

# PROLOGUE

9180AD

Deep in the desolate mountains of Enzo in an intricate labyrinth, sat a box, that although small and unimpressive, held extraordinary importance. A woman dressed in soot grey rags crouched beside it; eyes of azure fixed on the entrance to the dank cavity she called home. Beyond the reaches of her breath the labyrinth's emptiness awaited.

Zinnyi gave strict instructions. He trusted her to protect the box from humankind's hunger for power. Pandora crawled closer, biting what remained of grungy nails. Would one more peek harm anyone?

Soon it began to plead with Pandora's already outstretched fingers. The temptation exceeded Zinnyi's persistent warnings. So she licked her lips and caressed the panels; layers of filth disguised unusual symbols entwined around an ancient text she had tried, but failed, to understand.

Pandora's breath caught in her throat when she lifted the lid. Brilliant white beams illuminated her cave. Emotionless cavities which were once Pandora's innocent eyes welcomed the warmth and allowed it to flow smooth as a river to the farthest stretches of her mind. Her heart ached with sorrow as the howls of mankind's past mistakes echoed through narrow tunnels. Pandora's stomach churned. What had she done? She'd wasted her second chance at redemption.

It was time to run away from her responsibility and hide within an oblivious society.

Dangerous creatures lurked in the labyrinth, many of which He'd designed to guard her. Those claws, sharp as a samurai sword and teeth, curved like a sabre-toothed tiger would surely hunt her. Pandora didn't rate the chance of survival, but keeping her head down she took her first step back into the void, leaving the box unaccompanied.

Her only plan was to shuffle with her back to the wall, fingers crossed and breath held, until she found a way out of the labyrinth.

# CHAPTER 1

100 Years Later

Arriette Monroe startled awake, rescued from her troublesome slumber by a rap on the cottage door. Setting her tea cup and book on the sill, Arriette scurried to peer through the peep hole. Her heart thumped when their eyes met; his bottle-green saucers, swarthy hair and hypnotic smile were all beautiful reminders of a happy ending that might have been. The temptation to wrap her arms around him and squeeze was consuming, but she knew better.

Besides, her mother would kill her if the humiliation didn't.

"Never thought I'd see *you* again," said Arriette, running a hand through her matted locks.

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Kalvin Avery gave a curt nod, wiped his boots on the welcome mat, then followed her to the living room. The decoration hadn't changed; same squeaky floorboard beneath that hideous sheepskin rug, the art free stone walls and hand-crafted, ugly wooden furniture. Everything in its usual place, surrounded by leaning towers of paperback books, all coated in the expected layer of dust.

Arriette caught sight of her reflection in the mirror, gasped, licked her thumb and scrubbed at the fresh tea stain on her dress.

“Can I, uhm, can I get you a drink? Water, tea-?”

“Got anything stronger?”

“Sure,” she grinned, then scratched her head. “Somewhere. I'll, hmm, I'll find it. So is this a social call?” Before Calvin could answer, Arriette produced a bottle of red wine and two glasses. “Well it can't be for business if you're drinking this early.”

Arriette gestured for him to pour as she opened the window. Fresh air carried the scent of mowed grass, ruffled her long, brown hair and circulated the sound of busy harvesters.

Kalvin watched her sit. His eyes lingered a little too long.

“Sue sent me.”

Arriette shook her head and laughed off her mistake.

“Oh, of course. I don't know what I was-”

“It's good to see you though.”

“I didn't think you'd ever come back here.”

“Neither did I. You hated me; my 'mistake' branded me cruel. Plus, I have nobody else to visit here. Mousique holds painful memories. Anyway, I'm here for your advice.”

Arriette chewed her lip, cracked her knuckles and tried to ignore the ridiculous finger gestures he used around the word *mistake*.

“Couldn't you ask someone closer to home?”

Kalvin thumped his feet up on the coffee table and folded his arms. Arriette bit her tongue.

“No. You know about magic and I trust you. City folk are too nose-y.”

“Everything I know I learned by reading.”

Arriette sipped her wine and glanced out the window. Anything to prevent her worrying over that damn coffee table.

*I'm turning into my mother!*

“Doesn't alter my point.”

“Are you sure you're in the right village for this? We're ninety percent Human, remember? Your three-day ride was time wasted, Calvin.”

“I walked, and it's not wasted yet.”

Arriette only read a pinch of books on magic but what she had, she thoroughly enjoyed. On the odd occasion, in private of course, Arriette attempted a few spells too. Here in the Human settlement of Mousique magic had its limits.

“Retaining doctors were useless. They advised I find an educated Human.”

“I only read about supernatural theory,” Arriette explained, “not Human biology. I presume that's why you're here? Did you try the medical scrolls in the public library?”

“I hate that place,” he grumbled. “Silent, boring and dusty.”

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Arriette raised her brow. "I'm your ex-girlfriend. There's no way I was your first choice, so spit it out. Who's sick?"

Of course if Arriette could offer help she would; time had healed all wounds from their goodbyes. She'd even forgiven Susan for running off to the city with him, and Calvin for letting her.

He rubbed his eyes, sighed and removed his boots from the table.

"How about I tell you the symptoms?"

Arriette scowled at him, prepared to scold his impatience. She was only trying to understand. But then his shaky fingers found Arriette's. A once confident man, stubborn, stern and eager to set out and fulfil his dreams of joining the Everlast army now crumbled before her, his forehead and palms sweaty.

Arriette shook him free and shuffled away, listening to the villagers' harvest songs drift in from the closest field. It calmed her nerves and brought with it pleasant memories of previous festivals.

"I barely made it here." Calvin paused, "It's too hard."

"Hmm, must be *really* difficult for you." Arriette gulped from her glass and glanced away.

"You're still mad and I'm still sorry." Calvin groaned. "Can you shut that window? I can't think straight."

*You never could*, Arriette thought, but hiding her disappointment she closed the window anyway and fought with all her might to hold the salty floodgates for a few more minutes.

"Why aren't you outside with the others?"

Arriette cleared her throat. "Uhm, something horrid happened last year. I, well, I don't like to talk about it. You were giving me the symptoms?"

Before she could hide her fear, both hands became clammy and her entire body trembled at the memory.

It happened just after harvest time. Arriette hung back to chat with her neighbour, forgetting the curfew; something she will never do again. Sharing a bottle of sweet white wine they took little notice of the tree line where her attacker lurked in the shadows.

"You can't have been bitten. You're still alive," said Calvin.

Distressed, Arriette topped up her glass and took a distracting sip. *You know nothing of my pain.*

"So what happened?"

She frowned. "Does it matter?"

"Yes, Vampyrs are nocturnal so how-"

"You came here to get advice, not give it."

Calvin lived in a place with high walls and guards. Her only protection was a red cottage door and her garden shovel. Not enough to fight off a creature of the night.

Arriette sighed. "I got bit. He hid in the shade until the sun went down. I'm fine now. Happy?"

"Yes. So about those symptoms. They said Humans react differently to magic. Medication had no effect."

Arriette was pleased they were back on topic.

"Uh, that's true I guess. Our bodies have natural defences against disease but not magic. We're not designed to cope with the extremities of it." She glanced out the window at the height of the sun. Midday. Now he'd made her late for lunch with Rihaana. "Magic is complicated and dangerous; born from a divine power and capable of anything. Vampyrs are one example; if Zinnyi created those, who's to say he didn't make your friend ill too? Sure, Vampyrs weren't always around but neither were most diseases."

Arriette ran a hand through her hair, worried by the incoming blanket of silence set on suffocating them.

"Does that help?"

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“If you believe in a creator. Zinnyi's your God?”

“Zinnyi's a God, but that's my business,” Arriette said. “You make up your own mind. Look, Calvin, I don't want to be rude but I have plans for lunch next door.”

Kalvin scratched his chin and cleared his throat. She was staring at him all the while; criticising khaki eyes studying every breath.

“I exhausted my supplies,” he said. “Lunch sounds... fun.”

“I'm sure it does. Go home, Calvin. Ask an Everlast for their advice. They have lots of experience and scrolls. Is that everything? I really am late.”

Arriette exhaled, closed her eyes and replayed her mother's words. *Screw on your smile, Arriette. Be a good hostess.*

“I can't. Far too risky and I don't want lecturing. Just an answer. I owe too many favours to Everlasts to ask for any.” Calvin lowered his head.

“Don't tell me any more,” said Arriette, sticking her fingers in her ears. “You were supposed to join the army, Calvin. What happened?”

“I did. When Susan got sick I had to quit.” He shuffled, uncomfortable and weary. “May I join you for lunch then?”

“It's Susan that's sick?” she asked, ignoring his request. “I thought-”

“Sorry, I'm tired and forgot to mention it.” Calvin linked his fingers together and placed them on his head. “Susan said you'd have answers?”

Arriette felt guilty for rushing his visit when someone they both loved was ill, so she agreed he could stay for food.

“Answers to what?”

“Her illness. She's an ice sculpture; delicate and disintegrating. Her skin is bruised, her limbs are weak and her head's almost bald.” Calvin struggled to his feet and stretched. “You said we were late?”

*For a man about to lose his fiancée, he sure is focused on his dinner.*

“It must be magic but I can't diagnose from here.”

“I was hoping you might come to the city and confirm it. So will you?” Arriette barely had the chance to register the request before Calvin was on his knees beside her. “I can't lose her. She's my weakness.” Arriette thought his ego could do with a brief reminder of their history. “There's no reason for anyone to hurt an innocent.”

“Other than moral support what use am I?” she said. “Maybe if you repay your debt with those Everlasts they could investigate.”

“I wouldn't be here if it wasn't life or death.”

“I can believe *that*.” Arriette groaned.

She tied the laces of her comfiest shoes and buttoned up her favourite cardigan. Together she and Calvin packed enough supplies to last three days. Canteens of water, fruit, bread, sliced meat, cheese and biscuits.

“I can't believe I'm doing this. I suppose you want to eat first?” she said, shaking her head. “What am I thinking? I can't even erect a tent!”

With further encouragement, Calvin managed to get Arriette to the door and by the time they left, their stomachs grumbled and their throats were dry.

“What are my neighbours going to think? Running off with my ex-boyfriend! I must be mad. What about the harvest? I'll miss the celebrations.”

Kalvin took Arriette by the hand and led her down the garden path. She glanced back at her humble home and waved goodbye.

## CHAPTER 2

At her neighbour's table, Arriette took a crash course on Everlast leadership. Rihaana's father was a prestigious figure at the top of the supernatural food chain; first on what most Supes called the Haeyloian Power Scale and to everyone else, the HPS.

First on their minds though was a feast to fill their stomachs and lighten the mood. Rihaana served roasted chicken, honey-dipped parsnips and mashed potatoes, thick onion gravy, freshly baked bread and for dessert, juicy strawberries and sliced watermelon.

This time of year, the people of Mousique were never hungry. Harvest made them round, bellowing and joyful. Arriette knew from her attack that with wine came a wave of disaster, but eager to block such disturbing memories she leaned across the table and stabbed another piece of fruit.

“Rihaana, has the influx of crime this century affected the government's confidence? I hear there's been an uncontrollable increase in larceny, homicide and Vampyr attacks within Haeylo City. Haven't the citizens lost faith in their security?”

Arriette found Everlast immortality a truly fascinating subject. Rihaana explained their extensive training in many subjects including semiotics, philosophy, Haeyloian literature and politics gave them both the emotional and intellectual capability for leadership; more than enough to sit on the scale's throne.

Like all creatures on Haeylo, they too had a weakness and it laid within an oval pendant they called the *Mirror of the Soul*. Everlasts believed it was the gateway to a piece of Zinny's purity; white magic, strong enough to power their crime-riddled society. A path to the creator.

Kalvin scowled. “How can Everlasts guarantee the safety of the city's inhabitants? The past decade has introduced Vampyrs, three new Demonic species, plagues and who knows what else may march over the horizon?”

Rihaana poured more wine. “Well, on our twentieth birthday we get a pendant chosen by our closest relatives. Eventually, we find a pendant that chooses us, or so we hope. Such a bond increases our strength and our connection to other Everlasts. First-class leaders don't like to announce their capabilities but pendants have saved lives and will continue to do so.”

“You're *that* confident?” Calvin asked.

“Sure am.”

“Hey Calvin, you could help find her father's ideal pendant,” said Arriette.

“*Why* would I want to do that?”

“He might wipe your debts,” she replied.

Kalvin muttered something incomprehensible and shovelled melon in his already full mouth.

“Though it sounds like a hopeless task,” she said, deflated. “If you kept your promises you'd have friends among the Everlasts rather than enemies with no need to hate them.”

“I don't *hate* them.”

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Rihaana beamed. “Kalvin, pendants are gifts from the architect of our universe and they're such *beautiful* pieces of jewellery; used for healing wounds and self-defence. Treasure hunters are rewarded generously.”

“Why hasn't your father hired a private investigator to do the job then?” he asked.

“Father said he leaves the decision in Zinnyi's hands.” Rihaana smiled and stood to clear the empty dishes. “It's a safe occupation from dark magic too. Pendants are silver and vibrant, everything Vampyrs despise.”

“*Supposedly*,” said Calvin. “Nobody ever lived through an encounter to report a successful trial of that theory.” He cast a cautious eye across the table at Arriette. “Except our *friend* here.”

“Hey, I didn't *lie*. You can't count my incident anyway. I'm Human, not Everlast. No pendant, no statistics.” Calvin grunted and reached across for the bottle of wine. Arriette moved it just out of his reach and glared at him. “Being drunk won't help your sense of direction.”

“If we are both to survive one another's company, I recommend it.” Calvin rolled his eyes. “No sense of humour? Look, I'm not accusing you but Vampyr venom is deadly no matter the dosage. One bite and you'd be dead with little time to place blame on my habits.”

“Explain how I survived then,” said Arriette, folding her arms.

“Maybe he was a drunken local? No amount of sparkling Everlast tat can protect you from the real thing.” Calvin turned to Rihaana, his eyes narrow and accusing. “So, spare me your lecture on the life-saving qualities of pendants. Everlasts *will* lose control of the city soon and when they do, I want to be as self-sufficient as possible.” Satisfied, Calvin slammed his fist on the table. “Rumour is you're planning to forfeit your pendant. Know something we don't?”

Rihaana stopped chewing. “Where did you hear such a rumour?”

“Don't worry yourself, *runaway*. I've met your father.”

“Rihaana's trying to help you, Calvin. Give you a bargaining ticket. Treasure hunting could help pay Susan's medical bills. As a reward Charles might find and hang the lunatic responsible for using dark magic on her.”

Rihaana sighed. “I meant no disrespect. Susan isn't sick because of the crime influx *or* the government, least I don't believe so. Father has a lot of contacts and he plays golf with the magistrate; treasure hunting is a great idea.”

Rich city folk could afford to blow their money on sports like golf, fancy offices and luxury clothing for their daughters, thought Calvin. Rihaana's dyed cotton dress and leather sandals said enough about her upbringing to disgust him especially when most villagers, including Arriette, wore patchwork rags.

“I need no further Everlast contact. Local Retainers would point me toward easy money if I was so desperate. At the moment the cash Susan has saved will cover her care.” Calvin snarled. “Thanks for your concern.”

“Why would a Retainer waste an eidetic memory encouraging people like you to acquire illegal, undeclared cash?” Rihaana asked, maddened by his disdainful comments.

“I may owe debts in high places, Miss Melovich, but I am owed far more by middle-class Supes.” Calvin twiddled his thumbs. “My responsibility lies with the funeral arrangements only. I'd do the necessary to see Sue's burial go well but not so far as an Everlast's charity. Charles can hunt for his own pendant.”

Arriette sighed. “Look, Calvin, we're only trying-”

“No, he's right.” Rihaana sipped her wine. “Retainers are sympathetic and knowledgeable by nature; they'd help *legally* for free, but so would my father. I'd like to think him decent enough.”

“If you knew any honest half-Everlast, half-Retainers we'd have cracked it then,” said Calvin. “Shame they don't interbreed, huh?”

Arriette threw a spoon at him and scowled. “Don't be rude.”

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Retaliation wouldn't encourage Arriette's sympathy so Calvin cracked his knuckles and chewed his tongue before reaching over for the wine. This time she didn't scold him.

"I may be rude but I'm not wrong," he said.

"Time for a new subject before I change my mind," said Arriette. "Tell me where we'll stay if not with Susan."

"Local inn. Whoever hurt Sue might still be lurking in our apartment."

"So you *do* have a conscience," Rihaana said. "Let's use it before the alcohol dissolves your common sense. I'll get my map. We can plan your route around Manaia Forest."

"Quicker just to brave it."

"I take it back," said Rihaana. "You're about as *crazy* as a Vampyr in the sunshine. Arriette wouldn't survive two days. No offence."

"None taken. I tried to tell him," said Arriette.

Kalvin slumped back in his chair, picking at a piece of bread in thought. "Just got to learn how to avoid the ghouls."

"This isn't a science," said Arriette.

"I disagree; I managed the journey without incident."

Rihaana reached across the table and took hold of Arriette's hand. "Without Everlast funding or Retaining knowledge, there's nothing you can do for Susan."

"Moral support and friendship is a start," said Calvin. "Hey, tell Rihaana why they call it *Manaia* Forest. Settle her nerves."

Arriette grinned and raised her brow. "How should *I* know?"

"You read. Back me up."

Arriette inhaled her frustration and slapped on her most convincing smile. "Manaia is said to be the first creature Zinnyi placed on Haeylo. He was a trusted messenger and a protector of the land. Scrolls in Haeylo City's library are said to depict Manaia as a white bird, if you believe in myth."

Kalvin bit into his bread and, proud of his knowledge, slammed a fist on the table.

"See? Nothing to fear."

Unconvinced, Arriette turned to her friend. "Isn't there any way to contact your father? I'm not betting on the bird."

"I'm their firstborn; if I can marry into another Supe species within the next two years, I'm free of the Everlast inheritance. Until then I'll remain invisible."

"I thought you had older siblings?" Arriette asked.

"Only step-siblings. Father has children with other women."

Arriette decided not to go there.

In her opinion Rihaana would have made a wonderful Everlast and a skilled leader. One she'd be proud to follow. Giving that up for marriage to a Human, Retainer or any other Supe seemed such a waste.

"He's too proud, Arriette."

"He's over *five thousand* years old," Calvin said. "Proud is an understatement."

*Only a lunatic would agree to this death trip*, thought Arriette.

Even the most respectable people in that city were hard-hearted. How could Rihaana's father be so brutal? He'd been with her Human mother for over thirty years now. Surely marriage had crossed his mind?

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“Charles is only four thousand years short of Haeylo's birth,” Calvin added. “Has lots of children with many women. Rihaana's step-siblings are now influential politicians.”

“He just wants what he thinks is best for me,” she said.

“Every one of his children accepted the gift. No wonder he's frustrated; you're the first to break the chain,” he said, one eyebrow raised. “I'm surprised the army isn't out looking for you.” Arriette threatened him with her fork. He held up both hands in surrender. “Sorry, none of my business.”

“We're going to stay out of Everlast politics during our visit,” Arriette told Rihaana. “If anyone asks, we haven't seen you.”

“Well if Calvin's debts aren't with my father he won't bother you. Just behave yourselves.”

Confused by the information overload, Arriette attempted to recall any laws she'd read in her books and the Everlast class system. First were elders, second advisers and third new to the power. Haeyloian laws were universal, minus Zinny's guidance for religious citizens. Still, how difficult could all *that* be to master?

“Looks like I'm not getting out of this journey. Would you mind packing us extra food for the road, Rihaana? My pantry was bare.”

Once in the kitchen, Rihaana nudged her friend and smirked. “If you change your mind or decide to ditch him I won't judge you. I wouldn't trust his judgement. He'll get you both killed.”

Kalvin sipped his wine. “I *can* hear you. Please stop talking about me like I'm not present.”

“What else is there to discuss?” she asked, keeping her back to the table.

“Well, when did you move in? I'm sure that's an interesting topic.”

He would have remembered a face as beautiful as hers; the way she pulled back that slick hair in a high bun, revealing a smooth chocolate complexion and kind hazel eyes. Calvin's military training taught him to lie; how to look comfortable in a place you so obviously don't belong. Rihaana had dark secrets just like he, and she hid them about as well, from Arriette in particular.

“A few years ago,” she said, watching him carefully. “A housing agent re-located me off my father's radar.”

*There it is*, Calvin thought. *She's protecting someone*. He pondered which housing agent could possibly risk defying an Everlast and how much they were paid.

“Your father's search party will reach Mousique eventually.”

“He won't find me unless *you* mention my location.” Rihaana glanced out the window at the setting sun and shuddered. “So when are you going?”

“We can leave now if we're inconveniencing you,” he said.

Rihaana untied her apron and slung it on the back of her seat. Then she stormed to the kitchen and began to cram the leftover food into an old sack.

“You're a piece of work, Calvin Avery. I ought to let you starve.”

Arriette shook her head at his poor manners, disappointed she didn't have anything left to throw.

“You're lucky Arriette agreed to travel given your history. Susan was too much of a doll for my liking; more worried about her appearance than her friend's feelings.”

“We all have Demons. If you knew Susan's you'd give her a break,” he said.

Arriette excused herself from the table and escaped to the bathroom, pleased for a moment of peace. She could hear their debate through the walls as she tidied her hair. The conversation weighed heavily on her shoulders.

“You never met her.” Calvin went on, “You're being unreasonable.”



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“Arriette told me about your affair. That's all I need to pass judgement.”

“I'm not here for fun. Sue misses her.”

“That doesn't prove me wrong.”

“Susan ran away; she didn't come here because she liked harvest festivals. Just like she didn't leave to marry me. Not at first. She's got history. History Arriette *needs* to hear.”

“So tell her now,” Rihaana said.

“It's important she hears it from Susan. I promised I'd let her explain.”

*Explain what?* Arriette had heard enough. She splashed her face with cool water and straightened her dress in the mirror. Why didn't she buy one from the travelling tradesman? This unshapely brown sack looked awful on her.

“You can do this,” she encouraged herself. “Get back out there. Take charge.”

When she emerged from the bathroom, Rihaana and Calvin were clearing the table and preparing the picnic in silence. Rihaana scowled at Calvin and gestured for him to tell her, then continued packing.

“I need to come clean,” he said, glaring at Rihaana. “Susan doesn't think she has long and-”

“Yes, I heard you. Any idea what this is about?”

“Who she really is. One of her friends came by before Susan got sick and warned her of a war heading our way. She said Susan and I should leave and had Supes ready to protect us.”

“Don't be ridiculous, Calvin.”

He continued regardless of her disbelief. “I'm serious. I just want to meet her final wish.”

“Sorry, wait, protection from who?” asked Rihaana.

“And if there is a war on the way and it arrives when we do, then what?” asked Arriette.

Rihaana slammed the sack on the table and raised her finger. “If *anything* happens to Arriette so help me-”

Despite her threat, he seemed surprisingly calm. “So we get in and out of there fast. Go straight to the hospital. Do whatever we can to save her. If we can't then she'll die surrounded by loved ones. That's better than the alternative.”

“Which is?”

“Alone, frightened and unheard,” he said.

Rihaana took Arriette by the arm and dragged her aside. She lowered her voice, keeping a keen eye on Calvin. “You're actually buying this?”

“I have no reason not to,” Arriette said.

“He didn't tell you about this war until *I* prompted him.”

“Amends have to be made no matter the reason for his visit. He thinks I hate him.”

“Do you?”

“No,” said Arriette, proud of her quick response.

Despite such an uncomfortable history, Rihaana trusted Arriette could manage a few days of his company in a city surrounded by walls and guards. Her own feelings about Calvin Avery were irrelevant.

“Watch him closely,” she said, passing Arriette the picnic and gesturing at her scars. “Cover your neck and close your mouth. Oh, and Arriette, *try* to stay alive, will you?”

## CHAPTER 3

They left the paddock at dusk as Mousique's festivities began to settle for the curfew. Arriette's sweat-soaked palms skated the reigns, her feet quaked in the stirrups and despite the wonderful breeze, gentle thudding of her horse's hooves and the occasional neighbourly wave, the butterflies in her stomach scattered.

"Tell me more about the cause of Susan's illness," she said to kill the awkward silence.

Kalvin ran a hand through his dark hair, choosing a safe place to start the story.

"Retaining doctors think it's a hex." He frowned. "Don't pull that face."

"What face?"

Kalvin raised an eyebrow. "That's your disbelieving, criticizing, mothering-"

Arriette surrendered. "*Fine*, no more faces. You were saying?"

"Oh you haven't changed one bit," he said, shaking his head. "You know what a hex is, Arriette. I'm disappointed."

Arriette bit her lower lip. "But there aren't any witches on this planet."

"There's the Wiccan faith," Calvin said. "Bet you've studied that."

"Sure but they aren't powerful enough to hex someone."

"Everlasts think so. They're aspiring Supes; study semiotics and mix herbal remedies, that sort of thing. They're low on the HPS."

Arriette was sceptical. "Oh, symbols like the pentagram, you mean?" Arriette drew an imaginary star with her finger in the air and raised her eyebrow. "The symbol of power and disclosure of secrets."

"Drawing stars doesn't make you a criminal, Arriette. Let's not assume they summon evil spirits. It's kind of cliché."

Arriette sighed and forced herself not to look back at the village. They had already passed her vegetable patch and the communal fresh water well. The more distance they covered the more anxious she became. Most familiarities would soon be out of reach, like the gentle trickling sound from the nearby ravine, harvest shovels hitting dry soil and the salted taste of homegrown potatoes. Now an intriguing and terrifying alien world awaited her instead.

"You said you needed my help but I'm no expert."

Kalvin shook his head and pulled on the reigns. Arriette stopped beside him.

"I didn't expect you to be but you know a significant amount more than those Retainers."

"I can only confirm their biology is Human and their minds are magical." Arriette's brows furrowed in thought. "Does that help?"

Kalvin rolled his eyes. "I think you're more intelligent than you realise."

"On this topic I doubt it. Have you witnessed any of their magic? Spells, levitation, that sort of thing?"

"Not personally but Susan has. During her travels she also claims to have seen a Dragon so make up your

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own mind as to how valid the story is.” He laughed. “Crazy if you ask me.”

“In Susan's defence, they existed once.”

“*Once* being the important word.”

Arriette felt sick when she realised why they'd stopped. This was the tree line where the Vampyr latched to her throat; *drank* from her. Her scars began to pulse and Arriette pulled the collar of her cardigan up, taking deep, cleansing breaths.

“This *is* the quickest way, Arriette.”

“We should pick up the pace. I have a decent head on my shoulders which is better said now than once we've entered through those trees.” Arriette nudged her horse.

“Decapitation isn't a Vampyr signature,” Calvin said.

He grinned and waved off her nausea with a simple hand gesture, then urged his horse to follow.

Arriette stirred her memory for Wiccan information as a distraction. She'd studied magical illusions before and even tried a few. Her best-loved author was a woman named Harriet Foley who wrote about potions and chants as tools to flourish romance. Sometimes she gave recipes for healing balms and lotions, but Arriette wasn't a big believer in the spell-casting part. Those she'd tried all failed and after she'd felt rather silly. Still, the theory fascinated her.

Harriet's work would already have been studied by Retainers so was of no use to Susan's doctor, but she thought she remembered a travelling tradesman tell the story of a young girl; the daughter of an Everlast who died three days before her twentieth birthday. She was sure the girl was cursed so Arriette decided to ask Calvin. He said when the girl's father refused to marry his mistress and retire his immortality she hexed his firstborn. The cause of death couldn't be verified. Magic never left much of a trace.

“Are the symptoms the same?” asked Arriette. “I read about biology so maybe I can find a connection.”

“Unless she's worse since I last saw her, I told you all I know. It's like she's aged.”

“So we're against the clock. How old is she?”

Kalvin's face strained. “In Human years thirty-one but you don't know her history. That's why she-”

“Why she called me, yes you already said. I *read*.”

Kalvin rolled his eyes. “Oh, never mind.”

Arriette thought that such a vicious curse might be an Everlast's method of punishment; speed up the Human ageing process when their own lives would only flourish.

Kalvin leered forward to scan the opening ahead. “I wonder what the time is.”

“Will you focus? How can we be so sure this was a hex?” asked Arriette, trying to get his attention again.

“You agree it's the most likely explanation.” Calvin sat back in his saddle and sighed. “You know, you're the only Human for miles who reads about basic Human biology. There aren't many of you about these days so you're valuable, like a self-taught Retainer.”

“Many of *who* about?”

“Humans are in short supply. Especially those who can read.” His brow raised.

“We're not extinct,” she argued, “but we're outnumbered by Supes. All the best schools are in the city. I had no choice but to educate myself because unlike your Retainers I don't remember everything I see.”

“Finding an intelligent Human would've been almost impossible.” Calvin's eyes were wide and sweeping the clearing as they spoke. His hands began to shake. “Can you believe a Retainer asked where Susan's heart was? Like our biology is so different to theirs.”

“I agree that's odd but I don't see how this-”

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“They asked me if I knew any Human doctors,” he continued. “This isn't the only case so in my desperation I gave your name. Susan had that message for you anyway *so-*”

“You sold me to Supes, didn't you?” asked Arriette. “In exchange for what?”

He swallowed hard. “One of the Everlasts I owed money to came by. He threatened Susan's life if I didn't repay him. This seemed like the most logical way to please everyone.”

Arriette curled her fingers tightly around the reigns. “Except me.”

“Don't be like that. My debts are repaid, Susan can explain her story and you can examine some strange medical cases.”

“What if I *can't* help, Calvin? I'm not a doctor.” Arriette shook her head. “You're so irresponsible.”

“Don't be mad. *I'm* the one in trouble.”

“We agree on something at least.” Arriette sighed. “An Everlast has *purchased* me, Calvin. What's that even supposed to mean? Am I a slave? What if Susan dies before I reach her because I'm running errands to settle *your* debt?”

“Charles is looking forward to seeing how you diagnose other cases. Don't you want to help, for old times? Everlast accommodation is real nice.”

“I don't think I've ever met anyone more selfish. And *Charles* is behind this? You predicted he'd send somebody for Rihaana once he knew her location and still you lied to her. You lied to *me*. I can't even look at you. What a scheming, disrespectful-”

“I won't apologise,” he said.

“Oh, save your breath,” Arriette yanked the reins and galloped in the opposite direction.

“Hey, wait!”

Arriette ignored him and bolted into the forest. When she'd been riding for an hour without finding another presence she dismounted and scanned the ground for prints.

“I'm such a fool. I'm lost in the most dangerous forest on Haeylo, alone!”

A rustle of leaves startled Arriette.

She reached for her horse's reigns and prepared a quick escape when through the trees emerged an overweight man on a black stallion. His wide eyes were a piercing green, predominant upon such pale skin. He'd tied back his greasy hair in a long plait and was dressed in a city uniform.

“Thank Zinnyi! Can you help me, Sir? I took a wrong turn,” said Arriette.

“My name is Dean Constable.” He stared down at her with a bland expression. Arriette didn't hold her breath for a handshake. “I'm a Retaining servant of Charles Melovich. My orders were to find Arriette Monroe and take her to him should the first agent fail.”

Arriette peered round the horse to see Calvin fighting through the trees. He'd removed his trench coat to reveal matching attire and replaced his casual smirk with narrow eyes and a deep frown. He snatched Arriette's forearm.

“You just *had* to run, Arriette.”

“What are you doing? Let me go!”

Dean Constable threw back his head and bellowed with laughter when Arriette tried to struggle free.

“Rihaana was right about you,” she cried.

Bored with her fumbling, Calvin threw her body to the ground with a thud, pressed her face to the dirt with his boot and kicked her hard in the ribs. She felt a sharp crack, a hideous stab of pain and an unbearable burning in her lungs.

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“I tried to reason with you, Arriette.”

“What gives you the right to restrain me?”

He reached up to take a pair of cuffs from Dean's saddle bag.

When he crouched low enough to imprison her, Arriette lashed out with her palm, showering dirt and stones across his face. With her arms wrapped tight around her chest, she struggled to her feet and made haste for the trees, leaving a cloud of dust behind her.

Kalvin shrieked. “Get her you fool!”

The black stallion gained on Arriette. She focused every ounce of energy she could muster on her legs then dived into the branches and flung out both arms, forcing twigs and leaves left and right to create a clearer view of what lay ahead. There was nothing but green for miles in any direction with only the scent of wet peat and an uncomfortable sticky humidity to keep her company. The severity of each throb in her thighs soon slowed her pace.

The stallion hung back when the bushes were too thick, giving Arriette the opportunity to crouch low in a ditch and cradle her wounds. She covered her mouth to muffle each whine of discomfort until her pursuers stopped rummaging through the shrubbery.

“If I can't settle this with reason I'll do so in blood,” Calvin said.

“You want to take Rihaana?”

“Now my only other bargaining ticket has escaped I have no choice if I'm to protect Susan from Mr Melovich.”

Dean lowered his voice. “Sir, we're letting the Monroe woman go?”

“Believe me, she'll find us.”

Arriette crawled until she could no longer hear their squabbling. Her dress was mangled and uncomfortable. When her body wouldn't carry her further she sat, curled up and cried. What was she doing? Poor Rihaana's fate had been sealed because of her cowardice. Without a compass and a horse she'd be lost in the forest forever. Grazes on her arms, legs and face wept thick crimson ink and she had to tear her cardigan for bandages.

Arriette had barely caught her breath when the sound of a twig snapping in the darkness startled her. Before she'd gathered enough air in her lungs to scream, she was surrounded.

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