



# Prologue

In the year 2025 of a futuristic steampunk era, a darkness looms over the Great City like a thick blanket; dark and dismal. Within five years of our residency, changes drastically occurred.

Tanks and military personnel roamed the streets, establishing the new laws that all must adhere to. Following closely behind and instilling fear into the people, were creatures of great deformity; origins unknown.

Destruction of the Great City's Victorian architecture slowly transformed into grotesque structures completely unrecognizable. Pipes and wheels were distorted in clusters, appearing to devour the tall tower.

Parliament was overthrown by a barbaric Necromancer; declaring himself the new Lord of London. Proclaiming martial law and abolishing magical practices, herds of people evacuated the city, escaping the chaos and destruction. Citizens cautiously maneuvered through alleys and side streets, avoiding detection by the Lord's ominous militia. Attempts were thwarted for some as they were spotted; killed or captured upon sight.

The ones fortunate enough to escape with minor-to-moderate injuries, made their swift advance toward the train station hoping to flee.

A decorative banner with the text "Chapter 1" in a serif font. The banner is ornate, featuring a central floral motif and two ribbon-like flourishes extending outwards. The background is white, and the text and decorations are in black.

# Chapter 1

A little after midnight, people scrambled through the darkened streets with their belongings, dropping them now and then; eventually leaving them behind, trying to make it to safety. But with the new Lord in control, there was no safe place.

My mom and I ran through the streets, many others trailing all around, crowding the path to the trains beginning to evacuate people out of the City. There were only three trains; two that had already departed moments before we arrived. Hopefully, there was enough room on the last train convoy to board everyone left behind.

“Mommy!” I shouted out, pushing my way through the crowd with a duffle bag draped across my back; black Wolf-mix Zanzabarr at my feet strapped in his harness, “Excuse me...excuse me...” I continued pushing through, slowly approaching my mom who stood near the train doors; passengers crowding past her.

“Sweetheart, where were you!?” my mom asked, holding onto her bag and cat carrier; black cat Freya hidden inside. She struggled to balance the weight of the carrier, her bag and wheeled trunk.

“Don’t worry about me. Let’s find a cabin before they’re all gone or crowded.”

My mom turned boarding the train, disappearing through the doors where the conductor kindly helped her pull her trunk through the cramped aisles.

Before I followed, I turned looking back at the Great City that was once glorious, but now it's nothing but piles of rubble and smoke. It broke my heart because it's been our home for the last five years upon relocating from the States for personal safety, avoiding our government's detection of my hidden nature. However, that's all destroyed now. The menacing clouds looming over the city, flashed bright with light as more unknown and hellish creatures erupted from within it. A large slithering mass slowly moved in the clouds' concealment; a force that no one would have ever believed. But for those of us living in the City, it was a monster.

"Get moving!" a grumpy old man shouted from behind me.

"Shut it, Grandpa!" I snapped, "I'm moving...I'm moving!"

I boarded the train with Zanz; tightly grasped onto his leash, walking through the crowded aisles until finding my mom standing outside a small empty cabin. Just enough room with extra to spare. Once everyone settled in their seat and cabins, the train departed the station; spitting and churning of steam could be heard, as the engines powered. Sitting there looking out the window watching the tracks pass by and shifting in my seat, I asked worriedly as I felt my nerves trying to settle,

"Where do you think this train stops?"

"I don't know." my mom fearfully replied, "But wherever it takes us, I hope we'll be safe and aren't followed. The new order is very treacherous. I'll never trust them. But now, we just have to be on our guard and try not to call attention to ourselves." she too, shifted in place.

"Right. Don't call attention to ourselves. You're a witch...and I'm a woman traveling with a Wolf. Yeah, sure. That doesn't call attention at all." I said sarcastically.

My mom said nothing, flashing a faint grin.

Unfortunately those who weren't able to board the trains in time were captured or beaten on the depot platform, by the Lord's army; arriving minutes too late. Soldiers

stood on the tracks, watching as the last train grew smaller in the distance. They weren't upset so much that people had evacuated, but wanted control over the trains.

"Let's get back to Commander Matrix!" one of the soldiers ordered in disappointment, "Nothing left here. They'll be followed and tracked down! There's no where to hide."

Before climbing back in their tanks and trucks to return with their reports of failure, the soldiers looked toward the platform where the bodies of those killed, laid lifeless. Those captured, whimpered and cried as they were dragged and thrown into the prison vehicles, all chained together.



With reports he received from the Great City, a powerful immortal named MC stood among groups of supernaturals, paranormals and humans. He established a private haven for those seeking refuge. MC gathered most who lived behind the haven's massive wall.

"A great change has occurred in the Great City on the mainland, as you may have already heard. All the guards are on high alert and what I asked of them, I ask of you. Be aware of travelers that might venture into our harbor. Treat them with caution and hospitality regardless of their race and beliefs. These are dangerous times, as you all know but also be mindful that whoever comes, is permitted access."

"When you say regardless of their race!? Please don't tell everyone here that you're allowing more vamp..." a man objected.

"That's none of your concern." MC interrupted, "I said *ALL* who seek safety, are allowed. Is that understood!? You've given me enough trouble." MC leered at the man, who turned away disgruntled.

Everyone nodded, agreeing to what MC asked of them, speaking among themselves. They respected his authority as the proprietor. At least some of them did.

Hours later, MC was called upon by his dragon telepathically. Sensing his urgency, he entered a secret passage through his study leading to an underground cavern, where the dragon dwelled. After entering, he approached the mythical beast asking calmly,

“What is it, great Blue One? Why do you call on me in such urgency?”

*“I have had a vision of your successor. The orb-stone has finally chosen, after centuries of searching. She will be coming soon, with another woman who practices magic.”* the dragon replied telepathically.

“She? My successor will be a female? Impossible. A woman can’t rule this sanctuary, much less protect its secrets. She won’t gain the respect I have.”

*“Nonetheless, in my vision the stone itself chose a young female. She will be from a far place, coming inexperienced; unknowing of all of our ways. That is all I have seen. But I do sense that this female possesses a strange essence that you nor I will expect. I sense a fire within and around her.”*

MC paced, examining the cavern ceiling; thoughts crowding his mind. Pushing them aside, he said softly as he turned petting the dragon’s snout,

“As you say. Although, I still can’t see how a young woman can possibly handle this position. Unless she comes with great magic. But, have no worries Blue One. I will handle it. Now rest, dear dragon.”

He turned away, returning to his study. He contemplated when he should announce the new Keeper’s arrival, hoping to squelch the rumors of his impending retirement.

*“A WOMAN?”* he thought as he stared at the orb-stone, *“WHY A WOMAN? HOW CAN SHE POSSIBLY TAKE ON THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THIS PLACE? IT CAN’T BE. IT’S IMPOSSIBLE. AND FIRE? WHAT’S THE MEANING OF THAT? A FIRE MAGE? FIERY SPIRIT? FIRE...OH, MARXUS ENOUGH WITH THE THOUGHTS.”*

The orb-stone suddenly hummed as it sat in its box, taking on a pulsating glow answering MC's thoughts in soft whispers. He ignored their words as he stood, stepping into the bathroom to splash water on his face. In his absence, the orb-stone momentarily took on a red-fiery glow before quickly diminishing. A low whisper emanated,

"Things are finally in place as planned."



The train made several stops at depots along its route, but we decided to ride it to the end. The further the better. In our cabin enjoying the beautiful glimpses of the night sky and its stars, the conductor knocked on passengers' doors, making sure all were settled. He collected tickets and fares. Suddenly, we heard a knock. Turning our heads toward the cabin door, the conductor's head peeked inside.

"Hello, my lovelies." he whispered, "Fare or tickets, please. And do you have room to spare for one more?" his eyes scanned our small cabin.

"Yes, of course." my mom answered, handing him our fare.

"It'll be a tight squeeze but I'm sure we can manage." I added as I attempted to re-situate our luggage.

Zanz's behavior suddenly flared, as he began growling through his muzzle at the conductor, who briefly grinned before stepping aside.

Stepping around from behind him, was a strange but nicely dressed woman in her mid-to-late 40s with short curly red hair; bohemian-steampunk attire.

Before closing the door behind her, the conductor smiled as he gave a quick nod.

“Enjoy your ride, ladies.” he commented.

As he made eye contact with me after calming Zanz, I looked into the mans eyes and could have sworn they flashed a reddish tint. Maybe it was just my eyes deceiving me or a reflection cast. Either way, it was strange.

“Thank you, Sir.” the woman said in an English accent before the door closed. Looking at us, she continued as she sat across from us placing her carry-on-bag in her lap, “Thank you for your space. Everywhere else was full. Bloody hell, they really know how to cram those cabins.” she smiled, “My name is Mary.”

“Hello, Mary. My name is DD and this is my daughter, Yzavela.” my mom replied, gesturing her left hand toward me.

“Hello.” I added, giving a slight wave and smile.

Reaching out to shake our hands, Freya hissed through her carrier and Zanz snarled, making her withdraw her hand rapidly. After calming our pets, we apologized, explaining they too were afraid and protective.

“My, what a beautiful dog! Wolf, I gather?” she asked, “Wolves haven’t been reported in England for centuries. Their breed is considered extinct. Where did you find him?”

“It’s a long story, but thank you.” I answered holding onto his harness, “I’m guessing his gold eyes gave him away.” I smiled, “He’s a Wolf-mix actually. Easy boy.” he lunged forward.

“Beautiful just the same.” then her eyes scanned us as she continued curiously, “I’m guessing they’re your familiars?”

My mom and I exchanged a quick glance.

Looking back at Mary, my mom answered suspiciously,

“Wh...why? Is that a problem?”

“Oh, no-no. I greatly admire Wiccans. I practice old gypsy magic myself. My specialty is reading an individuals fortune, to be exact.”

“We...never said we were wiccans.” I said cautiously, as our steampunk attire didn’t give off any signals either; displaying no magical jewelry.

“Well...” she commented, “you just admitted to having familiars and don’t Wiccans possess them? Look, please don’t fear me. I won’t turn you in, for I’m running myself. I’m on my way to stay with some relatives that live near here. Where are you two ladies headed?”

“We don’t know.” I interrupted replied quickly.

“You two are cautious, that’s wise.” Mary whispered before a moment of silence, then she kindly changed the subject, “ Perhaps then, I can read your fortune? Free of charge? I get a good vibe from the both of you and I’d like to see where your futures take you. Do you mind?” she held out her hands, palms facing up. Reaching out, she took my mom’s gloved hands holding them firmly; eyes turned white as she looked up, continuing softly, “I see a good life for you, however, there will be minor obstacles but you shall overcome them. You will encounter a lot of strange events but will survive them as you always have. You come from a long line of powerful witches, of which you already know. Stay strong, be cautious and always be aware of those around you.” she sighed, releasing my mom’s hands, who rubbed them together for she felt a tingling sensation.

Shaking her head and blinking her eyes, Mary took in a deep breath. She gazed into my mom's eyes giving a smile of reassurance, then reached for my gloved hands, I reluctantly offered.

“Oh, my.” she continued; eyes white as before, “Yours on the other hand, takes a whole different turn but not drastically.”

“Not drastically!?” I interrupted, “ What's that supposed to mean!? Is there a death involved!?”

“Yes. A near passing of one you haven't come to know yet. A great task will be unloaded to you, through a powerful individual that will expect you to fulfill a destiny unknown to you. On this path, you will encounter friends, worst of enemies and a great love in the near future. He will be all you seek in this world.” then she flinched as her grip tightened, “Oh...”

“What!? What's wrong!?” I worried.

“Fire...I see fire...everywhere, but not burning. I see figures standing...you're a...”

I rapidly pulled my hands away before she could finish. I glanced at my mom; worried and afraid she discovered my fiery secret. I quietly gulped as I rubbed my hands that felt warm against my thighs.

Opening her eyes she stared at me, appearing weakened. She apologized, hoping she didn't frighten us with her readings. She revealed that she'd seen many futures but nothing quite like mine. I grew worried of what she saw, as I stared at her. Aware of her frightened state, we grew more cautious.

I tightened my grip on Zanz's harness which signaled him to be on guard. He perked his ears as he stared at Mary; menacing panting making her feel uncomfortable. I placed my other hand in my bag, holding onto a hidden pocket knife. My mom inconspicuously reached her hand into a hidden pocket of her coat, hiding a Wiccan Athame dagger. She too, if necessary would defend herself if needed. Mary noticed our uneasiness, remaining quiet for the rest of the ride.

Her stop quickly approached as she gave us the name of someone she knew located in the last town. Taking a pen from her bag, she scribbled a name and address on the back of a business card she removed from her pocket. After placing the pen back in her bag, she handed the card to my mom. His name was William Harley and could be

very helpful. She smiled as she exited the cabin, departing the train with several other passengers.

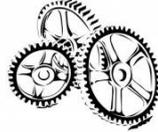
As the train departed, she stood on the depot watching as the train grew smaller in the distance. Closing her eyes, she felt the ache of a migraine she's never experienced. She exited the platform then paused, sensing as if someone followed her. Turning around, there was no one but felt a shiver. She kept on her course through the station, to arrange a ride pick-up.



I couldn't help but roll Mary's words around in my mind. Whose death? Mine...my mom's...a friend? And the fire? What did she think of that? It worried me, but closing my eyes and feeling the calming motion of the train, it helped keep my mind off it. We rode on until coming to the last stop. *WHITE-HAVEN*. After an exhausting five hour train ride, our legs were cramped and stomachs empty. Our pets too, were uneasy from the long travel. Especially Freya; locked in her carrier for such a long time. There were a few remaining passengers following behind, as we unloaded our luggage and pets onto the depot platform.

Walking through the small station and standing outside, we hailed a taxi taking us to a nearby Inn. Luckily, one was close by; a mile from the train depot, highly recommended by the driver as he informed us it accepted pets. A few glimpses along the way, revealed White-haven was a large town, rather than a city.

Pulling up outside, we peeked out the window catching a glimpse of the Inn's architecture. A sign hung above, framing the doorway; three large intersecting cog wheels turning above. The sign read in bold Italics:



## *The Night Table Inn & Pub* *Open 24 Hours*

Stepping out of the taxi, the Inn was beautiful; steampunk vibe with steam escaping from a vent on the rooftop. Thanking and tipping the driver, we walked in entering a small quaint and cozy lobby. Straight ahead, was a front desk and behind it, stood a desk clerk; a young man in his late 20s dressed in steampunk clothing. His hair was spiked and black guy-liner framed his brown eyes. Spiked leather cuff bracelets covered large wrists tattoos. He bid us a friendly welcome. After registering and receiving our keys, he cordially mentioned there was a pub in the back along with a garden area for pets. Before heading upstairs, I walked Zanz.

The room was decorated in an old-fashioned Victorian manner. Two beds had beautifully quilted bedspreads with feather mattresses and pillows. Floors were walnut wood; hand woven rugs placed about. The room was lit with a beautiful candelabra chandelier and small lamp set on a table between the beds. Above the table; medium window with old-fashioned shutters opening inward, overlooking parts of White-haven. The early sunrise glistened off the highest windows of the tallest structures. It suddenly hit me that we had traveled all night just to get here.

The bathroom; elegant tiled walls and floors with matching porcelain fixtures. The tub had four clawed feet. The room was very inviting. The owners really accomplished their goal in setting up the appeal of this place with the Victorian flair.

My mom released Freya from her carrier after setting up food, water and a temporary litter box. She ran, hiding under one of the beds. Zanz took lead, laying spread across on the other declaring it his. We smiled, then partially unpacked enough essentials for a few days. Exhausted from our long travel, we rested for a few hours.

Now afternoon, we ventured downstairs to grab something to eat.

The pub continued the Victorian-steampunk design. Tables of different sizes were spread about with booths along one wall. A long bar with wooden seats spread across on the other. Patrons were scattered at different tables and toward the back; a man sat alone, drinking a hot beverage reading a paper.

Sitting down, our eyes scanned the menu deciding what to order.

A waitress in her early 30s; dark blonde hair streaked with pink, clothed in a buckled and studded tavern wench dress, walked over. Her taller thick frame and studded bracelets, gave an intimidating, but nonthreatening approach. Her rose colored cheeks of her round face, scrunched as she smiled. Holding a touch-pen to a digital notepad, she greeted cheerfully in an English accent,

“Hello, loves. Are you ready to order?” her pen flicking; ready to place it..

“Well...” my mom replied, studying the menu's options.

“Newcomers, I see. Tell you what, loves...when you decide, just give a shout My name's Ellen.” she walked away, with the notepad and pen still in her hand.

“Wow.” I commented briefly laying the menu on the ledge of the table, “This place is so oblivious to the chaos taking place in the Great City. I just hope the destruction doesn't spread this far.”

“I hope not either.” my mom said glancing above her menu, “Now, um...what's that?” she changed the subject, pointing at a dish, “As delicious as I'm sure that is, I won't eat anything I don't understand. Mm-mm. No way.” she shook her head.

I laughed as my mom's eyes continued scanning the menu.

Two minutes passed.

“Are you ready to order now, ladies?” Ellen approached once more.

I looked up at her then over at my mom asking,

“I’m sorry, but what’s this?” I pointed out the meal my mom commented about, “Does that say...*CHACCA-CABRA*?”

“Oh, that!?” Ellen replied, “That’s our meat lover’s pie. We call it the *BELLY OF THE BEAST* in the kitchen. It’s inspired by the legendary creature, *CHUPA-CABRA*. It has a bit of everything and I mean *EVERYTHING* thrown in it.” then she added the waitress' pitch, "It's quite tasty really."

My mom and I contained our nausea. We quickly sipped from our cups before ordering an American dish. The service was courteous and friendly; always on point as to what the customer requested. The dish we ordered was better than we expected. Piling the plates on the ledge of the table, Ellen walked over presenting us with the pricey digital check on her notepad before retrieving the dishware. Our eyes widened at the overall total.

“Gee...that’s breaking the bank.” I joked, scanning my credit card over the notepads' screen, applying digital payment.

“Mm, but it was worth it though.” my mom added.

Once payment was accepted, Ellen approached our table one last time, retrieving her notepad. Before stepping away with a large smile, my mom questioned within an ears reach,

“Excuse me, Ellen...do you know a William Harley at this address?” as she revealed the business card reading *666 WEST ALCHEMY ROAD*.

As Ellen studied the strange address, she replied with a curious frown,

“I don’t believe I do. I pass by that stretch of businesses everyday and I’ve never seen one with that address.” then she turned asking the patrons at the bar, “Do any of you blokes know if there’s a business at 666 West Alchemy Road?”

The patrons talked among themselves; not knowing of that address either. Some made facial expressions at the three digit number. All the digits in the area ran in fours. Ellen stated as she looked down at her curious customers,

“I’m sorry I couldn’t help you more. It’s very possible there’s a business there. Pretty much all the addresses around here have four digits, so it could be possible there’s a number missing or perhaps, you were given the wrong address? But 666 is bloody odd. Again, loves...I’m sorry I couldn’t help.” she smiled.

“That’s alright, thank you.” my mom appreciated as Ellen walked away.

My mom and I wondered.

Leaning on the table, the thought ran through my mom’s mind, “*WHY WOULD MARY GIVE US AN ADDRESS THAT POSSIBLY DOESN'T EXIST OR IS JUST THE WRONG PLACE? AND REALLY, 666!?*”

She wasn’t surprised when I spoke words similar to her thoughts.



A hefty man sat in the corner of the pub sipping his tea; hat pulled down over his face. Without notification, he heard a ringing coming from his pocket. Reaching inside, he retrieved a futuristic I-phone; screen displaying a woman’s image. Accepting the call, the woman greeted in a friendly, but serious tone as they engaged in a brief video call,

“Hello, William. This isn’t a social call, I’m afraid. I’m calling because you need to set-up your storefront, making it presentable. I sent a mother and daughter who’ll be

coming into your...establishment. I'm sure they've realized the address I gave them doesn't exist."

William nodded.

"I believe I may be looking at them right now. Do they both have raven colored hair?"

William replied in an elegant English accent.

"Indeed they do."

"I'm having tea at the moment, but I'll prepare as soon as possible for I think they may have already figured out you had given them a false address. They're asking questions here at the pub."

"They're more attentive than I thought. Just the same, accommodate them accordingly, and make sure their needs are met. The young one's very special and important. I sense something off about her though, so be cautious just the same. MC's request."

"Very well, will do."

"Thank you, my friend. We will see each other again soon."

"Pleasant evening, Mary." William smiled.

His screen went blank.

He tucked the phone in his pocket, while scanning the notepads' surface on his table leaving his tip. Standing, he walked past the two raven-haired women; grasping the feel of their energy himself. He noticed a strong vibe emanating from both but especially the young woman which seemed out of the ordinary.

"*OUT OF THE ORDINARY, INDEED.*" he thought, "*INTERESTING.*"

Without watching his path, he stumped his foot against the table behind my mom, catching our attention.

We cautiously glanced up, watching the man from the back of the pub, leave rather strangely, as if something disturbed him. We dismissed the caution as he swiftly swept through the doors, holding his head low.

After lunch, we decided to explore White-haven taking Zanz, giving him a long walk while we ventured into town. A beautiful sunny afternoon; the cobblestone streets were crowded with tourists, pedestrians and possible fellow refugees. There were many steampunk storefronts; antique shops thrown in between. The architectures blended perfectly together. Some buildings still utilized electricity while most others ran on steam operated generators. You could see the steam rising above the rooftops, escaping from smoke stacks. Occasional storefronts displayed their holographic billboards and technology.

Steam powered vehicles from the 1900's Victorian era, drove up and down the streets; several tour shuttles also ran on steam. Hovercraft vehicles too, hovered about, mixing their futuristic designs amid the steampunk. A perfect balance.

Continuing to admire the towns' mixed architecture, we came across the realty office no one seemed to notice. The outside was filthy, and the windows hadn't been washed in quite some time. Faded bold lettering appeared to be on the window which I barely made out, with much difficulty:

## WELCOME TO W.H. REALTY & TOUR GUIDE SERVICE

My mom read the address written on the card, then glanced up at the building. She examined the other buildings along the streets; all displaying four digits. The facade of the building was out of place with old, cracked red brick.

"I'm guessing this is the place because it says 666 on the building." she observed, gesturing toward the business.

“How ironic is the address? But a number’s just a number.” I replied, “And you’d think they’d keep it cleaner. I mean, are they even open?” I walked over trying to look through the window. Rubbing the outer glass with my hand, I finally caught a glimpse of someone inside walking back and forth, “There’s someone in there.” I continued as I turned to my mom.

“Well, let’s go in and see if he can really help us. Mary suggested this place, so she must know him well enough to have referred him.” my mom answered, “And if this is the portal to Hell, then he must be the Devil.”

“True but that’s not funny. Although, I have been bad so...” I smiled then glanced down at Zanz, who took in all the scents as he intensely sniffed around, “Come boy.” I jerked his leash toward me.

Walking through the door, a bell above our heads rang, indicating someone had entered. Looking around, the office was small; maps covering the wall to our left marked with stars locating popular tourist areas. To the right was an old bookshelf situated in the corner, displaying antique books appearing worn with age. They were either leather or cloth bound. Tucked away on one of the shelves were rolled up parchments neatly stacked upon each other. But the main feature was dust covering everything with cobwebs hanging in the corners.

An old black wooden desk, sat in the center of the room stacked with papers and folders; two chairs placed in front as if expecting visitors. A small desk lamp tried peeking its way out of the mess and it too, had cobwebs hanging from it. Sitting behind the desk, was a heavy-set man in his early 40s with dark blonde hair and a trimmed mustache; glasses positioned on the ridge of his nose. He looked up greeting us in a jolly voice, as he laid stacks of papers down before him,

“Hello, ladies. How may I help you?” he leaned forward in his creaking chair.

I sat Zanz by the door while my mom replied quickly,

“A friend of yours...Mary, I believe...highly recommended your services. She said you can help us find permanent lodging.”

“Oh, Mary. Yes.” he said casually, “A good friend indeed. So, where are you from?”

“The Great City.” I added as I faced him.

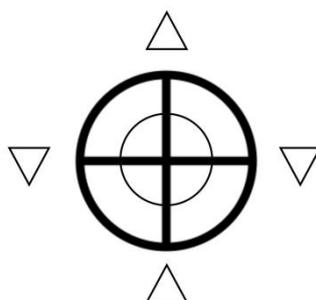
“Ah, the Great City. A lot of changes have occurred there and not good ones, I hear. Now, onto more pleasant matters. I think I may have what you’re looking for.” he pointed toward the cluttered bookshelf.

The office space was small enough as it is, so as he walked around his desk toward the bookshelf, my mom and I stepped aside. He scanned the shelves; fingers running over the parchments before removing one of them from their place. He turned with a smile then returned to his desk. Gently tucking the scroll under his arm, he attempted to clear his desk of all the dusty papers and folders.

“Please forgive the mess, loves. I’ve been away on business and didn’t find out until this morning, that my office aide is out sick.” he said.

*“IT LOOKS LIKE IT HASN’T BEEN CLEANED FOR AGES.”* I thought, flashing a quick smile.

Once clearing his desk of the last stack of papers, I noticed; carved directly into the wood, a large circle with a smaller circle inside. A cross divided both circles in half, both vertically and horizontally. Triangles capped each arm of the cross; the upper and lower points were upright while the left and right were inverted.



What it meant, I had no idea. He immediately placed the parchment forcibly onto the desk, rolling it out trying to conceal the symbol from view. I observed his actions but said nothing. Dust flew everywhere. We waved our hands blowing it away from our faces. If I didn't know better, I felt a sneeze coming on but managed to contain it.

He kindly commented as he too, waved away the dust from the air and his vest,

“Apologies, ladies. It's been quite a while since I've looked through these.”

“Are you sure it hasn't been...centuries?” I muttered, looking away.

He gave a quick glance, ignoring the comment.

My mom glanced at me, gently nudging me with her right elbow.

He reached over shaking our hands calling our attention away from minor distractions. Sitting back in his chair that creaked once more, he said cheerfully,

“It'll be a pleasure helping you. Now, you can call me Billy. Please, sit.” he gestured toward the chairs, then pushed the parchment toward us.

“Quick question, though...Billy.” I asked, “What's up with your address? I mean, the waitress in the pub down the street thought we were freaking crazy going to a place with that particular number.”

“Well...a number's just a number, right?” he answered bluntly, “Besides, I meant it as a joke. It has no effect on my business. A letter chipped away, so I left it that way.”

“Clearly.” I muttered sarcastically as I glanced around once more.

My mom smiled, shaking her head in silence.

Billy squinted but flashed a brief grin, noticing my sarcasm.

“*SARCASTIC LITTLE BIRD.*” he thought, “*YOU WILL BE A CHALLENGE.*”

The map was similar to those hanging on the wall; different housing locations. He opened the left drawer of his desk retrieving a few brochures, handing them to us across the desk. I didn't know if he took this visit seriously or made it sound like we sought places for a luxury vacation. I know my mom made it clear we're looking for permanent lodging and not your average site seeing tour. But whatever.

Skimming through the brochures (more my mom than me because I became more distracted) my eyes wandered toward what laid beneath the parchment, carved onto the desk. Slowly reaching my left hand over, I attempted lifting the edge of the paper to look underneath but my mom gently tapped my hand.

“What?” I whispered.

“What are you doing!? Stop it and be...*NICE.*” she returned the whisper.

“I am...being *NICE.*” I spoke through my smile then gazed toward Billy, who sat silent during our mother-daughter moment.

He rested his elbows on the desk's ledge, looking at me rather strangely studying me. He gave a friendly smile in acknowledgment of some kind. Billy broke his gaze then leaned back in the chair, kindly excusing himself as he stood,

“Excuse me, loves. I'll be right back. I need to use the loo.”

We smiled as he walked toward the back of his office; set rearward in an alcove with a storage room on the right and the bathroom on the left. A partition extended from the right, blocking off view of the rooms.

Billy entered the storage room.

Five minutes passed and we wondered where Billy had went, but continued skimming through the material laid before us, taking notes and giving complaints.

During his absence, Billy stood at a small window calling out in a Latin tongue, summoning a messenger. Minutes after his call, a black Raven appeared landing on the windowsill. Billy wrote on a piece of parchment paper with a special pen he removed from his pocket. Writing the words in a magical ink leaving the content invisible to the eye, except for the one it was addressed to, he wrote:

“MC;

*I think I've found the one you're looking for. There's a young woman who has now appeared in my office and she...NOTICED the symbol carved onto the desk. She's here with her mother and they're searching for lodging so with your permission, I'll send them to you. I'll make the preparations and they should be there in maybe a week or less. But I must warn you, Sir...the young woman is very strange. Strange indeed.*

-WH”

Rolling the note he attached it to the Raven's foot, instructing it to return the message to MC. He touched the birds' chest before it flew off, squawking as it disappeared into the distance, West of White-haven toward a blanket of unnatural thick fog across the vast sea off the coast.

Ten minutes total, Billy emerged from the storage room, peeking his head around the partition. He noticed I once again lifted the parchment trying to study the carving on the desk but lowered the corner in disappointment as the carving had disappeared. He glanced down at his feet as he breathed deeply, stepping out fiddling with his belt. Trying to lighten the mood of the situation, he joked as he patted his stomach,

“I’m sorry, but lunch didn’t quite agree with me. So, have you chosen a place you’d like to go? There are so many to choose from.”

“Billy...this isn’t a vacation!” I objected as I abruptly stood throwing the brochures onto the desk tempted to set them ablaze, “We came here because Mary said you could help, but apparently you’re not taking this seriously! We need help and you’re treating this as if it’s all fun and games!”

Turning in her seat looking up at me, my mom said firmly,

“Watch your tone! You know better than that, now sit down!”

“No, it’s alright.” Billy added.

“No, it’s not.” my mom argued as she flashed Billy a brief glance, “She’s raised better than that.” then she returned her focus onto me, “Sit down, now! You know what happens when you get angry. Please...calm down, alright!?” she glared with an angry expression and I knew I was in deep shit. She was right though.

I clenched my fists tightly as I retook my seat. Sighing deeply I replied softly,

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean how that sounded.”

“It’s not me you have to apologize to.” my mom corrected me, waiting for me to apologize. After accepting the apology with no hostility and understanding the situation, my mom continued after the moment passed, “As you know, I’m sure...there was a major evacuation of numerous people in the Great City. We were driven from our home leaving everything behind, except for what we have at the Inn. And that includes our pets. We’re terrified of what’s ahead so can you blame us? Again, we apologize for being...edgy. You presented the brochures yes, and showed us areas on the map yes, but we don’t know where any of these places are. So if you can just...give us a good recommendation for a place best suited for us, then please do. We’re staying at The Night Table Inn and Pub, so if you need to contact us

further, that's where we'll be. We have temporary lodging there and will probably need to move on before we're found. Now, Billy...do have a good day."

We nodded as we stood, turning away to walk toward the door.

Billy abruptly stood, pleading; hands resting on the edge of the desk,

"Ladies...please, sit. I do understand what you're going through and I can't imagine the fear you must be dealing with. You two stand out like sore thumbs, especially with your large dog over there." he glanced toward Zanz, "He screams for attention and unfortunately for the wrong kind. However, I do know of a perfect place that's uh...not listed on any of these man-made maps. Or any map for that matter." he paused, watching as we turned to him; curiosity taking over. He smiled as we slowly re-approached his desk, sitting back in the chairs. Once the mood of the moment was quiet and calm he continued, "The place I'm speaking of, is hidden from sight but very much there. It's extremely secluded from the public and requires special admission."

"Sounds like a cult." I worried.

"It most definitely is not, I assure you." Billy quickly cut me short, "It's such a beautiful and magnificent place and very safe. It's actually owned by a good friend of mine. You should be happy and welcomed there with no problems. I give you my word, you'll be safe there."

"So, pretty much what you're saying is that...this beautiful and magnificent place, takes in all the strays of the world?" my mom questioned sarcastically.

"In a sense, yes." he chuckled.

My mom and I glanced at each other in wonderment.

"Alright, but do they allow pets because we're not getting rid of ours." I asked, turning to look toward Zanz who laid by the door.

“My daughter’s right. They’re our family.” my mom added.

“Of course they do. They have many animals there. Even a large barn and elaborate stables.” Billy answered, “Now, I must add and forgive me if I momentarily change the subject, but your dog is quite magnificent. Wolves. Very magical dogs. Such gorgeous gold eyes. Can’t say I’ve ever seen one in these parts.”

“I’ve heard that before and yes, he is magnificent.” I remarked as Zanz heard his name, “Come here, boy.” he walked toward me, enjoying the tender scratches I gave to his massive neck, “Very rare indeed.”

“Mm. Incredible.” he smiled, “Anyway, I’ll make the arrangements which should take me...a week, maybe less depending on the availability of my contacts and transport. I’ll send word when everything is ready, alright?”

“Alright. Thank you again.” my mom appreciated.

“No problem.” Billy flashed a warm smile, as he kindly escorted us to the door, “And in case we don’t see each other again, travel safe.”

“Thanks.” I said, “And again, I’m sorry for my reaction earlier. Hot temper.”

“I sense that. Now, have a good rest of your day ladies.”

We flashed smiles once more as we exited the shop; door bell ringing as if giving it's own farewell. Reaching his hand up toward the bell, he grabbed onto it, silencing its sound as he watched us stroll down the street, engaging in conversation through his crusted windows. He turned away, immediately reaching out to his *CONTACTS* he spoke of.

Leaving his establishment with hope, we discussed Billy’s strange behavior but agreed we’d have to learn to trust some individuals if we’re to create a new life and friendships.

Returning to the Inn, Freya had bravely greeted us as we entered our room, upon our 3-4 hour absence. After feeding her and Zanz making sure they were settled in, we ventured downstairs for an early dinner. Sitting in one of the booths, we discussed the Great City; what's possibly taking place at that very moment. Shaking the thoughts from our minds, we tried focusing on more pleasant things but still worried we were being followed. After walking Zanz once last time , we settled in for the evening.



As Billy locked the doors to his office; lights dimmed to a low glow, MC appeared.

“Hello, old friend.” MC said.

Startled, Billy turned seeing MC standing in the corner of the room; hidden in the shadows.

“Bloody hell...” Billy pondered, “you gave me a fright.”

MC stepped from the shadows, toward Billy. Examining the office he answered bluntly,

“I apologize for my sudden appearance, but I received your letter. I see this place still hasn't been cleaned, William.” he ran his fingers along the desks' surface.

“Yes, well...” Billy mumbled as he tilted his head, “you're not here to discuss my office. And may I say, Sir...you're looking very elegant today. Special occasion?” he eyed MC's appearance in high admiration.

“No, I'm not.” MC stated as he raised an eyebrow, ignoring Billy's comment while making direct eye contact with him, “Are things in order?”

“Yes. In about a week or so, but I feel things will come together much sooner.”

“Very good. I’ll make the proper preparations on my end. Now, tell me more about these women, more importantly about the young woman in particular.” MC reluctantly sat in one of the chairs, after dusting its surface. He elegantly rested his elbows on the arms of the chair, waiting for Billy’s explanation.

Billy sat as he began explaining the events that occurred earlier in the day.

“First off, she noticed the symbol carved onto the desk designated by you, as I mentioned in my letter. Its appearance indicates you’ve found the person you’re looking for, right?” he watched as MC nodded, “Well, Sir...you’ll not be disappointed for I think she’s the one, but that’s not all.”

“Oh?” MC inquired curiously as he shifted in the chair.

“There was a moment, where the young woman became agitated and I swear, Sir with my own eyes, I saw a quick...glimmer of flame in her eyes. It most definitely wasn’t a glare cast off my glasses or hers.” Billy answered proudly.

“Flame in her eyes, you say?” MC mumbled, reflecting on Billy’s words then thought, “*BLUE ONE MENTIONED SOMETHING ABOUT FIRE.*”

He stood taking Billy’s words to ear; pleased that everything fell perfectly into place. He smiled as he removed a black velvet pouch from his pocket; high quality silver coins hidden inside, worth thousands on the collections market. Billy politely declined the gift, telling MC that payment wasn’t necessary for he did this as a favor. MC smiled, tucking the pouch back into his pocket.

After speaking with Billy, MC knew things were set in motion and that this search had come to an end...or has it? But what MC didn’t realize, is just how strong this young woman’s character really was. Or *WHAT* she really was but he was surely going to find out soon.

He returned to Ravenstone (the sanctuary for all) later that evening, visiting his dragon who without words, knew the meaning of MC's brief visit. Both grew pleased that the stone sent out; searching for centuries, had finally found the one chosen.

"Soon, Blue One...Ravenstone will have its new Keeper." MC whispered, "Soon."

*"Indeed it will."* the dragon replied telepathically.

## Chapter 2

**F**our days passed and Billy's arrangements were made. Since we had time to spare, we decided to drive around White-haven.

Shopping, we bought minor items for our journey including pet supplies. Taking in more of the towns' scenery; several shopping bags in the backseat of our rental car, we suddenly approached an old bookshop with its name alone painted on a large wooden sign in Medieval print, catching our attention. A little art was drawn beneath:

### Times of Olde: Rare Books & Novelties



Parking the rental nearby, we made sure the vehicle was locked securely before crossing the street. The outer structure was built of old wood and brick with faded glass windows; books barely seen through the glass panels.

“What’s with all the dirty windows around here?” I joked.

“Right and you’d think with all the rain they get here in England, they’d be clean.” my mom replied humorously.

I smiled.

No bell above the door announced our entry, as the environment was quiet.

There were at least a dozen patrons in the shop including two desk clerks, continuing the steampunk attire. Some patrons walked around, while others sat at tables glancing through books. Everything was neatly categorized by titles and genres, separated into various sections with many aisles. Antique wall sconces gave off adequate lighting, while tapestries of dragons and other mythological scenes hung on the walls. The whole ambiance was appealing and inviting.

Scanning the signs above the aisles, my mom revealed anxiously,

“Oh, an occult section. Good. I need new books, since I left most of mine behind.”

Catching an aisle that interested me I replied,

“Okay. I’ll be in Mythology. Meet up here, when you’re done.”

“Alright, but be careful.”

I nodded as we parted ways, going down the aisle of our choice.

Approaching the occult section, my mom went wild over all the titles for some of them were rare and hard to find, especially since she searched online for them.

“Wow...” she admired the books on the shelves before her, “keep this up, D and you’ll be broke.” then she turned her head toward a book with a captivating title, “Ooo...oh, crap.”

She took her time flipping through the pages, making sure they were what she needed then placed them in her *TO BUY* pile.

Meanwhile on the other side of the shop, strolling up and down the aisle of my choice; arm full of books, I spotted a shelf posting a sign above continuing the Medieval font:

## Old and Rare Books: Be Cautious In handling Them Please!

Laying the books down in a space on the shelf in front of me, I began examining the selection. I skimmed my fingers over the spines until spotting one at the end; jutting out slightly. All the books were brown, gray, beige and dark green leather bound so seeing the *ONLY* black book among them, immediately caught my eye.

On the spine of the book were silver etchings of an ancient script carved into the leather. Gently sliding it off the shelf and holding it in my hands, I ran my other hand over the hardcover surface. Embedded on the front was a symbol of an unknown origin. At least in my eyes. However, there was one small word beneath the symbol:



“Nin”

The book was so fragile I was afraid to continue handling it, much less look through the pages but my curiosity got the better of me. I carefully opened the cover, seeing the pages were old parchment paper and completely blank. The book or journal, was eleven-by-nine and five inches thick. It appeared to be a misplaced journal. A lot of writing could be done on these pages. As I gently closed the cover ready to place it back in its misplaced spot on the shelf, I felt a tingling sensation in my hands, causing me to drop the book to the ground. My palms felt as if an energy flowed through them.

“Whoa...” I muttered as I knelt down, carefully retrieving the book.

Before I could react any further, I abruptly heard a friendly male’s voice with a Spanish accent ask,

“Good afternoon, my lovely. May I be of assistance, or are you finding everything to your liking? Oh, that book...that book is one of a kind indeed. Beautifully made, should I say and gets quite a reaction.”

Startled I turned around, seeing a man standing at the end of the aisle. Black hair flecked with gray; white at the temples, was neatly combed back. His goatee was nicely trimmed, also flecked with gray. Elegant appearance; somewhere in his mid-to-late 50s. He was very handsome with such piercing hazel-brown eyes and stood a little over six feet tall. His attire was steampunk-aristocratic; white dress shirt with sleeves rolled up and open at the collar. A black double breasted vest and matching pants, an employees name tag with no name except the initial **M**, and a silver pocket watch with its chain hanging from his vest hidden in his left pocket, completed his strikingly immaculate appearance.

Still holding the book, I replied as I quickly looked around,

“Yes, it is but I think it’s been misplaced since the journals are back over there.” I casually pointed over my right shoulder.

“Yes, it’s a journal...of sorts. Some things are written here and there, but only appear to those who wish to see it. The rest of course, are blank pages for one to write in.”

“Uh-huh, right. If you’re talking about this book, the pages are blank.” I opened the journal gently flipping through the pages to show him they were indeed blank, “Or...are you talking about something else?”

“I don’t know...am I?” he smiled.

“I don’t know...are you?” I frowned.

He faintly squinted his eyes as he grew a pleasing grin. Taking steps forward, he commented strangely,

“All isn’t what it seems, my lovely. *ALL* isn’t what it seems. Remember that.”

“So are you really standing there then, or are you inter-dimensional?” I snapped sarcastically, “Are you what you seem?”

He chuckled heavily, gently pointing his finger toward me, as if I stumped him.

“You’re good...you’re good. Very perceptive, but you could be wrong. Or, you could be right.” he riddled.

“What!? What does this have to do with this?” I held the journal then letting him know I wasn’t alone, I deliberately mentioned as I stepped backwards feeling uneasy, “You know...riddling strangers are something to avoid on my list so just so you know...I’m not alone.”

“Are you sure, my lovely?” he continued his riddles.

“Of course I’m sure!” I answered firmly, “And I’m not your lovely!”

“Of course. Now, I’m afraid my culture refers to all young ones as my lovelies...for that you are. I meant no offense, so please have no fear. I’m not here to do you or your mother any harm.”

I took another step back, remembering what my mom said about being careful. I searched around once more and then stared directly into this hazel-brown eyes, cautiously saying as I knew I never mentioned her,

“How did you know about my mother?”

“I saw the two of you enter the bookstore and you resemble each other greatly.” he grinned.

“*THIS MAN’S VERY CLEVER. HAS AN ANSWER FOR EVERYTHING.*” I thought as I continued staring into his eyes which I could’ve sworn at this particular moment,

flashed a reddish tint, “*SAME AS THE CONDUCTOR ON THE TRAIN. WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON HERE!?*”

At that moment my thoughts were broken as my mom appeared around the corner behind me, startling me.

“There you are. What’s taking you so long to find some books that you probably won’t read.” she teased.

Turning around, she stood with an armful of books herself. Glancing past my shoulder at the stranger behind me, she inquired who he was and what he wanted (always has been and always will be a protective mother). He introduced himself taking a step back noticing my mom stepping alongside me. He stared into her eyes, sensing her protectiveness.

“My name’s MC.” he held his right hand to his chest, “I was helping your daughter choose a book but I can see she’s just fine.” and knowing that wasn’t true he continued; hands clasped together behind his back, “It was a pleasure meeting you. Have a good day, ladies. I’ll be seeing *YOU*...” he looked past my mom in my direction, “again, very soon.”

He elegantly nodded then casually turned the corner of the aisle; disappearing.

My mom turned quickly asking in a confused manner as she scanned the aisle.

“What was that and where did he go!?” she searched, “And what did he mean by seeing *YOU* again later!? What happened!? Did he make inappropriate advances?”

“I have no freaking idea.” I replied, “I was looking through these books...” I waved at the bookshelf, “and then he just appeared out of nowhere speaking in riddles about all sorts of things. And no, he didn't make any sort of advances.” I shook my head.

“Well, if he comes back again I swear I’ll...kick him where it hurts and shrink him down to size. Literally!”

“I believe you will Mommy, but let’s just go okay? I’m feeling uneasy.”

“Mm, don’t need to ask me twice.” my mom mumbled as I grabbed my books off the shelf, journal placed on top, making our way to the register.

My mom turned scanning the shop but the man was nowhere to be found.

As the desk clerk scanned our items, I quickly mentioned that I didn’t want to purchase the journal. Smiling, she placed it on the table behind her. Bagging our books, she asked if we found everything we were looking for. Glancing around the store behind us I continued,

“Yes, thanks to your uh...clerk with the black hair and goatee. He was weird but helpful, I guess.”

“What black haired man with a goatee? We don’t have anyone fitting that description working here.” she replied confusingly.

“But he wore a name tag with your store’s name on it, displaying the letter M.”

“I saw him too.” my mom added, “Very strange man and too personal with my daughter.”

“Apologies, ladies but as the shops Manager, I still don’t know of whom you’re speaking of. Have a wonderful day otherwise. Cheerio!” she smiled, handing us our bags.

“You too. Cheerio...” we both replied.

As we exited the bookstore, the mysterious man appeared behind the desk picking up the journal. The desk clerks couldn’t see him as he appeared invisible to their eyes. He smiled as he glanced down at the item. Holding it in his hands, he casually walked out following after us.

Leaving the bookstore my mom confusingly asked, stopping momentarily as she glanced back at the bookstore,

“What happened in there!? One moment, he was there and the next he wasn’t.”

“I don’t know but he creeped me out.” I replied then explained what he said about the journal, “All he did was speak in riddles. Striking yes, but creepy nonetheless.”

The man stood next to us, listening to every word; invisible from view. Having access to my bag as I briefly glimpsed through them, he swiftly placed the journal inside. Watching us walk across the street to our rental car, he grew another smile as he whispered with perfect diction,

“I will be seeing you again, indeed. I will tell *HER* that her gift has been delivered.”

Suddenly this strange man, shook off his current appearance as if experiencing a chill. Rolling his shoulders and neck, his true form was revealed. Mid-back length black hair, carved striking features, red eyes and tattoos down the right side of his face and neck. He stood at a godly height of 6’4 with a powerful herculean build. His lighter olive-skinned complexion gave off a faint copper tone. His attire was elaborate; red and gold velvet knee length coat fitted at the waist and fastened with an ancient clasp. No shirt revealed his muscular chest, displaying two delicate silver chains with pendants dangling from them. Fitted leather pants were hidden beneath his coats’ length and were tucked in leather laced up boots.

“Oh, my lovely...” he whispered, “my plans are now set in motion. Now, we await the final result. This will be fun.” then he chuckled as he turned walking down the quiet street. His long coat elegantly flowed behind him as he strode in strong masculine strides that commanded respect. He paused then turned, disappearing in a burst of red flame as he chuckled loudly.

Back in our car; bags placed in the backseat among the others, we returned to the Inn.

Two more days transpired, as we wondered how much longer it would take for us to receive our transportation for we hadn't heard from Billy regarding this arrangement. Oddly early that evening, we received a message via-courier from Billy, who had written out a letter, explaining brief details about the ride he arranged; we were to be downstairs no later than 5:00am and look for a coach.

"Wow, that was fast." I said.

"No kidding." my mom replied, "And it's strange. We were just wondering about this. But then again...everything about this whole journey is strange."

"Tell me about it and I'm sure it's not over yet. But if we wind up on another train taking us through a hidden dimension, then you know we're screwed." I laughed.

"That's not funny." my mom threw a pillow.

We scampered around the room, gathering all of our personal belongings. However, as I packed the books I purchased and have yet to start reading (I love it when my mom's always right), it was then I discovered the journal I *KNEW* I returned to the clerk.

"What the hell!?" I muttered as I held it in my hands, "How did this get here?"

"How did what get where?" my mom asked as she walked over, "Wait, didn't you put that back before we left the store?" she watched as I turned the journal in my hands.

"Yes! You saw the girl put it behind the desk."

"Okay, now this gets stranger by the minute." my mom barked, "Did she...maybe give it back or something?"

"Yeah, sure or I stole it." I snapped.

“Not funny. I never said you stole it, now watch the god damn attitude. We have enough to worry about here okay, other than your *fiery* temper which you need to control!”

“You know I can’t.”

"Then I suggest you try harder!" my mom frowned slightly, giving me a comforting side-hug.

She turned away, shaking her head while mumbling something under her breath. She was right, though. I needed to learn to control my temper and we did have a lot to worry about. Everything we’ve been through so far and god only knows what lies ahead for us. I tucked the book away inside my duffle bag among the others, along with Zanzs’ toys; ones of which he carried over. Placing our luggage and pet supplies near the door, we took advantage of the rest for we didn’t know how long our morning travel would be. After showering and watching a movie, we fell asleep.

Morning came within a few hours; alarm ringing loudly at 4:45am. Moaning as we climbed out of bed, we strolled toward the bathroom splashing cold water on our faces. Getting dressed and making sure we looked presentable, we made our way downstairs and grabbed quick cups of hot tea and coffee.

Due to the cold morning weather, we waited inside the lobby for our ride. We didn’t feel like eating anything for we were too tired to even think about food. Glancing down at my watch the time was 5:15am and we wondered if Billy’s friend had remembered. We waited for ten more minutes before contacting Billy when suddenly, a vehicle pulled up outside. Glancing out the frosted windows, my mom and I studied the vehicle then read Billy’s description he scribbled down:

*Older model Black Sedan-*

*Barred windows-*

*Iron metal sheeting and rivets-*

The driver climbed out walking toward the Inn's front doors; hands rubbing together. Entering the lobby entrance; doors swinging open, a cold breeze grazed our faces and necks. He was a senior man in his late 60s with a gray brushed, bushy beard and blue eyes. He dressed in warm clothing and knitted cap covering his head. Once the doors closed, he scanned the lobby spotting my mom and I sitting nearby; luggage and pets anxiously waiting. Smiling, he strolled over and greeted us in a jolly English accent,

“Morning, loves. Sorry I'm late. My vehicle was acting up and was a wee-bit difficult to start up this morning. Bloody old thing, really. So, are the two of you lovely birds looking for a coach?”

“Yes, we are.” my mom replied, “We're the ones.”

“Unless there's another mother and daughter waiting around.” I added as I looked around then at my mom, giving a sarcastic smile.

“Sassy little bird.” the man joked as he smiled, “My name's Robert but you're more than welcome to call me Bobby. Most blokes do. Now, are you ready to go?” he clapped his hands together bouncing on his heels, warming himself up, “It's bloody cold and damp out there, so you might want to cover your necks and heads a bit. Your pets too, yes?”

We followed his advice; scarves, hats and gloves in place, as well as making sure Freya's carrier was covered with a light blanket. Zanz, I dressed in his heavy sweater and winter booties which he disliked so much as he whined.

“Sorry, boy but you have to keep warm.” I whispered.

*Whimper.*

Stepping outside, Bobby wasn't kidding. Dampness hugged our clothing; breaths fogging in the air. Faint drizzle fell from the sky, leaving small water spots on our coats and luggage bags. Zanz shook the water from his heavy sweater, while Freya hissed in discomfort from inside her warm carrier.

We were surprised to see our ride was indeed, a comfortable black 1926 Chevrolet Sedan, converted with thick iron metal sheets securely bolted around its entire body. Sturdy bars on all the windows, gave the appearance of a prison transport vehicle. The heavy duty all terrain tires were wrapped in chains to protect them from the rough terrain.

“What the hell?” my mom whispered.

“Yeah, this isn’t creepy at all. Menacing isn’t the right word.” I replied.

Bobby walked around the Sedan toward the rear, opening the small trunk door. Turning to us, he politely offered as he reached for our luggage, placing them behind the backseat along with the pet supplies of food and cat litter. I kindly helped him for the supplies were a bit heavy for his old hands to handle on his own but he seemed to manage with ease without catching his breath.

“Thank you, love.” he smiled.

“You’re welcome.” I yawned, “Oh, sorry.”

“No, worries. Now let’s get you packed inside and ready to go, shall we? We need to arrive before dusk approaches, and we don’t want to be out and about then. Nasty things come out when dusk approaches.”

Once closing and locking the trunk, I questioned curiously as I fought my fatigue, noticing he made an emphasis on the word *DUSK*, repeating himself twice in a nervous tone,

“Why?”

“Apologies?” he replied.

“Why shouldn’t we be out at dusk? Does something wicked come out?” I added.

“Yes. Something wicked, indeed. Nasty beasts.”

He stepped near the doors, leaving my mom and I standing there in a moment of silence.

“I was joking.” I whispered.

“I know you were, but he’s obviously not.” my mom complained, “But I think he’s trying to tell us that no one ventures out at night alone...in the night...in the dark.”

“Is that a line from a movie?” I looked at her.

“Not word-for-word, but close enough.” she humored.

“Right.” I laughed.

Before climbing in, we caught views of the sun rising over the hills in the East. It was a gorgeous sight, seeing mother nature display her colors of golds, pinks and reds.

Announcing it was time to leave, Bobby kindly helped us inside the roomy, yet comfortable and warm Sedan with Maroon leather upholstery.

My mom placed Freya under her seat, while Zanz sat awkwardly between us due to his large size. We watched as Bobby climbed into the front, courteously adjusting the vents on the vehicles’ heating system. Turning on the Sedans’ engine, you could hear the steam spitting from its tail pipes. A slight rumble was felt as the entire vehicle powered up. Listening to the wheels slowly drive down the cobblestone streets among the drizzling rain and chains, they created a soothing sound.

Reaching the end of town, we exchanged small talk along the way. The pleasant conversation turned into a series of questions of where we were being taken to and how long it would take. Bobby was vague in the details as he explained the place; revealing certain aspects of beauty and safety. The length of time getting there would

be almost a full day. Nothing more was said, leaving us no choice but to trust him. There was no turning back for we were in the middle of nowhere on a desolate paved road.

However, the effects of the iron would soon take its toll on me with headaches, dizziness and nausea. Another secret I had to deal with.

The drive was at least two hours due to slopes, ditches, minor road closures and water filled potholes among the road that occasionally curved. He slowly drove through the countryside, passing scattered housing communities between White-haven and another called *PENRITH*. Such small, quaint and peaceful little places, with no destruction or fear; oblivious as to what is occurring in the Great City.

“Alright, ladies. We’ll be stopping up ahead for a little while. Get you lovely birds something to eat, including myself. Plus, I um...have business to discuss with someone.” Bobby said, looking at us through his rear-view mirror, “I know the town’s owner and it’s a very safe little place.”

“Alright, that’s fine.” my mom replied.

*Low stomach growls were heard.*

Zanz raised his head; ears perked and head tilted, as he grew curious as to where the low growls came from. I petted him with a warm smile.

“Sorry.” I groaned, “But it’s about time. I need to get out of this car. I need air.” I felt as if I couldn’t breathe.

“Now, now little bird...hang in there.” Bobby mumbled, “Don’t need, nor want you redecorating my vehicle.” he smiled into the mirror.

I didn’t feel like smiling.

Bobby drove through Penrith's calm and inviting town. Storefronts lined the streets where small businesses hid among them. Parking the Sedan, we glanced out our windows, studying a medium, two-story pub painted a dark green trimmed with black that blended with the color scheme of the other establishments. Large windows graced the pubs' front exterior, allowing views inside.

"I'll not have your pets sitting alone in the vehicle while we eat, so let me step inside and ask the owner if he'll allow you to bring them in. Given the circumstances, I'm sure he'll approve. There are booths close to the doors, so you should be fine." Bobby revealed before climbing out.

"Great!" I replied quickly before jumping out of the Sedan to get much needed air.

As I stood, a chilly morning breeze swept my face while I took in deep breaths of the fresh clean air. No scent of chemicals, smog, or the feeling of iron.

My mom too quickly climbed out, walking around the vehicle toward me; both doors left wide open, taking in deep breaths as well, while stretching her aching legs.

Bobby shuffled around the front seat, grabbing a few things before he too, climbed out. Closing the driver's door, he stood there watching as my mom gave me support; keeping me from falling to the ground. He watched as we whispered among ourselves, raising an eyebrow in curiosity before he turned to enter the pub.

We waited alongside the Sedan, until my mom glanced toward the pub spotting Bobby peeking his head out, waving his left hand in a beckoning manner for us to come inside. She smiled as she turned, reaching inside for Freya's carrier. I grabbed on tightly to Zanz's leash while he jumped out onto the tightly packed dirt street.

Once entering the pub, Zanz and Freya's behavior escalated; a sense of nervousness. Zanz began growling causing me to place on his muzzle. Freya hissed as she pawed the door to her carrier. We gazed around then quickly sat in one of the booths close to the door Bobby mentioned, trying not to draw too much attention. But that was a little

difficult with a hissing cat on the seat alongside my mom and a massive growling Wolf laying at my feet beneath the table.

Looking around cautiously, the pub was welcoming; a bit dark though as the shutters on the large front windows were drawn half way down. Low lighting from small lamps placed here and there, booths along two of its walls with tables spread about, gave a nice atmosphere. A long bar stretched out across the rear of the establishment where two bartenders wiped the counter or served drinks to waiting customers, whom of which sat scattered among the booths, tables and bar stools. A narrow staircase alongside the bar to the left, led upstairs to unknown rooms. Bobby stood at the bar, then headed up the stairs.

Glancing through the menus laid on the tables, we waited anxiously while listening to melodious Gypsy music over hidden speakers.

One of the bartenders, Roberto; Puerto Rican ethnicity, walked over introducing himself. Scanning our appearance, he inquired as to what we'd like to order. Catching Roberto's scent, Zanz growled regardless of his muzzle which irritated Roberto, as he released a faint hiss that neither my mom nor I noticed while deeply staring into his golden eyes. I apologized for his behavior as Roberto cautiously stepped back, seeing Zanz's full size crawling out from beneath the table.

"Santo, hijo de puta!" he cursed in Spanish, stepping back with his hands up in caution.

Repeating our order Roberto quickly smiled as he turned away, returning to the bar. Leaning in giving the order to the other bartender Steven, Roberto excused himself. Removing his apron, he climbed the narrow staircase. Steven nodded remembering the order as well then turned, stepping into a back room with swinging doors, we guessed was the kitchen. My mom and I continued glancing around nervously for we still didn't know if we could've been followed and felt the uneasy stares from the scattered patrons.

Fifteen minutes later, our order was ready. Steven carefully exited through the swinging doors, carrying two large trays of our meal; English gourmet burgers with curly fries and soft drinks. Laying the trays gently on the table avoiding Zanz's large head, he smiled. We thanked him then enjoyed our meal. Zanz peeked his head out from beneath the table wanting table scraps and giving the big golden puppy eyes, I gave in, sneaking a curly fry or two.

Taking our time and finishing our meal, we waited for Bobby who ironically, was nowhere to be seen during our entire time here. Steven and Roberto's service was hospitable and courteous.

Glancing toward the bar, a man of Hungarian culture, appeared out of nowhere. He was extremely handsome; below shoulder length black hair neatly combed back. His dark mysterious eyes stared in our direction in a piercing gaze. A beautifully trimmed goatee completed his carved features. I'd guess he was in his mid-to-late 40s; screaming a Gothic-vampire persona. He too, dressed in steampunk-aristocratic attire. A black shirt open at the collar, doubled breasted deep red Paisley vest, studded belt, fitted slacks and boots hugged his tall six foot medium build. Silver rings graced his fingers as the shiny metal glistened in the faint light, as did his silver chains that hung from his neck. Let's just say, he resembled the 2007's *SWEENEY TODD* without the mad crazy hair and dark shadows. Yes, just like that! And he's a menacing character enough as it is so imagine this man.

My mom glanced over her shoulder, curious as to what caught my gaze. Turning in her seat, she took notice herself. In a low tone she commented,

“Oh, my...that's a uh...that's a gorgeous man!”

“Mm-hmm.” I replied looking away momentarily, “If vampires exist, he certainly looks like one. And his eyes...my god...”

We took one last glance in his direction, as he leaned against the bars' counter on one elbow. He flashed a faint grin on the corner of his mouth then turned his gaze toward

Bobby who just stepped off the last step of the narrow staircase with Steven and Roberto. He sat on the stool on the end, near this mysterious-Gothic man.

We broke our gaze, smiling in embarrassment.

“You don’t think he heard us, do you?” my mom asked, as she leaned in.

“I don’t know.” I replied, “But he’s still staring and it looks like we’re going to Dracula’s castle after all.”

“Yes, well...he is what he is. Men were made to look at. Among other things. But if he is a vampire or Dracula himself, hell...he could bite me anytime.”

“Mommy...but that’s true.” I chuckled, “Possibly one of the most gorgeous men I’ve seen.”

“Well, the other two aren’t chopped liver either.” my mom smiled.

“No...no they’re not.” I agreed with a blushed face.

Suddenly, there was an eerie silence lingering in the air as the faint voices heard before, ceased completely. Taking a sip of my straw, I glanced around noticing the scattered patrons sat with their heads held low while others leaned forward slightly, until reaching their tables’ edge. All leered in our direction.

“Um, Mommy? Is it just me...or is everyone else here, staring at us as if we’re dinner?” I inquired in a whisper.

Taking in her surroundings, she agreed. If there were vampires out there in the world, at this moment, we were definitely in a nest of them. Or cannibals? Zanz growled as he too, sensed something peculiar.

The Gothic man at the bar, affirmatively and loudly snapped his fingers twice and when he did, the patrons turned their heads away, as if being told to do so. Yeah, like that's not creepy one bit!

Roberto quickly strolled over handing us our check and attempting to pay for our meal, he revealed the meal was complimentary by the owner; whoever that may have been.

"Well, please thank him for us." my mom said.

"He's actually right over there." Roberto answered, pointing toward the Gothic man, "But I'll tell him." then he thanked us for our service, speaking in our Spanish tongue, "Gracias por tu servicio."

I couldn't help it, as I too, thanked him in Spanish,

"De nada y gracias."

Roberto smiled as he looked down at me, acknowledging our ethnicity. I returned the smile then watched him walk away.

"*OH, MY...*" I thought, enjoying the view from behind, "*GOD BLESS LATIN MEN.*"

It was such a relief meeting a fellow Puerto Rican, for most in the Great City were all born and raised Brits. I pushed the thought aside, as we made sure the table was left clean; plates stacked on their trays with our glasses. Afterwards, we gathered our pets and quickly exited the pub, returning to the Sedan after two hours flew by, not wanting to stay in there a minute longer.

"Ugh, here we go again." I muttered in discomfort, standing next to the Sedan.

"I know, but maybe now that you've had something to eat, you'll feel better." my mom comforted me.

“Maybe, but I doubt it. I’ve never been around this much iron.”

“Alright, ladies...” Bobby’s voice broke our thoughts as he stepped out into the streets, “let’s get going, shall we?” then he turned his gaze toward the sky, noticing dark clouds rapidly rolling in, “Rain’s coming.”

Climbing back inside the Sedan and situated in our seats, Bobby powered up the vehicle. Driving down the street at a fast pace, we left Penrith behind us.

The Gothic man; the owner of the pub approached the windows, watching as we drove off down the street. He grew a faint smirk as he thought, “*WHAT LOVELY LADIES. BE SAFE OUT THERE BUT OH, YOU SMELLED SO SCRUMPTIOUS. BUT I WONDER, WHAT WERE YOU YOUNG LADY? YOU’RE DIFFERENT. UNNATURAL, BUT INTOXICATING AND...*” then his thoughts were broken as a hand tapped his shoulder and turning in place, there stood Steven, shaking his head as if telling him to let the thought pass.

The owner’s smirk faded as he glanced out the window once more, releasing a low hiss of frustration revealing canine fangs. He pushed past Steven who returned the hiss in a deeper, more authoritative tone. The owner paused, then continued his way up the stairs to his office. Steven listened, hearing the door slam loudly and commented under his breath,

“Temperamental Hungarian.”

“Yes...yes I am!” a voice boomed upstairs.



Exiting the town, the drive was rough and bumpy with hidden ditches and pot holes presenting problems as the Sedans’ chained wheels were caught among them.

We then drove onto an open highway, with continuous green countryside on both sides of the roads. Seeing the stretch of pavement ahead, I felt like this ride was physically going to kill me for I didn't know how long it would take. My mom, noticing the impact of the iron, offered me a specially made tablet of various herbs that would help soothe. Although, they don't last very long for my immune system quickly burns them off.

Along the way, leaning my head on the window, scattered farms and warehouses could be seen out in the distance. Whether they were occupied, was unknown. So many structures had been abandoned over the years as well as complete towns and communities. Why, I wondered. It would be hard to imagine that nothing could flourish out here. But, who knows.

As the drive continued, rare passing farm or cargo trucks appeared on the opposite highway, beeping their horns in a friendly greeting or in some cases, a warning not to venture any further in the Great City's direction.

“What do you know? There are others driving the Highway to Hell.” I remarked sarcastically.

My mom smiled in agreement.

The drive seemed to go on forever and there were only two apparent pullover lanes that we had passed during the entire journey, making it harder for me. Even with my moms herbal tablets. Zanz and Freya were beginning to feel uncomfortable for they were complaining in their own little ways; Freya meowed constantly while Zanz whined.

“Bobby, is there any way you could find another pullover lane so we can let our animals out? The drive is making them feel contained.” my mom eagerly asked, resting Freya's carrier in her lap.

Bobby moaned, not giving an answer when suddenly, the engine decided it would offer that break. There was a loud pop followed by hot steam that began erupting from

beneath the hood. He frowned as he glimpsed into the rear-view mirror, commenting as he made eye-contact with my mom,

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you jinxed my vehicle.”

“I would never.” my mom argued, “But maybe you should take that as a sign.”

“Signs are for idiots.”

“I resent that remark but in a moment, I’ll show you what this idiot can do. Now, there’s a pullover lane just up ahead there.” she pointed toward a small road sign that declared another lane.

“Alright, easy before things turn ugly!” I pleaded.

Without a word, Bobby carefully drove to the side, coming to an abrupt halt. Climbing out, he walked around the Sedan, opening the trunk door. He retrieved a large gas container filled with filtered water and a small oil lubricant. He slammed the trunk hard in frustration, as we too climbed out, giving us much needed time to get fresh air and care for our pets.

I walked over leaning on the roads’ barricade that overlooked the open green pasture before me. Zanz sniffed around the trims of grass peeking through between the metal sheets. My mom released Freya from her carrier and walking toward me with her on her leash, we watched as our pets enjoyed the fresh air and faint breeze, as it tickled their fur. Zanz gave Freya a brief sniff, making sure she was safe. Freya enjoyed the attention as she nudged his nose. We smiled then glanced over our shoulders, watching as Bobby continued examining the engine and wiping away the hot steam around the pipes and windshield. We watched his mouth mumble words but what they were, we couldn't hear. Besides, I’m sure they weren’t pleasant ones.

“I know this must be a first for him too, having two questionable women but there’s no need for him to be such an ass about it.” I commented quietly.

“True, but we too, should show him respect as our guide.” my mom agreed, “I know it’s difficult, but at the same time...we should still stand our ground. As I did and as I’ve raised you to do as well. Yza, we don’t want to get on his bad side for he could just leave us here, with *NOWHERE* to go.”

I smiled then wondered as I leaned in,

“If that’s his bad side, I’d hate to see his good side. But Mommy...you didn’t really...jinx his car so we could stop...did you?”

My mom answered bluntly as she looked away,

“A little sprinkle of some herbs didn’t hurt anyone, did it?” then she changed the subject, “Come on, Freya...it’s getting a little too chilly out here now.” as she picked up her small black cat with very cold paws, returning to the car.

I shook my head, knowing my mom and what she meant. Once Zanz relieved himself, I too returned to the car as we waited for Bobby.

Once closing the hood and returning the gallon to the trunk, we were on our way yet again. Things were quiet between the three of us when Bobby broke the silence saying softly and calmly,

“The ride from here will take another hour or so...so please be patient. Fear not, you’ll get to your destination in one piece before dusk. There’s plenty of time.”

We nodded in respect and agreement then my mom and I exchanged a brief glance, again wondering why he kept mentioning getting us to wherever we’re going before dusk and in one piece? But what he didn’t care to mention, was that this safe haven was hidden from sight...and not on this island.

As Bobby accelerated his foot on the pedal, the vehicle drove smoothly on the open and desolate highway.

Just then the skies boomed with rain rapidly pouring; visibility out the windows, unclear. He activated the windshield wipers and we listened to the squeaking sounds of the ticking blades back and forth, followed by the pounding sound of rain against the Sedan's metal roof. It began sounding almost rhythmic as if it were a song's introduction. Glancing at our windows, water spilled onto the glass, leaving our visibility of the gorgeous countryside scenery; different shades of green, looking as if someone covered the landscape with one massive multicolored blanket, a blur. It went from a cold beautiful morning, to quite a miserable one in just a matter of hours. We could feel the damp cold through the glass windows and noticing our discomfort, Bobby turned up the heat, after handing us blankets he retrieved from the passenger seat.

Miles out from Penrith according to Bobby's mile odometer, the fog thinned across the landscape; rain falling harder resembling eerie drums against the Sedans' roof.

Knowing how fog moves in and out, Bobby slowed his speed.

"With the fog coming and going, are you still going to be able to see?" I asked.

"No worries, ladies." Bobby replied, "Fog always appears out here. Especially when it rains like this."

"Good to know." I added, as Bobby didn't answer.

I sat back against my seat, frowning in worry and uneasiness.

*The long drive continued.*

As my mom and I engaged in conversation about the occurrences possibly taking place in the Great City, it was then we remained silent for glancing out the windshield, there it was...the Great City far in the distance. Its smoke rose above the rooftops and the dark cloud grew in size and thickness. Just when we thought we left it all behind us, here we were, close enough to feel the dark presence of what took

place. Feeling a sudden sadness rush over her, my mom whispered with memories flashing in her mind,

“Can’t believe it’s all gone. Our home. Our apartment. Five years worth of memories all gone. We came here, thinking we’d be safe and now look...it’s just all gone.”

“I know, Mommy...I know.” I reached for her hand in comfort, then scooted over leaning my head on her shoulder with tears stinging my eyes, "But at least we still have each other and our babies."

My mom lovingly kissed my head before leaning hers against mine.

The Great City grew closer as time passed by and it was then Bobby and other vehicles that were passing by, immediately hit their brakes for out in the distance, there were large explosions. Opening their doors and climbing on their car hoods, including myself, we observed as fires sprung out of nowhere, as if a giant blow torch flew through the air in thick smoke. Knowing what it was without seeing it, I climbed back inside, instructing Bobby that he needed to drive much faster.

“You don’t think it was...” my mom feared.

“I think so. It rained fire but there was nothing there.” I answered, “Who knows what kind of weaponry the new Lord has created now.”

Suddenly the Sedan took a sharp turn as Bobby finally left the highway behind us. The road was lonely as we were the only vehicle to drive across its cracked pavement. There were patches of wet dirt that splashed mud into the air, covering the Sedan in a layer of thick brown slush and that included the windshield. Up ahead, Bobby pointed toward a harbor and port in the distance, revealing we were almost there. Turning in my seat, I watched as the Great City faded but the dark cloud, fire and smoke could still be seen faintly.

Things were quiet between the three of us yet again until there was a break in the heavy rain, revealing a smooth drive as the green landscaping disappeared behind us.

Looking forward, the clear view revealed buildings and structures growing closer. We leaned forward in our seats holding onto the back of the front seats, gazing out the window taking in the scene before us. We approached the large town called Heysham where there seemed to be a harbor-port for we could see boat masts and water. The winding streets were crowded with other vehicles but Bobby managed to get through the traffic.

Once fully arriving in Heysham Port, the pier was quite crowded and packed with others trying to book passage across the waters to Ireland. Poor people were like my mom and I with nothing but their luggage, pets and remaining belongings, seeking sanctuary and safety far from the Great City and its new Lord in command. Beeping his horn several times, the crowds parted allowing him to continue until he made a rapid halt, parking the Sedan in the last spot of the crowded parking lot near the large red harbormaster's registry building.

"Alright, loves...I'm afraid we're going to have to go by foot the rest of the way from here." Bobby turned in his seat once more, "Come now, we need to get going before the harbor and port get too crowded with refugees. Your pets can stay inside the vehicle for now." he then climbed out.

We quickly followed as Bobby pushed through the crowd, leading my mom and I inside the registry office through the main South entrance. He instructed us to go outside on the other end of the building to the West, where we were to wait for him near the fenced area. Reluctant to do so, we followed his instructions exiting through the doors; an empty lot between the registry building and a large warehouse. The long harbor deck led to a fenced area where a lone boat sat tied and docked. We glanced across the waters, noticing all ferries and private boats with citizens boarding them. Some were already pulling out of the harbor port.

Stepping closer to the fenced area marked with a large *R*, we waited when suddenly, four very tall, muscular and mysterious guards appeared armed with what looked to be guns and bladed weaponry. They questioned our reasons for being in that vicinity and after explaining that Bobby was retrieving our paperwork, we waited. In the meantime, the guards stood with us. The lone and elaborate boat sat behind the fenced

barricade, rocking from the faint movement of the waves coming in. Elaborate it was, and large enough to fit at least ten people.

Twenty minutes passed.

“Ladies, over here!” we heard Bobby’s voice and turning around, he rushed toward us pushing a large trolley with our luggage stacked up on it. Freya’s carrier was securely placed atop. Suddenly, running from behind him was Zanz; chain leash dragging behind him.

“Zanz...” I called out.

Pushing the trolley and parking it next to us, he huffed.

“Bloody hell...getting through that crowd was impossible at first but hearing and seeing your massive Wolf-dog there, made a clear path. So to you boy, I thank you.” Bobby glanced down at Zanz who panted then snarled as one of the guards stepped forward.

“Robert...long time, mate.” one of the guards greeted with a smile.

“Yes, it has lad...indeed it has.” Bobby smiled then turned to us excusing themselves momentarily as they stood to the side, speaking quietly.

My mom watched as they nodded in agreement to something, followed by a brief handshake as he showed them the papers. She frowned then turned her gaze onto the boat. I too, couldn’t help but wonder who it belonged to or where it was headed.

It resembled a Venetian water taxi with a sleek black body paint and gold detailing. A large symbol was painted in Gold on its crown (boats hood) and studying it further, it resembled a large Gothic letter R with some sort of bird hovering above it:



It was striking against its black paint. The cabin was a bit taller to enable more head room with closed drapes. The drivers helm was also covered, blending into the cabin behind it, giving the appearance of a yacht. My mom recognized the model and shape, reminding her of her visit to Italy when she was a child.

“Just when I thought this journey wasn’t difficult enough!” I argued, sensing her presence, “Private use only. Interesting.” as there were signs everywhere near this area, declaring it so.

“Mm.” my mom agreed then turned to Freya, attempting to calm her through the carrier’s door.

“Ladies...” Bobby’s voice interrupted our thoughts and turning around, there he was with papers held in his hands, “these are for you.” he handed them to us, “Those are your temporary port passes to get across and once you're there, you’ll be given permanent ones and residency documents.”

“Get where!?” my mom questioned firmly, “Across the waters to Ireland!?”

Bobby stepped aside with us and whispered,

“Ladies, please...I understand your cautiousness but you have to trust me. Where I’m taking you, you’ll be safe and far from harm but unfortunately, it’s located across the waters...out that way.” he pointed toward the large mass of sea water between Heysham and a fogged area, “It’s between here and Ireland technically. Well, you can’t see it from here due to the fog concealing it, but it’s very much there. And don’t attempt finding it on any map for you’ll never find its name listed.”

“Robert!” the harbormaster called out, and turning toward his voice, Bobby observed as the pier began crowding more every minute, “You need to leave...*NOW!* The way is clear and they’re expecting you!”

“Alright, we need to hurry and get on the boat now, before these people begin scrambling onto it. It’s privately owned and these people sadly, will not be allowed passage. These guards will show their raging tempers if they break through, and I don’t think it’ll be pleasant for women to observe.” Bobby urged, “Come now, let’s get your pets and luggage on board.”

“But that’s not really fair...about the people, I mean.” my mom frowned, “Some have children.”

“Life’s not fair, dear woman. I could only tell you what is. Is it fair what happened to you?” Bobby answered briefly, “Now you two get your bums moving.” he opened the gate leading down a single ramp that led onto the boat, “My vehicle will stay here for I don’t have time to board it. It’ll be fine.” and before we could argue or protest, a rush of people bombarded the area; guards placing their hands on their weapons, while shouting out warnings before use of them.

Two of the guards helped get our belongings on board before we even realized they had. They carefully helped us on, and once Bobby was alongside us, the four guards untied the tethers from the dock as Bobby swiftly lifted the anchor. My mom and I bowed our heads, quickly sitting inside the cabin. Once we were situated in our seats with our luggage and pets, he immediately began the engine. It roared as water began churning beneath the boat’s weight and hull before it began gliding out of the harbor and toward its destination. The guards waved in a friendly farewell before turning to the large rush of desperate souls.

Eager and frightened, the patrons watched the boat depart and attempted to make a jump for it as they pushed past the guards but they were too far. They fell off the dock, and into the cold waters. The harbormaster, guards and his workers, tossed donut-shaped life preservers and hook shaped poles to pull them in. This moment was no different than when my mom and I boarded the train; people scrambling and

rushing to safety in desperate measures. It was heartbreaking but there was nothing that could be done.

Gun shots and screams were heard behind us and not wanting to know what occurred, we closed our eyes squeezing each others hands.

With the harbor port behind us, Bobby revealed the journey across the sea would take at least three hours due to the speed we would travel. He had to be careful of the speed for the waters were beginning to roughen due to the constant traffic of other boats traveling in opposite directions, along with the constant deluge creating a bit of wave turbulence. My mom and I agreed, as we sat comfortably in the cabin with elegant cream colored leather tuft seating, that offered views on both sides and along the back, once we slid open the drapery.

Zanz whined for he didn't like the sound of the roaring engine, or being on the large open sea. Neither did my mom because of her slight case of Vertigo. Hell, I didn't like it either and Bobby putting the boat on auto-pilot, offered relief in the way of motion sickness pills and bottles of water he removed from a small mini-fridge that was hidden in the front helm.

Once swallowing my water I questioned fearfully,

“If you're in here....who's out there driving this thing!?”

“Auto-pilot, love.” Bobby answered as he turned, gesturing toward the helm through the open sliding door.

“Does it know where it's going!?” my mom shouted.

“Actually...no.” he turned, returning to the wheel.

“*WHAT!?*” our voices echoed from behind him.

As he peeked his head over his shoulder glancing at our alarmed facial expressions, he answered bluntly yet calmly,

“Ladies...I’m trying to understand your uneasiness but understanding works both ways, yes? I’m doing the best I can with what I have and following the instructions to the letter to get you to your destination safely, alright? It’ll be three-to-four more hours most. Now, please...no more questions and if either of you...” he leaned forward on the door frame, “can’t keep your traps quiet and continue squawking like two bloody Ravens, then I will turn this boat ‘round and let you find another form of transportation. Is that agreed!? Bloody hell...” he huffed.

At this point, we had nothing to say for he was right. My mom apologized.

Time passed and the waters changed often from smooth sailing to rough turbulence which we could feel beneath the hull as it slammed against the occasional wave but nothing to worry about. We just took extra pills (no, we’re not pill-poppers), drank more water and breathed deeply but our poor babies, there was nothing we could do to offer them comfort for they left messes that we immediately cleaned. After a while, seeing the sea had calmed due to a break in the heavy rain, Bobby gave the engines a rest as he turned the engine off for about an hour. He took his seat, resting his feet up on the dash as he took a quick nap.

My mom decided to get her mind off things so she removed a book from her luggage while I wanted to visit Bobby. I ignored the views of the open water in my peripheral vision. Gently knocking on the glass window, I alerted him of my presence.

“Ah, if it isn’t the little troublemaker.” Bobby muttered, as he sat back comfortably, “Can’t you see I’m resting, girl?”

“Funny and sorry.” I smiled, “So...are we there yet?”

“Bloody hell...did you come out here to ask me that!?” he dropped his feet as he sat straight.

“No. Not just that.”

“Then why...and what!?”

“Hey, look...I came out here quiet and respectful so drop the god damn attitude.” I snapped then mumbled, “Before I blow the damn thing up.”

“What was that!?” his eyes widened.

“Nothing.” I sarcastically smirked then turned, observing two life buoys tucked away under the dashboard.

“Bloody hell...these birds are going to make me want to drown myself.” he muttered as he breathed deeply, closing his eyes momentarily, “It’s alright, Robert...after this, you’re done. No more. He’ll never hear the end of it. You’ve been wanting to retire to Paris with your family, and these birds just pushed that dream into reality.”

“Everything okay out there?” my mom raised her glance from her book, hearing me slide the door closed.

“He has issues.” I answered.

“Well, this is new for everyone here.” my mom replied.

“Mm, anyway...I’m going to listen to my music so give a nudge if anything happens.” I removed my I-pod and ear-buds from my pocket while I laid stretched out on the other long seat across from her.

The tense situation between the three of us lasted for the duration of the trip, however long that would be for Bobby had told us nothing about what was next for us or this boat. It was bad enough dealing with everything else but now, having to deal with a grumpy old Englishman, topped our list of problems. And thankfully having to use the restroom wasn’t one of them, for we had done so before we left Heysham.

I looked at the time on my I-pod and so far, we were traveling across the sea for almost three hours. As I stared at the roof above me, I thought, “*OH, MY GOD, COME ON...*” then closed my eyes, listening to my favorite song that had just begun with its awesome introduction beat.

My mom grew tired of reading so she placed her book back in her luggage then decided to carefully join Bobby up front. Wobbly legged, she held onto the door for support. Glancing up at the clouded sky through the skylight window, she huffed. Lowering her gaze, it was then, out in the far distance straight ahead, there it was. A white streak across the entire horizon. Thinking maybe it could have been a waters version of a desert mirage, she called out for me but I couldn't hear her. She groaned as she turned, making her way toward me as I laid stretched out. Tapping my leg she carefully removed my ear-buds.

“Whoa, easy. Don't rip my ears off.” I joked as I sat up, “What's wrong? Are we sinking?” I leaned forward in panic.

“No...we're not sinking! Come out here and I'll show you.” she turned then whispered under her breath; words I couldn't hear, “Are we sinking? Unbelievable!”

“That's not an answer.” I followed her outside.

Pointing toward the strange looking clouded horizon, Bobby revealed we were approaching our destination; arriving in about an hour and a half.



Citizens rushed through the large village square, heading inside for the rain had begun again, interfering with their shops and vendor stands. The harbor-port and fishermen tied their boats for the rough seas were too unpredictable to chance. A large twelve foot tall bell tower in the center of the village rang loudly as armed guards pulled the rope five times, alerting everyone that the harbor was closed due to the UK weather.

Other armed guards patrolled the village, making sure the vendor stands and displays were properly covered so the items of rare value wouldn't be damaged.

The substitute-harbormaster; a Scotsman, grew frustrated for he disliked taking orders from the guards who were of the supernatural race that dwells here. He was part of the paranormal crowd. He frowned, watching as the guards did their duty outside and sounded the bell. He cursed when a voice spoke over the radio on the messy table of empty beer cans and full ash tray of cigar butts. He listened, making sure the voice reached out to the proper frequency and hearing a certain code, he answered. After ending the transmission, he turned to go outside but was startled for one of the guards stood in the doorway.

“Bloody hell...don't do that!” the Scotsman barked.

“Sorry, Lancaster...don't get your flea collar in a twist.” the guard replied in a cocky tone.

Lancaster was his last name, and he ignored the comment,

“The water taxi is just a ways out and they'll be arriving soon. Alert Marx...”

“I got it. I heard you from inside this...” the guard looked around in distaste, “mutt house, remember Lancaster?” the guard tapped his ear.

“Just doing the job, f\*\*\* ass!” Lancaster flicked the guard.

The guards' smug smile faded; replaced with utter hate as he turned, disappearing from the doorway. He removed a radio from his pocket, alerting the other guards around the island that a boat was coming in and to prepare the signals for the boatman.



“Okay, Bobby...come on...tell us something, please!” I pleaded, “Where are we!?” I looked around where a menacing and thick fog engulfed us, “Are you going to be able to see in this!? It’s so thick, I can barely see the water overboard.”

“Hush, girl and listen!” Bobby argued, “Listen very carefully.”

My mom and I stared out into the foggy veil and sure enough, there it was; the distinct sound of a faint bell ringing, followed by squawks that suddenly emerged from the sky. Glancing upward, we waited and watched as forms broke through the fog; Ravens, an entire flock of them flew above us in a circular motion before some of them landed on the outer railing. Zanz jumped around inside the cabin, barking as if wanting to play or catch one because he was hungry for fresh meat.

Bobby opened a small glass sliding window, allowing one to land next to him. He smiled commenting quickly,

“Hello, there...showing the way as usual, are we?”

The Raven stretched its large wings as it released a loud squawk before flapping off to join the others. Bobby listened to our complaints followed by comments of high admiration.

“Bobby...what’s going on!? Where did they come from!?” my mom shouted over the continuous squawks and engine.

“Look there!” his voice boomed in reply.

Glancing out forward through the fog, it was then we watched a light appear, as if it hovered in midair but as we grew closer, we could see the shape of it. It was a massive lighthouse Southeast, guiding Bobby toward his destination. Okay, now things are growing more frightening. The flock of Ravens above turned their course, disappearing ahead. Their faint chirps then vanished. In the quiet stillness other than the boats engine, we could still hear the ringing bell. My mom and I stood there holding onto the dash, watching as structures began appearing through the fog. It

reminded us so much of the 2001 movie *DAGON*, where the couple come across the mysterious island, hidden far from everyone.

“We’re here!” Bobby revealed, as the boat began pulling into the port where small figures grew as we approached.

My mom and I retreated back inside the cabin, taking our seats as we grabbed hold of our pets. We exchanged fearful glances for we were here. Wherever *HERE* was. Now, we were terrified.

“Mommy...I just want you to know...that before these people eat us...I love you.” I remarked sarcastically, trying to lighten the moment.

“Sweetheart, I love you too.” she hugged me, as our heart beats quickened, “And that’s not funny!” she gave me a quick tap on the arm.

“Ow...” I chuckled.

“Robert...dock carefully. The waters are rough this day.” a Scottish voice spoke over the speakers.

Reaching for the two-way radio, Bobby answered roughly,

“I’ve done this before, Lancaster and yet...you always seem to remind me.”

A huff replied before the connection ended.

Bobby shook his head, while he carefully angled the boat into the ports’ dock. He bit his lower lip while carefully and slowly turning the wheel, parking alongside the dock. Once parked, he turned off the engine then quickly turned to the cabin behind him. Looking inside, he smiled for we sat quietly. Feeling the motion of the boat being pulled close to the dock by large hooks, Bobby excused his presence while he stepped off board.

We waited, once again, hearing voices exchanging quick words before Bobby's head peeked inside, urging us to come out. We were hesitant as we stood, cautiously following him off the boat. We stuck close to him and each other as he led us up the ramp to greet the figures we observed. I helped carry Freya's carrier while my mom held onto my shoulders for support. There were several people but three lingered as the others dispersed, uninterested in the new arrivals. Once our steps ceased, the Ravens returned swarming nearby, catching fish thrown into the air by scattered fisherman. The cold air stung our nostrils before the putrid stench of fish replaced the freshness. Zanz grew excited catching the fishy scent and whined as he wanted to lead but bracing my stance, I held him back instructing him to heel. He shifted in place as he sat, releasing low whines.

We watched as workers on the dock emerged from the building to our right. They cautiously stepped around us to due to the massive Wolf before them as they walked onto the boat; one of them pushing a large dolly. Stacking our luggage onto it, they carefully rolled it across the dock; wheels clanking against the wooden planks. They parked it alongside my mom and I, flashing brief smiles that we quickly returned before they were called away.

Glancing around, there was a beach that stretched both left and right, offering that calming harbor experience. The lighthouse could still be seen above concealed rooftops for the fog hid the structures of this place.

"So you're the new arrivals here, are you?" a mans voice bellowed in a strong masculine tone, breaking our thoughts, "Welcome to the Isle of Castillion."

Looking ahead, there he was; a rather tall man, dressed in a black leather jacket and jeans with a knitted cap. Red hair peeked along the trim, matching his striking brushed beard. Blue eyes gave a piercing gaze but complimented his strong and ruggedly handsome features. He rubbed his gloved hands together and breathing heavily, his breath fogged in the cold air. Looking at Bobby he asked,

"They're not very talkative, are they?"

“Believe me, Lancaster...they are but now it seems they’ve decided to stay silent.” Bobby answered turning to us.

“Well, I’m...” Lancaster stepped forward but before he could finish his sentence, Zanz lunged toward him, almost pulling me down. He jumped backwards; hands held in surrender, listening to Zanz release his threatening growls and slathering jaws. With his blue eyes bulged in surprise, Lancaster continued shockingly, “By the gods...what is that!? A hound of Hell!?”

I said nothing as I tried pulling him back but Zanz sensed something off about this man and this place, and it’s going to take everything in me to control him. After all, he does weigh at least 120 pounds and I’m only 5’2 in height. Do the math!

Bobby instructed Lancaster to slowly back away and retrieve one of the shuttles nearby so we could be on our way. He nodded quickly then turned, sprinting off the dock in an athletic run. Bobby turned to us, shaking his head when he urged us to follow him once more. He pushed the dolly ahead of us, leading us away from the harbor. We stood and waited on the edge of a large village that Bobby revealed was Raven’s Port and Village.

“Believe me, you’ll see a lot more of it when we pass through.” Bobby glanced around, “It’s quite something. Been a long time since I’ve been here and just wait until you see the rest of this island.”

“Island!?” I questioned, “Did you just say...mother-freaking island!? Oh, crap. Mommy...” I turned to her but her attention was grasped by something else obviously far more interesting and following her gaze upwards, she admired a statuesque idol of a Raven carved from wood. The detail was amazing as it displayed every feather. The eyes were carved as if they were watching you and shone with red glass stones. It faced the waters behind us, as if it were a giant sentinel standing guard. It was gorgeous but I couldn’t hold back my sarcasm as I remarked, “Oh my god...we died and went to Valhalla.” then I looked around, “What...no Odin?” and I released a frightened laugh.

“Well, there’s no Odin here but it did once belong to the Vikings. And ladies...you’re not in Dagon either. No one’s going to eat anyone. I’ve seen the movie too. Very disturbing.” Bobby revealed then heard an engine, “Ah, there’s our transport.” he pointed ahead, where a black Jeep approached exhibiting that same *R* insignia on its side and the license plate read *RAVEN I*.

“Well, the *R* explains a lot.” my mom whispered, “*R* is for Raven-whatever so...whatever. Sure...why not!”

“Helpful.” I looked at her with a smile, “But true.” then I felt the rush of exhaustion hit me, “God, I’m tired.”

“Me too, sweetheart and so are our pets.” she examined Freya inside her carrier, who slept.

Lancaster quickly jumped out, allowing us to climb inside. He avoided Zanz at all cost who wasn’t afraid to let him know he wasn’t liked. Once he was situated in the large trunk area behind the backseats, I quickly closed it. I apologized before climbing in.

“Thank you, Lancaster.” Bobby appreciated before pulling out, entering the village that was separated from the harbor with a large elaborate iron gate and eight foot tall cobblestone wall.

There were guards standing beneath a red canvas canopy that shielded them from the light drizzle. They smiled, opening the gate allowing us passage through a massive stone arched entry way. Shifting in our seats looking out through the water splattered windows, we admired the scenery. If this...island did once belong to the Vikings, then we could easily see it for the village was perfectly situated near the harbor and port for advantage of keeping watch over the sea for intruders as well as trade. The lighthouse too, offered a better view of all the surrounding directions. I could still see its tall tower above the rooftops. Good strategy for that era.

As Bobby slowly drove through the village that was semi-circular in shape, the citizens briefly came from their shops, watching as we passed through. Shops and storefronts of steampunk architecture followed the semi-circular curve, with steam erupting from their pipes on their rooftops. Its faint color blended with the white fog that lingered in the air. Glancing down, the streets were made of beautiful gray cobblestone perfectly fit together, as if it were all a massive puzzle. Obviously it, among others, were newer additions.

“Wow...” I mumbled with a smile then focused ahead, “is that...” as my eyes laid toward the center of the village where a large fountain stood, covered with a stone gazebo, “wow...” is all I could repeat.

Surrounding the fountain were many closed vendor stands of various sizes; items and trinkets displayed on covered tables. Scattered villagers continued watching as we curved around the fountain and stands, waving as we passed. Tall Victorian lamp posts lined the outside of the shops, along with individual building lamps.

Approaching the other end, was a large stone-brick pub on the right painted blue and a white Inn on the left; both continuing the steampunk flair with signs displaying their names in red neon lights, of which we paid no attention to.

Bobby continued forward when he approached another arched gated entrance (or exit depending on which way you're coming to and from). Two young men stood guard beneath their red canopy with sheathed swords; black ski-caps covering their heads from the rain.

“Are they carrying weapons?” I mumbled.

“Looks like it.” my mom whispered.