

# Lost Testament Soul Eater

Nic Wallace

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## DEDICATION

*For Corporal Matthew Wallace Creed*



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nic Wallace has been an author in the horror genre since 2009, when he wrote his first novel “Soul Eater,” the first segment in his 12-book “Lost Testament” saga.



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## PROLOGUE

I stood before her breathless, my clothes tattered and bloody, the barrage of black metallic blades extruding from my back being the only thing supporting my body weight.

“You alright?” I panted heavily in exhaustion, my body trembling as she began towards me.

“Yeah, I’m fine. You’re in worse shape than me,” she uttered worriedly.

Fatigued and barely able to stand, the excruciating pain surged through me as my blades ached to be withdrawn back into my body, every nerve-ending and cell sparking with torturous agony. I could feel the blood trickling down my blades like hot butter, waywardly working its way down, creating a scarlet puddle on the asphalt.

She parted her lips to speak, her brow furrowed in consternation, hesitating with whatever it was she was about to say. “I’m sorry, for everything. You weren’t meant for this. It’s my fault; I just—” she stammered. Her eyes glassy with unshed tears, her bottom lip quivered in distress, interrupting her own words; but she quickly recollected herself, not letting a single drop escape her bright-emerald eyes.

I felt as if my legs were about to give out at any moment, and even my loyal and supporting blades were beginning to

shake under my own weight. Never in my life have I experienced such pain; well, not since I blew my brains out all over my bedroom wall before all this tumultuous hell began, making me into the abomination I am today. If I knew now what I knew then, maybe I wouldn't have been so quick to pull the trigger.

It was fine though, because she was safe; and in that, the pain was justified. After all, she was the reason I kept fighting. I may not have had the ability to feel it in my heart—seeing as how I ripped it out from my chest because I could no longer take the agonizing emotional turmoil of my past dirty deeds—but in saving her, it's as if I had saved me from myself, giving me penance for all my wrongdoings.

The spine-chilling shrieks of the damned souls coming from the Hell-gate behind me permeated the air, interrupting my disquieting reverie and reminding me of what I had to do. I was so immersed in saving her that I had forgotten about it.

*Best I close the gate, before—*

“Look out!” she warned.

Before I could react, a searing pain ripped through me. Staring down at the gaping, bloody hole in my chest, I could see the sharply pointed tail of some beast. The gargantuan damson-colored tip was bigger than my head, and the gruesome tentacle was composed of rotted muscle-tissue and exposed bone, which oozed with fresh, dark blood at the punctures.

As I looked over my shoulder to face the owner of the spiked appendage, I found myself face to face with a dark, crimson-colored monster at the portal's entrance, its endless array of long serpentine tendrils weaving in various directions, while the largest of the tendrils burst through the portal, disappearing into my back.

As it brutally tore into me, the sheer force of it lifted me off the ground, impaling me onto its jagged limb. I grabbed and swung at it, hoping to push it back, but my efforts were futile;

the creature was far too powerful. If I were at full strength, this fiend would be nothing for me—I've dealt with it before—but I was getting weaker by the second, and I was running on fumes.

She frantically rushed to my aid, but I blocked her path with my blades, grinding them into the crumbling asphalt before her to keep her away. I wasn't about to let her die—not after all that we've been through.

The sound of tearing flesh and shattering bones reverberated throughout the city's dead streets as the tail relentlessly dug further into me, skewering through my body. As the beast's appendage bashed through my chest, rendering me frozen in place, I looked helplessly over my shoulder to see it charging through me and towards her.

Trying to bide her time, I quickly jerked my blades deep into the creature, trying with all my might to pin it down; but its tail just kept slithering through my body and toward her determinedly, shredding me from the inside-out with every twist and turn.

"Run, damn it!" I spit at her through clenched teeth, as my blades slowly started to crumble and fall apart from overexertion.

It hurled towards her rapidly, stopping mere inches from her face. Petrified from terror and in the guise of death, she stood there motionless, her eyes wide and breathing ragged.

Suddenly, the end of the hellacious creature's tail peeled open three ways, revealing a small, round mouth with jagged teeth and a single, devilish eye in the center. As an ear-piercing shriek emitted from the eye, she ducked, covering her ears in pain. The orifice opened wider and wider, the lethal tail ready to deliver its final blow. I did everything in my power to try and stop it, but it ignored me and shook me off, as if I were a mere insect.

She started to sprint towards me, ready to take on the demonic being to pull me to safety. Reaching out to me as she ran, her hand was soon a few inches from mine. Right as my fingers were about to touch her's, the beast's tail suddenly

jerked back into the portal, sending her body flying several feet into the air, whilst taking me with it and back to Hell.

In one last futile effort, I grabbed on tight to the edge of the cosmic gateway, watching helplessly as her limp body lay on the ground nearby. I could see her body start to stir, her head lifting off the quaking terrain as her desperate eyes met mine.

As she weakly crawled towards me, my fingers starting to pluck off the precipice one by one, the centrifugal force slowly suctioned me into the noir abyss, while the lost souls of the fiery inferno below grabbed at my feet.

“Grab my hand!” she yelled as she reached out to me, her voice nearly inaudible over the shrieks of the damned below.

I could literally feel the relief surge through me as my fingers clasped into hers, undoing my hellacious fate. It was only when I felt her bloody palm slipping out of mine that panic rushed through me again, crushing my tentative hope.

Losing my grip, I started to plummet deeper and deeper into the eternal darkness. I could no longer hear anything of the human world, only the screams of the damned souls welcoming me back into Hell. The last thing I saw was her screaming and sobbing, helplessly watching me as I tore farther and farther away from her.

Darkness started to engulf me, while any light left of the human world slowly slipped away; and as I drifted off into the black abyss, I closed my eyes, allowing myself to be consumed by darkness as I was swallowed by Hell itself.

## RITUALS

*Alright, Tyler, this is it. Just go in there and get the stuff, and walk right out.*

With my forehead perched on the steering wheel, my rigid knuckles stark-white with tension from gripping it so tight, I take a fortifying breath before getting out of my car and walking into the local 24-hour grocery store. I quickly look around before grabbing a shopping basket, so that I can easily conceal the suspicious items if need be.

Pulling my crumpled list out of my pocket, I go over the items I need to collect.

### **Satanic Shopping List**

1. candles
2. chalk
3. animal blood

*Is it too late to add courage to the list?*

As I peruse the aisles, I can't help but worry about my friend, Rebecca. She went missing a couple weeks ago, without

so much as a phone call. I've tried going to her parents' house, but they strangely won't tell me anything. All I got from them was, "It's none of your concern," before the door was promptly slammed in my disconcerted face.

Rebecca has always been rather impulsive—a very fragile person with a thin skin—and I'm worried that she's gone and done something stupid. I have no leads and I'm at my wits end, so I'm about to perform a Satanic protection ritual, so that wherever she is, I'll at least know that she's alright.

I know it's stupid, and my conscience is *screaming* at me to stop, warning me not to meddle with dark and precarious things that I can't control or understand; but I can't handle not knowing. Sometimes we do crazy things for the ones we love, and love filters from the nonsensical heart, not the logical brain.

I walk by the refrigerated meat and poultry section, searching for the bloodiest piece of meat I can get my hands on, because I have a feeling that going up to the butcher and asking for a pint of blood might elicit some weird stares.

*Geez, I never truly realized just how many different kinds of meat there are. Lamb, mutton, chicken, pork, turkey, ham, steak, ground beef. . . what kind of blood does a demon want, anyway? I've never done this before.*

Soon, I find it—the juiciest steak I'm sure anyone's ever seen, sitting in a huge crimson pool of blood in its styrofoam packaging. I guardedly look over my shoulder before quickly nabbing it and tossing it into my shopping basket, which is met from a weird look from one of the staff. I'm sure a shopper has never looked so utterly paranoid and terrified purchasing a damn steak before.

"Did you find everything okay?" the cashier asks me at checkout.

*Yes, I found all of the accoutrements on my little Satanic shopping spree. Thanks for asking!*

“Uh huh,” I mumble, avoiding eye contact, as if looking at her would turn me to stone.

“That’ll be \$29.56,” she chirps, impervious to my blatant oddness and rude tone.

I pull out a bunch of sweaty, crumpled bills and some loose change with trembling hands, throwing it on the counter before hastily snatching my things and marching out without so much as a pleasantry. I have other things on my mind.

I drive home incredibly slow, knowing that once I get there, I’m going to have to perform a Satanic ritual in which I have no experience, nor any idea on how things are going to go.

*What if I get possessed and go all “The Exorcist,” spewing pea soup all over my beige walls?*

*What if I invite this thing in, and then I can’t get rid of it?*

*What if—*

I’m interrupted from my unsettling thoughts when a car behind me honks, the jarring sound of its horn snapping me out of my trance-like state. I glance down at my speedometer to see that I’m going nearly twenty miles per hour under the speed limit, trying my best to postpone the inevitable and what I know is soon to come.

I finally get home, searching the house to make sure that noone’s around before I start to make the preparations for the ritual. I warily open the dusty, archaic-looking book that I had stolen off the bookcase of my friend, Amber, flipping through the withered pages until I find the protection spell I need.

Amber has been a Satanist for awhile, and she has all the good stuff when it comes to things like this. It was seeing this book sitting on the shelf in her bedroom—with its almost human skin-like cover practically calling out to me as an answer to all of my problems—that gave me the idea to do this ritual in the first place. Of course, Amber would never

approve, seeing as how I don't know what the hell I'm doing; but of course, I didn't let that stop me.

When I finally find the incantation, I place the book in the center of my bedroom floor, going over the instructions while arranging all of the collected items. From what I've read, I am apparently going to summon the guardian demon "Marutukku," which should hopefully, if everything goes as planned, attach to Rebecca and protect her from any and all harm.

As I grab the "Crayola Sidewalk Chalk for Kids" out of my grocery bag, I try to decide between the rainbow array of vibrant colors, which are titled kitschy names such as "Periwinkle pink" and "Mellow Yellow." Clearly this stuff wasn't created with the idea of performing a Satanic ritual in mind.

With a stick of the "Aquamarine blue" shade in hand, I shakily draw an encircled inverted pentagram on the floor, before bringing the four banners I had made earlier out from under my bed and unrolling them onto the hardwood floor before me. They're black with assorted white shapes and symbols and some ancient-looking calligraphy on them—I'm guessing Sanskrit. I then arrange them around the pentagram according to the four cardinal directions: North, South, East, and West.

Next, I position the seven keys—which from what I've deducted from my research are a blasphemous anti-symbol of the seven days of Creation—on the outer edge of the circle, scribing them in the animal blood, and encircling them in chalk. I had to make those too.

*Who'd have thought that a Satanic ritual would require so much arts and crafts know-how?*

The book says that I should have two other people helping me, but I don't really know anyone that would be so willing. It's not exactly like you can go up to a friend and say, "*Hey man, want to help me summon a demon?*"

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I glance at the clock anxiously, waiting one agonizing minute at a time until 3:00 am—“the Devil’s hour”—which is apparently the best time to do it because it’s the exact opposite of 3:00 pm, which is when Christ died on the cross, as well as being a mocking of the Holy Trinity.

As soon as the clock strikes 3:00 am, a surge of adrenaline rushes through me, my nerves prickling with caution as beads of sweat start to form on my forehead.

*Alright, this is it. Time to nut up or shut up.*

Beginning the chant, my voice shaky and fearful, I start lighting the three candles with trembling hands.

*Custos infimum, invoco te.*

*Exaudi orationem meam.*

*Hoc vobis faciam, ut dignum amplitudine tua.*

*Hoc inveniri qui humanum est pertinere, et in omni potestate sua defensuram.*

I repeat the chant three times, the air in the room getting thicker with each word. The candles’ flames each start to change to a different color, flickering in shades of orange, yellow, and blue. All of a sudden, the flames darken, followed by a hard gust that flies through the room and extinguishes them, leaving nothing but an evaporating trail of serpentine smoke in its wake—and that’s when I hear it.

A low, guttural growl resonates throughout the room, vibrating through the air with such evil and malice, that it seems to be coming from the darkness of the room itself.

*Oh, shit.*

I can feel the room temperature dropping substantially, causing my teeth to start chattering as each breath from my mouth forms thick clouds of condensation in the air. I know now that the ritual is working.

I quickly place a picture in front of my feet of my missing friend, Rebecca—a picture that she actually gave to me. The object has to have actually been touched by the missing person, as the demon needs it for her scent.

Unexpectedly, the picture spontaneously lights aflame, causing me to jump back in shock, followed by a sudden calm as the air's heaviness ceases, leaving me in a deafening silence. The candles slowly spark and flicker back to life, their flames once again glowing bright-amber, and I sigh with relief, as it seems all has gone as planned.

*It worked.*

It's been about a week since the ritual, but something just doesn't feel right. It's like there's a void in my chest, as if something that was once there is now gone; I can't put my finger on it, but it feels bereft, as if something I need is now lacking. Overall, my health is fine, but I feel an immense emptiness within.

"Boom! Call me the bus driver, 'cause I just took you to school!" my friend, Jade, screams, while doing the funky chicken up and down our seating area.

I roll my eyes and shake my head, but I can't help but smile.

My best friend and I are at the bowling alley right now, and she's kicking my ass big-time. She's always doing some kind of three-second victory dance, which is more endearing than you'd think. Truth be told, I don't have an athletic bone in my body, but it's okay; I just love spending time with my best friend.

"You should take some bowling classes," she teases. "I can't be whooping your ass from here to kingdom come *every* time we play, you know. It's too easy; it takes the whole fun out of it!"

"Well maybe you *shouldn't* have taken those classes," I retort petulantly.

"I haven't taken any," she exclaims proudly, as she sticks her tongue out at me.

“Oh, I see. So you were just born this good, huh?”

“Yep!” she chirps, as she joins me on the cornflower-blue, plastic bucket seats. “So, you’re up. Last shot!”

I look at the score board and sulk; I’m losing miserably. I pick up the ball, pacing forward with concentration. Walking up to the bold line, and making sure my ugly beige and red-stripped bowling shoes don’t overstep it, I shoot, holding my breath and hoping for an ice-cube’s-chance-in-Hell-shot that I get a strike.

*Damn it, another gutter ball. That’s twice in a row. This is not making me look good.*

“Um, you didn’t do *too badly*,” Jade draws, when she sees me walk back with my head down in defeat.

“Are you kidding me? You kicked my ass,” I snort.

“Hmm, true,” she replies all too quickly, as she pinches her chin between her thumb and forefinger, smiling like a cat that got the cream.

“Hey! Shut up!” I shout back indignantly, playfully shoving her shoulder.

Grabbing my almost empty beer cup, she grabs the nearby pitcher and fills my cup to the brim, handing it to me with a bright smile. “To your shitty bowling skills,” she toasts, the plastic cup lingering in midair as I eye her speculatively. I finally accept the cup before chugging down its contents and slamming it down on the table with a grin. After all, I can’t get mad; this is what we do. We tease each other, we take jabs.

“You ready?” she asks.

“Yeah. Let’s roll,” I reply, wiping my mouth of any beer that may have escaped with the back of my sleeve.

“Oh, by the way, I brought a movie. We could watch it while we’re going to bed?” she offers in question, as she opens the passenger’s-side door to my old, beat-up, green Honda Civic and ducks inside.

“What kind of B-horror, low budget, cutting-room-floor, crap-movie have you gotten for us this time, Jade?” I joke.

“The Dark Side,” she laughs, rolling her eyes at my subtle dig. “It’s about this crazy guy that goes around killing people. He’s normal one day, and the next he suddenly goes bat-shit crazy and goes on a killing spree. It’s supposed to be really good from what I hear—quite the mind-fucker.”

“*Fine*,” I concede, knowing that when it comes to battles between me and my childhood friend, she always wins.

As Jade gets ready for bed in the bathroom, I slide the DVD out of her duffle bag, to find a cover depicting some crazed-looking loon with a machete, and covered in what I assume is supposed to be blood, but in actuality looks like chocolate syrup.

“I can already tell that this is going to be a winner, Jade,” I yell wryly through the bathroom door, before I walk over to the TV to cue up the movie.

Moments later, she exits out of the bathroom with her long auburn hair neatly brushed, sporting a pair of tiny, bright-blue spandex shorts that bring out her azure eyes. I always thought that Jade was cute from a “just friends” standpoint, but when I see her in those shorts, and that little white t-shirt that’s clearly way too small for her, my breath hitches in my throat.

*Okay, Tyler, get it together; she’s your best friend, for Christ’s sake. Think of something else—your grandma, or old, fat dudes.*

Nervously tearing my eyes away from her, I quickly make my way to the bathroom to change. A few minutes later, I come out to see that Jade has started on some Jiffy-Pop on the stove, lightly dancing and shuffling around on her bare feet whilst singing “I Can’t Get No Satisfaction” by the Rolling Stones. As she belts out the high notes, her voice cracks and screeches, causing me to cringe; but once again, she makes the weirdest things seem endearing, solely because they’re coming from her. Her hips sway from side to side as she douses the popcorn in extra cheese-powder—our pre-movie ritual—before she turns around to face me with a giant bowl of it in-hand.

“Cheesy popcorn—check,” she says cheerily as she joins me on the bed.

“Cheesy movie—check,” I reply with a smirk, holding up the empty DVD case.

Two hours later of beauty-queen screams, chocolate syrup blood-showers, and far too many girls who run upstairs instead of out the door, the movie ends.

“Okay. Well, you were right. That was absolute shit. You ready for bed?” she yawns with a tired look in her eyes, revealing a small bit of stomach-skin when she stretches.

“Yeah, let’s hit the hay,” I reply wearily, before turning off the TV and sliding down into the green-plaid sheets.

Huddling up against me, she forces my arm under her and around her back, and as I bury my nose in her hair, I soon drift off into a deep sleep with her by my side, inhaling the intoxicating scent of her vanilla shampoo.

I dream of a lone farm in the middle of a desert. It reminds me of my uncle’s farm that I would go to sometimes as a kid, but certain things are off. The placid sky is a dark royal-purple with bright, red stars, and there are three suns: one orange, one yellow, and one blue. There’s a fire crawling up the hillside, the roaring flames dancing with grace to a song only they can hear, whilst cascading against the noir backdrop like northern lights.

I approach the horse stables, looking for my old horse, Spirit, that I used to ride as a kid. That horse was my best friend in my early years, long before I had met Jade, and I found myself spending endless hours with Spirit in my lonely and awkward childhood.

With trepidation, I start to enter into the horse stables, my mouth dropping in horror at the sight before me. Spirit is on the ground completely eviscerated, her guts and entrails flooding out into the puddle of blood encircling her limp body. I start to run to her, when suddenly, everything changes in an instant.

I am now in a sterile-looking, stark-white room with a single stainless-steel operating table in the center. The room

smells of bleach and sulfur and is completely barren, other than the strangely inviting table in the middle.

As I warily approach it, I can hear the pounding of my heart in my own ears, throbbing in unison with the humming buzz of the overly bright and blinding fluorescent light bulbs that are lining the ceiling. The closer I get to the table, the louder the droning hum becomes, and soon it's all I can hear, its monotone reverb becoming deafeningly loud and encompassing me with its vibration.

I can't shake the cloying and palpable thickness in the air. Something doesn't feel right; something's *off*. I notice that chains and shackles lay on the table, and before I know it, I begin harnessing myself into them, fastening myself to the cold table like a man possessed. Even though I'm the one physically doing it, my mind is screaming at me to stop; it's like I can't control my own body anymore, as if something has taken over.

Writhing on the inside, but helplessly paralyzed on the outside, it's as if I'm trapped within the confines of my own mental prison. I can feel something coming. I avert my gaze to the best of my ability, and see something standing off in the far distance out on the field. I can't really tell what it is, or if it's even moving; it's too far away to tell. All I can see is that it's jet black. I squint my eyes to get a better look, when in a split second, it's right beside me, the door slamming shut from its rapid speed.

Before me stands a grotesque monster with red, glowing eyes, and endless rows of sharp, twisted teeth with rotting flesh stuck in between them. Its body is humanoid with two arms and two legs, but there are parts of it with more animalistic qualities—it's almost demonic. It has curved ram horns that look as if they're made of bone, with large cracks veining throughout them that look like fault lines. Its skin is black and leathery, and its humungous chest and shoulders are rippled with muscly sinews.

As its giant, black, taloned claw slowly comes up onto my torso, I can see the hellacious creature grinning at me with an expression that portrays a sinister agenda, whilst black pus

seeps through the gaps of its pencil-point teeth. With a sick and voracious rapacity, it ruthlessly starts digging its claws into my side, methodically pulling out red chunks of my innards and entrails.

I beg and plead with it to stop, but it inexorably continues to eviscerate me, shredding my body from within. My ears shatter at the sounds of my own helpless screams, their ear-piercing reverberation bouncing off the sterile white walls; but there's no one to hear me. It's just me and the beast.

The monster starts to go into a frenzy, tearing through my flesh with a depraved, animalistic lust. I can feel the warm and slowly burgeoning puddle of blood pooling out beneath me, along with every torturous pull, push, twist, and rip, and all I keep wishing is to pass out from the pain. Soon, darkness drapes over my eyes, and I know I'm dead.

*Spirit is dead.*

*Spirit is dead.*

*Spirit is dead.*

I sit up in a cold sweat, my mouth still uttering the eerie words. Gasping for air, it feels like the monster is still tearing my flesh apart, but I'm in my own bed, with Jade calmly sleeping next to me.

*Calm down, it was just a dream. It was just a dream . . . but it felt so real.*

Wide awake with fear, I try to breathe; but my treacherous lungs betray me, closing shut with every strained breath. I hunch over in unbearable agony, still feeling the searing pain in my side, and that emptiness from before has deepened, leaving me with a void in my chest. My eyes start to tear as I clench my teeth, gripping the sweat-soaked sheets in my balled fists.

"You okay?" Jade mumbles sleepily, semi-startled from being woken up so abruptly.

But I can't answer her. I'm too focused on the pain and what I just saw, or didn't see—I don't know.

"Tyler!" she screams, shaking me back to reality.

"Yeah?" I mumble inarticulately, my voice cracking into a barely audible whisper.

"Are you okay?" Resting her hand on my shoulder, her brow knits together. "Oh my god, you're soaked," she utters, dragging her palm down my sweaty back.

"It was just a really intense dream," I manage to speak, casting my gaze downward so that she won't see the immense fear in my eyes. Jade is a worry wart, and the last thing I need right now is her panicking.

"Dream? Or nightmare?" she asks with concern, as she scoots closer.

"I'm fine, really. I'm going to jump in the shower and get this sweat off. Go back to sleep. I'm sorry for waking you," I murmur, putting on a fake smile.

I've never pulled off even a white lie with Jade, until now; I can't believe I pulled it off. To be honest, I'm not fine. I'm anything *but* fine.

My mind starts wandering with disconcerting thoughts. I think about the ritual and if it could've gone horribly wrong. I start wondering how something so big could've seemingly come without an indebted price. Most of all, I think about the growl that resonated in the darkness.

*Was that thing from my dream the source of that growl? I think I fucked up . . .*

As I let the cold stream of water flow over my head, I close my eyes and support my trembling body with an even shakier hand to the tile wall. All I can see are flashes of the demonic being's face, its sharp teeth and glowing eyes burning holes into my soul. I can still taste the metallic, burnt-ochre flavor of my own blood on my tongue, causing a lump to form in my throat.

As my withheld tears start to escape my eyes and mix with

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the trickling stream of water from the showerhead, I try to reassure myself that I'm just being paranoid and that this is all just a nightmare; but I know something's wrong. I just can't shake this uneasy feeling lingering in the air, like that thick, ominous heaviness that you get right before a storm.

## DAYMARES

The light pattering sounds on the roof provide a soft rhythm, waking me from my fitful sleep. As I watch the frosty fog slowly crawling up the windowpane, I peer down at my side to see Jade huddled tightly into me, sleeping like a baby.

Carefully reaching under my pillow for my cell phone, I see that it's late morning, reminding my growling stomach that it needs food. I'm about to get up when Jade sleepily climbs halfway on top of me, gripping me like a koala bear and rendering me virtually paralyzed as she nuzzles her face into my neck and snores away. I never thought snoring could be cute, but she's pulling it off.

I carefully slide out from under her, whilst simultaneously slipping my pillow into her arms to give her the feeling that I'm still there, so as not to wake her. I languidly drag myself over to the bathroom to splash some water on my face, trying to begin a new day; but I keep thinking about my nightmare last night, the searing pain in my side making it hard to forget.

I gingerly peel off my shirt, flinching at the tenderness I'm feeling on my side, when I suddenly drop it in shock. I gaze down at my torso with my mouth agape to find a large red scar on my side, running from the midpoint of my ribs, stretching all the way down to my hip bone. I run my shaky fingers along

it, flinching when I feel that it's sore to the touch. I fretfully recall the nightmare in terror, realizing that the scar is almost identical in size to the monster's hand from my dream.

"Holy shit," I mutter shakily, unable to tear my wide eyes away from the inflamed, swollen tissue on my side.

*I need to be quiet and keep my cool; I can't let Jade see this.*

I surreptitiously sneak back out to the bedroom and grab my phone, before tip-toeing back into the bathroom. I scroll through my contacts until I find my friend, Amber. I've known her for about five years, and she's been a Satanist for awhile, which is why I know she's not going to be too happy with me when she finds out what I've done. I try to steady my trembling fingers long enough to push the call button, before I eagerly wait through the dial tone. Four torturous rings later, I've nearly bitten my lip off and am about to hang up, when I hear the dial tone stop, followed by a loud shuffling.

"Hello?" a voice finally croaks on the other end.

"Amber? It's Tyler. I know it's early, but I—I need to see you. Something happened," I stutter, my tone shrill and emphatic, trying my best not to sound incredibly terrified.

"Tyler," she says softly, her voice softening in an instant. "What happened?"

"I, uh, can't really say over the phone. I think I'm in a lot of trouble though, Amber. Can I see you now? Please?" I plead desperately.

"Um, yeah, of course. Head on over."

"Alright, thanks. I'll be there in 20 minutes," I say hurriedly.

"Okay. Adios."

I quietly creep back out to my bedroom and get dressed, grabbing a shirt first, for obvious reasons.

"Where are you going?" I hear Jade suddenly yawn, popping her back as she stretches.

*Great.*

“Um, I’ve got to take care of a few things. I won’t be long. There’s food in the fridge, make yourself at home. I’ll be back soon,” I mutter, trying my best to put up a front and not show her how scared I am. I march out before she can protest, slipping my second shoe on as I stumble out the door.

Amber doesn’t live that far from me—just a few blocks—but the trip there seems as if I’m going by horse and carriage to Africa. After what seems like eternity, I find myself at her door, hesitant to knock. Before I think about it too much and end up bailing, I ball my hand into a fist and prepare to knock. The door suddenly swings open, revealing a worried and anxious-looking Amber on the other side.

“Hey, come in,” she invites, shutting the door after me.

“Thanks for seeing me on such short notice,” I utter while bringing her into a quick embrace, immediately inhaling her trademark scent of cigarettes and perfume.

“Of course, no prob. So, what’s this all about?” she asks.

“Well, remember how I was talking about possibly summoning that demon to find Rebecca?”

“Yeah,” she says suspiciously as she nods, her tone and expression both cautious and questioning, as if saying, “*What the hell did you do now, dumbass?*”

“And remember how you told me not to do it because I’m completely inexperienced and that it was a bad idea?”

“Cut to the chase, Tyler,” she snipes, her brow furrowed in consternation as she bites her lower lip.

“Well, I stole your grimoire and decided to do the ritual myself—”

“You *what?*” she hisses.

“Everything was going fine—until this.” I warily lift the side of my shirt so that she can see the scar, remaining tense while awaiting the verbal gunfire that I know is coming.

“So you’re telling me that you didn’t have this scar before you summoned the demon?”

“No,” I mumble in an inaudible whisper, the reality of all this really starting to hit me. I start to get dizzy so I sit down on the old, mucus-green, striped couch behind me, its worn

upholstery covered in stains and cigarette burns, and reeking of mothballs.

“Tyler, what did you do!?” she screams, throwing her hands up in the air.

“I don’t know,” I whimper, my voice trembling with fear—fear of both my glorious fuck-up, as well as fear of Amber’s wrath. This is not good.

“I need a cigarette,” she mutters exasperatedly, pulling a pack of Parliament Lights out of her pocket before hastily sliding one out of the pack. She marches over to the stove, muttering under her breath the entire way. I’m not sure what exactly she’s saying; all I caught were words like, “idiot,” “dumbass,” and “stupid.” Leaning over the stove, she flicks on the gas burner and sparks up her cigarette, hurriedly bringing it to her lips. As she inhales deeply, she leans back against the stove, closing her eyes and clenching her sinuses with her fingertips as if in deep thought. “You best start talking right now, Dawson,” she orders sternly, as if scolding a petulant child. “And don’t leave *anything* out.”

I reluctantly tell her all about the ritual and the dream last night in great detail, which is met with a worried look on her part.

“I really don’t know what to tell you, Tyler; this does *not* sound good. It sounds demonic,” she says solemnly, her tone unsettling, her mouth hardening into a disconsolate line. “I mean, what did you expect? This is precisely why I told you not to fuck around with this kind of stuff. These are dark and powerful forces you’re meddling with here, not the Country Bear Jamboree. Do you have any idea how much shit you might be in?”

“I think I have a rough idea,” I snap sardonically, gesturing towards the scar on the side of my torso.

“Did you really think you could ask for a gift as huge as assigning a guardian demon to someone for *life* without giving the demon anything in return? They’re demons, not a charity, Tyler—*everything* comes with a price.”

“I know, I know. I . . .” I trail off, my voice cracking as my

eyes treacherously start to well up with tears. “I fucked up, Amber—bigtime; and now, I’m probably going to die at the hands of this thing.” With my head in my hands, I start to sniff, futilely trying to hold back the flood of emotions I’m feeling surge through me.

“Shhh,” she soothes me, lightly stroking my back as she joins me on the couch, giving me a temporary and fleeting sense of comfort. “We’ll figure this all out, Tyler; I promise. I’ll look into it right away.”

“Thanks,” I whisper, tearing myself away from her scrutiny as I stare down at my knotted fingers in my lap. “I better get going. Jade’s at my place right now, and I told her I wouldn’t be long.”

“Does she know?” she questions, her brow knitting together.

“No, and she can’t know. I didn’t show her the scar, or even tell her about the dream. She worries enough about me as it is.”

I open the door to leave when Amber stops me, grabbing me by the wrist. “Oh, and Tyler . . . in the meantime, be careful.”

I manage a fake half-smile before I disappear out the door, but I know it doesn’t reach my eyes.

I arrive home to see that Jade has made our favorite breakfast: toads in a hole and applewood smoked bacon.

“Everything okay?” she asks hesitantly from behind the refrigerator door.

“Yeah, everything’s fine,” I lie. Luckily she isn’t looking at me; she’s always been able to tell when and if I’m lying. I guess that kind of comes with the territory when you’ve known each other since grade-school.

“Perfect timing. I just finished breakfast,” she chirps as she pulls out a carton of orange juice, before closing the door with her butt. She heads over to the cupboard, bringing down two old, chipped plates and mismatched glasses.

*God, I am such a bachelor. It’s pathetic.*

“Sounds wonderful,” I smile, ignoring my self-deprecating thoughts.

Two full plates in hand, she joins me at the breakfast bar and slides one over to me. I gratefully accept the much needed nourishment after my fitful sleep and unnerving morning, immediately spearing a piece of bacon with my fork before shoveling it into my mouth.

“Is this new?” she asks through a mouthful of food, pointing to a sketch I have up on the wall of an angel being devoured by a demon.

“Yeah, that’s my most recent one at least; but it’s been up for some time now.”

“Hmm . . . it’s good, I like it. It’s dark, but real, and very raw. The destroying of something beautiful and pure, evil triumphing over the good and the innocent by devouring and consuming our spirit—kinda like life,” she remarks.

I have a sudden and unfriendly reminder of the dream, and my horse, Spirit, laying on the ground eviscerated. I immediately try to shake it off and think about something else, unwilling to let Jade know anything just yet.

“I’m, uh, going to hop into the shower,” I murmur, my convivial attitude suddenly taking a hard dive, despite my best efforts to put on a facade.

Before she can say a word I walk off, nearly hurling myself into the bathroom before I slam the door shut behind me, my breathing heavy and disjointed. Stepping into the shower, I allow the hot water to flood down over me, cleansing me of my sins. I methodically grab the shampoo, like a robot trying to get through a task, grateful for the much needed distraction. It’s when I start to soap up my body that I see the huge scar again, the unsightly reminder bringing me back.

Slightly hunching over and angling my body to the left, I gaze at it, not being able to keep the image of Amber’s telling, worried look out of my head. The fact that I have this scar has to mean something—something serious—and it can’t be good.

As the water pounds onto my face, I close my eyes,

throwing my head back and trying to think of something else as I get lost in the solace of the steam. All of a sudden, I get a metallic taste in my mouth, bitter and alkaline, as if I've been sucking on nickels. My eyes fly open as I spit the foul-tasting water out of my mouth, and what I see causes me to reel backward in horror. It's no longer water coming out of the showerhead, but *blood*. Blood everywhere—spattered on the white tile walls, spotting my pale skin, covering every square-inch of the shower in a crimson spray.

I clench my eyes shut, breaking out into the typical non-believer's prayer of, "*If there is a god . . .*" My fists balled at my sides, I keep my eyes shut, unwavering to open them, as if keeping them closed will make what I just saw disappear.

A few seconds later, I find the courage to open my eyes, only to find that the water is, well, water. I shake my head in disbelief, hoping it was only my imagination; but when I look down and see that light-scarlet fluid, its hue turning that sickly shade of pink as it streams down the drain, I know that what I saw was real.

I immediately shut off the water, stumbling out of the shower as if I can't get out fast enough.

*Did that really just happen? Am I going nuts?*

I shakily grab a towel to wipe down the fogged-up mirror, wiping the middle section clear. With my hands perched on the bathroom counter, I stare at my own reflection, questioning my own sanity. I take a fortifying breath and lean forward, giving myself a pep-talk.

*Get your shit together, Tyler. Your mind is just playing tricks on you. You're being paranoid.*

I'm about to dismiss it all, when the air in the room suddenly thickens, that same static-charged heaviness I felt when I did the ritual. Suddenly, it feels as if I'm not alone, my stomach churning with so much adrenaline I feel as if I could

lose my breakfast at any second.

A rattling starts to resonate throughout the room, oscillating in unison with the dark vibration in the air. Leaning forward, I hesitantly place my hand on the mirror, and I can feel that the rattling is coming from it. The mirror's glass continues to shake harder and harder beneath my hand, causing me to retract it as I start to step backward.

A putrid stench like sulfur and wet soil permeates the bathroom, causing me to gag. Soon, the lights start flickering on and off, before one of the bulbs blows completely, shattering and raining glass down upon me, slicing tiny little cuts on my arms and cheeks. I turn around and head for the door, grabbing the door knob and pulling at it frantically; but it won't budge. I want nothing more than to scream for help, but I'm so petrified with fear that nothing comes out but a hoarse whisper.

The mirror starts swirling in the center like a whirlpool, becoming three-dimensional as it gets deeper. Suddenly, a huge, black claw sprouts from what looks like a vortex in the mirror. My breath shakes against my throat, which is swelled shut from fear, as I reel backward in shock and horror. It wraps its gargantuan claw around my throat, squeezing my airway until I can no longer breathe, causing the room to start swaying as a vertiginous stupor overtakes me. Within seconds I find myself pinned to the wall, completely helpless in its unrelenting grasp. The arm in the mirror stretches out even further, causing some of the surrounding glass to shatter, resounding in a loud crash.

"Tyler, are you alright?" I hear Jade yell worriedly on the other side of the door.

I can't speak as I fight to catch my breath, my eyes wide with terror at the sight before me. There's a glaring face with glowing, red eyes in the mirror, its expression dripping with a sick and yearning hunger. I recognize it immediately as the demon from my dream, causing me to whimper in fear.

The edges of the mirror where it's crossing through seems to be withering away as if melting, swirling from within as the

portal gets bigger to prepare for the creature to pass through. Small shards of glass continue to fall away to the floor and countertop as the frightening beast tightens its death-grip around my throat, its long talons piercing into my neck with a sick “pop” one by one, grazing and teasing my jugular in a murderous foreplay. The world around me starts to fade, leaving me in total darkness, and I can do nothing but helplessly welcome death itself.

I can hear the loud thud of Jade’s body pounding against the door repeatedly. A few seconds later I hear her using what sounds like a pin to open it, fiddling with the locked doorknob until I hear something click. Busting in through the door, she frantically runs to my side.

“Tyler! What’s wrong?! Oh my god, are you—” Jade gasps, as she blushes and turns around when she sees that I’m completely naked; but I don’t care, not right now.

“There was a . . .” I trail off unintelligibly, pointing a weak and shaky finger at the mirror as I look at her, ready to come clean and tell Jade about everything; when I look back toward the mirror to find that the creature is gone. The mirror is pristine and perfectly normal, without so much as a scratch on its shiny surface.

*Am I going crazy? I’m losing it. I must be.*

But I tasted the blood in the shower. I felt its claw around my throat. I heard the sound of the shattering glass. It felt so *real*. It *was* real—I think.

I slide down the wall, bringing my knees to my chest as I start to shiver from fear.

“Tyler! What’s the matter with you?” Jade yells at me in my muted state whilst shaking me by the shoulders; but I just keep staring at the mirror behind her, dumbfounded and in awe. Now I *know* she’s worried; so much for my charade.

I remain quiet, rocking back and forth like I just got out of the loony bin. Jade grabs a large towel off the rack to my right, causing me to snap out of my trance. I mindfully hug my knees

a little closer to my body to hide the huge scar on my left side so that she can't see it, still attempting to cover this all up. Wrapping me in a towel, she carefully pulls me to my feet and puts her arm around my lower back, gingerly guiding me to the bed before covering my shivering body with the blankets.

"Tyler, what the hell happened in there?" she presses, as she kneels down on the floor beside the bed, pushing for some kind of answer.

"Where's my phone?" I mutter absentmindedly. "I need my phone." I start to stand up, when she pushes me back down.

"No, I don't think so. I'll get it for you. You stay right here," she insists, as she jogs out the bedroom. She returns a minute later with my phone in hand, eyeing me patiently as if demanding an answer first. "You're not getting this until you tell me what's going on."

"Jade, give me my phone," I demand sternly, not in the mood to play around.

"No. Not until you—"

"Give me my damn phone!" I shout with venom, far past the point of anger, only further fueled by the immense fear in my heart.

"First of all, don't you dare yell at me, Tyler. Where the hell do you get off—"

"Give me my fucking phone, Jade!" I scream, marching towards her with fury and annoyed beyond comprehension.

Not saying a word, she chucks the phone at my face, the hard plastic smacking me right below my left eye before it falls to the floor.

"Jerk," she mutters scathingly, right before gathering her things and storming off.

I wait for her to walk away, listening for the slamming of the front door and the sound of her car speeding away before I allow myself to fall to my knees and break down. The towel around my waist slowly unravels as I sit in a wet heap and hug myself, shivering from both the cold and fear.

"Oh god, what have I done?" I cry to myself despairingly, pulling my knees into my chest and burying my head. "What

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the fuck have I done?”

## THE CURSE

I can't get the look Jade gave me out of my head. It wasn't anger in those eyes, but pain. She's never given me that kind of look, in all the years we've known each other, but I've got priorities. I'll apologize as soon as I take care of business, because the fact of the matter is, I won't be much good to her if I'm dead.

I race over to Amber's, pedal to the metal the entire way. Coming to a screeching halt, I barely throw my car in park before I'm busting out the door and running towards her place. My body throbs with pain, each movement like a knife to the gut eviscerating me from the inside out, as I walk up the steps. She throws open the door before I can even knock.

*How does she always do that?*

"Hey, I got your text. I figured you would head straight over," she motions, stepping aside with her trademark, lipstick-stained cigarette in hand.

Remaining still, I stare at her forlornly like a lost puppy, my hands balled into fists at my side.

"Tyler?" she utters softly, as she reaches for my hand.

"Something's really wrong," I blurt out.

She cautiously steps towards me, as if approaching a scared, cornered animal, grabbing my hand before leading me inside.

“So, talk to me. What’s going on?” she asks, her eyes wide with concern.

I try to tell her, but the words just won’t come out. I evoke the horrifying memory, and how the creature had me in its grasp, squeezing the life out of me.

“It came for me,” I utter, tears welling up in my eyes.

“What?” she mouths, her brow knitting together.

“It came after me, that black monster from my dream,” I reply, my voice cracking. “It wants me dead, and it’s not going to stop until it’s through!”

“Shh, calm down. Tell me exactly what happened,” Amber commands softly, as she sits me down on the couch. Sitting across from me, she pulls out a new cigarette, bringing it to her lips as she lights it with a match. She exhales slowly and deliberately, as the clouds of her smoky breath collect around us like a dense fog.

I can feel my chest tightening, making it hard to breathe. I take a minute to collect myself before I completely break down like a distraught child.

“I was taking a shower,” I recall, trying my best to steady my trembling voice. “I was standing under the water, when all of a sudden, it tasted like blood. I opened my eyes, and saw blood coming from the showerhead. Then, I closed my eyes, and when I opened them again, it was gone.”

“Go on,” she instructs, as she listens attentively.

“So, I got out of the shower, and that’s when I saw it in the mirror. It tried to kill me, Amber,” I utter, choking back the sobs building up in my throat, wiping away the salty tears from my tired eyes.

Amber’s face turns pale, as she regards me with a serious expression. It’s been an entire two minutes since she’s taken a drag off her cigarette, which for Amber is unheard of.

“That’s impossible, Tyler; you have to be lying. That or. . .” she trails off.

“Or what?” I question, not sure if I want to hear the

answer.

“Or you’ve pissed off a High Fiend,” she relents, her tone grave and solemn. “And if you have, then you’re in deep shit.”

“Amber, I don’t know what I’ve done or how, but I swear to you I’m not lying.”

Silence thickens throughout the room, the tension so thick it should have its own zipcode.

“*Idiot!*” she blurts, agitation and fury in her voice.

“Huh?”

“I said you’re an idiot! Didn’t I tell you not to do any sort of rituals because you aren’t a baptized Satanist?! And you went off and did it anyway! I get it, you were worried about Rebecca; but honestly, Tyler, what were you thinking?!”

“I—I wasn’t,” I stutter, feeling awfully small sitting before Amber right now.

“And what the hell do you plan on doing if we can’t fix this, huh?” she shrieks, pacing back and forth as she throws her hands up in the air, muttering curse words under her breath.

“It’s not like I meant for this to happen,” I try to reason.

“Yeah, well, that doesn’t make you any less of an idiot,” she spits with venom.

I hang my head in sorrow, unable to hold back the tears that are slowly but surely escaping. I just can’t be strong anymore.

“Look, Tyler—don’t cry, I’m sorry,” she concedes, placing a hand on my shoulder. “It’s just that, you are messing with some dark shit here. Do you have any idea the trouble you might be in?”

I sit with my head in my hands, trying to tear myself away from her scrutiny.

“We’ll try to fix this, okay?” she says gently. “I have some books that may help.”

She gestures for me to follow her, leading me to her room.

“Sit down,” she orders succinctly, pointing to her bed, as if saying, “*You’ve done enough; now sit down, shut up, and don’t get in the way.*”

“So let me get this straight,” she says, as she fumbles through the books on the shelf. “Last night you had a dream that this black monster was eating you, this morning you woke up with that scar on your side, and when you took a shower today, you got attacked by this thing and it damn near almost killed you. Did I miss anything?”

“That about sums it up,” I murmur, my tone barely audible.

“*Ab hab!* Bingo,” she whispers to herself, pulling a huge, brown, leather-bound book off the shelf, along with a large, maroon-colored paperback with brown, weathered pages and worn corners. “Here, make yourself useful,” she walks over to the bed and throws the maroon book on my lap, as she sits beside me, flipping through the pages of the other book with vigor.

“So, what exactly are we looking for?” I inquire, blowing the dust off the cover of the book I’ve been assigned to.

“Anything that ties into what you’ve experienced, specifically the scar you got,” she explains, her eyes darting all over the pages as she speedily flips through them. “This is probably going to take some time though, so I suggest making yourself comfortable. You’re not going anywhere until we find out what this thing is, and what to do about it.”

Nearly three hours later, and we still haven’t found anything. I’m lying on her bed, thinking way too much, when I hear a gasp, interrupting me from my reverie. I look up to find Amber wide-eyed, with a trembling hand over her mouth.

“You alright?” I ask. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s not what I thought, Tyler; it’s not a High Fiend. It’s an Elite Demon—a Soul Eater,” she murmurs.

*A Soul Eater? I do not like the sound of that. Anything with the word ‘eater’ in it can’t be good.*

“You’re in a lot of trouble, Tyler. There’s. . .” she trails off, hanging her head down and gently closing the book. “There’s nothing I can do to help you.”

“Wait, so it’s all over, just like that?! At least let me know

what I'm getting into here! What in hell's name is a Soul Eater, Amber?" I demand.

"It's basically Lucifer's debt collector. If you were a baptized Satanist when you did the ritual, then you'd be in the clear, because Lucifer would already have ownership over your soul. Since you aren't, the Soul Eater is sent to collect," she explains, looking at me with pity. "It's a very powerful demon, Tyler. I really can't stress to you enough how much shit you're in right now."

"And what is an Elite Demon?" I ask, trying my best not to piss my pants right here on the spot.

"An Elite Demon is the third most powerful type of demon there is. As humans, there's no stopping it. But the worst part is. . ." she trails off again.

"What?"

"Its eyes—you saw its eyes. The eyes of the Soul Eater represent all of the lost souls it's devoured. It uses that energy to brand the soul of its victim with a mark, causing any other demons that are around to be attracted to the victim. It's called the Saffron Curse," she explains, her tone now somber and dismal.

"I need to tell Jade," I say quietly, like a robot. I don't even know what to feel right now.

"Are you sure that's a good idea? She's going to be livid."

"I don't know how much time I have. If what you're saying is true, I can die any day now. She needs to know what's happening," I whisper, standing up and heading toward the door.

"Oh, and Tyler," she utters. "Be careful."

"Bye, Amber," I nod.

"Adios, friend."

*Well ain't that some shit. I spat in the face of God, then the Devil, and now I'm paying for it—tenfold. I don't know what I'm going to do. If what Amber's saying is true, and I truly am marked by this Saffron Curse, then it's only a matter of time before more demons come for me—before the Soul Eater comes for me. I still don't even know where my*

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*missing friend is. At least if through all this I knew she was okay, then this all would've been for something, instead of nothing. I could've died with a clear conscience, for a good cause, knowing that I died helping someone I loved, but no; instead I am going to die a 22 year-old virgin with no soul. This is not how I imagined my life going.*

## TRIALS OF TOMORROW

Jade is on her way, and I'm about to come clean—about everything. I've been racking my brain, trying to think of what to tell her. What am I supposed to say? How exactly do you tell someone that you summoned a demon in a ritual that went horribly awry, and that now you're on the shit-list of every demon within sniffing distance?

I hear the chime of the doorbell and I know that it's her

*Alright, Tyler—put your big-boy undies on. Time to nut up or shut up.*

I hesitantly place my hand on the doorknob.

*Maybe this isn't such a good idea; maybe I should pretend I'm not home.*

*No, she has to know. I have to do this. Stop being a coward.*

I open the door quickly, before I can change my mind again.

“Hey,” she says cheerfully. I guess she's not mad anymore.

“Jade,” I utter fondly, pulling her into a long, tight embrace, catching her off-guard.

“Uh, you okay?” she asks, a questioning look on her face.

“Jade. . .” I trail off, my voice wavering. “Jade, I—”

“Jade, Jade, Jade—we’ve already established that’s my name. Now what do you want to tell me? Spit it out,” she commands.

“Okay. I just wanted to apologize about earlier. It wasn’t cool, and I’m sorry.”

“Don’t even mention it; it’s in the past,” she concedes, putting a hand on my shoulder. “But that’s not why I’m here. What’s going on, Tyler? You’ve been acting really strange the past few days; I know something’s wrong. You know you can talk to me.”

“I uh, don’t really know where to start,” I murmur.

Jade casually kicks off her Converse sneakers and hops onto my bed. Sitting cross-legged, she perches her chin on her two closed fists, eyeing me patiently, waiting for me to explain.

“You remember my friend, Rebecca?” I start.

“Yeah,” she replies, her tone urging.

“Well, I kinda summoned something, for her protection.”

“What do you mean you ‘summoned something?’” she says, making air quotes with her fingers.

“I basically summoned a guardian demon for her protection, since she’s been M.I.A.,” I mumble, my head hanging low as if I’m a child preparing to be scolded.

“Tyler, get to the point. What happened?”

“It backfired, badly.”

I slowly get up from the couch, lifting my shirt to show her the scar. Gasping in shock, Jade puts her hands over her mouth, her eyes nearly bulging out of her skull.

“Jade, I’m in a lot of trouble. Because I wasn’t a baptized Satanist when I did the ritual, the ritual was forbidden, as I hadn’t officially given over my soul to the Devil. It’s like I had stolen something without paying for it, kind of like spiritual shoplifting,” I explain. “Long story short, I’ve gotten the attention of something very, very bad—a demon, or Soul Eater to be exact. It has basically marked me, hence attracting any and all demons that can sense it.”

“Marked you? What do you mean? Like that?” she gestures, pointing to the scar on my side.

“No, I wish it was that simple. Basically, at this point, the curse has made it so that the demons’ dinner bell is ringing, and my soul is the main course. Demons will be magnetically attracted to me from this point on, battling each other for my soul, and they will stop at nothing to take my soul prisoner and drag it to Hell. This is full-out spiritual warfare, Jade.”

Jade says nothing, as she stares at me with a bemused, dumfounded look on her face. The silence is deafening, and not knowing what her reaction will be is killing me.

“Jade, I—”

I’m suddenly cut off by a harsh blow to the jaw, sending a shooting pain throughout the entire left side of my face. Rubbing my jaw, I cautiously turn back to look at her, half-expecting her to slug me again.

*As if being walking, talking demon’s cuisine isn’t enough, now I’m a Jade’s human punching bag. This is getting old, really fast.*

“I *knew* nothing good would come of this! I should have said something before, about you getting this deep into this Satanic garbage,” she huffs. “I can’t believe you could possibly be so idiotic, so reckless, so thoughtless, so foolish, so. . .” she trails off. “So *dumb!*”

She continues to berate me and name off synonyms for stupid and irresponsible, when she finally stops her tirade and sits in silence.

“Are you done now?” I ask her.

“Yes,” she mutters through a clenched jaw. After another minute, she has collected herself. “So, how do we fix this?”

“We can’t, I’m branded. There’s no way to remove the mark; I’m cursed. It’s called The Saffron Curse.”

“You know this sounds ridiculous right?”

“Yeah, trust me, I know.”

She lifts my shirt, studying the massive scar, gently running her fingers along it with care.

“Jade, will you stay with me tonight?” I beg. “Please, I really don’t want to be alone. I’m scared.”

“Yeah, I’ll stay,” she sighs, giving me an exasperated but sympathetic look.

It’s nighttime, and we’ve just gotten done watching another crappy movie. Jade fell asleep halfway through it, and now her head is resting on my shoulder as she peacefully snores away. I never thought such loud, lumberjack snores could come out of such a little person. The thought makes me smile as I peer down at her.

“Wake up, sleepyhead. Movie’s over.”

“Mmm,” she yawns while stretching. “How long was I out? Man, that movie sucked.”

“You’re telling me,” I laugh.

“Hey, you got any PJ’s or something I can wear?” she asks with a tired smile.

I sift through my dresser drawers, finally handing her a pair of boxers and one of my band tees that’s covered with skulls and says, “*My Time to Burn*” in blood-red letters across it—pretty damn appropriate for the situation if I do say so myself.

“Really, Tyler? Pokémon boxers?” she teases. “Sometimes I think you are a walking, talking contradiction.”

“What? Why can’t Pokémon and death metal go together?” I ask, matter of factly.

Shaking her head, she smiles and accepts the clothes.

“Turn around, and don’t even think about taking a peek or I’ll punch you in the face again,” she jokes playfully.

Grinning, I hold my hands up innocently as I turn around and face the wall. Jade flings her bra at me, hitting the back of my head.

“Hey! That hurt, butthead!”

“Oh, hush. Don’t be so melodramatic,” she teases.

Soon we’re both in bed under the covers. I’m fighting sleep with every ounce of willpower in me, but my eyelids are starting to get heavy, and I’m so exhausted. My efforts prove futile, as I slowly start to feel sleep overtake me and darkness take over.

I'm dreaming of the white room again. My cold, naked body is bound to the metal grate with chains; I can't move my body at all. I'm bound so tight I can feel my flesh seeping over the bindings. I know the Soul Eater must be nearby; I can feel it's close. My eyes dart all over in search of a way out, but I'm completely helpless. All of a sudden, a searing pain fluctuates throughout the scar on my side, as shadowy, black tendrils start seeping out of it, like crawling smoke. Soon the smoke turns to clouds as it starts to take shape, constructing a muscular, tall, dark body, then forming two twisted horns. I know it's the Soul Eater. Helplessly bound, I stare into its blood-thirsty, red eyes—the eyes of all the poor souls it's taken before me—unable to look away from its penetrating gaze. Bringing itself mere inches from my face, it growls, forcing viscous, black mucus and coagulated blood to seep through its sharp teeth, which are littered with the rotting flesh of those it's consumed before me. I can smell the stench of death as it breathes on my cheek, right as a rogue tear escapes my eye.

I manage to move my head a tiny bit when something catches my eye—the creature's physique is different. Where its torso should be, there's a cage made of eroded, black bones. I tilt my head to the best of my ability to get a better look, and my jaw trembles at the sight—it's Rebecca. Kicking violently at the cage bars, she opens her mouth to scream, but no sound will come out. It's as if she's in her own personal hell with no escape, and it's all my fault. I'm the one who pointed the demon in her direction, and instead of protecting her, it's taken her hostage as just another tortured soul.

“Rebec—” I scream, but I'm cut off by a sharp pain in my side.

The Soul Eater starts to tear through my innards like a meat grinder, twisting, shredding, and eviscerating my gut. Pain radiates from within my body from where I felt the black smoke emit from, and everywhere the smoke was feels as if my entrails are treacherously strangling my own organs. I scream in pain for what feels like an eternity, until the demon finally crushes my head against the metal grate with a sickening

crunch.

“Tyler, wake up,” Jade whispers, shaking me roughly.

I shoot up quickly, nearly knocking her from the bed in the process, as I struggle to speak through my disjointed breaths.

“Shh, Tyler, it’s alright,” she drawls softly while rubbing my back, as if talking to a small, scared child. “It was just a dream.”

I hastily move the blankets to examine my side—no marks, no hole, just inflamed, reddened skin. Slowly and shakily, I lay back down.

“Jade,” I start, answered by a forced, worried smile on her part.

Before I can say another word, I sprint to the bathroom. Slamming the door shut, I bolt to the toilet, throwing up everything but my memories. Hugging the cold porcelain, I linger for awhile, when I peer down into the toilet bowl to see that my vomit is black. It looks just like the black, viscous substance that was seeping out from the demon’s teeth in my dream. Barely able to stand, I drag myself over to the sink, staring at myself in the mirror. I can barely recognize the pathetic, pale, shivering zombie of a person before me, the bags under my eyes so dark from lack of sleep that they look almost skeletal.

All of a sudden, the temperature drops, causing me to shiver. It’s so cold that my breath begins to form clouds in the air. Slowly turning to my left, I peer over at the shower door, which is coated in a thick fog—but the fog is moving. Through rapid, jagged movements, it appears as though someone is breathing on the other side against the glass. My heart skips a beat as I cautiously back away and towards the door. When I come out, I see Jade in the corner, sitting on the floor, hugging her knees close to her chest with her head down.

“Jade? You alright?” I ask, as I kneel down beside her.

Trembling, she peers up at me.

“I think, I just. . .” she trails off, with fear and trepidation in her voice. “I think I just saw whatever it is you pissed off.”

“What exactly did you see?” I ask her.

Finally, a possible witness; I finally have the chance to find out if this is all in my head like some crazy, psychosomatic nightmare, or if this is for real.

*I'm almost praying I'm just crazy. At least that can be solved with meds.*

I never told Jade what this thing looked like, so if she describes the creature I've seen, then I know I'm not crazy.

"It was jet-black, with twisted horns and jagged teeth," she whispers, staring off at the wall behind me as if picturing it all over again.

"Its eyes—did you see its eyes?" I ask abruptly, remembering how my fate was sealed after staring into the creature's eyes. I would never forgive myself if the same thing happened to Jade because of me.

"No, it didn't have any—just empty, black voids where the eyes should have been."

"Okay, good," I sigh in relief. "It's the eyes that mark the soul with the Saffron Curse. You'll be okay. What was it doing? Where was it?"

"It was just standing in the corner of the dining room staring at me, then it disappeared when you came out of the bathroom."

"Come on," I offer, extending my hand out to her. "Let me take you to bed."

"But—"

"But nothing. There's nothing we can do, Jade," I mutter hopelessly, pulling her up from the floor.

I lead her trembling body to the bed, where I pull down the covers and tuck her in. I can't believe this is happening. As if having this thing after me wasn't bad enough, now it's showing itself to people I care about. Who knows what it's capable of.

"Jade," I whisper softly while she forces my arms around her, as if I could actually keep her safe. "I might have to take off for a while."

"What? No! You can't, no! You can't just leave me, I need

you here. No! No!” she pleads repeatedly.

“Jade, I have to, at least until I find a way to get rid of this thing.” I try reasoning with her. “Please, you’ve got to understand. It’s for the best.”

“No,” she whimpers, as a stray tear escapes her right eye. “Tyler, *please*.”

“Alright, alright,” I whisper gently, soothing her and stroking her head. “I’m not going anywhere. I’m here, it’s okay.”

That’s probably both the best and worst lie I’ve ever told. Maybe I’m getting a little too good at this whole lying thing, but I can’t afford to keep putting her in danger. As it is, I’ve already probably done more harm than good to Rebecca, and now it seems as if my misfortune is spreading to everyone around me like a disease. I just can’t stay here. Either I go, and they have a fighting chance at survival, or I stay, and they all die at the hands of the Soul Eater that’s using them as pawns in a sick game to try and destroy me. I can’t let my friends suffer for my mistakes.

It’s come down to one big decision—it’s either me, or the people I love, and I’ll be *damned* if their blood is on my hands.

## THE HOLLOW-EYED WITCH

Six months have passed since I've been branded by the Saffron Curse, and shit's really hit the fan. I've tried everything, but things have just gone from bad to worse. I've investigated all kinds of religions and branches of the occult—everything from witchcraft and Wicca, to Catholicism, to ritualistic Satanism—and none have given me any solid leads so far. If anything, I'm just more lost and confused than when I started.

I've tried more traditional methods of salvation, such as getting blessed, exorcisms—hell, even drinking straight holy water—to more unusual methods, such as smudging my house with sage; but nothing seems to be able to get rid of this damn curse.

I have, however, picked up a few tricks along this hellish journey to help keep the demons at bay, such as specific chants to banish them; it won't kill them though, and is a temporary method at best. All it really does is manages to piss them off, making things worse when they do finally come back around.

I've been all over the country for several months now, thinking I could run from this, but that's the thing about demons—they're omniscient and omnipresent. It's impossible to hide or outsmart them. I need to broaden out and try to find some other courses of action if I'm going to survive this.

I'm at the coffee shop right now doing research on a demon that's been taunting me for nearly two months. It's strange; the Soul Eater has gone M.I.A., and now all of a sudden this new demon has shown up. It's not the only one plaguing me, but it is the most constant and persistent out of all the fiends. All I know is that I can't let my guard down for a second. That's how demons work; they wait for you to let your guard down in a weak moment, and then they attack, and that's how you end up dead.

I've just polished off my sixth cup of Turkish-roast coffee. I don't get a whole lot of sleep these days. I've found that it's when I'm asleep that I'm most prone to the attacks, so I've just decided to avoid sleep altogether. I know that there's only so long I can go without it, but I'm trying my best to fight it for as long as I can. At this point, I'm at Day 6 of no sleep, and I don't know how much longer I can keep this up.

I tiredly get up, cracking my knuckles as I drag myself to the counter to order another cup. The woman behind the counter smiles at me, with a mixed look of incredulity and bemusement.

"Another black?" she chirps.

"Yes, please," I yawn, as I sift through my pocket, finally handing her a bunch of change.

"You're a Christian?" she asks, nodding at my chest.

I look down to see that my crucifix has fallen out of my shirt. I hastily tuck it away from sight. "Uh, no, not really."

"What's with the cross then?" she inquires, her eyebrows arched in confusion.

*Geez, what is this? The Spanish Inquisition?*

I hesitate, shooting her a death glare.

"I'm sorry, I'm being rude. I didn't mean—"

"It's a personal matter," I interrupt. "And I'm not very fond of talking about religious things, *especially* with people I don't know."

"Well, I'll get that coffee for you," she murmurs awkwardly

as she scuttles away.

She comes back with a steaming cup, which I gratefully take before heading back to my seat. I hesitate drinking it, wondering if she's spit in it due to our little squabble back there, but I can't be bothered; spit or no spit, I need the caffeine, and I'll take spit-coffee over a demonic attack anyway.

Taking a long sip, I continue my research on the demon that's been plaguing me. I hear the chime of the front door, and see someone come into the coffee shop out of the corner of my eye. A few seconds later, I can see someone standing next to me in my peripheral vision, but I ignore them, continuing my research. When the person lingers next to me far longer than appropriate, I finally look over in annoyance.

It's a little girl in a tattered, white sundress, with long, raven hair that stands out against her freakishly pale complexion. Her face is expressionless, and her grey eyes are cold and empty, as if she weren't a child at all. She continues to penetrate me with her icy gaze, when suddenly she stops, making her way to the other side of the small, round table I'm sitting at. Placing her palms down flat on the center of the table, she continues to relentlessly stare at me for a few minutes.

*Okay, this is really starting to get old. Is part of the Saffron Curse also being a magnet for the idiots of society?*

"You're being rude," she utters chillingly, as if having read my thoughts. She reaches over and closes my laptop, taking the already annoying violation of my personal space to a whole new level.

*Is this kid for real? You've got to be kidding me. What is with people today?*

"Are you lost or something, little girl?" I feign nice, trying to ask as politely as possible.

"Not nearly as much as you," she mutters blandly, her voice laden with hidden innuendo as if she knows something about

me she's not saying.

As she leans toward me, I smell the awful stench of decay and cigarette smoke, and that's when it hits me—she's no little girl; she's the demon that's been after me, the very demon I was just researching right now. That trademark rotten, cigarette smoke smell always fills the air when she's near. I think about running, when she speaks again.

“Don't even think about it,” she commands, her tone freakishly cold and monotone. “Or I'll kill you and everyone in this place.”

“What do you want?” I ask her, point blank.

“What do *you* think, silly?”

I don't answer her, still in shock that this is all going down right here, in a coffee shop full of people, out in the open, instead of at home alone or in my bed.

“Well come on, guess!” she screams, her voice full of authority far beyond her years, or at least how many years old she *appears* to be.

The entire coffee shop full of people are staring at us now, and I have a fleeting thought of wondering if she would really do something to me in front of all these people, hence spoiling her little charade.

“Answer me!” she persists, her tone now full of anger and dripping with venom.

“My soul,” I murmur.

She stares back at me with a bright smile and leans forward, causing me to tremble with fear. Lightly tapping my nose with her finger, she grins.

“*Bingo*,” she whispers. “But it's not as simple as just ripping your guts out like I usually do in your dreams, Tyler. I need time, and that's exactly what I'm going to get.”

“So you came here just to tell me that?” I retort whilst crossing my arms, my tone dangerously trying and dripping with smart-ass. “Do you always waste your time like this, or am I just special?”

“I wasn't finished!” she hisses. “And don't you dare start running your mouth Tyler Dawson, or you're liable to have

your tongue cut out, *pathetic swine.*”

She smiles a sinister grin that chills me to the bone, and I know her threats aren't empty.

“I'm actually here to take care of some. . . *insurance,*” she draws, lightly tapping her fingers on the table.

With each successive tap the table begins to rot, spreading a necrotic fungus from the tips of her finger, branching outward.

“What are you doing?” I whisper in panic.

“Insurance,” she reiterates. “Don't worry. They'll die *torturously, agonizingly slow,* thanks to you.”

All the tables are completely covered in rot now, along with a large portion of the floor, and everything the rotten fungus touches soon turns to ash.

“Stop it,” I plead, ripping her hand from the table.

Her face contorts in anger as she rips her hand from me with a hiss. Her eyes are now empty sockets, and her mouth is sewn shut with thick, tattered X-shaped stitches of yarn. Now old and decrepit looking, her false facade of youth is gone, and her long, raven hair has turned wiry, patchy, and white. Taking the form of a little girl to disguise her true, dark, decaying inner nature is the first ploy in the demon handbook; I don't know how I didn't realize it sooner.

The rotting fungus has crept upon everything in the coffee shop now, but no one seems to notice until suddenly, the ash starts to creep up to the people themselves. Cries of pain and terror flood the coffee shop, as people start running for their lives in fear of the sight before them. As the fungus crawls up people's bodies, their limbs slowly begin to rot and turn to ash, falling off and hitting the floor. I freeze in place, horrified.

“You did this,” she hisses. “Just remember that the next time you think of trying something.”

A man crawls on the floor toward me, his face twisted in agony and horror, his body now covered in the rotting fungus.

“Please. . . help,” he pleads, grabbing my arm with pure fear in his eyes.

My eyes wide and my mouth agape, I freeze in shock, completely unable to move or speak as the man desperately

pulls at my arm. All I can do is watch helplessly as the man turns to ash in my arms, falling to a pile at my feet. The ash is flaky and strangely reeks of burnt paper and tobacco, as if it was cigarette ash.

*This can't be happening. This is just another dream. Wake up, Tyler. Wake up!*

I squint my eyes shut, hoping that when I open them all of the death and horror around me will be gone, and that I'll be in bed. I open them to find that the screams are only louder, and the body count has risen tenfold.

"Please, stop!" I beg her. "I'll never try anything again, I promise. Just don't kill them for my mistakes! They are innocent people!"

Throwing her head back, she giggles a cold, dark, sinister laugh. "You just had to fight. You just had to try to find a way to break the Saffron Curse. You just had to try and get rid of us."

I notice her mouth is no longer moving, and that I am hearing her speak in my head.

"Why?" I spit, clenching my jaw. "Why *them*!?"

"To teach you a lesson, Tyler. No matter what you do, you'll never be able to stop us. You will never get rid of us, and you are an arrogant fool to think you could. Never cross us again, Tyler, or next time you will have the blood of an entire school of children on your hands; that's a promise. You'd be wise to remember that."

The chair breaks beneath my body as the little girl slowly comes my way with her palms facing me. As she advances towards me, my body slides back. It's like I no longer have control of my own body as I continue to slide backward until I hit the wall, and that's when I realize it—she's using telekinesis. She's glaring at me and twisting her hand in the air when I feel like my bones are breaking and my organs are being twisted in a meat grinder. The more she nears, the worse the pain gets, as if she's breaking my bones inside of me and using them to

treacherously stab my own organs. Finally, she stops in front of me, kneeling down so that we're face to face. I can see that her empty eye-sockets aren't empty at all, and that there's something whirling around inside her head, like an endless black vortex of pure darkness.

"You see, Tyler, you can banish us, send us back to Hell, and fight us all you want. Go ahead, try. All you will achieve is to piss us off even more, and when we get pissed off, people die. You're just meat to us—dinner, a small morsel to whet the appetite—but I'll be damned if I don't have a little fun with you first. Your weak soul will be that much tastier once it's broken down and full of pain, sorrow, and despair," she mouths, cold and calculating. She stands up, her emotionless, black voids never once leaving me as the ground melts beneath her into a portal, and right before she drops through it, she turns to me and says something that stops my heart. "You're going to die a violent, bloody death, Tyler, but I won't spoil the surprise. Adios."

*Wait a second—did she just say what I think she said? There is only one person I know that always says that. Could it be? It can't be. . .*

*Amber.*

## JANE DOE

Ever since my run-in with the Hollow-eyed Witch at the coffee shop, I've been on the run and living a life of solitude. It's my method for making sure no more innocent people die by the hand of the Hollow-eyed Witch on my watch, because of my mistakes. If I'm always alone, who can she kill, but me? Besides, at this point, death doesn't seem as horrible an option as it did a few months ago.

I've been making my way up North for the past eight months, and now I'm in Canada, but to be honest, I'm tired. I've been running from demons for too long—I'm done. I can't do this anymore. I've reached my wits end, and life just doesn't seem worth living. The way I see it, a life of running, hiding, and being in a constant and perpetual state of fear is no life at all. Most days it seems that it'd be so much easier to just give in and end it all, and today is one of those days.

I've searched for any way of breaking this curse—of somehow getting my life back—but nothing seems to work, and I always just end up doing more harm than good. I've lost everything, and have been forced to leave anything or anyone I ever truly loved behind. Life has just become an ongoing game of survival, barely getting by from one day to the next, just to do it all over again tomorrow. Thoughts like these are what

caused me to wake up this morning wanting to blow my brains out, but I should be so lucky. You see, being on the constant run with no job, home, or money, means you can't afford luxuries like a quick, painless, gun-induced death. Looks like my knife will have to do.

I am currently residing—or slumming it, rather—in the broke-down city of Regina. During the day it's alright, but after dusk, the dregs of society seem to flourish. I'm looking for a good place to do the deed, and figure one of my standby park benches or alley-ways will do. I reckon that I'll just off myself and go to sleep. I have a fleeting thought of how poetic it would be to finally kill myself and then be able to go to sleep and dream, the only sleep I'll ever have without fear of demonic attacks; just a peaceful slumber that will never end, where I never have to wake up to this living Hell again.

“Hey baby,” a prostitute beckons me, running her hand along my shoulder. She reeks of cigarettes and cheap hairspray, and her teeth are decayed from the overuse of crack and methamphetamine.

“Sorry Hun, I'm broke,” I smile, trying to feign nice.

“Well I think we can work something out,” she implores, blocking my way. “What do you say I give you a sample, baby?”

“Sorry, not interested,” I mumble, pushing past her, my shoulder bumping her out of my way.

“Don't fucking ignore me, faggot!” she spits. “Are you a faggot? You are, aren't you?”

“If that's what helps you sleep at night, sweetheart,” I mutter over my shoulder as I walk away.

“Fucking fag!” she yells vindictively as she stomps off, her scream reverberating throughout the dead city-streets, as her worn down high-heels angrily clunk away on the pavement.

I ignore her, continuing down the sidewalk until I come to a wide alley, and to my surprise, no one's in here. I walk to one of the dumpsters and sit down beside it with a heavy, exhausted sigh, unloading the few belongings I have left, dropping them to the floor. As I sit on the cold asphalt,

surrounded by the stench of garbage and mold, I think about how I have nothing left to live for. I'm probably never going to see my friends or family again, I've left everything behind I ever gave a damn about, I tried to help Rebecca and probably did her more harm than good, and now I'm paying for it. Hell, I doubt I'll ever see her again either. What a waste. I highly doubt I'll ever find a way to break this curse upon my soul; there is no way out for me. I'm at the end of the road here.

I contemplate my miserable existence, and think about how helpless and out of control I've felt with my own life the past few months, as if I'm just futilely stumbling around in the dark trying to find my way out, when I'm on a one-way street to Hell, and that's never going to change. I'm going to die regardless; it might as well be by my own hand, rather than from that of monsters from another plane of existence. If I'm going out, it might as well be on my own terms, not theirs. I guess this is my way of taking my life back—my life that I have absolutely no control over anymore.

I can feel tears start to well up as I bring the blade to my wrist.

Alright, Tyler; this is it. Just breathe.

Biting down on my lip, I dig the blade in hard at my wrist, running it halfway up my forearm. I'm nowhere near ready for the searing pain that shoots up my arm, as the copious amounts of blood start to drip all over my lap. It hurts a lot more than I thought it would, and is the first real thing I've felt in months. I've been so numb and detached, but the pain I'm experiencing rushes through me like adrenaline. I quickly make an attempt at my other arm, before I lose my nerve. The knife drops from my trembling hands to the ground with a clanging sound, and I can barely move my fingers from the nerve damage I've just done, the blade having turned them and my ligaments into organic confetti.

The world around me begins swirling, and the sounds of the honking cars and yelling people start to echo and drain away. My vision starting to go black, my body becomes cold and weightless. It seems that the more the blood flows out of

me, the more the pain starts to go away. All of that pain that has weighed so heavily on my heart—the horrors I've seen, my loss, suffering, and despair—all of it seems to uplift from my being. I linger in silence and close my eyes, drifting away into darkness as I slowly create a scarlet puddle on the asphalt, having fleeting thoughts of what was, what could have been, and what just plain isn't.

I'm somewhere warm, and lying on soft sheets. My eyes flutter open, and my teeth immediately clench at the throbbing pain. I'm in a bed; it's hard to see. There doesn't seem to be any windows, so I can't tell if it's day or night. I run my hands over my wrists, noticing that they're wrapped up in bandages. As my vision starts to focus and adjust to the light, I can see that the walls are a dark, pine green, and that the room is extremely plain, with only the essentials: a dusty, old lamp, a nightstand, an empty closet, and the bed I'm sitting in. I start to sit up, when I look down to find that I'm completely naked under the covers.

What the hell happened last night? Where am I? Don't tell me Toothy McCrackmouth took me to her druggie den and took advantage of me while I was dying. That would be just your luck, Tyler. Typical.

Grasping the sheets to my body, I look around the room. I clumsily attempt to get out of bed, losing my balance as I fall backward onto the mattress. I sit up, trying to gather my bearings. The hard floor feels cold beneath my feet. My head is pounding and I'm dizzy, from all the blood loss I imagine, and I've never been more thirsty in my life. I cautiously stand up, putting my hand along the wall for balance, as I make my way over to the door. I slowly stick my head out into the hallway, not sure where I am, who's here with me, or if this is possibly another demon trick. I listen attentively, but all I can hear are birds chirping outside; it must be daytime. It's dead silent in the house, and the hallway is nearly pitch-black. I fumble around the walls for a light switch as I walk, flipping one on to find that I'm in a living room now. There's no windows in here either, and the flooring is dark-brown hardwood. I suddenly

feel uneasy, and withdraw back into the safety of the bedroom. Closing the door, I notice there's a note taped to it, which I hadn't seen before. I rip it off and hold it to the light of the lamp, squinting to try and focus my blurry vision the best I can.

*Morning, Sleeping Beauty.*

*You looked so peaceful, I didn't want to wake you. I will be back later tonight. Please don't leave until I get a chance to speak to you. There are many things we have to talk about. In the meantime, make yourself at home. There's food in the fridge, and your clothes have been washed and pressed; they are sitting on top of the dryer in the kitchen. There's a shower at the end of the hall if you care to use it. Feel free to explore.*

*Oh, and please—do NOT try to go into the room at the left end of the hall. That is all I ask.*

*Otherwise, mi casa es su casa.*

*Until tonight...*

*V.*

Well at least she didn't say Adios—thank god.

At least I assume it's a she, judging by the nice handwriting that's far from my drunken looking chicken-scratch. What the hell is going on here? I don't know if I should be jumping for joy that I'm not dead, or shitting my pants at the fact that some psycho might be holding me hostage. Is this a case of Good Samaritan, or Fatal Attraction? Who is this person, and what the hell do they want? So many questions that need answering. . .but first, FOOD.

I slowly go back into the hallway, clutching the sheets around my waist as I start to walk towards what I presume to be the kitchen, until curiosity gets the best of me. Staring at the far end of the hall, I cautiously tiptoe over to the last door on the left—the ever elusive, “forbidden door.” Holding my breath, I place my ear flat against it, listening for something—

anything—but there's nothing. It's dead quiet, no rustling, footsteps, or sounds indicating a presence of any kind, just silence.

God, Tyler; she gives you one simple instruction of what not to do, and of course that's the one thing you're doing. Stop being a snoop.

But I have to know more—about this person, who she is, why I'm here. I apprehensively raise my hand to the door handle trying to turn it, but it's locked. I back away from the door, coming to my senses, realizing that I really shouldn't be doing this. My subconscious is screaming at me to back the hell off, and if there's one good thing that this lengthy battle against demons has taught me, it's to always listen to your gut.

I do my best to forget about the mystery-door, and continue my self-given house tour. I head over to the kitchen, and am greeted by a dingy, old, pea soup-green refrigerator that looks like it's straight out of the Seventies. The floor is black and white checkered like a chess board, and the counters are a grey, washed-stone finish, like concrete or soapstone. The cupboards are all black lacquered, and there is a small card-players foldout table in the center with one chair. I open the cupboards to discover there are no plates, cutlery, or cups of any kind, which I find odd. To the right of the kitchen is the laundry room. I enter inside to find my clothes neatly folded on the dryer, and somehow devoid of all the blood stains that should be on them.

Okay, this person is mysterious, elusive, and knows how to get massive amounts of blood out of clothing. This can't be good.

I still haven't noticed a single window in the place, as I walk on in search of a way out. I notice the backdoor, and quickly rush to it. I frantically turn the handle, but the door won't budge. Looking up, I notice that it's due to a deadbolt that's openable by key only, and there's no latch of any kind.

Accepting the fact that I'm now officially stuck here, I figure I might as well make the best of it and take advantage of that shower offer. It's been a while since I've taken a halfway

decent shower that didn't consist of Wet Naps and the sink at the 711 bathroom. I walk down the hall toward where she said the bathroom was, flipping on the switch as I enter. I can't help but notice all of the girly items, as I scan the collection of perfumes and lotions. My eyes stop on the hot-pink razor sitting on the bathtub ledge.

Yup, definitely a female.

I question if I'm secure enough with my sexuality and manhood to shave with a hot-pink, girl's razor. I decide to just go ahead and use it, as I haven't had a shave in weeks—the Raspberry Rain shaving cream is where I draw the line though. After my shower, I flounce out the bathroom smelling like a chick, but at least I'm clean. It feels good to be clean and to strip away the weeks-worth of dirt and grime. I throw on my clean clothes and start to head back toward the bedroom, when I notice that there's another door.

I walk up to the door, noticing yet another deadbolt under lock and key, with no latch. I hastily approach it, turning the handle and giving it a hard pull, but this one is locked as well.

Is this woman seriously keeping me prisoner?

I clench my jaw in frustration, muttering curse words under my breath as I walk away at yet another failed attempt at freedom. I contemplate possibly waiting beside the door for the woman to come home, then jumping her and sprinting out first chance I get. I search around for something to possibly hit her over the head with, but there's nothing around this stripped house. Maybe I'm being paranoid. Maybe she's nice. After all, she did save my life. I decide on giving the mysterious, non-eating, girly smelling, laundry doing, nurse woman a chance. Maybe she won't be so bad.

I figure I might as well relax and get some food, as it's been a few days since I've had a decent meal as well. I open the ugly, pea-green refrigerator door in search of food, only to find it's completely bare, except for a small carton of recently purchased milk, fresh bread, and brand-new jelly, as judging by the expiration dates and un-open status of the items. It seems as if she bought the food just for me. I make a couple of

## LOST TESTAMENT: SOUL EATER

sandwiches and scarf them down, quaffing down a tall glass of milk with them. I decide to make a few more sandwiches for the road, for when I leave—if she lets me leave.

## THE RAVEN'S NEST

I open my eyes to the sound of rustling from the kitchen; I must've fallen asleep. The sounds behind me begin to grow louder, and I assume that the mystery woman must be home. Sitting up on the couch, I yawn and stretch as I sit up. I turn around to face the kitchen and greet her, when my mouth drops at the sight before me.

Standing in the middle of the checkered floor is a little girl, giggling sadistically. She appears to be no older than ten. Her mouth is sewn shut with tattered X's of yarn, and her dirty, white dress hangs in shreds on her frail body. I immediately recognize her as the Hollow-eyed Witch. Her ghastly, pale skin is covered in bloody slash marks, and her slick, black hair falls in greasy mounds around her angled shoulders. The overall stench emitting from her is nauseating, like a mixture of road-kill, sulfur, and cigarette smoke, causing me to gag as the churning in my stomach increases.

She turns her head upward to the ceiling as a muffled cry escapes her lips. The stitching on her mouth pulls at the seams, causing them to bleed intensely as tears start to leak from her eyes, as if she's trying desperately to tell me something, but can't; as if something has stifled her. The more she tries to scream, the more the stitches start to snap, until her mouth

opens with a deafening, shrill cry, causing me to cower to the ground in pain as I cover my ears.

Her hollow eyes penetrate me like dark voids, causing me to lose myself in them. She sets her hard gaze on me as she grinds two large butcher-knives together. She seems like such a contradiction as she begins towards me. Such innocence, yet tainted; a little girl, yet her gait and aura hold a wisdom and energy far beyond her years. She sobs with a deep sadness, yet she's full of such tremendous anger and fury; it's almost as if she's two people rolled into one.

Slowly, I begin backing away, as if any abrupt movements would suddenly trigger her to snap. She grins at me something sinister, as rows of jagged, sharp teeth reveal themselves. Blood pours down her chin and onto her chest, trickling down onto the floor and into a pool around her tiny, cracked feet. For a moment the two of us have a Mexican stand-off, glaring at each other, wondering who's going to make the first move. My slow, backward stance becomes urgent as I make a sudden desperate attempt to run, causing her to come charging at me. I'm no match for her as I barely get even two steps before I turn my head to look behind me and see her leaping over the couch like a wild animal, shrieking violently as she plunges the knife into my back.

I wake up in a cold sweat, my heart beating out of my chest, as I frantically look over the couch to the kitchen, checking for the little girl.

"Hey, it's alright. It was just a dream," a woman purrs, gently putting her hand on my shoulder, causing me to jump with surprise.

I'm still not sure if I'm truly awake or not, if the Hollow-eyed Witch is really here, or who this woman is beside me. My eyes continue darting about the room in a panic, as the woman patiently waits for me to calm down.

"Are you alright now?" she smiles.

I nod, not entirely sure of the answer to that question myself.

"What's your name?" she asks, her tone compassionate and

calming.

“Who are you and why are you keeping me here?” I reply suspiciously.

“You’re safe now, that’s what matters—so long as I keep you away from sharp objects,” she teases, as she softly places her hand on my shoulder, causing me to recoil away in fear and distrust. “I’m not going to hurt you; I saved you. Why would I save your life if I wanted to hurt you?”

She continues to stare at me patiently, awaiting my answer, but I’m still so shocked and shaken up I can’t seem to put words together long enough to form a sentence.

“My name is Victoria Swann. Pleased to officially make your acquaintance,” she says, offering her outstretched hand to me.

She has long, black, pin-straight hair that reaches her waist, dark, sapphire eyes, and large, pink lips. She isn’t wearing a stitch of makeup, but I must say, she is quite striking. She has flawless, pale, porcelain skin, and she is tall and slender. She’s wearing fitted black jeans with a tight, black tanktop that slightly exposes her cleavage. All in all, this woman is beautiful. If I wasn’t being tracked by demons on a daily basis, I might make an actual effort to get to know this woman a little more.

“Uh, Tyler,” I mumble. “How’d you find me?”

“I saw you in the alley, while I was going to get some food.”

“Not to sound ungrateful or anything, but why didn’t you just take me to the hospital, or call an ambulance?” I question.

“You were bleeding out; you wouldn’t have made it. My house was closer, and I’m pretty good with a needle and thread.”

“Well, thank you for everything Miss Swan, but I should be going,” I utter with a leery smile as I get up to leave, but the woman doesn’t budge. “Um, I need you to unlock the deadbolt, please.”

“Sit down,” she commands, her voice full of authority.

“Look lady, you can’t keep me locked up in here.”

“Sure I can,” she laughs, placing her hand on my chest. “I

don't want to though; I just want to talk for a little bit, that's all I ask. Please, Tyler, I don't get many visitors."

I don't know what it is, but when she makes contact with me, something draws me to her, as if her wish is my command. I immediately sit back down, staring straight back at her.

"So what exactly happened last night?" she says, outright.

"I tried to kill myself. What do you think?" I retort.

"Why?"

"Everyone's entitled to their secrets," I mutter, looking away.

"Well, maybe I can help. Are you in some kind of trouble?" she asks, tucking a stray lock of raven hair behind her ear. "Maybe I can help you out with that."

"You're joking, right?" I scoff. "No offense, but you're just some scrawny chick. What makes you think you can help me, even if I was in trouble?"

She leans back on the end of the couch, propping herself up by her elbow. A small, cocky grin grows on the left side of her lips as she squints over in my direction.

"I'm much stronger than I look, Tyler," she utters, as she tilts her head to the side, still fixating on me with her intimidating stare. "I could put you on the ground right here, right now, without breaking a sweat, and I could keep you there."

The intimidation factor strangely works, making me lean back from her a bit. It's strange, but I believe her. The uneasy feeling I'm getting from her is familiar, yet different. For a second I wonder if she might possibly be a demon, and if this is all a clever ruse just to mess with me. My suspicion becomes transparent when I eye her warily, causing her to giggle.

"What's wrong? I thought I was just some scrawny chick?" she chuckles. "Relax—I've got a gentle side too, you know; and I do actually want to help you."

"I appreciate that, but like I said, there's nothing you can do. Can I go now, please?"

"No one really knows I live out here. You'd be safe. You can stay awhile if you'd like," she offers, arching her eyebrows

with an endearing look of hope, mingled with a slight fear of rejection.

“Look, I can’t. It’s nice of you to offer, but—”

“Please?” she interrupts desperation in her voice. “I don’t get many visitors, and it gets lonely around here. I’m really easy to get along with, I promise. I’m clean, friendly, and I’m not a blanket hog. I’d really like the company. Please?”

*What’s with this woman? Why is she so desperate to have me around?  
What would someone like her even want with a guy like me?*

“Alright,” I concede, seeing that when it comes to this battle of the wills, I’m clearly going to lose.

“Perfect!” she says giddily, clapping her hands together.

Little does she know, I don’t actually plan on staying. As soon as I get the chance, I’m gone. I can’t shake this strange vibe I’m getting from her, and there’s something about her I still don’t trust. I’ll play along for now, pretend to play house guest; but as soon as she goes to sleep, I’m breaking out my banishing chant. Then, I’ll know if she’s a demon.

I slide my hand in my pocket, lightly clutching the little piece of paper that has the chant scribbled on it, and hold onto it like it’s gold.

## UNVEILING THE MASK

It's a little past two in the morning, and Victoria has yet to come back from work. She says she works at a "research facility doing case studies on sleep apnea," but the whole thing still sounds a little fishy to me. She's usually gone all night into the wee morning hours, and instead of coming back exhausted, she seems even more energetic than when she left. It's strange.

I keep pacing back and forth in front of the door, getting myself pumped up while waiting for her to come home, so I can finally tell her I refuse to be her prisoner anymore. Being cooped up in this house all day by myself is getting old, fast.

*This is ridiculous. I'm a grown man, and I'm letting some little, scrawny chick keep me prisoner. I've had it. When she comes home, I'm laying down the law.*

I hear someone walk up outside, and then the sound of the key inside the door knob.

"Hey," she chirps, as she steps inside, immediately turning around to lock the door again.

"Uh, hi," I reply nervously.

"You alright?"

"Look, um, you can't keep doing that," I say, gesturing

toward the lock.

“Of course I can. You just tried to kill yourself, Tyler; so far as I’m concerned, you’re on suicide watch, and it’s my responsibility to look after you. You may not want my help or feel like you even need my help, but if you don’t like it, then tough,” she says matter of factly, facing me with her arms crossed, as she leans with her back to the door.

“This is injustice! This is *kidnapping!*” I yell. “It’s my life and I should be allowed to take it if I so please, and I should be allowed to leave the goddamn house if I should so please! You can’t keep me here!”

As I go off on my tirade, Victoria continues to face me with a small grin on her face, her eyebrows arched as if she thinks my anger is amusing.

“What the hell is so funny?” I shout.

“Are you done now?”

“No! As a matter of fact, I’m not! How long do you insist on keeping me prisoner here? You’re not my mother!” I shriek, like a petulant child.

“Look, Tyler, I just want to help you. Why can’t you just accept that?”

“Why do you care so much?”

“I have my reasons,” she smirks.

“And what reasons are those?”

“None of your business,” she utters.

“Yeah, well I had my reasons for wanting to die, and you’ve officially made that your business. That’s grand. You can get involved in my life and business and pick my brain, but god forbid I do the same to you, hypocrite,” I hiss.

She continues to mockingly stare at me with that little smirk on her face, and it’s driving me insane.

“Fine, I’ll just take the key from you then,” I say wryly, as I take a step forward. I’m expecting her to back away, or at least move from the door, but she doesn’t budge an inch.

“Stop, *now,*” she mouths, slow and menacing. Her entire facial expression has changed, and her tone commands authority.

Dangling the keys in her hand, she waves them in front of my stunned face right before slipping them into her top.

“You want these? Well come and get em.’ I *dare you*,” she grins.

“Victoria, just let me go.”

“Not happening,” she drawls, in a sing-song voice.

At this point, I’m already fuming with anger, my pride and ego severely wounded at the fact I’ve let a small woman keep me prisoner. Frustration overcomes me and I advance towards her, ready to reach for the keys. Just before my hand is to make contact with her shirt, she swiftly grabs my wrist mid-air, not once taking her penetrating eyes off me. Her stare is intimidating, and is enough to make me regret what I’ve just done. I yank my hand away, shaking it in the air.

“Ow! That hurt! You crazy bitch!” I shriek.

“I’m telling you this only once, Tyler. You better stop, right now, or you’re going to get hurt. That was a mere warning in comparison to what you’ll get next time. It’s not a good idea to cross me,” she says plainly.

“Give me the damn key!” I roar, grabbing her and pinning her against the wall.

All of a sudden I’m falling, and before I know it, I’m on the ground with Victoria’s knee to my throat. It all happened so fast, like a blur. I try to toss her off, but it feels like a small elephant is on my chest.

“You done? Or are you going to make me hurt you?” she mouths, looking down at me.

“Oh, so this is you playing nice huh?” I grunt, barely able to speak.

“Actually, yes; yes it is. You really don’t know what I’m capable of, kid.”

“Kid?”

“Yes, *kid*. You’re lucky I didn’t break your hand for that. I’m going to let you up now. Don’t make me put you back down,” she bellows, as she stands and helps me to my feet, dusting off my back.

“What the hell? Are you a pro-wrestler or something?” I

ask sardonically, rubbing my neck.

“Or something. Ta ta,” she chirps, throwing a sexy look and coy wink over her shoulder as she saunters over toward her bedroom. “Sweet dreams.”

That night I go to sleep dreaming about sexy jail wardens.

I wake up to an uneasy feeling. I get up out of bed, slipping on some plaid pajama pants, and venture out into the kitchen for a glass of water.

As I tiptoe back to my bedroom, I pass “the forbidden door;” a.k.a. Victoria’s bedroom.

*She’s asleep. This would be the perfect time to try the demon banishing chant on her.*

I lightly place my hand on the knob and twist, and to my surprise, the door opens. I peer in, and see her peacefully sleeping away. Her naked body is intertwined in the sheets, and she is hugging a pillow.

I loudly swallow, summoning my nerve to do this. I slowly begin the chant, my voice barely audible and but a whisper. I’m halfway through the chant, and am expecting something to happen any second now.

When I finish the chant, and Victoria is still soundly asleep, I realize that she’s not a demon. When I see her quietly breathing out of her mouth in short pants, her eyes fluttering as she peacefully sleeps, I feel bad for a second. She looks so beautiful, and dare I say it—innocent.

I close the door as quietly as possible, before lightly treading back to my room. I scan the bookcase sitting along the wall, looking for a good read because I can’t sleep. I trail my finger along the spines of the books, seeing everything from J.D. Salinger’s “A Catcher in the Rye,” to Jack London’s “The Call of the Wild,” to Steinbeck’s “The Grapes of Wrath.” She clearly has good taste.

*Damn. These all look like first editions. These must have cost a fortune.*

My eyes continue to scan the books, when I settle on John Ajvide Lindqvist's "Let the Right One In." I grab the book, gingerly pulling it out of the bookcase. I curl up in bed and begin reading, and soon I fall asleep, dreaming about a scared little boy who lets a vampire take care of him.

I wake up to my stomach rumbling. It's been awhile since I've had anything to eat, and I'm sick of bread and jelly. I'm not sure whether it's night or day, since this house is devoid of any windows. I quietly enter into the kitchen, and pause when I see Victoria in the adjoining laundry room. Her side is turned to me, and she appears to be looking at something—a small picture. I notice her face looks genuinely sad, and there's a far-off look in her eyes, kind of like she's daydreaming. I clear my throat to announce myself, when she quickly shuffles her back to me and hastily shoves the picture in her pocket.

"Morning, sleepyhead," Victoria beams, turning around to face me. "Well, technically, late afternoon."

"Uh, ditto," I mumble, still a bit irked after last night, and how easy Victoria was able to take me down. "So, what's with the picture?"

"What picture?" she replies nonchalantly.

"The picture you were just looking at."

"I wasn't looking at anything. You must still be half-asleep," she utters, blinking at me like a deer in the headlights.

"I know what I saw. What's the big deal, anyway?"

"Look, just mind your own business, okay?" she hisses.

"Okay, okay. Jeez, cool your jets."

A long, uncomfortable pause ensues between us, as we regard each other quietly.

"So um, do you have anything to eat around here?" I question, finally breaking the silence.

"Yes, I went grocery shopping this morning," she beams proudly, as she opens the fridge revealing eggs, bread, juice, milk, and Jello. "I bought all the essentials."

"Jello, the classic, American necessity," I joke.

She frowns slightly, making me instantly feel bad for my

smartass remark.

“It’s okay. I uh, love Jello,” I mumble while feigning a smile, which is met with a happy grin on her part.

“So, Tyler, I’ve been doing some thinking, and you’re right; you’re a grown man, and you should be able to come and go as you please. If we’re going to be friends, we have to trust each other,” she says softly, with a mixed look of hope and apprehension in her eyes. “I’m not going to lock you in anymore. If you want to leave, then so be it; but I’d really like it if you’d stay a little longer. I am genuinely lonely, that’s the truth. I don’t have any friends, family—nothing. I’m putting myself out there right now, telling you all this; and I’m making you a deal. I trust that you’ll stick around a little longer, and I’m hoping that you’ll trust me enough to stay.”

The look on her face is so endearing, it’s hard to say no. Besides, I guess she’s not so bad. She’s trying, that’s for sure; and I suppose I can’t hate her for wanting to help me.

“Alright,” I concede, with a big sigh. “I’ll stay.”

“Thank you, Tyler” she whispers, placing her hand on my shoulder. “It means a lot to me.”

I walk over towards the fridge and grab two Jellos, peeling off the aluminum lids. I hand her one, while she gives me a weird look.

“To a new friendship,” I offer, holding up the Jello as if it was a glass. “Cheers.”

She eyes me strangely, staring down at the green, jiggly substance as if it was the most repulsive, disgusting thing on the planet. My Jello in hand lingers in the air, until finally she cracks a smile and clicks hers to mine.

“Cheers,” she mutters, smiling brightly.

I knock back the Jello, slurping it out of the plastic container, while she eyes me speculatively. She stares down at her own Jello, looks back up at me, then back down again, right before knocking it back. She looks confused, as if she doesn’t know whether to chew it or drink it. After she swallows it down, she starts to gag.

“You okay?” I ask.

“Yeah, I’ll be fine. Went down the wrong side,” she mutters.

We smile at each other for a little bit, and I could swear we’re having a moment.

“Hey, were you smoking in the house?” she suddenly asks, sniffing the air.

“Huh? No. I don’t smoke.”

“Cut the shit, Tyler. I can smell it, coming from your bedroom,” she says firmly.

“Victoria, I swear. I don’t smoke,” I reaffirm.

“Then how come I can smell cigarette smoke?”

Victoria walks past me toward the bedroom to investigate. When she passes me, I get a quick look at her eyes, and I could swear that they are a bright, neon hue of orange. I follow closely behind, entering in the room after her. I can now smell the stench of cigarette smoke as well, along with that familiar, rotten, sulfuric smell.

“Oh no. . .she followed me here,” I whisper under my breath.

“What?” she asks, turning to me.

“Um, nothing,” I mumble.

She leans toward me, sniffing my bare chest, running her nose upward all the way to my lips, where she then hovers for a few seconds. Having her this close to me is making me shake, and the feeling is intense; kind of like a mix between fear, desire, and an adrenaline rush. She eyes me suspiciously for a bit before retreating, and I notice her eyes are back to their usual shade of dark blue.

“Well, I know you’re telling the truth, because I can’t smell it on you,” she utters. “But it’s a mystery to me why your room smells like this.”

“I don’t know,” I mutter, acting completely oblivious.

Suddenly, an ear-piercing shriek reverberates throughout the house, causing both of our heads to turn.

*Oh no...*

## THE BRIGHTER SIDE OF SUFFERING

It's been two months since I've been living with Victoria, and for the first time in a very long time, life is good. I've got a steady job as a bartender at the local pub downtown, and for some strange reason, I haven't had any more problems with demons since the Hollow-eyed Witch made an appearance at the house the day after my arrival. It seems that right around the time I moved in with Victoria is when all the hell stopped.

I'm finally sleeping again, and Victoria has proved to be a fast friend. We have grown incredibly close these past couple of months, and looking back, it's almost as if she was a blessing in disguise—my guardian angel. If it weren't for her, I'd be dead right now; instead, I'm happy again, and have been able to move on and live a somewhat normal life.

I'm on my way to work, and it's a beautiful night. There isn't a single cloud in the sky, and the stars are starting to peek out one by one the closer I get to my destination. It has just rained, and the air has that crisp quality to it. Crossing through the forest, I think about how much I appreciate living out in the middle of nowhere. The sky is so much brighter, the stars that much clearer, and there's a quiet serenity you get out here that you can never get in the city.

As I reach the end of the forest trail, I say goodbye to the

quiet as the first sound of city noise assaults my ears. The cars whiz by, honking at each other, as I make my way down the street toward the pub. The pavement is damp, and the streets are slick with motor oil, reflecting an opalescent glow on the asphalt beneath the city lamp posts that decorate the avenue.

As I swing open the door to O'Malley's, the pub I work at, I am greeted by my always cheerful coworker, April.

"Ay! Dawson! What's good?" she yells cheerfully over her shoulder while polishing some wine glasses.

"Shit, it's colder than Santa's balls outside," I mutter, shrugging off my leather jacket and gray scarf.

"Hey! Language!" she scolds with an impish smirk, right before whipping my backside with a bar towel.

"What? We're in a bar for fuck's sake, April—not church."

The bar isn't too crowded tonight, as it's a weeknight and it's been raining all day. One of our regulars is here—Rita. She's middle-aged and slender, with shoulder-length, brown, wavy hair. She's always dressed to the nines, even though this is just a pub. Tonight she's wearing a tight, red, satin dress that shows way too much cleavage, and is clutching a white mink shawl to her bare shoulders. She's a bit of a cougar, and is always making it known that she would love to take me home with her.

"Hey, Tyler. Looking good, honey. Another of the usual, please," she drawls.

"Sure thing, Rita. One dry martini, coming up."

"Extra dirty," she mouths, with a naughty grin. "Just the way I like it."

I get to making her drink, making sure to pour in the extra olive juice before I serve it to her. She slickly slides me a twenty across the counter.

"Keep the change, handsome," she winks.

"Thanks, Rita," I mumble awkwardly, trying my best to feign a smile.

Rita is just one of the many regulars we have in here. These lost souls come in here, day after day, drowning their sorrows in their liquor, talking my ear off about all the ways their life

has been a failure. Some of them scream, some of them cry; but most of them just wallow.

“I’m going to go powder my nose. Have another martini ready for me when I get out, doll,” she says wryly, as she gets up and saunters over toward the restroom, her four-inch leopard heels clicking against the hardwood floor.

I’m depositing some money into the cash register when I hear someone walk up behind me and sit down.

“Can I help you?” I mumble over my shoulder.

“Yes, you can. I’d like a drink, please.”

“Sure, what can I get ya?”

“I’ll take an Adios.”

“One Adios, coming right up,” I reply, not even bothering to turn around.

I grab the tequila, rum, vodka, gin, blue Curacao, and sweet and sour mixer, throwing them into a cocktail shaker with ice. Shaking it over my shoulder, I strain the concoction into a tumbler before grabbing the soda gun and topping it off with Sprite.

I’m suddenly taken aback by the strong smell of cigarette smoke behind me.

“Hey, you can’t smoke in here,” I mutter over my shoulder to the girl, as I finish up her drink.

Suddenly, a loud scream reverberates throughout the entire bar. All the patrons immediately stop what they’re doing, their widened eyes all turning to the restroom, where the noise came from.

I turn around to see what the commotion is about, when I see her there. It’s the Hollow-eyed Witch, and she’s standing right in front of me, smiling at me with an evil, sinister grin. I drop the drink, the glass shattering all over the floor at my feet.

“Tyler? What’s wrong? Are you okay?” April yells, rushing to me.

But I can’t say a word. It’s all happening so fast. I stare at the witch in shock, but nobody else seems to see her there, except me. The patrons all rush to the source of the noise, running toward the restroom and throwing open the door. The

sight inside stops my heart.

It's Rita, and she's lying on the floor perfectly still. Her mouth is wide open, her face is twisted and contorted in agony, and her eyes are wide with fear. April rushes over to the body, placing two fingers on Rita's carotid artery on her neck.

"She's dead. . ." she murmurs. "She must've died of a heart attack."

But I know better. This is the work of the Hollow-eyed Witch. She's getting her revenge for me finally being happy and living a normal life again. She told me not to run, and I did, and now I—or Rita—is paying the price.

"Um, I've gotta go," I mumble under my breath, barely able to stumble out of the bar.

When I bust through the door to the outside, it's pouring rain. The once calm, beautiful night is now stormy and harsh, as water pounds onto my head. Throwing my hood up over my head, I start to pick up the pace. The loud sound of thunder claps around me, making me jump. Every person I see looks like they could be a demon, and every person who passes me I'm convinced is going to kill me. The paranoia I said goodbye to a couple months ago is now back in full-force, with its mocking grin that says, "*I told you so.*"

I pull my jacket closed tighter, jamming my hands in my pockets as the rain starts to come down even harder. I decide to hang a sharp right into the darker, more dangerous area of the forest to take a short cut home, as I'm in no mood to be walking outside right now, scared and paranoid that everyone's out to get me—that *she's* out to get me.

As I walk through the trees, I think about how damn stupid I am.

*I am such an idiot. What was I thinking letting my guard down? This is what happens when you pull down your guard and get too comfortable, Tyler.*

Victoria's house is about a mile into the forest, and at the pace I'm walking, I'm almost there with about a half mile to

go. All of a sudden, I hear footsteps behind me, or rather, the sound of crunching leaves in a rhythmic pattern that mimics someone's gait. I quicken my pace, and so does the person behind me. I'm afraid to look, like if I look, it makes this all real again. I'm dreading turning around and seeing her behind me, her black, hollow voids penetrating me, and her horrid, stitched up mouth shrieking my name.

I have less than a quarter mile left, and I can see the dim light of the house; I'm almost in the clear. I decide to bolt and make a run for it, sprinting for my life the last quarter mile. I sprint all the way up the hill until I reach the house.

Busting through the door, I stand there dripping all over the hardwood floors as Victoria stares up at me wide-eyed.

"Tyler? Is everything okay? Why aren't you at work?" Victoria looks up at me from her video game, setting the controller down on the table.

I stand there, frozen, my breathing ragged and disjointed. Victoria continues to stare at me with a questioning look.

"Tyler?" she questions again softly, stroking my arm.

"Um, nothing. It's nothing. Storms just give me the heebie jeebee's, that's all," I utter.

"You're shivering. Here, let's get you out of these wet clothes."

I nod, in a daze, as Victoria slowly starts to peel off my sopping wet jacket and shirt. She grabs the blanket from my room and puts it around me, but it's doing nothing to calm my shivering—shivering not only from the cold, but from fear.

I clutch the blanket tighter but it's freezing in the house, although Victoria doesn't seem to feel it as she's in a tanktop and only sleeps with sheets.

"Hey, do you have any more blankets?" I utter to her, my teeth chattering incessantly.

"No, I don't. I'm sorry," she relents. "We can get some tomorrow night if you want."

"I don't want to be a bother," I murmur.

"Ugh! How many times do I have to tell you, Tyler? You're not a bother, a burden, or a headache. You're my friend, and

it's my job to protect you and take care of you. Besides, I don't want you catching a cold."

"Okay, but I'll pay for them. Deal?" I reason.

"Alright," she sighs, shaking her head. "If it makes you feel better."

"Alright then. Goodnight, Vic."

I clutch the tiny, thin blanket around me as I tread to my room, but I'm still frozen to my core. I immediately throw myself into bed, covering myself with anything I possibly can, from the sheets, to the mattress cover, to even the pillows. My eyes are starting to get heavy when I hear my door creak open, before shutting again.

"It's me," I hear Victoria's voice whisper.

"What's up?"

I feel the blanket lift up on the other side, and feel the weight of the bed shift as she climbs in.

"It's really cold in my room too. We can keep each other warm. You don't mind do you?"

"Umm, uhh," I trail off nervously.

"It's alright. I won't bite," she whispers playfully, snuggling up close as she presses her chest to my back.

"Are you—" I start to question, when I feel cold flesh against me. "Are you *naked*?"

"I read somewhere that in dire situations, the best way to warm up is to strip off your clothes and huddle together, skin on skin," she says matter of factly.

I nervously swallow, completely nervous at the fact that I have an attractive, naked girl in my bed; and furthermore, it's Victoria.

As she breathes on the back of my neck, I shiver. Her breath is arctic and worse than the temperature of the room itself; but I don't have the heart to turn her away. What am I supposed to do?

*"Hello, attractive, naked woman. Get lost, I'm cold."*

*Yeab, I don't think so.*

So I tolerate it, because I just enjoy being close to her, coldness and all.

“Tyler?” she yawns.

“Yeah?” I whisper, turning over to face her.

“Why did you stay here?”

“Because you’re so dead sexy,” I joke, poking her stomach.

“Seriously!” she hisses with a smile, slapping me on the chest.

“Well, to be honest, I didn’t want to stay at first, as you know; but after getting to know you more, I changed my mind.”

“Can I ask you something more personal?” she asks.

“Shoot.”

“Why did you try to take your life the night I found you in the alley?” she questions.

*Shit. I knew this was coming. Should I tell her the truth? No, I can't. Like she'd believe me anyway. She'd probably think I was crazy and want nothing to do with me. I can't afford to lose her.*

“Um, things just kinda got out of hand. I got into some serious trouble a few years ago, and I had to pull up stakes and bail. Finally, I just couldn’t deal with it all anymore; I saw no other way out. . .” I trail off, as all the memories of my troubled past flood back to me. “I hope you never see it catch up to me, Vic.”

“I won’t press anymore. Just know that you can tell me anything, and that no matter what happens, I have your back. You can trust me, Tyler,” she says fondly, as she buries her head into my chest.

It’s moments like these that I see the brighter side of suffering. I’ve been through hell, yes, but if it wasn’t for all that, I wouldn’t have met Victoria. Because of her, I know what a real friend is, what love is, what security is. Although I’m scared, I know it’ll be okay as long as she’s around for me to lean on. Even if I could go back and change it all, knowing that she’d be the end result, I wouldn’t change a thing. She is

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my rock, my entity, my silver lining—my Victoria.

## A SHAKEN BOND

After Tyler drifts off to sleep, I stay with him to keep him warm—or at least that’s my excuse. I feel very protective over Tyler, and I’ve grown quite fond of him over the past couple of months. Hell, I might even be falling for him.

I think I’m slowly winning him over as well, seeing as how he used to want nothing to do with me, and tried to escape any chance he got; now, he’s living here permanently, and he seems happy.

I watch as he lightly stirs in his sleep, his eyelids fluttering rapidly; he’s dreaming. Smiling, I lightly brush a lock of his brown hair to the side, getting a small whiff of his scent. It used to tempt me, making it difficult to be too close to him, but my love for him has trumped my urges, and it doesn’t bother me anymore.

He looks so peaceful in his sleep. That jaded look of fear and exhaustion, and forced facade of strength that he usually has in his eyes—that type of strength you only get when you’ve really been through hell—is nonexistent when he’s asleep. Instead, his face looks calm and serene, unaffected by the ghosts of his past.

I watch his lips slightly part as he breathes in short pants, and I think about how much I want to kiss him. During the

short amount of time we've been living together, I've been slowly developing deeper feelings for him. I want to say he feels the same, but I'm not so sure, and I can't risk losing him over a hopeful hunch.

I believe that if he just had someone to truly love him, unconditionally, that maybe it would make his life better—his situation easier. I still don't know what the little "situation" was that made things so troubling for him that he was prompted to take his own life, as he still won't tell me, and any time I've asked about it, he's been purposely obscure; but how can I ask him to be truthful with me, and share all of the deep, dark secrets of his past, when I myself have so many of my own that I'm not willing to share? Secrets about what I am, secrets about my past—about Henry. . .

I'm interrupted from my reverie when I feel a cold shiver run down my spine, and all of a sudden, it's like an overwhelming force is in the room with us. I lift my head slightly to look around the room, but see nothing. I start to get up to investigate, but forget all about the weird feeling when Tyler buries his face into my neck, and pulls me in closer. It is so sweet and endearing, and makes me feel so *wanted*, for the first time in a while.

This boy—this one human boy—does things to me I can't describe. He makes me feel things—things I haven't felt in such a long time—things I thought I had lost the ability to feel long ago. When I'm with him, he sparks a rush in my chest, like electricity, warming my cold core from within, and radiating outward until I feel like I'm glowing. My once frozen heart has been thawed by him.

As I gaze down at Tyler, I have the sudden, overwhelming urge to kiss him. Sliding down to his level, I place my hand on his cheek, his warm skin feeling hot against my cold fingers. I finally cave into weakness.

Breathing nervously, I gently bring my lips to his; so gently, it's as if I am afraid to break him. Pulling away, I smile, stroking his cheek with the back of my finger, and I slowly drift off to sleep, basking in his body's warmth, just happy to

be near him.

I wake up to the cloying stench of cigarette smoke. It's incredibly strong, causing me to gag. I'm about to get up to investigate the source, when something stops me. Every nerve ending in my body is on high alert, and my gut is telling me that something is off. The atmosphere in the room is now heavy and intrusive, with an all-encompassing darkness that's so thick, it's palpable. I feel Tyler's body suddenly get tense against mine, as he starts making distressful noises in his sleep.

Suddenly, the sound of someone humming softly pierces the silence. It sounds like a child, and the chilling melody is eerily reminiscent of a nursery rhyme I used to hear as a kid. Emitting from the darkness in the corner of the room, across from the foot of the bed, the humming grows louder.

I cautiously peer over the end of the bed, and see a little girl in a tattered, white dress. Her back is to me, and she's kneeling on the floor in prayer-position, with her back hunched over. Her black hair is greasy and tangled, and the bottoms of her feet are covered in bruises and bloody slash marks. Her voice sends shivers through me as she slowly and deliberately sings each word, her voice tiny and shrill, yet mocking and full of authority.

*Don't you ever laugh as the hearse goes by,  
For you may be the next to die.*

*They wrap you up in a big, white sheet  
From your head down to your feet.*

*They put you in a big, black box  
And cover you up with dirt and rocks.*

*All goes well for about a week,  
Then your coffin begins to leak.*

*The worms crawl in, the worms crawl out,  
The worms play pinochle on your snout.*

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*They eat your eyes, they eat your nose,  
They eat the jelly between your toes.*

*A big, green worm with rolling eyes  
Crawls in your stomach and out your eyes.*

*Your stomach turns a slimy green,  
And pus pours out like whipping cream.*

*You spread it on a slice of bread,  
And that's what you eat when you are **dead**.*

Emphasizing that last word, “dead,” she giggles sinisterly as she rocks back and forth. I cautiously sit up, sniffing the air. She doesn’t smell human, and her blood smells sour, like sulfur and death.

I immediately bare my fangs, as a low, bellowing growl rumbles in my throat as a warning. The little girl slowly stands up, giggling maniacally as she turns around to face me, and my eyes widen in horror and disgust when I see her. Her eyes are gone, and only two solid-black voids remain. Sores and bloody cuts speckle her cracked, pale skin.

Regaining focus, I glare at her with dominance, shielding Tyler with my body as protection, as if telling her, “*This is mine. Don’t you even dare.*”

She suddenly jumps, and starts scaling up the wall toward the ceiling, as her long, sharp nails tear through the drywall, her hollow voids never once leaving me. I have a fleeting thought, questioning what the hell she could possibly be, when I get a quick sense of déjà vu, and that’s when I realize it. That smell, that feeling in the air—she’s what was in the house that first night, when Tyler and I had our first fight, and I accused him of smoking in the house.

I clench my jaw, baring my teeth threateningly at the little girl, as my fangs start to elongate. I am starting to shift into my true vampire form now, and the change has already begun;

there's no stopping it now. I'm about to lunge at the little girl when I hear a small yelp and rustling beside me. I turn to my side, and I see Tyler staring at me in complete and utter fear.

I immediately try to cover my fangs with my mouth, but it's futile; they are completely exposed and elongated, and impossible to hide at this stage. My senses are heightening, and Tyler's scent hits me like a ton of bricks. It's almost impossible to resist.

I'm about to walk towards him when the girl lunges at us in a violent frenzy, launching herself off the wall. I turn back just in time, catching the girl by the throat. She shrieks loudly, clawing at Tyler with an intense persistence and sick, animalistic rapacity, as he huddles up against the wall in the corner, far enough from her reach.

The shrieking goes silent and a loud crunch resonates throughout the room, as I squeeze the girl's throat until it caves in, her black, viscous blood pouring down my arm to my elbow.

I'm fuming with rage and am in a completely animalistic state as I stare at the limp, little girl clutched in my fist. I can feel my eyes shifting colors, and I know from the feeling in my gut that they're my hunting eyes. I can feel that familiar, tight pulling sensation, as the corners of my mouth are now drawn far back, nearly all the way to my ears, my teeth now a row of tiny, razor-sharp pencil points.

I'm suddenly brought back to base when I hear Tyler whimper, as he looks at me in horror. I turn to him, and feel the treacherous will and intent to kill him without hesitation. I want to drink the marrow from his bones. I want to feast on him.

"Victoria?" he murmurs in a tiny, fearful voice, huddled up against the wall, wide eyed and trembling, and staring at me like a frightened child.

But I'm seeing red, and I can't control it. I want his blood so badly, and two months of willpower officially flew out the window when the change took over. The last thing I remember before the rage takes over, is the look on Tyler's face, as he

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stares at me with fear and sadness in his eyes, as I lunge towards him.

## INNER DEMONS

I'm about to sink my teeth into him, as he shields himself with his arms and prepares for the worst.

“Victoria,” he begs, one last time. “Please. . .”

Hearing his voice, something in me shifts, and I begin to calm. Memories of the past couple months come flooding back to me in fast time—memories of when I found his limp body in the alleyway and I saved him, memories of us eating Jell-O together in a toast to our new friendship, memories of me watching him sleep, of us laughing and smiling, of all the love.

My eyes start to soften, turning their usual hue of dark blue, and my mouth regains its normal human shape. I can feel my humanity returning as I summon it up from the deepest parts of me, and I no longer feel the want or need to hurt Tyler.

As the killer instinct slowly leaves my body, my breathing slows down, and I regain my composure. I inch towards Tyler carefully, as if approaching a scared, threatened animal.

“Tyler,” I utter softly, lowering myself down to his level.

Smacking my hand away with tears in his eyes, he quickly runs for the door, but not quick enough, as I'm a lot faster. I'm in front of him and blocking the doorway before he can take two steps.

“Wait. Just wait, please. I can explain, Tyler,” I plead.

“You’re not going to let me go, are you? You’re going to kill me!” he screams frantically, backing up.

“No, I’m not going to hurt you, Tyler. I promise.”

“*Bullshit!* You almost just killed me right there! I saw the look in your eyes!” he shrieks, choking back his tears. “You were coming at me!”

“I know. . .” I trail off, my voice somber and melancholy. “I slipped. It won’t happen again.”

I reach my arms out to him, but he backs up to the wall in fear.

“Don’t. Just don’t,” he murmurs, putting his hand up. “It’s going to take me awhile to absorb all this.”

“That’s completely understandable,” I reply, motioning for him to sit on the bed.

After a long pause, I finally address the huge elephant in the room.

“So, Tyler, are we going to talk about what just happened?” I question, sitting on the bed near him, but not too close. “I saw the way you looked at that little girl—at that *creature*.”

Tyler is staring off into the distance like a zombie, not saying a word or moving a muscle. He finally turns toward me, with an affronted look on his face.

“You want to talk about ‘*creatures*?’” he says wryly. “What the fuck *was* that?”

“I don’t know. It seemed to have wanted you, though.”

“That’s not what I meant. I know what *that* bitch was; I’m talking about *you*,” he mouths firmly.

I stare down at my feet, trying to tear myself away from his scrutiny, unsure of how to answer his questions.

“I’m a vampire,” I whisper, my tone barely audible.

“A what?” he asks, with a look of incredulity.

“A vampire.”

He stares at me with his mouth open, as if he can’t believe what he’s hearing.

“So, you’re dead?” he asks.

“Technically, yes.”

“Fantastic. The first friend I make in years, and she turns

out to be a vampire,” he mutters under his breath, as if talking to himself. “It definitely explains a lot. The fact that the house has no windows, your nocturnal sleeping habits, your crazy inhuman strength, your constant cold body temperature. . .”

I try to place my hand on his arm, but he recoils immediately.

“Don’t.”

“Tyler, I’m not going to hurt you. It’s still me, Vic. *Your* Vic,” I utter, trying my best to choke back the tears that are starting to well up in my eyes. “I was going to tell you, eventually. This is not how I wanted you to find out.”

I barely finish my sentence when Tyler springs up out of bed, stumbling around the room while throwing on his clothes and heading towards the door. I jump up, turning the light on, when I notice his scar. I’ve seen it many times before, but he always tries to hide it.

“Where are you going? Can you sit down please and talk to me?” I plead with him.

“None of your business,” he mutters, while putting his shoes on.

“That’s quite a scar you’ve got there. How did you get that?” I ask softly, trying to stall, and hoping that in knowing some of my dark secrets, that Tyler will now be more willing to share some of his own. “It’s obvious that you’re hiding something from me too. Come on, Tyler. I don’t want secrets between us anymore.”

“What is this? An ‘I’ll show you mine, if you show me yours’ deal? I don’t think so,” he hisses.

“Tyler, please. You can talk to me. It’s still me, Victoria. That hasn’t changed.”

After a long pause, and what seems like him deliberating whether or not he should give up his secrets, he runs his fingers exasperatedly through his hair.

“That *thing* that was in here, was a demon,” he finally replies, pointing to the spot where the demon once stood. “I’ve been running from demons for awhile, so I’m sure you understand now why I’m staying away from you at the

moment.”

I stare back at him, affronted; I can't believe that he's comparing me to that—that *thing*.

“I'm not some mindless monster, you know! I feel love and hurt; joy and pain, elation and sorrow—just like anyone else. Don't treat me like you don't know who I am, Tyler. I am Victoria, and that doesn't change overnight just because I'm a vampire,” I reason, trying my hardest not to cry. “Look, I understand what you just saw was a lot to handle, but don't forget that I'm still *your* best friend, despite what I am.”

He cautiously starts approaching the bed again, sitting down at the far end of it, as far away from me as possible, like I'm a disease.

“So that thing was a demon?” I ask, scooting a tiny bit closer, hoping he won't notice. “But why was it after *you*?”

“I'm not even sure where to begin,” he trails off, staring at the wall.

“Try the beginning. That's usually a good start.”

“I bare something called the Saffron Curse. It's a mark on my soul that attracts demons, like moths to a flame,” he explains. “They won't stop coming until I'm dead. It's that simple.”

“When exactly did this happen? And how?”

“I'm not going to go into detail, but basically, a few years ago, I was a self-proclaimed Satanist. I did a ritual to help a friend, and tried to summon something, and ended up pissing something else off; and now, I've got this retched mark on my soul.”

His voice is starting to get shaky, his body starting to tremble. I can see tears welling up in his eyes and his hands balling into fists, and that usual forced facade of strength he always puts on is finally breaking down.

“I've lost everything because of this fucking curse!” he finally says through clenched teeth, as he breaks out into sobs. “No matter how hard I try, it's never good enough! I've tried everything to be rid of this curse; I've been baptized, I've had protection spells cast on me—nothing works. I'm a walking

dead man, Victoria. It's dangerous to be friends with dead men, and that's what I pretty much am. Good as dead."

Sitting there on the bed with his head in his hands as he cries his eyes out, I feel such tremendous love for this boy. He's so lost, so fragile, so *broken*—in so much pain, just like me. If only he knew. He is my strength; maybe I can be his.

"Listen to me, Tyler," I order softly, tilting his chin up so that his eyes are in line with my own. "If these demons even try to touch one hair on your head, I will *end* them. If they even so much as *try*, they are going to have one hell of a fight on their hands. I promise, I won't let anything bad happen to you. I will protect you at all costs. You're mine to protect, and I intend to keep that promise."

I lean forward to place my hand on his arm, and this time, he doesn't back away. He gives me a small smile, before wiping his tears away with the back of his hand.

"Can I ask you something?" he whispers, his eyes wide with hope and apprehension.

"Anything."

"When you found me in the alley way that night. . ." he trails off, his face awash with a hundred different emotions. "Were you going to eat me?"

*I knew this was coming, I had just hoped not so soon. I had my reasons for saving Tyler that night, but not for the ones one might think.*

"Let me tell you a bit about my hunting methods. If I could, I would avoid human blood all together, but unfortunately, I can't survive off of any other kind of blood. It doesn't work that way. It has to be fresh, and come from a beating heart," I explain. "But, I still have to eat, so I feed on those the most lacking in moral fiber—criminals, prostitutes, murderers, etcetera. I would never ever go after an innocent, Tyler."

I pause briefly, and assess his facial expression. He sits across from me, listening intently, with no judgment, so I decide to continue.

“In your case, I was a few blocks away, and I caught the scent of your blood, so I came to investigate,” I utter, hugging a pillow to my chest and turning away from him. “I’m not going to lie. When I smelled your blood, I’ve never wanted to feed on anyone so badly in my entire *un-life*; but when I saw you, saw your face, and saw that you looked like. . .”

I trail off, suddenly realizing that I’ve said too much.

“Like?” he asks, waiting for me to continue my sentence.

“You looked so forlorn and hopeless, and even though you were on the brink of death, I saw such fight in your eyes. You had just been broken down,” I murmur, trying my best to cover up what I had just let slip. “You just needed that will to live again; someone to build you back up.”

He nods, squeezing my hand a little, urging me to continue.

“It became more of an issue of putting you out of your misery, but I just couldn’t go through with it,” I whisper, staring down at my feet. “So I took you home and fixed you up instead, unsure if you’d even survive the night. Then, I nursed you back to health, and took care of you; and now, here we are.”

Then he says something that touches my heart and soul—something I’ve wanted to hear for so long.

“I know I haven’t officially told you this, but thank you, Victoria. Thank you so much for what you did. You saved my life,” he says warmly, pulling me into an embrace, no longer afraid to hug the monster he thought I was, and that I know I am.

And this time, I cry.

## UNFAMILIAR TERRITORY

I wake up to a soft, high-pitched wheezing sound. Victoria is snuggled into me, her arms and legs wrapped around me like a koala bear. It seems as if the wheezing sound is coming from her, but I'm not sure, because she's so still; it almost looks as if she's not even breathing.

This is the first time I've ever actually seen her sleep. Watching her sleep, she seems so peaceful, so normal, so *human*. Just as I think it, the nagging thought enters my head, about how *un-human* she really is; about the revelations from last night, about how she's a *vampire*.

Realizing her face is buried right in my neck, near vital veins and arteries, I carefully slide out of her grasp and get out of bed, making sure not to wake her. I quietly get dressed and grab my phone, slipping on my watch. I catch a glimpse of the time, and it's about half past nine in the morning. Victoria won't be up for quite a while.

I quietly walk to the kitchen to get some food, grabbing a Coke and some Oreos—breakfast of champions. I suppose that's what you get when you live with a vampire. Images of what happened the night before keep popping into my head; images of Victoria's terrifying eyes and sharp teeth—the teeth of a predator. I keep thinking about that look in her eye when

she came at me, and how she could have easily killed me if she wanted to.

*The question is, did she want to? And what stopped her? Is this just history that will repeat itself, and I'm asking for trouble in staying here with her? Should I just leave?*

I'm interrupted from my reverie when I feel my phone vibrate in my pocket. I shuffle through my pockets for my cell, seeing the number for O'Malley's flash across the screen.

"Hello?"

"Hey Tyler, it's April!" a voice on the other end chirps. It's my overly cheerful coworker, April.

She's always two Lithiums short of psychotically happy.

"Hey, what's up April?"

"Umm, can you come in today? I know it's your day off, but Kirk is sick, and we—"

"Yeah, sure; no prob. I'm on my way," I practically blurt, rushing out the door.

*Thank god. I've been looking for an excuse to leave. Everything in this house reminds me of Victoria—about last night. I need to get away and think, or rather, maybe not think so much. Maybe I just need to get my mind off of all this, and work will provide a much needed distraction.*

I take advantage of the long, quiet walk through the woods to get my mind off things. I try my best to admire the scenery, gazing at the tall oak trees and crawling moss, as I slowly make my way toward the interstate.

"Hey, glad you made it," April chirps, patting my shoulder as she greets me. "Um, Tyler? Earth to Tyler?"

I don't say anything to her welcome. My head just isn't really here at the moment.

"You okay?" she asks, concerned.

"Huh? Yeah, just tired, that's all. Didn't get much sleep last night," I mutter. "I was up most of the night with Victoria."

"Ahh, I see. Up all night with Victoria, eh?" she says slyly,

poking me in the side with her elbow. “What were you guys doin? Bumping uglies? Doin the nasty? The Horizontal Tango? Bashing the beaver? The Mattress Mambo? Heels to Jesus?”

“Okay! Enough already, April,” I yell, blushing scarlet. “And for your information, *no*, we were not having sex.”

“Well what else were you doing up all night if you weren’t getting jiggy with it?”

“For god’s sake, April; enough with the sex metaphors! We were fighting. . .”

“Oh. Well, anything I can help with?” she asks.

“No, you wouldn’t understand,” I mumble, polishing some nearby glasses in an effort to distract myself.

“Try me,” she says with a smile.

I debate whether or not to say anything. I mean, what exactly am I supposed to say?

*“Hey, I just found out my best friend is a vampire, and she tried to kill me last night. Any thoughts?”*

After a long pause, I decide to talk to her, but remain as obscure and vague as possible. I need to talk to somebody about this. This is all weighing so heavy on my heart and mind, and I need some advice.

“I just found out something really awful about Vic,” I relent. “I’m thinking of leaving.”

“Well, is it really bad? Did she betray you, or severely hurt you in some way?”

“Well, no; not really,” I murmur.

“Has she been a bad friend to you?”

“No.”

“Has she done anything messed up to you *at all*?” she questions.

“No, it’s just that, I found out she was keeping a secret from me.”

“We all have our secrets, Tyler; but as long as this secret wasn’t kept from you in an attempt to hurt you, or lead to you somehow getting hurt, then maybe you should cut her a little

slack?”

“But that’s the thing, I could’ve gotten hurt by this.”

“But you weren’t?” she asks.

“Well, no; not exactly,” I mumble.

“Then no harm, no foul. Right?”

After some pondering, I realize that April is right. We are all entitled to our secrets. Hell, I was even keeping some secrets of my own; and Victoria has been nothing but a good friend to me, taken care of me, and stuck by me. I at least owe the same to her, and shouldn’t abandon her just because of something she can’t help, nor did purposely to hurt me.

“Thanks, April,” I mumble, surprised that such a tiny Simpleton of a girl could offer such wise words.

When I get home, I find Victoria still asleep in my bed. She hasn’t moved at all since I left this morning, and is perfectly still—*too* still; it seems as if she’s dead. Even though I’m now scared shitless of her, the last thing I want is her dead.

I tiptoe towards her, making my way to the bed. I can hear the same high-pitched, faint wheezing sound from this morning. I kneel down, stopping my face right in front of hers, placing one hand in front of her mouth. I can hardly feel any air, and I’m curious, so I decide to check her eyes.

I slow my breath as I gently place my fingers on one of her closed eyes. I open it, and my breath hitches in my throat at the sight. Her pupils are completely *black*. Her usually blue irises are gone, and have been completely overtaken by her dark pupils, creating the illusion of two big, black orbs. Her pupils are so dilated it appears as if the whites of her eyes are almost nonexistent. I find myself getting lost in them like a hypnotic trance, and it feels as if I’m being sucked through those black voids into nothing but pure darkness.

Her wheezing has now stopped, but I’m too focused on her eye, which just sits in place, staring straight back at me.

“Boo!” she suddenly yells.

I jump back with a yelp, bumping my head on the nearby dresser as I scramble backwards on the floor. Victoria bursts into laughter, clutching the sheets to her naked body as she

keels over and giggles incessantly at my stupidity and misfortune.

“I’m glad you find this amusing,” I mutter under my breath, glaring at her as I sit up on the floor rubbing the back of my head.

“Aww, I’m sorry. Are you okay?” she asks sympathetically, trying to hide her giggles. “Poor baby.”

She climbs out of bed, taking the sheet with her, as she sits next to me on the floor and tilts her head against the dresser.

“So what were you doing anyway, hmm?” she asks, her face mere inches from mine.

“Nothing,” I mutter nervously, trying to hide the fact that I’m still scared of her after last night.

“You know, if you wanted a peep show, you could’ve just asked,” she says slyly, winking at me while seductively biting down on her lower lip.

I immediately feel the heat run through my face, as I blush uncontrollably. I’ve never been a smooth talker or a player, and my experience with women probably rivals that of about a 12 year old boy.

“That’s not what I was doing,” I murmur under my breath like a petulant child, frowning and staring down at my shoes.

“I know, I know. I’m just teasing,” she giggles, as she playfully shoves my shoulder, sending shocks throughout my entire body.

Placing her head on my shoulder, she gives me a kiss on the cheek, causing me to shudder with both fear and desire at the same time.

“But really, what *were* you doing? I won’t get mad, I just want to know.”

“Well, uh. . .” I trail off, stumbling over my words. “You see, uh, when I left this morning, you were barely breathing. I mean, like, you were wheezing, but I didn’t know if that was normal, or a vamp thing, or what. It was the first time I’d ever seen you sleep. I was just checking on you, but then I got curious about the whole vampire thing too, and wanted to see your eyes.”

“Aww, you were looking after me to make sure I was okay?” she drawls affectionately, causing me to blush again.

“Yeah. Well, actually, I also wanted to talk to you about something.”

“What’s up?”

“You scare the hell out of me,” I blurt out idiotically, immediately regretting what I’ve just said the second the words come out of my mouth. “Crap, I probably shouldn’t have started out like that. It’s just, I know you’ve told me that you won’t hurt me, but even still, I don’t know much about what you are. This whole vamp thing is really new and strange to me, and frankly, it scares me.”

Victoria sits there patiently listening, eyeing me speculatively as I stutter and stumble my way through my words.

“In fact, when I left the house earlier today, I was strongly considering not coming back. . .” I trail off. “Please understand, I’ve been hunted by demons for a while, and knowing you’re a vampire, well, it’s a little unnerving to say the least.”

I see her breath hitch in her throat when I say the words, “not coming back.” Her eyes instantly sadden as her tiny fists clutch the sheets, turning her already pale knuckles even more white.

“But I’ve made up my mind, Victoria; and I’m not going anywhere.”

“Oh thank god. Thank you, Tyler,” she breathes with relief, pulling me into an embrace and clutching me so tight that she cuts off my circulation, as if she’s afraid to let me go. “Thank you for not leaving, and for giving me a chance. Really, it means a lot to me. *You* mean a lot to me.”

As she pulls away, I suddenly hear her stomach grumbling, and I can tell she’s hungry.

“So are you going to, uh, you know,” I ask nervously.

“Going to what?” she replies, a bemused look awash her pale, angular face.

“Um, you know, get something to eat,” I mutter, fidgeting

with a piece of stray string on my t-shirt.

“Um, yeah. It’s about that time,” she says awkwardly. “But listen, when I get back, we are going to go out and buy you some more blankets, alright? I can’t have my little Tyler furnace freezing to death, now can I?”

“I’m not a furnace, you’re just an ice princess,” I laugh.

“Well, opposites do attract,” she says with a wink.

She smiles warmly at me as she strokes my cheek with the back of her cold hand, giving me a quick peck on the cheek before standing up and heading to the bathroom, shutting the door behind her.

I sit on the floor for a while longer, when I hear the door creak down the hall, so I get up and head toward the bathroom. Victoria, applies a tube of red lipstick to her pale lips, that’s when it catches my eye. She carries no form of physical reflection in the mirror behind her. The sheer fact that too is a vampire trait sends a shiver down my spine. She’s all done up, wearing tight black jeans, and a tight, revealing, black tank-top, her long, straight, glossy, raven hair grazing her waist.

As I watch her purse her lips together, and see how the red lipstick stands out against her pale, milky skin, my heart skips a beat; she looks breathtaking. She turns to me and smiles, and I instantly melt. Every time she smiles, it reminds me of who she really is, because how could something so beautiful and so sweet be a monster?

“I’m going now,” she utters, running her pale, long fingers through her dark hair, letting it fall to the side.

“When will you be back?”

“Don’t worry, I won’t be long.”

“Okay,” I mumble, looking away toward the wall, shoving my hands in my pockets.

Staring at her and seeing how beautiful she looks, a pang of jealousy hits me. She’s going out, and I’m sure guys will be all over her. She could probably get any guy she wants, all of them probably with far more game than I’ll ever have.

*What could she ever want with or see in a chump like me?*

Victoria eyes me sympathetically, and slowly walks toward me. She stops right in front of me, stroking my arm and giving me a quick kiss on the cheek, lingering there as her cold breath faintly blows on my jaw, her dark hair lightly brushing against my chin.

“It’ll be okay. Trust me,” she utters. “I’m coming home to you, Tyler.”

And just like that, she kisses all my fears and insecurities away, and all that unfamiliar territory no longer seems to matter.

## ANATHEMA

Something is changing inside of me. There's a dark, intrusive heaviness spreading within myself, like rot, and I feel a huge, gaping hole in the pit of my chest. I'm becoming more and more detached, and it seems that with every passing day I grow more numb. Sometimes it's as if I'm not even here inside myself, but rather a ghost of who I used to be, watching my body from the outside in; like a zombie on cruise control, wandering my way through life, but completely cut off from it all.

Some days it seems as if I'm completely helpless to stop it, as if it's a force so much greater than I am, and it's taking over. The more it takes over, the more I feel like an empty vessel, filled with a dense, never-ending coldness as my heart and soul slowly leak out, and that dark, looming force carves through me like a hot knife, leaving nothing but a hollow vacancy in its wake.

"Ready to go?" Victoria chirps.

"Um, yeah. Ready," I mumble after a long pause. I notice I've been spacing out a lot lately—or so people are telling me, when I come to, that is. "Is there even a place that sells blankets open this late?"

"Yeah, Al's Super Center. It's open 24-hours."

Walking outside, we approach Victoria's car—a black '68 Ford Mustang GT. She bends slightly, squinting at a nearly non-existent spot on the paint. Licking the underside of her thumb, she lightly rubs it against the car door with the utmost concentration, before buffing it away with her sleeve.

"There. All better," she says with a smile.

Victoria is far from a materialistic person, but her car is her thing. It is something even *I* know not to mess with, and I'd reckon that anyone who knowingly does so has a deathwish.

"Geez, V. You really do love this car, don't you?" I tease.

"What? It's my baby. We all have our treasures in life, and *you* and this car, are *mine*," she drawls, winking at me as she opens the door and ducks into the driver's side.

Driving on the road, I watch the passing trees, as they zoom by in a dark, emerald blur. It's as if I'm in some sort of a trance, spellbound, captivated by their watchful eyes, as if they're staring at me. I could swear I see shadows creep from around their trunks, and faces billow out from behind their gnarled, twisted branches. It's as if I can't escape these omnipresent, all-seeing eyes no matter where I am.

"Vic?" I utter robotically, turning to her.

"Hm?"

"You know this isn't going to go away right? The Saffron Curse, I mean. . ." I trail off, my tone impassive and somber. "I know you said you'd protect me, but you need to know that even *you* have your limits. They're invincible, Victoria. I'm doomed. It's just a matter of time. We're just prolonging the inevitable."

Victoria pulls over to the side of the road, shifting the gear into park.

"Tyler, what's wrong? Where is all this coming from?" she asks, placing her hand on mine.

"As much as I wish this all wasn't true, I have to be realistic. Eventually, they're going to get me, and with you by my side—collateral damage," I murmur softly. "One day they'll kill me, and I've come to terms with that; but I couldn't bear the thought of something happening to you too, all because

you got mixed up with a lost cause like me. You're guilty by association, Victoria. It's dangerous to be associated with me."

"Tyler, listen to me. Those demons haven't even seen *half* of what I've got. I have a whole bag of tricks and abilities up my sleeve, many of which I would never want you to have to see," she says softly. "Last night, was *nothing* compared to what I'm truly capable of, and if those demons want to get to you, then they're going to have to go through me first. I am going to protect you, until my last breath, Tyler, and I am not going to leave you just because the road is going to get a little rough. Things always get worse before they get better, but I want you to know that while we're waiting for that time to come, that I'm here for you, no matter what happens."

I do my best to feign a smile, even though my mind is plagued with a dozen fears and apprehensions.

"Now let's go get you those blankets," she adds with a smile.

I don't tell her that that constant, nagging, unearthly coldness I've been feeling inside strangely no longer feels foreign.

After a quick stop at the store for some blankets, we head out. On our way back to the car, I notice two sketchy men across the parking lot, stalking a little, old woman to her car. I quickly divert my glance, hoping Victoria didn't notice, because I know what she's capable of, and what she will do.

"Go sit in the car. I'll be there shortly," she murmurs, absentmindedly placing the keys in my hands, never once taking her eyes off the two men as she marches over.

"Vic, please don't. Please," I plead with her, but she's already halfway across the parking lot before I can get out the second "please."

My breath hitches in my throat and my stomach feels like it's just flipped—this is going to be a blood bath. I prepare for the worst as I get in the car, rolling the windows down so I can see and hear what's going on better. By now, Victoria is already coming up behind the men.

"Just hand over the keys, you old bitch," the larger of the

two men snarls. “And you might as well hand over your purse too, while you’re at it.”

“Sal, that’s not what we’re here for,” the younger, smaller of the two men murmurs, as he anxiously scans the parking lot.

“Shut up, Freddy!” the older one snaps, before turning back around to face the old woman. “Come on! I said now! Let’s go, grandma!”

He shoves the trembling old lady against her car, causing her to freeze in fear. She looks absolutely petrified and as if she’s about to have a heart attack, as tears stream down her wrinkled face.

“Hey you,” Victoria beckons, as she slowly and confidently walks up to the men, her gaze dark and obsidian. “That’s no way to treat a lady. Didn’t your mother ever teach you any manners?”

“And who the hell are you? Mind your own business bitch, or I’ll show you how I ‘treat’ a lady,” the older man snarls, crudely grabbing the front bulge of his pants, before smacking his lips at her.

“Hah, that’s cute, really; but I don’t have time for games. Just hand the keys over to the woman and no one gets hurt, okay?” she demands, her voice soft but challenging.

I notice that the younger of the two men, apparently named Freddy, looks terrified, and keeps trying to convince the other man to leave, but it’s clear that the proud, stubborn man isn’t about to back down to a girl.

“Who do you think you are, whore?” the older man hisses, practically goading her at this point. “Maybe I need to teach you a lesson about interfering in other people’s business. How about I steal your car inste—”

Before he can even finish his sentence, I see Victoria shove her hand towards his gut, her middle finger sharply pointed into his navel. The man keels over in pain, groaning, trying to pull away from her unwavering grip, but her brute strength makes his efforts futile.

“Now *that’s* just unacceptable. You see, I love that car almost as much as life itself,” she drawls coolly, bringing the

groaning man to his knees, as his accomplice watches on, dumfounded in fear.

Bringing her face mere inches from his, I can see her eyes turn blood-red, causing his mouth to drop as he struggles to get free from her iron-grip. She turns to his friend, flashing her scarlet-hued eyes in his direction, causing him to jump from where he stands and back up against the wall. I notice she does it in such a way so that the old woman can't see, so as not to frighten her.

Baring her now elongated fangs, she brings her lips right next to the man's ear.

"But what I love most about that car right now, is what's *inside* it. I've got precious cargo in there. So if you're foolish enough to ever threaten either one of those two things again, I'll rip you open and gut you like the pig you are," she utters, her tone slow, sinister, and calculating. "Now listen very, very carefully you pathetic waste of space. You are going to take those keys out of your pocket, and give them back to this nice woman behind me, and then you're going to walk away—no, you're going to *run* away, got it? Nod if you understand."

The frightened man nods profusely, tears streaming down his dirt ridden face, leaving shiny, white trails in their path. Quickly digging into his pocket, he pulls out the keys.

Tightening her grip, causing the man to yelp and his knees to buckle.

"Now apologize, both of you!" she commands.

"Sorry, sorry! We're sorry ma'am!" they both shriek repeatedly.

"And if I ever catch either one of you doing this to anyone else ever again, I will not hesitate to kill you both, and feast on your flesh until there's nothing left but the splinters of your bones to pick my teeth with."

And with that, she frees the man, shoving him hard into his accomplice, causing the two of them to go falling onto the pavement. They both quickly get up, running away as fast as their feet can carry them.

Victoria retracts her fangs and consciously reverts her eyes

back to their normal hue of sapphire-blue, before turning around to face the old woman.

“Are you okay, ma’am?” Victoria says sweetly, as she gently places one hand on the old woman’s shoulder.

“Y—yes, dear. Thank you. Oh, thank you so much,” she says shakily through tears. “You’re an angel; a guardian angel.”

And as I watch the old lady smile and get back into her car, to drive home safely and live to see another day, I think about how Victoria gave that to her, and how she selflessly helped this woman in need, using what I thought to be her “darkness” for good. How could you not love that? Love *her*?

As Victoria gets back into the car, I stare at her in awe and amazement.

“I honestly thought you were going to kill those guys, right there on the spot, Victoria; but you didn’t, and I’m glad you didn’t. I mean, don’t get me wrong, they totally would’ve deserved it, but you handled that so. . .” I trail off, still at a loss for words. “You just seriously kicked some ass back there, V. You never cease to amaze me.”

As she pulls out of the parking lot, she turns to me and smiles shyly.

“It was nothing. Just doing the same thing I would hope someone would do for me if I was in their shoes.”

As if she couldn’t get any more endearing, her un-sanctimonious, humble attitude and shy smile in response make her even more loveable.

“Victoria, I want you to know, I take back everything I said—everything I thought, about you being a monster, or for saying you were anything like those demons that have plagued me,” I utter, staring at her with complete adoration. “The way you’ve protected me since Day 1, the way you just protected that old woman. . .you’re amazing, and I was foolish to ever doubt you. I see now that it’s people like those guys, those *human beings*, that are the *real* monsters—not you. In fact, you are anything but. You’re an angel.”

## GHOSTS OF CHRISTMAS' PAST

As I walk down the snow-covered sidewalk towards home, I grip my leather jacket closed tighter to conceal the crimson bloodstains all over my shirt and arms. Jamming my hands in my pockets, I start heading towards the forest, as the crunching sound of my boots on the snowy asphalt reverberate throughout the city streets. I hug myself and shiver, as I start to quicken my pace. Even though I can't really feel the cold, I find that little gestures like this make me feel more human, and ever since Tyler walked into my life, I find myself strangely craving that feeling more and more.

I'm on my way home after a feed, and as I watch the billowing clouds of my breath, that seem even colder than the air itself, I think about the turning point me and Tyler have reached in our relationship. It's been a little over two weeks since he's found out about what I am, and although he's still a little skittish around me, he's slowly warming up to the whole idea, and for that matter, warming up to me.

It's Christmas time in Regina, and the store windows are decorated with shiny tinsel and tiny, twinkling, rainbow colored lights. As I walk by the Christmas tree lot, I deeply inhale the scent of Douglas Firs and snow-dampened dirt. I can hear children yelling and chucking snowballs at each other, and I'm

surprised at how sublimely happy I feel.

Usually around this time, I realize more than ever that I'm alone, and it makes me depressed and bitter; except this year, I'm not alone—I have Tyler. I've always been a bit of a misanthropic hermit, scathing and scornful of all the happy people living their lives—of all the people with a *future*—while I remain static, frozen in time, forever 23, my life nothing but a cruel, ephemeral joke. This is especially apparent during the holidays, due to harsh, painful reminders of all I've had and lost, and all I'll simply never have; just a haunting past, and a lonely, immutable, eternal present. This year, however, I now have a future to look forward to, and furthermore, someone to share it with.

I finally arrive, humming as I skip up the front steps. I quietly open the front door and tiptoe inside, so as not to wake Tyler. I walk down the hall to the bathroom, and surreptitiously creep inside before he can see the bloody mess I am. The last thing I need is to freak him out even more than he already is, by coming home looking like I'm the better-looking, female version of Jeffrey Dahmer.

Stepping into the shower, I throw my head back, relishing in the therapeutic, comforting stream of hot water pounding on my cold, scarlet-hued skin as I get lost in the steamy fog. I usually can't stand heat, but in this instance, I don't mind it so much. As I scrub all of the now dead hobo's dried, caked blood off my body, I watch the water swirl down the drain in that familiar, sickly shade of pink, washing away all of my sins.

Once the water runs clear, I shut off the tap and step out into the hot, swirling steam, drying off before wrapping myself in a navy-blue towel and walking down the hall to Tyler's room. Peering through the crack of the door, I see Tyler deep in sleep. I can't resist, and I quietly open the door and make my way toward the bed. I smile as I watch him sleeping peacefully, his chest slowly rising and falling, his breaths coming in short and perfect staccato.

Clutching the towel to my bare, naked body, my dark, wet hair dripping on the hardwood floors, I approach the bed.

Stopping at the nightstand, I can see his phone—12 missed calls, all from “Restricted.” He’s been getting these mysterious phone calls for the past few days, but he never answers them; I think he has a feeling that it’s someone from his past trying to get ahold of him and track him down.

From what he’s told me, that part of his life is long gone, and he kissed it goodbye the second demons entered the picture. He says he refuses to mix those two parts of his life—old and new, past and present—because it will only serve to bring death and sorrow to the people he loves; or loved, rather.

I crawl onto the bed, trying my hardest not to wake him, but his eyes quickly flutter open in response.

“Shoot. Sorry, I was trying my best not to wake you up,” I whisper.

“It’s okay,” he mumbles sleepily, with that endearing, tired, trademark smile. “What’s up?”

Resting my chin idly on his collarbone, I gaze up at him fondly, grinning like a dope.

“Umm, can I help you?” he laughs, sliding his arm around my back.

“I just wanted to see you. You always look so peaceful when you sleep.”

“You’re warm,” he remarks with surprise, grazing the skin of my back with his fingertips. “A lot warmer than usual at least.”

“That’s because I just got out of the shower. Don’t worry, your little ice princess will be back soon,” I giggle. I pull him in closer, nuzzling my nose into his neck, but he immediately tenses up, his expression unnerved as he not so subtly puts his shoulder as a barrier between my face and his neck. “Tyler, I’m not going to hurt you.”

Tyler unconsciously places his hand on his neck to shield it as he speaks. “I—I know. It’s just, I’m still not really used to this yet,” he mumbles.

“What, you mean a woman in bed with you?” I tease.

“*Vii...*”

“I know, I know. Look, if you want, I can just sit at the

desk while you sleep and watch over you from there, if that makes you feel more at ease,” I offer, but inside I’m secretly, desperately hoping that he’ll ask me to sleep with him instead.

“Yeah, you *could* do that. . .” he trails off, causing my heart to sink. “But to be honest, I. . .”

“You what?” I press, trying to hide the smile on my face.

“I like holding you while you sleep,” he murmurs shyly, his face blushing, as he furtively downcasts his glance.

“Oh? Is that because I like to sleep in the nude, which means you can cop a quick feel, or because I have assets that *pique* your interest?” I simper, thrusting my chest into his face at the utterance of the word “*pique*.”

“No, uh no, I swear, it’s nothing like that at all, I just—” he stutters, stumbling over his words as he turns an even brighter shade of scarlet. “I just like to hold you.”

“Wait, so it has absolutely *nothing* to do with sex?” I question, eyeing him speculatively, but deep inside, I’m secretly hoping that it does.

“No,” he mumbles, averting his gaze.

“So then if you like to hold me so much, then why are you always pushing me away, like you just did?”

“Because you got close to my neck; I panicked a little. I’m not used to having a vampire in bed with me, you know. I know you won’t ever hurt me, but just the fact that you could so easily, well, it scares me,” he relents.

*Oh, I’ll give you something to be afraid of.*

Grinning at him, my eyes twinkling with wicked intent, I suddenly pounce, straddling his body as I pin his arms down and trail tiny pecks all over his face.

“Rawwwrrr! The evil, scary, cuddly vampire is going to hurt you with her deathly kisses!” I roar.

Laughing as he tries to buck me off him, he squints his eyes shut.

“Vic!” he laughs, jockeying for control as he hurls his body around with me on top of it, but it’s no use, as my strength

towers in comparison to his own. “Stop!”

“Neval!” I shout, continuing to pin him down and smother his neck and jawline with kisses.

“Off of me, you depraved heathen!” he teases.

“*Okay*, okay, I’ll stop; but I have one request,” I smirk, my face mere inches from his. My towel suddenly comes undone, dropping in the tiny space between us. “May I please snuggle into your neck? I’m not going to bite you, I promise. I, your little *Vic*, hereby pledge this oath—scout’s honor.”

I lift one hand and put up three fingers, while lasciviously dragging the fingertips of my other hand lightly down his ribcage and torso, causing him to shiver, as he gazes at me with an anxious, impassioned stare.

“Do you know how hard it is to say no to you?” he utters, his eyes heatedly searching mine.

“Yup!” I chirp, happy that I’ve won this battle, as I slowly lean down, pushing my nose into his neck. I inhale his neck deeply, that slightly sweet, yet musky scent I’ve grown to know and love, as we both lie there intertwined in each other in the darkness. “Tyler?”

“Hmm?” he mumbles sleepily.

“What do you think of me?”

Pulling away from me, he sits up, staring at me in confusion.

“What do you mean?” he asks.

“What do you think of me? Like, am I important to you?” I ask nervously.

“Of course you are,” he replies, after a long pause, tucking a stray lock of wet hair behind my ear. “Why would you even ask me that?”

“Well, I’ve been thinking a lot lately. You had an opportunity to leave the night I told you about what I am. . .and to be honest, I wouldn’t have gone after you, out of respect for your wishes. I would’ve left you alone, and you’d never have to see me again. I—”

“That’s nonsense, Vic. The idea of never seeing you again. . .it breaks my heart,” he interrupts, gazing at me fervently.

“You have taken me in, and taken care of me, asking nothing in return. You have protected me, been there for me, and vampire or not, have been the greatest and most loyal friend I’ve ever known. I refuse to leave you—no, I will *never* leave you. You mean everything to me. You’re the reason I breathe, quite literally. I’d be dead if it wasn’t for you. Now, I can live again, and smile something genuine when I wake up in the morning, and I have you to thank for that, Vic. You’re the reason why I fight so hard to stay alive now; you give me a reason to.”

Tears start to well up in my eyes, as I hear all the things that I’ve been wanting to hear from Tyler for so long, as he drops his fear of me and what I am, out of love. I furtively hide my face and bury it in his neck, so he doesn’t see my tears of happiness. I lie down beside him, as he adjusts his head to make more room for me in the area of his no longer forbidden neck, cradling me in his arms.

The clock flashes 3:00 am, and we’re both about to drift off to sleep, when there’s a sudden, loud knock at the front door. I’m about to get up, when Tyler stops me.

“I’ll get it,” he utters, pushing me back protectively, as he climbs out of bed. He throws on some plaid pajama pants before cautiously making his way out to the hall.

I hear the front door creak open, followed by silence, and I suddenly feel a tight knot in my stomach. Like a stopper pulled from the bathtub drain, everything around me sucks into blackness, before another picture suddenly takes its place. My eyes shift out of my own surroundings, and I see a woman, except I’m not seeing her out of my own eyes, but from Tyler’s. I can see and hear her just as if I was in front of her, and see the surroundings of our living room in the periphery.

This has only happened to me once, centuries ago. Vampires get this kind of power only when they’re extremely connected to someone and feeling extremely strong emotions for the person, both physically and spiritually. This hasn’t happened since, well, since I was in love. . . since Henry.

*But wait, could that mean. . .I'm in love with Tyler.*

My heart soars at the thought, and I realize just how in love with him I am. All of a sudden, it's like everything clicks into place and makes sense, the force so strong as if he's holding me here to the Earth, like gravity.

I sprint up out of bed with excitement, deciding I have to tell him how I feel at this new revelation. I've only felt this way once in my entire life, and it's been so long since I've felt much of anything. It's as if he's woken up a dormant, frozen part of me that I thought I lost long ago in the past, never to be seen again, as if a light switch has been turned on in the seemingly endless, eternal darkness—*my* darkness.

After quickly throwing on some clothes, I rush out of the bedroom and down the hall, stopping when I see Tyler standing in front of the open door, motionless, with his mouth agape, as if he's seen a ghost.

As I walk closer behind him, I see a girl standing in front of him—the girl from my vision. I immediately get protective over Tyler; I need to know who this girl is, and what she wants. I'm about to advance toward her, when I hear Tyler utter something that immediately stops me in my tracks. . .

“Jade?”

## FAUX FRIENDS

“Jade?”

I stand there in the doorway, motionless, completely and utterly stunned.

*Is this a trick? Is this really her? Or is this a demon? Maybe I'm just having another dream.*

I scurry outside, gently closing the door so as not to alert Victoria.

“Hey there, Tyler,” she says with a smirk.

“J—Jade? What are you. . .what are you *doing here?*” I utter, my mouth still agape with shock.

“Glad to see you too,” she mutters sardonically.

“How did you find me?” I whisper, grabbing her arm forcefully and pulling her to the side before looking back at the door to check for Victoria.

“Well then, ditching of the formalities it is,” she says wryly.

“Keep your voice down!” I hiss.

Jade turns around, scanning the empty forest with her hands in the air. “What? Don’t want me to wake up all your neighbors?” she says sarcastically, motioning to all of the desolate, thick trees surrounding us.

The mixed feelings within me brew and bubble over, creating a whirling in the pit of my stomach. One part of me is happy to see Jade—the part of me that’s always had a soft spot for her. The other part of me is apprehensive, unsure of who the person standing in front of me is now, or what she currently represents to me.

“Cut the shit, Jade. How did you find me?” I demand a little more forcefully, dubious of her true motives.

“Hah, oh yes, there’s that. It’s actually kind of scary how easily you can find someone on the internet these days,” she laughs, looking awfully proud of herself. “All I needed was your first and last name, and I found you as an employee at O’Malley’s. I managed to track down your address from there, from your naïve, chatty little coworker. She was more than willing to give up any info I needed, and then some.”

*God damn it. April.*

“What do you *want*?” I insist, crossing my arms, my mouth a grim, straight line.

“I’m taking you home, silly,” she chirps happily. “Besides, everyone’s been so worried.”

“I can’t, Jade,” I sigh heavily, closing my eyes and shaking my head. “Don’t act like you don’t know why.”

“Tyler, come on—get real. You and I both know that that was all just a show,” she simpers, rolling her eyes. “There were no *demons*. There *are* no demons.”

My breath hitches in my throat, and I’m suddenly seeing red. She reaches for my hand, but I rip it away. She seems so foreign to me now; nothing more than a distant figment of the past, a symbol of what I formerly thought was meaningful.

How dare she. This was my best friend, who I’ve known my entire life—someone who I thought I could trust and depend on—and here she stands, pretty much calling me a liar and a diluted fool.

“How can you say that, Jade?” I ask, stunned. “You saw that thing with your own eyes!”

“No I didn’t, I was just playing along with you,” she mumbles uneasily, averting her gaze toward the ground. “And if I had known it would escalate to this, I never would have. Now please Tyler, stop all this nonsense and come home.”

It feels like I’ve gotten the wind suddenly knocked out of me. A cold breeze suddenly assaults my bare skin, howling through the trees like an eerie, weeping cry, and I shiver, not just from its cold chill, but from the cold, glacial person I’m seeing in front of me—the person I used to call Friend.

“So you. . .” I trail off, stumbling over my words. “You *never* saw it then? The Soul Eater? This was just a—a fucking *game* to you!?”

Anger suddenly overtakes me, as I realize that this was all a joke to her; and for that matter, our friendship was too, as far as I see it. My voice starts rising, and so does my temper, as I step forward and grab her by the shoulders and shake her.

“Ever since we were kids, we looked out for one another, Jade! I *trusted* you. I thought you were there for me. I thought that in all this mess, I had someone who believed me—who believed *in* me—so that I wasn’t alone in it all; but it turns out, I was alone all along,” I utter, unhanding her and staring at her now affronted expression. “I think you should leave now.”

I turn around to start heading for the door, but she grabs me by the arm and pulls me back.

“Tyler, I don’t mean to hurt you, but think about what you’re saying here. You can’t *possibly* believe that all this demon stuff is real,” she says, tilting her head sideways while opening her arms to me, her palms facing upward.

I turn back to face her, lifting my shirt up to my chest until my scar is on display.

“Not real, huh?” I mutter disdainfully, before sighing at her with disgust and heading back for the door.

“Alright then, fine. I’ll just have to come back again tomorrow to bug you some more,” she replies, her tone irreverent and mocking. “And then the next day, and the next day, and the next, until you come home with me.”

“No, you won’t,” I stress.

Completely ignoring my words, she advances towards me and pulls me into a hard embrace, before pulling away, leaving me stunned and confused. She softly places her hand on my cheek, gazing at me fervently.

“God, how I’ve missed you so much Tyler,” she whispers, lightly running her hand along my cheek.

Suddenly her false smile turns sour, as her eyes narrow at me. She raises her hand, slapping me hard across the face.

“That’s for leaving without so much as a word,” she sneers, before turning around to walk away.

*It’s only been five minutes since her arrival, and I’m already Jade’s punching bag again.*

I stand there, taken aback, rubbing the tingly, warm spot on my cheek as I watch her walk away. I turn around and am about to start heading back inside, when I see Victoria standing in the doorway, her eyes blood-red, her chest heaving up and down, seething with anger.

She growls like a wildcat before sprinting towards Jade, and within a second she’s tackled her, and has her pinned to the forest floor. Jade stares up at Victoria, completely stunned and trembling in fear, her arms pinned to the ground on each side of her head.

“Victoria, take it easy,” I mouth slowly, approaching her like I would a wild, cornered animal.

Victoria peers up at me, in a mad rage, although I notice her eyes are now blue again—most likely so as not to out herself as to what she is to Jade.

“She hit you!” Victoria yells, her breathing ragged and disjointed.

“I know, I know. Just please, let her go,” I plead, because I know how protective Victoria is of me, and what she’s capable of, and as angry as I am at Jade, I don’t want her dead.

Still on top of her, Victoria looks back down at Jade, as if two sides are battling within her. One side wants to tear her to shreds in the name of my honor and protection, the other side

doesn't want to be a monster, or rather, for me to see her as one.

After a long pause, with nothing but the loud breathing between the three of us, she finally speaks.

"Fine," she mutters, roughly unhanding a terrified Jade before joining me at my side.

Jade gets up apprehensively, dusting herself off while eyeing both me and Victoria speculatively.

"Um, Jade, Victoria," I motion with my hand from my old best friend to my new one. "Victoria, Jade."

"Oh, I *know* who she is," Victoria says scathingly, her hands balled into fists at her sides.

"Well I most certainly do *not* know who *she* is," Jade retorts, pointing and staring at Victoria scornfully.

"You don't need to know who I am. All you need to know is that I am his best friend, and I look out for my own," she replies, staring her down. "Keep that in mind next time you feel like laying your filthy hands on him."

"Who the hell are you and where do you get off? I have known him since *childhood*, and we have been through everything together. You just *met* him," she retorts, trying to stick Victoria with the only thing she can.

"I may have just met him, but I've been ten times more of a friend to him in this short amount of time than you've been in all the years you've known him, combined," she hisses.

Completely silent, I stand there dumfounded and in shock. Never in my life have I had two women fight over me, let alone with one of them being capable of *eating* the other, literally.

"Fine, I'll go," Jade utters, backing away toward her car with her hands in the air, before turning her head to face Victoria. "But you won't always be here to oversee everything he does. I *will* get him to come home with me; make no mistake."

And with that, Jade quickly ducks into her car and speeds away, leaving nothing but the whirling dust behind her.

## WHEN THE PAST AND PRESENT COLLIDE

I can hear the songs of mockingbirds singing outside as the morning rises, along with the hollow knocking sound of woodpeckers, pecking on the wooden walls right outside our bedroom. It makes me think about the knocking on the door late last night, and who had greeted me on the other side.

I had always imagined what it would be like to see Jade again, *if* I would ever see Jade again, and what I would say if I did; but none of those various scenarios included anything even remotely reminiscent of what happened last night. The mere thought makes me shudder.

Victoria just about almost killed Jade, and to be honest, I was so angry at Jade, I don't know how sick I'd be about it. Last night I learned a lot about who my true friends are, and as far as I'm concerned, other than Victoria, I don't have any.

Jade outright called me a liar and a psycho last night, in not so many words; Victoria, however, was amazing. She stood up for me, defended me, and protected me, from both the physical and mental wounds Jade was inflicting on my already severely scarred mind, body, and soul.

The thought makes me smile as I peer down at her fondly,

lying by my side, tightly wrapped in my left arm with her face buried in my neck. Her soft wheezing spasmodically goes in time with the rise and fall of her pale chest, emitting out of her full, ox-blood red lips, which are slightly parted.

Running my fingers up and down her cold skin, I think about how sometimes I forget that she's a vampire, and how her cold skin is often the only reminder of that. She's so kind, caring, and loyal, and has such a good heart, regardless of the fact that it no longer beats.

My stomach starts to grumble, and I realize it's been a while since I've eaten. I try to slip away from Victoria's tight grasp, but she grips me even harder, emitting a small, endearing whimper. I smile down at her lovingly, and keep still so as not to wake her.

"Vic? You awake?" I whisper, but she continues to sleep peacefully in silence.

Stretching my free arm out, I grab my watch from the nightstand; it's 11 am. I know Victoria won't be up until around 6:00 in the evening, and my stomach's growling at me to be fed.

Again, I try scooting out from under her. I manage to free the lower part of my body, stretching my feet until they rest on the floor, as my upper half lies sideways across the bed, contorted. I push up on the tips of my toes, slowly trying to slip my arm out from under her, causing me to fall out of the bed, hitting the floor with a hard thump.

I exhale heavily, shaking my head at my clumsiness, and how in trying so hard not to wake her, all I've done is just that; but to my surprise, I look up to find Victoria still sleeping soundly. She's an incredibly heavy sleeper, especially during the day, sometimes even going into something resembling a mild comatose state; but I still find myself trying my hardest not to wake her, as she looks so beautiful and innocent when in her peaceful slumber.

I quietly tiptoe out of the room and down the hall for a quick shower. I'm on my way to the bathroom when I see something out of place in my peripheral vision—a folded,

white piece of paper in the letter drop at the front door. Pulling it from the drop's flap, I unfold the paper, peering over my shoulder to make sure Victoria isn't around.

*I'll be coming back tonight, and every night from here on out, until you come to your senses and decide to come home with me. Please don't drag this out more than it already has been. Come home. We need you back, Tyler.*

-Jade

*P.S. Here's my phone number, in case you change your mind—(604) 513-8257*

I let out a long, irritated sigh, crumbling the note up in my hands before chucking it in the trashcan.

Walking back into the room, my anger suddenly disappears as I gaze adoringly at Victoria.

"*I'm not going anywhere where you're not,*" I whisper with a smile, my voice barely audible.

I idly lounge in the nearby chair for the rest of the day, watching Victoria sleep as I read Jack London's "The Call of the Wild," until she awakens, stirring under the sheets.

"Hey you," she mumbles sleepily, stretching her long, pale arms above her head.

"Evening, Sleeping Beauty. Sleep well?"

"Mhmm," she hums, sitting up in bed.

"*I am taking you* for a night out on the town, Good Miss. So get dressed," I order with a smile, sitting down on the corner of the bed.

"Oh really? What exactly do you have in mind?"

"Hmm, I don't know. We can't exactly go to dinner, seeing as how dinner consists of two entirely different things for us," I chuckle. "Maybe a movie? And we can always go to The Dome after; play some games. Just don't cry when I beat your ass at Halo."

Victoria gasps, smacking me in the face with her pillow.

“Oh please, the last time we played, I wiped the floor with you,” she teases. “And you may be decent at Call of Duty, but I make you my *bitch* every time we play Doom.”

“We’ll see about that, little lady. So what do you say? We can always go *MMORPG* if you want.”

Victoria is quiet for a few seconds, as she stares at me wryly, her eyebrows arched, the left corner of her mouth slightly pulling upward.

“Wow. We’re some hardcore nerds,” she finally utters, laughing heartily.

“Ha! Some *badass vampire*’ you turned out to be,” I goad her.

Her eyes widen and her mouth drops open, as she stares at me with an affronted look on her face, trying her hardest not to smile.

“Why don’t you come over here, and I’ll show you just how *badass* I can be,” she draws, while motioning me over with her index finger in a *come hither* motion.

“I’m so *not* scared of you, Vic,” I reply.

“Damn it, you’re making me soft! I used to be all feared and tough and intimidating; then you came along and threw me all out of whack, and now I’m a big softie for you. For Christ’s sake, you’ve even got me cuddling! What are you doing to me, Tyler?!”

I think about how much Victoria has changed, and how much I’ve changed—how we’ve changed each other. I’ve softened her immensely, while she’s toughened me up. As I look at her affectionately, I can’t help but smile at her disheveled, raven hair and her impish grin, as she sits there, wrapped in the crisp, white sheets.

“Come on, I just want a hug,” she says innocently, giving me puppy-dog eyes as she opens her arms out to me. “I’m Mrs. Softie, remember?”

“Yeah right, I’m not *that* stupid. You want me? Come and get me. But you’ll have to catch me first!” I shout, standing up and bending lithely at the knees, ready to run at any moment.

“But you’re stupid enough to taunt a vampire?” she laughs,

her back propped against the headboard. “It wouldn’t be hard to get you, you know; and I would have you in my grasp before you even reached the door. But *I’m* not that stupid, and *I’m* not about to get up out of bed and chase you around the house, stark naked!”

“God, you see right through me,” I utter with a naughty grin, followed by her throwing the remaining pillows at me.

“Pervert!”

Victoria lunges at me, and I immediately sprint out of the room. I turn around a few seconds later, only to realize she’s still sitting in bed, laughing heartily.

“Oh, *so tough*. What happened to Mr. Cocky? He ran out awfully fast, from the supposedly un-scary vampire girl,” she teases.

“Come and say that to my face, softie!” I shout from the hall.

“Ohhh, them words are fightin’ words. That’s it; just you wait until I get some clothes on!”

“Well, then hurry up and get dressed. Let’s go!” I say with a mischievous grin, peeking my head out from around the doorframe.

“I just woke up, give me a second!”

“Second’s up,” I retort, walking back toward the bed.

“Don’t make me manhandle you, boy,” she retaliates, her expression suddenly turning serious, causing me to take a cautious step back. “Hah, that’s right. Know your place, slave.”

“*Ouch!*” I reply glibly, clutching my chest dramatically while falling backwards onto the bed.

Victoria giggles as she bends down, lightly pecking my forehead with her cold, rosy lips before getting out of bed, the stark-white sheets wrapped around her pale body, which are almost as white as she is. She heads down the hall to the bathroom to start getting ready, while I wait on the living room couch.

When Victoria comes out, I gasp—she looks gorgeous. She’s wearing a snug, black-lace tank-top, skintight, black, leather pants, and fingerless black gloves, while a dark-red

garnet pendant hangs right above her cleavage.

“Well I hope you’re ready to get your ass whooped,” she snipes cockily.

“Psh, please. We’ll see about that, Rambo.”

Victoria giggles as she opens the door, with me following right behind her. Suddenly, she stops in her tracks, not moving a muscle as she holds the door ajar.

I’m wondering what the hold-up is, when I peer around her shoulder to find none other than Jade. She’s with some guy, who I presume to be her new boyfriend.

“*You*,” Victoria snarls, advancing towards Jade. “What do *you* want?”

“We’re here for Tyler. Mind your own damn business,” Jade says tersely, a fake, sardonic grin plastered across her face.

“What the hell, Jade?” I yell in frustration. “Just give it up, okay? I’m not going anywhere, so you can forget about even trying to give the little speech I’m sure you’ve prepared.”

“I told you, I’m taking you home,” she insists, rudely bumping Victoria’s shoulder as she tries to push past her.

Victoria immediately backs up and steps in front of Jade, raising her hand and placing it square-center on Jade’s chest, while glaring at her intimidatingly.

“Get off of my property. *Now*,” Victoria demands.

“Look, *Casper*, this is between me and Tyler, so butt out. Move,” Jade hisses disdainfully.

“*Casper*, huh?” Victoria replies, while pushing Jade off the porch, with the expert prowess of a predator. With every step Victoria takes, Jade takes one backward, until she’s backed up against her own car. “Well I’ll show you just how friendly *this* ghost can be.”

Victoria and Jade have a Mexican stand-off, as me and the other guy just watch from afar, knowing better than to meddle in girl drama. As Victoria glares at Jade, I can see Jade starting to back down, her body language and facial expression becoming more and more unsure of herself, and of what the woman standing before her is capable of.

“Fine,” Jade mutters.

“Now leave, before I make you,” Victoria bellows, her face mere inches from Jade’s.

Victoria turns around and starts walking back to the house, when I see Jade rush towards her with her fist in the air, about to suckerpunch her.

“Victoria!” I shout in warning.

Victoria suddenly turns around, catching Jade’s fist mid-air. She slowly twists Jade’s wrist, a smug grin across her face, causing Jade to fall to the ground on her knees. The definition of stunned, with her mouth agape, Jade writhes on the ground, staring in awe at her now twisted and contorted wrist, which is still in Victoria’s iron grip.

Finally, she grabs Jade by the hair, dragging her back to the car through the dirt, kicking and screaming.

“Get your fucking hands off me!” Jade screams, leaving a trail of swirling dust in her path.

Meanwhile, the man that Jade came with, who up until now has been standing there with his mouth open like an idiot, finally makes his move.

“Get off her right now, or so help me God, I’ll bust your face in, woman!” he yells at Victoria, advancing towards her.

Victoria slings Jade’s body towards his feet as if Jade were a rag doll, leaving her a whimpering, crumpled pile of limbs beneath him. Victoria marches over to him, placing her face inches in front of his, standing her ground.

“Go ahead, take your shot then; but you better make the first one count, because that’s all you’re going to get in, kid. Go ahead, give me a reason to do to you ten times worse than what I just did to her,” she whispers scathingly, pointing at the ground towards Jade. “I *dare* you.”

The man stares back at Victoria, his face awash with uncertainty, as if trying to figure her out and size her up.

“Vic,” I call to her apprehensively, making sure she won’t do something she regrets.

“Don’t worry, I won’t kill them,” she says, turning to face me with a sly smirk, before turning back around to face them.

“Wait, kill? Did she say ‘kill?’!” Jade shrieks, rubbing her

shoulder as if in pain.

The man stands there, fuming, as his pride and ego hang in the balance, his chest heaving up and down with adrenaline. He is about to go for Victoria when Jade stops him.

“Fine. We’ll leave, okay,” she mutters scornfully, as she gets up off the ground and holds him back.

“Yes, you will; and if I ever catch either of you here again—well, let’s just hope I don’t catch either of you here again, so you don’t have to find out, *if* you live to find out,” Victoria mouths, slow and menacing.

As they get into their car, Victoria stomps away in anger, muttering under her breath. “Idiots. There’s a whole goddamn forest where I can hide your bodies.”

I can see Jade looking at me through the car window, her face vague with unwritten emotion, before she drives off down the dirt trail, leaving nothing but an eerie silence in her wake.

“Vic?” I say softly, as I approach her, placing a hand on her shoulder. “You okay?”

“Lust, sadness, *anger*. . .” she trails off, emphasizing the word “anger” as she turns to me, her eyes now a bright hue of crimson. “All of the extreme emotions; they’re all connected to one thing for a vampire—the yearning need to feed, the need for *blood*. So, sorry, but I’m not in much of a mood to go out tonight anymore. I’m hungry now, and I’m seeing red—literally.”

“Yeah, maybe we should just go out tomorrow night. You need to eat something, and hopefully not me or them,” I laugh, trying to lighten the situation, but Victoria clearly isn’t in the mood.

“You, no; but them? I can’t promise anything,” she murmurs, as she gets into her car and drives away, down the exact same road I know that they are only a few minutes ahead.

## THE CAT'S OUT OF THE BAG

I'm at home alone. Victoria left to go feed about two hours ago, and I shudder to think if she caught up with Jade and her boyfriend. That look in her eyes before she left is engrained in my memory.

I've noticed she's been coming back from her hunts a lot quicker lately; probably because she doesn't like the thought of leaving me at home alone and unprotected. I hate thinking about what she does when she leaves for those few hours every night. I understand that she has to do what she does in order to survive, but the thought is still a bit unnerving, and can be disconcerting to say the least. Sometimes it's hard to imagine that the kind, sweet, caring woman I've grown to know and love can be capable of such things—that she's a glorified murderer; but I try my best not to think about it or let it get to me.

I'm interrupted from my reverie when there's a loud, persistent knocking at the front door, making me jump. I get up from the couch and apprehensively walk over, unsure of who I'll see on the other side, but I'm cashing in my bets that it's either Jade again, or the Hollow-Eyed Witch. At this point, I'm not sure who I'd want to see less.

I cautiously open the door to find a young man and

woman, approximately in their early twenties or so, with ox-blood red eyes and pale faces, that are vague with unwritten emotion and wicked intent.

“So, *you* must be the kid she talks about so much,” the woman says tersely, her words dripping with a thick English accent. She is hiding behind a facile smile, but I can tell what lies behind her seemingly nice expression.

“Umm,” I mumble, unsure of what I should be feeling right now, but fear and anxiety are on the top of the list.

“Is Victoria home?” she asks, barging in the door and marching straight past me, the large man following in closely behind her without so much as a pleasantry.

He catches me off guard when I look down to see that he’s barefoot, when the temperature outside is in the single digits and it’s starting to snow. He has on a tight t-shirt, black jeans, and his blonde hair is slicked back—very James Dean. The woman is wearing a plaid miniskirt, and a snug, black leather jacket, with an ivory colored, wife-beater underneath exposing her cleavage. Her long legs are clad in tall, thigh-high, heeled leather boots, and her hair is a vibrant hue of scarlet, complementing her crimson eyes, which are icy, taciturn, and ruthless. The man with her isn’t much better, as he stares down at me, his mouth set in a grim line, his eyes emotionless and detached. They’re both pale as porcelain, their chilling demeanors just as cold as their eyes.

I don’t say a word, because I immediately can tell by the looks of them that I’m not dealing with two normal strangers; and by normal, I mean human. The smell gives them away immediately. It’s not a foul scent, but it is distinct—slightly powdery with a hint of musk, and from what Victoria has told me, it’s the smell of their pheromones, which each vampire possesses their own unique version of; however, the scent is still fairly similar amongst the entire species. I’ve gotten used to Victoria’s, so I recognize the smell instantaneously.

“Well? Is she here?” the woman persists, peering into the hallway before making her way to the kitchen.

“Um, you guys can’t just barge in here like this,” I croak,

trying to assert myself, but it comes out nothing more than an apprehensive, pathetic, garbled whisper.

The woman stares back at me with an irritated glare, scoffing and crossing her arms in amusement. “It’s cold outside. Don’t you know it’s *impolite* to not invite guests in when it’s cold outside?” she says brusquely, her tone irritatingly cavalier.

Before I have time to respond, she’s behind me in a flash, grabbing me tightly in her grasp. She clasps her icy hand around my throat, making me gasp for air as I try to break free from her unwavering grip.

“But you already knew that we don’t feel the cold, didn’t you, pet?” she whispers into my ear, before licking the side of my face with her slick, freezing tongue. I cringe at her touch, as panic begins to build in the pit of my stomach. “Shame she left you here alone; little human, all pathetic and defenseless. It’s quite cruel, really. Or *maybe* she just left you here for us to play with? What do you think, Darren?” she asks, looking back at the man.

Finally something sparks in his sinister, crimson eyes, his face alight with wicked thought, as he starts advancing towards me to join her in their soon-to-be feast.

“Shhhh, it’s okay, love. This will only hurt a bit.”

She opens her mouth, fangs fully exposed, and starts bending down to my exposed neck, as I close my eyes and prepare for the worst. She deeply inhales, running her nose along the length of my neck, causing me to shudder. Suddenly, she stops, right as her razor-sharp fangs are about to reach the surface of my flesh.

“A virgin?” she whispers in wonderment, as she pulls sharply away, causing me to exhale with relief.

*Never in my life did I ever think I would be so happy to be a virgin.*

I thank my lucky stars at this revelation, praying that there must be some vampire law against feeding on young virgins, which is ironic considering that most lore portray them as

considering virgins a delicacy and overall preference.

She throws her head back as she starts to let out a slow, sinister laugh.

“Oh, this is just *fantastic*. A virgin! Imagine that. Do you know how rare you are to come by these days?” she mouths in my ear, her tone chillingly full of excitement. “I don’t think I’m going to kill you just yet. I might as well have a little fun with you first. Mind if I have this one, Darren?”

The man throws his hand nonchalantly in the air, looking as if he was bored and no longer interested. “Eh, sure. Go ahead and have at it, love. Besides, you know I prefer my virgins to be of the young female variety,” he drawls glibly, as he goes to sit down on the couch, stretching his legs out on the table in front of him as he picks up the remote and turns on the television.

She turns to the man, as she brings both my arms behind my back, clasping my wrists together. “And close the door, would you baby? I want to have some fun with this one,” she orders him, as she brings her arctic lips to my neck, kissing and sucking on it as I try to wriggle out of her iron grasp.

She puts her arms around mine, encircling my body so that I can’t move, as she picks me up and starts walking me to the bedroom, kicking and screaming.

“Shhh, little one; no point in screaming, now. It’s pointless, no one can hear you. Although I *do* love a screamer, in more ways than one, if you get my drift,” she says wryly, nibbling on my ear lobe.

The woman kicks open the door, flinging me along the bedroom floor as she slams the door behind her, grinning evilly.

“Relax,” she hisses, as she proceeds towards me with the expert prowess of a jungle cat. “We might as well have some fun before you die. Besides, you wouldn’t want your gravestone reading, ‘Here lies’. . . Oh, what was your name again?” She pauses, stroking her chin in deep thought. “Oh, yes—*Tyler*. ‘Here lies Tyler, eternal virgin.’ Hmm, yes. I think we will have a little fun before I drain you dry.”

She peels her leather jacket off, tossing it on the floor as she advances towards me. I scurry on the ground, crawling backward until I hit the wall, right next to the nightstand.

“I hope you’re the type that likes the woman in control, because I’m a dominant,” she smirks, as she pauses before me.

I keep a steel baseball bat next to my bed, behind the nightstand, just in case Victoria ever needs help with a demon. I’m sure it wouldn’t do much to a demon, but I’m sure as hell glad I have it now.

I slowly stand up, reaching behind the nightstand. Grabbing it between my sweaty palms, I swing it at the woman as hard as I can. She grins at me as she catches it with one hand, digging her nails into the bat’s steel shaft as my eyes widen in shock. I tighten my grip, trying my hardest to pull it from her grasp, but she tears it from my hands as if I were a five year old, chucking it backward into the closet door behind her.

“Dominated it is,” she says wickedly, shoving me head first into the adjacent wall, causing my vision to blur and darken as a vertiginous stupor overtakes me. “Oops! Sorry about that, love. I don’t know my own strength sometimes.”

She effortlessly picks me up by my shirt collar, throwing me on the bed as she straddles my body, forcing my arms down by the wrists. I groan from the pain in my head, still rather out of it, and doing my best to wriggle free; but my efforts prove futile against her brute strength. She rips my grey t-shirt off my body, throwing the shredded rag on the floor before she grabs me by the legs, pulling my body down the length of the bed and underneath her, as she starts kissing and nipping her way up my chest.

Pinning me down, she starts biting at my neck, grinding hard circles into my lower half, trying to get me physically aroused.

“Stop fighting back. I’m going to kill you regardless, so you might as well enjoy it as much as you can,” she chirps, her tone frighteningly cheery, as she starts to shove her tongue into my mouth and undo the zipper on my jeans.

Suddenly, there’s a loud crash in the living room, causing

the entire house to shake. The woman retracts her tongue and sits straight up, anxiously looking back towards the door.

“Shit,” she mutters, her eyes wide with fear.

There is now nothing but an eerie silence in the house, as we both sit there, frozen. Suddenly the door to the bedroom comes flying off its hinges, as Victoria quickly marches in, her eyes blood-red and her fangs extended, her hands balled into fists at her sides. Her veins are completely perceptible and a deep violet color, her pale skin taking on a transparency.

She violently grabs the woman by the neck, like you would grab a dog by its scruff, throwing her head-first into the closet, causing her to smash through the drywall and out the other side into the living room.

I back away in fear, still unnerved and frightened, as Victoria reaches her hand out to me.

“Are you okay?” she asks, her brow furrowed, as she takes my trembling hand in hers.

I manage to muster a nod, as I sit there, stunned. My first reaction is to be afraid of Victoria and her frightening appearance, but then I realize that even behind all those deadly teeth and bloodthirsty eyes, that it’s still her, and that she would never hurt me. I gingerly take her hand, letting her pull me from the bed as she walks me out into the hall.

“Did she hurt you?” she inquires worriedly, placing her cold, frail hand on my cheek.

“I’ll be okay. Nothing a little bit of whisky and Neosporin can’t fix,” I murmur, trying to force a smile so she doesn’t worry.

“Stay here,” she orders softly, lightly grabbing me by the shoulders before kissing my forehead.

Victoria’s expression suddenly changes, her eyes narrowing and her mouth contorting into a snarl as she marches into the living room. I stick my head around the corner to watch, and I can see the philanderer woman sitting in a pile of rubble, stroking her head in pain as she groans. Victoria growls as she sprints towards her, her eyes full of wrath and fury.

“Victoria, wait! I can explain!” the woman begs, as she

starts to sit up, shielding herself with her arms.

Victoria lets out a load roar as she grabs the woman's hand, crushing it in her grasp as she forces the woman to her knees. I can hear each bone in the woman's hand snap, as she shrieks in pain, writhing in agony below Victoria.

Suddenly, I hear the loud sound of ripping flesh, as I see Victoria literally rip the hand from the girl's arm, her cries of pain now turning in to an earsplitting, high-pitched screech. It doesn't even sound human, but more like the sound of a bat, amplified 700 decibels.

The woman stares at her now torn off limb with her mouth agape, as she squirms in pain in a pile at Victoria's feet. I shield my eyes, unable to watch this gruesome display any longer, but I inadvertently open them again when I hear a loud snap. I look up to see Victoria bashing her closed fist into the outer part of the woman's elbow, snapping it clean in half, leaving nothing but a jagged bone piercing through the other side, dangling in a hammock of bloody skin.

The pain is far too intense for the woman to take, as she falls to the floor unconscious, in complete silence. Victoria stomps over to the nearby table, tearing the lamp from the wall socket as she rips off the lampshade, turning it upside down and lifting it over her head to smash the now unconscious woman to a bloody pulp.

"Victoria, stop!" I yell from the hall, my eyes starting to well up with tears.

*This is not what I wanted.*

I look around at our home, and see everything in a mess, blood and furniture strewn about everywhere, as a man lies cataleptic on the kitchen floor, slumped up against the cabinet, while a woman who just tried to rape me remains unconscious, bleeding out onto the hardwood floors, to soon create a deep crimson stain that will never wash out, leaving a lingering memory of violence in its wake. This is our home; this place is supposed to be inviolable and sacred, and now it's ruined,

tainted with hate and gore and violence.

My voice snaps Victoria out of her rage, as she looks to me, breathing heavily, her chest heaving up and down with adrenaline. I know the woman deserved what she was about to get, but I don't want Victoria to allow herself to turn into a monster, and do something in front of me that I know she'll regret, merely in the name of vengeance.

In a stupor, she stares solemnly at the girl's body on the floor, as she drops her arms down at her sides, lowering the lamp and setting it back down on the small end table. She calmly walks over to me, staring fervently into my eyes, and I can see her eyes full of shame, guilt and fear—shame that she lost control; guilt that she had gone too far in front of me; fear that I'll think she's a monster.

I take a step forward, lifting my arms up to embrace and accept her, when she goes limp in my arms and buries her head into my shoulder. She quietly starts to sob, as I feel her surprisingly warm tears spread, creating a wet spot on my shoulder. Her body slowly stops trembling, as she relaxes in my arms. I stand with her for a few minutes, as we simply hold each other, both of us still trying to absorb what just happened.

"I thought I had lost you," she whispers, choking back her sobs as she stares up at me, her porcelain face sodden, her salty tears leaving pale pink trails in their path.

"But you didn't. I'm here, it's okay," I whisper back, tilting her chin up to meet my gaze. "Thank you, Victoria. Thank you for saving my life—again."

She lets out a small laugh and smiles, as she wipes her tears away with the back of her hand.

"You're welcome," she utters, bringing me back into an embrace as she rests her head on my bare chest, right above my heart.

We stand there in silence for a while, until we hear a groaning coming from the kitchen. The unconscious man is slowly starting to wake up, and so is the woman in the living room, who is gradually bleeding out.

Victoria starts heading towards her, her anger returning as

she bends down and picks the girl up roughly by her shirt, hurling her up against the wall by the throat, several feet above her head.

“Ow! That hurts!” the woman whines petulantly. “And did you have to rip off my hand? That’ll take several *days* and a vat of blood to grow back, ya cunt!”

“What the fuck are you doing here, Scarlet?” she growls, grinding her jaw down firmly as she digs her nails into the girl’s pale throat.

“I just came by to tell you something about your little pet here,” she whispers through clenched teeth, trying to speak through Victoria’s iron grip. “Interesting revelation, really; but you weren’t home, so I figured I’d make things easier on you and just kill him.”

“Don’t call him that,” she hisses, pushing her harder against the wall, causing tiny flakes of plaster to fall to the floor.

“Vic?” I ask, my eyebrows arched in questioning. “What is she talking about?”

“Ah, he doesn’t know, does he?” Scarlet sneers, as she lets out a hearty guffaw. “The *real* reason why you saved him in the first place?”

“Shut your fucking mouth,” Victoria retaliates, her eyes turning back to that frightening hue of crimson.

“Wait, what?” I inquire, turning to Victoria in surprise.

“It’s nothing for you to worry about, okay!” Victoria snaps at me.

“He *does* have a right to know, Vic,” Scarlet utters, looking awfully proud of herself for stirring the pot.

“Know *what*? Will someone tell me what the hell is going on?” I press, feeling as if I’m the only person here out of the loop—on the outside of some huge, colossal secret that I’m the center of.

Victoria immediately grows silent, as she averts her gaze to the ground. She’s hiding something from me; I know it.

“Fine, I’ll tell him then,” Scarlet mutters.

Victoria suddenly looks up, agitatedly presses harder on her throat. “Shut up!”

“Let her speak! I want to know what she has to say! Either that, or you tell me what she’s talking about—*right now*, Victoria,” I demand.

Victoria continues to stand there in silence, staring at the ground, as if looking at me would turn her to stone. She can’t bear to meet my eyes, because she knows I’ll see right through her.

“She was right, you know. You do look incredibly like him—spitting image, really. Same hair, same face, same smile—hell, you even sound just like him from what she’s told me. Too bad you’re just a token of ephemera to her; a mere symbol of a long lost memory she wishes to rekindle—nothing more,” Scarlet snipes, a proud grin plastered across her face.

“What is she talking about Victoria?!” I scream, peering at Victoria with a discerning look; but all she can do is stare at the ground in shame, unable to look at me in fear that it would make it all true.

“Let them *go*,” I mouth, slow and succinct. I pull her off of Scarlet, causing the girl’s body to drop to the ground before she gets up and dusts herself off, joining Darren by the door. She’s on her way out, when she stops at the doorway, turning around one last time.

“Oh, I almost forgot; the whole reason we came here. ‘The marked ones will all lose their soul in time, by the hands of the unholy ones.’ That’s all I was able to come across, but it was enough. He’s as good as dead, V; so you should either just kill him now or let him go. He can’t be saved. Just like Henry, who you couldn’t save all those decades ago; you won’t be able to save this one now either,” she utters solemnly, staring at me and Victoria with a mixed look of both pity and satisfaction, before turning around and walking out the door, leaving nothing behind but smashed hopes and dreams, sour expectations, and a bleak future.

## THE DARKER SIDE OF SACRIFICE

“What exactly was she talking about, Vic?” I hiss, scowling and leaning against the wall with my arms crossed.

She’s dead quiet and not saying a word, just sitting at the kitchen table, rhythmically tapping her fingernails on the hard surface, while staring at an old vase that sits upon it.

“Vic,” I persist, my voice dripping with venom. “Answer me! What the hell was she talking about?”

The tapping suddenly stops, as tears start to well up in her distant eyes.

“You know that I love you, right? For you, the person you are. *You*—Tyler. Right?” she asks, her bottom lip quivering as a rogue tear trails down her pale face.

“Don’t patronize me. Stop beating around the bush, Victoria,” I sneer, demanding a real answer.

She pauses, staring down at her feet, tearing herself away from my scrutiny. She lingers there for a moment, gazing at the wall with a far-off look in her eyes, her face awash with a million unwritten emotions as she seemingly recollects long lost memories.

“I had someone once. We were very close—in love. He was strong, handsome, loving, noble...” she trails off, a tiny smile pulling at her lips as if the recollection of the mere memory

alone brings back the happiness they once shared—feelings of times past. “If he had been younger, he’d have looked just like you. Sometimes it astounds me just how much of a spitting image you are of him; but, he’s gone now. He’s been gone for a very, very long time.”

“Henry,” I add.

“Yes,” she murmurs.

Her voice suddenly grows sullen and somber, as she bites her bottom lip and stares at the ground once again. I can tell she’s in so much pain, and while a small part of me cares, every other part of me is angry and seething, and wants to tear her apart.

“So what are you trying to say, Victoria?”

“What do you want me to say?” she screams, her voice quivering with desperation.

“Is that the reason why you saved me that night?” I utter, glaring at her as my blood boils and temperature rises. “Tell me!”

“Yes,” she finally whispers, after a long pause.

“So what do you see me as? An object? A lost memory? What *am* I to you?” I ask sternly.

“Tyler, although that was my original motive, and that’s how it was in the beginning, that’s not how it is now. You have to understand that. I truly love you, for *you*—not the memory of a man that you represent. Please, you’ve got to believe me!”

Even though I can see that my words are cutting into Victoria like daggers, I’m getting that same numb feeling I did when we went to the store a few weeks ago for those blankets; that lingering chill that tunnels deep down into my bones, almost as if it’s coming from within, as if I’ve become it. It’s like it’s no longer me interrogating her intentions or motives, but a cruel, angry bystander whose sole intention is to hurt Victoria, and doesn’t care if he does. It’s almost as if her pain is giving me a sick pleasure. Whatever’s happening to me, it’s getting worse. Day by day, it feels like my soul and feelings and emotions are slowly seeping out of me little by little, like the air slowly being let out of an already flattening tire. I’m helpless to

stop it, and even more, I don't even really care.

"Tyler, you're my *best friend*, and I love you more than *anything*. Please, you've got to believe me!" she pleads, choking back her sobs.

"And why should I, huh? Why should I believe anything you say?" I say scathingly. "You're a liar. You've lied to me since we've met, Victoria."

She's taken aback, a mixed look of incredulity and hurt awash her face. That sick pleasure at seeing her in pain returns, and the satisfaction I'm getting from it is bizarre.

I'm about to retaliate when there's a sudden knock at the door. I push myself from the wall to answer it, placing my hand on the knob.

"Tyler, wait," Victoria commands worriedly, getting up from the chair to stop me.

"Oh, give it a rest. I doubt it's your buddies. I think they learned their lesson," I mutter, pulling open the door.

I stare in silence at the person before me, unsure if it's a mirage.

*Is it? Could it really be?*

"Amber? Is it really you?" I ask, as a small smile starts to pull at my lips.

"Yes, Tyler, it's me—in the flesh," she replies, smiling back.

"How the hell have you been?"

"Well, after I got rid of that damn Soul Eater for you, I figured I'd come find you to make sure it actually worked," she answers.

"Wait, what? You did *what*?" I ask, my voice laden with shock.

"Yeah, about that; I'll explain everything over dinner. So what do you say? Want to grab a bite?"

"Um, yeah; okay. Just let me grab my jacket."

I leave the doorway and head to the bedroom to get my hoodie; I can hear the two of them talking.

"I'm Amber," Amber says, introducing herself to Victoria.

“Victoria,” Victoria replies flatly, her tone dripping with jealousy.

“So, are you and Tyler, umm. . .” Amber trails off, slightly awkward.

“No, not yet at least. We’re just friends for the time being.”

“Oh? Cool,” Amber replies succinctly, a hint of excitement in her voice.

I come back out of the room, holding Scarlet’s leather jacket.

“Your *friend* left this in my room,” I mutter to Victoria, shoving the balled up leather jacket into her chest, which is met with an affronted look on her part.

I can tell that Victoria is incredibly jealous and hurt, and feeling *more* than territorial, but at this point, I *want* her to hurt—for making *me* hurt. I head out the door with Amber, without so much as a goodbye or considerate answer as to when I’ll be back, out of pure spite.

“So, how have you been, Amber?” I turn to ask her, watching as she keeps her eyes ahead, her hand steady on the steering wheel.

“I’ve got to say, I’ve had better days; but now that I’ve found you, this one’s not so bad,” she replies, diverting her gaze away from the road and towards me, a wicked smile across her face.

“So, you got rid of the Soul Eater? How?” I question, still a bit skeptical.

“One can appease the demon by offering another soul,” she replies nonchalantly. “So, that’s exactly what I did.”

“Wait, what? *Whose* soul, Amber?”

“Mine,” she chirps, after a long pause.

“Wait, how is that even possible? People need their souls, don’t they? Or am I missing something here?”

“People need their souls, yes; but there are few exceptions. I offered mine up, and I paid a price. The price I paid was losing all of my feelings and emotions.”

I stare back at her with a bemused look on my face, still not quite understanding how she was able to do this. She has to be

leaving something out. If it was this easy, I would've done it a long time ago; but, if it worked—which it obviously did—who am I to argue with it?

We pull into a small parking lot before she turns the engine off, taking her key out of the ignition. We both sit in silence for a minute, and I begin to grow a bit uneasy. I don't know what it is, but something isn't right. Something's off, and there is a lingering tension in the air, kind of like the feeling you get right before a rollercoaster drop.

"When you told me that you loved me before you left, did you mean it in the way I think you did?" she asks timidly.

"Yes, I did, but that was a long time ago. Things have changed. I've changed," I reply, fidgeting with the ties on my jacket's hood.

"I thought you didn't believe in romantic love though?" she asks, her eyebrows arched in questioning.

"True, but my whole stance on that has changed as of late. Let's just say I've recently seen and felt just how strong love can be," I trail off. "What I really want to say though, is that you've saved me in more ways than one, Amber. You were the only one that was truly there for me when I got into the whole debacle with the Soul Eater, and now to find out that you sacrificed your soul for me—to save *me*—well, I'm speechless. I guess what I'm trying to say is, thank you, Amber. Thank you for everything. You're a good friend."

She's quiet for a brief moment, as she stares out the windshield like a zombie. I lightly touch her hand, and recoil back immediately. She's ice cold, the mere touch sending chills up my spine and into my bones, causing my stomach to flip and my heart to skip a beat.

"Bad circulation," she mumbles, eyeing me speculatively as she quickly retracts her hand away. "So, that girl that was at the house with you; is she your, you know," she inquires.

"Victoria? Nah, she's just a good friend of mine. Actually, she's my best friend. She knows about the Saffron Curse too, and she's been helping me and keeping me safe from the demons ever since I met her. I'd do anything for her. I owe her

my life,” I reply with a weary smile, realizing just how much I love Victoria, and just how good she’s been to me.

Furthermore, I’m starting to realize just how wrong I was in treating the situation the way I did, and treating *her* the way I did. I don’t know what came over me, but it’s gone now, and I’m suddenly regretting the harsh things I said to her.

“In fact, I love her,” I utter, causing a fluttering feeling in my heart and stomach as soon as the words leave my mouth, as if the mere mention of the words suddenly make what I already knew to be true, real. “I really do love her more than anything; I just haven’t got the balls to tell her. The last thing I want to do is ruin our friendship. You know me; I’m terrible at these kinds of things.”

“You know I was in love with you too, right?” Amber replies shyly. “That’s why I did what I did for you, Tyler.”

“You were?” I ask in disbelief.

“Yep,” she says with an awkward smile, followed by a long silence between us.

“Amber, what are you doing here? You never told me; and how did you find me to begin with?”

“Let’s just say I have some really good connections,” she replies. “But come on, there’s something I need to show you that’ll help you with the curse.”

She opens the car door and gets out, motioning for me to follow her into the alley way. I get out the passenger’s side, apprehensively trailing after her.

“Why would you hide it here?” I suddenly ask, getting an uneasy, queasy feeling in my gut as I stop mid-step.

“Come on, it’s just a little bit further this way,” she implores, beckoning me with her finger. “I had to stash it back here. It’s not really safe to be carrying it around.”

She walks further down the alley, stopping when she reaches a dumpster on the right side.

“Geez, what the hell is it? Or should I even ask?” I joke.

“This is it. We’re here,” she hisses, her voice suddenly changing into something sinister and wicked, as an evil smile pulls at her lips.

I turn around to inspect my surroundings, and I don't see the thing or object that she speaks of. I'm scanning the alley way behind me when I notice someone leaning up against the wall at the alley way's entrance. The dark figure suddenly starts to head towards us, picking up its pace.

"You know, it took me and my sister some time to get you away from that vampire bitch," she says crudely. As I turn back around to face her, I see that her face has now become severely twisted and disfigured.

Loose chunks of flesh start to fall from her tiny body, as she grows in height and bulk. Her beautiful emerald eyes melt out of their sockets, as bright, glowing, yellow orbs take their place. Her teeth are sharp and rotted at the gums, and her tongue is tiny and curved like a sharp, pointy worm, with bloody spikes that hook back towards her throat. Her entire body's muscles and innards are exposed, with a few pieces of bone visible, and her once black hair has become shadow-like and transparent. Every movement she makes causes her muscles to contract, while her bones shrink into them.

I slowly start to back away, when the sound of a horrific shriek permeates the air. I turn around to see the figure from before now crawling toward me along the top of the wall. It looks exactly like the one that stands before me—almost identical.

I turn back around to the other, which is now mere inches from me. It has a sick, twisted grin across its face, and the bones in its hand have pushed out through the tips of its fingers, growing into claws.

"Who are you? And what the hell did you bastards do to Amber?" I growl, clenching my teeth in anger while my hands ball into fists at my side.

"We are the Sisters of Malice," they chime together in harmony, speaking in monotone unison, as if clones reciting a computerized message speaking from one entity. "As for your little friend, that's a small, tiny detail about the Saffron Curse you and your friend may not have been aware of, Tyler. You see, if another soul is sacrificed in place of the marked one,

that soul is no longer pure, and becomes a demon. No black magic comes without a price and sacrifice, even if it was a sacrifice to begin with. There's always a fine print, Tyler; and your foolish friend failed to realize that. Where do you think the Hollow-Eyed Witch came from? Don't you think it was a little odd that the Soul Eater stopped hunting you, and in its place, the other new demon came for you instead?"

My brow knits together in confusion and anger; I can't believe what I'm hearing.

"You're lying," I spit, tears starting to well up in my eyes at the thought of my lost friend, and her soul now forever being held prisoner by the forces of evil. She didn't deserve this. She's one more loved one I've hurt and killed through my foolish mistakes, and I will never forgive myself for that.

"We stole the girl's memories, making you rather easy to find," they both sneer, grinning happily. "And all that mushy love-talk made you putty in our hands. As for Amber, her body has now become that of the Hollow-eyed Witch, which we can use as we see fit, making her our own personal puppet; and as for her soul? Well that belongs to us now, courtesy gift from the Soul Eater, since *he* can no longer go after you. Consider it his insurance that you still pay your debt."

They both close in on me like jackals on a lone, trapped rabbit. The one on the wall creeps above me and leaps on my back, while the other charges me, ripping my abdomen open with its claws. Fatigue plagues my body as I feel the life slowly bleed out of me, causing me to fall to my knees.

I clutch my stomach, trying to hold my entrails in, but I finally collapse on my back, gasping for air, as the steady beat of my heart steadily loses its reverb, the world flickering away into a black blur.

The last thing I see as I lie bleeding out on the asphalt, is a night sky devoid of all stars, and the two Sisters of Malice hovering over me, with those evil, twisted smiles across their faces; and the last thing that comes to my mind, before I fade out into darkness, is Victoria.

## A LOSS WORSE THAN DEATH

I don't know who that girl was, but something about her just isn't sitting right with me. I overheard their conversation, and her little spiel just doesn't add up. She was supposedly there from the beginning, when Tyler got the Saffron Curse, and she was somehow able to get rid of the Soul Eater, leaving her completely fine and intact? All black magic has a price—a fine print. Who the hell is *she* that she can banish such a powerful demon, just like that, with no price to pay?

Just her mere presence made me sick to my blood-filled stomach. Something about her energy was off. I couldn't exactly place her, but she didn't smell human; her scent was just. . .*different*.

A terrible thought begins to plague my mind. What if she was a demon, and she was just using the guise of his friend to manipulate him? And I was just too wrapped up in my own self-absorbed jealousy and anger to see it?

It feels as if I'm in a plane that's suddenly just lost cabin pressure. My heart sinks, my stomach drops.

*What did I just do? I let him go alone with her, against my better instincts. If something happens to him, it's all my fault. Oh my god—I have to go, now.*

I grab my keys and sprint out the door. I stop and stand in the forest clearing amongst the tall oak trees, where my car is parked, and close my eyes, tuning out my surroundings. I focus hard, letting all the frantic thoughts leave my mind, so that I can zero in on Tyler's scent and presence.

With all the time I've spent with Tyler, I've grown accustomed to his scent, and I should be able to smell him all the way into the city if need be. Now that we also have the empath connection, I should be able to feel his energy and presence if I concentrate hard enough, so finding him should not be an issue.

I try to connect to Tyler, allowing our energies to meld from across the long distance; but surprisingly, there's nothing. I can't feel his life-force at all, nor can I sense his energy. Maybe he's too far away.

As I inhale the cold, night air deep into my lungs, I barely catch his scent. It's extremely faint, but it's there. I jump into my car, roll the windows down, and continue to follow his scent, sticking my head out the window every few minutes to narrow in on it.

The closer I get to the location, the more time I have to think about everything.

*What if he's hurt? What if he's dead? No, he can't be. I can't bear to lose him—just like Henry.*

*God, he means everything to me; and the last thing we did was fight. If something has happened to him, I will never forgive myself.*

*I made a promise, that I'd protect him at all costs. I let him down.*

I have a fleeting thought of what I would do if something has happened to him, or even worse, if he's dead. Maybe I would just walk out into the sun, let myself ignite into flames and burn to ash. Life just simply wouldn't be worth living anymore.

I'm full of distracted thoughts, and my vision is now a blur as tears stream down my face. I decide to run a red light, when

I hear a loud honking and turn to my side just in time to see bright headlights coming at me. I swerve to avoid it, slamming my foot on the brakes, as I squint my eyes shut and brace for impact. The sound of crunching metal and screeching tires fills my ears.

I open them a split second later, to find that the car engine is still humming, and that I've managed to swerve completely out of the way of harm. There is a five-car pile-up behind me, but I can't stop—not now. Tyler needs me.

I accelerate on the gas, pedal to the metal, fleeing the scene, as I berate myself for being so stupid. I knew something about her was off, and I went against my gut. I *knew* better.

What's even worse, is that I should be able to see through Tyler's eyes, and feel him through our empath connection. I can barely even *smell* him at this point, and his scent is so faint, it's virtually non-existent.

I drive into the city, blowing through all the red lights. I search for his scent once again, and am instantly overwhelmed by the smell of Tyler's blood, which hits me like a Mack truck. Panic grips me as I press harder on the accelerator, my knuckles turning whiter than my already pale skin, as I grip the steering wheel in panic. I'm about to pass a liquor store when I zero in on Tyler's scent, and come to a screeching halt.

I turn the car off and jump out, practically running towards his scent. The people standing outside look at me with bewilderment, like I'm a crazy woman. I don't realize why until I hear the gasps and hushed whispers from the on-lookers, that it's because my eyes are blood-red and my fangs are starting to become visible; but exposure is the *least* of my worries right now.

I follow Tyler's scent into a nearby alley, and I can see a small, little shadow of a person, in fetal position on the ground. My breath hitches in my throat, and I silently pray that it isn't him. I have to catch my breath as I jog into the alley, ignoring the curious bystanders.

*It's not him. It's not him. It's not him. . .*

I keep whispering it to myself like a mantra, as tears start welling up in my eyes. As I walk over to the limp body, I peer down and see him—my Tyler.

I cover my mouth with my shaky fingers, fighting hard to maintain control and keep it together. He is eviscerated, his stomach slit open from side to side, and he is drowning in a pool of his own blood. His face is strewn with dry, pale pink trails of where his tears streamed down his bloody cheeks. I drop to my knees, shaking his wilted, lifeless body by the shoulders.

“Oh my god, Tyler! Tyler! No! No!” I scream over and over, as if saying it isn’t so will make it true, and erase this all. “Tyler please, wake up! *Please!* You can’t do this! You can’t leave me!”

I immediately scoop him up in my arms, pulling his body into my chest, as I rock him back and forth, cradling him in my embrace; but he hangs in my arms like a rag doll, no sign of life in his flaccid body.

“Don’t you *dare* leave me Tyler, or so help me *God* I will come down to the depths of hell and hunt you down! Do you hear me!? Tyler!?! Tyler!” I shriek, as I start to hyperventilate. “Please, baby, wake up—*please*. I’m so sorry, just please don’t die. I *need* you. I love you,” I whisper softly in his ear as I choke back my sobs, hoping that true love will somehow be strong enough to resurrect the dead, as if this was all just a bad fairytale gone wrong.

As I soak his bloody, ripped t-shirt with my salty tears, I stare despairingly down at his now pale face, and kiss his scarlet-stained forehead. I place my head on his chest, tightly hugging the lifeless, drooping body of my love.

Suddenly, I make out a soft fluttering thump. I stop all movement, as my eyes widen. I lean down and put an ear to his chest. I can make out a faint heartbeat—he’s still alive.

*Oh, thank God.*

“Tyler,” I whisper, as I smile and stare down at him fondly and stroke his cheek. “You had me worried for a second there, baby. Don’t you *ever* scare me like that again.”

His eyes open a bit as he softly groans, and tries to bring his blood-stained hand up to caress my cheek; but before he can, his arm collapses, as he violently starts to cough up blood. He immediately goes limp in my arms, his eyes rolling back into his head and closing, before he loses consciousness.

“Tyler?” I call out to him; but I’m met only with silence. “Tyler!?”

I put my ear to his chest again; his heartbeat is dangerously slow, and he’s fighting for his life. He will be dead in a matter of minutes, maybe less. He’s on the precipice of life and death; there is no time to get him to the hospital.

The battle begins in my head at my precarious dilemma, as the proverbial devil and angel bicker back and forth in my subconscious, debating selfish motives versus moral ones.

*You have to turn him. There is no other way. He will die if you don’t. No, you can’t; that is his decision, not yours. If you do, and he lives, he will never forgive you.*

*Who cares, just do it. Wouldn’t you rather have him alive and angry at you, than dead and not here at all?*

I know it’s selfish, but I need him in my life. I can’t bear to live a life without him in it.

I pull his sagging body up to me, lightly turning his head to the left. I bare my fangs and open my mouth wide, as I start to lower myself down onto his neck. I’m about to sink my fangs in, when I suddenly stop myself.

*I can’t do this.*

*I can’t force this upon him. If I had a choice, would I have chosen this life for myself?*

*No.*

I stagger up, cradling his body in my arms. I run to the car

clutching him tightly to me, ignoring people's stares as they gasp and cover their mouths at the sight of Tyler's bloody body. Once at the car, I set his feet on the ground, balancing him in my left arm as I open the passenger's side door with my right, leaning the seat all the way back. I gently set him down in the seat, putting on his seatbelt, before giving him a quick kiss on his now ice-cold lips.

"It's okay baby, I'm going to get you some help, okay? Just hold on a little bit longer," I command, as if some part of him can hear me.

I quickly get in the car on the other side, pushing 90 mph on the streets as I rush him to the hospital.

"Don't die on me. Don't you *dare* die on me, Tyler Dawson," I whisper through sobs, staring at him every few seconds to make sure he's still alive, as he slowly bleeds out onto my leather seats.

I pull into the hospital's ER, coming to a screeching stop. I wipe my watery eyes and runny nose with the back of my hand, as I rush around to his side and throw open the door. I carefully maneuver his body, so as not to cause any further injuries. I run into the ER carrying Tyler in my arms, leaving a crimson trail in our wake.

"Somebody, help!" I scream at the top of my lungs, as tears stream down my face again.

But no one's to be found. Panic finally sets into overdrive.

"Somebody! *Anybody!* Please! He needs help! Please, somebody!" I yell with desperation, peering down the empty, dark halls; but I'm met only with silence.

A nurse finally opens a door to one of the adjoining rooms to see what the commotion is about, and quickly runs down the hall towards me. Her eyes widen when she sees Tyler's crippled body in my arms, his entrails barely intact and hanging out of his slashed stomach.

"Oh my Lord," she mumbles, covering her mouth with her hand, before running down the hall to get a doctor. "Code Blue! We need a trauma surgeon over here, now!"

A few seconds later, a doctor emerges in a long, white coat,

jogging down the hall towards me.

“What happened to him?” he says frantically.

“I don’t know, I just found him like this,” I sob.

Seconds later, three others in scrubs come out with a gurney, which I gently set Tyler on.

“How long as he been like this?” the doctor asks me, as he uses his stethoscope to listen to Tyler’s heart.

“I—I don’t know,” I stutter.

“Any medicinal allergies he has that you’re aware of?” the doctor inquires, as he hastily pulls Tyler’s eyelids open, shining a small flashlight into them as he inspects his pupils.

“No. I mean, yes. I mean—I don’t know,” I murmur, as I start to go into shock.

“He’s going into severe cardiopulmonary arrest,” he utters to the nurses. “Administer 5 cc’s of epinephrine, STAT! And get ortho and cardio to the OR, now!”

Everything goes by in a blur, as I watch the doctors spout medical jargon and put a breathing mask over Tyler’s mouth, which they furiously begin pumping as they start to wheel him away.

I follow closely, gripping Tyler’s cold, limp hand in mine as I try to hold back my tears and remain strong, but it’s nearly impossible; he looks so small, so pale, so helpless.

“Ma’am, you need to wait outside,” the nurse orders me, as they rip Tyler from me, wheeling him away to the OR.

I rush over, trailing behind them, but they slam the door in my face. There’s a tiny, plastic window in the top area of the door that I try to peer into the best I can, as I stand on the tips of my toes.

I watch eagerly as a nurse cuts open his bloody t-shirt, before sticking electrodes on his chest and connecting him to the monitor. The other nurses insert IV’s into his arms and hands, while another pulls his head back and mouth open, before shoving a breathing tube into his airway.

*Please God, if there is a God. Please, don't let him die.*

I bargain with a God I'm not even sure I believe in, as I watch the nurse who administered the IV push some type of medicine that's in a syringe into the IV line, which I'm guessing is the synthetic-grade adrenaline. They eagerly watch on for any sign of life, but Tyler remains eerily still.

"I need 5 more cc's of epi!" the doctor yells.

Just as the nurse is about to administer the second dose, the heart monitor flat-lines—that long, monotone beep causing us all to freeze. I cover my quivering mouth, as the tears stream down my already sodden cheeks.

"Get the crash cart!" the doctor shouts.

They quickly pull his body up to the side, shifting him so that his weight is on his right arm before placing a mat of some kind underneath him, and placing him back down again. The doctor grabs the defibrillator paddles and places a clear gel on them, rapidly rubbing them together before he places the paddles on Tyler's chest.

"700 volts! Clear!"

They shock him, causing his entire body to jump, as they eagerly watch the heart monitor. Nothing.

"1,000 volts! Clear!"

They shock his body again, turning back to the monitor, but that flat line and awful sound still plague my ears, as my entire world falls apart.

"1,500 volts! Clear!"

The third shock shoots his body up the highest, followed by a tiny blip on the heart monitor.

"We've got a pulse!" the doctor screams.

And in that split second, just as the doctors and nurses turn back to him, I see them all back up several steps, some of them gasping, while others cover their mouths in horror.

I look at Tyler, and my mouth drops in shock. His eyes are wide open, and they are jet-black. A crooked smile plagues his face, right before his eyes shut again, his face returning to normal, and a weak but steady heartbeat sounds on the monitor.

## THE TIDES OF CHANGE

After Tyler's jet-black eyes close, the spooked nurses and doctors pause. They all stare at each other in shock and confusion for a moment, before scrambling to resume where they left off.

I watch on as they take out parts of Tyler's entrails and place them in a stainless steel basin, while the surgeon is elbow deep in Tyler's gut, looking for more tears and punctures in his vital organs. They're giving him a blood transfusion, and have him hooked up to a respirator. His heart has stabilized, and now it looks like it's just a matter of him coming out of the surgery alright.

I can't watch anymore, so I decide to go wait in the lobby. As I look around at all the sad, crying people, who are all probably here for similar reasons—losing a loved one, waiting for a loved one to get out of surgery, an accident—I think about how fragile humans are, and just how easily life can be taken away from them; how easily Tyler could've been taken away from *me*.

My stomach starts grumbling, as dinner time was a few hours ago and I should've eaten by now; but food is the *last* thing on my mind. I need to stay here and wait for news on Tyler.

A few hours later, I notice the trauma surgeon from before walking down the hall looking frazzled, wearing scrubs and a surgeon's cap. I eagerly stand up, my eyebrows arched in hope and desperation, awaiting the news.

"You're the woman that brought in the young, Caucasian male with the abdomen injury, yes?" he asks.

"Yes. Is he going to be okay?" I inquire, my voice trembling. "Please tell me he's going to be okay."

"He's in the ICU and he's in critical condition, but he's stabilized. He's sustained some very dire injuries. We had to remove a section of his intestines and part of his stomach, but luckily all of his other vital organs were missed and suffered no rips or punctures."

"Oh, thank god," I whisper, finally exhaling the breath I've been holding.

"We're not out of the woods yet, though. A number of things could happen; he could get sepsis, a blood clot, anastomotic leakage . . . but we won't know anything for quite a while. We should know more in a couple of days," he says grimly. "We're going to have to transport him to Saint Luke's Hospital though, because this is a county hospital. We can't provide the degree of care he needs here. You should go home and get some rest. As of now he's in a drug induced coma so that he'll heal faster, so he's not going to be waking up any time soon."

"No, I'm staying with him every step of the way," I persist.

"Miss, you'll be no good to him here. He's in a coma, and he will be resting and recuperating heavily for the next few days. Honestly, the best thing you can do is go home and get some rest. We will have Saint Luke's keep you posted on his condition."

*I do need to eat . . . and sunrise is coming soon.*

"Alright, I'll go," I murmur tiredly, running my pale fingers through my long, dark hair.

"Luckily he had you listed as his emergency contact from a

recent doctor's visit. Are you a friend, or family member?" he asks suspiciously, as he looks me up and down, staring down at my blood covered clothes.

"Friend," I mumble.

"What happened to him? Were you there?"

"I don't know. I just found him like that," I mutter, my tone slightly annoyed at this doctor's incessant questioning.

"Well by law we have to report this incident to the police, because this clearly looks like an attempted homicide. They will most likely want to speak with you."

For a brief moment, I panic. I can't have anyone knowing I was here. Hell, I can't have anyone knowing I *exist*. I have no official "identity" in the system, and as far as they're concerned, I'm a ghost. That's the problem with being a vampire—your papers are never up to date because of the tiny, little fact that you're dead; you can't leave a trail anywhere.

I decide to use some mesmerization techniques to make the doctor forget.

"No. There will be no police, and you will *not* make any such call," I command slowly, staring deep into the doctor's eyes. "You are going to forget this conversation between us ever happened, and you are going to forget that you ever saw me here. Got it?"

After I've compelled the doctor, he stares at me for a few seconds, spellbound. Suddenly, he snaps out of his entranced state, eyeing me speculatively before he speaks.

"Um, I'm sorry, Miss. Who are you? Can I help you?"

It'll be sunrise soon, so I head home. I'll just have to wait to feed until tomorrow; there's not enough time.

I arrive home, opening the door and stepping into the house. It's eerily silent and empty, and it feels weird knowing that I'm all alone, and that Tyler isn't here in his bed waiting for me.

I undress and take a shower to clean all of Tyler's blood off me, letting the hot water mix with that of my salty tears. Afterwards, I climb into Tyler's bed, hugging his pillow and inhaling his scent as I cry myself to sleep, plagued by bleak and

despairing thoughts.

I wake up groggy. I stretch my arm out next to me, blindly feeling around for Tyler on the bed, when I realize he's not here, and painful memories of what happened come flooding back to me in fast-time.

I've been restless the past few days. I haven't had the strength or motivation to get up and hunt, and I've become weak and emaciated. My sleep has been fitful, my mind plagued with nagging thoughts and nightmares of finding Tyler on the ground, bleeding out and eviscerated. This whole thing seems just like one horrible living *nightmare*.

I've been visiting Tyler at the hospital every night. He's always asleep, or maybe he's still unconscious—I don't know. I don't understand how these things work with humans. The doctors said that he's in a "drug-induced coma," but since I had to make them forget about me, I haven't been updated on Tyler's status. I've been stopping by every night to watch over him from the window sill, just to make sure he's alright.

I shudder to think what would happen if a demon came to finish the job. I would be completely incapable of doing anything. Vampires must officially be invited in to anywhere that is not our domicile; but once we are, we are able to enter the property at any time, unless the invitation is officially rescinded.

Saint Luke's—where Tyler was transported to—isn't a county hospital like the one I first brought him to. I originally brought him to the county hospital for a reason; because I knew I wouldn't be able to walk into any other hospital. A county hospital is a public domain, and hence, is open to *all* of the public. It isn't privately owned like most other hospitals because it's owned by the government, and they have to treat anyone and everyone that walks into their doors. Because the county hospital was a public domain, I didn't need an invitation. St. Luke's, however, is a private hospital, so until I am officially invited in—which is harder than you'd think—I'm restricted to the outer parameters.

My stomach starts grumbling, and I realize how weak I've

gotten from not feeding over the past few days. I have to feed tonight, or I doubt I'll be able to climb all the way up to the 7<sup>th</sup> story window to watch over Tyler.

I go to my room and get dressed in a hurry, throwing on some black jeans, flat black leather boots, a loose black tank-top, and a black hooded sweater. When it comes to casual murder, the less I stand out, the better. I look at the time; it's still dusk. I'll have to wait until sundown.

I lean up against the garage door, and slide down to the floor with a sigh. Leaning my head back, I close my eyes and wait as patiently as I can, as thoughts of anger, sadness, hope, and desperation fill my head.

The more I sit, the more time I have to think, and the more angry I become—angry at the demons for doing what they did to Tyler, angry at that bitch friend of his, *Jade*; angry at a god I don't even know I believe in, angry at *life*.

Ten minutes later, it's finally night time. I pull myself up, and get into my car, seething and seeing red. I have no plans as to whom I'll feed on, but at this point I don't even *care* if they're good or bad. I want to tear flesh, I want to drain someone dry; I want to shred them into organic confetti.

Perching on the roof of an abandoned building in a bad part of town, I scan the area below me, looking for good prey. I suddenly catch the scent of blood. I look down, setting my crimson eyes on a young man in an alley way. He's beating a young woman to death, a prostitute by the looks of it. I can feel my mouth widening all the way back to the ears as I glare hungrily at him. I want to obliterate him, *eviscerate* him, inflict every ounce of rage and wrath and fury that I have upon him.

I gracefully and silently leap to the wall across from me, scaling down it like a dainty black widow zeroing in on its kill. The woman is now dead from the brutal beating and head injuries he's given her, and cuts and bruises litter her entire body.

"Fucking whore. That'll teach you to try and screw me out of my money," the man hisses, as he kicks the girl's now blood-stained body before spitting on it.

I creep up behind him on the wall, hovering slightly above his head. My mouth widens even further, my nails lengthening as the frenzy begins. A deep growl rumbles in my throat, as saliva drips from my razor-sharp jowls. It's no longer just a matter of feeding.

*I want to kill this man, and make him wish he had never been born.*

He immediately jumps and recoils in shock at the sight of me, backing up to the wall, tightly clutching the rosary that is strung around his dirty neck.

*Hah. A religious, womanizing murderer. Well, isn't that grand.*

"Your god can't save you now," I drawl, smiling wryly as I slither towards my prey with expert prowess.

The man holds the tiny crucifix on his rosary up to me, as if this was a corny movie in which a small piece of metal would actually do something to me worth a damn.

I snatch the necklace from his grasp, ripping it from his quivering neck and throwing it to the ground, as tons of tiny beads crash to the floor, rolling in different directions.

I pounce, wrapping my legs around his sides, squeezing so hard that I can hear the sickeningly satisfying crunch of his bones snapping, like those of a helpless field mouse in a python's bone-breaking embrace. He tries to scream, but I clamp my hand over his mouth, his cries for help now stifled whimpers. His eyes widen in desperation, filling with tears that begin to pour down my icy hand.

"It's people like you that make me so disgusted with humans, sometimes. I absolutely hate and *despise* your kind; but on the other hand, there is one perk to running into your kind . . . I can make your pitiful death just that much more long and painful and drawn out," I mouth sadistically.

The man falls to his knees and starts praying profusely, causing me to erupt into hearty, sinister laughter.

"The only entity that's listening to your pleas right now is

sitting in Hell, where your welcoming committee is undoubtedly waiting and holding open the gates for you, Scum,” I drawl.

He starts to cry, his tears leaving white trails on his dirt-ridden face.

“Awww, don’t take it personally now. If it were a regular night, I would’ve snapped your neck and you wouldn’t have even known what hit you; but you caught me on a bad day, and I’m in a *really* bad mood, so I’m going to make your pathetic death as torturous as possible—like I’m sure you did for her,” I hiss, gesturing towards the battered, dead woman lying on the ground before slapping him hard across the face, the sound reverberating throughout the alley way.

I grab him by the throat, lifting him several feet off the ground before pinning him to the wall. He is starting to struggle when I finally lunge towards him, making sure to cover his mouth and stifle his screams before I tear into his neck, ripping his artery to shreds.

His muffled screams grow louder as I roughly withdraw my sharp teeth from his mangled neck and shoulder, causing blood to spurt out in spasmodic showers, painting the walls a dark crimson.

I drink in his warm, bitter blood until it runs cold and there’s nothing left. Dropping his cold corpse to the ground with a loud thud, I wipe my bloody mouth with my arm before bending down and taking his wallet, along with whatever money he has.

I drag his limp, flaccid body back to the car, which is parked down the alleyway, and throw him into the trunk before driving back to the woods so that I can bury him in the infinite, endless foray of forest.

I then make a quick pit stop to the house so that I can shower and wash all of that vile pig’s blood off of me. After I shower I get dressed, spritzing on some perfume and applying some lipstick so that I’ll look nice for Tyler in case he wakes up today.

I pull into the hospital parking lot, waiting until there’s no

one around so that I can climb the outside wall of the building. I climb up the wall until I reach Tyler's window, where I then perch on the sill, like I do every night. Again, I still don't see any signs of him being awake.

I notice the door starting to open, so I quickly retreat to the side and hide. I carefully peek back into the room, to see none other than his coworker, April, who is putting a small arrangement of flowers in a purple vase on the nightstand next to Tyler's bed.

She sits down with her back to the window, but turns around every few seconds with an uneasy, disconcerted look on her face, as if she knows she's being watched. She eventually turns her attention back to Tyler, as she waits patiently by his side.

Suddenly, his eyes flutter open. Tears of joy stream down my face as I try to contain myself, nearly falling off the windowsill in excitement.

"Hey, Tyler," April whispers. "How do you feel?"

"Vic?" he croaks dryly, taking her hand in his.

"No, it's April."

"Oh, sorry," he mumbles disappointedly, as he gently retracts his hand from hers and looks away.

He doesn't seem that happy to see her; it's all over his face that he was hoping it would be me.

"How do you feel today?" she asks. "Looks like they took you off the respirator, so I guess you're breathing on your own again."

"I'm thirsty," he whispers, to which she immediately springs up and pours him a glass of water from a nearby pitcher. He takes a long drink, gulping down the entire glass-full before setting it down on the nightstand next to him. "And sore. I'm really sore."

"Well I guess that's all part of the healing process," she remarks. "After all, you did have to get part of your stomach and intestines taken out, so it's no big surprise."

"I suppose," he mumbles as he stares down at the sheets, fiddling with them between his fingers.

There's a brief, awkward silence between them, before she speaks again.

"I bet you can't wait to go home. We sure do miss you over at O' Malley's. The customers are always asking about y—"

"Has Victoria been around at all?" he interrupts.

"Um, no; not that I know of at least," she says solemnly, as if slightly disappointed.

"I see . . . well, I'm tired," he mumbles to her after a long pause, as if cueing her to leave. "I think I'm going to try and get some rest."

"Oh, okay. Well, I just wanted to check in on you and refill your vase," she utters, smiling at him. "So you just rest and get better, okay? I'll see you tomorrow."

I watch eagerly as April leaves the room, leaving Tyler frowning in his bed. I hang back, waiting to make sure no one else comes in, but I can't contain myself anymore. I creep to the window, lightly tapping on it with a smile.

Tyler immediately jumps, startled a bit; but when he sees it's me, his entire face lights up, smiling ear to ear.

"Can I come in?" I mouth through the window's glass.

He beckons me with his hand, causing me to smile exasperatedly before rolling my eyes.

"You have to invite me in, silly!" I mouth through the glass again.

He jets up from his bed, stumbling and limping over to the window in his hospital gown, clutching his stomach. He bends slightly, lifting the window open.

"Come in!" he whisper-shouts happily.

I jump in, landing swiftly on the floor before helping Tyler walk back to his bed. I whistle a cat-call at him with a sly grin.

"I didn't know you were giving free peep shows over here," I whisper wryly, nodding downward to Tyler's hospital gown, which is completely open in the back.

"Shut up, Vic!" he whines, trying to contain his laughter as he blushes bright scarlet, clutching the back of his hospital gown closed with one hand.

I bite down on my lower lip, trying to contain my huge,

earsplitting grin; but I'm just so happy to see him. I gingerly help him into his bed, and I officially can't take it anymore. I immediately leap into bed with him, throwing my arms around his chest and neck, smothering him with kisses.

"I'm so sorry, Tyler. I'm sorry for everything. Please forgive me," I whisper, as I begin sobbing.

"I'm not mad anymore, Vic. It's in the past now, and that's not what matters," he utters, placing his hand on my cheek.

"So, what happened?" I inquire. "What happened to you, that night?"

"It doesn't matter," he says gently.

"It does matter, Tyler. You . . . you *died*," I say solemnly, trying to hold back the tears that are starting to well up in my eyes.

"I know, but that doesn't matter right now. All that matters is you," he assures me, as he stares back at me with adoration.

"I love you!" I suddenly blurt, catching him off guard.

He looks taken aback, but I have to tell him how I feel. Coming so close to losing him, and knowing how fragile life is and how quickly it can be taken away from us, telling him no longer seems the huge, daunting thing it seemed a few weeks ago.

"I love you too," he says fervently, placing a hand on my cheek. "I always have."

"You have?" I ask in shock, trying hard to contain my ecstatic joy. "Tyler, I—oh, to hell with it."

I stop and pull him in close to me, kissing him hard and passionately on the lips. I feel him reciprocate, as he gently places his hand on my cheek, entangling his other hand through my hair as he pulls me in even closer.

"You have no idea how long I've wanted to do that," I whisper through disjointed breaths, as I gently pull away and stroke his hair, touching my forehead to his.

"Oh, yes I do," he jokes. "*Trust* me."

"I was so scared, Tyler. I thought I had lost you."

"I know, babe. I know."

"I'm just so glad you're alright," I croak through tears,

pulling him into a hard embrace.

We sit together in silence for a while, holding one another tightly as if we're both afraid to let go.

"Well, I guess I should get going, and let you get some rest," I murmur reluctantly, as I start to get up.

"No, please. Stay," he pleads, holding his hand out to me. "Just for tonight?"

I look at him and smile fondly, as I walk back toward the hospital bed.

*How can I resist that?*

"Alright, just for tonight," I smile.

And for the first night in days, I fall into a peaceful slumber in Tyler's warm arms, not plagued by nightmares and regrets and twisted visions of bleak, awful times past, but instead, with happy, blissful notions of our bright and shining future.

## HOPE FOR THE HOPELESS

I smile as I pull into the dirt driveway after a visit to Tyler at the hospital. He's getting better every day, and they say I'll be able to take him home sometime this week.

*It'll be so nice to have him back, his warm body in my cold bed again.*

I step out of the car and walk up the front porch steps. Placing my hand on the door knob I start to turn it, when I hear a shuffling inside. I immediately still myself, vigilantly listening at the door.

Suddenly, I hear a loud scream. I bust through the door, my eyes reddened and my fangs bared.

"Well hello there, love," Scarlet drawls with an evil grin. "Lookie here! I caught a rat!"

She is sitting on top of a young man in his mid-twenties with her hand around his throat, while he struggles beneath her. He looks rather poor, his clothes dirty and tattered, and his face darkened with several days of facial hair overgrowth.

"Scarlet, what are *you* doing here?" I mutter with disdain as I approach her. "And who the hell is *this*?"

"I saw him trying to break in, so I caught him for you as a little snack. Peace offering?" she chirps, as she slams the

struggling man back onto the floor, causing a loud thud to resonate throughout the hallway.

As I walk closer, I get a better look at the young man underneath her.

“*You*,” I growl at him, shoving Scarlet off before grabbing the man by his shirt collar and pinning him up against the wall. “I know you. You’re the thief I dealt with a few weeks ago at Al’s Supercenter!”

“Wait, please! I can explain!” he pleads, his eyes wide with fear and trepidation, as he puts both of his shaky hands up in submission.

“Do you have a death wish? Didn’t I tell you that if I ever saw you or your no-good friend again that I’d kill you? And of all the places, I catch you breaking into my *home*?” I scream with venom, my face so close to his that I can feel my cold breath deflecting off his chin.

“Please, just let me explain. I’m begging you! I’m not here on my own free will, I swear!” he sobs, his eyes welling up with tears as he trembles in my icy, unwavering grip.

Eyeballing him speculatively, I ponder whether or not to give him a chance. The old me would’ve already snapped his neck and decapitated him by now; but the new me, the me *after* Tyler, is more compassionate and willing to give this pathetic little human a chance.

“Alright, you’ve got two minutes. If you can’t convince me by that time,” I whisper, leaning into his ear. “Well, I’m sure you have a pretty good idea of what’s going to happen.”

I smile, exposing my sharp, stark-white fangs as I run my tongue along them, causing him to start shaking with fear as small droplets of sweat run down his brow.

“Alright, look,” he starts, his tone frantic and rushed. “That other guy that was with me that night when we tried to steal that woman’s car, he’s the one that put me up to this. He has like, this personal vendetta against you now. He followed you home that night so he could find out where you lived, and then he sent me here to do his dirty work. He owns a chop-shop in the city, where he sells stolen car parts. He wanted me to take

your ride so that we could chop it.”

I wrap a hand around his throat, making him gasp for air and grunt in pain.

“Wait, hold on! I’m not finished!” he cries, straining to speak through my iron grip. “He told me that he’d kill me and my little boy if I didn’t come back with your car! I had to do it!”

“Oh yes, I’m sure you’re *such* the family man. You best be coming up with some better excuses, boy,” I hiss scathingly, tightening my grip around his throat.

“Please, I’m telling you the truth. In my right pocket is my wallet. Inside you’ll find a picture of my boy; he’s only seven years old. His mom is dead; I’m all he’s got.”

I eye him with suspicion, staring deep into his eyes to discern whether or not he’s lying or if this is a ruse to distract me. Finally, I reach into his pocket with my left hand, while still pinning him to the wall by his throat with my other hand.

“Scarlet, get over here,” I command, nodding at her.

She languidly drags her feet, trundling over with a frown on her face.

“Look in his wallet and tell me if what he’s saying is true; and for his sake, he better hope that it’s true, because I don’t like liars. In fact, I hate liars even more than I hate thieves,” I sneer, turning back to face him.

She takes the wallet from my hand and flips it open, immediately grabbing any cash from it and stuffing it into her semi-exposed red-lace bra.

“The *picture*, you greedy fool!” I shout at her.

“Alright, alright already. Cool your jets!” she whines.

She starts to sift through the wallet, before reaching into a small slot and pulling out a picture.

“Aww, cute little bugger he is,” she says slyly, licking her lips as if she’s just seen a yummy snack.

“Don’t you dare even *think* about touching him, you evil bitch!” he spits, starting to writhe under my grip as his head frantically lunges in her direction.

“Easy now, tiger,” I say to him, before turning to Scarlet.

“And Scarlet, is that really necessary? Quit it.”

“What? I didn’t mean anything by it,” she says disingenuously, her tone conveying a false innocence before that trademark, evil grin of hers spreads across her face.

Every part of me wants to eviscerate this man and turn him into a pile of bloody mush for invading my home, my space, my *life*...

*But that is not who you are anymore. Think of Tyler. What would be think of you if you did something like that?*

After a few seconds of debating, I unhand the man, letting him drop to the floor with a loud thump.

“Today is your lucky day,” I mutter. “Your story checks out, and I’m in a good mood today. So, you’re free to leave. Now *go*.”

He slowly rolls over, panting heavily as he rubs his neck and winces in pain. He sits up with his back against the wall, placing his head in his hands.

“What am I going to do?” he mumbles despairingly under his breath, as he runs his hands exasperatedly through his hair. “I suppose we can try to run . . .”

“Why are you still here?” I question him with annoyance. “I said you’re free to go!”

Staring up at me with hopelessness and despair in his eyes, he starts to cry.

“I know Miss, and thank you. I appreciate it, I really do; but I can’t show up without your ride, or I’m good as dead. Too much time has passed and he’s probably gotten suspicious. I can try to rush home and get my boy and run, but it’s a matter of beating him there at this point. He’s a ruthless man; he’ll use my boy as collateral to make sure his deeds are done. My boy and I are doomed.”

He begins to sob in his hands, his back heaving up and down with tremors.

“I’m a horrible father,” he whispers through heavy sobs.

“Oh, *god*,” Scarlet whines glibly. “*I’d like to thank the*

*Academy...*”

I flash Scarlet a death-glare, before turning back to the young man.

“What’s your name?” I ask him ruefully as I bend down to his level, softening my face as I feel my fangs slowly retract and my eyes turn back to their usual shade of dark-blue.

He looks up at me with surprise, his quivering lip now drenched in his own tears.

“F-Freddy,” he stutters.

“Freddy, I’m Victoria, and this is Scarlet,” I say gently, as I gesture from my chest to her. “And *she* is going to help you get rid of this guy that’s threatening you and your son.”

“Wait, what!?” Scarlet protests mid-yawn, her lazy and irritatingly cavalier attitude and demeanor suddenly changing as her eyes widen in shock.

“You heard me, Scarlet. I’m not going to kill him, and neither are you. You will get rid of whoever is threatening him, however you see fit. Just keep it clean, and don’t be sloppy,” I add.

Scarlet gasps, her mouth agape, an affronted look on her face. She finally snorts before crossing her arms and sulking, turning her head to the side with her chin in the air like a petulant child who’s just been told, “*No ice cream for dessert.*”

“Do I make myself clear?” I stress, boldening my tone.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, whatever,” she snipes, spouting obscenities under her breath.

“*Tonight*, Scarlet,” I admonish. “You will go with Freddy now, and you will find this man, and you will kill him. Understood?”

“Fine,” she mutters indignantly, biting her lower lip as she stomps off.

She’s halfway to the door before she stops and turns around, looking at a very confused Freddy.

“Well?! What are you waiting for?! Let’s go!” she shouts at him, throwing her hands up in the air in exasperation.

Freddy immediately springs to his feet, his eyebrows arched in confusion as he trails after her.

“Oh, and Scarlet, you never did tell me why you were originally here,” I add, as I watch her walk up to the door.

I hear her mumble to Freddy to go wait outside, followed by her closing the door after him. She leans her back against the door, a wry grin spread across her face.

“So I did some more homework on the Saffron Curse,” she utters.

“And?”

“And I found a cure,” she chirps. “A way to get rid of the curse.”

My eyes widen in surprise, my mouth agape at her words.

“What? You found a cure?” I reply with shock.

“That’s right; but you may not like it.”

“I don’t care. I’ll do anything,” I say frantically, as I walk closer to her in eager anticipation.

“He has to die, Victoria.”

“What? That’s it? *That’s* your idea of a cure!” I shout with incredulity. “How dare you get my hopes up like that!”

I’m about to charge at her with every ounce of fury within me, before she stops me, holding her pale hand up in the air.

“Victoria, dear; have you forgotten that vampires are technically dead?”

I pause mid-step, rolling over the revelation in my head.

“You mean . . . to turn him?”

“But of course,” she adds with a wink, standing up and grabbing the door knob before she pauses, turning back to face me. “Looks like you’ve got a lot of thinking to do.”

## WELCOME HOME

I'm getting released today, and I can barely contain my excitement. It's been two weeks since I've been in the hospital, and I've been poked, probed and prodded nonstop since I got here. I'm sick to death of the sterile smell of sanitizer and latex, and the food here is reminiscent of pig slop.

On a better note, it'll be so nice to see Victoria, and to finally be able to go home—to *our* home.

Victoria brought me some clothes last night, since the ones that I came in with were completely slashed up and covered in dried blood.

I pull the charcoal-gray t-shirt out of the bag of clothes she brought for me and throw it over my head, which she clearly and so dotingly washed with extra fabric softener by the smell of it. I'm pulling it down over my chest right as the doctor knocks on the door.

"Come in," I shout.

The doctor enters with a smile on his face and clipboard in hand

"So, Tyler Dawson. My, you've come a long way since the first time I saw you," he laughs. "I'm here to give you your last examination, and then you will be free to go."

"Thanks, Doc," I say with a smile.

He gingerly lifts my shirt to examine the post-op sutures.

“You’re healing very nicely,” he murmurs, as he gently and methodically presses on my abdomen and torso in various places.

“I think so,” I reply.

“How’s the walking coming along?”

“Good, good. I’m able to walk all the way to the end of the hall now if I use the wall as support.”

“Very good. Just make sure you don’t push yourself too hard.”

“I won’t.”

“Well, you’re in pretty good shape, so I’d say you are officially okay to leave,” he adds with a smile, before signing something off on his clipboard and handing it to me. “Just sign these papers and give them to the clerk at the desk on your way out. I’ll have someone come in with a wheelchair to pick you up in about ten minutes. Oh, and here is a prescription for extra-strength Vicodin; it’ll help with the pain.”

“Thanks, Doc,” I utter, accepting the tiny piece of paper. “It’s been a pleasure.”

He smiles at me one last time before turning around and heading out. I sign the papers like a mad man, getting through them as fast as I can.

Victoria is supposed to be picking me up around 8:00. I sit and wait in eager anticipation, watching every second go by agonizingly slow on the clock. Finally, an older woman in scrubs enters, wheelchair in hand.

“Tyler Dawson?”

“That’s me!”

“I have your wheelchair,” she chirps, as she brings it over and carefully helps me into it.

She wheels me to the elevator, which we take down to the main lobby where I hand the desk clerk my release forms.

I eagerly turn around to face the main lobby, rubber-necking my head around to try and find Victoria. Barely a minute later, I see her, as she walks into the lobby looking beautiful as ever, a beaming smile on her pale face.

“Hey you,” she greets me, bending down to pull me into a tight embrace.

“Hey yourself,” I reply with a smile. “Ah, ouch. I’m still a little sore.”

“Oh, sorry! I’m so sorry! Are you okay?” she asks frantically.

“I’m okay,” I laugh. “Don’t worry, I won’t break. I’m just a little sore, that’s all.”

“Sorry, I’ll try to be more careful. I’m just so happy to see you!” she beams, as she walks behind me and takes ahold of my wheelchair, eagerly wheeling me out. “So, how are you feeling?”

“Better now,” I reply, as I gaze up at her fondly.

She wheels me to the car, opening the door and laying back the seat a bit before carefully helping me in, and then we’re off. Her cold hand holds mine the entire way.

“I have a surprise for you—a welcome home present,” Victoria says with an impish grin as we pull up to the house.

She helps me out of the car and up the front steps.

*God, it’s so good to be home.*

As soon as she opens the door, I smell a mouthwatering aroma. With one arm snaked around my lower back, the other holding my arm, she starts helping me to the kitchen. As soon as we turn the corner, my mouth drops.

To my surprise, there’s an entire home-cooked dinner laid out on the table. There’s a whole roasted chicken in the center, along with a bowl of steaming, fluffy mashed potatoes, corn on the cob, and even a three-layer chocolate cake for dessert. The table is set with a crisp, white, linen table cloth, and there is a candelabra in the middle with three glowing candles upon it. A vase sits near it, full of fresh pink and purple wildflowers from the forest. The kitchen looks like a tornado hit it, but the table itself looks pristine—absolutely perfect.

“Vic, what is all this?” I ask with a smile.

“Well, I wanted a nice way to welcome you home. Plus, I

felt bad about not being totally honest with you from the beginning, so consider this my 'No More Secrets' dinner for you."

I stare at the table, speechless.

"Wow, Vic. I don't know what to say," I murmur. "Thank you. No one's ever done anything like this for me. You're the best."

"Well, I have a little confession to make. It wasn't just me; Scarlet did most of the cooking. It's been hundreds of years since I've cooked anything, so cooking for you would've been more of a heinous gesture that probably would've put you *back* in the hospital," she laughs awkwardly. "By the way, she's sorry too, for the uh, whole 'trying to rape you' thing."

I can't help but laugh. I guess in a dark, twisted sort of way, it is a little funny. I mean, what kind of guy nearly gets raped by a vampire? I'm just glad to be home; nothing can bring me down right now.

Victoria helps me into a chair before sitting across from me at the table. I dig right in with ferocity, stuffing my face with everything and scarfing it down at record pace that would make a Guinness competitive eater champion jealous. Two weeks of hospital food will do that to you.

Victoria watches me happily in silence, as I continue to go for second and third helpings of everything.

"Looks like you're feeling a lot better," she laughs.

"Yeah, definitely. I'm feeling much better . . ." I trail off. "But—"

"But?"

I hesitate, pausing for a bit, trying to choose my words wisely. This is such a nice moment, and I don't want to ruin it; but I need to address the huge elephant in the room. Furthermore, time is of the essence with this issue; it needs to be discussed.

"I found out what the Hollow-eyed Witch is," I finally reply. "It's Amber."

Victoria stares at me in confusion, her brow furrowed.

"What do you mean?"

“The *real* Amber—as in *my* friend, as I knew her—is gone. She’s been dead for some time now, and her body became the Hollow-eyed Witch. That thing that showed up looking like her; well, it wasn’t Amber.”

“Wait, what? So it was the Hollow-eyed Witch that did this to you?”

“No, something else did. They were two demonic entities that just posed as Amber; they called themselves the ‘Sisters of Malice.’ They were just pretending to be her to fool me,” I start. “They said that they have her soul now, courtesy of the Soul Eater since he couldn’t come to me anymore, and they had used her memories to find me and track me down. So in essence, we can’t kill the Sisters until I can find a way to detach Amber’s soul from them and free her.”

“How did this happen?” she finally speaks.

“Apparently Amber sacrificed her soul to the Soul Eater to save me, and in doing so, her body was changed into a demon—the Hollow-eyed Witch; but her soul was property of the Soul Eater. Because of her sacrifice, he couldn’t come after me anymore, but he still made sure that his dirty deeds would be done by giving her soul over to the Sisters, so that they could then use it to get to me,” I say uneasily, setting my fork down on the table, as I’ve officially lost my appetite.

We both sit in silence for a minute, as if trying to think of what to do with a shitty situation in which there is nothing that can be done. Victoria sits at the table, biting her bottom lip in concentration.

“Tyler, did it ever occur to you that maybe these demonic sisters are lying to you?”

“Lying to me?” I question. “But what would their motive be?”

“Well, demons are tricksters, and if there’s anything I’ve learned over the years, it’s to never trust a demon or a single word that comes out of its mouth,” she starts. “They will screw with you, Tyler; that’s what they do. Maybe these ‘sisters’ are just saying they have Amber’s soul so that you won’t try to kill them or banish them; and technically, it worked, seeing as how

you just said you can't kill or get rid of them unless you find a way to detach Amber's soul first. I think they were relying on the fact that you cared for her so much and that you would never do anything that would harm her, and in turn, you wouldn't harm them."

*She does have a point. What if this is all just a ruse—a stall tactic?*

"Besides, I've never heard of a human's dead body becoming a host to a demonic entity, while their soul goes to another entity. Something just isn't adding up here," she utters, stroking her chin in deep thought. "Maybe it wasn't Amber's memories they used; maybe it was *your* memories."

"Maybe you're right," I begin. "Nonetheless, I have to find a way to free her, Victoria; whether from the Sisters or the Hollow-eyed Witch. It's my fault she's in this whole mess."

"You didn't know," she says softly, as she leans in close and puts her hand on mine. "There's nothing you could've done. It was her decision."

I nod solemnly, trying to believe her words; but that deep aching feeling in my gut won't go away. I can't help but feel responsible.

"So, what are we going to do about this?" Victoria asks, in a tone that says, "*Alright, I'm ready for this mission. What's the plan?*"

"I don't know; maybe have an exorcism performed?" I suggest, taking a random stab in the dark as I'm completely unsure of myself or what I'm going to do at this point. "I need to find out more. We simply just don't have enough to work with right now."

"Well, whatever you decide to do, Tyler, I'm with you. I'll support you no matter what. I meant it when I told you that I'm in love with you, and that means being there for you and with you, every single step of the way."

"Thank you, Vic" I murmur. "And I meant it too, with all my heart."

I give her hand a squeeze and smile at her, as we sit in silence. It feels like my rotten world can be turning upside

down; and yet, one smile from her makes it all better. It's like nothing else matters. As long as she's by my side, we can take on and conquer anything.

"Oh! I have something for you too," I yell excitedly, as I stagger up, hobbling over to the room.

"Tyler, wait! Let me help you!"

"I'm fine, really. I've been walking for a whole week now. I think I can make it to my room," I reassure her with a smile.

I fling open the door and walk over to my dresser, digging into the drawers through the piles of clothes. Finally, I see it. I grab the object, walking back out to the dining room, using the wall as support. Holding it behind my back, I smile at Victoria.

"Pick a hand," I tell her.

"What is it?" she asks in curiosity and excitement, eagerly trying to duck behind me and see what it is.

I finally bring it out, holding the object in front of me. It's a portrait of her that I had drawn up in detail, in an antique, mahogany frame.

"I wanted to do this for you, seeing as you have no reflection," I explain, handing it to her.

Victoria gazes at it in confusion, as if unsure if the person in the picture is even her. I guess one can forget even what they themselves look like when it's been long enough, and considering it's been centuries, I can see why.

"Now you know what you look like," I smile. "And from where I'm standing, you're beautiful."

"Tyler I . . ." she trails off, as tears start to well up in her sapphire eyes. "I don't what to say."

She stares at the picture closely, trailing her long, elegant, pale fingers over each feature and curve of her face in the portrait.

"This is amazing," she says in awe, as a rogue tear escapes and trails down her porcelain face. "Thank you so much."

"I love you, Victoria," I utter, gazing at her fervently as I tuck a stray lock of raven hair behind her ear.

"I love you too," she whispers, wiping her tears with the back of her hand as she pulls me into a tight embrace,

NIC WALLACE

clutching the picture tightly between us.

We head off to bed, snuggling close to one another under the covers; and as I feel her cold body pressed up against mine, I smile and drift off to sleep, thinking about how wonderfully ironic it is that an atheist like me could possibly feel so blessed.

## AMOUR IN A VEIL OF THORNS

I wake up to that trademark smell of cinnamon, baby powder, and rain. It's Victoria's scent that I've grown to know and love, and she's snuggled up close to me, peacefully wheezing away. I've grown quite used to her wheezing; in fact, I almost find it relaxing now, and it helps me to fall asleep, much like the hum of a fan or the whir of a dryer.

I smile as I look down at her, her raven hair barely covering one eye, her raspberry lips slightly parted. I gently push the stray lock of hair off her face, and place a soft, chaste kiss on her forehead, causing her to smile and sigh as she deeply exhales.

"Hey there, Sleeping Beauty," I whisper.

"Mmmm . . . hey baby," she mumbles sleepily, as she squints up at me through tired sapphire eyes.

I gently drag my fingertips across her exposed shoulder, trailing them down the cold flesh of her upper arm. I continue on down past her elbow, causing the blanket to slightly drop, revealing her bare upper half.

I inhale sharply in response, immediately lifting my fingers away; but to my surprise, she grabs ahold of my hand and places it back on her body, except this time she places it right below her collarbone.

“Please, don’t stop,” she whispers, gazing at me fervently.

I hesitantly allow my hand to drop further south, trailing my shaky fingers between the small valley in the middle of her chest, between her breasts. My heart is pounding a million beats a minute; I can’t believe this is actually happening.

She closes her eyes, biting her lower lip as a soft moan escapes her mouth. She brings herself closer to me, wrapping a leg around mine while stroking my calf with her toes. She continues eyeing me with her seductive gaze, as if she’s about to pounce at any second.

Suddenly, she leans forward, wantonly placing her lips against mine in a longing kiss full of impassioned need. I return the gesture, kissing her deeply with a fervent fire that I’ve never felt before. It’s indescribable.

*I never thought I could possibly want someone so much.*

She sits up, positioning herself on top of me and straddling my lower half, causing the sheets to slink off of her smooth, milky skin, exposing the curves of her naked figure. I sit back against the headboard and look up at her, watching her dark, raven hair cascade and fall into a pool all around her shoulders. She presses her lips back to mine as we grind our bodies together in need, before slowly hooking her fingers under the top of my pajama pants.

“I want you, Tyler,” she whispers, gazing down at me with a smoldering stare.

Suddenly, her fangs begin to elongate a little, causing me to retract in fear.

“Your fangs—” I start, my eyes wide with trepidation.

“It’s okay baby, I’m just really turned on right now; it kinda comes along with the territory,” she laughs, casting her gaze downward as her pale face blushes a light scarlet. “I can’t control it, it kinda just happens.”

I allow my body to reunite with hers when she pulls down my pajama pants, leaving me in only my boxers, causing my entire body to tense up.

*She can see my fear. Hell, I'm sure it's written all over my face.*

"It's okay," she whispers, reassuring me.

"It's just that, I don't really know what I'm doing," I murmur. "I'm a . . ."

"A virgin?" she smiles.

"Yeah, how'd you know?"

"I have my ways," she says slyly.

Unsure of what to do, I awkwardly start trying to make my way on top of her.

"I don't think so," she whispers with a wry grin, slamming me back down onto the bed. "Just lay back and let me take the reins, baby."

I lay back, scared out of my wits. I've never even *seen* a naked woman in person before, let alone touched one. I have no idea what I'm doing.

She smiles sexily down at me, reaching into my boxers, when suddenly her eyes turn that all too familiar shade of blood-red, her fangs starting to elongate even farther this time, now past her lips. Her mouth curves into a snarl as a growl slowly rumbles in the depths of her throat, causing me to freeze in fear.

*Oh my god. She's going to eat me alive.*

Suddenly, she shoves my body off the bed, flinging me across the hardwood floor. I'm about to get on my knees and beg for mercy when I see that she isn't looking at me; she's looking at the wall above the bed.

I turn to face the wall, and that's when I see it—a black, shadowy portal is slowly opening on the wall above the bed, swirling like a dark whirlpool. The atmosphere immediately changes, causing the air to become thick and heavy, every movement feeling as if I were trying to make my way through invisible sludge.

"Tyler, get back!" she screams at me through clenched

teeth, as her skin starts to become transparent, her veins darkening and protruding, while her organs begin to become visible.

A deep, reverberating growl comes from the vortex, causing the room to start quaking. The portrait I had drawn of Victoria falls off the nightstand, the glass from the frame shattering into tiny pieces all over the floor. The lamp immediately follows, crashing to the ground with a loud bang.

The portal grows bigger and bigger, swirling deeper and faster as an ear-piercing shriek emits from its center. I back away, scuffling on the floor in slow motion until I hit the wall behind me. I try to muster up the courage to run, but it's like I'm glued to the floor. I try to scream, but it comes out muffled and suppressed, as if screaming into a pile of thick blankets. It's as if this portal has changed our laws of physics, so that whatever this inter-dimensional creature is can make its way in.

Another loud shriek permeates the room, and a large, grotesque beast is making its way through the portal. It's gigantic. Its mere head is larger than the bed's headboard, and it has a long, curved neck that sits atop a pair of defined, muscular shoulders. It has two monstrous, twisted horns on top of its head, and endless rows of sharp, jagged teeth that are dripping with bloody saliva. Its dark, leathery skin looks coarse and scaly, and a double set of spikey quills line its arched spine—it's a behemoth.

It sets its huge, glowing eyes upon Victoria, and then on me, their yellowish hue casting a glow on the surrounding walls. As it merges further out of the portal, I begin to see its body more, which has two humungous skeletal wings protruding from its back that are made out of pure bone, as if I'm looking at the wings of a decayed vulture after the feathers and flesh have fallen off. It has two massive arms sharply bent at the wrist, with long, taloned claws that hang in front of its bony chest.

I watch as Victoria takes her predator stance on the bed, her legs nimbly bent at the knees, her arms lithely branched out

at her sides. Her dark, black hair has now turned white as snow, and her limbs have grown to be freakishly long and gangly.

Her mouth is curved all the way to her ears, opening wider and wider as she starts to scream. Her knees snap and bend back the other direction, making them appear like that of a dog's. Her blood-red eyes are now clouding over, with a thick, blackness pooling over her entire sclera until all I can see in her eyes is pure darkness.

*What's wrong with her? I've never seen her like this before. Is that thing even her? How can that scary, awful, creature—that horrible thing, that **abomination**—be my Victoria?*

I stare at the behemoth, then back at her, petrified in fear and unsure of which one of them I'm more scared of at the moment.

The behemoth leaps out on all fours, crushing the bed under its immense weight. It roars loudly, revealing a forked tongue that snakes its way through its sharp, pointy teeth. It jumps up onto its hind legs, bringing its front arms crashing down onto Victoria, but she jumps out of its path with expert prowess and agility.

It suddenly whips a long, three-pronged, fleshy tail around trying to knock Victoria off her feet, but she jumps in the air, barely missing its deadly blow by mere inches. It starts to head toward me, the floor crunching and quaking under each of its heavy steps; but Victoria runs to my aid, positioning herself between me and the creature. She forces her taloned hand through one of its eyes, causing it to let out a loud, earth-shattering wail. She then does the same to its other eye, rendering it completely blind.

The beast frantically starts swinging its tail around, swaying back and forth in an attempt to destroy an enemy it can no longer see. Victoria grabs her huge, foot-long hunting knife out of the nightstand and starts sprinting towards the creature. She jumps through the air and onto its back, plunging the knife

deep into its spinal cord, right between its wings.

It lets out a loud wail in pain, whipping its head around and perching itself on its hind legs to throw her off. She lands on the ground with a loud thud before the beast retreats, swinging its tail around with it, leaving the stink of sulfur and a cloud of black ash in its wake. With that, the behemoth leaps back through the portal, emitting one last loud shriek before the portal closes in on itself, leaving an eerie silence behind as the room ceases its quaking.

The silence is deafening as I stare at the thing I formerly knew as Victoria, its grotesque appearance looking nothing like the pale, raven-haired beauty I've grown to know and love. She stands perfectly still, staring at the wall where the portal was with a diligent intensity, long after it has vanished.

Her chest heaves up and down in sharp breaths as her long taloned claws start to retract back into her hands and her petite body frame returns. Her skin slowly starts to build up its opacity again, her veins receding back into her body.

Finally, she turns to me, her brow furrowed and eyebrows arched.

“Tyler?”

I gawk at her in horror, unsure of what the hell I just saw. She slowly walks toward me, her fangs retracting and her eyes turning back to their usual shade of dark-blue. As she bends down to touch my shoulder, I shudder, recoiling back into the corner and squinting my eyes shut in fear.

“Tyler, it’s okay. It’s just me,” she utters. “I know what you just saw was terrifying and that it didn’t look like me at all; but that was still me in there, and I was on your side the entire time.”

I peer up at her from behind the shield my arms have created, frightened and shaking like a small, scared child. To my surprise, the woman looking back at me is indeed Victoria; that same beautiful, warm smile, that same long, dark hair, and those same deep, wise, understanding sapphire eyes.

She outstretches her hand to me, slightly kneeling down to my level. I hesitantly place my hand in hers, allowing her to

pull me up. Without so much as a blink, I immediately rush into her naked body, pulling her into an embrace as I grip her, unwavering to ever let go.

“Shhh, it’s okay,” she whispers soothingly. “It’s all over.”

I begin to cry like a baby in her arms, shaking with the reality of what just happened, the possibility of what could’ve happened, and the sobering thought of being locked into this hopeless, never-ending, uphill battle with creatures that are ten times more powerful than I am.

*Why even fight anymore? What’s the point?*

“What’s wrong?” she asks me, concerned.

“Nothing. Just a little shaken up, that’s all,” I lie.

“That’s understandable,” she replies. “Tyler, I never wanted for you to have to see me like that, but I had to shift into my pure form to fight that thing. It was solely so that I could protect you, though. I know it was scary, but the important thing is that it’s gone now and we’re both okay, and that I will never let anyone or *anything* hurt you, ever again.”

I nod in agreement, but my head is full of hopeless, despairing thoughts. Finally, I burst into tears, unable to control it any longer.

“It’s like no matter what we do or try, these things are going to keep coming, Victoria. I mean, why bother fighting anymore? Why bother delaying the inevitable? I’m sick of living every day in fear, just waiting for the next demon to come and try to end me. I’m cursed for the long hall, and it’s never going to go away; and neither will they,” I sob, sliding down against the wall and falling to the floor with my head in my hands. “I just don’t know if I can do this anymore. They just keep getting stronger, while I just keep getting weaker.”

“Shhhh,” she consoles me, as she sits down and wraps me in her arms, rocking me back and forth. “You’re a lot stronger than you give yourself credit for, Tyler; and you’ve got me now. You’re not alone in this anymore, and with me by your side, we can conquer anything.”

*How is it that she always knows exactly what to say to make everything feel like it's going to be okay?*

“I love you, Tyler,” she utters, gazing deeply into my eyes as she strokes my tears away with the back of her index finger.

“I love you too,” I murmur, allowing my cheek to fall into her cold caress.

She leans in close, gently pressing her lips to mine. I entangle my hand through her hair, pulling her head closer as she crawls around to my front, her lips never once leaving my own. She gently kisses and nips at my neck causing me to shudder, no longer out of fear, but out of pleasure. She places herself into my lap, straddling me open-legged as she slips her tongue into my mouth, before gently pulling my lower lip with her teeth.

After everything that's happened—all the fear, the adrenaline, the near-death experiences, the fight for our lives—it seems life's too short to not do what the heart desires.

“I want you, Tyler—*now*,” she says firmly, her lips slightly parted as she breathes in jagged, disjointed breaths.

“I want you too . . .” I trail off, staring fervently into her eyes with impassioned need and unrequited desire.

“So then what do you say we go finish what we started?”

## A WARNING

Victoria and I slept in her bed last night, since the behemoth destroyed mine. Actually, we did more than just sleep. I smile as I think about it, and how we finally made love for the first time last night. All that sex sure built up an appetite, though; I'm starving.

I lightly pull my arm out from under Victoria so that I can go to the kitchen and get something to eat, trying my best not to wake her. She lightly stirs, stretching her arms lazily above her head.

"Where you going, sexy man?" she says slyly, languidly rolling her body until she's on her stomach, propping herself up by her elbow.

"Nowhere. Just going to get a little snack," I reply with a smile, as I lean forward and give her a peck on the lips.

"Okay," she replies. "Oh, and Tyler, when you come back, I wanted to talk to you about something."

"Oh?"

*That's never good.*

"Don't worry, it's nothing bad," she quickly replies with a smile, as if reading my mind.

I nod and smile back, before throwing on my plaid pajama pants and heading out of the room toward the hallway.

“Oh, and Tyler?” she calls, as I’m about to disappear behind the doorway.

“Hm?”

“Last night was amazing. I really, *really* hope that’s not the last time we’re going to be doing that,” she says seductively, as she hugs the ivory-colored, satin sheets closer to her body, a mischievous grin across her pale face.

“You won’t get any arguments from me,” I retort over my shoulder, smiling and shaking my head as I walk toward the kitchen, feeling my cheeks start to flush.

I immediately head to the fridge and make myself a sandwich, scarfing the entire thing down on the way back toward the bedroom. I then join Victoria back on the bed, allowing her to snuggle up along the inside of my neck and shoulder, which appears to be her favorite spot—for reasons I can imagine.

“You know, even before Scarlet tried raping you, I always knew you were a virgin,” she utters, peering up at me. “From the very second I saw you in the alley way, I knew.”

“Really?” I reply, blushing. “How?”

“It’s a certain . . .” she trails off, stroking her chin in deep thought as if choosing her words. “A certain *scent* that virgins give off, and your blood positively *reeked* of it. Although I must say, I’m pretty shocked that no ladies popped your cherry way sooner. You’re a very attractive guy, Tyler.”

She lightly drags her cold fingers along my chest, trailing them further downward, causing me to shiver with arousal and sexual tension.

*Me? Attractive? I never would’ve thought . . .*

“Yeah well, I’ve always been a rather traditional kind-of-guy. I’ve always held the idea that when I did eventually do *that*, that it would be for love; and furthermore, I wanted to be sure that whoever it was going to be with, was as equally in

love with me,” I say with adoration as I stare down at her fondly, dragging the tip of my thumb across her lower lip. “I guess you could call me kind of old fashioned. It’s stupid, huh?”

“Not at all,” she replies with incredulity, bringing her palm up to rest on the side of my cheek. “And I’m *honored* that you chose me, baby.”

She leans in closer to bring her lips to mine, and as soon as she does, that feeling returns; that electricity, surging and sparking from within like an adrenaline rush, that feeling of absolute safety and security and fiery passion greater than anything I’ve ever known.

*It’s like I’m floating on Cloud 9, and nothing or no one can touch me—can touch us.*

*The behemoth, the demons . . . none of that matters when my and her lips collide.*

We lounge around in bed for awhile, just playing with our newfound freedom of expression; freedom to touch, freedom to kiss, freedom to finally be able to say all the things we’ve both knowingly felt for so long, but could never say. It’s exhilarating.

“So, what did you want to talk about babe?” I finally ask.

“Babe? Hmm, I like the sound of that,” she replies, biting her lower lip with that fervent gaze and naughty grin that make me lose it.

She hesitates for a bit, in deep concentration; she appears to be looking for the right words. Finally, she sits up, clutching the sheets to her body as she sits cross-legged, adjacent from me on the bed. She regards me with great intensity, and I get the feeling that whatever this is, it’s very important.

“It’s about the Saffron Curse,” she finally blurts. “More specifically, the fact that the demons that have been coming here are getting bigger and stronger; we need to do something about that.”

“There’s no way to stop it, Victoria; you know that. They

won't ever go away, and there is no cure."

"I know, but Scarlet told me something *interesting* . . ." she trails off, averting her gaze to the side wall before setting her eyes back on me.

"Okay," I respond, as if prompting her to continue.

"Alright, all I ask is that you just hear me out first," she starts, eyeing me speculatively before speaking again. "So, Scarlet did some homework on the Saffron Curse, and she found out that the only cure is for you to die—"

"Big surprise," I mutter sardonically.

"*However*, if I were to turn you, you'd technically count as being dead, and hence, the curse would be lifted," she says nervously, concentrating heavily on me as she gauges my reaction.

"You mean, turn me into a vampire?" I ask, my tone full of apprehension.

"Yes."

I pause, rolling over the thought in my head. The thought has never really crossed my mind. I've never thought about becoming like Victoria, especially after seeing what she has to do to people on a daily basis to survive.

*Could I ever be like that—be like her? Could I really be . . . a killer?*

"I don't know," I reply hesitantly.

She scoots closer to me, gently touching my face with her hand.

"It's entirely up to you," she assures me, gazing at me with those sapphire eyes.

*I do love her, and I do want to be with her forever.*

"For the first year, I'll be held accountable for you; you will be my responsibility, as I will be your sire," she explains.

"Sire?" I reply with confusion.

"Yes. When a vampire turns a human, they become that person's sire, and are held responsible for them for the first year; although, the bond and tie to your sire is indefinite, and lasts forever. It's sort of like a parent looking out for their

offspring,” she elaborates. “Like I said, I won’t force you; the choice is entirely yours, my love.”

“If we get rid of this curse, I’ll finally be safe,” I mumble under my breath as if thinking aloud, finally realizing the severity of what this all means.

*No more demons, no more running, no more battles with death . . . a life without constant fear.*

*I’ll finally be free.*

I’m interrupted from my reverie when the lights start to flicker. Instantly, the entire room goes pitch-black. I can’t see a thing, not even Victoria.

Suddenly, the same growls and loud thuds from last night when the behemoth had arrived start to reverberate throughout the house. The air gets heavy again like sludge, and a high-pitched frequency sounds in the room, like the shrill aftermath of when you hear a gunshot without headphones, or the loud, drawn out beep produced when the TV picture cuts out, leaving a series of rainbow stripes in its wake.

Finally, the loud noise ceases, as the lights begin to flicker back on. The atmosphere is back to normal, and it seems that whatever was here has left; but something’s not right. It’s too quiet, too calm—like the calm before the storm.

“What the hell was that?” Victoria asks with orange eyes and fangs bared.

*I’ve never seen her eyes so orange before.*

“I don’t know,” I reply apprehensively. “Your eyes, they’re bright orange.”

“What? What color are they now?” she shouts, her voice suddenly taking on an intense urgency as she grabs me by the shoulders, placing her face mere inches in front of mine.

“They’re slowly turning to red now,” I murmur, confused as to why it’s such a big deal.

“My eyes only turn orange when a demon is near; it’s a

defense mechanism. That means there was a demon here,” she explains. “Usually I can sense the demon too; this one must have come and gone quick. Looks like my body was able to detect it before I did. My eyes—they’re not orange anymore, right?”

“No, they’re just red now, like when you’re angry or hungry.”

“Okay, good. That means the demon is gone,” she says with relief.

All of a sudden, I smell something in the air, like a mix of rotten eggs and something burning. The smell appears to be coming from down the hall, and it’s getting stronger by the second.

“Do you smell that? It smells like sulfur,” I murmur, as I get up and start cautiously walking out towards the hallway.

She passes me in the hall, going around and in front of me so as to protect me from any unforeseen threats. She paces slowly and deliberately like a jungle predator, her knees slightly bent, scaling closely along the wall as she sniffs the air. I follow closely behind her as we try to track the source of the odor.

We follow the smell to the kitchen, when what we see stops us in our tracks. The table is smoking, and we can both see something etched into the wood. From where we stand, it looks like one short word, surrounded by random, ancient symbols—Sanskrit by the looks of it. It reminds me of the symbols that were on the banners I used in the ritual.

“Tyler,” she utters worriedly, as she points to the center of the table.

I feel all the blood suddenly leave my face, leaving me feeling cold and disturbed, as an eerie chill creeps up my spine. I stare at the table wide-eyed with fear, my mouth dropping at the sight of what I see carved into the center of it, leaving me frozen in place.

*J A D E.*

## DOUBLE ENTENDRES

“We have to go—*now*,” I say urgently, as I try to work through my shock and move my feet.

Victoria quickly nods before running to the bedroom and throwing on some clothes. A minute later she jogs back out fully dressed, throwing me a jacket before she hastily grabs her car keys, and we both rush out the door.

“How far is she, Tyler?” Victoria asks as we hurriedly back out of the garage, before she slams her foot down on the accelerator, causing us to speed out onto the dirt road, leaving a whirling cloud of dust behind.

“Not far. I think it’s just a few hours from here,” I reply.

“I thought she lived right near your old place? What do you mean you ‘think?’”

“As far as I know, she moved. I’ve been keeping close tabs on everyone through the internet, just in case something like this happened. Last I checked, she’s in a city in North Dakota called Minot,” I utter frantically, as I pull the piece of paper with her address on it out of my pocket, entering it into the GPS with shaky fingers. “It’s about four and a half hours from here, right near the Canadian/US border, but if we rush we can probably make it in three.”

We push 100 mph the whole way and make it in record

time, arriving over an hour earlier than the GPS said it would take to get there.

As Victoria turns off the car, I step out into the cold night air. It's eerily quiet, the silence only being permeated by the chilling howl of the wind. There's a dense, looming fog creeping around the house, so thick and slow-moving it almost appears to be stationary. The moon hangs low in the starless sky, which is interspersed with fleeting clouds of steel-gray, giving the atmosphere a foreboding quality.

All of the lights are off and the house is completely dark, causing a sickening churning to start in the pit of my stomach.

*What if she's dead in there? What if they did to her what they did to me in that alley?*

*I would never forgive myself. Yet another friend's blood on my hands .*

..

"She'll be fine, Tyler," Victoria says soothingly as if reading my mind, before she takes my hand in hers and we start walking toward the front door.

The last time I saw Jade was when she showed up to the house unexpectedly and Victoria had nearly beaten her to a pulp. I think about it more and more the closer we get to the door, making me question that if Jade is okay and nothing's wrong, then what's my excuse going to be for showing up here in the middle of the night, hand in hand with the woman who nearly obliterated her a few weeks ago?

*Maybe I should think this through . . .*

"Well? What are we waiting for?" Victoria asks as we reach the door, turning to me with a puzzled look.

"If Jade answers the door, what am I going to say to her?" I whisper exasperatedly, running my fingers through my hair. "I mean, we didn't exactly part on good terms—"

Before I can finish, the door swings open to reveal a wide-eyed, paranoid looking Jade, standing in the doorway with a

Louisville Slugger in hand. She's barefoot and wearing a small, red Spiderman t-shirt, along with those same little shorts she always wore before, giving me a sudden sense of nostalgia. Both of us stand in the doorway quietly for a few seconds, staring at one another.

"Jade," I finally exhale with relief, taking a step forward to bring her into an embrace. Jade and I have had our differences, but I would never wish her dead. "Thank god you're—"

I can barely get the words out before she swings the bat at me as hard as she can. I instinctively recoil and step back, but the tip of it hits my gut hard, knocking the wind out of me. I stumble backward, clutching my stomach and gasping for air.

Victoria immediately lunges toward Jade, as a rumbling growl starts to build in her throat.

"Victoria," I pant heavily, placing my arm across her chest to stop her. "Don't."

She hesitates, eyeing Jade closely, and I can see her eyes starting to faintly redden. It's almost imperceptible because of how dark it is, but I can tell, and I know exactly what she's thinking of doing.

"Victoria . . ." I admonish.

"Fine," Victoria finally mutters indignantly, crossing her arms and huffing before taking a step back, her eyes slowly turning back to dark blue.

I recover myself and attempt to stand up straight, breathing in heavy, jagged breaths as I stare back at Jade.

"What the hell are *you* doing here?!" Jade screams, once again holding the baseball bat high up above her head.

"Jade, look—I'm sorry for what happened last time," I concede. "I know I'm probably the last person you want to see."

"You're *sorry!*?" she yells with incredulity at the top of her lungs.

"We won't be here long. It's just—"

"It's just *what*, you worthless piece of shit? It's just that you finally feel some guilt and remorse for abandoning me, your *best* friend, after all the years we've known each other? And

then you have the audacity to bring *Rambo* over here with you?" she screams with conviction, gesturing to Victoria with disgust.

She continues to go off on a tirade, throwing her hands up in the air and spouting obscenities, while Victoria and I stand there in bewilderment, unsure of what to say or how to start.

"First you leave me without so much as one word, then I find you and you pretty much kick me off your doorstep and have this bitch beat me into the ground, now you show up here in the middle of the night, and out of all the people in the world, you bring *her*?!"

"Jade! Will you just shut the hell up for one goddamn second?!" I finally shout, leaving her wide-eyed in shock and with an affronted look on her face. "There's a very serious reason why we came here."

She stares back at me with her mouth agape, as if she can't believe what she's hearing. I can see her jaw clenching and all of her fury slowly coming to a head.

"Leave, *now*," she finally growls with narrowed eyes, as she leans in and brings her face mere inches from mine. "And I don't want to see or hear from you, *ever* again."

She's about to slam the door in my face, when I say something that stops her.

"Jade, there's a demon coming to kill you."

I see the door stop midway, where it then hovers slightly open for a few seconds with Jade hidden behind it. After a few seconds, the door slowly starts to open again, revealing Jade.

"Don't you *dare*," she hisses disdainfully. "Don't you dare start with that crap again, Tyler."

"It's the truth. You're in grave danger, Jade, and you can either let us in and we can help you, or you can slam the door in our faces and be dead by morning. So what's it gonna be?" I ask, trying my best to sound confident.

"There is no such thing as demons, Tyler. Enough is enough. You need to—"

Before Jade can finish, Victoria slams her fist against the outside of the house, cracking the wall near the door and

causing tiny crumbles of stucco to fall to the ground.

“Shut the fuck up and listen, you dumb little bitch,” Victoria snaps, glaring deep into Jade’s eyes.

“Can we come in now?” I ask, trying to hide the grin that is slowly but surely forming on my face at Jade’s now severely humbled expression.

“You’re not joking, are you? You’re serious,” she utters, as she moves over to the side. “Come in.”

Jade walks over to the couch and sits down in a daze, her hands on her knees. I sit down beside her, while Victoria plops herself down onto the nearby loveseat.

“You’re lucky Dominic isn’t here. He’d have beaten you into the ground right on the spot,” Jade mutters snidely, as if trying to take back her control.

“No, he wouldn’t have,” Victoria asserts with the utmost confidence, as she glares at Jade.

“Vic,” I whisper, shaking my head at her to stop.

Victoria raises her hands up innocently and smiles, then gestures for me to continue.

“I’m not too sure where to start . . .” I trail off, fidgeting nervously as I stare down at my lap.

“Just spit it out already,” Jade snaps. “Let’s get this over with.”

“The other night, a very strong and powerful demon came to the house—the strongest one I’ve seen so far; and tonight, a few hours ago, it came again, but this time it left a warning. Your name was carved into the wooden table at our house, Jade. I think it was some sort of omen.”

“So if this demon is *so* powerful, then how’d you two escape? This doesn’t make any sense,” she retorts with irritation in her voice.

“Well, let’s just say I had something stronger on my side,” I hint subtly, leaving Jade with a bemused expression on her face. “Vic?”

I turn to Victoria, my eyebrows arched in questioning as if asking permission.

“Go for it. At least then she’ll know that if she does

anything stupid or says anything to anyone, that she'll have far worse than just demons to worry about," Victoria sneers.

"You know you're going to have to show her though, right? She's not going to believe us," I reply, carrying on this conversation as if Jade wasn't sitting right there.

"Nearly every human is ignorant of the supernatural and paranormal. They go about their lives blindly, like lambs to the slaughter. It makes it *so* easy for us though," Victoria mouths menacingly as she stares Jade down, a grin starting to creep across her face.

Jade is on the couch, her eyebrows arched in confusion as she looks back at forth between me and Victoria.

"Will someone tell me what the hell is going on?!" Jade yells heatedly. "What are you guys talking about?"

"Jade, the reason I'm still alive is because Victoria is a vampire," I say bluntly, carefully assessing Jade's reaction.

Jade stares back at me, her face vague with unwritten emotion, before she looks at Victoria and then back at me again.

"Of *course!* Now it all makes sense!" Jade says sardonically, throwing her hands up in the air as if coming to a sudden revelation. "She's a vampire, you're Santa Claus, and I'm the Easter Bunny!"

Victoria and I look at each other, as if we knew that this is exactly what was going to happen. Finally, I nod at Victoria, as if giving her the go-ahead.

"I mean, how much more ridiculous can you get? You've wasted enough of my time. Get out, *now*—both of you," she yells contemptuously, standing up and pointing to the door. "Oh, and tell the Tooth Fairy I said hi."

"Sit down, you stupid girl," Victoria hisses as she towers over Jade, her eyes starting to redden and her fangs protruding far past her lips.

Jade immediately freezes in place, her tough exterior melting away as she starts to tremble in fear.

Victoria snaps her fingers and points down at the couch, commanding Jade to sit down. Jade immediately falls back

onto the couch and scoots over to the corner farthest from Victoria.

“You want to know if demons exist? You want to know about *real* monsters? Well you’re looking at one; and believe me, what’s coming for you is *far* worse. So tell me, do you need more proof? Because I’d be happy to give you more, if you’d like,” Victoria says wickedly as she hovers over Jade, who’s now huddled up into the corner of the couch, frozen in fear.

“Okay Vic, that’s enough. I think she gets it,” I say softly, as I come up behind her, taking her hand in mine to calm her down.

“I hope you’ve learned your lesson, little girl; and maybe next time you’ll think twice before you act like you know it all when it comes to things your feeble little brain can’t even *begin* to understand.”

We sit in silence for a minute, allowing Jade to soak it all in and come out of her initial shock. Finally, I break the silence.

“There you have it, Jade. Now you know that this isn’t some joke, or game we’ve cooked up for our amusement,” I murmur. “So will you listen to what we have to say now?”

Jade nods uneasily, swallowing loudly before opening her mouth to speak again.

“So what now? Do we just wait until the demon shows up?” Jade asks softly, her arrogant, cavalier attitude now replaced with a humbled and frightened demeanor.

“When it shows up, I’ll kill it; then we’ll go, and you won’t have to see or hear from us ever again, and you’ll be free to go about your happy little life,” Victoria states nonchalantly, her tone aloof and condescending.

“Until then, we wait,” I utter to Jade. “When’s Dominic coming home?”

“Not for another week. He’s gone on a business trip.”

“Okay, good. That makes things less complicated. Less witnesses,” I explain before turning to Victoria, which is met with a nod in agreement. “So should we just camp out here on the couch?”

Jade nods solemnly as she stares down at the floor, still in

shock.

“Jade, I just want you to know, that for what it’s worth, I’m sorry,” I murmur softly, sitting down next to her. “I’m sorry, for everything; for leaving you like that, for how I acted when you showed up, for getting you involved in all this . . .”

“I don’t want to talk about that,” she whispers, looking away uncomfortably.

“Alright. I just wanted you to know that though.”

“So, we’re going to be up all night I’m guessing. Should I put some coffee on?” Jade asks, quickly trying to change the subject.

“Yeah, sounds great,” I reply, conceding.

Jade turns to Victoria with a questioning look, as if asking her the same.

“Umm, she won’t be having any,” I say awkwardly, in response to Jade’s unspoken question.

“Not unless it’s coming from your vein,” Victoria retorts, eyeing Jade with a wicked smirk on her face.

“Victoria,” I chide, shaking my head at her once again before turning around to face Jade with an apologetic look on my face. “Sorry, she has a dark sense of humor.”

Jade looks as if she’s about to say something to Victoria, but she stops herself and decides against it, most likely out of fear of Victoria’s wrath, seeing as how she now knows what Victoria is and what she’s capable of. An unnerved Jade turns around, looking incredibly uncomfortable as she makes her way to the adjoining kitchen. She starts on a pot of coffee before pulling out two large, ceramic mugs and some cream from the fridge.

A few minutes later Jade joins us back in the living room, handing me a cup of coffee which I gratefully accept. This reminds me of my first few months of having the Saffron Curse, long before I met Victoria, when I would chug coffee like it was going out of style and stay up all night for days on end in fear of the demons.

“I’m surprised the demon hasn’t shown up yet,” I utter, as if thinking aloud. “It could’ve been here in seconds. Why it

didn't beat us here or why it hasn't come yet is strange."

Victoria strokes her chin in deep concentration, while I try to think of what the demon's motive could be for the late arrival.

*It just doesn't make sense. Why would it give us the upper hand? Why would it not want the element of surprise? It has to be playing with us somehow . . . something's not adding up.*

We all sit in the living room anxiously in silence, unsure of what to say or how to act. Finally, Jade breaks the silence, trying to make small talk.

"Heh, this is all kind of ironic if you think about it. I remember that one girl you knew that just up and left you out of the blue without saying a word, just like you did to me; and her name was Jade too. Talk about a weird coincidence, huh?" Jade says awkwardly, as she lets out a self-conscious giggle.

Suddenly, that feeling in the pit of my stomach returns, sending goosebumps over my entire body. My brow knits together in deep thought, as everything starts coming together; it all makes sense now. Jade isn't the only person I've had in my life named Jade.

"You alright?" Victoria asks me with concern, leaning over and putting her cold hand on mine.

"Shit. How the hell did I let that slip my mind?" I mutter to myself angrily.

"Let what slip your mind? What's wrong, Tyler?" Victoria presses fretfully, as Jade stares at us in confusion.

"Oh my god, how could I be so stupid!" I chastise myself, as I spring up from the couch in a panic.

"Tyler, what's going on?" Victoria persists, as she stands up and grabs me by the shoulders.

"It's not her they want," I utter, gesturing towards Jade who's sitting on the couch looking perplexed. "It's the *other* Jade they're coming for. My old friend . . . Jade Claussen."

## THERE WILL BE BLOOD

“The demon’s not coming here; it never was. It’s going after Jade Claussen,” I utter in panic.

“Jade Claussen?” Victoria asks in confusion.

“I haven’t spoken to her in years. We were best friends, and one day she just up and left without a word, and I never heard from her again. That’s why I didn’t automatically think of her when I saw ‘Jade’ carved into the table,” I explain.

Claussen was my best friend a long time ago, several years before I had gotten into the whole Satanic thing. I had gotten so attached to her that when she left, it seemed as if my world ceased to exist.

When she walked out on me, I lost all hope and faith in the world and people. She played a huge part in why I turned my back on god in the first place.

*Or maybe I’m just selfish and don’t want to take full responsibility for this.*

“Jade, I need to use your computer—*now*.”

“Okay, it’s over here,” Jade says frantically, as she leads me up the stairs and into a small office at the end of the hall.

I spend a good twenty minutes online trying to hunt down

Claussen.

*Geez, how many Jade Claussen's are there?!*

I never thought to keep tabs on her because she was no longer in my life, and hadn't been a part of my life for so long. She was merely a figment of the past; a lost token of ephemera.

My breath hitches in my throat when I finally come across her Facebook page. She still looks the same; those same sunken in and tired emerald eyes, that dishwater-brown, shoulder-length hair, and thin, petite frame. She hasn't changed.

From there, I'm able to deduce what city she lives in, which narrows down the address search tenfold. I finally find a Jade Claussen in Sundance, Wyoming, the same city that was on her Facebook page. I hurriedly scribble down the address on a piece of scratch paper, praying that it's not too late.

I rush out of the office and run smack into Victoria, who's perched against the wall right outside the door with her arms crossed, staring down at the carpet.

"Tyler, what are you going to do?" Victoria asks worriedly, looking up at me.

"I have to go to her, Victoria," I murmur softly.

"Not by yourself you're not."

"It's almost dawn, and the sun will be up in a couple of hours. You can't come with me," I tell her sadly, as she fervently stares back at me with tears starting to well up in her sapphire eyes. "I can't wait until tomorrow night."

"Tyler, you can't do that! Are you crazy?" she screams fretfully, as a rogue tear starts to make its way down her pale cheek. "You could *die*!"

"Please, you have to understand. I'm the source of this curse, so I'm responsible for anyone hurt or killed because of it. *I'm* the reason this demon is after her," I insist, as I grab Victoria lightly by the shoulders. "I have to do what's right."

I try to tilt her chin up with my finger to meet her gaze, but she's staring down at the floor crying, shaking her head back

and forth as if doing so would make this all untrue—just a horrible nightmare that we’ll all wake up from soon.

“Tyler, I—” she starts, choking back her sobs. “I almost lost you. I can’t bear to lose you again.”

She immediately embraces me, pulling me into her with need and desperation. Even though time is of the essence and I need to be getting to Jade, the thought goes through my mind about how this could possibly be the last time I ever see Victoria. I could die tonight, and I would never see her again.

*I better make this one count.*

I bring my lips to hers, kissing her so hard and so deep, as if literally trying to meld and bind my soul and being with hers. I pull her in even closer, entangling my hand in her raven hair, kissing her with such an intense urgency, it’s as if touching isn’t close enough.

“I love you, Victoria,” I whisper, as I close my eyes and touch my forehead to hers, cupping her cold cheek in my hand.

“I love you too,” she croaks, her face now sodden with salty tears.

“I have to go.”

I gently try to pull away from her, but she holds onto me tightly. She grips me harder, burying her face in my neck, and I can feel her back rising and falling with each sob.

She finally releases me, reaching into her pocket and reluctantly handing me her car keys, along with a small wad of cash.

“You better not forget that you’re still only human,” she murmurs, wiping away her tears with the back of her hand. “I never thought you’d be so willing to die.”

“I never thought you’d be so willing to hand over your car,” I laugh.

“If anything happens, I swear to—”

“I know, I know. Don’t worry, I’ll be careful with your baby.”

“Take care of the car too,” she adds, caressing my cheek with the tips of her fingers.

Victoria finally lets me go, an obvious internal battle brewing inside of her. I don’t want to go, but I know that I have to. My loved ones have already suffered and been taken as a result of my actions—*my* curse. First Rebecca, then Amber, and now Jade Claussen; except, I still have a chance to save her.

I rush downstairs to find Jade sitting on the couch in slight shock.

“I’m going now,” I utter to Jade. “Victoria is going to stay here and look after you.”

“I don’t need a babysitter,” Jade snips snidely.

“Really now? Okay then, have it your way. If the demon comes for you, be sure to give it my regards.”

“Wait,” Jade murmurs, crossing her arms and looking away in annoyance, before humbling herself and turning to Victoria. “Can you please stay?”

Victoria nods in response, before she starts walking me to the front door.

“Please, be careful,” she whispers to me, her eyes sad and hollow.

I nod solemnly, opening the front door. I’m halfway out the door when Victoria grabs my hand, pulling me back to her and kissing me harder than ever before.

“Come back to me,” Victoria utters one last time before letting my hand go, as she painfully watches me walk down the driveway and duck into her car, speeding away into the night.

I drive pedal to the medal the entire way, and manage to reach Claussen’s house in four and a half hours instead of the usual six.

The sound of tires crunching on gravel permeates the eerie silence as I slowly pull up the pebbled driveway. It’s right before dawn, in that unusual in-between period where it’s not quite day yet, but past night. The sky is just starting to get that opalescent quality to it, as the moon slowly starts to fade away and leave with the darkness.

I turn off the engine and step out into the dense fog, which is so thick that I can barely see my own hand in front of my face. I finally reach the small, two-story, yellow house, which in the daytime sun I'm sure looks bright and cheery, but right now even *it* looks dark and foreboding.

As I jog up the front porch steps, I get a sudden uneasy feeling and turn around. I keep getting the feeling that I'm being watched; but every time I look, there's nothing there, just an eerie, deafening silence and that thick, creeping fog.

I lightly knock on the door, listening intently for any sound of life inside.

*Nothing.*

I knock again, this time a little louder in case she's possibly sleeping; but I'm still only met with silence. I eye the door knob as if it were the scariest thing in the world, slowly stretching my shaky hand out toward it.

*Alright, Tyler. This is it. Time to nut up or shut up.*

I place my hand around the knob and twist, and to my surprise, it's unlocked.

*That's never good.*

I apprehensively step in, closing the door behind me. I fumble my hand around on the wall, flipping on the nearby light switch. I'm standing in a small foyer. There's a mirror on the wall to my right, along with a small table underneath it that supports a vase of dead flowers, a bowl of random keys, and a dog leash. On the adjacent wall are four metal coat-hooks with assorted coats hung on each one.

As I walk a few steps further into the house, I immediately catch the strong odor of blood. The house is freezing cold, and I can see my breath forming clouds every time I exhale.

"Hello?" I croak. "Anyone home?"

Still no answer, no sound, no life; just a dark, chilling silence.

Straight across the entryway is the living room, with the kitchen to the left of it, and a tall staircase to the right. I anxiously head to the staircase, rubbing my sweaty palms against my pants.

“Hello?” I try to yell again as I peer over the stair railing and up the stairs, but it comes out nothing more than a hoarse whisper.

Suddenly, I hear a loud growl coming from the kitchen, causing me to freeze in my tracks. My entire body starts to tremble, and every single nerve and cell in my body is telling me to run; but I know I have to face this.

I cautiously turn around and slowly start making my way toward the source of the growl, treading lightly. I follow it further, the growl getting louder and louder. I finally stop right before the kitchen, where I try to gather up every ounce of courage I have in me.

3, 2, 1.

I hold my breath and whip around the corner, entering into the small kitchen, when I see the source of the growl. A terrified German Shepard is hiding under the table, his ears bent back and his tail between his legs; he’s growling furiously.

“Hey boy,” I say with relief, tapping my thigh. “Come on, it’s okay.”

*I think I’m going to see the Legion, and instead I get Lassie. Come on, Tyler; get a grip.*

The dog immediately stops growling and begins to cry, as he backs up further until he hits the wall. Whatever scared this dog scared it bad.

“Here boy,” I whistle, to which he finally responds and apprehensively comes out from under the table. He slowly trots over to me with his head down and ears back, crying as he kneels at my feet. I pet him for a bit to calm him down.

After a minute or two, I venture out of the kitchen and

back into the living room, eyeing the sinister looking staircase. It seems so dark and ominous, because I know that the answer to why I came is most likely up there. At the top of those stairs I will probably find either a dead body or a demon; either way, the outcome is probably not going to be good.

I grasp the stair railing hard, feeling its cool, smooth, lacquered wooden finish beneath my sweaty, trembling palms. Step by step I cautiously make my way up the stairs, gripping the rail until my knuckles turn white, with the dog following closely behind.

After what seems like eternity, although probably just a few seconds, I finally reach the top. To my left is a bathroom, to my direct right is a bedroom, and further down the hall is another bedroom; all the doors are closed.

I slowly open the door to the right of the stairs, peeking my head inside; but there's no one there. The ceiling is slanted down away from the door, attic style, which ends right above a twin bed with hot-pink satin sheets. As I step in, I notice some posters of Marilyn Monroe and Paramore, along with a *Despicable Me* stuffed minion on the bed, and some girly looking clothes on the floor.

*This must be Claussen's room.*

Luckily, everything looks fairly normal. No dead bodies—*yet.*

I exit the bedroom, quietly shutting the door behind me. I then start making my way down the hall, listening vigilantly for any sound of life. I can hear a quiet repetitive humming, like that of a motor, coming from the bedroom at the end of the hall. I anxiously follow the noise to the master bedroom, stopping right before I reach the door. I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and fling the door open.

I gasp at the sight before me, frozen in shock. The once white walls are now spattered with dark crimson stains, while deep scarlet puddles soil the red-soaked carpet, which is littered with guts and innards. I take a step inside, and I can

hear my feet squish on the carpet from all the blood. Random limbs are scattered amongst the carnage, and in my peripheral vision, I can see something long and thin swinging above me.

I look up to find the source of the humming. It's coming from the ceiling fan, and there are endless feet of intestines and other unrecognizable organs dangling from the blades, causing a *swoosh-swoosh* noise that reverberates intermittently throughout the room with every turn, followed by the sound of blood spattering the walls.

I quickly turn around and rush to the bathroom, where I then puke my own guts out into the toilet.

*I don't know why I bothered to rush to the bathroom. It's not like my vomit would've made that much more of a mess in there. Habit, I guess.*

After I throw up everything but my memories, I spring up and immediately rush down the stairs, wiping my tears as I skip every other step until I reach the bottom.

*Poor Jade. I will never forgive myself.*

Just as I reach the door, I hear a sound; someone's coughing. I freeze in my tracks, listening closely as I follow the source of the noise back to the kitchen; but this time, I notice another smaller room adjoined to it—a laundry room.

I hold my breath and enter into the small room, where I then see my old friend Jade huddled up in fetal position, covered in blood and guts. There are pale pink trails all over her bloody face from where her tears had fallen, and her hair is matted in dried, crusted blood.

"Jade!" I yell frantically, running to her side.

She's alive, but she's shaking and appears to be in shock; she isn't responding to me.

"Jade!" I scream once more, shaking her by the shoulders, which is met with a wide-eyed look from her.

"Get away from me!" she suddenly shrieks, backing up against the linoleum floor until she hits the wall behind her, a

look of complete fear and bewilderment on her face.

I back up with my hands in the air, giving her some space.

“This isn’t real, this isn’t real, this isn’t real,” she chants over and over like a mantra, as she hugs her knees, rocking back and forth.

“Jade, it’s me—Tyler,” I whisper softly, as I slowly inch toward her, as if approaching a scared, cornered animal.

She squints her eyes shut, vigorously shaking her head back and forth as she begins to cry.

“Wake up, wake up, wake up,” she whispers to herself.

“Jade—”

“You’re not real!” she screams, her eyes wide with horror, before covering her ears and burying her face in between her knees.

“Jade, it’s okay. It’s all over now. I’m here,” I whisper to her soothingly as I slowly pull her into an embrace.

“Tyler?” she says with surprise as she peers up at me, as if finally believing that it’s really me she’s looking at.

“Yes, it’s me.”

“Oh my god, Tyler! This—this *thing*, it came out of the wall, and the wall was swirling! It was huge and ugly and horrible!” she cries, choking back her tears. “It killed my parents right in front of me! It tore them to shreds!”

“I know, I know,” I murmur, as I grab a towel off the nearby dryer and softly wipe her face and arms down.

The towel is completely red within seconds, so I grab another and start on her hair. She grips me hard and cries louder, resting her head on my chest as she sobs. Finally, she breaks the silence.

“Wait, what do you mean you ‘know?’” she sniffs. “You mean, you actually believe me?”

“Yes, Jade; I do. I know more about all this than you think,” I utter reluctantly.

“And what are you even doing here? How’d you know I was in trouble?”

“I’ll tell you all about it in the car, but we have to go—*now*,” I say urgently.

Luckily there's some clean clothes in the dryer, which I sift through, settling on a random t-shirt and pajama pants for her. I hand them to her before turning around and facing the wall, allowing her to get dressed.

"Okay," she sniffs. "You can turn around now."

I put my arm around her and help her walk to the front door. She's bloody and limping, and she's got some bad cuts and bruises; but overall it looks like she's going to be okay. We're about to open the door when a loud, deep, rumbling growling resonates throughout the entire room, causing the walls to vibrate as the hung pictures loudly crash to the floor.

*It's not the dog this time.*



## A LOST CAUSE

“Where’s the body this time?” a deep voice replies on the other end of the line.

“No body. I need a different kind of favor tonight,” I reply.

“Oh really? I’m officially intrigued. What can I do for you tonight, Victoria?”

“It’s sort of complicated, but do you remember that guy I told you about?” I murmur, peering out into the hallway before lightly closing the bedroom door.

“The kid hunted by demons? How could I forget?”

“Well, one of the demons slaughtered his friend’s family, right in front of her,” I start. “She’s displaying extreme symptoms of PTSD from the trauma she’s experienced; we can’t keep her here. She needs the kind of help we just can’t give. Could you *arrange* something for me?”

“Yikes, okay. I’ll see what I can do. Where should we meet? The usual spot?” he asks.

“Yes, perfect. Thank you,” I quickly reply, before ending the call and slipping my cell back into my pocket.

I exit the bedroom quietly, before walking down the hall towards the living room. I see Tyler sitting with Claussen on the couch, who’s rocking back and forth and mumbling to herself.

We came home with her three days ago and figured that we could just nurse her back to health, physically and mentally; unfortunately, we didn't foresee the amount of irrevocable psychological damage she'd have.

Every night, Jade has woken up from night terrors, screaming bloody murder. When she's not asleep, she stares at the wall like a zombie, as if in an almost comatose state. She barely speaks, she won't eat, drink, or bathe, and she's suffering from extreme paranoia and dementia.

I know that Tyler desperately wants to help her, more so because he feels responsible for all this; but we've both decided that she needs a lot of help, and that we simply can't give it to her. There's nothing left we can do.

I watch from the hallway as Tyler tries to calm her down. He's shushing and hugging her while she shakes and sobs heavily with her head on his lap, curled up into a ball.

"Shhh, it's okay," Tyler whispers, petting her head gently.

I clear my throat, announcing myself. He looks up, his eyes meeting mine as he arches his eyebrows in questioning, to which I nod as if saying "*The deed is done.*"

"Come on, Jade. I need you to come with me," he says softly with despair in his voice, as if talking to a small, scared child.

He grasps her hands and helps her off the couch, and we all pile into the car and head off to the fields. I glance at Tyler and Jade in the backseat in the rearview mirror every so often, watching as she sleeps on his lap. We finally turn onto a dirt road that's off the beaten path, following it until we reach a large corn field.

We're in the middle of nowhere and there's virtually nothing out here, other than an old farmhouse up the road, an abandoned, metal shanty-shack, and endless rows of corn for as far as the eye can see. It's nearly pitch-black dark, the only small bit of light coming from the moon, which is casting an eerie opalescent glow on the sharp, green leaves that line the thick corn stalks. There isn't a single other car or person in sight, other than an old, brown truck and an ambulance with

its lights off, which are pulled over to the side of the dirt road.

There are two young EMT's in uniforms sitting in the back of the ambulance with the doors wide open, one a young, husky blonde man with kind green eyes, the other man tall, lanky and dark-haired with a buzzcut. It's dead quiet, and only the sounds of the chirping crickets and bull frogs can be heard reverberating throughout the endless rows of corn, which you could lose yourself in if you took one wrong turn. It feels as if we're in some kind of deserted limbo; the land time forgot about which stands still, that you could get stuck in, disregarded and erased from the world, never to leave again.

I pull the car over behind the ambulance, turning the engine off. A tall, middle-aged, Caucasian man in a tan overcoat steps out of the old truck, flicking a cigarette butt onto the road before pulling his collar up around his neck. He has dark, greasy, disheveled hair and several days of facial hair overgrowth, and his teeth are stained yellow from too much coffee and cigarettes.

"We're here," I utter, turning around to face Tyler.

He looks nervous, as if he doesn't want to do this; but both he and I know that it has to be done. I step out of the car and motion for Tyler to do the same as the man approaches us, while Jade remains in the backseat.

"Victoria, doll. How are you tonight?" he greets me, with that trademark creepy, slimy smile and thick, New Jersey accent.

"Douglas," I greet him brusquely.

"You don't look well. Have you been getting enough rest? Eating right?"

"I'm fine," I reply, my tone abrupt and austere.

Douglas is my detective, hasmat team, trash man, clean-up crew, and coroner all in one. He's a PI by day—a sketchy, questionable one to say the least—but he always cleans up my little messes and problems, whatever they may be. I saved his life back in the day, so he owes me one—or a thousand. It's clear he thinks that if he does this for long enough, that one day he'll have me; but Douglas is more the type of scum I

would feed on rather than be with. I only keep him around because he's useful and trustworthy, and for that and that reason only.

Tyler and Douglas eye each other speculatively, both standing tall and puffing out their chests as if two cocks in a fight over the prized hen.

"So, this must be the demon boy," he snipes, as he puts out his hand to shake Tyler's. "Douglas."

"Tyler," Tyler murmurs tersely, as he aloofly reaches out to shake Douglas's hand, his eyes narrowing.

"Hm. Loose handshake you've got there," Douglas sneers condescendingly. "A firm grip is a sign of respect and strength, kid."

"Victoria, can we just get this over with?" Tyler hisses in annoyance, as he looks over at me with stifled anger in his eyes.

I nod, walking over to the car and opening the passenger's side door. Tyler glares at Douglas, sizing him up with hate and biting down on his lower lip, before hesitantly walking over to the car. He pushes the front seat forward, calling to Jade, holding her hand and helping her out of the car.

"Oh wow, you weren't kiddin'," Douglas twangs inappropriately, seeing the obvious trauma coming from her.

Jade's hair looks like a matted rat's nest, and she's still rather dirty and bloody, as she won't let us bathe her. She looks emaciated and exhausted from lack of sleep and food, and the forlorn, paranoid look in her eyes is unmistakable.

Douglas whistles and nods over at the two EMT's, who come out of the ambulance and over to Jade.

"It's okay," Tyler assures her, as he gently ushers her over to the EMT's.

"It's okay, Miss. We'll take good care of you," the kind, blonde EMT says softly as he smiles and takes her hand in his, to which Tyler reluctantly starts to hand Jade over, with an obvious internal struggle.

"Tyler?" Jade says with surprise, her brow furrowed in wonderment as she grips Tyler's hand, unwavering to let go.

“Jade, it’s not safe with me, and I can’t help you. These nice men are going to get you some help,” Tyler relents, barely able to look Jade in the eyes out of shame and guilt. “I promise, you’ll get better in no time.”

“Tyler? Tyler!” she screams desperately, ripping away from the EMT’s and running back to him.

She pulls him into an embrace and holds him tightly, as he hugs her back with a pained expression, trying his best not to cry.

“I need to make sure that you’re safe, and that you get the help you need,” he croaks in her ear, his voice a hoarse whisper. “It’s my fault you are this way. After what you saw . . . I’m sorry, Jade. I’m so, so sorry.”

He pulls away from her, his eyes welling up with tears as he lets the EMT’s take her away. She screams for him repeatedly, but he closes his eyes and stares out into the corn fields, unable to look at her.

“Tyler! Please!” she yells frantically. “Tyler!”

I can see a rogue tear starting to escape Tyler’s eye, as it rolls down his cheek and over his quivering bottom lip.

“I’m so sorry,” he whispers despairingly under his breath while shaking his head, so soft that it’s almost inaudible. “Please forgive me.”

The EMT’s take a struggling Jade to the back of the ambulance, strapping her down into a gurney against her will. She jerks back and forth, screaming her lungs out, her eyes wild and crazed as tears begin streaming down her face. I watch Tyler stare in horror as one of the EMT’s holds her flailing body down, while the other fills a syringe with enough tranquilizer to knock out a horse. I hug Tyler, bringing his trembling body into mine and burying his head in my chest right as they stab the needle into her thigh. Her fading screams can be heard echoing throughout the fields as the back doors close.

“Well, I guess that’s that,” Douglas says wryly. “See you around, kid.”

Tyler glares at Douglas as he walks toward me.

“Victoria,” Douglas nods at me with a sardonic smile, before hopping into his old pickup and driving off with the ambulance following closely behind, leaving me and Tyler holding each other in the cold night’s dead silence.

“None of this is your fault,” I utter softly to him, as I stroke my hand down his sodden cheek.

“Then whose fault is it?!” he screams contritely, throwing his hands up in the air in frustration as he chokes back his sobs.

“You couldn’t have known—”

“I can’t do this anymore, Victoria. I can’t have the people I love being hurt and killed because of my actions—*my* mistakes. Every few weeks, it’s another one, and another one. I’m not going to wait around for these son of a bitch demons to take anyone else I love,” he spits with fury. “This ends now. You’re turning me, *tonight*.”

## BAD OMENS

We drive home in silence, weary from the long journey and ordeal with Claussen, leery of what we know is to come when we get home.

“Vic?” Tyler murmurs, looking over at me.

“Hm?”

“Does it hurt?” he asks, his eyes full of nervousness and apprehension.

“Does what hurt?”

“The turning—does it hurt?” he says softly, his voice cracking, as he nervously clears the lump that’s building in his throat. “I just want to be prepared, and know what I’m getting into.”

“Yes, it hurts quite a bit. I’m not going to lie to you; but like I promised, I’ll be as gentle as I can, and try to make it as painless as possible,” I reassure him, as I reach over and place my hand on his with a smile.

He nods uneasily, giving my hand a squeeze before looking back out the window at the oncoming blur of tall oaks. Suddenly, something flies in front of the car, swiping the windshield and hitting the glass with a loud crack. A few small, black down feathers and a spatter of bright, scarlet blood litter the shattered area of the windshield.

“What the hell was that?” Tyler croaks.

“I think it was a raven,” I utter nervously.

We’re both left with an uneasy feeling, and we linger in silence the entire rest of the way. We finally get home at around 4:00 in the morning. The sun will be up in a couple hours, and I need to time this right. Tyler will be incredibly hungry when he wakes up after the turning, and I need to make sure that he’s fed right away to ensure that the turning takes and that the transition is successful. If I turn him within the next half hour or so, he should be waking up right as the sun is setting later today.

We trudge over to the bedroom, exhausted. We take off most of our clothes, leaving him in nothing but a pair of black boxers, and me in only a black lace bra and underwear. We then lay a dark sheet down and climb onto the bed, sitting cross-legged and facing each other. I take his face gently into my hands, lightly lifting his head until his eyes meet mine.

“You’re absolutely sure that this is what you want?” I ask, gazing into his eyes fervently. “There is no going back once I do this.”

“Yes. I want this,” he murmurs, nodding his head nervously.

“I won’t do this unless you tell me that this is what you want with some confidence, Tyler. There is no room for unsureness here; this is permanent,” I reply, cupping his cheek in my palm. “It’s okay if you don’t. We can always try to find another way to get rid of the curse.”

“I need to do this, Victoria; not just for me, but for them. I want this. No, I *need* this,” he utters, finally nodding his head with confidence before shaking his body loose and lying back on the bed. “Do it.”

I nod and lean in, kissing him softly on the lips, before slowly trailing kisses on his jawline, waywardly making my way down to his neck. I pause, hovering over his neck, allowing my cold breath to deflect off his warm skin. I can feel him trembling beneath me, and hear his heart fluttering like a hummingbird. I slowly wrap my arm under his back to brace

him, my other hand palmed flat on his forehead and pushing him onto the bed with force, because I know that once the venom hits his bloodstream, his body will react violently, and so will he.

“Take a breath and hold it in,” I instruct him, before taking a deep breath of my own.

I hear him inhale deeply right as I open my mouth, and I can feel my fangs starting to extend past my lips. His body begins to tense when the sharp tips of my fangs graze his fragile, delicate skin.

“Relax. Just breathe,” I whisper once more into his ear, before fully sinking and submerging my teeth into his neck.

His hands immediately ball into fists, his body tensing as he grips the sheets in pain. His entire body becomes rigid as he starts to flail about violently. I can hear his heart pounding out of his chest, not just from pain, but from fear. I hold onto him tightly, my grip unwavering, as I push his body back down and allow the venom to seep out of my fangs and into his bloodstream. I try to keep it as painless as possible, but the venom burns horrifically, like hydrochloric acid straight into your veins, burning you alive from the inside-out. I hardly remember my turning, but this part I remember *extremely* vividly. You never forget a pain like that—not in your whole entire *un-life*.

He opens his mouth to scream, but nothing comes out except a small whimper. I can feel and taste his metallic, salty blood pooling around his neck, flooding my lips with its sanguine warmth. His blood is like heaven on Earth, debilitating and enervating all at once. It’s like an out of body experience, as if I’ve been transported to Paradise, floating in the pools of his crimson life force.

*Never have I wanted anyone’s blood so badly.*

A vertiginous feeling overtakes me as my head swirls from within. I voraciously gulp down Tyler’s blood, biting down further and harder, drinking him in and injecting my venom at

the same time. His fist hits the headboard, causing a loud thud to reverberate throughout the bedroom, as his other hand clings to me desperately, his nails digging into my back.

“Victoria . . .” he trails off, his voice getting weaker and weaker. “Stop . . . *please*.”

I can hear his thoughts so loud, it’s as if he’s screaming in my head. He’s beginning to panic and regret his decision. He’s having second thoughts.

*It hurts. Oh god, it hurts so much more than I ever could’ve imagined. It’s like battery acid in my veins, like a chainsaw shredding me from the inside-out.*

*What if she can’t stop?*

*What if I die, right here and now?*

*What if this doesn’t work?*

*Rebecca. Amber. Jade.*

I then see pictures of Rebecca, Amber, and Jade in my head, followed by stills of the Soul Eater and the Hollow-eyed Witch, and I can tell that he’s reverting to images of them to keep his will going, to remind himself of why he’s doing this.

I plunge myself deep into Tyler’s being, his blood binding and connecting me to his deepest self; and to my surprise, I see nothing but darkness. It’s intrinsic, like a dark, empty void; a chillingly hollow enigma.

By this point the last of the needed quart of his blood is coming out of his veins and tissues and being expelled through the wound, and instead being replaced by the venom, turning the remaining blood in his body into vampiric blood. This is the most painful part of the process, and I brace him harder as I prepare for his body to go into convulsions. His eyes roll into the back of his head as his teeth clench down, before his body starts to convulse on the bed. My eyes start to well up with tears at the amount of pain he’s in, but I refuse to release him until it’s done. If I do, he will die. I’ve already started, and there’s no going back now.

Finally his body relaxes, as the last of the venom takes its

permanent place in his body, his heart making its last final beat. My fangs abandon his bleeding neck as I gently put his head down onto the pillow, placing a soft kiss on his now cold forehead.

“I shall see you when you wake, my love,” I whisper in his ear.

*It's done.*

## DORMANCY

I wake up to see Tyler sleeping soundly. His skin is now abnormally pale like mine, and I notice it's cold to the touch when I reach out to caress his cheek. I carefully place my head against his chest—no heartbeat, just silence.

I sit up and begin checking him to make sure that all is well, and so far, it seems all has gone as planned. Lastly, I check his eyes, pulling his eyelid open with the tip of my finger; and what I see takes my breath away. I reel backwards in surprise at the unnerving sight—his eyes are completely pitch-black, like big, dark, glossy marbles. They're completely empty, impassive and devoid of all feeling and emotion; just solid-black, hollow voids. I begin to panic, frightening thoughts filling my head.

*Oh my god, what have I done?  
I've never done this before. Is this normal?  
Did I kill him? Did I overdo it?  
What's wrong with him?*

I reach over him for my phone on the nightstand and immediately call Scarlet.

“Hello?” Scarlet's trademark thick-English accent twangs on the other end of the line.

“Scarlet, it’s Victoria. Something’s wrong with Tyler,” I utter frantically, running my shaky hand through my hair.

“Not to sound like a bitch, but you just woke me up, damn it,” she snipes, irritation laden in her voice.

“I’m sorry, but it’s an emergency. I turned him last night, and something isn’t right.”

“What do you mean? Is he dead?” she asks.

“Yes. I mean, no—I mean, I don’t think so. He’s vampire-dead, but not dead-dead. Everything’s normal as far as vampirism goes, but his eyes . . .” I trail off, my voice starting to shake. “They’re completely black, Scarlet. No pupils, no iris, no whites; just jet-black. This is the first time I’ve ever turned somebody. Is this even supposed to happen?”

Scarlet stays quiet on the other end, her silence speaking volumes more than words.

*This isn’t good.*

“Scarlet?”

“Yeah, I’m here,” she finally replies, a hint of anxiety in her voice. “Look, just stay put. Darren and I are on our way. I’m sure he’s fine, Victoria. I’ve never heard of *black eyes* before, but I’m sure it’s nothing. Just take a breath and relax, okay? We’ll see you soon.”

She hangs up in a hurry without saying goodbye, leaving me in a thick, uncomfortable silence. I look back at Tyler, my eyes starting to well up with tears.

*What have I done? What if I ruined him? What if I’ve hurt him somehow?*

*What if the Tyler I know is gone?*

I sniff, rubbing my nose with the back of my hand before taking a deep breath and attempting to calm myself down.

*I’m sure he’s okay. You’re just overreacting. Calm down, he’s fine.*

I hastily throw on some clothes and wait on the bed next to him, stroking his head and running my fingers through his brown hair. Every minute I wait for Scarlet and Darren seems like eternity, and my patience is beginning to wear thin. I glance down at my cell phone's clock for the fiftieth time; it's 9:00, and about an hour has passed. I struggle to remain calm as I vigilantly watch over Tyler, hoping and praying that he'll wake up any second now and that all of this will be something that we'll laugh about once he does.

Another fifteen minutes later, Tyler still hasn't woken up. I hold my breath and lean over, pulling his eyelid open again. Nothing's changed, his eye still just an endless, cryptic pool of black. I sigh, letting his eyelid go; but to my surprise, his eye stays open. I look back in curiosity, placing my face inches from his. Suddenly, the other eye opens, causing me to jump. Although he's completely still, his eyes stare back at me hard as if conscious and coherent, portraying unwritten emotion and a hidden agenda. They aren't empty this time, but glacial and full of a sinister evil.

"Tyler?" I utter apprehensively, but I am met with only silence and those dark, chilling eyes.

Suddenly, a loud noise reminiscent of grinding knives begins to echo throughout the room with a shrill and deafeningly loud reverb, causing me to cover my ears in pain. I look up just in time to see a long, almost spider leg-like appendage coming out of Tyler's stomach and plunging deep into my own. It's only when I feel its sharp tip puncture my stomach, and its beveled edge twist into my gut, that I realize it's actually a long blade.

My eyebrows arch in confusion, as I grab my torso in pain.

*Why is he doing this to me?*

I reach down to pull out the long blade, but before I can, two more blades come out of Tyler's back and pierce through my body, pinning me against the wall through my upper chest and right thigh. I immediately begin to cough up blood,

covering my chin in a crimson wash.

“Tyler what are you doing!? You’re hurting me! Stop it!” I beg, as tears stream down my bloody face.

He stands up from the bed, his face deadpan, devoid of all emotion other than an almost unnoticeable crooked, sinister little smile that is starting to pull at his lips. As he torturously plunges the blade-like appendages deeper into me, twisting and grinding them into my core and shredding me from within, I get that same darkness that I felt when I was turning him—that same intrinsic, hollow, dark void.

*This isn't a vampire that I'm up against. This is something new—something I've never encountered before. It feels like a demon, but slightly different.*

*No, this isn't just a demon. This is worse—much, much worse.*

I gasp for air as I feel one of the blades puncture my left lung, making blood flood into my airway, causing me to drown in my own blood. I try to scream, speak, *anything*; but nothing but a garbled, gurgling comes out, as frothy blood begins to bubble up from my lips.

I continue to helplessly watch in agonizing pain as the man I love betrays me, while more tentacle-like blades emit from his body, crawling in the air toward me with a serpentine movement. Tyler lifts his palms to his face in fascination, flipping them over and watching them in awe and wonderment. He then turns his palms to me with a wicked gleam in his eyes and an evil grin on his face. There is a bloody slit running across each of his palms, revealing a dense blackness that is surrounded by an uncountable amount of tiny, sharp, pointed teeth.

I take a deep breath and grab the blades in my torso firmly, roughly jerking my body to the side, and subsequently ripping them out through my gut. I hear blood spill all over the floor right before I land on it with a loud thud. As I writhe in a pool of my own blood, I grip my stomach and do my best to hold in my organs and entrails as I stagger up. I scamper to my feet,

running for the front door; but as soon as I reach it, I feel an even larger blade pierce through my back, pinning me down to the hardwood floor.

“Tyler, please!” I cry out in pain and desperation, screaming my lungs out as he joyfully and inexorably twists and eviscerates me from the inside-out.

I look back to the best of my ability and see the long blade snapping and bending like it has its own set of joints. As Tyler casually approaches me, I stare into those jet-black eyes, and know that it is no longer my love staring back at me. That monstrosity, that abomination, that *thing* is not my Tyler. He walks toward me with a sick, animalistic rapacity, his arms outstretched, the teeth lining his open palms hungrily snapping away.

Suddenly, I feel something heavy and warm loosening in my back and chest. It’s the strangest sensation, more ethereal than corporeal. The closer he gets, the more I feel this centrifugal force suctioning out from my back, like a reverse whirlpool.

My head collapses onto the floor in exhaustion, as my vision begins to blur from all the blood loss and tears. I lie there still, barely hanging on as I drown in a pool of my own blood, and all I can do is wait for death to claim me.

*I no longer have a reason to live. The only thing I loved is gone.*

I accept defeat and welcome the darkness, as a tear makes its way down my blood-soiled face.

*Goodbye, Tyler. I love you.*

Suddenly, I hear a loud bang, followed by a crash, causing that thick suction feeling to return, except this time it feels reversed, as if it’s flooding back *into* me. I try to open my eyes, and I can see Darren through my blurred vision. I watch as Darren tackles Tyler, flinging him through the back of the house, causing the blade to loudly rip from my nearly crippled

body.

“Oh my god, Victoria!” I hear a voice yell.

It sounds like Scarlet, but at this point, I’m having trouble remaining conscious and keeping my eyes open for long enough to see. Everything comes in quick flashes, like slides on a projector. I see Scarlet running to me, then black. I see Darren fighting Tyler, then black. I see Tyler advancing on Darren, reaching for Darren’s chest open-palmed, as Darren grabs him by the arm. I watch on as Darren screams in pain, clutching Tyler’s forearm in agony while Tyler smiles wickedly, his gaze dark and obsidian. Tyler begins to pull a thick, off-white, transparent material from Darren’s chest, sucking it through the huge gaping holes in his palms.

*What is that?*

Scarlet quickly advances towards Tyler, grabbing Darren and flinging his body to safety before kicking Tyler all the way through the living room wall to the outside. The thick, ectoplasmic substance stops suctioning into Tyler’s palms, making its way back into Darren’s body, which seems to infuriate Tyler more than anything.

I think about the Soul Eater, how it was attached to Tyler, the mark on Tyler’s soul—and that’s when it hits me.

*Oh my god. That was Darren’s soul. Tyler is literally trying to reap souls.*

Whatever Tyler is, he’s not a vampire; and it probably has something to do with the fact that his soul was marked. He didn’t have a normal soul, and hence, wasn’t a normal human. Consequently, the turning didn’t affect him the way it would a normal human . . . because he *wasn’t* one.

“Let’s go! Now!” Scarlet screams frantically, interrupting me from my reverie as her and Darren rush to my side.

Darren carefully picks me up off the floor bridal style, and we rush to the car. Right then I hear a loud, high-pitched

screech, and the last thing I see is Tyler jumping through the window and landing on the ground before sprinting down the street, as the sharp, pointy tendrils recoil back into his body. I then fade away to blackness in the backseat of the car, watching the blur of dark trees whiz by, fading in and out as I bleed out onto the upholstery.

I come to in a small, dark enclosed space. I realize that we're in an old fallout bomb shelter in the woods, a few miles from my house. It was created during the Cold War, when the threat of nuclear explosions was more imminent; but it's long been abandoned, looking as if it hasn't been used in several decades.

I blink a few times and catch my surroundings, seeing some long, metal shelves lining the wall, with old canned goods, and an old IV pole standing in the corner. There's a hand-cranked blower attached to a pipe for ventilation, and the walls are made of concrete. I'm lying on an old, rigid cot, and I can feel that I'm covered in dried-up, encrusted blood.

My body is incredibly sore, and I've been stripped of all my soiled clothes, leaving me naked and shivering under a flimsy, old blanket. I'm usually never cold, but the shivering is only natural, considering the extreme blood loss and trauma to my body.

*I've never been more hungry in my life. I need blood, now.*

I continue to slip in and out of consciousness, when I hear a sudden loud creaking noise. I watch as the door to the shelter opens, revealing Darren carrying a nearly dead young man in his late twenties, along with Scarlet, who's carrying three large blood bags. The young man is bleeding at the neck, his eyes rolled up into the back of his head, and although his body is completely limp, I can still make out a faint heartbeat.

Darren and Scarlet bring the human over to me, placing the young man's neck right near my mouth.

"Here, eat," Darren commands softly, pushing the man's

jugular to my lips.

I'm so hungry and in so much pain, I don't even bother asking any questions. I catch a strong whiff of the blood, causing my fangs to start extending past my lips. I open my mouth to the best of my ability and latch on, hearing the loud crunch of flesh and tissue as I sink my teeth into the guy's neck. I continue to feed for ten minutes, draining the man of all his blood until I hear his heart make its last beat. The two of them drop the cold, rigid corpse onto the ground with a loud thud, the young man's dead eyes frozen and staring into space.

I gasp and inhale deeply for the first time in minutes, and I can already feel the wounds on my body starting to heal and close, slowly but surely.

"It'll still take another day or two for you to fully heal from trauma of this magnitude, but it's a start," Scarlet whispers, perched on the cot next to me.

"Thank you," I whisper, still breathless. "You—you saved my life."

"You owe me one," she replies with a smile.

Scarlet wraps me up in bandages while Darren connects one of the blood bags to the IV. He starts a line on the top of my hand for the blood loss, before they both leave to find their own food before sunrise, locking me in the cold, pitch-black hole in the ground.

The more time that passes, the more I can feel myself healing. I don't want to be alone in here, and I'm terrified. I begin to cry, mourning the loss of my Tyler.

*What the hell did Tyler become? What if he comes back?*

*Dear god, what did I turn him into? How did this happen?*

Endless thoughts plague my mind as the excruciating pain of fast-healing surges through my body, and as I slip in and out of consciousness, I fade away into darkness, crying myself to sleep.

## DREAM WEAVER

I wake up to the feeling of my skin burning. My entire body sears with pain and soreness, and I'm ravenously hungry. My eyes flutter open, revealing what appears to be a mid-15<sup>th</sup> century peasant cottage. The floors are made of stone, and the walls look like they're made of twigs and mud.

There are two small windows, both of which are covered by burlap curtains to block out the sunlight. A large spinning wheel is against the wall to my left, and there's a small wash basin to my right. The bed I'm in is nothing but a lumpy straw mattress with a large cedar chest at the foot of it. A small, rogue wooden chair is situated near the bed, which I can feel is still warm to the touch, indicating that someone was recently sitting here.

I hiss in discomfort at the small bit of sunlight barely squeezing in through the loose threading of the burlap. It won't kill me, but it's uncomfortable. Just then, a young man in his late twenties with straight light-brown hair and piercing hazel eyes walks into the room, a kind, gentle smile on his face. Judging by his clothing, he's probably a peasant from the lower echelons of society, clad in a soiled, off-white, drawstring linen shirt, and light-brown breeches tucked into a pair of brown suede boots.

“Hello there,” he greets me warmly, as two young boys of approximately early adolescent age hide behind him.

The closer he gets, the more I feel as if I know this man. His kind smile tugs at my heart, and soon I realize—it’s Henry. I want to cry, jump for joy, and run into his arms, but it’s as if I’m nothing but a curious bystander, watching myself from the outside. I’m helpless to act, although I can feel everything as if I’m going through it all over again, trapped in a dream of a long-lost memory that I cannot control, like a marionette, helplessly acting out whatever the puppeteer desires.

*This is when I met Henry.*

“Where am I?” I murmur groggily, while shielding my eyes from the light.

“Don’t worry, you’re safe,” he reassures me, as he dips a washcloth into the nearby basin before wringing it out. “I found you nearly dead in the woods, about two miles from my village.”

“Dead? What do you mean ‘nearly dead?’”

“You were hanging on for dear life. You were naked and covered in blood, cold as the driven snow. I couldn’t make out a heartbeat and you had no pulse, but your chest was rising and falling so I knew you must’ve been alive. ‘Twas’ the strangest thing,” he utters, bringing the damp towel and basin over before leaning in to touch my forehead.

I recoil away in distrust, clutching the wool throw close to my body.

“It’s okay, I won’t hurt you,” he says gently, his tone soft, warm and full of compassion.

I eye him speculatively before loosening up, to which he leans in again and gently touches the damp washcloth to my forehead and chin, dabbing all over my face. When he wrings the towel out into the basin again, I can see that it’s red, turning the bowl of water a sickly shade of pink. His two sons remain perched behind him, wide-eyed and watching me with the utmost curiosity.

“Now let me see about tending to your wounds here,” he offers, as he gently takes my frail arm in his large hand.

When he sees that my wounds are nearly gone and healed up, he looks up at me with suspicion and his eyebrows arched in confusion, as do his two sons.

“I’m okay,” I murmur awkwardly, immediately retracting my arm and hiding it under the coverlet. “Thank you for helping me. You are most generous.”

“Think nothing of it, Miss,” he replies, that kind, warm smile tugging at his pale-pink lips again. “You’re welcome to stay as long as you need. My wife passed about a year ago, so it’s just me and my boys here anyway. It might be nice to be in the company of a beautiful woman for awhile.”

I feel my cheeks flush scarlet as I smile back at this charming man. His eyes look so lonely, so hopeful, so desperate, and the look is only further reflected in his children’s eyes. I don’t have the heart to turn them down.

“Alright, thank you for that,” I reply. “I shall stay.”

*I can always leave in the middle of the night.*

“Oh, where are my manners,” he says, his tone embarrassed and endearingly humble. “I’m Henry.”

“Victoria,” I reply as I reach out to grab his extended hand, to which he gently takes my hand and brings it to his lips, placing a soft kiss on my knuckles. “Pleased to make your acquaintance, mi’lady.”

We sit in silence for awhile enchanted by each other, before he introduces me to his sons.

“These are my two sons, Caleb and Jacob,” he says, as he gestures towards the two young boys a few feet behind him. “Come on, boys. Don’t be rude to the lady.”

The older of the two, who looks a spitting image of his father, apprehensively inches forward, the younger one with dark, straight hair and piercing blue eyes following shortly after. They both nod at me in greeting, before staring down at the floor.

“I apologize. They just aren’t used to having a lovely lady around such as yourself,” he utters, flashing that pearly-white, boyish grin again that makes me melt.

Suddenly everything goes black, leaving me in darkness. I open my eyes to see that I’m in the bomb shelter, still recovering from my injuries. I can feel myself slowly slipping out of consciousness, as everything goes black yet again, and I fade away into more dreams of times past.

I wretch over and over under the moonlight, creating a small pile of mush near my hands. The sour and bitter taste of bile plagues my tongue, as tiny droplets of sweat anoint my brow. I’m a small ways from the house, safely hidden amidst the thick brush and forest trees. The earth feels cold and moist under my knees as I continue to vomit on all fours, expelling everything but my organs.

After I throw up the last bit of food in my body, I gasp for air. I wipe my mouth with the back of my sleeve and stagger up breathless, leaning against a nearby tree trunk for support.

*Damn human food.*

I’ve been going through this almost every night for the past two months in order to keep up appearances. I’ve been staying with Henry and the boys for awhile now, and if I don’t eat it might rouse suspicion. So I eat, and go through the motions; and then after everyone is asleep, I sneak out to the woods and vomit it all up. It leaves me miserable and sick as a dog, but I have to.

Suddenly, a sinister cackling resonates from the shadows.

“Who’s there!” I demand, scanning the dark trees around me. “Show yourself.”

“I’ve been watching you for some time, fiend,” a shrill voice croaks, as a haggard old woman steps out from the darkness.

She’s hideous, her unsightly face covered in abnormal

growths and moles, craggy with valleys of wrinkles and mountains of rough patches. Most of her teeth have fallen out, and the few she has left are dark and jagged with decay. One of her eyes is a light, fogged over shade of aquamarine blue, while the other is gray and cloudy like her hair, which falls into scraggly mounds all around her sharp, boney shoulders. Her lumpy, swollen, arthritis-clad hands are gripping a tall, wooden walking stick, her filthy clothes loose and draped in shreds across her thin, withered frame.

*This is when I met Agatha.*

“What do you mean?” I reply, trying to feign dumb, all the while feeling an intense threat from the frail old woman.

“You don’t need to lie to me, *vampire*,” she says pointedly, her tone laden with hidden knowledge and innuendo.

I immediately tense, while thoughts of killing this old woman flit through my mind; but if I did, I would have to leave the village indefinitely, and I’ve bonded too strongly with Henry, Jacob, and little Caleb.

“I mean you no harm, my dear; so you can forget about killing me,” she answers, as if reading my mind.

“What do you want?” I ask, my eyebrows arched in questioning.

“Tell me, where have you been feeding since you’ve come here?” she asks, point blank.

“A village about five miles from here. Why? Are you going to tell the townspeople about me?” I reply as I slowly inch toward her, coiled and ready to strike at any moment.

“No, of course not, dear. I shall keep your little secret, under one condition—that you take me with you when you go on your feeds, from here on out.”

“Why?” I ask with incredulity, a bemused expression across my face.

“To ensure that it’s done humanely, and that you don’t turn others. If for any reason I see the need to put you down, then I will. I’m much stronger than I appear, girl.”

*Who does this old lady think she is? And why in god's name does she think I would ever take orders from her? Time to rid myself of this annoying insect.*

She sees the fierce, crazed look in my eye and the anxious twitching in my leg, and immediately slams her walking stick onto the ground. Suddenly, I feel a strong warmth crawling up my body, its radiating heat building in my core. Soon it turns to searing pain, causing me to drop to the ground in agony. It feels as if my insides have liquefied, boiling me alive from within, as if melting my organs. I clench my teeth and ball my fists as I writhe in the dirt, foaming at the mouth uncontrollably as the unrelenting heat sears me from the inside-out.

“That was just a warning,” the woman finally utters as she hobbles over to me. “Any more ideas of killing me like that and I’ll obliterate you, arrogant young girl. I am not your enemy, so stop thinking that I’m out to harm you. I will only harm you if you cross me, so don’t cross me; it’s that simple.”

The unbearable heat slowly starts to flood out of my body, until I’m left my normal, cold self. Cautiously, I stagger up to my feet, staring at the old woman in a mixture of confusion and fear.

“What did you do to me?” I murmur breathlessly, rubbing my arms as if not believing what has just happened.

“I boiled your blood,” she answers nonchalantly, her jagged, toothy grin returning. “So unless you want to feel that again, then I suggest you fulfill my simple request. Now shall we get moving?”

I nod uneasily, walking past her in the forest’s darkness, the old woman following closely behind; but before she follows, she looks back at the village with a sinister grin of pure evil and malice, scheming, as if with a hidden agenda. I shrug it off and start to head east, looking back every minute or so to make sure she’s still behind me. Surprisingly, she keeps up with me through the harsh terrain effortlessly, barely even breaking a

sweat.

We head to the nearby village which is several miles away, reaching it within *minutes*. I'm amazed at how the old woman was able to keep up with me with such ease. There's something weird about her that I can't quite figure out.

"So what are you exactly?" I question her. "I know you're not a vampire or I'd smell it, and I can't think of any other creature that can move like you do."

"I'm human," she replies, her voice monotone and clipped. "With a few *modifications*."

I eye her speculatively, but decide to shrug it off; I need to eat. I slowly make my way through some bushes to a lone tavern, spotting a dirty, drunken man that appears to be from the lower echelons of society. Nobody will miss him.

I creep over to him as he sleeps on the wooden chair, his sweat-stained clothes clinging to his body and his hat tipped forward to cover his face.

"He's passed out and inebriated beyond comprehension. I'll make it quick. Humane enough for you?" I ask the old woman sardonically, to which she replies with a curt nod.

I pounce whilst simultaneously sinking my teeth deep into his neck, his skin saline with the taste of old sweat. My fangs pierce his jugular, causing that sweet, tangy, warm crimson to flood down my throat. I quaff it down voraciously while the old woman lifts her walking stick, touching it to the man's chest. It is only when I feel his heart make its last beat that I see a small, turquoise-blue glimmer of light emit from his body. I pay little attention, figuring she's just doing some witchy hocus-pocus brouhaha.

I sink my teeth back into his flesh, draining him of every last drop. I then drop the body to the dusty ground with a loud thud, wiping my mouth with the back of my sleeve. I look up at the old woman, who seems immensely satisfied.

"So, was that to your satisfaction?" I mutter wryly.

"Yes, it was. You've done your part," she replies.

A few seconds later, I bend down to grab the body so that I may dispose of it; but to my shock, I look down to see that it's

gone, as if having disappeared into thin air.

“What? Where did he go?” I ask with confusion.

“Don’t worry about that my dear. Consider it a favor,” she replies, before turning around and hobbling back into the shadows.

“Wait, what’s your name?” I call out to her, but she’s vanished.

And although I hear no response, I could swear that I hear the wind howl, “*Agatha*.”

I wake up in the bomb shelter again, delirious and hungry. My sleep has been fitful, and I keep having these incredibly lucid dreams of past memories, watching them happen as if I’m enacting them all over again. I try my best to hold onto consciousness, but my eyelids begin to feel heavy and droop, sucking me back into my ephemeral dreamscape of the past.

I’m feeding on another drunkard, draining him fervently and joyously. I revel in the surge of adrenaline, the feeling of being untouchable, my immense strength that no one can counter. I’m interrupted from my reverie when I hear a small gasp in the darkness.

A small child stands frozen to the ground, petrified in terror and shaking profusely. He begins to cry, sobbing louder and louder, his cries turning to shrieks and screams.

“Shhh! It’s okay,” I shush him, putting my pointer finger to my lips, but it only seems to scare him further as my open mouth has inadvertently displayed my fangs. “It’s okay, I won’t hurt you!”

“Monster!” he cries, pointing at me with a shaky finger in the darkness, bawling hysterically.

But it’s no use. The boy screams louder and louder, his cheeks sodden with tears. In a minute the townspeople will show up wondering what the commotion is all about. I have to think fast.

*Either I kill him now and cover my bases, getting rid of any witnesses,*

*or I let him live and run, hoping that he tells no one, and that if he does, no one will believe him.*

My mind races with contradictory thoughts, as I debate on whether or not to kill the young boy. I start to hear townspeople coming, so I rush and flee into the woods, allowing the young boy to live.

A day has passed since the encounter with the little boy. I took shelter in a small cave, deciding against going home just in case someone followed me or connected me to Henry and the boys. I wake up anxious, antsy with fear of what I might discover.

It is now nightfall, so I exit the cave cautiously, looking around the forest a bit. I suddenly catch the smell of smoke and ash.

*It's coming from the village.*

I rush through the thicket of woods like a rabbit fleeing its predator, pushing myself to get there as fast as possible. The smell of smoke gets stronger and stronger the closer I approach. After a few minutes of running, I finally arrive at the cottage. My eyes widen in horror at the sight before me, as tears begin to stream down my face.

Henry and Caleb hang from a tree, their necks broken at harsh 45 degree angles, loosely hanging in rope nooses. I slowly approach their limp bodies, shaking my head back and forth slowly as if in utter disbelief at what I'm seeing. That's when I notice a long wooden stake in each of their hearts.

"Oh god, no," I whisper with my hand to my mouth, as tears begin to stream down my face profusely.

I quickly cut them down and hold them in my arms, refusing to believe that they're dead.

"Henry, come back to me, please!" I cry as I stroke his cold cheek, hugging him and little Caleb into my body.

*This is all my fault. Why did I think I could have a family, and live a normal life? Why did I put them in danger? I was selfish; and now, this is the price paid.*

“There she is!” a man yells accusingly, hate and disgust laden in his voice.

A large group of the villagers advance towards me, lit torches and weapons in hand.

“It’s the demon! Kill it, before it turns any more people!” one of them reviles, causing the crowd to erupt into cheers, egging on their sanctimonious reprisal.

I gently place Henry and Caleb down, stroking Caleb’s blood-soiled hair out of his eyes before kissing his forehead. I lean down, giving Henry one last kiss on his arctic lips, caressing his cheek with my hand.

“I’m so sorry,” I whisper hoarsely, choking on my salty tears. “I love you.”

As I bid them goodbye, my stomach jumps at my sudden realization—Jacob isn’t here.

*Oh my god, could he be? Is he possibly . . . alive?*

The hope surges through me like adrenaline, as I summon up every ounce of strength I have in me.

*I must get to him soon, before they do; but first things first.*

“Demon!” a man shrieks scathingly.

“Witch!” another screams in the crowd.

I slowly stand and turn around to face them, my head hanging low.

“They were innocent! What did they ever do to deserve this!?” I spit with fury, gesturing to their limp bodies on the ground as I begin to hyperventilate with pure anger.

“Don’t listen to her! She’ll hypnotize you with her lies!” the leader of the hunters yells.

I can feel my eyes starting to redden to that deep shade of

oxblood as my fangs begin to elongate. I face them head on as I stalk towards them, causing the crowd to recoil in fear and shriek in horror, as their dreaded anathema morphs before their self-righteous eyes. My skin starts to become transparent and my veins begin to darken.

“I’m going to slaughter you all and burn this village to the ground,” I growl sadistically. “You’re all going to *die*.”

I dart over in a flash and shoot my hand through the chest of the leader of the pack in one fell swoop, retracting my arm through his ribcage with a sickening crunch, holding his pulsating heart in my hands. He drops to the ground with a loud thump, his eyes cold, dead, and wide with fear. The crowd screams in terror, most of the villagers running for safety toward their homes.

“You can run, but you can’t hide,” I mouth slow and menacing, as I stalk each of the villagers one by one with a rapacious tenacity, impervious to their pleas.

I immediately tackle another towns person, gutting him within seconds, using his entrails to strangle the man next to him. I inexorably continue to eviscerate them all with a wrath so dark, the Devil himself would be jealous.

Within minutes, the group of men is lying on the floor butchered, as I stand amidst a huge pile of bloody limbs and entrails. I pick up one of the lit torches, and marching over to the nearest cottage, setting it aflame. I slowly walk down the village, lighting the houses in tandem, their straw roofs instantly combusting into amber flames that prickle the starless sapphire sky.

After the last home is lit, I drop the torch and watch the flames dance in the night, listening to the mellifluous sound of all the shrieks and screams of the women and children burning inside, their fiery death a sweet justification to my irrevocable cause.

*Burn in Hell, where you all belong.*

“Hang on Jacob, I’m coming,” I murmur aloud, snapping

out of my evil stupor.

I head towards the forest and never look back. Soon I catch his scent, and sprint as fast as my legs can carry me, weaving in and out of trees and hopping over shrubs. About a mile into the forest, I finally see him. He's sitting huddled up into a little ball, his head buried between his knees. He has Henry's musket lying on the leaf-covered ground next to him.

"Jacob?" I utter softly, as I slowly step toward him.

"Is it true?" he asks after a long pause. "Are you really a *demon*?"

"No. I'm no demon, I swear to you. I'm something else altogether, but a demon I am not. I would never *ever* do anything to hurt you or your brother or father. You are my family," I utter fervently, as I inch towards him some more.

"What *are* you?"

"I'm a vampire," I murmur, so softly that it's almost inaudible. "But I would never hurt you, Jacob."

"Then what do you eat?!" he shouts, backing up in fear.

I don't know what to say, as no answer is going to be a good answer; because at the end of the day, I eat people. There is no way to sugarcoat that.

"Stay back!" he shrieks, grabbing the gun at his side and aiming it at me.

"I mean you no harm," I plead, freezing in place with my hands up. "Please."

"I said stay the hell back!" Jacob shouts, the musket trembling in his shaky hands, tears starting to stream down his face. "Where is my family!"

"I'm so sorry, Jacob," I relent, hesitating and stumbling over my words as I begin to cry.

"What?" he replies in shock. "Both of them?"

"Yes."

"Oh god," he cries, falling to the ground in a heap. "Oh god, no."

He screams in frustration and sadness, gripping his hair in his balled fists and pulling it out with his fingers as he sobs. Within a second he places the tip of the musket to the base of

his chin, putting his trembling finger on the trigger.

“Jacob, don’t!”

“Promise me that from here on out, you’ll only eat or go after bad people. No more random attacks,” he chokes.

“*Promise me!*”

“I promise; you have my word. Now please just calm down,” I implore him, approaching closer. “Jacob, no!”

I watch helplessly as his finger pulls the trigger, causing the life to leave his body in a split second. Bloody mush and skull fragments spray the tree behind him as he collapses to the floor, his eyes dead and frozen, staring off into the smoke-filled night sky.

I run to him, scooping his limp body into my arms as I rock him back and forth, my tears of guilt and shame dropping one by one onto his face.

*How did they find out? How did they know?*

And that’s when it hits me—it was the young boy, the one I encountered last night. He must’ve told the townspeople about what he saw, and now my dear family is paying the price.

*I will find that young boy and shred him into nothing.*

My sadness turns to rage as I clench my teeth, seething and seeing red. It’s only when I see a cerulean blue glimmer of light rise from Jacob’s chest, into the air, and float back towards the village, that I have a flashback of the old hag, her strange fixation with being there when I fed, and how the blue light rose from the dead man’s chest and into her staff.

My anger turns to fury as the sudden realization dawns on me. It wasn’t the little boy . . .

*It was Agatha.*

## THE CHAIN OF COMMAND

I shoot up in bed in a frenzy, my eyes darting around at my surroundings. My face is drenched in tears, and all I can hear in my head over and over is her name.

*Agatha.*

*Agatha.*

*Agatha.*

The dreams were so lucid, as if they weren't dreams at all. Every touch, every feeling, every emotion—it all felt so *real*.

“Easy,” Scarlet hushes me as she runs to my bedside.

It's only once the delirium wears off and my mind awakens more that I remember the whole ordeal. It comes in bits and pieces, like flashes on a projector—the demon that looked just like Tyler, its cold, black eyes, the blades ripping through me, his sinister, evil smile, Scarlet and Darren rescuing me.

“Tyler!? Where's Tyler!?” I shriek while trying to get up out of bed, wincing at the incredible amount of pain that surges through my body.

“Calm down,” Scarlet says gently, as she tries to lay me back down and restrain me. “Your injuries are still severe internally, even though you're healed on the outside.”

“Let go of me! I need to find Tyler!” I shriek, forcing myself up once more. “There’s a demon that looks exactly like him. I know he’s in trouble! He needs me!”

“Wait, what do you remember?” Scarlet questions me, a bemused expression across her face.

“I remember being attacked by a powerful demon; it was impersonating Tyler. It tried to kill me, and then I remember you guys showing up. Everything after that or in between is blank,” I murmur, my tone shrill and panicked.

“Victoria, that demon,” she starts, as she takes my hand in hers as if preparing me for bad news. “It *is* Tyler. Tyler *is* the demon.”

My heart drops into the pit of my stomach as I freeze in shock.

*Oh my god, I remember now . . .*

*Me turning Tyler, his frightening black eyes, calling Scarlet and Darren for help, him attacking me.*

“How could this have happened?” I whisper hoarsely in disbelief, as my voice begins to crack.

“I’ll tell you how,” a voice says from the darkness.

A petite but beautiful young Japanese girl with icy blue eyes slowly walks out of the dark shadows. She has long, pin-straight, raven hair down to the small of her back, with one lone stark-white streak running through the front. She’s pale as porcelain, without a single blemish or imperfection, and her jet-black lipstick only further contrasts her milky complexion.

Her features are very delicate and small, much like her body, which is hugged by a black-silk corset over a skintight, black-silk, modern kimono-style dress with a high slit up both sides. She has a strap going diagonally across her chest, which holds a long katana on her back.

“Who the hell are you?” Scarlet demands forcefully as she springs up, ready to attack.

“Sit,” the girl commands, her voice soft but challenging.

I can feel the immense power emanating from the young

girl. Her gait and demeanor portrays a wisdom far beyond her years. I know immediately that we're face to face with another vampire, but not just any vampire—we're standing before an Elder.

Scarlet reluctantly sits down, frowning like a petulant child. The mysterious girl walks to the corner and pulls up a chair, each and every movement precise, refined, and delicate.

"So, you're the one that made the killing machine," she says pointedly, as she regards me with a contemptuous stare.

"Killing machine? What's going on?" Scarlet asks.

"You will speak when spoken to, you silly child!" the girl hisses, causing Scarlet's mouth to drop and eyes to widen.

"Hisoka, there's no need to be rude. Don't forget, we're here to help them," a voice resonates from the shadows.

Another young Japanese girl steps out from the corner, which was completely empty just a few seconds ago. She literally appeared into thin air, without so much as a sound, much like her counterpart.

She's a spitting image of the first girl—identical twins. While they're alike in looks, they differ in nearly every other way. While the first girl is clad in all black, which perfectly complements her dark nature and presence, this girl is dressed in bright colors, with a convivial tone and cheery demeanor.

She's clad in a fitted, floral silk kimono like her sister, except hers is a brilliant fire engine-red with tiny cherry blossoms running through it. Her corset is a stunning azure blue that perfectly matches her eyes, which are the same striking shade as her sister's, and her deep rubicund lips are pulled into a gentle smile. A thick raw-hide belt is tied around her waist in a just-knot, and two knives attached together by a long chain are hanging over it. They are covered in strange symbols, and the steel they are made out of is incredibly dark.

"Well, they should know their place, Ayaka," the first girl snipes.

"Hisoka, haven't you ever heard you can catch more bees with honey?" the other chirps with a smile as she joins her sister's side.

“Then *you* deal with them, Sister. My patience is wearing thin with this one.”

“I apologize for my sister. She’s blunt, succinct, and straight to the point. I, on the other hand, believe in the importance of detail,” she explains, her voice mellifluous and delicate with an almost melodious quality to it. “Where are my manners? Allow me to introduce myself, as my sister so rudely forgot to do. I’m the Elder, Ayaka, and this is my sister, Hisoka, who is also an Elder.”

“Victoria,” I introduce myself.

“Oh we *know* who you are,” the girl in black mutters sardonically, as she stares at me scornfully from behind her sister. “You are quite the talk of the town right now. A lot of people want you dead.”

“Hisoka!” Ayaka admonishes.

“What? It’s true. She has a right to know she’s got a bounty on her head the size of—”

“Please, pay no attention to my sister,” Ayaka relents, before turning to face Scarlet with an outstretched hand. “And you are?”

“Scarlet,” Scarlet mumbles tersely, as she apprehensively reaches out to shake her hand.

“Wait a damn minute,” Hisoka interjects, her interest suddenly piqued as she suddenly rises from her chair. “Are you by any chance Scarlet Flemington?”

“Yeah, what of it?”

“Does the name *Adam Charles* mean anything to you?” Hisoka asks, her eyebrow curved upward with intrigue.

“Greed?” Ayaka gasps, looking back at her twin sister.

“How do you . . .” Scarlet trails off, her shaky fingers at her mouth. “How do you know that name?”

Everyone stands in silence, regarding each other with intensity as I sit there, lost and the outsider to the conversation.

“Looks like there’s more to all this than we thought,” Hisoka whispers to her sister under her breath.

“Will someone please tell me what the hell’s going on? Why

do you know about Adam!” Scarlet screams, her hands balled into fists at her side.

“You dare act this way in the presence of an Elder!” Hisoka screams at Scarlet, her glacial eyes shining ruby red as her and Scarlet stare each other down.

“Hisoka, enough,” Ayaka commands, before turning to Scarlet. “Once again, I apologize for my sister. Now, Scarlet, tell us a little about your relationship with Adam Charles.”

Scarlet’s rage starts to subside, and that fury in her eyes is replaced with sadness. She stares off into the distance in silence pensively, as if recalling painful memories.

“We were friends—*best* friends. Over the years, what we had blossomed into more than that. He was everything to me,” Scarlet murmurs wistfully.

“He was human?” Ayaka asks. “Was this before you were a vampire?”

“Yes, he was a human; and I knew him both before and after I had become a vampire,” Scarlet explains.

“And then what happened to him? Tell us about his death,” Ayaka commands, her tone suddenly becoming grave and somber.

“Why do you need to know all this?” Scarlet shouts shakily, trying to choke back her tears.

“Because, looks like you two have a lot more in common than we thought,” Hisoka utters as she gestures to me and then Scarlet. “And it appears that your Adam has plenty in common with the boy we’re here about.”

“Tyler?” I gasp.

“Yes,” Hisoka murmurs, as she stares at Scarlet scathingly. “Because Adam Charles had the *same* curse, and the exact same thing happened to him—didn’t it, Scarlet?”

Scarlet’s face goes pale at Hisoka’s words, her eyes full of guilt and shame as she sits in silence.

“Scarlet?” I ask, my brow furrowed in confusion.

“Victoria, I’m so sorry,” Scarlet chokes. “I—”

“You what?” I spit. “You better tell me what this is all about right now, Scarlet.”

“The truth is, I’ve been where you’re at. I’ve seen someone suffer at the hand of the Saffron Curse, and the reason I knew that Tyler had become a demon was because I’ve seen it happen before. . .” Scarlet trails off shakily, followed by a pause. “Because when Adam died, he became the exact same type of demon.”

The words hit me like a ton of bricks. Scarlet knew about the Saffron Curse all along, and furthermore, she knew someone who had suffered the same fate. She knew there was a possibility this could’ve happened to Tyler, and she said nothing.

“You bitch,” I hiss, my eyes reddening with anger. “You knew all along that this was a possibility, and you said *nothing*? I’ve lost Tyler because of you!”

I immediately lunge at her, tackling her to the ground and wringing my hands around her neck. Scarlet does nothing but lie there as she allows me to choke her, tears of guilt streaming down her pale face, while the two Elders watch on, unmoved by our display.

“Enough,” Ayaka finally bellows with the snap of her fingers.

“Ugh. Youngins,” Hisoka mutters derisively, rolling her eyes.

I unhand Scarlet and stand up breathless, seething with anger. Scarlet finally staggers up and sits on the nearby cot, sobbing with her head in her hands.

“Victoria, I didn’t think this would happen, I swear! Adam was a human, and he was killed. I thought that turning Tyler into a vampire would be different!” she cries, her tone contrite.

“Adam Charles died at the hands of demons, didn’t he, dear child?” Ayaka asks softly as she stands before Scarlet, tilting Scarlet’s sodden chin up to meet her gaze. “Yet he and the boy suffered the same fate, didn’t they?”

Scarlet looks over at me, her expression despairing and repentant, before turning back to face the Elders.

“Yes,” she sniffs, burying her face in her hands.

“If you could please leave the room for a moment, there is

something that we need to discuss with Victoria,” Ayaka tells Scarlet.

Scarlet hesitates, looking at me and then the Elders in questioning with a bemused expression on her face, before reluctantly letting herself out.

“I mean no disrespect, but you still haven’t told us why you are here,” I interject, as I face the Elders.

“We are here about the boy,” Ayaka replies.

“Tyler?”

“Yes, the Segovian; and we have a way that you can save him.”

“I will do anything,” I reply fervently, my eyes widening with sudden hope. “Just tell me what to do.”

“Simply put, Tyler’s soul is in Hell, but his body remains here reanimated by a demon called a Segovian,” she explains.

“What’s a Segovian? I’ve never heard of it.”

“Hisoka,” Ayaka gestures at her sister, as if prompting her to continue.

“A Segovian is an ancient order of demons that originated in the 12<sup>th</sup> century after the fall of Lucifer. Each Segovian is ascribed to one of the Seven Deadly Sins, and they’re extremely rare and very hard to come by; but Tyler was special because he was an accident, which means he has the opportunity to be redeemed,” Hisoka elaborates.

“So that thing Tyler became . . . those blades that grew out of his back—do all Segovians have those?”

“Yes, that is a trait exclusive to them,” Ayaka replies, fingering the knives that are hanging on her belt. “These knives were fashioned out of the blades of dead Segovians, as is Hisoka’s sword. To get hurt by these is their only weakness.”

“You must journey into Hell to get his soul back, which is going to be a challenge because his soul is scattered, due to various demons feeding on it repeatedly. With the Saffron Curse, every time a demon came to him, it took a small piece of his soul; so in turn, you will need to track down and kill each and every demon in order to collect his entire soul.”

“You are going to need this,” Ayaka adds, handing me a

long chain with a large cerulean-blue crystal shard at the end, which is surrounded by a metal framing with symbols on it.

“What’s this?” I ask, eyeing it and flipping it over between my fingers.

“It’s a soul gem. It will help you track down all of the demons, as well as piece together Tyler’s soul. Just think of Tyler with that around your neck and it’ll lead you to his fragments,” Ayaka utters. “For every demon you defeat, a piece of Tyler’s soul will enter the gem. Once you have defeated them all, the crystal will glow bright blue, symbolizing that his soul is whole again.”

*This is a lot to take in, but I am so incredibly happy to find out that there’s a way to save Tyler. I don’t care what I need to do; I will do anything to get him back.*

“Okay, and how do I get into Hell? I ask them, immediately putting the necklace around my neck.

“Mirrors. You will need to find an enclosed space and surround it with mirrors, but only on the walls and the ceiling, *not* the floor. Whatever you do, do not put mirrors on the floor, or it will allow a two-way door to form in which not only can you get through to Hell, but anything in Hell can get through into our world,” Ayaka explains.

“Okay, what else?”

“You will also need to do a blood sacrifice; a lamb should do. Use the lamb’s blood to draw these symbols on each mirrored wall,” she utters, slipping me a piece of paper with strange symbols and an incantation on it.

*Hoc mundo, qui infra nos inter aperire porta.*

*Ut mundi in id turpis.*

*Ibi si me mori,*

*Custodi animam meam ad arma fateor caligo.*

“You’ll need to repeat the incantation until the gateway into the nether world opens. Once you’re there, it will immediately

close, and it will only open again if you return with a soul.”

“What happens if I don’t?” I ask uneasily.

“If you don’t, then you will die in Hell, giving up your own soul,” Ayaka murmurs grimly. “You will only be able to cross back over if you have all of Tyler’s soul intact in the gem; the gem will then open the gateway back into this world, allowing you to pass.

My mind is suddenly paralyzed with fear and trepidation. I steeple my fingers in front of my mouth in deep thought, my eyes vague with unreadable emotion.

*I could die, lose my soul, and spend the rest of eternity in Hell; but Tyler’s my responsibility. I made a promise to him that I would protect him at all costs, no matter what. He needs me now, more than ever; and I will not abandon him. I’ve already lost one love in my life. I refuse to do it again.*

“Okay,” I announce as I begin to get out of bed, ready to embark on this mission; but Ayaka puts her delicate hand up, halting me.

“Not so fast. You’re going to need blood—a lot of it. Crossing over into Hell will weaken you significantly, and you’re going to need all of your strength to beat these demons. Feed more than you normally do; three humans should do it,” she says.

“We have also come with a warning,” Hisoka utters as she steps out from the darkness. “There is an indictment out against you, because of what you created when you turned the boy. The Elders have sent the vampire assassin, Babel, to kill you. Whatever you do, do *not* try to fight him. He is licentious and absolutely ruthless, and is stronger than some of the oldest Elders. It’s a fight you can’t win. It’s best to just run.”

I nod eagerly, clutching the soul gem in my fist. I just want to get to Tyler.

“Very well then,” Ayaka replies. “I wish you good luck on your perilous journey; and please, be careful.”

“I will. Can I ask you one last question?” I ask her, to which

she nods. “Why are you helping me? I’m not trying to sound ungrateful, but I’m just curious. After all, all the Elders want me dead. Why not you?”

“All will be revealed in time, Victoria. The truth is, we need Tyler. He is very important, and could serve to help us greatly. We will explain why if you succeed.”

## THE HUNTER BECOMES THE HUNTED

Sitting on the small cot in the bomb shelter, I palm the soul gem given to me by the twin Elders. I know what I have to do to save my love, but the idea of going into the perilous mouth of oblivion weighs heavy on my heart. For the first time in centuries, I'm truly afraid.

"You give it any thought?" Scarlet asks, interrupting me from my reverie.

"Yes," I reply absentmindedly, still in a daze.

"Well?"

"I'm going in after him," I reply with conviction, clutching the soul gem to my heart.

"You really do love that human very much, don't you? Very well, then. When do we leave?" she asks matter of factly.

"*We* are not leaving anywhere. *I'm* going; it's my problem to fix. *You* are staying here," I protest emphatically. "I refuse to endanger anyone else any more than I already have."

"That's the thing though, Victoria. We already *are* in danger," she starts, her tone sullen. "They've already sent Babel after you, and he'll probably be showing up any time now. None of us are safe. Either we all sit around and wait to get killed by him, and end up going to Hell anyway, or we can go with you and try to undo this whole debacle by getting Tyler's

soul back.”

She appears to have her mind made up. Scarlet has always been an intractable girl—tenacious and hardheaded. Once she’s decided on something, there’s no swaying her.

“Scarlet, this is *Hell* we’re talking about! It’s the place where every vile, twisted soul goes after death. There will be endless hordes of demons, fiends, malevolent, soulless entities; we could all die there, where we would then spend the rest of eternity. This is not to be taken lightly,” I object.

“All the more reason for you to have backup. I’m not taking this lightly, Victoria, and neither should you,” she tells me sternly. “But if you go in there alone, and think that you can beat these things on your own, then *you* are the one taking this lightly.”

“I’m not going to convince you, am I?” I ask with a crooked smile.

“Nopel!” she chirps, patting a hand on my back. “So, when do we leave?”

“As soon as possible, but there’re still preparations that need to be made. I’m heading out now to collect the necessary accoutrements. I’ll call you later.”

I bid her goodbye, giving her a long hug. There’s a chance that I may not come back from this errand. This could be the last time I ever see her. Babel is after me, and leaving the shelter is extremely risky in and of itself; but this needs to be done. Tyler is counting on me, and time is of the essence. I might be able to save us all if I can right this wrong, and that’s exactly what I intend to do.

I pull away and start heading towards the door when Scarlet stops me, placing a cold hand on my shoulder.

“Promise me that if you see or feel *anything* suspicious, you get the fuck out of there,” she commands, her eyes laden with concern.

“I promise,” I reply, before she nods, apprehensively releasing me.

I approach the door, grabbing each of the four metal cranks with both hands, turning them counter-clockwise until a loud

rusty screech reverberates throughout the shelter, allowing a cold gust of wind and flurry of dry, crunchy leaves to fly in. I glance at Scarlet one last time, before heading out of the shelter and into the night.

As I zigzag through the trees in a blur, I think about Babel and all of the cautionary tales I've heard about him over the years. Legend says that he has astonishing abilities that no other vampire has—not even the Elders themselves. Most of the tales about Babel have all been passed down by word of mouth over generations, so there's no telling what's true and what isn't, or what's just been highly exaggerated along the way. I've heard that his abilities range from everything to immunity to the sun, to manipulation of shadows.

I finally arrive at the town citadel, looking for a furniture store where I can buy the mirrors. It's a cold, frosty night, and the air is hostile and biting. Every gust of wind slices through you, and every flake of snow pierces the skin. Everyone is rosy-nosed and bundled up in thick, woolen scarves and overcoats, so I wear a small black pea-coat to fit in.

The waning full moon is hanging low in the night sky, which is cloudy and starless, like a milky, navy blur. I make sure to remain inconspicuous, staying in large crowds so as to conceal myself. I force my blood to flow through my arctic veins to generate body heat and to give me a bit of color. It's incredibly uncomfortable and painful, but I have to do it in case he's watching.

I begin making my way toward the furniture store, when I notice a tall fair-skinned man a few feet away on the sidewalk, staring at me intently. He has a shaved head and a goatee, and is wearing an impeccably tailored pin-striped business suit, with an oxblood-red pocket square neatly folded in his jacket's upper pocket. Although he's lean and lanky, he appears to be very toned from what I can see, and his piercing eyes are an unnatural shade of malachite-green.

I strive to remain calm and immediately go into the first store I see. I enter a small gift shop and peruse the aisles, pretending to look at the various knick-knacks, furtively

glancing behind my shoulder every so often to make sure I'm not being tracked.

I glance through the front window to find the man regarding me with intensity, penetrating me with his unnerving emerald gaze. Quickly looking away, I turn the collar of my coat upward, covering as much bare skin as I can to hide my scent. I start browsing the "Get Well" cards, flipping each of them open. I freeze in fear when I hear the jingling sound of the door's bell.

I look over uneasily to find the man casually entering the store, eyeing me speculatively. I concentrate hard on circulating the blood in my body, upping it a few more degrees, causing me to sweat profusely. Even a temperature of 80 degrees feels as if I'm boiling alive from the inside out.

*Calm down, Victoria. You're being paranoid. It's probably just an ordinary man.*

*But what if it isn't? What if it's him? Should I just run now, or would that blow my cover?*

"Can I help you find something, sir?" a convivial, pudgy, middle-aged woman chirps as she comes out from the back of the store, wiping her hands with a rag.

I remain silent, sifting through the greeting cards while listening intently to their conversation.

"Well, I'm here on a business trip and I want to bring a little something back for my wife and kids. I'm thinking maybe some snow globes. You wouldn't happen to have anything like that, would you?" he asks the clerk, flashing her a charming, debonair smile that causes her to blush.

"As a matter of fact, I just got a shipment of those in today! They're still boxed up in the back, but let me bring some of those out for you," she tells him with a bashful smile, before scuttling over to the back of the store.

As soon as the woman turns the corner, the man sets his gaze upon me, and begins walking in my direction. By now I'm sweating bullets, not just from the unnatural body heat I'm

generating, but from pure, unadulterated fear.

The man approaches my side, looking at the card display and then back at me. He smells unusual, like sawdust and musk, with a hint of something else that I can't quite put my finger on. It's incredibly faint and probably imperceptible to most. It's more of an odor, almost like the smell of something rotting, but it's mostly disguised by the scent of his musky cologne.

I avert my gaze to the floor, too terrified to look up. I finally glance at him, giving him a polite, casual smile before returning my focus to the "Congratulations!" cards, picking the nearest one up and reading the message inside.

"Hm, strange. Is someone you know sick and celebrating?" he asks me.

I can't believe my ears, and I begin second-guessing what I've just heard.

"Excuse me?" I reply shakily.

"Because just a moment ago, you were looking at the 'Get Well' cards, and now you're looking at the congratulatory cards," he utters, flashing me a perfect pearly-white smile.

I look down at the gift card in my hands, and he's right.

*Damn it! Pay attention, Victoria!*

"Umm," I start, stumbling over my words with nervousness as I take a step back. "I—"

Before I can continue, he grabs my wrist firmly. I try to struggle out of his grasp, but his iron-grip is unwavering.

"W-what are you doing?" I stutter, trying to pull away.

"I've got to give you credit, child. Not many vampires can withstand to circulate their blood and up their body heat like you did. That was good. Hell, I almost looked you over; but your edgy demeanor and sweating in this cold weather gave you away," the man snipes, grinning at me with a sly, serpentine smile.

*It's him. RUN.*

He tightens his grip on my wrist as he starts to snap my bones with a sick satisfaction, causing me to let out a pained whimper as I struggle to get free.

“Don’t,” he commands me, his voice deep and authoritative. “We’re going for a little walk. Move so much as a *muscle* and I will kill you where you stand.”

He turns toward the door, still gripping my wrist. I begin to panic, knocking over the card display as he drags me. Suddenly, I grab the base of his hand with my free one, and without a second thought pull as hard as I can. I can hear snapping and crunching as I grit my teeth in pain. He looks back at me in confusion as I let out a loud, ear-shattering scream, pulling with all my might until my captive hand tears off. Without hesitation, I run, leaving my severed hand in his grasp.

I swiftly sprint toward the back of the store, knocking everything down after me to obstruct his path. I hug my bloody stump close to my body, wincing in pain as I press it to my coat and apply pressure. As I pass the door, the shadow of it begins to grow toward me, as if alive and with a mind of its own. I dodge it at the last second, smashing into a pile of boxes.

“What the hell are you doing back here?!” the clerk yells. “You need to leave right n—”

The clerk’s voice is suddenly cut off, her eyes widening in surprise. I watch in shock as her own shadow gauges a huge hole through her chest, her blood slowly starting to radiate outward on her white shirt like crimson tie-dye.

Her body goes limp and heavily collapses to the floor with a loud thud, as Babel retracts the shadows into his fingers. I run outside and scale the nearest tall building until I reach the top. I look around in a panic, scanning my surroundings as I try to decide what I should do next—where I should run.

Suddenly, I feel a cold gust of wind behind me; but something’s off about it. It feels heavier than wind, and I can smell that same rotting smell that I smelled on him in the store earlier, except ten times stronger.

I turn around to find a group of about ten humans clothed in tattered, dusty rags, their flesh completely rotted and decayed. They look dead, like zombies; except these things are fast and agile, not slow and dragging like zombies usually are. Some have missing limbs, and they're covered in bloody, rotting wounds, pained groans sounding from their agape mouths. I stare at them in disbelief, petrified in shock.

"I've been sent by the Elders to collect you, dead or alive," Babel bellows, coming out from one of the shadows.

"What are those things?" I ask, my voice shaky.

"Oh, these guys?" he says nonchalantly, as he strokes one of their faces. "They're a few chosen humans that I've fed off of, now forever-bound as my slaves. They have proven to be very useful, my little ghouls."

As I stare into the eyes of this ruthless killer, I see no emotion behind them at all; just a cold, dead emptiness. The power emanating from him is so strong it's as if I'm paralyzed where I stand, my feet cemented to the ground beneath me. The ghouls begin closing in on me, but I'm frozen in fear. There's nothing I can do—no place to go, nowhere to run.

My thoughts are interrupted when I hear a loud horn from below. It begins to grow louder and louder, snapping me out of my entranced paralysis. I peer over the ledge, noticing a set of train tracks and *The Canadian Express* rushing in our direction.

I fluidly leap over the edge, free-falling through the air. For a moment, it's as if time has stopped, and sound has ceased. My eyes re-focus, my vision sharpening, zooming in on the train and looking for a place to land. It's as if I'm in a vacuum, immune to time and sound as I continue to fall through the air in slow motion, processing my next move to perfection.

I time my landing by tearing down the side of the building, causing chunks of the cemented walls to crumble beneath me. I shift into my true form, crashing violently onto the top of the train with a huge dent as my body goes rolling down the middle. I nearly fall off, but I drive my claws into the thick metal, gripping to the edge for dear life.

Pulling myself onto the train, I stand upright and attempt to regain my balance. I hunch over with my knees slightly bent and my arms lithely out at my sides, the harsh, thick current of air nearly knocking me back down again.

I look back at the building I abandoned to find that Babel is gone. I carefully scan my surroundings, squinting my eyes through the wind and dusty debris. I can see the ghouls crawling alongside several of the buildings in my direction. Suddenly, one of the ghouls jumps from a nearby building onto the train, several more following the first. They begin to run toward me, forcing me to jump through the window of one of the train cars.

A group of people begin to scream and gasp at the sight of me in my true form, sending a chain reaction of panic throughout the car. I sprint to the end of the train towards the caboose, noticing each passenger I pass being slaughtered by their own shadow, one by one. Each shadow then merges with the one before it, until a large, black void starts hurling toward me.

I climb out of a window and back on top of the train. The ghouls from inside follow, while a group of twenty more continue to leapfrog along the sides of the buildings with the shadows. There's nowhere left to run, and I'm being cornered in. I'm about to give up and accept defeat, when I notice a tunnel in the distance. I run faster toward it, the ghouls following intently.

When the train is about to go through the tunnel, I immediately lie down and flatten myself, with only a small gap of less than a foot between me and the ceiling. There's just enough room for me to lightly lift my head, as I watch several of the ghouls go smack dab into the wall at its entrance, the others jumping off and fleeing.

Once through the tunnel I stand up, and I can see the station nearby. I brace myself, leaping off the train and bashing into a nearby support pillar, causing a shower of concrete chunks as I crash to the ground. I manage to escape just in time before a dark, shadowy cloud overtakes it, causing the

train to crunch in on itself and into flaming oblivion.

I spring to my feet and run up the stairs to the main street, shifting back into my regular human form on the way. I hail down a nearby car, which immediately comes to a halt.

“Help!” I shout, waving my hands up in the air like a damsel in distress.

“Oh my god! Are you alright?” the male driver in his mid-forties asks me with concern, as he stares at my bruised, tattered clothes and the bloody stump where my hand used to be.

“Thanks for stopping,” I mutter, before grabbing the man by the shirt collar and pulling him through the window, hurling his body onto the sidewalk. “I’m sorry.”

I instantly regret it and feel horrible, but I had to do it. I’m going to need this car to get around since I can’t use my own now, because it’s at the house. Babel will be waiting for me there.

I speed over to the forest like a mad woman, steering one-handed. I then park on the outskirts of the woods before rushing to the bomb shelter. I pound on the door frantically, my breathing heavy and disjointed as I clutch my battered arm to my chest.

The door opens to reveal a worried-looking Scarlet, her mouth agape in shock. I push past her in a frenzy to find Darren sitting in a chair, and none other than Freddy, the car thief, sitting next to him.

“Oh my god, Victoria! Your hand! What happened?!” Scarlet shrieks.

“It was Babel,” I utter breathlessly. “He came after me.”

I rip a piece of my already torn clothing off, wrapping my bloody nub while Freddy stares at me in shock.

“He did that to you?!” Scarlet yells, eyeing my shredded stump of a hand.

“I did it to myself.”

“What?” she replies, as a bemused expression crosses her face.

“I had to rip my own hand off to get free,” I explain,

before gesturing to Freddy with a nod. “And what’s he doing here?”

“We found him wandering around outside your house looking for you. When we didn’t hear from you for so long we got worried, and decided to walk by your house. We hid in the woods and scoped it out for a bit, and that’s when we saw Freddy. We knew he wouldn’t be safe there so we brought him back here,” Scarlet answers.

“And why the hell would you do that?” I ask with incredulity, seeing as how Scarlet and Darren despise humans, especially Freddy.

“He’s willing to help,” she replies. “With gathering the supplies to open the gate. I’ve told him everything and brought him up to speed. Besides, with Babel on our tails, none of us are safe out there right now. We need him, Victoria.”

I stare back at her, then at Freddy, pondering the situation.

*I guess we do need him. I’m in no shape to be going out anytime soon, and with Babel on the loose, it isn’t safe for any of us to be out there.*

“Alright,” I finally concede.

“Okay. Freddy, we’re going to need a change of clothes for Victoria, as well as some stretch gauze to wrap her wound until it heals,” Scarlet commands him. “We also need enough mirrors to panel the ceiling and these walls, and several gallons of lamb’s blood.

“Why do you even want to help us anyway?” I ask him.

“I feel indebted to you after what you did for me and my boy,” he says with gratitude. “You really got me out of a bind, and I feel I owe you one. I’ll do whatever you need me to do.”

Scarlet scribbles the list of items on a piece of paper, handing it to Freddy. He takes the tiny piece of paper and nods, folding it and slipping it into his pocket before heading out.

“Shit! God damn it, I forgot!” I curse under my breath. “We all need to feed before we go into Hell. Besides, I can’t exactly be fighting off demons one-handed, now can I? Great,

now what are we going to do!”

“Don’t worry, we’ve got that covered,” Scarlet smiles, as she turns around and starts walking, gesturing for me to follow. “Darren and I already fed, and as for you . . .”

She heads toward a small sectioned-off area to the left, behind a concrete wall. It appears to be a small bathroom that I never noticed before, with a small sink, toilet, and shower. With an impish grin she grabs a hold of the shower curtain and yanks it open, revealing a pile of four unconscious humans.

“Scarlet, you little devil,” I smirk, shaking my head.

“No, but if you want to meet the Devil, I’m sure we will very soon,” she retorts. “Now eat up, then get some rest and regain your strength. You’re going to need it; because tomorrow night, we journey into Hell.”

## L'ABYSSE ETERNELLE

I gorged myself until I could feed no more, draining the four humans dry. It's been about 24 hours, and with the help of all the blood, my hand has already regenerated. Now, we're just waiting for Freddy to arrive with the supplies so that we can start the ritual for opening the portal to Hell.

We hear five loud knocks on the door, followed by two soft ones—we've designated a special knock just to be safe, so that we know who's waiting on the other side of that door before opening it. I open the door to find Freddy breathless and sweating, pulling a small dump-trailer full of mirrors in his left hand, along with two one-gallon milk jugs full of lamb's blood in the other.

"By god, the little shit actually came through," Scarlet mutters sardonically, as her and Darren sit at a small fold-out table playing cards. "Go fish."

"A little help, please," Freddy huffs, his breathing ragged and disjointed.

"*Fine*," Scarlet whines indignantly, rolling her eyes and lazily trundling over.

Darren and Scarlet walk over to the trailer, each of them grabbing five large mirrors at a time, while Freddy sets the jugs on the floor, collapsing onto the bed in exhaustion.

“Perfect. Okay, we’re going to need to set these up along both walls, and then the ceiling,” I dictate, pulling the piece of paper with the symbols and incantation out of my pocket.

I grab the two jugs and pour them out into a large bucket, dipping my index and middle fingers in the blood. I then use my two fingers to draw the symbols on the mirrors, using the paper the Elders gave me as a guide. After paneling the walls with mirrors, we then start on the ceiling, using D-rings and wire to hang the mirrors from the iron pipes.

About an hour later, we’re finished, but there’s an ominous tension lingering in the air, like the quiet calm right before a storm.

“Alright, looks like we’re about ready,” I utter nervously, adrenaline surging through me.

*If I had a working heart, it would be pounding right now.*

“Awesome, let’s get to it!” Scarlet chirps determinedly, rubbing her hands together.

“Thank you, Freddy. You’ve been a great help to us,” I tell him, as he stares back at me like a deer in the headlights. “Now not to sound rude or ungrateful, but you should get going. We’ll take it from here.”

“I want to see it,” he replies.

“See what?”

“I want to see you guys open the gate! How many people get to see the front door to Hell?”

“More people than you’d think,” Scarlet mumbles under her breath.

“Freddy, you should really be going. It’s not safe to be here when we do this, and anyone who doesn’t have to be here shouldn’t be,” I admonish.

“No way. I’m not missing this,” he persists intractably.

“Fine, suit yourself.”

I stand in the middle of the room, centering myself in between all the mirrors, balancing the cardinal directions of North, South, East, and West, while the others stand off by the

parameters of the room. I then grab the now crinkled and bloody paper from the Elders off the nearby table, and begin the summoning chant with shaky hands.

*Hoc mundo, qui infra nos inter aperire porta.*

*Ut mundi in id turpis.*

*Ibi si me mori,*

*Custodi animam meam ad arma fateor caligo.*

The room begins to darken, the atmosphere becoming heavy and static-charged with electricity. I can see my breath forming smoky clouds as the temperature drops to freezing, causing Freddy to tense up, his lips turning blue as he wraps his arms around his shivering body. The bloody symbols then begin to glow a deep amethyst-purple, as the room starts to quake and jolt with tremors.

Scarlet freezes in fear, staring around the room wide-eyed in petrification.

“Is this supposed to happen?” I see her mouth to Darren through the noise, to which he responds with an uneasy shrug.

Suddenly it’s like the room is being suctioned into something we cannot see, as if a giant, centrifugal force is building, and sucking us all into its abyss.

The temperature now starts to rise drastically, well past 120 degrees Fahrenheit.

*Maybe this was a bad idea...*

As I near the end of the third and final go-around of the chant, the bloody symbols spontaneously light aflame, the blood waywardly streaming down the walls and to the floor in long, haphazard, crimson trails. Flesh and bone and organic matter start to miraculously appear on the walls and ceiling, as if the room is becoming a living thing. The room now quaking harder than ever, I struggle to finish up the chant and keep my balance—when suddenly, it stops.

We all stand around, perplexed and on-edge, waiting for

something to happen.

“Was that it?” Scarlet asks in bemusement, as she looks around the gory room. “Where’s the gate?”

“*Holy shit*,” Freddy murmurs in awe, peering up at the ceiling as it begins to move.

“What the hell is *that*?” Scarlet yells, eyeing the flesh and bone on the ceiling anxiously as it starts to move and breathe.

The flesh and bone start to drop to the ground intermittently in big, heavy chunks, forming a pile on the floor. Darren protectively pulls Scarlet behind him, his fists balled at his sides in preparation. I immediately bare my fangs and extend my nails, getting ready for the oncoming threat that we can all feel looming in the air. Turning to Scarlet and Darren, I notice that their eyes are bright, flaming orange—a demon must be near.

My nerves tingle with caution as the organic pile of bloody mush and entrails starts to sprout upward and take form, turning into a runny pillar of rubicund mush with twig-like shards of broken bone. The grotesque enigma then starts forming into a humungous body, towering above us by several yards.

Soon, the hellacious creature is apparent. Devoid of any skin, the fleshy creature is composed of bone and muscle and has long, gangly limbs, in contrast to its lower torso, which is fat and blotchy. An abnormally round, shriveled head sits atop its shoulders, its sinewy face devoid of any features, other than a wide mouth and countless rows of sharp, pointed teeth. Its stench is putrid and sulfuric with a hint of earthiness, like burnt electrical wire and earthworms.

The meaty and deep-rooted pillar that is the creature continues to grow until it reaches the ceiling from whence it came, its chest heaving up and down every time the ceiling and walls breathe, as if they are one in the same entity.

“*Quisnam peto obduco en pectus pectoris de Bestia*,” it bellows, its voice so loud and deep, it causes the entire room to vibrate with its resonance.

We all stare at each other in confusion, then back at the

numinous being.

“Is this supposed to happen?” Scarlet whispers frozen in place, as she eyes the beast speculatively.

“How the hell should I know? It’s not like I do this every day!” I snap through clenched teeth, keeping my eyes on the demon without moving a muscle.

“Who seeks passage into the heart of the Beast?” the demon asks again.

*This must be the gatekeeper and ferrier...*

“I, uh—*We* do,” I finally tell it reluctantly.

“Um, no—not me; I’m good. I was just here for the show,” Freddy objects pedantically, as if it’ll make a difference.

“You will go,” it commands him.

“No, no—I’ve got *nothing* to do with this,” he shrieks, waving his hands back and forth in front of him as he shakes his head frantically.

The demon ignores him and folds its mangled hands together, as its large lips begin to mouth an arcane chant.

“Victoria, tell it I’m not going!” Freddy hisses, his brow furrowed in alarm.

“Shut up!” I whisper agitatedly, fed up with his naivety and annoyance.

*I should’ve known better than to let him stay.*

Freddy’s face becomes stricken with panic, before he suddenly turns around and bolts for the door—but it’s too late.

The ground quickly melts away from our feet, exposing a shiny black-marble floor in its place. A strong wind starts to circulate throughout the room, whirring and howling like an eerie infantile cry, as all semblance of reality begins to slip away.

Freddy pulls at the door knob frantically, but it doesn’t open, no matter how hard he tries. Soon the door disappears, and any small feature that was left of the bomb shelter

vanishes, and it begins to hit us hard that there's only going to be one way out from this point on—and it's around my neck.

"You will stay, ill creation!" the demon reviles, pointing a long, crippled finger at Freddy.

"No! I'm not even supposed to be here, damn it!" he yells indignantly.

The demon ignores his pleas, continuing the chant. With every uttered word, the room quakes more and more violently, and the current in the air is so ferocious, that we all have to grab ahold of the wall for support.

Before we know it, everything that was there is now gone, and it appears that we're officially in Hell itself. We're standing on an endless and desolate black-marble plane, and the sky is a dark, grayed amber, with twisted clouds of crimson. The sun is eclipsed, giving the appearance of a dark, hollow void in the sky, and the dry desert-like wind fluctuates from glacial to scorching as it caresses our flesh.

"I will ferry you back when you have a damned soul," the demon croaks, before its body begins to flake apart like ash, evanescently scattering away into the wind.

"I need to get out of here—*now!*" Freddy shrieks, as tears start to stream down his chapped face.

"What a pussy," Scarlet mutters mockingly under her breath, rolling her eyes in annoyance.

"We can't, Freddy; we need a damned soul to get out, like the ferrier said," I tell him exasperatedly. "That's the whole reason we're here."

"A soul? How are we supposed to find a damn soul?!" he shouts with incredulity, throwing his hands up in the air.

Suddenly, a loud slap reverberates throughout the area. I turn to see Freddy completely stunned and perfectly still, with a huge red handprint across his left cheek. He stands there in silent shock, not saying a word.

"Ugh, finally," Scarlet simpers, wincing as she waves her flaccid hand back in forth from slapping Freddy so hard. "I just had to do that; he was getting on my damn nerves. Can we just kill him already?"

“Enough!” I bark at them, stomping my foot on the ground. “The both of you—cut it out! Scarlet, you cannot kill Freddy; and Freddy, pull yourself together! We came here for a reason, and we are not leaving until we accomplish what we came here to do. So, you can either help, or you can shut the hell up and stay out of the way. You’re the one that wanted to see the damn gate so bad? Well, you got your wish. Now deal with it!”

There’s a long, palpable silence from the others as I stand there with my fists clenched at my sides, my chest heaving up and down in anger. Freddy stares back at me with his eyebrows arched in fear, while Scarlet smirks at him tauntingly.

“I’m sorry,” Freddy finally murmurs, staring down at his feet. “I don’t know what got into me. I’m okay now; I’m done freaking out. Since I’m stuck here, I might as well make myself useful; I want to help. So, how do we find Tyler?”

“With this,” I answer, pulling the soul gem out from under my shirt and dangling it from my hand. “All I have to do is think of Tyler, and it will lead me to his soul. Right now it’s scattered—various demons have little fragments of him—so we have to put him back together. Once we do, that’s our ticket out of here.”

“Like a twisted Humpty Dumpty?” Freddy replies, causing Scarlet and I to stare at each other in silent confusion.

“Is that some sort of euphemism for all the girls that fuck you and dump you, Freddy?” Scarlet mocks.

“Humpty Dumpty—it’s a children’s poem. He was an egg that fell off a wall, and all the kings’ men had to put him back together,” Darren explains matter-of-factly.

“Oh my god—he speaks!” Freddy jokes, which is met with a pointed and contemptuous stare from Darren.

“Should there be any reason we need blood, you’ll be the first to know,” Darren answers with a crooked smile, causing Freddy to immediately shrink in fear.

I concentrate hard, focusing on Tyler. Several memories flash through my head, as I think about how much I love him, and all of the precious moments we’ve shared:

*When we first met, and I found him lying on the ground in the middle of the alley in a pile of blood.*

*When we had our first bonding moment, and I had to force myself to swallow that horrid, bright-green, jiggly mush.*

*When he gave me the gift of seeing myself, the night he presented me with my portrait.*

*Finding him nearly dead and gutted after the Sisters of Malice, and how I knew right then and there that I never wanted to live another day without him in it.*

*The first time we made love...*

Soon, the stone begins glowing a faint cerulean-blue around my neck.

“It’s working!” I shout excitedly.

As a test, I take a few steps backward, and the glowing ceases. I then take a few steps forward, causing it to glow again, signaling that I’m going the right direction.

“Alright—let’s go.”

## HOW THE DAMNED DREAM

I wake up with a start, gasping for air. My head swirls from within as a vertiginous stupor overtakes me, causing my head to throb with every racing heartbeat. Soaked to the core in cold sweat, my lungs fight for a chance to take in the precious air.

*Something's wrong. Something's . . . off.*

Everything looks the same, and all appears to be in situ; but something's off, and I can't put my finger on what it is—like a nagging memory of something you've lost, but you can't remember what it is or where you lost it. You start double-guessing yourself, questioning if you ever lost anything in the first place.

“What the hell?” I gasp, bringing my hand up to shield my eyes.

It only takes me a second to finally realize what's wrong—there's *sunlight* in the room. I eye the window in confusion, wondering why Victoria would ever allow the window to go uncovered. In my entire stay here, never *once* have I ever seen any of the windows uncovered; Victoria avoids sunlight like the plague. Even stranger, I don't recall there ever being a window in this room to begin with.

My stomach loops into knots as I climb out of bed with trepidation and walk towards the window. I apprehensively put my hand into the ray of light beaming down from the window pane, and it feels comfortably warm—soothing even. I finally step into it fully, and allow myself to feel the warm kiss of the morning sun all around me. I almost lose myself in the corporeal and strangely drug-like sense of comfort, but my subconscious keeps nagging at me, not allowing myself to enjoy it for long.

“What the hell is going on?” I half-mumble to myself, scratching my head as I walk toward the mirrored closet.

I slide open my closet door to find a spectacular all-black wardrobe. It’s immaculate, every black collared shirt perfectly starched, every black pair of pants perfectly pressed. A neatly arranged row of black dress shoes line the closet floor, not a single shoe even an inch out of place. They sparkle with a magnificent, buffed shine that’s so bright, I can see myself in their polished exterior.

I reach into the closet for a pair of black pants and begin to dress myself, because I strangely feel like it’s what I’m supposed to do. I can’t wrap my mind around what’s happening; everything seems foggy—it’s bizarre.

“Hurry up, Honey. We’re going to be late,” a voice suddenly chirps from behind me.

I turn around to see Victoria, dressed in head-to-toe black, wearing a modest black shift dress and black sun-hat, along with black fishnet stockings and black pumps.

“Stop!” I shriek, making her jump back in surprise.

“What? Tyler, what’s wrong with you?” she asks concernedly, her eyebrows arched in alarm.

“The sun!” I persist, gesturing madly towards the window.

“What about it? Is it too bright or something?” she replies with a bemused expression, as she slowly makes her way over to me, passing right through the sunlight. “Are you feeling okay? You’re acting kind of strange.”

As she approaches me, I notice that she’s got a lot more color to her. Her usually pale complexion is now a milky

peach, and her cheeks and lips are bright and rosy—I’ve never seen her look so *human*.

“How are you not burning right now?” I ask with incredulity, as I gently turn her around, inspecting her skin all over.

“Tyler, what’s wrong with you?”

“You don’t remember anything? You turned me last night, but . . .” I trail off, stunned, as I begin to get lost in my own confusion.

“Turned you? What do you mean ‘turned’ you? Tyler, you’re really starting to worry me.”

“Y-you were going to turn me, into a vampire; but then you got really rough, and that’s the last thing I remember,” I stutter, stumbling over my words.

*She’s staring at me as if I’m seven shades of crazy.*

“Vampire?” she laughs. “*Ha-ha*, very funny. Now enough of this nonsense, we have to go. We don’t want to keep everyone waiting,” she says, as she strokes my left cheek with the back of her surprisingly warm hand.

“No! There were demons that were after me, and you—you were a vampire; you protected me!” I insist fervently, as I begin to get agitated.

“Honey, I’m sure it was just a bad dream, okay?” she utters softly, planting a gentle kiss on my lips. “Now, finish getting dressed. We’re going to be late.”

“Okay,” I murmur, but it barely comes out an inaudible whisper.

*I guess it’s possible. This all could’ve just been a bad dream that I’m waking up from.*

*I mean come on, what’s more realistic: me living in a normal house with my normal girlfriend, or me living in a world full of vampires and demons, and danger lurking at every corner?*

I ponder the last couple years, and if it was all just a figment

of my imagination. I suppose it could've been; after all, that would be the logical answer.

"You ready, babe?" Victoria asks with a smile, entering back into the room.

"Yeah. Sorry about the way I was acting. I just had a bad dream and was still half-asleep. I wasn't thinking straight," I reassure her, placing a chaste kiss on her forehead.

"That's my Tyler—always watching those gory horror movies. I think they're finally starting to catch up with you," she teases, gently nipping my nose with her knuckle. "Now come on; let's go."

I follow her out of the bedroom, trying to shake off the queasy feeling in my stomach, like the feeling you get right before a 100-foot rollercoaster drop.

The entire drive there, I feel strange. It's like one half of me is content to finally be living a peaceful and perfect life; but the other half of me can't shake this uneasy, nagging feeling in my gut.

"We're here," Victoria chimes, interrupting me from my rumination.

I've been so wrapped up in my own thoughts, I never thought to ask her where we were going.

We pull up to what looks like a long grass lawn, with cotton-candy pink tulips and white lilies growing all along the parameters. A group of people are congregated in the center of the lawn, standing in three perfect rows, all facing the same direction. As I grab Victoria's hand and walk over toward the large group, I smile at the fact that all of my troubles have suddenly gone away in the blink of an eye—like an evanescent nightmare that I'm finally waking up from.

As I approach the group of people, I notice they're all dressed formally, in similar clothes to Victoria and I; furthermore, they're all wearing black.

*Hm... We must be at a funeral.*

Suddenly, a face in the crowd catches my eye—a girl with a

black veiled-hat and long black gloves, holding a handkerchief with the initial 'J' embroidered on it.

"Jade?" I whisper under my breath, as the sad woman gingerly rubs her nose and sniffs.

I quicken my pace towards her, unsure if my mind is playing tricks on me. What I see next stops me in my tracks.

"Mom? Dad?" I utter, eyeing them in disbelief; but no one will answer me. They're all too consumed with what they're looking at.

I watch on in confusion as my parents start to cry, my father pulling my trembling mother into him to console her.

"What the hell is going on here?!" I shout, my blood starting to boil.

I rush up to the group of people, and what I see hitches my breath in my throat. I'm staring down at an open coffin—and inside the coffin is *me*.

*Is this some kind of sick joke?*

I immediately get nauseous, clutching my stomach as it starts to churn at the sight of my pale and perfectly made-up self, a serene expression on my face, my body reeking of formaldehyde and death.

I shake my head in disbelief as I catch sight of my tombstone, standing at the top of a pile of freshly dug earth.

*Here lies Tyler Dawson: beloved son, friend, brother, and husband.*

I look to Victoria for help, but she looks like an inanimate zombie, her face deadpan as she stares off into the distance without a single facial expression, movement, or breath.

"Victoria, tell them I'm not dead!" I scream, but nothing comes out.

The world around me starts to spin, as I stumble backwards and grip my clammy forehead. I close my eyes for a second, and when I open them, I'm suddenly *in* the coffin, watching everyone from the inside-out.

The coffin lid suddenly slams shut, leaving me in complete darkness. I can hear the sound of clinking chains lowering me into the ground, followed by the shuffling sound of fluffy soil being dropped onto the smooth lid of the Mahogany casket.

“Help!” I scream desperately, pounding onto the lid. “Stop it! I’m not dead!”

I start to panic and hyperventilate as I feel my airways start to narrow from lack of oxygen. I claw on the casket lid from the inside, feeling the agonizing pain of my fingernails ripping and snapping off in my futile struggle.

“Someone help me!” I cry, my face starting to drown in my own salty tears.

Just as I feel I’m about to pass out, I hear a loud thump above me. I freeze, listening vigilantly for anything or anyone.

The casket lid flies open, sending a gush of fresh air into my gasping lungs, and a sprinkling of dirt into the coffin and all around me. All I can see is a dark, night sky, spotted with tiny specks of opalescent stars.

Suddenly, Victoria enters my field of vision, peering down at me worriedly.

“Oh my god, Tyler! Thank god!” she screams frantically, as she leans down and outstretches her arm down to me. “Here, take my hand!”

I grab ahold of her hand, allowing her to hoist me up.

“Why didn’t you help me when they buried me?!” I scream, coughing and gasping for air as I kneel onto the wet grass on all fours, trying to catch my breath.

“That wasn’t me, Tyler. It was a demon impersonating me. Don’t worry, I got rid of it.”

I immediately notice that she’s pale, and she looks back to her normal self. She’s also dressed differently, in her usual tank-top and tight jeans combo.

“I knew something was off,” I mutter to myself, standing up and dusting the dirt off of me.

“I’m just so happy you’re okay,” she murmurs, bringing me into a tight embrace.

I pull her in close, entangling my hand through her dark

raven hair as I gently kiss her forehead. After a few seconds, I pull away, only to find a chunk of her hair attached to a piece of her bloody scalp has come off in my hand.

“What the hell?” I shriek, eyeing the bloody, hairy scalp in my fingers as I recoil in horror.

“Aw, you don’t think I’m pretty anymore, Tyler?” she asks wickedly, before throwing her head back and letting out a long, sinister laugh.

“Who are you, and what have you done with Victoria!” I spit, clenching my fists.

Soon her face starts to change and contort, her beautiful, smooth, milky complexion melting away into rough, sinewy skin covered in bloody slash marks.

*The Hollow-eyed Witch. . .*

“I can’t take it; you’re just too easy!” she hisses mockingly, as a deep, evil giggle resonates in her throat. “Poor Tyler; such a gullible little child.”

I back up in terror, never taking my eyes off her hollow voids, when suddenly I feel myself stumbling on the precipice of a rocky cliff. I try to catch my balance, but it’s too late. I reel backward, freefalling as I watch the night sky above me, the stars the only light to its enigmatic blanket of darkness.

Soon the world starts to fade away, and the stars begin to disappear one by one, until I’m left only with the black abyss.

I wake up with a jolt to the jarring sound of an alarm clock. I peer around me frantically, inspecting my surroundings; but I’m just at home, in bed with Victoria. Nothing seems out of place, and everything seems as if it’s gone back to normal.

I know I was having a nightmare, but it’s like that sudden onset of amnesia that you get after you wake, in which the thing that seemed so important and detrimental a few seconds ago has now left your conscious mind, and suddenly that dream just drifts away.

“Babe, are you okay?” Victoria slurs sleepily, as she lightly

stirs and sits up beside me.

“Yeah, it’s nothing; just a bad dream, that’s all,” I murmur, trying to convince myself that that’s all it was.

*But it felt so real...*

“Aww, well here—let me make it all better,” she coos, as she stretches her arms from behind me and strokes my chest, trailing soft kisses along my neck and shoulder.

I close my eyes and revel in the feel of her lips, the feel of her enervating touch on my skin; and soon, I forget about the horrid dream, losing myself in ecstasy. I moan in pleasure, opening my eyes as I gently turn over to face her.

“What the—*Amber?*”

“Well, of course. Who else would it be, Silly?”

“What are you doing here? Where’s Victoria?” I demand, eyeing her speculatively.

“Victoria? Who’s Victoria? I think you’re just remembering parts of your bad dream,” she utters, stroking her fingers through my hair. “Although, I should be the only woman you’re dreaming about, Mister.”

“Cut the shit,” I hiss. “You know damned well who Victoria is.” She stares back at me like a deer in the headlights, her brow furrowed in confusion, causing me to suddenly doubt myself. “I’m sorry,” I finally murmur. “I’m just tired, that’s all.”

“It’s okay, baby,” she whispers, kissing my lips softly. “Now what do you say I go make us some breakfast?”

“Sounds great,” I half-mutter, still unsure of myself.

I shake off my disquieting thoughts and stand up from the bed, stretching my arms up over my head in front of the mirrored closet door, when something catches my attention—there’s a long, huge scar running along my side.

“How did I get this scar?” I yell to her, lifting my shirt up with my hand.

“You can’t leave well enough alone, can you?” she sighs from behind me, her arms crossed in front of her.

That’s when it all starts coming back to me—Victoria trying

to turn me, the struggle, the Soul Eater, the demons . . .

“What the hell is going on?” I spit with venom. “Tell me—right fucking now!”

“You want to know what’s ‘going on’? I’ll tell you what’s going on—your precious Victoria killed you. Yeah, that’s right; she lost control the first chance she got, and killed you during the turning.”

“What?” I reply in disbelief, my eyes wide in shock. “No. She would never do that to me.”

“What’s the last thing you remember?” she asks.

“I remember . . .” I trail off, as the memories slowly flood back to me. “Her trying to turn me, and then there was a struggle.”

“She lost control on you, love; and now, you’re dead, and you’re in a dream world with me.”

“I’m dead?” I ask with incredulity. “No, I can’t be.”

“Yes, Tyler; it’s true. You’re dead and in a dream world with me, and we can be happy here together,” she utters, walking up to me and stroking my cheek, causing me to shudder. “Didn’t you love me once, before all this happened? Before the demons and the vampires—before *her*?”

“Well, yeah—I did, at one time; but that’s all changed now,” I reply uncomfortably.

“It doesn’t have to be that way,” she whispers, bringing her face mere inches from mine. “We can be happy here. You can stay here with me—for eternity—and we can be happy; or, you can refuse, and spend the rest of eternity in Hell.”

“Hell?”

“Where do you think you are right now, Tyler? You died, and now you’re in Hell; but you’re asleep, and you can stay asleep forever. Just say yes, and stay here with me, in our little world. That’s all it takes,” she says enticingly. “That world of yours before is now gone, and you can’t go back to it—or go back to *her*.”

“But—but none of this is real,” I stutter.

“Reality is what you perceive it to be, Tyler. This can *be* your reality,” she whispers, gesturing her hand to our

surroundings.

*The offer is incredibly tempting.*

*To live in a world with no more pain, no demons, no danger and paranoia every day of my life; and if what she's saying is true, then I have no life to go back to anyway. If Victoria really did betray me and kill me, then there's nothing left for me there; and if I'm in Hell, then I'd spend eternity in torture and agony.*

“Say yes,” she whispers sumptuously, brushing her lips against mine. “We can be together, *forever*.”

I pause, the words on the tip of tongue, closing my eyes and sighing as she lightly drags her hand down my arm, breathing softly on my neck. I lose myself in old feelings, reveling in the corporeal sensation of her touch, which feels magnified and unnaturally *good*—too good.

“No,” I whisper, backing away from her.

“What?”

“I said, *no*. I'd rather turn you down and take the one-percent chance of possibly going back to be with the woman I love, than to play it safe and spend eternity here with you, Witch,” I hiss scathingly.

“How did you figure me out?” she asks wryly, blood spilling down her chin from her slashed-up lips as she speaks. Her face suddenly starts to contort, as the guise of Amber slowly drifts away, revealing the Hollow-eyed Witch in her place.

“No demon has stalked me quite as much as you have.”

“Ah, but you're just so fun to torture, Tyler,” she sneers, stalking towards me with expert prowess, two large knives in her frail, bony hands. “So *easy*.”

The more she walks toward me, the more the scenery around us changes. The bedroom melts away, and suddenly I'm outside in the forest. The ground is made of flesh and bone, and the trees are made from branches of barbed wire and rotting meat. The leaves are agonized faces aflame with hellfire—remnants of souls that fell victim to the Hollowed

Eyed Witch—twisting and writhing to the musical cacophony of their own screams and groans of anguish.

“Victoria! Wake me up!” I yell in panic.

“Oh, she can’t hear you, boy. You’re nowhere near your little vampire whore,” she spits disdainfully.

“If you did anything to her, I swear I’ll—”

“You’ll what—kill me? A demon? You’re in my world, boy! You’re dead, and you’re in Hell, and that’s where you’re going to stay.”

“You’re lying!” I cry, shaking my head in disbelief. “This is just a dream! It has to be!”

“Wish it was, *Sweetie*,” she drawls mockingly, plunging the knives deep into my gut and side, eviscerating me with every twist. “Did you really think it was a good idea to let the vampire try to turn you? She killed you, you silly fool! Although, you didn’t *stay* dead—at least your body didn’t. What a perfect little accident you turned out to be.”

“What are you talking about?” I demand, as I back up in fear and petrification, clutching my stomach in pain as I bleed out.

“You’re damned, Tyler. You have been since Day One of the curse. Your body was riddled with demonic essence from all of your friendly little visits, causing the demon side of you to take over your body completely, while your consciousness remains here in Hell with your soul. Oh, and speaking of the matter of your sad little soul,” she simpers.

“What about it?” I growl through clenched teeth.

“Do you know why no one *ever* gets out of a contract from the illustrious and great Lord Saffron?” she starts, rubbing her bloodied hands together with glee as she laughs depravedly. “Because every time a cursed soul comes into contact with a demon, a small fragment is always taken with the demon after it departs. So you see, Tyler, you’ve been here for a very long time; so long in fact, you didn’t even know it.”

“No, you’re lying,” I shriek, letting my back slide down the tree trunk she’s cornered me to as I cover my ears and squint my eyes shut, wishing for this to be just another dream within

a dream that I'll wake up from any second. "You're just trying to manipulate me!"

*But a part of me believes her, and knows that what she's saying is true.*

"That's right, boy. All those times you felt disconnected from your surroundings—that bereft emptiness and void inside, that feeling like you lost something—you were really losing pieces of yourself to this infinite inferno; and now, I have you all to *myself*."

## LIMBO

We've been walking for five hours now through the endless black plane—or at least that's how it seems. Time works differently in Hell than it does on the Earth plane. What seems like a few minutes here can be several *days* in the Earth dimension; so although it seems as if it's only been a few hours, in reality, we may have been gone for several weeks.

Hell isn't exactly as I imagined it. I pictured it to be more of a barren, flaming wasteland full of screaming, damned souls. It's more of a desolate and derelict parallel dimension that is very similar to the Earth plane, but with subtle differences.

It has a sky and sun and clouds and rivers just like Earth, but they glow in hues of royal purple, oxblood red, black, and slate gray. The air feels different here; it's thicker and heavier with a static-like charge running through it, causing a prickling sensation on your skin, like the pins and needles of a waking limb.

"That's it. I can't go any longer," Freddy huffs exhaustedly, collapsing onto the ground in a breathless heap. "How do you know that stone is even pointing us in the right direction?"

I dangle the gem from my hand for everyone to see and turn around to face the opposite direction, causing the glowing to cease. I then face the direction we were heading before and

take a step forward, causing the stone to illuminate again.

“Voila,” I utter sardonically, gesturing towards the now glowing crystal. “Now come on, we don’t have any time to waste. Let’s g—” I suddenly stop in my tracks, freezing at the sight of the abominable thing before me, causing everyone’s eyes to follow my gaze.

“What the fuck is that?!” Scarlet shrieks.

A demented and grotesque looking baby crawls towards us on all fours, its rotting body a sickly shade of gray, its limbs unnaturally elongated and crooked. As it stares up at us, I notice it has no eyes—just empty, hollow, skeletal black voids. Its mouth is twisted and drooped open as if it were screaming, but the only sound that emits from it is a shrill chirp.

The baby scampers toward Freddy, grabbing on to his leg with its gangly limbs.

“That is the *weirdest* looking demon I’ve ever seen,” Scarlet mouths, staring at it in wonderment.

“Ugh! Get it away!” Freddy shrieks shrilly, lifting his leg and kicking it off.

The baby crawls back towards us, but this time it passes, waywardly zigzagging its way North.

“Follow it!” I command everyone, trailing closely on its tail.

“Victoria, are you sure about this?” Scarlet asks uneasily.

“There’s nothing else out here! We’ve been walking for hours with no results. It’s our only lead,” I explain. “Now come on, hurry! We can’t lose it!”

We continue to hastily follow the satanic spawn on its meandering route, eventually coming to a small dark cave that runs throughout an enormous purplish-black mountainside. We cautiously approach the impressive edifice, watching on as the demon baby sprints into a small crevice of the cave.

I slowly start to enter, when Freddy pulls at my shoulder.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea, to be going in there?” he asks worriedly.

“There’s nowhere else to go,” I stress, gesturing to the endless and desolate plane all around us.

“It’s pitch-black dark in there though,” he murmurs, his

voice cracking as his brow furrows in consternation.

“Aww, is little Fwuddy afraid of the dark?” Scarlet coos, nudging him in the side with her elbow.

“No! Shut up!” he yells indignantly. “It’s just that . . . well, it’s dark in there, and I won’t be able to see. I’m likely to have a fall.”

“Relax Freddy, we can see just fine. We’ll guide you,” I offer, extending my hand out to him.

He reluctantly accepts, and we start making our way into the abyss. The cave’s pathway is tight and extremely narrow; if we get attacked here, we wouldn’t be able to defend ourselves. I start having second thoughts and think about turning back, when all of a sudden a loud, shrill wailing reverberates throughout the walls of the chasm—it’s a baby’s cry.

“I really don’t like the sound of that,” Freddy whines, his sweaty and trembling palm gripping onto mine like a vice.

The path starts to widen and I can see a faint light at the end of the path. The cries start to grow louder, multiplying in quantity the closer we get, and a putrid stench like death and rot is permeating the air.

Soon we find ourselves in a huge, circular open space with lit torches along the walls, and hundreds of little catacombs within the cave’s structure.

“We’ve got company,” Darren murmurs.

I gasp at the sight of hundreds of demonic babies littering the ground, walls and ceiling, the entire area vibrating with the sound of their eerie howls.

“Oh my god,” Scarlet gasps, covering her mouth. “It’s *Limbo*. These are all unbaptized babies.”

“There are hundreds of them,” Freddy shrieks, recoiling in horror.

“Noone make any sudden movements,” I murmur, standing perfectly still and statuesque so as not to aggravate or trigger the demonic babes.

The babies curiously turn their despairing gazes on us, eyeing us steadily. Suddenly, one of them crawls down the wall, apprehensively making its way towards us in jerky, sporadic

movements, as if it's just as scared and unsure of us as we are of it. Scampering over to Scarlet, it peers up at her, its tiny distorted mouth set into an "O."

"You know," Scarlet starts, as she bends down to extend her hand toward it, "it's actually kind of cute, in a demented, twisted sort of way."

"Scarlet, are you sure that's a good i—"

Before I can finish my sentence, the demon child clamps down hard onto her hand, biting into her pointer finger with its row of tiny razor-sharp teeth.

"Ow! You little shit!" she screams furiously, trying to pull away; but it's clamped down tight on her hand, unwavering to release her.

She yanks the tenacious baby off with her other hand, kicking it with hard ferocity and sending it flying across the room, like an organic, crying football. A loud splat resonates throughout the cave as the baby hits the wall, blasting purple and black entrails out its sides.

Freddy covers his mouth and smirks, endeavoring to shield his laughter, causing Scarlet to glare at him with hate.

"Don't you dare start!" she snaps scathingly, glaring at him with a pointed, contemptuous stare.

"What? It thought you were its Mommy. Can you blame it? The resemblance is uncanny," he teases.

"Perhaps you two can fool around at a later time?" I hiss, eyeing the monstrous melee of tiny demon children as they start scaling down the walls and crawling towards us determinedly.

My vision goes orange at the threat, causing my fangs to elongate and nails to lengthen. Darren and Scarlet do the same, bracing themselves in preparation for the ambush.

We immediately start kicking and punching the flotsam as they come, drenching ourselves in a hellacious baby bloodbath. All you can hear is the cacophony of the splattering sounds of babies hitting the cave walls, followed by the wet *squish* of their blood and guts ripping through their sides.

Within minutes we're covered in babies' blood from head

to toe, anxiously awaiting the onslaught of the rest of them. Suddenly the babies stop in their tracks, backing away in fear.

“Looks like they’ve learned their lesson the hard way,” Scarlet utters breathlessly, shaking her flaccid hands in the air and rubbing them on her jeans to rid them of blood.

We then notice them forming a circle around the center of the room, as if in preparation for something. The room starts to quake and vibrate as all the babies start wailing at once, creating an eerie sound reminiscent of a lamb’s slaughter. The sound of grinding stone echoes throughout the cave, and soon the ground opens up in the center of the circle, followed by two humungous thrones made of human bones rising to the surface.

On the thrones sits two female demons. They have no flesh or skin or distinguishing features—only sinewy muscles and innards, along with hollow, amber-hued voids where their eyes should be, and long, scraggly dark hair, that rests in greasy and knotted mounds around their back and shoulders.

*The Sisters of Malice . . .*

The soul gem begins to glow faintly at their presence, indicating that these two demons have a part of Tyler’s soul.

“State your purpose,” they both bellow in unison, their forked, thorny tongues snaking through their lips as they speak. “What is your business here in the Netherworld, vile creation!”

“I think you know,” I say assertively as I walk forward with confidence, causing the soul gem to glow even brighter.

“A soul gem? Who are you?” they inquire, their mouths moving and speaking together as if one.

“We’re here to get a piece of a soul that you stole.”

“Oh, yes; we remember you now. You’re that vampire bitch—the one that was trying to protect the boy from us. Heard he bit the big one, from your hand no less,” they sneer, a wicked smile pulling at their thin, withered lips.

“This is how it’s going to be,” I tell them, walking up

assuredly. "Either you give me back what you took, or I'll rip it from your still beating hearts."

The two of them throw their heads back and laugh maniacally. "Your hubris amuses us. Do you have any idea who we are, arrogant little girl?"

"Oh, I've heard *all* about you; and frankly, I'm not impressed," I assert, doing my best to keep my hard confidence from waning.

"After what we did to that little bitch-boy of yours, you should know better than to cross us."

"Oh, please. You *have to* pick on weaker beings like humans, because you're not strong enough to do otherwise—it's pathetic. You're *cowards*," I goad them.

"You will pay for your senseless badgering, whore!" they scream truculently, both advancing towards us in fury.

I allow one of them to approach me before kicking her hard, sending her flying several feet into the air and into her sister, the both of them crashing into the crumbling wall.

"From the still beating heart, it is," I mutter wryly, jetting over to their side in a flash.

Before they can react, I wantonly plunge my hand into the chest of one of them, tearing her still-beating heart out in my fist. I then use it to beat the other's face in violently, until the heart and the demon's face is now a bloody pulp.

Scarlet and Darren join in on the savagery with glee, kicking and punching, and shredding them into organic confetti with their teeth. One of the demonic sisters lies perfectly still, already dead and eviscerated, while the other screams for her sister in horror.

"You could have just given him to me!" I spit, pulling her up by her neck and force-feeding her the heart of her sister down her throat, before crushing her head in with my bare hands.

The two sisters lie limp on the ground in a pile of bloody, mangled limbs and exposed entrails, as the demonic babies all start to scurry away in fear, hiding in the various cracks in the cave walls.

“Victoria, look!” Scarlet shouts excitedly.

I turn back to the broken sisters in time to see a faint, flickering blue orb of light float up from their corpses, before slowly spiraling and suctioning into the gem around my neck, causing it to glow and beam brighter than ever before.

Soon after, several other numinous orbs float up from the bodies, half of them flying up and away into the ceiling, the others remaining in Hell and scattering off in various directions for their Judgment Day. Tyler must have been their most recent victim; that’s probably why he came up first.

“We did it! We actually got a piece of Tyler’s soul back!” Scarlet yells joyfully, causing a proud and triumphant smile to cross my face.

“One down, a few more to go. Don’t worry, baby; we’ll have you all put back together soon,” I whisper softly at the soul gem in my palm, before clutching it tight and holding it to my heart.

“Victoria, how did you know you could defeat them so easily? Why were you so confident that you would beat them?” Freddy asks.

“The air,” I reply. “The heavier it is, the stronger the demon; and this air was light as a feather. I can see why they had to deceive me and get Tyler alone to do their bidding.”

“Well, that was a lot easier than I thought it’d be,” Freddy says with surprise.

“They were nothing, and were a very low-echelon, weak demon; but trust me, there are still very powerful demons that we will have to face, and they’re going to make these gals look like a *cakewalk*,” I explain.

Suddenly, the thrones catch my eye. I can see a small, thin ring of darkness around the platform that they’re cemented to, and it looks as if there’s hollow space underneath it.

I grab one of the sisters’ bodies and hoist it up above my head, throwing it down hard on the platform, causing it to shatter into hundreds of tiny pieces.

As we all walk over to the new pit in trepidation to get a closer look, we notice that it drops straight down into pure

blackness for as far as the eye can see.

“Ohhh, no. We are *not* going down there,” Freddy insists, peering down off the precipice. “Who knows what’s down there!”

“Only one way to find out,” Darren says wickedly, grabbing Freddy by the arm.

“Shall we?” I utter, before diving off the ledge, the soul gem illuminating the darkness all around me bright blue as I freefall with the others close behind, venturing further and deeper into the mouth of oblivion, one step closer to saving my love.

## GLUTTONY

We fall through the bottomless pitch-black abyss for what seems like several minutes, but there's no telling. When you're in the dark for that long, you start to lose your bearings. I can vaguely make out the shape of Freddy, who is clinging to Darren's back like a shrieking spider monkey.

Several minutes later, I finally catch sight of the pit's rubicund bottom. I slow down my speed by tearing down its rocky sides, causing large chunks of rock to go tumbling toward the ground. I brace myself for impact, tucking my knees into my body; and that's when I feel the splash of thick, warm liquid hit me. A rusty, tangy, burnt-ochre taste floods my mouth as I begin to drown, seeing nothing but red.

I resurface from the viscous liquid and gasp for air, followed by the loud splash of Darren, Freddy, and Scarlet plunging beside me.

"It's blood!" Freddy screams, as he struggles to stay on the surface.

"Over there!" I yell, pointing to a small island in the distance.

We swim to the desolate chunk of land, shaking our hands and arms as we emerge from the ruby river of blood. Freddy lags behind, pitifully dog-paddling his way towards us.

“Ugh! That was fucking *gross!*” Freddy shrieks with disgust, as he spits a mouthful of blood onto the ground.

“Mmm . . . Are you sure we didn’t somehow transport to Heaven right now instead? Yummy,” Scarlet says with delight, as she greedily licks her bloody fingers with long, gluttonous strokes. “And a whole *river* of it, just for me.”

“That’s disgusting!” Freddy says disdainfully, as he watches Scarlet lick her way across each finger. “I think I’m going to be sick.”

“You make me sick too. Glad the feeling is mutual,” she replies sardonically, before running her tongue up the side of her hand.

“Scarlet, don’t eat the blood,” I command her, causing a bemused expression to cross her face.

“Why the hell not? It’s like vampire Paradise! An island surrounded by blood—does it get any better?”

“Yeah, but you don’t know where that blood came from. For all you know, it isn’t even human.”

She suddenly stops licking her fingers, her face laden with worry. “You don’t think it’s demonic blood, do you? Oh no . . . oh shit. I don’t feel so good,” she utters, clutching her stomach and bending over.

“Neither do I,” Freddy whines, before falling down onto his hands and knees and vomiting up a bucket’s worth of thick, black, tar-like liquid.

“Crap. We all must’ve ingested some from the fall. Everyone, get the blood out of you—*now!*” I yell, shoving my finger down my throat and forcing myself to purge the mystery substance.

We all begin puking up everything but our organs, retching and heaving until we’re all standing in our own piles of obsidian vomit. I immediately feel better after getting it out; luckily, the effect was only temporary.

To our surprise, the thick black puddles begin to move fluidly on their own, grouping and pooling together like mercury. The large mass then starts to trickle and flood back into the river from where it came, and soon, a deep swirling

begins. The entire island starts quaking, the river swirling faster and faster until a vortex starts to form in the center.

The air suddenly gets extremely heavy, indicating that a very powerful demon is near, before a loud ear-piercing wail resonates throughout the area, causing all of us to cover our ears in pain.

*Oh shit . . . I remember that sound.*

“The Behemoth,” I murmur, as I back up and start to shift into my true form.

My nails start to lengthen, my fangs extending past my lips as my vision goes orange. Soon my hair is stark white, my flesh thin and translucent, as my darkened veins start to grow all across my skin at rapidfire, like purple ivy.

Freddy eyes me in both awe and horror, reeling back at the sight of me in my true form.

“If either of you can shift into your true form, now’s the time to do it,” I tell Scarlet and Darren.

“We can’t do that yet,” Scarlet says nervously. “We’re too young.”

“Alright, just do your best; and don’t let its humungous size fool you—it’s incredibly fast and agile. We’re on its stomping grounds now, which means it’ll be ten times more powerful. Don’t underest—”

Before I can finish, I watch in awe as the Behemoth emerges from the river dripping in blood, stomping over to us with fury in its eyes. It flaps its large skeletal wings, causing a forceful gush of air to blow us off our feet. With every step it takes, the ground shakes with tremors, blood splashing out from beneath its feet and onto us in a crimson spray.

Suddenly, I notice the blood all around us starting to burgeon and take shape. The closer the Behemoth approaches, the faster the bloody puddles move and form; and that’s when I realize it—the Behemoth can manipulate the blood.

“Victoria? What do you want us to—” Scarlet starts to ask, but she’s cut off when the Behemoth stomps its foot down

hard on the ground, causing a bloody puddle under Scarlet to form into a point, sending a bloody spike up in the air from beneath her feet.

“Scarlet!” I yell, trying to warn her.

She looks to the ground beneath her and jumps back, bracing herself against the sides of the spike as it shoots up from the ground. The beast then advances towards Darren, screeching as it slashes its large claw against his torso, its huge, thick talons piercing deep into his chest.

I run to Darren’s aid, but the Behemoth whips its bulky tail around, smashing into me with such force that I go flying several yards back. The monstrous beast sprints towards me with ferocity, trying to slash me with its large claws as I crabwalk backward, missing its deathly blow by a hair.

I watch on silently as Scarlet slides down the spike, before her and Darren sprint towards the creature. They jump up and fly through the air simultaneously, using a joint kick to the beast’s eye to impair its vision, causing it to let out a loud, pained wail.

I scramble to my feet, this time giving the Behemoth no time for recovery as I pounce on it, brutally plunging my claw deep into its back until I feel its heart. It shrieks in agony as I grab its humungous heart, sinking my talons into it as I try to rip it out from the back of its ribcage, causing its bones to start splintering through its own back.

I’m about to rip out its heart when it rears up on its hind legs and bucks me off, flinging me to the ground violently before bashing its deformed head into mine.

*This thing’s a lot tougher than I thought it’d be.*

The world around me starts to blur and spin, and my head is reeling. My vision suddenly goes black, and I feel myself slowly slipping in and out of consciousness.

Next thing I know I’m on the ground with the beast on top of me, and there’s a searing pain in my gut. I lift my head to the best of my ability, and look down to find that it’s taken a

huge chunk out of my stomach and torso. I can see Darren and Scarlet unconscious by the wayside, and Freddy is hiding behind their bodies, crying and trembling in fear.

My heavy head collapses back onto the ground, the world starting to swirl again as I feel the life bleed out of me. The soul gem glows brightly around my neck as I and everyone I love are about to die at the hands of the Behemoth, and there's not a damn thing I can do to stop it.

Thinking me to be dead, the hellacious creature starts to head towards Darren and Scarlet's unconscious bodies, licking its snarled lips with a sick rapacity. I watch helplessly as it lifts onto its hind legs, ready to strike.

"No!" I cry, tears streaming down my face at the realization that my best friends are about to die, I'm about to die, and the love of my life will never be resurrected, to spend eternity in Hell. The Behemoth looks back at me curiously, its forked tongue snaking through its large mouth. "Stop!" I shriek out of pure frustration, even though I know it won't make a bit of difference.

To my surprise, the Behemoth suddenly stops its action as if on command, staring at me blankly without moving a muscle. "Come," I yell, trying again to see if it's listening. It paces over to me, stopping right in front of my body before sitting down obediently.

*Oh my god—it's actually listening.*

I penetrate it with my enervating stare, as it watches me patiently in an entranced stupor, its face blank. I know vampires have charm and manipulation abilities to make their prey do as they are told, but I never thought it'd work on a demon.

"Give me what you took from Tyler," I order it. "I know you have a piece of his soul. I want it back, and I want it *now*."

I notice Scarlet and Darren staggering up in my peripheral vision. They watch the ongoing exchange in quiet fascination, their brow furrowed in silent questioning; but I keep my focus

on the creature.

“Victoria, what the fuck is going on?” Scarlet finally whispers in awe. “Since when can you control demons?”

“I don’t know; I’m still trying to figure that out,” I reply, slowly standing up until I’m face to face with the subdued demon. “I said, *give me what you took from Tyler.*”

It growls at me threateningly in response, but remains docile and submissive.

“Don’t!” I scold it, like a mother yelling at her young, to which it stops growling as ordered. “Last chance—give me what I want, or else.”

It stands there stubbornly without moving a muscle, steadfast in its resolve, refusing to give up the soul. It’s like the control only goes so far, and for certain things.

Finally I get fed up, plunging my hand through its chest and ripping out its still-beating heart. A flickering blue light floats up from the Behemoth’s remains, swirling in the air with a brilliant cerulean spark before it suctions into the soul gem.

I triumphantly smile as I peer down at the crystal, its vibrant blue light illuminating my face. Suddenly, the Behemoth’s body turns into a huge puddle of blood, swirling in the middle of the island until a large vortex appears. Soon the whirling portal turns into a hole with a winding staircase within it.

“That’s our ticket out of here,” I murmur, as I start walking towards the staircase.

“What the *hell* was that?” Scarlet asks in shock.

“It was the Behemoth. It came for Tyler a few days before all hell broke loose and shit really hit the fan.”

A terrified Freddy apprehensively walks over to us, a traumatized look on his face.

“Holy shit, I thought we were all dead meat!” he yells. “Thank god you worked your little hocus-pocus vamp magic on it. Why didn’t you do that in the first place?”

“I didn’t even know I could. Don’t you think I would’ve if I knew?” I snap, as I revert back to my human form. “I’m sorry, Freddy; it’s just that I’m extremely weak, and I need

desperately to heal. I need blood—badly.”

I eye him in silence, insinuating what I need, and from whom I need it.

“Ohhh no. Don’t even think about it. No way!” he screams, shaking his head and waving his hands in the air. “And don’t you dare use that compulsion vampire brou-ha-ha shit on me!”

“I won’t take it without your permission—even though I could. It would be greatly appreciated; besides, if I don’t heal and regain my strength, then you’re all going to be ‘dead meat.’ I need to feed. Please, Freddy; I promise I won’t take a lot—just enough to get me by.”

He stands in awkward silence, uncomfortably fidgeting his fingers and shuffling his feet, staring down at the ground in contemplation.

“But won’t I turn into a vampire?” he asks nervously, peering up at me.

“No, I’d have to consciously inject venom into the bloodstream for that to happen,” I reassure him. “Look, how about I just make a small cut and drink from that? My teeth won’t pierce your skin, so it shouldn’t be very painful. Please?”

“Are you sure you’re not doing some vampire charm thing on me right now?” he asks cynically, eyeing me with distrust.

“No tricks,” I reply. “If you don’t want to, I won’t force you.”

“I’ll force him!” Scarlet volunteers cheerily.

“No, Scarlet; it’s his choice, not mine—or anyone else’s for that matter,” I utter, turning back to him. “Freddy?”

“I’m sorry,” he finally murmurs, shaking his head.

I sigh despairingly, but acquiesce, nodding at him in acceptance as I turn around to walk towards the newfound staircase.

“Wait,” he implores me. “Promise you won’t take a lot? And that you won’t hurt me?”

“You have my word,” I utter fervently.

He hesitantly extends his arm out to me, eyeing me with fear and trepidation. Using my long nail, I quickly cut him, making a small incision on the surface of his skin. As the blood

trickles from the wound, my fangs start elongating past my lips in anticipation. My vision goes red as I bring his arm up to my mouth.

“Thank you,” I whisper with a smile.

“So would this count as a dinner date?” he jokes awkwardly, trying to make the best of an uncomfortable moment.

“No. I would have to drink *all* of your blood for this to be dinner,” I reply wickedly, before I place my mouth on the wound.

I can feel Freddy flinch in surprise when my cold lips make contact with his hot skin. I wantonly dig into his flesh and quaff down that intoxicating, metallic liquid, derailing from humanity as I come undone.

I greedily press his arm to my mouth, brazenly tearing into the flesh with a sick, debauched rapacity, irreverent of his cries of mercy and pain. I devour him deeper, fervently sinking my teeth into his flesh, causing his life-force to flood down my burning throat. I can feel him trying to pull away, his arm jerking back in sporadic movements, but the part of me that cared is long gone—the beast inside has taken over.

I roughly pin him to the ground, constricting him like a python and losing myself in bliss as I gulp down his molten life-force.

“Victoria! Stop!” he whimpers—as if the person on top of him is still me, instead of the rabid animal inside—but I ignore his pleas, and continue to gulp him down without a second thought.

I can’t seem to pull myself from the wound. I can hear him begging for me to release him, but a battle of the wills ensues from within, and the evil side is winning.

I moan in pleasure, my arctic lips irrevocably sealed to his arm as he tries to buck me off; but his struggle is futile, as he is no match for my brute strength.

I force him down to the ground with my hand around his throat, causing him to flail about like a captured wildcat, while the reverb of his heart steadily slows in my ending embrace.

## LOST TESTAMENT: SOUL EATER

“Victoria,” he pleads one last time, his voice an inaudible whisper; but I’m gone, floating in the dark abyss of my sweet bloody reverie as I drain the life out of Freddy with one need and one need only—to devour every last sweet drop.

## GREED

I greedily continue to drain the life out of Freddy, inexorably latched onto him, lost in the dark, bloody abyss of my own inner demons.

Scarlet and Darren stand off by the wayside not moving a muscle, watching on in silence. I can tell that they aren't sure if they should stop me or not; they respect me too much to do so.

"Victoria, think about Tyler," Freddy murmurs in a barely audible whisper, causing me to suddenly snap out of my feral delirium.

Tyler's face floods my mind, causing me to unhand Freddy immediately, snapping back with the realization of what I've just done. He gasps for air, kicking me in the face before scampering away in fear.

"Freddy, I'm so sorry," I apologize, my tone contrite and laden with guilt.

"You gave me your word!" he cries, pointing at me shakily as he stares at me with hate and disgust.

"I know, I just—I lost control. I'm so sorry," I murmur ruefully.

"Don't even *think* of ever asking me to do that for you again. You'll have to kill me first."

“Gladly,” Scarlet chimes under her breath as she snickers profusely.

“Here, let me help,” I offer, as I try to tend to his wound; but he recoils away in fear, clutching his bloody arm to his chest.

“Get the hell away from me!” he shrieks, as he rips a piece off the bottom of his blood encrusted shirt, tying the scrap around his arm to stop the bleeding.

“Freddy, your shirt is soaked in blood; that’s not going to make much of a difference. Please, let me help you. I can heal you.”

“Just leave me alone, okay!” he shouts defensively.

“Alright, alright,” I whisper, putting my hands up in the air as I slowly back away.

After a long and awkward silence, I realize that we have no time to waste. That staircase is our only way out of here, and if it wasn’t there before, then who knows how long it will stick around.

“We should really get going,” I murmur uncomfortably, as I start walking towards the staircase.

Freddy, Scarlet, and Darren follow in silence. Our clothes are stuck to us from all of the dried blood from the river, our hair and skin awash with a crusty, ruby film.

As we descend the spiraling stairs into darkness, the light from above suddenly disappears as the hole closes, leaving us no way back.

Making our way through the darkness, I can’t even tell how far down we’ve gone. I tried counting steps in the beginning, but I realize that it makes no difference—we’ll get to the bottom when we get to the bottom.

The soul gem begins to glow faintly, providing a light to the endless darkness of this vacant vacuum of death and despair. The further we go, the brighter the gem illuminates, indicating that we are one step closer to another fragment of Tyler’s soul.

“Do you guys feel that?” I whisper, stopping everyone with my outstretched arm as I remain still on the steps.

“Yeah. I thought I was the only one,” Scarlet murmurs,

peering around us with a look of paranoia.

The feeling I've had since we started descending the staircase is undeniable—so thick, it's almost palpable. My instincts are on fire, my chest heavy with tension, as alarm bells go off in my head; and it's only getting worse the further we venture down.

We pass by several corridors on the way, each filled with tall piles of human bones and rotten flesh, as if something has been nesting here. The more we travel, the bigger the piles get, indicating that we're getting closer to whatever creature calls this place Home.

As we travel further into the dark and desolate tunnel, a dark-green light illuminates it, showing us that we've reached the end. A nervous chill and static charge surges throughout my cold body, and my chest now feels as if an elephant were sitting atop it.

We soon approach the end, coming into a fully lit corridor. A flame-lit chandelier made of bones and waxy human skin hangs from the ceiling, which is completely covered in rotten meat. The smell upon entering is so foul—like the stench of decaying flesh and sulfur—causing us all to immediately gag.

The soul gem is glowing brighter than ever now, indicating that there is something here with us even though we can't see it; and furthermore, this thing has a piece of Tyler's soul. The air is thick with malice, and I can feel eyes on my back, burning into me with a penetrating gaze.

"Show yourself, demon," I command it, turning around and scanning the area.

"Such arrogance," it scoffs, its evil laugh reverberating throughout the corridor, "to come into such a place—and with so little strength."

"Who's there?" I bellow, extending my nails and fangs as Scarlet and Darren do the same.

"And why would I reveal myself to second-rate demons such as yourselves?" it cackles.

By now my adrenaline is surging through me, my instincts screaming in my head. I can feel this thing right behind me,

breathing on my neck, its breath dripping with a foul and rotten rancor.

I close my eyes in silence, fooling the creature into letting its guard down.

“Victoria, what the hell are you—”

“Sh!” I shush Scarlet with a finger, keeping my eyes closed and concentration up.

Keeping my eyes closed, I focus hard, feeling the demon’s vile energy encircling me, like a shark circling its prey. Coiled and ready to strike, I wait until I feel it before me.

*Now.*

I swing hard, my fist colliding with the hard and calloused flesh of the demon, causing it to let out a pained sound somewhere between a shriek and animalistic roar. Although still invisible, I can hear the demon hit the wall hard, causing the chandelier to swing from the ceiling in its wake.

“It’s corporeal just like the rest of us,” I whisper to the others. “It’s just invisible.”

“Aw, hell no!” Freddy shouts, backing up and hiding behind Darren’s large body like a human shield, causing Darren to roll his eyes and shake his head.

“You might as well show yourself, fiend. I can tell exactly where you’re at either way,” I taunt.

“Can you now? It pains me that you would harm an old friend, Victoria,” it simpers mockingly.

The creature slowly shifts into its material form, allowing us to see a pair of legs and arms that look perfectly human—it doesn’t look demonic at all. Soon its entire form stands before us, causing my breath to hitch in my throat. I step back in total shock, shaking my head at the sight before me.

“Henry?” I murmur, shaking my head in disbelief, my eyes starting to blur with tears. “It can’t be.”

“What’s going on?” Freddy asks confusedly.

“I thought I’d never see you again. What are you doing in here?” I cry, walking towards him with tears streaming down

my face—tears of both joy and sadness.

“Oh my god, it’s really you. I found you!” I hear Scarlet whimper, as she walks straight past me and approaches Henry.

*What the hell? Something’s not right. Scarlet never knew Henry . . .*

My animalistic instincts are telling me to go in for the attack, and my mind is screaming that this is a trap.

“Oh, Adam,” Scarlet utters with joy, choking back her sobs. “I’ve missed you so much.”

Snapping out of my entranced stupor, I feel the energy of the being before me—and it’s not Henry. Henry’s energy was kind and compassionate; this thing’s energy is horrid and evil. I fight the urge to submit to the demon that holds the features of my old love. It may be able to change form, but it can’t manipulate its disgusting aura.

*It’s playing with us—preying on our vulnerabilities and taking on the form of whoever our weakness is.*

My blood boiling, I lunge at “Henry,” claws out and ready to kill it for what it’s done; it will pay for taking such a sacred form.

“No!” Scarlet screams through tears, running to my side and holding me back from the deceptive demon.

I throw her off to the side, charging at the demon with fury. I can smell the demonic ichor that runs through its tainted veins—a horrid stench like sulfur and death.

“Victoria! Stop! Don’t you love me? Why are you doing this to me?” it cries out in Henry’s voice, hoping to be able to trick me like it has Scarlet; but I don’t let up.

I ignore its pained cries and tear into its torso, plunging my fist through its skeletal armor. I open up its chest, gripping its ribs tightly and shattering through them with ferocity. I fervently sink my teeth into its frail neck, causing it to screech in agony as I tear into it with wanton violence.

“I don’t think I’ve ever met your kind, demon. What are

you?” I scream in its face, holding it by the throat with one hand, while my other is plunged elbow-deep into its gut and chest.

“You have never had the pleasure, wench,” it spits, coughing up black blood.

The demon weakens, losing its manipulative ability and finally showing its true form. A frail goblin-esque creature lies before me; his rough and calloused skin is a dark slate-gray, and his limbs are long and gangly, with huge back talons on each finger and toe. Half of his bald head is deformed and lopsided, and he has no ears, which tells me that he usually communicates telepathically. His malachite eyes have slit pupils like a cat, and he has a canine-like snout with rows of sharp, pointed teeth. In all my years, I’ve never seen a demon of this kind before.

The closer I get to it, the brighter the soul gem glows, indicating that this demon definitely has a piece of Tyler’s soul, even though it’s a demon I don’t recognize.

*This must’ve been a demon that plagued Tyler before I met him.*

“Give me back the soul fragment of Tyler Dawson!” I demand, twisting my fist in its gut, causing it to emit an animalistic wail.

“Eat shit, vampire whore,” the demon spits, black blood spilling over its mouth as it laughs manically. “Go ahead and kill me; you’ll never beat all the demons that have plagued your little cursed one. It would take eternity to track them all down—many of them ten times stronger than I am. Face it—your precious Tyler is *doomed*.”

“Well in that case, since you wanna play nice,” I hiss mockingly, before I shove my arm further inside its chest and up its throat, burrowing through until I reach its mouth. Its limp body lifts from the force, its eyes bulging out of its skull as I plunge my hand deeper, stopping when I feel the backs of its green lit eyes at my fingertips. “You won’t live to regret the day you even *thought* of Tyler, you retched, filthy varmint.”

With a forceful shove I push through, his eyeballs now kabobbed onto the tips of my fingernails. Gripping hard, I crush its skull in like a rotten egg, leaving him nothing but a mangled pile of dark-gray and crimson mush.

“Adam,” Scarlet whimpers, falling to her knees in grief as she mourns and cradles the grotesque, slime-ridden body in her arms.

“That’s not Adam,” I murmur, placing my hand on her shaky shoulder.

A blue orb of light drifts up from the demon’s limp body, whirling into the soul gem before the body turns to ash in her grasp.

The soul gem is now glowing brighter than ever, and for the longest it ever has. If I didn’t know any better, I’d swear we’ve collected all the pieces. I can literally feel Tyler’s energy and presence, as if he were right near me.

“Tyler,” I whisper with a smile, clutching the soul gem to my heart. I can literally feel his warmth, as if soothing my worries away.

A sudden mysterious wind blows through the corridor, as the pile of ashes starts to get swept away. Wherever the demon’s ashes blow, the corridor around us begin to fade, the landscape turning into a hellacious forest in which the trees are made of fleshy leaves and bone branches, with fetuses impaled upon them.

“Oh my god,” Freddy murmurs, cupping his hand over his mouth in disgust.

“*God’s not here,*” the wind howls eerily, as if alive and responding to his words.

I stand there, stunned, as every part of the tunnel and corridor starts to disappear, the grotesque new forest taking more and more shape.

A grassy mound covered with thorny and bloody wildflowers soon appears before me—and what I see on top of it freezes me in my tracks . . .

“Tyler?”

## HERESY

“Oh my god, Tyler!” I scream with joy, sprinting towards his still body as fast as my legs will carry me.

“Victoria, wait!” Scarlet beckons me, but I intractably continue to run towards Tyler, further closing the gap between me and my love.

The closer I get, I can see that the thorny blossoms on the flowerbed are actually covered in little barbs that are dripping with blood, and their buds are full of sharp teeth, forming tiny circular mouths.

*I've finally found him! I have Tyler back!*

“Victoria, stop! It could be a trap!” Scarlet yells from behind me, but I'm too lost in my tremendous elation at the sight of Tyler.

It's only when I walk up to his still body that a nagging feeling in my gut starts probing at me.

*The Sisters, the Behemoth, the Mimicker . . . someone's missing. This can't be it.*

And that's when it hits me—the Hollow-eyed Witch.

*How could I forget? How could I be so stupid?*

As I cautiously approach Tyler's limp body, I notice that he's cut all over. Bloody slash marks riddle his arms and legs, his torso eviscerated and bleeding with his entrails pouring out. My instincts are screaming at me not to trust the vision before me, but I can't help myself as I rush towards his body.

"Oh my god, Tyler; what have they done to you?" I cry, choking back my sobs as I start to bend down to reach him.

I'm yanked back by Scarlet just in time, as a massive black tendril-like appendage slams into the ground where I was standing. The huge, wormy limb has a runny texture and glossy sheen, with a thick, fat top and a rounded point at the bottom. I've only ever heard of tendrils being on energy-feeders—entities that psychically drain and feed off the energy, fear and emotions of their human victims.

"He's mine," a shrill voice sounds from the shadows of the forest, as the tendril quickly retracts into the darkness. I look around the dark, vast forest in wide-eyed paranoia, trying to find the source of the voice. "Over here," the voice resonates again, as an eerie wind blows through the trees boney branches, causing the impaled fetuses to howl in pain.

I look up towards the source of the voice to see a little girl sitting on a tree branch. I immediately recognize her trademark tattered white dress and hollow black eyes—the Hollow-eyed Witch.

"I have his soul now, so that piece of him belongs to *me*, to forever be my playmate in this hellish playground. We have so much fun together," she sneers wickedly, trying her best to get under my skin.

"What have you done to Tyler?" I growl, furtively allowing my nails to lengthen behind my back, while my hidden fangs extending underneath my lips, so that I can spring a surprise attack on the little Hell-child.

*Trying to pull a fast one on me, huh? You can't hide anything from*

*me, vampire. I can read your mind.*

I stand there in shock, as the grotesque little girl speaks in my head.

*You want to kill me? Go ahead and try.*

“Oh, I’m not going to ‘try’; I *will*,” I spit with fury, before charging at her like a rabid wolf that’s about to tear into the bleeding throat of its kill.

She immediately darts around me in a blur, flitting across the forest. Every time I try to tackle her, her body seems to almost vanish, before appearing somewhere else in a flash. I try to swing at her again, but she continues to evade my attacks effortlessly, all the while never trying to fight me.

“Stop moving,” I order her, like I did the Behemoth, hoping that my newfound trick will work once again.

“Your little ploy won’t work on me,” she cackles. “There are two flaws in your trick. You can only use it on one soul at a time, and I carry *two*: the human once known as Amber, and of course, my own. The other is that you can only subdue an enemy’s will to *fight*; so long as I pose no will to fight you, you hold no power over me.”

“And why don’t you want to fight me?”

“Because I wish to negotiate for Tyler’s soul,” she utters, suddenly materializing in front of me.

*This has to be a trick. Why would she want to willingly give up Tyler’s soul? There’s nothing I could possibly give her that would interest her that much.*

“It is not a trick, I promise you,” she says in reply to my inner thoughts. “I simply want something that you have, and I have something that you need—win-win.”

“If you’re looking for a soul to replace his, it’s not going to happen. That’s what turned Amber into whatever it is you are,”

I spit with disdain.

“That is not what I seek.”

“Fine, then. What exactly is it that you want?” I ask, both intrigued and apprehensive at her indecent proposal.

“Oh, just a little bite—from *you*.”

“You’re funny, you know that? All that will do is make you stronger and able to kill us all. I fail to see how exactly this benefits me,” I scoff, getting fed up with the go-around I’m getting from this little bitch.

“As *lovely* an idea that is, you do not have to worry about that. I am under strict orders not to harm you.”

“Orders? From who?”

“Trust me, you will meet him soon enough. Oh, and don’t even try seeking him out. You do not find him; he finds *you*,” she says wickedly. “Now do we have a deal? A bit of your venom, for one piece closer to your love’s soul. This is the one and only chance you’ll get.”

“And how do I know you will keep up your end of the bargain?” I question her skeptically.

“Tyler’s soul is of no use to me; I merely have it because I am a demon that plagued him while he was cursed. I merely seek to use it as leverage, in exchange for what I want; and I want vampire venom,” she explains. “Now do we have a deal or not?”

I roll over the thought in my head, at odds with myself as the battle between my mind and heart ensues.

*Don't do it!*

*You have to! Think about Tyler!*

*This is a trick. She's manipulating you. You can't trust her!*

*It's your only chance. You have no choice!*

“Give me your arm,” I utter quickly, before I lose my nerve and change my mind.

“Victoria! I can’t believe you’re actually considering this!” Scarlet shouts with incredulity.

“Neither can I,” I mutter under my breath.

“Now remember, don’t try anything foolish—that goes for your friends too. You’ve already seen that I can easily slip from your grasp if need be, and once I do, there’s no negotiating. You’ll never be able to catch me after that, and you will never get his whole soul back.”

“*Alright*,” I hiss through clenched teeth, annoyed at the fact that this bitch is in complete control right now, and that I’m having to submit to her. “We have a deal.”

“Perfect,” she says mischievously, rubbing her bloody hands together. “Now, on your knees, bitch.”

“You have got to be kidding,” I snipe, eyeing her speculatively.

“I’m 100% serious. Do you want his soul back or not?”

My wounded pride and ego hangs in the balance, as I stare down at the very floor that I am about to be kneeling on—staring down at those ugly, crusty, tiny, taloned feet that I’m about to be kneeling before.

“Victoria, don’t—” Scarlet starts.

“Stay out of this, all of you!” I snap, turning back to face the Witch as I reluctantly get down on my knees, eyeing her with complete and utter hate.

“That’s a good girl,” she sneers, peering down at me with her arms crossed, looking awfully satisfied with herself.

She shoves her arm to my mouth forcefully, commanding me to bite. Grabbing her frail little arm, I hesitantly bring it to my lips. I then bite down hard, sinking my fangs into her flesh and injecting the venom right away, so as not to suck any of her blood in my system. She tastes bitter, sour, and rotten, all at the same time—like bile, death, and cod-liver oil.

A minute later I pull away in disgust, spitting the vile, bitter taste of her out of my mouth and onto the floor, creating a slimy black puddle that starts to move on its own, before it sucks back to her body.

“Your turn,” I utter, glaring at her with hate.

“He’s all yours,” she hisses. “Well, at least the part that I possess, that is.”

She walks over to Tyler’s body and hovers her hand above

it, causing the body to transform into a glowing blue light. The radiant cerulean orb starts to swirl and spark as it floats into the air, before it suctions into the soul gem, making us one step closer to having all of Tyler's soul.

“And since you were such a good sport, I'll give you a little tidbit of information: there's only one shard left for you to find before Tyler's soul is complete. Getting your hands on it, however—well, that's a different story,” she says coldly, an evil grin across her face.

She turns around and starts to walk off, her tattered sundress blowing in the howling wind, before turning around to face us once more.

“Oh, and Victoria? He'll be coming for you soon; and trust me—you haven't seen *anything* yet.”

## VIOLENCE

*“You haven’t seen anything yet.”*

Her cryptic words play over and over again in my head.

*“He will find you.”*

Who is this mysterious and elusive “he,” and why would “he” give the Witch strict orders *not* to kill us? Furthermore, how powerful does this entity have to be to be able to control potent demons as if they were merely his unruly school children?

She said there was only one piece left of Tyler’s soul that we needed to collect; by deduction, it *has to* be from the Soul Eater. If that’s the case, then we have one hell of a battle ahead of us.

I steeple my fingers to my forehead, closing my eyes in deep thought.

“What’s on your mind?” Scarlet asks softly.

“What do you think about what she said?” I whisper dryly, my brow furrowed in consternation.

“The Hollow-eyed Bitch? I don’t know,” Scarlet trails off, plucking one of the tiny, barbed bloody flowers from the ground and rolling it between her fingers. “Personally, I think that she’s full of shit, and that this is all just a ploy—some *scheme* she’s cooked up to not only get you to not kill her, but

to give her venom, make her stronger, and then have *you* literally beg *her* to do it.”

“Yeah, the irony is not lost on me with that one. I still can’t believe I did that,” I mutter in shame, my confidence waning as I avert my gaze to the area of the ground I was just kneeling at moments ago.

“The Victoria I know doesn’t let *anyone* jerk her around—especially some little demon bitch like that. I think you just got too caught up in wanting to get Tyler back. You really do love him, don’t you?”

“I really do, Scarlet,” I choke, as I furtively turn away to hide my escaping tears. “I’m so sorry I’ve put all of you through this.”

“There, there,” she consoles me, awkwardly patting me on the back. Emotion and empathy have never been Scarlet’s strong suits. “Don’t worry. We’ll have this all figured out soon enough, okay? We came here for Tyler, and we aren’t leaving until we have him—*all* of him.”

I nod solemnly, wiping my tears away with the back of my hand, while Darren and Freddy stand by the wayside as the discomfited outsiders to the conversation.

An hour passes by as we all wait around for this mystery man; but so far, there’s no sign of anything or anyone.

*Maybe Scarlet was right; maybe the Witch was lying, and all we’ve done is given her exactly what she wanted, and then given her a huge head-start to escape from us before we finally realized it.*

Another long, drawn-out hour later, we decide to cut our losses. There is clearly no ‘mystery man,’ and no one is coming.

“Alright guys, we’ve been had; and all we’ve done is waste two hours that we could’ve been using to find Tyler,” I sigh. “Let’s g—”

I’m interrupted when a loud vibration starts to resonate throughout the forest. Suddenly, the air gets immensely heavy—so heavy that it feels as if we’re trying to make our way through sludge. A static charge starts to build around us,

surging with an almost palpable current of malice and evil. Any small bit of light there is starts to fade, as darkness slowly overtakes us like a thick, wet blanket.

“Oh shit,” Freddy murmurs, as he slowly backs up and ducks behind Darren.

The great shadowy mass engulfs everything in its path, slowly encircling us with the expert prowess of a high predator, leaving us no way of escape.

Just as soon as it came, the shadow suddenly starts to vanish; but the air is still heavy. It *appears* that whatever was here has gone, but my vision is blazing orange, and I can still feel it lingering in the air—watching us, observing us, just waiting for the perfect opportunity to strike.

The shadow vanishes completely, revealing an enormous ancient ruin in its wake. With its tall, stacked appearance and thick, porous, stone-slab structure, it is highly reminiscent of the old Mayan and Aztec dwellings used for worship and sacrifices. A tall, narrow doorway in line of giant support columns marks the front, along with three massive gray marble statues of almost identical demonic-looking creatures, which stand proud at the entrance, as if pets or guardians.

I step forward to get a closer look, when I notice that they’re not just any demons—they look almost identical to the Soul Eater. One of them is a spitting image of a picture Tyler once drew for me of the hellacious creature, and the other two are very similar to it. They are almost indistinguishable from each other, except for a few small, minute differences.

I peer up at the roof, trying to get a better idea of how big the building really is, but it’s so high up that it seems to disappear into the sky itself. I cautiously walk around the perimeter to scope it out, when a long border of ancient, archaic symbols wrapped around the outside walls suddenly catches my attention. I immediately recognize them as the same symbols that were on the paper from the Elders—the same ones that we had to draw on the bomb shelter’s walls to open the portal.

We all eye the impressive edifice in awe, gazing up at its tall

and imposing structure. I take a few steps towards the narrow doorway, when I notice the soul gem glowing bright blue around my neck, indicating that whatever has Tyler's soul fragment is in the old and foreboding temple.

I start to advance toward the doorway, when Freddy pulls on my shoulder.

"Haven't we learned the hard way that this could be a trap?" he questions me anxiously.

"Yeah, but what else are we supposed to do?" I reply, gesturing towards the glowing soul gem around my neck. "Tyler's soul is in there, which means we have to go in there anyway. We don't exactly have a choice."

"Don't worry, Victoria; we've got your back," Scarlet reassures with a smile, placing a firm hand on my shoulder.

We warily enter the temple, putting us in a large, vast room. It's completely barren and empty, other than a few lit torches along the walls and the almost palpable and foul stench of rot and decaying flesh.

I suddenly freeze in place when I hear a soft jingling. I listen vigilantly, heightening my hearing to locate the source of the sound, which seems to be coming from above us. I look up in shock to find endless rows of dead and decaying corpses wrapped in barbed wire and chains hanging from the ceiling. Perfectly still and with their mouths twisted agape, they appear frozen in time, forever bound in the thorny chains of their own hellish nightmare.

"What kind of sick fuck considers this interior decorating?" Freddy snipes.

Suddenly, one of the bodies spasms, causing us all to immediately tense and jump back. I gaze up at the ceiling in disbelief to see the corpses writhing and moaning in their enchained prison, the jingling and clanging sound of the metal chains reverberating throughout the temple's austere stone walls.

"Oh my god. It's like they're dead, but brought back to life," Scarlet murmurs, covering her mouth in disgust. "Like glorified zombies."

“Necromancy,” I whisper under my breath, as I guardedly make my way across the room and to a large, vacant hall.

*Anyone that can do such a thing is extremely powerful . . . There's no way we're prepared for this.*

“Tread lightly, guys. Be extremely care—”

Before I can finish, a large shadow takes out Scarlet, causing her to go flying through the air and onto the ground, which crumbles beneath the force of her fall.

“Scarlet!” Darren cries as he runs to her aid, but he only gets a few steps before he too is pummeled into the ground by another dark shadowy tendril.

I watch in wonderment as the dark and foggy forms dance around the room, like shadowy flames of hellfire. They begin whirl-pooling together, funneling to the ground and seeping into the cracks like thick tar. The temple then starts to quake violently, the ground cracking and splitting apart, causing all of the corpses on the ceiling to suddenly scream and wail in unison, as if they can sense something is coming. We all shield our ears in pain from the ear-shattering screams, whilst trying to keep our balance in the rumbling ruin.

Within a second, all of the commotion ceases, leaving the room dead quiet. Even the writhing bodies have stopped their moans, frozen in place with their mouths twisted in horror.

Suddenly, the silence is permeated by a feral growl that seems to be coming from the darkness of the room itself. A jarring cacophony of noises erupts from the shadows, like a symphony of shrieks and visceral roars, causing the room to vibrate and rumble with its resonance. A giant shadowy claw with long black talons bursts through the ground, soon followed by another. The humungous claws grip onto each side of the gaping crack in the ground, the creature starting to pull itself up and onto the surface.

Soon, a monstrous black head emits from the pit, followed by two gargantuan leathery bat wings. The second it surfaces, it immediately glares at me and the glowing gem around my neck,

as if it's magnetically attracted to it. It penetrates me with its hateful gaze, its eyes glowing blood-red as if in response to the glow of the soul gem, while a loud hiss emanates from its mouth.

"What the *fuck* is that?" Freddy screams, recoiling away in fear.

"It's the Soul Eater," I mouth, but it comes out nothing more than an inaudible, shaky whisper.

When it turns to look at Freddy, I notice that it has six horns: four on the back of its head, and two larger ones emitting from the top.

*I could've sworn that the Soul Eater only had two horns in Tyler's drawing; and I don't remember it having any wings either.*

The air is so thick and heavy, it's as if I'm trying to fight through quicksand. Never in my entire un-life have I ever been in the presence of a demon this powerful; even the Behemoth's air wasn't this heavy. Its mere presence *is* fear.

I suddenly catch the Soul Eater's deadly rubicund gaze on Scarlet, as a long black tendril slowly starts to unfurl from the beast's back.

"Scarlet! Look out!" I scream, trying to run to her.

Darren jumps in front of her like a human shield, pushing her out of the way right as the Soul Eater lunges in her direction.

"Darren! No!" Scarlet shrieks, right as a huge claw plunges elbow-deep into Darren's chest.

"Run," Darren barely manages to whisper, as frothy blood bubbles up over his lips at his last utterance.

We watch helplessly as the dark shadows along the wall all drive into Darren's limp body simultaneously, eviscerating and shredding him apart from the inside-out. Darren slowly turns to dust in the clutches of the Soul Eater's deathly grasp, leaving nothing but a glowing orb of blue light behind, while Scarlet despairingly falls to her knees in shock and devastation.

The demon opens its mouth wide, the blue light suctioning

into its toothy abyss as it devours the only thing that is left of Darren—his soul.

A long ear-shattering scream emits from Scarlet as she jumps to her feet, shifting mid-air into her true vampire form for the very first time, for no reason other than pure *rage*. Freddy stares at her in shock and fear, as Scarlet's hair turns stark white, her skin becoming thin and translucent, as dark, purple veins start to spring up all over her body like gnarled roots.

Her nails lengthen the longest I've ever seen them, as her entire body shakes and trembles in fury, her breathing ragged and disjointed. She rushes towards the Soul Eater, her blood-orange eyes alight with utter hate, when Freddy suddenly tackles her to the ground.

"Let me go!" she roars at him ferociously, his body pinning hers to the floor.

"No! You know this is a suicide mission! It's a losing battle, and I won't let you do something foolish and end up dead as long as I can help it! We have to go—*now!*" he screams. "Or do you want to end up like your friend there?"

Although Scarlet could easily escape his grasp, she doesn't try. Her facade of fury and anger quickly melts away at the utterance of Darren's name, showing her true sad and broken interior underneath.

"Darren . . ." she sobs in a whisper, dropping her arms and giving up, as tears start to stream down her face.

I suddenly see another deadly wave of shadows crawling their way, but before I can say or do anything, the murky tendrils rain down on them with a loud crash, covering their bodies in a cloud of dust and debris.

"No," I whisper, shaking my head in disbelief.

I fall to my knees in defeat, shattering and coming undone.

*They're dead, and they're all dead because of me. I'm the reason they came here, and their lives were given in a fruitless and futile battle—my battle.*

*I should've known better. This was my fight. I shouldn't have let them*

*come here . . .*

A rogue tear escapes my eye and trickles down my cheek at the sobering thought. I start to question whether or not I should even fight back at this point. I no longer have any reason left to live, and everyone I've ever loved is dead because of me—Henry, Caleb, Jacob, Tyler, Darren, and now Scarlet and Freddy.

*My love is a curse. I don't deserve to live.*

I'm about to willingly walk straight in to the clutches of the beast, when I see the dust clear, revealing Freddy and Scarlet's bodies. A bright shield of light is encompassing them, like an opalescent, transparent bubble. The cloak of light all around them appears to be shooting straight out from Freddy's arm, which is still up in the air in the exact place it was when he had raised it to shield them from the Soul Eater.

I can see Scarlet and Freddy staring at the radiant bubble of light around them in complete and utter awe, while the Soul Eater stands before them in confusion, getting more and more infuriated by the second.

Suddenly, it sprints their way, trying to penetrate the luminescent shield. When its claws make contact with it, a bright spark illuminates the room, causing the demon to go flying several feet back, roaring in pain as it crashes to the wall with a loud thud.

Freddy puts his arm down, causing the shield to flicker out before he collapses in exhaustion, hugging his crippled arm to his body. I immediately rush to their side, to find that Freddy's arm is completely fractured and severed in two, the jagged bone piercing out through the middle of his forearm, hanging in a hammock of loose, bloody skin.

"We need to go—now!" I scream.

Scarlet throws Freddy over her shoulder, following closely behind me, but a loud roar stops us in our tracks. We turn around to see the Soul Eater back up, roaring with fury and

more angry than ever. It starts to charge at us, when an omnipresent voice resonates from the darkness.

“Stop,” the deep, authoritative voice commands, its calm tone surrounding us.

The Soul Eater immediately ends its assault, obediently standing off to the wayside as if awaiting further orders. We all look around us in confusion, trying to find the source of the powerful voice.

Suddenly, a tall figure with glowing red eyes descends from the ceiling. Dressed in an off-white robe with gold trim and a white inverted cross on the lower chest, it is wearing armor made of bones underneath and a war helmet covered in spikes on its head, giving the illustrious and ethereal creature an air of being a prestigious warrior or royalty.

Its skin is a charred orange, and its craggy face is laden with deep sienna cracks and wrinkles. Two long gazelle-like horns protrude from its forehead, and long, straight white hair falls into mounds around its pointed ears and broad shoulders. It’s extremely tall, regal and muscular, towering over each of us by several feet, its horns grazing the corpse-laden ceiling.

The calm but intimidating entity lowers itself down between us and the Soul Eater, its bony sandal-clad feet finally touching the floor. Although incredibly threatening, the being exudes an aura of calm, strength and wisdom, as if it’s older than time itself.

“I am not here to hurt you,” it bellows deeply, its glowing red eyes suddenly turning completely black, as it cages its long, thin fingers neatly together in front of it.

“W-who are you?” I stutter, as I slowly start backing away in fear of the aura being given off by this all-powerful and numinous being.

“The source of all your problems.”

“I said, who *are* you?” I demand once again.

“I am Saffron.”

## TREACHERY

Saffron.

The one who started this all; the source of the curse.

*Did he really just say what I think he said?*

“What?” I ask absentmindedly in disbelief, as the soul gem around my neck illuminates my face from below, glowing brighter than it ever has before in the presence of this ominous being. “It can’t be—”

“I speak the truth. I am the arch-demon, Saffron—in the flesh,” he says deeply. “And you are?”

“Victoria,” I choke, barely able to put together a sentence as I stand before the powerful and unnerving entity. He nods curtly, peering over my shoulder at Scarlet and Freddy behind me. “Oh, they’re with me.”

“Come,” he commands, as he turns around and waves his hand in front of the wall, causing it to ripple and magically open before us. “And there will be no need for your true vampire forms, so I insist that you shift back. I mean you no harm.”

Scarlet and I look at each other apprehensively, unsure if we should be listening to this demon, or if we should be trying to

kill it. Scarlet raises an eyebrow at me and nods in the being's direction, insinuating a surprise attack.

Shaking my head at her, I silently mouth, "*No*," deciding that picking a fight with a demon as powerful as Saffron wouldn't be a wise choice. This being is far too powerful to beat on our own, and doing so would probably be a one-second battle—a battle that we would lose.

We quickly revert back to our human forms before we follow, keeping our eyes on the angry Soul Eater as we pass by it. It glares at us with fury, eyeing us hungrily as it licks its black lips. A low, rumbling growl resonates from its throat as Freddy passes, causing him to jump back in fear.

"Enough, Agony!" Saffron reprimands the Soul Eater, hushing the demon instantly as if it were a bad dog barking in the presence of company.

"*Agony*?" Scarlet mouths silently to me as she arches her eyebrows in questioning, to which I respond with a tentative shrug.

Freddy watches his back as he cautiously passes the demon and follows behind us, gripping onto Scarlet as if his life depended on it.

We enter into a small hall to find a fat, ugly creature holding a scythe standing guard at the door adjacent to us. Its stout limbs are thick and short, and its skin is pale and slimy with a sickly light-gray tint. It has very round but simple features, with a large, bulbous head that sits atop its neckless shoulders, and a humungous belly that protrudes outward.

Covered in ragged stitching and sutures as if it's been patched together, the unusual creature looks like some kind of abominable manmade Frankensteinian creation. It does nothing but stare at us blankly, its thick lips pulled into an indifferent downturned frown.

"Ignore the abominations that wander here. I'm more or less a scientist at heart," Saffron says with a smile, as he leads us past the unsightly being and into another room. "Although, I prefer the term *organic engineer*."

The disheveled room looks like the den of a mad scientist.

Its shelves are cluttered with endless rows of old, dusty books, and assorted glass jars of organs, brains, and mutant-looking fetuses floating in formaldehyde. There's an operating table covered in bloody rags situated on the left of the room, along with several aluminum trays holding different knives, scalpels and torturous looking devices.

A large wooden table stands in the middle of the room, littered with various odds and ends and strange appliances. There's a giant hourglass with sand in it sitting in the center, surrounded by numerous open grimoirs, an assorted variety of skulls, and beakers, flasks and Bunsen burners galore.

"Come. Sit," he commands, gesturing for us to sit at the table.

"Not the most verbose guy in the world, is he?" Freddy whispers mockingly under his breath.

"Are you going to heal yourself any time soon, boy? You're getting blood all over my table," Saffron snaps, as he crosses his boney arms and eyes Freddy impatiently.

"I'm not a vampire. I can't do that," Freddy murmurs, clutching his broken arm close to his body.

"Well, you're a mage, are you not? So stop being rude and playing games, and heal your damn arm already—or I'll rip it off," he growls, his glossy black eyes briefly flashing red again for a moment.

"Freddy, heal your arm for god's sake," I hiss at him, my brow furrowed in alarm as I furtively nod my head and gesture towards Saffron, who is quickly losing his patience.

"I can't. I don't know how!" he whines, a disconcerted expression on his face.

Saffron's interest suddenly piques. As he strokes his chin and stares at Freddy, it seems as if he's experienced a sudden revelation. "Was that shield your first attempt at magic?" Saffron asks curiously as he leans towards Freddy.

"I don't even know what that *was*. I was just trying to protect Scarlet from the demon," Freddy explains, his eyes darting back and forth between me and Saffron.

Saffron continues stroking his chin in deep thought as he

intently looks Freddy over. “Intriguing,” Saffron whispers, idly tapping his skeletal looking fingers on the table before turning to face me. “Who is this boy?”

“He’s a human. He wasn’t supposed to come with us into Hell; it was an accident,” I mutter.

“Well, you girls lucked out. He’s not entirely human, which saved both of your lives from my little pet.”

“Pet?” I question, my bemused expression reflected on both Scarlet and Freddy’s faces.

“Oh, I’m sorry; I believe you know it as a *Soul Eater*,” Saffron replies impassively. “Allow me to apologize for Agony. Between him and his brothers, he’s definitely the most ruthless and unruly of the bunch.”

Scarlet and I stare at each other utterly dumfounded, as if unable to compute what we’ve just heard.

“Wait, hold on,” I utter, my eyebrow arched in shock. “I thought that there was only one Soul Eater. Hell, I thought that’s what its name was.”

“No, my dear; they are just a breed of demon, created by none other than yours truly, of course. Unfortunately, Agony is obviously far too powerful for me to send to Earth to fetch my cursed souls; there’d be nothing left by the time he got back,” Saffron chuckles, as if talking about his endearing child rather than a vicious soul-eating demon. “No, I use Pain and Despair for that. Despair is the one that your Tyler is all too familiar with.”

*Pets? Brothers? What the hell is this—the demonic Brady Bunch? The Soul Eaters and Saffron all under one roof—one big happy Hell family.*

*I can’t believe this.*

Saffron eyes Scarlet speculatively, who is glaring at him with a pointed, contemptuous stare. She looks as if she’s about to blow her top.

“What’s her problem?” Saffron asks me, nodding in Scarlet’s direction.

“My *problem* is that this is the second time I’ve lost someone I love with your name being involved; not to mention your little *pep* killed Darren!” she screams scathingly, her blood boiling and her eyes reddening with rage at the sheer mention of Darren’s name.

“Mhm. Right,” he mumbles cavalierly, as he raises his hand before her.

At the raising of his hand, Scarlet’s mouth immediately shuts, causing an angry look of confusion to spread across her face. She tries to speak, but it comes out as nothing but unintelligible and tightlipped gibberish, as if her mouth is glued shut.

“Damn! You have the power to shut Scarlet up? That is awesome!” Freddy shouts enthusiastically, eliciting an angry “*You’re on my shit-list!*” glare from Scarlet. “Now that’s a power I could get used to! Teach me that!”

“Pay attention, you ignorant little child,” Saffron reviles at Scarlet. “You and *Darren* came here on your own accord; no one forced you to. Lesson of the day: Don’t play with fire unless you expect to get burned. Now, off with you,” he flicks his finger, causing a stunned Scarlet to go flying up in the air and through a swirling portal in the wall.

“Scarlet!” I scream, running toward the portal; but it immediately closes. I futilely pound my fists on the wall, but it’s rock solid, and Scarlet is long gone. Seething with fury, my fists clenched at my sides, I turn to Saffron. “What did you do?!”

He waves two fingers at me, forcing me to sit back down. “Calm down, child. I merely sent her back to wherever it was you opened the gates to Hell. Don’t worry, she is safe; she is just not needed here anymore.”

“What do you want from me?!” I scream indignantly.

“We will get to that in due time; but right now, I want to talk about your little mage friend here,” he says, gesturing towards Freddy.

“Who, me?” Freddy asks with incredulity.

“Yes, you. You are a type of Magi,” Saffron explains to

Freddy. “Of the Magi, there are three subcategories: animas, warlocks, and necromancers. Each of them draw their magic and powers—whatever they may be—from either the light or the dark, to be used for either good or bad, respectively. In Freddy’s case, he is what is called a light anima, which can channel and draw on life and light energy, and focus it to use for protection and healing purposes,” Saffron stretches his arm across the table to Freddy, open-palmed. “Give me your hand.”

Freddy hesitates, eyeing the being’s large hand and long, spindly fingers. After a few seconds, he tentatively places his hand in Saffron’s, a look of complete consternation on his sweat-ridden face. They sit hand-in-hand in silence for a few moments, before Saffron finally releases him.

“I have just bridged the gap between your mind and your magic,” Saffron explains to Freddy. “You don’t have full use of your abilities yet. You’ll still need practice for that; but for now, you should be able to heal your arm.” Freddy looks at Saffron in confusion, then back down at this arm, unsure of what to do. “Concentrate and focus, and picture your arm how it was before, when it wasn’t broken,” Saffron elaborates, as if a teacher instructing his new student. “Go on, give it a try.”

Freddy focuses on his arm, staring at it with the utmost concentration, biting his bottom lip as his brow furrows with intensity. Two minutes later, Freddy’s arm still isn’t healed, causing him to sigh in frustration. “I’m not going to be able to do this,” Freddy finally murmurs exasperatedly, as he gazes down at his arm. As if on command, the bones in his arm suddenly begin snapping back in place, forming together until his arm is completely healed. “Whoa!” he yells as he stares at his arm in amazement, bending it back and forth and wiggling his fingers in front of his face.

“Now that you’re taken care of, you need to leave as well,” Saffron tells Freddy, as he raises a bony finger and opens a portal on the wall, like he did for Scarlet. “Victoria and I have some business to discuss.”

Before Freddy can object, he is sucked into the portal,

leaving me and the intimidating arch-demon alone.

“Now, what do you want?” I demand, as I cross my arms and pout like a petulant child at the fact that I’m no longer the coolest kid on the playground. “Let’s cut the shit. I know that you know why I’m here.”

“Straight to the point? Very well, then,” Saffron replies. “There’s a war coming, and you and Tyler are caught right in the middle of it. I’ve had no luck on finding out what’s going on above the surface, but from what I’ve gleaned, the signs of the Great War and the end of times are all there: mass murders, poverty, the evil and tyrannical in power, sightings of extremely powerful demons that usually never escape the Circles of Hell . . . It’s not good. The Earth plane will be seeing its devastating end quite soon. The war is coming, and it’s coming full force. Tyler is going to have a huge target on his back because of what he is now, as will you. You both are going to need my protection.”

“I don’t understand. What’s in this for you?”

“You scratch my back, I scratch yours. During this interim, I’m going to need someone to keep tabs for me as to what’s going on above the surface leading up to the war. I believe Tyler can be my eyes and ears for what’s going on up top. In return, you will both have my protection and army backing you up.”

“Mhm,” I reply brusquely, eyeing him skeptically as I lean back. “And how do you know it’s not just one of your own that’s causing all this? Maybe it’s your bosom buddy Lucifer and his crew that are up there slaughtering everyone for shits and giggles.”

“You’d think that would be the case, but Lucifer has supposedly been dead for almost a thousand years.”

“What? The Devil is dead? Isn’t that the ultimate result of the Apocalypse? Good triumphs over evil, and all evil is banished from the Earth? For that matter, then shouldn’t all demons be gone from the Earth and everything be Paradise?”

“My point exactly. If the Devil is truly dead, then why is evil still present and roaming the Earth plane? I have my

suspicious that he may still be alive and well somewhere, in which case, my rule here is threatened; and let's just say, Hell isn't big enough for the both of us. This is my kingdom, and I won't have anyone taking it away from me—not even the Devil himself.”

“Okay; but why Tyler? Why not send one of your little minions or Soul Eaters to do your dirty work, hm?” I retort.

“As much as I love my little pets, they can't be trusted. If the Devil were to offer them a better deal and greater power, I know they'd probably take it in a heartbeat. I need someone pure of heart—someone loyal and noble who won't succumb to the evil and tempting force that is the Devil—and to me, that person is Tyler.”

“And what exactly makes you think that he'll even want to help you in the first place?”

“Other than the fact that I'm offering my protection and about to willingly hand over the last piece of his soul to you? Well, that's easy. I'll have Agony pay his loved ones a visit, and you know how *insatiable* and unpredictable he can be,” Saffron laughs. “Not to mention that if the wrong side wins this war, *all* demons will be wiped off the Earth—that includes you and Tyler. Trust me, Tyler will come around if he knows what's good for him. This is a win-win for all of us, and he'd be wise to accept.”

“And what part do I play in all this?”

“With your help, he'll go down the right channels to get the answers I seek. All I need from you is to convince him that it's in his best interest.”

I eye him with intensity, thinking about his dubious proposal and rolling over the various options in my head; and at this point, there are none. Saffron has the last piece of Tyler's soul, and he is far too powerful to beat. The only way I'm getting Tyler back and getting out of here is to play by his rules and his terms.

*I hope this isn't going to come back to bite me in the ass.*

“So, do we have a deal?” he questions, extending his hand out to me. “Can I count on you?”

“I’ll sway him over,” I finally concede, growing more and more anxious by the second to get Tyler’s soul back and get the hell out of dodge. I extend my pale hand out to shake his, sealing the deal to our fate.

“Good. You’re a wise woman, Victoria. You have made the right choice,” he opens his hand, and soon a light flickers in his upturned palm, transforming into a dazzling blue orb. “As promised.”

As I watch the last bit of Tyler’s soul suction into the soul gem around my neck, it gleams a brilliant cerulean blue; except this time, it doesn’t stop glowing, and burns brighter than ever before. I can literally feel Tyler’s essence—his sweet, kind heart with me again.

*I did it. I really did it. I’ve got Tyler back.*

Saffron waves his hand, causing a swirling portal to open up in the wall. I stand up triumphantly, clutching the soul gem close to my heart as I walk to vortex, unable to wipe the ear-splitting grin off my face—until a sobering thought enters my mind.

“Are *you* on *our* side?” I turn around to ask him hesitantly.

“I’m on *my* side; but the enemy of my enemy is my friend,” he utters, and the last thing I see is a mischievous glint in his coal-black eyes, before I feel myself get sucked into the portal and out of Hell.

## REQUIEM OF THE BEAST

All sound ceases as I begin to lose any semblance of reality. Amnesia and ego loss overcome me as I weightlessly fly through endless and all-encompassing space, becoming one with the inertia and pure, dark nothingness that surrounds me. I begin to lose memory of Saffron, the trip to Hell, the demons, the portal . . . soon I can't even remember my own name. All I know is that I exist, and that I simply *am*.

Time disappears, as seconds and hours and years collide, all becoming one in the same. It's as if I'm in some strange in-between—a desolate limbo between two worlds in which nothing else exists; nothing else matters. Everything of importance vanishes from my mind in my primal state, leaving me with only my intrinsic sense of being.

I'm stirred from my reverie when I come crashing out the other side of the centrifugal force, abrasively catapulting me back into time and life. Within seconds, my mind recollects everything: the journey, my resolute cause, the deal with Saffron, the portal; and it's as if I'm waking up from a long sleep.

I stare around me in confusion, stunned and foggy. I'm back where it all started, in the bomb shelter where we did the ritual, the heat from the portal still fresh and scorching my

back.

“Give her a minute. It’s extremely overwhelming. It took me a while to recollect myself when I first came back too,” Scarlet murmurs to Freddy.

I rub my head in disorientation, squinting my eyes at the jarring bright light that assaults my seemingly newborn eyes. Staring around me, I can see the mirrors, the bloody symbols on the wall, and Scarlet and Freddy eyeing me questioningly.

“Victoria, are you alright?” Scarlet asks, placing a hand on my shoulder. “I know; the portal back to here from Hell is not the same.”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I mumble in a stupor, still trying to pull myself together and back into this world.

“Thank god you’re alright. Do you remember everything?”

“Yeah . . .” I trail off, as several centuries worth of memories come flooding back to me at rapid-fire.

“You got the last piece, I assume?” Freddy asks.

I peer down at the soul gem, and remember the deal I made with Saffron. For a brief moment, I panic, wondering if I made the right choice in my state of desperation. Scarlet was right; my over-eager determinedness to get Tyler back has clouded my judgment, and on more than one occasion.

I dangle the necklace with the glowing gem from my fingers, showing them that I have Tyler’s entire soul.

“How on Earth did you get it? Saffron was insanely powerful,” Scarlet says in disbelief.

“He gave it to me,” I reply, as I slowly stagger up and get my bearings.

“What? Why?”

“It’s a long story. I’ll tell you later. Right now we’ve got to get this back to Tyler’s body,” I say with haste.

The howls and pained cries of the damned stop me in my tracks, as I turn around to see that the portal is still wide open. I can smell the putrid stench of decaying flesh and sulfur, and feel the scorching heat of hellfire charring my glacial skin.

“We can take it from here, Freddy. You can go home,” Scarlet tells him, before giving him an awkward smile and hug.

“Oh, and thanks for your help—all of it.”

He blushes a bit, a bemused expression on his face from Scarlet’s sudden change of heart. “You sure?” he asks.

“Yeah, we’ve got this.”

“Alright. Well, I guess keep me posted on what happens with Tyler,” he replies. “Good luck.”

Smiling tiredly, Freddy waves and bids us goodbye before cranking the door open and heading out into the cold night air.

“So, what’s the plan?” Scarlet asks.

“I’m not quite sure,” I murmur apprehensively. “The Elders were clear on what I had to do to *get* the fragments of Tyler’s soul, but they weren’t exactly clear on what happens *after* I collect all the fragments.”

“Do we need to find him and somehow get it back inside him, or will it just magically go where it’s supposed to?” she asks unsurely.

“I don’t know,” I mumble under my breath, staring down at the glowing crystal in wonderment.

All of a sudden, the glowing fades; and soon, it extinguishes altogether. We both look at each other in confusion, as I try not to let the nagging worry in my gut get to me.

“Um, was that supposed to happen?” Scarlet asks.

“I really wish Hisoka and Ayaka were more clear,” I sigh, as I inspect the soul gem, rolling it between my fingers.

“What should we do?”

“We should probably start by closing the gate,” I mutter, walking past Scarlet to the rippling, swirling vortex in the wall. “If we wipe away the pentagram, it should close, right?”

A loud hiss and eerie wail suddenly emits from the gate, freezing us in place.

“You might want to start rubbing. That doesn’t sound far away . . . or small,” Scarlet says shakily.

I quickly smear the bloody pentagram away, but the gate remains, whirlpooling faster and faster as the threatening screech gets louder. I look over worriedly at Scarlet, then at the vortex as I back away in fear and trepidation, not knowing what’s coming for us, nor what to do about it.

“What do we do?” she asks worriedly.

“Go get Hisoka and Ayaka! Hurry up!”

Scarlet dashes out of the bomb shelter, leaving me all alone at the mouth of Hell. I squat down on the floor, anxiously biting down on my thumbnail as I vigilantly watch the portal. I finally summon up enough courage to peer into the dark abyss; and I regret it immediately.

I look into the mouth of oblivion to find a gigantic crimson-colored serpent with a long forked tongue and scaly, leathery wings running down its back. The beast screeches at the sight of me, intently slithering towards me with expert prowess. Its size is *huge*—easily taller than ten of the bomb shelters stacked upon each other, and its length is four times as long.

I reel backward, shifting into my true vampire form in preparation for the hellacious creature. The closer it approaches, the more I can see just how gargantuan it really is. The winged beast, which I formerly thought was a dark crimson shade, is actually not at all; its skin is scaly and translucent, and the rubicund cast to its skin is actually blood rushing underneath its skin at warped speed.

It crashes violently against the portal’s opening, causing huge cracks to splinter through the wall around it. I extend my claws in preparation as I bend lithely at the knees, trying my best to feign confidence in the presence of this intimidating creature.

The serpentine hellion charges the hole, trying to burst from its world into ours; but its immense size makes its efforts futile. I’m about to attack, when suddenly, the demon stops its assault and backs away, leaving me perplexed.

I look down to see blood seeping up from the ground, pooling up and puddling all over the floor. Like with the Behemoth, the red pools start to collect, as the blood begins to form and take shape.

“Oh my god. That’s how it’s crossing over . . . the blood,” I murmur to myself, backing away from the widening hole in the bomb shelter wall.

I realize that this is a futile battle and bolt for the door, rushing outside and running as fast as my legs will allow. I hear a loud crash and the sound of tearing metal, and turn around just in time to see the beast tearing through the bomb shelter's roof, uprooting the ground with it in a violent cataclysm.

It advances towards me in a frenzy, its eyes set on me with a sick, determined rapacity. It snaps at my heels as I weave in and out of the flaming trees, determined to obliterate and eviscerate me. It's so close that I can feel its hot breath deflecting off my back.

I quickly leap to the side, rolling as I come crashing down onto the ground, barely avoiding the destruction of the beast's massive jaws by a hair. When I look up to gaze at my surroundings, I see the entire forest aflame, the rolling hills engulfed in black fire, and the burnt, ashy trees drenched in blood.

*Something went wrong with the crossing. It's like Hell is coming here, as if the mere presence of this creature has brought Hell on Earth. What kind of a being can do such a thing?*

The trees and flora all shrivel up and die, turning into ash as they get swept up into the smoky scarlet sky.

In one last futile effort, I jump through the air and behind the beast, ricocheting off a tree before coming in for a landing right beside it. Whilst running alongside its long body, I pull and drag my claws through its long torso, splitting it down the side as I go. The creature shrieks in pain, hissing viciously before it coils itself around me, constricting me in its bone-breaking embrace. I shove my claw elbow-deep into its body, ensuring my release; but all I've done is really, *really* piss it off.

I decide that this is a losing battle and sprint towards the woods for safety, but its three-pronged tail crashes into me from the side, flinging me against a tree trunk. I feel a sudden, excruciating pain, and look down to see the serpent's lethal tongue piercing my flesh, followed by a sharp suctioning sensation as it begins to suck the blood out of me like a

parasite. My body numbs and my vision gets fuzzy as the creature drains the life out of my limp body, sparking a fleeting feeling of empathy and contrition for all of my past victims. I finally give in and accept defeat, too weak to fight back any longer.

*This is it. After all that, and coming so close, this damn demon will be the death of me.*

*I love you, Tyler. I'm sorry I let you down . . .*

The world goes black as I prepare myself for my bloody atonement and reunion in Hell.

Suddenly, the jarring sound of screeching metal penetrates my cold aura of death. I manage to open my eyes enough to see the serpent fall to the ground with a loud thud, its split pupils staring at me before they flicker closed.

My vision refocuses, and I freeze when I see those same, long familiar blades—like the ones that had come from Tyler when he tried to kill me—pinning down the remains of the serpent.

“Tyler,” I whisper with a smile, barely able to speak in my weakened state.

The barrage of blades are coming out of a random black portal on the marshy, crimson terrain. The blades slowly withdraw as a figure steps out of the portal, which quickly swirls closed behind him. When I see the owner of the arachnid-esque blades, my heart drops.

*It's not Tyler.*

Instead a pale, ugly fat man appears before me. He looks like a complete and utter slob with his greasy and matted hair in complete disarray, his fat face awash with a sadistic smile, and his sweat-covered body reeking of a sour, putrid odor.

“What the hell?” the man asks in confusion as he scans the forest. “I thought I smelled him here.”

I eye him speculatively, too weak to speak or move.

Suddenly, he sets his gaze on me, staring at me with a knowing smile.

“Ah, so *you* must be the bitch that turned him—the one that was running around Hell killing all those demons. It would certainly explain the identical scents. I knew something funny was going on with the newbie,” he mutters sardonically, casually running his hand along the carcass of the serpent as he walks towards me.

I crawl away from him, trying to steady myself against the trunk of a now burnt tree as I spit blood out onto the red and soggy forest floor.

“Walkin’ around Hell all that time with a *soul*? You might as well have baited yourself for this creature,” he mocks, as he gestures toward the dead demon with his chubby thumb. “You must’ve had some kind of death wish, little girl. No wonder you caught the attention of a demon of this caliber.”

I suddenly see Scarlet creeping up behind him with a finger to her hushed lips. I stare the abominable man down, trying my best to keep him distracted and bide our time. He eyes me intently, taking a step forward, when suddenly a long blade goes flying out of his back, piercing through Scarlet’s chest.

*How did he know?*

“Trying to pull a fast one on me, huh? Don’t underestimate me, bitch. I know everything,” he sneers scathingly, before using the sharp tentacle to hurl Scarlet at me.

He stares at us with contempt, his blades simultaneously unfurling from his body and dancing in the air like serpents, in perfect unison with the dancing flames of the burning, bloody forest behind him. As the blades start to close in on us, I use the last little bit of strength I have to throw Scarlet to the side to safety, before shielding myself with my arms and squinting my eyes shut, preparing for the worst.

Just as the sharp appendages are about to plunge into me, I hear another set of grinding blades. I look up in time to see more blades coming up through the ground, erecting up in

front of me like a shield, guarding me from the assault. They're emitting from a portal like just like the one that the stranger had come through, and I can see the vortex getting bigger and bigger.

Suddenly, someone emerges, and tears immediately stream down my face at the sight before me. I watch as Tyler slowly steps out of the portal with his back to me. I can see the blades coming out from him as he looks back at me over his shoulder and smiles in reassurance, warming my glacial heart.

He rushes to me, bending down to caress my face; but I inch away from him, not sure what to believe anymore.

*Is it really him this time?*

"Victoria, are you alright?" he asks concernedly, as he gently strokes my face with his hand.

And when he touches me, all it takes is one look into his eyes, and in a split-second, I know it's him.

"It's you," I cry, not even thinking before closing my eyes and leaning into his palm, reveling in the feel of his touch again. "It's really you."

"It's me, baby," he says soothingly.

"What are you doing, boy!?" the stranger reviles with anger.

"Shut your damn mouth. You've gone and fucked up now by messing with my woman," Tyler snaps disdainfully.

"Well, then in that case, the other one should be fair game," the decrepit, fat man sneers, glancing over at Scarlet and sending his blades her way instead. Tyler extends several blades out from his arm, shielding Scarlet from the hell-bent stranger. "Why do you protect them?" the man asks indignantly. "You protect a *vampire* over your own kind?!"

"Get lost, Gluttony," Tyler snipes brusquely.

"What happened to you? You and I were killing it with the best of em'. Now you've gone and turned into a royal pussy!"

*Gluttony? Killing? What's he talking about?*

“Shut up!” Tyler screams.

“Aw, wait a second. Don’t tell me your little girlfriend over there doesn’t know about our little killing spr—”

“I said *shut up*, Gluttony!” Tyler spits, his tone scathing and dripping with venom. The tenacious man continues to grind his blades against Tyler’s as they fight in a dead-heat, neither of them wavering or letting up. “I’m warning you—leave now while your limbs are still attached,” Tyler commands, his tone surprisingly confident and assertive.

Suddenly, Gluttony sends his blades surging into Tyler’s chest, causing Tyler’s head to slowly lower onto his chest, his body at a quiet standstill.

“Tyler!” I cry, before I turn to face our vicious attacker. “What have you done, you son of a bitch!”

Scarlet sprints towards Gluttony to attack, when Tyler’s arm stops her, his head lifting up with a smile.

“I’m fine,” he whispers to her, before peering back at me for a moment of reassurance. He turns to face the abominable man, glaring at him with a cryptic smile. “He did exactly what I wanted him to do.”

Gluttony’s eyes widen as he retracts his blades, which are now drenched in Tyler’s blood.

“Do you notice that?” Scarlet whispers to me as she sniffs the air. “Tyler’s blood smells so strong and old; it’s almost as if he’s been dead for thousands of years. Only the *Elders* have blood like that.”

The blood that came from Tyler’s body starts moving on its own, twisting around Gluttony’s blades and whirling towards him, like a slithering serpent closing in on its prey. Gluttony goes wide-eyed in shock, grinding his teeth with frustration as he pushes back as hard as he can.

“What did you do to me!?” he shrieks, a look of complete shock and consternation on his face. Suddenly, Gluttony’s own blades turn against him, recoiling and pinning him to the ground as blood pools out around his grotesque body.

“I guess I should’ve warned you about my blood,” Tyler retorts. “You know Saffron, right? Well, he was generous

enough to give me a little present—the gift of blood manipulation.”

“This isn’t the last you’ll be seeing of me, boy!”

Realizing that he is in a dying battle, Gluttony forms a black portal beneath himself, before the man’s fat body gets sucked up into it in a cowardice escape. Tyler waits in still silence, his blood mystically floating around him as if it were dancing to the beat of its own death dance. He turns to face me with a warm smile, his blades sprawled out and blood showering down on him in slow motion, like a mirage.

Suddenly, the seemingly dead gigantic serpent opens its eyes, its neck rearing up as it shrieks with fury at the sight of Tyler. Without hesitation, Tyler drives all of his blades into the creature at once, his blood trailing up and strangling the beast’s until its neck harshly snaps to the right, causing the demonic being to come crashing down onto the ground, its blood surrounding it in a lazy, dark crimson pool.

Tyler’s blades furl back into him as he turns around and calmly approaches me. As he bends down and offers his hand to me, I flinch in fear, afraid of who he is now or what he may have become, frightened and apprehensive of what I’ve now seen he’s capable of.

“It’s me, baby,” he says lovingly, still holding out his hand to me. “It’s alright.”

I gingerly take his hand, and soon his blood magically swirls around his arm and down to mine, healing my wounds within seconds before lifting and suctioning back into his body.

He lifts me to my feet and patiently waits, gazing at me ardently as he softly rubs his thumb over my torn and bloody knuckles; but I can’t hold back anymore. All fear and doubt leaves my mind as my heart fully takes over. I fervently throw my arms around his neck in an embrace, clutching him tight as I sob heavily into his neck, unwavering to ever let go; and as he holds me in his arms and strokes my hair, he places a soft kiss on my lips before whispering, “*I’m back, Vic.*”

## GETTING UP TO SPEED

I remember him now—*Gluttony*. He was trying to recruit me over to his side when I was soulless. I can still remember all the horrible things we did together; and now that I have my soul back, it makes me *sick* to even think about it. Two weeks of nothing but murder and blood and gore at the all-you-can-eat soul buffet.

I can still feel the demon trapped inside me just waiting to come out and play, trying to break free and gain control; like the proverbial beast that sits inside its cage, slowly simmering and percolating until it boils over and breaks out.

I try to ignore my newfound dark passenger, pushing it deep down into the depths of my mind and heart. I constantly stifle its relentless cries to be let out, despite the constant temptation to let it take over once again; but those two weeks, although I hate to admit it, were the most stripping, liberating, and enervating days of my life. Never have I felt so strong, so free, so *powerful*. There were no tears or fears, regrets or accountability; just pure primal and glorious carnage.

When I'm not tapping into my abilities, it's not that hard to contain my evil side; it's when I'm forced to fight that the switch gets flipped, and the beast within comes to the service. Except, then there's two fights: me against my enemy, and me

against myself, like some twisted and demonic Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

So what do you do when you're your own worst enemy? What *can* you do when fighting your attacker means having to battle yourself first?

"Tyler?" Victoria calls to me, interrupting my disquieting thoughts.

"Vic," I whisper adoringly, pulling her into me and kissing her forehead, as I close my eyes and revel in the feel of her touch again.

"It's strange. You look and feel just like a vampire; but you're not, are you?" she says in wonderment, stroking my cheek with her hand and gazing into my eyes as if she were looking at me for the first time all over again. "You're cold. I was kind of looking forward to your warm touch again."

"Yeah, a lot has changed," I mumble awkwardly.

"I can see that," she replies with a smile. "For once, you're the one saving *my* life, instead of me saving yours, like usual; pretty interesting change of pace."

"You've protected me long enough," I whisper, as I tuck a stray lock of raven hair behind her ear. "Allow me to repay the favor now."

"I sure could use it. I've been going up against all kinds of powerful demons lately; and they're not even the worst of my problems."

"What do you mean?" I ask concernedly.

"Well, because of what I accidentally turned you into, the Elders sent an assassin after me—Babel. He almost killed me—after you almost did, that is . . ." she trails off awkwardly.

"I know. I'm so sorry about that, baby. I wasn't myself. Can you ever find it in your heart to forgive me?"

"I could never stay mad at you, Tyler Dawson. You are the love of my life," she utters while gazing at me fervently, before planting a long, deep kiss on my cold lips. "I just want to get you in bed so that you can hold me forever."

"Does that mean we're not going to . . . *you know*," I ask with an impish grin.

“I’ve just found you, and the first thing that you think about is *sex*? Are you sure you’re not a vampire?” she teases.

“I don’t know, but whatever I am wants *you*,” I say seductively; and just like that, we pick up right where we left off.

“Mmm, I like this new Tyler—”

“Get a room,” Scarlet interjects, her tone dripping with disdain.

“Well, I’m pretty sure you and Darren could have all the fun you want,” I add, as I sit down on the ground and pull Victoria into my lap.

They suddenly both go quiet, and Scarlet looks as if she’s about to cry, giving me the feeling that I said something I shouldn’t have.

“Tyler, there’s a whole lot we have to talk about; but as far as Darren . . .” Victoria trails off, before shaking her head back and forth, insinuating that Darren is no more.

“Scarlet, I’m so sorry. I didn’t know,” I murmur, as the realization finally dawns on me.

“It’s fine,” Scarlet huffs before storming off; but I swear I saw a rogue tear starting to escape her oxblood eyes.

“What—”

“Don’t ask,” Victoria whispers, her brow furrowed with dismay. “It’s a long story.”

“Okay. Well, what happened with me? How am I out of Hell?” I question, unable to contain my curiosity any longer.

“What’s the last thing you remember?” she asks me hesitantly.

“I remember you turning me, and next thing I knew I was waking up in Hell with the Hollow-eyed Witch.”

“Well, I tried to turn you, and then you went to sleep; but something went wrong. When you woke up, you weren’t yourself. You had turned into this *thing*, and then you tried to kill us all. We barely made it out alive. After that, they sent Babel after us,” she explains with a pained look in her eyes, as if the mere recollection of the events were traumatizing her all over again.

“What am I?”

“I don’t know much about that yet. The two Elders who were on our side only explained it to me a little bit, but apparently you are extremely powerful and very rare to come by. Basically, from what I’ve deduced, your body became what you are now, while your soul and consciousness remained in Hell.”

“Whoa,” I murmur in disbelief, still unable to comprehend the things I’m hearing. “How did you end up getting ‘me’ back?”

“*That* is a very long and complicated story; but, in a nutshell, The Elders gave me the things and instructions I needed to get into Hell to collect the pieces of your soul.”

“Wait, the pieces? Don’t I have just one soul?”

“Apparently, every demon that’s ever plagued you after the curse had a piece of it, and I had to defeat every single one of them to get you all back together,” she utters, biting her bottom lip.

“Oh my god,” I utter, touching my forehead to hers as I close my eyes and cup her cheek. “I can’t believe you put yourself in such danger to save me. I can’t thank you enough, Victoria. Thank you so much for not giving up on me and leaving me there.”

“Never,” she whispers back, before placing another gentle and arctic kiss on my lips.

We sit in silence for a few moments, unwavering to release each other. It feels so good to be able to feel her soft, cold skin again, and to smell her unique scent—that distinctive and sumptuous mix of baby powder, rain, and musk that comforts me like nothing else.

“I hate to ruin this moment, but we need to talk,” she says hesitantly.

“About what?” I ask, fearful of the conversation that’s about to ensue.

*What if she doesn’t want me anymore? What if she feels I’ve become too much of a threat to be around? What if I did something really bad*

*that I don't remember?*

“Saffron,” she says succinctly.

“As in the curse?”

“As in the arch-demon who is the source of your curse—the arch-demon that willingly gave over the last piece of your soul to me,” she utters, eyeing me and carefully gauging my reaction.

“What about him?” I almost growl, the sheer mention of his name starting to tinker with the lock that keeps the inner beast locked inside its cage. “And why did he give it over so willingly?”

“He said that there’s a war coming. He wants you to find out what’s going on and then feed him the information.”

“No,” I blurt, my tone abrupt and austere.

“Tyler, he gave me your *soul*, and he expects something in return. Besides, in this upcoming war you and I will have a huge target on our backs—especially you, because of what you are. He’s offering his protection.”

“No. If Saffron wants information on this supposed war, it can’t be for good use. He’s a demon, Victoria. We can’t trust him. I doubt his intentions are pure,” I mutter sardonically.

“And what do you think we are, Tyler?” she asks with incredulity. “In this war, you and I are considered demons too. Besides, we don’t exactly have a choice . . .” she trails off uncomfortably. “Saffron said that if you don’t help him get what he’s looking for, then he’s going to send his Soul Eater to kill anyone and everyone you’ve ever loved.”

“I’ll kill him,” I spit with fury, my rage causing the dark passenger inside to start taking the wheel.

“Please try to think about this rationally, Tyler. I know Saffron has practically ruined your life, and put you and your loved ones at risk. I’m sure he’s the last person in the universe you’d ever want to team up with; but this benefits all of us. We need this,” she whispers, her gaze urgent and strained.

I bite my lower lip in anger, closing my eyes and trying to breathe the fury away—trying to calm the inner enemy long

enough to let the rage subside, before I lose control and get consumed by my own wrath. I try to ignore the strangely titillating gore-filled memories—the permanent soundtrack and symphony of screams of the countless people I butchered, that’s set on replay in my divided mind.

The truth is, I remember everything. I butchered numerous people, I ate their souls; and what’s worse, I *liked* it. Even now, I want to devour more and more—to feed this newfound and insatiable hunger inside. It sickens me, but it’s been on my mind our entire conversation; I can’t shake it. It feels like it’s something I need, as if it were the food that I eat or the air that I breathe—like I need it to survive.

I stare at my palms, gazing into the empty black pits in the center of them that I used to suction the souls out of an endless myriad of people, some of them even innocent children.

“You alright?” Victoria asks, piercing my numb bubble of unsettling and tormenting thought.

“Yeah,” I murmur, shaking it off and forcing a smile. I can’t bear to let her know the truth. As I look into her eyes, I think about how much I love her, and how I’d do anything to keep her safe. Suddenly, all of my haunting exploits float away, her beautiful face and mellifluous voice bringing me back to the surface, and I immediately know what I have to do. “Alright. I’ll do it. I’ll do this for Saffron.”

She gazes at me fondly as a soft smile pulls at her lips, before clutching my chin in her fingers and pulling me to her.

Suddenly, a voice resonates from the shadows, penetrating our shell of solace.

“We have a proposition for you two,” says the voice shrouded in darkness.

Two women of Asian descent emerge from the shadows dressed in kimonos. They look like identical twins, but stand out from each other greatly. One has long jet-black hair and is dressed in head to toe black with a katana sword hung on her back. The other is dressed in bright red and aquamarine-blue, with some type of blade nunchucks hanging from her belt.

I sniff the air, and immediately feel the urge to attack these women for no reason. My eyes zoom in on the more colorful girl's blades again as I catch the scent, and I suddenly feel incredibly defensive and full of fury.

"Easy there, Segovian," the darker girl utters with contempt. "We mean you no harm; but keep in mind that these blades are from *dead* Segovians—dead because they tried to mess with us."

"Oh, Hisoka; must you be so rude?" the other girl chirps.

"Tyler, this is Hisoka," Victoria introduces me, gesturing towards the girl in black, before gesturing towards the other. "And this is Ayaka."

"What did you call me?" I ask the girl in black, affronted, the introduction going in one ear and out the other.

"You're welcome," Hisoka snipes, before crossing her arms and eyeing me with disdain.

"For what?" I reply facetiously.

"For saving you and your girlfriend, and putting together the plan to help get you out of Hell when all the Elders wanted to do was—"

"Hisoka!" Ayaka admonishes her.

"Fine!" Hisoka screams, throwing up her hands in frustration before storming off. "You deal with him!"

"I apologize for my sister. She can be very reticent and hardheaded," Ayaka says ruefully.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know who you were," I murmur, my tone immediately repentant. "It's very nice to meet you. I hear it was you that helped with the whole plan on getting me out of Hell. Thank you. I am much obliged."

"We come with no ill will," she explains. "We merely have a proposition for you."

"Okay," I answer, prompting her to continue as I take Victoria's hand in mine.

"We would like it if you would come to live with us at our secret base. We help lead an organization where humans and vampires work together to put an end to demons like you," Ayaka replies cheerfully. Although I can tell that her cheery

demeanor in regards to the death of “demons like me” is just her personality and that she means nothing by it, I still find myself feeling strangely offended.

“Look, I’m not the one you should be worrying about. If you should be worrying about anyone, maybe you should start with the demon who was just here, Gluttony,” I retort.

“You were in contact with Gluttony?” Ayaka replies in disbelief, her eyes widening as her convivial tone suddenly becomes grim and somber. Hisoka suddenly re-emerges out of the shadows, her interest clearly pique, and even her cold and taciturn face looks worried.

“Yeah, we met when I had no soul. He’s been trying to pull me into his ranks ever since,” I explain. “So, tell me more about this organization of yours.”

“We’ve been around for nearly 800 years, and we specialize in hunting Segovians, which is what you and Gluttony are. Gluttony is one of the original demons of your breed. There are usually seven Segovians in all, each one being linked up to one of the Seven Deadly Sins. He’s been seen running around with Envy a lot lately, so what you’re saying about him getting his ranks together must be true,” she utters nervously.

“What sin am I linked to then?” I ask apprehensively, leery of the thought of being one of their kind.

“We don’t think you’re connected to any,” Ayaka replies, as she and Hisoka approach closer. “You see, you’re a special case, Tyler. You were an accident, and created by mistake due to having no soul when you were turned. You are unique. As of now, all of the Sins are accounted for, and there’s always only been seven to exist at any given time. You’re the eighth Segovian to show up, and the only recorded case of such ever happening in history.”

“Look, let’s cut the shit,” Hisoka interrupts. “We’re losing people every day because of these demons. They seem to predate ancient biblical times. They are extremely powerful and virtually *unstoppable*; however, with your help, we believe that we can turn the tides. We hate to say it, but we need your help, Tyler. This is why we aided in getting your soul out of Hell,

and in doing so, we expect your help in return.”

“I think what Hisoka meant to say, is that we would greatly *appreciate* your help,” Ayaka interjects. “Isn’t that right, Hisoka?”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” she mumbles, crossing her arms and rolling her eyes in annoyance.

“So, do you think that you can join us at our facility?” Ayaka asks hopefully.

“We’ll see,” I tell her tersely, still apprehensive of all this. “It’s a lot to take in.”

“I understand. Let us know what your decision is within the week. Oh, and Tyler? Just know this: Gluttony has a pattern. Once he’s gotten the scent of something he likes, he won’t stop until he gets it. He wants you, Tyler; and he’ll do anything to get you, even if he has to use Victoria as leverage. Don’t let him. With us, you’ll be able to properly protect her. We don’t have any time to waste,” Ayaka says seriously, her usually chipper tone the most serious I’ve heard it yet. “He’s coming for you, Tyler; and he won’t stop until he has you.”

## MY SOUL TO TAKE

After a few days thought, we decided to go with the Elders to their facility. What they told us about the upcoming war somewhat matches up to Saffron's concerns, and it seems that joining their ranks is our best bet on protection. As much as I detest the idea of being Saffron's lapdog, and as dubious as I am about trusting him, I know what he's capable of; and I refuse to let any more of my loved ones die, over my own pride, nonetheless.

The wick of the sole large white candle lighting the room slowly flickers in the darkness, its amber flame casting dancing shadows along the wall. Much like Victoria's house, this facility has no windows, and the moribund candle is the only bit of light in the room's realm of darkness, giving me a strange and relating feeling of empathy.

Victoria, Scarlet, and I patiently await the Elders around the long, rectangular, antique oak table in the center of the room, as Scarlet anxiously taps her fingernails on its worn surface, permeating the uncomfortable silence.

*Clack, clack, clack, clack.*

"What's taking them so long?" I murmur, breaking the

silence.

“They should be here soon. These are Elders you’re talking about, so we wait as long as we have to. Don’t take them lightly,” Scarlet admonishes.

Victoria continues to pace back and forth across the room, the hard soles of her leather boots resonating in unison to Scarlet’s incessant tapping.

*Clearly, I’m not the only one who’s nervous.*

Victoria finally stops her disquieting rumination, leaning back with her arms perched on the table, as a heavy and wistful sigh escapes her mouth. I reach over to consolingly stroke her arm, forcing a tired smile when I feel like doing anything but.

I am so *hungry*, and not for food—I’m hungry for *souls*. It’s like a relentless and intrinsic need, beckoning me every single second of every single day, just coaxing and taunting me to take the gratifying bait and suck the souls out of them all. I’m already on the precipice; one good shove is all it’s going to take to push me off the deep-end and into the clutches of my own beast.

I lean back into my chair, tiredly sliding my palm over my face as I exhale heavily and try to shake this lingering and disconcerting hunger; but my newfound dark passenger continues to determinedly knock at my mind’s door, lurking and waiting for me to slip.

Suddenly, the old wrought-iron door creaks open, causing us all to anxiously stand up in preparation for the Elders.

“Took you guys long enough,” I mumble under my breath, my stomach tightening when I remember what Scarlet said. “And I mean that in the most respectful way.”

I look up expecting to see Hisoka and Ayaka standing here; what I see causes my breath to hitch in my throat.

“Didn’t I warn you last time that you hadn’t seen the last of me, boy?” Gluttony sneers with an ear-splitting grin, showcasing his rotten and decayed teeth.

Victoria and Scarlet stand up in shock, immediately shifting

into their true vampire forms. I catch sight of a rogue blade coming out from behind him, so I do the same to brace myself for the upcoming onslaught.

Next thing I know, I'm going through the brick wall of the facility and smack-dab into a tree, as one of Gluttony's blades hurls me several yards outside. I catch the sharp tentacle-esque blade coming my way between both of my flattened hands, holding it mere inches away from my face. I push back with all my might, but Gluttony has gravity working on his side, as the blade inches closer and closer to my face.

Suddenly, I see a little girl in a plain white sundress with long, stringy, straight black hair in my peripheral vision.

*Really? Out of all times for the Hollow-eyed Witch to show up? Fucking splendid.*

As she runs toward me determinedly, I notice subtle differences. She's still a child, but taller and a little bit older; and instead of hollow voids for her eyes, they are a cool shade of concrete-grey. Her sundress isn't tattered and covered in blood either, nor is her mouth sown shut. The closer she comes, the more I notice a set of long, sharp, spider-leg-like appendages burgeoning out from her in all directions.

*Since when does she have blades?*

"Envy," Gluttony grins at the little girl, continuing to further drive the blade dangerously close to my face, "how nice of you to join us."

*Envy? Isn't that also one of the Seven Deadly Sins?*

She runs at me, shrieking like a banshee through her curtain of noir hair, before hacking away at me wildly with a sick and depraved rapacity. I try my best to feign her off with my own blades, but it's getting hard to fight off two powerful Segovians at the same time.

"Tyler!" I hear Victoria cry, as she runs outside with Scarlet right behind her.

Gluttony takes notice of Victoria, grinning wickedly over his shoulder in anticipation of killing what I cherish most. An eighth blade unfurls from his back, giving the illusion of him being a gigantic arachnid, before he shoots it through her chest, pinning her to the forest floor.

“Oh my god, Victoria!” Scarlet screams, bending down to help her.

“I’m fine! Go help Tyler!” she spits, coughing up blood all over her pale mouth.

Scarlet peers up at Gluttony from Victoria’s side with rage in her thirsty oxblood eyes, before jetting up and sprinting towards him with fury. He swiftly brings one knee up to meet her sternum, knocking the wind out of her as she propels backward, crashing into a tree with a loud thud before ricocheting to the ground.

“I’m not interested in a wench of such low power, and with even poorer potential,” Gluttony mocks her.

“Well, I guess I should kick it up a couple notches then, huh?” she utters with a knowing grin, her rubicund eyes glaring at him through her messy, disarrayed locks of matching scarlet hair.

Her eyes start to swirl from within, becoming dark and obsidian, like the ominous clouds of a storm that’s about to begin. Her nails start to lengthen as her skin becomes transparent, exposing all of her organs and entrails inside, and her veins start to sprout up all over her skin like damson vines.

Scarlet glares at Gluttony, her eyes now pitch-black, revealing her new inner nature. She grabs Gluttony by the head, digging her long talons into his skull as she pulls his neck towards her growing fangs.

“Such a naive little girl,” he laughs facetiously, before he opens his mouth wide and bites down hard into Scarlet’s forearm, severing it instantly. A loud ear-piercing shriek emits from her mouth as she holds her severed arm in pain, before Gluttony grabs a fistful of her now-platinum hair, flinging her across the forest floor like a ragdoll.

Scarlet hits the ground hard, rolling like a bowling ball until

she hits the Elders' feet.

"Ayaka! Where's Hisoka?" Scarlet screams frantically.

Ayaka nods back to the house, gesturing toward Hisoka, who is using her katana sword to sever the blade that is pinning Victoria to the ground.

Gluttony eyes Victoria with an animalistic gleam in his eye, unfurling another blade from his back to replace the one that was severed.

"Gluttony!" I shout in an effort to distract him, my voice strained. "Your fight's with me, you coward!"

The young raven-haired girl continues her assault on me, screaming bloody murder as she swings her tiny little fists, clawing and scratching at my face with fury.

"Envy," Gluttony calls to the girl calmly, "stop."

The girl immediately takes his direction and halts her attack, an evil, twisted smile across her face.

"I have a proposition for the boy," he announces, as he keeps me pinned to the ground with his sharp tendrils, forcing me to hear him out. Everyone immediately freezes in place, eagerly listening, in hopes that Gluttony will be willing to negotiate to end this violent onslaught. "Come over to my side, Tyler; join me, and I will let you live. Your friends, on the other hand, I can't say the same for; but you're better off with me anyway. You're a pariah amongst these people, Tyler. You should be sticking with your own kind!"

"Gluttony, what are you doing?" Envy asks in confusion, as if she wasn't aware that this was the plan.

"Don't tell me you don't remember all the bloody fun we had, Tyler. I know you do. You do realize that you need souls to live, right? I know that you can feel the beast within, just chomping away at the bit, struggling to get free; and that insatiable appetite, churning away inside of you, which only further fuels that fire the more you don't feed it. How long do you think you can keep that up?" Gluttony asks incredulously.

"You don't know me at all, Gluttony. I'm not like you, and I will never be like you! Nor will I ever trust a damn word that comes out of your mouth!" I spit at him, before turning to face

the young girl with him. “And you—do you really think you can trust him? He’s using you, just like he’ll try to use me if I join him!”

“Shut up, you ignorant pig! You don’t know a fucking thing!” she growls spitefully, plunging a blade deep into my gut. “Besides, my beef with you is personal. You were friends with my mother.”

“Your mother?” I ask in confusion at her cryptic words.

“Yeah. You know that bitch, Jade Claussen—the one that I killed slowly and joyously until she was mincemeat. Bitch got what she deserved,” the little girl boasts triumphantly, the anger on her face suddenly turning to pride.

“What did you do to Jade, you little bitch!” I scream, struggling to get free as I foam at the mouth with rage. “If you touched one hair on her head, I will *end* you. You hear me?! I will fucking end you!”

“Like she ended me?” the little girl scoffs. “You have no idea what it’s like to be sucked up into a vacuum and thrown away like trash—to be thrown away like *nothing*—like she did to me. Although, I’ve recently come to terms with it; and frankly, it pleases me to know that I’ve slaughtered the whore you called a friend.”

My eyes widen as I come undone, shattering into a thousand little pieces at the news. Knowing that I couldn’t save Jade, and that I couldn’t help her after what *my* curse did to her—knowing that I *failed* her—causes the beast within to rise to the surface, its claws scratching away at the thin layer of soul and conscience that stands between it and this world.

Envy’s smile grows wide with evil delight as she plunges another blade deep into my chest. “Oh, you didn’t know? Your dear friend, Jade Claussen, was a filthy whore. She got pregnant and aborted me before I could ever see the light of day, and then I was turned into *this*. Although, walking around as a fetus wouldn’t do me much good; no, I take on the forms of all the children whose souls I slaughter and eat for breakfast, like I did to your little *niece* last week,” she utters scathingly, before throwing her head back and laughing a laugh so evil and

so sinister, it chills me to my very core.

“I will fucking *kill you!*” I spit, every nerve, cell, and organ in my body on fire with deep-seeded anger, as the beast inside eggs me on to release it.

“Tyler! Don’t listen to them!” Ayaka screams. “They’re trying to get you to let your rage and inner demon take over, so that you’ll go back to the way you were!”

Seething with anger, I want to rip Envy’s little head off her shoulders and drink from her skull like a bloody goblet. I summon every ounce of strength in me and rip my body through the blades, tackling her to the ground and grasping her tiny head in my hands. I twist with all my might, hissing through my teeth as I try to screw her head off, while Gluttony just stands back and observes, as if I were the dumb lab-rat that fell right into his little mind-fuck trap.

“Tyler,” Envy calls to me in a sad voice, her face and body suddenly morphing into that of my niece’s. “Stop! Why are you hurting me, Uncle Tyler?”

“What the—” I murmur, before unhanding her and recoiling away in shock, as I stumble backward onto the ground behind me.

The body that has taken on the form of my niece throws its head back in evil laughter, causing rage to surge through me. My veins feel as if they were on fire, and I am livid with such a profound and deep-rooted anger, that I can’t even see straight.

“They want you to join them, and they’ll do or say whatever they have to, to make that happen!” Ayaka reminds me. “They’re trying to push you over the edge and reform you to the Segovian you used to be. Don’t fall for it, Tyler!”

My jaw clenched in anger, I’m seeing red and boiling over. All I want is to kill, shred and obliterate every person within my blades’ distance, and it’s getting harder and harder to control the fury within that’s taking me over; and what’s worse, is a part of me wants it to.

“Think about me, Tyler!” Victoria suddenly screams, permeating my shell of hot-headed hysteria. “Think about *us*, and everything we’ve gone through to get here—everything

we've gone through to survive! I love you, Tyler. Please, don't leave me again!"

I zero in on Victoria's voice and look over to her in rage, my fiery eyes rolling over the beautiful curves of her pale face, and each duly memorized ridge of those lips that I have kissed countlessly. I think about all the times we've made love, all of the kisses we've shared and demons we've defeated together, all of the ordeals we've made it through and survived . . . and suddenly, my soul lights up, radiating from within and shattering all of the darkness clouded around it.

"I pity you," I finally utter to the young girl through clenched teeth. "I feel *sorry* for you."

Suddenly, the girl's facial expression completely changes, her brow furrowed in consternation, her eyes glassy with unshed tears.

"She left me out in the cold," the hell-child whispers, her face crestfallen as she fingers the frayed edges of her sundress.

"Damn it," Gluttony mutters under his breath. "This is what I get for teaming up with the only other Segovian with a soul. I'd have thought that *one* memory of hers that came attached to it would only further fuel her rage, not extinguish it!"

"She didn't want me. Why didn't she want me?" the girl cries, falling to her knees.

"Oh, for cryin' out loud—that bitch aborted you!" Gluttony suddenly screams at her, grasping at straws as he desperately tries to get her rage back. "You didn't need that whore! You have *me*, and together, we will kill every other whore that is like your mother."

The girl looks up at him in surprise, her face perplexed and ridden with unwritten emotion. "She left me . . ." she repeats, her voice trailing off as she stares down at her tiny hands, which are now balling into fists. "She left me to *die*!" Her gray eyes darken, refueling the rage inside her and sparking it with a new vengeance. She turns to me, her pale face alight with a wicked expression. "I'll teach you for helping that swine pig!"

Envy violently reaches for my throat, digging her nails into

it and squeezing as hard as she can, until a loud snap reverberates throughout the entire forest. I can feel myself go limp like a broken doll, and see Victoria's mouth drop in horror right before my eyes roll back into my head.

"Tyler!" I hear her shriek, but her voice is distant and hollow, as if I'm hearing it echo from across a gully. "You can't die, Tyler! You can't! It's impossible! Get up and fight back, damn it!"

"Would you shut your damn mouth, woman? He's far from dead. We've only just begun." Gluttony reviles.

I can't move or open my eyes, and to the world, it seems as if I'm dead; but I can still feel and hear as if I were conscious.

"We have to help him!" Victoria cries to the Elders, after seeing my immobile body lying lifeless on the ground for several seconds.

"Victoria, stop!" I hear Hisoka command her sternly. "I am your Elder and you will listen to me! This is a futile battle. You are no match for them, and you will lose! You're better off staying here and letting Tyler fight for himself, without him having to worry about you getting hurt in the process! You will only get in the way and distract him, causing both of your deaths!"

My vision suddenly returns as my eyes fly open, with Gluttony and Envy beside me. With a newfound strength, I catapult myself up, ripping their blades straight through my body. I throw myself straight into the perilous fray and advance towards Gluttony, thrusting several blades through his chest all at once, causing him to peer down at his chest and then back up at me in wide-eyed horror, as if he hadn't anticipated things going like this. I'm about to strangle him, as I let another blade slowly curl out from my back, when a sharp pain stops me.

I look down to see the ends of two blades piercing through my chest, and I immediately know that they're Envy's. My slow-moving blood starts to drip out of me, so I take the opportunity to manipulate it, forcing it to start swirling all around me as it lazily moves towards Gluttony in attack.

“Oh, no you don’t. Not this time!” he barks. “You’re not the only one with abilities, boy!”

He draws his head back, opening his mouth abnormally wide as his teeth grow into uneven lengths of black blades, before suctioning and consuming my shed blood into him until it’s completely gone. I try to force more blood out of me and use my ability to manipulate it, but no matter what I do, nothing happens. I must be too weak.

Gluttony suddenly flings me into a nearby tree, the whole forest shaking violently from the crash. I can feel my spinal cord snap from the impact before I land on the ground with a loud thud, leaving me paralyzed and helpless on the forest floor. My eyes wide-open and unmoving, I can see Victoria with her hand to her mouth in horror, tears streaming down her face at the sight of my limp body.

“Tyler!” Victoria screams, and I can see her starting to run at me in a blur.

“Stop it!” Ayaka orders her, pulling her back by her arm.

Even though they’re far away, my new and sharpened hearing can pick up everything they’re saying as if I were right next to them.

“I refuse to just sit by and do nothing!” Victoria shouts indignantly.

“Enough!” Hisoka cuts her off. “Victoria, do you or do you not believe in him?”

“Of course, I do; but this is too damn much! He’s not a god!”

“He’s damn close to it. The incapacity to be killed and the ability to move through divine planes of existence sounds close enough to a deity to me.”

“But—”

“But nothing!” Hisoka snaps. “Tyler is unique. He is not linked to a sin, and in that, he doesn’t have a sin-linked strength or weakness. *You* are his strength. You’re the reason he fights so hard—why he struggles to maintain his soul and conscience. If anything happens to you, his drive is gone forever. He will fall right back into where he was; and at that

point, we will never get him out of that void. Is that what you want?!”

“No, I . . .” Victoria trails off, her voice trembling with sobs. “It’s just so hard to watch this. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize to me. Atone by putting more faith in him,” Hisoka says more softly, to which Victoria nods, staring down at the ground as if she cannot watch any longer.

I can feel life surging back into my veins and kick-starting my body, like a circuit breaker that is being reset. I take a fortifying breath and hurl myself upward, ready to fight after my brief respite; but I can’t deny the weakness coursing through me from each temporary death, which are slowly but surely adding up.

I fling Envy off to the side, her body hitting a tree so hard that it rains branches down upon her frail body, burying her in a tidal wave of timber.

I turn to face Gluttony, tensing up and trying to force the blood out of me. A small trickle comes out, but instead of flying up around me and doing what I want it to, it merely flows down the length of my body.

My eyes widen with confusion as I look down at my formerly magical blood, my mind willing it to move, but it won’t budge.

“What’s wrong, boy? Your little ability having trouble working?” Gluttony simpers.

“What did you do?” I growl.

“To your little blood manipulation ability? I ate it, remember?” he laughs proudly.

I have a sudden flashback of when he sucked my blood into his wide-open mouth, when realization dawns upon me—he is the sin of *Gluttony*; naturally, his ability entails eating others’ abilities.

“You’ll never defeat us, Tyler,” Gluttony yells wickedly. “In order to kill a Segovian, you must destroy its heart; and seeing as how our hearts lie in another plane of existence that you’ll never find, we can’t die. You on the other hand, you’ve got a soul to take—more like a weakness if you ask me. Don’t worry;

you'll be far better off without it."

Soon, Gluttony starts pulling a viscous, off-white, transparent substance from within my chest, causing a debilitating pain to resonate inside of me.

"This isn't good," I hear Ayaka murmur under her breath. "That's Tyler's ectoplasm—the housing for his soul. We can't have him losing his soul again, Hisoka! We need him!"

"Tyler! Open a Gigas Gate and throw Envy in!" Hisoka orders me, like a teacher instructing her student.

"A *what?*" I growl back in pain, my voice strained as I fight to keep my soul in.

"A portal, idiot!" she yells. "Unlike other Segovians, your portals are Gigas Gates, which will banish the attacker for days. Open a damn portal!"

I can see Envy recovering in my peripheral vision, and I decide to take advantage of her child-like mind.

"Hey, Envy; you're *a joke*. That's why your mom threw you out like the piece of trash that you are," I goad her, like poking a panther with a stick, taunting her in hopes that she'll take the bait. "You're the sin of Envy because you envy every one of the children whose souls you take daily, because they have the life you never had; and for that, you have to resort to the shit-ability of mimicry, forever destined to take on the forms of all of your children victims who once lead happy lives, and all because you're miserable that you never had one. You're *pathetic*."

She turns to me with sheer wrath in her eyes, before charging at me full-speed. "You son of a bitch!" she screams.

Right as she's about to make contact with me, I open a portal before her, the sheer force causing Gluttony to release me. She tries to back up, but has already accidentally slipped her foot inside, the centrifugal force already pulling her in. As the swirling vortex starts to suck her into its dark abyss, she launches countless blades out onto the earth around her to pull herself out; but her struggle is futile, as it starts to suck her deeper and deeper like quicksand, into the confines of its unwavering inter-dimensional prison.

“Gluttony! Help me!” she shrieks out in desperation, struggling to maintain her footing. “You know I can’t go near Hell-portals because of my soul! The gatekeeper will get me! You have to help me!”

“Stupid girl,” he scoffs flippantly, ignoring her beseeching cries.

Envy looks over her shoulder at the darkness behind her, her eyes glossy with tears and wide with terror, and for a second, she seems like the scared child she really is.

Soon, a barrage of dark-crimson tentacles claim her petite body, encircling her neck and torso as they start to pull her in. Each of the hellacious creature’s tentacles suddenly open, revealing an array of sharp aubergine-colored spear tips on each end. They all open simultaneously and drive into her body all at once, before sucking her into the dark mouth of oblivion, leaving only the sound of her horrifying screams as it swirls closed in silence.

Gluttony stares at the place where Envy was fighting for her life just moments ago, completely unfazed, his expression emotionless and deadpan. She was just a pawn in his game.

“I’m giving you one last chance, Gluttony. Leave *now*, or you’ll end up like Envy,” I utter menacingly.

“Don’t underestimate me, boy; I’ve barely just begun. Envy is weak, but she’ll be back,” he replies blithely. “Look, why not just end this all right now; all I want is your allegiance, and of course, the vampire’s soul—”

The sheer mention of Victoria off his lips drives me into a mad rage, as I wantonly ram my fist down his throat. Gluttony’s eyes widen at the pain in his belly as I rip my arm from his mouth, which is dripping with black mucus, blood, and bile.

“What did you do!?” Gluttony grunts, as blood and bodily fluids bubble up over his fat lips.

“Opened a Gigas Gate inside of you,” I answer coyly. “I told you—don’t you *ever* talk about my woman.”

Soon, Gluttony’s torso starts to shake, before a huge gaping black-hole rips through him. In one last desperate attempt, he

shoots a blade out from the soul-eating pit in his palm, stabbing me through the chest.

I fall to my hands and knees, my entire body shaking with tremors and excruciating pain; except, this pain is a different kind of pain; it's ethereal, not corporeal, and it feels as if my born-again humanity is slowly starting to leak out, the beast inside finally breaking through its cage.

"Fine. I'll leave *you* to kill her and eat her soul yourself!" Gluttony spits, his cryptic words laden with a hidden agenda. "See you in Hell, boy!"

Soon after, the swirling hole in his torso sucks Gluttony into himself, leaving nothing but a swirling cloud of dust in his wake.

"Tyler!" Victoria cries, lunging forward to run to my aid; but Ayaka stops her with a hand to her shoulder.

"Something's wrong, Victoria," she says somberly; but Victoria ignores her, frantically pushing past her as she runs to my side.

"Vic, stop," I manage to utter, before a dark cloud starts to collect over my mind and heart, my dark passenger officially taking the wheel. I can sense what's happening, but I'm helpless to stop it. Whatever Gluttony did is shattering my soul, and little by little, I can feel the killer in me rising to the surface, its appetite for violence insatiable.

"Tyler," Victoria whispers as she scoops me up into her arms, giving me a sudden flashback of that first night we met in the alley when I was bleeding out, and the night that the Sisters of Malice gutted me and left me to die. She was holding me just like this, making the same sorrowful pleas, the glossy unshed tears in her sapphire eyes sparkling off the moonlight.

My eyes quickly haze over, my teeth clenching together as a low, guttural growl emanates from my throat at the scent of Victoria's soul. It's taking everything in me not to take it from her right here and now.

"What's happening to him?" she asks the Elders, her eyes wide and hopeful for a consoling response, even though the tears flowing from them show she knows otherwise.

“Gluttony attacked Tyler’s soul, and now it’s falling apart. We need to leave before he becomes the same old Segovian once more,” Hisoka replies, her voice becoming grave.

“I’m not leaving him!” Victoria screams defiantly, her eyes now brimming with tears as she peers down at me in her arms.

Flashes of Hell start popping up in my head like movie clips on a projector screen, and I know I’m getting closer to the point of no return. I endeavor to stop it, my hands balled into fists as I clench my eyes shut, trying my hardest to fight back and summon my deepest strength against the beast inside; but my struggle is futile. It’s far too strong.

A blade unfurls from my back, stabbing Victoria in the stomach. My vision is dark, and I know my eyes have gone pitch-black.

*No! Stop it! You can fight it! You love her! Fight back!*

My vision returns and I can feel my eyes revert back to their normal color for a flash, as the real me returns for a brief moment, in a dead-heat standoff with my darker side.

“Vic . . . get away from me . . . now,” I manage to hiss, my body now shaking violently in her arms.

“I’m not leaving you, Tyler; I will *never* leave you. I don’t care if I have to sit here while you kill me one blade at a time to make you see that, but I refuse to abandon you!” she screams through her sobs. “I just got you back! I can’t lose you again.”

I continue to fight the demon within, the beast inside me ebbing and flowing as we become one, its taunting voice getting louder and louder.

*Kill the bitch. Devour her soul and eviscerate her body until there’s nothing left.*

It wants back out of its cage, and the departure of my soul is the key to the lock.

“Victoria!” Hisoka yells sternly, her legs bent at the knee as

if ready to bolt at any second when things take a turn for the worst. “I command you, as your Elder, to leave him!”

But Victoria doesn’t budge, remaining completely focused on me, her cold hand caressing my cheek.

“Hey,” she begins softly, taking my face in her hands, “this is how we first met, remember? Just like this. You were all bloody and lying on the ground, knocking on death’s door, and anybody else would have just left you for dead; but I knew there was something about you—something special that I just couldn’t let slip by.”

The loud sound of tearing flesh follows as another one of my blades pierces through the right side of her chest. My teeth clench in agony as I fight against myself, my inner-demon and I dueling face-to-face.

“Victoria! Get out of there, now!” Scarlet screams as she lunges forward, but the Elders hold her back.

Victoria ignores the burning in her chest, biting her bottom lip in pain as she leans down and angles my face to look deeply into her eyes. I know full well what I’m doing to her, but I’m slowly but surely losing all control.

“And then, when you found out about what I was, even still you never left me for a *second*; and when I found out about your curse, I refused to leave you, no matter what harm might possibly come to me,” she whispers, the smile on her face at the recollection of our fond memories in stark contrast to her saddened and teary eyes. “That’s when I made my vow to you—a vow to protect you from any harm or demon that came for you—and that includes this homicidal bastard that’s inside you right now. I know you’re in there, or I’d be dead by now; I know a part of you is still in there. I can’t defeat this thing without your help. Come back to me, Tyler; please!”

Brief flashes of darkness flit past my eyes, the evil voice inside chanting at me to kill her, like a mantra.

“Don’t forget who you are, Tyler. Do not let everything we’ve worked for end like this. You’re stronger than that!” she spits.

I clench a fist and punch the ground hard, causing a huge

crater to form beneath my hand as I grit my teeth and scream in pained frustration. Victoria presses her forehead to mine, clutching me in her tight embrace until our chests are touching, and all I can think is, “*Stupid, stupid girl! Do you have a death wish? Why do you love me so much, god damn it! You’re going to get yourself killed. You deserve better than that. Get away from me, now!*”

“I love you, Tyler,” she utters through choked sobs, pressing her lips to mine in a kiss full of impassioned need, forcing her tears to trickle down her milky cheeks and onto mine. “I can love now *because* of you. And if I die, right here, right now, I have no regrets; but just know that I love you, Tyler. I love you with every single bit of my non-beating heart.”

My tense body starts to relax, my rage subsiding, and slowly all of the blades draw back into me. My vision returns, the darkness passing, as the violent tremors of my body cease.

“Welcome back,” she whispers fondly, placing a gentle and trusting kiss on my lips. She pulls away and gazes down at me with a soft and knowing smile, portraying a faith so steadfast and impenetrable and unbreakable, as if she knew I was in here all along; and as I look up at her beautiful, bloody smile, I can’t help but smile back, because I know that we’re going to make it, and that *nothing* will break us ever again.

## EPILOGUE

As Victoria and I sit atop the Il Vittoriano monument overlooking the city lights of Rome, I have a fleeting thought of how much they look like twinkling stars against the backdrop of the archaic buildings and monuments. Shades of emerald green, amber yellow, and fiery red sparkle in the noir night like supernovas, while the sound of chatter and car horns can be heard echoing in the distance; but up here, away from it all, it feels as if it's just Victoria and I, high above the world.

A crisp breeze wafts over us, laden with the smell of zucchini blossoms and fresh carbonara. I pull her in close, even though I know she can't feel the cold, causing her to sigh dreamily as she nuzzles her head further into my neck.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" she says wistfully, as she gazes out at the picturesque city.

"It sure is," I utter, but I'm not looking at the view.

We've been in the Eternal City for the past week on business, doing some reconnaissance for A.A.R.S.—the Alliance Against Rogue Supernaturals—which is the Elders' organization against rogue demons and supernaturals that are causing trouble or exposing our existence to the humans; but the organization is primarily meant to put an end to Segovians. Naturally, I'm the first Segovian to have ever joined.

We've been with the organization for about a month now, and it's composed mostly of vampires and gifted humans, such as Magi. They even have their own training department where they train vampires, as well as teach assorted types of Magi by helping them to further develop their powers and abilities. We tried convincing Freddy to join, but after a trip to Hell and being nearly killed and bled dry by Victoria, he wants nothing more to do with the world behind the veil.

One good thing that has come out of the organization is that they provide me with what I need to survive—souls. It turns out that by not devouring souls, I was only getting closer to reverting back to my old, evil self. I've found that the beast inside isn't so loud anymore, as long as I keep it fed; so A.A.R.S. provides the worst of the worst prison inmates for me to feed on, primarily ones on death row, seeing as how most of their souls were already going to Hell anyway.

It was extremely hard for me in the beginning, and I'm sure it always will be; but much like Victoria's method in choosing her victims, we both take solace in the fact that for every life we take from people like these, that we are probably saving several lives in turn. For every murderer we consume, several people out there will live.

*Or at least that's what I keep telling myself to curb the overwhelming guilt I have for needing to literally reap souls to survive.*

*Things were so much easier when I didn't have a soul—no guilt or remorse, no conscience to reproach me for what I know is wrong inside.*

“You ready?” Victoria asks me, the moonlight gleaming in her sapphire eyes; and just like that, she immediately chases all of my self-deprecating thoughts away, making me realize that I don't want the easy way out, no matter how tempting it may be.

“I suppose this business trip can't be *all* pleasure,” I groan, not wanting to end our lovely evening; but we're here for a reason, and time is of the essence with this situation. “Let's go, baby.”

We stand up hand-in-hand and walk over to the edge of the rooftop, peering several stories down at the alley below us. Turning to me with a beaming smile on her face, her raven hair fluttering in the wind as she clutches my hand tight, we jump off the side of the building, landing swiftly on our feet a few seconds later.

“Man, I’ll never get used to that,” I mumble, before we set off to the Vatican.

As we walk down the Via Veneto past the string of little cafes and churches towards Vatican City, we can see the shimmering western bank of the River Tiber. The crescent moon and star-speckled sky is perfectly mirrored in its still waters, like an oil painting, giving the illusion that there’s no up from down; and when I look around at this beautiful city, with none other than the love of my life by my side, I can’t help but smile. Surviving death so many times has really made me appreciate the little things in life more; everything from a beautiful place to simply being with Victoria makes every day worth living.

Before we know it, we’ve reached the walls of Vatican City. Victoria has been here many times before for her own independent work long before she was a part of the organization, and she knows the secret ins and outs of the ancient landmark by heart.

She leads the way as we walk along the side and around to the back. Once there, she leads us down a deserted alleyway, which appears to end after only a few yards. The only other thing I can see is another narrow alleyway to our left, but it’s extremely short and completely barren.

“Are you sure we’re in the right place?” I ask her skeptically.

“Mhm,” she responds, dragging me down the small, desolate alley to our left.

To my surprise, once we reach the end, there’s actually a thin, hidden slot between two brick walls. Victoria takes a deep breath and holds it in, flattening herself to fit through the thin opening.

“Victoria, what the hell are you—”

“Just trust me; this is the way,” she reassures.

I turn sideways like she did and try my best to fit inside the tight area, sliding with my chest and face touching the wall in front of me. After a few feet, I try to angle my head to see Victoria, only to see her duck out and disappear about halfway down the narrow shaft.

“What the—Victoria, where’d you go?” I yell in a panic, my mind getting the best of me in this cramped and constricted little space.

“Sh! Over here! This way!” she whispers as she pokes her head back in.

I shimmy and slide over to her as fast as I can, sighing with relief when I see her standing in a secret hidden pathway that’s nowhere near as snug as this one. As I step into it, I notice dried, crumbled leaves all over the ground, which is strange because there are no trees anywhere nearby.

Victoria takes a few large paces, counting aloud with each one. “One, two, three . . .” she whispers under her breath, the dry leaves crunching under her feet as she takes several steps forward, before she finally stops. “Seven.”

When she gets to her seventh step, she stops, scanning the area around us and looking up at the dirty walls, her brow furrowed in contemplation. “This is it,” she finally murmurs.

“What is ‘it’? There’s nothing here,” I reply with incredulity, as I turn and gesture to the barren space all around us.

She ignores me and starts brushing the leaves aside with her feet, kicking up a cloud of dust and dirt until a large symbol reveals itself on the ground. It’s a giant circle, with another much smaller circle in the center of it; but it’s too dusty and dirty to see any of the detail.

She pulls a necklace out from underneath her shirt—a silver, circular talisman of a dragon eating its own tail. I noticed the Elders give it to her before we left, but I was so hungry at the time that I didn’t bother to question it.

“What the hell is that anyway?” I ask her.

“It’s an ourobourous,” she replies, before pulling the

necklace up over her head. “Stand back.”

Clutching it in her fingers, she squats down on the ground before the large circular symbol, placing the talisman into the smaller circle in the center of it. She gives it two good twists to the right, before clicking it back to the left once more, causing the small circle to indent into the ground, as if she had pressed a button. She quickly stands up and backs away, before the large circle starts to creak and descend into the ground.

After a few seconds, a staircase is revealed in the pitch-black hole. Victoria grabs my hand with a calming smile, leading me down the steps and further into the dark abyss. When our feet touch the seventh step, the hole above us closes as if on cue, giving the illusion of a lunar eclipse before leaving us in total darkness. I can hear Victoria fumbling around in her pocket before I hear a spark in the silence, revealing a gold Zippo lighter in her hand that soon illuminates the dark corridor.

“Why can’t we just use the front door like everybody else?” I ask. “This is so much trouble to go through.”

“Because we aren’t ‘everybody else,’ Tyler. They can’t risk someone recognizing us and making the correlation, or somebody possibly following us here and hence, endangering everyone in the Vatican, including the Pope himself,” she replies, her tone implying that the answer should have been obvious. “It’s a safety precaution that we have to take.”

As we walk down the eerie tunnel, I notice petroglyphs on the wall—an endless array of archaic looking symbols and Latin bible-verses, as well as paintings and carvings of various demons and Segovians. Some have warriors taking long blades to them, others have what looks like Freddy’s kind—animas—shooting light out from their palms and at the demons.

“What is this place?” I ask in astonishment, as I eye the walls in awe.

“We’re right under the Vatican,” Victoria whispers, squeezing my hand in reassurance.

As I run my fingers along the ancient carvings, I trail them along the Segovians’ blades, which I found out after many tests

on me from the Elders are actually a living organism. My body merely controls the appendages and feeds them, whilst they work for me in return, kind of like a symbiotic relationship. We've dubbed them "sentinels," named after soldiers by the same name that guard all areas of a warzone to prevent a surprise attack, much like my blades do for me.

After several minutes of walking and turning random corners, we come to find that the tunnels are now illuminated by lit torches, which are lining the walls. Other than the hollow sounds of our reverberating footsteps, the spit and crack of the torches' flickering fire is the only other noise that pierces the deafening and eerie silence all around us.

We finally come to a dead end, putting us at a large wooden door with Latin inscribed on the front.

*Qui quaerunt animam reintrare abuti potestate profanum.*

"It means, 'Enter all those who seek to kill the unholy that abuse their power,'" Victoria utters as she stares up at the door's inscription, giving me a disconcerting feeling about all this—as if I wasn't already nervous enough.

*What if I'm just another Segovian to them? A faceless monster that deserves to die for what I've done?*

"Hey," she starts, angling my chin until my eyes meet hers, "don't worry. They are here to help us, and us to help them."

Placing her hand on the tarnished brass knob, she takes a deep, fortifying breath before twisting it and opening the door. Once inside, we find a small, bare room with a table and four chairs, with soft, diffuse light radiating off two old brass candelabras. Two men dressed in clergy-wear look up as they've been expecting us, before eyeing me speculatively with a slight look of fear. The older of the two, a middle-aged bald man with furry eyebrows dressed in a black ankle-length robe with a red sash, steps forward with his outstretched hand.

"Victoria," he says warmly, bearing a heavy Italian accent.

“Ciao, bella. Buona sera. Come stai?”

“Ciao, Padre Francis. Molto bene, grazie,” she replies with a gracious smile as she shakes his frail hand; although I get the feeling that they’ve met before. “Tyler, this is Father Francis.”

I reach out to shake the man’s hand, who stares up at me in wide-eyed fascination and wonderment.

“Questo è il Segovia?” the man asks her, while looking at me as if I were a fancy artifact on display at a museum, while the other man behind him stares at me as if I have five heads.

“Si,” Victoria answers, before turning to me with a smile. “Tyler, Father Francis is part of the organization. He is going to help us by giving us information on why we’re here and what we need to do.”

“You have a soul?” the man asks me in broken English, his words choppy and sporadic.

“Yes,” I reply, shifting my feet on the floor as I grow uncomfortable. I feel like an abomination that everyone is curious about.

*Step right up, ladies and gentlemen! Come see the demon-boy freak-show wonder!*

“Ahh . . .” he drawls in recognition as he nods his head, before caging his fingers and looking off to the side as if trying to find his words. “There is one who is like you who has been killing humans all over Rome.”

“He means a Segovian,” Victoria adds awkwardly.

“I got that,” I murmur.

“We do not know which sin she is, so we cannot know her strength or weakness,” the man explains, his intermittent words tripping harshly off his foreign tongue.

“What do you need me to do?” I ask him. “All we were told by the Elders is that we need to gather some information to aid in locating a rogue Segovian that has supposedly been residing here in Rome.”

“We need you to find out which sin she’s linked to, so that we may find what her weakness is,” the man behind him

interjects, his English a little bit better than the other man, and his tone just as grave. This man looks more like a quintessential friar, with his brown floor-length robe and rope belted around his waist. “She is ruthless. We have been losing several people a day to her insatiable appetite, and she is far too strong to defeat. You must find where she is feeding and stop her from killing any more people. She usually tries to seduce her victims and lure them out to the catacombs, where she then takes the soul. If we don’t do something soon, half of the population of Rome will be damned by the end of the year. Please, we need you.”

“I’ll do what I can,” I promise, before anxiously shaking both of their hands and heading out.

After dropping Victoria off at our A.A.R.S. safe-house here in Rome, I set off in search of the infamous Segovian, wandering the streets as I try to sniff her out. I’ve found that the best way is to feel for the electromagnetic fluctuations in the air, which are extremely perceptible when a Segovian is around, creating static electricity and a dense heaviness.

I close my eyes and focus, going into a semi-meditative state as I try to pick up on her electromagnetic frequency. A few minutes later, I pick something up, and it’s *extremely* powerful, even by my standards.

I follow the frequency and try to zero in on her location, eventually trailing it to the catacombs, where the priest said she would be. As I warily enter into the dark and tenebrous chamber, I can see stone sarcophagi and piles of old human bones littering the entire area, some of them fresh.

Venturing further and further into the ambulacra underground passages, its beige rock walls in-lined with graves, I can’t help but feel unnerved. It’s incredibly dark and hard to see, but luckily, my newfound heightened senses give me the ability to see in pitch-black darkness. I soon feel my pupils dilating, as if on cue, filtering light into my eyes and giving me night-vision in the black abyss of endless tunnels and corridors.

Suddenly, I hear a loud male-scream echo throughout the catacombs. The heavy static in the air is undeniable, and

getting stronger and stronger the further I delve in; soon, it's so thick, I can feel the little hairs on my arm standing up in anxious response, my nerves prickling with caution.

I turn the corner with trepidation, and see an incredibly beautiful young girl of about sixteen years of age, with long, wavy, dark-brown hair that hits the small of her back, piercing jade-hued eyes, and an endless barrage of sentinels shooting out from her in all directions.

She has a young man in her grasp, one of her hands tightly wound around his throat, while her other hand is perched on the wall next to his head. Her face inches from his, and his expression one of sheer terror, I can see several of her blades lodged into his chest and gut, twisting and shredding him from the inside-out. Blood froths up over his lips as he coughs and gasps for air, while a crooked little smile clings to her lips at his pain and misery.

"I see you've come to enjoy the show," she sneers wryly, sensing me immediately. She doesn't bother to turn around, far too enthralled and immersed in torturing the young man before her. "This one's *mine*. Go get your own soul."

"That's not why I'm here," I reply calmly, cautiously inching towards her as if approaching a wildcat.

I can see her starting to suck his soul into the gaping pit in her palm, her lascivious eyes rolling up into the back of her head as she moans in ecstasy.

"Mmm, *fuck*; that's better than sex," she says breathily, her head thrown back as debauched moans and cries of pleasure emit from her full oxblood-red lips.

"Stop," I command her, trying to feign confidence as if it'll make any difference; but the man in her clutches is already dead, his dead eyes wide with horror as she unceremoniously drops his limp body to the floor with a hard thud.

"What the hell are you doing here, *Segovian*? This is my turf, and it's not big enough for the both of us," she hisses, as she rubs the blood that's spotting her perfectly manicured ruby-red fingernails off on her *di rigueur* black-pleather pants.

"I'm here to stop *you*," I reply, trying to assert myself in the

presence of this powerful entity.

“Oh, really?” she scoffs, before throwing her head back in laughter, causing the catacombs to reverberate with her mirth. “Do you have *any* idea who I am, little boy?”

“Give me your name,” I demand.

“Oh, you really don’t know?” she laughs wickedly, her sultry malachite gaze burning into me with ferocity. “I’m Lust.”

