



The Rule of the Damned

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Description: Remember all those scary stories you were told as a child...the ones where the monsters are hiding under your bed? They aren't just stories.

We're real.

We're behind some of the world's deadliest catastrophes and continue orchestrating them from the shadows. Most humans don't know that we exist, and we aim to keep it that way. Remember the Salem Witch Trials? That's what happens when our secret gets out. Human fear becomes deadly and drives them to enact unthinkable violence.

The Druids. The Undead. The Rogues. The Sorcerers.

We're four families that are united in our mission to run the Underworld. While we may not like each other, we set aside our differences to keep the underworld running.

Until an Heir is murdered.

Now, I'm determined to find the murderer before the trail of bodies leads the humans to our front door, and everything we've kept hidden is at risk.

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Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:08 am

Prologue | Freak Show

Dracula (Then)

When you have nothing but an insurmountable amount of time ahead of you, your perspectives change. The simple joys in life become more meaningful again. Like the rain splattering against the stone castle walls, or the roaring fire keeping the chill of our endless winter at bay. Occasionally, a log cracks, and together, these things create the perfect atmosphere for me to uncover the adventure on the pages in my latest book.

Leaning back onto the settee, I crack open the book's spine, except the loud banging on the front door of the castle has other plans. Sighing, I abandon my reading to identify the source of the noise.

Only the sound of my feet padding against the cold castle floor accompanies me as I open the large wooden entrance doors with my Supernatural strength. After they're done groaning in protest, I find Van Helsing standing on the other side. Beckoning her inside out of the pouring rain, she hurries inside. Pushing her hood back, the water drips off Van Helsing as I hear Renfield's approaching footsteps.

Van Helsing and I have never held a fondness for each other, but I bite back any retort I may have when I see her expression. Something is different this time.

"They're coming, aren't they?" I ask her.

She wrings out her blonde hair before responding. "Those ignorant brothers are going

to ruin everything. Why didn't you take control of them when we were created like you should have? We wouldn't be in this mess if you had just followed the rules."

Renfield understands my frustration with this statement. She knows I would never take freewill away from someone, even the bastard brothers. Before I can retaliate, Renfield steps in between Van Helsing and me and holds her hands up between us. "How much time do we have?" She asks.

Van Helsing inspects her nails like she didn't just barge in here when things were urgent, and I'm one step away from throttling her before a glare from Renfield calms me. I need to figure out when we need to know now, and then I can fight with Van Helsing later.

Looking up from her nails, Van Helsing tells us, "I discovered the humans are the most scared of your Dracula legend. The brothers seem to have gotten overzealous and murdered one daughter of the village leader. Maybe she would have died from the plague. No one knows or cares though, because now the village wants justice from the monster they believe was responsible."

When the Black Plague hit humanity, we quickly discovered that all of Hecate's creations are immune from disease. My assumption is that it's the magic that protects us. Though that knowledge proved beneficial, it did not help the distrust humans felt towards us. They're always looking for a reason to explain away their suffering. Their faith demanded they look for a Supernatural reason, because they couldn't accept the reason for their suffering was something as simple as pathology. It didn't help that our very existence went against human beliefs, so we were the source of their frustrations from the moment of our creation. So, we withdrew from society to protect ourselves. Then we started over several times.

Hearing this new information, my heart drops. I tried so hard to prove I was good and that they didn't need to fear me, but it was never good enough. Now, everything I

tried so hard to prevent, the bloodshed and unnecessary death, has found us.

Straightening and resigned to our fate, my only response is, “Then we fight. We know they’ll never accept the truth, and humans always seem to need a scapegoat. Even though we have the right to exist, just like they do.” Renfield stops me, grabbing my arm as she tells me. “Think, Dru, the humans have been talking about us for years. If it wasn’t the brothers, it would have been something else. They blamed Vlad’s actions on you, too, and I won’t be surprised if they blame Countess Bathory’s actions on one of us soon. I’ve been monitoring her behavior, and it’s escalating. The humans were merely waiting for a reason. This is it.”

When I was gifted my new life, Renfield wanted to come with me, and now, our time together has grown into something more. I tried to turn her so she could be Undead like me, and although that didn’t work, she’s more than an average human now, if her long life is any indication. My fear ratchets up a notch for her because she’s the most fragile and the easiest target in our group. I have to protect her.

Renfield’s gray-blue eyes gaze at me as she continues to think out loud. “This is why we always had the escape plan in place. We had hoped to never need it, but let’s be grateful that today we do. Sure, we could massacre the villages, but then what? There is no blood for you, Dru. So, instead, let’s start over in the new world. The one we’ve been hearing rumors about. A world where no one fears us. We’ve done it once, and we can do it again.”

The howling wolves punctuate the night, and it’s quickly followed up with the clacking of claws against the castle floor. Jekyll and Hyde, the brothers that caused this issue, slide into the castle in wolf form with golden eyes, their entrance affected by the rain and slick castle floor. Van Helsing’s hand goes towards her sword, but I hold her back. A rare moment of unity between us. Under my breath, I mutter to her, “Remember our promise. We’re stronger together than we are apart.” The magical transformation takes over the brothers’ bodies and they regain their human forms.

Raising my hands, I focus on the blood particles in their bodies, and I squeeze as the fury courses throughout me. “How could you be so stupid? You place all our lives at risk with your reckless behavior!” I seethe. They squirm, trying to get away from my control, but they can’t. Blood controls everything, which means I do too. The veins bulging on their necks from straining against my control betray just how desperate they are, until Jensen shouts, “Alright! It won’t happen again. We got carried away. We will do better.”

If only their promise could undo the damage. “Next time you do this, I will explode the blood vessels in your head as punishment. Understood?”

The brothers nod their heads, and I relax my grip before looking at Van Helsing. “Do we know where Hecate is and if she’s coming with us?” A soft, whimsical voice answers my question. “I’m here. While these events are supremely unfortunate, I plan to come with you.”

I’ve become used to Hecate’s strange ways, so her impromptu arrival and announcement doesn’t surprise me. Sometimes she stays with us for extended periods of time, sometimes she disappears to her brothers, I assume in Athena. While she never divulges her secrets, I get the sense that she wasn’t pleased with her family, so she tried to create her own with us. Renfield gives us a pointed look. “What about—”

Hecate’s musical voice turns sharp as she cuts Renfield off. “Leave it and everything behind. We’ve wasted enough time as it is.”

Since I know the land best, I lead the group out of the castle into the darkness of the night, with Renfield close by my side. Even with the adrenaline rushing through me, it’s a struggle to keep my sadness at bay—for the home we’ve now needed to give up. It took us years to find the perfect place to call home. I remember the day Renfield found the castle and how I felt when she did. For the first time since our creation, I had felt hope. Like the years ahead of me could now have meaning. I know leaving

was the right choice, even if I wanted a different outcome. If we stay, we fight and create all the death I've been trying so hard to avoid.

Hecate stays close, occasionally lifting her hand to provide light. Thankfully, her magic is impervious to rain. The cobblestones are hard to navigate in normal scenarios. It's even harder to manage when you're running through the dark and rain.

Entering the forest, we're finally making headway until Hecate slips, entangling my gown with her feet, and takes me down with her. Between the rain and the overgrown forest path, we find ourselves covered in mud. Quickly standing up, I brush myself off and offer Hecate a hand. But we're too late. The hum I had been hearing grows louder, and I finally realize what it is. The mob is catching up to us faster than we expected. It seems like I'm not the only one that knows this land and all its secrets well.

Magic grows in Hecate's hands, and I whisper shout at her, "What are you doing?" She's always been the bravest amongst us, something I should have told her more often.

She responds with more fear in her eyes than I've ever seen, "The port is too far away, we need more time, and I'm trying to create it for us."

Oblivious to Renfields behavior during this exchange, I'm caught off guard as she shouts, "Stop!" to us all.

Turning towards Renfield, in one look, I know what she intends to do. My voice cracking, I tell her, "No. I won't allow it!"

Her eyes fill with love and determination. "Drusilla, you need to go now. Let them think it was me. Every spare moment I've had with you has been a blessing, and I wouldn't trade it for anything in the world. I've lived far beyond my allocated human

years. You have done more for me than I could ever repay. Let me do this for you.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:08 am

The rain continues to assault us as the light from the wooden torches becomes stronger. With a last glance at Renfield, I open my mouth to plead one last time. She shouts, “Go! Now, before it's too late!”

A Fresh Start

Circa 1600 BC, Hecate, the Greek Goddess of Witchcraft was adored by humans and worshiped frequently. But, as humanity evolved so did their beliefs.

While Hecate still received visitors at her temple in Athena, as the years passed, the frequency of visitors to her temple dwindled. Until eventually, only her brothers, the more well known Greek deities received the worship she had once received too.

Then one day, three human bloodlines appealed to her.

Their plea, tinged with desperation, touched something in her soul that she hadn't experienced for hundreds of years. So for the first time since she could remember, she listened to the prayers and took pity on the people offering them. Hecate granted these humans the power they craved, thinking that with the change for them, maybe it was time for a change for her too.

Along with the newly made Supernaturals, Hecate hoped to usher in a new era of power, one she could be an active participant in, instead of watching from the sidelines while someone else took all the glory.

But, with their unchanging appearance and superhuman abilities, humans struggled to accept the Supernaturals, and eventually they became more isolated from humanity

than they ever were before. Every few years, they moved around Europe and when they had nowhere left to go; they looked to the New World, America.

This time, when Drusilla, Amaya Van Helsing, Jensen Jekyll, Hadrian Hyde, and Hecate started over, they learned from their mistakes.

This time, they trusted no one with their Supernatural secret. This time, they built an empire and finally worked on becoming the kings they had always hoped to be.

The Four Families

The Harts

Ancestry

Hecate, the Greek goddess of witchcraft. Her descendants are magic-wielding humans.

Religious beliefs

They pray to Hecate and worship her as their Creator whilst honoring some old Greek traditions. Their beliefs are kept private because history has taught them what can happen when their abilities are discovered by humanity.

Head of family

Dominic Hart.

Business

Officially, they run a large fortune teller chain. Unofficially, they run a drug business

and influence world events in favor of the Supernatural. They are known as the Sorcerers.

The Rhodes

Ancestry

Jensen Jekyll and Hadrian Hyde. Their descendants can shift into any animal. They're naturally stronger in their human form with exceptional senses and extreme rage issues.

Religious beliefs

Neutral religious beliefs. They do give thanks to their ancestors at life events.

Head of family

Eric Rhodes.

Business

Officially, they're security contractors, which gives them the perfect front for their actual business—Supernatural bounty hunters. They are known as the Druids.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:08 am

The Vance's

Ancestry

Amaya Van Helsing aka Van Helsing the Monster Hunter. Her descendants have been granted super speed, strength, and fast healing ability. This does not make them immortal though.

Religious beliefs

In their early days, they were highly religious “warrior monks.” Now, their focus is gaining as much power amongst the humans and families as possible.

Head of family

Alyssa Vance.

Business

Officially, they're private investigator consultants. Their true business is assassins for hire, clientele being Supernatural and select humans. They are known as the Rogues.

The De Greer's

Ancestry

Drusilla aka Dracula. Her descendants are granted varying degrees of blood manipulation magic. Because blood powers everything they do, they need to drink a regular diet of human blood. They also have retractable claws and fangs and don't require a lot of sleep. They have a great sense of smell in relation to blood. While they're naturally gifted fighters, they prefer to rely on their negotiation skills instead.

Religious beliefs

They're deeply religious when it comes to their dead. They commune with them often and typically erect a shrine for their most recent dead.

Head of family

Gabriela De Greer.

Business

The nightclubs are a front for their money-laundering operation. They are known as the Undead.

The Human Faction

Ancestry

Founded by the families shortly after their arrival in the new world to continue their bloodlines. They also assist with supplying donors for the Undead.

Religious beliefs

None. But they have a worship-type mentality for anything Supernatural.

Head of Faction

Ryder.

Business

They were originally funded by the Supernatural families but have gone into sex work and become wealthy in their own right.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:08 am

Chapter 1 | Hot Right Now

Jude (Now)

If a hotel guest looked at me, they would see a well-dressed person who looked like she belonged here.

My custom designer dress is a beautiful gold and sage design with a matching bodice and a hint of black lace in the train that flares out behind me. The colors suit my tanned skin and chestnut hair, and the cut of the dress enhances the little curves I have. Ensuring the train of the dress is securely fastened around my finger, I flick my brown curls over my shoulder as I walk through the hotel lobby.

Because I'm nervous, I've overcompensated with my outfit, everything about me screams expensive. I need to look like I belong here, even if I don't feel like I do.

Stepping outside into a perfect summer's day, I secure my sunglasses with my free hand as I begin the walk towards the ceremony. I'm a fucking Rhodes, and I need to remember that. It's time I act like I own the place, because I probably do.

It's a beautiful day for a wedding in Arizona, and I take a moment to enjoy the greenery lining the path ahead of me. If I had my way, I would shift and explore everything this land offers. Especially since it's my first time here. But that's not the plan. I'm only here for the wedding, and tomorrow I can go back to my new life. Away from all of this. As it is, I'm cutting it close for the start of the wedding, and if

I'm late, Eric Rhodes won't like that.

The path winds down another bend as I follow the signs directing the guests to the Rhodes wedding, and I thank the Druids I wore sandals. Even if I'm Supernatural, this walk would have killed me in heels. It doesn't take much longer for me to see the ceremony set up in the distance, and my heart races with those damn nerves again. Attempting to center myself, I put one of those fake smiles on my face, the ones we use for people we don't like as I near the wedding guests. I've been gone for two years, so I should have expected the muttering to start when I made my dramatic appearance at this wedding.

When I got the wedding invite, I knew it wasn't a request. I was being informed that my attendance was required. When I evaluated my options, I knew if I didn't show face, Dad might cut me off financially, and since I still need his money, that was the lesser option of the two.

The invite said the theme was 'Fancy with a touch of green and gold,' and immediately I called in some favors from local designers to help me out. Because I knew, if you think you're being too over the top for a Rhodes wedding, add more. I'm pretty sure most of Chicago's local designers and some French labels have dressed this crowd. It looks more like the Met Gala than a wedding. Good to know that even if I'm out of practice, I've still got it.

Several wedding planners in their black uniforms scurry in between the guests, ushering everyone to take their seats. I have no idea where mine is or if it's first come first served. Figuring the back is where I will cause the least disruption, I grab a seat, hoping that no one demands I sit up front with the family.

Thankfully, it doesn't take the minister long to welcome us, and he's wearing a suit just like the other men here. It's an odd choice for a minister, but it fits the aesthetic. "Welcome esteemed guests to this beautiful day, celebrating Autumn and Parker. I'm

honored to bless their union before the eyes of the Lord. Love will always endure...”

It’s at that point that I zone out. Interesting that we’re going to keep it human today when more than half of the people here aren’t. If it was just the Druids, we would give thanks to the ones that came before us. We honor them at every milestone of our lives, and I wonder how my cousin got around that for today.

Inspecting the ceremony set up, I see each chair is covered with white material and a matching sage and gold bow tied around the back of the chair. A lot of this setup was riding on perfect weather, and that’s when I spot Dominic’s head in the crowd. The Sorcerers coming to our rescue with magical intervention makes sense.

My eyes follow the gold carpet up to the couple standing under the wooden arbor decorated with lilies and ivy. Those same plants are woven intricately through Autumn’s dark blonde hair with golden threads. They catch the sunlight amongst the several layers of tulle that make up her wedding dress. Not my style, but it works on her.

This is the wedding she always dreamed of. The one we spoke about when we were kids. We may not be close anymore, but even I can tell she looks happy. They move to their vows, and at that part, Parker chokes up before he says them.

“I, Parker, promise to love you, Autumn, for the rest of our lives and honor this bond between us.”

Cute. He really does love her going by this display of emotion, and I’m touched by the love I see shining in Autumn’s eyes. She feels the same.

After they’ve finished placing their rings on each other, the minister starts his closing passage before he says the words we’ve all been dying to hear.

“I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss your bride!”

Another wedding planner runs past, and I’m distracted, wondering what the issue could be. To me, it seems like this wedding is perfect. I know my father wouldn’t have accepted anything less than this. From my position, I can see his head in the front row, right next to my mothers. I can just imagine him radiating smugness at all the attention today will get him.

The wedding guests politely cheer as Autumn melts into Parker, and he kisses her a few seconds past what’s deemed appropriate. My ears pick up a few scandalized gasps, and I have to withhold my snort. Hypocrites. Even if they’re wearing their fancy hats so we can paint a picture of normalcy at this wedding, I know the truth. At least half of us shift into animals and have seen each other naked more times than we would like to admit.

One of the wedding planners shoves a bag of confetti into my hand, distracting me and answering my earlier question. That’s what was so urgent. Turning my attention back to the wedding party up front, I see another wedding planner in the corner, talking into her earpiece. Howmany do they have for this event?! That earpiece must mean she’s in charge, though. It’s always funny the things that give people power.

The minister signals for us to stand so we can welcome the newly married Mr. and Mrs. Rhodes. Following his instruction, we cheer for the happy couple and shower them with confetti as they walk towards the exit. Autumn startles as she notices me at the back, and I give her an awkward wave in response.

As the bridal party exits the ceremony area, I notice the mess that’s left behind on the gold carpet, covered with the crushed red rose petals. While it’s an odd choice for aesthetic, it makes an impact, and I will give them that.

The wedding planner with the earpiece, the one I think is in charge, starts ushering

the guests towards the reception area, and it's hard not to get my back up at the bossy tone in her voice. I wonder if she would behave the same way if she knew who I was. Her red hair is pulled back into such a tight bun; I wonder how she hasn't got a raging headache already.

"Please hurry along!" she tells us. "We need to get into position for the next part. We don't want to disappoint Mr. Rhodes." That's funny, you would think the couple would be her priority. Her lack of backbone irritates me, and I briefly entertain ripping her head off. But I went to school to find my humanity, amongst other things, and it will do no good for me to lose it now. These people are just doing their jobs, and they're just more scared of Eric Rhodes than they are of me.

When we get to the venue, the wedding planner tells us to find our names on the seating chart and get settled quickly before the bridal party is done with their photos. Raising my eyebrow, I say nothing as I search the seating chart. The reception hall overlooks a lake, and it's large enough to accommodate one hundred people easily.

I'm still amazed that Parker agreed to take the Rhodes name. Somehow, Eric Rhodes convinced him that this was a good idea, since apparently he can't trust his daughters to carry out the simple task of giving him male heirs. His words, not mine.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:08 am

It doesn't take me long to find my name right next to my family's, and I'm disappointed to see none of my sisters are here, especially since Lexie is a great buffer between me and Dad. But we're not sitting with the happy couple at the main table.

When Autumn's dad died, it left her with only a human parent and no one to guide her in the ways of the Druid, so Dad stepped in to help. A quick look at the main table shows that none of Autumn's remaining family is here, but it seems like Parker's are, and they're sitting at the main table instead. Interesting.

It's worth doing a quick scan to see who else got invited. Each Supernatural Family has six families in total, with one family leading the Supernatural Empire, and I expect an even distribution of presence from each family. We can't be seen playing favorites amongst the families after all.

Already, I know Dominic is here, and I need to catch up with him because it's been a while. Looking around for some other names, I see very few Undead are here and unless married into a Supernatural Family, there is no Human Faction. Ohhh, scandalous. I wish I knew why. Pity that Luca is not here, because I know she would fill me in on the gossip. But then I see his name is not on the list, and I can't decide if I'm relieved or disappointed.

Sighing and snagging a glass of champagne from the tray at the entrance, I brace myself for the polite falseness that I'm about to endure as I walk into the venue with my head held high. While I search for my allocated seat, I ignore the eyes on me. The inside of the venue is simpler than I expected, but there are fairy lights covering every surface. A quick glance at the cutlery tells me it's a designer label.

Pulling up the only available chair at the table next to my parents, I remind myself to stay calm. Dad only allowed me to go to university because Lexie stayed home to run the family business with him, but if I don't play it smart, he could revoke my attendance with only a moment's notice. And right now, I want freedom more than I want anything else.

"Mother, Father," I say in place of a greeting.

"Judith." Dad looks at my couture gown. Mom just glares at me and says nothing in response.

"Glad to see you've put your paws away for once, or have you moved on to wings now? You always were indecisive."

"Well, I was decisive enough to spend your money to get here, so clearly some things have changed. And you know I prefer Jude now."

It's not worth it, I remind myself. A fight with Dad will only ruin Autumn's big day, and I don't want that. No matter how much has changed between us. Luckily, a waiter comes to the rescue and places our starters on the table. I'm famished, and the beef carpaccio with parmesan shavings looks delicious.

Digging into my meal gives me something else to focus on while I decide on the safest way to interact. When I'm done eating, I look up to find Dad's eyes on me, so I meet him head on. He prefers directness, as he believes it "shows character". So I humor him for a moment and make polite conversation.

"Where's Lexie and Brooklyn? I thought they would be here."

Dad inhales with a sharp breath, like I asked the wrong thing, and here I thought I was picking a safe subject. A quick scan around the table tells me why. When we

have gossips like Zac at the table, we have to choose our words carefully before the whole Supernatural community knows about our business.

“We decided Brooklyn should focus on her studies. She has an important exam coming up, and Lexie stayed behind to keep the business running. Not everyone has the luxury to gallivant and do what they want with all expenses paid.” He raises his glass, a suave smile on his face—for the table, not me.

Ignoring his passive aggressive jab, I know what he really means. He decided. Our family wasn't a democracy the last time I checked. Before I can respond with a jab of my own, the newlywed couple enters the room, and we all stand to cheer for them. Parker and Autumn make their way to their table, and the MC welcomes us with his opening speech. When he's done, the chatter increases in the hall again with some upbeat background music to maintain the mood.

Excusing myself from the table, I make my way to the open bar because I need something stronger if I'm going to get through this evening without losing my temper. While I wait for my drink, another guy joins me at the bar and gives my outfit a once over. A sniff tells me he's human and on any other night, I would have enjoyed the challenge of flirting with him. But not right now. Too many Druids are here and if he pisses the wrong one off for sleeping with their leader's daughter, his death will be on my conscience, and I have enough of those.

Abandoning any hope of getting laid tonight, I make my way back to the table with my prized drink in hand and eager for the next course so I can get this evening over with. Maybe I should go search for Dominic next? I've shown enough face with the family.

My moment of solitude is over before it even begins as Dad slides into the chair next to me. Bracing myself for whatever insult he has prepared, I'm ready to defend myself until I see his face.

All of my earlier frustrations are put to the side for now as my eyebrows knit together in concern as I take Dad's arm. "Dad? What's wrong?"

He looks like he's seen a ghost as he tells me, "That was a call from security at home. They found Lexie with a silver knife in her chest. She's dead."

Chapter 2 | The Druids

Jude

"What do you mean, Lexie is dead?" My voice goes up an octave as the hysteria bubbles in my chest. Dad flinches at my tone before he hisses at me. "Keep your voice down! We don't want someone to overhear this."

Turning from him, I hastily grab my drink to give me something to do while I gather my thoughts. It also helps me try to cover the disgust I feel for my father when he behaves like this. I knew coming back wasn't going to be easy. But never in my wildest dreams did I expect this. Silence fills the space between us as we try to figure out what to say. Watching the table of guests in front of us laugh, I realize I'm jealous of them. Their worlds haven't been ripped apart like ours just has, and I envy them for that.

Dad's right, as much as I hate to admit it. This isn't the place to have this out. Even with the loud pop music blaring through the venue, we're still surrounded by Supernatural ears. Clearing his throat, Dad tries to cover the distance between us as he shares more information. "Security found her with a silver knife in her chest. You know none of us can come back from that." His voice wavers at that point, and it's the only hint of emotion he shows at the news of his eldest daughter's death.

It's real.

My tears threaten to fall at that point, and it feels like I'm making a superhuman effort to keep my emotions under control. Again, I remind myself this isn't the place as Dad pats my back awkwardly. Looking up at him, I search his hazel eyes, so much like mine, as I look for something, anything, to show he's as upset as I am. To show me I'm not alone in my grief. But I find...nothing.

Okay, so we need to carry on and pretend like nothing is wrong until we have some privacy, and if we leave now, it will attract too much attention, something we don't want yet.

I had hoped, as the head of our family, Dad would take control, but he's more concerned with appearances than creating a sound strategy to manage this crisis. Grabbing the programme, I try to see how much of the evening is left, but it's one big blur.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:08 am

What was the last thing I said to Lexie?

My blood roars in my ears, and my breathing picks up. Dad grabs my arm, and I wince from his strength. “You need to pull yourself together, Jude. Now is not the place.” Nodding to show I’ve heard him, I try to calm my breathing. I’m sure this is what a panic attack feels like. Lexie and I weren’t exactly close anymore. Two years apart does that to a relationship, but she’s still my big sister—was.

I think the last time we spoke, I told her about an exam I had aced, economics I think, and she was proud of me.

“Despite what you may think, I care more about my heirs than you realize. But no one can know about Lexie yet. Not until we know what we’re up against and if there is a larger threat at play.”

This time, I can’t help it, and my lip curls with disgust as I glare at him before I turn to scan the venue and look for Mom. Things have been strained between us in the past, but we should be able to put that aside for one night as we try to deal with this as a family. Dad sees my search and quickly deduces who I’m looking for. “Your mother was...upset. I told her to go to our room to collect herself while you and I maintain appearances here.”

Whipping my head back around to look at Dad, I pin my glare on him. “Your daughter—the heir to your empire—was murdered, and all you care about is appearances?” Dad’s jaw flexes as he lifts his whisky to his lips and takes a steady drink.

“Have you even considered Brooklyn and how she’s going to react to this? Or how you can support her in her grief? Because she will be devastated. Lexie was her everything.” Seeing I’ve hit a nerve, I back down for a second as Dad takes another sip of his drink.

Thank the Druids, Beau is with Brooklyn. He can help soften the blow, because I definitely can’t rely on Mom and Dad to do that. Beau has been there for all of us growing up, and while I would never admit this out loud, he’s been a better parent to us than our own.

“Do I even want to know what jobs you’re running now? Lexie can handle herself just fine, so either you’re in way over your head or you fucked up by leaving her without backup.”

Dad’s nostrils flare with displeasure at my audacity at questioning his authority. "This is not the place to discuss...business."

My eyebrows shoot into my hairline, and I’m ready to start a fight with him right now for calling his heirsbusiness, when out of the corner of myeye, I see the people from our table making their way back to us from the dance floor. Dad sees this too, and his voice becomes urgent.

"If you want to go back to that university, you’ll stay until the main course—and by stay, I mean behave." He raises his glass to signal a waiter for a refill, but his sharp gaze never leaves mine. “I will train Brooklyn up as heir and leave you alone. I won’t force you to take over, and we both know I could.”

The waiter sets a fresh glass full of amber liquid onto the plush sage tablecloth in front of Dad and disappears into the crowd. Staring at his new whisky, his jaw flexes as he says, “We can contain the situation. I know we can.”

Exhaustion overwhelms me, and I just want to get this over with. “Sounds like you’re trying to convince yourself, Dad.” Sighing, I tell him, “Let me think about it.” Dad expected me to jump at the offer to get away from our family and this world again, exactly like I did last time, but with his drink frozen halfway to his mouth, I can see I’ve caught him off guard. Only the slight nod he gives me confirms he’s heard what I said, and he accepts it.

We both put on our masks of politeness as the other guests join the table, and we jump into socializing. My personal thoughts on the matter aside, I understand Dad’s concerns in a way. The balance between families is delicate, not only within an empire, but across them too. One wrong move or misinterpretation leads to blood. As the most powerful family, the Rhodes have more protection than most, but with Lexie gone...that changes things. I may have been gone for a while, but the rules between our families haven’t changed. They rarely do.

I compliment one of the Druids, who is successful with recent business transactions for our empire, but I forget her name. Dad’s lip tugs at the corner. Not quite pride, but his version of it. Maybe I can just ignore it and pretend it never happened. Like how we’re pretending Lexie isn’t dead.

I mechanically eat the food the waiter sets in front of me as my brain blocks out the sounds of the wedding around me. The numbness gives me a moment’s peace in my sea of grief. Briefly, I register roast beef and potatoes au gratin, one of my favorite meals, but it tastes like cardboard to me tonight. Once our mains are cleared away, I lean back in my seat and take a long hard look at Dad, trying to weigh up the decision in front of me.

Eric Rhodes cuts an impressive six foot figure in his black tux. I know it’s expensive, because he wouldn’t accept anything less than the best. Even seated, he still towers over the rest of us, and I inherited a lot of my darker coloring from him. The biggest difference, though, is the obvious beard he has, and his hair has streaks of gray.

But that doesn't stop the looks he gets from a woman, and judging by the looks he's gotten tonight that hasn't changed either. Even if I'm convinced they love the idea of his power more than anything else.

I've always known he wanted sons and was bitterly disappointed that he had none. Now, we're only a means to further his line. Bile stings at the back of my throat as tears threaten to overwhelm me again. He is the definition of a monster to me. He catches me staring at him, and I excuse myself to make my way back to the bar.

Using the opportunity to collect myself, I order a strong drink from the barman as I catch my reflection in the glass paneling of the shelves. My grief is obvious in my eyes, and I wonder how no one else can see it. Noticing Zac's approach in the mirror, I brace myself for him.

Tapping me on the shoulder, like I didn't just make eye contact with him as he approached, I remind myself that taking my frustrations out on him won't help. Putting my false smile into place again, I hope I appear friendly as I turn to face him.

"Tired of us already?" Zac says. "One would think a two-year break was enough."

Raising one eyebrow, I look him up and down slowly so he knows how displeased I am with his question as I take in his cheap suit. He tried to flirt with me a few years ago and never got it right, so since then, he's been a constant thorn in my side. But he is the perfect person to help me see out an idea that just came to me.

"You're not quite rid of me yet, Zac. I've got an early flight back to Chicago."

Intrigued, he bites. "Oh, yes. I forgot you've run off to school. We can't all be cut out for this life, can we?"

Flipping my hair, I refuse to let him see how much those words anger me. I respond,

“Actually, I'm flying out to pack my things. I'm moving back.”

It's at this point where I've reached my limit with this evening, and I'm ready to get out of here. I can't do it anymore. That includes Zac and his mousy appearance and nosy behavior. Blowing a kiss at him, I leave the venue with my full drink sitting at the bar. If I know him, and I do, the whole venue will know this news by the end of the evening, as if I announced it to the room myself. Dad will find out eventually, but it's good to keep the old man on his toes.

Striding out of the reception hall as fast as I can, someone calls out to me. It's Autumn sneaking a cigarette in the shadow of an alcove. “I thought you quit?” I question the first thing we've said to each other in I don't know how long. She looks sheepish for a moment as she realizes she's been caught.

“I did, but I still indulge in the occasional social cigarette on days like today. But even then, I try to avoid overdoing it, nowhere near the two boxes a day like I used to. Anyway, that's not important. Are you okay? You came storming out like something was bothering you?”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:08 am

I hesitate. This would be the perfect way for us to bridge that gap between us. It's been there for far too long. She and I fell out because she loves her life, the life we were both born into, and she didn't understand why I didn't. Especially after how my dad was there for her growing up.

It's tempting to tell her about Lexie. She was Autumn's cousin, too. Despite all the hurt feelings and mess between us, I still want to protect her. So I don't tell her anything yet. We can argue about that some other time, but I won't be the person to tell her this bad news on her wedding day. She deserves one more day of happiness before it all goes to shit. So I just tell her I need to get back to Chicago and swiftly make my way to my room.

Letting myself into the room with my keycard, I flop onto the bed and revel in the silence of my room as everything that's happened races through my head.

Leaning over my bed and grabbing my phone, I message Luca. She's still my best friend, and she needs to know what's happened because it's going to affect her, too. With my message sent, I lay back on my bed, staring at the ceiling. That's when the tears for Lexie finally fall. And it's a long time before they stop.

Chapter 3 | LBD

Luca

When I took over the running of Tao, the best nightclub in Chicago and our family business, I imagined networking with celebs, parties, and growing our brand. Instead, it's been mountains of paperwork. If it's not inventory, or staff rosters, it's balancing

books and paying people off. This isn't exactly the dream I had in mind.

Stretching my neck from side to side, I get up from my desk chair and pace my office. The faint bass from the music of the nightclub pulses under my feet as I roll my shoulders back and try to refocus. I fought for the chance to prove I could run Tao, and I got it. I can't give up the moment things get hard.

My frustration about the waste of an outfit surfaces, and I try to ignore it. Even if I spent hours putting this look together, from my perfectly done makeup, to my lace bodysuit, to the black miniskirt with slits. Now, my heels are laying next to my chair with my oversized blazer thrown over the back of it while I try to finish the accounting.

Exhaling hard, I make to run my fingers through my straight dark hair, forgetting I slicked it back tonight. I love the look of a sleek high pony; it accentuates my naturally tan skin and sculpted cheekbones. Except, no one will see that tonight because I'm sitting at my desk instead of socializing, where I belong. Checking the monitors on my desk, I see people cheering each other in the VIP section, and a pang of longing goes through me. I should be there with them, not in the office. But if I don't do this, I will prove everyone right that I'm just a party girl, and I refuse to give anyone that satisfaction.

It helps knowing that my hard work has paid off because tonight we hit a record turnover. That's why there is so much celebrating inside the club, and since I can't join it, I sent Amelia a text to let her know the good news. My phone vibrates, and I reach over to see her response of congratulations.

"Well done babe! I'm so proud of you!"

The grin on my face is telling, I'm sure anyone can see how I feel about Amelia. She was the first person I told about our earnings tonight. Mom doesn't even know yet, a

fact she would be pissed about if she knew. I will never forget the first time I saw Amelia, when she came in asking for a job.

I was sitting at the bar finalizing a staff roster when Amelia walked in and threw her resume on the counter and insisted I should hire her. It was a pretty bold strategy, so I was intrigued. Looking up from my paperwork, I inspected her before I responded. “Tell me why I should hire you, even if we’re not looking right now?”

She rattled off a list of reasons as I paged through her resume, which was light on the work experience we usually required. I could see she had a hard life that much was obvious. But despite those signs she still had a fighting spirit, which was what I couldn’t ignore. Her reasons for being hired didn’t matter because I’m pretty sure she was lying about them all.

Holding my hand up to pause her mid sentence, I told her, “Go to Silva back there, she’ll get you set up. We’ll see how you do on a trial basis and take it from there.” She looked taken aback by my easy acceptance and cautiously said, “I thought you were going to tell me no. What convinced you?” Looking her straight in those beautiful emerald green eyes, I responded, “I would much rather be known as a business that looks after their staff than looks the other way. Respect and kindness do far more for loyalty than most people realize.”

Trying to wipe the giddy smile off my face, I put my phone down and get back to work. The sooner I can get this done, the sooner I can get out of here and join what’s left of the party. As if they’ve got a mind of their own, my eyes wander back to the statement picture wall. It’s covered in the photos Mom and Dad took with every big celebrity through the years. Soon, I’ll add my pictures to that wall.

Growing up as a child in the nightlife business was an interesting parenting choice. I’m not complaining because I loved it, and I’ve got some of the best memories from it. Whether it was napping in my parents’ office, sitting with the chefs in the kitchen,

or our financial manager helping me with my homework, I've done it all.

It was only when I became older that I started realizing how exceptionally good at this my parents were, and that raising your child in a nightclub was less than traditional choice. When I asked my parents about it, Dad, with his chest out proud, told me, "We didn't have a child for someone else to raise. So we got creative and combined our worlds."

All Supernatural Families know that our blood breeds true, even with a human as part of the equation. But I've always wondered if Dad felt like he had more to prove being the only human in our household. Being from the Human Faction meant he clawed his way up to the top to be with mom, and he never stopped working until the day he died. It's probably where I got it from.

I run my hand over the mahogany desk that I had custom made by a local designer. It's the only newer piece in the office that I allowed myself. Everything else is older furnishing from when this used to be my parents' office, from the maroon tiles, to the statement wall with the neon lights spelling 'Tao' and the photos framing it, as well as the plush carpet I wiggle my toes in.

To the outside world, Tao looks like a standard restaurant and nightclub, and while it absolutely is, for the Supernatural, it also caters to a few more things. Like, the money laundering option that moves all families' money. Or the blood donor section that keeps the Undead fed. Our other nightclubs are on a much smaller scale and usually only have one or two of these elements. They haven't been combined like we've done with Tao.

I had a rocky start, but now that I've gotten it figured out, Tao is flourishing under my leadership. There was a time I doubted I could do this on my own and plenty of late nights I spent crying down the phone to Amelia as I was flooded with paperwork and politics. Now that doubt is replaced with pride because I can do this. I've proven

it.

Well, I couldn't have done it without Silva. Our family owes a lot to her. She's been with us since before I can remember, and while technically she's an employee, she's family, too. I know she would have done this work if I asked her to, but she's better at the money laundering side, and Silva and I always agreed to play to our strengths instead of trying to do everything.

I'm better at understanding what people want and how to convert that into a profit, where Silva is better at making sure people remain happy, especially when they don't want others to know what they're up to.

Grabbing my phone again, I do a quick check on social media, especially after the influencer's appearance, and the results are even better than I could have hoped for. Based on the hashtags I'm seeing, there is a line around the block to get into the club part of Tao. Also, we're trending. While the wins are great, Tao isn't mine yet. There is still work to do. Another knock at the door sounds, and I tell them to come in. Not looking up from my laptop, I immediately know it's Amelia from the familiar passion fruit scent that wafts my way. I will always know when it's her.

Looking up, I see her leaning against the door frame, giving me one of her signature sultry looks, and my heart skips a beat. My eyes don't leave her delicious curves, which fill the waitress uniform she wears perfectly. It's a sleeveless black cotton romper, with a diamante collar. She helped me design it, mulling over the ideas to find the right blend of stylish, with practicality, like, pockets, or buttons instead of a zipper.

Her nose scrunches at the mountain of paperwork before me as she scolds, "You're working too hard again, and I know you forgot to eat and drink." Entering my office and moving towards my fridge, she bends over and takes a bottle of blood from her apron, and I lean over, checking out the view. I wonder what she would look like

with less on, preferably sauntering towards me...

Why am I acting like a hormonal teenager?

When she straightens, I hastily sit upright and watch as she approaches me. Not noticing the tumbler in her free hand till now, with the glass sweating on the side. “Greygoose, two shots, with only a splash of lime with your tonic. To take the edge off.” I don’t miss the double meaning of Amelia’s words.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:08 am

Biting her lip and tucking her hair behind her ear, I'm overcome with the desire to run my fingers through it. She has the most beautiful waves init, and I want to know what it feels like. But it's those eyes that stand out against her porcelain skin and her plump pink lips that really captivate me.

Clearing my throat, I look for something to say, except I see Amelia distracted by something, those lips gaping open slightly. And I follow her gaze to see her staring at the suspenders peeking out of my skirt slit. Maybe this outfit wouldn't go to waste after all...

Looking up at me with those beautiful green, distinctively curved, round eyes of hers, she breaks the spell, and randomly asks, "Why have you never wanted to drink from me?"

Taken aback at this question, I consider my answer. There are so many lines we haven't crossed yet that this one didn't even come to mind. Amelia moves behind my chair and starts massaging my tense shoulders, and I groan, feeling more than relief from the tension in my shoulders.

Sighing, I explain, "I don't know if I could control myself if I drank your blood. Wanting so much from you is a dangerous line for me to tread with control."

The warmth of her hands disappears as one of them brushes my hand on the desk, and my heart jumps again. It's hard to play it cool when she's so close to me. I'm not sure what's worse, wanting someone who feels the way she does and not being able to have her, or these forbidden feelings.

Her back to me, she pointedly asks, “I take it you haven’t spoken to your mom about us then?” It sounds more like a statement than a question because we both know the truth. Just like that, the moment is over as I try to withhold a different groan, this time one of frustration.

I care about Amelia so much. But she wants something I can’t give her.

It’s why we’re in this weird place. Wanting each other, sharing each other's lives but neverreallybeing together. Giving her a sadsmile, I let her know the answer hasn’t changed. How can I do so well with Tao but continuously fail her? Her jaw clenches as I watch her try to rein in her anger.

“I thought if I gave you time to find a way for us to be together, you would figure it out. But I’m kidding myself, aren’t I?” Her voice is like ice.

Standing up, I’m desperate to make her understand, but with any attempt I make to get closer to her; she flinches. I say with all the compassion I can muster, “You know the rules, Amelia. You’re not from the Human Faction, so I could never be with you. Just the fact that you know the truth about me puts you in danger. You know what my family expects of me. And while I’m not exactly thrilled, I’ve made my peace with it. I am all that stands between my family losing their empire, and I can’t–won’t let that happen.”

Amelia looks away, and I know she’s trying to keep her tears of frustration from forming. I feel like absolute shit for doing this to her, and if I could change it, I would. But I can’t. Leaning over, she kisses me on the cheek, and I catch a hint of that passion fruit scent again, before she tells me goodbye. This time, it feels permanent as she walks out the door, and I don’t stop her. Like a coward.

I hate myself for what I do to her, and I’m scared of the idea of not having her in my life. But I don’t have time to ponder this further as my phone chimes with another

text, this time from Jude.

“Lexie’s dead. I’m coming home permanently. Keep an eye out, you could be in danger too. I will talk to you as soon as I can.”

Chapter 4 | The Undead

Luca

My frustration over the disagreement with Amelia becomes second priority after reading the text from Jude. You don’t just send someone a text going, “Hey, my sister is dead, but we’ll catch up later,” thinking that they’ll just leave it there. Of course I’m going to call her. She’s my best friend. I don’t know why she expects anything less from me.

Tapping my foot impatiently, I dial her number, and she sends me to voicemail almost immediately. Reminding myself that getting annoyed is not going to achieve anything, I try to call her again. I’ll call her as many times as I need to until she answers her damn phone. She sends me to voicemail again, and staring at the blank screen, I’m at a loss on what to do when another text chimes.

“I’m sorry L...I don’t know if I can yet. Saying it out loud makes it real.”

Jude’s talking, so I can work with that. My thumbs fly across the screen as I type out my reply.

“Are you still at the wedding? Do you want me to come to you?”

“No, there’s no point. I’ll be back in Chicago soon. I’ll fill you in on everything when I see you.”

When she shuts me out like that, I know that no amount of coaxing on my end will get her to talk before she's ready to. Staring at the screen until it goes black, my mind races over the news. Lexie's dead...shit.

I know it's best to not jump to conclusions before I know all the facts, but in our line of work, death usually means murder. It's so similar to what happened to Dad, and I don't know if I'm shocked, worried, or a combination. One thing is for sure; I'm hesitant to tell Mom about it, even if she needs to know.

It's just like Jude to leave us midway through a scandal and to return that way, too. I remember when she had just come of age according to Druid traditions and completed her first assignment. There were talks of her needing to find her place amongst the family empire. There were even some rumors of how she was more powerful than Lexie and the rightful heir, even if she wasn't the firstborn.

Instead of taking her place, though, she left. And few people know why. I know it's because of Sebastian, but that's something we keep to ourselves. The families are allowed to have fun together, as long as it doesn't get serious, and they broke that rule. If there is one thing all the families agree on, it's that power should remain equally divided. Two families uniting doesn't honor that agreement and could lead to war amongst the empires. While a little bloodshed hurts no one, it would attract the attention of the humans, and that's something we want to avoid at all costs.

I'm one of the few people Jude kept in contact with after she went to school, and we've remained close despite the distance. At school, there were still rules she had to follow, but compared to the heartbreak she faced at home, there, she felt free. Even I could admit how much happier she sounded away from all of this. But now, that's changed, and it looks like she's being forced back home.

Sighing, I grab my phone and car keys so I can make my way home and speak to Mom because this is a conversation that's better had face to face. I can manage the

fall out that way. We need to figure out how this will affect the Undead, and I will start work a bit earlier tomorrow to make up for this evening being cut short.

Leaving my office takes me into the center of the club, and even if things are tense right now, I will never get over the joy I feel walking through this place. It's something about the combination of neon lights, thumping music, and sleek gothic decor that feels like home to me. The chaotic atmosphere might be an overload to the senses for most, but for me, I find it soothing.

Tonight's theme for the dancers in the club is "sexy luxury" so their props are items like martini glasses, lace outfits, and matching pearls. I stay well out of their way so that my outfit doesn't get splashed during their routine. Passing the cordoned off VIP section, I feel a small pang of longing because I had hoped to end up there with Amelia this evening.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:08 am

Waving at a staff member I pass, I paste a smile on my face. I may be worried, but they don't need to know that. Happy staff means happy clients, and I intend to keep it that way. Exiting the club via the staff entrance, I find my car where I left it parked out back. Sliding into it, I quickly shoot off another text, this time to Amelia. I'm not happy with how we left things, and we can never seem to catch a break.

If this thing with Lexie wasn't happening, I would track Amelia down so we could finish this once and for all. But as the heir to the Undead Empire, sometimes, the needs of our people outweigh my own. It's something I'm still learning how to deal with.

With my headlights illuminating the road in front of me, I'm thankful I don't have a long drive home because we're the only family that opted out of normal estate living. Instead, we went with a penthouse apartment close to Tao because of our long working hours.

It's more convenient than driving to an estate outside of town in the early hours of the morning after a sixteen hour shift. My thoughts are interrupted with a call, and answering with my bluetooth connection, I'm hoping it's Amelia even if she only ever texts. "I'm so glad you called," I say in place of a greeting.

A confused male voice responds to me, "Really? You were expecting a call from me?" Trying to cover my embarrassment, I wave it off. "Sorry Dom, I was waiting for a call from someone else. What's up?"

"The twins just let me know we're out of blood for spells. What are the chances you could help us out with some more? We've tested variations of plasma and

hemoglobin from other Supernaturals and humans, but yours seems to yield the strongest results.”

Turning on the indicator, I realize he can’t see my face, so I respond. “Sure, Dom, but I’m going to need more than a day. I take it you haven’t heard about Lexie yet?” I’ve known Dom long enough to know when he’s been caught off guard, which doesn’t happen often.

“I’m actually at the airport coming back from Autumn’s wedding. What did I miss?” Sadness tinges my voice for my friends. “Lexie’s dead, Dom. While I don’t know for sure, I assume it’s murder, like with what happened to my dad. I’m on my way home to figure it out with my mom, and you should do the same with the twins. I’ll keep you posted if I hear anything.” Thanking me, we end the call, making plans to meet in a few days when things have settled.

What would anyone have to gain from murdering Lexie...Upsetting the balance between the families? Surely that’s not enough of a motive? Especially since us kids have always gotten on better than our parents. But now that’s all gone to shit because Eric Rhodes is going to want answers for someone coming after his heir, and he does not take threats lightly. He also has the resources to make that happen. Has anyone thought about what would happen if the humans found out about us if Eric gets his way with revenge? I can imagine it’s going to be violent.

Shit...

My dad used to tell me bedtime stories of the horrible things that happened when the humans found out about us. While it was scary to hear, it served its purpose and taught me to keep my true nature a closely guarded secret from those who didn’t know.

The Salem and Bamberg Witch Trials, the crusades, the conflict between the

Protestants and the Catholics were all a result of humans finding out about us. Now, we know better, so we keep to ourselves instead. Imagine if they found out about us now with the tech in the world? We could be wiped out. Humans always fear what they don't understand.

Pulling up to our building block, I park underground and call the elevator to take me up to the top floor. It's surprising to most that I still live at home. I could afford to move out; I just don't see the point. It will be mine one day anyway, and we have the space.

Walking into our penthouse, the Chicago skyline greets me through the wall of glass, separating the living area from the high-rise balcony. Yellow and red lights twinkle from black buildings against a twilight sky. There is a function to darken the wall of glass to give us privacy, but tonight it seems we're going without that. It's not like anyone can see us from up here, anyway. Each family has a myth about them, and a part of ours says that we can't stand to be in the sunlight. It's one reason I love living here. If anyone were to hunt for us, this would be the last place they would look.

Calling out for my mom, I head straight for the fridge. Even though Amelia tried to help me, I still forgot to eat, just like she predicted I would. Mentally, I chastise myself because I know better. It's absolutely crucial for the Undead to keep a healthy diet of human blood at all times. Grabbing a bottle out of the fridge, my fangs snap out in excitement, more confirmation I need to eat, and I down a bottle of blood.

Turning, I find Mom standing behind me. She was completely silent in her approach, and I try to not let her see how much that unnerves me. She's smaller in stature than me, if that was even possible, with the same olive complexion. Except, where I'm dressed, she's still in her sweats, and it looks like she hasn't showered in three days. Smells like it too.

Pressing my lips together, I try to remain calm, because I know how delicate she's

become, yet I can't help but feel a bit frustrated with having to become the parent in this scenario. Mom glares at me, a glimmer of the leader she once was with her voice harsh. "Why did I just get a resignation from Amelia? She was our top earning waitress. Did you have something to do with this?"

Startled by the news, I grab another bottle of blood from the fridge and hand it to her. I don't even bother asking her if she's hungry, or when she last ate, and when she downs the bottle's contents, I know I was right. Turning to grab myself one of the pre-made sandwiches we keep on hand, I try to change the subject, but she beats me to it.

"Also, Ryder called. He's got some great candidates at the Human Faction for you to inspect if you've given the marriage any further thought?" Placing my hand on my hip with my sandwich in the other hand, I try not to let my irritation take over. "Mom, seriously, we have other more important things to worry about. Lexie's dead."

Mom's body automatically tenses, and she drops her bottle of empty blood. The plastic clangs against the tiles amongst the silence of my statement, and her eyes go wide. Belatedly, I realized I could have handled this with way more finesse, and I prepare myself for the potential fallout.

Bracing myself, I expect some type of outburst from Mom, but she says nothing. Instead, she turns and goes to the sofa and grabs the remote and puts on some trash TV show as she plops on the couch. Counting to ten in my head, I remind myself that losing my temper won't help me. I bend down and grab the bottle of empty blood and put it in the sink while I wipe away the blood marks it left behind. Walking towards the couch where Mom is, I spare a moment for Dad's shrine. It's a beautiful onyx carving with candles, his image, and a few precious stones and flowers when we have the time to switch out the dead ones.

Dad wasn't Undead like we are, so technically he didn't need the shrine. But he

honored our ways as if he was one, so it feels disrespectful to his memory to not give him this. Sometimes, I imagine what he would do in moments like this, and I know he would choose compassion. He would say, “Luca, my sweetheart, be kind to your mother. She’s still sad and misses me.”

Or maybe he would say something like, “This reminds her too much of how she found me when I was murdered. Be gentle with how you approach this topic.”

One of the Undead thought it would be a way to weaken our family, so they targeted Dad. While we dealt out our form of justice, Mom still hasn’t been able to move on. Who would have thought that a little old human would tame the fierce Gabriela De Greer and end up breaking her when he left way before his time? Digging deep, I walk over to my mom and grab the remote from her, putting the TV on mute.

“Mom, I need you to take this seriously. The Undead can’t get caught in the crossfire of Eric’s revenge schemes. We need a plan.” She stares at the quiet TV and says nothing, so I try my plea from another angle.

“Please Mom. I haven’t forgotten about our deal. I will further our line and expand our family when the time comes, but I need your help. Jude always told me Lexie was Eric’s favorite child, and the Druids don’t take well to being made to look weak. There is going to be violence, and even if I’m Jude’s best friend, it won’t mean I get special treatment.”

Mom looks at me, searching for something in my face before she responds. I don’t know why, but her eyes seem clearer than they have been in a while as does her voice when she speaks.

“How long has it been since it happened?”

It’s an odd question, but she’s speaking and working with me, so I’ll take it. I let her

know I'm not sure, but I got the idea it was recent from Jude's text. Mom goes silent again before she responds. "What do you need me to do? I'm sorry Luca, I haven't been present for you since your father...I am going to try harder, I promise."

Chapter 5 | It's Complicated

Sebastian

“Status update?”

You would never know Alyssa Vance is waiting for an update on a murder assignment. Leaning into her wingback office chair, she looks every bit the respectable business owner while she waits for my answer.

Mom couldn't even let me wash the blood off my face first. I don't know what was so special about this assignment that required me to rush to her study urgently, but I'm about to find out. With my hands clasped behind my back, mimicking the style of a soldier, I try to remain neutral as I deliver her report.

“Both targets are dead, made to look like a murder suicide exactly as instructed. It was messier than I would have liked,” I motion towards the blood splatters on my face, “but no one will suspect we were involved.” It's difficult to get a read on Alyssa as I finish my report, and she leans over her desk to make notes; the pen scratching away on the paper is the only sound in her study. I've always found it odd that we leave so much evidence of our assignments lying around, considering we go out of our way to make sure there is none in a crime scene. But I don't make the rules; I just follow them.

For years, I pushed myself hard in my Rogue training because I wanted to make Mom proud of me. The innocent boy I once was would have lived and died by her approval, until I learned that I was wasting my time waiting for something that would never happen. I also wanted to be a good Rogue, like our ancestors were, but it was never enough. While Alyssa expected greatness from me, I wasn't allowed to surpass

her greatness. I needed to show just enough to keep her happy, but not too much. Because nothing or no one could be better than her.

Mom hasn't changed her study much over the years. It still looks the same from when I was here the last time, and that was a while ago. It's a large space, with a few ugly art pieces on the wall behind Mom's head. But if you listen to her explain it, they're "priceless art pieces". Mom tries to play up the wealth we're surrounded by with priceless artifacts and furnishings. But she's not fooling me. Wealth doesn't cover up the disgusting person she really is inside.

I fucking hate it here. It holds nothing but bad memories for me and reminds me of a dark and gloomy dungeon. Like the time I had to deliver my first status update; I'd been assigned a decapitation, and it was my first assignment on my own. But, I struggled. After hacking away at it, and finally working out how to cut between the vertebrae even though I understood the theory behind it...I threw up right next to the body. Word got back to Mom, so she assigned nothing but decapitation assignments to me for the next month until she was sure I'd got over it, and she wouldn't face embarrassment like that again. Decapitation is not as easy as the movies make it seem, even with our extra strength. Now I've done it so much that it's become a bit of a trademark, and I feel nothing when I do it.

This shit hole is also where Mom confronted me about Jude's declaration of love, and where I decided I needed to end things. Protecting Jude from Alyssa Vance was more important than what I felt for her at that moment. A knock interrupts us, and Mom beckons for the person to enter. It's Logan with more of those stupid files in her hands.

Logan's eyes flick between us quickly, before ignoring me and relaying her message to Mom, "Here are the files you asked for Mrs. Vance. Ryder called. The Human Faction has business to discuss with you. But more urgently, Mr. Vance is looking for you."

Mom doesn't look up at Logan as she delivers her message. She continues looking through the files on her desk while holding out her free hand to take the additional files from Logan. "Thank you, Logan, that will be all."

I don't move. Mom may have dismissed Logan, but she hasn't dismissed me. It's only a quick glimpse from Logan that lets me know how relieved she is to see I'm okay. This assignment was dangerous, so it's nice to know that someone would have missed me if I didn't make it. Grabbing her phone, Mom dials and waits for the person on the other end to answer. She doesn't bother with small talk. "David? Yes. I'm busy with our son. Is this more important—" Dad's deep voice rumbles incoherently on the other end. "Ok. I'll take care of it."

Mom taps the screen, ending the call, and she takes her glasses off and rubs her temples in annoyance. I've seen Alyssa Vance hack a man apart with only a small knife to help her and not be bothered by it. But something in this news has done that instead. Despite this, she still paints a picture of elegance, and if you didn't know the signs, you would never know something was wrong.

"Earlier this evening, your father was summoned to the Rhodes Estate. We didn't have much choice, considering it was Eric Rhodes calling himself. Your father was now confirming the reason for the summoning, Lexie Rhodes was murdered. Apparently, while we were all at Autumn Rhodes' wedding and were none the wiser about it."

Mom just casually talks about Lexie's murder like an inconvenience, and it's getting harder to maintain my neutral stance, especially when anything to do with Jude gets mentioned. Mom inspects me with that unnerving gaze of hers again. "You've done well for yourself, Sebastian, and you're the very definition of what it means to be an excellent Rogue. Though, really, I expect nothing less from a son of mine."

When other children were scraping their knees and getting a kiss to make it better, my

mom was teaching me to be tough. Her definition included all the ways to murder someone, in the quickest and most efficient manner possible. To withstand physical pain and not run from it. And most importantly, to let nothing stop me from taking out my targets. According to Alyssa Vance, love is a weakness, and she wanted to stamp it out of me from a young age. So I learned to hide any signs of compassion. Nodding feels safe so that's the only acknowledgement I give for her praise, even if it was linked to her superiority.

Mom purses her lips before she continues. "Your father thinks it's a good idea that you focus on getting close to Judith again."

"Jude, Mom, we've been through this. You know she prefers that." I reply through gritted teeth. Raising her eyebrow at my cutting in, Mom gives me a look to let me know she thinks I've lost my damn mind for interrupting her. She has a point; nobody else would ever dare, and being her son gives me no special privileges, and I know that.

She ignores me and carries on with her order, "Jude is coming back to Chicago permanently to take her spot in the family business. Your job is to use your...history and get close to her again. Keep an eye on things for us, and give us a heads up if Eric is going to come for the Rogues. I'm sure you can understand how dangerous things could get for our family if we are blind in a situation like this."

I don't bother explaining to my mom that Jude never wanted to see me again, and she threatened to kill me if she did. A threat I fully expect her to see through. But I know there is no point in mentioning this because Mom would only see that as an excuse, and we all know she won't tolerate that. An excuse is a weakness, and she won't tolerate that either. It's convenient how Mom has forgotten about Jude's declaration of love for me in this moment, especially considering we're not allowed to fall in love with someone from another family. Or maybe that's exactly what she's counting on.

Looking thoughtful, Mom shares with me, “While it’s not public knowledge, Eric has always alluded to the fact that Jude was powerful, possibly the most of his children, but he said Lexie was more vicious. Lexie was apparently willing to do what it took to get the job done. An enviable trait in an heir. I was always surprised he let Jude go to that school. If it were me, I would have kept her close. Still, with Lexie now dead, all the families will be investigated until the culprit is found.”

A horrible thought occurs to me, and I brace myself for the blow back asking this will get me. “I have to ask Mom, just so I understand the situation I’m walking into. Did we have something to do with it?”

Disappointment washes over her face, and in a rare moment of explaining things to me, she answers my question. “I wish I had thought about it. If I wanted to weaken the Rhodes, yes, I would have done it. But I would have had the good sense to have taken out Jude first and left Eric with Brooklyn as his only heir. Jude’s always been the bigger threat. But no, Sebastian, we had nothing to do with it.”

Relief floods my veins, but I don’t let her see how much I doubted her. Her voice is quieter, but no less irritated with the situation we’re in. “While this drastic change in plan is unfortunate, we need to adapt. I will not assign you to any more targets for the foreseeable future, so you can focus on getting closer to Jude again. You are still expected to keep up with your training, though. Since your brother is still overseas, it’s in our family’s best interests that you monitor the situation for us. I will expect regular updates on your progress, so don’t let me down.”

Clark’s still in Europe? That’s something. I knew little about his assignment, but it must be serious if he’s gone for this long. Still, that’s not important right now. I dip my head respectfully, “Yes, ma’am.”

Turning to walk out of her study, Mom calls out for me again before I reach the door. “Oh, and Sebastian, the reason I called you in tonight was to discuss your duty to the

Rogues before this news about the Rhodes derailed my plan. I'm evaluating potential fiancées for you with Ryder, and while he will be disappointed to hear about the delay, he's a business man and will understand. Once this business with Jude is sorted, you will marry and further our line."

My heart sinking, I give a brief nod before I leave the hellhole known as her study. Determined to not let her see my inner turmoil, I struggle to figure out what to focus on first. Grabbing a cigarette, I light up in the house, waiting for Logan to shout at me because she hates it when I smoke inside.

I'm the one that ended things between Jude and me. I don't know why it hurts that I didn't know she was coming back, or why I didn't do a good enough job to make her stay away. They say time and distance help get over heartbreak, and they're talking bullshit. I still love her after all this time. None of that matters, though. I didn't miss the undertone of Mom's threat. If I don't do this, she'll go for Jude again. Getting my phone out, I shoot out a text to Jude asking if I can come see her, and immediately, the response is I'm still blocked. Looks like I'm showing up at her family's place uninvited tomorrow.

Chapter 6 | The Rogues

Sebastian

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:08 am

Downing a bottle of bourbon before bed usually helps keep the nightmares at bay. Except this time, it didn't work. The thought of seeing Jude again after all this time, kept me awake until the early hours of the morning. Giving up on the idea of sleep, I swing my legs over the side of the bed and pause as I stare at my bedroom walls. When Jude left, I tore everything down that reminded me of her, and I painted it all black. Now, I have no pictures or personal touches left, because what's the point? Jude was the best part of me, and she took that with her.

Now, I'm Alyssa Vance's weapon, dealing out death at her every command. I don't know what comes after we die, but I have to believe that anything is better than this endless cycle of violence I'm caught in.

That thought will have to wait as Gabe, my police contact, calls, and I know he only does that when it's important. Gabe works in the homicide department, and while he's very good at his job, I pay him extremely well to keep an eye on the murders I've committed. He pins them on people that deserve it, and it's a win-win situation for the both of us. I stay out of jail, and he keeps his streets clean.

"Gabe, everything okay?" I answer his call as I clap my hands to turn on the dimmer lights. Walking across my room towards my closet, I balance the phone on my shoulder. "Assuming the murder suicide was you?" He asks me. Standing in front of my closet, I mumble a yes, always mindful of recording devices even if I know Gabe wouldn't do that to me. He has three children to put through college, and I know our business arrangement will help him do that because his salary at the police station definitely won't.

"Okay, I'll take care of it. But next time, a heads up would be nice." His mild

chastisement is irritating since I'm the client here, and I'm about to tell him that before he cuts me off. "Oh, and Sebastian, that's not the only murder on my desk this morning. There is another very bloody crime scene...and it feels like it could be from someone in your world. I'll let you know what I find."

Ending the call, I put the murder from my mind as I try to find a respectable outfit in my walk-in closet. What do you wear to see the love of your life after you broke her heart? I want something that says, "I need you to listen even after you threatened to kill me," and I groan because nothing feels right. It's all the same, black shirts, slacks, and shoes. I have a look apparently. I keep looking, hoping to find something different, and briefly consider asking Logan to go pick something up for me, when out of the corner of my eye, I see a white shirt hidden in the back of my closet and an idea forms. Grabbing it, along with a pair of suit pants, I put them on and leave the shirt collar unbuttoned. Jude used to love it when I did this, and that's how I know it's the right move. It sends the message that I didn't fall apart after she left. Grabbing a thick gold chain, I add it to the outfit.

Opening the pot of gel on my dresser, I slick my fringe back into my signature style, and I get a glimpse of the finished product in my bedroom mirror. I don't know what's worse, hating myself for what I did to Jude, or that I look so much like my mom, the person I hate most in this world. I have her dark hair and crystal blue eyes. The only thing I got from Dad was his tall and lean build.

My tattoos are new; I wonder what Jude will have to say about them. They show from under my shirt, going to my jawbone, the most recent one covered in cling film on my chest under my shirt so it can heal. I started the tattoos after Jude left, one for each victim. Sometimes, it's a name, a place, or an icon, but I want a way to remember them all. My body has become a confession of their ends brought about by me, and I find it fitting. They deserve that much from me.

Leaving my room, I take the stairs down towards our garage and only stop my

descent when I hear someone calling for me. Turning, I find Logan approaching me with an espresso in one hand. “I was wondering why you didn’t show for breakfast. Where are you off to?” Handing the espresso to me, I down it and return the empty cup to her. I swallow, “I need to see Jude.”

She reaches over to fix my collar, and it never fails to choke me up when she looks at me with so much love. If my mother was normal, this was how I would imagine it. Helping me and guiding me when I expected it the least.

Logan has been with my family for as long as I can remember. While my parents ran the empire, she ran the home. I don’t even want to think what would have happened to me if I didn’t have her. Despite my analogy of parenting, Logan looks younger than her years even if I don’t know how old that actually is. She looks casual this morning. She’s wearing a pink tracksuit with her blond hair pulled into a ponytail, and she catches the quizzical look on my face as I note the look of pity on hers.

She smiles gently, “Today’s a cleaning day, but come see me when you’re done. I know it won’t be easy for you.” I want to hug her, but I won’t. So I just leave and carry on to my Lexus in the underground garage. I know I could get someone to drive me, but where’s the fun in that? I’ve always loved driving. It doesn’t matter how chaotic my emotions are, when I’m behind the wheel and pushing the limits of the winding stretches of road, none of it matters.

Driving out of the garage, I’m happy to see I’ve timed this well to avoid rush hour traffic. Except, the drive ahead gives me too much time to think, considering the Rhodes Estate is still a good thirty-minute drive.

After Jude left, and I got rid of my “weakness” as Mom called it, she became harder on me than before. I was assigned all the most dangerous assignments. She called it “toughening me up”. And her thinking was that if I died on a dangerous assignment, then I wasn’t good enough to be a Rogue. A fault of my making, not hers.

Getting back into Jude's life is going to be difficult. When we broke up, I made up every lie I could think of, from I was sleeping with other people, to Jude bored me, to I needed to find myself. She needed to believe there was nothing left between us. It worked better than I had hoped for. She was so hurt, and I know better than most; she doesn't forgive. I know that from what happened with her father. If she won't forgive him, I sure as hell don't stand a chance. So that gives me one option only.

I've got to tell her the truth. While I still don't believe she will forgive me, maybe it will mean we can find a compromise. Especially with her life on the line, Mom never makes a threat she won't see through. I know this because I used to have an older sister. I was very young when it happened so I don't remember her clearly, but according to mom, she was too soft. She cried all the time, so Mom had to take care of her. No one talks about her, like this would erase her from history. Her name was Saige, and even if I struggle to remember her face, I won't forget her. Saige is my reminder of what would happen to me too if I didn't obey. Logan still cries for her, even if she won't talk about her.

When I had exhibited signs of wanting to paint and being softer, Mom sent me along on an assignment where a painter was the target. It was a brutal death, and watching them do it, quickly squashed any cultural desires I had, which, if I look back on it now, was the whole point. It wasn't long after that when I had to take a life for the first time. I'm pretty sure a small piece of my soul died then, and I lose another part each time I take a life. At the rate I'm going, I'm going to have no soul left.

So I became exactly what my mother wanted me to be. To the world, I'm a vicious asshole with no emotion, and I hate every second of it. Jude knew the truth, though, and she made me feel alive again. She gave me hope. Hope that maybe one day, I wouldn't need to do this anymore, and I could enjoy life instead of barely surviving it. But that dream died the day I ended things with Jude, and while it's going to be hard to relive everything I said when I see her, I can survive pain if it will keep her safe. As much as I missed her, and I wanted her to stay for me, I was proud of her for

leaving and being strong. She was going to create a future for herself, one we could never have together. It was only temporary for us. I know I'm living on borrowed time, anyway.

It's my mother's end goal that I'm struggling to see. To the outside world, all four families appear to be close, and we give off the perception that family is everything to us. But it's a lie. Power and money are far more important.

Pulling up at the Rhodes Estate, a place I've avoided since Jude left, it's as impressive as I remember. It won't take long before their guards realize I'm here, and they will never let me in when they do, so I've got to be quick. Getting out of my car, I hop over the wall and sprint towards, what I hope, is still Jude's room.

Because of my ancestor, Amaya Van Helsing, I may look human, but I have a few advantages. They're what help me do my job so well, but today, it's the super speed and healing I'm going to need the most. Briefly, I pick up shouting, assuming it's the guards I'm trying to avoid and scale the wall by her open bedroom window. Launching myself through it, I softly land on my feet and find her unpacking her bag. Jude stops what she's doing and sniffs the air.

In a move that's too fast for even me to track, she grabs me around the neck with her arm in a semi shifted state. Judging by the furriness of it, I guess something like a grizzly bear as she pushes me up against the wall and constricts my air supply. It's an impressive show of awareness, strength and control, and it almost makes me grin. If things were different between us, I would call this foreplay.

Her eyes blaze like wildfire, yep; she's still livid. "You must have a death wish because I remember telling you I don't want to see you again."

Even in her anger, she's still beautiful, in her blue floral summer dress with her curls piled high on her head. I wonder if she's forgotten how much it turns me on when she

takes control like this. It's good to see she still hates me, though; it's going to make this easier. I don't care what happens to me. As long as she lives, I can deal with the consequences.

So I smirk, playing my role, "Well, that would never be possible. Our families socialize and work together." She squeezes my neck tighter, cutting off my air, and for a moment, I wonder if she's going to go through with it. I wonder if I care.

Her voice lowers threateningly, and it really shouldn't be so hot. "Do you want to test your healing ability, Sebastian? Let's see if you can regrow a limb. The only thing stopping me is I will upset Beau if I get blood on the carpet. Talk now, before I decide to take my chances."

"Can I talk freely?"

"Yes," she replies, still looking pissed off, yet a hint of curiosity peeks through her closed off expression. I know her too well. "I asked Dom to put a spell on my room. No one can hear us, and they think I'm just being quiet." So, for the first time in our history, I tell her the truth about my mother.

"I will never expect things to go back to the way they were. I know I've done too much damage, and even then, our families would never allow it. But I did what I did because my Mom threatens your life every few years to keep me in line. It's why I ended it back then and why I'm here now. So will you just agree to see me once a week, so it looks like I'm in your good graces again? I don't expect us to talk or anything. It's a temporary solution while I figure out something longer term. You trusted me once. Can you do that again?"

I don't know what Jude was expecting me to say, but I think I've surprised her. She blinks a few times before gathering herself, letting go of my neck and walking over to her bed. She says nothing. Getting her phone out, she presses a few buttons and then

looks up at me.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:08 am

She takes a deep breath in, and when she speaks, my chest fills with hope; it's with a hint of the Jude I knew before. "I know what it's like to have shit parents, so despite everything between us, I believe you. I've unblocked your number, and the guards will let you in. But it would be ideal if you messaged me first and came through the front door next time."

Chapter 7 | I'm Going To Be Sick

Dominic

I crane my neck around the steering wheel to see what the hold up is. It's unusual to have so much traffic at this hour in Chicago, and judging from the occasional honking around me, frustration seems to bubble over from everyone wanting to get home. Briefly, I entertain magical intervention, but I know it's not worth the energy it will cost me.

Somewhere during the 1300s, the Black Death in Europe brought the Supernatural families together, and a little over one hundred years later, the move to America cemented the bond between our four families. While our purpose has evolved over the years, one thing has never changed. We are stronger together than we ever were apart.

As the humans have adapted through the ages, so have we. At one stage, my family was the most powerful, not the Rhodes. It was back when we were still known as the mafia. But we trusted the wrong person, and my family almost lost everything, along with their position of power. Afterwards, we looked to rebrand ourselves because we realized that "mafia" was too negative. When we rebranded to "empire" change

happened and we were able to start building the influence we all craved. We found more versatility, and gained access to legitimate business opportunities while our true businesses operated from the Underworld.

Resting my forearm against the car door, I rub my temples in tiredness, and it's a struggle to not check the time every few minutes. I'm impatient to get home and get back to a routine and see the twins. I've been away from home for too long, and it shows in my anxiety. First, it was the business trip, then it was Autumn's wedding. To top it off, I thought I was done and ready to go home when I landed at the airport, but I got called straight to the Rhodes' Estate for an emergency.

The news of Lexie's death hits too close to home because we're still dealing with the recent loss of our father, Dimitri Hart. Eric comforted me only a few months ago when we lost Dad, and I had to transition into my new role too. But now, we've switched positions as today I helped him grieve for his daughter while I listened to him rant about his revenge plans. As sad as it is, when you're the head of an empire like I am, you don't have time for emotions. You need to figure out what these changes mean for your people.

Even if no one wants to talk about the stages of grief, it doesn't mean they're not there, along with the stress that comes with an unexpected death. There was nothing sinister about Dad's death; he died of a heart attack. The doctors told me it was stress that killed him. If I don't make some changes soon, I'm going to end up following in his footsteps...As Sorcerers, we can perform some incredible spells and change lives if we want to. But we can't stop death, even if we can create it.

My phone rings, and the car's bluetooth picks up on it. With my frustration building, a brisk answer is all I offer in place of a greeting. "Dom? I just thought I should call to let you know I had a great time at the wedding," she trails off, waiting for me to say something. Well, that's awkward...I don't remember giving her my number. I must have drank more than I remember.

Clearing my throat, I say, “Listen, Mary?” She immediately cuts me off. “Malin, remember?” I thank Hecate she can’t see me. “Yes, Malin. I had a great time too,” and I cringe at how false I sound with the words leaving my mouth. “But I’m not looking for anything serious right now.”

Her voice screeches to ungodly levels, “Well, you don’t need to be an asshole about it!” and she abruptly ends the call. Snorting, I can’t help wondering what she would think if she knew the truth about us. Ryder, the leader of the Human Faction, wouldn’t have approved of her, anyway.

I don’t know how Dad did it. From being a Hecate legacy, to running our empire, to raising a family, there is just so much pressure. For most Sorcerers, we keep larger families. I think that was my dad’s original plan, but Mom left when we were young, and now he’s gone, too. So it’s just the three of us left now. The twins don’t remember Mom, but I do. They look just like her, with their strawberry blonde hair and delicate features.

I didn’t understand it at the time, but when Dad explained it to me when I was older, I understood why she left. Mom couldn’t adjust to the expectations of our life, even if she was trained for it. Mom was from the Human Faction, and she was Ryder’s biggest failure. It’s something neither of us like to talk about. It’s almost like she gave Dad the children he wanted and then gave up on us. When she left, Dad had to pick up the pieces. I don’t know why he didn’t track her down and kill her as he should have, but I think he really loved her.

The honking starts all over again, the commuters in the traffic jam getting more impatient, and I finally see what’s causing the issue. Police have cordoned off an area on the side of the road, and they’re laying tarp down over what looks like a dead body. I can’t see much else other than some dark stains on the surrounding ground.

It’s odd for our part of Chicago, but not unheard of. I’ll add that to my never ending

list of things to worry over and figure out. Our progress is slow as I crawl behind the car in front of me. Switching on my beams because of how dark it's getting, I check the digital clock on the dashboard. It's later than I realized. Finally, I pick up speed as I get free of the traffic jam and step on the gas to get home.

Dad started showing me some of the ropes of running our empire when I was still a teenager, but neither of us took it seriously because we always thought we had more time. No one ever plans to die. He didn't. And now I'm stuck trying to figure this out on my own. My mind tries to go over what we could do to make the families take the Sorcerers seriously again; we need to come across as powerful.

As I near our estate, it takes me a moment to register what I'm seeing from the road. I can hear music pumping, but that's not the issue. The twins have turned our home into some high school party, and I can see multiple cars parked on the road outside our estate that shouldn't be there. Inside too, from the looks of it. I'm furious. They knew I was coming home today, and they didn't care.

My hands tightening on the steering wheel, I pull over to the curb and get out of the car. I doubt any of the attendees will know about our Underworld life, so I can't use magic to get them out, but I can use magic on my sisters. Staring at our home, I swirl my hand under my mouth, whispering into the wind, and I can feel its caress, cradling my words, "You've got five minutes to get everyone out before I do. And we all know you don't want that."

My magic turns yellow as the breeze carries it toward the house, the sign of convenience, and I wait for the magic to reach them. Getting back into my car, I lean back into the car seat in defeat. Here I'm stressing about our future, and the twins are fucking partying. I can't keep doing this. I need help, and it's time they got a reality check.

Watching the kids file out of our home, running and laughing like it's some joke, I

see my threat worked. Good. I wait until it becomes a trickle of kids before turning the ignition back on, although calling them kids is a stretch. They're only a few years younger than me. I am the oldest out of all the family heirs, well now that Lexie is gone, but when you have the responsibility of the empire placed on your shoulders from a younger age, you grow up fast.

Pulling up into the driveway to our home, I try not to grimace at the trash left behind. My anger is bubbling during the drive, and by the time I get to the front of the house, I'm livid. Things have been tense between the twins and I since Dad died, and I miss the days where I was just their big brother and not this pseudo parent I've had to become.

Stalking inside, with plastic cups crunching under my feet, I shout for the twins. "Remi, Reece! Where are you?!"

Reece comes running down the stairs, and she's wearing a dress that's way too short. I can see things an older brother should never see. Lifting someone's g-string off the banister with a pen from my jacket pocket, I give Reece my best impression of a glare. At least she has the grace to look ashamed for being caught. I force myself to suck in a deep breath. "Where's Remi?"

She says nothing because she knows she can't lie to me, and she won't rat out her twin. Still, I suspect I know exactly where to find her. I stalk upstairs to Remi's room and throw the bedroom door open. Reece isn't far behind me. I find her twin half undressed on the bed with some human boy. And my blood boils. First, she ignored my warning. Now, she's challenging me. I get acting out, but she's taken it too far. She doesn't understand what's at stake here. If I lose control of this family, they die. I'm not on a power trip.

Walking over to the human boy, I grab him by the neck, and his feet lift off the ground. He's shaking; he's so terrified. Good. I wave my free hand in the air, and my

magic weaves through it with a green hue, magic of the brain. I'm about to alter this boy's mind.

"Don't look at my sisters again. Every time you do, you will have an explicit urge to run. If I see you again, I will kill you. Now, forget this evening happened and get out of here."

Grabbing his pants, I throw them at him before he runs out of the room in terror. Turning to Remi, I see her propped up in the bed, looking at me with a smirk on her face.

Her voice doesn't waver, "Pity, I liked that one."

She grabs her phone, and the frail hold on my temper snaps. If I had a choice, I wouldn't care less. I was born into this just like they were. Remi is just too childish to understand that if she could abandon her petty games and prove to me she could handle responsibility, I would gladly give her our empire. She's just never asked.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:08 am

“I am not the enemy here! I get it; you miss Dad. We all do. But do you think I enjoy having an empire on my shoulders? Just a few months ago, I was partying like you were!” I feel the veins bulging on my neck as I really let loose. Reece tries to calm me down, and I shake her off.

I’m too far gone for reasoning with or restraining myself. She needs a reality check. My voice thunders, “Stop being so fucking selfish, Reece. I lost my dad, too. Do you ever think about someone other than yourself? Don’t forget, I used to be your brother, and now I have to be your parent and a businessman. I lost more than one thing that night. So either get your shit together and help me run this empire, or I will kill you myself. Because that’s what the other families will do if you don’t take this seriously.”

Her eyes widen, and she nods her head.

I take a deep breath in, trying to calm the simmering rage now that I finally got through to her. “You have an hour to clean this place. Without magic. Then meet me in my study. Lexie Rhodes was murdered, and we need to talk about what’s next for this family.”

Chapter 8 | The Sorcerers

Dominic

I can categorize my memories into a time before and after Mom left. While there are distinct moments that separate the memories, there is one thing that remains consistent; everyone needs magic. Whether it's to sway public opinion or campaign

votes, influence world events, or know which company to trade in, our family was and is perfectly suited to provide magic for these things.

Our estate was always busy with activity from Supernaturals and select humans alike that sought our services out, and sometimes, they had children. I never understood the implications of what the visitors wanted. All I knew was that I had friends to play with, and I was thrilled by that. Since my sisters were too young to play hide and seek with me, my favorite game, these other kids would. My favorite hiding spots were in the extensive garden hedges or my father's study. This game could entertain me for hours if I had a willing participant.

But things changed. Mom left, I grew up and stopped playing games, and then Dad died. When I took over, people stopped coming, and I haveno idea why. That worries me for more than one reason. It's because I know the need for magic hasn't changed. Where are they getting it from if they're not getting it from us? Are one of the other Sorcerer families working behind my back? These are all questions I can't answer on my own, and as I walk to the study with my footsteps echoing loudly through the empty passages, I admit the truth to myself. It's because we're not taken seriously anymore. I'm still a kid in the other family's eyes.

Opening the large mahogany door to Dad's study, I unbutton my waistcoat and throw it over my chair. Unbuttoning my shirt collar so I can breathe a bit, I try to make sense of the work I need to catch up on. While it's overwhelming, I knew what I was in for and that taking time off for the wedding would make it worse. It was necessary for the sake of networking though, but is the risk really worth the reward if I'm losing control of our empire? What's the point of networking if it doesn't help improve things and only makes things worse?

On top of that, I never counted on the temper tantrum waiting for me at home. Sighing, I move towards the alcohol cabinet and pour myself a drink and knock it back in one go. It burns my throat, and I welcome the feeling as I pour myself a

second drink. There is a mountain of paperwork waiting for me at Dad's desk as I get comfortable in his chair. From my position, it gives me a perfect vantage point of the gardens and the twins cleaning up without their magic. Watching Reece shout at Remi, I can't hear about what, I try not to snicker. I wonder what they would do if they knew about half the things I got up to at their age. Maybe, one day I will tell them about it. When things have normalized.

While it's easy to see we're all related, I definitely took more after Dad with my dark blonde hair and chocolate brown eyes. I inherited his sense of style too, and a three-piece suit is my answer to most occasions, just like his was. Maybe that's why out of all the rooms in our estate that I could have selected for my study, I chose Dad's.

Here, the good memories outweigh the bad, and there is something comforting about sitting where Dad sat. What I would give for one more moment with him and to hear his laughter, or to get his advice on everything that's going on. But that will not happen, and instead, I will draw comfort from knowing he walked this path before me, and if he can do it, then so can I.

Logging onto my laptop and checking the messages, I prioritize the urgent ones, first; I have people to pay off. When that's done, I move on to the coded correspondence about the drug shipment arriving in the port in a few days. It's our biggest one yet, and a spark of excitement forms. If we pull this off the way we've planned, it's going to make the Sorcerers exceptionally wealthy. Maybe even more wealthy than the Rhodes, and we all know that money is power.

Considering that Dad only had a chance to show me a few things before he died, I don't think I'm doing too badly. But even if I'm doing a good job, is it enough? Or are the other families laughing behind my back? Will I be the Sorcerer responsible for the fall of the Hecate line because I couldn't retain our family's position?

Looking down at the family tattoo on my hand, a crest and a Greek translation of

“we’re stronger together than apart,” my mind wanders to our ancestors. I know the story well of how they came to be here, and if they overcame that, surely I can overcome a bit of teething issues due to our change of leadership? Leaning over and opening the secure drawer with a spell only someone from our family can use, I grab the Sorcerer’s Tome of Origins. Every Sorcerer family has one like this, and it’s easily our most guarded and prized possession. Being hundreds of years old, I don’t want to think too hard about what they used for pages back then.

The first time Dad explained to me what we were, I was in awe. While all the families came from Europe, our family has Greek origins. It lines up with Hecate’s creation, even if the human legends have spun her story way out of control. The illustration of her on the front page of the tome still fills me with the same sense of pride. Her long, dark hair and alabaster skin stands out against her black and gold woven dress, and gold bangles line her arms.

“What would you do if you were in my position?” I murmur as I turn the pages. Starting at the story of how they fled Europe, I page through how they started fresh in what we now know as America, and I end at the last page, which shows our family tree, which dates back to Hecate.

That’s it. Our family needs strength.

A knock at the door interrupts my musings, and I call out for the twins to enter the study. Pressing my lips together, I try not to laugh because they both look like raccoons with their smudged make up and sweat combo. Pointing to the chairs opposite me, they take their seat as I explain our predicament.

“I’ve taken on too much. If we don’t start making some changes, I will follow Dad’s path, and there will be no empire left for future generations of Sorcerers.” I pause, observing the twins’ reactions, and satisfied that they’re listening, I continue. “I’ve prayed to Hecate for her guidance, and she’s shown me our family needs a show of

strength. So the first thing we're going to do is find someone to manage this estate. I can't do this on top of everything else too. The other families have someone to do this, so it's time we get someone, too."

My speech is interrupted by Reece running from the room, and I look at Remi in confusion as I say, "What just happened?" Turning to look behind her before she meets my gaze again, she says, "I don't know; we both hung out with different crowds at the party, but she's probably drunk and needs to throw up." Putting my head in my hands in frustration, I count to five before I look up again. We wait in silence for Reece to return, looking paler than she was before.

Grabbing the ornament on my desk, I throw it against the wall, and the loud crash echoes through the study as the twins flinch. "This stops right now. All of this. You are not normal, so stop with the human teenager bullshit."

Clearing my throat, I continue explaining, "We need to strengthen the family bloodline and add to it. Since the both of you are far too young for this option, it will have to be me. So I'm going to need you to contact Ryder and see if he's got any suitable human wives for me." Remi grabs a page from my desk and makes a note about my instructions as Reece just looks thoughtful.

Remi puts her hand up, and I nod at her, so she asks. "Is there anything specific we should look for in the candidate?" Shaking my head, I respond, "No, as long as the person is competent and has some ties to the Supernatural, I'm happy."

I carry on, "Next, we need a show of power; something that screams the Hart empire is stronger than ever. I need ideas." Snapping my fingers, I look between them and try to encourage a brainstorm. The twins look at each other, and they say nothing but weirdly seem to be on the same page as Remi nods and gives Reece the go ahead. Turning to look at me, she says, "The religious group." Looking at them quizzically, I ask them to explain.

“A few weeks ago, Brooklyn Rhodes was pulled out of school unexpectedly. Safety concerns were cited. Because there are so many humans at our school, we had to be careful when asking around.” Turning to Remi, she mutters something under her breath, and Remi nods before Reece continues her explanation.

“There is this religious group called Children of the Christ that has been targeting the Rhodes for a few weeks. The daughter of their leader goes to our school too, and Eden has been making Brooklyn’s life miserable. We overheard Eden calling Brooklyn a demon, so we suspect they saw one of the Rhodes mid shift. You know how humans always try to justify the Supernatural, not believing what’s right in front of them.”

Taking a sip of my drink, I mull that information over. I hum, “Okay. I’ll bite. Why would dealing with this religious group be the show of power we need?”

She smirks, clearly thinking she’s onto something juicy. “Because they’re inconveniencing one of our allies at a time where he’s grieving his daughter. But we have to be smart about how we do this. It would be bad for business if we were open in our approach. It doesn’t matter what you think about him, having Eric Rhodes in your corner is a good move.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:08 am

I should probably slow down on my drinking, but after the day I've had, I'm willing to take my chances. I walk to the bar and top up my drink. Remi's face is deep in thought for a long moment before she shares with us. "That's why you were so mad. Because things are precarious for us as it is. Technically, we should be the strongest and incontrol, but with Dad..." she swallows hard, "we're not. And that's why you think marriage and doing Eric a favor will make us look good."

She's always been too smart for her own good. Both of them. I lift my glass in salute to her because she's figured it out.

"I want you to study the business. Both aspects of it, then come back to me in a week to see what interests you. Pray to Hecate if you need to. In between completing your studies and your training, you will intern in the business in your chosen area. Once I'm confident that you've mastered your craft, we can evaluate if either of you are a better fit for the business than I am. Since you seem to have an issue with the way I run things, prove to me you can do it better than I can."

Raising my eyebrow at Remi, she understands the subtext. I am being hard on them, but I'm also giving them an alternative, and I know she will respect me for it.

"Well, you both have your assignments. Let's get going and show them what Hecate's bloodline is made of."

Chapter 9 | Rich People Problems

Jude

Only a few days ago, Lexie was still alive, and I was still at school, and we were all living our version of normal. Now, I'm home for good and trying to figure out how to crawl through my grief because I have no idea how. Lexie is gone, and nothing will ever be the same again.

Since I've come home, I've gotten into the habit of getting up before the rest of the house and finding solace in Dad's study. There is a mountain of work that's been neglected since Lexie's murder, and someone has got to plan her funeral. Using Dad's study is a temporary solution because I definitely need my own, but with him being gone so much, it's good enough for now.

The unsettled feeling I have from being home isn't helped by the fight Brooklyn and I had last night. After the guards reported odd behavior outside our gates and a strange package that they disposed of, I suggested to Brooklyn that she should stay home more for her safety. That, in turn, led her to accusing me of trying to take Lexie's place, and that I should try going back to school so that her life could go back to normal. Her insults hurt more than anything my parents have ever flung my way.

Reaching Dad's office, I open the door to find that this time, I'm not alone like I had hoped for. Dad is there in his wolf form with some random dude tied to a chair. It's not the first time I've seen a situation like this. For us, it's actually quite normal. I'm just more irritated with the inconvenience. Spying a tray of deadly looking blades on the desk behind him, the sun from the window glints off it. The tools are clearly untouched despite the array of wounds across the exposed chest of the guy on the chair. It seems Dad got carried away with his animal instincts. Since I know Dad still understands me in his animal form, I ask him, "What are you doing here?"

Dad shifts back into his human form, and there are flecks of blood covering his chest. When he speaks, it's barely discernible from a growl. "He's from that Children of Christ group. One of my contacts thinks their group knows something about what happened to Lexie, and I will get it out of him one way or the other." He's got to be

fucking kidding me. My temper flares, and I shove Dad in the chest, and he stumbles as he looks at me with wide eyes.

My voice overflows with all my pent up rage and frustration. “You have an entire estate to choose from, and you have to do this HERE? I’m not even touching on when someone realizes he’s missing. We’re the first place the police and the Children of Christ are going to look for him. Stop thinking with your heart and more with your head.”

Dad starts growling at me in his human form, which is more disturbing than threatening. “What’s wrong with you!?” I scream into his face. “I’m trying to plan your daughter's funeral because you won’t! None of this will bring her back.”

Beau’s footsteps echo down the hall, and he comes running into the study to play referee between my dad and I. His timing is perfect because I’m pretty sure Dad’s about to attack me, judging by the tense state of his neck muscles. It’s not exactly wise to go up against Eric Rhodes, even if you are his daughter, but the Druids know I would give it everything I’ve got.

Beau’s voice is a perfectly practiced tone designed to calm and placate as he sizes up the scene in front of him. He has the ability to soothe some of the rage I feel as he makes his suggestion. “Jude, why don’t you go for a run on the estate and burn off some energy? I’ll set up an office for you in one of the spare rooms while I discuss some boundaries with your father and his guest. He knows how I feel about blood on the carpets.”

After a few more tense moments of the standoff between me and Dad, I nod and leave the room and start getting undressed as I leave my clothes in a trail behind me. There are three things you can count on with a Druid shift. The first is it’s painful and something we learn how to manage from a young age. Second is that we always lose our clothes during the process of a shift. That’s why we’re comfortable with nudity

and try to avoid shifting with clothes if we can help it. The third is that we have gold eyes in our animal form.

As long as the animal exists and a Druid can visualize it, they can shift into it. Exiting the front door of our estate, I select a black panther favoring the lithe build that comes with this animal, perfectly suited for speed. The magic takes over my body as I embrace the feline within and start running through our gardens. Sometimes, things are so much simpler this way. No first assignments to plan for Brooklyn, no fights, no pressure. Just the pure joy that comes from the speed I've now temporarily got. The rhythmic thudding of my paws on the dry ground, the slight whistle of the wind through the thick foliage as it whips past me, a cooling caress through my thick fur.

If you know what to look for, there are signs our family is not holding it together. Aside from lashing out at me, Brooklyn isn't talking to anyone, and with the recent safety concerns, she doesn't leave her room much. When I excused her from school recently, the principal let me know he was less than thrilled with another absence, and then Brooklyn's anger made more sense to me. While everyone grieves differently, I knew her anger resulted from something else, too. Going to school with humans means she pretends to be normal when our family is anything but normal. And with this girl bullying her, I know it's infuriating pretending to be weak. But if we want to keep our secret and maintain our lives, incidents like this are a part of life.

If you ask anyone to describe Edie Rhodes, they will tell you she's always perfect. Her blonde hair is styled to perfection, and she's usually wearing the latest designer label trend. Since I've been home, I've seen her without makeup more now than I ever did as a child. Even if Mom barely leaves her room too, she makes an exception for guests who come to pay their respects. While this may seem normal to some people, I know the truth. She's always craved attention, so at least that part has remained consistent.

Then we have Dad. He disappears for long periods of time and then comes home

covered in blood at late hours. I'd assumed he was trying to track Lexie's killer, and today's exhibition proves that. That's the thing with my parents. They're so consumed by their own grief; they never stop to think about what their remaining children are going through. That's why I don't regret my decision to come home; Brooklyn needs someone in her corner, the way Lexie was for me. As I slow again, other thoughts creep in.

Lexie's body on that morgue table. At first I thought it was some horrible joke that she was going to jump up and tell me it was going to be okay, and I would hear her laugh again. But when I saw her lying there, so unnaturally still with the silver burns and unhealed puncture marks around her heart, that's when I knew. They got her the only way you can kill a Druid, a wound to the heart made with silver. I threaded my trembling fingers through hers and squeezed them, hoping she would squeeze back. Maybe she found a way around the lore. Except her stiff fingers never moved.

Tucking a piece of hair behind her ear, I still couldn't help thinking how beautiful she looked in death. Her silky, brown hair, so much like mine, laid over her shoulders, longer than I remembered, and her skin was much paler than it should have been. Separately, the three of us sisters look so different, but if you put us in a room together, you would easily see we were related.

Rounding a corner of the estate on my run, there is a part of me that briefly entertains running away again. It's so easy in this form. But no, I won't do that to Brooklyn. She deserves better. Instead, I move towards the house, long tail flicking and twitching behind me, ready to deal with the final stages of planning Lexie's funeral. Funerals are such a strange thing. We act like the dead need closure, but they don't. They're dead. Funerals are for the people left behind. It's why I'm so set on doing this right, even if no one else cares about it. Brooklyn and I deserve this.

Shifting back to my human form and stretching away the lingering ache of the change, I find Beau waiting for me in the foyer with two options of clothes to change

into. Selecting the fluffy robe option—after the comfort of your own fur, real clothes seem almost repulsive—he hands me the matching slippers. He turns away, his voice calming. “Come, child, let me help you. We’re going to figure this out together.”

Beau shows me to one of the spare rooms where he has set up an office for me, and the small jar of daisy flowers on the desk puts a smile on my face. He used to call me Daisy as a kid, and I can’t believe he remembered. “When things have calmed down, we can decorate this room more to your liking, but it should do for now.”

Hugging him, he pats me on the back as he leaves me in peace as I call the minister. I think we’re ready for tomorrow, but I need to make sure. He answers after a few rings, and I say, “Hello Minister Davis. I wanted to check we’re all set for tomorrow. Do you need me to sign off on anything else?”

I can almost imagine his smile at my question. While I’m not religious, he’s a kind man, and I’m grateful for his help in planning Lexie’s funeral. “Ms. Rhodes, I’m so glad you called. There was a mixup with the flowers at the last moment. We can still get peonies. Will that be okay?”

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I confirm it will be fine, and he then goes on to assure me everything will go off without a problem tomorrow. Thanking him and ending the call, I lean back in my chair, and for what feels like the millionth time today, I try to wrap my head around the fact that I need to bury my sister.

Lexie and I should have been closer than we were. And now I’ll never get the chance to repair the distance between us. Our whole lives, if Dad wasn’t playing us up against each other to see who was stronger, we wanted different things. It didn’t mean we didn’t love each other, though. I just can’t remember when was the last time I told her that, and it’s what bothers me more than anything.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:08 am

While being able to shift into any animal is pretty incredible, we quickly learned it came with a downside. We inherit the abilities of our animal temporarily, but with the increased strength and smell, come severe anger issues. With a super healing ability, comes a severe aversion to anything silver. Out of all the legends floating out there that was the part they had to get right. The one about silver. I asked Dom about it once, why the Druids seemed to have extreme strengths and weaknesses, and he told me it's because magic has its limits. If you get something, you need to give something in return to make sure the balance is maintained.

Changing my perspective, instead, I ask myself what someone had to gain with Lexie being out of the way. Surely me coming home can't be the end goal? My first guess would be Alyssa Vance, especially after what Sebastian told me about her. I haven't seen her yet, but that's something I will deal with after the funeral. Very few people know why I left, and to the outside world, it doesn't look like I'm close with my family.

One of the few parts of our empire that I will take over, whether it's wanted or not, is how Druids experience their first assignment. It's almost Brooklyn's turn, and I won't have what happened to me happen to her. Logging in to check our database, I see there is a larger than normal list of outstanding bounty. Something I'm going to need to solve soon as well.

I don't know which one of my ancestors thought that our animal forms would be suited to hunting criminals, but they were right. Even if I appreciate the irony, since it's not exactly like we're innocent either. Catching criminals has become something my family is very good at, and we're always in demand. It makes sense though because it doesn't matter what happens in the world; there will always be crime and

people who try to fight it. Even the few government officials that know about us contract our services. So many people suspect that the government is in our pockets, and they're right. So we use our shifting ability to our advantage.

An escaping thief? Shift to a cheetah and chase him down. A shootout? Shift into an elephant and take on the attackers with ease. The options are endless. It's why we spend a lot of time training as kids, learning how to think quickly, to shift all in the space of a few seconds. Oh, and we have to make sure that humans don't see us. It's a lot to achieve in the space of a few seconds.

That's where it sometimes goes wrong. Between the pain of the shift and when we catch someone that shouldn't be there, we need to maintain perfect control over the animal instincts we temporarily inherit. If we don't, they can easily overtake our human sides and send us into a wild beast frenzy. The results of which are rarely pretty. That's what happened with me and Dad.

Before my first assignment, he was my hero, and I would have done anything to gain his approval. Afterwards, when I saw his brutality and how he literally tore a human man to shreds with his claws for fun, I was horrified. The suspect had been apprehended, but he kept going anyway. I don't think I fully understood our nature or our lifestyle until that moment. And the moment I did, I wanted nothing to do with it.

When I got home that day, I ran to my mom, expecting her sympathy, her comfort, and shared horror. But instead, she just told me to toughen up. That was the night I lost both my parents, even if they're still living in the same house as me.

Chapter 10 | No Strings Attached

Jude

When you are born into the Rhodes family, you learn there are certain standards that need to be upheld. Most of them have to do with how you appear to the world because it's important that we come across as powerful and in charge.

Edie Rhodes' biggest issue with me is that she doesn't believe I honor these family requirements. It's particularly frustrating for her since my name was inspired by hers. We both have older names that we've modernized. In a way, that makes me her namesake. As a child, I know she doted on me, dressing us up exactly the same and telling everyone how similar we were, how I'd grow up and take after her...But I couldn't be more different.

So that's why, standing in front of my dresser mirror now, I wonder if this is the moment where Edie Rhodes will finally be proud of me. Because I barely recognise the Druid staring back at me. I didn't know grandma because she died before I was born. But from what Beau told me, grandma was really hard on Mom, and she expected nothing but perfection from her. It's why Mom is so hard on us. And it's why she keeps lashing out at me. I can only imagine I'm a disappointment of a daughter to her.

Smoothing the sheer black blouse into the waistband of my black slacks, I tuck a stray strand of hair into my chignon, making sure everything is in place and looks perfect. Today, I can give Edie Rhodes her wish. Even if I have to wonder when did looking the part become more important than grieving a lost one?

It doesn't help that I barely slept last night. I was having nightmares about Lexie's body and how the same would happen to Brooklyn if I left again. I don't need a professional to tell me what it means. My eye catches on a picture of Lexie, Brooklyn, and me from a few years ago on my makeup stand. It's from just before I left, and it was just some random day. Lexie looks so vibrant with her brunette waves blowing in the wind behind her. My hand is covering my face partially, and Brooklyn is laughing. I can't even remember what about, or why someone had snapped the

picture. I didn't think much of it at the time, but now it's one of the last moments we had all together. When we were whole.

Hearing a polite knock at the door, I turn to find Beau peering inside my room with a concerned look on his face. He's a large man, which is typical with Druids, and I've only ever known him to wear suits to work. He's still wearing one now, but it's different. More luxurious and fitted. It's how I know he's getting ready to bury Lexie, too.

He clears his throat. "How are you holding up, child?"

He's the first person who's asked. At times, I wonder if he's the only person who actually cares about me, and a stinging sensation pricks my eyes. I want to cry, but it seems out of place with this image we need to project today. So picking a safe change of subject, I motion to my bedroom walls.

"Well," I start, "If I'm going to be at home permanently, we need to redecorate my room along with the study. I would prefer to get my own place, but it sends the wrong message for our family, so redecorating will have to do. I love all the space in here, but it's the white, bland feel that's getting to me."

Beau's graying eyebrows crease as he reaches over and fixes a stray hair I missed. He looks sad, almost defeated. "It's okay Ms. Jude. You don't have to be strong for me. I miss her too."

I swallow a lump in my throat. He knows me too well. He's right. I'm trying to be strong for everyone else, for the image I need to uphold, and for him, too. Because I just assumed he needed that. He seems to pick up on my inner turmoil.

"You know I see you as one of my own, Ms. Jude. Don't forget that. But okay, I will make a note to get some options together for you." He says, resigned and moving to

turn away.

Instead, I launch myself at him. Beau rubs my back in soothing circles as I hug him, and I instantly feel stronger. It's hard to define our relationship. He's not exactly a brother, but he's not a father either. He's definitely family, though. I've always asked him about his biological family, and his answer is always that he has none, and that we're his family.

It's why I fought Dad the way I did when he first said Beau couldn't come today. How was that even up for debate? He loved Lexie too and deserves to mourn her with us. We settled on Beau coming, but he would sit somewhere else in the church and not with the family. Dad loves Beautoo, in his own way. He's just more concerned with the superiority of the Rhodes bloodline, even if Beau is a Druid like us, too.

Speaking of family, I need to go see where mine are and round them up. This funeral is about so much more than just burying Lexie today. The other empires will assess our strength and if there is an opportunity to take over. It's what we would do if the roles were reversed. While I don't care about power, I will make sure my family survives. Lexie would have wanted that. She was so good at keeping us together. When I asked to leave, she was the one that convinced Dad to let me go. She assured him that our empire wouldn't suffer because of it. Lexie always had a solution and took control of the situation. It's never been me, but today it has to be. The same family that I keep running from is the one I'm now trying to keep together.

At the last moment, I decide to add a burgundy lipstick to my outfit before I grab the heels by my bedroom door. All our bedrooms are on the second floor of our estate. The living areas are on the ground floor, and then we have a sundeck on the third floor. It seems like nothing has changed since I left. I start with checking on Brooklyn, seeing as her room is closest to mine.

Standing outside her door, I brace myself. We've been fighting nonstop since I got

home, as if she blames me for Lexie's death, for leaving. But that's fine. I can take it. Peeking my head into her room, I see things have changed. When I left, it was still very pink. Now, it's more blue-gray and very fluffy. Where Lexie and I are darker and take more after our father, Brooklyn looks more like our mother with her finer features and blonde hair, but she has the build of our father. She got the best of both of them. She's dressed for the funeral in a black dress, but she's struggling with a necklace.

"Here, let me help you." I go over to her, and for once she doesn't argue with me as I take the clasps away from her and move her hair out of the way so it doesn't get caught. We say nothing for a moment before Brooklyn breaks the silence.

Her voice is hoarse. "Lexie gave it to me a few months ago. She called it an early assignment graduation gift. I knew I had to wear it today." Turning Brooklyn to face the mirror, with a sad smile on my face, I respond, "It's beautiful."

Pausing for a moment, I then ask what I've been dreading, "Are you ready to leave?" Just like that, I ruin the moment between us, and she lashes out again. She shoves me away, stronger than she looks, and screams, "What a stupid question! Who's ever ready to bury a sister that was brutally murdered?!"

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:08 am

I flinch. It's not like I need reminding. So much for making up for our fight and uniting today. Maybe this is our new normal now. Brooklyn storms out of her room, I assume, to the car, and I follow her and bump into my mother along the way.

Oh, Druids. She's wearing a black lace veil that covers her face like the Italian movie stars used to. With matching lace gloves and a black lace dress, she's being extra dramatic, even by her standards. At least she's ready. Edie Rhodes is going to make today all about her. I don't know why I expected more, even if we're all mourning Lexie. She hasn't been a mother to me in years, so I don't know why I thought today would be different. She barely even looks at me as she huffs, "I'll see you in the car. Your father needed a moment."

Ignoring her, I walk past her and into my parents' room. It's just as luxurious as I remember, with all the cream finishes and high ceilings, more like something for a catalog than a place anyone actually sleeps in. They have a separate dressing room, bathroom, and eventually, their actual bedroom, which has a balcony that overlooks our estate. I find Dad sitting on the edge of his bed with his head in his hands. Eric Rhodes still cuts an imposing figure with his attractive looks, and he looks good in his suit.

Taking a moment to observe him, I try to put my finger on it. At the wedding, he seemed indifferent about Lexie's murder, but since we've been home, he's been nothing but angry. And now, he seems devastated, and I don't know how to deal with that. It makes me wonder if there is hope for us. Even if hope is dangerous because it means he can disappoint me again.

I don't think he's even noticed me entering, so I clear my throat. "Dad? We're going

to be late if we don't go soon."

Looking up at me, I can see he's been crying, and it seems like he's aged drastically in such a short time. Having your daughter murdered will do that to you, I guess. We don't have time to deal with this now. We just need to get through today first.

Is this what he was doing for us this whole time?

When he speaks, he even sounds older. "I know it doesn't seem like it, but I love you girls. It shouldn't be Lexie we're burying today. It should be me."

Where has this side of Dad been the whole time? As much as I would love to have a heart to heart with him and clear the air, we're going to be late, and I know he will hate that more. Bending down until I'm at his eye level, I urge him along.

"Dad, I don't want to rush you, but we're going to be late. I need you to go wash your face, straighten your tie, and pretend for me today. Once it's done, we can continue this chat if you want to. I would like that."

Nodding, he gets up and does as he's told, like he needs someone to take control, and I wait for him to finish. Grabbing his suit jacket, I follow him out the door. Walking down the staircase, towards the front door, my ears pick up a news report from one of the TVs that were left on. Something about an increase of unexplained murders and vandalism. Turning to look at Dad, I raise my eyebrow at him. He shrugs, sounding a little more like his usual self, at least. "That wasn't me. After yesterday, I stopped trying to find Lexie's murderer. You were right. We need a better strategy."

Trying my best to sound soothing yet stern, I say, "I'm glad you can agree. You've fought so long for this family to stay together, so let's not ruin it by acting irrationally. After the funeral, let's go visit Dom and find out if there is a spell he can do for us that might help us figure this out."

Accepting that, Dad turns, and we exit the house together. It's an overcast day, and I am relieved I have kept the whole ceremony inside. Except, I stop walking when we get to the car because Sebastian is waiting outside for me, and I'm confused.

"What are you doing here?" I ask.

He seems sincere as he explains, "I wanted to be here for you today. No strings attached." Even with his declaration that he broke my heart to protect me, it's too late. There is always a string attached with him. But if I make a big deal of sending him away, and Dad hears that the Rogue's threatened my life, it will cause more drama and I want to avoid that today.

Inspecting his dashing outfit, I tell him, "I forgot to ask, what's up with the tattoos? Those are new." Even in his suit, some of them peek out of his neck, and I can see some on his hands. With a small grin on his face, he tells me, "It's a long story for another day."

Accepting his presence, he leans over and kisses me on the forehead before he gets into the car with us. Today is not the day to deal with Alyssa. But I will when the time is right. As we drive away, I can't help thinking about my past with Sebastian. He's taught me we all want to be loved unconditionally, and if we lose that love, we will do terrible things to get it back. No matter the cost.

Chapter 11 | The Last Word

Luca

I've made a point of avoiding a church if I can, but today, there is no way around it. When my mother and I arrive, we immediately walk towards the gathering of funeral guests at the edge of the church grounds. The mood is somber, and no one bothers with greetings as the mournful music echoes throughout the grounds. Walking

towards the church, with our heads bowed in respect, I keep my arm hooked through Mom's as we follow the Hart's in front of us.

The muffled sound of tears occasionally reaches me as we pass the angel statues on the ground. I ignore her because it feels like the bitch is judging me for not coming here enough, but I spare a moment of appreciation for the gargoyles that guard the entrance of the church.

Entering the church in a single file with the Rhodes' family leading us, we're greeted with the choir's roster of songs as we all find our seats. A resounding thud echoes throughout the church as we all sit, and it's an effort to hide my disgust at being back in this place. It's not that I'm against religion or spirituality; I just struggle to accept this holier than thou attitude the church exhibits. We all sleep, eat, and fuck the same way. So why should we pretend we're better than others just because of a deity some decided to believe in? And to top it off, the church has shown me nothing but contempt, so I'm just returning the favor.

Church people always have this whole poverty act going on for them, but judging the state of this place, they're definitely doing more than okay. It makes me wonder what they get up to behind closed doors to achieve all this wealth. The fresco on the roof depicts a Holy War, and while stunning, I know something like that is expensive to maintain. The stained glass windows are exceptional and look freshly hand painted. There is a gold statue of Mary and Jesus in front, which I'm pretty sure is real, and the wooden pews gleam in the sun coming through the windows. And that's without my assessment of the priest's robes.

Excuse me, minister.

Double checking the program for the ceremony, I see the terminology has changed, and I'm clearly a bit out of touch with the latest church terminology. But who cares? They're all still judgy pricks, the lot of them. But whatever helps them sleep at night.

Turning my gaze to the minister in the front of the church, I wonder what he would say if he knew what I was. The myths were wrong. I can step foot in a church, and I would love to show him just how comfortable my unholy ass is, right under his nose.

We snagged a seat somewhere in the middle of the church. A few seats ahead of me, I can see Jude with the rest of the Rhodes family, with Sebastian sandwiched between them. Eric...looks unwell. He seems unkempt, less self assured. Granted, he's burying his daughter today. I just don't think I've ever seen him like this.

It makes me wonder why he wants to have the funeral in a church. Druids have their own ceremonies, which they have to hide from the public. It's probably to maintain appearances. Even if the families have never pretended to be good people, they still play the game. If money is the route of all evil, it's something we've profited off heavily, and we're not complaining about it.

There is a part of me that wishes the myths got it right, and that I could use it as an excuse not to be here because it smells like death. Similar to most things relating to the senses, it all depends on the perception of the person smelling it. To me, Amelia smells like passion fruit, but to another Undead, she could smell like something else. To me, death in a church smells like blood that's been sitting baking in the sun for days...It's not a pleasant smell to someone with my gifts. But Jude needs me and so do the Undead. That's what being an heir means. I can put aside my strong feelings on this subject for a few hours if I need to.

I block out whatever biblical thing the minister is saying about souls being commended to heaven. Did he know what a bitch Lexie was? Trying not to snort, I wonder what the minister would do if he knew I drank blood, and I'm hiding my fangs from sight? Reflecting on my first experience with a church, the priest told me I was going to burn in hell for liking girls, and I should repent for my sins. While I was young at the time, I remember clearly wanting to rip his throat out for saying that to me. Jude never knew that she saved a priest's life that day.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:08 am

I was petrified to tell my mom what happened. I got it into my head that she was going to think I did something wrong, and I've seen her mad plenty of times. But not this time. She promised me I never had to go back to church if I didn't want to, and for years, I didn't. Until Dad died.

Being Undead, Mom and I weren't phased by a church service, and we also have different beliefs. But Dad was human, and a public service was expected from a family like ours, so we did it. Between the asshole priest and Dad's funeral, this was an experience I never wanted to repeat.

Now it's Lexie's turn. It doesn't help that I never liked her. She was pretentious and self-obsessed, but Jude loved her, so I kept my mouth shut when I needed to, unless her sister treated her like shit. That's where I drew the line. I think the competition that Eric and Edie encouraged amongst the sisters made it worse. They said it made for stronger Druids, when all it did was fracture their family.

If I was going to make a move against another family, the Druids wouldn't have been my first choice. But if they were? I would have dismantled their family differently by taking out Edie first. Without her, Eric can't have more heirs, and it would take him too long to find a new wife, even with the Human Faction in the equation. Then, I would have picked his heirs off one by one. That's why I'm baffled as to who would want Lexie dead. No matter which way I look at it, she would never be the first target. It makes no sense to me, strategically or politically. That's why I wonder if it was a hate crime.

If anything good has come out of this experience, it's my plea to my mom for help. I'm seeing snippets of the old Gabriela De Greer emerge, and today she looks like the

bad ass head of the Undead empire that she once was. It's been challenging keeping her meltdown away from the public eye, but I did it. More than that, though, I've just missed my mom.

Folding one leg over the other, bringing my skirt scandalously high, I catch Dom's eye from the opposite pew, and I wink at him before turning my attention back to the minister. My attempt at paying attention is short-lived as he urges us to repent for our sins, but I refocus my effort as I hear him closing the service.

The Rhodes' family stands at the minister's request, and the rest of us are directed to the reception hall while the family go say their final goodbyes in the family crypt. Thank the Undead. How many times can you say goodbye to a dead person? We didn't even go this over the top for Dad. Trying not to roll my eyes, Mom gives me a sharp look as if she knows what I'm thinking, and I withhold my smirk. I love seeing this side of her again.

When I asked Jude what they get up to at the family crypt, she vaguely told me about some Druid traditions where they pray to their ancestors and will commend Lexie's body to them and pray for her safe passage. If there is another thing all the families have in common, it's that we don't really believe in heaven or hell, but we believe more in the people that came before us.

In single file, we leave the church and make our way towards the reception area. But before I leave, I pause to light a candle for my father. I think he would have liked that. As I enter the reception area, I have to work to keep the disgust off my face. You would think with all the wealth I just saw, they would put a bit more effort into this area of the church, too. It's just cheap tables, peonies, and beige tablecloths. Either someone fucked up with this part of the planning, or it really is just that boring.

Helping myself to some cake and coffee that the tables are laden with, I spend a few moments networking. It feels odd, like business is going back to normal, and Lexie

has already become a distant memory.

Trying to remain respectful, I make polite conversation with Autumn, Jude's cousin. Of course, all she can tell me is it was at her wedding where they found out about Lexie. Like I didn't already know that. Autumn bored me back then, and it seems marriage or a funeral didn't change that.

That's why I've planned a little welcome home party for Jude at Tao this evening. She deserves a little fun after coming back to this shit show. It's not much longer until I can get out of here and set everything up, and Mom will stay behind to represent the Undead.

Thankfully, the rest of the family returns, giving me a reason to end my conversation with Autumn, but my thoughts immediately turn to defense because Jude looks like she wants to murder someone. She storms over to where Sebastian and Alyssa are having a heated exchange, and I see Jude's eyes flash gold and her arm shift into something furry with claws. Grabbing Alyssa by the throat, Jude lifts her from the floor without much effort until her feet are dangling in the air.

The shocked gasps echo throughout the reception area, and I am pretty sure I hear china breaking from their surprise. Hearing the sinister growl coming from my friend, she practically roars at Alyssa, "If you ever try to come for my family, or even so much as look at them wrong, I will rip your fucking head off. Is that understood?"

You could hear a pin drop in the hall. Jude, taking on Alyssa so publically, is practically a declaration of war. As heir to the Undead, I should stay out of it, but Jude is my friend, and I know she would have my back if the roles were reversed.

Alyssa struggles to get free, but she can't shake Jude. That's another secret being carelessly revealed. Jude has worked so hard to hide her strength over the years and now, she's just publically flaunting it and putting a target on her back. What changed

between our conversation about playing it cool and this? Damn it.

I'm pushing towards them as fast as I can without making more of a scene, but Sebastian beats me to it. He approaches Jude slowly like she's a rabid animal and tries to keep his voice low, "Jude, please let go of my mom." Jude's arm doesn't move as her head whips to look at Sebastian. "I heard her! She was threatening you again. Today of all days!?"

Jude's eyes have dilated, and if she doesn't get hold of her temper soon, she's going to shift. Snapping my fingers at Dom, he jumps into action with his sisters to wipe the humans' memories. Jude's making it worse, having apparently turned her anger on Sebastian, voice rising, "I don't care if she's your mom, Sebastian. She's disrespecting you and my family, and I won't fucking stand for it. She needs to know her place."

Finally, I'm there, putting my hand over her still shifted arm, "Jude, my friend, I need you to take it down a notch. I think Alyssa got the message, didn't she?"

Alyssa nods meekly, which is unheard of for her, and Jude lets go after a few more seconds of squeezing, as if to make her point. Ignoring Alyssa's coughs, I take Jude by the shoulders and say, "Let's go get you ready for tonight's party while I see to the rest of your guests."

Chapter 12 | The Taste Of Freedom

Luca

Thank the Undead that the drive from the church to Tao is relatively quick. With my heels crunching in the gravel, I make my way into the club through the staff entrance. When inside, I'm greeted by the sight of the staff setting up for tonight's dinner service and party.

“Hey Luca! Things go alright with the funeral?” One of our waitresses asks as she places a red lamp on one of the dinner tables. I’m obsessed with the effect it creates with the red and black wall paneling. Satine is a feisty little firecracker as her name suggests, and I’m touched she remembered. Giving her a polite smile, I respond, “We only had one disagreement today, which is normal for us. Now let's get ready for the party!”

The shadows that were still clinging to me from the church fall away as I’m surrounded by the familiarity of the nightclub. Hearing cutlery cling against each other and greeting some bar men shining the glasses for the evening, helps soothe some of that unsettled feeling I’ve been struggling to shake.

Being a gay Supernatural is hard at the best of times, and even if I’m different, I can’t always draw attention to that. Having parents like mine helped though; they never cared who I love. They just want me to be happy. They taught me it doesn’t matter what life choices I make, as long as I’m okay living with the consequences of them.

Most importantly, they taught me that my happiness is not reliant on someone’s respect; both things can exist at once and have nothing to do with each other. I think it helped that Dad came from the Human Faction. He understood what it felt like to be an outsider. That's why I struggle to accept how horrible Alyssa and Eric are to their kids. Sure, we need to present as powerful; I get that. But when did that start becoming more important than family and being absolute dicks to your kids?

Shaking my head in disbelief, I refocus my attention on more important things. Tao is not just a club; it gives people permission to be different, to explore their darker sides and not have to be ashamed or apologize for it. Being here is the reminder I needed. Nothing is wrong with me. Heading towards my office, my phone chimes with a text from Silva to let me know she’s on the way there, too. She probably picked up my entrance on one of the monitors.

My first priority is to get out of these funeral clothes. Maybe burn them too. I want no reminder of this feeling of not being good enough, and the church represents that for me. Leaving my door open for Silva, I take my clothes off in one fluid movement until I'm just in my underwear and bend down to grab a spare black dress I keep for emergencies like this in my office.

I don't hear Silva's approach, which is standard for the Undead, but she makes her entrance known by asking me, "Was the funeral really that bad?" I finish pulling the dress over my head and straighten it before I respond. "I mean, it was fine; it's more the things the funeral brought up." My response is vague because I've seen we have company, and I cock my head towards Silva, waiting for an explanation.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:08 am

“When the donors heard you were going straight to the funeral, they were concerned you may not have time for blood. Evie here offered to come to your office to make things more efficient for you.” Evie and Silva create a striking pair. The donor is a curvy brunette with a sensual mouth, and Silva is a lot taller, leaner, and has beautiful caramel skin with her signature gray locks. She’s reminding me that when you’re wealthy like us, you learn not everything can be bought, and loyalty is one of those things. That is won over with kindness.

As a follow up, Silva adds, “Eat first, then we’ll talk business.”

Evie sits on my guest office chair, the black leather squeaking from disuse. “Wrist or neck?” she asks. If I had more time, I would prefer the neck, but since that usually leads to some form of sex, something I’m not keen to do in front of Silva while she waits, I go for the more efficient approach, the wrist. Evie offers her wrist to me, and my fangs snap out in response.

Seeing the old scars on her wrist, I try to match them as my fangs pierce her skin, and an explosion of flavors collide in my mouth. I’ve been told for some donors, the feeling of being fed on is like sex, where others have said it’s just an enjoyable high. Judging by the moans from Evie, I made the right call as it sounds like she falls into the sex category. She tastes exceptional, something like vanilla, with hints of chocolate and cinnamon mixed into one.

Taking a last pull of her delicious blood, I extract my fangs from her wrist and lick my lips before I smile at Silva. Clearly, she knows me better than I thought because I was hungrier than even I realized. Turning to Evie, I say, “Thank you Evie. That will be all. You may go join the other donors again, and please make sure to hydrate.”

Turning to take my seat, Silva takes the guest chair where Evie was only a few minutes ago.

One of the many things I appreciate about her is she doesn't fill the silence with useless words. When she talks, it matters. Yet it's because of her lack of words right now that I know something is wrong.

I sigh, bracing myself. "How bad is it?"

Silva checks something on her tablet she carries everywhere before she explains things to me, keeping her eyes on it as she talks, "There was...a rumor of a potential police raid tonight, so while I would have liked to wait for your approval on clearing the funds, I already paid the relevant people off while you were gone. It was a timing thing, and my worry was if I waited, we would have lost our opportunity."

Silva's right, it would have been better involving me, but I wasn't available, and she did the best she could. I nod my head, accepting it. She carries on once it's clear I'm not going to argue. "Because the payout was bigger than normal, it would be in our best interest to have a good month financially, so we can recoup some of our funds. Dinner service is ready to go. It's another full night of bookings. We have a new client on the money laundering side so that's a positive report. The staff is hard at work, and everyone is happy..." Her voice trails off, and I can hear the unspoken, "but."

"Out with it, Silva," I tell her, "what's so bad that it makes you nervous to tell me?"

"These rumors about Supernatural assassinations concern me. We don't know how it will affect our business yet, and some of the donors didn't show up for work, and Ryder doesn't know where they are either. It doesn't help that Storin is also in the donor room, causing a scene despite the repeated warnings he's been given."

Accepting Silva's report and assessment, I grab my compact to check my hair and makeup. Satisfied, I snap it shut and tell her, "Let's go. It's time everyone is reminded of how we deal with disrespect in this club."

Exiting my office, Silva and I make our way back through the club, this time a different part of it. We pass mostly dancers who call out a greeting, and I return them by name. Marching up the dim stairway that leads to the donor room, my eyes adjust to the growing darkness. If we placed a bodyguard here, unsuspecting humans will want to know what is being guarded. Instead, we've gone with the approach that if you don't know the donor room is here, you'll avoid it. It has worked for us so far, but just in case, we sound proofed this room as well.

Silently, I enter the room, spotting Evie in the corner looking healthy again. I'm thrilled to see we have a full house of the Undead in here, especially so early. But not all donors are looking as healthy as Evie, so I make a mental note to check we're rotating donors enough to account for the blood loss, and maybe we need to look into opening a second donor location.

I'm pleased to see my silent approach is still working for me. I lean against the door frame and clear my throat to announce myself. Checking my nails casually, I make my play. "Storin! So good to see you frequenting my club. I've heard reports you're unhappy though. You know we value your business, so how can I fix that?" I croon.

He leaps from his seat and stalks towards me red faced as he gives me a piece of his mind. While I don't appreciate his blood-breath and spit spattering in my face, I don't move. I can't have him thinking I'm intimidated by him. Many of the Undead forget about our natural fighting ability because, in these modern ages, we rarely need to use it, and it seems like Storin has forgotten that as well.

"This place has fallen to shit since your parents handed the running over to you." He spits on the ground, and while it's unsanitary, I don't stop him because I want to let

him dig his hole. Placing a sickly sweet smile on my face, I ask him, “Well, you still haven’t told me what you’re unhappy about? I’m happy to accept your formal complaint if that will help smooth things over?”

It seems he has no issue with digging his hole deeper, yelling even louder than before. “You’re disgusting, and you can go fuck yourself with a rock. You bring shame upon the Undead with your filthy habits, and you can take this useless whore with you.”

Even if I’m raging inside, I stay calm. That’s important for this next part. “What makes her useless, Storin? She’s here to provide blood, and by the looks of the fresh puncture marks on her body, she’s done that. Let me guess, you wanted sex, and she said no.”

I’m met with silence. I was fine while he insulted me. I’ve been called worse.

But insulting the donors, our literal life blood, is where I draw the line. They will be respected under my watch. “You are no longer welcome here, Storin. From here on out, you’ve been banned from this club, and if you keep coming, I will make sure you are banned from every Undeadinstitution on this continent. Good day.” I tell Storin politely, though I don’t expect him to listen.

Turning on my heel to give him the perfect opening, I immediately sense him coming for me. It’s the speed of the wind from his attack that he doesn’t account for. Whipping around low into a crouched position, I push my hand through his chest. This alone won’t kill him; it will just hurt. Unless I pull his heart out.

I squeeze it to emphasize my point, growling out, “I gave you one warning already. Consider this your final one. Next time, I will kill you. Understood?” His face is going red, and I don’t know if it’s from his pain or outrage, or both, and he continues to swear at me.

I laugh, shaking my head at him. “Really? While I have my hand in your chest? That’s just dumb.”

The threats still pour from his frothing mouth, so angry that the words are mostly garbled. But I’m over it, so I pull out his heart, and I let it fall to the floor with his body. Looking around the room with my bloody hand, I let that act as a message to the remaining Undead.

My voice is cool as it washes over the tense room. “If you’re unhappy with something, feel free to file a complaint with our management team. We’re happy to address it. But you will not be disrespectful. I can appreciate this is an unpleasant turn to all our evenings, so everyone gets a full night of drinking on the house.”

Turning to Silva, she hands me a handkerchief to clean my hands. Ignoring the rest of the people, I ask her, “Silva, would you mind getting someone to take the trash out? I will let Storin’s family know about his unfortunate demise.”

Leaving the donor room, knowing that Silva will handle the rest, I keep my stroll casual as I head back to my office, even if my heart is thumping from what I just did. I need to tell Mom because she’s still head of our empire, even if I’m hesitant to. I don’t want to diminish my authority.

Storin was from one of the Undead families, and in a choice of who was walking away from that encounter unscathed, it was always going to be me. He didn’t want to listen, so I had to resort to violence. None of this is helped by Silva’s comment on the assassinations, and that’s even more concerning than the life I just ended.

Talk about shit timing though. When I get back to my office, I find Amelia waiting for me. The first thought that goes through my head is that I would skip the entire party for her if she asked me to, and that thought shakes me more than anything else that has happened today. She’s enough to stop me in my tracks with her green eyes

and dark hair. Even though she's wearing jeans, a shirt, and beaten up sneakers, she's still the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. She's always seen more in me than anyone else, and I'm reminded of that now.

“I thought you quit?” I ask her.

Her face is guarded. “I did. I just came to collect my last paycheck. If you don’t mind handing it over?”

How do I tell her I miss my best friend? She’s putting distance between us that doesn’t need to be there, but because I respect her, I let it go. Grabbing her check out of my cabinet, I turn to give it to her to find her right in my face, soft chest right against mine. Gulping, with my voice low, I ask the only question I care about right now. “Will I see you again?”

After a moment, she replies, though her voice is bitter. “I don’t know. You’ve made it clear there can be nothing more than just sex with us, so I don’t see the point.” I don’t bother hiding the hurt from my face. I wouldn’t be surprised if she’s trying to make me hurt as much as I’ve hurt her.

Nodding, I lean to kiss her goodbye on the cheek, except we both go the wrong way, and our lips end up touching instead. I freeze because there is no way it could be real. It’s all I’ve wanted for so long, even if I’m not allowed to have her. It’s better than anything I could have ever imagined.

Fireworks are going off in my chest, and Amelia runs her hands down my back until she’s grabbing my ass. It’s sensual, sexy, and I’m ready to cross the line with her right now. Consequences be damned.

Except the knock at the door has other ideas.

Breaking the kiss, I look at Amelia and if “are you fucking kidding me?” was a facial expression, that would be us right now. She runs her hands through her hair in frustration, and for a moment, it looks like she has more to say but second guesses it.

Silva peaks her head into my office, and her face remains neutral, even after seeing Amelia and I tangled up with each other. I know she’s just doing her job, so I won’t take my frustrations out on her.

At least she sounds a little apologetic, “Luca, your guests are here. The party is starting.”

Silva leaves us alone again, but the moment's over. I sigh. Amelia mumbles something about a huge mistake and rushes out of my office without a backwards glance. And with her, she takes a piece of my heart.

Chapter 13 | White Girl Wasted

Sebastian

From the outside, my life looks incredible, enviable even. I’m sitting in one of the top clubs with access to whatever I want, and I’m friends with the owner. One of the trendiest DJs is here tonight, and he’s playing some of his latest hits. Has it only been days since Jude has gotten home? Even if she was gone for two years, it’s like nothing has changed with the four of us partying it up again like we used to.

My reality, though, is shit. Because I can’t have what I truly want.

According to my mom, I’m a prime example of what a Rogue should be. She brags this to anyone who will listen, even if she tells me how disappointing I am in private. So I’m either being controlled by her, pining for Jude, or killing people for hire. It's not much of a life. Then, you get moments like this in Tao that give me a reason to

smile again, even if it's only temporary.

Luca has gone all out for Jude's party, and I'm impressed at how full the club is. The Supernatural community isn't huge, but I'm pretty sure almost everyone is here tonight. The waitresses are scrambling to keep everyone's drinks flowing even as Satine, one of the waitresses I recognise, places a fresh drink and napkin in front of me. Despite the dimness inside the club, the warm tones of red beaming down from the chandeliers and red neon lights against the walls create a sense of drama. It's such a typical Luca thing to do. Thankfully, we're cordoned off in the VIP booths, which gives me the perfect vantage of my favorite sight. Jude swaying her hips on the dance floor.

I would be lying if I said I didn't want her. She consumes my every thought. Jude has embraced my darkness, and I know hers in return. I remember the day I told her how hopeless I felt about my life. She took my cheeks in her hands and told me that everyone had a bit of darkness inside them, and that's why we needed to find small moments to live for, to celebrate life. It's something I've tried to hold on to since then, even if it always feels like I'm failing.

Dom throws his arm around my shoulders and shouts over the thumping music, "How are things, Sebastian? It's been a while since we've caught up!" This forces me to take my eyes off Jude, which annoys me more than it should. Dom looks happier than I've seen him in a while. Though, I've never understood why people want to have heartfelt conversations in a packed nightclub.

Before I can answer, Dom looks down and pats his suit pocket for his phone. Grabbing it, something on it changes his demeanor. "Excuse me, I have to take this. It's business." He gets up and navigates his way through the packed club and disappears from sight. Turning my attention back to Jude and Luca on the dance floor, I can see they're still having the time of their lives dancing.

I hated myself for how I ended things with Jude, but I would do it again if I had to because she wasn't ready to hear the truth back then. She was always so sure that our love could change things, and that it would endure. I couldn't bear to take that hope away from her, so it was easier to make her hate me instead. Even though Jude knows the truth now, she still doesn't trust me because if I lied to her once, she believes I could do it again. She made it clear she's only tolerating my presence because of my mom's instructions that I should get close to her again.

I would be happy to spend the rest of the evening watching Jude dance, even if from afar, but Luca chooses this moment to approach me and interrupt my musings as she plops down on the velvet couch next to me, Dom still nowhere to be seen. Arms across her chest and her eyebrow raised, she's not impressed with me. "What are you playing at?"

Luca and I have a complicated relationship. Of course we're friends, but we disagree on almost everything. The only things we can agree on are our love for Jude and women. It's not a lot, but it's enough. Still though, you can count on most of our conversations ending in some form of bickering. Giving her my most irritating smile, I ignore her question and instead respond, "Well done, L; the place looks great. I'm actually enjoying tonight. Shocker, I know."

Luca swats at my shoulder. "Don't be a dick. Answer my question now before I beat you up in front of everyone, and we both know I could." Sighing because a packed Tao isn't the place to have an honest conversation, I tell her, "We can catch up later. Privately. All you need to know for now is that everyone knows where they stand, okay?"

Luca sizes me up with another glare, and while it seems I've convinced her, I can see she doesn't like being left out of the loop. Flipping her hair over her shoulder, she gets up and pauses before looking over her shoulder at me again. She really is annoyingly smooth. "Yes, tonight is awesome because of me, so don't fuck it up."

Luca sashays over to Jude and pounces on her as one of their favorite songs starts playing, and they jump around with the happiness of kids out for their first night on the town. I swear I even hear “this is my favorite song!” squealed over the music, and it's an effort to hide my smile. It's nice to see this side of them again.

It's at the point in the evening where the smell of sweat mingled with smoke machines and alcohol becomes overwhelming, and the only way to deal with it is more alcohol. Flagging down Satine for a drink, Dom's timing is perfect as he finally surfaces and returns to our booth, and I signal to Satine to bring him one too.

Noting Dom's dark blonde, tousled hair and untucked shirt, I clap him on the back as he sits next to me, and I ask, “Everything okay with the...business?” Giving me a roguish grin, he responds, “There's nothing like a bit of pleasure after you've taken care of the business.” Falling into a natural flow of conversation, I burst out laughing as Dom tells me about the party the twins tried to pull off recently. As pissed as he was, it really wasn't that long ago that he and I did something similar. His dad was furious at us, and I genuinely thought we were going to be skewered on the estate's iron gates when we got caught.

Satine arrives with an ice bucket, a bottle of champagne, and our drinks for the table, and she looks at my confused face as she responds, “Did you think I was going to leave my bosses table without a fresh supply of her favorite drink?” Grinning, I accept the drinks and catch Luca's eye to beckon her and Jude over. We may as well toast to being together again. Standing, I unscrew the cork of the bottle, and it pops as Luca squeals with happiness. Dom hands me the empty glasses, and I fill them all midway and pass them out to the girls. Once we all have a glass, I raise mine high to share my toast. “To being together again, and a reminder that we're stronger together than we are apart.”

Bubbles fizzle over my tongue as I take a sip of the champagne and immediately put the glass aside. I prefer my normal drink. Dom leans in to tell me, “You should come

over to the estate soon. I've got a matter that could use your brand of...expertise." I agree, but I'm only half listening. A curvy, pretty blonde girl from the Human Faction approaches me flirtatiously, and in another life, I may have taken her up on it. But tonight, her advances are unwelcome. Seeing the tense set of Jude's shoulders shows I'm not the only one who feels this way because when she turns around, she has murder written all over her face.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:08 am

Jude grabs the human by the shoulder and practically snarls at her to get lost, losing control of her temper. Everyone knows who Jude is and precisely why you should take that threat seriously, so the human scurries off. Jude then turns her anger on me, “What were you hoping to achieve by flirting with that human in front of me? You say you’re trying to win my trust back, and then you do that? Do you want me to hate you?” She seethes.

Raising my eyebrow, because we both know that it didn’t happen like that, I turn to Luca and ask, “Can we use your office for privacy?” She wordlessly hands me her office keys and grabbing Jude’s hand, I lead her through the packed nightclub, squeezing past all the gyrating bodies until we’re in the privacy of Luca’s office. Inside, the thumping of the music gone, I lean against the desk, crossing my arms over my chest, trying to remain calm and collected as I explain.

“You’ve made it clear you’re only tolerating my presence because of my mother’s instructions, and I can never have you the way I did again. So what was that display of jealousy about?” Jude stares at my lips and unconsciously starts biting hers before she quickly looks away and responds, “I don’t know.”

This time my temper flares. “Bullshit. If I’ve learned to communicate, you can definitely do it. Let me rephrase; you don’t want me, but your actions show something different. So what is it then? If you can’t have me, no one can? Am I not allowed to be happy without you?”

When Jude turns to face me again, the look on her face becomes predatory. Her voice is like a spell. “Maybe I’ve had a bit more to drink tonight than I should have, and it’s been a while since I’ve been with someone. I haven’t forgotten how good we are

together and maybe, just for a moment, I want to be a normal university student again. Not my family's future.”

She threads her arms around my neck, her body pressed flush against me, her mouth only inches from mine. There is no way she hasn't felt how hard I am, and when her breath shudders, it confirms my suspicion. When I brought Jude to Luca's office, I wanted to give her space to fight it out with me. Now, she's trying to seduce me. She may not trust me, but no one knows her better than I do. It doesn't help that I'm still hopelessly in love with her.

“What do you want, Jude?” My sanity is barely holding on by a thread. Having her so close to me is exquisite and torturous at the same time. “I don't know about the future, but right now, this,” she presses her hips into me for emphasis, “seems like a really great idea.”

She finally brings her face closer and presses her lips against mine. Groaning into her mouth, I relish the kiss for a minute before reminding myself that I have to do the responsible thing. I owe her that much after everything I put her through. Breaking the kiss, I tuck her hair behind her ear to give my hands something else to do while I ask what I'm dreading.

“Jude, is this really what you want right now? We've both been drinking. I've lost so much of you. I don't want to take advantage of you and give you another reason to hate me.” She bites her lip again, and I swear I will do anything she wants when she does that.

“Have you ever wondered that maybe I want to be taken advantage of? While I may not trust you with my heart, I know I can trust you with my body. Loving you has only brought me pain. But tomorrow, nothing will have changed between us.”

While some of that stings, it's all I needed to hear, and my mouth crashes into hers,

and we're frenzied trying to get close enough to each other. While I would have liked to draw this out for hours, we don't have a lot of time, and Jude fumbles for my belt buckle as I unbutton my shirt. Just having her hands on me again is enough to almost finish me. She touches something deep in my soul, and for a second, I want to close my eyes and savor this moment with her, committing every beautiful part of her to my memory.

Grabbing her hand, I take control as my pants hang loosely. Guiding her by the hips, we swap places so her back is against the desk. Hoisting her up onto it, I promise myself I will buy Luca a new office if I need to when we're done. Jude wraps her legs around my hips, locking me into place while she kisses my neck in my favorite spot, between my jaw and my ear. If she keeps going like that, this is going to be over before we've even started.

Lifting her head for a moment, she runs her hands over the myriad of tattoos over my body, something she's never seen before. "They're beautiful," she murmurs, and the last thing I want to do is talk about it now, so I lift her dress. Finding blue lace underwear waiting for me, I groan because she's a literal dream, and I can't believe I get this chance with her again after everything that's happened. A tear echoes through the room as I rip her underwear off her, and the only thing she says is, "Pity, I liked this underwear set."

Thankfully, this gets her back on track, and I slowly insert one finger inside her, and Jude's head rolls back in pleasure. She's wet for me already, so I remove my finger—I'm briefly met by a death glare—as I line myself up with her entrance. Holding her breath in anticipation, I slowly enter her, and she tilts her head back again, and this time she moans as her back arches further.

Sheathed inside her to my hilt, my breathing is heavy. I let out another groan because she feels so good, and I would do anything to draw this out for as long as possible. Picking up the pace, we meet each other thrust for thrust. With the sound of the desk

scuffing the floor, an ornament breaks, and I don't care, Jude neither. Pleasure courses through my body, and chasing that high, I increase the frequency of my thrusting. Jude sits up and grabs my ass, bringing me closer to her if that's even possible, her nails digging into my skin as we both find our release.

Chapter 14 | Blind Obedience

Sebastian

When Jude left, things were a blur. I had to make her hate me to get her to go, and it almost killed me to go through with it. Afterwards, between booze and any drugs that Dom would give me, I threw myself into numbing the pain. I dug myself into a pit of depression, and for a long time, I wasn't sure I would get out of it.

It didn't help that every time I closed my eyes, all I saw was Jude's face and how devastated she was when we broke up. Between that and the faces of my targets constantly flashing through my mind, I'm not sure I deserve forgiveness then, or now. But since Jude's come home, I've been noticing small changes in myself. The biggest one is I've started caring more, and I'm reaching for the bottle less. I've even set a new personal record in our Rogue training.

It's why I need to remind myself to appear indifferent at breakfast with my parents. You would think being vulnerable with them is a good thing, but when your mother is Alyssa Vance, it's something that only leads to problems.

The morning light casts a glow on the oak floors in the dining room, emphasized by the crystal chandelier. In the center of the room, my parents are already at the long mahogany table eating their breakfast while they discuss business. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee greets me as I find the sideboard table with breakfast options, and I help myself to the smoked salmon, deciding to make it a lox bagel. Grabbing a chocolate croissant to go with it, I find a seat at the table as far away from my parents

as I can get.

Things seem more strained between them than normal. I've known for a while that my parents weren't a love match, but to see them so openly advertise it, is odd, even for them. Mom looks nicer than normal, and I wonder what the occasion is, even if I won't dare ask. A tailored suit won't hide the evil person she is. Snippets of their conversation drift over to me. "Consulting is doing well, David. Did you see the new case?" I finish my croissant and move onto the bagel.

I zone out until their conversation is only a murmur in the back of my mind, even if now and then something else slips through. "Did you hear about the missing humans, Alyssa?" I see Mom nod out of the corner of my eye as I help myself to another coffee. "Yes, I did, and Eric assured me they're not a result of his rampage."

Determined to enjoy my breakfast even if they're there, I get comfortable in the plush high-back chair of deep burgundy velvet and happily munch on my lox bagel, wondering if I should go for a second round of breakfast.

When my mom ordered me to get close to Jude again, I wondered if it was a test, to see if she could trust me; because trust is vital in our line of business. I'm positive she never meant for my feelings to get in the way. Sure, she knows about our past. In fact, I think she's counting on it, but she can never know the true depth of mine and Jude's feelings. That's dangerous for us both. To Alyssa Vance, I need to appear as her good little soldier so I can keep Jude and myself safe. But if Jude can stand up to the very people and the system she hates, why can't I? Finally, Mom addresses me, and I wish she hadn't. "Clark called. His assignment is proving difficult...He's hoping to be home soon with good news and understands that failure is not an option for him. "

If she thinks that was a good conversation starter, she's sorely mistaken. She's killed any attempt at me wanting to engage if that's what she led with. What amazes me the

most is Amaya Van Helsing, our ancestor, the one that started the Rogues, evolved. But my mother won't. Because change could mean she needs to give up her power. My mom loves her power more than she's ever loved us.

The silence between us grows awkward as I barely acknowledge her pathetic attempt at making conversation, and Dad jumps in. "Ryder is getting antsy again. I know we all need these humans for our lives, but it's times like these I wish we didn't. We should go see him soon to help reassure him we can keep them safe with these disappearances."

Finally, a piece of conversation I can engage in. "I'll do it. Ryder and I have always gotten on. I don't mind." Downing my coffee and taking my last bite of the bagel, I push my plate to the side and excuse myself. Except, Mom has other plans in mind for me.

"Actually, Sebastian, I have something else I need you to take care of first. Ryder can wait. There is a Rogue that has disrespected the chain of command on too many occasions, and now they need to be dealt with. It would be bad for business and all the Rogues if it was known that this type of behavior was tolerated. The file is on the table on your way out."

Blind obedience, that's what my mother expects from her Rogues, and it never irritated me as much as it does now. Clenching my jaw and trying to remain calm, I ask, "I thought I was on a break to focus on relations with the Rhodes?" My mom's head whips around to me, as if she can't believe I spoke back.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:08 am

Her voice is ice, and I know I shouldn't have tried to get out of her request. "Being my son, you should be able to do both. You've kept up your training, so this tiny assignment shouldn't deter you from relations as you call it. You're my best soldier, so you need to handle my biggest problem. I've only explained this to you, for this reason. Once you're done, I need you to look into these murders that are on the rise. It's messy, like it's a baby Rogue with no training involved, and we need to get involved before the humans catch onto it. If we need to add time management skills to your training at this late stage of your Rogue career, well then clearly, we've failed you. You're dismissed."

Two backhanded compliments in the same year. If I cared enough, I would be concerned for her wellbeing. Leaving the room, I grab the file from the dining room table. The sooner I can get this out of the way, the sooner I can get some space from her. Heading to the weapons room, I open the file to see what I need and drop it in shock, like it burned me.

I dreaded the day that Kyla's face would ever be in a file like this. Next to the heirs, she's the closest thing I have to a friend, even if we haven't spoken in years. It took me a while to get the message through to her, but when she finally understood the dangers that come with being my friend, she made herself scarce and understood why we could no longer be friends. To everyone else, it looked like we grew apart naturally. But I never forgot her, and I always cared. It was easier to protect her if we no longer appeared to be close. Last I heard, she took an overseas assignment to get away, and I was hoping she'd made it out safely.

Who was I kidding, thinking that Mom was going to let the incident at the funeral with Jude slide? Alyssa Vance was made to seem weak in public, and oh no, we can't

have that. I'm Alyssa Vance's reason for everything that goes wrong, and if I asked, she would say it had happened because I didn't do a good enough job at winning Jude over.

The price I need to pay for that is murdering my friend.

I don't even bother reading the transgression Kyla's been accused of. I know it's bullshit, and there is nothing I can do to change her fate. It's a tactic to keep me in line, and it's working. Closing my eyes, I try to weigh up my options, and I have none. It's a decision between Jude or Kyla, and if I'm not careful, Logan could be at risk, too. I've never felt more hopeless in my life.

Steeling myself for what has to be the hardest thing I've ever done, I grab a few weapons and get in my car to drive to Kyla's last known address on file. Taking every long route I can think of to draw this out, doesn't help. I can't believe I have to do this. The last time my hands were shaking, this hard was on my first assignment.

Parking across the street from Kyla's house, I see she got her white picket fence dream, and for just a moment, I can be happy for my friend, even if I'm the one that will ruin her dream. I open the file again to double check the stats on her life. My blood runs cold as I see she has a child. It's at that moment that a child runs out of the house, chased by a man. That must be Kyla's husband, a human, by the sounds of it. Turning back to the file, I see nothing about the child being part of the assignment, and I allow myself to feel a small bit of relief. If that's even possible on a day like today. Kyla runs after the man with a backpack, and it looks like they're going on a school run.

Kyla looks older, but she's laughing more than I remember. She kisses the man passionately, and I hear the child exclaim they're being gross, followed by Kyla's laugh. Thankfully, they leave for school while Kyla goes back into the house. Weighing up my options, I determine the child must be around four years old. It's a

small mercy that I don't have to expose her to her mother's murder.

I've never cared about assignments before, but this is Kyla. What kind of evil monster wants to do this to a happy family? My mother, that's who. And she's using me to do this. I don't know why I expect empathy from a woman that had her own child executed.

While it's difficult to kill a Rogue, sometimes it happens on assignment. If we get caught and sent to human jail, someone is sent in to terminate us. That's why we could have shorter life spans because of the nature of our work. But we can live impossibly long under normal circumstances. Since we don't live under these dream circumstances, sometimes we marry and have children at a young age. This also means we have a lot more orphans than we should have. Something has got to change. This system is broken.

On autopilot, I brace myself for what needs to happen next; I get out of the car and sneak around the back of Kyla's house, going through her garden. Silently, I let myself in via the sliding door in her living room, to be greeted with the sight of her back as she does dishes.

"What was my supposed crime against the empire?" Kyla surprises me by asking calmly, as if I was a welcome, invited guest, and we are discussing something as mundane as the weather. "How did you know?" I reply quietly.

She turns to face me, freckles splattering across her nose and her blonde hair framing her face, still in the same pixie cut style I knew from when we were younger. Giving me a wry smile, it looks like Kyla understands what's supposed to happen, and she's already forgiven me. It's forgiveness I don't deserve, and it breaks something in me that Jude leaving, nor my mother, could ever have broken.

"I hoped you were being paranoid back then, but a part of me knew this day would

always come. You warned me about it after all, and I took too long to listen. I got too close.” She glances down at my foot with a smirk, “And your gait on your right foot is heavier like when we were kids. It’s barely discernible, but even if it’s been a while, I still remember what it sounds like. You really should train around that.”

I’m silent, because what do you say to someone you love before you kill them? How do you murder your best friend? I’ve never heard of murder of compassion. She sighs. “How are you supposed to do it?”

Looking around her living room, I’m overwhelmed with all the pictures of their family moments, and my throat clogs with emotion. “Gun,” I choke out and try to swallow the lump in my throat. “Research shows that housewives prefer to slit their wrists, but I’m allowed to go the gun route too, and I chose that...it’s quicker and less painful.”

Resigned, Kyla looks at a photo on her fridge of her little family, as if she’s drawing strength from them before she looks back at me, fierce. “Promise me you will make sure my daughter and husband stay out of this life. That they stay safe?”

I can’t do this.

Shaking my head, I tell her, “We’re getting you out of here. Leave everything, I will set a fire, to make it look like you died that way. Then we can get the three of you out of the country. I still have contacts of my own that my mom knows nothing about. You’ll be safe.”

She ignores everything I just said and asks where I want her. Confused, I look at her, my tone urgent, “Kyla, we have to go now.” But she remains still, looking back at me like I’m the crazy one. “Sebastian, the options you’re giving me is my daughter lives her life on the run, or I give your mom what she wants, and my daughter remains safe and still has my husband. We both know that if your mom even gets a hint that I’m

alive, she'll use whatever resources she has at her disposal until we're all dead."

My eyes go wide as I see how fast she's putting this all together. "But I'm guessing your mom will leave my family alone if I'm dead?" I won't lie to Kyla, but I won't confirm what she suspects because she's right. My mom is only going after her because of her connection to me. Her child and husband don't factor into this. I doubt she even glanced at them or considered them and the pain they would go through just so she could tighten my leash.

"That's what I thought." Kyla goes to the kitchen counter, pulling out a kitchen pad and taking a moment to scrawl a goodbye letter on it with steady hands. Then comes back to face me.

The guilt and sadness that have been swirling inside me since the moment I saw her name on that file turns to rage, and I shout at her. "No! Stop this. Why aren't you fighting back? Fight me. We both know you could. Make me hurt for trying to take you away from your family! No one would blame you for killing me in self defense!"

My chest heaves and tears spill down my face. Kyla reaches for my cheek and caresses it, wiping them away. So much love and tenderness radiates from her, despite what we both know is about to happen.

"Sebastian, when you love someone as much as I love my family, death is something you'll easily face if it keeps them safe. I knew I was on borrowed time, and I've had a wonderful life. Sure, I wish there was more time, but I regret nothing. Don't fear death, it's only the next step of our journey. But please tell my family about this conversation one day, when it's safe. I would hate for them to think the staged version of my death is real."

Shaking my head because I refuse to accept it, I'm unable to get any words out.

“Promise me you’ll protect them? My husband is human, and he doesn’t understand this life as well as he thinks he does. The Human Faction trains them, but it's barely enough for the reality of our lives. It would be better if you could help them disappear. Then, when she’s old enough, you can explain to her what we are. Would it make you feel better if I fought you for a bit to make it look like I put up a fight?”

I don’t answer before she strikes at me with a dagger, burying the short blade in my shoulder, and it hurts. Good. I half ass a punch and a kick that she returns, but my heart is not in it, and we both know it. Pain surrounds me as she stops with her assault. She takes a deep breath. “Leave. You don’t have to watch this.”

“No.” I refuse. “I want to be here for you. I don’t want to leave you alone.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:08 am

Nodding, she walks across the room to stand in front of her kitchen table. “I hope you find peace one day, my friend. The Rogues know you deserve it.” Taking the gun from the table, she places it on her temple and pulls the trigger.

The explosion sounds in the house and her body crumples to the floor, and the echo is all that’s left of my friend I’ve loved since I was a child. Kylais dead and nothing will bring her back. My numb state is the only way I’m going to get through this. Doing a quick scan of the scene, I see none of my blood is here. Taking a final look at her body, I leave. I won’t dare kiss her goodbye, but I swear, her death will matter.

Racing out of that house, I throw myself into my car and drive with only one destination in mind. With one hand on the steering wheel, I grab my phone and text Mom. “It’s done,” is all I say. Fuck her. I’m not giving her the report in person. I will kill her myself if she tries to blackmail me again.

Racing to the Rhodes’ Estate, I park outside and jump the gate and run to Jude’s bedroom. By now, the guards expect this from me, and I scale the wall to her bedroom to find her inside. That’s when the tears start blinding me.

Seeing the state I’m in, her eyes widen and concern floods her face. Falling into her arms, I hiss with pain as it pushes the knife deeper, even if it’s what I deserve. “Sebastian, what’s wrong? You’re hurt! Let me help you.”

Gently easing me up, she finds the source of the pain and gently eases the knife out of my shoulder. Turning, she grabs a shirt off her dresser and presses it against my wound, knowing that it won’t be long until the blood stops, and my healing kicks in.

“Do you want to talk about it?” She asks me.

Shaking my head, I collapse into her arms, and she holds me as I sob my heart out for the friend I just lost, and the daughter that lost her mother.

Chapter 15 | Bloodlines

Dominic

Banging pounds at my bedroom door, and half groggy, my eyes fly open. My shoulders tense, and the hand hanging over the side of the bed brews with magic ready to defend myself. “Dom! You said I must wake you up. So get up. Are you alive?”

Oh yes, Remi. I told her to wake me up in case I overslept, which I ended up doing. Shows me how well I know myself when there is a celebration. Bottles litter my room, and my head is pounding as flashbacks from last night go through my head. The drug shipment was a success.

“Yes! I’m awake. You can go now.” I shout back at her through the door. Pulling my other arm out from one of the girls sleeping in my king-sized bed, I pad across my bedroom floor and jump into the shower of my en suite bathroom. Even if I feel like a truck has run over my head, last night was fun, and I have no regrets.

I turn the water as hot as it will go, which does the trick, and after a few minutes of standing under it, my headache subsides. I could use my magic to get rid of it, but it feels like a waste of energy when options like this are available to me. Conserving my magic for when I really need it is crucial. Turning off the water and grabbing one of my fluffy towels, I dry off and walk into my bedroom naked while quickly getting changed into one of my signature three-piece suits.

Looking towards the bed and the satin sheets covering the girls, I see they're finally awake, both beckoning me to them. "Come join us again, Dom! Let's have a bit of morning fun."

One girl, I forgot her name, pouts, and I imagine she thinks it's sexy. Even if the aftermath of all her makeup from last night gives the opposite effect. Approaching her and leaning over the edge of the bed, I grab her by the jaw and give her the sexiest kiss I can muster up without my morning coffee. "Tempting but I've got a busy day ahead. You can show yourself out." I don't need to stay to see their gasps at how rude they think I am. They've served their purpose, and I just don't care.

My first stop is the kitchen for a coffee, and then I make my way to my study for the day ahead. I should stop at some of our business locations soon, but only when I've got a handle on things here. Leaning over the kitchen counter, I sip my cappuccino and mentally flip through everything that needs to happen today.

"There you are!" Remi walks into the kitchen, clearly with something big on her mind. With a quizzical look on my face, I respond with a hint of sarcasm, "Yes, I'm having my cappuccino if that's okay with you?"

"I need your help with my magical studies, Dom. You're the best Sorcerer I know, and I know you can help me figure it out." Between the twins, she's my tougher critic. I remember when she was a baby, how much quieter she was than Reece, like she was observing you to see if you deserved her love. When Remi lets you into her heart, she loves you fiercely and will protect you to the death. She's been nicer to me recently, and I appreciate it, even if I can't tell her that. She is never thrilled with the idea of over the top displays of emotion.

Even if she doesn't want me to make a big deal of it, my little sister needs me, and that makes my heart swell with love for her. I respond, "Of course I will help you, Remi. Do you want to look at it now?" She shakes her head. "No, Sebastian's waiting

in your office. Come see me when you're done with all the important stuff."

Making my way to my study, I still can't believe I pulled the latest drug shipment off. Sure, drugs are bad, and I've seen them destroy other families. But it's the very backbone of what protects my family, and it's all that matters to me. I do have a hard line at taking drugs, though, a rule that extends to the twins, and that's precisely because of what I've seen these drugs do. Between this shipment and having the heart to heart with the twins, things are getting better for our family. Our plan is working.

Entering my study, I find Sebastian sitting in a guest chair, waiting for me, staring out the window at the grounds. Turning to look out the window with him, I don't see anything and clear my throat to let him know I'm there. Walking towards him, Sebastian gets up, clasps my hand, and claps my back in greeting. Except, something is off about him, and I'm struggling to put my finger on what. My normally very put together friend is messy. His hair is rumpled, his shirt creased, and there is a haunted look in his eyes that isn't normally there. I don't know what he sees on my face, but I know I'm worried.

"Everything okay, my friend?" I ask him. His smile doesn't quite reach his eyes as he responds. "Yesterday was bad. One of the worst I've had in a long time. So I spent the night at Jude's, and I've just come from her place. I just needed to be somewhere safe while I work through everything that's happened, and what I've lost. But I will survive."

Accepting that, I share something that has been on my mind for a while, yet I've been hesitant to voice. "Do you ever wonder what would happen if the humans found out about us, and we lost everything? I'm responsible for so much, but sometimes, I can't pretend I don't miss my freedom."

Something dark flashes across my friend's face as he considers my question and responds, "Yes, but let's talk about why I'm here instead." Subtle change of subject

noted but not forgotten. Grabbing a manila file on my desk, I hand it to him. “What do you know about the religious group, The Children of Christ?”

Looking down while he pages through the file and scans the contents of it, Sebastian tells me, “I’ve heard about them; they’ve been giving the Rhodes grief. Jude was telling me about an incident at school with Brooklyn and the leader’s daughter?”

I nod, leaning back in my chair. “Rumour has it one of their sect saw a Rhodes shift, and now they’re convinced the Rhodes are demons. While they don’t have proof, they are making too much noise about it, and we need to do something. You know how these religious groups are.”

Closing the file and putting it on the desk, he looks up at me with those crystal blue eyes of his and responds, “You want to do Eric a favor, don’t you?” I nod and cross my arms over my chest. “I want you to assassinate their leader. You know they don’t know how to organize if you cut the head off the snake. The hypocrite is having an affair, and in the file you will find some of his movements with his mistress. We could chalk it up to she murdered him in a jealous fit of rage because he wouldn’t leave his wife. You know how often it happens.”

Getting up from the chair, Sebastian goes over to the alcohol cabinet and pours us both a drink, even if it's a little early for my liking. Waiting for him to say something, anything about this plan, he walks back to me with a drink in each hand, turning to give me one. “I can’t say I’m not intrigued. I would like to get rid of something causing Jude grief. But first, I want to know. Why don’t you do it? And why come to me, not my mother?”

Pausing, I take a sip of my drink. “I could use death magic, but that’s always more complicated, even if the twins were to help me. It would drain us for days. Your mom is a piece of work. I prefer avoiding her for business if I can. Even if you and I are friends, we both know having a favor from the head of the Sorcerer empire is a good

thing to have, which you would get if you did this for me.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:08 am

Sebastian goes quiet as he considers my request before leaning over the desk and shaking my hand. “I would do it anyway because you’re my friend, but I will take you up on needing that favor.” My face breaks out into a smile as I thank him.

With the matter settled, Sebastian turns to leave, but I stop him. “One more thing. I’ve been suspecting one of the Sorcerers of selling spells behind my back. It took me a while to figure it out, but I found the culprit. She should be waiting for us outside. While I don’t need help, I would appreciate your moral support while I deal with it.”

Sebastian nods and motions for me to lead the way as I exit my study. Following me, I can see he’s curious about what will happen next. My friend has never seen this side of me, because before, my dad, Dimitri Hart dealt with these things. Now, as the head of the Sorcerer empire, it's on me. Walking down one of the many passages, my footstepsechoing like some ominous sound track of what’s to come, I find both Katalina and another woman waiting for me in one of our lounge areas with the twins.

Katalina may present as a respectable businesswoman in her suit, with her red hair done up in a chignon, making her look older than her years. But that doesn’t fool me. Glaring at her until she squirms under my gaze, I turn to the other woman. “Amelia right?”

She nods, looking a bit intimidated. “You’re here for the assistant job if I understand correctly?” At that point, she gets up and offers her hand to me in greeting. There is a strength in her I’m struggling to place as I shake her offered hand. Her outfit is less fancy than Katalina’s, but she stands up straight and holds her head high; her emerald eyes never leave mine.

“Right, Amelia,” I say, “here’s your first test. This is Katalina. She’s a member of one of the Sorcerer families, and she’s grown up with our ways. She has everything she could have ever dreamed of. Instead of coming to me, her leader, and asking for help or guidance, she got greedy and started selling spells behind my back.”

The blood drains from Katalina’s face as she realizes her gig is up as I continue telling Amelia the situation we’re dealing with. “Katalina stole from the Sorcerer empire. She jeopardized our operations. Not because she needed anything, but just because she wanted to.”

Turning my glare back to Katalina, she tries to recover from being caught and pops her hip out while putting her hand on her hip like she’s trying to defend herself. “Do you have anything to say to yourself?” I challenge.

Katalina splutters like she can’t believe I’ve accused her of something so outrageous, even if she and I both know it's the truth. Our audience watches on as I say, “Your parents know the rules as do you. I’ve notified them about what will happen to you now, and they will not seek retribution. Goodbye.”

Blue magic weaves from my hands, the magic cutting off the air supply to Katalina’s brain, and she struggles to lift her hand to do magic against me. But her movements are sluggish with the lack of air to her brain. She’s too late. Her choking is the only sound that echoes through the room before her body slumps to the floor. Finally, the bitch is dead.

Turning to Amelia, I tell her, “If I accept you as our assistant, the only way you will leave this life is through death. Is that something you want? Are you sure? And what about Luca, aren’t you two...something?”

Her eyes flash, “I quit. I wanted something more. Luca couldn’t give it to me because I’m not on ‘the approved list of humans’, so I want to work my way up and prove I

can be.” I don’t know if getting caught up in Luca’s love life is something I want to entertain right now, but it's worth a shot, and it's not like I have another option.

Amelia seems to note my indecision, jumping in with that seductive persuasion. “While I have no official assistant experience, I was the top earner at Tao with no previous waitress experience. I’m a fast learner and can handle anything you throw at me. My feelings won’t get in the way. I need this job, and I’m the right person for it.”

Now I see it. What Luca is attracted to. I hide a smirk. “Alright, pop quiz time. We need to make a show of power for this empire. How would you do it? I’m assuming you know enough about us and our history if you’re here.”

Her voice is smug. “Oh, that’s easy. I’ve been around the families enough to know that they love nothing more than showing off their power to each other. A masquerade ball here at your home to showcase your power should do the trick.”

Sizing her up one last time, I have to admit it’s a solid idea, and I tell her she needs to plan it. She can consider herself on a trial run, and the twins will show her where she can find what she needs.

“Oh,” I think to add as I walk away, “Why don’t you notify Katalina’s family to come collect her body? Once you’re done, feel free to join us for lunch.”

Chapter 16 | Ignorance Is Bliss

Dominic

The worst moment in my life was when Mom left. It took me years to try and come to terms with it, and then Dad died. Then, that became the worst moment in my life. I’ve barely had any time to come to terms with his loss, and it’s been replaced by a new nightmare; Gabe’s call. He found Joshua, an up-and-coming Sorcerer, and he had

been murdered. He was close to my age, and I had big plans for him in our empire.

But now he's dead.

Death by a thousand cuts is cruel, even by our standards and entirely unnecessary. Even with our magic, we die like humans do. It's almost like the murderer tried to bleed the magic out of him. Some part of me wonders if I could have done something to protect him, but if the experience with Dad has taught me anything, we have to keep moving. The empire needs us.

Now, on my knees in the dirt outside in the middle of the night, I feel closer to Hecate, more connected as I ground my fingers into the dirt around me. While this ritual is definitely not as glamorous as the historybooks make it out to be, I follow the instructions and raise my goblet of wine to the sky; my cloak sleeves fall back as I recite the first prayer of the evening.

"Maiden, Mother, and Crone, we honor you on your special night. Please grant us your guidance and protection and accept this humble offering from each of us, your servants as a token of our appreciation."

Lowering my hands, I carefully rise into a standing position, making sure not to spill the ceremonial wine. Stepping forward, closer to the trees this time, I raise the goblet to the heavens again as I continue with the prayer. "Please accept this offering of wine Mother," I bend my head towards the trees in reverence. Pouring my wine at the base of the trees, I feed my magic into the soil with it, returning some of my magic to the earth with Hecate, where it belongs. Yew trees are symbolic, and they were first planted in our gardens years ago. Now, they're towering above me and perfect for us to celebrate The Night of Hecate with.

Taking a step back, I lock eyes with Reece, who's waiting with the tray of goblets for the rest of the Sorcerers, and give her a small smile. Turning to Remi who's holding

the herbs, I grab some from the bowl and throw them at a small pit of fire near the trees to signal the next Sorcerer's turn. Jax steps forward, and he starts with his prayer as I aim to give him privacy. "Goddess of Night, I beg you..."

The offering to Hecate doesn't matter. The only requirement is that it's personal, and that it means something to you before you offer it up. Tonight, each of us will go through this process before we close the prayer circle and eat together in a picnic under the stars.

My prayer signaled the opening of our annual celebration of the night of Hecate. It's the first one we've had since Dad died, and the firstone that I've had to lead as the head of the Sorcerer empire. When I was younger, Dad explained to me that when our ancestors came to America and settled here, they planted three sacred yew trees in our garden to honor the triple aspect of Hecate. Closing my eyes for a moment, I inhale the scents of the surrounding trees, and the symbolism of this moment helps ease some of the sadness I still feel about Dad's death. It helps me try to make sense of Joshua's murder. Hecate's night is reminding me that even if their body is gone, their legacy is everlasting.

All the Sorcerer families are gathered in a semicircle around Hecate's sacred trees as custom dictates. While we don't follow all the Greek customs for worshiping Hecate, there are some things we still do. Our families still honor the principle of secrecy and loyalty, and while we rarely wear robes for Sorcerer related events, tonight is one of the rare exceptions. Our robes this evening are deep blue with a silver collar, colors often associated with Hecate.

Back in the day, I would be considered the high priest, and because of that, my spot remains the center of the circle where I stand now as I watch each Sorcerer step forward and take their turn with their offering and plea to Hecate. We all stand in silence while we wait, and when it's not our turn, we remain in a meditative state of prayer to our goddess. For me, my prayer is obvious. I want to lead our empire to

greatness. What I also secretly want is guidance on how to deal with Remi's request to me yesterday while I helped her with her magical studies.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:08 am

“For days, I’ve been trying to figure this out, and then I realized you’re the missing piece. Your help, at least,” Remi tells me as she shows me to the living room she’s taken over. She plops down onto the couch and reaches for a textbook. Curious, I take a seat beside her as she grabs a pencil and scribbles away on the notebook before twirling it in her blond hair. Looking up at me, she asks, “If you were to swap the coins with a rare element like gold or silver during a tracking spell, do you think I could find someone I’ve never met?”

One of the first spells we learn when we come into our magic is a simple tracking spell. While it's basic, it's very handy to have in our arsenal. While we technically don't need an element for the spell, if we include one, we can track over larger distances. Typically, a regular coin is used, but in this situation, Remi might be on to something.

Rubbing my chin, I muse, “Gold is probably a better match from a composition perspective. The more complex the element is, the more complex the magic should be. Skip the incantation. It does nothing for our magic. It's the practice, ability, and elements that power the spell. Why do you ask?”

Remi looks back down at her notebook and makes another note before she answers me. “I’ve overheard your discussions. I know Supernaturals are disappearing, and humans disappear everyday. If I make this tweak to the tracking spell, we can do some good with our magic and help the police find missing people.”

I left Remi with a promise that she would only practice in private while I tried to figure out what to do with this information. The predicament is if we’re seen trying to do good, then someone else will challenge me for leadership rights. Humans have

treated us with nothing but disdain from the moment they knew about us. Hecate's escape from Europe proves that, which is why we've taken the approach of secrecy in our current business dealings. If someone challenges me for power because I suggest a change that threatens this, and I lose and die, the twins will die too. While it seems extreme, our families have always worked that way. Remove the threat to our existence, even if it's from within. If someone were to beat me, they wouldn't want to risk the twins coming for them in revenge.

But would I die, though?

It's possible. I've always suspected the three of us are different. The twins have a gift for creating spells, something our people haven't seen for a long time, and my magic endurance is a lot better than the average Sorcerer. In fact, I can do spells without elements for a longer period than most Sorcerers could. These things haven't been seen since Hecate's time, according to the records we have.

The final Sorcerer steps away from their offering at the yew trees, and something about the tension makes me look up. It's Jon, Katalina's father. In that moment, everything feels frozen as I can see him waver between attacking me and respecting Hecate's night. His grief comes out on top as he storms towards me amid the gasps of the Sorcerers, and Jon raises his hand at me.

By now, everyone knows what happened to Katalina, and they understand it. When our principles are secrecy and loyalty, what Katalina did is far more dishonorable than my execution of her. But I understand Jon's grief.

Beating him to the punch, I cast my own spell lazily from my spot on the circle, and I freeze Jon into his position. Sighing loudly, because for my first time leading the night of Hecate, I had hoped it would go smoothly. "I take it you thought I wouldn't go through with it?" I ask Jon. He mumbles something, and I realize I froze his mouth too, so I wave my hand to undo that portion of the spell.

“You killed her! Like a monster!” Jon shouts at me, and I put the magic back where it was, deciding it was better when his mouth was frozen. “NoJon, I executed her because Katalina went against the principles of the Sorcerer empire and Hecate’s ways, and you knew that. Now, you’re following in her footsteps by dishonoring our mother on her special evening.”

Pausing for dramatic effect, I look around the circle of Sorcerers to see I have their attention. I don’t want to execute everyone who disagrees with me, but when placed in a position of kill or be killed, what choice do I have?

“I don’t want to harm you, Jon. I’m going to let you go, and I will ask that you and your wife excuse yourself and go mourn in private. I would hate for your wife to lose two family members in the same week. The next spell I use won’t be as harmless.”

Releasing the spell, Jon regains the movement in his limbs and rubs his arm before he gives me one more glare, and he and his wife leave the garden. Turning to the rest of the Sorcerers, I say, “Come, let’s eat.” Remi and Reece take that as their cue to lay out the picnic blankets, and a few of the younger Sorcerer children help them.

Each family has brought a basket for the evening. We share with each other, which is another principle of the night of Hecate. Settled on the blankets under the stars, we begin our feast, Jon’s earlier outburst forgotten. We all talk like we used to and celebrate our goddess of witchcraft. I even see some children running around chasing each other like I used to do when I was that age. Impulsively, I lift my hand, and yellow magic weaves from the air as fireflies drift into the night for the children, and giggles fill the air as they try to catch the fireflies. A small smile creeps up on my face because the children’s laughter surrounding us, is how it should be.

As Sorcerers, we take our magical studies seriously. We come into our magic around ten years old, but even then, we don’t get to actually do magic for a long time. Instead, we study. It helps us to understand the basics of magic, hone it, and then take

advantage of the power this gives us when we're an adult. That advantage as an adult is especially important since amongst the four Supernatural families, we're the most human and the most frail. Sometimes staying alive is harder than it should be.

Except there is one catch. The bigger the magic, the more it drains us. Magic does not make us invincible. So we experimented with certain elements to bolster our magic and counteract the drain we experienced for the big spells. That's why understanding the periodic table is so important for us; something as simple as salt or water could save our lives.

One of my ancestors didn't take our studies seriously, and the size of the spell he attempted to make killed him. It's a story we all learn about from a young age. It is efficient motivation from our parents to study because none of us want to end up like he did. Our magic replenishes over time, but if we use too much magic at once without rest, it could have disastrous consequences. Because of this, most of us carry around a variety of one-use elements on us, so we're always prepared.

Looking across the garden, Amelia beckons me over, and she knows she only has instructions to interrupt if it's urgent. Getting up, I go to her, waiting to hear what's so important. Wringing her hands, she says, "Jude was looking for you, and she insisted it's urgent. She mentioned something about examining bodies and desperate for help with a tracking spell to find the culprit."

Turning to look at the twins and thinking about my predicament with Remi, I'm struck with inspiration. It looks like Hecate has answered my prayer, after all. Responding, I say, "Call her back. Tell her we'll do it, but she's going to owe us one."

Chapter 17 | Famous Last Words

Jude

Being born a Rhodes, I knew I was never going to be normal. Between our family empire and what we can do, I never stood a chance. But, it was nice to pretend for a while at university. While the circumstances that got me there were shit, I will forever be grateful for the chance. I knew it wasn't forever, but I thought I had longer than I did. Now, I have to keep reminding myself, "I don't need frat parties and normal human friends, they're overrated...right?" Maybe if I say it enough, I will believe it.

It doesn't take a genius to figure out why I keep waking up in the middle of the night thinking I had forgotten to study for an exam. That part of my life didn't get the closure it deserved, and truthfully, it probably never will. Now, my life has become dead bodies, magic, money and keeping it all secret from the humans.

"The police are here to see you, Miss Jude." Looking up from my desk at Beau, I can see the concern on his face. That's how I know this is serious, because police visits are frequent in our line of work. Normal even. For him to be concerned...I just hope it's got nothing to do with that Children of the Christ guy Dad was torturing. I never asked what happened to his body, and I don't want to know either.

Following Beau into the foyer, he introduces me to one of the detectives as he holds out his hand to me to shake. "Miss Rhodes, thank you for your time. I believe your parents are unavailable, which is why I've asked for you. This morning, a jogger reported a lifeless body a few steps away from your front gate. When we answered the call and investigated, we indeed found a body. Our coroner has confirmed the body was drained of blood, and the time of death was in the early hours of this morning."

The police holds up an image of the body, and asks, "Do you recognise this person?" Keeping my reactions to a bare minimum, I confirm I don't, and the detective continues to ask if I have any idea what the motive could be. Realizing he's going to get nothing more from me, we part by agreeing that if I hear or think of anything else, I will call him using the business card he gave me. Except, I don't tell him I do

recognise the person in the photo. It's one of Luca's Undead.

This is why I've taken to getting up before sunrise to go swim. There is a moment just before the sun is high in the sky, when the predawn light is strongest, and I feel at peace and like everything is going to be okay.

Standing at the pool ledge, I let the Druid magic that I was born with take over my body so I can shift. Immediately, my view of the world becomes smaller but no less accurate as my instincts take over and search for potential predators, as is common with the penguin form. Realizing I'm safe for now, I only have one thought on my human mind.

Swim.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:08 am

My legs tense as I dive into the pool, and my body cuts through the water like a knife as my black flippers and webbed feet paddle furiously. The scent of chlorinated water is harsher in this form, so when I get to the other side of the pool, I shift back into my human form. My brief stint in the water as a penguin reminds me why I rarely shift into this form. As cute as it is; the chlorinated water is too harsh on my coat. Shaking off the last phantom itches, I focus on stretching my muscles and training my human form instead. Just like a human athlete, Druids thrive with any form of intense movement. Balanced with training and proper nutrition, we're almost unstoppable.

Zeroing in on my swimming with a laser focus, I try to banish the thoughts of all the bodies in my mind. Every few days, another Supernatural shows up dead. A head injury, bled to death, decapitation, you name it. And then, when everyone has had a turn, the pattern starts all over again.

I lose track of time as I swim from one side of the pool to the other until something else catches my attention. While my head is still underwater, human feet appear in my peripheral at the other end of the pool. Coming up for air, I see it's Beau waiting for me. Shaking his head, he fondly scolds, "Child, you're going to burn yourself out if you swim for any longer without breakfast. Come inside. I've got some muffins in the oven and bacon on the stove. Let's talk about what's bothering you."

Beau leaves to the kitchen, and the scents of freshly brewed coffee and bacon start wafting towards me in encouragement to join him. Smiling, I pull myself out of the pool, and the water drains off me. Walking across the pool deck lined with sun bed loungers and shaded cabanas, I grab one of the fluffy towels from the shelf, and when I'm dry enough, I towel off my hair. Grabbing a fluffy robe, I wrap it around my body securely before I make my way to the kitchen.

Finding Beau busy in the kitchen, it's hard to keep the smile off my face. I have very few people in my life that care about me as much as he does, so when he gets bossy like this, I appreciate it rather than getting irritated. Pulling a tray out of the oven, he turns and sees me looking at him in the doorway and says, "What are you waiting for? Come, take a seat before you pass out from hunger," patting the island in front of him like I don't know where he meant.

The kitchen has always been where I've felt the most comfortable in our estate. It's the one place that feels like home. It's been decorated in honor of our single family holiday to the Amalfi Coast, and while it doesn't exactly match the rest of our estate, I love it. The bright yellows and blues with hand-painted tiles fill me with joy each time I look at them. I know Beau had something to do with this, and I've always been curious as to how he convinced my parents to go through with it.

Taking a seat, Beau pops the muffins out of the tray onto a cooling rack while he slices up some fruit and gets some cooked bacon pieces. He passes me a plate of assorted snacks. Using his stern voice, he asks, "Now, do you want to tell me what's bothering you?"

Using the food to buy myself time as I try to figure out how to answer, I munch on a slice of bacon and move onto a piece of melon, knowing that Beau will wait as long as he needs to while I figure out my answer. Leaving my complicated feelings for Sebastian out of it for now, I share my frustration about the murders.

"It's just...How am I the only one taking these murders seriously? Especially now that we all know they're Supernatural related." Running my hand through my hair, I continue venting. "I tried tracking the culprit in both my animal and human form, and that didn't work. Every few days, anew body turns up, and I'm two steps behind whoever is doing this. Dom is looking into a tracking spell for us, but they've come up with nothing yet. Even the police have nothing. It seems to be a dead end." I drop my head into my hands and sigh.

Turning, Beau fiddles with the coffee machine, and it loudly does its thing before he turns and places a cappuccino in front of me. “I know things are complicated between you and Sebastian, but have you considered asking for his help? His family specializes in this type of thing, after all.” His tone is gentle.

He’s right. Sebastian also has a contact in the police force that’s loyal to him and not his mother. I’ve been trying to avoid it because working together would just complicate things even more, and I don’t know if I can deal with that, too. But before I can even answer him, Mom storms into the kitchen. Bracing myself, because I know it’s coming, I expect a tantrum. Even if it’s far too early for her to start with her nonsense.

“Judith, there you are! I’ve been looking everywhere for you!” Her shrill yell makes me wince.

Fighting a roll of my eyes, I ignore her and look for something else to eat. I haven’t seen much of my mom since Lexie’s funeral. Not once did she think to check on her other children and how they were coping. Apparently, she needed some time in a treatment facility to help her cope with her grief.

Translation: She just wanted more attention.

Undeterred, Mom continues laying out whatever hair-brained scheme she’s cooked up today as I move onto eating bacon pieces straight out of the pan. I’ve mostly zoned her out when she beams. “I’ve got great news! We’ve finally selected a suitable husband for you. One of the Jekyll’s!” Choking on my food, I say, “I’m sorry, I must have water clogged in my ear because I swear I just heard you say husband.”

She just does that irritating laugh of hers. “Oh, you heard me just fine. We both know that nothing is wrong with your hearing, Judith.” My eyebrows raise. If she wants to start a game of who’s more bitchy this morning, I’m going to win every time. “If

that's the case, your memory must be failing because I've told you a million fucking times, I'm not marrying anyone. And it's Jude. When are you going to get it through your thick skull?!"

Pushing myself from the island, I leave Beau standing there. He's used to our bickering after all. I storm out to go find my father. He must know about this. Starting at his study, I furiously fling open the door, bouncing it off the wall, not caring who he is busy with. My mom catches up with me, and screeches, "Eric, I tried to reason with her—" Dad holds up his hand as he assesses the situation unfolding in front of him.

He glances back and forth between us, looking much like he'd rather be anywhere else right now. Probably some torture dungeon or whatever other shady place he would prefer. His jaw clenches, and he runs a hand over his scruffy chin, looking the least like the stoic, flashy boss I've known my dad as my entire life.

Mom tries again, this time, "Eric! Please speak to your daughter. I don't know what you want me to do with her. She's always so hostile and unreasonable. It's like she blames me for Lexie's death, and now she's threatening violence." Incredulous, I break Dad's stare and turn my anger on Mom, "Hisdaughter? Last time I checked, I'm yours too, unfortunately."

Facing dad, barely allowing myself a chance to hope that this was only Mom's plan, I ask him, "Please tell me you didn't know about this, and that it was only one of Mom's schemes?" I can see by the look on his face he's been caught out. It looks like he had a hand in this too, and my heart sinks.

Addressing me, Dad says, "Between the murders and your altercation with Alyssa, it's time for us to make some changes. We need to show we're still in control, and need the other families to know it too. A marriage alliance with the Jekyll's will do this and cement our power in the Supernatural community—" I cut him off; this time

my voice becomes shrill. “Please tell me you’re joking and not shipping me off like some broodmare?!”

Used to Mom’s shrillness and tantrums, Dad carries on like I haven’t spoken. “A wedding is a joyous occasion, and a few sons will help spread that message. Autumn is already expecting and doing her part for this family, as should you.” He claps his scarred hands together as he finishes, giving me a stern look as he does. Like he thinks he’s in the right, and I’m a spoiled child that needs chastising, and his job will be well done. I nearly growl, clenched fists trembling at my sides. There is so much to unpack in this statement, I don’t even know where to start. But Dad takes advantage of my silence and continues.

“Lexie was getting ready to do this, and then, well, we lost her. So now it’s up to you. I can always use Brooklyn if you prefer? As it is, we have the ball to attend at the Hart’s tomorrow night, and it would be a great place to announce this. With all the murders happening, we need something good to focus on in this community.”

That’s when I lose it completely and grab one of his chairs and throw it across the room. I’m practically vibrating with the contained rage. “Are you fucking kidding me? Do you actually care about any of your children? I’m not marrying anyone, least of all a Jekyll, and neither is Brooklyn. I swear to the Druids, if you try to force Brooklyn and I, I will run with her. I’ve had it with your emotional blackmail.”

My mom still blocks the doorway behind me and tries to assert her dominance one more time, and briefly, her eyes flash gold in warning of an impending shift. “Well, it’s not exactly like you have a future with Sebastian. It’s your job to provide for this family now. You’ve got the day to adjust to this news because we will announce this tomorrow.”

Out of everything I just said, this is what my mom took from it. I may as well be yelling at the wall for all the good talking to my parents does. My temper finally

snaps. In a move I doubt my lazy mother can track, I grab her flowery blouse and shove her against the wall. Seeing her pathetic form crushed against it is a satisfying sight. I've got no love for my mother, and if anything, today proves why.

I barely recognize my voice. "You add zero fucking value to my life. You're selfish, and you make this about you all the time. Say one more stupid thing, or call me Judith one more time, and I will challenge you to a fight in front of the Druids, and we both know I will win." Mom stutters and looks to my dad to intervene, her flushed face a comical mix between outrage and disbelief, but he says nothing as he sizes me up with his steely gaze.

"And me, Jude? Would you challenge me?" Turning my back on her, a direct insult, I face him like the man he wishes I was as I answer his question.

"No, I wouldn't because while I'm stronger than you, you're a better strategist, and because of that, I would lose. But for you, the idea of losing both your remaining heirs is effective, which is why I will take Brooklyn and run. You're both too old to have another kid, so effectively ending your line is the worst thing I could do to you."

My dad respects my courage, I can see that, and he shushes my mom and her protests with one finger. "How would you proceed then, if you were in my place?" He asks, curious and silences Mom with a look as she exclaims at my challenge.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:08 am

My chin lifts, and I meet his eyes coolly. “Solve the murders. Someone from the Undead was murdered and dumped near our Estate. Another Druid a few days before that. If the pattern holds, we can expect a Rogue or a Sorcerer body to turn up next. The bodies are usually dumped on someone else’s territory like it’s trying to play us up against each other. By creating stability in our community that we so desperately need, you send a message that we can take care of our own. Once we’ve done this, business can continue as usual. We need solutions for our people and not another wedding. We’re being picked off one at a time, and people are scared. I’ve got Dominic looking into a spell for me that could help me narrow the suspects down. I’ve also got another lead to chase down with helping me solve this.”

Mom pipes up, “Eric, you know it's our tradition for the females to marry, like I did—” Dad silences Mom again. “I know, Edie, but it's also my duty to raise my heirs to be fierce, and since you didn’t give me sons, this is the only option I have.”

Ouch. If I wasn’t used to it by now that would hurt.

He looks contemplative but not convinced. “The wedding is not off the table yet. We will revisit at a later stage. But for now, we will do as you suggest.”

"Eric! You can't possibly consider—"

“Shut up Edie.”

Mom stamps her foot in outrage and storms out as Dad delivers his decree, and I can’t help feeling a bit of satisfaction that I beat her today. Of course, Dad doesn’t let me feel it for long. “You’re not off the hook yet. Don’t forget, it's time for Brooklyn’s

first assignment. You fought hard for it, so don't let me down."

Chapter 18 | Rich Bitch Vibes

Jude

Just like I predicted, this morning we got the call. Another body was found; a Rogue's body turned up near the Hart Estate. Except, this time, the pattern is slightly different as the body has been hacked to pieces. While the Rogue's do have that pesky little healing ability, it's like each death gets crueler, and I just can't understand what's to gain here. Is it to pick us all off? Exterminate us? But who, if the humans don't know about us? And while I think Alyssa Vance is Satan in disguise, she's a proud Rogue, and the messiness of this feels beneath her.

Chicago goes by in a blur on the drive to Dom's estate, and I try my best to keep my frustration in check. Thankfully, the limo partition is up, giving me privacy, and Mom and Dad went in their own limo. I just don't get how everyone is so oblivious.

With the shitshow that is our lives, I can't get over how badly timed this masquerade ball is. We're being murdered, and the families want to throw a party? We should be throwing every available resource we have into solving these murders. Well, if there is one thing the Rhodes family excels at, it's pretending everything is okay when it's anything but. With the murders on the rise, the dumbest thing we could do is put everyone in the same room for the murderer, yet that's exactly what we're doing.

I even took Beau up on his advice and asked Sebastian for help. He connected me with his police contact Gabe, but Gabe had nothing for me. Before I left, he let slip that if he didn't get a lead soon, his bosses would replace him as lead investigator. The public was demanding answers, and well, he had none. It's baffling to me that the humans are taking this seriously, when we aren't. Is it because we're so used to being untouchable and generally indestructible?

I tried to convince Dad to call the ball off. I even tried to call in the favor he owed me. But it wasn't enough. He insisted we wouldn't look good if we backed out now, and we needed to "strengthen the community." The only concession he gave me was for Brooklyn to stay home, and even if it's a small win, I'll take it.

Another win? Brooklyn and I are finally getting on again, thanks to her first assignment going well, and it heals something in me, knowing I could give her the experience I was robbed of. Knowing her favorite animal form is a cheetah, I chose an assignment where she would get to shift into that option.

Walking towards the forest, which feels a bit out of place amongst the buildings of Chicago, I turn to Brooklyn as she asks, "What are we doing here?" Smiling, I tell her, "As you know, on our first assignment we need to showcase we can hold our own in a fight. In an ideal situation, you would never be alone, but it's important you can hold your own as if you were. So today, all you need to do is catch this suspect. Reports say he's coming through here, but you have to do it in an animal form of your choosing."

Nervous energy surrounds Brooklyn as she bounces on the balls of her feet and asks, "And then what do I do with him?" Holding out the zip ties, I tell her, "You keep the suspect subdued while I secure him. Then we go turn him in for the reward money. Druids always work together, but the point of today is to show me you can lead."

Nodding, she asks me, "What do I do with the reward money?" Shrugging, I tell her, "Whatever you want. A portion of it always goes back to the family, but the rest is yours to keep. So you tell me." Pursing her lips, she considers it. "I think we should donate to a charity in Lexie's name." Without giving a chance to answer, she shifts into a cheetah and paces while she waits for the suspect.

The hum of the motorway fades as we turn onto the cobblestone driveway of the Hart Estate. Flanked by wrought-iron gates, the driveway winds through hedges and trees,

glowing ethereally with fairy lights, making it look like fireflies are lighting our way. There must be magic involved. Sparing a moment of awe at how incredible the place looks, I put on my black and blue lace mask.

When we get to the top of the driveway and stop at the house, an attendant dressed in uniform takes my hand to help me out of the limo while my driver goes to park. Despite my mother's protests to control my outfit selection tonight, I won this battle too and selected a gorgeous royal blue silk dress. The heart-shaped bodice with straps around my neck is flattering, and I did a half updo with curls framing my face to complete the look.

My attention is captivated by the man standing at the doorway, waiting for someone. When he spots me, I realize it's me he's waiting for. He comes down the black carpet and holds out his hand to me. Sebastian and I would find each other anywhere, masks included. Taking his hand, Sebastian leans over and kisses me as he says, "You look stunning."

Leading me inside, he takes a glass of champagne from the attendant at the door and hands it to me before he takes one for himself and continues to lead inside. Attendants line the hallway with canapes, but I'm not interested in food. Not with so many eyes and ears on us, and the risk being here tonight poses.

Tilting my head back, I observe Sebastian from the corner of my eye, and he looks incredible with his black tux and hair gelled back. I can almost imagine we're a normal couple on a date night. It's what I would have wanted if things were different. If this Supernatural mess wasn't our lives.

The earlier fight with my father plays on my mind, leaving me conflicted about what to tell him. We are like magnets. We always find our way back to each other, no matter what we put each other through. But if there was one thing my dear mother was right about, it's that even if I wanted one, there is no future with Sebastian. Even

with how he hurt me, I've realized I'd forgiven him a while ago. I just didn't tell him that, and I should. He did the best he could at the time, and while I would have preferred it to play out differently, it's done now.

I tried to forget him for those two years. Even with everything he said to me, I still loved him. But I had enough self respect to not run back to him. Eventually, I could create a life without him, but in the back of my mind, he was always there. Even if it feels like I'm about to lose him again. But did I really have him to begin with?

"What's wrong?" His brows furrowed in concern, catching my expression. Looking into his beautiful ice-blue eyes, I'm reminded that this is not the place to have this discussion, and I just murmur that we need to talk privately soon.

When we enter the ballroom, it takes my breath away. It's like something out of a fairytale with gold decorations covering every surface. Mirrors reflect the crystal chandeliers casting rainbows over the floor. The guests are all dressed in their extravagant gowns and tailored suits with their faces obscured by masks similar to mine.

"There's Dom and his sisters," I murmur to Sebastian, and I try not to wave. In his black tux with a gold bow tie and matching mask, he looks like the head of the Sorcerer empire and not the kid I grew up with. I don't know what to make of that. Making eye contact with Luca not far behind them, she mouths, "Later," to me, and I dip my chin.

Moving inside, we all make polite conversation as we wait for the evening to begin. Never far from each other's side, both Sebastian and I network on behalf of our families. But I can't help thinking of what Brooklyn said to me yesterday.

"I'm sorry I've been so angry at you, Jude, I needed you and everyone to hurt as much as I did by losing Lexie. Everyone keeps pretending like she's only a memory,

except I still remember her! I hate feeling like I'm alone in my grief and like everyone has moved on."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:08 am

Standing here, seeing how we prioritize power over family, while I can't speak for the other families, I wonder when the Druids forgot their purpose? Family over all. Brooklyn was hurting, and we didn't fight for her. Resigned, I decide that while this may be our lives now, it doesn't have to be my sister's future.

“Good evening, everyone! Welcome to the Hart Estate!” Dom's voice booms, welcoming us all and officially kicking off the ball. We all turn to face him as he continues his speech. “Tonight I'm announcing my plans to marry a suitable candidate from the Human Faction. After all the horrible news we've had, I wanted to share this good news with you first!” Everyone applauds politely as Dom takes a sip of his champagne before he moves onto the next item in his welcome speech.

Using the pause as his opportunity, my dad chooses this moment to take over, and Dom struggles to keep the look of surprise off his face. My dad claps Dom on his shoulder and says, “Congratulations, Dominic! I'm proud of the man you've become, and the Rhodes family fully supports you in this next chapter of your life.”

Kissing ass is not my dad's best look, but he would call this networking if you asked him. I heard about the favor Dom did for us, and while I disapprove of the methods, I can't deny the result was effective. Unstoppable, my dad continues.

“I have one more announcement to add to Dominic's. Jude, my daughter, is also getting married soon to an old Druid family. She will strengthen our bloodline and ensure the future and protection of the Supernatural community.”

Gasps of surprise turn into applause as my face drains of all its color. Looking at Dom, he shakes his head slightly in apology, telling me he knew nothing about this. I

guess it's different when you choose to marry like he is, instead of when it's being forced on you the way it is me. My dad leaves his spot and snags a few canapes off a server's tray, and I try to look normal as I hurry towards him and hiss, "What happened to later? I thought we had an agreement? You promised you would wait!"

Popping his canape into his mouth, his glare intensifies as my mother appears at his side. His voice is a low hiss, sending chills down my spine. "I revisited and decided now was the right time. You just assumed otherwise. You're getting married, whether you want to or not. If you dare try to take Brooklyn, I will kill you myself. Don't test me. Alyssa has done it to one of hers, and while I've never had to, there is always a first time."

Tears threaten to fall as I say nothing. I have no counter threat, and he knows it. How can I take Brooklyn and run if I'm dead? I desperately try to keep my face blank under the mask, racing out of the ballroom with Sebastian not far behind me.

"Talk to me, Jude, what's wrong?" He rips his mask off as he tries to get closer to me and comfort me. "Is this what you wanted to tell me earlier?" He doesn't even look hurt at the thought of me marrying someone else, just worried about my reaction.

Looking around, I still see some guests milling around, so I pull him into one of the spare rooms. Here we can talk freely away from Supernatural hearing. Still, to be safe, I whisper. "What's the point, Sebastian? It's not like we have a future together. Why do we keep doing this to each other?"

We still haven't spoken about why we ended the first time. But Sebastian doesn't seem to care as he tries to get closer to me, and I fling him off.

I throw all my frustration and rage at him. "Don't you get it, Sebastian? We can't keep doing this to each other. A moment of happiness is not worth the agony I feel when we're done. Especially when I know I've got no choice in this marriage."

“I thought telling you the truth was the one way I would show you I’m serious about building a future with you.” He pleads, and it almost breaks me.

We have to let each other go, but I don’t know how to. That hopelessness I’ve been fighting off for so long crashes into me with the force of a freight train, and I try not to fall apart even as sobs wrack my body.

Chapter 19 | Clutching My Pearls

Luca

At one stage of our lives, we were monsters hiding in castles from the rest of the world. Now, we flaunt a different kind of power, one of wealth and influence. We’ve come a long way if this masquerade ball is any indication, and I can’t help wondering if this is the life our ancestors were fighting for.

But monsters come in so many forms, they’re not just limited to the Supernatural. I stood up to a bully, and it got me in trouble. Clearly, we still have work to do. I don’t care if Storin was from an influential family; he was a dick, but somehow it still earned me the Undead equivalent of a timeout. It’s the only thing that keeps me from running after Jude. That marriage announcement was a low blow, even by Eric Rhodes’ standards. It’s clear she knew nothing about it. It helps that Sebastian is with her, but I also know my every move is being watched.

As if my mom knows what I’m thinking, she gives me a sharp look of reminder, and I return a small nod and focus on the Sorcerer talking to me. Tonight, I was supposed to earn my good graces with the Undead and the rest of the families again, and going after Jude will undo my progress. My mom explicitly told me I couldn’t be seen being overly friendly with any of the heirs. I need to prove to the Undead that I prioritize them, something they doubt after how I dealt with Storin. Yet what kind of message would I have sent as an heir to our empire if I had done nothing, and just let

him treat me that way?

Privately, Mom admitted that if she was there, she would have done the same, but since she wasn't, she's the one that has been repairing the relationships with the other Undead families. Between that and the murders, tensions are at an all-time high, and there was even a rumor that I was responsible. That's why we decided that me remaining out of the public eye for a bit was a good move until we could gradually win back the trust I had lost. Fear makes people see crazy things.

"Looking good, Luca!" One of the Undead close to my age says to me as she walks past us, and it's hard to keep my smile of satisfaction to myself. Even if things are strained and the highlight of my day is now selecting a ball gown, I'm still Luca fucking De Greer and proud of it. I look incredible in my nude gown, tiered with lots of volume, while still clinging tightly to most of my body. Because I got the shade of the gown right, it almost looks like I'm naked, except that the dress is covered in a thin, black layer of sparkles, and it shimmers in the light as I walk. It's almost scandalous. I fucking love it. It will give these morons something fabulous to talk about.

The timeout hurt me more than I would like to admit. I get it and why it needed to happen, but Tao is such a big part of my life, and to have it ripped away from me so suddenly has been challenging. The Sorcerer excuses herself, and Rogue takes her place and launches into something. I can't be bothered to think of what, but I try my best to remain polite. I know I've met him before, and I know his name somewhere.

Alessandro, that's his name. I think he's one of Alyssa's cousins.

Alessandro loves the sound of his own voice as he prattles about the latest gossip in the empires, and I want to die from boredom. He's not doing the male race any favors, even if he is pretty to look at. He cuts an impressive six feet in his black, silk tux, and his bedroom eyes could easily pull one over on you if that was your kind of

thing. Looking at his pretty face would be quite enjoyable, but his voice makes me want to claw my eyes out.

If I just twitched my hand and took control of his blood, I could make all of it rush to his head and explode. That would be entertaining, although it would defeat the purpose of winning back trust. That, and this is what they mean when they say don't let intrusive thoughts win. It wouldn't be the worst thing people have seen here, though.

“Really, Dominic was lucky he caught Katalina in time. It could have been so much worse for their empire if things went on any longer. We should all look into our own empires and make sure the same is not happening to us.” I honestly have no idea what Alessandro is on about, but I nod like I've been listening the whole time.

Giving him my best false smile, I excuse myself to find anyone to distract me from the brain-meltingly boring company he was. Stopping by the Hart twins, I'm relieved to see I can finally tell them apart. I grin, “When did you girls get so tall? Stunners, both of you. You're going to break a lot of hearts along the way. Just lay off on the non approved human boys, will you?”

Raising an eyebrow at Remi, a blush creeps into her cheeks as she catches my hint, so I change the subject. I compliment her voluminous ball gown, the red chiffon so striking against her blonde locks. Reece, by contrast, is wearing a simple satin, black ball gown with a striking cat eye and red lip. The term “old Hollywood glamor” comes to mind. Reaching into my cleavage, I remove a vial of my blood and hand it to Reece, “For your spell work,” I murmur under my breath, and she performs an impressive sleight of hand as I continue with more polite conversation.

“So, what do you think about your brother getting married and expanding the family? That's exciting, isn't it?” I ask the girls. Seeing I've struck gold, the girls launch into all their ideas and I listen patiently while my mind drifts. The murders are bugging

me. While we don't have many, we keep our weaknesses under tight wraps, and unless you're from our empire, chances are you won't know them. Does it even matter though if someone has figured it out? Knowing the Undead are the hardest to kill out of the four families, I would love to know how they're still getting to us.

Not wanting to spend too long with the twins, I excuse myself and make a point of socializing with other guests like a good little socialite. One of the Druid families mention to me they have some money to move, and I remind him that Tao is there for his every need. Tomorrow, he should go to the club and ask for Silva. I also explain that we only take a small percentage for our trouble, and that's when I realize I can use tonight to network for Tao.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:08 am

I've never understood the name "Undead". We're very much alive. I blame that stupid legend of the vampires that humans came up with, the one that says we're nothing but reanimated corpses. Gross. We're born just like anyone else; with a few small differences. Regardless of that, if I'm seen putting the Undead interests first, and funnel that money into more blood donor facilities for us, that's a great PR move. I learned that from Dad.

Which reminds me of the deal I've made, that I also need to get married to further our line. I'm not happy with any of it, but at least I seem to have more choice in the matter than the other heirs do. Knowing Mom's only goal is for me to secure our family's future helps. It's because I know that which makes me wonder, would she accept a donor? Then I can raise the child without having to marry a man, someone I'm clearly not attracted to or comfortable around. Maybe I could even marry a woman and raise the baby with her, being true to myself and giving the empire what they need. My thoughts flick to Amelia, but I can't let myself even consider that fantasy.

I'm interrupted with my musings because I'm sure I smell something that shouldn't be here. At first I thought it was my imagination for having thought of her.

Amelia.

Following the smell, I find a beautiful woman in a green silk dress, and I know if she takes the mask off, I will find matching green eyes. "What are you doing here?" I whisper-yell, incredulous.

"Didn't Dom tell you? I'm his PA now. This ball was my idea." I catch her innocent

smirk beneath the mask. I've had even less time to catch up with Dom and Sebastian while wallowing in my self pity, and it shows how much I've missed.

I try not to gape, keeping the hurt out of my voice. "You just left without saying anything, and you disconnected your number. I had no way of knowing you were okay." Amelia's body language gets defensive, and a small part of me admits she has reasons to feel this way.

"Now you care?" Her eyes narrow behind the slits in her mask.

Looking around, I realize this is maybe not the best place to discuss this, so I grab Amelia's hand and lead her to Dom's office, where I know we will get the most privacy. Noticing she has a slight limp, I ask, "Are you okay?" I point at her leg, and she brushes my concern off with a fall she had the other day.

The door snicks close, shutting off the music behind us and pulling off my mask, I turn to face her, my arms across my chest. "Well? What are you playing at?"

I didn't realize that this move would elevate my already ample cleavage until Amelia's eyes dart down to them quickly before darting away again as she tries to remain focused. I lick my lips and shift on my feet. Her bottom lip sticks out petulantly, and it's all I can do not to cross the small room and catch it between my teeth. "Luca, I've told you a million times what I want, and you clarified I can't have it. So I'm trying to move on. Why is that so hard to understand?"

That's when the penny drops for me. I was so focused on Tao and our empire that I took advantage of what was right in front of me. I hurt Amelia deeply because I didn't fight for her. It's more than just sex, though. She was my friend first, and I miss her.

Taking in her standoffish attitude, I'm realizing the gaping hole my life has without

her in it. Making a split second decision, and probably taking the riskiest step of my life to date, I push Amelia up against the wall.

“What are you doing?” Her voice is thick, and I can hear her heart thundering.

Meeting her unwavering gaze, I let her see all the longing and regret in my face. “I’m showing you how sorry I am, and how I was an idiot for not fighting harder for you.” With our bodies pressed against each other, she seems to be more affected, judging by her rapid breathing rate as she says, “I thought you said we can’t have anything.”

I groan, tipping my head back. “I know. And I was an idiot. I will talk to my mom tomorrow and start trying to change things. You’re worth risking it all for.”

That’s all it takes for the restraint to snap, and our mouths finally crash together, Amelia’s hands roaming over my curves. My hands fumble with the neckline of her dress, practically yanking it down until it’s low enough to flip the cups and expose those perfect breasts.

I groan, nearly coming at that sight alone. I want to bury my face in them, but there will be time for that later. Kissing across them and down her neck, I leave a trail of fire as I lightly graze her skin with my teeth, making sure my fangs don’t get in the way, and she moans. It stokes something deep inside me, knowing we’ve finally crossed the line. I’m nowhere near done. I will do whatever it takes to pull more of those sounds from her sinful mouth.

Straightening, I hook her leg around my hip with one hand, my fingers gripping her thigh so hard I’m going to leave bruises on them as I lift her dress up and push her underwear to the side with my other hand, and then one finger slowly sinks inside of her.

“Look at me,” I tell her, and she practically smolders, her teeth biting into her full lip

as I increase my frequency. Adding a second finger, she gasps, and I'm spurred on by her desire as she clenches around my fingers. Withdrawing my fingers, Amelia gives me a murderous look as if she can't believe I've stopped so quickly.

A devilish grin covers my face as I lift her dress and get down on my knees, telling her, "Maybe me worshiping you on my knees will show you how sorry I am." My mouth finds her soaked center, and she moans, and my tongue finally tastes her. Amelia grabs my hair, and I welcome the pleasure, bordering on pain as her back arches against the wall as she grinds her hips against my mouth.

Looking up at her from my lashes, Amelia provides a sensual sight, her breasts pulled up from her dress, yet still fully clothed and her breathing heavy with my mouth between her legs. "What if someone walks in?" She whispers.

Removing my mouth for only a moment, "I don't care," is all I respond as I find her center again, determined to make this goddess come more than once this evening.

Chapter 20 | I'm Unwell

Luca

"Daddy, isn't it hard for you to be the only human in our family and married to the head of the Undead empire?" Dad steps away from rolling enchiladas and wipes his hand on a dish towel before he turns to face me. "Well, yes, Chiquita, it's hard knowing that I'm insignificant compared to your mother's power. But you know what's harder? Living in a world without her."

Leaning forward, I place my head in my hands as I lean on the counter and listen to Dad tell me his story again. I've heard it so many times, but it never gets old.

"You know, I was living on the street when Ryder found me. He gave me a home,

and when he suggested I marry your mother, he gave me a purpose. So at the end of the day, being human doesn't matter. Knowing I'm exactly where I'm meant to be, does."

Looking down at my warm pan, I struggle to keep my sadness at bay. There are so many memories in this kitchen, more good than bad, and today I'm honoring that by making the same enchiladas from scratch that Dad once taught me to make. He was the chef in our family, and he had this kitchen fitted out with every latest appliance you can think of. A kitchen that's gotten very little use since his death.

Dropping some homemade sauce in a pan, I add my tortillas one at a time until I have a nice stack of them, and the kitchen smells like onions and chillies. As I assemble the enchiladas, the loneliness threatens to overwhelm me. Dad's gone; Tao's gone, and if I don't act soon, I'm going to lose Amelia too. Dad made it clear that Mom was his life, and things have no purpose if you don't have someone to share it with.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:08 am

I can't help feel some anxiety at the fact that Amelia hasn't messaged yet, and it takes everything in me not to check my phone every few minutes. Focusing on finishing my dish, far too much for just Mom and me, I wonder if I can invite Silva for dinner.

Training usually helps distract me, but it didn't work today. Back in the day, the Undead were some of the strongest fighters amongst the Supernatural, but as we integrated into American society, we found we needed the ability less. Instead we developed our talent for the art of negotiation. When I was at Tao full time, I didn't have much time to train, but now, I have nothing but free time on my hands.

Knowing that I need to make a decision doesn't help matters. Either I tell Mom I'm ready to take Tao over permanently, or I wait for her to think I'm ready. I've never been good at waiting for other people, especially when my future is on the line. Pushing the casserole dish into the oven, I lean over the kitchen counter where my phone is charging and see Amelia still hasn't messaged. Can I blame her after all the times I rejected her? I wouldn't want to put myself out there again, either. Sighing hard, I make the first move; it's the least I can do to show her how serious I am about us.

"I'm talking to Mom this morning about our future. Just like I promised. Keep you posted!"

Having never been in love before, I have nothing to compare this to, but I think this is what they mean when they say, "butterflies in your stomach." Waiting for Amelia's response is torture, but it's given me the clarity I've needed. I've been so career driven that I haven't really lived. I almost lost Amelia because of it.

At the same time, after last night's events at the ball, it's time I catch up with Jude while I wait. Shooting off a text to her to meet me for lunch at our favorite hang out, I think, enough with the wallowing in my pity. It's time to start living for the things that really matter. Like the people I love.

Hearing footsteps sounding on the stairs from our second floor, a few moments later, Mom enters the kitchen talking animatedly on the phone. I can only guess with Silva, and she looks stressed. Well, she wanted me out of Tao, and this is what she gets. Trying not to smirk, I grab a bottle of blood from the fridge and down it before passing my mom one. She holds her finger up, letting me know she will be right with me.

Finishing her phone call, she takes the bottle of blood from me and downs it before she says, "Tao was raided by the police last night while we were at the ball. Nothing was found. We were just inconvenienced and losing revenue after we paid the informant hurts, but all in all, it has worked out fine. What's more disturbing is that another body showed up down the road from us. So soon after Storin, and in Undead territory...I'm concerned about how this will impact the empire.

Spinning to face Mom as she tells me this, my smugness flies straight out the window, and Mom sighs in defeat. "Is it anyone we know? Can I help you in any way?" I ask as Mom presses her lips together in thought as she considers my question, and I can't help noticing how good Mom is looking again despite the situation at hand. Her dark hair is also in a bun like mine, and she's barefoot in her track pants and matching sweater ensemble.

"You can't go back to Tao today. I want you away from this drama." She starts in her no-nonsense tone. I scowl, but she continues, hands up in mock surrender. "I know things were tense between us last night, but I just had...a feeling. Call it Mother's intuition. It was one of Dominic's Sorcerers, you spoke to her at one point, and while we're just getting over the bad press with Storin, I don't want your name associated

with a police raid or the body. Silva will take care of it. Is there something you can keep busy with today instead?"

As much as I want to give in to the petulant child within me, it's at that moment that I appreciate how much she's trying, how much stress is on her fragile shoulders again. Not only is she dealing with me and still grieving the loss of her husband, she's also having to deal with our people being killed off while needing to protect our business dealings.

Accepting Mom's decision, I make a point of responding, "But tomorrow is it. I want to go back to Tao. You and I both know it runs better when I'm there. I want to do this permanently."

Mom grins, actually clapping her hands together before wrapping me up in a hug. Blinking in confusion, I'm just about to ask if she's lost her mind, and if I should call a psych ward, but then she says, "This is how I know you're finally ready to take things over permanently. I needed you to fight for it."

My mouth hangs open, the two halves of my reaction at war; I'm enraged at the audacity of this and elated to finally hear her say, I'm ready. Then she adds with a wry smile, "Some of our most loyal patrons have also been complaining that you're not there, so the timing of this has worked out well."

Once I've had a few moments to process this turn of events, I can't help thinking how this conversation echoes my promise to Amelia, and this is now my perfect opening. "Mom, I need to talk to you about something."

Sitting down at one of the kitchen counters, Mom grabs a coffee and puts on her glasses while she waits for me to continue. I explain how Amelia and I became friends, until one day, it became something more than that. I swallow as I near the end of everything between us, surprised by the heartache recounting her leaving

brings up. Watching her walk away was one of the hardest things I've ever had to do, and I never want to go through it again. I need Mom to be okay with her and the future I want with her.

I take a deep breath before finishing what I have to say. "She quit because I rejected her. We never acted on our feelings because I wouldn't let it go that far. I know it's almost impossible to be with someone who isn't from the approved Human Faction, but is there a way for us? There has to be a way, Mom."

"You know," she says wistfully, "Dru was just like you. She was in love with her best friend, Renfield, who sacrificed herself so we could make it to America. It's another reason I didn't care what your sexuality was when you told me; who you love doesn't matter to me, as long as they treat you well, and you're happy. I know you're familiar with the story, but it sounds like you need a reminder. Dru had similar struggles because not everyone was as accepting of her. But it doesn't matter; you are not alone."

Trying to withhold the emotion clogging my throat, Mom continues with her musings. "Dru had children, obviously, because we wouldn't be here otherwise. But she never allowed herself to love again after what happened to Renfield. If you truly love Amelia the way you say you do, I don't want that future of loneliness for you."

Bowing my head, the pressure of digesting so much mind-blowing information presses on my temples, and my vision turns blurry. My mom notices and gets up immediately. She walks over to me and places her finger under my chin to look me in the eye.

Her voice wobbles, but is so full of conviction I could cry. "You are my child, and I love you no matter what. I will move heaven and hell for you if I can." She takes a deep breath in, and her eyes fill with regret as she carries on, "But there are some things even I can't change, which is the need to further our family. If we don't do

that, the rest of the Undead will revolt. So yes, you can still be with Amelia as long as the condition is met. As the Head of the Undead empire, that is something I can make happen.”

I nod, and I get out my phone and text Amelia and tell her I’ve got good news. Kind of. It’s not like we’ve exactly had the chance to talk about future kids, nor is it normal first date territory...We should meet later and talk about it. Seeing the time, I tell my mom, “I’ve got to meet Jude, but there are Dad’s enchiladas in the oven if you’re hungry.”

Giving me a sad smile, she responds, “Go. You should get out more and do stuff people your age normally do. Work will be there tomorrow.” Giving me one final hug, she looks lighter than I’ve seen her in a long time as she goes and puts on the oven mitts as I leave to meet Jude.

After a short drive, I get to mine and Jude’s favorite restaurant, where the staff knows us both by name. Finding my friend already at the table, my stomach sinks as I see she looks upset. “What’s wrong?” I ask her without a “Hello.”

Her miserable voice drips with sarcasm, “I have a fiancé. His name is Jayden, and I met him for the first time this morning. Apparently, he arrived while we were at the ball last night.” Sitting down next to her, I signal for a bottle of champagne and respond, “Okay...let’s start at the beginning. Your dad obviously dumped that whole marriage thing on you, and now you’ve already met your fiancé? You don’t even have a ring yet. What’s the rush? Can you maybe ask for more time, like with my mom?”

Jude laughs bitterly, “You forget, my mom is not like yours. If they had their way, I would be fucking Jayden already to get pregnant, wedding be damned. Autumn is pregnant already, a boy apparently, and now I should play my part too. Dad threatened to have me taken care of like Alyssa did to Sebastian’s sister if I didn’t go

along with things...so I don't think I have a choice."

Leaning over, I hug Jude. "We'll figure it out," I tell her. "It's not the worst thing we've ever been through." Thoughtful, I add, "Want me to explode your dad's head?" I was just imagining doing this last night, and I got carried away with the idea. I've never tested my magic that way, but I know I could do it."

Laughing, Jude wipes her tears of frustration away and changes the subject. "Where did you disappear to last night?"

Set to tell her everything about Amelia, my phone finally chimes with the text I've been waiting for, and I look down, and my face falls. "What's wrong?" Jude asks. Looking up at her, I tell her, "I've just been broken up with over text. After I convinced my mom that Amelia and I truly love each other."

A waiter sets a bottle of champagne down in front of us and pours me a glass, and I wave him on to speed it up. When he leaves, I down the glass and top it off again, still in disbelief that after putting myself out there, and keeping my promise to her, Amelia just threw that back in my face. And just like that, I know what rejection feels like.

Chapter 21 | The Alibi

Sebastian

On the odd occasion where business called both Mom and Dad away when I was a child, Clark always opted to go stay with a friend, and that left me alone with Logan. While I had to pretend to be sad about missing out on the action, secretly, I was overjoyed. Because every time this happened, Logan made a Christmas bed in one of our many lounge areas and got every junk food under the sun. We would stay up, and she would tell me about the old days of the Rogue's.

Our ancestor, Amaya Van Helsing, begged Hecate to be turned into someone that could avenge her murdered family. Choosing to become warrior monks, Amaya and my ancestors defended the weak and innocent while always remaining devout in their faith to God.

While I expect Logan embellished the story for me, that didn't stop me from asking her every question I could think of. We would watch bad comedy movies the rest of the night while we brainstormed what made us go from warrior monks to contract killers. Despite that though, just for that moment, everything felt normal.

Those were the moments I clung to when things got bad again, and they're what kept me going. But what do you do when the bad times exceed the good, and the good memories are no longer enough?

Recently, the training room has become a safe haven for me, and I've been spending every waking moment in it. What I want doesn't matter, so I punish myself with a

different form of pain. The physical kind seems fitting, since it matches what I feel on the inside. Every day gets harder, and I'm wondering if anyone would notice if I'm gone. Sure, Alyssa Vance would be upset if I was gone because how dare her soldier leave the Earth before she gave him permission to do so?

Jude now has Jayden, and—while we weren't exactly sweethearts—we had something special between us. Now, I can't even climb into her room, our thing, because chances are he'll be there. I know Dom cares about me in his own way, but he has his sisters, and soon he'll have a wife, too. Luca will always have my back, but she has her mom and whatever this complicated drama is with Amelia. What do I have?

Nothing.

Just the next assignment and more death.

Placing my weights back on the rack, I move onto the treadmill and set it to the highest tempo available, and I sprint. Like it will somehow help me run away from my problems. While my breathing is harder and the sweat drips off me, I maintain the pace easily, and for a few more minutes, this is how I run in silence. When the treadmill winds down, I grab a towel and turn around to face my mother, who breaks into a slow clap.

Confused, looking around, I see no one else with us, and the bitch doesn't even bother with a greeting and goes straight into my lecture. "You weren't at breakfast this morning so I could give you your next assignment. I don't enjoy running after you, so don't make it a habit." I'm not sure how she expects me to respond to this, but she saves me from needing to say something as she hands out the file to me. Taking it from her, because what choice do I have at this point, I page through it.

It's an effort to keep calm though when my rage at how she treats me keeps rearing its head. Having no questions, I close the file and reply through gritted teeth, "So, let

me get this straight. You want me to find the killer that no one else has found yet and dispatch them in the quickest manner possible? Is that correct?" Mom places her hand on her hip, radiating superiority and irritation. "Is that a problem for you? I would imagine my son could handle the challenge and bring honor to our empire when none of the other families could." Ever the scary boss berating her useless child.

I know when arguing is just a waste of my breath. Bowing my head, I accept it. I have no choice. How ironic and typical that this may finally be the assignment that kills me just when I was trying to find something to live for. Interrupting my thoughts, Mom says, "After that stunning display of Rogue superiority, let's train together. It's been a while."

Mom leaves without another word. I assume to change into training gear, and I move to the weight section again. This time, I stretch out my tight muscles. Many people neglect this aspect of our training, which leads to injury. Keeping the muscles loose and flexible helps in the more complex fighting moves, something I learned from a very young age.

If things were to end now, my only regret is Jude, and that we never got a chance to have an honest conversation about our feelings for each other. Now it's too late because she's being married off, a rite of passage for all of us, apparently. Instead, Jude has to spend the rest of her life with Jayden, not me.

It's not like our families encourage divorce. We only allow affairs and power struggles. Because what would everyone say if we prioritized happiness over power?

Now, Jayden gets to make Jude her extra sweet coffee in the morning and bring her home savory pies instead of dessert because she hates most sweet treats. Jayden gets to eat the pineapple off her pizza, because even though she loves it, she developed a mild allergy to it a few years ago. Jayden gets to learn how much she cares for the people she loves, and that's why she has such a temper, not just because she's a

Druid.

It's at that moment Mom enters the training room again in full work out gear and grabs a flail from the weapons rack and starts swinging. We're encouraged in our training to be adept at all weapons because we never know what situation we're walking into, and Mom seems to take this instruction seriously as well. Interesting.

She may be older, but judging by her footwork, she's still got it. Even if she acted like training was always beneath her. Mom turns her back on me for a moment, and I briefly entertain the thought of sneaking up and slitting her throat. It would serve her right for not paying attention, just like she's told me on countless occasions. It would be almost poetic, really. Alyssa Vance has taken so much from me and deserves nothing else but death. A painful one. She should suffer the way I did and continue to do.

First she took my sibling, then Kyla and now Jude. But I work to keep the rage from my body because deep down I know now is not the time. Not yet. But I can put her in her place. Grabbing a wooden rod, I throw it at my mom, and she turns just in time to catch it with her free hand, finally paying attention to the potential threat behind her.

"Fight me." I bite out.

Mom remains silent as she returns the flail to its place and takes a defensive pose. Not giving her any more time than that, I attack. She dodges me effortlessly. Man, she is quick. She twirls and runs up a wall using her speed, and just like that, I find her weakness. Her ego. Her pathetic need to show off with the more flashy elements of our gifts is what will be her demise. She yelps as I hit her knee with the rod, falling on her back while I point the rod at her neck. I can't help but dig in the insult. "If you were on assignment, you would be dead. Simple is far more effective. You taught me that."

She inhales, probably to reprimand me, but I talk over her. “I am exactly who you created me to be. Remember that too.”

Dropping the wooden rod and leaving the room because training no longer holds appeal for me, she shouts at my back, “Where are you going?” Turning to face her with a glare, I tell her, “To see the humans. Exactly like you instructed me to. I wouldn’t be surprised if the murders and missing humans are connected.”

Running up to my room to take the world's quickest shower so I can get out of this place, I briefly remember the first time I asked my mom about the Human Faction and why we allow them to dictate so much in our world. In a shocking turn of events, it was one of the rare cases in my life where Mom nurtured my curiosity instead of destroying it.

A few years after we came to America, we were in danger of dying out because our families were too small. While the Undead were the first to realize we could have children with humans without losing our Supernaturalabilities, the Rogues were the ones that made it happen. I remember when I asked why we never partnered with other Supernaturals; my mom had told me in her uppity voice, “No family should have that amount of power. Imagine a Druid-Rogue hybrid, or an Undead-Sorcerer hybrid? Their power would be unmatched. The rules are there for a reason.”

So the Rogues made it their mission to find the best humans suitable for this task and created the Human Faction. The humans got a safe place to live and everything they could have wanted while we trained them to become the best versions of themselves. Leadership has changed several times since then, and I have a good relationship with their current leader.

I’m ready in record time and out the front door, grateful to have avoided Mom again and on my way to the Human Faction. It doesn’t take me long to get there, and I park on the street instead of bothering with the admin. I have a code for their gate, sure,

but it's much easier to walk through than parking a car inside.

The beige home looks like it belongs to a normal family. Nothing about it stands out, but the bay windows give it a sense of old school glamor that seems to belong on this street. Punching my code into the security gate, it beeps and lets me enter as I walk towards the house. Walking past some children playing on the lawn outside, I withhold a smile because of the memories that they bring up. One of the rare, good ones.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:08 am

It makes sense why Ryder is so concerned about his humans; he makes a significant investment when he trains one. He is a businessman, after all, and for a human to disappear without warning is a loss of his investment. If you ask Ryder to explain it, you get two types of humans. Some want the glory of being part of a Supernatural family, and others can't handle the truth. Those that can't handle it are promptly dealt with.

That some humans are dealt with confused me because isn't that the loss of investment Ryder is so wary of? But his reasoning was that this was factored into his plans. There is always the risk of this happening, and while it's always there, it is much lower than the potential reward if he can complete the training.

Once the humans have completed their training, they have a very cushy life, like Luca's dad. Either Ryder trains them up to marry into a Supernatural family, or they go to the Undead donors. Alternatively, they can select the sex work option, and as I walk past some of the scantily clad girls, I can't help noticing that business seems to be booming.

Ryder is powerful in his own right, even if he's human. He's ambitious enough to be a Supernatural though. It's not enough that he supplies humans when we need them. Ryder also needs to remind us of the power he holds over us all. He knows far more secrets in our world than he should. It's why we entertain his demands.

Spotting me immediately he calls out, "Sebastian! So good to see you, even if the circumstances are shit."

Ryder's potbelly bumps into me as he hugs me, and his long gray beard tickles my

chin as he leans in. He's shorter than most, but what he lacks in height, he makes up for in confidence, even with his pockmarked skin. He flaps his arms at me to usher me on. "Come into the waiting room. I've prepared some snacks for us while you tell me what you're doing to ensure the safety of the Human Faction."

Chapter 22 | Intrusive Thoughts

Sebastian

One of the first places I always look for a missing person is under the highway bridge. It's an obvious place, but sometimes, those are the places that are overlooked. Ryder assured me that the missing people on his list hadn't run. They had been content with their lives until now.

While it's a nice change not dealing out death, investigating a missing person usually has a better ending than this. Throw in some happy tears with a reunion between loved ones, and we all leave a shitty situation feeling like do gooders.

But not today.

A brief flash of disappointment runs through me as I cross check the body that was carelessly dumped here against Ryder's list. It's one of his humans. Sighing, I put on some rubber gloves and bend down to her level so I can inspect her body for evidence. Carefully turning her body, I quickly deduce she wasn't murdered here. I say murdered because I'm familiar with the moment when life leaves a body, and as the blood pools at the lowest points, the muscles stiffen into rigor mortis.

This girl's body has purple hued pooling along her left side, but I found her on her back. There is no ichor, blood, or mess anywhere around her, and that's how I know this is only a dump site. Feeling her pale arm, it's still slightly warm too; it sets her death to only a few hours ago, which confirms not only was she murdered somewhere

else, but it was recent.

Above my hand, in the crook of her arm, a needle juts out of her skin. I know Gabe would be happy to rule this an “overdose” so he can close the case. He’s under immense pressure with all the open cases on his desk. If I didn’t know better, I would have believed the cause of death too. But this girl has no old track marks anywhere on her arms, and new drug users rarely come to places like this to get their fix. They go to more familiar places and only resort to a place like this when they’re desperate. Also, aside from her obvious death, she looks perfectly healthy. Her hair still has a glossy shine. She’s a good weight, and her skin is in good condition. The ultimate give away is the needle being in her right arm. According to Ryder's description, she’s right handed, so it should have been the other way around.

It helps that I murder people for a living because I’m able to spot things like this a lot quicker than the average police officer or detective, a perk of being able to stay so detached. Yes, it’s tragic to lose a young, healthy girl with her life ahead of her, but to me, she’s just a case. Another murder to be solved. If the roles were reversed, and I had to assassinate someone by drug overdose, these are the things I would have considered and posed.

The hairs on the back of my neck tingle, and for a minute, I get the creeping sense that someone is watching me. Is the killer waiting for us to find the body? Is it finally my turn to come face to face with them? Whipping around, flicking a blade out of my belt, ready to fight, I find no one. It's just me and the girl's lifeless body. After nothing happens for another minute, I turn back to the girl's body with a shake of my head, and I’m confident in my findings.

First the Supernaturals, now the Human Faction. Are they trying to wipe us out? Like they tried to do to our ancestors in Romania?

Either way, that answer isn’t important at this moment. Keeping Ryder and his

humans safe is. Without them, the Supernatural's future becomes endangered. Taking my gloves off and putting them in my pocket to dispose of later, I get my phone out and start walking back to my car. This was a call that no one else wanted to make, but it's necessary. The Human Faction needs to go into lockdown until we solve this. Ryder answers after two rings, so I know he's been waiting for my call, and I get to the point of what needs to happen next. I know he has prepared for this. Every empire has. If something doesn't change soon, we're all going to follow him.

We keep the call short, and after we end it, I follow it up with a text to Gabe to let him know he will need to cover it up because that's what I pay him for. This murder is part of our world, not the accidental overdose it seems, and I include my recommended next steps to keep the truth hidden. Jude was right; we should have listened to her. But instead of taking her seriously, we were too busy with parties and power struggles. This is what it's gotten us.

Inside my car, I briefly consider lunch at my favorite cafe as loneliness rears its head. Who would I call to join me for lunch? Kyla is gone. Jude has Jayden, and there is no space for me in their arrangement. Knowing I would be some awkward third wheel is much worse than losing her. Luca has her own stuff to handle. I could call Dom, and I know he would happily keep me company, but if I got too close to him, then what?

My mind circles back to Jude and my instructions to limit my interactions with her. Unless it's for business or another heir is with us, I'm not to be alone with her. The wedding needs to happen with no issues from me, or I could risk relations between the Rogues and the Druids, and we all know that Alyssa Vance would never want that.

Leaning back in my car seat, I'm conflicted because I'm not really sure what to do right now. Outside of work, I've got nothing left, and it's moments like this that drive that point home. Thankfully, my phone rings at that moment, saving me from needing to decide. Intrigued when I see Luca's name on the phone, I answer immediately.

“Hey, L, what’s up?” I ask.

“My mom’s missing Sebastian. I don’t know what to do,” she responds with anxiety flooding her voice. In all the time I’ve known Luca, she’s been fearless and unstoppable; this call is so at odds with the girl I’ve grown up with. Any traces of our usual bickering is gone as I get serious. “What do you need from me?” I ask her.

Ever practical despite her concern, she tells me, “Help me find her. Aside from the fact that I’m worried, if I don’t find her soon, Storin’s family is going to challenge me for the position of head of our empire. While I know I would win, there is a part of me that’s worried I won’t. Silva and Jude are already working on it, but I know you can help speed this up with your influence and connections.”

My heart sinks because Luca didn’t call me first. A petty part of me had hoped she did, even if I don’t know why. I just wanted someone to choose me first for once in my life. But, I’m no one’s first, and I’ve known that for a long time. Regardless, she needs me, so I’m going to shove the pity into the corner, and I respond, “I’ll be right there. I’m not that far away from you.”

Less than thirty minutes later, I’m strolling into Luca’s penthouse because she gave us each a code to let ourselves in if we ever needed to, something I’m grateful for now. Finding them all sitting on the sofa, I pause. It’s the first time I’ve seen Jude since the ball where everything changed, and it’s like a kick in the stomach to see her again.

Luca runs and tackles me with a hug as she buries her face in my chest, and this unnerves me more than anything else. The Luca I know is polished, controlled, and in charge. This version of her is about to fall apart, and I would do anything to stop it for her. Not wasting any time with greetings, I get to the point. “What do we know about Gabriela and how she’s been taken?”

Jude, doing her best impression of remaining neutral, responds, “Gabriela got called to Tao for an emergency, and she left in a rush. Silva then called Luca looking for Gabriela, unsure of who was coming into work since Luca is in transition to take over permanently. But that hasn’t been announced yet. Silva never called for Gabriela, and even then, she never showed up at Tao, and when Luca tried to call her mom again, her phone had been disconnected.”

Tense silence fills the room for a moment before the other man in the room, the one I’ve been avoiding for now, offers his take. “Tao cameras have picked up nothing, and neither have the cameras in this building. It’s like she’s disappeared into thin air.” Nodding at him, I immediately attempt to diffuse the tension I pick up from Luca as I hear her inhale a shocked gasp of breath.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:08 am

“Could you use your blood manipulation magic to sense your mom? I know you’ve told me before each person’s blood feels different, so you would know what your mom’s feels like, right?” I ask her. Luca shakes her head as she explains her power doesn’t work over long distances as her lip wobbles. Jude offers her hand to Luca, ever concerned, and murmurs under her breath, “Let’s go get you some rest, and then if you’re feeling better, we can brainstorm some new leads. I promise I will wake you the moment we hear something.”

This leaves me alone with Jayden, and it’s awkward at first because we both know about each other, but we’ve never met in person. Taking the first step, I hold out my hand in greeting to him. Trying to diffuse the weirdness between us, Jayden takes my offered hand with a warm smile and says to me, “I know all about your history with her. I get it. There was someone for me, too. We both don’t have much of a choice in this.”

Dammit. It would be easier if he was an asshole. And ugly. I’m even impressed by his large frame, and how it compliments his expensive suit. Armani, probably. His dark blonde hair and stubble with his gray eyes complete his looks, and I get the appeal. “Jude and I haven’t really spoken since you’ve arrived for obvious reasons, but please treat her well. She deserves that after everything I’ve put her through.”

Nodding, he tells me, “Is it weird if I say I think we could be friends if the circumstances were different?” Trying to keep the growing smirk on my face hidden, I deadpan as I tell him, “I don’t see how that’s possible.” Raising his eyebrow at my response, he says, “You’re right. I am being optimistic. Anyway, Jude and I are taking things slow, even if our parents would like her to be pregnant tomorrow. I can’t change our fates, but I can buy us more time.”

Before I can acknowledge what he's said, Jude comes back without Luca. She sounds weary as she tells us, "She's sleeping, and now we need to figure out what to do next. I'm fresh out of ideas, though. You?"

It's the first time I allow myself to truly appreciate her appearance. Jayden may not get this, but I do. She's frazzled by Gabriela's disappearance because Lexie's death is still too fresh for her. Drinking in her beautiful face for a moment because I don't know when I'm going to see it again with what I'm about to do, I take a deep breath before I share my feedback, "It's time for the families to go into lockdown."

I straighten my spine, letting some of the seriousness of the situation leech into my voice. "Once we've done a headcount and know everyone is safe, we can meet at the secure location with all the families so we can resolve this once and for all. It's time we remind everyone that we're the monsters to be feared.

Chapter 23 | Fuck It

Dominic

Since Dad died, the twins and I tried to make it a habit of having one meal together per day. With all the demands that come with running an empire, I'm worried that if I don't do this, I could go weeks without seeing them at a time. Where would that leave me? In the same place as Dad?

As much as I loved him, I want to do things differently. The twins are the only family I have left, and that means something to me. Even if I have to work longer hours, sometimes these meals together are the highlight of my very shitty days.

It's always those moments where everything feels normal, good even, where we tempt fate, and everything goes to shit. When the twins surprised me with a homemade dinner, a chicken Alfredo, I set aside additional time in my schedule to

listen to their progress on the complex spell work they've been working on. Hearing them explain it is a good reminder of what I'm fighting for. But my phone keeps lighting up like a Christmas tree. Normally, I keep it around for emergencies, but I make a point of not answering calls while I'm having meals with the twins.

And Sebastian definitely doesn't qualify as an emergency.

It's only when I see a text from him after the latest missed call that I start thinking I've been too quick to dismiss him. Calling him back, I say, "This better be important, I'm with the twins." He gets straight to the point as he responds, "It's time for the families to go into lockdown."

Looking at the twins' concerned faces because they know the rule I have, my only response is, "Understood," as I end the call. "Hold on, let me get Amelia. She needs to be here for this." Getting up from the table, I call for her to join us. It's been raining the whole day, but now the thunder starts, and it's an effort not to flinch at the ominous tone it sets. Turning to face the girls, I try to give them a crash course in lockdown protocol.

"When our families escaped Europe, they recognised the need to have a long-term plan in place in case they were ever faced with a similar situation." I pause, taking a sip of my drink before continuing. "Dad mentioned it to me before he passed, but we never went into detail because we thought we had more time. After his death, I went through his notes, and they said the lockdown happened every time there was an event which threatened our secret, our lives, or our money. The Salem witch trials were one case, and I believe there was another witch trials case in Germany somewhere in between."

Remi interrupts me, "We're going into lockdown, aren't we, because of the murders?"

With a grim look on my face, I confirm her suspicion. “We are. From what I’ve been able to piece together, each family presents a plan to solve the crisis moment we’re in. It usually includes their connections, influence and abilities in some way. We then each vote, until we find a solution that works for us all. The point is not to leave the sit down until we all agree. I’m going to call the other Sorcerer families to convene here urgently, and then the rest of the Supernatural families will follow soon thereafter for the sit down to begin.”

Concerned about how Amelia will take this development, because it’s not exactly in the assistant job description, I’m impressed to see how well she’s handling it, and taking to our life. She may have started with no experience, but she acts like she was born for it. Addressing her, I add, “It’s not traditional to have a human assistant. Humans are usually reserved for...other parts of our lives. You may get some flack from the others for this. After you’ve checked everyone is here, stay out of sight as much as possible. If I’m not around, stay close to the girls. They will protect you if trouble starts while I’m not around.”

From the tension in her body language, I can see she’s not impressed with this, but she accepts my direction. The twins take the news better than I expected, and I quickly make five successive phone calls to each of the Sorcerer families so they know they should be here soon. Amelia tries to clear our dinner plates while I plan, and I wave my hand at her, indicating she should leave it.

Amelia speaks up, “Dom, do you need us to prepare anything for the families?” Shaking my head, I tell her everything has always been ready, and she just needs to do her part while the rest of the heads of the empires and I come up with a plan.

As I say that, I suddenly realize that all traces of what we’ve been doing with Remi’s spell work need to be hidden from the company we’re about to receive. Relieved that I remembered in the nick of time, I turn back to the twins and say, “We don’t have long before everyone arrives. You need to hide all the notes and elements from the

tracking spell we've been practicing. We can not have the families knowing we're trying to do good with magic. Get to it." Wide eyed, the twins race off to cover their tracks, and it's not long before the doorbell rings.

Dammit. I thought we had more time.

Seeing Amelia is close to me like I instructed, I murmur, "stay close," as I answer the door. The twins are nowhere to be found yet, which tells me they're still busy, so I show the first family into the waiting room, trying to buy them as much time as possible. Even if their reception to Amelia is frosty, they tolerate her, and I'm comfortable letting her take over from me after I've welcomed them. My presence should be enough to keep everyone in line while she does her thing. I hear the next family arrive, and it's all happening so fast now. I underestimated how efficient we could all be when it counts, and I'm proud of my people. Shooting off a quick text message, I confirm with Sebastian that the lockdown is in motion.

"It's happening quickly. Exactly like we wanted it to."

His response comes quickly afterwards, and he lets me know it's the same for him, and we're the last empire to go into lockdown. It won't be long until the rest of the families join us. I'm about to respond when a commotion on the other side of the large room catches my attention.

After the night of Hecate, I considered bringing Jax into my inner circle. Until I have a child of my own or one of the twins takes over, it makes sense to have a back up plan since Dad didn't. But seeing him argue with Remi and Amelia quickly ends that idea. I'm impressed with Amelia's bravery as she tries her best to diffuse the situation, something most humans wouldn't attempt. Appreciating the irony of the situation because I'm pretty sure Remi had a crush on Jax at some stage with his dark skin tone and golden hair, I rush over to them to solve the issue.

“What’s this about?” I demand.

Jax shows me his fingers. I see charcoal residue on them as he sneers at me. “What are you doing with charcoal in your house, Dom? We all know that’s an element that shouldn’t be used in a spell. Are you trying to do good with your magic? You know how the families feel about that. Humans have always turned their back on us, so why should we bail them out of their problems? You’re not fit to lead this empire if so.”

Narrowing my eyes, I pause as I consider how to handle this. This is a very dramatic leap for him to make, especially for someone that’s just entered my house. It doesn’t matter that he’s right. It’s that intelligence he’s displaying right now that made me consider bringing him into my inner circle, I just never expected it to backfire like this.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:08 am

But tonight is another matter. It's about survival, and I need to bluff my way out of this.

Staring him down under my glare, I can see him shift on his feet because he's getting uncomfortable. Good. Twisting my hand at my side, no one notices the blue magic coming from my hand as Jax's hands fly to his head, trembling and scratching at his widening eyes.

"Do you feel that, Jax?" I croon. "You're now blind. Continue like this, and I'll sew your mouth shut and take away your ability to hear. Imagine life without senses? I think that's a fate worse than death. But you can't confirm that, can you? Because you can't talk or hear me. Total. Sensory. Deprivation." Turning to face the rest of the families, I see them watching our every move. Good. Relaxing the spell on Jax, I don't let him go just yet as I tell him, "We're being picked off like animals, and while I'm trying to protect us, you dare to come into my home looking for safety and have a go at my sister. You accuse me of treachery and question my leadership. Apologize, now. Consider that your one and only warning."

Fear is written all over Jax's face as he apologizes and tries to make himself as small as possible and remain out of my path of wrath. Adding as much venom as I can into my voice, I turn to address the families in the room. "It would benefit you to work with me, not against me. I've fortified this home with a protection spell, so you're safe here. Each empire will do the same, and when their people are safe, they're coming here to figure out a plan to end this. Are there questions?"

I'm met with silence as the Sorcerers look at me with their stony faces, and I'm getting fed up. "Amelia, Reece, and Remi. Please show Jax to a private quarter and

lock him in there, since I can't trust him around you while I'm away. When that's done, show the rest of the families to their rooms for the night."

As I leave the room, I remind Remi under my breath as I pass her she can't miss anything again, and based on the tense set of her shoulders, I can see she gets it.

When a lockdown happens, the family's house that we meet at is picked at random to keep it neutral, according to Dad's notes. Except, no one knows I altered the selection process to showcase it should be our house. I need everyone to be here.

The doorbell rings for the last time this evening, and I try to ignore the anxiety crawling up my chest again. I've been so good at managing it recently, but tonight, it's getting harder. There is so much at risk.

Opening the front door, I see Eric and Edie Rhodes at the front of the pack as I usher them into my home with the other Supernaturals close behind them. They don't even question that I'm answering the door. I show them to the fanciest dining room we have, a different one to where I just had dinner. This one, I specifically prepared for the sit down.

"Please, feel free to help yourself to refreshments, and if there is something you want that you can't see, let me know. I'm happy to have it brought in. I want you to be comfortable in my home."

Jude puts her umbrella in the stand by the door as she joins the Druid Empire, led by her father and mother, Eric and Edie Rhodes. The Undead only have Luca De Greer as she hangs her rain jacket on the coat stand. She and I have that in common. But, despite Sebastian's warning that she was falling apart with her mom's disappearance, tonight, she looks poised, elegant. Ready to run her family's empire. She and I have so many things in common, especially tonight. It seems Luca doesn't trust anyone else either, or she just doesn't know she should. And the group is completed by

Alyssa and David Vance for the Rogue Empire, but their sons, Sebastian and Clark, are nowhere to be seen.

Eric starts complaining about something, I'm not really listening because I can let him have this small moment where he thinks he's in power. Predictable really because I counted on it. It's what helps me get to my seat at the table, an important part of what needs to happen next. Checking the time, I know I have to start soon, but Sebastian is late, which is unlike him. Just as I'm finishing that thought, he strides into the room with water droplets running down his face and draws a gun in a fast move that's almost impossible to track.

Aiming it at his mother's head, she has no time to react. He pulls the trigger.

The explosion echoes throughout the room as Alyssa Vance's body collapses to the dining room table, life having left her body and blank eyes staring unseeing at the frozen, gaping faces around the room.

"That was for Kyla."

Chapter 24 | Good Luck Babe

Dominic

No one screams; it's not our style. We're surrounded by death too frequently to be shocked by it. Death is just another life event for us. But with Alyssa's still warm body as a reminder, they go on the defense from the threat that just walked in the front door. Seeing the gold of Eric's eyes flash, it signals his shift is about to start, and when I see Luca's fangs come out, it's my turn to step in, knowing I only have a few seconds before things get ugly. Raising my hands high in the air, the blue-colored magic leaves my hands as it weaves around everyone, forcing them back into their chairs and holding their bodies in place with only their heads and jaws free. It's a

complex spell, but I've prepared for it.

We just need them to listen. If only they knew how much worse it's going to get.

Checking on Sebastian from the corner of my eye while I finish my spell, I see my usually compassionate friend has adopted his ruthless killer persona for the evening. If evil incarnate had a human form, it would have been Alyssa Vance. That bitch deserved what was coming to her. Sebastian and I are united in our goal tonight of doing what needs to be done so we can survive.

When I asked Sebastian to come to my office to talk about my plans for the Children of Christ religious group, I don't know what prompted him to let me in on the plan. There was no way he could have known what I was up to with the twins and their spell work. It was a risk on his part because it could have gone the other way. I could have told the other families.

When he told me about the plan, and highlighted that no one could know, he had to repeat it a few times so I understood the severity of what we were about to do. If someone found out before we were ready, it would be over before it even started. We needed to play each of our parts perfectly, and we did. We inserted ourselves into investigations, sometimes even manipulating outcomes, and no one doubted our loyalty.

We planned every detail meticulously from how we would get them into lockdown to which Supernaturals we would murder. Altering the plans, hiding the guns no one was allowed to bring in, and what elements I would lay in the room it all took place so I could strengthen my power took an incredible amount of foresight on our parts. Most of all, we did it without being caught and we left no room for error.

"Let go of the spell, Dominic!" Luca demands, murder written all over her face. Lying to her and Jude was the hardest part, but it was necessary. I ignore her

demands. Keeping this many Supernaturals locked into position is no easy feat, but it's not enough to ask for change; you have to take the opportunities to create it. I wasn't sold on the idea of excluding them from this, but when I was given proof that Joshua was dealing under the table, that's when I knew I wanted in on this plan. I don't know when we stopped caring about each other's well being and prioritizing our empires, but if nothing, tonight is proving this.

The door opens, and Amelia walks into the room with the confidence of someone who belongs there. None of the Supernaturals take her seriously because she's a human and lower than them in their eyes. The outraged demands grow louder. To get their attention, Amelia puts her fingers in her mouth and whistles shrilly. Addressing her with familiarity, Sebastian says, "Took you long enough."

All heads whip to Amelia, and at first, we're met with silence. Probably confusion. Eric is the one who breaks first, and he sneers as he says to Amelia, "You don't belong here. Get out." Sebastian whips around and places his gun against Eric's forehead, who can't move to defend himself, and Edie lets out a little scream. Especially since Alyssa's body is still slumped on the table next to them, blood pooling under her head.

Sebastian's dark eyes flash, "You're next on my shitlist, old man. I have just as many reasons to put a bullet in your skull, so shut up for once in your miserable life and listen. Because your life depends on it."

Amelia tries to say something, and again she's cut off. This is why they needed me to put the spell in place. The parents have become arrogant, a shadow of what we once were, and they can't see what's right in front of them. This time, it's David who has something to say, which is unlike him. He doesn't seem to be bothered by his wife's untimely death, especially as she used to do all the talking before.

"This is not a matter for humans. Can you please show yourself out, young lady? I

don't care if you're Dominic's assistant. I'm not comfortable with you here." Turning to Sebastian, David gives him a piece of his mind. "Explain yourself for this mess! How dare you murder your mother!" He jerks his head towards his wife's dead body as if the brutal murder of his wife was just an inconvenience to him. "We raised you better than this!"

The rage takes Sebastian over as he whips around and steps so close to David that their foreheads are touching. Taking his gun, he points it at his father's head, too. While spit flecks fly from his mouth, the veins on his neck bulge as he shakes with rage, but his hand never wavers.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:08 am

“Raised me? You call that fucking raising me? YOU ABUSED ME. Did you stop Mother when she had me murder my childhood friend to keep me in line? Or when she murdered your daughter for being too soft? How about the secret love child you covered up?”

The blood drains from David's face as his head whips between his son and Amelia and starts putting it together. Sebastian takes a step back and looks to Amelia. She smirks, and in a turn of events I didn't see coming, she steps closer to David.

“Hello Dad. Bye-Bye Dad.”

Amelia pulls out her gun and, in a move eerily mirroring Sebastian's, puts a bullet in her father's skull. Like brother, like sister. David's body collapses to the table next to his wife's, and Amelia claps her hands, like this outcome thrills her more than we could realize. I won't miss David either. He's a callous bastard who looked the other way each time his wife did something horrible. No wonder there are no tears for either of the Vance's this evening. Amelia walks around the room like a teacher, like she didn't just execute her father and drop a bomb on everyone in this room.

“That's so much better now that those horrible excuses for parents are gone.” She lovingly looks at Sebastian as she starts her speech. “Now,” she purrs, “let me try this again. Meet your new head of the Rogue empire, Sebastian. As I'm sure you've gathered, I'm not human, and it's been pretty shitty pretending to be one. I'm the “secret love child” in question. I have every damn right to be here.”

Amelia pauses as she walks over to Alyssa's lifeless body and spits at it before she continues with her monologue. “Alyssa didn't want you to know that, of course. She

took every precaution to make sure my existence was kept a secret, and I could have dealt with that if I didn't know how she was abusing my brother. You all saw her cruelty towards him but did nothing to stop her. He was a boy that deserved your protection, and you all loved your power more than doing what was right. You deserve to die for your choices. But I've been convinced to try a different option."

While I knew it was coming, chills run through my body as I listen to the siblings explain it all. It's something I would never admit out loud, but at times, Amelia comes across as dangerous, more than the rest of us and slightly...unhinged. I didn't know who she was when I hired her, but after I was brought in on the plan, so many things started making sense to me.

Together, the siblings have given me hope for a future I never thought possible. My sisters deserve better than this. I deserve better than this. We want a different life where we can help people instead of destroying them. While it's tough to sit through this, these are the reasons I keep at the front and center of my mind so that my magic doesn't waver. Everything I do is for my sisters.

Amelia paces the room before she asks us, "Do you know what it's like growing up amongst humans, being made to feel like you're food or livestock for breeding, knowing you're different?" My eyes dart to Jude because she has to understand this in some way with her empathy. Then, my eyes move to Luca because I know she and Amelia have a complicated history. Luca's face pales as she realizes how much was hidden from her.

"It took me a long time to figure out why I felt different, and what was wrong with me. Obviously, I wanted to be Supernatural. Most of the Human Faction does, but never did I imagine, I would actually be one." Amelia pauses as she gives Sebastian a genuine smile.

"One day, I was bullied by some humans at the Faction and Sebastian was visiting. We bonded over his compassion to help me overcome my bullies, and when we got

talking, Sebastian started suspecting something was different with me, too. Apparently, I look just like Saige, the sister Alyssa had “put down” like she was some rabid animal. Remember her everyone? The kid you didn’t help, either?”

The silence is deafening.

“We didn’t actually think the tests would come back a match for Sebastian, but they did. I had enough DNA in common with him to be a sibling. We all know Supernatural blood breeds dominantly, and that I’m not Alyssa’s, so that leaves only one culprit.”

Her hand waves towards her father's dead body, and she folds her arms across her chest as Sebastian takes over. My job is to keep everyone in place with my magic, so they will listen to this speech. It’s actually incredible to see how they’ve come up with this plan to overthrow our empire, and no one saw it coming.

Clearing his throat, Sebastian begins, “We had always spoken about trying to change our lives, but we weren’t sure how, until I figured out that my mother was the one that had Lexie murdered. When I asked her about it, of course she denied it, but it was her choice of wording that made me doubt how truthful she was being. I suspected she went with a lie of omission, so I investigated, and eventually, I found the truth. Alyssa thought she had covered her tracks, but she kept forgetting she taught me all her tricks.”

Jude butts in with her disbelief, “So you’re telling me, you fucked me, and KNEW who had murdered my sister all this time and lied to me? You cried about Kyla to me, and you just said nothing? I don’t know how you sleep at night, knowing you betrayed me again. I can’t believe I fell for it, again.” Jude struggles against the bindings created by my magic, and I double down on my efforts to keep her locked in.

Sebastian flinches and I don’t miss the desperation all over his face, because he

knows he's losing Jude all over again. Amelia jumps in, responding to Jude's accusation with a sickly sweet look on her face, "I sleep very well on silk sheets, thank you. Preferably with company." And I don't miss the look she throws Luca's way as she says that.

Frustrated that she's not seeing his way, Sebastian tries again. "What would you have done if you had to choose between lying to me and saving Brooklyn? Because that's the choice I had. Save Amelia or lose another sister. The choice was impossible, but I had to make it. If I had told you, and someone had heard us? Or any of our reactions gave it away, what then? Kyla will be my biggest regret because we timed it wrong, and I couldn't save her."

Jude clenches her jaw and glares at him before she asks him a follow up question. "Why pretend to be shocked or help investigate or any of that?" Amelia rolls her eyes at Jude's question, but she waits to hear Sebastian's answer. "How would it have looked if I didn't? I would have been under suspicion and I needed to play my part."

"But why was murdering Lexie important?" Luca murmurs, and I'm shocked it's taken this long for them to ask. Amelia looks at her lover, sad for a moment as she says, "Because Lexie knew the truth. When Alyssa first found out about me, she tried to have me assassinated. Instead, my mom was murdered because she died trying to save me." Her voice wavers for a moment before she clears her throat. "Sebastian was the one that came up with the idea to hide me in plain sight at Tao. He knew you would protect me, just neither of us actually counted on us falling for each other."

For the first time this evening, Amelia acknowledges the Rhodes, and looks at Edie as she says, "Lexie was my friend. She treated me like I meant something and wanted nothing in return. She was a good person, and this bitch," Amelia waves a hand at Alyssa's body, "killed her. I told Lexie about my secret, and from what I've been able to put together, she planned on confronting Alyssa to make sure I got my share of the Rogue empire. Instead of Alyssa being publicly embarrassed by her husband's indiscretions and losing her power, she placed a hit on Lexie."

I can't decide if Jude looks more heartbroken or enraged, but her voice rasps with emotion, "So you've been lying to Luca and me this whole time. Why? Is this some sick ploy so we can be together, Sebastian?" Amelia steps into Jude's space and leans into her face and points the gun right under Jude's chin. "I don't like you. You're selfish, and you make everything about you. The only reason I'm not putting a bullet in your skull right now is because of Sebastian. You've been a pathetic friend to Luca, so don't flatter yourself. This was about change, like we've said. Or haven't you been listening?"

Sebastian's face softens as he sees how hurt Jude is, "I hated lying to you. It killed me. But it was necessary because if I was going to pull this off, protect you from my mother, and help Amelia while creating change where we can truly be together and be safe; I had to do this. Can't you see? But I swear I will spend the rest of my life making it up to you if you'll let me."

Jude turns her head away, and I don't know why Sebastian can't see she doesn't accept that answer. Edie splutters, "I'm sorry for what your parents put you through, Sebastian, but this is not the way to resolve disputes." He raises his gun to her head. "Give me a reason, Edie. I will pull this trigger. Don't test me."

Amelia looks amused as she tells us, "Alyssa was an excellent liar. She hired a human hitman and told him exactly how to kill Lexie so she could never be implicated in the process. In case anyone is wondering, the hitman is dead too. But I copied him. It's been interesting watching you all squirm trying to figure out what's going on. I've been picking you off one by one and none of you even stopped to think about working together until now. When it was almost too late."

Jude turns to me and says, "And you, Dom, clearly you're the only one not shocked tonight. How do you fit into all of this?"

Keeping some attention on holding my magic in place, I explain, "I'm here to protect my sisters and make sure they have a future that I never got the option to have. All I

ever wanted was a chance to be treated equally.”

Luca finally pipes up, her body trembling with the effort to contain her rage. “I’m guessing you’re behind my mom? Is she still alive?” Amelia’s face hardens. I know her well enough by this stage it’s a front. She will prioritize putting the people she loves first, even if it’s the unpopular choice.

“No, Luca, your mom is dead. One day, I will tell you about the things she was doing behind your back, but for now, all you need to know is she was holding you back under the guise of love. I made the choice so you didn’t have to.”

Luca’s enraged scream fills the room, and it seems we’re all not so far removed from emotion because most of us flinch when we hear it. Eric’s eyes narrow as he listens to that declaration, and he thrashes at my restraints as he yells, accusing Amelia of being a hypocrite. Luca’s bloodlust takes over as well, though I’m amazed she held out this long, and she snarls at Amelia as her fangs snap loose. It’s an effort to keep my magic in place with Luca’s strength fighting me so wildly, but with a bit of straining, I manage it as Eric starts with his insults.

“You accuse us of being heartless, yet you execute anyone who doesn’t agree with you. How does that make you any better than us?” Amelia laughs with a tinge of sarcasm as she directs her next question to Sebastian. “Why aren’t we killing him again?”

With a half-hearted smile, he replies. “Because being an asshole is his only crime, and he doesn’t deserve to die for that. Yet.”

Nodding vaguely, Amelia answers Eric’s question. “Because despite our repeated attempts to reason with you all, you’ve never listened. A show of force was our only option.” She then turns to Luca, raising her voice over the snarling and repeated threats, and tells her, “I prioritized you when no one else would. Hate me if it makes you feel better, but eventually, you will see I was right to protect you.”

Her face hardens as she looks away from Luca and back through the room. “Just like with the Human Faction members that turned up dead, no one has been innocent. It goes against everything we stand for to harm the innocent. Now that you’ve heard the truth, let’s work together to create a new world. Dominic is going to let go of the magic, assuming you’ve all calmed down by now?”

No one says anything, so naïvely, we take that as a yes. After a beat, I release the spell. Of course, that’s when all hell breaks loose.

To Be Continued...