

# *Raves Moon*

*By Nicholas S. Aholt*

# 1

## An Awakening

"Darkness, as always. There could be no other word to describe it, save perhaps oblivion. I slept soundly for how long? Years and years it had to have been to those who could view such things. In the state that I was in I knew no sense of time other than the slow shifting of the world around that I scarcely bothered to notice. I lay for what seemed centuries, pondering things and my lost one. It had been so long now since we had been separated, I wasn't entirely sure what it was that had done so. Details get lost in the big picture of one's memory of time. All details, except her.

Her face and laughter still trickled slowly across the back of my thoughts, as clear as the days when they came from her. I remember her face; her face was an all too clear portrait of beauty behind my closed eyes. It served only to heighten my torture. How can one forget that which is unforgettable? Was it for this that I descended into slumber?

No.

No, I recall the disgust of my own kind quite clearly. I remember the disgust I have always felt for most of them. Weak, scared, pathetic creatures that would incessantly seek to be more like those that they had been created and bred to hunt. They were worthless beings denying their birthright of fear.

I could still taste the fear. It was as if it were a solid substance, dripping, like thick crimson fluid between by parched and dry lips. Then, as realization

slowly came on me, I discovered I could taste it. Fear in the air, heavy and thick, near me, beating with a rhythm to taunt me..."

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Gareth shivered uncontrollably in the desolate heat in the room, sweat sliding slowly downward across his face. He did not understand this cold, as he sat numbly staring at the contorted corpse on the table. The corpse was certainly not fresh, that much was clearly evident. Its skin had faded to a mottled gray that had pulled tight over the body and face. Its facial features were grotesque, to say the least. Lips that pulled back in an unending grimace reveal two exceptionally long and sharp teeth. Its eyelids were shut, their sockets caved in and hollow, the eyes having long dried within them. Long nails as sharp as any claw adorned each hand. Indeed, on closer inspection they seemed as if they were claws, ready to strike out with force at any to disturb it. He knew that were impossible, but could not help the continued shivers of fear that slid up his spine every time he pictured it rising. So far the runes that circled the stone slab continued to work as they were meant to, serving to keep any life from returning to the creature.

It lay there, dissected. The dry skin of its chest had been cut and peeled back to reveal the aged white bones of its ribs beneath. Its ribcage was propped open by an iron rib-spreader that bared the organs beneath to the room. How the bones did not snap as they should have, being as dried out as they were, he didn't care to dwell on. The rest of the skin on its torso and legs was covered in a multitude of cuts and lay open to reveal the muscle structure beneath. The corded and tight muscles stretched taught as if to leap from the table at any

moment. As if it was just waiting for the right moment to do so.

Gareth shook himself, knowing his imagination was getting the best of him. His good master had said all was safe; to guard the creature on the table. To *guard* it. But from what? As far as he knew, no more than two others had any knowledge of this thing's presence here, much less what they were doing to it.

He gazed down at the candle before him, more-so to give him a distraction to look at than anything else; watching the flicker of the flame wobble unsteadily on the candlestick as his hand trembled beneath it.

*I'm trembling?* He thought to himself, more a question than a statement.

He didn't understand it. He had done this countless times before and never was there this cold, unyielding knot of fear. Even with this very creature, when he had first been left to keep vigil on it to ensure that no rats or other vermin would destroy their work, he had felt no fear at all.

As the minutes wore on into hours of waiting, he could feel his fear grow as steadily as he now pictured the shadows of the room growing deeper and deeper. He could practically see the dark tendrils of unlit space beyond his candlelight reaching out their dark claws towards him and the candle, the sole light in the room. He had erringly let all the others go out, so long had he remained frozen to this spot.

*How long has it been,* he wondered, feeling that fear tearing at his chest as if between the mountainous grip of a titan.

He could take it no more, he realized. With all the effort he could muster he tore his eyes back towards

the stone slab in the center of the room before him and the horrible creature that lay upon it, dissected and awaiting ritual. It was a creature of ages long past, completely at rest with no chance of return. Or so he had been told. He repeated this to himself again as he staggered wearily towards it. Every step brought him closer to the fear, as if it drifting out, that seemed to pulse with a will and energy of its own. He realized his steps were weak, as they trembled with what he told himself was hunger; trying to deny the fear he knew that had taken root in his chest. He held the candle aloft, over the creature's ribcage, knowing to see it as dead as any creature could be, that his fears in the impossible should abate. But, as his arm lifted he froze, blinking and shaking his head as he stood staring helplessly down towards the parched flesh of this thing before him.

It had moved.

He knew it; knew that it couldn't have possibly been his imagination. He swore over and over, reassuring himself that he knew it had moved and that he hadn't completely lost his mind. But lacking any real strength of will to back away, he found his legs remained locked in place. Sweat slid down his face and dripped to the stone slab he stood beside as his silent, frozen gaze looked helplessly on the corpse less than half an arm's reach in front of him. He simply stared at where he knew the heart had given one pulse, one beat of life.

Impossible.

*Impossible, impossible, impossible*, he kept telling himself, head now shaking as he could will the grim certainty of the situation from his mind. A soft, horrific moan nearly made him jump from his skin as he heard it rise in volume. He cursed himself as he did,

realizing that the sound came from his own mouth. The breath from between his lips clouded before his eyes as the noise escaped them. He had to calm himself, he knew, his thoughts feeling as if they were jumbled over one another. Even so, he could not understand it. In the heat of this day and land, he was shivering in cold, breath clouding before his very lips in temperatures that should have been bad enough to soak the shirt on his back. Soaked though it was, he knew it not from the heat but from the cold sweat of fear that had dug itself into every muscley fiber of him. Trying as he did, he could not force himself to relax.

He forced himself to lean forward over this thing, knowing or believing that if he dared himself to look closer on the creature and become more familiar with it as the dead thing he knew it was, it would dismiss the thoughts of his wild and fearful imagination and his unease should subside. He watched the heart, waiting for it to pulse again and show him that his careless fears hadn't run away with him. He tried to laugh, to reinforce himself, though stopped when it came out as a single dry croak of fear that seemed to turn the room against him; as if breaking the silence were a crime.

In full effort to calm himself, he leaned back from the creature and its unbeating heart. As he did this, his eyes immediately went to the clawed hand that had rested on the stone slab beside him. It was moving. He watched as its fingers flexed and curled as it rose before him.

He let out a piercing scream, candle dropping to the floor as all muscle control failed him. In an instant the clawed fingers snatched the front of his shirt before

his legs collapsed beneath him, as they would have sent him to the floor with the dimming candle.

"No, no, no!" he kept screaming as he reached for the vice-like grip of the clawed hand at his shirt, feeling its cold puckered flesh in his palm, feeling it cold flesh pulling with a sickly touch at the warmth of life in his own hand. He immediately realized that his own grip was held fast, as if his hand were glued against the creature's own.

The heart now beat fully with its own life, not the single twitch that he had tried so hard to deny that he had seen moments before. Held in place, he had perfect vantage as the creature's legs and arms slowly stretched; toes and free fingers curling and uncurling as if it were awaking from a long sleep. The low creaking noise of its bones horrified him as he watched its back arch upwards, pushing its chest into the air. He stood, horrified beyond belief as the iron rib-spreader before him bent and finally snapped with the force of its chest and ribcage closing as the creature's body mended itself and shoved the foreign object out, its flesh smoothing of its own accord in quick motion. As it grew darker, with him screaming in horror against this creature's indomitable grip that held his own, he knew that if he did not escape now that his light would soon fade to nothing and he would be stuck here in absolute darkness. But no matter his strength, he could not manage to break free.

His breath became more and more labored with every moment as a slow sound of fear tore through his throat, watching the creature before him slowly become whole as the light around him faded finally to nothingness. Gareth struggled to pull away as his legs pushed off the stone slab, trying to force his body past

the indomitable strength that held him. Regardless, the hand still held tight against his chest, his shirt gripped tightly within its claws.

To his amazement and continued horror, as the last glimmer of light faded and the darkness in the room became absolute he felt the iron grip of its fingers snap open and release him. The cold grip against the flesh of his palms ceased and his hands become free. At the sudden release, the force of his legs pressing against the slab was like a coiled spring that flung him loudly into the bench and wall behind him. The air in his lungs burst free with the force of his landing in a single loud yell of pain.

He quickly struggled to regain his bearings, knowing to lose the creature in the darkness would be nearly worse than being held. He could hear it; creaking, cracking, snapping as it moved and what he knew could only be the sound of it standing. His eyes, useless, darted blindly around through the darkness as he struggled to see. He waited frozen in place, back throbbing as he listened for the strange sound of bone and hard flesh on stone that would signal that it got to its feet, knowing then that all his doom would be sealed.

He waited.

Nothing.

Silence once again, not even the sound of its disgusting, sickening sound of cracking bones moving for the first time since ages past. No sound of air in breathing, just nothing. He could still feel the fear, however. He could feel the faint shift of moving air as it rolled over his skin. He shuddered with an audible plea to spare his life as he felt the shiver run through his spine, tightening the flesh of his arms and legs with it.

"Please don't hurt me," he begged, barely audible even to his own ears with the lack of force behind it. His shivering was wracking his entire body, legs practically convulsing in the fear. They were numb beyond his senses with the unworldly cold he felt, knowing they were shaking by the sound and movement beneath him. The room, still in dark silence, gave him no clue to the thing's location. It could be grinning an inch from his face and he wouldn't know.

Pleading in his own mind with fate, or whatever forces could save him, Gareth continued, "Pl... Please what, whoever you are, please don't hurt me. I have a w-wife, please by god show mercy."

He heard faint laughter then, slowly gaining in volume. He struggled to pinpoint it. Try as he might, he couldn't place its direction. It seemed as if the laughter were coming from every wall around him. When at last it spoke, its voice was dry and raspy, coming in airy breaths that gained volume as it spoke, "Mercy? MERCY?" It laughed again, bringing its volume slowly to a quieter rasp. Still, it sounded as if it gained strength by the moment, Gareth's body shaking uncontrollably. It spoke again, "What god is this of yours that knows mercy? I know of your God and its *mercy*. When you meet them, tell them who sent you. Tell them my name. It is Ravel. They will not have forgotten it."

He felt it touch him then, the creature named Ravel. He felt the slow crawl of the creatures' clawed fingers trailing painfully down his face, leaving numbness with them and a burning of fire surrounding, as if infected with the fear he felt. He felt the claws drop past his eyes that saw only blackness, felt the slow oozing of blood into them as they pressed into his flesh.

He could do nothing, screaming silently as if his voice had lost all will behind it, feeling his air rushing out of his lungs as it pulled from by a force as undeniable as death. He felt those claws over his throat down to his chest. His silent scream turned into a deep throated garble of phlegm and vomit as they pushed beneath the skin and abdominal muscles below his ribs and pulled outward. He was being cut open, dissected. He felt the claws tearing and cutting through the tendon and flesh that covered his intestines, felt the lifting of the skin of his stomach as it was sliced cleanly down to his navel. All he felt was the pain, oblivious to the rushing blood as it flowed from his open abdomen.

*Why will I not die?!* He screamed wordlessly in his head, begging his body to give up and pass out from the pain. Ravel was far too skilled in his torture, however, and knew just how far to push the body beneath him, a grim hiss coming from him with every new layer he cut through.

Gareth felt himself rise and lay back against something cold and smooth. The stone slab, he quickly realized as his body twitched and writhed in agony as he felt the flesh protecting his ribs being pulled outward. He knew then that the force keeping him lucid was beyond mortal ability, that somehow this creature standing over him had the will to keep him from death's door. It had the will to hold him awake, feeling every last pain that went through his torn body. And finally, as he knew it must soon be over he felt his ribcage breaking, two clawed hands pulling beneath it from either direction, the air falling into his chest cavity giving him the sensation of being full, nearly bloated, unable to swallow or breath. He heard the faint metallic sound of

one of their rib-spreaders holding him open, his vision failing as a cold numbness finally took all sensation from him. And finally, after impossibly long moments, he knew death.

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"It was quiet, once again, and I left the pitiful thing where I had awakened; a monument to the desecration that it had done to me while I rested. It had been gory work and not something I overly enjoyed, for the sheer waste it had been, if nothing else. My eyes looked over on it, the darkness having far less effect at blinding my eyes as his own.

Let it find its body as mine was in whatever afterlife that it believed in. Its pitiful little shell was hardly enough to sustain me, even as thick and full of fear as it had been. It must have known fear all its life, to fill me with so little. It made me think of the woman, that dark, bladed angel of death I had hunted in days long passed. Her fear would fill me as no other's had. Her own denial of it was as a sweet delicacy on my tongue, as she never stopped fighting her own inevitable surrender. I felt my lips curl into a smile. I knew these creatures better than they knew themselves.

In his pockets I found little of any interest or worth; some money, paper-rolled tobacco, flint-striker, and a wedding ring. My thoughts went to the world outside the door behind me and what I would find of it after so long a slumber. My hands idly flipped the lid of the flint-striker, moving in habit more than thought. I had no doubt that by now my kind had degenerated into the pathetic leeches they were swiftly becoming centuries before. A slow feeling of revulsion went through my dry stomach as I inhaled with a slow deep

breath against the freshly lit tobacco resting between them. The ember at its tip glowed weakly to reveal newly partially-rejuvenated youth upon my face. I inhaled the taste, making a face at the poor quality.

I had to leave this place, I knew, but there was this 'master' that the little weakling had been thinking of. Perhaps with him I would find more food to fuel my returning strength. I stretched, feeling already as strong as I ever had while my body remained almost as decrepit as before. The amount that had returned from my slumber with just the little creature that lay dissected behind me was hardly enough to do much more. I would find this Gareth's master, and show him a fear that the little one hadn't the slightest hint of.

The door was as if paper before me, and I stepped into the night, a soft laughter echoing from my lips as I felt the wind whip through the alleyway I had stepped into. In a blur of motion, I disappeared into the shadows of the night at its far end."

## 2

### Helina

Therod d'Merro stood with mouth agape as he watched the creature smash through the hidden door that led from the alleyway to his street-side sanctum. Having arrived some time before to the sound of screaming within, he remained to the side of the alleyway near its entrance, frozen in place and hiding just within sight of the door to his laboratory. He did not have to long to wait, though it seemed much longer, and when it had emerged his eyes could naught but help linger on the figure till its movement took it beyond his sights and deeper into the city of Merilonne.

The creature wore naught but the tattered rag that had been placed over its lower extremities, revealing the stretched taught muscles of the long slumbering undead that he had brought to the room weeks before. The ritualistic incisions and peeling away of the creature's skin that he had marred the once-corpse's body with had utterly vanished. Gray, dead skin moved as if dry leather over its body, grotesquely highlighting the animated tendons and muscles stretched beneath. The creature's face, where it had once merely served to intrigue him now brought forth a knot of revulsion deep in the chambers of his own stomach. Its eyes had passed over him for the briefest of moments; now whole and reflecting faintly the moonlight. They still remained sunken on its face, their sockets like deep hollow pits. Its cheeks were as gaunt as ever. While its lips, that were before drawn back in the same grimace of

death in which he had first laid eyes on it, now barely revealed the exceptionally long front teeth used for puncturing with their half full flesh. Its hair, once barely a trace of white that hung only in patches had seemed quick to grow into long dark locks. It looked almost as if a fresh corpse had arisen; eyes alit with a fire akin to the living. It had walked no more than ten feet from him. He'd heard stories, yes, but had never himself witnessed the spectacle of the semi-regenerated undead being that had emerged.

He looked back to the door, and saw only darkness within. As he finally, after long minutes of waiting to be sure that it had left approached the entrance into his lab. What was left of the door hung in pieces from the hinges and lock, now useless. It had been several minutes and still darkness and silence seemed the sole inhabitant of the room. He knew already that his innocent and unwitting aid was no doubt dead. From what he had heard of such creatures and the screams that came from within this room earlier, he knew that with certainty. He wondered if it was now his duty to cut the head from or burn or stake the body of the man he had once instructed and practically called friend, Gareth. He grimaced as he thought of his other duty to inform the newly made widow as he quietly approached the door.

As he stepped within the threshold of the room, the smell of blood nearly overwhelmed him. Pushing through his revulsion, in the darkness it took him a moment to light the unlit torch beside the door, but did so with a steady hand and grim determination to salvage what he could from this calamity. He had a great deal of time and effort invested in his work, and wouldn't let a

silly thing as the death of an apprentice or a friend stop him when he felt he had been so close. There were a great many scrolls and books within that he had collected at great peril to his own life. Why worry so much over one that wasn't his own? He pulled his lips into a smirk, thinking that it was obvious that whatever had happened, Gareth should have obviously done something about long before it got out of hand. But in the end, he was after all just an apprentice, and Therod had worked at this far longer than he had known Gareth. Would he let it all end with this calamity? Of course not.

When at last he turned back to the room and away from the torch, his breath caught in his throat. His apprentice had been torn apart precisely in the manner in which they had done to the creature once within. Crimson blood still dripped warmly from the stone slab on which Gareth's body now rested. What he found most troubling, however, was the gape-mawed look of absolute terror now locked forever on Gareth's face. Unlike the rest of Gareth's body, his face had been uncleanly desecrated. Three long gashes had been cut downward from his forehead and the entirety of his face, neck and beyond. Blood oozed in slow rivulets from the corners of Gareth's unseeing eyes, as if he had shed crimson tears.

Therod continued with lighting the few candles around the room while carefully avoiding the large pool of blood between the bench and Gareth's resting place. With eyes constantly traveling back to the dead body he became aware of something else with the additional light. Something about Gareth seemed empty. He was expecting the pale look of one drained of blood, definitely. He accounted the amount around the room

as part of some torture that had been played upon the body. What he couldn't account for was the overwhelming sense of emptiness in his former aid's look.

He spared no real time to contemplate the thought as he begun to gather as much as he could. It took moments to collect all his notes and papers, picking out those he knew were most valuable or condemning. He plucked several books from the shelves and in one motion threw the whole group into a large bag in the corner that was usually reserved for removing bodies once he had finished with them. Picking it up, he carefully placed a few more objects within from the shelves as he passed them and placed it just outside the door.

Sweat from the nearly unbearable evening heat dripped slowly from his brow as he moved ever more quickly, knowing time was essential. Taking a large bottle of some heavy liquor he kept, he poured it over Gareth's body and as much of the room as he could. He spared only a momentary glance towards Gareth's contorted face, smelling the rich smell of the alcohol quickly soaking through his blood soaked clothes. And again, as he looked on his former friend's face for the last time, his thoughts drifted to Gareth's wife, and how it saddened him that he would turn her beautiful smiling face to a grief-stricken look of sadness.

He threw the bottle at some others atop the shelf, shattering each with the force of the blow. With the room in such disarray, it would be easy to account it as a burglary. He had of course the foresight to have bought the building under a false name, and new that no investigation should lead back to anyone closely

resembling Therod d'Merro. He barely paused in leaving long enough to pull the torch from its place on the wall and toss it atop Gareth's torn body. The flames spread quickly and evenly, as if the blood itself were burning. The full slab became lit within seconds and the fire quickly began to consume the dead body atop it as it spread along the trail of alcohol throughout the room.

As he continued into the alley, lifting the bag beside the door within him as he took quick steps towards the back of the alley, he returned to his previous thoughts on Gareth's newly made widow. *Perhaps with the proper motivation*, he thought with a lecherous smile, *this can be turned in my favor after all*. Her newly widowed status may not be entirely without other merits. He laughed softly to himself as he rounded the end of the alley onto the walkway beside the dark city streets, bright flashes of flame illuminating the alley behind him as flammable bottles began to explode within the room. He barely noticed, already his thoughts returning to her once smiling face, a face that any man would find appealing. With such images in mind, he walked the sparsely populated streets.

It didn't take long for the city watchmen's first calls in response to the fire to sound several streets over through the still, hot night air. With a frown across his face, he knew that if they put the blaze out too fast there would be many more questions than he wanted asked. With added determination he set out towards home to gather what things he could. He knew, with luck, he could be out of the city at first light and well on his way by midday. He wasn't quite sure where too, but knew of several villages on the road south where what wealth he might be able to stow could set him up nicely. At his

pace, it wasn't long before he saw the gates to his estate and with plans already nearly formed in his head as he rushed through them and to his large manor home.

His home, though well stocked and elegantly decorated, held few things beyond the necessities that he needed, and in better time than he had hoped he was urging two well-rested horses forward out of the stable yard of his estate and into the city streets beyond, the plunder from his lab secure in the saddlebags behind him.

Thankfully, he kept his earthly fortune hidden elsewhere in case there came a time that a night such as this night was to ever occur. His pace pleased him, and though across nearly half of the city, he knew it was a relatively straight and short ride to the home of his former apprentice and the newly made, and no doubt sleeping, widow.

He felt he couldn't move fast enough, as if eyes were watching him from every window. Dark, cloaked shapes seemed to be following him it always seemed, just beyond of the corner of his eye. Silly of course, as the Arcanum would discover no more magic in what he left behind than was in the stones beneath his horse's hooves. *And if there had been anything left...* He shuddered merely to think of it. He shook his head, knowing there was quite likely a more pressing matter.

His thoughts came back to the very thing he didn't wish to think of: the creature. He had seen it rise, and seen it disappear into the darkness. What destination it had in mind he hadn't a clue, but he was most certain that it would feed again this night. Thinking back to the sheer amount of blood that was left behind, he wondered how much it could have possibly taken

from Gareth. The thought of it around any corner, hiding within the shadows as it sought out all those responsible for defiling its rest caused him to pull the black night coat more tightly about him, as if there were a chill beneath the night's heat seeking him out. If it had somehow discovered that Gareth hadn't worked alone, well he didn't care to consider on how someone would find *his* corpse. He shook his head irritably as it allowed illusions to fill his mind; knowing full well that how the shadows seemed to darken ever further around him, filling with hate and menace were only his thoughts run wild.

The feeling did little to lighten his increasingly foul mood as he rode into the fourth district, where the homes remained nice though not as upscale as his own estate within the third district. He felt the miser's mindset as he looked on these houses, believing not for the first time that the cost of keeping an apprentice who understood secrecy could to often become far more expensive than he wished. Next time, perhaps he would find a street beggar and let their abated starvation be the motivation they needed to maintain silence on matters not meant for open discussion. Others of his ilk tended towards such thoughts, though then again they usually did not let the person keep their tongue, either, and most definitely did not apprentice them. He shuddered at the thought of the mutilation. Knowing that the money he'd had to pay the people to cut out another's tongue most likely was not worth the cost.

Gareth's house soon appeared around the corner of the crossway ahead. It was a home on a corner lot with a hand manicured lawn, all within a chest high iron wrought fence that encircled the property. Its second and partial third floor rose high over the street below it,

with its own vaulted windows to mimic the style of the much wealthier estates from which he had just come. Its windows were dark with the hour of the night, save one. He smirked to himself, thinking that the day servant they paid to clean the place –in order to make Gareth feel wealthier Therod was certain– must have left a candle to glow to await Gareth’s return.

With a pull of the reins on the horses, he stopped the horses just beside the gate entrance. Feeling the night’s hour and the need to make haste, he jumped to the wooden sidewalk. As he secured the horses, something caught his attention and he paused. In the distance, beyond the rooftops the sky seemed aglow. He pondered this, as he realized the relative direction the same as his burnt lab. With widened eyes and ever quickening steps, he practically burst through the squealing gate and up the walkway to the stone stairs of the house itself.

As he reached for the knocker centered on the door before him, the door swung partially open. Confused, and surprised, he blanked as he saw the smiling face of Helina peering through the partially opened door, chain still holding it in place. Though unexpected, her smiling face was not unwelcome. He returned her smile with a quick one of his own, knowing the convincing he may need to do would not be easy. “Lina,” as Gareth tended to call her, “you must make haste—” The door’s sudden, loud swing shut cut him off, startling him. He lifted his hand to knock, as he intended before, while shaking his head at her odd behavior and the delay. With the sound of the chain within, however, he again lowered his hand and waited for the door crack open, whereupon he immediately began where he left

off, “and be out of here. No need to worry about gathering any money, I’ll see to that,” He said with a winning smile, adding in, “There was an accident, and we were attacked at work. Gareth was taken before they set the place on fire.” No need to let her know of her husband’s death yet, he thought, as he raised a hand, thumbing towards the glowing sky behind him to let it give some credibility to his story. “A warehouse got caught in the blaze, and I narrowly escaped as I fought them off.” He grinned, though calmed himself, knowing he may be stretching it. *Best finish it quickly*, he thought, and continued, “And I believe they are heading here this very moment for you. I know... not... why...” he trailed off as he stared at her, blinking as if to clear his eyes.

As he had spoken, she swung the door nearly open, the smile from before still faintly spread over her full lips. She leaned now with one side against the end of the door, intently watching him as he spoke with one hand just beside her face, her fingers drumming slowly across the wood her cheek rested upon. Still in her nightclothes and hair in partial disarray as if she had just awoken, she swayed one leg from beneath the long slit up the side of her sleeping gown as she seemed to stretch out her toes and calf muscles, revealing the creamy white skin of her lower thigh as the gown parted. He blanked. Her manner seemed all to out of the ordinary compared to her usual distant and reserved demeanor.

With a slow pull of her lower lip beneath its upper, he watched dumb-founded as she gave it a slow teasing bite before smiling and saying, “Therod d’Merro, it’s a pleasure. Now, what is this nonsense about Gareth being taken?”

He gave his head a brief shake as he attempted to shake the cloud from his mind that her unexpected behavior seemed to be causing. The sense of urgency returning, he pushed past her and into the house in an attempt to break the spell she had on him, still a bit numb as he mechanically said, "We must hurry, and you need to get dressed," his face turning slightly red from the strange turn things had taken from his thoughts. Behind him, as her smile shined with a glint of humor, she slid the door slowly shut.

He let out a sigh of relief at the sound of the lock sliding into place, believing her to be ready to move into action. As he turned towards her once again he gave a reassuring smile, meant for her more than anything else he told himself, and took one of her hands in both of his own. Gently pulling her back with him towards the stairs that wound upward around the welcoming room to the living area upstairs from the rooms opposite end, he noticed absently that what he thought was candlelight was in fact the fireplace, lit, and sending sparks up the chimney. A bottle of wine and a glass rested on the hearth before it, the glass practically dry, the bottle nearly half empty.

*'No time for questions'*, he thought to himself, and quickly assumed she had meant a surprise for her husband on his return from a late night. "Lina, you must hurry. We must make haste from here. I will do whatever I can to protect you from those who took your husband, but we must leave *now*."

*'This lie becomes easier and easier,'* he told himself with an inward smile, still somewhat disturbed, albeit intrigued, by her behavior in the doorway. As he crossed the room with her in tow past the fire roaring in

the hearth, sweat heavy on his brow from the heat of the room, he felt her pull him to a quick stop, shaking her head as she gave a soft sound of laughter. He stopped and turned to face her as she slid to stand between him and the hearth of the fireplace.

“Rod,” the less formal nickname that Gareth had long called him, and she never, “Calm down. What is this nonsense?” Her lips pulled into another smile as she shook her head, hands pulling his up between them as she looked up into his eyes, “Why did you *really* come here?”

He gave a start, thinking for a moment that she somehow knew the truth, but dismissed it as quickly as the thought came up. There was no way she could have known, of course. He stood looking at her for a moment, his thoughts still in disarray at the unsettling manner in which she addressed him. The way she continued to look at him with that soft, full smile. He couldn't have not noticed then, how the fire behind her left little room for his imagination as it glowed around the subtle curvature of her body beneath the sheer gown she wore.

His arm rose to wipe the sweat from his forehead, more in an effort to break his eyes from the lewd obvious way that he found herself staring upon her body, knowing now how nearly naked she was before him and that his gawking should do little to convince her to leave with him alone. As his arm lowered, his eyes again to her face he noticed it. She had not a bead of sweat on her. Her hands in his, though warm, also held no hint at the nearly oppressive heat in the room. For a moment, all desire to be near her nearly vanished and a definite desire to back away became nearly as strong as the uncontrolled, growing need to stay –if not pull her

closer—that he felt whenever he looked upon her faintly illuminated, nearly revealed body.

As if listening to his doubts, she took a partial step towards him to close the small distance between them, her eyes traveling from his and down over his chest, covered as it were beneath his night coat that he still wore. As one of her hands released his to rest upon it, she glanced even further downward and gave a slight pursed-lipped half-smile that seemed to serve only to make her lips appear more full and appealing to his own. With a shake of his head, and a last attempt to try and expand the now hands-breath distance between them he moved to take a step back. As he did, his foot caught against one of hers, which she had managed to snake between and around one of his legs, and he stumbled backward. Off-balance, he tumbled to the floor, nearly dragging her with him as he fell and knocked his head soundly against the low table just a few short feet behind him. She seemed more agile than he, and with her hand still within his as he reflexively pulled on it to keep himself from falling, she quickly stepped forward as he fell and moved into a straddled position atop his thighs, grinning wickedly down at him, with one of her knees to either side of his hips.

Dizzy from the blow, he looked up at her open mouthed grin as it spread over her lips. He watched as her tongue slid along the line of her upper teeth. He managed to mumble a faint, “Lina,” unsure as to what else he even intended to say. He watched numbly as her grin came closer, her body leaning over his to bring her face closer to his own.

She replied quietly, sensually, “Ssshhh.” Her hand, still entwined with his pulled his to her side just

above the slow rise of her hip. As his fingertips brushed the soft side of her stomach through her gown, they stretched out and closed around her side, pressing firmly against her as his hand pulled her body down against his. She caught his lower lip gently between her teeth, and gave a soft, catlike growl while she adjusted her legs on either side of him, moving her body just slightly to give her the room to sway slowly back and forth atop his hips with her own, pressing downward as she ground against him.

His head at an awkward angle, bent as it was against the short table's lower level; he remained trapped beneath her as her lips closed around his lower to give a slow suckle upon it, her throat again making a purring rumble. He wasn't sure that he'd move even if he could.

He felt his free hand lifted within her own and pressed to her bare calf. She pushed it upward along the warm flesh beneath his palm. He felt both their fingertips slide beneath the edge of her gown as she pulled his hand to rest behind her upper thigh opposite of his other. With playful laughter she forced his hand to give her a squeeze beneath it. Though he could barely see, her eyes seemed lit with a fire from within, adding their heat to the room around.

He gave a grunt of uncertainty, his head still in the daze of his fall as she whispered softly against his lips, her voice clear and demanding, "Forget Gareth." He felt her hips slide lower down on his hips, her hand leaving his as he felt his fingers kneed softly against her bare skin beneath them, unable to stop himself from savoring the feel of her beneath his finger-tips.

She purred softly beside his ear, giving it a teasing bite as she whispered, "Mm, I think I know the real reason you came." The feel of her hand pressing against him between her thighs penetrated the haze that refused to let go of his mind. He felt her squeeze him through the material of his trousers, hearing her hissed whisper, "Yesss" faintly beside him. He felt her shudder slightly atop him with the hiss. After a few quavering breaths, he heard her continue, voice edged with certainty, "I think I know exactly what to do with you, pet." And he felt her squeeze him yet again, more urgently, boldly.

He gave a soft groan as a shadow passed between her back and the fire, felt his eyes roll behind his eyelids before he realized what he had seen, mumbling her name yet again, though with more certainty behind it than before.

He felt her pulling at his coat, opening it. The hand between her thighs remained locked there caressing him beneath her fingertips. Though her arm never moved from between them, every so often he felt her hand lift from him and press against her bare flesh beneath the cloth of her gown. With every similar movement, her gown bunched further around her waist as he barely perceived a faint movement of her fingertips beneath it. This would be followed by a quick convulsing shudder that would lean her towards him with a deep throated purr. Whatever it was, it only seemed to fuel the urgency that grew, and as she gave a rough tug at the shirt beneath his coat. He felt the fabric pull free of his trousers as she growled out from higher in the air over him, saying, "Not yet," as he felt her weight seeming to lessen.

He shook his head in response just as he heard her say it again, practically a yell, "Not yet!" The yell cut through the spell she seemed to have woven over him and the fuzz from the blow to his head with quick certainty. With the cloud clearing and sudden revelation, he remembered the shadow he had seen cross between her and the fireplace and snapped his eyes open.

Standing behind Helina, one hand beneath her chin stood the creature from his lab. It looked much healthier, albeit still a dried husk of a man, as it reached down and pulled her face to gaze longingly up into his own. He could hear her whimper as if a babe removed from its mother's breast, her hand still caressing him between her legs longingly. Too stunned to move, he watched the creature wrap an arm around her stomach and in a swift jerk of his clawed hand, tear the fabric in one clean rip from her body, exposing her naked flesh to the air with an audible gasp from between her lips. The hand over her chin moved to pull her upward, and he felt her reluctantly release him between her legs as she rose.

Therod's hands fell to his sides, palms flat to the floor as he stared in shock, ready to bolt as soon as he was able. As she stood, the creature's hand lowered from her chin to cup one of her breasts in its once rotten hand, caressing her skin as it moved to enclose its obviously aching peak. Her neck arched into the creature as she leaned against its hand, giving a long slow moan as she did. Her head tilted to one side as her eyes stayed on it, as if she yearned for him to place his parched lips against her neck's soft flesh.

Therod's first yell of terror burst from his chest as he watched the creature in sudden, animalistic motion snap its jaws around her throat and begin suckling the

very lifeblood from her. Her moan of pleasure became lost in his sound of terror as he tried to scramble weakly back, finding that the strength in his limbs had somehow left him. He could merely sit back and watch as the woman's heavy breathing became weaker and weaker, until the creature that held her let her drop like a discarded rag doll at its feet.

Its face, with much of the former luster of life back within its flesh, turned towards Therod, a soft amused sound of laughter falling from its now full, blood covered lips. It took a step towards him, laughter fading as it spoke quiet words that seemed to pull another terrified scream from its next victim's lips.

“And now, for you. You who defiled my sleeping body with your pitiful work. You will know fear as you have never known before.”

### 3

## Reflections

Ravel sat quietly, feeling the warmth of the room keenly on his skin. No sweat broke across his forehead, and he enjoyed the feel of the thick heat. It did much too warm bones long cold from slumber. A thin smile spread from one corner of his lips, like a lion satiated after gorging himself. Using the worm-like, Therod d'Merro's fear as a food as nutritious and more fulfilling than any blood, he had quickly regenerated back to his former beauty.

His right arm hung draped over the back of the sofa with his hand over its back, played idly with the loose embroidery of the fabric, feeling its rough texture as another of Gareth's rolls of tobacco burned slowly towards his fingertips. Not the finest cushions he'd ever sat upon, but compared to the stone slab of his awakening, it would more than suffice. He glanced at the glass in his blood stained right hand, smirking at the irony of the contrast as he swirled Therod's blood in the glass before him. He hadn't yet even taken a sip of the cooling red liquid. He lifted his eyes from the glass after a moment, shrugging as to why he even bothered. With a swift toss over his shoulder, he heard a shattering sound as it hit whatever it landed on.

He looked back towards the fireplace, or more precisely upon the woman still lying there, as he had left her in front of it. Not Therod, as he had concluded that business away from the fire and front room of this corner home. He now gazed at the girl named Helina.

The name was not nearly what she deserved. She wasn't too tall, and had a thin waist and curvaceous hips that the noblemen of his time had all too often overlooked for their fat cousins, nor was she like the half-starved women whom had once begged at this very corner centuries ago in exchange for just a 'taste' of their so called *dainty beauty*. They had always reminded him of starving dogs; begging for food and attention.

No, this *Helina* was a truly beautiful marvel in any age, assuredly. No doubt she hid herself beneath layers of clothing that covered far more than what was needed, and the beauty of her flesh was lost to those who never had the joy of seeing her fully disrobed, naked and exposed as she was now.

He looked over her long, luscious dark red hair that fell around her pristine face as she lay in the half-curved ball he had dropped her in. His eyes traveled down her body and back up her long slender legs that rose slowly into the supple rise of her hips. He noticed how their curve, nearly perfect, turned inward to meet the sides of her little stomach with its soft line between her abdominal muscles that lead surely upward to fade away just beneath her narrow ribcage. Upon her chest rose two full, round breasts that would make any brothel woman proud. The areola on each of these was a dark rosy pink, surrounding a nipple that even still in the warmth, remained taught from his earlier... *work*. Eyes scanning upward over her thin neck still bruised from the puncture wound that had long since healed, he found it to appear delicate, hiding the strength that he saw within her. Her smile, peaceful as it was, betrayed any modesty as she lay there nude, albeit somewhat unaware of the fact, assuredly. Though her eyes remained closed and

she lay crumpled, just as he had left her, he knew from the weak rise and fall of her naked breast that she still lived; at least for the moment.

Shifting to cross one foot over his knee, he rested his hand against his covered ankle as he looked over her and wondered if her husband had ever known that beneath her prim and poised exterior there was a beast waiting to break free of its chains. Certainly Therod hadn't, or his surprise would not have been so complete. His lips parted over his teeth as he smiled, now appearing no different than any other man's save for the slightest point to his canines that had retreated back somewhat into his jaw.

What would she think of her actions when she awoke, and all the induced emotions that he had forced free from deep within her had faded? Would their memory be enough to let her truly live, or would she retreat and become the widow crone that her life would surely have become?

He considered these things as he gave his clothes, formerly Therod's, a soft pull off of his lithe arms and chest. Not yet accustomed to being covered, as his own attire had long ago rotted away, he found the material likeable, if not as fine as silk. *They will do*, he thought to himself with a soft smirk, *I was never very comfortable in silk before, so why bother to complain now? No, leave the silk for the weak ones and their blood feasts.*

He leaned his head back, the room blurring to his eyes as he heard the woman move, just barely. He gave her little mind, knowing she was in no state to pose a threat, or get very far for that matter. Memories of the past seemed to wash over him.

He thought back to the days, centuries ago, when his kind had filled him with such revulsion that he had left them for the inevitable destruction that they would face. Believing themselves higher than the mortals, they had decided to live among them as superiors and sometimes equals, albeit in secret. Their homes and manors had become dens of lustful parties and blood-wrought orgies. Their minions were of such number that they could scarcely hope to control them all if they banded together to overthrow their blood-giving master. They had long given up their birthright. They didn't hunt. They fed from their blood-giving puppets as if at a banquet or festival nearly every night.

They had stopped listening to his words long even before that, as he believed they felt that as any child had to eventually leave the father so did they need to leave theirs. *I never made them stay*, he told himself, *though they thought I had. After I knew they were capable of surviving on their own they were always welcome to leave.* He remember how they hadn't seen it that way, even when the first sounds of rebellion swept across his old haven and he did nothing to silence it. No matter how little he did, they still accused him of keeping them from the lives they wished to live.

He smirked.

Mortal desires left over from mortal bodies. They sought to be everything he warned them not to be. They created blood covens amongst mortals, many times using the unruly youths who thought they could get real *power* by kissing up to the undead that slithered around them. Some went so far as to bind handfuls of politicians to their side, something he had long warned against, lest they bring down the wrath of all the mortals.

He scowled.

They had wandered very far from the hunters they were. They were growing weak like cattle, bloated off the land they dwelled in. And as time wore on and those who could remember him slowly faded away, they had come to forget their history and progenitor. In seemingly no time at all, he had become the outsider. They diminished him, stole from him any respect he had, stylizing him as some mad young suckling who waged war against his superiors. He remembered the disgust he felt for them and their arrogance, as they believed themselves nearly invincible.

His smile grew as he remembered the first of them that he had hunted. It was one of their eldest, a creation of a creation made by one of his own. It could be called his great-grandchild as it was, and a member of their fourth generation; one of their oldest that hadn't already turned to dust.

It had known fear that night that it had never known possible. *Those of my kind are not used to being hunted*, he thought as he smiled in the darkness, *even when they refuse to be the hunter*. That first victim had been one of his cruelest. He knew their weaknesses better than any other, and reveled in the screams of fear from one of their mightiest. He had even let it live, to spread the terror to the others. He distinctly recalled the smell of fear from many, many of his own kind on the wind in those nights that followed.

With a soft single laugh to the air, he thought back to many years afterward and the numbers that had fallen beneath his fang, as well the many others he had released to bring new terror to their kind. He became to them what they were meant to be to their food. He had

been the nightmare. His smile turned to a smirk, *how it had changed me. How it had changed everything.*

As his hunt had become more and more a tool of dread and fear, he had become very keen to fear's taste without even so-much as touching the victim. He tracked them by it, and as he prolonged it he found that not only did he relish in their fear but that it had nourished him as keenly as any droplet of blood. By the time he would actually bring his chase to its inevitable conclusion, many were typically begging for death just to make it stop. As much as it had delighted him, it had enraged him. Those who begged never found the death they wanted, no. After endless hours of agony and pain and fear, they spread their tale to the others. It would be some time in days after that they would simply...

Disappear.

He couldn't allow ones so weak to continue for long, after all. They diluted the strength of the race. Even then, as he hunted them he still struggled to bring them back from the precipice. They never understood it, though. They never knew the need he felt as their time had surely been coming to its end.

Of course it didn't take long till they ordered their mortal minions to hunt him down. Even he was not without weaknesses. He could hardly hope to stop an army of them during the daylight. He had warned them of this, and they had turned his warning on him. Though it had taken many, many years, ultimately, as he had long known no hope of success, he was caught. *By treachery*, he thought to himself, the words bitter in his own head, leaving those memories to rouse his anger another time.

Once they had caught him they convened a trial for his crimes. He could still remember the tribunal. He

was to be judged by his own kind for his intolerable acts. He recalled his charges clearly. He had hunted them. He had killed dozens, if not hundreds; for they had no way to be sure. And most importantly, of course, he has sought to subvert their way of things, and bring them to ruin.

The last was thinly wrapped to cover to the real charge: that he was not like *them*. It had been a mortal's court with mortal charges. In the end it almost didn't matter. He was so disgusted with them that he no longer wished to share a world with them, and swore he would rest and never rise till the last of his kind had long since fallen.

His vow fell on deaf ears, and they condemned him not to death, but to be locked away into the in dark depths of an old cathedral, nearly forgotten of, save for in whispered tales of horror spoken by mortal society. At the time, there was no way they could have known the irony of their decision. They were burying him away in his oldest home; a place that since ages past had only one name...

The Cathedral of the Vampyr.

What was the oldest ruin in the dark city of Raven Falls had been standing before even their eldest could recall. It was a relic of a time long since passed that held no small amount of superstition attached to it. Among mortal spheres, though its name had been forgotten, it seemed as if its terror had been subconsciously inherited from each generation to the next.

Rising taller and wider than any man, broken masts of stone carved into the likeness of great and fearful men surrounded the cathedral itself, giving its

surroundings the look of an ancient graveyard. Whom these pillars had once resembled was long lost. Though they were only the long broken, exterior supports for the structure's massive vaulted roof, the grim faces and deep shadows around them served to intimidate most curious minds from exploring to close to its grounds. In a city of perpetual darkness, the shadows of a ruin could hold terrors unknown and the cathedral was no exception.

The few brave adventurers or those too foolish to have a reason to see fear would find the stone monoliths merely the first sentries protecting the ruin's sanctity. Darkness deepened and shadows lengthened in its proximity, as if some vile curse had never lifted off its stone walls. The structure stood near enough to the cliffs overlooking Raven Falls that a strong wind endlessly tore around it. The same wind gave rise to a low, vile sounding moan as it passed through the open spaces of the cathedral rafters and pipes of its ancient organ.

The cathedral had long before become half buried, leaving a shattered stained-glass window at the building's front as its sole known entrance. It was the cliffs themselves that had piled earth around the building to its uppermost floor. Not a plant would grow within the sphere of its grounds from this soil, as if it held some curse of infertility. The very way that it laid half-submerged, with its sharply vaulted roof, towers, and tall obelisks surrounding it gave the entire building the look of some a half-buried skeleton.

With regular intervals, the bells within the several still-standing towers that circled the cathedral would ring, and usually at the times the silence seemed most oppressive, as if they yearned for the sounds of startled fear that they would cause. Sometimes all at

once and at other times only one, they otherwise rang only to some sort of mad pattern that none could decipher, as not even the strong wind was enough to move them, and the mechanism that had once done so had long ago ceased working in any recognizable fashion. Of its seven towers, one's peak had long ago collapsed and its remains now looked jagged and dagger-like.

Though its roof remained nearly intact, several gapingly large holes had given way through the years, giving the building the gaunt, decaying look it held. Beneath that roof and through the shattered window, any unwelcome visitor would stumble onto the large, main balcony of the main chamber itself. Private boxes, perhaps once used for ancient royalty, lay barren and vacant, now holding only shadow. The great stone pews on the main floor were out of place and in disarray. Some lay smashed on one end beneath the great bell that had fallen clean through the roof when it had fallen from the peak of its now-broken tower. Its resting place would seem odd to those who noticed, as it laid nowhere near the hole in the roof that it must have passed through, with no trail of destruction to tell of its passing.

Over everything, there seemed an untouched layer of dust, as if nothing moved within its walls since the first days of its decay. This of course was part of its illusion, as Ravel knew, as any of his kind could move without leaving a path of any sorts. It was from his kind that the cathedral had been given its last name, and from them it had received its reputation. In the days before they had left the cathedral for homes friendlier in appearance for their decadent parties, his kind had lured many a would-be hero and foolish wanderer to an ultimately long and painful death.

The many lightless corridors and passageways within the structure or beneath the earth around and directly below the cathedral were perfect for ambushing any meal and hiding from any threat. How deep they went into the depths, only Ravel knew, and in them it had long ago been rumored that thousands upon thousands of his kind could theoretically lay dormant, if the need arose.

His smile faded at that, as they had been utterly empty when he had been imprisoned. They had chained him on a desecrated alter in a room far and directly below the alter of the main chamber. Bound with chains bearing runes to bind his strength, he held no hope of moving. He had lain there for well beyond a single year, and resigned himself to lay there for an eternity; or until some hero on a ridiculous quest stumbled upon him to strike him while at his weakest, bound and helpless as he were, and made quick work of him. Having fallen into an unending sleep, he had become very similar in appearance to the manner in which he had most recently awoken a shriveled, dried up shell.

He had not counted upon her. Wearing barely enough for any degree of modesty, her armored leather had seemed always on the edge of revealing more flesh than it should have. She was voluptuous, certainly; with the same body type that he had most recently enjoyed on the woman named Helina, if perhaps not a degree more *perfect*. She had worn her auburn hair loosely to cascade down her back and between two massive wings. She was a monstrosity by human standards, a fallen being of once-angelic grace perhaps, bearing wings not of feathers but of sharp and reflective blades...

*When she had come, on some errand I had never known, I had felt her presence, and within her the infallible sense of one secure in her own actions, lacking fear with their purity of conviction. Yet, when she gazed on me and felt the revulsion she felt, I could feel it. Even then, dried up and without the energy to lift a manacled arm, I could feel on her the fear she had long since forgotten, and I felt her deep unknown denial of it. She couldn't have identified why she had felt it at the time, even had she known, though neither could I.*

*Her fear had given me enough strength to speak, and that I did. I taunted her, as she watched me, played with her emotions and mind as a cat to a mouse. I lured her in, and goaded her anger till she at last made a swing to strike me down, and met the manacled wrists of my arms. They shattered in an explosion of sparks that she had not expected.*

*Her single moment of delay was all that was needed, such was the purity and strength I felt in her fear, and I was gone amongst the shadows of my oldest home. Once free, her hope for success had completely vanished; though she denied it the same as the fear which sent shivers up her spine at my disembodied touch to the back of her neck.*

*Not the foolish one, I saw, she countered in our game of cat and mouse, each of us thinking the other the mouse and ourselves the cat. She lured me, as I knew she was trying, to the surface where she undoubtedly believed the added space would grant her a greater advantage. She could not have known that in the Cathedral's main chamber was where I was at my best. It was the canvas to the beauty of the stroke that my hunting painted upon it.*

He smiled, slowly and softly to the sound of a faint breathing within the room.

*As she lay back on the consecrated alter, far above the one below, caught as the mouse she was, in the paws of the cat, I could see upon her face the look of horror at her own failure. Held as surely as any manacles would hold her, the fear she was so unaccustomed held her in place without the need for the sharp, bladed manacles that I knew hidden within the secret spaced of this once ceremonial table.*

*She tasted more delicious on my parched lips than the finest foods and wine could ever taste to a human; a white hot fire of lust and delicious fear. The season was a cold one, yet on her brow I could see the sweat that her helplessness had brought. I could see the quick rise and fall of her ample bosom beneath the tight leather of her semi-armored corset. I knew then, as her fear had always hinted at, she enjoyed it. As much as she hated and despised with all her being, as she was want to think, she ached for the fear all the same. The contrast, I'm sure, was jarringly keen to one whom had never truly had reason for fear.*

*I knew then that I had to taste a bit of her beyond her fear, and brought my lips to her neck. She growled at me as she felt my lips against the soft, muscular side of her exposed throat, and I could taste all the malice she had, mingling within in the bliss of her fear. Spiced, velvet wine. I couldn't have asked for a better meal for my return from the precipice of eternal darkness, or the revenge that would follow.*

*I drained every last drop from her, and stared down amazed from above her as her breathing pushed her chest against the tight edge of her corset more*

*heavily before, how her pale, bloodless face, which should have been still in death, held the faintest hint of embarrassment, lust, and, dare I say, hunger. What should have brought her to death merely excited her. I knew then at that moment I could not kill her, and found myself growingly intrigued as the flush of life and blood slowly returned upon her face and flesh.*

*It was a moment of weakness, I will admit, and I should have known better, lest the long leather boot that smashed into my head would not have struck or knocked me as far to the side as it did. My back pressed to the lower edge of the wall I had caught myself on, practically sitting, I watched with some surprise and amusement as she stood, denying the fear and emotions that she had shown all too clearly across her face.*

*She faced me and stood just beyond her own reach as she rubbed her neck, having healed faster than even my own unearthly kiss would allow, and looked at the blood upon her hand as she pulled it back. The look she initially gave me could only be described as cold murder, I saw, though as soon as it had drifted across her face it was replaced with something, else. I saw her flush for a brief moment, an immediate look of anger immediately following to replace it, aimed more at herself, I believe, than me. With a sudden blast of wind beneath her, she disappeared through one of the many large holes in the ceiling above, her bladed wings carrying her quickly away from my own senses. I have never seen her since.*

He had arisen from his imprisonment with a fury and strength he hadn't known before. Where he had been thought a nightmare before, they knew nothing of

what he would become. *Yet, he thought, it was but the beginning. I had no intention of ever returning for good.* I merely felt the need to show them their folly, and sow the seeds that would destroy them all. While he showed them an unknown definition of terror following his return, he left them all living with but a single warning; to change their ways before it destroyed them.

He would soon return to his rest. Not in the darkness of the home he had most recently been condemned to, but in one of the few dark holes of Raven Falls' sister city atop the cliffs, the city that knew daylight, Merilonne. It was here, just before he finally went to sleep away the centuries till his kind were no more, that he committed his last crime.

The kingdom of Saryon held two cities; Merilonne and its darker sister Raven Falls. Ruling this kingdom were four Consuls. These men were of great respect and renown. Never had one of his kind dared to claim one in such a prominent position beneath their wing or as their victim. For the very reason they avoided these men, Ravel targeted their greatest and wisest, a man known only as Victorio. He was a man of great faith in his god whom had once championed good behind the swing of a sword, though long since retired to the life of a Consul and priest. When time allowed, this Consul preached the goodness in the hearts of all men at one of Merilonne's many churches. A great leader and a better man could not have ruled in those days. It was this man who became Ravel's final target, and he still clearly recalled that night, though he seemed to remember it almost as if he were out of his own body. It was as if his memories disgusted him so much, he didn't care to be the creature within them.

*The Consul's personal bodyguards, throats torn apart, lay in the shadows behind the curtain of the church stage as Ravel stepped calmly from where he left them gurgling in their own blood. Before the entire awe-stricken and fearful audience, he held the Consul down atop the alter located mid-stage. He appeared to relish the screams of the audience as he bared his fangs and bit into the throat of the screaming man he held pinned before him. What protection and strength the man's god gave him was hardly enough. He drank little, but allowed the blood to drip freely from the man's throat and sides of his lips. Holding on like this, allowing the blood to pool widely around his victim, Ravel waited till the congregation's anger turned them from a pitiful mass into a merciless mob. To save their leader, they rushed the stage. Just as they were upon him, he released the still breathing Consul to their hands and while laughing as if to taunt them, he ran back to the shadows in which he had appeared.*

Of Ravel, they found nothing. Their Consul would live, as would their hatred. He held no doubt that his attack would set the city aflame for revenge. It was inevitable of course, that someone would make a play for those who controlled all of Saryon, and were considered by most of his kind to be untouchable. How much longer would it have been till one of them decided against all proper judgment to make puppets of the city's leading Counsel and turn the populace against them? How long till one of his kind outright fed from one of them? And with the grim act completed, he went to fulfill the vow he had made so long before to a tribunal who didn't care

to hear it, and disappeared from world of the living and the unloving.

## 4

### Ivy

When at last Ravel looked back to the woman who lay before him, he found her own eyes looking back. As he recalled uncaringly hearing her move so many minutes ago, he realized now that it was not the sound of her moving to flee. She rested calmly watching him, her hands crossed flat beneath her chin on the floor, with her body on its stomach. Her feet rested midair towards the dimming fire, knees bent to hold her lower legs aloft. The warmth didn't seem to bother her, though a thin sheen of sweat glistened across much of her skin.

It was he who was first to speak, "So you awake, little Helinna," He grimaced at the name, still thinking that it hardly suited the woman who lay nude before him. He saw her flinch at the look, and realized that it appeared he grimaced not at the name, but her, and softened his look as he continued, "the only question now is whether you wish to continue where we left off, or if you would prefer to rest beside the worm you so kindly welcomed into your home for me."

Her cheeks flushed visibly, even in the poor light, as he watched her recall just before Therod had arrived, and the manner in which she had *welcomed* him. Her eyes closed as she attempted to ward away the scene that now came from within her; of the actions that she had done not much earlier. With her eyes closed as they were, she couldn't see his smile as she unwillingly perceived the memory. Seeming to force its way from within her, she gave a whimper of surrender as she bit

the corner of her lip uncertainly. As she allowed the memory to overtake her, she became lost to the room, reliving within her mind once again what had occurred before as if in a hallucinating. Indeed, she felt every memory as if it were very, very real...

*She typically slept naked beneath their many covers, at Gareth's insistence; though it drove her to constantly feel like someone was watching her. It made her feel exposed. Every night, she would rush from their washroom to their bedside and disrobe as fast as she could possibly maintain without seeming improper for a wife. Any time Gareth would look at her like while she did, she would blush from head to toe and quickly hide beside him beneath the covers. He would then hold her, kiss her on her shoulder and go to sleep. She liked that. That was typical. He was never a man to push himself to more indulgence, and, save for their wedding night, he had actually only taken her but the one time in the few years that they had been married.*

*Taken. She flushed again as she thought of the word in relation to... that. She couldn't help the thought which pulled the blush in a flushed shiver from head to toe. Still, it was not an unpleasant feeling.*

*She had gone to bed alone, this night. Gareth was working with Therod, doing whatever it was that they did. He never spoke of it, and she had found early on she wasn't particularly interested so long as he came home clean and able to support them. Sometimes her father would visit and talk to Gareth at great length on what he did, though she would always dismissed with a wave of her father's hand and a explanation of "man talk" or some such before they had spoken anything to revealing. She had assumed that the legality of whatever*

*he did for a living may have been questionable. What sort of crime her timid husband could possibly accomplish was far beyond her own understanding of the underworld?*

*So she read, laying there atop her bed in a thin gown that helped keep away the season's heat. It was not one she wore often, as with the right lighting you could see straight through it.*

*The book was supposed to be a romantic story, as she tended to enjoy, but this one was filled with scenes of violent lust and heated passion. The main character was a noble woman who, after initially being forcibly seduced by her father-in-law, felt her whole world view had changed, and discovered promiscuity the perfect way to strike back at a cruel husband for whom she hadn't spared any hatred. She found it strange, how engrossed the story had her, as she typically read stories much less graphic. This one had her transfixed, and with night wearing on, she eventually fell asleep with the book still in her hand.*

*The dreams she had were vivid, the one she remembered most had been dreadfully similar to the book. In them she had become the noblewoman from the story, the Lady Ivy. Her dream had taken her to the very scene she had just read before sleep overtook her. It had been the story's climax; the scene where the lady seduced her husband's brother to convince him to murder his own kin. The dream had been so real. She could feel his hands on her. She felt him against her lips. Her body tingled, taugth as a coiled spring as when at last her dream lover took her, she arched fully against his body.*

*It was just as this occurred that she had snapped with a sudden moan to a state of full waking. She awoke*

*to a strange smoky taste against her tongue, suckling at two fingers of a man or creature standing over her. His other hand was beneath her gown and between her legs, strumming his thickest finger deep within her as she rocked up towards him, caught in spasms of rapture. Her body, aflame with a pleasure she had never known, had fully surrendered the man and creature that stood over her.*

*As she writhed between his hands, yearning for more, she saw two visions over her; both the creature and the man he truly was. She felt only pity and longing for the creature; and a hunger strong enough to consume all fear for the image of the beautifully handsome illusion of a man she saw over it.*

*“Yess,” it hissed between the long moans that came from her, “drink my blood and release your true self from the chains that bind you.”*

*So what I taste is blood, she thought to herself, and already begun to suck upon his fingers with a force to draw more of the hot crimson-red liquid into herself. With every pull against him, she felt a growing need within herself, as if a million stars were converging slowly into one. She could feel the urgency in them, and knew that soon, she would let them explode with the light and strength within her of an exploding sun.*

*She struggled against him, whimpering as she clawed at the bed covers around her, pulling them with muscles tight from exertion. She knew something momentous was building within her, something that her husband’s one-time love-making, as if she could ever think of what he had done to her in context with this undeniable mountain of pleasure would have never been able to come near.*

*Just as she was sure that that blinding star within her would finally consume her in all its glory, Ravel had released her. She fell back to the bed feeling emptiness and need inside of her that she had never felt, and a long moan of wanton hunger came from her lips.*

*He smiled. "Easy now," he told her. "You will have another chance for that, I promise."*

*She remembered how she had grunted in response, and how he caught her hand as it reached for him beneath the only garment he wore that hid the epitome of his masculinity from her. With her begging for more, he kissed her knuckle and whispered, "Perhaps later, my lady." His smile, pulling at only one corner of his lips, seemed to reveal an insight into her dreams that no mortal could know.*

*Indeed, he was hardly a man beside her, but a fossil of one. She scarcely registered how she felt no fear or revulsion for him, but only that deep sense of need and longing.*

*She tensed visibly as he spoke again, "You will have another chance in but a short while with another," though it was not with fear but longing.*

*He then told her what he wanted her to do, to lure Therod in and put him at ease. She didn't understand it, but actually agreed to it. She hadn't only agreed, she recalled, but pleaded with him to let her show him how good she could be, if but for another taste of what she had felt before.*

Her eyes opened slowly, vision hazy. In the few seconds that her senses had been assaulted with the memories that had flooded uncontrolled through her, her breath had become quickened, the feel of the heat

against the wet sheen of sweat on her body was a taunting sensation that sent shivers up and down her spine. Her thighs squeezed together over and over slowly, practically against her will.

As Ravel saw her fix her stare on him, he saw the fire that he had ignited within them before once again, and knew her answer before she even spoke it.

Her voice was a harsh whisper of "Yes." Her tongue slid along the inner edge of her lips as she bit down on them from the corner of her mouth, breath heavy as she added, no small amount of need apparent in her voice, "more, please." She pulled herself up and crawled the few paces to where he sat on her couch. Wrapping her arms around his waist as she laid her head, eyes closed, on his lap, she gave a soft whimpered, "Please."

He smiled down to her as he rested the back of his hand against her cheek, feeling her move her head to caress it against her skin before he pulled it to the side and brush a long stray strand of hair that had gotten caught between her lips from her face. "It is decided then."

Her eyes reopened as he lifted her chin with his fingertips, pulling her face before his own. She didn't hesitate a moment as she rose, and thrust forward to push her lips firmly against his own, embracing him as his own parted. She welcomed him between them, and furiously pressed herself against the warm flesh of his full lips. She could taste his blood against his tongue, and realized that he must have bitten it before kissing her. As the strange, wonderful, taste hit her, she drank it in deeply, and moaned against his lips as she felt the warmth light a fire in the depths of her stomach.

It was all too soon before he pushed her gently back, hand still on her chin. Her eyes stared into his own as she gave an unhappy noise that sounded like a growl, and snapped her teeth as his lips as if to take more.

He laughed, and lifted his thumb to pull at her lower lip. She turned her head in his hand to pull it between her lips momentarily, licking its tip before placing a kiss upon it. With a shake of his head he said, "First, we must do something about your dreadful name."

She made a face, and moved from her knees to sit straddled over him upon his lap. The soft feel of his clothes against her nude skin seemed much too real, as her senses were aflame, and she couldn't help but give a slow grind on him before relaxing. A slow shudder passed through her before she finally repeated his statement back to him as a question, "My name? What's wrong with my name?"

"It hardly suits you, especially now."

She gave him a thoughtful, curious look, though said nothing.

"You have been born again tonight, and will live all the hidden delights that you have never known. Helina, with her reserved, poised behavior would never suit you. Not now or ever again."

"Ivy," she said even before the last sound had left his lips, smiling. "I will be Ivy."

He perked an eyebrow at that, remembering the name from her dream, believing it had come from the book she was reading, or somewhere similar. With a smile to return her own, he gave his assent, "It's perfect. Ivy it is." With bow of his head, he added, "My *Lady* Ivy."

Her laughter lit the room, and she laid a brief,  
elated kiss against his lips.

## 5

### Whispers

Ivy left with him that very night. She had dressed quickly and left without taking so much as a hairbrush. As they rode, she knew that behind her all of the belongings of another life dwindled away as they traveled down the dark streets of Merilonne on Therod's own horses. She gave the house a backwards glance only once, though more as a reminder of all she was leaving behind, and why.

She turned her gaze instead upon Ravel's, and felt herself smiling even before his angular cheekbones and fierce ice-blue eyes were within view. He was a handsome man, assuredly, and would have fit perfectly in the role of any of the dark heroes in one of her books. Therod's clothes were a little tight on his body, but it suited him finely she thought. He was fully the man that she had seen when she had awakened.

Again, she could not help but blush as that memory swept over her. She had to control herself, she noted, as she struggled against being taken away with it. With a deep breath, she slowly calmed herself. These new sensations and urges were powerful. She could not go riding through the night having fanciful waking dreams of lust, of course.

Giving her head a shake as if to clear away a haze, she could not believe how she could have done and spoken as she had. What amazed her further was the certainty that given the opportunity to repeat the night once again, she wouldn't hesitate for a moment. She felt a tremble as she continued the thought, knowing that

she wished she had been able to do so much more; and how she knew her body needed to feel more.

She felt as if her body was possessed, though she could not deny that her actions had filled her with a sense of satisfaction and need of their own. Like a sweet drug or very rich wine, once she had a sip she knew she could not deny her own need for more. Even now, as she looked on Ravel, her thoughts could not help but drift back to the image in which she had first seen him.

Appearing to her somehow as both a monster and a man, she had seen through the illusion of beauty he had upon him. She had seen the partially-dried out corpse he had been. She had lusted for it just the same, as if his true form then had been the illusion of his current and very real beauty. It didn't matter to her then, and she knew if his appearance had never become more than a monster, it wouldn't matter now. She was his to do with as she pleased. It nearly startled her to realize at that moment, she wished he would; and so much more.

Ravel's attention was on the city streets as they rode down their middle, unafraid of anything it would seem. While he was more than sure that he could take care of almost any threat short of an army bearing down on them, he was in truth distracted. He watched the buildings go by one by one, remembering what had stood in its place before that, and in that buildings place before that. As they rode towards Therod's manor and into the newer wealthier district of the city, he was nearly certain he could remember a time when this entire hillside had been a cow pasture, and before that a deep forest.

As his time wore on from centuries into what he thought most certainly had to be millennia, memories once thought dear had long since faded into an overall blur of time. Still sharp as ever, however, it never ceased to amaze him how much he had forgotten. Those memories would often come back at odd times and for what seemed the smallest triggers; the smell of a room, a face familiar in a way that he couldn't quite place, and like now, the quiet city streets. Still, it eluded him as to how long ago this place had actually been a pasture or even a forest. As he thought back further and further, trying to put his recollections into any sense of chronological order, he realized quickly that it must have been long ago indeed; long, long ago.

He shook his head at that. He didn't care to dwell on how long he had actually walked this world, just as he didn't care to consider what else he had forgotten. It was further troubling that most of his clear memories were from only the last four-hundred years or so. Those older were mostly blurred images and scenes.

He wondered how many of *her* there had been; ones similar to the lost one he had so recently dreamt of during his slumber. Perhaps they had known each other before. Perhaps it had been so long that they could not recall the time when they had known each other before. Was that what fate for his kind was? Merely rediscovering those whom you had already known? Those whom you used to love? As they rode in the vague direction of Therod's home, he felt very old indeed. He focused in on the present, not caring to dwell on what was in the past.

He turned his horse to the side suddenly, and his eyes lifted to the manor before him. Though he had

never seen it with his own eyes, he knew it immediately as Therod's. Ivy followed him close behind, his turn having taken her by some surprise. Her riding skills were not as great as they could be, and he watched her urge her horse beside his own in a less than graceful manner. As she moved beside him, he noticed, her look on his was curious. He had never told them where they were going or asked her how to get to the manor that she obviously recognized.

"When my kind feeds, we sometimes hear a person's thoughts," he said as he began to answer her unspoken question. "It is a gift that only the strongest of us have, and most have no sense of how to control it." His face turned towards her, "As it is fear that typically sustains me, and not blood, I can hear the thoughts of anyone who feels fear."

From his tone, she knew at once it was no boast. Her reply came slow, uncertain sounding, "But, does not everyone feel fear?"

"All but the very foolish, the very mad, and the most fearsome."

She began to give him a slow nod, but her eyes widened suddenly as she quickly realized exactly what he meant. Her cheeks colored immediately as she realized *exactly* what it meant, "So, so you can hear everything I am thinking? *Everything?*"

He laughed faintly with a shake of his head, "mostly your surface thoughts, *Lady Ivy*; and that is aided by the link we now share."

Again, he gave her the title that went with the name she had taken from her book. For the first time, she understood true the meaning behind it, and the flush of her cheeks grew all that much darker.

He spoke behind an amused smile, “Don’t trouble over it too much. How much I hear is typically proportionate to the level of fear. Unless a person is absolutely terrified I pick up only bursts of thoughts, images really. It also helps if a person is very emotional, or if what they feel or think is very strong. The protective way a mother loves her child, for example; or a strong sense of revulsion.”

“...or a feeling of intense pleasure?”

His smile broadened a bit, gaining a mischievous look to it, “Precisely.”

She felt that his gaze was very strong at that moment, as if he could see completely through her. Her words came out as a gasp, “Oh my,” as she buried her mortified look in her hands.

She had barely pressed them to her face before she felt one of his cool hands on hers, pulling first one then the other away.

“Never feel shame for what you are.”

“B-but I’m not really... like that.” Even as she said it, she knew the words were no longer true.

“Then why are you here, and not looking for your husband?”

Her face turned into a grimace at that, and she urged her horse forward towards the stables behind the manor.

Ravel paused a moment, smile over his lips as he watched her disappear towards the stable. After a moment, he urged his own horse after her. When he had arrived behind her, he found her already unsaddled with arms crossed over her chest.

“What are we doing here exactly, anyways?”

He smirked as he leapt nimbly to one side of the horse. With a gentle pull, he led it into the nearby stall and began to pull the saddle and barding from the animal. "Sleeping." He saw her give him an incredulous look before pulling her own mount in beside him to do the same.

Watching as she removed the gear from the animal in silence, he noted with amusement that she did so with force. He told himself that he simply had to be patient. He knew it might take some time for her, as new as this all was to her. The beast within her had been in chains for far too long for it to fully comprehend when it was in fact free.

She followed him to the back of the manor. After producing a key from his coat pocket, or *Therod's* coat pocket to be more precise, they both stepped into the warm kitchen at the back of the manor. She knew it would be empty, as Therod valued privacy and kept only a paid servant to come and cook and clean for him. She had met him on several occasions, and had enjoyed a meal with him while the man she up until recently called husband ate in private with Therod. Thankfully, he lived somewhere else in the city, she knew, and would not be back until the morning.

Helina, or Ivy really, as she found it difficult to identify with the woman she had been before she had fallen asleep, had been here several times and knew her way around easily. There was the kitchen they had entered through, and the cellar it was attached to at one side. The kitchen opened into a grand banquet hall with a marvelous wooden table and beyond that into a long hallway lined with doors to all the other various rooms of the building. At the back of that hall was a stairway that

led to the second story and at that level another one beside it leading to the third. She had only seen only a handful of rooms, and knew where the various guest rooms and Therod's own master bedroom was located, as well as his private study.

Turning towards where Ravel stood, she started to explain how to get to where he assumed he would be sleeping, "Therod's room is..." and faded off as she realized he was no longer standing beside her, or anywhere else within the room for that matter. Whatever door he had disappeared through hadn't made a sound, and had been shut again behind him.

She glanced towards the door to the cold, musty cellar, and shook her head as a chill went up her spine. She had heard too many dark tales of what the wealthy had beneath their homes, knowing all too often that a wine cellar opened up into a family's private catacombs for their dead. He had seemed to know how to get to the manor well enough and had taken her along a quicker route than she herself had typically taken when with Gareth. He likely knew the place better than she did, now.

Making her way in the dark through the large manor was no easy task. Unsure if she should light a candle, she edged along the walls as she felt her way around to the stairs and ultimately, the third floor. At last she knew she had found the door to the guest room in which she had typically slept on those long nights that Gareth and Therod seemed to never finish talking. Down at the end of the hall, she could barely make out the double doors leading to Therod's room.

The door to the guest room opened at a turn of the knob, and she paused in its doorway as she looked in.

Dawn had started to creep into the horizon through the windows of the room, and she looked on the drab minimalist design tiredly.

*Although, she thought to herself as she looked down the hall to those double doors again, why sleep here when the master bedroom is empty?* With a nod, she committed herself to it and closed the guest room door. *Besides, she thought with a small smile as she made her way to the double doors, I did practically become his lover, did I not?*

Closing one of the large doors behind her as she stepped into the room, she found herself in darkness again. The curtains were drawn to keep all light out of the room. She leaned back against the doors, suddenly unsure. She thought back to her thoughts in the hall. “*Lover?*” Her whispered question was directed more at herself than any other as she wondered on whom this woman was, that spoke of such things as if they were commonplace.

It was her own voice that answered her back, and she nearly jumped through the ceiling for it. “*You are.*”

She stood frozen for a long moment, confusion echoing through her mind as it slowly dawned that she had been speaking to herself without realizing it. Shaking it off as tiredness, she pushed herself away from the door and into the darkness of the room.

She moved to where she believed the bed located at the rooms center, and soon found her hand touching one of the posts at its corners. She lowered her hand to the cloth of the comforter atop the bed, and discovered that she barely had to lean forward to touch it.

She had never seen a bed of the truly wealthy, though knew to attribute these two things to each other as she checked if Ravel was already beneath the sheets. It took her but a moment to realize the bed was still made, and that Ravel had chosen to sleep elsewhere.

Stripping down to her underclothes, her thoughts returned to the voice she had thought she heard; her own voice. She remembered saying both things, but could not understand why it had startled her so.

As she stood there beside the bed in naught but her underclothes, her thoughts went to the bed and its owner. She found that something within her said she could not remove the last of her clothes and slide into another man's bed. She gave a faint laugh at herself over the absurdity of the thought and gave another jump as she heard herself speak again.

Her voice was light, and matter-of-fact, "Yes you can *Helina*. Don't be silly. You helped kill the man, what harm is there in sleeping in his bed?"

Shaking her head in the darkness, feeling her hair against the almost naked flesh of her shoulder blades, she couldn't believe that she was arguing with herself, and out loud at that!

"Don't be silly, *Helina*. Notice how you didn't even register a hint of remorse at mentioning your part in a *murder*." She tilted her head at that, knowing she had a point. Thinking back on it now, she hadn't felt the slightest bit of remorse, regret, or even guilt at allowing Ravel to kill Therod. In fact she had knowingly helped him by *seducing* him!

"That's exactly it, isn't it? I very nearly slept with the man," she felt a sudden twinge deep within her

at that, and reached out to steady herself against the bedpost as she half hunched over. The feeling was not painful, but something else. Hunger? No, not for food. It was more like a yearning, deep within her, and far beyond any need for food.

Her voice hadn't stopped talking as she held on like this, feeling her legs grow weaker with every moment, "I nearly raped him. If he hadn't stopped me," at the reference to Ravel, her knees had nearly buckled. At his name, she knew the sound in her voice wasn't one of anger, but heard in it the same feeling that was sending shivers through her body. "I would have done so much more. Such delicious things I had in mind." She gave a soft whimper at that, and fell to her side against the bed.

Images more lewd than anything she had ever allowed herself to imagine poured through her mind, as within it she did more with Therod than she was able in her short time with him.

Or was it Ravel? Therod's face kept shifting into Ravel's anytime she attempted to focus. There was something about his ice-blue eyes. Every time she found them staring at her in the images invading her mind, she felt herself twitch with sudden need, the sensation growing as she felt her hips slowly undulate where she knelt, as if he were there with her, beneath her. She could barely control her own body.

She could hear herself moaning faintly into the room. Her voice was heavy, nearly panting as she was bombarded with the images she couldn't help but picture as she pulled herself atop the bed to lie on her back. As her knees bent and straightened to rub her legs along the material atop the bed, her toes curled and pinched the

fabric between her toes. Her arms were splayed far to her sides as if for balance, as she could feel her hands as they rubbed across the soft material very slowly. She gave a purr at its feel, and realized it was silk as her voice spoke up again. "You wanted him, *Helina*. You wanted to be Ivy before you even carried the new name."

She felt the fingertips of one hand lift from the silk bed cloth to caress across her stomach. As she felt them graze across the sensitive skin around her navel, she lurched upward with an arch of her back and gave a hissed, "Yeesss." to answer her own statement.

Her voice had a hint of goading in it as she continued, her mind flashing with images of everything she heard herself say, "You wanted him to make you *beg*, didn't you?" Her eyes closed, and behind them she could see herself on her hands and knees, pleading. "You wanted to crawl to him and taste all of him between your lips. You wanted to give him such pleasure that he would *reward* you." Her hands had a mind of their own now as she felt their soft caress slip lower across her stomach beneath the gentle dip of her belly button, and she flushed as their touch brought forth an inferno within her. All she could do was whimper between heavy breathes every time she spoke.

"You would have taken him into you in the very home of your husband, let him fill you and cast you aside when finished. You wanted to be used. You wanted to be his wench, his *whore*."

As if that word had a power of its own, a scream filled with all the pent up frustration from this night and the years of not knowing an intimate touch tore through her lips. It turned to a moan of surrender as that star

that had grown within her before quite suddenly, finally exploded.

After long moments, her breathing gradually slowed; the air heavy and hot around her as she lay covered in her own sweat. Though she realized she was nude and didn't remember removing her underclothes, she found she didn't care. She *preferred* it in fact. She pulled her fingertips up and idly over her body, savoring the sensation of sparks that she felt as they traveled across her flesh. She felt her goose bumps and the tightness around the peak of her breast, as well as the sharp sensation of need that shot straight down to her core when she touched it. It seemed that the shyness she felt before had faded away with the light of that star. Its warmth had filled her with something deeper, something *more*. She made a soft murring noise at that, and whispered to herself. Fully in control of her own words, she gave a soft grin and spoke, "Yes Ivy. I want more."

## 6

# Changes

Ravel awoke some time later after the sun had arisen and again descended beyond the horizon. Though he awoke in absolute darkness, he could have spoken the time within the hour. He had slept late, in fact. He expected as much, as his kinds periods of rest served to replenish and rejuvenate them throughout the day. Though he had fed well enough to return all youth to his form, he knew he had needed the sleep to fully recover from such a long slumber and rude awakening.

As he awoke and felt the first, strong pangs of hunger he realized that perhaps he had needed to sleep more than he thought when he had lain to rest. Within his limbs, he felt a new level of strength, heretofore unknown.

He gave a soft laugh at the irony of it all. As his kind grew weaker and weaker he grew stronger. By denying what they were, they denied what they could become.

Ivy had been right about the catacombs beneath the manor. He had gone to rest beside all the former masters of the d'Merro estate. His eyes, as they were accustomed to the night and darkness could clearly make out the shapes of their corpses within the darkness of the catacombs. He gave them a silent thank you for sharing their place of slumbering with him as he arose and gave a long stretch that caused his joints to pop and bones creak.

He was intrigued by another sensation that he felt. It seemed as if he had fed while he slept. Though he still felt the nearly overwhelming hunger, there was still behind it the sensation that he had fed *while he slept*.

His eyebrow rose across his face as he walked quietly through the vault door in the cellar and to the stairs that led out of it. As he climbed them and stepped back into the kitchen, he pondered whether or not his long slumber had bestowed upon him a new ability. It was not unheard of, as he had discovered several new talents throughout his years.

He ignored the smell of food, knowing that it would do little to satiate his appetite, and passed the plates still resting on the small table at the kitchen's center where servants were prone to eat. He could imagine why his body would develop a need to feed while he slumbered, and considered that perhaps his long slumber had forced it to take meals from the vague senses of fear people carried with them throughout their day in order to marginally sustain him.

Obviously, it was hardly enough for him after this last rest, but what of when he did not need the extensive amounts of energy to restore a long dried out body? He was not entirely at ease with the prospect of no longer hunting for his meals.

*Then again*, he thought as a sharp lancing pain attributed to his need to feed hit him again, *I obviously still need to hunt at least once and a while*.

But from where had he felt someone with enough fear to give him any sense of feeding? He knew it was not Ivy, though he felt some lingering anxiety coming from where he felt her thoughts tucked away in

the back of his mind. If anything, her fear of the unknown within herself had lessened quite considerably.

Though he was curious as to the source of a second set of thoughts nestled alongside her own. They were not the clear thoughts of one filled with fear, but random blurred images of a sort that would have once made Ivy blush.

*Most curious*, he thought.

Even as he thought it, he remembered clearly a picture in his mind of the kitchen and the servant's table. Upon the table rested two plates, food still warm. What he found to be more interesting than that, as he reflected, was the two glasses of wine beside them; one barely touched and the other nearly empty.

He gave a faint smile to himself as he ascended the first and second stairways, thinking, *that may explain things*.

Ravel gave a faint laugh to himself as he stepped before the partially open double doors that led to the room that Therod had once called his own. He had already been able to hear the distant, muffled sounds from the opposite end of the hall and knew all too well what sort of scene he would be walking in upon once he stepped in.

A single candle lit the darkness from beside the bed to illuminate the figures on the bed before him. He hardly needed its light to see, and could clearly make out the thin frame of her back and naked shoulders sitting upright in the center of the bed. Her head was thrown back to lift her face towards the ceiling, hair in a disheveled array at it bounced in the air behind her back with every movement of her body. Her loud moans filled the room with the obviousness of what he saw.

Beneath her lay someone he recognized from Therod's memories as a man named Byorin; Therod's only servant. The older man lay with his arms tied by some lengths of strong silk to the posts of the bed, unaware of Ravel entirely, it seemed.

He stood in the doorway to the bedroom for a moment, arms crossing over his chest as a father would when stumbling on their children doing something not approved of; though his smirk more than revealed his true opinion to be much more humored than anything else.

After some moments, he gave a cough as if to clear his throat, and spoke up, "So this explains my dreams before waking."

Ivy's eyes opened as she turned her head sharply back to look sideways towards Ravel. Across her face she wore a wide-mouthed grin as she otherwise continued as she was atop the marginally surprised man beneath her; whom appeared much more concerned with her than the stranger in the doorway.

Ravel nearly laughed aloud at the sight, with Ivy's eyes fixated with a strange gleam upon his own as she writhed her body against the red-faced man beneath her. Byorin was nearly out of it and was barely able to keep up, Ravel could tell, only furthering his amusement at the entire situation. The man's face was contorted in the most peculiar way as quick, breathless grunts escaped him.

There was no way that Byorin could know, as Ravel did, that within her mind she pictured Ravel's face and body as the one beneath her. Ravel could tell that the way she focused on it so strongly, especially as she looked upon him within the very room, that she meant

him to know very well whom she pictured, as if taunting him with the act.

It was a few moments longer before Ivy replied, letting her laughter echo through the room before she spoke, "I was waiting for *you*." A shudder tore through her at that. It appeared to have done so quite unexpectedly, and she gave a loathsome glance down towards the man below her, the gaze standing in utter opposition to manner in which her body moved in long undulations atop him.

Ravel found it fascinating how on one hand, she appeared to relish every movement and act between the two, and on the other seemed disgusted at the man she was with. He could not help but draw a comparison to the way he had one-time enjoyed hunting the creatures he despised. Seeing it expressed in her was not entirely unexpected, he found, but fascinated to behold.

She pulled him out of his reverie as she spoke, asking but one question, "I don't suppose you're hungry?" The return of her grin was not as unexpected as the blade she lifted from beneath a blanket to one side of her.

Byorin, whose eyes had again closed, didn't see the sharp metal as it came up to rest against his throat. They did not remain closed long as he felt the sudden sharp pain of her grazing its sharp edge across his throat, giving him a knick to let him know the danger his life had suddenly been thrown into. It took him a long moment to fully comprehend the situation, as peculiar as it was, with Ivy's continued movements atop him.

She seemed to find new fuel in the sheer inappropriateness of it, and could hardly suppress the moan that escaped her as she thrust herself against the

helpless man's thighs. He took note on how she no longer pictured his own face on the man beneath her. She seemed much more focused on the warm feeling that had been growing more insistent between her own legs.

With a step it seemed Ravel appeared beside the bed to the side of Ivy and Byorin. He could taste the strange mixture of lust mingled with the fear that was swiftly growing within the mind of the man as well as the feel of hunger that seemed to struggle against his control and consume Ravel within it. The long fangs beneath his lips had distended, and seemed ready to drink fully of the man before him.

Though Ravel knew that he hardly needed to feed from the actual blood of another, something within him made him actually want to drive his sharp fangs into the throat of this man whom Ivy yearned to be another. He realized that he did not want to drink from this man. He wanted to *hurt* this man.

The blade beneath Byorin's throat pressed more keenly against his flesh, causing a slow droplet of blood to ooze down his neck. Ravel could smell the fear on the room, even as Byorin's body was helpless against the feel of Ivy's atop it. As if his gaze was transfixed to see beyond what his body felt, Byorin's eyes were locked on Ravel's face, or more particularly upon the fangs visible upon his grim smile.

Ravel watched as she, with an impatient growl, leaned forward to bite sharply down into the man's shoulder, and felt the keen sensation of Byorin's sudden shocked fear lance out from the room as he could only assume from the sudden sharp pain that Ivy bit down

with the same sort of fangs he could now see within Ravel's grinning mouth.

Ravel inhaled its smell deeply, seeming to gain something from it beyond a taste of the sensation that mortals knew. The color of his face grew, and warmth spread across his skin as he felt the life-giving energy of Byorin's fear fuel his body's hunger. He saw that blood had begun to flow from between the corners of Ivy's lips, and realised with what real force she had bitten the man.

He marveled at the sight of her swallowing, knowing she was a mortal drinking as he would have once done so himself, mimicking what she expected of the monster beside her perhaps.

*Well if it's that she wants, I will give it to her.*

The finality of the thought was clear, and he leaned forward with such force that Ivy reared her head and bladed hand back with a surprised scream.

As his fangs tore violently through Byorin's throat he heard her scream break with a sudden moan, feeling her give a twitch atop the body beneath her to match those of the dying man. He heard her scream turn to sharp grunts as she shuddered against the man. She dropped the knife as she reached out to cling to Ravel's upper arm, forehead moving to lie across the back of his shoulder as the strength to support her own weight ebbed out of her.

His own hand had found its way into the now-dead man's hair to jerk it back and expose Byorin's throat during his attack. His kill finished, he looked with disinterest on the dead-eyed gaze of the man's unblinking eyes, and waited as the uncontrolled lurches of her body slowly faded to a stop.

Ravel smiled as she gave a long sigh and released his arm as he pushed back from the man to stand beside her once again. Blood still gurgled from the throat of the man, though she scarcely noticed as she moved from atop him to half-stand, half-fall into the Ravel's chest to plant a hard, bloody kiss against his lips.

Their lips pressed roughly into one another's, as she felt him tasting the blood still on her lips from her painful bite on Byorin's shoulder. As the kiss faded from their lips, she gave a pleased, satiated sound. She stood against him, looking again on his ice-blue eyes.

"That was an unexpected present," he said as he pulled his lips back from her own, the taste of the blood that was upon them and her tongue strong on his own. "Not unwelcome, just unexpected." His smile warmed the cheeks of her face and brought forth a smile of her own.

"To be honest, I wasn't entirely sure what to do with him when he arrived." She gave a momentary grin, "It didn't take long for me to come up with this idea. Though honestly, I can't say the present was entirely for you."

He gave a laugh at that and noticed her give an uncaring glimpse back to the dead body. To think that merely two days before, she would never have been able to picture herself standing naked against a man she knew to be a monster while looking coldly on the *second* man she had helped murder.

The only real emotion he felt from her as she gazed a moment on the corpse, laying in a deepening pool of its own blood with its throat torn open, was a sense of disappointment in how little he had lived up to

her needs. There was not a trace of guilt, not a shadow of remorse. He couldn't help but laugh.

The sound pulled her eyes back to him with a look of curiosity and a faint, "What?"

"Oh nothing. I was just thinking of how I'll make a monster out of you yet." As he finished the statement he gave her a quick wink before turning to walk back from the room. He heard her faint laughter behind as she stepped quickly to catch up.

As she came up beside him she wrapped her arms through his own to lay her cheek against his shoulder as they crossed the distance of the hall to the stairs down once again. "I think I'm more afraid of the other sort of *monster* you're driving me to."

He felt the sensation in her mind of a faint smile, and knew that if he looked down there would be one.

"The one that you found when you first entered the room. She's far scarier than that," what *that*, she gave a dismissive wave of her hand in the air towards the room behind them.

He pulled away from her as he took to the stairs, and gave her a backwards look as he descended them, "Of that I have no doubt. But consider that maybe she is the monster I was referring to." He gave her a quick, amused laugh to tease her with the possibility.

Ivy gave him a wiry smirk as she turned from the top stair and back to the room behind to dress. It took but a few moments before she was dressed again in the simple clothes she had chosen the night before. She didn't bother with much else, and soon found Ravel awaiting her at the bottom of the stairs.

When she descended the stairs to meet him, he gave her a smile and led her back towards the kitchens

she had earlier left. As they walked through the dining hall and through the kitchen towards the door, she spoke again, her voice questioning, seemingly innocent in its sound he thought, "Where are we going?"

He shook his head at the ease in which she was becoming ever more skilled at shifting from one shade of persona, to the next. As he opened the door and stepped through, he wondered how much of Helina remained, and how much Ivy had asserted herself. He knew he would likely soon find out as he spoke again, "We're going to see your father."

She went to a dead stop in the doorway, face blank of anything short of intense curiosity as she looked to his face. She waited till he had fully turned back towards her before finally asking in a soft voice, "Why?"

He noted how she managed to keep any suspicion from her voice, and if not for the link between them would have suspected she thought otherwise.

He perked a brow as he spoke, watching and listening for any reaction, "Because your father was secretly involved in whatever Therod and your former husband-" she gave a grimace at reference to him, but more on of disgust, "-were doing. I suspect he was in fact providing them with some of the *materials* that they were working with." He noticed the furrow of her brow, and waited for her coming questions, though only as he lifted her hand in his own and pulled her to walk towards the stable.

She spoke again as they lifted her saddle atop the back of her horse, "I don't think I understand. I mean first off, of why you would care when it seems completely unlike you to give a second thought over some petty criminals. And what sort of materials and

why did they need to get them from my father? And how do you know? Oh, wait.”

She smiled a bit at the absurdity of the last question as he clearly heard; *you learned it from their minds*, within her own.

Ravel wondered for a moment whether she had discovered that she may communicate via their link, or if she had just thought it towards him without any expectancy that he would hear. As he noticed this, he considered how to most appropriately answer each question as he moved to lift his own saddle while she brushed the neck of her mare. “Let me see. Your father; what does he do for a trade?”

She tilted her head curiously, and mounted her horse a bit awkwardly as he finished with the saddle on his own, “He trades antiques and things like that. I don’t see how that matters unless he’s been smuggling or something like that.”

He eyed her a moment as she mounted the horse, smiling at the uneasiness she had with the beast before speaking, “He’s been doing just that, though not of anything illegal, unless the laws have changed dramatically in the time I’ve been asleep; and I seriously doubt that, knowing what I do of Saryon’s political history. It wasn’t antiques he was smuggling, per say, but a corpse. My own to be exact, or what they thought was a corpse. I was to be experimented on in some sort of ritual I would say. I’m not sure what sort of magic they were using or intended to find, but I know they were being awfully secretive-“

He stopped at the look of horror on her face, for the first time perhaps, completely unaware of what she was thinking. All he picked over from her thoughts was a

strange sense of shadowy cloaks and darkness and a single word to which she held great fear, *Arcanum*.

“The Arcanum?” He gave a most curious look. It only grew as he noticed her obvious reaction to the word spoken aloud and watched as she gave some sort of movement of her hand, as if warding off evil spirits.

“Shh, you mustn’t talk about them lest you bring them down upon us for talking about such evil.” She gave a quick look around as she spoke, her hand seemingly in a ready state to ward off more evil.

His own look was incredulous, “If I didn’t know you were serious I’d demand some sort of truth to this strange turn. How is it that you hold so much contempt and I dare say, fear, for the *Arcanum*? What great change is this that brings fear at the mention of what was city-funded arcane militia meant to preserve magic and keep anyone from harming people?” He nearly laughed at that, and blanked as he saw Ivy’s amazed face at the incredulous look on his own.

“Please. Don’t say their name again. It will bring them to us as surely as if we carried a wizard’s staff.”

He shook his head at how she whispered the wizard’s staff portion of her words, as he walked to the wall of the stable to fix the saddle-bags they pulled off the horses the night before. He remained silent as he walked with them back to their horses and threw them over their hind end behind the saddle. Strapping them down as he spoke, he asked after a long moment, “I will promise to do just that if you can but first answer for me a question. Why do you fear them like this? I simply cannot comprehend what has befallen their order to cause it.”

She took a deep breath before nodding, agreeing. When she did speak, her whisper remained, “The Arcanum hunts down anyone who possesses magic of any sorts.” Her voice dropped even lower as she glanced nervously around, “Scrolls, spell books, tomes; even other things with magic merely in them like rings or wands.”

He bent upwards from beneath her horse to stand beside her, its bags firmly secure. “But that does not explain why *you* are afraid. Why do you act this way if you have no magic at all?” As he finished, he unsnapped the saddlebag directly in front of him beside her, listening. He didn’t care to tell her that at that moment, she was providing him with a taste of her fear as strong as any he had felt since he had awoken. He didn’t care to dwell on the fact of what that fear was caused by, and busied himself with examining Therod’s former possessions.

“I hadn’t gotten that far yet. Anyone they suspect to have the gift. You know; the gift to weave actual spells.” She gave a shudder at that before continuing, as if she found it revolting to her core, “They simply disappear. No one knows if they kill them, or where they went; nothing. If you’re even caught with a magical item, they may take you. They are trying to erase magic from the world. But they are fanatics, and though they have good intentions-” She faded off at a look from Ravel as he dug through her saddlebag, his attention seemingly caught on what lie within.

“Good intentions? How can you call those good intentions?” he asked. He looked as if he meant to go on, but paused as he gave a long look at what he held in his hand.

She gave a whispered, “What?” As if breaking the hush in the stable would bring about doom from all directions.

Ravel said nothing as an eyebrow rose curiously on his forehead. From within her saddlebag he pulled forth a book. She could read clearly the words across its cover, though didn’t understand their meaning. When she turned her eyes back towards Ravel he merely gave a grim smile.

“It is the Tome of the Dead. It is a spell book that was rare before your Arcanum was even out of its fledgling years, I believe.”

He had to admit that he hadn’t expected her initial response.

Ivy’s scream tore suddenly and violently out of her small frame to fill the stables with the sound of her horror.

## 7

### Memory

It took a long minute for her to calm her scream as she struggled to pull her body away from the book. Her eyes looked upon it as if it were a venomous snake. She moved as if to dismount from the horse to be away from the object that she looked upon with such distaste.

As she moved her leg over the horse and moved to step back, her foot twisted in the stirrup and sent her sprawling to the straw and dirt floor of the stable. The horse nearly bolted forward at that, though was stayed by a simple look from Ravel's eye to its own.

She struggled to free her snagged foot as Ravel calmly returned the book to its place in the saddle bag. After securing the bag to make sure it remained shut, he moved around the horse and placed his hand against the ankle of her snagged foot. He felt her wince at his touch, as if the magic from the book would infect her. At that, he turned his eyes towards her face with a patient sigh.

She felt her own gaze drawn inexorably towards his own, and felt the cool wash of calm that spread through her body as she quickly became lost in the cold ice-blue depths of his eyes. She gave her own sigh, after a moment, and pushed to sit up and meet his hand on her ankle with one of her own. She couldn't break away, she found, and realized that she hadn't the foggiest notion of why she would ever want to, and found herself content to stare into them for as long as she could.

A shiver ran up her spine, and she bit her lip coyly as she felt him release her ankle from the stirrup and lift her easily to her feet, his eyes on hers the whole time.

She could not recall why she fell in the first place, though felt a strong sense of warmth within her breast as he helped her to her feet. She felt, with the now-distant memory of fear falling quickly away from her, that she could find no greater peace in the world than what she saw within those two orbs.

Faint tears began to fall from the corners of Ivy's own eyes as she leaned up to place a small, wide eyed kiss upon his lips. Her hands had managed to entwine around the back of his neck, and she felt his knuckle against her cheek as she pulled back.

She watched as his eyelids closed over that mesmerizing gaze, and found herself quickly blinking. She felt Ravel's arms around her, holding her to him. The warmth within them was considerable, she noted, as she leaned her weight against him while turning her face to the side to rest a cheek against his chest. She could hear the faint pulse of his beating heart against her ear. It seemed to lull her with its gentle beat.

At last, she gave a long sigh, and contently spoke, "I'm not quite sure what came over me."

He said nothing in return, though gave her back a soft pat before pulling a piece of straw from the hair at the back of her head. Releasing her to go back to his horse, he noticed how much she appeared in a disarray as she mounted her own.

Minutes later, they were riding from the estate grounds and along the busy streets of early evening. The streets outside the manor itself were relatively empty. If

anyone had heard the scream, they did not seem to care they noticed, as the wealthy members of the district went about their lives as if without a care in the world beyond the tip of their own nose.

The thought that a woman could scream at the top of her lungs on the grounds of these manors sent a small shudder up Ivy's spine as she first considered it. She seemed almost surprised by a smile that followed behind it, as her thoughts quickly fell to what sort of debauchery the rich would get into to *cause* a woman to scream. She realized, vaguely, that a strong part of her was actually excited by the prospect.

She gave a sideways glance to Ravel as they rode, wondering if he heard the unspoken thoughts that forced her to noticeably adjust how she sat. He seemed focused on the road before, she noticed. Her head tilted as she continued her study of his expression, a sudden thought coming over her.

*How clearly can you hear me, I wonder.* Though the question was directed inward, the thoughts were towards him. If he heard her thoughts as clearly as she did, surely he would make some sort of response towards her.

She almost didn't see it at first, and nearly turned away. It seemed just as she was about to though, that he let his lips curl into a faint amused smile, and he gave a slow glance towards her.

"Oh!" she gasped. However much she had then suspected, it had not prepared her for the possibility that he actually *could* hear her very inner voice.

He merely laughed between closed lips as the continued forward out of the district and onto busier streets. She urged, with some difficulty, her horse beside

his own after giving a quick glance down the direction they should be going. Immediately, he canted his horse in the direction that her thoughts said they should be going, and his smile broke into a grin.

Her voice came in a loud whisper as they rode, "I knew it! You can hear me!"

Ravel gave but a slight shrug then a nod.

She frowned and reached over to poke him in the side. "Enough with the silence, if you're talking to my head I can't hear you. Speak out loud."

He laughed again and nodded as he spoke, "I wasn't saying a thing, but yes I would much prefer to speak aloud."

"I had no idea you could hear things so clearly."

"Only because of the bond we share. We are linked. I don't hear others as clearly as I do you." Ravel looked at her pointedly.

"But, how? When?" Her eyes narrowed as she tried to picture some way that they had become *bonded*, believing that it would appear some sort of strange ritual.

Ravel noticed how when she considered this, that this time when it involved him the thought of potential magic use did not bother her. He smiled at the prospect, though aimed it and a shake of his head towards her instead.

"When you awoke yesterday evening and-" He gave another pointed look around, "-had a drink."

She opened her mouth in a silent, 'Oh.'

The smile she gave him pleased him, as did the affection he felt coming from her.

Her next question was not unexpected, “How long does it last? Will it ever wear off? I, I don’t mean that I want it too. I was just curious.

He reached across the space between their closely trotting horses to rest a hand on hers reassuringly, mumbling, “Only a year from the last droplet you drink. It will also fade away with distance, though as I grow older that distance seems to grow.”

Ravel gave a thoughtful raise of his brow at that, and pondered aloud, “I wonder at what distance I would be able to hear you now.”

“How old are you, Ravel? If the question is not to rude.”

He looked towards her then, smirk over his lips as he knew she only curiosity with the question. He answered with a shrug of his shoulders and an unsure look to his face, “I’m not entirely sure myself. Which is to say a very, very,” he paused as he smiled; giving his words dramatic effect with the wink he gave her. “...very long time.”

“I don’t understand. How could you not know and how does that mean you are so very old?” Ivy looked down to his hand as it removed from her own, believing that perhaps she had pushed the subject to far. With the smile over his face however, she knew otherwise.

“When you look back over the memories of your life, do you feel the years that you have already seen? Think of when you were young and how the years seemed endlessly long before you. Then think of now, and how as an adult they blur quickly through time as if racing towards their eventual final destination with some eagerness. Just because I do not see your current,

ultimate end as a certainty does not change the situation of things. When I look back on my life it is not like flipping through a book and determining what page I am currently on. It is more akin to looking back through the most important scenes, with all the in-between nonsense of the day-to-day and year-to-year monotony having quickly faded away. You do not remember things in much a different manner than I, of course.” He noticed her nod at that, and before that the momentary distant look to her eye as he knew she considered it.

“As for actually keeping track of things year by year; when one has lived beyond centuries a year is not so long a length of time to measure things by. It is very easy to forget a year here, a decade there. Before you know it you haven’t the faintest idea of how old you are. Not without a calendar to compare the year and date of your birth to. I, unfortunately perhaps, do not have that option.”

Ivy nodded as she urged her horse to turn down another street. She smiled as a man standing on the street corner gawked in her direction. No doubt at her disheveled appearance she believed. Ravel, as she expected, stayed right beside her with his superior horse riding skills. After a long moment she finally continued with a new question.

“I don’t understand. What do you mean you don’t have that option?” Something within her told her that she knew the answer before he ever answered.

He smiled faintly as he said what she suspected, “When you are older than the Saryonian calendar, it becomes quite hard to track your time before its existence by its dates.”

Even though she suspected the answer she heard, the faint inward gasp she gave as she tried to remember how old the current calendar was.

As their horses crested a low hill in the road that was high enough to show much of the city beyond them, she gave a sharp gasp before them at a great distance she could see a large area of the city without a single light in the darkness over it. Her voice waivered as she spoke, and stated what she feared were true.

“If that’s true, you may very well have been around in the old kingdom. You might have seen Stonegate Keep before...” She paused, and shook her head at the absurdity of it, denying the possibility, and willed away thoughts of that dark, accursed place.

Ravel remained silent, and noticeably so. Memories rushed as if in a torrent across his mind as he spied the very same area of darkness that she saw. It was a ruin that he remembered all too clearly, as every memory of Merilonne that rushed over him held the same rotten core to the city that he now saw in the distance.

She couldn’t have known how at the moment she spoke he saw more than a dark shadow across that distant part of the city. He saw once again the forest he vaguely recalled the night before. He remembered something more this time, however. Rising impossibly large over the trees that were now buildings in that far distance across the city he saw exactly the object that had frightened her. He saw a keep, and the capital of the ancient kingdom of Stonegate.

He shook his head slowly as the barrage ended, and pursed his lips in thought as to the significance of that memory surfacing just now, and so soon after

another one returned the day before. Typically, the things he had forgotten were remembered an very long intervals, and the strangest times; two in one day seemed impossible to be coincidence.

His smile turned grim as he wondered if this could be a result of whatever it was that Therod had meant to do. That was one memory that escaped him, so deeply it was buried in the worm's mind. He could not garner the *why*. It was for this very reason they now traveled to birth father of Helina. It was back to this course that he now returned his thoughts to.

His first question was as grim to her as the frown upon his face, and she winced at the suddenness of it.

“Enough about my memories of the past for now. Tell me of what I haven't forgotten, but merely missed entirely. What happened that the Arcanum has turned into the monster you perceive it to be?” He looked at her then, and noticed the long sideways looks she gave to the few travelers about, and watched to see if one of them had heard.

He knew the answer quite easily. If they were nearly as fearsome to others as it was to him, he would have felt the strong surge of fear from whomever had heard him. He felt nothing, and knew his question went unnoticed by any but her. From her, he happily noted, he felt much less fear than before, and smiled contently inward as he knew his *technique* to relax her had worked as intended.

“Impossible.” Her voice was barely above a whisper, though his keen ears heard it clearly. “They would have been caught.”

“Caught?”