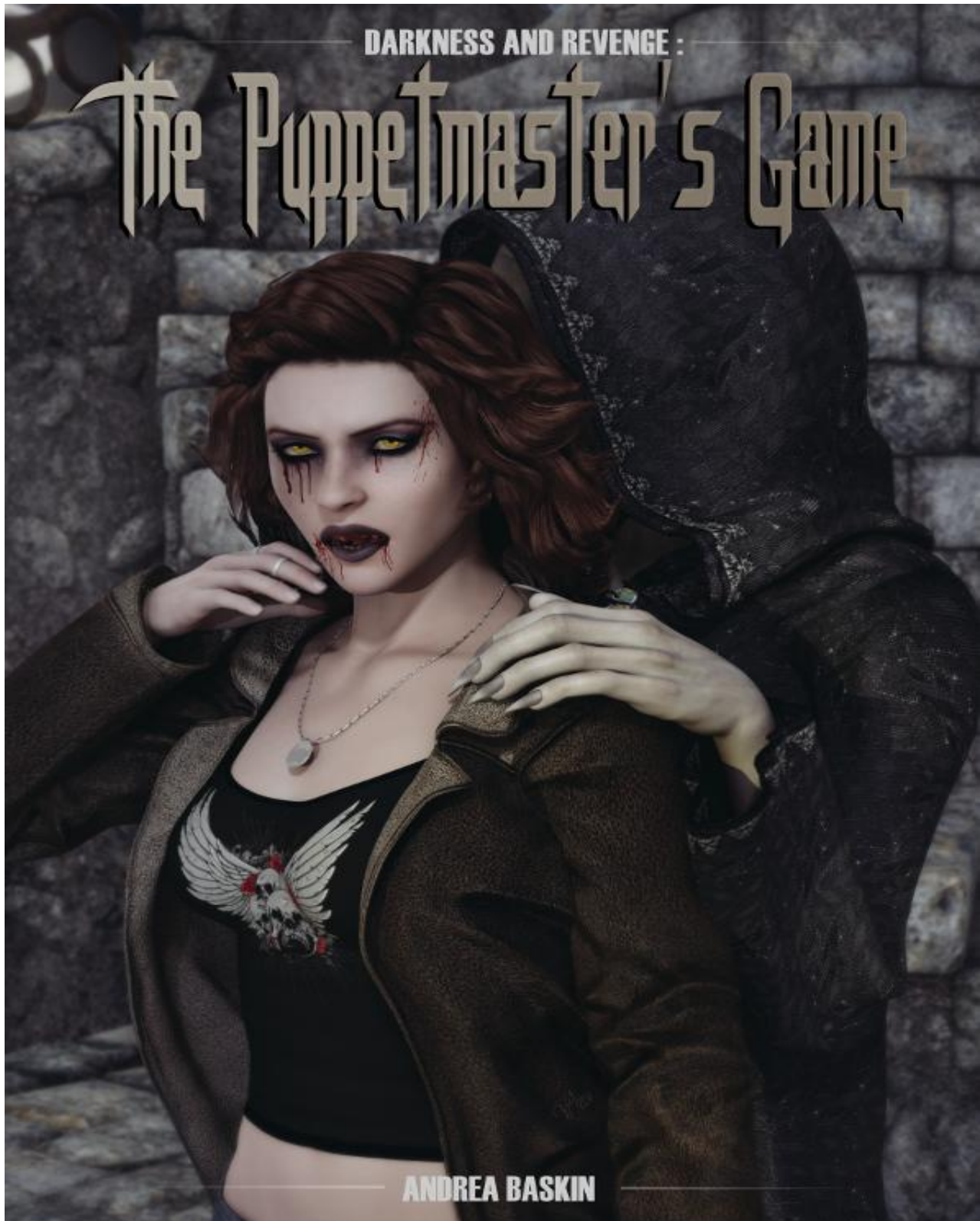


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I

He woke up in his underground kingdom, with the conclusion that he was bored. The longing for games was imprinted in his blood, but it was too long ago that he followed it. All the same – silence and darkness. The routine lasted long enough. He caught himself tingling with monotony. The days became empty, like the heads of his “children“. He desperately needed a new game. The fascination with games came to a point where it could be called an obsession.

His main passion was to manipulate people. Oh, how naive those mortal creatures were.

He was very happy with the time it took to master the skill to match his newest nickname – The Puppetmaster.

The hunger for challenge was getting stronger every day.

This time it had to be original. As cruel as possible.

It was time to set the record.

To do bad things to his victim.

Destroy the victim’s life.

Swallow its hope.

Make new players.

Feel the power of control.

That was exciting, and produced adrenaline that made one addicted.

He put on his favorite checkered suit and a hat with an identical pattern. Black and white. His mind was focused only on extremes. Grey nuances did not exist and were not counted as an option.

He grinned at the creepy guy in the mirror. The clock hit midnight.

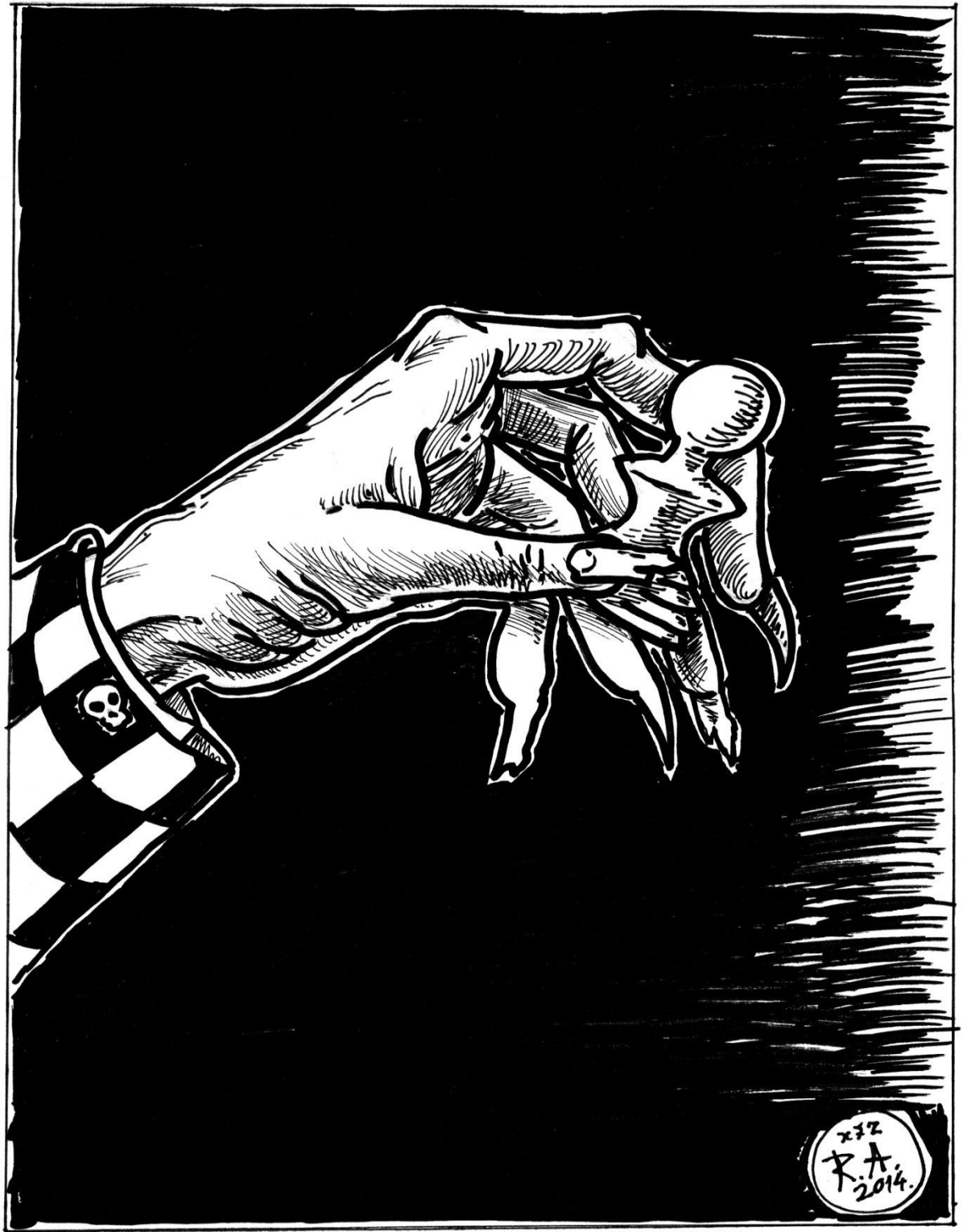
Slowly he went to the desk. His movements were gentle like the ones of a woman, but still he seemed dangerous.

He lived alone, but everything was locked – the obsessive urge to control things. He was wearing the keys around his neck. Turning the right one two times in the lock, from the last drawer he took out a chess table made of glass.

“Let the game begin!“ he said to his non-existent enemy.

He moved the white Pawn two fields forward.

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Leisurely, nearly mechanically, she circled her thumb over the smooth surface of a silver locket. She would do that every time she was nervous or deeply in thoughts. One of those things that people pick up in life, together with other strange habits.

The irritating, loud ticking of the clock echoed in the empty room. Being alone and in peace before travelling was a part of her ritual. Just a few more minutes.

She was getting tired. The gong of the clock startled her. One... two... three... in sync and boring... six... seven... eight... she heard the mechanical parts moving... nine... ten... eleven... twelve...

She left the locket on her table, took an empty notebook and wrote: “LONDON.”

All her thoughts were revolving around one thing – the expedition. Her equipment was standing beside the door, ready as always. She wrote a few more lines on the first page and stored the notebook in the bag.

They were informed that there was no need for them to participate in the digging. It was nearly finished, but they needed professionals to determine the value and authenticity of the things found. There should be no reasons to worry, but still, the last days her state could have been called anything else but calm. She was over-thinking, starting to doubt the decision that was clearly made. Maybe she shouldn’t be going.

The information was incomplete and disturbing. She hated the lack of organization. Her need for perfection did not allow sloppy execution in projects she was leading. The chaos that took over those days was the opposite of what she was used to. She could not really force herself to count on other people or heedlessly jump into adventures she was not in total control of. How could she accept this job?

A week before she had been, surprisingly enough, invited to a seminar. The professor who had started the project had called her. It was raining that day. She despised the rain. Her car didn’t want to start until the fourth try, so she was angry and nervous by the time she got to the university.

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But she was also curious. It was not usual to be invited to such presentations when you were an archeologist. Usually the leader of the group would meet the person who had offered the job and speak face to face with him.

The first questions that came to her mind were remained unanswered: Why my team? Are we famous? Has someone recommended us?

But they were not the only ones.

About fifty people were sitting in the amphitheatre. She knew a lot of them.

Exactly at the time that was arranged, a middle-aged man came into the room. Wearing a two-size bigger jacket, he did not seem as someone to be taken seriously. The well-preserved moustache and the glasses on his pointy nose did not point out a lot of intelligence.

Right beside him stood a shorter young man with intimidating blue eyes. Moving from one foot to the other he tried to hide that he was nervous. The boy approached the projector and waited for a sign from the professor.

“Good day, ladies and gentleman!” the older man greeted them.

The girl sitting next to her could not sit still.

“As if we were students,” she whispered to the girl, who nodded her head and returned the smile.

It seemed to her that the others were feeling that way too. She heard mumbling in the last rows. They were all eager to know what would happen.

The projector flicked on and a castle appeared on the wall.

“I am not sure you have heard about this place, but I can bet that you know the owners. I will tell you more about them later. Your task is about the part of this building that is placed under the castle. The catacombs.”

The projector clicked, and the image on the wall showed a staircase that led into the dark.

“Because of bad weather conditions, the entrance was completely closed. That is why the catacombs got forgotten. A few months ago, some documents showed up and got my attention. They seem to prove that under the castle there is the library of Catherine and Maximilian van Santoferus.”

At the sound of the names, all mumbling and whispering at the auditorium stopped.

“I knew that their names could not be unknown to you,” he laughed. “Even though nobody knows what they looked like, everyone has heard about them and their passion to collect books. And this is where we got to the reason for you being here. The thing that is important to me is that their library contained a large number of unique books. Even some which were thought to be lost forever. If you

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only found just one document, it would be of enormous importance for all of humanity. I hope you understand the responsibility that comes with a task like this, and that I am willing to work only with the best of you.”

Alexandra loved challenges. She lived for them: the constant need to lift her ego mixed with her competitive attitude. She knew she would accept. Even if only to show everybody and herself that she could do anything she decided she wanted to.

A chance.

The ultimate challenge.

A lot of archeologists were not interested because of the difficulty of the quest, but Alexandra had approached the professor and told him he could count on her.

He had been overwhelmed and had explained her how he would send all the pictures together with lots of information to her as soon as possible.

“Alex? Alex!” a nervous voice said.

“What?” She put down her locket on the table and looked at the frightened expression of her colleague’s face.

“Is everything ready for tomorrow?”

“Yes. You know that I always pack my things a day earlier. Why are you so nervous?”

“I don’t know.”

She had known him for four years, so she saw that he was lying. “Tell me. I see something is bothering you.”

“The curse,” he whispered.

“Don’t tell me you really believe it exists. It was made up to scare curious adventurers. Seems it worked with you.”

“Would people talk so much about it if it didn’t exist?”

“I don’t know. I just know that I don’t believe in such things. A curse... nonsense!”

“But what if it is true?”

“I don’t see a reason for so much worrying. If you think you can’t go, stay here, and I will ask Tom to join me.”

“You would really do that?”

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“If I have to.”

“Sorry, but things like this never happened to me before. I have a bad feeling. To be honest, I would like it if you didn’t go either.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes, serious as cancer. I didn’t want to mention it to you, but I dreamt about something weird and disturbing.”

“What?”

“I played chess with a creature that had a hood over its head. It was covering the face, but I felt it was not human. Do not ask me how. I was losing. I know that I felt it was all real. I couldn’t wake up. As the game ended it pulled up its hood. I saw a skull that laughed at me. He threw the chess table away, put some kind of a book on the table and burned it! Then I heard a husky voice: *“Stay away from the catacombs, or else you will die!”*“

“Really weird.”

“When I woke up I was sweating as if I had a fever of 104 F°. My eyes were swollen and my throat was dry. I was shaking -- not from cold but the fear, and you know that I am not a coward. Can you understand me now?

“I understand you.”

“If I can help you from here, no matter how, I will. You know you can always count on me. But I cannot go there.”

“No problem; everything will be fine.”

“Thank you, and think about it. You can still cancel the flight. Nobody would have hard feelings because of that. There are places that should not be touched.”

The situation occupied her waking thoughts, particularly when, in three days, half of her team quit. Most of them did not even bother to tell her why.

The conversation with her colleague reminded her of the accident that was in the news for the last few days. The disappearance of ten people who were digging up the entrance to the catacombs could hardly be unnoticed.

The professor called her several times, afraid that she would quit too. She didn’t know what to expect from the expedition, but she did not want to call it off by any chance. The curiosity was stronger than the fear. She promised the professor, and herself, that she would succeed.

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The journey had begun at sunrise.

They were travelling with a private jet that had space for six people and their equipment.

The pilot was smiling. Her team was, on the other hand, far from happy. The last night was, according to their faces, very long. They greeted the pilot, took their places, and the plane lifted off.

Alexandra decided to close her eyes for five minutes. A table appeared in front of her eyes. She was sitting at it alone. She turned her head trying to find out where she was.

From the darkness the creature with the hood came into the light. *This is not possible!* she thought, but couldn't do anything. Her torso felt as if she were placed in concrete; she could only move her hands. A slap. The awareness of her true strength. The look of doubt fell on her hand as she realized that she had just hit herself. Did she really do that? The chess table. The skull. "Stay away from the catacombs!" The creature grabbed her hand, started to shake her, and shouted at her: "Alex! Alex!"

"Alex! Alex, we arrived!" Tom's voice woke her up.

She jumped up, rubbed her eyes, and saw the look on her colleague's face.

"Damn, Alex! What happened?"

"Why?"

"You look scared. You're pale, sweating."

"I wear too warm clothes," she smiled clumsily.

"Fine. Make fun of it." He hit her shoulder with his fist. "Come on. The others are waiting for us. The man that will show us the way has arrived, too. Seems we are going by foot because it is difficult to get there by car.

They moved in two columns, with Alexandra and the guide in front. The weather was warm. It was peaceful, perfect for walking.

The guide would not take off his eyes off her.

She looked around, hoping he would stop staring at her. They were tromping through a field of wheat that was nearly a yard tall, obviously the reason they could not travel by car.

She turned her head.

The eyes of the foreign man were still on her.

She looked down on her clothes. Clean and tidy.

He was looking at her as if he knew her.

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She would simply ignore him. That would be the best. As long as he didn’t ask stupid questions, she would survive it.

They continued walking slowly.

The hotel loomed before them.

When the guide saw the locket around her neck, he stopped.

“Are you all right, mister?” Tom asked him.

“Everything is al... al... all right,” he mumbled.

“You look scared,” Alexandra said.

“No. It is not as it looks!”

“Then why did you stop?”

“I was lost in my thoughts.”

“So. No reason to worry?”

“Absolutely not. Let’s go. We will arrive soon.”

The walk through the green wall of grass around them continued in silence.

Alexandra’s wish was that the hotel was near the castle. Two stars were shining on the entrance. Good enough.

The rooms were simple, but tidy and clean.

They went to their rooms to leave the equipment and gathered a few minutes later in Alexandra’s room, to discuss all the details for tomorrow.

“We will start early and try to finish during the day,” she said. “I think that would be best.”

“How far is it?”

“According to my information, about two and a half miles.”

They marked the road on the map. They had been working together for a long time, so that they had a routine for safety. Keep the map in case someone got lost.”

The receptionist was a big help for them, explaining how they could get to the castle the fastest and safest way. They asked if someone from the village could go with them, but the villagers only looked at each and whispered nervously.

Early next day, as they left the hotel, they saw a man running toward them.

It was their guide. He stopped; his body was shaking. “They said you would leave at this time. Please, do not go there! That place is cursed! The Darkness will get to you!”

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Alexandra approached him. She put her hand on his shoulder. “Don’t worry. Nothing will happen to us. We are professionals!”

The man stood there for another moment, frustrated, his eyes filled with sadness. Then he turned and ran from them, shouting. “I just wanted to help you, but you seem crazy! You’re all going to die!”

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II

The path to the catacombs cut through a forest. Trees rose from the ground like oversized candles on a giant birthday cake.

Maybe we are the decorative figurines on the cake, Alexandra thought for a moment. Everyone was lost in thoughts. Somewhere near them a river was flowing. They were not walking for long, but for Alexandra it seemed like ages.

The words of their guide had left a deeper impression than she had expected. She felt that negative could happen, but didn’t want to add to the tension.

It seemed that no animal was living here, or they just kept silent in the presence of people. The fallen vines under them were rotten. Thick branches were covering the weak rays of the sun, dimming not just their sight, but their mood too. The only sound was the wind through the high branches.

She thought about the guide and his warning. She again pictured his fear, and this quickened her pace. What was it that scared these people so much?

Finally, a clearing that seemed to have no ending unfolded in front of them.

She loved to leave New York from time to time, but this was not a sight matching her earlier expeditions.

The forest was a rather uncomfortable experience, and here they were -- exposed -- served on a silver plate for someone who wanted to hurt them.

The place had been well marked by the diggers, but the entrance to the catacombs was maybe four-feet high, so they had to stoop to enter.

Stone steps led down below ground level. Unusual signs on the walls drew their attention. Could be warning signs, but in what language?

“Here we are.” She tried to sound happy. “But what do those symbols mean? Need to get a fix on them, determine their age. We’ll use some C-14 if we have the time.”

Her heart started to beat faster. She had the feeling they could hear it. Their worried faces were fixed on hers. They nodded with fake smiles on their lips, but they could not hide their real feelings. She could sense them.

But that was not what bothered her the most. She had the terrifying impression that something was calling her from down bellow.

Step by step they went down, this time with Tom in front. The stairs were broken and slippery. As they got deeper down, the air got colder and the voice

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became clearer. She looked at the others, but could not make out a single sign that they were hearing it too.



Soon they saw a lot of different colored blocks that were covering the ground in some kind of a mosaic.

“Be careful,” Alex told them. “Could be traps here!”

Too late.

Tom was stepping on the nearest green block.

Something dripped onto his head, so he touched it and smelled his hand. He looked up. It was still dripping, and he couldn’t move. Iron shackles were on his legs. He hadn’t noticed when they came out from the block in front and behind him. Like poisonous snakes they grabbed his feet. Soon his clothes were soaking.

He turned to Alexandra. “What the hell is th...”

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As if someone from the wall blew into the torch, it started to burn brighter and the fire caught Tom. In a few seconds, he was transformed into a living torch. He screamed, threw himself to the floor, but could not put out the fire.

The others helplessly watched their friend dying. “Tom!” One started toward him, but when a flame leaped at him, he jumped back.

Alexandra kneeled, trying not to cry, trying not to be seen. She had to calm down. She took a deep breath through her nose. Her thoughts were going crazy. “It is all my fault. Just mine!” She was told herself – again and again. She turned around and noticed she was alone.

They had abandoned her without a word. Evidently Tom’s death was the signal they had been waiting for.

She leaned her back to the wall. “What a great, promising beginning,” she sighed.

Tom was her friend, and her heart was aching. On the other hand, she did not have time to mourn. “Think clearly. Concentrate.”

But how, in a situation like this?

She knew Tom would not let her give up. He would never forgive her if she quit now.

She took only the most important things from the equipment, and a few minutes later she was ready to go.

First she had to pass that room. An idea came to her mind. From one of the bags she pulled out the second pair of shoes. Then she threw one shoe on the block, and the other on another. She noticed that it was not the weight that caused the accident, but the fact that Tom had touched it.

Whenever the shoe touched a dangerous block, a trap went off. Acid was dripping down on the block; metal balls were flying through the air. Soon she had just one shoe, because she could not reach the other in time.

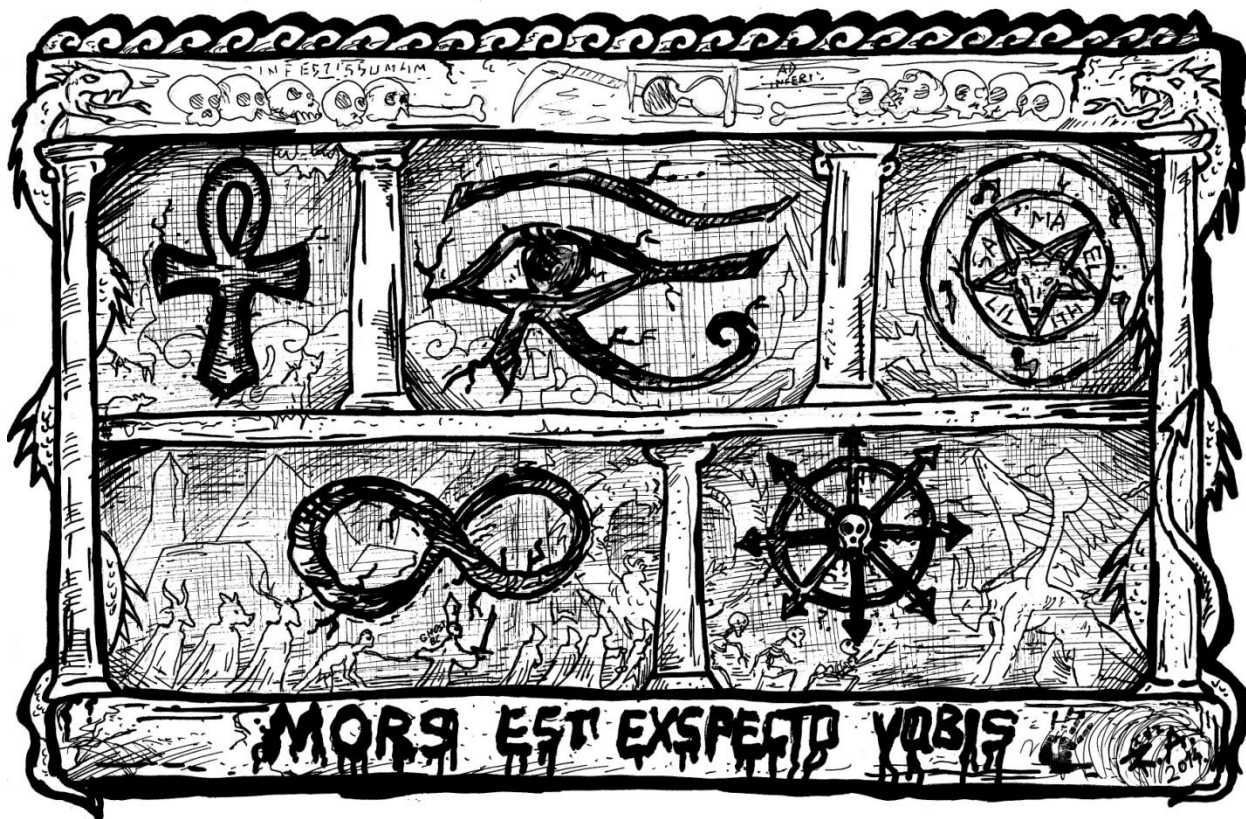
Moving forward she came to a hallway. The air was an undefined, musky smell. Breathing became harder. The voice that had been calling her drifted off into the distance.

She discovered more paintings on the walls: scenes of bloody rituals. People were tortured, their heads cut off, and their bodies thrown away like garbage. The ruler with an animal mask over his face sat on his throne. The executor, standing beside him, lifted his hand as an order to kill the slaves.

She knew the meanings of some of the symbols. Ankh, the symbol of life, and an eye, which she identified as the sign of the Egyptian god Horus. She clearly

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recognized the pentagram, an ancient symbol which was said to have magical powers. Also the sign of infinity. And a strange one that she could not make out.



Under the paintings something was written in Latin. She moved closer to see. A dark, partly smeared red color was on the wall, posting the message: “Death awaits you.”

Maybe the curse really existed.

As she moved her light near to the letters she realized that it was not paint, but blood. A bloody handprint was right under the message.

Backing off, she felt that she stepped on something solid. She pointed the light to it and saw it was a bone. Before she could think about where that bone came from, she found the former owner – Mr. Skeleton. The jaw was missing from the skull.

Her courage was gone for the moment. Her belly gave strange sounds, and her mouth filled with a sour taste. She started vomiting.

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When she calmed down, she looked at the skeleton again and saw that it wore modern clothes, which meant that archeologists or adventurers were trying to find that library -- obviously without luck.

She decided it would be the best if she searched him.

Nauseating thought.

From the pocket on his west something was peeking out. A passport. She pulled it out carefully and opened the page with the picture. The torn, yellow paper didn't gave any clues about the identity of the corpse.

How long had he been lying there?

After half an hour, all she found was a Swiss knife and a Zippo. Nothing else was useful.

She took a sip of water and wiped the sweat off her forehead. She could use a good shower now. The thought of warm water calmed her, but the next hallway brought her back to reality.

Fighting with cobwebs, she moved forward slowly. The vicinity of the wall gave her the feeling that she could get claustrophobic even if she had never had problems like that. The creepy silence did not mean any good. As she was moving farther, the cobwebs became thicker and thicker. The owners of the web houses – traps, were her only company. She could tell for sure that she did not want to meet any of them in person.

Suddenly she heard a mechanical clicking of an invisible machine. Instinctively jumping back, all she could see was an axe that swung a few inches in front of her.

Drops of sweat again covered her forehead. It was of no use wiping it off. Her pulse was raging. The mixture of adrenaline and fear was shooting through her veins.

Close to her, five axes were swinging from the ceiling, attached on metal holders. Moving fast, she had trouble following with her eyes. Left-right. In a constant rhythm. She felt like she was in a bad horror movie from the eighties or was it Indiana Jones?

There must be a way to get pass this!

She was getting more and more nervous. Her mouth was dry like sand in the Sahara. The air created by the moving of the axes moved her hair from her face. She felt vulnerable. The sound of swinging seemed to be mocking her, as if the axes were saying, “You cannot make it!”

Maybe this time it would be better for her to turn around and go back, if she wanted to stay alive.

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Just one more look and she will go back. But that look was enough for her to change her mind. Looking just at the floor, she noticed gaps under each axe. Deep enough to duck and not be bitten hit. She counted seconds to determine how long it took for the axe to swing from one side to the other.

Yes, it is possible.

She made a conclusion that it was doable. Counted how much time she needed to jump in the gap and duck.

“Now or never,” she decided and jumped. The axe came nearer and swung above her head. She did not notice that she was holding her breath. She even closed her eyes for a moment, but soon she felt pain and opened them.

Beside her there was a cut off, blood-covered arm. She was shocked to see it, but it was not hers. The pain that she felt came from the fact that she moved her arm too quickly.

She waited for the axe to pass again, and came out.

Four more times.

“So close!” he shouted.

*“But you did not think it would be that easy, did you?” He laughed hellishly.
“You are disappointing me... sometimes you are really disappointing me...”*

At the same time, Alex reached the other side.

A door made of massive stone was blocking her way. Of all the breathtaking decorations, the three circles in the middle stood out. They had numbers. Three different sizes sorted from the smallest to the biggest. They reminded her of the locker doors in college. But what now? She realized that she had to move the numbers, but what was the right combination?

The next half an hour she spent in thinking about a logical solution, which at least came fast, but she was leaving it in case she figured out something else.

She had problems to move the first circle. Years had worn out the material. Carefully and with a lot of effort she moved one by one until the combination finally showed up. A line of three sixes.

666, the Antichrist.

The number of the Devil.

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She was not a believer, but interested in numerology and symbols. She knew a few parts of the Bible and was able to combine signs. Also she remembered that the three numbers also meant “Little Nero,” one of the emperors of Rome. She had never imagined that such information could be helpful one day.

She heard a faint “click,” but the door stayed closed. She pushed hard, but it did not move an inch.

“Damn!”

Angry, she started to punch the door, but that only resulted in pain.

She decided to sit down and do what she always did in that kind of situation. Rub her silver medal. The smooth surface calmed her. Her ritual was effective. And after a short time an idea came to her. She had read in the professor’s documents that in the time of Catherine and Maximilian jewelry was often used instead of keys.

Wait a minute! She saw a round gap on the door!

It was a crazy idea, but worth trying.

She remembered her mother’s words: “Nothing in this world happens without a reason!”.

She stood up, took off the locket, and put it in the round opening. Creating a loud sound, the door opened.

“Yes! I made it! I am a genius!”

She entered.

The air was filled with the smell of mold. It seemed like a lot of time passed since someone was here the last time. Even so, the existence of an undefined evil was still present. Nearly palpable.

She lit the torches that were right beside her on the wall. The light fell on the objects. They were not looking dangerous anymore, but that did not make her feel better.

She saw a stone table filled with papers. A usual sight in the offices of administration workers. It seemed that the past had a lot of parallels with the present, only the material of the tables changed. Paperwork still meant work. A lot of work.

The room was round. On the walls there were paintings of explicit torture. The book drawer was left of the table, following the shape of the wall. The skull on the shelf was smiling into the emptiness. According to her instinct, she was at a king’s work room.

She noticed a pentagram on the floor.

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„Seems a lot more than work was going on here. Maybe magic?“, she assumed.

She moved closer to the table and saw a portrait on the wall. Dust covered the whole surface, but it was visible that in the painting there were a girl and a boy. *Who are they? Got to find out.*

There were two torches on the side of the painting. The portrait seemed to possess a magnetic attraction, maybe because the voice she heard seemed to emit from it.

She lit the torches and the light revealed an unexpected sight. The girl and the boy in the painting seemed to be about her age. They also seemed related. Could it be? The van Santoferus twins?! And the answer to the fear nobody talked about. Maximilian’s face – it was deformed. Proteus syndrome. The elephant man. He was suffering from this ferocious, rare disease. Around Catherine’s neck was a necklace with a locket identical to hers.

”Impossible!“

But the portrait was there, an existing proof. Not a dream nor a hallucination. She couldn’t look away. Everything became clearer now. She finally understood the looks of their guide and the other people.

She touched the frame. It was made of gold. The portrait moved and the whole room started to turn. The wall that was behind her, was now in front of her. She saw that there was an entrance to another, smaller room with wall-to-wall book shelves. The collection could take away every collector’s breath. They were sorted by titles. She opened one by one until she got to a heavy one. It was different from the others. A leather binding, dark and overused. Symbols that she has never seen. She took it and opened it in the middle. But it was not a book but a box, it was a box that resembled a book. Inside was a notebook with a seal on it. With dates on the pages, plans, and even schemes of constructions. Maximilian’s diary! It was the book from her dream.

The expedition had paid off; she had found the library, and this diary that was probably worth more than all these books together. That was enough. She succeeded, proved to herself that she could do it. That was all she needed. She would give all the money to Tom’s family.

She packed as many books as she could in her backpack.

Now to get back to the entrance.

Then. A quiet noise.

The moment she turned around, everything became black. The room was filled with uninvited guests, flying around her, attacking her and thrusting their

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teeth into her. She felt them everywhere on her clothes, moving and fighting. She lifted the notebook in front of her face, trying to protect herself. The bloodthirsty monsters with wings were tearing the pages of the diary, so she was soon without any protection. She was waving her hands to chase them away, but it only made them angrier. Raging with anger, they clearly wanted to hurt her.

Scratches on her face.

Blood flowed down her cheeks mixing with tears. Down her neck, following the curves of her breasts, soaking her clothes, painting her red.

Her legs grew weaker, and she felt that she could no longer resist the fall.

Then the biggest one came from the background and pierced her neck deeply with his teeth.



Her heartbeat was slower and slower. Like a clock someone forgot to wind up. Her muscles were abandoning their function. She became dizzy and fell on the ground.

“Fantastic! Extraordinary! The first attack on the Queen. You overdid yourself this time!” he said to the emptiness.

On the chess table one figurine was missing. A Pawn. A white Pawn. The Queen just got “check.” The game was still unforeseeable.

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“What is your name?” the kid asked.
“Why do you care?!” the boy answered.
- Do you want to play with me?
- No! Get away from me!
He left her crying.

“Mummy. Look what I found!” The girl ran towards her mother. a silver locket shining in her hand. She had found it in the sand, an interesting symbol on it.

“It’s beautiful.” She was used to her daughters findings.

“Can I keep it? Pleeeeeease!”

Her mother embraced her:

“You are my little archeologist!”

She cleaned the piece of jewelry with her skirt, and put it on her daughter’s neck.

“Weirdo! Weirdo!” The kids were singing as one, while she swallowed her tears. She didn’t know why she was so different. All she wanted was a friend. She hid in the corner. Moving her thumb over her lucky charm, daydreaming, locking herself in her own little world.

“I love you, Alex.” Erik whispered to her, gently touching her hair.

He was happy.

Then she thought he would remain the only one, not just the first...

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The phone rang.

“Yes?”

On the other side of the line, an unknown male voice asked: “Ms. Morison?”

“Yes. Speaking.”

“My name is Sergeant Jack Peterson, I am calling from the police station in San Diego, California. I am sorry to inform you that your parents passed away in an accident.’

“What?”

“I am sorry, but your parents died.” he repeated.

“No! That cannot be true.”

Two corpses on the tables. Cold, motionless. She wanted to hug them. She didn’t want to leave them there, amongst strangers. Because they would come back, they were not allowed to be dead. Not now, not when she needed them so much!

It was so warm. She heard her mother’s voice.

“Alexandra, my dear darling, come to me.”

The voice came from the light in front of her. She stretched her hands as far as she could. She breathed in and breathed out for the last time. She felt her soul leaving -- floating a few yards above the ground, looking at her motionless body, a body covered in blood. She was dead.

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III

The smell of fresh blood was spreading under the ground, as if a robbery with an unexpected ending happened there. Shelves thrown over, books all around on the floor, the table turned to the side. A girl was lying on the cold, solid ground. The torches were lighting the place.

She moved. At first just a tiny move, barely noticeable. Clutching her hand in a fist. The body started to shake intensely, as if she was having an epileptic seizure.

When she woke up she was feeling weak, but she didn’t want to stay in this place. Creepy silence filled the room.

She opened her eyes. Turned on the side, then on her stomach. Her muscles were vibrating. She stood up and held onto the table until her strength came back.

She didn’t remember what happened, but the chaos around her brought back some memories. There was still no explanation why the bats came. She hadn’t made any loud noise.

She was thirsty. A bottle of water remained in her bag; she pulled it out and took four big gulps. A metallic taste was in her mouth. Her gums hurt. The wound on her neck burned.

She frowned at what she saw – what her sight revealed. Things around her had a fluorescent glow. It was as if drugs were changing her perceptive skills. She touched her face. It reminded her of wax. So smooth, without scars.

Her attackers had disappeared but not without trace. The mess they had left was proof enough it really happened. She couldn’t even think that it might have been a nightmare. That the whole day could have been just a bad dream. That would have been perfect.

Cold was getting to her bones. She shivered. The fire will warm her a little. She looked at her clothes soaked with blood. She had to leave that place.

She reached the entrance following the traces that she left before, so that she doesn’t activate another trap. She knew how to overcome the others, so she soon was at the spot where everything started, where Tom had died. She hated the fact that she had to go past him again. Someone would bury him, she hoped. She couldn’t – not in her current state – bury a human?

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Finally. She propelled herself into the dark. It could not have been as long as she had thought for it was pitch black outside. She had to find the river but didn't want to go back through the woods. As she was moving towards the town her bloody face was lit by the magical silvery moonlight. The efforts to remember how to reach the hotel were in vain as if, down in the catacombs, she had lost all sense of orientation; As if everything that had happened before her going underground was erased. Her sight changed. The objects around her were having a mysterious glow around them.

As if she could see their *chi*.

After an hour, she got to a wooden sign that said SOLTON and a bridge leading to the town. The air was pleasant. It was cold, but people still wondered around.

Curious and frightened eyes followed her as she was glided along the streets, but no one dared ask what had happened or if she maybe needed assistance.

Then, a young man approached her and politely asked: "Excuse me miss, you look like you are in need of help."

He was attractive and in his eyes she could recognize a genuine intent on being helpful. A good-looking man with great manners – what a combination.

She looked at him for some time before answering. "Thanks for the offer. I will gladly accept it. I think I am lost. Could you possibly walk me to a hotel?"

"Of course miss. Just tell me what kind of hotel."

"The best in this city."

"Fantastic, a young lady who knows what she wants."

Right you are!

The way to the hotel led through a beautiful park. As they were passing through it, Alexandra felt an unbelievable thirst.

However, that was not a common thirst. She gazed upon the young man's neck and saw the irresistible rising and lowering of the carotid artery in a rhythmic throbbing. She could almost hear that warm, ruby-red blood as it flowed through his veins.

Surprised when she caressed his cheek, he halted. He turned to face her as her hands came upon his neck, fast as lightning. She embraced him. Had she wanted to, she could have crushed every single bone in his body. With her tongue she caressed his neck and in the end lustily sank her sharp teeth into him. In vain he tried to fend her off as she gluttonously sucked the life essence from his strong

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body, which with every passing moment became more and more like a plain doll made of straw.

The park was empty so the upcoming fight for life against the fight for surviving had no witnesses.

Everything was happening as if she had done this many times. Before the young man's heart stopped beating, she felt her strength growing. All her senses were being sharpened.

She could see the black raven on the very top of the tree.

She became aware of the mixed scents of the perfumes that the girls, who were at least quarter of a mile away from the park, wore as they walked through the town.

She could hear the flapping of the wings of an owl which flew over the other side of town.

She could feel the texture and every scar on his skin.

This new knowledge shocked her but the thirst had not yet been quenched.

The young man was dying in her arms but at this point she could not stop, she was so hungry. The heartbeat was becoming weaker and weaker. Throb... throb... throb... and then silence. But, she did not hear that silence; she felt it.

Every atom of her body stopped moving.

The recent influx of strength had evaporated and was replaced by a kind of weakness, dizziness, and a buzzing in the ears. Suddenly she started vomiting blood. Maybe she drank too fast. She wiped her mouth with her sleeve.

Wanting to clean her face and clear her thoughts, she stumbled to a brook which was flowing through the park. She washed her face and then gazed into the water in which a silvery moon was casting its reflection. Something was missing. Her own reflection. But how? The place where her image should have been was empty and dark. Shock. Fear. Anger. An overflow of emotions. But she had to calm herself. She had to come to grips with the situation. The stories of monstrous creatures which she listened to when she was a child were true. They not only existed but had her as one of their own... as a child of the night, an angel of hell, nor living nor dead, a monster, condemned to live her life as a parasite.

A vampire.

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The Queen ate her first Pawn. Risky, but very interesting. Will we let her take over control? Let her think she is the ruler of her destiny?

She had to give up her whole life.

Her friends.

Her job.

Her identity.

She could never again witness a single sunrise, which she has been so fond of. Never again will she be able to lie in the sun and enjoy its warm caress. Never again...

She had to get rid of the body. She cleaned traces of blood as well as she could, put on his jacket which was still clean, and pulled him to the bridge.

With one hand around her neck, the young man looked as if he were drunk. Nobody saw them passing by and the water did its job professionally as always. His body disappeared as if it never existed.

She did not even know his name.

When she entered the hotel, she rushed into to the bathroom with an unbelievable yearning for a shower so she could remove every single piece of that disgusting filth from herself -- the knowledge of having killed someone. The scent of blood was all over her. She undressed. The pale shine of the moonlight gave her an appearance of an angel. Perfect bodylines for which she had strived with an inhuman effort all her life now seemed foreign to her. Imprisoned she was in her own body, a prisoner to the force that controlled her flesh and blood. Something dark had gotten under her skin -- something ancient.

She turned on the water. It was cold. She knew it would calm her down. Breath in – breath out. Deep breaths.

The knowledge of killing a man was ever more painful and clear now. As the cold water turned into hot, her skin was burning. Turning red... taking on the

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color of a lobster... but she did not move out. There was a need for punishment. She would pay for taking the soul of an innocent.

When the limits of her endurance were finally reached she collapsed. Water still flowed onto her, leaving clear marks of its devastating heat which in a very short moment disappeared again...

But she could not see that... She did not feel her skin regenerating itself and therefore not allowing the water to hurt her. She felt pain because she wanted to...

The mirror was just a wide circle of fog when she opened her eyes... like a portal into another dimension...

She looked in it, hoping to see that skin that felt like wax. But there was no reflection. How could she look in other people’s eyes if she could not even look in her own?

She looked down at her hands.

Those hands became the hands of a murderess.

The white color of the bathroom was burning her eyes. The sound of water dripping. The smell of the towels. Everything was grasping her attention.

She looked behind her shoulder a few times, fearing that somebody would show up at the door. She looked at her hands again; the veins were a clearly visible blue, reminding her of rivers on a map. Her skin seemed like parchment paper. So delicate and fragile, you could nearly see through it. She had the feeling that cracks would show up if she clenched a fist. She carefully tried it, following each of her movements like a newborn baby. How long would it take to get used to the fact that it was her new weapon? With this weapon she just committed her first murder.

Did vampires look on that as something very usual? Like washing teeth in the morning and evening? Did they actually possess emotions?

She had to know. She had to write it down so that others would know.

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IV

She wrote into the diary until dawn, closed the curtains, and went to bed.

A piercing pain on the left side interrupted her dream. The shadows were a sign that it was daytime. She turned her head and saw something she wasn't expecting. A bloody stump. She took a deep breath and it moved up and down instead of the arm that should have been there. She was lying beside red locker doors that were open. Empty.

She wanted to stand up, but she likewise had no legs . Only her head and her torso remained. The blood she was lying in was turning to a river and threatening to drown her. It got higher and higher and all she felt at that moment was thirst. Everything became red. She swallowed the blood just to spit it out in the next moment. If evil had a taste, it was that taste. The Darkness wanted her body – her soul. She closed her eyes.



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The smell of ashes brought her to the state of consciousness. All limbs were in their places, but the feeling that her body did not belong to her anymore didn't leave her.

She returned to the hotel where she stayed with her team, told the receptionist that she would go back to the catacombs. Then she called a colleague and told him she needed more time, because she had not found anything yesterday. Her disappearance should have a logical reason. Because that was what she was planning to do – to disappear.

To get false documents was not a big challenge. With contacts all around the world, she just had to call the right one.

Soon she had a new identity. Alexandra became Lex.

She called a cab.

Flights to New York were frequent. Lex purchased a ticket and waited in the terminal. A monotonous voice announced the destination, time of departure, and the number of the gate.

Once seated in the plane, her thirst began to grow again. She clearly heard the heartbeats of all travelers, the blood flowing through their veins that kept them alive.

The airliner lifted off from the runway and began its climb. The sign to fasten the seat belts was still on. She had to do something. She felt like a junkie without drugs. Her hands were shaking, her mouth was dry.

The passengers were asleep. That was perfect for her. She went to the toilet and noticed that there was a room with animals that were in cages.

She slipped in.

The lattice works were not a barrier for her.

She went to a cage and grabbed the Chihuahua that was inside. Squeezing its snout so it could not bark. The animal was helpless, tried to bite her, but could not escape.

While she was feeding on it, her grip became harder. She heard the cracking of bones. The spine. The lifeless body of the dog was swinging in her hand. She put it back in the cage.

As the airliner landed, she saw the dawn from far. The airport was a few minutes away from her flat. She ran.

The first rays of sun appeared. The black horizon turned into a blue endlessness. The traffic was low. It was too early for the common traffic jam.

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One step away from the entrance a ray touched her hand. Instead of feeling the warmth, she felt pain. A scar was forming on her skin. Just a little more and she would be safe.

She decided to take the stairs and was jumping over two at once. Fifth floor, flat number five. Finally. The smell of dust. Silence. She went to the bathroom to get the first aid kit. But when she opened it and wanted to put a band aid on her hand, she saw that there was nothing. It had healed.

She remembered what happened in the hotel, and it came to her that she was no longer vulnerable. As long as she was no longer in the sun, nothing could hurt her. She needed time to get used to her regenerative powers.

The curtains were closed. What she needed was music. She turned on a CD.

Tori Amos – Silent All These Years. Perfect, she thought, while a smile spread on her lips.

The shelves were full -- a collection that she created through years, souvenirs from expeditions. She looked for all the books about vampires that she could find, hungry for information about herself and where she should live. What were her choices? What would she have to pay attention to? Which things did she need to take out of her flat?

Too many questions without answers.

All she wanted was to close her eyes and sleep for days.

The following three days she didn't leave her flat. She lay on her bed and watched the shadows playing on the ceiling. She was learning about her new existence and made some important decisions. Things she left in London -- it would be best to leave them there. She decided to call the press and inform them about her own disappearance. She would call from a phone booth. No traces. Alexandra Morison had to be officially dead.

She did not exist anymore.

She was alone.

Without anyone.

Without an identity.

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V

Nobody could imagine that the girl who showed up on the streets that night -- in leather pants, a black shirt, and a long leather jacket -- was not a human being. White face, red lips, and a color of eyes that could not be identified. On the first look they seemed purple, sometimes blue, yellow when she was angry.

She spent months in searching, writing everything down in her diary.

Getting used to the night was easier than getting used to the loneliness. Thoughts came to her that she could have been the only one. The last.

Seasons lost their meaning. The darkness was always the same, but she did not feel the changes in weather. She was neither cold nor warm. Her existence became one of constant learning. Melancholy ruled her soul. Sometimes, the only thing that could make her happy was snow.

A calendar was on the wall. In the beginning she was scribbling little X-s over the date, but not anymore.

When she wanted to buy something, she stole money strictly from criminals, and the city was full of them. She killed silently, cutting off her victim's heads and throwing them into the river. She had outbursts of uncontrolled rage and in those moments she would become a mindless animal. That scared her. Losing control was a thing she could not explain. What the hell was happening to her?

Many times she played with her immortality.

She threw herself in front of bullets -- jumped on knives -- the first few times with fear, later with crazy laughter.

When that was not enough, she started to play games more dangerous.

Fifteenth floor. The red light lit up the number. The elevator door opened. She took the stairs to the roof. Steps were echoing. Heavy boots were reaching it's destination. She looked down to the street. It looked so surreal. Trashcans and straying dogs. Every night the same scene.

She was standing at the edge.

Should she close her eyes?

She stepped into the emptiness.

She felt the air, but not if it was warm or cold. The temperature was not playing a role for her anymore. She could feel for a few seconds, only long enough to determine how it was. Same as the pain.

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She hit the pavement. Her teeth grinded. Her nose was pushed into her face. The jaw broke. The skull shattered. Her legs were forming an unnatural angle, a bone was peeking out from her arm. Blood was all around her.

And then the well-known process. Her body shivered and everything went back to it's place. She moved her fingers, rolled her eyes, and went into the night.



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Experiments with midnight trains, bridges, even hanging herself followed. But nothing.

She was always writing everything down in her diary.

After six months, she begun to search again.

The problem was that she did not know where to look. For weeks she was straying in the streets like a cat, without results. And then one evening everything changed...

She decided not to walk. She took a seat in the metro, in the farthest corner. The stations were passing by. Her thoughts were absent, but she noticed the piercing eyes of a child that was staring at her.

“Why is she looking at me like that?”

The little girl pulled her mother’s sleeve pointing at her with her index finger. The metro stopped. As the masses of people passed her by, she felt just one look. The mother. She held her daughter in her arms and screamed.

At that moment she realized -- the reflection in the window. There was none.

The door closed. She could not leave. She pulled her hood over her head as fast as she could. At the next station, she left the metro.

She would walk. It was late. The city was full of life. Night-life. The music changed on every few step. Whores tried to seduce boys and older man to be their company for the night. Not for free of course. Nothing in this world is for free.

She turned the corner. She had to be as far away as possible from everything. The noise. The smell. The people on the streets were a waiting buffet.

After a long walk without a destination, she felt that someone was following her. The tingling in the area of her temple was new for her. When she turned around she didn’t see anyone, but she could clearly feel a presence. The looks were touching her body. She was sure the person was walking behind her. The sky turned dark. From the clouds rain fell down. She hid in a shadow and waited...

The raindrops composed a metallic symphony by hitting the trashcans. The cats did not like it, so they found refuge under some boxes.

She saw every detail.

After a while a young man appeared. Tall, athletic. The dark blue eyes were shining in the darkness. Despite the clothes he had on, he seemed rather aristocratic.

“Why are you following me?” She grabbed his hand.

“Because we are the same,” he said in a calm voice and skillfully freed his hand from her grip.

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She backed off, with wide eyes, not able to speak. His look made her even more confused.

The young man ended the short, unpleasant silence. “I am Nicholas.”

“L... Lex,” she mumbled. “But how did you find me?”

“Your reputation was faster than you,” he winked. After a short pause, he added: “They were talking about you a lot, so I wanted to see you with my own eyes.”

“Who?”

“Other vampires. They reported you as suicidal; they saw what you were doing.”

“I wanted to know if there are limits.”

“Are you satisfied with what you have found out?”

“No.”

His expression turned soft, as if they had known each other for years. “Come with me.”

“No! Why would I?”

“Because I have the answers to your questions.”

“How can you be so sure of that?”

“Trust me, I know.”

She liked the way he flirted with her. “Alright. Where are we going?”

“Underground.”

Passing the ruins of a former metro station, they entered an unknown, subterranean city. They were alone.

Lex could not take her eyes of him.

He had a perfect face, she decided. Dead but still full of life. Did her face look like that too?

A thousand questions were on her mind, but she dared not ask him. Both were silent.

After half an hour of walking, they entered what had been a waiting room before the station was closed. What had been a ticket office before was a mini-bar. Instead of twenty chairs, there was a black, leather couch in front of it a white marble table. One thing was sure -- this gentleman had taste.

“There we are. Make yourself at home.” Nicholas showed her to take a seat with a move of his hand.

“Thank you.”

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He stepped behind the mini-bar, opened the fridge, and took out a dark bottle. He poured the red liquid in two silver cups. He put one on the table, and handed her the other. “Ask. I see the questions burning in your eyes.”

She nodded her thanks. “Who made us? Why do we exist? How many of us are there? Do you know a lot of vampires?”

“Slowly. One by one. Your curiosity amazes me.”

“Okay then. Tell me why do we exist?”

“I think some of the humans asking that themselves every day too. I will tell you what I know about the creation of vampires. The name of my dark father, the vampire who made me, was Razzien. When I met him, he was older than a century. The circumstances were tragic. While I was at work, robbers came to my house, stole my money and the technical equipment, and shot at everything that moved. They killed my whole family and left me with a bullet in my knee. While I was helplessly lying on the stairs a man in black came by. ‘Do you want revenge?’ he asked me in a calm voice. He kneeled down. I turned my head to see him. I was dizzy as if I had had three beers. I had the feeling he was seeing through my pupils and my eyeballs right into my mind, reading the electric impulses that the gray soft mass was sending.”

“What?”

“I know what happened. I want to help you. You have two choices: I call the ambulance and when you get better, you will maybe find those who did this to you, and have your revenge. Or... guaranteed revenge?”

“‘Guaranteed revenge,’ I said that without thinking. What was I getting into?”

“He turned me into a vampire.

“In the beginning I was afraid, the process of dying was painful and uncomfortable. He pulled me to a side street and covered me with his jacket. I screamed and threw myself around while he was watching without changing his expression. I started to doubt my decision. When everything was over I asked him: ‘What do you want in return?’ I realized that there had to be a trick.

“‘You will be my companion.’

“‘Just that?’ I asked him.

“‘Yes, JUST that.’ He smiled with only half of his mouth.

“I didn’t know what that smile meant and how much relinquishment it would bring. Razzien was patient. He taught me how to use my new powers, who I should stay away from and how to protect myself using weapons and martial arts. He became my friend. Despite the fact that he was silent and didn’t talk much about himself, he always listened. There were times when I missed my mortal life.

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Sometimes I dreamt that I was human again. It was hard to accept that I made a step with no chances to return. Two years after learning the basics I was ready to go with him, traveling around the world. But we never left this town. His look became melancholic, but he continued to talk.

“One night, while we were hunting stray dogs, Jason, the vampire hunter, showed up. That was the end of Razzien.”

“I am sorry,” Lex said.

“Do not be. He will always stay in my memory. I loved him like a father. I accepted that he is no longer here.”

The flickering light of the oil lamp shone dimmer. The clock on the church hit twelve.

Nicholas was thoughtful. He was searching for the right words to answer her second question. “Nobody knows why we exist, except maybe Maximilian.”

“Maximilian?” she echoed.

“I suppose you’ve heard about him; he is very famous. He ruled for a long time on the territory now known as London. He killed many people in most gruesome ways, so the people hated and feared him. He got sick when he was forty years old and his sister Catherine, when she saw no doctor can help him, called an alchemist which revived him after his death and made him an undead -- a vampire. Then Maximilian turned his sister against her will.”

“Yes, I heard about him, but I didn’t know that he was a vampire.”

“Yes. One more thing that people don’t know, but it is told amongst vampires is that he is obsessed with the wish to rule the world, even if he has to destroy the whole humanity to fulfill that. He doesn’t know fear, and doesn’t accept defeat. He created a lot of vampires: *The Army of Infinite Darkness* he calls us. He is the most powerful of all. Razzien told me a lot about him, because he was his first son and pupil, but also his biggest enemy. He split us, joining Catherine.”

“Razzien is his son? How do you mean split?”

“Yes, the oldest as I said. As for the split - there are good and evil vampires, and it is left to you to decide which ones you want to join. Also there are the *Chosen Ones*, but I never met one.”

“What is the difference?”

“Evil vampires don’t try fighting the Darkness. They let it control them, hoping they will become more powerful that way.”

“But, I am not evil, I don’t think.”

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“No, you are not if you have not passed the limit in the first week after you have been turned. The first seven days it is hard not to kill less than ten innocent people. In that period it is decided if you will be good or evil. Because if you don’t resist the thirst, it will become ten times more intense. You will become a merciless killer.”

One, two, three, four... five... the numbers were coming to her mind, and she tried to remember all of them.

“It sounds so easy when you say it -- to resist. How? I am always thirsty,” she muttered. “And how do I know that someone is innocent? Is it possible to live without killing people?”

“It is. Don’t you see me?”

“How do you survive then?”

“In the hospital I steal the blood meant for transfusion, and, in the worst case, rats and stray dogs have to say farewell to their life.”

“Eat . . . rats? No. Anyway, I have to be alone.”

“What?”

“I am used to it. I am better on my own. I don’t trust anyone fully; neither do I want to be someone’s burden.”

“What are you talking about? What kind of burden?”

“Nice of you that you told me everything and brought me here, but I don’t want to stay.”

“I understand, but let us make a deal.”

“About what?”

“Let me teach you martial arts before I let you back to the streets alone. I want you to have a chance to defend yourself if something stronger than a human attacks you.” His look became soft again. He liked that she was so stubborn and fierce.

“Alright. Teach me.”

“We will start tomorrow. I am too tired now, and you probably are too. It is not easy to handle so much new information at once.”

“You are right. I really feel weak.”

“I have some clean clothes for you. Change and you will feel better. You will sleep there.” He pointed with his index finger in the direction of a blue-silk covered bed.

“And where will you sleep?”

“Oh, do not worry about me. I will sleep on the sofa.”

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They fell asleep, while outside, over their heads, a new day was born.

The city came to life with its citizens rushing to undetermined destinations. Tempo and dynamics became the rulers of the stone giants from whose mouths humans emerged like worms.

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VI

The night held the town in its strong embrace. The life on the surface was quieting, and in the underground the death awoke from its dream. Two dark silhouettes were skillfully fighting, interrupting silence with their heavy breathing.

Lex was a good and ambitious student. Perfection was still one of her main character lines. In the time of four months, she learned Taekwondo.

Beside Nicholas as a trainer, it was not hard for her. She was following his instructions, listening to his critics and suggestions. She knew that the inevitable moment would come when the student became better than the teacher.

But he was no longer only her teacher; he was her friend. Yearning for more knowledge and his closeness she told him that she would like him to teach her something more. So they switched to a much more dangerous fighting style -- ninjitsu.

He taught her how to handle the short knife. Cutting her accidentally, his lips automatically found the cut.

“Who was your maker?” he finally asked, seemingly both confused and yet confident.

“It was not a vampire,” she answered.

“How do you mean that?”

“A bat created me.”

“Oh my God, you are... a Chosen One!” He appeared frozen for a moment. “Now I understand! Your locket! I was ignoring the fact that it might be one of those lockets, but now it all makes sense.”

“What does?”

“From your birth on you were predestined to become a vampire, the mightiest of all -- The Queen of Darkness.”

“Queen of Darkness?”

“One of the rare ones who can control the Darkness and the army of vampires that carry the Darkness.”

“Darkness? Army of vampires?”

“Didn’t you ever notice that you are different from other people?”

“Of course I did, but what does that have to do with this?”

“Your destiny is to take your place beside Maximilian, so you can rule together over all vampires. He will search for you if he doesn’t already. Every year he gives the order to produce about thousands of lockets like yours, hoping to find

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someone who will be his ideal bride. You are on the best way to become a queen. I don’t know how much time you have left before your mind goes awry. Bats carry the Darkness, which attacks the strongest vampires. It is nearly impossible to fight it and remain sane.”

“How does the Darkness manifest?”

“In the beginning you can notice it just for moments, but if you don’t learn to control it, it will become more aggressive. In the end you will not choose victims; you will kill everything you see.”

“Is that not the same as being an evil vampire?”

“No, the Darkness is a much worse option. When you are just . . . *evil* . . . , you are choosing your victims. Even evil vampires do not kill other vampires, only in self defense. But if you let the Darkness control you, there is no choosing.”

She shook her head. “No – oooo.” She didn’t want to become an even worse monster. She decided to fight her destiny.

After a short pause, she was pleading to Nicholas. “Would you join me in the fight against Maximilian?”

“What did you eat last? An insane cow?”

“I am serious. If the only chance to change my destiny is to destroy him, I will do that.”

“You are out of your mind or suicidal. You will not hear any word from me to help you kill yourself. You cannot imagine how powerful Maximilian is. If he wants, he can crush you with one touch of his finger!”

“Why would he want that? I am the Queen of Darkness? His Queen! Anyway, I need you to teach me everything you know about Maximilian.”

Information about their existence and the reasons why the paths of the Santoferus twins parted helped Lex to form a clear picture about her purpose.

Razzien was often talking about Maximilian. Even though he was his dark father and their relationship was different, Razzien was taking care of Maximilian, was calming him down when he had his outbursts of anger and was watching him so he doesn’t reveal their existence to humanity. He hid traces of massacres Maximilian would leave, begging Catherine to forgive him, but she could not forgive herself for making him a monster, and all she wanted was to cure him. Reading for years, spending every free minute in their library, she found out about the existence of vampires and people who had power to find them or even give their abilities to someone.

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He touched Lex gently while spoke, whenever he noticed that she was confused. So much information could be useful for her, but he didn’t know how to present her a few thousand years in short time. They were often taking long walks through the city. Winters were usually peaceful.

Lex looked at things differently, from another angle. The angle of darkness. All nuances that once were part of her life were now a gloomy grayness. Nothing had a positive glow to it.

But he was beside her.

A protector.

A friend.

A brother.

Maybe even some kind of light.

She became so close to him that she could see in his eyes that he wanted to be more than a friend. To save her from death. Help her to win against the Darkness. All that he could do was teach her about the vampire powers, even the aspects he personally hated.

– Oh, look at that. How romantic! The Knight in the shining armor will fall in love. Wait; don’t be fooled; that is just a horse!

“Tonight you will learn how to make a vampire.”

“Why?”

“You never know when you will want to have a new companion. Our ‘life’ carries loneliness... you know...”

“Alright.”

They stepped out into the night.

The streets were empty, but since it was weekend, the clubs were filled with humans.

“You have to choose carefully.”

“How should I decide?”

“Follow your instincts.”

A girl emerged from a disco, alone and standing under the neon lights crying.

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“This time you will just watch,” he said.

Then he stepped out of the shadow. “Are you okay?” His voice was gentle as he concentrated on her eyes.

“Not really,” the girl sobbed. She looked at him, wide-eyed in a bluish-red glow.

“Why? Don’t worry. I’m not a mugger.”

“My fiancé left me.”

“I am sorry. Do you want to forget?”

“How?”

“I will show you...” He gestured toward a dark space next to the building. She hesitated.

He pulled on her arm. He bowed his head and took just a few sips of blood as she was, it appeared, growing weak and maybe starting to faint.

“Now the most important part.” He said to Lex. On his index finger he made a hole with his fang; then he placed a few drops into her mouth. “1... 2... 3... 4... 5,” he counted loudly.

Still half conscious, the girl swallowed the blood.

“No less, no more.” He carefully set her in a seating position.

She started to cramp and sprawl, and suddenly became calm. She was dead.

“Why?” Lex asked.

“In case it is less, your vampire will become a zombie, completely mindless. If something like that happens, it is better you kill it instantly. On the other hand, if it is more, you will experience that your ‘child’ will have a too strong will. It will be an egomaniac with too much self confidence.”

The girl slowly regained consciousness. “Where am I? Who are you?”

“I am Nicholas, and this is Lex. Do not worry; we will explain everything to you, but you have to come with us. “

She followed them and asked no further questions.

“What is your name?” he asked her.

“Mandy.”

“Listen to me carefully now, Mandy. I’ll leave you at a place where you will be safe. When you feel like finding me, you will find me. I will look for you whenever I can, but that may not be often.”

“But I... what happened to me?”

“You are now one of us: my ‘daughter’ by darkness. A vampire.

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Her eyes widened in wondering as she swept her long dark hair away from her face. “So you really exist? I just read about them in books. Cool! Where will you leave me?”

“There is a sort of safe haven, a home for a group of vampires who teach newbies about the dark existence. It is the perfect alternative to the usual wondering life of vampires. The main idea is to keep you away from going through big trouble. Trouble that ‘children’ went through because they had no one to teach them.”

“Great idea,” Lex nodded.

“Sounds good.” Mandy seemed happy.

“Sorry,” he said quietly.

“Why do you excuse yourself?”

“Maybe it was going too fast.”

“No, it is better like this.” She smiled broadly.

Nicholas smiled back as if he felt relieved.

“You gave me a new chance.”

Lex followed them, listening to their conversation and smiling. She felt like Nicholas was a father talking to his teenage daughter.

They arrived at an empty building. The door was barricaded.

“The entrance is on the other side,” said Nicholas. He knocked, producing some kind of melody. From the darkness, a silhouette appeared. When it saw who they were, it opened the door.

“Hello to everyone!” said the figure. He had long blonde hair and a gentle face.

“Hi Lucas.” Nicholas saluted him. “I have a new friend for you. Let me introduce you: this is Mandy, and this, this is my ‘dark son’ Lucas.”

As they paused in the half-darkness of a hallway, Mandy analyzed him. “That means he is my brother. He looks like he might be a sweet brother.”

Lucas looked as though he wanted to blush, but he just glanced down. He waited.

“Son, I have to go, but I will come see how Mandy is doing. I trust you to show her everything.”

“Count on it,” he nodded.

“Keep safe.” Nicholas said and headed to the exit.

When they were on the street again, Lex stared at him. “So, you have more children?”

“Yes, five.”

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“And where are the others? Do you see them sometimes?”

“I prefer not discussing them. Sorry.”

“No, sorry that I am so curious...”

They strolled in silence.

She had the impression that he didn’t like to create new vampires. Maybe he had been forced to do it all five times.

Lex could smell rain. A storm was coming.

Nicholas walked slightly in front of her. It seemed that he was rushing somewhere, as if he didn’t want her near him.

“I understand if you want to be alone,” she said finally. “I am able to get home on my own. Just tell me and I will disappear.”

“What?” He seemed surprised. She apparently had shaken him from some deep thoughts.

“You are walking as if you want to leave me far away behind you.”

“Oh, no. Excuse me. I was just distracted. Maybe it is the best to meet him tonight.

“Who?”

“My oldest son.”

They reached what appeared to be a closed-in junkyard for cars. They opened and passed through a doorway in a wall of tin. The cemetery of discarded metal and tires glowed faintly in the dark. The constant noise of the creatures existing at that place suggested that they wouldn’t allow them to pass calmly and peacefully through it. The fear that something could topple down and crush anyone standing there could not be ignored.

Nicholas was searching for something.

“Ah, there it is!” He indicated a tin shed and cheerfully took Lex by the hand.

He pulled her to the locked metallic door. With his feet, he knocked four times.

They heard something clicking.

He managed to pull open the door, unrevealing a staircase under him. They descended slowly.

“John...”

“I am here, Father,” a pleasant voice answered.

“I want to introduce you to someone.”

“As long as I don’t have to call her ‘mommy.’ He chuckled quietly.

Nicholas laughed in return. “You will always remain a child.”

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“Maybe yes,” John said. “Maybe no.”

The light was dimmed, but Lex recognized that they were in some kind of an underground chamber. She supposed that it was used for hiding in time of disasters or, even worse, wars.

The young man sitting in front of the working table resembled Nicholas: the color of the eyes, the contours of the face. As if they were brothers.

“Lex, this is John,” said Nicholas. “John ... Lex.”

“Nice to meet you.” Lex tried to smile.

“Nice to meet you too.”

They shook hands.

Even their smile was similar.

“I will leave you so you can get to know each other better. I have some more work to do, but I’ll be back soon.”

“But...”

“Don’t worry, I will be back fast. John can teach you things that I never succeeded in. “

“If you say so.”

“As I said, it will not be long. You know me well enough; I wouldn’t leave you with someone who couldn’t protect you. “

“I’ll assume not.”

“I don’t bite. At least not at this time of the night.”

The atmosphere became more relaxed. Nicholas hugged her, petted her back and said: “You’ll succeed, and it’ll be useful for you.”

“Even if I do not know what it is about, I promise I will give it my best.” When she hugged him, she rested her head on his chest for a brief moment.

“Alright. Goodbye. John, you know what you have to do.”

“Of course, Father. You know she’s not the first.”

He nodded gracefully. “Right. See you later.” He spun on his heel.

“So,” said John. “You are father’s famous pupil?”

“He teaches me. Famous? I don’t think so.”

“What he taught you is the easier part. What you will now try is not that simple.

“Hmmm... What is it about?”

“If you want to be strong enough for the quest you are planning, you have to get rid of your greatest burden.”

“And that is?”

“Pity. Compassion. All that is human in you.”

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“How?”

“You will have to destroy it. There is a way to do that, but your success depends on you.”

“I will try.”

Pictures, neglectfully taped to the wall, testified that he hadn’t achieved what he mentioned that she should. He was obviously emotionally attached to them; he would have removed them if it would be different.

“Is that you?” She pointed at a picture of a child with a cast on its arm.

“Yes, that is me. “

“What happened?”

He laughed “I fell off the swing.”

“Where were your parents?”

“I have only my father, Nicholas.”

“He is your real father?”

“Yes.”

For a moment, she remained speechless. That, however, explained the similarities.

“I can’t blame him for what he did to me. He couldn’t lose me.”

“But he said that his family ...”

“Yes. Everyone except me. That happened when I was a baby. My sister hid me in a closet to scare my mom. It was all a game. A game that saved my life. I was sleeping. I didn’t notice that there was an accident. Daddy came back for some items after Razzien turned him into a vampire. He found me because I was crying. He was carrying me around with him -- always. He protected me the best he could. After Razzien’s death, it was just me and him. He played the role of a mother, father, brother, teacher, friend, everything I ever needed. Approximately twenty years after that, he has turned me into a vampire. At first I was very angry. I left him, traveled the world. Finally, I came back. I could understand it. Although it was extremely egotistical of him, I know it was all done out of love.

“I think I can understand it too. Thank you for telling me. “

“He would probably never tell you our story. Let’s get back on task. I believe you know what Absinthe is.”

Lex nodded.

“Do you also know that it causes hallucinations? Have you ever tried it?”

“No, not yet.”

“Uhhh ... fine. I’ll show you what to do. But everything you do is at your own risk. I don’t have any influence over what you will see; you have to focus on

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yourself and imagine that you are a child again. You should have a clear picture in your head.”

“I’ll try.”

“The hardest part is that you have to kill that child.”

“What?”

“To destroy all the humanity left in you, you have to kill that part of you, the most vulnerable.”

She kept quiet. She did not know whether she could do it.

“Ready?”

“I guess.”

“Good enough for me. You know, Oscar Wilde once said: ‘After the first glass of Absinthe, you see things as you wish they were. After the second you see them as they are not. Finally you see things as they really are, and that is the most horrible thing in the world...’”

From the drawer he took out a bottle of bright green liquid. He pulled the table closer and produced a glass and an unusual spoon.

“What kind of spoon is this?”

“Designed specifically for preparation of Absinthe. Watch.”

He poured the drink into the glass. Then he pasted a little sugar on the Absinthe spoon and started watering it with ice water -- slowly, drop by drop. Finally, he struck the lighter. The fire immediately covered the white crystals. He put it all in the glass, and the alcohol ignited. The flame danced in front of her eyes as she tried to concentrate on her childhood.

She lifted the drink to her lips.

“An essential thing,” said John. “Absinthe should not be drunk too fa...”

Before he finished the sentence, she drank it. She poured all the bitter liquid into her mouth at once.

“Noooo!”

Lex didn’t hear him. A green mist overwhelmed her senses. Her ears felt as if they were clogged. Scents faded. Only her eyes still functioned.

She looked at a child. She knew it very well. It was smiling.

She pulled a knife from her boot, and the child pulled a knife too.

Blinding whiteness surrounded them.

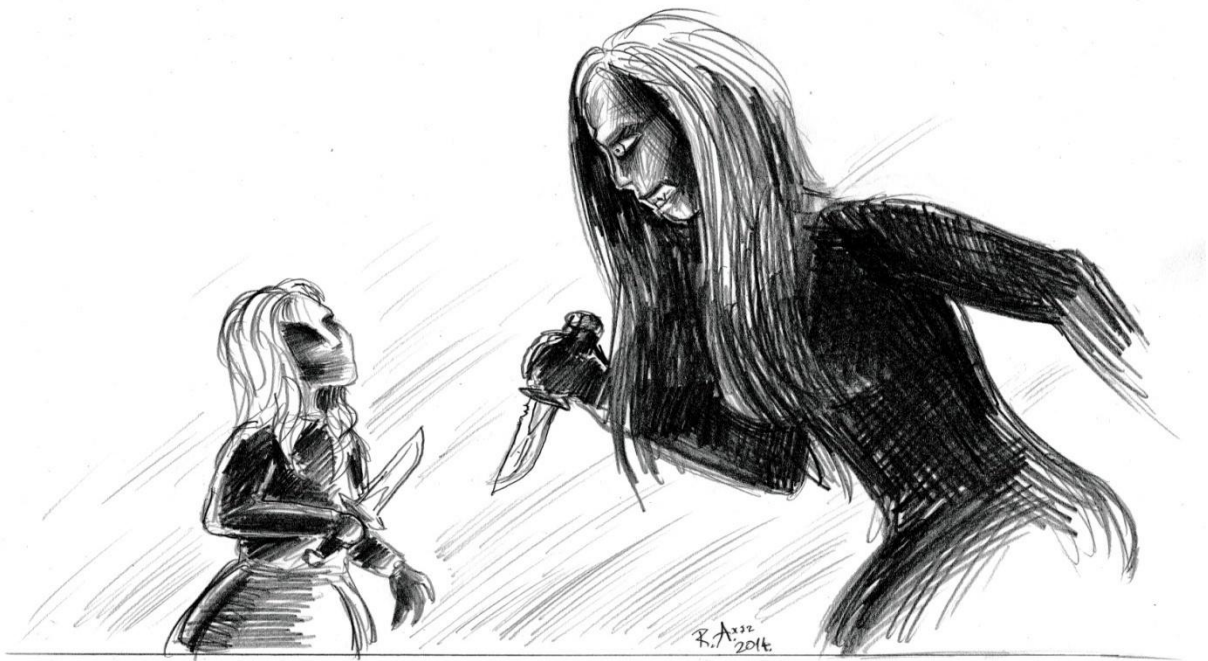
She swung it.

The color that began to pulsate in her mind became the same as at every thirst -- red. Dark and dense, it seemed almost alive and palpable.

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The little girl screamed. She pulled up the knife, but she could not defend herself. Blood started spraying everywhere. Lex felt warm drops on the face. The knife descended again and again. Rage took over the control. Adrenaline filled her veins.

The child opened her mouth, trying to say something, but Lex didn't stop. Every time the blood touched her lips, she greedily licked the salty substance off. She kept her eyes tightly closed. When she opened them, she was baffled. At each stab of the knife, the person's face changed. At first it was Tom's and the face of the boy from the park; then it belonged to the skeleton that she played chess with, and in the end, with a madness-filled smile -- Maximilian's!



“Lex! Lex! Leeex! Please, wake up!” John's voice . . . panicking.

She laid on the floor unconscious. She was mumbling and swinging her arm. The smell of Absinthe filled the room.

“Damn!”

He found a wet towel and placed it over her face.

She winced. She was still delirious. Outside it was dawn. She had to sleep it off. He lifted her up and brought her to the bed.

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Two nights later, she opened her eyes. She didn’t know what hurt her more -- the head or the stomach. She had a strong urge to vomit.

John was sleeping in the chair next to her.

She still felt the taste of wormwood in her mouth. She turned her head gently. The ceiling was covered with cracks. It was not a particularly pleasant view, but it was the position in which she felt the most comfortable. The less movement the better.

What happened?

She remembered what she had to do. Somehow she knew she started doing it, but did she manage it? She didn’t feel anything different from before, except for the awful hangover.

John moved and mumbled something. He was dreaming.

She bent her legs and brought the knees closer to the butt. Her hand was searching for the knife. It was there. Without any traces.

Could it be that she imagined everything?

What troubled her more was: Who was the skeleton that has been appearing since the beginning of the expedition?

He winced. "Is it possible that she has a hint?" The game has to last. He has to win. He must!

He always does. No one can resist his control. They are his puppets. He is their Puppetmaster.

“Lex?”

“Ah, you're awake,” she said.

He laughed. “Just so you know, you had me scared. Did it work?”

“I honestly don’t know. I remember swinging the knife. The face of the victim was constantly changing. That’s all I recall.”

“You'll find out soon, I'm sure. Anyway, drink this now.”

Blood. A whole bottle of it. Just by the thought of the taste, her condition improved. After a few sips, she felt exhilarated. She sat on the bed, watching the knife. “Has Nicholas stopped by?”

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“Yes. He was quite worried when he saw the state you were in. He told me to let you get some sleep. He was sure you'd be awake soon.”

“Hmm, I sometimes get the impression that he believes more in me than I do.”

“Yes, my dad is like that. A motivator.”

“Tell me, if you want, of course, why you don't live somewhere closer to him, if not with him? Or with others in the shelter?”

“I just like to be alone. After all, enough people suffered because of me. This is better for everyone.”

“I understand you completely. Sometimes I think it would be the best if no one would be around, as if I were bad luck to people who are close to me.

“Everyone thinks that once in a while, I know it from experience. Anyway, my father often mentions you. I think that he likes you a lot.”

“I like him too. I don't know what I'd do without him. He taught me everything I know. But what do you do besides this procedure with Absinthe?”

“I am a researcher.”

“Researcher?”

“Yes, I explore our species.”

“How did you get the idea to do that?”

“I had a lot of ups and downs in life, as a man and as a vampire. I've always been curious, but, eventually, I met a person who told me something that has prevailed. She gave me the answers to almost every question.”

“Who?”

“Earlier I used to spend hours walking. As I walked on the rails on the way to my father's ‘home’ I met the most beautiful girl I've ever seen. She had long, straight, red hair and beautiful green eyes. She looked at me, but it seemed unreal. I believed she was a ghost. For a moment, I thought I was dreaming. It seemed that the light that surrounded her came out of her. There was no regular light source anywhere around us.

“‘Hi,’ she said.

“I was smitten. I could not utter a word.

“‘I’ve been waiting for you.’

“I was even more surprised about these words. ‘But ...’ I stammered.

“‘I felt that you needed me,’ She said and laughed at me. ‘But do not ask me how I know.’

“‘But who are you?’ I asked finally.

“‘You may have heard of the muses?’

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- Yes, the goddesses of inspiration of literature, science and the arts. They were considered the source of the knowledge, related orally for centuries in the ancient culture, which was contained in poetic lyrics and myths. There are nine, I think. Thalia, Urania, Melpomene, Polyhymnia, Erato, Calliope, Clio, Euterpe and Terpsichore, if I remember correctly.

“Yes, you're right, but you're also wrong.’ Her smile looked so calming that I have almost entirely been convinced that I was dreaming.

“There is a tenth, that's me. My name is Isadora, I am the muse of the will to live.’

“The will to live?’

“Yes, did the will to live never leave you?’

“Hm ... If you only knew,’ I replied.

“I do know. I was there every time to keep you from killing yourself.’

“Why did you do that?’

“You still need to play a very important role in your life. I ignored mine; that's why I'm here.’

“What kind of role?’

“You need to devote yourself to the research of your kind. Your instincts and unbridled curiosity are extraordinary. You're one of the few who can reveal the answer to the question of your existence.’

“Seriously?’

“Yes.’

“But what about your role?’ I asked her. ‘Why are you telling me all this? Is this a kind of punishment for you? To save people who don't want to be saved?’

“Exactly. Once, I was a queen. We goddesses rarely were allowed to govern, especially at that time. Sent by a completely different task, I ignored the essence of my mission -- to prevent the suicide of the king's only son. I loved his father and soon we became husband and wife. We lived happily and people loved us, but my husband was killed in a battle. I was one of the first women who ruled. I took the throne, and thus all the liabilities of a ruler. I bravely led the warriors on the battlefield, but I sacrificed many innocent people. I sent them into battle when there was not the slightest chance of winning. I knew it meant certain death for them. However, I thought that giving up is not an option. Just because of my vanity. I wanted to be the best, the most powerful. My ego was the most important. I hurt the people around me, at the price that I never see them again. That's why I now have this task. I am in all of this secondary. How I used to always put myself in the first place, now I have to put others.’”

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He paused for a moment.

Lex realized that it was probably the end of the story. “Interesting.”

John smiled. “It's weird, I'd say. But I listened to her. I can tell you that I subsequently discovered many things.”

“Like what?”

“I don't know how much you really know about the history of vampires and Maximilian.”

“Only what Nicholas told me, what I've read and what the professor told us. “

“All right, I'll tell if you want to hear it.”

“Of course I do.” She made herself more comfortable.

“Do you know something about the dark centuries?”

“Yes.”

“Did you know that legends say that angels lived on the earth?”

“Angels?”

“Yes, angels, the first children of God. It's a part of history that is skillfully kept secret. It was a long time ago, in the age of darkness that I mentioned. The church grew and spread its lying fingers wherever it could. They had the control. The throne belonged to those who were easiest to be manipulated and also chosen by the church. It was the perfect plan to ensure control. Fear ruled amongst the people. Those who didn't accept the imposed truth were punished in the most brutal ways.’

“Women were declared witches and burnt alive. There was no other way to prevent their intellectual progress that would eventually lead to the certain discovery of the truth – that everything is a big lie and a manipulation of gullible people.’

“This was a time when cults sprang up like weeds that can not be destroyed. There were those who worshiped God, and there were various false priests who practiced black magic and worshiped Satan. One of them managed to free the Devil out of the prison to which he had been banished by God.’

“It was decided that the most powerful angel named Daniel would try to save what could be saved.’

“Unfortunately, the devil had already deeply intervened in the human fate. With the help of the stupid and naive man, he created the first vampire, Santiago known by the name The Red Count.’

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“Daniel was able to defeat the Devil who wounded him, but Santiago survived. He expanded the empire. Along with the empire his "kind" expanded too, plundering the world like a plague and cholera.’



“Vampires were drawing a trail of blood behind them. The number of people in the country declined sharply, and there was danger of the extinction of the human species. In many countries, vampire hunters were taught to destroy

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them. Hope was dying along with people, but then the Vietnamese Kaido Zidne appeared, who killed Santiago van Santoferus in a brutal fight. Along with him all the other vampires were killed. Or so it was believed. But this was not true. Several of them did survive, and among them were the bearers of Darkness, who since then emerged as a new generation.’

“Living and eating like bats, they retreated into the underground. There they built a shelter. Waiting that the time comes when they will be able to return to the soil surface, they ruled over all living beings.”

“What no one knows is that Santiago had a brother and a sister.”

Lex was stunned. “A brother and a sister?”

“Yes, an evil brother and a good sister. Twins. The monster that you're looking for, Maximilian van Santoferus and Catherine van Santoferus, whose trace is lost after she rebelled with Razzien against her brother.”

She looked at him incredulously. Then she felt that they were no longer alone.

“I hope that will deter you from your plan,” said Nicholas.

“Nicholas?”

He stood near the entrance.

She ran to him and jumped into his arms. “I'm so glad to see you!”

“And I'm glad you've finally recovered. Now you know most of the truth.”

“Yes.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I can't give up the intention to destroy him, Nicholas. I'm not one of those who sit quietly and wait. I'll find him before he finds me and turns me into an even greater monster.”

“I won't stop you. I'm just asking you to stay a little longer.”

“I will.”

“Now it's time to go.”

“Goodbye, John,” she said and smiled. “I'm glad I've met you. I hope that we will soon see each other again.”

He smiled in turn. “I'm sure we will.”

Lex and Nicholas spoke little as they returned to their residence. She promised to stay at least another month. She had to be ready mentally and physically to fight against such an enemy. She told him about the hallucinations under the influence of Absinthe.

What bothered her was the question regarding the identity of the skeleton.

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Several nights later, someone knocked at the door.
Nicholas opened. “John, how comes?”
“Is Lex here?”
“No.”
“Great. I need to talk to you.”
“Come in.” He closed the door behind him.
“I came here because I’m worried, Father. I have a very bad feeling about Lex. Something will happen soon.”
“Why do you think that?”
“My instinct tells me so, and it never fails me.”
“I know. What do you suggest?”
“I will take care of her. I’ll follow her wherever she goes, without her notice.”
Nicholas nodded. “If you wish.”

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VII

Lex did often go out when the weather allowed her a quiet walk. One evening her stroll took her to the shelter building. She remembered the password and knocked.

A vampire unknown to her opened the door. “Who are you?” he asked; he seemed almost hostile.

“I’m Lex, and you?”

“Lex. THE Lex?”

She had the impression that she has become something like a star in the world of vampires; soon they will start looking for her autograph on the street. The thought amused her. “As far as I know, I’m the only one with that name.”

“I’m sorry.” He bowed to her.

“It’s okay. I don’t want formality. Is Lukas here?”

“In the garden with Mandy.” He produced a faint smile.

The garden was filled with plants that flowered at night. The sweet smell hung in the air like a heady perfume.

Lukas sat on the bench hugging Mandy.

Nicholas’ hopes that they would get along were more than fulfilled.

She was glad about that. “Lovebirds!”

They were surprised. It was unusual that they didn’t feel her presence, but they were probably too busy with themselves.

Love. How had she managed so long without it?

Lukas looked up. “Lex, what a nice surprise.”

“What brings you here?” Mandy added.

“I wanted to talk to you. With you, Mandy, about how you are feeling now, and with you, Lukas, about your father.”

A worried look replaced his expression of bliss. “What about my father? Is something wrong with him?”

“All is perfect. I just wanted to talk to you about something he really doesn’t want to talk about: his children.”

“It’s just the two of us now. John and me. The rest are dead. They died in the fight against one of us.”

“What do you mean -- one of you? A vampire?”

“Not only that. Our sister.”

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Silence.

“Sonja wanted to kill our father. She tried several times to attack him, killing two sisters. In the end, father killed her. He never got over having to do that.”

“That's terrible!”

“Yes.”

“Tell me one more thing. Do you know something about the Darkness?”

“Not more than John or dad. Does the skeleton still appear to you?”

“Yes, that's why I'm asking. I'm disturbed by it. Can't stop thinking about it. But now, I'll leave you alone. The question I wanted to ask Mandy has an obvious answer. Take care of her.”

Lex could see in their faces their reaction to her being glad that they were together.

The problem, however, remained. Night after night, the unearthly creature came to her thoughts. By day, she saw it in her dreams -- by night in confused memories. She tried to free her mind through routines: walking, talking and Taekwondo training with Nicholas.

While she thought about the dreams of the past few days, Nicholas showed her how to properly hold her hand. He grabbed her around the waist and she felt the warmth of his touch, the warmth that she missed for so long. How could it be that vampires felt something like that?

She could not remember when she had last been touched by a man.

After months of living together, after many discussions, he had pried out of her that she hadn't had a boyfriend for a long time.

I want him, she thought.

As if he had read her mind, his hands moved toward her breasts. He began to gently caress them with uncharacteristic sensuality -- this from a vampire who had, in recent years, known only violence.

His tongue slid slowly on her cold neck, creating an explosion of feelings. Her excitement grew with every touch. She felt a small electric shock every time his tongue touched the invisible boundaries of her erogenous zone.

He wants me. He has to own me: my whole body and what is left of my "soul." She turned to him and looked at him. This was enough. She did not have to speak.

Lips created to kill gently clung to hers. He gave her the feeling that she was still alive, that she hadn't lost the feeling that was in every living being: the feeling that was stronger than death.

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Love.

Did it mean that she had not been able to destroy all that was human in her?

But the child was there. The knife rose and fell many times.

He saw that she couldn’t think clearly.

She twisted under his hands. The touches became rougher. She wanted to explore every inch of his body with her fingers. She tore his shirt and unbuttoned his pants. Soon, all the clothes were on the floor.

He jammed her against the wall, but in the blink of an eye they were on the pool table, where he was lying under her. The sound of breaking billiard balls replaced the breaking of wood and the table broke in half. They both began to laugh as children.

He gently covered her face and kissed her. It was as if he were remembering what it was like to be alive. He picked her up in his arms and carried her to the bed.

While he kissed him, she placed her fangs just above his nipples and sank her nails into his back. When she pulled her hands lower, he groaned as if in ecstasy. She grabbed the candle next to the bed and touched him with the flames. The skin swelled and cracked, giving space for new, pink skin.

He seemed to enjoying her wild instincts.

All night, erotic sighs ripped the silence of the underworld. Time stopped for them. When their two bodies were joined, he inside of her, she clung to the hope that the moment would last forever.

Nicholas moved his hand over her head, touching her cheek just with his fingertips.

“Mmmmm.” She let out a sound of pleasure.

He laughed. “You are just like a kitten.”

She kissed him gently. “How did you sleep?”

“Fine, and you?” He grinned broadly.

“Great, but...”

“But what?”

“This is our last day together.”

“It doesn’t have to be.”

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She sighed. “I can’t forget about the mission.”

“Why you? Why not someone else? Are you not happy here with me?”

“It’s not about you. I think the last night was proof enough. Or do you believe that I am so easy to have? As to the question ‘why me’, you know the answer. I was selected.”

“Let me then come with you.”

“I cannot!”

“Why? I can keep you safe, and take care of myself, you know.” He grinned mischievously. “I’m not a child.”

“I know. But if something bad happened because of me, I couldn’t bear it.”

“Lex, it’s my responsibility.”

“Please, don’t.”

“Don’t you understand? I don’t want to let you sacrifice yourself?”

Tears appeared in her eyes. “What part of the fact that I couldn’t stand the death of another close person don’t *you* understand?”

“I am sorry. I didn’t intend to make you cry.” He lowered his gaze. “I’ll let you go your way, but I want you to carry this with you.” From the box on the table, he took out a pendant. “You have to always wear it around your neck. Promise me!”

“What is it?”



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“A silver dragon. In some parts of Asia it is a symbol of happiness and health. Asian dragons are considered as mythical rulers of the weather, especially rain and water. They are the oldest symbol in Chinese mythology. They signify wisdom, good fortune, strength, fertility, courage, divinity, leadership, benevolence and enlightenment. It is itself an energetic, decisive, optimistic, intelligent and successful being. This pendant gives its owner all of the virtues. But its main role is to protect the bearer from evil. I got it as a gift, long ago, from one of my teachers.”

“But I can’t accept it. First, it is a keepsake for you and has great emotional value. Second, what will protect you then?”

“Don’t worry about me. As I said, I know how to be careful. You see that I don’t wear it around my neck, but am keeping it in a box. That has its reason. I was waiting for the person who needs protection more than I do. I want you to take it.

She took the pendant. It was soft to the touch, as if it wasn’t common silver.

“Thank you for being worried about me.”

He led her to the top of the world, the roof of an old building that offered one of the best views of the city. “I want to give you memories of a place which shows that you are a small part of a vast universe. It’s often neglected, but it’s a refuge for lonely hunters.

“You seem very sad,” Lex told him.

“But this place always calms me.”

The stairs creaked under their feet as they climbed.

“You’re wearing the shirt I gave you when we first met.”

She acknowledged that she was.

“Black silk accentuates your curves. It makes you look more attractive than ever; it makes me want to hug you and never let you go.”

She leaned on the concrete.

For a moment he left her alone. Then he returned to her. “See, this is the most suitable place for observing the full moon.”

That evening the moon seemed closer than usual -- closer and with a red tint.

“When you’re a vampire,” he told her, “even the moon looks bloody to you.”

“It really does look bloody.”

“Again. For the last time. I must accompany you.” He touched her shoulder.

“I’m sure you would be of great help, but the risk is too great.”

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She placed her hand on top of his. Then she hugged him, knowing that it might be the last time.

When they again descended the stairs, Nicholas held her hand.

Suddenly, behind them, a rustling sound.

“We're not alone,” he whispered.

“I know,” she said. Her hearing was more sensitive than his, she decided, possibly because of her new role in the empire of vampires.

The black figure materialized out of the shadows and hovered over them.

She heard the sound of a sword.

Nicholas tightened the grip on her hand.

With disbelief she looked down at the body that appeared at their feet. And then a head. John’s head. A flame swallowed his eyes, and then the rest of the face.

In a moment, all that remained of Nicholas’ son was a handful of grayish ash.

The sound of scratching woke Lex from sleep. The rats, whose number has lately increased, were again having a party.

Even in his sleep, Nicholas looked anxious as if he were having a nightmare.

She did not know whether to wake him or leave him to wake up alone. She decided to let him sleep.

She dressed, but felt that she needed to be alone. She turned to leave the room, but Nicholas raised his head.

“Lex?”

“Yes?”

He sounded groggy. “You’re going out?”

“I’m going to go for a walk.”

“Please don’t be long.”

“An hour will be enough to clear my head. Don’t worry.”

The city was noisy as usual.

The noise inside her head was equally dynamic as the whirlwind of events crowded together to threaten her sanity. How much could the mind absorb before it reached the saturation point?

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She was, however, no longer in a hurry. The need to conquer the uncertainty that life had fed her was slipping away. She watched the humans, but she felt empty, as if she has never been one of them, as if she felt as much of a stranger as before. It was merely that she had a different view of it now. That was the only difference.

She knew that she was not alone.

Nicholas, she realized, had been unable to leave her alone.

She pretended not to notice. Two men were behind her. One was Nicholas.

Out of the darkness, a stranger dressed in black appeared brandishing a sword. He was upon her and raised his arm as if to cleave her in half.

John jumped seemingly out of nowhere and blocked the blow before it struck her.

Nicholas leaped forward to stop the attack.

Before her eyes, the stranger beheaded John.

Nicholas was too late.

She watched as the enemy’s leg moved toward Nicolas, the same as in the dream.

Nicholas also saw this and managed to avoid being hit as he fell to one side. He dropped into a crouch by leaning on his hands and stuck out his right leg, making a semicircle. He kicked the stranger in the leg and jumped on him when he fell on his back, pressing his knees to the stranger’s chest. He swung his hand to hit him, but the man in black defended himself using his forearm.

Nicholas growled. His eyes turned yellow; he was crazed by the death of his son. Lex felt Nicholas's anger and knew that he wanted to tear the killer apart.

But the swordsman was powerful. He stood up despite the fact that Nicholas has used a lot of force to keep him on the ground. When he sat up lifting his upper body, he moved his head toward Nicholas’s head. He struck him in the forehead.

Lex cowered behind them, unable to move.

Nicholas grabbed his head, and the stranger took advantage of the moment to shake him off. Lying on the ground, Nicholas rolled to the side when the sword came down. He relied on his hands, placing them above his head, swinging his legs to jump to his feet.

Then the black swordsman slammed his elbow into Nicolas’ stomach and swung his shoulder into his chin.

Nicholas staggered. He felt his own cheek as if he thought his jaw had been broken. Then seemed to freeze and his eyes glazed over.

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The stranger turned to Lex. She tried not to cry. She clamped her teeth and concentrated on what was happening. She wanted to run, to try to escape, but her enemy blocked the road. Roughly, he was almost six and a half feet tall, and weighted about three hundred and thirty pounds. Looking at his clothes and weapons, she immediately concluded that he was either one of them or, perhaps, Jason, the vampire hunter.

Long, greasy black hair covered his eye, a scar on his cheek made him look even more formidable. He watched her with the other eye.

“I’m Tiberius,” he intoned, “a humble servant of the magnificent Maximilian.” He spoke calmly as he returned the sword to its sheath hidden under his coat, apparently convinced that, for her, no weapons would be necessary.

She spat at him.

He ignored this gesture. “You will now go with me,” he said, and grabbed her hand.

“No!” she yelled and struck him hard in the head with her fist, trying unsuccessfully to break away from his grasp.

“If you won’t go willingly, I will force you.” He pulled her towards him and knocked her down to the concrete. “I definitely prefer the force.” He laughed, grunting like a pig. He bent down to pry her from the ground.

However, Lex pulled her knees to her chest and, when he grabbed to lift her up, hit him with full force. Her legs flew up, targeting his shoulder. She managed to push him away. Then she quickly rolled over onto her stomach and assumed a squatting position. Her fingernails were shining, and her face, she felt, was transforming into that of a beast.

He merely laughed. “I love it when they resist.”

Somewhere nearby, dogs began to howl.

She had to use his own strength against him -- the principle of the lever.

Wait for the attack.

Respond spontaneously.

She didn’t have to wait for long.

Tiberius rushed her, still unarmed.

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She blocked a few hits and left a deep scar on his cheek, which, in the next moment, vanished. She swung to hit him again, but he was gone and she felt a thud in the head.

Busy with Lex, Tiberius didn't notice that behind him another man with a sword appeared. He was smaller than him, and therefore inconspicuous. Feeling the cold metal as it passed through his lungs, Tiberius turned quickly as an animal and drew his sword in one swift move.

A stream of blood flowed from his mouth. He eagerly licked it.

The entire street began echoing from blows of the swords. Sparks were bouncing from the edge of the fierceness of the fight, throwing occasional eerie light on the faces of the fighters.

The swordsman suffered a wound on the stomach, failing to turn around. But the battle was still unresolved.

Tiberius was apparently much stronger than his opponent, but the other was fiercer and managed to fight off the next hit. The hilt of the sword hit his head, and the vampire's arcade was bleeding.

He cut the stranger on the right hand and blood was pouring down the sword while he brought it down to be able to take a greater momentum. He mocked the huge savage in front of him by giving him a look of annoyance.

Both were panting from exhaustion. Great momentum and again a blocked hit, swords producing a creaking sound.

Tiberius pushed his opponent and tried to kick him, but he successfully escaped. He bent down. Maximilian's deputy approached him raising his arms, ready to throw one blow to sever his head. "Just like John," he said to Lex.

However, this brief moment of Tiberius distraction was enough for the attacker to pull out a stake that was coated with a layer of silver and pierce it right into the heart.

The stranger watched as Tiberius, his eyes widened in shock, fell to his knees and let out a scream, while the flame of death greedily devoured his body.

He disappeared, as if he never had existed.

Two less. The Rook and the Knight. Who knew that the hunter will destroy the Knight so fast ... Now he's going to protect the Queen for some time. But there's more to the game ...

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The street was suddenly blanketed with silence.

The mysterious man in black approached Lex. She lay unconscious. He ignored Nicholas. Maybe he didn't even see him, given that he was lying next to the container along with a pile of debris.

He hastily examined her if anything was broken, but couldn't conclude anything like that. It was as if she had no serious injuries. With ease, he carried her to his home.

Taking her straight to the bedroom, he gently set her on the bed, covering her with a blanket.

It was clearly a man's two-room apartment -- fairly neat but with beer bottles on the floor and a few empty pizza boxes. The smell was a mixture of cologne and alcohol.

He stood on the threshold, staring at the body and face that looked as if they could have been the work of professional sculptors. The moonlight gave her the appearance of an Amazon. He felt that power could indeed reside in her, but the outside looked so fragile, that he swore she wouldn't be able to harm anyone.

He checked his wounds. He had to put a bandage on his stomach and clean his hand with alcohol. After that he poured some iodine on it taping gauze over it.

New scars, new marks of experience.

He sat in a chair for hours and watched Lex. In his mind, he saw her being in danger and himself trying to preserve her life with his look.

He wanted to caress her but only, he realized, if she wanted it as well.

Finally. exhaustion overcame him and he fell asleep.

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VIII

She awoke to the feeling that her head would explode in pain. She realized that she was in a darkened room. It was a small room, so it probably belonged to a person who lived alone. She rose from the bed and straightened her clothing.

She entered the hallway and, seeing the front door of the apartment, approached it. No key was in the lock. Since the lights had been left on, she could see that it was not on any nearby table.

"God, where is Nicholas? What happened to him? And John ... "

In a large chair, she saw her rescuer, asleep. He had the face of a young boy, a child torn from a peaceful childhood and forced to grow up too quickly. His rough hands testified to that.

She could always, she felt, read people well, an ability that becoming a vampire had enhanced and refined. The human face had become as a map; every wrinkle, every line had a story. And his story, she sensed, was full of pain and sorrow -- an eternal struggle for survival.

At the left eyebrow, she saw a scar that was an evidence of one of those struggles.

She covered him with the coat he had draped over the back of his chair.

She had to eat something as soon as possible. It had been too long since her last feed.

She went into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. Inside she found a pair of bloody pieces of meat. She managed to appease the thirst.

She was wiping her lips when she heard footsteps.

"Oh, I see, you're up! I'm so glad."

She could see in his face that he truly was glad.

"You must be hungry. I'll make you something." As he opened the fridge door, he happened to glance into the waste-can. "I see meat in the trash. You must be a vegetarian." As he looked back at her, an astonished look transformed his face. "Oh God, I'm so rude. I didn't introduce myself. I'm Jason." He gave her his hand.

"Lex." she whispered as she shook his hand.

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She could hardly believe her ears. This young man -- Jason? *The* Jason. The vampire hunter?

After several minutes, he turned to her from the stove and gave her a plate of scrambled eggs and fried bacon.

“There you go. I hope it suits you. Unfortunately, I have nothing else.”

“Thanks; it is perfect.”

Since becoming a vampire she hadn’t eaten what humans would call normal food. That need had not existed. Her hunger and thirst were the same -- quenched only by blood.

She pretended that the meal was good, but she didn’t feel any taste. She could’ve been swallowing small pieces of cardboard or Styrofoam instead, and it would have tasted the same.

“I hope you don’t mind a little ‘aggressive’ music,” he said. He turned on the CD player. “You know, my feelings determine what I listen to, but lately I mostly listen to things like this.”

Breaking Benjamin - "Evil Angel" started.

How appropriate ... she thought. “I love this song,” she said.

“Great. I can see that we will get along well.”

“Get along well?” She raised an eyebrow. “I’m not going to live here with you.”

He laughed. “Who’s talking about living together? I know you’re not going to. Relax.”

“I am relaxed, but I want to go home.”

“Of course you’re going to go home. But be patient for at least a day or two. The creature that attacked you is dangerous. They often move in gangs, not to say packs. So it is not certain that he was the only one.”

“Creature?”

“Yes. Do not panic, please, but in the underground there is a form of life that nobody wants to know about -- not the government, not the state, not the planet. Nobody.”

“What would that life form be?”

“An extremely aggressive and inhuman one.”

“It sounds like a fairy tale.”

“More like a nightmare.”

“Anyway, you mentioned the attack. Who attacked me? Or what attacked me?”

“You were attacked by a vampire. Don’t you remember?”

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“A vampire?”

There was no doubt that he was precisely the person she considered him to be.

“Yes.”

“Nonsense. That’s fantasy fiction stuff.”

“I’m afraid not. Don’t worry. I protected you once. I can do it another time.”

“What about my friend?”

“Friend?”

“Yes. I was not alone.”

“I’m sorry; I didn’t see anyone but you.”

“Oh no ... Is it possible that he killed Nicholas? No, I don’t want to think about anything like that ... ”.

She felt like a prisoner, but the jailer was friendly and kind to her. Of course, he yet had no idea who she was.

She had asked to be left alone, so she lay in the bed thinking.

She could not stay for long retain for she would soon be hungry again. It was impossible to keep secret her need for blood.

He knocked on the door.

“Come in.”

“Please, come with me. I don’t want to leave you alone here.”

“Where are you going?”

“To the cellar. I need to train. Other tenants have allowed me to make a room there for exercising. I have a gym and a sparring part.”

“Sounds great. Can I exercise too?”

“Why not?”

A boxing bag! Perfect, she thought when she saw the equipment in the gym.

While she had been human, her routine every morning had been to spend half an hour hitting the bag. It was ideal for the removal of stress and tension. She was really missing it.

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She put on the gloves. She was hitting it full of rage: right hook, left hook and a jab. Then with the legs. She tried to pull herself together so it would not be too suspicious.

He was surprised in spite of her caution. He did not expect her to be so strong. He could have watched her all day, but he needed to practice. He took a Japanese sword from the holder on the wall and began to warm up.

When her training was completed, she stopped to watch him practice.

Every movement seemed to be choreographed. Perfectly arranged strength and coordination. He was extremely fast and skilled with the katana. It seemed to be a part of him, a kind of extended hand. He precisely guessed every weak spot on a wooden doll with which he had to exercise. Finally, he noticed that she was watching.

He turned to her and beckoned for her to move closer.

What is this? What does he want to do?

“Next time you will know how to defend yourself from a maniac.” He handed her a sword.

She had never held a sword in her hands. Now, when she took it, there was a feeling of superiority. Although she was aware that she was physically stronger than all humans, this weapon seemed to extend her sense of power.

“Where did you learn to handle a sword like this?” she asked him.

“In Vietnam.”

“You were in the war?”

“No. I went there on a scientific expedition. In the end I stayed. In addition to the language, which I partially mastered, I also learned how to handle this ‘toy.’”

“Expedition?”

“Yes. I’m an archaeologist by the way. I have traveled almost the entire world. For long I have dealt with the exploration of exotic graves, and I am an avid collector of everything that has to do with vampires. I wanted to find out more about them, so I could find the easiest way to destroy them.”

“Impossible. I’m an archaeologist too!” She wanted to divert him from the topic of killing vampires.

He grinned widely. “That’s great; it means we have something more in common.”

“Seems so.”

“Let me teach you how to handle a sword.”

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He stood behind her, putting his hands on hers and started swinging. His body was clinging to her.

She liked that feeling, but it also made her nostalgic. Nicholas... she missed him a lot. She still didn't know what happened to him. Was he alive or dead?

How could she let that monster separate them? Why hadn't she reacted in time? Why had she not been above to save John?

But still, at this point, Nicholas' place had been taken by a human, maybe, in some sense, his equal.

For a moment, she was distracted from the fact that she and Jason should be enemies. She had, however, to face the truth that they couldn't become friends. He was not aware that she was a vampire, but how long would she be able to hide the fact?

She decided that she would make her escape that night.

She was moving closer to the door, trying not to make noise. She darted out into the street, closed the door, and scurried in the direction of the hospital. She was thirsty. Suddenly, from one of the side streets, she heard a piercing scream.

She swerved to study the situation.

On the end of a blind alley stood a girl who was screaming at a human male with a gun pointed at her. At the girl's feet lay a man, curled up and writhing in pain. He was dying.

A robbery.

She turned toward them and moved in stealth mode.

"Get your damn wallet out or you will end up like your boyfriend!" yelled the gunman, shaking from nervousness.

"Aren't you supposed to be in bed at this time?" Lex came out of the shadows.

"Who the hell are you?" He pointed the gun at her, his hands still shaking.

"My name is not important." She knew her voice sounded cold as she grew closer to him.

"Sto-sto-sto... stop or I will shoot!" His pupils were huge. He was under the influence of drugs.

"Run!" Lex said to the girl.

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The girl looked down at her boyfriend, and then turned and bolted into the dark as if a pack of dogs were chasing her.

The man pointed the gun at the fleeing girl then back at Lex. He was shaking. His finger tightened on the trigger. Finally it clicked.

The bullet flew toward Lex in a split second. It cut through her coat and entered her stomach.

She shook, moved a step back, and lifted her shirt. She glanced at her injury. The hole left by the bullet disappeared after the bullet fell out.

The guy was totally confused, unable to believe what he saw. Must be that the drug was stronger than he thought. This was definitely a trip.

“You ruined my coat!” Lex could feel her eyes changing. She knew that they were becoming yellow.

“W ... W ... W ... Wh ... what are you?” Every few seconds, he rubbed his eyes with his free hand. “God, this is a bad trip!”

In an instant, Lex was beside him, grabbing him by the neck with one hand and lifting him up. She watched him helplessly gasping and waving his legs, trying to get free. He looked sad and funny at the same time.

She enjoyed this game of cat and mouse. Her true nature broke out; she was a beast. She loved to play with food, although her mother had objected to it. “Child, eat! Don’t play with your food.” Now she could do what she wanted; she was an adult. In addition, her body was permeated with pleasure she usually experienced only during feeding. Aggressive. Human nature gone.

In that moment, all control had vanished. Something in her brain that unleashed the kill instinct took over, something black and deep.

She lowered him and forced her canines into his jugular veins.

When she had sated herself, she pushed him away with an explosion of disgust inside of her. She would throw the corpse into the trash where it belongs. But she had to first remove the bite marks from the neck.

A knife. She always wore a Swiss army knife. Should she cut a large enough piece of meat just to get to the depths of the fangs or sever his head?

She held his face between her hands. His fate: just an unlucky bastard or a junky that had attacked an innocent girl and murdered her boyfriend.

At that moment, she abhorred all humans: jealous, arrogant, conceited, full of envy, greed, thinking only how to benefit from other people. They were greater monsters than she and her kind. Her kind has to kill to survive, but humans were killing other humans for inconsequential reasons: using a cell phone in a movie

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theatre, stepping on another’s foot, driving poorly on a highway, making too much noise in the next apartment, or for believing in a different religion.

The movement that she heard from behind shook her from her thoughts. She turned around.

Jason! Visibly confused. “No! This must be a hallucination! You can’t be one of them! Not you!”

These words and a disappointed expression said it all. He approached her. In his hand was a stake.

She didn’t have the thought of escape. She resigned herself to the fact that she would die then and there.

Jason lunged with the stake, but his hand stopped.

His heart was beating rapidly. She could feel that. She could sense that he was completely frantic. His feelings were fighting a brutal war.

She found that she could read his thoughts. He didn’t know what he felt about her.

Hate?

Pity?

Love?

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“Why?” He looked at her reproachfully. His breathing deepened as he tried to calm himself.

His face grew close to her face; he was ready to terminate her existence. But instead of killing her, his lips found hers. He kissed her violently, wildly. He took off her coat, tore off her shirt and threw it on the sidewalk. Pressing her against the wall, he expelled hot breath.

She could feel his lust. After a moment, she responded in the same way.

She longed for a human male. Her nails dug into his hips, while her teeth tore the cloth from his body. She bit him in the shoulder, as he lifted her up. She wrapped her legs around him.

He rammed into her rough and ruthless, but that only increased her passion.

Hot touches on her cold skin gave her a sense of living again. She didn’t care that they were on the street, visible for passers-by. The thought of someone catching them in a mutually satisfying sexual act excited her.

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He let go all of his frustration, she sensed, by penetrating her. Panting, exhausted, but relieved, he dropped her.

Silently he turned away and walked into the darkness.

She draped his coat over herself and followed him. She knew that he was returning to his apartment. Behind them, the street, seemingly empty, produced silent echoes of the events that had taken place in the empire of enclosed dust-gray bricks.

They didn’t enjoy the silence, yet they remained silent. Every superfluous word would have spoiled the delicate situation. This was a timeless moment, which allowed no room or place for conversation. Nor did they want it.

When they arrived at the apartment, Jason offered her a stuffed chair. She sat down.

He sat across from her, staring at her, analyzing her every feature -- particularly her mouth.

“Listen,” she said finally. “Don’t give me that look. We are on the same side.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m on the way to kill Maximilian. I don’t know if you are aware that he created all the other vampires. After his death, all evil vampires will die too.”

Jason frowned. “Are there good vampires?”

“You are talking to one.”

Déjà vu, she thought. Nicholas had said the same to her when she had asked about the good and the evil vampires. Nicholas ...

“... me too.”

She heard only the end of the sentence. “I’m sorry. Repeat please. What did you say? My mind wandered off.”

“I said, I will go too.”

“Where?”

“With you.”

“No! I won’t risk another life. I can’t watch the death of another... person....”

“What makes you so sure that I’m going to die?” He forced a mischievous smile.

Maybe he ... maybe he....

He broke into her thoughts. “We got to get you a good weapon.”

“What kind of weapon?”

“Don’t worry. Let me handle it. I know someone who can help.”

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The following evening she accompanied him to a store with its name about the door: “Jacob’s Shop.” When they entered she saw that it was small and dimly lit with antiques lining the shelves and pieces of furniture, sculptures, and lamps. Faded photographs and dusty paintings occupied bare sections of the walls.

From another room, an older man appeared. His face was full of wrinkles; he had small lips and a striking chin. His eyes were as gray as a rainy day, but in them was infinite wisdom. He had the look of a pleasant grandpa who loved to tell war stories to his grandchildren.

“Jason!” His small lips widened.

He leaned forward and the two hugged.

“Lex, this is Jacob.”

Lex gave him her hand.

“I’m glad, ma’am.”

“Me, too,” she said. She smiled.

“My father used to work for Jacob, so he knows me from birth. It makes him almost an uncle. He woke my interest in antiques, so I brought him back a lot when I worked as an archaeologist.”

“Right,” the old man confirmed.

“Jacob, we are looking for a sword for the girl.”

He flinched. “This girl, so young and fragile, and yet knows how to handle a sword?”

“I taught her a bit, but, to tell you honestly, she is not as fragile as she looks. In fact, she’s a vampire.”

Jacob’s eyes expressed a combination of fear and disbelief.

“Don’t be afraid,” Jason assured him. “She is on our side.”

“Are you sure?”

“Have I ever lied to you?”

”No. Follow me then.” He returned to the room from which he had just emerged. However, Lex could not see the door of the room, no matter how hard she tried. It was as if Jacob had come out of the wall.

She watched him carefully.

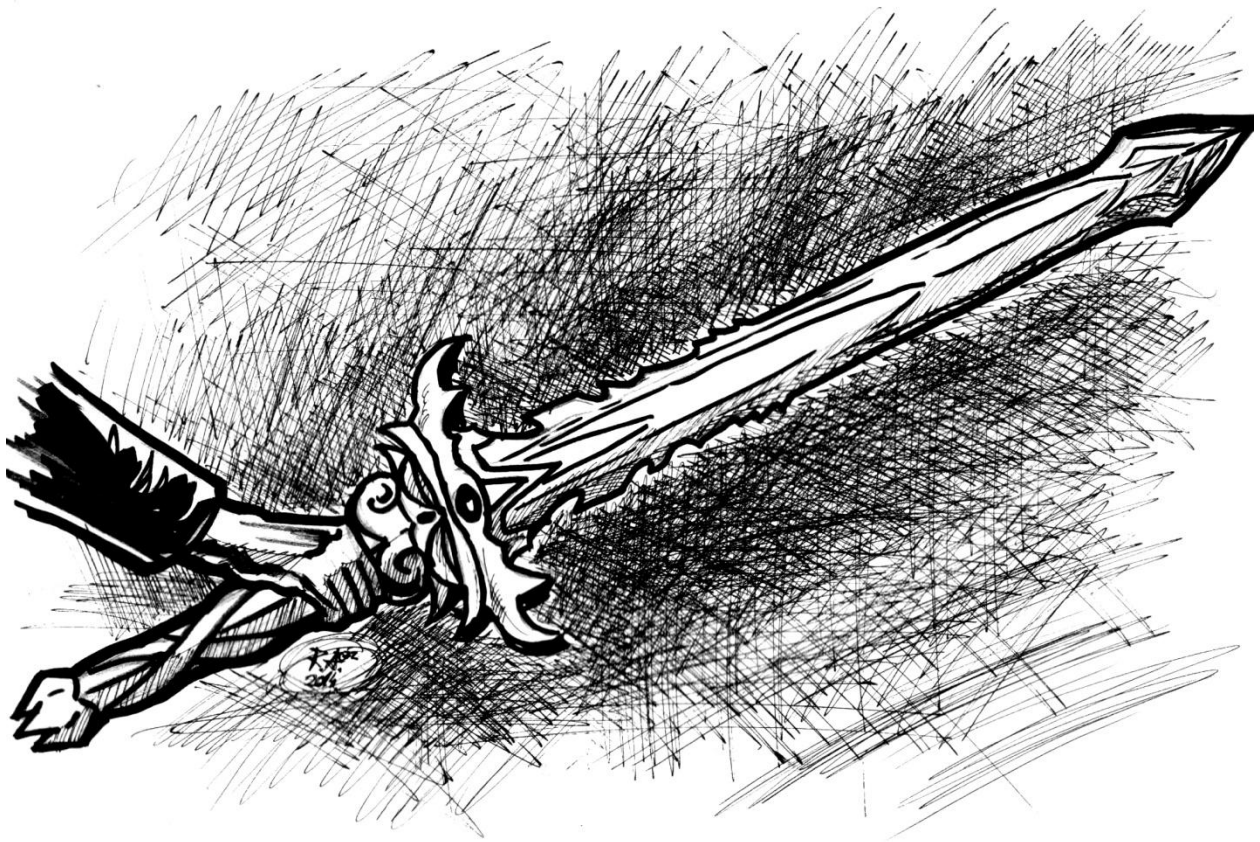
He stepped towards the closet with books and moved the stone statue on one of the shelves. A screeching sound emitted from somewhere and the wall of shelves moved. The closet was the gateway to another room.

They entered.

Lex realized that they had entered a warehouse of weapons, a small armory.

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“I have just the one for you.” Jacob picked up a sword from the table and presented it to her, blade flat across his arm and the handle toward her. She held it, balanced it, and swung it in the air. It exuded energy.



While she held it, the power flowed through her body. She felt invincible. “It must have belonged to one of the knights long ago.”

“Legend has it that it belonged to the angel Daniel,” Jacob told her. “Forged from the bone of the seven-headed jellyfish and a metal called Andrium. It was created in order to permanently destroy creatures of darkness.”

“An angel?”

“Yes. They once lived on earth.”

“I was told that by the son of my friend. He also mentioned the origin of Maximilian.”

“Kaido?”

“Yes, him too. But what happened with him? Could we get in touch with him to seek his help? He is the only one who managed to destroy any monsters.”

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“Unfortunately, no one knows where he might be located. After the killing of Santiago, it seemed as if he had evaporated. Just the records of vampires and the fight against them were left behind.”

“He always worked alone, so there is no person who could tell what really happened. Legend testifies that there is a stake coated with white gold, which Kaïdo Zidne made by himself. I don’t know if you’ve also heard about that, but it is believed that a vampire can use it to turn back into a man. There is a map. The gold stake can allegedly be found in the *Caves of the Mist*, but to get there, one has to pass through the *Forest of Hell*. The very name suggests that the attempt to get to that place is not a joke. Many have tried finding it. They wanted to get rich, I suppose. However, there were vampires in their midst. Unfortunately, no one came back, so the existence of these relics has not been proven. It is all still a legend.”

At these words, Lex’s eyes still shone. The belief in miracles returned to her. She knew that they existed, and if there were ways to find it, she would do it.

Knowing that there was a possibility, although minimal, that one day she could be a living being again, gave her an indescribable exhilaration.

Human.

A challenge.

She had to know the truth.

After she had killed Maximilian, she would look for that white-gold stake.

“Now please, Jason,” said the old man, “kindly leave us alone for a moment.”

Jason bowed politely and spun around to obediently exit the armory.

“So you are the chosen one?” he asked when they were alone.

“Seems so,” she said.

“I want to give you some fatherly advice. What you’re getting into is incredibly dangerous, but if you really feel your destiny, you have to follow it. Let your senses always be vigilant. Pay attention to the signs all around you. They will show you the right way. You will meet different people, and it will be of great importance to listen to them. So talk with whoever seeks your company. However, do not fully believe any of them totally, nor give your affection lightly, because you’re going to pay the high price of suffering. Don’t allow them to come too close to your heart. It is not necessary to have a stake to hurt it. The hardest thing is when a person you care about does it. Trust me, I know.”

Then he gave her a gentle hug.

“Thank you,” she replied and smiled.

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After they parted from Jacob, Jason spoke to her. “Will you allow me to prepare you for the upcoming fight as best as I can?”

“Please do so.”

From the shadows behind the building that housed Jacob’s antique store, two eyes watched them with great interest. She turned around, but she could not make anything out. She was probably wrong...

Months of hard training followed. Swordsmanship was much more complicated than Taekwondo.

Her keyword: concentration.

Lex had the habit of being too reliant upon her sharp eyesight. It was improper, because the eyes were capable of deception.

Jason gave her a black scarf. “Put it over your eyes.”

“Why?”

“Trust me. Put it over your eyes.”

She put on the blindfold. Standing in the center of the circle in which they practiced, she balanced a bokken, a wooden sword.

Jason went around the circle speaking. “Concentrate on the sound of footsteps, and try to hit me.”

Lex swung and narrowly missed him. She inhaled deeply and removed all thoughts from her head. There was only emptiness. Darkness.

She felt as if she stood alone in silence, listening to the heartbeat. It became calmer and slower.

Boom ... boom ... boom ... almost inaudible noise ... boom ... boom ... and there it was again ... boom ... boom ... the right hand firmly gripped the handle of the bokken.

She projected his figure. As she did, she directed the sword in the direction of the sensed noise. Hit.

“Ouch. You hit really hard.”

When she removed the blindfold, she saw Jason snickering and rubbing his right shoulder with his hand as if it throbbed with pain.

“You did it,” he said, “but I never doubted that.”

She was ready for the fight.

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The next evening, Jason entered the workout room beneath his apartment. “You learned the theory. Now we can go to practice.”

“Practice?”

“Yes. Tonight you're going with me to hunt vampires. You need to develop your skills in battle with a live opponent. Well. Not live, maybe, but real enough.”

“Tonight? Do you think that I'm really able to defeat a vampire?”

“Of course. I wouldn't take you with me if I weren't sure. I'm not ready to risk both of our lives.”

The night accompanied them with the sounds of music and joyous shouting. It was the last day of December, New Year's Eve. Humans had gathered in the downtown squares, eagerly anticipating the twelve beats that marked a new beginning, a new year.

It suited Jason, he told her, because with so many people, it was more difficult for them to be noticed.

Lex, on the other hand, felt nervous. She hated crowds. The mass of the humans surrounding her suffocated her.

The only area that offered an absence of humans and an absence of noise was a cemetery, the place where Jason, she had learned, frequently patrolled.

The smells of the perfumed and sweating humans were replaced by the icy breath of death.

“You can feel the presence of another vampire, right?” he asked her.

“Yes, I can. One is coming closer, if I'm not mistaken.”

They were looking around. Behind one of the funerary monuments, a boy appeared.

“Kid, what are you doing here?” Jason asked him. “Where are your parents?”

“My parents are dead.”

“I'm sorry. What happened?”

Instead of an answer, the boy's eyes became two glowing yellow balls. His face was deformed into a grimace. Approaching them, he growled like a dog. Mouth wide-open, ready to bite.

Lex was shocked. She didn't know that there were children-vampires. She had difficulty in believing it, even though one glided toward her at that moment.

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Jason, however, quickly responded. The head of the boy was already disappearing into a bright flame.

“Lex? Are you okay?”

“No ... no ... I cannot believe it...” She felt numb. She didn’t know whether or not she would be able to kill a child, but any delay because of emotions could cause her to fail the mission.

They sat on a stone bench near the monument behind which the boy had materialized.

“You know, when I was alive, I always used to shy away from the idea that one day I would be buried.”

He nodded. “Me too.”

“To be placed in a wooden box and buried. Served to the worms. The idea that after my death someone would have to maintain the grave and clean the weeds, leaving flowers on occasion, was absolutely impossible. I experience it now as if I’m going to become a burden. I don’t want that.”

“I understand completely.”

“I always rather liked the thought of cremation. My ashes spilled over Ireland and New Zealand.”

“Why those two countries?”

“I love the countryside. It radiates life.”

“But you’ll find death there too.”

It became colder. She knew it only because she could see the steam that was coming out of her mouth as she spoke. *Finally... something positive.* She didn’t feel the cold.

They were silent.

“Do you want to go home?” he finally asked her.

“No, but I’d like to get away from here. Do you have another place where you patrol?”

“I do, but it’s far less likely that we will meet some vampires, because they know that I used to spend time there. However, it is nice place, so I’ll show it to you.”

They drifted to an abandoned area away from the revelers. It was a river bank, and his destination turned out to be a tall tree.

“I come here when I want to think, because you can’t hear the noise. This is an ideal place to relax.”

They sat under the tree, on a mound of grass.

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After an hour of peace, a girl of about Lex’s years appeared wearing a long black coat. When she noticed them, her mood lightened. “I was looking for you.”

“Us?” they asked in unison. Lex pointed back at the two of them.

“Yes, you. Are you vampire hunters, huh?”

“Uh.” Lex looked at Jason. “Well....”

“Yes,” Jason answered after a long pause.

“I need your help. I want you to kill me.”

“Wait, wait, slowly. First, who are you? Why do you want us to kill you?”

“My name is Lora. I’ve heard from others that vampire hunters exist. They told me to stay away from this place. I come here very often, but have never seen you. I have been searching for someone who would be willing to kill me. And now you’re finally here! Among vampires it is forbidden to kill a member of our species. I don’t want to live anymore. I can’t stand this loneliness. I lost a child, my husband and my parents. I have no friends, nor have I ever had any. For me there is nothing worth living for. I don’t want to exist forever. Please shorten my torment!”

“But ... I think you can find....”

“Please,” the girl interrupted her, looking at her pleadingly.

“Lex, you heard what the lady said.” Jason’s voice was sad but firm. “It’s your turn to kill the first vampire.”

Though she was aware that it violated the ancient codex, Lex, with tears in her eyes, swung the sword toward her neck. After a strong hit, the girl’s body, minus her head, fell to the ground. It seemed to her that she heard a quiet “thank you,” before she disappeared forever.

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Again, that awful feeling: this time much stronger. She felt as if she had destroyed her own sister. But that's what they were, right? They were of the same type. They were all brothers and sisters: the children of darkness. She felt a slight tingle on the cheek. She reached there with her fingertips. A look at the wet fingers revealed a trail of blood. She wanted to return to the apartment as soon as possible.

She was longing for a shower. She rubbed her hands violently. It seemed that John's attempt to destroy all humanity in her failed. But she had never stopped hoping. The Darkness was not yet strong enough.

"Excellent! Soon there will be no more Pawns left. The saying "only the strongest survive!" seemed to be true. Great game! Perfect!"

Jason came into the room as Lex sat with her elbows propped on the windowsill that was now covered with snow, gazing out the window.

She looked melancholically at the moon; the wind transformed her breath into steam. Winter had noticeably taken control of the weather.

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She stabbed a knife into her right hand. Pulling it, she drew a curve in the same place. Drops of blood glowed in the dimness of the room. The wound would disappear in a split second. She was drawing the line again and again, feeling her control of herself slowly slipping away. Tears were streaming down her face uncontrollably. Pain held her in a hard, painful, but not physical hug. She knew that her body could not feel any pain. It was the pain that has arisen in the lost, non-existent soul. Phantom pain.

She was on edge.

“What's wrong with you?” Jason drew nearer. “Is it still about last night?”

“No. Today is practically my anniversary. One year that I am living this damned, parasitic life. It’s my first vampire birthday.”

He tried to wrench the knife from her hand, but she resisted.

She felt her eyes changing and knew that they were becoming yellow. She growled at him.

“Here was my lifeline before ... and then I became *this!*”

She felt the disgust deep in her bowels. Her eyes, she knew, were becoming black again, reflecting all her sadness and feeling of loss. “The line of life is gone!”

She felt her fangs growing.

He knew, she felt, reading him, that it was not her attempt to bite him, but to externalize the angst of suffering.

Her hands shook.

“Tell me: how can I help you? I cannot watch this.”

“I'm sorry, but I need to be alone.”

She stood up and dragged herself to the apartment door, leaving the bloody knife behind in the windowsill.

A cold wind discouraged humans from wanting to go out, but, for Lex, it represented death. So many times in recent months she had faced the invisible ruler of the underworld who easily took candidates to Hell or Heaven, based on merit.

But what about when my turn comes?

As a human, she had been a bit afraid of that last breath, last blink, last words, last thoughts. But now? She was immortal. She could live forever.

But was there an eternity? She wanted it not to exist. She wanted to die, to turn into ashes so that the wind would take her away.

A few steps from her stood an older man. She concluded that he was blind. He was wearing sunglasses. He wore a long, ragged and dirty coat and

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leaned against the wall. In his hand that looked like a bone covered with a pink cloth, he held a cup and a printed card, "Please help me with voluntary contributions. I am blind."

If he's blind, how could he write that? she thought.

The old man spoke to her. "I know exactly who you are."

"What?"

"Yes, yes, I'm talking about you."

"What do you want from me? Who are you?"

"I am your faithful servant!" He laughed mockingly and took off his glasses.

She lost her breath.

At the place where his eyes were supposed to be gaped two huge, empty holes. The old man began to laugh uproariously, causing the wrinkles on his face to go up and down, expanding and shrinking, like an accordion.

Lex flinched. She was lying in her bed. She was wet from sweating. She had been dreaming.

"You woke up?" Jason's voice.

"Yeah, what happened?"

"I was just going to ask you that. I was worried when you were gone for two hours, so I stepped out to look for you. I found you down in the entrance of the building, lying there unconscious."

Seems that it wasn't a dream. But what did the mysterious old man want? To frighten her? That he had accomplished.

But what did it mean? A premonition about her approaching meeting with Maximilian?

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IX

The dark blanket of the night, composed of stars and the Moon, covered the lethargic city. The iron bell was signing that the time has come for the children of darkness to leave the shelter and go out into the arms of the night.

Jason gently stroked Lex on her cheek to wake her up.

“It's time.”

A taxi headed for the airport, where Lex was to take a plane to London.

Jacob had told them that the ruler of all vampires could not leave the country in which he had been converted. His existence was tied to it.

It was time to go and visit him.

Lex saw Jason watching her from the car. She had insisted that she take the flight alone, and he had been unable to do otherwise. He would have to accept the fact that he might lose her forever before he tried to win her heart, to feel her love.

She had known him for several months. The time spent together consisted mainly of training and hunting vampires.

However, one look was enough to read him like a book.

She knew every face expression, the meaning of the slightest of smiles. This, however, was new. His usually cheerful face had taken on a grayish color. His eyes were staring into an endless void, losing their way in the nothingness of grief.

The taxi driver stopped the vehicle outside the airport entrance.

The controls at the airport were working well. Detectors were not able to register the sword made of Andrium.

She heard the voice from the speakers: “Flight 575 to London is ready for takeoff. Passengers, please proceed to the exits, which are indicated on the ticket in the top right corner.”

“So you're really going to go all that way alone?” Jason said.

“Yes, I'm sorry, but this is my fight. There is no need to destroy more innocent lives because of me. It has already cost too much.” She looked down as she saw images of Tom and John.

The voice coming from the speakers reiterated the previous statement. Lex moved to the corresponding exit. She turned around.

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Jason stood motionless, with tears in his eyes, trying to hide them by putting sunglasses on.

She ran to him, hugged him tightly, and kissed him as gently as she could.

“I will never forget you,” he whispered to her, stroking her hair.

She released him and turned to rush away, not turning around. She knew that Jason's eyes followed her. She could feel them. And she knew that if she turned around again, she would go back.

She felt, from somewhere, another pair of eyes following her, but, in her rush, she had no time to verify that she was being observed.

Dawn was breaking when her plane landed at Heath Row in London.

She waited outside the airport for Demetrius, Jacob’s friend. As she stood away from the others, she saw the black-coated chauffeur waiting next to a limousine, holding a card on which her name had been written in large letters.

She signified that she was the person whose name had been printed on the card.

He bowed and glided to one of the back doors to open it.

Demetrius, evidently well-informed, had chosen a car with tinted windows.

A well-dressed man of about thirty-six waited in the back seat. He was tall with brown hair, green eyes, and a charming smile. “I’m Demetrius. Now we have time to get to know each other.” He extended his hand.

“Lex,” she said, holding out her hand. After a moment, she realized that she was staring at him.

He nodded to the chauffeur.

The chauffeur turned to his position behind the steering wheel and started the engine.

“He knows the way, of course.”

“The way?”

“The shortest way back to my apartment.”

She listened to him ask about Jason and about her flight across the Atlantic, but her mind was racing impatiently.

No time to chat. I need to get right to the point.

She looked at the chauffeur and back at him. “Is the castle far away?” she said in a low voice.

“Don’t rush yourself. You need to rest, to get ready for your confrontation.”

“I wasn’t asking for advice, only information about the location of the castle.”

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He looked startled by her rudeness. “You Americans always seem to be impatient. The castle you ask about is far away, so we’ll take you above to the village in the forest. From there, you will, unfortunately, have to continue by yourself. I am unable to cross the border near the castle. Only vampires and their hostages can do that.”

There was a looming spark of sarcasm in his voice.

She was not sure if she could trust this man, but, at the moment, it was her only option. She will have to consider it alone, but later. Fatigue that she had been repressing finally defeated her.

She fell back against the car seat and drifted to sleep.

She dreamt.

In her dream, she visited the castle. She heard a clear voice calling her, but she could not trace the origin, only the direction. Something pulled her toward it against her will; it was as if she had been hypnotized. In fact, she felt as if she were outside of herself, watching her actions through someone else's eyes.

A young woman opened the door of the castle and bid her to enter. She did, but soon found herself to be again outside, surrounded by a dense fog. From the fog, a shadow materialized and approached her.

It was Maximilian in a long black robe, eyeing her with a look of superiority. All the time it seemed as if she was watching from a seated position or as if he were over six feet tall -- an extremely charismatic man with long black hair falling on his shoulders. His deep eyes held her transfixed, preventing her from uttering a word.

She tried to resist the control he had over her but soon realized that she was powerless. He pulled her closer to him as if she were bound with an invisible rope. Her greatest wish was to touch him. She simply was burning with desire for him. Her lips moved closer to his, melting into a kiss.

She jerked back. And awake.

She was covered in sweat, but the sweet taste of a kiss still lay on her lips. Was it a dream at all?

The next evening she presented Demetrius with her plan. She had to visit a few places in London before her real confrontation. She told him that she would return to his home in exactly a week.

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London was an extremely gloomy town, inspired by the dark, sick melancholy that crept under the skin. Hostile humans pushed against her in the streets. They moved rapidly, ignoring each other. Lex wanted to see something admirable, but, at that moment, she felt as if what she really sought was a territory that was the opposite of this.

The darkest places were where she found herself trying to realize the weaknesses of the human society, the wordless images of waste: the dirty streets, clogged with garbage and feces; the bleakness and desolation that caused her mood to deteriorate from moment to moment worse and her doubts to grow at an equal pace. It was as if she had been forced to plant the grain of insecurity into her heart and to allow it to germinate.

Charing Cross. She had heard rumors about the busiest railway station in London. At this hour, however, it appeared to be almost empty. On one of the chairs in the waiting room sat a girl. She had curly red hair, reminiscent of a restless sea.

She seemed to be dozing.

Lex started to walk past her.

“You finally arrived,” the girl said, suddenly looking up.

“Me? Was I supposed to?”

“Yes, I was waiting for you.”

“And I was supposed to know that without being told? I am supposed to know who you are?”

“I believe you've heard of me. My name is Isadora. I wanted to talk to you before you went to . . . meet . . . the Master.”

“Isadora? You're the muse that John mentioned?”

“Exactly. I'm glad that you know. I know you're looking for a few last details, and I am here to show you where to find them.”

She stared at her. Was she really one of the muses -- like Terpsichore -- a super-human entity, a mythological creature?

“But there is something else. You have to stop blaming yourself for the death of your colleague and John. Also, stop thinking about destroying yourself.”

“You know that? Well. Anyway, I am responsible for their deaths.”

“Not true. They weren't children that you would have to watch over. Each alone decided his fate, even if one died accidentally. However it came about, it was still a sacrifice. It was still an intention. You cannot let their sacrifices be in vain.”

“Not my intention.”

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“I’ll take you now to a place where you will see what you have to face: the most powerful vampires who skillfully use deception to get everything they want.”

Lex followed her to side of the city that seemed to be hidden from the rest, an area with empty streets and brooding buildings. The only illuminated spot suddenly seemed to thrust itself at them: crimson neon lights said **"Red Desire"** and blinked like the eyes of a creature that wanted their blood. *Threatening and yet prohibiting*, she thought.

“From here you have to go alone,” Isadora said. “My job is done. If need be, I’ll see you again.”

Before Lex’s eyes, she faded as if she had backed into a void. Lex reached out to her but only encountered a cloud of wet mist.

Lex approached the dark door beneath the **“Red Desire”** sign and pushed a barely visible button.

A bell rang inside.

After a long wait, a metal plate slid aside to reveal an opening and a pair of yellow eyes peered out: “What do you want?” a voice growled.

“I ... uh ... I’d like to come in.”

“Why would I let you?”

She felt a transformation in her face and a strengthening of the muscles in her throat. “Because I command you to.”

In less than a minute, the door opened slowly.

The vampire with yellow eyes stood with his hand still holding the doorknob. He gave her a slight bow and what appeared to be a sarcastic nod of his long-haired head.

Lex regarded him as if he were a servant and moved past him, pushing through a crimson curtain attached over the entrance. She moved the curtain, but, before she could take another step, an arm reached out and a hand caught her wrist.

“And where are you going, little girl?” a female voice with an accent she failed to recognize asked her.

“Inside.”

“Hmm ... without my permission, no one goes in.”

“And who are you?”

“I am the owner of this club, Giselle LaRouge.”

Right, Lex thought. Red. Likely possibility! “Lex Batson,” she said aloud. *If she is going to provide an absurd last name, I will do the same. Batson, son of a bat.*

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Giselle frowned at her for a moment and then smiled. “I see, Lex. What brings you here?”

Lex’s mind raced, scrambling for an excuse. “Uh, I wanted to . . . have some fun.”

“A reasonable choice.” Giselle smiled, eyeing her with a gaze that seemed almost lustful. “This is the place for it. I’m glad you came.”

Lex took a closer look as well. As Giselle glided in front of her, holding her hand, Lex observed her long dark hair that extended down to her firm and well-shaped buttocks. She was dressed in black with black makeup penciled onto her pale face.

Goth, Lex thought. Mysterious and attractive at the same time.

“Let me show you the club.”

They entered a large room where black-garbed vampires either sat at tables or clutched at each other on a dance floor as if floating in unbounded ecstasy. On a small stage a heavy-metal band played, the members and the singer who screamed into the microphone were also vampires with yellow glowing eyes.

“What is happening with them?” Lex pointed to the band. “They seem strange.”

“They are having a great time. You want to try too?”

“How?”

“Don’t worry. It’ll be beautiful.” She came even closer to her and whispered, pointing out the “O” by gently blowing in her ear.

She handed her a device used by asthmatics.

Lex inhaled deeply.

The liquid from the device worked instantly. She felt the heat. The room seemed to become much brighter, and the atmosphere more relaxed. She felt as if she were at a party with her best friends. She began to laugh uncontrollably.

Giselle devoured her with her eyes. She stroked her cheek and said: “You’re a good girl.”

She led her through the crowd. Vampires swayed and groped each other as if an erotic madness created by an unknown drug guided their moves. Every few minutes, gas vented over their heads. Lex assumed it was the same substance that she breathed in.

They drifted to the back quarter of the club that appeared to be reserved for VIPs. Outside of a heavy door stood a tall vampire with very broad shoulders. Undoubtedly, he was a bouncer.

“Jacques, let us in.” Giselle commanded.

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The bouncer opened the door and stepped to one side.

Lex saw a bar, a glass table, a wide leather couch, and a pool table in the center of the room.

Giselle guided her to the couch. “Sit down, dear.”

Lex did so.

Giselle joined her.

Lex studied Giselle’s hands, nails like eagle’s claws, fingers long and thin. What was the feeling like when she scratched?

As if on command, her index finger came closer. She pulled it across her cheek, and her blood erupted to flow down her face. As if she had cut her with a knife.

It excited her.

Giselle’s face was near hers. Her lips touched the last drop of blood. The hot tongue slid up to her neck. Her breathing was getting heavier. Giselle’s hand gently covered her jaw and she sank her teeth into her neck.

Then she suddenly jerked, as if something had burned her with a hot iron. Her fingernails disappeared. It seemed that she had the vampire ability to pull in the fingernails at will.

“You! You belong to him! You carry the Darkness in yourself!”

She jumped up with an expression of horror on her face.

“What are you talking about?” Lex stared at her, surprised.

“You know that very well! Your blood ... it’s like opium, stronger than any drug available. You must be a Chosen One!”

Lex just nodded. “So what do we do now?”

“We? Not ‘we,’ my dear. You. I have to be far away from you. I don’t want to die yet.”

“But I need help.”

“Yes.” She looked around her as if searching for someone. “You will have to find another . . . helper.”

“Please,” she pleaded.

“Do not give me that look. Damn you! You are gouging out of me my weakness!”

“So can you help me?”

“What should I do with you? Can I do anything? Should I do anything? I don’t know.” She slid back from her. Gradually, she rose from the couch and, in a flash, appeared the bar counter. She reached for a decanter and poured a greenish drink into a glass.

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“Absinthe?” Lex asked her.

“Yes. Do you want one?”

“No, thank you.” She remembered her experience with the drink.

“Oh, Satan! How do I just always manage to get myself into these things?”
Giselle muttered to herself. “How could I help you?”

“What are you most experienced in? Something that has to be unusual?”

“Oh, dear, you don’t want to know.” She grinned almost salaciously.

“But I can imagine.”

“No, you can’t have guessed. Trust me.”

“Then probably I don’t even want to.”

Lex remained sitting, but now swept her gaze around the room.

Someone has refined tastes. Paintings by Van Gogh, Dali and Gauguin adorned the walls. *Interesting mix of styles.*

“But ... there is one thing.”

Lex looked around at her. “Yes?”

“I can help you learn to control the Darkness.”

“Really?”

“Correct.”

“But what do you know about the Darkness?”

“I know that it comes from an African tribe called Tiponomanga. A voodoo sorcerer created it and *infected* the *dark animals*. They were mostly cold-blooded ones. He collected five from each type. There were snakes, spiders, bats, various reptiles and even wolves. The Darkness was transmitted through the bite of these animals. Humans who were too weak to try and take control of it were pulled into irreversible madness. Often they turned into a creature like that animal. So he created a lot of *new species*. like vampires and werewolves.”

“Vampires and werewolves are of the same origin?”

“Somewhat.” She took a drink of the Absinth.

“But aren’t they mortal enemies?”

“One who carries the Darkness in himself is everyone's mortal enemy.”

“Why did the sorcerer create such evil?”

She emptied the glass and looked around the decanter. “Because he was confident he would be able to control it. He was hungry for power.”

“What happened to him?” Lex now wished that she had taken her offer of a drink, a glass of blood-red wine at room temperature.

“After one of the bats bit him, he created Santiago and Maximilian.”

“So he is actually the father of the first vampire?”

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“They call him that, yes.”

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So much new information. “But how can you help me?”

“As a teacher. You’ll have to travel into yourself.”

“I have to what?”

“The Darkness is always placed in one part of the brain. You need to find out where that part is and to temporarily lock it, so that it can’t spread.”

Lex’s head swam. “But what happens then? It must have consequences.”

“My dear, everything has consequences. The memories that are there will be lost forever. It will be as if this part of your life no longer exists.”

To forget forever what she kept in her memory -- that couldn’t happen, not with something she cared so much about. She couldn’t do it. But to allow the Darkness to prevail simply was not an acceptable alternative.

“All right, let’s do it.”

“I’m going to hypnotize you. Lie back.”

She lay down, lifting her feet onto the couch.

“Are you comfortable?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Hands next to your body.” Her tone was monotone and calm. “Turn your palms toward the ceiling. Take a deep breath, inhale through your nose, and breathe out through your mouth. Concentrate only on your breathing.”

Lex felt her heart rate slow down. “Now look into my eyes. Concentrate.”

Giselle’s eyes were two black spots in the gloom.

“You’re relaxed. Nothing else is important. Listen to my voice. Hands and feet are completely relaxed. Breathe calmly and evenly. Inhale-exhale. With each breath, you sink deeper and deeper into a pleasant feeling of tiredness and weight. Simply letting something happen -- letting something influence you. Your thoughts are disappearing. You feel relaxed.”

She really felt the weight. It was an enjoyable sensation -- sinking into the interior of the couch. She kept her eyes on Giselle’s eyes until her own eyelids became heavier and heavier.

“Close your eyes. Now you are completely relaxed, not tense at all. Nothing can distract you. Just listen to my voice. Whatever I say, you’re going to do. Any word from me is indelibly carved in your subconscious. And you will do as I command. You cannot and do not want to do anything but listen to me.”

She listened to her, giving in to the belief that she could do nothing other than whatever she said.

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“You can clearly feel the pleasant feeling that is expanding more and more and becoming more powerful. You will answer every question I ask you. Do you understand me?”

“Yes.”

“Now you're going to go into your mind. Do you see the door?”

She saw a door made of unstained oak. “I see it.”

“Walk toward it and open it.”

She touched the knob and slowly turned it. The door creaked as it slid open.

Beyond it was a vast space. It looked like a warehouse, filled with cabinets identical to those back in the school days where books and equipment for physical education were stored. These, however, were marked by year, month, and day.

“Now what do you see?”

“Cabinets.”

“Excellent. You have to find the one in which the Darkness is hidden and lock it up.”

“But how? There are so many.”

“Knowing the Darkness, it will choose one of the memories that are very valuable to you. Usually it is of a loved one. Perhaps a person who is gone, and you never want to forget. Think about who it might be.”

Her parents? In recent years, she missed them again. When she had a crisis in love, she needed her mother's advice. She knew her the best. They often communicated without words. Just one look at her and her mother knew that something was wrong. She walked to the cabinet that bore the date 25. 2. 2009.

Her first breakdown had come when she was twenty-two years old. After that, everything changed.

The cabinet was red. When she looked back, she saw that there were differences in the shades of color. Each color and shade evidently had something to do with the subject of the memory.

The metal cabinet door was closed, but the lock was hanging loose. She could not imagine what waited for her behind it. She might need to take a peek before fully committing herself.

She opened a part of her memory and suddenly found herself in that day. She saw herself waking up in the morning and doing the routine: shower, coffee, newspapers. She heard the phone ring. She saw herself crying again. Again, it hurt.

“Do you recognize something unusual?” Giselle’s soft voice asked her.

“I don’t. How does it manifest itself?”

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“You need to see something that does not belong there.”

“What do you mean by ‘something that does not belong there’?”

“A smell, sound, taste. A distraction that changes the entire memory.”

“Then this is not it.”

“The Darkness usually hides in a memory that is not very old -- an event that happened recently, or a person that you might have lost a couple of months ago.”

"Nicholas."

She directed her mind to the current year. The date was around 3.6. That was the day when Tiberius had appeared and killed John, the day she saw Nicholas the last time. The door was blue. She could not tell what it might mean. She opened it.

She found herself in the street, watching the fight between the two vampires. The very sight of the killer provoked anger in her.

“What's going on? Your body is starting to shake! You need to calm down! Breathe!”

She tried to bring it under control.

She saw what was changing the entire memory. A shadow. It was almost imperceptible, but it seemed as if it flowed along the street like an oil spill.

“There it is!” Lex said aloud.

“Excellent! Lock it!”

She rigged the lock and closed it. It had a combination of numbers, like the chain lock of a bicycle. She turned it and heard a loud "snap."

“I did it!”

“Great. You feel how the power returns to your body. Hands and feet are completely fresh, light, and mobile once again. You are determined and full of energy. I'm going to count to three and you're going to open your eyes. You will be fully awake and ready for action.

“One - two - three!”

She was again inside the club. Although she was awake, a languor seized her.

“Drink this.”

“What is it?”

“Don't worry; it is not a drug, just ordinary blood. You're exhausted. It is better to spend the night here.”

“Only if I don't bother you.”

“You won't.” Giselle said. “Do you mind sleeping next to me?”

“Why would I mind? I don't see why I would have to be afraid.”

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“Even better. Come with me.”

Giselle took her by the hand and led her into a bedroom where a bed had been covered by black satin. She loved it. The feeling of softness on the body, gentle like the caressing of a beloved person.

She turned on the music. *Enigma* came from the speakers: "*The Principles of Lust*."

What am I doing here? went through Lex’s head.

She tried to focus at least on one of her thoughts, to concentrate. However, the drug that she took seemed to work again. She had a feeling that pure fire coursed through her veins instead of blood. Above her upper lip droplets of sweat appeared. She was trembling, as if she had fever. Her heart was pounding so heavily that she could feel and hear it.

Giselle began to undress.

Slowly and seductively, she took off the black dress by pulling it over her head. She wore nothing but panties underneath. She swayed her hips in the form of the sign of infinity. Her nipples stood erect. She had luscious breasts. They looked like cute, yellow melons. She licked her lips, knowing what effect she could achieve with it.

Lex just watched. The desire to kiss Giselle came upon her.

She approached the bed, dropping at first one and then the other knee on the cover. She crawled to her.

Lex was confused. She had recovered from neither the hypnosis nor the drug.

Giselle’s face was the only thing she saw. Her lips were so perfect, full and soft. Lex couldn’t take her eyes from them.

Noticing how she looked at her, Giselle lowered her index finger to her upper lip and dragged it down the lower lip, separating her lips and revealing the sharp fangs. She could no longer resist and kissed her. Giselle’s tongue licked her. They kissed as if they knew that they had an entire eternity.

Lex started to take her clothes off, unbuttoning one by one button of her shirt. She threw the piece of clothing on the floor and took down her jeans, removing, at the same time, her panties. Lex put her hands to Giselle’s cheeks as she began to stroke her hair pulling it a little.

Giselle’s hands began to slide down again. She did this slowly. Very slowly. Each movement of a few inches seemed as if it had lasted for hours.

Lex was in a sweet agony. She fully surrendered to Giselle’s hands. Her breathing was becoming deeper. She felt she was getting wetter. Giselle’s hands

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came down over Lex’s shoulders to the chest, abdomen, and lips finally followed the path of her hand.

The long black hair tickled her body. The drumming of her heart now seemed to fill the entire room. Giselle’s wet tongue started making circles around the navel while her hands gently parted Lex’s thighs. Her fingers explored every inch of the most sensitive erogenous zone; she plunged into her with her tongue. Lex started to moan. The feeling was overwhelming and more intense than anything she had ever felt.

Giselle pulled out a scarf and cuffs. She tied her with cuffs so that her hands were above her head. It was not frightening. Actually, it led her into ecstasy.

She put the scarf over her eyes. The experience of the sensations of touch suddenly became ten times more intense. She unlocked the handcuffs and Lex acted as if she could not wait to be able to touch her. Giselle, however, dropped her hands to sides. Taking her by the waist she lifted her off the bed. Then she tied her hands again.

“What are you doing?” the intense erotic feelings drifted into fear.

“Relax ... yourself ... trust me.” Her whisper was still as gentle as a warm breeze.

For reasons unknown, she didn’t resist. She let her lift her. Giselle turned her against the wall and pushed her to it. The feeling of the cold wall on the hot skin gave her goose-bumps. Giselle hugged her from behind. She clung to her body.

Lex felt that her nails as she dragged her hands down her back, were now as the ones of a human, short and not dangerous. She was pushing her lips against her neck. But this time she did not drink; she merely kissed her. She was teasing her and finally penetrated deep inside of her with her fingers. Her movements became faster.

Lex gasped as sweat ran down her back. She moaned softly, and that seemed to excite Giselle and to inspire her to speed up her motions. Lex was feeling an intense heat, and she knew that at any moment she would have an orgasm.

“Last night...”

“Don’t worry.” Giselle smiled. “No one will ever know.”

“Thank you.”

“Oh, no. Thank you, dear. And now you have to go. I hope you will succeed in your plan, even if it means that I will have to die.”

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“You will not die. If you were evil, you wouldn’t have helped me at all, and you did much more than that.”

Giselle kissed her. “The learning process has now been completed. It’s time to start getting ready for your confrontation.”

“Goodbye,” Lex said in a solemn tone.

“Goodbye.” Giselle hugged her tightly. “Be careful!”

“I will,” Lex said. However, something felt wrong. When Giselle hugged her tightly this time, something in her eyes had changed; something in her mind was different.

Lex heard words -- not spoken words but words echoing in the back of Giselle’s head. She heard a conversation between a man and a woman, and one of the speakers was Giselle.

Lex waited. The male voice belonged to . . . what was it . . . the name?

Someone named Jacques appeared next to Giselle. Where were they? In the club somewhere?

“Catherine, how long will you play this game by pretending to be from France and deceiving young vampires?”

What? Lex thought. *What was this?*

“As long as one of them finally destroys my brother -- Maximilian,” said Giselle -- or Catherine. “I’ll never forgive him that he has turned me into a monster!”

Lex pulled back and stared at her.

“What is it?”

“Nothing,” said Lex. She turned away and walked toward the exit door of the club. “Good-bye . . . Catherine.”

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Once again on the street, Lex felt lost in the swirl of London’s version of mankind.

I am supposed to find my way back to Demetrius. But how?

It would be stupid to go back to the club to ask Giselle – Catherine as it were -- so she looked around. There had to be signs -- anything that might show her where she was exactly located. Morning was still hours away, so she didn’t have to feel rushed as well as lost.

She hoped to meet at least one passerby whom she could ask directions. No one, however, appeared.

Finally she decided to rely on her instinct. She headed in a direction that the voice in her head told her was correct. It was something that she could feel, just as she could hear the conversation in Giselle’s head that had taken place while she slept.

Rely on your intuition and instincts; they are your gifts. Soon she saw Charing Cross, which was teeming with travelers and passers-by. She thought of Isadora, her muse who had been waiting for her. It was not far from there to the residence of her newfound acquaintance. Two streets.

She quickened her pace. She thought it would be the wisest way to use the remaining time. Sparing with the Greek would be more than a good workout.

Demetrius greeted her at his door, wearing a robe that covered his pajamas. He grinned weakly in his half-awake state “Lex!”

“Hello, Demetrius.”

“It’s almost dawn.”

“I can be destroyed by the sun if I linger in it, or face it directly.”

“I had a feeling you’d come before the week was over.”

“I learned everything I wanted to learn. In fact, more than I wanted.”

As she thought of Catherine pretending to be Giselle, she again felt that strange sensation that had occupied her when she heard the conversation with Jacque re-played. Something was not complete in the picture before her. A piece was missing.

She tried to concentrate while Demetrius asked her about going early to Maximilian’s castle. Then she got it. Outside, around the corner, another person

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had been watching her arrival. That was the missing piece -- one that she was undoubtedly not meant to discover.

“Would you repeat your question? Sorry. I only heard part of it.”

“Does that mean you're going earlier to Maximilian’s castle?”

“No,” Lex told her friend. “I said a week. I still have four more days. Jacob said you knew some martial arts. Would it be a problem for you to train a little bit with me?” She looked to the windows to see if she could spot the curious onlooker.

“Of course not. Have you ever practiced jiu-jitsu?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“I’ll show you a few simple moves. You’ll easily remember. It’s good exercise. Otherwise, this skill is used solely for self-defense.”

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X

The next evening, the sun dropped slowly below the western horizon, leaving the Crescent moon alone on the stage.

Lex prepared herself by starting with the vest. She took the sword and swung it, practicing again the fastest and most effective ways to attack and defend.

Finally. Ready to go.

She called Demetrius. “I’m ready.”

“Yes, it is time.”

The wind was blowing harder that night as they followed the path through the dense forest, playing music by using branches and leaves as instruments. Tall trees in the darkness turned, in the imagination of most observers, into gruesome images. The howling of the wolves accompanied the haunting music.

The rustling around Lex made her more nervous. Shadows danced with the beat of the wind. She and Demetrius, she felt, were not alone, so she quietly suggested that the two of them only give hand signals. They didn’t want to attract more attention than they already had.

However, even the insects felt the arrival of the Queen and crawled out from their underground hideouts, descended from the treetops, and dropped from the air to watch her.

She hated them. She wanted to leave this area as soon as possible.

They had agreed that Demetrius would bring her to the village that was located deep in the forest. From there to the border was a few hundred yards.

“Goodbye. I’m sorry I was so rough to you when we met for the first time.”

“No problem dear. Be careful, and come back!”

He hugged her.

Reluctantly, she walked away from him.

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It was recognizable where Maximilian’s territory began. The trees in front of the castle were completely dry and dead, while outside the perimeter, they were green and strong, fecund and healthy.

Black and gray earth beneath her feet resembled sprinkled ashes.

The castle loomed large in her sight, exactly the same as in her dream.

Gray towers.

Dilapidated facade.

Black gate.

It was as if an invisible sign read: "If you care about life, don’t enter!" Not that any human would voluntarily enter the castle. She, however, had little choice.

There was no turning back; she could only continue, trying to block cautioning thought.

She grabbed the gate in an attempt to open it. It was locked.

“Damn!

As if her oath were some kind of password, the gate, with a loud creak, opened.

She passed through the gate and started toward the front entrance. She had only taken several steps before the gate slammed shut behind her.

Getting out of here alive won’t be an easy task.

Seemingly, fog materialized out of nowhere and swept around her, rubbing her feet like a cuddly cat.

In the courtyard she saw a fountain with stone figures of lions on four sides of it. From their mouths, clear water had flowed long ago, but now the only water at their feet was stagnant, green, and full of backwater.

The entry door was made of solid wood with a stone sign. That's how it could be guessed who actually resided there. It was a head of a bat, like the one that had bitten Lex in the catacombs.



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She pushed against the large door and was astounded when it opened without effort.

The corridor was draped with a red carpet. Lex was amused that it reminded her of the annual gala of the Academy Awards in America.

She walked along the carpet and stood still when she reached the end. Greeting her was a huge room that must, she decided, be used for balls. She could not help but admire its impressive size. On the wall, she saw an ominous image -- the figure of the vampire with his wings folded.

She had three options: the stairs on the left, the stairs on the right that led upward, or the carpeted corridor straight ahead. She chose the third option.

At the same time, in the main hall, with a luxurious throne, Nicholas searched for Maximilian. What he found, however, was a figure he wouldn't have expected in his wildest dreams.

Behind a crimson curtain stood a tall, thin man wearing a checkered suit. His hat had the same pattern as the long coat. He grinned as he saluted him with a cane containing a bat's head on its tip. "Hello, Nicholas."

"But how?" He was bewildered.

"Probably nothing is clear to you," he said. Then he laughed.

"No."

"You know what I taught you -- not to believe your eyes. They can always easily fool you.

"Yes. But what does all this mean?"

"Maximilian is my father, and I always worked for him." He made a circle in the air with his cane. "Still do."

"How is this possible? Weren't you against him? And how is it possible that you are alive?"

"You just saw that fight with the hunter, and I just yelled at you to run. You ran away. But I managed to escape. I decided that it was much more useful if you thought I was dead. And as far as my dear father, I've always liked to do the opposite of what he wanted me to. When he created me, he gave me seven drops of his blood. As a result, I became like this."

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“Why didn’t you contact me?”

“You were no longer needed.”

“But the story of good and bad vampires...”

“Hahahahaha. Fiction for adolescents. You really think there are ‘good’ vampires? We are all evil! All murderers!”

“But...”

“Nor are you different!”

“Why Razzien??”

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“Very simple. I like to play, that's why. Humans are naive creatures, totally pathetic. They are not good for anything except for killing. It makes me sick when I watch them in their eagerness to be different -- to be more beautiful, richer, better known. And yet... all those ‘problems’ that they complain about. They are greedy, self-centered, and corrupt. They don’t know how to appreciate the true value of life!”

“Why did you help me then?”

“I thought you had potential. But I was wrong. You're too soft.”

“Damn you!” he reached out to make a strike, but Razzien de-materialized, leaving behind only a cloud of mist.

The corridor that Lex entered was extremely wide, and its walls were decorated with stuffed human heads.

She wanted to wretch and her stomach hurt. She could not imagine what kind of being could be so cruel. Who would be able to do something like this?

Given that she was no longer a special friend of humans, but she would never do something like that.

Or would she? Could she?

Killing humans was one thing, but preserving the evidence in such a gruesome manner? Could she eventually end up like that, allowing the Darkness to prevail?

As long as she had a choice, she felt that she could not descend that far!

While she was sunken in her thoughts, the torches on the wall lit flared up.

She saw a throne

... and on it ...

Maximilian himself.

He bore the mien of someone arrogant, wealthy, sophisticated. On either side of the throne, a wolf lay quietly, half-awake and with disinterest as they regarded Lex.

“You've finally arrived. I waited so long. I needed to see you.”

Overwhelmed by her sudden confusion, Lex found him to be charismatic and attractive. She was paralyzed as she realized that her chest was swelling because of him and the area between her legs became wet. She felt her legs slowly failing her and she collapsed to her knees in front of him.

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She was speechless. Her anger was disappearing and she felt, at that moment, that she couldn't kill him. Neither would she see his true, ugly face.

She remembered John. And the anger was back. She started yelling at Maximilian. "You took everything in my life, now I'm going to destroy you!"

She grabbed the handle of the sword that she was wearing on her back, but she did not pull it out.

"Everything? I don't think so."

He laughed aloud as he slowly swept open the dark red curtain behind his back.

Lex was breathless. Her heart pounded abnormally fast. In front of her eyes, blackness set in. Behind the curtain, in a metal cage, beaten and bound, was Jason!

Beside him lay an unknown young man, unconscious. His face was turned towards her. At first, she saw him as a stranger, but, then after a long moment, something looked vaguely familiar.

"I'm sorry," Jason muttered through squinted eyes. He spat blood as he spoke. "I could not stay there alone, without you. If you die, I don't want to live."

Clearly, he had been tortured by the vampire. For hours, if not days. His face was swollen. He looked as if he were trying to focus on her.

"Woaaaaow, sooo romaaaaantic," scoffed Maximilian.

"Shut up!" Lex hissed through her teeth.

"Let's play a game," Maximilian suggested. He opened the cage and pushed Jason toward the wolves, and they immediately jumped to tear him apart.

"No!" Lex screamed.

Maximilian just laughed. "It is their first meal today."

The growling of the wolves as they were eating Jason's flesh was louder than their voices.

She unsheathed the sword, and, leaping forward, swung the large blade twice, gutting the bloodthirsty animals.

She halved them.

They were dead, but that was not enough. She continued to swing the blade at the lifeless bodies, even as blood splashed into her face. Finally, she just pushed them away from Jason who lay severely wounded, coated in blood.

In a matter of minutes, he would die. It was too late to react.

She bent over him.

Maximilian waved his cloak, and Lex flew away from Jason, as if he had pushed her with an invisible force.

"I want to see you suffer before you die." He laughed as he vanished.

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She could not move the fingers and felt that her left arm was broken. She tried to stand straight and realized that she had also sprained her leg when falling.

Regeneration, she thought.

She needed blood.

She focused on Jason. He was watching her with longing and love.

Lex crawled slowly toward him, gritting in terrible pain, but she wanted to come to him, to touch him, to caress him, just one last time.

When she reached the place where he lay, he was pale and shaking.

She managed to sit up and leaned his head on her chest.

“I’m sorry,” he wheezed, his blood dripping from his mouth. “I know that this is it for me, that I am ... I am...”

She leaned her index finger to his mouth, showing him that it was unnecessary to say anything.

“You are wounded,” he mumbled, barely able to move his head. “You have to drink my blood so you can regain power.” His deathly pallor now occupied his entire face.

She needed to do something but could not decide on what.

“Please, I’ll be sure to die,” he whispered, “but you can avenge me. Promise me you’ll kill him.”

It was the most difficult decision of her life.

“I love you.”

These words coursed through like a river breaking through a levee. They testified about grief, pain, suffering, thirst for revenge, and the uncontrollable rage of a monster that flowed through her veins like toxic mercury.

Maybe it was the right time to free the Darkness.

She stroked him on the brow and leaned to bite his neck. She eagerly sucked the blood.

Jason took another deep breath, looked deep into her eyes and gasped: “I love you!”

There was no time to cry. She was livid. Only one thought consoled her: she and Jason would now be together and never die. She drank his blood.

She would carry him forever.

She knew that her eyes were turning yellow, knew that she was becoming the monster that wanted one thing only. Revenge! Revenge for Jason, Tom, John, and for this life that she had never wanted.

She was boiling with hatred that wanted to spill over and destroy all around her.

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The young man inside the cage watched what was happening. “Lex ...”

She saw his eyes were full of tears.

“Yes? And you? Do we know each other?”

“Oh my God! What have they done to you? Nicholas. I’m Nicholas. Don’t you remember me? Don’t you recognize me?”

“Honestly, the name doesn’t tell me anything, but I feel like we should know each other.”

“Know each other? I taught you most of the things you know about vampires. My own son died to save us.”

“Your son?”

“Yes, my son John. Please don’t say that you don’t remember him either.”

“John? You are John’s father? Of course I remember him, but I don’t remember that he had a father.”

“I can’t believe this is happening!”

“Go home, Nicholas.” She wrenched the bars apart.

“I can’t. I’ve got a few more loose ends to tie. After all, I never had the courage to confess that I love you.”

“What?”

“Yes, Lex, I love you.”

She waited the length of time that it would take for Jason’s blood to rejuvenate her.

She again grabbed the bars, this time to haul herself to a standing position. She could only use one arm and the pain was nearly unbearable. She tried to stand and even tried to walk. “I, I really don’t know what to tell you.”

“You don’t have to respond. I followed you the last few months, to protect you as much as I could. I was sure you’d be safer if you were alone. Maximilian’s people were looking for you. They’ve almost destroyed the shelter for vampires. However, I managed to stop them. I wanted to contact you, but I couldn’t bear your look after John’s death. I was weak in front of you. It took me a while to get my strength back.”

“I understand that. Jason’s blood is giving me back my strength.”

Her memories were blocked. She knew that it was John who taught her how to kill all of the humanity in her -- that it had been he who had talked about the origins of vampires and Isadora, the muse. She remembered that on that fateful day she was walking with John when Tiberius, Maximilian’s servant, attacked them and killed him without mercy. Then she had met Jason, who had saved her from certain death.

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“Do you want to fight with me against Maximilian?” she asked finally.

“Yes.”

“Do you have a weapon?”

“I won’t need any.”

“Then come, follow me.” She gripped the sword, and, as her strength continued to build, found her to the room on the first floor.

He followed her into an empty room. All she noticed was a figure on the wall, a painting vividly showing the nature of what they represented -- their true face: a vampire with their fangs bared.

She shuddered. Was it possible that she was just one of these monsters?

She heard something moving behind her.

From the shadows Maximilian appeared. “There you are, my dearest Queen. Where have you been so long?”

“Mock me, you monster!”

“Oh, thank you for the compliment. I’ve tried hard to make it to that status.”

Nicholas took his position beside her.

“Ah, you brought reinforcement. Well. this is getting interesting. Razzien was right.” He disappeared, but in the next moment he appeared behind her, putting his arms around her waist.

She freed herself from the embrace as if he were infected with a disease that was transmitted by touch. She felt the heat of a flame ablaze in her eyes. She pushed him away.

“Why are you fighting so much? The two of us are a perfect pair to rule over the world. We can just eliminate this vampire and...”

“No! Never! I’d rather die than have to live with you!”

“I see. Well. I can grant that wish if that’s what you want.”

He waved his hand. The curtains were on fire. The flames ate the heavy cloth hungrily and grew in intensity. It seemed to rage like a beast, snarling and belching out smoke.

Then he raised his hand, and Lex found herself in the air. She looked down and saw that she was at least a foot from the floor. Maximilian jerked his hand down, and Lex felt the hardness of the parquet. She fell on her left hand. Again. She tried to move, but the severity of the pain returned.

Nicholas stood there as nailed to the floor. He didn’t move.

“Help me!” yelled Lex.

“I’m sorry, love; your friend is under hypnosis.”

Maximilian stood, visibly overwhelmed by his own success.

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“Nicholas! Nicholas!” Each exertion only resulted in a minimal movement.

“Why don’t you stop this? Accept your fate; I don’t want to kill you.”

“You have nothing else left!”

“Ah. You think so? Well. We will see.”

She fixated her gaze and closed her eyes.

When she opened them, she realized that she had been hypnotized. The memory storage. Surrounded by cabinets.

Maximilian stood in front of the locked cabinet. He had just broken the lock.

“Nooo!” she shouted.

A flood wave of memories overcame her.

Nicholas. That evening he was with her. Tiberius had wounded him and left. And Jason took her away. Nicholas. Her first teacher. Friend. Brother. How could she be so blind as not to notice how much he loved her?

Images appeared so clear as if she had just experienced them, but all of a sudden ... emptiness.

She opened her eyes.

Nicholas was still standing motionless.

She came to him. She petted him on the head, looked deeply into his blue eyes... and sank her teeth into his neck!

"Perfect! Perfect!" Razzien was applauding. He was again in his small underground empire. In the catacombs of Maximilian's castle.

"This has to be checkmate."

He did not resist but just emitted one tear.

She could read his thoughts. He had to accept defeat. He shouldn't have left her by the vampire hunter; he should have been braver to admit his love. But now it was too late. Darkness had taken control of her.

Vampire blood was her strongest aphrodisiac and it awakened her appetite.

When Nicholas collapsed at her feet, lifeless, she approached Maximilian.

That fascinating King of darkness, the powerful ruler of all vampires, he could just be hers. She stood face to face with him -- his long hair, full lips.

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She leaned forward and kissed him.

He could not believe she was finally his. Again. The King and Queen together. They kissed long, passionately.

She separated her lips from his, smiled, and sank her teeth into his neck.

“You insatiable bitch!” he cried out.

But she did not let go. She greedily sucked the blood that was even stronger than Nicholas’s.

He resisted, and finally managed to push her away.

For a moment he was gone, but soon afterwards appeared at the other end of the room. His power had weakened. He could no longer teleport as far as he wanted.

“Damn!” He raged. He swore. He screeched like a wounded animal.

She stepped toward him, and he disappeared as if he turned to air.

Her eyes, she felt, were black again.

She remembered the lesson she learned from Jason.

Could she resist the Darkness for a few minutes a last time?

She closed her eyes, focusing on the sense of hearing. Again she heard the brazen voice.

“Ah yes, I almost forgot to ask: how is your dear, what was it. James? Jack? John?”

“Jasoon!” she shouted out.

Without opening her eyes, she swung the sword in the direction from which the voice was coming.

She heard Maximilian gasp in surprise. He could not avoid the hit, and his right hand flew across the room. It reached the flames that was now engulfing the curtains, spreading everywhere.

Leaving him no time to regain his composure, Lex opened her eyes and swung again, this time causing Maximilian's left hand to separate from his wrist and join the right. Blood from his torso was spurted in the air and onto the floor. It created a pool beneath their feet. He tried to regenerate, to turn into a bat and fly away.

However, Lex turned and shot a blow as if with a baseball bat, striking Maximilian in the middle of his neck. He looked at her, completely confused. His head, from the power of the hit, turned around his neck, then fell and rolled to Lex’s legs.

The fire that burned the curtain as well as the flame in her eyes, wiped the last trail of the bloody reign of the tyrant Maximilian van Santoferus.

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His ashes, the only proof that he had existed, his last remnants of evil, Lex threw out the window, watching the wind carry them away.

"Noooooooo! This can not be true!" He angrily pushed the figure from the chessboard. The Black King lying, while the white Queen remained standing on the board. He had to turn her to black. Hypnotize her again. The Darkness will completely take over her mind and she will become a black Queen. "

Lex climbed the winding steps almost to the top of the castle. She walked out onto the terrace, sat on the fence, and directed her look towards the east.

Her eyes were shining. She thought of Jason and Nicholas. Both of them loved, both of them lost. She didn't want to lose anymore. She was exhausted. This game was over, and she would decide the aftermath.

She pulled out her silver locket and stared at it. She remembered how many times it helped her to calm down. She began to sway it from side to side. Self-hypnosis.

Slight redness appeared on the horizon. The golden, glowing orb was slowly peaking beyond the hill, illuminating the environment and giving the land a pleasant appearance.

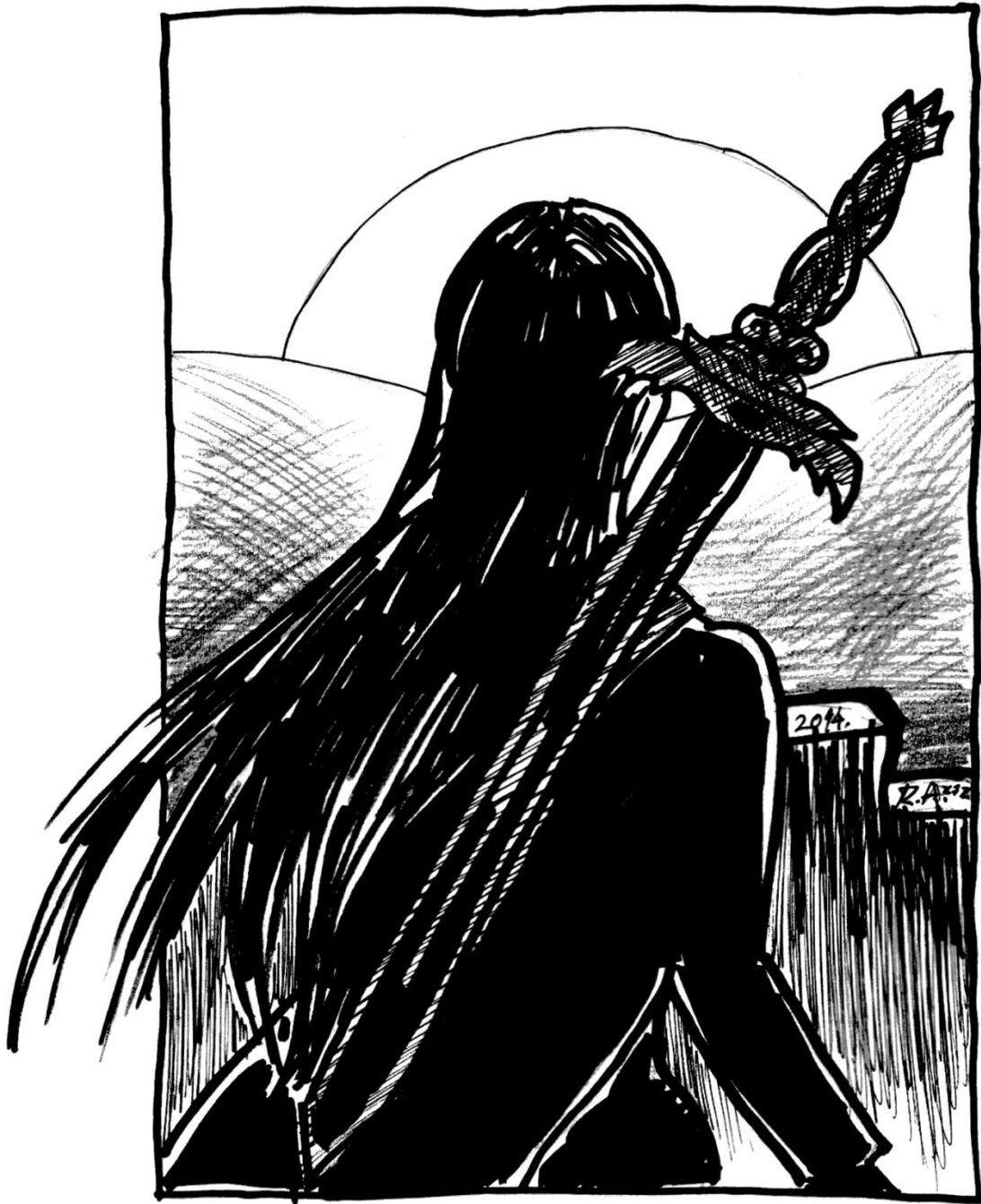
Nothing looked terrible any longer, not the forest nor the castle.

The rays touched her. The sound of the morning drove away the silence. Pictures of life passed through her head while she was slowly wiping out one by one. They disappeared, going to an unknown destination. A last, blank stare into the distance remained. Although she had forgotten everything that happened to her in life, she was sure that it was the most beautiful sunrise she had ever seen.

She had a feeling that this one belonged to her alone. The sun came out just for her.

In the first place it was her favorite because she loved it. She wouldn't lose it...

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Cover Art by: Valzheimer Studio - <http://valzheimer.info> - Verica Alzheimer

Proofread & Revised by: Joe Gande

Illustrations by: Relja Antić

Editing & Design: Radoslav Slavnić

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