

## Chapter 1



A pulsing entity.

It called out to him from within the torrents of rain, enticing with a promise of unimaginable power, demanding his full attention.

When Drayvex had first arrived and breathed the alien atmosphere, it had nudged against his senses. He'd almost dismissed it. But as he'd lingered at the point between worlds, he'd deduced that not only was the entity moving *towards* him, but its power was on a whole other level.

A low-level demon shot down the cobbled street below him. It took him a second to realise that it was, in fact, his demon.

Drayvex narrowed his eyes from his rooftop perch. Kaelor had followed him through the portal. On top of this, his idea of blending in was truly spectacular. Moron.

The rain lashed around him in waves, hurling itself at him, then evaporating into a fine mist upon contact with his hot flesh. He looked down at the village below, sharp eyes slicing through the downpour, and zoned in on the strange power.

What he saw threw him off his guard.

It was a girl. A human girl emanating a throbbing black aura.

Drayvex relaxed his jaw, allowing the tension to ebb from his taut muscles. She didn't strike him as an unusual specimen. The girl wasn't interesting to look at, nor was there anything about her that stood out. Nothing except

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that delicious black energy that gathered about her in a possessive miasma.

He watched the girl flee with mild interest, studying her as his minion blocked her path. Would this power weaken and die without its human host? He would soon find out. Kaelor was about to have his way.

As the demon below made to strike, Drayvex's eyes remained on her.

Kaelor pushed off the stones, disappearing in a pop, teleporting with over-dramatic enthusiasm.

Unless, Drayvex mused, watching as the demon materialised in front of her. Unless, she was something *more*. A slick pretender that liked to play human. If that was so, Kaelor would be put in his place, permanently. The ultimate lesson in biting off more than one could chew.

The demon leapt for the kill. The human slashed out with perfect timing, a hidden blade in her hand.

Drayvex stilled. The human had teeth after all.

As the blade sliced into the soft abdomen of his demon underling, Kaelor vanished, fleeing like the miserable coward he was.

Drayvex stared, glued to the diminutive creature standing victorious on the soaked street below. It had been more panic than calculated swipe. A clumsy, last-ditch thrash; but frankly, this girl had the luck of the devil. For one, she'd hit him with her eyes closed.

Drayvex felt his eyes narrow, fresh suspicions emerging. He found himself studying the human with growing intrigue. It was then that he noticed what was around her neck.

It *looked* like a piece of jewellery: a ruby teardrop enshrouded in a delicate silver webbing. It hung on a worn leather cord, with the surrounding silver lattice pulled back on either side to reveal the gleaming face of the stone. The darker line running through the centre gave it the distinct look of an eye. Its slit pupil stared out at the world into which its power bled.

It looked like a pendant, but Drayvex knew better. He stared at the stone in revelation. It was unbelievable.

As the girl walked away with her life, his demon was long gone. Drayvex made a mental note to punish the worthless ingrate. If he'd wanted to be followed, he would have told someone he was leaving.

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The pulsing presence lingered in his mind long after her absence.

Old notions of ambition seduced him where he stood. A venture like this would prove to be the best kind of distraction. The kind that would produce hard results.

Bringing up his hands, he studied the curved, black tips of his fingers. These would have to go.

Drayvex clenched his hands into tight fists, and then unclenched them, flexing his fingers anew. He examined the blunt human nails that had taken the place of his claws. Their subtle black sheen was the only thing that gave away his disguise.

His tongue wandered over an array of pointed teeth, and their tips dulled and shrank under its touch. The Lapis Vitae. He, like many others, had assumed that such a powerful object could never be outside the mythos of its own existence. Now that he had seen it for himself, he could confirm that it was everything it claimed to be and more.

The corners of his mouth lifted as he considered his fortunate position. He would do whatever it took to possess it.

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The words that sprung to mind were ‘mangled cat’.

Ruby’s feet pounded the puddle-riddled pavements, explosions of water erupting around her. She sucked in breath after ragged breath, the chill catching at the back of her throat with each gasp.

It was one thing to run from danger, to flee for your life; it was another thing entirely to flee from a thing without quite knowing why.

Ruby’s heart pounded in her chest. Curiosity buzzed within her like a trapped insect. It was large enough to be a dog, yet its features were distinctly feline. Clumps of fur were missing from its twisted torso and bones jutted out at odd angles, as though someone had pulled the poor animal apart and rebuilt it using the most basic of instructions.

As a child, she had possessed a wonderful knack for finding trouble, often in the most unexpected of places. Now as an adult, the only thing that had changed was that Ruby often found it on purpose.

Her footsteps echoed around her; the sounds magnified tenfold within

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the enclosed passageway. She knew this village and its secrets inside out. Maybe she could lose the cat if she—

A sharp blow to the middle of her back cut her musing dead.

Ruby gasped, the impact pushing her forward. She stumbled, adrenaline kicking in, and grabbed out at the wall beside her. Her palms dragged across the stone as she caught herself, its rough surface biting into her flesh. Her body reeling, she glanced up.

A jolt shot through her.

The animal was blocking her path. Its sinister silhouette, with its misshapen edges, was unmistakable.

A strong gust rolled down the cobbled passageway, throwing cold rain against her back. Ruby shivered and shrunk into her jacket, bracing herself against the spray. If she stopped running, what was the worst it could do to her?

Soggy ribbons of unnatural red hair tumbled out of her hood, the damp strands sticking to the sides of her face as it fell free. Those teeth alone could cause some real damage.

Stomach churning, she squinted past the cat. The hazy glow of the corner shop winked at her from the other side of the passage, an odd guiding light in the middle of the murk. People. She needed to surround herself with people.

Breathing through her nose, Ruby steeled herself. She would charge at it and catch it off guard. Then, she would vault straight over its head and make a break for the store.

But as her eyes fell back upon the cat, she started.

She hadn't seen it move, hadn't even registered its presence, yet there it was, almost close enough to stretch out and touch. Its twisted body was flat to the floor, yellow eyes fixed on her.

Ruby squinted through the unrelenting rain at the creature, and *it* stared back. Its muddy eyes were large and round, and glowed in the evening dusk.

An instinctual tingle shivered through her. As its lips rolled back into a silent snarl, she noticed its teeth. Its lips stretched back, contorting beyond

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what was cat-like.

The sound of the persistent rain was like white noise in her stuck mind. Licking her lips, she squeezed her eyes shut. Blinked. As she returned to the smiling cat, they widened. No, smiling didn't do it justice. It was full-on grinning at her.

Ruby stepped back in slow motion, a soft undercurrent of fear oozing through her blood. Her hand gravitated towards her jacket pocket, to the comforting weight of the flick knife, and paused.

The animal bared its teeth in a silent hiss. Then, it sprang.

Ruby screwed her eyes shut in a knee-jerk reaction. A breathy scream escaped from her lips, body tensing for the painful impact.

Her hand closed around the handle and reflex gave way to instinct. That instinct demanded that she fight back.

Still with her eyes closed, Ruby tugged the flick knife from her pocket. She yanked the small blade vertical and slashed out at the space in front of her in one jerking movement.

Her heart sank at the pathetic display. Knife or not, she was *not* a badass.

When she felt the blade connect, she almost dropped it. A terrible hissing swung off to the left. A warm dampness, a contrast to the icy rain, spattered her fingers.

Ruby's eyes flew open. Heart in her throat, she searched the passageway, frantically spinning.

Gone.

She stopped and breathed out. The knife slipped from her fingers, clattering to the ground. Dark speckles dotted the stones at her feet. She'd hit it. Numb, Ruby lifted her hand and studied her fingers. Black.

Her sluggish mind twitched, coming back to life. She'd really hit it, and its blood was ... black?

Heart pounding with the euphoric sensation of being alive, Ruby gazed down the passage towards the hazy lights of civilisation. The cat-shaped thing was gone. And now, like it or not, she would never know its secrets.

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Drayvex tracked the pulsing entity to a dilapidated building a short way

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away. Its outdated roof was thatched, and positioned in gold lettering above the door were the words, 'The Golden Spoke'. In the event that one couldn't read a simple sign, wedged into the ground in front was a large, golden wheel.

He scoffed as he approached the door, his steaming skin ebbing as he stepped under the small alcove out of the rain. Humans were predictable to a fault, with their habits and their rituals. Their fear of rejection made them weak and dispensable, and inferior. This was a common opinion among demonkind.

A less common viewpoint—one that involved thinking outside the rather battered box your average knucklehead demon clung to with extreme prejudice—was that at their worst, humanity wasn't so far removed from demonkind at all. Greedy, selfish, violent. Oozing with lust. Rotten at their core. Acknowledging these ties to a species that was best served raw and wriggling was just too much for some.

Drayvex frequently walked that fine line. He violated every rule when he world-hopped on the sly, abandoning his morals to indulge in the simple, sordid pleasures humanity had conjured to keep themselves buzzing in this dismal life. And when he was done, he slipped back into the vicious world that had spat him out and smiled as though he'd never left.

Regardless, he knew how to get what he wanted from these people—specifically, from the girl with his prize. He pushed against the door and stepped over the threshold. This would be child's play.

The girl was sitting alone at the far end of the dim tavern. As before, his eyes were drawn to the stone that dangled at her throat, to its steady sway as she shifted in her seat. As it moved, the air around it rippled and distorted in distracting ways.

The Lapis Vitae. The stone of life. Its power was absolute, sought out by weaklings and powerhouses alike for one reason: it made the claimant untouchable.

Drayvex ran his tongue along the tops of his pitiful human teeth, resisting the change as his fangs fought to emerge in the presence of the stone. The claiming of a Lapis Vitae was more than a one-off power surge; it was a

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contract. Once sealed, it protected its owner with unflinching loyalty.

The only way it could safely change hands was if the current owner discarded it or died with it. This made it almost impossible to steal.

Drayvex smiled, feeling his ego swell in anticipation of a challenge. Persuading her to cooperate would be simple. Whatever she loved, he could track it down and break it piece by piece until she begged him to take the stone off her hands. Child's play indeed.

It was *too* simple. No, he could think of an even better way to get what he wanted. A method worthy of his time. He tore his eyes away from the stone, and with great reluctance, made himself look at the girl.

She was petite, with a slight frame and bottle green eyes. Her hair fell down her back in a soggy cascade, its rich burgundy sheen a stark contrast against her anaemic complexion. The small stud in her nose, along with the unnatural shade of her locks, appeared to be her small attempt at human individuality. There was something about the way she held herself that made her seem older than she looked. Drayvex narrowed his eyes as he drank her in. Her body language hinted at insecurity, but her sullen pout said, 'bite me'.

As far as humans went, this one would be easy to manipulate. Maybe, when he was done with her, he would devour her. He smirked in response to that last thought and slipped across the room towards her.

The girl was oblivious to his presence as he approached her table. Despite having just battled a demon, she'd already dropped her guard.

He pulled out the chair opposite her, allowing the legs to scrape against the hard-wood floor, and sat down uninvited.

She glanced up at the sound, a smile forming on her lips. It slipped when she saw him.

She was expecting someone. Drayvex folded his arms and lounged back in the chair, making himself comfortable. He gazed at her with open curiosity, picking her apart.

The girl stared back with big eyes. As her blatant surprise morphed into something resembling the suspicion he'd expected, she pulled back from the table, her mouth setting into a sullen line. The corners turned down in

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the smallest of movements.

Drayvex could almost hear the cogs grinding inside her head as she looked him up and down, her attempts at subtlety falling short. He smirked, careful once again not to trigger the natural sharpening of his human stumps into fangs. It was harder than it should have been.

She broke the silence.

“Can I help you?” The tension was audible in the tightness of her voice. She lifted a hand to twirl a lock of hair around her index finger. A nervous habit?

Drayvex didn't immediately answer, allowing the moment to stretch and distort. A candle flickered in the centre of the glass-strewn table, throwing patches of moving shadow across her unblinking face. The living darkness at her throat throbbed.

When he was satisfied that he'd got under her skin, he leaned forward, resting an arm on the table between them. “Maybe you can.”

He smiled, catching and holding her gaze, confident of his abilities. She may be physically untouchable, but Drayvex knew that there was more than one way to crack a nut. She was, after all, only human.

The girl lost her focus for the briefest of moments, her serious mouth falling slack, before bouncing back to its previous shape. She sat upright in one movement, her spine pressing into the padded back of the bench. The stone bounced against her chest and fell still.

“Are you looking for someone?” she asked.

The air around it thrummed. His demon blood screamed in his veins. His teeth throbbed.

Searching for a distraction, Drayvex looked down and noticed again the array of glasses on the table between them. He snagged a stray bottle cap and rolled it between two fingers.

“No.” Hearing the new edge to his voice, he blocked out the stone's influence and continued. “I was wondering why you're drinking for two. Are we drowning our problems in whisky?”

The girl gaped at him, her small eyebrows raising, as though every pint-sized human drank this way. Maybe they did. Or maybe he was simply the



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first to call her out on a bad habit.

“Excuse you?” She moved in to grip the table. “What did you—”

As she leaned in, her arm collided with her current drink, sending it straight off the edge. She gasped and swiped for the glass, her delayed reactions not unlike those of an inebriated troll.

Making a conscious effort not to blur, Drayvex moved with preternatural reflexes. He produced the sloshing glass and placed it back on the varnished surface, sliding it towards her with the push of a finger.

The girl veered to catch it.

“Good save.” She laughed once. The sound had a warmth to it, and he found himself wondering how often she genuinely used it. “Thanks. God, I’m a klutz.”

Drayvex leaned forward, letting the table take a portion of his weight. Ignoring her gratitude, he picked up the discarded cap and span it on the tabletop. “Have you been stood up?”

She blinked. “*Stood up?*” She laughed again, this time without warmth. “No. I prefer my own company.” Her eyes danced to the side of the room and then back. “Not that it’s any of your business.”

As he watched her stare at an interesting patch of wall, it was obvious that she thought she could lie to him. However, he didn’t find it hard to believe that she preferred to be alone. “That so?” he murmured, using his mind to spin the cap. “Well, then you must be good company.” He let it wobble and drop.

“Hey, *Rubeey!*”

Drayvex turned and clocked the tall, ginger mop bobbing towards their table.

“Ruby!” The mop stopped to hover behind Drayvex’s left shoulder. “How are you, girl? Haven’t seen you in ages.”

The girl visibly cringed as the boy fixed his attention on her, something that Drayvex took an odd iota of pleasure in watching. “Gary,” she said, sounding resigned. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

“You wanna join us? We’re over in the other corner.” The level of hope his voice projected was pathetic.

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Drayvex watched the girl named Ruby flounder as the human named Gary mouth-breathed down the back of his neck. Then, after what looked like a fair amount of effort on her part, she smiled back.

“Actually, I—” She paused mid-sentence. Her gaze fell on Drayvex from across the table. “I’m here with someone. Sorry.” Her eyes pleaded with him. She didn’t *look* sorry.

Drayvex bit down on his lip, fighting to conceal a smirk. He glanced up at the full-length mirror on the wall opposite and studied the boy.

His beady eyes were gawking down, as if he’d just noticed Drayvex sitting there. His clenched fists told a different story. With the red clouds blooming on his cheeks and the indignant bulge of his eyes, he looked as though he’d just been slapped.

Drayvex bristled, his irritation overriding his previous amusement in watching the girl squirm. I’d be happy to slap you, he thought, but I won’t stop there. Ignoring the weed, he focused on the girl as she communicated with him using subtle-as-sledgehammer eye gestures. He rewarded her with a smirk. Okay, I’ll bite.

“Gary,” he drawled.

It took the boy a moment to reply. “Who are you?”

Drayvex smiled without humour. Then, he rose to his feet and turned to face the boy. “I’m busy.” He met the boy’s gaze and straightened, matching him in height. “In fact, we’re both busy. Ruby and I have a lot to talk about, and you’re holding us back.”

Drayvex moved in closer, putting his mouth next to Gary’s ear. “Later,” he murmured, allowing his voice to drop in both tone and volume, “we may not talk at all.” And just because he could, he winked.

Gary’s flaming face glowed as he stared back over at Ruby. She smiled at him, giving him a semi-apologetic shrug that was vague enough to confirm anything Drayvex could have possibly said. It was the final note in a short-lived, ginger opus.

As the boy turned and skulked away, Drayvex smirked, amused at how easy it had been to bait the boy.

Humans really were a cinch.

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Ruby exhaled as Gary retreated, flame-faced. She glanced towards her new friend, wondering what he'd said to get rid of him. Looking down at her half-empty glass, she decided that she didn't really care. The cool of the rim met her lips, and she took another gulp.

He reclaimed the seat opposite and lounged against the hard wooden backrest, making it look comfortable. This guy, she thought, unable to look away. He would look swank in a bin bag. A grin pulled at her mouth.

The smile slipped as she clocked him watching her back, pinned by those piercing eyes.

Ruby squirmed in her own skin, suddenly conscious of her drowned rat appearance. Her heart pulsed in her throat. They were a strange shade, a powdery blue so pale, they were almost white. It was impossible not to stare. They were striking, and they stood out against jet black hair that she could only describe as organised chaos. His face was cold and handsome with a compelling still, like the calm before a storm. Her breath clouded the glass that hovered at her lips, arm frozen in the motion of pulling it away.

"Friend of yours?" His soft, masculine voice interrupted her reverie. It was smooth velvet and dark chocolate.

Ruby blinked. Where had *that* come from? She felt her face grow warm as she appraised the stranger at her table. She didn't fawn over men.

Taking a moment to ground herself, she licked her lips and replied, "he's

a friend of a friend.” Of a friend. “A bit clingy, but harmless enough.” She owed him at least that much. He had just covered her backside, after all.

His gaze drifted to the wall behind her. When he looked back, he flashed her a smile that briefly touched his eyes. “Ruby, right?”

Ruby fought the ridiculous urge to finger-comb her hair. “Uh, right. And you are?” There was something about him. Something strange that she could see, but *couldn't*, like the faintest stars that you can only see in the corner of your vision. She just couldn't put her finger on it.

“Drayvex.”

She nodded. “Well, thanks. It would have been awkward had you got up and left me. And a little sad.”

Drayvex hummed in agreement. “The downside to preferring your own company,” he said, his eyes lingering on her chest.

Ruby's stomach twisted. “Hey,” she yelped, glowering across the table at him. He was a perv. Of course, he was a perv. She should have known that this was what he'd wanted straight away.

Drayvex reacted as though she hadn't spoken. She considered making her escape, and then hitting him over the head *before* making her escape, until a different thought occurred to her. Was he ... looking at her necklace?

Taking the charm between two fingers, Ruby stared at Drayvex. His eyes followed it. “Oh. It's a family heirloom.” She slid her thumb over the smooth stone. She supposed it was rather pretty. “I don't think it's worth much.”

She swallowed hard as the words stuck in her throat. Memories of her gran, still tender, flooded her mind. Her heart squeezed. It was worth a lot to her.

Drayvex had a faraway look as he studied the charm. But as his eyes regained their focus, they flicked up to her face. “I'm sure it's valuable in other ways.” He sounded serious.

Ruby stared. Was she that transparent?

Before she could respond, Drayvex rose to his feet. Then, without saying a word, he walked off, leaving her at the table.

Had she offended him? He'd seemed like he had a pretty thick skin.

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Drayvex was back before she'd come to an answer. In his hands were two tumblers of golden liquid.

As he reclaimed his seat, he slid one across the table, skimming it through the middle of the empties in a casual display of skill. The liquid inside sloshed up to the rim in a heady, honey coloured wave.

"To dodging life's idiots," he toasted, draining the contents of his own glass in one.

Ruby smirked, unable to disagree with such a simple toast. She picked up her own. "To freedom," she echoed, draining the glass and slamming it down.

The wheezing jukebox sprung to life. Her favourite song drifted across the tavern and the background hum rose to a murmur, matching the song's energy.

Ruby unbuttoned her shirt as the drink burned a trail down her throat. She was starting to feel them *all*.

"You never did say what problem we're ignoring." He flicked a stray peanut across the table, which bounced off her arm. The ghost of a smile played on his lips.

So, they were back to this. She wondered what game he was playing. "You don't even know me. Why do you care?"

"I don't," he replied. "It doesn't matter to me what form your misery takes. I'm just killing time."

Ruby was lost for words. What a jackass.

"But I'm a good listener." Holding up two fingers, he raised his eyebrows at her in an unspoken question. A question that spoke for itself in a place such as this.

Basking in the soft whisky glow, Ruby fell back into the chair and gave a knowing smile. Two more.

Two *rounds* later, Ruby was telling her life story to the charming stranger at her table. She felt oddly comfortable talking to him, albeit with some effort, the drink slowing her tongue into a sluggish stupor.

"We've lived in this place for two years now." Ruby traced the swirls in

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the rustic table, her mind drifting to days gone by. “Mum and I. We used to live in Callien.” When she didn’t get a response, she looked up. “You know, the big city a hundred miles from here?” She smiled at his blank expression. “Not a local, then.” Not that she’d ever doubted that. No one from around here looked like him.

Drayvex smirked as though she’d said something funny. “No, Ruby. I’m not local.”

Ruby frowned. “That’s obvious. Crichton is small enough for everyone to know everyone. These people have lived here for a *veery* long time.” She leaned across the table and cupped her hand around her mouth. “There are no secrets here,” she whispered, feeling the drink buzz in her veins. “It’s kind of creepy.”

The corners of his mouth lifted. “I see.”

Drayvex got to his feet. This time, he moved towards her.

As he took a seat on the padded bench beside her, Ruby was hyper-aware of him. They were now only inches apart, and despite having just watched him get up and move, the change felt instantaneous. It was an unpleasant sensation, not unlike being snuck up on from behind.

“So, what you’re saying is, if someone were to see us here, together ...”

Drayvex lay his arm across the back of her seat. This close, he was both glorious and terrifying. Ruby wasn’t sure which one was winning. But as he spoke, her eyes were drawn to his lips, and all coherent thought began to slip through her fingers. She wanted those lips.

“... people would talk?”

Ruby leaned in. He was warm—very warm. A soft heat radiated through the thin jacket he wore, as though he’d been standing out in the blistering sun. As he exhaled, his hot breath brushed the base of her jaw.

“Um ...” Struggling to hold on to a single thought, she scanned up. Their eyes locked.

Just like that, Ruby was snared. Those pale eyes seemed to contain such depth; a depth a person could get lost in. She couldn’t look away. She almost felt like a bird, staring into the eyes of a snake.

*Snake.*

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Ruby blinked. Wait, what was she doing?

She pulled back in sudden alarm, sliding away somewhat down the seat. She'd almost given herself to him right then and there.

Ruby placed a hand on the back of her clammy neck. She knew she'd been drinking. She could feel it in her system. The room had that warm, fuzzy glow that only alcohol could offer. But she was still in control and a long way from losing her inhibitions.

"Uh, yeah," she mumbled. "It would give them plenty to talk about." She peeked at him from the corner of her eye.

For a moment, Drayvex didn't move. His gaze continued to pierce through her, and in the eerie hush, Ruby could hear her heart throbbing in her ears.

Then, he threw her a half-smile. "You were saying?" he prompted, relaxing back into the seat.

Ruby breathed out, making the candle flame in the centre of the table flicker and dance. She ran her fingers through her tangled hair. What *was* she saying?

"You're a country girl from the city."

Ruby looked up, triggered by his words. They sounded all wrong.

Perhaps sensing her hesitation, he tilted his head in silent question. "Or, not?" he considered, his softly narrowed gaze making her feel inside out. It was as though he saw right through her.

Shaking her head, she pulled herself together and sat up straight. She was a *city* girl stuck in the country, without a doubt. But for two long years, Ruby had gritted her teeth and sucked up Crichton without complaining, for her mother's sake. Drink or no fricking drink, she'll be damned if she was going to crack wide open for some silver-tongued stranger now.

"No, you had it right. I'm a country girl." She pulled her face into a smile, the muscles in her face feeling tight and wrong. It was Sandra that kept her sane in this small, forgotten place. Thank god for her.

Drayvex smiled back, a small, almost non-existent gesture that spoke volumes. He wasn't buying what she was selling.

Ruby frowned, irrationally annoyed by this. Who the hell did he think

he—?

“Ruby. Oh, *Ruby*.” Sandra’s voice sang out across the half-empty tavern, attracting the attention of the few occupants seated nearby. She weaved towards them, her blond pigtailed bobbing as she bounced on the balls of her feet.

About damn time, Ruby fumed, remembering her original reason for being here. She threw a fleeting glance at her new friend and wondered how she was going to explain the man at her table in a way that didn’t lead to a thousand questions.

“Rube, I’m so sorry I’m late. I got held up at work. The old hag just *wouldn’t* let me go and—hello. Who’s this?” Sandra ogled Drayvex. No doubt in a similar way to how Ruby had herself not so long ago.

Drayvex watched Ruby. She knew what he was thinking. She fidgeted in her seat, remembering her earlier protests of not having been stood up.

Ruby ignored Sandra’s question. “Why didn’t you call? I’ve been waiting here for over an hour.”

“Well, at least you had company.” She giggled, grabbing the nearest chair.

Ruby sprang to her feet, jumping straight to damage control. This was a recipe for disaster. “Don’t bother, Sand. I’ve got to get back to Mum.” Slipping into a jacket that was now almost dry, she fussed over the material, smoothing out the crumples and folds.

“Ugh, but I’ve just got here. What were you drinking, the special?”

Ruby started for the door, but then hesitated. Drayvex. She chewed on her lower lip, unsure of how to leave.

After a second’s thought, she settled for a rather bland, “It was nice to meet you,” before striding for the exit. Sandra would follow if she knew what was good for her. Ruby pushed through the door and stepped out into the cool evening.

Crichton had a certain smell at night. It was delicious and fresh, one of the few things she preferred about the country.

The door swooshed behind her. “I’m sorry, Rube. Forgive me?”

Ruby ignored her, setting off at a leisurely pace, her shoes squelching on the wet ground. It wasn’t really Sandra she was mad at.



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“Ruby. Who’s your friend?”

She stopped and span, her feet crunching against the stones. She didn’t see the point in playing dumb. She did, however, want to make Sandra work for her juicy gossip. “Who was who?”

Sandra sighed, slapping her arms in a dramatic gesture. “The guy,” she pushed. “That guy sitting at your table. You know, the one you were talking to when I arrived?”

“Oh,” Ruby said lamely. “The guy.”

“Yes, you dummy.”

“I dunno. He just invited himself over.” No sooner had these words left her mouth, than she realised her mistake.

“Oh. Ooh, I seeee.” Sandra winked, her blue eyes sparkling. “Maybe he fancied you.”

Ruby felt her numb face glow. “Well, he’s not from around here. Pretty sure he would have been just as friendly with anyone. You know, when in Rome ...”

They kept going, the two of them walking side by side in silence, their steps falling into perfect sync.

“But he was cute, though, right?”

Ruby laughed out loud, astounded at Sandra’s one-track mind. She gave her friend a small smile. “Sure.”

The remaining wisps of day lingered on the skyline, painting the streets in varying shades of dusk. She could still see his eyes in her mind. Like looking into a bright light for too long, temporarily blinded and seeing nothing but spots after looking away. It was hard to describe. Her stomach gave an odd squirm, reacting to the memories.

“I wanted to tell you something.” A hesitant voice interrupted her thoughts.

Sandra’s fingers picked at a loose button on her coat as she spoke, and suddenly, she almost seemed smaller, her naturally tall frame squashed.

“Okay,” Ruby said, wanting to make this easier for her. “What is it?”

“I’m moving in with my dad.”

Ruby was a few paces ahead when she realised that Sandra wasn’t with

her. She stopped in her tracks.

“I’m moving in with my dad.”

Her head felt like a vacuum. But a different kind of emptiness was creeping within her, spreading with each second.

“Rube?”

Ruby turned around, blinking back a betraying dampness. She was leaving.

Sandra sighed and trudged towards her. Stopping a few feet away, she looked down at her perfectly manicured fingernails. “I’m going to work for him. Become his apprentice.” Her voice was heavy, thick with forced enthusiasm.

Ruby groped around in her sluggish brain for an emotional response. What she found was an unwelcome throb of panic. “You’re leaving Crichton.”

Finally, Sandra looked at her. The colour in her face was gone. “I didn’t want to tell you until it was set in stone.”

“When?”

She opened her mouth, hesitating. “T-tomorrow. But, *but*, everything has happened so fast, and my mother is really keen for me to go, which—”

“But you hate your dad.” Ruby was trying to understand, but it just didn’t make any sense. “Why now? When was the last time you spoke? Did you even get a birthday card this year?”

“Rube.” Sandra grabbed her shoulders and squeezed. “This is what I want.”

“But-but why so sudden, Sand? I mean, if you could just give me some time, maybe I could persuade Mum that we—”

“Ruby, this is what I *want*.” Sandra’s eyes were wide and pleading. It was the kind of look that she often used when she was hiding something and didn’t want to explain.

Ruby stared into the big blue eyes of her dearest friend and came to an understanding. This wasn’t sudden. Just a well kept secret.

“Please, Rube.”

How could Sandra just drop this on her and walk away? It was a low

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blow, considering all they'd been through. And yet, what kind of friend would Ruby be if she denied her this?

"I'll come back," Sandra said, emphasising with her eyes. "I promise."

Ruby couldn't speak. There was nothing she could say. As Sandra took her hands off her shoulders, the emptiness spread out from her chest. It was too much.

"I'm sorry," Sandra mumbled, spinning around and dashing off down the street.

Ruby watched her best friend flee, the sting of betrayal seeping in. What was she not telling her? Did Sandra not trust her after all this time?

"You're a coward, Sandra Serling," she blasted. Her friend's scarf disappeared around the far corner.

Ruby was alone.

\*

Fate: the idea that a higher-power had some modicum of control over his life.

The moon was full and bright, an eyesore in an otherwise pitch black sky. It was a ridiculous notion on many levels. For one, having stood at the top of the food chain for most of his unnatural life, he knew there was nothing out there capable of backing up such a bloated brag. As a being that had both a massive ego *and* the stones to follow through, notions such as fate could kiss his arse.

On the other hand, it was after a day such as this that one had to at least consider it. He breathed out, blocking the moon briefly from view as vapour spewed out into the night air. He was thinking about it.

Drayvex stood on the wasted ground at the edge of the village, his focus clearer than it had been in years. What were the chances that, of all the times he'd escaped to Earth, always with a specific destination in mind, he would screw it all on this one occasion and strike gold? He had ended up in the one tiny spit of a place that was hiding the *stone of life*.

His fangs stirred as he reflected, extending in anticipation. He didn't believe in coincidence. What he did believe in, however, was opportunity. Now, fated or not, the stone and its powers would soon belong to him.

*Shadow-Stained*

Drayvex crunched across the hard ground, manoeuvring around the mountains of earth in his path. Unlike the rest of this saccharine village, the dump that concealed his portal looked more like the end result of a personal grudge. The kind of grudge that would see him annihilate an entire populace on a whim and leave a smoking crater in its place. It was the perfect place to hide a demonic gateway. Still, Drayvex never left anything to chance.

Raising a hand towards a particular hunk of crumbling concrete, he reached out and hovered the hand within an inch of its surface. Drawing power from his core, he sent it down his arm to the tips of his fingers. When he felt it burn, he stopped. Then, inching his hand forward, he placed it on the concrete.

The portal shifted at his touch, throwing out judders of protest as it fought against his wishes. Drayvex held fast, absorbing the impact. Everything bent to his will eventually. It was only a matter of time.

The concrete rippled and pulsed one last time, and fell still.

Drayvex inspected the rubble, satisfied. Nothing else would arrive this way. Nothing with any real power, anyway.

He turned and slipped into the shadows, his business here complete. Any demon with a scrap of ambition would want the Lapis Vitae for itself. The stone, after all, gave life. Power. Granted finite creatures their maximum life potential and protected the most incompetent fool from unforeseen demise.

He licked his lips, his form slipping as he thought of the chaos to come. For a powerful demon, such as himself, the stone offered so much more than protection. For a being with a *infinite* lifespan, it was immortality.

Immortality and an infinite reign.

The stone would soon be his. And eventually, she would bend to his will too.