Mario Chronicles #6:

The Fang Gang

By Jonathan Gutheinz





Twitter: @gutheinz

First Printing: USA 4/12/2021

Other Books in WarZone

Dawn of War

Warzone

Tales

Relics

Chronicles

The War for San Diego

**Chapter 1**

 The Old Manor was a hole in the wall bar, built to look old. It opened a few weeks back, replacing an old diner that couldn’t afford to keep the lights on. It was the type of place where all the college kids liked to go out and have fun. Drink a little, dance a little. Forget all the worries that were weighing them down come sun up. At least that was the idea.

 It didn’t always work out that way, as Wesley, Nadia, and Lenny were quickly learning as they wasted their night away attempting to cheer up their friend Kyle Leman. He was a heartbroken young man, who hadn’t been on a date in nearly two years, not since his high school sweetheart left him for his older cousin. He’s been a wreck ever since.

 “You just got to get back out there.” Nadia said, she was a year younger than Kyle, and a lot more adventurous when it came to dating. Romance not so much. She didn’t believe in love, figures it’s nothing more than a way to end up hurt, as Kyle’s situation proved. She had been pressuring him for weeks to just go out and find someone to have a fling with, he wasn’t a fan of that idea. He was old fashioned, he didn’t want meaningless sex, he wanted romance. He wanted love.

 Which is where Wesley and Lenny came in. They were old friends of Kyle, going back to middle school, and have never had a serious relationship in their lives. Since college started, they have had a running bet on who could sleep with more women. Wesley was currently in the lead, but only by one. Lenny was hoping to tie that up before the night was over. After they did their part helping Kyle.

 “Get back out there? Nadia, I’ve only ever been with Isabel.” Kyle said, “Who I’ve been with since time immortal, I have nothing to get back out too. That’s just not who I am!”

 “But it’s who you could be.” Wesley said.

 “It’s not too late to get in on our little bet.” Lenny said with a smirk.

 “Oh, him you’ll let in, but I can’t play?” Nadia said, shooting daggers at Lenny, who returns the annoyed expression with a cocky grin.

 “I mean, you want to take part in the bet, I’d be more than happy to accommodate you.” Lenny said, doing his best to seem charming. “You’d even tie me up.” He finished it up with a wink, she was not impressed.

 “You’re only beating him by one?” She asked Wesley, ignoring Lenny’s lame attempt at a pick up. “You slacking.” He couldn’t help but laugh.

 “What can I say, I’m having an off week.” Wesley said, enjoying getting under Lenny’s skin.

 “Har, har. You guys are so funny.” Lenny said.

 “This is what you guys want me to be a part of?” Kyle asked. “None of this seems fun.”

 “Sex is fun.” Wesley pointed out.

 “Isabel did let you, *you know*, right?” Lenny asked, seemingly concerned.

 “Of course, she did!” Nadia said. “Our boy’s not a virgin!” she waits a beat for Kyle to answer before adding “Right?”

 “We had sex.” Kyle said exasperated.

 “You enjoyed it right?” Lenny asked, dumbfounded.

 “Was she bad?” Nadia asked. “Were you bad?”

 “I never said that!” Kyle retorted.

 “So, why don’t you want to get laid?” Wesley asked.

 “I want sex! I never said I didn’t want sex! Stop! Just stop putting words in my mouth. Fuck!” Kyle snapped, hitting the end of his rope.

 “Good!” Nadia said. “That’s why we’re here. To get you laid. So,” she motions around the bar. “Who’s the lucky lady?”

 “I’m not ready for this.”

 “It’s been long enough.” Lenny said.

 “My sister always told me, the only way to get over a man, was to get under another one. I assume the same goes for getting over a woman.” Nadia said. “What could it hurt to try?”

 “You might even like it.” Wesley added. Kyle let out a sigh, it was becoming clear that he wasn’t going to be able to talk his way out of this. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to find someone, he did. He knew he needed to get over Isabel, that that relationship had run its course. There was no going back. It was just that he wanted to find someone new. He wanted to get married, he wanted kids, a white picket fence. The American dream, that’s what he was after, not meaningless flings. He never judged his friends for their sexual appetites, but he didn’t share that desire. He wanted something serious. Something real.

 He scanned the room, looking for a very specific woman. He wanted someone who looked like his type, so that his friends would believe that he was interested, but was so far out of his league that she would shut him down quickly, thus preventing any chance of going through with it. He wasn’t that guy, and he didn’t want to become him.

 It didn’t take him long to find the perfect candidate, sitting at the end of the bar, very much alone, sat the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. She had to be only a few years older than him, with dark black hair, and a dress that matched.

 “Her.” He said, hoping that his friends would talk him out of it. There was no way that any of them believed he had a chance.

 “Not bad.” Nadia said.

 “My man’s got taste.” Wesley said, patting him on the back.

 “So, what do I do?” Kyle asked, his heart racing. He was getting nervous, which was odd, he was going into this to get rejected, why was he suddenly nervous? He couldn’t possibly believe he had a chance, could he?

 “You go talk to her.” Lenny said, as if it was the most obvious answer in the world.

 “Which is why you’re losing.” Wesley said, an air of smugness around him. “Go over there, get in that opening right next to her.” He motioned to the empty chair next to her. “and order a drink.” He made it all sound so easy, yet Kyle was lost. How was that going to get help him to talk to her? “But, and this parts important. You wait until the bartender is busy with the drinks. The longer you can wait there, the better. After a bit of waiting, you simply complain about how long it’s taking. Make sure you come off jokey, not whinny, she’ll reply in kind. You introduce yourself and hopefully by that time the bartender shows up, you order your drink and order her whatever she is having too, thus opening a conversation.” Wesley finished seeming very proud of himself. “Works every time.”

 “If that even worked once, I’ll sleep with Lenny. Right now, on this fucking table, in front of everybody.” Nadia said, rolling her eyes.

 “You will?” Lenny asked, his eyes wide with excitement. Wesley and Kyle just gave him looks of pity, before Wesley turned his attention back to Nadia.

 “Well, drop your pants and hop on the table, cause this is Lenny’s lucky day.” Wesley said, locking eyes with Nadia, daring her to call him a liar.

 “You’re so full of shit.” Nadia said, “Got me wondering if you really are beating Lenny. You might be an even bigger loser than he is.”

 “Hey!” Lenny said, his feelings genuinely hurt.

 “Would I lie?” Wesley asked, feigning hurt.

 “Yes!” All three of his friends said without missing a beat.

 “Fuck all of you.” Wesley said.

 “So, you don’t think that will work?” Kyle asked Nadia.

 “Not with her. That might work with the bimbos that Wes goes after, but she’s a hotty.” Nadia said. “And I normally can’t stand your taste in women.” She added.

 “So, what do you think I should do?” Kyle asked. She gave him a mischievous smile before replying.

 “Wait five minutes and then come join us.” She said, as she got to her feet and walked over to the table. The three men watched her work. Lenny and Wesley paying a bit more attention to her form than to what she was doing, Lenny even had a little drool. Kyle on the other hand watched nervously. The plan had been for him to go and mess things up so that he could escape the demands of his friends. What if she pulled off a miracle and actually helped him score? That wasn’t what he wanted, not even with someone as beautiful as this mystery woman.

 “You’re up junior.” Wesley said, hitting him on the back. Kyle didn’t respond, he just nodded and got to his feet. His whole body felt as if it was made of lead. His steps slow and sluggish. Time seemed to move in slow motion. He could feel the dread overwhelm him, almost as if it was filling him from head to toe, making it all but impossible for him to move. He had to force himself to move forward, using all his might to keep his legs moving forward. The idea of getting shot down wasn’t a fun one, but he figured that going into it knowing that it was going to happen made it easier. That was before he was going to get shot down in front of Nadia. He would never live that down; she wouldn’t let him. Worse yet, what if he didn’t get shot down? What if he had to go through with this stupid plan of theirs? He didn’t want to have a one-night stand, and he didn’t know this woman. He had no way of knowing if she was someone he wanted to be with, or if he was someone she could even like. It was so much pressure, he felt as if he was going to be sick. He prayed that he didn’t throw up on her.

 “Ah, Kyle, there you are!” Nadia, said, grabbing Kyle by the arm and pulling him towards the table. “I want you to meet someone.” She introduces him to the woman, who is even more beautiful in person. She has light green eyes that seem to sparkle in the light. “This is Ana, she just moved him from Mexico, right?”

 “I’m from Juarez,” She said, her accent strong, and pleasing to listen too. Kyle was in even more over his head than he had thought back at their table, so long ago. “Originally, but I’ve been all over.” She held out her hand, Kyle looked down at it, as if he had never seen one before. He wasn’t sure if he was supposed to shake it, or kiss it. His mind was racing a thousand thought a second and yet none of them were helpful.

 “Shake her hand!” Nadia hissed in his ear, trying not to be overheard. Kyle did as he was instructed.

 “I’m. . I’m Kyle Lameman” Kyle said. Naida gave him a reproachful look.

 “Yeah, you are.” She said under her breath.

 “Leman!” He corrected, feeling like a fool. This woman made him so nervous, he couldn’t even remember his last name.

 “It’s a pleasure to meet you.” She said, shaking his hand and then pulling it back, rather forcibly after he held on just a bit too long. “Nadia here, was just telling me that you were here celebrating your big promotion.”

 “We are?” He asked, looking at Nadia, who looked as if she was about to tear out his eyes and feed them to him. “We are!” He said attempting to recover. “I still can’t believe it. Very exciting.”

 “He deserves it.” Nadia said, patting him on the back, just a bit too hard. An attempt to convey her anger at how badly he was messing everything up. “Man, never stops working. But I keep telling him he needs to take some time for himself. Find him someone.”

 “You two aren’t?” Ana asked.

 “Us? No! Nadia said. “I’m his cousin. My man is the cute one in the hideous shirt,” She said, pointing to Wesley. “Sitting next to the guy who looks like a reject from a low budget horror movie.” She added, nodding towards Lenny. Kyle couldn’t help but chuckle.

 “Ah, I see.” Ana said, nodding at the table.

 “Here’s your shots.” The bartender said, handing them three shots.

 “You only got three shots, yet there are four of you, no?” Ana said.

 “Uh, well uh. . .” Kyle said, panicking. Nadia elbowed him.

 “The horror reject doesn’t drink. He’s in AA. It’s sad. We didn’t want to invite him, but he insisted. Wanted to make sure none of us drank and drove.” Nadia said, she was a natural. She had an answer for everything.

 “That is kind of him.” Ana said.

 “I guess.” Nadia said, not really paying any mind to the compliment for Lenny. “but how about I order another round of shots, and we just take this one.” She passes out the three shots. “To new friends.” The three of them hit their shot glasses together, echoing her cheer.

 “Thank you.” Ana said.

 “No problem, uh Kyle, I’mma hit the little girl’s room, why don’t you order the next shot.” She said, vanishing before he had a chance to answer. Leaving him alone with the beautiful Ana. Not knowing what to say he just nods at her and she smiles at him, not unkindly. After hours, or at least what felt like hours, but most likely only seconds she breaks the uncomfortable silence.

 “Your friend is very sweet.” Ana said.

 “Yeah.” Kyle said, grinning way too much and not knowing what to say.

 “And you are very cute, but not so good at this.” She said, smiling and touching his arm. He felt the blood rush to his face, his cheeks turning bright red.

 “Not so much.” He said after a few frantic seconds of trying to figure out something to say.

 “It’s okay.” She told him, rubbing his arm. “Just relax, I don’t bite.” Then with a flirtatious grin she adds “Well, maybe a little.” He finds himself giggling, and then hating himself for it. He didn’t know what was wrong with him. He had never really talked to women. Not really, except for Isabel and they had gotten together so young. It had been so easy back then. So natural. Not like this.

 “Sorry.” He said, his voice cracking as he spoke. He felt like an idiot.

 “Don’t apologize. It’s flattering to make a man as handsome as you, this nervous.”

 “Handsome?” He asked, not daring to believe that he heard her correctly. She nodded, as she got to her feet, taking his hand into her.

 “I’m going outside for a smoke, care to join me?” She asked, his only reply was his head nodding like a damn bobblehead. She led him outside, holding tight to his hand. He followed without a glance back, all thoughts of his moral objects long since forgotten. It wasn’t every day the hottest girl in the bar picked you up. Besides, maybe this could turn into something real. He wouldn’t know unless he tried. He just had to figure out how to talk without sounding like an idiot first.

 They didn’t head towards where a few other people were smoking, instead they went out behind the bar, to a dark alley, where there was nothing but some old boxes and a rusty dumpster that had seen better days. She turned towards him, smiled and pushed him against the wall. He had never been so nervous or excited in his life. She moved in and started kissing him, he kissed back. It was wild, crazy, the most unkyle thing he had ever done and he was loving every moment of it. He couldn’t believe it was him doing it. It felt so surreal.

 She moved from kissing his lips to kissing his neck, her hand running through his hair. It was bliss, at least until she went from kissing his neck to biting it. Only that was bliss too, just of a different short. The longer she bit into him, the weaker he felt. It was as if the sensation was growing fainter, as if the world was growing fainter. Part of him knew that he needed to push her off of him, he had to get away. This had gone too far. Only he couldn’t. He didn’t seem to have the strength. He was going to die, out in this alley, at the hands, or rather teeth, of the strange beautiful woman who he just wanted to get rejected from.

 Ana pulled away from Kyle, letting his lifeless body drop to the floor and wiping her lips clean from his blood as her face reverted back to its human form. She had come out tonight to find a bite to eat, and it had come to her. She always loved it when it was that easy.

 “He looked tasty.” Farai, a beautiful dark-skinned woman with piercing eyes, said as she walked out of the darkness. A few steps behind her came Eli, the youngest of their quartet. He was young, fit and had the look of someone who enjoyed the finer things in life. He was just as handsome as when Ana had first laid eyes on him over a hundred years before and decided to turn him. His eyes lit up at the sight of her, as they always did. The love they shared was deep and true. At least as true as love can be between vampires.

 “He served his purpose.” Ana said, moving in to greet Eli with a kiss. Farai indulged them their indiscretion before speaking once more.

 “We should be off. Lexington has a lead on the chest.” Farai said, moving out of the alleyway and onto the street. “And the sooner we can be out of this shit town, the better.” Ana and Eli started after her, holding onto each other as they did so. Even after a hundred years, they were still in their honeymoon faze. Something that Farai and Lexington had long since gotten over.

**Chapter 2**

 “Tell me one more time.” The sheriff asked, he was sitting across from Nadia in an interrogation room, his eyes looking through her, as if he could read her soul. She shifted uncomfortably in her chair, it mattered not that she was innocent, that she was in fact, the one who found the body of her best friend, no, none of that mattered, not when dealing with the police. Her father had taught her that when she was a little girl. The law wasn’t there to help people with her complexion, no matter how nice they pretended to be. The fact that, Kyle, her best friend, the man who was murdered, was a white guy, didn’t really help either.

 “I told you.” Nadia said, doing her best to sound calm and in control, despite her racing heart. “We took him out to have a few drinks, to get his mind off his broken heart.”

 “From a break up that happened two years ago?” The sheriff asked, his tone making it clear he didn’t buy it.

 “I know, it’s crazy, but his ex really hurt him.” Nadia said, liking the way this conversation was already going. “He cut himself off. Retreated into himself.”

 “I get it, real sob story.” The sheriff said, sounding almost bored. “Get to the part where you hired the hooker.”

 “What?” Nadia asked, genuinely confused. His question threw her for a loop, she thought for sure that he was going to try and put the murder on her, now he was suggesting that a hooker killed him?

 “The hooker.” The sheriff said, getting to his feet. “Come on, stop playing games. Everyone in the bar saw you go up to a pretty woman, sitting alone at the bar, speak to her, introduce your friend before leaving them alone. No sooner do you walk away, then she takes him outside, where he is found dead moments later. Any fool can see what happened.”

 “Then can you explain it? Because I’m lost.” Nadia said, wishing she could just get up and leave. She wanted to mourn her friend, not sit here and play 20 questions with this ass clown.

 “Your friend, Mr. Leman, was lonely, horny, and so you, being the great friend that you are, found a prostitute and hired her, she took your friend outside, for a good time, shall we say, only to turn the tables on him, kill him, rob him and take off.” He said, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

 “She robbed him?” Nadia asked, not sure why that information shocked her. The murder had to happen for a reason, no one just killed to kill, at least she didn’t think so.

 “Why else would she kill him?” He asked, his eyes once more piercing her. She shrank before his glaze, not daring to answer. He got to his feet and headed towards the door. “I have to admit, I’m disappointed, I thought you’d be more cooperative, seeing as the two of you were friends.” He pulled the door open, motioning for her to leave.

 “I can go?” She asked, not wanting to make the wrong move.

 “For now, but I’ll remind you, that solicitation is a crime.” He said, she avoided his eyes as she made for the door, he was holding open, hoping to put as much distance between them as she possibly could. “Though not as a serious a crime as accessory to murder.” He finished as she walked past him. She kept her eyes glued to the floor and sped up, her heart drowning out anything else he might have said to her. The shoe she had been waiting for had dropped. He was going to try to link her to the crime.

 She pushed out the hallway door, back into the lobby, her eyes scanning around, praying that Lenny and Wesley waited for her. Sure enough, they were standing over in the corner deep in conversation. They smiled weakly when they saw her and together, they headed for the door. Off to return to a world that she no longer felt connected to. Ever since she found Kyle’s body, she had felt like a part of her was missing. Was taken from her. It was a void that was threatening to consume her, but she had no idea how to even attempt to keep it at bay.

 Meanwhile, locked safe and sound behind his office door, sheriff Cole Simon pulled an old wallet out of his jacket pocket. He opened it, inside, clear as day, was Kyle Leman’s Driver’s License. He looked inside and pulled out a few $20’s, then tossed the wallet into the trash. Clearly disappointed that there wasn’t more in there.

 “You can’t really believe that the sheriff is corrupt?” Ralph asked, not for the first time. He was sitting next to Mario on a park bench, under one of the few street lights that still worked. It was only a few weeks since he had told Mario that he wanted to help out with the occult, but so far things had been kind of dead. Mario’s main focus seemed to be on the sheriff, ever since he had visited him at his house and got him in trouble with his parents for wrecking his car. It was becoming something of an obsession.

 “I know he is.” Mario said, his voice firm. There was no doubt in his mind. “He murdered his girlfriend back in high school, who knows what he’s been up to since.”

 “You can’t know that.” Ralph pointed out.

 “Alyssa was on a date when she was murdered, he was her boyfriend at the time.” Mario said, as if that settled it.

 “Circumstantial.” Ralph said. “I’m sure the sheriff back then looked into it, yet he was never arrested.”

 “I know what I know.” Mario said, stubbornly. “We just have to prove it.”

 “And how do we go about that?” Ralph asked, his impatience growing.

 “I don’t know yet.” Mario admitted.

 “Fine, well when you figure it out, let me know.” Ralph said. “But till then, let’s do some good. I want to help with the occult. You can’t really have just walked away from all of that.” Mario looked at him for a moment, as if he was going to protest, but instead he pulled a newspaper out of his back pocket and handed it to Ralph. The story on the front page was about a murder that happened the day before. Mario had taken the liberty to underline parts of it.

 “I found the perfect one.” Mario said, grinning ear to ear. A weird response when talking about a murder. Ralph tried to put his friends joy out of his mind as he looked down at the article. The underlined sections jumped out at him. The murder happened behind a bar not far from here named the Old Manor. The victim had been a college student named Kyle Leman. None of that explained the excitement that was radiating off of Mario, but the next sentences did. He was found with two tiny holes in his neck, drained of blood but not a drop to be found around the body. He couldn’t believe what he just read, he looked up at Mario, wearing a matching smile.

 “You don’t think. . .do you?” Ralph asked, his adrenaline was already flowing.

 “Vampire.” Mario said the word with a reverence that matched its importance. “The ultimate supernatural experience.”

 “We’re going to hunt a vampire?” Ralph asked, he couldn’t believe it. After fighting it for so long, he finally agreed to hunt the supernatural and his first case was the undead.

 “We are!”

 The full moon shined overhead as Walt nervously made his way towards the Milano brothers. They were sitting at a picnic table, drinking, having the time of their lives. They were the kings of the town and everyone knew it, after all, they were the only ones who had access to the drug of choice, Denix, and Walt was feigning.

 As Walt closed in on them, they turned their heads to look at him, the distain was evident. He fumbled a request for the drug, pulling out what little money he had on him. His life had been spiraling out of control for the past few years, nothing ever seemed to go his way. No matter how hard he tried. Ever since his wife died in the car crash after a night of drinking. Since then, it had been one form of escape after another. It wasn’t long before alcohol was no longer enough. He needed something with a bit more bite, which eventually led him here, to Denix, which made him feel alive for the first time in years. This high wasn’t just a way to dull the pain, it actually made him feel whole. It gave his life a purpose that had been absent for years. Deep down he knew that it was a false purpose, but it was better than nothing.

 The older of the two brothers hopped down and started the transaction, toying with their client before actually going through with the transaction. Meanwhile, across the street, hunched down low in his car, Tommy V. watched on. Night after night he followed the brothers around, finding their hunting grounds. If he was going to take on the Milano family, than he needed to know everything he could about their operation. Yet so far, all he had been able to gather is that they liked to party. Tonight, it was drinking at the park, the night before they were at a house party, the night before that they were at some club. Night after night they drank away the hours, selling to whoever came up to them. They didn’t seem to have a go to spot to sell, nor did they seem to sell out of the house that often. There was a trap house over on Heinz Parkway that they sold out of, but it seemed to be run by lackeys. If Tommy V. wanted to get this damn drug off the streets, he would have to take down that house too, but his first priority was to hurt the family, starting with the brothers.

 Walt got off the floor, after being knocked to the ground by the elder brother, the Denix tossed down to him as the brothers counted the money. He wasted no time in gathering up the drugs and ran off, leaving the brothers behind so that he could find some place nice and isolated to partake in his score. Part of Tommy V. felt bad for him. After all, he had nothing against addicts, he made a living off of them. No, his issue was the Milano family. They were responsible for Al’s death, along with putting Mike in the hospital and breaking Sal’s rib. He was going to revenge his friends, if it was the last thing he did.

**Chapter 3**

 The day was dragging by, at least as far as Mario was concerned. Ever since he had discovered that there was a vampire in town, all he wanted to do was go and hunt it down. Add to that the fact that Ralph was on board, and he was on the top of the world. At least he was until he reconnected with Ralph on the way to Mr. Needs’ English class.

 “I don’t know what the fuck is wrong with me.” Ralph said miserably.

 “What’s wrong?”

 “It’s Carla.” Ralph said, and Mario felt a tidal wave of relief. He thought it was something seriously wrong, but it was the same thing that had been bothering Ralph on and off since the disaster behind the scenes of the school play. “I just. . .I can’t ask her out.”

 “Why not?” Mario asked, not for the first time. He kept insisting that all Ralph needed was some confidence, but Ralph never seemed to listen. He was determined to make this as hard as possible on himself.

 “I don’t know. Just. . .every time I try, I fuck it up. I just, I suck.”

 “You can talk to her just fine.” Mario pointed out. “I’ve seen you do it.”

 “Oh yeah, talk. That’s fine. I’m great at that. I can go right up to her this very second and start a conversation with the woman and we’ll have a great time. Laughing, giggling, it’s perfect, right up until I try to ask her out. That’s when it all goes to hell.” Ralph said as they entered the class room.

 “How?” Mario asked, only half listening at this point. He hadn’t had a chance to finish his paper. He had hoped to get to class a little early so he could knock the rest of it out, but he got held up in Math class with a lecture about needing to try harder. It wasn’t his fault that Math was such a pointless subject.

 “Yesterday, at lunch, I tried. I really tried.” Ralph said, his face etched with horror as he recalled the attempt. “We were talking, having a great time, I look over at her and open my mouth to ask if she would go out with me. Instead, I ask her ‘will you have my sliced bread?’”

 Mario stopped writing and looked up at his friend, he didn’t hear what he thought he just heard. He couldn’t have. There was no way Ralph asked the girl he was crushing on if she would have his slice of bread. What the fuck did that even mean?

 “Will you have my slice bread?” Mario asked, sure he misheard.

 “I panicked half way through asking her out and attempted to shift it to asking if she wanted one of my sandwiches. My mom cut it in half. I don’t know, it just came out.”

 “But, but you didn’t ask her if she wanted a sandwich, you asked her if she wanted sliced bread. What, were you going to take it off the top of one of your sandwiches and hand it to her?” Mario said, doing everything he could to keep from laughing. That was the greatest thing he ever heard. Ralph on the other hand, did not look amused. Rather he looked as if he was about to cry.

 “Of course not! I just. . .my brain just stopped working. I don’t know what the fuck is wrong with me.” He seemed genuinely distraught, Mario wanted to say something to cheer him, while also fighting a strong desire to laugh, but both impulses were curbed when Mr. Needs walked in and greeted the class, asking for their assignments to be handed up. Mario’s heart sank. He was still three paragraphs short. He reluctantly passed the paper up.

 The rest of the class went in a similar fashion. This was normally Mario’s favorite class of the day, but he was so distracted by the night ahead and Ralph’s misery that it was more blur than anything else. As they left for their next class, the only thing he could really recall from the class was getting yelled at, more than once.

 As they broke for lunch, instead of heading down to the cafeteria with everyone else, they made their way towards Tommy V.’s bathroom. They knew that Sal wasn’t set to return to class till after the Christmas break and there was no telling when Mike was even let out of the hospital, but they wanted to check on Tommy V. Neither of them had seen him around school much, since his gang was all but slaughtered, not that they could blame him. It sounded like something out of a nightmare, and to think that the guy who did it was the same one that almost killed Ralph and the others at the school play. It made Mario shudder just to think about it. How close he really came to losing everything.

 Tommy V. had expressed interest in the supernatural and now that his own normal extra circular activities were on hold, maybe hunting an honest to god vampire would distract him for a while. At least that was the idea, unfortunately he wasn’t in his normal ‘office’.

 “Is he ever going to come back?” Ralph asked, as they made their way to the cafeteria to get something to eat.

 “I don’t know.” Mario replied. “But I don’t like this. What’s he doing?”

 “No idea, but, it’s Tommy V. If anyone can take care of themselves, it’s him. He’ll be fine.” Ralph said.

 “He’s alone.” The two friends continued in silence, neither one having a reply to Mario’s observation. Neither one saying what was on both of their minds. If he was going after the suppliers of Denix, he was in serious trouble. Far more trouble than they were about to walk into hunting for creatures of the night.

 The conversation turned back to Carla, and Ralph vow that he was going to ask her out before the break started at the end of the week. Just not today. He figured one crazy reckless act per day, and todays was hunting down a vampire.

 The rest of the day crawled by, until it was finally time to go home, at least for most students. Mario on the other hand had to head out to his family’s pawn shop. He swore to his father that he would keep working at the shop to try and help them stay afloat. It wasn’t fun work, or exciting, but it helped him grow closer to his father and that was something. The two of them had never been distant, but they had never been friendly either. His dad was the man of the house. He fixed things. He took care of them. He pulled out the belt when Mario crossed lines. He wasn’t the one you talked to when you needed advice. He wasn’t the one that you joked around with. That was his mother, but the past couple weeks, all that started to change. He started to see his father as a man, not just the man. He was actually a pretty funny guy. With a good heart, and a lot of weight on his shoulders. Weight that Mario wanted to help him carry.

 From the outside the shop looked closed, not that that meant anything, Halts Glee was very unwelcoming to outsiders, no matter how long they lived there. The residents of this shitty town never much cared for Mario or his family and they showed it by the complete lack of interest they took in their store. That wasn’t to say they didn’t do business. They did, it was just slow going.

 “I have arrived!” Mario said, throwing open the door in a dramatic fashion, expecting a laugh from his father, instead he was greeted with an annoyed look, not only from his father, but from the man he had seen talking to him before. The man who was somehow involved with his father and their business, but Mario had no idea how. Every time he asked, he was sent away. Whatever the secret was, his father meant to keep it.

 “Clean out the back room.” His father shouted, before going back to quiet conversation with the mystery man. Mario did as he was told, attempting to get a good look at the man as he did so. He was white, middle aged, with black hair that was slowly giving way to gray. He had a scar jutting down his right cheek.

 As Mario started to clean, he did his best to overhear what they were talking about, but neither man ever spoke over a whisper and when customers finally came in, they broke off their conversation all together and he left. Leaving Mario none the wiser as to what his role in the family business was. He was determined to find out, one of these days. The rest of the work shift went without a hitch and as the day turned to night, his father started acting more himself again.

 Farai sat in the back of the abandoned warehouse, her eyes glued to the door, doing her best to ignore the sound coming from the office, where Eli and Ana were expressing just how desirable they still found one another. Her mind drifted back to when she shared that animal magnetism where they couldn’t keep their hands off each other. The passion was enough to change the world. It certainly changed her life. She was all set to marry a man she hardly knew, because it was expected of her. Not for love, although her mother told her that love would come, with time. She never believed it. Less so when Lexington showed up. She had never seen a man so handsome, so confident. She fell for him at once, and when he offered her a place by his side till the end of time, she jumped at it, no questions asked.

 That was over 300 years ago. Over that time the passion had subsided. As had the physical attraction. Each had taken other loves over the centuries, yet Lexington had been true to his word. He never abandoned Farai. He treated her like a queen, holding her above all others, even while they went their separate ways. There was a loyalty between them that went beyond the lust of youth, it was something she would hold onto till the end of her days. Something that she would kill for.

 It also came with certain benefits. Lexington had been around a long time, the son of a Roman general and an Egyptian queen, or so he claimed, yet he never spoke names of either alleged parent. During that time, he had served faithfully at the feet of Kerrigan, the queen of the vampires. The most powerful of them all, possessing powers that the rest of them could never hope to master. Farai never dared to ask how old Kerrigan was, but she knew she was far older than even the great empire of Rome, from which Lexington hailed from.

 Vampires from before the great purge were rare, as far as Farai was aware, there were only a handful left. Kerrigan and Lexington being the chef among them. They were far stronger than normal vampires, with speed and the ability to heal themselves, even from the deadliest of wounds. It was one of the main reasons that Kerrigan kept Lexington so close. They were a breed apart. It was a connection that Farai could never hope to match. It was a chasm between the two of them that seemed insurmountable. Farai believed that it was one of the main reasons they had drifted apart over the years.

 As sunset neared, the door finally opened and Lexington walked in, closing his umbrella as he did so. He looked distressed, but attempted a weak smile as he saw Farai rise to her feet. Their happy reunion interrupted by Ana’s moment of enjoyment. Farai rolled her eyes as she started towards her mate.

 “What news?”

 “None good, I’m afraid. It seems are information may not have been as reliable as I was led to believe.” Lexington replied. His voice heavy. It had cost them a lot to enter this hellish city.

 “Kerrigan will not be pleased.”

 “No, she will not.” Lexington said, taking the seat that Farai had been waiting in. “She was against us breaking the treaty, but I was so sure.”

 “It’s not your fault, my love.” Farai assured him. It wasn’t just empty words. She really didn’t believe that he was at fault. She saw the evidence herself. The chest was hidden here by the Greek thief. “She had access to the same facts we did. She came to the same conclusion.”

 “Yes, but we brought her those facts. If we were wrong. If the Dreamer’s chest is not here, the fault will rest with me and me alone.”

 “My love, you are old, older than all but a select few. With that age, comes power. Power that our beloved queen is in need of. Do not fear, she will not forsake you.” Farai said, doing her best to put his mind at ease.

 “I’m sure your right my angel. Yet I can’t help but feel that this trip was a mistake.”

 “This town is cursed for our kind. This is known, but if the Dreamer’s chest is indeed here, we must know.” She pointed out. He nodded.

 “And we shall. Tonight, we will turn every stone. Leave nothing to chance. If the enemy or his worshippers come for us, I shall handle them. You will be safe. You have my word.” He said, kissing her hand as he did so. She couldn’t help but smile.

**Chapter 4**

 The Old Manor didn’t miss a beat. Never mind the fact that a man was found dead in the back alley the night before. People were still here in force, drinking away their problems and having a good time. It made Nadia sick just thinking about it, but she forced those feelings down. She was here for a reason. She was going to find that Ana woman, the one who had murdered Kyle and then she was going to force the sheriff to do something about. Kyle was her best friend, the only person in her life who had always been there for her. She wasn’t about to let his death go unavenged.

 Nadia, Lenny and Wesley had been driving from bar to bar all night, spending only a few minutes at each place, looking for any sign of the woman in question. So far, their search had turned up nothing. They all agreed that the odds of her coming back to the Old Manor was next to none, that if she was going to be out looking for her next victim it would be at another bar, but after they all came up empty, they figured they had nothing to lose by coming back here.

 After a few laps around the bar, a deflated Nadia made her way back towards the exit, catching sight of Wesley and Lenny doing the same. It seemed that once more they failed. This woman was still out there somewhere, enjoying the cool night air, while Kyle rotted away in some morgue. His life cut painfully short.

 “No such luck?” Lenny said, despite already knowing the answer. He wanted to call it a night. In fact, he had been against this whole enterprise from the start. It wasn’t that he didn’t miss Kyle, or that he didn’t want justice for his murdered friend. It was more that he was afraid of the sheriff. Afraid of a woman who would kill for the share joy of it. He knew in his gut, that going around town looking for trouble was going to do nothing but bring that trouble to you. Maybe more than they could handle.

 “Now what?” Wesley asked as they made their way outside. “Start over at the first bar?” He asked, ignoring Lenny who was about to speak and instead directing his question to Nadia, who looked more determined than ever.

 “Nothing else we can do.” Was the only answer she could give. She wasn’t going to give up. She knew Lenny wanted to, but until he said something, she was going to keep them together and keep them hunting for the truth.

 “Mario!” Ralph yelled out; he was across the street from the shop as Mario left for the night. His father stayed behind to get some extra work done, which was perfect. It allowed him to sneak off without having to give a reason.

 “Ready to hunt us a vampire?” Mario said, barely able to keep the excitement out of his voice.

 “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but yes, hell yes, hell the fuck yes, I’m ready.” Ralph said. He seemed as excited as Mario felt. It was an excitement that faded fairly quickly as the hours ticked by and they found nothing. No sight of any vampire, or anything else that goes bump in the night.

 “Is it always this dull?” Ralph asked, not hiding the disappointment he felt in his first intentional hunt.

 “Honestly?” Mario asked, to which Ralph nodded. “I don’t know. Usually, the supernatural stuff just kind of falls into my lap. I’ve never really had to go looking for it before. Well, maybe with the Phantom racer.”

 “But we had a car then.” Ralph said. “Wasn’t so much walking.”

 “Don’t remind me.” Mario said, he still missed his car. It sucked having to walk everywhere. He sacrificed it for the greater good, after all it stopped the Phantom racer and saved lives, but it got him in trouble with his parents, which is why he had to start working with his father, cost him his car and put him in the sheriff’s line of sight. He had hoped to stay out of his radar until he was ready to make his move. That was no longer an option.

 “There has to be an easier way of doing this.” Ralph said, as they left behind yet another bar. The idea had been to scope out the different bars in town until they found something weird, only the problem was, they had yet to find anything and walking from bar to bar was more a burden than they would have originally believed.

 “I’m open to suggestions.” Mario replied, feeling the same sense of frustration as Ralph.

 “Maybe we should head home, figure out a new plan of attack and start back tomorrow?” Ralph said, Mario didn’t want to cut and run, but this wasn’t working. Ralph’s idea had merit.

 “The Old Manor is just up ahead, that was where the original murder happened. We can go check that out, if we don’t find anything, we call it a night.” Mario said, praying that Ralph didn’t fight him on it. He really liked the idea of the two of them doing this together. “Deal?”

 “Deal.” Ralph said.

 The Old Manor was busier than it had any right to be, the night after a murder. No one here seemed to be giving it any real thought. Or rather, they seemed to be enjoying being so close to something so dreadful. As if it was an exciting adventure. Eli loved every bit of it. He had spent all night looking for any sign of the Dreamer’s Chest, only to come up empty. Which was about what he expected. Lexington had gotten a mysterious tip that the chest, the very chest they had been looking for, just happened to be in the heart of the enemy’s territory. Lexington had refused to reveal his source, but insists that it was solid. So here they were, wasting their time and risking their lives on a wild goose chase.

 He had grown tired of the pointless search so he had made his way here, to the Old Manor, where his beloved had told him food was easy picking. She couldn’t have been more right. He had his choice of any meal he wanted, and he had just the one in mind. A young woman in her mid-twenties, who seemed to be on the rebound. If Eli had to guess, she had just gotten out of a bad breakup and wanted a distraction. He had just such the distraction in mind.

 The rest of the walk to the Old Manor passed in relative salience. The truth was, both men were disappointed in the way the evening had turned out. The thought of doing battle with an honest to god vampire had excited them both. The fact that they had found nothing interesting all night was a source of major despair.

 Neither one of them had any hope that the Old Manor would turn that lack of adventure around. There was no way that a vampire would show up at the same bar two nights in a row. No one could be that stupid. Everyone would be on the lookout for them.

 Yet no sooner had they reached the bar, when they found what they were looking for. A man, maybe a decade older than they were, biting into the neck of a young woman, who seemed oddly calm. Mario and Ralph exchanged looks, before nodding. They pulled out their wooden stakes and their crosses and they started towards the undead monster, doing their best to go unheard. Mario pressed the cross the vampire’s face, who let out a scream and pushed the woman towards them. No sooner had he pushed her away than she let out a scream and run off, back into the bar.

 Mario lunged at the vampire with his stake, but the vampire, Eli, stepped out of the way, caught his arm, twisted it, till he dropped his weapon and swung him around so that he crashed into the side of the bar, sliding to the ground. His whole body was aching.

 Ralph wasted no time in trying to help his friend, he rushed at the vampire, letting out his pathetic version of a battle cry when the vampire, twisted in his spot, throwing out his arm, his forearm catching Ralph in the throat. He went down hard. Before the vampire could move in on him, Mario jumped on his back and stabbed the stake into his chest, missing the heart.

 “Fuck!” Eli screamed out in pain, grabbing Mario and throwing him off of him. Mario landed with a crash in the middle of the road, where a car almost hit him, but swerved out of the way. Mario slowly got back to his feet as the vampire hit Ralph, who had just managed to get back to his feet.

 Mario fell back to his knees. He was too weak to stand up. The crash landing had taken a toll on him. He shouted to Ralph to run, but doubted very much that his friend had the strength still in him. Just as Eli closed in on Ralph, shouts started to come from the Old Manor, as the woman who had been his victim returned with more guests. Eli took in the sight of their new onlookers and took off running. Vanishing into the night.

 Mario attempted to get to his feet once more, this time managing it. He met up with Ralph and the two of them took off in the opposite direction of their pray, just as the sirens started up. Their vampire hunting days would have to start another night. They had gone out and they had failed. Neither one of them spoke a word as they headed home, both embarrassed and ashamed of how badly they failed, but also both determined to do better the next night. This wasn’t over, it was only the beginning.

 Wesley regained control of the car as they pulled away from the Old Manor. Everyone was shaken. Some idiot had fallen into the street right in front of them. He had come inches from hitting the man, if he hadn’t turned the steering wheel as hard as he had, he would have been a murderer. As it was, he was shaken.

 “What the fuck was that?” Lenny demanded, sounding as shaken as Wesley felt.

 “It was some idiot!” Wesley screamed. He was pissed. He didn’t like being that knocked off his game. Lenny leaned in from the back seat.

 “Did we hit him?” Lenny asked, fearing the worst.

 “Did it feel like we hit him?” Wesley snapped back. He was already shook enough, the last thing he needed was Lenny making him feel worse for almost hitting someone, no matter if it was his fault or not.

 “Should we go back?” Lenny asked. “Look for him?” Wesley let out a sigh, it was the right thing to do, even if he didn’t like it.

 “No.” Nadia said, speaking for the first time since the near miss. Lenny and Wesley turned to look at her. She pointed out the window. “We found her!” Sure enough, the woman who killed Kyle was walking down the street towards the bar.

 “Oh shit!” Lenny said.

 “She’s headed back to the bar.” Wesley pointed out.

 “Do we follow her? Or try to head her off?” Lenny asked, both of them were looking to Nadia for answers. She thought over both options, but neither one sounded like something she wanted to do.

 “Neither!” She answered, throwing open the door. She jumped out and ran after the vampire, fishing in her pocket for a wooden stake that she had made after leaving the sheriff’s office. She had never believed in vampires before, not really, but there was nothing else this could be. She drained Kyle dry, without spilling a drop of blood. It was time for her to get her revenge.

 Lenny and Wesley exchange looks, before getting out after her. Wesley made it a few steps before cars started honking. He cursed to himself, ran back into the car and drove it down the street to park. It took him a few moments to get back to where he left his friends. At first, he didn’t see them, but then he caught sight of Lenny waving over to him. He was standing in front of an old warehouse, no sign of Nadia or the woman who had killed their friend.

 “They went inside.” Lenny said as he closed in on them. Wesley, nodded, before following Lenny in.

 Meanwhile, inside, Nadia chased the murderer through the building, before the vampire darted through what used to be a door, down a hallway. She was doing her best to avoid Nadia. The hallway came to an end, and the vampire let out a laugh, before turning around to face Nadia, who was gripping the stake so hard that her hand was bleeding.

 “Kerrigan can’t say I didn’t try.” The vampire said, her eyes seemed to light up at the sight of Nadia. “Ah, the woman who fed me my dinner. I owe you a thanks. Nadia, wasn’t it?”

 “You know damn well it is.” Nadia said. “Ana.” She said the name with as much venom as she could manage. “He was my best friend!”

 “And he was a mighty fine snack, but I’m hungry again, and those veins on your neck are looking awfully appetizing.” Ana said, taking a step towards Nadia, who in turn fell back a step. She knew this wasn’t going to be easy, but something about the smile on the vampire’s face, filled her with dread. “You’re not scared, now are you? I thought you were brimming with righteous anger?”

 Nadia cursed herself, in her head, not out loud, not for this monster to hear. She hated that she had shown fear. That she had let this freak get into her head, even for a moment. She mustered up every ounce of self-control that she possessed and took a step forward.

 “I’m not afraid of you.” Nadia lied, taking another step forward, lifting the stake into the air. She was going to revenge her best friend, even if it cost her everything.

 “It’s cute how you lie.” Ana said with a laugh. The laugh pushed Nadia over the edge, she threw caution to the wind and lunged at the vampire, the stake diving down towards the chest. In the same motion that Nadia came down with the stake, Ana’s hand swung up, grabbing her wrist, twisting it, breaking her arm and lifting her up, slamming her down behind her. That would have been bad enough for poor Nadia, but the floor was weak and it collapsed under their weight. Nadia and Ana fell to the basement below, knocking them both out.

 Up above, Lenny and Wesley come to a stop over the hole in the floor. They look down in horror, neither one of them awake.

 “What do we do?” Lenny asked. Wesley shook his head. The truth was, he had no idea what to do.

 “Stay here!” Wesley said. “I’m going to go get help, you keep an eye on them!” Wesley ordered before turning and rushing out of the hallway, stopping at the edge and turning back. “Don’t let anything happen to our girl. I can’t lose her too.” Lenny just nodded.

 Wesley wasn’t sure what he was going to do, he just knew he had to get help. The only thing he could think of, was to find the sheriff. He seemed useless when he had questioned them, but there was no one else. He had to get Nadia out of there, and hopefully get Ana sent to prison where she belongs.

 The plan had been to run back to his car and speed to the sheriff’s station, but it seemed that fate was on his side. No sooner had he exited the warehouse than he found the sheriff running towards it.

 “Sheriff!” Wesley called out, out of breath from running.

 “What was that sound?” The sheriff demanded, stopping in front of him.

 “The floor. . . it gave way!” Wesley said, trying to catch his breath. “Nadia, she found the killer.”

 “The killer? This mystery woman you said killed that Leman kid?” The sheriff asked. Wesley nodded.

 “They both fell through the floor.” Wesley said. “You have to help her!” The sheriff seemed taken aback by the fact that they had managed to track down the killer. He let out a deep sigh and looked around.

 “You sure it’s her?”

 “Yes! We have to stop wasting time and go save her!” Wesley demanded; he wasn’t sure what the sheriff was waiting for.

 “I really wish you kids had just left it to me.” He said, his voice filled with regret. Wesley meant to ask him what he was talking about, but before he had a chance, the sheriff pulled out his gun and shot him right between the eyes. Wesley dropped to the ground, dead.

 Back inside, Lenny turned to look for the source of the gun shot. His heart racing.

 “Fuck!” He said to himself, he glanced back into the hole, both women still seemed to be out. He backed away from the hole and started back towards the warehouse proper. He wasn’t sure if he was going to look for the sound of the gun shot, to make sure that Wesley was okay, or if he was looking for a chance to run and hide. He loved his friends, he did, but he didn’t want to die for them. He didn’t want to die at all.

 He made it back into the main room the warehouse just as he saw the sheriff enter, no sign of Wesley. His gut told him to run, but whoever had fired the gun was out there. No matter how much trouble he would get for being in here, at least he would be alive.

 “Sheriff!” He shouted, to make sure that anyone else in there would know the cops were there too. “Over here! Hurry!” he ran towards the officer. The sheriff didn’t miss a beat, he pulled out his gun, lifted it up and fired right at Lenny. He was dead before he knew what happened.

 Back in the hole in ground, Nadia was startled awake by the sound of the gun fire. She looked around, not far from her, the vampire was also getting to her feet. It seemed they had both survived the fall and were stirred awake by the gun fire.

 “Someone is having fun out there.” Ana said, getting to her feet. Nadia felt around behind her for the stake as Ana started towards her. “I might have to end our time together a bit sooner than I would have liked.”

 “You think that’s up to you?” Nadia demanded, doing her best to sound brave. Hiding the horror, she felt in her stomach. Ana stopped in front of her, looking her over as you would a juicer burger.

 “It sure as hell isn’t up to you.” Ana said, with a smile, picking up and biting into her neck, leaving no room for doubt. Nadia felt an odd sense of calm wash over her. There was a sight pinch in her neck, but it no longer bothered her. Nothing did. She was at peace. She could feel the life leaving her body, but did nothing to fight against it. Part of her welcomed it. Just as she believed that it was over, Ana pulled away, smiling at her. “Maybe, I’ll keep as a pet.”

 As soon as she pulled away, Nadia felt her pain and panic rush back in at the exact same moment. She was scared out of her mind, only moments from death. Even if Ana decided to spare her, there was no way she would survive. She had already lost too much blood.

 Ana cut a line across her arm and forced Nadia’s face down to it. She wasn’t sure what made her do it, but Nadia started drinking, as if her life depended on it. In fact, she knew it did.

 *Don’t let this happen!* A voice in her head said. It took everything she had, and in doing so, she knew that she was dooming herself. She lifted her arm, still holding the stake and stabbed it into the vampire’s chest. Ana let out a scream and threw her back, as she turned to dust. Nadia landed with a crash on some rubble, the world growing dark around her.

 Up above Sheriff Simon stood over the edge watching the two women fall to their deaths. He let out a sigh, turned around and left. It seemed his fear was right, vampires had broken the truce and were in Halts Glee. The elders would need to be informed.

**Chapter 5**

 “It seems you were right.” Farai said, an air of boredom in her voice. She was doing her best to hide how uneasy she felt in this place. A vampire hadn’t stepped foot inside of Halts Glee since the cities founding, at least not knowingly. It was an uneasy alliance, but one that no vampire, other than a few younglings who didn’t know better, would ever break. Lexington leading the four of them here, was a risk. One that they had hoped to pay off, yet it seemed it was all for nothing.

 “I wish I wasn’t.” Lexington said, his eyes glued out the window. Farai couldn’t tell if he was looking for their missing member, or if he was playing over his upcoming conversation with Kerrigan when they returned to the nest.

 “Who was this source?” She asked, not for the first time. It wasn’t like Lexington to keep something from her. He was always open with her, even when she sometimes wished he wasn’t. Yet on this, he was silent. As far as she knew, he hadn’t even told Kerrigan, not that the queen would have asked. She showed a level of respect for the elders. Those who came before the great purge. Few as they were.

 Lexington spared her a glance before turning back to the window. It was a searching look, as if he was judging what to say, or rather, how much to tell her. It stung a bit, more than Farai would ever openly admit. It was just a further sign that the two of them were drifting apart. The look came with no spoken answer.

 “Whoever it was, sure as hell screwed us.” Eli said, throwing a ball into the air and catching it. His voice was filled with quiet indignation. Whatever had happened out in the town seemed to not sit well with him. “Sending us to this hellhole for no reason.”

 “And risking a war we cannot win.” Lexington said, speaking at last.

 “We’re vampires, immortal, damn near gods.” Eli said, getting to his feet. “What could possibly defeat us?” Farai let out a laugh. The arrogance of youth, how she missed it so. Eli shot her a dirty look. He didn’t like to be made a fool, yet he never missed a chance to be proven one.

 “An actual god.” Lexington said. “Ready your selves. We depart this forbidden land.”

 “Surely not yet.” Eli said. “Ana hasn’t returned!”

 “And where is your lover!” Lexington demanded. “The sun has taken its place in the sky above, yet she is nowhere to be seen.”

 “She’s having a spot of fun.” Eli said, defensively. “We were set to meet at a local pub when I was assaulted by children. The whole bar came out to save them and I was forced to flee. I assume, she had not made it yet, and was waiting for me.”

 “All night?” Farai asked, not believing that even Ana had that kind of loyalty, let alone patience.

 “And what was the plan at this pub?” Lexington asked, his voice sinking lower, so that the others had to strain to listen. Farai knew that that was never a good sign.

 “Have a few drinks and maybe a bite.” Eli said with a laugh. In the less than a blink of an eye, Lexington was across the room, his hand on Eli’s neck, lifting him off on the ground. The demon upon his face.

 “You would dare to feed in this wretched land?” Lexington demanded, his voice echoing across the room. Farai had never heard him scream with such fury before. Nor did it seem, had Eli, who looked as if he was about to wet his pants with fear. He attempted to mask his fear with bravado, which only served to piss Lexington off more.

 “Are we to starve? Like common filth?” Eli asked.

 “While in his land? Yes!” Lexington said, his voice demanding to be questioned no more.

 “Could they know we are here?” Farai asked, worried about what the answer might be.

 “How should I know?” He asked, refusing to look Lexington in the eyes.

 “Did you feed?” She asked as Lexington growled.

 “I did not indulge.” Eli said, his voice finally giving way to his fear.

 “And your whore?” Lexington demanded, squeezing his hand, drawing blood from their young comrade.

 “So, what if she had?” Eli asked. Lexington howled in anger before throwing Eli clear across the room. He hit the wall and crashed through it into the room next door.

 “We stay in this cursed land one more night, to find our wayward sister.” Lexington said, murder in his eyes. “But know this, boy, if she, or you, have allowed them to learn of our arrival, I’ll end your pitiful existence myself.”

 Sunlight, holy relics, stakes to the heart, beheadings. All the information that Mario had managed to dig up on the killing of vampires, were things he already knew from movies. Ralph, who for once had done his own research, turned up the same information, more or less. It seemed they knew everything they needed to know, and none of it helped them pull off the actually trick of slaying a vampire. Get the stake through the heart, that was key, but how to do it? That, was still beyond their means.

 “There has to be something we’re missing?” Mario said. He was sitting at the lunch table in the back of the school with Ralph. They had once more checked on Tommy V.’s bathroom office, only to find he was still absent from the school.

 “Skills.” Ralph said, with a slight grin. “The only thing we are missing, is skills. We need them and yet we lack them.”

 “Helpful.” Mario said, with a slight grin of his own.

 “I try.” Ralph said, his eyes transfixed on something behind Mario. There was no need to turn around, he already knew what his friend was looking at, or rather who.

 “Just go ask her already.” Mario said.

 “Now?”

 “Now!”

 “But. . .but we have work to do.” Ralph said, pointing at all the notes they had pulled on the subject.

 “And I need you focused.” Mario shot back. “Ask her, get your yes, come back and we figure out the game plan for tonight.”

 “I’ll ask her tomorrow. Let’s just get this done today.” Ralph pleaded.

 “That’s what you said yesterday. You’re running out of tomorrows. I think it’s time.” Mario said, Ralph let out a sigh, nodded and got to his feet. Then sat right back down.

 “One more tomorrow.”

 “Go!” Mario snapped and Ralph obeyed. Part of him wanted to watch his friend go, but Mario didn’t want to make him more nervous, so instead he went over his notes again. Looking for anything he might have missed.

 Ralph did his best to keep his nerves from getting the best of him as he neared her table. Of course, she wasn’t alone. Instead, Carla sat with a handful of her friends, having the time of her life. They were all laughing and joking around. There was no way he could just go up to her and ask her out.

 “Ralph!” She called to him as he neared her table, locking him into the task at hand. He offered her a smile that he hoped wasn’t too over the top.

 “Carla, hi!” He said, his voice a bit more high pitched than normal. “Can I have a word?”

 “Sure!” She said getting to her feet and excusing herself from her friends. The two of them walked a bit away from the table. “What’s up?” She asked. Ralph could feel the eyes of everyone, not just at her table, but in the whole cafeteria, locked onto them. Needless to say, that did not make this any easier.

 “I just wanted to ask. . .” His heart was pounding so loud he couldn’t hear himself think. Could she hear it too? Could everyone? He could feel sweat dripping down his forehead. “Did you finish all the homework?”

 “We had homework?” She answered, a look of panic appeared on her face to match his own. “I thought he cancelled it for the break?”

 “Oh yeah,” Ralph said, attempting to recover. “That’s right. You right. You so right.” He started to back away. “Thanks.”

 “That’s what you wanted to ask me?” She asked, “Why’d we leave the table?” at her words his heart stopped. She saw through his lame attempt at a coverup. It was now or never, and as nice as never sounded, he really wanted to go out with her. She was so pretty and he liked her so much. He would never forgive himself if he missed this chance.

 “Wanttogooutthisweekend?” He asked, feeling an immense sense of pride and relief at finally getting it out.

 “Pardon?” She asked, looking confused. It was then that he released just how fast he had asked. He attempted to smile as he took a steadying breath and tried again.

 “Want to gooutwith me” He said, only slightly better. To his horror she laughed, although it was not a mean or cruel laugh. It was actually kind of a cute one if he was being honest.

 “When?”

 “This weekend?” He asked, not daring to believe his luck. Her face dropped slightly.

 “I would love to, but I can’t. Not this weekend.” She told him, as sweetly as she could.

 “It’s okay, I understand.” He said, nodding, feeling like a fool for believing that he ever had a chance.

 “It’s not that I don’t want too.” She told him, reaching out and grabbing his arm to stop him from leaving. “I just have a church getaway this weekend. We can go out next week?” Ralph couldn’t believe what he was hearing, she had asked him to reschedule. She wanted to go out with him! He had never felt so happy in his life.

 “Yeah?” He asked, sure he had misheard. She gave him a warm smile and nodded, then her face lit up.

 “Or better yet, why don’t you come? It’s open to everyone. It’s really fun! There are all kinds of activities, we play games. I’d love for you to join us.” He nodded like a damn fool, stumbling out a yes as he did so.

 It was a few minutes later that he rejoined Mario at their table who looked up at him expectingly. “Well?” He asked and Ralph’s face split open into a massive smile. “Congrats, my friend, congrats. Now can we get to work?” Ralph nodded, taking his place across from the man who was directly responsible for his date.

 “Thank you!” He said, his eyes glued onto Carla, who had rejoined her own table. She smiled at him and his heart skipped a beat.

 “Not a problem, now, can we get to work?” Mario asked, scooting over to block Ralph’s eyeline of Carla. Ralph snapped out of his daze and nodded.

 “Yeah, sorry. So, where do we look first?” He asked, glancing down at a series of maps that Mario had brought out to replace their notes on vampire lore.

 “I was thinking we start at the Old Manor and move out from there. We’ve seen more than one attack there; they must be somewhere close by.”

 “That makes sense.” Ralph agreed. Mario was about to reply when they were joined at their table by none other than a tired, worn out Tommy V.

 “I’ve been looking all over for you, Mario.” He said. Both friends turned to look at him.

 “Where have you been?” Mario asked.

 “We haven’t seen you since,. . .well, you know.” Ralph added. Tommy V. nodded.

 “I know. I’ve been busy. Keeping an eye on the Milano, especially the brothers, Sylvester and Roman, the enforcers and drug pushers.” Tommy V. said, all but spitting the names.

 “How’s Sal and Mike?” Ralph asked, reading between the lines. Tommy V. looked as if he had been hit at the sound of the names. After all, they were the last two living members of his gang.

 “Sal’s all but back to normal, Mike. . .he’s awake at least.” Tommy V. answered, his voice heavy. If it was anyone else, Mario was sure there would have been tears.

 “I’m glad.” Was all Mario could think to say.

 “So, we going to make a move against the Milano family?” Ralph asked.

 “You know we have your back.” Mario added.

 “I know, but this is my fight. Not yours.” Tommy V. said.

 “If you change your mind.” Was all Mario had to add.

 “That’s not why I’m here.” Tommy V. said, forcing the subject to change.

 “Is it something supernatural?” Ralph asked, lowering his voice and looking around conspiratorially. “Because we are already kind of dealing with vampires.”

 “Vampires?” Tommy V. asked, his eyes wide with excitement. The others fill him in on everything that had been going on. “That’s insane.”

 “Yeah, so we kind of already have a lot on our plate.” Ralph said.

 “And I hate to add to it, but I have no choice.” Tommy V. said. His eyes locked onto Mario. “This morning I decided to follow their father instead.”

 “And what was papa Milano up to?” Ralph said.

 “Making a stop at Russo’s Relics.” Tommy V. said. Ralph turned to look at Mario as well. It was, after all, his families store.

 “What was he doing there?” Mario asked.

 “Buying antiques?” Ralph asked, hoping the answer was that simple.

 “He wasn’t buying.” Tommy V. said. “Nor did it seem like it was his first time there. Your father knew him and was waiting for him.”

 “Why?” Mario demanded.

 “I couldn’t get close enough to hear, at least not there.” Tommy V. said. “He was visited a few other shops, and I could hear some of those conversations. It seems that his part of the family business is personal loans.”

 “Loans?” Ralph asked.

 “My. . .my dad took out a loan?” Mario asked, he couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “What do he look like?” If his dad was expecting him to show up, it might mean an answer to the question that had been plaguing his mind. Namely, who the hell was the man his father kept meeting with?

 “I don’t know, late 40’s, early 50’s. Salt and pepper hair, scar down his right cheek.” Tommy V. answered, Mario felt his stomach sink.

 “My dad’s been meeting with him for weeks.” Mario told the others.

 “That’s not good.” Tommy V. told them. “Mr. Milano isn’t a good guy. When it comes to collecting debts, he tends to hurt people, before leaving them with nothing. He won’t just take your store; he’ll take your house. Cars, everything.”

 Mario couldn’t process what was happening. How could his father have entered into some kind of deal with a monster like the Mr. Milano? That whole family was toxic. Evil. His father should have known better.

 “I have to go talk to him.” Mario said, getting to his feet.

 “We’ll go with you.” Ralph said, getting up, as well.

 “No!” Mario snapped, “I need to do this alone.” He left a worried Ralph and Tommy V. behind as he made his way out of the school and to his father’s store. He wasn’t sure what he was going to say when he got there, he just knew this was a conversation that needed to happen.

 Russo’s Relics was dead by time Mario got there, not that the store ever really had a busy period. Any customers they may have had, had long since left. He entered the store to find his father sweeping the floor.

 “Mario? What are you doing here so early?” He glanced up at the clock, which showed it wasn’t even 1 yet.

 “Is it true?” Mario all but screamed. He hadn’t meant too, but it was taking everything he had to keep himself together. On the walk over here, he had played out hundreds of different versions of this conversation. Each time coming up with a different reason for his father’s actions, yet none of them made sense. Not really. Part of him was just hopeful that Tommy V. was wrong. That he misheard, or didn’t understand, but deep down he knew he was right, and he needed to know why.

 “Is what true? What’s wrong?” His father asked, showing concern. That wasn’t what Mario wanted. He didn’t want concern, he didn’t want to be made to feel better, he wanted answers.

 “Did you make some kind of deal with the Milano family?” He asked, his voice shaking. “Do you know who they are? What they are!” His father didn’t answer, rather he looked as if he was struck. He backed up a few paces, his eyes darting around the room, as if he was looking for a quick escape.

 “Wha. . .how?”

 “I have friends in the hospital, dead, because of what they do. Please, dad, please tell me you didn’t tie our business into their family. Please.” Mario could feel the tears starting to well up in his eyes. The truth was, this store never meant much to him. Not really, but it was all they had. It was his parents dream, and to think that they might lose it to the same people who hurt Sal and Mike and were responsible for Al and so many others deaths was unthinkable. Never mind what would happen if his father couldn’t pay his debt.

 “We were in trouble.” His father answered, avoiding eye contact. Mario could sense the shame from across the room. It made him ill. “We were burning through our money far faster than I would have thought possible, and no one was coming in the store. What’s worse, we were being vandalized every other day.” He pulled out an old wooden chair that was for sale and sat down in it, for the first time looking his age. Mario never saw his father as he was, an older man with a bad arm. In his mind’s eye, his father was a strong, healthy young man, who could do anything. Sitting in front of him, he looked downright feeble.

 “Your mother begged me to pack up and move us, but the truth was, we couldn’t afford it. Not if our dream of being self sufficient were to survive. This was it, our one shot, and I held onto it as long and as hard as I could, but it became too much. All seemed lost and that’s when he came. Christopher Milano. He offered me a loan, not a small one either. It was enough to get us back on our feet. Keep the lights on. I took it. I didn’t know who he was, what he was after, I was desperate. The truth was, before he came in, I thought all was lost, but he saved us. After that, business started to pick up. Things were going alright. Not great, but alright, things were starting to look up. I was positive I could keep up with the payments.”

 “You couldn’t?” Mario asked, his heart sinking as he did so. He was about to find out something really bad, he could feel it in his bones.

 “I tried; I really did. He came around to collect, and when I couldn’t pay, he offered to renegotiate our deal. I tried to say no, but he told me that between the original loan, the interest and the late fees, I owed him more than Russo’s Relics was worth.”

 “What?” Mario asked. “How much did you borrow?”

 “Not that much, just enough to keep us afloat for a few months, but that doesn’t matter to him. He isn’t the type of guy who plays fair. He has people who work in city hall, he put a lien against our house. If I miss a payment, he can not only take Russo’s Relics, but he can take our home.”

 “How could you let this happen?” Mario screamed at him, rage coming to the surface, but the truth was, that rage was only covering up the fear and panic that were right beneath it.

 “You have to believe me, I never meant for this to happen. I swear I didn’t, I was just trying to keep us going. That was all, I never. . .I never wanted all this.”

 “What was the new deal?” Mario asked, fearing the worst. His father looked up at him, his eyes filled with as many tears as Mario’s own. He slowly got to his feet and shook his head.

 “That’s not your burden Mario. It’s mine.”

 “Bullshit! It’s our family! It’s just as much mine as yours. And what about mom? Does she know any of this?” Mario demanded.

 “No! Nor will she find out!” His father yelled, sounding more scared than angry. “I’ll figure a way out. Just give me time.”

 “What was the deal?” Mario asked again.

 “I told you not to worry about it.” His father said again, almost pleading with his son.

 “You’re asking me to lie to mom. I deserve to know what I’m lying about.” Mario pointed out, putting no effort into masking his resentment. His father hung his head in shame.

 “He’s started using Russo’s Relics to launder his money.” He said under his breath, as if he was too ashamed to speak it clearly.

 “And you said yes?” Mario asked, feeling as if he had just been hit by an 18-wheeler.

 “What choice did I have?” He asked Mario, his eyes locking with his son’s for the first time, as if he was searching for some kind of validation. Mario had none to give. He turned and left the store without saying another word. “Mario!” His father called after him, but he didn’t stop. He just kept walking, attempting to put as much space between himself and his father as humanly possible. He was going to be sick.

 Back in the store, Tony Russo, stood rooted to the spot, not knowing if he should chase after his son, or give him space. He wanted to chase after him, he did, but what was there to say? He knew he messed up, he put his whole family at risk. He wanted so badly to be his own boss, his own man, that he fundamentally failed at the most important job he had, to take care of his family.

 He resigned to let his son go, at least for now. Give him some time to cool off, and it would give Tony some time to figure out how to fix things. At least that was the idea, but as the hours passed, he started to think that he might not be up to the task.

 He was startled out of his brooding by the door chime going off. His heart skipped a beat as he glanced at the clock on the wall, it was 4:37, around the time that Mario would normally show up for work. Was there a chance his son came back? Did he still have a chance to make this right?

 He rushed from the back room, full of hope, which was quickly dashed as he saw his son’s friend Ralph and another student looking around. Still no sign of Mario.

 “Mr. Russo!” Ralph said, spotting him. Tony did his best to smile at his son’s friend.

 “Ralph, how are you?”

 “Great, we were just wondering if Mario was here.” Ralph asked, the other friend stood behind him, not saying a word, pretending to look interested in an old painting hanging on the wall. “We were supposed to work on a project after class, but I couldn’t find him. I thought maybe he came to work, forgetting.”

 “He’s not here.” Tony said, turning away from the children to avoid them seeing how much it hurt him to admit that.

 “Okay, well, we’ll be going.” Ralph said. The other teenager started towards the door, Ralph right at his heel. As the door chime once more went off, Tony decided to speak up.

 “Ralph?”

 “Yes sir?” He asked, stopping and turning back around.

 “If you see Mario, tell him I love him and I’m sorry.” Without another word, Tony walked into the back. He felt embarrassed saying that, but the truth was, Ralph was lying to him. He knew Mario walked out of school. He came here to find out how it went. Tony wasn’t stupid, no matter what the younger generation thought. He just wanted his son to know that he cared. That he regretted what happened.

**Chapter 6**

 Mario had lost all track of time as he made his way through the town, his mind lost in thoughts. He kept thinking of different ways his conversation with his father could have gone. Ways that he could have made it better, but nothing he thought up could fix the rift that had opened up. His father had risked everything and kept them all in the dark. Their whole lives could be upended and he didn’t even feel the need to let them in on that fact. Where was the fairness in that?

 He wanted to scream, to hit something. His rage was over flowing, but he had nowhere to direct it. A few hours ago, he was sitting the school cafeteria plotting out ways to hunt a vampire, how unimportant that all seemed now. His mother had a right to know, but did he have a right to tell her? That was a whole other can of worms that he wasn’t sure if he was ready to open yet. How had his life gotten so complicated?

 “Help!” a woman’s scream pulled him out of his thoughts and back into the real world. He scanned the streets around him for the source of the scream, but had no luck. He was halfway down Johnson street, it opened up on one end to an old park, the same one that opened up to the high school on the other side. The scream had to come from there. A voice in the back of his mind screamed at him to just turn around and go home, but he forced that voice from his head and started towards the park. If someone needed help, he was going to provide it. He wasn’t his father.

 “Where would he go?” Tommy V. asked, not for the first time since they left Russo’s Relics. He was starting to get impatient; Ralph had a feeling that he was itching to get back to his obsession with the Milano family.

 “He could be anywhere. You just told him that his father is working with the assholes who killed your friends. Put Sal in the hospital. He isn’t going to just be okay.” Ralph said, getting a bit defensive.

 “I don’t know if that’s fair. If anything, his father was struggling and made a bad choice.” Tommy V. said, he didn’t blame Mr. Russo. Life was hard, it took everything from you, beat you down until you had no choice but to give up. If you had a way out, a way to get your head above water, even for a simple breath, than why wouldn’t you take it? He was about to say as much when he was stopped dead in his tracks. Across the street were the Milano brothers, Sylvester and Roman, walking the other way, deep in conversation. Mario was driven out of Tommy V.’s mind. He wanted to know where they were going.

 “You can’t really believe that?” Ralph said, not noticing that Tommy V. had stopped paying attention. “He put their whole family at risk. It was incredibly selfish.” He finished up, that was when he finally noticed that Tommy V. wasn’t paying attention. “Are you even listening?”
 “It’s the Milano brothers.” Tommy V. said, pointing them out. “Their father is the one who started Mario’s problems.”

 “And what are we supposed to do about it?” Ralph asked, the fear clear in his voice. It seemed that he was fine trying to face off against vampires and demons, but two normal humans were too much for him to handle.

 “Follow them. Maybe Mario went after them.” Tommy V. said, pointing out the only lead they had. It really quickly stopped mattering. Some man was walking towards them, paying the two brother’s no mind. This didn’t seem to sit well with them and they started harassing the man. Roman laid hands on the man, who in the blink of an eye, grabbed his hand, snapped it, they could hear the bone crunching across the street. Ralph let out a tiny scream, Tommy V. on the other hand took a sick satisfaction from the sight. The man pulled his arm back, pulling it out of the socket before moving in and biting his neck.

 “Vampire!” Ralph yelled. Tommy V. couldn’t believe his eyes, neither could Sylvester it seemed. He attacked the man, who without even glancing at him, swatted him away, sending him flying across the street. Ralph pulled out a stake that he had in his belt and ran towards the vampire, Tommy V. stood frozen in place.

 It didn’t take Mario long to find the source of the scream. A woman was being sucked dry by the very same vampire that had attacked Mario and Ralph the night before. He had lost any interest in hunting the blood sucker down, what with his family drama, but it no longer mattered. He had run into him just walking the streets. That had to mean something. He had no weapons on him, so he glanced around and found a broken stick that could serve the purpose. He picked it up and made his way towards the vampire. He was going to slay a vampire.

 As Ralph ran towards the vampire, he pulled out a vial that he had made the night before, one of about 12 he had along his belt, all filled with holy water. It was designed to break at first contact with someone. Lifting the vial over his head, he threw it with all his might and it stuck his target. Crashing on his head and covering him in water, where steam started to rise out.

 “AHHHHH!!!” The vampire spun, his face in full on vamp mode, his eyes narrowed in what could only be unmasked fury. All bravado fled Ralph’s body as the vampire closed in on him.

 Mario moved as silently as he could towards his pray, while trying to move quickly. He wanted to be cautious, to make sure he did this right, without getting himself killed, but he also didn’t want to take so long that the poor woman ended up dead instead. Just as he started to lift his makeshift stake up above his head, ready to swing it, his foot came down on a branch that made a surprisingly loud crushing sound.

 In a flash the vampire threw the woman onto the ground. She let out a whimper of pain, it was a small relief that she was still alive. Key word being small, it vanished as soon as the vampire spun around, grabbed Mario’s hand and twisted, snapping his wrist, forcing him to stop the makeshift stake.

 Mario let out a scream of pain as the vampire lifted him up into the air, behind the blood sucker, Mario could see the woman running through the woods, back out towards the street. Mario couldn’t help but feel a sense of pride. Even if he were to die in this moment, at least he went out saving another person’s life.

 He turned back to look at the undead thing holding him in the air, the pain in his hand was almost blinding, but Mario pushed it aside and did his best to lock eyes with the animalistic yellow eyes.

 “You again.” The vampire, Eli, said, distain in his voice. He bared his fangs; Mario had never seen them so up close. They were far sharper than he would have thought. Eli opened his mouth wide, slowly moving in to bite him. Just as the teeth were about to pierce his neck, Mario took his other hand and moved in the back of his pants, where he pulled out a second makeshift stake that he found and pulled it out, stabbing it through the vampire’s chest. The vampire screamed out in pain as it turned to dust, dropping Mario to the ground.

 True to his luck during this whole encounter, he landed hard on his hands and knees. The pain in his wrist shot through his arm and he let out a howl of pain, rolling over, tears streaming from his eyes. He knew for a fact that it was broken.

 The vampire was on him before he could even think to move. The fangs baring, filling him with dread. Ralph knew he was going to die. It was a forgone conclusion. There was no escape for him. He felt the teeth sink into his neck, it was a pain beyond anything he had ever felt before, but it came with it a strange calming sensation. He felt at peace for the first time in his life.

 Ralph felt content to just stay here and let it happen, it seemed like the best course of action. No pain, no stress, no worries. Just peace. But in that same moment, as the fear left his body, he had a thought, the holy water vials. Without even thinking, he moved his hand down to his belt, picked off a vail and slammed it into the vampire’s head. He let out a scream and threw Ralph to the ground.

 Without missing a beat, Ralph pulled out another vial and threw at the vampire, catching him right in the face.

 “Fuck you!” Sylvester said, fighting through the pain as he sat up against the wall. He was in pretty bad shape, including more than a few missing teeth.

 “How did you think this would end?” Tommy V. asked, as he kicked Sylvester in the side, before swinging down with the pipe he had pulled free from the side of rundown warehouse where Sylvester had landed. The pipe landed against Sylvester’s face with a bone crunching crash.

 “You won’t get away with this!” Sylvester screamed. “Do you know who I am?”

 “Do you know who I am?” Tommy V. asked back. “Do you know what you cost me? What you took from me?” he pushed the pipe against Sylvester’s throat, blocking off his windpipe. Sylvester tried to catch his breath, but it wouldn’t come. “I’m going to destroy your entire family, leave nothing but rumble and ruin in my wake.”

 He pulled the pipe away from Sylvester’s throat, threw it aside and pulled out a tiny knife and quickly stabbed him twice in the neck, doing his best to make it look like a vampire bite. He cleaned the knife off on Sylvester’s shirt and turned and headed back towards Ralph. He hoped the kid managed to keep himself alive while he took care of business. He seemed like a good guy and a great friend to Mario, one of the only people Tommy V. still had in his life who he cared about.

 “Tommy!” Ralph called, running towards him. He was bleeding from the neck, it looked pretty bad.

 “You got bit?” Tommy V. asked, feeling like a jackass for leaving him to fight a fucking vampire by himself.

 “I did. I thought I was a goner, but luckily I had some holy water on me and well, yeah.” Ralph said, a nervous chuckle as he thought about how close he came to death.

 “You killed him?” Tommy V. asked.

 “No, he got away, but so did I, so win right?” Ralph asked, not seeming so sure. Tommy V. laughed and patted him on the back.

 “Win.”

 “So, where did you go? It all happened so fast, I didn’t even notice you were gone.” Ralph said.

 “Well, I didn’t think you were going to bum rush a vampire. I went to go check on Sylvester.” Tommy V. said. “I got there just as some other vampire was finishing him off.” He did his best to sound distressed by the sight of it.

 “He’s dead?” Ralph asked, his voice falling. Tommy V. just nodded.

 The stench of the warehouse was overwhelming Farai. There were corpses rioting away in here, under the ruble. Some fresh, some not so fresh. She couldn’t yet tell if Ana was hiding away in this deathtrap, but there was no reason not to search it out. After all, there was no other way to get Eli to leave this god forsaken shithole.

 Young love was so precious. Sometimes she couldn’t help but miss that feeling. The way that she used to be with Lexington. He was the most magnificent creature that she had ever laid eyes upon. Something about him was so elegant, powerful. It excited her. He offered a world that she wanted to be a part of, and he took her in. Changed her whole life, turned her into a completely different person. A person that she loved. A person that, if she was being honest with herself, no longer needed to be a part of a pack. She was ready to break out on her own, leave her family behind for good. It wasn’t an easy thing to come to grips with, but her infatuation with Lexington had come to an end, it wasn’t that she didn’t still love him, part of her always would, but she suffocating under this relationship. They would have to keep looking for the Dreamer’s Chest without him.

 She hadn’t told Lexington that yet, she wasn’t sure how you end a relationship that you’ve been in for centuries. This was going to be the hardest conversation of her entire life, or unlife, that was for sure, but she was determined to make it a clean break. That meant that she wasn’t going to just start doing jobs for Kerrigan on her own, no, she was going to live her own life.

 All thoughts of her coming break up exited her mind when she came across the first of the corpses in the warehouse. It was a young man, couldn’t be much older than she was when she was turned. His body looked fresh, as if it had only been dead a few hours, a day at the most. The bullet hole told her it wasn’t Ana, but it didn’t mean she wasn’t close.

 She followed the hallway just passed his body until she came to a stop at a hole in the floor. Down below was yet another body, this one with marks on the neck, a stake in hand and dust at her feet. At long last she had found Ana, or at least what was left of her. She must have been feeding on this woman when she staked her. They both died. It was tragic, to be sure, but at least now they could leave, before they started a war.

 “I’ve been waiting for you.” A voice said from behind Farai. She cursed herself for being so distracted, she should have smelled him coming. She turned around and found a middle-aged man in a sheriff uniform standing there. He had an almost bored look on his face. “Figured one of you freaks would show up sooner or later.”

 “The sheriff, I take it you’re here to enforce the treaty?” Farai said, her mind racing as she tried to figure out the best outcome for this conflict. She didn’t want to make this worse for her kind. An all-out war was the last thing they needed.

 “Sheriff Simon, and yes, I do speak on behalf of the council.”

 “The council.” Farai said with a sneer. “The council, how fancy you mortals always try to make yourselves sound. We both know for who you enforce your petty rules.”

 “Well, if we both know that, than you should know what happens if you break them.” He responded.

 “We broke them. Just the two of us. One of whom is already dust. If you need to punish us for our trespass, I take the punishment.” She said, locking eyes with the man.

 “Just two gals making their way through a no vamp town?” Simon asked. “Why do I have such a hard time believing that? It was my understanding that Kerrigan enforced those rules, strictly.”

 “She does. I broke them.” Farai said.

 “Why are you really here?” Simon demanded, making it clear that he didn’t buy her lie.

 “Have you heard of the Dreamer’s Chest?” She asked, deciding to try the truth instead.

 “Should I have?” He asked.

 “No, I guess there’s no reason for you to have.” She said. “It’s a religious artifact. Sacred to my kind. We’ve been searching for millennia, never even came close. Then we got word that it was in this town. Behind your protected walls.”

 “So, you broke the treaty to find the vampire version of the ark of the covenant?” Simon asked.

 “More or less.” Farai answered truthfully.

 “You find it?”

 “What do you think?” She asked, sarcastically.

 “So, you risk a war and got nothing out of it?”

 “Pretty much.”

 “Look,” Simon started. “What do I call you?” he interrupted himself to ask.

 “Farai.” She answered.

 “Fair enough, Farai?” He asked, she nodded. “Look, I don’t want to start a war. It doesn’t benefit either one of us, or our people.”

 “Agreed.” She said, not sure what he was getting at. There was no way that this council, or who they really represented, would let this trespass go unanswered.

 “So, let’s say we avoid one.”

 “How?” She asked, she was growing tired of the game.

 “You said you didn’t find this chest of yours.”

 “Right.”

 “Right, so I stand aside, you walk out of here, collect what’s left of your little pack and leave. Make sure your queen knows we don’t have it, and I tell the council that it was some baby vamp who didn’t know better. No harm, no foul.”

 “And that will work?”

 “If you go now, I’ll make it work.” He said, and she believed him.

 “We’ll be out of here by sun up.” She said, agreeing to his terms. With those words, he nodded and moved out of her way, letting her walk past.

**Chapter 7**

 “Mario!” Ralph called out, having spotted their missing friend walking out of the old park, looking a lot better than he had when he had left school. It was a load off to find him alive and unharmed. After Ralph’s close call with the vampire, he was worried something might have happened to him.

 “I did it!” Mario exclaimed.

 “Did what?” Tommy V. asked, fearing the answer.

 “I slayed a vampire! He was attacking some girl, and I just” he mimed staking someone in the heart. “I’m a vampire slayer!”

 “I survived a vampire attack.” Ralph said lamely. The two of them just stood there for a second, watching each other before rushing into their own stories. Tommy V. watched on, a darkness hanging over him. The memory of killing Sylvester was starting to haunt him, but he shrugged it off and forced himself back into the conversation.

 The three of them made their way through the town, at first trying battle stories, but when those ran dry, they shifted to vampire movies. It was the first fun that Tommy V. had had since the massacre of his friends. Which in and of itself, was a mixed bag, full of complicated emotions. He was happy that he could still feel joy, but he also felt guilty that he wasn’t in full on vengeance mode anymore.

 “So,” Tommy V. started, forcing himself to speak. “What’s next?”

 “More vampires, demons, ghosts, murdering sheriffs. Whatever it is, we got this!” Ralph said, feeling far better than he had any right too. After all, he had lost his fight, it just didn’t feel like it.

 “All that sounds great.” Mario said, with a smile on his face, but it wasn’t a happy smile. “But first, first I have to talk to my dad.”

 The pain was excruciating. Beyond anything he had ever felt before, and Lexington had felt a lot. He was no stranger to pain in his vast life, but the holy water burning off his face was one of the worst things he had ever experienced. He was thankful he made it away without suffering further damage. He thought for a moment of breaking his oath and finding something to eat, after all, that would be the only way for him to heal, but he was an elder, and the other vampires looked up to him. If he gave in to weakness, it would allow them to do the same. He forced himself to return to the warehouse where they had been hiding out. He would wait there for the others and feed once they were gone from this hellish land.

 His vision wasn’t the best, what with his eyes half melted away, so he relied on his sense of smell to guide the way. Not an easy feat when the strongest smell was your own burning flesh, but he managed it. Once he was back safely in their hideaway, he caught the sent of another vampire, at least someone was home. It wouldn’t do for him to be by himself, in case those wannabe hunters followed him. He was in no condition to do battle.

 The vampire who beat him home was male, which meant it had to be Eli. This caused Lexington a moment of confusion, there was no way that Eli would return to the hideout without Ana, what could he be doing here? It was only as Lexington entered the room with who he thought was Eli, that he realized that while the sent was known to him, it wasn’t Eli’s.

 “What are you doing here, Gambit?” Lexington asked, rather annoyed. No one but his team was supposed to be in this town. It was too risky. They could be causing a full-blown war, which Lexington wasn’t sure they could win, or even survive.

 “Lexy, you don’t look so good.” Gambit said with a sneer. His arrogance was staggering. He seemed to challenge authority as others breathed. It was a way of life for him, one that was going to get him killed. Sooner rather than later if Lexington had any say.

 “I asked you a question.” Lexington demanded, standing up to his full height and doing his best to look imposing, despite half his face being burnt off.

 “Our beloved Queen, sent me here, to check the status of our most important mission. Have you located the Dreamer’s Chest?” Gambit asked. The question sent shivers down Lexington’s spine. While every vampire had learned the legends of the Dreamer and his ancient chest, which carried in it, the greatest power that the original vampires possessed, no one but a select few knew it was real, or that Kerrigan was looking for it.

 “How did you learn of our purpose?” Lexington demanded. Even with his vision impaired, he could make out Gambit’s smile. Something was wrong, he had been alive long enough to be able to sense impending danger.

 “Now that, that’s a million-dollar question.” Gambit said, laughing as he spoke. He was baiting him, this Lexington knew, but there was no way he was going to bite. After all, he was an elder, not some plaything for a child. He stood there, his eyes, what were left of them, drilling into Gambit, waiting for him to continue speaking. “As far as anyone outside this room is concerned, you picked me as the newest member of your team. It took some convincing, but once I provided Kerrigan with the same tip you sent her, she bought it.”

 “How did you know about the tip?” Lexington demanded. His source was reliable, of that he was sure, but he never would have thought that he would run off and tell anyone else, least of all a punk like Gambit.

 “Again, as far as anyone else knows, you gave it to me.”

 “I did no such thing!” Lexington roared. “And Hell will freeze over before I allow you a spot in my pack!”

 “Of that we can agree.” Gambit said with a chuckle. “I’m not here to fall in line behind the great vampire general Lexington. I’m here to replace you.”

 “You dare!”

 “Dare, my man, it’s already done. I’ve watched your team get picked off, one by one. The sheriff is taking care of your little lover as we speak, which just leaves you. You know, when I first came up with this plan, I thought I’d have to kill you all. I wasn’t looking forward to that part, but I was committed, but somehow, this town provided. I haven’t had to lift a finger, well, until tonight.” Gambit said. He spoke as if his victory was assured, but it was far from it. Lexington, even weakened was far stronger than a normal vampire. Besides, Gambit spoke in lies. There was no way the rest of his pack was dead. They were far too strong for that.

 “Never mind what everyone else believes, I wish the truth. How did you know about our mission?” Lexington asked, both because he truly wished to know how he was betrayed and to buy time for another of his family to return home. He refused to believe they were dead.

 “I’m not what you would call the content type. I’m ambitious. Yet, in this world of ours, only those of you born before the great purge, seem to have any real power. So, I asked myself, how do I climb the ladder. How do I, become someone important? The answer was simple, step into the position occupied by an elder. But which elder? A great deal of you have power, this is true, but most of them set up their own little kingdoms. Paying tribute to Kerrigan as needed, but otherwise living as kings and queens. I can’t just take one of those over, there is already a hierarchy. Besides, I want in on the real power. Kerrigan rules our kind with an iron fist, and I want as close to the throne as I can get. Which led me to you. Her right hand man.”

 “You flatter me.” Lexington said, the truth was, he had known Kerrigan a long time, since before the purge. He was one of the few elders who knew the truth about her, which gave him a special freedom inside the kingdom, but he would hardly call himself her right-hand man.

 “I speak only what I see.” Gambit said.

 “And what do you see?”

 “Far more than you would like. It wasn’t easy, but I figured out what you were after. That you and your little band of followers, were hunting down the Dreamer’s Chest. This gave me an idea. I started going out of my way to be seen in the company of your little troop, sprinkling in the idea that we were starting to bond.”

 “I’d rather bond with a damn lycan.” Lexington spat.

 “The feelings mutual, I assure you. But it served its use. People started to talk, and I set my plan into motion.”

 “Your plan?”

 “I left a trail of breadcrumbs for your little friend, Liam. He fell into my trap, followed all the clues and ran to tell you.” Gambit said, laughing at his own brilliance. Lexington felt his rage boiling over. Liam was his oldest friend and one of the few vampires that he truly trusted. To know that that friendship, that trust, was abused would not go unpunished.

 “So, you set us on a fool’s errand. That was your great plan? Such a small-minded child. I hope you enjoyed your victory; it shall be your last.” Lexington said, doing his best to keep his cool and failing.

 “Hardly.” Gambit said, getting to his feet for the first time since Lexington entered the room.

 “The only question is, shall I kill you myself, or turn you over to the queen?” Lexington asked. He was just playing a part. There was no question, he was going to kill Gambit himself and he was going to enjoy it.

 “Is that the question? Must be a trick question, because the answer is neither. What is going to happen, is I’mma put this stake through your heart, return to Kerrigan, tell her that we were ambushed as soon as we got into town. Turns out that your boy, Liam, sold us out. I witnessed my friends, my family die at their hands and barely made it out alive. Of course, I didn’t want to leave you, but you felt it imperative, that word reach your beloved queen of Liam’s treachery. I’ll even offer to punish him myself.”

 Lexington had had enough, he lashed out, attempting to land a punch on Gambit’s smug face, but he was far too weak, his movement slowed down by the pain. Gambit dodged out of the way, catching his arm and breaking it. Lexington howled out in pain; Gambit laughed.

 “I’ll then continue your work, in your honor of course. Moving myself up the ladder.” Gambit said, twisting Lexington’s broken arm, sending a spasm of pain through his body and forcing him to his knees. “Just think Lexington, all you’ve been through in your unnaturally long life, and your greatest and final honor, was being the first to kneel before the future king of vampires.” With those words, Gambit plunged the stake into Lexington’s heart, turning

him to dust. Gambit let out a laugh.

 On the far side of the warehouse, hiding behind the wall, stood Farai. She had witnessed most of the struggle and done nothing to help her lover. She had loved Lexington far longer than most people could ever fathom, she pained at seeing him dusted, but Gambit believed she was dead. That meant that she was free. For the first time in her life, she was truly free. No obligations to anyone, but herself. It was what she had wanted, handed to her by a termite of a vampire, but no matter. She was going to make the most of this change in fortune. She was going to live her life for herself, all others be damned.

 In the cold dark room, underneath the broken floorboards of the old building, Nadia slowly started to awaken. She had thought for sure that she was dead. The vampire had taken so much of her blood. How could she possibly be alive?

 Stranger still, she would have expected to feel like death. Weak, sore, drained, but she felt none of that. She felt stronger than ever. Powerful even. She opened her eyes and the world before her was far more vivid than anything she had seen before. On top of that, her sense of smell was off the charts, she could smell people walking around outside. Smell the iron in their blood. Her stomach gave a rumble at the thought. She was hungry, only it wasn’t food that she was craving. It was blood.

The End