







# A Touch of Madness

## (Chronicles of the Cursed #2)

**Author:** *Victoria Ellis*

**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** Sylvie

Lara came back to me—but she's not the sister I remember.

Whatever the Solstice Society did to her, it's twisted her into something dangerous—something

hollow. I know she's still in there, buried beneath the coldness in her eyes and the venom in her

words. And I'll stop at nothing to bring her back...Even if it kills me.

In order to restore Lara's humanity, I'll have to embrace the powers I've only begun to

understand. Magic that terrifies me. Magic that could consume me. With help from a powerful

witch named Ravenna and the Guild's most ancient elders, I'll attempt an incantation few have

survived. But I can't do it alone...

The vampires are fracturing. The Society is escalating their war. And the only way we stand a

chance is if we unite the very beings they're trying to destroy.

Even if it means trusting creatures I've only just started believing in.

Lucian

Lara's return should've brought peace. Instead, it's torn Sylvie in two.

The woman I love is burning herself alive trying to save what remains of her twin, and every

moment she spends with Lara puts her in more danger. The Solstice Society's newest game is

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*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:26 am*

The sky weeps with the colors of a dying day, streaks of molten gold and burning crimson spilling over the horizon like a bleeding wound that refuses to heal. The house looms against the shadows of twilight, its ancient stone walls bristling as though alive, resisting the inevitable crawl of night. In this fleeting hour, where light and dark wrestle for dominance, the air tightens. A fragile silence clings to the air, stretched taut like a string ready to snap.

The foreboding omen is not lost on me.

With the inevitability of a blade meeting flesh, she steps outside.

Lara.

Beside me, Sylvie stiffens, her breath hitching as if the very sight of her sister steals the air from her lungs. Even before the sun fully surrenders to the horizon, the light struggles to touch her, retreating as though repelled by her presence. She is a chilling vision—too perfect, her beauty sharpened to a cruel edge, something sculpted from frost and shadow—from decay.

From death.

Her eyes, once mirrors of Sylvie's warmth, are now crystalline and unfeeling. They catch the dying light like shards of splintered glass, reflecting none of it. Every step she takes is methodical, measured, like a predator's prowl, her sharp heels clicking against the steps as she descends.

"Lara..." Sylvie whispers, barely audible, her voice fragile as antiquated porcelain,

trembling in absolute disbelief. Her sister's name hangs in the air, a prayer or plea, its fragility underscored by the oppressive silence it's met with.

Lara's gaze is fixed ahead, unwavering, cutting through the gathering gloom, her expression a mask of disdain.

When she reaches the bottom of the stairs, she stops, the silence around her deepening like the hush before a storm. For a moment, all is still. The air seems to hold its breath, and even the shadows seem to cower in her presence—a prelude to violence.

“Hello, sister,” Lara says, her voice a blade honed to destroy. “Miss me?”

The venom coiled in that one, singular word, sister, twists Sylvie's features with an agony I cannot shield her from. It's a deliberate wound, a rejection that leaves Sylvie visibly shaken.

“Lara, it's me,” Sylvie says, her voice cracking under the weight of hope and desperation. She takes a tremulous step forward, her shuddering hand outstretched.

“Stop.”

Lara's command halts Sylvie mid-step, the sharp syllable a leash. Her lips curl into a smile, but it is anything but kind. It mocks rather than welcomes.

“Is that all you have to say to me? After everything ?” Her voice drips with venom-laced malice, each word a dagger aimed directly at Sylvie's heart. Her disdainful smile twists, contorts into a sneer as she shakes her head.

Sylvie falters, her brows knitting together as she struggles to respond to the person her twin has become—cold, heartless, and immeasurably bitter. “I—I've been

looking for you. I thought?—”

“You thought I was dead,” Lara interrupts, her voice cold and unyielding. “No, Sylvie. You didn’t think. You didn’t fight. You didn’t care.”

She steps closer, slowly closing the space between the two of them, and my instincts flare to life.

“That’s not true, Lara,” Sylvie protests, her voice trembling as tears spill down her red cheeks. “I never stopped looking. Never stopped trying. I did everything I could. I nearly went insane trying to figure out how to get you back. I put myself in harm’s?—”

“Lies!” Lara’s shrill, accusatory voice cuts through Sylvie’s protest. She takes yet another step closer, her movements sharp and measured, each one radiating hostility. “You left me. You betrayed me. Betrayed our family.” She cocks her head to the side as if thinking. “You were happy to be rid of me, weren’t you, sister?”

The accusation lands like a blow, and I watch Sylvie flinch as if visibly struck, trying to hold onto a reality that is quickly slipping through her shaking fingers.

“I didn’t betray you,” Sylvie whispers, her voice barely audible, as if even she doesn’t believe herself anymore. Shock is written on her face as her eyes widen, as her lips quiver.

“Didn’t you?” Lara’s tone drips with scorn, with pure, unbridled hatred. It’s such a sharp, stinging contrast to who I’ve heard of her to be. “While I was rotting away, suspended in some fucked-up other realm, you were here, hiding like a coward, like the shell of a human you’ve always been. Hiding with him .”

Her gaze instinctively snaps to me, her black eyes narrowing with uninhibited hatred,

her scorn palpable. I meet her glare without flinching, though I feel the weight of her anger like a tangible force.

“Lara, please,” Sylvie pleads, stepping forward again, nearly completely closing the space that remains between the two of them, causing me to step forward in her wake. “Whatever they told you, it’s not true. They are the reason you were stuck in time. They took you and tried to use you against?—”

“Enough of the lies!” Lara’s voice rises, piercing and callous as it reverberates with raw power. She gestures toward me with a disdainful sweep of her hand, her nails gleaming like talons in the fading light. “The Solstice Society showed me the truth, Sylvie. They told me everything they told you, you’re just too insufferable to believe it. Vampires killed our parents— his kind killed them, yet you stand here defending him. Defending your vile actions.”

Sylvie’s breath catches, her hand flying to her mouth as though the words physically struck her. As if she cannot believe just how wrong her sister has things.

“No,” she whispers, shaking her head. “That’s not true. They’re lying to you just like they lied to me. They are twisting everything. They are trying so hard?—”

“Lying?” Lara laughs, cutting Sylvie off once again, a bitter, hollow sound devoid of joy. “They opened my fucking idiotic eyes, Sylvie. While you were here playing house with a revolting monster, they showed me what I was meant to be. They gave me purpose beyond anything you could ever even conceive.”

The two stand, mere inches apart, Sylvie looking as if she’s lost everything and everyone she has ever loved, and Lara radiating nothing but disdain and contempt. The way she glares at Sylvie makes even my blood boil, causes a shift in my demeanor to the point that I’m nearly about to lose my carefully constructed poise. I move to stand directly next to Sylvie, placing an arm tightly around her waist to show

her I am here, and I am not going anywhere. Lara scoffs as her eyes travel from where my hand rests against Sylvie's hip back to my own gaze.

Lara's voice hardens, taking on an edge of unshakable conviction. "I am their weapon now. And I will rid this world of the plague that took everything from us. That you seem to have been able to look past because a monster is the only godforsaken fuck who will ever even glance your way. I will make every single one of them pay for ruining us."

Her gaze locks onto mine, her expression twisting into something cruel and vengeful, those blackened eyes striking something deep within me. "Starting with you."

I step forward now, firmly placing myself between her and Sylvie. My movements are calm, unhurried—a stark contrast to the storm violently brewing around us.

"This is not your sister," I say.

"She is," Sylvie insists, her voice trembling with desperation.

"No," I reply, my gaze never leaving Lara. "Not anymore."

Sylvie's hand clutches at my sleeve, her grip tight with desperation. "She's my sister, Lucian. I can save her. I have to?—"

"You can't save someone who doesn't want to be saved," I say, my tone firm but not unkind.

"You can't save someone who doesn't want to be saved." Lara twists her face and mocks me, tilting her head from side to side as she speaks, like she's putting on a performance. She laughs again, the sound sharp and grating. "How noble. Protecting her, even now. But it won't matter. You can't stop what's coming." She pauses as if



to think, but quickly adds, “None of you can.”

Her words are a distinct promise of violence, and the air around her seems to hum with restrained power.

Sylvie makes a move to come around me, to face Lara again, but I stop her in her tracks, unwilling to allow it.

“Sylvie,” I say, turning to her. “Stay behind me.”

But she doesn’t listen. She steps forward again, her hand outstretched, her voice trembling with emotion.

“Lara, please,” she begs. “This isn’t you. This isn’t who you are.”

“Who I was ,” Lara corrects, her voice cold. “I’ve changed, Sylvie. And so have you. Only one of us for the better.”

Her gaze flicks to me, her lips curling into a sneer. “I see it now. You really are weak. And he’s made you weaker.”

Before Sylvie can respond, a voice I’d hoped to never hear again cuts through the air, dripping with command.

“Lara!”

Amara.

Her shrill voice is a sharpening blade in the moment. The sound sends a chill down my spine. I glance toward the edge of the property, and there she stands, just beyond the barrier of the warding spell—a dark, imposing figure shrouded in shadow.

She wasn't supposed to return.

Amara's presence is a shock to us all, her sudden reappearance a reminder of the power she wields. She stands just outside the invisible boundary, her posture regal and unyielding. Her voice, when she speaks again, is laced with authority.

"Lara. Come!"

Just like one would beckon a hound.

Lara hesitates for a moment, her expression flickering with something unrecognizable—perhaps doubt, or perhaps something deeper.

"Lara," Sylvie whispers, her voice trembling with hope. "You don't have to go with her. You can stay. We can figure this out. I will do anything to help you, to make you see..."

But Lara doesn't respond. Her expression hardens, and she steps away.

Amara's lips curl into a faint, triumphant smile as Lara crosses the boundary, leaving us behind.

"You made the wrong choice, Sylvie. I will always be one step ahead of you," Amara says as they walk away, their backs to us. "This is only the beginning," she sings on the wind, flicking one hand in the air, her voice carrying the weight of a promise. "You'll see soon enough."

And with that, the pair disappear into the gathering darkness, leaving Sylvie and me watching, our friends standing stone-still around us, and a lingering feeling of complete and utter doom filling our chests.

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*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:26 am*

The air is thick, smothering, as though I'm breathing through a heavy layer of smoke. Shadows dance on stone walls around me, cast by a dozen flickering torches. My feet move on their own, carrying me forward into the center of the room. I don't know where I am, but I know who's here.

Lara.

I feel her down to my very marrow.

Her voice echoes in my ears, sharp and commanding, speaking words I can't even begin to comprehend. She's standing at the heart of the room, surrounded by figures cloaked in black, their faces obscured by hoods.

The Solstice Society.

I don't need to see their faces to know who they are—they radiate menace, their energy stifling and oppressive.

Lara doesn't look like herself.

Her hair is slicked back into a tight ponytail, her usual softness gone, replaced by something cold and obstinate. Her hands move deftly, wielding a pair of blacksmith's tongs that seem too heavy for her slim frame. She pulls a molten hunk of metal from a forge, her movements smooth, precise, like she's done this a thousand times before.

The forge spits sparks into the air, illuminating her face. Her eyes are... wrong. Not the warm, mischievous eyes I grew up with but something darker. They gleam with

an unnatural light, hard and unfeeling. Cursed with death and plague.

“What’s next, Lara?” a deep voice hisses from one of the hooded figures.

She doesn’t look up, doesn’t hesitate. “The silver must be folded three times. Infuse each fold with the incantation I gave you.”

The figure nods and turns away, moving to a table where weapons are laid out in meticulous rows. Stakes of pure silver, glinting even in the dim light. Daggers engraved with runes I can’t read. Chains laced with something that shimmers, glisten like moonlight.

I try to speak, to call out to her, but my voice remains locked in my throat.

Another figure steps forward, carrying a bowl of something black and viscous. They hand it to Lara, and she dips a brush into the liquid, then paints it onto the blade of a dagger. The metal hisses and smokes as the substance sinks into it, leaving behind a faint, pulsing glow.

“The curse will bind to the blade,” Lara says, her voice clinical, detached. “Any vampire struck with this will lose control. Feral instincts will take over. They’ll destroy themselves from the inside out.” She smiles a sickly sweet, menacing smile. “Thus, serving us.”

A murmur of approval ripples through the group.

This isn’t her. It cannot be her.

“Lara!” I scream, but no one reacts, no one even looks in my direction. My voice is devoured by the tyrannical weight hanging in the room.

The scene shifts suddenly, pulling me forward like a thread yanked too tight. I'm closer now, standing just a few feet from her. The smell of the forge is overwhelming, metallic and acrid. My head swims, but I can't look away. It's a hypnotizing, mind-numbing scene, and I'm sinking into it.

Lara sets down the dagger and picks up a stake, its tip still glowing faintly. She runs her thumb over it, testing the sharpened edge, and sneers—a small, cruel thing that twists my stomach.

“We're close,” she says, her voice low but certain. “Soon, we won't need her at all.”

Her?

The words strike me like a physical blow, and I stagger back, the room spinning around me. Lara's eyes flick up, and for a heart-stopping moment, I swear she's looking directly at me.

Right through me.

“You've ruined everything, Sylvie. You've ruined it all.”

She knows I'm here.

I stumble back again, the world tilting violently. The room begins to dissolve, the edges blurring like paint running in the rain.

“Lara!” I scream, but she's already fading, her figure swallowed by the shadows. The last thing I see is the glowing weapons, their light pulsating like a too-slow, dying heartbeat.

I bolt upright in bed, gasping for air. My chest heaves as I clutch at the blankets, my

skin clammy and slick with sweat. The vision—dream?—is still vivid in my mind, every detail sharp and wholly unbearable.

“Lara,” I whisper, my voice breaking as I cry out.

I press a hand to my chest, trying to steady the wild pounding of my heart. She’s in danger.

Or worse—she’s become the danger.

One Week Later...

While Lucian is at the school for a full day of teaching, I find myself wandering through downtown Blackthorne, looking for a quaint hole-in-the-wall spot Nicole and Rebecca told me may help with the Lara dilemma. From what I’m being told, getting Lara’s humanity back isn’t going to be easy, and I’ve been warned by several people that we shouldn’t even try—but she’s still my sister. I owe it to her.

I just have to figure out my next steps.

It’s one of those crisp mornings where the air smells faintly of frost, even though winter hasn’t fully taken hold yet. The narrow cobblestone streets are dotted with small shops, their windows dressed in cozy displays of candles, knit scarves, and books.

I’ve been meaning to get out of my head, to do something normal, but the vision I had of Lara the morning after everything went down at Lucian’s house still lingers like a weight pressing firmly on my chest. I’m restless, spiraling, and the thought of everything in front of me feels nearly unendurable. It’s been one full week since Lara woke up without her humanity and left willingly with Amara. One week of an entirely different pain than I’ve ever known before. To know my sister is out there,

walking around, willingly trying to destroy people I care about...

It's just too much.

I thought when we found our way around the virgin element to the curse, I'd get my sister back and we could take on the Society together—with Lucian, and Rebecca and Nicole. I was so, so wrong, though. I never even saw it coming. I knew they'd try to bring me down. I knew they'd be pissed at me for ruining their well-thought-out plans. I just didn't know the price would be Lara's humanity.

I pass a bookstore that looks like it's seen better days, and that's when I see it: Petals and Potions Apothecary. A wrought-iron sign swings gently in the breeze, its golden script lettering catching the light as it sways. The storefront is charming, with ivy curling around the windows and bundles of dried herbs hanging on the door. There's something about it that draws me in, like the place is calling to me.

I gently open the door, and a chime of bells rings throughout the shop.

Inside, the air is warm and smells of lavender and sage—and something else vaguely floral that I can't put my finger on. Shelves line the walls, crammed with jars of dried flowers, vials of colorful liquids, and books with titles in languages I can't read. It's a witch's haven, and I feel a peculiar sense of comfort wrap around me when stepping inside.

"Be with you in a moment, dear!" a warm voice calls out.

I wander deeper into the shop, letting my fingers trail over the edges of various sized bottles and jars. Everything here feels alive, humming with energy that's nearly palpable. It's cozy and unlike anywhere I've ever been before. That sense of familiarity and comfort seeps into my body and I take a deep breath for what feels like the first time in too long.

“Sorry about that,” the voice says again, and I turn to see a woman emerging from a back room. She’s tall and slim, with beautifully braided dark hair streaked with silver, and kind, gray eyes that seem to hold centuries of knowledge. Her presence is compelling, commanding, but warm and inviting in a way I’m not sure I’ve ever known.

“Well, you must be new,” she says, her lips curling into a knowing, genuine smile. “A Blackthorne attendee, no doubt.”

“You’d be right,” I tell her with a small smile of my own. “This is my first year at Blackthorne. I’m Sylvie.”

“Ravenna,” she replies, wiping her hands on a purple cloth peeking out from her apron. “Welcome to my little mystical corner of chaos.” Her bright smile widens. “What brings you in, my dear?”

I hesitate, unsure how to explain everything in a way that won’t make this woman look at me like I’ve gone completely insane—even though it feels like I have, and one half of me truly believes this is all a horrible nightmare.

“I, uh...” I flounder, all words ceasing to exist in my brain. “Well. My friends told me this might be the place I could get some insight on some issues I’ve been having,” I say, feeling like that explains exactly...nothing at all.

Ravenna studies me for a moment, her light gray gaze piercing but not unkind. “Well, you and your friends have good instincts. This place tends to find the people who need it most.”

Before I can respond, the door swings open behind me, and a young, light-haired man walks in, clutching a box. He’s out of breath, his cheeks flushed from the chill of the morning.



“Hey, Ravenna. Sorry to interrupt, he says, glancing my way with a grin and a nod. “Just dropping this off. And... well, also here to say my goodbyes,” he says, setting the box on the counter.

“Goodbye?” Ravenna raises an eyebrow, shifting her focus as she walks closer to the man. “What do you mean, dear?”

“I got the internship I was telling you about. I leave for New York next week.” He shrugs like he’s trying to not be as excited as he wants to be in order to protect Ravenna’s feelings.

Ravenna sighs, walking over to him, but there’s a glimmer of pride in her eyes. “Good for you, Nate. You’ll be missed around here.” She gives him a warm embrace and he wraps his arms tightly around her in return.

They exchange a few more words before the man—Nate—waves and leaves, the bell above the door chiming softly, a bundle of herbs rustling.

“Well,” Ravenna says, turning back to me. “That was rather sudden, wasn’t it?” she says with a half-hearted smile. “I’d love to hear all about exactly how I can help you Sylvie, but also...you wouldn’t happen to be looking for a part-time job, would you?”

The question catches me off guard. “Oh, I don’t know. I mean, I wasn’t planning to...”

She laughs, a rich, musical sound. “Don’t overthink it, dear. Just a few hours a week, and I’ll make it worth your while. Pay, of course. And mentorship, if you’re interested.”

“Mentorship?”

Ravenna leans against the counter, folding her arms. “You’ve got a spark, my dear. I can feel it. Rebecca and Nicole are the friends who told you about me, yes?”

My eyes widen. “You know them?” I’m forgetting about the fact that the girls told me she’s a witch from the Guild, and she probably knows everything about me without having to ask even one question.

“Of course. I’ve been mentoring those two for years. They’ve mentioned you, as well. Told me things. And I think it’s nothing other than fate that you and Nate stopped in at the same time. I’m well aware of who you are, Sylvie Rosenthal. And I’ve been waiting for you to come in and see me.”

A flicker of curiosity sparks in me. “And who am I?”

Ravenna’s expression softens as she closes the distance between us. “Someone with much more potential than you realize. The Everdawn lineage, your mother’s ancestry, is no small thing, Sylvie. It’s rooted in some of the most powerful witch and vampire lore in all of existence. We studied your family growing up in the Guild. There’s rich history there, depth. And you... you’re at the center of it.”

Her words send a cold chill down my spine, but it’s not fear—it’s something else entirely. I’ve learned plenty about my lineage in a short amount of time, but hearing people talk about the Everdawns so highly still gives me pause.

I think about Lara, about the dreams, the visions—about everything that’s been happening since I came to Blackthorne. Maybe Ravenna’s right. Maybe I’m meant to be here, to figure this out. And there’s obviously a reason I was meant to meet this kind-hearted woman in front of me. I can’t deny the warmth she radiates, and the peacefulness I’ve felt since stepping into her shop. I have my parents’ trust, of course, but I should probably consider bringing some money in eventually as well. Maybe if this works out, I could pick up more hours.

I swallow hard and look her in the eye, nodding. “Okay. I’ll do it. I’ll take the job.”

Ravenna smiles, and for the first time in what feels like forever, I feel like I might be on the right path.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:26 am*

The scent of roasted coffee beans mingles with the faintly sweet tang of parchment and old ink, a comforting blend that has become synonymous with these weekly meetups with the girls who have become my best friends—my only friends, really. Aside from Marisol, a girl I met in one of my classes who I’ve started growing closer to over the past few weeks.

The Raven’s Quill, with its mismatched furniture, shelves lined with well-loved books, and low-hanging lanterns, feels like a haven carved out of time. These stores were few and far between back in Chicago. Every now and then I would find a small, cozy shop tucked into the confines of the stinky city streets, but it wasn’t often—and never one as beautiful and enthralling as this one.

I sit across from Nicole and Rebecca at our usual table that’s nestled tightly among the stacks of books. There’s a circular window to the left of us, the view outside hazy from the fog rolling in. Their drinks—Nicole’s cinnamon chai latte and Rebecca’s peppermint mocha—steam in front of them, but their attention is fixed squarely on me.

I pick up my lavender tea and get prepared for the onslaught of questions surely headed my way now that I told the girls I stopped in at the apothecary. “So, let me get this straight,” Nicole says, her voice tinged with excitement. “You finally met Ravenna? Like, the Ravenna?”

“Yes,” I reply, chuckling as I set the mug down on the table between us. “Apparently, she knows you both pretty well. Even more so than you let on...”

Rebecca’s eyes light up, her mocha all but forgotten. “Yeah, we may have undersold

our relationship a bit. She's practically family. She's mentored us at the Guild since we were in our early teens."

"Thirteen for me," Nicole says with a grin. "And she's beyond brilliant. One of the most respected witches in the entire region. If anyone can help you with the humanity issue, Sylvie, it's her."

I blink, taken aback by the fervor in their voices. "She... did seem like she knew what she was doing," I admit. "But it was more than that. She made me feel... calm. Like I wasn't completely unraveling for the first time in weeks." Her presence was like a soothing balm. One I could definitely get used to having in my life.

"That's part of her gift," Rebecca says, her tone softening. "She has this way of making everyone feel safe, even when the world is falling apart. It's why she's so revered at the Guild. She's not just powerful—she's compassionate. But don't mistake that kindness for weakness. She's as sharp as they come. One of the most compelling and intelligent witches I've ever met."

Nicole leans forward, her expression serious. "Did you tell her about Lara?"

I nod, the warmth of the coffee in my hands doing little to ease the cold knot in my chest. "I told her everything. The dreams, the visions, what happened with Amara. How I tried to deceive Solstice, but they were one step ahead and had a failsafe in place by erasing Lara's humanity. She is quite hesitant, like everyone else, but she agrees...we have to help Lara. In some way, at least."

I think back to spending hours in Petals and Potions, spilling my guts to a woman I'd only just met but that felt like a pivotal person in my life. She took it all in, listened, and offered advice from a brand-new lens.

"That's huge," Rebecca says, her voice laced with something incredibly

dangerous—hope. “If anyone can figure out a way to bring Lara back—really bring her back—it’s Ravenna. She has access to spells and knowledge most witches can only dream of.” She looks to Nicole. “I honestly don’t know why we didn’t bring her in back at the beginning of everything. It was all just so sudden and fast...”

“It’s okay,” I reassure her. “Everything was up in the air and messed up and none of us knew the best approach.”

Nicole reaches across the table, her hand brushing mine. “I’m so happy about all of this. So, so happy that you will finally have someone else on your side that will be beneficial. But Sylvie, we also need to talk about you. Helping Lara is one thing, but you can’t keep putting yourself in danger for her. If she’s lost her humanity...”

“She hasn’t,” I interrupt, my voice sharper than I intend. I take a deep breath, willing my emotions back under control. “I know she hasn’t. Well, she has, I guess. But she’s still in there. I just... I can feel it.”

Nicole exchanges a glance with Rebecca, but neither presses the point.

“Well,” Rebecca says after a moment, “if Ravenna’s involved, at least you’ll have someone who can help you control your powers, and even learn to better wield them, while you figure this out. You’re not doing this alone anymore.”

“I’m also...” I say, pausing, the words heavier than I expect. “Thinking about cutting down my class load at Blackthorne.”

Both of them look at me, startled.

“Now that I know what and who I truly am, I’d rather just stick with my supernatural classes for now. I’m going to talk to Mr. Fallon and let him know I want to keep my two supernatural classes but drop the rest for the remainder of the semester,” I

explain. “Between Lara and... everything, I can’t focus. I just don’t have it in me right now. I want to keep learning about this other side of me, though. I’ve really enjoyed those classes, and I think I can keep up with them, even with the Lara issue.” I sigh deeply. “There’s one more thing,” I tell them.

They each give me a look of disdain, as if I’m going to tell them I’m vanishing from the face of the earth.

“I’m moving out of the dorms. At least for now.”

Rebecca’s brow furrows. “What?” she asks, shaking her head. “Why?”

I shrug. “Honestly, it doesn’t feel safe. Amara knows where I was staying, and if she comes back...” I glance down at my still-steaming mug. “And I can’t exactly live with Lara, either. She currently hates me. And Lucian says she isn’t safe because she isn’t herself. I don’t want to believe she would ever truly hurt me but?—”

“Nothing is as expected right now, Sylvie,” Nicole says. “With the way the Society has her, she isn’t thinking clearly. You can’t be too sure.”

“I agree with Nic on this one. And at least you won’t be homeless while we figure all of this out. You can stay with Professor Draedon,” Rebecca says matter-of-factly, as if it’s the most obvious solution in the world.

I’m surprised she suggested it, although I’m unsure as to why. The girls have been privy to everything going on with Lucian—even the fact that I lost my virginity to him. I didn’t tell them until after the switch of my blood for Lara, but I was glad to have them to confide in about it.

“Yeah. He has more than enough space,” Nicole continues. “And if you’re worried about safety, there’s no one better to keep you protected. Plus,” she adds with a

teasing smirk, “he owes you, doesn’t he? After everything.” She’s clearly referencing the fact that he hid the whole Seraphina thing from me—and the fact that we were lovers in my past life.

“I don’t think I want to fully move in with him,” I protest, though the idea isn’t as outrageous as I try to make it sound. When it comes from my lips, it seems almost...natural. I’ve already been staying with him anyways, and it’s working...quite well. “Maybe just stay for an indefinite...amount...of time.” I offer the words up like I’m not exactly sure where I’m going with it. And I suppose I’m not.

I think back to my time with Lucian. How we went from strangers...sort of...to partners in research, to...lovers.

It’s so much more than me losing my virginity.

It’s the intense bond I feel with him—even more so now.

He is everything. Everything I could ever want. And he’s only proven that to me time and time again. I’d like to think that I’ve proven it to him, too. He’s been necessary for my sanity, especially since finding out Lara’s humanity is gone. Sure, in the beginning he was vital to me learning and growing as a witch. He pushed me to learn and research. He helped me when others couldn’t. But the moment we first kissed, everything shifted.

I’m falling in love with him. And the bond I feel to him is unlike anything I’ve ever felt in all my life.

Rebecca shrugs. “I mean, it’s practical. And honestly, he probably wouldn’t mind. You’re kind of important to him, Sylvie.”



Before I can argue, Nicole sits up straighter, her expression shifting. “We’ll get your stuff for you. No need to go back there yourself.”

“What do you mean?”

Nicole grins, wiggling her fingers in the air. “A little magic goes a long way. Just tell us what you need, and we’ll have it out of your dorm and into the professor’s gigantic mansion before you can blink.”

I hesitate, the weight of everything threatening to overwhelm me again. But as I look at Nicole and Rebecca, their unwavering support shining through, I feel the smallest flicker of relief.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:26 am*

The pulse of Midnight Delight hums low, a languid rhythm that thrums like an ancient heartbeat. The club breathes life in its peculiar way, a sanctuary where shadow and sin entwine. Among these velvet-dark walls, the undead and the living intermingle in whispered revelries, their desires bleeding into one another. Silken drapes of plum and obsidian cascade down, catching the faint gleam of silver from chandeliers that hang like spectral sentinels above. The air is rich with the heady aroma of spiced wine and cloves, laced with the subtle, unmistakable tang of blood—an undercurrent that lingers like a ghostly caress.

All around, decadence reigns. Vampires and their mortal vessels recline at tables draped in velvet, their voices hushed, smoky with indulgence. A sultry jazz melody weaves through the air, its bassline a languorous echo of the world's primal beat.

Sylvie stands beside me, an ember of reluctant light amidst this sea of shadows. Her unease betrays her newness to this realm, where the rules of humanity falter and the macabre becomes commonplace. Her wariness of my kind—a wariness she wears like armor—is only natural, though her curiosity gleams through the cracks.

Her gaze flits across the room, alighting on vampires and their human companions entwined in intimate rituals. One couple in a far corner commands her attention: a woman, bound and suspended, her body a willing altar to the vampiric hunger. Her partner drinks deeply as he moves within her, their union a symphony of ecstasy. The tableau is raw, electric—a vision designed to seduce even the most reticent.

“It’s not what I expected,” Sylvie murmurs at last, her voice tinged with wonder and trepidation.

I tilt my glass, the bourbon within catching the faint light as I swirl it. “And what, pray tell, did you expect, my love?”

Her lips press together as she considers, then she gestures vaguely toward the room. “Something... darker. This feels almost normal. Like some kind of gothic cocktail lounge.”

A smile, faint and sardonic, curls at the edges of my mouth. “Normality is but a thin veil, Sylvie. Tug at its edges, and the truth lies bare beneath it.”

Her eyes drift to a nearby booth where a vampire drinks deeply from a human’s wrist, their gazes locked in an unbroken communion. The human tilts their head back, a soundless gasp frozen on parted lips as bliss overtakes them. A faint tremor ripples through Sylvie, her breath quickening ever so slightly.

Before I can speak again, Dorian strides toward us, his expression carved from stone, his movements unhurried yet purposeful. One hand rests within his pocket, the other hanging loosely at his side—a posture deceptively casual, masking the gravity of his presence.

“Thanks for meeting me. We need to talk. Now,” he intones, his voice the low rumble of distant thunder.

He leads us beyond a pair of iron doors into a private lounge, its walls intimate and oppressive. Midnight-blue chairs encircle a solitary table, a decanter of crimson wine resting at its center like a sacrificial offering. Candlelight dances upon its surface, casting flickering shadows that writhe like restless spirits.

Dorian doesn’t wait for us to settle. “They’re gone,” he says, the words clipped, his tone taut with restrained fury.

Sylvie's brow furrows. "What's gone?"

"The blood reserves," Dorian replies, and the weight of his revelation drops like an iron shroud.

The breath I take feels sharp, like a blade drawn across my ribs. Dorian continues, his usual composure fraying at the edges. "The packs we've relied upon to stave off chaos—they've been taken. All of them. Vanished."

Sylvie's confusion deepens. "The blood packs... they're for vampires who don't feed from humans, right?"

I nod, my gaze steady upon her. "They are a compromise. A lifeline. For those among us who choose restraint, they offer sustenance without sin. Some walk a path of balance—human veins for indulgence, packs for practicality. Others abstain entirely from feeding directly. But this theft..." My voice falters briefly, a storm of unease roiling within me. "It is no small matter. This could unmake all we have built."

"Why not replenish the supply? Can't the donors provide more?"

Dorian exhales sharply, his frustration palpable. "The process is not so simple. Blood cannot be drawn without consequence. Humans must recover, their health safeguarded. To replace what was stolen will take weeks, if not longer. And in the meantime..."

His pacing quickens, each step heavy with foreboding. "Ravenous vampires make poor decisions. Without the packs, restraint crumbles. And with it, so does the fragile peace we cling to."

I step forward, placing a steadying hand on his shoulder. "The city would quickly descend into madness," I say quietly, the truth of it settling like ash.

Sylvie's voice cuts through the tension, sharp and incisive. "Who would do this? It isn't like a theft would go unnoticed."

Dorian's gaze darkens. "It was no accident. Someone planned this. And I believe we both know who."

"The Society," I say, the name a bitter curse upon my tongue.

Dorian nods slowly, his jaw tightening. "Who else would gain from inciting chaos? Turning us into the monsters they fear. Unleashing the darkness we keep buried, barely contained. They couldn't get Sylvie to take part in their ritual, so they are going to hit us where it hurts in the meantime. Can't kill us? Why not make us our own downfall? It has Solstice written all over it."

I glance at Sylvie. Her delicate fingers toy with the hem of her sleeve, a small, unconscious gesture of unease. Her lips are a pale line, pressed firm as her mind works to unravel what's just been said.

"There's more," Dorian adds, his voice quieter now, as if the weight of his next words has stolen the air from his lungs. He drags a hand over his mouth, hesitating. "I've heard whispers of betrayal among our own. Staff meeting with outsiders. Accepting bribes."

"From the Society?" My voice is measured, but there's a razor edge to it, cutting through the room like a blade.

"Most likely." Dorian exhales sharply. "If the Society's pulling strings, it's their poison seeping into everything. They starve us, pit us against one another, and call it justice. But we have to be certain. If they're involved, we'll find the evidence. No one else stands to gain from this... no one hates us more."

Sylvie speaks then, her voice soft but steady. “Can you read their thoughts? Whoever’s hiding something?”

Her question sparks a sudden, visceral ache in me, a longing to silence her questions with a kiss, to press my lips against her unknowing, beautiful mouth. She doesn’t yet understand what she’s asking—what she’s asking of me.

“Our staff,” I say, my voice cool and distant, “are all vampires. If there’s one thing we excel at, it’s guarding our thoughts. Even from our own kind.”

And then, as if to challenge every certainty we’ve built, the air shifts. A crackling energy arcs through the room like lightning, sharp and sudden. Dorian and I turn to find its source: Sylvie.

She sits unnaturally still, her hands trembling as a faint shimmer surrounds her, an aura of power rippling outward in invisible waves.

“I can find out who it was,” she says tightly, her voice strained but resolute.

Dorian arches a skeptical brow. “How?”

Her gaze meets his, unflinching. “I don’t know how to explain it, but I can feel it—the moment you mentioned betrayal, something surged inside me. Like I could... pull the truth out of the air.”

Before either of us can respond, she closes her eyes and effectively silences us. A breath shudders through her as the room begins to dim, the candlelight flickering weakly against the thickening shadows. She’s finding herself, I realize, her instincts guiding her where her mind cannot.

Her hands rise, and the air fills with the heady scent of jasmine and vanilla, a strange

contrast to the growing darkness. Magic spills from her like threads of silver light, winding through the air in a hypnotic dance.

She whispers something, low and ancient—a language older than memory. The energy sharpens, condensing into shimmering tendrils that snake through the room like restless spirits before snapping back into her waiting hands.

Her eyes fly open, wild and wide, as if she's just torn the truth from the fabric of the night itself. "We recently learned a spell in my Spellcraft Fundamentals class. I'm not perfect at it yet, and my professor said it takes a lot of honing, but it seems as if I have a little natural ability for it."

It's no surprise to me. Not at all. Sylvie is a force.

She closes her eyes one more time, nodding to herself. Then, a pained expression takes over her beautiful features.

"It's Lara," she says, her voice trembling. "And the Society. They're behind this. They're stealing the blood, forcing the vampires into desperation. And—" Her voice falters, and her gaze shifts to Dorian. "There are traitors among your staff. You're right. They're here. Now."

The silence that follows is deafening, the air heavy with unspoken questions and a tension so sharp it threatens to break.

"Names, love," I demand, my voice cutting through the stillness, every syllable carrying the weight of centuries.

Sylvie shakes her head, frustration darkening her expression. "I don't know their names. But I feel them—their fear, their guilt. They're here, tonight."

Dorian curses under his breath, already moving toward the door to the main room. The fire in his eyes tells me he's on the brink of losing control, and I follow close behind, sparing a glance at Sylvie.

"Come," I tell her, my tone leaving no room for refusal.

She hesitates for only a moment, then nods, following us into the heart of what I'm certain will be a battle.

The club's atmosphere has shifted, tilted slightly. There's a crackling tension in the air, the kind that precedes a vicious storm. Conversations are hushed, nervous glances exchanged among the staff and patrons alike. Vampires move with predatory grace, their restraint teetering on a knife's edge as the absence of their lifeline—our stolen blood—makes itself known.

"I understand your frustration," she murmurs to me. "We need to act inconspicuous," she adds, her voice barely audible over the low hum of the jazz ensemble. Her eyes scan the room, sharp and calculating. "If they suspect we're onto them, they'll bolt."

"You already have a plan?" I ask, curious despite myself.

Her lips press into a thin line. "I think I can tap into their emotions, maybe even pull the truth out of them. I just need to get close enough."

Dorian moves closer, arching a brow, but says nothing, his doubt clear. I offer her a faint nod and gesture her forward, giving her the space she needs to prove herself.

We split up, weaving through the room like shadows. I keep a measured distance, watching Sylvie as she moves from one group of staff to another. Her steps are tentative at first, but she gains confidence with each interaction, her power building like a quiet storm as she stalks the staff like they're her prey.



She pauses near the bar, her fingers brushing the edge of the counter. The bartender, a young vampire filled with nervous energy from the day he started, avoids her gaze as he pours drinks. Sylvie tilts her head, her expression softening as she leans in.

I allow the sounds of the club to fade into the background and tap into her, into her words and her accusations. She's all I hear, the rest of the club drowning to a low hum.

"You're worried about something," she says gently, her voice laced with a subtle compulsion. "It's okay. You can tell me." I cock my head to the side and stay rooted in place. There's no way she could compel him. He's a vampire who compels his own targets. But the way she's looking at him tells a different story.

The bartender stiffens, his eyes flicking toward the shadowed corners of the room. "I... I don't know what you mean," he stammers, but his voice cracks under the weight of her gaze.

Sylvie closes her eyes briefly as I watch her side profile, her breathing steady. A faint shimmer of energy surrounds her, visible only to those attuned to the supernatural. When she opens her eyes again, they glint with an unnatural light.

"You're scared," she says, her tone more commanding now. "Someone's threatened you. Tell me who."

She may be truly compelling the vampire. I've never seen it before, and I can't comprehend how, but his voice lowers to a whisper, trembling as if uttering the words would seal his fate. "They came last week...approached me before I came in...men in dark suits. Said they were with the Society." His eyes dart to the kitchen door again, then to me, lingering just long enough to betray his fear. "They gave us an ultimatum—help them, or they'd see to it we disappeared. Some of us resisted, but others..."

"Others what?" Sylvie presses, her voice laced with an edge of urgency that sharpens the moment.

"Folded." The bartender's hand tightens around the edge of the counter, his knuckles pale. "They took the packs as leverage, threatened to expose us to the authorities if we didn't cooperate. It's bigger than you think. They're everywhere."

"Okay, Michael," she says. That's right. Michael. I forgot his name, but she knows it. It can only be a testament to her powers. "You're doing good," she says, giving him a soft smile and nod.

"Give me names," Dorian says gruffly as we both swiftly cross the room in a split second and demand answers. The bartender flinches at our sudden appearance, but Sylvie places a comforting hand on his arm to steady him. I know she's playing a part, but it tugs at something inside of me.

The bartender swallows hard. "I don't know all of them. But Elijah—he's one of ours—he's been meeting with them. He's in the back now with Cara, she's been helping him. He's the one who handed over the keys to the blood storage."

Dorian exhales sharply, his fists clenching at his sides. "Elijah." The name falls from his lips like a curse, weighted with betrayal.

I step forward, placing a hand on Dorian's shoulder to steady him. "We need him alive, Dorian. If he knows the Society's plans, he's more valuable breathing than dead."

Dorian glares at me, his jaw tight, but he nods. "For now."

"Where are they now?"

“They’re in the back,” he admits, his voice trembling. “But please, I didn’t want to?—”

“Get back to work,” I growl. “And don’t speak of this to anyone.”

He nods frantically and does as told. Sylvie turns to me, her expression a mixture of determination and unease. “They’re scared, Lucian. Desperate. The Society isn’t just threatening them—they’re using them.”

“Then they’ve chosen poorly,” I say, my voice low and venomous. “Michael is lucky I’m feeling generous. But my generosity only carries so far, love.”

Sylvie glances between us, her brows furrowed. “What are you going to do?”

I turn to her, my expression softening despite the storm raging within me. “We’ll handle it. Stay here. You’ve done enough for tonight.”

Her eyes narrow, defiance sparking in their depths. “I’m not staying behind while you confront him. I can help.”

“You’ve already helped immeasurably,” I say, my tone firm but not unkind. “And I need you to trust me. Elijah in particular won’t hold back if he feels cornered. This could get... messy.”

She looks at me with an intent gaze, and knowing what that means, I begrudgingly gesture her forward, Dorian at my heels.

The kitchen is dimly lit, the air thick with the metallic tang of blood and the faint scent of decay. Elijah and Cara stand near a metal table, their backs to us, rifling through stacks of papers. They don’t hear us enter, but the moment Elijah senses our presence, he stiffens, his hand hovering near the knife at his hip.

"Hello," I say evenly, my voice cutting through the stillness like a blade. "We need to talk."

They turn slowly in tandem, Elijah's eyes narrowing as he takes in our stances. "Lucian. Dorian. I figured it wouldn't take long for you to come knocking." His tone is casual, but there's a flicker of unease in his expression.

"You've betrayed us," Dorian growls, taking a step forward. "Do you have any idea what you've done?"

Elijah smirks, though it's brittle. "Spare me the lecture. You don't know what it's like, living under their thumb. They gave me no choice."

"There's always a choice," I counter, my voice low but laced with steel. "You made yours. Now you'll face the consequences."

Elijah shifts his stance, his hand inching closer to the knife. "I did what I had to do to survive. You'd have done the same in my position."

"No," I say, my eyes locking onto his. "I'd let them kill me before I betrayed my people."

Dorian moves like a shadow, his hand gripping Elijah's wrist before he can draw the blade. The sound of bones snapping fills the air, followed by Elijah's sharp cry of pain.

"Where are the packs, Elijah?" Dorian demands, his voice cold as I grab Cara and hold her steady before she tries to run. She squeals but makes no attempt to get out of my hold. Neither of them are a match for Dorian and me. They're much younger and nowhere near as quick or powerful. Still, one can never be too careful.

"I don't know!" Elijah snarls, struggling against Dorian's hold. "Solstice took them. They didn't tell me where."

"You'll tell us everything you do know, Elijah. Who else is working with Solstice? What are they planning?"

Elijah's defiance wavers, his eyes darting between us. "They... they're planning something big. Something that'll tear the city apart, according to them. But I don't know the details. I swear."

Dorian leans in, his fangs glinting. "You'd better hope you're telling the truth, Elijah. Because if you're lying, the only way out is death."

The tension in the room crackles like a live wire, Elijah's fear palpable as Dorian tightens his grip.

"Start talking," I say, my voice as cold and sharp as a winter's night.

Cara knees me in the crotch and tries to bolt before I can fully right myself, but Sylvie is faster. She raises a hand, and the air around Cara shimmers, trapping her in place. "You're not going anywhere," Sylvie says, her voice steady despite the strain of holding the ward spell that she's grown quite fond of.

I latch onto Cara once more and throw her to the ground, Sylvie's spell dissolving as she realizes I have her under control again.

The two traitors exchange panicked glances, the realization of their doom sinking in. Under the weight of our combined fury, their resolve shatters, and the truth spills from their lips like blood from a wound.

"I didn't have a choice!" he cries as Dorian pounds him against the wall.

“They—They threatened me! Come on, please!”

What a stark change of demeanor.

“Do you think that excuses the two of you?” I snarl, my fangs bared as my spittle lands on Cara’s cheeks. “You betrayed your own kind.” I look between the two once-trusted staff members. “You endangered us all. Do you understand what will happen now? Now that your peers have no food?”

I take a deep breath, silently doing my best to compose myself.

“Get them out of my sight,” I growl, turning away. “Have the guards lock them in the underground chamber and we will see to it we start the process tomorrow.”

Sylvie watches me with wide eyes, a mix of shock and something else—something I can’t place. Dorian calls out to our guards in his mind, I’m able to hear it but I’m unsure if Sylvie can. Soon, two of them come and lead the traitors out of our sight. Their terrified, shrill screams pierce the air, and if they think they’re scared now, they better pray to whomever their God is that I die before I get my hands on them tomorrow.

“It’s safe to say you will continue staying with me,” I say as I turn to her, my voice softer but firm as my fangs retreat.

I cup her face, still trying to get my heart to slow down.

She hesitates, her lips parting in protest as her dark brown eyes peer into mine.

“It’s not safe for you elsewhere, especially now,” I add. “Solstice is on the move again. Lara is too dangerous, and you’re too important to me. Nothing will happen to you under my care, Sylvie.”

Her shoulders drop slightly, the fight leaving her. “Fine,” she says quietly, reluctantly, but at least she’s acquiesced. “I wanted to talk to you about future living arrangements anyway.” I give her a questioning look, but she shakes her head. “When we get home.”

Home.

I like the sound of that coming from her sweet lips.

I can’t help myself, despite the rage still boiling inside of me, I claim her mouth, my tongue slipping inside as I press my body to hers. She wraps her arms around me, and I hold her like my life depends on it—like hers does, too. I pick her up and she tangles her legs around me and kisses me back with such force it causes a chill to spread through my body.

And only then, does my heart return to its normal rhythm.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:26 am*

The council chamber feels colder than usual tonight. The ancient stone walls, carved with protective runes that glow faintly in the dim torchlight, seem to echo with the tension filling the room. Dorian and I felt an intense pull to gather the factions before outrage consumed everyone and there wasn't a chance to.

Sylvie is home, where she belongs, cloistered in safety, protected from the world's dangers. It is the sole reason I am able to fix my thoughts upon the impending night and not be swept away by the chaos brewing within. She spoke of spending the evening with Rebecca and Nicole, a small gesture of normalcy amidst the storm. A new film, one they've longed to view, will be their escape for the night.

I cast my gaze across the chamber, where vampires of each faction have assembled—each one a solitary figure within their designated enclave, unwilling to mingle, as is their way. Which, I confess, suits me. I have no desire to converse with the Unbound—the feral deviants who roam the world as they please, killing anyone and everyone for their own gain—or the Ascendancy—their totalitarian society, so removed from any semblance of humanity.

Our faction, the Midnight Alliance, is assembled on one side, our members seated with rigid formality, while the Ascendancy maintains their accustomed air of lofty superiority on the opposite side. Across from them, the Unbound slouch in their chairs, lounging like the barbarians they are, their confidence a bitter affront that gnaws at my restraint. They're probably merely thinking of the next human they'll surprise and drain on the outskirts of our region—where they roam.

Hunt.



The chamber is quieter than I anticipated, save for the scrape of boots and whispered conversations that bounce off the high ceilings. Dorian sits beside me, his usual relaxed demeanor replaced with the same grim resolve etched on every face here.

“We all know why we’re here,” Dorian begins, taking control, his voice steady but low. “Our blood packs are gone. Stolen. The entire reserve.” He pauses, scanning the room. “If we don’t address this immediately, the fragile peace we’ve maintained will unravel. All will be for nothing.”

“Fragile?” scoffs a member of the Ascendancy, his aristocratic features twisted in a sneer. “Let’s not pretend your little experiment wasn’t doomed from the start. Relying on humans to willingly hand over their blood was always beneath us.”

A murmur of assent ripples through the Ascendancy ranks, but Dorian presses on. “We built this system to avoid unnecessary bloodshed. To maintain the balance between us and them.”

“And now your precious system has failed,” a voice interjects, low and mocking.

All heads turn toward the Unbound section of the room. Their leader, Kristoff, a towering, ghostly figure with a jagged scar cutting across his cheek, leans forward in his chair, legs spread wide, his predatory grin visible even in the dim light.

“You’ve spent decades cloaking yourselves in the guise of civilization,” he continues, his voice dripping with derision. “Feeding from fuckin’ plastic bags instead of the veins of your prey. Now look at you—heading toward starving, desperate. And still clinging to the illusion that you’re better than the rest of us.”

Dorian stiffens, his voice sharp with restraint. “The system hasn’t failed. It’s been sabotaged. By the Solstice Society—a common threat. This should be an issue to all of us, regardless of if you feed from ‘fuckin’ plastic bags’ or not. Being sabotaged in

one area is only going to lead to them testing us in other areas.”

“Sabotaged?” The scarred vampire laughs maniacally, a sound that echoes ominously through the chamber. “Of course it was. They saw you for what you are—weak. And they’ve done us a favor, really. Now you have no choice but to remember what it means to be real vampires.”

“Real vampires?” I speak before Dorian has a chance to respond, my voice slicing through the growing tension. “You mean beasts. Creatures of pure instinct, with no thought beyond the next kill. You call that real? It’s feral. Inhumane. You are draining and slaughtering humans with no regard for life.”

His grin widens. “I call it being free. Not leashed like dogs, begging scraps from humans who would rather see us dead. You’ve let them tame you. You’ve let them make you forget what we are.”

“Enough!” Dorian slams his hand upon the table, the sound reverberating through the chamber like a thunderclap. “We didn’t come here to debate philosophy. We came to discuss how to resolve this crisis. If ever there were a time to come together, it should be when an entire covenant of people wants to see us wiped out from the earth. Yes, this is about blood, but for those of you who don’t care, it’s also about our potential extinction. Have you no regard for that?” He lets out a long sigh, looking to each faction. “How are we going to resolve this?”

“Resolve?” Kristoff leans back, feigning amusement with a wide-eyed gaze. “There’s nothing to resolve. The solution is simple—hunt. Feed. Take what we need, as we always should have.”

“That is no solution,” I snap. “It’s a declaration of war. Against humans. Against each other. How do you not see how bad this is going to get? And quickly? As Dorian said, even aside from the blood issue, there’s a much larger issue at hand with the

Solstice Society. And it includes all of us, regardless of how we've divided ourselves up."

"War is already at your doorstep," Kristoff replies, his voice deadly calm. "You're just too frightened to admit it. What do the kids say nowadays? It's very on-brand for your weakened kind."

The argument erupts like a tempest, each faction clinging to its ideology with an almost desperate fervor, as if holding on for dear life.

The Ascendancy, predictably, takes the first swing. "This crisis demands order," declares their second-in-command, Tobias, a tall vampire with hair so pale it gleams like stubborn moonlight. His voice carries the clipped cadence of someone who has rarely been questioned. "Our priority should be the preservation of our kind. We must consolidate resources, fortify our estates, and ensure that those of value are protected."

"Of value?" spits Dorian, his hand curling into a fist on the table. "What are the rest of us, then? Cannon fodder?"

Tobias regards him with a cold, mocking smile. "If the shoe fits."

Before Dorian can retort, a sharp laugh cuts through the rigidity. It comes from the scarred vampire, who leans back in his chair with the smug satisfaction of someone watching a circus. "I quite love this," Kristoff says, gesturing lazily at the Ascendancy. "Always the same song. Hide in your mansions, count your gold, and pretend the world isn't burning outside your gates. You lot are a relic."

"Better a relic than a rabid beast," Tobias snaps with venom. "Your kind—if we can even dare to call it that—are the reason we're in this godforsaken position to begin with."

“Please,” Kristoff drawls, his grin stretching wider. “Don’t flatter yourself with the illusion that anyone cares enough about you to sabotage this truce. The Solstice Society targeted you and your precious bagged blood because they know you’re the weakest of our three factions. And they know that when your hunger sets in, the Midnight Alliance will crumble first. You are so far removed from this life, it’s downright laughable. May as well be humans yourselves.” He glances at me with deliberate contempt. “The only thing holding you together is denial.”

Dorian rises, his calm facade fracturing. “We agreed to peace because we believed in a better way,” he says, his voice rising in a passionate crescendo. “Not for ourselves, but for the future of our kind and for civilization as a whole.”

“Peace?” Another Unbound vampire, a wiry figure with sunken eyes, sneers, his voice dripping with contempt. “You call this peace? Feeding from plastic bags like livestock? Bowing to humans?” He scoffs and crosses his arms firmly over his chest, looking to Vada, Kristoff’s lover. “If we had it our way, humans would be the inferior species. We’d keep them like cattle and farm them like the no-good nothings they are. We would be the premier species.”

“It’s survival,” Tobias retorts.

“It’s pathetic,” Kristoff vampire interjects. He spreads his hands as if addressing children. “Listen closely, little lambs. The humans hate us. Always have, always will. The blood packs didn’t change that. You’ve just found your army of desperation—humans who will willingly give you blood in exchange for a cheap vampire-fuck. They’re just a leash. And now that leash is gone.”

The room erupts into chaos, a whirlwind of shouting and acrimony. The Ascendancy demands silence while the Unbound revel in the uproar, yelling and raving like feral fools. Dorian tries to restore order, but his voice is swallowed by the cacophony.

I have heard enough.

“This isn’t sustainable,” I declare, my voice rising above the din, sharp as a blade, cutting through the mayhem.

The room stills. All eyes turn to me.

“The Solstice Society is the true enemy here,” I continue. “They’ve orchestrated this crisis with the sole purpose of sowing discord among us. And, by the looks of it, it’s working.”

The silence that follows is palpable, heavy with tension.

“What do you propose, dear Lucian?” Tobias speaks first, his tone a mixture of condescension and genuine curiosity. “Another noble speech about unity?” He makes a motion like he’s jerking his century-old cock and rolls his eyes.

How mature.

“No.” I meet his gaze coldly. “A plan. We locate the stolen blood packs. We expose the Solstice Society for the threat they are, and we take them out before they can take us out. And until then, we survive—without tearing each other apart.”

“And if we don’t find the packs?” Kristoff leans forward, his grin returning. His eyes glint with amusement, as though he’s enjoying this far too much. “How long do you think your precious peace will last when hunger sets in? A week? Two?”

I meet his gaze unflinchingly. “We will find them. And in the interim, we’ll start rebuilding our reserve.” I look around at the other members of the Midnight Society, who still look unsure, nervous, but who nod along anyway.

“You’d better hope so,” Kristoff says, his voice low and mocking. “Because when this alliance crumbles—and it will—don’t come crying to us. We’ll be busy thriving. The way our kind was meant to.”

He rises from his seat, his movements languid and deliberate. The other Unbound follow, their laughter echoing through the chamber like the taunt of a predator walking away from its prey. I already know their destination: the outskirts of our domain, where the chaos will be unleashed in their wake.

The room feels eerily empty in the wake of the Unbound's departure, but their mocking laughter lingers in the air like a foul stain. For a moment, no one speaks, the weight of their words hanging over us like an ominous storm cloud, a threat too near to ignore.

The silence rings loud, a thick veil woven of tension and unsaid truths, until it is broken by Tobias’s steely voice. His words are calm, measured, yet the subtle tremor beneath his pale features betrays a slight crack in his composure. “It doesn’t matter what they do. The Unbound are parasites. They’ll latch onto chaos, feed on it, and leave the rest of us to pick up the pieces. It was pointless to even include them tonight. Or ever.”

“Which is precisely why we need to act,” Dorian says, his tone sharp and full of vigor. He turns to the Ascendancy group, his frustration barely concealed. “You can’t ignore this anymore. The Solstice Society isn’t going to stop. They’ve already proven they can cripple us. What happens when they escalate? When it’s not just blood packs, but direct attacks on our kind—or worse, on the humans who sustain us? We’ve already been experiencing firsthand issues with their group over the last few weeks. They are getting closer to ending the curse, thus ending us, or bending it to their will, by the day.” Dorian’s voice reverberates through the chamber, ringing of authority, his dark eyes burning with conviction.

Tobias folds his arms and leans back in his chair with a quiet arrogance. “You assume we haven’t considered that, Dorian. The Ascendancy has contingency plans for every scenario, including human casualties. This crisis will pass, as all others have. We simply need to retreat, consolidate resources, and wait them out. They haven’t broken or bent the curse in the past, it’s not happening anytime soon.”

“You’re not providing a solution,” I interject, my voice cutting through the ever-thickening tension. “Retreating only emboldens them. Every step we take back is a step they take forward. They’ll keep pressing until there’s no one left to resist them.”

He regards me with a cold, assessing gaze. “And you propose we strike at them? At the Solstice Society? Do you even know where to begin? Who to target? Their network is vast, their leaders elusive. We might not want to think they’re powerful, but they are. With dark magic on their side, they have endless capabilities.”

“Exactly! But they are not invincible,” I counter. “No one is. If we can identify their leadership and cut off the head of the serpent, the rest will wither. We already have contact with one of the administration leaders. The Society thrives on fear and division. If we deny them that, their power crumbles.”

His lips thin, and he glances at the other Ascendancy members, their faces unreadable behind their decades upon decades of practiced neutrality. Finally, he speaks, his tone measured. “Let’s say we agree. Do you have a plan? Or is this more of your idealistic drivel?”

“I’m working on one,” I admit. “But it starts with intelligence. We need to know who their leaders are, where they operate, because they don’t solely rely on their headquarters for their own planning, and how they are planning to strike next. That means cooperation—between the Ascendancy, the Midnight Alliance, and anyone else willing to stand against them.”

Dorian nods solemnly, the weight of his agreement hanging heavily in the air. “He’s right. The Unbound may have washed their hands of this, but we can’t afford to. If the Society succeeds, none of us will survive their purge. They’ve already proven they can manipulate us, even infiltrate us. The time for sitting idle is over.”

A murmur ripples through the Ascendancy members, their perfect facades cracking as they exchange uneasy glances.

“What about human involvement?” one of them asks. “If we start taking out the human leaders of Solstice, won’t it draw attention? Governments, authorities, the public—they’ll all come down on us. These people have families who will tie things back to us.”

“It’s a risk,” Dorian says. “But the alternative is extinction. And if we act carefully, strategically, we can eliminate their leaders without drawing unnecessary attention. We can also beat them at their own game, find their dark magic power source, and eliminate it. No killing involved. We just need a plan, and we need to move forward.”

Tobias’s jaw tightens, and for a moment, I think he’ll dismiss us outright. But then he exhales slowly, his gaze hardening. “Very well. The Ascendancy will agree to work with the Midnight Alliance—temporarily. But if this alliance jeopardizes our survival, we will withdraw immediately. I’ll be informing our head that he needs to seek out a meeting with you to catch up on all things relating to our current alliance.”

“Understood,” I say, though my voice lacks warmth, cold as the steel within me. Cooperation is progress, but trust will take far longer to build.

He rises, signaling the end of the discussion. “You have our support—for now. But remember, Lucian, the Ascendancy’s patience is not infinite. Fail, and you’ll face more than just the Solstice Society.”



With that, the Ascendancy members file out, their departure as cold and precise as their presence.

The room is quieter in their wake, the weight of his parting words heavy in the air.

Dorian turns to me, his expression a mix of determination and concern. “We’re not just fighting Solstice anymore. We’re fighting decades upon decades of mistrust and division. This alliance is hanging by a thread.”

“It’s enough,” I say, though the tremor of doubt creeps into my voice. “We have a chance now—a fragile one, but a chance. We need to safely and quietly utilize Sylvie’s connection to Solstice. She’s the key to this.”

“She’s also a target,” Dorian reminds me. “If Solstice realizes what she’s fully capable of... Her abilities are growing by the day.”

“They won’t get the chance,” I interrupt, my fists clenching at the thought. “Not while I’m still breathing.”

Dorian studies me for a moment before nodding. “Then we’d better move quickly. If we’re going to strike, we need to do so soon.”

As we step out of the chamber and into the night, the downtown district sprawls before us—a labyrinth of lights and shadows, its secrets hidden in every corner. Somewhere out there, the Solstice Society is watching, waiting for us to falter.

And I can’t allow that to happen.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:26 am*

The kitchen is vast, its high ceilings supported by dark wooden beams that seem to stretch endlessly. A wrought-iron chandelier hangs above, its intricate design casting dancing shadows across the stone-tiled floor. The walls are lined with deep mahogany cabinets, their polished surfaces reflecting the dim glow of flickering candles perched in silver sconces.

An island dominates the center of the room, its black marble countertop smooth and cool beneath my hands. The faint aroma of spices lingers in the air, though the shelves stocked with aged copper pots and jars of preserved herbs suggest the kitchen is more for display than use.

The staff is eerily quiet, their movements precise and efficient. A housekeeper—Margaret, if I remember correctly—nods politely as she passes, her expression unreadable. Another worker moves through the room with a tray of polished silverware, barely making a sound. The atmosphere feels heavy, as though the air itself holds its breath.

Despite the imposing surroundings, there's an intimacy to the space, a strange contrast to the cold grandeur of the rest of Lucian's estate. It's here, surrounded by muted light and silent staff, that I begin to prepare a simple task—slicing fruit for my tea.

Unfortunately, the knife slips before I can register the sting.

I stare down at the thin red line forming on my fingertip, a bead of blood swelling quickly before spilling over. The sharp metallic scent hits my nose, subtle but unmistakable, and I frown.

“Damn it,” I mutter, reaching for a dish towel as the blood rushes from the split in my skin.

Before I can wrap the cloth around my hand, a presence freezes me in place.

I glance up and my breath hitches.

Lucian stands in the doorway, his tall frame filling the entrance like a shadow come to life. He looks otherworldly, his dark hair tousled, his sharp features partially obscured by the dim light. But it’s his eyes that hold me captive—those piercing, storm-laden eyes that lock onto my hand with a focus that feels almost primal.

“Lucian?” I ask hesitantly.

He doesn’t respond. His gaze flicks to my face for a split second before snapping back to the tiny wound. His lips part, and though no words come out, I can see the tension building in the set of his jaw, the tightness in his shoulders.

“Are you okay?” I press, stepping toward him, though it’s a ridiculous question given the circumstances.

“I...” His voice is low, strained, as though it’s been dragged out of him against his will. “You’re bleeding.”

I blink down at my finger. “It’s nothing,” I say, trying for nonchalance. “Just a small cut.”

“Leave.”

His command is sharp, cold. It takes a moment for the meaning to register.

“What?”

“Leave the kitchen. Now.” His voice is firm, but there’s a tremor beneath it, a crack in his usual composure that sends alarm bells ringing in my mind. I watch as his shoulders rise and fall in quick succession, and he swallows hard.

The air feels heavy, like the moment before a storm breaks. I set the knife down carefully, my movements slow and deliberate, and step closer toward him.

“Lucian,” I say softly, watching the way his hands clench into fists at his sides. “What’s going on? You’re scaring me.”

“Do not come closer.” He shakes his head as if warding something—me?—off. “Please, Sylvie.”

I stop in my tracks, my heart pounding. His tone is like ice, but there’s a heat in his eyes that sends a shiver down my spine.

“I’m not leaving until you tell me what’s wrong,” I say, more firmly this time.

His head tilts back slightly, as though he’s trying to catch his breath. When he finally looks at me, his expression is raw, haunted.

“It’s the blood,” he admits, his voice a hoarse whisper. “The shortage is affecting me more than I anticipated.”

I don’t know what to say. The idea of Lucian struggling, of something as primal as hunger reducing him to this, leaves me at a loss.

“How bad is it?” I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

He hesitates, then looks away. “I feed using the blood packs every few days in addition to normal food. Not just for sustenance but to keep my body... balanced. The blood keeps my mind clear, my strength steady. Without it...” He trails off, his jaw tightening.

“Without it,” I repeat. “What happens without it?”

He closes his eyes, and when he speaks, his words are low, deliberate. “I become unpredictable. Dangerous. Everything I’m afraid of.”

The weight of his confession sinks in, and for a moment, the room feels colder.

“I didn’t realize it was this bad,” I say, feeling both guilty and alarmed.

“I didn’t want you to.” His gaze returns to me, sharper now, though his eyes soften at the edges. “But this isn’t something I can hide anymore. Being around you...” He cuts himself off, his expression unreadable.

“What about me?”

“You’re...” He exhales sharply, running a hand through his hair. “You’re too close. Your blood—it’s...” He swallows hard, his voice dropping. “It’s difficult to ignore.”

The revelation hits me like a slap, and I instinctively step back. “You mean?—”

“I won’t hurt you,” he interrupts quickly, his voice fierce. “I’d die before letting that happen. But you need to understand... this isn’t easy.”

His emotions project themselves onto me. It’s one of the very first abilities I discovered about myself when I came into my magic—after Lara was first taken. I actually asked Ravenna about this because I couldn’t wrap my mind around why I

came into the abilities when I did. She said some witches, ones who are full-blooded, come into their magic at a certain age determined by their lineage. For me, it was a life event that triggered my magic. When I had to stand on my own after Lara went missing, that's when my abilities finally appeared. To save me. To protect me.

A tense silence stretches between Lucian and me. I'm not sure whether to feel afraid, angry, or heartbroken.

"You could have told me," I say finally.

"And what would that have changed?" He looks at me, his expression weary. "You'd only worry, and I'd still be the same. Hungry."

"You don't have to be hungry," I whisper.

His eyes snap to mine, wide and disbelieving, the storm within them freezing as though my words have shattered some invisible restraint. "What?"

"I can help you," I say, stepping closer, the air between us charged and suffocating. My heart is pounding so hard I'm sure he can hear it, but I refuse to back down. With deliberate care, I begin unwrapping the towel from my hand. The red-stained fabric falls away, revealing the fresh wound.

His gaze drops to it, his breath catching audibly, a low sound in his throat that's somewhere between a growl and a groan. The sharp, coppery scent of my blood thickens the air, and I see the way his chest rises and falls, his breaths becoming shallow, strained.

"Sylvie, don't," he rasps, his voice frayed and desperate, each word weighted with warning as he turns his head away from me. "You don't understand what you're offering."

“I trust you,” I murmur, the words trembling with conviction as I take another step closer and gently turn his face toward me. “You’d die before hurting me, remember?” My palm presses lightly against his chest, right over his heart. The fabric of his shirt is cool under my touch, and I can feel the faint rhythm of his heartbeat beneath it, erratic and unsteady. “I’m offering.”

He stiffens, his body coiling as though bracing against some invisible force. His hands hang at his sides, trembling, fingers curling into his palms in a futile attempt to anchor himself. “I can’t,” he says, his voice breaking, his eyes clenched shut like he’s trying to block out the sight of me, of the temptation I’ve become.

“You can ,” I say softly, tilting my head. His eyes flicker open, and for a moment, they blaze with raw hunger, a darkness, the kind of need that steals the breath from my lungs. “And you won’t hurt me.”

The tension between us crackles like a live wire, and for a heartbeat, neither of us moves. Then, slowly, hesitantly, I lift my hand toward his mouth. His breath hitches, his lips parting slightly as I press my wounded finger to them. The warmth of his exhale brushes against my skin, and for a fleeting moment, he hesitates.

Then his mouth closes around my finger.

A shiver runs through me the moment his lips make contact. The cool press of his mouth is startling, but it’s the heat of his tongue brushing against the cut that sends a jolt through my body, a strange, electric current that races to places I can’t name. My knees feel weak, and I sway toward him instinctively, like a moth to a flame.

Lucian groans quietly, a deep, guttural sound that vibrates against my skin, and his hands shoot up to grip my wrist. His touch is firm but not painful, and I realize he’s not holding me in place to push me away—he’s holding me because he can’t let go.

His eyes are shut tight, his brows furrowed as though he's fighting some internal battle even now. But the way his lips move against my finger is slow, deliberate, reverent, as though he's savoring every drop.

The room around us seems to disappear, the edges of my awareness blurring until all I can feel is him. The gentle pull of his mouth, the way his tongue brushes against the wound with a precision that feels both tender and carnal. My pulse thrums wildly, each beat sending a fresh wave of sensation through me, intoxicating and consuming.

I don't realize I'm leaning into him until his free hand presses against my hip, steadying me. His fingers splay across my side, cool and firm, grounding me even as I feel myself spiraling into something deeper, something I can't name. My breath catches, and I let my eyes flutter closed, losing myself in the moment.

The sensations are overwhelming—heat and cold, sharpness and softness, hunger and surrender. It's as though the act itself is more than physical, as though some unspoken connection has flared to life between us, binding us in a way that feels ancient, inevitable.

Lucian's breathing grows uneven, each exhale warm against my skin, and I can feel the tension radiating from him, the way his restraint is unraveling thread by thread. His fingers tighten slightly around my wrist, his grip almost possessive, painful, and a low, desperate sound escapes him as he draws more blood from the wound, sucking my entire finger into his mouth in an undeniably erotic way.

For a moment, I think I'll drown in the intensity of it all—the way his touch sets my nerves alight, the way his need feels like a mirror of my own. I can't even fathom having him truly drink from me. Feed from me. The intoxicating sensation would only be that much more heightened.

It's terrifying and exhilarating all at once, and I don't want it to end.



But then, suddenly, as if sensing this is real, he pulls back.

The abruptness of the loss sends a wave of cold through me, and I stumble slightly, catching myself against the counter. His hands fall away as though my skin has burned him, and when I look up, his expression is a mixture of anguish and regret.

“Lucian,” I breathe, my voice unsteady, still caught in the haze of the moment.

“I can’t,” he says, his voice rough and raw, each word heavy with self-loathing. His eyes open, and they’re wild, swirling with a storm of emotions—hunger, guilt, longing, and something I can’t quite place. “This... I shouldn’t have?—”

He cuts himself off, shaking his head as though trying to clear it. Before I can say anything, he turns on his heel and strides out of the room, his movements quick and deliberate, like he’s fleeing something he can’t face.

I’m left standing there, breathless and trembling, my heart caught somewhere between exhilaration and devastation. My hand still tingles where his lips touched it, the memory of the moment seared into my skin.

And as the silence settles around me, I realize I’m not sure whether I should feel relieved or broken by the space he’s put between us.

\* \* \*

The lingering sensations of what had happened earlier with Lucian still buzz faintly beneath my skin as I step into Petals and Potions for my first shift. The wound on my hand, now neatly bandaged, throbs in time with my heartbeat—a constant, subtle reminder of the connection we shared. The memory of his lips on my skin and the way his storm-filled eyes had flickered with an emotion I couldn’t name—hunger, guilt, something else—hasn’t left me since.

I can still feel the ghost of his touch, the electric charge between us that seemed to hum louder with every second we stood close. The intensity of that moment lingers in my chest, wrapping tightly around me like an invisible thread I can't break.

I don't know how to categorize the emotions swirling inside me. It wasn't fear, not exactly—though there was an undeniable edge of danger to everything about him. It was trust, too—a reckless, consuming trust that I had no right to feel but did anyway. And now, as I stand surrounded by shelves of vials and jars, I wonder if the wild thrum of my pulse is something I'll ever grow used to.

I try to push it all away—for now—so I can get started on my first shift with Ravenna.

The shop looks exactly as I remember it: ivy curling lazily around the edges of the windows, shelves brimming with jars and vials in every imaginable hue, and a faint, calming aroma of lavender, sage, and something earthier that I still can't quite place. It feels like stepping into another world, another dimension, one I belong in—one that hums with quiet, unassuming magic.

Ravenna looks up from the counter where she's arranging a new display of colorful crystals. The sunlight filters through the window, glinting off her braids and making her silver streaks shimmer. She greets me with a warm smile, setting down a delicate amethyst point.

"Sylvie, right on time. I knew you'd be dependable," she says, her voice carrying that soothing yet commanding quality she seems to exude effortlessly.

"I figured it wouldn't be a great start if I was late," I reply with a small smile.

She chuckles softly, gesturing toward the counter. "Come over here. Let's ease you into the day."

Shrugging off my coat, I drape it over the back of a nearby chair and join her at the counter. A nervous flutter stirs in my stomach, but Ravenna's presence is as grounding as it is intimidating.

"Before we dive in," she says, leaning on the counter and studying me with those piercing gray eyes, "how are you holding up, dear?"

The question catches me off guard. It's not the casual, obligatory type of question people ask in passing. There's weight behind it—genuine concern.

I hesitate, unsure how much to reveal. "I'm... managing," I say finally. My voice is quieter than I intended. "Some days are harder than others."

She doesn't press, but her expression softens, and she nods like she understands more than I've said. "That's fair. You've been carrying a lot lately. Just know this place isn't only a refuge for customers—it's a haven for you too."

Her words settle over me like a comforting blanket, and I nod, swallowing the lump in my throat.

"All right," she says briskly, straightening. "Take some time to settle in and then you can get to work by restocking the shelves over there." She gestures toward a wall filled with jars of dried herbs and powdered roots. "Everything's labeled, but I'll be nearby if you have questions. If you're curious about the elements of anything, let me know. I can give you a brief overview."

I nod, grateful for the distraction, and make my way to the shelves. The jars feel cool under my fingertips as I pick them up, reading the faded labels: mugwort, valerian root, angelica, damiana. The simple, repetitive task gives my mind something to focus on, and for the first time in days, I feel a sliver of calm.

The doorbell chimes periodically as friendly and knowledgeable customers come and go. Ravenna greets each of them warmly, answering their questions with an ease that suggests she's done this for centuries. I overhear snippets of conversations—requests for tinctures to ward off bad dreams, crystals for emotional balance, oils for spellwork. I feel like I'm learning so much just by overhearing different protocols and remedies.

The blend of the mundane and the mystical is oddly soothing, and I can't help but be fascinated by the small rituals unfolding around me.

By mid-afternoon, I've gotten the hang of the shop's layout, and Ravenna seems pleased with my progress. "You're doing well," she says as she watches me restock a shelf with small vials of shimmering blue liquid. "You've got a good instinct for this."

Her words bring a warmth I hadn't expected, and I can't help but smile.

A few hours later, after the shop has quieted and the customers have started to trickle down in amount, Ravenna approaches me with a small bundle of herbs tied with twine. "Here," she says, holding it out to me. "Burn this when you need clarity. It might help you untangle whatever's weighing on your mind." She smiles. "Especially things with your sister. We can get more into things with her and your goals with her humanity, but let's ease into it so we don't overwhelm you, dear."

I accept the bundle, the faint scent of rosemary and chamomile reaching my nose. "Thank you," I say, meaning it.

She gives me a knowing look. "I told you before, Sylvie, you've got a spark. You're here for a reason, and it's not just coincidence. Trust your instincts."

The weight of her words settles over me as I slip the bundle into my bag. The gentle

words remind me of my mother, how she always said the same thing. Trust your gut, Sylvie. Trust your instincts.

It must be a witch thing.

As the sun begins to set, casting golden light through the shop's ivy-framed windows, Ravenna waves me off with a smile. "Go get some rest, dear. You'll be back soon enough. Your next shift is on a slow day, so I thought we could practice some spellwork and study a bit more about the humanity curse."

After bidding Ravenna a good night, I step out into the crisp evening air, clutching the bundle of herbs she so graciously gave me in my hand. The cobblestone streets of Blackthorne stretch ahead of me, but for the first time in what feels like weeks, the weight on my chest feels just a little lighter.

When I spot Lucian waiting at the corner, I shake my head despite the flicker of warmth that blooms in my chest. Of course he's here. He wouldn't let me wander the streets of Blackthorne alone, not after everything that's happened. He's predictable in that way—steady, watchful. It's something I've come to count on, even if I'm not sure I should.

It strikes me, as I approach, how normal this moment feels. Too normal, considering how not-normal it all is. My hand still aches faintly from the way he sucked at my skin, but there's no awkwardness between us, no strained silence to mark what happened. Lucian had fed on me—an act that should have left me reeling, terrified, something—but instead, we'd kissed like it was the most natural thing in the world. And now here he is, waiting for me on a quiet cobblestone street like none of it ever happened. Like we're just... us. And he was able to restrain himself in a way he didn't believe he could.

"Stalking me again?" I tease as I approach, but my voice softens at the edges,

betraying the growing fondness I feel.

Lucian raises a brow, the faintest hint of a smirk tugging at his lips. “You make it sound sinister,” he replies, his tone low and smooth. “I prefer to think of it as keeping you alive.”

I roll my eyes, but the corners of my mouth twitch upward. “I think I’ve done a pretty good job keeping myself alive, Professor.”

I say the word just for theatrics, considering he isn’t my professor, but I can’t help the flicker of heat it sends surging inside of me.

His smirk fades slightly, replaced by something gentler. “That you have, love.”

The space between us evaporates, and I rise on my toes to kiss him—a quick, fleeting brush of lips meant to say hello. But Lucian surprises me. His hands come up to cradle my face, and he kisses me back, slow and deliberate, as though he’s trying to keep us both in this moment. It’s not rushed, not desperate, but it’s everything—soft, consuming, and impossibly steady.

When he finally pulls back, his lips curl into a faint smile, the kind that’s rare enough to make my heart ache. It’s not the smirk he wears like armor. It’s something real, something vulnerable—something undeniably human.

As we walk side by side into the gathering dusk, I let my fingers graze over my bandage. It’s healed more than it should have in the time that’s passed. Another not-normal detail in a string of not-normal days. And yet, walking next to Lucian, I feel... safe. Whole.

I glance at him, catching the faintest flicker of something in his expression before he smooths it away. He doesn’t speak about what happened earlier, and neither do I.

Maybe we're both pretending it didn't matter, that it didn't change something between us. But as his arm brushes mine, I wonder if we're both lying to ourselves.

Because my feelings have been building by the day for this man—with each lingering stare, each sentiment of love that spills from his lips, each time he protects me in a way only he can. But after what happened in the kitchen, everything seems to have shifted once more.

And as we walk side by side into the evening shadows, I can't help but think that maybe, just maybe, this is a step in the right direction.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:26 am*

I push open the tall, arched door to Spellcraft Fundamentals, and immediately the fragrance of lavender and bergamot hits my senses—Professor Ambrose must be burning her signature blend of herbs again. The floor-to-ceiling windows let in streams of morning sunlight, painting stripes of gold across the worn wooden desks. There’s a low murmur of excitement among my classmates, all of us eager to see what our famously enigmatic professor has in store for us today.

Marisol spots me and waves from the middle row, where she’s already set up with her notebook and a colorful spread of pens. We’ve grown closer over the last couple of weeks—our partnership in spellwork starting to turn into real friendship. She has this magnetic optimism that makes me feel less alone navigating my new life as a budding witch.

“Hey,” I say, sliding into the seat next to her. “Ready for round two of magical boot camp?”

She flashes a grin. “Bring it on! My wrists are still sore from Monday’s shielding practice, though.”

I chuckle, shaking out my own stiff fingers. “Same. Pretty sure I dreamt about wards chasing me around the library that night.”

Before Marisol can reply, the door at the front of the room swings open, and Professor Ambrose sweeps in. She wears her hair pinned back, the silver streak framing her face with an air of effortless authority. Her long robes rustle as she makes her way to the lectern, the low chatter in the room subsiding to a hush.



“Good morning,” she begins, glancing around at all of us. “I trust you’ve been practicing your spellwork. Today, we’ll build on our continued foundation with a spell that offers more subtlety—specifically, concealment.”

A flicker of excitement passes through the class, including me. Concealment? That sounds immediately useful, especially with all the chaos in my life lately.

Professor Ambrose continues, her voice echoing lightly in the spacious chamber, “Unlike warding, which repels or guards, concealment distorts perception. It doesn’t render you truly invisible, but it can make you far more difficult to detect—whether by mundane eyes or certain forms of magical scrying.”

She gestures to a chalkboard where a neat incantation is already written in pale script.

*Obscura meum conspectum, umbram dantis lumen.*

“Repeat after me,” she instructs, pronouncing each word slowly. We all echo her in unison, stumbling over the unfamiliar wording. “Good. Now, watch the motion carefully. Think of gathering your internal energy like a veil you pull around yourself.”

She demonstrates, tracing a circle around her torso with one hand while clutching a short staff in the other. A soft shimmer emanates from her fingertips, enveloping her form. For a moment, the edges of her silhouette flicker like heat haze on a summer road.

Marisol and I exchange exhilarated glances. This is going to be so handy, I think, a thrill coursing through me.

“All right,” Professor Ambrose says, dropping the spell. “Pair up with your usual partners and spread out. You’ll need space to move. Remember: your partner is your

observer. They'll help you gauge how effective your concealment is."

The clatter of desks and low chatter fills the room as students shuffle into open areas. Marisol and I find a corner by a tall window, where the sunlight illuminates swirling dust particles and warms the air around us. We set down our bags and face each other, adrenaline buzzing in my veins.

"You first?" I ask, offering a playful raise of my eyebrow.

Marisol squares her shoulders. "Sure. Let's see if all my late-night energy channeling paid off."

She closes her eyes and inhales deeply, then speaks the incantation in a clear voice. I watch a faint ripple pass along her arms, but the effect fizzles out before it reaches her shoulders.

"Ugh," she groans. "I felt something, but it didn't hold."

"Try again," I urge, resting a comforting hand on her forearm. "Remember how you pictured your protective ward? Except now, it's not about pushing others away—it's about hiding you."

Her eyes flash with determination. She whispers the words again:

"Obscura meum conspectum, umbram dantis lumen..."

This time, a gauzy shimmer wraps around her like a second skin. She doesn't vanish, not exactly, but the edges of her form blur, like I'm looking at her through frosted glass.

"That's it!" I exclaim, voice hushed. "I can see you, but it's... fuzzy."

Marisol releases the spell with a giddy laugh. “Okay, your turn, Miss Ward Master.”

I smile as I set my shoulders, recalling the steady calm I’ve used for our other spells. The chant is slightly different, but the principle feels the same—gather energy, shape it with intent. I speak the incantation in a measured tone:

“Obscura meum conspectum, umbram dantis lumen.”

Warmth spreads through my chest and flows down my arms. I feel the air shift around me, and suddenly Marisol’s gaze goes a bit distant.

“Whoa,” she whispers. “I can still see your silhouette, but it’s distorted. Do a little spin.”

I turn in place, and she tracks me with difficulty, her eyes widening in delight.

“You’re basically a wobbly mirror image. That’s... so cool,” she breathes.

A glow of pride surges in me. This is exactly the kind of magic I need—quiet, subversive, effective. Something that will help me slip under the radar if I need to face the Solstice Society again.

Professor Ambrose glides over, nodding in approval when she sees the shimmering aura around me. “Well done, Sylvie. Your focus is impressive. Keep practicing duration and stability—distraction can break the effect prematurely.”

I drop the spell, feeling my pulse thrum with excitement. Next to me, Marisol claps a hand on my shoulder, and I grin back at her. There’s a comfortable camaraderie between us now—like we’re more than just classmates. We’re allies in the art of witchcraft. I still need to introduce her to Rebecca and Nicole, too. I’ve been meaning to, but life has been a bit...hectic.

The rest of our class whips by in a blur of trial and error, laughter and exasperated groans whenever someone loses concentration and the concealment snaps. By the end, we've both managed to hold the distortion effect for a solid minute each. My head buzzes from the magical exertion, but it's a satisfying buzz—like a runner's high after a marathon.

\* \* \*

I slip out of the classroom, still giddy from the lesson. But a knot of nerves tightens in my stomach as I head for the administrative wing. Just get it over with, Sylvie, I tell myself. Mr. Fallon will understand.

The hallway leading to the guidance offices is quieter than the other wings of the school. A few students linger by the bulletin board, scanning club flyers. The overhead lights hum softly, reflecting off polished marble floors. The contrast from the vibrant energy of Spellcraft Fundamentals makes me feel like I'm stepping into a library.

Taking a steadying breath, I knock on Mr. Fallon's half-open door.

"Come in," chimes his warm, familiar voice.

I step into the office, which is lined with file cabinets, shelves of reference books, and a large window that overlooks Blackthorne's front courtyard. Mr. Fallon sits behind his cluttered desk, a kindly expression on his face. He gestures for me to have a seat in one of the padded chairs.

"Sylvie, good to see you. How's everything? How's your sister now that she's been found safe and sound?"

Mr. Fallon is aware that Lara is no longer missing, I told him as much. But to my

knowledge, he doesn't know any of the details behind her disappearance or resurgence.

I nod, setting my bag down. "Still trying to settle back into my norm. Actually, that's kinda why I'm here. I need a drastic schedule change, Mr. Fallon."

His brow creases, but his voice remains gentle. "Go on."

"I want to drop all of my current courses, except for my two magic-focused classes," I blurt out. "Spellcraft Fundamentals and Elemental Magic: Theory and Practice." I think better of it and add a quick, "Please."

A beat of silence passes. He sits back, tapping a pen lightly against his desk. "That's quite the request. Might I ask why?"

"Because... my life is hectic right now," I say, trying to maintain composure. I decide to be a little more open with him. "I'm dealing with... some very serious supernatural issues. My sister's safety is at stake, and I'm working to figure out how to help her. On top of that, I'm trying to hone my abilities as a witch. As you know, I thought I was a normal human before setting foot on Blackthorne soil. I just can't juggle normal coursework right now."

He studies me, concern etched into his features. "Does this mean you're changing your major?"

"Eventually," I admit. "But for now, I just want to focus on my magical side. Next semester, I'd like to switch to a fully supernatural-based schedule."

Mr. Fallon exhales, expression thoughtful. "It's late in the term, so you'll lose credit for the classes you're dropping. But given your... unique circumstances, I can arrange a withdrawal that won't damage your academic standing too severely."

My shoulders relax with relief. “Thank you. That’s more than I hoped for.”

He leans forward, folding his hands. “Just be aware this may delay your overall graduation timeline.”

I shrug. “I’ll worry about that later. Right now, I need to do what’s best for me, and for my sister.”

Mr. Fallon nods slowly, scribbling a note on a pad. “All right. I’ll file the paperwork to officially drop those courses. And we’ll adjust your schedule next semester so you can continue on a magical track.”

He glances at me over his glasses, a fatherly kindness in his eyes. “Is there anything else I can help you with?”

A lump forms in my throat. “Actually, yes. I want to move off campus. I have a close place to stay,” I tell him, thinking it probably isn’t best to inform him of my staying with Lucian. I’m not exactly sure how it’ll look for a professor and student to be living together. “Things have been chaotic, and I don’t feel safe in the dorms anymore—for multiple reasons. And with Lara’s condition still uncertain, I...” I swallow hard. “...I need a calmer environment.”

His eyebrows rise, but there’s no hint of disapproval. “We usually require underclassmen to remain in the dorms, but given your recent troubles and your, er, extracurricular responsibilities, I’ll make an exception. You can file the off-campus request with Housing, and I’ll approve it.”

My gratitude is so strong it almost knocks me off balance. “Thank you,” I say, voice trembling slightly. “I really appreciate everything you’re doing.”

He rises and holds out his hand. I stand too, shaking it, struck by how supportive he’s

being despite the unconventional situation. “Keep us posted if anything changes,” he says gently. “Remember, Blackthorne is here to support you, supernatural or otherwise.”

With one last nod of thanks, I leave Mr. Fallon’s office, breathing a little easier. My heart pounds with a mix of nerves and hope. I’m really doing this, I think. No more balancing a normal college life when nothing in my life is normal. I’ll live at Lucian’s estate, focus on becoming the witch I need to be, and figure out a way to save Lara.

As I step into the hallway, I allow myself a small smile. The future might be uncertain, but I’m no longer paralyzed by indecision. With each spell I learn, each step I take, I feel the momentum building—and I’m more determined than ever to see all of this through.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:26 am*

The damp night air wraps around us as we walk, leaves crunching furiously beneath our feet and a light layer of snow dusting the walkway. The occasional flicker of a streetlamp is the only sign of life as Lucian and I tread the narrow streets toward Petals and Potions to meet with Ravenna. The air smells faintly of rain and the dank earth, but there's something else beneath it—a metallic tang that makes the hairs on my arms rise.

Lucian walks beside me, silent but on high alert. His head tilts slightly as if listening to something I can't quite hear. His eyes narrow, scanning the shadows ahead.

"Lucian?" I ask, my voice breaking the stillness between us.

"Something's wrong," he says, his tone clipped. "Stay close."

I do as he says, and his grip on my hand tightens. My heart thuds harder with each step. I can feel the tension rolling off him, a coiled energy that makes the space between us feel abundantly charged.

Then I hear it—a faint, wet, slopping sound, like something being torn apart.

"Lucian—"

"I hear it," he says, his voice low and deep.

Before I can react, he moves. One second, he's beside me, the next he's a blur of motion ahead, his dark coat billowing behind him. I scramble to keep up—failing—my pulse racing as dread knots in my stomach.



When I finally round the corner after him, the scene before me steals all the air from my lungs.

A vampire looms over a young woman, his long fingers digging into her shoulders as its teeth sink into her neck. It's feral. A gross display of extreme power. The vampire's head twists and turns, like a dog with a chew toy, as he sucks her life from her body. Blood gleams like molten rubies under the flickering light of the nearest lamppost, pooling on the cracked pavement. The woman's head lolls to the side, her breaths shallow and ragged, no longer able to yell or cry out for help.

The vampire is monstrous, all gangly legs, its features distorted as he drains the woman of her lifeforce. Scars lace its body, deep etches into his naked back. He's in nothing but a pair of blood-soaked pants and shoes. Its eyes seem to glow and are much too large for its gaunt face, and its jagged fangs glisten with fresh blood as he moans into the night, drinking from the poor woman whose body goes limp.

Lucian's voice cuts through the scene, sharp and commanding, more forceful than I've ever heard it before. "Let her go!"

The ragged vampire lifts its head, its lips peeling back in a terrifying snarl as the woman's thick, bright blood drips from his fangs. The sound it makes is guttural, animalistic, and it sends a cold shiver down my spine.

"Get back, Sylvie," Lucian says without looking at me, his body tense as a spring.

But I can't move. My feet feel rooted to the ground, my eyes locked on the woman who's barely clinging to life. My instincts are screaming to save her. Get to her and save her. But how?

The vampire hisses, crouching lower and cocking its head to the side, as if preparing to pounce.

Lucian doesn't wait for the vampire to make a move. He's on it in an instant, grabbing it by the throat and slamming it into the nearest wall. The impact cracks the brick, and for a moment, I think it's over as its body temporarily slumps, falling to the ground.

But as quick as it went down, the vampire lashes out again, its long, talon-like nails raking across Lucian's shoulder. He doesn't flinch. Instead, he grips the creature tighter, his knuckles whitening as he bares his own fangs—looking dangerous and deadlier than I've ever seen him.

“Leave. Now,” he growls, his voice low and menacing, so deep it shakes me. “Or you'll wish for a faster death.”

The feral vampire doesn't heed the warning. With a guttural roar, it breaks free, throwing Lucian back a step and knocking him off-balance. The fight is a blur of motion—snarls, flashes of nails and fangs, the metallic tang of blood thick in the air.

The unruly vampire is strong, but Lucian is faster, more controlled, and stronger yet. He grabs the vampire by the arm, twisting until I hear the sickening snap of bone. He lets go and the arm dangles limply at its side.

“Run!” Lucian snarls at me, but his tone is sharp with command, not fear.

I force myself to move, darting toward the fallen woman, as opposed to the shop like I'm sure Lucian was intending. Her pulse is faint, her skin pale and clammy, beads of sweat rolling down her forehead and landing in her long lashes. I press my hands to the wound on her neck, trying to stanch the flow of blood, but it's no use.

Behind me, the vampire lets out a long, ravenous wail, and I risk a glance over my shoulder. Lucian has it pinned, his fangs bared as if he's about to finish it off. But then, the creature locks eyes with him, and something shifts.

Fear.

The vampire flips like a switch and kicks out, catching Lucian in the stomach. It uses the momentary distraction to twist free and dart into the shadows, its movements erratic but impossibly fast.

“Damn it!” Lucian mutters, his voice low and full of disappointment.

He doesn’t chase after it. Instead, he turns back to me, his expression hard.

“Is she?—?”

“She’s alive,” I say quickly, though the words feel fragile.

Lucian kneels beside me, his presence grounding me even as my hands tremble against the woman’s pale skin. Blood pools beneath her on the cracked pavement, glistening like spilled ink in the dim light.

“She’s fading quickly,” I whisper, panic tightening my chest. “I can try to heal her, like I helped you in the chamber.”

Lucian doesn’t answer immediately. Instead, he shrugs off his coat and rolls up his sleeve, exposing the pale skin of his corded forearm. His movements are steady, deliberate, as though he’s done this before.

“Lucian, what are you?—”

“Sylvie, please.” His voice is calm, but there’s a raw edge beneath it. “Stay back.”

I don’t move. I can’t. I watch, frozen, as he rips into his skin using his fangs to puncture two small holes and brings his wrist to the woman’s chapped lips.

“Drink,” he murmurs, his voice low and coaxing. There’s something so intoxicating about the way he says that one word, and I have to bat away the feeling growing inside of me.

Her lips part slightly on instinct, her eyes fluttering open just enough to meet his. They’re unfocused, glassy with pain and fear, but his voice seems to cut through it all—reaching her just in time. She obeys, her mouth clamping down on his wrist with an instinctive desperation.

The sight should terrify me—it does terrify me—but I can’t look away. There’s something strangely intimate about the way Lucian cradles her, his hand supporting the back of her neck while she drinks. His face remains impassive, though his jaw tightens, and his breathing grows shallow.

She becomes almost...greedy. Latching onto his wrist with her hands and drinking furiously from his vein, life coming back into her eyes.

A quiet groan escapes him, so soft I almost miss it. His fangs elongate as his eyes latch onto the blood dripping down her neck, from where the other vampire left off. For a fleeting moment, I wonder if he’ll lose control. If he’ll succumb to the darkness inside of him.

“Lucian,” I say, my voice barely audible.

As if I’ve pulled him from a trance, his eyes snap to mine, glowing faintly with that eerie vampiric sheen. But instead of the hunger I fear, there’s resolve. He takes a slow, steadying breath, his free hand gripping the pavement until his knuckles blanch.

“She’s had enough,” he says, his voice rough. He gently pulls his wrist away from her mouth, a thin line of blood smearing her lips.

Her breathing is stronger now, her complexion no longer ghostly pale. I can see the difference immediately, as though life is returning to her in waves.

Lucian wipes his wrist clean, the wound closing almost instantly, and leans close to the woman's face.

“Look at me,” he says to the still immobile woman, his tone soft but commanding. He grips her chin in his hand and tilts it upward so she can meet his gaze.

Her eyes flutter open again as his blood drips down her chin, gaze locking onto his. The shift in her expression is instantaneous—her fear dissolves and is replaced by a serene blankness in her icy blue orbs.

“You're safe,” Lucian says, his words deliberate and measured. “You walked home tonight and fell asleep. You won't remember me, or the vampire who hurt you. None of this ever happened. You were never here. Neither was I. Do you understand?”

She nods slowly, her head tilting slightly as though mesmerized as she looks at Lucian.

It's hypnotic to watch him work. His voice is like smooth velvet, wrapping around her mind and molding—shaping—her reality. It's subtle and unnervingly elegant. Even though I know what he's doing, part of me feels drawn to it too, as if his words could pull me into that same calm nothingness.

Lucian straightens, brushing a strand of blood-matted hair from her face. “Go home,” he says softly.

She rises shakily to her feet, her movements dull but purposeful. She looks like she's an extra in a horror film, her shirt shredded, her own blood drying on her neck. Without a word, she begins to walk away, disappearing into the shadows.

I can only hope she gets home safely this time.

The silence that follows feels heavy, the kind that demands acknowledgment that I don't know how to give.

"You didn't have to do that," I say finally, my voice barely above a whisper.

Lucian exhales slowly, his fangs retracting as he wipes a hand across his face. "She didn't deserve to die like that," he says, his tone unreadable. Then, softer, "No one does."

\* \* \*

The bell above the door rings as Lucian and I step into Petals and Potions, but Ravenna is already watching us, her keen eyes immediately assessing the tension we've brought with us. The soft glow of the candles lining the shelves flickers, casting long shadows that seem to make the small, cozy apothecary even more intimate, like we're stepping into a world of secrets.

She doesn't even need to ask—she can feel it. The shift in the air, the unease radiating from us, especially from Lucian. Her expression tightens when she sees him, his clothes rumpled, his face drawn with exhaustion, his posture defensive.

Without missing a beat, Ravenna glances over at me, then to Lucian. "Come to the back," she says, her voice commanding yet gentle. "You can wash up here," she says, pointing to a small room as she looks at my blood-stained hands.

Once we're as clean as possible without changing our clothes, she leads us through the shop, her movements graceful and precise. The soft click of the door closing behind us marks the shift from the bustling world outside to the quiet, almost sacred space of her private back room.

The familiar scent of herbs and potions fills the air. Ravenna pulls a chair out for Lucian, then gestures for me to sit beside him. The moment we're settled, she turns her gaze on him again, her eyes softening with familiarity.

Lucian settles into the chair Ravenna pulled out for him, the tension in his shoulders never quite dissipating. She stands across from him, arms folded. "You've looked better," she says, her voice softer now. "What happened this time?"

He exhales a quiet laugh, brushing a hand through his hair. "The usual chaos. But I'm sure you've already guessed that."

Her lips curl faintly, though the smile doesn't reach her eyes. "You always did have a knack for finding trouble." She glances at me briefly, then back to Lucian. "And for dragging others into it."

I clear my throat, feeling the weight of her words. "You two seem like old friends," I say. "I mean, I know you've mentioned knowing each other, but how exactly?" I ask, just genuinely curious.

Lucian leans back in his chair, a tired but amused smile pulling at his lips. "Ravenna and I go back a long way. She saved my life once—or maybe twice. She has a habit of keeping score, though she'd never admit it."

Ravenna arches an eyebrow, a wry smile playing on her lips. "Someone had to keep you in line. The first time we met, you were bleeding out in my shop after a fight with—what was it?—a demon or a rogue vampire? I can't keep track anymore."

"Demon," Lucian replies with a smirk. "And I didn't ask for your help."

"You didn't have to," Ravenna retorts, her voice edged with fondness. "You were practically begging for it, whether you realized it or not." She looks at me, her

expression softening. “He likes to downplay it, but Lucian has a knack for biting off more than he can chew. I’ve patched him up more times than I can count.”

“And yet you still let me through the door,” Lucian counters, his tone light.

Ravenna shakes her head, but there’s no malice in the gesture. “Because you’ve helped me just as often, dear, even if it wasn’t always graceful. You’ve pulled me out of more than a few fires—literally.”

Lucian shrugs, his smile fading slightly. “I believe that’s what friends do.”

The weight of the unspoken history between them lingers in the air, heavy with memories I can’t begin to imagine. There’s a bond here—one forged in fire, blood, and survival, if I had to guess.

Ravenna turns to me, her expression serious now. “Lucian may be infuriating, but he’s loyal. When he trusts someone, he’s all in. That’s not a trait you find often, especially in this world.”

“Don’t make me sound too noble,” Lucian says with a faint grin. “You’ll ruin my reputation.”

“Well let’s get down to business then,” she says. “I knew you two were coming tonight but I wasn’t aware it would be under dire circumstances; I thought we were just having a meeting about something simple—like humanity.” She chuckles, and even though this isn’t a light conversation, it makes me feel better. “However, you aren’t well,” she says, though it’s clear she’s already seen past the surface. Her gaze moves over Lucian, lingering on his bruised knuckles, though they are already healing, and the visible exhaustion weighing on him.

Lucian sighs, running a hand through his hair. “Not exactly,” he mutters. “It’s been a



long night."

Ravenna's sharp eyes narrow with concern. "That much is clear," she says softly, crossing her arms over her chest. "What happened?"

Lucian glances at me for a moment, before turning back to her. "Factions are at war. The Solstice Society has stolen blood packs—the packs our faction survives on. They're preparing for something, but I don't know what—aside from our total extinction. Vampires are already getting hungry...too hungry. Desperate. They aren't used to going without. I had to stop an attack in the alley tonight—hence the blood." He looks down at himself. "One of the Unbound."

Ravenna's eyes flicker with a brief flash of recognition as she absorbs his words. Then, she lets out a small, almost inaudible sigh, her demeanor softening. She stands and moves toward the counter and grabs a glass of water, setting it in front of him. "And you're still standing, I see," she says, her voice laced with a quiet admiration. "You've always been more resilient than most."

He offers a tired but genuine smile, his expression lightening for a moment at her words. "That's kind of you, Ravenna. But I think I'm pushing the limits of even my patience tonight."

Ravenna chuckles softly, the warmth of the moment settling between them. "I've seen the best of you, Lucian. There's more to you than just the darkness."

Her words hang in the air for a beat, a mutual respect between them that neither of them have to voice, but that I can feel. It's an unexpected softness between two beings who should, by all rights, be at odds. Though, when I told Lucian about starting work here, he was transparent about knowing Ravenna. He told me they've known each other for decades. That she's always been kind to him, even when others in her circle weren't.

I clear my throat, the silence growing too long.

"Well, now that we have all of that out of the way," I say softly, trying to break the tension. "Thank you for agreeing to meet with me off the clock about this. I'm at a standstill with the Lara situation, and I don't know where to turn." I shrug as my face falls, unable to contain my emotions for a second longer. Part of me thinks I could break down and start bawling at any moment—the other doesn't know if I have it in me.

Ravenna's gaze softens, her expression shifting from playful to serious in an instant. "I've been thinking a lot about this ordeal, dear," she says, her eyes shifting from me to Lucian—then back again. "You're carrying too much for someone so new to all of this." A grim expression crosses her face. "I want to help you, and I've spoken to others who are willing as well. I just want to make sure this is the best choice for you as well."

I nod, trying to hold back the rush of emotion that her words bring. "I trust you," I say, my voice steady but tinged with desperation. "And I also trust myself and what I'm capable of, too. The best choice for me is to get Lara's humanity back. I can't... I can't lose her. Not for good. I have to cling on to some hope that we can get her back."

Ravenna tilts her head, her eyes thoughtful as she studies me. "Restoring a soul is no small feat, Sylvie; I know I've explained that much. It's not something that can be done without great consequence. We're playing with fate, with life, with the order of things."

I lean forward, desperate. "But there is a way. You can help me, I know you can."

Her lips curl slightly into a knowing smile, but her eyes remain serious. "There is one option. One ancient ritual that I've heard of, but it has... it has both worked and failed

in the past. I can take you through the steps in time, but it won't be easy. And the results are incredibly unpredictable."

I clench my fists in my lap. "I'll do anything. If there's even a chance..." I trail off.

"Very well," she says. "We will move forward with setting up a meeting with my elders. I can't guarantee anything, dear. But I can commit to helping you in any way I can—regardless of the outcome."

I thank her profusely and reach over to give her a hug.

Lucian speaks then, his voice a low rumble, the weight of his exhaustion clear in his tone. "Not to interrupt your planning, but Ravenna, is there a way you can help with the blood shortage? Potions, or something? Anything at all? I will be indebted to you, of course."

Ravenna looks at him, considering his words. "You've always been resourceful," she says, a faint smile tugging at her lips. "And I've seen you push the boundaries of what's possible. I might be able to brew something to help with the blood shortage for the time being, but it won't be enough for long-term survival. Potions are a stopgap solution, nothing more." A wary look crosses her face. "But anything is better than if we start having a string of violent Unbound outbursts—or worse, if your faction starts going feral, too. Or even the high and mighty Ascendancy. I wish the three of you would learn to work together. You'd be so powerful if you were all on the same team for once."

Lucian's gaze darkens slightly, but he nods in understanding. "I know. Believe me, Dorian and I have tried. It's like there is no getting through to them." He hangs his head before adding, "And as far as the blood and your short-term solution...anything will help."

Ravenna steps toward her shelves, moving with the practiced grace of someone who has seen more than their fair share of hardship—and who has helped more people than I've probably even encountered in my lifetime, judging by what Rebecca, Nicole, and Lucian have all said about her. "I'll prepare something for you," she says, grabbing a few herbs off the shelf. "Also, while I'm thinking about the meeting with the elders, Sylvie..." she trails off as she gathers things. "I suppose there isn't much I can do to prepare you prior to the meeting. But like I've said, this won't be a simple incantation." She brings the herbs back to the table and sets them down.

I swallow hard, my throat tight. "How will it work when we meet with them?"

Ravenna gives me a long, measured look, then pulls down an ancient-looking book from the shelf. "I'll set up the meeting with the elders of the Witch's Guild. We'll go, and along with me, they'll guide you through the process and help you prepare for the incantation. You'll need training, Sylvie. The ritual requires more than just intent. You'll need control and understanding of the magic involved. You've come into some of your abilities on your own, using your emotions, but this is much bigger than any of that."

I nod, already feeling the weight of what lies ahead. "But they can help me?"

"They'll test you first," Ravenna says softly, her voice almost a whisper. "But they'll help. I can guide you, but it's the Guild's knowledge and expertise that will get you where you need to go."

I glance at Lucian, seeing the tiredness in his eyes. "What do you think?"

He looks at me, his gaze intense but comforting. "I whole-heartedly trust Ravenna. If anyone can help you get Lara back, it's her. I just don't want you to get your hopes up." His lips turn down and I reach my hand out. He places his palm over mine and squeezes gently.

Ravenna places the book down, her fingers brushing against the pages lightly. "We'll start soon. I promise. I'll let you know when I have confirmation of a meeting time, and I'll be sure to go with you," she says with a kind smile. "Now, next order of business. Let me get Lucian's blood remedy prepared. We can't afford to waste any time if it is as dire as you suggest."

She begins to mix her potions and herbs, speaking in a different language as she mixes. I'm impressed with the fluidity of her movements.

A few minutes later, once Ravenna seems to be nearly finished, Lucian's quiet voice breaks the moment. "Thank you, Ravenna. For everything."

Ravenna looks up and smiles, but it's not a smile I've seen on her before—there's something more gentle in it now, something that speaks to the quiet bond between them, built over years of mutual respect. "You've always been a friend, Lucian. That's something rare in this world."

Her words hang in the air, a bond of friendship and trust between them that I envy. I can tell it's platonic, and it makes me feel good that he has a friend like her. I watch as Lucian nods, his gratitude unspoken but clear. Ravenna's calm presence is exactly what we need right now, and I feel a flicker of hope. Perhaps this ritual will be the answer we've been searching for.

"Call Dorian and tell him to meet me at the back door in an hour or so. He can transport the blood from here, and I'll be sure to do a spell to make sure if anyone is tracking him, they are thrown off. We don't want your new supply to go to waste," she says. "Now, you two kids get on home. I do believe someone has a shift in the morning." She winks at me, and a light-hearted feeling encompasses the space between us.

I feel like I could get used to having witch abilities—especially when Ravenna is in

the picture.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:26 am*

The feeding club is magnetic tonight. It inhales the pulse of the music, the low hum of whispered promises, and the sharp, iron edge of spilled desire. Midnight Delight has always been a place where indulgence masquerades as freedom, where humans come willingly to lose themselves, and vampires come to remind themselves they cannot.

It's even more alive tonight, as our vampires grow increasingly more thirsty—more feral. The bloodpack shortage has impacted us more than we'd care to admit, but with Ravenna's supply she conjured, it's helping to stave off our beasts.

From my perch in the shadows, I watch the room unfurl its secrets. The velvet-clad humans are purely bait and temptation, their laughter sharp against the sultry melodies of the live violinist. Candlelight flickers along the silver veins of the marble bar, where a few vampires lean lazily, indulging in drinks that shimmer crimson under the low purple lights. Above it all, the air is heavy with incense and lust, thick enough to suffocate.

I am not here to partake. We have enough bloodpacks to cure our shortage for the time being, but I won't utilize any of them until the faction is able to replenish what they've lost. I can restrain myself from going feral, but I worry about our faction being strong enough to do the same.

I've always told myself this place was for listening, for keeping one step ahead of those who would see me undone. I enjoy hearing the word on the street for myself, and that is what I come here to do—most nights. That, and to reminisce with my old friend, Dorian. We both claim a certain sense of ownership to this place, but Dorian runs it.

I close my eyes, but the scent of her lingers, sharper than the cloves and myrrh that permeate this place. Sylvie . A drop of her blood is all it took to bind me to this restlessness, to awaken something I'd spent centuries burying. Her willing blood is in me now, haunting me like a melody I can't stop hearing. And worse than the intoxicating taste was the knowledge it came from her—the young woman who feels like both an ending and a beginning.

The sharp shift in the room's atmosphere draws me from my thoughts. A hush falls over the patrons, so subtle only the most perceptive would notice it. But I notice everything. The air grows taut, charged with an energy older than this place, older than most of the beings in it.

I don't need to look up to know who has arrived.

He's summoned me here, after all.

Viago Sanguine moves like a shadow-given form—fluid, deliberate, and utterly undeniable. He's a storm dressed in tailored black, with every thread of his suit sharper than a blade. The humans shiver as he passes, though they don't know why, their instincts bristling under the weight of his presence. Even the vampires straighten, murmured conversations fading into reverent silence.

He crosses the floor unhurried, his eyes already finding mine through the dim light.

“Lucian,” he says, his voice silk and steel. He sits without waiting for my invitation, his movements languid as he folds himself into the chair across from me. “You're a difficult man to pin down these days.”

I lean back in my chair, fixing him with a calm gaze. “If I'd known you were looking for me prior, I'd have made myself even harder to find.”



He smiles, though it's a blade more than a gesture. "Ever the charmer."

"Why have you requested this meeting, Viago?" I ask, my voice steady, though I can feel the weight of his presence pressing against my thoughts like an unwelcome guest.

"To talk," he replies, as though that isn't the most dangerous thing he could suggest. He leans back, draping an arm over the chair in a display of casual power. His gaze drifts over the room, but I know better than to think he's anything less than entirely focused.

"Yes, well. We did plenty of that at the council meeting the other night. Too bad you didn't show for your faction," I say dryly.

"Yes, it appears I missed the memo. I was on unavoidable business anyhow. You understand."

"Convenient timing," I say, unamused.

He chuckles softly, but there's no warmth in it. "I hear the Unbound weren't particularly cooperative."

"They stormed out," I reply, my tone clipped. "You'd know even more had you been there."

He waves a hand dismissively. "I know all I need to know," he replies. I have no doubt his second-in-command, Tobias, informed him. Still, he should have been there as the leader of the Ascendancy. "The Unbound are little more than feral dogs, barking at their own shadows. Let them run wild. They'll burn themselves out soon enough."

“And take half the world with them in the process,” I say. “Surely you do not want our region to be in the spotlight.”

His smile fades, and for a moment, the pretense drops. His gaze sharpens, cutting through the air between us like glass. “Surely not. However. This isn’t about the Unbound, Lucian. I’ve not come here to chat idly about old rivals and our inner faction turmoil. I’ve come here to discuss something somehow more disheartening.”

“And what, pray tell, is that, Viago?”

“You and your human slayer witch.”

My jaw tightens. “There’s nothing to discuss. She believed herself to be a human mere months ago.”

“Oh, but there is plenty to discuss.” He leans forward now, his voice lowering, carrying the weight of centuries. “The Solstice Society is stirring again, and I find it curious—no, suspicious—that their interest seems to align so perfectly with your newfound...entanglement.”

I force myself to hold his gaze, though the mention of her sets every nerve alight. “The Society has been hunting us for centuries. This has nothing to do with Sylvie.”

He perks up at the mention her name. “Sylvie,” he says, letting her name roll off his tongue. “What a sweet name.”

“Your point, Viago?” I inquire, growing angrier by the second.

“I believe the current Solstice issue has everything to do with her.” His words are a serpent’s coil, tightening with every syllable. “The girl’s bloodline is a flame, Lucian. She’s a spark in a room full of kindling, and it’s only a matter of time before someone

lights the match.”

“You will never touch her,” I say, bending closer, my voice low and edged with warning.

Viago tilts his head, amusement flickering in his dark eyes. “Touch her? No, Lucian, I have no need for such crude methods. But her bloodline... it’s unique. Precious. Power like that doesn’t simply exist without consequence. Do you think the witches won’t come for her, too? Or that Solstice won’t bleed her dry in the end? We can use her to our advantage in the war against the Society, Lucian. We need to be smart about this, their dark magic is not to be played with. Sylvie will be useful to us.”

“She’s not your concern,” I bite out, every muscle in my body taut.

“But she is yours,” he counters smoothly, his smile curling like smoke. “And that makes her my concern. Tell me, Lucian, how far are you willing to go to protect her? Would you bleed for her? Kill for her? Die for her?”

The words hang between us, heavy and deliberate.

“I’ll do what I must,” I reply, and I hate the way the truth of it tastes on my tongue.

Viago leans back, folding his hands in his lap like a man utterly in control. “Of course you would. That’s what makes you so... dependable. Ever a Midnight Alliance fellow.”

His eyes gleam as he shifts the conversation. “But enough about her. Let’s talk about the debt you owe me. I can sense you’re getting a little...” He trails off for theatrics, although he already knows the word he wants to use. “Tense.”

My hands curl into fists under the table. “I paid that debt decades ago.”

“Oh, Lucian,” he says softly, shaking his head. “You and I both know that’s not how this works. You owe me your life—your existence. And now, I’m here to collect.”

“What do you want?” I ask, though I already know the answer.

He leans forward, his voice dropping into something more intimate, more dangerous. “War is coming. The Unbound’s continued rebellion has thrown the factions into chaos, and the Solstice Society is exploiting that chaos for their own gain. The council is weak, divided. But together, you and I... we could join forces for the betterment of all—or most,” he says with a sneer. “Join me, Lucian. Stand by my side, and we could end this war before it begins. We could build something stronger, something lasting. We take out the Unbound and the Ascendancy and Midnight Alliance unite as one. We conquer the Solstice Society and live freely again without looking over our shoulders at the dark cult they are.”

“And if I refuse to go to war with the Unbound?”

The smile that spreads across his face is slow and venomous. “Then you’d best hope the girl’s blood tastes as sweet as it smells coming from you. Because when the war begins, no one—human or vampire—will be safe. Not even her.”

I stand abruptly, my chair scraping against the floor, but Viago is already rising, his movements as fluid as smoke.

“Think about it,” he says, brushing an invisible speck of dust from his sleeve. “I’ll return soon for your answer.”

And then he’s gone, melting into the shadows as easily as he arrived, leaving behind only the faint echo of his presence and the lingering taste of his threat.

I pace the perimeter of the room as remnants of Viago’s presence cling to my

thoughts like cobwebs, and though he's gone, his words echo in my mind.

Sylvie.

I had thought I could protect her by keeping my distance, by keeping her at the edges of this war. But Viago's arrival has shattered that illusion. He knows about her—what she is, what she could become. And worse, he sees her as a means to an end, a pawn in his endless game of power.

\* \* \*

I had to return to my schoolroom after meeting with Viago. Unfortunately, it was bound to be a late night. I've had nothing but extenuating circumstance after extenuating circumstance to tend to, and these papers refuse to grade themselves.

My door opens, and I turn sharply, my tension easing only slightly as I see Sylvie step inside. Her presence is sunlight breaking through the storm clouds, though it's a light I know I don't deserve.

"I didn't mean to interrupt," she says softly, her eyes darting to the scattered books and papers on my desk.

"You're not interrupting," I reply, though my voice is tighter than I'd like. "What are you doing here? It's late. I thought you'd be tucked away at home."

She hesitates, her hands twisting together. "I went to the library and lost track of time after my theory class. It's too hard to sit still, Lucian. Plus, I wanted to ask how your meeting went with the Ascendancy guy."

"Well, it went, that's for certain," I tell her with a sigh. She pulls me by the hand over to the student chairs, and after a chaste kiss, we sit next to each other. Looking into

her eyes brings me a peace I can't deny. I am in love with her. I never lost the love I had for her; in fact, I believe it only grew with each year we spent apart.

"There's something I need to show you," I say, my throat tightening around the words. "It won't be pleasant, but it's the only way to explain."

She watches me with those steady, unyielding eyes, and I know she's braver than she gives herself credit for. I've seen it time and time again in the short time she's been back in my life.

I reach for her hand, the connection between us sparking to life the moment our skin touches. She flinches, but she doesn't pull away.

"Close your eyes, love," I murmur.

When she does, I let my power unfurl and mingle with hers, drawing us both into the memory. The room dissolves around us, replaced by a flickering vision of years past.

The hall was once a grand ballroom—arched ceilings draped in velvet banners, shimmering chandeliers overhead—but now it lay in ruin. Torn tapestries dangled from the walls, and heavy drapes fluttered in a breeze that reeked of death. My footsteps echoed on the marble floor, sticky with fresh blood. Every breath tasted of copper and ash.

I had arrived there with a single hope: to end the war. Humans and vampires had been locked in senseless conflict for months, both sides leaving fields of bodies behind. I believed I could broker a truce, a chance for us all to coexist. I was naive enough to think peace could be negotiated with words alone.

When I stepped into that hall, the fighting had already reached its bloody crescendo. Bodies—human and vampire alike—littered the floor. Some had fallen clutching

weapons, others with their throats torn out. The air hung thick with despair, and my heart thundered against my ribs, each beat screaming that I was too late.

And at the center of it all stood Viago.

He was young by vampire standards, his hair still dark and cropped close, his eyes holding a spark of arrogance. But he wore authority like a second skin, radiating power despite his youthful appearance. The Ascendancy faction had chosen him as its leader, a ruthless prodigy who could bend others to his will in their totalitarian lifestyle. Around him, pockets of remaining fighters cowered or lay dying. They hadn't stood a chance.

I stumbled through the carnage, desperate to reach the survivors. My clothing was soaked with the blood of allies I'd tried—and failed—to save. Still, I clung to the belief that if I could only speak to him, show him reason, it might not all be lost.

“Viago!” I shouted across the expanse, voice echoing. My words sounded hollow against the moans of the dying. “Enough blood has been spilled. Call off your forces. Let's... let's end this.”

For a moment, he didn't acknowledge me. He turned slowly, wiping a crimson blade on the tattered remains of a fallen human's cloak, as though my plea was merely background noise. Then he smiled—that cold, calculating smile that would haunt me for eternity.

“You speak of ending a war,” he said softly, almost gently. “But you arrive too late. The Ascendancy has already claimed its victory here.”

I forced myself to approach, despite the trembling in my legs. The weight of so many deaths pressed in on my mind, the thick stench of blood nearly overwhelming. But I had to try. “This... this isn't a victory,” I said, voice taut. “Look around you. You've

won nothing but more hatred, more grief, more war.”

Viago tilted his head, considering my words. “Hatred. Grief. War. These are trifles, Lucian. What matters is power.” He gestured with his blade, indicating the corpses strewn around us. “I’m forging a new world order, and you think you can negotiate it away with pretty words?”

I swallowed hard, glancing at the few humans still clinging to life. I could hear their ragged breaths, sense their fragile hope that I might somehow save them. “I’m offering a chance,” I said. “A chance for peace.”

A low, mirthless chuckle slipped from Viago’s lips. “Peace? The only ‘peace’ these humans will know is in their graves. Their existence is an obstacle to our dominance.” He flicked his blade toward the captives. “Unless... you’d prefer I spare them?”

I froze. I saw the cruelty in his gaze, how he relished the moment. He was going to twist my idealism into a weapon. Sure enough, he turned to his subordinates—other vampires in the Ascendancy faction, hungry-eyed, loyal to him—and murmured a command I couldn’t quite catch. Instantly, several more humans were brought forward, bound and trembling.

“You see,” Viago purred, “I’ve been waiting for you to arrive. Word travels fast when someone is fool enough to believe they can end this war through talk. I knew you’d show up eventually, compelled by your inflated sense of heroics.”

He strode forward, and before I could move, his boot collided with my chest. The impact forced me back, and I lost my footing on the slick marble, crashing to my knees in a pool of blood. Pain tore through my ribs, but I refused to look away.

“Now,” Viago continued, circling me, “I give you a choice: your life... or theirs.” He



gestured to the humans, who stared at me with desperate eyes. Some of them were children, no older than fifteen. Their fear was palpable, fueling my own.

My stomach knotted, horror and guilt spiraling within me. “You can’t force this on me. Let them go, Viago. I’m the one you want, not them.”

“Oh, but I can force anything I wish.” He crouched beside me, blade still in hand, blood glistening at its tip. “Swear yourself to me. To the vampires. To doing what is right and joining a faction, living among your own kind. Do as I command. Then I’ll let them walk free.”

In that moment, I understood I was cornered. If I refused, these innocents would die. If I submitted, I would be giving up my will, tethering myself to a monster. But the alternative—the thought of hearing those children scream—was unthinkable.

Tears burned at the corners of my eyes, my voice nearly failing me. “I... I’ll do it,” I whispered, staring at the faces of the captives. “Just don’t hurt anyone else.”

Viago’s smirk deepened. He seized my hair, yanking my head back to bare my throat. I heard the rasp of his blade against my skin, felt the press of cold metal. For a sickening second, I wondered if he’d kill me anyway. But instead, he cut a thin line just beneath my collarbone. My blood welled up, and he dipped his fingers into it like ink, drawing some ancient, dark sigil on my skin.

“You belong to me now,” Viago murmured, eyes locked on mine. There was triumph dancing in his gaze. “Through this blood, our bond is sealed. Your life, your freedom—mine to command.”

I shuddered, barely registering the pain, too hollow inside to protest. All around me, the moans of the dying human captives slowly faded, replaced by muffled sobs as they realized they might yet survive. But it didn’t feel like a victory. It felt like the

end of everything I stood for.

Viago rose, snapping at his subordinates to stand down. He gestured for the uninjured among them to start hauling bodies aside. “You have your precious peace—for tonight,” he said. “But tomorrow, we rebuild on my terms.”

I knelt there, drenched in the blood of strangers, tears of shame and guilt sliding down my cheeks. The humans were allowed to leave, stumbling out of that cursed hall into the night—but I stayed. I had no choice. From that day forward, my life belonged to Viago, and every step I took was chained to his ambition.

The last thing I remember before consciousness slipped into an exhausted haze was Viago’s low chuckle echoing across the marble floors, the tang of blood filling my lungs, and a single, crushing realization:

In trying to save them, I’d damned myself.

“This is how it began,” I say, my voice echoing through the memory. “My debt to him—to Viago, the faction leader for the Ascendancy. I vowed to live my life by vampire code and no longer worry myself with humans or their needs—or trying to save them from our people. I had to choose to join a faction.”

Sylvie gasps beside me, her hand tightening in mine. “And you chose the Midnight Alliance? Why was it so important to Viago that you side with the vampires?”

“That’s something I’ll never know. Over the years, he has said he saw potential in me. He wanted me with the Ascendancy, but I could never abide by their oppressive one-party lifestyle. At the time, there were only two: the Unbound and the Ascendancy. Dorian and I, having long been friends even at that point, founded the Midnight Alliance as a middle ground. Unbound were feral and atrocious beings who wanted, and still want, humans to be their livestock. The Ascendancy want to rule

this godforsaken world with their tyrannical thinking. But we, the Midnight Alliance, have always aimed for peace among all sides. Between supernatural factions, between humans and supernaturals. We don't believe in harming people because we can."

Silence stretches between us and the quiet hum of reality presses against me—the muted ticking of the clock, the faint flicker of the overhead lights, and the steady rhythm of Sylvie's breathing. But I can still feel the echoes of the past clinging to me, the weight of Viago's smirk, the blood-soaked floor, the crushing failure that sealed my bond to him.

I look at Sylvie, and the expression on her face isn't one I deserve. Horror lingers in her widened eyes as she tries to wrap her mind around everything, but it's softened by pity—a pity that cuts deeper than any blade.

"You're not the man in that memory," she says softly, her voice like a balm I have no right to. "If you would have had your way, you'd have ended everything right then and there."

"No," I murmur, the word laced with bitterness. "But I still carry his sins. Monsters never forget their wrongdoings. And I'll never forget the fact that I had to choose to live, and in order to do that, I bound myself with Viago for eternity. He believes he can use me in his game."

I don't tell her, not yet, that he also wants to use her.

Sylvie doesn't move, but I can feel the weight of her gaze, sharp and unrelenting, cutting through the fog in my mind. Her silence stretches thin, the kind that demands more without uttering a single word.

She takes a cautious step forward. "You showed me this for a reason. Why does this

matter now? Why is he resurfacing?”

I look away, my jaw tightening. The question hangs in the air, heavy and unavoidable. The past isn't something I enjoy revisiting, let alone sharing. But Viago's shadow has always loomed large, and now he's set his sights on her. Whether or not she knows the specifics of his threats, she has a right to understand the noose tightening around me—and, by extension, her.

“Viago,” I begin slowly, “is not the kind of man who forgets a debt. He thrives on leverage, on power. And centuries ago, I gave him exactly what he needed to own me. Yes, I bent his rules a bit by creating a new faction and not joining his, but still, I sided with the vampires all the same.”

Sylvie crosses her arms, her fingers gripping the sleeves of her sweater. “What kind of debt are we talking about? You said it was blood—what does that even mean?”

I glance at her, noting the way her brows knit together, the way her lips press into a thin line as she waits. I can't tell if she's horrified or intrigued, but perhaps it's both.

“Blood,” I say, my voice low, “is currency in our world. It binds us, seals promises, and ties us to one another in ways that can never truly be severed. It's ancient magic, the kind that predates the curses and wars. When I made that deal with Viago, I offered my blood willingly as payment. It was the only way to secure the outcome I needed at the time.”

Her frown deepens. “What outcome?”

I hesitate, the memory rushing back with all its sharp edges and bitter aftertaste.

“I tied myself to him when trying to end the war. My blood gave him a link to me, a way to find me, to summon me, to demand... whatever he chooses. I've spent decades

trying to keep my distance, trying to avoid being pulled back into his games. But now...”

I trail off, unsure how to finish the thought. Now he’s here again. Now he’s threatening her.

Sylvie steps closer, her voice firm but quiet. “What is he asking you to do?”

I let out a sharp breath, dragging a hand through my hair. “He’s asking me to choose a side. To join forces with him in his war against the Unbound faction. He wants the Ascendancy and the Midnight Alliance to come together as one. The council is splintering, the Solstice Society is stirring up disorder, and Viago sees an opportunity to consolidate power. He believes I’m a valuable ally—or perhaps just a convenient pawn. Either way, he won’t let me stay neutral. I believe he wants to rid our region of the Unbound, and I know he wants to eliminate the Solstice Society.”

Her eyes narrow, and I see the sharp edge of her intelligence cutting through the confusion. “Well, I know nothing about the Unbound, but I mean...I can’t see why we wouldn’t want to help him destroy the Society.”

“This is true, and I do intend on helping him take out Solstice in any way possible, I just...” I trail off, thinking about his threat to use Sylvie and her power. “I want to help on my own terms and not in the ways he’s asking of me. He’s capable of destroying much of our world.”

Sylvie tilts her head, her gaze piercing. “Is that why you showed me the memory? So I’d understand what he’s capable of?”

“In part,” I admit. “But also so you’d understand why I can’t afford to fail him—or to defy him outright. He has a way of twisting the knife, of finding the things you care about most and exploiting them.”

I force myself to stand, intent on retreating to my desk, to distance myself from her, but the weight of the vision—and the hunger gnawing relentlessly at my core—makes my body falter. The room tilts, and I stagger, my knees threatening to buckle.

“Lucian!” Sylvie moves without hesitation, her hand shooting out to steady me.

The warmth of her touch bleeds into my arm, grounding me in a way that is both comforting and dangerous. For a fleeting moment, I let myself lean into her, my head lowering just slightly toward hers as if some primal instinct in me craves the solace she offers.

But then it happens—the scent.

It’s subtle at first, like a whisper carried on a summer breeze. But it grows stronger, richer, wrapping around me like silk, tantalizing and intoxicating. Her blood. It sings to me, its melody haunting and inescapable, calling out to the deepest, darkest parts of me.

I freeze, the beast in me clawing its way to the surface, and I pull back as if her touch burns me. My chest tightens, my fangs aching in their sheath as my restraint begins to crumble.

“Lucian?” Sylvie asks, confusion and concern etched into her features.

“I can’t,” I rasp, my voice jagged and raw, cutting through the silence like shattered glass. I press the heel of my palm against my forehead, as if the pressure might force the hunger back into the abyss where it belongs. “I can’t be near you like this. Not right now. I’m too...”

My words falter as the scent wraps tighter around me, threading through my senses like a drug. I step back, desperate to put distance between us, but it’s like trying to

outrun a shadow.

“Hungry,” she finishes for me.

The hunger lashes out, raw and unrelenting, and my mind betrays me with flashes of what it would feel like to give in—to sink my fangs into her neck, to taste the life that pulses beneath her skin. The image is vivid, almost tactile, and I dig my nails into the desk to stop myself from moving closer.

“Lucian...”

Her voice, her scent, her presence—it’s all too much. I spin around, my hands gripping the edge of the desk so tightly I hear the faint crack of wood beneath my fingers. “Do you understand what I am? What I’ve done?” My voice is low and trembling, the words laced with desperation. “I’ve spent centuries starving the monster inside me, denying its every craving, and then you?—”

I choke on the thought, the memory of her blood still lingering on my tongue from that single, accidental taste. “You’re undoing me, Sylvie. And it’s not your fault, but it’s happening. Your blood—it’s like nothing I’ve ever encountered. It calls to me in a way I can’t... I can’t fight forever. It’s our bond. It’s inescapable.”

“You won’t have to,” she says. “The supply has already started to replenish. Ravenna has bought you time.” She pauses and then adds, “Do you honestly think you’ll hurt me?” I’ve told her I could never. It may now be a lie. Until I can replenish myself.

“Before I was sure I could never. Now, at this point, I don’t think I could hurt you,” I whisper. “I know it’s possible. After you willingly gave me your blood. It was different than when you felt you had to in the chamber. You wanted to this time. And it created yet another bond between us,” I tell her. “But with my current state, I don’t know how to control myself around you.”

She steps closer, and I force myself to stay still, though every instinct screams at me to retreat. “You haven’t used any of the bloodpacks from Ravenna, have you?” she asks, confusion lighting her eyes.

“I refuse to utilize those. Not until the faction is able to replenish their systems. Not until all of my people have been replenished.”

She lifts a hand to my face, once again closing the space I’ve put between us. Running her fingers down my cheek, she says, “You’re a good man, Lucian.” She pulls away when she senses my frustration over her nearness. “I trust you,” she says, her voice unwavering.

“You shouldn’t,” I reply, my fists clenching at my sides. “Not right now.”

I so badly want to pull her in, to kiss her, to right every wrong I’ve done to her—that I’ve done to all of mankind. But I can’t. Not right now, not while this hunger courses through my veins like a feral beast.

“Everything will be better when I’m able to properly consume again,” I tell her. “You’ll see.”

She nods, solemnly, and I can’t help but feel like I’ve let her down all over again.



## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:26 am*

The hallway leading to Mr. Fallon's office feels longer than it should, each step dragging as if my legs are wading through quicksand. I pass a few students heading in the opposite direction, their chatter fading into white noise. The world feels muffled, distant, like I'm wrapped in a weighted blanket that's slowly suffocating me.

When I was at work earlier, the message came in, and I've been on pins and needles ever since, unable to concentrate on anything else.

I check the email on my phone again for the hundredth time.

Subject: Urgent: Formal Meeting Regarding Your Enrollment Status

Dear Ms. Rosenthal,

I hope this message finds you well. I am reaching out to address an important matter regarding your enrollment at Blackthorne University.

The Office of Student Affairs has received concerning reports related to recent activity involving student records and campus facilities. Due to the nature of these concerns, it is imperative that we meet to discuss your enrollment status and clarify your involvement.

Please be advised that attendance at this meeting is mandatory. Failure to attend may result in further action, including the potential escalation of the matter to the university's disciplinary board. If you have any questions or require accommodations, please do not hesitate to contact me directly at this email address or call the Office of Student Affairs at the number below.

Thank you for your rapt attention to this matter. We look forward to resolving this issue in a constructive manner.

Sincerely,

Trevor Hathaway

Student Guidance Counselor

Blackthorne University

The email lists a date and time as well as a phone number at the bottom, but all the words blur slightly as I read them, my heart pounding in my chest.

The last time I spoke to Mr. Fallon, it was to drop some of my classes. He'd been kind—almost too kind—assuring me that the university understood my situation. This feels... different.

The door to his office is ajar when I reach it. I knock softly, hesitating on the threshold.

“Come in,” Mr. Fallon calls.

I step inside, the scent of stale coffee and office supplies hitting me immediately. His desk is a mess of papers and manila folders, a coffee mug perched precariously close to the edge. The counselor himself looks tired, his tie slightly askew and his hair mussed like he's been running his hands through it all morning.

“Thanks for coming in, Sylvie,” he says, gesturing to the chair across from his desk. His tone is gentle but firm, the way a disappointed parent might sound before delivering bad news.

I sit, clutching my bag in my lap. “You didn’t really give me much of a choice.”

His lips press into a thin line. “I know the timing is inconvenient, but this is an important matter. One that requires immediate attention.”

The knot in my stomach tightens. “What’s going on?” I ask, because I honestly haven’t a clue what could be so important.

He leans forward, folding his hands on the desk. “Sylvie, effective immediately, you’ve been placed on an indefinite formal suspension from Blackthorne University.”

For a moment, all I can do is stare at him. The words don’t make sense. It’s like they are all jumbled, out of place. Suspension? Indefinite? What the hell is he talking about?

“I... wait. What?” I sit up straighter and clear my throat. “Why?”

He reaches for a file and opens it, flipping through a few pages before pulling one out and sliding it across the desk toward me. “The administration has reviewed evidence of you tampering with confidential student records. An office administrative assistant informed us, and security footage and keycard logs place you in the administration office late one night last week. Her story checks out.”

I pick up the paper, my hands trembling. Still images from a security camera, the timestamp glaring up at me. The girl in the photo is... me. Same messy bun, same jacket, even the same tired slouch in her shoulders. She’s walking through the dimly lit hallway, her head down, a file folder clutched in her hand. Another photo showcases me looking straight at the camera, almost like I’m posing. What sticks out the most is the glaringly obvious gold necklace around “my” neck. It’s an initial. An S.

It's me. Unmistakable.

Except it's not me.

It's Lara.

I slam the papers back down on the desk. "This isn't me."

His brow furrows. "Sylvie, the evidence is clear?—"

"No," I snap, cutting him off. "It isn't. I would never break into an off-limits area. And I have no use for anyone's records."

He exhales slowly, like he's trying to keep his patience. "I understand you haven't been on campus quite as much, but you have still been here. The woman in the photo is clearly you."

"Regardless, Mr. Fallon. I did not do what you're accusing me of." I shake my head in complete disbelief. "Plus, again, why would I need to tamper with records? It makes no sense."

The words come out louder than I intend, and he flinches slightly. He leans back in his chair, regarding me carefully. "Sylvie, I'm trying to help you here, but you need to be honest with me. If there's something going on, now is the time to tell me."

"There is something going on," I say, my voice shaking. "But it's not what you think."

Mr. Fallon raises an eyebrow. "Then what is it?"

I hesitate. How do I explain this without sounding insane? I can't tell him the

truth—that my twin sister is working with a secret society filled with dark magic and is somehow impersonating me to... to do what, exactly?

“I think...” I pause, choosing my words carefully. “I think my sister is pretending to be me.” I know my sister is trying to be me. That’s what I should have said. There’s no other excuse.

His frown deepens. “Your sister? Sylvie, I’ve spoken to Lara. She came in to withdraw from her own classes last week. All of them, in fact. She seemed fine and I haven’t seen her since. Why would she drop her classes, tamper with classified information, and then pretend to be you? Surely you know that sounds a bit...unbelievable.”

Of course, Lara seemed fine, I think bitterly. She’s always been good at pretending.

“She’s... complicated,” I say finally. “Things are complicated. Different. We’ve been going through a lot, and I think she might be acting out. She isn’t happy with me right now.”

“Acting out by committing academic fraud and putting the blame on her twin sister?” He doesn’t even bother hiding his skepticism.

“I don’t know!” I snap, my frustration boiling over. “I just know I didn’t do this, and there’s no way I could have. I wasn’t even in this area of the school when that was timestamped. If I know it isn’t me, and I do, then there’s one explanation and it’s the person who looks identical to me.”

He sighs, rubbing his temples. “Sylvie, I want to believe you. I really do. But the evidence is overwhelming. He glances down at the S necklace around Lara’s neck. “If you have proof that your sister?—”

“I don’t have proof,” I say, cutting him off again. “But I swear on my life, this wasn’t me.” I shrug. “Don’t you see how easy it would be for her to say she’s me when she’s caught? We’re identical twins, Mr. Fallon. You have to at least understand it’s a possibility to explore.”

For a moment, we just stare at each other. The room feels unbearably small, the air heavy with tension. My thoughts switch to Lucian and how I wish he were here. He’d know how to fix this. He’s become a sense of security for me, and I’m falling for him in a way I never thought possible. Everything is better when he’s by my side. I lose myself in thoughts of Lucian as the guidance counselor ponders my life, until finally, he leans back in his chair, his expression softening slightly.

“I’ll bring your concerns to the administration,” he says, his tone cautious. “But for now, the suspension stands, and my hands are tied. You’re not permitted on campus until further notice.”

The finality in his voice is like a punch to the gut.

“Mr. Fallon, please,” I whisper, my voice cracking. This could ruin everything for me.

He doesn’t respond. Instead, he goes back to working on the mess of papers on his desk, and without looking up he says, “Would you like me to get security to escort you? Or do you think you can make it on your own?”

I refuse to answer and instead stumble out of his office, disoriented, my head spinning. The hallway feels colder now, the fluorescent lights casting harsh shadows on the tiled floor. My footsteps echo in the empty space, each one a reminder of how completely I’ve screwed up my life.

No. Not me. Lara.

Lara has completely fucked me over, and it's increasingly hard not to be pissed at her for all of this. I have to keep reminding myself that this isn't her—that who she was is still more important than what's happening right now.

I can't think straight. My heart is racing, and my hands won't stop shaking. By the time I reach Nicole and Rebecca's dorm, I'm on the verge of hyperventilating. I knock on the door, and when Nicole answers, the look on her face tells me everything I need to know.

"I'm screwed," I say, pushing past her into the room.

"What's going on?" Rebecca asks from her spot on the couch, her tone cautious.

"Lara's been pretending to be me," I snap, pacing back and forth. "She broke into the admin office, tried to steal records, or tamper with them, or something, and now I'm the one getting suspended for it!"

Nicole closes the door quietly. "We were going to tell you."

I stop in my tracks. "Tell me what?" I demand, spinning around to face her. "How does everyone always know shit before I do?"

They look at each other and sigh, and it feels vaguely like when we first met, when they were keeping the fact that they are witches from me.

"Lara tried to pretend to be you with us, too," Rebecca says, standing up. "We have no idea what her end game was, but we sensed it immediately. We could tell it wasn't you."

Nicole shrugs. "We wanted to tell you but not like this. You've been through hell, Sylvie. We didn't want to make things worse."

“Worse?” I laugh bitterly. “I just got kicked out of school— indefinitely . How much worse could it possibly get?”

Nicole steps forward, placing a hand on my shoulder. Her touch was meant to be grounding, but I shrug her off, too wound up to be consoled.

“We didn’t think she’d go this far,” Nicole says quietly.

“But she did,” I snap. “And now I’m the one paying for it. What the hell was she trying to do? Why would she risk everything like that?”

Rebecca and Nicole exchange a glance, one of those silent conversations that I’m not a part of. It only makes my anger burn hotter.

“Don’t do that,” I say, pointing at them. “Don’t talk around me. If you know something, just say it.”

Rebecca sighs, crossing her arms. “We didn’t want to worry you, but it wasn’t just once. It was twice.”

My stomach drops. “When did it happen?”

“About a week ago and then again yesterday,” Nicole says. “She stopped by here first. Said she needed supplies for?—”

““A memory enhancement spell,”” Rebecca says flatly. “She said she assumed we had a way of getting it.”

I blink, confused. “What would she need that for?”

“No idea,” Rebecca says. “But we didn’t give her anything. We knew it wasn’t you.



Her energy was... wrong.”

I sink into the nearest chair, my knees suddenly too weak to hold me up. “She’s losing it,” I whisper. “I thought maybe... I don’t know, maybe there was still a part of her that could be saved, but...”

Nicole kneels in front of me, her face soft with concern. “She can still be saved. But you can’t start giving up now. You’ve done so much and this isn’t your fault.”

“Isn’t it?” I ask, my voice cracking. “She’s my sister. My twin. We used to be inseparable, and now she’s—” I cut myself off, shaking my head. “I should have seen this coming. I should have stopped her.”

“There’s no stopping someone like Lara,” Rebecca says, her voice sharper than Nicole’s. “Not when she’s made up her mind about something and she’s being controlled by Solstice.”

I slump against the wall, my head spinning as I recount what happened in Fallon’s office. “She was pretending to be me to get a spell. A memory enhancement spell. Why?” I ask, my voice trembling. “What would she need that for?”

Rebecca and Nicole exchange a glance, their expressions grave. This time, I don’t bother snapping at them for their silent communication. I’m too drained to care.

“It doesn’t make sense,” Nicole says, pacing the room. “Unless she was trying to piece something together for herself... Maybe something she’s forgotten?”

“She’s working with the Solstice Society,” Rebecca points out, sitting cross-legged on the couch. “If they’re involved, it’s more than likely part of a larger plan.”

“But why me?” I ask, pushing off the wall and pacing the small space. “Why go out

of her way to impersonate me instead of just asking for what she needed as herself? She knows you two would've seen through it eventually."

Nicole chews on her lip, her brows furrowed in thought. "Maybe it's not just about the spell. Maybe it's about you. About keeping you off-balance, distracted—keeping you from digging too deep. Keep you looking in the wrong places."

"Or," Rebecca interjects, "it's because of her lost humanity. If she's still trying to hold on to whatever's left of it, maybe she thought pretending to be you would make it easier to manipulate us."

Rebecca looks at me, clearly as disheartened as I am. "Has Ravenna set up the meeting with the Guild yet?"

I hesitate, the knot in my chest tightening. "I actually talked to her earlier," I admit. "I had a shift at Potions and Petals this morning, and we worked on spells a bit in our downtime. We're meeting with the Guild tomorrow, and I'd love for you guys to be there if you can make it work with your schedules."

"Good," Nicole says, folding her arms across her chest. "Because we're running out of time, Sylvie. If Lara keeps spiraling like this, the Solstice Society will use her for whatever twisted agenda they have, and there won't be anything left of her to save."

The words settle like a stone in my stomach. I look down at my hands, clenched tightly into fists at my sides. They're right. And as much as I want to scream, cry, and curse the universe for everything it's taken from me, I know there's no room for that now.

I just need to trust that I'm moving in the right direction.

Easier said than done.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:26 am*

The moment Sylvie crosses the threshold of my estate, I feel her presence like a shift in the tide—an electric undercurrent rippling through the air. Her heartbeat, once a steady rhythm that seemed to anchor the chaos around her, now wavers, tired and uneven. The book in my hands is all but forgotten, the words blurring on the page, and I find myself moving toward her presence without conscious thought.

I find her standing in the entryway, her silhouette framed by the soft glow of the chandelier above. There's something fragile about her tonight, something I haven't seen from her since she first arrived at Blackthorne with her sister. It's as though the weight of her world has finally pressed too hard against her shoulders. Her eyes are shadowed, lips pale, and she looks utterly drained. But still, she carries herself with that quiet strength that draws me to her like gravity.

“Sylvie,” I say, her name rolling off my tongue like a vow. I close the space between us, taking her hands in mine. Her fingers are cold, trembling slightly. “You look like you’ve been through war, love. Come, sit with me.” I am still nervous about being around her, but at the same time, I can’t stay away.

Her lips quirk in the ghost of a smile, but there's no fight left in her to deflect my concern. She lets me guide her down the dim corridor and to the sitting room, where the firelight dances against the wallpaper on the walls and the air whirrs with warmth.

Sylvie sinks into one of the chairs, folding in on herself like a wilted flower. I take the seat beside her instead of across, wanting to be closer. Her exhaustion is palpable, tugging at something primal within me.

“What’s happened?” I ask gently, though I already sense the answer.

Her voice is barely a whisper, as fragile as the breath that carries it. “I’ve been suspended. Indefinitely, apparently. They think I broke into the administration office to steal records.” She shakes her head, and her hands twist in her lap—her movements jerky with pent-up frustration. “But it wasn’t me. Obviously. It was Lara—pretending to be me. She’s sabotaging everything, and they won’t believe me. She also impersonating me to get a memory-enhancing spell from Rebecca and Nicole. I just don’t get it.”

I feel the familiar burn of anger coil in my chest, slow and smoldering, threatening to consume me. How dare they?

“What fools,” I say, the words cutting like steel. “They cling to their shallow reasoning because it’s easier than acknowledging the extraordinary truth. If anyone should recognize the possibility of deception, it’s Blackthorne. And the administration wants to punish you because they lack the imagination to see beyond their rigid rules.”

She lets out a hollow laugh, her gaze dropping to the floor. “It doesn’t matter what they should recognize, Lucian. What matters is they’ve already made their decision. And now, I’m stuck. I’ve lost my classes, my reputation, and... God, I’m just so tired.”

There’s a crack in her voice that splinters straight through me. I reach out, tilting her chin up so she’s forced to meet my eyes. “You’ve lost nothing that cannot be reclaimed. Do you hear me, Sylvie? Nothing. We’re going to fix this.”

Her lips tremble as she whispers, “It doesn’t feel that way.”

I cup her face gently, brushing my thumb along her cheek. Her skin is warm beneath my touch, but it’s the flicker of vulnerability in her eyes that holds me captive. “I know you’ve given so much—too much—in such a short time. You shouldn’t have to

do any of it. I despise everything you're dealing with." My voice drops to something softer, something meant only for her. "Let me carry some of that weight. Please."

Her breath hitches, and for a moment, the air between us is heavy with unspoken words. Finally, she leans into my touch, her forehead pressing lightly against my hand as she clenches her eyes shut.

"I don't know how much more I can take, Lucian. I feel like I'm drowning, and every time I come up for air, every time I think things are about to go in my favor, something else pulls me under."

I don't give her a chance to say more. Instead, I rise from my chair and sweep her into my arms, the motion smooth and effortless. She doesn't protest, simply curling into me like it's the most natural thing in the world.

"You don't have to say anything else," I murmur, my voice low. "Let me take care of you."

I carry her to the chaise lounge, where she can be more comfortable, as the fire crackles softly in the hearth. The glow casts golden light across the dark leather furniture and the richly patterned rug. I settle onto the warm furniture, cradling her against my chest, and drape a soft blanket over her shoulders.

Sylvie sighs, her body melting into mine as though she's been holding herself together for far too long. Her head rests against my shoulder, her breath warm against my neck. "You're too good to me," she whispers, her voice tinged with exhaustion.

"Never," I reply, pressing a kiss to the crown of her head. "You deserve far more than I could ever give you."

Her fingers clutch lightly at the fabric of my shirt, and I feel her relax further, the

tension leaving her in waves. For a moment, we simply sit in silence, the world outside this room forgotten.

“You said Lara asked Rebecca and Nicole for a memory-enhancement spell,” I say finally, my voice a quiet rumble. “Perhaps she’s trying to piece together something important—or erase something she can’t bear to face.”

Sylvie nods faintly against me as she watches the flames dance, entwining together, embers popping from the flames. “I just don’t understand why she’s doing any of this. She’s not... she’s not the sister I grew up with anymore.” Her voice cracks, and I feel her tears dampen my shirt. “I’m not an idiot. I knew her humanity being erased wouldn’t be easy for any of us, but I never expected her to come for me like this.”

I tighten my hold on her, my jaw clenching as anger and sorrow twist within me. “The Society is using her, Sylvie. They’ve twisted her humanity into something unrecognizable. She’d never do this to you without their influence, and you know that. We’ll get her back. I promise you that.”

She tilts her face up to look at me, her eyes shimmering with tears. “Do you really think we can? Because I’m starting to lose faith that it’s going to happen. There’s so much stacked against us.”

I brush a strand of hair from her face, letting my fingertips linger against her warming skin. “I think you’re capable of anything, Sylvie Rosenthal. And I think you’re starting to see that too. You just have to keep believing it.”

Her lips curve into the faintest of smiles, and for a moment, the weight of the world doesn’t seem quite so heavy.

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*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:26 am*

Last night replays in my mind. My thoughts are heavy, but not with despair. For once, there's something grounding me, something steady. Someone.

Lucian.

I can't stop replaying the way he held me last night, the way his voice wrapped around my frayed nerves and pulled me back from the edge. He didn't push, didn't demand answers I wasn't ready to give—he just... was there. And in the quiet, when the weight of everything threatened to crush me, he reminded me I didn't have to face it alone. I never knew how much I needed that until he gave it so freely. He's done it before, sure, but the more he reassures me the more it fully sinks in.

He's so much more than the enigmatic vampire I first met. He's my tether, my calm in the storm. The way he looks at me—like I'm something precious, worth fighting for—it's overwhelming. He sees parts of me I haven't fully understood yet, parts I didn't even know were there. And when he says I'm strong, when he says we'll get through this together, I almost believe it.

Almost. But that's more than I had before him. And for now, it's enough.

I'm still reeling over what happened in Mr. Fallon's office. How easy it was for Blackthorne to just assume I'm up to shady things. Yes, I am fully aware it looks like me in those photos, but to just drop me without letting me explain before making a decision? Now I have to jump through hoops to get the administration to listen. I'm devastated over it. I was really enjoying my classes, and I felt like I was learning so much. I enjoyed my professors and building a bond with Marisol.

But now it's all gone to shit. It's just one more thing on my long list of things to figure out. Right now, though, I have to change gears.

The doors of the Witch's Guild creak open, the sound reverberating through the vast, silent halls. As Ravenna steps inside, I follow close behind, nerves twisting my stomach into tight knots. The air immediately feels heavier, charged with an energy that prickles my skin.

The entryway is breathtaking—impossibly grand, with a vaulted ceiling painted like a star-filled night sky. Constellations shimmer faintly above us, their faint light playing off crystal chandeliers that cast tiny rainbows across the polished black-and-white marble floor. The scent of sage, ancient wood, and something faintly metallic lingers in the air.

Nicole and Rebecca hover beside me, their presence a small comfort in this overwhelming space. Nicole glances my way, offering a faint smile that does little to ease the tightness in my chest.

“Stay close,” Ravenna murmurs, her voice low but firm as we walk deeper into the Guild. “This is not a place to wander. There are many things going on, and I'd like you to not get caught up in them.”

The corridors stretch endlessly, each one lined with tall arched windows that overlook the moonlit Delaware River below. I catch glimpses of the water's silvery surface between the thick velvet drapes, and for a moment, it feels like the Guild exists in an entirely different world.

“What a beautiful place,” I whisper, struggling to keep my voice steady.

“The Guild chose this land centuries ago,” Ravenna says without turning. “It holds power, like all sacred places. It was the Guild that built this sanctuary atop it.”



We pass witches along the way—men and women of all ages, dressed in flowing robes or modern clothing that looks out of place in such an ancient setting. Some carry books or bundles of herbs; others clutch staffs adorned with glowing runes. None of them stop to look at us, though their presence makes the space feel even more alive, as if the very walls hum with their combined magic.

I struggle to breathe as the weight of the atmosphere settles over me. Every step deeper into the Guild feels like stepping further into an invisible current of power. By the time we stop in front of an ornate double door etched with glowing runes, my palms are slick with sweat.

Ravenna turns to face me. “Once we go inside, speak only when spoken to,” she warns, her gaze sharp. “The elders are not ones to suffer interruptions or idle questions.”

My throat feels dry, but I manage to nod.

Nicole leans in close, her whisper light in my ear. “You’ll be fine. Just... don’t freak out.”

Rebecca offers me a reassuring look, but even she looks unnerved.

Ravenna places her hand against the center of the door and murmurs something in a language I can’t recognize. The runes glow brighter, and the doors swing open soundlessly, revealing a room that takes my breath away.

The circular chamber is illuminated by soft, flickering light from floating candles. The domed ceiling above is painted with shifting constellations, as if the very cosmos were alive here. At the center of the room sits a massive table carved from black obsidian, its surface polished to a mirror-like sheen.

Three women sit around the table, their presence so commanding that I instinctively stop in my tracks.

The eldest—or who I assume is the eldest, judging by her skin and hair—sits at the center, her white hair pulled into an intricate braid that falls over one shoulder. Her crimson robes shimmer faintly in the candlelight, and her piercing silver eyes lock onto mine with a sharpness that makes my stomach flip.

This is exactly what I envisioned when thinking about a guild full of witches. Not the people dressed in modern clothing like me, but this...this room and these women.

There's also a woman with rich, dark skin and coiled golden hair that seems to catch the light. Nicole resembles her in many ways, her bone structure, her skin, her hair. The woman's necklace of polished gemstones clinks softly as she moves, her gaze warm but penetrating.

The third woman is tall and elegant, her silver hair cascading in waves down her back. Her beautiful gray eyes flicker with intensity, like the calm before a thunderstorm. Her deep blue gown glimmers faintly with embroidered stars that seem to twinkle as she shifts.

"Sylvie Rosenthal," the eldest says, her voice resonant and firm. "You have arrived at last."

The sound of my name from her lips makes my breath hitch. I step forward, unsure of what to do, my legs stiff and unsteady.

"Sit," the silver-haired woman commands, gesturing to a chair near the table. "We have much to discuss." She gives me a knowing look. "My name is Eldara." She motions to the second woman, the one who reminds me of Nicole, and says, "That is Calidora, and that is Etta," she says gesturing to the woman with the long silver hair.

I nod at the three women before me and then glance at Nicole and Rebecca, who stay back near the door. Ravenna gives me a slight nod, urging me forward. My legs carry me to the chair, my footsteps echoing loudly throughout the room, every step feeling like I'm wading through quicksand.

Calidora leans forward, her voice melodic but firm. "Your mother came from a long line of original witches—the Everdawns. It is a name spoken with reverence among the witches in these walls. Your lineage is one of power, resilience, and great sacrifice."

I blink, caught off guard from their immediate compliment of my lineage. "I wasn't aware of any of this until recently," I manage to get out.

"That's because your family shielded you from this world," Eldara cuts in. Her tone carries no malice, only a matter-of-fact certainty. "But shielding does not erase destiny. The blood that runs in your veins carries a weight few can bear."

Etta nods slowly. "Your ancestors were more than witches. They were architects of balance, protectors of the fragile peace between mortals and immortals alike. They were also known for being the first great healers of our kind."

My heart pounds in my chest. The idea of my family being so important to the supernatural world feels impossible to reconcile with the quiet, ordinary life we led before everything fell apart.

Eldara folds her hands on the table, and I admire the rings encasing her fingers. "Your sister, Lara," she begins, her voice cutting through my spiraling thoughts. "Ravenna has informed us of her particular issue. Restoration of her humanity is possible—but it is not simple. Nor is it without risk."

"I've been told as much," I admit. "What kind of risk?" I manage to ask, my voice

barely above a whisper.

The three women exchange a glance with each other before answering. “The ritual requires immense power, precision, and sacrifice. It demands more than just magic. It demands the blood of a vampire and an artifact of great significance—one that is now tied to the Solstice Society.”

I stiffen. “The Solstice Society? They have it?”

“They guard it jealously,” the storm-eyed witch says, her tone sharp. “And retrieving it will not be easy. Without it, the ritual is impossible.”

“I was told this has been done before. Was there a different artifact used?” I ask, suddenly feeling my cheeks heat. Maybe I shouldn’t have told them I know anything about it at all.

“We had one of our own join Solstice, and she brought it with her. They can be very convincing, especially with their dark magic. It was a nightmare. Still is,” the silver-haired witch says.

My chest tightens as their words sink in. “Will you tell me what happens if the ritual fails?”

Eldara leans forward, her piercing gaze holding mine. “If the balance is not perfect, the magic could turn on you. You could lose yourself entirely. Or worse, you could lose Lara forever.”

Her words hang in the air, heavy and smothering.

Eldara speaks again, her voice softer now. “Thirty years ago, a young witch attempted a similar ritual to save her brother. The magic consumed her. She was lost,

though her brother survived. It is not a path to tread lightly.”

I clench my fists, forcing myself to breathe through the storm of fear rising within me. “But it is possible,” I say, my voice firm despite the tightness in my throat. “You’re saying there’s a chance.”

Etta, once again, nods slowly. “There is always a chance, Sylvie. But you must understand the stakes because they are quite dire. Once you begin, there is no turning back. You cannot start the incantation and decide you’d like to back out. That will shift everything as we’ve ever known it.”

Ravenna places a hand on my shoulder, grounding me. “Sylvie,” she says gently, “you must be certain. This isn’t just about saving Lara. This is about whether you’re willing to risk everything—for her and for yourself. This will affect many more than just your sister. It will affect you, these three women before you, and me as well. All of us who are helping you with it will be subject to peril.”

I take a deep breath, meeting each of their gazes in turn. “I’ll do whatever it takes,” I say, my voice steady. “I’m prepared for the consequences.”

I don’t know if it’s true. But I don’t see any other way out.

The witches exchange a look, a silent conversation passing between them in the same way Nicole and Rebecca converse. Finally, the eldest nods. “Very well. Then you must prepare yourself—for what lies ahead will test you in ways you cannot yet imagine. We are privy to your recent studying, your recent classes you’ve taken. Those will surely help you, but we also need to meet with you again as well.”

Ravenna takes the lead and explains how I will study with her and a fellow colleague of hers and we will learn the incantation.

“After we feel you’re strong enough to handle it, we can reconvene with our elders and move forward. We will need to get our hands on the stolen artifact, which will be a challenge in itself. I have a feeling you won’t have a problem with the vampire blood, though.” She looks at me, giving me a soft smile, and I nod.

As we leave the chamber, the weight of their words presses heavily on my shoulders. The path ahead feels impossibly daunting, but I don’t have a choice. I’ll find the artifact. I’ll face whatever comes next.

Because failure isn’t an option—not for Lara, and not for me.

\* \* \*

The next room Ravenna leads us to feels entirely different from the grand, ceremonial chamber we just left. This one is smaller, warmer, with the faint scent of lavender and cinnamon filling the air. Soft golden light spills from sconces on the walls, illuminating shelves lined with jars of herbs, ancient books, and vials of shimmering liquids.

“This is where we can practice the incantation and continue building up your strength in a safe environment,” Ravenna explains as she gestures for us to enter. “It’s a sacred space, designed to focus and amplify magical energy. You’ll need every advantage you can get.”

The air in here feels heavier, electric, as though it thrums with an invisible current. I step inside cautiously, my fingers brushing against the edge of the long wooden table that dominates the center of the room. At its heart is an intricate carving of a sigil—a symbol I don’t recognize but can’t seem to look away from.

Ravenna moves to the far side of the room, where another woman stands waiting. She’s tall and willowy, her auburn hair pulled into a long loose braid that falls over

her shoulder. Her olive skin glows faintly in the warm light, and her amber eyes seem to pierce straight through me.

“Sylvie, this is Cassandra,” Ravenna says, her tone respectful. “She’s an old friend and one of the Guild’s foremost practitioners of restorative magic.” Ravenna places a hand on Cassandra’s shoulder and gives her a warm smile, which the woman returns.

Cassandra turns the same smile on me, though there’s a weight to her expression that suggests she knows just how impossible this task feels to me right now.

“So you’re the Everdawn heir,” Cassandra says, her voice smooth and rich. “I’ve been told you’re a quick learner. That will be necessary here.”

I swallow past my ever-growing anxiousness, feeling the weight of her gaze as though it’s pinning me in place. “I’ll do my best.”

Cassandra’s lips twitch into something like a smile, but it doesn’t quite reach her eyes. “That’s what we all hope for, isn’t it?”

Ravenna gestures to the sigil on the table. “This is the spell’s foundation. Before you can attempt the ritual itself, you’ll need to understand the incantation’s mechanics and how to harness your own energy to sustain it.”

Nicole and Rebecca stand off to the side, their presence a silent reassurance; that’s all I’ve asked of them—just to be here for me. I glance at them, drawing strength from their quiet confidence before turning my attention back to Cassandra and Ravenna.

Cassandra begins tracing the sigil with her finger, her movements deliberate and precise. “This incantation requires more than just words. It’s a weaving of power, intent, and connection. Your focus must be absolute, or the magic will unravel.”

She looks at me, her expression grave. “And if it unravels, it could take you with it. Surely our elders informed you this is not for the weak.”

The weight of her words settles over me like a lead cloak, but I force myself to nod. “What do I need to do?”

Ravenna steps forward, her voice gentle but firm. “First, you need to build your strength. This isn’t just about magic—it’s about endurance. The ritual will demand everything you have, physically and mentally.”

“What does that mean?” I ask, my stomach twisting with unease.

“It means you need to prepare your body as much as your mind,” Cassandra says. “Meditation, physical training, proper nutrition. Magic draws from your life force, and if you don’t have the reserves to sustain it, the spell could drain you completely.”

I nod slowly, the enormity of the task settling in. “And the incantation itself?”

Cassandra gestures for me to step closer. “Let’s start with the basics.”

She begins to recite the spell, her voice steady and resonant. The words are unfamiliar, a mix of harsh consonants and flowing vowels that seem to hum with energy as she speaks them. I repeat after her, stumbling over the unfamiliar syllables at first but gradually finding a rhythm after a few minutes of repetitive practice.

“Good,” Cassandra says. “Now, try again, but this time, focus on channeling your intent into the words. Speak them as though you’re shaping reality itself. As if you can move mountains with your palms.”

I take a deep breath and close my eyes, letting the words flow from my lips. As I speak, I focus on delivering the intent, and I feel a faint stirring in the air around me,



as though the room itself is responding to the magic I'm trying to summon.

"Better," Cassandra says, nodding. "But you'll need to do more than stir the air. This spell requires precision and strength in equal measure."

Ravenna steps forward, placing a hand on my shoulder. "Sylvie, you're doing well, but this is just the beginning. You'll need to practice until the incantation becomes second nature—until it feels as natural as breathing. Like your body could do it on its own."

I nod, though the enormity of what lies ahead feels like a mountain I'm not sure I can climb.

"Let's try again," Cassandra says, her tone encouraging.

And we do.

For the next hour, we work through the incantation, breaking it down into smaller sections and practicing each one until the words begin to feel less foreign on my tongue. By the end of the session, my head aches, and my muscles feel as though I've run a marathon, even though I haven't moved from my spot.

"You're making progress," Cassandra says, her expression softening slightly. "But this is only the beginning. The real challenge will be sustaining the spell during the ritual."

"How do I do that?" I ask, my voice hoarse from repeating the incantation over and over.

"By building your reserves," Cassandra says. "Focus on strengthening your body and mind over the next couple of weeks. Like I said, meditation, exercise, eating the right

foods—these are all essential.”

“And don’t forget rest,” Ravenna adds. “Between each of your practice sessions, you’ll need to wind down. Your body needs time to recover, especially as you push yourself further.”

I glance at Nicole and Rebecca, who both nod in agreement. “We’ll help you,” Nicole says firmly.

“Whatever you need,” Rebecca adds.

Their support bolsters me, but the weight of the task ahead still feels overwhelming. I know this is only the first step, and the road ahead will be long and difficult. This is what I’ve asked for, and I’m well aware there is no turning back.

“You’ll continue practicing the incantation as you work on your strength and endurance. Don’t let a day go by without at least one attempt. We don’t want you overexerting yourself, but your body and mind need time to turn this into muscle memory. Small bits of time each day will work wonders for you,” Cassandra says with a knowing smile. “You’re welcome to come back here and use this room anytime you like.”

I take a deep breath, bracing myself for the unknown and hoping I can do this without destroying Lara and myself—and these women in front of me—in the process.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:26 am*

The Crimson Veil feels like less bar and more powder keg waiting for a spark. Shadows stretch long across the room, where whispered deals and quiet murmurs twist together in an uneasy symphony. The air is dense, steeped in the tang of copper and faint traces of human desperation as they try to convince their partners to take them to the feeding club. The Crimson Veil is the step before Midnight Delight. It's where most bring their partners prior to subjecting them to the feeding club—just to see if they can handle it.

The air in here is thick with tension as representatives of all three of our factions settle in—a volatile mix of allies and rivals. Viago, naturally, commands the head of the table, his posture lazy but his gaze sharp. His second-in-command, a gaunt man named Tobias who actually managed to make it to our first meeting, hovers behind him, his hands clasped like a mourner at a graveside.

Across from me, Dorian sits rigid, his jaw tight as he observes the Unbound representatives—Kristoff and Vada, both dressed in stark black, their expressions unreadable. This is a room built on frayed trust, every word a tightrope walk over treachery.

Viago wastes no time establishing himself. “Good evening, gentlemen, lady,” he begins, his voice smooth as silk. “Before we address tonight’s agenda, allow me to share some good news. The shipment of blood packs from the northern territories has arrived. Another temporary fix, yes, but one that should keep your people from tearing each other apart—at least for the next few weeks while you continue to build up your reserves.”

“You act as though you’ve done this out of charity,” Dorian mutters, his voice laced

with skepticism. “You’ve merely delayed the problem, so we look at you as a savior.”

“Is that what you think?” Viago replies with a smirk, leaning forward. “I would remind you, Dorian, that without my intervention, your ‘neutral’ little corner of the world would be running dry. Midnight Alliance would be just as feral as the Unbound—no offense, you two,” he says as he motions toward Vada and Kristoff. “Or maybe slight offense.” He glances back to Dorian. “Perhaps a little gratitude is in order.”

“I think we should move on,” I cut in, weary of their sparring. “If this is about the Solstice Society, then get to the point.”

Viago asked we all meet tonight, the representatives from each faction, in order to speak on how to move forward with getting rid of the Solstice Society for good. It isn’t like we’ve never attempted to organize something before, but their dark magic is strong, and the factions have always been on the same page until now—why disrupt what isn’t killing us? Yet, that is. Though it seems we’re running out of time.

Viago’s smirk deepens, as though my impatience amuses him. “Ah, yes. Solstice. The thorn in all our sides. They’ve grown bolder, more dangerous. We can’t afford another year of sitting idly by while they tighten their hold and get closer to ending the curse that began it all—thus, my friends, ending us all.”

“Bolder because they’ve had the luxury of time,” says Vada, the female Unbound representative. Her voice is as sharp as her dark eyes. “Every year we hesitate, their fucked-up magic grows stronger. We should have destroyed them a decade ago.”

“And yet, here we are,” Kristoff interjects, his tone cold. “Do you have a better plan than waiting until they suffocate us entirely?”

Viago raises a hand, a thin smile tugging at his lips. “Patience, Kristoff. I do have the

makings of a potential plan. A bold one, but it requires precision—and perhaps a little... creativity.”

“Creativity,” I echo, leaning back in my chair. “You mean desperation.”

Viago ignores me because I’m right. “An ambush,” he says, letting the word hang in the air. “A coordinated strike at their stronghold.”

Vada scoffs. “An ambush? As if they haven’t fortified their territory with every spell in their arsenal? We wouldn’t make it past the front gate.”

“She’s right,” I say, folding my arms and remembering all Henry Quill has told me. “The Society isn’t an ordinary enemy. Their defenses aren’t just physical. They’ve layered their stronghold with enchantments. Spells designed to repel, confuse, and incapacitate. Even if we managed to breach the perimeter, the cost would be catastrophic.”

“That’s why we need someone who can counter their magic,” Viago says, his gaze sliding to me like a blade. “Someone with...dare I say, unique abilities.”

My jaw tightens, knowing where this is going.

“Someone like Sylvie,” he continues, his tone almost casual.

“Absolutely not,” I snap, my voice cutting through the room like a whip. The others turn to me, but I don’t care. “Sylvie is not a weapon to be wielded.”

“She’s more than that, isn’t she?” Viago presses, leaning forward with the precision of a predator. “You’ve seen it. Her potential. Her power. If anyone could pierce their defenses, it’s her. You think I haven’t researched the girl?”

“She doesn’t fully know how to control it,” I argue. “She’s still incredibly new to all of this. And even if she were an expert, I wouldn’t allow her to be dragged into this.”

Vada’s gaze sharpens. “Allow? Is she a child in need of protection, or are you simply afraid she’ll realize she’s stronger than you?”

I fix her with a cold stare, but she doesn’t flinch. Dorian, to his credit, speaks up before I can respond. “Enough. This isn’t the time to argue about Sylvie’s capabilities—or Lucian’s motives. If we’re serious about this ambush, we need a strategy that doesn’t rely on untested power or a young girl who has enough on her plate.”

“And what would you suggest?” Tobias sneers. “Continue to cower in the shadows while Solstice grows stronger?”

Dorian’s calm breaks, his voice hardening. “I suggest we stop pretending this is as simple as ‘storming the gates.’ If it were, why didn’t we do it years ago? If we want to take them down, we need to dismantle them piece by piece. Target their allies, cut off their resources, weaken their magic. An ambush might feel satisfying to you, Viago, but it’s a fool’s errand if we don’t lay the groundwork first.”

For the first time, Viago’s smirk falters. “And how long would this ‘groundwork’ take? Months? Years? By then, we’ll be dead.”

“Then maybe we’re not ready,” I say, my voice low but firm. The room falls silent, every pair of eyes on me. “If we can’t guarantee victory, we’re walking into a massacre.”

“And if we do nothing, we’re already lifeless,” Viago snaps, his voice rising. “This isn’t a debate, Lucian. You’ll either stand with me, or you’ll stand in my way, and I think I’ve made your lingering debt abundantly clear.”

Before the meeting spirals further, Sylvie appears, and all eyes snap to her standing in the entryway. She steps into the room, her face set with determination, though the flicker of uncertainty in her eyes betrays her nerves.

“I was told you needed me, Lucian. Someone came to the apothecary. What’s going on?” she asks, her voice steady despite the tension crackling in the air.

I should’ve known Viago would do anything to get her here. To try and force her into something she doesn’t need to be part of.

Viago’s smirk returns, sharper now. “Perfect timing,” he says smoothly. “We were just discussing how you might help us, Sylvie.”

Before anyone else can speak, I step toward Sylvie and lower my voice. “Come here, love.”

I don’t miss the way Viago’s eyes light up when he hears my term of endearment.

Sylvie hesitates for a moment but then follows me to the edge of the room, away from the others’ prying eyes and ears. The tension between us is palpable, and I keep my voice low enough that only she can hear.

“Sylvie, you need to know what’s happening here,” I begin, my tone urgent. “Viago is trying to use you. He thinks your abilities are the key to taking down Solstice, and he’s not going to care what it costs you in the process.”

Her eyes narrow slightly, a flicker of defiance behind them. “And you don’t think I should be part of it?”

“I don’t,” I say bluntly. “You don’t understand how dangerous this is, or perhaps you do, but even so. They’re asking you to walk into the heart of the most fortified

stronghold we've ever faced. Their magic is ancient, layered, and deadly. If something goes wrong?—"

She cuts me off. "Why do you always assume things will go wrong?" she asks. "I've been dragged into this world, Lucian. I've already lost so much. If I can do something to help, I want to. I need to. You can't just decide for me."

Her words hit harder than I'd like to admit, but I force myself to meet her gaze. "You're right. I cannot decide for you. But I can make sure you understand what you're stepping into. Viago doesn't care about your well-being, Sylvie. To him, you're a means to an end. If things go sideways, he won't think twice about leaving you behind."

"And you?" she asks, her voice softer now. "What about you, Lucian? Are you going to leave me behind if things go sideways?"

The question makes my chest tighten. "Never," I say without hesitation. "If you choose to do this, I'll be there. Every step of the way. Alongside you. But I need you to be certain you even want to hear what the factions have to say, Sylvie. This isn't just about taking down Solstice. It's about your life. Your future."

Her shoulders square, and she nods. "I am certain. I need to hear what they have to say."

For a moment, I search her face for any sign of doubt, but all I see is resolve. With a heavy sigh, I step back. "Fine. But that doesn't mean you're doing it."

She nods again, and together, we rejoin the group as Viago gestures for Sylvie to join us fully.

"Let's continue this discussion in private," he suggests, his tone taking on an air of



false camaraderie. “We have maps to review and plans to finalize.”

We move into a dimly lit backroom, where a massive table dominates the space. Its surface is covered with detailed maps of Blackthorn Woods and the surrounding area. Candles flicker along the edges, casting shifting shadows over the plans. The woods look as foreboding on paper as they feel in reality, a labyrinth of winding paths and cursed ground.

Viago spreads his hands over the maps with a flourish. “This is their stronghold,” he says, pointing to a dense area deep within the woods of Blackthorne. “The wards begin here and grow more complex the closer you get to the center. They’ve had decades to fortify their defenses.”

“Most of these wards are designed to mislead or confuse intruders,” Dorian adds, tracing a path with his finger. “But some are lethal. Traps, curses, enchantments designed to kill on sight.”

“That’s where Sylvie comes in,” Viago says, looking at her pointedly. “You’ve already proven you can sense and disrupt their magic. With you leading us, we can navigate these defenses and reach the stronghold.”

Sylvie hesitates, her brow furrowing as she studies the maps. “I don’t know if I can handle all of this. What if I make a mistake?”

“Should you decide to do this, you won’t be alone,” I say firmly, stepping closer to her, not wanting her to be swayed either way but also needing her to know I’m here. “I will be with you every step of the way.”

“And once we’re inside?” Kristoff asks, his voice skeptical.

“The Mirror of Thorns is our target. Our goal,” Viago says, tapping a spot on the map

at the heart of the stronghold. "It's the source of their power. Destroy it, and their enchantments collapse. Their leaders will be vulnerable."

"Honestly, I think it's kind of shit that you're making it seem so simple," Vada says, crossing her arms. "They'll be waiting for us. We aren't going to just prance in there and grab the Mirror of Thorns. One of the oldest relics still in existence." She scoffs.

Sylvie's breath catches, and all eyes turn to her as she steps closer to the table, her gaze fixed on the marked location. "The Mirror of Thorns," she murmurs, almost to herself. Then louder, she adds, "That's the relic I was told I need to find and capture—the one that could restore Lara's humanity."

The room goes silent for a beat, the weight of her words sinking in. Viago's smirk returns, this time tinged with intrigue. "Well, isn't that convenient? Two birds, one stone. It seems fate's taken quite an interest in you, Sylvie."

I feel my chest tighten at his words, and I step closer to Sylvie, my voice calm but firm. "This complicates things. If the Mirror is tied to both Solstice's power and Lara's humanity, destroying it might not be an option."

"Then we don't destroy it," Sylvie says, her voice gaining strength. "We take it. We take it and use it for what it was meant to do and return it to the witches and restore my sister's humanity. But... how does taking or destroying it weaken the Society? What happens after that?"

Viago's smirk fades slightly, replaced with a calculating look. "The Mirror of Thorns is their tether to dark magic. It anchors their spells and amplifies their power. Without it, they lose their ability to maintain their wards, their enchantments, and their control over others. They'll be exposed—vulnerable to an attack."

Dorian adds, "Think of it as cutting the strings on a puppet. Their magic is vast but

unstable. The Mirror stabilizes it. Without that anchor, they'll collapse under their own power."

"And that's when we strike," Viago says. "With the Mirror in hand, we not only dismantle their defenses but ensure they can't rebuild."

"But there's another complication," I interject. "If the Mirror is to be used for Lara, there's a ritual involved. One that likely requires witches."

Kristoff scoffs. "You want to bring witches into this? They're as unpredictable as Solstice."

"Not all of them," Sylvie says firmly. "There are some I trust with my life. I will agree to help you because I need the relic anyway. I want them to be taken down. And as long as I have time to save Lara first, I'm in."

Viago taps his fingers on the table, clearly considering. "Fine. Bring your witches, if you must. But if they even think about turning on us?—"

"They won't," Sylvie cuts him off. "Because they want this as much as we do. Solstice stole that relic from them ages ago. It's rightfully theirs. Plus, they know once Solstice accomplishes what they want with the vampires, they are moving on to the witches. They want them dismantled as well."

"Then it's settled," I say, my voice firm. "The plan remains: breach their defenses, take the Mirror, and neutralize their leadership. The witches will handle the ritual after we secure the relic. Everyone knows their role."

The room falls silent as the enormity of the task sinks in. Finally, Sylvie nods. "If this goes wrong..." She looks at me, her voice faltering for the first time. "I'll need you to trust me."

I meet her gaze, my voice steady. "You have my trust."

Viago claps his hands together, breaking the tension. "Then it's settled. One week. What is the point in waiting if we know what we need, have the magic behind us, and can defeat Solstice? Your witches can help with their magic as well. We're in as good of a spot as we can be. Vampires will work on making sure we go over the lay of the land. Sylvie, you work on your wards, the incantation, and whatever else it is you need prior to going. Your witches will know what we're up against, and they'll prepare as well." He pauses before looking around at all of us. "Rest while you can—it may be the last chance you get."

As the group begins to disperse, I linger near the maps, my thoughts heavy. Sylvie stands beside me, her presence grounding despite the chaos ahead.

"This is incredibly dangerous," I say quietly. "You don't have to do this."

Sylvie has been hard at work over the last few days since meeting with the Guild, practicing her incantation, meeting with Ravenna, Rebecca, and Nicole. Still, I can't help but worry. I never want her in harm's way—especially due to me.

She turns to me, her expression soft but resolute. "I have to. If this mirror really is the key to helping Lara and stopping Solstice, then there's no question. I'll see this through."

Something in her voice makes my chest ache. It's not just her determination, but the weight she carries, the sacrifices she's willing to make. And I can't let her bear it alone.

"Sylvie," I say, stepping closer, my voice low, "I need you to understand something. Above all else, your safety matters to me. Not Viago's plans. Not even this war. You."

Her breath hitches, her lips parting slightly as she meets my gaze. For a moment, the world narrows to just us, the tension from the meeting and the looming battle forgotten. Slowly, I lift my hand to her cheek, my thumb brushing against her skin.

“Lucian,” she whispers, but whatever she was about to say is lost as I bend down, capturing her lips with mine. The kiss is soft at first, an unspoken promise, but it deepens as she leans into me, her hands clutching at my shirt. It’s not just passion—it’s everything I’ve held back, all the words I haven’t said.

When we finally pull apart, her forehead rests against mine, her breathing unsteady. “You always act like you have to carry everything alone,” I tell her. “But you don’t. Let me be there for you, too. We’ll end them and we’ll get your sister’s humanity back. And then the two of us can finally be what we’re meant to be for each other.”

“Promise?” she asks, looking up at me with so much hope in her eyes it makes me want to whisk her away and never allow her to leave my side again. To protect her at all costs. And I will.

“Promise.”

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:26 am*

The air inside the Witch's Guild crackles with energy, thick and potent like the charge before a storm. I stand in the center of the main chamber, my focus locked on the shimmering sigils glowing faintly on the stone floor. My breathing slows, syncing with the rhythm of the incantation, the words curling off my tongue like smoke.

"Aetheris vinculum, potentia mea fluo," I murmur, my voice steady, resolute. The dagger in my hand glows faintly as I channel the magic through it, imagining the invisible threads of power latching onto the target in front of me—a straw effigy suspended in midair by Ravenna's magic.

I raise the dagger and release the final syllable, thrusting the blade forward. Light explodes from its tip, golden tendrils wrapping tightly around the effigy. The figure jerks violently before freezing, held fast by the magical bindings I've summoned. My chest heaves, but the rush of power surges through me, exhilarating and electric.

"Well done," Ravenna says, her voice calm but laced with approval. She circles me, her eyes sharp and calculating. "Your control has improved over the last week. No hesitation this time. You're learning to command the magic rather than letting it command you."

I glance at Cassandra, who stands off to the side with her arms crossed. Her expression is less reserved—there's clear pride in her eyes. "You're stronger than most witches would be at this point," she adds. "I can't attribute that solely to your bloodline, either. You've been practicing, haven't you?"

"Every chance I get," I reply, unable to hide the small smile tugging at my lips. It feels good to be recognized, to feel like I'm finally stepping into the potential I've

been chasing since arriving at Blackthorne.

Ravenna waves a hand, and the effigy drops to the ground with a dull thud. “Again,” she instructs. “But this time, we’ll add a defensive layer. Bind the target, then shield yourself. You’ll need to be able to multitask in the field.”

I nod, gripping the dagger tightly. The sigils on the floor flare to life once more, and I dive back into the spellwork. The incantation flows more easily now, the words feeling like an extension of my will rather than something foreign. As the bindings tighten around the effigy, I picture a shimmering barrier forming around me, a protective bubble warding off any potential attacks.

Cassandra lets out a low whistle as the shield solidifies, a faint silver glow surrounding me. “Impressive,” she murmurs. “I’d hate to be on the receiving end of that.”

Ravenna watches me with a critical eye, her arms folded across her chest. “You’re getting there,” she says finally. “But remember, Sylvie—magic is as much about intention as it is about execution. Keep your focus sharp. Distractions can be deadly.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I say, wiping a bead of sweat from my temple. My muscles ache, but it’s a satisfying kind of exhaustion—the kind that comes from progress.

Ravenna steps closer, her voice dropping to a softer tone. “In a perfect world, we’d have an abundance of time to perform the incantation. In this world, so far from perfect, we don’t. I believe you’re ready for what’s coming,” she says. “But don’t let overconfidence blind you. Stay grounded, stay focused. And remember—you’re not alone in this fight.”

I nod, swallowing the lump in my throat. “Thank you,” I whisper.

\* \* \*

After a long day at the Guild, I sit at a corner table in Midnight Delight, the dim lighting casting flickering shadows across the walls. The air smells faintly of wine and cloves, mingling with the tang of blood. It's quieter than usual tonight, the hum of conversation low and subdued. I tap my fingers against the table, my pulse quickening as I wait for Lucian to arrive.

When he finally steps through the door, my breath catches. He moves with his usual grace, his dark coat billowing slightly as he scans the room. His eyes find mine almost immediately, and something inside me settles. He crosses the room in a few long strides, his presence commanding yet familiar.

"Sylvie," he says, his voice low and warm. "You've been busy today. I was surprised you didn't want to just meet at home."

I smile faintly, gesturing for him to sit. "I needed to see you."

Lucian arches an elegant brow as he takes the seat across from me. "And why is that, love? Not that I'll ever complain."

I lean forward, resting my elbows on the table. "There's something I need from you," I say, my voice steady despite the flutter in my chest. "Something important."

His eyes narrow slightly, a flicker of concern passing over his features. "You know I'd do anything for you," he says softly. "Just say the word."

"I'm worried you'll say no," I tell him honestly.

"Never. Unless it puts you in danger of course," he affirms, and that's what I was afraid of.



I take a deep breath, my heart hammering against my ribs. I need to just tell him and get it over with. I've been thinking about it for days, and I want it. I've just been too shy to ask. "I want you to feed from me."

The words hang in the air between us, heavy and unyielding. Lucian freezes, his expression shifting from surprise to something darker—something conflicted.

"I—" he says, his voice barely above a whisper. "You don't know what you're asking."

"Yes, I do," I reply, holding his gaze. "You need to be at full strength for the ambush. You said it yourself—Solstice won't hold back. You can't afford to be anything less than your best. I want to be the one to help you strengthen yourself before we go in."

He looks away, his jaw flexing and tightening as he looks around the room, more than likely trying to figure out how to let me down easily.

"It's not that simple. Feeding from you... it's dangerous. I could lose control. I could hurt you."

"You won't," I say firmly. "I trust you, Lucian. I know you'd never hurt me."

He shakes his head, his hands curling into fists on the table. "You don't understand. Feeding... it's intimate. It's not just about the blood—it's about the connection. The bond."

"Good," I whisper, my voice trembling but resolute. There's another thing I've been wanting to tell him, to share with him. I've never said it to anyone in my life—aside from my family. But I'm certain I want to say it to him. It's not because of our bond, my previous life...or anything else. It's because of him. Who he is. Who he is to me.

“I want to because I’m in love with you, Lucian.”

His head snaps up, his eyes locking onto mine. For a moment, the world around us fades, the noise of the club falling away. He stares at me like I’ve just unraveled some age-old secret, his expression a mixture of awe and disbelief.

“Sylvie,” he breathes, reaching across the table to take my hand. “You have no idea what you mean to me. What you’ve always meant to me.” He looks so intensely into my eyes I swear he can see into the very depths of my soul. “You have no idea what that means to hear that from your lips.”

“Then show me what it means,” I say, leaning closer as he brings my hand to his mouth and kisses each knuckle. “Let me be the one to make you stronger. Let me give you what you need.”

His resolve crumbles, his shoulders sagging as he exhales deeply. “If this is what you truly want,” he murmurs, his voice tinged with both longing and fear. “I would love nothing more than to taste you like that, more deeply, more intimately. In such a way that I am claiming every inch of you.” He pauses and once again looks around the room as if he’s looking for someone. “But I must put fail-safes in place. I’ll get two guards to stand nearby. If I show any sign of losing control, they’ll intervene.” As he says it, he looks to two different men and beckons them without so much as a word.

“Whatever you need to be comfortable,” I tell him.

My heart pounds as he stands and offers me his hand. “Let’s go somewhere more quiet,” he says.

Lucian leads me deeper into Midnight Delight, past the velvet curtains and the low bustle of murmured conversations, past the quiet, darkened alcoves where others indulge in their own desires. The air is thick with something heady and electric—a

pulse of magic, of want, of something far older than I can name. The warmth of the dimly lit space wraps around us like silk, the glow of crimson sconces casting flickering shadows along the stone walls.

He doesn't speak as we walk, but I feel the shift in him—the barely restrained energy twisting beneath his skin, the quiet war raging behind his dark eyes. He's holding himself in check, and yet, with each step, the space between us feels thinner, the air charged with something unspoken.

At the end of the hall, he opens a door and gestures for me to enter.

The room is unlike anything I expected. It's more opulent, more intimate than I thought a place like this could be. The walls are draped in deep garnet fabric, the ceiling arched high above us, giving the impression of being tucked away in some ancient, forbidden temple. A plush, dark velvet chaise sits in the center, its frame carved with intricate details that catch the light. It's everything sensual and controlled and moody.

Above us, a balcony with gold railings encircles the space. I know that people could watch if they wanted—some undoubtedly will—but for me, for Lucian, this moment feels like ours alone.

My pulse flutters wildly as I turn to face him.

His expression is unreadable, but his eyes... his damnable, haunting eyes hold me captive. There's an intensity in them, something almost reverent, and it sends a shiver down my spine.

Lucian moves toward me with slow, deliberate steps, as if approaching something sacred. He reaches out, fingers barely ghosting over my wrist before he takes my hand in his, lifting it gently to his lips.

“Are you certain about this?” Lucian’s voice is low, roughened with something I can’t quite place—concern, desire, fear.

I turn to face him, lifting my chin. “I’m sure,” I say, though my voice trembles slightly. “I trust you.”

He steps closer, his dark eyes searching mine for any trace of doubt. When he finds none, a muscle in his jaw ticks, and he exhales sharply, as though resigning himself to the inevitable. “You don’t understand what you’re offering, Sylvie,” he says softly. “This isn’t just an act of necessity. I am a different person entirely when I partake in feeding from a human. It’s why I don’t do it. Feeding... it’s raw, primal. Everything will change after I feed from you. I will be an even more obsessed man.”

“Good,” I reply, holding his gaze. “Because I don’t want things to stay the same. I want this, Lucian. I want you.”

Something in him fractures, and he closes the distance between us with a suddenness that steals my breath. His hands settle on my arms, firm but not forceful, his touch sending shivers racing down my spine. His lips a whisper away from my temple, he whispers, “Promise me this is what you want.”

“I promise,” I breathe, though I’m not sure I could ever stop him. Not when I want this more than I’ve wanted anything. Not when the magnetic pull between us feels as inevitable as gravity.

He bends down again, pressing a kiss to my neck. His mouth is warm against my skin, and the kiss he presses there is softer than I expect, more restrained. I exhale shakily, my entire body already attuned to him.

“Your heart is racing, love,” he murmurs against my palm. “Are you nervous? I would never ask this of you, and I don’t want you to ever feel forced. Like it’s a

duty."

I swallow, trying to steady myself. "Not nervous."

He lifts a brow.

"Maybe a little," I admit.

Lucian smirks, the corner of his lips tilting in amusement, but there's something else in his gaze. Something darker, something utterly devotional.

"Not because I don't want this," I clarify quickly. "Please trust me when I tell you I do." My fingers tighten slightly in his grasp. "I just... I don't know what it will feel like. It's like first day of school jitters," I say, and then feel like an idiot for comparing it to school.

His smirk fades into something more serious, more tender. "You will feel me ," he whispers. "In my rarest form."

He releases my hand, and instead of stepping away, he reaches up, his knuckles grazing my jaw, then sliding gently along my throat, his eyes tracking each movement. His fingertips are cool against my flushed skin, a contrast to the fire that coils low in my belly.

He tilts my head slightly, with just the smallest hint of pressure, exposing the delicate curve of my neck.

Then he steps behind me.

I let out a soft breath as I feel the solid weight of his chest against my back, his body warm despite the coldness that usually lingers beneath his skin. His hands trail lightly

down my arms, slow and teasing, until they settle on my waist, his fingers gripping my fabric-covered skin. I shudder at the closeness, at the feeling of being utterly claimed without a single word spoken.

Lucian leans in, his breath fanning against my throat, just above my pulse. I swear I hear a shaky intake of air pass through his lips, savoring the moment before he indulges.

His fingers slide up, gathering my hair in his hands, brushing it aside with excruciating slowness.

The sensation alone is enough to undo me, and I feel my desire pool at my center.

His lips graze just below my ear, a whisper of a touch. “Tell me again,” he murmurs. “Tell me you want this.”

My lashes flutter shut from the feeling of his breath against my neck, goosebumps rising to my skin’s surface. “I do,” I breathe. “I want this, Lucian.”

I watch as the two guards slowly enter the room and take their places in opposing corners, standing like sentinels of the night, their eyes trained on Lucian with quiet understanding. Each of them holds something small but unmistakable—a silver dagger. Magic radiates from it, and it’s strange to me how, even just a couple of months ago, I wouldn’t have noticed it. Now, though, I instinctively know the daggers are blessed and charmed with an incantation designed to subdue even the most powerful of vampires. I can feel the magic flowing around each dagger.

A precaution. A safeguard.

Lucian pays them no mind as his lips skim lower, tracing the sensitive curve of my throat where my pulse hammers wildly. It takes everything inside of my body to

steady myself, because the anticipation is too much, a slow-burning fire licking its way through my veins.

The world stills. The moment stretches, infinite and unyielding as he stands just behind me with his mouth hovering above my skin.

There's a beat of silence—a suspended moment where the world seems to hold its breath?—

And then his fangs pierce my neck.

The initial sting is sharp, startling, but it's swallowed almost instantly by a flood of sensation that steals every ounce of air from my lungs. Heat blooms from the point of contact, radiating outward in pulsing waves. It's intoxicating, like drowning in liquid fire, my senses overwhelmed by the sheer intensity of it. My knees weaken, and I cling to Lucian as the room spins around us.

His grip tightens, anchoring me to him as he drinks deeply, his lips warm and firm against my skin. Each pull sends another jolt of euphoria coursing through me, a dizzying blend of pleasure and pain that borders on unbearable. My head lolls back, and a soft moan escapes me before I can stop it.

“Lucian,” I whisper, the sound barely audible, but it seems to reach him. His feeding slows, the pressure easing, and he pulls back slightly, his breath hot against my neck.

“Are you all right?” he asks, his voice thick and rough, tinged with something almost feral.

“Yes,” I gasp, my fingers tightening in his shirt. “Don't stop.”

He groans low in his throat, a sound that reverberates through me, and he leans in

again, his lips brushing my neck with almost reverent tenderness. This time, the bite is slower, deliberate, and the sensation is even more overwhelming. My whole body feels alight, every nerve ending alive with sensation. I've never felt more aware of him—of the way his body presses against mine, of the faint tremor in his hands as they hold me, of the quiet, desperate hunger that radiates from him like a palpable force.

I've never felt more aware of him—of the way his body presses against mine, of the faint tremor in his hands as they hold me, of the quiet, desperate hunger that radiates from him like a palpable force. It's intoxicating and terrifying all at once, a storm I've willingly stepped into.

But then, something shifts.

The tremor in his hands grows stronger, and his grip tightens—not painfully, but enough to make my pulse quicken for reasons I can't entirely name. His breath deepens, ragged and uneven, and a low, guttural sound escapes his throat, reverberating through the space like a distant growl. He sucks harder, his fangs striking something deeper inside my flesh.

“Lucian?” I whisper, unsure if I'm grounding him or testing his control.

He doesn't respond. His fangs somehow sink even lower, the warmth sending a shiver down my spine. But there's a tension in him now, a sharp edge to his movements that wasn't there before. His hunger is no longer quiet—it's roaring, clawing to be fed.

Suddenly, there's movement in the corners of the room, and it catches my attention, taking me out of the moment. Both guards step forward, their silver daggers gleaming in the low light. The air thickens with their presence, their watchful gazes hardening into warning.



“Lord Draedon,” one of them says, his voice steady but low, deep, like the rumble of thunder before a storm. “You must control yourself.”

The other guard raises the dagger slightly, not in attack but as a signal, a reminder of the boundaries they’ve sworn to uphold. “She’s trusting you,” he adds. “Do not betray that trust.”

Lucian stiffens against me, his entire body coiled with tension, but he doesn’t stop. He continues on as if he heard a warning but refuses to heed it. I feel his emotion, the war raging within him, the battle between the man and the beast, between reason and instinct.

“I love you, Lucian,” I tell him as he continues to feed, and I slowly start to fall back into bliss. But then, as if something has shocked his humanity, his hands tremble and they loosen their grip on my waist, just enough to show he’s fighting for control. Then, he stops.

All at once he stops sucking my skin, feeding from my vein. For a moment, he doesn’t move. His head remains bowed, his lips inches from my skin, the strain in him like a physical force. Then, slowly, he spins me around to face him and lifts his gaze to meet mine. His eyes are a storm of amber and black, torn between the hunger that drives him and the humanity that anchors him.

“I trust you,” I say, my voice steady despite the trembling in my hands.

The words seem to reach him, threading through the chaos in his mind like a lifeline. He exhales sharply, the tension in his frame easing slightly. The storm in his eyes softens, though the hunger doesn’t vanish entirely—it merely retreats, held at bay by sheer force of will.

“Forgive me,” he murmurs, his voice raw, like the scrape of steel against stone.

“I?—”

“There is nothing to forgive. You didn’t lose control,” I interrupt gently, offering him a faint, reassuring smile as I cup the sides of his face. My blood runs down his chin, and I reach up and swipe it away as I feel a trickle run down my neck. “You’re so much stronger than you think.”

The guards exchange a glance and step back, lowering their daggers but remaining vigilant. The tension in the room eases, but the moment feels heavier now—charged with something deeper, more intimate.

My own breathing turns ragged again, my thoughts scattering as I lose myself in the moment as I look into his eyes. It’s more than just the physical act—it’s a connection, a tether between us that feels ancient and unbreakable. I can feel him, his emotions bleeding into mine, his longing and restraint and the undercurrent of something deeper—my love for him igniting with an uncontrollable fire I can’t ignore.

I don’t want to ignore.

The room seems to blur as the world narrows to just us. He growls softly, the sound vibrating against my skin. It’s possessive and unguarded, and it sends a shiver through me that has nothing to do with fear.

“Lucian,” I murmur again, the name a plea and a declaration all at once as I force him to look at me.

He inhales sharply, his lips stained crimson, his chest heaving as though he’s been holding his breath. His eyes glow faintly in the dim light, their intensity stealing what little composure I have left. “Sylvie,” he rasps, his voice raw and unsteady. “You... you’re extraordinary.”

My fingers brush against his jaw, and the smallest of smiles grace his lips. He leans into the contact, his eyes closing briefly, and when he opens them again, the tenderness in his gaze is almost enough to undo me.

“I feel it too,” I whisper, my voice trembling with the weight of everything unsaid. “Whatever this is between us... I feel it.” It’s almost as if my magic is responding to him. I’ve never felt anything like it.

His hand comes up to cover mine, pressing it gently against his cheek. “You’re everything, Sylvie,” he says, his voice barely more than a whisper. “And that terrifies me.”

I smile faintly, my thumb brushing against his skin. “Good,” I say, echoing his earlier words. “Because you terrify me too.”

He chuckles softly, the sound low and warm, and then he’s pulling me into his arms, holding me as though he might never let go. I rest my head against his chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart as the fire crackles softly in the background.

For the first time in what feels like forever, I feel whole—like every jagged piece of me has found its place. And as I close my eyes, I know with absolute certainty that whatever comes next, we’ll face it together.

“I love you, Sylvie. So much,” he says, and for the first time in a very long time...I believe in good things again.

“And I love you, Lucian,” I tell him—meaning every single word.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:26 am*

It's the morning after our time at Midnight Delight and just about a week since I began training at the Witch's Guild—testing the edges of my abilities and pushing myself in ways I didn't think were possible. At first, it was slow, frustrating. The magic felt foreign, slippery, like trying to hold water in my hands. But now? Now, there's a flicker of confidence surging through me. I've started to feel it, the strength simmering beneath the surface, waiting to be called. It's not perfect, not yet, but it's enough to make me believe I can do this. I have to.

It's now or never because I feel something more coming. If we don't do this, if we don't infiltrate and act now, I think there will be an ending I don't want—Solstice is growing stronger, and I fear for Lucian.

After the faction meeting at Crimson Veil a few nights ago, I met with Ravenna, Nicole, and Rebecca back at the apothecary shop. I told them about the plan that had been laid out before me. They were skeptical, of course. Ravenna's sharp eyes narrowed the moment I brought up Viago's name, and I knew what was coming before she even spoke.

“Viago doesn't care about you,” she said, her voice clipped. “He cares about power. About winning. You're a piece on his board, Sylvie. That's it.”

“She's right,” Nicole added, her tone more sympathetic but no less firm. “Viago's not going to prioritize your part of this. If it comes down to helping you save Lara or securing his win against Solstice, he'll choose himself every time.”

And yet, even as they voiced their doubts, I couldn't bring myself to turn back. This isn't just about Viago or even about stopping the Solstice Society. It's about Lara. It's

about making sure her “death” wasn’t in vain—or better yet, making sure it isn’t permanent. I was going to do this anyway. I needed to get to the relic. So why not work with Lucian and the vampires in order to do so? Is there a better option?

“I still want to go through with it,” I told them, my voice steady despite the weight of their disapproval. “Viago may have his own agenda, but this is the best chance we have. If the Mirror of Thorns is as powerful as they say, it’s worth the risk.”

Ravenna didn’t look convinced, but she sighed and nodded. “Then we’ll be there. I’ll speak with the elders and some of my colleagues and tell them of the urgency. I know they wanted you to practice longer, but I will let them know the vamps are going in and it’s now or never. I’m sure, even with haste, they’ll join us to perform the incantation. But Sylvie,” she added, her gaze piercing, “if this goes sideways, you’ll need to make a choice. Are you willing to sacrifice everything for this?”

The question lingers in my mind now as I prepare for what’s ahead. Am I willing to give everything? To lose everything? The truth is, I don’t know. But what I do know is that I can’t live with myself if I don’t try.

I want Solstice gone. For Lucian. For Rebecca and Nicole. For Ravenna.

For all the people I’ve come to care about.

I also need Lara to be herself again. I want that artifact so we can complete the incantation.

Viago has made it clear: this happens now or never. He’s impatient, as always apparently, and while part of me wonders if that urgency is more about him than the plan itself, I can’t afford to delay. The Mirror of Thorns holds too many answers, too much potential. Tonight, it all comes to a head.

Despite me being unable to meet with the three elders again, due to time constraints and their schedules, they have still agreed to help. Thankfully, Ravenna's also managed to convince several trusted colleagues to come as back up. Their presence should make the ritual possible, assuming we can get the Mirror. That's the part that gnaws at me. The act of getting it.

Or of failing while trying.

I've run the scenarios through my mind a hundred times. I've thought about the wards, the traps, the Solstice enforcers who will stop at nothing to protect their stronghold. And through it all, I keep coming back to one thought: this can't just be about brute force. We need precision, timing. We need to rely on each other, even if our alliances are tenuous at best.

I glance at the faint scars on my hands, remnants of my training over the past week. They're a reminder of how far I've come, and how far I still have to go. Tonight isn't just a battle—it's a test. Of my strength, my resolve, and my ability to see this through.

But most of all, it's a chance. A chance to set things right. A chance to bring Lara back.

And I'm not going to let it slip away.

The soft knock on the bedroom door pulls me from my thoughts. I turn to see Lucian stepping into the room, his presence a mixture of calm and tension that mirrors my own. He's always so composed, yet tonight, there's something in his eyes—a storm of emotions he's holding back.

"You should be resting," he says, his voice low as he closes the door behind him.

I shake my head. “I can’t. Not now. My mind won’t stop racing.”

He steps closer, his gaze softening as it sweeps over me. “It’s a lot to carry, Sylvie. You need to be prepared for the night, though.”

His lips quirk into a brief, almost-smile, but it fades just as quickly. “I mean it. You’ve come so far in such a short time. What you’re doing... it’s more than anyone should have to bear. If something goes wrong tonight...”

“Lucian,” I interrupt, meeting his gaze. “If something goes wrong, we’ll deal with it. Together. I’ve made my choice.”

He doesn’t respond immediately, but the silence between us feels heavy with unspoken words. Then, as if compelled by something neither of us can name, he reaches out, his hand brushing against mine. The touch is gentle, grounding, and yet it sends a shiver through me.

“You make it sound so simple,” he murmurs, his voice barely above a whisper. “But it’s not. None of this is simple.”

I step closer, tilting my head to look up at him. “Maybe not. But it’s worth it. Isn’t it?”

For a moment, the weight of everything—the plan, the danger, the uncertainty—melts away. It’s just us, standing in the quiet of this room, clinging to something neither of us can fully define. Slowly, he leans down, and I meet him halfway, our lips pressing together in a kiss that feels like both a promise and a question.

The kiss deepens, our movements instinctive and filled with an urgency that matches the storm swirling around us. His hands find my waist, pulling me closer, while my fingers tangle in his hair. There’s no hesitation now, only the raw need to hold onto

this fleeting moment.

Our bond—our connection in this lifetime—has been growing from the moment I first stepped foot in his classroom. But between the act of Lucian taking my virginity and drinking from me, it's transformed into something I can't even properly describe with words. It's otherworldly.

It's not just desire, not just some fragile infatuation. It's something deeper, something ancient, something that thrums through my veins like a song I've always known but never had the words for until now. Every glance, every touch, every whispered vow between us feels like a thread weaving our souls together, tighter and tighter, binding us to something beyond this moment, beyond this lifetime.

His presence is carved into me, into my very essence. I feel him even when he's not near—an ache, a whisper at the edge of my senses. It's as though the act of giving myself to him, of allowing him to drink from me, has unlocked something raw and primal between us. A tether stronger than blood, deeper than love.

He sees me—truly sees me—in a way no one else ever has. And when I look at him, I don't just see a man or even a vampire. I see a force of nature, an unrelenting storm that I have no desire to seek shelter from. He's my anchor in the chaos, my quiet in the madness. He makes me feel safe, but more than that—he makes me feel seen. Like I've been waiting for him all my life, maybe even longer.

I don't just want him. I need him. Not because I can't stand on my own, but because the world feels sharper, more vivid, more real when he's beside me. And the terrifying truth is, I don't think I'd ever be the same without him now. Because Lucian Draedon isn't just a part of my story—he's woven into the very fabric of who I am. And the fact that I've found him again, in this lifetime, says it all.

“Sylvie,” he breathes against my lips, his voice rough with emotion. “Tell me if you



want me to stop.”

“Don’t,” I whisper.

The rest of the world falls away as we give in to the pull between us. His lips find the curve of my neck, and I gasp as his hands trail over my body, exploring with a reverence that makes my heart ache. It’s not just passion—it’s something deeper, something neither of us can put into words.

He lets out a low sound, somewhere between a sigh and a growl, as I push the fabric off his shoulders. His skin is warm under my fingertips, a contrast to the cold tension that’s been building between us for weeks. When his hands slide up my back, pulling me closer, I feel the strength in his hold—protective, yet unyielding.

I lead him backward until the edge of the bed presses against his knees, and he sits without breaking the kiss. My heart pounds as I climb onto his lap, straddling him, and his hands find my thighs, sliding up to settle on my hips. We’ve continued growing closer, and shared many more intimate moments, since he first took my virginity. Each time feels brand new. Like we’re bound together just that much more.

There’s a brief moment where our eyes meet, and I see everything he’s trying to say without words—fear, desire, and something far more profound.

“You’re incredible, love,” he murmurs, his voice barely audible. His lips trail down my neck, sending a shiver through me as I press closer to him.

My hands roam over his chest, tracing the lines of muscle and scar tissue, each touch a silent promise. The need between us is electric, urgent but layered with tenderness. As I move against him, his breath catches, and I feel his grip tighten, grounding me while also surrendering to this moment.

I lean forward, pressing my lips to his collarbone, tasting the salt of his skin as his hands slide under the hem of my shirt. He pauses, giving me a chance to stop him, but I reach for his hands, guiding him to lift it over my head. His gaze roams over me, and the intensity in his eyes makes my breath hitch.

“You’re so beautiful,” he says softly, his hands cupping my waist, as though I might vanish.

“Lucian, please,” I whisper, leaning down to kiss him again, my hands tangling in his hair. The kiss grows hungrier, deeper, and as I shift against him, I feel his body responding to mine. There’s no hesitation now, no second guessing—only us, drowning in each other.

“You never have to ask me nicely,” Lucian whispers against my skin. “Not for this.”

This moment...it feels like something more than passion—it’s a collision of everything we’ve been holding back. Every touch, every movement speaks of trust and longing, a desperate need to connect before the chaos of the night ahead. The world outside fades away, leaving only this moment, raw and unfiltered.

I take his cock from his pants and adjust him at my opening before guiding him inside. Lowering myself onto him completely, we both sigh in unison. In the midst of everything else happening, this is the one thing that can always take me from those incessant thoughts.

I move slowly, with precision, up and down his length as he bends to my breasts, admiring them as he takes them in his hands. My head lolls backward as I continue the motion, allowing him to bottom out inside of me before moving back up and down once more. His moans of pleasure only spur me on further, and when he reaches between us to massage my clit, I lose the sliver of control I was barely holding onto.

“Lucian!” I cry out, unable to stand the desperate need welling inside of me. He’s always controlled and careful with me, shielding me from his animalistic tendencies, the feral side of him I’ve yet to experience—in the bedroom, anyway. But for a split second, I think he may lose that bit of control he has too. I look him in the eye and his gaze is so deeply intense, so unwavering, and something lights his beautiful orbs as his breath catches.

“Fuck, Sylvie,” he grunts out as I pick up the pace, and he bends down to bring my nipple into his mouth, using his expertly skilled fingers on my other. I cry out in complete bliss as he moves his fingers back to my clit and circles the small bud in time to my own movements, and before long, he’s sending me over the edge of utter desire. I’m careening into the void, and I don’t have any care in the world because he’s the one making me come undone—shattering me in the best possible way.

He forcefully grabs me by the hips and starts to control my movements, and I sense him close to the edge as well. “Fuck, Sylvie. Fuck.” He repeats the words like a mantra, my name from his lips a prayer as he does unthinkable things to my pussy. He slams me onto his cock and lifts me back up, repeating the motion again and again as he claims my lips in a bruising kiss as he comes.

He holds me, keeps himself bottomed out inside of me as he cradles me to his chest, both of us heaving and panting and coming down from the intense orgasms that just rippled through us. I don’t know how long we stay in that position; it seems like hours but is somehow over too soon. When we finally break apart, he exits the room only to get a warm cloth to clean me, and I revel in the way he cares for me.

After he finishes, we reposition ourselves on the bed and lie tangled together, the weight of what’s to come pressing against the fragile bubble we’ve created. His fingers trace absent patterns on my skin, and I close my eyes, savoring the quiet.

“Whatever happens tonight,” he says softly, his voice steady despite the vulnerability

in his words, “I’ll protect you. Even if it costs me everything.”

Tears prick at the corners of my eyes, but I don’t let them fall. Instead, I press a kiss to his chest, over the steady beat of his heart. “We protect each other. No matter what.”

He doesn’t answer, but the way he holds me says enough. For this moment, in this room, we’re not fighters or leaders or pawns in someone else’s game. We’re just us.

And that’s enough.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:26 am*

The night air presses against us, thick and damp, as if the forest itself holds its breath in anticipation of our arrival. Shadows flicker like restless phantoms under the crescent moon's pale glow, and the world feels impossibly small, swallowed by the vast, brooding presence of Blackthorn Woods.

Ravenna, cloaked in her dark robes, stands at the forefront with Sylvie beside her. The three elders she's brought along are imposing figures, their silence carrying an authority that makes even Viago hold his tongue. Nicole and Rebecca linger close, their gazes darting between the trees, tension etched into their faces. The faction leaders—myself, Dorian, Viago, and the two Unbound representatives, Vada and Kristoff—stand in a loose circle, keeping our distance but united by necessity.

“We move quickly and quietly,” I say, breaking the silence like the crack of a distant storm. My voice carries low but firm, slicing through the thick anticipation hanging between us. “This isn't a battle of brute force. Precision is key. The wards will make us stumble if we're not careful, and the traps are designed to split us apart.”

Viago chuckles softly, the sound grating in the stillness. “A lesson in caution from you, Lucian? How refreshing.”

I ignore him, focusing instead on Sylvie. She's watching the woods with a steady gaze, though I can see the faint tremor in her hands. I step closer, lowering my voice. “Are you ready?”

She meets my gaze, her nod steady. Her voice resolute, she says, “Let's finish this.”

Ravenna steps forward, her voice sharp and commanding. “The elders and I will

perform the incantation alongside of you once we have the Mirror of Thorns. But understand this, all of you: the wards are layered and malicious. They won't just disorient us. They'll attack our minds. Our memories. Stay close to each other, or you'll lose yourselves in the magic."

"Comforting," Vada mutters, adjusting the blade strapped to her side.

The group stands in tense silence as we finalize the plan before entering the forest. Viago steps forward, his tone uncharacteristically serious as he addresses everyone. "We all know what's at stake. No one goes off on their own, no matter the reason. These woods aren't just haunted by magic—they're alive with it. Stick with the group."

Ravenna nods, her gaze sweeping over the faction leaders. "The witches and the vampires will need to support one another. Our magic and your strength complement each other. If you see a ward, call for one of us. Don't assume you can bypass it with brute force."

"The elders and I will deal with the most complex enchantments," one of the older witches adds, her voice low but steady. "But we'll need your protection if things get chaotic."

Dorian crosses his arms, his expression unreadable. "And what about Sylvie? Are we really putting all our faith in someone so new to this?"

Before I can respond, Sylvie speaks up, her voice firm. "I know I'm not as experienced as the rest of you, but I've studied this. I've been working on the incantation as well as getting stronger. I haven't had long, but I've made good use of my time. I've studied the wards, practiced counterspells, and I'm ready. You don't have to trust me, but you will need me."

Her words hang in the air, and for a moment, no one speaks. Then Ravenna places a hand on Sylvie's shoulder. "She's right. Tonight isn't about doubt. It's about action."

Kristoff exhales sharply. "Fine. But if anything goes wrong, we adapt and we do what we need to survive. Agreed?"

A murmur of assent ripples through the group, and I take the opportunity to meet Sylvie's gaze. Her determination is unmistakable, and I can't help the surge of admiration I feel for her.

"Stay close to me," I tell her quietly. "Please."

She nods, and with one last glance at the group, I signal for us to move forward into the woods.

The trees loom around us like silent sentinels, their skeletal branches clawing at the heavens in a gesture of defiance. The path beneath our feet is uneven, roots jutting out like grasping fingers. I keep Sylvie within arm's reach, my senses tuned to the unnatural hum of the wards. The magic here isn't subtle. It presses against my mind, whispering doubts and fears that aren't my own.

"Stop," Sylvie says suddenly, her voice cutting through the silence. She holds up a hand, her eyes narrowed as she scans the path ahead. The group halts, everyone tensing as the air seems to shift around us.

"What is it?" Viago asks impatiently, though there's a note of caution in his tone.

"A ward," Sylvie murmurs, stepping closer to the invisible boundary. Her hand hovers in the air, and a faint shimmer of energy ripples like disturbed water. It's almost imperceptible, but now that she's pointed it out, I feel the hum of its presence, like static in the air. There's a small smile on her lips, and I can tell she's proud of

herself for sensing it.

“It’s designed to confuse,” she continues, her voice steady despite the sweat beginning to bead on her forehead. “If we’d walked through, we would’ve ended up circling back without even realizing it. It’s laced with misdirection magic and something... darker.”

Ravenna moves to her side, her brow furrowing as she studies the shimmer. “The layering is intricate. It’s meant to disorient while draining anyone who tries to counter it.”

“Can you break it?” I ask, keeping my voice low.

Sylvie nods slowly, though the strain is already visible in the tightness of her jaw. “I can do it.” She looks at Ravenna, who nods and allows her to take the lead.

Sylvie closes her eyes, her hands lifting in deliberate, fluid motions. Words spill from her lips, quiet but resonant, as though they carry their own power. The shimmer intensifies, the ward resisting her intrusion. A sudden crackle of energy snaps outward, and she stumbles slightly, catching herself before Ravenna can reach her.

“Focus, Sylvie,” Ravenna says, her tone firm but supportive. “You’re stronger than this magic. Feel for the core and unravel it.”

Sylvie nods again, her breathing steadying as she adjusts her movements. The air grows heavier, charged with opposing forces, and I feel the hairs on my arms rise as the ward pushes back. Her fingers trace patterns in the air, and with each pass, the shimmer dims slightly, its resistance faltering.

A low hum builds, the ward’s final act of defiance, before Sylvie lets out a sharp, commanding word and flicks her wrist. The energy shatters like glass, dissolving into



nothing. The oppressive weight lifts, leaving the path ahead clear but still foreboding.

She sways, and I step forward, my hand at her elbow. “Good work, love,” I say softly, the words carrying more weight than they seem. She offers me a faint smile, her exhaustion already visible but tempered by pride.

“We need to keep moving,” Ravenna says, her eyes scanning the woods. “The wards will only get stronger the closer we get to the stronghold.”

Sylvie straightens, brushing a hand across her brow. “We’ll handle it,” she says, her voice resolute. And as we press on, I can’t help but feel a swell of pride—and worry—for her.

As we move deeper into the forest, the traps grow more insidious. Every few steps, someone catches the faint shimmer of a ward or the glint of a magical snare. It’s not long before another obstacle halts our progress entirely. A wall of thorns, glistening with an eerie black ichor, rises before us, blocking the narrow path forward.

“Blood magic,” Ravenna says, her voice tight. “It’s designed to respond to pain. If we cut through, it will only grow stronger.”

“Then what do you suggest?” Viago asks, his tone clipped.

Sylvie steps forward, her gaze focused. “Let me try something. I just read about this one.” She kneels before the wall, her hands hovering over the tangled vines. The air around her hums with energy as she mutters an incantation. For a moment, the thorns writhe, resisting her efforts, but then they begin to recede, shrinking back into the earth.

“Not bad, new chick,” Vada mutters, though her tone is grudgingly impressed.

We press on, but the forest seems to fight us at every turn. One trap sends jagged shards of ice shooting from the ground, narrowly missing Kristoff. Another conjures phantom figures that whisper cruel lies, their voices weaving doubt and anger into our minds. The witches and vampires are forced to work together, their strengths complementing one another.

“Hold them off,” Ravenna shouts as spectral wolves emerge from the shadows, their eyes glowing with an unnatural light. Dorian and Vada move as one, their blades slicing through the ethereal forms while Ravenna and Sylvie combine their magic to seal the breach the wolves emerged from.

Before we can catch our breath, a new sound pierces the air—the sharp crack of branches breaking. I whip around, my senses screaming danger, just as a group of Solstice Society enforcers bursts through the trees. Their dark robes are adorned with sigils that glimmer with enchantments, and their faces are masked, but their intent is clear.

“They know we’re here!” Viago shouts, drawing his blade.

The group scatters, forming a defensive line. The enforcers waste no time, unleashing bolts of dark magic that sizzle through the air. One strikes a nearby tree, splitting it in half with a deafening crack.

“Witches, focus on countering their magic!” I call out, deflecting an incoming strike with my blade. The impact sends a jolt through my arm, but I don’t falter. “The rest of us will keep them off you!”

Ravenna raises her hands, her voice ringing out as she chants a counterspell. Sylvie moves beside her, their magic intertwining as they send a surge of energy toward the enforcers. Two of them are thrown back, crashing into the underbrush, but more step forward to take their place.

One of the enforcers lunges at Dorian, a blade glinting in the moonlight. He parries the attack with practiced ease, his movements fluid and precise. Vada joins him, her strikes fast and lethal as she takes down another attacker.

Nicole and Rebecca stand back-to-back, their magic forming a protective barrier around the witches as they work. Rebecca winces, her focus faltering as an enforcer hurls a curse at her, but Nicole steps in, deflecting the attack with a well-placed shield.

“They’re stalling us!” Ravenna shouts over the chaos. “We need to break through!”

Sylvie grits her teeth, her hands glowing with power. “I can push them back, but I’ll need a clear path!”

“Do it, love!” I call, slicing through an enforcer who gets too close. “We’ll cover you!”

The group tightens around Sylvie, creating a protective circle as she gathers her magic. The air vibrates with energy, the ground beneath us trembling as her power builds. With a fierce cry, she releases it, a wave of light erupting outward. The enforcers are thrown back, their cries of pain fading as they’re hurled into the trees.

For a moment, there’s silence. Then Viago lets out a low chuckle. “Impressive. Remind me never to get on your bad side, Sylvie.”

“Let’s keep moving,” I say, my voice sharp. “That was just the first wave. They’ll send more.”

The group regains its formation, bruised and battered but determined. As we press on, the woods grow darker, the air heavier with magic. Every step feels like a battle, but we move forward, united by the singular purpose that drives us all: to end the Solstice

Society once and for all. To save ourselves.

As we near the edge of the woods, the air becomes stifling. A sudden pulse of energy ripples through the ground, and I barely have time to shout a warning before the earth splits open, revealing a pit filled with writhing tendrils of dark magic. They lash and twist like living things, reaching for anything within range.

“Go around!” Viago orders, but Sylvie steps forward instead, her eyes fixed on the pit.

“No,” she says firmly. “We don’t have time. Let me neutralize it.”

“You don’t have to do this alone,” I tell her, stepping to her side. The power radiating from the pit is intense, oppressive, and I can feel the strain already tugging at the edges of my mind. “Let the others help.”

She glances at me, a flicker of gratitude in her eyes, before nodding. “Ravenna, I need your help.”

The two witches exchange a brief look, and then Ravenna steps forward, her hands already moving in precise, practiced gestures. “Rebecca, Nicole, support us. We’ll need to combine our strength to dismantle this.”

The three witches form a triangle around Sylvie, their magic building like a storm. Sylvie takes the lead, her voice rising in a steady chant as she reaches toward the pit. The tendrils react violently, snapping and writhing, sending sparks of dark energy into the air. One lashes toward Sylvie, but I’m there before it can reach her, slicing through it with my blade. The severed magic dissipates into smoke, but the tendrils grow more frenzied.

“We need more time!” Ravenna shouts, her voice strained as she channels her energy

into Sylvie's spell.

"Time isn't something we have," Dorian growls, stepping forward to fend off another tendril. Viago joins him, his movements precise and almost casual as he slashes through the encroaching magic.

Nicole and Rebecca close their eyes, adding their voices to Sylvie's chant. The air hums with power, a tangible force that vibrates through my bones. The pit resists, the dark magic pushing back with a fury that feels almost sentient.

"Now!" Ravenna commands.

Sylvie's eyes snap open, glowing with a brilliant light. She extends her hands toward the pit, and with a final cry, a burst of energy explodes outward. The tendrils writhe one last time before disintegrating into ash. The pit seals itself with a groaning sound, the ground smoothing as though it had never been disturbed.

Everyone is still for a moment, the only sound our ragged breathing.

"Good teamwork," Nicole says, though her voice is shaky. She leans against Rebecca, exhaustion etched into her face.

Ravenna places a hand on Sylvie's shoulder, steadying her. "You did well. That was... intricate magic, and you handled it with control. I am so proud of you, dear."

Sylvie nods, though her shoulders sag with fatigue. "Thanks. I couldn't have done it without all of you."

"Let's hope we're ready for whatever comes next," I say, my eyes fixed on the dark silhouette of the stronghold looming ahead. The air around us is still heavy, charged with the residual energy of the magic we've faced.

Viago smirks, brushing off his coat. “This is only the prelude. The real challenge lies inside.”

The group regains its formation, bruised and battered but resolute. As we press forward, I can’t shake the feeling that the forest has one last test waiting for us. But for now, the path is clear, and the stronghold beckons—ominous and unyielding.

After what feels like hours, the forest begins to thin, revealing the faint outline of the Solstice Society’s stronghold. Its dark spires loom like jagged knives against the night sky, their silhouettes wreathed in an unnatural haze. The air here feels thick, pressing against us with the weight of layered magic that hums with warning.

Viago gestures for everyone to halt, his eyes scanning the terrain ahead. “This is it. The Mirror is inside. Stick to the plan.” His voice is low but sharp, and for once, there’s no smirk on his face—only grim determination.

The stronghold’s perimeter is surrounded by an open expanse, barren of trees but filled with the remnants of old wards. The faint glimmer of sigils etched into the ground catches the moonlight, their magic still active despite the years. Ravenna steps closer, crouching near one of the larger symbols. She doesn’t touch it, but her expression tightens.

“The wards here are ancient,” she says. “More potent than the ones in the forest. We can’t simply dismantle them; they’re tied to the stronghold itself.”

“So how do we get through?” Dorian asks, his voice edged with impatience.

“We work together,” Ravenna replies, standing and dusting off her hands. She glances at the elders, then at Sylvie. “The witches will channel a shield to neutralize the ward’s effects temporarily, but we’ll need the vampires to cover us. These sigils are likely tied to alarms as well as defenses, and we’ll draw attention the moment we

step inside.”

Kristoff scoffs. “Great. A stealthy approach was too much to hope for.”

“You knew what you signed up for,” Viago snaps, his patience wearing thin. “Focus on the task at hand.”

Sylvie steps forward, her gaze fixed on the stronghold. “If we can neutralize the outer wards, I can try to sense the weaker points in their internal defenses. It might give us a chance to move without alerting everyone inside.”

“That’s a big if,” Vada mutters, but she steps into formation with the others regardless.

The witches fan out, their hands raised as they begin to weave a protective barrier. Sylvie’s voice rises alongside Ravenna’s and the elders’, their magic intertwining into a shimmering dome that pulses outward. The air crackles with energy, and the sigils beneath our feet dim slightly, their power suppressed but not extinguished.

“Move now,” Ravenna commands.

We cross the barren expanse quickly, the vampires forming a protective circle around the witches. Every step feels like a battle, the suppressed wards fighting against the shield with bursts of residual energy. One of the sigils flares suddenly, and a blast of light erupts toward the group. Viago moves faster than thought, deflecting the attack with a blade that hums with enchantment.

“Stay sharp!” he barks.

Another burst of energy strikes toward Rebecca, but Nicole intercepts it, her shield shimmering as it absorbs the impact. The strain is visible on her face, but she doesn’t

falter. Meanwhile, Sylvie's focus remains on the stronghold, her eyes glowing faintly as she channels her magic.

"There," she says, pointing toward a section of the outer wall. "That's the weakest point in their defenses. If we concentrate our efforts, we can break through."

Dorian and Vada exchange a glance before stepping forward, their weapons ready. "We'll clear the path," Dorian says, his tone resolute.

As they advance, the wards lash out again, sending jagged streaks of energy toward the group. The vampires move in unison, their speed and precision a stark contrast to the chaotic magic surrounding us. Vada's blade slices through an incoming tendril of energy, while Dorian's movements are a blur, his strikes calculated and efficient.

Behind them, the witches intensify their efforts, their chants growing louder as they channel more power into the shield. Ravenna's voice cuts through the din, commanding and steady. "Sylvie, now!"

Sylvie steps forward, her hands glowing with an intense light. She raises them toward the weak point in the wall, her magic surging outward in a focused beam. The wall trembles, cracks spidering across its surface as the combined energy of the group presses against it. The wards scream in defiance, their energy rippling outward in one final, desperate attempt to hold us back.

With a deafening crack, the wall gives way, a section crumbling inward to reveal the shadowed interior of the stronghold. The crushing weight of the wards eases, though the air inside thrums with latent menace, like the lingering vibration of a struck bell.

Viago steps through first, his blade drawn, eyes narrowed as he surveys the dimly lit corridor beyond. "No turning back now," he says, his voice a quiet edge of resolve.



I glance at Sylvie, her face pale but determined, like the faint glow of a candle braving a storm. "Stay close," I murmur, the words more a plea than a command. She nods, her hand brushing mine briefly before she steps forward, her gaze fixed on the darkness ahead.

The final test lies inside, and there's no turning back.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:26 am*

The moment we step inside the confines that were once so hidden in the depths of the forest, the weight of the stronghold's magic wraps around me like an iron veil. The air is heavy with the scent of burning herbs and decay, a nauseating mix that churns my stomach. Shadows flicker across the walls, twisting in ways that make my skin crawl. The corridor stretches ahead, narrow and suffocating, and each step feels heavier than the last.

I'm getting tired. My body aches to rest. We all knew a week wouldn't be enough time to get my stamina fully built up to handle this, but we had no other choice. The longer this goes on, the more danger Lara—and the vampires and witches I've come to love—are in.

"Stay by my side," Lucian murmurs, his voice low and edged with concern and his blade drawn and ready.

I nod, gripping the edge of my cloak to steady my trembling hands. Every instinct screams at me to turn back, to run, but I force myself forward. This is what I've been preparing for—what I've trained for, albeit not nearly long enough. Lara's face flashes in my mind, and I steel myself.

Ravenna steps to the front, her hands glowing faintly as she scans the corridor. "The wards in here are layered over centuries," she says, her voice sharp. "They'll be harder to detect and dismantle. Everyone, stay vigilant."

"We've got movement up ahead," Viago calls out, his tone clipped. He gestures toward the far end of the corridor, where faint shadows shift against the stone walls.

The group tightens, instinctively falling into a defensive formation. Dorian and Vada move with precision, their weapons at the ready, but the shadows ahead seem endless. The tension thickens, and just as I draw a shaky breath, they strike.

The first wave of Solstice members strikes fast and without mercy. They're clad in black robes, their faces obscured by masks etched with glowing sigils. They move like phantoms, their attacks precise and unrelenting. One of them hurls a bolt of dark magic toward Ravenna, but Nicole deflects it with a shimmering barrier, the force of the impact rattling us all.

"Don't let them pin us down!" Lucian shouts, his blade slicing through one of the attackers. The sharp clang of metal against metal echoes through the corridor as the vampires engage in close combat, leaving Solstice members slain on the ground before us. Their movements are a blur, faster than the eye can follow, but some of the Solstice members match their ferocity with crafty dark magic—others aren't so lucky.

A masked figure lunges toward me from around Lucian, a dagger glinting in their hand. My breath catches, but I manage to conjure a shield in time, the blade skidding off the glowing barrier. I retaliate with a burst of energy that sends them sprawling, the force of it leaving my hands trembling as Lucian finishes them off, slicing their head completely from their body and causing blood to splatter the front of his body.

"Good work," Ravenna says, her voice strained as she fends off another attacker.

The corridor erupts into a chaotic blur of magic and steel. Lucian kills another robed figure with a ruthless efficiency, his blade a blur of silver streaked with blood. Vada and Dorian fight back-to-back, their strikes deliberate and unrelenting. Vada takes down one Solstice member with a blade to the throat, only to spin and evade a strike aimed at her side. Dorian disarms his opponent before slamming them into the stone wall with a sickening crunch.

Rebecca screams as a masked figure grabs her arm, but Kristoff intercepts, his blade slicing cleanly through the attacker, the hand still clinging to Rebecca's cloak as the arm is cut clean off. Blood sprays across the stone floor as another Solstice member falls to Nicole's magic, her hands glowing with a fiery intensity.

The air vibrates with unbridled power as Ravenna launches a spell that slams three enemies into the far wall. Their bodies crumple to the ground, lifeless. But the Solstice members keep coming. One charges at me, their robes whipping around them like shadowy tendrils. I stumble back, barely managing to send a pulse of energy that knocks them off their feet. They hit the ground hard, but another takes their place.

A tendril of dark magic snakes out from the floor, wrapping around Lucian's ankle. He growls, severing it with his blade, but the ground beneath us feels alive with enchantments.

"We're being overwhelmed!" Viago barks, his blade dripping with ichor as he carves through two attackers. "We need to move forward, or we'll drown in their numbers!"

Ravenna doesn't hesitate. "Push ahead!" she commands, her voice ringing out above the chaos. She hurls another spell that creates a temporary barrier, forcing the Solstice members back. "Sylvie, stay close!"

I nod, my heart pounding as we surge forward. More attackers pour into the corridor, their weapons and spells tearing through the air. Lucian stays by my side, his blade cutting down anyone who gets too close. The corridor feels narrower, the walls pressing in as the bloodshed escalates.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watch Kristoff bite into the neck of a Society member, yanking his flesh from his bones and discarding him to the side.

Nicole sends a streak of fire racing down the hall, consuming two masked figures

who scream as they're engulfed. Rebecca deflects a spell aimed at Dorian, her quick reflexes saving him from a fatal blow. The floor beneath us shifts again, tendrils of dark magic lashing out, but Ravenna and the elders work quickly, their combined magic holding the chaos at bay just long enough for us to push through.

As we press on, the Solstice members begin to falter, their numbers thinning. The corridor feels alive with the echo of their screams and the metallic scent of blood. For a moment, I think we've won, but the oppressive energy in the air reminds me that the worst is yet to come.

"Keep moving!" Viago barks, his blade dripping with dark ichor. "They're trying to stall us!"

We push forward, but the stronghold itself fights against us. The floor beneath us shifts and cracks, tendrils of dark magic erupting from the ground. One wraps around my ankle, cold and unyielding, and I cry out as it pulls me down. Before I can react, Lucian is there, his blade severing the tendril in one swift motion.

"All right, love?" he asks, his voice tight with worry.

I nod, scrambling to my feet. "Thanks."

"Stay focused," he says, his eyes lingering on me for a moment before he turns back to the fight. "I'm right here with you."

Ravenna and the elders work together to neutralize the dark tendrils, their magic weaving a protective barrier around us. "Sylvie, we need your strength here," Ravenna calls, her voice steady despite the chaos.

I step into the circle they've formed, adding my power to theirs. The energy surges, bright and blinding, forcing the tendrils back into the ground. The corridor stabilizes,

but the reprieve is brief.

“We’re close,” Ravenna says, her gaze fixed ahead. “The relic’s magic is stronger here. I can feel it.”

The corridor opens into a vast chamber, its walls lined with flickering torches. At the center stands a pedestal, and atop it rests the Mirror of Thorns. I’ve only seen it in pictures since the witches at the Guild told me about it, but it’s unmistakable. The relic glows faintly, its surface swirling with shadows and light. The air around it crackles with raw power, a tangible force that sets my teeth on edge.

“There it is,” Viago says, his smirk returning. “The key to everything.”

Ravenna's voice cuts through the air, her words tight with urgency. “It doesn’t make sense,” she says, her gaze scanning the chamber. “The Mirror should have been surrounded by more defenses, wards layered like the forest outside.”

“They relied on intimidation and the strength of the stronghold itself,” Lucian murmurs, his blade glinting in the torchlight. “The creatures, the figure, and the weight of the magic were meant to do the rest. Few make it this far alive.”

Viago smirks, a sharp, humorless expression. “Overconfidence. They thought their dark magic was impenetrable. A fatal mistake.”

“It’s not overconfidence,” Ravenna counters, her eyes narrowing. “It’s arrogance tied to something more sinister. There’s a chance this isn’t their strongest bastion. Perhaps they didn’t think we’d come for the Mirror—or perhaps they wanted us to.”

Her words send a chill down my spine as I stare at the relic glowing faintly on the pedestal. Even with the beasts and the figure guarding it, there’s a hollowness to their defense, a sense of something waiting just beyond this moment. The power

thrumming through the air is undeniable, but Ravenna's suspicions cling to me like shadows.

Before we can approach, a new figure steps from the shadows. They're taller than the others, their robes more elaborate and their presence suffused with a dark, commanding energy. The air grows colder as they lift a hand, and the torches dim.

"You fools. You shouldn't have come here," the figure says, their voice echoing unnaturally. "The Mirror does not belong to you."

Lucian steps forward, his blade at the ready. "It doesn't belong to you either. It belongs to the witches, and they're here to get it back."

The figure laughs, a cold, hollow sound. "Beasts. You think you can simply take it? Prove yourselves, then."

The chamber erupts into anarchy as the figure summons dark constructs—hulking, shadowy beasts that lunge toward us with inhuman speed. The beasts are massive, their forms shifting and writhing like living shadows, their glowing red eyes fixed on us with predatory intent. Each step they take shakes the ground, and their guttural snarls echo through the chamber.

The first beast charges at Dorian, its claws raking the air with a sound like tearing metal. He ducks and rolls, slashing upward with his blade. The creature howls as the steel bites into its form, but instead of dissipating, it lunges again, faster and angrier. Vada joins him, her dagger flashing as she plunges it into the beast's side, the enchanted blade burning its shadowy flesh.

To my left, Ravenna and the elders unleash a barrage of magic, their combined spells weaving through the air like threads of light. One of the constructs staggers as a bolt of energy strikes its chest, but it quickly recovers, retaliating with a swipe of its

massive claw. Rebecca deflects the attack with a shimmering barrier, but the force of the blow sends her stumbling backward.

Nicole screams as another beast leaps toward her, its jaws snapping. Lucian intercepts it mid-air, driving his blade into its neck. The creature roars, its body twisting unnaturally as it tries to shake him off, but he holds firm, wrenching the blade free in a spray of inky darkness that splatters the ground.

“They’re drawing power from the figure!” Ravenna shouts, her voice strained as she fends off another beast. “We need to cut off their connection!”

Another construct charges at me, its glowing eyes locking onto mine. My heart pounds as I summon a burst of magic, hurling it forward. The beast stumbles, its form flickering, but it doesn’t stop. It swipes at me with a massive claw, and I barely dodge in time, the force of the blow sending me sprawling to the ground. Before it can strike again, Kristoff appears, his blade flashing as he drives it into the creature’s back. The beast howls, collapsing into a puddle of shadowy discharge.

“Sylvie!” Ravenna calls, her voice cutting through the chaos. “We need you to disrupt their connection to the Mirror!”

I nod, forcing myself to focus. My hands tremble as I channel my energy, reaching toward the Mirror. The figure notices and turns their attention to me, their magic striking toward my chest. I barely dodge in time, the force of the attack sending me sprawling.

“Stay on her! Protect her!” Lucian shouts, blocking another creature as it lunges for me.

I gather my strength, my heart pounding as I reach for the Mirror again. This time, I feel it—a connection, faint but growing. The relic hums in response, its surface



flaring with light as I pour my magic into it. The moment my fingers brush the Mirror, a surge of raw energy shoots through me, powerful and unrelenting. My knees buckle, and I collapse to the ground, clutching the relic tightly in my hands as the world spins around me.

The figure screams, their control over the creatures faltering, and I push harder, the strain nearly unbearable. My limbs feel heavy, like I'm being pulled under water, but I refuse to let go. The Mirror's power pulses through me, wild and chaotic, filling every corner of my being. My vision blurs, and a sharp pain pierces through my chest, but still I hold on.

"Sylvie!" Ravenna's voice is distant, muffled, like she's calling to me from the end of a long tunnel.

The connection shatters with a deafening burst of light. The constructs dissolve into nothingness, their forms unraveling like smoke in the wind. The figure staggers, their strength drained, and collapses to their knees, defeated. My body goes limp, and the only thing anchoring me to reality is the cold surface of the Mirror pressed against my palms.

Hands grip my shoulders, steadying me. Lucian's voice cuts through the haze, soft but urgent. "Sylvie, are you all right?"

I nod weakly, unable to speak. My breath comes in shallow gasps, and every muscle in my body feels like it's been stretched too far. The Mirror's power still hums faintly in my hands, subdued but potent, like a storm waiting to be unleashed.

"We have it," Ravenna says, her voice tinged with relief as she steps closer. She looks at the Mirror, her expression unreadable. "But the cost..."

Lucian's hand lingers on my arm as he helps me to my feet. "You did it, love," he

says softly, his eyes searching mine for some sign of reassurance.

I manage a small nod, my fingers tightening around the Mirror. The chamber falls silent, save for the crackling of the torches and the sound of our labored breathing. And as I look down at the relic in my hands, its surface swirling with shadows and light, I can't help but wonder if we've won... or if this is only the beginning.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:26 am*

The weight of the Mirror of Thorns feels as though it's shifted the air itself. Sylvie stands unsteadily, the relic clutched in her trembling hands, her chest rising and falling with shallow breaths. The wild hum of magic surrounding her has settled, but its presence still lingers, a storm subdued but not dispelled.

"We need to leave," Ravenna says sharply, her gaze darting toward the corridor we came through. "The stronghold's defenses might be faltering, but Solstice reinforcements won't be far behind."

She's right. The remnants of the battle linger around us—blood, scorched stone, and the faint stench of magic burned raw. Yet the fight is far from over. I step closer to Sylvie, my hand brushing her arm.

"We're moving out," I tell her. "Stay close to me."

I glance at Ravenna and the elders, their faces lined with fatigue but focused. "She won't make it back through the woods in this condition," I say, nodding toward Sylvie, who sways slightly on her feet. "She needs strength, and none of us can carry her without jeopardizing our defenses. Can you do something? A spell? Anything to keep her moving."

Ravenna hesitates for a moment, then nods. "We can channel a temporary fortification spell, but it won't last long. It'll give her enough energy to make it through the forest, but she'll need rest after that."

"Do it," I say, stepping aside to let them work. Sylvie looks at me with glassy eyes, clearly trying to protest, but the words don't come. I steady her with a hand on her

shoulder, murmuring, “Let them help.”

The elders form a small circle around Sylvie, their hands raised as they begin to chant in low, melodic tones. Light shimmers between them, a soft, golden glow that washes over Sylvie. Her breathing steadies, and the color returns to her cheeks. The trembling in her hands subsides, and when the spell fades, she looks stronger, more grounded.

Her eyes lift to mine, unfocused and dazed, but she nods. The elders gather around Ravenna, their whispered voices urgent as they discuss our next steps.

“The incantation can’t be performed here,” one of them says, her voice low and measured. “This chamber’s magic is too volatile. We’ll need to retreat to safer ground and Sylvie isn’t equipped currently.”

“Agreed,” Ravenna replies. “We’ll regroup at the edge of the forest.”

“You think they’ll just let us walk out of here?” Viago asks, his blade still glinting with blood as he glances toward the shadows at the far end of the room. His tone is sharp, but even he seems wary of what lies ahead.

Before anyone can answer, the air shifts. A cold wind sweeps through the chamber, extinguishing several of the torches. My senses sharpen, every nerve on edge as three figures step from the shadows.

The leader is unmistakable. Amara, clad in flowing black robes that seem to ripple with unnatural energy, stands at the forefront. Her eyes gleam like shards of obsidian, and her very presence makes the air heavier. Flanking her are two men, their towering forms brimming with the same dark magic that radiates from her.

“You think you’ve won?” Amara’s voice is sharp, cutting through the silence like a

blade. Her gaze sweeps over the group, lingering on Sylvie and the Mirror in her hands. “Fools. You’ve only ensured your own destruction. I told you, Sylvie. I am always one step ahead.”

The elders move swiftly, forming a protective barrier around Sylvie. Their magic hums in the air, clashing with the oppressive force emanating from Amara and her men.

“You’re not taking it back,” Ravenna says, stepping forward. Her hands glow with a ferocious light as she squares off against the Solstice leader.

Amara’s smile is cold and destructive, her gaze locking onto Sylvie with a chilling intensity. “You don’t understand what you’ve unleashed. That relic isn’t salvation. It’s a curse—a burden that will hollow you from the inside out. The Mirror doesn’t grant power freely; it demands a price. Every ounce of strength you take from it will strip away pieces of your soul. Do you think you’re strong enough to wield it? To bear its weight? It will consume you, little by little, until there’s nothing left.”

She steps closer, her voice dropping to a venomous whisper that seems to echo in the chamber. “It was forged in betrayal, bound by blood, and steeped in magic so dark that it taints everything it touches. Even now, it’s burrowing into her. Can’t you feel it? The Mirror takes more than it gives, and when it’s done with her, it’ll turn on the rest of you.”

Ravenna’s eyes narrow, her voice seething as she steps forward. “It wasn’t always dark magic,” she snaps, her tone cutting through the tension like a blade. “Not until your precious Society stole it from the Witches’ Guild. That relic was once a tool of balance and protection, but you corrupted it, twisted its purpose for your own gain. If it’s a curse now, it’s because you made it one.”

She straightens, her voice hardening further as she continues. “We won’t buy into

your mind games. That relic belongs to us, to the Witches' Guild, and it holds all the power your Society has channeled into it. We know the truth, Amara. Once it's destroyed, your entire foundation collapses. Solstice's power will be gone, and you know it."

Before anyone can respond, her men attack. Dark tendrils of magic lash out, striking against the barrier the elders have erected. The impact sends shockwaves through the room, and the barrier flickers but holds. Lucian's voice rings out over the chaos.

"Hold the line! Don't let them breach!"

The fight is brutal. Amara commands her magic with precision, her hands weaving spells that cut through the air like whips. The elders retaliate, their combined power creating bursts of light that clash violently with the dark magic. One of Amara's men charges forward, his body wreathed in shadow, but Dorian intercepts him, their blades meeting in a shower of sparks.

"Sylvie, stay back!" I shout as another wave of magic surges toward us. She stumbles, still clutching the Mirror, but Rebecca and Nicole pull her into the protective circle the elders have formed.

The second man lunges at Viago, his hands blazing with black fire. Viago sidesteps the attack, his blade carving a deep gash across the man's chest. The Solstice enforcer snarls, his wound leaking a thick, dark ichor that seems more magic than blood.

"They're drawing from her," Ravenna says, her voice strained as she deflects another strike. "Amara's feeding them power. We need to sever the connection."

"Then take her down," I say, my tone sharp.

Ravenna's jaw tightens, and for the first time, hesitation flickers across her face. The

elders chant louder, their voices weaving into a crescendo of light that strikes against Amara's dark magic. But it's not enough. The oppressive force radiating from her doesn't waver; if anything, it grows stronger. One of the elders cries out as the backlash of their spell slams into her, knocking her to the ground, unmoving.

Ravenna curses under her breath, her hands trembling as she conjures another barrier to shield us. "Her magic... it's too twisted, too layered. This isn't just dark magic; it's something far worse. We can't overpower it like this."

"What are you saying?" I demand, my blade cutting down a shadowy tendril creeping toward Sylvie.

Ravenna turns to Sylvie, her eyes filled with both urgency and dread. "Sylvie, we may only have one option. The Mirror. We destroy it here and now. It's the only way to sever her connection and stop her."

Sylvie's eyes widen, her grip tightening around the Mirror. "But... if we destroy it, what happens to Lara? What if?—"

Ravenna interrupts, her voice fierce. "If we don't destroy it, Amara will kill us all. Her power is feeding off the Mirror, and as long as she's connected to it, she's unstoppable. You have to decide, Sylvie. Now."

The weight of the decision bears down on all of us, but none more than Sylvie. Her gaze flickers between the glowing surface of the Mirror and the chaos unfolding around her, her breathing shallow as she wrestles with the terrible choice laid before her.

I glance at the others. "Cover us," I call to Dorian and Viago. "We need a moment." Without hesitation, the vampires move into a defensive formation, blades flashing as they keep the advancing threats at bay. One of Amara's tendrils lashes out, but

Dorian deflects it with a sharp twist of his sword.

“This isn’t the time to read your love a nursery rhyme, Lucian!” Viago seethes as he strikes out toward a bolt of force Amara sends his way.

I crouch beside Sylvie, lowering my voice to a whisper meant only for her. “Sylvie, it has to be your call. I’ll stand by whatever you decide. Even if it means we die trying, I’ll fight for you. But you need to decide now.”

Tears stream down her face, her hands trembling as they tighten around the Mirror. “Lucian, if I destroy it, what happens to Lara? What if... what if it means she’s gone forever?” Her voice cracks, raw with emotion.

“I know how much she means to you,” I say, my voice gentler now. “But this isn’t just about Lara anymore. If you don’t act, Amara’s magic will destroy everyone here. And then none of us will have a chance to save her.”

A strangled cry escapes Sylvie as she looks at the Mirror, her tears falling freely. The chaos around us intensifies—a sudden blast sends Vada crashing to the ground, her body motionless.

“Sylvie, we don’t have long,” I urge, gripping her shoulder. “You have the strength to do this. I know you do.”



*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:26 am*

Time stretches, slowing to an unbearable crawl as the world around me dissolves into chaos. The roar of battle fades, muffled and distant, as if I'm underwater. My eyes lock onto the Mirror of Thorns in my trembling hands, its surface swirling with shadows and light. My chest feels tight, as though I can't draw a full breath, and tears stream freely down my face, hot and unrelenting.

Lucian's voice echoes in my mind. "It has to be your call."

I've fought so hard to get here, risked everything for a chance to save Lara. Every step, every choice, every sacrifice has led to this moment. My hands ache from holding the Mirror, but it's not the weight of the relic that overwhelms me; it's the choice it demands. The choice I have to make.

My thoughts spiral, fragments of memories colliding in my mind. Lara's laugh, bright and carefree. Her voice calling my name in the woods. The blood, the emptiness, the desperate hope that I could somehow bring her back. And now, this. This relic that holds the power to end the Solstice Society's reign but might also extinguish my last chance to save her.

"Sylvie." Lucian's voice pulls me back to the present. I look up, meeting his gaze. His eyes are steady, unwavering, but I can see the concern beneath the calm. He crouches beside me, his presence grounding me in the chaos.

"It's your choice," he says quietly, his voice low enough that only I can hear. "Whatever you decide, I'll stand by you. Even if it means we die trying, I'll fight for you. But you have to decide now."

Tears blur my vision as his words sink in. I glance at the Mirror again, its glow pulsing faintly, as if it's alive. "Lucian," I whisper, my voice breaking. "If I destroy it, what happens to Lara? What if... what if it means she's gone forever?"

His expression softens, and he places a hand on my shoulder, steady and reassuring. "I know how much she means to you," he says, his tone filled with a gentleness that almost breaks me. "But this isn't just about Lara anymore. If you don't act, Amara's magic will destroy everyone here. And then none of us will have a chance to save her."

The Mirror feels like it's burning in my hands, its power thrumming through me, as if it's waiting for me to make a decision. My tears fall onto its surface, disappearing into the shifting shadows.

A sharp blast jolts me back to reality. Vada's body hits the ground, motionless. Amara's magic swirls violently around her as she cackles, her hysteria reverberating in the air, the air thick with her oppressive force.

"Sylvie, we don't have long," Lucian urges, his grip on my shoulder tightening. "You have the strength to do this. I know you do."

But do I? The question pounds in my head, relentless and cruel. I've come so far, but standing here now, I feel like a frightened child lost in the dark. I glance around at the others, their faces etched with determination and fear. They're all waiting, trusting me to make the right choice.

Everyone in this room has trusted me—to some point. They've helped me, whether impassively or out of the kindness of their hearts. Ravenna didn't have to offer me a job, didn't have to help me meet with the Guild or get three of the most powerful witches to help me. Nicole and Rebecca—they've been nothing but helpful and kind to me from the first day I stepped foot onto Blackthorne soil. And Lucian...

I could never repay him for everything he's done. The help he's given.

And I love the man that's staring into my eyes, waiting for me to make a call that could end his life for good. Allowing me the choice. My sister, or him.

It's an impossible choice, but it's one I have to make.

Ravenna's voice cuts through the fog. "Sylvie, listen to me. If you don't destroy that Mirror, Amara's magic will only grow stronger. She'll kill us all, and everything we've fought for will be for nothing. I know it's a terrible choice, but you have to make it now."

"You are all idiots!" Amara screams. "The girl will never destroy it. Her sister's humanity depends on that relic. Quit while you're ahead. Bow to Solstice and we'll take mercy on you," she says, a wide sneer on her face. "For a little while, at least."

The amount of absolute disdain I have for this woman takes hold of me as a strangled cry escapes me as I clutch the Mirror tighter. My vision blurs, and my chest heaves with silent sobs. The world feels like it's crumbling around me, and I'm the only one holding it together.

Lucian's hand moves to my face, his thumb brushing away a tear. "Sylvie," he says softly, his voice steady despite the chaos.

I close my eyes, drawing in a shaky breath. The weight of the Mirror presses against my palms, and for a moment, I let myself feel the pain, the fear, the hope. Then I open my eyes and meet Lucian's gaze.

"I know what I have to do," I whisper, my voice trembling but resolute. And with that, I make my choice, tears rolling down my cheeks as I do so.

I grip the Mirror tighter, its surface pulsating with an otherworldly energy that courses through my veins like liquid fire. Every fiber of my being feels stretched to its limit, the weight of the relic pressing down on me, demanding more than I think I can give. My chest tightens as fear claws at the edges of my resolve. What if I fail? What if destroying this takes everything—my life, my soul, my chance to save Lara?

I'd rather die trying to protect the people I've grown to love.

There's no room for hesitation. I plant my feet firmly, drawing in a ragged breath as I summon every ounce of strength I have left.

"Please," I whisper to whatever power might be listening. "Please let this work."

I close my eyes, my trembling hands pressing against the Mirror's cold surface. The energy radiating from it lashes out, jagged and sharp, cutting into me like shards of glass. My head throbs, my heart pounding so hard it feels like it might shatter, but I hold on. Somewhere in the distance, I hear Lucian's voice calling my name, but it's muffled, as though he's a thousand miles away. All I can hear is the hum of the Mirror, deep and resonant, like a storm building inside me.

"Sylvie!" Amara calls. "You mustn't do anything to that artifact. Your sister's life depends on it! You best not forget?—"

"Enough!" I scream, my voice breaking as I pour every ounce of my will into the relic. Light bursts from my hands, blinding and searing, illuminating the chamber with a brilliance that feels both holy and destructive. The Mirror resists, its shadows writhing against the light, but I press harder, my teeth clenched, tears streaming down my face.

Memories flood my mind, unbidden and sharp. Lara's smile. The nights we spent whispering secrets. The promise I made to her. The love I've clung to, even in her

absence. That love surges through me now, mingling with the raw power tearing through my body, and I scream again, louder, pushing back against the Mirror's darkness.

The relic begins to crack. Fine lines spiderweb across its surface, glowing with a light that burns brighter with every second. My body shakes violently, my knees threatening to give out, but I can't stop. I won't stop. The room trembles, the walls groaning under the force of the magic unleashed. The Mirror lets out a piercing shriek, its power fighting to the very end, but then... it shatters.

The explosion of light and energy knocks me backward, and I collapse to the ground, the breath ripped from my lungs. The shards of the Mirror scatter across the chamber, disintegrating into wisps of smoke that dissolve into nothingness. The oppressive weight in the air lifts, leaving an eerie stillness in its wake.

When I open my eyes, my vision swims, the world a haze of blurred shapes and muted colors. I can barely make out Amara, standing frozen, her once-powerful presence reduced to something frail and human. Her dark magic is gone, stripped away by the destruction of the Mirror. Her two men stagger, their hulking forms diminished, their strength drained.

It worked.

"No!" Amara's wail is guttural, filled with rage, agony, and desperation. She lunges toward the nearest exit, her voice a torrent of obscenities and furious threats.

The vampires are faster. Dorian intercepts her, his blade a blur as he slams the hilt into her side, forcing her to the ground. Viago and Kristoff close in on the two men, their movements precise and efficient. The enforcers barely have time to react before they're immobilized, Viago's blade pressed against one's throat while Kristoff pins the other's arms behind his back.

Amara thrashes, her fury undiminished even in defeat. “You think this is over?” she spits, her voice venomous. “You’ve won nothing!”

I watch through half-closed eyes, my body too weak to move, as Lucian steps forward. His presence is calm but commanding, his gaze cold as he kneels beside her. “It’s over for you,” he says quietly, his tone laced with finality.

Amara glares up at him, her defiance unwavering, but there’s a flicker of fear in her eyes now. She knows she’s lost.

“We take them. Alive,” Viago says. “They will be our prisoners for the remainder of their days.”

“Sylvie,” Lucian’s voice breaks through the haze. He’s by my side in an instant, his hand steadying me as I struggle to sit up.

“It’s done,” I whisper, my voice barely audible. My head lolls against his shoulder, my eyelids fluttering shut as exhaustion overtakes me. The last thing I see is the shattered remnants of the Mirror, glowing faintly before fading into nothingness.

“It’s done.”

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:26 am*

The first thing I register is full-body warmth.

It's everywhere—wrapping around me, settling deep into my bones. For a moment, I let myself drift in it, weightless and untethered, my body hovering between consciousness and something softer, quieter. The world vibrates distantly, muffled, as if I'm buried under layers of thick, heavy fabric.

I inhale slowly. The air is laced with herbs and smoke, something grounding—lavender and rosemary. A far-off memory tugs at me, but I can't place it yet. My fingers twitch against fabric sheets, but the material isn't familiar. It's too crisp, too sterile.

Panic prickles at the edges of my mind.

I try to sit up, still unable to fully open my eyes, but my limbs protest, heavy and sluggish. The warmth shifts, cool air rushing against my skin, and the muffled voices sharpen into clarity.

“She's waking up,” a familiar voice murmurs.

I blink, my vision swimming as shapes take form around me. Rebecca and Nicole sit to my right, their expressions a mixture of exhaustion and relief. Across from them, Lucian.

My Lucian.

His form is a silhouette against the candlelight, his gaze locked onto me with an

intensity that makes my chest tighten.

I try to speak, but my throat is dry, my voice cracking. “Where am I?” I ask through painful chapped lips.

Rebecca is the first to answer. “The Guild. The elders insisted you be brought here after... after everything.”

The Guild.

Not the estate. Not the apothecary. The Witch’s Guild.

I glance around, suddenly hyperaware of my surroundings. The walls are stark white, lined with delicate warding sigils, their faint glow pulsing in a steady rhythm. The air purrs with residual magic, and the bed I’m in—too pristine, too much like a hospital—confirms it.

“They said it was the best place for you,” Nicole adds gently. “The elders have healers who specialize in magical depletion.”

Magical depletion .

It makes sense, but it doesn’t make it easier to process. My body feels stretched too thin, hollowed out and barely held together. The effort of breaking the relic—the sheer force of magic I channeled into it—left something raw and aching inside me.

I let out a slow breath, then force my thoughts to the only thing that matters.

“Lara.”

Lucian’s jaw tightens, and in that single movement, I know.



I sit up too fast, my vision swimming. “Where is she?”

Lucian is beside me in an instant, steadying me before I can collapse back against the pillows. His hands are warm, strong, anchoring me. “She’s still out there,” he says, his voice careful, measured. “We haven’t found her yet.”

I squeeze my eyes shut, frustration clawing up my throat. Of course. She wouldn’t have just been waiting around for us to come for her.

Nicole hesitates. “Sylvie... you need to rest.”

“No,” I say, sharper than I intend. “We don’t have time for that.” I turn to Lucian. “Tell me—did everyone make it out?”

Lucian’s expression shifts, something dark flickering across his face. “Yes. Viago, Kristoff, Dorian... all of them survived. One of the elders was taken down and is recovering, and Vada was also impaired, but she will be just fine.”

Relief surges through me, but it’s fleeting. “And Amara? Those she brought with her?”

Lucian’s hand drops from my shoulder, his expression unreadable. “Gone. Taken to a place they’ll never return from.”

I search his face, trying to decipher what he isn’t saying. A place they’ll never return from. It’s vague enough that I know he doesn’t want to tell me more.

But another thought sinks in, colder than the first. “That doesn’t mean Solstice is gone for good.” I try to adjust myself on the bed but every muscle inside of me aches.

Lucian exhales slowly. “No. There will be remnants. They’ll reband, eventually. But

they'll be starting from nothing. Without the Mirror, without the dark magic they relied on, they are nothing more than zealots clinging to a dead cause."

I press my fingers to my temple, my head throbbing. "And Lara is still with them."

Silence stretches between us.

Then a new voice—soft but firm.

"You need to stop."

I glance up to see one of the elders, Calidora, standing at the foot of my bed. I recognize her immediately. She's tall and composed, her brown hair perfectly pinned back, her eyes sharp despite the lines that age her.

"You've done something extraordinary, Sylvie," she says, stepping closer. "But you cannot sustain this pace. You are not invincible. If you keep pushing yourself like this, there won't be anything left of you to save your sister."

My stomach twists, guilt and frustration tangling together. "I can't just sit here. Not when Lara?—"

"She's currently gone and is of no use to anyone in her state," Calidora cuts in, not unkindly. "And if you want any hope of bringing her back, you must recover first."

I grit my teeth. "How? The Mirror was our way to restore her. It's gone. What do we do now?"

Calidora studies me for a long moment, then sighs. "We don't know yet."

Something inside me frays. "You don't know?"

She folds her hands in front of her. “The Mirror was our strongest lead. But magic is not always solely bound to relics. There may be another way.”

Lucian’s fingers graze mine—the smallest touch, grounding. “The elder is right. You’ve done enough for now, Sylvie. Let us work on things while you rest.”

But it doesn’t feel like enough . It feels like I’ve failed.

Calidora continues, her hands laced together in front of her, “We’re looking into alternative methods. You are uniquely tied to your sister, more than any spell or object. Your bond as twins, your shared lineage, and the magic inside you—it’s all connected. There may be a way to channel that, but it will take time.”

My throat tightens. “I don’t have time.”

Calidora’s gaze hardens. “Then make it. You must learn not everything is an automatic fix, Sylvie.”

Her words land like a blow.

She’s right. Even if it feels like every second wasted is another second Lara slips further away... I can’t keep going like this.

I exhale, pressing my fingers against my temples. “I need to see her. To know she’s okay. I haven’t seen her since those photos at the school were captured of her.”

Lucian’s voice is quiet but firm. “She won’t come to you willingly.”

Rebecca shifts beside me. “And if we need her for a ritual, we’ll have to find a way to bring her in.”

A chill rolls down my spine. “You’re saying we’ll have to force her.”

No one says anything. But the answer is obvious.

Nicole frowns, hesitant. “Sylvie, if there’s even a chance that your blood can bring her back... we have to try.”

I close my eyes. I know.

But Lara won’t let us try. Not as she is now.

I swallow hard, forcing my voice to stay steady. “Then we find her.”

Lucian nods. “And when we do, we’ll be ready.” He pauses. “If, that is, you rest in the meantime and let the rest of us help you in the way you’ve helped us.” He places a kiss to my hand and strokes loose hair tendrils from my face.

I don’t know if I’ll ever be ready for what’s coming.

But I will save my sister.

Even if it kills me.

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:26 am*

War doesn't end the moment the last blow is struck. It lingers. It clings to the air, settles into the bones of those who survive, coils in the silence left behind. I've seen it before—the way battles end but never truly finish. The way ghosts of the fallen never quite fade.

But this time, it's different.

Not because of the bodies left in the dirt or the ruins of what once stood strong. Not because we dismantled the Solstice Society, reduced its leaders to prisoners waiting for an end that will not come quickly. Not even because of the blood we spilled or the magic we severed.

Because of her.

Sylvie.

I see her even now, standing in the wreckage of the battle, light pouring from her like something celestial. The moment she shattered the Mirror, the very air seemed to shudder, as though the world itself felt the shift in power. She was stronger than I had ever imagined. More dangerous. More powerful. And then—she collapsed.

I don't remember the moment my arms caught her, only the weight of her body as she crumbled. I remember the way her skin felt cold, how her breath barely stirred against my chest. I carried her through the trees, through the ruins of what we had destroyed, each second stretching impossibly long between heartbeats. For the first time in centuries, I felt something akin to terror.

We brought her to the Guild, to the witches who know how to heal those drained by magic's toll. They swarmed around her like crows, assessing, tending, murmuring incantations I barely cared to understand. I stayed beside her, refusing to leave. Rebecca and Nicole never left either.

And when she finally opened her eyes, when I saw her look at me, alive and whole, I knew—there is nothing I wouldn't do for Sylvie Rosenthal.

Which is why I'm here now.

Not because I care about Lara. Not because I hold any deep desire to redeem what's left of her. If it were up to me, Sylvie and I would leave this all behind. Let the remnants of Solstice fade into nothing while we forge something untouched by war. But she won't rest until she has her sister back.

So I do this for her.

Because if she loses Lara, she'll never forgive herself. And if I lose her, there will be nothing left of me.

The red lanterns of The Crimson Veil cast a low, flickering glow over the polished mahogany tables, illuminating the gathered faces in slow, rhythmic pulses of crimson and gold. The scent of clove smoke and aged whiskey thickens the air, curling between whispered conversations. It's quieter than usual tonight. Not empty, but subdued. As if the city itself understands the fragile space between the war that was won and the war still to come.

I grip the glass in my hand but don't drink. Too much of my restraint is needed elsewhere. Across from me, Dorian lounges in the booth, one arm draped carelessly along the back, though the sharp edge of his golden gaze betrays his casual posture. He's been restless since the ambush, though he'd rather be gutted than admit it.

To my right, Nicole and Rebecca sit, their usual ease absent. Their drinks remain untouched, the spiced wine dark and glimmering beneath the dim light.

We are all waiting.

For something. For nothing. For the inevitable next step.

And Sylvie?—

She isn't here.

The thought tightens something in my chest, though I force it back, burying it beneath reason. She wanted to come. Of course she did—it's Sylvie. But after collapsing from magical depletion, the Guild's elders made the decision she refused to make for herself. She isn't allowed to leave until she recovers.

For the first time in weeks, she isn't at my side. Instead, she's confined to a sterile room in the Guild's medical wing, kept under constant watch. When we told her we were coming here to meet, she was stubborn—as always. She demanded to come, and for the first time, no one was on her side about it.

She should be resting, not worrying about what comes next. But I know her too well. She's restless. Frustrated.

She wants action.

She wants her sister back.

She wants to fix everything herself.

And she can't.

Dorian is the first to break the silence. He rolls his glass between his fingers, watching the amber liquid swirl before speaking. “If we’re going to do this, we need to be smart about it.” His voice is low, calm, but there’s an edge beneath it—one that mirrors my own thoughts. “Staking her out is the only way. We can’t afford another ambush, not yet, not after we’re all depleted from the last attack. We watch her, learn her routine, find the moment she’s weakest. Then we take her.”

Nicole nods, her dark eyes sharp with understanding. “Lara’s not the same person anymore. If we need her for the ritual, she isn’t going to come willingly.”

Rebecca sighs, rubbing her temples. “We have to be careful. We don’t know how much of her humanity is left.” She shakes her head. “I’m willing to bet there isn’t much, based on her actions toward Sylvie.”

I glance between them before shifting my gaze back to Dorian. “You’ll take the day shifts while I’m at Blackthorne. I’ll relieve you at night.”

Dorian smirks, though there’s no humor in it. “Giving me the easy job, are we?”

“You get to sleep through the best part,” I reply dryly, finishing off my drink and placing the glass back on the table. “We start tonight. The sooner we learn her schedule, the sooner we make our move.”

“What about Nicole and me?” Rebecca asks, and I look between the two of them, knowing what Sylvie would and wouldn’t want.

“The two of you need to focus on your classes. I know you want to help Sylvie, and you can, but stay on top of your studies and when you have free time over the next few days you can let me know. We will bring you in.”

Nicole exhales sharply, as if she’s been holding in her breath. She meets my eyes,



something serious settling into her expression. “And once we know her schedule enough to successfully take her?”

The words hang in the air, but no one breaks the lingering silence. The truth is, none of us know what will happen next. Not yet—but we’ll figure it out.

For Sylvie.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:26 am*

The air in the passageway is thick with the scent of dried herbs and the faintest trace of smoke. It clings to my skin, heavy and warm, curling around me like an invisible force. My bare feet make no sound against the cold stone floor as I drift forward, the hem of my nightgown whispering with each step as I walk around the Guild.

The halls stretch endlessly before me, bathed in the golden glow of candlelight and sconces lining the walls. Shadows move strangely along the walls, flickering in ways that don't quite match the rhythm of the flames, as though something unseen lingers just beyond my periphery. It isn't scary though, and it feels much different than the ominous halls of Blackthorne. It feels as though it's breathing beneath my fingertips, shifting beneath my weight, but giving life to the place that it needs.

Despite not knowing where I'm going, I continue moving. My feet pattering down the hall, guiding me as if they know the way. There's a pull deep in my chest, a thread wrapping itself around my ribs, drawing me forward with an urgency I don't understand. The sensation is strange—not painful, but insistent, like a forgotten memory straining to be recalled.

And then I hear it.

Running water.

A quiet ripple, a delicate, lapping sound, as though something disturbs a perfectly still surface.

I round a corner, and suddenly the hall is gone, replaced by a vast courtyard bathed in moonlight. The reflecting pool stretches out before me, the water dark and endless,

mirroring the sky above. The air is crisp, cool against my skin, yet I feel no chill. I'm as warm as when I sit in front of the grand fireplace at Lucian's home.

I glance about the space, and to my complete surprise, at the edge of the pool, standing still as black death, is Lara.

My breath stills in my chest as I look at my sister. The girl who protected me for as long back as I can remember. The one who pulled me out of anxiety attacks and helped me get through the death of our parents.

That girl feels so lost to me now.

She's barefoot, her toes hovering just over the water's edge. A long dress clings to her frame—deep burgundy, almost black beneath the subtle light of the moon, the fabric rippling gently in an unseen—and unfelt—breeze. Her dark hair spills over her shoulders in loose waves, strands lifting slightly as though gravity holds less sway over her.

She doesn't move.

She only stares, unblinking.

Her gaze is locked onto her own reflection, motionless, as though she's frozen in time. The surface of the water remains unnaturally still, reflecting her face with eerie clarity.

The quiet stillness is broken when she speaks.

"I know you," she murmurs, tilting her head slightly to the left, as if she's inspecting the reflection. The words are barely more than a whisper, but they cut through the silence like a knife.

Lara lifts a hand, her fingers trembling as she traces the curve of her jaw, then her collarbone, as though mapping the shape of her own face. She leans closer, breath fogging against the water's surface.

“I think I know you.”

The words scrape at something deep in my chest, a cold and hollow ache.

Her fingers curl at her sides, and I see it—the way her body tenses, the way her brows furrow, the smallest flicker of confusion in her glassy eyes.

She doesn't recognize herself.

She's now at the point where she doesn't know who she is. There's no way she knows who I am at this point. I understood Solstice erased her humanity—but how would she forget her own self?

A slow, shuddering breath escapes her lips, and I feel it as though it's my own.

I take a step closer, my pulse thudding in my ears.

She doesn't see me.

She only stares harder, her breath coming faster now, panic curling at the edges of her expression.

“Who are you?” she whispers, her eyes still on her reflection.

She's speaking to herself.

My heart clenches, aches in a way I've never hurt before, despite everything that's

come before. A tear slips down my cheek as I try to figure out what to say to her, how to pull her from her thoughts, how to make her remember herself.

Me.

Us.

I try to reach for her, try to step forward, but the moment my fingers stretch toward her shoulder, the world shatters.

A deafening crack splits the silence, a burst of wind slamming into me with the force of a tidal wave. The reflection in the water distorts, twisting and writhing, as though something beneath the surface is trying to claw its way free.

I hear my name—a voice not my own, fractured and distant?—

And then I fall.

Everything collapses in on me and I shatter into nothing more than shards of light as even the earth vanishes beneath my feet.

And I am falling, falling, falling?—

The blood-curdling screams jolts me, and for mere seconds I am terrified, until I realize that the scream is rippling from my own throat. I breathe in a strangled inhale, my body lurching upright before my mind catches up, before my soul returns to where it belongs. For a moment, my world is still half-formed, stitched together by the lingering remnants of the vision—or was it a dream?—but the sensation of it remains, sinking deep into my bones like a frost I can't shake.

I reach blindly for the sheets, my fingers curling into the fabric, desperate for

something solid, something real, something to tether me to the present. But my body betrays me, trembling, sweat-slicked, as if I had run for miles, as if I had stood at the precipice of something too vast, too dark, too consuming.

And maybe I did.

The room around me is unfamiliar in my half-dazed state. Not the apothecary. Not the estate. Not the courtyard where I had just been standing. But I was never standing there, was I?

I give myself a few moments to acclimate to my surroundings, and thankfully, I realize I'm at the Guild. I've been here for nearly five days, resting as much as possible and listening to the elders as instructed.

Reality settles in slowly, reluctant in the way the mind clings to something just out of reach. Candlelight flickers dimly on the small nightstand, its golden glow barely cutting through the dense shadows along the walls. The scent of herbs lingers—lavender, rosemary, hints of dried sage, a smell I've come to find comfort in—and beneath it, the sterile bite of salves and poultices. There is a heartbeat in the air, magic woven into the very walls, its rhythm steady and slow, unlike the erratic thrum of my own pulse.

I draw in a breath—shallow, uneven, barely enough.

The vision is still with me, the images sharp, burned into the backs of my eyelids even as I blink them away. Lara, standing in front of her reflection. The way she reached for her own image, the way her lips parted around a question that should have never passed them.

"Who are you?"

The words coil in my chest, tightening, pressing against my ribs like an iron cage. My stomach knots, nausea twisting deep, but I force myself to focus, to sift through the mess of it. My heart is breaking all over again, and I can't help but wonder...how many times can a heart truly break?

This wasn't just a nightmare.

It was more than that. I know it, feel it deep in the essence of my bones.

I wasn't just seeing her—I was with her.

Somehow, through the tangled, fraying thread of whatever bond we still share, I had felt her confusion, her unraveling sense of self. There had been no recognition in her gaze, no certainty in her movements, only a ghost of something she had once been.

She doesn't know who she is anymore.

If that was a vision and not a nightmare...my sister doesn't know herself.

I grip the blankets tighter, my breath shuddering in my throat. I have to do something. I can't just sit here while she?—

I shove the blankets back and swing my legs over the edge of the bed, but the moment I try to stand, the world tilts violently. A sharp, searing pain lances through my muscles, locking them up, and my vision sways dangerously. My knees buckle, and I barely catch myself against the nightstand before my body gives out completely.

A small, strangled sound escapes me, frustration and exhaustion bleeding into one as my nails dig into the wooden surface and the candle nearly tips over.

Too weak.

I am still too weak.

A sharp knock at the door splinters through my thoughts, startling me, the sound jarring against my already raw nerves. I exhale sharply, trying to steady the shaking in my hands as I brace against the edge of the bed.

“Sylvie?”

Ravenna.

Her voice is firm, steady in a way I am not.

I drag in a breath, swallowing back the dizziness threatening to pull me under. “Come in.”

The door creaks open, and Ravenna steps inside, the candlelight catching on the deep green of her robes. Her sharp gaze sweeps over me, assessing, cataloging, and then narrowing slightly when she takes in the state I’m in.

She exhales slowly, crossing her arms. “Well, dear. I wish I could say you look better.”

I almost laugh, but there’s nothing in me to summon amusement.

Ravenna moves closer, eyes flicking over my unsteady posture, the way my fingers still clutch at the nightstand for balance. “How long have you been awake? It’s early in the morning.”

I don’t answer.



I don't care.

Instead, I lift my gaze to hers, my voice hoarse, raw from disuse. "I need to leave."

Ravenna lifts a brow, unimpressed. "No. You need to rest."

My hands curl into fists, nails biting into my palms. "Lara?—"

"Isn't going anywhere," she interrupts, stepping closer, her voice calm but resolute. "Lucian and Dorian are tracking her as we speak. They'll bring her to us when it's time."

I shake my head, something frantic, desperate curling in my chest. "You don't understand."

Her expression doesn't shift, but something in her energy sharpens. "If I fail to understand, then explain it to me."

I force a breath through my teeth, the weight of it pressing against my ribs like lead. "I saw her."

Ravenna stills.

For the first time, I have her full attention.

The shift is subtle, but I catch it—the way her stance stiffens slightly, the way her focus narrows in on me, no longer just scanning me for signs of exhaustion but listening.

"What do you mean?" She looks around my small room, as if I mean I saw her here, in the flesh.

I swallow hard, my throat tight. “Just now. In my dream, my vision—whatever it was. I saw her. She was standing in front of her reflection, staring at herself like she was trying to remember her own face. She didn’t recognize herself, Ravenna.” My voice cracks, the weight of it pressing down on me. “She doesn’t know who she is.”

My mentor doesn’t speak right away.

Instead, she moves toward the chair beside my bed, lowering herself onto the seat with a slow, deliberate motion, eyes never once leaving my own. There is no disbelief in her face—only contemplation, the weight of her knowledge settling over the room like a thick fog.

She exhales, folding her hands in her lap. “This is a normal stage in the process,” she says. Flames burn just beneath my skin because no one ever told me this. “Once humanity is erased, eventually, the unfortunate soul will no longer remember even themselves.”

I grip the sheets beneath me, fingers digging into the fabric. “So it could be too late,” I say, my mind racing as I try to make sense of what I thought could never be true: she may be too far gone to ever come back again.

## Page 23

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:26 am*

Five nights of watching. Five nights of waiting.

Patience has never been a virtue I struggle with—it is, after all, the gift of eternity. A lesson carved into the marrow of my existence, honed over decades of watching those in power rise and fall, men burn themselves to ash with greed, and time itself erode all that was once sacred.

But this waiting has been different.

This waiting has been for her .

Lara moves through the city like a specter, lost between past and present, between what she was and what she is becoming. We have followed her every step, mapped her routine, memorized each erratic habit—every moment of stillness that stretches too long, every pause before a reflection, every whisper she breathes to no one at all.

She is unraveling, though I suspect she does not fully understand it yet.

But I do.

I have seen this before, the slow descent of a creature who no longer recognizes its own face, who stares into the abyss of its existence and finds only emptiness staring back.

And I have no desire to pity her.

I do this for Sylvie.

Only for Sylvie.

Dorian shifts beside me, his sharp golden eyes gleaming in the moonlight. The four of us: Dorian, Rebecca, Nicole, and myself, had gathered at The Crimson Veil tonight before setting out for this final night of tracking, our meeting filled with the weight of unsaid things. The war with Solstice is over—for now—but the battle for Lara has just begun.

My old friend has been just as restless as we all have, not to mention the exhaustion that has seeped into our souls.

Lara does not travel with others, nor does she return with them. She keeps her distance from those still loyal to Solstice, although I have no idea as to why. They have not sought her out. And why would they? The Society is in ruin, its leaders taken to the edge of the world where they will rot, where Viago and Kristoff will extract what little use remains in them.

No one is coming to save her.

And tonight, she will not save herself. Her life as she knows it rests on Sylvie.

Lara emerges from the safehouse just as she has the nights before, her movements eerily consistent. The same time, the same route, the same unsettling sense that she is walking toward something unseen.

Her face is blank, unreadable beneath the dim light of the flickering streetlamps. But something in the way she moves betrays the fractures forming beneath the surface. She is not well.

She never sleeps.

None of us have seen her eat the way she should, only enough to sustain, never enough to satisfy.

She is wasting away, burning herself from the inside out.

"She's right on time," Dorian murmurs, his voice carrying the quiet amusement of a man who finds pleasure in a hunt well-played.

Nicole and Rebecca linger a few streets down, waiting.

"We should move," Dorian continues, shifting his stance beside me, ever eager, ever impatient.

I tilt my head slightly, observing the way Lara hesitates for only the briefest of moments before continuing down her usual path. She does not sense us, not yet, but there is something there—a wariness, perhaps. A small, sharp instinct buried too deep beneath her exhaustion to fully surface.

For being Sylvie's twin, at this moment, she looks so different from her. Yes, same hair, same bone structure, same coloring. But her cheekbones are sunken in, her clothes hang loosely from her body...even her eyes seem wrong.

I exhale slowly.

"Not yet," I murmur. "A few more blocks."

And so we wait.

Until, that is, we strike.

We follow her as we have every night before, careful, measured, always just out of

reach. The city is silent, wrapped in the hush of an hour too late for mortals to roam, too dangerous for those who do not understand the creatures that lurk beneath its surface.

She does not know she is being hunted—until it is too late.

She steps beneath the glow of a dying streetlamp, her figure limned in the sickly yellow light, and I know this is the moment.

I do not need to signal the others—we're all in the know on how this needs to go down. I slow my car from a roll to a stop and Dorian moves first. He swiftly exits the car.

Quick, brutal, precise—his hand snaps around the back of her neck before she can even register the threat. Lara snarls, thrashing violently, but Rebecca is already there, the syringe glinting once before she drives it into the soft skin beneath her jaw.

A feral growling noise tears from Lara's throat. She fights, her body jerking, twisting, her strength far greater than it should be given the state she's in.

But the sedative is instantaneous.

Lara's movements grow sluggish. Her limbs falter. And then—she collapses.

Dorian carries Lara's unconscious form to the car hastily as the girls get in the backseat and prop her up as if she's just another willing passenger. I watch them move her body with ease, and for a brief moment, a ghost of memory brushes against me—Sylvie, fragile and cold in my arms as I carried her into the Guild only days before.

Dorian shuts the back door and slides into the passenger seat alongside me.

"She belongs to us now," I say, finally drawing in a deep breath as I realize we are one step closer to getting her to Sylvie. One step closer to ending all of this—for better or worse.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:26 am*

The descent into the Guild's underground chambers feels heavier than it should.

The stone steps echo with my footsteps, each one dipping slightly in the center from centuries of wear. The air down here is thick, stale with age and old magic, the faint scent of damp stone clinging to the walls. Runes glow faintly along the passage, pulsing in steady intervals—wards meant to hold creatures far more dangerous than my sister.

But then again, I don't know what my sister is anymore.

The thought clenches at my chest, a slow, painful twist as I tighten my grip on the iron railing, steadying myself. My body is still weak, the aftershocks of the Mirror's destruction lingering in my bones, but I feel my power coming back—slowly but surely. As Calidora said, it hasn't been a quick fix. And despite everything, I'm grateful for the rest she and the other elders have demanded of me.

No one thought I should come down here, insisting I wait even longer, but eventually I talked them into it. Nearly a week of waiting is already too much.

I step off the last stair, the corridor stretching before me. The walls are carved from dark stone, flickering torchlight casting long, wavering shadows across their rough surface. The closer I get, the more I can feel her—the way the air itself seems heavier, charged with something unnatural. She may not be my sister anymore, but I feel her as if she's never left.

At the end of the corridor, Lucian waits for my arrival, along with the three elders.



Lucian's figure is partially obscured by shadow, but I'd recognize the way he carries himself anywhere—shoulders set, arms folded, his presence steady even in the dim light. He watches me approach, his expression unreadable, but there's something in his gaze that makes my stomach twist.

"Are you sure about this, love?" I've missed him so much over the last week. I've seen him, yes, but it hasn't been the same with the stress of finding Lara, getting my strength back up, and being in a different environment. I miss us being us. Long talks in front of the hearth. The way he holds me in the way no one else has.

"Sylvie?" he asks again. "Are you sure?" His voice is quiet, but there's weight behind it. A warning.

I nod once. "Yes."

The man I love studies me for a long moment, his gaze searching, and I wonder if he sees what I already know—there is no version of this where I walk away untouched.

He sighs, running a hand through his dark hair before stepping aside. "She's restrained. Warded. She can't hurt you."

That's not what I'm worried about.

I move past him, pushing open the heavy iron door keeping her from me.

The chamber is dark, lit only by a few hovering orbs of witchlight, their glow casting the room in a pale, unnatural luminescence. The walls are lined with sigils, carved deep into the stone, glowing with faint gold and silver light.

In the center of the room, strapped into a reinforced iron chair, is Lara.

My breath catches, and for a moment, the world narrows.

She looks... the same.

And yet, not at all.

Her body is still, head slumped forward, dark hair tangled and sweaty. The soft rise and fall of her chest is the only indication that she's alive. But it's her aura that unsettles me most.

Even from across the room, I can feel it—wrong, fractured, like something struggling against itself.

Nicole and Rebecca stand along the far wall, watching in tense silence. Dorian lingers near the entrance, arms crossed, his usual smirk absent.

I step forward.

The wards hum in response, sensing my magic, crackling faintly in the charged air. The restraints around Lara's wrists and ankles pulse in tandem with the runes along the walls, ensuring she stays locked in place.

I swallow hard. "Lara."

Nothing.

Part of me braces for the worst—silence, refusal, a sister who doesn't even acknowledge my presence. But somehow, the nothingness is worse. The emptiness. The hollow void. The absence of response, of reaction, of anything resembling who she once was.

I take another hesitant step forward, the dim light stretching my shadow across the stone floor. The closer I get, the colder it feels, like the air itself is retreating from where she sits, caged in iron and magic.

Her head slowly raises as she lifts her chin from her chest, and the first thing I notice is the way she's smiling.

Not in greeting. Not in warmth.

It's forced. Too wide, too sharp, too knowing—like she's been waiting for me in the dark, amused by my arrival.

The second thing I notice is her eyes.

The light inside of them, the reflection of who she was—it's gone. Her pupils are too dark, swallowing the color until there's nothing but black voids, staring, watching, waiting. The whites of her eyes are barely visibly, as if I'm only imagining the sliver that's there.

I try again, my voice quieter this time. "Lara, do you know where you are?"

Slowly, like she's just remembering she has a body, she tilts her head. The movement is unnervingly smooth, her chin dipping at an unnatural angle before she rights herself again.

Then, after a long, aching pause?—

"Do you?"

Her voice slithers through the air, soft and saccharine, but threaded with something else. Something wrong.

A shiver crawls down my spine.

The runes embedded in the walls pulse once, the magic sensing the shift in energy, reacting to her presence the same way I do. Like it knows she's not supposed to be here.

Not like this.

Lucian shifts behind me, barely perceptible, but I feel it. The way the others tense. The way Dorian moves just slightly closer, his hands curling into fists.

Lara hums. A small, quiet sound. Then, finally, she moves.

Not much—just the flex of her fingers, her nails tapping against the iron armrest in slow, deliberate succession. A rhythmic click, click, click echoing through the chamber, like the ticking of some invisible clock counting down.

“Help me understand,” she murmurs, her head tipping back slightly as she studies me. “Are you afraid?”

My throat tightens. “I’m not afraid of you.”

The lie sits heavy on my tongue.

Lara laughs—a breathy, delighted sound that doesn’t belong in this room, doesn’t belong to her.

“You should be.”

She leans forward just enough for the torchlight to illuminate her face, and I swear a demon is possessing her. The way her eyes are so far from hers, the strange, eerie

smile, the hollowness of her cheeks.

I suck in a sharp breath as I take her in, and it's then that I notice...

There's something wrong with her skin.

It's subtle, almost imperceptible at first, but then I see it—the faintest shimmer, like the remnants of some spell stitched just beneath her flesh. A weaving of magic that doesn't belong to her, something forced inside, something unnatural trying to seep out.

The wards around the room pulse to life again.

Rebecca exhales sharply beside me. I don't look at her, but I feel the way she tenses, the way the air shifts with the slow, careful build of magic pooling at her fingertips.

Lara notices.

She lifts her chin again, her lips twitching, that sick, knowing smile still carved into her face.

“You all think I don't know, don't you?” Her voice drops lower, almost conspiratorial. “You think I don't see it? Feel it?”

She leans back against the chair, the iron restraints digging into her wrists, but she doesn't even flinch.

“They did something to you,” I whisper, barely able to form the words.

Lara hums again, eyes flickering to the ceiling as if considering. “Maybe.”

Then she shifts again, her gaze dragging back to mine, and for a fraction of a second, the expression flickers. The edges of her smile falter, the amusement dimming, replaced by something... lost.

I seize onto it. "I know you're still in there."

The words ache as they come out of me.

I step closer, even as every instinct screams at me to stay away.

I think of the vision.

I think of the way she stood in front of her reflection, staring, staring, staring at her own reflection like she didn't recognize herself. Like she wasn't even sure if she was real.

"You looked at your reflection," I press, voice trembling. "You didn't know what was staring back at you. You don't know what they've done to you. You're playing a game. Why?"

She stills.

The smile fades completely as she refuses to speak. It's enough to make my pulse trip, my breath hitch. The silence stretches, warping, twisting into something unbearable.

Then, she lunges.

The restraints hold—barely—but the force of it sends a sharp pulse through the room, the magic trembling beneath the weight of whatever she has become.

I stumble back, my heart hammering, and suddenly Dorian is there, standing in front of me, a dagger already in his hand. Rebecca and Nicole move at the same time, their magic sparking around them like embers in the dark.

Lara sits still again, but she is different now.

The cracks have sealed. The flicker of hesitation is gone.

And then, she whispers—so softly I almost don't catch it.

“You should have let me die.”

The words slam into me like a physical thing.

I shake my head, my breath coming in ragged bursts. “Lara...”

She exhales, long and slow, like she's just humoring me. Like she already knows how this ends.

“You should have let me die!” She screams the words this time, shaking her head frantically from side to side as she repeats those six words again and again—and again. “You should have let me die! You should have let me die! You should have let me die!” She screams into the room like she's reciting a prayer, her words guttural, throaty, deep, and otherworldly, shaking me to my core.

Then, all at once, she stops.

She swallows hard.

And she looks at me, straight-faced.

“But you didn’t, did you?” she asks, slowly tilting her head again, a smirk creeping up on her face. “You’ll break before I do.”

Her voice is nothing but a murmur, but it might as well be a prophecy.

And for the first time, I believe it.



*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:26 am*

I don't remember walking out of the chamber.

One moment, I'm standing in front of my sister, watching the last pieces of her slip through my fingers, listening to her voice break apart my resolve like cracks spreading through glass.

The next, I'm moving through the stone corridor, the air thick and damp around me, torches flickering along the walls, throwing my shadow into jagged shapes I barely recognize. My legs are carrying me forward, but my mind is still back there—stuck in the way Lara's voice slithered over my skin, in the way her eyes devoured the light.

She's gone. It's solidified now.

The thought presses against my ribs, sharp and cruel, leaving no room to breathe.

I don't realize I'm shaking until I hit the top of the stairs and nearly collapse. My knees buckle, the weight of everything sinking into me all at once, and I brace a hand against the cold stone wall to steady myself. My breath is coming too fast, uneven, my body threatening to unravel under the crushing weight of what ifs and should haves?—

And then he's there.

Lucian.

I don't hear him approach, but I feel him, like a shift in the air, like gravity itself recognizes his presence. His arms are around me before I can fall, a steady force

grounding me, pulling me back before I can spiral too far.

“Love,” he murmurs, his voice rough with something unreadable.

I let myself sink into him, pressing my face against the smooth fabric of his coat, my fingers gripping the lapels like a lifeline. The scent of him—old leather, cedar, the faintest trace of something darker—wraps around me, comforting in a way I can’t explain.

I can’t keep doing this.

To myself. To him. To any of us.

The thought rises, unbidden. Not just because I’m exhausted, not just because my body is still weak from breaking the Mirror, but because I feel like I’m continuously losing pieces of myself.

Lucian’s hand moves to the back of my head, his fingers threading into my hair, holding me close. He doesn’t speak at first, doesn’t rush me to say anything. He just lets me breathe.

The silence stretches between us, heavy and fragile, until finally, I whisper, “She’s not coming back, is she?”

His arms tighten around me. “We don’t know that.”

I pull back enough to meet his gaze, my throat tight. “Did you see her? She’s... she’s something else. Like she’s been hollowed out and replaced with someone I don’t know. And she looked at me, Lucian. She looked at me and told me I should have let her die.”

His expression darkens, his jaw clenching. “She doesn’t know what she’s saying.”

I let out a humorless laugh, stepping away, rubbing a shaky hand over my face. “I think she knows exactly what she’s saying.”

Lucian exhales slowly, his fingers curling at his sides like he’s fighting something in himself. “Then we will make her remember.”

I shake my head, my eyes burning. “What if she doesn’t want to be saved?” The words scrape against my throat, raw and painful. “What if I’m just dragging her back into something she’s already accepted?”

Lucian’s expression doesn’t change, but there’s something fierce in his gaze, something unyielding. “And what if you’re the only one who can stop her from becoming something worse?”

His words settle into my chest like a stone, heavy with truth.

Lucian studies me, his fingers twitching slightly at his sides, like he’s resisting the urge to reach for me again. “You need to rest, Sylvie.”

I shake my head. “No. I need to know what happens next. I need to be done with this before it consumes me in the same way it’s consumed my sister.”

\* \* \*

Ravenna’s office at the Guild is dimly lit, the scent of burning sage curling through the air. The space is small, lined with shelves filled with books bound in cracked leather, ancient scrolls stacked in neat piles. A single candle flickers in the center of the desk, its wax pooling at the base like melting gold.

Nicole and Rebecca are already inside when I arrive, their expressions tight with unease. Lucian follows behind me, taking his place near the door, arms crossed, silent but watching.

Ravenna and Calidora stand across from us, the weight of their presence alone commanding the room.

“We need to discuss the next step,” I say, skipping past any pleasantries. My voice is steadier now, but I can still feel the remnants of my breakdown clinging to me.

Calidora nods once, her sharp gaze assessing. “You’ve seen her.”

I nod. “She’s worse than I imagined possible.” I shake my head, thinking about how she got me expelled from school. “Maybe I should’ve known. But I didn’t.”

Ravenna folds her arms. “At this point, we have no choice. The Mirror is gone, but there may still be a way to sever what’s been done to her. The longer we stay in limbo, the more the humanity curse takes from her.”

She pauses, and I already know I’m not going to like what she says next.

“We need to use your blood.”

A thick silence falls over the room.

Lucian straightens beside me, his entire body tensing. “No.” He places his palms up. “Absolutely not.”

Ravenna ignores him, her focus on me. “You and Lara were born of the same bloodline, and with the prophecy of the ‘hunter born of twins,’ it is likely that your magic is the key to restoring what was taken from her. We may not have a relic or an

artifact or any tangible item. What we do have, however, is you, dear.”

Nicole leans forward slightly. “So what? We just make her drink Sylvie’s blood and hope for the best?”

Calidora shakes her head. “No. It will require a ritual—a dangerous one that is paired with the original incantation Sylvie has practiced.” She flicks her gaze to me. “If we do this, it could alter you permanently as well, and that is something you will either have to accept or we will not move forward. Your magic, your strength. It might bind you to her in ways we can’t predict.”

Lucian takes a step forward. “As I’ve stated, not happening.”

I swallow hard, keeping my voice even, refusing to look at Lucian in this moment. Right now, it’s about me. It’s my choice.

“And if we don’t do it?” I ask.

Ravenna’s lips press together. “Then whatever is inside of her will consume her completely. And there will be no saving her.”

A heavy silence stretches between us.

Rebecca glances at me. “Sylvie...” Whatever she was going to say dies on her lips.

Lucian is seething beside me. I can feel the fury radiating off him in waves, his teeth clenched so tightly I can practically feel his tension.

“I need time,” I say finally, the words barely above a whisper. “I need to think.”

Ravenna nods. “Understandable. But we don’t have long.”

“Give me twenty minutes and then everyone can meet me back in Lara’s chamber. I’ll have my answer, and we can move forward however the elders believe we should.”

I exhale slowly, my fingers curling into the fabric of my sleeves.

There is no good choice.

Either I risk losing everything—including myself—to save Lara...

Or I lose her forever.

And I don’t know which one terrifies me more.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:27 am*

There is one person I'd go to when I needed something—anything. She may not be thinking clearly right now, but I still need to see her again. One more time before I make a decision that will change everything forever.

I steel myself and push open the door.

The chamber is dim, the light from the hovering witchlights too pale, too weak to chase away the darkness curling along the edges of the room. The air is thick, too still, as if it holds its breath in anticipation. The runes along the walls pulse faintly, reacting to my presence, but my gaze is already drawn to the figure at the center of the room.

Lara.

She is exactly where I left her, bound to the reinforced iron chair, her wrists and ankles encased in glowing sigils designed to suppress whatever unnatural force lingers within her.

“Lara.” The word comes out harsher than I intended, and she stirs.

It feels unnatural. Not like a person shifting into wakefulness.

Like a puppet whose strings have just been pulled.

Her head snaps up, her chin lifting too fast, her body jerking against the chair like something unseen has yanked her back into herself. Her limbs remain bound, but something in the air shifts, thickens, as if the magic holding her is fighting to keep her

in place.

The room warps, the shadows stretching wider, deepening.

And then she opens her eyes. I will never get used to the emotionless void staring back at me.

A poor imitation of what once was.

A sickness twists in my gut.

“I was wondering,” Lara murmurs, her voice a soft, saccharine drawl, “how long you were going to make me wait.”

I feel the others tense behind me, although I told them to wait.

Lucian. Dorian. The Girls. The elders. Ravenna.

They rest just outside of the room, but I feel them.

I square my shoulders. “What did they do to you?”

Lara tilts her head, the motion eerily smooth, the corners of her lips still curled, her amusement stretching too thin.

“You act like you don’t already know.”

A shiver crawls down my spine.

Her fingers flex against the restraints, nails scraping against the iron again in that familiar rhythm.



“The nightmares,” she whispers, her voice slithering through the room. “You’ve seen them, haven’t you? The pieces they let you have.”

My breath catches.

She knows.

She knows about the visions.

“Do you know why, Sylvie?” she continues, her voice sickly sweet. “Because you and me? We are not separate. We never were.”

I shake my head, refusing to let the weight of her words dig into me, refusing to acknowledge the way my blood thrums at the sound of her voice.

“No,” I whisper.

She leans forward as far as the restraints allow, her head tilting, those black eyes gleaming.

“Then why do you keep dreaming of me?”

A sudden, sharp pulse ripples through the air, the wards flaring bright, and I stumble back, my heartbeat thundering.

Lara grins, her teeth too white in the dimness. “They need your blood to fix me, don’t they? That’s what Solstice said would happen if you were foolish enough to try to fix things on your own. Your blood.”

The words feel like a noose tightening around my throat.

She giggles, the sound light, airy, like a child whispering a secret. “What do you think will happen, Sylvie?”

Her voice drops to a whisper.

“When we are one again?”

The chamber spins, my body locking in place, my breath choking out of me—

And Lara smiles like she already knows the answer. Like she’s waiting for me to figure it out. Like it was always supposed to be this way.

“What will it be? Will you save yourself or will you save me? Because I don’t think there’s a world in which you save us both.”

Her words hit me again, the reality inside of them putting me in a chokehold.

“Lara,” I say, and she locks her soulless eyes on mine. “Do you remember when we were little girls, and mom would always tell us to trust our instincts. Trust our gut.” I don’t know why I’m asking the question. It comes to me, and I refuse to ignore it. “She would always say that we had all the answers we needed inside of ourselves.”

The words almost seem to reach her, like that memory of our mother’s words can penetrate deep enough into her soul to pull her back, just a little.

“She said that we would always have each other,” I say, my voice cracking as a tear rolls down my cheek and Lara sits, expressionless, staring at me. “She said even if we lost track of each other, all we needed to do was trust ourselves. That we’d find out way back to each other. Because our bond as sisters was one that could never be broken.”

The words come, and I feel as if our mother is the one speaking them instead of me. Her voice ringing loudly in my ears. The words she said over and over again for years.

My tears flow as she continues looking at me with those dead eyes, and the pain clutches at my chest like it wants to pull me under. Everything is spinning and I'm trying to right myself, but nothing works.

Except our mother's words.

"I still believe her," I say. "I still believe in that bond, and I always will. No matter what."

Finally, Lara deeply inhales, and she starts to say something, but then abruptly stops, as if she thinks better of it.

"Do you believe her?" I ask, needing to know. Needing to see if anything I've said is working. If anything is helping even in the slightest. When she doesn't answer, I ask again, repeating the same question as she slowly shakes her head.

"I suppose you'll have to find out for yourself, won't you. Trust your gut, Sylvie."

Her words are meant to be menacing, but instead of being eerie and damning, I decide I'll do just that.

I'll trust myself. And if something goes wrong, there is exactly one person to blame.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:27 am*

The chamber is eerily silent. Not in the way that simply lacks sound, but in the way that waits. A living, breathing thing, thick with the weight of what is about to come. The torches burn low, casting long, restless shadows across the stone walls, their flickering glow illuminating the intricate carvings of the runes that line the chamber, pulsing faintly with old magic, as if they too are preparing for what is to unfold. The air is dense with the scent of damp stone, of incense burned in preparation, of Sylvie's magic—a wild, untamed force that hums beneath the surface of this place, curling around us like a silent storm on the verge of breaking.

We stand in a circle around her.

Lara.

She is bound, not merely by iron and chains, but by the wards that keep her tethered to the here and now, the runes upon the chair locking her in place. Yet, she looks at us not with the eyes of a prisoner, but with the eyes of something ancient and clever, something that has been waiting in the dark, watching, biding its time.

She does not struggle. Not physically. But I can feel it. The tension coiled beneath her skin, the slow pulse of something shifting within her.

She knows—and she is amused.

A moment ago, Sylvie stood in this very place, just beyond the threshold of this chamber, her hands trembling at her sides but her voice clear, unyielding. I'm ready, she had said, though I had seen the ghost of hesitation flicker behind her eyes. No one had questioned her. No one had told her she should reconsider, not because we agreed

this was wise, but because we knew it would not matter. There was no changing her mind. Not on this. Not when it came to Lara.

And so we oblige.

Not because we believe this will work. Not because we do not fear what it will cost.

But because she is the one asking it of us.

Because she has chosen this path, and I—despite every part of me that wants to take her away from all of this, despite the part of me that has already imagined a future far from this place, a world where none of this has to matter—I cannot deny her. Not when her hands are already stained with the weight of everything she has done to bring us here.

Not when I love her the way I do.

A love that surpassed every lifetime before this one and will continue to do so for all of eternity.

The three elder witches, along with Ravenna, Rebecca, and Nicole, stand at the perimeter of the sigil now, their robes dark, their fingers twitching with latent energy as they prepare the ritual. Rebecca and Nicole exchange a look, one of quiet reassurance, though there is tension in their shoulders, an uncertainty that lingers even as they school their expressions into careful masks.

Dorian shifts beside me, his stance loose but ready, his eyes gleaming with something unreadable. He does not speak, but I know him well enough to sense the discomfort rolling beneath his calm smokescreen. He has seen what Lara has become. He has witnessed her unhinged, reckless, dangerous. He knows what it means if this does not work.

And then there is Sylvie. She is and will always be everything .

She steps forward, her combat boots brushing against the edge of the sigil, her breath even, measured, though I can hear the faint hitch beneath it.

She is afraid. Not of Lara. Not of what she must do.

But of failing. Of pouring every last piece of herself into this spell and finding there is nothing left to bring her sister back.

But she does not waver.

The air shifts as she takes the ceremonial blade, its silver edge catching the dim light, and I want to stop this.

I want to reach for her wrist, to pull her away, to tell her she does not have to do this, that she does not have to bleed for a sister who is already lost, that she is not obligated.

But I resist the urge to move. To stop her and end all of this before it can begin.

I watch as Sylvie presses the blade to her palm, dragging it slowly across her skin. The scent of her blood blooms in the chamber, rich, potent, alive—and something inside me snarls.

Not in hunger. Not in the way blood usually calls to me.

But in fear—an emotion I have had less than a handful of times in as long as I can remember.

The first drop of her beautiful crimson blood falls, striking the center of the sigil

carved into the floor, and the magic reacts instantly, the runes surging to life in a brilliant, blinding glow. Lara jerks against the restraints, but it is not in pain. It is something else.

Something expectant.

A slow, delighted smile spreads across her lips.

“Oh, Sylvie,” she murmurs, her voice curling around the chamber like a whisper from the depths of something long buried. “You really do love me, don’t you?”

Sylvie ignores Lara’s incessant games and mockery, her expression set, her focus locked onto the sigil as the witches begin the incantation, their voices low, rhythmic, filling the air with a language so old it feels like the walls themselves are listening.

The moment the magic takes hold, Lara’s body tenses, her back arching slightly against the chair. A shuddering breath escapes her lips, something between a gasp and a laugh.

And then she screams.

It is not the sound of pain, not the cry of a creature suffering beneath the weight of something unbearable. No, this is a sound of resistance, of something fighting to remain exactly as it is, of darkness refusing to be torn from the body it has rooted itself within. The torches flicker violently, the runes etched into the walls surging to a near blinding brightness, reacting to the battle now waging inside her.

Lara convulses, the restraints biting deeply into her skin as she thrashes about wildly, her body bowing against the weight of the magic trying to force her humanity back into the hollowed-out space where it once resided. A pulse of black energy bursts from her form, an unseen force slamming against the runes, fighting back against the

incantation pulling her toward something real. The chamber shakes with a malevolent force—one that should never be reckoned with.

She is fighting it.

Not because she cannot be saved.

Not because the magic is failing.

But because she does not want to be saved.

Worst of all? She is winning.

Sylvie grits her teeth, her hands curling into fists at her sides, blood still dripping steadily into the sigil, her breath coming fast, uneven. She is giving everything, pushing past the limits of her body, her magic, her soul—and I know in that instant, if she keeps going, she will break before Lara does. I want to give this to Sylvie. I want this choice for her, a choice I never gave her all those lifetimes ago. To choose freely for herself. But how, when I am as selfish as I am, can I let the woman I love destroy herself to save another?

I hesitate but then move forward just as the torches flicker once—twice—before they die altogether, swallowing the chamber in thick, impenetrable darkness. A gust of unnatural wind whips through the space, though there are no windows, no doors left ajar for air to enter. The runes carved into the stone walls flare in response, their glow pulsating like a heartbeat, erratic and unsteady, as if the magic itself is straining beneath the weight of the spell.

And then, the sound comes.

A low, guttural crack, reverberating through the walls, through my chest, through



every fiber of my being. It is not metal snapping, nor stone shifting—it is something deeper, something more primal, like the breaking of a seal that was never meant to be undone. The very fabric of magic is splitting open, raw and seething, exposing something we cannot see but can feel in our bones.

And then—silence.

The kind that stretches into eternity.

The kind that feels active.

The runes falter, flickering like dying stars, and in that agonizing pause, in that moment that hangs between life and oblivion, a sound rises above the breathless void?—

"Lara."

Sylvie's voice does not tremble. It does not waver. She does not hesitate, nor plead, nor break beneath the weight of the impossible task before her. She speaks with certainty, with finality, her words an anchor cast into the storm that is my sister's unraveling soul.

"Come back to me."

The silence does not break.

It shatters.

A ripple of energy pulses outward from where Sylvie stands as she and the elders complete the incantation. The energy is so strong that even the magic-laced iron chains around Lara groan in protest, the spell thrumming at the very seams. I brace

myself against the force of it, feel the air crackle with something ancient and wild, something so much larger than any of us. And then?—

"Sylv?"

The voice is fragile, distant, as if spoken through a veil of thick, choking fog. But it is not the voice of the creature that has been wearing her sister's face. It is not the voice of the thing that sneered and spat and mocked the girl standing before her now.

Sylvie does not falter. She does not dare allow hesitation to creep into her spine, does not allow fear to carve its way into her resolve. Instead, she presses forward, her body trembling with the strain of magic still flooding through her veins, and she speaks the incantation one final time.

Each syllable is spoken like a command, like the slow, deliberate turning of a key in a rusted, forgotten lock. The energy around us recoils, desperate to resist, to fight, but it is too late—the spell is sealed, and magic must obey. All at once, the chamber erupts in light. Blinding, searing, consuming—an explosion of raw, unchecked power that knocks the breath from my lungs, forcing me back a step as the magic collapses inward, latching onto its target. I watch as Lara's body jerks, her spine arching against the restraints, every muscle in her frame locked taut as the energy surges through her. The room quakes, dust and stone rattling from the ceiling, the spell crackling like a wildfire set loose in the hollowed belly of the earth.

The sigils burn brighter—brighter—brighter, until they are too much, until they are unbearable, and then?—

The light dies once more.

Everything is still.

The weight in the air lifts. The static that had crawled over my skin fades. The torches, once extinguished, flicker back to life, casting long, wavering shadows over the chamber's stone walls. For a moment, none of us move. None of us breathe.

And then?—

A single twitch of fingers.

The faintest movement of lips, parting to take in a trembling breath.

And then, ever so slowly, Lara lifts her head.

Her eyes—no longer void-black pits of endless hunger, no longer filled with that cruel, hollow mockery—find Sylvie.

And for the first time, they are hers.

No abyss. No darkness. No echo of something ancient and wrong peering through the cracks of what she used to be.

She sees her.

She knows her.

And Sylvie's breath catches, not in fear, not in pain—but in sheer hope.

Lara.

The room feels different now.

Not because the magic has faded—because it hasn't, not fully. The walls still hum with residual energy, the runes carved deep into the stone still flicker with the last vestiges of power. But the weight of it, the unbearable pressure, the darkness pressing in from all sides—it's gone.

I don't realize I'm crying until I taste salt on my lips.

I can't seem to move. Can't seem to breathe. The entire world has shrunk to the girl in the chair, bound by iron and magic, her wrists raw where the restraints held her in place.

My sister.

I take a step forward on unsteady legs, my limbs trembling, exhaustion curling into my bones, heavier than anything I have ever carried before. The weight of this moment presses into my chest, an unbearable thing, making it nearly impossible to inhale.

I want to say her name, but I don't have the breath to do it.

Lara is slumped forward, her body utterly still, her dark hair spilling over her face in tangled waves, still sweat-stricken. And for a horrible, gut-wrenching second, I think I've failed. That the magic burned through her, consumed what was left, leaving

nothing behind.

Then—a breath. And another.

Another.

A slow, shuddering inhale, deep and uneven, her chest rising in the dim light. Her fingers twitch against the arms of the chair, nails scraping against the iron as though testing if she is still here, still alive, still something more than the thing Solstice twisted her into.

And then, she moves.

It's not sudden. Not dramatic. Just a slow, aching tilt of her head, strands of dark hair falling away from her face as she blinks open her eyes.

The breath in my throat locks.

Because they're not black anymore.

Not void. Not empty.

Lara's eyes—my sister's eyes—are staring back at me.

I let out something between a sob and a breathless whisper, my hands trembling as I take another step closer. My pulse is a frantic, stuttering thing beneath my skin, my magic stirring weakly inside of me, sensing the shift, sensing the change.

She's here.

She's really here.

“Lara,” I whisper, my voice breaking, and the moment her name leaves my lips, something in her face crumbles. Her body shudders, a sharp, gasping inhale ripping from her throat, her fingers clutching at the armrests like she doesn’t know how to ground herself, like she isn’t sure if she’s real. Her cracked lips part, but no words come out, just a soft, pained sound, something fragile and lost and human.

It is the most beautiful thing I’ve heard in my entire life.

I fall to my knees before her, unable to stand any longer, my hands hovering, hesitant, afraid that if I touch her, if I reach for her, she will vanish like a wisp of smoke.

“Lara,” I whisper again, my throat tight, my voice trembling. “Do you... do you know me?”

She lifts her head fully, eyes glassy and unfocused, and for a single, terrible moment, I think she doesn’t. I think this was all for nothing, that I was too late, that?—

Her lips tremble. Her brow creases. And then?—

A whisper, soft and fragile, barely more than a breath:

“Sylvie.”

I choke on my own sob as tears stream down my cheeks and I continue to search her face. I’m wailing now, the sound echoing throughout the chamber, the tears creating an ocean beneath me.

I reach for her before I can stop myself, my hands gripping her shoulders, her skin fever-warm beneath my touch. She flinches, but only slightly, only for a second, and then, despite the restraints, she latches her fingers around my arms, the bindings tugging and biting into her, but it’s as if she doesn’t notice. She grips me just as

desperately as I'm holding onto her, her fingers digging into my arms— holding on, holding on, holding on.

I can feel her shaking. The way her body trembles against mine, the way her breath comes in ragged, uneven gasps, like she is learning how to exist again.

“I'm here,” I whisper into her hair, my arms tightening around her. “I'm here, I've got you. I've got you, Lara.” My entire body shudders as she grips me, and my chest heaves, the pain and pressure eradicating itself from my core.

She lets out a broken, gasping sound that matches my own as she buries her face in my shoulder, fingers clutching my shirt like if she lets go, she'll be lost again. Like if we separate, one of us will vanish into the air and we won't get a do-over.

Despite everything, despite the weight of it all, for the first time in what feels like eternity...I breathe.

I don't know how long we stay like that, clinging to each other, my tears soaking into her hair, her breath hot against my neck. I don't care.

I would stay here forever if she needed me to.

But then?—

She pulls back. Just enough to look at me, to truly see me, and there is something broken in her gaze, something lost and uncertain.

“I—” Her voice is hoarse, raw, like she hasn't used it in months. She swallows hard, shaking her head. “I don't... I don't remember all of it. I don't...” She exhales shakily, her expression crumpling. “Sylvie, I don't know who I am anymore.” She catches herself and thinks better of it, adding, “I mean, I know who I am. I know. I

just...”

I press my forehead to hers, my own breath unsteady.

“You’re my sister,” I murmur. “You are my sister and you’re here and for right now, that’s enough.”

She exhales, long and slow, and I feel it when her body finally sags against me, when the fight in her melts away into exhaustion.

Lucian’s presence is there before I even lift my head.

He kneels beside me, his palm pressing gently against my back, grounding me, solid and there. His voice is soft when he speaks.

“I don’t want to pull you away from her, love. But soon, she needs to rest.”

I nod, my hands still gripping Lara’s. “I know.”

Nicole and Rebecca are already moving, removing the bindings and easing Lara from the chair, their hands careful, their magic pressing gently against her skin to steady her, to support her.

Lara doesn’t resist.

She just leans into them, her strength gone, her limbs heavy with exhaustion.

I rise unsteadily, my body screaming at me to stop, but Lucian is there, always there, his arm slipping around my waist before I can stumble, steadying me. I lean into him, pressing my face into his shoulder for half a second, just breathing him in.



It's over. We saved her.

And maybe, just maybe, we will be okay.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:27 am*

Time does not stop for grief.

It does not pause in the aftermath of battle, does not still itself to allow the broken to gather their scattered pieces before the world moves on. It turns, ever forward, relentless in its pace, and those of us who remain must learn to match its stride or risk being left behind.

I have seen many wars. I have lived through countless endings, countless quiet ruins left in the wake of conflicts fought. And yet, I have never seen one end quite like this.

Not with victory. Not with loss. But with something that feels impossibly like both.

Sylvie walks ahead of me, her figure framed by the soft glow of candlelight, the heavy tapestry of night spilling in through the towering windows of our home. Her steps are lighter now, though still weighted by the things she cannot yet name. She is not the same girl who first stepped into my classroom all those months ago, nor the girl who trembled in the face of the truths she was never meant to know.

She is something more.

Much more.

More powerful. More dangerous. More herself than she has ever been—even though it is so far from the person she thought she was meant to be.

I have watched her shed the skin of who she thought she was. I have seen her break, and I have seen her rebuild. And now, as she settles into this life—our life—I see the

quiet beginnings of something she once believed was impossible.

Peace.

It does not come easily. There are still battles left to fight. The Solstice Society is in ruins, but ruin is never as final as one hopes. There will always be remnants. Whispers in the dark, gathering strength, waiting for the moment they can rise again.

And yet, for the first time in decades, I do not feel the weight of inevitability pressing against my spine.

Let them try.

Let them try to end us. Try to use Sylvie against us. Try as they might, they will never touch her.

Sylvie curls into the chair across from me, her legs tucked beneath her, a book in her lap. Her fingers trace absently over the spine, her mind elsewhere, lost in the heavy quiet of the evening. The fire flickers in the hearth, casting long shadows against the walls, warming the air between us.

She is tired. I see it in the way she holds herself, the way she blinks slower than usual, as if trying to stave off the exhaustion pulling at her limbs. I know she has not yet given herself permission to rest.

It is not in her nature.

I move before she can protest, crossing the space between us, lifting her into my arms as effortlessly as all the times before.

Sylvie exhales, the smallest sound of protest escaping her lips before she relents, her

body molding against mine, the tension in her frame easing as I settle us onto the chaise.

"You never let me do anything," she murmurs, the words soft, teasing.

I brush my lips against her temple. "You have done more than enough for this lifetime, love."

She sighs, her fingers curling into the fabric of my shirt. "Lara's still adjusting. She's... struggling. I should be with her more."

"You will," I say, pressing a hand against her back, holding her closer. "But not tonight."

She doesn't argue.

The silence stretches between us, comfortable and unhurried. I listen to the soft cadence of her breathing, the steady beat of her heart, and I know, without question, that I would destroy the world if it meant keeping her safe.

I have never cared for the concept of fate . I have spent lifetimes trying to outrun it, trying to bend it to my own will. But if fate led me to her, I will never curse it again.

She is my undoing.

And I will never seek to be whole again.

Six weeks.

It feels both impossibly long and startlingly short, a stretch of time that barely scratches the surface of everything we've endured, yet somehow, it is enough for the world to settle again. The days have softened, the sharp edges of all we've been through dulled to something more manageable—memories that still linger, but no longer weigh me down so completely.

I wake in a bed that is not mine but feels like home. The air in Lucian's estate no longer carries the weight of ghosts, no longer hums with the constant tension of looming disaster. It is still dark and quiet, ancient in the way only something centuries old can be, but it is safe. It is ours.

Lucian still awakens before I do. It's become a small comfort—rolling over in the early morning light, eyes barely open, just to find him sitting at his desk or perched in the chair by the window, already immersed in some long-forgotten text. He always looks up when he notices me, his gaze lingering, something almost unreadable in his expression before he crosses the room and presses a kiss to my temple, wordless, reverent. I don't think I'll ever grow tired of it.

I don't think I'll ever grow tired of him.

But it's not just us anymore.

Lara is here.

Well, not in this house, not in this space that belongs to Lucian—and me, now—but

she is here, alive, sitting across from me now as I twirl my spoon through my untouched coffee, watching her with quiet contemplation.

We meet at The Raven's Quill every Tuesday morning before class, easing our way back into something that resembles what we once had. She is different, of course—we both are—but there are pieces of her that are still familiar. She still drinks her coffee the same way, still scrunches her nose when she's thinking, still taps her fingers against the ceramic cup in slow, rhythmic beats when she's lost in thought.

And she is still my sister.

Some things never change...

But some things do.

She told Mr. Fallon the truth. Not the full truth—there are some things even the most open-minded mortals and immortals would never believe—but she told him enough. Told him she was the one who hacked into student records, told him that she was not in her right mind, that she had been manipulated, controlled by one of the oldest secret societies in existence. There were consequences, of course, but the Guild stepped in where they could, providing enough evidence of supernatural influence to explain away the worst of it. She's a student again.

And so am I.

The reinstatement process wasn't easy, but most good things aren't. The damage to my reputation was salvageable, and after enough meetings, enough bureaucracy, enough people whispering about me in the halls, I've slipped back into some semblance of normalcy. My classes feel different now, tinged with the knowledge that I will never be just another student, that my purpose here will always be more than textbooks and term papers. But I don't mind it.

Because I'm here. I'm alive.

And for the first time in a long time, that is enough.

Lara shifts in her seat, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear before meeting my gaze. "You're staring."

I smirk, taking a slow sip of my coffee. "You say that like you're not used to it."

She rolls her eyes, but there's no malice behind it, no sharp edge to her voice. She lets me look, lets me study her, lets me pick apart every detail to reassure myself that she is real, that she is here, that she is not some lingering shadow in my mind.

"I'm fine, Sylvie," she says, softer now, her fingers curling around her cup for warmth. "I know you're waiting for me to fall apart, but I promise, I'm okay."

I exhale slowly, leaning forward to rest my chin on my hand. "Yeah?"

She nods with a slow stretching smile. "Yeah."

For the first time in six weeks, I almost believe her. Each day is better, and we're closer to ourselves than we have been in a long, long time.

I reach across the table, letting my hand settle over hers, squeezing lightly. She squeezes back, the barest pressure, but it's enough.

We have time.

For the first time in forever, we have time.