



House of Night (House of Night #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Only she knows the secret of what happened that night ...

Trapped in an upside-down castle, Georgia is met at every turn by a creature as cruel and vicious as his vampire kin. Valen, the cursed lord of the manor, is the monstrous minotaur lurking at the center of Georgia's maze. He stalks her steps, his gaze forever on her as she desperately searches for escape. He wants her memories, memories that are just as lost to her as she is to the outside world.

Valen has no intention of ever letting her go, not when she is the key to his ascendancy to the vampire throne. He desires nothing more than her secrets. Not her entrancing eyes, her soft skin, her coursing blood. Once he breaks her apart and extracts her memories, he'll be done with the mortal who haunts his days and nights, who dances just outside his grasp, who defies him at every turn.

But fate looks different in the light of day, and night can't obscure the truth forever. . .

Total Pages (Source): 27

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Recovered Journal of Dr. Georgia Clark

May 2, Year 1, Emergence Era

Forgetting can be a mercy. I think that's something I remember hearing in the past. The long past—before the plague and the monsters in the night.

My eyes have been open so long they start to tear up. But I can't close them. Not when someone might be coming. No, someone is coming. I feel it in the way my skin prickles in warning, the way the bodies around me begin to shiver, low, fearful moans escaping their throats.

"Don't." Someone to my left whimpers, her pale skin almost glowing under fluorescent bars bolted and caged to the stone ceiling high above us. Her eyes are sunken as her gaze strays to the door. She stares just as I do. Waiting. Black bruises mar her neck, and her shirt has long since been torn to shreds. Her small breasts bear similar bruises, puncture wounds that never fully heal. She makes no move to cover herself. We are far past modesty here in this pit. I think she was a senator. Maybe from one of the Western states. I remember my sister holding up a Christmas card with the woman and her family, all of them grinning while brandishing aggressive-looking guns. Not that those did them much good in the end.

The man closest to the door scrambles backwards, knocking the woman over as he tries to find someplace to hide among the dead or dying farther back in the cage. He's still strong enough to move at decent speed, fresh enough to draw the monster's

attention. That's our only hope—that we'll be skipped over for a nicer meal.

I have nowhere to go, no dark corner where I'll be safe. My back is already to the stone at the side of the cell. It's twenty feet across and about fifteen deep. I counted out the measurements when I first got here, only a couple of other prisoners cowering against the wall as I searched for some way out, some sort of meaning, some way to make order from the chaos of this horrific new world. I did none of those things. I simply measured out the exact size of our doom. Of our coffin. Of the last place in this hell where our souls will remain.

Someone in the haze of bodies mumbles a prayer. I don't have faith in anything, and I'm certain her words don't rise any farther than the ceiling, perhaps falling back down onto us like ash. If I were to pray, it wouldn't be for salvation or even for survival. It would be for vengeance, the only burning ember left inside my hollow shell.

A whisper in the long hallway sends another shiver through the remaining bodies, even the unconscious ones somehow sensing a predator.

Seventy-two steps. That's the average of how long the hall is from the door to our prison to some outer door that I've never seen. I've counted it when a new prisoner is brought, though often they're dragged by our captors. The jailors barely make a sound as they move, the same as the rest of their brethren, so from them I learn nothing. There are other cells, too, ones filled with the same stew of human suffering and horror. Their screams are nothing but white noise now. I can only assume my screams are the same to them.

Still, I wonder where the hall leads. I know I'll never find out. I've been here longer than most. A month? Perhaps more. I don't remember exactly. In any case, it's borrowed time. I lost count like everyone else who tried to keep up by drawing marks on the wall with our own blood. That commodity quickly became far too precious to

waste.

Every new arrival comes in bloody and beaten, their eyes empty and haunted. Horrific stories spill from their lips if they're able to speak. DC is gone. I know that much. Wiped out by the vampires. The newcomers speak of someone they call the "Specter," the leader of the vampire legions. Merciless, he kills and kills—no human survives in his presence.

Fewer and fewer humans arrive. The other political prisoners brought in with me were drained one by one, picked out and finished off. Only a handful remain. Secretary Shaw, Vince, and Sheila—a page from the White House—are still alive. Sheila doesn't speak any more, hasn't said a word since she was brought here a few days after I first woke on this concrete floor. She lies beside me, her body curled into a ball. Vince, once the head of my sister's security, is awake, but his labored breathing evidences a body ravaged by violence. He should've died weeks ago, but he holds on, his eyes opening only when I try to force a morsel of food or a sip of water into his mouth.

A flash of movement outside the bars draws a gasp from several of us. I stare, doggedly intent on meeting my fate with my eyes open. I won't look away from the creatures who turned our world to a graveyard, who took everything from me.

"Here." A voice like the first dusting of snow on violets, soft and fragile. I know it well now. "These are the ones." The vampire stops outside our cell, her long, straight white hair and smooth skin so perfect that the very idea of it defies nature. Before, when I'd see images of friends or even celebrities using too many filters to cover their plague marks, they'd look like this. Unearthly and smooth, devoid of anything that suggests age or breath or frailty. She's that perfection at all times. A doll's face to cover a demon's soul. "He wants three to give as gifts. High ranking, preferably. Do we have any left worth offering?"

The guard unlocks the cage door. He's Blood Dragonis. How do I know that? My head throbs when I focus on the knowledge, the thought disappearing like a snake slithering off into pitch black.

The guard swings the door open. I've seen him before, his pale eyes boring into me as he's killed others. I feel like I knew him before my time in this cage, but I can't quite place him. There's a lot I lost when I was captured and interrogated, my thoughts scraped out of me by torture or pulled from my veins by another of the Blood Dragonis. By Whitbine, the interrogator. Bile rises in my throat at the thought of him.

The white-haired one walks into the cell, her crisp black suit tailored perfectly to her long, elegant limbs. She steps daintily across a small pool of vomit, her silver heels barely clicking as she surveys the room.

Pointing a long finger tipped with a sharp nail, her eyes narrow on Vince. "This one. He was with the president. Close to her."

Her words hit me like a gut punch, grief and rage rising and swirling until I have to take a deep breath just to stay lucid, to stay here. Not back on the night it happened. The night the entire world fell apart. The night I can't remember despite weeks of trying. The torture was absolute, my memory stolen and gone.

I can't let her take Vince. The last vestige of my old life.

"He'll do." She twirls a finger. "Bring him."

I lean toward Vince, shielding him with my thin body as best I can. Black spots swim in my vision at the simple act of sudden movement, my heart pounding and sweat breaking out across my brow as I lift a shaking arm to bar the guard from touching him.

The guard knocks me back, my head cracking against the wall sharply as he lifts Vince with one hand and carries him from the cell. Vince moans, his eyes opening and finding mine as I push myself back to a sitting position. Breathing hard, I don't have the strength to do anything more. He disappears down the hall. Seventy-two steps and he'll be gone forever. Tears prick behind my eyes, but none come.

The ethereal monster toes the body of a woman still wearing bits of military fatigues. "It's still alive. Take it."

The guard is already back, and he grabs the woman and leaves again. No one protests. No one does anything except try to survive.

"One more." She clucks her tongue and turns toward me again, her gaze going to Sheila.

"Hmm." She steps across a few more bodies and kneels with a grace any cat would envy. She gives the slightest sniff, her eyes narrowing. "Already dead." She rises with a perturbed sigh.

"No." My voice barely makes it past my lips in an ugly rasp. I press my palm to Sheila's forehead. She's cold. She must've passed in the last few hours. I'd given her my share of water only yesterday. Or was it two days ago? I don't know, but she's cold now, her body curled in on itself yet unable to find comfort. She couldn't have been more than 20.

A sob catches in my chest, but I bite it back.

The monster turns, her gaze finally fixing on mine. "And who is this?"

"Me." A weak voice carries from the back of the cage. "Take me."

Her head snaps toward the sound, and she moves quickly to it. A spider picking its way across its web.

“I remember you.” The man coughs, a wheezing sound seesawing from his lungs as he sits up. That’s when I realize it’s Secretary Shaw speaking. His voice is cracked and hoarse, but I know his sharp tone.

“Do you?” She lifts him from the floor, dangling him in the air. His brown skin is faded, and one side of his face is deeply clawed and infected, swollen and oozing. The mark of Blood Tantun. “And what is it you think you know about me, dog?” she asks softly. A voice of beauty. A voice of pain.

He smiles, his lips bloody. “You’re one of your boss’s least favorite whores.” He spits in her face.

She throws him against the back wall in a blur, the spittle missing her as she moves like a ghost, so fast it sends alarm bells blaring in my human mind, warning of a danger so visceral I feel myself freeze.

Catching him by the throat again, she squeezes until his eyes bulge and several cracks reverberate from his twitching, struggling body. With nothing but the faintest effort, her hand closes, severing his head in a burst of blood. Again, she steps away so quickly that not a drop touches her. Then she’s standing in the cell’s doorway, her hair still a silken waterfall, her suit unblemished. There’s not a mark of temper on her—no color in her icy cheeks or dead eyes. There’s nothing there.

Then she turns her gaze on me again, and with a tone as cold as Sheila’s body, she says, “I suppose this one will have to do.”

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Recovered Journal of Dr. Georgia Clark

February 1, Year 1, Emergence Era

It's the little things that change the world. Big events on the tiniest of hinges. Nothing more than the right combination of proteins and cells. The details are what promise change. But the smallest minutiae are also what leave us in the dark, stumbling blocks that keep us forever falling into either discovery or failure.

The 72 steps lead to another dark corridor. The lights overhead are closer now, no longer caged away from grasping fingers. They hum away as if they preside over nothing more than an accountant's office or perhaps my old lab. Instead, they illuminate horror.

The concrete floor is stained almost black with old blood. Barefoot, I feel the chill of every spent drop. Crying and suffering echo around me. How many humans are trapped in this underground vault? No, not a vault; a larder. The smell of rot and putrescence is fuller now, hitting me with each ragged breath.

The guard pulls me along. I don't see Vince or the military woman, and the white-haired vampire has already disappeared ahead of us. Mind muddled from the knock against the wall, I can't count steps or memorize the layout. I can only be borne along, my body aching, fatigue in my bones. I know I'm on my way to die. With what's left of my will, I try to yank my arm free from the guard.

He doesn't respond, doesn't loosen his grip, just continues as if I'd done nothing at all. His perfect features don't change. That's one of our many mistakes. Humanity's, I mean. We had no grasp on the eternal, didn't know that endless life was the catalyst for unimaginable cruelty. The sort of malice that, to the vampires, is commonplace. We weren't prepared for it. How could mortals understand the depth of depravity created by the promise of forever? Impossible. A butterfly could sooner understand nuclear fission.

We keep going, moving up stairs and through other corridors. By the second set of stairs I can't catch my breath. When I finally stumble and fall—my ribs blooming with white hot pain as I crash onto the corner of a step—the guard yanks me to my feet and shoves me against the wall.

“Walk.” He snaps his fangs at me, his face only inches from mine. I don't flinch. I can barely breathe.

Then, after swiping his finger along one of his fangs, he jams the bloodied appendage into my mouth, splitting my lips from the force of it. That's when I feel the pins and needles creeping along my skin, burrowing underneath and making a home. Compulsion. I'm too weak to fight it. My blood obeys his. He forces his will into my own, taking over my resistance, my weariness. Like someone dousing a rotten fence with a fresh coat of paint, he drowns out my mind. I'm a passenger in my own body, strapped to the automaton he's made of me. I trudge forward, continuing for more sets of long hallways and screams and blood. More stairs. And finally, an elevator. The freight kind with scraped steel walls and an array of buttons, though none of them bear any marks.

The compulsion drains away, leaving me empty and cold. I sag against the wall as we travel upward so quickly my ears pop and my knees start to give. He cuffs the nape of my neck, holding onto me like I'm an unruly kitten.

“So weak.” He almost spits the words at me, his grip growing painfully tight. “Just like all your kind.”

“Theo would beg to differ.” My hoarse voice still manages to carry in the small space.

His nostrils flare the slightest bit, and he squeezes so hard my neck cracks and streaks of pain race up and down my spine. I sag, his hellish grip the only thing holding me up.

“Don’t speak his name.” He snarls, his fangs bared as he glares at me. “Insolent pig. I’ll enjoy watching the high lord gut you.”

Not a smart move on my part, mentioning the vampire king’s son. I’ve only heard whispered rumors from other prisoners about him—that he was killed, that no one knows exactly how. The elevator doors open.

He shoves me forward, his grip still tight as my limbs flop around, my body torn with the searing pain of everything. Everything . It all hurts. Inside and out. Plowing forward, he passes through two large doors, guards on either side. They don’t even glance at us as we pass.

Inside, the air chills even more, the cold rattling my teeth. The smell hits me again, this time somehow worse. I gag, but my stomach is empty. There’s nothing inside me anymore. I retch all the same, spit flowing in a string from my lips as we move into the king’s cathedral. The high black walls are polished to a sinister glow, light from a dozen huge chandeliers bouncing all around to illuminate the bodies.

Hundreds of them, each impaled on steel spikes that rise from the floor in an orderly pattern.

I try to look away, but they're on either side. So many people, some of whom I probably know. I might remember. But I don't focus on faces. I don't focus on anything. I retch again as the smell of decay eats its way into my mind. For the first time in a long time, I choose to close my eyes.

Voices murmur somewhere nearby, the echo flowing off the stone and muddling through the gore to reach us.

The guard doesn't let up, dragging me along as my body rebels. I dry heave again as my feet squelch through rotten entrails and chunks of skin and hair.

"—isn't something I'm interested in entertaining." Gregor's voice.

How do I know Gregor? How?—

"We still need enough of them to feed on."

I go still, my heart frozen. That voice. I recognize it.

"I don't care about keeping cattle!" Gregor roars. "I care about vengeance! I am owed their pitiful lives, every last one! There will never be enough death to repay what they've stolen from me!"

The guard stutters steps, then regains his balance and keeps going. People are on my left and right. No, not people. Them. The dark cavern is full of vampires, all of them focused on Gregor at the head of the room. He's atop a dais, more bodies spiked on either side of him. And standing a few steps below him, his back to me, is a man. Not a man, I remind myself. I can't take my eyes off him, the blackness of his hair, the pale skin of his hands. A monster.

The guard throws me down at the base of the stairs, pain bursting at my knees as I fall

to the side. Someone beside me grunts, and I force myself back upright onto my aching knees.

“Vince.” I grab his arm and pull him toward me. He’s so light now that even I can lift him, the two of us huddled against each other as the wolves crowd around.

He grunts and opens his eyes, the whites gone yellow as he stares ahead.

“Vince.”

A sharp pain cracks through my skull, and I fall forward again, my cheek smashing onto the stone step.

“Silence, dog,” the guard growls.

I lie there for a moment, the pain paralyzing me.

The room is silent. I let my eyes close only for a moment. The slightest second of respite. And then I open them again and force myself back to my knees.

“My son.” Gregor’s voice is a furious hiss. “My beautiful son. They will die. All of them. I will wipe them off the face of the Earth. They must die.”

“They will. Just some sooner than others,” the monster on the steps says. Valen, his name is Valen . I remember him.

Gregor sighs.

My hazy vision clears somewhat, and I can see the vampire high lord. Sitting on a black throne, his hollow eyes almost glowing in the low light. Gaunt, white skin, blue veins like rivers flowing beneath his pale flesh.

“Washington?” Gregor asks.

“Gone,” Valen says. “Not a single human left alive. I made sure of it.”

The third prisoner, the one in tattered fatigues, moans and covers her face. The guard slaps her so hard in the side of the head she falls to the floor and doesn’t move.

Gregor drums his long fingernails on the arm of his throne. “They’ll run now. Little pigs running and squealing. Filthy beasts. Hunt them down. Drag them from whatever stinking hole they crawl into. Kill them as they killed my son. Kill them all. Spare no one.”

“With the government collapsed, the plague will kill them even quicker. No help from any quarter, they’re low on supplies and what little cooperation with each other they had to begin with has already evaporated.” Valen sounds almost bored. “If that doesn’t get them, your armies will.”

“I want them all. Across every continent. Every single one of them!” Spittle flies from Gregor’s mouth as he yells. “Dead!”

“My lord.” Valen dips his chin. “It will be as you’ve said.”

Gregor stares at Valen, his eyes narrowed. “My spies tell me you executed more humans than any other on the front lines. I chose well when I made you my general.” Click, click, click . His fingernails beat a maddening tattoo. A hammer in my skull slowly sinking deeper and deeper. “This pleases me.”

The monster nods. “For Blood Dragonis.”

“For Blood Dragonis?” Gregor considers for a moment, a slight snarl rising on his blue-tinged lips. “You should’ve been the one to die. Not him. Not my son,” he

growls, rage flashing across his face. “That is what you should’ve given for your blood! Your accursed life for his glorious one!”

The monster only bows again, accepting Gregor’s pronouncement without protest.

Gregor’s ire fades suddenly—a match quickly extinguished. His demeanor turns morose in an instant. “Theo deserves—” He pauses, his gaze dropping for a moment. “You’ve done well, but there is much more to be done. So much more.” His claws curl around the arms of his throne. “Bathing in their blood, in the blood of their children. All of it. This and more.” His gaze scans the room of vampires. “Corvidion and Tantun have served honorably as well. United, we will bring the human scourge to heel. We will crush them.”

Valen turns to the gathered crowd. “All hail the high lord!”

They rejoin him, their voices deafening in the black cavern as they repeat it again and again. When he turns back to Gregor, the sound dies. Abrupt silence reigns as Gregor surveys the room.

His claws retract somewhat as he refocuses on Valen, his demeanor switching yet again to something more lax, verging on indulgent. “As a reward, I’ve brought three choice beasts from the dungeon. These animals are to be awarded to the top generals from Corvidion and Tantun and one for you, Valen. Your choice. All I require is that you make them hurt. Make them suffer as my Theo suffered. Show them nothing but pain and fear and when you finally end them—” His fangs lengthen, “—send them to hell where Theo awaits them with open arms.” Gregor’s gaze rakes past me, his malevolence like a winter draft. Then it returns, his nostrils flaring.

I choke, my throat burning as Gregor appears directly in front of me and hoists me in the air by my neck. “You,” he hisses and brings my face to his. “That traitorous bitch’s sister!” He roars, his fangs long and deadly. “You’re here!”

I claw at his hand.

He throws me down, something snapping in my side as agony lances through me. Broken rib, I think almost clinically. Possibly punctured lung.

“Was it you?” He yanks me up again, hand around my throat, his claws digging into my spine. With a movement too fast for me to track, he bites my shoulder, ripping my flesh as my scream meets the bottleneck of his palm. Then he presses his fingers into the bite as I flail.

He returns his gaze to me, the blackness of his eyes becoming my whole world. “Tell me. Who killed Theo?”

Compulsion. He must’ve mixed his blood into the wound. This compulsion is more than suggestion, far more than the puppet show the vampire put on with me earlier on the walk here. Gregor’s power is magnitudes higher than the guard’s, so much so that my entire body goes limp, every bit of my energy focused on answering his question. I must answer him. I must tell him the truth. But my mouth doesn’t move. No words form in my mind. I ... I don’t know the answer.

“I don’t know,” I say hoarsely.

With a vicious screech he throws me into the crowd of vampires, some of them not fast enough to get out of the way. I land in a heap, my ears ringing. I hurt in so many places. More broken bones. More pain. But I don’t need to stop my suffering. I need to tell Gregor what he wants to know. With a groan, I crawl toward him, my entire being focused on telling him the truth. I feel like I know the answer. Somewhere. Somewhere I have what he wants. Give me another chance . I crawl, my blood streaking the floor as vampires snarl on either side of me.

“If I find out that any of you had something to do with it!” Gregor’s voice rises, the

entire crowd wincing back. “Blood Tantun, Blood Corvidion, or my own —” His gaze cuts sharply to Valen. “I will rid this world of you and every single one of your line.” Teeth bared, eyes wild, he bellows his rage to the ceiling of the black room. Then he turns to me, his roar still resonating as his voice slithers into my ears. “What happened to my son ?”

I convulse, my mind twisting in on itself as it tries to find the answer. Where is it? Theo. Blond hair, cruel eyes—I see him. Standing behind Juno. In the White Hou—the pain expands, filling every cell of my consciousness as I scream. “I don’t know!” My throat tears, anguish in my heart at being unable to answer Gregor. I must give him what he wants.

“Tell me!” Gregor is in my face, his hand gripping my hair.

All I see is the endless black of his gaze. I’d do anything in my power to tell him. It hurts as I can only say, “I don’t know.”

“Were you there?” he asks.

I would turn myself inside out to answer him. To give him what he wants. Again, the words pass my lips as tears well in my eyes at my failure. “I don’t know.”

His screech echoes along the black walls, and I feel blood oozing from my ears. “You know something. You know !” His fangs are so long they graze my cheek as he speaks. “You were captured near the White House. Where my son died. You were there!” He shakes me, some of my hair ripping free as he slams me onto the floor. “You know. Tell me.”

I close my eyes, but when I try to pry back into my memories, tearing through them to find an answer, all I feel is pain ripping me in half. All I can do is scream, ‘I don’t know’ the only words coalescing amidst the shrieks.

“You lie!” Gregor’s eyes swallow me, crushing me in endless black. “You lie!” he thunders. “You will tell me what I want to know.”

“I don’t know.” I can’t stop saying it even though it fractures bone and crushes my lungs. “I don’t know.”

He snarls. “You know nothing. You failed at your task. You didn’t cure the plague. I’m glad, now, of course.” The merciless pits of his eyes are streaked with veins of red. “Your kind will suffer the same fate. Pain and death. Over and over again. You included.”

He rises and turns. The woman cowering on the stairs screams, but the sound is cut off as Gregor digs his claws into her back, then rips her apart. She splits, her torso in his right hand, her legs in his left. Blood splatters across the floor, spraying on me as he throws the two halves down with crushing force. Her mouth is open in a scream, her eyes blinking once more before she goes still.

“Valen!” Gregor barks as he sags on his black throne, his fury crackling through the air like an electrical storm. “Get that creature out of my sight. Scrape every piece of information from her mind and serve it to me. Break her apart. She knows.” His glare is like a dagger in my forehead. “She knows .”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Any scrap you get from her, I want it immediately.” His eyes flash. “If you get nothing, I’ll tear her to pieces myself. Slowly.” He sits back, his body thin and taut, as if he’s fed on nothing but rage. That’s when I realize he’s worn. Tired. Not the invincible creature from some snippet of my disjointed memory.

“If I may, my lord?” Another vampire steps forward, though he stops short of mounting the stairs.

His voice makes my skin crawl, and for one terrifying moment, I think he's speaking in my mind again. Poking and prodding, looking for memories where I have none.

"Yes, Whitbine?" Gregor's ire has faded to a simmering, exhausted rage.

"I feel I'm particularly suited to extracting the secrets from this human. As you know, I've worked tirelessly with her. I could be close to cracking what's left of her memory."

Valen turns toward him, a derisive sneer on his face. "You've gotten nothing. Not a single iota of useful information, and yet you have the audacity to ask our high lord for more time?"

Whitbine's gaze darts to me and then back to Gregor. "I apologize, my lord. But, as I've said, I believe I'm close?—"

"You've learned nothing from her?" Gregor asks. He blinks slowly. "Nothing. She's been here all along. She knows. She knows everything."

"Sire, you've known she was here. You asked me to—" Whitbine pales as Gregor's gaze snaps to him. "You—" He swallows hard and seems to rethink whatever he intended to say. "In any case, she is particularly astute at withstanding my efforts. I haven't had the chance to adequately break her. However, if she were to be placed in my care at all times, I'm certain I'll be able to?—"

"Silence." Gregor slashes a bony hand through the air.

Valen stands with total nonchalance, his gaze somewhere over my head.

"Valen?" Gregor asks.

“If Whitbine truly had any chance of breaking into her mind, he would’ve done so by now. His blood is weak, just as he is.” Valen shrugs and looks up the stairs at Gregor. “However, I serve at your pleasure, my lord. Do with the creature what you will.”

Gregor’s gaze lands on me again. I whimper, faintly writhing as my body desperately tries to find a way to ease the pain.

“No, you’ve had your chance.” Gregor’s eyes narrow on Whitbine, then he turns to Valen. “Take your spoils. Return her to me once she’s broken. I’ll take my time with her then. You will ravage her mind, but keep her in good health. I want her to survive me as long as she can.” He smiles, his thin lips parting to show his yellowed fangs. “Whitbine,” he snaps.

“My lord!” Whitbine bows again.

“Inspect the prisoner weekly. Report progress to me.”

“Yes, my lord.” Whitbine shoots me a sideways look, triumph in his vicious eyes.

Valen, the monster, turns to me, his form blotting out everything else.

Blue eyes. A glassy, stormy lake, gray clouds overhead. I remember him. We were supposed to work together to find a cure. A sharp stabbing pain lances through my head when I think about it. About my work. I see faces—blue eyes, shaggy hair, a friendly smile, more—but they’re blurry. I know them.

Valen strides to me, his cold eyes taking me in with utter disdain.

“Get up,” he snarls.

The vampires closest to me back away, all of them pitiless ghouls. They’re afraid of

him. Of Valen.

I try to push myself to my knees, but my left arm hangs limply at my side. It's broken close to the elbow. Blood trickles along my cheek and drips onto the black stone.

With a grip like iron, Valen grabs my other arm and yanks me to my feet.

I scream involuntarily as he drags me away, my feet scraping along the floor as the vampires part for him. Some of them hiss at me, their fangs bared. My ruined arm drags the ground, and I can't get a full breath. Black spots float in front of my eyes as we pass the impaled bodies. Valen drags me through the viscera and congealed blood, past severed and torn body parts, past organs ripped to shreds. His steps never falter as he bears me away to more torment.

Somewhere in the horror and pain, I pass out. Blessed oblivion. Silence. Night.

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“Where did this one come from?” A voice echoes along a tunnel, miles away from me, only reaching me in hollow, booming sound. It’s cold here. I can’t move.

I can’t open my eyes. There’s something covering my face. It’s claustrophobic, panic rising in my chest, my throat. Where am I?

“Swept up with the rest near Capitol Hill. Trying to escape. Barely avoided the Specter’s blade, but we managed to scoop up a few for questioning.” A woman’s voice, soft and sweet. “It’s the president’s sister. One of the others identified her. She’s the one who was supposed to find the cure.”

“Well, well. High Lord Dragonis will be pleased we caught this little hare.”

“Nothing can please him now.” The woman’s voice goes cold.

“Even so. Ah, she’s awake. Perfect.” The man sighs. “Let’s see what we have.”

The face covering is ripped off, and light stings my eyes. I close them against the glare.

“My name is Whitbine.”

I can sense the man leaning over me, and I open my eyes just a little to see the shadow of his face.

“You and I are going to spend some time together, Georgia. I can admit, it won’t be pleasant. At least not for you.”

My vision clears somewhat. He’s young, his green eyes and pale skin setting off a warning in me. Vampire. The woman behind him moves into my field of vision. I strain against the cuff or chain at my throat to look at her. Long white hair, beautiful face.

“Do whatever it takes.” She stares at me. “When you find out what happened to Theo, come to me with the information. No one else. I want to be the one to tell High Lord Dragonis.”

“You think that will garner favor?” The man stands straight, one of his pale eyebrows rising.

“As I said, there is no favor to be had from the high lord. He’s ...” She trails off, as if thinking better of assigning a descriptor. “We must find who’s responsible.” Her voice drops lower. “If it was someone from within our own ranks, we can’t let recriminations fall on us. Understand?”

“Yes, yes. Let me work.” Whitbine picks something up and presses it between my lips.

I try to spit it out, but my mouth fills with liquid. Sputtering and coughing, I expel some of it. But not all.

“Better.” He presses his cold palm to my forehead and smooths my hair down. “Now, you will tell me the truth. If you refuse, I will hurt you.” He holds up a knife. “It’s simple.”

I strain against the table, trying to free myself from the bindings at my wrists and

ankles. I get nowhere. I'm tied tightly. Shackled in this cold room.

"Let's begin." He yanks up my shirt, exposing my stomach, then presses the knife to my skin. "Did you witness Theo Dragonis's death?"

"I don't know." The answer pops free, compelled from me like pumping water from a well.

He frowns, the white-gray skin around his eyes crinkling ever so slightly before reverting to perfection. "That's an odd answer. Let's see if we can't get a better one." His tone is almost friendly now.

I scream as he presses the knife into my stomach. Skin and tissue, the intestines beneath—he cuts through them with no effort.

He smiles, his fangs lengthening at the scent of my blood. "Don't worry, Georgia. I'm a professional. I know how to bleed you without hitting any major organs. I'm a doctor just like you." He pushes the blade deeper. "You see?" he calls over my wail. "I have all the training. But I need you to be forthcoming. It's the only way this little office visit can be productive. You will tell me what I want to know." The compulsion hits me harder, twisting through my brain like a tangle of snakes.

I fight against my restraints, the white-hot pain of the knife searing into my consciousness.

"Did you witness Theo Dragonis's death?" he asks again.

"I don't know."

He twists the knife, smiling as he does it, smiling even bigger as I scream and scream and scream.

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4

Recovered Journal of Dr. Georgia Clark

January 4, Year 1, Emergence Era

The world is changing. DC seems so far away, but Juno has made it possible, and with it, a whole new way to fight the plague. New lab. New chance at finding the answer. But it also means working with her new political partners. I don't trust them, and I can't for the life of me figure out why she seems to.

"Wake up, bitch," someone hisses.

I groan and open my eyes. My throat is dry and scratchy. I try to ask where I am, but no sound comes out.

"Move!" Someone shoves at my side.

I scream as pain cuts through me, and I fall, landing hard on a floor.

"Oh my god, if you don't shut up I'm going to strangle you with my bare hands!"

I roll onto my back and stare upward at a dark ceiling.

Someone peers down at me over the edge of a mattress. "Do you want them to come for you?"

“Who?” I croak.

“Idiot.” The dark eyes disappear.

I breathe in, past the pain, past the confusion. I’m alive. I have to start there.

The room is dark, but there’s enough light for me to get a decent look around. My neck hurts when I turn, so I just scan with my eyes. It’s a bedroom, the walls paneled in wood, the ceiling high. I’m lying halfway on a rug.

“Where am I?” My throat feels like I’ve been gargling glass.

The person doesn’t answer.

I lie there for several minutes, just breathing and trying to adjust to whatever the hell this is. It’s not the cell. I hold onto that thought. In the cell, I was dead. Here, maybe ... Maybe I’ll live a little longer.

“Hello?”

“Shut—in the most direct of terms—the fuck up.” The bed shakes and settles.

I reach across my body and feel my left arm. It’s in a splint, the limb immobilized and wrapped neatly. I feel along my ribs. They ache, the soreness going so deep I gasp and settle back down.

“I didn’t agree to this.” The voice comes again. “I don’t want you here. You should be dead with all the rest of them.”

The bed shifts again.

“What?”

“Oh, shut up.” The eyes appear above me again. This time I notice dark hair cut short and pale skin.

“Are you one of them?” I whisper.

“Not yet.” He mumbles against the mattress.

“Please tell me where I am.”

The dark eyes roll. “I heard about you. You’re smart. Isn’t that right? A doctor or some shit. If you’re such a genius, figure it the fuck out.”

“Somewhere with the vampires?”

The eyes roll again.

“Do you know where the others are? The people from the White House. J-Juno?” I ask.

He snorts. “Dead. All dead.”

All the air rushes from my lungs. It’s as if he’s punched me, my entire being rocking back on its heels. “No.”

“Yes. High Lord Dragonis wiped out most of them.” He folds his arms beneath his head and rests his chin there. “Then his Specter finished the job. He’s quite thorough,” he smiles admiringly.

“Juno?” I ask again.

“I heard you came from the Black Cavern.” He ignores my question, his eyes smirking. “I’m sure you noticed the bodies, right? What do you think happened to Juno Clark?”

My eyes water.

“Serves her right, when you think about it. I mean, I know she was your sister and all, but she wasn’t a friend to her own kind. Then again, I hate humans, so I’m cool with it.” He shrugs.

“What?” I wipe at my tears and wince. My face is bruised, and I notice two of my fingers are splinted. “You aren’t human?”

“Oh, I didn’t say that. I just said I hate them.” He sighs. “I was waiting for the plague to kill them all, but now, the timetable is moved up. Good news for me.”

“So, you’re human.” I stare at those eyes. What the hell is he talking about?

“So observant.” His tone turns even more snide. “Yes, I’m human, so I know the depths of our depravity. We need to go. Our time is done.” He sighs. “Think how nice things will be once we’re all gone. Peace and quiet. No more war. No more bitching and accusing and fighting. It’ll be like paradise.”

“The plague can’t kill every single person on the planet. Nothing can. It would take?—”

“The vampires can.” The skin beside his eyes crinkles. He’s smiling. “They can ensure humanity dies.”

I realize I’m dealing with someone who’s either violently psychopathic or deeply mentally unwell. In either case, he seems to be quite pleased about it.

He disappears again.

“Just tell me where I am.” I groan and roll over onto my good side—if it could be called that—then push myself into a sitting position. Blood pounds in my ears, and everything hurts. I have to take slow, deep breaths just to make it through. I’m wearing a loose dress, more like a nightgown than actual clothes. I don’t recognize it. Being stripped and dressed while unconscious is the least of my worries at this point.

When I can finally breathe steadily again, I turn my aching neck slowly to see the man lying on the bed, his back to me.

“Where am I?” I grit out.

“Castle Dragonis. Obviously.” He tugs the blanket up to his neck. “You’re a blood consort. Just like me.” He glances at me over his shoulder. “But not like me. I’m first consort. Understand? You’re second. Unnecessary. A spare, if you will. Master won’t want you, especially not in that state.”

“Master? Do you mean?—”

“Valen Aronov Danior Constantin Dragonis. Heir to the throne. The finest of his kind.” He says it all with warmth that quickly fades with his next breath. “Now shut up. I’m tired.”

“I—”

“Shh.” He holds up a hand and clamps it shut. “Close your mouth. Sleepy time, bitch.”

I gawk at him, but in what seems like an impossibly short amount of time, he starts snoring. “I don’t even know your name,” I mumble and grab the side of the bed. With

more effort than anything should ever take, I get to my knees. Then, after doing more deep breathing, I force myself to my feet.

I hold onto the four-poster bed, my body staying together despite all indications to the contrary. Head swimming, it takes a moment to adjust. The man snores louder and flips over to his back. Even in the shadowy room, I can tell he's young. Maybe around 20 or so. Perhaps it's better that he's sleeping. It's not as if he'll be any help.

I scan the room again, looking for anything that I can use as a weapon. But as I lift my one good arm, I realize there's no way I could wield anything. Not like this. I'm thin, far thinner than I've ever been. My muscle mass is gone from my time spent in the cell, and I can barely stand.

I examine my splinted fingers. Who tended my wounds? Something tells me it's not the young man in the bed.

There are two large, curtained windows on the wall to my right. The opposite wall has a door, and the wall in front of the bed has two doors, one of them open to a bathroom. The urge to pee hits me hard, and I wonder how long I've been out. With struggling steps, I make it to the bathroom. Marble floors and walls, it has a giant tub and a rainfall shower. I didn't think anything could put my bathroom at the DC hotel to shame, but I was wrong. After relieving myself, I ease back into the bedroom and go to the window. Pulling the curtain back, I find nothing. No glass. Just a wood casing around a smooth black obsidian wall.

"Underground?" I move slowly, excruciatingly to the next window and try it. The same.

I have no idea if it's day or night. It's discomfiting. So much so that I move a bit faster as I make my way to the first door past the bathroom. Pulling it open, I find a mostly empty closet.

I keep going, my body aching in new ways as I make it to the third door, half expecting to find it locked. It's not. The handle turns smoothly, and I pull it open as the man in the bed lets out an obnoxious snore.

A hallway stretches right and left. Doors line the paneled walls, and flickering lights hang from what I can now see is a stone ceiling. Goosebumps rush along my arms, and I stick to the golden rug running down the center of the floor, my bare feet quieter and warmer there.

Slowly, I ease along. I nudge a few doors open, finding empty bedrooms, each of them lavishly furnished. After the first few, I stop checking and continue toward what looks like a more open area ahead. I have to keep bracing myself against the wall, my head swimming, my heart pounding. A cold sweat covers my skin, the stink of stress and sickness hitting me.

I come out onto a rotunda with a black filigree railing. Looking over it, I see a staircase winding downward, sconces glowing softly to show several floors below. Far ahead of me is more stone, a flat wall that extends up to the ceiling and down into darkness.

There's no light, no hint of a way out. If I truly am underground, how do I get to the surface? I lean against the wall at the top of the stairs, my breath already labored and my ribs aching. Nausea churns in my gut, but I keep going. I have to. There's only one way to move. Down.

I painstakingly descend, my steps silent on the stairs as I keep one hand on the wall. The sconces give off a warm light despite the chill in the air, and I find them a slight comfort. I silently thank each one when I pass it and hope they stay lit.

At the next landing, I find a grand piano, several sitting areas, and more art. A large statue of some Greek hero commands the center of the open landing, his body draped

across a chair, his eyes rolling toward the heavens. A gash mars the stone at his chest, a deadly wound. Macabre but also somehow beautiful, his eyes seem to follow me as I creep past the large piano and into another hallway.

Again, I have to lean against the wall, my hands shaking as I brace myself and take in steadying breaths. My head is spinning now, exertion eating up my adrenaline and leaving nothing in its wake. I'm out of gas.

I slide down the wall despite my efforts to stay upright. It's a losing battle. When my ass hits the floor, I groan and rest my forehead against my knees.

"You shouldn't be here." Valen's voice, cold and curt.

I look up at him. "No shit." The words pop out. No filter. No thought. I don't even have the energy to be startled. If he's come to kill me, maybe it's a relief. Maybe ... Maybe I'm done.

He sighs, irritation in the sound. "Go back to your room."

"Why am I here?"

"You know why." He crosses his arms, looming over me.

"I remember you, you know? I remember you from before."

His eyes flash for a fraction of a moment, then return to their stony color. "From what your jailors told me, your brain is diseased. You haven't been able to tell them anything about your work or what happened to Theo. You're just as useless to me now as you were then."

"Maybe." I grit my teeth. "But I remember you ."

“What is it you think you remember?” He reaches down and takes my arm, hauling me to my feet with ease as I let out a yelp.

“You were supposed to help me.” I can’t stop him from pulling me past the piano and statue. I’m nothing more than a doll to him. “We were going to find a cure. I was going to find it. I-I’m a scientist. A doctor. I was working on?—”

“You failed.” He walks me up the stairs, his grip sure but not painful. “Not to put too fine a point on it—after all, I want you to be able to understand me, so I’ll use smaller words. There is no cure, your people are doomed, and you’re never leaving this castle.”

“That’s not true. I found—” A splitting pain hammers into my temples, and the world seems to flash into black and white, then back to color.

“You found something?” he asks. “What?”

“I ...” I don’t know. When I think back to my research, everything is scrambled. I know I had a lab, had people working with me to find a vaccine, but beyond that—it’s gone. Just like I remember Valen, but nothing specific. Nothing that could help me piece together what happened. I get a flash, but this time it’s of the torture. Of what happened to me after I was captured—not that I remember being captured. I simply woke up tied to a table. That’s when my memory becomes far too specific. Fangs and blood. Whitbine. Questions, so many questions. But I couldn’t answer them then. Just like I can’t answer them now. Whatever the vampires did to me, its effects are lasting. Will I ever know how the hell I ended up like this?

“Too bad you never found a cure. We could’ve used that to lure humans into the blood camps. But I suppose the objective has changed now.” He pauses when I lose my balance, the pain in my head obliterating whatever thoughts I might’ve been having. “Total annihilation works best when there’s no help coming. Nothing to stop

the plague. Nothing to stop us .” He sounds almost bored as he talks about destroying an entire species.

“You won’t win. We’ll fight you. We’ll?—”

“Your military has already been crippled from the inside. We have people everywhere. It was pathetically easy. Truly, humanity should be ashamed.”

“It wasn’t supposed to be that way.” Memories fade in and out. Blood samples. A lab. We tried to find a way to fight the plague. We were working together . “You were going to help us. You were supposed to?—”

“I was.” He gives me a ruthless half smile. “I was going to help you find the cure. Those were my orders. Then I would take it from you, kill you and your friends, and raze your lab to the ground.”

“My friends? Where are they?”

He sighs with irritation. “A smoldering hole in the highway. They didn’t make it far.”

He knows people I can’t even remember, and he knows it would hurt me to learn their fates, yet he tells me with that same bored tone. Horrible, wretched creature. I glare at him, my eyes watering. “You never intended to save us from the disease. You were just using us. Using me.”

“Ah, the chimpanzee finally sees the bars of its cage.” He smirks as we reach the landing.

“Fuck you!” I seethe with all the hatred in my heart. Hatred—it’s all I have left, a mountain of it smoldering and burning me slowly from the inside out.

“Such language, Doctor,” he chides. “I expected better from the would-be savior of humanity.”

“Let go.” I put one hand on the wall to steady myself. “I don’t need your help. I don’t want your help.”

He does, stepping back and watching as I try not to fall, my knees threatening to buckle. Watching, he crosses his arms over his broad chest, the crisp line of his collared shirt mirroring his jawline. He was always beautiful—haughty and derisive—but beautiful. Somehow, I remember that. It makes me hate him even more.

I need to focus on the now. On how to get away. Instead, I ask the wrong question. “Where’s Juno?”

“You don’t remember?” he taunts.

I take a halting step away from him. He follows me in one easy, almost imperceptible movement.

“Tell me what happened to her. Is she alive?” Maybe the vicious man I met when I woke up was lying to me, maybe Juno is alive somewhere. Maybe she’s safe.

“Alive after the high lord found her?” He gives me a flat stare. “What do you think?”

“I think I hate you.”

“Revelatory.” He smirks. “I’m surprised you’d bother to ask about Juno’s fate. You still care for her?” He cocks his head to the side like a cat that’s curious about whatever creature it’s about to impale with its claws.

“She’s my sister .”

“That isn’t an answer.”

I clamp my mouth shut. Whatever he wants from me, I won’t give it.

“Is the chat over?” He feigns disappointment and walks slowly at my side as I retrace my steps.

“Why am I here?”

“You’re my war spoils, apparently.” He grimaces and looks me up and down. “I suppose I’m not doing a good enough job.”

If I could find some way to kill him right here, right now, I’d do it without a thought. The devious half smile that turns his lips tells me he guesses what I’m thinking.

“Your room is to your liking, I take it?” He stops in front of the bedroom door.

I force myself to push off the wall and face him. “I’m not giving you my blood.”

“I think you’re aware that I’m not asking for it.” He steps to me, our bodies almost touching. Looking down at me like this, his eyes have a catlike glow. “It’s mine to take.”

“I’ll fight you.” I scowl up at him. “You’ll never get anything from me. Not freely.”

“As I said, that isn’t an issue.” His hand is on my throat so quickly that I gasp. Then his mouth. His lips lingering at my jugular as he pins me to the bedroom door. “You are mine, Doctor. Every bit of you. I will drain your memories for High Lord Dragonis, and once I have the knowledge I seek, I’ll keep you here to serve me as I desire. That is your purpose. When you’ve fulfilled that purpose, then and only then will I let you die.”

“I’ll kill you.” I try to push him away. He takes my wrist and twists it behind my back, pressing me against him.

“Oh, I do certainly hope you’ll try.” His silky tone is laced with malice.

I shudder as he runs his fangs along my bare throat.

“What a pleasure it will be to watch your efforts, little rabbit.” He releases me so suddenly I almost fall.

I slump against the door, my heart hammering, head spinning.

The door at my back swings open, and I fall. Before I hit the floor, Valen has his grip on my arm again and drags me to the bed, depositing me there before whirling on the rude man from before. He’s scrambled up, his eyes wide as he stares at Valen.

“Gorsky! What are you doing in here?” he yells, his voice low and thunderous.

The man pales. “I wanted to try a different room. See if I like it better than?”

Valen hisses and shoves the man—Gorsky—into the hallway so hard he hits the opposite wall and slides down it. “You are not to enter her room. Ever. Am I understood?” He looms over the man, who looks up at him with a mix of reverence and fear.

“Yes, my lord.” The man drops his gaze. “Apologies, my lord. It won’t happen again.”

“You dare endanger the high lord’s plans?” He takes the man by the throat and slams him against the wall. “I should kill you for this.”

“P-p-please,” Gorsky cries.

With a disgusted look, Valen drops him, then turns and strides away, leaving the man glaring at me as I try to catch my breath.

“Happy now?” He gets to his feet, his dark blue pajamas rumpled.

“No,” I say weakly.

He rolls his eyes and disappears to the right. A short moment later, I hear a door slam.

“What is happening?” I rub the heels of my palms into my eye sockets, as if I could somehow make all this disappear. All I do is restart the headache that’s come and gone in intervals.

Exhausted, I lie on my side and curl into a ball. The air is still, silent. I feel the permanence of the stone all around me, hemming me in. My blood pounds, my heart racing.

I trace the scars at one of my wrists, the marks embedded far deeper than just skin. I’m trapped again. At the vampires’ mercy. Whitbine. His fangs tearing my flesh. I can feel his hot breath at my cheek, his hands— “Stop.” I clench my eyes shut and force myself to think about being somewhere else. A lab. Samples. Running images across a screen while I check pathology. Rubella. I focus on the shape of the virus, the way it invades and destroys healthy cells. Then I imagine smallpox, and after that, different strains of the flu. I keep my eyes closed as my thoughts wander to the Sierravirus. The plague. It’s unusual structure and proteins. If only I’d been able to stop it, to—I groan as a lightning sharp pain crashes through my skull.

No, no I won’t think about Sierravirus. Tears well, and a single one rolls down my cheek. I shiver, unable to fall asleep, unable to think, unable to do anything except

wait and wonder when the next horror will begin.

Recovered Journal of Dr. Georgia Clark

February 13, Year 1, Emergence Era

I can't work like this... That's not true. I can , but it's hard, and I HATE it. I'm completely in the dark. Juno is even further away now. Even better, the first sample—the one that was supposed to turn Juno's Miracle into reality—is garbage. Valen won't budge on giving me another. He's cold and rude and I think about punching him in the face more often than not. Asshole.

“ I didn't think I'd find you out here.” Juno plops down beside me on the bench. “Plants were never your thing.”

“They were.” I shrug. “I just excelled at killing them. Houseplants are way more fussy than most people let on.”

She leans back and reaches for one of the pink rose blooms that hovers alongside the walk. The ground is littered with petals, and the air has a sweet scent mixed with the faintest bit of mildew. The grass is high in a few patches, and tree branches dot the wide lawn.

“I suppose I should get a new gardener.” She sighs and surveys the sunny spring morning, dew still coating the blades of grass.

I stare beyond the black iron fence toward the barricades, the soldiers atop them like

toys at this distance. “I don’t think it matters.”

“It does.” She straightens her skirt, her suit a deep mauve. “We have to give the people hope.”

“How does cutting grass and trimming roses do that?” I doodle in my journal, cell structures and bits of thoughts on how to attack the Sierravirus.

“People believe what they see.” She sighs, her gaze now on the barricades. “If they see a governor’s mansion running efficiently, the grounds kept beautiful, their governor looking shiny as a new penny?—”

“Pushing it with that last part, aren’t we?” I give her a sly smile.

“Oh, hush.” She closes my journal and takes my hand in hers. “You know I’m the hottest governor this state has ever had.”

I can’t disagree. Not with Juno. Not when she’s still optimistic despite everything the world is going through.

“Yes,” she continues, “a new gardener. We used to have an entire crew.” She pauses then, the weight of what she’s said settling on her shoulders.

There isn’t a grounds crew anymore. Not now. Not when the virus rages all around us and strikes down anyone—weak or strong, young or old. The Sierravirus is the indiscriminating hand of Death. The great equalizer. No one is spared, not even people who spend their entire lives creating beauty from other living things.

“You going to the office today?” she asks, her gaze pensive.

“I’m on triage duty this afternoon. Figured I’d get a little fresh air before I head to the

tents.” I watch a yellow butterfly float past, its wings iridescent when it catches a sunbeam.

“I wish you’d stop going.” She pulls her hand back and folds both of them neatly in her lap. Back straight, eyes clear, she’s always ready. Ready for what? I don’t know. Could be a photo op, could be a war of words with an opponent, could be anything. All I know is that Juno has always led the way, no hesitation.

“People need help.” I shrug. “I’d rather be there than just sitting here twiddling my thumbs or getting nowhere in my lab.”

“At least in your lab you’re safe.”

I don’t tell her how dangerous the university has gotten lately, how vagrants have crept into the places where students used to flourish. She worries enough as it is.

“I’m safe in the tents. Layers and layers of PPE—so much that I think I lose a few pounds in sweat every time I go.” I don’t look forward to the suffering, to the inevitable death I’ll witness this afternoon. But I can’t stop trying. I have to help in whatever ways I can.

She looks down at me, her brown eyes only slightly disappointed. “Don’t take any chances. Promise?”

“Promise.”

“All right. I’ve got to get back. Dallas is sending a delegation again.” She sighs. “If they don’t get their shit together, they’re going to fall apart. Infighting over resources like idiots.”

“You’ll straighten them out.”

Another butterfly floats past, this one deep crimson.

“You bet your ass I will.” She gives me a thin smile. “I always do.” Her suit begins to darken.

“Juno?” I blink, unsure of what I’m seeing.

“Hmm?” she asks.

“There’s something—” I point.

She looks down, then meets my gaze again. “It’s nothing.”

The darkness spreads. I realize it’s blood. So much blood.

“Juno!” I jump to my feet. “What’s happened?”

She backs away, her eyes going milky and gray.

“Juno!” I reach for her, following her as she falls backwards, disappearing into an explosion of crimson butterflies.

I jolt awake. Covered in cold sweat, my body trembling, I slowly realize where I am. Not at the governor’s mansion, not even in DC. I’m in Valen Dragonis’s underground castle.

What time is it? I sit up and wipe my brow with my sleeve. My body aches, and now there’s a gnawing sensation in my gut. Hunger.

Pulling the dark blue blanket around me, I wrap myself in it, then get unsteadily to my feet. Disoriented, I enter the hallway again.

I freeze when I see movement. A vampire approaches, her skin a light brown, her eyes shining catlike in the darkness. I step backwards into my room and close the door.

Not a second later, I hear her voice right outside. “I have your breakfast.” Her accent is mixed, somewhat English, somewhat American, and her voice has a lovely tone to it for a monster.

I swallow hard, unsure of what to do.

“Would you prefer I leave it out here?” she asks.

Agonizing moments go by before I find my voice. “Yes.”

“Not a problem. I’m Melody. If you need anything, simply pull the cord beside your bed.” I glance behind me and do indeed see a pull cord.

I wait there, standing against the door. I don’t hear her leave. Maybe she’s still there, fangs at the ready. It could be a trick. No, it has to be a trick. Why would one of them ever bring me food? Why would they serve me? In the cells, they’d have humans—filthy and bloody—bring meager rations and water. The vampires would never stoop so low as to offer us anything themselves.

Fear and hunger go to war inside me. My stomach growls, my knees feeling so weak that even leaning against the door seems precarious.

With a shaking hand, I grab the handle, and with all the quickness I can manage, I wrench the door open. The hall is empty. I sag against the doorframe, relief making me lightheaded as I look down at the tray of food.

Giving up the charade, I drop slowly to my knees and drag the tray into the room,

closing the door soundly as soon as its inside. There is no lock, no way to bar the door, but this will have to do. I simply put my back against it.

A glass bottle of water with a silver top is the first thing I grab. It takes me far too many tries to unscrew the lid, but once I do, I drink deeply. At this point, I don't care if it's poisoned. I just need something in my stomach. Forcing myself to slow down, I take one more swallow then lift the golden lid of the tray. Inside are some simple things—crackers, hard cheeses, grapes, and some hunks of what must be ham. I eat slowly, my stomach aching as the food hits. The tastes are so much stronger, the food like an awakening. Nothing in the cell was ever like this. It's as if I've forgotten what real food is like. Now that I'm remembering, I want to devour every last crumb. My stomach lurches as I reach for the last cracker, and I stop.

Taking deep breaths, I rest the back of my head on the door and focus on my breathing. Saliva floods my mouth, and my stomach cramps.

“No.” I grit my teeth. I can't vomit right now. Not when I'm already so weak. Fuck, I shouldn't have eaten so fast.

I keep breathing, but my stomach gives another warning lurch. Crawling to the bathroom, my body aching and gut twisting, I don't make it to the toilet before everything I'd eaten comes pouring back out. I crawl the rest of the way to the bowl and heave.

It burns, acid in my throat and my mouth, as I purge until there's nothing left. I rest my clammy forehead on the toilet seat for a long while.

When my stomach finally stops cramping, I crawl back to the door. The remaining food is still there, mocking me. I sip the water. Slowly. So fucking slowly it's like I'm being tortured all over again. But this time I take small bites. It takes almost an hour of painstaking control, but I eat a small meal. For the first time in a long time, I

feel almost full.

Still weak, I return to the bed and curl up again. Sleep takes me with ease, like a falling curtain across a dark stage.

I lose time. I don't know how much. Over the course of what has to be a few days, I wake at intervals and often find food waiting for me outside my door. I eat. I sleep. I even bathe.

I get stronger, my body less achy each time I wake. New clothes have appeared in the closet, and the mess from the bathroom is gone. I try not to worry about whoever is coming into my room as I sleep. There's nothing I can do about it, and I haven't been harmed ... yet.

Finding a way out is imperative, but I stick to my room. The thought of running into Valen again is enough to keep me inside—at least for now. But being alone in here is slowly driving me mad. All I do is think. And thinking about the past—the parts of it I can remember—causes nothing but a special sort of anguish. I don't want to relive the horror of it, but I have to.

It's all I have left.

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Recovered Journal of Dr. Georgia Clark

February 23, Year 1, Emergence Era

The lab has everything I could possibly need to find a way to fight the virus. What I'm missing is what I was promised—Juno's Miracle. All I have are unusable samples. If Aang gives me one more dirty look, I might snap. I don't know what the hell Juno is thinking, and it's not like I can ask her. I screamed 'bullshit' at the top of my lungs in the shower this morning like a lunatic. Something's got to give. And soon.

The hallway is even longer than I first thought. I stand outside my room and take deep breaths. I catch more details now—the lights along the stone ceiling, the smooth walls, the paintings and art. Everything is meticulous and clean, not even a mote of dust floating through the air. Despite being underground, it isn't dank here. It's simply still. As if hermetically sealed. The thought isn't comforting.

My body is stronger. My aches remain, but they've faded to the background. No one has bothered me, and I haven't heard a sound during my time in my room. If it weren't for the food and clothes, I might have fooled myself into thinking I was alone. I'm not, so I have to be careful. I don't know if I'm even supposed to be out here.

Sitting and wallowing are no longer options. Not when there's a war being waged somewhere over my head. People are dying. If I can help them, then that's what I

have to do. Even if that means I forfeit my own life. I can't let these monsters win, but I don't know what to do to stop them. Nothing is clear. Nothing is easy.

I wish Juno were here so I could lean on her, or maybe Candice. I blink hard, Candice's face flashing through my mind. No, not her face, the gaping wound in her throat. Candice is dead. That's right. She's gone. It's like I've come across a grave of an old friend, someone I always loved but put away in the recesses of my mind. Discovering her death is a fresh wound, and the bridge of my nose stings with tears. Who else is gone? Who else's grave will I stumble across?

I stop for a long while to gather myself, my thoughts disjointed as fragments of memory wash over me in sharp, stabbing waves. Then the sea is gone and I'm left alone, the water receding, leaving me gasping on the shore.

There's so much I don't know, but one thing I do: I can't stop. Not now. Not until I draw my last breath. Keeping to the wall, I ease along the corridor in the opposite direction of where I went last time. I listen at the first door I come to. Nothing.

Goosebumps creep along my spine as I turn the handle. The door swings open with a small squeak. Inside is another bedroom, much like mine but decidedly empty. The bed is neatly made, everything in here untouched. I close the door and continue along, opening the doors I come to and finding more empty bedrooms.

When I reach the end of the hallway, I turn back and examine the rooms along the other side. It reminds me of a fancy hotel, room after room of exquisitely furnished quarters. Who needs this much space?

I close the last door across the hall from my own room, then give up on searching this hallway. Instead, emboldened, I stride down the center of the corridor to the staircase. Gripping the rail, I stare down at the expanse below. So many floors. They can't be all bedrooms. There has to be more. I look up at the stone overhead—there has to be

a way to escape.

“Venturing out, little rabbit?” Valen’s voice slithers through the darkness.

I white knuckle the rail and try to find him in the gloom.

“I thought you’d never come.” Taunting, his voice seems to come from everywhere all at once.

A cold breath brushes along the back of my neck. I whirl.

He’s standing across the hall, leaning against the wall, his eyes pinning me in place.

I can’t seem to breathe, to move. Loathing and terror twist inside me, both of them trying to win out over the other.

“Melody says you’ve been eating.” He looks me up and down. “Not enough, clearly.”

I grit my teeth so hard my gums ache.

“What am I to do with a skinny little rabbit like you? Damaged beyond repair.” He sighs and crosses his arms over his broad chest.

I find my voice. “You could let me go.”

He smirks. “Not until I’ve gotten every detail for High Lord Dragonis.” He’s on me before I can even blink. “Shall we begin?” He kisses me hard.

Surprised, I open my mouth in a gasp. That’s when I taste blood. His blood.

He pulls back, his pupils huge and haunting. “Tell me what you remember about your

work on the cure.”

A series of images race through my mind—data, the lab, cells—along with a searing pain that rips through me like lightning.

I fall back against the railing. He cages me there, his hands on either side of me. “Tell me what you remember.”

The compulsion grips me, forcing me to speak. “I don’t know.”

“Your lies will not save you from this snare, little rabbit.” He bares his fangs.

I cringe away, but there’s nowhere to go.

“Tell me what you remember.”

The compulsion burns through me, turning my resistance to nothing but ash. “The lab,” I gasp. “The lab and my—” I jerk from the jolt of agony in my skull. “My friends. We were working. We—” I get a flash of blue eyes, intense and full of some nameless emotion. Nothing like the emotionless stare I see right now. “And you. You ...”

“What, rabbit? What about me?” He grips my throat. “Tell me.”

“You were supposed to help. You—didn’t. You—” I cry out as the pain explodes and splits me in half. “You betrayed me!”

He releases my throat and backs away.

I hold onto the rail as nausea roils in my gut. He looks feral, his fangs long, blood smeared on his bottom lip. The same blood he forced into my mouth. I spit on his

perfectly polished floor. “I hate you.”

Something flashes in his dark gaze. “Good.” Then he strides past me and down the stairs. His mocking voice floats up to me. “You can explore all you like, little rabbit. There’s no way out for you. Not now. Not ever.”

For two days, I’ve explored the mansion. At least, I think it’s two days. There are no clocks, no way for me to know the time or the day. This place is a tomb.

“Could you creep elsewhere?”

I startle at the sudden sound.

Gorsky, the rude young man from before, pops up from a sofa in one of the drawing rooms on the piano floor of the mansion. “I’m tired of seeing you sneak around corners and lurking in hallways. Fucking irritating.” He glares at me.

Despite his cold reception, I can’t deny I’m glad to see another person. Even if it’s him.

“What are you doing?” I step into the room, the floor a deep crimson lined with emerald rugs. Flames crackle in a fireplace that’s taller than I am and about six feet wide. Three stone dragon heads grace the mantle, their maws open as if only a moment away from breathing fire across the entire room.

“Reading.” He sighs and settles back down.

I move closer, keeping my eye on him as I settle on a side chair. He pays me no mind, his attention already returned to his book.

“What is it?”

He groans. “Can you just go on your way? I don’t need company.”

I fold my hands in my lap and sit back in the chair. Maybe he doesn’t need company, but I do. Even his.

He looks at me over the edge of the leather-wrapped tome. “You wouldn’t know it.”

“Try me.”

He slides a second book—this one with an explicit cover—from the middle of the antique-looking book. “The Vampire’s BoyToy . Do you know it?”

“I ...”

“Didn’t think so.” He slides it back down.

“Why hide it?” I glance around the empty room. “It’s not like anyone’s here to judge.”

“You’re here,” he fires back.

“I don’t care what you read.”

“Good. Now go away. Haunt some other room.” He flicks his fingers at me.

“No.” I tuck my feet beneath me.

He groans again, but he doesn’t leave.

I take that as a win. The fire crackles, sending out a wall of warmth. The mansion always seems to be cool, though not uncomfortably so. Even so, I’m always cold. The

clothes in my closet range from simple t-shirts to heavy sweaters. I opt for the sweaters and jeans, though I have to cinch them tightly with a belt I stole from my bathrobe. Two layers of socks and a pair of house slippers—no other shoe choices are available—also help to insulate me from the clinical chill in the air. But there's nothing like a roaring fire. It drew me in, and now that I feel its warmth, there's nowhere else I'd rather be.

We sit in silence for a long time. I have a million questions I want to ask him, but if I do, I fear he'll simply get up and leave. So I let him read while I watch the flames.

I'm dozing off when he slams his book shut.

"Go ahead." He rolls his eyes.

"Hmm?" I sit up and rub my eyes.

"Talk. I can feel a logjam of stupid questions all piled up inside you. It's like you're constipated. You disgusted me before, now it's even worse."

"Why do you have such a problem with me?" I fire back.

"Because you don't belong here," he snaps.

"And you do?"

"Yes," he says confidently. "Ask your idiotic questions or don't. Up to you."

"Where's Valen?" I blurt out. It's what's always at the forefront of my mind. The fear of him. I look for him around corners and in doorways. It's been two days since he came at me in the hallway, and I'm always tense for another attack.

“Out winning Gregor’s war.” He puts his books on the table beside him and settles down on the dark blue sofa, his feet dangling off the end.

“The war—you mean killing?—”

“Everyone.” He smiles to himself. “Killing all the humans.”

I swallow hard. “Because of Theo?”

“Yes.”

“Why? I mean—” Pain explodes behind my eyes for a moment when I try to put together my thought.

“Because Theo was his son.” Gorsky looks at me like I’m utterly stupid.

“But isn’t Valen—” The pain threatens again, and I go silent.

“Also his son?” he fills in. “Yes, but no.”

Wait, Valen is Gregor’s son? The spike in my forehead returns when I focus on that fact. Did I already know it before Gorsky said it? I can’t get a grip on my own mind. It’s like some of it has been scraped away and replaced with a mishmash of thoughts. Fragments of knowledge, all disjointed and at sharp angles.

“Theo was his heir.” He waves a hand dramatically, and I notice a bandage at his wrist. “A pureblooded Dragonis heir . Do you have any idea how rare that is? Most vampire births kill the mother and the child. For Gregor to have sired a child like Theo, and for Theo to have lived—it guaranteed their dynasty forever. The other bloodlines plotted against him, of course. Don’t get me wrong. But they knew they’d never be able to topple Gregor from his throne. But now—” He shrugs. “Now, his

legacy is dead. His future is finished. He could live another thousand years and never sire another heir. It's over." He draws his thumb across his throat.

"But you just said Valen is also his son, right?"

"From a human mother." His mouth twists with distaste.

"Oh." I feign understanding.

"Don't get me wrong. Valen is my master. He's going to give me eternal life. I'll be part of his Blood. A Dragonis. A powerful one."

"He promised you that?"

He shrugs. "He doesn't have to. I've been here for months . He and Melody have been drinking from me exclusively." He puffs out his chest. "I'm all they need. You're extra, and from what I've seen, you're also extra useless."

"Because I'm not volunteering my blood for them?"

"Has he fed from you?" he asks, the question propelled with enough force for me to realize he'd been wanting to ask it from the start.

"Um—" I think back to what he did to me at the top of the stairs. He didn't drink my blood. Quite the opposite. "No."

He lets out a small sigh of relief. "Good."

"Does he feed from you?"

"Obviously." He pulls his collar up.

I glance at his wrist. “From there?”

His eyes narrow. “That’s none of your business.”

“I could help. I was—” I shake my head. “I am a doctor. If you’re injured?—”

He snorts derisively. “I don’t need your help.” He stares me down for a long while, then closes his eyes.

He reminds me of a contented housecat, and I’m his plaything. The dying mouse he bats around for fun. “Is there a way out?” I ask.

He simply looks at me, amusement in the slight turn of his lips.

“Like a way to the surface?”

He smirks. “Oh, I knew what you were asking.”

My hands fist. “Then why won’t you answer me?”

“Because you already know the answer. Yes, there’s a way out. No, I won’t help you find it.”

Hope, just the slightest glimmer of it, flares in my chest. There is a way.

“You aren’t going anywhere.” He turns to his side, his gaze on the fire now. “Gregor already gave his orders. You’re here until you spill what you know. Then you’re dead.” He says it with contentment. “Master will kill you, and things will go back to the way they were before.”

I don’t know him. I don’t know his circumstances or what he’s been through or why

he's like this. All I know is that at this moment, I hate him. The sort of hate I thought I reserved only for the vampires. It's spilling over now, my cup too full, the blood red wine forming a river that rises all around me.

"Doctor?" A gentle voice wakes me from my dark thoughts.

I turn my head so fast my neck cracks.

"I'm Melody. Remember?" The vampire stands just inside the doorway, her dark hair roped into a crown on top of her head. Her lips are a deep red, and she wears a navy-blue dress that fits her curvy frame perfectly.

"Yes." I stare, my fight or flight glitching.

"Please come this way." She steps back and gestures toward the hall. "You have a meeting."

"A meeting?" I swallow thickly.

"Yes." She doesn't offer anything else.

"With who?"

No answer, but her demeanor isn't vicious or cruel. She's nothing like Gorsky, at least not on the outside. Inside, she's a monster just like Valen.

"If I say no?"

Gorsky snorts. "I'd love to see it."

"Please." Melody drops her chin deferentially.

Good manners. Southern woman's kryptonite. It goes straight to my Texas programming, getting me on my feet despite the fact that I'm probably marching to a grisly death.

She leads, remaining a few steps ahead as we walk across the rotunda with the piano, then down the winding stairs to a lower level. It's darker down here. I've never ventured this deep, something about the entire area giving me a queasy sensation. It's gloomy and colder, almost damp.

We keep walking past rooms within rooms. Some are closed off, the doors dark and unwelcoming. Others are simply black chasms, no door necessary to keep me out. I stick close behind her as we wind through the mansion. When we stop at a set of doors adorned with blood red stones inlaid on the surface in the form of a dragon, I clasp my hands in front of me to keep them from shaking. My skin clammy, my heart pounding, I find myself wishing for the room with the roaring fire even if it comes with Gorsky's loathsome presence.

"Enter." Valen's voice, several degrees colder than usual.

Melody opens the doors and leads me into a room with similar stone inlay on the high walls, each different images of dragons. At the back of the room is a sitting area with black furniture. A fireplace burns, the flames green and giving off no heat.

Valen, turned slightly toward me, sits before the fire in a wingback chair. The other is occupied, but I can't see who it is.

I glance at Melody. She gives a short bow and retreats, closing the doors behind her. I want to follow her out.

"You haven't fed from her?" That voice, both scoffing and clinical at the same time.

My knees go to jelly. I know his voice. His touch. The feeling of his fangs in my wrist. I flinch back until I'm against the cold door.

"She's weak," Valen says, disdain dripping from his tone. "High Lord Dragonis won't be happy if I kill her before I find out what she knows."

"Ah." Whitbine turns in his chair, his gaze landing on me. "Here she is."

I scramble for the handles. They don't turn. I'm cornered again. I close my eyes, and I'm there again—strapped to the table, Whitbine pulling information from my mind. The same answers over and over until I'm wrung out. Dry of ideas. Dry of life. Nothing more than dust, my tears falling like sand in an hourglass.

"Why so skittish?" Whitbine clucks his tongue. "Don't you remember me?" He smiles, his fangs descending into two sharp points.

"Do what you came here to do, and get out," Valen snaps. "I don't have time for your games."

"Apologies. However, the high lord made clear I'm to be thorough in my review of her memories. He's quite determined to find out what she knows, as am I."

"You had her for a month," Valen's cold condescension seems to chill even the air. "You learned nothing. If you fail to recover what High Lord Dragonis seeks, your usefulness will be at an end."

Whitbine clears his throat. "I will discover what she knows—" He turns back to Valen. "—and whether she's been tampered with."

"What are you suggesting?" Valen's frigid tone has me yanking at the unmoving doorhandles once again.

“I’ve nothing concrete,” Whitbine says quickly. “Just that perhaps something has made her memories unreachable. It could be inadvertent, of course. Trauma or the like. Or it could be something slightly more ... intentional. I’ve yet to?”

“Do go on and bore me with every single way you’ve failed to do your duty.” Valen rises, and Whitbine quickly follows.

“Apologies, my lord.” Whitbine drops his chin in deference.

Bile coats my throat, acid rising as my stomach churns. A cold sweat breaks out along my brow, and I cower as both vampires approach me.

“Make this quick.” Valen glowers down at me. “I have a city to destroy.”

“You may leave her with me, Lord Dragonis. I?”

“And let your incompetence continue uninterrupted and unwitnessed? I think not,” Valen snarls.

Whitbine’s eyes flash with so much malice that I flinch. Then his face returns to its perfect mask.

“Don’t touch me.” My voice shakes, my entire body revolting against the nearness of my torturer.

“Oh my dear Georgia, that’s no way to greet me, now is it?” he simpers.

“Get on with it,” Valen sighs, his expression bored, his gaze somewhere over my head.

“Doctor, let’s begin.” Whitbine takes my wrist.

I scream, horror coating my mind in acid, eating away at my sanity. I can't do this again. I can't go through it. I won't survive it. With a hard yank, I try to free myself, but it does nothing to stop him. Whitbine's too strong. Even when I'm not lashed to a table, he can still overpower me with ease.

He brings my wrist to his mouth, but Valen grabs him by the throat and lifts him from the floor. "She's mine," he seethes. "You may not take from her."

"Ah." Whitbine chokes out. "Understood."

When Whitbine releases my wrist, I fall back, then try to dart away. Valen catches me easily and pins me against the doors.

"Let go!" I scream and fight. I'm not helpless now. Not strapped down. But Valen's grip may as well be thick iron chains. "No more theatrics, little rabbit." He turns to Whitbine. "Do it."

Quickly, Whitbine swipes his blood between my lips, grazing across my teeth. The acrid taste of it invades my senses, and I cry out as it takes hold.

"Don't fight it," Whitbine says. Except it's not just him saying it. It's a command.

Immediately, the tension leaves my body.

Valen releases me and steps back.

"Sit with me." Whitbine leads me to a couch near the fireplace.

It doesn't matter how badly I want to bolt out the doors or even jump into the damned green flames. I can't. I can only do what Whitbine tells me.

“Let’s warm up, shall we?” He settles beside me, his gaze holding mine captive. “Speak only truthfully, Dr. Clark. Now, tell me what’s happened since you’ve been in Lord Dragonis’s care.”

The compulsion is bitter on my tongue. “I woke up here, and there was a man who taunted me. He said we were blood consorts. He was cruel...” I speak for long minutes, going over every detail, every moment I spent waking and sleeping, eating and creeping around the corridors.

Whitbine’s expression changes to amused when I recount how Gorsky wants me dead. I keep talking until I get to the now, to sitting here with Whitbine.

“Has Lord Dragonis questioned you?” he asks.

“Yes.”

“Did you answer him truthfully?”

“Yes.”

His eyes flash. “I see. And how do you feel about Castle Dragonis?”

“I hate it.”

He tsks, his mouth twisting with slight amusement. “Quite rude to speak thus in front of your host.” He cuts a look to Valen. “However, I appreciate your honesty. Now that we’ve gotten a better hold on your memory, let’s go back. Tell me about your work on the cure. Let’s begin when you first came to DC. Let’s begin with your sister’s inauguration.”

I don’t know how long Whitbine questions me. It feels like days. Could be hours.

Could be less. Time doesn't mean anything when I'm under the compulsion, when my entire consciousness is laid bare and sliced into thin strips. Bits of information that Whitbine digests. He's chewed me up many times, the same questions asked and answered.

"But you never found a cure?" he asks.

"I don't know." My head is splitting in half, the pain so great that my entire body shakes from the weight of it. I can't remember. All these questions I can't answer. Whitbine has cut and cut and cut, dissecting my memories over and over again, but still there are things he can't find. Things I don't know. Things that have been stolen from me either by Whitbine or some trauma I can't fully grasp. Were the answers ever in there? I don't know.

"Did you come close to finding a cure?"

"I don't know." Thud, thud, thud . Each beat of my heart is another hammer blow to the spike in my head.

Whitbine nods and looks somewhere over my shoulder. "You see, my lord? This is where I fear the tampering has occurred. She recalls her work—though not in detail—and has completely blocked out any recollection of the cure."

"You've no need to explain your incompetence to me." Valen's voice, low and snide.

"Of course, my lord." Whitbine turns back to me. "Did you use vampire blood to create a cure?"

"I don't know." I shake from the impact, from the agony inside. A pained moan rises in my throat.

Whitbine holds up a clawed finger. “No blubbering. No sound except your answers to my questions.”

Tears well, but I don’t make a sound. I can’t.

“Were you present when Lord Theo Dragonis was killed?” he asks.

“I don’t know.” I gasp out the answer, my vision flooding with black spots. I remember this. I’m close to passing out. The pain has gone somewhere deep now, in my marrow, in places where no human can withstand it.

“Who killed Lord Theo Dragonis?”

“I don’t know.” Just saying the words is like swallowing lava. My blood is boiling, everything inside me screaming and clawing.

“You know the answer, Dr. Clark. Now tell me who killed him,” Whitbine demands.

Like a rubber band stretched too far, my mind snaps. The blackness takes over, swamping me like a murder of crows taking flight. No Whitbine. No questions. No pain. Only me, alone in the velvet dark.

Recovered Journal of Dr. Georgia Clark

March 28, Year 1, Emergence Era

Candice. It's a waking nightmare. Over and over again, I see her. I can't stop it replaying in my head. There's no way out of this, no way to stop what Juno has set into motion. And now my time is ticking away. Gregor's ultimatum is final. There's no way out. Not for me. Not for anyone around me. I'm alone in this knowledge.

Alone.

"T here are three bloodlines. Dragonis, Corvidion, and Tantun. Remember them. Repeat them back to me ." A voice, a warm hand on my shoulder. He tells me the bloodlines and demands I remember them. The splitting pain in my head tells me to forget, but I repeat them as best I can. "Dragonis, Corvidion, and Tantun."

"Doctor." A hand on my shoulder, squeezing gently.

I roar to consciousness, my body seizing as I look around wildly. Whitbine. Where is he?

"He's gone." Warm brown eyes meet mine. Melody. "You were talking in your sleep."

I surge away from her, pressing my back to the headboard. I'm in my room again.

She stands and backs away, her chin down. “I didn’t mean to frighten you.”

My panic, all-consuming for a single moment, begins to ebb. Still, my heart thunders in my chest, and I think I might be having a panic attack. I press my sweaty palms to my cheeks and try to regulate my breathing. My stomach cramps, acid creeping up my throat.

I fix my gaze on the wall ahead, telling myself I’m okay.

I’m okay .

I’m okay .

I’m okay .

I’m back in my room. Whitbine is gone. I’m alive. I’m alive. I’m alive .

I inspect my wrists. No new bites. Only the scars from the old ones. He didn’t take my blood, just another sliver of my sanity. That’s all. Just that tiny concession.

In and out. Slowly. I catch my breath and orient myself. The same walls, same stone windows. I’m not safe, but at least I’m somewhere familiar.

“How did I get back here?”

“Lord Dragonis brought you after the ... interview.”

A dry laugh catches in my throat. An ‘interview’. As if I was applying for a professor spot and Whitbine was the department chair. Nothing more than questions about my interests and what I bring to the faculty. How I see my future, what research projects are on the horizon.

“I’ve brought something to help with your stomach.” She gestures to a golden tray at the foot of my bed. “Toast and the like.”

The old me would thank her. The one who was raised in Texas with a graceful mom and a gentle dad. One with a sister who made sure I minded my manners. A lifetime ago. This me is suspicious. My naivety died in that cell, or perhaps before. As with so many things, I don’t remember exactly when it happened.

“You’re Blood Dragonis?” I ask.

“Yes.” Her eyes meet mine again.

“Have you ever compelled me?” I glance at the food tray. It isn’t the first time I’ve wondered if they’ve been spiking my food with their blood, but it’s the first time I’ve been bold enough—or foolish enough—to ask.

“No.” She doesn’t flinch.

I feel like she isn’t lying to me, but it’s not as if I can trust her. Not her, not anyone in this damned castle. She’s the enemy. Her people are hellbent on wiping mine out. I’ve spent plenty of effort on trying not to think about what’s going on outside these stone walls. Is the world out there burning at Gregor’s behest? My stomach lurches, and I push the thought away.

Melody stands silent as I go through every stage of grief then circle back to self-loathing and fear. She’s never been in my room like this, at least not when I’ve been awake.

“Why are you here?”

“I was instructed to make sure you eat something.” She gestures to the tray.

“By Valen?”

She nods.

I suppose he doesn't want his pet going on a hunger strike, or worse, dying before he gets his precious information. “If I eat, you'll leave?”

Another nod.

I drag the tray toward me and open the lid. True to her word, there's toast, plain white rice, and an ice water.

“Is there anything else that would help you recover?” she asks.

Yes. An IV with fluids. Maybe some Pepto. But I'll be damned if I ask her for anything. Silently, I take a bite of toast, then wash it down with water.

“There.” I glance at her. “I ate.”

With a nod, she turns and leaves, closing the door silently behind her.

As soon as she's gone, I rub the heels of my palms into my eye sockets. The itch of unshed tears, the unbridled rage at being turned into a puppet yet again. I'm broken in myriad ways, but I still feel. Every emotion, every hurt—I feel all of them like they're fresh. It's the worst part of all of this. My emotions. All of them raw. All of them impotent.

It's been two days since the interrogation. I'm finally on my feet again, my mind recovered enough that I can creep down the hallways without jumping at my own shadow. I've run across Gorsky a few times, though I've immediately turned and gone the other way the moment I saw him. Maybe my isolation isn't healthy, but

spending another second with him isn't either.

I've ventured down another level, labeling each in my mind. The top where my room is, I call "Bedroom Alley," the next lower one is "Piano Bay," and lower than that is where I'm exploring now. This is where my investigation will end, because the thought of going down to the room with the green flame fireplace is enough to turn my stomach.

I even found a ballroom on the piano level, the black walls high and wide. Hundreds of people could fit in there with room to spare. The silence gave it an eerie feeling as I hurried to the next set of adjoining doors.

It doesn't matter where I go, I feel like I'm being watched. I don't know if it's paranoia or wisdom that gives me that sensation. Either way, I'm careful to always peek around corners and listen at doors. For being an enormous underground manor, the inhabitants are sparse. I haven't seen anyone save for Melody and Gorsky. Valen hasn't accosted me since the interrogation. I'd prefer he kept it that way.

The hallway on this level is a bit wider than those above, the ceilings rougher, the stone even darker. All the pomp of the upper levels seems to have missed this floor, and I hesitate as I start down the center corridor. The air is damp here, an icy chill whispering across my skin. I pull my makeshift shawl—a blanket from my closet—tighter around my shoulders and venture deeper.

My breath fogs out, the silence eating whatever sounds I make as I pad along in the gloom. Despite being closer overhead, the lights are dim, and some are out entirely, leaving patches of pitch between one faintly glowing oasis and another. There are no doors here, only stone.

I continue, my sense of being somewhere I shouldn't increasing with each step. Even so, I force myself forward, searching for something. For anything. For a way out.

The hallway begins to narrow and makes several turns, a labyrinth that has me worried about losing my way. But there aren't options, only a steady advance toward whatever lies at the end, to the minotaur waiting in the depths.

Goose bumps rise along the back of my neck, and I shiver as I come to another sharp corner. I peek around it, but the way ahead is dark. Far darker than anything in the tunnel at my back. It's as if the light has been swallowed, siphoned down into some black hole.

I peer into the opaque shadow, my eyes straining to pick out the barest hint of detail. There's nothing. It could be a blank wall or a pit deeper than the sea. I have no idea.

"Shit," I murmur under my breath.

The walls take the sound and bounce it around until it, too, disappears into the black. It doesn't come back to me after that.

"This isn't a place for you."

I yelp and spin, then lose my footing.

Valen grips my upper arms and holds me upright, the tips of his fangs glinting in the low light. "You don't know what's hiding in the dark."

I swallow hard as he puts me back on my feet. But he doesn't let me go.

"I was just?—"

"Snooping. I'm aware." He stares down at me, the shine in his eyes particularly predatory. "You've scoured a few floors so far. Find an escape yet, little rabbit?" He smirks.

“Let go.” I step back from him, but not too far. Not enough that I’m in the pool of darkness. “No one said I couldn’t come down here.”

“No one told you not to jump off the balcony either. The danger there is obvious, just as it is here.”

“Shouldn’t you be out doing mass murder?” I flinch at my own words.

“I’ve just returned from a nice trip to Philadelphia. The humans there raised a decent resistance.” He shrugs. “I wiped them out all the same.”

I glare up at him. The hate must show on my face because his smirk only deepens. “Does your heart bleed for them? For all the people your sister betrayed?”

“Don’t talk about my sister.” I fist my hands, rage blotting out my reason, my logic, my fear.

“Don’t talk about the one who started all this?”

“You started this!” I fire back. “You came to her, remember? You offered her a deal. You—” The headache slices through my skull again, piercing me like an arrow. “Fuck!” I press my palm to my temple.

“Don’t overwork your pitiful human mind.” He takes my elbow and pulls me along beside him, leading me from the dark corridor. “It wouldn’t do for you to fall apart before I’m done with you.” He turns quickly, his hands at my shoulders, pinning me to the wall. “Speaking of?—”

“Hey!” I shove at his hard chest.

He strikes at my throat so quickly that I don’t know it’s happening until I feel the

sting, the crush of his lips against my skin.

“Stop!” I’m paralyzed, my skin heating as he pulls from me. I grip his shirt, fisting it as I shove against him. I may as well try to push the ocean away from the shore. He doesn’t let go, doesn’t give me even a hint of softness, of kindness. He only takes. I whimper, a stolen sound that passes my lips. The burning rage that flares inside me turns into something languid, something that swirls lower in my belly and turns me liquid. Shame mixes with my fear, and I tremble at the desire he’s forced into my veins.

He pulls away, then swipes his thumb across his fangs and onto my wounds.

“Don’t.” The only word I can gasp out.

“Don’t what?” he taunts, eyes shining. “Don’t take what I want from you?” He inhales, his lips twitching into a cold half smile. “You betray yourself. Your cunt is slick for me right now.”

“Stop.” I shudder, the truth of his words cutting to my core. “You did this. Y-your bite is?—”

“Poison.” He finishes for me. “One you mortals succumb to every time. One bite, and your body opens for me, your thighs spreading, your cunt weeping.” He inhales again, his eyelids fluttering. “I can taste you, little rabbit.” Leaning closer, he’s all around me. Caging me. Keeping me in his predatory gaze. “I could take it all, and you’d let me. I could fuck you raw, right here, right now, and you’d come harder than you ever have in your pathetic human life. Is that what you want?” He looms over me, his words burning me in licks of flame. “Do you want me to make you scream?” He glances at my lips, then his gaze slides lower along my body.

“Leave me alone.” My voice is weak and trembling. I can’t catch my breath.

His eyes go cold, his sneer returning. “And if I don’t?” His gaze flickers to my mouth again.

I have no answer, no way of stopping him. And that part of me his bite has charmed—that part of me wants him to take me, to shove me against the wall and plunge inside me. It wants his cock, his fangs. Tears spring into my eyes at my own betrayal.

“Going to cry for me?” He grins.

“I hate you.” I force the words out between my clenched teeth.

“Liar,” he coos, his voice sultry. “Never forget what you are. You are available to me at all times. Your blood is mine. Your body is mine.” He backs away from me, the sneer in his voice like spikes in my skin. “Now return to your room like a good little rabbit.” The compulsion takes hold, forcing my limbs into motion.

I want to fight, to scratch his eyes out, to do something, anything to take back even the smallest scrap of what he just stole from me. Instead, my body carries me away from him, his presence receding behind me as I mindlessly climb the stairs. My tears fall in silence, my heart numb, my soul in ribbons.

Recovered Journal of Dr. Georgia Clark

April 13, Year 1, Emergence Era

Blood. All my hopes rest in it. I've studied it for as long as I can remember. I fell off the swings when I was still little, crimson welling from a cut in my palm. I ran home to Juno who was home from college. She went to the bathroom for a Band-Aid. By the time she got back, I'd swiped my blood onto her microscope—didn't even use a slide—and was trying to get it into focus. I just had to see what was inside me, to know what I was made of.

The cord hangs beside my bed, utterly untouched the weeks I've been here. Now, though, I stare at it. Dread creeps through me. It's been days since I've seen anyone. After I returned to my room, Valen's compulsion kept me inside for a long time. Or perhaps it was the fear of him, of what he could do to me with such violent ease.

Now, though, I can't hide any longer. I eye the cord, the end frilly with golden threads, not sure if it's a lifeline or a noose. I suppose it's a bit of both. But at this point, I'm not left with any other options.

I haven't had a period since I've been a captive. My body shut down from sheer stress and the lack of food. But now, one half of the equation has been solved. Eating regularly, I'm healthier now. Still gaunt, still stressed—but I have enough going for me that my cycle has returned. Great.

Staring at the pull cord doesn't seem to be solving my issue. With a resigned sigh, I grip it, the silky rope soft against my palm, and give it a short pull.

Nothing happens. No alarm goes off. For some reason, I'm relieved. Maybe it doesn't work. Or maybe whatever notification it gives is far enough away that I can't even hear it. Either way, I sit and wait, my gaze glued to the door.

In the space of less than a minute, there's a soft knock. "Doctor?" Melody calls. "May I come in?"

"Yes." I tangle my fingers in my lap.

She steps in, her pale yellow dress particularly flattering on her figure. She's a beautiful woman. I wonder how long she's been with Valen. Does she hate having another woman here? I graze my fingers across my throat where he bit me. That wasn't sexual, I tell myself. It was ... a violation.

"Doctor?" she asks.

"Sorry." I wrench out of my musings. "I, um, I'm—" I glance down.

"I understand."

I meet her eyes. "But I didn't say anything."

"Vampires have an acute sense of smell." She has the courtesy to look away. "I should've already thought of this. It's been so long since I've had a menses that it truly didn't occur to me. My apologies. I'll bring what you need within the hour. Is that all right?"

At a loss for words, I simply nod.

Then, as she opens the door, I blurt, “You were human?”

She stops, going preternaturally still. “Yes.” The word comes out softly, like the lightest puff of warm breath.

“So humans can be turned,” I say it more to myself than to her. “That’s what Gorsky is hoping for. But—” A sharp pain slices through my temple. “—vampires are born, too. Right?”

“Yes. It’s rare, but it’s possible.” She steps into the hall, the conversation clearly ended on her part.

She leaves, closing the door silently as always.

The first conversation shouldn’t have been difficult. A woman’s cycle is a common knowledge, a biological fact. Even so, her mentioning the scent thing—I cover my face with my hands. It’s like I’m thirteen again, hiding in a bathroom stall as I feverishly phone Juno. She saved me that day. A knot grows in my throat. I swallow it down and shut away any thoughts of my sister. I can’t go there right now. Not when my hormones are putting me on the edge of a breakdown.

A cramp builds in my abdomen, and I curl up beneath the blankets. It hurts. But thinking hurts worse. So I focus on the physical, on the twisting sensation in my gut.

It can’t be ten minutes before the soft knock comes again. Melody enters and deposits several boxes in my bathroom. “I have a variety for you.” She returns to the door and waits. “Is there ... anything else?”

“Yes.” I’ve been afraid to ask. Afraid of having the daydream cut short with a simple ‘no’. Because a no would be final. A no would break off another piece of me, a chunk I wouldn’t be able to recover.

“If I could get a notebook?” I hurriedly add, “And a pen. Or a pencil. Whatever. Just something I can?—”

“Of course.” Her face brightens, and I swear she seems almost pleased that she can grant my request.

“Oh. Okay.” I kick myself for not asking a week ago as she leaves my room.

I find what could be a lifetime supply of period products in the bathroom and almost collapse from happiness when I spy a bottle of ibuprofen in the mix. Once I’m comfortable, I return to my bed to find a fresh notebook, leatherbound with nicer paper than I’m used to. A set of pencils in a black case sits on top.

With more joy than I’ve felt in a long time, I snatch up the pencils and paper and snuggle down into the blankets and pillows. The first sheet of empty paper is like an undiscovered continent. God, I used to spend hours on my journal, describing my work, drawing out cells or structures. I’d become a first-rate doodler, my mind wandering as my pencil kept moving.

But now as I stare at the empty page, I can’t seem to pull anything from my mind. Not data, not diagrams. Instead of graphs or findings, my pencil begins to scratch against the page with a recounting of Gregor’s dungeon. Of the people who lived and died in it with me. Of my days spent dreading the sight of the vampires, of Whitbine.

On and on I write. My hand cramps. Still, I write. My head aches, the pain expanding past the analgesic effect of the ibuprofen. I ignore it, the words flowing from me. It’s a purge. A regurgitation of horror. And still, I write.

I’ve filled half the journal by the time I can’t feel my fingers. My words turn into jumbles of botched letters. Finally, I stop. The pain in my head has grown so bad that my vision is blurry. I know I’m missing chunks of time, of information. But what I

remember now lives in this book. It's all I have. Cradling it close, I hold onto it like a mother with a small child. It's everything to me, my only possession. A splinter of myself embedded inside it, keeping my fractured thoughts alive for a little longer. Just a little longer.

Recovered Journal of Dr. Georgia Clark

April 22, Year 1, Emergence Era

The lab feels less safe now. There's too much going on, too many factions. The Saints, the vampires, even the CDC—I feel like I'm at odds with everyone when all I wanted to do, all I've ever wanted to do, is end this fucking plague and save lives. Now that Gage is gone, that's one less layer of protection. And with the way Valen's been acting, I don't know if I can count on him to help me or hurt me.

“S till skulking about?” Gorsky peeks his head into my room. “You've been in here for days. I heard you had quite the run-in with Master.” He looks me up and down.

“Get out.” I yank my blankets up to my chin.

He rolls his eyes. “Not my type. Get over yourself.”

“Why are you even here? Just go away.” I've been isolating myself. Ever since Valen ... I don't want to think about it. I clench my eyes shut against the memory of his fangs in my throat. It's been a rough week. And then my period was particularly painful—especially after Melody added that bit about being able to smell my blood. A chill rolls down my spine.

“The master finally fed from you, then?” he asks it airily, but I can feel the anticipation in his tone. He runs a hand over his close-cropped hair.

“Is that why you’re here?” I turn away from him, my gaze on the stone window. “Just go away.”

“Melody is quite good at draining blood. I’m sure you didn’t feel a thing. I never complain, of course. Unlike you, I know my place. I’m here to serve.”

“What are you on about?” I refuse to look at him.

“She’s gentle. That’s all I’m saying. I barely feel the stick when she takes from me. Master likes his blood fresh, and I’m more than happy to oblige.”

“Melody draws your blood for Valen?” I’m confused enough that I meet his gaze again. “He doesn’t bite you?”

His lips press into a thin line as his halfway-friendly mask drops. A glare replaces it. “He drank from you directly?” It’s more an accusation than a question.

Unbidden, my fingers ghost along my neck.

His nostrils flare, an explosive rage roaring out of him. “You fucking slut!”

“What?” I drop my hand beneath the blanket and pull my knees in tight.

“He drank from you? He touched you?” Spittle flies from his lips.

“I don’t know what?—”

“Shut up!” he yells.

I flinch back, my heart thumping a warning against my ribs. Gorsky has never struck me as particularly reasonable, but right now he looks deranged. He looks like he

wants to rip my throat out himself.

“He’s mine,” he hisses. “I am his first blood consort. I provide for him. You’re only here until he gets whatever information from you he needs. After that, he’ll gut you and leave you for dead.”

“You’ve made that clear.” I keep my voice steady despite my very real fear he might try to hurt me. Then again, he hasn’t crossed my threshold. Not since Valen told him my room is off limits. “You can go now.”

Seething, he stares at me for long, tense moments. “Don’t let me catch you outside this fucking room, bitch.”

“I don’t think Valen would like you threatening his prize human.” I don’t know where this bit of bravado has come from, but I indulge it.

His face turns even redder, his fingernails digging into the doorframe. “You’re dead.”

“I’ve been dead for a long time.” I return his glare. “This is nothing.”

Murder in his eyes, he finally backs away and disappears down the hall. With shaking legs, I hurry to the door and slam it shut. For the hundredth time, I wish there was a lock, some way to ensure he—and anyone else—can’t get in. But there’s nothing, and the furniture is far beyond my ability to move on my own. I can’t bar the door. I can only hope Valen’s command that Gorsky stay out will be enough.

“Psycho.” I let out a shuddering breath and crawl back beneath the covers. Gorsky is acting like a jealous lover more than ever. But he raises a good point—why doesn’t Valen drink from him directly? And why did he drink from me ? I’d much prefer a clinical setting where Melody takes my blood. Hell, I’m a decent stick. I’ll do it myself. This is so messed up . I’m literally debating the best way to let Valen

victimize me.

I groan and consider simply staying in this room for the rest of the day/week/whatever. I won't.

This inverted castle beneath the ground doesn't have any answers for me. It doesn't even have a way out—at least not one I've found. But I'm going to keep looking. Not Valen, not Gorsky, no one can keep me from trying to escape. I refuse to give up. I refuse to believe there's nothing I can do.

Hesitating on the stairs, I lean over the rail and peer down into the darkened levels below. There are no lights to tell me how deep it is, no way of knowing where the stairs go, how many circles of hell beneath me.

I stare at the landing two flights down, the same floor where I was taken to Whitbine. That's where I need to go. Steeling myself, I hurry down the steps, past the floor where Valen caught me. Down, down, down until I'm pressed against the wall, cold sweat on my brow, fear rising in my heart like the incoming tide.

Whitbine isn't here, I remind myself. I would know if he were. Melody would've come to get me. Right? Panic sets in, the world caving in around me. I can't catch my breath. My head pounds right along with my heart. I shouldn't be here. I shouldn't ... I clutch the wall and climb a step. My legs go weak, spots invading the edges of my vision. Whitbine is in the darkness waiting for me. He's going to tear me apart to get his answers, ripping everything out as he goes. His fangs in my flesh, his fingers digging through my gray matter. Hot tears roll down my cheeks as I sink to the floor.

"What have we here, little rabbit?" Valen's silky voice wraps around me as he grabs my arm and pulls me to my feet.

"Don't!" I try to yank away from his touch, but I get nowhere.

A vicious slash mars his face, the edges of it puckered and oozing with some sort of gunk. He surveys me with cold calculation. “Pale today.”

“Leave me alone.”

“And let you break your neck on the stairs? I’m not that easy to escape.” He gives me a thin smile that doesn’t begin to reach his eyes.

“I’ll go back to my room.” I shy away from him.

His grip doesn’t change. “No. I don’t need you plotting and scheming the rest of the day away.”

I look more closely at his wound. The cut has almost severed his nose in two across the bridge. “What happened?”

“I tripped. Quite clumsy of me.” He gives me a smirk and pulls me down two steps.

“No.” I freeze. “I won’t?—”

“This way.” He ignores my protest and pulls me across the landing and away from the corridor where Melody led me before.

The décor here is stark, the walls inlaid with the red tile, all of it in dragon motifs. I don’t even realize there’s a door ahead of us until Valen shoves a key into a nigh-invisible hole and pushes through it. It makes sense. The piano level is two above us, and there’s a door in a similar spot. I add notes to my mental map as he leads me through another series of rooms, each of them stuffy and filled with treasures. My heart stutter steps when I realize one of the chambers is lined with armor and weapons.

“Getting ideas, little rabbit?” His smug tone is like a bucket of cold water. He isn’t worried about me grabbing one of the swords or spears, not when he could break my neck with a movement quicker than my eye can follow. “You want me dead?” he asks.

“Yes,” I answer quickly, almost as if compelled. I’m not.

“Maybe you’ll get your chance one day.” He stops and pulls another door, this one sliding to the left and revealing an accordion grate.

My eyes go wide. “An elevator?”

“Always so observant, little rabbit. It’s truly your greatest gift. How did you ever manage to get captured with such a sharp, incisive intellect?” His acid tone is underlain with amusement. He slides the grate back and pulls me into the carriage.

I’m afraid to ask anything else, afraid to give him any reason not to show me more.

“Plotting your big escape?” He closes the grate and slides a lever at the back of the elevator.

When we begin moving upward, I hold my breath. Up. Up .

I feel his eyes on me. I don’t care. He can stare all he wants. I’m memorizing every second of this, every moment, every change in the black walls of the elevator shaft, every stutter of the cables.

When we come to a stop, I sway on my feet.

With a quick pull he opens the grate, then moves forward into the darkness beyond. I can’t see anything. No light, no way through.

I almost call his name. Almost. Instead, I step hesitantly forward. “Where—” I gasp as light explodes in front of me.

Flinching back, I slap a hand across my eyes. But I also feel a breeze, fresh air against my skin. My eyes water. I can’t be sure if it’s from the light or the relief. Outside. I’m outside .

“Come, little rabbit.” Valen’s voice brushes past me. “But be wary of the snare.”

I walk forward, unable to see where I’m going, but moving toward the light. A moth. One who longs to be burned. When the sun touches my face, I breathe in deeply. It’s warm, the air slightly damp as if just after a rain.

The ground is soft beneath my feet, my simple slip-on shoes sinking into the turf a little.

Squinting, I look down to find tufts of grass. Bright green and alive. Saturated with color. A tear drops, falling straight to the ground as I step forward again and again.

My vision finally comes back, and I realize it’s a cloudy day. The sky overhead is a sullen gray, the sun hidden in billowing clouds that threaten rain.

It’s the most beautiful day I can remember.

Valen stands with his back to me, his hands clasped behind him.

We’re in a garden, one that hasn’t been tended in quite some time. Roses grow wildly in beds overcome with weeds. The grass shoots up in clumps and patches interspersed with bits of muddy terrain. A fountain is farther along, no water running through it, though a dragon’s head sits atop it, its eyes grown over with moss. Far beyond the garden, a line of trees blocks out any view of the world except the top of a ridge in

the distance, the cusp of it swathed in low clouds.

The wind, though, is crisper, possibly promising cooler weather. Is summer already over? How long have I been trapped underground? The trees are still green, though some of them are turning golden at the edges. I've lost time. So much of it.

Where am I? I don't recognize anything here. Only sky and earth. And I'm grateful for it. I step forward, weaving around the mud puddles despite being almost overcome with the desire to splash in them. Everything is so open, so wide and free it's almost oddly oppressive. The sky goes on forever. So different from where I've been for the past months.

"This is ..." I spin, my eyes on the sky. "This is wonderful."

"Don't mistake this for kindness, little rabbit." Valen turns his head slightly, giving me his sharp profile. "I need you healthy for the time being."

"I would never make that mistake." I stop and breathe in deeply, savoring everything the wind has to offer. Then I stride past him, dodging around a tangle of vines that have taken over what used to be some sort of arbor. Withered flower blooms hang from it, all of them drooping under their own weight. "Where are we?" It's hard to believe an entire structure is just beneath us. Nothing up here gives any indication of it, except for this ill-kempt garden. "How has no one noticed the castle?"

"When Gregor had it constructed, this was nothing but a field in a fledgling country that he didn't believe would last more than a decade, if that. And, of course, anyone who labored on it was silenced shortly after its completion."

Gregor's had his clawed hand on Washington's pulse since its inception, yet we never knew about him. Or am I being naïve? Did the government know the vampires existed? "So we're close to DC?"

“Does it matter?” he asks, his eyes on me as I wander from area to area.

“I suppose not.” My pants snag on a rose thorn, and I stop to disentangle myself. “I’m not sure why a vampire would need a garden, though.” A memory hits me, or perhaps more of a realization. It almost bowls me over with the force of it. “You can withstand the sun.” I turn to him, my eyes going wide. “You’re the only vampire who can. How do I know that?”

“We worked together before all this. You know that.” He says it with a bored exasperation. “Whitbine seems to have scrambled what brains you had left. Now you don’t remember a damn thing, which then leads to endless inane questions from you. Quite the vicious cycle.”

I cross my arms over my chest. Talking about Whitbine is a sure way to spoil this tiny moment of freedom.

“Go.” He jerks his chin toward the fountain. “Don’t worry.” His gaze darkens. “I won’t let you get far.”

I swallow hard, then trudge away from him. Having him at my back feels like the height of foolishness, but I keep going. I slip in a particularly muddy patch of grass but right myself and hurry until I reach the silent fountain. The basin is filled with what must be rainwater. Green algae clogs the surface and the depths, and tiny tadpoles wiggle their way through the muck. A frog jumps into the upper basin, splashing a little as it disappears.

When I glance over my shoulder, Valen is gone. Even though I can’t see him, I know he’s watching me. I can feel his attention. It’s almost like a touch, like a firm grip on my shoulder or a collar around my throat.

This place must’ve been beautiful once. A long, long time ago. The wind blows in a

small gust, making waves along the surface of the murky water. It's beautiful in its own way. A microcosm. A world of cells and bacteria, organisms and fungi. I used to be part of a world like that, studying it. Now I'm interred underground as it all falls apart.

I look to the sky again, my thoughts wandering. Outside this crumbling garden, the world is still there. But what does it look like now? How many more lives have we lost to the plague? How many cities have the vampires razed in their impossible quest to kill every last one of us?

Rising, I intend to make the most of my time outside. I keep going, moving past the brambles and wildly branching roses and into rows of orchard trees. Rotten apples litter the ground, their scent perfuming the air with sweetness and hints of decay. I breathe it in, my feet moving faster as I search for any lingering fruit on the branches. Emerging from the trees, I stop to catch my breath. Out of shape is an understatement, but I relish the burn in my side. This pain is worth it. I accept it with arms wide open, my face upturned to the murky sky.

Lingering among the trees, I spend long moments just looking at the greenery, taking in all the colors and sounds I've missed. Birds and bugs, bright greens and subdued browns. No harsh gold, nothing gilded, nothing false. Just nature. It heals the smallest of fractures inside me, though the larger ruptures remain.

Movement in the grass catches my attention, and I stand and step toward it. Out from a clump of crabgrass shoots a rabbit, its brown fur perfect camouflage amid the leaves and brambles. It disappears into a bush at the edge of the garden. Beside it is a statue of a kneeling woman.

I pull my sweater more tightly around me, the wind picking up again as I walk over to the statue, bending down slightly to avoid some low-hanging tree limbs. Her hair has streaks of lichen in the crevices, but her face is smooth and unmarred. She's looking

up, her gaze on something above the horizon, her expression calm but also somehow sad.

“Beautiful, isn’t she?”

I jump and whirl. Valen lingers at the edge of the tree branches, his marred face shadowed by the dying light.

“Who is she?”

“Come, it’s time to go.” He holds out his hand. “You’ve had enough fresh air to continue surviving.”

I want to argue, to say anything if it means more time outdoors. But I know there’s no point. Valen has already made clear this little trip isn’t for me, not really.

With one more look at the statue, I turn and walk away, ignoring Valen’s offered hand.

“You wound me, little rabbit.” He matches my pace with ease.

I glance at the injury across his cheek. “Not me, sadly.”

He only gives a smirk in response.

“You should have that looked at.”

“Worried for me?” he taunts.

“You know what? Never mind. I hope it rots your entire head off your body.”

His smirk becomes a half smile, his eyes flashing as he leads me into the elevator. “Not possible, though you have such a way with words. By the way, what part of the Hippocratic Oath is that sentiment?”

“Pretty sure that only applies to people,” I snap back as the elevator begins its descent back into hell. “You’re a monster.”

“Fair point.” He invades my space, stepping toward me as I back away. “Are you saying you wouldn’t help me if I asked?”

My back hits the elevator wall as I stare up at him. He’s too close. I’m trapped.

“I—” My voice creaks to a halt as he leans closer, his lips ghosting against my ear.

“Please help me, little rabbit,” he whispers.

“Stop.” I shove at him.

He doesn’t move, not even the slightest sway of his body. He’s as much stone as the statue in the garden. “Maybe that’s where you went wrong. How you got captured like the foolish little rabbit you are. You were probably helping when you should’ve run. Instead of saving your own life, instead of being smart. But that’s who you are, isn’t it? Hopeful and optimistic all the way to your grave. You and all the rest of your kind.” His voice turns even more bitter, the force of it like a blow. “Will you still think there’s going to be a tomorrow when the dirt is piling on your coffin?”

“Get off me!” I scream.

Slowly, he backs away, his eyes eating me up as the elevator slows to a stop. As soon as he opens the grate, I tear past him, dashing through the hallways. Pausing for only a fraction of a second to grab a knife from one of the tables in the weapons and armor

room. I start running again and conceal it in my waistband as best I can as I find the way to the staircase. When I make it to my floor, I hurtle toward my room, then skid to a stop when I see him leaning against my door, the picture of nonchalance.

Heart pounding, body aching from the exertion, I put one hand against the wall and drag in ragged breaths. If he takes the knife from me, I might cry.

His eyes narrow on me, his gaze scanning up and down my body in an unnerving way. There's no way he can see the knife. It's small and concealed, tucked between my underwear and my hip. When he snaps his focus to my face again, I could swear there's the hint of a smirk on his lips.

"Whitbine will be here tomorrow. Prepare yourself." With that, he strides past me.

Hatred, pure and raw, bubbles in my heart. I can't do anything about it. I shove it down, swallowing it like a child taking its medicine, and return to my room.

Collapsing on my bed, I let myself feel the aches, the small pains that run through me. But I also let myself remember. The smell of the grass, the wind, the feel of stone and dirt and sunlight. There's a way out. I can get back to that elevator, back to the surface.

A slow smile creeps across my lips, and I hide it away, burying my face in my pillows as I mentally retrace my steps all the way to the edge of the garden. To freedom.

Recovered Journal of Dr. Georgia Clark

June 1, Year 1, Emergence Era

Hope. It's the one thread I've held onto for the past few months. Hope for a cure. Hope that once Juno is in office, things will get better. That we'll find a way to stop the plague. But every time I think we're making progress, I realize we aren't. It isn't even two steps forward, three back. It's just three back. The science isn't getting any clearer, and DC is becoming more dangerous. I don't know how long we can hold out, or how long I can hold onto hope.

The door to the elevator corridor is locked. Of course, I assumed Valen wouldn't leave my only known exit from this buried castle open for me. I simply hoped it might happen. No chance. I forced myself to wait two whole days before trying it—as if Valen would somehow be off his guard since I didn't jump at the opportunity right away. Silly of me.

I lean against the door and chew the inside of my cheek for a little while before turning back to it. There's no handle, nothing to indicate a door is even here. Running my hands along the wall, I can barely feel the lines to indicate the opening. The tile inlay is cleverly done to disguise it, the dragon eyes watching me as I attempt to discover its secrets. Then I scour the entire surface with my fingertips until I find what must be the keyhole.

Kneeling, I peer at it, then try to look through it. Only darkness. Damn. Glancing

around again to make sure I'm alone, I pull out my stolen knife and jam it into the hole as far as I can, then wiggle it around. Nothing happens. I'm not a cat burglar. It's not like I have any history of picking locks.

Shit . I sit back on my heels and inspect the door again. The dragon looks back at me, seemingly above it all. I give it the finger. Immature, but also somewhat satisfying.

I need something other than the knife. It's too big to catch on anything inside the locking mechanism—at least that's how I think the lock works. Tumblers and all that. What I need is a bobby pin like in movies. Something I can bend to fit whatever shape the tumbler requires to turn. But where the hell can I find one of those?

I climb to the Piano Level and plop onto the deep emerald couch. It gives me a decent view of this floor as well as the stairs going both up and down, so I tend to perch here when I'm in-between searches. The upside-down castle is its own enigma. Why so many rooms when Valen and Melody seem to be the only vampires in residence? How has no one noticed it's here?

Leaning back, I look up at the black ceiling far overhead. I know that beyond it, the sun is just now rising. I wish I could feel it.

With one more careful look around, I pull my journal from my makeshift tote bag—crafted from a long-sleeve t-shirt I cut with my knife then knotted by hand. It's not great, but it works. If I find anything of use on my explorations, I'll have somewhere to store them while I ferret them back to my room.

My most recent journal page bears a list of experiments I conducted while I was still in Austin. They aren't detailed in my scrawl, but I remember plenty of the particulars of each one. In fact, Austin and everything that happened before we came to DC lives in my mind with relative clarity. It's when I moved to the CDC lab that things get murky. I know people block out traumatic experiences, that their minds build walls

around those memories to keep the person's psyche safe from additional injury. But how could my mind have blocked out months and months of time, a million details? I don't think that's the answer. It's something Whitbine has done to me, siphoning off my memories while I was strapped to his metal table. But if that's the case, then why is he still questioning me? What could I possibly have left?

I don't know, but it all revolves around Juno. Or, I suppose more specifically, Theo's death, which I only know about from the other captives in the cell. I wasn't there. I have no idea what happened to him, no matter how many times Whitbine asks. A warning throb pulses through my temples, and I let that train of thought go.

Instead, I continue my list of studies on the plague virus. Then I draw out its structure again. All exercises in futility. I need a lab. I need blood samples. I need a multitude of things that this ancient castle doesn't have, could never have. Golden tassels? There's a million of them. Electron microscopes? Shit out of luck.

"Ugh." I slam my notebook shut and tuck it back into my bag.

I have to get going. Just knowing there's an elevator is enough to keep me scouring the other levels of this unique hell. If I can access it from some other floor, that's all I need. I have to keep searching. I've gone through every inch of Piano Bay, or at least as far as I can tell. There could be hidden doors like the one to the elevator, so I'll have to go over it all again with a closer attention to the walls. But not today.

With admittedly shaky resolve, I get to my feet and descend the curving staircase. I quicken my pace as I reach the green flame landing, hurrying past the doorway until I hit the steps going ever downward. The light here is sparse, the sconces spaced farther apart and their glow tantalizingly faint. I can't see what lies on the lower level, so I go slowly, one hand on the wall.

When I reach the next landing, I keep moving forward to see if there are more stairs

winding down into the dark, then curse under my breath when I discover there are. But here there are no lights, no way to keep from breaking my neck, and no way to know what I'm walking into.

I back away until I can feel the stair railing again, a lifeline that leads to the brighter floors above. Swallowing hard, I close my eyes and imagine the layout of the higher floors. This one has to be similar. It holds true on the other levels, so it only makes sense this rotunda is shaped the same. I take careful steps, following the path I've tread on Piano Bay dozens, maybe hundreds of times. I take halting steps with my hands out in front of me.

Each step forward feels like five degrees cooler. My skin is pebbled with goosebumps. If I could see better, I'm certain my breath would be puffing out in a steamy cloud. When nothing jumps out, I keep going until I find the familiar corridor opening that leads to whatever rooms have been carved from the rock. Stopping on the threshold, I peer into the gloom. There's a dull light quite a way down the hall, but at least it seems like a straight shot.

I step inside, the air turning stale and dank. Colder now. I wipe my nose with my sleeve. It takes every bit of resolve I have left, but I force one foot in front of the other. If the layout holds true, the elevator shaft might be down this hall. All I have to do is reach it.

The floor is solid, likely stone, but I can't tell. I tread carefully, moving slowly with one hand on the wall until I feel the edge of a doorframe.

I freeze.

A sound. Soft. Like someone whispering. Creeping closer, I press my ear to the door.

I can't make out any words, just a never-ending whisper, as if the person speaking

doesn't take a breath. It raises my hackles, my entire body going tighter than a piano wire. It's unnatural, the tone of it something between a moan and a cry.

I shouldn't be here. I know that now. This was a mistake. I have to get out.

When I step back, my hip brushes what must be the door handle. It creaks, the tiny sound loud in the black hallway.

The whispering stops.

I freeze, staring in utter terror at the door I can barely see. Please don't open. Please, please, please. I'm leaving. I'll go. I'm not here .

I'd take the whispering over the suffocating silence, over the awareness that flows through the air like an electric current.

The handle squeaks as if someone is slowly turning it.

My eyes widen until they hurt. Backing away, I hear the whisper again, but this time it's behind me. The way I came. The way out. The scent of rot wafts to me, the scent of the morgue in medical school, the back chiller where they kept the highly decomposed bodies. The sticky ones left out in the Texas heat or bloated on swamp water. Death.

There isn't a decision. There's only fear that spurs me to run. I take off toward the pale light, no longer caring where I step. I have to get away from that whisper, from the never-ending hiss of god-knows-what.

By the time I make it to the barely-there sconce, I realize it's at the very end of the corridor, which stops in a stone wall face. No elevator shaft. Not even a door. Plastering my back to the rock, I stare into the dark.

The whisper has stopped.

With a shaking hand, I wrest the knife from the inside of my waistband and hold it out in front of me. I never should've come down here. My breath fogs in the cold, stale air, and I can't stop my entire body from trembling.

"Looks like you're trapped." Gorsky's voice creeps out of the blackness.

Was it him? The whispers? "Stay away!" I yell.

"Stay away," he mimics.

I strain to see him in the dark, but I can't. The light is too close to me, too far from him—which means he can see me just fine.

"You really shouldn't be on this level. It's not safe." His taunting voice comes from all around me. "Do you even know where you are?"

"In a dark hall with a fucking nutcase, apparently." I keep my knife in front of me, ready to swing at him if he appears. "Didn't Valen tell you to leave me alone?"

"Master said for me to stay out of your room," he corrects. "Which I've done. I don't disobey."

"You're splitting hairs. He wouldn't want you to hurt me."

"Don't think you ever know the mind of our master." His tone is infused with vitriol. "You have no clue, no fucking speck of thought that could approach what he's doing or thinking. You don't deserve to be in the same room with him, much less in his service!"

“Did he feed you his blood or just the Kool-Aid?” My heart rattles against my sternum, beating wildly as Gorsky’s voice gets closer, louder. It’s awful, but at least I know he’s flesh and blood, not a whisper in the dark.

“This floor is quite special.” His tone is back to normal. Only mildly acidic. “Do you know why?”

“I—”

“Rhetorical question,” he snaps. “It’s special,” he says, continuing, “because it’s where the Dragonis lords would keep their pets, the ones they brought over from Europe when they first arrived here.”

I grip the blade so tightly my knuckles ache.

“By pets I mean their blood consorts, of course. Master prefers we stay up top, but before he ruled the castle, all sorts of humans were kept in these rooms. Gregor preferred pretty young females. Sometimes he got carried away and turned them. Do you know what happens to a vampire who’s turned and not allowed to feed?”

Fingernails—or claws—scratch along the rock walls somewhere ahead of me. Somewhere in the dark.

“Rhetorical again,” he singsongs. “They become husks. Not alive. Not dead. Their flesh rots, their eyes sunken and black. Any light hurts them, even artificial. They must remain in the dark, down here in the depths of the castle. Forgotten, I’m certain. Master would have destroyed them if he realized they were still here. But I suppose he’s been too busy wiping the disease of humanity from the face of the earth.”

“Gorsky—”

“I don’t want to hear your fucking voice,” he hisses.

The whispers begin again, more this time, and I swear it sounds as if they’re coming through the stone wall at my back.

“Husks are ravenous. They don’t simply crave blood. They devour . Flesh. Bones. Everything.” His voice fades, getting farther away as the whispers grow. “Enjoy your stay.”

The cold air goes still again, only my breath stirring it. The whispers get louder, a hissing sibilance that sends horror into my veins. My eyes burn from staring into the dark, but I can’t close them.

“Gorsky?” I whisper.

No response.

When something cold and wet touches my cheek, I scream and take off. Running faster than I ever have in my life, I eat up the grim distance, tearing out onto the landing, knowing that at any moment a skeletal hand will clamp around my throat, my hair, my ankle. I run into the bottom step, then fall forward, slamming my cheek against the corner of one of the higher stairs.

The pain is nothing, nothing at all compared to the terror that sends me crawling upward, pushing myself away from whatever lurks below.

I collapse on the Green Flame Landing, gulping in breaths as I lie on my back, my entire body shaking. Turning on my side, I watch the staircase, fully expecting some horrific creature to round the banister and begin its ascent.

For long minutes I wait, just trying to breathe and stay alert. Nothing appears. No

rotted hand, no whispering monsters.

Once I catch my breath, I get to my feet and back away slowly.

When I bump into something, I scream and lunge forward.

“Whoa!” a woman yells.

“Melody!” I stumble but manage to get my balance as I press a hand to my chest.

“You scared me.”

“What are you doing?” Her lineless face screws up in concern. “Hey, are you all right?” She steps toward me, her hand out. “It’s okay. You’re okay.” Her voice gentles as she moves closer. “Georgia, really, you’re safe.” She pulls me into her arms.

My tears are instant. I don’t remember the last time someone’s touched me with kindness. I break, a sob tearing from my throat as Melody holds me tightly. It’s not lost on me that she reminds me of Juno, and her embrace only adds to the familiarity.

“Shhh,” she says. “It’s all right.”

In that moment, I miss so much. My sister most of all. Juno was the one who always kept me together, protected me. Now she’s lost, and so am I. The bond we had is severed, cut short like the fates with their strings. I’ll never see her again. I’ll never see anyone I loved again.

I yell against Melody’s shoulder, crying and clinging to her. Nothing is right. Nothing

.

I cry. Helplessly. Completely. I haven’t let myself have this. Grief. The sort that blurs

out everything else except the pain that goes so deep you'll never find its root. That dark hallway broke me open somehow, gave voice to my victimization. I let it out. Wailing for myself and for whatever cursed creatures lurk beneath my feet. They're victims, too, after all.

Melody simply holds me, her arms around me as I go to pieces. No judgment, no sound, nothing except her presence. It's what I need. How does a creature like her know what I need? How can I find comfort in her when her people are wiping mine out? I don't know. I don't know anything anymore.

It takes longer than it should, but I get myself under control. My tears slow, and I'm finally able to catch my breath beyond gut-wrenching sobs.

Putting a bit of distance between us, I look up at Melody. The kindness in her ethereal eyes threatens to pull more tears from me, so I drop my gaze.

"Can I do anything to help?" she asks softly.

"Let me out of here?" I sniffle.

"That's not within my power."

I feel like an ass for even asking her, which is insane because, when all is considered, she's just another one of my captors, albeit a nicer one.

"But I can make you some tea?" she offers. "If you'd like?"

I prefer coffee, but I'm not going to turn down any offer that involves caffeine. "Please."

"Sure. This way." She leads me up to Piano Bay, then back through the halls.

When she stops at a wall and pushes it open, my heart sinks. I've been all over this level and never knew there was a door here. What else have I missed?

We pass into a small kitchen with an antique-looking stove and fireplace blackened from use. "Is this ... Do you ..." I look around at the neat space, the clean counters. "I've been wondering where my food comes from. You aren't the one who makes it, right? I figured you had, I don't know, like servants that I haven't seen?"

"We used to have a larger staff, but Valen sent most of them away prior to your arrival. In any case, I'm the only cook." She opens a drawer and pulls out the tea, then lights a fire in the stove with rapidity borne of frequent use. After grabbing a kettle at the copper sink, she sets it on the burner.

"You've been feeding me." I look at her with new appreciation. "I wouldn't think you'd do that."

"Why?" she seems genuinely puzzled, her dark eyebrows rising.

"Because you're ... you're Lady Dragonis, Valen's?—"

She laughs, a beautiful sound I realize I've never heard. It's full-throated and tickles like cinnamon. "'Lady Dragonis'? Where did you get that?"

"I don't know." My face heats as I feel myself wading deeper into my own mistaken assumptions. "I thought you and Valen were?—"

"Valen is my sire. That's all." She's still smiling, and it gives her a much more human appearance. "He turned me, but I'm not with him in that way." She makes a face. "That would be—no, I won't even think about it."

"I'm sorry." I lean against the counter behind me. "I didn't realize."

“It’s all right. I certainly would’ve disabused you of that notion sooner had I known.” She plucks the kettle from the fire right as it begins to sing. “Valen will have a good laugh when I tell him.”

“Valen laughs? Is that just when he’s kicking puppies or?—”

She giggles. “He told me you were funny.”

“He did?” Now I’m curious.

She looks at me as she pours the hot water with utter precision. “I suppose it’s fair to say we don’t know him in the same way. I should probably leave it at that.”

She’s deft at avoiding my questions. I have to give her that.

“If you won’t tell me about him, tell me about you.”

“Milk, sugar, honey?” she asks.

“Yes?”

She cocks her head to the side in question.

“I’m not super familiar with all the ways of tea. Just fix it how you like it.” I wince. “I mean, how you used to like it, I guess.”

With preternatural quickness, she prepares the tea, then pushes through a door at the rear of the kitchen that leads to another hall—yet another area I don’t recall from my exploration. What the hell else have I missed?

She turns left into a doorway.

I follow her inside to find a cozy sitting area, and another door leads to what's clearly a bedroom toward the back. "What's this?"

"My apartments. I hope you don't mind." She places my full-to-the-brim teacup—of which she hasn't spilled a drop—onto the table in front of a deep mauve sofa.

"Thanks." I sit on the sofa and appreciate the room. It's feminine, soft and warm with florals and a coat of white paint that obscures the black stone ceiling. If I didn't know better, I'd think I was sitting in a pretty Victorian house about to have a nice catch-up session with a girlfriend. But this couldn't be farther from the truth.

I know Melody's never been anything but kind to me, but I still don't trust her. I can't. Not when I'm a prisoner here.

She settles beside me, her lavender dress fanning out around her.

"You always dress so nice," I blurt.

"How kind." She glances down. "When Valen said we were moving in here, I told him in no uncertain terms that my entire wardrobe would be coming, or I would quit his company."

I can't imagine anyone giving Valen an ultimatum. He's cold, dead inside. He's a remorseless murderer, but she speaks of him almost fondly. It doesn't match at all with the monster who holds me captive.

"You can always borrow anything you like," she adds.

"Oh, no." There's no way in hell I could wear anything of hers. The colors, the form fitting tops and flowing skirts. I'm about five inches shorter than she is, not to mention I can't match her ample curves. "But thank you."

“If there’s anything you’d like to add to your closet, you can tell me. I did a little research on you—photos from before—and chose comfortable things,” she says without the slightest hint of reproach.

“I’m good.” I look at her with new appreciation—both because she seems to have stalked me and also because she picked out decently comfy clothes for me. “You’ve done a lot for me, and I’ve never thanked you.”

“You don’t have to thank me. I know the situation isn’t exactly ideal.” She sighs and settles back against the cushion.

“That’s putting it mildly.” I take the teacup, spilling a little into the saucer as I bring it to my mouth. Sipping slowly, I appreciate the sweetness of the honey and the brightness of the tea.

“Do you want to talk about what happened?” she asks gently. “What had you so spooked?”

I don’t want to tell her about my exploration of the lower levels, not if it means she’ll restrict me from looking any further. “Nothing. Just, um, this whole place isn’t exactly home sweet home.” The cup rattles against the saucer as I return it to the table. “But I will tell you one thing: Gorsky needs to back the fuck off.”

Her eyes sharpen, and I realize all over again that she’s a predator, same as Valen. “Did he harm you?”

“No.” I don’t know what to tell her. Do I want Gorsky to stay the fuck away from me? Yes. But he didn’t touch me, didn’t do anything to me, not really. And what will she do to him ? Kill him?

“I’ll speak to him.”

“No.” That’s the last thing I need. I have to stand up to him myself. It’s the only way to deal with a bully. “It’s fine. I’m good.”

She doesn’t seem the least bit convinced, her lips pressed into a firm line.

“Seriously.”

After a slight staring match, she relents. “All right, but you tell me right away if he’s a problem. He’ll be dealt with.”

The way she says it—it sounds final. Like final final. I don’t want Gorsky anywhere near me, but I don’t think I want him all the way dead, either.

“Can you tell me about you?” I do my best to change the subject. “I don’t know anything. You’ve been here taking care of me, and all I really know is your name.”

“What would you like to know?” she asks, her expression unguarded.

“Where are you from? How did you meet Valen? Why did he turn you? How? When?” A lifetime of questions sits waiting on my tongue.

“Your tea is getting cold.” She glances at the cup.

“Sorry.” I take it again.

“There’s not much to tell. I met Valen in London in 1744. I worked as a cook for Lord Bowlingbroke.” Her face remains unchanged, but her eyes seem to darken slightly. “A slave, I’d been born in 1717 to my mother, a 12-year-old girl who’d been stolen from her home in Nigeria. She died as I was born. Lord Bowlingbroke was my father.”

I don't have the words. Her lived experience encompasses an entire world of injustice. Pain. Suffering. A living history of sorrow and unwilling servitude.

Setting down my teacup, I hesitantly reach out and take her hand. "I'm so sorry."

She gives me a tight smile. "It was a long time ago."

"Long story short, Valen had business with the lord and was staying at the London house where I worked. On his second night there, he heard me scream." She looks straight ahead now, no emotion on her face. "You see, Lord Bowlingbroke had come to my room—not the first occasion—and I fought him. I didn't win. He beat me to the point I lost consciousness. I was dying when Valen found me. After that, he?"

A bell rings somewhere nearby.

She snaps her gaze to mine, her eyes even starker, and squeezes my hand. "You must return to your room and ready yourself. Whitbine is here."

T his time I'm ready when Melody shows up. Her soft knock still makes me jump, my body tense as I try to force my mind into some sort of calm.

When I open the door to her, she gives me an apologetic look. "Are you ready? They're waiting." She drops her chin, her hands clasped in front of her. Her knuckles are pale, as if she's squeezing hard.

"Are you all right?" I ask.

"I'm fine." She meets my gaze. She's closed off, her freeness from earlier gone and a stony resolve in its place.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing." She straightens and places her hands at her sides.

"You can tell me. I'm pretty sure any secrets you give me aren't going to leave this place." I don't have to say it's because I won't be leaving here alive. I think we both know that.

She walks at my side toward the staircase. "You aren't the only one Whitbine interrogates while he's here," she says quietly.

"Oh." I look sidelong at her. "Valen lets him question you?"

“It isn’t a choice.” She shrugs. “Lord Dragonis must obey the high lord in all things, as must I.”

“No conscientious objectors, then?” I quip, something to cover up the raging of my heartbeat.

“Impossible.” She shakes her head. “The bloodline is absolute. Gregor’s word must be followed. High Lord Dragonis has ordered Whitbine to question all within the upper houses. The high lord suspects everyone and won’t stop until he discovers what happened to Theo.” She wrings her hands. “We are blood bound to do as he commands.”

“Blood bound—what does that mean exactly?” I take the steps slowly, deliberately. This is the most information I’ve gotten on the vampires since I’ve been here.

“Valen is the high lord’s direct descendant,” she says as if it explains everything.

But there’s a vast ocean of knowledge between us that only she can navigate. I’m drowning in what I don’t know.

“Direct descendant, right. So, um, what does that mean exactly?” I prod.

She pauses on the stairs to look at me. “Their blood is bound. Gregor is more than a simple sire, he is Valen’s true father. Anything Gregor wills, Valen must obey or suffer the consequences.”

I cock my head to the side. “If Gregor told Valen to cut off his own head?—”

“Gregor’s compulsion is powerful on all creatures, and even more so on those of his direct line. Though, of course, using that compulsion directly against Valen would be a violative act. Enough to turn Blood against Blood. An act of war...” Her voice dies

off as she glances around. “But yes, if Gregor compelled it, Valen would be bound to obey. But there is plenty that binds Valen to Gregor without the use of compulsion. Gregor’s influence is constant, just as his will.” Her voice is so low now I can barely hear it.

I can assure her there’s no one to hear. I’ve never seen another soul in the castle, except Gorsky lurking here and there. And what hides even deeper, the husks. I shudder involuntarily and ask, “So Valen must do what Gregor says, but if Gregor actually uses the compulsion hardcore to make it happen—that’s bad?”

“Come.” She moves more quickly, taking the stairs with unearthly grace. “We’re only prolonging the inevitable.”

“Is compulsion their only power?” I ask.

“No,” her clipped reply as we reach the level that sends a shiver through me.

I follow. Several times along the way I wish I’d brought the knife with me. I left it concealed under my mattress right beside my journal. It wouldn’t be of much use against Valen or Whitbine, but it might come in handy if I ever make it free of this place. And—a darker part of me whispers—I could use it to end all of this once and for all. If it comes to that.

“My favorite patient.” Whitbine grins from his spot just inside the door, a spider waiting for its prey to walk into its web. Valen glowers at him from deeper in the room, the green flames sending odd shadows across his face. Healed now. The gash is completely gone.

“Open for me.” Whitbine offers me a capsule. “I’ve created a new delivery method to make quicker work of my subjects, though, of course, I’m more than happy to do it the old-fashioned way with you.” His fangs lengthen as he brings his wrist to his

mouth.

“No.” I grab the capsule. My gorge rises, but I force myself to swallow it. There’s no point fighting. This is going to happen—and quite regularly it seems. I’ll survive it the same way I survived it when I was still in the cell.

“There we are.” Whitbine gestures toward the same sofa as before. “Let’s have a chat.”

He goes through the same questions, asking me about my time at the castle. When I recount Valen biting me, his eyes narrow.

“Did you enjoy his bite?”

“No,” I answer quickly. “Yes,” comes out directly after, self-loathing burning like acid in my heart.

“Mixed emotions, I presume?” He clucks his tongue. “Did you ever enjoy my bite?”

“No.” My answer is flat. No other word pushes past my lips. The no is final.

Valen growls low in his throat. “Get on with it.”

Whitbine scowls and continues his interrogation for long moments. My voice grows hoarse as I narrate every bit of minutiae. He listens raptly, his focus never wavering. I hate his gaze on me, his attention, the way he sometimes brushes his hand against mine. “I’d very much like to see this journal of yours.”

“No.” My mouth snaps shut after I spit the word.

Whitbine gives me an indulgent smile. “No secrets between us, Georgia, remember?”

“Yes.” The compulsion forces my answer.

“Good. I’d hate to think something as small as a journal could shake our trust in each other.” He raises his hand to my cheek as if to stroke it, but I shrink back.

He hides his disapproval in another question. “Lord Dragonis hasn’t questioned you again about his brother’s death?”

“No.”

“Curious.” He lifts his gaze to Valen. “My lord, I would think you’d be far more interested in learning the truth of what happened to beloved Theo.”

“Perhaps it’s slipped your mind, Whitbine, but I’m High Lord Dragonis’s Specter. While you’re frittering your nights away playing with your human subjects, I’m wiping them off the face of the earth city by city, town by town. Do instruct me when I should abandon my duties fighting Gregor’s war to return here and ensure this single human—who very well may have no information whatsoever—is properly questioned to your standards.”

The Specter. I should’ve realized it before now—it’s Valen. He’s Gregor’s executioner, the vampire whispered about by all newcomers to the cell. The one whose bloodlust rivals only that of his master. A creeping horror spreads through my veins, and it must show on my face because Valen’s sneer only grows as I stare up at him.

Whitbine bows his head. “Lord Dragonis, I meant no offense.”

“None taken.” Valen’s tone says otherwise. “Now if we’re finished here, I have duties to attend to.”

“Of course, my lord.” Whitbine brushes his hand along mine again, his fingers lingering at the scars he left on my wrist. “However, I would like to ask her about Theo’s?—”

“Perhaps if you’d wasted less time spying on me through your questioning of her, you could’ve done your job and gotten the information our high lord seeks. However, you chose a different path. As such, we’re done here.” Valen is behind me, his presence like a looming wave set to drown me.

“Yes, my lord.” Whitbine dips his chin even lower as Valen pulls me to my feet.

“Let’s go,” he orders.

Though I’m under no compulsion from him, I put as much distance between myself and Whitbine as possible, only slowing once I’m safely back in my room. I’m shaking, but it’s not as bad as before. I feel as if I’ve dodged a bullet, but I have no doubt Whitbine will more than make up for it at our next interrogation. The thought sends me reeling, and I pull out the small dagger from beneath the mattress. Just having a weapon—even one as ineffectual as this—gives me a sliver of comfort. Or perhaps it gives me the slightest sense that I might have some sort of control over my future, however short it may be.

I’m able to move around the next day. Ever since Valen took me outside, I have a better grasp on days and times. It’s as if that brief glimpse of the sky reset my internal clock. I estimate it to be morning, perhaps just after dawn, when I leave my room and head to the stairs. As always, I pause at the top and listen. No sound, not even the faint hum of Gorsky snoring in one of the bedrooms behind me. He’s been quieter lately, out of sight. It’s a good thing. I don’t want to see him. But it also makes me uneasy, especially given his threat. I run my hand along my side, the blade tucked in the pocket of my loose joggers.

Then, as quietly as I can, I move down the stairs. When I get to the Green Flame Level, as I call it, I keep my breathing calm and even. I need to investigate every cranny of this horrible place—and that includes the rooms where I’m interrogated, no matter how much I hate it down here.

The red dragon motif has gotten old. I ignore the jade green eyes staring at me as I creep through the double doors that lead through several rooms. They are all so overdone, dripping with finery. I wonder how old the golden tapestries and ornate chandeliers are. And why would Valen choose to live in a place like this? If anything, he’s somewhat austere in his appearance. I’ve never seen so much as a ring on his finger or any hint of the gaudy style that surrounds him. I suppose I can just add that to my pile of questions.

I keep going. Sticking to walls and ducking behind cases filled with pieces of China or statuary. A hoard, treasures everywhere though no one is here to appreciate them. Only me.

When I get to the room with the green flames, I peek inside. It’s empty. No fire. No Whitbine. I wipe away my sweat mustache and venture deeper, farther than I’ve ever been in this part of the castle. The rooms seem almost endless down here, and there’s no apparent reason for why some rooms are attached by short hallways and others lead directly onto larger areas. There are plenty of paths I haven’t taken, and I expect it would require hours, maybe even days, to explore every nook.

I creep along, taking in the many doors, each of them marked with the red inlay tile. Dragons, all of them watching my every step. I’m scowling at one of the dragons, this one with blue eyes, when I hear voices.

Creeping forward, I edge around a wide couch to another set of doors. One is slightly ajar, light shining through the crack, and I move closer, taking each step with utmost care so as not to make a sound.

“—timing was still wrong. When we got there, Carlotta’s forces were already rounding up humans and executing them.” A male’s voice, but not Valen and not Gorsky. Who’s here?

“I can’t do anything about it. Not now.” Valen sounds tired. There’s a strain in his voice I’ve never heard before. “Gregor demands we kill until no human still draws breath. You know his orders. If Tantun arrives before the rest of our forces, it’s another step closer to the throne for them. They’ll take any advantage they can get. It’s all part of their ploy—pretend to be loyal now and strike at the first opportunity. Traitorous wretches.”

“We have to work out a better solution.”

“There’s no solution to Tantun bloodlust. Or Gregor’s, for that matter. We have to keep pushing.”

A loud sigh. “Have you seen him?”

“Yes.” Valen.

“And?”

“He grows more erratic by the day. More bodies. He’s ordered the servants to put a fresh corpse in his bed every morning. He wants to wallow in blood, to delight in death.”

“And there’s nothing to be done?” the other man asks so quietly I almost miss it.

“Nothing I can do. You know that.”

“And nothing Corvidion and Tantun haven’t tried to do a thousand times over and

failed. Fuck!”

They’re silent for so long that I wonder whether they’re preparing to jump out and grab me.

“What of the dissenters?” the stranger asks.

“I executed those 12 Corvidions three days ago. No Tantun has spoken against the human extermination.”

“One of the 12 was of my line. Druin.” The visitor doesn’t sound angry. Only sad.

“I know,” Valen’s somber response.

More silence. Uneasy and thick, as if there’s something unspoken going on that I can’t sense. I close my eyes, listening hard for any sound.

“And her?” the visitor asks, finally breaking the quiet.

Valen gives a short, harsh laugh. “ Her .”

“Has Whitbine broken her, gotten the information he seeks?”

“No. She’s strong.”

“He’s stronger. A human can’t stand against a vampire, not even a weakling like Whitbine.”

“True.” Now it’s Valen’s turn to sigh. “But she may surprise us all.”

I yelp when something brushes past me.

“Mightn’t you, little rabbit?” Valen’s whisper in my ear sends cold terror washing through me. He grips my shoulder and pushes me ahead of him, through the doors and into a library. “She was too shy to announce herself.”

“Vampire hearing.” The newcomer taps his ear. “You aren’t slick.”

Valen walks past me and takes a seat on a couch, the furniture in this room far different from all the opulent rooms I’m used to. It’s almost homey, except for the two stories of books that span the formidable distance from the doors to the back wall. And the destroyed canvases along the walls. Each ornate frame holds a shredded painting, only hints of eyes and mouths showing in jagged bits.

“Sit.” Valen gestures to an armchair nearby, one of the arms frayed.

I edge to it, keeping both of them in front of me as I sit. “What is this?”

“A library,” Valen answers dryly. “Perhaps I overestimated your perceptive powers after all.”

I grit my teeth to prevent myself from saying anything that might lead to me getting my throat ripped out.

“You just going to take that, Doctor?” The other man asks.

I turn to him, opening my mouth to explain how I don’t have the luxury of talking back when I notice he has two black wings peeking over his shoulders. Whatever I was going to say dissolves away. All I can do is stare.

“Like them?” He wiggles his dark brows, his deep brown skin smooth and perfect. “Fancy a ride?”

“Coal.” The name is a growl between Valen’s teeth.

He grins. “I’m Coal. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Georgia.”

“You know my name?”

He shrugs. “You’re the talk of the Black Cavern.”

I don’t like the sound of that. Not at all.

“Can we actually get to the subject you’re here about?” Valen settles back in his seat, his form relaxed in a black button-up shirt and jeans. He looks almost casual, far different from the usual all-black head-to-toe attire he favors.

“The ball.”

“A ball?” I ask.

“Her hearing still works.” Coal smiles at me again. There’s warmth in it. Unexpectedly so. Then he glances at my wrists. The scars.

I pull my sweater sleeves down quickly and cross my arms.

He has the grace to look away. “Gregor has given orders, and he won’t change his mind. He says it’s to reward the warriors who took Atlanta and?—”

“Atlanta’s been taken?” I blurt, my palms going sweaty. Why does that bother me so much? I’ve never even been to Atlanta.

“Corvidion’s legions—” Valen tips his chin at Coal. “Has the city under its control for now.”

“What will happen to it?” I ask, fearing the answer.

“For now, we’re containing the humans. We have air superiority—the last of the military’s fighter jets don’t pose any real problems for us. Just the bombings they unleash, but they’re manageable. We have plenty of resources underground.”

I look up at the impenetrable stone. Somehow, the conflict seemed far away. I’ve been too wrapped up in my own private hell to let my thoughts venture farther. But the country is at war. Humans are fighting for their lives against impossible odds. The plague. The vampires. I rub my temples.

“Wait, but what about during the day? People can fight back. You can’t come after them. Or are there others like you?” I lift my gaze to Valen.

“There’s only one of him. Be grateful,” Coal says.

Valen gives him a withering look. It’s almost like ... banter. Are they bantering?

That’s when it dawns on me. “Wait, are the two of you friends?”

“Coal is my Corvidion commander.” Valen stands. “Come, little rabbit.”

“Just your commander?” Coal gets to his feet, and I realize he’s even taller than Valen. Hulking and huge, his shoulders corded with thick muscle where the wings stand at attention. “I thought I meant more to you than that?” His teasing tone is more shocking to me than the bat-like wings.

“Shut up and plan the festivities.” Valen’s tone is clipped. “I’m for Atlanta.”

“Wait, you didn’t answer my question.” I call to Coal over my shoulder. “What about daytime?”

He keeps pace with us. “Blood Dragonis has plenty of humans in thrall, not to mention plenty of volunteers who think they’ll be turned into one of us once we’ve won the war.”

“You won’t turn them into vampires?” I ask.

“Not a chance.” Coal chuckles darkly. “But it’s enough motivation to get humans to turn on each other, so that’s what we’re going with.”

For a moment, I thought they were people. That they were friends, creatures with feelings, relationships. But they aren’t. “You’re really out there just killing us? You don’t care? You won’t do anything to stop this?”

Coal cuts a look to Valen, then returns his focus to me. “Why would I?” he asks coldly.

“Because it’s wrong!” I shout, anger heating my face. “Because we aren’t roaches to be crushed under your goddamn boots!”

“Get the ball planned. I’ll return for it.” Valen’s grip tightens on my arm as he walks me through the maze of rooms and out to the landing.

“Yes, my Lord Specter,” Coal’s voice is flat.

“It will never happen. You can’t wipe us out.” I pull against his hold as he marches me back through the rooms and corridors. “There are simply too many of us. We have the numbers. An entire planet full of humans. We?—”

“You had the numbers.” Valen’s grip is relentless as he pulls me up the stairs to Piano Bay.

“The plague hasn’t killed enough of us for you?—”

He spins me to face him, his hands gripping my upper arms. “I’m not talking about the plague, little rabbit. You’re not thinking big enough—a common failing of your kind, one which we’ve exploited to great benefit.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Your beloved sister gave Gregor the nuclear codes, the bombs, the guns—every-fucking-thing he wanted. What do you think he did with that knowledge?”

I stare up at him, not understanding, or maybe refusing to understand. “No,” it comes out in a whisper.

“Oh, yes.” His eyes bore into me. “We can use fangs or we can use nuclear warheads. It doesn’t matter. In the end, humanity is fucking done. Paris, Tokyo, Jakarta, London, entire swaths of China—wiped out. Obliterated before they even knew what was coming. It was all too easy.” The icy cruelty in his words hits me like a fist.

“No.” I shake my head, my vision blurring. “That’s not possible. There’s no way. Juno would never?—”

“We aren’t mobilizing to the west. Do you know why?”

I don’t want to hear any more, don’t want to believe it. “No.”

“Because Los Angeles is gone .” His grip is so tight it hurts. “That’s how far Gregor got before someone at the Pentagon figured out a way to circumvent him. He’s murdered millions, maybe billions, and he’s given orders that we are not to stop. Every vampire in the world obeys his command.”

“Including you?” Hot tears roll down my cheeks.

“ Especially me,” he snarls. “It’s best you remember that.”

My breath catches in my throat, my mind shorting out at the sheer horror of it. How many people? How many?

My chin trembles as he releases me and stalks away, disappearing into the gloom of the level below.

12

Recovered Journal of Dr. Georgia Clark

January 11, Year 1, Emergence Era

I can't sleep. I keep thinking about Juno. About how she's changed so much. There's a million miles of distance between us now. I hardly see her anymore. No more family dinners downstairs, at least not with her. She's too busy. Or maybe she's avoiding me. I passed her on the front steps, and I thought for just a second that she would keep going, would pretend she didn't see me. Of course she didn't. She wouldn't do something like that. So why do I keep thinking about it?

"I haven't been up here for quite some time." Melody scans the garden, moonlight turning everything into silver and shadows. "I'm sorry I couldn't bring you during the day."

She'd come to my room earlier, her soft knock announcing her arrival. Apparently, Valen ordered her to take the 'little rabbit' out for some fresh air while he's away.

I hate him more every single moment, with every breath I take. I wish he could feel it, the way I despise him. Maybe it's best he's been gone for five days or so, by my count. Though I can't imagine how Atlanta is faring right now. When my mind strays to it, to the things Valen told me about the new world, I turn inward. I spend hours writing in my journal, filling every bit of space with the things I remember. With notes about Sierravirus, small sketches of faces I remember but can't name, and my thoughts—but only the ones I feel safe enough to write down. I can't stomach the

notion of Whitbine getting his hands on my deepest thoughts, the ones I hope I've managed to keep hidden from him despite his compulsion. I have to cling to those secret parts of me, the only bits of my consciousness I can still call mine.

"Georgia," Melody turns to me, the silvery light shining on her dark hair. "Please don't run. I wouldn't want to have to ..." She lets the sentence fade, and I don't have to do much imagining to know she'd hunt me down if I strayed.

"Not on your watch." I nod. "Don't worry." I don't fear what she'd do to me if she caught me. I'm more worried about her disappointment. As much as I refuse to trust anyone in this special pit of hell, I have to admit she's grown on me. Her quiet way of meeting my needs, her ability to sense when I need space or comfort—she's nothing like Valen, nothing like any of the vampires I've met. I want to put every one of their kind into a box, pigeonhole them under a sign marked 'EVIL' in no uncertain terms. Melody, though, has made that far more difficult than it should be. She's too human, and if I'm being honest with myself, she reminds me too much of Juno, the Juno who helped raise me and made me feel loved when I felt like nothing more than an abandoned stray.

"Thank you for understanding." Melody walks into the gloom, her form visible but unobtrusive.

I wander forward, drawn back to the silent fountain, its waters stagnant but also teeming with life. Sitting on the mossy edge, I stare at the reflection of the sky, my eyes becoming better adjusted with each passing moment. Wherever we are, I can see plenty of stars. We must be far from any city—that, or whatever town we're near doesn't have power. Not uncommon. Once the plague hit with full force, plenty of cities collapsed. Then they reformed in loose collectives or allowed the federal government to step in and impose a bare bones sort of order. In the worst scenarios, people became lawless and violent. Leaders emerged—some warlords, some actually concerned for the greater good. A mixed bag of ideals and monarchies, democracies

and dictatorships.

Austin was different. We had power more often than not, other services, too. All because of Juno. She kept civilization as intact as possible, used federal resources to maintain the rule of law, and set up food and medicine banks. Our hospital was up and running even in the darkest days of the plague, when the bodies piled up in tractor trailers and then the streets. When the crematoriums were running around the clock and the smoke from the open burn pit beyond the city's edge darkened the skies. Juno kept order, kept the people moving toward hope. She saved lives. Countless lives.

"Why?" I whisper to her, to myself. Why did she accept Gregor's offer? Access to vampire blood couldn't have been enough reason. My work in the lab was fruitless. I never found the cure, never found anything to help save humanity. If I had, we wouldn't be here right now. Maybe her misplaced faith in my ability was her true downfall.

She believed in me. I failed. And now the world is burning, Juno's dead, and I'm trapped here. What was it all for?

A turtle surfaces, only its head visible, getting air. I watch the ripples in the pond, melting away from the creature simply trying to survive.

I sit for a long while, the light wind turning colder. Melody is nowhere to be seen as I meander over to the statue. The stone woman is still looking past me, her sad eyes somewhere on the horizon. There's no marker, nothing to tell me who she is or why she's trapped here like me.

Venturing farther than before, I stroll past a row of fruit trees, their limbs barren, the rotten fruit beneath them already subsumed by tufts of grass and piles of leaves. The rolling hills give no clues of what lies beyond them, and as I stand still and just listen,

no sounds make it to me other than the breeze sighing through the trees and the slight clack of limbs bumping against each other. No civilization. No rolling waves. Nothing to give me any real hints.

Footsteps behind me, particularly loud when I know Melody is capable of moving without a sound. “We should return now.” She’s being polite, making her presence known so she doesn’t startle me. Would a monster do something as thoughtful as that?

“All right.” I walk with her past the trees and back into the garden proper, but I pause when we get level with the statue. “Who is she?”

She stops. “I’m not sure if that’s my story to tell.”

“Please?” I catch her cat-eyed gaze and hold it.

She ponders for a few moments, her body eerily still. Sometimes I think the vampires exist outside of the laws of physics. I’d love to examine one of them. Though Melody has been patient with me, I don’t know if I can ask her to let me perform a physical. It’s not as if I have any tools here, anyway. The best I could do is press my ear to her chest and listen for a heartbeat.

“Do you have a heartbeat?” I ask before thinking better of it.

“Where’d that come from?” She gives me an amused half smile.

“Sorry. No ADHD meds here.” I shrug.

Her smile grows a little. “Yes. My heart beats. I’m still young in vampire years. The older ones, though, their hearts stop eventually.”

“But they’re still alive. Breathing?”

“I believe so, though I don’t know the particulars. That could stop, too. I’ve just never inquired about it.”

I can’t remember most of my work in the lab, though I remember receiving samples from Valen. It was vampire blood. What did I learn from it? Before I can think further on it, a dull ache sets up behind my temples. A warning. I return my gaze to the statue, to an unknown bit of marble that has no chance of driving a spike into my skull.

“I’d love to know about her.” I don’t want to push, but I’ve always been a curious creature. My imprisonment hasn’t changed that.

Melody considers me for a few moments longer, then seems to make a decision as she gives a resolute sigh. “Valen won’t appreciate this, but I don’t think it will hurt. Maybe you could see him in another light if ...” Her sentiment fades away when she sees the look on my face.

“You can’t redeem him to me. No matter what you say.” I mean it. I’ve made a promise to never do harm to anyone, but Valen isn’t a person. He’s proven that to me time and again. If I could end him, I certainly would, because in a twisted way, it would save lives. More humans would escape Gregor’s purge if the Specter was gone. That’s upholding my oath.

“I suppose that’s fair enough.” She shrugs and walks over to the statue, ducking a little to avoid a tree branch. “Her name was Sylvana.”

“She’s beautiful.” I follow her beneath the tree and study the statue again, the soulful eyes and longing expression.

“Very. Her beauty was legendary in her town. It’s how she drew Gregor’s eye.”

That took a turn. I swallow hard.

“A human woman from a small village in Eastern Europe. She was young, perhaps barely twenty, when Gregor took her.”

My jaw tenses, and I tuck my hands in my pockets. The reticence in her voice tells a story beneath the words. One that makes my insides churn. I don’t have to use my imagination to understand what she means by ‘took’ and the suffering it entails.

“She barely survived it.” She looks away. “And when she returned to her village, she was pregnant. No doubt when she stumbled into her home, bloody and broken, she thought she was saved, that she’d endured the worst. But instead of protecting her, the people she trusted the most turned on her. The humans forced her from the town, her own parents turning their backs. Cursed and scorned, she fought for her life and that of her unborn child. But there was no kindness for her, not when she bore the marks—” her gaze flicks to my wrists, to the scars from Whitbine’s bites. “She was accused of witchcraft and of being the devil’s whore. They thought she’d bring the wrath of god down on them if she stayed. Their fear needlessly magnified her suffering. The villagers swore they’d burn her on a cross if she ever returned.”

“What the fuck? She was a victim .”

Melody shakes her head. “Superstition was just as strong then as now. No one would help her. Humans would rather she die than bring the devil’s child into the world. Some of her own people, those who’d watched her grow, had shared meals with her—they tried to kill her. She ran for her life and found an abandoned homestead in the woods, using her wits to keep her alive. Hunting, stealing what she could, and trading her body.”

“God.” I shiver.

“He didn’t help her either.” Melody steps back from the statue, a reverence in her eyes. “In spite of all of it, she lived. She bore the child, screaming and alone in a moldy hut. And when she saw him, she loved him. She didn’t want to, had already decided to leave him for the wolves, but a mother’s love is something beyond anyone’s real understanding. She kept the child, sacrificing what life she could’ve had for him.”

“Valen.” I look at the statue with new eyes.

“He never knew her, of course. This is drawn more from imagination than actual memory.” She dips her head to the statue in a small bow and turns back to me.

“What happened to her?”

“That’s enough for tonight.” She shakes her head and gestures toward the elevator doors. “I have much work to do.”

I reluctantly follow her. “Work for the ball?”

“Yes.”

“When is it?” I try to sound disinterested.

“Two nights away.”

“Oh.” A jolt of excitement courses through me. That night, when the vampires will be busy celebrating their massacres, they’ll be far too preoccupied to bother with me. It’s the perfect chance for me to escape. The main problem is that the corridor leading to the elevator is always locked, and my knife is a poor lockpick. I need something

else, but I've yet to come up with anything clever.

"What's the matter?" Melody asks as she pulls the lever and we descend. "Your heart rate jumped."

"Oh, I, um. I don't know," I say lamely.

"Is it the ball?"

"Yes." I grab her lifeline. "I didn't realize it was so soon. That's all. I don't look forward to the castle brimming with vampir—" I turn to her. "Nothing against you , of course. It's just?—"

"You don't have to explain." She waves a hand at me. "You've seen the worst of my kind. I can't blame you for your apprehension."

"They aren't like you." I shrug. "I wish they were."

She sighs. "Something like this should be planned months in advance, not on a whim. But Gregor is ... He's ..." She can't seem to find the right word. I would offer "demented" or "homicidal maniac" but neither of those even come close to encompassing the depth of his evil.

"It's the first time he's visited the Dragonis manor since Theo was killed." She opens the accordion grate, a somber look on her face.

"Is that a big deal or something, that he's coming here?" I ask. Then another question I should've already thought of surfaces. "If this is the Dragonis Estate or Castle or whatever it is, why doesn't Gregor live here?" I regret it as soon as I ask it. I want Gregor as far away from me as possible.

“This was Theo’s residence. A gift to him from his father.”

I suppose that explains the shitty golden décor in almost every overdone room. From what little I’ve learned, Theo was just as sadistic as his father and on top of it, treated like a spoiled little prince.

We walk back through the rooms, and though I’d like to linger in the one with all the weapons, Melody sets a quick pace. I don’t dare grab anything when she’s with me.

Once we reach the staircase, she bids me farewell and starts down and away from me. My mind is working with all sorts of different plans for how I can get that door open. I’ll have to sneak to it, so my only hope is that all the vampires are too busy partying on Piano Bay to bother with journeying to this lower level. It will take planning and skill and more than a little luck. Maybe I could find a lampshade with metal in the rim of it, something malleable I could fashion into a lockpick. Or there could be some other?—

“Oh.” Melody pauses and turns to me, her heeled foot perched effortlessly on the corner of a step. I’d fall and break my neck if I even thought of trying it. She seems to be walking on air. “And don’t worry about your gown. I’ve already had something created for you.”

“My—” My voice cracks, and my skin goes cold. “My what?”

“Your gown. It’s almost finished. And if you’ll allow me, I’ll be with you to help you get ready.” She even smiles, like we’re discussing hair and makeup for prom.

“I-I’m going to the ball?” My mouth is dry. “I didn’t think I’d have to do that.”

Her perfect eyebrows draw together. “Of course. You’re Valen’s—” She stops herself, then begins again. “You’re his guest.” She turns and hurries down the stairs.

Prisoner. I'd bet money she was going to say I'm his prisoner, and now I'm about to be paraded around at a vampire ball like a show pony.

I clench my hands in my pockets, one of them wrapped around my knife. What if Gregor decides to flay me then and there? My breathing quickens, panic overcoming me as I stumble to the stairs. I sit down hard, my teeth clacking.

What am I going to do? My entire escape plan is shot. Unless... I take deep breaths. Unless I move up my escape attempt. It can't wait. Not when Gregor is coming for me.

Today. It has to be today. When the sun is high and no one can come after me when I run. On shaky legs, I rise and return to my room.

Today is the day I escape or I die. Either way, I'm not going to sit here and wait for the decision to be made for me.

Recovered Journal of Dr. Georgia Clark

May 29, Year 1, Emergence Era

We've hit a wall. Both with the samples and with the usual processes we use to analyze blood. I've been thinking too conventionally. We all have. Today, I started a new course of research. My lab mates probably think I'm insane, but we can't keep trying old methods on an entirely new species. I have a plan for the next sample. It's desperate and dangerous, verging on idiotic. But it's the only way I can see forward, no matter what it might cost me. Trailblazing science can't be done carefully, not in this brave new world. If I don't have skin in the game, then I shouldn't be playing.

"How does this place have no wire hangers?" I'm in my closet, digging through the clothes for any hint of metal. Nothing. "Shit!"

I walk back into my bedroom and stare around for what has to be the tenth time in the last hour. Creating a lockpick is turning out to be far harder than kid detective novels made it seem. I have to think more broadly here, though I've already considered trying to rip wire from the walls or even asking Gorsky. That's how desperate I've become.

When my breakfast arrives outside my door—Melody nowhere to be seen—I pull it in and snatch the fork from the tray. Testing the tines, I discover they aren't the least bit bendable. I'd probably need to heat the metal somehow for it to be useful.

Still, I tuck it into my makeshift bag. It's all I have.

Foregoing the food, I move into the hallway and study everything with new eyes. What could be used to pick a lock? Not marble, not canvas, not the bits of statuary. I keep going down to the piano level, then pause at the piano itself. Peeking under the hood, I stare at the strings. They're wire, but not strong enough to turn a lock. Damn.

I keep going, checking in rooms here and there. When I spot a decorative urn, I pause. The handles are golden, maybe brass. They swivel, making it easy to lift the pottery, and give a slight clink sound when I let them go. I know nothing about antiques, but the blue flower motif on the jar coupled with the level of extravagance throughout this hellish place tells me it's likely priceless.

With zero fanfare, I lift the vase and drop it onto the cold marble floor. It shatters, the sound like the boom of a shotgun in the silent estate. I flinch and wait for Melody or maybe Gorsky to show up and scold me for being clumsy, but no one comes.

I hastily kneel and grab the two handles, shards of porcelain falling away as I tuck them into my bag. I don't bother cleaning up the mess. Somehow, this place is perennially spotless. I used to think Melody snuck in at all hours and made my bed or freshened my laundry, but now I don't know. It's too much work for one person, or even ten, to take care of this endless mansion. It gives me the shivers to think there are other servants, invisible workers who move silently, seeing everything yet never being seen. It's not possible, is it? I know better than to ask that question. In this upside-down castle, every nightmare thought could easily become a reality.

The sun is up now. I can't see it, but my internal clock is ticking away. I have to get out soon, or else I won't be far enough away by the time it gets dark. That's if I can get the door open.

With new urgency, I hurry down the stairs to the door, keeping an eye out for anyone

on my way there. I don't see anyone, but that doesn't surprise me. Gorsky has snuck up on me more than once, and Melody seems to appear out of thin air half the time.

Crouching in front of the tiled door, I feel around until my fingers catch on the keyhole. My heart sinks when I realize the hole is even smaller than I remembered. The brass handles might be too thick to be of any use.

I curse under my breath and dig out one of the handles. Pressing it against the keyhole, I barely get it more than a few centimeters inside. Not enough. It's too rounded to catch on any sort of mechanism, and too thick to reach it in the first place.

"Fuck." I doggedly push the lockpick harder, trying to force the keyhole wider from the sheer heft of the brass. That doesn't happen. What does happen is that the door moves.

I let go of the now-stuck handle and push against the panel. It swings open. I know it was locked just yesterday. Why is it open now? Could this truly be a stroke of luck? I glance around again, my skin prickling with worry that someone is watching me. Is this a trick? Is Gorsky lying in wait for me? I don't know. But it doesn't matter, even if he is, I have to get to the elevator.

Feeling around in my bag, I find the knife handle and palm it, gripping it tightly as I push the door the rest of the way open. Nothing moves inside, no hint of anyone lurking. Even so, I move slowly, looking closely at every shadow, every darkened corner. I listen for footsteps or anything that could indicate I'm not alone. The weapons room is wide open, so I grab two more knives and stuff them into my bag. The other weapons are too unwieldy for me, and I'd probably just end up injuring myself. I test a vicious-looking morning star in my palm, just to see. When I can barely lift it, I let it go and move on.

By the time I make it through the rooms, I find the elevator grate just as before. But

the carriage isn't on this level. The shaft is open, a gaping maw of black that might fall ten feet or forever. I don't want to find out.

When I press the elevator call button, I half expect alarms to go off or for the elevator to stay silent. Instead, the cables shake, the carriage descending at its usual pace until it appears before me. No one's inside, though I wonder if someone is up top. It couldn't be Melody, not in the day, and Valen isn't here. He's occupied in Atlanta, tearing apart as many human lives as he can. That thought alone strengthens my resolve. I open the grate, step inside, and move the lever for the top floor.

The ride is without incident, though I white knuckle my blade the entire time. When I step out, I see sunlight streaming through the cracks of the doors that open to the outside. It stings my eyes, but I don't stop. Pushing through, I meet the daylight, the cool air, the smell of green grass and musty plants. My heart stampedes, my entire body coming alive as I take first one step, then another, and then more out beneath the yawning sky.

This can't be real. Eyes watering, I scan the landscape, looking for someone, for anyone who might try to stop me. The garden is still, only a light wind blowing past in faint swirls of falling leaves and petals.

I breathe in deep, tasting the air and relishing the warmth on my upturned face. A voice in my head grows louder, the beat of one word thrumming through my veins. Run. Run . RUN . I heed it, taking off from the open doors of the mausoleum at my back, tearing off through the grass. I don't know which way to go, which way safety lies, but I head toward the ridge where the trees grow thick, their branches offering a shadowy refuge where I can hide.

My pace is hectic at first, adrenaline coursing through me. I sprint past the statue, past one grove of dead fruit trees, then to another where I choose a center row to follow. Slowing, I have to wind around a fallen tree and jump over limbs here and there, but I

pick my way toward freedom. Careful to avoid turning an ankle, I force myself to move methodically, to search the ground and keep scanning ahead of me for danger.

When I reach the edge of the orchard, I pause and catch my breath. My body isn't used to exertion. My muscles withered away in the cell, and other than combing the castle and climbing its infernal stairs, I haven't gotten much muscle back. An oversight. I should've been working on getting stronger.

Once my blood stops pounding in my ears, I step from the grove, run across an open area, then enter another orchard. Some of the trees here are still alive, and a few even have slightly moldy pears hanging from their limbs. I reach up and grab a few, stuffing them into my bag for later. A cluster of three draws my eye, and I strain to get them. My fingers brush across their leathery skin, and I manage to get my grip on one. Right as I yank them down, a light breeze blows by.

I freeze, my body going cold as the wind carries voices to my ears.

Eyes wide, I creep around the tree and stand still. Unsure of where the voices are coming from, I listen, barely breathing, for the sound.

I wait for what feels like an excruciatingly long time. Each second that ticks by while I'm standing still is distance lost. But no matter how I strain to listen, it's silent again. No voices. Nothing except the occasional creak of branches against each other. I wait for longer than seems prudent, even though the sun is still high overhead. I need to make it to the far tree line before nightfall. I have no doubt Melody will come searching for me, and she likely won't be alone. This is my only chance. Maybe I imagined the voices. I can't be sure. And I haven't heard them again.

Swallowing hard, I begin to move, creeping from tree to tree slowly as I keep my head on a swivel. The effort is getting to me, my adrenaline draining as a trickle of cold sweat rolls down my spine. I hold onto the tree trunks as I pass, the small weight

of my bag becoming heavier with each step. Still, I keep going.

I'm almost at the far end of the grove when I catch movement ahead. My heart stops, my entire body seizing as I watch two people walking toward me.

“ Fuck !” I ease behind the nearest tree, thankful it still has leaves, and hold still.

“—isn't for you to decide.”

“Wrong again, Captain. Everything about her is for me to decide.” Valen's voice, low and almost feral. I don't know who he's speaking to, but there's no love lost between them.

“You should turn her over to me now. Before Gregor?—”

“I will never willingly give her up. She's mine.”

“She's not safe here. Her wellbeing is vital to everything the—” That voice. I know it.

“Her wellbeing has been entrusted to me by Gregor himself. I will ensure her survival.”

The man scoffs. “What does that even mean?”

I close my eyes and see a flash of red hair and laughing eyes, followed by the opening salvo of a headache. I know him. He's ... The headache increases as I try to put a name to the voice.

“She's safer here than anywhere else, and her situation isn't up for discussion.”

Are they talking about me?

“She is human. One of us. That makes her?—”

“Your next words will concern Atlanta, Captain, or I will remove your godforsaken tongue.” The ice in Valen’s tone makes me grit my teeth.

The approaching footsteps stop nearby, perhaps 50 paces away at maximum. I can’t see them, but I feel them. I have to hope Valen is too preoccupied to sense my presence. Even so, I stay as still as I can, so much so that one of my thigh muscles begins to twitch.

“Atlanta is your goddamn mess, vampire. Not mine.” The man speaks with vehemence and a tinge of hatred. “We had an arrangement.”

“Your failure to protect your own people is not my cross to bear, Captain.” Valen’s derisive tone is like the work of a scalpel, succinct and precise.

These two are clearly at odds, and I’m not sure what they’re getting by meeting clandestinely, especially if the second man is human. He must be, given the time of day.

A long pause passes between them, one that seems to charge the air with tension. Like the tickle of electricity before a direct lightning strike. “Atlanta is a complete clusterfuck as you well know.” The redhead’s tone is grim. “Tantun destroyed infrastructure. Your own forces have decimated entire sections of the downtown grid.”

“Yes, yes, poor defenseless humans slaughtered. How terrible. Such a shame.” Valen’s haughty reply. “My heart bleeds. Now, the scientists, Captain. What of them?”

“Such a fucking—” The man stops short, silence reigning for a short while, then he says with a tense, even tone, “The two who survived the attack on their way from DC are in a safehouse. That’s all I know. The CDC has been leveled,” he says bitterly. “Your forces made sure of that. No one survived the blast, and the fire ensured the research will never be put to use. Fucking bastards,” the redhead practically spits.

I’m glad I’m leaning against the tree. The idea of the CDC being gone is a sucker punch. It was our only hope of combating the plague. The resources, the scientists, the knowledge—everything within that one building served as the crux of our epidemiological knowledge. For America and for the world. If it’s gone ... If it’s gone, we don’t have a chance. All my work—all everyone’s work—on finding a cure, gone. Obliterated. The sheer magnitude of it brings tears to my eyes.

“Where’s the safehouse?” Valen asks.

“That’s classified.”

Valen gives a short, hateful laugh. “Classified by whom, the defunct US government or your hardscrabble little band of doomed humans?”

“You aren’t getting that information. Ever.” Now the redhead has a chill in his voice. “They’re all we have left. The only chance to fight the plague.”

“Gregor is no longer interested in a cure,” Valen says airily. “I can’t say I am, either.”

I fist my hands, anger rising despite the layer of fear covering me, like ice over rapids. Valen will kill every last one of us on Gregor’s orders. He’s made that clear. But he’s also actively destroying any chance humanity has at finding a cure for the plague. And the scientists from DC, the ones he said were attacked? Are they the faces I’ve drawn again and again in my sketchbook? The people whose features I can barely see, whose names I don’t know? I can’t begin to understand what Whitbine

has stolen from me, the memories he's scraped away at until even I can't reach them. The headache intensifies, but so does my rage. My helpless fucking rage that's gotten me nowhere, and if I'm not careful, will get me caught.

"We're going to beat this plague, and then we're going to kill every last one of you vicious motherfuckers." The red-haired man says it with such ire that I wonder why Valen doesn't snap his neck. I know he could do it.

"Ah, two of humanity's favorite things: blind faith and indiscriminate violence," Valen sneers.

"We're done here." The man, muttering creative curses under his breath, strides past me.

I stare at his back, at the green of his uniform and the small emblem on his sleeve—it's a ring or perhaps a halo. Do I know him? I feel like I must, but no name comes to mind, no memory.

He takes a sharp left and eventually disappears amongst the trees.

I stay frozen, afraid to move, to breathe. Listening, I wait for Valen to leave. The moments seem to stretch out more and more, elastic and terrifying. Is he still there? He must be gone by now, but I can't risk it. Can't move until I know for certain he's long gone.

I wait.

Another bead of cold sweat runs down my back, tickling my skin in a particularly malicious way. My nose begins to itch. I feel the sudden, urgent need to pee. It's the same things that would happen when Juno and I would play hide and seek. I could hide perfectly well, it was the staying hidden part I couldn't manage. I'd invariably

give myself up so that I could either use the bathroom, scratch my nose, or both. The stakes here are a lot higher than losing a game of hide and seek, so I force myself to remain still, to barely breathe. God, does he know I'm here? Maybe he does. His hearing and sense of smell might have already given me away.

Suddenly, I hear quiet footsteps, and he walks past. Eyes forward, walking with purpose, he doesn't so much as glance at the tree where I'm hiding. He keeps going, his strides long and even as he recedes down the row of trees.

When he's finally almost out of sight through the trees, I breathe deeply and press a hand over my thumping heart. He didn't find me. Maybe the redhead distracted him, gave me an opening to escape. I could kiss that guy.

I'm about to edge around the tree and continue away from the castle when Valen stops. He's so far away, his back still to me—but he's standing utterly still.

I stare at him, willing him to keep walking.

Then he turns his head to the side.

His voice carries back to me. "Are you coming, little rabbit?"

Icy fear grips me like a skeletal hand, and for the briefest second, I can't move. All the hope I'd had roots me to the ground, as forlorn and earthbound as the dying trees all around me. And then I'm running from him, hurtling through the trees as fast as I can go. Stumbling forward, I scrape my palm against a tree trunk, then vault forward, my shins aching as if they're splintering as I pound ahead. It's not logical, nothing but instinct. Instinct chose flight, and I'm soaring across the ground, the tree line no closer, salvation outside my reach, damnation likely already on my heels.

I dodge a downed tree limb and shoot out of the grove, the ground rising as my

muscles burn, my lungs underperforming right along with the rest of my body. I have to make it out of here. I have to.

I almost trip, then right myself and keep pushing up the hill. My pace slows as a shape emerges ahead of me. The sun is at my back, bathing him in golden light. His hair, black as a raven's wing, his eyes the same blue of the icebergs that sink old-timey ships. He strolls toward me, a smirk on his face, his hands in his pockets. Casual. Utterly, effortlessly evil.

Breathing hard, I stop, my chest heaving, my eyes wide as he approaches. I've long since let go of the thought "this isn't possible" when it comes to the world around me. But seeing him like this, laughing at me while doing circles around me—it breaks off a part of me. The part that dared to hope.

"You simply must wear more appropriate clothes when you go on little outings like this," he chides, his eyes taunting as he stops right in front of me. "You could catch a cold."

"I heard what you said," I gasp out. "You're working with Gregor's enemies."

"Oh?" he asks, feigning interest. "Is that so?"

"Yes. And W-Whitbine will see," I finish, lungs burning, face hot. Easing my hand to my side, I slip it into my bag.

He leans down, his eyes almost level with mine. "Looking forward to your next meeting with Whitbine, are you?"

I wince.

"Didn't think so." He straightens again. "Come along, little rabbit." He glances

around. “Too many hawks out here. You could get plucked away.”

“What did you do in Atlanta?” I put my hands on my hips as I struggle to catch my breath and glare up at him. “What did you do?”

“I thought you already heard everything?” he mocks.

“Tell me!” I yell.

He steps to me, looming over me like a beast in a nightmare. “I killed and killed and killed. More humans than I can count. My forces wiped out entire communities, drenched the ground with blood. Is that what you want to hear?”

“Why?” The bridge of my nose burns with tears. “Do you hate us that much?”

“It isn’t hate that drives the wolf to hunt down the rabbit. It’s in his nature to destroy. If anything, it’s indifference. Indifferent to the lives of other beings if it means his own survival.”

“You don’t have to massacre people to survive!”

His scowl returns, the coldness in his eyes like a slap to the face. “Agree to disagree, little rabbit. Now, come along.”

“I won’t go back.” I cross my arms over my chest. “I won’t.” My chin trembles, and I hate myself for it.

“Must I drag you?” He tsks. “Or shall I wait for this tantrum to end?”

“You could let me go.”

He gives me a withering look.

“Why are you doing this?” I yell. “You don’t have to follow orders. You don’t have to kill us. Or me, for that matter. We could?”

“This is getting tiresome.” He sighs.

“One thing we can agree on.” I lunge forward, burying my knife in his side. Then I’m running again, tearing away from him and up the hill.

I’m almost to the crest when I feel his hands on my shoulders, dragging me to a stop that’s so quick it knocks the wind out of me.

“At least you made our little game fun.” He pulls my hair away from the nape of my neck, his bite so fast I barely feel it.

I cry out as he wraps one of his arms around my middle, holding me against him as he drinks. My knees go weak, my body succumbing to whatever power lives in this horrible exchange between us. His blood. My blood.

My eyes fall closed, and I’m lax as he holds me up, his hard body pressed to mine, clutching me like a lover as he forces his way into my veins, his will consuming my fight. Heat blooms between my legs, my nipples going hard and sensitive.

“There it is.” He growls against my throat, one of his hands cupping my breast.

I moan as he kneads me, his hard cock pressing against my back. This is wrong. So fucking wrong. When he pinches my nipple, I cry out, my body curling tighter and tighter around my need for him to take me. All of me. Every last bit until there’s nothing left. I’m dying. My life draining into desire for the devil. Turning from breath and heartbeats into lust and despair. I can’t keep going like this, hating and wanting.

“I know what you want.” His voice is feral, his tone coated in my blood. “On your knees in the dirt. My fangs in your shoulder. Fucking you as you scream for me. You want me to hurt you, little rabbit. To devour you.”

I shudder with hatred and pleasure.

“Soon,” he promises on a dark whisper. Pulling back and spinning me to face him, he cups my cheek. My blood stains his lips, a rivulet running down his chin. “What happened to Theo Dragonis?”

I stare into the tumultuous sea of his eyes. “I don’t know.” An ache sets up in my temples.

“Who killed Theo Dragonis?” he practically purrs the question, his gaze dropping to my mouth.

“I don’t know.” The ache intensifies into a stabbing pain.

He smirks. “Humans are so weak, so utterly pathetic. If you’re to be believed, a trauma caused you to forget. What trauma, little rabbit? Did the hoot of an owl frighten you so badly that your memories disappeared?”

“No.” I answer mechanically, his compulsion forcing the word from me. Still burning for him, still aching in ways that make me loathe myself.

“I will have the answers the High Lord seeks.” He strokes my cheek, his touch soft, his voice violent. “You will give them to me.”

He drops his hand, the compulsion still swirling through my mind.

In that moment, I realize I’ll never escape him. There’s no way out of here. I can’t

kill him. I simply have to wait until he kills me. Or, if I can find the courage, I'll end it myself. That, in itself, is a revelation, one that's lurked in the recesses of my mind. One I've never wanted to fully face. But knowing that I can't get away is also knowing that I have one remaining option.

In a daze, I stare up at him and realize he's carrying me. I don't remember him picking me up. The trees pass overhead, the sun peeking from behind wispy clouds. I stare at his sharp profile, the line of his jaw, the pale skin, the dark hair. His scent, sandalwood and soap and something smoky, mixes with the smell of green grass and honeysuckle.

"I hate you." The words fall from my lips unbidden.

"I know."

"I wish I could kill you."

"I know that, too." He sighs and carries me into the elevator, the door behind us closing, shutting out the brilliant sun. Cutting off my chance at freedom.

He looks down at me, something in his eyes that I can't read, can't name, can't know. With a voice softer than silk, he whispers. "Sleep."

Recovered Journal of Dr. Georgia Clark

May 23, Year 1, Emergence Era

It's late. Valen just left. He was worse off this time, so bad that it would kill a regular person. A human. Not him, of course. He'll survive. I'm beginning to think he's just humoring me when I try to repair the damage he takes night after night. He won't tell me how it happens, only that he's at war—that we're all at war, whether we recognize it or not. I'm not a soldier, not a fighter. I'm a healer. Not that it will matter if the vampires decide I'm expendable. Will there be a night when he comes for my life? When he shows up with his usual arrogance and ends me with boredom in his eyes?

“This isn't so bad as far as picnics go.” Evie lies back on one of the hotel blankets we spread out beneath the cherry trees. They're leafed out now, giving us shade and privacy from the tall buildings along Pennsylvania Avenue. Bits of white fluff from some tree deeper in the park float past and land in Aang's dark hair as Wyatt strums his guitar somewhat aimlessly. It's nice to get out of the lab sometimes. Even nicer to pretend the world is still chugging along like it did before the plague. I imagine a group of Girl Scouts coming up the avenue, their tour guide explaining landmarks as a harried chaperone tries to keep them away from traffic. But there are weeds growing in the pavement cracks now, and not a soul along the wide avenue.

Gretchen pulls her backpack around from the rear of her wheelchair and unzips it. “Gene packed us some chicken salad. He muttered something about expiration dates,

but I didn't question him further." She hands me a loaf of bread wrapped in parchment paper. "If we get botulism, I guess it's all just part of the plan."

"Gross." Aang wrinkles his nose.

"It's fine. Gene wouldn't poison us." I lay out the sliced bread along the side of my blanket, then take the proffered chicken salad container.

"He wouldn't poison you ," Aang says pointedly. "But I think I'm fair game."

"Maybe if you didn't get onto him all the time for tidying up your pigsty of a desk, you wouldn't have to worry," Evie chides, the sun dappling shades of gold along her blonde hair.

Gretchen glances around at the empty streets and even emptier buildings. "We should talk business now while we can. Wouldn't want any of the soldiers to overhear."

"Can we eat first?" Aang takes Gretchen's backpack and digs around before pulling out some carrot sticks. "Is there ranch?" He digs more. "Shit, no ranch."

"We're lucky to have this much." I finish making the sandwiches and hand them out. "Gene always gets us what he can."

Wyatt starts humming a tune and playing along, the melody familiar though I can't put a name to it.

A hum vibrates through the air, the noise sudden and jarring. Then a helicopter buzzes overhead, and I freeze.

"Your sister?" Evie asks.

Glancing up and catching the glint of the Air Force One colors, I give her a quick nod.

“Is she going to meet with them ?” Gretchen whispers.

“Probably.” A sinking feeling in my gut kills my appetite. Juno’s flying into danger. Every moment spent with Gregor and his monsters is like playing Russian Roulette. I’m afraid that it’s only a matter of time before the gun goes off, before the helicopter returns without a passenger.

“Hey.” Evie takes my hand and squeezes it. “She’ll come back.”

I clear my throat. “I know. She’ll be all right.” I know I’m not particularly convincing, but Evie doesn’t press. She gives me a small smile and returns to her sandwich.

“Not bad, I guess.” Aang chews his thoughtfully. “Now, to work.” He leans in closer. “I ran the proteins we all agreed on for the new blood sample. Same results as before. Nothing. No interaction. It’s like the blood doesn’t recognize the markers that normally affect human cells. I can’t even find a starting point for a vaccine.”

“Same for viral interactions,” Gretchen adds. “Nothing.”

“Wyatt, what other viruses do we have in the containment lab to experiment with? Did CDC send us everything we asked for?”

He stops singing and looks up in thought, his shaggy hair falling back by his ears. “They sent most, I think. More should be coming as long as the supply line between here and Atlanta holds up. Um, let me think... We haven’t tried the sixth series of coronaviruses, but that’ll take a while to get synthesized. There’s also an entire library of cold and flu strains. Again, it’ll take a lot of work to get them ready to try

on the vam—” He stops himself. “The alien blood.” He does a big Scooby Doo sort of wink. “But I’ll get started on them after lunch.” He glances down at the sandwich. “Speaking of ...”

Gretchen wheels a little closer and leans forward. “How about what you’ve been working on?” she asks me.

“Nothing.” I chew slowly, savoring the food, the company, the warm air tinged with the scent of early summer blossoms. “Sunlight works to destroy the cells, but beyond that, I haven’t found anything that’s permanent. Acid, bleach, alcohol—you name it. The cells wither, but they never fully die off.”

“We’ll keep at it,” Evie says brightly despite the dark circles under her eyes.

We’ve all been working long hours. They’ve been searching for a cure, a way to finally end the plague. That’s what I came here to do. But now, given everything I know, everything I’ve witnessed, my mission has changed.

I’m not looking for a cure anymore. I’m looking for a poison.

I wake in pain, my head splitting as a gurgled scream erupts from my throat. I taste blood. I must’ve bitten my tongue. It’s black in my room, not a shred of light. Then I realize it’s not the room, it’s my vision. I can’t see, the agony in my head hitting a crescendo. I grip my temples, my entire body rigid.

I can’t inhale or exhale. Can’t move.

“Let it go.” Someone’s voice through the darkness. Distorted. Twisted in sound, as if my ears can’t process anything. My sight, my hearing—it’s gone, all eclipsed by the raging fire in my temples.

“Let it go,” it says again.

Tears run down my cheeks, my fingers in my hair trying to yank the pain out.

“Breathe.” More urgently this time.

Opening my mouth wide, I gasp in a tortured breath, my lungs burning, my entire body rigid.

“Again.”

I let it out and drag in more air.

“Again.”

The excruciating pain finally begins to recede. I’m freezing, covered in cold sweat, and I still can’t see anything. My muscles shudder, a cramp forming in my calf that tears a pained moan from me. I writhe against the sharpness of it, my body aching.

“Georgia.” A palm against my cheek, swiping away my tears. “Let it go. Whatever you saw, whatever it is. You must let it go.”

“I can’t,” I choke out. I don’t want to. Whatever it was, I have to hold onto it. To remember . But even as I say it, the tendrils of the dream slip through my fingers. Who was I with? There were trees and faces. Friends. Secrets. I reach for them, wanting to clutch them to my chest. But they fall away, water circling a drain until there’s nothing left but a slick residue. When the image is just a blur of colors, my body finally relaxes, the cramp unwinding.

I don’t move for a long time. My hands are balled, clutching the blanket. When I finally force them open, my knuckles twinge and pop.

My vision returns slowly, the darkness receding to the edges of my vision before disappearing completely. I'm in my room. In my bed. And I'm alone. Did I imagine the voice? I test both my hands, then move my legs. A rudimentary check to see if I've suffered a stroke. Though sore, everything works. Not a stroke as far as I can tell. I've no history of seizures.

With pained effort, I sit up. My oversized t-shirt sticks to me, cold sweat giving me the shivers as I rub my eyes.

"What the fuck?" I say out loud, testing my voice. It's raspy, but the words make sense. No slurring.

A night terror? Sleep paralysis? My mind goes into doctor mode trying to diagnose what the hell just happened. It certainly could be either of those things, brought on by stress, exacerbated by my recent exertions during the escape attempt.

I jump when a soft knock sounds at the door.

"May I come in?" Melody asks.

"Y-yes." I grab the hem of my shirt and wipe my face as she walks in, her face drawn.

"Are you all right?" She hurries over to me, sitting on the bed without invitation as she peers into my eyes. She hands me my glass of water from the nightstand, then rises and goes to the bathroom. "You were screaming."

"You heard me?" Then I scoff at myself. "Right, of course you heard me, super vampire hearing."

"Yes, though I daresay anyone in the castle would've heard it, human or otherwise."

She returns with the bottle of pain medicine. “Take these.”

“I think I’m okay.” I press my palm to my forehead and rub in a circle. “It was a dream. A nightmare, I guess.”

“What was it about?” She drops two pills into my other hand.

I down them then follow with a too-big gulp of water that makes me cough and sputter. She takes the glass from me, then pats me on the back until I recover, kindness in her touch and concern in her eyes.

“Thanks.” I relax against the headboard, my body tired and aching. It’s like I’ve run a marathon at full speed, but I was only sleeping. And dreaming. “I don’t remember.”

“Nothing?” she asks.

I clench my eyes shut and try to find clues, but when I think about the dream, the headache amps up. “I can’t,” I gasp and shut the door to whatever that memory might be. “It hurts too much.” I focus on the here and now, on Melody as she looks at me with worry.

“I’m sorry.” She takes my clammy hand in hers.

That one kind act makes my eyes smart, tears threatening. I swallow them back and wish them away.

“This isn’t natural.” I wipe my face again.

“Hm?” she asks, her gaze assessing me. “You’re even paler than usual. I can count every freckle on your face.”

“This pain.” I let my hand drop and sag against the headboard again. “It doesn’t behave like anything I’ve ever had to treat. A concussion, head trauma—that can cause short-term memory loss, sure. Some people even experience more symptoms, their brains losing several functions over time, especially if the injury is repeated. CTE studies were quite clear on the effects of concussions over time. But this is different. The pain is real, but it’s not from an acute injury. It’s almost ... psychosomatic.” It’s like I’m back doing rounds for my residency, trying to figure out what I’m looking at with no clues from the attending. I’m rambling. Talking it out more to myself than Melody. “It has to be caused by trauma, by something that happened to me though I can’t remember it. Whitbine’s torture...” I think back to when it started, when I was caught and dragged into that cell with the others. He always had a particular interest in me. I thought it was because I was Juno’s sister, but maybe there’s more I’m not understanding. Like a picture that’s out of focus, the figures in the distance only smudges of suggestion. “If only I could remember.”

“Let it go.” She squeezes my hand.

My gaze snaps to hers. Something about that phrase tickles the edges of my consciousness. Was it in my dream?

“I’ll run you a bath. I always feel better after a bath.” She disappears into the en suite, and soon the sound of running water greets me.

With an only slightly shaky hand, I take the glass from my nightstand and drink. My nerves slowly settle, though I’m still not completely at ease. Whatever the dream was, it’s gone. The only tufts remaining have dissolved like cotton candy in water.

My joints are tender from strain, the spot where I had the cramp promising to be bothersome for the next few days, but I crawl out of bed and follow Melody into the bathroom. I strip without fanfare and sink into the tub.

“The water all right?” she asks.

“Perfect.” I look up at her. “Thank you.”

“Of course.” She drapes a towel on the warming rack. “I’ll be back later. Your dress is ready.” She avoids my gaze. “If it needs any last-minute alterations, I’m all right with needle and thread. Not great, but I can sew?—”

“What’s going to happen to me at the ball?” I ask. I’m tired of avoiding it, of dancing around whatever dark fate is waiting for me. I let my head rest on the tub and close my eyes. Maybe she’ll be more inclined to tell me the truth if she doesn’t have to look me in the eye.

She stands silently, the only sound in the room the slow drip—drip—drip from the faucet. “I ... I don’t know,” her voice is faint.

“So this could be it?” I say it so conversationally, like ‘I could die tonight, what’s for dinner?’ or ‘I might be murdered in myriad gory ways, but isn’t the weather nice?’ It’s as if my emotional switches have all been overloaded. I’m out of tears, wrung out like wet laundry hung on a line. Perhaps I’m finally numb.

“No.”

“No?” I look at her.

“This isn’t the end.” She picks a piece of invisible lint from the towel. “I know that for certain.”

“How?”

“Do you need anything else?” she asks. “I’ll go fetch your gown and a few other

things.”

“Melody.” I sit forward and pin her with a stare. “How do you know?”

“Because you are Valen’s guest.”

“But Valen has to do whatever Gregor says!” I snap. “If Gregor tells him to gut me, he’ll gut me. Right?”

She wrings her hands. “I’ll return.”

“Melody!” I call for her, but she’s already out the door, her speed almost blurring her figure as she escapes. “Fuck!” I slap the water, splashing it onto the floor. Childish. Stupid. With a frustrated groan, I sink beneath the surface, holding my breath as my thoughts spin out of control. I have to rein it all in, to squash it down with all the other things I can’t bear to think about. When I finally emerge, lungs burning, head finally beginning to clear, I breathe in deeply.

Melody’s assurances are empty. Gregor could rip me in half, and no one would do a thing to stop him. Not Valen. Not Melody. I’m on my own. The sooner I remember that, the better.

Turns out I’m not numb after all. The rage that’s kept me company since I found myself in the cell is alive and well and burning brightly for Gregor and all his minions.

15

Recovered Journal of Dr. Georgia Clark

June 19, Year 1, Emergence Era

Valen was right. We are at war. With ourselves. With the vampires. With the plague. I was told DC was secure, safe as it can be in these difficult times. All that came to a crashing halt when I realized that the people who are supposed to be on my side don't know friend from foe. I almost died today. I think the soldier would've (portion scribbled out). I have to STOP thinking about the what ifs. It's the only way I can keep working to save people, even if some of those same people want me dead.

"What do you think?" Melody hangs a deep crimson gown on the high rail across the top of my four-poster bed.

I gawk at it, the fabric silky and draping. Intricate beading on lace adorns it across the bodice, the neckline plunging severely. "Not a chance."

Melody frowns a little. She walked into my room as if we hadn't just discussed my untimely death only an hour ago. I've cooled off since then, at least a little. Dread is burning right along with my rage, and I keep telling myself that I have to get through the night. That I will get through the night.

"I know it isn't ideal." She looks down. "I know it's ...". She wrings her hands. "I know this is all so, so awful. But there's nothing I can do. Nothing you can do. We have to keep moving forward. We have to survive." Her shoulders sag a little. "Cold

comfort, I suppose.”

A slight twinge of guilt filters through me. “I mean, it’s gorgeous,” I add quickly and walk to the dress. “Really pretty. But I’m not ...” How do I put this? “I’m not cut out for a dress like this. You know that. You chose my wardrobe based on old photos of me, right?” I gesture down at the sweatshirt and baggy jeans I donned after the bath.

“You wore a light turquoise gown to your sister’s inaugural ball once she became governor,” she replies with the faintest hint of hope. My olive branch accepted.

“Yeah, but Juno made me wear it. I didn’t have a choice.”

She gives me a pointed look. One that says, ‘it’s not as if you have a choice right now, either.’ Instead of making that argument, she runs her hand down the material. “Just try it on, all right? I think you’re going to look stunning. But once it’s on, we’ll be better able to make a decision then.”

As if there’s any other decision. I’m being forced to go to this ball, forced to wear this dress, possibly forced to die. I have no options. Melody is actually being almost sweet by playing along with me.

“I brought some makeup and other things, too.” She hands me the dress, then grabs a black overnight case and walks into the bathroom. “I’ll set up in here. Just try on the dress, and then we can decide on hair.”

“Why does it matter what I look like?” I grudgingly strip off my sweatshirt and jeans.

Melody doesn’t answer.

With a sigh, I dig around at the dress’s hemline, find the opening, then slide it over my head and down my body. I miss the arm hole, then rearrange the fabric and find it.

“It’s too loose,” I call.

Melody appears and in stunningly short order finds the side zip and yanks it home.

“No, it fits perfect.” She circles me, her appraising eyes taking in every detail. “Lose the bra, though. That won’t do.” Her eyes travel lower. “Panties too. I can see the line.”

“No way.” I cross my legs and drape a hand protectively across my sports bra. “No fucking way.”

“I’ll find a set of more appropriate underthings, all right? But the bra truly has to go.” She unzips me quickly and helps me from the fabric. “Let’s get to work on the hair.”

Everything about this feels so ... off. It reminds me of when Juno helped me get ready for my senior prom. Awkward and shy and a senior at only 13 thanks to my heady combination of IQ and ADHD, I didn’t have a date and had no clue what to expect. Juno and Mom told me I’d regret it forever if I missed my senior prom. I disagreed, but as in all things, the two of them won out. Juno found me a dress that was formal and at least two sizes too big in the bust. Mom got me a corsage. As it turned out, I’m allergic to lilies, can’t dance, and only stayed at the prom venue for all of five minutes before hiding in the ladies’ room for the remaining two hours. I get the feeling this ball is going to be magnitudes worse, only this time I can fill out the dress.

“You have to trust me.” Melody leads me to the vanity bench. “But first.” She hands me a wine glass filled with green liquid.

“Already moving on to the poison portion of our evening?” I eye the glass.

“Not poison.” She rolls her eyes. “It will help you relax.”

“Pacifying me before slaughter, then?”

“No! How many times must I tell you that you aren’t dying tonight?” She sighs, particularly weary of me this evening. “It’s simply a way to make this evening more bearable for you. That’s all.” She considers for a moment then gives me a sly look. “Would it make you feel any better to know that Gorsky is so jealous that you get to go to the ball he threw a fit and locked himself in his room?”

“Good. At least he’s contained.” I’d love for Gorsky to go in my place. The creepy asshole could even wear my dress. I wouldn’t care. I sit, the fight draining out of me as she goes about curling my hair with a resolve that verges on stern. When I take a sip, the green concoction is somehow sweet and bitter at the same time.

“Not bad?” she asks.

I take a bigger gulp. It burns funny in my stomach, but it warms me up nicely. “I think I’m going to be shitfaced before we even walk in. Wait. You’re going to be there, right?” I ask her reflection. (Turns out vampires have reflections. All the stories are bullshit.)

“Certainly.” She frowns at my hair, then works on curling the same tendril for the third time.

“I need you to tell me everything. What happens at these balls? What’s it like?”

“I don’t know. This is the first one in many centuries.”

I swallow hard. “So this isn’t a yearly sort of thing?”

She meets my gaze in the mirror, then returns to her work. “No. High Lord Dragonis has never been much for parties, especially when bringing all his enemies together

under one roof could lead to an attempt—or multiple attempts—on his line.”

“So why the change—oh, shit. Because of Theo?”

She nods. “That and the open war with humans. Plenty of vampires prophesied we’d eventually be forced to wipe most of them out and keep the rest as cattl—” She stops herself. “As a food source.”

I wrinkle my nose. “That doesn’t really make it sound any better.”

“Sorry.” She digs around in her bag and pulls out some absolutely ancient-looking hairspray.

“Is that safe?” I ask. “Will it destroy the ozone layer all over again?”

She glances at the bottle. “No telling.” When she sprays it, I hold my breath, but it doesn’t keep the noxious odor from invading. “It works!” She curls one lock of hair, then another. I suspect hair professionals would decry the damage, but I don’t see a salon anywhere nearby, so I let it go. It’s not like it matters. At least I’m going to my possible death with pretty hair.

“So we’re both going to a mystery ball.” I grab a powder puff and wave it around a little, sending a little plume of white into the air. “Do you think there will be a mystery prince?”

“Only Valen.”

I roll my eyes and take another drink of the green liquid. “He’s not a prince.”

“Not yet.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that his human ancestry has prevented him from being fully heir to Gregor’s kingdom, but now ...”

“Now that Theo’s dead, Valen’s all Gregor has left?” I fill in.

“It’s not quite that simple. Theo’s death has changed everything, Gregor most especially. He’s become ...” She presses her lips into a fine line.

“Whitbine.” I tap my nose. “Can’t be saying anything about the boss man that could make its way back to him, right?”

She doesn’t respond, but her expression is a plain ‘yes.’

“Fuck you Whitbine, you sack of donkey shit!” I raise my glass in mock toast. “I hope you meet the sun before I meet my maker.”

“Maybe slow down a little.” Melody finishes curling my hair, then runs her fingers through it, separating the tight ringlets into flowing waves.

“My hair has never—and I mean never —looked this good.”

She smiles, and for the first time, I swear I could see her blush. “I’m glad you approve.”

I finish the glass and hold it up. “More?”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.” She takes the glass and digs around in her overnight case.

I hiccup then giggle. “Definitely not a good idea,” she mutters.

“This is bad.” I pace the floor beside my bed, terror slowly creeping up my spine, slowed only by the green liquid. My aches from the nightmare have lessened, another gift of the green mystery drink. Despite its haze, my thoughts are spiraling, full of questions and futile thoughts of escape. Some way out of the ball, some way to avoid Gregor. I don’t know what’s going to happen to me. I don’t know how bad it’s going to get. Despite Melody’s reassurances, every doubt has managed to creep into my mind.

Why couldn’t I have escaped? Why? Valen is toying with me, that’s why. Did he know I was going to try the elevator? He must have. That’s why he left it open. So he could taunt me with the illusion of freedom. He took all my knives, all my options, and I bet he laughed while he did it. I hate him so much it threatens to make me physically ill.

“Fuck.” I almost turn my ankle, my body totally unused to the heels I’m wearing. This is a farce, a horrible farce. Me in this dress, me being forced to go to a damn party when I’m nothing but a prisoner.

“Gregor went to great expense to have these floors put in.” Valen’s voice startles the hell out of me. “The wood was sourced from a single forest in Romania, renowned for its dark wood that many believed sprouted on the field of an ancient battle, their roots fed with heartsblood.”

My hand to my chest, my heart on a rampage, I glare at him. In a sharply cut black tux with crimson accents, he looks every inch the villain. He should dress like this more often, the outside matching the inside.

“It would be a shame for you to cut a trench through the boards with your incessant pacing.” He looks down at me, his gaze sweeping to the floor and then back to my

face in a slow, meticulous assessment. “Blood Dragonis colors suit you.”

“A knife in the heart suits you.”

He smirks, his arrogance back in full force. “I believe you tried that already, though your aim was lacking.”

“I won’t miss next time.” I mean every word.

“I have no doubt.” He steps to me.

It takes every shred of courage I have not to move back. Outside, I stand strong. Inside, I want to curl into a ball and hide in the closet. Exposed, I itch to cover myself, to throw on anything to cover my bare skin. The v-cut of the neckline leaves the inner swells of my breasts exposed, and Melody made sure I wouldn’t wear a bra underneath. I don’t even want to think about the underwear she gave me, but I feel it in places where underwear should never go.

“First, do no harm?” he taunts.

“Killing you will be the biggest gift to mankind’s survival since Jenner created the smallpox vaccine.”

“You’ll get no argument from me.” He’s too close to me. His scent, his looming figure, the way he looks at me with disdain and something else beneath it. He drops his gaze again, lingering on my exposed flesh. A blush creeps into my face, unwanted heat.

“I would say that I hate you, but the word isn’t enough. Not anymore.”

“No?” His smirk deepens, his gaze lazily returning to mine. “Perhaps you should hold

that thought until we're done with the ball. I'm certain you'll have come up with a choice descriptor for me by the end of it."

"Or I'll be dead," I say flatly.

His brow creases the slightest bit, then his expression returns to its cold indifference. "Come along, little rabbit. Time to meet the wolves." He takes my arm and leads me through the door.

I try to slow our pace, but he won't let me. His stride doesn't falter as we descend the stairs. When I see movement on the piano floor, I try to halt. Once again, he pulls me along. People—no, not people—vampires, dozens of them on the landing, almost all of them looking right at me.

My stomach clenches, mouth goes dry. The liquid courage Melody gave me is all but gone, and I'm left with raw fear as I survey the hungry eyes awaiting me.

Music drifts through the air, some sort of classical dirge played almost jauntily from deeper in the castle. The ballroom.

"Lord Specter." A vampire at the bottom of the stairs gives a short bow, then stares at me. "And this is the human I've heard so much about. Quite lovely, aren't you?" He smiles, his fangs already pressing past his lower lip.

Valen doesn't even acknowledge him, simply pulls me past as more vampires whisper and watch. The ones with wings all wear gowns of deep violet or tuxes with violet accents. Others have dark green—the females with emerald jewels draped about their bare throats or green dresses that reveal miles of flawless skin. Fewer wear crimson. All of them watch Valen and me, their gazes open and direct.

They move for him, parting as he stalks through their midst. I find myself sticking

closer to him. Better the devil you know, I suppose. He doesn't let go of my arm, his hold tightening as we pass through the rooms, all of them brimming with bodies and chatter. Every accent, languages I don't recognize, and faces that bend reality with their timeless perfection—the silent castle has come alive, teeming with gorgeous terrors.

“There she is...”

“Fucking humans?—”

“Omoara-i pe toti ,” a green-draped woman leers at me.

Valen growls in her direction, and she leans away, her gaze snapping to him. Still, he doesn't stop pulling me through the various salons until we reach the ballroom. I keep waiting for my ankles to give, for my heel to catch, but if it happens, I don't notice. His grip is absolute, and he seems to be driven by a similar fury to my own. These vicious creatures cower as he passes, shrinking back with hisses and whispers.

I have to take a breath when we step into the ballroom. It doesn't look like the same space. Crimson banners festoon the walls, and the chandeliers hang lower, their candles flickering brightly, the crowd here just as thick. The music swells, and as the throng parts for Valen, I see a mass of vampires swirling through the center of the room, keeping time with the music in what must be a waltz.

I'm mesmerized, my entire reality already shaken down to its fractured bones, but this is another level of unbelievable hell. Vampires waltzing in an underground castle. My skin erupts in goose bumps at the haunting music and the perfect movements of the couples. Fantastical costumes and effortless, uncanny beauty. It raises my hackles.

Valen doesn't seem to care, perhaps not even to notice. He barrels ahead, disrupting

the dancers as he continues his march onward.

By the time we get across the ballroom, I'm breathless, but I don't dare stop. Not when the vampires are hissing or glaring at me. Rancor is all around, raw hatred directed solely at me for reasons I don't entirely understand. Is it because I'm the only human here?

We finally slow, then stop as the music continues behind us. I don't look, but I assume the dancers are back to their perfect twirls, skirts swishing across the floor in dramatic arcs.

"Stay here." Valen's hand disappears from my arm.

A word of refusal catches in my throat, too late. He's already gone.

I clutch my hands and look around, hoping to see Melody. She's not here. Instead, the vampires approach, their precise movements predatory and graceful. So many of them, their eyes glinting as they stare me down.

I back up a step. Then another. Where the hell is Valen?

"It's the Specter's pet." A man strides up to me, his green bowtie telling me he's part of some faction, though I don't know which. "Left alone, are you? I'll keep you company."

"Charles." Coal steps between us, his black wings obscuring my view. "I didn't realize Tantun had such a problem with boundaries."

His wings are black, bat-like. I can see the veins in the webbing, like lightning streaking out from the bone that runs from the taloned tip all the way to the bottom of the wing. They aren't fully extended yet are still massive. Strong enough to carry the

hulking Coal through the air, though I can't imagine the sight.

"I was simply welcoming her to the ball," Charles murmurs.

Coal turns his back on him, a clear dismissal, and the vampire slinks away into the crowd.

"You." It's all I can manage to say.

"Valen is speaking with High Lord Dragonis. I'll keep you company until he returns. Come." He leads me away from the dancing area and into an alcove along the side of the ballroom. There are still plenty of vampires around, but it's not quite as oppressive. Coal stands ahead of me, his stance tense.

I press my back to the wall, giving myself that small bit of comfort that no one can creep up from behind me. Coal is a babysitter, a welcome one given the way the other vampires keep eyeing me.

The music swells again, the vampires dancing as I watch the crowd. I catch a hint of pale blond hair. Through the throng, the white-haired vampire who took me from the cell sways toward me. She's wearing a deep green dress tightly fitted against her body. A snake covered in scales. Her eyes seize on me, and she smiles, her fangs showing. She has something in one of her hands, a buckle or something shiny. She yanks it.

Someone screams. No one looks. No one but me.

"Vince." My insides go cold as Vince, Juno's head of security, falls forward at the monster's feet. He's naked and bloody, his body emaciated.

I dart from the alcove and kneel beside him. "Vince!"

“You’re alive.” He grips my forearm with a wizened hand. Blood runs from a collar at his throat, the edges of the metal covered in twisted barbs that dig into his skin. She’s parading him around, showing him off. His suffering is their entertainment.

“Oh, no. No, no, no !” I grab the collar and try to find a way to remove it.

He cries out the moment I touch it. “You can’t.” His sunken eyes meet mine. “Georgia, it’s really yo—” He screams when the white-haired vampire yanks on his chain again.

“Stop!” I push to my feet. Even with my heels, I have to look up at her, into her cruelly beautiful face. “Let him go.”

“I don’t take orders from vermin.” She snaps her teeth at me.

“Now, now, Carlotta, is that any way to treat Valen’s spoils?” Coal chides from beside me.

“Don’t, Georgia,” Vince says faintly. “Not for me.”

“Silence!” She kicks him hard with her stiletto, and he falls to his side.

On pure instinct, I swing at her. Coal catches my fist, pushing it back down to my side. “No,” he warns.

“Let her try, Coal. We could have so much fun,” she taunts, her pale eyes flashing.

I go back to my knees and help Vince to a sitting position. I don’t ask him if he’s all right. I know he isn’t. He’s bleeding from the collar and now from the hole in his side from Carlotta’s heel. Pressing my hand to the wound, I apply steady pressure.

“It doesn’t matter.” His yellowed eyes are desperately tired, infinitely sad. “None of it matters.”

“We’re still here.” I grip his shoulder with my other hand.

“I’m not,” he whispers. “I’m sorry. I should’ve stopped her. Should’ve—” He coughs, a hacking, dry sound. “I should’ve put my foot down. But I was weak.” His eyes are almost pleading. “Do you, do you think I’ll be forgiven? Do you ... Do you think ...” He trails off, his gaze going distant.

I don’t realize I’m crying until my vision blurs. Vince’s breathing is labored, his breath putrid, and his skin is covered in bruises and scabs. My brittle soul cracks, hairline fractures destroying me as I look on his ruined face.

“Yes.” I touch his cheek, and he seems to return to the present. “You’ll be forgiven.”

His shoulders droop, and he shakes his head just once. “No, I won’t.”

“Get Valen’s whore out of my way, or I’ll handle her myself,” Carlotta snaps.

“Georgia.” Coal’s hand comes down on my shoulder.

I shrug him off. “Leave me alone!” I speak to Vince. “We can survive this. We can?—”

Carlotta laughs, the sound musical and almost sweet. Then she yanks the chain, pulling Vince away from me. I reach for him, but Coal’s grip tightens, holding me in place as Vince screams.

“No!” I swipe at the air trying to capture his wrist.

Carlotta drags him away, his blood marring the floor as they disappear into the crowd.

“Vince!” I scream.

Coal grabs my arms and pulls me up, then shoves me back into the alcove. “Don’t,” he warns, his dark brown eyes narrowed. “The more attention you call to yourself, the more danger you’re in.”

“I have to help him.” I try to push past Coal.

He shoves me against the wall again, his hold like a vise. “You will stay right the fuck here.”

“Let me go!” I kick his shin.

“Fuck.” He squeezes my shoulders painfully. “Stop!”

“Get her out of here.” Valen appears beside us, his gaze dark. “Now,” he snaps.

Coal lets go and steps away.

Something fires in my mind. A thought. Just a split second of an image. Coal, his wing ripped, his face bloody. My forehead tears apart, the agony so vicious that I yelp, my vision going black.

“What is this?” Valen cups my chin.

I gasp as the image disappears, the pain receding with it. I straighten, my body shaking.

“Georgia!” Valen tilts my face up and stares into my eyes. “What the fuck was that?”

“I-I don’t know.” My voice trembles.

Valen searches my face, his brows drawn together. Then he turns cold again, his demeanor closed off. “Take her back to her room. Stay with her. Now, before?—”

“Welcome all.” A sinuous voice coats the room, the music falling silent, the vampires freezing in place with uncanny stillness.

My breath, already an ephemeral thing, leaves me in a whimper. Gregor. He’s here.

“Fuck.” Valen glances from me to Coal.

“Tonight, we celebrate. Tonight, we feast.”

My heart thumps faster than it ever has. I don’t like the sound of any of this.

“Go. Now!” Valen shoves me into Coal’s grasp.

“Specter, come forward. Generals, come forward.”

Coal and Valen exchange a look, and then Coal is sweeping me back toward the entrance. A hint of relief swirls in my gut.

“Faster.” Coal wraps a thick arm around my waist, lifting me so my feet barely touch the ground. We move even quicker this way. We’re at the doors, the vampires focused on Gregor somewhere in the room behind us. Now past the doors into the outer salon. Out of this madness, away from the hungry stares and evil intentions.

Then Gregor’s voice rings out again. “Bring your humans with you.”

16

Recovered Journal of Dr. Georgia Clark

May 11, Year 1, Emergence Era

The three vampire blood types are the same, at least on the surface. A new species. I can't track them, can't compare them to the vast wealth of knowledge I have at my fingertips. Our experiments are shots in the dark, and we're all so tired. We're losing Aang. He's withdrawing more and more each day that he can't get in touch with Idrine. I know the feeling, the distance, the loss of someone who knows your ins and outs. But I can't share any of that with Aang. Not when my lost person may be the reason his person is lost, too.

Coal stops short.

Valen appears at my side as if from the ether, his face stern. "Don't speak," he says as he takes my elbow.

I wasn't planning on it.

He pulls me forward so roughly I lose my footing. Keeping me upright with ease, he drags me through the crowd that once again parts for him. His touch is rough, uncaring. Some of the vampires snicker, others leer. I can't clock all of them, not when Valen is half-dragging me to Gregor.

The rear of the ballroom has a short staircase leading to a stage, perhaps where a band

is intended to set up. The musicians aren't here. Gregor is, sitting on a crooked throne with a wine glass in his hand. I've no doubt the red liquid inside is blood.

"This is a celebration, my friends!" Gregor continues, his voice brittle like a dry, fallen leaf. "We have struck mighty blows against the human scourge, the masses of rats that bite and scurry if given a chance. We won't let them escape. We will rid the world of their filth, one by one until they breathe their last."

The scent of death wafts to my nose as Valen pulls me closer, my heels scraping against the wood floor. We stop at the bottom stair, and Valen forces me to my knees. A moaning wail comes from behind me, and then Vince is tossed onto the steps, his bloody body landing with a sickening crunch.

I reach for him, but Valen grips my hair, holding me in place, crushing the curls Melody so meticulously created. Death is all around me, in the air, on the faces of the vampires who watch, in Gregor's eyes. If my stomach wasn't already empty, there's a good chance I'd vomit. Instead, my stomach churns, acid in my throat as I try to keep breathing. My hatred of everyone in this room might be the only thing that's keeping me alive right now.

A female clad in gauzy crimson draped across her chest and her hips, the rest of her pale brown skin bare, sidles up to the throne and sits at Gregor's feet.

I stare at her, recognition flaring in my mind. "Fatima?" The name falls from my lips.

Her eyes are pale now, not the deep brown I remember, and her hair is free in long waves that flow around her shoulders.

"Nice to see you, Georgia." She smiles, her fangs almost dainty behind her lips, painted a deep plum.

Gregor strokes her hair like a pet dog, and she leans into his touch, her catlike eyes still on me. Fatima—she was Juno’s aide. We were, if not friends, close acquaintances. How many times did we share a table at dinner time in the governor’s mansion? She was like family. I thought she was dead with all the others, but here she sits. Whole but changed. No longer human. A creature that lounges at the foot of evil and purrs contentedly.

“And yours, Lord Corvidion?” Gregor asks and sips his blood. Something falls off the side of his throne and makes a squelching thud as it hits the floor.

It draws my focus, the shape of it. Long and pale like a fish belly. One with ... toes. My chest tightens as I realize it’s a severed foot. I rip my gaze from Gregor and stare at his throne. My gorge rises anew, my breath catching in my throat as I realize what it is. His crooked throne is bodies. A pile of bodies stacked and arranged—some tied with rope, some leaning precariously, and some dismembered entirely to fit into the crevices. I cringe away, but Valen’s hold on my hair tightens, stinging my scalp and forcing me to remain where I am.

“High Lord Dragonis.” Coal bows, his wings tucked tightly to his back. “I believe you killed my spoils back in the Black Cavern.”

Gregor, his skin white, the veins bulging in darkened lines, looks up as if he’s trying to recall. Then he gives a short bark of a laugh. “Ah yes, I remember. You should’ve asked for another. Sadly, I’m running out of humans these days.” He smiles, his yellowed fangs elongating.

Fatima gives a little laugh, her fingers tracing across her chest. The sheer fabric of her dress gives a clear view of her dark nipples, her body bare in a way that strikes a discordant note with her former modesty. Is she still her? The coldness in her gaze says she isn’t, that she’s something else. Transformed not only on the outside, but inside too. No vestige of humanity left.

Coal bows again.

“And yours, Lady Carlotta?”

“A very gracious gift, high lord.” Carlotta, the vicious blonde, curtsies.

Gregor raises a white brow. “He certainly doesn’t look it.”

“That’s because we’ve been having so much fun together.” Carlotta kicks Vince to his back and presses her foot to his chest. “Haven’t we?”

Vince moans, his eyes rolling back in his head. Carlotta drags him down the steps, and I’m thankful he’s unconscious, that he can’t feel any of it. Not yet.

“Yours is looking quite well, Valen. Quite well, indeed.” Gregor’s cold eyes flick to me. “Stand her up. Let me get a good look.”

Valen grabs my arm and pulls me to my feet, then forces me to stand in front of him.

Gregor looks me up and down slowly, then takes a long draw from his glass. “How does she taste?”

“Like a human,” Valen answers, bored again.

Gregor leans forward. “Is that all?” He tsks. “I don’t think so. I may have been a bit too hasty with her last time. Giving her to you when I should’ve kept her. She looks delicious, doesn’t she? What do you think, Fatima?”

“Good enough to eat.” She licks one of her fangs, her gaze raking up and down my body.

“Yes, I should’ve taken you for myself.” His eyes bore into me. “You’d have fewer fingers of course and no tongue. And your eyes, a lovely shade, I’d have those for dessert.”

I press my knees together to keep myself upright. Fatima rises and walks down the stairs, her hips swaying as she locks eyes with me. There’s something in her gaze that’s threatening, feral even. Her fingertips ghost along my arm as she whispers past and disappears into the crowd behind me.

“Alas, you belong to my Lord Specter now.” Gregor’s gaze returns to Valen. “And what have you learned from her. What of Theo?”

“I’ve inspected her memories, such as they are. There is nothing in them concerning Theo. She barely has any recollection of her work on the cure. I suspect she didn’t play as pivotal of a role as we were led to believe.” I can hear the sneer in his voice. “She only gained her place at the lab because of who her sister was. The others did the actual work.”

“The others?” Gregor asks.

“The ones who attempted to flee DC. We destroyed their convoy before they ever reached Atlanta. Our human spy tells me only two remain alive, and soon enough, we’ll have them for questioning.”

Human spy? He must mean the redhead from the garden. From what I heard, they didn’t sound particularly forthcoming with information. In fact, they seemed more like enemies than collaborators. But what do I know of spies?

Gregor stares at Valen for long moments, time passing without Gregor so much as blinking. I shiver, my skin cold and my heart on ice. If Valen has a spy higher up in the human ranks, how can we fight back? We’ll never get ahead of them. Never have

a chance at survival if someone is blocking us at every opportunity.

“Whitbine!” Gregor snaps so unexpectedly that I jump, my scalp smarting where Valen still holds my hair tightly.

“My lord.” Whitbine appears to my right and gives a deep bow.

“What of her memories?”

“She has recounted everything from her time here with utter clarity. There is no mental defect that would keep her from giving me the details of her time before captivity. However, she is unable to do so.”

“Unable or unwilling?” Gregor drums his long fingernails on the arm of his throne. A cheek. A person’s cheek, their eyes gone gray and dull, dried blood crusted where their nose was shattered.

“I assure you she cannot fight the compulsion. She’s only a human.”

“You’ve failed me yet again.” Gregor hurls his glass at Whitbine, striking him in the face. The glass shatters, shards littering the floor.

Whitbine only blinks, bits of his blood welling from cuts on his nose, his white tuxedo shirt turning crimson to match his bow tie. “As I suggested before, my lord, I believe she may have been tampered?—”

“Do you have any evidence of this tampering?” Gregor thunders.

“Not yet. But I would like to request that the Lord Specter allow me to interrogate her alone and more frequently. I feel that his presence may possibly be interfering with her ability to focus solely on my requests of her memory. Also, a prolonged

compulsion may yield better results.”

I stiffen and clutch my hands together. At least Valen has made Whitbine cut his tortures somewhat short. If he’s given free access to me, I don’t know what I’ll do. I don’t know if I’ll be able to withstand it.

“Are you accusing Valen of tampering with her mind?” Gregor asks carefully.

“Oh, no, my lord. Of course not,” Whitbine crows.

“Specter, what have you to say for yourself?” Gregor’s tone rises, furor in the hollows of his cheeks and eyes.

“If Whitbine seeks to cast aspersions, I suggest he look inward.” Snide and clipped, Valen continues, “He is the one who damaged her mind beyond repair. The only one who had access to her for the weeks she was in the Black Cavern’s dungeon. If anyone tampered with her, it was him.”

Whitbine steps closer to the throne. “My lord, I assure you?—”

“Silence!” Gregor’s voice cuts through the air surer than any blade. I wince, leaning back until I’m against Valen’s unforgiving form.

“Someone has betrayed me. I know it now for certain.” He surveys the crowd. There isn’t a sound, not a single breath from the huge ballroom. “Which of you was it? Blood Corvidion?” His gaze returns to Coal. “You’ve sought my death for centuries upon centuries. Have you finally achieved it by destroying my only heir?” He gnashes his teeth.

Coal drops to one knee and bows his head. “Corvidion is loyal, High Lord. We would not betray you.”

“Nice words.” Gregor rises and walks down the steps, his movements jerky. “But empty. All of them.”

Coal doesn’t move even when Gregor is standing right in front of him.

“Lady Tantun!” Gregor snaps, then appears in front of Carlotta in a blink.

She drops into a low bow. “Blood Tantun awaits your orders. We will slay the humans and praise you as we do it.”

“More pretty words.” Gregor looks down at her with disdain.

“And you.” Gregor materializes in front of me, his eyes focused on Valen at my back. “What of you, Valen? You’ve failed to avenge Theo. Failed to find his killer. Failed to bring honor to my line. Did you think killing Theo would elevate you? You? A halfbreed ?” Gregor’s arm shoots out, his cold palm wrapping around my throat. He squeezes, cutting off my air as he lifts me off my feet. “ You were the one sent to mind this human, were you not? You!” he yells, his fangs only inches from my face. “Has your weak human side won out finally? Have you chosen to die with these animals?”

I reach up to grab Gregor’s arm, to try to get air, but Valen snatches my wrists and pins them behind my back.

I can’t move. My lungs burn. I can’t breathe. A tiny whimper escapes, but nothing else.

“My lord.” Valen’s voice is even. “If this human has the information you seek, I will bleed it from her. No matter her refusal, no matter Whitbine’s incompetence.” His hold tightens. “I will never allow her to escape me. Her body, her mind, her secrets—they are mine .”

“Yet you have no answers.” Gregor squeezes tighter.

My vision blackens, my mind blanking.

“Not to sound impertinent, my lord, but I’ve been razing the human world at your command as well as executing your enemies within our own ranks. Give me more time with the prisoner, and I will grant you the results you seek.”

I go limp. Dark. Silent. I float along, a leaf on a still pool of cool water—My lungs fill with a searing pain, and I gasp in air. Gregor is a few paces away, his hands in the air, and Valen holds me up as I regain consciousness. I’m still his marionette, moving only when he pulls my strings.

He shakes me, and I gulp in more air.

“Georgia—” Vince reaches for me as Carlotta drags him away through the ballroom.

My throat is raw. I can’t speak, can’t do anything except watch as he disappears, only his blood left behind.

“—lesson must be taught.” Gregor’s voice rings tinny and hollow in my ears as my senses come back.

Head woozy, legs uncertain, I stare at Gregor as he motions for someone. A vampire hoists a long spear of some sort and hands it to Gregor. His white skin smokes and sizzles where he touches it. “My betrayer is here among you.” With a flash of impossible speed he returns to the top of the stairs and slams the silver spike into the wood floor, driving it deep.

A murmur goes through the room at my back.

“Though I may not know which of you it is, I can give you a small sample of what awaits you once you’re discovered.”

There’s a slight scuffling sound behind me, and then someone is dragged up the steps between two vampires. Their body is limp, the crimson of their gown trailing behind and whispering across the floor. It’s a vampire. Finally, Gregor is going to take out his wrath on one of his own. Good. I want to see one of them die. I want them to suffer. I want to know it’s possible to kill them. This is a stroke of luck, a small dose of vengeance.

Valen puts one hand at my sore throat, the other at my waist, locking me against him. He’s almost vibrating with tension.

Gregor grabs the woman’s head and pulls her upright.

My heart lurches. The beautiful hair coiled into a crown, the smooth brown skin. I know her immediately. Melody.

Melody is on the grisly stage, her face marked with slashes, her eyes swollen almost shut. Valen wraps his palm around my mouth as I stare up at her, at the only kind vampire I’ve ever known. She looks right at me, her warm brown eyes steady despite the pain she must be in.

“No objections?” Gregor asks, his mocking eyes on Valen.

Valen remains silent, his entire form rigid, his hand tight over my mouth.

Tears well and run down my cheeks, and still, Melody holds my gaze. Unwavering. Strong. Only when Gregor takes her by the hair does her focus shift above me. To Valen.

With more strength than his withered body should possess, Gregor lifts her over his head, then slams her down on the silver stake, impaling her through her heart. No fanfare. No acknowledgement of taking a life. Just pure brutality.

She screams, the sound so full of anguish it rips apart every wound I've ever had. She shudders violently. Once. Twice. Her eyes going black, her mouth still open in a scream. And then she stills, her body sliding down the silver spear until she lies unmoving at Gregor's feet.

Valen's hand slips from my mouth. I don't scream. I do nothing. Nothing . I let her die. Valen let her die. There's a roar in my ears, a howling of wind and malice and icy hate. Impotent rage. Smothering me slowly with each dead body stacked on top, everyone I've ever cared for arranged like kindling for a fire that no one will see, no one will mourn, no one. No one. No one.

"—in. Yes, bring them in!" Gregor shouts, snapping me back, his reedy voice indulgent now. "No more matters of state. Only matters of feasting." He gives a cold, toothy smile.

Two wide doors to my right open. Faces. So many faces.

"No." My voice is hoarse, barely there.

People. Naked and bruised, some of them crying, others in near catatonia as they stare around. Not just adults, children too, a little girl screaming and clinging to a man's arm. The terror in her cries breaks me.

"No," I say it louder and try to fight Valen off, to get to her. To save her. That's my calling, that's always been my calling— saving lives. Helping.

"Stay still." He wraps his arm across my shoulders in a brutal hold.

“No!” I claw at his arm as the horde of monsters encircles the humans, more of them pouring through the doors, pushed forward by the vampire guards at their backs.

“Music!” Gregor yells as he approaches me, then gives a small, stately bow. “May I have this dance?”

And then he has me clutched against his chest, spinning me onto the dance floor as the people scream and scream as they’re murdered. Violated. Dismembered for sport.

Gregor grins at me, his wiry body moving to the music as he lifts me effortlessly. “I’ve always loved music. It’s one of the small joys of this life, don’t you think?”

I can’t speak. Not because of compulsion, but because of the knot in my throat. The screams grow louder. A vampire drags a woman into the alcove I’d been standing in. She wails then goes suddenly silent as he tears her throat out, blood splashing the crimson banner.

Then Gregor spins me again and again. I get glimpses of horror with each turn, each dip and sway of the music. Bodies ripped and shredded. Tears unheeded. I don’t see the little girl. I don’t hear her anymore, either. She’s gone.

“My Theo loved music, too. You’ve seen his piano?” He waltzes faster, spinning us through the open dance floor. “He could play so beautifully it was almost as if he had a soul. You would’ve cried to hear it.” His eyes flash. “But your kind stole him from me, him and all his beauty.”

Blood splatters across us in an arterial spray. I don’t see where it comes from. It doesn’t matter. They’re all going to die. We’re all going to die.

He feigns concern. “You think my vengeance is unwarranted?”

I don't answer. His questions aren't for me.

“That's because you don't understand legacy. Humans never will. Your short, empty lives are meaningless. Not ours. Not Theo's.” His claws dig into my side, and I bite my tongue to keep from crying out. “His death changed the world. His death changed everything . All your fates rested on him. And what did you do? You killed him like the swine you are. It's a common theme among you animals, kill the most beautiful, the purest thing you can find. That's what Theo was. Did you know his mother was my sister? He was pure . Every bit of our family line culminated in him, his perfection. He was my Blood!” He grows feral for a moment, then turns conspiratorial. “I suppose you think we're even somehow?” He tsks. “As if a human life could ever equal an immortal one.”

Not understanding, I finally look into the pitiless depths of his eyes. I don't want to understand him. To understand a creature like him means sharing something, some sort of connection, some sort of empathy. There can be none. It is his destruction or mine.

“I mean Juno, of course,” he says it like a teacher to an exasperating student. “When Valen killed your sister, it was to me like the squashing of a loathsome bug.” He shrugs. “It didn't change anything. She was the president of this entire foolish country, and it still meant nothing . Because humans are nothing. You are nothing.”

Valen killed Juno. Until this moment, I didn't know how it happened. She was gone, that was all I needed to know. I didn't want to think of her being dead. It was only the abstract, the bloodless version of death. Gone. Unreachable. But this ... this is so much worse.

He smirks, his smile growing even more predatory. “You didn't know it was Valen? Quite the bloody affair. She'd been torn to slivers while still alive. Valen is quite skilled at eliciting pain. The best I've ever seen. I've often pondered the reason is in

his blood. His human weakness gives him insight into your suffering and how best to inflict it. Wouldn't you agree, Doctor ?" he taunts.

I blink away tears, but they flow anyway. Just as the blood flows all around me. Unstoppable. The walls and floors and mouths unquenchable.

"Oh, well. Enough dark talk, yes? This is, after all, a party." He opens his mouth and slices his tongue against his fang. Then he bites my throat. It burns, tearing through my veins like razors. I barely react, my invisible wounds so much deeper than anything Gregor has done to me.

"Dance." He stops and backs away a step. "Dance for me and me alone."

My head swims, but my body obeys. I sway to the music, pirouetting when he spins his finger in a slow circle.

"Come." He takes my waist again. "Dance with me like a lover. Dance like you fuck. Dance like you're desperate to fuck me."

I taste bile as I wrap my arms around his neck and press my body to his.

"Slower!" he snarls at the orchestra.

The tempo drops, and he sways with me, his hands at my waist, then at my back. I feel every sinewy bit of him, his cold flesh against mine, his fetid breath on my cheek.

"I should've kept you." He whispers in my ear, then rips my earlobe with his fang as I scream. "Maybe I will."

Recovered Journal of Dr. Georgia Clark

June 26, Year 1, Emergence Era

They're leaving today. I have to stay strong and let them go, no matter how much they ask me to go with them. This is where I belong. Here, in this city that's on the edge of a precipice. We're at the brink of something that will either make or break mankind. I send my hopes and my love with each of my friends. I told them I'll meet them in Atlanta once I can convince Juno to come with me. They knew I was lying, Gretchen especially. But she and I share a secret that even the others don't know about. We've created a substance that could change everything... But only if it works.

I don't leave my room for four days. At least, I think it's four days by my count. I have no memory of how I got back here the night of the ball. For once I'm glad I can't remember.

Food appears outside my door like always, though I don't know how. It's different, the dishes simpler, the silverware laid out a bit more haphazardly. I pick at it, my stomach aching with emptiness. I didn't realize how Melody's personal touch made everything better. I didn't realize ...

Her body shuddering on a silver spike.

I flinch at the sudden image, then roll into a ball, hugging my knees. I'd wanted her

dead. Gloated at the thought of the vampires killing each other.

I didn't know.

How could I have known it would be her?

It shouldn't have been her.

And Valen just watched. Stood there with his hand over my mouth, forcing me to swallow my grief and anger. A vicious creature. The one who killed Juno. Why does that somehow make it hurt even more? He's just another one of them. There is no warmth, no kindness, no mercy. He's slaughtered his way through this world, and no one can stop him. Certainly not me. I'm no one. Whatever work I did on the cure, it wasn't enough. I was a bit player put on the stage by my sister just like he said. That's all.

My gown lies on the floor beside the bed. I wish I could burn it, wipe it from existence. Gregor's hands on my bare skin, his fangs embedded in my flesh. I shiver and burrow beneath the blanket as tears threaten.

Sleep comes and goes, but I often wake to phantom screams. Vince's. The little girl's. My own.

I run my fingers along my neck, then my earlobe. They're unharmed, the skin overly sensitive in those spots but undamaged. Healed though I don't know how.

In these past fevered hours, all my dreams of escape have faded. Even if I could somehow get away from this estate, there's nowhere to go. No safety. No one.

My thoughts have circled the drain, coalescing into one stream. I have only one option. A single chance to end all of this for good. Whatever information might be

hiding in my mind, I can take it with me. Whitbine won't have a chance to strip it from me if I'm dead.

On the fifth day, I resolve to move around. With quiet steps, I roam the halls, a ghost in a haunted mansion. When I find Melody's quarters, I sit on her small sofa. Her floral and citrus scent still lingers in the air, but the room is still. All her color and vibrancy are gone, dead on a silver spike while I did nothing.

Did I do nothing when Juno was killed? Was I there when Valen hurt her? Was that the trauma that broke my mind and erased my memories? I don't know. I'll never know. I say a silent apology to Melody. It encompasses many things, my failure to save her, my coldness toward her when all she had for me was kindness. She was a vampire, but she wasn't a monster. Could there be more like her? All the ghouls at the ball—not a single one of them had any kindness, any care for the humans they slaughtered. That child, her screams, I can't escape them.

No, there was only one Melody.

In her closet, all her beautiful clothes are hung neatly, one sky blue dress set out from the rest. As if she might walk right in and change into it. I run my fingers along the fabric, a tactile goodbye.

"I always envied your taste." I rest my cheek against the dress for a moment.

I wander out of her rooms and past the piano, which I now know belonged to Theo. I'd burn it right along with my dress if I could, watch it crackle and spark until it was nothing but cinders and melted strings. I won't get the chance.

Slowly, I climb back to the bedroom level and stand at the top railing. The castle falls away below me, level after level, each one slightly jutting out farther than the one above it. The black stone wall, smooth and cold, lies just beyond. I never managed to

explore any deeper than the level where Gorsky ambushed me. If there's anything else lurking in the lower darkness, I suppose it will be the first to find me.

Gazing down, I realize I'll need to launch myself as hard as I can to clear the piano level. That should give me enough of a fall to kill me. I have to hope I die on impact, but if I don't, I've accepted that fate. I might suffer, but it won't be for long. It won't be anything compared to what Valen did to Juno, what he'll do to me if I stay here, locked in this castle.

I want to be brave and strong. I'm not. I'm scared as I look down into the blackness, my heart thundering, blood rushing. But I'm also resolved. It has to end now. All of it. I won't be a pawn for the vampires any longer.

With shaking hands, I grab the railing and throw first one leg over, then clamber onto the thin ledge on the other side of the rail. It's just enough for me to stand using the sides of my feet. Holding on, I lean forward and try to gauge my jump. It'll take a hard launch, but I'm pretty sure I have enough strength to make it past the next railing. Not much more than that, though. It has to be enough.

Unbidden tears roll down my cheeks, and fear mixes with self-preservation, both screaming at me to climb back over.

My muscles don't want to obey as I crouch against the rail. I release one hand, only hanging on by one now. My body trembles, vertigo making everything below me appear so much farther away. I close my eyes and breathe in deep.

I hope I'm forgiven just as I hope Juno and Melody are forgiven. Just as Vince hoped he was forgiven.

Bending my knees, I get as low as I can, then spring forward into the open air, into the freedom of death.

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Recovered Journal of Dr. Georgia Clark

February 3, Year 1, Emergence Era

I've always been hopeful but not like this. A new lab, tons of supplies, every single scientific device for epidemiology at my fingertips! I'm giddy. This is it. I can feel it. This is where we make history and save lives. Somebody pinch me!

I get clear of the piano and the landing below, the fall so quick yet impossibly long. Hurtling down, I close my eyes.

That's when he grabs me.

The sudden jolt rattles my teeth, and I taste blood where I've bitten my tongue. I scream, pain flaming to life in my shoulder. Dislocated from the hard stop.

"What the fuck?" Valen roars and pulls me over the rail, his grip on my arm so strong that my bones ache. "What do you think you're doing?" He shoves me back into the wall, his blue eyes wide as he stares down at me.

"Just let me go," I whimper.

"Never!" He leans down until his gaze is level with mine. "I will never let you out of my grasp, little rabbit. You are mine. This body, mine! Your life belongs to me! You will not harm yourself!" he bellows.

“It doesn’t matter.” I meet his glare. “I’ll just do it again. Or something else. Anything to get away from you.”

He takes in a deep breath, his jaw tense as he breathes it slowly out his nose. Then he says, his tone cold and even, “First you want to kill me, but now you’ve changed your mind?”

“I can’t kill you.” I wince as he leans into me, the force of his fury like a blow.

“You’re wrong about that, as you are about most things.” He bares his teeth. “Never try something like this again.”

“Fuck you!” I scream and shove at him, kicking and flailing, anything to get him away from me.

He takes it all, even when I manage to get a hand up and slap him right across his goddamn face. He doesn’t so much as flinch.

I rage and rail against him until my body gives out, my impotent anger burning up like kindling. My shoulder aches, my busted arm hanging limp, and I have an empty feeling inside me. Hollowed out from what I tried and failed to do. I’m still alive. I don’t want to be.

When I go still, he sighs and straightens, his arms caging me against the wall.

“You let her die. You—” Grief chokes me as sure as a hand at my throat. The horror of Melody’s death, the awfulness of standing and watching and doing nothing. It’s a bottomless well, cold and black in its endless depths.

“She was of my blood,” he says it softly.

“Why didn’t you do something?” I look up at him. “She trusted you. I saw it in her eyes. She looked at you, and you did nothing. Nothing!”

He stands silent.

“You could’ve saved her.”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you?” I erupt again, my anger flaring and then dying out like the head of a struck match. A sob catches in my chest. “She’s dead. We just stood there and watched. She was the only bit of kindness, the only one of you with a soul left. She was...” She was a friend. I realize it now, far too late. “You didn’t help her.” It sounds so weak, my voice, my regret. A thin sheet of glass, already cracked in a million different ways, one breath away from falling completely apart.

He meets my gaze, something unknowable in his eyes. Something like ... pain. Can he even feel that? Does he hurt? Was Melody anything more than a servant, a forgettable cog in his infernal machine?

“You killed Juno.” My voice breaks on my sister’s name.

Whatever was in his eyes is gone, replaced with derision. “And?” he sneers.

I can’t breathe, can’t reply. I can do nothing in the face of his callous confession. He doesn’t care about the harm he causes. He never has.

“Do you care about anyone?” I ask, emotion turning my voice into a whispered plea. “Didn’t you care about Melody?”

His expression closes again, his eyes going hard like flint.

“You mourn her rather than the pitiful humans we slaughtered while you danced?” he taunts.

“Fuck you.”

“Foolish little rabbit.” He grips my chin and tilts my face up. “You should worry about your own kind. The millions who will die while you sit here pitying yourself. Your sister was nothing. The humans we ripped apart at the ball were nothing. Their bones are already out for the vultures, their blood gone to feed their betters. This is how it will be with all humans. The sooner you accept that, the better.”

“I’ll never accept it.” In a sudden burst of insanity, I thrust my head forward. I catch him on the nose, pain blooming on my forehead as he jerks back.

“There she is.” He’s on me again before I can even take a step, a malevolent grin on his face as blood drips down his upper lip. “My little rabbit has claws.”

He kisses me hard. No warning, no escape. It’s an assault, his tongue swiping between my lips and carrying the taste of his blood with it. I try to turn my head, but he holds me still, his hand at my throat, his body an impassable wall.

I scream, and he only delves deeper, his tongue dancing across mine. When I bite down, he withdraws before I can take a piece of his tongue, my teeth clacking together with a snap. Blood smeared across his grinning lips, he’s a terror. A nightmare that can’t be escaped.

“Listen well, Doctor.”

The compulsion takes hold, gripping my heart with an icy fist. “You will never attempt to take your own life again. You will never harm yourself again.”

My hands fist. Hatred, an endless pool of it, rises inside me.

“Tell me you understand.” His eyes are icy blue.

“I understand.”

“Good little rabbit.” He eyes my mouth again.

“I’ll bite your fucking tongue off,” I grate out.

“A sacrifice I’m willing to make,” he whispers. “Perhaps later.” With eerie speed he backs away, then turns and disappears down the stairs.

I sag against the wall, my already broken spirit bearing extra bruises. This was my last chance. My only chance. I slide down until I’m sitting, my entire body limp. I test my shoulder. It doesn’t hurt. I rotate it around. Everything is back in place. Did he heal me? He wouldn’t. And how? He’s made it quite clear he enjoys my suffering.

With the strength I have left, I pull myself up and grip the railing. When I try to throw my leg over, my body disobeys.

“No.” I lean forward. Again, my body stops me from going too far, from toppling over and down to the next level. It’s as if an invisible hand is holding me back. “No.” I swallow hard, my face hot. But it doesn’t matter how I try to deny it. Valen’s compulsion is in my blood.

Once again, I’m nothing more than his marionette. No free will. No way out. He’s taken everything from me, and I’ll never get it back.

I busy myself with my journal, writing down everything that’s happened to me, every iota of information I know about the vampires. It’s silly, indulging in the reckless

hope that maybe one day a series of fortuitous events might land my journal into human hands. But it's all I have. There's nothing left for me to do, no way to change my fate. So, I write it all down until I'm pushing on the edges of my memory, the sharp pain in my head a warning that I've gone too far.

There are only pieces, flashes of images that don't seem to fit any real pattern. Faces, cherry blossoms, lab equipment, Gene.

I blink. Gene. I remember him. I've never been able to put a name to his face, but it just came to me. He'd been the custodian at the university where I worked. Then he came to DC with us. After that ... was he at the lab with me? My memory goes murky. Frustration wells when my headache threatens to return.

Fatima. I think about her instead. I know she was with us in DC. She'd been Juno's aide ever since she won the governorship. Now she's a vampire, Gregor's vampire. Foreboding lodges in my gut, my mind spinning out a million theories in a single second. The most obvious is that Fatima was somehow in on it all along. Did she push Juno to make the deal with Gregor? She'd been in the meetings. Everywhere Juno went, Fatima was always there. Even more so than Candice, who'd taken more of a quiet role once Fatima showed up.

"With her iPad and all her political savvy." Candice rolls her eyes.

"Hang on, I thought you liked Fatima?" I chew through a particularly tough piece of steak, the meat more like boot leather than food.

"I do." Candice cuts her meat in neat squares. "I guess she just makes me feel old, and I get crabby about it, all right?" She wrinkles her nose as Vince walks in while giving orders into his radio. "Can you cut that shit out at the dinner table?" she snaps.

"—perimeter sweep before it gets full dark. Out." He pockets the radio and grabs his

plate. “Grumpy this evening,” he remarks and serves himself a hockey puck piece of steak.

“I’m not grumpy.” Candice cuts her meat into even smaller pieces with a vicious sawing motion. “I’m just a little crabby.”

“She’s worried she can’t keep up with all the new technology,” I translate.

Vince scoffs and sits down, then flips his tie over his shoulder. “What new technology? Everything’s shut down. We’re working with 20 th century tech.” He pats the radio in his pocket. “My cell has a signal for maybe five minutes of every hour, and the power is getting more questionable.” He bites a hunk from his steak and chews as Candice glares at him. After a big swallow, he adds, “Look, you aren’t behind is all I’m saying.”

“Fatima is always flitting around and acting like Juno can’t wipe her ass unless it’s in her separate calendar.” Candice makes a childish face, one distinctly at odds with her wrinkles and gray hair. “A separate calendar. Can you believe that? I’ve kept Juno’s calendar for years . Never had an issue.”

“What’s that saying, ‘more hands make less work’ or something like that?” Vince offers.

“Hi everyone.” Fatima strides in, a somewhat stiff smile on her face.

Shit, she must’ve been listening. “How are you today?” I ask a little too brightly.

“All good. Juno should be down in a minute. She’s just finishing up a call with Washington about the Houston situation.”

“The food bank assault?” Vince scowls. “I thought they had that handled with

additional National Guard.”

“Juno thought so, too.” Fatima serves herself from the veggie trays. “But apparently a lot of the angry locals are ridiculously well-armed. They need more troops to keep the distribution area safe for civilians.”

“Was that call on the calendar?” Candice asks pertly.

I give her a death glare, but she completely ignores me.

“It was on both calendars, yes.” Fatima says evenly as she takes her seat. “I added it this morning.”

A tense silence settles over the room, only the sounds of chewing and the occasional grunt from Vince interrupting the stalemate.

“Anyone want to hear a joke?” I blurt.

Candice gives me the stink eye. “Professor, maybe you should sit this one out.”

“I’d love to hear a joke.” Fatima smiles.

I clear my throat. “What did the famous auctioneer’s tombstone say?”

Vince and Candice exchange a puzzled glance.

“What?” Fatima asks.

“Going, Going, Gone!” I slam my hand on the table as if it’s a gavel.

Candice snorts a laugh.

“Is this what passes for jokes in these rough times?” Vince gives me half a smile as Fatima giggles.

The tension eases.

“Is that gallows humor? That’s what they call that, isn’t it Professor?” Candice asks.

“Shitty humor. Can’t believe they think you’re a genius around here.” Vince shakes his head, a twinkle in his eye as he ribs me.

We’re a family again, cobbled together before and after the plague arrived.

“Well fuck Washington, am I right?” Juno strides in, her presence lighting up the room. She stops and eyes us all suspiciously. “Why is everyone smiling?”

The memory comes and goes in a blink, but it hits me with the force of a gut punch. I curl into a ball, my journal forgotten as I revel in the memory, turning it over and inspecting it like a treasured, but rusty, coin. We were happy. The world was falling apart, but we were happy with each other, happy with what we had.

Now they’re all gone—Candice, Juno, Vince. And Fatima has become something twisted and evil. I still feel the touch of her cold fingertips along my skin. What happened to her?

What happened to all of us?

The rain had set in early, soaking the wooded countryside with cold and wet. Sleet mixed in every so often, and Sylvana kept her shawl up against the relentless pelting of both ice and wind. She travelled at dark. The road was far too dangerous during the day. Too many people knew her, had heard of her, had shunned her.

Night was her only protection against the whispers. She cloaked herself in it, hiding from the women who would curse her or the men who would do far, far worse. The trees were barren, fall coming early and threatening a particularly brutal winter. One she wouldn't survive. Not in her tiny shack in the woods. She had nowhere to go, no one who would help her. Her death was a certainty if she stayed where she was.

Sylvana did the only thing she could—she set out on the long, treacherous road that led to the black castle. The place the locals avoided, where unwary travelers disappeared, and screams could be heard in the wee hours when ordinary folk were abed. It was a cursed place, one that held many terrors for her. It had almost claimed her life once. She had no guarantee that it wouldn't try again, but this is how small her world had become. There were no other options, no chance at life unless she took the stony road to the dark keep.

She climbed over rocks and slid along the muddy wheel tracks, moving ever onward despite the howls of wolves and the yellow-eyed owls that watched her from the skeletal trees. This was about survival. If anyone could understand that, it was the animals looking for a meal.

Lean and hungry, she ached with each hard footfall, her ankles turning on the slippery

ground. On she went, shivering in her wet clothes as she kept her back hunched, her shoulders taking the brunt of the icy wind and water. Tired, so tired. But that was why she had to do this, to go back to where it all started. Back to him .

Just the thought of it makes her stop. She bends over and dry heaves, nothing in her stomach. Still, she retches until the feeling passes. Until she can push the emotions down and focus on her need. Her raw need to live, no matter the cost.

The hill of crosses and religious shrines rises to her right. A dead goat rots on the stone altar, an offering for the monster who lives in the castle. The villagers think that killing a goat or hanging up trinkets can keep the nightmare at bay. Nothing can. He will take their children, their young and their old, their weak and their hardy. No one is spared from his scythe. Sylvana certainly wasn't.

She keeps trudging for another hour before she reaches the black gates. They're open, welcoming anyone foolish enough to venture inside. Her skin crawling, she soldiers on past the stone wall and into the courtyard. A broken carriage sits off to the side, the doors ripped away long ago.

Nothing stirs. Only the wind and the rain that seem to drive her onward, pushing her through the portcullis and into the castle. Drafty and dim, bats swoop overhead, some of them flying out into the night despite the weather. She knows the way. Each step harder than the last as she descends into the bowels of the castle, the air here dank and tinged with rot. The last time she was here, she crawled up each step, struggling to be free, to get home to her village where she would be safe. Where the nightmare couldn't touch her anymore.

But that's another story. One that leads right back here. For her, all roads have led to this cursed place. The land gone dark and barren because of the monster that lives within the stone walls.

Shaking, she reaches the bottom, her gaze slowly growing accustomed to the gloom. Only a few tapers burn along the black corridor, the flames nearly guttering as she passes.

Raucous laughter echoes down the hall, and she has to stop. To breathe. Her hair stands on end, her scars somehow burning. It's as if they remember this place, too. Remember him .

Taking a shuddering breath, she continues, her steps never faltering as she enters the throne room. A horde of monsters lounge throughout the room, some of them talking, others blithely sinking their teeth into one of the shepherd boys from her village. She remembers him. Ivan, she thinks, that's his name. Part of the posse that forced her from her home, he'd made the sign of the cross when he'd last seen her, then threatened her with his shepherd's hook. Using it as a weapon instead of leading her to safety.

Ivan's screams are weak, barely heard over the hum of conversation. He must've been out past dark, herding too close to the black castle. His shepherd's hook is long gone, probably still in the field where the devils found him.

"What's this?" A vampire rises from her seat on one of the ratty cushions. Topless and filthy, she's still lovely. Her eyes too green, her lips too red. Their beauty is a lure, a trick. "A treat just wandering in?"

"I'm here for Gregor." Sylvana's voice doesn't shake.

The strigoi pouts. "But I'm hungry."

"I came for the king of your kind. Not you. He would be displeased if you took what is his."

Sylvana keeps walking, brushing past the vampire who growls low in her throat. More of them notice her now, and Ivan does too. He holds out a bloody hand toward her, silently beseeching as his cries have died away. She keeps going, leaving him to his fate as he left her to hers.

The king of the monsters lounges on his throne, one leg thrown over an arm as he stares at the ceiling. Listless and bored, he lets out a long-suffering sigh. Then he turns his head at an owl's angle, his neck twisting as his eyes glow like a wolf's.

"You've returned." He smirks and sits up, then his brows draw together with confusion. "You've returned?" he says again, a question in his words this time. He laughs, the sound low and dark. Beautiful, almost. Sylvana realizes she would've thought him beautiful if she didn't already know what lurks beneath his handsome disguise. Her body bears the scars of it.

The room is quiet now. Not even Ivan's labored breath sounds in the darkness. Dead. Just like everything else in this castle.

"This is ... unexpected." Gregor stands, a boyish smile on his face as he drops down the steps to her. He plucks a strand of her hair and inhales, then wrinkles his nose. "You smell like filth and poverty and something else, something different. Not the innocent maiden I spent ever so much time with." He grins, his fangs growing long. "I had quite a bit of fun with you, didn't I?"

Though it hurts, though it galls her beyond measure, she slowly sinks to her knees.

Gregor's amusement only grows. "You want my cock that badly? Then you shall have it." He unbuttons his trousers.

"I'm not here for that," she says softly, her heart pounding, her fear a live thing that whips around inside her, searching for a way to be free.

Gregor has the nerve to feign disappointment. “No? But we had such amazing times, you and I.”

She grits her teeth.

“Did you come to die?” He stares down at her. “Or do you think I’ll turn you?” He shakes his head.

“No.”

He crosses his arms and adopts a puzzled expression. “You say you didn’t come to die, but of course you did.” With snake-like quickness, he grips her throat and lifts her until she’s dangling in front of him. “You know what happens here, what happens to silly little humans like you.”

“I came for Valen,” Sylvana forces out.

“Who?” Without another word, Gregor flicks his hand, breaking her neck.

Her eyes go wide, her mind flaring in bright white light as he releases her. She falls, her body twitching, her eyes still open, her hands grasping weakly at the small, warm lump strapped to her chest. In seconds her hands still, her breath stops.

Only then does her child give a small cry.

Gregor stops, his gaze fixed on the dead woman’s chest. Kneeling, he rips away the fabric and finds the babe tucked against its mother.

The others gather around, some of them openly salivating when they realize it’s a child.

“A snack?” He snatches the child into his hands and stands, then holds it up, staring into its eyes. The faintest connection, weaker than his bond with Theo, springs to life, pulsing in his veins. Power. His power shared through blood.

His mouth drops open, his pupils blowing as he realizes this child is his. Diala reaches for the babe.

He slashes her throat, sending her stumbling backwards.

“My lord?” Nialen asks, his gaze on the child.

The child cries. Big, whooping wails. Gregor laughs, hoisting the child even higher and turning it around so everyone can see the pale skin, the icy eyes, and the tiny fangs of his progeny.

20

Recovered Journal of Dr. Georgia Clark

June 24, Year 1, Emergence Era

It doesn't seem real. It can't be real. Juno is in trouble, more trouble than I ever could've imagined. I didn't know. Juno made sure I didn't know because she's kept me away. Was it for my safety like she said, or was it so I wouldn't find out? Both? It doesn't matter. I have to get her out before they kill her or worse. If I don't, then we are all lost.

I 'm drawing a diagram of the castle into my journal when there's a sharp rap on my door. Then it opens.

I slam my journal closed.

"If you're done with your doodling, Whitbine is here for your examination." Valen is cold, his haughtiness filling the air around him.

"Today?"

He only glares at me. Paler than usual, he looks particularly tired. Dark circles under his eyes and dried blood at his hairline. His or someone else's? Besides mass murder, what does he do while he's gone from this horrible place?

So, yes, today. Fuck . My mouth goes dry as I stand and toss my blanket over my

notebook.

He sighs. “Come along. I don’t have time for your navel-gazing.”

I don’t argue. There’s no point. He can make me do anything he wants, and there’s no way I can stop him. He’s proven that again and again. The less time I have to spend with him, to interact with him, the better. Not that Whitbine is any better. In fact, my skin crawls at the thought of Gregor’s interrogator.

Valen walks beside me. I’m careful not to touch him, my arms wrapped protectively around my middle.

“Have you come up with any more clever ways to end your life?” he asks.

I glance at him.

“Not that jumping to your death was particularly clever. I expected more of you, little rabbit.”

I don’t know why he wants to goad me. Hasn’t he done enough? I try to ignore him as we reach the stairs, my apprehension growing with every step closer to Whitbine. Then I remember what Whitbine said at the ball. His change in methods.

I stop and press a hand to the cold stone wall for support. “You’re going to leave me alone with him?”

He smirks. “I didn’t realize you were desperate for some private time with Whitbine. I suppose if you insist, I?—”

“Stop!” I finally meet his gaze. “I know you get off on torturing me and being as cruel as possible, but I need you to tell me you won’t leave me alone with him.”

“You’d prefer to be alone with me?” he asks, still taunting.

I can only look at him, stare into his eyes as I try desperately not to fall apart. He stares right back, his icy exterior revealing nothing.

Regret fills my mind. Regret that he caught me before I could fall all the way to my death. In a way, I did. I’m at the bottom, slowly bleeding out what little life I have remaining. There is nothing else for me, only waiting to die and wishing for it sooner rather than later.

His jaw tightens for a moment, then he takes my elbow.

I yank away from him, and he lets me. With an aggrieved sigh, he gestures for me to continue down to the Green Flame Level. “I won’t leave you alone with him. In case you weren’t paying attention at the ball, you belong to me . I don’t let paunchy little bitches like Whitbine play with my toys.”

It shouldn’t be a relief, but it is. I’m still sick to my stomach, my forehead covered in clammy sweat. I could take issue with Valen treating me like property or calling me a toy, but I don’t. It’s not that I’m choosing my battles, it’s that I’m already beaten. I have no leverage, there is no play, there is only what scraps Valen throws me.

My feet become leaden the closer we get to the interrogation room, and I reach it all too soon. Whitbine is waiting. Dressed in clinical white, his light hair slicked back neatly, he greets me with a saccharine smile and reaches for my hands.

I cringe away from him, and he gives a jovial laugh. “Always so skittish with your friends.”

I swallow the sourness rising in my throat.

“Lord Specter.” He gives Valen a small bow. “Thank you for bringing her. I will get to the bottom of her memories, I assure you.”

Valen leans against the wall and crosses his arms. Letting his head fall back, he closes his eyes. “Get to it,” he intones.

Whitbine’s smile twitches away, his gaze going dark. “I believe High Lord Dragonis instructed?—”

“The high lord briefly entertained your never-ending excuses and pathetic attempts to undermine me. That is all. Now you can either do what you’ve been instructed to do, or this session is at an end.”

Whitbine scowls and pulls a pill from his pocket. Instead of handing it to me this time, he says, “Open for me,” with a clear expectation.

I shudder, hating every second of this, but I open my mouth as bidden. If I don’t, he’ll touch me and force me to take it anyway.

“There, isn’t that better?” he asks once I’ve swallowed.

“No.” I answer, his compulsion working its way through me, a silent command embedded in it. How I would love to look at this blood under a microscope, not that I’ve found a single scientific instrument anywhere in this underground mausoleum. Then again, I’ve already seen vampire blood under a microscope, haven’t I?

“Sit.” He leads me to the couch and settles in beside me, his leg against mine, his hands far too familiar with touching me.

I have no resistance. His blood has made sure of it. I’m a puppet again, simply serving a different master.

“I’d like to try something new,” he pushes my hair from my shoulder.

“What are you doing?” Valen growls.

“What the high lord has commanded,” Whitbine simpers. “As you’ve stated many times, my previous methods weren’t thorough enough.”

Without warning, Whitbine bares his fangs and strikes at my neck.

I scream.

He never makes contact.

Valen is standing over us, his hand around Whitbine’s jaw. Seething rage, the sort that lives in the heart of me, is writ large on his pale face. He jerks his arm to the side, and Whitbine lets out a yowl as half of his jaw folds inward. A complicated fracture dealt with nothing more than a twitch of Valen’s hand.

Valen lifts him, holding Whitbine as he screams, blood pouring from his mouth. “I told you never to take from her.”

Whitbine blubbers something, his voice gurgling and unintelligible. Eyes wide, he grabs onto Valen’s arm, but he isn’t strong enough to free himself.

“She is mine. All of her. Or perhaps I didn’t make myself clear?” Valen squeezes again, the other side of Whitbine’s jaw caving in, his entire mouth a mush of blood and protruding bone.

His screams send chills through my body, my skin crawling as I watch, unable to look away. The smallest sense of satisfaction twines with the horror, and I’m once again reminded that some part of me is becoming monstrous. When I silently gloated

over Melody's impending death—I didn't know it was her, but I knew a creature was going to suffer, to die. And I delighted in it the same way I delight now at Whitbine's torture. I am not the same person I used to be. No longer Doctor Georgia Clark, do no harm, help everyone no matter their situation. I'm something else, something that survives in the deep, deep dark.

A malevolent look of enjoyment on his face, Valen digs his fingers into the wounds, crushing Whitbine's tongue into pulp. "Leave now or I will chain you outside to meet the day. It's your choice." Valen shoves him backwards, Whitbine tripping and almost falling into the green fire.

He holds his mangled face, a scream bubbling in his throat as he stares at Valen. Then, with supernatural speed, he tears from the room, his form disappearing as I sag against the couch.

Valen flicks the blood from his fingers, the fireplace sizzling as the droplets hit.

He's given me a reprieve.

"Don't look at me like that, little rabbit." His tone turns snide again. "That wasn't for you." He turns his back to me, his gaze on the fire. "Whitbine has tried my patience for centuries. This was a lesson. Nothing more."

I have nothing to say. I can't thank him, can never thank him. And Whitbine will be back. But at least for today, for this moment, I was spared.

As I rise, something shiny on Valen's back catches my eye. He's dressed in his usual black, but his shirt is wet. Somehow, without even thinking about it, I know it's blood.

"Is it your blood or someone else's?" I ask quietly.

He looks at me over his shoulder. “Worried for me?”

“Glad to be rid of you.” The words come out unbidden, as if compelled. But they weren’t. Whitbine is long gone.

His black eyebrows rise, then he turns away from me, hiding whatever thoughts might be playing across his face.

“Do you ...” I don’t know why I’m doing this. Maybe to recover some shard of the old me, whatever I can find that’s left. Or perhaps it’s simply to get a better idea of how to hurt them, maybe kill them. “Do you need medical attention?” I ask.

“No,” he says flatly, his back still to me. “I need to be left alone. You’re free to return to your room. Continue plotting suicide, writing sad poetry, or whatever it is you do in there.”

“I plot your death.” I glare at his back.

“Let’s hope you come up with a decent plan soon.” He sighs. “Run along now, little rabbit.”

I don’t ask any more questions, not when I can be free of this damnable room. Still, I hesitate at the door, my gaze returning to the blood on his shirt. If I could get closer, could examine his blood ... But he doesn’t deserve my help. I know that, and I feel painfully foolish for even offering it in the first place. But it’s part of me, just like the darkness is now part of me.

“I can look at?—”

“Just go.” He doesn’t command, doesn’t yell. If anything, he sounds ... exhausted.

I turn and leave, my steps quick as I escape Whitbine and the green flame room. No more questions, no more Whitbine, at least for today. I bask in the lightness of it and try to forget the sag of Valen's shoulders, the weariness in his tone. He isn't my concern and never will be. I have to remember that; my instincts to help be damned.

I'm sitting at the top of the stairs, my thoughts wandering to what might lurk on the lower floors of the castle. The problem with investigating is light. I could barely see when I went to the next lower level, the one with the husks. I swallow hard at the thought of them. Would they come after me if I went deeper along the staircase? Or could there be more of them below?

It's an exercise in futility. I realize that. But I can't just sit in my room any longer. I'm slowly going insane and find myself counting cracks in the stone ceiling and walls. I have to get out, even if 'out' means somewhere else in this dark cave.

I've yet to find whoever is leaving the meals outside my door. It would be nice to know, if only so that I didn't feel so completely alone. I'd also like a chance to go outside again, but I suppose after my last escape attempt, Valen isn't too keen on letting me out into the world. I groan at the thought of never seeing sunlight again.

I'm stuck in here. So here is where I have to focus my efforts. One thing in particular has been itching at my mind—how did all the vampires get to the ball? I didn't have a chance to pay too much attention, but I doubt they arrived through the decrepit garden. It doesn't seem fancy enough. Trudging through mud and weeds in their fine clothes? No way. So they had to have gotten here through some other means, and if they can get in, maybe I can get out.

I head down to the Green Flame landing, my ears pricked up for any sound. I don't want to run into Valen during my snooping, but I have the feeling he isn't here. He's gone most of the time, out committing genocide in the name of his father. I shake my head at myself—why the hell would I even think about treating him? Even if it meant

I'd get a chance to see how the vampires tick, it's not worth it. Maybe it's Stockholm Syndrome or simply a trauma bond. Or maybe I'm just lonely and pathetic.

The halls are silent down here, the rooms in their usual state—unoccupied and untouched. I hurry past the interrogation room and move deeper through the connecting rooms. I've been this way before, searching for the castle's secrets. This time I move even slower, my body on high alert as I approach the doors that lead to the library. No voices this time, no hint of anyone inside.

Pushing the door slowly ajar, I peek inside. Nothing moves. No one's here as far as I can tell. Still, I stay as quiet as I can, practically tiptoeing past the sitting area where Valen met with Coal. Beyond the fireplace, there are some glass cases filled with artifacts. I don't know what they are, not specifically. One has a jeweled cup, another some sort of cross made of ruby and silver.

A table sits farther back, the top of it littered with books and scrolls. A single lamp burns beside a well-worn side chair, a book open on the arm. I ease closer to it, looking around for almost a minute before I dare to pick it up.

It's heavy, the pages thick and the binding wide. There's an illustration in gold on the front of a dragon, a snake, and a crow. I don't recognize the language, and as I flip through the pages, I find notes scrawled in the margins. Most of them are in a foreign language, though here and there I can make out a word or two in English.

I sit and lay the book in my lap, turning the pages and inspecting the illustrations within. The first one is of a tree, a single fruit hanging from it. On the branch of the tree sits a black crow, on the ground beneath it slithers a green snake, and in the clouds above flies a crimson dragon. It's almost like the Garden of Eden story, though I don't recall any mention of a dragon in that one. I turn page after page, finding notes of "blood bond" and "compulsion" here and there with underlined sections.

This one book seems to contain a wealth of information, maybe a way for me to understand the vampires, a way to fight them. If only I could read it. I keep looking until I come to a page with the most margin writing. The image on the opposite page is of a child, a vampire child based on the look of it. She's holding hands with what must be her mother, a beautiful vampire with a snake draped on her shoulder. Blood runs from where their hands are joined. "Blood bond" is written beside it.

Someone has made copious notes all over the pages, some of it in feverish foreign script, some of it in English. "Broken?" is scrawled next to an underlined passage. I scour the page for any more words in English, but the rest is unreadable.

A few more pages beyond that is another illustration. This one is of two black trees, some of their branches touching. A cross-section image, their roots go deep into the earth, blood seeping around them. The blood continues through the trunks and the limbs, as if through veins. The link is unbroken from one tree to the other, their bloodline shared where the branches touch.

More pages, more scribbling. The last illustration is of the trees again, though one is skeletal. Its leaves are gone, the blood around its roots a charred brown as is the blood in its 'veins'. Where its branches join with the other tree, the same charred brown is spreading, polluting the veins of the healthy tree. What does it mean? If one tree dies, the other dies as well, but what do the trees represent? Family lineages or individuals or what? Or are there two magical trees somewhere in what, Transylvania? I snort a choked laugh at that idea. There are no answers, at least none I can read.

I close the book and sit with it for a while, my mind trying to parse the data. The book must be about the vampires, perhaps their history. Or maybe a book of legends or fables about them. There's no way to know. But whoever had this book out—presumably Valen—was looking for information on blood bonds. Of course that leads me to the question of 'what the fuck is a blood bond'? The only thing remotely like that is what Melody told me about Valen's link to Gregor, but why would that be

important to Valen right now?

Putting the book back where it was, I search the other tomes on the table. They're similarly in a language I don't know. The ones that are open have more notes in them, but nothing I can use to decipher the purpose of Valen's research.

I move farther into the library, the dust in the air making me sneeze several times loudly. I cower between the stacks and peer out, hoping no one heard the noise. After long, tense moments of silence, I ease back toward the doors. If there are any more clues in here, I haven't been able to find them.

Pushing through the doors, I feel a hint of relief. As if I ran the gauntlet and came out unscathed simply because I traversed the library. Small victories.

Instead of returning to the stairs, I opt to travel deeper into the rooms. I've never been this far, had barely made it to the library when I was caught last time.

The furnishings become shabbier as I go, not the glitzy glam of the rooms closer to the grand staircase. All the paintings here are destroyed much like the ones in the library, as if whoever did it couldn't stand to look at the faces in the frames. When I exit a particularly bare parlor, I find myself in a short hallway that ends in a set of double doors, one of which is ajar.

I creep along, stopping every so often to listen. It's quiet, not a sound ahead or behind me. Holding my breath, I push open the door and wince when it makes a high-pitched creak. Frozen, I wait for Valen to grab me and threaten me, but he doesn't arrive. The black walls are silent as usual, and no one seems to notice that I'm snooping.

Finally exhaling, I keep going, entering what's clearly a bedroom. Ahead, a large bed is covered with a dark blue blanket. No gold tassels or random bits of crystal hanging from it, the bed is quite plain compared to the rooms on my bedroom level. There's a

small sitting area in front of a fireplace, a couch and a coffee table that bears more than its fair share of scratches. A few books are piled here and there. I walk in a few more steps and stop when a particular scent hits me.

This is Valen's room. I know it as soon as I catch the sandalwood and soap, along with something slightly minty and a deep edge of smokiness.

His room. I thought it would be bigger, grander. I thought ... I guess I don't know what I thought. I've been too busy trying to survive to wonder too much about Valen's quarters, but now that I'm here, curiosity drives me onward.

There's a dresser against the wall. I go to it and open the top drawer. Clothes. The next one is the same. No hidden compartments, no secrets. I whirl and go to the bed. Nothing special, and when I look beneath it, all I see are shadows. Standing, I go to what must be his closet. Inside, his scent is even stronger, the long room lined with mostly black clothes. Soft sweaters and smooth shirts. A section of crimson formal attire toward the back, and in the middle a bureau full of belts and a few ties. No jewelry. No watches. Nothing showy.

Bending down, I inspect his shelves. Shoes. Mostly black. No surprise there.

After his closet, I go through his bathroom. Again, nothing interesting. Not even a razor I could use as a weapon. When I've inspected every single inch of his rooms, I think about sitting on his bed for a moment. Then I realize what a bad idea that is and return to his doors. Backing out, I try to put it ajar in the same way it was when I found it.

"What are you doing here?"

I stifle a scream as I turn and find Gorsky in the hall behind me.

“Leaving,” I say, but I don’t move down the hall. I don’t want to get near him.

“Trying to get in Master’s good graces?” he asks as he moves closer. “You think you can trick him? Maybe seduce him?”

“I said I’m leaving.” I step to the side, keeping to the wall.

“Were you the belle of the ball?” He asks it conversationally, but his eyes are manic. His hair is on end, and in a few places, his skull is bare as if he’s been tearing away locks. “Did you dance with the prince, lose your glass slipper?” His odor hits me, the smell of filth and rot.

“I just want to leave.” I slide along the wall, keeping as far away from him as I can. “That’s all.”

“Melody didn’t come back.” He blocks the doorway, his hands on his hips, eyes flashing. “It’s your fault, isn’t it?”

“No.” I stop and meet his gaze. “I didn’t?—”

“Shut your mouth.” He grins. “I know it was your fault. Ever since you came here, everything’s been wrong. So fucking wrong. I don’t even see Master. Not anymore.”

“Because he’s out killing us all!” I snap.

He shakes his head, what remains of his black hair longer now, and greasy. “He watches you. Always making sure you’re all right. I see him in your room.”

“You’re insane. He’s never in my room.”

“Liar!” He gnashes his teeth. “You think you can tempt him? He’s mine!” He raises

something in his hand. Long and wooden, the end splintered. A broken chair leg, perhaps.

I hold up a defensive hand. “Gorsky, don’t.”

“You won’t take him from me. He’s going to give me immortality. Me ! Not you.”

“I don’t want immortality! I just want out!” I take a step back.

He follows. “I’ll give you a way out.”

“Don’t!” I throw up both hands as he swings.

Pain explodes through my arm as he makes contact. I scream and fall back, landing on my ass.

“Mine!” he screams and brings the club down again, this time narrowly missing my head. Something in my shoulder cracks and I try to scoot away from him, my legs kicking against the rug as he swings again, this time catching me in the cheek.

My vision goes black for a second, and when I look up, I see him swinging again. I try to cover my head, but I can’t protect myself, not when he won’t stop swinging. I scream as he hits me furiously over and over.

“Please!” I cry, but he doesn’t stop.

I keep trying to push back, to crawl away from him. Blood runs down my face, my arms ruined, his blows landing on my head and splitting my scalp.

He rears back, and for a moment I think he’s going to leave me. Then he brings his foot down hard on my chest. I gasp, all the air knocked out of me, and something

snaps. He brings his foot down again. I can't breathe. At least one lung has collapsed. Blood runs into my eyes as I stare up at him, his face a mask of fury as he raises the club again.

I can't beg for my life, can't say anything, can't do anything. Just watch as he swings at my head.

Then he's gone, a pink mist fogging through the air. Or perhaps it's the blood in my eyes. I still can't draw in a breath, and a strange claustrophobic feeling sets in.

"No." Valen is hovering over me, his face haggard and bloody. He tears his wrist open and presses it to my mouth. "Drink!" he yells.

I can't. I look at him, at the seething blue of his eyes. The anger in them. The sort of raw emotion I thought he was incapable of. And stronger than anything else—fear. He's afraid .

Panic grips me, but I can't do anything. No matter how hard I try, I can't get air. His blood pools in my mouth, going nowhere, doing nothing.

"Georgia! What do I do? What—" he smears his blood across my face. "Breathe!" He presses his hand to my chest. "Breathe!"

I spasm, my lungs trying to work but failing. They must be punctured, deflated and incapable of holding air. They can't expand. No oxygen. I'm dying. I close my eyes.

"Georgia!" Valen howls, the sound fading. A low-pitched wail, or perhaps its wind rushing in my ears. Then I hear nothing. It hurts. See nothing. I can't breathe. It hurts. I stop trying. It hurts. Darker and darker. It hurts.

There's nothing else. No more. It's pitch black.

The hurt stops.

I stop.

21

Recovered Journal of Dr. Georgia Clark

May 30, Year 1, Emergence Era

We've tried so many different ways of approaching the plague. We're missing something, something huge. It's right in front of us. Nothing is unsolvable, not even this goddamn virus.

I scream awake, my chest on fire as I draw in a huge gulp of air. Burning, dying, I can't survive the explosion of agony, the sheer wall of torture. I thrash, tearing at my skin.

"Georgia!" someone yells.

The world is black, but I'm awake. I'm awake to feel every ounce of flame. I am nothing but pain.

"Just breathe."

I can't. It hurts too much. Let me die. Let me die. Please let me die .

"Never!" the voice says.

Time passes, the flames receding, my vision still empty. I don't know how long. It's like I'm floating through the night sky, no stars, no moon. Just cold nothing tinged

with a never-ending burn.

“Don’t move. Don’t fucking move. I can’t tell where the blood is coming from. Fuck!” Hands probe at me.

I shrink away from them.

“Georgia, please.” A growl near my ear.

My skin prickles to life, pins and needles everywhere.

The hands return despite my flailing.

Warmth joins the uncomfortable sensation, and I hear water. My vision turns into a gray blur. Each breath chars me, my body struggling to simply exist.

“That’s better. Better.” A low mumble.

Blinking, I reach out and feel someone moving, their hands on me again. It doesn’t hurt nearly as bad now. I let out a big breath and cough, convulsing almost from the force of it.

“Shh.” The hand is smoothing along my face.

“Valen?” I ask though all I can make out is a blur.

“Yes.” He pours water along my body, and I realize I’m in a bathtub.

“What’s happening?” My voice is a croak. I blink hard, desperate to see him, to see anything.

“You’re safe.”

“I’m never safe.” I fall into a coughing fit again, my respiratory system feeling like it’s turning inside out.

More water splashes against me, and I have the odd thought that this is like being born.

The next time I open my eyes, I see him. He pours water across my chest, his gaze intent.

I draw my arm up to cover myself.

“Don’t.” He grips my wrist gently. “I have to see.”

“See what?” I swallow, my throat barely cooperating.

“I had to ... I had to ...” He swipes his hand along my ribcage.

I’m naked. The water is dark pink. Blood. My blood.

I scramble away from him. “Stop!” My voice is a squeak.

“I had to,” he says again.

“What?” I look down at myself, my skin red and raw. Not bleeding. I run my palms along my sides and down into the water. “The blood.” I can’t tell where it’s coming from. Am I bleeding out?

Valen sits back.

“What happened?” I reach forward and yank the stopper’s chain, the water draining in a gurgling flow.

One arm across my breasts, I stare at the rest of me, at the pink skin along my sides and arms.

“Valen!” I snap at him.

He looks up, his eyes sunken, his skin gone so white it verges on blue.

I lean over the side of the tub. His wrists are open, ragged as if chewed into by an animal, blood pooling beneath him.

The torn flesh—I remember. It comes back in a screaming whirlwind. Gorsky tried to kill me. Did he? Am I a vampire now?

Valen leans to the side, then topples, splayed onto the floor as he bleeds.

“What the fuck?” I climb out of the tub and drop, my legs refusing to cooperate.

“Valen!”

Dazed, he stares up at me.

“I had to,” he whispers.

“Had to what?” But I know. I already know what he’s done. He’s used his blood to heal me. My pain is gone. After the beating I took, I should be dead. Collapsed lungs, broken bones, shattered ribs, head trauma—a mortal cocktail.

“You—you won’t die, right?” I kneel beside him, my nudity forgotten, everything forgotten except survival.

He smirks weakly. “Worried for me?” he rasps.

“Glad to be rid of you.” Déjà vu creeps through my gray matter. We’ve had this conversation before. Once. Only once?

“You gave me your blood. You ... saved my life. Your blood can save lives?” I’m frozen now. Too many thoughts crashing into me at once. Valen should die. Maybe he will if I do nothing. If I wrap myself in a towel and just leave. I could do it. I should do it.

“Decisions, decisions,” he whispers, still taunting. Then he closes his eyes. “I never should’ve found you. A gift undeserved.”

His lips are blue, his body still. Dying. I have to let him die. It will save lives. This is for the best. I can’t intervene, no matter how much my idiot bleeding heart instinct says otherwise.

I hover, tears welling as I look down at him. Not a human, but a creature. A soul? I don’t know. But he saved me. Gorsky, a fellow human, gave me no such grace. But Valen did. He gave me his blood—a lot of it from the looks of him. He endangered himself for me. Why? I guess it doesn’t matter why. Even a monster can do something deeply human. Even a human can do something monstrous. Like ... like Juno. Can I do the same? Can I let someone die right in front of me when I have the power to save them?

“You deserve to die,” I whisper as I stare down at him. Do I do this? Do I become monstrous, too?

I close my eyes, my head spinning. This choice, it all boils down to this one choice. Who am I? A healer or a destroyer? A soul or a barren, empty shell? A sob tears through me as I lean over him. I know who I am, or at least, I know who I want to be.

Though I shudder with the weight of my choice, I press my wrist to his mouth. Cold lips, no breath.

“Valen?” I ask, my voice barely squeaking past the knot in my throat.

He doesn’t stir.

“Valen, you have to drink.”

Nothing.

“Shit!” I look around for something to cut my wrist, but I’ve already searched this bathroom. There’s nothing here.

With my other hand, I lift his upper lip and find the tip of his fang. With a surge of courage or stupidity, I jam my wrist against it. The sting is instant, his fang sharper than any scalpel I’ve ever held.

My blood oozes into his mouth, a thin stream of it escaping along his cheek.

“Drink.” I press my skin against him. “Come on. Come on!”

He doesn’t move.

“Are you dead?” I ask, and for some reason that makes no sense, my heart stutters.

“Valen?”

I pull my wrist back.

He moves so quickly I scream. His hands are around my forearm, and he bites me hard on the wrist.

“Valen!” I yell, but his eyes are still closed, his mouth pulling at my vein.

Color is already returning to his skin, the pallor fading as he drinks.

I try to pull away, but he holds me tight, his mouth going hot against my tender flesh.

“Let go!” I wrench myself backward.

His eyes open, and he releases me. I fall on my ass, the wet floor making a loud smacking sound as I do.

“Kedves verem ,” he purrs.

“Stay back!” I hold out my uninjured arm.

“No.” He cuts his fingertip and presses his blood to my wrist. It heals, the skin knitting together as I watch.

He’s already up and grabbing a fluffy black towel. Then, with unexpected gentleness, he lifts me and wraps me in it.

“You were dead.” I gawk at him. “Was I dead? Am I a vampire now?” My mind races ahead. How do they make vampires? Is it like the old movies? Am I already halfway there? All the way there?

“I wasn’t dead, but you certainly know how to wake me up.” He cuts me a smirk. “And no, you aren’t a vampire. You didn’t die.”

“But—”

“I’ll never let you die.” His face goes stony for a moment.

“Gorsky—”

“Most assuredly dead.” He bares his fangs, a feral look on his face.

“Okay.” I step back and grip the top edge of the towel. “Noted.”

“I wish I could kill him again.” He holds my gaze, wrath dripping from every word.

“Slowly this time. I’ve kept a human alive for months before. I could do the same with him. I could strip the flesh?—”

“No, thank you.” I wince.

He refocuses on me. “Where do you hurt?”

“I—” I do a quick mental once over. “I don’t. I should, but I don’t.”

He lets out a sigh, relief in his eyes.

I know it’s only because he wants to get Gregor’s information from me, but for a sliver of a moment, I think he might actually care whether I live or die. Not just for intel on the humans or the truth of whatever happened to Theo—but because he wants me to live. Me, a human. But that can’t be right. He’s a mass murderer. One whose life I just saved.

He gave me so much blood. He risked himself. I don’t even pretend to understand what just happened.

“Are you hurt?” I ask, my voice slightly dazed.

“No.” He glances at his bloody wrists. The wounds have already healed over.

“You saved my life.” I meet his gaze again.

He looks away.

“Why?” A tremor hits me, rattling my teeth from the strength of it.

I’m in his bed before I even know what happened. He always moves fast, but this is a new level of what-the-fuck. He tucks the dark blue blanket around me carefully. “Are you all right?”

“Shock, I think.” My voice trembles. Images flow into my mind, all of them Gorsky, all of them what he did to me. A sob comes from nowhere, ringing in my throat. Tears burn hot in my eyes as I struggle to breathe.

“In slowly,” Valen sits beside me. With a soft touch, he pulls my chin to the side until our eyes meet. “In slowly.” He inhales. I follow him, just breathing as I replay Gorsky’s violence, each blow a hammer hit to my skull. The pain isn’t physical, not anymore. It’s a horror show in my mind, the thoughts welling up like blood from a wound. His manic eyes, the anger that seems to double his strength. “Out slowly,” Valen says, his hand straying to my forehead, stroking my hair back. “Again.”

“I-it’s just sh-shock.” I’ve seen it hundreds, no, thousands of times. In the years of the plague when I worked triage at the hospital. So many people losing their loved ones or losing their own lives. Everyone was in shock at first, the new normal of death not quite settled into our consciousness yet. Until we got used to it, until it was commonplace, until death was part of everything all the time. Even so, I can’t seem to stop shaking. Can’t stop seeing Gorsky bringing the club down again and again as I scream.

“In, Georgia. Slowly.” He models it. I follow again. Then again. And again until my breath no longer hiccups or catches, until I feel the warmth of the blanket, the weight

of Valen beside me, the heartbeat strong in my chest. I'm alive.

A strangled laugh erupts from me, and Valen's brow arches.

"It's just that I tried ..." My suicide attempt feels like it happened underwater, or perhaps in a dream. Like I wasn't awake when I tried that desperate move. I'm awake now. Nothing like almost being murdered to make you reassess your situation.

"You won't meet your end here." He pulls his hand back. "Not in any form."

"Not until you get what you want."

"Just so." He smirks, his eyes shuttering, whatever emotions he'd shown me long gone. "I can make you sleep, if you like."

"No—" I answer quickly. "Don't use compulsion on me."

"All right."

"Wait, you want me to sleep here?" I ask, worry sending my voice an octave higher.

"Afraid I'll ravish you?" His taunting arrogance is back.

I can only scowl at him and draw my knees up.

He shakes his head and looks toward the door. "I'm afraid there's quite a mess in the corridor. I doubt you'd like to trudge through what's left of Gorsky, but if you'd rather?—"

"No!" My heart rate jumps, panic trying to creep back in.

“Shh.” He turns back to me. “You’re safe here.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Safe from Gorsky, at the very least. And I can assure you no one—save you—” He gives me a pointed look. “—would dare come snooping in my private quarters.”

My cheeks heat. “I wasn’t?—”

“You were.” He stares me down. “Find anything of use?”

“You’re still alive, so no.” The joust is empty. We both know it. I had the chance to end him and didn’t take it. Like a fool.

He rises. “I’ll get the new staff to clean. They’re probably already working on it.”

“How would they know to—wait.” A thought hits me like a brick. “How did you know?”

“Hmm?” He pauses at the hallway doors.

“How did you know I was in trouble?”

He shrugs. “Just lucky timing.” He peers into the corridor. “Unlucky for Gorsky, I suppose.”

“But you were there when I tried to jump, too. You?—”

“Get some rest. You won’t be disturbed. Not by me or anyone.” He steps out and closes the door behind him, ending the conversation like the arrogant prick he is.

The weak part of me wants to ask him not to go far. The part that's even now trying to replay the attack, the sick crunching sound of my bones, the tang of blood. I yank the cover up to my chin, my grip going tight. Then I hear Valen's voice outside the door, gruff and rude as he bosses someone around in a foreign language. My grip eases, my body still tense but not enough for me to chip a tooth.

The adrenaline from earlier is long gone, and the more evenly I make myself breathe, the more my eyelids droop. Every so often I hear Valen, his intonation utterly dickish. I relax deeper into the bed. It smells like him. I shouldn't be here. If I had half the courage of the old me, the one who worked for a cure instead of simply survived, I'd be out of here. This me, though, is weary and terrorized. Different. So different that I wonder if I'll ever have a chance of being the old me ever again. I don't think it's possible.

I'm almost asleep when I hear something fall in the corridor. Valen curses profusely, his words a litany of acid against whoever is out there with him. The new staff, he said. My eyes drift closed again.

It's fucked up and wrong and sick on so many levels, but I feel safe knowing the worst monster of them all is the one standing guard outside my door.

Recovered Journal of Dr. Georgia Clark

April 11, Year 1, Emergence Era

In Austin I was alone. I had Juno and the others at the Governor's Mansion, but when I went to the lab, it was only me. I ran my lab as a one-woman show and went through thousands of trials on the Sierravirus. I thought I was going to find a vaccine for it, that it was only a matter of time. Now I know how stupid I was. Or maybe that was hubris, isn't that the old school word for it? But now I know better. Having a team—even if it has people like Aang who make me want to pull my hair out—is the only way humanity is going to overcome this virus. Together.

Valen treated me with kindness. Valen treated me with kindness ? I rub my eyes and look around Valen's bedroom. It's the same, no hint about how long I've been asleep or where he might be. I crawl from the bed and remember I'm only wearing a towel. Where are my clothes?

I peek into the bathroom and find my answer. Bloody, shredded material is strewn across the marble floor, and the tub still has a slight pink tinge to it. I don't want to see it, to think about it. I'll just have to do a modern walk of shame through this medieval nightmare castle.

Pausing at the doors leading to the hall, I steel myself. Unless Valen's cleaning crew is especially talented, there's no way they could remove all the blood—mine and Gorsky's. It's a blur, but I'm almost certain Valen turned him into mush. I clutch my

towel tighter as that unpleasant thought grows larger and larger, so big that it's jammed against the door to the point I'm afraid my shaking hand won't be able to turn the knob.

"Just go," I tell myself through clenched teeth. "Go!"

I yank the door open and force myself to walk. To just fucking walk and not look too closely at anything.

Relief floods me when the hallway seems to be just as it was before. Still, I hurry past the place where Gorsky pinned me, where he—No. I can't think of it, not right now. My steps quicken, and before I realize it, I'm sprinting through the corridors, past the library, past the staid rooms with too much gold, too much finery, then up, up, up, climbing the stairs so fast my thighs burn.

Once I'm in my room, I slam the door and press my back to it.

Safe .

My lungs burn, but it's a good ache this time. They aren't damaged or deflated. They're healthy and whole. ' Thanks to Valen ,' my mind whispers.

"I wouldn't be in this situation if it weren't for Valen," I snap.

Damn, now I'm talking to myself. I was right about this underground prison making me go nuts eventually. How could it not?

I toss the towel and take a shower with the water one degree shy of scalding. Every trace of blood goes down the drain, and I scour my skin mercilessly until every inch is wiped clean and inspected. It's pink in spots, and not just from the water. The skin is soft and smooth, like scar tissue but not. Once I'm out of the shower, I inspect them

all in the mirror. The ones on my arms and my head—I know how they got there. Gorsky bludgeoned me enough to break skin and bone in several spots. But the marks along my sides, those are curious.

Turning this way and that, I take stock of all the spots and find the biggest ones along my ribs on both sides.

“What the fuck?” I stare for a long while. A possible answer ricochets around my skull like a pinball from one of those old arcade games. But there’s no way. I would’ve died if Valen had done what I’m thinking. But if I look at it clinically, the conclusion becomes plainer, almost obvious. I was unconscious, my lungs deflated, my heart possibly stopping or right there at the brink. Valen—I swallow hard as my mind recreates a possible scene—must’ve torn through my skin to reach my lungs, to use his blood to heal them. He did an emergency surgery with nothing but his hands.

“Holy shit,” I mumble as I go to my closet and get dressed. “Holy fucking shit.”

For the next three days, I wander around the castle, invading spaces that were previously off limits because I knew Gorsky favored them. His death has left me scarred inside and out, but at least I’m not afraid of him anymore. I have plenty of other things to fear, so it’s nice to check one thing off the list.

His room is messy, clothes hanging from his dresser drawers and his bed unmade. Old magazines litter his nightstand. I pluck one up and flip through it. It’s from the 90s, the women on the pages wearing combat boots and butcher’s aprons while the caption promises “Riot Grrrl Revolution”.

I’m in his bathroom snooping through his drawers when I hear the hallway door open. I freeze, then hurry behind the bathroom door and hold my breath.

Shuffling sounds emerge from the bedroom, and then I hear a ‘ fwoompf ’ that tells

me someone is stripping the bed. The new staff? I lean back a little to try and get a look through the hinged part of the door. When I get a good angle, a green eye appears on the other side.

I scream and jump back.

“I can hear you in there.” A male voice. “Your pulse is kind of insane. Sit down or something.”

I clutch my chest, my heart threatening to vacate the premises. With careful steps, I edge around the door. Black wings greet me as the male vampire stuffs all the bedding into a large canvas laundry sack.

“Hi?” I don’t know what to say. It’s been so long since I’ve seen anyone else here in the castle—not counting the horrors of the ball.

“Hi yourself.” He keeps working, his back to me.

“I’m—”

“I know who you are.” He sighs and starts grabbing the clothes from the bureau. “What a pig this guy was.”

“Are you the new staff?” I ask.

He whirls. “Staff?” His black eyebrows draw together. His skin is a warm bronze, his eyes green, his hair black and curly. And he’s large. So much so that he reminds me of Coal. “You think I’m staff?”

“I don’t know. I was just ... I mean, Valen said he had new staff and you,” my words are falling all over each other, “you were in here doing housekeeping so I thought

maybe you were the new staff person he got to replace ...” I can’t say her name, especially not in the same sentence with the word ‘replace’. Melody is irreplaceable.

“Housekeeping?” He runs a hand through his hair, and I get the distinct feeling that he might be all right. Not like the vampires at the ball. But I can’t trust that instinct, not when he has fangs and I don’t.

“Sorry, I’ll just go.” I edge toward the door.

“I’m not a housekeeper,” he says. “I’m not supposed to be, anyway.” He jams some of Gorsky’s clothes into the bag. “Yes, I cleaned up what was left of this guy, and now I’m cleaning up this pile of filth, but?—”

“You were the one outside Valen’s room?” I ask. “After ... After he ...”

“Yeah.” He shakes his head, his curls falling across his forehead. “Valen always takes shit too far, but that was ... I mean, I could only find bone shards, no actual bones. And a few teeth.” He sounds impressed.

My stomach gives an ugly lurch.

He stops violently packing clothes into the bag. “I’m Drui—I mean David. I’m David.”

He’s obviously lying about his name, but I let it go. It’s not as if I expect anything from him. “Hi David. I’m Georgia.”

“Yeah. I know.”

“So you’re a Corvidion?” I ask.

One of his wings twitches. “What gave it away?” he drawls.

I can’t tell if he’s being mean or funny. Given that he’s a vampire, I have to assume the former. “I’ll um, leave you to it.” I back toward the door.

“Sure.” He grabs another fistful of clothes and stuffs them into the bag. “I’ll come get you later. Valen said it’s garden time for you tonight.”

A thrill goes through me. Outside. I get to go outside. “Okay.”

He stops, his eyes meeting mine. “Don’t try anything while we’re out there.” He flexes his wings, my eyes going wide as they spread, black webbing covering bone. “I can catch you easily.”

I stare as he pulls them in and tucks them against his back.

“You keep looking at me like that and Valen will tear my wings off and feed them to me.” He yanks a drawer open and grabs more clothes. “See you in an hour.”

True to his word, he’s in my hallway an hour later. He doesn’t knock so much as bang on my door with a fist in a bam-bam-bam ... bam-bam sort of rhythm.

“Let’s go.” He jerks his chin toward the stairs when I open the door.

I walk along with him, my gaze always drawn back to his wings. I’d love to know the structures, how they connect to his back, what muscles they use.

“Seriously, you have to stop staring.” He doesn’t even look back at me as we enter the elevator hallway.

“Sorry.” A blush creeps across my cheeks, which is idiotic. Of course I’m going to

stare. Humanity didn't even know vampires existed a year ago. "It's just that I don't see wings every day."

"You're with us now."

"Us?"

"Vampires." He closes the elevator gate and swipes the lever. "You should get used to it."

I can't tell if he's annoyed or simply straightforward. Not that I've ever been good at reading people, but this is a new level of confusion. "I saw some at the ball, and Valen's friend Coal?—"

"That's right, you met Coal." He opens the grate once we reach the top. "He's the head of my Blood."

"Corvidion."

"Yes." He walks out ahead of me, the moon just a sliver behind wispy clouds. The air is heavy, like storms either just passed or are on the way. I breathe in deeply, the musky scent of the garden and the crisp air like a balm on my battered soul.

"Like I said, don't try anything." He crosses his arms over his wide chest, his gray t-shirt straining.

"I won't." I made the same promise to Melody.

"All right." He gestures toward the overgrown roses and silent fountain. "Have at it."

I hesitate for a few moments, my desire to get out into the garden at odds with my

need for information.

“What?” he asks, the slightest hint of a Southern accent in his voice.

“Can you tell me what’s happening in Atlanta? If you know.” I ask and try not to wring my hands.

He narrows his eyes. “The same thing that’s happening all over.”

“Mass murder?” I meet his gaze.

He shakes his head. “Look, I’m your housekeeper , not a newspaper. If you want to know about the war, then you should speak to Valen.” He looks up at the sky, his nose wrinkling. “Ah, fuck.”

A big whoosh sends fallen leaves and bits of debris swirling around us.

Startled, I turn around and find Coal standing behind us, his wings spread wide.

“What?” David glares at him.

“You’re too close.” Coal grabs David’s arm and pulls him away from me.

I just stare.

“I wasn’t trying to?—”

“Even if you weren’t, you need to keep your fucking wits about you. If Valen thought for a second you were getting too cozy with his guest , there would be bloodshed.”

“Why are you even here?” David snaps back. “I don’t need you up my ass. I already

have Valen wedged up there.”

I just watch, the dynamic becoming clearer the more they go back and forth. Coal is a father figure, and David is something of a bratty son. The resemblance is much more striking now that they’re standing face to face.

“—isn’t the best situation, and you have a habit of?—”

“Coal’s your father?” I blurt.

They both turn to me in unison, their shared expression confirming my suspicion.

“No.” Coal shakes his head. “Absolutely not.”

“Yeah, that’s crazy. I’m not—I mean, no.” David makes a pfft noise.

They even lie the same.

“I need a word with David, if you don’t mind.” Coal glowers. “Don’t go far.”

“Where’s Valen?” I ask.

“Out.” Coal bites the word off, his fangs sharp against his bottom lip.

I don’t argue, not when I’ve already cheated death once this week. Wrapping my sweater around myself, I wander down the path between the wild roses, careful to avoid their thorns. Once I’m at the statue, I stop for a while. I can still hear the low growl of the argument going on behind me as I stare into the statue’s face. Valen’s mother. A human. I want to know her story, to hear more about her life than the horrors she endured at Gregor’s hands.

“I’m a human in their world, too,” I whisper to her, a chilly breeze blowing past and taking my voice with it.

Stepping out from beneath the tree, I walk around toward the overgrown arbor. Ahead, a gray monument glows pale in the moonlight. I don’t remember it being here before. When I’m close enough to read the inscription carved into the stone, my eyes water. Melody Okpara Dragonis, flame eternal . The monument is simple and beautiful, a curving swirl of marble that gives the impression of a dancing lick of flame.

“I miss you.” I sit on the grass and cross my legs in front of me. Wiping my eyes with my sleeve, I lean against the cold stone. “I’m sorry,” I whisper. “I’m sorry about what happened.” I don’t want to think about it, to re-live it, but it happens anyway. My vision blurs with tears. “I don’t think I was very good to you. I was suspicious. Scared, too.” I rest my head against the marble. “And I saw you as the enemy. You weren’t.” I sniffle. “I know that now. You were nothing but kind. You didn’t deserve—” My voice breaks, and I have to sit in silence for a long while, the wind growing colder as I think a thousand different thoughts to Melody. I tell her how badly I wanted to save her, how angry I was that Valen didn’t. I still don’t understand how he could do nothing.

“You told me you know him differently.” I give up wiping my tears away. “You told me how he saved you from your father’s house. But I can’t read him. I don’t see what you see. He could’ve stopped Gregor, or at least tried. Why didn’t he? Then he saved my life, but he only did it for Gregor. Right?” My questions remain unanswered, her soft voice and clear eyes gone somewhere far beyond my reach. “I don’t know. I don’t know anything.”

I sit for a long time. Until my hands are freezing, and I shiver with each small breeze.

A flap of wings overhead draws my attention, and I watch as David swoops down and

lands about a dozen feet away.

“Let’s go.” His face is stony.

“Did you know her?” I ask.

He glances at the monument. “Yes.” He doesn’t say more, pointedly so.

I get up and brush myself off, then walk toward the elevator. He stays several steps behind.

“No more fraternizing with the prisoner?” I ask once we’re back inside.

He shrugs.

“What is so wrong with speaking to me? Valen isn’t here. I know he wants me to be miserable, but you don’t have to ...” I groan in frustration. “He won’t know you dared to tell me about the weather or what’s happening out in the world.” I stare up at him.

He avoids my gaze, his lips pressed firmly together.

“Got it,” I say more snappily than I intended. I was already alone. Him refusing to speak to me doesn’t change anything. Maybe this is more of the Stockholm Syndrome, me trying to make nice with one of my captors.

Suddenly tired, I trudge to my room. The heaviness of Melody’s loss is still weighing on me as I curl up in my bed and write in my notebook. I’ve begun writing smaller, the pages growing thin toward the back. If I run out of room, I don’t know if I’ll be able to get another notebook. Given the way David reacted, I’d say chances are good I’ll go back to not seeing him again, so there’ll be no way to ask. Valen would laugh

in my face if I asked him, I'm certain of that. That thought scrapes against the memory of him saving me. My fingertips brush across my ribs, the healed skin tingling at my touch.

Valen literally tore me apart and put me back together. He swore he wouldn't allow me to die. I believe him. His will dominates everything, as if his blood runs through everyone and everything, compelling the world to bend to his demands. I don't bend anymore. I think I must've broken when I lost my memory. One trauma too much, though I can't imagine what horrors could top the things I've experienced here. The idea of anything worse than the ball turns my stomach.

Because of Valen's will, my body lives on as I wither away inside. Detached, forlorn, and with no illusions of escape. Doomed right along with the rest of humanity but meeting my fate alone. Locked away like some sort of upside-down Rapunzel, I know my prince will never come. Perhaps it's better that way, already buried here so I don't have to watch the world go silent, the humanity I worked so hard to save wiped out. This is when Juno would give me a lecture about self-pity, how indulgent and foolish it is. But Juno's not here.

It's just me.

Interred.

Alone.

Recovered Journal of Dr. Georgia Clark

May 27, Year 1, Emergence Era

I had the nightmare again. Candice. The way she looked at me, silently pleading. I don't know how I'm supposed to keep moving forward knowing what I know. I'm sinking. I'm lost at sea, rudderless and dying of starvation and exposure. I can't tell the team what happened. I can't tell anyone. Except Valen. But how can I confide in one of them ? Especially him. He was there. He was there and now Candice is nothing more than a recurring nightmare.

The library has no organization system—at least not one I can follow. The bookcases reach impossibly high, and there aren't any ladders. It's like a library that was created for looks instead of usefulness. Then again, I suppose if I had wings or vampire abilities, the height wouldn't be an issue. As it is, I'm relegated to examining the bottom rows.

It took almost a day of screwing up my courage, but I forced myself down to this level again. I intend to stay far, far away from Valen's private quarters. The library, though, doesn't feel particularly threatening. No terrible memories in here, at least not yet.

Most of the books are in foreign languages, and some of them are so old that when I touch them, they crumble, their spines rotten and the pages little more than dust.

I sneeze so much that I've stuffed a hand towel into my back pocket for my poor nose. It's been hours, and I'm no closer to finding anything of use. I did discover some books on ritual sacrifice, demonology, gods, and monster of the ancient world—at least that's what I think they were about based on the illustrations.

I've searched only a fraction of the stacks before I plop down in the threadbare armchair beside the lamp. The same book lies on the arm of it. Valen must be too busy killing and maiming to sit here for a bit of light reading. Still, why is this book the one he has at his fingertips?

I open it again, flipping slowly through the pages as if I can somehow break the code he's embedded in the margins with his notes. Nothing strikes me, nothing new, anyway. I glance at the table, at the books stacked here and there. I grab one, then sink back into the unexpectedly comfortable chair. All it needs is a throw blanket and it could be decent.

The spine creaks as I open it, the pages yellowed at the edges. I sneeze. Even here in this dungeon, a library smells like every other library, the books slowly disintegrating just like the humans reading them. My metaphor falls apart when I think about the vampires. They'll outlive the books, the humans, everything. I should've asked Melody that—how long do vampires live. Is it really forever? But only forever if they don't get hurt. It's immortality but also not.

I pinch the bridge of my nose in a fruitless effort to stop it from tingling. Two more sneezes shatter the library's stillness.

This book is written in the same language as the other, or at least it's in a language I can't read. I'm back to picture books, doing my best to follow the plot through the images. The text is cramped, the lettering small. I don't think I could read it even if it were in English. But the deeper I go, I start to realize what it is—a vampire lineage, possibly a history, too.

“Holy shit,” I mumble as I turn the next page and find the dragon emblem in stark red ink, the same dragon that adorns the walls all over the castle. Not a coat of arms, more of a sigil, it signifies Blood Dragonis. Several pages are filled with illustrations of a black castle on a craggy hillside. Then an entire barren field of bodies impaled on spikes, a forest of the dead.

More flipping leads me to the green emblem of Blood Tantun. A snake curls its way around the parchment, its eyes a vicious red. And beyond that, the dark violet crow of Blood Corvidion.

What I wouldn’t give to be able to read this. It’s a wealth of information, something the humans could use to understand the vampires, possibly to stop them.

I keep going, my fingers skating across the pages until I reach what seems to be another section. The entirety of it is written in dark crimson ink, and my throat closes at the notion it could be blood.

“Surely not,” I reassure myself and keep flipping.

Though sparse, the illustrations are full of clues, like puzzles I’m not quite able to complete.

By the time I close the book, I have a sinus headache and an empty stomach. I take it with me back to my room and find dinner sitting outside my door. I assume David is the one preparing my meals now though I can’t be sure. He doesn’t seem like the sort who cooks, but it’s not like I know him.

I open the door a crack, tuck the book under my arm, and grab the tray, then back through the doorway into my room. When I turn, I let out a yelp and drop the tray.

Fatima catches it easily, her unnatural quickness making me gasp.

“You always were so clumsy,” she chides and slides the tray onto my nightstand.

My mouth hangs open from the surprise of it as I take her in. She’s wearing a black jumpsuit that’s fitted tightly at the top and flares out into loose pants. Her hair is down, the waves like flowing ebony over her shoulder.

“Not happy to see me?” she asks and sits on my bed, crossing her legs at the knee. “Come.” She pats the space beside her, her eyes glinting.

“What are you doing here?” I wonder where David is, if he can hear the panicked beat of my heart.

“An old friend can’t stop by for a visit?” She pouts, her red lips a perfect Cupid’s bow. “Sit.” Her command is curt this time.

I ease closer to her and sink down, the book still tucked under my arm. Maybe she won’t notice it.

“I’ve been waiting for you to leave that dreadful library. What do you have there?” She reaches for the book.

I lean away. “Nothing.”

Her eyes narrow, but she drops her hand back into her lap.

“What happened to you?” I ask the question that’s been haunting me since the ball.

“I evolved.” She leans back on her elbows, her cowl neckline revealing the swells of her breasts. It’s jarring, seeing her like this. Fatima was always so modest. And religious. Her hair carefully covered, her prayers always said.

“You’re with Gregor. He’s killing everyone. He wants to destroy every last human in existence. You’re okay with that?”

“I am.” She shrugs lightly.

“What happened to you?” I ask again.

Her eyes meet mine. “I finally made a decision for myself,” she snaps. “I chose what I wanted my life to be. No one else chose for me, not this time.”

“You were part of our family. We?—”

She scoffs. “I was tolerated, nothing more.”

“That’s not true. Juno relied on you, trusted you.”

“Juno?” She smirks. “Juno is the one who set all this into motion. I should thank her.”

I stand, unable to sit next to her for another moment. She makes my skin crawl. “Why are you here?”

“Just visiting.” She tracks my movements with her eyes, her pupils dilating. “You seem uncomfortable with the new me.”

“The old you wasn’t a liar.”

“Oh, but I was.” She smiles, her beauty frozen in time, perfection etched into stone. “Everyone is a liar. Even you, Georgia.”

“Are you going to tell me what you want?” I cross my arms over my chest. “I’m tired and hungry.”

“I’m hungry, too.” She sits up with feline speed.

“Don’t.” I back up until I hit the wall.

Her eyes close. “I never heard the sound of a heartbeat before. You did. You were a doctor. But not me. Now, I hear them, and they’re a symphony. Not a simple beat, there’s more. The blood rushing through the chambers, flushing the skin, plumping the veins,” she purrs. “Beautiful.”

“The old you didn’t creep me out.” I tighten my arms around myself.

She opens her eyes. “You don’t find me beautiful?”

“Are you going to tell me what you want or are you here to fish for compliments?”

“You always were clever.”

“I thought you were, too.” I don’t know if it’s fatalism or because I survived a murder attempt, but I’m tired of her, of this. I walk to the nightstand and open the tray’s lid. A simple sandwich and some cucumber slices. Not bad. My appetite died the moment I saw Fatima, but I make a show of taking a bite of sandwich.

“Why does Valen keep you locked away in here?” she asks, her voice right behind me.

I whirl and swallow hard, the lump of food like a stone in my throat. She’s close, too damn close.

“What?”

She cocks her head to the side. “Why does he never bring you to the Black Cavern?”

“How should I know?” I stare back at her. I don’t want to think about him dragging me back to that horrible place.

She glances at my lips. “I suspect he’s become attached to you.”

I can’t help the snort that escapes me. “Attached ? He’s kept me prisoner, assaulted me, bragged about murdering my sister to me.” My flash of amusement turns to cold anger. “So no, I wouldn’t say he’s attached .”

“Sounds like foreplay.” She presses me against the wall with her body.

“Get off.” I wince as she bares her fangs.

“No.” She grips my shoulders.

“This isn’t you.”

“Wrong. It’s me distilled to the finest vintage.”

“Why?” I spit the word like an accusation.

“Why?” she mocks, her eyes flashing. “Because I’m stronger than I’ve ever been. Because now I’m the one who calls the shots. I’m not your sister’s fucking lapdog.”

“You never were. You were?—”

“You don’t know anything about me.”

“I know you used to sing—you had a beautiful voice. You never ate meat. You mourned your sister who died from the plague. You?—”

“Shut up,” she snaps.

“You were a friend.”

“I was expendable.”

“Not to me.”

She laughs, the sound full of cruelty. “To Juno. You were expendable to her, too. That’s why you’re here.”

I grit my teeth. There’s nothing I can say to her, to this new nightmare that wears Fatima’s face.

“Gregor gave me a chance to be more. I took it.”

“What did you give him in exchange?”

Her grip tightens. “Enough of your bullshit, Georgia. Tell me what I want to know. What is Valen doing? Plotting against Gregor? Why hasn’t he stripped your memories yet?”

“What, no compulsion to force it from me?” I taunt.

She smiles, her fangs growing longer. “I’d be happy to?—”

Someone clears their throat. I look past Fatima to find David in the doorway.

“You may not harm her,” he says in a chiding tone. “That was the deal.”

“You knew she was here?” I ask.

“Of course.” He has the nerve to roll his eyes.

“Get out,” she snarls.

“No blood,” he warns, then disappears.

Her tone turns silky again. “Is he plotting against Gregor? Tell me and you can have this. Young forever. Beautiful forever.” She skates her fingers along my cheek. “I could give it to you. You could do anything you wanted.”

I have no loyalty to Valen, but I have none to Fatima, either. I don’t answer.

“Tell me.”

“You think Valen lets me in on whatever it is he’s doing? You think what, that I help him figure out the quickest, easiest way to destroy humanity?” I scoff. “I guess you’re right. We never did know each other.”

“No, I said you never knew me . You, on the other hand, I know everything about you. Juno’s adored little sister, doted on, cared for, loved above all else. Child prodigy. Scientist. You were supposed to save us all from the plague. How’d that turn out?” She grins.

“Why are you here? Just to ask me stupid questions I can’t answer? Gregor should’ve sent someone else.”

“What makes you think Gregor sent me?”

I don’t have an answer for that.

Her eyes harden. “I told you, I’m making my own choices now. No one else is

making them for me. Not even him. But I need to know which way the wind's blowing."

"I'm locked in an underground castle, and you think I have any idea which way the wind is blowing?" I scoff at her. "That's something else about you that's changed. You used to be smart."

She hisses between her teeth and backs away. "You know something, some tidbit of information that would be invaluable to me. Do you think I just floated along behind your sister for all those years? No, I watched and listened and learned. Gaining the upper hand is often nothing more than a matter of paying close attention. But Valen is inscrutable, never giving anything away. We know he's plotting against Gregor. Torture hasn't gotten the truth from him, no matter what Gregor tries. He won't admit to his treason, and he hasn't given us another target. Either he is the traitor or he knows who it is."

"If Gregor thinks Valen is plotting against him, why doesn't he just kill him?" The thought just pops out. I'm becoming more like them the longer I'm locked away down here.

"Kill his most powerful general in the war on the humans?" She tsks. "And he is the last of Gregor's direct line, even if his blood is tainted by the human half."

"You were a human, Fatima. Have you forgotten that?"

"And now I'm something more. Humans are a species meant for extinction. It's just occurring faster than nature intended."

"How does that happen?" I ask.

"Extinction?" She blinks. "By?—"

“No, how did you go from having thoughts and feelings to being a vicious bitch with no regard for anyone but herself? Does becoming one of them cost your soul? Are you damned?”

She smirks. “As I’ve said, it’s humanity that’s damned. Not me.” She crosses her arms, drumming her nails along the bare skin of her upper arms. Her beautiful eyes narrow. “What do you want?”

“What?”

“I had to make a deal to get in here to see you. Now I’ll make one with you for the information I need. What do you want, Georgia? Quid pro quo .”

“Out of here.”

She barks a mirthless laugh. “Something actually doable, you little fool.”

I have a question, one that’s never been fully answered. It’s tickled at the edges of my mind, a misshapen puzzle piece that can be forced but still ruins the final image.

“I can tell you who he’s met with—the ones I’ve seen. But that’s all. I don’t know anything else. If that’s of value to you, then we may be able to make a deal.”

She wrinkles her nose. “That’s all?”

“Take it or leave it.” I shrug.

“What do you want in return?”

“An answer to a single question.”

One of her perfect brows arches, then she twirls her finger in a ‘go on’ motion.

“Gregor wants to destroy humanity. But doesn’t that mean he will also destroy vampires?” She opens her mouth, and I hold up a finger. “That’s not my question.”

Her fingers drum faster against her skin.

“I mean, this is obvious. The whole food chain will collapse if the vampire’s primary blood source is gone. Just basic math. Gregor’s end goal is irrational and nihilistic. I think you all know this.”

She doesn’t so much as twitch.

“But the vampires go along with the plan because Gregor’s the king and disobedience earns them a visit from his Specter, which then ends with their heads separated from their bodies. Maybe the vampires think Gregor just needs time to come to terms with his grief. Or maybe, as you suspect, some of them are plotting to take him down.”

“Is there a question?” she asks testily. “I’m not one of your students, Doctor. The lecture isn’t necessary.”

“There is a question. Gregor lost his only full-blooded heir, Theo. He’s a homicidal maniac, so a bloody rampage seems on track as a way to assuage his anger over the loss. But this complete extermination is something different.” I think back to the book with the joined trees, one dead, the other fading slowly. “I only did a few psych rotations, but I studied suicidal ideation. Most suicides destroy only themselves. But some—particularly if they display narcissistic traits—are what are known as family annihilators. They take everyone with them to the grave. Usually, they don’t show outward signs of their descent into destruction. Gregor though, he looks ...”

She’s grown more tense, her fingers still, her gaze fixed on me.

“Well, you know how he looks. Like he’s suffering from a wasting disease. Skin gray, eyes sunken—” I grimace. “So my question is this: Is Gregor dying?”

She’s on me in an imperceptible blink, her palm across my mouth, the force of it pressing the back of my head painfully against the wall. “You will never utter that out loud again,” her whisper is a sibilant hiss.

I grab her wrist, but she doesn’t move.

“Never ,” she repeats.

Heart racing, I stare into her eyes. And in them I see the truth. The fear. The uncertainty.

I’m right.

Gregor is dying.

She yanks her hand from me and tears from my room, the door slamming against the wall and vibrating from the force of it.

Recovered Journal of Dr. Georgia Clark

March 18, Year 1, Emergence Era

Blood that's more like a virus. Blood free of so many markers, so many ways we've always used science to analyze cells now made useless in the face of a brand new set of genetics. If the vampires were actually helpful, instead of sending Valen to sneer at me on a nightly basis, they would have provided me with someone from their ranks who actually knows something about medicine. Or even basic biology. I don't know their numbers, their backgrounds, or anything more than the little bits of data I get from Valen, but surely there's a vampire amongst them who knows their way around a microscope?

"Y ou let her into my room?" I yell down the hallway.

David appears from a few doors away. "You were safe."

"Safe?" I scoff. "She could've ripped my head off!"

"She didn't. I wouldn't have allowed it." He trudges toward me, at least having the decency to look slightly chastened with his downturned gaze.

"That doesn't mean anything! She could've?—"

"I wouldn't have allowed it because Valen would rip my head off the moment he

found out, all right? If I'm good at anything, it's self-preservation. Relax."

"I can't 'relax' when you just let anyone waltz into my private space?—"

"Weren't you two friends?" he asks.

"No!" I huff out a breath. "I mean, yes, but not now, obviously. Now we're ..."

"Did she harm you?" He asks, hands in his pockets.

"Well, no, but?—"

"Just because she's a vampire doesn't mean she's an enemy." He meets my gaze.

"You know that, right? We aren't all the same."

"Are you chastising me for wanting to stay alive?"

He shrugs.

"Let me make it simple for you: don't let strangers into my room!" I yell.

His wings pulse outward for a moment, then retract.

We stand there for a while in utter stalemate.

"What did you get in return?"

"What?" He looks away. He knows damn well what I'm asking.

"She said she had to make a deal with you to get in here. So what did she give you?"

“I’m just a housekeeper, remember?” He gives me an exaggerated bow and turns his back, striding away.

Mouth open, I stare after him. What an asshole.

I eat my dinner in angry silence, my mind constantly replaying the conversation with Fatima. I still don’t know what she thought she’d get from me. Everything I know will eventually be dissected by Whitbine and regurgitated to Gregor. That thought is enough for me to put down the rest of my sandwich, my appetite gone.

I’m fast asleep when a rhythmic knock sounds at the door. David. “Time to go up top,” he calls through the wood.

Though I’d much rather sleep, I don’t want to miss any chances at going outside, so I dress a bit warmer and follow him to the elevator.

“Were you born a vampire?” I ask him as we walk out into the cloudy night.

“Yes.”

“How old are you?” If this was the old days and I just met him somewhere at the university or at a restaurant, I would think he was no older than early twenties.

“Why do you want to know?”

I shrug. “I don’t know how vampires become vampires except vaguely.”

“Learning about your enemy now?” he asks, then continues before I can respond, “I was born about fifty years ago. Young in vampire years.”

“You’re a baby to them.” I peer up at him.

“They treat me like one.” He frowns. “Keeping me here to be a?—”

“Housekeeper. I know, I know. I slip up one time and you can’t let it go.” I give him a half-smile. “Would you prefer ‘butler’?”

“Ugh. Go do human stuff,” he gestures toward the garden as his lips twitch with amusement.

I wander away down my usual path. David and I may not be friends, but he’s right: he’s a vampire, and he’s not my enemy. At least, not yet. Nothing is black and white. Not even this.

I wander past the fountain, the frogs singing in the moonless gloom. Distant lightning flashes infrequently, the thunder too far away for me to hear it. I’m drawn back to Melody’s monument, and I sit and lean my back against it.

I’m still there when a shadow catches my eye.

I freeze, my heart doubling its rate as someone moves from between the hedges.

“Georgia?” he calls, his voice familiar.

I look around for David, but he’s out of sight. Should I yell? I open my mouth to do just that when the shadow becomes clearer.

The redheaded man who’d met with Valen before. He’s here again. The human spy.

I scramble to my feet and move around Melody’s statue, putting it between us. “What do you want?”

“Georgia. It’s Gage.” He holds his hands out, palms toward me. “It’s me.”

Why is he talking to me like that? I don't know him. "You, who? Gage?"

"Yeah." He stops on the other side of the monument. In military greens, he blends in well with the landscape, the trees losing leaves and going dormant.

"I don't know you." I grip the cold marble.

"You do." He puts his hand over mine, and I yank it back. He winces, looking almost wounded.

Do I know him? He seems certain I do.

"Were you in the cage?" I ask.

"The cage?" His brows draw together.

"At the Black Cavern?"

His mouth presses into a tight line. "No. I tried to rescue everyone from that hellhole several times, but we never had a chance. Lost a lot of troops in those attempts."

"Then you know me from before?" I ask.

"Yes." His eyes search my face. "You really don't remember?"

"No."

His jaw tightens. "When Valen told me you'd lost your memory, I couldn't be sure if he was lying. You never know with them." He says it with unfiltered bitterness.

"The vampires?"

He nods. “Are you all right?” He grips the stone where my hand had been. “He told me you are, but again?—”

“They lie,” I finish for him. “But yes, I’m mostly okay.” I glance around. “Any chance you could take me with you?”

His eyes soften. “I wish I could.”

“Oh.” I tuck my hands in my pockets. At least he let me down easy, I suppose. None of the gruff Valen hatefulness that I’m used to.

“They say you’re a spy.” I try to test him, to figure out if he, like the vampires, is also a liar.

“I am.” He gives me a half-smile.

“Wait, is that a ‘haha I’m a spy’ or an ‘yes, I’m really a spy’. Mixed signals here.”

“Would a real spy tell you?” he asks.

“Fair point.” I glance at the sullen sky. “I suppose David knows you’re here.”

“Of course I do,” David calls from somewhere beyond the rose tangle.

I stare at him, at Gage. “Were we friends?”

“Yes.” He glances at my mouth.

Were we more ? That question stays in my mind. It’s just a random thought, given his familiarity with me. But there’s nothing in my memory that sparks as I look at him, no heat, no vivid emotion.

“What’s happening out there? How many dead?”

His expression darkens, his posture turning a bit more rigid. “I don’t have numbers. Suffice it to say we’ve been hitting them back hard, but we’re at a severe disadvantage.”

“The plague?” I ask. “Are those numbers bad, too?”

“We don’t know anymore, but it’s still raging. We don’t have the luxury of hospitals or infrastructure. People hunker down at night, even if that means sheltering with people who’ve been exposed to the virus.”

My heart sinks. “So more people die.”

He nods, his expression grim.

“What about the CDC? There have to be some scientists left. The ones you hid in Atlanta.”

He looks away. “All dead.”

“What?” My throat closes up, his words like a physical blow. “All of them? But that’s not possible.”

“The vampires are very good at what they do. Hunting and killing. Everyone you worked with, they were found. The vampires ...” He doesn’t have to explain. I know what the vampires do to their enemies, which now includes all of humanity.

Bitterness seeps into my heart, turning that shattered organ black. “Have you found a way to kill them? Other than sunlight? I’ve witnessed silver through the heart—” I repress a shudder at the memory— “and beheading, but what else?”

He moves closer, now the monument the only thing separating us. “You must remember.”

“Remember what?”

“Georgia, you?—”

And then he’s gone, flying back through the rose bramble and crumbling in a heap as the ailing arbor crashes down on him.

My brain can barely do the math as I step around the monument to get to him. “What the?—”

Valen yanks me back, shoving me behind him as he faces Gage. “I warned you, Captain.” Valen’s voice is dark and low. Lethal. His familiar scent washes over me, the outline of his broad back now familiar. If I had a silver blade, would I plunge it through his nice black shirt and into his even blacker heart?

“Fucking hell.” Gage sits up and presses a hand to the back of his head.

I step around Valen. He blocks me. I try again. Blocked.

“Move!” I shove at his back. “I’m a doctor. He’s injured.”

“He’s fine.” Valen glances at me over his shoulder. “Stay.”

“Fuck off!” I yell and dodge around him again.

This time he faces me, and I run right into his chest.

I glare up at him. “He’s hurt!”

“I’m fine, Georgia,” Gage calls.

“See?” Valen smirks. “He’s fine.”

“What was that about? And where the fuck have you been? Fatima was in my room!” My voice is rising right along with my emotions. Everything is always too much, and then Valen pours more gasoline onto the bonfire.

“I’m aware.” He glowers.

Valen whirls, again cutting off my view of Gage. “I told you never to speak with her, Captain.” He’s gone icy, the tone of his voice a few degrees colder than the grave. “I warned you.”

“You were late,” Gage retorts. “Maybe you should keep better track of our meeting times. Or maybe you’re too busy kissing Gregor’s ring.”

I edge to the side so I can see them both. Valen’s eyes are on me, his scowl deepening.

“No, in truth, I was busy slaughtering one of your battalions at the edge of DC, the one you sent in to recover intel from the lab?” His gaze flicks to Gage. “Or were you not going to mention that to me?”

Gage blanches paler in the dim light. “You found them?”

“Of course I found them,” Valen sneers. “Your pathetic bunch of volunteers were spotted a mile outside the beltway. They had no chance. You gave them no chance.”

“Fuck.” Gage runs a hand through his hair.

“David, please escort my guest back inside,” Valen says softly.

David swoops down, his wings blowing the hair back from my face as he lands with a thwump beside me.

“I’d rather stay.” I kick my chin up.

“Since when have I cared for what you’d rather?” Valen asks snidely. “Confused little rabbit, thinking she has any say.”

“Come on, Georgia.” David reaches for my arm, then drops his hand when Valen lets out a low growl.

“I’ll see you again soon.” Gage has the nerve to sound apologetic.

I’ve been dismissed. By both of them.

“Well, fuck you too.” I shoot them both the bird (because I’m an adult) and march right back to the elevator, anger in each step.

“Unlike the captain, I will see you soon, little rabbit.” Valen’s voice slithers down my spine as I enter the carriage and start my descent back to hell.

I’m copying the notes from Valen’s book into my journal when my door opens. Valen doesn’t knock, just walks in and stalks over to me.

I scoot back from him, but he simply prowls over me, pinning me to the bed as he bares his fangs.

I don’t even get the word “don’t” off my lips before his fangs are buried in my neck.

He settles his weight onto me, not all of it, but enough that I feel every hard inch of him. Sliding one hand beneath my back, he holds me to him as he drinks, stealing from me. I can't fight, whatever compulsion he's laced into my blood keeping me right where I am. It doesn't stop me from hating him, though. I don't think anything ever could. That horrible heat roils beneath my skin, my lips parting on a sigh as my eyes flutter closed. I hate this feeling, this cursed desire he seeds into me each time he violates my flesh. Even as I think it, my hips move of their own accord, grazing my core against his hard cock. Shame tries to coat my desire, but it drains away like water through a sieve, until my need is all that's left.

He smiles against my skin. The bastard.

When he pulls away, his fangs red with my blood, he doesn't get up. Instead, he stares into my eyes. Hovering over me. My heartbeat roars, and I wonder if he can feel it where we're pressed together. My breasts against him, one of his knees between my thighs. Embracing like lovers when we're nothing but enemies.

"Get off," I grate out.

"I'm afraid you haven't done enough to get me there just yet." He grins, his tongue grazing across his lips as he cleans the blood away. "But I'm open to whatever you might like to try."

"I hate you."

"You've said."

"Where have you been?"

He moves his knee higher, pressing it against my sex, causing the flames in my belly to lick higher, deeper.

“Don’t,” I gasp.

“Don’t what?” he taunts and presses his lips to my throat where he’d bitten me.

“Don’t drink from my delicious little rabbit?”

“I’m not a goddamn rabbit.” I try to buck him off.

His laugh, deep and sultry, assaults me, and he grabs my wrists, pinning them over my head. “Perhaps you’re not, but you’re mine. If I want to drain you dry, I will. And there’s nothing you can do about it.”

“You get off on this, don’t you?” I glare at him.

“On you whimpering and squirming beneath me?” He moves his hips, his thick cock pressing against my clit. “I do very much enjoy it. Having you at my mercy.”

“I should’ve let you die.” Hot tears sting behind my eyes even as my back arches.

“Yes.” He nuzzles my throat again, his lips whispering against my skin. Goose bumps erupt wherever he touches, my body reacting though my mind is screaming bloody murder.

When he meets my gaze, his coldness is gone. For a moment, I see more. Heat. The raw sort that makes reasonable people do decidedly unreasonable things. His desire is etched in his handsome face, in the way his gaze lingers on my lips. In the way his need mirrors my own.

Then, in another tiny shard of a moment, it’s gone. In its place, his usual mocking smirk. “Tell me, little rabbit, what did Fatima say to you?”

This question begins an hour-long interrogation, all of it conducted with him pinning

me beneath him. My hate grows as my tongue recounts everything I've done in his absence. The library, my irritation with David, my time in the garden, my conversation with Fatima. He listens raptly, only asking questions when I stop speaking. When I repeat the part about Gregor dying, his eyebrows move up a hair, but he gives no other reaction.

When he's caught up to this moment, he grins as I tell him how much I hate him, how badly I want to knee him right in the balls.

"On that note, I must dash." He stands, his gaze raking over me as I still lay on the bed. "Humans to kill and all that. But I'll return in a few days for Whitbine's visit." His murderous glee subsides a little as he mentions the torturer's name. "Until then, I suggest you continue your studies, such as they are." He gives a snide glance to the library book. "Best of luck reading ancient Romanian."

When he's gone, whatever compulsions he forced on me finally begin to fade. I roll to my side and curl up, my fingers grazing across the wound at my throat, now closed. Violated again, I don't even feel like crying about it. There's no point. My tears have never gotten me anywhere, not in this dark place, and I'm certain they never will.

I'm sitting at the top of the stairs munching on some questionable crackers—they're stale, but not stale enough to deter me—when David appears on the piano landing below me.

"I've been meaning to ask you," I call.

"What?" He's always varying shades of grumpy. But he's not vicious about it, not the way Valen is. He's more ... I guess I'd say, he's disgruntled. It's wild how quickly I've gotten used to it.

“If you’re Corvidion, why are you here? The three Bloods are all very territorial.” I tap the library book in my lap. “There’s some particularly gruesome woodcuts in here from something called the Sanguine Wars. This was 452 BC, and Dragonis killed so many Corvidion that?—”

“That we were nearly wiped out forever. Yeah, I know. Those are bedtime stories for Corvidion vampires.”

“Bedtime stories?” I grimace and munch another cracker. “Twisted.”

“History.” He shrugs.

“From what I saw at the ball and what I’ve seen in all these books, not much has changed. So why would you be the housekeeper—” I smile when he groans. “—for a Dragonis?”

“Maybe I’m a glutton for punishment.” He leans on the stair rail. “Maybe this is a whole new era for vampire cooperation now that the humans are going tits up.”

I stop chewing. “I know you think that’s a cute taunt. Like ‘haha we’re murdering all of you.’ But it’s really fucked up.”

He shrugs. “I just told you my childhood bedtime stories were about genocidal war.”

“I guess you have a point there.” I chew again, then barely manage to swallow the dry puck of cracker. “Still fucked up,” I mumble. This is my life now, a prisoner whose jailor makes flippant jokes about the systemic elimination of everything I hold dear. It would be funny if it weren’t so fucking dark.

Then another idea hits me. “What if a Corvidion and a Tantun have a baby? Can that vampire fly and have acid blood?”

“The Bloods can’t interbreed.”

“Huh? But I’m assuming you’re all the same species. I’d have to do DNA analysis to know for sure, of course, but?—”

“You going to do that here?” He looks around. “Got all the equipment you need, Doctor?”

“I didn’t specialize in DNA.”

“Right, you focused on blood,” he snorts a laugh.

“Why is that funny?”

“It’s just, I don’t know, ironic, I guess.”

“That’s not irony.”

“Well, whatever it is, it’s funny.” He uses the talon at the top of one of his wings to scratch the back of his head.

“Okay, whatever.” I wave a hand at him. “So you can’t have a vampire of more than one Blood?”

“Correct.”

“Then how did Gregor have a child with a human, which once again, I’m assuming is a different species?”

“I don’t know.” He seems particularly disinterested in any line of scientific questions. I’ve learned that about him, too.

“It’s not unheard of. I mean, Neanderthals and Homo sapiens were breeding. Same genus, different species. The Neanderthals eventually died out and humans became the dominant organism.” My thoughts darken at the current ‘dying’ breed. Mine.

“Uh huh.” He isn’t listening.

Just about every conversation we’ve had goes in a similar fashion. I ask questions, he answers a few, and then he zones out. He may be in his fifties, but he’s more like one of my college students. Nineteen and clueless. Maybe vampires develop at slower rates because of their long-lived nature?

“Hey, do you know if you age at a slo?—”

“Shh.” He puts a finger to his lips.

“What?”

He glares at me and presses his finger tighter to his lips.

I look around, unsure of what’s going on. There’s nothing. Not the slightest sound—in a sudden burst of movement, he flies upwards. “Get to your room!” he shouts. Then he disappears over the railing and down to the lower levels.

I gawk for only a moment, then rise and rush down the hall. The sharp bite of his voice nips at my heels. He’s never been that serious before.

Once I’m inside, I press my ear to my door and listen. Long moments go by, my heartbeat the only sound I can make out. If there’s something going on, it’s too far away or too quiet for me to catch it.

I back away and wish for the hundredth time that I hadn’t wasted my dagger on

Valen. Ducking behind my bed, I crouch down and wait. It's the only place I can stay slightly hidden while also getting a view of the door. Did the husks get out? Is Valen back unexpectedly? What had David so concerned?

If there's someone here, I have to hope they aren't after me. Unless, of course, it's a rescue. That thought is like a tiny explosion in my thoughts. I've never pondered that possibility. No one even knows I'm here. Just the redhead—Gage. All the people who cared about me are dead, and if there are others, I don't remember them. Add to that the impossibility of breaking into this vampire stronghold, and my chances of getting a ticket out are nonexistent.

My breath catches when my door opens. Black shoes, black dress pants. It's not David. He favors sneakers and jeans. Somehow, I know it isn't Valen either. My hackles rise as they step farther into my room.

"You can come out, Georgia. I know you're there."

Everything in me curls into a tense ball at the sound of Whitbine's nasal voice.

"Allow me." He comes around the bed and grabs my arm, yanking me upright.

"Hey!" I shove at him.

"Bringing back memories of our first meeting." He grins, his fangs long and sharp. "What a pleasure it was to make your acquaintance then. Even more enjoyable now."

My skin crawls as I look up at him, at the seething darkness in his eyes. "You can't come in here. Valen will?—"

"Our Lord Specter is otherwise engaged. And you owe me answers."

In the space of a heartbeat, he latches onto my throat, his fangs digging in painfully as he grips my upper arms. It burns, the intrusion far more violent, more damaging than Valen's snakelike bites.

Whitbine clamps down harder, and I realize the difference. Whitbine is enjoying the pain he's inflicting, so much so that he groans with pleasure as I whimper.

"David," I call weakly. "David!"

Whitbine finally lets up, my blood smeared on his mouth and dripping down his chin as he meets my eyes. "He's been detained, I'm afraid." He licks his lips. "There it is." He closes his eyes as if relishing the taste. "What I've been missing."

I can't move, his hands still gripping me tightly.

"You have been tainted." His eyes open, the pupils dilating rapidly. "Compulsion is running through you, far stronger than I'd realized. I missed it during our sessions at the Black Cavern, perhaps because I didn't know to look for it."

"I don't know?—"

"Silence."

My mouth snaps closed, his compulsion overcoming my will. He must've put his own blood into the bite.

"Compulsion and something more," he says thoughtfully. "Something ..." He focuses on me again, a grin peeling his lips back from his teeth. "Something impossible. My, my, my. Valen, how very clever. Unexpected, truly." He squeezes me tightly. "A treasure. I must get you to Gregor immediately."

No ! I fight his grip, desperately trying to get free, to run, to do anything to get away.

“Stop struggling. Follow.”

I walk behind him, my movements robotic as I trail behind him. Out of my room, down the hall, and down the stairs into the blackness below. I shudder as we pass by the husks level and then into the pitch blackness beyond. I can't see anything, but my body obeys his command, descending the steps into the abyss. Panic expands in my chest, making it hard for me to breathe. Still, on he goes. Down, down, down. And I follow. The air growing dank and clammy, sulfur in every breath.

I slow and stop, then hear something creak. My legs carry me forward, and I step up, the floor moving slightly beneath my feet.

“Sit,” Whitbine purrs in my ear.

I do. I'm in his lap. My gorge rises as he puts one of his hands on my thigh.

We move. In the absolute dark, we're moving, the sounds of creaking and metal all around us.

“Why so stressed?” His hot breath is at my ear. “You're perfectly safe down here... With me.”

I'm trapped in my own head, unable to speak, unable to exercise even one shred of control over my body. I shouldn't be here. All this time I've spent working on ways to escape the castle, but this isn't it. This isn't escape. It feels more like a kidnapping, and it won't end well for me. What am I going to do?

“These tunnels were built ages ago. New ones have been created over the years, of course. We certainly do like to get around.” He chuckles, his hand moving further up

my thigh. “But the sun is quite limiting. Not down here.”

This is how all the vampires came to the ball. Through tunnels. Deep underground. How many are there? How far do they go? Will David be able to follow, to find me? Is he even still alive? There’s no way he would’ve allowed Whitbine to take me like this. Unless ... unless he made a deal, like the one with Fatima. My heart sinks. He sold me out.

“Sadly, these tunnels no longer connect directly to the Black Cavern. Gregor wisely realized that no one should be able to reach him too easily. We’ll have to wait out the day. Only a few hours of it left. Then we’ll reach our destination.” His tongue flicks along my ear, and I scream inside my head, my body going cold. “I’m glad we’ll have some alone time before then. Just you and me. I’ve no doubt you won’t leave the Black Cavern alive. That’s never been a problem for me, generally speaking, but the issue is you won’t be in one piece, either.” He sighs. “So I’ll need to enjoy you before then. I should’ve done this long ago. I don’t know why I didn’t. I had you on my table. Hmmm.” His hand moves higher as silent tears roll down my cheeks.

I shake, an involuntary action that even he can’t control.

Inhaling at my neck, he says, “Your fear smells amazing. Like cold rain on dying flowers.” He bites me again, ripping my skin with a raking motion before locking on.

I can’t scream, only suffer. His grip tightens painfully on my thigh as he sucks. Weakness comes over me in a wave. Blood loss. Maybe I’ll pass out. Please, let me pass out .

We jolt to a stop, and he tears himself free of my throat. Blood soaks through my shirt, dribbling down my back and chest.

“Follow,” he commands again, his voice raspy as he yanks me to my feet.

I move sluggishly, then wince as light erupts from somewhere overhead.

“In here.” He leads me into an elevator. The machinery coughs and shakes as we rise, finally stopping where the light is brightest. The doors open, and I follow him into a sitting room that’s straight from the Victorian period. No windows here, but there are lights around the room. A shelf along one wall is filled with jars. As I move closer, I see that each jar contains a severed head. Then the smell hits me, and I dry heave. Another reflex, not something to be controlled.

“We all have our little knickknacks, don’t we?” He chuckles and continues deeper into the house, past a dining room with a body splayed out on the table. A woman, her flesh stripped back and pinned beside her, her organs rotting and flies buzzing all around. “A failed experiment.” He sighs. “I’m sure you understand, don’t you Doctor? We can’t be brilliant at all times, no matter how hard we try.”

I dry heave again even as my feet continue to move, following him through the dining room, into a long hallway, and then up a staircase.

We enter a bedroom, the walls covered with pale leather, the bed unmade, more jars, these filled with body parts.

He stops and turns to me as he reaches for the buttons of his shirt. “Lie down on the bed.”

No! I try to force my feet to stick to the floor, to glue myself right where I am. It doesn’t work. Tears erupt in freshets as I obey.

“In the center,” he adds.

I move, lying on his bed, the scent of death invading my nose, staining every pore. Please don’t. Please don’t. Please don’t. The words repeat themselves in a litany in

my head. But I can't speak. And even if I could, I would be ignored.

He strips his shirt off, his skin sallow, then crawls onto the bed.

I shiver so violently that I bite my tongue. Blood. More blood.

Reaching to his nightstand, he grabs a pair of surgical scissors.

I stare at them, their silver glint. Please don't. Please don't. Please don't.

He grips the bottom of my shirt and cuts an easy trail up the center, then spreads it open. With another click of the scissors, he cuts through my bra. Cold air hits my skin, and I clench my eyes shut, trying to be anywhere but here.

"Oh no," he tsks. "You must watch me."

My eyes open.

"I want to know if you approve of my methods." He grins and gets to his knees, then slides down the bed and grabs one of my ankles.

He cuts up one leg, then another. Taking his time. Enjoying my tears as I'm forced to watch everything he does.

Terror, the sort that blocks out everything else in your mind, consumes me. And for the first time in a while, I want to die. I want to die right now before he goes any farther.

He pulls away my tattered denim and plucks the edge of my panties. The scissors go shick . On the other side, shick .

“It’s a shame I can’t add this beautiful skin to my collection.” He gestures toward the walls. That’s when I realize they aren’t covered in leather. It’s human skin. Dozens of sheets of human skin.

Sitting back on his knees, he stares down at my naked form. “So very pretty. But I can make you even more so.” He opens the scissors and runs the blade across the top of each of my breasts. I gasp, but I can’t speak, can’t scream. There’s nothing I can do to stop the pain or the blood that oozes from me. “A masterpiece already and we’ve only just gotten started.” He reaches for his belt.

I try to close my eyes. I want to close my eyes. To dissociate. To be anywhere but here. I can’t.

“Shall we begin?” He comes down over me, his hands spreading my legs.

The bed shakes.

His forehead wrinkles.

No, not the bed, the entire house shakes, one of his disgusting jars breaking on the floor. He sits up. “What the?—”

Then his head turns all the way around, the bones snapping.

Valen roars, his hands at Whitbine’s temples as he spins it again, then again, Whitbine’s neck turning to a grisly mush as Valen treats it like the lid of a soda bottle. Whitbine lets out a gurgled yell that’s quickly subsumed by the ripping of flesh and tendon.

With a slight yank, Valen pulls his head clean off and smashes it onto the floor. He brings his boot down on it again and again, uncaged fury turning him into a blur of

movement.

I breathe in and let out a scream so raw and horrible that Valen finally stops grinding Whitbine into the floor.

Without a word, he strips his jacket off and drapes it over me, then scoops me from the bed.

Crying, I cling to him and close my eyes. I can't look anymore. I can't be here. I don't want to be here.

"Please," I yell, hysterical. "Please make me sleep! Please!" I scream.

He lifts me to his mouth and kisses me. I catch the slightest taste of his blood, and then I'm gone.

25

Recovered Journal of Dr. Georgia Clark

June 23, Year 1, Emergence Era

Our bubble is already bursting. DC is fracturing. Our discoveries could be destroyed any day now—either by the Saints or the vampires. They both think we’re the enemy when all we’re trying to do is keep humanity alive. Sometimes when I can’t sleep for fear of dreams of Candice, or Gregor, or even Juno, I wonder if any of this is worth it. Did I keep hope alive just so I could watch it die a slow death?

“— s earching his house. Holy fuck, Valen. Did you see his place?” David’s voice floats to me.

“I saw enough. Get over there and plant this before anyone realizes he’s missing. Put it somewhere only slightly hidden. We have no idea who Gregor will send to look for him.”

“Got it.”

“Your wing?” Valen asks. “He silvered you?”

“Yeah. He smashed it pretty damn good, then pinned me with silver. He came prepared. Took me the fuck out, but only because he got the drop on me.”

“He used a distraction. One you should’ve figured out right away. A smart move on

his part, but you must be smarter.” Valen’s voice turns to coarse sandpaper. “He’ll never make any moves—smart or otherwise—again.”

“Yeah, I saw that too. Well done. And you’re right. I fell for it. I should’ve seen through it, and I was on my back foot.” David’s voice fades. “I’ll leave this in his place like you said. Back in an hour or so.”

I don’t want to hear them. I don’t want to open my eyes. I don’t want to be conscious at all.

“You’re in my room. You’re safe.” Valen’s voice, softer now. Closer.

“Stop saying that. It’s a lie.” I keep my eyes clenched shut and curl up in a protective ball.

“He’s dead. He’s not coming back.”

I get a flash of an image—Whitbine’s head turned completely around, then the bloody stump of his neck. My stomach lurches. I lean over the side of the bed and vomit. Then I do it again. And again until nothing but yellow bile comes out.

“It’s all right.” Valen hands me a cool, damp washcloth, then kneels and starts cleaning the mess.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, then hate myself for apologizing to him. I wipe my mouth and nose, getting rid of the sick as best I can.

“Rest. I’ve cleaned up far worse than this.” He glances over his shoulder at the hallway.

Gorsky. He’s thinking of Gorsky. Now I am, too. At least Gorsky only wanted me

dead. Whitbine wanted—my stomach gives a warning twinge. I force my thoughts elsewhere, anywhere else but there.

“What happened to David?”

“He’ll be fine.”

“That’s not what I asked.” I curl up again.

“Whitbine brought a husk and set it loose. David went to investigate. Whitbine pounced and subdued David so he could get to you.”

“But David’s all right?”

“Worried about him?” he asks sharply.

“Yes.”

He sighs. “He’ll be fine. And you?”

“I’ll be ...” I don’t know. I don’t know if I can be okay again.

Valen finishes cleaning and goes into the bathroom. When he returns, I watch him, his eyes meeting mine.

“You saved me.” I don’t know why the bridge of my nose is stinging, my vision going watery.

He moves slowly and sits beside me.

“How did you find me?” I close my eyes, then find I don’t like the dark. Not when

I'm alone in it.

He glances away. "David."

"You were close? I thought you were in Atlanta."

"How far do you think Atlanta is?"

I curl up tighter. I'm too tired for games, too worn out and stretched thin. If he wants to ask me a question for a question, I'd rather be silent.

He sighs. "I was on my way back."

"Oh." I run a hand along my chest. My skin is healed there and also at my throat. I smell like soap, like Valen's soap. He stripped me and washed me. I should be angry, embarrassed even. I'm not. I'm grateful every trace of Whitbine and his house of horrors is gone. I shiver.

"Did he ...?" Valen's jaw clenches.

"No. He tried. He—" A sob overwhelms whatever I was going to say.

Valen's hands fist, his body rigid as I cry. He doesn't touch me, doesn't comfort me. He simply stays. Somehow, that's better. I don't want to be touched. I just want to purge every horrible emotion. So I do.

After turning myself inside out until I can't breathe from the strength of my fear, my sorrow, I finally pull in a shuddering breath. Smoother ones follow until I'm quiet. The awful memories are still there, the trauma from them still so raw and bloody that I can't bear to look at them. But the tears were a slight release, at least for now. I know the horror will build up again, covering me like grave dirt until I burst through

again, digging my way free with my bare hands. Only to be buried again. Slowly.

“He can’t hurt you ever again.” Valen’s voice is the touch of black moth, silky like shadow.

“What will happen when Gregor finds out you killed him?” I close my swollen, puffy eyes. The dark isn’t so bad when I know I’m not alone. “Will he torture you again?”

“Who told you?” he asks.

“Every time I see you, you look like you’re fervently ringing death’s doorbell, but maybe I’m just guessing.”

He’s silent.

“Okay, Fatima mentioned it.” I shrug one shoulder.

“Ah. I see.” He glowers. “I gave her strict parameters for her visit. She disregarded them.”

“She’s so different. Fatima always followed the rules. She practically wrote the rules. Now that she’s a vampire, she’s so ...”

“She’s no different.”

“What? Yes, she is.”

“Becoming a vampire doesn’t instantly make someone vicious, little rabbit. That cruelty, or whatever it is, was always there beneath the surface.”

“No way. She was never like that. She wouldn’t even eat meat because she loved

animals. I mean, come on. That's practically saintly."

"Underneath, she was something else. And now, in her current form, she's free to wear it on the outside instead of masking it."

I don't know if I believe that. "She wasn't a monster before."

"She was. She was simply better at hiding it."

I can't deal with the additional emotion of frustration, so I backtrack. "You didn't answer my question about Gregor, about what he does to you."

He crosses his arms over his chest with a sigh. "Anything he does to me is nothing new. It becomes quite boring after a while."

I don't believe him. He's suffering. Like knows like, I suppose.

"Gregor is still certain there's a traitor in his ranks."

"Is there?" I study him, his stark profile. Pale and sharp-angled, he's as much stone as he ever was. But there are cracks now, more each time I see him.

He catches my eye, his gaze lingering on my face. "It just so happens I've discovered who was feeding intel to the humans and working with the disgruntled among our own ranks to oust the high lord. A traitor through and through, now unmasked by none other than the high lord's Specter."

I sniffle. "You mean Whitbine."

He smirks. "It seems my little rabbit has a talent for subterfuge."

“When you call me little rabbit, it’s like you calling me ‘bitch’ or ‘serf’ or ‘peasant’ or, I don’t know, something worse.”

“Is it?” he smirks, casual cruelty edging back into his demeanor. “Would you rather I call you one of those?”

I let my puffy eyes close again, blessed relief. “You know, I was never the sort who forced anyone to call me doctor. I was fine with Georgia or even Miss Clark, as long as it was done respectfully. But you,” I sigh and sink farther into the pillow. “You can refer to me as Dr. Clark.”

A tiny amused sound, nowhere near the enormity of a laugh but the closest I’ve ever heard from him, bursts and dies in his throat. “Would that make you happy?”

“Nothing can make me happy.” I answer, truthfully. “I don’t think ‘happy’ is something I can experience anymore.”

“Losing hope, are we?” he taunts. “I thought you of all people, plucky little scientist, would still be looking for a way to save the world.”

“The world doesn’t know I exist. The world ...” I sigh, too tired to keep going. The world left me here to rot .

He rises from the bed.

Panic bells ring in my cranium, blurring out thought and replacing it with sheer terror. “Stay,” I blurt.

He stares down at me, his brows rising in brief surprise before his countenance returns to baseline stony.

“Just until I fall asleep. Or, you could compel me? So I can sleep?”

“That shouldn’t be a problem. You’re exhausted.”

“I know. Right. Don’t compel me.” I reach toward him, but only under the blanket where he can’t see my weakness. “Just stay. Please? You can go on a murder rampage after or drown orphans or whatever you want once I’m out. Just stay till then.”

“If I do, will you stop mewling like a lost kitten?” he asks.

“I’m a kitten now?”

“Worse.” He sits carefully, his back to me. “A human.”

“You’ll stay then?”

“Go to sleep, little rabbit. The wolf will keep watch.”

“Aren’t you a dragon?”

He glances at me over his shoulder. “Does it matter? Both have fangs.”

“I suppose not.” I pull the blanket up tighter and breathe out slowly.

I’m almost asleep when I feel the softest touch on my hair and hear him whisper, “kedves verem.” Unknown words that follow me into a comfortable, dreamless sleep.

“How far do the tunnels on the bottom level go?” I wander through the orchards and ask my question aloud.

David swoops down and lands about 20 feet away. “We have hundreds of miles of tunnel. They don’t all connect.”

“Where does the one that connects to the castle go?”

He has his hair up in a man bun tonight, giving him an even more youthful appearance. “You can’t use it to get away. You know that, right?”

“I know.” I roll my eyes. “You think I’m going to traipse down there in the dark? Now, if you give me a lamp, maybe I could?—”

“You aren’t getting a lamp.” He turns surly. “I’m not letting you out of my sight. Valen would turn me inside out if I let—” He swipes a hand through the air. “Not going there.”

“Just tell me where they go. It’s not a difficult question. Besides, I’ve already figured out we’re in rural Virginia.” I watch him closely.

His eyes widen a little.

Bingo . I guessed right.

“Come on. Tell me. Or I can go through all the parts of the smallpox virus if you like. I know you can hear me wherever you are up there.” I point to the sky.

He glowers.

I take a deep breath. “Well, the envelope of the virus?—”

“This one connects to DC and branches up to Philly and south to ...” He stares off in the distance. “Somewhere to the south. I don’t know.” He shrugs.

“Atlanta?” I ask.

“Maybe.”

“How did the vampires dig all that without anyone noticing?” I wander farther through the orchard. All the leaves are gone now, the trees on the distant ridge past their brightest foliage and dwindling to morose gray.

“I’m sure some humans noticed.”

“And they didn’t say anything to anyone?”

“Think about it, Georgia. What would happen to a human if they tried to report vampire activity?”

“They’d be labeled a lunatic?”

He scoffs like I’m a complete moron. “No, we’d kill them.”

I stop and glare at him.

“Well—” He runs a hand through his hair, then stops when he realizes it’s trapped in the bun. “We’d definitely compel them to shut up. How about that?”

“I tend to believe your first response more.” I pull my jacket tighter and look up at the full moon. “Where’s your dad tonight?”

“He’s with Valen and the Tantun general, Carlotta. Meeting with Gregor at the Black Cavern.”

“And where’s that?”

“New York somewhere, or maybe it’s Jersey?” He shrugs. “I don’t know. Never been.”

“Never?”

“No, why would I? I’m not one of the nobles.” He shakes his head.

“So there are classes in the vampire hierarchy?” I chew on that as I continue through the orchard, a branch catching in my hair. I untangle it. “Three separate Bloods plus a social structure.”

“We’re just as complicated as humans.” He snaps off a twig and twirls it around in his fingers. “Well, maybe not that complicated. Humans love to pick out all their differences and fight over them.”

“Rich coming from a species that wars among themselves constantly .”

“Not anymore.” He points at me. “Now we have a common enemy.”

“But all the vampires aren’t going along with it. Valen told Coal he killed plenty of Corvidions who wanted to rebel against Gregor’s plan.”

He freezes for a second then tries to play it off. “You don’t have vampire hearing yet you’re always eavesdropping, is that it?”

Interesting. He knows something about those executions, something he doesn’t want to tell me. I file away that tiny tidbit and continue asking questions. I’m almost at my limit; any second now David will start doing the thousand-yard stare or fly off to chase a bat.

“And the Tantuns seem to be just waiting to kill Gregor off so they can run the whole

show their way,” I add.

“Not wrong there.”

“All the vampires at the party—they were nobles?” I ask.

“Yeah.” He bites down on the twig, then frowns and spits it out.

“What makes them nobles?”

“Age,” he says it like it’s obvious, the ‘duh’ heavily implied.

The nobles are the oldest vampires. Also the cruelest. Is there something to that? Does age make them more horrible? Or are they all that way? I glance toward Melody’s monument, gleaming white under the moonlight. No, they aren’t all that way.

“When does Valen come back?”

“Don’t know. But our time’s up.” He hooks a thumb over his shoulder toward the elevator. Sun’s up soon.

“What happens to a vampire in the sun.”

He gives me the ‘duh’ look again. “We die.”

“Can you be more specific? Do you turn into a vapor, burst into bats, dust, ashes, blood—what happens to your cells?”

“My cells?” He is utterly baffled.

“Never mind. Let’s go in.” I trudge past him, then stop. “Can you read ancient Romanian?”

“No, can you?”

“Ugh.” I was already pushing my luck with all the questions. Then again, David has been a lot more open to me in the days since I was taken. I think he blames himself for what happened. He hasn’t said that, and he hasn’t apologized, but I feel it in the way he’s more patient with me. The food has been better too, confirming my suspicion that he’s been my new cook all along. There was even an apple on my tray at lunch today.

He hasn’t asked me about what happened. That’s a mercy, too. I try not to go back to it in my mind, but I do. It’s like a scab, and I’m damned to pick at it, making it bleed all over again. I hope I stop doing that. I don’t know if I ever will.

Recovered Journal of Dr. Georgia Clark

June 7, Year 1, Emergence Era

Wyatt's playlists are getting more unhinged. I keep wondering if there's some way I could just 'accidentally' fall onto his vinyl collection. Kidding! I'm only kidding. (But am I though?) In other news, we've made zero progress on the virus, the power keeps going off, and I'm worried the generator isn't going to come on one of these times. At least Gene found some jam the other day. His limp is better, too. So I guess that's a kind of progress. *sigh*

I sneeze. The dust in this library is enough to open anyone's sinuses. Or clog them. The books I've plucked from the shelves sit in a neat pile on the edge of the table. I've given up sneaking around. No one seems to care that I spend a lot of time in here, though David does complain here and there that he'd rather be anywhere else in the castle. Still, he hangs around in the seating area or haunts the rooms nearby while I dig through the tomes.

"Done? I feel like you're done," he calls for the third time today.

"No." I finish making a stack of the few books in English, then set off into the shelves again to see if I can somehow find another copy of one of the same books but in Romanian. If I can find some way to make a cipher, I could actually get some use from the books on vampire bloodlines, history—on everything in here.

“What’s this?” Valen’s voice curls through the air like a tendril of smoke.

I lean back and spot him standing at the table, his fingers running along the spines of the books I’ve chosen. “Books.”

He looks up at me. “How droll.” He sounds anything but amused.

“If you must know, I’m trying to create a cipher so I can read these books. I can’t do anything else in this upside-down hell, so I may as well work on figuring out what makes vampires tick so I can then reverse engineer a way to murder you all.” I drop two more books in English on my stack.

The corner of his lips quirks into his familiar smirk. “Quite ambitious of you.”

“I’ve always been aces at research.” I stare up at him, daring him to try to stop me.

“Are you certain of that?” He turns and strides away into the stacks.

I lose him in the dark, then sit down and wait for him as I organize another stack of possible contenders in Romanian. From the corner of my eye, I catch movement in the dark, uppermost recesses of the library. Turning, I peer through the shadows, barely making out Valen’s shape as he scales the stacks with ease. He’s half-floating, half-climbing, as if he only needs to contact the shelves to control his direction. I gawk as he disappears into the full gloom.

“What the fuck?” I whoosh out in a breath.

He appears at my elbow, a book in his hand. “Try this one.”

“Ah!” I jerk back. “You were ... Were you flying?”

“Have I finally impressed you?” He smirks and proffers the book. “Here.”

“What is it?” I take it.

“A—what did you call it? A cipher .” He taps the cover. “Romanian and English. Not, of course, the ancient tongue, but close enough.”

I gape at him. “Hang on, I think I’m having an aneurysm or something. Are you helping me?”

“All you had to do was ask, little rabbit. Or did your pride stop you from doing so? What with all your acumen at research?” His smirk turns even more snide.

I clutch the book to my chest. Finally, something helpful.

“Leave it. We’re going outside.”

“No way.” I tuck it into the second makeshift tote bag of my design and follow him out of the library. “It’s about five o’clock in the afternoon right now?”

“Yes.”

I expect him to comment on how I’m able to tell time in a place with no clocks, but he doesn’t seem the least bit impressed.

“Sun still up?” I ask.

“Yes. For a short while.” He moves the lever in the elevator, and we rise to the surface.

I all but run out into the daylight, the warmth on my skin at war with the chill in the

air. How long has it been since I've felt the sun? I don't know, but the answer will always be 'too long.'

Valen keeps pace with me easily, and I slow down when I come to Melody's monument.

"Hi." I kiss my fingers, then press them to the top of the stone.

Valen stops beside me.

"I asked David if you had this made. He said he didn't know—a common answer from him. But, I mean, you must have." I turn to look at him.

He nods, his gaze on the words carved into the marble.

"It's beautiful."

"She deserved more," he says curtly. "More than ..." He doesn't finish the sentence, just lets it fade.

I don't disagree. We stand for long moments, the air still and cold. I'd like to think Melody was here with us, but that's selfish. She should be at peace or maybe onto her next life. I don't know—the same way that no one knows.

"You come here often," he finally says.

"How did you know?"

"The turf." He gestures toward the flattened patch of grass.

"Oh." I shrug. "Yeah."

“She would’ve liked that.” He clasps his hands behind his back, his gaze far away now as he looks toward the ridge. The setting sun casts a golden glow over the land. And over him, giving him a warmth he would eschew.

“She told me about how you found her. How you—” I tangle my fingers together. “—how you saved her.”

He barks a harsh, ugly laugh. “A whole lot of good I did her.”

“I don’t think?—”

“Come. Get your fresh air, little rabbit.” He turns and strides away into the brambles.

I stare after him. For so long I blamed him for not saving her. But the look in his eyes right then—a tortured sort of grief. I recognize it. Like knows like, after all.

I wander away, pausing at the fountain then venturing into the orchard. It looks different in the day, even in the fading light, I see so much more detail. The mystery of nighttime is gone and the starkness of winter on full display. Valen is out of sight, so I take my usual path around the garden, inspecting everything with new eyes thanks to the sunlight.

“She told me about your mother. The statue of her.” I speak at regular volume again, knowing he can hear me even if I can’t see him. “She seemed so ... brave. Braver than anyone I’ve ever known. Strong, too. She protected herself, and then she protected you. I think ... I think Melody told me about her so that I could see you differently.”

“Did it work?” He appears in the next row of trees, his dark hair shining black as the sun fades away.

“Yes and no.”

“Enlighten me.” He walks alongside me, though one row of trees separates us.

“Nothing deep. Just that you have a human side, one you don’t claim. One I rarely see. But it’s in there.”

“I think she was taking a rather rosy view of me if that’s what you came away with.”

“No, like I said, she didn’t change all my thoughts about you. You’re a murderer.”

“Ah, so true.” He smiles, the fake one. The cold one. I see it in the last light.

“You do whatever Gregor tells you to do.”

“With pride.” He nods.

“But you have a secret part of you.”

“Is that so?” he mocks.

“Yes. I’m sure of it now.”

“Melody, ever faithful to me, led you down the primrose path. She looked kindly upon me as her sire, so she wanted to share that with you. You ate it up. I should’ve rewarded her for it.”

I stop and turn to him. “I’m not falling for it.”

“For what?” He faces me.

“For this.” I wave my hand at him. “This one note farce that you?—”

“Down!” He’s on top of me in the beat of a hummingbird’s wing.

The breath knocked from me, I cough as he covers me with his body, a shadow passing overhead. He bares his fangs, a feral look on his face, his gaze on the sky.

“It’s me,” someone calls.

“Fuck!” He gets to his feet then pulls me up.

Coal lands outside the orchard, his black wings smoking the slightest bit.

“What are you doing?” Valen scowls.

“I came as soon as I heard.” Coal barrels through the trees, his wings clipping branches, twigs flying.

“Heard what?”

“Gregor has summoned us.”

“Does that require you to fry?” Valen swats at Coals smoking shoulder. “You could’ve waited.”

Coal shakes his head. “No. He wants you to bring her.”

Valen stills, and I could swear the air turns colder, my breath coming out in a fog.

“Now?”

“Immediately.”

“Fuck!” Valen roars.

I jump at the fury of it, and a flock of some winter bird takes flight from the next orchard over.

“Go,” he barks at Coal. “We shouldn’t arrive together.” Valen takes my hand and pulls me along the row with him.

I hear the thump of Coal’s wings as he takes flight and swoops over us, his silhouette against the rising moon, the magic of it an all-too-brief distraction.

“Why?” I stumble over a tree root, but Valen keeps me upright. “Why does he want to see me?”

“He knows I haven’t made progress, and Whitbine is dead.”

“He doesn’t know—” I gasp as it hits me. “He’ll find out. He’ll compel me. H-he’ll ask and—” I dig my heels in. “You can’t take me to him.”

“You don’t have a choice.” He wraps his arm around my waist and half carries me to the elevator. “Neither do I.”

My knees are jelly as I lean against the elevator wall. “He’ll see what you did. He’ll kill you.”

“Worried for me?” he asks.

Déjà vu hits me hard, and I catch a glimpse of a memory. Valen. He’s asked me that before. In DC. Before—the sharp stab between my eyes makes me drop the thread.

And then it's gone, as if floating away like the spool to a kite caught by the wind and sent flying, a hapless child chasing slowly behind.

"What?" He peers at me as the elevator keeps dropping, not halting where it usually does. "What is it?"

"I had a ..." I don't know what I had. I can't remember it. "The elevator can go farther down?" I ask instead.

"Always the most observant little rabbit." He smirks.

"You know what's on the lower levels, don't you?" I edge closer to him.

His eyes widen, actual alarm showing in them before he hides it with his usual stoicism. "Do tell."

"Husks."

"Mmm." He looks up as if beyond exasperated. "And how did you discover that?"

"You said I could explore, so I explored." I shrug.

He takes a deep breath, as if it requires every bit of his patience to speak to me. "And you failed to mention it to either David or me?"

"I guess I thought you knew." Why am I getting defensive?

"I'll have David destroy them when?—"

"No."

“What?” He looks genuinely curious now. “Why not?”

“Because they’re victims. They didn’t choose to be that way. They were stolen and hurt and ... And it’s not their fault. But, I mean, if they have to go, do it humanely. Gently, even.”

I’ve never seen him so utterly flummoxed. It would be amusing if we weren’t currently on our way to an audience with Gregor. The reminder makes me shiver.

The elevator stops with a rough creak, and Valen slides the accordion grate open. I don’t move. Beyond is utter darkness, and I remember the dank smell. We’re in the tunnels, the same place where Whitbine—I wring my hands and back away from the opening. “I can’t.”

“Come along.”

“No.” My blood pounds in my ears, the darkness beyond the elevator growing and threatening to swallow me. “I can’t.”

“You must.” He steps beside me and pulls one of my hands free, then tucks it in his.

“No.” I can’t breathe. I’m drowning.

He steps in front of me, his free hand on my cheek. “Breathe.”

“I can’t.” I gasp.

“Georgia.”

The way he says my name is jarring. I take in a breath. Then another.

“Look at me.” His thumb strokes my cheek, his skin so warm.

I look up.

“You can do this.”

I shake my head.

“Let it go.” He leans closer. “You have to let it go.” His voice is gentler than I’ve ever heard it, nothing more than the faintest brush of a raven’s wings. I remember it.

“You were there.” I clutch his hand. “I-In my room after the nightmare. It was you.”

“You can do this.” He pulls me haltingly from the elevator, my body trembling, my legs threatening to give out.

“I’m scared,” I whisper and walk alongside him, hewing close to his side.

“I know.” He squeezes my hand.

More steps into the black, more horrible memories threatening to consume me.

“I can’t.” I slow my pace.

“We’re here. I’m going to lift you now.” He grips my waist and sits me down on a bench. Then I feel him beside me, his side pressed against me, his arm draped across the seat at my back.

The carriage, or cart, or train—I can’t tell what it is—begins to move with high pitched squeals of metal on metal. I huddle closer to Valen. His arm at my back wraps around, his hand on my shoulder. Then I feel his chin on top of my head,

tucking me close as the carriage rocks, brief flashes of sparks showing black walls looming close on both sides. I'd rather not see, not know, so I close my eyes and let Valen, Gregor's executioner, hold me tight.

I don't know how long we travel, but when the carriage slows and stops, I open my eyes. Pale light shines from somewhere far above, barely illuminating the track that continues into the inky black.

A vampire stands guard at an archway ahead of us, the top of it formed by fanged skulls.

"Lord Specter." The guard bows as we pass.

Valen, no longer holding my hand, leads the way, his black trench coat flying out behind him. I keep up, and I notice him glancing at me over his shoulder every so often.

We come to two more vampires, each of them standing at attention. "Lord Specter," they say in unison, deference in their tones.

Valen ignores them and continues along the hall until he comes to a set of double doors. The vampires standing here bow then push them open.

Everything is happening so fast. I don't have time to think, to panic, to run. I just follow Valen into the lion's den.

"About fucking time!" Gregor's voice snaps like a whip as we enter a wide room, the walls gilded, the floor gleaming white marble. A large desk is ahead of us, and Gregor sits behind it in a throne-like chair.

I stare at him, his veins even more sinewy and pronounced, his face like a death

mask, skeletal and hollowed. Sores have erupted on his forehead and cheeks, angry red and black pustules. I've never seen anything like them.

Valen bows then grabs my arm and pulls me forward, forcing me to bow as well.

To the side, Coal stands and stares straight ahead. Carlotta, the Tantan vampire with the white hair, the one who tortured Vince, stands beside him, her smug gaze on me.

"Carlotta, I said to bring your human with you." Gregor turns to her, the cords of his neck straining.

"Apologies, High Lord." She dips her head. "He perished a month ago. I did my best to keep him alive, but he proved weak, as do all their kind."

My hands fist, my impotent rage given a clear target. She murdered Vince, and she has the audacity to gloat about it.

Valen's hand comes down on my shoulder.

"Weak. Yes." Gregor's gaze snaps back to Valen. "Would you call them weak, Specter? When they yet live? When you've failed to eradicate them despite my distinct command!" His voice rises, spittle flying from his lips. "They have fortified south of Atlanta. Regrouping! Why are they still alive?" he screeches.

"The humans are dying in droves, my lord. I carry out your orders. They fall before me like wheat before the scythe."

"I want them dead!" Gregor snarls, then leaps the desk and grips Valen by the throat. Valen doesn't move, his hand never wavering from my shoulder. "I could rip you to shreds right now. I should. For Theo. He should be here. Not you." He bares his fangs. "Never you!"

I shudder at the ferocity in Gregor's withered frame. His claws are curled and yellowed, drawing blood from Valen's neck as he scowls at him.

"I understand, High Lord." Valen lifts his chin, baring his neck further to Gregor.

Gregor makes a squeaking sound.

I can't stop shaking, my bladder threatening to let go.

Gregor makes the sound again, and I realize it's a wheezing laugh. Then he jumps backward like some sort of uncanny hyena and retakes his seat.

"You've much of me in you." He licks one of his fangs. "But not enough. It will never be enough."

Valen lowers his chin, utterly cool and undisturbed.

"And what of Whitbine?" Gregor settles back in his throne and picks at a sore on his cheek.

"He was the traitor, High Lord. Conspiring with Corvidion rebels—" Valen cuts a deadly look toward Coal. "—and feeding information to the enemy. Now that he is gone, we'll be able to crush the humans beneath our heel."

"You killed him yourself?" Gregor asks.

"I did."

"My spies told me it was quite the brutal scene." Gregor grins, his sunken cheeks clinging to his teeth.

“He deserved far worse for his betrayal, High Lord.”

“Indeed. You should’ve brought him before me!” He flicks some of the blood from his wound onto the floor.

A memory chases through my mind, blood on white marble. On this white marble. Someone screaming my name. Pain erupts in my forehead as Gregor continues, “But it is rather curious how you managed to catch him. After all, you never informed me of his traitorous leanings.”

“I acted on information from my human spy. If I hadn’t, then even more critical plans would’ve been in enemy hands.”

“You acted because you trust the humans?” Gregor asks, his tone turning sly.

“Of course not, but my contact is firmly under my control. He doesn’t breathe unless I compel him to do so.” Valen is clinical, direct. No emotion passes through him except the slightest hint of boredom.

“Easy, is it not?” Gregor says airily, his demeanor spinning like a weathervane during a tornado. “To bend them to our will. They’re nothing more than animals, ripe for slaughter.” He presses his claw so deeply into the wound on his cheek that the tip of it appears inside his mouth. “And this delectable animal here. Where are my answers, Valen? What happened to my son?” he hisses, his eyes narrowing.

“Whitbine tampered with her mind at every opportunity, compelling her to misremember details, forget events, and any number of tricks in an attempt to cover his tracks. He programmed her to lie and lie and lie.”

Gregor leans forward, his eyes almost glowing. “You believe Whitbine had something to do with Theo’s death?”

“I have no doubt of it. The only person who can tell us what happened to Theo is this human. She’s the key. I expect to have the answers from her soon, now that Whitbine is no longer tampering with her mind.”

“Bring her to me,” Gregor commands.

Valen takes my arm and pulls me around the desk until I’m standing beside Gregor’s throne, then pushes me to my knees.

“A pretty one. Still a pretty one.” Gregor traces a claw along my cheek. “Why didn’t I keep you?” He actually seems confused, his pale brows drawing together. Then his eyes snap back to me. With a quick movement he slices his wrist, then presses it to my mouth.

His bitter blood flows across my tongue, and I gag. Valen grabs my hair in a vicious grip, then puts his other hand at my throat, massaging it until I’m forced to swallow.

Gregor grins, his tongue darting out to wet his pale lips. “Now, girl, tell me what happened to Theo.”

Gregor’s blood isn’t Tantun, but it’s poison all the same. I writhe against Valen’s hold as it scorches through me. And when the words, “I don’t know” pour from me, I feel it burning like lava in my veins.

“Tell me what happened to my son!” Gregor screams in my face, black blood oozing from his sores.

“I don’t know,” I wail, the pain rising as I burn from the inside out.

“Pah!” Gregor shoves me back. “Useless human!”

Valen drags me away, hauling me around the desk and placing me on my knees.

“She is playing games. A student of her sister, I see. The same. All of them, all humans the same. Mud-dwellers crawling on their bellies.” He gnashes his teeth, his crazed eyes on me. “And you, are you enjoying your time at the Dragonis home?”

“No.” The truth burns through me.

Gregor cackles, amusement draping over him like cobwebs. “I should think not.”

“Surely there’s something within those walls you like?”

“I liked Melody until you murdered her.”

His face contorts into a black grin. “We danced, you and I. Waltzed right past her corpse. I should’ve fucked you on it.” His voice rises. “Tell me who killed my son!”

I try to answer him, to give him what he wants. My blood demands it. But I can’t. I can do nothing but suffer through the axe that’s splitting my skull as I scream, “I don’t know!”

Carlotta clucks her tongue and walks to me, the click of her heels like gunshots in my pounding head. “Whitbine was this powerful, was he? I didn’t realize he was of Gregor’s direct line.”

“He was not,” Gregor cries.

“Oh.” Carlotta feigns surprise. “Is that right? Hmm, it certainly seems that he had great power over this human, tampering with her mind so completely.” She bends down, her eyes level with mine, her white hair falling like a curtain over one shoulder. “To ruin her so fully.” Her gaze rises to Valen. “I would’ve thought it

would require a pureblood Dragonis—” She smirks “—or someone close to it, to do such damage.”

“Thought?” Valen sneers. “Since when does anyone of Tantun blood have thoughts?”

Gregor barks a laugh, the sound like splintering wood as Carlotta straightens, murder in her eyes.

His laugh dies abruptly. “And you, Coal, where is your human?”

“Apologies, my lord.” Coal bows. “But I fear my human didn’t leave the Black Cavern alive.”

Gregor asked this already, at the ball. Has he forgotten?

“Ah. Yes, yes.” Gregor waves a hand at him. “I shall grant you another.”

A similar echo from an old conversation. Gregor is fading all over, his body and mind dying. The wild swings of temperament, the forgetting—how long does he have left?

Gregor slumps back, his thin body like a bent branch. “Get her out of my sight before I rip her spine from her body,” he says. “You have one week, Specter. One week. If you haven’t gotten the truth from her by then, I certainly will. And then I’ll add her body to the pile of humanity.”

“Yes, High Lord.” Valen pulls me up, his grip so tight on my shoulder that I swallow a whimper. With a rough push, he walks me from the room, my veins still burning with Gregor’s blood. I’m dazed, barely aware of the hallway, the vampire guards. I can’t feel anything but the flames, the itch in my veins that consumes me. Crawling with fire ants inside and out, I sit heavily on the rail car as Valen takes his seat next to me. Then we’re moving again, the darkness becoming complete again.

“Georgia.” His mouth is at my ear. “You’ll be all right. His compulsion will fade.”

I shiver so violently he wraps both his arms around me to keep me still. He’s warm. He shouldn’t be. Just as I shouldn’t be leaning on him for comfort. But I do. I have nothing else, no one else. Only my jailor, the vampire who’s overseen every ounce of my misfortune. It’s so sick and twisted, but that’s what I am now. So much so that I press my cheek to his chest and let him hold me. His heart beats with thumping strength. He’s alive. But not. I was hoping the books would be able to enlighten me on vampire physiology, but I only have a week to live. One week before Gregor takes what little I have left.

“You can’t let him—” I fight back a sob. “Promise me you’ll kill me before the week is out.”

He hears me over the creaking carriage and the rushing air. “It won’t come to that.”

“It will .” I clutch his shirt tightly. “Promise me.”

“Never,” he says it with a vehemence that verges on feral.

Then I’m lost. I can’t end it myself, and Valen refuses. My death won’t be swift, won’t be anything other than pure brutality. Gregor will crush everything in me before he lets me die.

I try to pull away from Valen.

He grips me tightly, his whisper fervent in my ear. “I won’t let him take you from me.”

“You can’t stop him. Melody told me you can’t directly disobey him. Your blood?—”

“You’re my Blood!” He cups my cheek. “You, Georgia.”

“What?”

The carriage slows.

“There’s so much. I don’t know where to?”

“Aww, a sweet moment between lovers.” Carlotta’s voice echoes around us.

Valen tenses.

“Gregor may believe your bullshit, but I don’t.”

The carriage stops with a squealing sound. Eyes wide, I try to find her in the complete black around us, but I can’t. I grip Valen’s arm.

“I don’t recall asking for your opinion.” Valen pulls me from the carriage.

“Give her to me, and I’ll have the answers from her before sunrise.” Her voice comes from everywhere all at once. “Or have you grown attached to your pet?” she taunts.

“That’s one consistent thing about you, Carlotta, you never fail to overestimate your ability.” Valen’s tone is nonchalant, but he holds my hand in a tight grip as we move through the suffocating dark. “Leave now, and I might let you live. I’m not certain, though. I’ve imagined your death quite a few times.”

“Thinking about me often, are you?” she asks coquettishly.

“Thinking about how nice your head would look on my mantle.”

“I see through you, Lord Specter. You and your lies. Whitbine wasn’t working with the humans. He was working with me . You killed him over this disgusting human swine.”

“I’m certain the high lord would love to hear all about your machinations with Whitbine. Is there anything else you’d like to confess?”

I jump when something brushes across my arm.

Valen moves faster, keeping me close at his side.

“Perhaps only one more thing.” I can hear the grin in her voice. “That little safehouse outside Atlanta, the one where you hid the CDC scientists?”

Valen’s grip tightens, and we’re all but running now.

“I raided it just last night. Your human spy was pathetically easy to track. I enjoyed killing everyone inside, especially when I realized they were working on a cure for the plague. It’s truly too bad that I destroyed every bit of equipment, then set it ablaze.”

There’s light ahead, the faintest glow and the familiar outline of the elevator’s accordion grate.

“Running from me, Lord Specter?” She laughs, the sound raking across my ears.

Valen shoves me into the elevator and yanks the grate closed from the outside. “Hit the lever.”

“What about you?” I ask.

“She’s not alone.” His face is in shadow, only his feline eyes glowing slightly. “I won’t risk you.”

“But—”

“Hit the lever, Georgia!” He turns and strips off his coat, tossing it to the ground.

Something flashes to his right, a vampire in the darkness. Valen dodges their blow, then rakes his claws across their neck. Blood sprays onto the grate, the metal reacting with a hiss.

“Georgia, go!” he bellows, then disappears into the midnight black.

Hisses and screams erupt. I can’t fight. If I try to, I’ll die. I know that as surely as Valen knows it. So I do the only thing I can: I turn the lever. The elevator creaks to life, the cable catching and lifting as more screams echo against the black stone. I stare, looking for any sign of Valen. There’s nothing, only the sounds of fighting and sometimes, the sounds of dying.

I’m almost out of the lower level and into the elevator shaft when the carriage shakes. I back into one corner and flatten my hands against the walls. Cold sweat trickles along my spine. Then I scream when something slams against the floor, indenting the metal.

Another hit, then another. There’s someone under me trying to tear their way through. Each hit dents the floor, a bubble forming in the center. The blows are relentless. I’m frozen, watching with utter terror as the next hit sheers off some of the metal and opens a hole. A black-clawed hand reaches through and begins to pull, enlarging the hole, not stopping despite the razor-edge of the torn metal.

I stomp down on the hand, but it grabs my shoe, the claws sinking in. Screaming, I

yank my foot free right as the shoe is ripped through the hole, shredded as it goes.

I back away from the grasping hand. The carriage shakes more, the floor bowing in another section. They're going to get inside, and I can't stop them.

"Georgia!" David's voice filters down from somewhere far above.

"David, help!" I scream.

Two bloody hands reach inside and grab the metal, peeling it back as I look for some way out. The blood sizzles, the bubbles a sickly green. I know instinctively I can't let it touch me.

There's no access to the roof of the elevator, no way out for me except through the door.

I can't wait here and hope to reach the top level. They'll be inside before I get there. Plastered to the wall, I reach across to the lever and hit it. The elevator slows to a stop, a dark hallway halfway visible through the grate. The hits intensify, the entire thing shaking.

Keeping to the wall, I move around and yank the grate open. The landing is above me, smooth black rock underneath. I'll have to climb up. I eye the lever, wishing it was closer so I could send the carriage back down, but there's no way I'll be able to get out fast enough. Indecision is going to get me killed, so I grip the edge of the floor and pull myself up, rolling onto my back once I'm free of the carriage.

The pounding intensifies, the carriage shaking violently. I get to my knees, then my feet, and take off into the dark hallway. The slight bit of light from the elevator shaft quickly evaporates, and I'm forced to slow my pace. My hands out in front of me, I feel my way along, sticking to a wall as I follow it deeper into the dark. I listen for

every tiny sound, but my thoughts wander to Valen. He's outnumbered. Even if David makes it to him, there are still too many Tantun. Something sick twists in my stomach at the thought of him dying. I left him. He told me to run, and I did. Old Georgia would've never done it. She would've stayed to the bitter end for a friend. But Valen's not a friend. He's ... I don't know what he is. He might be dead. I might be on my own. Which would mean I'm dead, too. Just keep going .

The cold stone turns this way and that, the hallway utterly unfamiliar. I could be on the husk level or somewhere worse, if there even is a worse.

A faint hiss reaches me, every hair on my body standing on end, and I speed my pace, yelping when I run into a wall. My panic triples as I feel along it. What if this is a dead end? I slide my hand over the stone until I find a corner. A thimble full of relief is all I get as I take this new corridor, the claustrophobic darkness like a separate being, one that swallows me whole.

Another hiss, this one closer.

I find another corner, then another in quick succession. Am I going in a circle? I don't know. All I know is that if I stop, I'm done. They'll catch me, and I don't know if their orders are to kill me or drag me to Carlotta.

My steps are too loud, even the scrape of my skin along the rock a burst of unnecessary sound. They'll hear me. I know they'll hear me, but I have to keep moving. If I can reach David, or somehow find a place to hide, Valen will reach me. The thought hits me with a steely certainty—Valen will come for me. I just have to stay alive long enough.

I turn another corner, the faintest light glowing down a long corridor. The landings, that must be where the light is coming from. Out in the main area of the castle. I break into a run, my heart pounding as I race toward the pale glow.

A shadow passes in front of it, and I skid to a stop.

“There she is.” Carlotta’s voice. “Just the rat I was looking for.” She strides toward me.

I back away, then dart down a side hall, then another. Turn after turn until I’m standing somewhere I’ve been before. This is where I discovered the black hole, the place where I might’ve gone if Valen hadn’t caught me.

“I can hear your heartbeat,” Carlotta’s voice is razor wire, shredding any rationality I might have. The only thought that remains is escape. I have to get away from her. But the darkness ahead of me is so absolute, so impossibly black that I wonder if it’s some sort of trick or a layer of midnight velvet. “I can’t wait to taste it,” she taunts.

“Fuck you!” I yell, my voice raw with hate.

Carlotta only laughs as she moves in for the kill. She’ll be on me at any moment.

“Georgia.” A voice. Not Carlotta’s. “Georgia, I hear you.”

I gasp, a tremor going through me as I clutch my hands to my chest.

“Come this way,” she whispers. “Don’t be afraid.”

“Another victim? Is that what I hear?” Carlotta is closer now. “How many humans does Valen keep in this bomb shelter?”

“Georgia, now! Hurry!”

I put a hand into the black, then step forward, my heart quaking as I follow the sound of my sister’s voice.

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Recovered Journal of Dr. Georgia Clark

June 18, Year 1, Emergence Era

I don't know what I'm doing. This ... romance, if that's what it is, is ill-advised. It can't happen. It's not a thing. I keep telling myself that, but then he touches me, and I'm a puddle. It's been so long since I've felt cared for, since I've felt this sort of ... want. I'm always concerned with needs—we need more samples, we need the lights to stay on, we need a cure. But when I'm with him, just us, there is only bare, raw, aching want .

The black is syrupy horror, as if there are webs strewn across the corridor, each of them holding me back a bit more.

“Juno?” I call, then clap my mouth closed at the bitterness on my tongue. As if the darkness has a taste.

There's nothing. I'm in the center of a black hole, gravity pulling everything to me. Moments away from being crushed, wadded up like a piece of paper. It's hard to breathe as I stumble forward, my hands in front of me again searching for something whole.

I could turn back, but Carlotta is there waiting for me. Will she enter this darkness? Maybe she can see through it, though I know it's not a normal lack of light. There's something different about this, something that keeps pushing against me, silently telling me to go away. Screaming 'danger' at a fever pitch without making a sound.

The black turns even more corporeal, strands of it between my outstretched fingers and catching around my throat. I tear at myself, ripping the threads away as I push even deeper. Juno is here. It's been so long since I've heard her voice, but I'd know it anywhere. No matter how much time has passed. I know my sister.

The walls close in, the velvet strands turning more solid. I strain, forging ahead though everything tries to repel me. My foot catches on something, and I fall forward, my hands scraping along the stone floor. I smell blood.

Crawling now, I bow my head and use my shoulders. The claustrophobia is only second to my fear of Carlotta. I could suffocate here, my lungs clogged with this black substance. But that's still a better death than whatever Carlotta has planned.

I take in a breath through gritted teeth. Still crawling, I almost fall forward when the strands ease. I keep going, my movements less restricted, the walls fading away, the velvet growing thinner. Moving faster now, my palms and knees aching from the unforgiving stone, I get back to my feet. The blackness clears, and ahead there's a glow. Daylight? I knock that thought away. I'm far too deep underground. Still, I break free of the last bits of black web and jog toward it.

"Juno?" My voice carries and echoes back to me.

The walls beside me change to bars. Cells line the walls, most of them with open doors. Some with skeletons. A true dungeon. Why is Juno in here?

"Juno!" I call again.

"Here." A hand reaches out between the bars farther down the hall.

I run. My sister. Juno. She's alive. Everything inside me soars, floating above the fear and the pain. I'm flying. She's here .

Skidding to a stop in front of her cell, I see her. It only takes a moment—not even that—and I know.

“Finally come to see your big sister?” Her hand is still extended beyond the bars, her nails now terminating in thick, sharp points. Claws.

I stare, taking in her smooth brown skin. Her left eye is gone, nothing there but a smooth socket. Her other is the warm brown shade I remember. It’s her, but not her. Her hair flows in black curls, only a few strands of gray still mixed in. Wearing a loose gray t-shirt and lounge pants, she seems completely at ease. My sister, but not.

I can only look at her. My fervent hope come to life as a nightmare. My sister is alive. My sister is a vampire.

“You never did have a way with words, did you?” She pulls her hand back through the bars. “That was my gift.”

“How?” The question comes out strangled, as if my throat didn’t want to let it go.

“Valen told me you didn’t know I was here. I thought he was mistaken, that you were far too clever not to realize he had me stashed away.” She sighs and walks backward with a slight limp, then sits on her cot and crosses her legs at the knee. Spine straight as always, posture impeccable, poise without effort. My sister. But not. “But I suppose I overestimated you.”

Vertigo threatening to topple me, I grip the bars. “You were dead.”

“Was I?” She shrugs one shoulder. “I don’t remember much of it. I mean, I remember the White House.” She wrinkles her nose. “Theo. Yes, I remember him quite well. But when Valen turned me ...” She looks up as if racking her brain. “I don’t even know how it happened. I woke up here, and this is where I’ve stayed.” She grits her teeth, her fangs pressing against her bottom lip. “A prisoner. I’m the president of the

United fucking States!” she hisses.

“Valen turned you?”

“Yes. Though I don’t know if it’s much of an improvement.” She vaguely points at her face. “The eye was already ruined, so he says, and my back too broken to mend completely. But I suppose I’m still alive. In a way.” She scoots farther back and leans against the wall. “You really didn’t know I was here?”

“No!” I crumple, my knees giving out as I sink to the floor. “I didn’t know.” So many emotions tumble through me. Relief, shock, and surprisingly, anger. Not a slight irritation, a growing bubble of red-hot rage. It’s as if the box I kept it tucked away in has ruptured, the guts oozing and spreading.

Her head turns quickly, the movement almost mechanical. “Someone’s following you.”

“Shit!” I forgot about Carlotta the minute I saw Juno.

“There’s some sort of blood magic or woowoo spell work on the walls. Valen said it would keep you out. So who else is coming to this reunion party?”

“It’s another vampire. A Tantun.”

“You should come in here with me. You’ll be safe.” Juno is at the bars immediately, her one eye focused on me, the pupil dilated. “Unlock the door.”

“I don’t have the key.”

“It has to be here somewhere.” She juts her chin toward the other cells. “Just look.”

I scramble up and stare at the black mass down the hall. No Carlotta. Not yet,

anyway.

“Better hurry,” Juno’s voice is almost amused.

I search her face, looking for my sister somewhere underneath. I don’t find her. “You’re not you anymore.”

She gives a grim chuckle. “Neither are you.”

I back away down the hall, keeping the black hole in my field of vision while I search for any sign of a key. The only light is a single sconce above Juno’s cell, and it fades quickly with each step I take away from it.

Peeking into cell after cell, I find tattered clothes, some moldy books, and bones. Lots of bones. No key, though. By the time I’m at the farthest limit of the light, Juno hisses. “She’s coming through. Hurry!”

I test the door of the cell I’m in, swinging it shut and trying to lock it. Nothing. It needs a key. I’m defenseless with nowhere to hide. “There’s no key.”

“There has to be!” she says, irritation lacing her words. “Find it!”

“It’s too late.” Leaving the cell, I walk back to Juno, my gaze drawn to her, to the woman I used to put every ounce of my faith in. What is she now? And what am I?

“Keep looking. It’s safe in here.” She grips the bars.

“Is it?”

She cocks her head to the side, eerie and unlike her. “What does that mean?”

“Valen told me that becoming a vampire doesn’t make someone a monster. It only

enhances whoever they already are. Whatever is underneath comes to the fore.”

She arches the brow over her good eye. “And?”

“And ...” I shake my head. “I believed in you. I trusted you more than I trusted myself. I thought I knew you. I thought I knew you in the way that only sisters can know each other. But after everything, I think I was wrong.”

“Is that so?” Her expression turns sour.

I nod slowly. “Yeah.”

“Let me help you out, sister . We aren’t blood. We never were blood. You are no more my sister than Miss Bones over there.” She hooks her thumb at the skeleton in the next cell. “So if you have any more high and lofty pronouncements about?—”

“Finally!” Carlotta strides through the darkness and wipes away the tendrils of black from her clothes. “What a spell.”

“Get back!” Juno reaches through the bars and grabs me, yanking me to her, one of her hands at my throat.

“Juno!”

“Shut up!” She presses her claw into my skin, drawing blood.

“What’s this?” Carlotta, unhurried, walks to me, her gaze bouncing from me to Juno and back again.

“Come any closer and I’ll tear her throat out,” Juno growls.

Carlotta stops and puts her hands on her hips. “That wouldn’t be ideal, of course, but

killing her is certainly on my agenda. I'd prefer to ask her a few questions first, though. And you are?" she asks, peering around me.

"A vampire in a cage. Set me free, and I'll release this human."

Carlotta blinks a few times. "Hang on. You're ..." Her eyes go wide. "You're Juno."

"Well, I guess she isn't as dumb as she looks." Juno's tone is pure acid.

Carlotta bears her fangs. "When the high lord finds out about this..." She laughs and steps toward me again.

I yelp when Juno digs her claw in deeper.

"Your own sister? Really?" Carlotta asks her.

"She's adopted."

Carlotta's eyes narrow. "I'm no longer amused. Give her to me."

"No."

Carlotta shrugs and steps closer. "I would've taken you to Gregor alive, but now I've changed my mind."

"I would've let you have her, but I've been waiting for?—"

"Georgia!" Valen jumps through the black portal. He's covered in blood, his gaze meeting mine as he barrels forward, then moves too fast for me to track. Something explodes behind me, and I whirl.

Valen has Carlotta pinned against one of the cells, his hands at her throat. She swings,

raking her claws across his face in a vicious slash.

He rears back and punches her hard in the face, her neck cracking and her head banging against the metal. Then he hits her again and again.

“Get back.” Juno grabs my arm through the bars and yanks me hard, tossing me down the hall toward the black hole.

Carlotta slashes Valen again, then rears back and kicks him. He crashes into the stone wall, the sound of shattering rock filling the entire corridor as he hits his knees.

“Fucking Dragonis!” Carlotta screams and kicks him again. “Half human dog!” She brings her knee up, smashing his chin.

I hear the bones break, the horrible snapping and creaking.

“When you’re gone, Gregor is next, and then—” She lands a vicious haymaker to the side of his head. “Tantun will rule as we always should have.” Grabbing a handful of his hair, she lifts him from the floor. “Your line will die. Dragonis will be just as extinct as the humans!” She raises her other hand, the claws splayed wide.

Valen is limp, his head lolling back, neck exposed.

She’s going to kill him. I see it before it happens, his head severed from his body. I feel it, too, like splintered glass in my veins, parts of me dying right along with him. Parts that are somehow... connected. A flash of the two trees, one fading, one already gone.

“Valen!” I scream, the sound tearing free like a thorn pulled from my side.

His head snaps forward, and one of his hands does too. It passes through Carlotta’s chest, Valen’s bloody, sizzling fist outside her back, her heart caged in his palm.

She staggers and releases her hold on him.

With a twitch of his fingers, he crushes her heart, sending a cascade of sizzling blood raining down on the black stone.

She screeches, her body convulsing, only standing because she's impaled on Valen's arm. He shoves her to the side, and she drops and twitches. Then she goes still.

"Georgia!" Valen appears in front of me, his face bloody and mangled, white mandible poking through his skin. He kneels, his eyes searching mine. "Are you hurt?"

Yes. In ways I can't even put into words. In ways I don't understand.

Two trees, both of them linked by blood. A bond.

"I'm fine, if anyone cares," Juno calls. "She's fine, too."

"She's bleeding," he snaps, the words slightly slurred. Then he wipes his less bloody hand on his shirt and slits his finger open with his fang. "Here." He wipes his blood along the cuts from Juno's claws.

"Juno." I stare at him. "You saved Juno."

"Saved?" Juno scoffs.

Valen ignores her. "I had to."

"Why?"

He gingerly touches his jaw, then presses the bone back into his skin.

“Are you hurt anywhere else?” He takes one of my hands and frowns at the scrapes.

“Valen.”

He wipes his blood along my wounds.

“Valen, look at me.”

He meets my gaze, his eyes cold at first. The same hardness in them I’ve seen from the moment I woke up in this buried hell. But as I look at him, the ice fractures. Then it melts. Emotion, an entire ocean of it, lives in his gaze. All of it focused on me, tugging at some invisible link I can almost feel.

“Tell me why,” I say softly.

He stills, only his eyes still raging with life, the blue unruly and electric. “Because you would’ve wanted me to.”

“I don’t understand.” I reach up and touch his cheek, the skin warm. “But I want to.”

Something breaks in him. A dam. A dawn. His hand shaking, he puts his wrist to his mouth and slashes deeply. Then he offers it to me.

“Drink.”

I hold his gaze as I lean forward and take his arm in my hands, his blood flowing past my lips and over my tongue. He pulls me closer, my back to his chest as I drink from him.

With a ragged sigh, he presses his lips to my ear and whispers, “Remember.”

The second book in the House of Night Trilogy, *Land of Shadow* , will be released on

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