TABLE OF CONTENTS

PROLOGUE
CHAPTER I: An Unannounced Visitor
CHAPTER II: Escape from the Catacombs
CHAPTER III: Hunt Interrupted
CHAPTER IV: Seraphin´s Ritual
CHAPTER V: The River of Blood
CHAPTER VI: The Sudden Departure of Markus Humboldt
CHAPTER VII: Pride and Prejudice
CHAPTER VIII: Held up in Reims
CHAPTER IX: Pages in the Wind
CHAPTER X: The Map
CHAPTER XI: The Hidden Trap Door
CHAPTER XII: The Belmont´s Treasure
CHAPTER XIII: Leaving the Sepulcher
CHAPTER XIV: Old Ties
CHAPTER XV: Running with Banshees
CHAPTER XVI: Megan´s Protection
CHAPTER XVII: Bartolomeo´s Sorrow
CHAPTER XVIII: Lycans by Day
CHAPTER XIX: Preparing for Battle
CHAPTER XX: The Fount Returns
CHAPTER XXI: Bartolomeo
CHAPTER XXII: Rumors in the Castle
CHAPTER XXIII: Frederika´s Predicament
CHAPTER XXIV: Morgan´s Grudge
CHAPTER XXV: Secret Tunnels
CHAPTER XXVI: Akira
CHAPTER XXVII: Of Blood We All Come
CHAPTER XXVIII: Akira´s Choice
EPILOGUE
ABOUT CHRISTINE DUTS
BOOKS BY CHRISTINE DUTS
CONNECT WITH CHRISTINE DUTS
SAMPLE: LUCAN
PROLOGUE:

It was a dreary morning in the autumn of 1807, when I landed on the roof of my house in Rue Mouffetard in Paris, and tucked in my wings. I had arrived a little before dawn, and in the far horizon, the sun sent its first golden hue over the long line of buildings. The stark contrast of my whereabouts struck me. It was cold and windy, and a few dark clouds had formed over Paris. It was a contrast that reminded me of my own internal struggle that raged between the demon and the human in me, both fighting to get the upper hand, and both not giving in. Despite the cheery horizon, the sky right above us promised a rainy day, a day that I would not experience this time, because I would sleep. I had not rested in a week, and it was time for my body to lie down and have a break. Gracefully I leaped down into the garden, which Angelique and Kokayi kept so well, and walked into the house where I found Sophie already up and busy in the kitchen. Besides cooking for Angelique, Kokayi, and herself, Sophie did not need the kitchen for much else, so I wondered why she always spent so much time there. When I slid by the kitchen door, her back was turned to me, and she was wiping the wide wooden table in the middle of the room. The girl never heard me, and silently I went on and ascended the stairs to my bed room on the second floor. Kokayi’s snores reached me from his room and I could hear Angelique turn over in her bed. Everything was quiet and peaceful, just the way I liked it, especially after my rather turbulent initiation into the world of immortality. There had been horrors and battles, wild chases, and at last the killing of Giada, which rendered the immortal and also the mortal world a great service. Giada had been mad. Her plans to dominate the world of vampires had sounded far-fetched; and yet, she could have succeeded, if we had not stopped her, and if she had not caused us so much pain which clamored for us to take action. Her lack of scruples, her joy of murder, her connections to werewolves, and her strengths had made her a worthy adversary, dangerous and cunning, but it was her own foolishness and arrogance that had brought on her downfall. And I had been the one who had to face her in the end and destroy her; and that I did.

Seraphin had left with Akira; and Lucan, no longer waiting for me, had gone to Cologne. I missed them both, but whenever I thought of Seraphin, my heart filled with anger and disappointment. He had been gone for a year now and I had not heard from him at all. I doubted that he would return. His place was with the lycans, despite carrying some vampire blood in him. Our world had always offered him very little whereas the werewolves had accepted him into their midst as one of their own. I could not blame him for seeking out their company and wanting to learn more about them.
Lucan, on the other hand, had sent me a letter a month after we had parted. His second letter found its way to me four months later. I never answered, but I kissed them both and kept them in my night stand drawer. I stuck to my belief that I had to stay away from both men. There would be no more challenges between them, and no more fights. I wanted nothing to do with their quarrels. I wanted that to be over and if it meant a separation from them, then so be it, as long as it kept them both alive and safe. I had learned to live alone; as an immortal it was essential to know how to be alone, shunned by everyone, feared and loathed, and ultimately to be scorned, righteously, by love for the likes of us.

In my room, I took off my dark blue coat and threw it carelessly over a chair. At that moment, I heard someone pounding impatiently on the front door of my house.

As I walked down the stairs, I knew it was he. The werewolf scent on him was very pungent, stronger than usual. Sophie, who still remembered him, let him in and he stood in the hallway, looking up at me with a wide smile, as I stopped on the stairs, not believing what I saw. He opened his arms wide and expected me to run into his embrace, but I did not. I stayed where I was, my face a cold mask.

A little taken aback, he lowered his arms and his smile faltered.

“I did not expect such a welcome,” he said.

“What did you expect then?”

How could he waltz in here as if no time had gone by at all? How could he disappear for a year without letting me know anything and then just appear on my doorstep as if he had only left yesterday, and expect me to still be pining for him? Such arrogance!

“Are you not happy to see me?” he asked.

“How long are you staying, Seraphin? When will you leave again?”

“I am not leaving, not now. I am staying, and I thought that you would be pleased.”

“Have you ever heard of letters? They serve the purpose of informing of someone’s whereabouts during a long absence,” I spoke harshly.

“There is no need for sarcasm. You act as if I have done a terrible thing.”

“First, you let me believe that you were dead and then…”

“I did not!” he interrupted. “You chose to believe that!”

“After you were attacked by a werewolf and kidnapped by another immortal! What was I supposed to think? Anyone with a right mind would have dropped a note to inform me that he was at least all right, but no, you could not do that. You could not even tell Hadea, the blood drinker that Lucan had sent to find me!”

“This is a long time ago and we have already talked about this.”
“Indeed, a long time, a year! And now you finally decide to come? A little late, is it not?”
“Aurélie, I …”
I did not let him speak.
I rose my hand and pointed at the door.
“Out!” I said firmly.
“But …”
“Out! You are no longer welcome! Get out!”
“But, Aurélie …”
“Get out!” I shouted now, my voice vibrating in the hallway and shaking the walls. I knew that Kokayi and Angelique were awake now. Kokayi had stopped snoring. The kitchen was quiet; Sophie had stopped cleaning, and listened in fear, worried sick about my anger and fearing punishment because she had let him in. I had never punished the girl for anything, quite on the contrary, but somehow she always expected my hand to strike her, which it never did.

Seraphin’s face distorted in anger and reluctantly he took a few steps back.
“I will be back, Aurélie. I did not come here to be treated this way.”
“Out!” I yelled.
He turned and left the house, slamming the door so hard that it broke off its hinges and fell with a loud thump on the gravely pathway. He did not care. He walked down the path and then slammed the gate after him. Slowly I descended the stairs and looked through the open doorway. He was gone and so was my anger. I glanced at the door lying on the ground. I would ask Sophie to get it fixed today. Then the sky rumbled and it started to rain.

Rome, 1821

Dark tunnels that had protected her for centuries now loomed threateningly ahead of her, challenging her to enter and to defy the forces that had invaded her protective lair. They were behind her, not close enough to catch her, but her extraordinary sense of smell was still able to pick up their musky scent. How she hated their smell. They were not true immortals like she was; they were too much like animals. Grunting, disgusted by their mere presence, she moved on, venturing into the dark tunnel that had sheltered her for millennia. It now seemed to be leading her to hell. She could not go back though. Her exit was blocked by werewolves, a whole horde of them, snorting excitedly, anticipating her ancient blood. They were not moving, which was strange. She had expected them to come bounding after her, but instead they stood in the lofty hall where they had surprised her. This was very unnatural behavior. They were not that smart. They were beasts, led by instinct; they were unable to reason in their werewolf form. Yet, there they stood, watching her retreat through the tunnel. She knew that she
was not safe. They were only giving her a reprieve, following orders from a mightier beast. And there was only one creature that she knew of that could control them, none other than their maker, Akira. She wondered where he was and why he had not shown himself. This was very much unlike him.

“Show yourself, you bastard,” Penelope whispered, “let’s get this over with.”

Slowly she stalked through the black tunnel, not encumbered by the lack of light. Her vampiric vision allowed her to see in the dark. She welcomed the darkness, and she had no fear. On the contrary, outrage seeped through her at the werewolves’ audacity to attack her lair. She knew they had come to kill her, but she was not foolish enough to let her lack of fear make her do anything irrational. She would deal with them. She was Penelope after all, fount of the vampires. No one could match her powers. The Catacombs lie very deep under the city of Rome, and it would take time to get to the surface. The way to the elevator was blocked. She was not safe yet.

The werewolves behind her now moved, following her stealthily, with the confidence of a predator who knew that its prey was trapped.

Trapped?

She stopped and sniffed the moist air. There was definitely a whiff of sweat and wet animal ahead of her. From both sides they were closing in on her, and for the first time fear crept over Penelope’s spine, chilling her to the bone. She stood still, a thousand thoughts going through her mind. She mentally accessed escape routes, watched fellow vampires go up in flames with her death, saw Balthazar, Lucan, and Aurélie as they met their inevitable end.

“No,” she whispered, unable to accept that these beasts had outsmarted her. She heard their steps on the moist underground floor, licking their tongues in expectation, saliva dripping on the ground, and she even heard some low growls. They would rip her apart. Only a moment ago she had been so sure of her safety, and now she had no way out ... How could this have happened? How had they gotten ahead of her? It was impossible that they had found a route that was unknown to her. They could not be that smart. Impossible!

“Penelope.”

Relief washed over her as she recognized Balthazar’s gentle voice. She looked to her right and saw his face behind a fissure in the wall.

“How did you get there?” She asked in wonder, not ever having known about this passage.

She heard the werewolves move faster. They had heard her speak and knew that she was not alone. She could hear them stomping through the tunnel, coming at her from both sides. In an instant Balthazar was beside her, materializing out of thin air.

“Get in there, the passage leads upward. It must get you out of here.”
“You did not verify?”
“There was no time,” he said hurriedly.

She looked at his dark features. There was something different about him. His eyes were somber and resigned. Sadness emanated from them, mingled with peace and calm.

“No, Balthazar,” she said.
“Go,” he urged her.
“We’ll go together.”
“They will break this wall in mere seconds.”
“They will not catch us.”
“We do not know that.”
“There is no need for sacrifice.”
“I will hold them up. You’ll be able to get out.”
“We have powers they do not have. We can go together.”
“You will not have a moment’s peace until they get you. More of them may be in other tunnels. We can both run and materialize in different places, but we do not know how many are here. I will keep these at bay. You use this distraction to get as far away as possible.”
“No, Balthazar.” Desperately she grabbed his arm.

Yellow eyes appeared on both sides of the tunnels. The werewolves ran at them, their snouts open in vicious snarls, their teeth abnormally long and sharp, and murder on their minds.

Balthazar pushed Penelope towards the fissure.
“Go!”

She went up in dust and materialized on the other side of the crack, her face stricken with tears.

The werewolves jumped.
“Go!” Balthazar yelled.

She turned and ran, the terrifying sounds of angry snarls and flesh being torn behind her, Balthazar’s flesh. She could smell his blood. He never had a chance. Tears streamed from her white, pupil-less eyes and trickled over her parched, translucent skin as she ran through the steep, narrow tunnel.

CHAPTER I: An Unannounced Visitor

Paris, 1821
A little more than a decade had passed since the fateful events that battled werewolves and vampires against each other; since Akira had gone to find himself
a new lair; since Penelope had again failed in annihilating him; and since Giada, my nemesis, had been destroyed.

So much time and yet so little…

Akira was the fount of the werewolves – or lycans, as they liked to call themselves – and if he were to die, all werewolves would die. He was a gentle and noble being that had been hunted by Penelope, our fount, for millennia. All her killing envoys had been destroyed. None of them had ever been able to beat Akira. Nobody knew where Akira was; most werewolves didn’t even know. Only a few privileged were told, but they would take the secret to their graves. Seraphin was one of them.

As far as I knew, Penelope still dwelled in the catacombs of Rome, as she had done for thousands of years. During millennia she had remained there undetected, with Balthazar and Gael. Years ago, she had lost Gael to werewolves: the only creatures that were able to kill us. Now only Balthazar was left to her, an ancient vampire from the East, nearly as old as Penelope.

Lucan and I had parted for good. I had returned to Paris, and he had chosen Cologne as his lair. I had not seen him in sixteen years. It was a separation I had brought on myself, having chosen to stay away from both Lucan and Seraphin. There had been too many fights between them; and one day, a battle to the death would be inevitable. I could not be the cause of that. I missed Lucan, but it was best to be alone … at least until he and Seraphin could settle their differences, if that were at all possible. Both were educated men; yet they squabbled like children.

Sophie was now a woman in her 29th year. She had served me well all this time, and her mother had stayed with her in my house. Although Sophie’s mother was blind, her disability had never inconvenienced her. She had faithfully looked after my horse, Papillon, who was now also a little older, but still as fast and agile as she had been over fifteen years ago. And Angelique had always tended to my garden.

Kokayi, the African slave I had rescued from an abusive Spaniard fifteen years ago, was still a part of our household. He had not returned to Africa, afraid to find his village destroyed and his loved ones gone. His wife, daughter, and his best friend had perished during their voyage from Africa to Cuba where they were going to be sold as slaves. He had never wished to widen the gash in his heart. Africa did not welcome him anymore, he reasoned. The white man had stolen everything from him and he had nothing left, nothing to return to. His name, of which the origins were Shona, meant “He Summons the People”. I thought it was beautiful; and although he had asked me not to use his name, for it was a link to a past long gone, he preferred me to call him Charles by which he was known among his acquaintances, but sometimes I could not help myself and I addressed him by his real name. The acquaintances he mentioned were the vendors at the food
market: the fat, toothless woman who sold him fish and who smelled just like the animals she offered. She claimed the fish were fresh, but everyone knew better. Nevertheless, she had the highest turn out, since her wares were still tastier than her competitors’.

The man at the vegetable stand also knew him by Charles. None of the food they bought interested me. The only nourishment they were asked to purchase was the raw meat for Seraphin, but they were obviously given free reign when buying their own fare. Kokayi always accompanied Sophie when she went out. He enjoyed those little outings and took in the sounds and sights of Paris, a city he had grown quite fond of. A deep friendship had developed between Sophie and him, and I often found them engrossed in engaging conversations when she was busy in the kitchen. He now spoke fluent French and Spanish. He seemed to have a certain talent for languages, for he learned quickly and spoke with barely an accent.

Sometimes Sophie’s mother joined them in their dialogues. Angelique loved Kokayi. She said he had a beautiful spirit.

I often inquired why he insisted on forgetting his origins, but he did not wish to enlighten me. I knew the answer though. There was no need to ask. I knew he missed his homeland, despite his desire to let go of his past. He missed what he had had before the white man came and took it all away. The strong and brave warrior was afraid to face his past and Africa’s presence. I, on the other hand, had gained a loyal friend, and I was happy to have him. Sorrow sometimes befell him, but he had made my house his home, and I knew that he, despite his losses, was content with his life with us.

All in all, life was good in my house, although France’s political situation was quite turbulent.

It was the month of June in the year 1815 when our leader Napoleon finally came to his doom. Previously, he had committed several crucial mistakes, such as the invasion of Russia where he lost thousands of soldiers to the freezing temperatures, starvation and the attacks of Russian soldiers on his depleted troops. In 1814, upon his return from that disastrous campaign, Frederick William III of Prussia and Czar Alexander of Russia finally defeated the French troops and paraded triumphantly through the streets of Paris. I was there to see it, and it was a pompous and impressive parade, accompanied by a loud fanfare. The foreign cavalry rode proudly on their horses, following their victorious generals who were preceded by Czar Alexander and Emperor Frederick William themselves. The foot soldiers made up the rear and marched with their heads held high, while the drums sounded rhythmically to the same victorious tune. The parade seemed endless. It wound its way through the streets and turned corners like a snake would wind its body around obstructions. The crowd was subdued, staring at this invader, not
believing that Napoleon had finally come to his end. Nevertheless, there were also many others who expressed their relief that the wars were over now. Too many young men had perished; too many mothers had lost their sons to Napoleon’s campaigns, and now it had been enough. No more young men would be offered to his wars, no more mothers would wait for sons who would never return.

After Napoleon reluctantly surrendered and gave up his throne, he was sent into exile, to Elba, an island close to the Italian coast. We had no knowledge that his banishment to Elba was only a temporary one. The news of his escape a few months later broke all the headlines, and a multitude of joyous people welcomed him on his way back to Paris. His army grew considerably and on June 15, 1815 Napoleon made his final mistake. He launched an attack against the British who were preparing for battle near the village of Waterloo. Waterloo was in Belgium (at that time still part of the Netherlands), not so far from Paris.

The Duke of Wellington, with help from the Prussian army, defeated Napoleon. This time the Corsican was exiled to St Helena, an island in the South Atlantic. Elba had been too close, and now the British wanted to be sure that there would not be another escape.

Napoleon spent the rest of his days there and died in 1821 on St Helena.

The news of his demise did not impress me much. It was, nevertheless, an unlikely ending for a man who had led vast armies, risen in rank astonishingly quickly, and created an empire. However, since the events of the French Revolution, I chose to stay out of political life and I had less contact with mortals. I watched events from afar, and felt more disconnected from them than before. Despite the friendship I had once shared with mortals in Cologne, I now refrained from talking to them and had become nearly as reserved as Lucan. The news of Louis XVIII regaining power left me unconcerned. Louis XVIII was the brother of the late Louis XVI who had been executed during the French Revolution. In honor of his nephew, Louis XVI’s son, he named himself Louis the eighteenth, not the seventeenth. He gave his nephew who had died of abuse in prison at the young age of twelve, the title Louis XVII. Our king Louis had not been able to save that boy, but he had been able to negotiate the release of little Theresa, daughter of his brother and Marie Antoinette. She was sent to Austria where she remained for the rest of her days.

Seraphin had tried to reconcile several times, and eventually we did, but there were ugly clashes, accusations, and terrible shouting matches. Kokayi took Angelique and Sophie out of the house on those occasions, because when we fought, it was a nasty sight to behold. Our angry voices echoed against the walls, making them tremble. Our eyes blazed, I flashed my fangs, and Seraphin’s hands turned into wolfish talons. It was a wonder that Sophie still worked for me and
never told a soul about us. The first time she witnessed Seraphin’s hands transform into claws, her eyes widened in disbelief and fear, and she covered her mouth in shock. Whenever he felt enraged, his hands sprouted patches of brown fur, his fingers grew long and wiry, and his nails extended into deadly spikes, one of the werewolf’s deadliest weapons. The rest of his body stayed the same, but the transformation of his hands was impressive and most of the time he did not even notice! So intense was his anger that he did not feel the painful change of his hands. Poor Sophie … I did not pry into her thoughts, so I did not know what she thought, but I could only imagine what she went through. Then again, except for the three humans who lived with me, I had distanced myself farther from humanity over the years and the woes of mortals did not always affect me as much as they used to. I rather felt a fondness for them as some would for a neighbor’s pet. The only thing that stirred me was their literature, and perhaps a few of their philosophies, and improvements to humanity. I could not be bothered with the rest. Maybe I was reaching that stage that Penelope had told me about a long time ago, the stage where all humans meant delicious blood to me and I would not differentiate between a murderer or an innocent maiden. Perhaps my lack of interest would lead me to that stage, but I realized that I was not fully there yet, and I did not intend to be. I still cared about the good of humanity. I still exclusively hunted the evildoer and would continue to do so. Sometimes I had strayed from that resolve. Sometimes I was weak, but it happened rarely.

Seraphin had remained in Paris, but he had set up his own lair in the Fountainebleu Forest, since I refused to let him live with me and because it was better for his monthly transformations. It was safer that way, since werewolves had no control over themselves. Even I could be in danger once he was fully transformed, because werewolves were known to kill their loved ones in their wild frenzies, not realizing who they were killing. In the forest, I reasoned, he was close to thieves, and even if there were not any, he did not necessarily have to feed anyway. When he did not, he usually ran around on a rampage, howling and growling and snapping at shadows.

Even now, after sixteen years of immortality, Seraphin still did not respect my wish to stop this destructive triangle that he, Lucan, and I had once been. It had led to battles between them in which both were seriously injured. Seraphin, in his werewolf form, had tried to kill Lucan, and it was because of Markus Humboldt, an allied blood drinker, that Lucan was still alive. I had not forgotten and never would. Therefore, I had decided not to let either one of them become an important part of my life; but I had reluctantly allowed Seraphin to live on the outskirts of Paris. What was I to do anyway? He knew I would never force him out or kill him. I was not happy with the arrangement, and we argued often. I found him more conceited now that he was immortal. He made the mistake many fledglings made:
he believed himself invincible for the first months of living in Paris. Fortunately, he did not take foolish risks, but his attitude could be infuriating.

Sometimes he came to visit me and a few times he accompanied me on a hunt in his vampiric form. Every so often an argument developed about something I said, something he said, a misinterpretation, or … Lucan. As I discovered over the years, we were both quite explosive. I had never thought he would be, for I had always believed him to be a man of reason, but his monstrosity sometimes would get the better of him. Immortality had changed him a little as it did all of us. It could bring out the worst in us and it erased some human traits. It had done so to me. The human in me was long gone and the remaining feelings had intensified with vampiric force.

Once I even unfavorably compared him to Lucan, which sent him into a violent rage, slashing my sofas with his claws that always sprouted out when he became angry. He would shout without restraint, and threaten the absent Lucan.

Regarding me, I often wondered about compromise, realizing that it was a difficult concept to learn. How about forgiveness? I was not blessed with a forgiving soul, and I was well aware of it. Instead of an inability to forgive, it could also have been pride that stopped me from letting him back in. Nonetheless, I still thought I had every right to turn him away.

The smell of fried meat filled the house. It always bothered me, preferring the scent of fresh blood. Meat was too pungent; now as an immortal it smelled too much like a fried corpse and boiled blood to me. Fresh blood however, deliciously warm, pulsing with life, and direct from the source, filled our ancient bodies with the lives we took and allowed us a glimpse into fleeting souls. There was simply no comparison. Sophie loved preparing lunch for Seraphin. She was always happy when he came, providing we did not argue, because then she finally had someone to cook for. Cooking was important to her, and preparing meals for her mother, Kokayi, and herself was not quite the same thing, she explained. I only laughed when she told me, and I argued that frying meat very rare for Seraphin could not be compared to a human meal at all.

I found him in the library reading a novel, and indulgently I said, "You are so lucky to have someone who can cook for you."

He looked up from his book and said, "We can hardly ask Sophie to bring a few humans for you."

"No," I answered and smiled.

I sat down on the divan opposite him. He laid his book on his lap and looked at me.

“How do you do it in the forest?” I asked.
“Well, I have invited you many times, but you have not accepted yet. I have made myself very comfortable there. You should see it.”
“If it is so comfortable, then why are you always here?”
His eyes sparked, annoyed, but when he realized that I had meant it jokingly, he visibly relaxed.
“You have a library,” he explained.
“Oh, you come for my library.”
He was not in the mood for jokes. I could tell.
“You know why I come.”
“Yes,” I sighed, “and I wish you were not so stubborn. If we cannot compromise, then at least we can laugh about it.”
“It is no laughing matter.”
I stood up, not willing to launch into another argument, not today. Not any day anymore. It had been a little over fifteen years of fights and reconciliations and I could take no more. I knew I was as guilty as he was. I had often angered him, but he had done the same to me. His stubbornness drove me mad and I wished he would finally realize that relentless insistence did not work with me. It had quite the opposite effect. Instead of finally admitting defeat, it only increased my defiance. I loved him, but I knew now that it was not the same way I had loved Lucan. I had learned about myself from my mistakes. We were not as united as Lucan and I had been. There was no understanding between us the way Lucan and I had shared it. There was hardly any sense of belonging with Seraphin; but with Lucan I had felt that I had come home. I had learned over the years that Seraphin and I were both too conflictive to be living under the same roof. Even on his frequent visits we found reasons to argue. It irked me that he could not accept my refusal. Lucan had, so why not Seraphin? But I knew the answer to that. Lucan was proud and Seraphin was stubborn. He was so stubborn that he would never accept no for an answer.
I made to leave the room, but he got up and grabbed my arm, dropping his book on the floor. I stopped and turned to him, glancing annoyingly at his hand. They were in their human shape, so he was not that angry yet.
“When, Aurélie? When? And do not give me any more excuses. This has been going on for fifteen years.”
“I have always told you the truth. I have never given you excuses.”
“Yes, Lucan!” he spat, “your fear of one of us killing the other. Tell me one thing, how is it possible to love two men and refuse them both?”
“What do you mean?”
“You know! Do I have to point it out? You zealously want us both to be safe. You cannot be with one without missing the other.”
“That is not true!”
“Really? Your dear Lucan, the one you so admire, the one who taught you everything, the one you can really talk to. Bah!”

His words spat pure jealousy and I thought he was overreacting. I had not seen Lucan in sixteen years, and yet, he was still a topic of discontent between us, a topic that was usually brought up by Seraphin. It only confirmed that they would indeed fight if they ever met again. There was too much anger and resentment between them, but it seemed to me that it came more from Seraphin’s side, my “philosopher”. Immortality had taken over his usually beautiful mind and allowed the beast in him to rage. I wondered where that mind had gone.

“He is your maker! Have you already forgotten? He saved your life,” I said. “And then he challenged me to a battle, don’t forget that.”
“A battle which you began!”
“He provoked me!”
“You let him provoke you.”
“You see! You see how you are defending him, how you never stand by my side?”
“You are being ridiculous.”
He was blowing this way out of proportion.
“You are acting like a child!” I told him. I pulled my arm out of his grasp and dashed out of the room. He followed, ranting at me, but I motioned him to leave me alone.

“You should know where your priorities lie, Aurélie!” he yelled when I entered the drawing room. “Remember how I was willing to enter immortality to be with you. Do you remember how I looked for you again and again, and every time you turned me away?”

Now I stopped and, without looking at him, I said, “I do, and my refusals should have been enough to convince you, but you would not listen.”
“Because I loved you.”
“You loved me? How about now? Don’t you love me anymore?”
“You know I do. I told you how I was willing to risk my mortality to be with you.”
“Yes, and you can stop reminding me, because in the end that did not happen. A werewolf attacked you, and it was Lucan who risked his life to save you.”
“Lucan again! He did not even know me. I just don’t…”
“He did it for me,” I interrupted, and turned to look at him. I had never told him this before, and now he looked at me surprised. Many years ago I had asked Lucan why he had saved Seraphin when he had the opportunity to kill him and rid himself of his rival. It would have been so easy for him. He had answered that he had thought of it, but that he could not do it. He was not able to cause me that pain. His words had touched me and shown me his love for me, and as I repeated those
words now to Seraphin, he was quite taken aback himself, for he stopped shouting and stood there in silence. And I knew why Lucan did not want me to go through the pain of losing a loved one. He had gone through it himself when Giada murdered his wife, Althea. It had destroyed him. He did not wish this pain upon me, so he chose to save the man I loved. I believed that few would do that, but I could be wrong. Anyway, those words had never left me and had been played over in my mind for all these years, taking me back to him, to memories of us together, and proving once more what a grand being he truly was. It was with regret that I chose to exclude him from my life; but unlike Seraphin, Lucan had accepted it. Perhaps he even understood. Perhaps he had moved on … and then I caught myself hoping that he had not …

I was tired of the fights with Seraphin and the only reason we were still here after fifteen years was because he knew very well that I was unable to force him out of Paris as I would have had to do with any other unwelcome or potentially dangerous intruder. He was not really an intruder, but our arguments were not doing us much good, and I wished he would give it up. I wished he would not be so stubborn. Sometimes I wondered if he insisted out of love or out of stubbornness.

Now he still seemed at a loss for words, but finally his eyes narrowed in anger again, and he said, “He should not have. It is bad enough that I owe him my life. Now I also owe him you?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You know very well.”

“You are not making any sense. Where is your reason? Where is my …?”

But now he interrupted me angrily, “I am not your ‘philosopher’ if that is what you were going to say! Just because you found me discussing the revolution with some intellectuals when I was a mortal, does not make me a philosopher. I come from Aquitaine! And my father was a laborer as was I! I was raised by monks, but that still does not make me a learned man. I am not the philosopher you are trying to make me out to be!”

“Right now you are not. You are being quite foolish, but when your mind functions well, you are able to make a lot of sense, you know,” I said harshly.

Again, he made to grab my arm, but I avoided him and ran out into the hallway. He followed, cursing under his breath, and caught up with me. Suddenly, I felt him intrude upon my mind, enter my thoughts and read my inner turmoil and anger. The invasion of my mind perturbed me and, enraged, I turned and looked at him, but he only commented on my harsh words previously spoken. It hit me that Seraphin and I were not as connected via our minds as we should be, perhaps due to his werewolf blood; so, it could not be him. Suddenly I knew … and I felt his presence … he was here. I stopped and looked around, and there he was. He
stepped out from the shadows of the corner, tall and handsome, and with the same regal bearing he had always carried. Seraphin stared at me, angered by the smile on my face. He hardly looked at Lucan, who also regaled me with a wide smile and opened his arms to welcome me in his embrace. When his arms closed around me and I hugged him tightly around his neck, I felt Seraphin’s eyes probe into my back, filled with envy and resentment, for I had not embraced him when he had first returned to me. I had told him to leave my house. It was good to see Lucan again and to feel his arms around me, but I knew that he had not come without a reason, and somehow he seemed worn and worried.

When we let of each other, we met Seraphin’s angry stare. I wondered how much Lucan had overheard. I hoped he would forgive me for having told Seraphin the reason he had let him live. Lucan looked at him and said, “My, such hostility.”

“It is not directed at you,” I said.

“How would you know?” Seraphin added maliciously. I gave him a look, and he did not speak again. But it was Lucan who answered, “That is why I remained in the hallway when I arrived. I heard you shouting and did not want to interrupt. It did not seem a good time.”

“It still isn’t,” Seraphin said.

“This is my house, and I decide,” I told him sternly. Seraphin only scoffed at me and walked towards the door. “Fine.”


He stopped and turned, his eyes still menacing and furious.

“Can we sit down? I need to talk to you and it is important.”

“I gather the news is bad?” I asked.

“Unfortunately, it is.”

“Don’t worry. This is exactly what she has been waiting for,” Seraphin said irritably, “some calamity to get away from me.”

I looked back at him and said, "Don’t be a fool."

At that moment, I wanted to hit him, shake him, sink my teeth into him and draw his blood, teach him a lesson. My fury roared through my veins, begging for retribution, but I remained calmly where I was.

CHAPTER II: Escape from the catacombs

When we returned to the drawing room, I heard the first rain of the day spatter on the windows and slide down the glass on their way to the ground. For a moment, I looked at the rain drops, contemplating their beauty, and then I walked towards the window and looked outside. The blue sky from this morning had gone and had been invaded by dark grey clouds which now opened their flood gates and
drowned the city in a curtain of thick rain. Lucan had just arrived in time and escaped the downpour.

“Why are you here?” Seraphin asked him.

“It is bad, very bad.”

At those words I turned and faced both men. They were both still standing. Lucan, apparently, preferred to be standing to deliver the dreadful news, and Seraphin did not seem to want to let his guard down, which was ridiculous, I thought. I leaned against the wall next to the window.

"It is Penelope," Lucan continued. "She is on the run. A band of werewolves finally found the entrance to the catacombs."

"What?" Seraphin and I exclaimed in unison, and now we exchanged a worried look, finally feeling a connection again. That this horrible news was the reason for our newly found connection was not good though.

"There were many of them, too many to fight. Balthazar told Penelope to run. She had to be saved."

"He sacrificed himself," I sadly said.

"Yes."

I was overwhelmed with grief. I had known Balthazar, and I had liked him very much. He had been in this world for thousands of years and had been Penelope’s companion all this time. He had given his life for her, for she was the fount, and if she died, we would all perish with her. He had walked into his death; he had faced a horde of werewolves, knowing he would not get out alive, and he had done this to save our fount and all vampires.

“Oh, Balthazar….” I gasped, "Where is she?"

"At my house in Cologne, but she won’t stay there for very long, she has to find a new safe lair."

"But how, who found her?" I asked confused.

"We don’t know how, they must have tracked her down. As to who, I think we know the answer to that."

"You think Akira’s behind this," I softly said.

Lucan nodded.

"That is impossible!" Seraphin snarled defiantly.

Lucan gave him a cold look and said, "We can see where your loyalties lie."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Is it not obvious? You being a half breed…" Lucan said.

"How dare you!"

Both men now faced each other; Seraphin’s claws were ready to strike, and Lucan bared his fangs.

"No, stop!" I said and placed myself between them.
I turned to Lucan and said: "Seraphin is right. How dare you insult him? We cannot let old enmities flare up again! And I’m sorry, but I have to agree with him. Akira can’t be involved in this."

I saw Seraphin’s hands and realized that his fingers had lost their wolfish form. My words had somehow rekindled the bond between us and our angry words from before were now forgotten.

"Of course. I had forgotten that you have a soft spot for him," Lucan said.

"I had the honor of meeting him and talking to him, just like the honor I was given when you first took me to Penelope. Akira is not a vicious being."

"Penelope has tried to kill him several times. Why can’t you understand that perhaps he’s had enough and now went after her? Do you realize what will happen if he kills her?"

"Yes, of course I do! I just don’t think...."

"Never mind," he interrupted, "werewolves have entered the catacombs of Rome and are out to destroy Penelope. You can tell me whatever you want, but someone is behind this and I strongly suspect Akira."

You should have let me kill him, he conveyed to me with his thoughts. I shook my head. Lucan had indeed tried to annihilate Akira, fount of the werewolves, and he would have succeeded if I had not stopped him, to his great disbelief and shock.

"So why are you here?" Seraphin inquired.

"We need to find those werewolves and destroy them. I need help."

"To kill Akira?" Seraphin asked, barely hiding the hostility in his voice.

"If he is involved, yes."

"You do not need us," I said.

"Yes, I do."

"Seraphin is half werewolf."

"He is also half vampire. You haven’t forgotten, I hope."

Now Lucan turned to Seraphin and said, "If you care about Aurélie, then you must help me. If Penelope dies, she dies."

Seraphin glanced from me to him and back to me, pondering his words.

"I think we should stay out of this," I said, to his great surprise. He had expected me to leap at this new mission, and my refusal took him very unexpectedly.

"Let fate take care of it? Are you ready to die then? If Penelope falls into their hands..." Lucan said.

"I’m sure she can handle it. She has amazing powers."

"But she cannot battle a horde of werewolves."

He gave me an exasperated look.

"And we can?"

"We have done it before."
“With the help of Markus. Why don’t you ask him?”
“He has disappeared.”
“What?”
“Look,” Lucan patiently said, “Penelope has requested that you help, even though she is not very happy that you let Akira live all those years ago. She is still pretty resentful about it, but she told me that she needs you to come.”
“Only me? What about Seraphin?”
“She doesn’t trust him.”
At this, Seraphin snorted, and said, “Because I’m a ‘half breed’? I’m one of them?”
Lucan did not answer.
“I will think about it,” I said, “I will let you know tomorrow.”
“Aurélie, please understand that you cannot refuse Penelope!”
“I said I’ll think about it.”
He sighed and threw up his arms in despair.
“You can stay here in the meantime. Sophie will prepare a room for you,” I offered.
“We have no time to lose,” Lucan said.
I pulled the cord hanging by the door. A bell rang and a few moments later we heard Sophie’s footsteps in the hallway. Trying to flatten her skirt, she appeared in the library, looking very confused at our visitor, whom she had obviously never heard or seen arrive. She understood immediately that he was not human, but having lived with me for so long, she also knew that he, being my friend, was not going to hurt her.
“Sophie, please take our guest to his room,” I told her.
She nodded and then looked at Lucan.
“This way please,” she shyly said.
The Roman gave us an annoyed, quizzical look, not understanding why in the world I needed to deliberate, if Penelope had ordered me to come. To him there was nothing to talk about. Penelope had beckoned, and I had to obey. Sometimes I wished I had never met her.

I retired to my bed room on the second floor. Seraphin followed me there and this time I did not object. I was tired of fighting with him.
We both sat on the bed and looked at each other. I was apprehensive and he was worried.
“You do not wish to go?” He asked me in a slightly surprised tone.
“No, I do not. I wish to stay here and not get involved in any of this.”
“You know that is not possible.”
He took my hand in his and stroked it gently. "She does not trust me. I can go with you though, you can use my help."

Akira trusted him. He had spent considerable time alone with him and taught and revealed many things; some he had confided in me; others, I knew nothing about.

"She will kill you as soon as she sees you. Haven’t you heard what Lucan said? She doesn’t trust you. Penelope is merciless. I know she will kill you as soon as you set foot in Lucan’s house. You cannot come with me," I said, pulling my hand out of his.

"But did you not say that you do not want to go?"
"Yes, but you do not need to come either."
"It’s Penelope! And you need me! If you refuse, she will come and find you, and then who knows what she’ll do in her rage...."
"You speak as if you know her," I said pensively.
"Well, after everything you’ve told me, I nearly feel as if I do."

We sat there in silence, both contemplating our options. I stared at the ruffled bed sheets as if somehow they could provide me with an answer, tracing the patterns with my index finger.

"I have to go," I said unwillingly.
"Yes."

He rose from the bed and started pacing the room. I watched him walk to and fro; considering different possibilities.

Then he stood still and said, "I will accompany you, but obviously I will remain hidden. I cannot let you go alone."
"She’ll know."
"She will not."
"Do not underestimate her."
"I do not. I will find a way. I could go and find Markus."
"How will we stay in touch?"
"I’ll figure it out."

I sighed, not entirely convinced.

Suddenly, Seraphin stopped in front of me and pulled me up by my hands.
"It is imperative that Lucan remains unaware of my presence," he whispered.
"He is your maker, he will not hurt you."
"There is a lot of anger between us. We both do not know what we are capable of. You have seen that."

He was now his reasonable self again, and I thought it was quite sad that it had to be a catastrophe that brought him back to his senses. Now he was the man I used to know. What did this tell me? That we only found the way to each other in times
of distress, but could not stand to be or function together in times of peace? That was not very good …

I nodded. I remembered all too well the challenges and the arguments between both men. For a moment, I wondered if Lucan would inform Penelope of Seraphin’s presence, to get rid of his rival. I didn’t believe that he would. He would never hurt me like that; he cared too much about me.

“But he wanted you to know about this. He trusts you.”

“That may seem so, but he would not agree with my coming. Like you, he knows what Penelope would do, although it would be the perfect opportunity for him to …”

“Don’t!”

He stopped and calmly looked at me. All the anger was gone. Before me I had the Seraphin I had fallen in love with such a long time ago, the one I only glimpsed occasionally now.

"We have to be sure that he does not know," he then said.

"He will not find out."

I would have to keep my mind closed at all times, to make sure Lucan could never penetrate it, or Penelope. This was something I was usually a little careless about, so I had to train myself to do it continuously. I did not like the plan much.

Penelope knew Seraphin was on good terms with Akira, her arch nemesis; and he was half werewolf. Those two reasons were enough for her to kill him. We could not risk that.

"This is not good," I said, "I wish I could just disappear."

"Lucan is right though. If those werewolves catch Penelope and kill her, you will die. And I do not know what I will do without you."

CHAPTER III: Hunt Interrupted

Full moon was only two days away and Seraphin was getting restless. If he was going to accompany me, we had to put off the trip for at least three days, until after his transformation. Dealing with him as a werewolf during our journey, however far he was separated from us, was too high a risk. Lucan reluctantly agreed to wait, and I kept my mind closed to avoid him discovering the reason for our delay. He knew of course that something was going on, since I usually never made much of an effort to seal my thoughts from him. He did not ask though, nor did he comment on it. He may have guessed the cause of our holdup, but he, like I, kept his thoughts to himself.
On his second night, he left my house in Rue Mouffetard to go hunting. I told him I would like to go with him, for I was craving blood, but he curtly said that he preferred to hunt alone. Confused, I watched him leave.

He walked down the pathway to the road, his black frock framing his ancient, well-built body. I could not help staring at him, wondering … wondering what if …

My thoughts now journeyed fifteen years back to a place far away on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, to Veracruz, in Mexico. I remembered Kokayi and me on the grass plain, awaiting Seraphin and Akira who came out of the jungle. Seraphin looked elated, and I mistakenly thought that his reunion with me was the reason for that, but it was not. It was the upcoming trip with Akira to his lair and the prospect of learning more about his kind. Who could blame him?

I did. I had believed him dead and hadn’t ever heard a word from him. I had mourned him while he was alive. After everything we had been through, it was finally time to be together. Yet, he decided to postpone it a little longer … for selfish reasons, I thought.

He returned to me a full year later. During that year I had come to terms with his absence, and I had finally defeated the loneliness that came with immortality. I occasionally received word from Lucan, but after reading his letters again and again, twice, four, five, even ten times, I did not find the heart or the courage to write back. I often sat there, thinking about what to tell him, but all the things I wanted him to know could not be explained on paper. It was impossible to utter my inner turmoil in mere words. When I was finally ready to be alone, Seraphin showed up, too late for me, and I told him so, but he, as usual, would not take no for an answer. I let him stay outside Paris, and after a few years of bitter reproaches and angry discussions, we found a way to co-exist. Anger made way for forgiveness; bitterness was flattened by the feeble remnants of love we still had in our immortal hearts; and the accusations fluttered away and were locked out.

And now I wondered.

What if I had replied to Lucan’s letters? What if I had had the nerve to admit my mistakes and to forgive, not only him or Seraphin, but also myself? “Too human”, Penelope would dismissively say. I did indeed feel like a human, but it had to be part of our immortal existence. After all, we had been humans once. Love and hate did not disappear the moment we became blood drinkers. We were monsters, but we battled and cherished – or at least I did – the same demons humans did: envy, rage, revenge, love, passion, loyalty, and many more.

As Lucan walked down the path, I sighed longingly, but then I caught myself and marveled at the motive for this exclamation. When he disappeared through the gate and turned right, I stepped from the front steps of the house on the path. I strode down the pathway and stopped at the gate. The street was busier than usual
for this time of night. Many mortals strolled by, lost in their mindless chatter and oblivious to the monsters among them. I stared hard at a well-to-do young man who passed me by very closely. He had dark red hair and a thick mustache. He appeared rather jovial, but when he turned to look at me, his smile faded and quickly he withdrew his gaze and hurried past me.

Lucan was long gone, but I knew where he was. Our bond was too strong not too feel each other’s presence, therefore he also had to sense me following him.

My course took me to Place de la Concorde, a large square that had played host to the infamous guillotine during the French Revolution. Now the dreaded machine was gone, and the square offered room for vendors and couples in love crossing the plaza, engrossed in themselves. The blood and terror of the revolution had been replaced by the beauty of daily life.

I did not like to remember those revolutionary days. I had been a revolutionary as a mortal, but the violence and the bloodshed had turned me away from the cause. My father also abhorred the senseless brutality and he was thus arrested and tried for “treason”. The Jacobins condemned him to the guillotine, but Marie Antoinette’s famous trial postponed his death sentence by a day, which gave me time to save his life.

I crossed the square and entered a narrow street on the opposite side. I knew Lucan had taken this route. Why I followed him, I did not know. It happened instinctively. I did not even know what I would do once I found him. My insides felt dry and in desperate need for fresh blood. I decided to feed first and then find Lucan. Few people ventured onto this street. The houses stood close together and there were few lanterns. Darkness kept people away and only the ones who lived here or absolutely had to come this way, entered this alley. I thought of the red-haired man and licked my lips. I would have liked to sink my teeth into him. I wondered what his blood would taste like.

A young woman walked by me. A whiff of strong perfume irritated my nostrils, and, annoyed, I looked at her. She was young and very pretty. Her dark brown hair cascaded in long waves over her back. Her bright blue eyes were large and mesmerizing; her thin nose was exquisite, and her full lips curved into a small, pouty mouth. The Bordeaux colored dress was topped by a black, velvet bodice, and it hid nothing of her voluptuous curves. Had Lucan not seen her, or was he too set on hunting the evildoer? I did pick up something from her though, something rather sinister, which piqued my curiosity. She held a black pouch in her hands, and I heard the subdued clinking of gold coins, a sound she tried to suppress. But the sound clearly entered my excellent, immortal sense of hearing. She seemed relieved and victorious about something.

The gold could not be hers. Although her dress was not cheap, she did not come from a wealthy or noble background. If she did, she would not be walking
the streets alone at night. She was up to something or had already done her deed. I watched her walk by and then I turned and followed her. She went to Place de la Concorde and stopped. She looked behind, to the left and to the right several times, then after having reassured herself that she was not being followed, she crossed the square.

I was distancing myself from Lucan now, but my curiosity had been ignited, and I had to know what she was up to before I killed her. My mind had been made up the moment I had first seen her; I wanted her blood, wanted to sink my teeth into her flesh and feel her warm, red elixir fill me with her life and course through my veins. The thought filled me with excitement.

I could not wait any longer. As soon as she turned onto a quiet street, I quickly ascertained that no one was around, and I made my move. She knew she was in danger before I even approached her. Suddenly, she realized that my presence was no coincidence. Nervously, she looked back at me and increased her step. The wide distance somehow comforted her, but she knew she was not safe yet, and when I moved in absolute silence and swiftly appeared right by her side, she gasped in fear and shock, taking a step back, towards the wall. She did not understand how I could have bridged those twenty meters in less than a second, but she had no time to think. My eyes stared into hers, breaking her will and making her succumb to me. With her mind no longer her own, she blankly gazed into my sapphire eyes, hypnotized by their intensive sparkle. I opened my arms and she blindly came to me. My embrace closed around her in this dark, forgotten street, which lay hidden from the hustle and bustle that could not hear, nor see, and even less save her.

With one hand, I moved her silky hair out of my way and exposed her throat. Hunggrily, I bent over her and sank my fangs into her soft skin. She leaned heavily on me, giving herself to me, to death … Her warm blood pulsed into my veins, filling me with her life, invigorating me…… delicious, and exhilarating. Her blood was exquisite and pure, untainted by age or disease.

Slowly, images from her life drifted by, as they always did when we drank from someone. In the throngs of death, the soul prepared to leave and one last time, events from its human life flashed by as if on a big screen. This time the face of a young man floated from her to me. He was handsome and devoted to her. She laughed at him and now felt regret at her behavior. She now wished she had not scorned his advances. He smiled uncertainly and then his face became blurry and it faded away. A court room materialized before me and the girl stood alone on the stand, facing a merciless prosecutor and exchanging a desperate look with her inept lawyer who shrugged and sat down, resigning himself to her fate, a fate that did not encumber him at all. The faces of the grim jury stared at her. Their verdict was
unanimous and irrevocable. Her eyes widened in shock when she was found guilty. Her last hope at justice had been crushed. She lowered her head and barely noticed strong hands grab her and lead her out of the courtroom.

Then she was in an ornate ballroom, wearing a golden gown and hanging on the arm of an older aristocrat. Noblewomen looked at her in disgust, knowing where she came from and that she did not belong there. They whispered behind her back, but she did not care. Openly, she flaunted her passion for her lover, provoking scandalized looks and backstabbing gossip.

Next, money passed into her hands in the same ball room, hidden from view in a quiet corner. She smiled, but the woman who paid her did not. She handed over her funds, gave her a revolted look, then turned and walked away.

In the antechamber of a luxurious bedroom that was not hers, she received coins from a man. Her naked body was covered by a thin bodice and she did not bother to close it. On the contrary, she enjoyed his discomfort in her presence and his furtive attempts not to stare at her breasts. When he gave her the money, he asked her if her silence was now guaranteed. Smiling indulgently, she said, “Indeed it is, my dear Grégoire.”

Blackmail is what it seemed. That was how she got her income. She discovered painful or embarrassing truths about her victims, or she was the embarrassing truth herself, and then she used it to her advantage. That was how she got the beautiful, expensive dresses. Not so innocent after all. I still had a knack for spotting the evildoer.

One last image came to me. I saw his tall form from behind. He looked strangely familiar, and I found myself now inside the woman, walking towards him, feeling giddy and excited; I was seeing her past rendezvous with this handsome stranger. He turned slowly. I saw his profile, but his face became blurry. I knew him; I knew him well. Although I could not see his face, his shape and movements were intimate to me; I saw them in my house, on my couch, in my library, nearly every day… It could not be him … it had to be a mistake.

When I felt Lucan’s presence, I let go of her and looked around. He was not here yet, but he was approaching me. He could not be farther away than the next street.

Weakened by the extreme loss of blood, she dropped to the ground, but her consciousness had returned. The hypnosis had been broken. Realizing that she was close to dying, she stared up at me. Terror filled her big, round eyes, not knowing what had happened to her, and she opened her mouth, but before she could scream, I grabbed her and quickly broke her neck. Then I turned around, and I saw Lucan turning around the corner, his hands folded behind his back. He stood still and observed the scene.

“Did I interrupt you?” he asked apologetically.
“Yes.”

There was still some blood left in the woman, but it was too late now. She was
dead and her blood was getting cold. I did not like it cold.

“I did not mean to. You were following me.”

“Yes, I was.”

“Why?”

I shrugged, trying to make it appear meaningless, but when I closed my mind,
he knew that there was more. I never blocked my mind, and the few times I did, I
always had a good reason. Lucan knew me too well. When I did not answer, he did
d not insist and he said, “Let’s walk.”

We left the young woman where she was and returned to the Place de la
Concorde. We promenaded for several hours and talked about many things, but I
did not mention Seraphin or the many fights we had had, and he did not ask. It was
a blissful time together with a few moments of stilted conversation when we both
tried to avoid the topics that caused us only pain.

CHAPTER IV: Seraphín’s Ritual

When we returned home in the early morning, Seraphín was not there. He must
have returned to his lair in the Fontainebleu Forest to await the time of his
transformation. I knew his departure was very unwilling. He was reluctant to leave
me here alone with Lucan after I had not seen him in fifteen years. So much to
catch up on, so much to talk about, and always alone together … it had to drive
him crazy, but he had no choice. He could not remain here when he transformed. It
was too dangerous.

My night walk with Lucan had distracted me and even produced an occasional
smile on my face, but my thoughts were constantly on Seraphín, knowing what I
knew now, wondering how on Earth I could not have noticed that only times of
peril brought us together. I wondered if Lucan knew or suspected anything of our
plan, but in fact he could not. My mind had been impenetrable at all times. There
was no way of him knowing.

“We should not have waited so long. It is full moon, and Seraphín will
transform tonight. We cannot travel,” he complained.

“But you agreed to wait.”

“I did, but reluctantly, you know that.”

“If you want to leave, then we can fly. It is likely we will not run into him
anyway,” I said.

“We may not run into him or any other werewolf, but we have no reason to risk
it.”
“There are no other werewolves here. He is the only one.”

It was the first time I referred to Seraphin as a full-blooded werewolf, and not as half werewolf, half vampire. Lucan had also noticed.

“We will leave in the morning.”

“Since when do you decide?”

“Fine, I propose we leave in the morning, as a precaution, and I would really appreciate it if you would agree,” he spoke sarcastically.

Our eyes met, both harboring a mild annoyance. Then I smiled and said, “Fine, we will leave in the morning, but we should wait for Seraphin. I cannot leave without saying goodbye.”

I expected him to turn up early in the morning anyway, since he planned on accompanying us without Lucan’s knowledge. How he was going to do that, I had no idea …

A few hours of rest could do wonders for the mind. As long as my eyes were closed, and I was asleep in the world of the undead, there were no thoughts, no anger, no disappointment, and no sorrow. There was only sleep and darkness. When I awoke though, I remembered the events of the previous evening, and the familiar, blurry image I had seen when I drank from the woman.

I rose from my bed, and took off my dress. Carelessly, I threw it on the bed, and picked a dark green, velvet garment with a red lace bodice and wide sleeves. It was a beautiful gown. This one had not been a gift; I had bought it myself only a few weeks ago. I stepped into it and pulled it up. Then, I pulled the cord that was hanging over my bed to call Sophie and ask her to help me fasten the bodice. She came, closely followed by Kokayi. Surprised, I looked at him. I knew he had something to tell me, and when Sophie moved behind me to close my bodice, Kokayi said, “Seraphin was here an hour ago and he had words with your visitor.” He left out the part of their evident shouting and threats which I could only imagine, and it was obvious that it had been the topic of speculation in the household.

“Is he still here?” I asked.

“He left only a few moments ago.”

Immediately, I rushed to the door, my poor Sophie behind me, hanging on to my dress.

“Wait, Madame!” She called.

I stopped, having completely forgotten about the bodice.

“Hurry up please,” I urged her. Then I turned to Kokayi and asked, “Where did he go?”

“I believe he went east.”
As soon as Sophie was done, I dashed out of my room and hurried down the stairs. The house seemed empty, and for a moment I wondered if Lucan was resting or if he had gone out. It did not matter right now. For what I was about to do, I did not want him around.

It was early evening when I sprinted out of the house and hurried east, hoping to pick up Seraphin’s scent and find him. The moon was rising and her light emanated through the thick clouds that shone silvery in the bright night. The streets were crowded and many couples strolled in the moonlight, never guessing the horror the full moon entailed.

Instinctively, I made it to Place de la Concorde, but I did not expect to find him there. I wondered why he had not gone into the forest yet, and then suddenly knew with a blinding certainty, that it was because of Lucan. He planned to position himself close to us, and risk my life to get to Lucan. How spiteful! How cruel, not only to Lucan, but also to me! How reckless to hunt in the city, how incredibly reckless and careless! If he was here now, could that mean that he had done it before? Could that mean that there was indeed more than one werewolf here? If he had injured humans without killing them, they had entered immortality too and now would transform once every month. The horror of it struck me, and I suddenly realized how vulnerable I had been in my house. Anger rose in me at the way he had been endangering me, the woman he apparently loved. How selfish he had been! How selfish and reckless and careless! I hunted in the city, but I was in control and I did not leave a mess like he did. Once transformed, he had no control over himself and lashed out at anyone.

It occurred to me that in the last years, Seraphin had been leaning more towards his lycan than to his vampire form. He had hunted as a vampire and drunk blood like I did, but more and more did he turn to Sophie’s rare steaks and his monthly outings. It was as if the lycan blood in him was increasing in strength, and taking over. Was that possible? Could that explain the intensity of our fights? Was this the monster taking over in him and erasing his reason whenever we argued?

I came to a small park which was invaded by couples in love. I did not enter. He was not here, and I could not deal with all the love flaunted at me so openly. I felt like grabbing all those lovers and ripping their heads off, one by one; but calmly I walked by and continued down the street.

Somewhere a woman laughed. Horses drew a carriage. Men were engaged in conversations about politics, women, business, or whatever else occupied their minds.

And then I saw him. He moved through the crowd, wearing brown pants and a loose, white shirt. He walked purposefully, seemingly knowing where he was going. I made sure to stay at a safe distance and I followed him through the throng.
of people, taking so many turns in different streets and avenues where I had never ventured before. He was going somewhere and it was not the forest.

At a busy intersection, he entered a tall corner house that stood out right at the junction and which had a view over all that went on below. The small windows of the building were glowing in the candle light inside and gave it a cozy view. Coziness was the last thing on my mind though, and it certainly mattered even less to the owner, since this edifice was well known for its occupants and their trade. There was no need to go in. I knew what Seraphin was looking for; it was the same thing the man who walked in after him came for. With a pang of hurt, I stood on the other side of the street and stared over the moving horse carriages to the lit windows, wondering which room he would enter, and why? Lycans did not contain an insatiable lust for physical coupling, just a craving for human flesh. Or had Seraphin been this promiscuous as a mortal too? After all, how could I know? I had met him briefly when he was mortal, and although we had shared many stories, I now doubted if I really knew enough about him.

Shadows moved in a room on the third floor, and then he appeared behind the window, looking out onto the street. Fortunately, an approaching carriage blocked me from view, and when the carriage was gone, so was he. He had not seen me.

Soon, a woman stood behind the window, glancing carelessly at the traffic below while she removed her silk gloves, deliberately slowly. She threw them onto the floor and turned around, unbuttoning her red blouse. The last thing I saw of her was the garment sliding off her shoulders. Then, the window was clear again, blazing in the candle light.

The clouds shifted slightly, and revealed part of the bright, yellow moon. Instinctively, I looked up at the window. Everything was quiet up there. Then, the night breeze blew the clouds back to cover the moon. The yellow orb was gone.

My vampiric hearing focused on the third-floor window, trying to catch a sound. My hearing was extraordinary, a gift of immortality. I could hear rats scurry in the cellars; I could hear people talk on the other side of the street; and I could even hear the upper class ladies cross the intersection in their coaches while slandering the bordello in whispering voices. A little higher up, soft, pleasurable moans reached me, widening the gash in my soul and urging me to fly up there and kill the woman, but I did no such thing. I had no claim on him, had not had that for years, and I had even refused it. The pain I felt was due more to having been lied to than anything else. I abhorred dishonesty, especially from beings that were close to me.

I remained where I was. It was full moon and Seraphin could turn as soon as the moon emerged. What was he thinking, visiting such a busy street when it was time to transform? I had always believed he went into the forest. If he came here now, then he had done this before, many times. He had made our kind known to
people and he had endangered us. Why had there been nothing about his killings in the newspapers? Or had there been and I had just overlooked it? Even Kokayi, who was so observant, had never mentioned anything. Or perhaps it had not been reported. Or had Seraphin always cleaned up his mess? How? Werewolves were uncontrollable, and never cleaned up their kills, unless he returned when he lost his lycan form … but that was risky too, even more so. By then, the body had to have been discovered. Maybe I had missed something in the newspapers.

The wind picked up speed and the clouds were blown away, leaving the moon uncovered, the bright sphere illuminating the night sky. I had not seen the full moon in years, having always wisely locked myself in the house. Now I stood there, staring up at it in awe. I had forgotten how spectacular the full moon could be. What a sight!

A roar, closely followed by a scream hit me from the house. Immediately, I directed my attention back towards the window. Many passersby had heard it too; and worried, they stared at the house. Many trotted off though, knowing that it was a bordello and thus expecting certain noises emanating from it. Others though, understood that that scream had been uttered in panic and fear. Some rushed to the door where a young girl leaned against the door frame, wearing a thin gown. Her dirty blond hair hung loosely over the see-through garment, as if she had not a care in the world for the shriek she had just heard. The brave men who had rushed to the door stood still, unsure whether to go inside. The clouds had gone now, and the moon stood vividly in the sky, unleashing its monsters. Then my gaze moved instinctively to the window, sensing a movement, hearing someone weeping in fear, pleading for her life. A wild roar filled the third-floor room and suddenly, a large spatter of blood splattered onto the window. Nobody seemed to have seen it, but I. I watched the blood trickle down the glass. There was so much of it that the woman could not have survived. She better not survive this!

Lycans were not turned like vampires. Vampires usually chose who they wanted to gift with immortality and it was a whole ritual. Werewolves, however, all descended from accidents, from victims who did not die from a werewolf attack, even the ones who only received one scratch, which was enough to taint their blood. None of them had been planned to turn. They were all creatures who had been meant to die in the first place. Therefore, there was also a lot of resentment between some werewolves, for having been launched into this existence against their will, forever yearning for the full moon. If this woman survived, she would become one of them.

There was another scream, and this time people’s faces were drawn to the window on the third floor. Some women screeched in terror when they saw the blood, and now the young prostitute who had not seemed interested, stepped out on
the street and she also looked up. Her mouth opened wide in disbelief. She stood there, frozen to the ground, not knowing what to do.

“Call the gendarme!” A woman shouted at her, but she seemed to be in a stupor, unable to move. A man ran down the street, looking for a uniformed officer. It was useless; there was nothing the police could do anyway.

A hand appeared on the glass and slid through the blood to the handle, trying to open it, but she never made it. Roughly, she was pulled away, and the hand was gone. More blood spattered onto the window.

I knew this was it. I had to get out of here. I started to move when I heard more screams from the bordello. He was coming down, dashing down the stairway and pushing people aside, lashing out at them, roaring in hunger and rage. Women screamed when they saw the hairy monster in the hallway. From the street, we could see him when he landed on all fours in the vestibule, snarling viciously. The Madame fainted. He lashed out at a man who had rushed out of a room, barely dressed, and he slit his throat with his sharp nails. Then he slashed the bare chest of another customer. The woman behind him screamed in fear while the werewolf tore his claws through a prostitute’s arm. At last he ran out of the house and confused, he looked at the crowd that scrambled everywhere in blind panic. Blood dripped from his muzzle and his fangs; his eyes were yellow like the moon and filled with a wild fury and an animalistic ardor. I was staring at Seraphin, whom I had seen as a werewolf before only once, and under different circumstances. Now he looked murderous! Quietly, I moved into the dark portal of a house, hiding in the shadows.

There was blood everywhere in the lobby of the house, and prostitutes and customers were in a daze, not knowing what had happened to them. The survivors tried to take care of their wounds. I knew I could not finish them off. There were too many of them, and there was too much visibility. I knew that I should return here later and take care of it. Lucan would have to help me. We could not let these people live, but I realized that we had no time. We were leaving in the morning; and by the next full moon they would all transform. It was too late … Now they would go through the rest of the month, living their lives, not knowing that something in them had changed, but sensing that something was happening to them. They would have cravings for rare, nearly raw meat and eat nothing else, shocking their family members and friends; and then, when it was full moon, most of them would leave their families, hide what they had become and look for a safe place. They usually ended up in the covens or were found by coven members.

How could Seraphin have been so careless? What had he been thinking? How many more had he created? For all I knew, Paris could be populated with werewolves and I had never realized it. Lucan was right, as always, when he said that I could not be sure that Seraphin was the only lycan, or half lycan. He had
suspected more of them. Werewolves were not solitary creatures like vampires. They lived in packs and shared lairs. Even Seraphin had to have that need … why had I never thought of that? But the answer was simple. I had always hoped that his vampire half would eventually take the upper hand. Yet it did not. His lycan half was obviously stronger and had overpowered him more.

He ran through the street, causing panic and screams everywhere, and lashing out at anyone who got too close.

CHAPTER V: The River of Blood

Sophie had a knowing look in her eyes when we said goodbye in the morning. She knew we would be gone for a long time. Angelique assured me that she would take good care of Papillon. Sophie hugged me and whispered in my ear, "Please be careful."

She had never known what we were up to on our travels, and she did not have a clue about what was awaiting us now. Yet she sensed danger ahead, and she knew that it had been there in the past.

Kokayi offered to accompany me, but I refused. I did not trust Penelope around him. She had no respect for human life and killed indiscriminately. In his case, she might actually be very tempted to make a blood drinker out of him, due to his courage, lack of fear of death, and his strong and handsome physique. He would make an excellent vampire, but I did not want to expose him to her. If he had to be turned, it would be through me. I had offered immortality to him before, but he had refused. Penelope also despised Lucan’s and my choice to only slay the evildoer, a habit I mistakenly believed Seraphin had also acquired … I would feel more reassured having Kokayi in Paris. He was not happy with my decision and told me that I had no right to choose for him; and he was right.

“I have indeed no right to make decisions for you, but you mistakenly believe that I do this because I regard you as my property, when you know fully well that I do not. You are a friend to me, and that is why I am worried about your safety,” I explained. “I want you to live. You have seen the creatures we travelled with in Mexico. You know what I am; you know what Seraphin is. There are a lot more like us, and they will not respect you like we do. They will regard you as their next meal. They are monsters with unnatural powers, demons; and you know that.”

“Madame,” he said, sighing impatiently. “I know all about battling monsters. When the white man came to Africa, we had to fight his guns with spears, outrun his horses with our bare feet, and resist the jaws of his dogs in our naked flesh. I have come face to face with monsters, and I know what they can do. They murdered my wife, my daughter, and my friends; they turned my village into a
ghost town; they made me sit in my own shit on my way to Cuba; they whipped and chained me. So, do not lecture me about demons from hell. Mortal or immortal, I can fight them.”

His answer took me by surprise, and for a moment I was lost for words, but I still was not going to take him. I could not be watching over his safety, especially if I had to battle werewolves.

“It is too risky,” I said firmly.

He understood that it was useless.

“Kokayi,” I spoke and rested my hands on his shoulders. “Kokayi, if you can still fight, and I know you can, then why have you insisted on me calling you Charles, the name you have chosen here? Why did you forsake your true name? Why do you want to fight now? I do not wish to lose you. I will take you with me on my next trip, but not on this one. This mission is too dangerous. I do not even know if Seraphin, Lucan, and I will be able to return unscathed. I need you here, to look after Sophie and Angelique. They need you.”

He nodded listlessly.

“Can I trust you to stay?” I insisted.

“Yes, Madame.”

I looked into his eyes that met mine with pure honesty, although a little clouded by disappointment. I knew I could believe him.

Movement behind me made me turn around. It was Lucan, who was kicking the small pebbles on the driveway. When I looked at him, he stopped and said, “We need to go. Penelope is waiting for us.”

I nodded.

“She did not give me much time,” he added, “since she is set on finding a new lair. That is why we have to hurry.”

"We will fly?"

"Yes."

I glanced at Seraphin, who as only half a vampire did not possess the ability to fly. He didn’t say anything, due to Lucan’s presence. He only smiled and hugged me. I received the hug in stone silence, never forgetting what I had seen the night before.

"Don’t worry,” he whispered in my ear. Then he moved a strand of my hair behind my ear and looked at me.

His eyes were tranquil, and told me he would be there. Somehow, he would find a way to reach me on time. He was sure about the trust between us, and he had no idea it had been broken. I did not know why I did not yell at him, why I did not hit him, push him away from me, or tell him not to come with us. I did not know where my rage had gone, but I was surprisingly calm. My coldness though, was not missed by him. I serenely returned his smile. Lucan’s eyes stared fixedly into my
back, so strongly that I thought I could feel it. He had never accepted my, albeit reluctant, approval of Seraphin in Paris. He, as my maker and mentor, had always expected me to return to him.

“No,” I then softly told Seraphin.
Confused, he stared at me. “No, what?”
“Do not come.”
His eyes clouded with anger, for Lucan could hear what I had said. He was not supposed to know, but I did not care anymore.
He did not say anything, but his eyes conveyed the question “why?”
“I know now that the forest offers you no motivation to hunt, unlike … let’s say, the city,” I answered. He gaped at me, understanding fully what I meant. His eyes opened wide in shock and then turned to shame. Finally, he looked at me in defiance, hoping to still be able to deny everything, hoping that a lie might save him.

We had spoken in subdued voices and Sophie, Kokayi, and Angelique could not hear us, but I knew that every single word we spoke reached Lucan’s ears, which angered Seraphin even more. I knew the situation embarrassed him, especially because he still regarded Lucan as his rival. Perhaps they still were, I could not be sure anymore.

“What do you know?” Seraphin then asked.
“Enough.”
“Enough of what? You saw nothing.”
“Your lover, the blackmailer; or the whore house? I saw nothing?”
“Not me, it was not me. It is a lie.”
“What is?”
He did not answer, and I repeated, “What is a lie? What I saw last night, or you standing here and denying the facts?”
“Aurélie …” He pleaded, but I held up my hand and stopped him from whatever he wanted to explain, if he was going to say anything at all.
I turned to Lucan and nodded. I was ready. Seraphin stood behind me, and although I could feel his eyes probing into my back, I never gestured or said goodbye.

Obviously, we did not take off flying from Paris. It would be foolish to call such attention to us, or to expose ourselves like this to Sophie, although she knew I was not mortal.

Finally, I did look at Seraphin, wondering how long it would be before I saw him again, the pain of his betrayal tearing at me. Then I followed Lucan.
As mortals, we walked through the Rue Mouffetard, and turned the corner. We crossed the city of Paris until we reached the green fields surrounding it. The last houses lay far behind us.

"Ready?" Lucan asked.

I cast one last longing look at my beloved city, imagining Seraphin still standing in front of our house in the Rue Mouffetard, cursing himself for his foolishness.

"Read," I said.

He nodded and we both spread our leathery wings. Like giant bats, we soared up into the sky and then flew over the forest, in silence. I was sad and reluctant, Lucan was lost in his own thoughts. I remembered my last real conversation with Seraphin, before Lucan had arrived, our argument which now seemed so silly. Lucky for me, Lucan was busy scheming plans. Otherwise, he could have penetrated my mind and discovered that Seraphin planned on joining us, if he still did …

Immediately, I closed my mind, sternly reminding myself to keep on doing that for the rest of the journey and during my stay at his house. Would I be able to keep my mind closed in front of Penelope? She had incredible powers, and for a moment, I feared that she might have the strength to pry it open, and force me to spill the contents.

But this was ridiculous. She had summoned me to help her. Therefore, she trusted me and she had forgiven me for having stopped the murder attempt at Akira. So why was I nervous about our meeting?

She was not the forgiving kind. Judging by her past and what she had done, she certainly was not. I vaguely wondered if I would be an exception. She had to be desperate for help if she was willing to oversee my "betrayal". She was a lot more powerful than Lucan and I together. I wondered why she really needed us. It was true that she could not battle werewolves alone. But still, I could not help wondering what was really going on. It seemed so unlikely that Akira was behind this that I could not comprehend who had gone after Penelope. I did not know much about lycans except for their creation story which Akira had told me a long time ago. I also had no idea if there were other powerful lycans around.

As I pondered this, I kept my mind closed for Lucan, I could not shake the feeling that something awful was about to happen.

"Frederica will be happy to see you," Lucan said.

"Is she still with you?"

"Yes, have you forgotten about her?"

"No, of course not. I just thought that she had moved on, perhaps married someone else, and left us. You know, live like a mortal, like she is supposed to do."
She had been engaged to Pierre, Lucan’s servant, but Pierre had been murdered by thieves. Frederica begged me to save him and when I was unable to, she had beaten me in anger. That was when I lost control and bit her, drank her blood until Lucan arrived and pulled me away from her.

"She has not."
"Have you...? You have not turned her, have you?" I asked hesitantly.
"No."
"Does she still want it?"
"What do you think?"

Frederica had always wanted to become like us, had called immortality a gift, and even though she had been presented with many horrors of our world, she was still convinced that it was the kind of life meant for her. She was nearly obsessed with it.

"Is she constantly begging you?" I asked.
"She knows better than that. No, she has become my servant and is happy with her existence. I must admit she has proven herself a real asset. If someone asks probing questions about me, she always comes up with some story that explains perfectly my untimely comings and goings and my long disappearances. The neighbors always believe her and have now, for many years, stopped asking questions. Everyone leaves us alone, and the neighbors restrict themselves to friendly nods or greetings."

"Yes, she is quite good at that, I remember. She has done the same for me."
"I think she hopes that I will make her like us at the time of her death."
I looked at him and asked, "And, will you?"
"I don’t know."
"Giada is long gone. Frederica would not be in danger."
"I realize that. I just don’t know if I want to make her my fledgling. I like her, but not enough."
"Well, she is always free to go."
"Yes, but she will not. I know she will not."

He was right. Frederica was very loyal to Lucan. I had known it even before he realized it.
"It would be a mistake. To make a vampire of someone who so desperately wants it would be wrong. She could go mad, cause havoc, and enjoy the killing."
"Perhaps...But, Lucan, wait a moment. Is she at the house, with Penelope?" I just realized.

He nodded.
"But are you mad? How can you trust Penelope around her? You know she does not respect human lives."
"I asked her to leave her alone, to respect her as my servant."
"And you think she is going to do that? For all I know, Frederica could be dead by now."

Now he gave me a worried look.

"Do you think she fears your wrath if she touches your servant?" I mocked.

It was true. She was the fount and our leader. She was the most powerful one and could kill us with her mind, never using her hands, never even having to suck blood. She could dispose of us as she wished, and she could do as she pleased, for none of us had the power to exact justice, and she knew it.

Lucan also understood that now, and said: "Oh no, how could I have been so foolish!"

He had always been extremely cautious, but he had trusted Penelope, because they had known each other for millennia. After all, she was the one who had made him.

"Damn that woman!" he said between gritted teeth, angry at his own powerlessness.

Frederica was my friend, and now I was also very worried. I feared for her, I already knew it was too late. No human could stay alive for long with Penelope around. I could envision Frederica’s lifeless body on the floor, Penelope licking the last of her blood off her lips. Oh, let it not be true, I prayed. I hoped that for once she had restrained herself, but then I remembered the dungeon deep in the catacombs, where she kept her human prisoners, hunted for her by Gael and Balthazar. She did not distinguish between young and old, male or female, good or evil. There had been a little girl, barely 5 years old. And when Penelope felt the need for blood, she would go down there and pick her victim; or she would send Gael or Balthazar to choose one.

That poor little girl was long dead.

When the werewolves had hunted her in her own catacombs, and most probably found the prisoners, they must have caused a bloodbath among them. I could just imagine it, and I felt sorry for the poor victims. "You are still too human," Penelope would tell me every time I felt for humans. She never meant it as a compliment. She always said it as if she despised me.

Both Lucan and I increased the speed of our flight and reached Cologne by dawn. I used to live there many years ago, and still loved it. With joy in my heart, I flew over the Rhine River and looked down upon the picturesque rooftops of the houses. Nearby, I saw the tower of the cathedral, but I had not forgotten why I was here, and soon my joy was replaced by a sense of doom.

Slowly, we descended. It was late at night, but a few people were out on the streets. We made sure nobody saw us when we landed in the huge garden of Lucan’s villa.
Everything was quiet, and for a moment I hoped that my fears had been wrong, that Frederica was safe and alive.

We walked to the door, and I turned to Lucan and said, "I thought you did not use doors."

"Well, this is my house, and Penelope is there. What is there to expect?"

But the door opened and swung wide open, and before us stood Frederica. She looked radiant, her eyes shone like crystals; her hair looked much healthier and fuller than it used to; her skin glowed, and when she smiled, I could see what I feared true, tiny fangs at the corners of her mouth.

Lucan was in shock and stared at her as if he were seeing her for the first time.

"Welcome home!" she said, her voice unable to contain her happiness.

Lucan walked into the house, and roughly pushed her aside. He stormed up the stairs. Frederica and I both looked at each other, knowing what he was about to do.

There was no time to tell her what I thought. We both followed him upstairs. There, he kicked the door to the guestroom open. Penelope sat calmly on her bed, her long, white, wispy hair flowing over her back and the bed, her skin more translucent than I remembered, nearly all her blue veins visible underneath. It was the first time that I saw her in brighter light, and the beauty she had shown in the shimmery light of the underground catacombs was now erased by the flicker of the many candles that exposed her as the ugly, cruel being she really was. Her eyes were white orbs; the irises had long mixed with the white of her eyes. She could see though, very well.

"How could you? How could you do this?" Lucan raged at her.

"Be careful who you’re talking to," she said.

"I asked you, specifically asked you to leave her alone, and as soon as I turn my back, you make a vampire out of her!"

"You told me not to kill her. You never said I could not make a new blood drinker."

He roared in blind fury and hit the wall in anger, and I knew he wanted to fling himself at her, but his good sense stopped him.

"How could you defy me in my own house? I had a good reason for not turning Frederica, but you just do not care, do you? You just do whatever you want! Why don’t you go back to your damn catacombs and dig yourself a new tunnel? There is a good chance the werewolves won’t find you! There is plenty of space down there!"

At this, she stood up and looked at him with her white orbs. They began to shine and the white turned into faded silver, and suddenly a strange light emanated from them and surrounded him, lifting him up. For a moment he hung helplessly in the air. Then she moved her head and he was thrown violently against the wall. A crack appeared where he had landed.
The light disappeared and her eyes turned white again.
"I warned you," she said angrily.
Lucan scampered dizzily to his feet as she now focused her attention on me.
"Aurélie, it is so good to see you. You have heard the news?"
I nodded.
"I assume you will help me."
I did not really have a choice.
"Yes," I said.
"Good, very good."
She stared at me hard and suddenly, I felt a splitting pain in my head.
"Why did you save Akira?" she asked me in an angry voice.
Unable to answer, my hands went to my head, in a fruitless attempt to stop the pain.
"Tell me!" she thundered, making the walls shake.
"Penelope, please," Lucan pleaded.
"I have trained you, trusted you, passed secrets to you; and you betray me?"
she roared.
Frederica was very afraid and took a step back.
The pain in my head increased and I knew it was Penelope doing it. I was fighting it, and struggling to keep my mind closed despite the agony. Droplets of blood escaped my eyes and flowed out of my nose. I held my hands against my ears and screamed in pain as more blood now also oozed out of them. With the powers of her mind she was crushing my head, slowly killing me. Blood burst out of me and it seemed as if my head was going to explode any moment now. The pain was torture, leading to a slow death if Penelope did not stop.
"Please, let her go!" Lucan yelled in despair. "She did not betray you. She didn’t know about the mission!"
Penelope did not listen and increased the pressure. I could hardly see because of the blood flowing out of my eye sockets.
"Please stop it!" Frederica yelled.
I sank to the floor, my hands on my head as a useless defense against this terrible agony.
"Why?" Penelope yelled, but I could not speak. My tongue was thick and heavy, and I could not lift it. My head felt like splitting, the pain tearing through me and pushing at my eye sockets, my temples, my forehead and the back of my head, like a giant fist punching me everywhere, desperate to get out.
"Stop it!" Frederica pleaded.
"Penelope, let her go!" Lucan yelled.
Suddenly, the pain was gone. I fell, and lay still on the floor. I had stopped bleeding, but there was blood on my face and dress, and some of it trickled onto the marble floor.

"Why did you do that? Why in the world did you do that?" Lucan asked her in an accusing tone of voice. "If I had known this, I would never have brought her here."

"You would defy me too?" said the cold voice.

"She never defied you. She met Akira and talked to him. She liked him, and did not know about the mission."

"Liked him? Did he fill her mind with his ideas? We were so close, Lucan, so close, and she ruined it!"

Penelope stood up and walked over to me. With her foot she turned me around and looked at me, like a lioness contemplating her prey.

"Can I count on you to do as I ask and not work against my orders?" she coldly asked.

I nodded and quietly said, “Yes.”

"I cannot hear you."

"Yes, I said yes!"

She smiled cruelly at my answer.

"Get up."

Slowly I got on my knees and stood up. Lucan gave me a very guilty look. I did not blame him though. I knew he would never knowingly have exposed me to such danger.

"This was just a little foretaste. If you defy me again, I will kill you. Do you understand?" Penelope said.

I nodded.

Frederica put her arm around me and pulled me close to her, but I pushed her away. There was no need to show myself weaker than I was in front of Penelope. Frederica looked hurt, but did not make another attempt to touch me.

"Good," the ancient vampire said as if nothing had happened. "Then let’s talk. I need to go soon, and I will take her with me." She pointed at Frederica, who took a step back. In shock, she stared from me to Lucan and then at Penelope. She had hoped to remain in Cologne and enjoy the beginnings of her vampiric existence here.

"I made you, and I need you. Both Gael and Balthazar are gone," Penelope said, as if it were completely acceptable stealing Lucan’s servant.

"She is a fledgling! What can she do? She doesn’t have any powers yet!" Lucan protested.

"She has my blood and that is enough. She will learn the rest from me."
"Are you going to train her to bring you your supply of humans?" I coldly asked, not forgetting her dungeons in the catacombs.
"Among other things."
"Then take me," Lucan offered. "Let her stay here. She has nothing to do with this."
"Not you, my dear Lucan. I need you and Aurélie to track those werewolves."
"Just the two of us?"
"You have done it before."
"We had someone with us."
"I do not want that half breed involved!" she spoke harshly, and looked at me to see my reaction. I controlled myself though, and returned her look passively.
"Aurélie, let me be very clear. If I did not need you so much, I would have destroyed you already. You are a disgrace to our kind. You ruined my mission, and are voluntarily sharing your territory with a half breed. I truly regret having ever received you at the catacombs and wasted time with you. I regret having told you my story and trained you, wasted my energy on you. But you are a good warrior, and I need your services. I trust that this time you will not disappoint me."
I did not answer. I knew this was not a request, but an order. If I did not comply, she would finish me off. She had already given me a foretaste of the way she would make me suffer.
"Aurélie?"
"No, I will not disappoint you," I said.
"And if it means killing Akira, then you’ll have to do it."
"Yes," I said reluctantly.
"She believes Akira is not behind this," Lucan said. I could have killed him when he said that, and I gave him a glowering look.
"Of course, she does, but there is no one else, my dear. He is their only leader, and he wants me gone."
"So, when do we start?" he asked.
"I and Frederica will leave soon to look for a new lair. As soon as I have found it, I will send word. Trust me, I will know where to find you. I suggest you and Aurélie also get going. There is no time to lose. The whole line of vampires is at peril."
"As long as you are safe..." Lucan began.
"They will go after all of us. If they can’t reach me first, they will kill whomever they get their hands on."
It was now that I understood the seriousness of the situation. I was surprised at Penelope’s obvious concern about the fate of other vampires. It seemed so unlike her, or was it more a sense of responsibility?
“There is one more thing,” Penelope added with a smug look on her face. She knew we were not going to like what she was about to say and she was enjoying it. “We are up against a lot of werewolves, more than you could possibly imagine. There are not enough vampires to battle them. We must create more vampires.”

“For what? Are you planning to fight a war?” Lucan said.

“I believe we already are at war.”

“Then you should tell us more. It seems to me that you know a lot more about this.”

She smiled.

“You do what I command you. I have given you all the information you need.”

“We are to create more vampires of which most will perish once they confront werewolves,” I said.

“Yes, my dear Aurélie. Does that conflict with your human side? Are you still trying hard to retain some of your humanity? Give it up. You are what you are; a blood drinker, and now you will make more blood drinkers.”

I glanced at Lucan. He looked grim, but I knew that he would follow her orders. I would have to do the same. We had no choice.

“How many?” I asked.

“Hundreds, perhaps even a few thousand.”

She laughed at the alarm on my face and turned to Frederica who looked at her in awe.

“And you,” she said, “you who carry my ancient blood will also make blood drinkers. When it is time, I will summon them and they will stop the hordes of werewolves.”

“Hordes? You sound a little too dramatic,” I said.

“I am not being overdramatic.”

“Where are those “hordes”? Lucan asked. “We need to know.”

“I cannot tell you.”

“But you know.”

“No, I do not. If I knew, Akira would have died a long time ago.”

Lucan moved to the window and stared outside, his hands folded on his back. I watched him longingly, my eyes on his broad back, his hair which was a slight tinge between blond and light brown, held together in a short pony tail at the nape of his neck. Penelope noticed and smirked. I looked away, angry at her, and also at myself.

“Lucan, I need to speak to Aurélie alone,” Penelope suddenly announced. He turned around, looking at her warily.

“Do not worry. I will not hurt her.”

He did not believe her, and neither did I.

“Go,” she said, now more impatiently, “you too, Frederica.”
Reluctantly, they left the room and closed the door behind them.

“They can still hear if they want to,” I said.

“No, they cannot,” she said. She raised her hands; I felt the power of her mind penetrate the room and an unfathomable energy emerge from her hands, and suddenly I sensed an invisible force field quivering around us. It hummed quietly and I felt as if I could touch it if I stuck out my hand.

“We can say whatever we want now. We could even plot their deaths and they would never know,” she said with a cold grimace, lowering her hands slowly.

When she saw my dismayed look she immediately said, “No, not Lucan. I would never hurt him. I love him. And I need Frederica. I was only speaking in jest.”

The force field around us stopped humming, but it was still there, its force very tangible in the air. “I wish I had not told you the story of my creation, but it was you I confided in, and so it will be you whom I will talk to now. If you move against me, I will kill you.”

“Penelope…”

“Do you understand me?” she interrupted me harshly.

“Yes, but please let me speak. I would never move against you or betray you, and not because you threatened me with my destruction, but because you are the fount. Whatever you believe, I am loyal to you. Yes, I allowed Seraphin to stay in Paris, but that does not mean that I am plotting with him behind your back. Seraphin also has vampire blood and he can be a great asset to our cause. He can easily move in and out of werewolf lairs. He can help us.”

Her eyes narrowed in annoyance, but strangely enough she controlled her ire at the mention of Seraphin.

“I do not trust him. He is more loyal to Akira, and you know that.”

“Yes, he is, but he also wants me to live, and that is why he could be a great asset. He does not want us destroyed.”

“If it comes to a battle and he has to choose between saving werewolves or vampires, who do you think he will choose?”

I did not answer, and she smiled triumphantly.

“You see, he cannot be trusted. He is unpredictable. I do not want him. I do not want him to exist and if I ever get near him I will destroy him. His kind is an abomination, werewolf and vampire blood in one … It is preposterous.”

She moved very close to me and brought her white face right in front of mine, the white orbs that were her eyes, staring into mine.

“Listen to me, for what I have to say is very important. You can never tell anyone, and even if you tried, you would not be able to. This force field I created around us does not only prevent our words from leaving, it also prevents them
from being spoken to anyone else. So, you see, this is quite the way to keep a secret.”

“I cannot tell, even if I wanted to?”

“You cannot.”

“But that is magic. We do not have such powers.”

“I do. My mind, as you know, is very powerful.”

“Your mind can stop my tongue from forming the words that you do not want spoken?” I asked in disbelief.

“No, it cannot stop you from doing that, but if you do so you will die, in an instant.”

In awe, I stared at her, still unwilling to believe, but knowing that somehow this was not an empty threat. Somehow, the powers of her mind had created a way to kill me if I ever uttered the words that were forbidden for me to speak.

She took a step back, creating a more comfortable distance between us. Satisfied that she had my attention and my silence assured, she spoke. “The werewolves are after me, the fount. If I am destroyed, you all die. This is what they believe, and what I have believed for millennia. But what if there is a source that was there before me?”

“The River of Blood,” I said, remembering the story she had told me years ago.

“Yes and no. The source is not a place. How could it be? It is not the river. However, the river is a medium. A few months ago I was out in Rome when I felt the presence of an immortal. He was very different though. He had enormous powers. It was night, and suddenly a cold wind blew in my face, although it was a warm summer night; the stars disappeared and made way for a black sky, and then all the fires in the street lanterns were extinguished, all at the same time. I never saw this creature, but he knew my name and he laughed at me, always whispering the River of Blood in my ears. All of a sudden, he disappeared, and the lights in the lanterns came back on, the stars were back in the sky, and the cold wind was gone. I know that this immortal was ancient, but I believe that he could not be older than I. I think that he was also turned in the River of Blood, but where he got those strange powers is a mystery to me, because I do not have them. He could also be a ghost, but we do not see ghosts. Or he could be another kind of immortal, one that we do not know of.

Anyway, I travelled to Greece, to my place of mortal birth, and I went to the river. It was still there, looking very peaceful, hardly appearing a river of blood, but the blood was there, trickling down a ridge on a mountain. I was surprised, for when I was made, I never saw that, but of course, back then I was running from the enemy that had invaded our village, and I did not understand that I had been turned. Even if I had noticed the blood, I would probably have credited it to my people who were slain.
I followed this ridge up the mountain, this mountain I knew so well from my mortal days. It was very high. Its top was always shrouded in clouds. I walked like a mortal, not knowing where this ridge began, but suspecting it was at the summit. This mountain is a very active volcano and can turn very vicious. Naturally, I was apprehensive about climbing it. Fire can destroy us, and the mountain already began to rumble. I continued. I thought it would take time before it would erupt, but the volcano seemed to be in a hurry.”

It was strange how she gave this volcano a personality as if she knew it so well. “I had grown up with this volcano and I thought I had learnt to know its antics, but this time I was mistaken. I never found out about the source. Hot lava quickly came bubbling down the mountain. I flew up to avoid it. I rose a little more, trying to see what was up there, but the volcano had now turned so violent that I had to give up. I returned to Rome.

I wanted to go back a few days ago, but then werewolves attacked me in the catacombs, and I lost Balthazar.”

Balthazar, good, strong, loyal Balthazar, who had sacrificed himself to save Penelope, to save us all… His death hurt me. I had liked this ancient vampire from the East. He had been noble and brave, courteous and honorable. He should not have been killed …

“And you did not see anything on that mountain?” I asked.

“I made out something in grey, but it was not very visible. The clouds moved constantly and the volcano was bursting. It could have been a wall or a temple, but I cannot be sure.”

“A temple on a volcano? That does not sound right to me.”

“I don’t know, Aurélie. I must go back, but this will have to wait now. The reason I am telling you this is that the source might be up on that volcano. It is not the River of Blood. The source’s blood is sent to the river.”

“For what reason?”

“To turn us, obviously, but I think it is more than that. I think that this source is weak and sends its blood down the mountain to create strong blood drinkers, and certainly a strong fount. Maybe they need me. I think they or it cannot survive on its own. I think it is stuck on that volcano, whatever it is. Therefore, I must not be destroyed. I need to find out more about that source, perhaps free it, but most of all, it, or he or she, must be kept safe.”

“Why are you telling me this? What do you want me to do?”

“You need to understand the seriousness of our situation. Akira is from the same island.”

“Wait a minute. It is an island?”
“Yes, in the Aegean Sea. That is where we both come from. I suspect Akira to go after this source and destroy it. Why else would he have sent his werewolves after me?”

“I don’t know, but how do we know that you are the true fount now? How do we know that we all perish if you die? Why would this apparent source not be enough to keep us alive?”

“Because it is weak. Do you want to take the risk and find out?” she snapped.

“No.”

“Then do whatever it takes to keep my vampire blood line alive. Make more vampires, create an army of vampires, and find Akira. He will kill me if given the chance, and then you will die.”

“But why did you tell me about the source? Why could you not tell Lucan? You trust him more.”

“Lucan does not know my story of creation. Unfortunately, you are the one I told years ago. I also want you to understand how important it is that you stand on our side and that you forget your sentimentalities towards Akira. He is our enemy. I will tell Lucan eventually. After all this is over, I will go back to the mountain and I want to take him with me. There is no one better to accompany me than he, but now I will not burden him with this information. You both have enough to plan and do.”

“So, why burden me?”

“It is no burden to you. You are hungry for information and you feed on stories like these. You cannot tell anyone anyway, so it will not create any burden for you and Lucan. It might be useful though for what is awaiting you. You need to understand what Akira is after. “

“This mountain is like Earth. Once people destroy Earth, it will regenerate and start a new life. Plants will grow over the ruins, tree roots will choke the wrecks, and eventually animals and even people might be allowed to procreate again. The blood from this mountain holds the same promise for us immortals.”

“Only you could say something so idealistic,” Penelope said with a mocking smirk.

CHAPTER VI: The sudden departure of Markus Humboldt

Penelope made to leave immediately after our conversation, which had left me a little dazzled. I found it hard to understand how she was about to kill me moments ago, while ranting about my “betrayal”, and then confided something to me, merely based on the fact that I was already informed about her beginnings. It did not make a lot of sense to me, but when had I ever understood the workings of
Penelope’s mind? Lucan gave me a concerned look when we walked out of the room, and Penelope called Frederica to her side. “We have to go. We have stayed too long already.”

"Allow me to say goodbye," Frederica said.

Unusually understanding, Penelope nodded.

My friend stood before me and took my hands. A single tear escaped her eyes. "After all these years apart it hurts me not having the time to spend with you. I hope that one day we will have the opportunity to catch up."

Wordlessly, I hugged her. It was weird feeling her cold body. I had been so used to her as a human, that her immortality was now hard for me to accept. Her human form had always been filled with warmth and love, but now that seemed to have gone, or faded.

Then, she turned to Lucan and took his hands in hers. "I wish it had been you," she whispered.

Gently, she laid her right hand on his cheek, and said, "Goodbye, Lucan."

"Goodbye, Frederica."

She gave me one last hopeful smile, but then Penelope put her arm around her waist and pulled her over to the window. “Do not disappoint me, Aurélie,” Penelope said. She spread her wings and flew away, holding Frederica firmly. Lucan hurried over to me.

"Are you all right?"

"I am now."

He gave me a handkerchief, and I gladly accepted it to wipe off the remnants of blood.

"I am sorry, I would never have brought you here if I had known...."

"It is not your fault. You know her."

"Yes, but I thought she liked you."

"Perhaps that is the reason I am still alive. If this is how she treats the ones she likes, I do not want to know how she treats her enemies."

He out a short, insincere laugh, still too laden with concern and self-reproach. “What did she want with you alone?”

“Even if I wanted to, I cannot tell you. She made sure of that.”

“Why? Did she threaten you?”

“Her mind is very strong. She put up an invisible sound barrier, to prevent you and Frederica from hearing, and she said that this same barrier also prevented me from telling anyone else. I do not know why she told me and not you, especially after the welcome she gave me, but she claimed that it had to be me, since I know the story of her creation.”

“I suppose that whatever she told you is linked to that story.”

“Yes, but I cannot tell you more.”
“And I would never defy Penelope’s mind powers.”
“You know you’d better not.”
He nodded grimly, knowing her too well.
“Damn that creature,” he hissed angrily.
“She did not hurt me in that room.”
“She should not have tortured you though. I trusted her. I never believed that she would do this. I would never have brought you here if I …”
I laid my finger on his lips and said, “I know. I know, Lucan. It is not your fault. I know what she is. How could I blame you? I trust you with my life.”
“You do?”
“You know I do.”
He looked at me, his eyes still blazing, but now their expression slowly softened, and he took my hand in his. Our eyes locked, his green eyes still ablaze, but now with a different emotion. I pulled my hand out of his, and turned. He did not say a word, and followed me as I walked down the stairs. In the drawing room we sat down, a little more at ease, now that Penelope was gone.
"I don’t ever want that creature in my house again," he said, as if the brief moment between us had not happened. I was glad he let it go. A little disappointment also seeped through, but then I told myself to get a grip on my emotions. I had requested my distance from both Lucan and Seraphin. I should stick to my decision. No more battles between them; that was over.
"I do not think you have a choice in the matter."
"No, I don’t," he said grimly. Then he added, "I worry about Frederica."
"So do I.”
As we had both feared, Frederica could be lethal as a vampire, and surely so under Penelope’s tutelage. Frederica had always yearned for immortality, for the ability to roam the world freely and take human lives at will, to live for centuries and watch mankind evolve, and to be a part of past and future. She had always romanticized vampirism and now that Penelope had turned her and would teach her, she might make a fatal weapon out of her. True, she was only a fledgling and fledglings did not have special powers; but Frederica carried a direct link to Penelope’s ancient, powerful blood. She had an advantage and power many other fledglings never had.
In fact, I had met very few fledgling vampires, which made me only conclude that most of them did not last long. Many made the mistake of thinking themselves invincible in their newly acquired immortality, which inevitably led to their doom in either facing a stronger opponent, or carelessness leading to easy capture and destruction by humans. That would not happen to Frederica, and by the time she had to meet her opponents, Penelope would have made sure she’d have the tools to fight them off and defend herself and her maker. Frederica could still perish in the
attempt, but by then Penelope would have moved to a safer place. Her vampire’s death would not matter so much; it would just be an inconvenience.

I had always admired Penelope, even loved her, but now I felt repulsed by her. I had always known how cruel she was, but I had never experienced it. Never had she made me feel her wrath, only her kindness. Kindness....it was only pretense. She had no idea what it meant to be kind.

But she was the fount, and she had to be protected at all costs. If she died... No, I was not ready to die. We had to save Penelope and stop this band of werewolves. If necessary, we had to eliminate them all.

I only hoped Akira was not behind this. I had no wish to fight him, and I knew that if he turned out to be my enemy and I had to kill him, that Seraphin and I would go our separate ways forever.

What would happen to Seraphin if either Penelope or Akira died? He was half werewolf, half vampire. Would half of him die or become mortal again? Or would the perished side turn and make him a full-blooded vampire or werewolf?

Or would he perish either way? If that was so, then he was in even more danger than I was. It angered me that I still cared about his fate.

Lucan and I did not leave immediately. We stayed and discussed our options, trying to make a firm plan; and I hoped that Seraphin had somehow made it to Cologne. I would often turn and glance at the door, expecting it to open, but nothing ever happened. He did not show up. I wondered how he would travel to Cologne; he would come most likely by carriage, but would take some time.

We prepared to leave on the second day, set to find Akira. Lucan still did not agree with me on Akira’s innocence, but I argued that he could help us find the real culprit if he proved that he had nothing to do with this. He would receive me; after all, I had saved his life.

We left on a small carriage. I sat next to Lucan on the driver’s seat. He held the reins to two beautiful black horses in his hands, and waited for me to settle by his side.

"That doesn’t sound like a plan at all," Lucan grumbled when we took off.
"And what if he is guilty? What if I am right?"
"You are not."
"Just suppose I am. How can you be sure anyway? Just for one moment, imagine that in fact it is Akira who has sent his werewolves to kill Penelope."
"First of all, I think he would do it himself; he is too protective of his werewolves. But fine, let’s say it is he." I thought for a while, but could not come up with an answer.
"I do not know," I said. "We will have to discuss it if that situation occurs."
He gave me an exasperated look.
We both left the house, and Lucan locked the door.
"Funny," he said. "Frederica usually waves me goodbye and looks after the house in my absence. It is the first time I am leaving it completely abandoned."
"Do you miss her?"
"Maybe, a little bit, but that's not it."
"What is it then?"
"Anyone could enter the house while I'm gone."
"I'm sure your neighbors will keep an eye on it. Anyway, I think it is better for Frederica not to be here. What if the werewolves tracked Penelope down here and searched the house? They would have killed Frederica if she were here."
"So, you are saying that I might find my house ransacked and perhaps destroyed when I return," he remarked drily.
"No ...well, who knows?"
He smiled and said, "Let's not think about that."
He arranged a carriage that took us out of Cologne through the German countryside. Everything was green, green fields stretched for miles over lush hills and around little lakes. It was simply beautiful. Somewhere on a hill top I spotted a medieval castle. It was flanked by two round towers. It looked abandoned, but still in good condition. It would be the perfect lair for me, for anyone …
"Lucan, look at the castle."
"What about it?"
"It is beautiful!"
"Yes, indeed."
"It is the perfect lair."
"For whom?"
"For anyone, for you, me, Penelope, werewolves. Castles are always strategically built, either on a hill with a view over the valley where nobody can approach it unnoticed, or surrounded by a moat, where one must swim or use a boat to reach it. I wonder why you never settled in a castle. It offers so much protection."
"They are big places, too much territory to cover."
"You could see anyone coming from miles away."
"What good is a castle to me if I cannot share it with you?"
I stared at the ground, unwillingly creating an uncomfortable silence between us.
"Forget it," he said, "I should not have said it."
"Lucan, I thought we discussed this …" I began. Hope flared up in me, but I suppressed it. There was no use. There really was not.
"Yes, a long time ago, and I have always respected your wishes. Seraphin has not though, and now he has set up house in your place, behaving as if he owned it."
“He is not living with me.”
“It certainly looks that way.”
Annoyed, I turned my face to him.
“I do not need to explain anything to you.”
“No, you do not. It is all very clear already,” he spoke calmly, not betraying the slightest care. His face was cold and his eyes devoid of any expression; yet, I could feel a fire burning in him like a volcano ready to burst. Although he was superb at blocking his mind, he could not hide that fire in him.
“What is clear?”
“You and he. You let him make his lair in the forest, and you let him stay at your house whenever he pleases. I remember very clearly that you told us both that you would stay away from us, that you wanted to stop us from fighting over you. You want us both to remain separate and you want us to live. That is why it was your decision not to be with any of us. I always respected your wishes. I never agreed with you, but I respected them. Seraphin did not. He was relentless, was he not? He would not stop until you caved and let him back in. So, instead of sticking to your principles, you reward him for his lack of respect and keep on punishing me for respecting you.”
“What would you have me do? Kill him?”
“You could have chased him out of Paris, but you did not, because you still have a soft spot for him.”
“I do not! And I do not see how that concerns you!”
“There is no other reason for him being there than your weakness. You have no discipline. You did not stick to your decision.”
“So what?”
“So, I no longer see any reason to respect your decision either.”
“No, do not do this.”
“You should have told Seraphin the same thing.”
“I did …”
“You are a strong blood drinker and he would never hurt you. You had the power to get rid of him, but you did not. For fifteen years, I stayed away from you because it was what you wanted. And it was all for nothing!”
“You are just jealous, Lucan.”
“Yes, I am, and what of it? Your treatment of me is very unfair. I have always treated you fairly. I have every right to complain.”
“What’s done is done. He is living in his lair outside of Paris, and it will stay that way. I cannot force him out.”
“Then, I will find a lair in Paris too.”
“This is childish.”
“No, it is right. I will not lose you to someone who does not have the least amount of respect for you, someone who …”

He stopped and stared angrily ahead.

“Someone who…?”

“Nothing.”

Whatever he had wanted to say was now locked inside his mind, and I knew that it would be impossible to pry it out of him. He would not let me.

“Lucan, this does not sound like you. You have always been reasonable. Please, be reasonable now.”

“Concerning you, I have made too many mistakes. I will not make another one.”

“What mistakes?”

“You know.”

Expelling me from his life in my first year of creation, and unwillingly driving me into Seraphin’s arms was something he had always regretted. But it was over now. Seraphin and I were no longer together. His frustration at us sharing the same city was unfounded.

“You would be making another one if you set up a lair in Paris,” I said.

“Why?”

“It would provoke more aggression.”

“In case you have not noticed, the aggression came solely from him.”

I could not argue that, it was true. Seraphin had always been the first to attack, and the one to inflict the most vicious wounds.

“What can I do, Lucan? I cannot live with this. If you both live in Paris, then I will leave and set up a lair somewhere else, and none of you will follow me.”

“Perhaps, one day, the problem will need to be confronted. You are running from it, and that is not helping things. You must make a decision.”

“I must do nothing I do not want to do, I have decided. I want both of you out of my life.”

He stared at me, his eyes betraying surprise and disbelief, but then he composed himself rather quickly.

“When will you tell Seraphin?” he asked coldly.

A long, heavy silence passed between us as we rode the carriage over the lush green countryside. We both sat on the driver’s seat, and Lucan had the reigns in his hands. Two black horses pulled the carriage, both with long, flowing manes and beautiful long tails. We had not wanted a driver, not for what we set out to do.

It took perhaps hours before we spoke another word. Lucan was usually a self-possessed man, and it was not often that I saw him unsettled or behaving
unreasonably. I knew though, that he was right, and it pained me to admit it. He might have made mistakes, but so had I …

I should have stood stronger, and made the decision once and for all. I should have kicked Seraphin out of Paris, regardless of our past feelings for each other. I should have stuck to my word. I kicked out nearly every vampire that came to Paris, but with Seraphin, I could not do it. Like Lucan said, Seraphin had disrespected my wish to remain separated from him and Lucan. He had ignored my arguments, and we had fought about it viciously. He never took no for an answer. To both of them, I reacted more like an adolescent mortal than an experienced or mature immortal.

“We do not even know where to look for Akira,” Lucan said. “He could be anywhere.”

Although I still did not believe that Akira was behind the attack on Penelope’s lair, I welcomed the change of topic.

“He has got to be on this continent,” I said.

“Why?”

“I still think that he is not involved, but I feel that he is here. He must know what is going on. He … He is here. I know it.”

“You are not making any sense. There is no connection between you two.”

“No, but he would not let these attacks go unpunished.”

“Aurélie, he looks very guilty.”

“Yes, he does, but I believe he is innocent.”

“Why?”

“I can feel it.”

"And how would you know?"

"I do not. I just think he is. I know him; you have got to trust me."

I knew I was not making any sense, but I did not know how else to explain it. Akira did not strike me as a villain. He was a noble and honest being who genuinely cared about his werewolves. He respected me, and his grudge against vampires was not nearly half as strong as Penelope’s hatred of werewolves. I was just about to voice my thoughts to Lucan, when he mockingly threw up his arms and said, "This is just wonderful. You think, you feel. Are we going to base our hunt on what you think? We have to be sure before we make a move."

"What else have we got? We don’t know where he is. We don’t know anything. Penelope has sent us on a wild goose hunt."

We rode through the forest. It was nearing dusk now. The gloomy mist in the forest gave the trees a spooky glow, and knowing that werewolves could be close did not feel very reassuring. It would be full moon in two or three weeks, judging by the size of the moon, but even without their wolf form they could still be dangerous.
I sighed, relieved when we finally reached the clearing with the two huts, the same spot I had visited years ago, where I had had a rather strange encounter with Markus Humboldt, a German vampire who possessed the rare talent of being able to command werewolves.

Lucan jumped off the seat and held out his hand. I took it and climbed off.
"Thank you."
"You see," he said. "It is abandoned, he is gone."

We entered the first hut, and saw that it had been cleared out in a hurry. A chair lay on the floor, and the cabinet doors hung open, displaying empty, dark spaces.
"By the look of it, he was in a hurry," I remarked.

The second hut was not much different. Straw was on the floor, and on the bench; and the wooden trunk was open and empty. They had not even bothered to close it. There was a trapdoor, and curiously I approached it.
"It is a chamber," Lucan explained. "I think that’s where he slept."

I pulled it open and peered inside.

It was indeed, a small, round underground chamber, dug into the ground. It smelled of earth and moisture. A coffin stood on the floor, its lid leaning against it. So, this had been Markus’s safe haven, protected by werewolves. He had led a very simple life, but he had enjoyed it. I wondered what had made them leave.

I closed the trap door and turned to Lucan.
"This is all very strange."
"Indeed."
"Why did he leave?" I wondered, not really expecting an answer to my question. I walked out of the hut, pondering his sudden departure. Markus could not possibly be involved in the plot against Penelope. He was a vampire. If she died, he would die too.

Lucan followed me.
"Do you think he is involved?" I asked him.
"What do you think? He is a vampire after all. He would be endangering his own existence by wanting to destroy Penelope."
"Yes, but he has very close ties to werewolves."
"He can command them, but he is still a vampire."
"Then how do you explain this?"
"I don’t know. I brought you here, so you would see for yourself. Perhaps, both of us could make something of it."

Suddenly, we heard the sound of hooves. A horse was galloping through the forest. I could even hear it snort. It was nervous, and not enjoying the ride through this gloomy place. It was afraid; its rider however was not.

He slowed down to a trot and then appeared in the clearing.
My mouth opened wide in disbelief when I recognized Seraphin riding Papillon. He smiled uncertainly when he saw me, and gently stroked the horse’s neck.

I ran to them and hugged Papillon, but ignored Seraphin.
He jumped off the steed and stood there, sensing that he was not welcome.
"Did I take too long?" he asked.
"No. You are fast, but I told you not to come." I turned to the horse and said, "Good girl, still as fast as the wind."

I looked back at Seraphin and said, "I thought you were afraid of hurting her."
How could I ever trust him again?
He, hoping for a more friendly approach to our re-encounter, replied, "No, I listened to you for a change. And you are right, I did not hurt her."

Seraphin had now noticed Lucan, and gave him a curt nod, which the Roman coldly answered.
"But I wanted to keep her safe, far away from all of this. You may be safe for her, but you are riding her into a pack of werewolves," I said cautiously, and still a little resentfully about his arrival.
"I will not let it go that far. She will not come with us all the way, don’t worry. Your precious Papillon will be fine. I think she’s actually glad about the exercise," he said, and now smiled more assuredly.

But he was not out of the woods yet, and would not be for a long time.
“Return to Paris. I told you not to come,” I then said curtly.
“Àurélie, let me explain.”

“There is nothing to explain!” I spoke, my voice rising. Annoyed, he looked from me to Lucan, who stood close behind me. It was obvious that he did not want the Roman to find out about what he had done.
“Not here,” he hissed.
“Then go. I did not ask you to come. I remember vividly that I thwarted your participation.”

“You need me.”
“What on Earth for?”
“I am your connection to the lycans, and you know it.”

Yes, I did, but with my hurt feelings, and damaged pride, I did not acknowledge it. I did not want him around, ever. What he had done was bad, but it was even worse that he had done it more than once. He had mocked me from the beginning; mocked me with his year long absence on his so-called journey with Akira to discover more about his kind, and mocked me every time he hunted in Paris and created more lycans. Had he really needed a year to discover more about the werewolves, when he had their leader by his side? I shook my head to rid it of those images.
“Aurélie, please, let me help you, you need me. I am sorry, I do not know if you will ever forgive me, but at least let me help you somehow; let me save you if I need to. I beg you. Have I not done so before?”

“Are you referring to the attack on Akira when you “saved” me?”

“I did save you. Do not mock me.”

“I do not mock you. You are the one mocking me; you have been doing so for years!”

Again, he glanced uncomfortably at Lucan.

“Not here. Let’s not talk about this here.”

“Did you expect to just turn up, hoping I would have forgotten all about your escapades?”

With pain in his eyes, he looked away. I left him there, not expecting him to follow, but he did.

Lucan awaited us with a dark look in his eyes, watching us approach, Seraphin close behind me.

"Penelope will not be happy about this," Lucan said."

"I told him to leave," I replied coldly.

"She will find out, and she will do worse than what she’s already done."

"What happened? What did she do?" Seraphin asked, and Lucan told him about my arrival at his villa. I wanted to stop him, but once he had started the story, it was too late. Seraphin wanted to know. He was fuming with anger when he had finished the account and said accusingly, "Why would you endanger her like that! She could have killed her, and you took her there!"

"Not on purpose. He didn’t know!" I interfered, jumping between both men.

"Please do not fight now, we must stay focused."

Lucan took a step back and nodded.

"She is right."

Seraphin, still glaring angrily at Lucan, now went to the huts and looked inside.

"Where is Markus?"

"We do not know," I replied. He was not going to leave. I could force him, turn vicious, but I would not do it in front of Lucan, and Seraphin knew that and banked on it.

"You cannot stay with us," Lucan said to my relief. "If Penelope finds out that you’re here, she will kill you, or worse, kill Aurélie."

"She can use my help."

"She will send us word of her new whereabouts. If her messenger informs her that you’re here, she will send someone to get rid of you, or she might do it herself."

"Because I’m a half breed."

"Yes."
"It is fine. For once I must agree with you," Seraphin reluctantly said. "It is better if I leave and remain at a distance. I could track the werewolves and gain their trust. Perhaps, I can find out where Akira is, or who is behind this."

"You do not have to. Nobody asked you! I told you to go home!" I said, finally losing my temper.

"I will find you. I’ll be close," Seraphin said, ignoring my angry outburst. Lucan gave me a strange look, but he did not comment.

“I do not want you to be close!” I said.

Now Lucan placed himself between us, and looked from one to the other.

“I have to agree with Seraphin,” he began. “He can be of help as long as he keeps his distance. He has a connection to the werewolves, and we have to use that.”

Furiously, I glared at him, but I did not speak. Seraphin seemed relieved.

“Thank you,” he said.

"This is ridiculous!" I spat, but none of them replied. Lucan gave me a knowing look, and Seraphin glanced at me apologetically. I walked away, widening the distance between both men as much as possible, I did not want any part of their plan, a plan I had originally wanted to keep secret from Lucan, but which was now embraced by him. How ironic and how infuriating!

CHAPTER VII: Pride and Prejudice

Papillion’s white coat was a stark contrast to the black horse beside her, but the brown spots on her neck and flank seemed to provide a balance between both opposing colors. Both steeds marched at a steady trot, pulling the carriage.

Seraphin had unstrapped the other black horse, which was relieved to be free of the carriage’s weight, and darted happily about, like a foal.

I wanted Papillon close to me. Seraphin was out to mingle with the werewolves, and I could not expose her to them. I could not expose the black horse either, but Seraphin had promised me to set her free if he got too close to the lycans.

Lucan and I sat there in silence; he was holding tightly to the reins.

Seraphin had left us less than an hour ago. Despite my anger and my refusal to work with him, I was worried. I also felt a lot of wrath towards Penelope for her treatment of me, and her neglect at providing us with leads. Akira would have made sure we knew where we were going, and provided us with some protection, whereas Penelope simply rejected any notions of our safety. The more I compared both leaders, the more I was inclined to favor Akira. Yet, I had loved Penelope too,
when I first met her. In the subsequent years, I had always admired her. And most importantly, my life depended on her existence.

She had never treated me as a threat though; she had never willingly hurt me before; and it was still hard for me to come to terms with that. I could not help feeling resentful.

We were on our way to the Ardennes, in the southern provinces of Belgium, which in 1821 was still part of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands. It would not get its independence and be called Belgium until much later, in 1830. It was a beautiful area, hills covered in green forests, where one could hide away from view. Green fields stretched from one hill to the other, from one forest to another.

Castles were abounding. We came upon one in the Southeast that bore a long and eventful history. The Castle of Bouillon was an old fortress that had first been built in the 8th Century. It stood sturdily on rocky formations from where its occupants had a full 360 degree view, and it was well protected from invaders. Godefroid, a leader of the crusades in 1096, was one of its best known residents.

We stopped there and had a look. It was truly beautiful and impressive, and for a moment, I envisioned myself living in such a magnificent structure.

We met Seraphin in the village, and I let Lucan tell him about the stronghold, and my ideas about such a structure providing a safe lair, as I was still refusing to speak to him myself. Seraphin entered the abandoned castle by night, to check if there were any traces of werewolves, but he came back with no news. No immortals but us had visited the premises.

We left the village, and continued our journey, Lucan and I together, as Seraphin went off on his own.

Crossing the Ardennes was a beautiful ride; the views over the green hills, and the dense forests were amazing. One could so easily hide here. It was also great to use Papillon again and to spend time with her. The other horse was about her size, and both horses had accepted each other.

"It is so beautiful here. Sometimes I forget why we even came." I sighed once when we rode through a lush, green valley surrounded by forested hills.

"Or you’d like to forget," Lucan mumbled.

"Of course, I would. I do not like this mission."

"We do not have a choice. Our lives..."

"Depend on it. I know," I interrupted him. "And trust me, I know we don’t have much choice; but I don’t like the fact that we might have to confront Akira."

"So, you do admit then that he is involved?" he said, and glanced at me.

"I don’t admit anything. I just do not wish to battle him."

"Look, he will not let you live because you saved his life, or because you live with half a werewolf. If he is set on destroying Penelope, he will do it, he doesn’t care if that kills you."
"Lucan, first of all, I do not live with Seraphin; and secondly, that is not what I am worried about!"

Now, he gave me an inquisitive look. "What are you worried about?"

"That we are in trouble either way. In case we have to fight him, he will destroy both of us. He is a very powerful being. If Penelope wins, she may still kill me. If Akira wins, I die anyway. If Akira is not involved and somebody else is doing this, and he wins, then I will surely die. Whichever way you look at it, my or our chances do not stand so well."

"What are you saying? That we shouldn’t even try to save Penelope, to save our kind?"

"Of course not. We have to try, but you must admit that we are facing a serious threat. Werewolves are extremely strong and dangerous. This is not Giada, and she was a handful! These are werewolves!"

"And yet, we have faced them before."

"But less was at stake, and Akira stopped the battle."

"True,” he said, and nodded grimly.

"You know, this the most dangerous mission ever, and everything is at stake, yet we have no information; we don’t know where to go; we don’t know where to look. We don’t even know if we are in the right country, or on the right continent. Penelope, with all her powers, should have accompanied, us and helped. I am sure she could have detected a lot more."

"She will not."

"I know that. She does not want to risk it, but Lucan, do you honestly think that she cannot kill a werewolf with her mind? What she did to me, and to you, was very impressive. Why does she not go out there and face them? She could take care of them."

"So could Gael and Balthazar. Both had the same amazing powers, but both were killed by werewolves."

For a moment I did not say anything. He was right. Both elders had lost their lives to the lycans.

"They have tough hides and are extremely strong. You just said it yourself. Killing them with your mind may work, but only if you catch them unaware. In battle, it is a difficult weapon to use, unless you are fighting another vampire or perhaps humans."

"Then you are saying they are stronger than we are."

"In some ways they are, but not always."

"When are they not?"

"They only achieve their full werewolf form once a month at full moon. During the other days, they are normal men, still strong, but not strong enough to face a vampire, unless they use powerful weapons or they know our vulnerable spot. The
latter is hardly possible, because you need to have intimate knowledge of the vampire to find that out."
"Or be lucky," I said.
I remembered how I had stumbled upon Giada’s weak spot during a battle. It had been her eyes.

Our vulnerable spots, or Achilles heel, as I called it, were the parts of our bodies where we had been mortally wounded before we had been turned into vampires. I had been stabbed in my abdomen before Lucan rescued me, cured my injury, and made me a vampire. So, my belly was the place in my body where one could hurt me. If one became a vampire without any injuries, then obviously one did not have any vulnerable spot, which was even better; but I had one; and Giada used to have one. Seraphin had one, it was his throat. I did not know if Lucan had one too; he had never told me, but that did not surprise me. There were many things he had not conveyed to me.

"Yes," he said. "Or be lucky. Of course, there are those werewolves that choose to keep their wolven form, such as Heinrich. They can never become men again, but they are always strong and hard to defeat."

I remembered Heinrich, and my first meeting with him where I had watched him devour six humans who had been bound to trees by forest thieves. Heinrich was one of the werewolves that had lived with Markus Humboldt. He had shed his human form forever, and chosen to always live in his werewolf form. How this was possible, I had no idea, but this made Heinrich obviously very dangerous.

"How do we recognize them if they are in their human form?" I asked.
"You will know."

We climbed a low hill and disappeared into the dense forest.

Many years ago, I had thought of the forest as the perfect hiding spot, a place where I could find safety. Since I had met werewolves, and seen their numbers and viciousness, the woods had taken on a threatening appearance.

Papillon’s nostrils flared nervously, and anxiously, she stared ahead. Lucan’s horse also seemed apprehensive. She snorted and stomped her hoof. We continued our journey a few paces, but then, as if they had silently come to an agreement, the horses stopped and refused to go on. Lucan and I exchanged worried looks, since both steeds were terrified.

Something was out there, something, or someone. Strangely enough, neither Lucan nor I were able to detect anything. We did not sense the presence of another immortal.

We dismounted our horses, and bound them to the nearest trees. Slowly, we walked on, not knowing what had unnerved Papillon and the black horse so much, ready to strike at any threat if necessary. We moved forward, our feet barely
touching the cold soil. We entered the center of the forest, where the trees stood closer together and hardly let any sunlight through; and even though it was around noon, the sun’s rays were soon unable to penetrate the thicket of trees. We stopped in a spot, so dark that it could have been night, had we not known what time of day it was.

We knew that this was the place where the scent had scared the horses, we sensed it too. Werewolves had been here. We knew that they had gone. It looked as if the camp had been abandoned a few days ago. I wondered if they were on Penelope’s trail. There were scraps of bones and human flesh, a bloodied, handless arm lay next to the ashes of a burnt-out fire. Bunches of shed hair were strewn all over the place. Lucan picked one up, and held it to his nose. He looked at me and nodded affirmatively.

“They must have left two days ago,” he said, and knelt with one knee next to the burnt embers.

“The ashes are cold,” he said.

“They can’t have gone far.”

“No.”

Despite the darkness, our vampiric vision allowed us to see things ordinary humans would not be able to distinguish. An unusual sign caught my attention, and curiously I moved to the tree where I had spotted it.

It looked as if someone had carved something in the bark.

It was an arrow pointing left, a W neatly carved below. I could see that it had recently been done, perhaps by the werewolves that had been here, or perhaps by a captive …

“Lucan,” I called.

Immediately, he stood next to me and stared at the sign.

“This is recent,” he said.

“Yes, but what is it? Why would they start carving trees? To leave clues behind for the rest of the clan?”

He let his fingers glide over it and said, “It looks as if someone is telling them to go west. Look, the arrow points to the west, and there is a W underneath. It is a little too obvious, isn’t it?”

“Why would they do that? Do they know we are following them and therefore they are trying to guide us in the wrong direction?” I wondered aloud.

“They would not bother.”

“It could be a code. It is obviously pointing to the west, but maybe it means something completely different. This is just too easy to be taken seriously.”

Lucan did not answer; he seemed to ponder the meaning of the sign.
Suddenly, some paper lying at the bottom of the tree caught my attention. It was stuck between the roots that were rising out of the ground. I did not think it was a coincidence. It rather looked as if someone had left it there on purpose.

I bent down, and picked it up. As soon as I saw it in my hand, I recognized the words.

“It does mean that we have to go west,” I said, amazed at my discovery. “Seraphin left us this clue. He could not have made it easier for us.”

“How do you know it is he?” he asked suspiciously.

I held the paper in front of him and said, “This is a page from “Pride and Prejudice”, a novel I was reading a few days before you arrived in Paris. He must have taken it with him.”

“Surely, he did not expect to find time to read,” he said mockingly.

“One course not!” I snapped. “You should at least give him some credit, he must have planned to use it as a means to communicate with me.”

“Anyone could have that book. I’m sure we will find the rest of it somewhere around here.”

“Then look for it. You will not find it. Trust me, Seraphin just left us a message telling us to go west. Most probably he is travelling with them, and if he is, he will show us the way.”

Lucan took the paper and held it to his nose.

“It smells of him.”

“You see! Why didn’t you believe me?”

“Aurélie, I trust you, and you know that; but we are on a dangerous mission, and we have to be careful and treat every piece of information we get with suspicion.”

“Even if it comes from Seraphin? Do you still not trust him? You are his maker!”

I had not planned on defending him, especially after what had happened, but considering the circumstances, I did not see how Lucan could not be convinced it was him.

“I know he is an honorable man, but you know the history we share. I do not think I need to explain.”

“You are both on the same side. You are the one who decided to let him help us.”

“He is on your side. He is helping you, not me. He is only helping to make sure that you will live; in other words, saving Penelope means saving you.”

On my side … how that sounded … because of guilt or due to some forgotten loyalty he had discovered deep within himself, I wondered. But if Lucan understood that Seraphin was helping because of me, then there was no reason to doubt his clues.
“And therefore we can trust the information,” I said, more resolutely than I had intended.

He nodded, realizing that I could be right. Seraphin was leading us to the werewolves.

Holding the paper, I remembered that this was a part of Seraphin that I reluctantly kept in my hand, not sure if I wanted this part to remain with me. For a moment I stayed where I was and stared at the paper, still remembering the blurry outline of his profile I had seen when I drank from the con woman in Paris, as the last images of her soul fledged by. There was the night that he entered the bordello, the woman taking off her red blouse deliberately, slowly, and seductively. Her hand slid over the bloodied window, desperately trying to find an escape. Next, I saw her bloodied corpse on the floor, by the foot of the bed they had not even used. Her eyes were still open, as she stubbornly clung to life. She did not see her ripped open throat. She did not look down upon her slashed open torso. She did not know how much of her blood had splashed onto the floor, walls, window, and even ceiling. Her blood had given the room an eerie glow in the dim candlelight; and Seraphin, the werewolf, stood over her on all fours, blood dripping from his muzzle and his long fangs, eager to tear her up. She knew she was dying, but she did not accept it. She knew a monster had killed her, but she could not accept it. She was fighting it, but she had lost this last battle. I closed my eyes and opened them again, hoping the images would disappear. Then, I crumpled the paper into a ball and dropped it into the remnants of the dead fire. Finally, I followed Lucan and left the messy camp. We returned to our horses that were awaiting us eagerly, and we unbound them.

Relieved to go the other way, they turned and took us west.

CHAPTER VIII: Held up in Reims

The Ardennes were beautiful, and I wished I had come here for different, more pleasurable, reasons. I vowed to return here one day under happier circumstances, if I survived this adventure. Perhaps an abandoned castle could become my new lair. The idea pleased me enormously, and I already envisioned myself looking over the high castle walls and watching Lucan fly towards me. I shook my head and forced the image of Lucan away. There could be no silly, human day dreaming. I wanted to see only the castle and me in it, no one else.

Papillon seemed more relaxed, which meant that the werewolves were far away. I sometimes wondered if we were still going in the right direction, but then, as if he waited for my moments of uncertainty, we found one of Seraphin´s many clues. He usually left a page of my book behind, and it was always in numerical
order. A paper would be sticking out from between two rocks; it could be rolled up and stuck in a crevice of a tree stem; we also found some in the ashes of a burnt out fire; or we would encounter the ripped out pages in a crack of the wall of an abandoned hut.

What he was doing was very dangerous. If the werewolves caught wind of his betrayal, they would kill him without pardon. His lycan blood would not help him; and after all, he was also half a vampire, a trait that did not increase his chances of getting any mercy.

He was taking an incredible risk.

If Penelope only knew… would she accept him? Would she forgive him for his werewolf blood?

But as Lucan had pointed out, he was not doing it for her; he was doing this for me, to make sure that I would live.

Seraphin’s clues took us out of the Belgian Ardennes and led us south to Reims in the French Champagne region. Everywhere we saw vineyards, as far as we could see. White grapes grew into the far horizon, carefully cultivated by the farmers. The ever-watchful owner was very proud of the champagne he produced, and wanted to make sure that every stock of grapes was processed under the same conditions, to produce his high quality trademark beverage.

As a mortal, I had never tasted this bubbly luxury, since we did not have the means to afford it; but I knew that Marie Antoinette and her ladies-in-waiting at Versailles had drunk it frequently. The pre-revolutionary pamphlets had shown us that. I realized that most of the information on those pamphlets had been exaggerated and even invented, to arouse the common people’s hatred for Marie Antoinette; and I had not believed everything, but her luxurious life had been true, and champagne had always been the wine of the wealthy.

My mortal life was such a long time ago, as if it had never happened, as if I was now leading a second life. In a way that was true, my mortal life now seemed meaningless compared to my immortality.

The sun had just set, its flaming orange ball disappearing behind the endless vineyards, bathing them in a glorious light. Once she was gone though, darkness soon set in.

“Do you ever think of your life as a mortal?” I asked Lucan out of curiosity. He gave me a surprised look. He had obviously not expected that question. “It was a long time ago,” he said evasively. “But you must have memories.”

He opened his mouth to answer, but then glanced up at the sky. The darkness and the lack of lights in the countryside allowed us to admire a star-filled sky. They were endless, countless, one next to the other, millions of little lights illuminating the black dome covering the earth. It was such a spectacle of beauty
and I stared at it in amazement, not noticing that Lucan had looked up for a completely different reason.

“It is full moon tonight,” he said somberly.

Now I saw it too. The yellow orb was firmly set between the many stars. The full moon that inspired such beauty and romance was to us only a messenger of doom. We were chasing werewolves who until now had not been able to take on their form. Tonight, however, they could. How could we have missed that? Why had we not seen the moon’s round form increase? Had we been on the road for a month already?

Lucan and I exchanged worried looks. We knew we had to reach a safe haven, so we spurred our horses on, and raced in full gallop towards the city of Reims.

Papillon’s nostrils flared; she knew we were in danger; and if she knew, that meant that the lycans were close. The black horse was also nervous. We did not even need to spur them on. They ran of their own free will, eager to escape whatever was behind us.

And then I heard them. They were snarling and breathing heavily, trying to outrun our steeds.

I looked back and saw that there were five of them, fully transformed, avidly chasing their first kill of the night. There was still a large distance between them and us, but they were catching on.

“Allez!” I yelled and kicked Papillon in her flank. She snorted as an answer and ran as fast as her legs could carry us.

“We have to leave the horses, and fly away!” Lucan shouted.

“No!”

There was no way that I was going to leave Papillon and the black horse behind.

It was a simple, but firm no; and Lucan knew that he could not get me to follow his advice, and it was not the time to argue.

The lycans were getting closer. I knew we could not outrun them. We would have to fight them. I saw that Lucan was transforming as he rode his horse. His arms expanded; his nose and mouth took on the shape of a large, fanged beak. His clothes ripped off of him as he grew to an enormous size, and his horse shrieked as she felt sharp talons in her flanks where a moment ago Lucan’s feet had been. Finally, he was too big to stay on the horse; and, now a gigantic eagle, he jumped off and leaped at the first werewolf behind us. His huge form did not intimidate the monster at all. It did not even evade Lucan’s attack, with murderous intent it also leaped at him. Both met in midair, snarling and growling at each other.

The black horse, now carrying less weight, ran off to save herself. Papillon tried to keep up with her, but I knew I had to help Lucan, so with all my might, I
focused my energy on my transformation too. It didn’t always work, in fact, it had let me
down before in crucial battles. But not now, I prayed, not now!

It was difficult to do it on a racing horse, but slowly I felt the strength tear my chest
apart. My body expanded; my clothes tore, and fell away; my fangs grew very large, and
my skin took on a dark, nearly black color. My hair grew in long strands over my back
towards my buttocks; and I felt my face contract and expand. I knew my shape, Frederica
had described it to me. I changed into a giant, black, leathery bat with incredible
powers. Once I had achieved my full transformation, I jumped off my running horse,
and growling loudly and threateningly, I ran back to the battle scene to help Lucan.

It was not necessary though, two werewolves met me halfway. I ran at them, my rage
giving me enormous strength. Then, with one movement, I lifted the first werewolf
up and threw him into the vineyard. He roared angrily, and immediately stood up, while
I fought my other attacker. He opened his jaws wide and went for my throat, but I evaded
his teeth cunningly, and thrust my claw through his chest. He was still holding on to me,
trying to bite me, as my claw felt his beating heart and decisively closed around it. Sudden-ly, he stopped fighting, and stared at me as the last seconds of his life were coming to an end. I ripped out his heart and held it before him. It was the last thing he saw before he dropped dead onto the ground.

I did not have much time to recover. His heart still in my talons, I felt a sharp blow
against my back. I screamed in anger and pain, and furiously I turned around, dropping the bloody heart.

I heard a horse whinny in panic, and hoped it was not Papillon.

The werewolf struck again, and this time his sharp nails tore at my chest. I flung
myself at him, and he leaped at me, ready to strike a killing blow. I was bleeding from
my chest and back, but I did not pay attention to it; it did not seem important. This was a
matter of life and death, and he would not rest until he killed me. I could see it in his
bloodshot eyes. The moment our eyes met was strange and scary, and lifted our rage to
violent proportions. Somehow, our brief eye contact increased our lust for blood, and we fought and snarled, and struck wildly, rolling over and over in the grass. Then, he was on top of me, his teeth dangerously close to my face. It was like a déjà vu. Years ago I had been in the same position, the same danger, and I had thought my life was over, but then Seraphin had saved me, and he had killed my attacker.

Seraphin was not around now.

I flashed my teeth and kicked him hard, pushing against his chest with my demonic
arms, and finally rolling him over. I went for his throat, and tore it to pieces, but he did not go down easily. He ripped my back open with his claws, and tore through my wound. I flinched, but did not let go of him. Suddenly, his arms dropped by his sides. He was still breathing, but he was dying. His eyes were
already clouding over. He stared at me in disbelief and shock, and then his eyes lost their brilliance and he was gone. When I stood up, I saw two ordinary men on the grass. One of them had a hole in his chest the size of my fist; and the other one’s throat was a bloody mess. Both had been very young when turned.

But there was no time to lose. I remembered that there had been five werewolves. If I had fought two, that meant that Lucan had to fight three of them, which even in his form was a difficult feat.

I raced through the vineyard, jumping over the vines and hedges. I heard snarling and growling noises and I knew I was getting closer.

The moon still stood brightly in the cloudless sky, its threatening orb overlooking the battle scene.

Lucan was fighting two werewolves, but I could see he was hurt; blood gushed from his chest.

My wound was not deep and I had not lost so much blood, but Lucan had been hit badly. The third werewolf was nowhere in sight, and I could not see a body either. Had he fled?

I did not hesitate. I leaped at one of his attackers, who turned in surprise. He had never expected me to survive. He grinned in anticipation, blood dripping from his fangs, and he fought me, his talons tearing at me viciously. I retaliated by ripping my claws into his face, and tearing through one of his eyes. Blood spurted from the socket, his bloodied eye a mess. Furiously, he hit me, but I grabbed his paw and threw him over my shoulder. He fell face down on the grass as I went after him, and landed with both knees on his back. With my claws, I held his strong paws to the floor, and then tore at his neck, ripping it open. Blood spurted out and splattered my face. His arms were resisting, trying to throw me off. Once he managed to break one arm free, but immediately I pinned it to the ground again.

Soon, his struggle became weaker, and then he stopped. He was dead. As soon as life left him, his body lost its werewolf shape and became the man he had once been. I was sitting on a young man’s body; and when I turned him around, I realized that he had only been a boy. He could not have been older than sixteen or seventeen. He had been too young to enter immortality; he had not lasted long…

My body also acquired its vampiric form again, covered in a flimsy, severely ripped undergarment, which was all that had survived my transformation and battle.

Lucan, having lost his eagle form too, lay on his back, a dead werewolf next to him.

I knelt by his side. His chest was bleeding profusely. Without a second thought, I bit my wrist and created a small gash. Then, I held it over his wound, my blood dripping over his body, in an attempt to heal. His flesh was slowly growing back, but not everywhere.
“It will take time,” he whispered.
I nodded. I knew that; I had seen it before.
“There is another one, a fifth one,” I said.
“He is gone.”
“Dead?”
“No.”
He gave me a meaningful look, and then I saw it in his thoughts. I remembered the whinnying horse.
Papillon!
“Oh no!” I stammered.
I wanted to go and find the horses, but I knew I could not leave him behind.

But Papillon … I could not abandon her.
“Get up,” I urged Lucan.
“It is just a horse. You can get a new one,” he said.
“Just a horse? This is Papillon!”
I thought of the other horse, the black one. Which one had it been?
How could Lucan be so cold? He knew how much Papillon meant to me.
“We have to find them!” I spoke urgently.
“We can fly. We do not need them.”
“You cannot fly in your condition!”
“But you can. You can take me with you. Aurélie, forget about the horses. They can take care of themselves.”
“Damn you, Lucan! If you weren’t in such a weak state…!” I cursed.
He sat up slowly, now losing less blood. He was paler than usual.
“We will fly,” I said, “but we will look for the horses.”
“Aurélie!” he said, exasperated.
“I am the strong one now, so I am in charge. We will find the horses.”
He sighed like a worn-out teacher would with an obstinate student. I helped him up, and he laid his arm around my shoulders. I grabbed him around his waist, and spread my wings.

We soared through the cool night air, Lucan hanging on to me, still feeling weakened. My eyes searched the dark surroundings below me, the vineyards, and the endless fields, and finally, they rested on a large forest.

We could not enter now, not in Lucan’s condition. I was also wounded, although my wounds were not so deep, and I had lost little blood. I knew though that the horses were there, terrified, hiding from monsters they could not fathom.

I flew over the forest, unable to see through the thicket of trees, but using my senses.
The forest was quiet, and I wondered if the lycans’ lair was in the forest. But, if it was, would the horses hide between the trees? They were highly intelligent creatures, and they knew when to run from danger. Nevertheless, they were there. I just knew it.

“Do not go in there,” Lucan said sternly.

“But they are down below.”

“I know, but remember that one werewolf is still prowling the grounds, there were five of them.”

I did not answer, but flew closer to the trees, and peered through the thicket. I saw only one horse, but I smelled blood, a lot of it.

A nauseous feeling overtook me as I took Lucan down into the forest and descended next to Papillon. As soon as I landed, I carefully let go of Lucan and felt Papillon’s flanks and throat, but to my relief, I found that she was unblemished.

But then I noticed the dark mass on the ground.

I knelt next to it, and realized it was the black horse; Papillon had been watching over her. Her throat was a mess of blood, flesh and bone; her stomach was ripped open, and a large chunk had been torn out of it. I recognized the tooth marks in the bloodied flesh. The poor thing was still breathing. She looked at me, knowing that she was safe now, but she also knew that it was too late.

Tears brimmed at the corners of my eyes, and when I couldn’t withhold them any longer, they ran freely down my cheeks.

Lucan stood there helplessly, and said nothing, but I could feel his sorrow.

I wanted to lessen her suffering, to help her enter death without pain, only in beauty and peace, like the visions most people had when I drained them of their blood, and they approached death. Poor girl, she looked so innocent. I stroked her back gently, the part of her body that had not been attacked, where my caresses would not hurt, but only convey the love I felt for her.

I had never even given her a name.

She looked at me, really looked at me; and then life left her eyes, and she let go of her last breath.

A cold wind came up from below, touched my chin, and went up over my face into the air. I never understood how I knew, but I sensed that it had been her soul leaving her body.

After that, there was nothing. The forest was silent.

CHAPTER IX: Pages in the Wind

Lucan’s injuries took time to heal, and therefore we were forced to spend a few days in Reims. My wounds also took their time, but not as long as Lucan’s. Any
other injury would normally heal immediately, flesh growing over the gash in an instant; but lesions that were inflicted by werewolves took longer to mend.

We decided it would be safer to stay in the city. Lucan gave me some livres and we rented a room in a quiet hotel. Luckily, we were the only guests. I left Papillon at a rented stable, and paid the boy a generous tip in advance to make sure he took good care of her. I bought new clothes for us and I hunted alone at night. Lucan was still too weak to accompany me, but I brought him blood in drinking flasks. I bled my victims and tapped their blood, thus filling the flasks. By the time I got back to the hotel, the red liquid had cooled down and did not taste as good as it should, but I could not possibly take humans to the hotel. Until Lucan got his strength back, it would have to suffice. He never complained, he was grateful for the blood I brought, even though it was cold. He took it all and it gave him more strength every day.

Seraphin could not have known what had happened to us; otherwise he would have come. He was probably still with the lycans, leaving clues for us, trying to lead us to Akira’s lair.

“Thank you,” Lucan said when I had handed him a fresh flask of blood on our third day in Reims.

He unscrewed the cork and held it to his lips. He had now gotten used to the cold liquid, and drank it with his eyes closed, but I could see the disgust on his face. He could not hide it.

“I could smuggle some live animals in if you want: a few rats, pigeons. It is not much, but at least the blood will be warm,” I offered.

He smiled, amused.

“Only you would think of that,” he said, and smiled. “Do not worry. The human blood is fine, even though it is cold. It is helping me, and I feel a lot better. Perhaps we could leave in the morning.”

“Are you sure?”

He nodded.

Then he took my hand and held it to his chest. Warmth spread through my cold body, feeling out of place as it touched my dead heart, and yet filling me with hope again … a useless hope …

I withdrew my hand and said, “No, Lucan.”

“What? Aurélie, talk to me, please.”

I sighed and said, “I do not want to talk about it.”

“But I do. In fact, it is my fault that you met Seraphin. If I had not cast you out of my house all those years ago, you would not have travelled to London, and you would not have run into him.”

“Lucan, that sounds very unreasonable. Remember that I met him the night that you made me?”
“Yes, but it was a chance meeting and it would have remained that way if I had not cast you out.”

“But you have and it is too late now. Your “ifs” will not turn back time or change anything. Besides, how do we know if you and I would have stayed together? We might have separated eventually anyway. You are my maker and my mentor, and that is how I love you, how it will always be.”

I stood up and walked to the window, not wanting to face him, refusing to meet his eyes. My words rang a little untrue and it bothered me. I should have worked things out by now. I was acting like a human. A true vampire chooses his or her companion and does not confuse him or herself with human feelings and insecurities. An immortal has no reason to lie about her feelings. An immortal does not struggle with indecisions, and certainly not with infidelity. An immortal would take care of the betrayal by killing the one who had wronged her. But no, not I …

We had a view over the town of Reims, and absentmindedly, I gazed over the rooftop.

This was not the time to discuss these things. We were on a dangerous mission, and had barely escaped with our lives a few days ago. Conversations about lost opportunities and regrets were unnecessary and they were surely out of place. There was no need to make anyone uncomfortable.

As I contemplated the dusk settling over Reims, I suddenly noticed a movement on one of the rooftops. A man carefully walked along a gable a few blocks away. It seemed as if he were searching for something or someone, because he was constantly looking down onto the streets. He had a strong physique and thick ash blond hair. Agilely, he moved over the roof and jumped to the next house. The muscles of his legs bulged in his pants when he took the leap.

“When you see them, you will know,’ Lucan had told me not so long ago.

At that moment the man turned around, facing me, and although he was far from our hotel, I immediately moved away from the window.

“What is it?” Lucan asked.

“I think I have spotted a werewolf.”

Alarmed, he sat up.

“Where?” he asked.

“On the rooftops. He seems to be looking for something.”

“He is looking for us,” Lucan said and left the bed. Firmly, he strode towards the window and peered outside.

“Do you see him?” I asked.

He did not answer. He looked left and right and then said, “He’s gone.”

“That can’t be! He was there just a moment ago,” I said, and pushed him away.
But indeed, he had disappeared.
“We cannot stay here,” Lucan said.
I nodded. He did not have to tell me twice.
We left the room and descended the stairs. Downstairs we ran into the owner, and we quickly explained to him that we had to leave. We paid the confused man what we owed, and then left hurriedly. We went to the stables a few blocks away and picked up Papillon. We both mounted her - Lucan behind me - and galloped over the cobblestoned streets.
Soon, we left Reims behind us, and rode over green fields, passing large vineyards. We travelled west, assuming that it was still the right direction.

Once Reims was far behind us, we slowed Papillon down and rode her at a steady trot.
We had left the green fields behind and we were surrounded by an endless forest. It was not so dark though, and the trees did not stand so close together. A lot of sun light peered through the green thicket and gave the leaves a shimmering glow.
“Why was that man looking for us?” I wondered aloud. “He could not finish us off, since he was not in his lycan form.”
“Perhaps he needed to inform his leader.”
“To send more men after us?”
“Who knows?”
A cracked wall rose in a clearing, and suddenly we found ourselves among the ruins of an old house. Papillon became nervous and wanted to retreat. We dismounted, and tied her to a tree. She snorted apprehensively.
They had been here, very recently. Werewolf hair was strewn all over the place, and there were footprints of giant monsters and ordinary men. I wondered if the latter had been victims or the lycans in their human form.
Anxiously, I searched for one of Seraphin’s clues, but as I combed the camp, nothing turned up. Lucan seemed to be doing the same.
“Aurélie.”
I turned and looked at an empty spot where he had been just a moment ago.
“Where are you?” I asked.
“Over here.”
I heard his voice behind the ruined wall, and so I went around it. There I found Lucan standing by an open trap door. I stopped next to him and peered down into a pitch dark shaft, leading straight down. Again, a sense of déjà vu came over me. I had seen such an entrance before, many years ago. It had been in Central Mexico, when we had found Akira’s lair.
“Should we go down there?” I asked hesitantly.
“They seem to have left,” Lucan offered.
“What if they are still there?”
“There is only one way to find out.”
“Lucan, your wound has just barely healed.”
He gave me an exasperated look and said, “The camp is abandoned. They would have guards watching the place, and the trap door would not be open. They have left, and obviously they were in a hurry, because they did not even bother to close it.”
He did not wait for my reply, and leaped into the darkness, gently gliding down.
I knew I could not let him go in alone, so I followed him.
The shaft was extremely long, and I wondered how deep it really went when after a while I still had not reached the bottom. I stuck out my hand and felt cold moist soil around me, firmly molded into four walls. It was very well done, and must have taken a long time to prepare. If the camp was indeed abandoned, Akira must have regretted his sudden departure. But why had he left? Lucan and I could not be the reason, or could we? Did he know we were looking for him on Penelope’s orders? Did he fear Penelope?
When I finally landed on hard rocks, Lucan had already disappeared. To my left, a wide tunnel led into more darkness. I entered it, and as I walked, I noticed that it descended even more, but not as steeply. I wondered how deep this lair really was. Empty torch holders were stuck into the walls.
The tunnel took me to a round hall, which was lit by one torch. I supposed Lucan had lit it. There were five wooden doors, and one of them stood wide open. I decided to take that one, guessing that Lucan had gone through it too. I walked through a narrow tunnel. It took a sharp bend around a corner and then opened wide into an enormous common room. The rock walls were decorated with colorful tapestries, and the stone ground was covered with red and brown Persian rugs.
Small tables were strewn around the room and each of them was surrounded by comfortable sofas and couches.
This was definitely a permanent lair, or at least it had been. Now that Lucan and I knew of its existence, Akira could not dwell here any longer. Vampires could not know werewolves’ hiding places.
It was a shame though to lose it. Akira had obviously invested in this place, and had to be disappointed to have been forced to abandon it.
A blue and red tapestry moved as if blown by wind. The others though, remained still.
Curiously, I approached the tapestry, and discovered a hidden door behind it. It was wide open. Lucan had to be there.
I moved the curtain aside and stepped into another room, even more extravagantly decorated than the first one. A large red carpet with interwoven golden threads lay on the floor. By the opposite wall, I saw a four-poster bed that could have been taken from Louis XVI himself. It was enveloped by a thin curtain that was just thick enough to blur any mortal’s sight, but thin enough for me to see through with my vampiric eyes.

To my left, there was a Louis XIV chair next to a small, round table, and in the middle of the wall to my left stood a long and round mirror, framed in pure golden leaves. It was so big, that two people could stand in front of it.

On my right side, I saw a book case that spanned the whole wall, from right to left and floor to ceiling. It was filled with books and manuscripts, and that was where I found Lucan. Carefully, he was examining several manuscripts. He seemed so absorbed in them, that he never even heard me come in.

“He sure likes his luxury,” I commented.

Surprised, he looked up.

“Yes, he does; and he has got some interesting literature. Come and have a look.”

I walked over to him, and looked over his shoulder.

The words were written in an ancient language that I had never seen or heard of, but Lucan seemed to be able to read it.

“What language is this?” I asked.

“It is Sassanid.”

“What does it say?” I asked, wondering how he had come to learn this language.

“Well, this one here is the most important one. It recounts the story of the lycans, how they came into existence. It is interesting and a little shocking. I had never expected Penelope’s name to show up.”

“Yes,” I sighed. “I know.”

Now he looked up and inquired, “What do you know?”

“The legend of the lycans. I know Penelope is indirectly responsible for it. Akira told me everything. Don’t you remember?”

“You never said what exactly he had conveyed to you.”

“No, but I told you that he had acquainted me with the legend of the lycans.”

“So, what I have is nothing special then?” he mocked. “Everyone seems to know the story, except me.”

“Only I know it, and Seraphin. This document is very valuable, trust me.”

“I realize that.”

“But how come you can read Sassanid?” I asked him.

“That is another story.”
“I am sure,” I said sarcastically. Lucan had so many secrets, and he had hardly told me anything about his life. All I knew was how Giada had killed his wife and how she had stalked him. He had always kept his existence as a mortal and immortal very secretive.

“So, what now? We cannot read the whole library. They have long gone, and the longer we stay, the more time we waste. We have to go after them,” I said.

“We do not know where they went. Did Seraphin leave any clues?”

“No… I did not find any,” I said, disappointed.

He rolled up the document and collected a few others.

“I can read them during our journey,” he said. “It is always good to learn more about our enemy.”

I wished Akira were not our enemy. I wanted it to be someone else; but it appeared that it had been he who had sent his werewolves after us a few days ago to eliminate us. He had not shown mercy.

Lucan’s eyes met mine, and he said softly, “Do you believe me now?” He nearly sounded as if he was sorry to have been right all along, but I knew he was not.

With sadness in my heart, I understood that both Akira and I were on opposite sides now.

CHAPTER X: The map

Akira’s lair provided us with a lot of information about the lycans, and if we had not been in such a rush, we could have learned a lot more about them. For the time being we contented ourselves with packing a few scrolls that seemed useful and informative. Papillon was certainly relieved to leave this place.

“They left everything behind, did not take anything with them. They must have been in a hurry,” I remarked.

Lucan, who was seated behind me on my horse, did not reply.

“Perhaps they were in such a hurry, that they did not have time to prepare for their departure. Or maybe they are confident that no one will ever find this place. They are probably planning on returning,” I continued.

“Whatever the reason, they surely did not expect us to find their lair. Otherwise Akira would not have left all these documents,” Lucan now said.

“If he finds out what we took, he will kill us,” I said.

At this, Lucan laughed, amused. “He will kill us anyway, with or without the scrolls. So, we might as well take them.”

I heard him roll one of them open.
“This one here is interesting. It seems some kind of a map, but it is a little confusing. There are no names of cities or even countries. There is not even a clear drawing of the continents; yet there seems to be some kind of a pattern.”

“Of what?” I asked

“Strange names next to drawings of caves, and here I see a sketch of a castle.”

“Then perhaps we have to look for a castle; that is where we will find their lair.”

“Aurélie, you haven’t even seen this document. How do you know this is a map of their lairs? And why would he keep that information and leave it behind so carelessly?”

“Maybe there are more lairs, different clans.”

“There is only one clan, and that is his,” he said in an authoritative voice.

“Show me the map.”

He held it in front of me, and I snatched it out of his hand.

It was indeed a very strange map.

Weird names were strewn about, each next to a drawing of a cave and one next to a castle. Then, there was another sketch; it looked like a Roman villa, and next to it I read the name “Bartolomeo”.

I stopped Papillon and stared at the document.

I read and reread the other names, and suddenly I realized that they did not indicate places, but that they belonged to people.

Some were names I did not even know existed: Eustanio, Frangiolo, Manlitoba, Upolitus, Artorius, Cliutilius, Barotols, and Woudinil. None of these names made sense; and the only one I knew was Bartolomeo, but I had no idea who he or anyone on this document was.

I returned it to Lucan, and kicked Papillon gently on her flank. Slowly, she started moving again.

“So?” Lucan asked as he rolled up the document.

“You say it is a map,” I said.

“Yes, if you think about it. The names seem to be in different locations, but we cannot see where, since no countries are drawn. If it were a mere list of names, they would have been written chronologically, or in order, or at least in a row; but they are not. They are strewn about, apparently randomly.”

“Apparently,” I said pensively. “Do you think they are locations?”

“I do indeed.”

“Locations of lairs?”

“Probably.”

“Then we have to find out where.”

We continued our journey, still heading west, and we rode for hours at a comfortable trot. Lucan examined the documents he had taken from Akira’s lair,
and from time to time I would hear an amazed “Oh”, or “I see”, escape from his lips, but I did not ask.

We did not encounter any more werewolves along our journey, and a week later we safely reached the town of Amiens.

This time we avoided human contact, therefore, we did not rent a hotel room. Instead, we ventured into the town’s cemetery and installed ourselves in an underground burial chamber. I was the one who found it. The entrance was in the middle of the cemetery, between two tall rose bushes. I knew immediately, that there was more to the tiny building, and when I entered, my instincts were confirmed. The small room functioned indeed only as the hallway. In front of me I noticed a white marble stairway leading down into the darkness. I turned and smiled at Lucan. It was the perfect place to hide.

We closed the door and headed down the narrow stairway. We descended exactly fifty steps and then arrived in a spacious underground chamber with a high, rounded ceiling. The walls were decorated with stone statues of angels. Some were depicted with a musical instrument such as a harp, a violin or a flute; others had been carved into praying positions, their innocent faces turned upwards towards heaven; and others had their wings spread out as if they were about to fly. It was strikingly beautiful, and I realized that this burial vault belonged to a prominent family. It was also clean and well looked after, which meant that the surviving relatives visited often.

Perhaps it was not as safe as we thought, but then again, it was large, and I saw two doors that would probably lead into more hiding spaces.

In the middle of the chamber stood a shrine with various white, burning candles around the statue of Mary, holding baby Jesus. She wore real clothes! Curiously, I approached the shrine and could not resist touching the fabric of her dress. Her serene face seemed to be looking at me, inquiring as to why I showed such little respect. Nevertheless, I did not do this due to lack of respect. I was mesmerized and intrigued by such beauty and the loving care of the dead.

The fabric was soft and delicate, and I knew that it was expensive. It felt rather fresh, and I suddenly realized that this was very fine silk, a rare material that few were privileged to hold in their hands.

I let go of the blue dress and stared at Lucan.

He shrugged, not very interested in the shrine, and opened the wooden door to our left.

For a moment he stood still; then he entered.

“Aurélie, come here,” he called.

I went over to him, and walked into a smaller room. It had also been arranged with love and dedication. The floor was of white marble, and in front of us stood an elaborate glass case on a black marble base.
We both approached it and looked through the glass. The glass case was a coffin, and inside we saw a young, beautiful girl. She must have died recently, because her skin was still intact, and her white gown seemed new and looked very clean. She could not have been here long.

“We cannot hide in here. She has just died. There must be a grieving family member who comes to visit her, or a husband.”

“Aurélie, I know that we have agreed on only slaying the evildoer, but right now we have to focus on our mission and our own safety. If someone comes in here, we will have to kill him or her. We are staying here for now, until we know what our next step will be.”

I did not argue. He was right. This burial chamber was an excellent hiding place.

We also inspected the second room, and found another glass case. That one however, displayed a more decayed body in a grey dress that had probably been white when she was buried.

“Both are women,” I said.

“Yes,” he said, uninterested, and left the room.

In the main chamber, he sat on the floor and spread out the scrolls he had taken from Akira’s lair.

He studied them as he had done many times before, and as usual, he spent most of his time trying to understand the country-less map.

Nobody came to visit the dead girl the next day, but I ventured outside and went to the library where I stole a map of the European continent. I took it back to the burial chamber and showed it to Lucan.

“Look,” I said, and spread it out next to Akira’s strange map on the floor.

“You see?” I said, and looked at him triumphantly.

He understood, and a knowing smile came over his lips.

The names were all in different positions; and now that we had a real map, we could see where.

“You see, Eustanio is in Constantinople,” I said, tracing his location on the real map, according to his position on the country-less map. “And here is Friangiolo, in Bucharest. Manitoba is in Macedonia if I am not mistaken, judging by his position, perhaps in Skopje.”

“Upolitus is on the island of Crete,” Lucan said.

“And Artorius in Budapest!” I said, as excitement rose in my voice. “Clutilius must be in … yes, Vienna. Barotols is in…” I hesitated for a moment.

“Ingolstadt,” Lucan said.

“Yes, that’s it: Ingolstadt. And then Woudinil is also in…”

“Actually, Woudinil is in Cologne.”
We both looked at each other. Lucan lived in Cologne, and I had lived there many years ago.

“We know that lair,” he said.

“Yes, but Markus and his werewolves have disappeared. And who or what is Woudinil?”

“Are you thinking what I am thinking?” he asked.

“What do you mean? Do you think that Akira…? I did not finish.

I understood perfectly what he meant, and if he was right, then we were in very deep trouble.

“Yes,” he said, “I am afraid so. All those places are werewolf lairs. The names must be the leaders of the clans; and Akira is rounding them up for the final battle. This time he is not leaving anything to chance. He has already got the lycans from Cologne, and Markus is most probably dead, or has gone into hiding.”

I stared at him and said quietly, “Lucan, we … cannot win this.”

He did not contradict me; and he did not scold me for being so fatalistic. Fear had not only taken hold of me, but also of him. A feeling of doom had clouded our minds, and we finally fully understood what we were up against.

Did Penelope already know? We had to warn her!

“Penelope cannot know about this,” I stammered.

“I think she does. She asked us to create an army of blood drinkers, remember? She knows.”

“She should have told us. Do you really think that she is fully aware of their numbers? We do not even know where she is. Let us just hope she has found a very good hiding place. Let us hope she is safe. That is the only thing that matters.”

“I think hope is all we have right now.”

The rest of the documents taught us more about Greek and Sassanid history – since a Greek island had been Akira’s mortal birthplace and his forefathers had been Sassanid - and one scroll seemed to be some kind of log of the centuries. Akira apparently had noted important events of each century, of which some were recorded in historical books, and some were conveniently forgotten or erased. The new knowledge was fascinating, and I devoured the information with great eagerness.

After two nights, we heard the door at the top of the stairs open. It was a mortal. We had both just fed on a couple of thieves in the city of Amiens, and we were not particularly hungry. When we heard the mortal’s steps on the marble stairs, we exchanged a quick look, gathered the documents, and then in unison, we climbed the lofty walls until we reached the ceiling. It was very dark in the chamber, and it would have been impossible for the man to see us. If he did spot us however, we had no choice but to kill him, evildoer or not.
Finally, he appeared at the bottom of the stairs. He was a young and handsome specimen, and he was well dressed. It was obvious that he was rich. His face however, had a sad expression. In fact, he looked distraught, and I knew he had come to see the young girl in the glass case.

He walked over to the shrine and laid flowers at Mary’s feet: a bouquet of red and white orchids. Then, he crossed himself reverently and went to the chamber to the left. He opened the door to the young woman’s vault, and entered.

He did not say a word. I imagined him standing there, staring at the beautiful woman in the glass case. Who had she been? Had she been his fiancée, his wife, his lover? Or had she been his sister?

Suddenly, I heard him speak in a thick, emotional voice.

He called her Jeanne, and told her that life without her was not the same, had never been, and never would be. He missed her, and he longed to be with her.

“My life does not make sense without you. Part of me is gone now, and I am left incomplete. I cannot eat, I cannot sleep. I see your face all the time; I hear your laughter, your voice, everything; and it is driving me crazy. I cannot live without you. I have tried, Jeanne, but I cannot.”

I met Lucan’s eyes, and we both understood what that young man was about to do.

He had stopped talking, and the silence that followed his words was too much to bear. We were not left in the unknown for very long though. The scent of blood became too strong, and we both flew back to the ground, drawn by it.

When we walked into the young woman’s chamber, we found him standing, his upper body on the glass case, his bloody hands holding on to it, wishing to die while looking at her beautiful face, two lovers united in death.

He was still alive.

Although I had just fed, I could not resist the irresistible scent of his blood, and so I approached him and lifted his right hand.

He turned his head and looked at me terrified, but he was too weak to move. His eyes opened wide in disbelief when I brought his arm to my lips and sank my fangs into his slashed wrist. He did not resist; in fact, he seemed relieved to die so quickly and painlessly. He closed his eyes and allowed his visions to enter my mind.

There he was at the center of Amiens, talking to the now dead woman. She wore a pastel pink dress and her long blond hair hung loosely over her back. She laughed gaily at something he said. Then I was taken to their wedding where I saw them kiss and then dance while looking at each other lovingly. I saw them in bed, making love; and at last I saw her in bed alone, her face very pale, a dead baby in the midwife’s arms, and the mother having lost too much blood. She was dying. Her husband sat by her side and held her hand. He wept.
I did not notice Lucan taking his other arm and drinking from his left wrist, but suddenly the man stirred, and opened his eyes.

His visions left suddenly, like clouds blown away by a strong wind.

I let go of him, and in shock I watched Lucan bite his own wrist and hold it over the man’s self-inflicted wounds. He took his arm out of my hands and let his blood flow into the man’s cut wrists.

“Lucan, no!” I said and pulled the mortal’s arm back to me, but Lucan was stronger than I, and stubbornly he took his arm back and spilled his healing blood over his injuries.

“Why?” I asked. I had never been in favor of creating more vampires, and I did not understand why he felt the need to make another slayer of this stranger.

“We need more vampires. You and I are not enough. He will be strong, because he will have my blood.”

“Are you out of your mind?”

He did not answer, but the look in his eyes told me enough.

“Lucan, no… You cannot be serious.”

“It is the only way. You said it yourself: we cannot win this battle, and Penelope ordered us to create more blood drinkers.”

“But not him…”

He ignored me, and as the man’s wounds closed, he held his own bleeding wrist over his lips and ordered him to drink.

The young man opened his mouth as if in a trance, and drank Lucan’s blood, at first hesitantly, but then more greedily. With both hands, he grabbed his wrist and held it to his mouth, sucking eagerly.

Finally, Lucan withdrew his arm and took a step back.

The man stood up and swayed, but he quickly held on to the casket. He stared at us in wonder, not understanding what had just happened. He knew he was not dead; yet he also seemed to understand that he had lost his human form. His body became firmer, his fangs grew, his dark brown hair shone, and his brown eyes acquired a mesmerizing sparkle.

He looked at Lucan, and then at me, contemplating both of us. For a moment I thought he seemed pleased, although shocked and confused; but then he opened his mouth and uttered only one word, and in such an agonizing voice, that I knew he regretted having been given a new life. He had sincerely wanted to die.

Lucan had had no right; he had not even asked him.

“Why?” he asked us, and the one word cut through the air like a knife, slapping our faces in an accusatory lament.

His name was François Belmont. He was 25 when he died and entered immortality. He had been married to Jeanne Le Blessé for one year when he lost
her to childbirth. Their daughter was stillborn, and Jeanne had lost too much blood in the struggle of expelling her from her body. She succumbed to death before even seeing her daughter; she never even knew if she was alive or dead.

François was disappointed, because Lucan had stopped him from reuniting with his loved ones in death. Now they were gone forever. He glared at him angrily, but was too much in awe to berate him.

“So, you made me to help you in your struggle against … werewolves?” he asked, not really believing what he had heard.

“Yes,” Lucan said.

François shook his head in disbelief and said, “And you are planning to make more like me?”

“Yes,” Lucan calmly replied.

I said nothing; I did not like this idea. Judging by the amount of werewolf lairs, there had to be hundreds of them, maybe even thousands. Lucan would have to create too many vampires to defeat them all. I had always known Penelope as a very responsible being, and the fact that she now so carelessly planned on creating an army of immortals disconcerted and frightened me. Seeing Lucan perform the act finally made it real for me. What would the world do with so many vampires? Even if most of them got killed in the upcoming battle, what would happen to the survivors? Where would they go? How many humans would they kill? How much anger and grief would they cause among humans? Would it be so much that in the end, they would come after us? Would yet another battle ensue?

“This is nonsense!” François spat. “Werewolves? How gullible do you think I am? Men that transform into vicious beings every month at the full moon? Do you really expect me to believe that? And you made me to help you battle these … lycans, or whatever you call them?”

“And what are we? And you?” I asked. “Shall we take you outside to show you what we really are? Will you believe us then? You know what just happened to you. If we are possible, then werewolves are also possible! Believe me!” I spoke angrily.

For a moment he looked at me, then back at Lucan.

“And why would I want to help you? I do not even know you,” he blurted.

“Because I am your maker,” Lucan said.

“And what will you do if I do not help you? Kill me?” he asked mockingly.

We both knew that we would do him a favor if we killed him; it was what he wanted, why he had come here, after all.

“You will get the chance to die, if that is what you still want,” I said. “You can die in battle. At least like this, your death will not be in vain.”

Lucan looked at me in mild surprise. He could not have said it better, and again François just stared at me.
“You are both mad,” he said. “Werewolves… vampires.”

“You are a vampire!” I yelled at him, and in uncontrollable fury, I grabbed him by his hand and took him up the stairs. He followed me reluctantly, but I was strong, and I pulled him outside.

It was dark, and the cemetery was deserted. No one in their right mind would visit a cemetery at night anyway, except for the mad, or the ones who considered themselves “brave and defiant”.

Still holding his hand firmly, I crossed the cemetery with him. I could now feel Lucan behind us. He did not seem worried, only intrigued by what I was about to do.

When we reached the street, we found a one-horse carriage. The driver was on his seat, holding the reins loosely, apparently waiting for someone, probably waiting for François.

I let go of François, and leaped onto the seat. The driver jumped in shock and fear, but I held him by his shoulders, and flashed my fangs, making sure François saw them. I turned to our fledgling, and saw him cringe in discomfort. Then, I turned back to my victim and sank my fangs into his throat.

It was the first time I had attacked someone without putting him into a trance first. This man knew fear before he died. He tried to fight me, but to no avail. His warm blood flew into me, and entered my veins, ran through me, and filled me with new vigor.

His visions were few, and allowed me a glimpse into a life of horses, an old woman he was taking care of, and then … there was a young girl who looked at him in blind terror. She leaped out of bed, and in disgust, covered her abused body with a bed spread, begging him to leave, but he did not. That was all I saw, before I drank his last drop and he died in my arms.

I dropped his corpse onto the seat, and jumped off.

François stared at me in shock.

“This is what you are,” I said brusquely, looking at him hard. He did not flinch, but I read comprehension in his eyes. It was finally dawning on him; he could not deny it any longer.

Lucan had a slight smile on his face, but when I left François and walked by the Roman vampire, I said, “I did not do this for you. You can wipe that smile off your face.”

I still did not agree with his decision of making a vampire of François.

Never had I known Lucan to be so reckless, and I reasoned that he had to be desperate to have come to such a drastic measure.
When we returned to the cemetery, we knew that François was not the only immortal with us. He did not sense it, but Lucan and I glanced at each other and wondered if we should go to the burial chamber or just turn and leave.

We could not tell if the intruder was a vampire or a werewolf, but we knew he was alone, and the three of us could defeat him.

We walked through the rows of graves, marked by statues, simple gravestones, wooden crosses, orchids, lilacs, roses, marguerites and tulips.

The entrance to the vault between the tall rose bushes was unperturbed, so we could still hide inside. I reckoned that the intruder had not discovered our hide out.

François realized that something was happening. He noticed our behavior, and he knew that we were not alone any longer. I could sense his anxiety, and I realized that the other immortal who was probably observing, could sense it too.

The blood of a fledgling was too fresh to ignore. Most vampires thought it sweet to dispatch of a fledgling, denying him or her the promise of eternal life that the young one hoped to embark upon.

François’s dying wish might still come true tonight.

Then I heard the familiar voice.

“Aurélie.”

Visibly relaxing, I turned and saw a shadow emerge. Seraphin appeared from behind the trees and walked over to me.

I waited for him to reach me, and when he stood close, he hesitated, knowing I had not forgiven him. But I was relieved he was still alive, relieved he had found us.

I could feel François’s surprise at his sudden appearance, making him realize that indeed there were more of us.

“We did not find any more clues, and we thought something might have happened,” I said, pushing my grudge to the back of my mind.

“I left you clues. I guess it took you too long to get to them. The wind must have blown them away,” he said. He looked at François and asked, “Who is he?”

I looked at Lucan and said, “Let him explain that.”

We returned to Lucan and François who were awaiting us.

“We found Akira’s lair, Seraphin, and a map,” I said.

“You did? What map?”

“We will show you.”

Lucan greeted him politely, and introduced the new vampire.

François understood that Seraphin was a vampire, but he also noted immediately, that something was different about him. He stared at him, trying to figure out what it was, but could not fathom the complete essence of Seraphin.

We walked back to the burial vault, and after we entered, we bolted the door from the inside.
Seraphin thought that Penelope was mad to instruct the creation of an army of vampires, and it frightened him. He did not approve of it, and he told us not to do it. At this, Lucan grabbed the map and threw it at him angrily.

“Then look at this!” he said.

Seraphin unrolled the strange map and stared at the names. He did not look shocked, or even in awe. Calmly, he gave the map back to Lucan.


“No, I know of these places,” he calmly replied.

“You what? Why did you never tell me?”

“I promised Akira many years ago to keep his secrets.”

“Why did Akira give you that information, and why in the world would you keep this from us? If we had known this before…!” I yelled, now furiously.

“Then what? Would you have created more vampires to fight them all?” he asked sarcastically.

“Yes,” Lucan answered.

Seraphin stared at him hard and shook his head.

“Whose side are you on?” I asked.

“Yours of course.”

“Then why do you withhold important information?”

“I do not! I was leading you, wasn’t I? I was showing you the way, risking my life with every betrayal of the lycans I was travelling with! Do you know what they would have done to me if they had discovered what I was doing?”

“Betrayal of the lycans?” Lucan asked. “Is that how you see it? Why do I get the feeling that you feel more allegiance to them than to us? You always seem to forget that you are, after all, also a vampire.”

“I do not forget. How could I? But Akira has shown me more mercy than your beloved Penelope ever has. That monster wants to kill me, whereas Akira receives me into his clan, despite my vampiric blood. So, forgive me if I am more loyal to him than to her, but you know why I am helping you. I am only doing this for Aurélie, not for Penelope.”

“How can we trust you?” Lucan asked.

“I risked my life leaving you those clues! And I am risking my life again now that I came looking for you! When I realized that you had lost the trail, I left the werewolves, to search for you.”

François took it all in, and in his mind he slowly pieced the puzzle together. For a moment his thoughts did not linger with his dead wife.
“Are you travelling with Akira?” I asked.
He did not answer right away, but he did not have to. His silence told us enough, but finally he nodded and said, “Yes.”
“Where is he going?” I wanted to know.
“He is going to England.”
“There is no lair in England according to this map.”
“Have you seen Akira’s name anywhere on that map? Those are lairs of other clans, but the main one, the fount, will not be disclosed on a document that anyone can get their hands on. Apparently, you have discovered one of his lairs in Reims, I think; but he has more, and now you know two of them.”
Besides the one in Reims, we had also fought him in his lair in Cuernavaca, Mexico, more than a decade ago.
“And there are more,” I said, hoping he was going to tell us which ones.
“Yes, there are more,” he calmly replied, but he did not convey the locations.
“Was the one in Reims the central lair, the main one?” I asked.
He smiled, and said, “No, that one is far away.”
“In Persia, if I am not mistaken,” Lucan said.
Seraphin seemed astounded at this knowledge, and I suddenly remembered Lucan’s surprising knowledge of ancient Sassanid. Another history I did not know; another one he had not told me.
“Yes, somewhere in Persia, and that one you will never find.”
It sounded like a threat.
“What are his plans?” Lucan asked. “Is he rounding up all the clans?”
“He is trying to find them, but most have disappeared.”
“Disappeared?” I repeated in shock.
“So, he is planning a major battle against vampires. He is rounding them up to go after Penelope,” Lucan said bitterly.
“No,” Seraphin protested. “You are wrong. He is not after her. He is trying to get them on his side, but he is not after Penelope.”
“He is not?” Lucan laughed sarcastically. “What is he doing then, planning the next lycans’ Olympic event?”
“Seraphin, he sent his werewolves after us. We were attacked,” I said. At this, he seemed surprised.
“What? That is impossible.”
“Lucan was injured, and we barely escaped with our lives.”
“Aurélie, do you now also believe it is Akira?”
“I don’t know. You must admit, everything points to him. They attacked Penelope in the catacombs, killed Balthazar. Markus has vanished, and so have the werewolves that lived with him. I suppose they have joined Akira’s ranks. About ten days ago, five werewolves attacked us.”
Seraphin did not seem to listen. He looked around the huge chamber, and asked, “Where is Papillon?”

At this, Lucan impatiently threw up his hands and said, “Here we are, discussing major events, trying to figure out what side you are on, and now you are asking us about that stupid horse?”

“She is not a stupid horse!” I said harshly. Then I addressed Seraphin and said, “I left her at a stable, here in Amiens. The stable boy is looking after her.”

François meanwhile sat down on the cold marble floor, listening to the conversation with interest. He still could not believe it all, but he knew that he had been raised from the dead, and I realized that he had to be thirsty for blood. Was he trying to suppress it, to deny his vampiric existence?

I noticed him staring at Seraphin’s hands. In his anger, they had turned into sharp wolfish talons, and by the look on François’ face, he now finally comprehended that we had not been lying to him.

“Listen, Akira did not send those werewolves after you. He has great respect for you, Aurélie. It must have been someone else,” Seraphin said.

“Then who?” Lucan asked drily.

“Why did most of these clans disappear?” I wanted to know.

“We fear that they have joined …” Suddenly, he stopped and looked up at the ceiling.

“Is there any way that someone could enter through the roof? Is there an opening?” he asked, carefully.

Now it was François who finally spoke.

“There is a trap door, but it is impossible to get through that way. It is too high, and you would need a ladder.”

I spread my wings and rose up to the ceiling.

“Where?” I asked, looking down at a mesmerized François. He stared at me with his mouth wide open.

“There, at the left side of the stairs, but it is padlocked. No one can get in.”

I flew in the direction he was pointing to, and indeed, I found an iron trapdoor, which was padlocked from the inside.

“There is someone on the other side,” Seraphin whispered.

He was right. I could feel it too; it was a very strong presence. Quickly, I moved away from the trapdoor and returned to Lucan, Seraphin and François.

Seraphin knew he was in danger before I realized it. He understood it was too late to flee. He turned to François and asked him if there was a place where he could hide.

“Come with me,” the fledgling said, and led him to the vault to the right, where the older corpse was resting. The door closed behind them.
Worried, I looked at Lucan, but he already seemed to know who we were dealing with.

 Barely a few seconds had passed when an incredible force blasted the iron trapdoor open, and we saw a blue dress and a white gown covered by long, white, wispy hair descend slowly through the opening. In shock, I recognized Penelope in the white gown and Frederica in the blue dress.

CHAPTER XII: The Belmont’s Treasure

Her face was contorted with uncontrollable rage. Frederica looked rather timid and horrified at Penelope’s fury.

“Where is he?”

There was no point denying it. She knew Seraphin was there.

“Penelope, please. He is helping us,” I pleaded.

She ignored me and walked over to the room where François had taken Seraphin. With the force of her mind she destroyed the door, causing it to burst open into splinters, and she entered the chamber. François was alone; he stood next to the glass case, staring at Penelope in sheer terror.

Her white orbs set deeply in her ghastly skin, covered in a spider web of blue veins, were a terrible image to behold, and in fear he cowered towards the corner.

“Where did he go?” she thundered.

He was too afraid to answer. He opened his mouth, but no sound escaped.

Slowly, he sank to the ground as if he hoped to find safety there.

She looked around the room, looking for an exit, but there was none.

“Penelope,” I said, standing behind her. “He has been helping us. He has given us a lot of useful information.”

She turned to me and her white orbs glared at me furiously.

“I should kill you for disobeying me.”

“She did not disobey you,” Lucan spoke quickly. “Yes, he was helping us and leading us to the lycans, but she never asked him to come. He forced himself on us. She told him to leave because she never planned to disobey your orders. You must believe me, she does not even trust him any longer; she told him so herself.”

“And you think I believe that?”

“Penelope, I honestly do not know what side he is on. It is a good thing he has left,” I said coldly, while keeping my mind firmly closed to prevent her from discovering my lie.

“Then you do not mind me killing him.”

My eyes told her enough, more than I wanted her to know.

“I did not think so,” she said, and smiled cruelly.
Frederica walked into the room and now noticed the crack in the floor next to the marble base of the coffin. Penelope followed her gaze and saw it too. Carefully, she approached it, squatted, and then pushed against the base. It moved effortlessly, opening into a dark, secret tunnel.

François stood up and made to leave the room.

“Wait!” she called.

The poor man stopped and turned away, not wanting to look into her white eyes again.

“He is gone,” he said. “This tunnel leads straight up and ends behind the walls of the cemetery.”

She gazed into the tunnel and did not hear a sound, meaning that Seraphin had escaped. I was relieved, and I hoped she did not notice.

Penelope stepped into the tunnel, and bent over to pick something up.

“Jewels?” she then asked surprised, holding a large emerald between her thumb and forefinger.

François nodded.

“This burial vault was built years ago, before my mother died. It was designed for the family, but we never finished it. Two chambers are still missing, but in fact, there is no need for them anymore. One of them was for me.” He smirked at this and continued: “The other one was for my father. We used this vault to hide our family jewels when the Revolution began, and my mother and I have spent time in this tunnel too, hiding from the mob. The jewels have remained here ever since. My father was killed in the Revolution. They never gave us his body for burial; his remains were dumped in a mass grave.

Penelope closed her hand around the emerald and handed it to Frederica.

“Keep it,” she said, without asking for his permission. “It might come in handy.”

François did not protest; he knew better than that.

“Close it,” Penelope ordered him, disappointed that Seraphin had escaped.

He looked at her flabbergasted, wondering how she could ask him to perform such an inhuman feat. The marble base weighed tons.

“Just do it,” I said and nodded encouragingly, knowing that he had the strength now. He pushed, and to his great wonder the base of the coffin moved easily. Surprised at his own strength, he stared at the marble base that was now covering the secret tunnel; then he looked at me.

“You knew I could do it, didn’t you?” he asked.

I nodded and smiled.

“As a vampire, you are now immensely strong. You have already discovered plenty on your first night. You will learn more,” I said and walked to the main chamber where Penelope, Frederica and Lucan were waiting.
She was staring at the map and another document. At closer examination, I saw that she was holding the paper that revealed the legend of the lycans. She dropped them both on the floor, showing her disdain for their origins.

“I suppose you now know more than you should,” Penelope said.

She never knew that Akira had already revealed a great deal to me.

“More than we should? We should have known about this a long time ago. Why let us waste time like this?” Lucan asked.

“Because the lairs are empty. What is the point? Do you think I am responsible for the existence of the lycans? Don’t you think they would have come into existence anyway?”

“I do not know,” he said, and picked up the scrolls she had dropped.

“So, you know what they are,” she confirmed, pointing at the map.

“Werewolf lairs,” I said.

“Yes, indeed, and all of them were created by Akira. He turned Eustanio and Woudinil. Artorius and Cliutilius have unknown makers; their creations were possibly accidents. The others were turned by another werewolf, Hermes. I think one of the lycans Hermes created was a certain Bartholomew who had a lair in Rome.”

“Bartolomeo, from Rome,” I said, wondering how she knew all this, but then I remembered the immense library she had had at the catacombs of Rome where she had hidden for millennia. She had to have recorded that information on one of the countless scrolls. “Could he not have been the one who entered the catacombs with his werewolves?”

“Bartolomeo is too self-centered and dim-witted to find out where I live. It was not he,” Penelope said dismissively.

“You should have told us,” Lucan repeated accusingly. “We have to know what we are up against.”

“I had the information, but I did not know that their numbers had grown so much. Besides, Akira is known for changing his lairs on a regular basis. Therefore, I thought it superfluous to provide you with that information if it was inaccurate, and as I said, the lairs are emptying.”

Frederica looked first at Lucan and then at me. Her eyes were an open book. Despite the precarious situation we found ourselves in, she only thought of her separation from us. Her face had taken on a worried expression, and all she could probably focus on was the remainder of her immortality. She did not want to spend it with Penelope.

“And I believe you took care of Hermes many centuries ago,” Penelope addressed Lucan.
“We wasted so much time,” Lucan complained annoyed, not replying to her statement, and again filling me with an annoyed wonder at what else from his past was being kept from me. I knew better than to ask. He was not going to give me an answer.

“No, you did not, on the contrary,” Penelope countered, looking at him dismissively. Making it clear that the subject was now redundant and that other issues mattered more to her, she continued: “You have to find a very good hiding place. If one of them ever finds you, it is over for us, and there are too many of them. I need you.”

She now looked at François and nodded approvingly. “Very handsome, were you feeling lonely without your half breed husband, Aurélie?” she mocked viciously.

I ignored the stab and said, “I did not make him.”

“I did,” Lucan said.

At this, she looked at him, mildly surprised that he indeed had begun to create more vampires.

“He wants to make your army of vampires,” I said, unable to hide the disapproval in my voice; but Penelope could only be pleased. It was, after all, what she wanted.

I still could not believe it though when I saw the excited look in her eyes, and she turned to Lucan and said, “I am glad you are following my orders, but you need to pick them based on their courage, and not their looks. This one nearly peed his pants when he saw me.”

“And that was your intention, was it not?” I said angrily.

My remark did not annoy her; it rather amused her.

“I can see you have a soft spot for him.”

“I do not. It is his first night. It is obvious he needs to take it all in first. He has Lucan’s blood, so he is a strong one.”

Penelope smirked cruelly, and turned to Lucan.

“What are your plans?” she asked him.

“We are going to England. Apparently, Akira is heading there.”

“Did the half breed inform you of that?”

I clenched my teeth when she insulted Seraphin again, but I said nothing.

“Can you trust the information?” she asked.

“Yes,” Lucan said.

She nodded.

“Where will you go?” he asked.

“We will also go to England. I want to be there to get my hands on Akira. I will destroy him; get rid of his filthy lineage. In the meantime, Frederica and I will also
find a good hiding place there. For safety reasons, I will not give you the exact location, but I will be there; and when the battle begins, I will join you and end it.”

“You risk getting killed.”

“Not if I reach Akira first,” she spoke confidently.

François shifted uneasily from one foot to another and asked Lucan, while avoiding Penelope’s eyes: “Do I really have to go with you?”

“You and many others,” Penelope answered, reiterating her need for us to create an army of vampires, all filled with Lucan’s ancient, powerful blood: each and every one a lethal killing machine. It became real … I had to do it too.

“This has nothing to do with me,” François said.

“It has everything to do with you,” Penelope said. “If I die, all vampires will die with me, including you. We will be erased from the earth.”

In his thoughts, he wondered, *is that not a good thing?* He did not realize that we had all heard his thoughts, and again Penelope answered, “No, it is not a good thing. None of us wants to die. Imagine a world in the hands of werewolves. They are vicious beings that kill cruelly and always leave a bloody mess. And they have no control over their procreation. Whoever survives a werewolf attack, turns at the next full moon, and they leave plenty of victims everywhere without a second thought.”

I did not believe that this was her true argument. She had never cared about humankind, and she slaughtered as injudiciously as the lycans. She simply wanted to remain on this earth, endure more millennia, keep the vampire blood line alive, and possibly create a few more immortals. François did not know that, but it did not really matter what he was aware of.

Again, he did not answer, and I knew that he carefully kept his mind a blank, because he did not want her to read his thoughts again. I also knew that he did not care; he did not mind dying.

I did wonder though what Penelope had in mind for the hundreds of vampires she planned on creating. Surely, she could not let them all live once this war was over. Yes, she was right, we were at war. I had refused to acknowledge it until now, but an attack on our fount equaled a declaration of war …

Perhaps Penelope counted on most of the newly created fledgling army to perish in the upcoming battle, and in this way solve the problem of too many blood drinkers. To her they were a means to win against Akira, a sacrifice she was willing to make, an easy sacrifice as it did not require the spilling of her own blood.
Penelope and Frederica left the same night, but we had to wait. Now that François accompanied us, we could not travel by day anymore. The sunlight was fatal for a fledgling in the first five years of his or her existence.

The coffins in the burial vaults were useless, since they were made of glass. So, at dawn, nearly an hour after Penelope had gone, Lucan went out to find a closed casket. He soon came back with a simple wooden coffin. Dust, filth, and soil littered the bottom, and I had a feeling that the dust was all that was left of the person who had rested in this coffin. He or she had to have died a very long time ago.

“There is no way that I am going to lie in there,” François said haughtily. Wordlessly, Lucan pushed him in despite loud protests, and closed the lid over the coffin.

François yelled and shouted furiously, while knocking relentlessly on the wood, but Lucan just sat on the lid and told him to be quiet, we had to leave soon.

It took him some time, but eventually François gave up, and an angry silence came from the coffin.

“We need a carriage,” Lucan said.

“We can take some of the jewels,” I offered.

He stood up and said: “Let me check and see if there is any gold there.”

He left and immediately returned with his hands full of emeralds, rubies, pearls and gold coins. It was a fortune. He placed it on the coffin and went back for more.

Then he opened the casket and dropped the riches next to François who did not try to get out, but just glared at him furiously.

“We are not stealing; this is for all of us.”

François did not say anything, not even when Lucan closed the coffin lid again.

I went to get Papillon while Lucan bought a carriage and a horse.

We met at the entrance of the cemetery and when I saw the tall brown stallion that had a beautiful white marking on his nose, I remembered the black steed that had been killed by a werewolf.

I approached the horse and gently stroked him along his sleek face. The marking looked a little like a star. He had beautiful, brown, soulful eyes that looked at me intelligently. He did not fear me, although he sensed my immortality, but somehow he also felt my love for horses, and it calmed his nerves.

There was no room for Papillon, so we decided that I would ride her while Lucan steered the horse pulling the carriage.

It was early morning, and an old lady trotted across the cemetery with a bouquet of white and yellow roses in her withered hands. She wore a tattered old
coat over an old cotton dress, and looked poor. She was muttering to herself, and never seemed to notice us.

Lucan took the carriage to the vault between the rose bushes, while I waited at the entrance, seated on Papillon’s back.

I watched him enter the vault.

While he was gone, a young woman came down the street. She looked at me and seemed to wonder what I was doing there, but then she turned into the cemetery. She did not carry any flowers. She saw the old lady and hesitated. Then she walked over to her to greet her. The old woman smiled at her warmly, and for a moment both were engaged in a nice, little chat. The young woman looked sad though. After the old lady went on her way, the young one turned and walked into the direction of the underground burial vault.

It did not mean anything. There were plenty of graves in that area, I tried to reassure myself; but the uneasy feeling in my stomach told me differently, and to my horror, I saw her go directly to the entrance between the tall rosebushes.

Lucan still had not come out.

She stopped when she saw the open door and she looked disconcerted at the empty carriage. She seemed to hesitate again, not sure if it would be wise to go in, but then she entered and disappeared from view.

Worried, I spurred Papillon forward. I realized who she was. She bore a striking resemblance to the young woman in the glass case below ground. She had the same wavy blond hair, the same figure, and her face was a mirror image of the dead girl. She was not only her sister; she was her twin.

I dismounted Papillon and walked into the vault. Slowly, I descended the stairs. An eerie silence greeted me; there was no sound.

When I reached the bottom of the stairs, I saw her. She was in a kneeling position, praying in front of the statue of Mary. She looked so peaceful, but her appearance was deceiving. Deep inside her I felt her sorrow at losing her sister so young. I looked up and saw Lucan above her, effortlessly clinging to the ceiling like a lizard. The girl had never noticed him. I asked him in my thoughts if he planned on making her like us, but he shook his head.

Let her go, he told me with his mind.

I looked at the praying girl. I had thought about killing her just a few moments ago, but now the thought disturbed me. She was a truly innocent soul. I had to agree with Lucan; we had to let her go. Turning her was an option, but somehow she did not seem the right candidate. We had no right to take her when her sister had already lost the battle with death and her brother-in-law had now joined the undead. On the other hand …

She could keep François alive.
What do you care if he lives or not? You never wanted to turn him. Lucan`s voice reached me in my thoughts.

I do care now.

No, Aurélie, not her. Now get out of here before she sees you.

I took a few steps backwards, but when she suddenly rose I disappeared on the spot. Where my body had been a moment ago was now nothing but transparent matter faintly shimmering in the fading light that entered through the open door upstairs. My form took shape next to Lucan, and quickly I held on to the rocky ceiling. Like two bats we hung there, watching her from above as she turned and ascended the stairs. We waited until she was gone and then flew back to the ground. When we were sure she had left the cemetery we carried the wooden coffin upstairs and loaded it in the carriage. I mounted Papillon as Lucan got on the carriage and took the reins. Then we left the underground chamber that had provided us with some protection and with an unwilling soldier. We left the cemetery and rode out of Amiens, heading west towards Calais.

CHAPTER XIV: Old Ties

Once we arrived in the port of Dover, England, we did not waste time, and boarded immediately. We had been able to load the carriage and the horses, since the ship was rather large, and the carriage was quite narrow. It was rather convenient, because we did not have to find a new carriage.

François had now finally accepted his vampiric existence. During our voyage he could not deny his lust for blood any longer. Since he had been made, he had not drunk a single drop of blood, and that had weakened him considerably. At first he had hoped he would eventually die of starvation, and it could indeed have happened. A fledgling had to feed on the first night, or at the latest, on the second night. He however, slew his first victim on his sixth night. His face was already very bony and pale, and Lucan and I both knew he would not last long if he did not feed soon. We were going to force him to drink blood, but then, all of a sudden he decided to live after all and he left our cabin at night to feed. We followed him and watched as he grabbed a sailor who had been on night duty and greedily drank his blood.

Lucan and I both exchanged a relieved smile, and then we helped François to dump the body overboard.

Yes, even I was happy that he had finally chosen to acknowledge his existence as a vampire. At first I had been against his creation and I was not really bothered
whether he lived or died, but I had taken a liking to the serious and polite young man.

He rested in his coffin in the carriage while Lucan steered it through the streets of Dover, and I rode Papillon in front of them.

When we were about to leave Dover, I stopped my horse and turned around to face Lucan. He pulled the reins and halted the carriage. The brown stallion waited patiently as I approached the carriage seated on Papillon’s back.

“What is it?” Lucan asked suspiciously.

“I want to see my parents.”

He stared at me impatiently. He did not say anything, but his thoughts told me enough anyway. He did not need to say it. He thought I was mad to waste my time like this. I had been a vampire for over 28 years, and my parents could be dead by now.

“I have to see them before it is too late. Too much time has gone by, and they might still be alive. If I wait much longer, I may not get the chance to see them again. If they are still alive, I have to see them, make sure they are fine.”

“How do you think they will react?”

“I think my father knows what I am, and I suspect he never told my mother, to spare her feelings.”

Slowly he shook his head and told me that he thought it was a bad idea.

“I am aware of that, but I am here now. I have to see them.”

He sighed, knowing that it was impossible to change my mind, and he said:

“Fine, we will go together, but you cannot enter their house or talk to them. Remember what we are chasing. For all we know, some of them may still be after us. If you lead lycans to your parents’ house, you know what will happen.”

I nodded. He was right, and I had also considered this. I could not endanger my parents’ lives like that. I would have to simply watch them from afar.

Evening fell when we found my parents’ house. It was a row house on a narrow street. We stopped the carriage at the street corner. François, who was able to walk only by night, jumped out of the carriage and grabbed Papillon’s reins while I slid off her back.

“I will not be long,” I said.

Two middle aged men walked on the narrow street, talking animatedly about today’s catch. They both carried the strong scent of fish. I waited until they were gone, and then, like a lizard, I quickly climbed the wall. Once I was on the roof, I jumped to the next house, and in this way I crossed a few buildings until I found myself opposite my parents’ house.

The window was open and I spotted a candle on a wooden table. There was no one in sight, but I knew that someone was there.
Excitement and anticipation rushed through me while I waited for my father or mother to appear, but I soon realized that there was only one person inside. There were no voices, and I remembered that my parents had always been engaged in lively conversations.

Then, my father appeared in front of the window, holding a book in his hands. He peered outside, as if he were looking for something. His hair had turned grey in the last years, and his face was wrinkled and worn out. He seemed lonely. He walked towards the table and sat down on a simple stool. My heart cringed when I saw how simply they lived. We had had a big, beautiful house in Paris, and my father had been a wealthy merchant. I did not understand how he had come to live in this common neighborhood. Even his clothes looked shabby, and there was a hole in the right leg of his pants.

He opened his book and began to read.

And suddenly it hit me. He was not waiting for my mother. She was not going to come back tonight or any other night. My mother was dead! That was why my father neglected his appearance and wore those tattered clothes; that was the reason he looked so worn out and old. He had to be sixty-five now, but physically he resembled a seventy-five-year-old man.

There was no dinner like we used to have in my mortal life with them, just a plate with stale bread and some cheese. His hand closed around a cup and he slowly brought it to his lips. He drank without taking his eyes of his book.

It broke my heart to see him like this, and I wished there was something I could do for him, but I knew I could not approach him. I did not want to endanger his life.

I had known my father as a vibrant and worldly man. Nothing seemed to be left of him. He looked a ruin of himself.

With sadness in my heart, I turned and walked over the roof tops back to the street corner. I could not watch him any longer, knowing that I could not help him. It was horrible to feel so powerless. Lucan saw the disappointed look in my eyes when I climbed down the wall, and he did not ask. François’ eyes told me that he felt for me, and wordlessly he handed me Papillon’s reins. I mounted her while he leaped onto the carriage and took a seat next to Lucan on the driver’s bench. Then we left and did not turn back.
We travelled through England’s beautiful countryside, but I could not really enjoy the sights. My mind kept wandering back to my father, and I cursed myself for not being able to take care of him. I could, if only we were not battling werewolves…

I vowed that I would return to look after him if I made it out alive, if we managed to defeat the lycans, although I knew that that would happen at a high cost. I knew I could die; we all could, even strong, powerful Lucan. Balthazar and Gael, two ancient vampires with amazing powers had not been able to defend themselves against werewolves and even Penelope had to run. An army of vampires seemed more attractive to me, now that I thought about it.

It was still irresponsible though and there was no guarantee of winning. So many vampires could go on a rampage, feel their power and use it, take advantage of it, and terrify the world.

As I pondered the pros and cons of a vampire army, Lucan stopped the carriage and got down from the driver’s seat. I pulled at Papillon’s reins to stop her and watched him pull at the carriage door. He shut the door tightly.

“The door was not closed, and sunlight could enter,” he explained.

He returned to the driver’s seat, and we continued our journey in silence.

After a day we were nearing London, and I expected us to go there, but Lucan steered the carriage around the city.

“Where are we going?” I asked, surprised.

“We will stay with an acquaintance of mine north of London,” he explained.

“Are you not afraid to endanger his life? Who is he?”

“It’s a she, and no, I do not fear for her life.”

“Is she a vampire?”

“No.”

“A lycan?” I asked hesitantly.

He laughed, amused and said: “Not all immortals are vampires and werewolves. There are others.”

Other immortals? There were more monsters on the loose? I would think that lycans and vampires were quite enough for this world.

“What others?” I asked intrigued.

“There are banshees for example; and then there are also mortals with extraordinary powers, known as witches and wizards.”

I stared at him in awe, shocked by this revelation. Of course I had known of witches and wizards, but - just like my parents – I had never believed that they existed. In the Dark Ages, thousands of innocent people had been burned at the stake under the accusation of being a witch or a heretic because they had doubted God’s word or the Bible, or they had questioned a priest because they had turned
away from the Catholic Church and had embraced Martin Luther’s teachings, or, in some cases because their neighbors had wanted to get rid of them to obtain their possessions. Accusing someone of witchcraft had been extremely easy in those times; and under torture people would admit to anything, just to make the inhumane torture stop.

“Lucan, you have never told me much about you; most of your life is a secret to me, and you never cease to amaze me. Are you telling me that you actually know banshees, and witches and wizards? Are you trying to convince me that witches and wizards in fact do have power, even though they are mortal beings?”

He smiled and said: “I am not trying to convince you of anything. I do not know any witches or wizards, but I know of a few, and let me tell you that they are rumored to be very crafty, and it would be wise to fear them. Even we are not immune to their sorceries. I know only one banshee, and trust me: she is a very powerful being. We are heading there now, and she will provide us with some protection against the werewolves.”

“How? How can she protect us? She is only one person,” I asked, although I did not know if “person” was the right description for her. I had never laid eyes on a banshee and had no idea what she would look like. All I could think of was an angry woman with lots of unruly hair, letting go of an anomalous shriek.

“We only need one banshee to do that. Have you ever heard a banshee scream?”

“No.”

“Neither have I, and that is the reason I am still alive. Whoever hears a banshee scream will not live to tell the tale.”

“Is it that terrible?”

“It is rumored to be loud and horrific, and absolutely terrifying.”

“But what if she screams when the lycans come and we are there too? We will die just like them.”

“There are ways to avoid that. Trust me; we will be safe with her. Even if the lycans know of our whereabouts, they will think twice before attacking us there. Her lair will provide us with time and space to plan our offensive.”

“So that is what it is coming to then? We will fight here in England?”

“I am afraid so. It certainly looks that way. If Seraphin is right, Akira is moving here to prepare in his lair. From here he can only return to the European continent or go on to America, and he will not do that. America is too far away, and I have a feeling that he is not going to avoid this battle. He will attack, believe me.”

I did not like the idea. Although I knew Akira had sent the werewolves after us, and that he was our enemy now, I still cringed at the thought of having to fight him. Despite everything that had happened and everything I knew now, I still
respected him, and I could not believe that he was doing this. I knew though that I had to accept the truth: Akira was our enemy.

We rode through Hertfordshire and then left the little town. We crossed green fields and rode through lush valleys until we finally entered a coniferous forest. The trees stood close together and it was dark, despite the fact that it was noon. I did not feel the presence of other immortals, and I was pretty sure we were not being followed. I began to feel quite safe, and even more so, because I noticed that Papillon and the other horse, which I had named Star, seemed relaxed. If danger was imminent, the horses would know, but they trotted happily through the forest, breathing calmly.

The forest was huge! After one hour, we were still surrounded by thick trees, but I knew we were approaching our destination. I hoped the banshee would recognize Lucan. He had called her an “acquaintance”. So, how well or how little did he know her? Did he know her enough to trust her? Would she provide us with a safe haven or would she toss us out, unwilling to get involved in the vampire–werewolf conflict?

If she helped us, she would be a part of this war, and she had every right to refuse and stay out of it. After all, this had nothing to do with her, and regardless of the outcome, it would not affect her either way.

Lucan stopped the carriage and leaped to the ground. We stood still on a dark patch, and I knew why he had stopped. The trees stood so close together, that it would be impossible to travel with the carriage.

I slid off Papillon, and helped Lucan to retrieve the coffin that bore François. We pulled it out and gently placed it on the ground. Then he cut Star loose and led him away from the carriage.

“Now what?” I asked.

“Wait here for me. I will go and get her,” he said.

“Can’t we go with you?”

“How will we take the horses and François at the same time? Besides, she does not know you. I want to inform her of your presence first.”

His words did not reassure me. I pictured his banshee acquaintance as a terribly vicious being who killed first and asked questions later; but I did not complain, and only nodded in agreement. Lucan knew what he was doing, and I could trust him. If he thought it was better to wait here for him, then I had to believe him.

“I do not think the lycans are anywhere close,” he said.

“They are not here. We would know, and even if they were, they would be in their human forms.”

“Do not underestimate them in their human forms,” he warned me.

“I do not, but I know that they are not here.”
“Fearless and brave, as an immortal and a mortal,” he said admiringly.
As a mortal? Perplexed, I wondered what he had seen of me in my mortal days, and what he remembered.
“Oh, I saw you,” he said, reading my thoughts. “You were a brave woman during the Revolution. Perhaps that was why I was drawn to you.”
“I may be brave, but I do know fear,” I said.
“That, my dear, shows your courage. Being courageous without knowing fear is plain stupidity; but showing great courage despite your fear is true bravery.”
I smiled and hugged him.
“Only you could say something that wise,” I said, and let go of him.
“I will not be long,” he said, and then turned away. I saw the faintest smile on his face as he walked away and disappeared between the trees.

This forest was not silent. I heard birds chirp happily, hoping to attract females and build their nests. I spotted a few squirrels running on the ground and even climbing trees; and I heard mice scurry in the underbrush. This place knew no fear; the animals existed in peace, unaware of any danger. The only threat they probably knew of was human.
This peace could speak well of the banshee; it meant she left these creatures alone. I wondered what she ate. I did not think she drank blood like we did, nor did she bite off chunks of meat from people like the lycans did.

François was asleep in his coffin, unaware of his surroundings or of what was happening. He would wake up tonight in the house of a banshee, and again be confronted with the ugly truth that immortal beings roamed the world freely.

Poor François had learned more in his first week than I had in the last 28 years. He had already met Penelope; was acquainted with the legend of the lycans, since he had read the document; and he knew of their lairs. He was involved in a war that he would not have deemed possible when he was a mere mortal a little over a week ago; and now he was about to meet a banshee! Poor François? I think he was rather lucky to be privy to all this knowledge. Getting Lucan to tell me about us, or other immortals in my first year as a vampire had been like pulling teeth.

An hour later Lucan returned, accompanied by the banshee. Excited, I stood up and watched them appear between the trees.

The banshee was short and had indeed long, black, bushy hair that reached her knees. She wore a long, dark grey robe that covered her ankles. Black, Roman
sandals on tiny feet stuck out from underneath. I wondered if she was ancient like Lucan.

Once they reached the dark patch and appeared from behind the carriage, I could see that I had been very mistaken about her. Besides the bushy hair, she was nothing like I had imagined her.

“Aurélie, this is Morgan,” Lucan introduced. “Morgan, Aurélie.”

She nodded, and I gazed into a pair of black eyes, framed by long eye lashes. She had very full, red lips set in a pale face. She was a beautiful woman, and to my dismay she reminded me of Giada, but immediately I saw a big difference between both women. Giada had loathed me, whereas this banshee did not bear me any ill will at all. In fact, she even smiled. Lucan must have told her good things about me.

I returned her smile, relieved that things went so well.

She glanced at the coffin and said: “This must be the other one.”

“Yes,” Lucan said.

She stared hard at the casket, and suddenly I saw it lift itself effortlessly and float in the air, six feet above the ground.

“Shall we?” she said.

She took us even deeper into the forest, while guiding the coffin with her eyes, making sure it would not bump into a tree while we followed her. Lucan held Star’s reigns while I led Papillon. Both horses did not seem to feel threatened by Morgan’s presence, which I took as a good sign. She did not look threatening at all. She was so short and slim, and had the face of a young girl. I could not imagine her capable of killing anyone with her scream. Nevertheless, I had learned never to underestimate anyone.

Finally, we arrived at a little hut. It looked shabby and neglected, and I did not think we would all fit inside. Morgan, however, thought differently and led us inside.

In awe, I stared at the luxurious interior that was in such stark contrast to the dilapidated walls outside; and again I was reminded of Giada. She had also loved her luxury, but, like Morgan, had her expensive lairs hidden well in ruined houses where no one would dare enter.

We stood in a small hallway that was decorated with red tapestries covering the walls. She opened a shiny trapdoor, and to my amazement I realized that it was made of silver and had recently been polished!

She smiled when she saw the surprise on my face.

“Nothing is as it seems,” she said, “and no one can enter these premises without my knowledge. Nobody would anyway. Humans are afraid to enter a
forest, especially such a big and dark one; and immortals know my scream can kill them. Lucan is one of the very few I allow inside.”

Below the trapdoor a wooden staircase led down into darkness. We followed her as she guided François’ casket down the stairs. Even the horses came with us, upon her request. She reasoned that the horses would call unnecessary attention and reveal our presence if they remained outside.

It was very difficult and uncomfortable to lead them down the stairs, and they jumped nervously when the trap door closed magically once we had all entered. Both at first refused to descend, but eventually we managed to get them to follow us, albeit reluctantly.

The stairs ended in a round chamber that was lit by torches. There was no furniture, only big and small rocks. In front of us an arched metal door opened, and I knew that Morgan had willed it to open with her mind.

François’s casket floated through it, and we followed. We entered another chamber where we surprisingly encountered another horse. The room was flooded with light, and I saw that the light came through a wide, open window on the west side, stretching from left to right. It opened up into a deep abyss, allowing the rays of the sun to enter. A six-foot wall prevented the horse from falling into the ravine. Grass grew on the floor, and in the corner I saw a throng filled with water and a bunch of straw. Morgan definitely cared for her horse.

“This is Megan,” she said. “You can leave your horses with her. They will be safe here, and well looked after.”

After she said this, the door closed behind us.

I approached the wall and looked over it into a very deep abyss, maybe 200 feet, which ended in a shallow stream. A fall from here meant certain death for any mortal. A green valley stretched out before me. The grass was long, and marguerites and daisies sprang up randomly in this fairytale valley bathing in the sun slight. It was a truly glorious sight.

Megan, Morgan’s steed, seemed very content with her enclosed grass patch. She could never escape, but I imagined the banshee riding her on a regular basis, although it had to be difficult to lead her up and down the stairway.

We left Papillon and Star with Megan, and followed Morgan through a lit tunnel. She did not close the door behind us, and she explained that the tunnel was too low and narrow for the horses to follow. She explained that if someone were to enter their stall without permission, which was unlikely, she would hear Megan and come to her rescue.

The tunnel ended in a comfortable room. It was small, but there was enough space for the four of us.
A large, wooden dining table stood in the middle, six chairs around it. In the far right corner I saw another door, which maybe led to her bedroom. Next to the door, there was a ten-foot-tall candle, its flame barely licking the stone ceiling.

In the far left corner I noticed a round, red couch that was covered in pillows. A window provided us with another spectacular view over the valley, and to my left, by the entrance door, I noted a strange array of flasks and jars filled with green, blue, red, purple, and yellow liquids on a small wooden table.

It was certainly an interesting room, and it looked comfortable.

François’s coffin still floated in the air, but now she lowered it and guided it gently to the floor, next to the round couch.

We were in a banshee’s lair, and it was very different from what I had imagined.

CHAPTER XVI: Megan’s Protection

Penelope would be very safe here, but somehow I thought that she would not like Morgan very much, and that the feeling would be mutual. I could not imagine these two beings getting along.

Lucan never told me how he had met Morgan, but I could see that she respected him and would never harm him.

François was indeed shocked when he left his coffin at dusk and found himself in a banshee’s lair. He had long ago stopped doubting us, or any story we had told him about other immortals. He had seen enough. It was truly a week full of discoveries for him.

Lucan still planned on creating an army of vampires, but fortunately Morgan was against that. She abhorred the idea of filling the world with thousands of vampires and argued that it would not resolve anything. Lucan was stubborn though, and told her that Penelope had ordered this.

“Penelope!” Morgan then spat in disgust, which shocked me. So, my suspicions were right, but I had not counted on them knowing each other. I wondered if they had met before, and if so, what could have caused this hatred. Spite and revulsion was indeed all I saw in Morgan’s eyes at the mention of Penelope’s name.

“Of course she would like that. She loves nothing more than filling the world with vampires and killing anyone in her way. She is just as bad as the lycans!”

I began to like Morgan even more now.

She began pacing the room and said: “Vampires, werewolves, you are all the same: vicious killers with no respect for anything or anyone.”

“And you are such an innocent being?” Lucan asked sarcastically.
She stopped and stared at him, her black eyes taking on a blazing look. “This is not about me. I know what I am and what I have done, but I had my reasons. You however, are fighting about world dominance.” “World dominance?” I repeated. “This is about our lineage. If Penelope is killed, we all die.” “And if one lineage is wiped out, the other one will rule the world,” she said. She walked towards the window and looked out over the valley, something she did rather often. “Of course they will rule the world. Humans are powerless against vampires or werewolves,” she continued. “But it will not come to that,” I said. She turned and looked at me. “Oh yes, it will,” she spoke intensely. “It will.” “Penelope only wishes to save the vampire lineage. If vampires are in power, there will be less bloodshed,” Lucan argued. “Imagine the werewolves. They have no control over themselves once they transform; they kill randomly, and the ones who survive their attacks become werewolves at the next full moon; and we all know that they leave too many survivors.” Now I looked at him and said: “So, we will vanquish the werewolf blood line?” “I thought you already knew that.” “I did, I only wanted to make sure that that is what you really want. You forget that Seraphin is half a werewolf.” “Who is Seraphin?” Morgan asked, but Lucan did not answer her. Instead, he got up from the couch and roared: “I will not allow the lycans to finish us off, just because you feel the need to save Seraphin! We do not even know whose side he is on!” “He is on our side!” “He is on Akira’s side.” “He trusts him, but he will do everything to protect me!” “Who is Seraphin?” Morgan asked again, now more impatiently. “He said he was “betraying the lycans”? And you still think he is on our side? He will kill Penelope if he gets the chance! After all, she wants to kill him too! So, why would he spare her? He even tried to kill me once!” “He will not try to kill her! He will fight on our side! Trust me!” At that moment, Morgan yelled in a very high pitched voice, so strong that we all covered our heads with our hands to protect it from the splitting noise that seemed to be ripping our brains apart. “Who is Seraphin!” she screamed, her eyes red and bloodshot, her face and throat displaying an array of blue and red veins and her lips curling up in a
threatening snarl, displaying her teeth. She now looked more like the banshee I had imagined her to be before I had met her.

I held my hands over my ears, but her screams filled the room and echoed against the walls, travelled through the tunnel and hit the horses. Papillon and Star whinnied in panic and pain, and I heard them stomp around their room, trying to escape this deafening noise.

Then it stopped, just like that; and the silence that followed was just as deafening as her scream had been.

François took his hands away from his ears, and stared at her in shock and fear. Lucan did the same, not knowing what had brought on her anger.

“Do not ever ignore me like that again,” she said, her eyes still blazing, but they were black now as they used to be, and the veins that had pulsed beneath her skin had disappeared. The snarl was gone and had become her full, pouty mouth again.

“This scream only damages you, but next time I may raise it a note and kill you. I asked you a question and now you will answer me. Who is Seraphin?” she asked, threateningly.

Although I was anxious to go and check on Papillon and Star, it was I who answered.

“He is half vampire, half werewolf. When he was mortal, a werewolf attacked him and left him to die. Lucan saved him and made a vampire of him. So now Seraphin is both. He is a vampire, but when he gets angry, his hands turn into wolf talons, and every month, by the full moon, he transforms into a full werewolf.”

Morgan was amazed.

“I had no idea beings like that existed. I would like to meet him,” she said.

“He does not know we are here, but he will probably try to find us,” I said.

“And why is he not with you?”

“Penelope does not trust him, and she will kill both of us if she knows we are working together. She thinks he is on Akira’s side.”

“And rightly so,” Lucan interrupted.

“He is not,” I calmly continued. “He has been leaving us clues, and he told us to come to England because he knew Akira was heading here. He is helping us, because he wants the vampire lineage to continue, to save me.”

“How romantic,” Morgan said and smiled amused.

Uninterested to continue this conversation and worried about the horses, I left the room and hurried through the tunnel to check on them. They had whinnied in fear, but strangely enough Megan had not. Did she have protection that Papillon and Star did not have?

When I reached their stall, I found them standing, but they were nervous and stamping their feet.
Slowly I approached them both, and spoke to them in a soothing voice. I stroked both horses on their necks and tried to calm them down.

Raw fury welled up in me when I realized how easily she could have killed them.

After the horses were quiet and more at ease, I raced back to the main chamber and demanded to know: “Why did your scream only hurt our horses, and not Megan?”

CHAPTER XVII: Bartolomeo’s Sorrow

After two days, Lucan ventured into London, and left me with Morgan. He hoped to find some trace of Penelope or Seraphin, and he also planned to speak to “some allies and some of his acquaintances “, to get them to make more vampires. I rolled my eyes when he said that, and he asked me, annoyed, what the problem was. We were outside Morgan`s hidden dwelling, I had come out to see him off.

“Well, as usual, your life is a secret to me, and over the years I always find out more about you. I spent years in London and yet, I never knew you had acquaintances there. What I also do not understand is why you would endanger their lives. The lycans could be following you.”

“They are immortals and can look after themselves very well.” He sighed and continued. “And they are on our side. Besides, I believe that you know one of my allies already.”

“Who?”

“Hadea.”

“Is she here?”

“I received word that she might be in London.”

“How did you…? When …?”

“I am her maker. As you know, we have a bond. When we passed by London, I felt her presence. She must wonder why I did not stop to see her.”

“But she does not know anything about what is happening, does she?”

“No.”

“Will she help?”

“She will.”

“You seem to trust her a lot.”

“I do.”

He smiled and said: “I know you are dying to find out more about my past and about Hadea who is a part of my mortal and immortal past, but now is not the time, Aurélie. When all this is over, you may ask me all the questions you want and I will tell you what you want to know. How about it?”
“Sounds good,” I said and returned his smile. I turned and descended through the silver trap door. “Be careful,” I said, and closed it.

On my way back to Morgan’s quarters, I stopped at the horses’ barn. Papillon and Star stood by the window, calmly chewing on some grass. Megan was drinking water. I walked over to Papillon, and absentmindedly I stroked her flank while looking through the wide-open window. A gentle morning breeze flew in and caressed my face. The flowers and grass were still covered with dew which now sparkled in the rays of the sun. It was such a glorious sight. The banshee had chosen her lair well.

Papillon nudged my arm with her nose, and in response, I gently stroked her between her eyes. I placed a kiss on her wet nose, and then returned to the main room.

There I found Morgan at the small table that held the strange potions. She was holding a glass flask that was filled with a dark yellow liquid, and she examined it carefully. She was staring at it as if she could see the components with her bare eyes.

To me, it looked like a bottle of urine. I did not speak, and went over to the round couch. François was resting in his closed casket right next to it. I dropped down on the soft, comfortable couch and stared at the ceiling.

I heard the clinking of glass, and then the swirling of a wooden spoon hitting the flask while Morgan was stirring her mixture.

She had never revealed to me why her horse Megan was unaffected by her deadly screams. The day I had asked her, she had just given me an empty look, and then ignored me. I did not insist.

She was not so talkative during Lucan’s absence. When we had met her, we had talked quite a bit, but now that he was gone, she basically kept to her herself. Sometimes she left with Megan, but she never asked me to accompany her.

Lucan stayed away longer than I had expected. After five days, he still had not returned, and I was getting worried.

At night, I took François outside to hunt in the forest. Since there were no humans in this area, we contented ourselves with animal blood. We caught owls, mice, and once we even got our hands on a deer. We never strayed far from Morgan’s lair. If werewolves were nearby, we had to be able to disappear through the trap door immediately.

François learned quickly, and became a fast and efficient killer. Since we spent so much time together, and Morgan distanced herself from us, we talked a lot, and got to know each other better. I learned more about his late wife, and found out that he still had a wish to die. The latter he had not been able to do, because Lucan and I had prevented that. His coffin had an iron lock to which we had the key, and
so François could never escape to go into the sunlight. At his fledgling stage, the sun would burn him to ashes.

We both wondered why Lucan had not returned yet. He was wasting valuable time that Akira probably took to his advantage. He was in England, after all, and had most probably already prepared for battle.

I gave François more information about Akira, and about what was awaiting us. He was not looking forward to it, and sometimes he would burst out in anger at having been forced into our war. I could not contradict him; he was right. Lucan had taken him against his will and made a vampire of him to use him as a soldier.

“Do not lock my coffin in the morning. Let me walk into the sunlight,” he begged me.

Vehemently I shook my head.

“I promised Lucan to look after you.”

“You fear his wrath, don’t you?”

I laughed miserably and said: “I have already felt his wrath many years ago; and if I survived it then, I can survive it now. No, I do not fear him. I have no reason to, but I made him a promise, and I intend to keep my word.”

“There is a history between you two. I can tell by the way he looks at you.”

We were alone in Morgan’s chamber. She had gone into the forest.

I looked out of the window and listened to his words. François was sitting on the couch, but now stood up and walked over to me. He stopped next to me and stared into the darkness. It amazed him how much his vampiric vision allowed him to see in the dark; he now saw things he had never been able to distinguish as a mortal.

“There used to be, but that is a long story, and a long time ago,” I said.

“It is perhaps a long time ago for you, but not for him.”

I turned to him and looked into his dark eyes.

“Perhaps,” I said.

I did not wish to discuss it. It was all in the past where it belonged. There was no need to revive it…

François understood that I did not want to talk about it, and so we stood there in silence.

After Morgan’s indifference towards us, I was not so sure anymore whether I liked her, and I also began to ignore her. However, when I began to show a lack of interest myself, she began to talk. Suddenly, as if we had not spent the last days in silence, she asked me about my origins and my connection to Lucan. Glad that the uncomfortable silence was over, I happily obliged and answered all of her questions. I told her about my revolutionary days during my mortal years, Giada,
Frederica, Sophie and her mother, my dear human friend Madame Betancourt, Seraphin, and Kokayi.

It made those last two days more pleasant, but it was still a relief when Lucan returned after an absence of eight days.

I was brushing Papillon when he walked in. François had gone hunting alone; I trusted him to do that much without trying to commit suicide. How could he kill himself at night anyway? He could perhaps try to find a werewolf that could do the job for him, but I did not think that the idea seemed very appealing to him.

Morgan was in her chamber mixing more formulas. She had never told me what they were for.

Since Lucan was my maker, I sensed his presence before I heard the trap door open and his footsteps on the stairs. Excited, I stopped brushing Papillon and turned around, awaiting him eagerly. He had a smile on his face when he walked in, which could only mean that he had good news.

“I can see the long journey was worth it,” I said.

He nodded and hugged me warmly.

“It is good to find you safe and well,” he said.

“This is a very safe place; you know that. So, what news do you bring?”

“Where are François and Morgan?”

“François went hunting, and Morgan is inside.”

He stared at me in anger and said: “You let him go by himself?”

“Well, yes, he is strong enough. He is a vampire, not a baby.”

“You know what I mean.”

“He cannot kill himself now. You once told me that it is hard to kill our kind, and I cannot imagine him trying to find a lycan to help him along.”

“No, but…” He did not finish his sentence, but took me by my elbow and said: “Let’s go inside. Morgan also needs to hear this.”

The banshee smiled when Lucan walked in, and it was the first time I saw her face light up since he had left us.

“Welcome back,” she said without stopping her work with the flasks.

Exhausted he sat on the couch, which had become everyone’s favorite piece of furniture in the short time we had been in the banshee’s lair.

“I found some useful contacts and received enormous help,” he announced.

I did not ask; instead I waited for him to continue.

“I found Hadea and two more acquaintances, and they have agreed to assist us.”

“Assist you in what?” Morgan asked. I noticed that she did not include herself anymore.

“In creating an army,” he calmly replied.

She stopped her work and turned around to look at him.
“So, you are going through with this? How many?” Morgan asked coldly.
“As many as are needed.”
“But you are out of your mind!” she said, raising her voice.
“Do you have any idea how many lycans are out there? Aurélie, François, and I will never be able to fight hundreds of them; and believe me: there are hundreds!”
“How do you know that?” Morgan asked.
“Did she show you the map?” he asked her, and briefly glanced at me.
Both the banshee and I did not tell him that we had spent most days in absolute silence.
He did not wait for us to answer, and continued: “There are at least a dozen lairs in Europe alone. Each lair has between 40 and 50 werewolves, I reckon. You do the math.”
“Most of them have disappeared,” I said.
He made a face as if he were talking to an idiot and said: “Of course they have! They are getting ready for battle!”
“You do not know that! Seraphin said that Akira was looking for them and that he did not know himself where they had gone to. That does not sound as if all of them are on his side.”
“But we do not know that for sure,” he countered.
Morgan finally set the flasks on the table and walked towards him.
“You cannot create an army of vampires. It will cause mayhem in this world,” she said as she sat down next to him.
“It is already being done,” he said.
“Lucan, I have always known you as a wise and responsible being, but now I do not recognize you. Even if this is not your decision, it is very much unlike you to agree with it.”
“I do not agree with this, but I acknowledge the necessity of it. Things have changed, Morgan. We are at war now.”
None of us said anything. Morgan was not pleased, and I was very worried.
“But how many are there? And where are you keeping such a large amount of vampires?” Morgan asked.
“We do not need to keep them anywhere. When the time has come, we will call them, and they will fight.”
She shook her head disapprovingly and said, “I do not like this.”
“It is not up to you. Penelope wants this.”
At this, Morgan rose in fury, and spat: “Penelope! That creature! If it were not for you or others I know, I would have killed her myself a long time ago!”
In mild shock I stared at her.
I wondered what her experience with Penelope had been. It had to have been something terrible, since she reacted violently every time our fount’s name was mentioned.

At that moment we heard the silver trapdoor open. We thought it was François, but when we heard voices, we looked up, alarmed.

Both Lucan and I moved to the open door and peered out into the corridor. Lucan seemed visibly more relaxed and his thoughts told me that one of the men was François. The latter did not sound worried or afraid, so we could only assume that whoever was with him came in peace. I sensed the stranger’s presence now and could not decide what kind of immortal he was, but then I realized that in that case it could only be Seraphin.

And indeed, François appeared in the tunnel with Seraphin.

In surprise, I stared at him.

“How did you find us?” I asked him, astonished.

“I have werewolf blood in me, remember? I followed your trail and ran into François in the forest.”

François, in the meantime, had gone on and found himself with Lucan and Morgan.

“Come in,” I said. We returned to the others, and now Morgan approached Seraphin curiously and looked him up and down. He was rather intrigued by her as well, already informed by François what she was.

She took his right hand in hers and examined it. She turned it around as if she expected a talon to grow out of it.

“I have never seen anyone like you before,” she said, “half werewolf, half vampire…”

She let go of his hand and asked: “Was it easy to find my lair?”

“No, it was not. It is very well concealed,” he said.

“Nevertheless, you all have to go. If he can find it, then the werewolves can find it too,” she said, addressing the rest of us.

“Just one scream from you, and they all die. You know that, and they know it too. Besides, they have better things to do than try to find us,” Lucan said.

Before she could reply, Seraphin said: “He may be right about that. They are indeed very busy at the moment.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I will tell you, providing you will believe me.”

Morgan moved to the window, and crossed her arms expectantly. Lucan remained seated on the couch, and I stood next to Seraphin while François took a seat on his coffin.

“As you know, I have been travelling with Akira.”

Lucan nodded.
“Well, that is not entirely true,” Seraphin then announced. Now, Lucan and I exchanged worried looks, both not knowing if Lucan had been right about Seraphin after all.

“I did travel with Akira for a while, but later I joined another band of werewolves. After you were attacked in Reims, I followed your attackers’ trail back to where they had come from; and it turned out that they were with a different pack, under the leadership of a certain Bartolomeo. At first I thought he was looking for Akira, but in fact he was not. He knew what I was, but he assumed I was on his side; so he believed me when I said I wanted to join him. I did not need to ask him anything. He told me that they were on their way to England, and that a huge battle was going to take place there. He also talked about you: Lucan and Aurélie. He knows who you are, and that Penelope has sent you to stop them and eliminate Akira. He is the one who sent his werewolves after you, and he was very angry when only one of them returned alive and informed him of their failure. I guess you have impressed him somehow. Anyway, Bartolomeo is also in England now, and he is preparing a huge offensive.”

“That only means that Akira has his lieutenants. All the lairs are going to join him; this Bartolomeo is just one of them,” Lucan said.

“He and Akira are on opposite sides. That is what I am trying to tell you. Akira has been looking for him, but not to join him. He wants to stop him.”

“Stop him from killing Penelope? Do you think us fools?”

“He is not after her, or any of you. You have to believe me. “

“Forgive me, Seraphin, but you are not making a lot of sense.”

At this, Seraphin exploded and said: “Do you still not trust me? I am warning you! Akira is not behind all this! He is trying to stop it, just like you!”

“You are saying that Akira is not the culprit, but Bartolomeo is?” Morgan asked, uncrossing her arms. The way she said the latter’s name gave me the feeling that she knew him too. She seemed a little surprised at Seraphin’s revelation as if she had not expected this name to show up.

“Exactly,” he said.

I had not said anything. I took it all in, trying to digest this information. On the one hand I was relieved Akira was not the one we were after, but on the other hand Seraphin could still be wrong.

“Does Akira know what side you are on?” I asked.

“No, but he is aware that I will not do anything that could endanger your life.”

“So, he knows you are on our side,” Lucan said.

Now Seraphin gave him a hard look and said: “He seems to think so. Do you?” Lucan ignored the question and did not reply.

“What if Akira has been leading you on?” I offered.

“Why would he do that?”
“Perhaps he knows you report to us, and maybe he has been giving you the wrong information with that in mind,” I said.

“That could be possible,” he said pensively. “But, I doubt it. He knows he can trust me.”

“Excuse me, but what side are you really on?” Lucan said and stood up. “You are on Aurélie’s side and on Akira’s side too? Aurélie fights for Penelope, Akira’s enemy. You cannot stay neutral in this!”

“Trust me, I am not.”

“Or are you playing us against each other?”

“Lucan!” I exclaimed.

He looked at me, and I slowly shook my head. Do not go too far, I told him in my thoughts.

Now François looked at both of us and offered: “I do not know these beings you mentioned, but why does it not occur to you that Seraphin might be speaking the truth?”

Seraphin gave him a grateful look, and said: “Here is a wise man.”

“I do believe you,” I said. “I have always secretly hoped we did not have to battle Akira. We just need to be sure; that is all. We have to be sure that you have not been misinformed intentionally in order to mislead us.”

At last Morgan moved away from the window, and walked back to her table which was covered with the flasks and vials. She took a vial that held a fiery red liquid and shook it gently. Then she opened it and poured the contents into a flask that held a white solution. The mixture began to smoke as she poured the red stuff in. When she was done, she sealed it with a cork and replaced the flask. After that, she turned and looked at us.

“I met Bartolomeo about a hundred years ago, and back then he was a member of the lair in Rome,” she spoke. “He had just been turned, and he killed enthusiastically. When he was in his human form he could hardly wait for the full moon, impatient for flesh and blood. He was also deeply enamored with a Roman lady. She was pretty and vivacious, and she was very popular. She had many suitors, but she only had eyes for Bartolomeo. She did not know though what he had become. One night tragedy struck. She found him in his house just after he had turned, and, unable to control his werewolf instincts, he killed her … ravished her. He was never the same after that, and he has never forgiven himself. He vowed never to kill a loved one again, and he isolated himself from the werewolf’s lair in Rome. Every full moon, he placed himself in a remote location before he turned, where he would not be able to kill family members or loved ones. He belonged to a large family. Of course, they had no idea about his monthly transformations and when he disappeared; they searched for him, but never found him.”

“What has this got to do with current events?” Lucan asked impatiently.
“I am trying to tell you that he is not the one that wants a war between vampires and lycans. He turned his back on violence about a hundred years ago.”

“But how do you know all that?” I wondered aloud.

“That is irrelevant,” she said, not wishing to discuss it.

“When I met him, he did not seem very peaceful to me,” Seraphin said. “He changed. A lot of time has gone by.”

“I am telling you he is not your man,” Morgan said impatiently.

“And I am telling you he is!” Seraphin said, now also losing his self-restraint.

“I have risked my life trying to get the information for a creature that would kill me on plain sight, and you still do not believe me! Even you, Aurélie, have doubts!”

“I do not! I only said we needed to be sure, to protect ourselves and you!” I protested.

“Well, I am returning to Akira. I have done what was necessary. Aurélie, you should come with me. You will be safe with him.”

“But have you lost your mind?” Lucan exploded. “You would take her to our enemy, deliver her into his claws?”

“He would not hurt her.”

“She is not going anywhere!”

“Stop! Stop!” I said and held up my hands. “I will decide that, and no one else. If I want to leave, I will leave, and if I need to stay, I will stay, but that will be my decision, and not yours, Lucan!”

Nobody said anything. Seraphin glared angrily at Lucan while Morgan watched it, amused. François had shifted to the round couch and watched the scene with interest, trying to form his own conclusions. It was he who finally said:

“Perhaps we should sleep on it and decide tomorrow on a clear head.”

“That is the smartest thing I have heard so far,” Seraphin agreed grimly.

CHAPTER XVIII: Lycans by Day

Seraphin left with me the next evening. I would accompany him for a while; or better said: he would come with me to make sure that I was safe, because given the circumstances, Lucan would never have allowed me to travel alone.

Although the banshee’s lair had been very comfortable and had provided me with excellent protection, I was relieved to leave it behind for a few days, so I left Papillon with Megan.

Seraphin accompanied me to London. Lucan did not want me to go, and he demanded to know what my plans were, but I would not tell him. I wasn’t certain, but I knew that I had to distance myself. The surroundings were stifling me, and I
needed a change of atmosphere; I had to get away from our impossible plan. I realized that our mission was indeed very hard to accomplish, and the knowledge depressed me. The army of vampires was not going to help; it was only going to cause more bloodshed.

I knew I was unable to stop the creation of this army, especially because Penelope was in favor of it; but if I could, I would defy Penelope’s order, and refuse to make more blood drinkers. Of that, there was no doubt in my mind.

Seraphin was reluctant to take me to London, so much so that it seemed suspicious. He really did not want me there; he seemed to wish to hide something from me. At Morgan’s lair, he had protested my idea, and I had coldly answered him that I did not need his approval or his escort. No one could talk me out of it, and I insisted on travelling alone. When Lucan, however, insisted that I go accompanied, I caved. He was right. These were dangerous times and safety over-played pride. Lucan had never asked me what had caused the rift between Seraphin and me, but he should probably have guessed by now.

Nevertheless, Seraphin’s unwillingness to take me to London bothered me, and after walking in an uncomfortable silence for more than an hour, I said: “What is the matter? Are you hiding something from me in London?”

“Why would you say that?”

“You have blatantly refused to go there with me.”

“I have not.”

“Stop lying to me. There have been enough lies.”

No reply came from him for a while. He seemed to think about his answer. Following his lengthy silence, I said: “Probably another mortal woman you want to enjoy before killing her.”

“Oh, you think that’s it? Once a marked man, always a marked man?”

“You marked yourself, Seraphin, and not only once, but twice. I have seen you sate your dual hunger twice.”

When he looked at me surprised, I continued: “You did not know that, did you? The first victim provided me with enough information, the thieving wench! When I drank her blood, I saw your face. She knew you, and she remembered you fondly! I saw you twice, and who knows how many more times you have lied to me!”

His mouth opened in shock and a name reached me from his thoughts. Not often could I penetrate his mind, due to the werewolf blood in him, but he was upset, and the name Annette escaped from him in a sorrowful sigh.

“Annette, is it? She was special, was she not? You cared about that one, did you not? Did you love her? Were you going to turn her and leave me? I asked you to leave me alone time and time again, and you refused. Yet, you keep other women while refusing to let me go!”

“No …”
He was at a loss for words, too flabbergasted at the discovery that I had kept quiet for so long.

“You knew all this time?” he asked. He did not even try to deny it, and I knew that this woman had meant something to him.

“Tell me, is this something Akira taught you, or is that just your own promiscuous self?”

“Are you implying that I have been doing this all along?”

“You had been away for a year before you returned to me! And knowing what I know now, you may have played me for a fool even then! I should kill you right here, right now!”

Abruptly, he stood still and looked at me defiantly.

“Then why don’t you do it?”

Our eyes met, and his were now void of any sorrow or shame. He challenged me boldly.

“Go on, kill me. Try if you can.”

When I did not move, he laughed dismissively and said: “Are you afraid, after what I did to Lucan?”

“You know I do not fear you.”

“You better remember that even though I cannot transform now, I have incredible powers.”

He could beat me. He had done so before with Lucan when both men had fought over me many years ago. Back then he had inflicted horrible injuries on Lucan, and they had taken a long time to heal. He could not transform for lack of the full moon, but rage could still turn his hands into deadly werewolf talons.

“What is it? Do you need my services, or do you fear me?”

Tired of his taunts and of the returning image of the woman called Annette, I finally flew at him, letting out an angry cry. He had not expected me to attack, and he was not prepared for it. I put my hands around his throat and opened my mouth to slash his skin with my fangs, but he recovered from his surprise, and with incredible strength, he threw me off him. Fury flashed in his dark eyes and his hands turned slowly into big, hairy claws. We fought and fell on the grass, his claws ripping my dress, my fangs grazing the skin on his cheek, when he deftly pulled away. I could not get close to him, and he roughly hit me and pushed me away from him. I rolled over in the grass, and then he was on top of me. Angrily, I snarled at him, but he had me pinned firmly to the ground. His talons bore into my arms, which he did not notice.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he panted.

I did not answer. I did want to hurt him, I wanted him to feel the pain I had felt when I had seen him with that woman. I wanted him to suffer.

“You have to forgive me,” he said.
“This is not about forgiveness anymore. This is about trust,” I said. “You forced yourself on me, apparently wanting nothing more than to reconcile with me when all you did was play me for a fool.”

His eyes conveyed hurt and shame. Abruptly, he let go of me and stood up. Slowly, I rose from the ground and wiped the soil from my dress.

When by dawn London appeared at the horizon, Seraphin and I parted ways. One last time he tried to convince me to go with him to Akira, but sadly, I shook my head. I had made a promise to Penelope; and leaving Lucan and François to find refuge with werewolves would be an open betrayal in the ancient vampire’s eyes, punishable only by death.

He did not ask for my forgiveness; our ways had ended here for good and he knew it. We were still allies and would be until this war was over, but then we would each go our separate ways. There was no need to tell him. He knew.

I headed to Knightsbridge, wishing to visit my dear, mortal friend Madame Betancourt. I longed to be with someone who had nothing to do with this war, someone who did not know about the vampire army that was being created, someone who preferred to talk about the theaters and current events in London.

I had known Madame Betancourt for 28 years, for as long as I had been a vampire. I had met her in prison during the French Revolution in the year 1793. She had been arrested for being a member of French nobility, and I had entered the prison walls to free my father. He had been falsely accused of treason when all he had been “guilty” of was having moderate views and disgust with the unnecessary violence. With the help of Giada, who later became my nemesis over the many consecutive years, I managed to free my father and hundreds of other prisoners, amongst whom was Madame Betancourt. In her gratitude, she promised to take my parents safely to England, which she did. Years later, I ran into her in London and stayed with her for over a year. We became close friends, and it was through her that I met Seraphin again, when he was still a mortal, and fell in love with him. In time, Madame Betancourt learned what I was, and she accepted it without fear, but, unlike Frederica, she had never had the slightest desire to enter immortality. She had been quite content with her mortal life. She had been around forty when I met her. Now she had to be in her sixties.

It had been many years since I had last seen her but I knew that she would be glad to receive me.

A feeling of excitement filled me when I turned from Brompton Road onto Sloane Street, and walked beside the tall houses I had not laid eyes on in so many years. They stood there majestically, each demonstrating its owner’s status and wealth, some more pompous than others. A few found themselves placed modestly between the loftier buildings; it seemed that they were trying to reach out to be
noticed. The gardens were still very well kept, as I remembered it, something I thought the English had always excelled in.

The sun was already slowly setting over the tree tops in the park, but birds were still busily chirping away, making it such a peaceful setting. I forgot about Lucan, about Penelope’s foolish plans, about Morgan and her stubborn silence when she was alone with me, about her mysterious potions; I forgot about François and his depressing suicide plans of which we had all grown tired; I stopped thinking about Penelope and her wrath and her inability to forgive. I forgot about Akira and Bartolomeo, about werewolves prowling the woods and following us, about past and future battles.

The sun had disappeared behind the trees and it was slowly getting dark. Madame Betancourt’s house was only a few steps away, but I stopped short. The scent of blood was unmistakable, and I feared the worst. I hoped with all my might that it was not coming from my friend’s house, and repeated the thought over and over, as if hope alone could make the terror go away.

I gathered my courage to face what I dreaded, and continued walking. Madame Betancourt’s house was the next one.

I ascended the stone steps leading to the entrance. I already knew that there was no use knocking. The door was closed but not locked, and nobody would come to open it. With fear for my dear friend, I turned the knob and entered the hallway. I looked up at the stairway and at the various floors. Everything was very clean. Perhaps I was wrong. There was no sign of forced entry, no sign of any struggle, no blood. Nevertheless, the scent was awfully strong, and there was another familiar odor as well …that of decay, of death.

Mechanically, with my mind fighting with all its might, I opened the door to the drawing room. I did not wish to see what was inside, but I knew I had to. I had to know what had happened.

The sight awaiting me was terrible.

The door opened slowly, creaking on its hinges.

Madame Betancourt lay on the floor, wearing the green gown she had worn the day she had run into me in London, but the garment was torn and bloody, pulled up to show her bloodied legs. Her left arm was covered in deep scratches and gashes. As if in a daze, I moved closer, still not wanting to see, yet drawn to her by some strange power.

I knelt down next to her.

The worst was her throat: it was torn open, a bloody mass of raw flesh, bone and blood. Her head was barely hanging onto her neck by a few thin strips of flesh. Her eyes were wide open, shock and terror engraved in them. Her mouth was slightly open in a last attempt at a scream for help that had never come.
It was too late to close her eyes and her lips. Her body was hard and cold. She must have been dead for several hours.
That meant that she had been murdered in broad daylight.
I wondered how the lycans had achieved their form during the day, without the full moon. It was not even full moon yet. I remembered Heinrich however, a werewolf living with Markus Humboldt, the German vampire that could talk to werewolves and had mysteriously disappeared. Heinrich was a werewolf that had voluntarily chosen to remain in his wolf form for the rest of his life, which meant that he could kill any time he wanted to. I had always believed that he had been the only one, but I knew now that there had to be more like him.
He had been merciful though, whoever had done this. He had gone straight for her throat and had not mutilated her body. She had died quickly. It was a small consolation, but I could not stop the tears from flowing down my cheeks.
Madame Betancourt had died because of me. Whoever had killed her had known he would hurt me; he had known I would come and look for her.
My eyes still blinded by tears, I stood up, unable to look away from her.
Now I noticed the broken glass doors and understood that they had come in through the back. They had climbed the garden walls and jumped through the glass doors, probably giving my poor friend the fright of her life.
Had nobody heard her screams? Did nobody know she was dead?
What about Georgina and Gerard? Were they dead too?
Still in shock, I left the drawing room and entered the hallway.
The lycans had left through the front door, making sure the door was closed. How had they known I was coming? Had they followed Seraphin and me? Then they had to be closer than we had thought. They could even have discovered our hideout.

The kitchen door was slightly ajar and the scent of death greeted me. I did not want to know. I did not want to enter, yet I did. Slowly, I pushed the door open.
Pots and pans were scattered on the floor. The table was lying on its side, one of its legs broken off. An arm that must have belonged to poor Georgina lay next to the table.
I stepped over the pots and pans, went past her bloody arm and found her behind the counter. Her shoulder was a grizzly stump, her throat a gory mess just like Madame Betancourt’s, and there was a bloody hole in her chest.
Georgina had cursed the day I had arrived in this house. She had always feared and resented me; and rightfully so, because the lycans had murdered her because of me, just like her mistress.
Gerard, where was he? I had loved him; he had been good to me and very sweet. He did not deserve to end up like this.
I found him by the stove. He had a nasty gash in his thigh, straight through the main artery, and he had already lost a lot of blood. There were tooth marks in his throat and some torn flesh, but it was not as bad as Madame Betancourt’s and Georgina’s wounds. It was as if his attacker had been interrupted and forced to leave his prey.

When I got closer, I realized that he was still breathing. Quickly, I knelt down next to him and took his hand in mine. He turned and looked at me, his eyes teary and showing me his pain, but when he recognized me, he seemed relieved.

“Miss Duvernay…,” he stammered.

“Gerard, I am so sorry about this. I never thought they would …. What happened?”

“Monsters….” He had trouble speaking in his weakened state. “Monsters from hell, with long yellow teeth and red eyes …. Huge beasts ….!”

Lycans ….

But why? Why them? They had nothing to do with this!

Gerard looked at me as if he needed an answer from me.

“They came for you …. Didn’t…. they?” he asked.

I nodded, unable to hide my feelings of guilt.

How had they known about this place? I had not come here in years. The only one that knew about Madame Betancourt was Seraphin ….

No, that could not be …. Not Seraphin …. It could not have been him; they must have found out in some other way.

“This is my fault. I should have been here. I should have come earlier,” I said.

“No, Milady … No …You are not … to blame. “

“Gerard,” I said, and gently caressed his cheek. “I can make you like me. I can give you life. You don’t need to die. Just tell me that you want it and I will save you from death. Just give me your word.”

He stared at me. He did not ask me what he would become. He had never asked me what I was, but he had always known.

“And together we can avenge Madame Betancourt and Georgina’s murders, because I swear to God that I will,” I said.

He was still staring, and then he nodded.

It was all it took.

I bit my wrist and let my blood flow over the wound in his thigh. My blood mixed with his and entered his leg, nurturing his flesh and torn veins, closing them and making the gash slowly close.

Gerard breathed heavily, patiently waiting. He had lost a lot of blood, and I did not know if he was strong enough. There was a pool of it around him, and
suddenly I remembered Pierre, who had died in a similar pool of blood after thieves had cowardly attacked him.

I never realized when Gerard stopped breathing, but suddenly I looked up and saw that he had died. He was still staring at me, but his eyes had lost their light. With sadness in my heart, I gently closed them, relieved that at least I could do him that favor.

When I walked out of the kitchen I knew someone had arrived. I felt too much rage and despair to be afraid, and so I walked straight into the drawing room where I knew I would find the intruder, ready to battle him to the death. I was sure it was the lycan that had killed my friend and her servants. He had been waiting for me, and he would have me! But I was going to finish him off.

It never occurred to me that it was not a lycan, but a vampire. My rage was so intense that I did not pay attention to my instincts.

I was shocked when I encountered Markus Humboldt in the drawing room.

“You!” I said accusingly and stormed at him, ready to kill him; but he threw me off and moved to the other side of the room.

“Murderer!” I roared. “What have they ever done to you?”

I flung myself at him again, but one more time he threw me off, this time more violently, and I landed with my back against the wall.

“I did not do this!” he said angrily.

“And how am I supposed to know that you are telling me the truth?” I asked as I stood up. This time though, I did not attempt to attack him. I stayed where I was.

“I was following them.”

“What for? Do not lie to me, Markus! A werewolf that always lives in his wolf form has killed them, and we know that one of those beasts is very close to you!”

“Heinrich is not with me anymore; none of them are.”

In disbelief, I stared at him, not sure whether I should believe him.

“They ran off a few months ago to join Akira. Most of them did.”

“And why did you not join him?” I asked, unable to suppress the hatred in my voice.

“Theirs is not my cause. We are on opposite sides now. Akira is out to destroy Penelope, and we both know what will happen to us if he succeeds.”

I still was not sure whether I could trust him, and I stayed where I was.

“So, you also think it is Akira,” I said.

“Yes ….”

If this information came from him, then there had to be some truth to it, unfortunately. Markus had always admired Akira. For him to admit that Akira was the culprit must have taken a lot.

“Why did you come here?”
“I have been hiding for months. When I learned that you were in England I
came looking for you. I needed to find protection. I cannot defend myself against a
horde of werewolves.”
“How did you know we were here?”
“Everybody knows. We all know that the battle will be fought here, and I am
here to join you.”
Everybody knew? How? Did they know about Morgan’s hide out? That was
impossible.
“Fight your former friends?”
“They tried to kill me. I escaped with great luck.”
“And how did you know about Madame Betancourt?” I asked suspiciously.
“I did not. I was following the lycans, in the hopes of getting to you somehow.
I did not know why they attacked these people. I had no idea they were your
friends.”
The first time I had met Markus he had been imposing and intimidating. Now
he was still strong and defiant, but something had gone from him. He was without
protection. His faithful werewolves had run off, had betrayed him.
“You were following them? Don’t you think they realized?”
“They did not.”
“You cannot know that for sure.”
“You forget that I used to live with them for many centuries. I know them very
well, and therefore you can use me,” he said angrily. “We are on the same side,
Aurélie. I do not wish to kill Akira, but if I have to choose between Akira and
Penelope, I choose Penelope. She has to live, so we can live.”
He was right. As much as we feared and sometimes loathed her, she had to stay
alive for our sakes.
I nodded.
“I will take you to our hide out. If for any reason I discover that you have
betrayed us, I will kill you.”
He smirked when I said that, still underestimating me. I had been, after all, a
mere fledgling when I had first met him.
“I know you are powerful,” I said, “but so am I. And Lucan is there as well.”
“As I said, I have no reason to betray you. I would be foolish to do so.”
I glanced at Madame Betancourt’s body, and with a sudden urge, I walked over
to the dresser on the left side of the room. The little portrait was still lying there.
Nobody had seen or touched it, and even if they had, who would have guessed the
emotional value of it?
I picked up the small portrait of the handsome Thibault Monet, Seraphin’s
father, and I laid it lovingly on my dear friend’s chest.
If life had never given them the chance to be together, at least now they were united in death.

I looked at Seraphin’s father and again was amazed by the striking resemblance. Then I turned to Markus and nodded.

We left the house where I had shared so many beautiful moments and where I would never set foot again, all the memories trampled and smudged by blood, and my heart aching for revenge.

CHAPTER XIX: Preparing for Battle

We were truly at war. It had finally rung clear for me. It had to take the murder of my friend to make me realize, but now Markus and I went into the world and grabbed humans. Vengeance was on my mind and any notion of picking only the evildoer was gone. We went to East London and we chose the marginal, the outcasts of society, but always focused on the physically strong ones. We picked the ones who did not seem to have anyone to go to or anyone waiting for them, and we turned them, one after the other. For everyone I turned, I remembered my friend Victoire, Madame Betancourt. We picked prostitutes, flower girls, evening strollers, and we even turned some evildoers; procurers, thieves, and a few murderers. We became more and more indiscriminate. It did not matter to me. Every single one of them would join in the war against werewolves and avenge my friend’s murder. They would avenge her, Gerard, and even Georgina, who had always loathed me. When the time came, Penelope would summon them.

After we finished our task, Markus and I joined his two remaining loyal werewolves outside of London where they had been awaiting us. Their presence made me feel a little apprehensive, even though they were in their human form. Somehow, I imagined them to be the murderers of Madame Betancourt, and a deep hatred towards them took hold of me. They sensed it, and gave me a glowering look. I knew it had not been them though, but it was hard to believe that they were truly on our side. Would not their blood line be exterminated if Akira was killed? Did that not worry them?

Strangely enough, Lucan and Morgan welcomed them with a lot less hostility than I had greeted them with. Only François did not hide his nervousness at the sight of the formidable looking men. Werewolves in their human form somehow still looked very strong and frightening, even without one knowing what they really were.

Lucan and Markus had a long private talk, and Morgan tried to convince the werewolf men to donate some of their blood, which they blatantly refused, of course. She probably needed it for one of her strange potions.
Lucan informed us all that the vampire army was growing. Hadea and his other acquaintances had sent him news about the alarming number of fledglings they had “recruited”. He looked at me and saw the turmoil in my eyes. He did not ask; he read my thoughts. It was all there; I did not hide anything. I slowly came to my senses, and realized what I had done in my rage and grief. It was too late now. I could not undo it. My blood drinkers had been made, many of them fierce and fearless.

The battle was slowly approaching. I had never shunned a fight, but this struggle was one I would have liked to avoid. I had no desire to fight a horde of werewolves alongside inexperienced fledglings who were more likely to hinder than help us. I was sure that most of them would flee once they saw what they were up against. I did not voice my thoughts, because I knew that I would hit a wall of stubborn resistance.

Over the days, with the help of Markus’s loyal werewolves, we found out the whereabouts of our enemy. Both lycans had scouted out the area, and discovered their lair only two days away by carriage. They could not tell us if Akira or Bartolomeo was there or if both were present, but they informed us that the lycans ran in the hundreds. François shook visibly when he heard that. His eagerness to throw himself into battle, and to be finally killed and reunited with his dead wife was slowly waning. He did not fancy death by werewolves, and I could feel his resentment towards us, especially Lucan, for having made him a vampire and for forcing him to stay with us and preventing him from committing suicide. We had no right, and I knew that. I think Lucan did too, but his desire to raise a vampire army and beat the werewolves was greater.

“I want to see this for myself,” I said.

Markus and Lucan gave me a strange look that I did not understand. Both men’s minds were sealed and so I could not read their thoughts.

“Then why don’t you accompany Rudolph and Thomas?” Markus offered.

“They are embarking on another reconnaissance trip to confirm who the leader is.”

“I thought you had already made up your mind about the leader,” I said.

“We have to be sure. If it is indeed Akira, we have to be careful, very careful. If it is Bartolomeo, we can expect a massacre, but there will be no surprises with him. We need to know, to be able to prepare ourselves the best we can,” Markus explained.

“I have told you before; Bartolomeo is not after blood; that is not the way he is,” Morgan spoke out, annoyed, but nobody acknowledged her opinion or replied to it.

“Lucan seems to think Akira is behind this,” I said.

“And I still do, but Markus is right. We have to be sure.”
It angered me that he gave Markus’s words more importance than mine. Lucan knew that, he had penetrated my thoughts.

“So, do you want to go?” Markus asked.

“Yes, I do,” I said.

“This is not a good idea,” Lucan countered.

“Lucan, I have told you before, I can make my own decisions. Besides, I will not be alone.”

“Rudolph and Thomas are very capable, and I can assure you, she is in good hands. Besides, the full moon is still a few days away,” Markus said. “And Aurélie is just as good a soldier as anyone of us.” That, coming from Markus, was a true compliment.

Nevertheless, we all knew about the lycans that never changed into their human form… No one mentioned it though.

“When are we going?” I inquired.

“Tonight,” Lucan said grimly.

Despite my personal growth and experience, he still regarded me as his fledgling that needed his protection, expertise, and guidance. The fact that it was not so, and had not been for a long time, bothered him. He did not like to let go of me, he never had. The master was refusing to let his student graduate.

CHAPTER XX: The Fount Returns

Rudolph, Thomas and I left the following morning. We vanished between the trees and crossed the deep forest, taking the route to the lycans’ lair and on the lookout for fresh werewolf tracks.

Was it fate or pure coincidence? Who knew? I did not believe much in coincidence. I trusted in fate, knowing that we chose our own paths, our own destinies. Either way, after we had left, Penelope and Frederica arrived at Morgan’s dwelling.

Had she come a little earlier, she would have encountered Rudolph and Thomas, and would have killed them on the spot for being werewolves. She might have destroyed Markus and me too for having brought them in the first place.

They entered Morgan’s place, and found everyone planning their next moves. Lucan was the first one who sensed her presence, and immediately he blocked his thoughts to avoid Penelope from penetrating his mind, and finding out about the lycans.

François felt that a strong, threatening being was approaching, but he had no idea who or what it was. Markus knew straight away who was gliding through the corridor, and when Megan shrieked in panic, Morgan rushed out fearlessly, making
sure she closed the door behind her, hurrying to protect her horse from the ancient vampire.

They heard the banshee scream at her. Although she had closed the door to protect her friends from the sound, as a banshee’s scream was deadly; it still rang horribly shrill through their ears and rattled their heads and bones. François thought he was going to die. The table clattered and the glass flasks shook and fell down. Two of them broke and the thick, yellow potion oozed out and spread over the wooden table, then dropped to the floor.

Suddenly, the anomalous shriek stopped.

Even we in the forest had heard the scream, and exchanged worried looks.

We did not speak; we knew something terrible had happened, unaware that Penelope had arrived. We could not go on without making sure our friends were safe, so we turned back.

Morgan obviously did not fear Penelope, but after she stopped screaming, a feeling of doom enveloped Lucan, Markus and François. Penelope was merciless, and would destroy the banshee for this.

I could just imagine Penelope’s furious expression on her parchment-white face.

Rudolph, Thomas and I were running now. We had covered a large distance in a short time when we had left, but the return to the banshee’s lair seemed to take forever.

We knew as soon as we entered the clearing and spotted the entrance to Morgan’s dwelling. I sensed her strong presence and looked at my companions. They had never met her, but they knew she was there. No need to say that we had to get out of there immediately!

I figured Morgan had screamed when the creature had entered, without knowing who it was, perhaps; but I also remembered her dislike of her. However, Morgan would not hurt Lucan. The force of the scream had worried me though. It had been incredibly loud and shrill, and I could only hope that my friends were not affected.

It would be suicide to go in and check. Penelope would pick up the werewolf scent on me right away and kill me for my “betrayal”.

We had to leave before she caught our scents or sensed our presence.

So, we ran at an inhuman speed to widen the distance between us and Penelope as much as we could.

“I do not like this.” Rudolph spoke in a concerned voice, his French laced with a thick German accent.

“Neither do I, but we have to keep going,” I said. “She has no mercy and she will kill you, assuming you are on Akira’s side.”
Thomas grunted disapprovingly.

We had crossed the forest and had stopped running now. We were far enough. An endless meadow stretched out before us, and again I was mesmerized by the beauty of the English countryside.

“We cannot stay out in the open for long. We have to find cover by sunset,” Thomas said in German. He did not speak French, my native tongue.

“We do not even know if they are alive,” Rudolph continued, immediately switching to German as well.

“They have to be. Penelope would never hurt Lucan. She respects him,” I said.

“What about the others? What about Markus?”

“She would only kill me and I am not there. Everybody else should be safe.”

“Providing they survived the banshee’s shriek,” Thomas said doubtfully.

I did not know what to answer there. He was right; we had no idea how shrill her scream had been and how it could have hurt them. It had been awful for us and we had been far away. For them, it could have been fatal. Again, I thought of her horse that had strangely been unaffected by her screams. There had to be a reason, but I could not fathom what it could be. I visualized the flasks with the yellow and red potions, and I guessed that they had something to do with Megan’s immunity to the banshee’s shrieks, but how could I be sure of their purpose?

“We cannot go back. She will kill us on the spot. If they are indeed dead, then we are the last hope of finding Akira’s lair. I can only pray that they are alive,” I said.

“Pray?” Rudolph asked disdainfully.

“Yes,” I said aggressively.

He shrugged and said: “If you rely on prayer alone, you will not get far, not with Penelope.”

“What else do I have? I can’t go back.”

We walked between the long grass that was enhanced by beautiful violets and cornflowers.

A forest sprouted up at the end of the meadow, and we hurried to reach it. The open field left us too visible and very vulnerable.

Morgan was indeed facing the old Greek vampire who blazed with fury. Frederica cowered on the floor, blood gushing from her ears, nose, and mouth. She was still alive, but could barely move. Papillon, Megan and Star were unharmed, but tried to stand as far away from Penelope as they could, for they feared her.

Penelope, however, did not try to kill Morgan. The latter stared at her hard, ready to scream again, this time fatally; and Penelope knew it, but she remained calm.

“I came here in peace,” she said.
“If that is the truth, then attacking my horse is a bad start,” Morgan replied coldly.

“I did not attack her; she panicked when I walked in,” Penelope said, ignoring Frederica who was slowly dying. Her face looked up at her maker, wondering why she did not heal her…. Her eyes pleaded silently for help.

Morgan glanced at her and said: “You should put her out of her misery.”

“Why don’t you do it?”

Frederica’s eyes opened wide with shock, not believing what she had heard. Fear was written all over her face, and she wished she hadn’t yearned for immortality during her mortal life when all she ended up with was violence and terror. She had known our world was violent, but she had always romanticized it, ignoring our battles and hardships. Now, she was fatally wounded and about to lose her immortal existence.

At that moment, Lucan burst into Megan’s barn, and when he saw Frederica, he rushed to her immediately, and knelt down next to her body. Love flooded her weepy eyes when she looked up at him.

He bit his wrist and opened a thin gash. Morgan watched his blood drop onto Frederica’s right ear, and said: “You cannot save her, not in this way.”

“Bloodletting only helps open wounds, but the damage now is internal,” Penelope said.

“Why did you do this?” he raged at Morgan.

But he knew why. He looked at Megan and made an impatient face. My love for Papillon and Morgan’s love for Megan was something he had never understood.

“She is just a horse!” he yelled, infuriated. “Does Frederica really have to die for her?”

“Megan is my companion and she is part of me; nobody will harm her; and yes, I will kill others to protect her,” Morgan coolly replied. Then without another word, she left the room and went back to the others in the main room who stared at her in shock and amazement, now that they knew what she was capable of.

She soon returned to Lucan and Penelope, and handed Lucan a flask holding a fiery red potion.

“Give this to her,” she said.

“What is it?”

“It will help her. Now just give her the potion, before it is too late. She is obviously important to you. So please, trust me.”

He looked at her doubtfully, but without further ado uncorked the flask and held it to Frederica’s bloody lips. She drank, trusting and hoping this would save her. She drained the whole flask and then looked at the banshee, wondering if she would live.
Morgan did not stay to see the results. She turned and walked back to the common room, not caring if Penelope followed or not. Her lack of fear of the ancient vampire was truly impressive, or was it mere folly? She could not be safe from Penelope. So why was she so sure she would not try to kill her?

Now Penelope glanced at Frederica and saw that the bleeding had stopped. The girl convulsed violently and gasped for air she did not even need. Penelope left for the main room, not waiting to see if Frederica would survive.

She was pleased with François’s development. She looked him up and down and then said: “Handsome specimen.” He did not take it as a compliment; he looked rather insulted at her comment, not liking to be treated as an object. Nevertheless, he was smart enough not to complain.

Lucan had not appeared yet. Nobody asked what had happened, and Morgan commenced cleaning up her table and rearranging the flasks as if it was a daily chore and Penelope’s presence did not bother her. She did not hide her dislike for the creature at all.

Penelope stared hard at Markus and asked disdainfully: “Where are your werewolves?”

“They are not my werewolves, and they are probably with Akira.”

“So, you finally found out where your loyalties lie.”

“I have always known where my loyalties lie,” he replied calmly.

Nobody knew how to take that answer, and she did not say anything.

She wore a long black robe that contrasted starkly with her chalk white, transparent skin. As usual, she was a scary vision, and I could just imagine François, unable to look away from her, feeling something between fear and revolt.

Lucan entered, supporting Frederica by her arm. She was pale, but she seemed fine. Morgan’s potion had worked miracles. Frederica gave Penelope a look full of resentment, realizing at the same time that she was still bound to this woman. She had to do her biddings if she wanted to stay alive. For the first time, she understood what her fate was, and she felt doomed. She was to be with Penelope for eternity, just like Gael and Balthazar. The only difference was that Penelope had truly loved both men and she had wept when she had lost them – both of them had perished at the hands of werewolves.

The ancient vampire turned and looked at Lucan, ignoring Frederica.

“The battle is approaching. The lycans are awaiting the full moon to strike.”

“It will be full moon in five days,” Morgan remarked, without stopping her work.

“Exactly, and that is when we will fight.”

“When they are fully transformed monsters?” Lucan asked in disbelief. “That is madness!”
“It is the only way. We will not be able to lure them out of their lair before that. They know about our army and they will not confront us in their human form. They are no fools!”

“And we are? If we cannot lure them out, then we have to assault their lair before the full moon!”

“It is very well hidden. I have not been able to find it, and if I cannot find it, I doubt anyone else can.”

“Aurélie is searching for it right now. If she finds it and returns on time, we might still have a chance,” Lucan spoke hopefully.

“But do you doubt me?” she asked, insulted. “How dare you even suggest that Aurélie is more skilled?”

“I am sorry, she is not. I just hoped… It is our last chance.”

Markus watched both of them wearily during this conversation. Morgan finally turned and held a flask of yellow liquid in her hand.

“We have to be prepared for battle. My shrieks will be able to kill about fifteen or twenty lycans, but also you. Therefore, you will each drink this potion an hour before we go into battle. This potion will be activated whenever I scream and it will numb your hearing. It will protect you for two days.”

“How do we know this is true?” François asked. It was the first thing he had said since Penelope’s arrival.

“Are the horses still alive? They were in the room with me when I screamed a while ago. Go and check on them and then you tell me how effective my potions are,” she said haughtily.

He stayed where he was, knowing she had spoken the truth. Papillon, Megan and Star were indeed alive and well.

“Did you give this to them?” Lucan asked incredulously.

She nodded.

“Good,” Penelope said. “So that is settled. Thank you, Morgan.”

Morgan gave her a hateful look that conveyed more than words could ever express. It was obvious that she resented Penelope having the advantage of her potion. François immediately understood that there was a history between both women. He was curious to know what it was, but he understood that he was not going to find out soon. He doubted that even Lucan knew.

Eyes were upon us; I could feel them burn in my back. Rudolph and Thomas walked protectively beside me. We knew we had been followed for a while; we just did not understand why our followers had not attacked. It was not full moon yet, and they were probably not in their wolfish forms, but they were still in the majority.
I glanced at Rudolph. He seemed tense; he knew the strength of his fellow lycans, and so did I. It seemed to me that I had fought more werewolves than vampires in my immortal years. I had interacted with them more than had been good for me.

It occurred to me that perhaps Seraphin was watching us, probably thinking I was in danger, but I knew that that was a futile thought. I only sensed enmity. He was not here.

Thomas stopped and looked up along the thicket of trees. The nearly full moon appeared from behind dark clouds, bathing them in her light.

She would fill out in a few days, but not now. Perhaps it was better this way. I was not ready to battle werewolves again, not yet.

“There are many nearby,” Thomas whispered. We knew he did not mean our followers. We were approaching Akira’s lair.

I knew that there were some in front of us. We were surrounded.

We stood still between the tall trees, waiting for what was to come, preparing for our doom.

My companions stood very close to me, ready to defend me, and to fight to the death. A sudden love for these two beings that I hardly knew rushed through me.

Since the lycans realized that we were aware of their presence, they finally made themselves visible. They appeared from behind us, from left and right, in front of us, and even above us, perching on the trees’ thick limbs. There were hundreds of men, most of them tall and wiry and with very strong physiques. They stared at me with hatred in their eyes, and I was very relieved that they were unable to take on their werewolf form right now.

Some of them had tanned skin and smoldering dark eyes; others were blond and had bright blue eyes, resembling the once impressive Vikings. Then there were older ones with grey hair and beards, and even very young ones, barely in their adolescent years. The latter though, were ruthless killing machines once transformed, just like their elders.

They seemed confused, not knowing what to do about two lycans prowling the woods with a vampire.

Then the ones in front of us moved to the side and gave way to a tall, handsome man. He had long, dark brown hair that fell in waves over his dark green, velvet robe. His face was a light olive brown, which made him look Mediterranean. His black eyes were framed by long lashes. He was a very attractive man. He looked young, barely older than twenty, but then, for how many centuries had he been twenty? In our world looks were so deceiving.

And my suspicions were confirmed when I saw that, despite his youth, he was the leader of this group.

We had found Bartolomeo.
He walked towards us and then stopped a few feet away. Boldly, he stared at me, and then at my companions, not knowing what to make of us.

“Who are you?” he asked in a deep voice.

I did not answer; I had no wish to make my name known to him.

“We come from Cologne,” Thomas said. “Our names are Thomas and Rudolph.”

“I am interested in the woman! Why are you travelling with a vampire?”

Thomas seemed to be lost for words, but then Rudolph improvised. “We were looking for you. We want to join you.”

“And what about her?” the leader asked, nodding hatefully at me.

“She is our prisoner.”

“Prisoner?” he spat. “You should have killed her as soon as you caught her! What good are prisoners to us?”

He now came closer and inspected me; his face was very close to mine, and I could feel his warm breath on me. His eyes gleamed with bloody anticipation.

“We wanted to wait until the full moon,” Thomas said hesitantly, knowing that he had sealed my fate with those words. I looked at him, but he ignored me. Bartolomeo noticed and smiled.

“Indeed, we can keep her for the full moon; let me have a little snack before we go into battle.” He licked his lips expectantly.

I had not forgotten Morgan’s story, and I remembered she had told us that he had turned away from violence after he had accidently killed the woman he loved. Now that he stood before me, and I looked into his bloodthirsty eyes, I did not believe that anymore.

Suddenly, a young man stepped forward and said: “I know this creature. She is the one who travelled with Lucan, the Roman, and killed my companions.”

“Lucan!” someone spat in the crowd, his voice filled with hatred.

Now Bartolomeo’s eyes filled with pleasant surprise.

“Aurélie?” he asked, intrigued. “Are you the famous Aurélie who saved Akira from certain death and kept the werewolf line alive?”

I nodded, sensing a positive shift of my destiny. At least I hoped so.

“Yes, I knew you were coming after us, and I had sent my lycans to eliminate you. I must say, I was very impressed with their failure. Both you and Lucan are strong. Few vampires manage to fight off a group of werewolves,” Bartolomeo said, and touched my hair with his right hand, stroking it gently.
“But you killed three of my men, and they were good men. And you are the enemy now,” he said, with fake sorrow in his voice. He could barely hide his anticipation of killing me.

“You remind me of someone I used to know, a long time ago….” he said, reminiscing, and I thought I knew who he meant. “I will enjoy feeding on you.”

He let go of my hair and told his men:” Take her to the castle.”

A castle? And Penelope had not been able to find them? I did not understand. How was this possible?

“Where is Akira? Take me to Akira!” I demanded.

Bartolomeo laughed and said: “Yes, Akira, he would surely keep you alive in his gratefulness. I know he has a soft spot for you; but I am sorry to disappoint you. Akira is not here!”

The castle lay on a small island in a lake. When we arrived, the bridge was slowly lowered. Thomas and Rudolph walked behind me, but they were not prisoners. I had no idea if they would try to free me, or if they would just play the game to save their own lives. Perhaps I could not count on them anymore.

Once we were in the courtyard, the bridge was drawn, and the heavy wooden gate was shut.

I was clearly doomed.

A werewolf in his wolf form ran towards me, his teeth flashing, saliva dripping from his muzzle, but Bartolomeo stopped him with a firm command. The monster stared at me, his tongue lolling, and he seemed strangely familiar.

I thought it was Heinrich, but I was not sure. I knew I could not expect any help from him, a man who had chosen to remain in his wolf form for the remainder of his life. He could not favor vampires very much, not even Markus.

“Where is Akira?” I asked.

Bartolomeo, who stood in front of me, turned to face me, and said: “As I said, he is not here.” He smiled maliciously. “And he will not come.”

I remembered Seraphin’s words which had warned us about Bartolomeo, and tried to tell us that he and Akira were on opposite sides; that Akira was not behind this. I started to believe it now.

If only Lucan would believe it too….

Bartolomeo walked away, and two of his men opened a grate in the floor. Wordlessly, they indicated that I had to descend the stairway below. Stone steps led into moist darkness. I hesitated, but one of the men pushed me roughly. I tripped, and managed not to fall, but could not help flashing my fangs at them instinctively. They laughed, and followed me down the steps.

They took me to the dungeons. All of the cells were empty; I was to be their only prisoner. Then, they led me to the farthest cell in the darkest corner, and
pushed me inside. A rat scurried away. A flashback of Giada lurking outside my cell, telling me how she would relish killing me, came to me. But Giada was long gone, her ashes strewn in the wind.

The threat seemed much worse now.

CHAPTER XXII: Rumors in the Castle

Voices and growls could be heard everywhere. I could hear them through the thick stone ceiling and through the walls. They travelled through the grate in the courtyard, and down the slippery stairway, into the dungeons, overlapping and interrupting each other, each one eager to make itself heard.

“A vampire down there!”
“A female, in fact the one that has killed Giovanni and Mario.”
“I wish I could get my hands on that one!”
“I heard she killed Gustave too!”
“Bartolomeo has plans… he wants…”
“She will burn in hell for what she did.”
“Saved Akira? I saw her, and she does not look that strong. How could she have stopped his attacker? That won’t do her much good now anyway.”

Then, there was loud, bloodthirsty laughter.

To my surprise, I heard female voices too. I had never thought of lycans as women; I had always imagined them to be men, and the ones I had met until now, had indeed been only men.

“Very pretty, I heard.”
“Not after he’s done with her.” This was followed by a woman’s shrill chuckle.
“She will not be alive to see it, bless her.”
“I heard that vampires are able to hear through walls. You think she can ….?”
“Do not be ridiculous! Have you seen her? I saw her when she was brought in, a thin, pale creature, she seems weak to me.”

“All vampires are pale,” a man remarked, and his companions cackled, amused.

“Rather a sad existence if you ask me,” a woman in a croaky voice said; I figured she was quite old. She had probably been lucky enough to have lived her mortal life until old age before she was turned.

“We should keep her alive, and make her watch how we’ll massacre their army, and Penelope. I wonder how they die when their fount is killed.”

“Go up in flames?” a young man’s voice suggested.

“I heard she has a werewolf companion,” a woman whispered.

“A werewolf? So, she is on our side?”
“No, she is Lucan’s companion.”
“Lucan!” a man spat. “Please leave him for me; we have an old score to settle.”
Breathlessly, I listened, wondering what secret part of Lucan’s life this concerned.
“No, I think her real companion is, in fact, a werewolf.”
“And where is he?” a woman laughed.
“Lucan, the Roman?”
“What are you talking about?”
“Did Lucan not kill Hermes?”
“Should we keep her alive because she favors us?”
“She does not favor us!”
“Did he? Hermes? Really?”
“A thousand years ago, he lured Hermes into a trap and killed him.”
“She came with two werewolves.”
“Either way, she is still going to die. Once their fount is destroyed, the whole vampire line disappears too.”
“Didn’t Hermes create most Western European werewolves?”
“Seraphin,” someone said. “It is he!”
“Who?”
“The Parisian.”
“What do you mean?”
I held my breath. Would this revelation endanger his life? Would it just remain a rumor, or would someone inform Bartolomeo? I hoped that he was safe, and that his connection to me would not seal his fate. Despite what had occurred between us, and despite my angry words, I did not wish him dead.
So, Seraphin had been here. I wondered when and how he had managed to get away. What excuse had he given them? Given his ties to the vampiric world, they would not have wanted to let him go for fear of betrayal. Then again, they might have sent him on a mission to spy for them. I realized that, in fact, he had been made a double spy, a very dangerous position to find himself in.
But rumors flew. Soon, I heard his name mentioned everywhere, and it would only be a matter of time before this news reached Bartolomeo.
If Seraphin decided to return here, his life was in real danger. I wished there was some way to communicate with him, to tell him to stay away. However, if he knew I was imprisoned here, he would do just the opposite. He would be here right away.
It did not take long for Bartolomeo to find out.
Soon, he descended the narrow, stone stairway, accompanied by a young, petite woman whose white face was framed by long, straight, black hair. Dark eyes examined me with scrutiny.
Finally, I laid eyes on a female werewolf, in her human form. But, despite her femininity and frail looking figure, there was something animalistic about her. I could not determine which it was: if it was the predator look in her eyes, or the way she licked her blood red lips in anticipation. Suddenly, the vision of a black, lanky werewolf tearing at raw flesh came to me. The flesh took on form, and I suddenly saw the werewolf tear at my own body. It caught me so violently and intensely, that I was flung backwards and landed on my back, hard against the wall.

“Cecilia, stop that,” Bartolomeo chided her softly, but he could barely hide the enjoyment in his voice. Both were unable to conceal their hatred of me.

In mild awe, I stared at the female, never having seen a werewolf with mental abilities. I did not think such lycans existed …

“I hear you have some connection to us,” he began, assuming I knew what he was talking about.

I moved away from the wall, and approached the bars.

“Does it matter?” I asked.

“I am curious. How do a vampire and a werewolf manage to trustingly live in the same city? Have you never had the urge to kill each other?”

“No.”

He and the woman exchanged an amused look.

“And where is he?” Bartolomeo asked.

“I do not know.”

“Really? I find that hard to believe.”

“What do you want with him anyway? He is on your side,” I lied.

“That is why she is here alone, and we found her in the woods without him, I suppose,” the woman said.

“Nevertheless, she was with two lycans. Why are you are on friendly terms with some of us?” he inquired.

“As you said, with some of you. Most of you are not that fortunate.”

At this, Cecilia let loose of an angry roar, but Bartolomeo held her back and said: “You are feeling very brave, are you not?”

“I have no need to be nice. You are going to kill me anyway,” I said coldly.

Cecilia raised her eyebrows in an involuntary act of admiration at my courage.

“That is true,” Bartolomeo said. “It just seems such a pity having spent so much time with lycans, and even loved one of us, if we are the ones that will destroy you.”

I did not answer, instead I tried to stare him down.

“But let’s not get sentimental,” he then continued, and smiled cruelly.

“You would know about that, wouldn’t you?” I said.

His smile vanished, and turned into an angry scowl.
“What do you mean?”
I did not say anything; he knew very well what I meant.
“What are you implying? Answer me!” he roared.
“A rumor of a woman you used to love.”
In his anger, he hit the bars viciously, his handsome face contorting with rage. I took a step back.
“You seem to know a lot about me. Well, it will not do you any good! You’ll be dead in no time!”
With these words, he turned and walked away.
Cecilia looked at me, not sure whether she should say something, or if she would be allowed to hurt me just a bit. Her eyes took on an intense glare, and for a moment, it felt as if she were penetrating my mind, as if invisible tentacles were reaching into my brain, but that was absurd. Lycans did not have such capabilities. This one seemed different though, very unusual.
“An army of vampires? And you created some vicious ones, I gather. Interesting,” she said.
I wondered how she had gotten this last bit of information. I had not even thought about that.
“You cannot read my mind, that is impossible,” I said.
Her black eyes sparkled menacingly, and now I felt her terrible grip on my mind. She held it firmly, and would not even allow me to think. My mind seemed to be mired in quicksand. Her mental strength reminded me of Penelope, but this could not be. How had a lycan achieved such powers?
Suddenly, she released her hold over me, unbalancing me. I held my hands firmly onto the cell bars to maintain my equilibrium.
“The werewolf lied to you. He betrayed you,” she suddenly hissed, to my astonishment. Then she haughtily flung her hair back, and followed Bartolomeo.

CHAPTER XXIII: Frederica’s Predicament

They did not seem to need much sleep, just like ancient vampires. They continued prowling the castle at night, incessantly gossiping about the foolish prisoner that had dared to challenge Bartolomeo, and had lived to tell the tale. There were also the occasional growls of the werewolves, who were always in wolf form, and had given up their human bodies.
I had not gotten the chance to get a proper look at the castle, since I had immediately been thrown into the dungeons without even being given the chance to take in the size of the building, and the height of its walls and towers. At the moment of my capture, it had not occurred to me, but now I regretted not having thought of it, despite the few seconds I had spent in the courtyard.

I sat there in my dark, moist cell, pondering the possibilities of escape. I knew I had the strength to bend the bars, but there were a hundred werewolves outside, and not even my flying would guarantee me a flawless, or even a successful escape. The only way out was through the grate, and I was sure that guards were posted near it, and if I judged Bartolomeo correctly, he would have posted at least one lycan in his wolf form. He did not take any chances.

This was certainly a doomed mission.

I had long given up on any help from Thomas or Rudolph, who probably thought it wiser to stay with their own kind. When the latter however appeared outside my cell on the second night, just before dawn, I could barely hide my surprise.

My night vision, as usual, was excellent, and I recognized him immediately in the darkness.

Quickly, I approached the bars. He held his index finger to his lips, and I understood. I did not say a word.

“I am sorry to find you here,” he said, softly.

He could not be here secretly; the guards had to know about him. The only way in was past them.

“Thomas and I both offer our deepest sorrow. It will be full moon in two nights, and that is when the battle will take place. You will be killed before we go into battle, to raise our men’s morale. I will join Bartolomeo’s men, and so will Thomas.”

I could not believe what I was hearing. I had felt such joy when he arrived, but now, I only felt anger and revulsion. Why had he come in the first place? To rejoice in my upcoming demise? I was about to speak my mind, when he suddenly slipped me a note. Instinctively, I closed my hand around the small piece of paper, and then understood. The guards could hear us; he could not risk being overheard, so he had to play the ruse.

I nodded.

He then turned and walked away, after giving me a hopeful smile.

When the grate creaked moments later, I knew the guards had let him out. Impatiently, I unrolled the note, and read:

Seraphin knows you are here. He will come with a proposal that Bartolomeo cannot refuse. He should arrive tonight.
In shock, I stared at Thomas’s neat handwriting, and I realized the risk both men had taken in contacting Seraphin. I wondered how they had found him. Fear for his safety, and excitement at my possible rescue overwhelmed me at the same time, but I knew I had to be realistic. Whatever Seraphin had planned, it was going to be a difficult endeavor. I wished he had left me some more information or some instructions.

What I did not know yet was that a few hours ago Seraphin had sought out Lucan and Morgan at the dwelling, and had barely escaped with his life. He had no idea that Penelope was there, but when he arrived, he sensed her presence. Since he had sensed her before, he knew it was she; but he did not know that she had also sensed his werewolf scent. She knew immediately that he had appeared, the half breed, and she rushed out to murder him, but he was too quick for her, and the distance too wide. She flew after him, and he ran for his life, but then Morgan appeared, and closed the door to her hideout, to protect the others from what she was about to do. She screamed, loud enough to hurt Penelope, but not loud enough to affect Seraphin. Penelope covered her ears in pain. Morgan did not scream for very long. It had been sufficient to help him escape.

Furiously, Penelope turned on her, and shouted: “What on Earth are you thinking? He is the enemy!”

“He is not.” Again, the banshee did not fear the ancient vampire that could destroy with her mind. Strangely enough, Penelope did not punish her for her “disobedience”. Morgan somehow counted on it, and took advantage of that fact.

“I would not go too far if I were you,” Penelope said, gloomily.

Morgan did not reply, but went back to her dwelling.

I was unaware how Frederica and Lucan had left the house. It was beyond me how they had gotten out of Penelope’s clutches, but apparently François’s charms had distracted her.

Both went looking for Seraphin, who patiently waited in the forest. He knew he could count on Lucan. Both men had hardly ever seen eye to eye, but when it came to me, they joined forces. Lucan cared about me, and Seraphin meant to use him. Lucan was more than willing, but Frederica was terrified.

“She will kill me,” she stammered.

“She might do that eventually, once you lose your usefulness, and if she does not, the lycans will,” Lucan said drily.

She would not hear of it though. She protested, and even wept in her panic.

“You do not know her like I do.”

At this, Lucan exploded and said: “We don’t? If there is anyone that knows her, then it is I! You think you know her? How long have you been with her? A week, perhaps two or three? I have known her for nearly two thousand years!”
“The way she treats me …. It is….” She did not finish her sentence. She literally shivered in fear.

“Frederica, we need you,” Seraphin calmly said.

“Let me think about it.”

“We do not have time to think!” Seraphin spoke impatiently.

Lucan gave her an exasperated look, one that a father might give his rebellious teenaged daughter.

“What you are asking is a lot….”

Both men looked at each other, knowing it was pointless.

“What do we do?” Seraphin asked.

“We? She is going to help us, if she wants to or not,” Lucan said fiercely. Then, he turned to Frederica and said in a hard voice: “Immortality is not quite working out for you, is it? You do understand now why I never wanted to turn you. Well, now you listen to me, and I will only say this once: you are going to help us, whether you want to or not, because believe me, you really have nothing to lose and everything to gain!” She winced when he said “nothing”, realizing the hopelessness of her existence.

“But I do not understand the point of this. If we succeed, we are going to die anyway,” she cried in a last effort.

“We will do everything in our power to prevent that,” Seraphin said. “But we cannot leave Aurélie to the lycans. Do you have any idea what they will do to her?”

She did not answer, but she did not have to. She stared at the dry forest floor, lost in her thoughts, pondering her options, of which she did not have many.

“She will find out,” she said quietly.

“Not if you block your mind. You have her blood in you, which means that you are stronger than any other fledgling. Use your power; you can prevent her from penetrating your mind,” Lucan replied.

“But she will suspect if I close my thoughts to her. She does not trust me anymore.”

“She will not enter your mind all the time, will she?” Lucan said impatiently.”

And why would she not trust you?”

“Because I did something that …”

“Look, time is running out.” Seraphin interrupted, impatiently. “The battle will take place in two days. We have to start moving NOW.”

Lucan nodded, and Seraphin made to leave.

“I will wait for you,” he said.

“We will be there, where you told us to meet.”

“Good.”

“Fine,” Frederica said, “I will help.”
Now, gathering her courage, she said: “I have yearned for immortality for far too long to have it spoiled by Penelope. You are right, Lucan. It has not worked out so well for me. I need to be rid of her, and therefore, I will help you.”

“We do not plan on getting rid of her.”

“But I will free myself from her.”

Frederica’s mind was in turmoil, and she had to make a grand effort to close her thoughts. As soon as they arrived back at Morgan’s dwelling, a few vampires were there, and were already waiting, ready to take their army of fledglings and also older vampires to the battlefield. Hadea was not among them, having done her part in creating more blood drinkers, but then she hurried away to someone who was awaiting her, someone close to her.

CHAPTER XXIV: Morgan’s Grudge

I was sitting on the cold floor, my knees drawn up close. I was alone with the rats that scurried about, too busy to pay any attention to me, and smart enough to stay away, for I had already fed on two of them. I needed to keep my strength up.

Mindlessly, I stared at the empty cell in front of me. A little light fell through the barred opening in the ceiling. My cell had no windows or grates; it was dark and depressing. They must have chosen this prison for me for good reason.

I did not feel despair, although I knew my end was near. Seraphin’s message had not reassured me. On the contrary, it only worried me. I had faith in Seraphin, but he was up against hundreds of lycans, and he would never get the vampires’ support, certainly not Penelope’s. Even if Lucan agreed to help, and I trusted that he would, it still remained an extremely risky mission. They could not free me from this place.

It was nearing noon, and I picked up no sounds of commotion or excitement. Seraphin had not arrived yet. Or had he perhaps slipped in undetected? Did he know lycans here? He had to, since he had previously been in contact with Bartolomeo.

I hugged my legs tighter and rested my head on my knees.

What would it be like to die, to come to the end of my life? How would it be for me, an immortal, a non-human? Was there a place in heaven for us, or did we go straight to hell?

Many years ago, I had once come close to death, and it had been dark and empty. There had been only emptiness, no spirits of dead loved ones welcoming me, no tunnel, no light, just nothing. It was a scary prospect. Or was heaven waiting behind this darkness? Did monsters like me have to wait in limbo before being allowed a chance at heaven, or did we go from limbo straight to hell? Did
hell even exist? I had seen hell on Earth, and it seemed sufficient to me. If there really was a hell, then it had to be here on Earth, and not in some underground cave with a horned, hellish, red creature. Mortals and immortals had proven themselves quite capable of creating their own hells on this planet.

Voices mentioning Penelope….

Alert, I looked up. What was going on? There was sarcastic laughter, and a woman giggled.

Then, the main gate opened with a screech. It was not Seraphin, a female descended the stairs. When she appeared on the landing, I recognized the one that was called Cecilia, the one with long black hair and those incredible mind powers. Very leisurely, she walked over to me, and stopped outside of my cell. I remained seated on the floor, gazing up at her.

Her eyes were calm and devoid of the threat they had conveyed the first time we met.

“You should not have created those blood drinkers,” she said.
“How do you know what I have done?”
“You must have noticed the power of my mind.”
“Yes, and I wonder, how can a lycan possess such powers? It is very uncommon.”

She smiled, but did not explain.
“I thought you were on Akira’s side,” she then said.
“Of course I am, if he is not behind all of this.”
“You know he is not. Then, why did you create those vampires? For what battle, if you do not wish to fight Akira?”

“Will I have to battle him, or not?”
She shook her head.
“And Bartolomeo?”
“He will fight. We all will.”
“Why are you here?”

She grabbed the bars, and said: “At full moon, I will lift the barrier over this castle. Yes, my dear, it was I who shrouded this place under an invisible dome, making it impossible to be seen, or even sensed by other immortals. Only the ones who know, are able to find it. Once I lift the invisible veil, the vampires will come, and we will fight.”

“How did you come to have these mind powers?”

What she had just described to me in a few words was an incredible mental feat that would cause even Penelope an immense challenge.

She grinned and said: “You would not believe me if I told you. I have heard that you have quite an enlightened mind, stuffed with the words of Voltaire and
Rousseau, and that you are unwilling to believe anything you cannot see with your own eyes.”

“How do you know all this?”
She pointed at her head. “I just found out. I only have to enter your mind.”

“Vampires can do that, but not werewolves.”

“True, but I am no ordinary werewolf.”

“Then, what are you?”

“You would not believe me. Like I said, your mind can not fathom the existence of witches.”

“The existence of what?”

Werewolves were unable to achieve such power. Surely, she could not expect me to believe that. Witches? Mere superstition, a terrible scapegoat that the inquisition had used to torture and kill thousands of people. Real witches could not exist; they were a creation of the human mind … or were they? Had I been too quick to discard the possibility of their existence?

“No, I do not expect you to believe me. I do not care if you do. I need to know, though. How many vampires have been created?”


At this, she laughed out loud.

“You just wait until it is full moon and you will lay eyes on werewolves all the way to the horizon. You have no idea of our numbers. We are many, and we will destroy you. Your army is nothing against us.”

“So, why ask about our numbers?”

“I am curious.”

“Why don’t you enter my mind?”

“I already did. I cannot find the information.”

“Because I do not know.”

“You, Aurélie, created a small number of vampires in London, only around twenty, I think. Why so few?”

“What do you care?”

“You should have created more to be effective against us. A few turned criminals will not make a difference.”

“Once they join our army, they will.”

“Why did you turn them?”

“What does it matter?”

“It does. You were against creating this army. So, I believed that you would not move against us, for Akira’s sake.”

She knew a little too much about me to be comfortable around her. It scared me, how much this female lycan had found out about me by prying into my mind.

“And risk Penelope getting destroyed?”
“You are quite an enigma. There is your loyalty to Lucan, yet there is also a sense of loyalty to Akira and a sense of duty to Penelope. There is anger in you, pain, disappointment . . .”

“Why do you care?”

“I do not. I just wish to solve this riddle. I also see murder in your mind. I see mortals, killed by my kind, in a beautiful house, in London, I believe.”

“No. Stop!”

“How do they relate?”

She already knew how. She was taunting me, and enjoying it. Rage rushed through me as I slowly rose, my fangs flashing discreetly, but ready to strike if the opportunity presented itself.

“You loved them, did you not? You tried to save the young man, turn him. He would have been like your Seraphin, half werewolf, half vampire, a traitor to both our kinds. But he died before you could finish it. You were too late.”

“Stop it.”

“And the woman, the portrait on her chest, how touching.”

“I said, stop it!” I yelled, and flung myself at the bars which rattled at the impact. She took a step back, and barely avoided my hand reaching for her throat. I flashed my fangs fully, and she stared at them with fascination.

“My, even locked up you are a danger.”

I let go of the bars, and closed my mouth.

“I have fought vampires before. You do not frighten me,” she said, and narrowed her eyes. Immediately, an array of images from her mind invaded mine forcefully.

Coffins stacked in rows were burning, shrieking vampires lunged at her in her black werewolf form, werewolves running in a large underground chamber, and tearing vampires to shreds. Screams and growls ricocheted against the stone walls. Blood splashed onto the cold floor. Two vampires were cornered, a male and a female, the only ones that had survived the massacre. They moved backwards, and before the werewolves could strike, escaped through an air vent. She sent me the image, and watched for my reaction, but I did not know those vampires. The two survivors were not known to me either. It did not concern me. I still did not know why she had come to me, unless taunting me was the only thing on her mind.

Of course, she had read my thoughts, and she said: “What happened to that coven, will happen to your army. They goaded us into attacking. Those vampires I just showed you had ambushed us, reduced our numbers, and proved to be a royal pain. Eventually, I found out where their little coven was hidden and we took care of the nuisance. Soon, we will destroy all of you, and you know it. We will all transform, but your fledglings cannot transform yet. Only the older ones can. We are stronger than you, and you stand no chance. But I am here, because I am
confused. You saved Akira’s life once, and now you are on opposite sides, as if he were the enemy. He is not. You are fighting Bartolomeo, not Akira. Yet, now you would not hesitate to kill him.”

“I would not kill Akira, but if he is a danger to me, and to us all, I will defend myself and our blood line. You are confusing to me as well. Why do you care so much? You want to kill us anyway. You cannot wait to enter this battle.”

“True, but you intrigue me.”

She walked away and said: “I know that Seraphin will come, but his plan will not succeed. He betrayed you. Think about that.”

His betrayal now seemed to have taken place long ago, and I did not see how it could affect my current situation. He would not abandon me here, despite what had happened, but suddenly I understood what she meant. She did not even have to send me an image to explain it. It became clear to me. Cecilia’s mind reached out to me, unable to resist the demonstration of her power. Again, her invisible tentacles, instead of prying into my mind, grabbed me, pried my hands from the bars, and slammed me hard onto the floor.

Chuckling, she opened the door at the top of the stairs, and walked out.

I felt his presence immediately; he was here! Excitement mixed with fury; disappointment and concern surged through me, and quickly I stood up and ran to the bars of my cell. A guard holding a lit torch walked behind him. As soon as Seraphin saw me, he hurried to my cell and covered my hands, holding the bars with his. Immediately, I removed my hands, not wanting to touch him.

“Aurélie.” He gave me a worried look. “Are you all right? Have they hurt you?”

“You!” I glared at him angrily.

“What? What have I done now?” he asked sarcastically.

“Madame Betancourt,” I simply said, and those two words were enough; enough to see the guilt in his eyes, enough to know my suspicions had been right.

He betrayed you, the female werewolf had told me. I had not understood it until later. She had not meant the prostitute in the brothel or any other female; she had meant another kind of betrayal, one that was even crueler.

“You told them! You led them to her! Why, Seraphin, why?” I cried, hitting the bars in fury.

“Keep your voice down!”

“You let them murder her!”

“Aurélie, I …”

He did not know what to say; and, ashamed of himself, he avoided my eyes.

“You do not even deny it. You sent them to her, you had her killed! Why? Why did you do it? And Gerard, him too?”
He bit his lips, and then he looked at me.

“They were after you,” he whispered. “They were close on your trail, and just short of discovering your hideout. They know about my ties to you and your kind, and there was no point denying it.” He kept his voice down, not wanting anyone to hear. “I had to send them down the wrong path.”

“To Madame Betancourt?” I asked in revulsion at what I was hearing.

“I had to give them something real.”

“You could have given them any other location.”

“They would have known it was a lie. Your scent was still all over Madame Betancourt’s place. Even if you were not there, they would know I had not lied.”

“You sacrificed her!”

“To save you.”

“She was your father’s love! You did not only betray her and me, but also your father!”

At this, he grew angry, and said: “She never gave herself to him the way he wanted her to, she was too afraid of losing her wealth!”

“He loved her!”

“She was only a mortal.”

“She was my friend!” I shouted and hit the bars in anger, unable to control myself.

He stood there, once more avoiding my eyes. Then he said softly: “I only tried to save you.”

“By murdering my friend? What has happened to you? What has become of you, Seraphin? I do not recognize you anymore.”

“I had no choice.”

“You always have a choice!”

“I could not lie to them!”

“But you can lie to me? You cannot lie to your furry friends, but you can cheat on me and betray me, and have my best friend murdered? Is that what you are saying?” My voice now thundered through the prison, and I knew that everyone in the lair had heard me.

“Keep your voice down,” he whispered, “please.”

He grabbed the bars, and brought his face close to mine, but I moved away from him in disgust.

“You will be out of here in two days,” he murmured.

“It is full moon in two days. That’s when they plan to kill me.”

“They will not.”

“Why? What other magnificent plan have you got?”

He noticed the sarcasm in my voice, but he let it slide.

“I am getting you out of here. I have arranged a deal with Bartolomeo.”
“What kind of a deal?” I asked suspiciously. How did he expect me to trust him ever again?
“I cannot tell you now, but you will find out in due time.”
“Why can’t you tell me?”
“It would not be prudent,” he said. I gathered he had discussed it with Bartolomeo, but the guard and the others could not know yet.
“If you can whisper the rest, you can tell me everything. You have lied, and kept me in the dark about too many things. Be honest with me, just for once.”
“You need to be prepared,” he continued, ignoring my comment. “I will be there when the deal is done, and when I say run, you have to promise that you will run. Do not wait for me. It is too dangerous and you do not know yet what you are up against,” he said.
“I do, I met Bartolomeo.”
“Have you seen his numbers?”
“Yes, and here is my next question. Run where, and how fast, if there are hundreds of lycans?”
“You will see.”
“You should at least give me some indication.”
“When the time arrives, please do as I say. Please, Aurélie.”
When I turned and met his gaze, I knew what he was thinking. He could bend those bars effortlessly and knock out the guard, but it would be madness. After that, we would still have to get past hundreds of werewolves. Then again, escaping with him by my side … I could not trust him, I did not want him near me anymore. How could he expect me to love him, trust him, and be his ally, after what he had done?
“Fine, I will do as you say,” I agreed. What else could I tell him? Perhaps, after this was over, he would finally leave me alone.
I hesitated and then said: “I have just one doubt. If you have arranged a deal with Bartolomeo, will there still be a battle?”
He did not answer me verbally, but his solemn eyes confirmed my suspicions.
So, if we were still going to fight despite the arrangement, then there was something very fishy about it. I just wished he would share more with me, but alas, what could I expect of him?

Morgan had a profound dislike for Penelope, and had harbored that dislike for centuries. She had never forgiven the ancient creature, and her wish to kill her had been vivid for just as long, but she knew she could not. No one knew what had caused this enmity. I suspected that Lucan was the only one who did know, but he did not divulge his secrets that easily, as I had learnt over the years.
When Morgan found Frederica in the woods, on one of her monthly trips to collect herbs and plants, she was surprised to see this strong, but terrified fledgling address her in a secretive manner. Morgan knew there was a good reason, a very ancient one, and she was all ears.

Frederica was nervous. The banshee listened attentively and nodded a few times, not believing what she was hearing. Lucan and Seraphin were willing to take an enormous risk here. They could both perish in the endeavor, and she knew that they were aware of it. Frederica was pretty sure she was going to die, and somehow she seemed to have accepted her fate.

“Is she worth all that?” Morgan asked, when the girl was finished.

“Who, Penelope…?” Frederica asked, confused.

“Of course not! I mean Aurélie,” she said impatiently. Frederica shrugged.

“Lucan and Seraphin made you do this, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Frederica, you are a blood drinker for Christ’s sake! You even carry Penelope’s blood in your veins, and therefore you must have incredible powers! Yet, you allow them all to bully you, and you just let them walk all over you.”

“How can I protest against Penelope?”

“I can understand that. No one messes with Penelope; but Seraphin and Lucan? Don’t get me wrong. I am in. I will do anything to help, but you need to be more assertive, stand up for your rights. You are a very powerful vampire, and you could crush a man’s gullet between your fingers if you wanted to. I do not understand your fear. In fact, it seems rather foolish. I have never seen an immortal filled with such fear.”

“And that is coming from you? You nearly killed me two days ago.”

“That was a misunderstanding,” Morgan said lightly.

Frederica gave her an incredulous look.

“That is what you call it?”

Morgan was the one who shrugged this time. She arranged the plants in her hands and said: “Let’s go back and get started.”

Frederica followed her back to her dwelling. As they walked through the forest, Morgan continued: “Nobody will respect you if you are always afraid. It seems as if you never wanted this, as if you abhor your kind.”

At this, Frederica looked up surprised, not realizing that she might have given that impression.

“I do not. I have always yearned for immortality.”

Not having expected this answer, Morgan gave her a scornful look and she said: “Then embrace it! Lose your fear! Stop being a coward!”
No one liked to be called a coward, and Morgan’s words stung her, but she knew they rang true. Something was going to change; it had to change. When this was over, she would leave Penelope, regardless of the consequences. She would not spend her immortality as that creature’s lackey. Death was preferable to an existence in misery. Penelope would have to be gone, and thus she would help Lucan and Seraphin, to save me, but also to save herself.

CHAPTER XXV: Secret Tunnels

It was a little before dawn when Cecilia, the female lycan, returned. I was awake, sitting in the middle of my cell, my arms hugging my legs as I contemplated Seraphin’s apparently flimsy plan. When I heard her descend the stairs, I rose and walked towards the bars of my cell. The light of the nearly full moon seeped through, making her pale face appear more vampiric than lycan. She stopped at the bars, and this time her presence emanated friendliness.

“Tomorrow is the day,” she said.

“I know,” I answered, knowing that she had not come to state the obvious. I readied myself for whatever taunts she might fling at me, despite her calm appearance. A brief moment of silence passed between us, as if she was unsure about speaking her next words, and the goading I expected never came. Instead, she said: “Do not worry about Seraphin’s plan going awry. There are other things you have to worry about. Penelope will come, and there is every chance that she will not get out of this alive.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

The way she had told me did not sound as if she were enjoying the news; she seemed concerned, which was very unlike the Cecilia I had first met. Obviously reading my thoughts, she said: “I had to pretend, because I came down here with Bartolomeo. He wanted me to come with him, because of my mind reading skills. He wanted me to dig into your mind and find out information about Penelope.”

“You told him that Seraphin was on his side. You were lying,” I said, recognizing why she had done that.

“Yes, to protect him, and you. I know that Akira holds Seraphin very dear.”

“Why do you care? You are a lycan. Surely, you want Penelope dead.”

“Of course I do. She is pure evil, but Akira, for reasons I cannot fathom, does not wish to destroy her.”

“And you do not wish to upset him?” I asked in disbelief.
“I am Akira’s lieutenant, his right hand, or whatever you want to call it. When this conflict began, he summoned me, and I went to find him. We did not expect Bartolomeo to intercept me, and he forced me to come here and assist him, as he has use for my powers. I had no choice, and I was unable to use my mind skills against him at that time. So, I am here, apparently assisting him, but in reality, I am only waiting for Akira.”

“His lieutenant? When I met him in Cuernacava, you were not there. There was a French lycan claiming to be his lieutenant.”

“Yes, Fernando, I remember. He was the lair’s lieutenant, but I am Akira’s true right hand, always by his side, at any lair, wherever he is. When you were in Cuernavaca, I had left. If I had known what was about to happen, I would have stayed, but it all turned out well, as I heard upon my return. You killed Giada and saved Akira, which is also why I am here. I know Akira has great respect for you, and he would want you to live. So, I am here to make sure that happens.”

“But Bartolomeo, will he not find out?”

She touched her right temple with her index finger and said: “As you know, I have incredible mind powers. He will never know. In fact, right now, no one is able to hear our conversation, as I have created an invisible sound barrier to surround us.”

“So, what will happen now?” I asked, impressed at her enormous skills and how they nearly matched Penelope’s.

“You will go along with Seraphin’s plan. It is not a perfect plan, and it will not work as he expects, but it will get you out of here. What will happen afterwards, I have no control over. There will be a battle, rest assured.”

“What does this plan involve?”

“I was too late to catch all of Seraphin’s thoughts, but there are some other things you need to know.”

Expectantly, I looked at her.

“Your friend, Frederica, betrayed Penelope. She saved some humans who mean a lot to you; people who Penelope wanted dead, to punish you for having consorted with Seraphin, although she had forbidden it.”

“Which humans?” I asked with dread, already knowing the answer.

“The humans who are looking after your house in Paris. Frederica warned them, and thus saved them from Penelope, who later came to kill them herself, but they had already gone.”

“Where are they? And when did this happen?”

“It happened a while ago, perhaps a few weeks back. The women have gone to a relative of theirs somewhere in France, and the man has gone to England.”

“Kokayi is coming?”

“Yes, Frederica told him that you would be here.”
In despair, I struck the bars. “She should not have told him! I am glad she saved his life, but she has now sent him to his death!”

Penelope went after them weeks ago. Frederica had not told me anything. She should have trusted me. I was relieved that she had saved Sophie, Angelique, and Kokayi, but I wondered why she had kept this from me.

“I believe that he is close. It is too late to save him. You must think of your own safety now, and of your friends. Penelope punished Frederica harshly, but she is alive.”

I could just imagine the punishment Penelope had inflicted upon her, remembering the torture she had put me through.

Finally, Cecilia informed me of what had been happening, and how Seraphin and Lucan had asked for Frederica’s assistance. She also told me that Frederica planned to break away from Penelope.

When I asked her how she knew this without having been able to enter their minds, as they were not that close by, she simply said: “There are other ways than reading minds,” but she did not explain.

“There is one more thing,” she said, and her face turned grim, “when the battle begins, I will fight. I will be your enemy. I will fight and kill vampires, as I am one of the werewolves.”

I understood. It would be suspicious if she did not. “But would they know? Once transformed, werewolves are hardly aware of what they are doing and who is doing what to whom,” I said doubtfully.

“That is true, but I cannot disappear before battle. So, I will be there, and do my part.”

I nodded.

“I will not attack you,” she continued, “but that does not guarantee your safety. Many will still want to kill you. So, be on the lookout, for in this battle it will be all or nothing. Bartolomeo will go after Penelope.”

I was not sure if I should thank her, but I was grateful for the information she had given me. She was not a full ally, but I understood her position.

“I need to go now. I am meeting Bartolomeo at dawn. He wants to go over the battle plan.”

She hesitated and then said: “I always hated blood drinkers, or vampires, as you call yourselves. After I was turned, this hatred was bred into me by other lycans and it only increased, due to nasty experiences with your kind. Akira showed me tolerance and forgiveness, and I find it impossible to hate a blood drinker that saved his life. Anyone who is kind to Akira, has my support. Be careful when you get out of here, Aurélie. Always watch your back.”

Again, I nodded, and this time I thanked her.
She gave me a rueful smile, as if hoping that she had done the right thing; and then she turned and walked away.

Although my dungeon was dark and gloomy, somehow the light of the moon made it through the densely barred openings, and penetrated through the moist tunnels. I realized that it was time, and I felt nervous and scared. Seraphin had not returned in the past two days, and I knew that I would only see him again in this so-called deal he had arranged with Bartolomeo. I could not comprehend what might have convinced Bartolomeo to keep me alive, apart from Cecilia, with whom I had spoken only this morning, but I knew that I was far from safe yet.

The iron bars on top of the stairs shrieked when the main gate was opened, and I heard footsteps approach. Two male voices were conversing in subdued tones.

“This is madness, pure madness.” I picked up from a baritone voice.

“He will betray us, you will see. He is only half a werewolf,” an adolescent voice said.

Over the last days, I had heard many youngsters speak through the walls, and it amazed me how many young ones had been made lycans. Did Bartolomeo prefer the young ones, because they were fearless? Or did he take them because, as a lycan, they found some kind of identity? After all, adolescents always needed something to identify with, and if that was the reason he turned them, then he was indeed ruthless, and very astute. They proved to be lethal killers. I had already battled, and killed, one of them; and after his dead werewolf body had become its human self once again, I had been shocked at the boy’s tender age.

I had seen few vampires that young. There had to be a rule among vampires that prohibited us from taking them so young; but werewolves did not seem to have any rules at all.

“Bartolomeo should not trust him,” the youngster continued fiercely.

“I do not think he does,” the baritone voice said. “He is using this deal to get close to Penelope.”

“Really?” the young one spoke excitedly.

Their silhouettes now appeared a few feet away, and strolling along my corridor. They were both tall, and one of them, the older one, I supposed, was quite muscular. The young one carried a torch, and held it in front of him. His face was that of a fifteen-year-old, he did not even have a beard yet. He had large doe eyes and soft, thick lips. He was a handsome boy, but when he stood in front of my cell, hatred and animalistic rage sprung from his beautiful eyes, twisting his face into ugliness.

I wondered why they had not turned yet. After all, it was full moon.

But then I saw a spasm in the younger one’s features. He was trying to fight his transformation, but was not very successful.
The older one had a scarred face that reflected remnants of past battles. He looked tough and mean, and I would not like him as my opponent.

“Control yourself,” he said impatiently. “She has to stay alive, at least until Seraphin gets here.”

The young one’s mouth opened wide, and sprouted a large hairy snout. He screamed in pain when he attempted to remain in his human form, and the snout slowly waned back into his human mouth.

I had never known that werewolves were able to stop their transformations, but it was obvious that they could only stall, but not prevent it. The full moon beckoned them, seduced them, and the young one was aching to become a wild lycan and release the pent up energy. The older one was also dying to transform, even though he had much more control over his body than the young one did.

The scarred man took out a set of keys, and opened my cell.

“Stay close to us, if you wish to stay alive. I do not really care for your life, but Bartoloméo’s orders are to keep you alive until the exchange is done,” he growled.

“What exchange?” I asked.

An amused smile curved around his dry lips.

“You do not know? Your lover has not told you?”

The young one laughed and said: “You will find out soon enough.” A new spasm attacked his right hand and he moaned in discomfort when he tried to stop the transformation.

“Soon,” the older man said, and opened the door to my cell wide.

I stepped outside, and both immediately seized me by my arms. A blurry memory of two men grabbing me by my arms before I was stabbed to death as a mortal, came to me, but was gone straight away. It had been Lucan, who had saved me from the clutches of death and made me a vampire. Lucan had flown me out of the crowd of attackers, away from the courthouse where Marie Antoinette’s verdict had been reached, away from Paris, and away from the French Revolution. He had taken me to his lair and asked me the question: asked me if I wanted to die or live an eternal life. I had chosen immortality.

The chance of Lucan whisking me away in midair was very slim now, and I had no idea how Seraphin actually planned my escape, but I had nothing but faith, and I knew that I could trust both men with my life. I would not forgive Seraphin his betrayal, but I could at least be certain that he would try to save me. I also knew that the battle was going to take place tonight. There was too much commotion, and a great vampiric presence was awaiting the lycans outside the castle. Cecilia had finally lifted the invisible veil and they had found Bartoloméo’s lair. The question now remained whether they were going to assault the castle, or fight in the forest as lycans preferred.
We ascended the stairs and reached the courtyard which was buzzing with werewolves trying to stop their transformations. They ran around, stretching their bodies into impossibly long postures, crying out in agony, while fighting to halt the transformation until the battle; they slammed their fists aggressively against their chests, and growled fiercely. Some did not succeed in halting their transformation, and right before my eyes, turned into vicious werewolves, their bodies growing to twice or even three times their size, muzzles emerging from their human mouths, stretching their skin to intolerably painful lengths. Hair sprouted all over their skin, and their feet grew into huge claws while their hands transformed, stretching their fingers, and ending in long black nails as sharp and lethal as knives. When one of them spotted me, he ran at me immediately, eager to destroy me, but my guards yelled at him with authority and stopped him. With great effort, he braked right in front of me, his deadly nails scratching the stone floor with a piercing shriek. His dark, murderous eyes met mine, promising me that he would get me outside. He would find me. He was not the only one conveying that threat to me. I received a lot of hateful looks, and many lycans wished to kill me right there, at that very moment. We entered through a wooden door to our left, and I could not hide my relief once we were inside. My captors noticed, and grimaced. Behind me in the courtyard, I heard more growling.

I was taken up a circular, stone staircase. We passed two doors, and when we arrived at the top floor, we walked into a circular room. We were in the highest tower, and inside this room, I encountered Bartolomeo.

He welcomed me with a false smile that never reached his eyes. This time, he wore a long, black velvet robe and a red, velvet cape. He seemed to have a great liking for that material.

He gave my dirty dress a haughty look and asked: “Has your lover filled you in?”

“No.”

He exchanged an amused smile with my guards and said: “That is strange. Does he not trust you, or does he think that you love Penelope too much?”

“What is going on?”

“Seraphin will bring us Penelope tonight, in exchange for you.”

“She would never agree!”

“But they were truly mad! How did they expect to fool an ancient vampire like Penelope, our fount?”

It did not make sense though. Even if it worked and they got to Penelope, once she was dead, all vampires would perish. What good was this plan anyway? What did Seraphin try to accomplish by endangering Penelope?
“Judging by the look on your face, you do not quite agree with this idea,” Bartolomeo said.
“You are fools if you think that this is going to work,” I said.
“We are no fools, my dear. We do know that this plan has some flaws, and we know that the exchange is not going to work. All we need is to get close enough to Penelope.”
“And the war will be won,” the young lycan said triumphantly.
I wondered how they would convince Penelope to present herself. How would they deceive her? She could break into minds, just like Cecilia. She would know. Perhaps that was why they were using Frederica …
“Come,” Bartolomeo said, and opened a door that led to the castle wall. I followed him outside, flanked by my guards. Two cannons stood on the wall, and to my surprise, they were manned by two men each, and loaded with ammunition.
They pointed straight to the field across the lake which was filled with vampires. There were hundreds of them, perhaps even a thousand … each and everyone of them had been created by Hadea, Lucan’s acquaintances, Markus, and me. The army was a reality; they stood there, ready to fight a threat that they had never faced before, and like most fledglings they believed that they were invincible. I wondered how many of them would die tonight. I could not see Seraphin or Lucan or Frederica or François or even Morgan, but I knew they were there. Hadea did not seem to be present either, but I doubted that she had come.
The vampires looked fierce and ready to fight. I knew the elders had prepared them vigorously, and filled them with loathing for the werewolves. They seemed very eager to get their hands on some lycans. I pitied them. Nearly all of them, except for Lucan, Markus, Penelope and I, had never faced a fully transformed werewolf before, and they had no idea what was awaiting them. They had never seen how they ravaged their victims; they had never lost loved ones to them; they had never come close to feeling their claws rip through their skin, their vicious teeth tearing at their flesh. They did not have a clue of what they were up against. They had no idea about the upcoming blood bath.
I suddenly thought of Giada, and I could imagine her joy at the sight of this. She had always loved a challenge, but she had been wise enough not to provoke werewolves. In fact, she had made an alliance with them. Now she was long gone, and good riddance.
If she had not been such a lunatic and so vengeful, she would have made a strong ally, but Giada had been too dangerous and evil for all of us. Lucan had hunted her for centuries after she had murdered his wife, and I had been the one who had struck her the fatal blow.
There was movement in the crowd, and François appeared. François! I would have expected Lucan or Seraphin, or even Frederica, but not him. He had always
tried not to get too involved, and now here he was, stepping out of the vampire army, and approaching the lake. At that moment, I felt such pride and love for him.

Had he volunteered, so that he could finally meet his death as he had long wished for?

The buzzing stopped, and everyone was quiet as they watched François stop at the shore. The young man, who had entered vampirism against his will, looked up at the castle walls across the lake and immediately spotted Bartolomeo and me. Relieved to see me well, he smiled.

Then, his smile vanished, and he addressed Bartolomeo in a loud and clear voice: “We will wait here as agreed until the exchange is done.”

“Who is he?” Bartolomeo hissed, annoyed.

“He is one of Penelope’s attendants,” I lied.

“Why would he betray her?”

“Because she made him against his will. He only wishes to die, end his existence.”

Bartolomeo was intrigued. “I will gladly do the honors,” he said, and licked his lips.

Again, he looked at François, who seemed strangely in awe by the fierce looking lycan, and he said loudly: “We will meet them as agreed.”

Then, he and my guards took me along the wall, past the cannons. Next to the cannons, I spotted stacks of metal and glass shards that would cause a lot of damage among the vampires. I feared for François.

My young guard suddenly could not control his body any longer, and fell on the floor screaming in agony. He sprouted a snout with long, sharp teeth and brown coarse hair grew over his chest. He tried to rip it out, kicking his legs wildly. The older man pushed me ahead, worried that the young one, once transformed, would kill me, and ruin the exchange. Once we reached the other tower, we entered and closed the door behind us. We descended the circular staircase until we got to the first floor, and then followed a long corridor. It seemed to be a secret tunnel that went behind the rooms, and I was right, since all of a sudden it lowered deep into the ground.

Suddenly, I realized that the vampire army was doomed. If there were more secret tunnels, and there had to be, then the lycans could easily surround them and finish them off.

The walls were made of hardened soil; moisture dripped from them, and a few big spiders scurried away as we walked by. The tunnel seemed to turn and lead away from the castle, and then it descended even deeper. The walls became damper, and water even dripped from the rock ceiling. I understood that now we were below the lake.
Deep below the ground, my guard seemed to be able to control his transformation more easily, probably because the light of the full moon could not penetrate here, or he might have finally managed to hold off his transformation. Bartolomeo had not shown any discomfort whatsoever. Perhaps he had mastered control of his body to perfection over the last centuries.

I heard noises and movements that I could not place, and confused, I looked around. We were completely alone; there was nobody else here, and yet, it seemed as if lycans were following us. Nervously, I looked behind me, but I only saw my guard smile at me viciously. He knew something and he relished in not telling me. And then, I realized that the noise came from another tunnel that ran parallel to ours, and as I listened closely, I heard hundreds of them, all transformed, running to get to the other side of the lake.

It was a trap! The exchange was indeed just an attempt to get close to Penelope, and at the same time it was a planned massacre of the vampires.

“You never intended to let me go, did you?” I asked, addressing Bartolomeo’s back.

He walked on without looking back and said: “As I said before: I never believed that Penelope could be so easily fooled. It would be unwise to underestimate her.”

Bartolomeo had such good chances to win, and Akira was not even here … Their fount was away from it all, very well protected, the werewolf line secure, whereas Penelope was out there, ready to battle, believing in her arrogance that she was actually going to extinguish the werewolf line.

It was then that it hit me. The only way they could have convinced her to come, was by telling her that Akira was here! Bartolomeo was of no importance to her, since he was not the fount. Akira had always been the one she was after.

What had Seraphin been thinking?

We reached the end of the tunnel, and in the tunnels parallel to ours, I heard the werewolves growl impatiently, eager to get out and kill, tear, ravage, destroy… Something or someone held them back, but I knew that that was only temporary.

Bartolomeo unbolted the heavy door and we stepped out onto a moonlit clearing. To my surprise, Frederica was awaiting us, looking nervous but determined at the same time.

CHAPTER XXVI: Akira

The door closed behind us, but I knew it was not bolted. Frederica did not acknowledge me; I doubted if she really saw anyone at all. Her mind was blocked
surprisingly well for a fledgling, but of course she was directly linked to Penelope. She was blessed with extraordinary strengths.

“So?” Bartolomeo asked.

Frederica looked up and said softly: “Wait.”

I tried to catch her eyes, but she stubbornly avoided me.

My guard looked up at the cloudy sky, watching as the yellow moon hesitatingly appeared from behind a grey cloud. Now it was harder to control his body and he struggled to stay in his human form.

Bartolomeo turned to him and nodded at a bush to our left.

“Get ready,” he ordered.

The man grinned, claws sprouting from his hands, and moved towards the bush. As I looked more closely, I realized that there was another wooden door hidden behind it, and I knew that the bands of lycans were waiting for it to be opened. The scarred man had only been brought for this purpose.

Penelope would not come; she would sense their presence. She was no fool. I still did not understand how Seraphin could ever have imagined making her come here, away from the battle. His plan had been folly from the beginning. No one could trick Penelope into coming here, or anyone else for that matter. It was so obviously a death trap. The only way anyone could convince Penelope to appear here was by using treachery, and even that was a difficult feat concerning her. Seraphin was risking the existence of our bloodline by bringing her here. Perhaps he never expected her to be in danger. Perhaps he trusted her skills in battle and her mind powers to take care of herself. It was still too great a risk though. It was not well thought out.

I knew the vampires were very close, but I could not warn them. They did not know where we were and they never realized they were surrounded.

“She will not come,” I said.

Bartolomeo looked at me, but did not answer.

It was then that the leaves of the bushes rustled and Lucan appeared with Penelope at the edge of the forest.

In shock I stared at her, not believing my own eyes.

She was just as surprised to see me as I was to have come upon her, and I understood immediately that she had never been informed of my capture.

She misinterpreted my presence right away and reckoned I was collaborating with Bartolomeo.

“What is this? Where is he?” she asked impatiently. She turned to Frederica.

“What is going on?”

Realizing that her own fledgling had betrayed her for the second time, she moved towards her, ready to strike, but Frederica held up her hand. A faint power emanated from her palm, emitting weak vibrations. They were not strong enough
to stop Penelope, but they held her at bay, and she halted in her steps. We were both confused by the girl’s unusual determination and surprised that she had inherited a portion of Penelope’s mind powers, albeit not as developed or lethal.

I heard the scarred man move. She had heard him too and looked at him.

“Penelope, it’s a trap,” I said.

For once she believed me.

“You betrayed me,” she hissed at Frederica who now took a step backwards, still holding up her hand defensively.

“Are you blocking me?” she asked incredulously. “You do not have the power!”

“I do, you gave it to me.”

Enraged at Frederica and frustrated at the girl’s newly gained lack of fear, she now turned to the scarred man and sent him a glowering look. Crying in agony he sank down, blood flowing from his nose and mouth. When he dropped to the grass, he was dead.

In fury, Bartolomeo leaped at Penelope, turning into a huge werewolf in midair, but she was too quick for him, and she rose up into the air and disappeared. Lucan ran up to him, trying to stop him, but Bartolomeo, although in his lycan form, had not forgotten his mission, and cunningly avoided him. He raced to the door.

I glanced at Lucan just when Seraphin appeared behind him.

“Run, now!” I yelled. “There are hundreds of werewolves behind that door. The army is surrounded!”

Just at that moment Bartolomeo rushed back to the secret door and opened it, and indeed hundreds of bloodthirsty werewolves rushed out. Lucan, Frederica and I flew up, but Seraphin was unable to escape and was swallowed up by the horde of lycans.

I screamed and tried to descend to his rescue, but Lucan held me back as we both watched the werewolves race into the forest. I cried and kicked, desperately trying to free myself from his grip, but he held on tightly.

More and more werewolves appeared from the tunnel, growling and howling, eager to kill and feed, impatient to destroy vampires.

I knew we had to warn the others, but I could not move and neither could Lucan. I could only think of Seraphin.

When the last lycans had finally run into the forest, we lowered ourselves and landed on the grassy ground. Seraphin was not there.

“Perhaps he escaped, or maybe he is with them,” Lucan offered.

“Maybe….” I sadly said.

“He cannot be dead. If he were dead, we would find him right here. Perhaps he managed to transform right before they reached him,” Frederica offered.
“I would know if he were dead. I am his maker,” Lucan said. “We have to help the others, before it is too late.”
I nodded; he was right.
We took off and with one last sad look at the ground I followed Lucan. Penelope was gone.

We headed straight for the battle scene, but to my shock and anger I found Kokayi hiding behind a boulder where he naively believed himself safe from immortals who, in reality, would pick up his scent immediately. It was lucky he was still alive. How on Earth had he found us? Perhaps he truly was the warrior and tracker he had always claimed to be. I had never doubted that, but he still never ceased to impress me.

“Kokayi!” I cried, displeased, as I descended by his side. Lucan made to follow me, but I told him to go on and that I would be with him shortly. He nodded and continued his flight towards the battle field, perhaps relieved to have me safely tucked away here, but I would soon join him. I would not be kept away.

“I am sorry, I had to leave the house. Frederica …”
“I know, but you should not have come here. How did you even find us? And do not give me that rubbish about being a warrior. We need immortal warriors here, no humans.”
“It took me several weeks. I had to find you. I know you were heading out on a dangerous mission.”
“And you actually believed you would make a difference? Do not be a fool, Kokayi. You are not like us, you are a human!”
He stood up and now I saw that he was injured. Blood trickled from a deep gash in the side of his torso.
“Who did this?” I asked, hoping it had not been a werewolf, and knowing what I had to do. The wound was deep and he would surely bleed to death.
“One like you,” he calmly said, already accepting his upcoming death.
I took his hands in mine and said: “If someone is worthy of eternal life, then it is you. You will die if I do not save you. I must save you.”
“You saved me a long time ago.”
“And I will do so again.”
“No …”
“Kokayi, there is a war going on. I have no time to argue.”
“Then leave me here.”
“You will live. Let me turn you.”
“I am not afraid of dying.”
“I know. You are afraid of living.”
At this he stared at me surprised, not pleased to be called a coward, but knowing that my words rang true; that in all these years he had preferred to remain in my house in Paris instead of taking the freedom I had offered him a long time ago.

I bit into my wrist and opened a gash in my flesh. Blood trickled down over his wound. He did not protest or move away. He let me, finally accepting my gift. In awe, he watched the blood flow stop and new flesh re-grow over his wound in his side. As soon as his wound had closed, I bent over him and sank my fangs into his throat, and was met immediately by images from a long time ago. These visions from his youth included a young woman who was his wife – the same woman I had drunk blood from when she was dying during her journey from Africa to the New World, where she was to be sold as a slave. I saw his daughter’s body thrown overboard after she had died during the arduous journey. I saw Kokayi cry in sorrow and anger. I knew most of his story, for he had told me a long time ago, but the images were still disturbing.

When I let go of him, I slashed my wrist again and held it over his mouth. Still hesitating, but now more willing, he grabbed my arm with both his hands and drank my blood. He would see visions of me, from my mortal and immortal life and understand more about me. Our fledgling-maker bond was now being created, a strong bond that only death could break.

After he had drunk his share, I pulled my wrist away from him and watched him change before me. His dark eyes took on a new vitality and a seductive sparkle. His black curls shone, and fangs grew from his straight, white teeth. Slowly, he stood up, taking in his surroundings with his new vampiric sight, and he now heard the screams from the battle ahead.

“You cannot participate in this fight. You have just been made. You have to feed first,” I said.

He was a marvelous specimen of a blood drinker, and he looked even stronger, and more handsome and virile than he ever had as a mortal.

“Wait here for me,” I said.

“Even now you are still trying to protect me,” he said sardonically.

“You do not know what is out there.”

“I do. I have seen them.”

“Then you’d be wise to stay away,” I said and spread my wings. “Please, wait for me here. Please, Kokayi.”

Hearing the urgency in my voice, he nodded. Relieved, I flew off and into the battle. I had stayed away too long.

The battle field was a scene of disaster. The vampires were indeed surrounded by werewolves and even though the fledglings fought them fiercely, they were
being decimated quickly. I watched Lucan fight a ruddy werewolf, but as soon as I floated over them, Lucan felt my presence. Immediately he fought off his attacker, flew up, and handed me a flask.

“Drink this.”
“What is it?”
“Just drink it.”
I drank it, suspecting it to be one of Morgan’s potions.
“What do we do?” I asked, eying the massacre below me. Frantically I kept on looking for François, but I did not see him anywhere. Had he thrust himself into battle, finally getting the death he had so yearned for?

Frederica’s terror had gone and she now seemed almost eager to throw herself into the ghastly scene that was unfolding below us. I knew I would meet certain death if I descended into that battle field, but when I saw my friend’s unwavering courage in the face of the murderous lycan hordes, I flew down to the ground to join the battle, not willing to let her fight alone.

Vampires wielded their fangs fearlessly and some elders had transformed into their monster forms. Those managed to kill a few werewolves and had more chances to survive, but the fledglings did not have that advantage and were killed quickly. Soon, the vampires were outnumbered. Blood colored the grass red and flowed into the lake, turning the water a scarlet color. Limbs and heads were ripped or bitten off, screams filled the air.

We were right in the middle of it, fighting in our battle forms, except for Frederica who was unable to transform yet.

Where was Penelope? Could she not stop this? Did she not care? This battle was being fought for her, and yet, she was nowhere to be seen!

“We have to find Bartolomeo and kill him,” I said.

It was then that I saw François. He was still alive! His clothes were torn, and blood oozed out of a fresh wound, but he fought fiercely, and cunningly he avoided the deadly blows. He did not throw himself into a suicide mission; he fought to live. He wanted to survive this battle. Markus was by his side; I recognized the giant dog with the huge fangs tearing at a lycan’s throat. François had a strong ally in Markus.

A young, female vampire behind them flashed her fangs viciously, and agilely jumped over an attacking werewolf who seemed confused at her sudden disappearance, but then turned around and again went for her. This time she did not avoid him, but went straight for his throat. She managed to set her fangs into his skin and tear through it, but he pulled off her arm and then bit off her head. It was dreadful and I witnessed more of this bloodshed everywhere.

“We are losing!” Frederica cried.

“Where is Bartolomeo?” I yelled and looked for him furiously.
“Go and find Penelope!” Lucan ordered Frederica. “We will find Bartolomeo.”
It was then that Frederica chose to rebel.
“I can’t! I’m busy!” she yelled while fighting off a werewolf.
“You are risking your life! Find Penelope!” Lucan shouted when he briefly
reappeared from his monstrous form.
“Go to hell, Lucan!”
He cursed and rebutted a new attacker in his human form, risking a fatal injury
as he lunged out of the werewolf’s grasp, just in time before the beast’s sharp
claws slashed through the air.
“Damn you, Frederica!”
Giving up on her and deciding to save his own skin, he changed back into his
monstrous battle form, growing twice his normal size, and taking on the shape of a
giant eagle with a viciously fanged beak.
Frederica leaped over the werewolf she was fighting and landed behind him. I
immediately lunged at him to protect Frederica.
“GO!” I yelled at her.
She ignored me and ran off to fight a werewolf that stood over the ravaged
remains of a male vampire.
“You’d better not get killed!” I shouted angrily.
But then a raw scream filled the air; it was so high pitched, so unbelievably
loud and anomalous, so terrifying and frightful, that I felt my skin crawl. Pain
filled my ears and instinctively I covered them with my hands. Below us, vampires
and werewolves stopped fighting and most lycans and also vampires dropped dead
on the ground, blood gushing from their ears, noses, eyes and mouths.
Finally, I saw her. Morgan stood at the edge of the forest, her face contorted in
a horrible mask, her eyes blazing with rage, her mouth a wide open gap, letting go
of that shriek like only a banshee could.
As the werewolves fell dead on the ground, they slowly changed back to their
human forms.
There were so many youngsters, too many….
There were also elders and I saw women too, laying there with their eyes wide
open in shock at what had just happened until life finally left them.
Suddenly the scream stopped and an eerie silence filled the air.
Some lycans and vampires had survived, or perhaps the shriek had not had the
capacity to kill everyone.
Now I understood why Lucan had given me the potion; it had been Morgan’s
antidote to her shrieks. My body had retaken its normal form.
And there, farther down the slope, among the confused survivors, I spotted
Bartolomeo; I recognized his giant werewolf form and the dark granite color of his
coat.
Taking advantage of the confusion, I raced down along the edge of the battlefield and went for the unsuspecting werewolf. I summoned all my willpower and rage, and felt myself grow and change into a giant, black, leathery bat. My muscles bulged and ripped my clothes and my form rose over the other vampires. François stared at me in shock. Slowly, everyone was recovering from the terrible banshee scream. I did not wait and leaped at the surprised Bartolomeo. I flew right at him and went for his throat. He moved back and grinned maliciously, looking at me with anticipation. He avoided my deadly blows cunningly and growled angrily. His claw slashed my shoulder.

Suddenly the cannons roared from the castle walls, and a rain of broken glass and shards of metal assaulted us. I threw myself onto the ground, but others were not that lucky and got hit. Arms and legs and even some heads were mercilessly sliced off. Even some unlucky lycans could not avoid the attack. Most ran off into the forest, followed by the vampires where they continued the battle. After the second volley, Bartolomeo also escaped into the forest. I went after him, set to finish him off. I had no idea where Lucan was, but I knew he had to be somewhere nearby.

A brown werewolf joined the battle or perhaps he had been there since the beginning. He however did not attack vampires; he fought werewolves! The lycans were confused at this werewolf attacking his own kind. He fought fiercely and viciously, relentlessly assaulting the others and killing mercilessly. It was Seraphin. I knew his wolf form, I knew it too well. Feeling relief at his survival and his presence filling me with new strength, I again went for Bartolomeo, tearing at his throat. He fought me off vigorously. Soon, Seraphin and I fought side by side. Bartolomeo was very strong though, stronger than any lycan I had ever fought. All of them had possessed enormous strength and I knew it would be hard to destroy him; he was a powerful being.

Lucan was in his eagle form, furiously fighting off two werewolves. The forest was filled with warriors, and now blood not only covered the lake, but also the forest floor, and even the tree trunks were bathed in it. Blood was everywhere.

Lucan’s attackers drove him backwards and were closing in on him. I wanted to help him, but Bartolomeo would not let me go and leaped at me fiercely. One more time I went for his throat, and I grabbed it with my right claw, opening my mouth wide and displaying my terrifying, long fangs. I saw the mirror image of my black, leathery bat face with its red eyes and long white fangs in his eyes. I tore at his throat with my teeth, this time not letting go. He tried to push me off and ripped my back open with his long, sharp nails.

We rolled over the ground and suddenly I found myself below him. He growled loudly and ripped at my throat. I fought him off, trying to push him off
me, snarling viciously. Someone fell by my side and got up immediately. I grabbed Bartolomeo by his neck again and with all my might pushed him up. Slowly, his teeth let go of my mangled flesh. I kicked him hard and again flung myself at him, despite the numbing pain of my bleeding gullet. I was losing strength, but I could not give up; too much was at stake.

Bartolomeo tried to avoid my assault and it was then that I saw Frederica taking on one of Lucan’s assailants. With an unknown vigor she threw herself into this battle, prepared to die. Her inability to transform did not encumber her; on the contrary, she had enormous powers. In her fledgling form she managed to throw off her attacker and even inflict some damage. She jumped and kicked and tore and hit and bit him, even lifted him up and threw him to the ground. Now that she finally learned how powerful she was, she began to enjoy her new found strength, but she forgot that she was not invincible. Her opponent was a strong, ancient werewolf that also possessed enormous powers. He proved to be a fierce fighter and Frederica now seemed to understand why we had always resisted battling werewolves. Nevertheless, her new found courage had given her amazing strength, and she fought like a lioness, and finally he succumbed to her. She ripped his throat open and destroyed the huge beast, showing no mercy, just like Penelope must have taught her.

She smiled triumphantly, not believing that she had managed to annihilate such a great monster.

The lycan lay on the ground, breathing his last breaths, staring at Frederica’s frail body in disbelief, but understanding that ancient blood ran through her veins. She was the last image he saw before he died and his eyes took on a vacant stare. His dead wolf form slowly changed back into his original human body, displaying a young man with Slavic features. Stunned, Frederica gazed at him, and thus never noticed the lanky, black lycan leap at her, its jaws opened wide in anticipation and lust for revenge, its eyes eagerly visualizing the upcoming carnage.

I never saw this werewolf clearly because I was too busy fighting Bartolomeo, but in all the bloodshed and between the deadly blows I could feel her aura. I knew this lycan was a female, and I sensed her intense presence just as I had experienced it in my dungeon a few days ago. Somehow, I just knew that this werewolf was Cecilia, the woman who had visited me with Bartolomeo in my cell; and Frederica’s disposal of the Slavic werewolf had hurt and angered her considerably. Frederica became aware of her too late. Cecilia struck when she turned to look at her. She saw her furious snarl, the sharp teeth and her red eyes; and then Cecilia threw her to the ground, her jaws firmly around Frederica’s throat. I yelled my friend’s name, trying to shake Bartolomeo off and run to her aid, but he took advantage of this moment to smash me against a tree. The blow broke some bones
in my back and, in agony, I fell, unable to get up again. As my bones quickly rejoined, my body returned to its normal shape. But I was too late.

Cecilia’s werewolf form stood there, staring at Frederica prostrate at her feet, nothing but a bloody mess of flesh and bones. Her face was the only distinguishable body part that remained. Cecilia had ravaged her, expelling blind hatred. And yet, Frederica stirred; desperately, she clung to the last remains of life within her.

In shock, I watched my friend’s destroyed remains while trying to hold off Bartolomeo. Finally, I threw him off with all of my remaining strength, sending him flying into a group of fighting lycans and vampires. Lucan cried in fury and despair, threw off his attacker and went for Frederica’s assassin while I crawled towards my friend, bent over her and bit into my wrist. I held my gashed wrist over her throat and let my blood soothe her terrible injuries. She gasped when my blood dropped onto her torn flesh and mixed with hers.

Cecilia, however, growled threateningly, impatient to be finished with this, and readied herself for attack. I had to leave my friend, but I was assured in the knowledge that my blood would give her a little more time, hopefully enough to help her once the battle was over.

Raw screams filled the air; the smell of blood overflowed the forest. It seemed as if this battle would never end. And Penelope still had not appeared.

Suddenly, a terrifyingly loud howl penetrated the forest, rustled the tree leaves, and halted the fighting. Cecilia, with surprising intelligence in her werewolf form, realized that she was about to fling herself at me. As if remembering her promise to me, she stopped, and stared at me with wild, bloodshot eyes. I thought I even recognized a hint of sorrow, but I could have been mistaken. She turned towards where the howl had come from, as did all other lycans. We all looked up at a magnificent werewolf on a tall boulder. He was much bigger than everyone else and the only one whose coat had a beautiful golden glow. His eyes were nearly human as he sadly looked out over the battle scene. His paws were huge and deadly; his teeth and fangs long and sharp. I knew who he was without anyone telling me.

It was Akira.

He had finally arrived.

CHAPTER XXVII: Of Blood We All Come

Respectfully, the lycans looked up at him, awaiting orders. Bartolomeo had a defiant look in his eyes; he was not happy with Akira’s arrival. I changed back into my normal vampiric form, and so did Lucan. Some werewolves, including Cecilia,
also returned to their human form, but not all of them. I recognized the young one that had been one of my guards. He glared at me with hatred in his eyes, but he did not move.

I could only stare at Frederica’s body. Her glassy eyes searched me out, still clinging to life, refusing to die. Cecilia had disappeared.

I felt my own throat; blood still flowed out of it. It had a deep gash, but it was not destroyed. I bit my wrist and held it over my wound, to let my own blood cover it and help it heal. Werewolf wounds were hard to heal; it took a long time. Lucan was bleeding from his belly and covering it with his hand.

François walked towards us, his right hand was a bloody mess and he had a gash on his left cheek, but otherwise he looked all right. He gave me a victorious grin, and I knew he felt very good about himself, having fought werewolves like a true hero and still alive to tell the tale. In his eyes I could see his new found will to live. His death wish was long gone; François now embraced life. Having finally come close to death had aroused his will to live again.

Kokayi now also appeared, not from the forest but from the battlefield, and with a fresh shoulder wound. He had not listened to me and he had joined the fighters; and miraculously this one-day-old fledgling had survived. There was indeed a sturdy warrior in him, and as an immortal this warrior had become very lethal, apparently even to werewolves; but his survival could also be due to sheer luck, or both. There was blood on his white shirt and on his face, but it was not his. He was fortunately not badly injured, one of the very few.

Then I suddenly saw Seraphin …

He lay on the ground, very still … he did not seem to be alive … he did not move. Refusing to believe my own eyes, I slowly walked over to him. As I got closer I saw that his eyes were closed and he was bleeding profusely from his chest, throat and belly. His right thigh was ripped open. He had lost a lot of blood and he was badly wounded. All his injuries were inflicted by werewolves, slashed by sharp claws and flesh torn by the beasts’ fangs.

Tears welled up in my eyes. I was afraid to know, afraid to find him dead. After all we had been through, now that we finally came to the end of the battle, regardless of the outcome, I could not lose him, not now …

My lips moved in a silent plea, his name spoken wordlessly.

Seraphin … he had only entered this conflict to save me from destruction. He had never cared for Penelope; and despite his loyalty for Akira, he had not fought for him. He had only done it for me, to keep me safe. He had given his life for me. My last words to him had been so unkind …

He could not be dead. He was not dead, he had to be unconscious, only unconscious …
But my eyes could not fool me. He had lost too much blood, was too badly injured… I stopped a few feet away from him, afraid to find out. His eyes were still closed.

_Go_, I told myself. _Go and make sure he is alive. Do not be a coward._ When I took my next steps, Akira finally spoke, now in his tall, human form, his voice an accusatory lament.

“Bartolomeo,” he said. “What have you done?”

The Roman werewolf did not speak. He changed back to his human shape and his eyes glared angrily at their fount, not willing to accept that he had come to end this battle.

“Kill him!” Akira then ordered his men, and immediately the lycans, who until now had fought for Bartolomeo, turned on him.

“Wait!” he yelled. “I did this for us! We would be rid of the vampires, rid of Penelope. Is this not what we all want?”

Akira motioned the other werewolves to wait and said: “As much as I despise Penelope and certain vampires I have no wish to annihilate them.”

I could only imagine Lucan’s surprised look on his face when he heard that, but I only had eyes for Seraphin. I finally knelt down next to him and held his hand. I bent over him to make sure he was still alive.

“You forget that a vampire saved my life many years ago, and she is right here in our midst,” Akira continued.

At this, I looked up and met his warm eyes.

“You forget that one of us is half werewolf, half vampire, which unites our blood,” he said.

Now tears blocked my eyes as I looked down upon Seraphin who still had not moved.

Suddenly Penelope descended between the trees, slowly and elegantly, staring hard at Akira who knew why she had come. Focusing on him, she never paid attention to what was happening around her and she never expected any reaction from anyone. Everyone stared at her in awe as she majestically glided down in her white robes.

Akira immediately changed back into his glorious golden werewolf form while she charged at him, and he avoided her, more agile than I believed possible. Shocked by his swift move, she landed on the ground, staring at him in blind fury.

Bartolomeo however, could not give up this opportunity. Back in his wolf form, he raced over the bloodied earth, and leapt at her like a tiger at its prey. He caught her by her throat and tore it open in a few swift moves, using the element of surprise. Penelope was too surprised to move. She tried to fight him off, but the damage was done. She dropped to the ground, blood gushing from her gaping
wound. Bartolomeo changed back into his human form, simultaneously with Akira who stared in shock at the scene.

Penelope was still alive, but the attack had been too vicious and too profound for her to survive. It had been brief, but Bartolomeo had destroyed her throat. Frederica who bore many more injuries had even more chances of survival than Penelope. I turned and looked at Lucan who swayed on his feet. I suddenly felt very dizzy and weak, and other vampires also seemed to be close to fainting. But I knew we were not fainting; we were dying. Our fount was dying and we would perish with her.

I was not afraid anymore. Soon I would be reunited with my mother, Madame Betancourt, and Gerard. I dropped down onto Seraphin, my head on his bloody chest, my arms along his sides, on the ground. My head felt very light.

There was no darkness, only light and music. Lucan was there and Gael and Balthazar, Frederica and Pierre, Gerard, Madame Betancourt, my mother who smiled down on me and told me that she was not terrified of what I had become. I also saw François, and there was Penelope who refused to die, but could not fight it.

I welcomed death. I had lived for so long and there was no longer a need to survive another century, another decade, another year, another month. I could not go on….

My blood stopped flowing, I felt very cold and continuously weaker. My vision faded and light entered, a vast field of light. This was it, the angels were calling. Soon it would all be over, we would all be gone. I heard Bartolomeo’s faint laughter, then a horrible scream. Blood smudged the lens of my tunnel of light, and then the light returned.

Seraphin was there, beside me, but he moved further and further away from me. I struggled to stay with him, and I struggled to find Lucan. My hands reached out, but only touched nothingness.

And then blood gushed from my wrists and flowed down like a waterfall.

“No yet,” my mother told me. “It is not your time yet.”

But the blood….and Penelope, she was dying… My time had come.

“No,” Madame Betancourt said.

A handsome man was by her side, Seraphin’s father, Thibault Monet, Madame Betancourt’s love united with her in death. “Not yet,” she said. Thibault smiled and called his beloved son.

My wrists still bled, and slowly my vision returned. Thibault, Madame Betancourt, my mother, Gael and Balthazar, Gerard, Frederica and Pierre vaporized. I reached out for them, blood dripping from my wrists.

Where was Seraphin? He was not beneath me anymore…..
I found myself bending over Penelope’s weakened body, my wrists’ blood healing her injured throat. She stared at me in a mixture of weak shock, gratefulness and fury. I never understood how I had ended up here with her, saving her with my blood. Confused, I looked up and met Akira’s loving eyes.
And I understood.

CHAPTER XXVIII: Akira’s Choice

Slowly life returned to us as my blood closed Penelope’s wounds. The flesh over the gashes in my wrists also closed, and then Akira lifted me up and helped me stand.

The light was gone and so were my mother and all my dead loved ones. I wanted to go back… The light had been so beautiful and welcoming. The world of the living and immortals seemed so much less appealing now than the world of the dead, the place of the spirits, the souls’ safe haven. I needed to go back… But they were gone and had left without me….

Penelope also rose and still stared at me and then at Akira. She knew very well that he had saved her and therefore she did not move, honorable enough to acknowledge that she could not destroy the one who had saved her life. She was enraged though that it had been me he had picked to donate blood.

I could see the silent question in her blazing eyes: why her?
When we were dying, Akira had quickly killed Bartolomeo; after that, he separated me from Seraphin and carried me to Penelope. There, he cut my wrists with a shard of glass that had landed in the forest after the cannon volley, and held it over Penelope’s throat.

“Why did you save us?” I asked in astonishment.
“I owe you my life, Aurélie, and I also hope that with this the age-old feud between vampires and werewolves is finally over.”

Penelope still did not speak; she only stared at both of us.
I had to get back to Seraphin.
“Seraphin…” I stammered.
Akira’s eyes clouded over and he said, “I am sorry, Aurélie.”
“No…” I said, and turned to search for him. I stumbled and was caught by Lucan’s arms.

“Seraphin…” I called, not wanting to believe it.
Lucan held me tightly as I tried to find my way back to Seraphin.
“Aurélie,” Akira spoke.
I turned and looked at him.
“Now your blood is linked to Penelope’s. You both now have an unbreakable bond that goes beyond your blood, for she is no longer the only fount of the vampiric line.”

My hand holding on to Lucan’s arm, I asked, “What do you mean?” But I had understood him all too well; I just was not sure whether I wanted to hear it, whether I wanted the responsibility.

“You now are both the fount,” Akira said. “If one of you dies, the other one will keep the vampiric line alive. You have not only entered immortality, you have now gone beyond the gates of immortality.”

I met Penelope’s eyes and I read the anger in them. I remembered how she had tried to kill Sophie, Angelique, and Kokayi, and her torturing me for a betrayal I had not instigated. She did not deserve to be saved, and there was not any need for her existence any longer. Reading my mind, she grimaced, challenging me to even try to destroy her.

“Why her? Why could you not take Lucan?” she spat.

“Lucan believes, as you do, that the world would be better off without me. Aurélie has a more tolerant view of it, and as I said before, I owe her my life.”

“I do not believe that anymore,” Lucan spoke. “I was wrong about you. I should have listened to Aurélie.”

I could not believe my ears. Lucan admitting a mistake did not happen very often. Penelope stared at him in anger. I glanced at him and he smiled. But both our smiles faded when we looked at Seraphin, lying motionless on the ground, all life gone. My heart felt heavy.

All the anger and accusations, the betrayal and the fights seemed meaningless now that I was losing him. The prospect of spending the next centuries without him weighed heavily on me. Even though the battle had given both werewolves and vampires peace, I felt like I had fought with everything I had and still lost the struggle. Seraphin had meant a lot to me, despite his annoying stubbornness, despite the quarrels, and despite the murder of Madame Betancourt. I think I had finally found the forgiveness I had struggled so much with before.

Bartolomeo rested close to the boulder, his mangled carcass on the forest floor, his chest a gaping hole where his heart had been.

I let go of Lucan and walked over to Seraphin.

Penelope moved away from Akira. She did not thank him; she never even gave Frederica the slightest look, not caring about her wounds, and she completely ignored me, her unwilling blood link. She walked among the bodies, looked with a cruel smile at Seraphin, then spread her wings and ascended between the trees into the open sky, off to find a new lair, never to be seen again.
It was the only way. If I wanted to save him, I had to let go of him. It was the only thing that was on my mind, and I decidedly pushed away any thoughts or apprehension of the new position that the bond between Penelope’s and my blood had given me. It was too big a responsibility and too incredible to fathom, but there was no way to deny it or run from it. I was now a fount, just like Penelope. If she perished, the vampire line would not cease to exist. My blood would ensure their survival. It was a scary thought. It was a responsibility I had never wanted, and yet Akira had deemed me the best candidate …

And then there was the information Penelope had given me about this so-called source. I knew that now I had to go and find it. I had to make sure that it was true and perhaps free this source if it proved to be necessary. However, looking at the destroyed fledglings and my injured friends, none of that mattered now. The source, or whatever it was, would have to wait.

My eyes still rested on Seraphin. Akira had knelt beside him, and he looked at him with brotherly love. Both had spent considerable time together, enough to have forged a strong bond. Akira’s tear-stained eyes told me all. His hand was on Seraphin’s chest. He was still alive, but hanging on by a thread. Lucan walked over to them and stood still beside them. Akira looked up. I could not see the look they exchanged, but something seemed to have developed between them, perhaps some understanding, or forgiveness on Akira’s part for Lucan’s attempt to kill him about ten years ago … I would never know, but what I knew for certain was that they were no longer enemies. I sensed a deep respect between both men.

Finally, Cecilia appeared, looking at me apologetically, remembering very well that she had nearly killed Frederica and that she had wanted to attack me in her lycan form, coming very close to not keeping her word.

“Forgive me,” she said softly. She stood still by my side and gazed at Akira.

I did not speak. My thoughts told her what she needed to know. I had forgiven her. She was a lycan, after all, and she had warned me. She had spared me, and she had not dealt Frederica the fatal blow, although she had come close. Too much had been lost to bear any more grudges. Frederica would get better.

After a while, Akira looked up and met Cecilia’s eyes, his narrowing in anger.

“Go away,” he said curtly.

“Akira, I did not …”

“Get out, now!”

His eyes blazed with fury and disappointment.

“How could you?” he asked in an accusatory tone when she still did not move.

“I had no choice. He made me …”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“Akira, let me explain. I was always on your side. I …”

“I do not want to know. Go, now.”
She did not move. I stood still next to her, feeling her pain at his harsh words and his disappointment in her.

“Go!” he yelled, losing his patience, and this time Cecilia turned, one single tear trickling from her right eye, and she walked away.

“She was on our side, Akira,” I said, but he waved my comment away, unwilling to listen. I had never seen him so upset, and I believed that the thought of Cecilia’s betrayal had hurt him more than Seraphin’s fatal injuries.

Akira now beckoned me to come, and I walked over a little hesitantly, not eager to hear the news. If he could not save him, who could? My blood had not been sufficient to heal his wounds …

“I need to take him with me,” he said.

I nodded.

“Once more we face the end of a battle where I take him away from you, but if we want him to live, then he has to come with me. I can help him, but I have to take him to my nearest lair.”

“Yes.”

My voice was dry … raspy … my grief had even stolen my voice from me … Seraphin’s eyes were still closed. At least the bleeding had stopped, but the wounds were still gaping holes and the flesh had not healed. He had lost a lot of blood.

Akira called two of his men who stood closest to him. Without asking what he wanted, they each grabbed Seraphin, one by his shoulders and the other one by his legs, and they carried him away.

Akira now rose and faced Lucan and me. He took my hands in his and said: “Do not despair. I will bring him back sooner than you know.”

Somehow a tentative smile broke through my saddened face. “I know,” I said. I knew I could trust his word, but it did not diminish my worry.

“We are connected now, leaders of a clan, bearers of a blood line. We have a responsibility. You know that you need to keep safe, always. The fount has to be protected.”

I nodded.

“You have Lucan,” he continued. “There could not be a better guide and protector, from what I hear.”

I did not look at Lucan. There was nothing else I wished for, but I had not planned on staying with him, and surely not when Seraphin came back. Fights might flare up again, unless both had now finally gotten over that, but I doubted it. They would always be on opposite sides … I still faintly thought of continuing my existence alone, without Seraphin and without Lucan, but I needed them both alive and safe. Akira was right though, I needed Lucan’s guidance … again. And I could no longer fight it … Perhaps it was time to stop looking out for them and to start
looking after myself. The separation Lucan and I had imposed upon each other had always been hard to bear … I had never stopped loving him.

Akira let go of my hands, and said: “Goodbye, Aurélie.” Then he turned to Lucan, and nodded. “Take care of her,” he said.

“I will.”

It was then that I finally glanced at Lucan’s profile, and immediately wished I had not, for the unbreakable bond I shared with him tugged at my insides and reminded me … reminded me of a long time ago. I turned back to Akira, but he had already walked away.

We both stood there in silence, among the remnants of a battle scene, the eerie silence of death surrounding us, and the smell of blood palpable in the air. Seraphin was carried away for whatever they were going to do to him to save him. He would be back one day, stronger than before, and most probably with more lycan blood than vampire blood, but that would not matter anymore. As long as he was alive, that was all I cared about. Lycans and vampires were now at peace. There would be no more enmity and no more wars. Penelope could not hurt Akira anymore, and she would have a hard time hurting me. As far as I knew, we might never lay eyes on her again. I certainly would not miss her. A long time ago she had inspired love in me, but that love had soon been replaced by revulsion. Gael and Balthazar had loved her throughout the millennia. They had been able to endure her awe-inspiring presence and her unforgiving cruelty. They had protected her. Balthazar had even given his life for her. Gael had sacrificed himself for me … And now Lucan would be the one to protect me. I could not think of a better candidate. If I was honest with myself, I was not as reluctant about that as I pretended to be. On the contrary, my self-imposed wariness evaporated and it now made place for an ecstatic feeling. Love filled my heart. Our time together had re-enforced the bond once shared and our memories were too many to be abandoned to the past. Too many memories still had a foothold in the present …

Instinctively, my hand moved towards him and grabbed his. Immediately, as if waiting for that moment, it closed around mine. Words did not need to be spoken. Akira had said it all.

EPILOGUE:

Mexico, 1853
Time passes and erases all wounds. Scars heal and fade, but memory never leaves. It was all such a long time ago, too long, and yet, I remembered it all as if it were only yesterday.
The view from my balcony was amazing, the balcony of my own house, my house that I had paid workers to build, according to my ideas, on the land that I had claimed. My land, far away from Paris, far away from everything, isolated from civilization, just the way I wanted; the fount well protected.

I looked out over an endless field of giant cacti, stretching over hills towards the Pacific Ocean. Some were over 6ft tall; others even 30 or 40 ft: witnesses to centuries, just like me.

The ocean glimmered in the late afternoon sun; and, as usual, the pink and orange lights in the sky began to set, bathing the few scattered clouds in their glorious colors.

An eagle soared through the sky against the colorful background; a vulture sat quietly on a cardón cactus, looking out over the desert, its eyes calmly following dying prey. The vulture was like me in a way, it preyed only on the dying. It waited patiently until its victim had perished, then it would pick at it and tear off shreds of its skin and flesh. This bird took care of the body, this body that nobody wanted, that would only rot and fill the air with its stench.

I take care of the living that no one wants- the scum, the ones that do not respect human or animal lives, the thieves, the rapists, the murderers; like I had always done. I searched for them and observed them. When the time was ripe, I would make my move. I was careful when I killed; I never left bodies. I always made sure that they disappeared and were never found.

I lived hidden in the mountains with a far-away view from the Pacific Ocean, on a peninsula on Mexico’s west coast.

The year 1853 was a good one. So much had changed over the last century, too much to discuss here. Revolutions had swept over Europe and brought an end to some monarchies and given rise to democratic governments, or the attempts at them. I had come a long way though, from 1789 to 1853, and I had returned to the country where I had first met Akira, where he had had his lair long ago; New Spain, now known as Mexico.

How I had ended up here on the southern tip of this long peninsula on the Pacific side is not part of another grand story, but I was truly glad to have stumbled upon this little piece of paradise.

And I was the only vampire. No other immortal had ever set foot here. Hardly any mortals inhabited this small piece of paradise, but that did not encumber my feeding habits. I did not mind long excursions, and it kept me isolated like I wished to remain. The fount had to be safe.

The colors in the sky now became darker and turned a dramatic red as the sun set slowly in the sea. A feeling of peace and calm overcame me when I witnessed this spectacle. It always did when I watched the sunsets here. They were truly
unique and spectacular, every single one; and the sunrises were even more terrific. Their colorful displays never ceased to amaze me.

I touched the back of my head and felt my hair. It was pulled up in a complicated hairdo, which I had done a day ago, when I visited a town on the mainland.

In the 1800's fashion also changed, not always to my liking, but I enjoyed acquiring new clothes and adapting to the times. I had also begun to don man's trousers from time to time, although that was far from socially acceptable and would not be for a long time. They were practical though, especially here in the semi-desert. I still wore my long dresses and gowns occasionally; after all, they were beautiful and it would be a waste not to wear them, but I enjoyed the feeling of man's pants around my legs.

Wars had never stopped and only continued with better and improved technology, which to me was a step backwards. Humans had always found ways to advance their technology and kill in larger numbers with less effort. Improving weapons seemed a waste and an erroneous usage of the marvelous brains humans had. It was wrong to use their gray cells to develop destruction. Why not use them to lessen the suffering in this world, the suffering of all sentient beings? Of course, it seems strange for such an opinion to come from me, me who feeds on sentient beings, but I have seen enough to know that not only immortals have their share of monsters. There are plenty of monsters that the mortal world struggles with. Unlike us immortals though, humans did not seem to do much about it. They either enthusiastically followed the leadership of those monsters, believing it was right, believing that they were “just following orders” or they sat back and claimed that “it had always been done that way” and therefore it had to be right. Humans baffled me. They were horrified when they faced me in the last moments of their lives, and they did not accept my cruelty, but they had spent their own lives justifying their own cruelties with something they called reason, civilization, and progress. Massacres were justified, extinctions were justified. Wars were justified, destroying habitats and stealing land and claiming it as their own was justified in the name of civilization …

In his mortal life, Kokayi had been a victim of that, and now, as an immortal, knowing what he did about the fate of his homeland, he did not hesitate to slay white invaders. He now took back what had been taken from him long ago.

But I was far removed from all of that now.

Peace and quiet, no wars or battles for nearly a century; what more could I ask for? I did not feel lonely. I had no reason to. Everything I needed was right here. I opened my eyes and looked out over the cacti.

A rider on his horse followed the winding path between the cacti forest. He saw me and waved. I smiled and waved back. I watched him ride his black stallion,
remembering Star and Papillon who were long gone. This horse had been stubborn when he had bought it, but soon it bent to his will, and now they seemed to have become one. Only he could ride that horse. It would not allow anyone else. Strange, but I had never expected Lucan to be this good with horses. When he passed the cactus where the vulture was observing its prey, the bird flew up, fluttering its wings, annoyed. He watched it fly away. As soon as he had gone on and was far enough, the vulture returned to the cactus, sat on top of it, and tucked in its wings.

I leaned over the balcony, still enjoying the breeze, and waited for the rider to re-appear. Soon he would be at the gates. He had left them open before he left. Yes, precautious Lucan had left them open, realizing that we truly were in a safe and isolated place. The fount was well protected. He would close the gates as soon as he entered.

All my loved ones - my parents, Papillon, Star, Sophie, and Angelique were long gone. Old age had claimed Papillon who had lived 45 years, quite a good age for a horse.

Sophie and Angelique succumbed to the complications and diseases that came with old age. It was painful to let them go. I had shared a lot with them and I had loved them with all my heart.

And last but not least, Star, the horse we had adopted after the battle, had lived a happy life with us for 31 years. He left us a few years before Papillon did.

François had begun a new life in the young city of New York, and he now enjoyed his immortality to its fullest. Most of his victims were young, well to do ladies who fell dreamily for his handsome looks and his French accent, which they all thought so incredibly seductive. He had finally adapted very well to life as a vampire.

Markus had returned to his lair in Cologne, and he still lived with a few loyal werewolves, amongst whom Thomas and Rudolph who had also survived. Heinrich had perished in the battle.

And Frederica, my dear friend, had recovered her spark and lust for life, her brightness and her courage. She had fought audaciously in the last battle between lycans and vampires, but Cecilia had nearly killed her. My blood saved Frederica, and when the war was over, Lucan and I took her to a safe place where we cared for her until she recovered. Her recovery took more than a month. Her whole body had been torn open, and it was pure luck and dedication that brought her back to life, and perhaps also Penelope’s powerful blood that coursed through her veins. She recovered and accompanied me to Mexico where she stayed with me for two years. They were two years of bliss, many deep and entertaining discussions, beautiful walks on the beach, and explorations in the desert. We had fun hunting
together and when it was time to leave, I watched her go with sorrow in my heart. But she had to move on; she needed to find her own destination, and I understood.

After she had gone I did not hear from her for six months, but then news reached me that she had settled down in Cologne. She had visited me twice since then and our friendship had only deepened, despite the distance.

Lucan’s old Roman villa had turned to ruins, and it was now city property and reserved for tourists, but he did not mind. The house bore too many memories of his murdered wife; and so he bought a comfortable two-level loft apartment in the center of Rome, close to the Spanish Steps. He had been there only once, and then returned here. The apartment awaited him whenever he felt like returning to his city of birth, which had remained the same, proudly showing its many classic ruins, and yet, at the same time, it had changed so much. It was a marvelous city which still held his love, and I hoped to accompany him on a visit soon.

Seraphin and I had parted ways. I had learned to forgive him, and I now understood what he was and where he belonged. Fortunately, he also understood. He was not the right being to share immortality with. I knew that now. There had been a purpose to Seraphin, and his role in saving us had been grand. There were many feats we would not have been able to accomplish without him. There were many things he had been meant to achieve and which we had to be grateful for. Even Penelope acknowledged that now, albeit reluctantly.

He still lived in Paris, and for a while I had generously allowed him to dwell in my house in Rue Mouffetard. He did stay there for a year, but then he returned to his old house in Rue Parnasse, grabbed the few possessions he had there, and installed himself in the Fountainebleu Forest. There he refurbished his underground cave and transferred his belongings. He remained there, as far as I knew, with occasional trips to Paris where he still hunted. I was also aware that other lycans joined him in that cave, and that after a while it grew to be a coven. Seraphin abandoned his vampiric ties and he became the coven leader. I thought it was for the best. It allowed him to belong, and it showed me that that lair was his destiny. It was not me, and that was fine. We had parted on good terms, and we were allies. Vampires and werewolves would never fight again.

Now was the time to enjoy immortality to the fullest, and enjoy mortal creations such as music, which I loved so much, and which had developed so beautifully over the last century. My disappointment in humanity’s desire to improve weapons of destruction waned when I remembered music. I enjoyed its rhythm and its ways of playing with different notes, putting them together to create a true piece of art. Mozart, such joy; Beethoven, such talent; Wagner, Lendl, and Bach, mere mortals who had achieved immortality through their music. I loved how music kept on reinventing itself, just like the Renaissance had. People kept on reinventing themselves, always bringing more to this world, more music, more
paintings, more literature, always more art, showing how their fabulous creativity could also be used for the greater good, for the enjoyment of all. This is what reinventing is all about, and it was what held some hope for humanity. Creativity for the good of all, for the enjoyment of all, for the love of all. Love is all that matters. Only love can keep us going. Without it we are nothing. Even I, whom you know so well now, am nothing without love. I dwell amongst you, and feed on you, limiting myself to the ones whose creativity is used for evil. Even I, a monster who is desperately clinging to some part of her humanity, needs love, and it took me nearly a century to learn where to find it.

I fancied an evening walk on the beach later today. Lucan and I could walk there like mortals; it was only a half hour walk, and I loved strolling through the desert which was so full of life. Holding Lucan’s hand, talking to him, and being in his presence filled me with such bliss and made me feel like the luckiest immortal on Earth. And then we would walk on the deserted beach in the evening, feel the waves crash onto the sand, the water covering our bare feet, gaze at the stars, the countless stars, and the thin sickle of the moon in the ink-dark skies above.

Yes, it was an excellent idea, a wonderful way to end the day.

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Thank you for reading my book. If you enjoyed it, won’t you please take a moment to leave me a review at your favorite retailer?

Thanks!

Christine Duts

About Christine Duts

Christine Duts was born in Germany, her father being an officer in the Belgian Armed Forces stationed in Germany. She grew up as a Belgian, and later went to London and then Los Cabos, Mexico, where she eventually settled. Christine is a teacher of World History and Literature at a private high school. Although she loves teaching and loves her students, her passion is writing. Christine has been writing since the age of six, and she still has the very first story she ever wrote, packed in a tattered suitcase; she has lost the key, and claims she will have to cut it
Christine often finds inspirations while walking on the beach or sitting on the sand and staring at the waves, and finds that dreams can inspire her too. Her goal is to live off her writing, because it is who she is. Christine also volunteers for Baja SAFE, an animal rescue organization, and often has a variety of rescue animals in her house. Her dream is to run an animal sanctuary from her land in Los Cabos, and that her writing can support such a dream.

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Coming soon, in September 2015: Lucan

Preview of Lucan

Prologue

Two thousand years is a very long time, an eternity. It is forever, timeless, as if there were no past, no present, nor future. The past entwined with the present and laid the path for distant future. The soul travelled to the future and back, warned the present body of dangers and informed it of pleasures ahead. We should’ve, but never heeded the warnings.

I have lived for 1,913 years, I think; forever it seems.

Mexico City, in the year 2014, was a world away from 121 AD, histories made and continents away from ancient Rome, my city of birth.

Mexico City was enormous, with endless rooftops stretching from horizon to horizon, the valley bathed in a thin layer of smog; millions of cars polluting the air relentlessly; old buses were filled with passengers like sardines in cans, millions of people hurrying over the streets, crossing the “Periferico” (the city’s freeway) on
the connecting bridges, too busy to stop, too busy to ponder what they were rushing to. They were like ants crawling along cement, eager to do their duties for the queen. The subway would swallow thousands of commuters and spit them out a few stops later, where they would scramble and run into connecting tunnels to find their ways to another subway, or to ascend the long electrical stairways to the bustling streets.

Often I would find a spot on a hilltop and watch the frenzy from afar, like an objective observer, disconnected from it all.

It was the perfect hunting ground. There were so many people to choose from, and the city harbored so many evildoers who were my favorite victims. It even added a sense of excitement to my feeding habits.

There have been occasions when I rescued the damsel in distress, who was being molested by two individuals (they hardly ever operated alone). In her gratefulness she wept, unable to believe that she was not going to become another statistic, another unlucky victim of crime. She would not ask where I took her attackers; and why would she? I was her hero, and the perpetrators I was taking away deserved their punishment. Reasonably, she assumed that I would deliver them to the nearest police station, but even she had to know that that would not do much good. They would be out in no time. I only cared about the blood they provided for me, and so I took them into a dark alley and killed them there.

Mexico City was designed for me; I could easily go undetected as a mortal, and nobody bothered to look me in the eye, faintly sensing my threat and fearing an assault. I was taller than most people there, and therefore I must have made a strong impression on them. My whole physique inspired awe and demonstrated an unknown strength that no one in their right mind would dare challenge.

You know who I am.

Aurélie has told you plenty about me in her memoirs. Most of it is true; some of it is a little exaggerated.

My dear Aurélie…she is right about one thing, though: my undying love for her. I loved her from the moment I set eyes on her. She was mortal then, and an avid supporter of the French Revolution. I met her during the September Massacres in 1792, an event that turned her away from the revolt. It was violent and bloody, and the Parisians had lost complete control of themselves, annihilating men, women, clergy and children. The bloodshed shocked her and the outside world alike, and the French Revolution lost sympathy due to the indiscretion.

But it was on that day that I decided that I wanted to be with her. Aurélie has told you how she became mine, how I made her.

I had no wish to turn her into a vampire so quickly. In fact, I wanted to protect her from vampirism, so I stayed away from her despite yearning to see her, to be with her.
I have committed many mistakes concerning Aurélie, and one of them was making her a vampire so soon without having given her the chance to get to know me and love me. Circumstances though, would not allow me to wait. If I had not turned her, she would have died.

Why remember those events? Why remember how I had driven her away from me and into Seraphin’s arms; how I had failed to make her mine again; how I had acted like an adolescent fool?

I have always been a very composed man, but Aurélie has made me lose my sense of reason. Because of her, I let go of myself. I became someone I did not think was possible…not since the days of Althea...

As you already know, I was born in 121 AD. It was an important era, because Marcus Aurelius, born that same year, was Rome’s last true leader of a declining empire, after which his son led Rome to its ruin. I shared that opinion with many Romans of my time, but I have read in some modern-day reports and books that a few historians tend to disagree. History can be tricky, and it often differs depending on who tells the story. We Romans, however, all loved and admired Marcus Aurelius, who had brought peace to our empire. He had frequently had to engage in campaigns to defend the borders from raging Germanic tribes, but the city of Rome knew only peace.

We had absolutely no respect for his son, Commodus, and felt no loyalty towards him. After he became Rome’s emperor, I did not dwell much longer in my city, and saw myself forced to leave with my wife Althea.

Aurélie could not really mention Althea in her memoirs, since I had never spoken much of her. She often complained about my lack of trust in her, because I never shared the details of my life. It was not due to a lack of trust, though. I have always been a very reserved man, and I have never been at peace with my past.

Althea was, and has always been, a delicate subject for me.
PART 1: THE EARLY YEARS

Chapter I: Claudia

My father was a wealthy architect. He had undertaken several projects, even for the emperor’s palace, which had provided him with so much gold that he could afford to buy a big, luxurious villa in an exclusive neighborhood on the Avantine Hill in Rome. Obviously, he had most of the villa rebuilt and redecorated in his own unique style. He was an astute man with a nose for business. He could be ruthless, but I suppose he had to be to achieve so much.

My mother married him when she was fourteen, which was not unusual in our society. She was the daughter of a rich patrician landowner. My father also came from a reputable, patrician family, but he was never interested in following his father’s footsteps into the Senate. Instead he focused on architecture, something that inspired him. He was very driven by ambition, although he had no need to expand his wealth. My mother supported him in all ways.

My older brother and sister were also born during those times. My sister, Claudia, was very lucky actually. My father could have rejected her because she was female. He could have taken the baby and left her outside overnight to die of exposure, as was Roman custom. Many female babies were left to the elements where they would die of hypothermia, hunger, or be eaten by wild animals. In this way, the parents could claim that they did not kill her; they had left her to the gods’ devices. Sometimes, other families rescued some of these babies to raise them as slaves. My father, however, did no such thing. He never considered leaving little Claudia to die. On the contrary, he took her into his arms and kissed her on her soft forehead, proudly claiming that she was a little treasure to be kept. My mother smiled, relieved, for she had feared her sacrifice.

By the time I was born, my parents were very rich and prosperous, much wealthier than their own parents. I had never known a different life. My brother Marcus was five and Claudia was four years old when I came into this world.

Two years later, my younger brother Silio was born.

We were a happy family and my parents loved each other very much. They displayed their affection openly. My father never took a mistress and he never took a slave to bed. He was only devoted to my mother.

Claudia was spoiled, being the only girl. She was also very beautiful, and as she grew up she had many suitors. None could resist her irresistible smile and her radiant blue eyes that were such a stark contrast to her dark brown hair.
Naturally, my brothers and I felt very protective of her. We probably did not make life easy for her suitors, but she was so naïve that she needed our protection. It was so easy to see through the suitors. Some were earnest, but most were only after her wealth, or were already betrothed to someone else.

When Claudia was twelve, she was old enough to be married. My father knew that he could not wait long. She was ready, and had many people interested in her. So, he and my mother met with several suitors. My mother was not really expected to decide, but my father allowed her to sit in on those meetings.

I was only eight back then, but I remember it so vividly, despite the fact that more than a millennium has since passed.

At a young age, Claudia was not blessed with great cleverness, and while my father set out to find her a worthy, well-connected, and self-sufficient husband, she had already made up her mind on her own choice, with tragic consequences.

Claudia was impulsive and spontaneous, and she usually acted before she thought. She seemed pleased with my father’s choice of a husband, and my mother also wholeheartedly agreed.

Her groom to be was a senator’s son in his early twenties. He was a widower, having lost his first wife and his baby in childbirth.

He was tall and agreeable looking, with a little pot belly beginning to protrude. In a few years he would probably be chubbier, like his father. Obviously, he would also follow in his father’s footsteps and become a senator.

The marriage was arranged for early spring, which was only two months away.

Claudia looked forward to the wedding and prepared with my mother, both of them often giggling like little girls. She and her husband, Marcus Antonio, looked very happy on their wedding day, and all of the wedding guests expected only bliss to come from this marriage.

Ten months later, tragedy struck.

Claudia gave birth to a healthy baby boy, but to her guilty horror he was colored. Marcus Antonio was livid. He seized the baby, and under Claudia’s crying protests he smashed its skull against the wall. Claudia screamed in agony as her baby’s blood spattered onto the wall and floor. She sank, devastated next to it, cradling its lifeless body in her arms, whimpering like a little girl. Then her husband rounded up the house slaves and demanded to know who the culprit was who had lain with his wife.

None dared speak, in fear for their lives.

Marcus Antonio grabbed Claudia and forced her to point out the slave that had “raped” her.

Everybody knew that it had not happened that way. She had been the one who had seduced him, and when he had fearfully tried to refuse, she had coerced him into obeying, promising him that no one would ever know.
She refused to tell her husband. He brutally struck her face, and when she fell onto the cold marble floor he kicked her in her stomach where, a few hours before, she had been carrying the child. She cried out in pain.

When the slave who had impregnated her saw her suffering, he could no longer keep quiet, so he stepped forward to make his master stop, knowing full well what the consequences would be.

He was a tall, athletic Nubian slave, in fact one of Marcus Antonio’s favourites, and when he saw that it was him, he opened his mouth in shock, disappointed that he was the guilty one. “You!” he gasped. Roughly, he took him by his arm and pushed him outside towards the courtyard.

Claudia scrambled to her feet and followed them, pleading for the man’s life. Marco Antonio bound him to a pillar, his back exposed. Furiously, he tore off his tunic and grabbed a whip.

He struck him hard on his back. The man winced in pain, but did not utter a sound.

Claudia begged him to stop, kneeling by her husband’s feet and holding on to his legs. He kicked her away and lashed at her with the whip.

A female slave came and helped her up. Gently, she took her distraught mistress away to her quarters.

Marcus Antonio gave the slave 100 lashes with the whip, tearing open the man’s skin and exposing his tender, bloody flesh down to the bone. The whip tore so savagely into his back that it took the skin right off, the shreds hanging onto the sharp whip’s ends. Claudia heard the lashes from her bedroom. Every strike tore at her soul and filled her with guilt. She asked the female slave to go to her parents’ house to tell them what had happened, to send for help.

My father, my brother Marcus, and I arrived when the poor slave received his hundredth whiplash. We walked into the courtyard when Marcus Antonio unbound the man. He dropped to the ground, still breathing, but his back was a bloody mess of torn flesh hanging in strips from his bones.

The slave was dying, but Marcus Antonio, in his rage unwilling to quit, turned him around and drove a knife into his chest, ending his misery once and for all.

My brother and I stared at the slave on the stone floor. We had never seen a dead man before.

As was Roman custom, children were taken to the circus at an early age, to toughen them up, to make them indifferent to bloodshed and violence. They were taken purposely to watch gladiators hack each other to death, and were expected to cheer when lions and tigers tore their helpless victims to shreds.

My father abhorred the circus and had never taken me or any of my brothers or Claudia. He did not think that one should grow accustomed to violence.
Now that my brother saw the bloody corpse, he looked at it in awe. He did not
gasp in horror though, nor did he display any emotion, because he knew he would
be despised for it. He remained calm, but unable to take his gaze off the dead man.
My father laid his hand on Marcus’s shoulder. “Go to your sister,” he said.
As my brother nodded and ran off, my father stayed to talk to Marcus Antonio
to salvage what he could.

Marcus Antonio wished to take Claudia to court for having committed
adultery. We were all horrified, although we knew how torridly foolish she had
behaved. A conviction in court would only lead to her execution, and we had to
prevent that.
My father talked to her husband, tried to reason with him. He was furious at his
daughter for having put her life at such risk and having discredited the family. In
only one day, our family had become the laughing stock of Rome, and Claudia had
forever lost her good reputation. My father was unable to keep the affair a secret,
even though he changed the story a little. It was too late. Now all of Rome knew
that Claudia Gaius Marcus, daughter of Marcellus Gaius Marcus, had betrayed her
husband with a Nubian slave during their very first month of marriage, and
produced a son. It was the scandal that filled the public baths and offices, the
scandal that was shared on the streets and that became more and more preposterous
as it spread from mouth to mouth.

In only one day my father lost everything he had worked for in all of those
years. He was left with his gold and villa, but his dignity had been destroyed,
rippled to shreds and fed to the gossiping mouths of Rome. It was just as well he
had chosen not to become senator.
He and my mother were too ashamed to show their faces in public.
Claudia received a harsh scolding, and after that, my father sent her away. He
had the slaves pack her trunks and had Marcus and I put her on a ship to
Alexandria, where a friend of my father would take care of her until he would
decide upon her return.
Such was his anger and disappointment that he refused to say goodbye to her.
He forbade my mother to accompany her, and ordered only Marcus and me to go.
Silio was still too young.
I was only eight years old, about to turn nine in a month. Marcus was fourteen.
We were children, but we understood that irrevocable damage had been done to
Claudia and to our family.
Claudia shed tears when we embraced in a last goodbye.
We stood at the pier and watched our sister on the ship as it slowly glided away,
widening the distance between us. She did not wave; she just stood there, staring at
us as if she was trying to engrave the images of our faces forever in her mind.
I did not see Claudia again until many years later. My father never forgave her, and so he never allowed her to return.

She sent us many letters, telling us about her life in Alexandria, about our father’s friend, Flavius, who had taken her in as his own daughter, and about his daughter, who had become her good friend. In every letter she begged for forgiveness. My mother wrote back to her, but my father never did.

Over the years, he had reestablished his position in society, and the scandal had become a thing of the past, but it was clear that no one would really forget, and some sniggering remarks behind his back ever continued.

Marcus married a senator’s daughter when he was twenty, but I, barely fifteen, was not very interested in finding a wife. I liked to walk around Rome and watch people. I learned a lot about them in this way. I found out which men I should not argue with, I knew what kind of a woman would stab me if I even made a move towards her. One could say that I, the wealthy architect’s son, became quite streetwise during my daily outings.

I even made some acquaintances, but kept those to myself, knowing fully well that my father would never approve, especially after the episode with Claudia.

These acquaintances would come in handy one day, I figured, although I did not know for what purpose. After all, I had a good, comfortable life and did not need to worry about finances. What good could come of knowing some prostitutes, beggars, a thief and a juggler? But at the age of fifteen, having this little secret was exciting and worth keeping. Later in life I would be grateful for those contacts, and for them having taught me street smarts.

Silio was now thirteen and was growing into a handsome young man. He resembled my father with his unruly black hair and hazel eyes. In fact, I was the only one who did not look like either of my parents. My brothers would often joke that I was adopted. Unlike them, and as you already know from Aurélie’s account, I had dark blond-brown hair and green eyes, and I was very tall. The jokes did not bother me much. I had enough confidence to put them aside.

Claudia never saw my father again. He died of a severe fever at the age of forty five. We were all sitting at his death bed, and it was there that he, in his delirium, called for Claudia. My mother held his hand as he called their daughter’s name in vain. He lamented having cast her away, having put his reputation before his own daughter. He even shed tears.

He passed away with Claudia’s name on his lips. Gently, my mother closed his eyes and looked at me, not at Marcus, the eldest, but at me. I sat by my father’s
head, opposite her, and met her gaze. It seemed as if she wanted to say something. She opened her mouth slightly, but then closed it again and looked away.

After the funeral, my mother sat us down in the atrium and handed Marcus a letter.

Confused, he looked at her.

“It is for Claudia,” she said.

Marcus glanced at the letter, not knowing what she wanted him to do with it.

“It is time for her to come back,” our mother said.

But Marcus shook his head. “He would not have wanted that.”

“He died with her name on his lips!” she said fiercely.

“People have not forgotten,” he protested.

“And they probably never will, but she is your sister, and whatever people say should not concern you.”

Marcus avoided her gaze and looked at me.

“Can I go?” I asked. “Can I go with him?”

“I am not going,” Marcus said impatiently. “It is not what father would have wanted. If he had been alive, he would not have sent for her.”

“You are going, because I am your mother and I am telling you to go. Your father wished to see her before he died, and so I am calling her back. And you will obey!”

Marcus glared at me angrily, annoyed by my eagerness to travel to Alexandria. “Fine,” he grumbled.

My mother allowed me to accompany my older brother. She and Silio came to wave us goodbye as the vessel left the harbour. Marcus was still reluctant to go, but to no avail.

The journey to Alexandria was quiet and uneventful, but our arrival in this bustling city was truly memorable. Just the sight of the city as our ship approached the harbour was spectacular.

Claudia had no idea we were coming, and she was not at home when we arrived at Flavius’s villa. He received us warmly and was truly sorry that we had lost our father. He informed us that Claudia was at the library with his daughter.

We were taken to the atrium and offered wine. Our host ordered his slaves to prepare a meal for us.

“You must be starved,” he assumed.

I drank the wine. “This is delicious,” I murmured.

“Thank you,” Flavius proudly said. “It is made from the grapes of my own vineyard in Rome.”

“You have a house in Rome?” Marcus inquired.

“Yes, my son and his wife live there. They regularly send me cases of wine.”
Flavius was a man in his early fifties, of regular height and a slim build. His face was severe and regal and looked very Roman, but his strict demeanor was deceiving. Below it was a warm and friendly man.

“So, have you come to take Claudia back to Rome?” he asked.
“Yes,” my brother said reluctantly, something that did not go unnoticed.
“It was my father’s dying wish,” I added, and received a glowering look from Marcus.

Flavius nodded. He did not know the whole story. He was told that Claudia had been unfaithful to her husband and had therefore been cast away. The affair with the Nubian slave and the baby had been wisely left out.

“What about her husband?” Flavius wanted to know, out of curiosity.
We had never bothered to ask or inform Marcus Antonio. We had not seen him in the past years, but we knew that he had remarried. His new wife was a very young, pretty daughter of a wealthy landowner. She had given him two healthy sons of whom he was immensely proud.

“He remarried,” Marcus informed him.
“If you take Claudia back, will Rome welcome her?”
At that, Marcus remained silent. He had not forgiven her. Marcus could be harsh; he was strict in his household, even with his wife.

Roman women were allowed an education and had relative freedom compared to Greek or Northern women; yet Marcus’s wife, Agrippina, was given little liberty. He preferred her to stay in their villa to look after the household. She was in charge of the slaves and made sure everything was run smoothly. Basically, she had become his housekeeper. She had accepted her role and never complained. She would not dare, because Marcus would not hear of it. Their marriage was childless and he blamed her, claiming she was barren.

I did not think Agrippina was very happy, but she was a submissive woman who endured Marcus’s mean remarks about her sterility. He even did it in our presence. Our mother had not said a word about it, but the look on her face expressed more than words could ever do.

Agrippina was certainly nothing like her famous — or, more correctly put, infamous — namesake who, a few hundred years before my time, had poisoned Emperor Claudius and committed incest with her even more infamous son Nero. Nero had his own mother murdered, having been unable to deal with her sharp tongue and destructive intrigues. Agrippina was the complete opposite of the humble, submissive, enduring woman Marcus had married. She would put up with anything.

Marcus abused that, since he was and always had been very dominant.

He had been the one who had witnessed the death of the Nubian slave. He had never been a man who cared much about his slaves, but even as a little boy he had
known that that slave had been killed because of Claudia. His blood was on her hands, as was Marcus Antonio’s humiliation and our father’s and our family’s social ruin. No, Marcus had never forgiven her; he had judged her even harder than my father had.

My mother had sent the wrong man to pick up our sister — or had she done it on purpose? Perhaps she had hoped he would soften once he felt his sister’s arms around him.

Silio and I were different. We had always wished for Claudia’s return. She had always been a good sister to us. Perhaps we were too young when the tragedy struck to understand its implications, but when we grew older, we understood it very well. I had also been angry at Claudia, but time had taught me to forgive her.

“Yes,” I said. “Rome will welcome her back.”

Marcus seemed annoyed, and gave me another angry look, which I boldly returned. Flavius noticed the exchange, but wisely refrained from commenting.

“Claudia is very happy here. What if she wishes to stay?” he asked.

“Then she can stay,” Marcus said quickly.

At that moment slaves walked in with trays stacked with roasted pheasant, fried fish, red and white grapes, boiled vegetables, and white bread.

It was a true feast and heartily we dug in. The food was truly wonderful, and I think I even devoured half of the pheasant.

Claudia and Flavius’s daughter walked in when we were nearly done with our lunch. Our sister’s mouth went wide open when she saw us, and then she stormed at me and hugged me profusely, nearly smothering me in her embrace and her kisses.

“Lucan!” she said breathlessly. Finally, she let go of me and hugged Marcus who held her in his arms, but not with the same affection.

Flavius’s daughter watched the scene with mixed feelings. It was obvious that she had become very attached to my sister, but that was not the reason I could not take my eyes of her. She was stunning! I guessed her to be around eighteen, like Claudia. She had big brown eyes framed with long, soft lashes, long, wavy, dark brown hair that she wore loosely over her shoulders, very unlike the Roman fashion which dictated women to wear their hair tied up in elaborate designs. Her lips were full and soft, and the long sky-blue tunic she wore barely hid the soft curves of her body.

I was smitten, whereas she hardly noticed me.

“Althea, come here,” Flavius said warmly, and held out his hand.

She approached us, now finally looking at both Marcus and me. Her look lingered on me for just a moment; then she took a seat next to her father. “Oh, fish — I am starving!” she said, and grabbed some of the fried fish.
While she was eating, I could not stop staring at her. She sipped wine from her father’s glass and smiled at him. It was clear that she was his little darling. I did not know if he had other children.

“Have you come to take me back?” Claudia asked.

“Yes,” Marcus said when I did not answer, still mesmerized by Althea’s beauty.

Later we had dinner with the whole family. Althea had one older brother who came to visit. He was married, but he had come alone. As I later learned, he and his wife often went their separate ways, and seemed quite content that way.

We made ourselves comfortable on the Roman long chairs and enjoyed more fresh fish, roasted pheasant, goat cheese, grapes, fried vegetables, white bread, and Flavius’s homemade red wine.

Claudia and Althea chattered endlessly while Flavius, his son, and Marcus were engaged in a discussion about military campaigns.

Flavius had been an excellent general and had spent most of his life leading his army against Germanic tribes. Now he was retired and had chosen Alexandria as his hometown to live out his days comfortably.

As the evening wore on and we drank more wine, conversation turned to the girls. I even dared ask Claudia if she had not found a husband here, to which she giggled nervously.

Marcus could not withhold his curiosity much longer and asked Flavius if Althea had not been married off yet. She was a beautiful eighteen-year-old girl and long overdue marriage according to our standards.

Flavius smiled endearingly and said, “I am afraid Althea has a mind of her own. We have found her many promising candidates, but she has refused them all, on the grounds of her being too young. She keeps on saying that she does not feel mature enough to be married, and how can I deny her?”

It was clear he spoiled her.

Althea smiled coquettishly and sipped her wine. She had long ago noticed that I could not keep my eyes off her, and she was rather enjoying it. I knew she did not take it seriously though, since I was three years younger than she was. She was flattered that a young boy like me was so smitten by her.

“We cannot wait much longer,” her mother said.

“No, we cannot. Althea, very soon you will have to accept a husband, because your time is running out,” Flavius agreed.

“What if I do not want to get married?” Althea asked.

At this, Marcus laughed out loud. “You cannot be serious,” he said.

She looked at him boldly, something he was not used to, and said, “I am very serious. What is the use of being married? Women’s only purpose is to produce sons. Girls, if not accepted, are killed immediately after birth. Men can roam the
world freely, engage in battles, travel and meet different cultures, broaden their minds, and engage philosophers in discussions, but women stay at home, go to the markets… Yes, we can read and educate ourselves, but what good is that to us if we cannot do anything with it?”

Marcus was shocked. Agrippina would never have uttered this “nonsense”.
But I fell in love with her there and then.
Claudia nodded in agreement, and I knew that she shared Althea’s opinion after having spent years in her company. I was not sure if our mother was going to like this new Claudia.

At that moment I wanted to ask Althea to travel the world with me, but I knew that she would only laugh at me.

“Would you battle the Germanic hordes?” Her brother Marius mocked her, already used to Althea’s contrary opinions.

“No, but I would like to be there, to see it, to report on it for future generations.”

“Witness people hacking each other to death? For that you can go to the circus,” Marcus said.

“The circus!” she snorted. “That is not the same. People cheer and clap for some poor gladiators who are forced to kill each other. I am not talking about death as entertainment; I am talking about death as a part of life, how death is part of us every day, how people are massacred everywhere in the Roman Empire, so that we in Rome and Alexandria can live in peace.”

Marcus was impressed, but her intelligence worried him.

“How many people have you killed, Father, to guarantee Rome’s peace?” she continued.

“That is preposterous!” Marcus spat.

Flavius leaned back in his long chair and said, “She has a point, a very valid one. It was I who told her about the endless military campaigns, the bloodshed, and the sacrifices, all done in the name of Rome. Peace comes at a high price. War and peace seem to be intrinsically linked.”

“But it is not up to a woman to discuss these matters,” Marcus remarked arrogantly.

Althea gasped in shock.

Flavius now sat up and said sternly, “Women in my house are free to speak their minds.”

Before my brother could make another sneering remark and risk having us thrown out, I said, “It is truly refreshing to hear a woman’s opinion on these matters. I have never given it much thought before, always having taken our peace for granted.”

She gave me a grateful look and a beautiful smile, and that alone made the evening worthwhile for me.
Marcus glowered at me, but realising that no one shared his opinion, he wisely kept his comments to himself.

We stayed in Alexandria for two weeks, and in that time I let Claudia and Althea show me the sights in the city. Althea never spoke much to me, but I was happy just to be close to her. Claudia told me about the past years in Alexandria, how Flavius had sent her to Althea’s classes with their hired teacher and how much she had learned.

Althea sometimes teased me about my age, but I think that, deep down, she actually liked me. Perhaps she regarded me as some lovesick puppy she could play with. During those two weeks she came to understand how I felt about her, but she never mentioned it. Her suitors were of her age and even older; so it was understandable that a fifteen-year-old boy did not impress her much.

Claudia told me that her father sometimes regretted having filled her mind with so much knowledge, because now she refused to wed. He worried what was to become of her if she did not marry. I could hardly imagine her as an old spinster. I rather saw her as a wealthy woman who still had lots of suitors and occasional adventures, but I preferred to envision the two of us together.

When Althea excused herself one day, Claudia and I ventured out alone and went for a walk along the harbor. Marcus never came with us; he usually hid in the villa’s library, or accompanied Flavius and Marius to the public baths. I went with them only once or twice, but definitely preferred to spend my time with Althea.

As Claudia and I strolled along the harbor amongst a cultural mix of Egyptians, Romans and Greeks, she teased me about Althea. But then she became serious and said, “You know that I trust you more than anyone else, more than Marcus or Silio.”

“Anyone is more trustworthy than Marcus.”

She held on to my arm and said, “Not anyone. Marcus is just…well, he has some old-fashioned values.”

That was an understatement, but I did not wish to discuss my brother, so I did not answer.

“You know,” she continued, “I really loved him.”

For a moment I was lost. I had no idea who she was talking about. I looked at her in obvious confusion and asked, “Marcus Antonio?”

“No, Jenno.”

“I am sorry. Who is Jenno?”

But her eyes told me, and I understood.

“The slave? No, Claudia, you cannot be serious. I have never judged you for what has happened, but how could you have loved him? He was just a slave. I do not think you know what you are talking about.”
“I did, Lucan. Please listen to me.”
We stood still on the pier; a large Egyptian vessel was anchored by our side.
“Not a day goes by without remembering those events, remembering how he
died because of me. The guilt gnaws at me every single day and I cannot forgive
myself. He died to save me, because he loved me.
“Yes, I seduced him. He was so tall and strong, and so very handsome. I could
not resist him. He politely refused and told me that he valued his life too much. He
begged me to leave him alone. I could not take no for an answer, and I seduced
him. It did not only happen once, but many times. It turned into an affair. I went to
a midwife to protect myself, but it was to no avail. I became pregnant. I really
thought that it was Marcus Antonio’s child, for I had not used the weeds with
him.”
“What weeds?”
“Weeds that the midwife gave me. I had to take them to prevent pregnancy,”
she explained impatiently. “Jenno and I did not only meet to lay with each other;
we talked so much, and, oh, Lucan…he was such a gentle and noble being. He was
very smart and always knew the right advice to give me. We fell in love. We even
talked about running away together, although we realized it was impossible. A
Roman lady like me could not be with him, unless we escaped to a very remote
place where nobody ever set foot. We knew our situation was hopeless, but just the
talking and fantasizing of a life together made us so happy.
“You may call me crazy and unreasonable for loving a slave, but that is what
happened. You know the rest of the story.”
“And why are you telling me this?”
“Because I trust you, and I needed to tell you. Althea knows — I told her years
ago. You and her are the only ones.”
Me and Althea… It sounded nice.
“I know that I caused his death. Do not tell me he was only a slave. He was a
man I loved, a man who died because of me. Can you imagine the guilt that I have
to carry for the rest of my life?”

Althea and Claudia were inseparable, so when I found the former alone in the
garden, there were no words to describe my relief.
I approached her and wished her a good morning.
She sat on a bench under a willow tree and said happily, while patting the spot
next to her, “Good morning, Lucan. Come and take a seat.”
I obliged all too eagerly.
I knew she did not take me seriously because of my young age, but in fact I was
old enough to get married. I was also tall and therefore looked older.
“We are leaving in two days,” I told her.
“I know. Claudia is excited. She has told me how she yearns to be reunited with her mother. But I am sorry to see her go. She has become more than a dear friend; she is like a sister to me, and it pains me to lose her. When will I see her again?”

“Then come to Rome to visit her.”

She turned to me and smiled. “I would love that.” For a moment her eyes lingered on mine, and then she said, “I would also love to see you again.”

“You do not mean that.”

“I do.”

I took her hand in mine, and to my surprise she did not pull away. “Althea,” I said, “I do not know if I will ever find another moment alone with you, and I also know that you regard me as just a fifteen-year-old boy who is too young for you, but I love you. I cannot stop thinking about you, and I want to marry you as soon as I reach an age you deem appropriate to marry.”

She looked at me in mild surprise, and an endearing smile curved her lips. With her hand still in mine, she said, “Lucan, you are a wonderful boy. If you were older, I might consider your offer. Right now does not seem the appropriate time to accept.”

“Does that mean you may accept in the future?”

Now she laughed out loud and she said, “Oh, I love your confidence! So young and yet so sure of yourself! You are delightful, Lucan, and I love you, but I do not think I love you the same way you love me.”

I knew I was not delightful, and I did not like her answer. So I let go of her hand, grabbed her by her shoulders and pulled her closer to me.

She was again surprised, but did not fight me when I kissed her. She softened in my arms and responded wholly to my kiss, threw her arms around me and gave herself up to me completely. Her previous laughter and words rang very untrue on her lips, but just as quickly she let go and pulled away from my arms, looking at me in wild wonder, her usual confidence for once disappearing.

She seemed flustered, and slowly she stood up, gave me one last confused glance and then ran over the green grass and back into the house.