

# VEINGLORIA

The Beltraine Sisterhood

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# PROLOGUE

## Mother Meirothea's Appeal To The Magisterium

### *To The Establishment of the Beltraine Sisterhood*

There was once a time when the sun beamed down upon the city of Nyxhaven. It was in a glorious time when the hearts of men held good and evil in equal measure, along with all the gray areas in between. The dead would respect the grave, whittling down to bone and dust as time prescribed, and the living would live out their natural lives, seeking happiness in whatever form they chose. There was a time when Nyxhaven was normal.

That was a long time ago. Now the Sun is black. Only the Moon glows, cycling through twenty-four hours of varied luminosity. Yet unrepentant of their use of dark magic that widowed the moon, the denizens of Nyxhaven personified its phases with names dredged up from the same grimoires responsible for the sun's blackening. The Opalesque 'Opal' Moon was made to represent the period of the dawning sun, the Ashveil Moon to usher in midmorning, the bright Emberglow Moon likened onto noon, and the cold, unseen Ebenveil Moon to reign over the sleepful night.

Mankind had become so enslaved to their obsessions that they sought to fashion their vain pursuits with nothing but sheer willpower, their manic will birthing magic to enslave the laws of Physics to do what they wished. Like plagues witches and warlocks transformed from mankind by spells cast at the witching hour, greed in their eyes, delusions of godhood imprinted on their spirits. Vampires conquered the principle of death by consuming lifeblood

from the living. And Lycans rose from unholy communion with the moon to transform into beasts.

So it was for ages, these beings finding solidarity in the fact that they were odd...perhaps even labeling themselves divine. They respected each other's peculiarities as beings who transcended human-ness. But this too changed. As vile as their circumstance already was, it decayed into more morbidness, for the aspirations of each faction clashed with the other, a foreshadowing of the strife to spread among them. Now witches, vampires, and werewolves found themselves locked in a fierce battle with each other. It was a war for supremacy, each making it their life's work to eliminate the other, to claim Nyxhaven as theirs.

Hence the Beltraine Sisterhood, a citadel standing in contrast to these bloody ideals. It is to be an institution for witches whose mission espouses restoring and maintaining harmony among factions and honing young witches into upstanding citizens of Nyxhaven.

## CHAIN OF GLORY

Gloria screamed as they channeled life from her. Hot streams of energy tore from her like limbs being amputated. She couldn't see the frenzy on the grounds of the Beltraine Sisterhood due to the tears and smoke distorting her view. But the chaotic atmosphere was driving her insane. The entire Sisterhood watched as the ceremony progressed, and Gloria felt as though she was the enemy amid the witches as she wailed. No less than thirteen witches encircled her with their hands clasped, each taking from her something highly personal and invaluable: her life. They called it the Chain of Glory: the formation used for ritual killing.

**“SALVIA LUMINA! SALVIA LUMINA! SALVIA LUMINA!”**

Purple fire gashed in the space before the witches, pitching like an angry spirit at the vampire, engulfing him.

As the only passive Channeler in the Beltraine Sisterhood, Gloria's position was not a part of the chain itself, but inside it— the most dangerous place to be.

She hated her role within the Sisterhood. Gloria would have preferred if she were a normal witch, but she sucked at magic. A light breeze blew the smoke to the east, giving her a clear view of the real enemy of the night. Bound from head to toe on a long cedar log at the center of the Chain of Glory, was an unfortunate

creature. A mere six feet from her, the vampire was the subject of the night's execution. He thrashed as purple fire lashed his skin, his screams adding to the heady chorus dominating the space. His once pale skin was now burnt black. Gloria knew it wasn't long before the magical fire destroyed him. Another incantation ripped through the cold air, cast by one of the witches to her right, and stoking the fire afresh. Gloria fell to her knees as the spell taxed her body and mind, sweat washing her face. Suddenly, her stomach lurched, vomiting before she could get it away from her body. Let it be over, she thought, gazing at the dying vampire.

### **Die already!**

As her eyes crossed from the pain, the creature made a slow gesture — a stark contrast to its previous thrashing. The vampire stretched its fiery hand toward her as if begging for mercy. The movement was so strange that Gloria froze, her wailing quickly halting. The next second saw the outstretched hand flaking into ashes, before scattering into Nyxhaven's blackness. The remainder of his body followed, disintegrating into nothingness. A moment of silence passed: the only sounds were the trees rustling in the surrounding Shadowgrove forest. The purple flame extinguished with a crack of finality. With the vampire now banished, the young women of Beltraine erupted into deafening roars and cheers, while Gloria collapsed on her knees, wheezing.

Faint and spent, she willed herself to remain conscious, her mind flickering like a candle in the wind. The cheers from the girls seemed distant and insignificant as her brain strained under the pressure of pain and exhaustion. Gloria lowered her throbbing body to the damp earth. No sooner had she done this than she caught sight of something peculiar. Perched atop the cedar log on which the vampire had just been vaporized, was a large raven plucking at its plumage. Gloria squinted to ensure she wasn't

hallucinating: Ravens and crows were supposed to have been extinct in Nyxhaven for more than a century. It resembled a shadow, almost camouflaged in the obsidian night. And Gloria might not have seen the thing had it not been sporting forbidding red eyes directed squarely at her. She didn't believe in omens, but the timing of it unnerved her. And just as she was about to observe the crowd to determine if they saw what she saw, the creature took flight, flapping silently out of sight beyond the Shadowgrove forest. A dark thought intruded upon her weary mind: what if the vampire had transformed into a raven? What if he wasn't actually dead? Gloria shoved the thought from her mind, refusing to further depress herself with dark conspiracies.

From the ground, she caught sight of two girls weeping among the cheering onlookers. Gloria would have smiled and told them she was okay if she had the energy. Their names were Faelina and Osara— her only friends at Beltraine. They were the only two reasons why her time at the Sisterhood thus far wasn't total hell. She thought of crawling toward them — away from the witches who had comprised the now broken Chain of Glory, but she now noticed one of the three Headmistresses of Beltraine approaching them from behind the cedar log. Dressed in a white tunic, the old woman's movement was so graceful that she seemed to float. Gloria forgot her pain in awe of this rare sighting of one of the three nun-like Mothers. The cheering ceased dramatically as the Mother approached, the sisters similarly stunned.

Mother Meirothea, the wizened Mother of Mercy, stepped into their midst. Even from her grounded position, Gloria could see the lines and creases on Mother Meirothea's face. The old witch regarded the sisters with her shrewd black eyes. Her fulsome silver hair defied her age of almost three centuries, taking on an almost magical sheen in the moonlight.



“Ladies of Beltraine,” she began, her voice soft but grave. “Allow me to express how proud I am to see you execute the mission of Beltraine. The hard work we do here nightly is to get the beasts off the streets of Nyxhaven...one by one, until true peace is restored to this blessed land.”

Gloria managed to prop herself up a bit to get a better view of Mother Meirothea. The words proceeding from the Mother of Mercy seemed to soothe her, the searing pain in her back and head fading. Her new vantage point revealed something she hadn't seen as the old witch spoke. Floating beside Mother Meirothea was a pearlescent, ghost-like figure, which Gloria knew to be a vestal. Vestals were wraith-like beings who protected Beltraine in some capacity. There were three in total, each vestal the creation of one of the three Mothers. The vestal beside Mother Meirothea was Paracelsus, who was usually stationed at the Beltraine gate to admit allies and annihilate foes. Each vestal possessed a unique ability bequeathed upon them by the Mother who created it. Paracelsus had the power of cauterizing light, an offshoot of a greater power held by Mother Meirothea, that burned anyone subjected to it with deadly, purifying light. Meirothea continued.

“To also express their satisfaction with what you women managed to do tonight, Mothers Lysandra and Crimsonia invite you all to the chapel in thirty minutes, where we will discuss some very important matters concerning Beltraine.” The Mother paused, her face taking on a graver aspect.

“I'm afraid that though the banishing of that vampire was a victory for the witches, there are other things at play which threaten us.” Suddenly, Mother Meirothea's eyes lowered to where Gloria lay. Gloria's breath caught in her throat as Meirothea nodded at her.

“I must commend our resident Channeler. She was the hero tonight— or should I say— heroine. Without her, we could not have hoped to banish that bloodsucker. Remind me of your name, dear?”

Gloria’s mind went blank for a second as all eyes found her. It was only now that the embarrassment of being on the ground in front of so many persons dawned on her. Finally, she opened her mouth to speak, but when she did, no words came out. Another attempt had her releasing a rasping gasp. By now, the silence was awkward. Gloria had no more energy to even attempt her name again.

“Are you dumb?” A voice mumbled beside her. The voice belonged to Cassandra, a fellow first-year whom Gloria disliked.

“Mother asked you your name, idiot.”

Finally, a voice rang out. It was Meirothea’s.

“Gloria, is it? How could I forget? Of all the admissions I’ve conducted for young women entering Beltraine, yours was one of the most interesting. I see you’re too exhausted to even say your name. Poor soul. I shall not forget your name again, especially after the service you’ve just provided for the Sisterhood.”

With that, the crone turned and went back in the direction she came. Her vestal, Paracelsus wafted to the main gate. Gloria watched in her weakened state as the sisters scattered to their respective dorms to prepare for the meeting with the Mothers in the chapel. Cassandra glowered at her.

“At least you finally made yourself useful to the Sisterhood, huh? Still pathetic though, never forget it.”

Gloria had no energy to argue. She watched as Cassandra ran toward her friends, Timea and Philippa. Together, they modeled off toward Dorm L. A minute later, Gloria's friends, Faelina and Osara helped her up.

"You okay?" Faelina asked as she flung Gloria's limp arm over her shoulder.

Gloria nodded despite feeling terrible. The pain had been gradually returning since Mother Meirothea left.

"Of course, she's not okay," Osara chimed. "Try having your life-force stolen from you. Where do you get so much energy to give anyway, Glo'?"

Gloria and Faelina exchanged quick stares, but none of them answered.

"Anyway, we need to get ready for chapel quickly," Osara continued. "We don't have much time. Do you think you'll be well enough in time for chapel, Gloria? I mean, Philippa's a healer, so if we can get her to—"

"No chance," Faelina interjected. "Our hatred toward Cassandra extends to her people. Besides, that arrogant bitch wouldn't let us have her anyway, control freak that she is."

Gloria smiled at Faelina's definitive response. It was what she would have said if she could speak. Although the first-years of Beltraine weren't taught magic in a structured way, some—through their relations with second-years—had learned to cast simple spells. Cassandra was a standout among the first-years, able to wield complex magic with little practice. Besides Gloria, Cassandra was the only first-year qualified enough to be involved

in the Chain of Glory. Gloria only made it because she was the only Channeler at Beltraine.

They walked by an eight-foot-high bronze statue of the three-faced Crown Goddess, the deity the Headmistresses worshiped. Gloria glanced at it as her aides wheeled her by. The towering graven image of the goddess gave her the creeps. Just then, a shadow moved across Gloria's darkening eyes, jolting her. She levered her head upward, new pain rocketing through her.

“That ugly thing!” Osara exclaimed. “Scares the crap out of me every single time!”

Gloria felt Faelina shivering beside her. Floating above them toward the Shadowgrove forest was the vestal of Crimsonia, Mother of Justice. Out of the three vestals, Gloria considered this one, known as Obsidia, to be the most hideous of all the Mothers' spectral creations. Exuding a putrid scent that oftentimes preceded her wherever she went, Obsidia was more or less a black ghost with deep gashes on its body resembling torn cloth. To Gloria, she seemed less like a vestal and more like an undead being summoned from somewhere dark and evil. An aspect of Mother Crimsonia, Obsidia was tasked with protecting Beltraine from the inside and enforcing the rules. Of all the vestals, Obsidia's power was most feared among the sisters since it could entice souls from bodies, a part of an elaborate ability of its creator, Mother Crimsonia.

The three entered Dorm L. Gloria felt the immediate warmth of the enclosure caressing her frame. A pair of mean-looking gargoyle statues leered at them from either side. Inside their mouths were softly burning candles, the only source of light illuminating the expansive hall. Gloria heard a frenzy upstairs in the rooms where the sisters were preparing for the meeting with the Mothers. With Osara by their side, Faelina helped Gloria past dusty gothic

tapestries of old witches and wizards— a combination of past students and notable sorcerers from the past. The journey up the winding staircase seemed to last an eternity as Gloria wondered about the implications of possibly missing the meeting in the chapel due to her injured state.

“What do you think the meeting will be about?” Osara inquired behind them. “It’s been ages since we met with a Mother, not to mention all three of them at the same time!”

Faelina shrugged. “ Maybe something to do with the beasts killing people in the city.”

“Vampires?” Osara said.

Gloria’s body twitched. She remembered the vampire they’d just killed, and the raven perched on the log. She was about to ask them both if they saw it, but she remained quiet as the final vestal floated past them on its way down the stairs. The creation of Mother Lysandra, the Mother of Light, Gloria thought the vestal known as Aurelius was the tamest of the three vestals. Though ghostly, its aspect was more immaterial— like vapor with a consciousness. Its wispy essence seemed slow and harmless. Gloria regularly wondered why the vestal belonging to the strictest of the Mothers (Mother Lysandra), was the least frightening. Aurelius was responsible for order in all the Dorms, moving through each structure like a benevolent spirit.

Once they reached the landing of the second floor, the path opened into two narrow aisles astride a second flight of stairs leading to the third floor. The third floor housed the second-year sisters.

“I’ll see you two later,” Osara said. “I hope you feel well enough to make it to the meeting, Gloria.”

“I probably won’t make it,” Gloria said, pleased that her voice had returned. “If not, we’ll meet in our room when you get back?”

Osara nodded before strolling off down the leftmost aisle—the beta aisle. Faelina ushered Gloria to the penultimate room on the alpha aisle. Once inside, Gloria made a beeline for the bed, lusting after sleep. Faelina watched her as she flung herself upon the plush vermilion comforter. It was a bad idea, for her body flared with eye-watering agony. When her pain had somewhat subsided, she noticed Faelina had come over to her bed.

“You have to do it now, or I’ll be late for that meeting,” Faelina whispered.

They stared at each other in silence for a while before Gloria spoke.

“You don’t have to...” she began.

“Whatever, Gloria. You need the energy. We both know you won’t recover if you don’t.”

With that, she lowered herself toward Gloria, who felt her mouth salivating. She knew she couldn’t resist even if she tried. Not a second spared, Gloria bit Faelina’s neck. Faelina moaned as her blood spilled into Gloria’s mouth, writhing as Gloria held her head in place as she fed.

## THE MESSENGER

Located at the peak of a desolate hill in the easternmost part of Nyxhaven, the main building of the Blackcross castle rose more than three hundred feet into the starless sky. Like a gothic citadel made of charred bricks and greasy clay mortar, the building sported a rather unique pair of protrusions at the sides of the castle. The pair of bat wings were given form and strength by tons of reinforced steel, showing no signs of wear for well over a couple of centuries. To complete the dark aesthetic of the Blackcross castle was a pitch-black wrought-iron gate, infused with an obsidian-onyx mixture, which made the gate glimmer under the moonlight. The castle was the home of the oldest vampire family in Nyxhaven—the Blackcross family.

In the guest room of the Blackcross mansion, a man took his last, gurgling breath. The image he saw before his soul departed was a pale, scarred individual with deep-set scarlet eyes. Draven Blackcross let the corpse fall with a thud on the carpeted floor, the body half drained of blood. Wiping his mouth, he stepped over the body and opened the window. A strong wind immediately brought a scent of pine to his nostrils, stirring the leaves of the great Oak in the center of the manor. Draven gazed at the full moon, stealing occasional glances behind him toward the locked door. His confidante was late; Draven intended to get this meeting over with quickly so as not to be discovered in the Blackcross guest room.

Lately, he'd been thinking about the hierarchy of power among the four great vampire houses. His Blackcross family stood at the top, seeing that he held the title of Vampire King—a title

conferred upon the leader of the entire vampire fraternity in Nyxhaven. But lately, he'd felt his reign slipping. He was slowly losing the trust of each leader of the other houses. The Nightcreed house was next in rank, and though he and its leader, Owl Nightcreed generally saw eye to eye, his wife, Carmine plotted against him. Draven sighed. The truth was he didn't much care what the members of the other vampire houses thought of his leadership. His anxiety was based on something else entirely. Echoes from his dark past were suddenly streaming into the present time, threatening to not only unseat him but to banish him forever. Of course, Draven couldn't let that happen. He would do everything in his power to preserve himself and his power.

He walked over to the mantelpiece and dimmed the light from the crystal chandelier. As he did so, a soft 'whoosh' told him his confidante had arrived. A bird had perched on the window sill, resembling a shadow with a consciousness. It leaped onto the carpet as their eyes met. The raven cawed softly, before transforming into a man with long, greasy hair. Clad in a well-tailored, deep-crimson velvet coat, he smiled, baring accentuated canines.

"I hate to be kept waiting, Crowe," Draven spat, advancing on him.

Crowe gave a slight bow, his eyes on the corpse.

"How did he taste?" The vampire turned the man's face over with his polished shoe. "Not a trace of juice left in him."

"Update me on your findings," Draven said brusquely.

Crowe was silent for a while as if gathering his thoughts.



“Well, I managed to breach the Sisterhood. Took me a while, but it turns out your theory was correct: The Alph3tenory Brotherhood isn’t as protected as Beltraine. I managed to slip through the magical protection there without much effort.”

“Good.” Draven nodded. “Therefore, we can form a plan to infiltrate in number, overwhelming them.”

“Not exactly,” Crowe countered. “Remember, my gift is special among vampires. I only succeeded because they made no magical provisions for ravens, which I assume they think are extinct. Even then, I was still discovered.”

“You were caught!?” Draven exclaimed, his voice rising a couple of octaves. “Then, what happened?”

“They burned me with magical fire,” Crowe explained. “I would have been killed had it not been for a lucky detail in how they tried to kill me. But the mission was a success, I think. You wanted to find out about the scope of the protection surrounding the institution. Well... it is elaborate, but penetrable.”

“And the Mothers?” Draven tensed as he waited for Crowe’s reply.

He fastened the topmost button on his coat as a cold breeze streamed through the open window, fluttering the curtains.

“Alive,” he whispered. “I only saw one though.”

“Then how did you determine they are all alive if you admit to only seeing one?” Draven inquired.

“The vestals. I saw them all. I know a vestal will cease to exist if the Mother who created it dies.”

Draven nodded. “Yes, that is my understanding from what the leader of the Moonshadow house told me.” Draven regarded Crowe, feeling slightly disappointed by what he told him thus far.

“And is that all you discovered?”

Crowe emitted a mirthless cackle.

“Aren’t you the least bit curious about how I actually managed to survive the fire they used to try to kill me?”

“Don’t waste my time, Crowe! I asked you for information, not riddles!”

Crowe offered a pained smile, his teeth and red eyes glinting.

“You see, the witches used a Channeler to pull their energy from.”

“And?”

“It turns out,” Crowe continued, “the Channeler is a vampire.”

Draven was silent for a long while. Crowe’s last revelation was the reason he’d sent him to Beltraine in the first place. For the sake of his continued leadership for decades to come, Draven wanted to eliminate all potential threats. With the mention of a vampire at Beltraine, Crowe had all but confirmed a suspicion he’d had for some time now. It turned out that his greatest threat happened to be from a source dating back to his childhood, someone spoken about in a prophecy he took for granted until now.

“A vampire at Beltraine!?” Draven exclaimed, feigning surprise. “Under the eyes of the three most powerful witches in Nyxhaven who hate vampires to the core? That’s interesting... very interesting. How did you determine she is a vampire?”

Crowe sneered.

“My many talents include aura detection. I saw traces of the dark gift inside her. She is definitely one of us. The question of how she’s avoiding detection by those Mothers is baffling to me as well.”

But Draven wasn’t listening to what Crowe was saying. His mind had gone off on a tangent of thought when his confidante mentioned that the vampire was a Channeler.

“Crowe,” he said, his head hung low, deep in thought. “Have you ever heard of a vampire also being a Channeler? Seems almost paradoxical to me.”

Crowe smiled. “That’s the best question you’ve asked tonight. There is only one other time in history when that happened. That is why I was late in coming here tonight. I was doing some research. I—”.

Draven never got to hear what Crowe said next, for he blazed toward the door. He’d recalled exactly where he’d heard of a person being both a Channeler and a vampire, and he was a fool if he sat idly by while such a mythic entity bloomed until it could kill him. Draven intended to crush Beltraine before they crushed him. But he had to plan like the devil to pull it off. After all, he wasn’t only fighting against the witches, but the other vampire houses as well.

## THE SCAR

Gloria decided to skip the meeting with the Mothers. Though Faelina's blood had revived her from the taxing channeling hours prior, she could not conjure up the resolve to face the Mothers with blood churning inside her stomach. Having spent almost a year at Beltraine had made her somewhat used to hiding her dark secret. But due to the Mothers' rare appearances to date, Gloria hadn't gotten comfortable with facing them just yet. She gazed up at the chandelier above her bed, wondering what the meeting was about. Her mind wandered to the vampire she'd help to kill, shuddering as she recalled his final gesture— stretching his hand toward her as though begging for mercy.

An odd sensation about her midriff pulled her from her reminiscing. Throwing the vermilion sheet off, Gloria raised her sweaty shirt. What she saw disgusted her. Covering her navel, extending radially about three inches from it, was a mysterious scar no one knew about. Black with wrinkled skin that prickled even now, she had no idea how she got it. Her intuition told her it was related to her vampirism— a condition she didn't know how she acquired. Slowly, she ran her hand over the rough skin, frustrated about how little she knew about herself, her past, and her vampirism. Gloria's memories before being enrolled at the Beltraine Sisterhood were almost non-existent. Now and again, fragmented images from her former life washed up in the form of nightmares, which led her to believe her past was filled with pain and blood. It was almost as though her memories were somewhat altered the second she came here. Gloria understood the Mothers

sometimes did just that if they thought it was necessary, though all the sisters she was acquainted with here had their memories intact. The curtains fluttered beside her bed from a gentle breeze. Through its teal fabric, Gloria watched the waning moon, its luminescence struggling to pierce through shawls of dark clouds. The gong struck atop the chapel, its low, mournful note sending shivers down her spine. The sounding of the gong signified the moon's transition from one phase to the next. Here in Nyxhaven, the moon wasn't just a celestial body, it dictated their very existence. In each of the four phases, lasting six fleeting hours, the moon beamed a unique ambience and luminosity. They'd just entered the Ebenveil Moon, which was bedtime. The characteristic cold of Ebenveil hit her immediately as Gloria watched as the moon went black.

As she eagerly awaited Faelina's return, so she could hear what the Mothers had to say, Gloria stared out into the night, bored. Her eyes settled on the top half of the Alph3tenory Brotherhood's chapel. The remainder of the building was hardly visible through the dense foliage of the out-of-bounds Shadowgrove forest. The spires jutted toward the sky, glinting silver. Gloria had never met the students from Beltraine's twin institution. Precious little information was let on about Alph3tenory, and Gloria wondered if that was by design. But it would be nice if the sisters were allowed to meet the brothers on occasion, she thought. Gloria rose, deciding to take a bath to wash away the sweat and dirt from her body. She was going to have to change the sheets as well, she thought. Gloria was halfway to the bathroom when she heard a knock. Halting, she glanced backward, waiting for the knock to come again. It did, more forcefully this time.

“Gloria? Open the door.”

Gloria didn't recognize the voice at first.

“Just a sec!” she hollered. Shuffling to the bathroom, she washed her face and rinsed her mouth. Done, she scampered to the door, unlocked it, and muscled it open. A dark-skinned girl with a star-shaped scar on her jaw regarded her. Her name was Rowan, a second-year prefect in Dorm L.

“Your presence is required in the chapel now,” she informed in her deep voice.

With that, the girl spun and paced back down the aisle. Gloria watched as the vestal, Aurelius wisped past her, rising to the third floor.

...

Five minutes later, Gloria strolled into the chapel. There on the pulpit was not one, not two, but the Three Mothers sitting stiffly with grave, wrinkled faces. Though she knew beforehand they would be there, Gloria felt her stomach flip inside her body, her mouth drying. What wouldn't she do to acquire the power of invisibility right now? Gloria thought as she made the agonizing trek to the front, where the first years were seated. The chapel was as quiet as a cemetery. Had they paused the meeting for her? she wondered. Her breathing short and labored, Gloria passed the prying eyes of the second-years seated behind the first years. A feeling of uneasiness roiled inside her as she spotted Faelina and Osara seated in the penultimate row of the Dorm L cohort. She took a seat beside Faelina, her head spinning.

As if compelled, Gloria's head rose to the pulpit, trembling as she looked directly into the ancient eyes of Lysandra, the Mother of Light, whose gaze was like a laser prizing away all the layers of

her skin and mind. Time seemed to stop for a second as their eyes did a sort of silent dance, Mother Lysandra's posture as stiff as death. Betraying her considerable age, her long white hair fell upon her shoulders like the veil of a wizened nun. Then, the moment passed. Gloria felt her muscles relax, her breathing—which she only now realized had also stopped—resuming with a frantic gasp.

“You alright?” Faelina asked. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

Gloria sighed, nodding. For some reason, she didn't even want to speak in the presence of the three Mothers, afraid they might use their legendary witchery to unearth her deep secret. She noticed Faelina had worn a thick coat with its collar pulled up to hide the bite marks.

“The meeting actually hasn't started. We only just finished mass,” Faelina whispered.

Gloria hazarded a glance at the pulpit again and saw the vestals floating by the side of their respective Mother: Obsidia beside Mother Crimsonia, Aurelius next to Lysandra, and Paracelsus astride Meirothea. The mass exercise was usually conducted by one of the most senior sisters of Beltraine. The hall descended into deathly silence as Mother Crimsonia rose, positioning herself behind the lectern. The amorphous mass of black that was Obsidia hovered next to her. Faelina turned her head away, only to snap it back to attention when the Mother of Justice started speaking. She was garbed in a black tunic. Her long, fiery red hair somehow made her look decades younger. At two hundred and eighty-five years old, Mother Crimsonia was the youngest Mother. She was the quietest of the three, hardly ever speaking. Also, Gloria hadn't seen her smile once in the year she's been here. Yet, Mother Crimsonia didn't seem unapproachable to Gloria. She did seem

austere but in a different sense than Mother Lysandra. Mother Crimsonia's demeanor, when tasked with being strict, was more like a mother scolding a child out of love. This approach was different than the harsher, reactionary punishment Mother Lysandra (and sometimes Mother Meirothea) tended to mete out. Of course, Gloria knew her thoughts weren't concrete, and so her appraisal of their demeanors could be very wrong. Gloria took a deep breath as the Mother of Justice began her address.

“Sisters of Beltraine, may the Providence of the divine Crown Goddess bless you and keep you, as you learn the way of light. You may be wondering why all three Mothers are here on this grand night, gracing you with our presence. The astute among you will even deduce how significant this is. My sisters will correct me if I'm mistaken, but it has been about two years since we three gathered here in this chapel. And at that time, like now, the circumstance was quite dire. Back then, the iniquities of the world was threatening to breach our walls. The hearts of mankind had become hopelessly dark, the murders reaching closer and closer to our sanctum here at Beltraine.” Mother Crimsonia paused, looking about her and straightening her black tunic.

Gloria gazed at her transfixed, curious about the remainder of her address.

“Back then,” she continued, her tone serious, “our diligent prayers worked, and Mother Crown allayed the danger. In these times today, we face something similar. But I daresay, my sisters, we are no longer fighting against mankind. You saw proof of this tonight, when we banished a vampire. You see, the devil has devised ways and means to test our resolve, so we must come together as one force to repel him. You may have heard the rumors by now...whispers floating around the grounds that the vampires are wreaking havoc on the streets of Nyxhaven.”



Gloria fidgeted upon hearing 'vampire', her scar pulsing uncomfortably. She stole furtive glances around her to gauge how suspicious the other sisters were of her reaction. Everyone was in rapt attention, including Faelina, who stared unblinkingly at the Mother.

“These rumors are true.” Mother Crimsonia continued, her voice a rasp. “My sisters and I have confirmed the traces of paranormal evil getting more prevalent right here in Nyxhaven. I say all this to say that we as the heads of Beltraine will do our part in keeping you sisters safe. But be forewarned, our efforts in doing this shall affect the daily lives of each and every one of you. You can expect a series of drills in the near future as we prepare you for the vile world. Also, new security measures we will be introduced posthaste. I welcome Mother Lysandra to update you further.”

Gloria watched as Mother Meirothea whispered something to Lysandra. She heard the words spoken between them, but she didn't understand them. Were they speaking in a different language? she wondered.

“We've heard this all before, haven't we?” Osara asked.

Gloria nodded. She had heard about the vampires increasing their activity before, but it came from the sisters, not the Mothers.

“Yeah, but it rings a little differently coming from the Mothers, doesn't it?” Faelina echoed her thoughts.

Mother Lysandra finally stood, her vestal, Aurelius hovering above her head as Mother Crimsonia sat. At three hundred and thirteen years old, Mother Lysandra was the oldest Mother. The sisters generally thought of her as the friendliest of the three, but Gloria

couldn't disagree more. The Mother of Light was extremely blunt and austere. It wasn't difficult for Gloria to imagine her cursing someone to death after they blasphemed the name of the Crown Mother.

“Greetings sisters,” she began. Her voice was croaky, cracking at intervals. She continued, running a spidery hand through her straight, black hair.

“It's quite sad that the only times my sisters and I deem it fit to sit with you is in dark times like these. We shall move to correct this as it is unbecoming of the unity we preach. Sister Crimsonia has already told you the crux of the matter. I shall remind you what our mission is, here at Beltraine, for it is easy for us to lose our way and get caught up in what doesn't really matter.” Mother Lysandra took a deep breath, closing her eyes. Gloria got the distinct feeling she was staring at her even with her eyes closed. Half amused, half wary she was onto something, Gloria flashed her head to vanquish the feeling. Osara turned to her mechanically, shooting her an “are you stupid?” stare. Gloria ignored her as the Mother of Light continued, her voice stronger, more impassioned than before.

“The vision of Beltraine is to create a bastion where young women can begin a journey of transcendence through righteous deeds, holy magic, meditation, and chastity. It is our steadfast intent for Beltraine to be a sort of exemplar of feminine mysticism, where women, upon achieving the title of transcendence by the Mother Crown, can venture into the world to create real change with holy magic. That is the beginning and end of our purpose. Everything else is secondary. Any force that fights against this endeavor, and the teachings of the Mother Crown, is seen as devilish and malevolent, having no place in our space nor the world. A multitude of devils' spawns rise and fall with time, but

now it seems to be the age of the vampires. As Sister Crimsonia said, they are the present threat. I'll allow Sister Meirothea to rap up this meeting. We know we're well within the Ebenveil Moon. But she will be succinct, I hope, so you call all go get some well-needed rest."

With that, Mother Lysandra left the lectern. Gloria felt numb. She only had to get through Mother Meirothea's speech and get away from the Mothers before she felt at ease. Ever since she'd walked into the chapel, she was on edge. She'd envisioned a million ways her secret could be exposed. Most of them involved the Mothers using their magic to somehow cause her to confess to being addicted to the taste of human blood, admit to feasting on Faelina nightly, expose the dark fantasies she entertained...

"Greetings sisters," Mother Meirothea screeched. "As my sisters established, the vampires are the present threat to us. And as such, we believe it is wise that you know the history of the relationship among witches, vampires, and lycans. As the saying goes: Know thy enemy." Mother Meirothea paused, clearing her throat. She cast her eyes down at the sisters, slowly nodding as though she was pleased with something.

Gloria angled her head from the Mother's gaze, her heart surging.

Mother Meirothea continued in an even tone, "Believe it or not, sisters, before the Sun was banished long ago in another age, the witches were actually neutral toward vampires. Witches gladly performed their art by day, while the vampires and lycans left a trail of blood by night. Although in principle the three factions disliked each other, they coexisted in peace— each showing grace to the other by virtue of the power they held relative to humans."

Caressing her stomach to soothe the prickling scar, Gloria listened to the Mother of Mercy's address. It was a story she heard many times before from the second-years. But to hear it from Mother Meirothea herself made it that much more impactful.

Mother Meirothea continued, "Everything changed when the Sun was extinguished, prophecies..." her voice trailed away, replaced by awkward silence.

Gloria sighed, annoyed at the interruption. Mother Lysandra had made her way to the rostrum, whispering to Mother Meirothea, who now nodded. In all the versions of Nyxhaven's history Gloria had heard, this was the first time she was hearing of a prophecy.

"Nyxhaven was bewitched into perpetual night," Meirothea said. "And as you can imagine, the vampires took this to mean they could do as they pleased, slaughtering indiscriminately from one moon cycle to the next, in their unquenchable bloodthirst. It remained like this for a time. Then came the Salvia Moon...the witches' response to the vampires' degenerate lifestyle. Now, fast-forward to present times..." Mother Meirothea paused for emphasis.

"To put it bluntly," she said, her voice a low rasp. "The vampires are frustrated with the Salvia Moon. It represents a symbol of their oppression. The fact that they have to hide on those Salvia Moon nights as the moon beams down rays lethal to them, is becoming unbearable. And though they feed on normal, defenseless humans for sustenance, it is really witches who they want to harm. We seek to honor our ancestors who instituted the Salvia Moon to curb the chaos those bloodsucking abominations can cause. And Beltraine seeks to produce witches with the

requisite skill to keep the Salvia Moon burning...to keep witches as the supreme force in Nyxhaven.”

...

“So, it seems the vampires are multiplying,” Osara said, sitting on Faelina’s bed.

They’d just walked over to the Dorm after being dismissed from the meeting in the chapel.

Gloria eyed Osara disdainfully as she spoke. She had agreed to them getting together like this after the meeting, but now Gloria’s mood was haywire, mangled up by the Mothers’ speeches. Besides, Gloria always felt on edge whenever someone entered the room, wary that they would discover evidence of her vampirism. Now, she just wanted to be in the peace of her comfort zone. She wanted to spend the final hours of Ebenveil with Faelina without having to go paranoid over the dark veins that sometimes crept under her eyes, or mistakenly letting down her canines, or her bloodlust metamorphosing her eyes from innocent black to forbidding red. Worse, Gloria had been slowly losing control over all these things as of late... things she realized she had to address quickly. As soon as the meeting with the Mothers was over, Gloria felt the change in the whole vibe of Beltraine. The very air seemed tense with nervous energy as if it too was worried about what the vampires were up plotting.

“I’m not worried about them,” Faelina said, standing before the mirror of the chest of drawers. “The witches have an advantage over them, I think. One spell, and they’re dust.”

Gloria fidgeted, glancing at Faelina for any signs that was what she wanted to do to her. Faelina’s gaze was on Osara, who nodded.

“You have a point, but you’re downplaying the strength of the vampires. The witches instituted the Salvia Moon for a reason.”

“Speaking of...” Gloria said. “When is the next Salvia Moon?”

Osara shrugged. “Soon, I think. Don’t you have your Moontracer?”

Faelina pulled out the first drawer on the chest of drawers, plucking a coiled parchment from it. The scroll glowed a light silver as she unraveled it. Tracing her hand over the rough glitter, Faelina’s hand stopped.

“The Salvia Moon is sooner than I thought,” she stated, her eyes glued on the moon calendar. “We’re now almost at the end of Ebenveil, a few hours out from the Opal Moon. The next Salvia Moon happen when the moon cycles to the next Ebenveil Moon.”

Gloria was confused. She had to know exactly when the Salvia Moon would be, so she could prepare herself mentally for it.

“Explain that again, Faelina,” Gloria demanded.

Faelina offered her a knowing stare, handing the Moontracer to Osara beside her.

Osara took it, nodding after studying it for a while. “Simple. We’re now in Ebenveil, right? So, the moon will cycle as it normally does through the remainder of Ebenveil, the Opal Moon, Ashveil, Emberglow, then Ebenveil again.” Osara paused, bringing the Moontracer closer to her face. “Then, the next moon cycle begins as normal. But at the end of that cycle, instead of Ebenveil, we’ll have the Salvia Moon. Get it?” Osara gazed at Gloria.

Gloria nodded. “So, basically, the next Salvia Moon will happen...not on the next Ebenveil but the other one.”

“Exactly,” Osara said. “So that’s in...” She angled her head upward as she calculated, “about forty four hours’ time.”

Gloria sighed. She’d only experienced a few Salvia Moons since being enrolled at Beltraine. Each one was worse than the last. But although Salvia Moons were supposed to be fatal to vampires subjected to its glare, Gloria never felt as though her life was in danger on Salvia Moons. The worst that would happen was her scar would burn a bit, and she would be hit with waves of nausea. Faelina had theorized that it was the Mothers’ protection over Beltraine that had shielded Gloria from the more harmful effects of the Salvia Moon.

“Have you recovered from the channeling, Gloria?” Osara asked.

“Not completely,” Gloria replied candidly. “Why?”

“I overheard Rowan speaking to Lystra on my way to the chapel. I think another Chain of Glory is planned. It might be as a drill, and not an actual vampire banishing. But I’m not really sure.”

Faelina yawned. “I’m going to bed ya’ll. Hope I can get a piece of Ebenveil’s dreamworld.” She swayed theatrically before falling beside Osara onto the bed.

Osara took this as her cue to leave. She rose hesitantly, glancing at Gloria, then back at Faelina.

“Did you know you people spend the most time with each other in your rooms out of all the room-mates?” Osara made her way to the door. “If I didn’t know better,” she continued, “I’d think...” Osara left the sentence hanging, before proceeding through the door.



## THE BLACKCROSS CASTLE

In a dark dungeon of the Blackcross castle, Kain Fangsworth struggled against steel shackles affixed to the rugged walls. They didn't budge. Although his strength far outstripped the strongest man, Kain knew these restraints were imbued with ancient magic to ensure even vampires could not escape. Kain closed his eyes as tears flowed down his pale cheeks, a feeble scream issuing from his throat. An optimist though he was, the many months that had come and gone since his imprisonment had mocked hope, and he had now taken to praying for a quick death he knew would not come. But who should a being like him pray to? Was there such a thing as a vampire god? Which deity delivered the damned and the accursed? Would heartfelt supplications onto the devil deliver him out of the internal war for power raging quietly among the vampire families? Kain knew he was just a pawn in a political chess game being played between the Blackcross and Fangsworth families—a pawn captured by the enemy.

His knowledge about the war was limited. The fact was his father, Vain Fangsworth, had decided to separate their house from the remaining three houses. As far as Kain knew, his father's goal was for the Fangsworth house to act as a single, self-sufficient family, that was to be un beholden to the vampire laws and practices the other houses were subjected to. In other words, Vain wanted the Fangsworth house independent. Kain had only half-heartedly supported him. He genuinely wanted nothing to do with Draven Blackcross, but he knew if his father pushed too hard for Fangsworth independence, it would jeopardize his relationship with Tamsyn—a vampire woman from the Blackcross house.

Suffice to say, that was exactly what had happened: Draven had not only rejected Vain's request for independence, but he'd kidnapped Kain. Now he was suffering, not because he'd done something wrong, but because he was the son of the head of a rogue family. And in the months he'd spent languishing in this hellhole, he had asked the darkness questions from his defeated mind: What did he do to deserve this torture? Why was his own kind subjecting him to this grim fate? Was his purpose really to live a few short years only to perish like an animal? Was he to have no shot at a future of happiness, no chance to experience true love?

Kain opened his teary eyes to darkness, his mind slipping from his control as the silence spoke to him in an agonizing monotone. As another muffled scream escaped him, he heard a great rumble break the silence, startling him. A bright light attacked his eyes. He flashed his face away, falling to his knees. The colony of bats he shared the space with fluttered away madly.

“Kain?”

He rose his head slowly to gaze upon the intruder. Her face partially obscured by the dancing flames pitching from the torch she carried, was a young woman whose existence for Kain brought bliss and misery. With her long, raven-black hair cascading down her shoulders, and eyes shoning an alluring shade of crimson—eyes that he peered into many a time in moments of deep but forbidden sensuality. This was Tamsyn Blackcross, the only child of Draven Blackcross. Her red eyes gazed softly at him, the roiling shadows of the flames playing over her lithe physique.

Tamsyn wore a stylish purple corset, crafted from luxurious black velvet. Kain's eyes drank the view, presuming there was some event being held at the castle for such a sensual display. His eyes found the black velvet; it was adorned with intricate lacework

intertwining like delicate spiderwebs. His eyes followed the patterns of blood-red roses and thorny vines, whose precise lacing accentuated Tamsyn's neckline and collarbone. Despite his gloomy predicament, Kain couldn't help but be mesmerized by her beauty, the likes of which he hadn't seen in what seemed like forever.

"I thought I made it clear you shouldn't return here, Tamsyn," Kain said, belying his lust. "If Draven catches you visiting—"

Tamsyn held her free hand up.

"Relax, Kain. My father is in a meeting with the other elders. He sent me for you."

Kain scoffed. "That's a lie. Your father would raise hell before he allows you to share the same space as me."

"Fair enough," Tamsyn said softly, stepping towards him. "It was Crocs that Draven sent to get you. I convinced Crocs to let me."

Kain twisted his face in confusion. The haughty guard, Crocs would sacrifice an arm before disobeying Draven's wishes. Kain decided not to push the matter.

"What business does Draven have with me?"

"I'm not entirely sure," Tamsyn said. "But I assume the fact that he sent for you is good news. Your presence at the meeting will reveal to the other house leaders that my father held you hostage all this time."

Kain sat up, intrigued by Tamsyn's suggestion.

“And you think the other leaders will respond favorably towards me, a measly Fangsworth?”

“I do,” Tamsyn said, smiling. Her dazzling canines seemed much brighter than the torch she held above them. “The elders have no conflict with the Fangsworth house. Besides, holding a fellow vampire hostage is illegal according to vampire laws. The leaders will likely lash out against my father rather than at you.”

Silence reigned in the dungeon as Kain pondered Tamsyn’s words. He watched her as she fitted the torch into a holster just above one of the restraints keeping his hands in place.

“Why would Draven risk his position as Vampire King by revealing what he did to me?” Kain reasoned, staring at Tamsyn. He felt his mind still as he gazed upon her.

Tamsyn shrugged. “I don’t know for sure why he’s revealing what he did to you now. But I’m willing to guess it will lead to your freedom. One step closer to us being together.”

Kain uttered a nervous chuckle. “Don’t you know your own father? His hate for the Fangsworth family goes back to before we were even born. I can assure you the rift between him and my father won’t end with the house leaders knowing what he did to me.”

Tamsyn placed her palm on his face. Then, without warning, she kissed him deeply. Kain tasted the wine on her tongue as her soft lips caressed his. It took him a moment before he indulged as much as his restraints would allow. Tamsyn withdrew, peering deep into his eyes. Kain broke eye contact, unwilling to let himself fall back into a dream that once was.

“It’s okay babe,” Tamsyn murmured. “I trust in the goodwill of the leaders. There is no way they will countenance your continued incarceration. Especially, not without just cause. You did nothing wrong...you were simply caught in a family feud. That’s all.”

Just then, Kain saw a shadow move across the dungeon’s entrance.

“Take me up,” he said, wary Tamsyn’s presence here could get her in trouble.

Tamsyn nodded. And with her hand still on his face, she closed her eyes and muttered something under her breath. Her palms glowed at once—an ethereal green vapor issuing from them. She stepped even closer to him, and then placed her other hand on his temple. Kain flinched as a pleasant warmth radiated through him such that he released a long, drawn-out moan. His eyes rolled back in his head as the strange euphoria deepened. As quickly as the pleasant sensation began, it disappeared in a flash. Kain opened his eyes slowly, his focus coming back momentarily. Kain felt as though he were back to normal both physically and mentally, the anguish wrought by his many months of imprisonment whisked away like a feather in a storm.

“Draven still doesn’t know about your...abilities. Does he?”

Tamsyn shook her head as she freed a key from her bosom and began undoing the locks.

“Of course not. No one knows but us.”

“You’re living dangerously,” Kain said seriously. “The hatred Draven has for witches is only bested by the devil’s hatred for god. He wouldn’t hesitate to kill you.”

Tamsyn offered a nervous chuckle as the final lock clicked open.

“There you go,” she chimed. “Come on. I’ll get Crocs to lead you to the guest room.”

...

A few short minutes later, Kain followed the burly guard, Crocs through thick oak doors on the uppermost floor of the Blackcross castle. No sooner had he entered the guest room than a black figure attacked his face. Startled, Kain flicked his hand trying to free himself from what seemed like some sort of bird. Someone in the room giggled as he weaved his head away from the frantic thing, which seemed hellbent on making his forehead its footstool.

“ZEUS!” A deep, gravelly voice boomed. The flying thing retreated posthaste in the direction of the voice. As it flew, Kain saw it was a massive Flying Fox bat. It settled on the shoulders of the man who called it. Draven Blackcross, Kain thought. Just then, his eyes found Tamsyn, who had entered before them and had already taken her place beside her father. Tamsyn offered Kain a subtle smile before her shoulders stiffened, her lips drawn taut.

Kain was inside a large room at the center of which was a large, mahogany round table. He counted eight persons seated around it, most of them peering at him in shock. They must have heard I was kidnapped...or dead, Kain thought. In his anguish inside the dungeon, he hadn’t thought much about the upheaval his disappearance must have caused in the vampire fraternity. Judging from the astonished faces in the room, he surmised there was indeed some consternation concerning his whereabouts, his disappearance probably sparking rumors. Kain avoided most of their gazes.

“Took you long enough, bastard boy!” Draven barked. “Have a seat.”

Kain made his way to the only empty chair in the room— a seat much less pristine than the others with plain wood and stained padding. The room smelled strongly of pine and sandalwood, and there were bottles of wine on the table.

“You look terrible!” a female voice rang. “Though better than dead.”

Kain smiled weakly. “Thanks Lilith. I appreciate your admiration.”

Lilith Moonshadow was the leader of the Moonshadow family. She was a slim, caramel-skinned vampire with deep dimples, emerald-colored eyes, and a flat forehead. Her blonde hair was caught in a bun, revealing the usually concealed tattoos on either side of her neck. The Moonshadow family was unique among the vampire fraternity due to their ability to use Heka, a technique comparable to, but distinct from ‘divining magic’ done by witches for fortune-telling. Heka drew upon blood ingested rather than on the four elements or the mind. The Moonshadows acted as mediators of the vampire houses, resolving conflict and negotiating truces.

“Let’s get on with it then,” a voice issued from Kain’s left.

It was Owl Nightcreed, the reserved leader of the Nightcreed family, and the only house leader his father respected. A powerful and ancient vampire, Owl Nightcreed was outranked only by the Vampire King himself. Kain liked Owl. He hadn’t had the opportunity to interact with the Nightcreed much, but from what

he gathered so far, Owl was impossibly calm and had a firm grasp of justice. The Nightcreed family was responsible for defending the vampires as a group, employing tactics such as aura detection and shielding. Owl's bald wife, Carmine was beside him, and next to her. their twin children, Sebastian and Selena.

Kain watched with growing anxiety as Draven took a sip of blood from a crystal glass. Slamming the empty glass down, he stood...all six feet five inches of him. The deep, crescent-shaped scar on his right jaw seemed to glisten under the chandeliers above.

“This meeting is called to order!” he bellowed.

The attendees straightened in their chairs. The atmosphere had suddenly become tense.

“Greetings fellow royals, and welcome again to the Blackcross house. I hope tonight's festivities were to your liking.” Draven paused. His ominous red eyes seemed to flicker under their hoods.

“But now it's time for us to address serious business.”

Kain glanced at Tamsyn. She was already watching him. An inexplicable desire overwhelmed him in that instant, and he felt exposed as if he'd just yelled his feelings for her for all to hear. Such a death wish that would be, he thought as Tamsyn broke the gaze, peering at Draven, who continued.

“Firstly, I would like to commend Lilith for rallying us together in such an impressive fashion. Representatives from all the royal families are in attendance. I know how difficult it is to get us all under one roof.”



Kain fielded a cold gaze from Draven, fidgeting in the chair. Someone began a spirited applause. Kain glanced across the table to see it was Selena Nightcreed. The others joined in momentarily. Lilith beamed across the table, offering a dramatic bow. Kain kept his hands together. Beside him, Owl's pet raven commenced a cawing racket, hopping across the top of its owner's garnet-studded chair.

"Aye Pluto!" Owl exclaimed, quieting the creature.

Draven continued. "I must also commend the Nightcreed house for being delightfully dependable in our defense against outside forces. By now, you all must have heard of Owl's and Carmine's exploits in detecting two wayward witches on the verge of attacking this very house. They were disposed of...of course, and in a manner befitting of their sin."

Carmine gave a single, austere nod in acknowledgment, while Owl remained impassive, his head directed stiffly before him. Draven's last statement about the witches being disposed of would have been lost on Kain had he not known fire was the Blackcross house's dominant element. No doubt, those witches were burnt down to the bones.

"However," Draven continued, "that is but a small victory in our war against the witches. And I daresay, fellow leaders, our enemies have the upper hand."

To his surprise, Kain realized Draven was pointing at him.

"Pathetic and weak though they are," Draven snarled, "the Fangsworth family are still our own, and a few nights ago the Salvia Moon almost burned off young Kain's face. A minute more under its glare would have meant his untimely death. I found him

tied to a Yew in the Dunfar forest. Despite my differences with the Fangsworths, I freed the young man, but I was quickly attacked by no less than three witches. I ran through them like wildfire, leaving their shells to rot for the worms. Tamsyn here has been nursing Kain to health. This is the end result.” Draven shoved a hand at Kain disdainfully.

Kain’s mouth had opened in shock ever since Draven began speaking about his fictitious encounter with the Salvia Moon. The Vampire King had managed to tell the most blatant lie he ever heard in his life! Draven gazed at him testily. He wants me to respond, Kain realized, avoiding eye contact. Draven seemed to be daring him to deny what he said... to deny the Vampire King. A seething anger rose inside him like a fiery snake. How dare he pretend he wasn’t responsible for the pain Kain had endured during all those months? He had to say something. Kain opened his mouth to do so, but before words could escape him, he felt his tongue stiffen, his throat constricting. Eyes widening with terror, he realized he was mute, unable to utter a single word. What was happening to him? Was he so nervous he couldn’t speak? Kain dismissed this thought as soon as it surfaced. Then, the moment passed. The desire to speak was gone as if magicked away.

Smiling nastily, Draven said, “The boy was missing for almost four months. I’m yet to uncover what happened in the months before I found him on the verge of death by the Salvia Moon. We all were wondering what fate had befallen Vain Fangsworth’s only living child. Such a tragedy it would be if the Fangsworth family had no heir.”

Kain saw Tamsyn glance up at her father, no doubt likewise shocked at this bold fabrication.

“Why would a witch kidnap Kain though?” Lilith inquired, her face creasing.

Draven shrugged. “Does there have to be a reason? Hating vampires is imprinted upon the souls of witches. Killing our kind is, for them, a rite of passage.”

Kain shook his head in disbelief. Lilith didn't seem satisfied with Draven's response and was about to speak again when Draven forestalled her.

“The Salvia Moon...” he began, running a hand through his black hair, “We are all susceptible to this...cosmic magic, some more vulnerable than others. To function at our highest potential, we must strategize against it. The last time we were all gathered here, we had all agreed on a plan to eliminate the witches, in the hope that the Salvia Moon would be no more.”

Kain fidgeted, his skin getting hotter by the second. Memories of the events five years ago dredged up in his mind. Draven and the other families had decided to send his older brother, Jubal on a reconnaissance mission at the Beltraine Sisterhood. Jubal failed to make it back alive...at least not all of him. Kain struggled to push the image of Jubal's severed head from his mind. The witches had sent his head back to the Fangsworth house in a red-ribboned box. His body was never recovered. Kain caught Sebastian Nightcreed staring at him, a satisfied smirk on his face. His twin sister, Selena was staring wistfully into space.

Draven voiced, “Lilith, can you tell us where we are with the Heka aspect of the plan? The plan revolves around the Moonshadow house.”

Lilith stood quickly, almost toppling the glass of wine on the table before her.

“Certainly, Lord Blackcross. We Moonshadows have been trying to unravel the magic behind the Salvia Moon. But I daresay, it seemed to have been put in place by some extremely ancient magic. What we were able to uncover so far is that it has something to do with the three Headmistresses at the Beltraine Sisterhood.”

Draven held up a halting hand. “Are you implying those hags are the ones responsible for Salvia Moons?”

Lilith shrugged. “My research tells me their ancestors did it.”

Draven nodded. Kain could see the veins beneath his eyes pulsing.

“Quite interesting,” he croaked. “Can you confirm that killing them will return the moon to normalcy?”

“I can,” Lilith replied, her voice rising a couple of octaves. “It is clear the three witches are the final members of their bloodline. Generational magic usually ends with the death of the final member of the bloodline. And with those Headmistresses in particular, they’re magically bonded, so it’s even possible killing one of them will be enough.”

“Hence, the plan remains the same,” Owl said beside Kain, his voice measured.

“Precisely,” Draven said. “We made a mistake the last time. Instead of reconnaissance, we should have brought all our forces to bear on those hags, killing every last one of them.”

“No!”

The voice of dissent belonged to Carmine Nightcreed, Owl's wife.

“I'm afraid that would be quite reckless. If we employ that strategy and fail, that would be the end of us.”

Draven's expression hardened. He fixed Carmine a cold stare. Kain wondered what he would do next. It wasn't often that someone challenged the Vampire King. Draven's expression transformed into a sinister smile that was almost as bloodcurdling as the scowl preceding it.

“And what, say you, should be our plan, Carmine?”

Everyone's eyes flashed toward the bald woman, who now adjusted her scarf. She seemed to have anticipated the question, nodding in earnest as Draven asked. Her bald head glistened under the candlelight, revealing tattoos of various sigils and symbols.

“I actually believe we had the right idea the last time. The error was that we sent only one person on the reconnaissance mission—a Fangsworth at that.. The Headmistresses at the Sisterhood are seasoned witches, and it is with deepest loathing that I admit their magic is quite legendary. Some of you will remember my encounter with one of them almost a decade ago. The battle left me crippled for an entire month, leaving me bald and powerless. Had my powers faltered even for a second, I would not be here under this roof.”

Kain admired Carmine's defiance toward Draven, but her mention of his Fangsworth house as if they were the weakest link among the families, stoked his anger. Kain recalled that she was dissatisfied with Draven's leadership as the Vampire King and desired her own Nightcreed house to be at the helm. Draven nodded as he downed

another swig of the blood in his freshly filled glass. Kain could see he was doing his best not to lash out at Carmine, biding his time as he savored the drink. Under the chandelier, Kain could see his temples twitching, a solitary vein threatening to burst from his forehead.

“Indeed,” he finally said in a measured tone. “I had forgotten about your unfortunate experience, Carmine. You’re right.”

Draven paused, his eyes gleaming under their hoods. Kain sensed an air of deceitfulness about him. Something about the way he capitulated on the point of what they should do regarding Beltraine seemed unnatural.

“Reconnaissance is crucial,” he muttered. “We cannot attack in mass blindly. So... who shall we assign that esteemed role — just to gather valuable information about the Sisterhood, before we return and strike them like the gods we are?”

Lilith Moonshadow raised her hand. “It has to be a team of —” she began before she was interrupted.

“I was thinking,” Carmine began, this time standing as she spoke.

Owl watched her in surprise, gazing up at his wife as if seeing her for the first time. Pluto the raven mimicked his action, its head angled upward at the woman.

“I was thinking you should do it, Draven,” Carmine finished.

A few gasps punctuated the statement, the room getting more tense as a standoff between Draven and Carmine loomed. Kain was enjoying this segment of the meeting, and for a moment, he

realized his good spirits were quite peculiar given the setting. Furthermore, he was only just released from hell less than thirty minutes ago. He gazed at Tamsyn; it was clear her healing magic had altered his mood more than he'd originally thought. Also, Kain was beginning to think that it was Tamsyn who'd caused him to be mute when he would most definitely have responded to Draven's lie earlier. Tamsyn seemed the least perturbed by the impending fracas brewing between her father and Carmine, analyzing her nails. She was a daring woman, casting magic in a room not only occupied by haters of witches but in the presence of Lilith Moonshadow, who knew everything there was to know about magic, sitting inches from her.

"I beg your pardon?" Draven hissed.

Owl grasped Carmine's burgundy dress, coaxing her to sit. She ignored him.

"You're the strongest among us, aren't you, Draven? Who better to gather intel and return with it alive than you?"

Carmine paused, watching Draven with eyes of steely determination. The silence in the room seemed violent as a light breeze moved through the space like a ghost, rattling the chandelier.

Carmine continued, "Besides...you, Draven, would know exactly what to look for—the brand of magic protecting the grounds, the scope of the witches' powers, and the means to escape should you get caught."

Owl tugged at Carmine's dress again. Again it was ignored. Kain wanted to laugh for some reason, but he held it in. Draven guffawed. It was a sound not unlike the bark of a vicious dog.

“The gall you have to suggest that I, Draven Blackcross, the Vampire King, should embark on such a menial task as a reconnaissance mission. My dear Carmine, if it is only I who is fit for such a role, we may as well surrender to the witches right this minute!”

Another awkward silence moved through the room before Owl stood alongside Carmine.

“No need for this meeting to descend into chaos,” Owl said. “Perhaps the solution lies somewhere between both of your suggestions. A strong person must be sent on this mission—or rather a strong team as I think Lilith was suggesting. That team can comprise of myself, Lilith, and perhaps some other volunteer. That way we can almost guarantee success, while eliminating the possibility of any significant losses to our houses.”

“A wise repost,” Draven said, his posture relaxing. “Lilith, you shall accompany Owl on this mission.” Draven glanced around the room. Kain tried to avoid his gaze, his eyes settling on his raw wrists.

“KAIN FANGSWORTH!” Draven bellowed. “I shall send you along also. Surely, you won’t object to this task, given that I saved your skin from that old witch.”

Kain felt Draven’s aura pressing into his. It was an oppressive feeling, almost like he was back in the torturous atmosphere of the dungeon. Though he wanted to back out of this situation, he didn’t see a way he could extricate himself. Moreover, how would that seem to Tamsyn— that he was afraid...weak even?



“Of course, sir Blackcross,” he said, in awe of how confidently he said it.

Tamsyn glowered at him, her wide eyes betraying her shock and disgust.

“Good. Then we have a plan,” Draven said, smiling.

Carmine and Owl finally sat. Lilith cleared her throat.

“One more thing, Lord Blackcross.”

Kain watched her smirk, pausing a while before she continued.

“I intended to make this announcement at a later date, when I was more certain it was true. But I suppose in light of this plan we’ve just agreed upon, I should reveal it now.”

Draven urged her on with his hands.

Lilith continued, “I have reason to believe, backed up by Noctua, second in command in the Moonshadow house, that the BloodVeil is not only alive and well, but somewhere close.”

Kain exhaled loudly, but no one noticed, for everyone reacted the same. He’d first heard about the entity known as the “BloodVeil” from his father. From what Kain had gathered from his father, the BloodVeil was a personality whose purpose was to return Nyxhaven to its prior state before the trinity of witches, vampires, and lycans, tainted it with evil. Kain had always considered her to be some sort of character from folklore, who had the powers of a god...or goddess in this case. Earlier in the dungeon, he had wondered about the god of the vampires; if the vampires ever had a

god, it would have to be the BloodVeil. Draven turned to face Lilith directly.

“The BloodVeil?” Draven repeated after a long while.

Lilith nodded. “I know it sounds absurd. And I’m sure some of us here, especially the younger set, were led to believe the BloodVeil is a myth. But the Moonshadows’ Heka has seldom failed.”

Owl shook his head madly. And for the first time, Kain saw that the head of the Nightcreed house was visibly rattled.

“That’s impossible,” Owl remarked. “The BloodVeil is long dead. Her corpse is inside the crypts of the Nightcreed castle as we speak. The death of the BloodVeil is well-documented and can be easily proven.”

Draven closed his eyes, reclining into his massive, throne-like chair, his face creased with worry and stress. Kain peered at him wondering what he was thinking.

“I know, Owl,” Lilith grumbled. “But that’s what our Heka told us.”

“The BloodVeil is a non-issue,” Draven said dismissively. “It has no bearing on our mission at Beltraine.”

Kain saw that despite Draven’s calm, he was sweating heavily, his face awash and glistening. Kain got the impression the topic of the BloodVeil was bothering him.

“Oh, but it does have a bearing on the mission, Draven!” Lilith exclaimed.

At that instant, the chandeliers flickered like ornate, blinking eyes. The dramatic timing of it pitched the room into silence once again. Kain glanced nervously around him, looking to see if everyone else felt the change in the atmosphere. Tamsyn was fidgeting, biting her lips as her head flashed about her. Selena had finally emerged from her stupor, staring expectantly at Draven, who now spoke.

“But Lilith, we are jumping ahead of ourselves. I’m tempted to ask you how exactly you came upon such information, but I know the intricacies of the Heka ability would be lost on all of us. But still, would you tell us, if you can, where the BloodVeil is located?”

Lilith nodded. “The question of where the BloodVeil is located...” her voice trailed off. “Well...I’ll let you decide for yourselves.”

With that, Kain watched the woman pull a small scarlet vial from her corset. The light from the chandelier played across its rough surface as Lilith carefully unscrewed the cap.

“Is that—” Tamsyn began, her eyes glued to the vial.

“The Bloodwhisper Elixir, yes.” Lilith whispered. “It took us three years to brew it to perfection.”

To Kain’s astonishment, lilac vapor started rising from the liquid inside. Its slow, almost purposeful motion gave the impression the smoke was conscious. As Kain thought this, Lilith raised her hand.

“Quiet. Listen as the spirits speak.”

The instruction was pointless; a deathly quietude had already fallen upon the room. The smoke that had risen above them stopped suddenly. Kain saw it had taken the form of a woman. Draven's pet bat, Zeus squeaked, fluttering its wings.

Lilith's lips twitched before she spoke. "Oh great spirit of blood. I call upon you in reverence. May we bother you to confirm a matter that affects us all?"

Kain watched the female spirit flutter, sending wisps of gas about her.

"Indeed. Ask what you must. But do it quickly. It is not proper for my consciousness to be here."

The voice sounded shrill and far away, as though it came directly from beyond the grave. Kain saw that Draven's face was contorted as the scene unfolded. He surmised Draven's consternation stemmed from the witch-like nature of the ritual now unraveling in his house. Draven hated witches.

"Thank you," Lilith croaked. "Please. Tell us where the BloodVeil is currently residing."

There was a long pause, during which the spirit seemed to freeze. Kain thought it might not respond as its breezy lilac essence faded. But then it emitted a hum before the eerie voice sounded.

"The BloodVeil shall rise in two, where the goddess of three makes one."

With that, the ghost's essence coalesced into a single, thin thread of gas, streaking back into the scarlet vial. Kain was so enraptured

in the spirit's revelation that he jumped when Owl's voice sounded beside him.

“A strange revelation,” he said. “But I think we can all agree where that place is.”

