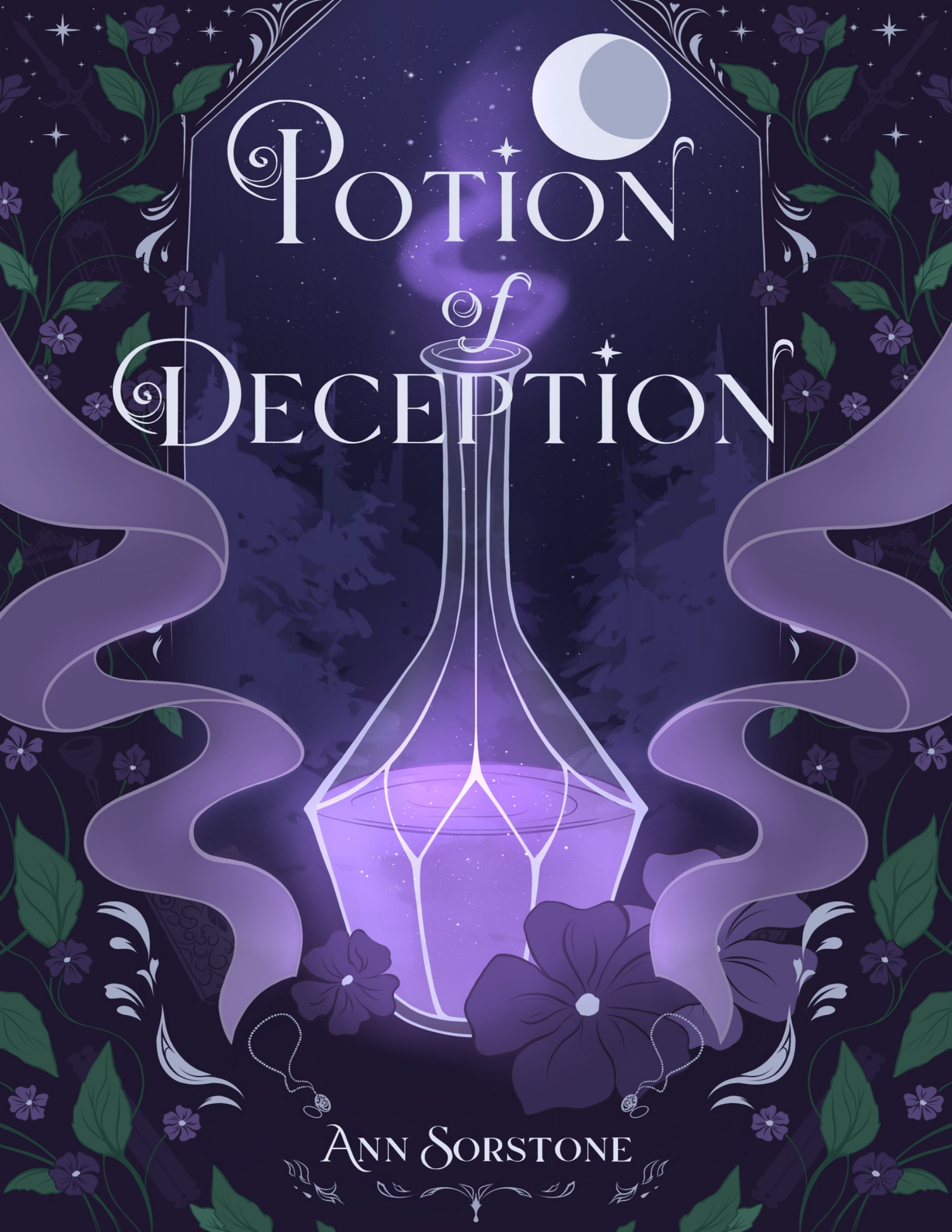
Potion of Deception
Ann Sorstone

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Acknowledgments

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PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Violette Effontesorts – VAI-let EFON-te-sorts
Dante Duretedefiant – DAN-te Dure-TE-de-fiant
Hegga – HE-ga
Eve – EE-v-e
Caidas - KAI-das
Nigel - NAI-gel
Ornard - OR-nard
Orienella - ORI-e-nella
Adrogans - ADRO-gans
Lamia - LA-mi-ya
Acies - ASEE-yes
Desisenfort – DE-see-sen-fort
Laevitin - lae-vee-TEEN
Tinieblas - Tee-nee-E-blas
Fyrratrae – Fee-RA-tra-E

DEDICATION

For anyone who felt everything but never let anyone see their tears because they thought their pain would aggrieve others.

CHAPTER 1

OMINOUS SIGNS



Pink smoke danced in the air emitting from a small cauldron. Dim light cast its rays on the floor at the exact moment a click came from the cash register.

Violette was closing the store and putting away the pots of brewing potions. Lid after lid slammed shut over the vessels on their own until the smoke disappeared, and with it, all the magic dissipated. Now, it was an ordinary room with several shelves and tables containing glass bottles filled with colorful liquids and ingredients for preparing even more magical concoctions.

She placed the stand of glowing bottles in an antique emerald cabinet, then locked it. Her blue-gray eyes glimmered as the light in the remaining lamp went off and the fresh air caressed her face. The old-fashioned beige sign that read ‘Closed, we are waiting for you tomorrow!’ gently swayed on the door, while the little, old bell above made itself known, awakening the silence in the alley. The only living soul down the road was a black cat playfully wagging its fluffy tail as it watched the witch hurry home.

Warm lights were pouring from the windows of the cafe a few windows away from the ‘Potions and Magic Infusions’ shop; and the store across the street; it seemed like the owners worked longer than normal hours today. Same as Violette.

Just before closing, she had been detained by an indecisive old woman, who continually doubted the quality and reliability of the potions the store sold. Violette didn't mind staying a little longer, she often did so, but of her

own volition – when she was reading and missed closing time or lost herself while experimenting with the preparation of some new interesting liquids. However, such customers had exhausted her and all she could do while talking with the woman was glance at the clock on the wall, which had long since struck nine o'clock in the evening.

The time was late. All the shops were closed except those few that were shining with inviting light, but no silhouettes in the windows were detected.

Most of the lanterns had already gone out and only one was still illuminating the path for the wanderers and those lost at such a late hour. A strange somberness altered the air in a way that Violette had never noticed before, though she wasn't quite bothered by it; no one had ever heard of something happening in the Enchanted Alley that would later be written about in an emergency release of the local newspaper. Furthermore, there was no better weapon than the magic wand attached to her waist.

The pounding echo of Violette’s patent leather boots on the cobblestone was disrupted when her attention drifted to the small alleyway. Her body froze. The lonely lantern outlined her silhouette as her eyes glanced into the dark corner of the dead-end street. Two male figures were standing at the wall, one ominously glared in her direction and a chill swept over her shoulders. A black scarf covered half of the man's face; she saw nothing but black eyes that faintly flickered at her from the darkness; The echoing voices, ricocheting off the walls, fell immediately. An awkward silence hung in the air.

The other man frowned, his head bowed, fingers shaking, while the man with black eyes stayed peculiarly calm. A knot tightened in Violette’s stomach, and she felt she did not belong. No matter what was happening here, it was none of her business, and therefore she continued on her way, without a single word.

The lantern on the street was gleaming with dim light, the candle flame acted absolutely fickle and seemed to almost die out before flaring up again, as if warning her about something ominous. Two yellow eyes belonging to a white owl glistened in the darkness above the green sign that said ‘Glasses from Avistar Aclarar’ as it watched people pass in the lane. Violette tipped her head only to find the owl's gaze fixed on her – chilling and creepy, as if peering right into her soul. She quickened her pace. Her boots bounced off

the pavement as her light amethyst cape fluttered in the wind along with her dark brown hair.



THE LOCK on the door clicked as Violette turned the handle and crossed the threshold into a dark corridor. The warm light from the lamp on the wall flickered slightly, casting her shadow on the floor.

Taking off her boots, she hung her silk cloak on a hook by the door and walked down a small hallway. With the snap of her fingers, the lights in all the rooms lit up. Her path led to the living room.

She stopped in the passage, leaning her shoulder on the wooden arch, her gaze lingering on the man dozing in a dark blue velvet chair. A faint smile tugged her lips, but with that – invisible sadness burdened her existence. She approached almost silently and squatted down, lightly touching the man's shoulder.

“Father,” she said softly, trying not to frighten him by abruptly snatching him from the clutches of his dreams.

Then she patted his shoulder once more, smiling gently as he opened his eyes through his lopsided glasses.

“You need to go to bed and rest,” Violette noted, helping him get up.

His back straightened as he clumsily adjusted his glasses, placing them back on his thin nose.

“I am fine,” he muttered sleepily and yawned. “I closed my eyes only for a second. How are things at the store?”

“Everything is alright. It was a busy day.”

“Did I tell you how amazing you are?”

“A thousand and one times. I'm keeping count,” she teased with a faint smile.

Once she had shown her father to his bedroom, she went back downstairs. Her body fell into the chair, hand covering her face. She was tired –actually, exhausted – but not from work or what she'd been doing all

day in the shop. The heavy burden on her shoulders had weighed on her for several weeks now, ever since her father had fallen seriously ill.

Seeing him so lethargic and devoid of any joy was tearing at her heart, and it did not get easier with a new day. The thought that he felt so sick didn't become commonplace and she couldn't get used to it, no matter how much time passed. Just a couple of months ago he was a healthy man, her father, cheerful, absorbed in work and papers, and now…all he could do was spend the whole day at home, sitting in a chair reading a book. Occasionally he made it into the office, but tiredness overcame him too quickly to get any work done. Violette constantly scolded him for it, although she understood that it was hard for him to sit and do nothing. She couldn't imagine what torture it was for him to just sit at home without diversions, considering how he loved his job. She herself couldn't imagine sitting in one place for days on end, without the opportunity to go out to do what she loves.

His strength was quickly leaving him, sometimes he looked too pale and helpless, and she found it difficult to stay around. She knew that he needed her, but she couldn't bring herself to be in the same room with him for more than half an hour. She almost always disappeared to the shop, and no matter how much she loved her father and wanted to spend time with him – his lifeless appearance was slowly killing her. This was not her father, this was a completely different person, devoid of color and joy of life. And despite him trying to sound more cheerful, more positive in conversations with her, she knew that he wasn't doing this sincerely, it was only to ease her worries. He would never admit how hurt he was, just as she would never admit how much gloom his condition brings her.

Violette hardly knew anything about the illness that took over him. Even magic was hopeless to identify it and it was as strange as it was hard to believe. The only certainty was that it was progressive, and time seemed to be flying by.

There was another reason she spent all her time in the shop: she often sat up late over books in the hope of finding at least a single hint of a cure for him. Doctors and wizards were stating that no magic would help against the illness that captured his body, but she couldn't allow this to be true. She kept searching. She knew that she was able to help him; all she needed was more faith.

She tried to adopt this faith from her cousin, who always seemed to be in control over any situation and who was able to deal with any problem and task. Violette was afraid that she wasn't so strong, but she wanted to be like that. She didn't want to give up because if she did – who would fight for her father? Everyone folded their hands, everyone shook their heads, sighing and expressing their sorrow. It was pathetic. She didn't need empty sighs and pitying looks. She needed hope. And no one could offer her even the smallest fragment. Instead, they only kept making the stones on her shoulders sink deeper. She pushed those thoughts away – she had no need to be sad, everything would be fine. She couldn't afford the luxury of disbelief. Time was running out, her father was only getting worse, and the thought that one day she would come home and find him in his chair dozing in eternal sleep frightened her more than any dark alleys.

Sometimes it felt like her whole family was cursed, maybe one day it would be her turn. First her mother, now her father…as if there was a black mark hanging over their house. Her mother's sister also died mysteriously just a few years ago. If fate had enemies, then the *Effontesorts* were definitely on the list. But Violette didn't believe in fortune or fate; that's not what her parents taught her. They showed her that she was capable of everything if she makes an effort. So she made it her immutable principle to never give up. And she would have continued her attempts to find a cure, if not for one evening that changed the course of her life.

CHAPTER 2

NEVER MAKE A BARGAIN WITH A STRANGER



The rough sound of foreign footsteps made the air heavy. A tall stranger in a long cloak stepped over the threshold of the shop, the bell over him swaying. Everything around him seemed to shrink from his presence and the room became strangely stuffy. Something viscous loomed in the atmosphere like an invisible warning that this guest wasn't sent here by the good forces.

“Sorry, we're already closed,” Violette said, as she finished counting the day's revenue.

Her head rose.

The hooded stranger silently crossed the room in two steps, his gaze – serious and clear, as resolute as if a hawk had spotted its prey. Violette perceived this as a challenge.

Even with his nose and mouth hidden behind a black silk scarf, she could still discern his strange, inhuman beauty. His thick, perfectly arched dark brows framed his eyes, and his silky raven hair fell in a single strand between them as he hunched over the counter. His eyes were incredibly expressive, only…dark as a night whose stars were stolen or extinguished by someone very cruel and inscrutable. She held his gaze, and a strange thread of memory sparkled in her mind, a fleeting déjà vu she couldn’t explain.

“I said we are closed,” Violette repeated persistently, however goosebumps crawled across her skin. It was not the man himself that frightened her, but his eyes, devoid of any humanity. She placed a sign,

'CLOSED', right in front of him and her other hand slid to her belt, fingers ready to grab her magic wand if anything happened.

“I'm not here for a potion.” His voice sounded arrogant, containing a note of amusement. His fingers twirled a bottle of pink liquid by the cash register as he leaned on the counter with his forearms.

Violette's eyes darted to the vial and just as quickly returned to the stranger. There was something evil in this innocent movement.

Something about this man was already familiar to her; maybe she knew him? Then this memory slipped out of her head and disappeared into the dark alleys… a*lleys*. This prompted her onto something, but the stranger's voice scared away the thought too quickly.

“I have an offer. This room is filled with regret and despair,” he let out calmly, his eyes dropped to the bottle between his fingers and then back to her.

“I don't understand what you're talking about,” Violette uttered roughly, her tone meant to convey to the guest that she wasn't in the best mood and wouldn’t try to hide behind politeness. Maybe he was just crazy?

His eyes locked with hers. There was probably more fear than confidence in her gaze, and he could sense it. With a slight movement, he took off his hood, apparently thinking it would gain him more trust. Wrong.

“Relax, witch. It's in your interests,” he declared, and his voice no longer sounded as mysterious as it had seconds ago, as if all the charm and all his mysticism had dissipated with it. “You need help, don't you? I can give you the medicine you're looking for. In return, I ask for a simple favor.”

His head cocked to the side, a spark of mischievousness showed in his eyes.

Medicine. What is he talking about?

“Who are you? And what do you need from me?” Violette balked.

“Let's say I'm a well-wisher. I need help and I know you need it too. I can give you what you want in exchange for your witch services. A mutually beneficial offer if you wish.”

“I don't know you.” Her face sent forth mistrust, an anger creeping into her veins.

Her expression didn't bother the stranger. “Me neither. And I don't have any desire to get to know you. All you need is a cure for your father, right?

And I need your help with a magic spell," he waved, sounding so carefree. Like they were friends having a very casual conversation.

Violette backed away.

"How do you know about my father? How do you even– Listen, this is not funny. We are closed. It's time for you to leave," she demanded, this time angry and irritable. She wasn't going to listen to some stranger's jokes and banters. She wanted to help her father and she wasn't in the mood for such ridicule. If it was a trick – it wasn't funny at all.

The stranger withdrew a scroll and tossed it across the counter. She caught it reflexively; perhaps it was a mistake to open it. Maybe she should have thrown it back at him or not touched it at all, but…she unwrapped it. Curiosity was Violette's enemy and sometimes she chided herself for it, but there was so much unknown and incomprehensible in the world, and if she hadn't been curious, it would have remained that way for her. She didn't like secrets, or mysteries, or rather… there was something magical and beautiful in them, and she loved them as long as she knew what they were about. She lived in a big city, where thousands of wizards and other people lived, and each had their own secrets. Every day she sees new customers and some of them seemed incredibly ordinary, but the city's gossip still slipped between the counters directly to her. She didn't talk about what she heard or saw, but it was so interesting to be the keeper of other people's secrets and know what was happening. She was stuck in this shop among potions and dusty recipes hidden from the world, and yet her curiosity wasn't blocked by the teal door. Just because she was left out of adventures didn't mean that they weren't attracting her. Maybe someday she would be able to go to new lands and find out at least half of the secrets that life has in store for her, but for now, it was just a small dream. How could she leave her father; especially now?

Besides, there were too many inexplicable things and mysteries around that she would like to solve, and she knew as soon as she came across one of them, she would lose herself in it. Violette knew that if she had the opportunity to do some world exploring, her curiosity would most likely be her undoing, as her heart always screamed louder than her mind. And yet it didn't frighten her, at least here, in these walls smelling of violets, iris, herbs and thousand-year-old hopes – she was safe from her own impulsivity. This stranger however, smelled of bad decisions and regrets.

It took her almost half a minute to drop her eyes to the scroll. It was filled with strange symbols but as soon as she looked at them, they started turning into words, emitting a weak pink glow. She couldn't believe her eyes. What was written on the scroll amazed her. Was he telling the truth? The cure she needed so badly existed and the recipe for it was in her hands?

She put the parchment on the table.

“How do I know this isn't a trick?” Her brows raised, and her gaze turned pretentious.

“You won't know until you try,” the stranger said and the corners of his eyes rose.

“Who are you? What is your name?” The incredulousness slipped from her lips. The magic of the scroll was still pleasantly tingling her fingers. In fact, she had no doubt that it was genuine and this potion was exactly what she was looking for. There was a lot of magic in the world, and this was one that you just had to look at to understand it is capable of working miracles. She was a *wizardling*, she couldn't confuse this. However, it didn't mean that she would throw herself at the feet of the stranger.

“Dante,” he said carelessly.

She squinted. “And how did you find me?”

“I? I didn't find anyone,” his voice stayed indifferent. “You yourself appeared in front of me.”

“I don't quite under–”

That's it. A strange feeling, as if she had met this man before, these eyes were familiar to her. It was *him*. In the dark alley the other day. She hurried to leave and not bring trouble on herself, but apparently she didn't succeed… in fact, Violette would consider herself terribly unlucky, because the chain of events that led her to being late in the shop that day and meeting this man was startling. And now he found her and came to her shop. And he somehow knew about her father.

“You followed me!” She recoiled. “How did you even know about my father?!”

“Too many questions. When you need something, you can find anyone and anything,” he casually stated.

“Do you know that's called harassment? You are insane!”

“Call it that if you wish, but it's not quite true. I used publicly available information.” His voice remained as calm as a water on the windless day.

“That literally doesn't change the situation.”

“Who cares? Life is unpredictable and it's what makes it more interesting. If not me then others will come to you and offer you something, at the best it will be a 'wonderful miracle working' perfume for such a ridiculous price,” he mocked. “My offer is better, don't you think so? You want to know who I am and why you should trust me, but how do you know if you do not try?”

“Why me?” Her brows pulled together, not breaking eye contact.

“I told you, the walls of this store are saturated with despair and broken hopes, and you are the one who brought it here.” He swirled the bottle with a pink liquid once again before it rolled over the table and almost fell off the other side, but Violette stopped it with her fingers.

“I'm not desperate,” she earnestly let out and moved the bottle back to its place.

“Oh, really?” He pushed a book on the table and it fell to her side of the floor.

“Hey! What the Hell?” Violette scowled irritably and bent down to pick it up.

Dante leaned over the counter and snatched a notebook with a purple cover from the bottom shelf.

“A recipe for a tincture for sandy illness,” he read out loud, opening the book. Violette looked up, her eyes widened.

“Spell against fatigue that gives energy,” he continued. “A recipe for returning strength. Oh, and here's the shopping list. You better not lose it, however I don't recommend you buy anything from the bakery on Luna de Medeis Street. I saw the pastry chef was picking his nose.”

“Give it back, it's personal!” she snapped and leaned over the counter towards the stranger, ending up too close to his face.

His hand moved the notebook away as she tried to take it back. The corners of his eyes raised in insolence, looking down at her.

“And in the corner lies an old book of spells by Agness Fumehex 'How to defeat the ailments that knock on your door: A manual for potion makers',” his words came out playful, as if he was toying with her.

“It's not funny,” she fumed and stood back on both legs, moving away from him.

“I'm not joking. It's you who's denying you need help.” The notebook fell onto the counter.

“I’m not denying it, I am just–” she suddenly stopped, reminding herself to not overshare. “I'm just confused.”

“You have a notebook with pages covered in recipes and formulas about curses and diseases. On the shelf behind you are three different books about dark spells and a manual on fighting the dark arts, and none of those are goods for sale, at least not in this store. Near the table on the right – glass jars of potions which smell like cypress, begonias, and tears of silver unicorn – main ingredients in healing elixirs. A blue thistle, known for its salubrity, sticks out from a bag on the chair. And between pages of this book,” he pointed out the book with a berry cover by the basket of potions, “there's a ticket for a lecture by Lumeria Lepos on ancient maladies.”

“You're either very attentive to details or crazy. And I think the second is closer to the truth.”

“Call it a talent.” He shrugged.

“I said what I said,” she declared, her face muscles tensed, letting him know that her mind wasn't about to change.

“I'll give you some time to think.” He reached into his pocket and a second later placed a tiny vial of purple-pink liquid in front of her.

Her hands crossed on her chest. “What is it?”

“The cure. Well, part of it. Give it to your father, I bet working in this shop you can understand if it's poison or not. Look how his health changes throughout the night and thank me later. I'll visit you tomorrow and you'll tell me if you want to help me or if you want to see your father in a coffin soon.”

Such a prick, she thought.

“I don't think it will change my mi–”

She raised her head. Gone. The man vanished as suddenly as he had appeared. Her gaze lowered to the little vial left by him. *Such nonsense.* Did he really believe she would do it? Was it just a joke? She didn't care… maybe, a little.

Tick tock.

Violette lifted her head to the big wooden clock on the wall. It was louder than usual, the sound bouncing through her mind.

“It's a sign I need some sleep.” She shook her head.

The situation seemed so ridiculous. Maybe she was just going crazy? This thought made her gasp a short laugh and with it, she left the shop.



THE HOUSE SMELLED of herbal tea and honey. The room she entered was poorly lit, barely lighting the place where her father dozed off again. She froze in the doorway to the living room, her hand clenched. Should she say hello? They barely talked nowadays, but she missed him and their long entertaining conversations. He loved to tell her different stories about his adventures when he was young or some legends and other things he heard from wanderers while he was traveling. Being a writer, he loved to share the ideas and stories he came up with, and she loved when his eyes were engulfed with excitement.

When she was little he always read her his new works, sometimes unfinished ones, though she was still listening as if the whole world depended on these little stories. She kept asking him about his characters and what will happen next but her questions were not always answered, some of these character's lives stayed a mystery for her. Even now, when she's grown up, she still sometimes thinks about heroes from her childhood.

A lot has changed since then. They had always been close, but since her father fell sick, everything turned gray – in their house and in their lives. Everything felt pallid to Violette, even if she never showed it. She couldn't let him know how worried she was and how painful it was to see him like this – once vibrant and lively, now missing his usual spark. He was the heart of this house which she couldn't call home if he will… if he will leave her like her mother did. Violette still remembers how the colors drained after her death but her father… he made everything easier; he was always there for her. She knew he was mourning; she knew he suffered after her mother's death. He loved her. But he also loved his daughter and wanted to save the light his wife once brought to this house for her. His laugh made Violette believe life didn't end with her mother's last breath; the moment the

doctor said it was over. The moment she knew she would never hear her voice or touch her hand. Life didn't end then. But it could now.

She didn't step forward, instead turned around to go upstairs.

“Violette?” A raspy voice brushed her ear.

“Dad, hi…” She entered the living room. An awkward wistful smile appeared on her face. He knew this smile, like she was scared to look upset.

“How was your day? Have you already made a great discovery in the potion world?” He asked and rose heavily from his chair.

Violette quickly ran up to help him.

“It's not necessary, honey. I can walk by myself.”

“Yes, I know. Of course you can.” She smiled again, though he wouldn't fool her.

“So, how are your days in the shop?”

“Everything like always, nothing interesting.” She waved jauntily.

“Oh, I don't believe you. You probably saw and heard a lot there,” his lips curled in an amused half-smile, “Such wonderful stories flying around, aren't they?”

“Not better than yours.”

He laughed. “I think you're kind of prejudiced.”

“I don't think so.” The corner of her eyes finally matched her smile.

Perhaps she was biased, after all, these stories were written by her father. And she wondered if he had any work in mind. She believed he was still writing some time after he had fallen ill; when he still had some energy and his face wasn't that pale… and he was more himself than now.



SHE CLOSED the door of her room as she stepped in. A deep exhale left her lungs. She leaned on the door, slowly sliding down, followed by a quiet sob and then another one. One more. And again until the tears started streaming down her face like a waterfall. She cried so quietly, almost muted. Even the walls of the room barely heard her pain.

Her head bowed as her hand covered her face. She couldn't let her father see her tears but it didn't mean she didn't want to cry most of the time she was looking at him and thinking when the day would come. She hated to make it about herself but what would she do without him? Who was she supposed to talk to? Who was she supposed to laugh with? Whose story was she supposed to listen to? She cried with a thought of how everything could be different. And she wanted to believe that soon he would get better but the truth is… the hope was leaving her with each day. She was still trying, she was still believing, but sometimes in the darkest moments like this, when nobody sees, behind the closed door, she could lower all her walls.

Her mother told her to be strong. She had to. If she wasn't strong, who would be? She didn't have anybody else, only herself. And nobody will help her father, except her.

The tears were heavy, the breathing suffocating. There's no more agony than shedding tears in silence. Violette took a deep breath and lifted her head. She couldn't do this anymore. She couldn't live in the fear that any day would be the last day with her father. She didn't have such a luxury as time.

Her fingers groped the little bottle in her pocket. It was risky, it was stupid. But did she have a choice? She had only two options – keep searching in endless books about magic, about cures, and waiting for when her father's light faded, or she would take a risk, and maybe, it would resolve all her problems.

She stood up and went to a wooden dressing table replete with a small number of other vials with colorful liquids. Violette rarely worked in her room; all the time that she devoted to potions was spent in the shop, where she was more accustomed to experimenting. Though she brought some of her 'achievements' home and kept them gathered on a table near the mirror. She took out a deep transparent bowl from the last drawer and poured an alluring warm liquid in, then a little gold powder, mixing it all with a silver spoon. The sound of the vial opening cut through the silence. Violette sighed and held her breath as she tilted the bottle of purple potion the stranger had given her over the bowl.

The drop fell into the golden liquid and dissolved in it, leaving not a trace behind – a sign that the potion was harmless. Forging a potion was a

difficult task, especially if you weren't a wizard. If the golden potion changed color, then the liquid was actually an unhealthy infusion. Red meant it could cause harm to health, whereas purple meant it could change the appearance, and the most terrifying, black, meant death.

The stranger with somber eyes didn't deceive her – the potion was indeed safe. It was not a poison, nor a toxin, but it also could be just a regular decoction for a cold. However, Violette was haunted by the feeling that had visited her back in the shop, when she first saw the bottle – soft emanating light and the feeling of a real magic. She had no doubt that the potion was genuine; she had spent time among the magical bubbles since birth, after all, her mother was a skilled potionist. Just one glance was enough to confirm it was real, this kind of magic leaves traces. But Violette couldn't just trust anyone, especially a rogue. What if he bewitched her or it was something else? What if she felt this magic for another reason? For example, it could be an illusion. She seemed to be coming up with reasons not to give the magic drink to her father as the fear still constrained her.

Enough!

Enough doubt. It was decided.

Step by step, stair after stair, Violette found herself in the passage to the living room again. A deep sigh escaped her as she clutched the vial to her chest; a sigh of hope and fear at the same time.

Her father was settling down on the couch, drinking freshly brewed tea.

“Father,” she faltered and immediately fell silent, resisting the urge to retreat.

“Yes?” His lips came off the rim of the cup as he looked over his shoulder.

Violette quickly walked forward, the sooner she said this, the faster it would end.

“Do you trust me?” The words escaped her mouth before she could formulate what she was going to say.

“What kind of question is that, dear?”

“Do you…do you trust me as a potionist?” Her lips pressed in a thin line as she sat opposite him.

“Honey, you are the daughter of your mother. I have no doubt in your talent.”

Good. She breathed.

“What if I say I found a potion which can help your health. But I am not sure about it completely?” she continued carefully.

Her father smiled. “When you doubt yourself, I'm always at your side,” he said softly.

The inner corners of her brows nervously angled up.

“If you think it will help me, I trust you. If I didn't trust you, what kind of father would I be?” The smile that hung on his face lit a new fire of hope in her heart and she tried to memorize this expression of pride and trust.

And that's how it was done. With trust. No lies. Well almost, as she didn't tell him how exactly she got the potion. It didn't matter, not in the moment, for sure.



VIOLETTE STARED at the ceiling for a long time, not being able to bring herself to properly sleep tonight. Always thinking about her father, about how weird yesterday evening was; a stranger named Dante, and most importantly – the potion he gave her. She was worried about her father's well-being, but didn't want to bother him until he woke up. She glanced at the window – the sky was painted with a pale orange and red hue, wiping the cloak of night away. A burning yellow disc finally showed up on the horizon, the first rays of which began to creep across the sky announcing the coming of the new day.

The steps on the wooden stairs creaked as Violette tried to go down silently. The white fabric of her nightgown flashed around the corner as she slipped into the kitchen.

The surprise that shot through her as she found her father already awake, preparing breakfast, made her freeze in the doorway, watching him set the table and humming under his breath. She would stay there even longer if he wouldn't notice her.

“You woke up!” He raised his head and went right to the stove. “Was I too loud?”

Violette opened her mouth to say something but words just didn't come out. Her lashes fluttered and she just took two steps to the table and quietly sat. Her mind couldn't even function to offer him help. Only when she noticed his hands were shaking, she flew up from her place.

“Dad! What are you doing?” She grabbed his hands.

“It's okay. I'm fine, Violette,” he demanded as she was trying to put him in a chair. “I just woke up early and had this sudden burst of energy and thought it would be nice to make breakfast. It's been a while.”

Violette blinked. “And you feel okay?”

“Not great but I haven’t felt so alive in months,” he replied and went back to the stove.

Violette was left standing on the same spot. She gasped.

The cure is working.

And it's working better than she even expected. She couldn't remember the time her father looked that fresh and active. He still was weakened and his hands were proof of it but it was already something. The stranger. Dante. Did not lie. *Fascinating.*

CHAPTER 3

DEAL



Tick. Tock.

The golden arrow pointed to nine o'clock in the evening.

Tick. Tock.

Again it sounded like it was in Violette's mind, loud and warning. Her eyes darted to the clock when the door lock click reached her ear. She didn't turn her head until she heard the low voice a few feet away.

“And how is your father?”

Dante. He kept his promise and came just in time.

Her gaze shifted to his face. The sound of his boots echoed throughout the room. His eyes brightened with a hue, the color of which she didn't have time to detect as it disappeared.

“He's fine,” she said calmly, trying to look indifferent. “What did you give me? Some of the ingredients in the scroll are coded.”

“I can't lay all my cards on the table. But I will give you the rest if we make a deal.”

“A deal with a stranger is not a good idea. And not smart indeed,” she stated incredulously.

“Unfortunately, you don't have much of a choice. Time is running from you faster than you can imagine.” He leaned towards the counter. “So, what do you say, Purple?”

She frowned. “I'm Violette.”

“Same color.”

“Violette, as a flower.” Her fingers pressed against the counter surface.

“Okay, Hibiscus.” Again his words were spoken with complete indifference, even disrespect. His eyes not leaving hers as he finally let out an important fatal question, “Deal?”

His voice was velvet and sweet like a deceiving dream, every word an alluring invitation to something that promises to be a pure fairytale instead of the impending calamity it actually was; everything he could say she would believe without a second thought. He talked not like a stranger but like a longtime friend. But that was what was making it even more suspicious.

She looked away.

It's a bad idea, right?

The idea of sealing a deal with a stranger was indeed incredibly bad and even stupid but she felt this unexplainable feeling it might be for the best. She didn't know how it could be possible or if she even could trust him at all but… something was whispering to her that he was telling the truth.

It's definitely a bad idea, her inner voice kept warning her and she knew she should listen to it. But also all she was hearing was a ticking sound in her head. Louder each time.

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.

Time was slipping away like sand through her fingers, and she simply didn't have a vessel to put it in for later. The sound of the clock was ricocheting through her mind with every second, reminding her of this. She doesn't have any options, no time to find one. Maybe it's her only way to save her dear father. Even if it was an incredibly bad idea.

She raised her eyes to him.

“Deal,” came out from her mouth with surprising confidence.

“Great, I knew you'd make the right decision.”

She doubted it was the right one, but it was the one that could help her. She feared she wouldn't get another chance. She was ready to risk it all even if it did not go as she wanted and would regret this decision later. After all, sometimes to get something – you have to lose something first.

“So what is my part of the deal?” Her brows lifted.

“There will be a time and place to answer your questions. But it won’t be now,” Dante uttered calmly.

“Great, and you want me to trust you?”

A sigh. “I want to break a curse related to the thing on my face. Is that enough for you to trust?”

Right, the scarf on his face. Violette thought it might just be a fashion preference.

“Barely, but better than nothing.” She played it cool, even if she didn’t appear this way.

“Anyway,” his back straightened, “I don't believe words. I don't think you do either.”

“And what do you want? To sign a contract with blood?” She sneered but when her eyes met his, she realized he might consider it.

“I want to seal our deal with magic. I think it's not a problem for you, *wizards*?”

Violette didn't like this idea but, she must admit – it was fair enough. He wanted to be sure she wouldn't leave him the moment she got the cure, and she could understand that.

“Fine,” she breathed, folding her hands together. “How exactly?”

“Ever heard about Grotte de La Foi?”

Her eyes shone brighter, brows raised in intrigue. “Cave of Faith and Disbelief?”

“Some called it this way.” He raised his gaze from the table to her face, the corners of his eyes lifted in an enigmatic manner. “Do you know why?”

“It connects to an old ballad about trust,” she commented skeptically. “Two allies who didn't trust each other made a deal in this cave. Every word said there becomes an unbreakable promise. Is that what you want?”

He tilted his head to the side like it was an obvious answer.

She didn't remember how this ballad ended, it was an old story she heard in history class but she couldn't recall what happens if you break a promise. Well, she wasn't thinking about breaking it, so it wasn't relevant. The worst could be if he asked for a vow sealed by blood – the worst type of magic as it could tie you to something you wouldn't like in the future. Everyone knew it was better to not bind with any blood spells.

By that, there was nothing bad in making a promise in a magic cave. Though, if she was remembering right, something happened to this place or the magic inside it, and it was no longer there.

She voiced this thought aloud, “Didn’t something happen to the cave?”

“Oh, not every story tells you the truth, Little Witch.”

“That was not necessary,” a hint of reproach crept into her voice.

“It's not magic inside the cave that ties promises,” he voiced before abruptly changing the topic of the conversation. “Go home, tell your dad some story about you having to leave and meet me at midnight at the end of Sorcery Road, near Momentary Lane. We'll start our little adventure from there.”

“At midnight?” A wrinkle formed between her brows. “Are we traveling at night?”

“Is that problem for you? Scared of the dark?” His eyes flashed for a brittle moment, challenging her.

“I don't think traveling at night with a stranger is a good idea,” she insisted.

“Then, making a deal with a stranger is an even worse one, don't you think so?”

“Fine, so it’s midnight, Fairy Godmother,” she drawled bitterly.

The corner of his mouth turned up before he disappeared without a trace.

Violette stared at the closed door for some time after. Too many thoughts were flying around and wrapping her in. The suspense lodged inside her chest. What had she done?



A DEEP BREATH left Violette's lungs as she pushed off the wall and went into the kitchen. The smell of flower tea enveloped her as she walked to the table where her father sat with a book. His glasses fell to the tip of his nose as his eyes were following the words on the page before he noticed her.

“Dad,” she started hesitantly, plucking up the courage and hiding all her worries deep under the guise of calm. She didn't want to lie, especially to her father, but she couldn't tell him she had put her trust in a stranger. If he knew that it was all for him he wouldn't be happy; especially since it was an unwise decision to begin with. “You know, there will be a potion fair in the south and Mr. Ahenum wants me to go there to gain some experience. There

will be lessons, lectures, and exhibits. I think it is a great opportunity for me to grow as a potion maker."

"Excellent!" her dad exclaimed, a sincere smile radiating on his face, which was so unusual these days.

Confusion clouded Violette's features. "You think so?"

"Yes, of course! You'll see new places, get to know new people and learn something. I think it's great, and you deserve some fun time for yourself," he expressed vividly.

A warmth spilled through her chest.

"Oh, that's nice. I worried if you would be fine with that news. I don't want to leave you alone…" Her brows turned downward, eyes gleaming with remorse.

"Don't worry about me." He waved. "I'll be fine and I feel much better now."

It was true. Violette didn't remember the last time she saw him moving so easily around the house as this evening. The cure was working, and it made her feel a glimpse of relief. All of it was worth it.

"I'm happy you're feeling better," she said with a meek smile on her face.

"Yes, so don't even think about me. I want you to go and have the best time," he voiced and stood up to put his cup aside. "Want some tea?"

Violette nodded, her smile growing more confident as she finally started to recognize her father; he almost looked as he did before, and she couldn't help but feel emboldened by it.

The last thing she had to do was write her boss, Mr. Ahenum, a letter with some made up story about why she will be away from work for some time; and get ready for the trip. Her gaze dropped to the tea cup her father had placed in front of her – a few lilac petals were floating on the surface as the corners of her eyes fell down.

CHAPTER 4

BINDING SPELL



It was dark and lonely on Sorcery Road. The moonlight dimly lit the tree where Violette stood. Usually she wasn't very scared, not of the darkness, not of the empty streets, but the whole idea of meeting someone at midnight was still making her doubt her decisions.

You did the right thing, Violette. It's for your father, her inner voice chimed.

She was wearing a dark purple dress with a tiered skirt adorned with black frills on the last layer. The underbust corset was tied with ribbons in a shade matching the ones on her wrists over the long sheer black puff sleeves and her tall black boots. Meanwhile, the seashell cups of her bodice were revealing a bit of cleavage, leaving her collarbone fully exposed. The amethyst on her neck was glimmering where her patterned cloak began, flowing down her back to her thighs.

Her fingers pitter-pattered on her wand, hidden under her cloak in its sheath. What did she have to fear? She was a skilled enough magical being to resist whatever danger might be lurking in the darkness, she should've just relaxed.

“Waiting for someone?” A male voice altered the air, his tone twisted in amusement.

A coldness pricked her neck and her head snapped in his direction as she swiftly unsheathed her wand.

Dante stood leaning against the tree with his arms crossed over his chest.

“I'm warning you, if you try to scare me, I'll introduce you to my magic wand,” her eyes flashed in the light of the street lantern.

“I advise you to save your magic for later. We’ll need it.”

Violette shoved the wand back in the sheath.

“Well, what now? Midnight, a full moon. Are you a witch in disguise, trying to make some ritual?” she let out sarcastically, her hands folded over her chest.

“I believe in the idea that the sooner you start, the sooner it'll be finished,” he said airily, stalking closer.

“Fine. So are we going to the cave?”

“I'm glad you have a good memory.”

“And how will we get there?” Violette looked around but didn't notice any transportation, but then something glistened in the golden light of the lantern as Dante took it out of his cloak. An old rusted locket with a broken hinged lid.

Her heart skipped a beat.

“Is that…” Astonishment aroused on her face, she couldn't believe her eyes.

“A portal, yes. It belonged in the cave a long time ago, so it will bring us right there.”

“That's an incredibly rare thing to have,” she said suspiciously. She'd never seen a portal in real life – only in pictures in books.

There weren't many portals left since the government of the Magic Lands decided they were not really safe things to use. They could lead to some side effects while using but most importantly – a portal was a dangerous thing when used by bad people. Soon the Magic Council sealed the majority of the portal gates and prohibited pocket portals (which could be any object), leaving only a few to use. The primary was the Stone Arch located on the south side of the capital – a portal to another continent, left to make traveling easier, instead of embarking on a voyage for days or even weeks on end.

“Why would I be interested in something ordinary?” Dante’s face turned stoic.

Violette’s gaze dropped to the locket again. Objects usually didn’t reveal the magic itself so others could know it was enchanted, but such a strong magic couldn't be hidden. She felt it pulsating in this little thing. The

soft blue light it emitted was beguiling with almost invisible sparks floating around it that shimmered in and out of existence.

He sensed her hesitation. “Did you change your mind?”

“No,” she blurted. “I've just never used a portal before.”

“Then I suggest you get used to it because it's not the only portal we'll use for our adventure.”

She raised her eyes to him in question. It was both exciting and worrying – traveling by portal was described as quite an unpleasant feeling.

“Chickening out?” He shot her a smirk.

She snorted and put her hand on the magic object.

The ground seemed to move, Violette staggered. A strange feeling curled up in her stomach, making her sick. Her mouth went dry, something came down her throat that she couldn't swallow or spit out. Her head began to spin and she would have lost her balance, but the sudden sensation of a motionless surface under her feet brought her back to reality.

She blinked a few times and shook her head to regain clear vision. The air was thick with the pungent smell of the salty sea. The wind tickled her back; the light rustling of the leaves was the only noise interfering with the absolute peace. Everything around was quiet and dark, just like a few minutes ago, but instead of high buildings and elegant street lamps, there were only deciduous trees, furze bushes and an immense, tall cave.

Violette raised her head – the entrance to the cavern looked more like a huge arch made of stone. She felt the magic coming from within; magic that felt like a warm breeze coming straight from the Grotte de La Foi.

She'd never seen something like this, something as great – a place from ballads, which most considered to be fiction, and the others believed had gone into oblivion forevermore.

Dante walked towards the cave entrance and before following him, she turned against the cool wind. Her gaze followed down the path where the beach led to the endless sea. The cold air brushed her hair, making her shiver, whilst the cave beckoned with a pleasant warmth and a faded golden light.

Violette ran her fingers through a curtain nearly undetectable to the eye. Golden grains of sand floated in the air creating the diaphanous veil, a sign of a spell.

“Is this a barrier?” she questioned, smoothly running her fingers along the invisible wall.

“No,” Dante uttered. “A magic spell for safety reasons. The cave won't let in anyone who has bad intentions. For example, if someone is planning to cheat.” He gave her a skeptical look.

“Well, then I have nothing to be afraid of,” Violette said with ease and drew a step forward. Warmth enveloped her before she found herself on the other side of the entrance. She turned around and waved her hand to her companion with a satisfied smile, inviting him to do the same.

A wide path laid further into the depth of the cave. An echo of their steps resonated from the stone walls.

“So, what did you mean when you said the cave isn't magical?” she finally asked.

“You'll see in a moment,” he aired vaguely.

Violette didn't like when people said that. She was lacking patience for answers, though she didn't say a word as she followed her new acquaintance deeper into the cave.

The darkness receded as a sudden blaze of light lit the place. Their steps had led them to a spacious hall with carved panels lined with torches, which had ignited the second they entered. Violette looked around, suppressing a gasp, amazed by the mystery of this place as Dante confidently strode to the most illuminated wall.

Sitting there, on a stone pedestal, was a luxurious golden goblet decorated with rubies, weakly glimmering in the firelight.

“What is this?”

“The Cup of Trust.” Dante's gaze landed on the pedestal.

Violette approached to inspect the enticing vessel. It was truly great. Her eyes followed the openwork pattern on the rim of the cup, forming into symbols and then into words:

I promise to keep the sacred oath.

Dante's deep voice reached her ears.

“The ballad sings about it wrong. The allies didn't just say words and by some magic force it became a promise.” Violette glanced at him as he

continued, “The cave is not magical, but the cup is. They placed it here themselves and then cast a spell on the cave to protect this place and the cup. Nobody can take it from here and nobody who has bad intentions can enter the cave either.”

Her eyes looked down the pedestal, tracing inscribed words along the edges:

Et quicumque de hoc calice biberit,
promissionem suam nunquam franget.

Dante followed her gaze.

“And whoever drinks from this cup will never break their promise. It's Latin,” he noted.

“I know,” a caustic tone filled Violette’s voice, her attention lingering on the inscription.

She examined the goblet and then straightened up, locking her gaze with his.

“So, they drank from the cup and it made their vows unbreakable,” she summed up. “But why is there nothing about it in the legend?”

“Who knows.” He shrugged impartially. “You will not find any legend or fairytale which hasn't changed through time. I doubt most of them are even half true.”

He then reached into the pouch on his belt and pulled out a small vial. A red drop fell into the cup and, as if by magic, the drop filled it halfway.

“In this light it looks more like a wedding ceremony,” Violette blurted.

“If I wanted a wife, I wouldn't put in so much effort.”

“Mmm,” she drawled. “A song for women's ears. I bet you would be a dream come true as a husband,” she strained through a fake smile.

Her gaze fell inside the cup – the liquid that Dante poured into it gave off a blood-purple hue, similar to wine, its deep color glinted in the torchlight.

“Don't worry, if I wanted to poison you, I would have done it a while ago. Besides, you won't be of any use to me dead.”

She glanced at him from under her lashes and warily took the cup from his hands.

Maybe it would be smarter to ask him to drink first, but her pride wouldn't admit it. He thinks she is too scared and can't take his challenge? Then she will prove him wrong. She wasn’t a coward and wasn’t scared of him, nor any questionable liquids. She was perfectly capable of doing all these things, she just tried to be careful. Once she forgets to think first, it will be over for her. And she knew how easy this would be – to just stop being cautious and allow her adventurous spirit to take over.

“Should we make a vow?” she asked, swirling the liquid in the chalice.

“Having drunk from this cup, you swear to help me to remove the curse cast on me, in return for which I swear to help you to cure your father of the illness and give him the medicine,” he declared.

Her eyes lowered to the cup, her lips touched its cold edge and with that everything started spinning. It tasted and looked like wine, but much sweeter. Luscious as a dream, as a lovely promise which it surely wasn't. Its taste was heady and she couldn't stop. Her consciousness started to fade, nothing felt real, and a strange feeling tingled her body. Maybe this is how such strong magic works. The ground began to slip away from under her feet, and wine spilled down her chin and neck. Her mind clouded – there was nothing but this drink that no longer felt as such. She drank as if her life depended on it, magic flooded all her being – her body and her mind. The word *promise* hung in her head as if tied by a golden thread, ringing in the ears.

Promise. Promise. Promise.

She felt such joy and happiness in one second and such darkness and emptiness when she came back to reality. It ended as soon as it started, she simply felt like she should stop. A single glimpse into the cup – it looked as if she had taken just two or three sips. But it felt like she guzzled the entire cup.

“Your turn,” she said, handing him the drink, her eyes escaping his direct gaze as her betraying cheeks flushed with a pale shade of crimson.

Dante took the chalice from her hand while she wiped her mouth, keeping an eye on him. He slid away the black scarf, revealing a solid black mask on his mouth with an opening that reminded her of bars, but no matter how she tried to scrutinize it, she couldn’t see it clearly. Interesting choice of decoration, indeed. She almost shot him another question about why

exactly he was cursed but as she opened her mouth she forgot what the question was.

“How do you even eat in this?” she asked instead, her brows pulled together.

“I would like not to bother myself with explanations,” he said coldly and lifted the cup to his mouth. His mask had a big enough opening to drink, even if some of the drops would be spilled, but she doubted it would let him eat easily.

Her hand reached for the handkerchief in her pocket, still feeling the remnants of the wine on her face.

“Such a strange feeling.” She wiped the corners of her lips. And as soon as Dante placed the cup back on the pedestal she threw another question, “So, what now?”

“Ever wanted to travel?”

“Let's say ‘yes’.” She pursed her lips, a look of distrust crossing her face.

“We'll be going to a slightly different place than this.” The corners of his eyes raised cryptically.

“To the south?”

His eyes narrowed and she felt like he wanted to say ‘Are you stupid?’ but instead he simply voiced, “More different.”

This only made her more confused.

“If you've ever thought about traveling, then you're probably familiar with the Valley of Enchanted Stories,” he uttered.

“We called this way the continent over the ocean,” she noted thoughtfully.

A smirk wrapped his lips.

“Wait. You are not serious, right? It will be a very long trip.”

“We live in a magical world, I think we are able to make it there much quicker,” he waved.

Violette got lost in her thoughts. In fact, the news of traveling to the lands she had read and heard so much about was incredibly tempting. Life on the continent had promised to be very different from the one she'd known. The magic that she used, the magic that lived in her, which was weaved in the air, came precisely from those lands. No one remembered a time when the world was not surrounded by magic, but everyone knew that

its source was the *Valley of Enchanted Stories*. The place where princesses were enchanted into birds, cursed by evil sorceresses, knights were fighting with dragons, and enchantresses blessed heroes for their great exploits. The place where the great love stories were born and were fighting for their existence.

“Don't worry, Little Witch, it won't take long.”

“I'm not worrying,” she confessed. “I’ve heard a lot of stories about these lands. In truth, I'm quite curious to finally see the homeland of the old fairytales.”

“I would not say it's an exciting place, but as you wish,” he said, his voice devoid of any enthusiasm before he headed to the exit.

Such strange words to say about the place that breathes magic and legendary stories. How could it not be exciting? While Violette was absolutely happy to live with wizards, she would never pass up the opportunity to see the great kingdoms and their inhabitants. She already saw plenty of newcomers from the Valley of Enchanted Stories, it was no secret that some of them moved here, as it's been known the Magic Lands were a more progressive place and much more modern compared to the old towns and castles on another continent. And yet, Violette wanted, at least, to see a glimpse of it. How could she believe someone's words when she didn't see it with her own eyes to make up her own mind about it?

The only question that came to her mind after Dante's statement was, “Have you been there before?”

“Let's say I'm quite familiar with it,” he said vaguely.

“That’s not an informative answer.”

“It's still an answer, though,” he insisted.

She rolled her eyes but wasn't about to give up on her curiosity. “And where exactly are we going?”

“Not far. There's a little place on the west of the lands where we are likely to find a clue to how to break the spell.”

“Fine. And yet, I still don't understand my role in it,” she remarked.

“I said I want you to break the spell. Do I look like a wizard to you?” He side-eyed her like this suggestion could have offended him.

“Not even close,” she said, waving him off.

“Then put two and two together.”

Her forehead creased in a frown. She had too many questions, especially about the place they are going to. Dante distinctly didn't enjoy her questions but could he blame her? It’s not everyday something like this happens.

She quickly caught up with him as he voiced, “We are pretty lucky. It's not far from the portal here. We can get there on foot.”

Violette looked around – everything that surrounded them made it seem like they were closer to the south than north; the warmer air and light wind was not usual at this time of the year for the north of the Magic Lands. So Dante's words didn't make much sense – the Stone Arch, the portal to the Valley of Enchanted Stories, was far away. Walking there could take days.

“I don't want to upset you, but we won't reach the Stone Arch by foot. It's a long trip and I thought you wanted to finish our deal as soon as possible,” she doubted.

“Who said I was talking about the Stone Arch?”

“It's the only accessible portal. All others were sealed by the Magic Council if you didn't know.”

“Except a few others,” he said ambiguously.

“Well, nobody knows for sure which one and where,” she blurted.

He eyed her with a self-confident look. And it made her assume he knew of at least one. “Fine, wise guy,” she drawled disdainfully, “What is it?”

“I'd rather spend our little walk in silence, if you don't mind.”

“I do mind.”

“If only there was someone who cares, right?” he said simply and continued on his way like Violette doesn't even exist.

“You're not really courteous for someone who needs help,” she remarked, jogging up to his side.

“Why should I care about your favor? You'll still help me.”

It was true. Now that they had sealed their deal with a spell, there was no going back. At least Violette could benefit from this. Her mother taught her to always look on the bright side of life, even when it's hard to find something good in the situation. So she started to list the advantages in her mind on their way to the portal. Maybe, even, her companion will not be as bad as he seems right now, though she really doubted it.



THEY STOOD near another cavern on the edge of the forest. Two oak trees stood like guardians on both sides of the entrance, only the rustling of their leaves disturbed the silence which settled around.

Violette raised her eyes to the sharp edges of the cave etched with ancient magic signs, following them right to the top to a little image of an eight-pointed star, concluding in the winding frame made of spirals.

This cave looked smaller and lower than the previous. Instead of leading just into the deep, its path lay somewhere down. Violette dropped her gaze down to the little slippery path.

“And where does this lead to? Is this a portal itself or–” She hadn't taken her eyes off the depth of the cave.

“Only one way to find out,” Dante said with ease and stepped in.

Violette’s steps faltered, her fingers gripping the edges of her cloak. After a deep breath she stepped forward, trailing behind Dante. They didn't descend deeply, as the path suddenly ended and they ran into a wall covered in thickets of green leafy vines. She didn't have time to voice her thoughts as Dante, without a word, moved the climber plants and walked in. His figure disappeared behind the leaves.

A line formed between Violette's brows. She stroked her fingers over the vines, a light breeze tickled her fingertips.

One step and she found herself surrounded by the thick stems and leaves. Her hands reached forward, making her way. A bright blue light flew past her eyes – a little butterfly. She followed the twinkling and in a few moments ended up on the other side.

Violette felt the grass under her feet, the fresh scent of a summer night reached her nose. The flickering yellow lights were serenely floating in the air, like fairy pollen levitating just a few inches above the ground. The warm light immediately attracted her attention, inviting her to look at the tree with glowing leaves. She stalked forward, her heart fluttering. This place was breathing with *magic*. She'd never seen something so beautiful,

inspiring peace in the soul, before. It felt like entering a sacred place hidden from prying eyes, from the outside world.

The bright light blinded her for just a second as the flying line of fireflies glimmered before her eyes. Her lips parted in astonishment, gaze trailed to the top and how surprised she was to see a night sky instead of the stone ceiling of the cave. Was it an illusion or entirely another dimension?

A big blue bird with a resplendent tail iridescent in the surrounding lights on the willow's branch set eyes on the girl. It eyed her for a few seconds and then continued preening its feathers. Violette recognized this bird from the old books about magical animals, an extremely rare species to meet.

Ahead, in the glow of a golden light, a gracious willow had leaned over the dark waters of the wide lake. Dante already was ahead, waiting for her.

“What is this place?” she asked, stepping from foot to foot.

“Our way to another continent,” he said dryly, moving from his spot forward.

They appeared to be on the edge of the lake.

“See that swirl over there?” He pointed with his chin ahead.

Her gaze lugged to the center of the lake and then back to him.

“Yes,” she expressed but then again glanced at the water swirl and then back at him. “No…” Her stomach sank.

A brazen smirk slanted Dante’s mouth.

“No, don't tell me it's our portal,” she repeated, disappointed.

“What, never heard about a water portal?” He stepped with his boots into the water.

Violette cowered. “Weren't they closed because a lot of people drowned using them?”

“Stupid folks just kept confusing portals with real swirls, their fault,” he said simply. Everything he was saying to her, no matter if it was about the people drowning or about legends, sounded from his mouth like ordinary daily conversation, not really involving any emotions.

She opened her mouth, her brows pulled closer.

“Are you coming?” Dante called her over the shoulder.

Her nails clasped the neckline of her cloak. “Don't tell me all of it just to drown me.”

“Hm,” he said thoughtfully, “As much as this idea sounds tempting, I still need you. But remind me about it later for sure.”

Violette's face became stony in a split second and she finally moved forward right in the water. The chill went down her spine as it finally covered the edges of her boots and touched her knees. The sound of rippling water cut through the air as they moved deeper. When the water reached her waist, she stopped, unsure if this was a good idea. Of course it wasn’t, she already knew the answer. And nonetheless, here she was.

The sharp low voice broke through the silence.

“What? I can hold you by the hand if you are scared.” The faint smirk conveying the baleful look appeared on Dante's face.

She scrunched her nose and huffed, stepping further, feeling her boots sinking in the sand.

Finally the swirl showed up in front of her eyes. She perfectly knew the rules – you just need to dive. Now that she knows how portal transportation feels, she wasn't really pleased with using one. Her gaze once again dropped down to the swirl as she bit her lip.

“Just dive in, it's not so bad,” Dante spoke.

“You first.” She raised her eyes to him.

He looked like he couldn't care less, he clearly used it before, perhaps more than just one time. The water swayed and without spare words his head disappeared under, but not before he shot her a glance.

Violette stared at the spot where he vanished for a solid minute as if waiting for him to jump out of the water and scare her, but after it didn't happen, she gathered all her resolve together, took a deep breath and finally dived.

CHAPTER 5

THE LANDS OF MYSTERIES AND GREAT TALES



The strange feeling consumed her body as she caught in a whirlwind, everything spun as if on a carousel and then it suddenly stopped.

The fresh air burst into her lungs as her head emerged from the lake. She opened her eyes, her vision remained blurry. She swam to the edge and her hand pressed into the hard stone surface as she wiped the water from her face. All she saw was the lonely dark walls of a cave. It didn't look like the place they dived in, not even close. There were no lights, trees or pretty archways. It was just an ordinary empty cave.

Her eyes found Dante in front of her as he leaned down and offered her a hand of help. Violette frowned, something in his moves had seemed tricky to her, all of him seemed this way.

“Don't worry, I won't bite,” Dante sneered.

“Only because you are in the mask.” She pouted.

He converted his gaze to the side with a mysterious smile. “Perhaps.”

And yet, she put her hand in his and got out of the water. Her dress and cape all sodden, the layers of the skirt weighed her down. As she found her balance, Dante was already walking up the path.

Her fingers reached to the magic wand on her waist. The water was still dripping from her forehead and her dark, shoulder-length hair to the neck. She definitely wasn't planning to stay wet so she shook her wand and with an elegant move her clothes dried up in a beat. Her eyes darted to Dante's back and she cast the spell once again. The warm wind wrapped him, making him turn his head.

“I didn't ask for it,” he let out the words in the air with an impassive tone.

“Could just say a simple ‘Thank you’,” Violette said, putting her magic wand back in the stealth, her eyes following a little lizard before it slipped under a stone.

Dante squinted and silently continued his way.

The bright moonlight greeted Violette's head as she emerged from the cave entrance. The blanket of stars was glimmery as a flash of lights, while the moon halo brilliantly glowed against the clear dark sky with a vivid sapphire hue. One look around and it was clear – they stood on the coast of the ocean separating the two continents. The coast of the *Valley of Enchanted Stories.*

Violette's gaze rushed into the distance beyond the horizon as the male voice hit her ear.

“How long will you stand there?”

She turned her sight to Dante, though her gaze quickly shifted to the black horses harnessed to an elegant bleak carriage, lonely standing next to the tree, bathing in the moonlight.

Inside was draped dark blue velvet and a thick curtain. Her eyes measured the seats before she looked at Dante again.

“Where are we going?”

“To the northwest of these lands. Day and a half from here,” he said and got in the carriage.

Violette gaped at him. “Day and a half? Don't you have some other portal to get there quicker?”

“The quicker you get in – the quicker we will arrive at the place.”

She hovered for a second and finally took a step inside, choosing the spot on the other side. And despite having plenty of things to ask or thoughts to voice, somehow she just kept silent as the carriage was slightly swaying from side to side.

Her gaze dug into the one living thing in front of her – her new companion, a mysterious guy who she'd known nothing about. A lot of doubts and mistrust kept settling between her ribs and captivating her mind. She had no idea where they were going and what to expect, however something prompted her not to worry – she could wield magic after all – it didn't mean she would ease off and let her guard down. It would not be a

smart decision after all. Truthfully, all of it wasn't smart. At least she was aware of this.

Dante meanwhile was looking at the window, not a word left his mouth since they sat in the carriage. His face stayed serious and unreadable through the whole journey until his jaw finally moved, “Tell me, has nobody ever told you staring makes other people uncomfortable?”

Finally he graced her with his gaze as if only now acknowledging her presence, a pinch of annoyance visible in his eyes.

“You are not people. You are a stranger,” Violette calmly noted.

“Trying to study me, Little Witch?” A shameless smirk wrapped his mouth.

“I am not a witch. I am a *wizardling*,” she corrected.

“Uh yes, your odd magic system.” He carelessly waved his hand.

“This system was created for a reason,” she retorted. “A witch is the one who brews potions and–”

He eyed her like it wasn't exactly a description of her.

“Well, they *only* brew potions,” she emphasized. “And do healing. While they don't have the ability to cast spells and control magic itself, they are magical beings,” she went on. “But a female who has powers, a magic wand and the ability to develop their magic with knowledge to completely new levels is called *wizardling*. That's two different things.”

“On the lands where we go, they are called the same. There you will be a witch – doesn't matter if you can wield a magic wand or not.” He condescended her with an insincere smile.

“Anyway,” she waved away. “Answer to your question is yes, I do study you. That is a smart thing as I don't know who you are and what your plans are, because, I emphasize, you are not telling me. And I don't know what to expect from you.”

A chuckle slid down his lips. It made her brows draw together and her mouth pressed in a thin line.

“What is funny about it?”

“Excuse me.” He cleared his throat. “I didn't mean to. I do understand your suspicion, really. You have every right to not trust me and I would say it's a wise thing to do. But don't worry – I'm not interested in anything else except your magic.”

“My mother told me not to trust strangers.”

“Did she tell you to make a deal with them instead?” He stretched, leaning back and closing his eyes. Then opened one eye again with a smug smile on his lips.

How dare he? She couldn't explain why it bothered her so much but his audacity was making her blood boil. Like it wasn't him who offered her a deal in the first place.

She crossed her hands over her chest and turned to the window, leaning on the back of the soft wall.

“You apparently don't understand what people are ready to do to save their loved ones,” she murmured.

He opened his eyes, looking at her perfunctorily. “No, I actually counted on it. If I didn't know what people are capable of – I wouldn't come to you.”

“So that's what you are doing? Coming around in search of desperate souls?” Her blue-gray eyes flew back to him, flickering in the dark.

“Mind you that it's *you* who called yourself that.”

“It doesn't mean you can manipulate me into doing anything you want. We have a strict line,” she warned.

“As you say, Little Witch.” He threw his feet up on the opposite seat and closed his eyes again.

Violette rolled her eyes and converted her stare to the window with slowly changing landscapes. It was hard to enjoy the scenery in the night, the road was hardly lit up by the lanterns and most of what she saw in the window was wild fields and nature. She assumed the little shimmering clusters of light far away were little towns, however it was too late to believe someone wasn’t asleep yet.

The teeter of the carriage for a moment seemed so soothing and the darkness outside inducing serene dreams, that her eyelids unwillingly shut, succumbing to wafted fatigue.

THE CARRIAGE STAGGERED AND HOPPED. Violette's eyes flew open as she felt the bounce and in the next second her forehead hit something solid. The leap repeated once again, caught on another stone. She raised her head, trying to come to her senses as her eyes met a dark blue shirt and then Dante's face. Her hands pressed into the seat as her brows jumped.

"You'd been worrying about my intentions but you're the one who is getting handsy now. Should I be worrying for myself?" he scoffed.

"You are the reason why women choose to read romances rather than speak with real men," she grumbled and pulled back to her seat.

He arched one brow and then propped up his head with a hand.

"If I knew you were so boring I'd choose someone else for this deal."

"I'm boring? Huh!" A sharp laugh slipped from her lips. "Sorry for not falling to your feet."

"You almost did." His mouth curved.

This earned him a vicious look. She shot her eyes to the window, closed with dark velvet curtains, not letting in a single ray of sunlight. Her fingers swayed the fabric to peek through and then swung them open. Dante recoiled, leaning back from the window, his gaze remaining strong.

A beautiful field of purple-blue clematis emerged in the window. The sky was overcast but the sunshine hadn't given up trying to break through the clouds and warm the ground, perhaps for the last time this year. A thin layer of frost covered the grass and naked trees, making the clematises the only bright sign of color around, something alive – a piece of spring amidst falling asleep surroundings.

Violette's attention shifted to Dante. "How much longer do we have to go?"

"I presume we'll reach the destination by the late night," he said dryly.

She tilted her head and her eyes went back to the window. Sitting in the carriage for so many hours had already made her back ache with intense pain. The only place she had traveled to in a carriage for long was nearly her hometown when she was younger.

Before her mother left the world of the living, her family often spent weekends by the lake, in the Sorcery Gardens – a beautiful place with remains of ancient arches, alcoves and statues surrounded by flower alleys and thickets of ivy. A lot of families and couples visited it during summer and spring seasons just to take a rest from their daily routine and the

bustling city. These little trips were her only time away from home and seeing such a beautiful place, she kept wondering what the rest of the world looked like. Maybe she didn't leave her city or the potion shop she worked in, but her mind traveled to a lot of different places.

Violette squirmed on her spot, trying to find a new comfortable pose. Her legs had been eager to jump out the carriage and take a little walk. Dante only took a sidelong glance at her.

“Maybe we could make a stop?” she finally burst into the air.

“No.” The flat answer left his mouth as he was looking out the window, afar, with his fingers resting under his nose.

“Why? We've been driving for several hours already, my back is stiff, I want a little break.”

“I see you are not used to traveling in a carriage.” He finally turned his gaze to her, looking no less bored than she was.

“Are you not uncomfortable?” she questioned.

With these words he stretched and in a satisfied tone said, “No, I'm fine.”

“Well, I'm not,” Violette frowned.

“Don't see how it should be my problem.”

“Oh, it will be your problem if we do not stop. I promise you.” Her brows drew together, while lips curled in a scornful smile.

“Going to threaten me with your magic wand again?”

“No, I'll just be talking nonstop and making staying in this carriage impossible to you so you want to jump out before we reach our destination.”

“Who said I don't want to do it already?”

She held his gaze, crossing hands at her chest, her brows knitted.

“If you want to hear real complaints I will gladly give you this opportunity, I am not that proud. So, at first, I–”

“Fine.” He glared. “Ten minutes. No more.”

A winning smile lit up her face.

Soon enough, the view of cozy cottages and passing people on the other side of the street flashed through the carriage window. The horses stopped and Violette finally stepped out of the stuffy coach to breathe some fresh air. A satisfying sound left her mouth as she inhaled and then turned her head over the shoulder.

“You are not going?”

“It's you who wanted to stop,” Dante said indifferently.

“Too proud to get out?” She raised a brow and an edge of her mouth.

He didn't say anything, only closed the door and leaned to the back.



VIOLETTE STEPPED on the wide busy street. People were quickly pacing by, reminding her of her hometown. Two women with wicker baskets filled with flowers passed by, animatedly chatting with each other. Behind a woman with her chin tipped towards the sky and a little white dog loping merrily ahead, a man was trailing with a mountain of multi-colored boxes and packages, barely balancing on his legs. Violette's gaze shifted to a man with a top hat on gray haired head, holding a long black cane, swaggering right in front of her nose, forcing her to pull back. And then her eyes found the man with a stack of packages again. One of the beautiful boxes tied with silk ribbon flew down and before hitting the floor it levitated back to its place on the pile of boxes in his hands. He looked out and his gaze locked on the magic wand in Violette's hand, the expression painted on his face seemed quite strange, his eyes opened widely.

“Thanks,” he mumbled quickly, escaping her gaze and immediately rushed away.

Violette tilted her head to the side, pondering about his reaction, but as soon as she heard a bell of a clock, her thoughts scattered away. She remembered she didn’t have much time and the sounds her stomach was making were definitely a sign to find something to eat.

The town they arrived in was a small and cozy place with a lot of low cottages and not many shops, however she noticed pretty stores with fancy signboards. One of them had female mannequins in long opulent ball gowns, totally different from the fashion Violette was used to. She raised her eyes to the lettering above – ‘Dresses by Madam Filaiguille’. Another little shop with a sunshade in a color of pale pink, decorated with vines of

flowers called ‘Soiree's Fallalery’, meanwhile the next one could brag with a variety of colorful brimmed hats on its displays.

This street was hardly different from where she lives, however small houses were not a common occurrence there. This place reminded her rather of an old fairytale town. A big antique chantry and a fountain on the square was a revived picture from the romances where couples would meet for the first time or secretly meet at midnight.

A beige leaflet flew past Violette’s eyes, playfully dancing in the air, her gaze following it until she noticed a cute bakery shop on the other side of the road.

The smell of fresh baked bread and berry jam were curling in the air inside, she almost could see a scent strip coming from behind the counter. The showcase had been filled with different buns, little pies, bread, rolls and jam cookies. The options were endless and everything looked especially delicious, so Violette was on the verge of buying every type of treat here. Though her stomach was begging her for at least a small piece.

However, every bun looked enchanting, bakeries on the Magic Lands were different; some of them had incredibly whimsical and fun sweets, radiating true charms. Some of the most impressive sweets she'd ever seen – little cakes in the shape of clouds, floating in the air above the plate. There were cookies that could change their color or shape in a beat but here – in this shop – the baked goods were absolutely ordinary. Yet, the smell was just unbelievable.

She’d made sure she got enough for the remaining trip when her gaze shifted to the clock outside the window and it struck her – she had to hurry up.

The way to the carriage was pretty quick, although Violette turned on the wrong road once and almost wandered onto another street.

She finished her raspberry roll just before she got in.

“Are you satisfied now?” Dante grumbled.

“More than,” she sang. Her mood immediately improved. And it's no wonder – how can you be happy when your stomach is rumbling and your legs are completely stiff?

Dante knocked on the wall and the carriage moved, then his gaze settled on Violette pulling out blueberry tartlets from the paper bag.

Her eyes raised. “You want some?” She held out one tartlet.

Dante eyed her for a solid ten seconds then closed his eyes and leaned on the back of the carriage wall.

“Rude,” she mumbled.

Without a word he straightened his legs and threw them over her seat, making Violette snort as she took another bite of her delicious treats.

CHAPTER 6

A WITCH!



The sun had set below the horizon a long time ago as the carriage still was moving in the same rhythm to the north. The silence that reigned between them continued for hours and was unlikely to disappear anytime soon. Violette watched Dante looking out the window whereas he was pretending he didn't notice it or simply didn't care.

The scenery outside didn't change for some time – only an impenetrable thicket of trees. The only light source was a silver moon and an old lantern hanging above the coachman's head.

There was nothing interesting outside the window, so she assumed Dante just wanted to keep his eyes busy with something to not meet her stare. And in the moment she wanted to finally break the silence, the carriage suddenly stopped. It made Dante finally tear his eyes off the window. His back straightened, and his body stiffened as he looked sideways. It was certainly not a planned stop by the way his facial expression changed, no longer looking so untouchable.

"Why did we stop?" Violette opened her mouth in confusion.

Dante didn't have time to answer as the head of a man in a black mask popped up in the window. Violette yelped in surprise as the man threatened.

"Give me all your money!"

His voice hadn't sounded as menacing as the dagger he pulled out and pointed towards the girl. Her eyes darted to Dante, being completely unconcerned of the situation. More than that, he looked bored and not surprised, like it was something usual to witness. Like the thief was just a

salesman who stopped their coach to promote his new ‘magical’ product to them – the invention of the year. It could mean only two things – Dante either had a lack of emotions and awareness or it was the road thieves that were so common in this land he just wasn't impressed. Not the first, nor the second of these assumptions could make Violette happy.

The big man in a mask shook the dagger in his hand. “I said give me everything you have!”

The hairs on Violette's neck raised, heart hammering against her chest like a drum.

“Want to take care of him and show your magical abilities you are so proud of?” Dante finally showed signs of life.

Violette blinked twice. *Right, she's a wizardling after all.* It happened so suddenly she completely forgot she could whip this man out the window. As she woke up out of her little trance, her hand clung to her magic wand.

“What? Want to fight me with a stick?” the man derided as she pointed her wand at him.

One word and, with a flash of light, the man blew away right into a tree. He shook his head and just in a quick moment his face distorted in absolute fear and malice.

“The sorcery…” he gasped, his eyes went round but soon they narrowed in two slits, expressing not fear, but total anger. “Go back to Hell!” he screamed and lunged at the girl.

Violette's eyes widened.

“Well, that escalated quickly,” were the only words that escaped her mouth before bolting to the other window of the carriage. “Are you not going to help?” Her eyes full of indignation flickered at Dante.

“No more hocus-pocus?” He faked disappointment but didn't even move an inch. That's it – because of this stupid guy she will die. She knew it would not end well but she didn’t expect it would be that soon.

Violette had to think quickly, she didn't want to hurt this man, which couldn't be said about him though. Her hands kept trembling, making it hard to focus, to remember any spell. Her heartbeat was racing, anxiety lingered beneath her skin. She jumped out of the carriage and pointed her magic wand at the robber. A burst of courage just before it faded to dark and her hands started shaking again as the man hit the tree with his back and hovered in the air for a couple of seconds before falling to the ground with a

heavy rumble. His hand was still clasping the hilt of the dagger. Back on his feet, he shook his head.

Violette stared at the man without blinking when she mumbled, “There's no need for this. Just let us go.”

“Evil spirits have no place in this forest!” the man spat.

It sounded bizarre – Violette was anything but evil and definitely not a spirit, if she hadn't died a few minutes ago and all of it was a dream of hers right now, of course. Anyway, the robber's flaring nostrils were threatening enough to her, as well as his eyes filled with blood. Violette didn't have time to react as he threw himself in her direction. She tottered, making a step back as her heel stumbled over a bulging rock. Her body lost balance, her vision blurred. But just before he would reach Violette, a tall figure in a black cloak obscured her, a shadow cast on her face. Dante appeared out of nowhere, in one blink, he was already standing in front of the thief.

The man tried to hook him with his dagger but Dante quickly moved to the side, then as he tried to stab him again, the young man without an effort dodged another blow.

“Do you even know how to use it?” he said calmly, even now, his face not showing any concern.

Showing on her feet, Violette carefully tread back to the carriage as the man tried to fight Dante but, instead, tripped over his leg, flying with his face into the ground.

“No, I'm serious. Is it your first time?” The corner of Dante’s lips lifted, a mischievous note surged in his voice. “How are you holding a dagger? What do you want to do with it, slice some bread for dinner?”

The man got up again, writhing and rubbing his face.

“The witch's demon!” he bawled with another hopeless attempt to stab Dante. But this time he managed to catch his sleeve.

“Oh, come on. It's a new shirt. First, you are trying to hurt my companion, now you are ruining my clothes. Not really polite of you.” Dante effortlessly grabbed the man by his vest. Their gazes locked until he twisted his brows and threw him aside. Somehow, the man managed to get up and still rushed to him. Indeed, Violette was impressed by his assertiveness and…stupidity. It was an impressive and pathetic sight. She pursed her lips, watching his futile attempts to touch his opponent. Suddenly the dagger flew by her cheek and got stuck in the bark of a tree.

Her pulse echoed in her ears, her hands trembled, she had to do something, even if it hadn't looked like Dante needed help.

A streak of light flashed in the darkness and the man fell to the ground petrified.

“You could have done it sooner.” Dante turned his gaze to her.

Violette finally breathed with ease. “Why? To miss the opportunity to watch as someone would punch you in the face?”

His expression remained stoic. “It still didn't happen.”

“Maybe one day my dream will come true,” she mumbled, twisting her magic wand in her hands.

She couldn't tell him she lost courage in the moment. Everything happened so fast she was completely lost. Such a shame the wizardling couldn't handle such an easy situation.

“Glad to know you are seeing me in your dreams,” Dante taunted.

Violette rolled her eyes. The audacity he had to make everything about himself was too much to hold at the moment. So while Dante went to check on the coachman, she decided to go back inside.

One look inside the carriage as Dante's head popped in the window frame, making her to wince.

“Hey,” he said, leaning at the window, “The coachman is knocked out. Do you have something in your arsenal of spells to bring him to his senses?”

Her lashes fell before raising again – she had something better.

“Wait.” She got inside the carriage to get her little dark purple bag stitched with violets. Dante’s eyes slid her way as she shoved out a little bottle with a magenta liquid, looking like a bottle of perfume; if only it would smell as good.

“It's a potion for magic trace but it has a really strong scent,” she explained as she reached the front of the carriage and leaned over to the coachman with the vial. It worked in a flash – the man opened his eyes, loudly coughing. He looked pretty sluggish.

“What happened?” he let out, his eyes still clouded.

“A road robber,” Dante voiced.

“Oh, I didn't notice how he knocked me out. Are you both okay? I am so sorry,” he started but Violette cut him off.

“Nothing to apologize for. Everyone is well,” she said, her eyes bolted to Dante's shoulder where the robber tried to hurt him. Or did he? She'd thought the dagger caught his skin but he didn't mention anything on this matter.

“We have to leave before that one regains his consciousness" Dante pointed out. Both Violette and the coachman craned their necks to look over his shoulder to the tree and the man lying unconscious beneath its branches.

Her gaze went to the coachman. “I don't think he can drive.” And he seemed to want to object but Dante interrupted him.

“I'll drive.”

“Great! And you, sir, will take a little rest in the carriage,” Violette's mouth curled in a polite smile.

“Thank you for your kindness but it's really unnecessary,” he managed to say, despite it being definitely necessary if they didn’t want to end up off the road and facing a tree.

“I won't take no for an answer,” Violette objected. “It's fine. Really. I'll take you inside.”

She quickly accompanied the man to the carriage, and ensuring he required nothing further, she returned to Dante, finding him the moment as he was inspecting the horses and their gear.

“Is he fine?”

“Yes, we can go,” she voiced as he tightened the carriage buckle on the horse.

“Go back inside then,” he said, putting his leg on the step to the coachman seat.

“I'll sit with you,” she proclaimed.

“Don't trust my driving abilities?” His eyes shone at her.

“I just want fresh air,” Violette simply uttered and he reached his hand to her. She wanted the coachman to rest and at the same time, to avoid an awkward silence that could settle between them.

She put her hand in his when her attention got stolen by his shoulder. There was nothing except a ripped cut on his shirt.

“I thought I saw blood.” Her forehead puckered.

“I'm not sure what you are talking about,” he said easily and joined her on the seat.

The carriage wheels started spinning, the horses let out a neigh and their hooves began to bounce off the ground in a precise rhythm again.

CHAPTER 7

GUESSES AND ASSUMPTIONS



Violette's face was pointed upward as she watched the stars for a quite long time. The night was beautiful and not as cold as she'd expected it to be, however she was still wondering – where was the magic of fairytales she'd heard so much about? Sometimes she'd looked around in search of signs of it but there was only a dark forest around, nothing else.

"Still worrying about robbers?" Dante's voice entered the air as he noticed her restlessness.

"No." She took her eyes off the snowy trees. "I actually –" she paused,"Well, I expected something more from this place. I mean…It looks pretty ordinary."

"This is the thing they don't tell you, right?" A magnetic smile lit up his face. "These lands hide magic well, it doesn't scream for itself. That's the whole point – you never know if the well is enchanted or the owl," he pointed his chin upward at the bird on the branch over them, "is an evil sorcerer. Some places are more whimsical than others, but the truth is you'll always meet the magic when you least expect it. It's always around – you just don't really notice."

She thought about his words for a bit and then voiced something that really was disquieting to her, "That man was mad at me that I was…a witch."

He drew a sigh. "Yes, some people don't like…some of the magical beings. You see, you don't look like an enchantress from legends who came to make a wish come true."

“You mean that one in a sparkly dress with wings, radiating light around her?” She let out a soft laugh.

“Exactly. If you don't look like this – they assume you are an evil witch.” He glanced at her before his gaze shot back to the road. “Most of the people are wary of them or afraid. But not all, some just are not used to wizards. They are not as common here. Most of them are leaving for your lands because people are still very prejudiced about them. Even after years they can't forget what some of your species did in the past.”

He most likely was referring to the old tales where witches and sorcerers were casting terrible curses on kingdoms and their people, however, it was a long time ago and wizards and wizardlings had nothing to do with it.

“It's so unusual,” Violette breathed. “In the Magic Lands nobody would suspect me of something bad just because I don't look like a cupcake. I mean, it's the usual fashion where I came from. We are not cute little fairies. Though, I met a few unusual wizardlings and wizards who look more like royalty,” she continued. “Our society doesn't have such preconceptions. Human and magicborn live in harmony and we accept everyone, even descendants of evil species. I mean, some still don't trust them but we don't judge or discriminate against them.”

Dante had seemed to attentively listen to her as he immediately responded, “We might have more wizards and other magical beings here but don't even know it. Some of them don't talk about it. There was a time when these places had a lot of reincarnates but now it's a mystery how many of them are still living among us.”

Violette cocked her head, still watching Dante. Reincarnates or as others called them ‘shapeshifters’ were an interesting happening – people who could shift to a predestined animal form, depending on who their ancestors were. It's been known their heritage came from the Valley of Enchanted stories, however they were quickly populating the Magic Lands, it seemed it was connected to this bizarre behavior towards magical beings here.

“Look,” Dante suddenly broke the silence with a soft tone and waved his head to the side, “*Laevitins.*”

Violette turned her head in the direction he showed – under the tree there was a little fluffy lump of light reminding her of a little rabbit, illuminated by a bright cold light around him, as if he was the light itself.

Violette's lips parted as she gasped. “Never saw them before.”

It wasn't surprising, as a lot of the mystical animals could appear only under the cloud of night and usually they lived in the forests, but for such a city girl as Violette it was absolutely new. Most of the creatures living in this world she'd never even imagined seeing, as they lived in the wild or were incredibly rare. And meanwhile Laevitins weren't the rarest species walking this world, it brought the butterflies to life inside her stomach.

“They leave their holes after midnight,” Dante said.

The little animal cleaned out its fur and in a flash of a second disappeared between the trees, leaving a strip of light in the air which slowly ebbed away.

“Consider this the first magical creature you saw here,” the young man said as Violette kept peering with her starry eyes in the depths of the forest where the magical animal vanished. “Though that owl we saw could still be an evil sorcerer in disguise,” he kidded.

She drew her gaze back to Dante as he was already looking at the road, the corners of her mouth grew into a smile.

After one more hour of the trip the carriage finally stopped. They drove up to a town, quite larger than the one they stopped by earlier. Arriving in the middle of the night they found the town entirely loaded in sleep. The silence reigned on the streets hand in hand with darkness.

An old black lantern brightened the paved street, dimly illuminating cottages on both sides – closed shops, cafes, bakeries and houses. The dark windows reflected street lights, not a soul detected around.

Dante bowed out the coachman very quickly. He took them to the final destination as they agreed and departed. Violette and Dante again were left alone, however, instead of a comfy bed in an inn, they continued on their way.

“The place we need is not far off, we can walk there,” Dante said as he started moving.

His words took Violette by surprise. “It won't wait until tomorrow?”

“Do you have any other plans for the night?” He abruptly stopped and turned his head.

“No, I just meant we could wait for the daytime,” she suggested.

“The faster we get there the better. I thought you wanted to get rid of me as quickly as possible, or had you started to enjoy my company?”

Violette shot Dante an unfriendly look and with a frustrated sigh followed him.

“Why are all our adventures always happening in the night?” she asked herself more than him. Though, he didn't hesitate to reply.

“Isn't night the favorite witches' time?” His voice sounded playful.

And despite it being just a popular assumption, it was still kind of true and Violette couldn't object to his words. She herself finds night a mystical and inspiring time. She couldn't say if it was because she was a magical being or she just liked the secrecy that darkness hid. Though, it was a fact – there were a lot of potions and spells which some wizards believed better to brew and conjure in the nighttime. This belief started because of the strong power the moon can radiate while being in the different phases. It could energize some of the potions and objects, and give them special powers. Some of the potions required to be brewed for three nights under the light of the full moon, or to leave the ingredient to bathe in its light for a while.

When Violette was younger she had a time when she had to brew a potion of alleviation for five hours under the crescent moon’s presence, and then do it again after almost a month. Same time. Same day. Otherwise the potion would be useless, just a usual liquid, no matter how many ingredients she'd put there and how uncommon the color of it looked.

As they were leaving the town Violette took in a little wooden sign:



Violette raised her brows, continuing treading behind Dante. They were going into the woods? It's not what she actually expected but why should she be so surprised when her companion was secretive all the way here? And it's not like he brought her this far just to get rid of her in the forest.

“The place we are going to–” Violette started as one of the thorns caught her cloak, “so what exactly is it?” she continued removing the thorn.

“You are very impatient,” he pressed.

“It's called having common sense.”

Dante only slightly turned his head to fling a look at her over the shoulder. “We are almost here.”

“Remind me again, why can't you take whatever is hidden in this place?”

“One witch didn't want me there so she enchanted that place with a blood spell,” he explained dryly.

“And what is there? A spell that can break your curse?”

“Don't rush events, Little Witch. I said there is something that will help us with the curse, not break it. It will require more work.”

She glanced sideways, of course she didn't hope they would be done that soon but it would be nice to dream.

A white veil covering the tall trees and a deep layer of snow on the ground suggested that the snow was falling here only a few hours ago. While the winter barely visited southern lands, it was already celebrated here in the northwest.

The snow was crackling under Violette's boots with every new step. The fresh and cold air filled with pinecone and a wooden scent was drifting around while the moon had followed the travelers as a kind friend keeping an eye on them.

Violette took another step, the snow creaked under and suddenly she stopped. The silence circled around her. Her eyes fell onto the steps ahead left by Dante. She took a step again, and two more. Snow pressed under her boots, making a loud sound and then silence reigned around again. Her eyes darted at Dante's back – he was treading forward, not making a sound. Literally none. His steps were completely quiet, as if muted. Like he wasn't moving at all.

“How do you do this?” Her voice shattered the silence.

Dante didn't turn his head. “What?”

“How do you move this quiet?” A confusion hovered over her.

He made a little turn with his head, voice remained nonchalant. “What do you mean?”

“You walk completely quiet while my boots make noise filling all around.”

His face was covered in a blanket of indifference and without much emotion, maybe only a taunt, he said, “Expensive boots I guess.”

“No, it's not. Your moves are silent and soft, even your footsteps are not deep. Like your legs are barely touching the ground,” she explained.

The snow cracked under his boots, and then one more time.

“Now you're doing it on purpose.” Violette’s shoulders dropped.

“I have no idea what you are talking about. You are too suspicious.”

“Maybe because you keep secrets from me. I thought we were partners and should share our plans.”

“We are not partners. I am the head and you listen to what I say.” He didn't stop walking, nor did he look at her.

Violette didn't move, her leg rooted to the ground. Her brows furrowed and after a second a pressed pile of snow flew at the back of Dante's head.

“What the Hell?” He instantaneously spun to her, looking outraged and struck, completely clueless what he did to deserve it.

“Don't talk to me like this. I am not just a tool or your servant. I am not asking you for admiration, but I need simple respect,” Violette demanded.

The anger was seething inside her, her eyes pulsing, hands clenched in two fists, whole body tensed under his gloomy gaze. She held the glare until the moment Dante was finally able to admit defeat.

He took a deep breath. “Fine. I am sorry, I was…”

“Mean? Rude? Arrogant?”

“Yes,” he pressed, narrowing his eyes. “You're right, you deserve respect but I can't tell you everything. Not now.”

She barely believed his apology was sincere, but it was enough for her. For now.

“Now, when we finally drew a line I wanted to ask,” she said after a few more passed trees. “You know a lot about magic and potions but you’re not a wizard and don’t look like anything…magic related.”

“What gave me away? No mantle or patent leather shoes?”

She raised one of her brows in annoyance. “So what are you?”

“Why do you think I am something other than a human?”

“I just don't feel like you are a human. Maybe you're not a wizard or a sorcerer but you might have some magic abilities. Maybe you're a shapeshifter? If you could turn into an animal I can see you being something small with big ears like a bat but not as cute, more arrogant,” she stated.

“Big ears?” he inquired, his eyes taking on a gleam of confusion.

“Yes. It's my detailed image.”

“No, I am not a reincarnate,” he let out coldly.

“Then you could be a human with magic abilities. I bet your super power would be self-confidence.”

“Ha ha. How did you guess it? I thought I didn't make it that obvious,” he said with an absolute stone face but Violette noticed as the corner of his mouth lifted a bit.

“Oh, I must have solved a riddle,” she clapped, “You are indeed a fairy.”

“Yeah, absolutely. Of course I am.”

She sneered at him, her nose scrunched for a second. A sly twinkled in her eyes.

“Fine. You are not a wizard or a sorcerer. Not a reincarnate or any kind of shapeshifter. You can't really be just a human, right?”

“I think I'll disappoint you with my answer after all.”

“Really? But you are quite familiar with magic. I mean, I was studying with humans and we both learned the basics but you know too much, I'd say.”

“I had time to learn.” Another dry response left his mouth.

After a couple of minutes of silence and snow creaking underfoot, they came out to a clearing in the middle of the woods.

Several small stones were rising above the ground dusted with frost. Violette's attention was immediately drawn to the crypt towering above the ground, looking like a small temple dedicated to some ancient God or Goddess. The stones beneath its shadow turned out to be graves with the names carved under the hoarfrost – they came to a graveyard.

The shrill bird cry broke the dead silence.

CHAPTER 8

IN THE MURK OF THE CRYPT



Crows.

Crows had never been a good sign in the human world, however they were highly respected by wizards. As a symbol of a wise, cold mind, royalty and rigor, it was an honor to have a crow sit at the top of your house and a great privilege to have them as an animal assistant. But for humans a crow was a sign of death and tragic ending. They believed these birds would come flying if someone was fated to die soon.

Violette remembered clearly her human neighbor was truly mad and frustrated when crows were choosing her house out of all the houses on the street. She didn't know why this woman was so convinced about the crows being such a menace to her but she had fought them for as long as Violette remembered. And it prompted her to think – what if she was alone because all of her friends and loved ones died?

Violette’s mind forced the image of her neighbour, standing with a long broom and trying to get rid of a crow from the rooftop of her house. The bird was very stubborn and didn't want to leave. That day the woman told her that all her life they've followed her around and it was never a good sign, as if they were haunting her. And despite how little Violette was, she started being very cautious about these particular birds, partly because she was seeing how much her neighbor had struggled with them. Perhaps it made sense that there's so many crows at graveyards – everyone there was already dead.

The black bird, sitting at the top of a cold gravestone, was staring at the guests with curiosity until Dante drove it away, continuing his way.

Violette looked at the crow once again as it landed on another stone.

“If you wanted to bring me to the cemetery to kill, it was actually kind of smart but I would politely reject,” she needled.

A sharp chuckle escaped Dante’s throat.

“I already told you, if I wanted you dead I'd have killed you much earlier. I had quite a few chances already. Remember the robber?”

“Oh, so you hired him. I suspected it, to be honest," she played along.

“And you got me again.” His brows twitched.

The huge old doors to the crypt had no handle, no lever, nothing that could be grabbed onto and unlocked – only ornate patterns in the center that resembled coiled vines with leaves.

Violette was studying the columns when Dante ran his hand over the pattern and they, as if alive, crawled to the sides, revealing a seal. She didn't have time to scrutinize it as he pressed his palm on them and the doors opened. The ensuing sound disturbed the centuries-old silence of this place, the sound similar to that of touching a stone that hadn't moved for an eternity. A light night breeze blew inside the crypt and a murky haze slowly began to creep into its depths. The ominous feeling crawled under Violette’s skin, raising the hair at the back of her neck.

It didn’t look like someone had been here recently. Nevertheless, Dante moved forward without hesitation. Violette took out her wand, with a light shake it lit up, radiating a warm soft light.

They went down a long, cold corridor. Old pieces of cobwebs, covered in dust, hung from the ceiling. The smell of a hundred years of mustiness lashed the skin.

Violette's wand was illuminating the stone walls, leading the way deeper into the room. As soon as they entered the crypt itself, Dante lit a lantern and it glinted with a blue ethereal glow, plunging a room in state of night under the light of the moon.

Violette's gaze lingered on a stone coffin in the middle of the room, where there rested a person, apparently of no small importance. A table pressed to the wall sparkled with jewelry and boxes, covered in a thick layer of dust. On the other wall – an enormous portrait of a beautiful woman whose dark hair was crowned with gold.

“Who is buried here?” Violette brought her wand closer to the portrait to scrutinize.

“A person whose fault it is we are in this situation,” Dante said with an already familiar coldness.

Her eyes ripped off the portrait. “What has she done?”

“She made this mask,” he replied dryly.

“What did you do to her that she decided to curse you?”

“Me?” He abruptly stopped, his back visibly stiffened.

“You apparently made her angry.” Violette gazed at him intently. “Did you hurt her?”

“If I hurt her, it was absolutely her fault. I didn't do anything to be a villain in her story.” Dante worked his jaw and stalked to the farthest corner, with barely lightened walls.

A stone tablet, shrouded in dust, was adorning the wall. Despite the carved words, the darkness made it absolutely impossible to read. Violette’s eyes flashed at Dante as he

shone the lantern on the stone floor. Something glimmered in his hand – a gold pendant with a round, light blue gemstone. A harsh rumble rang out in the crypt, as if stones were falling from their places or…something was opening. And as soon as Violette thought about it, the floor in front of them began to move apart, laying steps leading into the depths of the unknown.

“I can't go any further,” Dante said.

She gave him a curious look, on the other hand, lacking trust. It might be the blood spell he was talking about earlier. A long time ago, blood spells were quite popular and used to protect places from uninvited guests. It mostly was common between old wizard families who were too afraid for their treasures and secrets, so it wasn't really surprising, and yet Violette decided to remain wary.

Dante pointed the lantern light at the passage. “There should be some information about the mask. I presume her spellbook.”

“Was she a sorceress?” Violette’s lashes clapped.

“Not really,” he answered vaguely. “Go.”

“How do I understand what I'm looking for?”

“I wasn't there, I don't know. You're a witch, you should know where and what is magicked. Don't you?”

Violette looked down the aisle and took a deep breath, preparing for the worst.

“Take the lantern,” Dante aired, his voice lacking any emotions, so impartial and much colder than the blue light brightening the room.

Violette put the wand behind her belt and took the lantern, her eyes raised to Dante’s face. His facial features seemed as sharp as a dagger, and instead of any words of encouragement or wishes for good luck, only silence accompanied her down. Not to say that she expected that there would be something dangerous below, but the darkness and the unknown nevertheless had made her heart pound faster.

She went deeper and deeper down and only the echo of her boots reflected from the walls, perhaps it was even for the better – it was unlikely that any other sounds would have made this situation less tense.

She walked downstairs, holding the lantern just above her gaze. After a couple of steps, her eyes found a stone archway. An old tangled piece of cobweb hanging above made her grimace, muttering something under her breath. She stopped for a beat to look back where the dim light was still shining. And as she turned her head – a loud, piercing sound echoed throughout the room.

“What happened?” She heard from above.

A small black spider was descending on its web in front of Violette's face, her body froze, dread raced through her veins. Maybe going back and running away, forgetting about everything, wasn't such a bad idea? At least there were no spiders outside.

“Little Witch?” Dante called and it seemed as if his voice had acquired new colors. She swallowed and squeezed to the nearest wall, making her way around the spider.

“What happened?” Dante called again.

“Everything is fine!” The loud words came out of her mouth as she walked into the passage. *Everything was not fine*, but she had no desire to explain. In textbooks about magical animals, Violette once read about huge hairy spiders that had disappeared a long time ago, but this thought sometimes had haunted her in terrible nightmares and being reminded of it now only made the situation worse. She shuddered, as if that spider could now crawl over her body.

The small room looked like a witch's sanctum, except not an old hag who lived in the middle of the forest, but a skilled sorceress. Though the crown on the woman’s head on the portrait and the beautiful painted boxes made Violette wonder if she was something more than that. Could she have been a countess or even a queen?

A wooden sorcery table with crystal flasks and glass bottles filled with sparkle powder, some of them empty, was centered in the room. A beautiful magic wand resembling intertwined branches laid upon its surface – a magnificent thing to have but utterly useless in the hands of none-owner.

Violette ran her eyes over the old incised candelabras as she passed the table. Her attention was caught by a beautiful silky cloak in a shade of royal blue, embroidered with silver threads which were making a slender tracery of the moon and heavenly constellations. A sapphire of a deep color on a collar flickered beneath the lantern light. Another beautiful cape of dark cherry red color traced with gold flashed before her eyes.

She came to a little bookshelf with a few old sorcery books. Her fingers glided down the spines and then she picked one in a burgundy cover. The spine was so shabby that it almost let the book fall to the floor as it opened. Specks of dust rose into the air causing Violette to sneeze. She wrinkled her nose and almost sneezed again but it didn't come out. Dispelling the dust haze with her hand, she finally looked inside. Pages of the book were covered with different descriptions of flowers and their meanings in the sorcery world. Violette read a book like this before, as much as it was interesting it wasn't valued in her current situation. She leaned to the shelf again. One of the books was dedicated to rituals, another had strange symbols she hadn't seen before. It made her curious and she reached her hand out, placing the flower book back on the shelf. It was covered with writing in a foreign language and inked pictures of different monsters and demons that hid in the darkness. Whatever it said – it wasn't a book about good magic for sure. She placed it back and suddenly felt some strange pull, a thread that connected her to something that was not here before.

She spun her head in the way her heart suggested and it led her to a little table near the wall.

There were two little jewelry boxes brimming with herbs and dried flowers – lavender, blue lupine and purple anemone. Another thing on the table she observed was a little dark velvet bust with a ruby necklace upon

its neck, though it also was not the thing that led her here. She pressed her hands on the dusty table in search of a thing that called her. Magic objects very rarely radiated an energy other wizards could feel but when the feeling was there it meant something. In that case, Violette felt whatever the old witch left here, it could be enchanted to be found one day. She leaned over to look under the table to find out it actually had a dilapidated ledge.

“Huh,” she exhaled.

A secret drawer? With that thought she pressed on the table's inner surface.

A brisk snap rang out, waking up the silence as the drawer rolled forward. Violette's eyes witnessed a thick book in a shabby leather cover. A little magenta gem in the center between twirls glimmered in a cold light. The cracks on the leather hinted the book was extremely old, outliving at least a century. Violette carefully studied the parchment pages. She had no idea what it was about – the pages scrawled with little pictures and recipes followed by the text written in language she'd never seen before. She glanced at the cover again – nothing except dancing oblong squiggly tracery. No words, no name.

Although Violette had never seen a book like this and there was not a word she could understand, there was no doubt it was the thing she was looking for. She could feel it.



DANTE WAITED near the entrance into the secret passage, twirling some kind of trinket in his hands, more likely one of the jewels from the witch's little boxes. But as soon as he sensed Violette, he carelessly threw it aside and bolted his gaze to her.

Stepping closer, she handed him the book.

“That's all that I found. Only, I didn't understand a single word.”

Dante plunged his eyes lower and pulled the book from her hand. He attentively scrutinized its cover before opening it. His eyes were gliding

through the pages as his greed started to grow with every turn in search of something.

“Do you know what it is?” Violette peered in the book. The old brown pages were painted in strange and weird letters, or was it rather pictures? She didn't have time to catch it, as Dante was flipping through it very fast.

He didn't say a word, just kept skimming through it, sparking Violette's interest. Had he known what these symbols meant, for how smart and thoughtful he looked at the moment, or was he trying to understand what he was reading? He was definitely looking for something specific.

When he finally took his gaze off the book, his eyes shifted to Violette’s face.

“It's Heggas’ language.” His voice was peremptory, calm, which couldn't be said about his chaotic fingers iterating through the pages seconds before.

“Heggas? Aren't they like legends or something?” She skeptically tilted her head to the side.

She hadn't remembered much about them – only that they were evil witches that were cursing people, menacing chaos long before she was born.

“Oh, I wish they would be legends or even better – a mythical thing.” His hand scrubbed over his jaw. “Unfortunately, they're real, there just are not a lot of them left.” It sounded like relief from his mouth. Perhaps, for *everyone*, if all that was written about them was true.

“So, this book belongs to one of them?”

“Yes,” he said shortly.

It was a strange thing to assume because the woman in the portrait behind them was nothing like how Heggas were pictured in stories. Were this woman and the one who the secret room belonged to the same person?

“How do you know? You understand what is written here?” Violette let loose her curiosity.

“Not really. I recognize some of these symbols but to read it we need someone who actually knows this language.” His eyes dropped to the pages again.

“So we will be looking for a Hegga?”

“A Hegga is the last thing I want to see,” Dante gritted his teeth. “There's someone else who can read this book.”

Violette raised her brows, astonished. “Who?”

“The Witches of Emerald Capes.” The book slammed close in his hand.

Violette's lashes batted. “I've never heard of them.”

“It's a community of witches who take their power from nature and praise it. They engage in all sorts of strange rituals, but the main thing is that they know Heggas’ language.” With those words he started to move in the direction of the exit and as he made a few steps something fell out of the book right on the ground.

“Wait,” Violette quickly picked it up. It was a piece of paper folded in half. The cursive writing on the beige parchment indicated that it was intended for Dante. She raised her eyes as he stalked closer and extended the letter to him. “It's for you.”

He roughly opened the parchment, quickly running his eyes over what was written inside and then…just threw it away. There was nothing to read in his eyes, as if the letter hadn’t touched him at all. Only impassivity stared back at her. Violette's eyes darted to the place where the letter landed, startled by this simple action.

“Nothing important.” He got ahead of her question as she glanced at him, about to open her mouth. And then turned back to go away.

Violette's feet glued to the floor, her eyes fixated on the paper hidden in the shadow now. She didn't have the right to read it, to pick it up, so she could do nothing except just to leave.

“So,” she tried to change the topic and go back to their previous conversation as she neared. “Are these witches some kind of sorceresses or are they indeed witches?”

“Well, they're not like you, but still they're not like Heggas either. I'm not familiar with their heritage. In my opinion they are just a bunch of crazy weirdos. But they can read this language,” Dante finished as they ended up at the crypt entrance again.

Violette raised her eyes to the moon, fresh night air played with her nose. How nice it was to see the stars after darkness in the tomb, they seemed brighter than before.

She looked around – the graves and the headstones erupted goosebumps over her skin, making her wish to leave this place immediately.

“And where can we find them?” she let out, stepping on the steps down.

“They celebrate a new moon in the North Forest every new cycle.” He raised his head and took a gander at the moon. “It will be in two days if I'm not mistaken. We have time.”

“And we just ask them for help?” she wondered.

“Exactly,” Dante nodded placidly.

Violette couldn't stop pondering. She'd never heard about a secret circle of these witches or any circle at all. Specifically, she'd never heard about witches whose powers were connected to nature. Of course, regular witches were working with its gifts, brewing healing potions and cures using different herbs, but they didn't have such a deep relationship with nature as Dante described the Witches Of Emerald Capes.

She'd never heard about someone taking magic from nature at all. Objects were able to absorb magic with the right ritual, it was a common thing but a person – never. Though she should remember these lands were different from her homeland, they had another type of magic and most legends and stories have never made it to her home, they just got lost on the way.

“Meanwhile, we're waiting for the crescent moon, we stay in the town.” Snow crunched under Dante's boots.

The air, cold and exhilarating, filled Violette's lungs, every step accompanied by the creaking of snow, following the forest sounds. A few minutes later her eyes spotted the warning sign about the forest again as they passed the town gates. The empty streets and lonely lanterns were the only things they met on their way to the nearest place to stay. The town was still sleeping. Didn't matter what time it was, Violette didn't feel very tired as her curiosity was ringing in her head, and yet she assumed it was deep night, perhaps almost morning.



THE INN they stayed in was a cozy little house with two floors. Dante paid an old lady for two rooms before they walked upstairs.

Violette had felt like she should say something as her fingers reached the handle of the door.

“We will stay here for two days,” Dante suddenly spoke first. “Until then try not to get into something that can cause…any inconvenience.”

From all the words he could say, Violette didn't expect that.

“I am not a troublemaker.” She glared at him.

“That better be true,” he replied, his voice sharp and unyielding..

The silence filled the space between them for a moment. And then as Dante opened the door Violette clumsily let out, “Goodnight.”

He glanced at her from the side and without any unnecessary emotions responded in kind.

The doors shut.

Violette heaved a deep sigh as she finally was alone and had time to think every thought that invaded her mind since the start of all of this trip. Her eyes moved around the room – simple but warm. The big window in the opposite direction let in the light of the street lantern before she lit up the lamp on the wall. A pretty big bed with bedposts under the wall seemed soft and a perfect place to lay in after a long day, but the first thing Violette decided to do was to take a bath.

She sniffed the flower soap on the bathtub – the pleasant smell of it filled the room in minutes. She was more than happy being able to change her clothes after almost two days of traveling and she was prudent enough to bring herself a few more dresses, including the nightgown in her magically spacious bag. She was absolutely convinced it was the greatest invention which always came in handy. It could contain twenty things of different sizes which didn't make it heavy, however to be honest she wished for a bag which could hold more stuff. Unfortunately, more spacious bags were truly rare and therefore extremely expensive.

She took a few possibly useful things for this trip as well, trying to be prepared for whatever happens – three bottles of potions, a longer cloak with a cape, gloves, pocket size manual of plants, spellbook and another pair of boots, just in case.

Smelling like a burst of flowers and feeling absolutely clean she lay down in the warm bed and knocked out faster than she expected.



ALL NIGHT VIOLETTE had strange dreams, she was wandering in circles in the forest and every time ended up at the cemetery. The crows were flying over her head, snow covering her hair. The field of purple clematis had flown over all her dreams and then somehow she'd ended up in the little town she’d stopped in with Dante before and an angry seller had tried to sell her a little sparkling Laevitins.

She opened her eyes long past noon.

Clouds covered the sky with gray and black colors, muffled noise from the street faintly slid into the room through the window as Violette was sitting on the bed half sleepy. She rubbed her eyes and her mouth let out a yawn as her lashes fluttered.

Her legs led her to the dining room.

She stepped in and crossed the room to the long table filled with snacks. The fluffy little cakes with heavy cream garnished with raspberries on top were calling out her name and who was she to resist them?

One bite and she let out a satisfied burble. The berry layer between the biscuits melted in her mouth. Her eyes didn't notice the teapot on a silver tray straight away but soon she was pouring the hot water in a porcelain teacup. And white cookies with blueberry jam covered with chocolate topping suited her mood that day perfectly. The warmth spread through her body with every sip of hot tea and she didn't realize she’d emptied a whole plate of cookies alone.

Shortly, her curiosity led her to the living room – a spacious room with a large window, two velvet chairs, one couch and a little coffee table. Her eyes brushed a pile of books on the table, a crystal vase with fresh white flowers in it, then she gazed at the windows. The sky remained overcast with the gray clouds.

Opening a window, Violette stuck her head outside, inhaling fresh air – the cool wind brushed her cheeks. Her nose smelled the rainy scent.

“Gloomy weather, isn't it?” The cracked, aged voice behind her Violette whip around. The woman with gray hair styled in a low bun was whipping

the dust from the table with a cloth. Her white linen shirt with long sleeves was neatly tucked into a brown long skirt with colorful flower tracery along the hem. A reserved but sincere smile lit up her face as her eyes met Violette's.

“A little,” Violette confirmed by closing the window. “I quite enjoy the freshness the rain brings.” Her legs drew a few steps forward in the direction of the woman, the same who met her and Dante at night when they needed rooms.

“Uhh,” she sang peacefully. “Me either. But I thought you had plans and the rain might ruin it.”

Violette glanced at the window again.

“I wanted to walk around the town a bit,” she admitted.

“I advise you to hurry up if you don't want to get your feet wet,” the woman said softly, touching up the flowers on the table.

She was right, it wouldn't be nice to catch a cold in the middle of their trip. Violette didn't have much planned but she wanted to go outside and look around, however her mind was still wondering about Dante. She hasn't seen him since they wished each other a good night.

Nearly at the threshold from the living room she turned her head around to the old lady. “Excuse me. My companion…The guy who was with me, did you see him today?”

The woman raised her eyes. “No, miss. I believe he didn't leave his room.”

Violette nodded meaningfully and thanked her before returning to her room to grab her cloak.

Her eyes lingered on the next door. The idea to knock on Dante's door was tempting but all she did was turn back and go down the stairs and to the door leading to the world outside.

CHAPTER 9

A MONSTER BEHIND THE MASK



The faint glow of street lamps entered the room through translucent curtains. A line of warm light divided the floor, falling directly onto the illustrated pages of the book Violette was sitting over.

Crunch.

The sweet scent of apple burst into the air as her eyes continued to run over the words. The apple in her hand was oddly shaped like a heart, a soft pink hue, the inside of which looked more like sprinkles made from stardust than the inside of an ordinary apple. It also didn't taste like what she was used to – incredibly sweet with the first bite and sour when you chewed it.

Violette's fingers turned the page of the book she bought at the store that afternoon. It has been narrating about the magical and legendary places of these lands. Her eyes studied the lively illustration of the next chapter – a dragon-shaped stone arch in the far south. It's been said that it was a sacred place for dragons until they disappeared, taking refuge in the north forever, more than five hundred years ago.

Crunch.

The small hand of the clock pointed to one o'clock in the morning. Violette didn't notice that she'd been sitting over the book since dinner. Her eyes rose to the bed and she moved the book onto the blanket.

Her hands reached out to the curtains to draw them and retreat into the world of dreams as her attention was quickly caught by a figure in a dark cloak outside. She patted her lashes and leaned closer. Only two floors away, but she could swear it was Dante. The young man looked back only

for a few seconds but she couldn't confuse his mask with any other scarf, as well as his inky hair.

What was he up to?

Violette wasn't going to just leave this question unanswered. Grabbing her cape, she sprang out into the corridor. Her boots knocked on the stairs so loud it could wake up other guests but her thoughts were occupied by other things. She had to be quick. Whatever Dante was trying to do – she had to know it. His cryptic personality and Machiavellian mind were bothering her more than anything and her dreams will not give her answers she was so eager for.

The street was empty and dark, only street lanterns lit up the road. A fresh rainy scent saturated the air, clean and cool, sending a shiver over Violette’s shoulders. An absolute hush hovered over the town drowned in sleep.

Splash!

Violette looked down, her leg sunk in a puddle. Every street was covered in wet spots. It will not work this way. She quickly grabbed her magic wand and cast a spell to mute her steps. Now she could start her shadowing. Fortunately for her, Dante hadn't gone far. He was just around thirty feet away down the lane.

She had to hurry if she didn't want to lose him. A few steps and she hid behind one of the buildings. His late walk aroused suspicion. Where was he going? Why at night? What else was he up to and didn't tell her?

She tried to be as unnoticed as possible, careful not to get too close. Luckily, Dante didn't look back, continuing forward with a slow, unhurried pace, as though he had nowhere in particular to be. She again didn't hear any steps from him like he was flying, however his feet remained on the ground. The pure lull.

And she followed him for ten minutes more until he stopped in the middle of the street, near a tall lantern. His head raised to the stars, eyes closed. A deep breath left his lungs just before his mouth let out the words into the cold night air.

“And how much longer are you going to follow me?”

Violette's heart numbed before it started throbbing faster, a stone dropped down her stomach. She couldn't see him but she definitely sensed

he was looking in her direction, knowing exactly where she was. She squeezed her eyes shut. There was no reason to hide anymore.

A deep breath filled her chest and she made a step from the shadow, her pulse quickened. And why did she even think she could follow him unnoticed? Dante was moving smoothly as a shadow of the lantern, he was noticing lots of details at once, while she knew how to make noise, for sure.

“You knew I was here?” she burst out.

“You are not really good at spying, but I respect the effort.” A half smile touched his face as the corners of his eyes slightly rose.

“I wasn't spying. I mean, I just tried to find out more about what you are up to.” She rolled her eyes to the side, gripping her hood tightly.

“It's the equivalent of spying.”

“Perhaps, but it wouldn't be necessary if you didn't hide so much from me.”

“Your curiosity can get you in trouble one day.” His voice was bracing as frost.

“Is it a threat?” She stalked closer.

“No.” A quiet chortle. “A warning. You can meet someone who doesn't like it when someone sneaks into their business and it'll cause you problems.”

“Then tell me what you are doing here alone,” she insisted, meeting his stare.

An annoying smug smile lit up his face as he tilted his head to the side.

“I can ask you the same question.”

Violette stayed sullen, he just tried to get away with that answer. “My question remains the same.”

“What if I just like walking at night?” he said simply.

She raised her brows as her hands crossed on her chest. “Really?”

“I find this time quite peaceful. I'm not a big admirer of day's bustle. Besides, walking at night helps clear the head.”

“You don't really like people, do you?”

“I prefer to say I value my personal space.” Something magical was in his voice, so low, cold and mystifying as the night itself. Unhuman.

“So you didn't leave the room today? I didn't see you,” she pressed.

“I stayed inside. And now I want a little bit of fresh air.” He turned, deciding to continue his walk.

Violette hesitated, should she just follow him? Either way, she has to. It was hard to believe he was just enjoying the night air.

She caught up with him in a moment, trying to continue their conversation.

“Don't you fear someone would think you are up to no good being outside at such a late hour?”

“Do you?” he drew nonchalantly.

She didn't respond, her brows knitted, she was determined to get the answer despite his evasiveness, and she wasn’t about to joke.

“It's not like I care about what others think,” he uttered, continuing ambling down the street.

“Do you even care about anything else except for yourself?”

“I will be pretty honest, Little Witch, it seems you've been thinking a lot about me. I might start to think you’re fixated on me.”

She shot him a dirty look. “For a person in a mask you think too highly about yourself.”

“It's because I *know* how I look behind the mask. But why should it matter to you? Think too much about it?” He leaned to her for a second.

“You can wish,” she let out unbothered. “I will upset you with my answer because not everything revolves around you. You think others have nothing to do except think about you?”

“And yet, it's you who followed me. Indeed, I am on your mind.” He proudly tilted his head.

Violette narrowed her eyes.

“Only because I know nothing about you and you are not really enthusiastic to reveal anything about yourself. It's a natural thing to do when some stranger offers you help and doesn't tell you anything about his plans,” she pointed out.

“You call me a stranger so often that I might start to think you say it only to not forget about it yourself.”

She frowned. “And what should this mean?”

“I'll leave it up to you.” His nose winced as he boldly leaned towards her and glimpsed down at her. “Well, I'm not the only one who enjoys walking late, am I?”

She realized what he meant. The night they first locked their eyes was not in the shop – she saw him the day before. She'd remembered his eyes

flickering at her in the darkness of the dead-end alleyway.

“I was just walking home from work,” she murmured.

Dante hummed thoughtfully and then added, “Do you like it?”

“What?” Confusion hardened her features.

“Working in the potion shop?” Dante explained.

Violette didn't hesitate with an answer for this question. Her mouth twisted in an ironic smile. “Quoting one person, I'll say – *why should it matter to you*?”

“Just trying to keep our small talk going as you're already tagging along behind me.”

“Small talk? This is what you called it?” She tried to catch up with him again, not really able to keep up with his pace.

“Isn't it? A conversation that is not giving any important information, not for me, not for you,” he simply stated.

She frowned but a second later she simply voiced, “Then I will not answer if it's not important.”

“Enjoy the silence then.”

Oh no. If he thinks she'll give him such satisfaction he is terribly wrong. She had all intentions to turn his life upside down if it means she'll get the answers she's so hungry for. Does he really believe she will just shut her mouth and walk in silence? Though she didn't have time to say anything as Dante got ahead of her.

“Look, our mutual acquaintance.” He pointed his chin into the distance.

“What?” She was befuddled, peering into the distance. “What acquaintance?”

“The guy from the forest. A thief.”

Her face contorted in confusion, lips parted and brows bonded together. The male figure walking down the street in their direction hadn't evoked any resemblance in her mind.

“How do you know? He was in a mask,” she said, scrutinizing the stranger.

“Call it a talent,” he waved away and then added, “Should we say hi to him?”

“What?” Violette flinched. “No! Are you even in your right mind?”

“Why not?” he retorted with ease, as if they had stumbled upon a mutual friend. “It would be a gesture of good manners.”

He can't be serious. No.

“Oh so, you have decided to be well-mannered for a thief, but not me,” Violette snorted.

“I mean, he has more chances to hurt me, even being that bad at it. At least he has a knife. You on the other hand…have a wooden stick.”

She couldn't say if he was serious or just tried to get on her nerves mimicking the same thing the thief said in their first meeting. Violette looked again at the man as the distance between them was shrinking. It can't really be him, right? How could Dante recognize him without a mask and different clothes, especially after such a short interaction? There was nothing about him signaling he was the same man they met in the forest. Though, a man walking down the street at two o'clock in the morning could be considered as a suspicious person if not for the fact they were doing the same. Just three people who enjoy late night walks, apparently.

Perhaps it made sense if not the man’s next action. He stopped in front of the door until another man walked out. They greeted each other quickly and then looked around while Dante and Violette still were walking in their direction. It sent a strange sensation, snaking down her spine. Her common sense might have tried to warn that something suspicious was in the behavior of these two.

Pacing down the street on the other side of the road allowed them to still be unnoticed, though Dante seemed to not be so preoccupied with those men.

Violette squinted her eyes as the two male figures crossed the road on their side. She couldn't see their faces – the shadow covered half of it. No. Not the shadow – masks on their eyes. Dante indeed was right, she didn't know if it was the same thief but the two were definitely up to nothing good.

“They are going in our direction. At this point we didn't even have to try,” Dante voiced with a chuckle.

“It's not funny. I think they have something in mind,” Violette worried. “We have to stop them.”

Dante looked at her like she was out of her mind. “Why?”

“Because I think they’re about to do something bad. If you’re right and it's the same–”

“Since when is it our problem? We are not watchmen of the sign,” he retorted.

“It's you who wanted to say hi to them, isn't it?” she quipped.

Suddenly the familiar crispy voice rang out in the street.

“You!” the man cried. “The witch and her demon from the forest!”

“Oh, never mind. What sense in arguing if they had already noticed us?” Dante sent her pretentious smirk. He wasn't mad or angry, however, she might suspect he wasn't really happy to deal with the robbers. At least, not in the name of a greater good.

Violette had no time to blink as both men already rushed at them. It turned out Dante was right, they were indeed familiar with one of them and it seems his friend already heard about their little adventure in the forest which tied them together. *Great.*

Violette grabbed her magic wand in an instant; They didn't take her by surprise this time, she won't lose courage now.

The bigger man they had already met before, threw himself on Dante with a dagger as if he didn't learn his previous lesson. A sudden burst of courage seemed to flood his being, perhaps because this time he wasn't alone. His friend, thinner but much taller, swooped on Violette with a sword. She evaded the blade as it cut the air. Her heart skipped a beat as she stumbled back. Although her pulse hastened, she quickly blasted a blow of magic in response. The man swayed away a few feet, even though he managed to stay on the ground. These two idiots were definitely determined.

The man raised his sword high in the air to try his attack again and Violette, bouncing off, cast another spell, this time stronger. Her breath turned into short ragged gasps, loud hammering of her heart ringing in her temples as her body froze in a protective pose.

She hadn't really had a chance to practice defensive and attacking spells since graduating from school. Back then, there were magic duels and lessons on protecting oneself from black magic and dark forces, but since then she’d lived quite a peaceful life, like almost everyone she knew. You can't really practice attack charms when nothing in your life is dangerous. Thankfully, she’d been a diligent student and never neglected her classes, though she definitely needed some time to recall more of those old spells.

The thin man fell off his feet. Violette’s gaze shifted to Dante – his assailant was kicking his legs in the air while Dante held him by his vest. The dagger is nowhere to be seen. Then she heard another shout out – the man with a sword rushed forward. Dante tilted his head to look over the shoulder of his opponent.

In a quick moment he threw the thief to the side and was ready to take the attack, but Violette worked ahead of the curve and sharply cut the air with her wand. A blast of dark blue light released into the air and slammed the man into the wall of the nearest building. In that moment as Violette's action took Dante in surprise, the other robber got back to his senses and swiftly jumped on his back. In a blink of an eye he thrust a dagger deep in his shoulder.

A snarl let out from Dante's mouth as he shut his eyes in pain.

“Uh, you're a sucker,” he hissed and slammed his back into the wall, trying to shake off the attacker. Then he deftly grabbed the man by the arm and pulled him over himself with one blow, hitting his whole body into the asphalt. “Now I am really done with you.” With these words he released the dagger from his shoulder and put his leg on the thief's chest. The other robber remained unconscious on the ground.

“Wait!” Violette stood up as Dante pressed his leg on the man's chest. The thief breathed hard, the blood on his face dripping down as he lay on the wet ground under Dante's shadow. Dante's eyes darkened as he pressed his foot harder and the man released a howl.

“What else?” he grumbled, not looking at the girl.

“You won't try to kill him, will you?” The line drew between her dark brows and her eyes flickered with a plea.

“It would be something he deserves after trying to kill us. Twice.” He leaned with a hand on his knee, his gaze fell onto the man underneath. “Don't you agree with us?”

“Dante.” Her lips pursed, face painted in colors of austereness.

Dante pressed him harder into the ground.

“She thinks you deserve to stay alive, do you think she's right?” he said to the man, malice dancing on the corner of his half-smile. “Just dare to show yourself to me again,” he finished and beat his head to knock him out.

“Dante!” Violette cried out.

“Relax. He’s alive. I said he deserved to die but it didn't mean I intended to kill him,” he voiced with simplicity and left the thief alone. Approaching, he flung the blood-streaked dagger away, the blade ringing out as it struck the ground.

“How are you finding our little walk now?” His mouth twitched.

“Horrendous…” She bent her brows.

“Yeah, could be better.” He waved his head to the side and Violette's eyes fell onto his shoulder, widening. She got completely distracted, forgetting the man violently stabbed him, and Dante stayed so calm and firm, it was hard to believe he was just hit with a sharp weapon in his shoulder.

“God, you are bleeding!” she exclaimed.

His gaze lowered to the wound. His shirt soaked with blood from a deep cut into the skin. “Nothing scary,” he said and then looked at her again like nothing happened.

Violette was flabbergasted. Her mouth remained wide open and brows bent, completely dazed by his behavior.

“You need help immediately!”

“I am fine,” he drew coldly.

“No, you’re not!” Grabbing his hand, she dragged him in the direction they came from, wanting to leave the spot where they were fighting the thieves who also could wake up at any moment.

“Don't hurry like that,” Dante complained.

“Don't hurry? You are injured. Do you even have a tiny bit of self-preservation?” She dropped his hand.

“I care only about things that can kill me. This one won’t.”

“You’re literally bleeding,” she retorted, irritated by his carelessness.

“It happens.” He shrugged.

“You are unbearable to deal with,” she grumbled, starting to rummaging through her bag. “We are going back to the inn. We've had enough of late adventures.”

“Then what are you doing?” He bent one brow.

She ignored his question, and instead pulled out a little crystal bottle with clear liquid. “Here. We have to clean the wound first.”

He looked at her with sombreness in his eyes as she poked him with a little potion bottle. She did it again when he didn't accept it. Her eyes were

saying, *Take it or I will make you*. Then she pulled out a handkerchief.

“I can help you with the cloak,” she said and reached for the clasp of his coat to make the way to the wound. Her fingers brushed the metallic clasp as her eyes darted to the injury. Her lashes fluttered. Something was weird about it. The wound stopped bleeding too fast; they walked only a block, maybe two.

What surprised her most was that the cut hadn't looked as deep as she'd imagined. She slid her hand to the place where the dagger was sticking out just a couple of minutes ago and without touching it she ran over the carve with her fingers. There was nothing. Not a sign of a wound except for the blood. It wasn't even dry yet, but there was no sign of an injury. Her hand numbed just above his flesh and she slowly raised her gaze to his. His eyes darkened as it seemed he was waiting for some words to come from her mouth.

She couldn't be mistaken, she clearly saw how one of the men stuck a dagger right into his shoulder up to the hilt and how Dante winced in pain and then pulled it out. The blood on the shoulder was completely fresh but there was nothing there. *Nothing!*

She froze in front of him, just inches away. His eyes stared at her still awaiting. Awaiting for *realization.* And finally the puzzle she'd tried to solve for so long, started to align, putting every piece in place. The rhythm of her pulse began to grow, rushing in her ears.

His footsteps weren't on the snow as he was moving light as a feather, and he always moved very quietly. He could appear out of nowhere and she thought it was just dexterity of movements, but it didn't seem like that anymore. Not when he disappeared in her store, not when he appeared in front of her to protect her from the mad thief. Something dark in his eyes was not just a shade of his pupil, it was almost like shadows were dancing in his gaze. He avoided the sun all their trip here, he didn't want to stop the carriage for a break, and he admitted it himself, he didn't leave his room all day, preferring a late walk. She saw him for the first time in the night and all the time after their meetings occurred only under the moonlight. He had sensed her following him and he recognized the thief when she couldn't. It all wasn't just a coincidence, some little details she hadn't really thought about. And the mask on his face began to acquire new colors and details that she hadn't noticed before. It was not a mask. It was a *muzzle.*

Violette's hand still hung in the air. She couldn't say how long she was staring into his sinister eyes before her body started to show signs of awakening. Her fingers started to shake as she drew a very slow step back.

“Want to share your thoughts?” Dante exhaled in the air.

“I…I don't under–” she stuttered.

Her mind couldn't process a thing for a moment. She couldn't understand how it was even possible and how she could be that blind. But more than that, she still couldn't understand who was standing before her. What a creature, what a thing could possibly fit all these details she just found out. Because the one who came to her mind was complete nonsense. A mythical thing. Impossible to exist. It *shouldn't* exist.

“I was curious when you'd finally get the clues.” He said and made a step closer as she started to back up. “To be fair, I am surprised you didn't come up with it earlier with such a curious mind of yours.”

Her eyes widened even more, stomach twisting, and her legs faltered just before she spun to run away.

Dante disappointedly cocked his head to the side. That was not a reaction he probably waited for or he was disappointed she did exactly this raw gesture – just run. He couldn't blame her though, she was a human, they're always running and only then thinking. It didn't even come to her head to reach for the magic wand, completely baffled and scared. All she could hear in her head was *Run* as if she was prey who just realized it was in the cage all this time, playing with the predator's fingers until it would squeeze it in his hand.

She bumped right into his chest.

“You don't want to make it that dramatic, do you, Little Witch?” he said as she stepped back and in a second she was again running past him.

He let her. He didn't really try to catch her, waiting when she finally realized it and just stopped. But she didn't mean to. Instead, she was scared that if she stopped, it would make it even worse. There was nothing in her head – she immediately forgot about the deal, about why they were there, her thoughts just scattered away. A blankness in her mind. All she could hear is how loud and strong her heart was pounding. Another realization struck her – in the minutes of silence between them she'd never heard his heartbeat, not even a ghostly sound of it.

Something seized her hand, dragging her with a tremendous force until her back crashed against the wall.

“Don't touch me!” she wanted to scream but it came out so unnaturally, so dim and hoarse as he pressed her against the wall with his hands on either side of her.

“You're making it complicated,” his voice was calm and unshakable unlike her continuous panting.

She tried to catch the air but instead she caught his words as he again made an attempt to calm her down.

“Breathe, Little Witch. That's what distinguishes you from the dead.”

Violette finally was able to open her eyes and she wanted to scream at him, to punch him, to seem mad but instead she breathed with crispness in her voice.

“What are you?” The gasp left her lungs, the blood curled inside her veins.

“And what do you think?” The corners of his eyes rose.

“Just because I can wiz doesn't mean I can read minds.”

“Well, you just think about it a bit. Who else can be muzzled on the face?”

“Someone who bites…” she aired uncertainly and carefully, as if this answer did not seem funny and absurd.

“Well, now add two plus two. Night, biting and, I will give you a clue – *blood*,” he nearly whispered, arousing goosebumps all over her.

She swallowed, stiffness instead of shaking occupied her body as she didn't want to believe his words.

“Your words have no meaning,” she managed to say, her voice trembling.

“Why?” His gaze seemed so deep and intense, freezing the time between them.

“Because vampires do not exist,” she breathed.

“Really? Then why is one of them looking at you right now?” His eyes flashed like a hawk's.

“No…” Her chest heaved. “You just want to fool me like you always do.”

He softly laughed, lowering his head and eyes to the ground then taking his gaze back to her starry eyes focused on him.

“Why would I lie to you about this? Why do you think I have this stupid thing on my face? If you have another explanation I'd like to hear one.” The last words came out almost like a whisper, while his intense gaze stayed with her.

Violette almost hadn't blinked, she couldn't. She stared at him in disbelief, waiting for magical relieving words *I'm just kidding* from his mouth but they didn't come.

“Vampires do not exist, not anymore. It is just legends…”

“Oh yes, legends – half the truth, half the fiction, right?” His words came out stolid.

“It's not possible…” Her lashes fluttered.

He pulled away but she couldn't shift her gaze to anything else. The words didn't come to her throat, she didn't even try to find them or force herself to speak. She couldn't believe that all this time she'd been working and communicating with the real vampire, a monster, a night demon being, sucking blood.

“Who locked you in the…mask?” she asked cagily, still standing where he left her.

“Not really good people,” he said mysteriously, raising the corners of his mouth, as if their conversation was something amusing and not a revelation of a terrible truth.

“And you…want to take it off?” She trembled.

“Would you like to have a mask on your face forever?”

She let these words past her ears.

“If you will do it…You– If I will help you then I'll free a–” She abruptly fell silent.

“Please, don't be shy.” He knew exactly what word she wanted to say, and he wasn't surprised or offended. But she still changed it, she couldn't possibly say it. To call him a…*monster*.

“Then you will be able to drink blood again,” she said instead.

“Don't be fret, Little Witch, I won't touch you. It would be too rude and ungrateful after all your help.”

“I don't worry about myself,” her voice suddenly became rougher. “You're trapped in this thing for a reason. This changes the meaning of our deal radically. I didn't sign up to help the vampire start the hunt again!” she burst.

“You can't start a hunt if it has never ended,” Dante said. “Do you think I am the only one?” His brows drew together while Violette's eyes glistened with tears. “Vampires live around for hundreds of years, they suck blood and use people all the time. If you don't notice it – doesn't mean it doesn't happen.”

A sickening taste came to her throat, voice still unstable.

“And when were you going to tell me? Were you thinking of hiding it until we are done with the deal?”

“I didn't try to hide it, Little Witch. I was just interested when you'll guess. It took you more time than I expected.” He leaned at the wall.

“Yes! Because it's all legends!” she snapped.

“Now you know sometimes what legends say is true. That's why it's called this way.” His eyes flashed with mirth.

“If you think it's funny then you have a perverse sense of humor.” She glowered.

He shrugged. “Nobody is perfect.”

“If nobody is perfect then you are just completely faulty,” she greeted her teeth, finally taming her trembling.

“Oh, *the attitude*.” He shot her a proud smile. “Glad I wasn't wrong about you.”

The line appeared between her brows. “Can't say the same about you. What else are you hiding? Your brother is a mummy and you have a friend who howls at the moon?”

“I know one vampire who did this to scare some residents of one village.” Playfulness hadn't left his voice, still taunting her and it couldn't not be annoying. She started to think that his serious side wasn't that bad after all, she kind of started to miss it.

Her fingers brushed a strand of hair behind her ear when she lowered her eyes. She had nothing to say, moreover, she would need time to digest what she had learned in the last couple of minutes.

“Either way, you have no choice. We made a deal, there's no way to back out,” he reminded.

“I know what we did,” her words fell like a stone. “I just need to think. I need some time,” she said honestly. And surprisingly, he showed understanding as he didn't say a word and was quiet all the way back to the inn.

Unbelievable. Horrendous. Just dreadful. How could she get into this? How could she possibly be that unlucky to meet a vampire and even make a deal with him? Stupid girl! She shouldn't have done it, she knew it's a stupid decision to trust a stranger but she couldn't imagine, even in the wildest dreams, that it would turn out like this. Decision after decision, the blindness of hope led her to this moment of truth and regret.

Every step, every stair was just a new shameful thought until Violette buried herself in bed. She turned her head right into the pillow, thinking how unfortunate and miserable she was right now. Why was she punished just for trying to save a dear person to her heart, her beloved father? And it didn't matter how much she would reproach herself for her mistakes, it would not change one thing that was now clear as the sky that night – she had no choice but to help a vampire. Little did she know how fateful the innocent decision to make a deal in that cave will be. She can't just run away right now, they were tied with the vow.

She rolled on her back, her gaze fixated on the ceiling.

Stupid girl. Dante should have called you Stupid Witch, her inner voice scolded.

And with that thought his look appeared in her mind. She covered her face with her hands. She didn't want to think about him, especially not now. She didn't want to even imagine talking with him tomorrow. He lied to her even if he said he didn't. He still didn't tell her the truth and now she was trapped. Such a jerk!

After a long time rethinking her life and decisions and calling herself all possible offensive words, she closed her eyes, trying at all cost, to not think about the vampire on the opposite side of the wall.



HER SLEEPING WAS AWFUL. She woke up tired with forlorn thoughts. She felt this way last that evening when she decided to accept Dante's offer. She didn't get out of bed right away, but after a solid half an hour she decided

it's not the best way to spend her day. She will not let this inconvenience ruin her plans and it will not break her spirit.

Violette nearly jumped from the sheets on her feet. She must get rid of the bad thoughts, it was only making her feel miserable. *Everything was fine.* She would fulfill her part of the deal, Dante would give her the promised cure, and she would go home, never see him again, and, if she was lucky enough, forget that vampires ever existed. That sounds much more positive than self-flagellation. With that she collected inspiring thoughts and dressed up for a little walk over the town. Yesterday the weather made her go back home too quickly, but today she was determined to visit a few shops. What could be better than nice new stuff to cheer up yourself?

The main street was more crowded today. The sky didn't seem as dark as yesterday and the glow of the sun could be seen through the veil of clouds.

Little colorful shops lined up one after another, beckoned with garish signs.

One shop with a soft green board and majestic carved letters invited passers-by to pick up fabrics from the South Kingdom with a cool-toned emerald flag, centered with two white lilies and a gold crown above. Violette didn't need fabric, or any furniture but she was so attracted to the store that she couldn't deny herself the pleasure of just going in and looking around.

The sophisticated smell of lilies wound round her as soon as she crossed the threshold. Elegant and precious fabrics were neatly stacked in closets and on shelves one by one. The soft material of each startled with its quality. The airy lace and delicate chiffon felt incredibly nice between the fingers – the softest silk she'd ever touched felt like a cloud itself. A pile of crepes in different shades of pink, green and blue colors on the other side. Velvet fabric in rich colors such as midnight blue, berry and deep teal were beckoning with its sumptuous shades.

Violette's gaze wandered around the shop absorbing everything with her eyes, all of it seemed so delicate and felt soft and nice to the touch, to the eyes. She still didn't need fabric but she couldn't resist buying at least something, so she chose the silk lilac ribbons to decorate her dress straps or use on the waist, whatever she'll come up with.

Violette has never denied the opportunity to dress nicely, it didn't matter when and where, a casual meeting or something more formal. She'd believed a beautiful outfit could help lift the spirit and set you up for a wonderful day. She would sell her soul for magnificently made lace, or beautiful purple ribbons and bouffant skirts. Not to mention that her heart could be won over by a pair of gorgeous sparkly gloves.

She tied one of the ribbons to her bag, ready to explore other stores.

Another shop, marked with a forget-me-not symbol on the door, was filled with shelves stuffed to the brim with books. The scent of the freshly inked papers, hot coffee and vanilla was soaring in the air, spilling out even beyond the doorway.

After some time she indulged in lunch at a local cafe where she was served pink fizzy lemonade that sparkled in the sun like stars in the night sky and she might have never eaten more delicious meat pie in her life.

The store with inks and parchments reminded Violette of her father’s favorite shop. The feathers on the counter staggered slightly when the door opened. She couldn't just pass by and not step in. The smell of the crispy paper aired in the room. The notebooks, textured parchments, colorful inks – everything was bringing her thoughts to her father. She missed him. She'd never left her home for such a long time, even though it was merely a few days. She brushed her fingers over the notebook with a leather brown cover, wondering if her father felt better at the moment. She wished she would see him, talk to him, or just to know he's fine.

Somehow she ended up at the counter of the shop with headbands and a silver hairpin in her hand. Finishing storming all the shops her eyes had found interesting, she finally got back to the hotel. She was yet to meet Dante, that thought alone made her heartbeat ramp up.

She tried not to think much about him, about his vampire nature but it was practically an impossible task. The questions were flooding her mind and it seemed to be even more overwhelming. She just hoped it wouldn't be awkward to be around him. Fear was not exactly the right word to describe her feelings about him, it wasn't lingering under her skin anymore. She kept reminding herself that she is a wizardling after all – he'll not be able to hurt her and she will not let herself fall for his charms. She wasn't actually sure if he was capable of any spells or magic but she remembered from old tales

that vampires were familiar with mind charms. He'll have to explain himself to her whether he wants it or not.

Her body plopped down on the bed, eyes staring at the already studied ceiling of the night before. It started to get dark outside and the clock was showing eight in the evening.

CHAPTER 10

THE THINGS NOBODY WANTS TO KNOW



The darkness outside was wafting a strange obscurity and eeriness. The bare branches of the dark trees were strangely akin to the bony fingers of terrible witches or monsters that live deep in the forest, ready to drag anyone even deeper, where only the moon and stars will hear their hopeless pleas for mercy.

Violette ran a wavy line along the foggy window with her finger, turning it into a small drawing of a flower. She took a deep breath before the clock struck ten in the evening, bringing her out of the abyss of her thoughts. Her eyes traveled to the arrows of the clock as Dante appeared in the hallway. He wore a dark blue velvet doublet with crescent moon ornaments and curlicue patterns on the collar and long high boots. His hand held two dark blue – almost black – cloaks.

“Ready?” he asked as if he cared about her answer.

“Are you sure it'll work and they'll want to listen to us?” Violette came closer, keeping the distance between them, the taste of the previous night still lingering under her skin.

“Yes, they will,” he said with such confidence it infused a suspicion into Violette’s chest. “Do you know the spell to change the colors of the cloaks?”

Violette nodded, getting out the magic wand.

“It should be a dark shade of emerald,” he remarked.

She wielded her wand, with a light movement it burst out sparks and in a brief moment the two capes in Dante's hands changed their color to a

spellbinding emerald shade.

He handed her one and put the other on himself.

It was heavy and weighty, although inside it was very soft and pleasant to the skin. She didn't think it was cold enough outside to wear such warm clothes, however, maybe it was cooler in the forest than in the town. She fastened the gold clasp on her neck under her ribbon necklace and glanced at Dante, already waiting for her at the exit.



THE SILENCE between them was prevailing since they left the inn. And despite all of the revealed truths about vampires, Violette couldn't stop wondering. Dante hasn't tried to talk with her either but it was so him to do it: he wasn't really talkative, not until she provoked the conversation.

“So,” she finally spoke, trying to sound nonchalant. She still kept the distance between them, though she assumed he wasn't dangerous to her, at least, not while he was in the mask.

“Oh, I was wondering when it will happen,” he said lightheartedly, slightly throwing his head back.

Her brows raised in confusion. “What?”

“Your curiosity awakens and you'll talk me to death.”

You can't kill something that is not alive, she wanted to say but instead let out another question. “Do you blame me for my curiosity?”

“I just don't like it,” he cut off.

“Good for me, you don't have a choice as to how to tolerate it,” she waved away. “It's an important question though. I wonder why you are so sure these witches will want to help us.”

He didn't hesitate with the answer, his voice didn't lose its chill. “Oh, I don't think they'll want to. You see, death is a natural thing, but rising up from the dead is not. They don't like it; they have the mindset that it's not right. So, I won’t exactly be a welcome guest there.”

Despite his words, Violette didn't notice any concern in his behavior, not a crumb, which only aroused her suspicion.

“Not like you're welcome anywhere else, Dante,” she noted.

She could hardly imagine someone would want to invite a vampire over for a cup of tea. If she knew who he was when she saw him for the first time at the shop, she would kick him out in the span of a second, though it certainly wouldn’t help.

“It would be sad if I cared,” he said apathetically.

Violette bristled. “Were you even going to tell me you’re a vampire?”

“Well, I didn’t hide I'm a vampire, I just didn't mention it.” His figure swayed for a second as if it was something rather funny.

“That doesn’t change the fact you kept me nescient. Did you think I will never know?”

“Of course not. I told you, I was simply curious how long it would take you to guess. I actually expected you to do it sooner. Perhaps I overestimated you,” he breathed coldly.

Violette’s face took on a frown.

“It’s not like vampires are a common occurrence.”

“Exactly why I didn’t mention it when we met. How did you imagine that? ‘*Hi, I am a vampire and need your help to take off the mask which I was imprisoned in*’?” he ridiculed her. “You already hesitated to trust me, I doubt it would make me more reliable in your eyes.”

“What about your mask then? I don’t think I paid much attention to it before you said you’re a vampire.”

“Well, it’s enchanted in a way that people don’t question it much. It helps with unwanted attention.”

“Wait,” Violette blew, remembering their previous encounters. “But I asked you about it, didn’t I?”

“You did but if I didn’t mention it first you wouldn’t. People don't really pay attention to this thing on my mouth, if they do, they quickly forget what was bothering them. But soon as I mention it myself, the charms vanish.”

That makes sense. Before, she couldn’t really see it properly, it’s like something didn’t let her see the hideous bars, and how erratic the mask looked. Its top edges were protruding with spikes, reminiscent of a dragon crest, a detail which was really hard to miss. But before it felt like her eyes were veiled as well as her mind and any curiosity about his appearance.

“So what are we planning to do?” she asked, following him through the thickets of the forest.

The air meanwhile became only colder, bracing her throat.

“You'll speak with them,” he stated. “They are pretty compassionate about others, especially since you're a witch too. You're just a poor girl who became a victim of an evil vampire's plan. Doesn't it sound so dramatic? They will eat this up.”

“Will they not feel you're something…unnatural?” she wondered.

“No, they won't. However, they’re claiming they can communicate with nature, like hearing the wind. I think they're just brainwashed or hopeless dreamers. What freaks,” he grumbled.

“Said the one who literally raised from the dead and now can't step out the room while it's sunny outside,” Violette pointed out.

“Don't tell me you really believe they can speak with the wind.”

“I just cannot exclude it from being possible.”

“Well, next time you need help, you should talk to the grass, maybe it will give you some advice.” The corner of his mouth twitched.

Her eyes slid his way. “Still better than yours.”

CHAPTER II

THE WITCHES OF EMERALD CAPES



The air was only getting frostier as they were pacing deeper in the woods. Violette didn't notice straight away as snow began to appear on the trees they were passing, and the further they walked, the whiter tall ancient spruces became until finally the ground under their feet also turned to a sparkling white blanket.

The steam came out with Violette's breath along with the snow cracking under her boots. The magnificent absolute silence followed them, while the stars sparkled in the sky, as clear as the snow on the needles of fir trees under the warm light of a lantern. Meanwhile, the moon hid behind the clouds.

If it weren't for a thick cloak, Violette would have become an icicle long ago. The cold was biting and even managed to creep through the crack of the fabric as she shifted from foot to foot.

Strange sounds began to creep from afar. The closer they came, the more clearly it sounded as if they were approaching a celebration. The muffled music was reminiscent of cheerful dancing and there was something warm about it, although Violette was completely unfamiliar with the tune.

She recognized drums and the strings of guitar. A golden alluring light began to pour through the needle-pointed branches, so bright against the backdrop of the dark night and the white pines.

A few more steps and a circular glade appeared in front of her eyes. In the middle of it, a large fire was burning, spewing tongues of yellow bright

flame into the air. But her attention was riveted to the female figures in long cloaks of an amazing emerald hue, dancing around. Their silhouettes moved to the beat of the music, the source of which Violette hadn't seen, though it was the last thing on her mind. The admiration in her eyes was burning with every second of the performance.

The witches' dance was dynamic and synchronous, even hypnotizing. Orange pumpkins in their hands were tossed over and over again in the air as they were catching them each time. Sometimes the pumpkins passed from one hand to others, while the witches were changing poses in this wonderful rhythm. As the women raised their heads to the sky, Violette finally noticed that the guest of honor of the celebration – the crescent moon – had finally graced them with its presence.

“This doesn't look like a feast,” Violette said, attentively watching the witches as a golden ethereal glow was forming around them like a magical sand, a pollen that covered the snow and emerged in a matter of time.

“It's a ritual,” Dante answered, moving around the perimeter. “They are welcoming the birth of the moon and gaining their strength from nature, or so they claim.”

“And what should we do? They seem to be quite busy. How can we make them talk to us?”

“It's simple,” he said and pushed Violette to the circle. “Dance.”

“What?” Violette’s eyes darted at him but then she found herself between flowing cloaks and whirling skirts.

The snow under her feet shone brighter, spreading an aureate tracery out, as if the circle was not just made by these witches, but existed on its own. Violette looked around: the women were moving to the beat, repeating the same movements so strange and unusual that she couldn't figure out what to do without looking completely goofy. She tried to repeat some of their moves with her hands, and if the witches had not been so busy with their ritual, they would have definitely noticed a stranger among them. One inadvertent step back and she happened to push one of the witches.

“Hey!”

“I am so sorry, I–” Before Violette could finish, the woman dramatically waved the hem of her cloak and continued dancing.

Violette worried her lower lip between her teeth.

The witches were raising their hands to the moon, their feet never remaining still. The gold dust kept spilling out of the pumpkins thrown in the air and falling onto the white ground absorbing into the snow. With smooth movements they'd drawn different figures in the air and then their dance turned into a pure saltation. All at once they stopped, sharply twirled in place, ran up to the fire and back, depicting new inexplicable figures. Some of their actions were so sharp and powerful, sudden enough to continue to pick up on the train of their thoughts and repeat it in a perfect rhythm.

Violette was spinning in place as she glanced at Dante. He stood by a tall tree, his arms crossed over his chest, and she might not see his face but she had no doubt he was definitely smiling, or rather mocking her clumsiness.

As soon as the dance ended, the witches threw gold dust into the air. Violette didn't know what kind of powder it was, what kind of magic, but it was a mesmerizing thing to watch as the golden flecks with a tranquil tickling were slowly falling onto the snow-white ground against the darkness of night.

The aglow specks of dust dissolved under her feet, leaving the snow as white as it was before. Surprisingly, the ground underfoot didn't seem trampled, the snow remained as clean and fluffy as if not touched before.

As witches dispersed and started talking to each other, Violette hurried back to Dante.

The vampire was still standing under the tree’s shadow, leaning against its trunk. If she hadn't been so focused on finding him, she probably wouldn't have seen him at all. He looked like a mysterious stranger who seemed to be able to force the shadows to hide him from unwanted eyes.

Suddenly Violette heard a voice behind her, soft and kind, like snow itself, only much warmer.

“You're not one of us. And it doesn't seem as if you're a new one, who are you?”

Violette spun to see a girl, presumably the same age as her.

She followed Violette after the dance, the only one who seemed to notice her. The witch looked friendly and curious. Her curly light brown hair was falling in waves on her shoulders, pretty messy bangs touching her long lashes. Her gaze was dreamy, eyes sparkling like stars.

“Oh, hi,” Violette faltered. “Yes…I'm not one of your…um…”

Her head swiveled at Dante by the tree, but to her own surprise he was no longer there. At first it seemed to her that he'd merged with the shadow, like all creatures of the night, but he really wasn't there. Then, she shuddered as a familiar low voice sounded right next to her. Dante's hand fell on her shoulder as he addressed the witch in a green cloak.

“We are here seeking help, miss. My love was unfortunate enough to meet a terrible creature. A vampire.” His voice filled with sorrow. “And now this ail is following her. We were trying to find a way to get rid of it and we thought this,” he held out the spellbook, “could help us. Unfortunately, we are not able to read it. But we heard about witches who can and that is why we came here.”

Violette gawked at Dante. What did he call her?

Soon enough she turned her gaze back to the witch, widening her eyes like a poor puppy who needed help. In fact, she cringed from the weight of Dante's hand on her shoulder and the way he called her – the word *love* from his mouth sounded rather like a curse.

“Oh no…” the girl in the cape gasped. “Vampires are awful! Such a terrible sign to meet one. It's said vampires bring tragedy with them.” Her eyes shone with rue.

Violette nervously smiled. “Maybe because of biting? Biting is never a good thing to experience,” she tried to sound polite.

“Depends,” Dante retorted and Violette threw a pointed look at him.

“I'm so sorry for you. We beware of them, vampires are one of the most terrible species to ever exist. And if they like you enough to make a deal with you, well…They're just like a disease – once you meet one you'll never be able to get rid of them.”

“Oh…Nice to hear it…” Violette quietly mumbled, her shoulder visibly drooped. Like she wasn't in enough trouble.

“Oh, I'm sorry! I didn't mean to make the situation worse!” The girl’s forehead crinkled.

“Well, then you understand our concern,” Dante said frostily before warming his voice again. “Would you like to help us, please?”

“Oh…I–I don't know, everything that includes vampires is forbidden. They're like a horrible curse ruining everything around.”

“Oh, we'd never put you in danger, we just need to read a few pages of the book. It's all that we want. Please, don't reject us, we don't know where to go,” Violette confessed as her eyes left Dante's hand on her shoulder. And her tone seemed convincing enough by the way the witch angled her brows down.

“We wouldn't ask you if not for the fact that it's not a great idea to go to the Heggas, we already have to deal with evil spirits,” Dante said imposingly.

“I understand…It is indeed not safe,” she stumbled as her gaze traced to Violette and her eyes dropped to the magic wand on her waist. “Wait! Are you a witch?”

“Yes?” Violette pulled her brows together.

“Well, sisters should help each other! I won't leave you in such an awful position! Especially since you did such a long trip here.” She grabbed both her hands and shook them. “I'll tell my sisters that I'll be late and then come back to you! Just wait a second.”

“Thank you, it means a lot.”

Violette's words were sincere, it meant a lot to her, however the witch's reaction surprised her. Her eyes were following the emerald cloak as she was leaving them and then she let her forehead furrow.

“Don't be scared, these witches live in another dimension, they don't know what they're saying,” Dante said, more likely referring to the words calling his species a disease. Not quite an inspiring thing to hear indeed.

“I'm not scared,” she lied.

“Yeah, that's why you became so sad.”

“Uh, I'm sad because I can't join these witches. Such a shame I didn't hear about them before. Look at these nice capes!” she expressed.

Dante raised his brows and a faint smile took shape on his face, just a subtle lift of the corners of his lips, as his eyes went to the ground.

The witch they met was talking with some of the other women whose faces they couldn't see clearly. They were nodding their heads, listening to her very carefully but something suggested to Violette she wasn't quite telling them the truth. Or maybe not all of it. Maybe the girl didn't mention vampires because if she reacted that badly to their story – other witches didn't look terrified or even surprised. One of them glanced in their direction, warily narrowing her eyes at Dante, their gazes locked for a brief

moment. And then emerald capes flashed in the moonlight, disappearing behind the trees.

Approaching Violette and Dante, the witch smiled at them as if they were already her close friends. It made Violette feel a pang of guilt, it seemed like this girl was truly sweet and kind, and they were just using her and it was so…so unfair. She shrunk again and that time because of how ashamed she felt. Though it seemed Dante wasn't bothered at all, his face lacked emotion, even a glimpse of understanding he was doing something bad. Maybe vampires weren't able to feel some types of feelings, like guilt, or maybe they didn't understand what is bad and what is good, or Dante was just a mongrel without a heart. Perhaps not because he was a son of the night but because he was just a bad person. She really was curious if he was even a little sorry for this poor girl who had mistaken two souls in need of help with them. And she was afraid she'd known the answer to it already – Dante didn't care about this girl, he didn't know her, well, to be honest, he didn't care even about Violette and she couldn't imagine him caring even about people he'd known. Humans were just toys in his immortal life. He'd use them for his needs and then throw them away as an old tattered trinket. He probably was thinking that the trust in her heart is her own mistake and she's too naive, which makes her easy prey, so it doesn't make him guilty. Assumptions were all that Violette had, she didn't know him at all and she wasn't sure she wanted to know how his twisted mind works but she knew curiosity will not leave her that easily.

The girl in the velvet emerald cape eyed Violette with a smile, the dark blonde pieces of her hair fell on her forehead between her brows.

“I'm Eve,” she beamed, her kind eyes glimmered at Violette. Strangely, she looked naive but wise at the same time. Maybe she was just too trusting and believed there's good in people. *Her* mistake.

“I'm Violette.” Her lips curled into a faint smile. “And he's Dante.”

He nodded tightly. Eve tilted her head to the side and smiled nicely at him, and Violette wondered if someone looked at him with such warmth as this girl before.

As they were walking, the girls moved a little forward.

Eve leaned closer, almost whispering, “What is the scarf on his face?”

“Oh…um,” Violette stammered, “he gets cold very easily. He grew up in the south and all this winter weather just makes him feel sick.”

The made-up story came into her head as she nervously tried to remind herself why she was doing this.

“Oh, well, then North Forest is definitely a trial for him,” Eve shortly giggled.

Violette pretended to laugh. She wanted to tell her to run so bad but she was selfish enough to keep masquerading.

After some time they stopped on the spot in the forest, amid its frozen kingdom.

“Can you hold the book, please?” the witch asked nicely, and Violette quickly opened the book to the right page.

Eve put her fingers on the pages, her eyes closed. The symbols and the letters began to glow with gold light under the witch's fingers – a pure sign of breathtaking magic. It was hard to believe these symbols belonged to the ancient evil sorcerers who were tied up with dark magic and lethal spells.

Nobody actually knew what Heggas were doing and what type of magic they possessed, as well as their purpose. It wasn't clear if it was pure dark magic or if it was completely new spells, not bad but not good either. Everyone had believed they were daughters of night, and this night lacked stars and any light, existing in the presence of the moon in a red eclipse. But even Dante was wary of these creatures, which led Violette to think that Heggas were an absolute evil that you can't hide from once you met it.

She knew about them from the books, they were witches as old as time, who were depicted in pictures as scary and crooked old crones. The picture vividly lived in Violette's mind: a wrinkled old woman in a black cloak with fingers curved in the shape of tree branches, ready to grab and drag you into the depths of a dark forest.

It was believed that most of them had disappeared, while others were hiding in such wilds that they couldn't be found. And it's been said these witches were not even sorceresses of some kind. Sorcerers were considered wizards and wizardlings whose parents or ancestors turned to black magic, and thereby the magic cursed their children for their misdeeds. Sorcerers were prone to dark magic much more than ordinary wizards like Violette; they could be kind, but the darkness always had called to them in the most difficult times and not all of them were able to fight it. But the heritage of Heggas remained unknown. What exactly these magical beings were doing, besides cursing people and casting terrible curses, remained a mystery.

They and their actions became a kind of legend, what was true and what was a lie was difficult to say. Everything written in books could be compared to fairytales – exaggeration and fiction, just as Dante said.

The pages of the old book continued to emit a soft light and every word that Eve ran over with her thin finger turned golden. It looked as if she wasn't just reading them, but was absorbing the words into herself, or, on the contrary, giving her own piece of magic to read this one. This is probably why she kept her eyes closed and never once had lowered her gaze to the pages: she did not read the words, she was *feeling* them.

The creaked line formed between Eve's brows and then she opened her eyes, her fingers numbed above the pages. She looked at Violette, and suddenly her voice no longer seemed as sweet and friendly as it'd been.

"Why do you need this spell?" she asked timidly.

"Is something wrong?" Violette's pulse began to pound faster.

"It doesn't say anything about vampires. This spell removes curses, break them."

Violette answered immediately without hesitation like a cup overflowing with a lie, poisoning her mouth. "Well, that's right, you yourself said vampires are a curse. We'd thought this spell would help us get rid of him."

Eve bit her lip, as if something inside her was tugging an unseen string, telling her that something was off.

"I don't know…" She dropped her eyes to the pages. "Heggas don't write about spells to help people, unless…it's a spell that will release something terrible…" Her consciousness seemed to wake up from a dream. "What kind of a spell are you going to remove? What are you going to release?"

For a split second, it seemed as if she wanted to say, *Or who?*

"We…" Violette balked, feeling caged.

Dante was staying silent. He stood steadfast and it didn't seem as if he was worried about the girl's sudden suspicion.

Eve raised her gaze to him. "This thing on his face, not because of the cold, right?"

"I would not say the cold is something that bothers me," finally Dante spoke and his voice turned weirdly sweet and derisive, feeling she was very

close to the truth and it almost faced her. Oddly enough, he wasn't sad about this fact, and the strangest of it all – he looked like he felt himself a winner.

Eve's eyes darkened, her face didn't seem as soft as it was a minute ago.

“Who is your friend?” she roughly asked Violette, keeping her eyes at Dante.

“Eve, I…You shouldn't be scared, it's just–” Violette tried to explain but the witch quickly interrupted her.

“You lied to me…” She finally turned her gaze to Violette, looking like a kid whose dreams were crushed by the cruelty of this world.

A pinch creased between Violette’s brows. “I'm sorry, Eve, I promise it's not as it seems–”

“You're a vampire,” she trembled, frightened by Dante’s presence.

His eyes gleamed in the dark. Eve could feel something in the air was warning her but she was too blinded by her naive soul and intention to help a sweet couple. Her innocence led her to a trap.

She took an uncertain step back, shrinking into herself.

“You tricked me, I believed you!” She raised her voice, though it was noticeably shaking. Fear and disappointment was snaking under her skin. “I believed you, I thought we were similar!” Her eyes radiated such misery and chagrin. For a moment she thought Violette was such a kind of dreamer like her.

“I'm truly sorry, Eve. I didn't lie to you. It's true, I was unfortunate to meet a vampire and sealed a deal with him. And in order to fulfill my part, I must help him,” Violette tried to explain herself.

Eve shook her head, thinking how stupid she was to believe two strangers. It was only her fault. It was only her gullibility that brought her here; she shouldn't have trusted them. She hadn't thought that someone like Violette could set her up like that, she was a witch, just like her…Sisters don't do that. But she forgot one small detail – they weren't sisters, she was not one of the Witches of Emerald Capes, she was just a stranger.

“You got involved with a vampire! I won't help you, I won't take part in this.” She pushed the book towards Violette, raising her hands.

“Please, Eve…I need help. It's for the person I love. For my father. He is ill and Dante promised me a cure for my assistance and this spell, in this stupid book, can help with it. I owed him,” the anxiety was creeping into Violette’s voice.

Eve hovered, the words about her father touched her fragile heart. Her brows bent, eyes filled with regret, but the next thing she said was not what Violette had expected.

“I'm sorry, but this is dark magic. I won't do this.”

“It's not like you have a choice,” Dante's words cut the air, his voice cold and slightly distant, bitter as before. There was nothing left of the sweet tone.

“Or rather to say, Violette doesn't really have it, but you do. Formally. You either help us, or I'll burn this forest with your lovely witches to the ground,” he declared, his eyes grew dim.

Violette turned her head the vampire's way as he approached closer. Too stunned to speak, she couldn't believe what she heard.

Eve shuddered. “You can't do it.”

“I'm a vampire, weren't you the one who said I am one of the most terrible creatures to exist?” he sneered darkly.

“You can't. This forest–”

“Protected by magic? Do you think I don’t know? You should have listened to your sisters better when they'd said that meeting a vampire does not lead to good things,” with these words he took out a small brown pouch out of his pocket. “Ever heard about *Ignire Omnia* ash?”

Awe crossed Eve's face. She turned pale in a twinkling.

“You won't dare…”

“It really won't be difficult for me. I have no sympathy for you and those you know.”

Violette's eyes flew to the little bag in his hand. The powder that was considered an ash was extremely hard to get, it had a ruinous power so it became forbidden to have. There were only a few powders like this. And, she couldn't remember which one the vampire was referring to, she recalled her knowledge of Latin. Ignire Omnia…*Burn everything*.

Her knees went weak. This powder could engulf everything in a terrible fire, turning this forest into ashes in one night. Dante was playing violently, unfairly. And why in the world was she surprised when it was so clear who he was?

“Wait! You didn't tell me about it,” she called out. “We didn't agree that way!”

“When will you learn that I don't require your approval for anything, Little Witch?” he simply voiced, not bothered by her protest.

“It's not fair…” The color drained off her face, her jaw tightened. Meanwhile, the witch in an emerald cloak backed away.

“I don't play fair. It's not effective.” His gaze became gloomy. “I need the spell. And I don't care how I'll get it.”

“You're a menace to this world…” Eve whispered, her voice shuddered. “And you…” She looked at Violette, her forehead creased.

Violette swallowed, the witch looked at her with such longing and disappointment. She expected sharp words in her direction, but Eve's tone didn't sound angry. Instead it was miserable and draining.

“I'm sorry for you,” she said and lowered her eyes to the snow just for a second. “I wasn't exaggerating saying vampires are a curse. Get lucky to get rid of this disaster because it seems like he’ll doom you and he’s already halfway through.”

Violette’s heart ached. She didn't want to trick this girl, who was nothing but nice and compassionate…Too naive, she would admit. This girl with dreams in her eyes really wanted to help them but now…It didn't matter anymore. Violette opened a book in front of her face once again.

“It says…” Eve brought her gaze to the vampire watching her and immediately dropped her gray eyes to the yellowed pages of the book. “In order to break the spell, you need a person who voluntarily agrees to help, without the influence of any charms. This person will lead to the sacred place where the curse will be ready to be broken. This person is *a guide* and *a key*. Without them you won't find the place and you won't come in.”

Violette listened carefully to the witch's speech and did not take her eyes off the pages, which again had emitted warm light.

“The light of the moon, blue iris and resting place of the great love will lead you where you need,” she finished.

“Is this some kind of a riddle?” Violette gasped.

Nobody answered and Eve seemed to be too nervous to raise her gaze to either the vampire, or to Violette.

“You know where it is, right?” A cold voice left Dante's mouth.

Eve pursed her lips, still looking at the book, avoiding any eye contact that would give him a sign of something she wouldn't want him to know.

“Is it here, in the forest?” he asked again.

“There's an iris field on the east…” The girl sobbed.

“You're free to go, witch,” Dante ground his jaw and Eve's eyes glistened with tears.

A lump stuck in Violette's throat, she couldn't find the words, so she just watched as Eve slipped away. Only a long emerald cloak blowing in the wind flashed between the snowy trees, merging with the forest.

“It was cruel!” As soon as the girl disappeared, Violette snapped. “You didn't tell me you were planning to blackmail her!”

“I said the witches will help us, who cares why?” he said impassively.

“Well, if you're so heartless, why didn't you lure her then or what do you vampires do? Why did you choose to hurt her instead?”

“These witches have protection spells. Such snobs,” he growled and turned to go away.

The anger was boiling in Violette's veins while he just walked away like everything was alright. Like it was fine what he just did.

She was burning a hole in Dante's back with her gawk on their way, keeping silent, however he could feel how she stared at him with such malice.

“If you think I will feel guilty because you stare at me then your attempts are pathetic.”

“No, I'm just trying to make you uncomfortable,” she scowled.

“Who told you I'm uncomfortable with you staring at me? Do it as long as you want if my appearance makes you feel better,” he simply aired.

Such shameless audacity to tease her after everything that happened.

“Oh, you have a big ego if you think I'm enjoying looking at you,” Violette grumbled.

“Sure, keep telling yourself that before bed. Maybe if you say it often enough, it’ll come true.”

And she could deny it hundreds of times, but in truth he was right – she was enjoying watching him. She was wondering what he looked like under this mask. The silhouette of his face seemed sharp and even. She couldn't see his chin and nose, and she could barely make out what his lips looked like, but for some reason she assumed that he was incredibly handsome. Probably because his facial features seemed highly sophisticated to her. His eyes were so languid, and no matter how dark they were, she wouldn't call them frightening, even if they reminded her of darkness that made the stars

in the sky dim. Something sad and unsearchable was in it. And his long dark lashes complemented his thick expressive brows. He had this cold and yet gentle gaze which made him highly charming and interesting. Maybe it was a mystery that was never meant to be solved – the worst are always the most handsome. And Violette wasn't better than any girl, she could easily fall for his looks if she hadn't known the truth behind them.

She tried to think it's because he was a vampire and he probably had this vampire charm that makes him this captivating. This was just magic… beautiful deceptive magic that lured her into thinking he could easily be one of the most beautiful men her eyes had ever witnessed. She didn't have any other explanation, she hadn't even seen half of his face, there was no way she was not enchanted.

She didn't want to talk to him, she wasn't signing up for lying and using people for her benefits. She wasn't cruel and she didn't want to be. What they did to that witch was ruthless and the way Dante wasn't feeling that he did something bad was driving her even more crazy, making the guilt dig its claws deeper into her skin. She wasn't responsible for his actions but it felt like it was half her fault and it made her feel horrible. She could stop it all, she kept telling herself but the truth is she didn't know how. Could she really?

CHAPTER 12

FOLLOWING THE MOON



They were wading through the forest, the soft, niveous blanket under their feet was covering the frozen ground everywhere. It was quiet around; sometimes the spruce trees let the sounds of forest animals pass through their branches. And despite how the surroundings resembled a snow-swathed kingdom, the air didn't seem cold and wintry; it seemed that soon all of it would melt away like a fairytale dream, slipping through the fingers a few minutes before the sunrise.

The loose snow crunched quietly under their boots as they were making their way deeper and deeper into the woods.

Violette was looking at her feet when suddenly a small sprout of a blue flower surfaced before her eyes. Raising her head, it turned out that they'd reached a small glade spangled with flowers, pulsing with vibrant blue and purple.

Dante lowered on his haunches and rubbed his chin.

“What's next?” Violette wondered, her eyes roving over the flowers among the snow, bathing in the moonlight.

There was nothing around except tall ancient trees. She'd remembered the witch's words and something about the place where ‘the great love’ lies but there was nothing that could remind her of something like a grave or whatever it’s meant to be.

Dante didn't say a word. Sitting near the flowers, he ran his hand over the petals. Then his eyes narrowed, following the line of the blue light paving the way somewhere between the trees.

“We'll find out now,” he said mysteriously, standing up.

Despite Violette's love for the atmosphere of mystery and the idea of secrets and magic surrounding it, she didn't like how Dante was an epitome of this word. The suspense of something was torture for someone as curious as her. And she wouldn't be surprised if Dante was just playing with her to get on her nerves.

The moonlit line led them deeper into the woods, through the snowy needles of the pine trees. The snow was sparkling under their feet and the air around them was getting colder, or Violette's cloak wasn't as warm as she thought in the beginning. Dante removed one of the large branches, clearing a path for himself. He didn't bother to hold it for Violette and it whipped right over her head, showering snow on her. She grimaced, but Dante didn't bat an eye.

They appeared on another small snowy glade. In the middle of it, among the trees, a stone statue of an angel was powdered with a thin layer of snow, his eyes frozen on the small stone tab below.

Dante approached the statue, removing the hood from his head. His gaze moved downwards, following the streak of the moonlight over the statue.

The stone angel bore an indubitably tragic look, almost heart wrenched. His head, bowed to the ground, was covered with lace, long wavy hair cascaded down to his hands, which held a marble chalice. Violette walked closer, examining the frozen statue, gaze fixated on his face, his half-closed sad eyes that seemed to be mourning someone…or something.

The place where the great love rests.

“It's a grave, isn't it?” Violette breathed, not taking her eyes off the huge beautifully engraved wings of the sculpture.

“I suppose,” Dante said, working his jaw as he squatted by the statue’s feet. He began to inspect the pedestal the angel stood on and stroked his fingers along one of its edges, removing snow from the inscription carved on the stone:

There rests a great love, worthy of the ballads and legends.

Violette lowered her gaze, her attention lingered on the curving letters.

“Do you know what it means?” She leaned over him, pressing her palms to her knees.

Dante brushed his fingers over the words again as if absorbing them would make him grasp their true purpose.

“There is a legend about two lovers who died together due to tragic circumstances. *Their grave rests in a dark forest, and an angel sheds tears on them every night…”* Dante quoted the legend thoughtfully as if trying to put together a puzzle.

“What happened to them?” Violette asked, her gaze not leaving him.

“I don't know,” he said carelessly. “Nobody remembers. Everyone only knows that it was a heartbreaking story but what exactly happened and who it was…is forgotten.”

“That's strange…”

He turned his head towards her. “The legend is as old as time, they are all forgotten. This world is full of thousands of different stories like this. The peak of some disappears and they fade into the background, replaced by others.”

“But if it's a story about Great Love, shouldn't everyone remember it?”

“I'm not particularly interested in what happened to them,” he said blankly. “I'm more concerned about how it relates to my curse.”

Violette drew a step back and raised her head. The statue's gaze was directed downward but despite his grieving, he wasn't shedding tears.

Dante meanwhile followed her example, standing up.

“Any ideas?” she asked.

A shadow of puzzlement crossed his face as he knitted his black brows, examining the angel in search of some kind of a trick or a sign. Then he took a couple of steps forward, trying to get around it, while Violette leaned towards the chalice in the angel's hands, attracted by the strange symbols on its upper walls. Only when she approached him, she realized that these were not symbols, but images of the moon in different phases. And there was something else, some kind of a sign between them.

“The glow of the moon changes its position,” Dante stated after some time, drawing Violette's attention back.

“What?” She rounded the statue.

“When viewed from this angle, the moonlight is split into two stripes by the wings and appears to be pouring from the eyes,” he explained.

“The angel's tears…There's phases of the moon inside the cup,” she remarked and Dante caught her sight.

He swayed to the side and a little more forward, bowing his head – the moonlight tears had flowed straight from the angel's eyes, streaming down into the snow. Dante rubbed the spot where the light fell; His fingers groped a cold marble tile with an eccentric symbol depicted on it, the same as on the angel's cup. He pressed it and the symbol fell down into a small hole, then he turned the bulge to the side and a loud creaking sound of a working mechanism shuttered the peace of this place.

A secret passage with a staircase, leading into darkness, opened at their feet.

“Light your wand, Little Witch.” Dante suddenly appeared behind her, making her flinch.

“Afraid of the darkness?” He bent over her.

“I'm afraid of unknown deep chambers that no one has gone down to for years,” she pressed.

Dante glanced at her again and walked forward.

“Don't worry, if I see a spider, I'll warn you,” he derided and started down the steps.

Violette bit her lip before taking out her magic wand and lighting it up. She followed Dante, carefully moving her feet step by step. And she couldn't say if the stairs were too steep, or there was less air as they descended deeper and deeper into a full nothingness.

CHAPTER 13

WHERE THE GREAT LOVE LIES



Finally, Violette's feet reached the stone tiles of the floor. Arches built around and inscriptions on the walls indicated that this was someone's burial, as well as a foul odor curling the air.

“Well, of course, this is the entrance to the crypt,” she muttered. “Why do secret passages always lead to a crypt? Why not somewhere less creepy?”

“Calm down, Little Witch, when we're done, you can go down wherever you want, even to the magical library absorbed by sunlight.”

“I don't need sunlight, I'd just like something that doesn't involve dead people and spiders…” She shuddered.

“It's better to let these dead people lie in coffins than walk on the ground.”

It seemed his words sounded slightly ambiguous, but she decided to not bother herself with it and simply moved forward after him.

The darkness had wrapped around their bodies, each step echoed eerily. And except this sound, nothing more. The dark corners of the crypt were evoking obscurity, sucking the very breath. The goosebumps pricked Violette’s arms, she tried to not lag behind Dante.

He picked up a torch on the wall and handed it to her to light. One touch of her magic wand to the top and it was aglow with a bright fire, illuminating the small part of the empty hall.

The echo of their footsteps distorting through the room caused the hairs to raise on the back of Violette's neck. For a second she had thought she

saw something moving across the floor, which made her quicken her pace. She wasn't afraid of the dark before and thought it was because she was a wizardling and her magic wand was a powerful weapon that could cope with any obstacle, but now she began to wonder that perhaps it hadn't scared her because those places were simply familiar to her – it was her *home*. Now she was in a place foreign to her, in a crypt with corpses, and lastly, her companion was a bloodthirsty vampire. The situation was not going well for her. It was damp, eldritch, and the only source of any sound around was her accelerated heartbeat and their footsteps.

Stop being a coward, her inner voice had busted a little confidence in her, at least she wanted to believe in it. She squeezed her wand tighter.

Dante walked forward silently, not looking tense, on the contrary, he looked well put together. At some point, he stopped and looked around, pointing the torch first to the left and then to the right.

“What are we looking for?” The words slipped off Violette's tongue as she was uncertainly peering into the darkness.

“Do you feel something?” he asked.

“Me?” She goggled at him.

Dante didn't turn his head towards her. “Traces of magic, for example?”

“No…Wizards rarely feel magic in rooms, only its complete absence, which is a very bad sign.”

Dante glanced back at her and moved on, choosing the path through a grand metal arch to the left. Violette tipped her head, inspecting the space. Being too distracted by the cracked columns and the stone walls, she tripped over her own leg.

“Don't kill yourself prematurely, I still need you,” Dante noted.

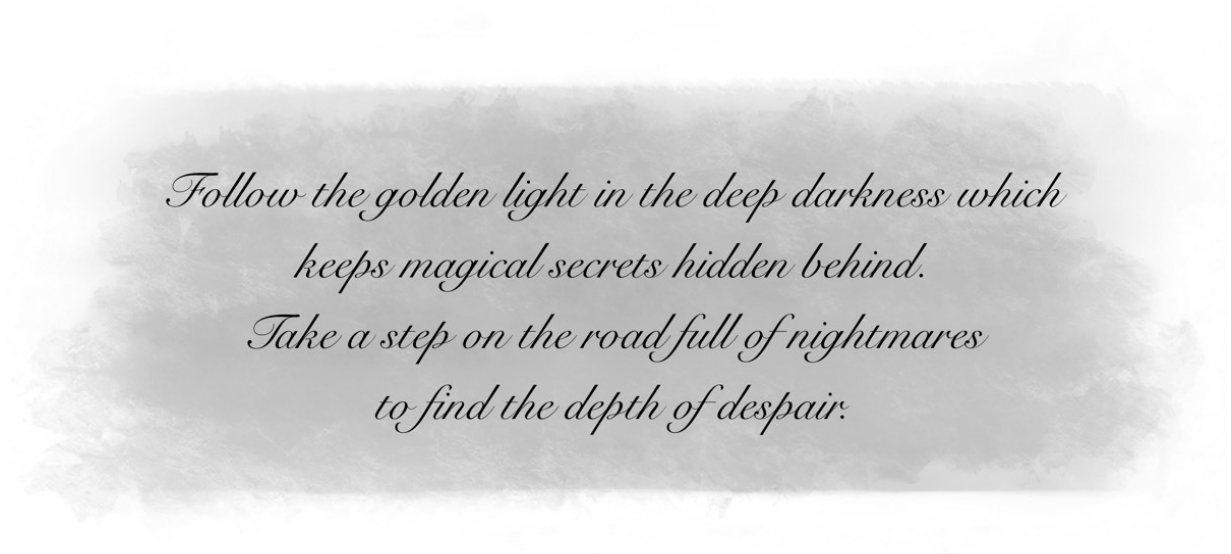
She rolled her eyes and continued on her way.

The hall resembled a labyrinth of old carved stone walls and cinquefoil arches. A strange feeling made her turn her head to the side – something flashed in the darkness, with a bluish light as if a reflection of the moon on the wall.

“Dante,” she said and stalked forward.

“Hm?” He turned around, his gaze shot her way, treading towards the usual stone wall to his eyes, into the far dark corner, a simple dead end, and yet he followed her.

Dante raised the torch to light the wall they reached to find a large ornate inscription carved there:



His eyes hadn't left the wall, rereading the words. He took a step closer and led the light on the inscription, then his fingers brushed the stone.

“What are you doing?” Violette questioned.

“Checking it's not some kind of trick to confuse us.”

“Well, all this trip sounds like a trick to be honest.” She swayed.

He shot a look at her, looking more reproving than before. Then he stepped back, his eyes not leaving the inscription.

Violette was scrutinizing it as well, letting her thoughts out, “It's strange, we already saw golden light today. Do you think it has something to do with the Witches of Emerald Capes?”

“It's hard to say. I'm not sure. But the road of nightmares sounds familiar.” Dante lowered his head. “Write this down.”

“What?”

“Write this down.”

“Am I some kind of assistant who carries paper and pen everywhere for you?”

“Conjure it,” he grumbled.

“Magic doesn't work like this, stupid,” she snapped. “I can't create something from the air. It's a dark sorcery.”

“Then turn a rock into paper.”

“This is–” Surprisingly Violette’s grimace faded in a beat “…actually not a bad idea.”

Turning one object into another was a type of sorcery, but not a bad one. Wizards very often turned one object to another, however it takes quite a lot of strength from the magic wand. The only exception – you can't turn something into a *magical* object or something alive if it was not as such before. Sorcery also didn’t allow for bewitching magic creatures, for example animals, into something or someone else.

Violette did exactly what the vampire said and wrote down the riddle from the wall. Every word she wrote seemed more and more bizarre with each letter, the letters as if distorted with each sway of the pen. Maybe it was not just words but some kind of a spell? Perhaps the riddle was bewitched.

“Dante, do you think the woman who wrote this was the same one who wrote the book?” she asked uncertainly.

“I am convinced of it. It looks like her.”

“So you were close?” she voiced, concerned at the moment. It seemed that he knew this witch on a quite personal level. They certainly had known each other before she locked him in the mask but how long ago was it? And how old was he then? A lot of questions, which Dante wasn't bothered to give answers to.

“Why are you asking?” he let out irritation.

“She was a witch right? I mean, Hegga, that's why she had that book, yes?”

His gaze concentrated on Violette now. “No. She wasn't a witch, not like you. And she wasn't really Hegga, at least not fully one.”

“So what was she?”

“She practiced magic.” Again this dry answer.

“I was thinking. What if it's not just a riddle, like the one Eve told us. What if it's a magic spell?” she assumed.

Dante looked at her questionably. “And what could it mean?”

“I'm just giving ideas, I didn't say I have answers for it. I won't do all the work for you.”

Dante thought about her words for a while before his voice filled the air again.

“I need some time to come to a conclusion. Let's go back to the inn and then I–We will think about it.”

Violette nodded and followed him on the way outside.

A rustling in the darkness disrupted her peace again, making her shoot a look back one more time before reaching the stairs. As her leg hovered in the air – ready to take a step – something touched her boot. A panicking shriek echoed from the walls of the hall.

She started to trample on the spot, squeezing her eyes closed before pointing her wand down at the creature. Dante, as impervious as always, lowered the torch to illuminate the ground – a pair of black little eyes looked back at him.

“It's a rat,” he stated and then eyed Violette with discernment in his eyes.

Violette's eyes widened, mouth shut tightly.

“Oh…” was the only thing she exhaled in the air, staring at the little animal which winded away in the next second. That wasn't what Violette imagined when it brushed towards her leg. This place was deadly and dreadful – she could expect anything from monstrous shadows to the scary beasts who like to hide in the darkness.

Dante's face relaxed with a slight smile, that one arrogant and tickling her pride. “What did you want to do with it? Didn't know you were scared of everything small and fluffy,” he mocked.

“Shut up,” she snorted and continued her way.

Something ran under her feet as she crossed the next stair and she practically flew up the stairs outside. The last thing she heard as she breathed the cold air into her lungs was Dante's chuckle as he ascended after her. His pleased look almost made his eyes sparkle with joy, which was incredibly odd to see from someone like him. Perhaps other people's suffering brings him pleasure – Violette thought, glaring at him from under her forehead.

The light wind grazed her face as Dante moved past, and as his cloak swayed her eyes caught the red glimmering on his hip. Her gaze drew to the sheath hanging on his belt, observing the almost black hilt of the dagger pointing out. A big ruby adorned the pommel, pulsating with the color of wine, while the hilt was inlaid in sapphires and amethysts. An interesting shape of crossguard, reminiscent of a bat's wing, captured her attention the

most. It seemed too redundant for someone like Dante; he didn't look like a person who values jewelry or cares about such things.

“What is this dagger for?” Violette suddenly asked, observing Dante's look; he indeed didn't pay much attention to how to dress. His attire usually was a dark blue shirt he didn't bother to button up to the top, simple pants and black leather boots. Such a pretentious dagger didn't fit his image.

“Daggers have only one purpose,” he uttered indolently and hid the dagger behind his cloak.

“It's just not your style,” she commented, following him.

Dante's brows furrowed.

Violette felt she had to explain, “You don't look like someone who would care about how a weapon looks. It's too…much for you. So I assume it's something more important, otherwise your dagger would be basic and inconspicuous.”

“Hmm,” Dante drawled amusingly.

“So what can it do?”

The smirk played on his lips. “Guess.”

“It's an unfair game,” Violette rebuked. “I can create tons of assumptions, my imagination is pretty vivid. It might take forever.”

“I have this time,” he pleasantly replied.

Violette sent him a persistent look.

Corners of Dante's eyes crinkled, and after a short silence he asked, “Do you know what can kill a vampire?”

“A stake? A silver…something?” she suggested uncertainly.

“That would be a pathetic death. Imagine getting killed with a wooden stick.”

Violette's brows pulled together.

“I presume this dagger can kill a vampire then,” she voiced.

“You're very sagacious.” A smug smile curled his lips.

“Why carry with you a thing that can kill you?”

“I prefer to know where such a thing is. It's much safer with me than somewhere else.”

Violette kept walking, mulling over Dante's words. He didn't even try to fight her curiosity and it was more than strange.

“You told me about it too easily. Aren't you scared I'll steal it and use it against you?”

“Little Witch, you're close to me that much only because I allow it,” he said placidly. “By the way, how will you get the cure then?”

His words made sense, besides, Violette was too soft for it anyway. Her argument was weak, so she asked another question instead, “Do you use it?”

“A vampire can't kill another vampire. Not with the dagger, it's for your kind only,” he said idly and then side-eyed her.

Violette wanted to ask him more about vampires, if they can turn into bats, can they lord over the shadows, can they be fed by something else besides the blood but Dante expressed disinclination to such a conversation, leaving her in an oblivion, as always.



THE LIVELY KNOCK was followed by a quiet crack of the door.

“What are you doing?” Violette's head popped up and she shamelessly walked in not really caring if Dante didn't want her here.

He was sitting at the writing table with his legs crossed, reading a book or rather flipped through it as if looking for something specific. There were at least three stacks of books next to him and a little stack on the floor with a few books open.

“Reading tales, legends and different stories that flew around these lands,” he said with a bored tone, not raising his eyes up from the pages, and before Violette opened her mouth to ask the following question he added, “I have a peculiar feeling that I know what Road of Nightmares is. It sounds familiar but I just can't remember.” He flipped another page.

Violette sat on the velvet sofa nearby. “You think it's a real place?”

“I think it's a metaphor but I'm trying to find where and who called some place this way.” His eyes raised to her as she’d already grabbed one of the books from the floor and started skimming through it. “I already looked at the map and there was nothing so I don't think it's a real name,” he said at last.

She nodded meaningfully while examining the book in her hand.

An hour later they were still sitting over the papers. Violette's foot beat out a rhythm on the parquet as she was reading another book with a pretty green leather cover, whereas Dante was studying a book in a red one. The silence between them in the last few minutes was quite delightful for both of them. Only the sound of the flipping pages and the ticking of the clock had followed their quiet evening.

“How often do the names of the places change here?” Violette said more to herself but then realized she actually voiced her thoughts out loud. She didn't finish this theory to reckon but it was too late because Dante's attention was already drawn to her. “I mean, we had one street which was called the Street of Deceived because a long time ago it was full of swindlers and thieves. You'd be easily tricked by anyone there. But times were changing so the street was rebuilt, completely converted and now it is a nice place called the Street of Wondrous Performances. Instead of con men and wandering crooks, there're performers who show tricks, dances and people selling fun stuff and food.”

Dante pointed his chin, leaning on his forefinger.

“That's a good point actually,” he said after thinking and then closed the book. “It could be something that was called that earlier, the witch whose crypt we were in lived a few hundred years ago, everything is possible. I think there's maps in some of these books. We just need to find the right century.” He leaned over one of the books on the floor.

And that's how they spent a few hours more, reading books and speculating on theories which unfortunately hadn't given any results. The hand on the clock was pointing at five in the morning, however the sun wasn't going to rise for at least two more hours.

Dante put a book with a worn spine down and ran his hand over his face. His eyes darted to Violette as she yawned, her eyes following the ink on the yellowed pages as she continued reading.

“You should go sleep,” the words slipped from his mouth and it made her turn her head. The confusion froze in her eyes.

“It's late, we had a busy night,” he answered her silent question.

“Since when have you been worrying about my well-being?” She sneered at the ridiculousness of this thought.

“I won't carry you to your room if you pass out right here,” he snorted.

She moved her lips to the sides and stood up.

“The thought of sleeping with you in one room is too outrageous to let it happen,” she let out and plopped down the book on the table. His eyes followed her as she closed the door.

Violette went to her room, for once Dante was right – she needed to sleep even if she didn't actually want to. Her eyes wanted to close but her mind wandered in many thoughts that were flying over her head. Too much information and riddles. And Dante, perhaps, wanted to rest as well. She didn't know how long vampires slept – to be honest, she wasn’t sure if they slept at all. It had never crossed her mind until now. She might ask him later but for now, she let herself close her eyes and fall into a deep sleep.

CHAPTER 14

HOLDING FOR THE TRACES



An inquisitiveness didn't want to leave Violette's mind. She was puzzling over the written riddle, lying in her bed for hours after she woke up.

Unable to bear sitting in her room any longer, she crawled out of bed, deciding today was a good day to explore something new. Even if she wasn't in a big, exciting city, she knew for sure she'd find something to keep herself occupied.

The place they stopped in was an old township, which reminded her a little bit of a witches' town not far away from her home city. Its antique architecture looked straight from the old fairytales with those small cottages and narrow alleyways, infusing it with a peculiar charm.

She wandered around, scrutinizing the windows of colorful shops. Her nose caught the scent of a whole mixture of flowers, which later turned out to come from a beautiful, quaint flower shop.

A line of small stores lined the entire street: cozy bakeries, clothing stores, a small bookstore. She even decided to visit the last, but to her surprise there were practically no textbooks on magic and sorcery. They had an assortment of novels, tales, legends of magic, but nothing that would help to learn spells or potions. Apparently, this was one of those towns that Dante spoke about: where wizards were either not a common occurrence, or witchcraft was absolutely prohibited here. Be that as it may, Violette decided to cover her wand with her cloak. She wouldn't want to tempt fate; she already had plenty of problems.

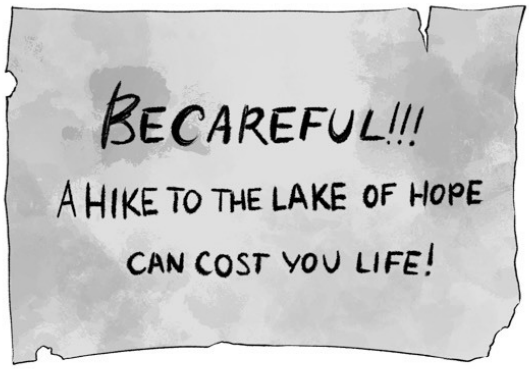
She walked through the small alleys for a bit before she realised she had already managed to get around all of the town. As she reached the notice board located next to the small, quiet park, her eyes scanned the posters and other signs on it:



Perhaps magic was not forbidden here – Violette felt relieved.



She lowered her eyes to the bigger thesis:



Her eyes quickly ran to another edge of the board, looking through the advertisements and announcements until she heard a low grumbling.

“Fools!” an old man spat out. “Lake of Hope! How many times should I tell them it's called the Lake of Despair? Hope in the dark forest? Idiots!” He waved his hand, not stopping muttering under his breath.

He caught Violette's eye. He was an old man with a long silver beard and embittered eyes, not a really pleasant type of a person to meet. She would easily disappear in the moment to stay away from this grump if not for his words that brought her attention. She glanced again on the thin, yellow paper pinned to the sign with a warning. Her mind went back to the name *the Lake of Despair* and the gears in her head immediately started to work. She tried to hang on to the last word.

Dark forest…What did the riddle say?

If she remembered it right, it was something about the depth of *despair.*

Something clicked. Her head quickly turned to the old man who had already started walking away.

“Excuse me, sir!” She hurried to catch up with him. “Did you say the Lake of Despair?”

“I know what I said!” he snapped. “Want to tell me I'm wrong? Stupid kids, if only you'd listened to your elders!”

Violette froze. The man's tone sounded so rude, as if she didn't just speak to him but accused him of something terribly ridiculous. Trying to collect her thoughts, she swallowed the desire to tell him what she thinks about his behavior.

“Um, no…” she started cautiously. “I actually wanted to ask you about the lake. Why do you call it differently than it's written?”

“Because only desperate people would go into that cursed forest. It was called the Lake of Despair in the past and for a good reason! But no, some wiseacre decided to call it the Lake of Hope,” he mocked. “A lake in the middle of a beastly forest? Bilge!”

Violette forced a smile. Unfortunately, she dealt with people like him while working in the potion shop. Despite how many good customers visited her shop there always were a few who could ruin a day and suck the life out of anyone just out of spite. Sometimes she wondered if these people just come up to quarrel and vent their anger.

No matter how hard it was, she tried to be polite and asked, “Is it a magic lake?”

“Who knows? Nobody goes there, and if they do, they never come back.”

Great…

The last thing she wanted to hear about was a cursed forest where people go missing. First vampires, now this. She must have incredibly terrible luck.

“Thank you! You actually really helped me,” Violette blurted out and spun on her heels, hurrying back to the lodge. She has to tell Dante about it immediately!

“Oh, another fool soul,” the old man grumbled under his breath, watching as the young wizardling ran away.



VIOLETTE'S booming steps could have alerted Dante about her appearance even before she opened the door in his room but it didn't happen, instead she saw the vampire sleeping in the bed facing the pillow.

“Dante, wake up!”

In response she only heard some mumbling.

“Dante! I think I found a clue to the riddle!” she said again, closer to his face.

He didn't move, only a small sleepy gasp left his mouth. She wasn't sure if he'd just ignored her or slept that soundly. Perhaps it was impossible to wake up vampires in the middle of the day but she didn't care, it was too important.

“Dante!” This time she pulled the blanket off him and shook him by the leg.

The irritated male breath entered the air.

“What do you want from me?” he drawled tiredly, casting her an annoyed side-look.

“Have you ever heard of the Lake of Hope?” she asked but didn't receive a response as he had already closed his eyes, succumbing to the kingdom of dreams. “Wake up! I have important information about our business!”

In a quick moment he finally sat up, forcing his eyes open. He looked exhausted. If not his sleepy sight indicated this then his messy hair and disheveled shirt. She didn't notice it until now but his bed and room also looked quite chaotic.

“When did you go to bed?” She looked around, taking in the open books and papers on the floor.

“If you have nothing important to say, I am going to bed,” he mumbled as his body started to lean to the bed sheets again.

“No, no. You're such a baby!” She pulled him by the arm. “It's about the riddle.”

“Why didn't you say so right away?” He finally seemed to listen to her and straightened up, trying to open his eyes wide enough and focus.

It made her sigh as she took a step to sit on the edge of the bed.

“So, I was in town and I heard about the Lake of Hope, which was actually called the Lake of Despair some time ago, which got me thinking–” She looked at Dante, only to find that his eyelids were almost shut again. “Are you even listening to me?”

He didn't answer.

“Dante?” No answer. “Dante!”

He blinked twice.

“Sorry, I got distracted,” he let out.

“I'm saying that perhaps the Lake of Despair is from the riddle. It's in a strange forest everyone is afraid to go to, which I think is a clue to the 'darkness' in the riddle.”

“I know,” Dante said simply.

“I’m not sure, it's just a gue–” She fell silent for a second. Her lashes flapped. “You know?”

“Yes,” he yawned, rubbing his eyes, “I figured it out some time ago when I was looking through the books. By the way, we're going when the sun goes down.” With the last words he lay back on the bed, his eyelids half closed as his forearm landed on his forehead.

Violette's lips parted. “Why didn't you tell me?”

“You were sleeping and I actually wanted to sleep as well. By the way, you interrupted a pretty dream of mine. By that, if you are not thinking about joining me then leave and let me sleep,” he drawled, rolling over.

“I'd rather leave.”

He wasn't listening to her as his eyes had already closed and his mind left this reality, trading it with the desired dreams. Violette pouted, leaving him alone. Maybe, after all, she could take a little nap. She didn't know how intensive their adventure would be this evening; she could expect anything with the situation she was in, so it was rational to take care of herself.

A few hours flew by and Violette opened her eyes again. Her gaze fixed on the pink-red sky beyond the window. The sun was setting. One blink. A blink again. It was time to get ready and find something to eat before they departed for another trip. She stretched as lazily as the last rays of the sun traveling around her room.

Flipping the blanket, she quickly dressed and was already standing at the threshold to the corridor. Dim lamps illuminated its dark green wallpaper and the wooden doors leading into other rooms. Violette took a step with the decision to find a kitchen. The door behind her shut quietly. She passed three doors as one swung open right before her nose, making her pull back.

Dante's silhouette appeared in front of her.

“You woke up!” Violette exclaimed happily. “I know we are about to leave, but I thought about having lunch before.”

His eyes appeared reflective. He studied her face for some time, then narrowed his gaze and angled his head.

“Were you in my room earlier?” he asked.

“Yes?” she said uncertainly.

“Oh, good, because I started thinking it was a fever dream.”

“We were literally talking,” her brows drew together, “You told me you know about the lake.”

“Lake?” His brows raised.

She nodded.

“Oh…I lied.” His mouth twisted in a shameless smirk.

“What?!”

“I just wanted you to leave me alone.” He shrugged and turned to the stairs.

Violette quickly caught up with him on the way down.

“Are you kidding me?” Her mouth twitched.

“I was asleep. I'll be honest, I didn't care what you were talking about at that moment.”

She sighed quietly. That's alright, she'll just tell him again.

“So you don't know where to go?”

“I didn't say that,” he said airily as they went down the stairs. “I remembered where I heard of the Road of Nightmares’. While I have no clue what you told me about a lake, I am pretty sure there is a lake on the way, so perhaps our clues are related.”

“Remind me to slam your face next time, maybe it'll make you listen.”

“Don't pout, Little Witch,” he said and crossed the hall to the dining room.

“So what is the Road of Nightmares?” Violette took a plate, standing at the table with food.

Dante's hand reached to take something to drink.

“It's not a metaphor like we thought. It's an actual road which leads deep into a dark forest not far away from here.”

Listening carefully, Violette placed a blueberry cream bun on the plate and then poured some tea into a porcelain cup.

“I don't want to sound dramatic but…why is it called that?” she released a question.

“Well,” he made it to the table first, “at the time this riddle was written it was called differently. You were close with your clues. But it was never

the official name of the road. People just called it this way because of the stories around it.”

Violette glanced at him, taking a spot at the same table.

“They saw something scary and suspicious in this forest,” Dante continued, gesturing with his hands. “Some of them said they saw strange, frightening beasts hidden there,” Violette didn't take her eyes off his face, carefully listening. “As time went on it was confirmed – these strange beasts were monsters. Now this place is called the Forest of Somber Eyes.”

“No…” she said in disbelief, her hand with the bun frozen in the air. “You are not telling me our path lies through the forest full of monsters.”

“I wish.” Dante took a frustrated breath. “Well, they’re not as scary as people picture them. You're human, always so dramatic.” With the last word, he stirred his drink with a straw and took a sip.

“Oh, well,” Violette casually started. “Sorry I am not immortal and can die from any small inconvenience like…I don't know…maybe, being killed by a beast?!”

“You're safe,” he said serenely, like he was having a casual conversation about the weather or he was informed that the bakery didn't have his favorite rolls and now the lunch menu needed to be changed. “Don't worry. They don't just attack the guests. They rather watch and play hunting games.”

“It's definitely changed the whole situation.” Violette's brows snapped together as she leaned on one hand, aggressively stirring her tea with a spoon.

“They're shadows or part of the shadows. Can't say how exactly,” he explained shortly. “But they won't jump on you straightforwardly. And I will be beside you, remember? I still need you alive, Little Witch.”

It didn’t sound as earnest as she wished but she knew it was true. He needed her. Needed her alive. So he would protect her, right? At least from dying. She wasn't sure he cared about her remaining unharmed. She might have to watch her limbs.

CHAPTER 15

THE ROAD OF NIGHTMARES



The Forest of Somber Eyes perhaps wasn't an exaggerated name as Dante stated. Violette felt like something was watching her, even when there was no soul to be seen as she continued deeper in the woods with the vampire.

Naked gloomy trees were threatening with their shape and crooked branches. The thick fog was evoking an ominous atmosphere. There was something rotten in the air, as everything around them was just dead. They hadn't met any animal, not a bird. She also hadn't heard any sounds of the usual forest life – quite the opposite – it was the silence that worried her the most.

She tipped her head back to look at the trees, which almost completely blocked out the sky. The stars from here seemed faded and so far away as never before. The moonlight barely made its way through the tangled limbs.

A slight gust of wind caused her to shiver, like the sudden burst of fresh air was not natural for this place. Dante sent her a glance out of the corner of his eyes.

He cleared his throat. “Everything seems not too bad,” he said. “We've already walked halfway and haven't met a single monster. Looks like tonight is your lucky night.”

“If it was my lucky night I would be wrapped in a blanket in bed by the fireplace,” she grumbled.

“Then the night would be boring. This way, you can gain an unforgettable experience.” She couldn't tell if he was serious or sarcastic as

the corners of his mouth twitched.

Unforgettable experience.…She would rather it be not. She would politely reject any experience related to monsters. She already knew one and it clearly wasn't making her happy. Good thing her monster didn't have claws, a diabolical shape or a terrifying face. However he had fangs, which weren’t safe either.

No, she shouldn’t let bad thoughts discourage her. Her mother taught her a lot of things, but one she remembered really well: with hard work and passion, you could achieve everything you wanted. Of course, her mother likely wasn’t referring to a situation involving vampires but it was all Violette had. If she'll take on the matter with diligence – she'll find a way to help Dante take his mask off and say goodbye to him forever. Their paths will never cross again and Violette will live happily with her father as it was before. This thought cheered her up a little bit, even the forest became not as terrible in her eyes as it was a few seconds ago. She should think about it as another step which will lead her to the desired goal. After all, Dante was right, they hadn't seen any beasts yet, so perhaps, people indeed were exaggerating.

There was no denying the fact that the place was creepy and dead, there was no sign of a living soul, but maybe, it was for the better – they would rather not meet anyone than something bad.

The night, to her surprise, was quite warm for the season. The ground underneath wasn't covered in a white veil of snow, but it was hard and stiff. Some leaves of the bushes were still covered with a thin layer of frost but it was nothing compared to the night in the North Forest.

Violette stepped over a tree root protruding out of the ground as her mouth opened, “I have a question.”

“Who would doubt that,” Dante let out frostily.

“Don't frown. I am being nice to you.”

“Want me to smile at you with all my teeth? You won't like it.” The corner of his mouth raised brazenly.

“You’re right, I don't want you to flash your fangs at me,” she waved her hand.

“Don't like fangs?”

“Don't like what they can do.”

“In vain, you're missing out on a lot.” His voice sounded joyful, however she didn't like how he said it. It didn’t feel sincere.

“So my question. You said there are other vampires,” she side-glanced at him, “does that mean you have friends?”

Dante let out a laugh that could make anyone shrink. Shivers went down Violette's spine. She'd never heard such cold and arrogant laughter.

She speared him with an accusatory look. “I suppose that is a no.”

Dante didn't say anything but his eyes said everything she needed to know.

The fog was playing with Violette's vision. She almost stumbled over another snag sticking out from the ground. Distorted pictures of the tree at the right reminded her of a big monster from her worst dreams – her forehead wrinkled in disgust.

Crunch.

Violette shuddered. She glanced down – just a wooden stick. Though, Dante didn't even bat an eye, continuing deeper in the forest. Their footsteps again became the only sound around. A few more minutes of unchanged landscape and finally, a view of the lake opened up in front of them. And if the forest was frightening and unwelcoming, this place appeared even more inimical.

CHAPTER 16

THERE IS NO LIGHT WITHOUT DARKNESS



The bleak view of the lake was evoking anxiety, tugging on the string of Violette's soul. Its water seemed to be completely black, even impermeable to the light of the moon, rising in the sky. The only light, warm and friendly, radiated from the middle of the lake. Muffled, but it was there. It shined deep in the water, like undying faith, a glimpse of hope in the endless darkness, the last remnants of it.

Oh.…Violette's heart sank, she suddenly understood why it was called this way – the Lake of *Hope*. The forest and the lake was a murk, a desperation, a wounded heart, and this light – the last sign of hope, deep down hidden under all of the darkness and obscurity. Like a wretched soul who still believes in the happy ending. Violette held her breath. Suddenly this place seemed beautiful to her, she felt a thread in her heart connected to this glow. She knew how it is…to hold for the last faith in your heart when everything seems hopeless.

"Let's go," Dante called out, going down to the lake.

Violette finally took her eyes off the luminescence and followed the vampire. The ground underfoot felt loose and wet, more like sand. She slipped, her right foot pulled her a little forward before finding her balance. Dante at that time was already waiting for her below by a large sharp rock.

The last step she totally missed, which led her to bump into his back. He turned half of his body to her as she drew an awkward step back.

"Sorry," Violette mumbled under her breath. She'd never been so clumsy as for the last days, it's like fate wanted to embarrass her in Dante's

eyes. She knew how to keep cool but it wasn't an easy task in his presence and she could only keep guessing why.

“The thing we need is definitely at the bottom of the lake,” Dante stated, his arms crossed on his chest.

Violette darted her gaze to the dimming glow in the middle of the blackness.

“And what next? Dive into the lake?” she asked incredulously.

Dante sat down and touched the water's surface. The sound echoed in the air, the water seemed to tremble from this innocent and light movement. Then he stood up and began to unbutton his shirt.

She was taken by surprise. “Are you really going to dive there?”

“Do you have any better suggestions?”

Violette inclined her head looking at the black liquid. “It's just…You think nothing lives there?”

“If I see anything – I'll say hello from you,” he sneered, proceeding to take off his boots.

Violette was a little taken aback. Most likely, just as Dante hadn't really felt the cold, he also hadn't felt the cold water, but that didn’t change the fact that she wouldn't have gone into the water even if she hadn't felt anything at all. The lake looked incredibly deep as if the bottom was completely out of reach. Only the middle of it was emitting a dim light, the rest – complete darkness. Who even knows what could be down there…

She again shot her gaze from the lake to the vampire and she herself didn't notice how quickly blood rushed to her cheeks.

Dante had just thrown his shirt onto the nearest stone, standing with a fully exposed torso. Violette's eyes fleetingly glanced at the sculpted muscles on his chest, and just as quickly slipped away to the lake.

She, of course, noticed his broad shoulders before; he himself was big and tall. However, seeing him without a shirt still somewhat made her shy. Her traitorous cheeks started to burn. Her immediate decision was to distract herself with some other thoughts to not get her attention back to Dante, and most importantly, so that he didn't notice her embarrassment. It would only amuse him. Maybe she should imagine the old dealer of antique robes and hats from the Alley of Deadly Flowers and Cursed Stories? He was an old, bony man with a long gray beard who always wiped his endless snot on his sleeve. Just the thought of him was enough to kill any

infatuation, as well as appetite and, in general, the desire to shake someone's hand.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the swaying of the water – Dante was already entering the lake. Not a single muscle on his body flinched. Her eyes followed him until he dived and his head disappeared into the depths of the Lake of Hope.

Violette stood on the shore, cowering at the thought of the cold water in front of her, both her hands wrapped around her.

Dante had been gone for several minutes, she almost found herself worrying about him. And the silence around was only infusing more nervousness in her soul.

Clouds covered the night sky, slowly stealing the colors around. Only the golden glow from the lake gave this place at least some colors of life. Violette felt like the only living creature among the trees, everything else seemed dead and had died hundreds years ago. She looked heavenward just before the water surface swayed again.

She squinted, peering into the middle of the lake until the inky hair appeared from the water.

Dante walked out of the lake, water dripping from his face onto his muscular chest as he wiped his chin. His wet hair carelessly fell over his forehead and for the first time Violette noticed that it was intricately curled. Her eyes couldn't tear themselves away from his figure. An image of the old snotty dealer surfaced in her mind and she forced her gaze to drop to Dante's hand – no hint that he'd gotten anything from the bottom of the lake. Violette's heels kept clicking in place, either from the cold or impatience.

“Did you find something?” she asked loudly, an unexpected echo rang out over the lake. Her eyes raised to the sky before lowering them to the vampire again.

“I can't take what is there,” he said, displeased, before reaching the shore. His hand ran over his wet hair, a water drop beading between his brows.

“Why?”

“Magic doesn't allow me to do this. I felt that something was wrong as soon as I touched the water. It didn't like me. I think it protects whatever is hidden there from vampires.”

Violette shrank even more.

“No. You're not going to say that I should dive there, are you?” She glanced sideways.

Dante ran his hand over his jaw.

“What, Little Witch, are you afraid to get your hair wet?” His teeth flashed behind his mask in a teasing smile.

“Sorry, I just don't like diving into cold water almost in the middle of winter in a place I don't know. And I don't remember if I told you, but just for clarification,” Violette waved her hand dramatically, “I'm not immortal.”

Dante cast her a reproachful eye.

“Oh,” her voice trembled. “Fine…I'll remind you of this,” she muttered, reaching for the buckles of her boots for the magic wand.

“Great, cold water in the winter…Just the way I like.”

“I tried my best to choose this specific location,” Dante sneered, then his eyes lowered to the wand in her hand. “What are you doing?”

“I wasn't planning to catch a cold and die from inflammation,” she grumbled through clenched teeth and with one wave of the hand, the air around the lake became warmer, steam coming out of the water surface.

She began to take off her boots, meanwhile, Dante settled on a rock nearby and carefully watched her every move just before she speared him with an evil look.

“What?”

“Nothing. Just enjoying the show,” he voiced satisfyingly.

One of her boots flew at him and he caught it with a smile, not saying a word.

Following the boots was her cloak, which she folded and laid on the damp ground, although she was tempted to throw it in Dante's face as well.

She once again shot a glance at him before reaching the water. “Are you sure nothing lives there?”

“Absolutely.” Dante rolled his eyes and leaned on his elbows.

“And what should I do? Just take what's there?” she asked, still expecting some trick from him.

“Yes. And don't drown,” he waved and then added, “if possible.”

Violette’s brows pulled together. “I know how to swim.”

“Good for you.”

The water wasn't icy, but it wasn’t really warm. Violette walked forward, dipping her feet into the black waters and wincing at the sticky sand between her toes, which felt more like mud in a swamp than a seashore.

As the water hit her waist she twisted her head round in Dante's way. He was sitting on the rock expectantly, watching her as she moved deeper into the lake. Soon, as her feet no longer felt the ground beneath, she began to swim.

Her breath was intermittent, heart quivering as she was approaching the glow. It became brighter with every breath, with every blink. So far, it was not that bad, at least, she didn't feel anything around her. The sky had thickened above her head, the clouds covering the moon but Violette’s eyes locked on the gold light and finally she was in the middle of the lake.

One deep inhale and she was under the water. The light was slightly brightening the surroundings. She tried focusing her gaze on what she had to get from the bottom, and then moved deeper. The water, turbid and thick, was making it hard to push forward but she didn't think about giving up. The light shone brighter. She was almost there.

As she reached it, her fingers found something. She pulled it towards herself, and despite her clouded vision, she made out it was a scroll.

Feeling as if she was running out of air, she quickly started swimming up, pushing all her body as water seemed to thicken, trying to detain her. Something stroked her ankle, and it didn't bother her until it suddenly pulled her back. Her eyes went round – some kelp wrapped around her leg. She tried to take it off but instead, felt a pull again. Another piece girded her hand. Violette cursed in her head, her heart pounding in her ears. The strength was leaving her. Everything started to look blurry as she tried to fight water plants, only going deeper underwater.

Something tightly circled around her waist and she was ready to push it away just before realizing it was not a plant but a hand. Dante dragged her as soon as he cut the kelps tied around her.

The air burst into Violette’s lungs as they reached the top, a strong cough seized her throat. Dante pulled her to himself.

“Breathe, Little Witch, breath,” his voice sounded near her ear as she continued gasping for the air.

His hands enfolded around her, as he started to move both of them to the land, letting her wrap her arms around his neck. Reaching the shore Violette fell on her palms, clearing her throat. She was trembling like a wet kitten, her hair stuck to her face and neck.

Dante helped her to get up.

“Are you okay?” His warm breath braced her face, his palm cupped her cheek as he steadied her.

Her eyes wet and wide stared at him as she breathed heavily. She swallowed before slowly nodding.

“Just breathe, okay? I wasn't serious telling you to not drown if *possible*.” His thumb caressed along her cheek.

Suddenly Violette broke her gaze and lifted her head up. It was strangely dark. The sky was not just clouded, it was almost black, no sign of stars and the moon. The eerie naked trees surrounded the lake as if they grew over the last hour, embedding even more concern in her heart. She'd thought she was still under the shock, but Dante looked around as well and his facial expressions didn't promise anything good.

The shadows started to occupy the place, the ominous fog spreading through the skeletal trees reached the lake. The sudden frost evoked goosebumps on Violette's arms. She clutched the scroll in her hands.

“We need to go,” Dante stated, and in opposition to his steady voice, his eyes gave away a worry.

“What is happe–” Violette didn't have time to finish as trees rustled and a hysterical howl spread over the forest.

“Run!” Dante ordered and Violette rushed to grab her boots and cloak.

As they tried to make their way out, some rigid tree branch slapped Violette in the stomach, making her eyes squint. Another one caught on her wet skirt and as she turned to let it free, she realized the branch was actually a claw pulling her closer. All other trees distorted, beginning to look like the real nightmare monsters with growing limbs and beastly faces, sowing bone-chilling horror.

The branches were chaotically moving in an attempt to grab Violette as something silver flashed before her eyes – a dagger went through the wooden fingers. Dante grabbed her by the hand. The ground shook. Something was indeed following them. The shadows behind kept moving in

their direction, fog started to take on strange features and shapes which Violette had no desire to see as her legs continued to run through the forest.

As they passed some bushes, her eyes flew in that direction – two eyes flickered at her from the darkness. Suddenly, she realized it was not the first eyes she'd seen in this forest today. Her boots pushed off the ground, her breath unsteady, but she could feel the adrenaline rush to her head.

A dozen black birds flew right between Dante and Violette, followed by Violette's shriek as she was trying to get rid of them. The steps shook the ground again, whatever it was it was coming for them, it was *hunting*.

They were wriggling through the trees, the branches tried to claw Violette from all the sides, tearing the edges of her skirt and her cloak. A few more feet and they rushed past the sign:



“Why did you stop?” Violette exhaled, almost swallowing her words.

“They can't leave the forest. We're safe,” Dante cleared his throat.

She shot her gaze back to the woods – two big red eyes, peering at them and then slowly faded in the blackness. The chill went down her spine. They made it out.

“Are you alright?” Dante asked, looking at Violette with a less gentle sight as the moment she nearly drowned.

Trying to catch her breath, she leaned over, pressing her palms to her knees.

“I don't remember when I ran that fast. I don't even think I ever did,” she exhaled and then the vampire did an extremely odd thing – extended his hand to her. Violette's eyes widened, her gaze dropped at his hand.

What does it mean? Should she reach out?

She hesitated, gazing at his palm before he interrupted this awkward pause.

“The scroll,” he said.

“Oh, right.” She looked at her hand, grasping the rolled sheet of paper. “Here.”

Stupid, Violette. You are very stupid.

She handed him the parchment. Despite being protected by magic, as it was completely dry, it looked like an ordinary piece of paper with a stamp on it, nothing special.

“Now let's get out of here,” Dante voiced.

Violette nodded, grabbing herself by the arms as she again felt how her body started trembling, being still wet and cold. The freezing air embraced her fully and for a moment she got jealous of Dante’s ability to not feel anything, after all, being a vampire has its pros.

But instead of moving forward, he suddenly stopped and spun to her. With the words “I think it's yours,” he extended her magic wand.

In a cascade of events, Violette completely forgot about it, she might have dropped it in the water. She couldn't be more grateful to him for saving it – the dearest thing to a wizard's heart.

“Oh, thank you,” she whispered, her eyes shone brighter. Taking it back, her fingers brushed his palm, surprisingly warm and soft, not at all what she'd imagined.

Shaking off the strange feeling, Violette finally was able to cast a spell to dry her clothes and hair.

“Much better,” she breathed contentedly, a pleasant shiver running through her body. Then she cast the spell again on Dante as he was already taking a step in the other direction.

He turned his head slightly, glancing at her from the corners of his eyes.

“Thank you.”

“And,” Dante pulled out the dagger from its sheath and offered it to her, “take it as well.”

Violette, astounded, looked at the blade, the jewels on the hilt sparkling in the candlelight of a lonely lantern.

“Why?” She couldn't understand.

“You definitely don't stand a chance with your bare hands.” Somehow his words

managed to sound like an accusation. “Maybe, at least, this will help you to stay alive. At some point.”

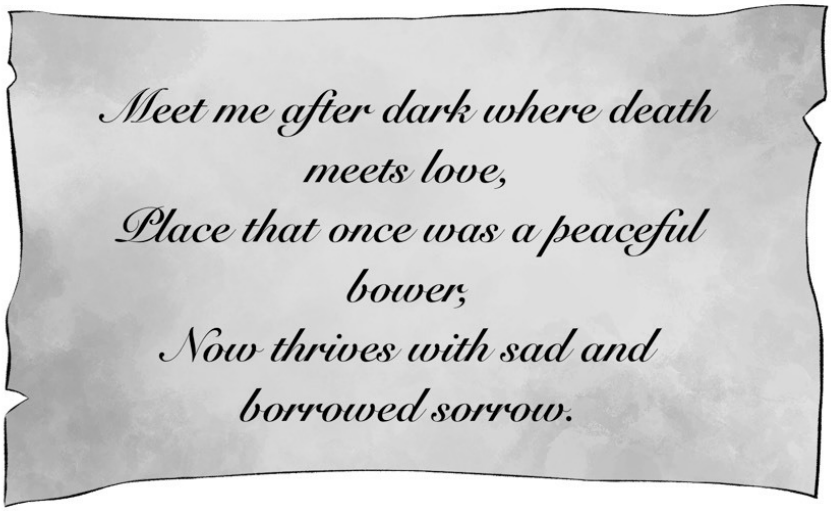
Her lashes fluttered as she carefully took the dagger. She remembered he didn't fear she'd use it but she didn't expect him to simply hand it to her as if it wasn't a lethal weapon to him. Has he trusted her that much or just underestimated?

CHAPTER 17

SPECIAL CHARMS

They stopped by the wooden bridge over a narrow fast river. Violette raised her eyes to the stars, the clear sky made her heart flutter. The moon illuminated the river's waters as Dante unrolled the scroll.

A warm glow radiated from the paper written in gold ink:



Violette looked over to read the message. She couldn't say if the paper was enchanted or it was just a regular sheet with a clue.

“I see she definitely loved riddles,” she pointed out.

“Oh, yes,” Dante sighed, “she'd loved to make life difficult, especially to others.”

“Why do we follow her riddles? What if they lead to nothing?” She finally risked asking the question that couldn't leave her head. “It can be possibly just a trick to distract us and lead us in the wrong direction.”

“Of course it's a trick,” Dante said with a placid and faint smile, which made Violette raise her brows in surprise. “But even tricks have something that can help, Little Witch. I'd never trust someone like her but it can lead to what I want to find.”

“This doesn't make sense,” she retorted.

“You just had never met her. Luckily for you.”

Violette looked at the piece of paper again, her eyes plunged lower to a small black inked picture of two flowers in the corner.

“This looks like a hand drawing, not a stamp,” she noted, pointing at the drawing.

Dante slowly switched his gaze to the place her finger showed.

Violette’s forehead creased. “It looks like a lilac and a lupine. Does it tell you something?”

He shot her side-glance. “Only that it's flowers.”

“Maybe you could see it somewhere?” she suggested. “Maybe it's a signature? It has to mean something.”

“It can be. She had a favorite spot in her garden full of blue and purple flowers, perhaps there could be lupines and lilacs,” he said thoughtlessly. “Can't say for sure.”

“You said she was a witch, right? Could she make potions?”

“No, I don't think so. But she was making magic powders.”

Violette got deep into her mind. Tinctures, potions and powders, although requiring different skills, sometimes were prepared from the same ingredients.

“I don't know that much about powders as about potions but I know lilacs are not toxic flowers and never used in poisons. In the magic world we call them midnight flowers because they symbolize spirituality, believing that night is the best time for brewing potions.” She tipped her head towards the sky, processing her thoughts. “Midnight flowers are usually used in sleep powders and spells, as well as in cures for memory loss and to fight nightmares. And the lilac is a symbol of memory so I'd

connect it to a powder of memory, an old and kind of rare spell.” Her head lowered, her index finger touched her chin. “Maybe the answer we're looking for is in her memories? Could she leave a message for us in one of her reminiscences?”

Dante was deep in thought for a short time, pondering over her words.

“You think she could leave a piece of her memory?” His shoulders got tense.

“Yes!” Violette actively nodded. “Some magicians can save their memory for centuries to convey a message to their followers, to teach them or warn them about something.”

Dante looked at the piece of paper once more, his eyes fixed on another flower – *lupine*.

“No,” he said with a low voice, not taking his eyes off the little drawing. “It's not from her memory.” A sudden realization cleared his mind. “It's from mine. I know where to go.”

Dante rolled up the scroll in a second and stalked forward.

“Wait!” His words caught Violette off guard. “Where do we go?”

“It's a place from my past,” he let out shortly as she aligned with him, moving further out of the river.

“What exactly?” She crossed his path, forcing him to stop.

His stone face looked right onto her. “I'd rather not have a conversation about it.”

“And again, you're keeping secrets. I thought we were past it.”

“It's not a secret.” An earnestness flickered in his eyes. “I just don't want to speak about it,” he said as he walked past, leaving her behind.

A WHITE ALCOVE with cracked columns stood lonely among the thickets of various flowers and plants which could only blossom in the winter. Climbing vines of wild ivy entwined the structure from below to the roof, thick clumps of leaves hanging from above the bare bushes of the lilac. It looked sad and fallen. A neglected garden.

“This place saw better days,” Violette mumbled.

The place of borrowed sorrow, the words rang through her mind.

She could see anguish and dying in this place, not because of the ruins of stones but because this place reminded her of something that once was great and was making people happy, whoever was spending time here. But now all this is just wreckage of the past covered in dust and forever mourning. Desolate and forgotten.

“What are you looking for?”

“I hope I am not mistaken,” Dante breathed as his hand reached the spot under the marble bench through the tangled thickets of ivy. A little beige box made of wood appeared under its shadow. A little symbol of lupine decorated the case, the same as on the scroll from the lake.

“How did you know?” Violette's lashes flitted.

“I remembered I saw it before. Long time ago,” he said. Violette felt a tone of grief in his voice, the longing in his gaze as it fixated on the wooden surface.

He reached for a little lock and opened the box – nothing except a little crystalline bottle with a silver dust in it.

Dante took the bottle out.

“Do you know what it is?” The question fell from his lips as his eyes were studying the little vial.

“I am not sure,” Violette looked closely and then took it from his hand. “A lot of potions and powders share the same color. Sometimes toxic potions can look exactly like the regular potion for better eyesight.”

“Is there any way to know what exactly it is?”

“Well…” she started uncertainly. “Sometimes you can smell some of the ingredients, especially flowers or berries, or blood. But it's not really safe – there's poisons which can function through the smell, one sniff and you are dead.” She tilted her head to the side, her eyes twinkled to Dante. “Anyway, it's not really effective, you won't get every ingredient for sure and you can confuse one of the smells with another one, depending how much of a master you are.”

“Another way?”

“It's a difficult one, with the right spell and tools it's possible to find out the key ingredients, but it's not an easy spell.”

“Can you do this?” the vampire inquired.

“Even if I could, it's hard to get tools for it and the ingredients for the spell. It's not an option, if you want to do it quickly,” she sighed.

“Do you know which powders can look like this one?”

“Hm…” Violette lightly shook the bottle. The dust, despite being silver, had a blue undertone and darker sparkles, and it awakened some thoughts in her mind. “Like I said I don't know a lot about powders, but it could be sleeping powder…or vanishing fog. It also looks like–Oh wait!” Amusement filled her voice. “It can be a memory powder, remember I told you earlier?”

Dante drew a deep sigh.

“Maybe, after all, it's still about her memories,” she implied with pride.

“Or,” Dante snatched the bottle out of her hand. “You are simply wrong.” His voice sounded bitter, almost acrid which made Violette flinch back.

She wondered since their first conversation about the witch’s memories, why Dante was so against this theory? What does he hide? However, he was always hiding something…What if in these memories she'll see Dante from a bad side? Not like he was a good person, but what if she'll see what he had done to the witch that made her put the mask on him? Could it be a reason? Or there was something else, something that he didn't want to see himself? He said he doesn't want to talk about it, now Violette started to think the core of the problem was not her being nosy but perhaps, him not wanting to dredge up the past.

Dante put the vial back in the box. His gaze turned sullen, eyes dimmed as if they were not dark enough before. And she would not have disturbed him, but one question remained unresolved.

“What are we gonna do now?”

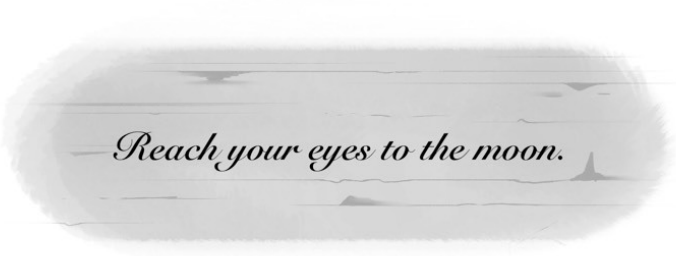
Dante kept his eyes on the box.

“I don't know,” he said honestly. “I have to think about it. Let's go find a place to stay if you don't want to freeze.”

Violette stared at his back as he was drifting away. She saw him like this for the first time, perhaps he still felt cold and arrogant, but she'd never seen him…*sad*. With that, she clutched the box he gave her, closer.

They didn't talk for some time, Violette even held the distance and was treading behind. Her eyes were scrutinising the box case – it was very simple, she'd never have thought it could belong to the same witch from the

crypt with jewelry and crystal boxes. Her eyes studied the slightly cracked surface and colorful drawing of lupin flowers on it. Then she opened the box – a bottle with magic powder rolled upon the bottom along with her steps. She raised her eyes just a little bit and found a line in cursive on the inside of the case:



Violette stopped.

“Dante,” she called out, “there's something.”

He crept up on her practically unnoticed. Towering over, his eyes scanned the inscription.

“Did you see this before?” she asked.

A simple answer left his mouth, “No.”

“Could it be left on purpose?” The question slipped from her lips as she turned her face to the vampire, not noticing how close he was until her breath brushed his neck.

He mysteriously tilted his head to the side, occupied with thoughts.

“More likely,” he finally said, his tone unsure or he might have tried to hide his dissatisfaction. Another riddle definitely wasn't something they both wanted to see, however it couldn't be even called this way: it was just a set of words, resembling a warning or possibly advice.

Violette turned her attention back to the words on the wooden surface.

“I don't understand,” she murmured.

“I think that is the point,” he said coldly. The words written by the witch didn't surprise him. Violette couldn't unravel if he was tired, didn't care or it was something he exactly expected. He told her already that the woman

who cursed him was cunning and mischievous, capable of vileness and tricks.

The raindrop dripped before Violette's eyes right onto the beige surface. Another cold raindrop fell right between her eyes, making her squint and scrunching her nose.

Violette already got used to the weather in the Valley of Enchanted Stories for that short time she'd spent here. It varied from rain and fog to snow and frost. Today was an unlucky day for them as the clouded sky brought with it rain.

In a few minutes the drizzle altered into a torrential downpour, making Violette's boots get bogged down in the mud along an eroding path.

For their fortune on their way they found a small summerhouse. It was a tiny building with columns but the big conical roof was spacious enough to shelter the two of them from the deluge. It didn't really help with the cold though – Violette stood there soaked to the skin, shaking like the leaves on the wind. Dante was no less wet; his shirt stuck to the body and hair dribbled with water as he ran his hand through it.

The unceasing rain tugged at the fragile windows, a flimsy door was creaking with every lash of the wind.

The room was empty, probably intended for travelers like them. With shivering hands, Violette pulled out the magic wand and with a light movement their clothes and hair got dry again.

“That's much better,” she murmured. The gentle steam from the clothes embraced her in its arms, warm and comforting, and for a brief moment, it was the nicest feeling she’d had all day.

“The rain seems to last for a long time,” Dante stated, standing near the long window, his sight directed into the distance.

Violette looked over his shoulder, following with a sigh. She placed the box on the floor, sat nearby tucking her legs under herself and leaned with her head on the wall. They were stuck here not less than a few hours, it was hardly pleasant thought. Not for her, neither for him.

Dante’s gaze dropped to her. “If I leave you for a few minutes you won't run into trouble, will you?”

She glowered at him. “I'm stuck in a little cabin and it's raining outside. What can I do?”

“You're too nosy, I wouldn't be surprised if you'd find an adventure here.”

She wanted to grimace but instead she dramatically put her hand on her forehead and closed her eyes. “Don't even know how I will live these few languid moments without your wonderful company.” And then she dropped seriously, “Where are you going?”

“Want to see if there is someplace more pleasant to stay nearby.”

He turned to go but then bent over to her again.

“One thing I should have done much earlier,” he stated and pulled out the dagger from Violette’s belt.

Violette recoiled back in confusion.

“I think you don't want to be lured by vampires, right?” The exposed blade sparkled before her eyes as she slowly stood up.

“Lured?” Her brows twisted warily, palms clenched into fists.

“Well, I definitely don't need it,” he ignored her question. “The only one who I want you to listen to is me so you need a protection spell,” he said while dipping the dagger into his big finger.

Violette's eyes watched this process with caution.

“What are you doing?”

“I guess you don't know that vampire blood has some good sides, it can protect from curses. Don’t your books say anything about it?”

“I've never read such books,” she murmured.

The blood flowed down his finger in a thin stream. Then he raised his hand and nearly pressed a finger to her lips before Violette quickly shrunk back. A few red drops stained the wooden floor.

“What are you exactly doing?” Her voice came out as a mix of anger and confusion.

“Relax, Little Witch. It's just to protect you,” he said airily.

She scolded. “Is it necessary?”

“If you are scared it will turn you into a vampire – don't worry, it doesn’t work this way.”

“I know how people become vampires,” her mouth screwed in a frown. However, did she really know? She'd only known what was said in the legends, and even so, she wasn't really interested in vampire heritage before.

“Then what are you scared of?” he let out with ease, almost unbothered.

“I'm not scared,” Violette grumbled.

“Really? Then why is your heart beating so fast? Or is it because of me?” And there it was – his grin, similar to a devil's. “Am I too close to you? Do you feel excited by this thought?”

Violette forehead creased. “You think too highly of yourself. The only thought that flashed through my head was how I want to introduce your face to the nearest wall.”

He tipped his head to the side with a curious smile. “You've already said it.”

“It's because my dislike of you only grows.” Her features sharpened. “Fine,” she gave out. “But if it's another one of your tricks, I swear you'll regret this,” she warned, straining her back, and tipped her chin.

Dante, amused by her words, kept stupidly smiling, then took a step closer and pressed his big finger to her lips.

Stubbornness still burned in Violette's eyes, but she parted her mouth, letting his blood touch her lower lip. His finger lingered, stroking it lightly along the soft curve of her mouth before pulling away. Violette licked the crimson blood, the metallic taste burned her tongue, the distinct sour aftertaste making her grimace. It was more than repellent, she'd never repeat such a thing again and she hoped there would be no reason for it.

“And how long does it work?”

“As long as I want it to,” he stated.

She drew an incredulous sight at him and then he was gone.

SHE WAS TWIRLING the clear bottle with dust in her hands when Dante stepped in the summerhouse again. She raised her eyes at his wet hair and rose from the ground. The vampire shook his head – spray flew in different directions. The rain didn't even think about letting up.

“There's an abandoned estate nearby, I didn't find anything else,” he declared as his hand went through his soaked hair, removing it from his forehead.

Violette’s lips swayed to the side and brows pulled down: she hoped for better news.

“I suppose you still want to go there?” She shriveled at the thought of the battering shower outside.

“Would you rather stay here?”

An abandoned house didn't sound much better in her mind but then Dante added it's not far from the town out there so it made sense to walk there and stay for some time before rain will be, at least, not that strong.

Turning some object into an umbrella was also not a good idea, the strong wind would blow it away so all she could do is just turn her purple cloak over and cover her head with it.

With quick steps they ran across the clearing down the hill. Splashes flew from their boots and slippery ground almost made Violette fall but she found her balance at the last minute. Her skirt sodden, the dirt stains covered the hem. Her cloak got drenched very quickly but soon they were standing in a big empty hall of the abandoned mansion.

It looked broken and desolate. There still were a few pieces of furniture, broken glass on the floor and thick layers of dust on the other surfaces. The walls, once decorated with expensive patterns, had darkened and were covered in mold. A crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling lacked details and was slightly skewed to the side, which made Violette carefully pass under, not taking her eyes off it. The corners were concealed with old web, scraps of which also hung from the ceiling – Violette's nose wrinkled. The low thud of Dante's step followed her to another room.

“Why do you always bring me to the old dusty places?” Violette went on, stepping over a silver vase lying on the floor. “I'll give you advice, if you ever go on a date don't bring a girl to somewhere like this.”

“You're the only one I bring to places like this,” he sang, his lips curled into a smug smile.

“Oh, I'm flattered,” she sarcastically drawled.

“Why did you decide I meant it in a good way?” His nose creased with a satisfied smile underneath, as he left the room to look around.

Violette trod deeper in the room. It looked like a living room: the old fireplace hadn't been lit for years, a few faded paintings hanging on the wall, an old piano with a broken leg, near an empty dark spot presumably from the sofa which was no longer there.

Violette walked to the wall and pulled out the cracked box they found earlier. Her gaze lingered on the wooden top of it before she opened the case and looked inside; the content of it haunted her. She was thinking about it all that time when she was alone in the little summer house but she didn't do what she insisted now.

Her hands placed the box onto the empty fireplace and she took out the crystal bottle with silver dust. It was common knowledge not to consume anything unfamiliar, yet Violette was nearly sure it was a memory powder. It seemed logical. At least, she certainly knew it wasn't a poison. She sprinkled some dust on her hand. If Dante doesn't want to – she'll do it. After all, if she doesn’t take a risk, she won't get what she wants.

She shook the powder in her hand, blue grains sparkled with a silver hue as she lifted her hand to her nose. A sweet flowery scent entered her nostrils – a delicate blend of lilac and blue Renvoit, which was often used in the memory potions. A decision was made. She raised her hand and threw the powder over her head. The purply blue grains iridescent with silver slowly landed on top of her head, then her lashes, lips and her clothes. A burst of sudden tiredness made Violette’s legs give way, a mist crept to the corners of her mind.

“Little Witch!”

The male voice intruded in the room and she felt a familiar hand under her back, grabbing her before she'd fall onto the floor.

“What have you done?” Dante's face appeared before her eyes before it turned blurry.

“I'll just lie down here for a bit,” she babbled as her eyes started to close and she could no longer feel her body. Everything started to fade to nothing. A gushed sweetness and headiness – all what Violette felt as her eyelids became so heavy, she couldn't keep them open any longer.

CHAPTER 18

UNDER THE VEIL OF A DREAM



Violette opened her eyes – only stone walls around her and darkness of an empty room. Standing up, she looked around. Her eyes found a door and as soon as she took a step in its direction, a heavy sigh followed by a sob reached her ears. She snapped her head at the way the sound came from. At the darkest corner was a man sitting on the cold floor with his head down. Violette froze on the same spot and looked closely at the stranger. The dark reigning over the room and the twilight outside made it difficult to see his face. But then her heart quailed. This stranger actually seemed very familiar. She took a step closer. It was only an assumption but…

"Dante?" she breathed.

He raised his head and a deep exhale, filled with a heavy burden, left his lungs. The horror swept over Violette's face. She tripped over her own leg as she faltered back but someone's hands caught her before she'd hit the ground. She turned her head around – the familiar vampire with the mask on his mouth was looking at her, his gaze piercing, framed by furrowed brows. She bolted a glance at the other vampire still sitting at the wall. Instead of the mask, his mouth and chin was covered in blood, down to the neck…his collar stained in burgundy stains. His tortured appearance shocked her to the deepest of her soul but the blood on his face was not his at all. And there was something peculiar in his eyes, similar to *pain*.

"You never listen, right?" Dante snarled, still holding her.

Violette finally stood on her own feet.

She stared at him for a bit with fully rounded eyes. He must have taken the powder too after she knocked out but to see two of him at once seemed like a shocking experience, especially since one of them didn’t have an imprisoned mouth.

“We have to go,” he said, ignoring his other-self on the ground.

Violette jolted her head to the vampire on the floor again. His face looked horrific and yet…looking at him her heart faltered. He looked so exhausted and sad, almost frazzled.

“Are you going? We have to find the witch.” Dante already stood near the open door leading to the hallway. He took a step out of the room. Violette’s eyes lingered on the vampire at the wall before following him, a strange pang pierced her chest.



THE CORRIDOR they walked through looked like a big hall decorated with portraits in golden frames with intricate patterns. The green long carpet on the floor was leading them to the wall with an arched pass.

“How come you know the way?” Violette suddenly asked, nearly whispering, still startled by the witnessed picture in the room.

“I was there, as you could notice,” he said coldly, rushing himself through the hall like he wanted to escape this place as soon as he could. Well, she partly understood why…This place didn't hold great memories for him as she saw.

But that didn't explain him knowing this place so well.

“You seem to know this place a little too well,” she said, her eyes gliding over the walls and its oil paintings.

Dante didn't say a word, keeping striding forward.

Violette wanted to inspect the paintings, the surroundings, to find out what kind of place they were in. But Dante was in too much of a hurry, and they didn't have much time, but everything seemed so interesting and unusual. She'd never seen such beautiful decor and exquisite sculptures. Without noticing it, she slowed down, studying the portraits.

Here hung images of great nobles, at least that's the conclusion she came to. After a few more steps, her eyes rose to a huge gilded portrait of a beautiful woman, starting almost at the floor and ending nearly at the ceiling. She was struck by a strange feeling like she'd already seen this woman once, something familiar was in her features. Her gaze rose to the lady's eyes and then to a gorgeous painted crown in her hair, a glorious stone flaunted with blue tints in the middle. She stared at the painting fully enchanted until Dante's hand grabbed her.

“We don't have time, Little Witch. We can wake up at any moment.”

“Yes, you're right. Sorry,” she blurted, rushing through the hall.

Finally they reached the archway. Violette looked up – the twisted staircase led into absolute unknown, so high that she finally wondered how high they were already.

They'd walked quite a bit when the echo of female voices entered the air. The higher they rose, the louder they became, and finally, they came across their owners – two women in identical outfits, apparently maids.

“I don't think it's a good idea,” said one of them. “It's not a good time.”

“I don't know, it seems the Queen and King want to cheer people up a little bit with this ball,” the other commented.

The woman frowned, her voice filled with bitterness, “Yes, while people are dying because of some monster.”

“I think they are fully aware of this, Charlotte. Anyway, we have a lot of work before the event. Did you see Loisa?”

“No. Actually, I haven't seen her since breakfast. She was supposed to work in the East Wing today.”

Violette noticed how Dante immediately lowered his eyes to the floor. He looked different, like he–*Oh.*…The realization hit her. *They were in the East Wing today. The blood. The vampire on the floor.* They will not find Loisa…or will find her gutted somewhere in the castle.

She raised her gaze again to Dante but his attention was already taken by something else. He was looking through a door crack as the voices of servants were fading, echoing from the walls down the stairs. Taking a step, he carefully squeezed through the door as if he was scared to interrupt something. Or someone.

Two voices, one soft and gentle, and the other – deep and much sharper, slipped through the doorway. Violette followed Dante to the room and

unlike her curiosity, his face was drawn with surprise, however he'd tried his best to not show much emotion.

“I don't like it,” the man in the chair said. His short brown beard was already streaked with silver strands and wrinkles at the corners of his eyes suggesting he was old enough to live half of a human lifetime. His appearance, his clothes, his voice, everything about him was regal and quite majestic. The same goes with a woman whose beautiful deep brown hair to the waist cascaded down her back. Her sumptuous long cobalt dress embroidered with a gold tracery over the trim and sleeves, mirroring the tracery on the man's coat, swept behind her as she crossed the room.

“Quite the opposite,” her hand approached the man's shoulder, “it's a perfect time to show everyone that our family is doing alright. People are lost, we have to show them that we are still there for the kingdom and not afraid of new…issues.”

“Throwing a ball while there's a monster outside killing innocent people is madness!” He stayed unbreakable.

“People already have questions, Ornard.” The woman's tone turned sharper. “They want to see their King and Queen and to see the prince. He is an heir to the throne, we have to show whatever happens – he will take care of the kingdom.”

The man wearily drew a sigh, leaning deeper in the chair. “It's a terrible idea and you know it.”

“Everything will be alright. I will take care of it. We have to bring hope to people and this ball is a nice opportunity for it. Please, stop overthinking it. We must pretend we have everything under control.”

“But we don't!” he seethed from the chair. “Everything is falling apart, Orienela, our family already did.” His shoulders slumped, brows wrinkled above his eyes, tired and hopeless.

“But they don't need to know that. That's it, I have to prepare things for the ball. Please, try to look at it as I see it.”

He shook his head in despair and closed his eyes, lost deep in his mind.

Violette's gaze, meanwhile, followed the woman leaving the room.

She jolted her head to Dante.

“Are you going?” she asked, raising a brow.

Dante stiffened on the same spot, eyeing the old man. His gaze was disturbing, she wished she could read his mind but there was no time to ask

unnecessary questions.

“I'll catch up with you in a minute,” he said thoughtfully.

Pursing her lips, she rushed to the door. Since others cannot see her, she could assume that she could pass through the walls.

A moment later, without even feeling anything, Violette again found herself at the entryway. Her eyes caught a glimpse of the cobalt dress eloping above and she hurried in that direction, hoping to not lose the witch. Or rather to say…the Queen? It hit her just now that the woman they saw wasn't just a witch but a queen, the same one on the portrait with a beautiful graceful crown, the same portrait she'd seen in the crypt.

It was always right under her nose but she'd never really thought about it. It gave her a new perspective to the situation, what Dante did to the *Queen*? The one answer begged to escape on the surface and she didn't like it at all. Anyway, she should pay more attention to the memory and look for the clues.

Steep steps led her up to a spacious room. Crossing the threshold of the royal chamber, Violette carefully scrutinized the premises as if danger could lurk in its corners. Her presence has been greeted by bright moonlight pouring from the open balcony.

Reach your eyes to the moon, flowed through her mind like a light breeze, reminding her why she was here.

Her eyes followed the radiance, but it only led her to an empty spot on the terry cobalt carpet. She scanned the room from the gray walls to a grand bed with a dark blue canopy studded with stars. Fresh flowers – blue bells, on a luxurious chest of drawers with gold handles. Nearby stood two bottles of magic powder. She looked closely, trying to take one of them, but her hands went through it.

“Oh, right,” Violette murmured, remembering that she was only a ghost in these reminiscences.

She leaned closer to eye the vials. Though it turned out the symbols on the yellowed labels were completely unfamiliar to her. Her lips pursed as she turned her head in the other direction in search of at least some clue, instead she caught a living silhouette against the opposite wall.

Violette quickly trod towards the Queen at the desk and peered over her shoulder. She was writing something but the words coming out of her pen were not like anything else, again these incomprehensible symbols that

Violette saw a minute earlier on the vials. She scoured the scroll with her eyes trying to find something she could understand, but alas, there was nothing useful.

A feather swayed – the final dot. The Queen picked the scroll up, admiring her work. A whisper came out under her breath and Violette realized that what she wrote was nothing else but a spell.

“Great. Hope it will not come to it,” the woman murmured, folding the parchment in a wooden box painted with blue lupines.

A frown warped Violette's face. If this memory was supposed to help her dilemma with Dante, why did everything around her seem useless? The Queen was writing spells unfamiliar to her, in a foreign language, and spoke only in riddles. The royal family behaved strangely, throwing a ball while there's a horrid monster walking outside the castle, and Dante…Dante from the past was here, completely different from the one she knows. During all the time she'd spent in this dream, she only came across more questions than answers.

At least that she knew for sure – the magic Queen Orienela used definitely cannot be found in the ordinary books about sorcery, and since she doesn't know the symbols, it was most likely because it was a forbidden type of magic she couldn't see before. Considering the fact that they found the Hegga's book in her crypt, it meant she'd practiced their magic, though it was unlikely that she was Hegga herself; she looked too young and beautiful to be called a crone.

And although, unlike most of the wizards, Violette didn't find conversation about black magic scary or forbidden, she didn't like what was happening. A vampire was enough for her to deal with, and now she had the queen who practices dark spells…What else should she expect? This little adventure acquired new colors and the worst of it – it only attracted her more. The unknown. Secrets. Her treacherous nature radiated curiosity and she didn't try to shake this feeling off, though it was necessary to direct it in the right way.

Violette again ran her eyes around the room right up to the moonlight. She walked to the balcony, letting the glow shower her. Her eyes gawked at the full moon, wondering about the words written inside the box they found.

But no matter how long she stood there, the answer didn't magically come to her mind. She lifted her index finger to the chin, her gaze dropped down.

“Reach your eyes to the moon…” she repeated under her breath, entering the room again.

“Any progress?” Dante’s voice came from the doorway.

Violette looked up at the vampire and shook her head.

He closed the distance between them in two steps, examining the space around. Then following the moonlight, he headed to the balcony.

Violette's eyes lowered to the dark coffee table, where a book lay beside a crystal jewelry box, a velvet pillow cradling a golden crown, and a small framed portrait of the Queen.

“Oh, she loves herself,” Violette murmured, reaching to the frame before remembering she couldn't touch it.

Suddenly, a subtle, beguiling glimmer caught the corner of her eye, beckoning her to look closer. The crown. The same one depicted in the grand portrait back in the hall. The center stone was not as luxurious as she’d imagined a queen might wear, yet it held her attention all the same, shimmering in a way she couldn’t look away from.

“There's a trick,” Dante sighed, coming back to the room but he didn't manage to continue as Violette cut in.

“It's a moonstone,” she gasped.

Dante stalked in a moment, peering at the spot Violette’s eyes sank in.

“The stone on the crown is a moonstone,” she repeated in awe. “That's it! Reach your eyes to the moon!” She raised her head with an inspired smile on her face.

“Great.” The vampire sat on his knee, scrutinizing the crown. His hand reached for the stone and it answered with a glowing blue light but he couldn't take it, not touch it. “Hm…I don't think it's here. I know there's spells to hide the objects in memories but I think this one is just a prompt for what to seek in reality.”

“And where do we have to look for it?” Violette parted her lips.

“The crown was on the Queen when she was buried.” Dante stood up without taking his eyes off the gem.

Violette slanted her head at his side with confusion.

“We are going back to the crypt.”

His voice sent frost over her skin. She winced at this terrible thought.

“We will…dig up her grave?” She swallowed.

Dante nodded.

Then he said something else but she couldn't quite hear it: his voice was nothing but a distant noise. His features got blurred and the surroundings started to get misty. Everything around started to disappear and Violette felt a strange pull as if something tried to drag her out of this dream. The last thing she saw was two sapphire eyes flickering in the darkness and then she woke up.

Her body was aching. Violette was sure she was just sleeping but it felt like she was dragging a heavy burden on her back the whole day. Her body was weak and the pain was tightening around her head like an invisible ring. She took a deep breath and slowly breathed out. It didn't help with the headache but it made her head a little bit clear, at least she understood where she was. Her eyes darted to Dante's body on the ground, he still was in the dream. So she sat, curling her legs to her chest, waiting for him to come back. They had a lot to talk about.



AFTER A FEW MINUTES Dante snapped a sigh and then his eyes opened.

“Why do I feel like I was run over by a carriage?” he breathed.

“I think it's a side effect of the powder,” Violette yawned. Every muscle of her body was burning. One more yawn escaped her mouth.

“Then we should find a place to stay,” Dante said.

He didn't look as tired though.

Lucky, probably an advantage of being immortal, Violette thought.

She glanced at him as he reached a hand to help her to stand up. Suddenly as she looked at the ground again it seemed to her like a very comfy place to lay down. She actually would lay anywhere, curling up in a ball, no matter how hard or cold the surface would be.

“Standing?” Dante asked.

She nodded.

Then he turned around and waved. “The faster we are, the faster we'll find an inn to rest.”

Violette absolutely agreed with his statement. They should hurry up so she could meet her long-awaited friend for the next couple of hours – a soft comfy bed. She drew an unstable step, another one and then her face flew down, but instead of the cold floor it crashed into Dante's warm shirt.

“Little Witch?” He looked down at her as he caught her in his arms.

She didn't answer. She was far away in a real dream. Somewhere where no vampires, no diseases, no crypts exist. A place far enough to not hear Dante and his tries to wake her up.

CHAPTER 19

HOPELESS ATTEMPTS



The first thing Violette saw as her eyes opened was a beautifully painted ceiling. She blinked a few times, shaking off the last remnants of sleep and then got up.

She was sitting in a big soft bed surrounded by an emerald canopy with gold embroidery down its trim, ending with tassels. The air was infused with begonias resting in a vase on a big fireplace opposite to the bed. She looked around: the thick emerald curtains, matching the canopy of the bed, were almost shut, except for a small dark gap.

Violette lowered her foot from under the warm blanket onto the soft white carpet, its fluff tickled between her toes. She found herself in the same clothes as before, in her deep amethyst dress with iris tracery from the heart-shaped neckline to the dark violet corset with lilac ribbons. Only the cloak was missing, which she later noticed on the velvet green chair near the bed, her boots were at its legs.

She slowly circled the bed to the window.

It was dark outside, only stars were glimmering in the sky in the company of the forever-changing moon. She couldn't say how late the night was and how long she was sleeping. Was it only a few hours after she passed out or was it days since then?

She hurried to the chair. There was no time to explore where she was, she had to find Dante. Quickly pulling on her boots, she took her magic wand and ran out of the room.

Violette hovered for a second, gazing at the hallway. It was a nice place with dark green walls lined with rich paintings. Deciding to follow the bright light, she came right to the big hall with a wide mahogany staircase. If it was an inn, it was much richer and more beautiful than the ones she was in before. A crystal chandelier illuminated the hall as well as a few other lamps down the marble stairway.

Her eyes dropped to the stairs and there he was – Dante, pacing up. And as he raised his head, his gaze met hers.

“You finally woke up. Great,” his voice came out friendlier than usual. “Be ready to leave in thirty minutes.”

Violette froze in place until he finally reached the last stair and his eyes were higher than hers.

“To leave?” Her lashes fluttered.

“We're going back to the crypt, did you forget?”

“Where are we? How long did I sleep?” she worried.

“Why don't you get your stuff and meet me downstairs in a few minutes?” Dante said and without much explanation, went down the hallway Violette just came from.

His words made her go back to the room to grab the forgotten stuff, but unlike the cloak she found in a span of ten seconds, she couldn't find her dark purple bag with all things she took with her. She searched under the bed, rummaged through the bed, beyond the curtains, between cushions in the chair but it wasn't there. Then she let herself assume Dante took it, unless she lost it on the way here. The last thing she remembered was that she tried to get up from the cold floor after a really tiring dream. Then everything went dark. She didn't even remember if she'd seen the dreams after.



VIOLETTE WAS WAITING for Dante at the staircase when he showed up.

“Come,” he waved his hand and went to another big hall, inviting her to follow him.

“Where are we?” she asked, carefully looking around.

“Some nice people were kind enough to invite us to stay overnight,” he simply aired but his words raised suspicion under Violette's skin.

“Some people?” She side-glanced at him.

The room they entered featured a long wooden table set with food, drinks and so much cutlery that Violette didn't even recognize half of it.

“Dante, where are we?” she asked again, taking in the splendid table and the equally luxurious room.

Then her eyes caught the presence of two people, and she honored them with a simple “Hello.” She tried to say something else but before the words escaped her mouth, she sensed something was off. Their gaze was empty, like they weren't quite here, just two dolls, silently staying aside. Though they were for sure living humans.

Violette felt a knot tying in her stomach. “Did you do something to them?” Her voice trembled. She was thankful she hadn't eaten today as a raspy sour taste crept in her throat.

“I didn't say they invited us by their own will,” Dante said calmly, taking a seat at the head of the table.

She was outraged by the way he said it, without a second thought, as if it were completely normal to make people into his own puppets.

“You can't make people do whatever you want, Dante.” Her fists clenched.

“Well, you are wrong. I definitely can.” He sounded light-hearted.

“It doesn't mean you should do that!”

“Why not?”

“Because it's wrong. They are humans, living creatures!” She pointed her hand in their direction, however, right now, they really didn't look like something alive. Just two toys waiting for the vampire's command.

“Well, you might be right, Little Witch. But I wouldn't lure them if you didn't pass out. We needed somewhere to stay.” His face was imperturbable, only a ghost of frolic danced in his almost black eyes.

“Oh don't make it about me!” Violette protested. It was so arrogant of him to blame it on her when she'd never wanted to hurt someone.

“As you might notice I do not lure people on a daily basis. So yes, I did it because of you.” That time his voice sounded much more serious as if he really believed in his own words.

“Don't pretend like you care about me,” she snapped back.

“Oh, I might not care, but I still need you to solve my little problem.” He grinned, tilting his head to the side, his finger trailing along his masked jaw.

“Anyway, you have to break the spell. Disenchant them or whatever you need to do,” Violette demanded, the pinch between her brows twitched.

He frowned. “Disenchant them? What am I to you, some kind of enchantress?”

“You understood what I meant,” she grumbled.

“Why should I? I like them this way.” He swayed the wine in a cup with a clueless look on his face.

“You are unbearable! Why couldn't you just ask them to stay for one night? It’s not that hard to be nice. At least, one time.”

“They are not the kind of people who would shelter someone out of goodwill. And actually I didn't have time and energy to explain to them why I am traveling at night with a passed out young lady.”

“Then unlure them and we'll explain it…somehow,” she stood her ground.

“You won't like it, Little Witch.”

“Just do it.” She was determined to fight him if she had to, even if it wouldn't be as effective as she imagined in her head.

“If you wish so,” he waved and leaned to the back of his chair, completely restful.

The woman's gaze who stood near the table turned unclouded, however the indifference on her face immediately changed into madness. Her eyes grew wider, soft features got lost into sharpness. Not a sign of the calm beautiful lady she was a moment ago, just peacefully standing near the table.

“Who are you?!” Her yell flushed through the room. “What are you doing in our house?!”

Violette had to admit – when she asked Dante to break the spell she didn't think about what to say and how it would look. And she clearly didn't expect to see a mad woman, however, she completely understood her point of view.

“Oh, um…” Violette started, it seemed much easier in her head. “I didn't actually think about this…Well…We–”

“How did you get in our house?!” the woman screamed again and Violette winced from her high squeak.

“Um…Well, let's start again. I apologize for the inconvenience we might have caused you,” she stumbled, trying to gather the words into a logical sentence. It turned out to be quite a challenge as the woman went hysterical in a split second.

“Burglars!”

Violette had never seen someone who would get wound up so quickly, despite the fact that she worked with people everyday. Some of them could be beyond belief dramatic. But this woman, well, she had a reason to be so.

“No, we're–” Violette didn't have time to finish as the angry lady swung a silver plate in the air. “No, wait! Let me explain, please.”

“Get out of my house!” The shout, sharp and grating like the creak of a door, echoed off the walls.

“We're not burglars, I'm sorry…We just needed a pla–” She didn't finish as a crystal wineglass flew towards her. “We're not here to harm you.” Violette took a few nervous steps back, her head spun in Dante's direction. “You are not going to help me?”

The vampire restlessly was watching the show from his seat.

“No,” he said and his smile grew even wider than before.

“Really?!”

“I thought you knew how to deal with it.” He got up with his wine glass, retreating in the opposite direction of the fight.

Another piece of dishes flew at Violette, though she awkwardly dodged it.

“I said get out!” The woman stepped closer, her nostrils flaring.

Violette still tried to reason with her, though she clearly didn't want to hear a word from her mouth. “Please, stop this, we are not here to hurt you…”

“I don't think she shares your intentions,” said Dante with an indifferent voice, leaning towards the wall.

“Fine, you were right. It wasn't the best idea. Lure her back!” Violette shot back.

It was hard to admit, but she couldn't control the situation and protect herself at the same time. She was not in a position to use her magic wand

against the person who was just defending herself, but keeping it up like it was wasn't an option as well.

“Oh, no…” A dramatic expression crossed Dante's face. “I thought it's a bad thing to make people follow my orders.”

“Dante! Lure her!”

He didn’t make a move.

“Please, Dante!” Violette screamed as the angry lady was close enough to hit her with a big silver plate.

Snap!

The sharp sound of two fingers cut the air. Violette opened her eyes – the woman with the tray above her head froze in place.

“It brings you fun, doesn't it?” She bent her brows.

Dante contentedly shrugged and sat back in the chair.

“I admit unluring her was a bad idea, but the worst one was to lure her from the start. You are a terrible person.” Violette greeted her teeth.

It didn't look like Dante was about to defend himself, no, he stayed completely cool.

“By the way, it seems you're in a good mood today,” she went on, eyeing him with narrowed eyes. “What caused it?”

“You are just too much fun,” he said unbothered. “Are you hungry?” He tried to switch the topic of the conversation, although the question seemed to be reasonable.

Violette's gaze dropped to the table, there was so much food – meat, snacks and desserts, and she knew nobody invited her to this feast and this house but she was starving. She took another look at the table trying to find an excuse to refuse to eat.

Dante raised his eyes to her. “Little Witch, we have to go in fifteen minutes. If you want to eat, just sit. If not, still sit because it's annoying.”

Her eyes found his as she quietly said, “They are watching…”

Dante looked to the side and after a sigh, waved his hand to his dolls, letting them know they were free to go.

Finally Violette took a seat, however she had no idea where to start. There were too many options, and every one looked better than the other.

“We didn't have a chance to talk about what happened in the…umm, *dream*.” She started, reaching for the plate full of mashed potato.

Dante looked apathetic but Violette knew him enough to feel his coldness already starting to steal up under his skin.

“What were you doing when I followed the Queen?” she asked.

“Does it matter?”

“You look too happy today, it's very unusual. What did you do?”

“I didn't do anything. I couldn't do anything even if I wanted to. It was a dream, Little Witch. Whatever we do there will never have an effect on the present,” he said earnestly.

Violette took a bite of cheese.

“Fine…But I saw you there. In the castle. I know you–” she paused, pressing her fork to the potato on the plate. “That servant…They will not find her, right?”

Dante's gaze fixated on her, his eyes as cold as a blade of knife near his plate. Violette didn't raise her eyes, taking his silence as *yes*.

“What I'm thinking about is…” she continued, “it seems like you knew that place very well.”

At last, she let her eyes meet his. His smile vanished, his loose posture gone; he now looked as if she was a living threat to his existence.

“Did you live there?” she asked, tugging the fork in her hand over the plate.

“Perhaps.” A dry response.

“Were you working for the King and Queen?”

“It's funny how you think I will answer you on this.” Finally a subtle smile lightened up his face. What game was he playing with her?

“Alright, then another question. Not personal. What kind of kingdom was it?”

“You don't know this one. It doesn't exist anymore.” His back drowned into the seat back as he sipped the wine.

Her eyes didn't leave him. “Why? What happened?”

“Something horrendous. But the royal family is the only one who is to blame, so don't think about it much. Everyone got what they deserved.”

Violette's gaze darkened, the lashes sank down and a sullen took its place on her face. As much as Dante looked unruffled and was really careless with his words, covering any emotions that would indicate a sadness or anything slightly related to it, she felt like what happened there would deeply hit her heart.

The King and the Queen hadn't seemed evil enough to cause something truly disastrous. They tried to fix the problem with the said monster, even if the idea with the ball wasn't what they really needed, at least they tried to bring hope to people's hearts. Violette knew how important it was to keep believing in the better and how it can save your soul in the hardest time of your life. Even if they failed their kingdom, even if their attempts didn't help to fight the monster, did they deserve punishment for it?

Violette's mind wandered in the clouds until she finally let out a new question, “You truly think so? That…they got what they deserve?”

“I see what you're doing.” Dante's eyes flickered with iciness. “Don't try to analyze me. You want to know if I sympathize with them or anyone who has lived there, if I have a heart. My sincere advice – don't.”

Despite his sharp voice Violette wasn't about to stop. She was wondering about what was going on in his head, about the person he is, since they stepped on this land and she couldn't stand that he was always finding his way out of the conversation.

“Maybe if you'd be less secretive, I wouldn't resort to this. I'm trying to understand you.” Their gazes locked, the line drew between her brows, lips pressed together.

All of Dante's body tightened, his eyes have not lost their former coldness.

“I didn't ask you for it.” The sound that left his mouth made her nearly shrink.

“I'm just trying to have a conversation,” she pressed.

“Keep it to yourself.”

An unpleasant tension stuck in the air for a few seconds before the chair scraped the floor and Dante roughly left the table.

And with words “We should go” he strode out the room, leaving Violette sitting alone. She felt a sour aftertaste and holding to this feeling, she drew to the door – they had a long night ahead.

CHAPTER 20

QUITE UNUSUAL INVITATION



The stars hung bright in the sky, the cold air filling Violette's lungs and the warm light of the lantern lightning up her and Dante’s silhouettes as they made their way through the trees.

They didn't talk all the way to the crypt. The sound of boots, squeaking in the thin layer of snow, filled the silence between them instead. Whatever good mood Dante had in the beginning of the evening had disappeared and it didn't look like it was coming back any time soon.

Not much time passed until their feet crossed the threshold of the crypt they had already visited a few moons ago. Fate seemed to be laughing at them as they got to the point they'd started from.

Nothing had changed since they left this place – the same cold, dark walls, the same painting of the Queen, the same stone grave in the center of the room, covered in the thick layer of dust.

Dante stalked forward and passed the lantern to Violette.

“Hold this,” the first words that came out of his mouth since their conversation in the dining room. The harshness still lingered in his tone.

Pressing hands onto the stone surface, he pushed the grave cover. The loud sound of a stone moving from its place echoed throughout the hall, awakening every inch of the crypt. Violette with caution came closer and peeked in.

Empty.

It was empty. No sign of someone being there. No body. No bones. Nothing.

It didn't look like someone ever was in this grave.

All color from Dante's face vanished. He stood there, unusually still, with his eyes fixed on the empty grave. Then he finally breathed a curse into the air.

His restraint was impressive for someone whose hopes crashed in a moment of time. He shut his eyes, gripping the edges of the open grave, and bowed his head.

Violette took a glance at him before tracing to the wall. She sat on the ground and leaned on the cold wall, thinking how stupid her head was to get herself involved in all of this mess. After all, the Queen indeed tricked them as it should've been expected.

A sigh released from her throat, her eyes trailing the pattern of the ceiling, following it to the portrait. The Queen was indeed a beautiful woman, however the more she looked at her the more she started to realize she wasn't as kind as she seemed at first sight. Her blue eyes weren't as kind as cunning. Her soft smile wasn't that innocent either, and her overall expression was more arrogant than admiring. Could it be true or Violette just started to see her not as a queen but a big obstacle who kept her away from the cure for her father, she couldn't say.

Standing up, she came closer to the painting, scrutinizing it very carefully, from the bottom to the top. And then it hit her like thunder – the stone on her crown looked slightly different than the whole painting.

“Dante,” she let out brightly. “Can you lift me up?”

He drew a side glance her way, his face twisted with confusion.

“Don't ask, just help me,” she said.

He didn't ask questions, instead he stalked closer. She felt his breath above her head as he put his hands on her waist and then easily lifted her into the air so she was able to reach the stone in the center of the crown. It was weakly shining in the dark, almost unnoticeable to the naked eye. Violette held out her hand, plucking it out, leaving a small pit in the painting.

Then her feet reached the ground. Her gaze studied the stone before holding it up to the vampire.

“It was here all along,” she gasped.

“I'm impressed,” he admitted. “I was starting to think you just sought a reason to keep me closer.”

Violette speared him with a disapproving look.

“By the way, you don't need a reason. You can just ask.” The mischief got back to his voice as he flashed his dimple at her. He lifted the moonstone into the air to examine in the light of a lantern, its beautiful effulgence playfully shimmering with blue and white hues. Then Dante lowered the stone, lost in his thoughts.

Violette broke the silence, “Should we look for another riddle or some other kind of clue?” She looked around.

“The Queen was…” Dante tried to find a word to make it sound right. “A complicated person. She wasn’t really kind to others.” He eyed Violette. “I think there's no more prompts anymore. She gave us riddles before – consider this her gesture of goodwill. It will only get harder.”

“Such nonsense,” she burst out. “What are we supposed to do with a damn stone? How do we know what it means and what we should do next?”

“I don't think that's something she was worrying about,” he voiced simply, keeping his eyes on the stone in his hand. Violette did the same.

It was such a tosh! What should they do now? Where to go? How would the stone help them to take off Dante's mask? There should be, at least, something that could guide them in the right direction. A little clue.

A thought sparkled in Violette's head.

“Wait! What about that letter she left you? The one you threw away last time we were here. Maybe there's some kind of word play or something like that.”

“There was no important information for us,” he said and after a pause he added, “It was a personal message.”

“What? Something like ‘Ha! Ha! Gotcha!’?”

His face lightened up with an approving smile. “You are not far away from the truth.”

“Then she is incredibly pitiful,” she commented at last.

Dante didn't say anything else, except asking Violette to save the moonstone in her bag, which he gave her back before the trip. They were ready to leave the crypt, after all they had nothing else to find here. Wondering about their next move was good food for thought, since they were stuck at a dead end.

But just before the exit of the crypt Violette bumped into Dante’s hand as he stopped her.

“We have guests,” a rigor painted his voice. “Stay here.”

She looked behind his hand; her eyes found a woman sitting on one of the graves, as she could guess by Dante's warning, unlikely a human.

“Don't show yourself,” he ordered and as she nodded he left her alone.

Violette took a step back and hid behind the wall. She didn't want to meet another vampire so she'd finally decided to listen to Dante's words and wait for him where he told her, although her mind was curious as to who that woman was and what brought her here. The voices brushed her ear: one belonged undeniably to Dante, another was insinuating and supercilious, however she couldn't figure out what the conversation was about. She pressed her back to the stone wall, and stood closer to the entrance, trying to catch a single word.

“Good evening, Dante. Good to see you after so many years,” the woman said through a wide smile and crossed her legs. Her voice carried an unmistakable note of gloating.

“Can't say the same,” Dante grumbled. “What are you doing here, Rela?”

“Just here to deliver a message,” she flipped her chestnut hair, “from Caidas. He wants to see you. Immediately.”

“Tell him I do not accept invitations at the moment. Maybe, in the future, around a few hundred years,” he said and threw his head back.

The face of the woman suddenly changed – a serious expression took its place. Her voice became much sharper and colder. “This is not an invitation. It's an order.”

Dante sulked. “Caidas can order *you*. Not me.”

This earned him a loud snort like she wasn't bothered with his answer.

“I said what I said. You know it's inevitable.” Rela stood up with ease and shook the snow from her burgundy skirt.

“Oh, and one more thing,” she added as she drew steps towards the forest. “Your human friend, who is hiding in the crypt, can come with you.” Violette pricked up her ears, but didn't stick her head out. “You're not going to come to Caidas without a gift, right?”

Dante's features sharpened but he remained silent as Rela disappeared in the darkness of the night.

Violette paced to him as soon as she didn't see any peril. His gaze still lingered in the direction where the woman disappeared.

“Is everything…alright?” She inched carefully.

He faced her with his back but she could feel the disgruntlement in the way his body tensed. The woman wasn't a welcome guest to him and even if Violette didn't know what exactly her words meant she could guess Dante didn't like it. In fact, she didn't remember him to be so sharp and gloomy, even more than during their conversation earlier this evening.

“Not exactly,” he sighed and then finally turned his face to her.

Despite not hearing everything well, it was clear someone important wanted to see Dante and he was, to put it mildly, not excited by this news. She'd tried to hold the name she heard in her head.

“Who is Caidas?” she asked curiously as Dante wasn't quick to explain.

The vampire exhaled and sat on the nearest stone grave, propping up his temple with fingers. His gaze was drawn to Violette.

“Something like a king for vampires.”

“A king?” She dazed. “Vampires have a king?”

“There's many more vampires than you think and they need a ruler to… not evoke *chaos*,” he explained.

“Never thought vampires have their own…” she stuttered.

“Kingdom? Yes, they have.” He waved, not being satisfied with that fact either. “Caidas there's like some kind of,” he paused trying to choose the right word, “a protector. His duty as he says is protecting humans from vampires.”

“Protecting humans?” The news that vampires had their own kingdom was not as astonishing as the fact that their ruler was thinking about human safety. Such nonsense to hear! Never in her life she'd think vampires cared about someone else except themselves. “Sounds…strange for a vampire. Or he is…Is he a vampire at all?”

“Yes. The oldest.”

“The oldest vampire in the world?” She raised her brows, her eyes sparkling.

Dante nodded.

“He must be incredibly old. Do you know how much?”

Violette's curiosity was beyond worrying very often, it was the thing she was very scared about, but she couldn't fight it.

Dante's forehead wrinkled. “Never tried to fill my head with such information. But I think he is as old as the ancient forgotten stories.”

Violette tried to imagine Caidas and her mind came off with an image of an old wrinkled bony man that looked more like something scary and totally unhuman than the beautiful vampire Dante was. Something she'd better never meet in her life.

She reflected about it, voicing, “It is hard to believe a vampire thinks about humans' well-being. What is his interest in it?”

“He believes everything has to have a balance,” Dante said. “He knows about humans and immortal life like no one else. And thinks the best way to survive is to be in harmony with mortals. He came up with rules for vampires to follow and they honor them like laws.”

“If there are laws, do they have punishments for not following them?” A stupid question to ask, she realized only after voicing it.

“Yes, that's why vampires are not in a hurry to break them.” He shrugged and with such conversation Violette noticed how Dante's features softened and he no longer looked irritated.

She fixed her gaze on his face, on the covered part of it.

“Did you break the rules?” It wasn't really careful of her but this question bothered her mind for a long time.

Dante raised his eyes to her with a slightly arched brow.

“I mean…” She tentatively circled her finger around her jaw, hinting about his mask.

“I've never been part of his squad to break the rules to begin with,” he said and then stood up. “Come,” he called and started to make his way back into the forest.

Violette blinked, pondering what he meant, her gaze shifted back to the crypt towering over the snowy ground. The symbol on the roof kept her interest until she heard his voice again.

Taking a last glimpse of the tracery on the stone, she rushed to catch up with Dante as he had already started to disappear between the trees.

“What happens with vampires who break the rules?” She puffed, moving away a branch in her path and ducking down, whereas Dante was ambling unbothered by anything in his way.

“Nobody knows exactly. But I am a great example of what happens with vampires who don't listen to Caidas. So they won't dare to disobey the laws if they want to stay the way they are, saving all their privileges.”

“The privileges?” Violette dodged another spruce branch.

“Vampires can't be a part of the human world, they don't belong there. Most of them don't respect or perceive people like something important or clever. Caidas gives them an opportunity to have a home, living among the same as them. Nobody wants to be exiled and live their life far beyond.”

“And yet, you do,” she pointed out.

A little smug smile touched his face as he looked at her, just as he always did when she tried to analyze him, as if her attempts were too pathetic and pointless.

“I still don't know what exactly you did,” she noted, side-eyeing the black mask covering his mouth, her gaze lingering on its sharp, threatening edges. “Maybe you are not a part of his court, but you definitely did something to deserve it.”

She didn't know but she could guess, however she wanted to hear it directly from him. Perhaps there was something she didn't know. Her little puzzle could never be solved as she still didn't have a lot of important pieces, without which she couldn't see the true image.

"Want to guess?” he aired, not looking at her.

Violette lowered her gaze to the ground, too timid to look at him or pretend it's something regular to ask.

“Did you kill many people?” she asked cautiously and then shot a glance at him.

A cold answer followed her question, “I did.”

He didn't turn his sight at her, walking with his head straight. An unreadable expression took place on his face, not a muscle moved, Violette believed he wasn't even blinking. It wasn't even coldness or thoughtfulness, he didn't look like he tried to distance himself from her, rather he just locked up his emotions or…could it be, he didn't feel them at all? Either way, Violette kept staring at him. She studied his face in the light of the antique street lanterns, not as much trying to figure out what he was feeling but amazed by his declaration. And to her own surprise she wasn't much horrified by his words as dazed that he didn't try to play his way out of this conversation. Mixed feelings veiled her heart: an angst and turmoil and yet, Dante looked even more inscrutable and dark in this light. Her lips slightly parted.

Whatever expression she had, Dante probably took it as fright and finally turned his gaze to her. The shadow of his tall figure fell onto her

face.

“Are you scared?” A ghost of a smile appeared on his face but his voice still sounded serious.

“No. Not actually,” she confessed.

And to her own surprise it was true. She said it so easily, without a second thought. She wasn't scared, at least, not like she thought she'd be. Maybe she was just prepared for an answer like this – she couldn't find another explanation. She knew he killed the servant in the past, he was imprisoned in the mask covering his face, of course, she was ready to hear he did something horrible. That made sense, however, somehow she didn't know how to react to this. She knew she was speaking with a dangerous vampire and still didn't feel like he was dangerous to her, and not because he couldn't bite her but she just couldn't imagine him hurting her, even if it was a naive thing to think.

“That woman,” she kept getting bolder, “seemed to be happy to disappoint you. It didn't seem like she liked you at all.”

“Vampires don't like anyone. Especially other vampires.” His shoulders loosened.

“Then why do they live together?”

“Because they don't like people even more.”

Violette tried to evaluate his words and then said, “I don't quite believe you.”

“Little Witch, I am a vampire who was punished with a mask and who doesn't live with other vampires. Who would want to hang out with me? Of course, except you. You rather enjoy my company,” he taunted, the corners of his eyes twitched upwards.

“Hooey!” she spat out.

He bolted her a satisfying smirk as if it was something rather funny how she'd tried to deny the simple fact to him.

“They might not like you because of your self-centeredness,” she calmly stated.

“All vampires are slightly selfish,” Dante said earnestly.

“And you outdo all of them, right?”

He chuckled under his breath, bowing his head to the ground.

“Look, I'm not bothered if some vampires don't like me. I actually don't care about them and would like not to meet any of them ever again. I'd

gladly refuse this sweet little invitation of Caidas and forget all about it. Believe me, I don't want to go there any less than you or any human.”

“I presume, you're trying to say that we should accept his invitation?”

“If we won't come – he'll come for us. It's better to say a few greetings to him first.”

“And where are we going?” she finished abruptly as her cloak got caught by a tree branch and she stopped to release it from the annoying stick.

“To the Vampire Kingdom.”

The fabric of the cloak slipped through her fingers, leaving Violette flabbergasted. The pinch between her brows became clearer.

“I hope I misheard you. Don't want to sound rude but are you out of your mind?”

He looked over his shoulder, not showing any concern, well, like almost all the time.

“I will remind you because maybe you forgot but I am a human. You know. The mortal,” she pressed.

“You have nothing to worry about.” Then he added after a little pause, “Pretty much.”

It didn't sound relieving or earnest, not for her, not for any human who was about to go into the heart of a vampire lair. And he surely understood it by her worrying expression.

“As I said, we have rules over there. Vampires indeed do not respect people but they respect the laws and other vampires, even if they don't really like them. If a human was claimed by one vampire the other can't do anything about it. It's become forbidden,” he tried to explain. “A claimed person belongs only to the one and others can't encroach on them.”

Violette didn't like how it sounded.

“You are talking about people like they are property,” disgust surged in her voice, her nose bridge creasing.

“Welcome to the vampire world.” He threw his head back and continued the walk. “A human's voice means nothing there, they're just toys in their bloody hands,” he said with an impassible tone.

Violette grimaced.

“You broke the rules and don't live with them, where's a guarantee they will respect you? Respect me?”

“It's not about respect. At least not to me. But they won't go against these rules. It's too risky. As I said, nobody wants to be an outlaw.”

Violette's face turned bleak. She lowered her eyes to the snowy ground thinking about everything Dante said. She knew vampires were no good but she couldn't believe they could be so arrogant to claim people as if they’re something that can belong to someone. It can't be true.

“They were humans once…” she said with disbelief, bitterness filled her voice.

“They don't remember how it is to be a human.”

CHAPTER 21

IN THE VAMPIRE LAIR



Snowflakes fell softly on Violette's eyelashes. The shoulders of her cloak were dusted with snow and the cold, giving her cheeks a slight rosy blush, making her thankful that she'd worn the long gloves today.

As they passed an empty snowy clearing they came to two tilted weeping willows bearing a resemblance to an arch, further – a land of bones and stones.

Old stone graves looked like they belonged to someone who died a long time ago, long before this kingdom started blooming. Violette's gaze was following each grave they passed; Most of them didn't have anything on them except for the name and year of death. Almost every stone shared the same date, sometimes in a span of a year or two. The stories which died here and were put in the ground were more than two hundred years old.

Dante was making his way to the end of the cemetery, not paying attention to any of the stones like they weren't here at all.

Each grave was graced with a glorious angel statue. Some wield swords, others were depicted in tears, a few were crowned with flowers. One angel was kneeling, resting on his sword with his head.

Violette took a glimpse of the inscriptions engraved on stone: *To a guardian and protector who…* as she passed by. She didn't discern the second part.

Another winged warrior, with a chalice raised up, was guarding a stone with the words *To a dreamer who was never meant to make it*. Gone again.

Next one was praying to the snow beneath. All of them were looking down. Not to the stars. But into the cold ground.

As they got to the end of the graveyard, Dante stopped and reached for something under the thin layer of snow on the ground. He pulled the doorknob, opening an old stone door, leading somewhere down. As Violette already guessed, it was an entrance to the realm of the dead souls – *vampires*.

“It doesn't look promising…” Worry clouded her features.

“Promising? It is an entrance to the place where vampires live, what were you expecting?” A line between his brows formed as he stood up.

Violette looked into the darkness hidden behind the stone doors.

“I don't know…” She faltered. “I mean, where does it lead to? I didn't think the Vampire Kingdom was literally *underground*.”

“Vampires can't live under the sun. Where else did you think they live?”

It was a reasonable question but Violette hadn't actually thought about it before, though the underground definitely wasn't in the way. She had grasped that vampires have their own kingdom only a few hours ago, after all.

“I don't know, maybe a place where it is always night and magic holds the darkness all day long,” she suggested.

“Vampires don't have such magic, we are not wizards. I don't know if it's even possible.”

“Then, in a castle with fully closed windows. I don't know!” Violette shrugged, chaotically waving her hands. “Somewhere where it is not that… deep.”

He looked at her intimidatingly before making a step down the stairs.

“Are you coming?”

Violette’s mouth went dry. She didn't like the secret room in the crypt which was definitely not that deep in the ground and this looked more scary than meeting a bunk of vampires.

“Is there even enough air?” she let out uncertainly.

He cocked his head to the side and extended his hand, inviting her with him. She fell silent, looking at his palm facing her.

“I want you to remember,” Dante remarked, “do not trust any vampire there and do not accept any of their help.” His eyes narrowed and brows

knitted. The caution in his words sounded not like one more joke, he was more than serious.

Violette raised her eyes to his and reached out her hand to accept his offer when he flinched his hand, letting her stagger.

“As I said, do not trust *any* vampire,” his mouth twitched.

“Really?” She snorted. “We haven't even gone down yet.”

“Never let your guard down,” he said as he bent his head to the side with a smile on his face, offering her his hand again.

“No, thank you. You'll not trick me again.” She walked past him, pushing him aside, and proudly tipped her head.

Dante stumbled slightly, his smile growing even more satisfied as his eyes followed her back.



IT WAS cold and empty down here recalling the entrance to an ancient tomb, and perhaps it was so. The stairs didn't go too deep and ended abruptly.

Violette's lips parted as her foot reached the stone ground, wondering about the place they were. It looked like a cave, rather than a beautiful kingdom, though the road led somewhere further. And before she made another step, Dante's voice hit her ear.

“Wait.”

He took his coat off and threw it over her shoulders.

“What is that for?” She lowered her eyes to the dark blue fabric.

“To muffle your human scent. They'll still be able to smell it, but at least it won't drive them crazy.”

“Drive them crazy?” She winced.

“It's possible that you might meet a hungry vampire.”

Violette's legs staggered and her brows pulled down. Her fingers nervously gripped the edges of the coat's collar.

“Don't worry, you are in no danger. If you stay close and don't stick your nose in everything like you usually like to do. Moreover, this will give them a sign you're already claimed.”

“Claimed? I'm not a thing,” Violette spat.

“Don't forget, for most vampires people are just prey, Little Witch. No offense but you are just a toy to claim for them.”

“So gallant,” she grumbled as she drew a step but Dante stopped her again.

“Stick with me, don't lag behind and don't get ahead of yourself,” he warned.

Violette felt the words *Save your curiosity for another time* dance on the tip of his tongue, however he didn't let them out. She nodded.

They had walked quite a bit when another staircase appeared in front. Again, deeper in the underground. Violette hardly swallowed.

A dark corridor, surrounded by the immense void on the one side and a cold wall on the other. No handrails and the steps seemed extremely unreliable and flimsy. One wrong step and the Valley of Enchanted Stories would be replenished with a new tragic tale.

In a moment, Dante extended his hand in front of Violette just as a dark flock of bats fluttered past their faces. Her shriek echoed from the stone walls and she took a sharp step back and suddenly her feet no longer felt the ground beneath them. And she'd have fallen if Dante didn't reach for her hand, gripping his fingers tight into her wrist. Pulling her towards himself, his hands held her waist. Violette pressed herself tight against his chest, her heart panting, lump stuck in her throat.

Clinging to the vampire, her eyes fell down as horror crossed her face – several stones fell straight down into a dark hole where, apparently, there was no bottom at all. Or it was so deep down that she couldn't even hear when the stones touched the ground.

“When I said you are in no danger, I meant vampires. At this rate, you'll be dead before we even meet one,” Dante said coldly and removed his hands from her.

Violette swallowed, her gaze trailed down again. As her attention got back, she found herself still holding onto Dante's arm, her nails firmly digging into his shirt. Surprisingly he didn't say a word, however she let him go without giving him a chance to mock her for it later.

They entered through a semicircular archway and suddenly everything around felt more alive, brighter. The light walls were traced with an

intricate helix folding in a distinctive pattern. The impossibly ornate candelabras along the way kept the corridor in a crepuscular light.

Violette's silhouette flashed in one of the top rounded mullioned windows, reaching to the ceiling. Her eyes fell to the floor as her black boots were stepping on the wine carpet as if drenched in blood, however under the stripes of light it seemed brighter, nearly berry red.

The air seemed quite suffocating, although she surmised it was because she knew who exactly lives in these walls and yet, there was no vampire in sight. They turned into another same looking hallway. This place was not as disheartening as she could imagine, especially compared to the dark stone hallway before. The passage they were walking through reminded her of a big manor or perhaps, a castle.

Their steps halted when the pale face of a woman with auburn wavy hair popped up in front of them. Her fangs flashed in the candlelight like the moon in the sky and her scarlet lips twisted in a delighted smile.

“Oh, look who is here,” a velvet voice slipped out her mouth.

Dante drew an irritated sigh. “This will be a long night.”

Violette glanced over his shoulder, and Dante immediately grabbed her hand with tension as a reminder to not stand out.

“Didn't think you missed us.” The woman's voice sounded like wine, the same way intoxicating and flirtatious.

“Not in a thousand years,” the apathetic words came out of his mouth.

He made a step but the woman didn't let him go further.

“Move away,” he commanded but she only smiled more, trying to peer at Violette over his obscuring figure.

“I didn't say hi to your friend yet,” she nearly sang.

Violette's eyes darted around.

“She'll live.” Dante's jaw clenched.

“I insist. I don't want to seem ignorant to our guest.” The woman inclined her head to the side staring at Violette, which only made her frown.

In one simple and quick move she appeared at Dante's back, looking at the girl as if appraising her. Her fingers grabbed the sleeve of the dark coat embroidered with black threads, weighing on Violette’s shoulders.

Violette pulled back as if the woman was contagious, as though her simple gesture was a threat, however she was just studying the fabric.

Dante's hand tightened around Violette's wrist, pulling her closer to himself.

“We're in a hurry,” he stated as Violette lowered her head avoiding the uncomfortably curious gaze of the woman. She would bet her life her eyes weren't even blinking.

“I know. Rela told me, everyone knows. Why do you think it's so empty here?”

Another head peeked around the corner.

“There you are!” The guy with cold eyes gaped at the young lady and then his eyes darted to the guests.

The stillness of his gaze made Violette's heart quiver like she just touched ice with her fingertips; she could feel his bloodthirstiness. She flinched, Dante could feel it the way he glanced over. Her nails dug in his palm but before any of the vampires continued their speech he backed up, shielding her with his back.

“Caidas waits for us. I wouldn’t want to make him angry,” he said callously, his tone not accepting any excuses.

The smile on the woman's face faded but the eyes of the young man shone in the light with silver, a threat, when he glared at Violette again. She felt like someone took her jacket away and placed her in the middle of a frozen garden.

“So sad,” the guy purred and then hugging the woman by her shoulder, they turned around, walking away down the hallway.

Violette would sigh with relief if her breath hadn't stuck in her lungs. She was almost numb. She couldn't even imagine it would affect her that much. At that moment, she felt so tiny and insignificant that she couldn't even bring herself to hide it.

Dante glanced at her again. He didn't say anything, instead he squeezed her hand. Violette's eyes twinkled at him, the brows arched in bewilderment, her lips parted just a bit before pressing together tight and then she turned away, deciding to share the same silence, instead of saying anything.

Their steps were leading them deeper through the hallway, which seemed to be endless. The walls repeated the same patterns, the same light escorted them all the way. Violette would start thinking they were rambling in circles if her eyes didn't lay on the two tall vampires appearing ahead.

Dante noticeably tensed, however his face remained calmer than the water. He looked rather bored but she knew for sure he wasn't happy to be here. She might think he'd sooner be anywhere else, for whatever reason it was.

One of the vampires with shoulder-length red hair traced his sight to them, while talking to his friend.

The closer they were coming the wider his smile grew. Violette felt her skin prickling as her eyes met his vicious smirk. She bowed her head to the floor, wishing to blend with the walls. For the first time she was ready to listen to Dante's instructions and be quiet without any complaints.

“Dante,” the vampire drawled with mirth in his voice. “What did we do to deserve such a visit?”

“Sinver, Verevor, I hoped such rogues would be already hunting up,” he said carelessly, his disaffection soared in the air.

“We are on our way. Want with us?” The blond vampire bared his teeth, hinting at his inability to really ‘hunt’ but Dante stayed still. In fact, he looked like he heard the oldest joke that walked this world.

And as much as Violette would like to stay invisible in the moment, she wasn't successful in this.

One of the vampires peered at her brazenly. “You brought a snack?”

Her face stranded in disgust, fighting the desire to respond. Dante remained static, although she felt how his muscles tightened.

“Certainly not for you,” he let out and pulled her closer by the waist.

Violette shrunk into herself.

“Don't be scared, pet, we don't bite.” The other vampire grinned.

“I'm not scared of two idiots,” Violette finally stood up, drawing back from Dante. The concern or traces of fear disappeared in seconds as soon as the last spoke. “And I have a name. Calling others *pets* is extremely disrespectful.”

“But I don't want to mislead you and make you think I respect you,” the red-haired vampire spoke again, the young man with a vicious smile. Now he looked half offended as if he stepped on some nasty thing with his shoe.

“You are disgusting.” Violette brows twisted together.

He frowned. “Dante, tame your little toy.”

Violette was nearing her breaking point, her eyes twitching and her hand clenched into a fist. Just as she was about to speak, Dante interrupted.

“You can say it directly to her. She has excellent hearing,” his voice carried a weight of condemnation.

“She must learn to respect others,” the vampire again ignored Violette as if she wasn't standing right in front of him.

“How ironic because I was thinking I'm too kind to you actually. The one who needs to learn respect here is you,” Violette spoke valiantly and proudly tilted her chin.

Sinver pinched the bridge of his nose, clearly irritated by her behavior, meanwhile the other vampire seemed to enjoy this conversation.

“Oh, she's daring. I like it,” the blond guy butted in.

“I might remind you that you are a human in the Vampire Kingdom,” Sinver pointed out.

Meanwhile Dante leaned closer to Violette and whispered to her, “If you want to slap his face I will highly approve of it and will pretend it didn't happen.” The corners of his mouth pulled up.

Violette darted her gaze to him but it didn't make her laugh, she was irritated and wanted to leave this company as soon as possible.

“So,” Dante cleared his throat, putting his hand on her shoulder. “It was *not* nice to meet you, and *not* nice to talk with you, but we must leave. We have much other business before the sunset,” he finished, taking her by the hand and pushing the vampires to the side, heading forward.

Violette glared at the red-haired vampire with malice – he shared that feeling.

“They are hideous,” she whispered, scowling.

“They are,” Dante simply confirmed.

He turned out to be right, these vampires definitely had no respect for any other kind of living beings. They were rude and overbearing. It was hard to accept it but that is exactly what Dante warned her about and it felt sickening. She couldn't believe someone would behave like this with her or with any other human, just like they owned her. She was nothing more than a pretty doll who was expected to do anything they wanted and she must either say what they want or just shut her mouth. Hard to believe these night demons once were humans – humanity left their souls a long time ago.

Violette started to believe the corridor seemed to be a maze. The same walls, the same candelabra and windows with maroon drapes with no view except of the blackness outside.

She felt the necessity to fill the silence formed between them. These walls were putting pressure on her, the air seemed heavy and the awkwardness she felt only grew inside her.

“They don't like you,” Violette stated clumsily.

Dante speared her with a withering look as if she said the most obvious thing.

“You don't like me either,” he responded simply.

“It's different. I have reasons.”

“Who said they don't?”

"What are the reasons then?”

“You don't stop surprising me, Little Witch.” His head turned in her direction as she did the same, meeting her baffled stare. “Thinking I will actually give you an answer,” he finished the sentence and Violette brows dropped immediately. “If you stay this naive, it can end badly for you.”

“Why do all your words sound like a threat?” Her forehead pinched.

“I am the least you have to be wary of.”

“That is exactly what the most dangerous person would say to its prey,” she pointed out, the corners of her mouth raised up and nose wrinkled.

“You see yourself as prey?” His voice filled with teasing.

“I see *you* as a predator.”

“Ohh, you'd kill me with that statement if I wasn't already dead.”

Now Violette was the one who gave him a withering look, causing him an even more satisfied smile. Actually, of all of the vampires she saw today, Dante seemed to her the most innocent. Perhaps it was a deceptive impression because, after all, he was the only vampire with a mask on his mouth. But all of them were giving Violette an inescapable feeling like she was indeed in the predator's lair.

She suspected she had to be afraid of Dante the most and she had plenty of reasons for this, however, she'd be lying saying she doesn't feel somewhat safe around him. She knew that he wouldn't harm her, after all he needed her, and there would be no use of a dead person. He posed no danger to her, at least not now. Though, other vampires wouldn't be averse to feasting on her blood. How strange it was to realize that the most dangerous vampire hadn't inspired her with the proper fear as much as the other pawns. Maybe it was because of their sparkling teeth and the fact that they were flashing them at her. A thirst for the blood in their eyes was

brightening with red, truly terrifying as if they already knew which part of the body to sink their teeth in.

Finally their eyes met the red wooden door at the end of the hallway, surrounded by a few other smaller ones. Her ears caught Dante's deep breath, her eyes darted to him just before they stopped.

“Ready?” he asked, raising his hand to the door to knock.

Violette nodded, however she had no idea what she had to be ready for. She didn't know what to expect from this meeting, though Dante convinced her Caidas will definitely ask her about the connection they have and she must be a master of lies no matter what he'll ask her. He was a vampire, she couldn't imagine how she was supposed to trick him but it didn't seem as as she had any other options.

A concise thud on a wooden surface rang down the corridor and the door opened with a strained creak.

CHAPTER 22

THE LORD OF DEATH



The ample room was sinking into semidarkness. Two cupboards placed on both sides were stuffed with the books in shabby ancient spines: the language of each different, including runes and wondrous signs.

The creaking sound under Violette's boot made her perk up. It felt like they were entering an ancient place, which was not far from the truth. The silence of this room made it feel sacred, as if any sound could wake up what has been sleeping here for centuries.

The wide oak table stretched out in the center of the room, the dark broad-shouldered figure sitting at it, the gold sparks flickered in two brown eyes.

“Hello, Dante. I haven't seen you in a long time.” Violette felt a shiver down her hands right to the fingertips, as she’d never heard such a majestic but sepulchral voice. A hundred years of wisdom was concentrated in it.

“I would be glad to not see you even longer.” Dante's tone was replete with gloom.

“You are very gallant as usual.” The figure stood up so the candlelight illuminated his face and Violette at once could get a better look at the man. The deep ash brown hair neatly lay back, a few strands falling on the prominent forehead almost not touched with time: he looked not much older than Dante, a few years difference.

“Tell me one thing, please.” Amber eyes gaped at Dante. “What were you thinking about bringing a human to a vampire's lair?”

“I thought your vampires are trained dogs.” Dante carelessly looked away.

“Some of these vampires were your friends.”

“I don't actually remember such times,” he gruffed. “And don't pretend you wouldn't send someone to talk with her, I made it easier for you by bringing both of us.”

The Lord of Vampires bestowed Dante an intensive look, approaching Violette. Her eyes darted to Dante at a loss before they met Caidas’ again.

“Nice to meet you, Violette.” His hand reached for hers and his lips delicately pressed to her skin.

Dante rolled his eyes in silence.

Violette's gaze was glued to Caidas, she didn't feel fear like with other vampires, something different was in him: he didn't inspire a trust but he hadn't looked evil or vile, or…hungry. Furthermore, he definitely wasn't an old bag of bones as she could imagine. The man standing before her was tall, representative and gallant. Perhaps they shared a ten year age difference by look but centuries or even thousands by existence. And she could feel it. The ancientness was circling around his presence. The knowledge of centuries was living in his eyes, the sacred wisdom of many years. If she didn't feel Dante's vampirism when he was around, it was completely different with Caidas – she could sense something really powerful standing in front of her eyes. And yet, his features were much duller and the gaze seemed to be kinder and friendlier. There wasn't much mystery about him, until she looked into his eyes that close. He was mannerly and amiable, she'd never in her life could imagine the Lord of Vampires would be like this. But the thing to say – he definitely suited descriptions of vampires she read in the books. Courteous and charming. Not like Dante at all, with a somber flame darkness filled eyes.

“Can't say the same,” she said as politely as she could and then added to clear up things, “I mean, not like I was dreaming about meeting a bunch of vampires.”

The corners of Caidas' mouth curled in a soft smile but then it slowly faded away.

“Tell me, dear Violette, what connects you and this tremendous essence?”

“Nothing illicit. We are friends.” She fought a laugh at this thought. Her brows arched in conviction. If her eyes will not betray her, he might believe her words.

“Dante? Your friend?” He converted his gaze to the vampire and then laughed. “It's a hilarious joke, won't lie. But I would like to hear the truth.” His eyes flashed at the girl again, but this time his face was still and decisive.

Dante sighed by the wall, leaning towards one of the shelves. “I can really get offended, Caidas. Your low opinion of me truly hurts.” His hand dramatically fell on his chest, pretending to be deeply heartbroken. “Can't vampires and humans be friends now?”

“Vampires and humans, yes. But you and humans – no.”

Caidas' tone sent a tingle of goosebumps down Violette's spine.

“Well, he is improving his relationships with mortals,” she blurted sarcastically.

“Violette, look at me, please,” the old vampire asked softly.

“Don't. Look at him,” Dante said firmly, with an almost commanding tone. How different their voices sounded, the word placing. Caidas' voice wasn't as harsh and rough as Dante's, if choosing who to listen to, Violette would rather make a deal with Caidas. At least he gives the impression of an honorable gentleman.

She knew she probably shouldn't do it but she couldn't stand Dante's tone, as if she belonged to him, as if she'd listen to every word he'd say, so her pettiness made her raise her gaze to Caidas.

He looked carefully into her eyes, as if trying to read the hidden truth there. The silence settled in the room and then he let her. Violette turned her head to Dante, finding him with a satisfied smile on his lips. Of course this bloodsucking monster knew she wouldn't listen to him. That's why he said it to her – to prove to Caidas that she is completely sane. Her mind wasn't dazed by anyone's magic and wishes, all her actions were voluntary and now Caidas didn't have reason to think contrariwise.

“So, Dante didn't lure you,” Caidas stated and strolled back to the table but instead of sitting back in his chair, he leaned toward the table’s edges. “But it's even worse, it means you are doing whatever he wants of your own free will.”

“I do not do what Dante says to me,” she frowned.

“Oh right. I noticed.” He smiled. It seems as if he was polite with her but somehow Violette could feel that it wasn't sincere. He was trying to be nice to her so he could win her trust. He wanted answers. Little did he know that Violette swore to herself never to make such a mistake twice – to trust a vampire.

“Dante is helping me,” she voiced without hesitation. She needed to be more convincing. She felt the pressure Dante set on her with his stare.

“Helping?” Caidas looked at Dante nearly with aversion. His forehead wrinkled, one of the brows raised in a question like she said something ridiculously stupid.

“I am full of surprises.” Dante forced a smile.

“Oh, I know you are,” something bitter embraced the vampire's tone. “So what is he helping you with?” His attention got back to Violette again.

“Well, my father is ill and Dante kindly offered me his help to find a cure for him,” she stated.

“A cure?”

Violette nodded.

“And what does he want in return?” Caidas eyes slightly narrowed.

“He was just being nice. Is it not enough?”

“Not for someone like him.” He nearly frowned.

“A lot of years went by. Maybe I just changed,” Dante cut in, his voice appeased. “Couldn't I? Maybe I just want to be useful, to redeem myself.”

“Oh, no. Don't try to make me believe this. Such people as you do not change. We all know you do not care about others' feelings and well-being.”

“You are saying this like other vampires are not the same,” Dante grumbled.

“Do not think I will believe you would offer someone help just because you really wanted to do so.”

Dante annoyingly clicked with his tongue.

“This is what we'll do. I want to speak with our dear human guest alone for a few minutes,” Caidas said after some thought. “Dante, could you leave us?”

Dante's jaw tightened. Violette doubted he liked this idea but he left the room without a word. And before disappearing, he sent her a look, reminding to remember everything he said about Caidas and vampires before.

“Can't vampires hear through the walls?” Violette asked as they were left alone.

“Not through these,” Caidas stated calmly, a benevolent smile took its place on his face again. “This place is enchanted. Take a seat, please.”

She glanced at the chair and sat in it, her shoulders tensed up. “Do you value privacy? How old are you? You look not much older than Dante.”

“You're a curious girl.” He bowed his head to the side.

“Well, it's not a crime.”

“Or,” he continued, “you’re trying to engage me in conversation to divert my attention.”

“To fool the oldest vampire who'd walked this world? I am not that smart.”

“I don't think so.” The corners of his mouth turned up again. He was right with his assumption, sadly her tactic was revealed too quickly.

“Violette, don't be afraid that someone will hear you,” he went on, this time he leaned slightly in. His gaze was penetrating, as if trying to inspire trust in her soul. “You can tell me the truth. Dante will not do anything bad to you. Just tell me what he wants from you.”

“I told you everything you should know,” she asserted. At least, she wasn't lying. She definitely told him only that part he was *allowed* to know.

“You know, I don't think about my own needs, Violette. I am worried about others, that's my duty. Vampires and people both.” Caidas pushed off from the edge of the table and began to measure the room in steps. “My vampires learned how to live with people, controlling their urges for blood. Some of them even have friends in your world. But Dante…” He gazed back at Violette. “He's not like this. He doesn't have any respect for others, doesn't matter if they are humans or vampires or any other kind of person. He doesn't stick to the rules, never followed them, never really tried.”

Violette's hands fell onto her skirt after a deep sigh, revealing that his attempts were hopeless. “I'm sorry but I don't know what you want to hear from me, Caidas. I've already said all I had to.” Her eyes got back to his face as his figure stopped in front of her. He leaned forward, pressing his hands on the armrests of the chair on either side.

“Do you think I don't know he is trying to take his mask off?” In a moment Caidas' voice became sharper, Violette held her breath. “He knows

I know it as well. I just don't understand your role in this. I know you're somehow connected to all of it. You know the way to take it off, right?”

Violette’s gaze locked with his intensity and that's where she could say the purest truth. “No, I don't.”

The vampire fell silent for a moment. He made a deep sigh, before continuing more blandly, “Do you understand why he is imprisoned in that mask? Did you see any other vampire with something like this here?”

“No, but I didn't see a lot of them. Good for me, I guess,” she said, holding his gaze like it was a game of who will give up first and she definitely didn't plan to lose.

“Wonder why?” His voice dropped. “Dear Violette, you should understand that Dante is not like any other vampire here.” His back straightened, getting away from her – Violette's chest rose, feeling the relief.

“He is not a rebel. He is an *anchorite*. He had never actually sought control in his bloodlust. He doesn't care how much to take.” Caidas waved his hand and turned his back to her. His tone changed, “I tried to teach him, to help him, but it was useless. You can't really help a person who doesn't seek salvation.”

Violette drew a glance at him before quickly looking away. It was tiring – to sit here, to lie and try to prove she is just a clueless girl, especially when her opponent was an old vampire who definitely wasn't born yesterday. The air wrapping her was even more suffocating than his attempts to get the truth from her mouth.

“Caidas…” she breathed, “I understand you but I can't help you. Dante promised me something and it's very important.”

She still wasn't about to lay all the cards on the table, however she wanted to share some truth. Maybe it would make it believable after all.

“Don't be scared of him. I will take care of it, of you and your situation. Whatever he offered you, I can do it as well and even more. You have no reason to be afraid of Dante if you'll trust me.”

Afraid? She wasn't afraid of Dante. She disliked his view on a lot of things, he annoyed her – sometimes even too much – he was shameless and at the same time secretive, cold and aloof. But not scary and Gods know why.

“You don't understand.” Another brief moment of truth. She kept reminding herself to not overshare. Good thing he couldn't get into her mind, perhaps Dante wasn't much weaker than him: his protection was working just fine. “We made a vow. My hands are tied. Literally.”

Caidas fetched another sigh. He was probably fed up with this conversation as well as she.

Violette had felt something else – Caidas didn't just dislike Dante, he truly despised him. She couldn't get whatever was going on between them, between Dante and vampires, but this time she was confident that it's none of her business. Not here. Not now.

“Then tell me his plan, maybe I can–”

“No,” she said firmly, her shoulders straightened. “I will not risk it. I understand what you're doing, and your duties. Though, I wouldn't trust you either, not you, not Dante, not any other vampire. Maybe it's the only good advice he gave me. I'm sorry, but if you want to stop him – do it without my help. I'll do my part and then I'll go back home to my life, leaving all this behind.”

“Dante is a monster, Violette. Once you unleash him – you will not be able to control it.” Caidas took one last chance to convince her, “All he is driven by is thirst and hunger. While other vampires have limits, he does not.”

“And yet it doesn't change anything,” she swallowed. She understood Caidas' worries, she truly did, but all she could really concentrate on was her father. He needed that cure, *she* needed it.

Caidas pressed, “I can help you to get rid of him. To get rid of the deal, you will be free without making your part. And I will accomplish his part, how about that?”

“What do you mean?” She recoiled with caution, a drop of mistrust, her hands tensed around the armrests.

He walked around the wooden desk and pulled one of the shelves towards him. An oblong box of a cobalt color appeared in his hands. His fingers stroked along the velvet surface embossed with an intricate black tracery, opening the case.

Violette's gaze followed his every move as he pulled a familiar dagger out of the box. Her eyes narrowed. She'd already seen this shape of the

blade, and this handle strewn with rubies was familiar to her…*The Vampire Slayer.*

Her back straightened, a tingling sensation went down her spine.

“Where…How?” Her tongue twisted, her mind couldn't comprehend how it could be in Caidas' hands if it was in her bag.

“I see you know what it is, right?” His index finger ran along the steel blade of the dagger.

“Dante has the same,” she remarked.

“Right, he really does,” Caidas confirmed and then came closer, leaning back to the edge of the table. “Except *this* is a real one.”

“What do you mean?” She pulled her head back, a lack of trust pulsating in her temples.

“Dante has a copy, one that can't really kill a vampire.”

She frowned. “Does he know?”

“Of course he knows. He is not stupid to carry a dagger with himself that can kill him.”

“This was not what he told me.”

Caidas chuckled. “Does he ever share with you his plans or is honest with you?”

Violette decided not to answer.

Caidas' shoulders slightly relaxed as he continued, “Nobody knows I have the real one. It was part of our agreement, making Vampire Slayer unattainable. While everyone thinks Dante has it – it safely lays here. I wouldn't want a lethal vampire weapon to be in a human world.”

Violette raised her chin. “And why do you tell me all of it?”

“Because I want you to take it,” he said, his eyes found hers.

“Excuse me?” She backed up in the backrest of the chair.

He took two steps to her and offered her the dagger.

“I want you to save it for me. And,” he paused, “perhaps, to use it.”

Violette shot her gaze from the silver blade of the dagger to the vampire's face. Her pupils widened, brows knitted together, lips parting in confusion.

“I don't think I understand you,” Violette nearly whispered.

Caidas looked at her thoroughly – she fully understood what he meant.

“I think you do. I want you to kill Dante.” Words fell like a stone.

She pressed her back into the chair tightly, wishing to dissolve in it. “Are you insane?”

“Violette,” he started as he walked to the table and faced her again. “As I said, caring about others is my duty. I built a whole kingdom for vampires, set the rules. Here they are under my control. And Dante is a threat to everything I did to keep people safe, as well as giving vampires a life not much worse than the one they had as humans. Dante ruins everything he touches and I do not have the luxury of fixing it again and again. You will release a disaster in the world. But you also have a chance to not do it.” His eyes slid to the Vampire Slayer in his hand.

“I'm not a murderer,” Violette pressed, her eyes glaring.

“Of course you are not. You will be a savior.”

She didn't like how it sounded despite the meaning behind this word. She still saw it as just her taking life and she didn't want it, she knew she wasn't able to do such a crime.

“Maybe you're wrong about it,” the words fell from her lips. “I don't know him much, but it seems he just wants to be free. He's pretentious and apathetic, and some of his actions are questionable but I don't think he seeks destruction.”

“Violette, Dante will shred the peace into flinders. He's already broken and wants to break others as well. People like him find peace in ruining other lives, so they don't feel as lonely.”

Lonely. Dante seemed to relish solitude, it scarcely weighed on his soul. However if he truly wished to stay this way, he wouldn't be so eager to remove his mask. Maybe he wanted to be a part of this world. A *human* world.

“And you think killing him will be a good idea?” Violette frowned, she couldn't believe he was asking her about such a disgusting and soul dirtying offer.

“To save the lives of hundreds and thousands.”

Her nails dug into the chair’s arms. “No…It's not right. I don't want to.” The unbreakable decisiveness scattered throughout her voice.

“You said you can't break the deal. Killing him you will no longer be in debt, as well as it will help me, and save many people. This world can survive the death of one vampire, and believe me it will breathe a sigh of relief.”

She looked at him as he extended the hilt to her again. Her gaze dipped to her reflection, eyes glowing in the silver light of the blade.

“I just hope you're kind enough to understand me, because I already know you're smart enough,” he affirmed.

They definitely saw *kindness* differently.

“Why do other vampires hate Dante?” she finally asked. If they were so frank right now, she deserved to know the truth.

“They have their reasons. Believe me.”

Again a mystery that nobody cared to tell her. Everything she'd wanted to know ‘has a reason’, it started to get on her nerves.

Violette didn't think even for a moment. “I'm declining your offer,” she stated, raising her chin. She had no desire to change her mind.

Caidas disappointedly pressed his lips together. “I see,” he sighed. “Then just take it. Just in case.”

He probably thought she'd change her mind, so instead of taking it she looked right into his eyes, not moving even a muscle.

“I insist, please.”

Violette held his gaze for some more time, and when her eyes fell on the dagger, she finally held out her hand. She hardly had a choice: The Lord of Vampires himself was handing her the dagger. Her only consolation was a thought – taking it doesn't mean using it. Her hand twisted around the hilt, the big ruby shimmered in a dim light.

“I hope you will be thoughtful.”

Violette refrained from responding to his words, knowing exactly what he meant. Her hand with the dagger fell in her bag.

She once again looked at Caidas before opening the door.

“It was nice to talk to you, Violette. Take care of yourself,” Caidas said, a smile spread across his lips. Though, it didn't seem as friendly to her, even if he tried to make it so.

“Dante,” he shifted his gaze to the vampire who already appeared behind her, “Just want you to know – maybe I don't know what your plans are but either way you will face the consequences.”

Dante's gaze was intense, with menace burning in his eyes.

“Have a nice day,” Caidas added at last before the door of his office closed, leaving Violette and Dante staring at its wooden surface.

The silence hung in the air like a feather slowly drifting downward, reaching the floor before any words were finally spoken.

“Are you alright?” Dante wiped the silence off with his low voice.

Violette turned around and raised her eyes at him – he looked quite menacing, perhaps even worried. His eyes stared right into hers, waiting for an answer.

“Yes, everything is fine,” she managed to say.

“What did he want from you?”

“As we assumed he tried to find out what my business is with you. I assured him we're not up to no good and you're not making me do something mercenary. I don't think he believed it though.”

Dante nodded meaningfully. “Fine, we'll talk about it later. Now we need to get out of here – the sun can rise any moment.”

The way back was much easier: they met no vampires, except for one who didn't honor them with a conversation and disappeared into another hallway. They returned to the stairs that led upward – to the stars, the sky, freedom like Violette sees it.

Dante abruptly stopped halfway. And Violette, having walked just two steps up, turned around to see what made him do so. Right, the *sun*. She hadn't known how long they spent in the underground kingdom, or how long Caidas kept her in his office under interrogation. The journey wasn't too long there and back, but they'd already spent half the night searching for the moonstone and it was only a matter of time before a new day began. Besides, she suspected that they could have spent much more time with vampires than how it felt.

“I'll go first,” she blew and spun on her heel.

She opened the door with caution expecting sun rays like she was a vampire herself. To her amazement it was still dark: the first pastel colors only started to streak the sky with its hue and the stars were still there, waiting for them.

“It's still dark but the sunrise is coming,” she said and then froze, not expecting to feel Dante already near her. She didn't hear him. And almost squealed when she felt his breath above her head.

They stepped outside on wet ground covered in the thin layer of the snow. It was slightly warmer than the time they entered the Vampire Kingdom.

Violette looked around, then turned her head to Dante. “Do you think we can find somewhere to hide before the sun rises?”

“We'll go back to the manor,” he declared with such calm, like there was no problem at all.

“We can't go back, it's someone else's house. And isn't it too far away?” She wasn't sure where they were right now and how long it would take to return to the place they temporarily occupied.

“If we argue then we definitely won't make it in time,” he grumbled as he began to move.

“Wait!” she let out before catching up with him.

It was getting light. The sky began to turn to pink, red and purple paints. Violette continued to raise her eyes to the sky, sometimes shifting her gaze to Dante walking along.

The first rays of sunlight finally began to touch the earth's surface, awakening its nature.

“Maybe we can find another place? The sun has almost risen,” she gasped out as they passed two pain trees. She looked much more worried than him, as if the one who really was in danger was actually her.

“Vampires don't die because of the sun,” he finally said, his voice sounded quite derisive as if it was a stupid assumption to think the other way around. But then he added, “Not immediately. It's just painful to be under the sun, but I am not scared of a little pain. The longer you are in the sun, the more it hurts. It's tolerable for now.”

Violette looked at him – his face painted in serious colors, not a sign of worry or fear, though she assumed he could just hide it. Or he was indeed cold-hearted even to himself. It was hard to say. All she could do is just follow him through the woods.

CHAPTER 23

EVEN VAMPIRES HAVE A WEAKNESS



Bare tree branches let in the dull rays of the sun as they were trudging through the tall dense forest. Violette exhaled warm breath in the fresh morning air. The ground beneath became wetter from the melting snow, the drops of water sparkled on the surface of the tip of her boots.

She kept returning her gaze to Dante. The higher the sun was – the more dispirited he looked. His head bowed downward, however he remained speechless. Violette seemed to think he wasn't in a really good state: since the day she'd met him she saw many versions of him, he could be serious and untalkative, sometimes he was shamelessly bothersome, sometimes carefree but never lacking energy like now. He looked like a kid who was tired of walking after a long day spent outside.

“Dante,” she called him.

“Yes?” His attention seemed dull, but he answered her almost immediately, without raising his head or eyes.

“Are you okay?” Violette bent her head to the side.

“Concerned about me, Little Witch?” He smiled under his breath, though his voice came out rather raspy.

A shadow of worry crossed her features.

“So sweet of you,” Dante said softly, almost like his words weren't intended to rag on her.

“I need you alive not less than you need me,” she pointed out.

He lazily glanced at her from the corners of his eyes.

They walked some miles, crossing the clearing when she noticed Dante was practically sleeping on the go. She nudged her elbow at him, although it didn't have any effect – his eyes remained closed.

“Dante!” she exclaimed.

“Why are you yelling?” he drawled and slowly opened his eyes.

“Because you are sleeping.”

“I'm not. I just didn't want to answer.” His eyelids were again practically closed.

Her brows dipped. “You look bad.”

“Thank you, I was dreaming to hear that,” he mumbled.

“It's not funny. You are literally walking with closed eyes.” Her legs went still.

“I am not sleeping, the sun is just too bright to look at.”

She hardly believed he was telling her the truth – his voice reflected tiredness and his gaze blunted.

Finally they found themselves near the cemetery, it meant they were not far away from the mansion. She spun on her heels.

“Look, we–Dante!” she choked a gasp and fell silent, finding the vampire falling to the ground near the closest tree.

“Don't tell me you are dying,” she murmured angrily, trying to bring him to consciousness as she caught him before he reached the ground with his face. His weight immediately pulled her down.

“I knew you would find a way to get close to me,” he sang sleepily.

Violette raised her eyes to the sky, as though searching for patience. She made a few shaking steps before grumbling, “Ugh, you're heavy.”

“You are so generous with compliments today, Little Witch,” his voice sounded besotted, drunk, almost dreaming. Just until a painful groan tumbled out his mouth.

Violette didn't know where to go, the only idea that came to her mind was to get to the crypt since they were close and then…She didn't have a plan after actually, but Dante was struggling to stay upright and his mind seemed to convert into a fog. It turned out it wasn't just a ‘little pain’ as he stated.



THEY ENTERED the crypt once again. Perhaps they should stop coming here so often. At this point, Violette visited cemeteries on these lands much more often than her mother's grave; it had been a long time since she was there.

She helped Dante to sit on the floor near the painted column. He quietly sighed in pain, leaning against the wall. It wasn't that noticeable outside how tired and sickly he looked until now: his skin lost its color, and eyes grew dim, his eyelids half closed, looking like he just woke up after a not really sober night and it was not as fun as it was supposed to be.

Violette’s eyes betrayed concern, prompting him finally to speak.

“I'm not dying, Little Witch. Stop looking at me like this,” he murmured, taking off his coat and placing it under his back.

“Then stop acting this way.” Violette sat further from him. The ground beneath was hard and frigid.

Her gaze drew back to Dante, as he shut his eyes and threw his head back. She started pondering: what would happen if she hadn't led him here? If they continued the walk under the sun? And she didn't hesitate to ask him about it.

“I would not die, if you are thinking about it.” He opened his eyes and cocked his head in her direction. “The high vampires can't die because of the sun but their condition can turn very bad. It can take weeks or even months to recover.”

Violette’s brows raised as her shoulder strained.

“High vampires? Do you have…classifications?” she asked carefully, weighing her words.

“There's only two types of vampires – regular and high.”

“What is the difference?” Her curiosity was aroused.

“High vampires don't die that easily.” A smirk wrapped his lips.

She snorted. “That's all? I don't believe it's the only difference.” She had thousands of reasons to presume Dante was telling only half the truth, or doubt he was telling the truth at all.

He threw his head back with a soft sigh, not expecting any other answer from her.

“They are much stronger and enduring than other vampires,” he simply added.

“I presume you are a high vampire because you're too selfish for anything else.”

It earned her a relaxing smile from him.

She swayed on the spot, then brushed a strand of her hair behind her ear.

“You said you can be killed only by the Vampire Slayer,” Caidas words unintentionally flew over her mind. “What about other vampires? Can they be killed by something else?”

“You want me to tell you all vampire secrets so you could use it against them?” His voice brimmed with decisiveness.

Violette tilted her head to the side. “You hate them anyway, as well as they don't like you. So, what does it cost you to tell me their weaknesses?”

“You asked me so many questions, I see the only fair option is you telling me something about you,” he said all of sudden.

These words truly impressed her, her mouth nearly flew open. She couldn't believe Mr. Selfish would want to know something about her.

“I thought I am very easy to read to you,” she teased.

“Yes, you are not a mystery,” he confirmed serenely, “but I want to hear your point of view. It seems your father is a very important person to you.”

“He is.” Her gaze trailed to the marble ground and a soft smile embraced her lips, lightening her eyes as the memory of her father's face slowly emerged in her head. “I believe we’re actually two halves of the same soul. He's always by my side, giving me the best advice. He's wise, funny, and the reason I believe you can achieve anything if you don't give up. He’s the one who told me stories about this place. He’s a writer.” She raised her head with a gentle smile. “He read me all these fairytales when I was a child, taking inspiration from these stories and breathing a new life in them.” Violette's voice acquired new softly flowing tones. “I remember when I was little I always asked him to read the new chapters he’d written because I was too curious about what happened with his hero since the last night, did the knight defeat an evil sorcerer or not.” Her eyes sparkled with jollity as she dropped them back to the ground, reminiscing about her childhood. “And what amazes me now – he always listened to my ideas. He

used them in his stories, polished and improved but…he listened to me.” Her hands wrapped around her knees as her shoulders sagged. “He always valued my opinion, even when I was just a little kid. It means so much to me, especially now when I grew up,” suddenly she felt silent, realizing she was carried away with the memories. “Sorry, I went too much with it, I–”

“No, it's fine. He seems like a really great father,” Dante said and for the first time she saw a truly gentle smile on his face, its edges lost their sharpness for a moment. However, he looked very tired, half delirious as she could suppose. He didn't even try to joke or say something playful to annoy her. He was truly listening.

“Did he publish his books?”

“Oh yes. Some of his novels are quite popular on the Magic Lands. I remember when he released his most anticipated story. I was nine at the time. He took us to his favorite bookstore in the city. The window display was fully filled with his new book. He was so happy that day, I don't even remember what we did after, only his joyful face.”

Dante's features softened. “What about your mother?”

A smile slowly faded from Violette's face and she drifted her gaze to the ground again.

He immediately realized his blunt mistake. “I didn't think you wouldn't like to speak about her.”

“No–no,” Violette blew. “I love my mother and I love thinking about her. She was…” it took her time to think about the word that would describe her the best, “a magnificent witch,” she breathed. “I was always impressed by her sharp mind and perseverance. She was always so calm and she knew how to fix anything. She was very determined, and had a temper for sure.”

“Oh, and I was wondering who you got this from,” he softly chuckled.

It caused her eyes to squint, gracing him a faint smile.

“She introduced me to the world of potions and encouraged my desire to learn it. But the most important thing – she was a dreamer. I think this is what my parents bonded over. They believed that with great effort you'll reach the greatest peaks. It can seem that it's very easy to be a dreamer when you live in a place where magic is blooming around but, I met so many wizards who take everything for granted. Magic and their lives is just a regular thing to them. While my mother was grateful to be born in a magic family, she valued her charms and was proud to be a wizardling.”

She looked at Dante, though he didn't share her gaze.

“You know, I think I told you too much,” she uttered, however she didn't think it was a bad thing. To be honest, she could talk about her parents all night: it was a nice feeling to dive into such beautiful memories. About her parents. Her home. It seems like it was the only connection she could have with all of it right now. And it'll be forever the only way to feel her mother near. The full closet of memories is all that Violette had and she was grateful she left it to her – she didn't know what she'd do without it: if every scrap of her mother would be completely erased from this world. From *her* world. And even when it felt like the time she gave to her was not enough – memories were not enough – she still was happy she had at least this; some people didn't even have a glimpse of the happiness her mother brought to her feet.

“Don't worry, Little Witch. I am so out of my mind right now, I probably won't remember anything you said later.” He waved her away.

It didn't bring her relief as it would to him; she wasn't that reticent, but it might be for the better.

Suddenly her thoughts slipped away with Dante's moan. It was the loudest he was since they entered the crypt.

“Very painful?” she asked, unwillingly showing her concern.

“What's the matter?” He chuckled, side-glancing at her. “Worrying about me?”

She glared and then grinned. “Not even a bit. Even more, the grave in the crypt is empty so it's available for you to use.”

“So you *do* want me dead?” His brows pulled together, a mischievous smile twitched his lips.

“No, at the end of the day, I am not you. I don't like hurting people. And I don't wish them death.”

Violette took her gaze away, not wanting to show him any other emotion, especially worry. She shouldn't feel anything like this. Not for him. Maybe it even will do him good and he'll feel how it is to be in pain. Perchance, he'll think before he’d hurt anyone else.

Dante didn't say anything more, only raised his head to the ceiling, leaning over the wall. What he was thinking was a pure mystery for her and for the first time she wasn't much bothered with what it was about. Instead, she chose silence.

Some time after their conversation Dante fell asleep. The same couldn't be said about Violette, she wasn't feeling that safe and comfortable to fall asleep in the crypt, at the cemetery, among the dead. Perhaps, after all, Dante was feeling himself more in place here: he was certainly closer to death than life.

She wrapped her arms around her knees tightly and lowered her chin. It was cold and lonely. And even if she really wanted to sleep she wouldn't be able to close an eye.

Violette started thinking about her conversation with Caidas tonight. She went over it in her mind repeatedly, examining every detail. When words said by him started to turn into nonsense, she realized she needed to stop. She needed air, and she didn't know what time it was. Is the sun high in the sky or was it still morning and the time didn't pass as quick as she'd hoped? Dante was sleeping despite the harsh cold stone beneath him, and she felt like she had to move to not turn into a stone herself.

She stood outside the crypt, absorbing the view of the foggy forest. The sun, meanwhile, tried to escape her direct gaze, hiding behind the gray clouds. Her eyes dropped to the graves. The snow was melting, revealing the stone surface.

She took a step forward and placed her cloak on the stair to sit. It was slightly better than in the cold and dark crypt, at least she could feel herself a little bit more alive, even if there were more dead than inside.

She breathed in and breathed out – the air, fresh and bracing, filled her lungs. Everything around was gray and sad as the passing autumn was taking away all the paints with her. Even the sky was lacking colors. Only the pine trees remained invariably green.

She raised her head. As much as she loved night, she couldn't imagine how it is to live a whole life not seeing sunshine like Dante and other vampires do. She wondered if they ever missed it. Their skin didn't let in either cold or warm but were they missing these feelings? When a ray of sun slightly touches your skin and the warmth spreads throughout your body. For a second she felt sorry, their lives must be so miserable, and she sensed some of them didn't even realize it. She was happy to be alive, not in a million years she'd trade this life for immortality, even if it makes her vulnerable. She would rather feel everything than completely nothing.

To shorten the time Violette decided to occupy herself with something more interesting than pondering about immortal beings. The book which belonged to the Queen was questionable in this meaning as she didn't understand what it was written about but she decided it'd be interesting to flip through it.

Her fingers ran over the old wrinkled brown cover, the whimsical curls and helices paler in shade danced under her touch. Her hand reached to the beautiful small gem in the center and she opened the book. There was no signature or initials, not inside, not on the back of the book. No date. Only a heraldic sign on the first page, which looked like a coat of arms. If this book was written by the Queen they met in the dream, the coat could belong to her family. But was it written by her truly or was she just an owner of the book?

Next pages were covered in beautiful calligraphy accompanied by small inky drawings. Some of it looked like recipes as Violette recognized proportions and some ingredients in her own language, other descriptions were written in ancient letters and esoteric signs. She came across the page which Dante pointed out as the most important. A little drawing of a cage and a lock suggested his vampire nature. She flipped a paper.

The spell of emergence

Her eyes ran over the recipe: it wasn't a really difficult potion, although she'd never seen something like this before.

There's a spell that helped with emerging something that was hidden by magic, but this one looked unique…*made*. She flipped another page, her gaze found a crescent moon doodle and other ancient spells written in Heggas' language. She studied the book for some time until she realized that she could barely feel her legs. It was time to take a break. Arching her back, her eyes skimmed through the pages one more time before slamming the book.

Having straightened her skirt, Violette stood up. The book was once again in her bag. She didn't want to walk between graves, it was brazen and unpleasant so she paced to the forest. And as it was day, she'd no reason to

be afraid of monsters or vampires, which actually could be considered synonyms.

The walk was a great chance to clear up her head as her mind was plagued with questions, however she'd lie saying she wanted to think about something more cheerful and happy: everything that happened for the last few days couldn't give peace to her curious mind, she was eager for the answers and reveals. But there was one thing that made her truly unsettled. Her hand reached in the bag for the dagger inlaid with jewels.

The blade flashed before her eyes. It was completely indistinguishable from the one Dante owned: same shape, stones and decor. Caidas' words were sitting in her head, digging with its claws – he wanted Dante dead. She wondered why, what horrible thing he did to wish for his death? Yes, Dante wasn't an angel indeed. She hadn't forgotten him blackmailing the poor young witch they met a few moons ago. But despite it, she wouldn't wish him death. Violette knew for sure he killed someone and he revealed it was not just one person, but she couldn't wrap her head around Caidas' words.

Once you unleash him – you will not be able to control it.

Maybe she didn't know him for a long time, but somehow she felt Dante is not a ruthless beast, thirsty for anguish and blood spilling. Despite him being so cold and somber sometimes, she hadn't felt frightened by his presence.

He loves causing pain to others, other words of the high vampire surfaced.

As much as Dante was driving her mad with all this teasing, he looked more like a shot-down bird doomed to eke out its existence alone on the ground. And regardless of the darkness in his eyes, she also saw wistfulness and despondency. He wanted to be free, it was understandable, she couldn't blame him for it. But not once she felt like it was for simple vampire instincts. She refused to believe that all of it was just for the purpose of insatiable hunting. Was she naive thinking like this?

Violette kicked a stone with her boot as a heavy sigh tumbled out her mouth. She didn't want to believe Caidas but she had no reason to believe Dante as well. All she knew was that she made a promise and she had to keep it. For her father.

A light wind caressed her back. Taking a deep breath, she raised her head to the sky and closed her eyes.

The peace and quietness of the surroundings lodged the looseness in her soul. Only a quiet breeze was breaking the silence, playing with the leaves of the trees.

All at once, she heard a strange sound coming from the bushes. Her eyes flashed open. Just a quiet sound but something was unnerving in it. Perhaps just an animal. She looked around and finally it struck her – it was already darkening. She hadn't noticed how time flew by. Just a few moments ago she was strolling under the cloudy sky and now, the stars have already started to lighten up instead.

Another rustle. Violette felt uneasy, just in case she took out her magic wand, gripping it tight. Maybe it was Dante who came for her? It's strange how one situation could make you wish for the presence of someone you don't trust. Perhaps she felt more calmer with him than she cared to admit.

The next rustling sound appeared too close and she'd have liked to ignore it, but a sudden burst of coolness made her turn around. There was nothing. And yet she had a strange feeling as if she was being watched.

“Who is there?” Violette let a question into the air.

Silence.

She spun back, maybe it was her imagination? She was probably already going crazy.

Again the strange chill struck her back, making her whirl around sharply. Nothing again. Only trees and bushes.

“I know you are here,” she let out firmly, narrowing her eyes. “Dante? I told you to not scare me.”

A deep sharp male voice entered the air from behind, “I wouldn't want to be confused with Dante. I find it disrespectful.”

Her head snapped at the side the sound came from.

Right in front of the tree was a stranger, leaning over its trunk with his back. The barn red color of his suit stood out against the dark bushes, his pale golden hair fell sloppily onto his forehead and his dark gray eyes looked at Violette with such entertainment like she was a little animal in a cage.

“So it's true, Dante got himself a girlfriend,” he said with a provoking smile.

“Who are you?” Violette’s shoulders tensed.

“Friend of your vampire.” The grin, arrogant and cruel, appeared on his face, the menace in his eyes was noticeable even far away.

“He's not mine,” she snapped. “And as far as I know he doesn't have friends.”

“Friends…enemies…same thing. From one to another one step, you know.” And as he threw his head back and bared his teeth, Violette’s eyes caught two front *fangs*.

She withdrew a step back, hand tightened around the magic wand, extending it against him.

“What do you want? Dante is not here if you are looking for him,” she blew in the air.

“I didn't say I need Dante,” the vampire purred and negligently shoved off forward. “I'm actually here because I wanted to see his new little toy.”

Violette's stomach twisted in absolute disgust.

“I am not anyone's toy and I suggest you to not come closer if you don't want to get to know the ground beneath your feet,” she gritted her teeth.

The stranger laughed. A sharp, merciless sound.

“Oh, I would like to see it.” His back straightened up, he immediately grew taller. “You are a witch but know nothing about vampires, right?”

Violette's brows twisted together. “What do you mean?”

“Magic doesn't work on vampires, silly,” he derided.

No, she felt sinking. It's a lie. Dante would say to her. Right?

“If you think I'd believe any of your words, you are–”

“Then just show me your magic, pet.” The stranger's face lightened up with an amused smile as he shoved his hands into his pockets, drawing a step closer. If she thought Dante was shameless, this guy, right here, was a definition of this word. Selfish, conceited and cavalier.

She couldn't comprehend why Dante wouldn't tell her that magic doesn't work on vampires. She threatened him a few times already. Was he just laughing at her all this time, letting her think she could hurt him? *What a stinky bastard!*

She didn't finish her little pleasant conversation with the blond vampire as a tall dark-haired figure appeared in front of her.

Dante emerged out of nowhere shielding her from the piercing gaze of the other vampire. And he wasn’t in such a happy mood as his friend…or

enemy, or whatever he was.

“Dante, how many years,” the stranger drawled with the same careless smirk.

“Not enough. I'd take a few more. Hundreds,” Dante nearly hissed.

“You have become grumpier.”

“What do you want, Nigel?” No sight of a smile or any friendly appearance on Dante's face.

“Just wanted to visit an old friend,” he waved and threw his gaze over his shoulder to eye Violette. “And to see his new pet.”

“If you did what you wanted then get lost somewhere else,” Dante grumbled.

“You are so inhospitable, no wonder other vampires don't want to befriend you.”

“Good thing, I don't care. Now, get off,” he trod a step forward, all of his muscles went still. “If I see you near her one more time, you'll see how inhospitable I can really be.”

“Ohh, how unfriendly. I didn't mean to cause drama,” Nigel sang joyfully.

Meanwhile, Violette stood up on her toes to peer over Dante's shoulder. The stranger, as much as in the short time that she managed to dislike him, aroused her interest, or rather, Dante's reaction did. He certainly perceived him as his enemy or a person he least wanted to see. Even Caidas didn't deserve such a threatening look as Nigel.

“I'm not saying goodbye,” Nigel winked to Violette and disappeared into the darkness.

Not a muscle on Dante's face moved, his eyes peered at the spot where the vampire was a second ago.

“Who was–” Violette wasn't quick to say as Dante cut her off.

“Why the Hell have you gone that far?” He finally turned to face her. An expressive pinch between his thick brows didn't bode well.

“I just decided to take a walk,” slid off Violette's lips.

“Was it so hard to stay near?”

“I don't have to report to you about my every decision and action.” She pouted.

Dante held his gaze on Violette – she did the same. The darkness of his eyes matched the storm in hers. Her brows pulled even closer to her nose

bridge, making him swallow his disaffection.

“It was Nigel. The most nonchalant and sordid asshole you ever can meet,” he sniffed.

“Oh, so you’re not the worst. This took me by surprise,” Violette taunted.

“He has no affection and sympathy. I don't want to see him around you.”

“Not like it depends on me.” She narrowed her eyes.

“I just warned.”

Crossing her arms, she eyed Dante from head to toes. He seemed to have come to his senses since the last time they talked, she actually liked him more when he was injured – he seemed nicer.

“About assholes,” Violette started and pointed her forefinger at his chest, pressing it against his shirt. “Why didn't you tell me my magic can't harm you?”

Finally that dim fire in his eyes danced in another tone, corners of his mouth slightly lifted. “Oh, about that.”

“Yes! About that.” Her finger poked him twice. “Were you even about to say it to me?” She frowned.

“Why? You look so funny when you try to threaten me,” his lips swayed as he shrugged before turning around and taking a step ahead.

Violette's mouth fell open, the heat embraced her cheeks. His audacity was unbearable to tolerate.

“You are…”

“Yeah, what?” He faced her again and leaned closer, widely grinning.

“You are an insufferable jerk,” she drawled sizzlingly through her teeth.

“Anything else?”

She frowned, looking away. “Just shut up.”

His eyes flashed, a playful smile exposed his snow-white teeth, and with that his two front fangs, hidden behind the mask.

“Words are not the only things that could shut my mouth. There's plenty of other more effective ways to do so.”

“Oh, right, I know one – stab you with a stake in your heart.” She grumbled, pushing his chest away.

“This will do you no good.” He mockingly shot his gaze to her back as she was walking away.

A dirty look darted at him over the shoulder. She knew that stake would do no harm to him. But she had something better – thanks to Caidas – though it was not the time to talk about it. She actually wondered if she should tell him about it at all.

“What now? Do you have a plan?”

“We'll go to the inn. And will think about what to do next,” he said vaguely, hiding his hands into his pockets.

After some silence Violette decided to speak again, revealing her little research.

“While you were…asleep,” she tried to pick the right word to use. “ I was studying the Hegga's book.”

Dante curiously raised a brow, side-glancing her. “Studying?”

“Well, perhaps, saying studying is too much, rather I flipped through it. I don't know Heggas’ language after all but there were little notes and symbols written in known language to both of us. Not much but I found it pretty interesting.”

Dante listened to her, watching his footsteps.

“Some of the pictures,” she continued, “seem to be written with different inks or written much later, as the whole text is more dingy. I don't know if it's on purpose or she just swapped the inks but you can clearly see some of the little images that have been drawn have a different shade.” Violette's gaze followed Dante, waiting for him to say something but the cracking of the snow under the boots was the only sound stirring the air.

The awkward silence, settling between them, made her push the conversation further. She wasn't sure if Dante was thinking about her words, trying to come up with ideas or just didn't want to talk with her. As she learned this evening – he didn't like to talk about his past, and it was beyond just spite, he really didn't have any desire to talk about it. Out of fear? Regrets?

“So,” she tried nonchalantly but was cut off too quickly.

“You might be right,” the words left his mouth,

Violette curiously fluttered her lashes.

“I've been thinking about this book since we found it,” he went on. “To be honest, I am glad you looked through it. Perhaps you could notice something I couldn't, you are a part of the magic world after all.” His eyes slid to her. “Did you find something?”

“I think I need to investigate more,” Violette confessed.

“Fine, maybe, finally it can be a useful thing for once.”

She knew what he meant. She noticed how Dante didn't like Heggas and this book, partly because it belonged to the witch who cursed him, though she'd suspected he didn't like the magic this book holds overall. It's most likely Dante had learned a lot of interesting things that, probably, were unfamiliar even to some wizards like her, over the course of his long life. How much can you learn in centuries? It seems some things are incomprehensible even over thousands of years if you don't try to understand them. She gaped at Dante; he was extraneous to compassion and concern for others if they weren't useful for his affairs. Violette wondered if he'd always been like this? Just a few hours before, he told her that vampires don't remember what it's like to be human, and therefore they themselves disdain human life. Does that mean that she shouldn't judge him too harshly? But she couldn't just accept it, letting him and the other vampires treat her and other people like toys.

Violette pushed her luck forward. “Was this book written by her?”

Dante looked at her from the edges of his eyes. “Yes.”

“How could she be a Hegga and a Queen?” She truly couldn't comprehend this fact as Heggas were known for being outlaws even in the wizard’s world.

Dante’s gaze fell to the ground as a stone under his boot bounced off to the side. “She had Heggas’ blood, but she wasn't a direct heir. You perhaps noticed she wasn't an old crone.” His jaw strained.

“She was beautiful,” Violette affirmed. It really made her ponder about her heritage. “She had a magic wand.”

Dante again looked at her from the side.

“I saw it down in the secret passage. I thought Heggas don't use magic wands.”

“She practices different magic. I am not really familiar with it,” he admitted.

“You seem to know a lot about her. Were you close?”

“I'm observant.”

It was true. She remembers how easily he exposed her worrying about her father when they met in the shop, he indeed had a keen eye to the details. But it wasn't an answer she wanted to hear.

“That guy…Nigel.” Violette’s fingers were tugging the ribbon on her cloak. “He has something against you.” She wasn't sure if it was a question or confirmation.

“Everyone has.” Another truth from his mouth.

She averted her gaze. “I noticed this.”

The questions were dancing on the tip of her tongue, however she saw Dante wasn't really in the mood for questions. But that guy whoever he was and whatever connections he had with Dante was making her exceptionally curious. If Dante wasn't a pleasant company to have, then Nigel was someone she'd rather eat her own arm than spend more than an hour with, not to mention days. The only vampire who seemed to be bearable, except Dante, was Caidas. Others were bloodthirsty and haughty, making her want to dissolve into the air.

After a short pause words left Violette's mouth on their own, “So who exactly is he?”

Dante didn't look at her, but still answered her question.

“Insolent idiot. A disdainful bastard. Mistake of nature. Call it the way you want,” his voice dripping with contempt.

“Wow, you indeed can't stand him.”

“He's one of the most loyal dogs of Caidas,” Dante spat. “His appearance doesn't bode well.”

“What problems do you have with other vampires? I can't figure it out no matter how long I think about it,” Violette finally dared to ask.

“I am just being myself,” he voiced.

“Well, that's definitely a good reason, to be honest,” she poked.

He eyed her with a satisfied smile.

She didn't give up, she needed to solve this mystery. “But being honest, what have you done to them?”

The smile suddenly washed from his face and any hint of humanity as well. He looked away as he breathed the cold. “Watch your steps, Little Witch.”

“What?” As soon as the question left her mouth, she tripped over the crooked tree roots sticking out of the ground.

“You could have said it earlier,” she huffed.

“And *you* could watch where you're going. I'm saying this not only about your legs,” the bloodlessly scattered through his voice, giving the

impression of a parent annoyed by the curiosity of a child.

Violette rolled her eyes. “You know, I'm more and more convinced that your life is actually very boring so you try to make it look much more interesting with all these mysterious and scary tones. Like you want others to be scared of you and think you're such a danger but actually the only scary thing you do in your life is sleeping with your leg extended under the blanket. I imagine what you did to the vampires is similar to eating a cake meant for everyone all by yourself.”

“Yes, vampires are very sensitive about their cakes.” His face remained stoic.

“No, I'm pretty serious. You're always detaching yourself and running away from the conversation as if it can scare me away. I'm already stuck with you, Dante,” she grumbled at last. Partly she wanted to play on his pride, but she said the truth as well – she was indeed stuck with him, doesn't matter what he'd confess – she can't escape.

“Well.” Dante turned around, looking straight at her face. His eyes dilated to the full black. He made a step and suddenly for herself Violette staggered back. “Do you really think I do it because I want to seem too interesting for you or any other?”

“I wouldn't say you are looking for approval,” she faltered, taking one more step back, as he seemed to be shrinking the space between them. “I mean, you don't look like a person who wants to meet people at all…”

“The first time you are right about me. I don't care what other people think or what *you* are thinking about me. But I made it clear that I need your help so think about my mysterious answers,” he drew a step closer and Violette's back hit the tree, “as a nice gesture of mine to not hurt your sensitive and pathetic human feelings.”

His eyes struck with iciness, causing the hair on her neck to stand on end.

“I know that you're scared, Little Witch. You're trying to pretend you're not but I can hear your heart pounding so fast like it is preparing for the race. Especially right now. Maybe I can't read your mind but I can see you terrified of this situation with vampires and where it would lead you. You can lie to anyone, but not to me because *I* see through you.”

She held her breath as he continued with his voice low and steady.

“This mask is on me for a reason and believe me you won't like the story behind it. Stop asking your questions and just do what I say to you.”

His face drifted away from her as he turned around and walked away.

An exhale finally slid past her lips. Then by impulsive thought, she scooped snow and threw it right at his head.

He faced her in a span of a second. “Are you again?!”

“It's a warning to never come close or speak to me in that tone again,” she burst furiously. Was she afraid? Yes. Has she thought about it? Absolutely not.

“If you do it aga–”

Another pile of snow flew at his chest. She met his irritated stare with a glower.

“Did you finish?” he asked calmly.

“Not even close,” she seethed, holding another pressed ball of the snow in her hand, her skin burned. “Maybe I'm scared but it doesn't mean I can't stand up for myself. Want to be scary and frightening? Fine, you can keep pushing everyone away but I won't tolerate such behavior towards myself. Otherwise, you'll have to figure out how to take off your mask on your own, understood?”

“Don't pretend that you don't need me just as much.” He glared.

“I remember it but you're being rude.”

“Is hitting me with a snowball an answer to everything for you?” He drew several solid steps back to her.

“At least, I have an answer when you just give me shallow responses.” Her lips pouted, the hand with the snowball still frozen in the air.

Pulling his brows together, Dante's palm covered hers, slowly dragging it down, his gaze penetrating to the bones. After struggling for a few seconds Violette gave up and dropped the snow, though her eyes didn't stop flashing lightning at him.

“You're giving me a headache,” he grumbled, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “Let's do it this way. You don't ask me about my past and I'll be nice to you. We'll finish our deal and split our roads like we hadn't even met. How about that?”

However she pretended to hesitate for a minute, she'd agree to these conditions.

“I accept your offer,” she affirmed, although the tingling curiosity still pulsated in her mind.

CHAPTER 24

DEAD END



Finally Violette was able to settle down in the inn. Her room was quite small but cozy and most important: it had a shower. Washing away the atmosphere that was still lingering on her skin after the visit to the Vampire Kingdom was ineffably releasing. She felt like rinsing all of the bad that happened this evening, even though it was far away from the truth. This little trip to the vampire's lair put only more weight on her shoulders and no water could sweep it away.

She let the water flow for some time, staying under, completely zoned out. These couple of hours taught her a few things for sure. First, Dante was a dangerous vampire, however this was to be expected, he couldn't be put in the mask for something like stealing the candies in the store. Still it was hard to gather her head over all of it. And Caidas…Caidas tried to warn her about the terrible outcome if she'd help him to take the mask off. He doesn't want him free so much that he's ready to kill him, if he could of course. Instead, he was asking *her*. The image of the dark blue hilt of the Vampire Slayer, still laying in the bag, flashed in the back of her mind.

All of those things and thoughts drained her, she felt her body was craving the soft material of the bedsheets. There was a lot to unpack and she wished to think about it more, to have more time but her eyelids felt heavy and her body sank into the soft mattress until all her thoughts turned into darkness.



IT WAS ALREADY a late hour as Dante and Violette sat together in his room. She wasn't sure how much he had slept, if he even was in a bed: the blanket looked untouched, while she had a deep long sleep before.

His suite was slightly bigger than hers and had a simple chair where she decided to settle down as Dante passed the window, still covered with drapes.

“What exactly do you think I should look for?” she questioned, her fingers squeezed the delicate ruffled fabric of her skirt. She was wearing a grape-colored dress with a layered skirt, laced on the hems. A heart-shaped neckline with almost black frills along with the underbust corset elegantly emphasized her slender figure. And the thin lilac straps made of silk on her shoulders were covered by a short dark violet cape, folded on the back of the chair.

“If I knew, I wouldn't ask you to do this,” Dante said with ease.

Violette slid her eyes to the book cover and leaned in the back of the chair, opening it. She must dive in and be much more attentive than yesterday, any detail could be a breakpoint.



A FEW HOURS passed by as Dante left her alone with the book. The ink on the pages started to intermingle in Violette's head, paper felt harsh between the fingers and she didn't count how many times she changed position while reading.

The pictures on the parchments resembled little doodles and quaint sketches, others looked like symbols or signs. Some of the words were underlined or highlighted with little notes above. Howbeit, nothing of it seemed to Violette valuable or something she'd understand. Next to some

recipes she'd found little sketches of flowers and some ingredients, and she counted ten lupin flowers in the last one hundred pages. The drawing of gnarled trees awakened flashes of the Forest of Somber Eyes in her mind, goosebumps dotted her skin.

A calendar with the moon phases and an eclipse calculation spread over the other page; another showed a foreign symbol made of twirls and waves. She flipped a few pages over, her eyes lazily running over the words she didn't understand until the image in the right corner moved from its place on its own.

Violette blinked. She couldn't be that tired, right? Her spine straightened up as her gaze fixed on the picture, waiting for it to move again. It didn't happen but she still examined the symbol. It looked like a coat of arms: big letter A centered between ribbons, surrounded by a garden. She flipped the page one more time, until her eyes came across a page with a big sketch of a stone arch that looked like an entrance to a cavern. Below a little doodle of hands, a crescent moon above. A bird cage next to the detailed drawing of the cavern, and a keyhole beside.

She tried to make out the words but as was expected, everything was written in the bizarre Heggas' language.

The door opened, putting a tremble over Violette's shoulders. It was Dante, one of his hands clenched a little brown paper bag.

"Any progress?" He made it across the room and put the bag on the writing desk.

Violette looked again at the pages and then got up from the chair.

"I found this symbol which looks like it was written much later than anything else on the page," she declared, showing the book. "Do you recognize the sign?"

The vampire towered over her, sloping his head to the pages. "It looks familiar." His eyes narrowed. "Seems like a coat of arms of one of the noble houses, a house of Adrogans, if I'm not wrong. And I'm rarely wrong."

Violette wrinkled her nose at his last words.

"So what is so important about this house so the Queen decided to put it here?" she asked.

"This is good food for thinking." He took the book from her hands and flipped the page, then back again. On the same spot but on the back of the page there was a symbol Violette saw before: two crossed swords with the

blue chiffon flower in the center, as she assumed – the coat of arms of the Queen's house or her kingdom. After Dante examined the page, he skimmed through a few pages right to the one with the drawing of the cavern.

“This one,” he pointed at the curved tracery above the cavern and then rotated the book to the side: G*rotto of Spells and Relics*.

Violette bolted her gaze to the pages, closely scrutinizing it. Indeed, the pattern which looked like senseless hundreds of twirls turned out to be stretched letters.

“Do you think it's what we're looking for?” She patted her lashes.

“Possibly. But I am not sure I know where it is,” Dante said wistfully and sat on the bed, continuing to study the pages.

Violette started measuring the room with steps. She spun back and her thoughts were dispelled as her gaze fell onto the paper bag on the table. The pleasant delicious smell reached her nostrils only now.

Dante, as if reading her mind, stood up and handed her the bag.

“In case you are hungry.” Violette looked at the bag agazed as if he was offering her poison. Well, it was more likely.

She took the package and squashed it in her hands, while Dante settled over the desk.

The smell of the baking and braise released in the air as she opened the little bag and her eyes fluttered shut in satisfaction. Her hand reached to one of the buns with chicken and mushrooms, still warm. One delightful bite and happiness spread throughout her body. In two minutes the bag rustled again.

Dante raised his eyes to Violette and noticing it, she immediately stopped halfway through the second bun. He turned his gaze back to the paper. Was she too loud? Or was he hungry as well? Thinking about it, she'd never seen him eating. She wasn't sure if he was able to eat with this thing on his mouth but then it leads to the question: how was he fed? She also doubted she wanted to know, it's unlikely that the answer would please her. Still, she saw him drinking, it wasn't hard, the lattice was wide enough for it, but she believed it took time for him to adjust and not spill it everywhere.

“How are you able to eat?” she asked directly.

The answer followed immediately like he wasn't actually that deep in his thinking, his eyes remained on the pages of the book. “You'd already asked me this question.”

“And I didn't get an answer.”

“Some people it stops,” he said coldly.

“I am persistent.”

“I'd say stubborn and nosy.”

“It's a part of the equation,” she waved. “So how?”

He just leaned back in the chair, not taking his attention off the book. Violette rolled her eyes and savored another bun.

Hours of searching only led them to nowhere. It seems Dante had never seen this place and had no idea where it was. There must be something else they were missing out on. The picture was not clear.

Violette was sitting in the chair for too long, trying to connect all of the details together. By the end of the night she felt bored and tired.

“How can we find a place which you, neither me, know where is?”

Dante was standing by the window with the book, she didn't know how long he was staring at these pages. They were sharing theories for a few hours already and it didn’t bring them anything.

“I think that Adrogans family has something that we need,” he enunciated, finally raising his eyes to her face.

“What for example? Another riddle?” She fetched an irritated sigh.

“No. I actually think that what we are looking for is a map for the place on these pages. I guess this cavern is our final point.”

“How can you be sure about it?”

“I didn't say I am sure. I need to check some information first.” His eyes trailed to the clock on the wall as Violette yawned. The hand stopped at four in the morning. “Enough for today,” he let out and the dull sound of the book hitting the table’s surface disturbed the settled atmosphere of serenity.

Violette took a deep breath, it seemed as if her back was already glued to the back of the chair as it was hard to stand up. She pulled forward trying to get up, however her legs hardly listened to her.

“You are not going to sleep, are you?” she asked at last as her hand pulled the doorknob.

Dante's eyes twinkled in the dim light, already speaking for themselves. Maybe she didn't know him long enough, but she'd already realized one thing: when Dante needed to find something he was very determined, they were similar in this.

“Good night,” was the only words that left his mouth – a calm velvet voice that felt like a night itself.



VIOLETTE WAS SITTING in the living room at the round table by the window, to the sounds of hearth’s crackling. Her fingers wrapped around the cup of tea, gaze went into the distance and the darkness outside returned her thoughts to Dante.

She hadn't seen him since she woke up – he didn't leave his room or left it and sneaked out back before she could notice it. She didn't know what he was doing the whole day but it was clear – he couldn't be out, their recent trip after the Vampire Kingdom proved to her it's a bad idea to let a vampire out in the daylight. Dante was pretty reckless and unbothered by many things but she doubted he'd want to repeat that experience again.

Dante’s voice burst into the air, causing Violette to choke on her tea.

“Waiting for someone?” He leaned on the doorframe, his white teeth flashed through the mask.

The cup clunked over the saucer, the question immediately left Violette’s mouth, “Did you find something?”

The corners of his mouth tugged upwards and he quickly made his way to the table and sat down opposite her.

“There's a legend about a magical cavern with magic trophies which belonged to one witch. Want to guess what it's called?”

“The Grotto of Spells and Relics?” Her gasp curled into a smile.

“Exactly.”

The sparks danced in her eyes. “And you know where it is?”

“The legend says it could be found only with a special enchanted map,” he uttered.

“And you think Adrogans have it?”

He drew a hand along his jaw. “There's a reason for their coat of arms in the book and I'm aiming to know what it is.”

“But what about the moonstone? How does it come in hand?”

“There's one more thing. See this crescent moon,” he handed her the book with open pages. “And the keyhole. The legend says: *To open the cavern you must ask the moon for help*.”

Violette beamed.

“It's a key! That's brilliant,” she spat out. “So what will we do then? How do we get the map?”

Dante delightfully let out a breath. “Every first Friday of December Adrogans throw a winter ball. Luckily for us, we are just in time.”

Violette counted days in her mind, it was already the day after tomorrow.

“So you want to attend the ball?” she asked, her brows and the corners of her lips lifting in surprise.

Dante's face didn't evoke the same enthusiasm. “I didn't say this is what I want. But we are going.”

Violette assumed Adrogans were a very important and famous family – Dante almost immediately recognised their coat of arms and the Queen drew their sign a few centuries ago. It was probably hard to arrange a meeting with them, perhaps, this ball was their only chance to talk with them.

“And what then? What is the plan?”

“The mansion is run by the young Lord Adrogans,” Dante started, “his father passed not long ago and it will actually play a good hand for us.”

Violette frowned. “Someone's death?”

“It's easier to trick a young guy who has a reckless desire to show up than an old nerd.”

‘A reckless desire to show up’ sounded a bit weird, but it awakened her curiosity.

“What do you know about him?”

“I heard he is vainglorious, adventurous and haughty. Like most of the nobility so there's nothing new. However, he has an interest in magic things.” His eyes almost inflamed as he looked at Violette – he already found a role for her in his plan.

Violette felt the tugging of an invisible thread, reminding her to be careful. “What kind of magic?” she asked.

“He loves artifacts, rare curiosities and things similar to it.” He carelessly waved his hand, relaxing in his chair. “He is not a wizard, but I

believe he has interest in anything magical, including people as well."

"I might not like where you are leading me."

"Oh, of course, you're not." The corners of his eyes raised. "Not like someone asked you about it."

"Careful," she warned. "We were talking about it. You have to be respectful."

He cracked his neck muscles as the words "You are no fun" left his mouth and it earned him a side-eye from her. "Relax. I'm joking. There's nothing extreme in my plan. Lord Adrogans has a collection of magic gizmos, I believe he might have a map that will lead us to the grotto."

"What is my role in this?"

"You just need to make him give it to you."

"It's very unlikely he'd just hand me the map, especially if he really treasures his stuff," Violette doubted.

"Ask?" The vampire nearly snorted. "I'm not saying you should ask him. I want you to charm him."

"To charm? With magic?"

"With your skills in seduction." His expression turned serious.

"My what?" She drew back, her brows creasing. "You want me to seduce him?"

"What, fear you won't cope with it?"

Oh, she knew what he was doing – trying to test her. To hurt her pride. *The jerk.*

She'd much like to prove him wrong but there was one thing: she knew nothing about how to talk romantically to a guy. She was pretty confident in her speech while talking with males but she'd never flirted with any or dated someone. It felt strange to imagine she had to seduce someone when she barely knew how to get a romantic conversation going; how do people even…start it?

She might read about it in the books but she'd never felt enormous attention from boys. She actually didn't remember if someone tried to flirt with her before, even if so, she was thinking they were just being nice. It came to her mind that she possibly never was really attentive to the guy's behavior. And while it'd be nice to feel cared about, romance wasn't really bothering her mind that much before.

"Is there any other way?" Her brows twisted in incertitude.

“What is it? A ghost of doubts?”

She swore he looked kind of surprised that she didn't jump in with refutations of his words. No, he was right, she will not give him such satisfaction. There's nothing hard about charming a guy. It's just a *guy* after all.

“And what do you want me to do then?”

“Charm him, talk about magic things and then make him take you to his collection,” he said with such ease as if it was indeed that simple.

She had an urge to ask why he wouldn’t try to lure him as it was not ordinary for his behavior – never would she believe Dante would choose a more difficult path.

“Weren't you saying it's a bad thing to do?” He raised his gaze, mystery played in his eyes and the corner of his mouth yanked upwards, she couldn't read what was that about.

Her brows pulled together. “Of course it is. But it's something you'd do.”

Dante's face slightly twisted but his voice remained calm.

“How many people I lured for that time you were with me? Aside from that couple I didn't use my vampire ability to charm others. As you can see I don't do it as usual.”

It was true though. He didn't use his luring powers, as she assumed. And though Dante wasn't a person to believe, somehow it felt like the truth – she didn't notice any strange behavior from the people they had any contact with. That woman and man he lured to stay the night wasn't the best memory of their journey, though she couldn't continue to blame him so she'd decided to close this chapter.

“Wasn't it an easier thing to do?” Her fingers brushed the saucer edges. “Why are we not arguing where you’re suggesting to lure him and I am trying to dissuade you, reading you a full moral speech about how it is wrong to take someone's choice and you can't do it to people?” Her eyes raised to him again.

“Yes, I decided to skip that part,” his lips curved into a selfish smile, “I thought it would save us time.”

Leaning back in the chair, he continued, “To be honest, I'm with you on this, Little Witch. I don't like the concept of taking away someone's choice, I think it's not fair as well. However, sometimes there are rare occasions

when it can be useful. Although even if I decided to choose an easier path, it won't be that easy to meet the young lord. I need eye contact to lure him and he is too aloof to speak with everyone. It's much more clever and easier to send a girl to him. He likes women's attention."

Violette surveyed him. It was hard to say she believed him but she wanted it to be true – it would be for the better.

"And why do you think he'll listen to *me*?" She raised a brow.

She thought it's too presumptuous to hope he would want to speak with her when there would probably be many other guests, some of which would be much more beautiful women in grandiose dresses possessing the skills to charm men with a smile and a single sway of a fan.

"I'll be honest," he said, leaving the back of the chair and moving closer, his elbows pressed on the surface and fingers clasped together. "You are pretty, attractive, smart and a witch. You are the bearer of all qualities he values and extols the most."

She glared at him, trying to catch a ploy in his words. Violette considered herself a pretty and fairly attractive woman but it was bizarre to hear it from Dante. He tried to turn her cheeks scarlet several times, however she took it as an action to annoy her. No doubt he was messing with her then but he sounded serious now.

"And I'll make it easier for you to get his attention," he continued, his gaze not leaving her. "I sent a letter to his estate that a certain duchess, Lady Nora, from distant magical places will arrive at the ball. It must intrigue him: he loves guests from high society, especially ones from new magic places."

"And how might it help me?"

"Don't make me take my words about you being smart back, Little Witch."

"I have to pretend I am a duchess?" She almost chuckled at this thought. "It's ridiculous."

"Perhaps you are not behaving yourself as a duchess. There is some work to be done here. But you have a great personal trait most of the nobles share, which can help you to make him believe you're one of them – your pride. So don't be afraid to be a little bit arrogant to him. Can you handle this?"

Violette softly snorted, a smirk curled her lips. “Don't worry, I have a great example in front of my eyes. I was watching you for weeks, finally it'll come into use.”

“Careful with your words, Little Witch, I can think you're obsessed with me.” His eyes brightened with an unusual tone she'd never seen before in his eyes.

“Only in your dreams,” she huffed.

Leaning back in his chair, Dante summed up in a perfunctory manner, “So that's what we have. You'll charm this boy – make up something about the magic lands you came from, about its extraordinary spells so that it makes him talk about his own interests in magic. Then casually mention you heard about a magic map to an enchanted place and make him show you it. Get as close as you can.”

“And what’s next? It's not like he'll gladly lend me the map to use.”

“That's where your extraordinary talent will get the use.” He threw his head back and folded his hands behind his head.

Violette's back straightened in surprise. “My talent?”

“Potion making.”

She lowered her brows with a grain of salt, waiting for an explanation.

“We'll put him to sleep. I was thinking about some potion or sleeping powder. Can you make something like this?” He gazed at her.

“Of course I can,” she reproved. “You can doubt me, but never my potion skills.”

“Great. I'm glad we came to an agreement with this.”

“But I do need ingredients for it,” she warned.

“Fine, then we'll go to town to visit a potion shop.”

Violette's brows rose. She didn't expect there to be magic shops after all these stories about how people don't trust magic here.

“If they have potion shops, why can't we buy some sleeping powder there? Don't they have ready to go potions?”

As much as she was happy to hear she will have a chance to brew a potion and use her talent for something useful, she couldn't understand why to choose such a hard way if it can be bought from the store.

“They have problems with some potions here, especially with sleeping ones, too many stories involving magic poisons,” he said vaguely. “It's forbidden to sell something that can harm other people.”

“Harm?” This way of wording took her by surprise. “There's many sleeping potions with different effects, some of them completely harmless and can be used just for a better sleep,” she retorted.

“I know. But people here are familiar with the bad side of said potions. You can sell flying potions or any other silly things like that but you can't sell something that can put a person in a suspended state.”

Her frown deepened. “But not all sleeping potions and powders do this.”

It was hard to believe someone could claim a sleeping potion as something dangerous when it was one of the most easy and available things to buy where she'd lived. Every other wizard knew how to brew it and it could be easily found in any healing store.

“On my land, people use sleeping powder if they have problems with insomnia. It's like some kind of medicine, even if it's magic itself,” she remarked.

“I think it's possible to get sleeping powder here but it'll be a hard long journey. All the more, I'll finally get a chance to see you in work.” A faint grin appeared on his face, though his words seemed sincere. Was he interested in how she was brewing potions or did he come up with a trick she is yet unaware of?

Her gaze fell to the empty cup as Dante said at last, “We'll go to the shop tomorrow as the sun settles down.” With that he got up, not bothering himself to say something else.

Violette supposed it was all for today, this night she could just sleep. It was so unusual now: for the last week she was only able to go to bed in the morning and by the evening she had to be ready for a new trip. She had no idea what to do, and yet she still got up to her room.

CHAPTER 25

A MANUAL ON HOW TO BECOME A DUCHESS IN ONE NIGHT



"Get up, Little Witch," the voice bounced off the walls as Violette lazily cracked her eyes. And closed them again.

"It won't work that way," Dante said and she could feel like something – someone – pulled her ankles.

Her eyes opened wide before she kicked him with her leg.

"What do you want?!" she fumed.

"Time for a lesson on how to become a duchess in a few hours."

Violette could swear she heard the fun in his voice but she didn't look at him, instead she closed her eyes in the middle of his speech and rolled over with her back to him, continuing her sleep.

Then she heard a deep tired sigh, and already started thinking it's him giving up and leaving her alone but then she felt the tossing of the pillow and her head slammed on the bed surface. It's okay, she can sleep without a pillow. She had no desire to get up right now; she didn't know how long she was sleeping but she was certainly sure it wasn't a long time ago when her body touched the bedsheets for the first time. She was tired. But Dante probably wasn't bothered by that. She yawned and then she realized something was keeping her away from the bed.

"Hey!" she yelled, happening to be in Dante's hands.

"Oh, sorry, did I interfere with your sleep?" He ironically grinned as she cut him a look full of enmity.

A pinch twitched between her brows. “What is your problem?” she blew.

“Have I finally caught your attention?” His face turned stoic.

“Is that how you get girls' attention?”

“Only stubborn ones like you. Will you listen now?”

“Only when you put me down!” she tossed, trying to break out of his arms.

“So you can crawl to your bed again?”

“Exactly. I'm happy we're finally understanding each other,” she tapped him on his chest and tried once again to wriggle out of his hands but it didn't seem like he had any intention to let her go.

“We don't have much time before the ball. And you need to give a good impression on the Lord, or he won't believe a word from your mouth.”

“Wasn't it you who said I am attractive and smart?” She strained through a fake smile.

“Did my words get stuck in your head and make you think about me at night?” he teased and, Gods, she hated how it sounded.

“Put me down,” she ordered.

“Or what?”

She pierced him with an even more intense gaze and it finally made him agree with her.

“Only if you promise to not go to sleep again. We have work to do.”

“Just put me down,” Violette grumbled.

But he'd done no move, staring at her and waiting for the answer.

“Fine, yes. I'll do whatever you say.”

“Oh, really?” His mouth curled into a smirk. “Whatever I say?”

“I can't with you,” she puffed and her feet touched the floor.

“I see you really don't like to get up.”

“Yes, exactly, I don't like to be woken up by someone in the middle of the–”

Violette's gaze drooled to the window to check the time, and only met darkness. It was unlikely the sun would rise any time soon, and while she might claim she missed the sunlight, that wasn’t entirely honest. The sun remained oblivious to all misdeeds she’d committed over the past week, but the stars, the moon were different. They knew, they saw; they felt more like confidants, keeping her secrets hidden from the daylight.

“Give me a second,” she yawned, stretching, “to dress.”

“You have a right to do whatever you want,” he sang and plopped down on her bed, throwing his hands behind his head.

“I said out.” Her finger pointed at the door.

He raised his hands in surrender and stalked to the exit.

“Call me when you're ready.”



VIOLETTE SHOOK the last remnants of the doze away as she sat on the bed.

“I just want to remind you: if you can sleep less than humans it doesn't mean I can,” she murmured, trying to focus.

“I won't keep you up all night…unless you ask about it.”

“Oh, believe me, that is the least that I want,” she waved. A drowsy deep yawn escaped her mouth, making her wholly stretch. “Why didn't you say about it earlier? I thought we were done for tonight.”

“I didn't say good night.”

She side-eyed him. “It's your regular behavior.”

“Then maybe it was just an excuse to see this pinch between your brows,” his lips stretched in a grin.

Violette frowned.

“Anyway, what’s now? What you wanted to teach me, uh, the master and expert of noble society?” she taunted, leaning with her palms on the bed.

“I might impress you a little.” A restrained smile came across his face, while his fingers reached to a music box with a little gramophone inside on the fireplace. The enchanting and soothing melody began to play, filling the room with new colors.

“Why do we need music?” Violette wondered.

“Did you ever hear what people do at balls?”

“I know about the dancing part. Don't say you will teach me how to dance.” She waved her hand, not believing this creature knew at least something about ballroom dancing, despite how gracefully he'd moved.

“Do you know how to dance?” he asked, ignoring her bitterness.

“I–” she started but then paused. “Not really. I mean, I think I know something about it but I didn't really practice anything.”

“This is the reason why we are awake right now,” he said and moved in her direction, then offered her a hand.

Her back straightened and she immediately rose on her feet.

“So, starting with steps. Nobody wants crippled legs after dancing, especially our dearest lord. Not until he shows you the map, at least.”

Violette lowered her head and looked at her legs. “I think I am not clumsy.”

“I didn't say you are. However, I would definitely argue about it,” Dante chuckled and

stepped closer to her, one of his hands wrapped around her waist, another reached to her palm.

Violette intently watched his movements, she felt unusually constrained, a knot tied in her stomach, confusion sneaked under her skin. Her shoulders strained as his touch sent shivers down her spine, his fingers gently intertwined with hers.

“Relax, Little Witch. You look like you have a test which your whole life depends on. It's just a dance.” He pulled her closer, his hand straightening her back, fingers running along her backbone.

Violette felt as her heart fluttered, a nervous feeling settled in her belly, it felt much more intimate than it looked. The space between them shrunk, leaving too little to breathe. Dante’s hands were warm and delicate, despite them being twice as big as hers. But mostly that made her nervous was cluelessness to what she was even supposed to do, while he looked absolutely confident and gracile.

“The key in dancing is your stable legs and your confidence. The pattern is actually really easy, it contains six steps,” he said and moved forward. “Basically you just repeat everything your partner does but backwards.” He led her into the next three steps.

Violette felt like a doll, her legs were firm like a log before she adjusted. Her eyes settled on her feet and she had been feeling incredibly awkward until Dante stole her attention.

“What are you doing?” he inquired and it made her eyes raise to his. The line between his brows testified to his bafflement.

“Counting steps.”

Hesitation in her voice only confused him more. “Why?”

“Isn't that what waltzing is? You said it yourself, your legs should be stable,” her gaze dropped back to her shoes.

“You will never learn how to dance if you keep staring at your feet. Raise your eyes.”

And she did as he said. Her eyes met his. He looked so graceful; almost like he could be a duke himself. Even with the bizarre mask obscuring half of his face, his confident demeanor radiated a remarkable sense of sophistication. And it made Violette get lost in the depths of his eyes for a while. In this light they didn't look as gloomy and dark. The riddle she wanted to solve behind what was hidden in them was still haunting her. And she could swear, for a second, under a certain angle of light his eyes flashed with a dark blue hue. She reminded herself to keep count. Her legs seemed heavy and her movements weren't as natural as Dante's, despite how much of an unnatural thing he was.

“You think too much,” Dante remarked. “Your head is full of unnecessary thoughts and fears. Let it go. Feel the music. Feel the rhythm and let your feet lead you.”

Her eyes dropped to her feet again as she almost stumbled over his leg.

“No. Keep your eyes on me. The waltz is about eye contact, Little Witch. It's a connection, creating a special bond. If you want to charm the young Lord you should look in his eyes. A long stare and he will feel the click.”

She looked in Dante's eyes. *A long stare and he will feel the click.* Can Dante feel this click too? It's been said the eyes are the mirror of the soul. But what about eyes which belong to someone who doesn't have a soul? Because it died a long time ago? His eyes sparkled in the dim light of the lamp but it still was full of darkness and secrets.

“Are you not afraid I'll charm you too if I stare at you too long?” she let out a tease, flirtatiously smiling.

This earned her a soft smile.

“Why do you think I am not already under your spells?”

“We both know it's not true,” despite how simply it sounded from her mouth it settled a strange feeling inside her. A sadness, by chance? If she'd think about this she'd get scared to find out it pleased her to know Dante is

charmed by her presence. Meanwhile, he didn't say anything, only continued leading her in the dance.

Soon enough Violette broke the silence to scatter this feeling away. “Did you often attend balls?”

“I grew up in a place where balls were a big part of everyone's life. My evenings were occupied by dancing pretty often,” he said, his voice didn't radiate any delight.

“Did you like it?”

“I didn't mind it.”

He gave her such a dry answer, it made her wonder about his opinion even more. He was pretty good at dancing, making her question whether the reason behind his grace was because of this or due to him being a vampire? She thought his moves, his gait were elegant because he's a vampire but right now she started doubting this guess. She recalled a memory of him sailing though the castle's hallways. Could he also be a part of a court? A son of a royal advisor? Or knight? Last thought seemed ridiculous to her in a split second. How could she even imagine him being a knight? An honorable protector, a valiant guardian with a duty and moral principles. No. It was not about Dante at all. But maybe, an heir of a count or any other noble family.

She didn't want to lose her chance to know more about him, pushing her luck further.

“What is that supposed to mean?” she asked.

His face was void of any emotions. “Sometimes balls were boring or I just wished to be somewhere else but mostly I didn't mind spending my evening in the crowded ballroom,” he stated, as their legs kept moving, following the placid melody.

“Couldn't you just not go there?”

“My family wouldn't let me do so.”

He didn't talk about his family before, she was surprised he mentioned them.

Her eyes sparkled in the dark, lashes fluttered. “Was it mandatory for your family?”

“Pretty much.”

Again this dry answer, she needed to get something else out of him.

“So what did you like about balls then? Don't tell me it was dancing.”

“Why not dancing?” The corner of his lips slightly lifted upwards.

A joyful shrill sound filled the room. She needed some time to stop laughing, finding it hard to imagine Dante would be such a romantic soul and between all of the joys ball could offer, he'd choose dancing.

She cleared her throat. “You are not looking like you'd enjoy dancing.”

“Maybe, but I liked pretty girls I was dancing with,” his mouth turned up in a sinister smile.

“I am not surprised then,” she jeered. “Is this the real reason why you're giving me a dancing lesson?”

His smile widened and his fingers squeezed her waist tighter. Violette tensed under his touch as he pushed her closer to himself, so close that she felt the warmth of his solid chest against her face.

“And what if so?” The warm breath tickled her ear as he lowered his head.

Violette's heart skipped a beat. Maybe two. His voice did something strange to her, she could feel it in her bones – the sudden heat. And so she pulled away just a little bit to raise her gaze to find his dark eyes looking at her under the black long lashes. At that moment, she could swear she had never seen anything more beautiful than his face, his arms wrapped around her. In this darkness, where only a glimpse of light behind him illuminated the room. And it doesn't matter how cold he looked, being able to turn the candle flame into ice; how dark his eyes, how sharp his face was – Violette felt like he could set the room on fire just by his words and the way his voice sounded. The way he *looked* at her. The way he was standing there. And she had no idea why the sudden move of his fingers on her waist made her feel this particular way.

Was she staring too long? Doesn't matter because he was staring at her all this time too. But what was he thinking? She wanted so badly to take his mind apart to the smallest details to finally put the puzzle together she was trying to solve all these days. And she didn't know why she wanted to do it but she felt like it was a vital thing to do.

“You've been silent for too long,” his words cut the air. “Relax, Little Witch. If I wanted to spend time with you I'd choose something more interesting, perhaps something that would not make you get dressed.”

She narrowed her eyes, her brows knitted. “Like I would let you. This,” she pointed her finger at him measuring the distance between their chests,

“is the closest we'll ever be.”

He hummed under his breath with a provocative smile and then spun her so her back hit his chest. What was that tingling down her spine about?

His chest heaving against her back as he lowered his head to her ear with a soft smile on his face. “Don't worry about this, Little Witch, romance is the last thing on my mind. Even with such a beauty like you.”

And then he turned her back to him, one hand behind his back and the second connecting with her palm. After making a half circle he stepped back, slanting his head to the side.

Violette's cheeks flushed as she escaped Dante's gaze, still feeling his touch on her waist, leaving a peculiar trace deep down inside.

“You are not as bad with dances as I thought,” he voiced. “Now, do you know what to speak about?”

His words pulled her out of her thoughts. “Well, we need him to show me the map, so I guess about magic.”

“Not exactly. You need to start from something less provocative. The conversation on such an event usually starts from the weather, compliments and other boring stuff,” he waved. “Start from complimenting his manor but don't be too generous with your words, you're a duchess after all.”

Violette looked to the side, thinking about what to say.

“The evening is quite…nice?”

Dante was staring at her deadly for a minute before speaking again, “Tell him that his house is admirable. You should show him your appreciation, it's a good tone, just don't look like you're easily impressed. Then he'll eventually ask you about your trip. Say it was a long road, but don't complain, ladies don't do it.”

Violette chuckled and then pretended to be serious again. Dante fell silent.

“Something is wrong?” he asked.

“No, not at all,” she said firmly and gave him a serious look.

He looked at her with a distrusting look but continued, “About your trip. As you know he loves to travel, try to seem like an adventurer to him. You are pretty good at it, aren’t you?” A smirk lightly curled his lips.

She indeed was good at finding adventures…Not like she was really happy about it. She would rather prefer something safer and more pleasant than dealing with vampires and cemeteries.

“Try to act like you are more important than you are, but don't be mean. Don't laugh too loud, be unapproachable and yet flirtatious. Make him want to impress you.”

Another snicker left her mouth before she could suppress it.

“That's it. What was that?” Dante’s brows wrinkled.

“Sorry, I just didn't know you're such an expert in manners,” she confessed, covering her mouth with a hand.

“I lived in a castle for a long time, if you remember.”

“Oh, so you can be a gentleman then?”

“Was I not a gentleman to you?” His hand dramatically landed on his chest.

One of her brows raised, mouth bent in reproach. His soft chuckle somehow warmed her heart, it was a strange feeling, not something she would expect to feel because of Dante.

Luckily, their lesson ended without crushed legs and Violette didn't embarrass herself. Speaking frankly she was left with quite pleasant feelings after that night. She couldn't imagine it was possible but the time they spent together was somehow enjoyable. She felt tiredness creeping up onto her but it was a nice one.

CHAPTER 26

HIDDEN INTENTIONS



Time had flown too fast in Violette's mind. Just a few days ago she was working in her little shop and now she was on her way to shop with a vampire, and she even met the Lord of Vampires which actually sounded absurd. His words couldn't leave her and she tried to ignore the dagger he gave her but sometimes she could swear it was whispering to her. Despite not having any desire to use it, thoughts about it had been scrambling into her head. Caidas said Dante is a monster and he had no place in this world, otherwise it's in danger, which didn't make much sense to her; Dante looked too apathetic to be plotting atrocities against others but she knew for sure – he wasn't innocent and this mask on his face only proved the fact he wasn't trustworthy.

They passed a little clearing surrounded by trees as Violette grabbed the dagger on her waist, her fingers felt its hilt encased with gems.

She never wanted to hurt anyone. The thought of killing someone seemed horrendous, even if it's someone as terrible as a night demon. And she wasn't sure she wanted Dante dead, aside from his terrible character he didn't do anything bad to her. If only she had more time to investigate what exactly happened, what put Dante in his mouth trap. But he was an impenetrable wall and was very careful with his words. He'd never let her know more than he wanted her to know, he treasured his secrets as if they were inviolable oaths and it's unlikely it would change in the near future, if ever at all.

Her reflection glimmered in the blade, bathing in the moonlight. A new image surfaced in her memory. That servant in the witch's reminiscent…he killed her. What if he will kill more people if she'll free him? All their blood will be on her hands because she let it happen. She once again felt creeping cold in the empty dark room: Dante sitting on the ground, his shirt stained in blood. Now she imagined the girl who he killed; she didn't deserve such a fate…Nobody does.

She squeezed the dagger's tilt.

“What are you doing?”

Violette’s eyes snapped to find Dante staring at her, his brows writhed. Her throat went dry as she stumbled upon the words. She had to come up with something. Quickly.

“I was thinking maybe you'll show me how to use it right?” Not a shiver in her voice. “It's no use if I don't know how to…use it?”

“Where's gone 'I'm a wizardling, there's nothing I can't do'?” he sneered.

“As you remember,” she accusingly pouted her lips, “my magic doesn't work on vampires and I was thinking maybe it's time to learn how to protect myself…From someone like Nigel or Caidas.”

Dante stared at her for some time with a completely unreadable face, Violette almost believed he'll laugh at her at any moment but instead “It's reasonable” came out of his mouth.

And then, by a quick move he knocked out the dagger of her hand and pointed it at her. Violette's brows jumped, she reared back.

“First, you should move quicker. Dexterity and agility are essential if you really want to fight with a dagger,” he said with a serious tone, then flipped the dagger over with the hilt facing Violette. “Second, confidence.”

She cautiously took the weapon, not taking eyes off his face.

“You must trust yourself and be stable with your intention. You can hurt someone only if you really want it,” he uttered. “If you are not confident in your thoughts you won't be confident in your movements either. You'll never be able to stab someone if you're unsure or have doubts, Little Witch. Never be scared you won't hit the target. Just stab. There's always a chance you'll still hurt your opponent even if not in the place you wanted. You'll win some time anyway,” with these words he stalked closer.

“One of the best parts to hit – the thigh above the knee. Another – side of the abdomen but it's much more difficult to reach.” Dante came around

from behind and wrapped his palm around her hand on the dagger. “Hold it tight and with honor, it won’t bite you.” He dropped her hand. “Now imagine I attack you, what would you do?” His hands in a second landed on her waist.

Violette's spine straightened.

“I…” she stuttered, thinking, “I'd hit you in the stomach and I'd step on your foot…I guess.”

“Okay. And what about the dagger?” Dante's head lowered to her closer.

“Uh…” A strange excitation slinked under her skin. “Stab you in the thigh?”

“Much better. You can also hit me in the knee to throw me to the ground and put the dagger to my throat. Like this,” he whispered, moving her hand to her throat, another wrapped around her shoulder.

Violette swallowed, her eyes fixated on his palm around hers.

“But if someone did it to you,” he continued, “you can strike them with your elbow in the stomach as you said, then in the nose or their jaw, and while they're in pain, push in the shoulder to knock them down from their feet. Let's try, fight me, Little Witch,” he said, his grip tightened.

Violette's body tensed and she weakly hit him in the stomach.

“Come on, it should be much stronger to hurt me.”

“I don't want to hurt you,” she let out.

“Very bad,” he chuckled. “I thought you disliked me enough for it.”

She frowned and kicked him harder.

“Slightly better,” he said, his voice too even to think he felt something.

Violette's brows twisted together, she gathered all her courage and hit him with all her finding force. He clearly succumbed to her but dropped his grasp. Then she blew a strike at his nose and pushed him down to the ground, pressing him harder and pointing the dagger to his throat.

“Is that better?” she blew, her voice came out panting.

His face was only a few inches away from her as she overhung him. His eyes flashed with merriment, a shameless smirk contorted his lips as he purred, “Oh, I just wanted to end up beneath you.”

Violette sputtered and pulled back, shoving on her feet.

A delightful chortle escaped his mouth as he lay on the ground.

“But you were good,” he said, lifting his body. “Need more practice though.”

Violette shot him an evil look. “Don't even dream,” she pressed. Dante responded to her by gritting his teeth.

CHAPTER 27

THE POTION SHOP



The potion shop Violette entered had nothing in common with the shop she worked in, except the fact that they were selling ingredients for potions and ready to use liquids.

There was no magic pot that was brewing something on its own, nothing was fizzing in the corner, no magical haze in the air, however it did smell with a familiar floral scent. The picture she saw in front of her reminded more of a healing store with its herbal fragrance and lack of *magic*. It was calm and quiet here. Not like she was expecting fireworks inside the store and a crowd of wizards, but there was nobody except them, a seller and a woman examining a basket with colorful vials.

Violette was familiar with the silence her potion shop was submerged into when it was quite empty: there were days when she had a free minute for herself and her experiments, however, even in these moments there was never so much hush. Instead of voices and footsteps the air was occupied with the sound of boiling pots, fizzing and gurgling liquids. The mop was dancing around the room cleaning after customers, the rag would fly along the shelves, collecting dust, and the smoke in the air could plunge anyone into a restless atmosphere, blocking every sound from outside. The store which Violette and Dante found was nothing like this. This place reminded her of any other shop in this town – nothing special.

A middle-aged woman behind the counter was flipping the pages of a book. Behind her a wall with many shelves stuffed with different plants in amusing pots, few wooden and marble painted boxes. On a counter were

two baskets: one contained glass bottles with liquids, another a few pouches with colorful tags, assumedly full of herbal tea. Next to the cash register were lying several books about brewing potions.

The most interesting part of the shop turned out to be a small shelf on the other side of the room. It was stocked with potion bottles that had intriguing effects. One contained a tiny storm cloud that repeatedly flashed with lightning and then faded over and over again, while another held a luminous liquid with little, gold doves flying inside the glass. There was also a bottle with a miniature swirl and sparkles that burst every second; and if you leaned closer you could hear a laugh in the vial with a blue haze.

At the end of the room Violette's eyes found a wooden arch leading to a pantry rather than another room.

The woman behind the counter raised her head and lazily greeted the visitors. Coming closer, Violette did the same but with much more enthusiasm.

“Where can we find ingredients for potions?” she asked politely and her face lit up with an amiable smile.

The woman sighed and idly waved her hand in the direction of the archway with a half open dark green curtain. Dante didn't wait a second and crossed the room, disappearing behind the curtains as Violette thanked the vendor.

Violette hurried to the hidden room. Dante was regardfully eyeing the wooden shelves stuffed with pouches, jars and tins and glass boxes with ingredients under the muted light of a lamp. It was looking much more promising than she expected after what she saw in the other room. At least, they had many options of the components to choose from.

The room was almost as small as a closet, chock full with tall shelves around, height to the ceiling. In every square was displayed a jar or a tray signed with a name of the ingredient. There were herbs in the glass open boxes, herbal pouches, the same as on the counter, jars with liquids, tins with powders and small bowls with spoons sunk in the bulk. Almost all of them were pretty full.

Violette's nose crinkled as the strong scent of flowers and herbs reached to her the second she stepped in, making her feel dizzy, and creating a compressive ring around her head. The stiffness in the air made it harder to breathe.

She sized up the shelves and curiously leaned to the shelves, studying the jars. Her eyes stopped on the glass vials with potions – not that astonishing as in the main room. There was a little yellow bottle with shimmering fluid labeled as ‘Sweet dreams’, a bottle in the shape of a tree leaf with the label ‘Growing potion’, a blue flacon tagged as ‘Memory fixer’ and…

“Love potion?” Violette was surprised as her eyes took a glimpse of a heart-shaped lilac bottle with a pink liquid. “So they don't have a sleeping powder thinking it's a bad thing but have a love potion?” An insolent smile emerged on her face as she took the bottle in her hand. Such hypocrisy. Love potion was much more dangerous than sleeping potion at her discretion.

“People here believe love is a beautiful thing and can't cause anything bad.” Dante's mouth twitched as he leaned on the shelf near. “I consider it ironic, since most of their famous stories are quite tragic, even if some of them get their happy endings after all.”

“But it's about a choice. Putting love spells on a person won't make them love you truly, just take their choice away to love and the right to be loved,” Violette resented.

Dante slanted his head to the side. “Let me make it clear to you who shops in the stores like this: desperate people who want to change their lives, witches and wizards for ingredients and people who seek something magical and entertaining, like a firework in a bottle. Nobody cares if these shops sell love potions if it doesn't kill anyone.”

“This is completely strange for me.” She placed the bottle back.

“I think so.” He turned away from her, viewing the opposite closet. “You grew up in a society of wizards, magic potions and spells, all of it is usual to you. But most of the people here don't understand how magic works, some of them afraid of it, some curious. You see,” he effortlessly explained, “people here love magic, magic things and spells but they don't want to be involved with it too much. They like to watch magic, to experience it but they don't want to use something they can't control. They like only the pretty side of sorcery and avoid all the ugly stuff it can do.” His hands folded together, measuring the shelves. “They don't want to cast spells themselves and use potions that can have side effects, it's easier for them to buy something that they can't really mess up.”

Violette perused the shelf for the right ingredients, ruminating about his words. Dante’s eyes got back to the girl, he watched closely where her hands landed and what she was examining. She grabbed some lavender, which was logical enough since these flowers were used in sleeping medicine. And after a long pause he decided to switch sides and lean on the back of the shelves, tilting his head to the side.

“I hope you don't have in mind a plan to trick me, Little Witch.” His voice curved with a smirk.

“I am the one who wants it to end as quickly as possible.” She sent a glance at him, taking a small bottle with yellow leaves.

“Sweet mallow? Didn't know it has some magical traits.”

“It's for the taste. I'll pour the potion in the drink, it's better not to have any strong taste that could arouse suspicion,” Violette explained.

“Good,” he said meditatively, his eyes glued to her. “Also, I was thinking if there is something you can do to make him forget everything that happened, especially you and your questions about the map?”

“I can,” she replied, putting forget-me-not flowers in a small velvet pouch.

“Tell me about the ingredients,” as well as it sounded like an order, his voice was soft as silk, instilling unwonted amity.

“Don't trust me?” Her lips curled upwards.

This earned her a feeble smile. “I'm just invested.”

Was it true? She'll never know, but she did as he said.

“Forget-me-not says for itself,” she voiced and then leaned forwards. “Night blueberries for strong sleep, cloudlet pillows,” her hand grabbed three pink fluffy balls which looked like cotton candy from a white plate, “to fall asleep faster, periwinkle juice to mix and stardust berries…for beautiful dreams.”

He looked at her questionably.

“The least I can do for him after lying and stealing is giving him nice dreams,” Violette explained. “He'll awake elated, convinced everything was a dream.” Her gaze dropped at the silver berries in her palm, sliding in the pouch. “It won't harm him, just secure his sleep with good emotions deprived from stress and worrying about what happened.”

“Very well.”

Violette’s search for the last ingredient was completely unsuccessful, no matter how long she scrutinized the shelves it didn't magically appear there. She looked around for something she could stand on to take a look on the highest shelves where her eyes couldn't reach. Luckily, there was a small soft pouf nearby; it wasn't really tall, but it allowed her to look at least three shelves higher. To reach the last two though, she had to raise on her tiptoes.

Dante pored over her. “What are you doing?”

“Trying to find the last ingredient – dust of forest fairies,” she puffed, trying to reach another shelf with her eyes.

Suddenly she felt Dante's hand around her hips and then he lifted her into the air, settling her onto his left shoulder.

The blood rushed to her cheeks instantly, the butterflies fluttered in her stomach.

“Is that better?” Dante asked before the silence settled.

“Yes,” she whispered, her voice barely audible, as she swiftly redirected her focus back to the shelves to conceal how much his seemingly effortless gesture had unsettled her. Just one touch was all it took.

She rearranged a couple of bottles, reading the labels, but sadly didn't find the required ingredient. Her eyes again ran over the vials and bowls on the two last shelves, but they also didn't yield any results.

“You can put me down.” Her eyes fell down and she swiveled in his arms to face him as he was lowering her.

Their eyes met, shivers went down Violette’s back. For a few moments they stayed so close to each other that she could feel the warmth of his chest, his breath. His hands stayed on her waist, her blood was pumping. The silence occupied the room as they froze just like the time around them. Some unsaid words started flying in the air but were never meant to be voiced out loud as Violette finally took a half step back and let her mouth speak.

“I didn't find the dust but the good news is we can find it in the wild,” she murmured, removing the hair strand away from her face.

“Good,” he nodded, not taking his eyes off as she tried to avoid eye contact, not ready to face his gaze yet. The goosebumps down her spine still were tingling her skin.

Violette shook this strange feeling off and handed him a couple of bottles.

“Here, keep your hands busy.”

“I'd rather keep my hands busy with you,” he purred.

Violette's lashes fluttered, face flushed and then changed with the grimace as she pushed another bottle right into his chest with force.

The little bells above the door chimed as they were leaving. It was already dark outside, the streets covered with white powder, sparkling under the street lights.

Violette raised her eyes to the moon which took its place in the night sky among the stars. Dante made a step from the stairs.

“Wait,” she hurried her way, her violet cape streamed behind her, cloaking her pale shoulders, tied into a loose bow on her chest; a blooming violet rose swirled around her neck with dark strings above. Today she wore her favorite dark purple strapless dress seep with warm hue and divided in a two-layered skirt, trimmed with frills deeper in color along the neckline and the edges of a tight corset, tied with lilac ribbons, and embellished with purple flowers on the both sides of her hips.

“And where will we find the last ingredient?” Dante asked as she aligned with him.

“Forest fairies usually leave the dust on the flowers in the morning by the river. I've read that they are quite common here. I'll go to the river tomorrow.”

Dante stealthily glanced at her. He might have doubted that her plan was good and there was no guarantee she'd really find it but even if so, he didn't decide to voice his thoughts out loud.

“Will the potion be ready on time?” he asked her as they crossed a street lined with colorful little shops.

“Yes, it's not hard to brew,” her voice came out confident. She knew her work and she meant it saying he can't doubt her potion skills. Violette's mother was a great potion maker and, maybe, her daughter wasn't that great yet, but she was indeed talented and diligent. She didn't inherit only her stubbornness but her determination as well.

The next few minutes they spent in silence as Violette was scrutinizing shop windows on their way.

One of the shops had a beautiful setting with diminutive gold figures dancing on the snow in the little town, another was decorated with snowflakes landing on the exquisite fairy village. The warm light coming

from the windows of the little cottages with roofs covered in moss reminded Violette of one of the fairytales her father once read to her. Her eyes took a glimpse of the night forest with an unicorn who galloped along the field of blue flowers in the other window. Right next to it – the shop of ‘Ribbons, Textiles and Barrettes’ had the most amazing showcase, delighting Violette's heart. The metal scissors were cutting floating pink and golden ribbons in the air. In the center – a marble delicate figure of a woman with a needle in her hand measuring a silver thread, glimmering under the soft light, twinkling with stars. Breathtaking sight.

These displays shimmered with magic, more enchanting and closer to Violette's imagination of the Valley of Enchanted Stories than anything she had seen in the past week. It reminded her of the streets of her lovely hometown that her heart was already missing. She'd never thought she would crave strolling by so familiar streets of the Sorcevellis. She's been passing them everyday, and hadn't seen much special in them but now…she wanted to step on the Street Of Spells and Potions and see her little shop, go down to her favorite cafe, and glimpse at the window of a little hat shop across the road. Then she'd turn to the Cursed Street through the Enchanted Alley to buy her favorite chocolate mousse with stardust and laughing berries on top, and then finish her little walk by the Midnight Square to watch how lanterns light up the park.

The sights of the red and green ribbons settled the particular feelings in her soul. Warm star lights and a tall tree with kids dancing around in a window case sent her a flash of realization – it was the holiday season. That's why every other window was decorated so beautifully, they were preparing for the most magical time of the year.

The streets of Sorcevellis were even more magical during winter holidays. Every shop had seen it as their duty to compete for the most beautiful festival showcase. It felt like wandering through an alley of a thousand different magic stories as every window was telling one of them. The city had transformed into a splendid snowball you could only find in the most whimsical and beautiful shop. She missed it. Her heart started aching for familiarity.

Violette liked to walk these streets with her parents, later only with father, in the beginning of December, studying new displays in the stores’ windows; watching people decorating streets, preparing their houses, cafes

changing their signs and menus, and adding new hot drinks to the season. Everything was transforming into a winter fascination, little holiday fairytales collected in one book. The streets wore the scent of peppermint and hot chocolate. The warmth of the festive buns warm the hands after the frosty weather outside, while snowflakes gently cover the roofs of the houses, roads and people's heads. Colorful holiday ribbons and packages flashing across the open streets. A joyful singing scatters through the alleys, the sound of the bells flying off the walls of buildings and cheering merry greetings echoing from every corner. She remembered it too well to not be veiled by nostalgia. The holiday season was already at the door, while she was too far away from home. And yet, if it means that next holiday she'll be able to spend it with her father again, like in the good old times, she was ready to make this sacrifice. Just to have more time with him later.

Violette stopped in front of a window with a beautiful silver gown. Her heart pitter-pattered at the sight of a gorgeous dress. The little reminder that the ball was coming and it was closer with each minute. And with that, her little mission as well. Her gaze slipped to the mesh iridescent sleeves of the gown, and the silver long ribbons on the waist down the skirt. And she'd stand there longer scrutinizing the beauty if Dante's voice didn't pull her back to reality and she had to catch up with him.

In a few short moments they were already standing on the threshold of the inn.

The evening didn't end – she had to prepare the potion for tomorrow's soiree. Fortunately, the fairy’s dust could be added later so she had all night to peacefully brew it, without a worry. Well. Almost peacefully: Dante decided to stay near all the time, watching her work. Now she finally got his intentions – he just wanted to get on her nerves.

“And what do you want to do?” She glanced at him from the side, placing all the ingredients on the table.

“Just want to see how you brew the potion,” he said simply.

She narrowed her eyes, taking another vial full of liquid. It was hard to believe he had nothing suspicious on his mind.

“Fine,” she mumbled, pouring the liquid into a little black cauldron. The first bubbles on the liquid surface gave a sign to add another ingredient.

“You don't need a recipe for it?” Dante asked, glancing at the pot.

“Sleeping potion is not something rare,” Violette noted and stirred the liquid with a soup spoon – the only spoon she found in the kitchen. “I had plenty of practice in the shop to brew it for years. You know, a lot of people have insomnia.”

Violette's eyes hadn't left the brewing potion. Next thing that fell into the pot – dried petals of forget-me-nots, then after mixing she poured the periwinkle juice and the liquid inside the pot gained a rich shade of dark blue. A flowing lavender steam emitted in the air, dancing in the light of a dim lamp.

Dante silently observed all Violette's actions as if it was very important to not miss anything. It could be said, he found it quite entertaining by the way he tilted his head to the side. A half-smile formed on his face as his eyes followed Violette measuring the juice from night blueberries which she mashed in a teacup with the spoon.

Then she added two tablespoons of the puree and the steam changed its hue to a vivid blue, the liquid inside the cauldron hissed with bubbles that emerged on its surface.

The silence that settled down in the room wafted the suspicion in Violette’s soul. Her eyes flew to Dante just in time as his fingers reached a vial with the periwinkle juice and before he could take it she hit his hand with the spoon.

He grumbled, shooting her a glare with a question.

“It's my area of work, so there my rules apply,” she declared.

“You could just say.” He raised his brows and the rigorous crossed his face again.

“That would be no fun,” she said smugly and continued to stir the potion.

Her fingers pulled one and a half of the cloudlet pillows. The little pink puffs dissolved in the dark liquid and the potion changed its shade once again, this time to a dark periwinkle.

“So you do it not only because it's your work?” Dante expressed.

She questioningly raised her eyes to him. “What do you mean?”

“I thought you make potions only because you are paid for it, not because you actually…like it.”

Violette stirred the potion once again, pondering.

“I love brewing potions. Don't you have something you like to do?”

Dante glanced at her with a mysterious smile.

“Except following witches to their place of work and making deals with them,” she added teasingly.

Dante parted his lips. “How did you know?”

She blew a chuckle. “No, really. Do you have something like a hobby?” She looked at him once again, while he seemed to think about her question.

“No,” he finally replied.

“I don't believe you.”

“Everything I liked was left in my human life,” he said and pushed off the table to leave. This time his voice sounded frigid and gruff. Violette felt like the distance between them stretched again. The carefree atmosphere evaporated and the cold set in the room instead.

“Are you sure it will be ready before the ball?” he asked.

“Yes. It has to stay overnight. In the morning I'll go to the river and then I'll finish the potion.”

Dante thoughtfully nodded.

“Good,” he said but instead of leaving as he intended he suddenly turned around.

“Lastly,” he added, throwing something in her direction. “Take this. If something goes wrong.”

She caught the little object – a little vial with pink liquid, almost lilac color. She recognized what it was.

“What is it?” A question escaped her mouth, confusion swept over her face.

“I thought you were an expert in potions,” he taunted. “A love potion.”

“I know. But why? You want me to use it on the Lord?”

He sighed and crossed the room. “You want to get to the trophy room? If so, that's what will make him do anything for you.”

“You think I can't charm him?”

“Well…” His hands crossed over his solid chest, eyes rolled, lips slanting in a weak smirk.

“Really?” she spat, offended. “You think I can't pull a man without a magic spell? If I don’t have a boyfriend that doesn't mean I can't flirt or I can't be interesting.”

That was a lie, she didn't know how to flirt and it was making her nervous but she wouldn't let him humiliate her like that. She believed she

was a pleasant person to be around and she could befriend the young lord without any potion, especially such a pathetic one.

“Prove it,” he suddenly voiced.

She went still. “What?”

“Prove it. Imagine I'm your target and you have to seduce me. Go on.”

“I won't do it,” she frowned.

“So you can't prove it then?”

“I…I–Oh, you're such a menace!” Her teeth bit into her lower lip. “Did somebody tell you that it's so hard to even stay in one room with you?” She drew a step, her brows furrowed. “You're so ignorant, and selfish. And thinking about yourself so highly, just like any arrogant nobleman. It's getting old, Dante. You’re no better than Lord Adrogans.”

He kept his eyes on her with an unbothered smile.

“Tell me, how is it to be that careless? How is it when nobody even crosses your mind?” She stalked closer, leaning forward.

“I didn't say nobody is crossing my mind, Little Witch,” he paused. “I just ignore it.”

“And who are you thinking about?” she nearly whispered. A deep breath escaped her lungs as her lips turned out to be close to his face, her eyes radiating boldness.

He straightened up.

“Does it really matter? You just said I am arrogant and selfish, didn't you?”

“Maybe, I believe there's something else in you.” The line between her brows weakened as her lips slightly parted. Her chest heaved, almost touching his with the last words.

“Then you're just wasting your time,” he said with a faded smile. “You know, girls like you, who believe and see the best in people usually get trapped in bad situations.”

“I'm already in one,” she breathed slowly, air hot against his skin. Just inches away from his face.

His gaze was no less intense and he was about to open his mouth but then he almost closed it, leaving a barely visible gap.

Violette's eyes left his and slid to his lips in the shadow of his mask, lingering on them just for a few seconds. He did the same, the muscle in his jaw twitched. And then his eyes got back to hers.

“Not bad.” The corners of his mouth curled into a satisfied smile, shoulders loosening. “Hope that guy will be even more easy prey.”

Violette beamed, leaving, she finally proved him something. She hadn't remembered the last time she was that proud of herself.

CHAPTER 28

ONE OF US IS A LIAR



Violette’s head was occupied with dreams about the warm bed which waited for her in the inn as she was pacing her way near the river. She even tripped over a tree root sticking out of the damp ground – the drowsiness was swept away in a blink. Her eyes switched to the root and made her question how she managed to miss such a big let. Perhaps she really needed to make a heist if she wanted to go back to resting in the soft sheets before the ball. And no more dreaming, with her luck next time she'll find herself standing in the middle of the river.

The swirling fog obscured the surroundings. The sound of the wet grass, newly coated with dew, rustled softly while the sun barely woke up, still sweeping away the remains of the night. The damp ground near the river stained the soles of Violette's boots, their tips covered in water drops. She got closer to the edge of the river, searching through the stones for any sign of the forest fairies.

Her walk lasted for half an hour when she started to realize it might take longer than she'd wished.

She yawned, passing a little wooden bridge. Her eyes laid at the water surface as she finished examining the space – no signs of magic. Though she wasn't about to give up, after all, the forest fairies weren't something rare to see. Last time she met them on a walk through the city park before her work shift. It was a nice distraction as that day promised to be extremely busy – the Week of Enchanting Sales just started and she knew

it'd be a really tough few days of bargaining and complaining with some stubborn customers. Good thing she was not less persistent.

Twenty more minutes passed by and, as she believed, her eyes finally found a place where the fairies held their celebrations last night. A few stones glimmered with the gold freckles and the clear surface of the water was strewn with sparkles, shimmering with signs of charms.

Violette quickly scooped the dust from the nearest stone in a flask and took another one in reserve. Nothing made her happier than knowing that she could finally go back and flop in the bed to meet the wondrous world of dreaming.

The time after flashed by in a moment, one blink and Violette was already standing in front of the mirror, looking at her reflection.

She was still in her regular violet dress with black lace, thinking how to change it to make it up to the level of a noble ball gown. The dress she saw yesterday in the town broke the surface in her mind. She really liked its skirt and the neckline seemed quite fitting to her likeness. She'll definitely take notes for her own design but she might make some adjustments and she wasn't about to betray her favorite color, so the dress unquestionably had to be in shades of purple. She should look elegant and she'd like to keep the style of her homeland fashion.

She whirled in a spot, scrutinizing her current dress and finally the picture in her head came together. One sway of the magic wand in her hand, a few more and her dress started to transform into something completely new. The skirt lengthened and hit the ground, adding a few dark tulle layers to make it more bouffant and regal. She left the silhouette simple and delicate. A tight bodice close fitting to her waist with lilac ribbon at the back created an imitation of a corset, the front remained a heart-shaped neckline trimmed with the exquisite black lace. Her neck had been wrapped in a silk dark lilac ribbon with a silver pendant. The cherry on the top appeared to be the long sheer black gloves reaching her shoulders where they connected to the bodice, leaving her collarbone exposed. Her hands sparkled in the dim light of the lamp as she admired the work that was done.

Her eyes found her reflection in the mirror – she looked magnificent. The dress wasn’t adorned with a multitude of petticoats or elaborate designs, but it was perfect for her and the occasion. She put her magic wand

in a hidden pocket, then walked up to the table where she left the Vampire Slayer. Her fingers froze above it, eyes reflected on the blade and then she sheathed it, hiding on the thigh. She smoothed the wrinkles on the skirt and looked in the mirror again. She was ready. She *hoped* so.

The hall appeared to be empty. The inviting light of the candles illuminated the living room. Violette trailed her steps near the window – the moon shone in the sky brighter than usual. A clear sky spangled with stars and the beautiful constellations, plugging something warm and familiar in her chest.

When her mother died, Violette found her peace in the star embroideries, looking for her between the million lights on the dark firmament, seeking her advice. Any signs she’s there and watching her. But even now, staring at the sky, all she could see is the blackness that separated them.

Nervous feelings engrossed her body and mind, sweat covered her hands under the sheer fabric. She didn't want to be a coward but she couldn't fight the agitation inside. It was her first ball and she wasn't just a regular guest, not herself. She was supposed to play a duchess, and something deep inside her heart whispered that this night will not be as successful as she hoped. Maybe, it's just fear and doubts of the past talking – whenever she is with Dante something bad always happens. Was it him or was she terribly unlucky, she couldn't calculate. She just hoped she was wrong this time.

Her gaze lowered to the tall trees bathing in the moonlight. A sudden glimpse of light drew her attention. She narrowed her eyes, peering into the darkness. Two dark eyes shimmered in front of her. The giant figure a few feet away outside – a shaggy monster with pointed ears. No. Not a monster. A *dog*. A huge black dog resembling a shepherd looked right onto her. The chill of fear swept over her – everyone knew what it symbolized – a sign of bad luck. Violette hadn't believed in most of the superstitions but there were undeniable ones and this one was not an exception. The black dog which is also known as Tinieblas – a harbinger of darkness and tragedy. A rare glimpse of such a magical animal was compared to a death sentence. She blinked and – it was gone, disappeared as suddenly as if it'd never been there.

Her eyes kept looking for the phantom through the window. Was it just in her head? Could her imagination, her nervous state, make it up? She stood there wondering and peering at the mysterious creature, not even hearing the steps behind her back.

“There you are. Didn't know you already came down,” the male voice slipped to her ears, bringing her back from the deep thoughts. And she turned away from the window.

Dante was standing at the last stair, adjusting the cuffs on the dark sleeves. His attire consisted of a dark blue coat with silver embroidery on the collar and sleeves, black pants and high leather boots. He looked much more put together than usual, even all buttons of his coat were fastened. She couldn't say which style suited him more, this or his unbothered way of dressing, however he looked like a noble in this light, perhaps even a prince.

“I decided to get ready earlier,” Violette said with a vacant smile.

His eyes examined her with an appraising glance, raking over the trim on her chest then down to her waist but then he abruptly broke it off, raising them to her face. “Great, then we're ready to go.”

But before stepping outside, she once again looked in the window – nothing.

A BLACK CARRIAGE was waiting for them outside; it had been a while since they'd taken a ride in it, not to say that Violette missed it – she still remembered the spinal pain it caused her before.

Dante opened the door and kindly offered her his hand to get inside.

“How gallant,” Violette purred in a sarcastic manner.

Dante decided to remain silent, he looked pretty serious. Was he nervous about tonight as well? She doubted so, however he might not believe in her part of their affair.

The road to the Adrogans family estate shouldn't have been long. Violette kept staring thoughtfully out the window, the image of the shaggy

dog wasn't leaving her mind, sowing a disquietude in her soul. Was she indeed just imagining it? She no longer knew if she could trust her own eyes. It could be just a regular black dog, passing by. *Maybe…*

Dante seemed to notice her distress.

“You are too silent today. This doesn't look like you,” his words didn't immediately reach Violette's consciousness, her mind was flying in the clouds.

She slowly turned her head to him, and blinked, pondering over his words.

“Are you nervous about the ball?” he asked.

“No,” she let out languidly, her fingers toying with the wrinkles on her dress. “I–Do people here believe in bad signs?”

Dante pulled his brows together, surely surprised by her question.

“Depends. Mostly, yes. Because of the old tales people are disposed to believe in some portent or augury,” he voiced meekly.

“For example?”

“As absurd as it could sound, the thunder before an important day…I don't know, coronation, used to be considered that witches are up to something bad. Or it is believed that crows and eagle owls are servants of the evil sorcerers,” he waved carelessly like it was nonsense. “Suddenly extinguished lanterns indicate the presence of evil spirits.”

“What about a black dog?”

“A black dog?” His eyes turned into two matte black stones, jaw straining.

“Tinieblas to be precise,” Violette suppressed a worried look.

Dante stared at her for some time and then finally responded, “It's an image of gloom and despondency. Not a good thing to see.” A line drew between his brows. “Why are you asking?”

“I was just curious, we have the same belief in my lands. Most of the tales originated from here, I was wondering if it's one of them,” she tried to sound nonchalant. Her eyes rushed to the window again. He only confirmed her fears.

She didn't know if she assured Dante with her calm wave, most likely not, but he didn't continue this conversation. Likewise, he switched the topic.

“Let's repeat your steps today.” He leaned back, crossing his legs.

Violette's eyes broke away from the altering landscape. Her fingers stuck into the delicate fabric of the dress.

“Well, I have to start a conversation with the Lord, be nice but a bit haughty. Then smoothly change the flow of the talking to the magic objects and charm him to make him show me the trophy room. Then I'll put him to sleep with the potion and take the map,” she finished, thinking if she forgot something to mention.

“Very good. Let's hope you won't tip over while dancing,” he said with a too serious voice to take his words as a joke and it made Violette pout.

“What are you going to do while I keep Lord Adrogans busy?” She raised a brow.

“I’ll make sure nobody will interfere with you,” he replied placidly.

The corners of Violette’s eyes creased, a silent question froze in her eyes.

“I'll take care of the guards,” he condescended to explain, “and will make sure the way to the trophy room will be clear so nobody will see the Lord in your company. We don't need any curious eyes.”

“How will I make my way back?”

“Signal me out of the window.”

“A window? Do you want me to climb out?”

He looked at her as if it was an obvious answer. Well, it wasn't a bad idea, after all she could just conjure a staircase out of vines or branches.

“And don't use magic,” Dante stated, as if hearing her thoughts.

“Excuse me?”

“It may attract unwanted attention. I'll bring the rope,” he said at last.

Violette's lips pursed – climbing out the window was definitely not on her to-do list this evening.



THE TREES BEGAN to change to lanterns, the winding road became wider and the stars in the sky began to fade from the bright light emanating from

the large fenced house ahead. The road started to fill with other carriages, the noise of hooves mixed with the sound of spinning wheels.

Violette risked sticking her head out the window just a little to see the flickering lights of the estate. The enormous mansion surrounded by gardens and fountains towered over her head as they drove under the arch through the black ornate gates.

As her shoes stepped on the cobblestone her head rose to the sky, gazing at the magnificent palace, meanwhile other guests were passing by, reminding her that she was a duchess after all, she shouldn't look that impressed, it's probably not even the biggest estate on these lands.

The high triumphal gate was right above the grand marble staircase, fully opened to the guests. The figures in colorful costumes, illuminated by warm light from within, were disappearing behind the arch as Violette and Dante continued their way by the white stairs.

Violette's gaze wandered along the walls of the lengthy corridor. Her head followed a path from the dimly lit, candlelit painted ceiling, downward. Grand columns adorned the walls as they made their way to the main hall.

Her eyes stopped at the reflection in a gold-framed high mirror. Her brows knitted and lips parted as she realized that the only reflection in the mirror belonged to her. *Only her.* Dante, who walked along with her, seemed not to reflect in it. Looking around, she grabbed him by the hand to rush them both to pass the mirror quicker before someone would notice it.

His fleeting confusion dispelled as soon as his head turned to the mirror.

“Relax, Little Witch,” he said nonchalantly. “Most people don't notice it as well as my mask.”

Her hand remained on his arm only for a few more seconds.

“How do you preen yourself if you can't see your reflection in the mirror? Knowing your self-esteem I don't believe that this hair styled itself,” she babbled as her eyes struck at him.

“My morning starts like any self-respecting princess, I go out to the lake at dawn and braid my hair in the water reflection while the birds around me sing early serenades,” he said.

“Do you also wear pantaloons?” She beamed.

“My situation is not that bad yet,” he frowned.

A loud chuckle escaped Violette's mouth she had to suppress. The corners of Dante’s mouth slightly got upward but the seriousness still remained on his face.

They followed the other couple a few feet away from them until their silhouettes disappeared in the passage flooded with bright light.

The archway entrance led right into the ballroom – the grand affluent room was sparkling in the aureate candlelight. The high ceiling garnished with an elegant central chandelier was high above the polished to a shine floor. Down there various silhouettes were gliding in exquisite gowns: women dressed in every possible shade, their voluminous floor-length skirts trailed elegantly along the marble and the expensive jewelry glittered, catching the light with every move; men wearing brocaded doublets and coats in an ensemble of meticulously polished high boots. And the servants with trays were circulating between them, offering drinks and canapes.

The pleasant atmosphere intertwined with joy and clinking of the champagne glasses. The resounding laughter and conversations bounced off the high walls sprayed with gold floral arrangements and crown moldings which gave the room special sophistication, along with the thick velvet drapes over the large windows in a color of burgundy.

Violette looked down as Dante offered his hand to escort her down the balustrade split stairs.

“Do you see him?” Violette didn't take her eyes off the ballroom as her legs were leading her down to the spotless marble floor.

“The owner doesn't show until the ball officially begins. When all guests arrive he'll be presented and open the evening with his first dance,” Dante explained evenly.

He looked tepid and casual, almost like this type of life was a common thing to him, however he attended his last ball a lot of years ago. He was much more relaxed than Violette – her heart was racing with excitement and nerves all at once. What was happening in the hall caused delight in her soul. She'd never attended such a momentous evening.

She finally ripped her eyes off the crowded hall and looked at the vampire. “How will he know I'm the duchess then?”

“I'm sure his servants will tell him or already did. I saw how the guards shared a look when you were presented. He won't lose the chance to meet you.”

Dante dropped her hand as soon as their feet met the marble floor, and paced to the windows with people drinking and happily spending their time while other couples were flowing in waltz.

Violette's eyes ran around the room, contemplating the imposing clothes of those present. Her gaze caught a beautiful teal gown tattered with golden embroidery and diaphanous sleeves, then one of the most extravagant hairstyles she'd ever seen – a bunch of feathers and glitter flowers braided into honey locks. A berry blue glimmered before her eyes, taking her breath away – the silk skirt of the dress beaded with silver stars, a dark corset tightened around the young woman's waist laced with glistening ribbons. Expensive jewelry was blindly sparkling in the candlelight from all sides: pearls, diamonds, sapphires, rubies and other peerless gems. The opulent fabrics were floating in the air with every movement of the dancing couples, beautiful coats embroidered with gold and silver were flickering before her eyes.

Golden bubbles were rising in the champagne glasses in every other hand. One of the men, perhaps older by a few years, was attired in an emerald doublet with silver lining which resembled the silhouettes of the different forest animals. Another looked less reckless and extravagant, dressed in a long coat of sky blue with white embroidery over the fabric sheathed in dark blue quadrangular stones.

The music – a melange of the violin and piano, wrapped around Violette until Dante spoke again.

“Make sure you'll be close enough to the stairs when he shows up, so he'll invite you for a dance. But don't be too close, act quite disinterested at first.”

“Why is it so complicated?” she sighed more to herself than him.

A soft chuckle fell from Dante’s lips. And then he extended his hand.

Violette's eyes widened in surprise, as if he'd done something blatantly strange.

“Are you inviting me for a dance or there's something on your sleeve?” Her eyes stared at his palm like he was holding a poison or his hand was simply poison itself. It felt as if he offered her something absolutely obscene instead of an innocent dance.

A complacent smile twitched on the corners of his mouth as his gaze trailed to her.

Her fingers squished the soft fabric of her dress. “You didn't tell me we'll be dancing together.”

“I didn't tell you a lot of things, did I?” His arm still extended, offering her his company for just one dance. One dance…it's not hard, she can do it. Nothing will happen if she'll just put her hand in his and let the light absorb their presence between other silhouettes. Though she looked at him suspiciously.

“Let's practice one more time to not embarrass you in front of Adrogans,” he said with an encouraging smile.

“Oh, yes, because being embarrassed in front of all of these people is better?”

“Come on. Who cares what they say? They're not your goal tonight.”

She looked at his palm again, still frozen in the air. One dance, right? What could possibly go wrong? She slowly landed her palm on his and let him lead her into the heart of the evening.

Their fingers interlocked, his hand resting on her waist, hers fell on his strong shoulder. She tried to avoid his gaze, the nerves knotted inside her. Because of him? Because of the people around? She couldn't tell.

“What did I tell you about the eyes?” His voice sounded like a velvet blanket for a moment.

Violette raised her eyes. Perhaps for the first time not trying to disobey him. Her gaze was strained, the storm preparing itself. She tilted her head, showing that she was all in his attention, while Dante looked much calmer and carefree.

His moves were smooth. He was flowing on the floor between all these costumes and sparkly skirts, cutting through the air. He led her so casually and naturally like he was born in the ballroom, well, it was almost like that. His feet were flying upon the shiny floor, elegant and airy. She didn't notice how she was doing the same – he made everything look and feel so effortless, their hands intertwined over and over again as they were dancing, all while the skirt of her dress was flying in the air, repeating the moves of their legs.

“So how are you finding the evening?” He spoke first, his face matched the level of confidence of his moves.

She let herself think for a second and then said, “I think I could live this life, without all of these ridiculous rules of right tone, of course.” Her eyes

escaped to the side for a split second. “But the mansion is beautiful, music is great. To be honest, I just really like my dress,” her confession earned her a soft smile, breaking through his shield.

“The dress is really elegant,” he stated dryly and after a short pause he added with a less restrained tone, “and you look not less gracious in it. You're holding up very well.”

He spun her around before his hands caught her again. Their legs followed every beat of the beautiful symphony, the sweeping but graceful movements of their hands, and the unbreakable eye contact awakened strange feelings in Violette's chest. Her eyes explored every depth of his. If her eyes resembled a storm, his was a dark room with a dim sapphire light which rarely sparkled in this blackness. His brows drawn together in insistence, making Violette's lips separate, wondering what he was thinking about. The silence between them seemed too loud. She felt like he was looking through her the same way she was looking through him. Like he was exploring the very depth of her soul reflected in her eyes, trying to resolve what's going in her mind, as if he was no less curious about her than she was about him.

They appeared near a glass door leading to a little garden, the flowers bloomed behind them bathing in the moonlight.

He delicately turned her around in the dance.

“Now, to the less pleasant part, Little Witch,” he rasped and then his warm breath caressed her ear. “Or should I call you a *Little Liar*?”

The shivers slinked under her skin.

“What do you mean?” Her breath hitched, she tensed in his arms as her heart was ready to jump out of her chest.

“I am just wondering when you'll stop this masquerade and stop lying to me?” She didn't say anything as he was already continuing, not really caring about her answer. “We both know about the Vampire Slayer hanging on your pretty thigh.”

Her heart skipped a beat, feeling his fingers groping the dagger over the fabrics of her dress.

Dante’s voice came out unusually low, like he was about to break the wings of a bird trapped in a cage. *Her* wings.

“So when were you going to kill me? While dancing? Maybe while I’m asleep? Or perhaps, you were planning to stab me while looking straight

into my eyes?”

She roughly spun on her heels, facing him. His jaw tightened and eyes dimmed, empty as two black holes.

“It's not what you think. I didn't want to use it,” her voice broke. She felt as if she needed to guard herself even though she didn't believe Dante would hurt her. Maybe, she was a fool to think this way, but she certainly believed he wouldn't kick her out for this.

“Didn't want to as ‘didn't plan to use it’ or ‘wish you'd not use it but would anyway’?” The pinch between his brows yanked.

“Dante…” she started gingerly. Drawing a breath, she looked around to see if anybody was watching. Fortunately, the guests were much busier with dancing and champagne.

Then he roughly took her by the wrist and led to the garden to avoid interested glances.

The ballroom was left behind the glass doorway. It was a perfect place for a little privacy without the risk of being suspected of unnecessary connections. The light from behind was piercing the garden, but, at least, nobody could hear them.

Violette broke off, her heart trembling, “Dante, please, I actually didn't plan to use it. I'm telling the truth.”

“Are you sure about it?” he said darkly.

Now she started to notice the spite he acted out of, the swirling shadows in his gaze. “You are still in doubt, otherwise you wouldn't bring the dagger with you. And even so, why didn't you tell me about your little conversation with Caidas then? He gave you it when we were there, right? I started to suspect that something was wrong after.” He rubbed the corner of his jaw.

“Yes, he made me an offer but I didn't agree to it.” She shook her head, her brows tangled together in remorse. “He handed me the dagger anyway, to think but I–I wouldn't…I don't want to use it. I am not a murderer.”

“I know, you're too weak for this.” It didn't feel like a compliment but acid from his mouth, as if it was part of her weakness – *not able to kill.* It was unfair but she let him speak. “You've already had a chance to kill me, you had a few chances to be correct and you missed all of them.”

“What do you mean?” She backed off.

“When I was training you.”

Her eyes widened, and she blinked rapidly as if trying to process what she had just heard. “Did you already know?”

“I am not stupid to not sense the real Vampire Slayer,” his voice was sharp and crisp. “I was wondering if you didn't want to use it or if you just weren't ready and were waiting for a perfect moment to do so. I was rather interested in what you'll come out with, when and how. Then I started doubting you'll do it at all. Until today.” His eyes found hers, forcing her to hold a breath. “I wasn't planning to do it before the ball started but you turned out to be a naughty, sneaky girl, bringing it with you. Maybe, you are not a person who would kill but I have no doubt you can betray me if there will be a chance. I see I should’ve slept with one eye open around you.”

Violette didn't wait long with her response.

“It isn't fair,” she greeted her teeth. Her pulse was pumping, and not because of fear but because it felt like he accused her of something she didn't deserve. He made her look like a traitor but what was he? Right, the unworthy of trust vampire. She felt bitterness tweaking her tongue.

“If I wanted to betray you I would already do it. Without any dagger involved, I would still come up with something.” Her eyes looked up, “Don't blame me for taking the dagger with me. What am I supposed to do? Everyone is telling me you are a monster, vampires hate you and Caidas call you a disaster if you were free. You were imprisoned for a reason, and everyone expects me to do something because I am the only one who you let close. And still you did it only because you have the intention to use me.”

Her voice shattered, she didn't notice how it started shaking and how her anger and worry let out. Her eyes glinted in the darkness as she unleashed all her emotions that were eating her from inside all this time. The confusion, doubts, lostness. Everyone expected something from her and she couldn't cope with it anymore, locking it deeper and deeper inside as she always does. She didn't want to make it all about herself but she could no longer pretend like everything was okay. And it was not her fault. Not. Her.

“I am not the one benefiting off this situation,” Dante's voice was sharp like a knife trying to cut her heart even deeper.

“Oh, don't say that!” she snapped back. “You were the one who came to me. You knew what you were going for when I didn't even know you were a

vampire. Don't put blame on me for being scared and hesitating. I have no reason to trust you more than Caidas. Despite how many days went by, I still know nothing about you!”

The blood under her skin was boiling, however with that the tears glistened in the corners of her eyes. But no matter how overwhelmed she was, she didn't let them out.

Dante's gaze was regardful, the undetectable emotion frozen on his face. He didn't make an attempt to stop her as her voice continued to crack.

“You didn't make it easier, didn't let me know something about you to make me feel some sympathy for you. You are still a *stranger*. And it's not fair that I am the one who has to do something and decide what is better for others. All I wanted was to save my father, not all of this mess!” She slowed down, trying to steady her voice, “Yes, I do have doubts about you but you have no right to make me feel guilty about it. You did nothing to gain my trust. Our deal started with lying so no, I am not the only liar here. And I'm just a human. And I'm scared. I am terrified to be honest, and it makes me confused because I'm trapped in something I don't understand and I don't know what to do and, honestly, I don't want to! I was put in this situation where I have to choose what to do but it's not my responsibility. I don't have to choose. Why me? You think I am happy to make this decision? It's your problem and the vampires’, never mine. Excuse me for not throwing the dagger in Caidas' face when he put it in my hands; For thinking what I should do with it and if I can trust you with this information. But don't make me feel guilty because of it. I didn't choose it. I just want it to end and…I want my normal life back.”

Finally her lips pulled tight, the corner of her mouth trembled and the look she gave Dante said she was truly done with all of this mess.

He studied her face, her eyes. Not a muscle moved on his face. What he was thinking was a pure mystery. Then his jaw clenched and he let out the words in the air to fill the tense space between them.

“You are right, it's not fair, not for you, not for any other human. I didn't think it would turn into this. You indeed don't have any reason to trust me but we share one goal. I told you not to trust other vampires, not because I'm scared that they can convince you to betray me. I said it because I don't trust any of them and would never do so if I were a human. All I said was

only to protect you. I promised I won't let anyone harm you and I meant it. But I didn't think I should beware of you too.”

Violette swallowed, did she imagine it or had she indeed caught a pinch of sadness in his tone?

His eyes lowered for a brittle moment before they found hers again.

“I forgot what fear can do with the human heart and mind.” His shoulders loosened, a sorrow crept into his voice. “And yet, I'll give you advice, Little Witch. If you kill me then you won't go back to your previous life, you'll not be the same. It will change everything.”

His features softened, brows knitted and eyes gleamed with understanding. He didn't say anything else as a triumphant melody came from the hall, announcing the arrival of the host of the evening. They had to go back to the ballroom.

But Violette didn’t move, still staring at Dante as if she waited for something else he would say. As much as his last words didn't sound angry or peeved he still looked pretty gloomy and rigorous.

She didn't know if he fully understood her but he seemed to be kinder than she expected after all of the emotions she threw his way. Perhaps he understood how it is to be human more than he was revealing. Perhaps he still remembers how it feels to be embroiled with hesitation.

“You should go,” he said as his dim eyes bored into hers.

She pursed her lips, heading to the ballroom. And despite her numbing in the aisle for a brief moment, she didn't turn her head back. No, she disappeared into the crowd of opulent skirts and quilted frock coats.

Her steps quickly brought her to the center of the room and picked the spot nearby; she remembered Dante's words to not be too close to the stairs. Her eyes caught the champagne tray and she quickly picked a glass from a passing courtier to look casual and *bored*.

Her heart was still shrinking, and she let her gaze drift to Dante – his eyes were peering at her from the crowd and then he simply nodded. She hoped it was a gesture of support – if he could feel such a thing after their conversation.

A male frame appeared at the top of the stairs. Lord Adrogans began to descend the stairs with elusive grace, as the eyes of all the guests were riveted to him. He was a tall, fit young man with chestnut hair brushed back, a few strands of which were falling over his bushy brows. His attire

comprised of a short silk brown coat needlepointed with a fanciful pattern, beige pants and polished high boots.

Violette watched his every move as she remembered to look more casual. Well, she knew how to pretend, it wasn't the first time she had to show other emotions instead of what she felt, even when a hurricane reigned in her soul. She nervously looked back, trying to find Dante again, but then a soft and gallant voice hit her ear.

“Lady Nora.”

She spun her head – two green eyes were looking at her from above. *Lord Adrogans*. Great, she didn't even have to do anything to get his attention. Probably shouldn't have doubted Dante's words. This time.

“I'm honored by your presence.” His lips curved into a kind smile as he leaned to kiss her hand, his lips brushed over the thin fabric of her gloves.

Up close he looked like a really handsome young man and much taller than she'd imagined. He had high cheekbones, an aristocratic chiseled nose and a passionate gaze. His eyes radiated life – so different from the vampire she knows.

“Lord Adrogans.” Her legs intertwined for a curtsy.

His voice was soft as velvet, “I hope your trip was safe and didn't cause any inconvenience.”

“Thank you, it was quite enjoyable,” Violette aimed for a refined and graceful tone, carefully considering each word and avoiding any impulsive urge to share her thoughts.

She breathed as she continued, “However, who doesn't like a little adventure in between the passing landscapes outside the window?” Her lips curled in a jaunty smile. She hoped it looked better than it felt. Her heart wasn't as good at hiding the truth as her face, it was thrumming with such a speed and in every beat was rattling *Liar*. Good thing Lord Adrogans wasn't a vampire and didn’t have sensitive hearing, otherwise it would give her away in an instant.

For her own luck, her fake smile worked like a charm and earned her a laugh. She'd never heard such an expensive sound: short and ringing. It sounded fake but she always imagined rich people were sounding somewhat like this. It was so different from the sharp and complacent laugh of Dante, maybe because he'd never tried to impress someone or gain their favor unlike Lord Adrogans. She was an interesting thing to him this

evening, a gem in this room. She was a *duchess*. And finally she realized how important she was, how welcomed she was here. Even if all this was for Lady Nora, not her. With this thought the strain loosened its grip on her and she raised her chin, letting herself be dazzling tonight.

“Indeed, I would never give up on a good adventure,” the words left the Lord's mouth.

“So we share the same interest then.” Her eyes shone as her lashes fluttered.

With an elegant movement he extended his hand to her. “Would you make me an honor and be my partner for the first dance, Lady Nora?”

Her eyes dropped to his palm. The inner voice encouraged her to put her hand in his. So with a new breath she gave him a sweet sincere smile, while placing the glass with champagne on a silver tray.

“Lead me,” she said and let him take her to the center of the room.

All the guests' eyes were locked on them – the young lord and the duchess, a truly tempting occurrence for new whispers.

The violin started playing, another one joined. Then, a piano, cello notes and a light flute motif accompanied, plunging the ballroom in a transcendent composition.

Violette looked straight in the Lord’s eyes, trying to not look away, although it seemed to her not such an easy task at first – she'd never held eye contact for this long before, except for Dante…But sometimes she herself hadn't noticed how quickly time flew when she looked into his bottomless sapphire eyes; there was something in them that she couldn't unravel and probably this made her return her gaze to them so often. Nevertheless, the Lord's eyes were green, almost a pine shade. His gaze was kind and yet assertive. She wondered, was he really like that or was he just trying to impress her? Maybe both?

She found it not too hard to make her gaze lock with him after all. He didn't make her nervous as another man in this ballroom and it made it much easier for her to pretend she liked this evening and his company. Well, it was partly true: Lord Adrogans was nice, seemed respectful and, of course, well-mannered. He didn't allow himself insolence and shameless comments. It was easy to talk with him, however, she was thinking twice before letting the words leave her mouth, holding to a memory that she is a duchess and should withstand the game until the end.

Surprisingly, she still hadn't noticed his arrogance – it brought her thoughts back to Dante again. He was somewhere in this room. Her eyes escaped the Lord's gaze just for a brief moment to find another one. Sharper. Colder. But she felt like she wanted to see his familiar face. And yet, her eyes didn't find him, more likely he already started his part of the plan. Or, perhaps, he found himself a quite pleasant company here.

“How do you find our places? Isn't it quite boring compared to your homeland?” Lord Adrogans asked, however Violette felt like this question was only to return her eyes back to his. She lost the courage for a second.

Breathe in. Breathe out, she reminded herself.

“I would say another word to describe my feeling about this place,” she expressed.

The focus slowly started to get back, though her head started spinning, overwhelmed by the dances and the crowd around. Maybe, she hastened to the conclusion that she could live a life like this. Or was it the aftertaste of the conversation with Dante that still haunted her? She remembered to put on a smile as a knot started tightening in her stomach, the lights began to seem too bright.

“What I am trying to say,” she went on, “your lands are quite different from what I'm used to.”

And it was true. Chantoret – the land she claims to be from, was an imaginary place but Sorcevellis was not. And it felt different from the fashion to the lifestyle and society rules.

“Really? What exactly surprised you or possibly disappointed?” He spun her once more, while the other guests were waltzing around them, the sparkles of their costumes glimmering under the warm light.

Violette realized she needed to hasten with her plan to escape the dance floor as soon as possible. It was time to get closer to the topic of magic. She must choose the words wisely.

“Your land is truly magical but I didn't see even a bit of your magical legends that are so famous,” her voice sounded neutral. “It seems that wizards and witches are quite a phenomenon here but I still was hoping to see something great: infamous artifacts and proof of really strong magic. It's hard to believe in all these tales if you can't see evidence of their existence.”

She crossed her fingers in her head praying it would work. These words should convince him, *intrigue* him. She saw how his eyes lit up when she

started talking about the place she came from. He should be interested.

Please.

“Oh, so you didn't see much of our magic then, I assume,” his voice didn't lose its amusement, eyes wandered over her face.

“I didn't have a chance, unfortunately.”

“It's easy to fix.” His mouth twisted in an exultant smile, eyes inflamed with excitement as a kid who was very happy to show her his new toys. “I have a quite impressive collection of magic artifacts, if you'd like to see.”

He spun her once again, following the notes of the violin. Violette felt like she might trip over any moment, the ground began to disappear from under her feet. And although her mind began to spin the same way as her body, she aimed to continue the conversation.

“You have an interest in magic, I presume?” Their faces met again, his hand slipped on her waist back, fingers on the other intertwined with hers.

“I find everything magical – fascinating,” he expressed fervently.

He didn't take his eyes off her through the whole dance, like he was enchanted just by her being here and talking to him. This picture was quite different from the one Dante told her, she wouldn't call Lord Adrogans haughty, however she might feel how prideful he was.

Violette tilted her head. “How come? I heard people here don't really like being involved with magic, not on the level to explore it.”

“Uh,” he sighed and threw his head back with a joyful chortle. “Yes, some people are really like this. I think they're too prejudiced about all these curses and sorcery.”

“Well, magic can be as dangerous as beautiful,” Violette's voice came out deeper than usual.

“It doesn't mean we should avoid it. Better to study it to know about it, don't you think so?”

“I more than agree with you on that.” Her eyes glinted with pure delight. It felt like years since someone had the same opinion as her. She finally met someone who was not scared of magic or wanted to kill her just because she is related to it. “So how did your interest in a magic world start?” Another step.

“My family,” Lord started enthusiastically, “was friends with a family of wizards. I remember how thrilled I was when I saw them casting spells. Their house was truly a treasure place, it was filled with magic right to the

roof. They decided to show us a little performance with tricks, that day I was convinced I have to be a wizard too. Unfortunately for me, days later I was told it's impossible if you are not magicborn," an ironic sigh left his mouth. "If only you'd seen how disappointed I was with that news. But luckily, it didn't stop me from collecting magic stuff and dedicating my time to studying it."

"That deserves respect," Violette nodded. Feeling as her legs tangled in the fabric of the dress, she forced a strained smile and shook her leg hoping nobody would notice it.

"What is your opinion on magic? From our conversation, I gathered you don't find it any less interesting – am I right?" Lord asked, hope burning in his eyes.

"I grew up with magic," she said honestly. "It was always a part of my life as a witch," she quickly remembered people here not familiar with the definition of wizardling.

"So you are a witch?"

Oh.

Her stomach dipped. Was she not supposed to say it? She didn't know if Dante mentioned it in the letter and they didn't discuss if she should introduce her heritage, however it might only spark Adrogans' interest in her.

"I am. And I would say pretty good witch," she didn't lie with this one, although she wanted to sound more haughty.

"Compelling!" His smile became even brighter.

It was a peak, she could feel it and just as she thought about it the music finally stopped. She thanked the higher powers for that: her legs would not survive more dances without ripping the dress off.

The cello began to play again, this time the musicians set a more lively tone. How lucky Violette was that their dance wasn't that agile because she'd definitely embarrass herself with all that bustling and jumping. She only hoped she wouldn't be invited for another dance. What she really wanted was to make her way to the collection room Lord Adrogans already admitted to having. Her mind went through a full circle thinking when is the appropriate time to ask him about that. She only could rely that Lord Adrogans would be very excited after their conversation to offer her a tour himself. Maybe she needed to lighten his interest a little bit more, he

already was sparkling with happiness as their fingers opened and they bowed to each other.

She let words slip from her lips as her hands gracefully folded in front of her, “Maybe, one day I'll have a chance to look at your collection to know if it's *really* that great,” she uttered.

“Why wait?”

Thanks God, the butterflies flew through her whole body with those truly magical words. She did it, the next step was probably the hardest but she was ready to take it, just for the sake of ending this masquerade.

“Now? You want to leave your guests?”

“Only for you,” he said, nodding slightly while leaning closer to her. “Well, in the name of magic as well.”

Violette tried not to smile too obviously, but she felt a victory, even if it was a small one.

CHAPTER 29

THE COLLECTION ROOM



The long hallway laid with green carpets and drapes quickly changed to the corridor lined with many double doors. The doorknob turned as Lord Adrogans pressed on it. The mechanism clicked and the door swung open letting the bright light in.

“Welcome to my little but as I'd call it, splendid, collection.”

Not conceited at all.…Violette thought to herself.

She reverentially nodded, a warm smile embellished her lips as she walked past him. Her eyes trailed to the room – it wasn't a big hall or enormous room, quite the opposite – it was cozy and a nice place to spend a time in.

A warm muffled light spread throughout the room, illuminating it from bottom to top. Along the wall was an elongated cabinet with protruding drawers and a glass top, resembling display cases in museums. Various papers that Violette assumed were spells and other magical parchments laid under the glass lid. A large mahogany desk with additional drawers on the surface took its place in the middle of the room. In one of the inkwells she observed multi-colored feathers: one of them definitely belonged to the rare bird called Fuga – dark green with a purple tint towards the tip. The rest looked less fancy, but they were all different colors and shapes – one gray with flowing patterns, the second absolutely snow-white, almost dazzling, two blue, different in several shades, and another short one in soft pink. Violette knew that many feathers, especially those collected from magical creatures, held interesting and unusual abilities. Some of them could write

without ink and reflect what was written only under the moonlight, others made painted objects come to life or were able to hide a message among the words. One day she even heard about a magic pen that can bring to life anything you write or draw on paper, but like many old tales, it could be simply made up.

Nearby lay several books in various bindings. It was not difficult to guess that they weren't just novels or science fiction. Books about magic have always been distinguished by their colorfulness; they were usually also foiled with gold or silver patterns and lettering. Generally, it was dark shades of various colors – green, teal, indigo, royal blue, mulberry, violet, magenta and others in the same range. However, some ancient spellbooks could be bound in brown and beige leather. At least, this rule applied to the places where Violette came from. Here, she noticed, some people seem to mask books with other more ordinary covers because magic and everything connected to it might be forbidden in some kingdoms. It still was hard to wrap her mind around it as magic was an inevitable part of her life, of life in Sorcevellis. It was on the streets, in every house, in every shop, the air was saturated with it. Magic was *everywhere*.

In a place where every third one was a wizard it was hard to impress someone with your powers if you weren’t a special kind. Wizards with distinctiveness were extraordinary species – someone who had a gift of illusions or telekinesis, or could move to any place at the snap of a finger. A wizard who could shapeshift into an animal was another gem and spectacular phenomenon. Violette wasn't any of these, but she'd never sought such attention. Though, she surely was thinking she's a talented potionist. But she *gained* it, she wasn't born with it. Years of practice, lessons with her mother, days spent over the books, making research. It wasn't easy, but it was hers. Her accomplishment. Her passion, something she loves to do. And she missed her little potion shop – she could feel a part of her mother's soul left there. Of course, Violette wanted to see new places, but she knew for sure she'll be always returning to her shop. It was her home, especially since her dad got ill and she wasn't at her house that much lately. All her time she spent between vials and magic liquids, and it was the most magical place in the whole world and nothing would change this. Nothing would compare to this, because no matter where she would go,

these places always will lack one important thing – her memories with her mother.

The room Lord Adrogans led her to was indeed packed with interesting exhibits, some of which Violette had never even heard of and didn't know what capabilities they were endowed with, but since she was supposed to look unimpressed and slightly bored, she wouldn't let him know it.

Her legs stopped as her eyes glided over a little wooden box with an intricate pattern, not much having a shape.

“Bottomless box,” the young man proclaimed, studying Violette's face from afar. “You can't imagine how hard it was to get.”

It wasn't such a rare thing in the place where she lives but she suspected something that is much used in her home land was not that common here. She imperviously passed, seeking something more enlivening.

“Do you travel a lot to find all these things?” she asked, her eyes roving over the relics.

“Some I found while on expedition, some were found in very unexpectable ways on trips and some I bought from other collectors or travelers,” his voice full of joy as he stood at the table, slightly leaning back.

“You have an incredibly engaging life." Her eyes got back to his face. She hoped he didn't catch a note of jealousy in her tone. She wanted to travel and wished her companion wouldn't be a vampire and everything was just *different*. However, she couldn't deny that she doesn't feel much annoyance and aversion to Dante as it was. She started developing a slightly warm feeling towards him, not big enough to call him a friend, no, but she felt pretty comfortable in his presence and could have a decent conversation with him. Until he starts to be himself again and keeping any kind of information private, of course.

“Your collection is *lovely*,” she commented, not taking her gaze off the oddities.

Another thing that brought her attention was a cup with the endless drink, even now it had something – liquid with an enchanting golden tint. How long was it there and how safe was it to drink? She didn't want to know for sure.

“Oh I heard about this,” the enthusiasm woke up in her tone. Her eyes shot to the two silver ribbons on the wall. “Are those Steel ribbons?”

The man proudly nodded.

Of course, it wasn't ribbons made of steel, but people tended to call them this way for its incredible durability – impossible to tear or cut. A long time ago they were pretty common in basic usage but there was a dangerous side to it so they mostly disappeared.

She turned her head to a little red pad with a glowy silver needle under a glass cloche.

“A needle which can sew anything you can only imagine, a very useful thing,” the Lord commented.

It was interesting, Violette didn't hear about such a thing and she'd really love to have something like this back at home. She almost let out a gasp of excitement but remembered she shouldn't be much impressed, especially because of some needle.

There were also a few impressive things like a sword that could change its size to a thin stick, a necklace that could give the most beautiful voice to whomever wears it, a few spells written on parchments and little live figures of unicorns who were happily chasing each other on a plate.

“Vanishing hood?” she asked, stroking a silky fabric of beautiful navy blue cloak on an old-fashioned rack.

“Yes.” The young man’s smile grew bigger, however it almost faded as Violette said the next words.

“Nice but it's not rare in Chantoret.”

“Maybe, you can tell me what you'd like to see and who knows, maybe, it's here, in this room.”

Great. The words she exactly wanted to hear.

“Tempting offer but I doubt you have something like this,” she vaguely waved.

Her fingers crossed, hoping these words would deeply affect him and then she turned to him with her face.

“Maybe, you'll be quite impressed,” he said confidently. His posture shifted, he was on an urge to prove her wrong.

“I doubt it,” she retorted with a friendly smile but continued as she met his eyes filled with unbreakable assurance. “I heard about one extremely rare thing and had never seen it before. I might start believing it's just a legend.”

He was all ears. “Yes? And what is it?”

“A magic map that was enchanted by an old witch. I was told there was a little legend,” her fingers brushed upon the table surface as she was coming closer to him, “not really famous but quite intriguing. One witch had a hideaway for magical treasures. She cast a spell on that place and only those who have a map she enchanted can find it.” She stopped near Lord Adrogans, staring at him, her big eyes alluring, twinkling under the weak light.

“Uh…” he drawled with a satisfied smirk. “Today is a great day for me as I can impress such a beautiful lady.” His words were a song for her ears.

He waved his hand to the shelf at the wall.

She gave him a look full of mistrust, pretending like it's nearly impossible.

“Take a look, please.” His head swung in the direction of the glass cover. Under it the magic parchment inked with rivers, towns and forests – *the map to the Grotto of Spells and Relics.*

“No, you are trying to trick me. It can't be real,” she blew as she made her way to the shelf.

“It is indeed.” How proud he looked right now, she could recognize this expression from her own reflection in the mirror, every time she succeeded in brewing a new challenging potion.

“I can't believe it…” Her eyes scrutinized the map before they got back to Lord Adrogans.

“I'll show you closer,” with that said, he turned to the glass, taking out a small key.

The mechanical lock clicked and a pull-out shelf moved forward to them.

“Can I?” she gasped, her eyes filled with hope for approval to look at it closer.

He spread his hand to give her space.

Violette reached out to the map. She already could feel magic radiant under her fingertips. And as it was in her hands she felt – it was undoubtedly a paper soaked with true sorcery.

“Undeniably an incredible magic object,” she breathed without taking her eyes off. And she didn't lie, it was a perfect example of great magic skill. The witch who did it was decidedly proficient in the magic craft.

“See, I said I'm able to impress you.” The young man leaned toward the glass surface with his elbow. His proud and satisfied smile could brighten up the whole room.

Violette cast a sidelong glance at him.

“If you have this map, why didn't you try to find the witch's hideaway? I thought someone like you wouldn't want to miss a chance to find new magic artifacts,” she said.

He tilted his head to the side. “Oh, believe me I tried. I talked to many wizards and witches but nobody could make the map show the way to the secret place. They used some spells and magic powders but nothing revealed its secrets. In the end I came to terms that maybe it's not enchanted at all, maybe some trick to make others think it's a magic object or the spell is too strong to break.”

He was indeed right, with his second guess, of course: it was a strong spell and the wizards he talked to were definitely not familiar with Heggas’ powers and didn't know it has something to do with a special potion to reveal its magic. A recipe of which she and Dante elicited from the Queen’s spellbook.

“I gave up but I'm happy to have such a thing in my collection, it's still fascinating and impressive,” he said placidly.

“I won't argue with this statement.” She glanced at him right before she bore her eyes into the map again.

“Maybe, *y*ou can decipher it? Maybe, magic in Chantoret is different and more skilled?” He bestowed her with a charming and irresistible smile.

Violette carefully placed the map back upon the wooden surface. “I'd be happy to look at it. It needs a keen eye for sure.” Clearing her throat, she waved her hand, using it as a fan and blurted, “It's quite stuffy here, isn't it?”

“Perhaps a drink will fix it?” the man said, pointing his chin to a crystal jug and two glasses on the sill.

Meanwhile Lord Adrogans was locking the shelf, Violette hurried to the window. The drink in the jug seemed to be cool. Apparently, it was brought here right before their appearance: she noticed the young Lord talking to the courtier before they left the ballroom.

Violette's fingers clenched around the handle of the jug and as she poured the champagne into the glasses, she quietly took out a bottle of

potion from her hidden pocket. She had to be quick and nimble. Two drops of the almost transparent liquid fell into one glass, dissolving in the drink between the bubbles.

The lock snapped.

Her heart almost flipped. She quickly took the drinks, shaking his glass lightly so that the potion blended better. The knot tied in her stomach again as her eyes dropped to the bubbles. It still felt awkward deceiving the man who had been nothing other than kind and hospitable to her. He turned around just in time for her to extend him a drink.

“Thank you,” he said as his lips touched the glass, her eyes gandered at him from under her forehead. “You know you can come visit anytime you want, and stay as an honorable guest.” He sipped on the champagne again. Violette was ready to breathe out with relief but held on to her rejoicing.

The sleeping potion usually works almost immediately, in a span of two minutes, sometimes less. At first, the person feels light weariness, then as the potion begins to spread throughout the body, they feel like their eyelids become heavy and then they fall asleep. Generally, the dream is strong but not really long, approximately four to six hours.

Violette curled her lips and nervously sipped from the glass, hoping that the potion would work soon.

“The room has become stuffier, or so it seems to me?” He yawned. “The evening started not a long time ago.” He looked at the champagne in his glass with confusion and shook it a little before taking one more sip.

“Maybe, you're just tired,” she suggested, holding her lips together in a meek smile.

And finally he started to close his eyes. *Yes!* She swung and caught him before he'd fall on the floor. Afterwards, she dragged him to the chair and laid him there in a casual position, then took a step back to see what her work looked like.

“I think alright,” she murmured, swaying her head.

Everything should look like he just fell asleep and nothing of this even happened.

Violette hurried to the glass shelf.

“Where did he put that key?”

She went back to the young man and looked at the inside pocket of his coat. Her fingers groped something small inside the fabric. *Excellent.* A

little bronze key glistened in front of her eyes. Her legs rushed to the shelf, her chest tightened – anyone could knock on the door any moment – she must hasten.

The lock clicked for the third time this evening. Her hands were trembling but she was able to take out a small pouch of powder that helps identify magic, to make sure – just in case – that it was an authentic map.

It started glowing with gold light for a few seconds, confirming its origin. Then she cast a copy spell with her magic wand. This map will never lead someone to the magic place – it wasn't magical at all – but it'll make a good decoration, at least nobody's going to know the real map was stolen. With a few finger moves she folded the real one in four. Her hands froze: she didn't know where to put it – her pockets were too small. After a short moment she decided to shove it in her tight corset. Now she really felt like a thief, her stomach curled. She reminded herself to not think about it and focus on her mission, putting the key back inside the Lord’s pocket.

The fresh cold air entered the room as Violette opened a window, relief shawled over her shoulders.

The glasses! She forgot to get rid of the evidence.

Dante said he'll take care of the servants not seeing them but she has to make sure Lord Adrogans will not remember anything and there will be no signs of someone in this room, except himself. She bolted to the table, grabbing the champagne glasses and poured the remains of the fizzing liquid in a flowerpot by the window, same with the jug.

It was time to recollect the spell of converting. A deep breath fell from her lips and the wand shuddered over the glassware. In a second it turned into two blank pages and a pen. Violette gasped with relief.

Time to get out. Her palms pressed onto the windowsill, eyes dropped down – it wasn't really high, she suspected it was a third floor, however she still decided to be careful.

Dante told her to give him a signal by a violet flash of light in the air. Just with a few quick flashes he appeared right under the window. If not for the mask on his face she'd really forget he is a vampire and can move this fast. Especially, when he was wearing that suit, standing beneath the window like a prince in a fairytale. He looked so good in this light, like a total beautiful stranger.

“Ready, princess?” His voice sounded beautiful as well, the only thing that pulled her out of the dream was his grin. The princes do not grin. At least not in the fairytales she was reading in her childhood, maybe something changed since then.

He took the promised rope, though Violette still had wished she could get down with magic. It was safer and more habitual for her.

The vampire threw the rope in the air, making it easier to catch. As she secured the knot, her hands pulled it repeatedly. As soon as she made sure the fastening was safe enough to climb down, her gaze dragged to the ground again. Dante just checked if nobody was around.

“It looks slippery,” she squeezed and swallowed her cowardice before throwing her leg over the windowsill. It wasn't an easy thing to do – a dozen petticoats were making it much more difficult. Frankly, she remembered she can adjust the length. With a quick spell the skirt became a bit lower than her knees. Her fingers twisted over the rope and then she jumped through the window.

Her legs were in the air just for a split second before she pressed them into the wall, beginning to slowly slide down.

“Can you move quicker?” Dante's voice came from below.

“I'm trying to!” she quietly hissed.

“Jump in.”

“I am fine,” she panted, struggling as suddenly her leg slipped from the wall and the rope swayed. Violette tightened over the rope praying to not fall onto the ground, and continued her way down.

“You're wasting our time. We should be quicker,” Dante complained.

“Ohh, excuse me for not practicing fleeing from the window everyday. Next time I'll be more thoughtful.” She groused, glancing back to measure her progress. She really wasn't fast, but the thought of breaking her leg clearly wasn't attractive. Dante was undeniably immortal, but she's certainly not.

“Just jump. I'll catch you,” he pressed.

Violette hissed, “I don't trust your lying ass!”

“It's nice to know you're thinking about my ass up there, but I was planning to catch you with my hands. If you please.”

She sighed with disbelief at what she was about to do in a second and took a deep breath – he was right – if she would be that slow the guards

would make a circle and would catch them like this and she had no idea how to explain herself.

Her grasp on the rope tightened. She pushed away from the wall with both feet, and with her eyes shut, she began to fall.

Violette landed right in the strong male hands, looking almost surprised or even scared when she met his dark eyes – she couldn't sort out her feelings yet. The adrenaline rushed to her blood as she kept staring with her eyes wide open, holding onto him.

And then his serious face lightened up with a delightful smug smile.

“So what did you say about my ass up there?”

“I don't trust your hands either,” she murmured and jumped out of his hands, “but for other reasons.” Her eyes struck him with a disgruntled look.

A chuckle fell from his lips and then he looked to the side again. “Let's go.”

“So how do we get out?” Violette asked, catching her breath.

He stopped by the window on the first floor and opened it. “We'll just get back.”

Violette's brows raised. “How will it help us to escape the mansion?”

“Leaving earlier will be a suspicious sign. And we can't leave the carriage here without leaving any footprints. Quicker!”

Violette lingered.

“Fine,” she muttered through her teeth. “Today is the day of window climbing, I see.”

Picking up her skirts, she hopped up and as Dante lifted her, she ended up inside, falling off the windowsill into the dark room.

Finding herself on her feet again, she crossed the room to the only source of light – the door crack with the pouring warm glow of candlelight. She pressed on both door handles – locked. Dante's boots hit the floor.

Violette turned back and delved into her pocket for the wand. One swing and the lock clicked. The door easily opened and Dante peeked out of the room, checking the situation outside. Fortunately, the hallway happened to be empty.

“The way is clear,” he let out, stepping out.

Violette was about to follow him when she recalled that her dress was too short for such a formal evening. With another spell her skirt hit the floor again and she hastened to pursue Dante who was already a few feet ahead.

“And no one will suspect why we're wandering around?” Her fingers picked up the layers of the skirt.

“Guests always get lost at parties, especially when looking for a restroom. I don't think this is something that will make others suspect us of something bad,” Dante's words came out unobtrusively. He didn't look strenuous at all but his steps were hasty like he wanted to leave immediately.

“So we'll be at the estate until the end of the evening?”

“No,” he said, and finally they came out to an archway guarded by two males in uniform. Their eyes followed Violette and Dante, hardly interested in them.

“We'll leave now. But I need you to cause a little chaos.” A furtive smile crossed his face.

“Chaos?” She shuddered.

“Yes, distract the guests with something, but don't draw attention to yourself,” with these words he patted her on the shoulder and rushed to the stairs into the courtyard.

“Wait! How will I do this? Dante!” Violette hit her heel on the marble floor, groaning under her breath.

Her skirt swayed towards the ballroom, eyes wandered around the hall between the guests, trying to find at least something that she could cling to.

Create chaos…How did Dante even imagine this? And on top of that, to remain unnoticed!

No matter how angry and confused she was, she had to focus on her new mission now. So she breathed and tried to gather her mind together.

There were many ways to ruin the party but it wasn't in her plans: she wanted to do something harmless and something that would engage the guests only for a moment, not more. Anything that wouldn't invoke much noise or cause a scene.

Her eyes slid to the windows, then scanned the guests, a champagne pyramid, tables…*champagne pyramid!* That could be something. But it wasn't enough. Her gaze retreated to the other side of the room, tracing around the butlers, the chocolate fountain and the snacks. The idea came to her mind almost immediately.

“Okay, let's try,” Violette hummed under her breath and reached into the pocket of her dress. Sticking out her wand just a little, she pointed it straight

at the champagne pyramid and whispered a spell. One blink and a rumbling noise scattered through the ballroom, drawing all the guests' attention to the corner where the glass shattered and the champagne spread over the floor. The squeals, followed by surprised sighs, blew into the air. Violette used this moment to cast a spell at the other corner of the room. She shook her wand lightly and in a moment a woman who was walking away from the table of regale dragged the tablecloth sticking to her corset. The noise of fallen trays and gold plates evoked one more situation to everyone's discussion.

Great. Played like clockwork.

Lastly, she needed to slip away while everyone was distracted, even the guards' observation was brought to the mess in the ballroom.

Violette scooted out the hall, rushing to the main gates as her gaze locked with one of the guards.

“Did you see something suspicious? One woman said she can't find her diamond ring, it better not be stolen,” the words naturally came out from her mouth as she was making up the story just to get his attention to something else.

The man's eyes went round. An unfeigned concern flew across his face instead of the usual serious grimace. The last thing she saw was his back, quickly disappearing in the crowd.

Violette raised the hem of her dress, bolting through the arch to the entrance. A few more steps led her to the marble staircase, down where the familiar dark carriage came in sight just in time.

Dante pulled the door.

“Jump in!” he exclaimed, peering at her from inside.

She immediately shot to the carriage, and reaching the ground, she almost flew into the carriage into the vampire’s arms.

“I see you're indeed pretty good at evoking chaos,” he said with a proud smile.

Her eyes met his. She wouldn't want to admit to him that it was kind of fun and she might enjoy this night more than she showed. Something sparkled inside her after such a gamble, not because of the robbery but for the feeling of adventure filling her body. It was nice to feel so lively, to feel a glimpse of merriment. As much as she loved her life and her potion shop, for the last couple of months she rarely felt joy or any other emotion except

of determination and sadness, even if hope still lived inside her heart. The pleasant feeling of boldness and intrepidness sowed confidence in her and it felt like waking up after a long dream. A breath of fresh air after drowning.

Dante fixated his gaze on her, an impish smile danced on his face. For the first time, curiosity burnt in his eyes.

“And how are you feeling about this evening *now*?”

“It was,” she tried to measure her words, “it was interesting.”

“Oh, come on, you can tell the truth. I'd say you enjoyed the mess you did in the ballroom.” He relaxed into the back of the seat. His fingers traced to his collar and he let out groans of relief, pulling the fabric of the coat and unbuttoning its first buttons.

“Well, it was fun,” she admitted and lifted her chin. “But it doesn't mean I approve of any of this action.”

“Did everything with the Lord go according to the plan?” His eyes turned back to her, his facial expression no longer as playful as it was, drowning in his seriousness, though he still looked quite relaxed.

“It turned out better than I expected,” she admitted.

“Don't tell me you enjoyed Lord Adrogans’ company.” One of his brows raised in confusion, nearly rebuke.

“I was indeed pretty comfortable in his presence. We had quite a delightful conversation,” she proudly stated.

She liked when Dante was proved wrong and this was exactly a moment like this. Especially since she was completely sincere – she wouldn't say the company of Lord Adrogans was bothering her or caused her any negativity at all. His desire for knowledge of magic was inspiring and deserved respect. He was polite and genial, however it might be just his upbringing. She wasn't sure if he would talk with her if she wasn't a duchess or a guest from far away magic lands, but she wasn't really thinking about it much. He was confident and had pride for sure, but she saw only a young man who wanted her recognition and deference. In truth, it felt exciting and heartwarming to know he wanted her attention. It brought her decent elation, even if it was counterfeit.

Dante prudently eyed her from head to toe.

“Really?” The only word that left his lips as he peered at Violette. His fingers touched his temple as he adjusted his jaw between his forefinger and his thumb.

She nodded affirmatively. “I enjoyed his company actually. He is not as selfish and bad as you described.”

“That rich snob?”

“He is not a snob,” she chided.

“You talked with him for a few hours and think you know him already?”

“No, but for this short time he made himself more likable in my eyes than you for more than a week.”

“It's because I didn't try to,” he smirked. “If I wanted to charm you – I'd do it without much effort.”

She chuckled, rolling her eyes.

“Think I couldn't enchant you?” The confidence beamed in his voice, even if his smile loosened.

“That’s exactly what I'm thinking.” The corners of her mouth lifted in a vicious smirk. “You might have a pretty face but it's not enough to charm. Not with your character.”

“Oh. You're saying I have a pretty face, it's enough for me to make an assumption I'm already half the way.”

“I said *might*. I didn't see all of your face,” she drawled slyly.

“We both know you still find me attractive.”

“I do not,” she carelessly said with a winsome smile.

“We both know that's a lie,” Dante stretched, “To be precise, a second lie for one evening. You are gaining boldness, Little Witch.”

“Did someone ever tell you how unbearable you are?” she snickered.

“Yes, there was one witch. What was her name? It started with a V letter – Va…Vi…Something related to the color.” Spreading his palms to the sides, his mouth twitched upwards.

The joyful laughter left Violette's throat. She might have wanted to say something else but before the words escaped past her lips the carriage stopped and made her nearly fall down.

The question quickly fled off her mouth, “Why did we stop?”

Dante's face turned dismayed in a snap. “I'll check. Don't leave the carriage.”

A few moments in silence and he was back. Violette’s chest clenched, she had a presentiment of something bad coming and Dante's look only confirmed it.

His eyes were cold, voice sounded uptight, “The coachman is lured. We should get out immediately.”

Violette's lashes batted as Dante opened the door of the carriage and reached his hand to her.

She wondered at how bizarre it was. Why would vampires stop them and what did they want?

As they were moving away from the carriage in the forest she blurted out, “Who do you think it is?”

“Mmm,” he let out, “one assumption is worse than another.”

Dante had quite a lot of enemies, as Violette had already guessed after their lovely visit to the Vampire Kingdom. For whatever reason other vampires didn't like him, some even – according to her assumption – hated him. Even Caidas seemed very cold and hostile towards Dante, despite how honorably he endured their conversation and didn't interfere with direct actions. But still he asked Violette to kill him…Could it be him? Did he decide to check if she had changed her mind about the dagger yet? Or if she was already done with it?

They were jogging through the woods. The hem of her dress had been getting in the way of her legs and she hadn't had time to change into more comfortable clothes. Drifts of snow on the ground only made it harder to get through. Of course, it wasn't difficult for Dante, but Violette was out of breath and almost caught herself over something covered with a layer of snow. The air was heavy and cold, pervasive through the sheer fabric of her gloves.

She's been assuming they tried to confuse their pursuers running deeper in the forest, instead of taking a ride by the carriage. But it was pointless anyway – the hound dogs had been already waiting for their prey between the trees.

CHAPTER 30

THE HOUND DOGS



"Running away from guests is considered bad manners. You should've known this, Dante," a sinister voice came out from under the shadow of a tree, the tone making skin crawl from one's bones.

Caidas.

Violette froze.

"Won't you even say hello?" Caidas pushed his back off the tree and left the shadow. Another pair of eyes appeared near. She was familiar with that blond head – *Nigel.* Violette's heart shrunk at the sight of his bared fangs.

Dante rolled his eyes in displeasure, and Violette felt how the tension in the air acquired new colors.

"I remember a time when you were polite and nice. Where have your manners gone?" Caidas' voice was like a sudden burst of cold breeze, spreading goosebumps all over her skin.

Nigel side-glanced at him with a satisfied grin.

"It was a few centuries ago, the memory is no longer the same," Dante responded indifferently.

"For your status, you are being extremely rude."

"Really? Didn't notice," he waved insensitively. "Are you here to give me a lesson about manners?"

Violette's eyes shot to Dante, then to the two vampires before returning it to him. Caidas' words lingered in her mind for half a second.

For your status, echoed in her head.

"Hello, Violette," Caidas said kindly, turning his amber eyes to her.

Violette lowered her gaze ingratiatingly – she guessed why he was here. Nigel meanwhile stayed silent, the reserved smile froze on his face as his eyes glanced between both of them. He looked like he was here for entertainment purposes, waiting for something that could occupy his attention.

“Why are you here? To take away the Vampire Slayer? Or convince Violette to kill me?” Dante breathed in the air as his brows twisted together.

Violette pursed her lips, hazarding a fleeting look at Caidas.

“Hm, I see you know,” he said placidly, and then spoke to the girl again, “I'm not angry with you, Violette. However, I think you are making a big mistake.”

“I told you I won't do it,” she said with a gloom in her tone, finally letting her eyes meet his.

“I remember, however I hoped you'd appeal to common sense. You know what is the right thing to do, don't you?” Was he trying to make her feel guilty or was he still trying to convince her to change her mind? “Dante is a bad person to be around and you know it.”

Dante ground his teeth.

“When will you stop pretending I'm not standing right here and tell all of it to my face? If you want me dead you should've just said it,” his voice even, the embodiment of tranquility itself, but it inspired a strange feeling in the air.

“Dante, you should know as nobody else that a ruler should do what’s best for his people. It's a shame you'd never had the chance to experience it for yourself.”

“Interesting why,” he finally let some emotions pervade his tone. The muscle near his mouth twitched crossly.

“You can't blame anyone for what happened, except for yourself,” Caidas persistently cut out.

Dante nearly hissed, “Let me decide for myself *who* to blame.”

“You know too well everything could be different. If only you'd listen.”

Violette couldn't describe how the tension between these two began to tingle her skin. Dante's gaze was comparable to a predator who wanted to dig its claws into the living flesh of its interlocutor. Caidas got close to something sensitive, otherwise it was difficult to explain such a fierce look Dante speared him with. Still, his restraint amazed her.

“I listened,” he strained through his teeth, all the color drained from his face, leaving him as pale as the moon.

“Not carefully enough.”

Violette could swear she could see arson start to flare up in Dante's eyes, but instead of spitting poison in Caidas' face, he just smiled and threw his head back.

“Glad to know you haven't changed since then,” he simply said with a note of merriment, though these words were pierced with bitterness.

“Unfortunate to know, you did, but not the way we all had wanted.” Caidas turned to the girl again. “Violette, one question. Do you want to know *why* he was imprisoned in this mask?”

“Don't,” Dante said in a low, deep tone. His voice turned harsh and cold as a blade, and just as sharp.

Violette wasn't looking at him, her gaze locked with Caidas instead.

“I am not that stupid to think he did nothing wrong. I suppose something truly terrible,” she said, unnerved.

“Terrible is not the right word. Do you want to know the real reason?”

“I said don't,” Dante repeated.

Caidas cut him a look just for a split second before continuing, “Have you ever heard of a kingdom called Desensisfort?”

“Don't you dare,” Dante drawled again with a deathly tone and this time he was looking at Caidas as if he was a target to shoot to kill. But he didn't move or take a step. He just warned, or perhaps…was asking?

“No, I haven't,” Violette ignored Dante as well.

Caidas' jaw clenched, a line appeared between his dark brows as he continued, “Right, it's because it doesn't exist anymore. People are saying that the forest and nature are still mourning the tragedy that happened there. Once a beautiful place, now only ruins and ashes. It was a home to many people you'd already met at some point.”

Violette tensed, her heartbeat throbbing in her ears.

“You know why vampires don't like your friend? They have a really good reason. They had lives, families and futures until one monster brought pure terror to their lands. Streets of Desensisfort Kingdom turned to rivers of blood filled with dead bodies, not tens – *hundreds*. The murders were beyond cruel. It was dreadful: the screams and the prayers of the unfortunate had been filling the air but nobody heard their pleas for help.

And while no one knew what a horrible being was causing this chaos, everyone knew one thing for sure – it didn't have a heart. People were assuming it was a ruthless beast but little did they know it actually was a human," he made a pause and looked directly into Violette's eyes. Her heart dropped to her stomach. "Well, he wasn't human then, but looks can be deceiving."

No…

Her insides cowered.

No. No. No.

Please no, Violette's blood ran cold, she could hear the pulse in her temples, fright wrapping itself between her bones.

It can't be.…Of course it can. He was a vampire, nobody liked him and he had a mask on his mouth. How stupid she felt thinking he was not that bad. He warned her to not trust him and yet she did. She couldn't believe the words she heard. Of course it was so obvious, so clear and the puzzle finally fell into one piece but…How could it be real? She couldn't give an answer, she actually wasn't looking for it at the moment. All she could picture was blood and pure chaos.

"The darkness," Caidas went on, "lasted for weeks until there was no living soul on the land – some of them escaped to the other lands but others were brutally killed and by who? The *prince*." Caidas switched his gaze to Dante waving his hands. "An heir to the throne. The future king who ripped the throats of his people and turned them into monsters like him, who destroyed his entire kingdom and broke hundreds of lives just because he wanted to. Just because he didn't want to listen, didn't want to fight back."

Violette felt like she was just stabbed into the stomach with a dagger that was slowly twisting. Horror washed over her, draining her to devastation, and yet she didn't move or look at Dante. How could she look in his eyes after what she just heard?

He approached her from the back.

"Little Witch, I–" he said, reaching his hand to her shoulder. She shuddered, flinching away without a sound. It was a touch of *monster* she escaped.

She raised her chin, ignoring him – her attention was drawn to Caidas.

"And why are you telling me this right now? Should I be scared of this story so it would change my mind? Should I be surprised?" she said, like

the story Caidas told her was just a little figment.

“I want you to understand–” The old vampire started but Violette cut him off.

“I do understand. And it doesn't change anything, I don't care what he did in the past, it's none of my business. All I want is to save my father, and Dante,” she swallowed his name like it was a pure acid, “can help me. Sorry if that is not what you wanted to hear,” her voice kept balanced and stringent. Pretending she wasn't affected by the revealed secret was the hardest thing to do. She meant to look apathetic and cold. And although she succeeded in it, her soul was consumed by terror. She was on the verge of shaking, fighting it for her voice could give her away.

“Very sad. I really hoped we would come to a mutual understanding,” Caidas aired disappointedly, working his jaw at last.

Violette remained steadfast as stone, even though her heart was blocking any other sound around. She knew they could hear it, but she had to endure this moment, remaining detached and unemotional. All the suppressed screams and fears she wanted to let out have to stay in. Caidas should see it clearly – she had no intention to back away. Not now. Not when she was so close.

“It's your fight, not mine and never was,” Violette stated, her throat burning.

He released a deep sigh, just before Dante and Violette turned to leave.

“If it's your choice…I really didn't want to do this,” the high vampire's tone deepened. “You know that I can't kill Dante, but I can get rid of *you*.”

His eyes darkened as he snapped his fingers. The last thing she saw before the dark blue coat obscured her was Nigel who nearly levitated in her direction. A loud groan left Dante's lungs as Nigel sank his teeth into his shoulder, a blow that was intended for her. The fine hairs rose on the back of Violette’s neck. Dread crept out under her skin, making her body petrify for a second.

“Little Witch, run!” Dante yelled.

Violette didn't hesitate; her legs rushed off on their own. Abruptly, she turned around and looked back at Dante resisting Nigel as he pressed him to the ground.

“I said run!” he commanded again, his voice cracking.

She only glanced at Caidas still standing at the same spot like he didn't want to be involved, like an owner who let his dog off the leash, waiting for his job to be done. She wavered a step back before spinning on her heels and running as fast as she could. It felt like her heart could easily overtake her if it could jump out of her chest. Her hands clenched the delicate fabric of her gown, holding the hem above the ground.

Her legs hadn't stopped as she threw a look over her shoulder just once to take a glimpse of what was happening, but all she saw were naked trees and a fragment of two blurry figures through the branches.

The escape from whatever she heard in the Forest of Somber Eyes was nothing compared to the terror that consumed her now, perhaps because she definitely knew *who* was hunting her this time. If she thought she couldn't run faster before, she was so wrong as her legs were racing for their life, never would she think running on heels would be that easy. Adrenaline was flooding all her being, her heart drumming loud as a thunderstorm.

The sight of the carriage didn't bring her relief but she was completely out of breath to continue her way on her legs.

The driver seemed to come to his senses, sitting at his seat as if he was commanded to wait for them after a casual little walk in the forest.

“Oh, miss!” He lifted his eyes from a brochure in his hands. “Did something happen?” The confusion crinkled his eyes at the sight of Violette gasping for air.

“No time to explain. Rush as fast as possible!” she commanded and burst open the door.

Sudden rustling coming out the back made her foot freeze on the carriage step. She looked around and jumped inside.

“But what about–”

Violette cut the coachman off as her head popped out from the window.

“I said make haste!” she yelled. “Go!”

The man didn't say anything else. As soon as the reins were drawn, the sound of the horses' hooves beat off the ground at great speed.

Even minutes after, Violette couldn't soothe herself, staring at the road left behind as if waiting for anything to suddenly show up, like a big beast jumping out of the thickets. Finally after watching the road for a while, she got fully inside, her back collapsed into the seat. Her chest was raising up

and down, she tried to ease at least a little before her heart would burst from the speed of its beating.

Everything happened so fast – she couldn't even collect all her thoughts, which scattered like coins on a marble floor. Her mind was a place covered in a thick pathless haze. Turning her head, she looked through the window again. A scream nearly blew out her lungs as a male figure stormed in.

“Easy, easy. It's me,” Dante calmed her.

She breathed out with a release that it wasn’t someone else. However, his presence was not very comforting now either.

His coat was gone, half of his shirt was ripped, the blood dripping from his shoulder.

Violette’s brows twisted together, her lips parted and she gasped for air once again. Her eyes glistened in the darkness as Dante’s hand reached to hers. He tried to calm her down, reassure her everything was fine but then he was forcibly thrown out of the carriage. This time the scream left her lungs, after all.

It was Nigel, trying to get in. Dante sank his nails into his arm, another hand into his shoulder. The carriage swayed from side to the side. Nigel gripped the edge of the door but soon both of them fell to the ground and were whipped out.

Violette dug her palms into the seat, pressing herself against the wall desperately trying to become one with it. She crawled to peer outside, but as the carriage sped down the road, she saw nothing except a glimpse of a bright red jacket.

The wind fluttered her hair – the locks were getting in her face as she peered back for a long time after. The trees were flashing past her eyes, the cold air wrapping her by the shoulders. Her breath steadied. And then the carriage stopped.

Violette hit the floor as the horses neighed. The warm light twinkled in the darkness from the spot where the door was before it was ripped off.

“Why did we stop?” she called, rising on her feet.

“We're back,” the driver let out.

She looked out – they were in the town, standing before their inn.

“I don't know what it was but no money is worth it,” the man stuttered, wiping the sweat on his face with a handkerchief.

Her brows drew together and she jumped out of the carriage. Her gaze fell onto the peaceful inn bathing in the warm light of the lanterns, bringing a slight ease to her soul. She made it, was it stupid to think the town was her protected place? Precisely. But she had nowhere to go.

Her eyes dragged to the damaged door of the carriage. Dante probably paid the coachman in advance but she didn't have money with her to cover the damage, though it seemed it wasn't something that bothered him – he pulled the reins and got away as quickly as possible, just being happy to stay alive.

Violette picked up her petticoats and got inside the inn, wobbling to her room. She was exhausted and scared. As soon as the door behind her closed, her back laid upon it; shutting her eyes, a deep sigh slipped from her lips. Her heart had never been that close to fleeing her body.

She lightened up the room and took a few shaky steps to sit on the bed. She needed some time to come to her senses. But how possible was it?

She got rid of her capelet, in the urge to change her dress – it was getting on her nerves. She actually would rather take a shower and wash away everything she witnessed if only it would help. Her eyes darted to the clock on the wall – the arrow showed the midnight hour.

CHAPTER 31

LIKE A BIRD IN A CAGE



Violette remained on the bed for what felt like an eternity, her body refused to get up. The soft glow of the moonlight streamed through the window. She lay like that for a few hours, thinking and…waiting. Would Dante return? And if so, did she really want to see him? She remembered Caidas' words and they sent a pulsation down her arms. She glanced at her hands – they trembled just at the thought of him. She appeared to be on the edge without a choice, alone. She always feared to be alone and now it was her reality. There was nobody who could comfort her, to give her advice. No. There was only her and the terrible monster she was left with. She buried her face in her hands, succumbing to the sobs.

The knock on the door broke the peace of the room. The sound felt threatening to her existence, even the shadows seemed to stagger. She lifted, clenching the bedsheet with her hands, staring at the door.

“Yes?” she almost whispered.

The door creaked, a thin line of the light began to spread on the floor. A male silhouette appeared in the doorway. *Dante.*

She leaped from the bed. His figure leaned on the door frame, the light from the hallway catching in his inky hair, then his face. The bright red flashed, dripping from his mouth. *His* blood. One of his sleeves was torn, a wound near his neck, a cut. But he didn't look scary or threatening. Her brows arched down.

“Are you alright?” The question slipped from his lips, unusually raspy.

Violette gazed at him for a minute and then her expression changed – the anger inundated her. Not only did he turn out to be a terrible monster but now because of him other vampires wanted her dead. Although she miraculously escaped this time, she wasn't really sure if she was safe here. With him.

“I can't believe Caidas wanted to kill me,” she grunted. “Do you understand that all of it wasn't in our agreement? You lied to me. Again!”

He'd been looking at her from above, still standing at the door frame. His body moved forward, half-step and he flew with his face down.

Violette held a breath. Her eyes widened in horror – all his back was teared up, the blood streamed like a river down his muscles. Two daggers stuck out, deep to the hilt from the remainder of his shirt, now soaked with blood.

Violette froze, her legs glued to the floor. She could leave him like this, it's not like he wasn't immortal. Maybe, it would be even better if he wasn't and he would die. She had no reason to help, to feel sympathy for him after all she knew about him and what he did. About the monster he was. And yet this monster was her only protection, the only living soul who could save her from other vampires. Her hand trembled, clenching into a fist. She had to do something. After all, she wasn't heartless.

She teetered closer and tried to turn him over.

A moan of pain shattered the silence before Dante opened his eyes only halfway.

“What now? I can no longer lie quietly on the floor?” He breathed heavily.

It wasn't funny and only made Violette scowl. “Do you want to bleed on the floor?”

“It's less painful if not moving, however I'll be honest – your touches are quite pleasant,” he murmured.

“I am not going to explain to the inn's owner why there are dark stains on the floor,” she grumbled, helping him to get up.

Dante could barely stand on his feet, his body was shaking.

“Should have left me on the” –he released a quiet groan– “floor.”

“I should have,” she confirmed, sitting him on the bed.

She quickly found some towels and got them wet. A deep breath was needed to gather strength before she could do something. Before she could

touch him again. She was scared, completely terrified, from him, from other vampires, from everything. She always knew how to collect herself in hard moments, but not now. She didn't know how to react other than being completely frightened. She couldn't just hide it, put it somewhere in the farthest corner of her mind.

She turned to Dante again – he was unbuttoning his shirt. The loud hiss released in the air.

Violette came closer, her fingers shakingly reached to the buttons and she gently moved his hands away.

He raised his eyes to her face.

“You can leave me,” his voice came out raspy.

She hardly swallowed but continued undoing his shirt. His chest and stomach looked better than the back but it still was covered in cuts and some bite marks on the shoulder. A first touch of the towel on his torso made him press his lips in the thinnest line and close eyes.

The tears welled up in Violette's eyes as she focused on the wound. She felt like she was touching the flesh of a ruthless monster. After all she knew about him, how could she just look in his eyes like nothing happened? He saved her today but only because he needed her. But what will be after? What will be when she releases the monster out of his cage?

He was studying her, without even hiding. He knew he shouldn't, he knew she needed time but he also wanted her to talk to him. Just one word. *Anything*.

Dante stopped her hand with his. “You don't have to do it.”

Something blocked her throat. She pressed her lips together, continuing to wipe the blood from his skin. A tremor traveled through her hands, and her entire body quivered.

Dante pulled away.

“Little Witch,” he said, his voice unusually gentle. “Stop.”

He seemed to want to grab her by the hand but hesitated to touch her – he remembered how she winced at his touch before. Despite her words in front of Caidas, he knew exactly what she felt.

Her hand stopped on the clean spot under his chest. But her eyes didn't dare to lift.

“Are you scared of me?” His voice low.

Violette didn't remove her hand, instead she washed his shoulder.

“Why do you think so?” she said coldly, as she thought, but her voice cracked midway.

She lied. She wasn't even scared to death – she was completely fear-struck, fully seized with this feeling. The truth that was hidden behind his mask just broke everything in her faith. She was scared of him, of his actions and she was in the arms of horror just being that close to him. She'd known he did something bad but she'd never realized how horrible his story could be…how horrible *he* could be. All she could see was a monster. Instead of the mask she saw blood all over his mouth, his hands painted in burgundy and his shirt stained with dark spots. Everything in him seemed so dark after what she heard, after what she imagined.

“You have nothing to be worried about,” he said, his eyes lowered to her hand on his chest. “I am not a threat to you.”

Violette's brows pulled together, the corners of her eyes crinkled as she settled her gaze on the same spot, not ready to meet his gaze yet. But she felt anger rumbling under her skin. How could she not be worried? What does he think she has to do – just forget this night?

The pinch between her brows twitched.

“What about other vampires? They want to kill me, Dante. And I am helpless, my magic is not working against them. I have nothing,” she grumbled, swiping another drop of blood.

“You have me,” he said mildly. “I won't leave you and I won't let anyone hurt you. Truly.”

“And what if they–What if you won't be able to save me?”

“I'm much stronger than you think,” he rasped. “Little Witch, when I promised to bring you back home I was honest with you. I intend to keep this promise.”

“And what are your words worth?” Her hand froze.

“I know you have no reason to believe me but I've never lied to you. I kept back, didn't reveal to you some things or twisted the truth, I admit it, but I've never lied to you and I'm not going to lie to you now. You have nothing to worry about because I won't let them even get close to you.”

Violette sighed and then ran her hand over her face, feeling like the tears would release at any moment but she didn't have strength for crying. She was tired. She just wanted to close her eyes and then wake up, wishing

all of it was a bad dream and what it takes to make all this disappear it's just for her to wake up. One simple thing.

Dante slowly pulled forward his body but she harshly flinched away as if it was a threatening move. And then he pulled back again.

The silence reigned over them.

“I didn't want this,” tumbled up from Dante’s mouth.

She finally raised her eyes to him, before quickly looking away.

“I didn't want to become…*this*,” he said, turning his gaze to something else.

Violette slowly wiped another bloodstain, her gaze locked on the same spot where the blood was a second ago.

“You said you've never lied to me…” she started, her voice deepened.

“Yes, I did not.”

“Then tell me…what did Caidas mean when he said you didn't listen?”

He let out a deep breath. “Caidas claims I've never really tried to tame my–” he swallowed “—urges. But it's not true. I've never meant to kill anyone, to become what I became. I am disgusted by everything I did back then. The truth is – my urge was unbearable. I couldn't get to used to it, I couldn't stop hearing the rush of blood, seeing people was a torture and I didn't have time to come to my senses as I…”

He raised his eyes to her face, finding it hard to tell the next word in her presence. The line of his jaw tugged.

“Caidas doesn't believe me, he thinks I didn't want to listen to him and was just stubborn but it's not true. I tried…I tried my best, Violette.”

Violette.

Violette.…

He'd never called her by her name. She bit her lower lip before she dragged her eyes to him. The look on his face was strange, she couldn't say which emotion he tried to show or to hide. Perhaps that's what she saw earlier this night when she flinched away – he looked hurt.

She wet a towel again, carefully listening.

“If I could change everything – I would,” he said, his voice unusually gentle. “I'd been trying to run away from home as far as I could but no matter how hard I'd tried every time I kept waking up in a strange place with my hands covered in blood. I am a monster and I would never deny it but I didn’t want it.”

“What changed now? Why do you think this time will be different?” She raised her eyes to him for a split second.

“Since I was imprisoned almost three centuries have passed. It's not a lot for a vampire but I've tried to learn, I've lived among people and tried to bear with my thoughts and curb them. There was a time when all I could think about was blood and hunger but it changed – I'm fully conscious, I cleared the thoughts and don't have irrepressible urges anymore. I couldn't bear with my own mind and it was driving me insane, making me do horrendous things but I am no longer in that fatal state. I don't want to hurt anyone. I've already done enough. I just want to be free.”

Her brows lowered. Something inside her wanted to believe his words, despite her common sense screaming how dangerous and stupid it was. Something in his look, his voice made her believe he regretted his past, he always avoided conversation about it, after all. She could feel the woe lingering in his heart, even if it didn't change the fact that he was a murderer.

“I don't want you to think I've never tried,” he nearly whispered. She felt his breath against her nose as she cleaned a cut on his collarbone.

“Why?” Her lashes felt too heavy to raise them up.

The words fell from his mouth like a stone, “I just don't want you to think about me this way. I don't want your attitude towards me to change.”

“But it already did,” she breathed and shut her eyes. “We can't go back, pretending it didn't happen.” Her head shook as she withdrew from him.

“I know. But I don't want you to hate me for something I did hundreds of years ago that I'd never meant to do. I don't want you to hate me, at least, not for this. You have plenty of other reasons to do so.”

She looked to the side. There was a truth in his words and she hated it'd been making her feel sorry for him, however he seemed to be so sincere. Her eyes raised, lips pressed together.

“I just want you to know, you shouldn't be scared, I will not cause you pain and I will not let anyone else do it.”

For unexplainable reasons she trusted his words. Maybe, she just didn't want to believe that he is a pure monster, that a guy she spent time with was a soulless murderer. It didn't mean she could trust him unconditionally. No. But she wanted to believe him.

“What are we going to do now?” she asked.

“We can't stay here for long. I know you're tired,” he said. “But we need to go somewhere else, far.”

Violette's brows arched down, a vertical line formed on her forehead. She didn't want to go somewhere. Not with him, and yet it seemed like she had nothing else to do. Her eyes didn’t dare to look in his. She didn't want to. Her fingers, her whole body, every muscle were tense and any words couldn't make it disappear.

She helped him to get rid of the daggers from his back, despite how terrible the sight was.

Dante stood up, his legs seemed to listen to him again. She remembered how fast he healed after the meeting with the robbers almost two weeks ago, it probably was in the vampire’s nature.

“I'm not done with your wounds,” she stumbled.

“It doesn't matter. We should go,” he protested. “Get all your stuff as quickly as you can.”

He left her room in seconds, leaving Violette staring at the closed door.

A lonely tear ran down her cheek.

CHAPTER 32

TO RESTORE WHAT WAS LOST



As they left the inn the moon was still high in the sky. The Western Forest in front of Violette's eyes made her swallow, and although it was in the total opposite direction from the one they escaped a few hours earlier, it was the last place she wanted to go; it didn't seem a safe place for her after this night – it barely was safe before.

“Don't worry, vampires won't look for us there,” Dante expressed, noticing the change of emotions on her face.

“Why?” Her voice came out uncommonly quiet.

“Just trust me,” he said and moved forward.

Trust me…He's insane thinking she'll trust him after everything that had happened.

Her face frowned, entering another deep forest. Though now she wasn't even as scared to meet monsters as she was on the Road of Nightmares – she wouldn't have been scared that time either, if she'd known that the actual monster was walking beside her.

Dante had been keeping silent all the way before he offered to make a little stop. And while it caught Violette by surprise, she didn't voice any objections.

She realized why this stop was needed – they had yet to discuss the magic map. She’d entirely forgotten about it since the last time she saw it on the floor when she got changed and the parchment fell out of her corset. She almost forgot that this night started with a ball also. It felt like a fever dream, a dream that had never happened. The magic of the evening snapped

away the moment the carriage stopped in the forest. Nothing about that ball was beautiful anymore, all she could imagine – the ballroom flooding with blood. A scene that couldn't leave her mind: Dante’s palms and face painted with red in the middle of the chaos, rivers of blood beneath his feet. The cries in the distance. Something shrank inside her.

Her eyes fell onto the map on Dante's lap; he was searching for something in the Hegga's book and then Violette distantly heard him call out to her.

“Where can we find these ingredients?” He stood up and passed her the open spellbook. The page was covered with a recipe she saw before – the spell of emergence, a potion for breaking spells cast on the map. The ingredients were familiar to her and, surprisingly, instructions weren't written in any strange language. Though she'd never seen this recipe before, she didn't doubt she could actually brew it. It was quite an easy thing to do.

“These two are very rare to find even in the Magic Lands,” Violette pointed to the ink on the page and lifted her head, her eyes finding him before she quickly escaped his gaze.

“What about others?”

“Some could be found in nature but we still can't do it without a potions shop,” she mumbled.

“Fine. When the sun rises vampires won't be our problem.” He scratched his temple. “We'll go to the nearest town. We can stop for a while until the night comes again and you'll be able to go to the potion shop to buy the ingredients,” he finished.

Violette nodded. This idea seemed quite pleasant. She wanted to rest for a bit, ideally, to sleep. The night was coming to an end, the sky already faded to the light blue color, stars were getting dimmer. The anxiety that was drugging Violette's heart this night seems to slowly disperse along with the moon.

BOTTLES OF POTIONS were clinking under the touch of Violette's fingers. She'd been sorting through powders and liquids in a hope of finding the right ingredients for the potion that would remove the spell off the map. She was lucky enough to find three out of seven, and wondered if this little pharmacy had more or if it's not as advanced as the potion shops in her homeland. She was holding onto the last hope of hers that she was wrong thinking this way.

Her eyes trailed from one shelf to another with a small basket full of dried petals. As her finger went through it, the floral smell burst into the air. And finally she found another component – petals of Calantise – a magical white flower.

After spending another hour in the store and then in the town she got back to the inn they stayed in. At least, she was not empty-handed. Although, last two ingredients were really rare, the third one could be found in the forest – the Folica plant grows in the mud, and was known for its love for dampness and moon bathing.

Violette’s mind was an insurmountable maze with thousands of threads which were leading her only deeper, every step a new thought, every breath a new question, but despite that she fell asleep very fast, completely taken by exhaustion. Then she tried to force herself to eat before their new adventure but not a single piece went down her throat. She was thinking it would be the right thing to get something for the trip, maybe later her stomach will be more inclined to it. With that thought she stuffed her bag with sandwiches.

She hadn't seen Dante since he wished her a good sleep; he couldn't go outside and it made her think he probably was gaining strength in his room, especially since he was severely injured. His absence actually brought her relief – she didn't want to see him. Not now. Or better, *never*. It was hard to believe any of his words, even his confession of having a bag of regrets about what he did in the past. No, she couldn't just fall for it, even if she wanted his words to be true. He said he'd never lied to her but he'd never been honest as well.

As evening approached and the purple tinge cast a warm vivid hue on the sky, Dante entered the living room to find Violette seated on the coach, gazing out the window. Her fingers fidgeted with her magic wand, her

figure stressed and detached from the world. He cleared his throat to draw her attention and her body immediately reacted to the foreign sound.

“Hi,” he said with a hushed tone.

Her eyes raised just to look away a second later.

“Hi.” She moved from her spot on the couch and sat still, with her hands on her knees.

“Did you sleep?”

Violette doubted he was really interested in it, he just needed to start a conversation. His real intention was to scout if she found ingredients.

“I was in a potion shop,” she let out.

“It's not what I asked,” he said but she ignored him.

“I found all except Emersus powder, Sideralis flower and the juice of the Folica plant. The good news, we can find the Folica plant in the forest.”

His gaze dropped.

“Good,” he murmured, his tone clipped. “Then let's focus on this first. Are you ready to go?”

Violette swallowed hard and gave a stiff nod, forcing herself to stand even though her legs felt like a stone.



VIOLETTE’S BOOTS stepped onto damp ground as she was trying to find any traces of the Folica plant. It wasn't picky to the seasons – it didn't need sun or warmth to grow and the snow as well didn't affect it too much, especially since it loved humidity.

She'd noticed a lot of plants in this forest weren't scared of the cold, despite it being the beginning of December, some of them were remaining green and alive. The air was too warm for this time of the year, as well. It was in hand for them, at least – it should be easier to find the ingredient. And yet their searching continued.

The space between them was plugged in a total silence, only rustling of the leaves and an owl's hoot was heard above their heads.

Violette bowed down to look closer at the little herb hiding in the mud, but unfortunately it wasn't what she was looking for.

A disappointed sigh whooshed from her throat. But as she raised her head her eyes caught a blue hue ahead. She straightened up and rushed there. Her fingers reached to the blue leaves in the ground, covering her nails in the dirt. *Yes!*

She tugged the plant – a cerulean blue tint glistened before her eyes in the silver moonlight.

“I found it!” she voiced and Dante was near in seconds.

His eyes fell to the plant as Violette folded it into a napkin.

“Will it be enough?” he asked.

“Yes, it's quite succulent.” She closed her bag and the silence again prevailed in the air. Her hand gripped the buckle of her bag as she bit her lip.

“Now that we have this, we need to find the two last ingredients. To find it in the wild is almost impossible,” she expressed.

Dante fetched a thoughtful sigh and knelt down, picking up a dry branch.

“What are you doing?” She raised a brow.

“A fire cannot be lit without branches,” he said calmly, picking another.

Her brows creased but before she asked a question, he already voiced an answer, “We'll sit and think about it.”

It was a strange offer, especially coming from Dante's mouth. She thought he was all about rushing and not making stops but if so she was not going to protest.

Violette settled down on the log near the fire, Dante across, yet she still couldn't bring herself to look at him. She could stare at him for hours before and now she couldn't make herself raise her eyes for more than a second. She knew he'd noticed it and still kept silent.

How awfully selfish she was, trying to save her father despite how much danger she'll put on others. It was her responsibility – mistake after mistake. Her curiosity, her desire to change fate brought her too far. She knew it would happen. She always knew playing with her desire to acknowledge everything, to experience, will bring her to something terrible, she just never knew what exactly. Well…now she has the answer.

Dante was watching her. Sometimes he glanced at her, however she didn't pay attention to him doing whatever he did. The colors of the world around her slowly were fading away. She felt so dumb for not taking Dante and the vampires seriously enough. It led her right into the trap and the worst of it – she still could feel sympathy for him…A vampire who doomed his kingdom and turned it into rivers of blood.

“You're unusually quiet,” he blew and lowered his eyes to the fire, adjusting it with a wood stick.

He was so annoyed by her questions before, wishing she'd leave him alone, but now he'd trade anything for her endless questions rather than her being so silent. And it was unbearable – she was so sad and drooping. He might admit he missed conversation with her, her laugh, her bittersweet answers to his silly jokes.

Violette didn't respond and kept her eyes on the fire.

“Your father is doing well,” he said and it finally made her look into his eyes and linger her gaze.

“How do you know?” she breathed, not believing he brought her father into conversation.

“I have connections.” He moved the branches on the fire. “He leaves his house very often these days.”

She couldn't believe he made someone look for her father. Why?…To hurt him or to make her feel better? Was he trying to gain her trust and support? Did he start to talk about her father to manipulate her into thinking he cares about her? Either way, she was happy to hear he was doing better. She missed him. And she didn't have a chance to see him after his healing – to see the same man he was a few months ago.

“Mostly he is going out with a shabby brown journal,” he added.

It made Violette smile to herself.

“It's his writing journal,” she said as her face lightened with a warm smile. “He takes it whenever he goes, saying inspiration can come anytime in any place. I don't remember the last time I saw him writing…”

“Soon you'll see him again.”

Violette smiled, fixing her eyes on the fire as the face of her father surged in the back of her mind.

Dante wasn't that nice with her before, even his voice was softer. And she thought she should shoot her shot and know more, to benefit herself and

perhaps…to *understand* him.

“What about your parents? Were you close?” she asked, folding her hands.

To her surprise, he didn't look detached by her question – no coldness or frown.

“I don't think so,” he said wistfully and then raised his eyes to Violette – she was looking at his hands. “I thought we had a pretty understanding family but I don't think this way anymore. I don't think we had a bad relationship but they were far away from being perfect. Maybe, only when I was a kid. Things were easier at that time. When I was older I still was satisfied with our relationships…and then everything went down.”

Her eyes raised to him but he wasn't looking at her anymore; he was staring at the fire lost in his thoughts.

“When you became a vampire,” she said quietly.

“I didn't want this life,” he said. “Vampire venom was made as a punishment. Almost everyone who turned thinks it's a curse.”

“Before, I thought you like this life.” Her fingers clenched into the silk fabric of her skirt.

Dante's brows scrunched. “Death is more of a blessing than living this life. The irony is that you can't die,” he said with a ghost of a mournful smile, his eyes sliding to the side.

“You probably had a good life,” she quieted, “you were a prince.”

“I'm not complaining. I had my role and place in the world.”

“Your life could be totally different,” she gasped thoughtfully.

“I don't like to talk about something that was never meant to happen.”

Violette felt his coldness creeping back. At least, she had a little time to know what was in his head. And the inside of it only lit up her curiosity more, leaving her quite astonished. She was so sure Dante was a selfish vampire who had no shame and morals but it seems he had a lot of regrets in his life. Maybe, he wasn't the person he was before – she'd never met him – but she could swear she could still feel something alive in his soul. A little light very close to dimming into darkness. What if she was wrong? What if he wasn't a monster and didn't try to manipulate her? What if he was sincere with her? Could it be true? She really wanted it to be.

Violette lingered her gaze on him for a solid minute before letting herself speak again. “What are we gonna do with the map now? Without the

Sideralis flower and Emersus powder I can't make the potion to break the spell…”

“I know one witch who has the rarest collection of ingredients and potions. If she doesn't have it then I don't know who does.”

“And how does she feel about you?” One of her brows arched in question.

“Despite everything you might hear, not everyone hates me.”

“I didn't mean that,” she blurted.

“Don't bother explaining yourself, it doesn't matter.”

Her eyes raised to the sky, thinking about his words.

“Hmm,” came out of her mouth. “So you *do* have friends.”

“I wouldn't call them this way and they wouldn't call me like this either. I call them partners with whom I have mutually beneficial relationships.”

Violette squinted. She didn't know why but the word 'partners' discouraged her for a while. After all, she was not the only witch he'd known, and it made her feel something fluttering in her stomach. Why would she be bothered by it? Why did she even think he doesn't know any witches except her? And why did she care if he had a nickname for her too? *Nonsense.* It had no reason to make her feel whatever was going on with her.

CHAPTER 33

THE LITTLE WITCHY HOUSE



The air in the South was clearly warmer and most of the trees there still remained leafy and green as if shrouded in magic. No sign of the winter or the late fall, no snow or frost on the grass and windows. The weather felt like early spring – a light soft breeze. The forest attracted with its vividness and denseness, such a contrast compared to the Forest of Somber Eyes with its eerie stifling air and ominous fog. Instead of silence it was filled with rustling leaves, natural sounds of animals and crickets' songs. It looked so welcoming and cozy, that even the North Forest felt completely hostile in comparison. Layers of different scents intermingled in the air, creating a fresh earthy smell. Slightly damp ground had been covered in green grass, moss and twigs. Warm light from a little town near was slipping through the tree trunks as Violette and Dante were making their way out of the woods.

Their steps led them to a small house covered in moss. Violette abruptly stopped looking at the house, more struck than curious.

"What? Never saw a witch's house?" Dante tossed her a look over the shoulder.

He was indeed right, she'd never seen such a house before, only read about it in the tales. *A small house in the corner of a small town*.

The roof was covered with green moss, a swirl of pink smoke emitting in the air from the chimney. A stone path overgrown with grass was leading to the house, white anemone hung above the wooden door.

There was a little garden decorated with pumpkins and blue fly agaric mushrooms with a well maintained pond nearby. A warm inviting light was pouring from the round window, beckoning the travelers to come closer.

Violette’s eyes slid over a dark brown sign dug into the ground with the name 'Blue Pot', following with a list of what it was selling.

The old door creaked, letting little silver bells with orange ribbons above announce their arrival.

Inside, the house was no less mysterious and truly magical; Smoke coming from the many bottles was tracing the air. A boiling whistle was heard somewhere from the second floor. Jars glowed in different colors – pink, green, blue, iridescent in the light. Various herbs hung from the ceiling on thin ropes, swaying from side to side as if enchanted with silent music.

A black cat was resting at the window, waving its tail. Something white and furry was snoring below, but it hardly resembled an animal, rather something from a magical forest.

Vibrant colors filled this place – it looked chaotic but at the same time unbelievably enchanting and cozy. The sight took Violette's breath away, leaving her completely speechless.

In the corner stood several brooms with crooked trunks, tied with silk ribbons. Next to them, several shabby dark robes. A large purple witch's hat hung on the hook – Violette wondered if it was part of the store's design or if it was what a real witch's house looked like. Not like her, not wizardling but exactly a witch who had been living near a forest like in old fairytales, and brewing potions from herbs. Witches were not as common as wizards or sorcerers where she grew up. She had only met a few of them who frequented her shop, but they looked like any other wizardlings at first glance. She assumed it was part of their adaptation to the world they now had been living in, however before this moment she'd thought all the witches looked this way.

A little further in the room she observed a small counter with a huge open book in a thick binding upon its surface, next to it resided a bird stand. Two yellow eyes flashed from that place. The gray owl squinted at those who entered, but didn't make a sound, only traced a sight.

There was no one behind the counter, but the house didn't look like it was empty, quite the opposite.

Dante sailed further and tapped the cauldron several times with his palms, playing a spontaneous rhythm.

“One moment!” A woman's voice came from the distance, outside of the room.

Beyond the counter were several bookcases, but instead of books, some shelves were heaped with various dried plants and glass bottles of different shapes.

Dante’s fingers ran over the green ribbons and colorful stones hanging from the ceiling on his way to a small table.

“Dante!” an astonished voice sounded from behind the counter as the vampire leaned on the table with his back.

Violette turned her head in the direction the sound came from. The light of the lamp brightened the woman's face. The warm colors sparkled in her expressive brown eyes. Her thick brows raised and an impish grin curled her lips.

“Long time no see. I thought you forgot about me,” she let out.

“If only,” Dante said flatly.

“Cad.” She waved hand before her gaze shifted to Violette, standing beside him. “Hello. Are you with him?”

“It's Violette. We have business,” Dante said dryly, without elaborating on what exactly connected both of them.

“Hi,” Violette hadn't had time to say anything else as the woman exclaimed.

“Oh, Dante got himself a girlfriend?” she teased with a sweet smile.

“Oh, no-no-no,” Violette nervously laughed, “I'd rather die.”

The woman burst into laughter, the sound shaking the walls. “No wonder! Dante is not the one to fall in love with.”

“Uhhh, I wouldn't agree with it,” Dante spoke. “I'm definitely much more handsome than your former lover.” He arched his back and took something small from the table, fidgeting it between his fingers.

“At least he was nice, until he decided to break my heart, of course.” The woman ironically shrugged, turning to the girl.

Violette bared her teeth in an awkward smile.

“We both know it's not entirely true,” Dante said and with it something flew in his direction that he deftly dodged. His teeth flashed through the mask and then his regard got back to Violette. “I think it's hard to believe

but once she was young and pretty. Though it was a very long time ago, nobody actually remembers such times.”

“Oh, nobody? I am pretty sure you were there. But of course, you don't remember. How could you? A bag of sand. Having problems with memory is quite common at your age,” the witch drawled.

Dante huffed, and his face lightened up with a slight smile as he jumped on the table and dangled his legs.

Violette angled her head to better inspect the witch. Dante was right – she wasn't young, although beauty didn't entirely leave her face. She was definitely way older than both of them, well – if speaking of Dante – he looked young despite living centuries. Her tanned skin was giving off a bronze tint and barely noticeable wrinkles formed on her face were imparting some charm to her appearance. The dark hair with copper undertone pinned back was covered with a multi-colored scarf. A few messy locks fell onto her rosy cheeks.

“I'm Lamia.” She smiled at her.

“Didn't think Dante had a friend,” Violette remarked. Something about their interaction seemed like they'd known each other for too long and too good to be just 'partners' as he stated.

“A friend? Me befriending a vampire?” She laughed loudly before distinctly letting out “Never.”

Violette doubted it. “For someone who doesn't like vampires you're too welcoming with us.”

“The enemy of my ex-lover is automatically my ally – it's as simple as this.” Lamia's eyes flashed with amber fire.

“Well, considering Dante, he has a lot of enemies.” Violette glanced to the side.

“It's definitely true. So what do you want?” Lamia asked, changing her gaze to the vampire.

“We need some ingredients for a potion,” Dante voiced, playing with a round statue in his hands.

“Yes, we need Sideralis and Emersus powder,” Violette added.

Lamia listened very attentively, her eyes crinkled with suspicion as she switched her gaze back to Dante.

“And what are you up to?”

“Me?” Dante raised his brows.

“You want to make a rare ingredient potion, I want to know what you are up to.”

“Nothing criminal if you are worried about it.” He shrugged it off.

“Knowing you, I wouldn't trust your words. At least because you don't really separate good deeds from bad.” Her eyes narrowed.

“I'm not going to hurt anyone, the witch girl won't let me. She's very strict when it comes to torturing people.” He glanced sideways at Violette with an almost offended grimace.

Violette ignored him on purpose.

“Well, I have something from my own collection. But I need to know what you can offer me.” Lamia waved her hand.

“Offer to you?” Violette startled. “What could we possibly give you?”

“Come on, it seemed to me that you both got along so well that you could help us just like that. As your new friend.” Dante tossed the figurine in the air.

“Sorry, honey, I like you, but I don't like him,” the woman pointed out.

“Well, that's a common occurrence.” Violette rolled her eyes with a smile on the corners of her mouth. “I actually don't blame you.”

“And what do you want?” Dante asked directly.

“You know what,” the witch said, an insolent smile shining on her gloomy face.

The vampire sighed in annoyance, and then hopped off the table and rolled the sleeve of his shirt.

Lamia came out to meet him from behind the counter and handed him a large needle – unlikely for sewing.

Taking the needle from her hands he nearly hissed “You are so calculating” and thrust it into his index finger.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

Blood gushed down his palm.

“I'm just looking for benefits – it's a business.” The woman smiled slyly, handing him a flask.

Dante placed it under his finger and the liquid quickly began to fill the small container.

“Why do you need his blood?” Violette fluttered her lashes. “Do you want to protect yourself from the vampire luring?”

“Luring?” Lamia’s forehead creased. “Oh no, vampire blood is incredibly rare and an extraordinarily special ingredient. You can't even imagine how much it can be useful in the field of potion making.”

“I hope I don't meet my clone one day thanks to you,” Dante murmured, wiping his hand with a cloth.

“God forbid, never!” She jolted. “This world cannot stand two like you, and neither can I. How do you even tolerate him?” Her eyes run to Violette.

“I wouldn't be sure she tolerates me,” Dante's voice intervened, drawing their attention. He looked quite serious again. “She is too talkative and likes to bother me with questions all the time. Hard to believe, but she barely can stand me, right, Little Witch?”

“Hard to believe?” Violette sneered, meeting his gaze.

“Yes, because I am so charming and handsome,” he counted airily and drew Lamia's attention back. “And while Violette claims my presence irritates her, it’s undeniable that she actually enjoys my company.”

“I'm going to pretend I didn’t hear that,” Violette commented at last.

“Uhh, isn't he just so delusional?” Lamia taunted.

“Said the witch who believed a vampire could fall in love with a human,” he chided.

Lamia's face pulled in a frown. “I was young and stupid and didn’t know your species are not able to love. Don't worry I learned my lesson and will never make this mistake again.”

“Oh, no vampire will look at your wrinkles now," he commented and the witch shot him a vicious smile.

“You should remember it too, Violette. I learned vampires don't have a heart, so don't be surprised if he stabs you with a dagger in the back,” she warned.

“Speaking of daggers,” Dante cast a glance at Violette, “I'm sure she can get ahead of me.”

Violette met Lamia's gaze burned with questions.

“Never mind, we had a few disagreements,” Violette said with an awkward smile.

“Fine, you two have a lot of secrets, I see. You can keep all of them but one I still want to know. What potion do you want to brew?”

“If you don't know then you are a bad potionist,” Dante arrogantly remarked.

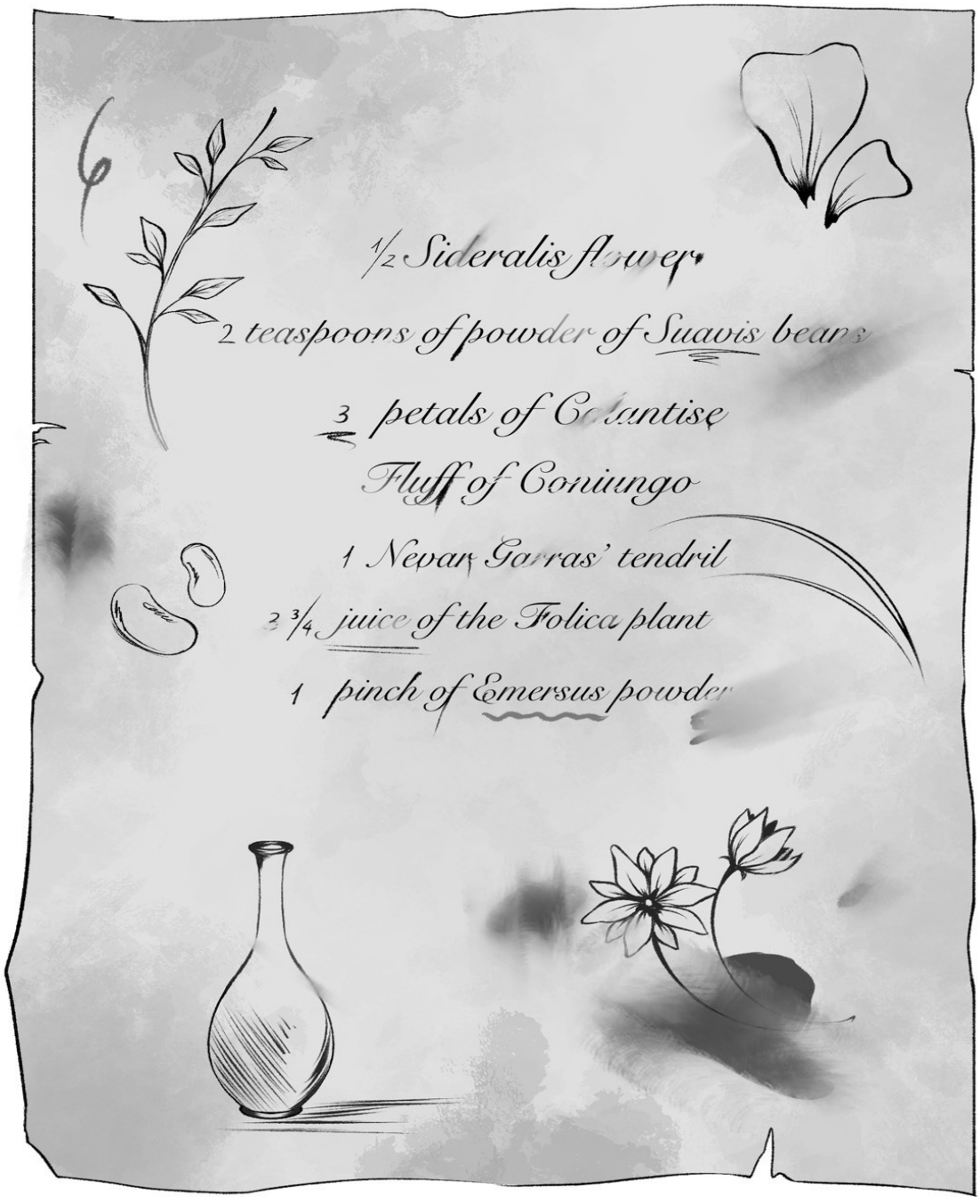
Her face painted in gloom in an instant – Violette would do the same if someone doubted her abilities in the potion field.

“I have a few guesses, but I am not Wisenheimer, Dante.” She opened her mouth again but the sudden sound of the bells interrupted her – a man entered the shop.

Dante's eyes flashed at Lamia as a silent hint she is better to go to her new customer and stop nosing out about their business here.

The witch traced her sight from him to Violette and finally said, “If you need a place to brew your potion you can use a pot over there.” She pointed at a little table near the window and spun on her heels in the direction of the man wandering above the little pots with powders.




½ Sideralis flower
2 teaspoons of powder of Suavis beans
3 petals of Calantise
Fluff of Coniungo
1 Nevan Garras' tendril
3 ¾ juice of the Folica plant
1 pinch of Emersus powder

DANTE CAREFULLY WATCHED as Violette threw more and more ingredients into the black cauldron. Her moves felt clear and confident – she definitely knew what she was doing. Meanwhile, she tried to not think about him being that close to her, it was making her nervous.

Indeed, the emerging potion wasn't that hard to brew with her skills. When it came to potion making Violette was attentive and concentrated, certain in her actions and wasn't afraid of a failure. She had the same faith in her work as she had faith that if you are really diligent, you'll get anything your heart desires.

“How long does it take?” Dante peeked inside the pot, drawing his brows together.

“Around an hour.” Her eyes fixated at the open pages of the book in her left hand. “Give me a spoon.”

Dante took a long wooden spoon hanging on the wall nearby and handed it to her, then leaned forward and rested his elbows on the table while continuing to watch her work. The liquid was changing its color inside the pot with every new powder and herb before his eyes, until they locked on her face and he no longer paid attention to the potion.

Violette's serious and collected expression changed as her eyes shifted to him.

“What?” her voice filled with wonder.

“Nothing,” he said simply and then straightened his back. “I'll look around, do your thing.” And he left without spare words, leaving her alone with her best friends – the spoon and the pot.

Violette was replete with excitement as she finally had an opportunity to escape her thoughts about all that was going on in her life. For a moment she could forget about all of it and just do what she truly loved.

A white tendril of Nevar Garras landed on the liquid surface. Violette looked into the book to check the recipe, her fingers reached to the brown bag and she dropped a pinch of Emersus powder in the pot – the liquid inside was slowly boiling, the bubbles that formed on the surface burst one by one. With each new ingredient, it changed color until it turned into a light shade of pine. The slight fresh scent, reminiscent of a breeze, tickled her nostrils.

She was mixing the potion when the sound of steps from behind hit her ears, making her exclaim. It was Lamia – the witch crept up completely silently.

“Oh, excuse me. I thought it's Dante,” Violette exhaled.

“Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you.” She smiled and then curiously looked over into the pot. “Hm, the potion looks good!”

Violette's face beamed. “Thank you.”

“So you know how to handle a pot and a spoon, I see,” she teased in a kind way.

“I work in a potion shop on the continent.”

“So you're from the continent! Oh, I'd like to go there one day.” The witch leaned with her hand on the table. “It's so interesting to see the wizards and sorcerers community, where magic is…you know, everywhere and not as unusual.”

Violette softly chuckled. “Yes, you have different rules here but it's indeed interesting. And traces of magic still here. It's just *different*.” Violette quickly glanced at the bubbling pot. “I miss home, but this place isn’t bad. And your house truly looks like something from a fairytale!” She happily looked back at the woman.

“You think so? Are your houses not the same?” Lamia quirked a brow.

“Yes, indeed! It looks more casual – wizards are very neat,” Violette prolonged, slowly stirring the potion, her tone steady and velvety like butter.

The witch canted her head to the side with an interest. “And you grew up around other magic people?”

Violette nodded. “I was lucky enough to be born in the biggest wizard city. Magic there is such a common thing. We have a lot of shops which sell potions, magic animals, spell recipes, enchanted inks and scrolls. We also have a wonderful library with a ton of enchantment books and, no offense, but the best blueberry cakes.”

Lamia's head raised to the ceiling in a ringing laugh. “It sounds truly nice.”

Violette smiled under her breath, fixating her sight at the bubbles on the potion surface. An awkward silence sealed between them before a sudden dull thud rang off – the cat, who was licking his paws until now, jumped off

the windowsill, landed on all fours and then followed the stairs leading to the second floor.

Violette turned her attention back to the witch. “Can I ask you one question?” Her voice became awkwardly quiet.

“Yes, of course. I don't usually have many interesting visitors, so I am happy to answer anything,” Lamia’s eyes shone as she confessed.

The curiosity slinked to Violette’s mind as she tried to rewind their previous conversation in her head.

“You said that vampires can’t love. How is that?”

“Oh, this one,” the witch calmly sighed. “Vampires don't have a heart, not physically of course, but they indeed cannot feel love. They are selfish and think only about their supremacy. As you can see I experienced what a vampire's ‘love’ is, and I don’t recommend it.”

“I am sorry about that.” Violette’s lips pressed together.

“Oh, don’t worry. As I said, the wound is already healed. But my advice to you – be careful and do not let yourself make such a mistake like I did. It can end in ruins for you.”

“Oh, believe me, I don’t plan to fall for a vampire.” Violette chortled.

She was not that stupid. Yes, she kept making mistakes and getting trapped in bad situations, but she wasn’t dumb. Never in her life could she imagine herself falling in love with a night bloodsucking monster – it was illogical and absurd. And except the fact that they were talking about vampires, how could she feel some deep feelings toward someone who is so blatantly selfish and rude as Dante? Or those vampires she saw a few moons ago in the Vampire Kingdom? How could someone even find something attractive in their souls? They had nothing but a pretty face, and however it was everlasting, their love would never be real and their interest most likely would fade in a very short time, leaving you completely wretched as if you had never been a part of their immortal life. She felt sorry for Lamia, she didn’t know her story but it seemed like such a tragic turn of events. Nobody likes to be misled, especially by someone who they keep close to the heart.

“Great, because in one thing Dante is right. He indeed has a pretty face even if half of it is covered.” Lamia winked at her. “Don’t tell him I said it. No need to feed his ego.”

Violette laughed. “Your secret will die with me.”

The seething liquid under her gaze changed its hue for the tenth time, now radiating a teal shade, when the menacing sound of the clock ricocheted in her mind.

“Nine o'clock, time to feed Acies.” Lamia clapped and immediately disappeared, leaving Violette with her own thoughts.

Her gaze drifted to the window.

CHAPTER 34

UNDER THE MOONLIGHT



Violette's eyes found Dante sitting by the pond – something dull and sad was in the way he bowed his head, the way his dark silhouette looked against the reflection of the moon in the water. It made her stop on the last step.

Alone. Obscured by darkness. It was so him. She's been wondering what his thoughts were occupied by.

Stepping on the wet ground, she walked forward. Dante's eyes were lowered to his own reflection on the water surface – the only thing he could see himself in.

Violette cleared her throat and he slowly turned his head. His face – calm and loosened up, she didn't remember if she saw him like that before. He looked like there wasn't really something on his mind at the moment but Violette felt like something strange was lingering over him. Maybe, his mind was clear of the dark plans and his eyes were free of mischievous demons but she felt his thoughts were consumed by something else.

"The potion is nearly ready," she announced, locking her palms together.

Dante angled his head to the side and leaned slightly back, pressing his hands to the ground. "Very well." His voice was smooth as the water surface on the pond.

He wasn't in a hurry to get up. His eyes were staring in the darkness of the night beyond. Violette took a step, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear and then she silently sat next to him.

“Well–” she tried to start a conversation but he cut her off too soon to continue her thought.

“You look happy when you make potions,” he said, not taking his eyes off the distance. “Why potion shop?”

She looked at him with a bewildered expression. His eyes finally met hers – so dreamy, two wanly twinkling sapphires, almost black as the night itself.

“Why did you decide to work in a potion shop?” he clarified.

She was caught off guard with this question, though there wasn't much mystery about it. Thinking for a bit she absently said, “I think it makes me closer to my mother.”

Dante bent his head staring, inviting her to continue.

Violette swallowed. “She loved brewing potions and experimenting. I liked it too but I think I started to take it seriously because it connects me to her even if she's no longer with me. I could feel her when I make potions, I can feel like…” she faltered for a second, trying to find the right thing to say, to find the word that would describe that precise feeling, “like she's still with me. She taught me how to make potions. She hadn't had a lot of time to show me everything…” She gnawed on her bottom lip. “I still have her notes with potions and spells and every time I open it I feel like she's talking to me and teaching me again,” Violette's eyes lowered to the ground, while Dante’s were wandering on her face. “She was a wonderful and talented wizardling. Days in her sanctum always were like a magic portal to somewhere else. And she loved the shop I work at right now; she always went there when we had our family weekend.” A faint smile appeared on her face as the warmth of those days went down her skin, nostalgia wrapped her in its arms.

“Family weekend?” Dante's forehead slightly crinkled.

She raised her gaze to him and her smile grew brighter.

“Once a week me and my parents used to walk to Wonder Alley to stroll and visit different shops. My father would always go to the store for parchments and quills, and my mother would always check up on the potions shop, and me…I'd always follow her like a tail.” She tipped her head, her eyes twinkled like the stars. “This store seemed like the most magical place to me. There was a terrible and disgusting smell every time,” she softly chuckled as she tucked her knees, “but I was mesmerized by the

sparkling liquids in the vials. Some of them changed their color, fizzed, bubbled and mysterious steam flowing around was wrapping me up, while various wizards and witches in fancy hats gathered around. There was a small corner with floral ingredients, and it always smelled like violets…Her favorite flower."

Dante tore his gaze away and returned it to the distance ahead over the pond.

Violette's voice, silky and mellifluous, continued curling up the air, "We'd meet with dad on the main street after, visit the bookstore, and then we'd walk together to our favorite street cafe, where he always ordered his favorite crumpets with butter, and mom drank hot violet chocolate."

"You really love your parents," he simply said, his voice devoid of emotions, yet, she felt his ease; his tone was as smooth and gentle as a warm summer night's breeze.

"They're everything to me…" Her eyes sparkled at Dante, a smile changed with a pondering hanging up on her lips. "Do you miss yours?"

"Sometimes, but I wouldn't want them to be alive right now." He could already feel curiosity sprawling in Violette, so he answered faster than she could ask the following question, "I don't want them to know this side of me."

"They died before you turned into a vampire?" She bowed her head.

"No, not really…" his brows knitted together. "They saw me as a vampire but since then I have made a lot of mistakes and things I wouldn't want them to know." Finally their gazes locked together before he broke it again. "They already died with such a bad opinion about me."

"You know…" Violette's voice became soothing. "It sounds stupid but my dad always tells me that parents will always love you. If they were good parents I think they wouldn't judge you like others, especially if they'd known it brought you pain too." It was not really clever to assume but the love her parents gave her seemed like this.

He gravely smiled and closed his eyes, raising his head.

"I'm not scared they will judge me, I have more reasons to judge them anyway."

"Why?" she asked.

He didn't open his eyes, nor did he say anything. She was silly assuming he would answer her on this question. So she asked another one:

“What were your parents like?”

“They were…nice.” His voice sounded dry. Lowering his head, he continued, “My father wasn't the best father, but he was a good king. He taught me everything he knew to make me a perfect heir to the throne. And my mother—” he fell silent for a second, “she was a great parent. But she was not a kind person.”

Violette blinked as he side-glanced at her.

“She did bad things thinking only about herself and had never… acknowledged this.” Dante hid his gaze, burying it into the ground beneath them. The gloom woke up in his eyes, making Violette's heart almost ready to sympathize with him.

“Did she love you?”

“Oh, yeah…” A chuckle fell from his lips and his eyes again slipped away. “She loved me. I'd never doubted her love.”

“Then…Maybe she was doing something that she thought would be better for you?”

“Then she was terribly wrong.” The familiar coldness in his tone seemed to awake.

“Nobody said parents are always right,” she let out merrily. Naive of her to think it would cherish his mood.

He bowed his head and a subdued smile lit up the corners of his lips. Violette quickly swayed her gaze away and raised her head towards the night sky. Chirps of crickets followed the rustle of leaves caused by a light wind. Violette's wavy hair tickled her cheeks as she blinked at the stars above them – their bright light against the saturated dark blue sky felt fascinating. They were just sitting for a few moments like this; no one decided to drop a word. It was not needed.

Dante's back cracked as he stretched and finally started to rise from the ground.

“Come on, Little Witch,” he said airily and Violette stood up while straightening the folds on the skirt.

Little Witch...

Maybe it was the way he said it at the moment, or maybe it was just this nickname but it brought warmth to her soul, as if her heart was wrapped in a soft blanket. And…she liked it.



THEY WERE ONCE AGAIN STANDING by the little potion table over the black pot with the teal liquid inside. Violette poured the ready potion into a crystal multifaceted bottle with the ladle. Her hand slipped in the bag for the map as Dante stopped her with his hand.

“Not here.”

“Why? I thought you trust Lamia.” She batted her lashes twice.

“I don't trust anyone. She's good but I don't want to let my guard down. It would be overhasty.”

The creaking of the wooden stairs interfered with their conversation, followed by the witch's footsteps and both Dante and Violette closed their mouths before she reached the floor.

“Finished with your potion?” Lamia asked with a hint of gaiety in her tone.

Violette pressed her lips and nodded approvingly. And before both of them would exchange another few words Dante aired, “It was nice doing business with you.”

“We both know you don't think so.” Her brow arched in an insolent manner.

“Did it not sound sincere?”

“No.”

“Because it wasn't.” The corner of his mouth twitched upward.

Violette stepped out from the house as Dante already went ahead. The fresh air burst into her lungs. The stars in the sky were still scintillating just as brightly – the night promised to be calm.

“It was nice to meet you, Violette,” Lamia’s gentle voice carried by the wind, and followed by the same smile while she stood on the doorstep. “You know, I won't say you are lucky to meet Dante but, believe me, there's much worse vampires out there. At least, he doesn't pretend to be something he is not.”

It was hard to believe these words when Violette knew the truth of his past, but she just responded to her with a faint smile.

“Goodbye, Lamia,” she said kindly, the corners of her eyes lifted.

“May the moon light up your way back home,” the witch said at last as Violette turned around and followed Dante who was already passing the pond.

They were walking to the forest which began not far from Lamia’s house. Finally, Dante stopped and extended his hand, asking for the map.

Violette reached into her bag and pulled out the folded parchment, passing it to him. Then she took out the bottle of the magic potion she'd prepared earlier this evening. The teal liquid sparkled before her eyes as the bubbles inside hissed.

As Dante unfolded the map, two drops of the potion fell on its surface – a purple smoke appeared emanating from the place where it was spilled. Only a fraction of a second and magic spread throughout the paper, as if removing a protective barrier. The map began to transform, the pictures began to change – villages, towns, forests began to be replaced by others and finally the map showed its true face. In the northeast's forest – not far from some old little town – a pulsating purple light indicated their destination. Golden letters in cursive writing arose on the same spot – *Grotto of Spells and Relics*. This was where their way lay, their last journey, unless the Queen decided to lead them into another trap. Violette had enough mysteries and obstacles on her way, it would be better if it really was their *last* stop.

Dante appeared unexpectedly serious; Violette had anticipated he would be pleased. Instead, he looked as if the map showed him not the path to liberation, but spat right in his face.

“You know where it is?” she inquired.

“I think two nights from here, maybe less if we hurry up. We'll take a carriage here,” he pointed to the paper, his finger traced higher, “To Turret and then the one to Lagrival, then walk from there through the Dormant Woods.”

Violette thoughtfully nodded. Finally they had a clear plan to follow, finally everything was coming together.

CHAPTER 35

HUNTED



Violette studied the map while Dante dozed off. She was plotting the path to the magical cave in her head.

The map has indeed changed since they broke the spell – some of the names have shifted, and the position of places has switched. Where it was empty now towered kingdoms, some towns disappeared, new ones emerged, more forests grew, and new lakes formed. The map seemed to adjust to their time and it wasn't surprising, since Dante said the Queen lived several centuries ago – it was likely that the map showed old places that are unknown to anyone now or bear little resemblance to nowadays.

Her eyes fell on a new name on the parchment she'd never seen before – *Lost Kingdom.* She stopped, and wracked her mind about what was there before. And it struck her – *Desensisfort*. The kingdom from Dante's past. *His* kingdom.

She peered at the sleeping vampire over the map. Her eyes ran to the parchment again and trailed the way to their destination. If she was right their path lies through…*Oh*. That's why Dante wasn't satisfied with the map's answer. It really spat the bad news in his face – soon they'll pass by the remains of the kingdom he once called home. Painful memories – if trusting his words. He probably never wanted to come back even to see this fragment of the past, what was left of his – once – life. His *human* life. Interesting. How much time had passed since the last time he was here? Was this the reason why he rarely looked out the window on the way?

Violette was hit once again with a feeling she was trying to overcome – compassion.

She looked up at Dante again, her eyes raked over his dark hair to his calm sleeping face. Her heart sank. In this state she would never have said that in front of her was a murderer and a monster. He looked so harmless, so sweet…And that is exactly why Violette was avoiding feeling sympathy for him. In this light she would easily believe he is an innocent soul. It was so easy to doubt everything she heard about him right now, about the vampire who gutted the whole kingdom. She couldn't let it fool her.

Remember it, Violette. Do not believe anything, especially what you see, sounded in the back of her mind.

Vampires were so easy to trust with their charm. They were the masters of allurement and lying, able to make their prey believe they were just unfortunate souls who were enclosed in the bodies of bloodsuckers. But… Dante had never tried to paint himself as a saint. She remembered Lamia's words and they had been rooting in her head since then.

‘At least, he doesn't pretend to be someone he is not.’

And yet, Dante himself said she can't trust anyone, even him. Was he really just a victim of circumstances or was he just trying to make her believe he is better than he is? He looked so shattered and regretful about what he did…or was he playing? If so then it was cruel. Something in Violette's heart wanted to believe him, part of her soul wanted to give in, to hope all he said was true and he isn’t the monster as everyone paints him… But she couldn't. If she would do it, she would be foolish. Dante was exactly what he was and she should sink this thought in.

A few hours passed until the coach stopped. Violette couldn't make herself sleep, she might have dozed off for a while, but it didn't last long – the seats were too hard and uncomfortable. She opened her eyes right before the carriage stopped. Dante was already awake.

Her head popped up out the window. They arrived in a town, quite big and crowded. This place lived and flourished; people hurriedly were crossing the roads, the air was brimming with loud conversations, shouting of vendors spread through the streets.

“We'll stay in the inn for a rest and then take another carriage to the final destination,” Dante said and opened the door.

They appeared to be on the main street with a market on the other side. The noise was following them all the way to the place they decided to stay in, until the door closed behind their backs.

While Dante decided to check the availability of the carriage, Violette chose to take a nap, even if it was a short one – a few hours of sleep is better than nothing.

Her muscles ached with a deep soreness, mind clouded with a hazy fog. As soon as she stepped on the threshold of the room, she surrendered to the warmth of the bed.

But soon enough something flew into her face, snatching her from the clutches of the dreams. Her eyes burst open.

“Wake up, Little Witch. Plans have changed.”

“What?” She roughly rubbed her eyes, a slumber still obscuring the clarity of her mind. She blinked continuously until her vision became clear again, finding Dante peering out the window through a gap in the curtains.

“I noticed two vampires in the town. I don't know if they're here for our souls or just to have fun, but we need to get out urgently.” He drew the curtain closed and streaked through the room. “We won't go by carriage, we need to leave unnoticed.”

“If not by carriage, how will we get to the grotto?” she finally spoke, still veiled with the drowsiness, as she almost wore a left boot on her right leg. She picked up the cloak that Dante had thrown at her a minute earlier when she heard his next words.

“On foot.”

“On foot?” Surprise filled her voice.

“Yes. We'll go through the forest,” Dante stated.

“Isn't forest a more dangerous place to hide in?” Her brows pulled together in confusion. It sounded like a terrible idea.

“In any other time, yes. That's why they'll be looking for us in the towns. It's filled with too many scents but that's exactly what would make them think we'd rather be here than in the woods,” he explained.

“I hope you're right because if I die, I will find the way back just to annoy your whole existence to the end of your days,” she snorted.

“I am immortal.”

“Exactly,” she blew.

Dante hurried. “We need to cover up your smell.”

“My smell? Do I stink?” Violette's face contorted in an offended way.

“I'm talking about your *human* scent,” he evaluated. “Some of the vampires met you before, they can recognize it. Do you have something that you haven't worn yet and that hasn't taken on your scent?”

“I think I have another dress in the bag,” she murmured as her hand reached for another pair of clothes.

She took out a long-sleeved dress of a vivid purple color with a cape attached to its back.

Dante pulled one of the sleeves and sniffed it. “I can still smell traces of you. Can you change it with magic?”

Violette faltered. “I can conjure a trailing scent but it'll be very light like a perfume. There's no spell to change a scent, especially since vampires have *such* a sensitive smelling ability.”

“Fine, then just change clothes and throw my coat on top,” he suggested.

“Won't they smell you?”

“No,” he flung over the shoulder, leaving the room. “Vampires can't sense each other. The only way they can track us down is your scent.”

So strange…Violette could clearly smell Dante, for a vampire he had a very delightful scent – it reminded her of a late summer night, lulling her to peace, totally the opposite of death.



VIOLETTE'S DRESS was a slightly warmer tone of violet than her previous one. It had long sheer sleeves to the knuckles, black lace along the hem of the tiered skirt, which ended just above the knees. A wide corset belt, decorated with silver star patterns entwined her waist, her magic wand hanging behind.

As she found Dante on his way downstairs, he measured her from top to toe, his eyes lingered for two seconds on her collarbone crossed with lilac ribbons, matching the black one on her neck with a violet rose. “Are you ready?”

She nodded as they stepped down and he shoved her his long embroidered coat in a dark blue. It was heavy and much bigger than her, making her doubt she would be as fast in it as always but it wasn't like she had other options. At least, it was warm and soft inside, she felt like she was wrapped in a blanket.

As they approached the first floor she noticed a hint of concern on Dante's face – it was something new for sure. Her fingers seized the coat, pulse quickened. She looked around, although it was a pointless thing – she couldn't distinguish between vampires anyway.

“Let's go out the back door.” He moved to the back of the hall. "Stay here for a moment, I'll take a look around,” he said near the threshold and just before leaving, he turned to her and said formidably, “*Don't* do anything.”

“I won't,” she breathed with the intention to keep the promise.

His forehead crinkled, gaze lingered on her face, and then he disappeared in a second as if merging with the darkness outside.

Violette only now noticed how loud her heart was thumping, she could hear it in her ears. Growing anxiety made her look out to see if Dante was coming back.

“Hello,” a cloying voice called instead.

A male head popped out in the doorway, a malignant smile dancing on the corners of his lips.

The blood in her veins curdled.

Bad. It was very bad.

Two young men blocked her path. One of them bared his teeth – *fangs*. Such a simple act but it made Violette nervously back up, she suddenly felt like caught prey. She reflexively reached for the wand, though it wouldn't help her.

“Don't think we are familiar but you know some of our friends,” another vampire finally smiled as they both made their way closer.

Her back pressed into the wall and she shut her eyes in fear. The echoing heartbeat in her head was all-consuming. And then she remembered she actually was holding the most powerful thing. *The Vampire Slayer.* If only she could reach it in her bag.

Her eyes flew open as something hit the wall nearby. The vampire who was threatening her a few seconds ago was pressed to the wall with a

broken forehead. The bright red was dripping to the ground as she raised her eyes to Dante, who was seizing his neck. Another one tried to hit him but ended up being hit into another wall, his legs hanging up in the air. Dante squeezed his collar and leaned closer.

“I'll say only once, so listen closely and tell others,” his voice came out raucous. “I'll rip the head off anyone who even breathes her way,” he snarled.

Violette could feel her heart palpitating relentlessly against her chest, each beat echoing like a drum in the silence. She seemed to be fused with the ground, as if invisible vines held her firmly in place, refusing to let her move even an inch.

Dante added, “Now, if you value your limbs, get lost.” His fists unclenched, letting the vampires go, and both of them whipped out into the darkness.

Violette breathed out, oblivious to how loud it was. Dante spun to her, his expression remained serious and baleful, his features hard and sharp. But his voice turned out much softer.

“Are you fine?” he asked, something twinkled in his eyes.

She held his gaze, swallowed and slowly nodded, fastening her nails into the fabric of her coat.

“We need to hurry,” he said and grabbed her by the hand. They almost jumped outside in the direction of the forest. Violette once again looked back at the city lights as her legs continued to run towards the thick trees, her hair fluttering against the wind.

CHAPTER 36

NEVER SAID BEFORE WORDS



Violette made a heavy step through the dense forest. Didn't matter how much she looked around, her eyes couldn't find anything that looked like a path. Instead, their way went through the tangled bushes and the tall trees.

Dante's coat was weighing her down and made her tired very quickly. Dante all this time strolled slightly ahead, without going far. The silence was hanging in the air until Violette got caught over a thorny bush.

“Will all our way be that…clogged? I don't want to complain but–” she broke off, waiting for Dante's voice to be out in the air.

“Be patient. We might find a path soon,” he said, treading forward. Not once did he look over at her.

A warm puff of steam left her mouth. The vampire suddenly stopped and turned her way, which she didn't notice until she staggered closer. She lifted her head and found his eyes.

“If you're tired you can just say it,” he said blandly.

“I'm fine,” she muttered and made her way past him.

“We can make a stop,” he continued.

“No need.”

“Nothing will happen if we take a break for ten minutes,” he insisted as he appeared shoulder to shoulder with her.

Violette raised her head to the stars and then trailed her gaze to Dante. She was silent for a while – she didn't want the vampires to catch up with

them but if Dante was sure they could take a little break then perhaps, she shouldn't worry. In truth, she was longing to sit.

She sat on a log and raised her head towards, just breathing in and out. The cold air made the journey even worse, she barely could keep up with Dante’s pace.

Her eyes opened – the stars were sparkling bright as diamonds against the inky gulf, settling tranquil in her heart. The pale moon shone with silver hue, emitting the space around itself. As always Violette sought something else there, maybe a sign or moment of epiphany; the sight of stars while traveling all these nights was soothing her with a feeling of protection, even if it was a very weak glimpse of it.

“You like looking at the sky,” Dante suddenly released into the air.

Her head spun to him, his gaze directed at the stars. She didn't understand if it was a question or just a statement.

Steam released out of her mouth, her lips bent in a faint smile.

“My mother told me once, that dead souls go to the sky and shine among the stars, so I just…I just hope she’s there too,” she paused, her brows slanted, “watching me. I know it sounds stupid but it's nice to think so.”

Dante's voice brought down the silence almost immediately, “It's not stupid.”

Violette shifted her eyes, watching him intently.

His head tipped towards the sky. “There are so many stars in the sky that you can't even count them. If you think about it – how many lives have passed since the beginning of time?”

She blinked, entranced with his face as if she would have watched a painted portrait. His silhouette majestic against the moonlit sky, too immovable, absolutely monumental. His eyes – inscrutable as if he was hoping to see something there as well but he knew he couldn't – it wasn't there.

“Isn't it sad, you can watch a million stars above your head forever, except one, the brightest?” Violette voiced, shifting her gaze back to the glittering sky.

Dante turned his sight to her. He stared at her for some time, then again at the stars.

“I prefer the moon over the sun,” he breathed into the air. “It’s different but more…familiar. We can see her shape, her shadows, different phases of her life, how it changes. How *she* changes. How her parts disappear just to come together again. How she rewrites herself every month – her rebirth.

“She lightens the way for travelers at night, which is way more than the sun does. The moon leads you through darkness.” His eyes sparkled with that precise sapphire hue that was always so quick to escape. “She doesn't hide behind blinding light, letting us watch all her imperfections. And to all others, she's never trying to outshine the stars' beauty.”

Violette found herself watching Dante with parted lips, completely mesmerized. A sudden tug inside her heart, quick and silent but the one that leaves traces. What he said made her feel some strange way of rue and dejection, but it was beautiful, all of his words made a perfect sense.

His eyes met hers.

“You stare again.” He smiled derisively.

“I am at a loss for words,” she confessed.

A soft chuckle slipped his lips. “Did I make you speechless after all?”

“Don't get used to it,” she frowned.

“I won't,” he said mysteriously and then straightened up, his shoulders tensing again. “We have to continue on our way.”

Violette slowly nodded, then hastily got up, shaking off invisible dust from her skirt but not the feeling that veiled over her soul. He was right, they had to go – soon all of it will convert into a past event of her life but now she should be worried about what will come next.



FINALLY THEIR LEGS led them to the little path in the deep of the forest, between trees covered with a thin layer of snow. Dante seemed to slow down his tempo so Violette didn't fall behind, walking almost hand in hand. Somewhere far away a series of warm lights glistened – another little town.

A few hours passed by and Violette started yawning, her thoughts meandered aimlessly and her eyelids were only half open until she tripped

over her own leg, drawing Dante’s attention.

“I think we need to stop,” he voiced.

Violette blinked, trying to shake the drowsiness from her shoulders.

“I think we can make a long one,” he suggested and made a few steps to the side. “I'll light a fire.”

Violette let out a weary sigh and stretched, nodding her head as a sign she heard him. She found a little wooden stump to sit – it wasn't too comfortable but her legs howled in pain. They were on their feet too long and her boots, despite being so pretty, weren't doing her a favor. A quiet moan left her mouth as she stretched her legs forward.

In a few minutes Dante piled the brushwood in front of her.

“Let me,” Violette perked up.

She shook her magic wand and the pile of branches inflamed in seconds.

The chilling air caressed Violette's cheeks. She rubbed her hands and pulled the coat on her shoulders tightly. The further they traveled, the more wintry it became. The glistening snow cloaked trees with white lace and blanketed the ground beneath.

Dante settled down near.

A warmth crept to Violette's skin, her shoulders shuddered and shivers went down her spine. She sniffled, holding up her palms to the fire. She even might envy Dante for his ability to not feel the cold. She must admit – being a vampire had its own perks.

Her eyes trailed to his figure, sitting with a bowed head, his gaze locked on the blazing fire, brows drawn together.

She tipped her head thoughtfully. His strange mood bothered her too much to keep quiet about it.

“You're not looking happy for a person who finally will get what he wants,” Violette voiced.

“Maybe because I am not happy,” his voice – sharp like a knife – cut the air. Even the trees seemed to shudder from this sound.

“Why not?” Her eyes widened. She didn't expect him to be that blatantly honest, her words supposed to be a joke.

“Why wouldn't you go…” he paused, frowning as if trying to figure out where she should go and what she should do, “somewhere?”

Violette immediately protested, “Don't push me away! We're almost done with our deal, it's probably our last time together.”

His eyes shifted to her but then quickly got back to the playful fire.

“Are you still trying to befriend me, Little Witch? Nobody told you it's a bad idea?”

“You told me, but you also told me not to listen to you.” She joyfully rolled her eyes and swayed.

“I didn't say that. I said you can't trust me.” A sullen expression wrapped his face as he raised his gaze only to meet her tender smile.

Violette couldn't say what changed since she discovered he was a monster, perhaps, her mind surrendered to her heart. She couldn't lie – she didn't see him as such. Was he narcissistic? Yes. Did he play on her nerves sometimes? Also yes. He was controversial and hard to read. But he wasn't evil. She tried to convince herself otherwise but it was hopeless. Her faithful nature couldn't let her believe he was a cruel bloodthirsty monster.

“I’m just trying to give you a hand of help,” Violette kept trying. “You seem to be thinking about something and I'm offering you a chance to talk about it. I promise I won't think we're best friends forever after this,” she said sarcastically.

He looked at her from the corner of his eyes and smirked. It made her tilt her head, ready to listen to his most honest speech.

“I–” he started and for a second Violette thought he'd changed his mind, yet he continued after a heavy breath, “I want to take this mask off but I think, perhaps, I wasn't honest with myself when I said I am confident in what will happen next…” He wearily drew a line from forehead to jaw with his hand. Then carefully looked at Violette waiting for her to get scared or angry, after all he assured her there's nothing to worry about just two moons ago. But she just inquisitively stared at him, at his face.

“I mean,” his voice weakened, “I think about…” he reasoned if he should share this thought and at last second changed the course of his thinking, “What if I'm actually what others claim me to be?”

Violette bit her lower lip. “You think you won't be able to hold on?”

He didn't say anything – only a sad confirmation in his eyes.

She slightly pulled back and looked up to the stars, thinking. She wasn't mad at him, not for his honesty. Perhaps he just expressed more emotions now than during their entire journey. Undeniably, this particular topic of his

past was bringing him pain; she realized it back after he told her the truth of how he was fighting his vampirism. So it made her think the reason for his hesitation is more than explainable.

“Fear is a natural thing, I presume, even for something that is not actually natural.” A lovely half-smile curled her lips. “You're nervous about what will happen – I would think about it as a good sign.”

“A good sign?” The corners of his eyes wrinkled.

“It means you still care,” she said, her tone no less warm than the fire. “It means that you can feel and care about others; I never thought I'd say something like this but otherwise, you'd not care what will happen after you take your mask off.”

“I still don't see it as a good thing,” he muttered and dragged his sight into the dancing fire.

Violette musingly hummed. “You said you'd never want other people to die, as much as this whole…*situation* is horrible, I wouldn't call you a villain. What happened,” she looked away, “was horrendous and you can't turn back time. But you can become better and if your heart is truly kind then it speaks for itself.”

Dante's brows drew together. He was pondering her words, though Violette felt like she didn't convince him. He didn't believe in himself. Well, nobody had believed as it seemed. She couldn't be sure if all he said was true but she wished to be. He stated Caidas was harsh and didn't try to understand. Dante might have lost the hope – the faith in himself after all.

“You said you were trying to run away,” she voiced.

He raised his eyes to hers, his shoulders strained. “It still didn't work. I tried everything to stop myself, but the moment I saw people, my mind just went blank.”

“Did you notice you're using words in past form? Believing in yourself is actually half the deal.” She angled her head. “Sometimes even hard work is not enough if you don't have faith in yourself.”

His gaze pierced her as if he was waiting for more reasons than that. And she understood her words might instill mistrust and it sounded a bit naive and dreamy but she believed in what she was saying. She was thinking how hard it might be for him to think better about himself when everyone around kept calling him doomed, a wrong one.

“But if you need someone to believe in you,” she tried to sound more nonchalant than it looked. ”I believe you can handle it.” Her hand slipped closer to him, and after a thread of waver, her fingers gently touched his.

Dante’s forehead slightly creased, brows curved down, and for a frail heartbeat confusion froze in his gaze. His eyes slowly lowered to her hand – Violette took it away at the same moment.

His gaze froze on his hand for a while and then he finally looked at the girl, eyeing her as though he couldn’t fathom why she might be kind to him after all she knew.

“I mean. It's in my interests, so don't be too flattered,” she waved, “But…I do think you can do it if you really want to.” Her eyes flew to him again and her soft smile could melt even the most impenetrable heart.

He clacked. “You're making me believe I am a better person than I am, Little Witch.”

“Oh, no, you're definitely terrible.” She chuckled softly.

Turning to the fire, he looked at her from the corners of his eyes and smiled back, and even if that smile was not as soft and warm as hers, even if the mischievousness was dancing on the corners of his mouth – it was sincere.

“Thank you,” he said deeply, his voice calm and smooth as night itself.

“See, sometimes it's good to talk about your feelings with others.”

“Look who's talking.” A quiet chuckle left his mouth.

Violette blinked at a loss.

“You know what I mean.” The smile didn't leave his mouth. “If we are talking about my feelings, it's only honest to talk about yours as well.”

“What do you mean?” She shuddered.

“Sometimes you say things that are different from what you really feel.”

Violette lips pressed in a thin line.

“You don't know what I feel,” she set.

A tease burned in his eyes. “Come on, Little Witch. I won't judge you, just tell the truth.”

“I am not scared you'll judge me,” she murmured. She said the truth, it's not something she worried about.

“But what about others?” He adjusted a stick in the fire.

She raised her eyes to his. He couldn't be that insightful – he was attentive to details but she wouldn't think he was good at distinguishing

feelings.

“I don't think I follow.” She swiped her gaze away.

“Don't you get tired of pretending?”

“I'm no–I–” She gave him a dirty look. “I don't pretend. I just don't think I should show more than needed.”

He meaningfully drawled “Mmm.” And then after a long pause he added, “But isn't it lying then? You always try to act cool when you indeed feel too overwhelmed.”

She glanced at him again. She knew what it was about. He was talking about all these moments when she was scared or anxious but tried to look calm and unbothered. Unlike Dante, she wasn't that cold, that careless. Sometimes feeling was devouring her from inside but she always tucked it in. That's how she was with her father – she never told him, never showed him how much she was scared, how much his state had been making her dolorous. It was the way she acted with others. If she felt sad – she was smiling. If she wanted to cry – she waited until she was completely alone. Nobody was allowed to see her tears, to know she is not able to control her own feelings. She wanted to be strong. Stronger than she was.

“I don't understand what is bad about it,” she murmured. “It doesn't harm anyone.”

“What about you?” he said softly. “Does it not harm you? It's hypocritical. You want me to share my feelings but you don't want to do the same.”

“I–” she stuttered, “There's a difference. I do it to not bother others.”

“Why do you think you'd bother someone with your feelings?” His brows twisted together in confusion.

And she again felt at a loss for words. She actually didn't have an answer for this question, she just knew everyone had their own problems, so she had never wanted to weigh them with hers.

“You devalue yourself, Little Witch. And you don't have to try to appear stronger than you are. You're already strong, you're more than enough,” he said firmly. And it wasn't a speech of encouragement, he didn't award her with a gentle smile, he said it like it was something obvious – not more than a fact.

Violette strained. A strange tightening feeling surged inside her, she couldn't explain it, nor describe it; like something tickled her, a mix of chill

and warmth – a pure confusion.

A little crystal vial sparkled in sight as Dante pulled it from his pocket. A quick glance and he held it out.

“What–” she didn't finish as he interrupted her.

“The cure. We're almost done so…I want you to take it,” he said putting the potion in her hands.

She blinked at the vial, completely dazed, and then looked at him. “Are you not afraid I will run away?”

He chuckled. “Consider it as a gesture of my gratitude.”

Violette froze staring at him before her gaze dropped to the little vial in her hands – a sudden warmth spread throughout her chest, wrapping her heart in.



VIOLETTE WAS HONEST WITH DANTE – his past was terrible and irrevocable. But if he changed, he shouldn't hold this burden that stops him from living freely. Though, it was strange to think after all she had been through for the last few days.

She was terrified to death, couldn't even make eye contact with him and now she was sitting with him and simply having a conversation. And the strangest feeling of all – her commiseration. She felt sympathy for his tortured soul. She could see it in his eyes – he was honest with her. The glimpse of regret and something else she couldn't solve yet in his gaze made it clear – he didn't want to be a monster. Yes, he wasn't flawless but he didn't want to hurt anyone and he had never intended to hurt her. She started to recall memories they made together and they weren't that bad as it seemed at first. Looking back she started to realize he wasn't bad or evil; he was undeniably cold and less compassionate than her or others she knew and his methods were questionable if not more, but he wasn’t heartless. And now when he confessed his fears, his past, it was hard to feel hostile towards him. The truth is, she found this conversation quite pleasant. And then it finally hit her – it was indeed their *last* night together. Tomorrow

they'll finish their bargain and she'll be free to go. She'll be able to go home, back to her life. Her wish finally will be able to come true. But…why did this thought feel emptying?

She would want to deny it but the truth was inevitable – she got *attached* to Dante for these few weeks. It was unfair, she shouldn't miss him, she was more often annoyed by him than tolerating him and yet…She realized she no longer sought freedom from his company, likewise, she sought his presence. She wasn't thinking much about it but now it was so clear – she wasn't ready to say goodbye. They weren't friends, they still were quite nothing, but definitely not strangers and she found herself thinking she'd like to know more, explore him…them. Maybe, one day she could call him a friend, even after the terrible revelation of the truth of his past.

Sauntering through the snowy woods, she was thinking how much more was hiding behind Dante's somberness. And she wouldn't want to accept it in a million years but she couldn't see another day without his presence in it. What is she supposed to do now? She will go back home and what next? After seeing him every day she will not see him at all? And she will not hear his jokes or shameless flirts? His eyes full of shadows will never meet hers again? No more adventures and riddles? Nothing? A hole started to grow in her chest, spreading the vines of anguish. She didn't want it to end. And it was foolish to think this way, but she hoped he might feel the same. Their conversation earlier – he looked different. Could he not be ready to say goodbye too? She shouldn't plant a sprout of hope in her heart but she couldn't resist it. What if there was a chance that tomorrow they will not split their paths? What if their adventure will not end? No. It will *not* end. Not after this night. She decided. Tomorrow they'll finish their deal but it doesn't end anything between them. She doesn't know what will be next but it will not be a goodbye.

She tipped her head towards the night sky, and then her gaze met a field dotted with old gravestones.

CHAPTER 37

THE GROTTO OF SPELLS AND RELICS



A veil of snow covered the graves and stone slabs. A crow on one of the openwork crosses croaked, watching Violette and Dante making their way to the big arched cave.

Violette's gaze investigated the space, while the snow was smoothly falling onto her eyelashes and covering her shoulders. She shook the powder from her front curls, the cold made her cheeks rosy, the air was tingling her throat.

As their steps led them to the wide low staircases, she lifted her head – a big cave was towering over them, the archway gates decorated with runes along its curve. Its engraved symbols were telling a story; who knows what it was about, was it a warning, a prophecy. One thing was clear, it was the entrance to The Grotto of Spells and Relics.

Dante raised his head toward the night sky – its deep darkness started to fade to a light blue. His eyes measured the door and then his palm reached for a hole in it.

Five symbols on the gates were connected with each other, spreading wavy threads leading to the recess in the center – the perfect shape for a gem.

Violette handed Dante the moonstone, its glimmering reflected in his eyes.

He exhaled a deep breath in the air, drawing Violette's glance. There it is – the moment of truth. Dante placed the shiny stone centered on the dark gates. It fell inside, twinkling, and then the ancient runes on the columns on

both sides lit up with a silver blue light. The old gate opened followed by the centuries-old sound, shattering the peace inside. A thin layer of snow in front of them rose and then smoothly fell to the ground again. Violette and Dante shared a look and then eyed into the depths of the grotto.

The golden flecks flew by Violette's eyes as they stepped in. The sparkles lingered on her extended palm for a couple of seconds before quickly disappearing as if they'd never existed.

“What is it?” Her head tipped to the white flowers hanging from the aisle, showering them in a gold dust.

Dante rubbed the dust particles between his fingers.

“Ugh. A dust that blocks magic.” His brows wrinkled.

“Didn't know such a thing exists,” Violette blew in amazement.

She had heard of spells that could take magic away or protect a place from it, but they required to be spoken out loud, not to mention exceptional skill. Once she came across a potion that could increase some magic skills at the expense of others, thus improving defensive spells for a while in exchange for attacking but to take them away completely? It was something new.

“It's not an extremely rare thing on this land; some people use this dust for protection,” Dante commented and it seemed as if he was thinking about something else but didn't voice it.

A long stone corridor led them inside the grotto, to a spacey hall. The sharp facets of the walls with adorned rock pillars were sparkling in the flickering silver torchlights. Inside looked exactly like a regular cavern but filled with many different magic things and heaps of white crystals glimmering under the cold blue light.

Violette was fascinatedly absorbing everything with her eyes, her inquisitiveness rejoiced with all those interesting and exceptional relics surrounding her.

Her eyes fell onto an emerald glass plate with bronze coins carelessly scattered – or it wasn't coins? On the other side, a whimsical hat rack decorated with flower vines, she noted that she'd gladly have one of these in her house. A few steps further – a clear glass case with a sword whose beautiful gold hilt was encrusted with red garnets and brown smoky quartz; capital letters fickly glittered on the silver blade.

A sudden gasp left Violette’s mouth as she almost cracked into the stoic figure of a knight. Her eyes stared at his adorned gauntlets, fascinated by the magnificent work, before her attention was taken away by a beautiful pellucid silver veil in the corner.

Meanwhile, Dante passed by a big splendid hourglass with curved handles on the sides, though it didn't draw his attention – he didn't care about anything in this room. The only thing he was looking for was a key to his freedom, everything else – just unnecessary trinkets.

He stopped in front of a stone pedestal with a dark blue varnished chest. Two swords crossing each other with a blue chiffon flower blossoming in the center – the coat of arms of Desensisfort Kingdom.

Violette snuggled her hands to her chest, noticing how he quieted down. She trod steps forward as his words, “Found it”, caught her hearing.

Her eyes fell on Dante's fingers lifting the lid and revealing a pair of dark brown leather gloves. He slipped a hand in one of those – the ornamented garment with each finger covered in tracery, a big star sign on the palm sparkled with silver hue. Then another one.

His gaze dropped to his gloved hands. A line drew between his brows, then he glanced at Violette next to him. In this silent plea she understood he wanted some space.

She increased the distance, deciding to keep herself busy with something else and thankfully, there were plenty of things to investigate. Her eyes traced to the veil she saw a few minutes ago, indeed a magnificent thing – a transparent piece of fabric powdered with silver-blue sparkles over the faceless female bust. She tried to find something that would explain what she was looking at but it had no signature or note.

Her fingers brushed over the soft veil and then her betraying curiosity made her glance at Dante – his fingers reached to the clasp of the mask. Her eyes darted away to something else – a beautiful hourglass with blue sand in it. The surface was embossed with silver lettering:

Break to fix your past mistakes.

A deep exhale released into the air. Violette rushed her eyes to Dante again – his shoulders shuddered, his jaw clicked. Her attention was fully

shifted to him, her burning prying couldn’t hold itself back anymore. No relic was as important as that precise moment, especially for Dante. After so many years to finally feel free. And Violette – she was wondering what hides behind this mask from the moment they met. How unusual it would be to see his mouth, his lips, not covered in the shadows of the hideous bars.

Dante’s hands freed from the gloves as his head slightly bent down.

She made a flimsy step forward, her hand running along the cold surface of the stone table with raw corners. In a flash moment a corrosive pain pierced her palm – crimson sparkled in the blue light, dripping down to the ground. A quiet hiss escaped Violette’s throat as she squeezed her hand in a fist against her chest. The acrid metallic scent flashed under her nose, she looked down, unclenching the fist – the cut wasn't deep, a tingling sensation pulsating under the skin. Her eyes raised as Dante slightly turned his head, standing with his back to her. In the dim light she saw a silhouette of his face, *all* of it. The mask disappeared. His eyes finally flickered at her as she squeezed her palm again. A muscle in his jaw wavered.

The curiosity lit up Violette before it dimmed too soon. In an instant, Dante arose right in front of her – a strange…frantic look on his face. She didn’t even have time to scrutinize his features as the agonizing pain struck her.

CHAPTER 38

A PRICE FOR CURIOSITY



The metallic scent blew into the air – a moment of silence before a burst of soul-destroying scream. Dante's fangs flashed in the darkness as they buried into Violette's bare skin. The colors drained from her face in a blink of an eye. The scream stuck in her throat and for a moment it seemed that she wouldn't be able to squeeze out even a small squeak, but then the heartbreaking cry left her mouth.

Her voice echoed through the hall as if a terrible reminder from the past. The grotto fell into a dark night with no stars, no moon, no glimpse of hope. Only the phantom of the beginning of heartbreaking tragedy fated by the start, was glutting the air. There was nothing Violette or anyone else could do – only wait for the end of her story as its ending was already written on the pages of a book covered in an ancient layer of dust.

Everyone had known that meeting a vampire would bring no good, there was nothing that could hint at a happy ending for such an event, especially if you're making a deal with one of those night monsters, but Violette wanted to believe it would end differently. She always thought people had a love for exaggeration but even she knew that making friends with a bloodsucking beast is a bad idea. She just had faith that the stories were wrong, or only telling one side, keeping something else undercover as it always happens. But she forgot that life wasn't a fairytale. She will never go back home. She will never see her father again. And she will never step into her lovely potion shop, smelling of violets and doomed dreams. But

mostly she will not even remember it. There will be nothing. There will be no her.

“DANTE!” Violette didn't give up pleading. Her hand struggled against his chest.

She tried to push him, to sneak out from his arms, shrink back but every attempt to do so was completely useless.

The more she bucked, the more densely his hands were squeezing her waist, like he was determined to crush her bones. Her whole body ached, a growing hollow where her heart fought to not fall asleep. Her hands gave up, and it seemed that a little longer and she wouldn't be able to feel anything at all. She was expecting to crash on the ground at any moment, if not for the vampire's tight grip.

“Dante, stop, please…” she cried. “Dante…”

Her voice weakened as did all of her limbs. She wasn't sure if she still stayed on her own feet or she was just being held. She wasn't sure she recognized her voice anymore and it seemed like she heard it far away…it wasn't there, it was too quiet. Everything became too quiet. She couldn't move anymore and she couldn't scream either. Life was slipping through her fingers with every second, her eyelids felt too heavy.

She tried to break away again with her last burst of energy but she wasn't even sure she did anything. Did she hit him or just slightly tapped on his shoulder?

“Dante,” her voice felt too dry, her body felt too helpless.

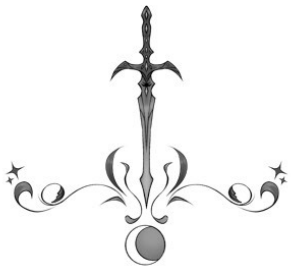
Her gaze got too blurry, the unfordable haze engulfed her mind.

“Please!” she cried louder as if trying to hear herself. “Please…”

The ailing pain consumed her completely as the vampire’s hunger was only growing. He didn't hear any of her pleas. He didn't hear how she screamed, how she was asking him to stop, how her voice trembled and then slowly faded away. And suddenly it was too quiet. Too dark. Too lonely in this room as if *something* was gone.

CHAPTER 39

A BURNING ACHE



The vampire opened his eyes – something was wrong. Something terrible happened. Something terrible was done by *him*. His gaze dropped on the body of the girl in his arms.

A sharp pain throbbed through his head – there was nothing, he wasn't hearing anything, not her heartbeat, not her breathing, *nothing*.

The only thing that stopped his hunger was silence, a pure hush. No sign of life from the girl in his hands, the colors drained from her face. Something clicked in his mind as he stayed there, his lips still lingering on her skin.

One.

Two.

Three droplets dripped from his mouth, the sound of each touching the cold ground echoed in his ears. His breathing slowed down, palsy wrapped his body in as the realization struck him – he did something terrible. Unforgivable. He *killed* her.

He slowly pulled back, shaking, eyes looking at her lifeless face. His mind froze. Words hovered in the air. Emotions too heavy to let out or even swallow. An emptying wound scattering down where his heart was supposed to be. He was there, holding the girl he used to know, as his entire being was agonized by pure torture. Suddenly he forgot how to breathe. The air felt like a poison, sharp and trenchant, slicing his throat. Why did his heart seem so small right now? As if shrunken, or was it too big and his body was too small to handle it? Nothing in his mind could compare to the

feeling that sheathed his soul. Was he wretched? Shattered? Battered or smitten? He was *guilty*.

Finally the numbness loosened its grip on his shoulders but he couldn't let her, to put her soft and fragile body against the cold and rough stone.

The absolute terror clouded his features as his trembling fingers reached to her face. Her closed lids, her skin too pale – or his mind was playing with him because it knew she wasn't alive? She felt too cold, too unfamiliar…It was not his Little Witch. It was a girl he killed without a second thought.

No…

No.

NO!

His mouth went dry but it didn't matter, if he could say something it would change *nothing*.

Some sighs finally escaped from the deep of his throat and then it became louder until it turned into blaring. And then it grew into an agony, a hideous torture. A stinging rain fell from his eyes on the girl's hair as he pulled her closer, shattering on the floor. He held her the same way the child holds the dearest thing to their heart and swears to never let it go. He held her with such an intensity as someone could hold only the most important soul in their life. As if it matters…As if it could cross out the fact that he killed her. He took her soul. Her heart. He absolutely destroyed everything in her. His body burned in throes while she was colder than a winter night.

The stars faded as the sunrise finally spread its color over the sky. And *this* was much more terrible – the touch of the sun seemed like heaven to him right now.

The blood on her neck, at her shoulders, her blood smudged all over his lips, everything burned red. *What has he done?*

Instead of her heartbeat – absolute silence. It echoed from the walls right into his mind. A burning pain. All that remained. After a minute. After two…And after one more it didn't leave him as well. His head fell onto hers, his chin burying in her hair; it still smelled like violets. His brows knitted one more time.

His curse was not his mask after all. This was much more painful. Out of all losses. Out of all centuries. Such an empty hole inside his chest.

The hoarse sigh left his mouth. His gaze raised to the hourglass on the table across the room. His eyes flashed in the darkness – a spark of

determination, not hope. Hope was too weak with what he was about to do. If it will not work he–No. There was no *if*.

He stood up and strode to the hourglass with blue sand. If it was truly magical, it would fix everything. Not him, of course. After all, it turned out, he was *remediless*.

He broke the glass the same way he was determined to break time. If the legend was right the grains of this sand will turn him back to the moment of his biggest regret. If the legend was right the grains of this sand will get her back. Back to *him*.

He sat once again beside the girl, pressing her to his chest. Her still body was becoming colder with every second. His hand squeezed a pile of magic dust tingling his skin.

“We'll meet again, Little Witch,” he whispered, pressing a gentle kiss to her nape and closing his eyes. If fate will be kind enough to her…to him – he'll see her in a second. Just a short moment of time. Like nothing happened.

CHAPTER 40

ONE MORE CHANCE



A white crystalline flake flurried before Violette's eyes.

“Dante, are you coming?” she called.

The vampire turned his head. And there she was – standing near the grotto. Violette. *Alive*. And if her friendly face and soft smile was not evidence of it then her calm heartbeat, which he could hear from miles away, was. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes for a second – he didn't have another chance to save her, he had to do everything to prevent her death.

Dante came closer. The smile still danced on Violette’s lips, her brows raised with curiosity. Then her forehead slightly creased, something was off – the way he looked at her, the way his brows pulled down.

“Is something wrong?” she gently asked, her head tilted to the side, noticing something strange in his eyes she'd never seen before, but he didn't give her time to think about it. Before she could see the pain in his eyes it darkened, and his face sharpened.

“No…I was thinking,” he said hoarsely, “you shouldn't come with me.”

“What? Why?” Her brows knitted, the smile waned weaker, taking it as one of his tricks.

“You better leave.” His voice was cold like falling snow.

Violette’s smile slowly faded away.

“What do you mean? What happened?”

“You fulfilled your part of the deal and you have the cure – you are free to go. There is no need to accompany me,” he said soullessly.

“Are you joking right now?” She tried to pull a smile back. “I don't think it's funny…but if you think so–”

“I'm being serious. I don't want you here,” he pressed firmly.

“What? Dante, I don't understand you…What happened? I thought–”

He cut her off, “Thought what?” His voice became much more cruel and sharper, piercing under her skin as a dagger, slowly going deeper and deeper to reach the most sensitive part of her heart.

“Don't be that rude,” she frowned. “I don't understand why you're acting like this…” A confusion crept under her skin.

“And what did you expect me to act like? I'm not a hero of your little stories and can't follow your fantasies.”

“You–You're being messy. I don't get it…Yesterday–”

He chuckled – Violette heard a crack in her heart with this crispy *inhuman* sound.

“And you still believe every word I say? I didn't think you were that naive.”

“Don't say it…” Her voice weakened. “You're cruel to me right now without a reason. Or if you have one then say it to my face.”

“I'm not cruel to you. I'm just saying you're free to go whenever you want.”

“Well, then I want to go with you inside,” she grew bolder.

“And I don't. I don't need you there, do you understand it? Or your little human mind can't comprehend what I'm saying?”

“Don't talk to me like this…” Her brows pulled together in a hurt expression he'd never seen before.

“Then just go, Violette. We finished our deal. There's no reason for us to see each other ever again.” The sides of his eyes crinkled.

Her name felt like vitriol from his mouth.

“Leave,” he repeated impassively.

“But why?” Her frown deepened. She couldn't understand this sudden change in him.

Dante fetched a sigh. “It's not safe here,” he finally confessed.

“What do you mean? I thought we figured out everything. You'll take the mask and—”

He didn't let her continue. “And there's nothing more. I don't want anything else. Just you to leave and go back to your life while I'll go back to

mine as it should be.”

Her heart skipped. She knew he didn’t promise her anything, it was only in her head but she couldn’t believe he didn’t think about them after the end of their agreement. She didn’t want to.

“If you’re playing with me, I don't want these games…” Her shoulders loosened.

“I thought you love games.” He smiled at her but this smile was too cruel.

“Say you are not serious, Dante…Please,” her voice let out a tremble. “What's wrong? Why are you acting like this?” Her starry eyes stared hopelessly at him as if in a plea to say it was all a joke. A very unfunny and cruel one. But she'd forgive him – she got used to his twisted humor.

“I'm just being myself,” he pressed.

“No, you're being the worst version of yourself and I want to know the reason behind it. Why are you pushing me away?”

“How many times do I have to tell you to leave?”

“Dante–”

“I want you to leave. Now,” he demanded.

“Stop saying that!” She was stubborn enough to fight him if that's what he wanted. “I don't believe in any of your words! Tell me the truth. I won't leave until then.” She fought tears coming closer with every word. But she wasn't about to back off – she wouldn't make a move until he's telling her the real reason for him being that strange and hostile. She didn't believe he wanted her to leave without a reason, not after that night.

His guard let out a crack and he heaved a sigh. “I don't think I can hold on when I take off the mask.”

“That's it?” Her eyes crinkled. “That's the reason? We talked about it. Everything will be fine. You won't hurt me, I know it.” And she truly believed in it, he could read it in her eyes.

“I can't predict all events.” His gaze became even more miserable, like he knew something she didn't and it made her lean closer, her voice softened.

“Dante…” She reached her hand to his, but he pulled it away before she could touch it.

His gaze dropped. “Go away, Violette.”

“Please don't push me away. I want to go with you,” she insisted. “You can handle it. I believe in you.”

Bad decision to make. If she knew what already happened her eyes wouldn’t shine with such faith.

“I told you to leave. I don't want to see you now or after.” His acerbic voice froze the air around. He said it with too much cruelty to joke about or make her doubt it wasn't his real intention.

Her lashes fluttered, her heart sinking. She stared at his face, trying to read at least something in his eyes that would prove her wrong. He looked at her with coldness she'd never seen before. Like she didn't know him at all. Like she was just a stranger to him, a person he couldn't care less about.

Violette's brows pulled closer. “Why are you being an asshole? Why so rude, like I mean nothing to you? Like you don't care.” The tears sparkled in the corner of her eyes.

“Because I don't care about you,” he let out.

This time the dagger pierced right through her heart.

“It's not true…Then you would let me come with you,” she stuttered, her stomach dipping.

“What is not clear to you? I want you to leave and to never see again. You're just mortal, go and live your fantastic magical life, you are free. We had a deal now it's been sealed. *Done*. We used each other and now it's the end. Can your mind wrap around it?”

Her legs rooted to the ground, she couldn't even move after his words.

Dante's eyes didn't let any light in or out.

“I let you go.” His tone was sharp as steel.

“No, you are kicking me away!” she snorted through tears.

“Call it what you want, but I want you to leave and to never see you again.”

“You didn't mean it…” The corners of her eyes lowered. These words hurt her more than she'd like to admit.

“I meant every word.”

Tears ran down her face, for a moment, she forgot how to breathe. Though her heart hopelessly whispered to her that it wasn't what he wanted to tell her, at the same time it was tearing with every word he was saying – so harsh and cold. It felt like a steel hammer with every blow destroying her

fragile heart, which only wanted to believe that she was not just a tool to him.

“Fine…I'll go if you want me to.” She swallowed. “I thought you were better than this,” her voice cracked, hands started shaking, his words echoing in her mind, “And you know…Maybe your heart stopped beating a long time ago but I'm not sure you ever had it at all. In order for the heart to stop – you need to have it first.”

She had no choice but to simply leave. Her legs rushed away from the gate, the tears flowed down her face like a waterfall, no matter how much she tried to wipe them off. Her cheeks were being eaten away by salt, her vision obscured, turning everything around to just a white blur.

Then her hand caught on something hard and long, and she hit the cold snowy ground with her knees. A burning sensation made her gaze drop to her palm – blood.

She squeezed her hand and pressed it to her chest, gasping for air. It wasn't nearly as painful as Dante's words anyway. She couldn’t understand why he treated her like that, as if she truly did mean nothing to him.

She was in pain, unbearably in pain, and she couldn't even find a reason why this pain was comparable to a broken heart. She couldn't even call him a friend. But she thought something had arisen between them, they were clearly not just acquaintances to each other. After these weeks she thought she’d started to understand him but now she clearly saw – she will never get into his way of thinking. All his actions were lies. His confession was just another twisted trick to make her worry for him. He shouldn't do it. It was unnecessary. They could just stay strangers, instead he used her in the most evil and unfair way possible. She believed this day wouldn't be their last day together but it turned out it was just a game of pretend.

Her chest rose and fell with each quiet sob, her hands gripping herself tightly as she sat in the snow. She felt the cold seeping through her clothes, yet welcomed the numbness it brought. Snowflakes gently landed on her, forming a thin white veil, and for a moment she wished they’d bury her completely.

The snow reflected its blinding white light on the pastel sky – an early morning. But Violette didn't want to get up. Not now. She felt like this pain would destroy her, crack her in half, if she tried to.

Something whipped nearby, as if the wind had passed through, but she didn't feel the cold. A soft whistle cut the air again, making Violette raise her head in a search of the sound’s source. It was too quiet, too peaceful around. She sniffled and looked around again, slowly getting up, her knees quailed.

“Dante?” she let out hesitantly.

“Wrong, pet,” a familiar voice brushed her ear but not the one she wanted to hear.

She spun around and flinched – Nigel was leaning on one of the stone graves.

Her brows twisted together, lips pressed in a thin line.

“You,” she muttered through her teeth.

“What, does your vampire boyfriend no longer need you? Did he throw you away like a useless toy?” A smirk curled Nigel’s lips but a second later his brows furrowed and his nose caught a whiff of something in the air.

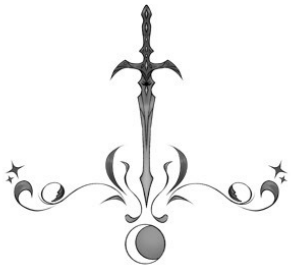
His gaze fell on Violette’s hand – a burgundy stream of blood slowly flowed down her palm. She backed away, face turning pale.

Their gazes met, something terrible darkened in Nigel's eyes, which prompted her to run. Though the time was already ahead of her. The last thing she remembered – two white fangs and a terrible pain in her neck.

Everything faded to blackness too soon.

CHAPTER 41

SOME THINGS DON'T CHANGE



Dante entered the grotto once again. The air didn't seem this thick the first time, it was becoming heavier with each step. He didn't notice how he was already standing before the pedestal with gloves, his thoughts were occupied by another event. His gaze fell onto the box, the hesitation veiled his eyes – Violette's face once again fleeted in his mind before his hands leisurely lifted the case.

He remembered the feeling of release when he took off the mask last time but it still brought him pleasure to freely work his jaw. He stretched his mouth but as he wanted to open it wider, his head flinched and his fingers trembled. The memory of what he did the *first* time raised the goosebumps over his arms and lodged the chill inside. The mask fell inside the chest when the sudden sharp sound entered the space.

"So you did it after all," a voice, the cracking sound slicing between the bones, evoking only disgust in Dante's soul every time he heard it – *Nigel.*

Dante's eyelids dropped for a few seconds, cursing the powers which brought him here.

"I think I'd already said that you're not a welcome guest here," he grumbled.

"As if I'm listening to you." Nigel's lips slanted in a wry smile.

Dante speared him with an icy look over his shoulder as he slowly turned around.

His fingers started taking off the gloves. "Will you report to Caidas?"

“In any case, he'll find out when rumors and news about mysterious brutal murders spread throughout the cities.”

Nigel's careless tone full of amusement caused a look of absolute hatred on his face. And yet that wasn't what was bothering him right now. His thoughts were with the girl with the dark brown hair and blue-gray eyes full of stars which he brought to tears. At least, it's better for her to cry than be dead. He didn't regret his decision even if he broke her heart, even if it was breaking him too.

“Did you leave your girlfriend?” Nigel leaned over the wall, crossing hands over his chest.

“You know, it would be nice if you minded your own business…if there was any, of course. Sorry, I forgot that you don't have your own life. That's why you keep your nose in others’.” Dante turned to the chest to close it from snoopy hands.

“Okay, I'll go do *my* business, otherwise I'd be late – your little pet detained me. Did I mention we met?” He gritted his teeth in a shameless grin.

Unhidden indignation and concern embraced Dante's face. His brows pulled closer, a line creaking between them. Perplexing feelings filled his lungs.

“What have you done?” he breathed, his voice deepened.

“Nothing she wouldn't like if she really enjoyed the company of a vampire.” Nigel flashed his snow-white teeth again.

Dante’s stomach churned. A high-pitched aggravating sound that drowned out any other thoughts rang in his ears. The nightmare on his face seemed too real to suggest that Violette really meant nothing to him.

Spinning on his heels, he left the grotto before Nigel could say anything else – he'll deal with him later. Finding Violette was more important, he didn't send her away to di–*No!*

The snowflakes were calmly falling on the already white surface as if it were an ordinary winter morning. As if nature had no idea what had happened here before and what was happening now.

Dante’s eyes fell to the ground – her footprints were barely visible, the snow had managed to already powder them. He just hoped she didn't go far.

The pulse was throbbing in his temples, a sludge of dread in his chest, as he searched between the marble graves and crypts for a sign of her

presence.

He crossed half of the cemetery, but the girl was still nowhere to be seen. A panic began to creep into his consciousness, which he vigorously tried to muffle: he couldn't let himself lose his head now, he had to find her…she had to be okay, she couldn't–A quiet groan reached his ear.

He turned quickly.

“Violette!” Dante exclaimed, hurrying to her.

She was sitting on the ground, leaning against a large stone grave. Snow dusted her hair and her lashes. Her dull gaze raised to the vampire. She seemed so small and miserable, as if life had been sucked out of her, but she was still breathing, she was *alive*.

“Dante…” Violette breathed in a heavy voice, trying to move, but her body gave up on her.

He scurried to her and crouched down, his hand carefully straightening the lock of her dark hair back, revealing fresh marks from fangs between dried blood under her jaw.

His worried gaze shifted to her face. She was breathing, her heart was beating, although slower than usual, but she was not dying, only deprived of energy. It also didn't look like she was infected with the vampire venom. He'd never forgive himself if she turned into a vampire. A breath of relief left his mouth.

“You got rid of the mask,” Violette nearly whispered with a drained voice. “You have a pretty face…” She scarcely understood what she was saying but it didn't mean she hadn't thought so.

She looked half asleep, half delirious. Her breath came out in a heavy and labored way, short exhalations kept releasing into the air.

Dante’s forehead wrinkled as her eyelids fell and a deep sigh slipped from her pale lips. He touched her cheeks – absolutely icy, lacking their color. Falling snow had accumulated on her clothes. His fingers immediately reached to the buttons on his coat and he threw it over her cold shoulders.

“You need to warm up,” his gentle voice caressed her ear, “and rest.”

“No…I don't,” she squeezed hoarsely.

She was even able to raise her hand, however she didn't have enough strength to even touch him, nor to push him away.

He caught her as she began to slide off the stone wall into the snow. And he felt very warm – she didn't remember when he'd been so warm, even hot. He reminded her of a warm fireplace, but that didn't change the fact that she didn't want to lie in his arms, no matter how hot and cozy they were. He sent her away, said a lot of rude things to her. He behaved like a brute. It was his fault she was freezing now, deprived of vitality.

It seemed as if life was slipping away through her fingers, and she tried to cling to it, but it was burdensome. The cold made her eyelids even heavier; she wanted to sleep so badly. Just close her eyes and fall asleep. And if she is lucky – everything that happened turns out to be just a dream. And it will all disappear the next time she opens her eyes. If she will open them again.

“Put me down…I don't want to die in your arms,” she whispered.

“You're not dying, Little Witch,” the vampire said tenderly, and tucked her in his coat. His voice sounded as sweet as a lullaby, making her eyes even harder to keep open.

Violette didn't believe his words, she couldn't help but die – the weight of exhaustion was unbearable, lodging itself deep in her bones. She couldn't feel her hands and legs, and her mind was wandering in the hazy fog. It felt like soon all of it would turn into a blank page. She should have been angry at Dante or felt upset, but she didn't even feel that, all she wanted to do was to close her eyes. *Forevermore.*

You're such a liar, she wanted to say but instead of words her mouth let out some unclear burble.

“Everything will be alright.” Dante scooped her in his arms, his fingers brushed her hair away from her face and shook off the snow.

“I hate you,” she slurred very quietly against his chest, her eyes drifting shut. “I hate you so much…”

He didn't say anything as she whispered her last words before falling asleep. He knew he deserved it. She should have hated him after everything he did, especially after what he did when she went into the grotto with him the first time. He hated himself not less, if not more.

CHAPTER 42

DECEIVED



Violette opened her eyes. Sunlight streamed into the room through a gap in the curtains.

She was under a heavy blanket in a comfy bed when the fog in her head started to clear. She was at the cemetery and then…What was then? She remembered how she cried and the two fangs that flashed before her eyes. Then she felt like vitality left her but she didn't die, however it felt like she was about to. The blurry image of Dante appeared in her mind; he was there, he found her in the snow after Nigel sucked her blood and left her to freeze. He might be the one who had taken her to wherever she was.

The exhaustion was still deep-seated under her skin, calling her to a sweet oblivion like she was only half alive. She felt so tiny and the world was so big. And…she felt *alone*. Furthermore, she couldn't tell if this hole in her heart was because of what Nigel had done or because of what Dante said…

She herself hoisted from the bed. A headache forced her eyes to squint shut for a second, her temples pulsating with pain.

She tried to replay in her head everything that happened and as far as she was going into it – the more it hurt; every flash, every word. And then she felt a grudge. A torment. Like someone was squeezing her head so tight and she knew exactly who that someone was. What he said. What he did. She remembered the pain he caused. How he used her and treated her. Tears once again flickered at the corners of her eyes. But stronger than her pain

was her anger. She didn't deserve any of this. And if he was that cruel, why would he come for her?

She jumped out of her bed in a second, feeling indignant, rage pulsating in her veins. She swayed. She had to find him. And as she held this thought in her mind, the door opened.

Dante stood at the threshold. Their eyes collided. His jaw drew tight. Silence fell between them. The growing storm in Violette's eyes was ready to meet the shadows in his. She pressed her lips tight, fighting tears back.

“You got up,” he said. Cold.

Everything she wanted to tell him stuck in her throat. She couldn't swallow it, nor let out.

“Why did you bring me here?” she finally managed to say, her gaze not leaving his face, not once. She almost didn't blink.

He looked away. “Better to leave you in the snow, freezing to death?”

“That's not an answer,” she nearly growled, her hand clenching in a fist.

“It definitely is. I just don't tell you what you want to hear anymore,” he said bluntly.

Ouch. She felt a pang.

“So that's what you were doing all this time? Just feeding me with something I wanted to hear?” The tears shone in her eyes but her voice rose.

He eyed her again. His gaze had never been so raw. Like he despised her, when only she had a reason to do so.

“I think I've already told you all of that.” He straightened up his back – his eyes had never been so bleak, not even when they’d met for the first time. “I promised to bring you home, you’ll depart at sunset. The carriage will be waiting outside.” With those words he turned back and walked away.

Violette froze. Each of his words felt like a stone. She couldn't believe what she just heard. This was how it was going to end? Him just walking away? No goodbye? A flash of their memories and moments they spent together flew before her eyes. So that's what it was – just a vague insignificant occurrence? Nothing to remember, nothing to forget because all of it was just an illusion. A *lie*.

The anxiety hovered over her. The air sliced her throat with each inhale. The tears ran down her cheeks, she couldn't hold them in anymore. She didn't want to cry. She thought she could swallow this truth, she thought she

would feel only anger but it was too painful. She roughly wiped her cheeks and ran out of the room in an urge to get one answer before it all ended.

She intercepted him right before he disappeared behind the other door.

“I just want to know one thing.” Her face distorted in animosity. “Why?”

His gaze fixated on the doorknob before he turned his head in her direction. His eyes flickered out of the corners at her.

“Should there be a reason? Aren’t I just a terrible evil being?”

Violette’s chest tightened.

Dante took a step into his room but she stormed in right after him.

“You push me away but then go after me to keep the promise, like you are a damned gentleman. I don't understand you. Why make it so complicated? Why make me go away if you don't care? Why save me if you don't care?”

Dante stood by the window, facing her with his back. He didn't dare or didn't care to turn to her – to look into her eyes. She didn't expect him to be that cruel. Last night, when she said she believed he had a kind heart, she never thought she’d be so wrong. Her biggest mistake so far. She was indeed naive, believing in him, believing there could be something more behind this fortress.

“I have no obligation to explain myself to you,” Dante stated and looked to the side, but never at her. That was what she remembered last, him by the window, silhouetted by the dim sunlight penetrating through thick curtains.

Her stubbornness finally gave up. It was time to let go. She didn't say goodbye, she didn't say anything and she didn't cry anymore. Why should she cry about something that was never real?

CHAPTER 43

UNHEALABLE WOUNDS



The trees and snowy fields rolled past the window as Violette sat in the carriage. The fogginess outside and the icy ground were the only things she remembered about this trip. She looked through all of it, the empty eyes of a hurt soul watching as the landscapes changed over hours.

Dante didn't come with her. He didn't even show up as she departed. The way home was hazy – her mind was a labyrinth of thoughts about what happened in the last hours. She wished to think about something else but she was haunted by the visions of the past. Betrayal was the only thing she could feel as the carriage was moving through all those places she saw for the first time with Dante just some days ago. She lost track of time, not paying much attention to what was happening outside, instead she was traveling through the memories which she had to bury now. How ironic, they'd visited so many dead places but now, the one who felt less alive was *her*.

The young man who drove the coach accompanied her throughout all of her journey. She assumed Dante paid or lured him; she didn't really care at this point. She just wanted to go home. To see her father. At least, she had something real waiting for her.

One blink and she again stood by the lake with the portal. It was time to go back where she belonged – the splash of the water echoed through the cave.

One sigh and she was already in the middle of the lake in the night garden. The trees were blissing with light just like the night she was here

the last time. The fireflies glowed bright before her eyes as she stepped out to leave this place forever.

Her companion took her to the city and finally everything started to feel more real, like the phantasm of the dreams started fading away. Soon a familiar sign emerged before her eyes and it felt like awakening.



The amicable willows at the entrance to the city greeted Violette with their presence, lightning something warm in her chest. The small houses blended with the high buildings, streets so familiar and dear to her heart,

were filled with ever-burning magic and lights. Her eyes followed the changing streets with longing as the colorful shop signs were flashing outside the windows. It has been forever since she left this place, though everything stayed as it was. It was her place, her town, her home and yet – she still felt the aching like she lost something while being away. A part of herself, perhaps. The street lights were burning just the same when she saw them for the last time, but she was different. The pain of losing something that turned out to be fake will forever linger underneath her skin.

She crossed the threshold of her house. The familiar smell that met her nose seemed to be a dream but it didn’t awaken excitement in her heart as she expected. Everything seemed so different when nothing changed. Her chest squeezed, something heavy weighed her soul, even though a smile tugged the corner of her lips when she finally found herself in the living room.

“Violette!” A male voice burst into the air and she shut her eyes. Finally her smile grew sincere and wide.

She turned around and fell into her father's arms. “Why didn't you send a letter that you're coming?”

She only took a deep breath in and out, burying her nose in his shoulder. Tears streamed down her face. It was a conjunction of happiness and grieving. How badly she wanted to see him, and she couldn't believe she finally made it to him. How badly she'd wanted to tell him everything she'd been through just to be here, just to hear his voice again.

“Honey, did something happen?” he asked, pulling back to look at her watery eyes, his brows furrowed with concern.

Violette shook her head.

“I just missed you…All of it,” she sobbed.

“Did you become homesick after two weeks? Oh, darling,” he chuckled softly, “I missed you too.” He hugged her again and Violette felt at home. A warmth spread through her chest, a dreamed glimpse of relief.

She closed her eyes, but the only image that surfaced in the back of her mind was a field of dreams, burning with regrets. All the stitches of the embroidery she made for the past two weeks started undoing themselves like they had never happened. Not to her.

CHAPTER 44

IN THE SHADOW



The streak of moonlight lingered over the teal sign of the ‘Potions and Magic Infusions’ shop as the light inside was muffed.

The lid of the pot with steaming green fumes closed, leaving a faded thread above.

The day passed quickly, to Violette's surprise. She was wiping the counter when the air infused with the strange familiar feeling that she was being watched.

She could feel someone’s presence in the store aside from her. And though her eyes didn't catch who, her heart knew. Something unnatural and unwelcome here, something totally dark. Something she already met before. *The vampire.*

“Hello, pet.”

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