

# The Lion and The Fox

by Ashra Horizonstar

*My name is Cordelia Wells, the daughter of Vincent and Diana. It is now the second decade of the twenty-first century and our world beneath is still recovering from 9/11 and the recession. I have inherited both my father's gift and his curse, I only hope that I can be the protectress needed to keep this world, my grandfather's dream, alive.*

I ran through the forest, the cold air and the sharp smell of pine. The trees swayed in the frosty wind. I felt a wild solitude, away from the stink and noise of the city. I was running to keep up with her, the wild voice in the wind. I ran faster toward the edge of a clearing, pierced with silver moonlight. She stood before me, then I saw images of her rending flesh from bone and felt rage fear so deeply that no reason existed. I heard a roar in the darkness and bolted nearly out of my bed.

The clanging on the pipes and the trains overhead relaxed my body, it was only another nightmare. Though the other had been in my dreams more frequently. It was one of the family traits that were passed down, my father called it a gift, more often than not it was a curse, though I have been honing it like a skill as of late. The gift is we feel what others can feel, if we open ourselves enough. I found that I could control it by shielding myself against what others felt. However, when I was asleep, I had no such control, and that's where she would come with her rage and anguish, wanting to be found.

I rose and put on a robe to ward off the chill, I walked towards my parent's chambers, down the spiral staircase. They were already awake, my mom was typing away at a computer program glaring intently at the screen, and my father was speaking with Uncle Mouse.

"Little Cordelia," Mouse said, smiling. After that, he went into a bout of coughing.

Uncle Mouse was an odd man, with graying blond hair and a face that was still youthful. He invented many things and helped with the tunnels here. When the towers fell he had invented machines to pull people from the wreckage and stayed up with my father and mother days upon end for the rescue. Except where everyone else (especially my father) wore a mask to keep out the dust, he did not and had a horrible cough ever since I can remember. To be fair, I was very small when it did. I do know that this world was much larger before then, and many of us had to go deeper underground. I remember my brother Jacob pulling me down deep into the caverns and hiding, that is all.

"Are you all right, Uncle Mouse?" I said.

"Okay good, okay fine," he said, catching his breath.

“Mouse has been helping with the new mapping program,” said my father. His long hair once golden was now gray and bound back. My mother’s hair was turning from red to white and was bound up into a bun. I had inherited her fiery red hair and freckles. From my father, I inherited his gift and his curse. We both had features that mark us as other than human. I had four sharp canines and a face that looked foxlike, a mouth that fell muzzle-like and soft hair along my nose that arched into reddish eyebrows. The face looked proud and leonine on my father; on me, it looked more pointed and canine. My eyes were a golden brown, the color of honey, where my father’s were piercing blue and my mother’s were the softer dark blue of the ocean.

“Your brother sent a letter,” said my mother. “He’s on leave and will visit us soon, he also has an offer to be promoted to Staff Sergeant.”

“I’m proud of both my children,” my father said. “Jacob has felt a need to help in the world above and decided the Army was the place he could do the most good. Not that I would have made that decision, but he has done well. You can be here for the people below.”

“Not that I have much choice,” I piped sarcastically. I could feel him flinch when I said that and felt ashamed. My head started to hurt again

“I had another nightmare,” I said.

“Your darkness?” asked my dad.

“I wish you wouldn’t call it that,” I said

“Night terrors might not be related to anything,” my mom said. “What did you see?” she asked.

I told him of the pine forest of running in the night, the presence of someone in the dark calling for me.

“You must be careful,” he said. “I should be down to keep watch.”

“I’d rather you not,” I said. “I... I’m , can mother watch me instead, it’s less awkward.”

“You’re not sleepwalking,” said my mom. “You can see me and your surroundings clearly.” She felt my forehead.

“Body temperature is normal, you’re not sweating.”

She grabbed my wrist looking at my lightly-furred hand and sharp pointed nails.

“Your pulse is normal. I think you just had a nightmare,” she said.

“Here take this,” said my dad. “It’ll help you sleep.”

He handed me a white rose, he used to give it to Jake and me when we were little and had nightmares.

“Thank you,” I said, smiling.

“I’ll make you some tea,” he said.

I nodded. My father looked sheepish.

“Now go back to sleep,” said my mom.

I took the tea. It was bitter but soon sleep took hold of me and my nightmares were banished

at least for a little while.

My mother gently shook me awake a few hours later. She handed me one of my father's old cloaks to wear.

"You know this thing is huge on me," I said, "I wish we could find another seamstress to find something more fitted."

"It'll do for tonight," she said. "I'll try to find a jacket for you soon, something with a hood, it's chilly."

"Because we all know the chill is the reason for the hood," I said, rolling my eyes.

"Dear, I love you, but we have to protect this world. We're not getting any younger and we need you to help us with this."

"Because Jacob is god knows where risking his life for a country that couldn't care less about him," I grumbled. "There are many tower children that are grown enough to do the same things I am."

The tower children were children orphaned after the towers fell.

"I wish I could carry that chip on both your shoulders," she said. "You know we love you very much, you know that you came from love. Your father never knew who his parents were."

"It feels like someone reaching out to me every night, clawing at my mind, not letting me rest."

The nightmares, more night terrors, have plagued me for nearly a year.

"Your father is just worried about you," she said. "When he was around your age he got very sick and is worried you may be going through the same."

"I'm not ill, just tired; tired of thinking feral thoughts," I sighed.

"Just practice on blocking it out. Grounding and centering remember to breathe and count to one hundred."

"I'm trying. When I'm awake I can, but it also blocks out my gift and dad can't reach me, and then he worries, and then I don't hear the end of it. I mean, can't I just have a day when people aren't invading my thoughts and feelings? Is that really too much to ask?"

"I'll talk to him," she said. "Here, let me braid your hair before you go out. "She took out a brush and started to comb through my crimson hair.

"People have always had ignorance and fear, as well as love and worry," she sighed, grabbing at a pin to hold one of the thick locks of hair in place. "You have to learn how to shield against it, otherwise you'll burn yourself out. Focus on the task at hand."

"I will mom."

I kissed her on the cheek, tied up the cloak a bit to fit my much shorter stature, and headed on my way.

I walked beneath the tunnels, hearing the pipes clanging away. It felt comforting knowing I was home. My father used to come up and take me to the world above. However, everyone and their mother had a cell phone with a camera, he became a lot more paranoid about it. The thing that my dad didn't realize was that the locals were too busy staring at their phones to

even notice us. The last time I found myself above, I saw everyone just marching past staring at a screen, oblivious of the world around them. Of a city of eight million people, it felt so isolated. Everyone alone in the crowd, listening to the few friends they had over data, not truly connecting with anybody.

I used that loneliness to my advantage, it made it easier to slip through the streets unseen and unheard with people being distracted, self-absorbed and disconnected.

I walked up to the upper tunnels, below the East Village I think, when I heard people babbling in the background. I silently crept closer to the sound, though the cloak started to drag a bit and make a shuffling sound behind me. I got close enough to the people, they looked young, about my age. One was a girl with white-blonde hair with splats of bright color, her eyes were painted black. She was speaking to a boy with a Mohawk, he had dark skin and a tee-shirt that said Black Flag on it. It had a skull and crossbones that reminded me of Treasure Island. There was also another girl, tall and reedy with glossy black hair in pigtails. Her lips were painted black.

“So is this the place Izzy was talking about?” said the blond. She had a Brooklyn accent.

“I don’t know,” said the boy. “These tunnels go on for miles.”

“I don’t want to go any further, I’m scared,” said the dark-haired girl.

“I was too, the first time I explored,” said the boy.

Just great, urban explorers or urbex as they sometimes called themselves. Many of them were harmless mostly, just bored people looking for adventure. Usually, a well-placed growl would have them running in a panic. It was for their own good really, places were dangerous down here. I was here to remind them of that danger. It was also fun to see the look on some of their faces too. I was getting ready to walk out and growl, do the routine my dad did to shoo them away when my foot caught on a loose hem and I fell face-first onto the tunnel platform. Smooth move Cordy, really frightening there.

They turned and looked at me in unison

“Are you all right?” the blonde asked me.

“Uh, yeah,” I said.

I noticed the hood of the cloak fell behind me. I was about to pull it over my head and run away but I didn’t get the look or feeling of fear, only awe, and fascination.

“That is some badass makeup,” said the blonde. “Did you learn how to do that on YouTube or Instagram?”

“Umm, insta...what.”

The blonde chuckled.

“So are you going to a Con or something?” asked the boy, his dark eyes inquisitive.

“I suppose,” I shrugged. If they thought I was just wearing a costume, I might as well let them believe it.

“I don’t know if there are any Furry cons this week in the city,” said the dark-haired girl.

"Furry?" I repeated quirking an eyebrow.

"To each their own," said the boy. "Hey, we're freaks ourselves, who are we to judge other freaks." He smiled her teeth showing white next to dark skin.

"I'm Melissa," she said. "Mel for short."

"Nice to meet you, Mel," I said. "I'm Cordelia, people sometimes call my Cordy for short."

"Cute," she said.

"My real name is Jermain," said the boy. "But you can call me Blade."

"Really?" laughed the blonde. "Oh Jermaine, so pretentious. Last week it was the Crow and before that it was Spawn." She was almost doubling over. "Just call him Jermaine."

"I'm C.C.," she said. "Short for Cecelia Clark."

"Very nice to meet you," I said. "May I ask what you are doing down here?"

"What are you doing down here?" C.C said.

"Just on a shortcut home, from the ... con," I said.

"We've heard of tunnels beneath the city," said Jermain.

"So have I," I said. "Most of them are full of dangerous people and bad construction. Not to mention the rats, not someplace I'd venture into." I said, If I couldn't use fear, perhaps I could dissuade them with boredom. "I've been to a few of them, there's really not much there except for the occasional addict, which is more sad than frightening."

"Still dangerous," Mel said.

"Yeah," I agreed.

"Well, I guess we could go to Orpheus again," said C.C

"The song of Orpheus, that's a sad one," I said remembering the ballad.

"Club Orpheus," Said Mel. "It's a punk slash goth slash indie club, they have an all-ages night on Saturday."

"Oh," I said

"You can come." Said C.C "Your costume will really turn some heads." She smiled. "You look like you put a lot of work in it, it's a shame to waste all that time."

"It's missing ears," said Mel. "Don't you think cat ears would be super adorbs?" she asked C.C "You can grab a nice pair on Amazon for a couple of bucks."

Jermain grabbed my hand. "Wow, you even got your hands done up," he said looking at my long nails and lightly furred skin. "Girl, you went all out!"

"Come on, you have to go with us!" said C.C

"I suppose," I shrugged. "For a few hours at most."

The club was dark and crowded. No one feared me, quite the opposite. Quite a few people complimented me on my "costume". One of the patrons said she had spare cat ears and plopped a headband with cat ears on my head. The people here all wore a costume of some sort themselves. Some wore big black boots with gas masks and colorful hair braided into

patterns. I saw bright eclectic colors and some in all black. People in top hats, people with contacts to make their eyes catlike. People with fangs longer and sharper than mine, piercings, and tattoos in all arrays of color and design. The music was dark and moody, and full of electricity, not as neat or as pretty as the classical I grew up on but it had a melody to it in the chaotic rhythms.

Then I looked at the blinking lights on someone's cell phone. It read at midnight. I had to go home, my parents would be terribly worried. I walked over to Jermaine and bid my farewell.

"May I have a dance before I go, milady?" he asked.

"One, then I have to go."

We danced, not a waltz or anything formal or intimate, we really just held hands and spun mostly. It was fun and a little dizzying. When the song stopped I crept out among the crowd.

"Cordy?" he said.

He looked puzzled as I was just there. Stealth was a trick my father taught me. I used it to get away quickly and quietly through the dark and back underground.

I completed my round in the tunnels and didn't see anything too alarming. A drug addict or two, but we didn't frighten them off, just took down their location. A helper in social services would come by to check on them and make sure they were getting treatment. I ticked the locations off on the new mapping system. When I got home, I decided to report in the morning, as I'm sure my parents were sleeping.

Except they weren't. When I went to my chamber both my parents were sitting there.

"Where were you?" asked my mom. I knew I couldn't lie to either of them, my father could search out my feelings and my mom was a former investigator.

I shrugged and sighed. I told them what happened and that people saw me. I also told them that no one batted an eye really.

"That would explain why you smell like cloves," said, my mom. "You know if it had been another person they might have tried to hurt you. You have to be careful who you trust up there."

"You sent me out on security patrol," I said.

"We trusted you with security patrol, and you go to a party!" said my mom, sharply.

"I met people from above that accepted me," I said.

"Only because they thought you were wearing a mask!" she said. "What would they say if they knew you weren't?"

"Diana, please," said my dad. "She's just a youth, we've all done foolish things in our youth. I finished the patrols; the tunnels are safe. I felt no harm or fear, only joy in you for the first time in a while, and fear of punishment."

I nodded.

"I'm glad you have not come to harm, but be careful who your friends are, some may not be so forgiving if they find out what you truly are," he said. He then hugged me.

With that, he blew out the candle in my chamber, and I slept more soundly than I had in months.

I had been patrolling for several months and the shifts were getting easier. I had rummaged above and found a discarded black hoodie, much more fitting than the cloaks made below. I moved through the tunnels quickly and quietly looking for intruders. I contacted the sentries on duty for a report.

The hardest perpetrators were actually the rats. Their numbers were already many and they had moved further down. One of the tunnel dwellers was named Piper. She had lost her parents the day the towers fell. Piper had a group of terriers she trained to keep the tunnels free of vermin and would take them out daily. She had short brown hair and a dog whistle she kept around her neck.

Then there was Bell, one of the tower children that insisted on updating Pascal's code to an intranet. His real name was Thomas but he took the name of Bell, after Alexander Graham Bell. He kept insisting that we needed to update, where Pascal said the code worked just fine on the pipes. It made a bit of contention among the council members.

I wish I had known both Mary and my Grandfather better, they helped found this world and helped to grow it. Grandfather passed away a year before my birth and Mary when I was too young to remember much.

I was the daughter of Vincent Wells and Diana Bennet. My mother was a detective above but decided to move down to the tunnels when she found out when she was pregnant. They lived a life of happiness in the tunnels below, then the towers fell.

Many of our people had died that day and half of the upper tunnels collapsed or became too full of rats to live in. Amidst the chaos, a small boy took charge. He found Piper and Bell, he and a young man, Kipper, started to organize the world again. That boy was my older half brother, Jacob.

Jacob was only a boy, but he worked nonstop to help the younger children move to the tunnels further underground, and build another pipe network. He was ambitious and he and my parents worked tirelessly on rebuilding. Then when he was eighteen, he decided he needed to help the world above. He enlisted in the Army, and now I only saw him when he was on leave. My brother, the leader, was lucky enough to look human at birth.

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It was All Hallows Eve. A month has passed since I had met Jermain, C.C, and Mel. I had gone out nearly every Saturday Night since then to the club in the East Village, and no one even questioned me. The tunnel dwellers were even kind enough to build me a passage nearby.

The ground rules my parents set for me were: One, I kept my connection on, I did not try to block my father out emotionally or shield from him; two I called on the pipes when I was returning; three, my patrols and chores came first. This all seemed pretty reasonable.

However, on Halloween, I was resolved to stay in. This was a night when normal people would

go to the clubs and the village and try to be one of the freaks. I had heard C.C state it was the night of the living posers. I advised her to be less judgmental, but if my friends didn't want to go out tonight and celebrate, I had no reason to go out. I decided I would read the works of Edgar Allen Poe to the children after my father read the headless horseman. It all went well, the children were rapt at my delivery of *The Raven*. The children then left and scattered for trick or treating.

"Cordelia," said my father. "The night is still young, you should go and enjoy it."

"Eh," I said. "My friends above aren't going out and I see no reason to."

"Tonight, of all nights, is when you can go out among people, and see the city how it's meant to be seen," he said.

"You took Jacob and me to the city every Halloween we were little, Dad. I've already seen everything at least seventeen times," I sighed.

"First you argue with us go above, and now you don't want to go out," said my mom.

"Alright, I'll go," I shrugged. "I think C.C is watching some movies at her house, I'll just hang out with her I suppose."

I left, wondering why they were in such a hurry to be rid of me, then remembering that they hadn't had a night alone in weeks. Well, I suppose I could go out anyway and see if anything was going on above.

I made it to Orpheus and there were a few drunken men in backward-facing ball caps.

"Hey, Ginger, are you going to howl for us?" said a young man, I could smell the beer on his breath.

"Ginger?" I asked.

"Ginger snaps," said his companion.

I was about to run home when I heard a voice behind me. "Hey, Cordy."

I turned around and it was C.C Her blond and bright hair was pulled back and her face was wan and free from makeup.

"It's Halloween, so I thought I'd show up like a normal person," she said.

I giggled.

"Have you seen Mel or Jermain?" she asked.

"Sadly, no. It seems that tonight the plebeians have wrecked loose on our underground."

"Yeah, this is why I don't go out, look, hon, you can come back to my apartment and we can watch horror movies. I think you'd like *Suspiria*, it has classical music and ballerinas," she said.

"Sounds like a plan!"

We headed toward the subway, it was crowded tonight, but I walked onto the car unnoticed. We got off the train in Queens. The streets were much quieter here, with all the revelry happening in Manhattan. We left the subway and headed toward her apartment. She lived with three other girls, it was the only way she could afford the rent with her tuition. Her apartment was part of some converted row houses. As she entered the house, we noticed

there was a young man approaching us.

"Heya, C.C, good to see you," he said. "Who's the catgirl with you, some kind furry, I didn't know you were into that sorta thing."

"Leave me alone, Chad!" She looked irritated.

"I didn't know you were that freaky," he snickered. "I know you wear too much makeup and have tattoos, don't you know how to act like a lady?"

"Back off creep!" she said, and the young man grabbed her wrist.

I let out a visceral growl towards Chad.

"What the f...," he said, and before he could process it, I had knocked him down and was growling over him. He went to grab at my wrist and my claws slashed deep into his hand. He got up, looked at C.C and looked at me, and then ran back into the other direction as fast as his feet could carry.

I then realized that I had roared and clawed someone in front of C.C I should have counted to 100, why didn't I count to 100?

"Holy shit!" she said wide-eyed. "You're not wearing a costume, I... Please don't hurt me."

"It's still me," I said. "I'm the same, Cordelia."

"This isn't really happening," she said.

"I am what I am. Either accept me as your friend or I'll go away. It was fun but illusions can't last forever."

"It's a' right," she said, "Come in."

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All of her roommates had gone out for the night of revelry. It was only me, her and my father in the small apartment. She sat at a small round table in the kitchen. I was pacing wearing all black, my face showing and a pair of cat ears plopped on my head. C.C had made herself a cup of tea and was looking at me intently.

"So you're real? Not just a furry?" she asked.

"What is a Furry?" I asked

"You don't want to know ..."

"Oh, don't I? Everyone calls me that in Orpheus."

"A furry is someone who dresses like an animal and thinks they have an animal spirit. It's an alternative lifestyle, but there are some people where it's a fetish. Those I won't talk about"

I nodded.

"I will say if not for them I wouldn't have been able to go above as I have," I smirked. I thought of going above to Orpheus and only compliments passing, no fear or surprise.

"Above?" asked CC.

"Underneath the city, there is a vast world of tunnels. It was once much more vast before the towers fell. We and others live there and depend on each other, it is safe and peaceful."

"Are there others like you guys there? Ninja Turtles? Splinter? A nest of nasty vampires? This all sounds a bit bats," she said.

"Only my father and I," I said.

"Your father is like you?"

I nodded.

"He never knew his parents, he was left as a baby."

"You and your dad are the only people like you that you know of?" said C.C "If you exist why couldn't others, have either of you left the city?" she said. "I'm an archeology student, and studied ancient history, the Egyptian Goddess Bastet, and werewolves, this explains so much, you can't be the only one."

She looked into her tea.

"I suppose there could be others like me in the world," I shrugged. "I never really thought about it."

"And your mom?" asked C.C

"She's alive and well, and normal," I said. "If I had been born normal, I think I would have been her spitting image. I also have a brother that is normal, well, half brother."

"Different dads?" C.C asked.

"No, mothers," I said.

"Can I see this place?" asked C.C

"You must promise to keep it a secret. Many people rely on our world for safety."

I found a nearby pipe and clanged out a code for my mother.

"What are you doing?" C.C asked.

"Checking in, telling my parents that I'm ok," I said

"Wow," said C.C "You know there are cell phones now?"

"Yes, with cameras, video, and satellite!" I barked, a little too harshly.

"Fair point," she said. "I guess we can watch some movies. I have Susperia."

"That sounds fine." I looked at her shelf of movies and pulled out a box.

"Ginger Snaps?" she said looking at the werewolf movie. "That's a good one."

"Then we'll watch it," I said.

I watched the movie, and it was good, but it was more of a cautionary tale of how I had to keep this rage, this creature inside me from becoming wild, lest I become like poor Ginger and her sister. We also watched Susperia, it was very pretty and very gory. I knew that my parents would not approve of such violence, but it was so staged that the blood was more like paint in a strange ballet than anything real.

The sun began to rise and I left her row house and headed home, safe in knowing that I had a friend that knew me.

I went back home and told my parents what happened.

"Do you trust this girl?" asked my mom.

"She could have betrayed me," I said. "Instead we just watched scary movies."

"It's harmless enough," he said. "We would never make it as a community if we didn't make new friends on occasion."

"The others still don't know," I said.

"It is your decision to trust them," said my father. "Although, are they truly your friends if they trust an illusion?"

"That is true father. Speaking of trust, do you suppose I could show C.C this place?"

"One day," said my mother. "What is this C.C 's actual name anyway?"

"Cecelia Clark, she's a history and anthropology major at NYU, she's studying to be an archaeologist."

"And I bet she's very interested in you," said my mother.

"Only as my friend."

"Be careful," said my mom and kissed me on the cheek and left the room.

"Father?"

"Yes, dear?"

"Could you read me the Raven before I go to bed."

"I suppose," he chuckled.

*"Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,*

*Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore—*

*While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,*

*As of someone gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.*

*"Tis some visitors," I muttered, "tapping at my chamber door—*

*Only this and nothing more."*

His whispered words brought me to a calm sleep, just as they have so many times as a child.

During the next month, I was able to gain council permission to bring C.C Underneath, after she swore an oath of secrecy. She stood in fascination with my father and mentioned several mythologies that we could both fall into.

"It does not matter how I am to be," he said. "We were born and we survive, and thank you for being my daughter's friend."

"But I can find out for you if you want. I won't tell nobody, but don't you want to know?"

"Child, I have made it nearly seventy years without knowing an answer, I don't think anything you find would change much. I am at peace."

"Cordelia might want to know," she said.

"I'll cross that bridge when I come to it," I said. "I know that I was born in the usual way that

people are born, and that I am loved, that is all I need.”

I smelled the sharp scent of pine needles and felt a growing roar as I said that. I began counting the ways that I was loved until the darkness passed.

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It was a rainy day, a week before Thanksgiving, when I awakened in my chamber. I put on my clothes - a black tee, black pants, and a new black hoodie - and I headed towards my parent’s chamber.

When I entered the room, I saw my big brother Jacob sitting between both my mother and father. He was tall and broad, with buzz-cut sandy hair and piercing blue eyes. He smiled warmly at me, his mouth upturned slightly.

“Little Cordelia,” he said, his voice was soft and similar to my father’s. “Well, not so little anymore.”

“I thought you didn’t have leave till January,” I yawned, confused. “Sorry, I overslept a bit.” I gave my brother a hug, he towered over my small frame. He then held me at arm’s length.

“What’s with all the black?” he asked.

My mom sniggered. “She’s going through her emo phase,” she said.

“Really Mom?” I said, “It’s just easier than wearing a cloak everywhere, getting snagged and tangled less.”

“You’ll grow out of your clumsiness,” my father said.

“I know.”

Just then Kipper came into the room and gave Jacob a giant bear hug. Kipper was a man in his early thirties with brown hair and warm brown eyes. He had grown up in the tunnels and he still helped my family run errands, but as with Bell, he was more inclined towards technology. He was assisting my mother to build an intranet mapping and message system for the tunnels, much to Pascal’s chagrin.

My brother was about ten years younger, but they looked almost the same age in the room, and I suddenly felt so very young.

“I’ll let you guys catch up,” I said.

“Why don’t you see the Tower Children?” said my father to Jacob. “There are so many that are thankful for your help that day.”

“Until he left us to fight men in a desert country, ordered by the government above, the government we built this world to escape,” I said.

Jacob’s eyes turned into sharp blue icicles, pinning me to the wall.

“Cordelia, that was uncalled for!” Mom said sternly.

“No, she’s right,” said Jacob.

"I know I just got an offer or promotion and I requested leave. I'm thinking of getting out instead, my contract is up soon and you guys could use the help here."

"What?" she asked.

"I'll discuss it later with you and dad. Right now I just want to catch up with people," said Jacob.

"Mom, I'm sorry that I brought that up," I said. "Can I go out now, I told my friends that I'd meet them."

"Sure, just remember curfew at midnight and to let us know on the pipes where you are."

"Going out?" asked Jacob. "Where?"

"She has some friends up top, it's fine," said my mom.

My brother glared at me icily, I glanced back nervously and quietly headed out.

I could feel Jacob following behind me as I walked toward the basement of Club Orpheus. I could hear a live show playing, it was Light Asylum, a local darkwave band out of Brooklyn. Jacob caught up to me and grasped me by the wrist.

"Have you lost your mind?!" he asked.

"Quite a long time ago, if it's any difference to you," I chuckled.

"Stop smirking at me, snaggletooth," he laughed and proceeded to put me into a headlock.

"Unhand me you brute!" I growled playfully.

"Is this guy bothering you?" said Jermain.

"Since I was born," I said. "This is my older brother, Jacob."

"I've heard so much about you," said C.C, as she shook his hand. "You didn't tell me how cute he was."

Mel just curtsied and said hello.

I pulled Jacob aside. "C.C is the only one that knows what I truly am, the others just think it's an act of some sort."

Jacob looked around them and saw all the patrons, the Cyber-goths wearing yarn dreads and gas masks, people dressed in medieval, steampunk and Victorian garb.

"You don't have to worry," I sighed.

"What if you have a panic attack, what if you snap?" he asked.

"I am among my friends, my people. I won't snap here."

"The world below is where your people are."

"That is true, but look around you."

Jacob glanced at the club around him.

"We're all freaks here, both the world above and at this club, hell even some of the places in the East Village. It's all underground some way or the other."

I smiled and pulled him up the stairs to a balcony in the club.

"Do you see that young man dancing below, the one in the red jacket?" I asked.

"Yeah," said Jacob

"He was thrown out for coming out to his family, he's been rooming with Jermain. The lady sipping on absinthe has a severe eating disorder, Mel's been trying to find her help. C.C is my friend; she knows of the world below. What I'm trying to say is we're all family here as well, still underground, in a different way. We all hurt, we all come here to heal."

Jacob looked resolute, sighed and patted my shoulder.

"Just promise me you'll be careful?" he asked.

"Of course," I said.

By the time he turned around, I had slipped away from him and joined C.C in the front of the row to see the band. Us short girls have to stick together.

After the show ended, I saw Jacob at the bar speaking to another young man, dressed in black with some military accents, probably another serviceman. I swear they had a gift to find each other in the largest of crowds.

When he was done with his conversation, I hugged my friend's goodbye and we headed back to the basement, and to the tunnel entrance.

"Sorry if that took too long, sis," he said.

"No worries."

"It was another brother in arms. He was shipping out tomorrow, he needed someone to speak to. I thought I'd lend an ear."

"That is very kind of you," I said. "Are you really going to try to get out?"

He nodded.

"You could lose everything you worked for."

"My contract date is next month," he said. "I was offered a promotion if I stayed on but I can get out as a veteran."

"Well, you could use the GI bill, go back to school."

"I'll figure that out, I'm going back in a week and I'll probably get out sometime around December."

"Why are you deciding to pass up the promotion?" I asked

"A lot of reasons," he said. "Mainly the one you most cynically stated, that I'm not being a hero by being a soldier. "

I flinched. "I'm sorry I said that."

"You don't need to be sorry for telling the truth," he shrugged. "I don't know what I want to do, and I know I'm going to be starting over. I just want to help people, like my mother helped people before..."

"So, you want to be a lawyer?" I said,

"Not so much, I'm not as smart as her or dad, I just know how to take and give orders."

“You are brilliant and heroic, you saved so many people, here and above,” I said.

He slowed down his walk down.

“Cordy, I have to tell you something, now. I don’t think you’ll judge me but I have to ask you to keep an open mind.”

“Yes, of course,” I said.

“On 9/11, when Uncle Mouse and I went out in the rubble to save the other kids, my mother was there guiding me. Not Diana, but my actual mother,” he sighed.

I nodded.

“You’re the only person I’ve told so far. I’m afraid it’d break our father’s heart if I said anything to him.”

“Or he’d say that she’s your guardian angel,” I said.

“I remember, when we were little, he said that your mother was always guiding you.”

I actually remember when dad said that it would confuse the hell out of me, because I looked behind me and said, “Mom’s right behind me, of course, she’s here’.” When I was about six or so they told me that Jacob had a different mommy and that she died and was always with Jacob.

I thought this poor ghost must be terribly bored keeping an eye on my brother all the time, even as a kid, he color-coordinated his socks.

“So, I’ve always just been taking orders,” he said, his eyes tearing up.

“Jacob, it’s always been your will to do good, your mother is just a manifestation of that will, you’ll find your way. Until then you’re welcome home.”

“That’s what our father said, you are a lot like him.”

“Version 2.0, now in pocket size,” I laughed.

“You’re right about that,” he said. “Let’s go home.”

We headed back through the tunnels to home, ready to face a new day.

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Jacob woke me up at five in the morning.

“Your combat training starts today sister,” he said shaking me out of a cold haze. It was just as well; I could feel another night terror starting.

“Combat training?” I asked.

“If you’re going to be this world’s protector you’re going to need to polish your fighting skills. You may roar but you’re still a pipsqueak.”

I was tempted to roar at him, pull the blankets over my head and pass out. However, he had a point. I was tiny compared to my father, yet our people were starting to look at me as the next protector, or protectress? Their looks seemed to grow stronger as my parent’s hair grew

whiter and their faces more wrinkled.

“Very well,” I said. “Let me throw on some clothes.”

“First lesson,” he said, “You should always be ready for an intruder. Wear something you can be ready to fight in, even when you're sleeping.”

“All right,” I grumbled as I grabbed a cobbled together shirt and jeans. I threw on my black hoodie over my clothes to keep out the cold.

My brother and I ran for five miles that morning, he slowed to keep pace with me a few times. I kept up relatively well despite my legs being quite a bit shorter. After the run, my brother started to teach me some basic military combat, with a healthy dose of Muay Thai and Akito.

“Remember Sis, your weapons are built-in. The opponent has to reach for theirs,” he said.

“I understand,” I said, sweating and out of breath.

“You’re doing great! I think you have a natural talent for this.”

My mom walked into the chamber with her eyes bright.

“He’s teaching me how to be a better protectress,” I gasped, short of breath.

“I see that,” she said. “You can take the man away from the Army, but you can’t take the Army out of the man.”

“He’s our resident jarhead,” I said.

“Shut up, snaggletooth,” he laughed.

“Children behave!” said Mom. “I came down to tell Jacob he has a visitor.”

“And who would that be?” I asked.

“Kittie,” said mom.

Kittie's formal name was Catherine. She was named after Jacob’s birth mother. Kittie's real mother, Lena, was a tunnel dweller that became a nurse for St. Vincent’s hospital. Kittie followed suit and became a nurse herself.

Lena had married a doctor and moved to Tennessee during the recession of 2008. She always wanted to go to the mountains. Kittie stayed behind to help the backlog of victims of 9/11. She stopped in to see Mouse on a regular basis.

“Let me hit the showers first,” said Jacob.

“I should as well,” I said.

I headed off toward the bathing chambers. When I came back I could see Jacob speaking with Kittie. Kittie had dark hair and dark blue eyes. She was dressed in burgundy scrubs.

“Hey, Cordelia,” she said. “Just catching up with Jacob. Has Mouse been taking his medicine?”

“Yeah, dad makes sure he does,” I said.

Jacob and Kittie were childhood friends; they were only about a year apart from each other. I remember most of the kids being older than me. Even now, I feel so much younger than the other residents. Yes, there were a few children my age, but I never truly connected to them as well as my brother, or even my father connected to people. I was content to read poems and

have tea parties by myself.

I remember some of the other kids would sneer at me. It wasn't my appearance that they hated, but they thought I had privilege because I was Vincent's daughter. Jacob had earned his title by being a hero, but I waited in the shadows. They never called me a freak, but they jeered the term "princess" to me often.

If they saw me as an entitled brat, so be it. I would train and become the best protectress I could. I would start attending council meetings regularly, and I still had my friends from the underground above if no one wanted to be my friend here.

Kittie never saw me as a younger brat though. She was always nice to me; her and her mother. But she was my brother's friend, not mine. I was alone at least from the other kids. I made friends with the adults of the world and my parents. I was very close to my father; he was the only other person like me he was my best friend.

"So, do you know what you'll be doing now that you're out of the service?" Kittie asked. "Other than picking on your little sister?"

"I really have no idea," he said. "I know I want to help people."

"Well, we always need help in the medical industry," she said. "You should apply to be an EMT." She kissed him on the cheek as she left. "We'll talk about it over lunch."

"OOOOOO," I giggled. "Looks like you have a date."

"Oh, grow up!" he said, his cheeks flushing.

"I'm trying to, but you keep interrupting my beauty sleep. It's probably the reason I'm still short."

"Actually, my mom was only four eleven," said my mom, as she entered the room. "Sorry to disappoint you but you might not grow much taller. That's why I asked Jacob to train you, to learn how to defend yourself for your size, without resorting to scratching and biting."

"She'll always be a pipsqueak," he laughed while giving me a noogie. I lightly dug my claws against his arms; just doing that drew a little blood.

"Ouch! Remember to block, not claw like a raccoon."

I rolled my eyes.

My father entered the room and Jacob gave him a big hug.

"Dad, I'm headed out. Kittie and I have a date, and I'm going to apply to the hospital to apply for EMT certification. I have first aid and combat medic skills, I think I'd do well there."

My father smiled.

"I wish you luck, in both endeavors. It brings me joy to see you doing well. I'm also glad Kittie is doing well. I made a promise to Lena that her daughter would be looked after and loved. Now it's her daughter that looks after us."

"I saw. I hope to help people too - the heroes that fell between the cracks, the ones that deserve more."

"Like Uncle Mouse?," I said.

“He’s the main reason I want to help, yes,” said Jacob.

As he was heading out he turned back toward me.

“Remember, training again at 0500, and the next council meeting is at 1500. Be there early,” he said.

“Lovely,” I groaned before heading back to my chamber.

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## **My Wyrd Sisters**

C.C was visiting me during downtime from training. Jacob is training at work and spending more time with Kittie. It was all well and good, I had most of the basic combat moves memorized and I was thankful to be able to sleep in on weekends again.

C.C gave me some old band t-shirts she had as well some dresses and pants. We hung a few band and movie posters in my chamber. Mom came in and I thought I heard her mutter “teenagers” under her breath before kissing me on the forehead and heading out again.

“So if you could date anyone, who would it be?” C.C asked.

“I haven't thought about it, I'm really busy with things,” I said.

“I think Jermain likes you,” C.C said.

“He doesn't know what I am; that just is a really bad idea,” I said.

“What about the tunnel people?” she asked.

“Most of them are older than me, and the ones that aren't are like my brothers and sisters. That'd be weird.”

“Your dad found someone to love,” She said.

“He was nearly in his thirties,” I said. “I'm only seventeen, I haven't even gotten a handle on this whole adulting business let alone trying to drag someone into it.”

“Who would you date though, real or fictional?”

My cheeks turned almost as red as my hair. “I... I don't know... I guess Harry Dresden?”

“Harry Dresden?” She asked.

“From the Dresden Files. He's used to supernatural creatures and wouldn't judge me too harshly. Then again, he lives in Chicago, is about forty and is practically married. Just scratch that. Romeo, Othello, Macbeth, and Hamlet are all from Shakespeare and equally screwed up, no thanks. I guess I could go with Dream from the Sandman. Really C.C, this is a silly question. Can we move on to something else.”

Suddenly, I felt such a deep pain stab through my heart. It was heavy and leaden and seemed to dampen everything else I felt out. It wasn't my pain but coming from a distance.

You look like you've seen a ghost,” said C.C “Are you ok?”

“Yes, but I feel someone else's pain. It feels like someone took a soaking wool blanket and threw it over me,” I said.

“It’s Melissa,” said C.C. “She’s had depression for a while.”

“We should go check on her.”

I grabbed my hoodie and headed out of my chamber quickly. I told my parents I was checking in on a friend and headed out as fast as I could run.

Melissa Chen lived in Chinatown, in a small cramped apartment that her grandmother rented for her over a grocer. It was broad daylight and away from the club and art districts, so I couldn’t just walk in unnoticed. That and everyone had a camera and computer at their fingertips, it was better not to do anything rash or stupid.

C.C. went out ahead of me and carefully led me behind some back alleys. I was small, so I could hide easily if there were passers-by. It was considerably slower, but we managed to make it to the fire escape behind Mel’s apartment. When we reached her floor and opened the window, we heard Tori Amos’ *Girl* playing on loud repeat. On a coffee table, there was an empty pill bottle that r and Mel lay still on the floor.

I grabbed her wrist and felt for a pulse, it was weak but it was there. C.C. turned off the music.

“We need to call an ambulance!” she screamed.

“There’s no time!” I said, “I can’t really leave easily either.”

I saw Mel’s smartphone on the table. I hit the emergency dial just in case, C.C. gave the location of where we were. I also went and found a pipe and sent out a code to the world below. I grabbed Mel’s phone again, thankfully it was unlocked, and fished out a card in my pocket. I dialed the number on it.

“Jacob Chandler, who is this?” said the voice on the other line.

“It’s Cordelia, your sister,” I said.

“Wait they let you have a phone?”

“No, it’s C.C.’s phone. I need your help.”

I described the situation to Jacob. At the same moment, I heard a loud knock on the door. I ran to the restroom as C.C. answered the door. It was paramedics, and my brother was among them holding the phone. He gave Mel an injection of some kind and they moved her onto a stretcher. He and the other paramedics carefully but hurriedly rushed her out the door.

“I don’t know how you got assigned,” I began over the phone.

“I didn’t but I told them that a friend had an emergency, they usually don’t do this but we were training in the area,” he said.

“Please let me know how she is.”

I was trying not to cry.

“We gave her a shot of flumazenil, she overdosed on Xanax. Her pulse is weak but her breathing is normal. She should pull through, but they’ll hold her overnight for observation. She’s lucky to have you and C.C. as friends, otherwise she wouldn’t have made it.”

"I'm lucky to have a brother that's a hero," I said.

"Nah, I'm just a working stiff like everyone else. You're a friend. She suffers from depression?"

"Apparently. She always just seemed quiet and shy; she hid it well, even from me."

"That's no easy thing to do," he said. "If she has depression, you and C.C need to keep an eye on her after she gets out. She also needs to get help."

"Yes," I said.

"I mean it!" he said. "I've lost too many friends to this, I don't need one of your friends going to, you be there for her."

"Yes, sir!" I blurted.

"I have to go, I'll talk to you later when I get off work. You and C.C try and get home without being seen. Over and out."

With that, the phone hung up. C.C stood in the small apartment, tears in her eyes.

"Was that Jacob?" she asked.

"Yes, Melissa is in good hands," I said. "She'll make it, but we need to save her from her sadness," I said.

"It's not just sadness, it's clinical depression, she's had it since high school at least."

"It's just a pain so overwhelming; I don't know how to process it," I said.

"Neither does she," said C.C

"We'll have to find a way."

"Yeah," sighed C.C

We both slumped into a ball and cried ourselves. C.C left to check on Melissa in the hospital. I hid in the tiny apartment until nightfall.

I made my way to C.C's house that evening. I looked in the window to see if any of her roommates were home and gently tapped on the window. She opened the window, streaks of heavy mascara ran down her cheeks.

"She's going to be alright," she said. "Thank God your brother was there. How did he know?"

"I called him," I said. "Also we have a bit of a family connection."

"Yeah. I keep forgetting about that, your gift," she said. "Mel is going to be under observation for a day or so, then I'm going to pick her up and bring her home. I was wondering if you could be there?" she asked.

"Surely I will," I said.

"I might have let it slip that you're real."

C.C looked at me sheepishly.

"Did she believe you?" I asked, quirking an eyebrow.

"She was too out of it to really hear me," she said. "I think you should tell her."

I shrugged. "Worst case scenario, she thinks I've gone mad," I said. "As long as she's alive. We

do need to be there for her. We should check in on her more, see how she is. I of all people should have known her state.”

“Don’t blame yourself,” said C.C. “She’s had depression as long as I can remember. I thought the medicine she was on was helping, but it wasn’t enough.”

“She shouldn’t be alone, I’ll be there. I do have to go home and tell my family where I’m going, I’m sure Jacob has filled them in, but still.”

“Yeah, you go home.”

She hugged me and then I scaled down the house and went to the Chinatown tunnel entrance.

My father was at the entrance and he greeted me with a great bear hug.

“Your friend’s darkness and sadness are so great, I can feel it radiating off you.”

“I’ll be alright. I just need to be there for her,” I breathed in deeply and caught myself in a near sob. “I don’t know how else to help her - it’s as if she’s sinking underwater and I don’t know how to pull her to the surface.”

“Just be there for her in her darkness, but don’t let that darkness drown you.” He patted me on the back. “You’re a good friend.”

“Thank you,” I said. “C.C asked me to come back to Mel’s apartment in a few hours. Father, I have something to ask of both you and mom.”

“What is it?” he asked.

“Can I tell her what I am, and about the world underneath? She may be able to heal her heart here.”

He sighed and then knitted his white eyebrows together. “In the end, it will be up to you who you let know about yourself and this world. Know that people rely on this place for safety. Do you trust Melissa?”

“I do,” I said. “She’s very quiet. I didn’t know of her depression until I felt it for myself, but I trust her,” I sighed. “She’s apparently great at keeping secrets.”

“Don’t judge her,” said my father. “Just be there, that maybe what she needs to keep her head above the waves.”

I nodded, sniffed and headed back to Mel’s apartment

When I arrived C.C was sitting with Melissa. They had a tea set in front of them and were drinking out of small cups. Both of them were wearing pajamas and their faces scrubbed of makeup. Melissa looked very young. Her eyes were more almond-shaped than when painted, but still a beautiful coffee color. I tapped on the window to be let in.

“Cordelia,” she said giving me a big hug.

“Hey, Melissa,” I said. “How are you feeling?”

“I’ve felt better,” she said. “I have a headache.”

“I can only imagine,” I said.

“I’m sorry for what I put you and C.C through,” she looked down. “You deserve a better friend...”

“Nonsense!” I barked out. “We should have known, I should have known.”

“I didn’t want to trouble anyone,” cried Melissa, nearly in tears.

“Trouble us, cry to us, tell us everything, that’s what we’re here for,” I said. “I also have my own secrets to share.”

“You’re real, and it’s not a costume,” said Mel. “I already thought as much.”

“Really?” said C.C.

“My people know you as Huli Jing. Others know you as Kitsune or Kuhimho. The spirit world exists as part of our world,” said Mel. “I’m glad I have one as a friend.”

“I’m not some great spirit or goddess. I’m just a person trying to figure out life like everyone else. I don’t even know what I’m doing most days,” I shrugged.

“You showed up,” said C.C. “Have you heard anything from your mother, Mel?”

“She told me that I was lucky to have an apartment and next year I wouldn’t have medical insurance to cover an ambulance if I brought dishonor to myself,” said Melissa.

“How cruel!” I said.

“That’s just the way she is. I wanted to go to art school but she said it wasn’t a real career. She lets me stay here as long as I help with the store. I need to be in tomorrow, no excuses, or she said...,” she cried. “She said she’d commit me.”

“No you don’t,” I said. “I’ll talk to my parents. I live in a world under the city where many go to heal. You can paint or draw until your heart’s content if you like.”

“You know what? Let’s just head down now, it’s easier when it’s still dark.”

“All right, may I grab my sketchbook?” asked Melissa.

“Sure,” I said.

We all headed out of the tiny apartment towards the Chinatown entrance. It was my mother at the door to greet us this time, her pale copper hair bound neatly.

“It’s nice to meet you, Melissa,” she said. “I’m Diana, Cordelia’s mother and one of the leaders of this place you are about to enter.”

“Nice to meet you, ma’am,” said Mel.

“This world is home to people that rely on us for secrecy. It’s important that you keep our secret and our people safe, especially my husband and my daughter. Even if you think they don’t care, Cordelia, there are still people that would fear you both and judge you.”

“I know, Mom, I’m not an idiot,” I said.

I then got a glare that only mother’s give their unruly children, a glare that can turn water into ice.

“Sorry,” I said. “Mom’s right. There are still people that would hunt me if they knew who I really was. I have to be especially careful now that everyone and their mother has a camera on them.”

“I won’t tell anybody,” said Mel. “Even if I did, they’re about to stick me in a madhouse

anyway.”

“Not if I can help it,” I said.

We led her down the corridors and paths, down the spiral staircase to my parent’s chamber where my father, Jacob and Kittie were waiting for us.

“It is good to meet you, Melissa,” my father said, holding out his hand.

Melissa shook my father’s hand tentatively. She looked up at his intimidating size.

“Your father is more Shishi than Huli Jing. More guardian lion than fox spirit,” Mel said quietly to me.

“I know,” I said, under my breath. “He is also the kindest and most noble person I know.”

“I’m Jacob, Cordelia’s brother.”

“We’ve met before,” said Mel.

“I’m Kittie, his other half,” she hugged Mel.

“Now Mel,” said Jacob. “Understand you have a safe place, but also know that depression is chemical in nature, at least partly. Kittie and I want you to see a licensed therapist at the very least, preferably a psychiatrist. You can have your medication adjusted so you can start feeling better.”

“Yes, sir,” said Mel.

“Don’t mind him,” I said. “Former military, he’s used to giving out orders.”

“Hey!” said Jacob. “I’ve had friends in the service that have taken their own lives. Some with families. It’s something I take seriously. Now, Mel, promise me you’re going to get help. You’re family here now. “

She nodded.

“I’ll help you set an appointment, we have helpers up top that can assist.”

Mel looked around, with tears in her eyes. “Thank you all so very much. I’m going to go up above and tell my mother that I’m staying with your C.C, that way she won’t hunt for me. I’m also going to quit my job at the grocer.”

“It’s about time,” said C.C

“I like to draw, I’m going to try to get into art school again if I can,” said Mel.

“There’s a beautiful waterfall where you can practice sketching,” I said.

“That’s a wonderful idea,” said my father

“I’ll take you there before we leave,” I said.

I led her through the tunnels to where it opened into a beautiful underground lake with a cascading waterfall.

“This is also where we get our water,” I said. “It’s also safe to drink, and quite delicious.”

“Wow!” exclaimed Mel. “You have paradise here, I will be in a world of spirits.”

“I’m only a person,” I said. “This world was much larger before the towers fell, we lost many of

the upper levels. My grandfather helped form this world close to sixty years ago, he passed away before I was born.”

“Was your grandfather Shen?” she asked.

“No.” I laughed. “My grandfather found my father and raised him. My brother and I were born in the usual way,” I said.

“Your father is lucky to have such a pretty wife.”

“Honestly, they’re lucky to have each other,” I said.

“To be married to a Shen is a lucky thing indeed, you don’t realize you are Shen or God form too.”

“I am not a God form. I’m terrified I won’t be able to live up to what my grandfather and parents built. What if I fail and this world crumbles under my feet? It’s something I worry about every day. I also have horrible nightmares and I’m terrified of accidentally hurting people.”

Mel smiled. She showed me the beginnings of a charcoal sketch of the waterfall; it was quite good.

“We should go and clear things up in Chinatown before I move what few things I have,” she said. “C.C said she’ll lead me back home.”

“All right,” I said.

“You both are my sisters now,” she said.

“Boil Bubble Toil and Trouble,” I said. “We’ll be the Wyrd Sisters then.”

“Just don’t start hunting down bats for wool,” laughed Mel.

Mel and C.C left for the morning. I felt the heavy blanket of sadness starting to fade, sometimes it would return in fits and starts, but it would never reach the depths it did to drown in if I was there to help it.

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## **Playing Games**

It was a cold day in December when I came up to the shop. Magic tower games were owned by David Ralls. Mel and I were outside and nightfall was upon the city.

“Is anyone in there?” I asked.

“A few older men with beards, and a middle-aged woman. It looks like a Dungeon and Dragons (DND) game.”

“Well, it is a game shop,” I shrugged.

“I can just order the cards online,” answered Mel.

“I wanted to say hello to Dave. I haven’t seen him for a bit.”

“I’ll let him know you’re here,” replied Mel.

I nodded and drew my hoodie up even further and tied the strings. A young man walked toward the shop. He was dark-skinned and muscular and had a shock of lime green hair combed over to one side. I let out a sigh of relief.

"Hello, Jermain, fancy seeing you here," I said.

"Small world, Cordy." He smiled. "So what are you up to?"

"Mel and I were just going to buy a set of Magic the Gathering cards, and I wanted to say hi to an old friend," I said.

"You know one of these guys?" he asked, pointing to the DND circle.

"No, not them." I giggled. "I know the shop owner. His name is Dave, he's a nice guy."

"Aww, I thought you played DND," he said.

"They have invited me to a game or two, online," I said. "And I've played Pathfinder at C.C's house"

"Good series."

"Kajit has wares if you have coin," I purred.

"Hey, Cordy, I see you prefer to be in character and everything, but I'd like to see your actual face one of these days," he chuckled.

"About that...."

The door clanged open and Dave was on the other side waving us in. He was a thin man in his mid-40's with blonde hair and glasses.

"Hello Dave," I said, giving him a quick hug. "These are my friends, Jermain and Mel."

"I know Jermain," he answered. "He comes in for rule books and miniatures, I was just speaking to the lovely Melissa."

"Charmed, I'm sure," I said.

"Cordy, is it safe for you to be here?" asked Dave, raising a brow above his spectacles.

Just then, the phone rang loudly. The store still had a landline and an old rotary phone with an actual bell.

"Magic Tower Games, this is David Ralls speaking, how may I help you?" he said crisply.

A voice chirped on the other line and I heard faint laughter.

"No, we do not have Battle Toads!. Stop calling us and asking."

He slammed down the phone.

"Trolls!" he said.

The middle-aged woman turned her head and asked if David was ok.

"I'm fine, it's just the trolls again," he replied.

"Well it's best not to feed them," replied the lady. "I'm sorry, where are my manners. My name is Martha."

She was soft but kind looking and had short brown hair turning to a gentle gray.

“Nice to meet you, milady. I’m Jermain, this is Mel and Cordelia.”

Mel just curtsied, and I waved. I was less self-conscious about my hands since Mel had been painting my nails with ornate designs. They looked pointed and manicured now, less claw-like.

“Wow, you like to get into character, don’t you girl?” she stated.

“Kajit has wares,” I shrugged.

“We just started this campaign,” said Martha. “You can join if you want, the more the merrier.”

“Perhaps some other day,” I said. “It is an entertaining game, but a rather time-consuming, truth be told.”

“You’re not wrong about that!” said Martha. “Well, you kids have fun and be careful.” She then proceeded back to her table.

Just then Mel came back with two decks of cards, one red and one blue. We all sat down at a little round table. Jermain’s face lowered and his tone became serious.

“I heard what happened, Mel,” he said. “Are you hanging in there?”

“As good as I can,” replied Mel. “Some days are harder than others, but at least now I can be myself, thanks to Cordy.”

“We’re roommates now,” I said.

“I thought you still lived with your parents,” said Jermain.

“Oh, I do, just Mel has joined us,” I said.

Mel nodded.

“Her parents are very kind people, speaking of which, I’m going to head home and work on my drawings. You should have Jermain teach you how to play Magic,” she said with a wink.

“Too bad C.C.’s in class,” I said. “Perhaps the four of us should start our own pathfinder campaign,” I said nervously.

“It’ll be fine,” she whispered.

“Just tell my folks where I am, just say I’m at Dave’s, they’ll know where I am,” I said.

“Sure thing,” She smiled before heading out the door, the small shop bells tinkling as she left.

I picked up the decks and rifled through them. The blue deck was serene with lakes, islands, and sea creatures. The red deck was covered with craggy rocks and full of goblins.

“First time playing Magic the Gathering?” asked Jermain.

“It is,” I replied. “I heard it was like chess, I grew up playing chess.”

“I used to play with my grandpa in Central Park,” said Jermain. “He let me beat him a couple of times until I learned how to really beat him, and then he didn’t want to play anymore.”

“Perhaps we should play chess sometime?” I said,

“To be honest, I was in the chess club in high school, I got burned out on it. Every teacher wanted me to join the basketball or football team, saying a young black kid couldn’t get a scholarship on chess, and they were right,” he smirked. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to go off down a rabbit hole there.”

“It’s all right,” I said.

“Yeah, I’m just in debt for a lousy B.S degree and working as a temp at Pfizer,” he sighed. “It could be a hell of a lot worse though. I have a roof over my head, I stay out of trouble. “

“About what?” I said, “I heard about your new roommate.”

“Oh, yeah, Tom from Orpheus. He’s a nice guy, has been through a lot with his family, but he’s one of four people I live with.”

“Whatever it takes to survive,” I said.

“Yeah, with all the gentrification, the rich getting richer and the poor being pushed out of the city, debt wages going down. You know, I might move out to the Midwest or something, start over from scratch.”

“Whatever you feel you need to do,” I replied. “But before you move to the Midwest, could you teach me how to play?”

He smiled at that. “This might take a while, do you want me to get you some coffee?”

“That would be most appreciated,” I said.

The game store had a modest café in the corner. Dave fixed us two small coffees and a bag of chips. He had a particular grin. I shook my head, grabbed the coffees and headed back toward the small table. Jermain then taught me how to play.

The base idea was similar enough to chess, but it was far more detailed. I enjoyed looking at the artwork on the cards, tapping them to call out fantastic creatures to pummel against the waters of Jermain’s keep. He was very skilled and did not let me win on principle. It held five games, but I beat him on my merit.

“Girl, you’re a pretty quick learner,” he said.

“It only took three hours,” I said yawning. “I should head home now,”

“I’ll walk you home,” he said.

“I’ll be fine on my own,” I said. He looked a little disappointed.

“Shall we meet again?” I asked. “Another game next week, same time?”

“Sure thing,” he smiled. “You should come out of costume, I want to know how you look.”

My heart sank as I headed out the door and walked home.

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After fretting for the greater part of a week, I headed back to the game shop. I would let Jermain know about me; he would find out anyway. I had been friends with him for months now.

I once again waited for nightfall and kept my hoodie pulled up over my face. I saw the same group of middle-aged gamers rolling dice in the edge table. I saw Jermain at the corner table with a small laptop and a stack of books. Upon closer inspection, I found that the books were a

mix of gamebooks and scientific textbooks. There was a paper cup of coffee near him.

"An odd place to study," I said as I sat down across from him.

"It's quiet, and it's as good a place as any," He sipped some coffee and smiled. "I see you're still in costume, O furry one."

"About that." My hands started to feel clammy, and I took a deep breath. Now is the only thing that is real. I thought to myself and commenced counting in my mind, from 100 backward.

"About what?" he asked.

"It's not a costume," I said, almost under my breath.

Jermain took a deep sigh and closed his eyes.

"Are you trying to tell me this is your lifestyle and who you are?"

"I was born like this," I answered. "I was always this way. C.C has been looking into it. She thinks I may not be the only one, that there might be others."

"C.C did a Bigfoot investigation back in high school. She also wanted to find alligators in the sewer system. I mean she's cute and all, but not the most stable cat out there. I think that's why she's studying archeology; she wants to locate a missing link, or that we're all aliens or something." He chuckled. "It's why we didn't work out."

"Work out?" I asked.

"Yeah, I always attract crazy ladies, adorable crazy white girls. It has to be the scene, do you guys see me as an exotic?" he asked.

I shrank back in my chair. I took a deep breath and held back tears. As much as Jermain had belittled me, I could feel his words were spoken in defense. That he himself was from a place of rejection and loneliness. I could understand that he was working toward something, a degree perhaps.

I pulled my chair out and began to take off.

"Look, you don't have to leave, we can play another game of magic. The costume is fine if you want to wear it," he stated.

I got up and walked over to David.

"Are you Ok?" David asked.

"Yes," I said. "I need you to vouch for me. I need you to tell Jermain that I am real, and what I say I am."

"I made a vow to your father and your world thirty years ago," replied David. "I'm not going to break that promise now, not because you're having a crush on some boy."

"Cordy?" said Jermain.

But by the time he got up to look for me I had left the store, bells jangling behind me. I pulled my hoodie up over my head and dashed to the nearest entrance to the tunnels.

I walked for miles, ran even holding back tears. I then reached my chamber and landed on my bed and sobbed. I was supposed to be a protector of this world and I'm sobbing into my pillow like a stupid teenage girl. I am better than this. Breathe, count to a hundred, suck it up.

I saw Mel come in, she sat down beside me and gave me a hug.

“Your dad sent me to look in on you,” she said. “He felt that you were upset, but didn’t want to impose.”

I chuckled at this, then hiccupped. Mel handed me a glass of water and a cloth to wipe my tears.

“What happened?” she asked.

“It’s foolish,” I said

“It’s not foolish if it made you cry,” she replied. “What’s wrong? Tell me.”

“I told Jermain what I was, and he thought I was crazy,” I said.

“Oh, he can be a jerk, sometimes,” she shrugged. “You liked him, didn’t you?”

“I could see him as a possibility,” I said. “I don’t know him well enough to be head over heels in love. Just, he thinks I’m crazy, for what I am. I mean I’m mad but not for that reason...”

“Shh,” said Mel. “Jermaine can be a bit of a dick. C.C, Jermain and I went to the same high school, we’re close friends. He dated C.C back in sophomore year, it wasn’t too serious.”

“I figured as much,” I said.

“They decided to just be friends because he felt she was crazy, and she thought he had no imagination,” said Mel. “I think he has an imagination, but he’s terrified of what that could lead to. I suspect some of C.C 's theories scared him, to be honest.Perhaps he saw something frightening while urbexing or ghost hunting.”

“He seemed just so closed off, lost in study,” I added.

“That’s his way out,” replied Mel. “His immediate family is doing ok, but his cousins and grandparents are from the projects. His parents admitted him into school fair and square, but there were a bunch of racist assholes that would harass him and call him things like Affirmative Action Case.”

I rolled my eyes. “I hate people, sometimes, or at least their ignorance and fear.”

“Tell me about it!” said Mel. “If I hear ‘I love you long time’ from another jerk, I’m going to stab their eyes out with a pen.”

“You know, C.C tried to set us up,” I said.

“She thought you understood him, that you could get the chip off his shoulder.”

“Not so much,” I sighed. “Mel, I will go to the whispering bridge to meditate for a while, it helps me feel better.”

“All right, should I tell your parents where you are?” she asked.

“Yes, please,” I said. “I don’t want them to worry too much.”

I walked a mile down to the whispering bridge. It was once composed of wood but now was made from steel, the wood collapsing after the towers. They call it the whispering bridge because you can hear the whispers of the city. Pascal claimed that the city whispered a lot more before they invented texting and that the bridges were too quiet now, but I could still hear the whispers loud and clear. The bustle of the city above, the Uber drivers competing with

the old cabbies, the people on their way to work, the street musicians.

I sat cross-legged on the bridge and let my arms relax at my sides, I shut my eyes and listened as my breath drowned out the noise of the whispers and let my thoughts go.

After what I think was an hour, I felt a tap on my shoulder. I saw both my dad and my mother standing over me.

"We just thought we'd check on you to see if you were ok," said my mom.

"Yeah," I said. "I was just meditating, as you taught me."

"So, what has upset you so?" inquired my father.

"It's dumb," I sighed. "It's just some boy I liked."

"Jermain?" he asked.

"Yes. He doesn't believe I'm real. He just thinks I'm a crazy girl in a costume. At least if he had been afraid, I'd understand, but he doesn't even take me seriously enough to be scared."

"Did you love him?" asked my father.

"No, not really," I chuckled. "I saw him as a possibility, but not love, not like anything you've had. It's just my pride that's been broken, not my heart."

"It's ok," said my mom, stroking my hair. "You shouldn't worry about what some boy thinks, anyway."

"I bought it on myself," I replied. "He thought I was wearing a mask when we first met, and I never corrected him. You know what? I have friends that believe me, and people that trust me, from now on, no more deception to people, if they think I'm mad, so be it."

My dad smiled and my mom helped me up to my feet.

"Also, I haven't treated you guys as I should have. I've been like a manipulative child. You guys deserve better; this world deserves better."

"Don't be so hard on yourself," said Mom.

"You were a child, not so long ago," said my father. "You still have a bit of learning ahead of you."

"Lovely," I said. "Does it ever end?"

"You must always keep learning and continue growing, I'm an old man and you and Jacob teach me new things every day."

I hugged my parents.

"I should probably get some sleep."

"Just be up early tomorrow," said Mom. "We need you to help prepare the great hall for Winterfest."

"Sure thing," I said.

"Cordelia, you have been chosen to give part of the opening speech," said my father. "We need a voice for the younger generation, would you write something?"

"You want me to speak in front of everyone?" I asked.

“At the candle-lighting, there will be others with you.”

“You’ll do fine,” said my mom and hugged me.

I waited till they left and headed toward my chamber. Well, I was no longer worried about what a silly boy thought of me, not when I had more important things to take care of.

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## **Screams In Winter**

The great hall stood empty, bare rock walls and bare tables. C.C, Mel and I walked down the stairs, the fierce wind blowing through our hair. Piper, Bell, Uncle Mouse, my parents, and about a dozen other members, came down the steps, holding large boxes.

We shut the doors and started unpacking the boxes. C.C marveled at the tapestries in the boxes.

“Where do you want me to hang these?” she asked my dad.

“Hang them above the steps,” he said.

“The markings on these are at least from the seventeenth century, do you know where they came from?” she asked.

“No one knows exactly where they’re from, they were found decades ago.”

“Ya know, I could bring one of them to the lab, have it carbon dated,” said C.C

“Some mysteries are worth keeping,” said my mom.

“You would know Detective,” said C.C, as she hung the tapestries.

I laid out the placemats and took a basket of candles and arranged them in a chandelier hanging above the middle of the table. Jacob tapped me on the shoulder.

“Have you written your part of the speech yet?” he asked.

“I’m still working on it, you and father are going to be a tough act to follow.”

“You’ll do fine,” he said. “Just don’t overthink it.”

“I’m glad you could get the time off, Jacob,” said my mom, as she hugged him. “It must be hectic.”

“It is, but I like helping people, it gives me purpose.”

Mel was in the background working on a few sketches. She wiped some charcoal off on her black shirt and pulled up her sleeve. On her arm there was a line of scars.

“You’re safe here, with people who care for you, try not to think of past wounds,” said my father, gently touching her arm.

“Oh. I know” said Mel. “I’ve been thinking of a tattoo to cover them, something to make my scars pretty.”

“Go for it,” said Jacob. “A lot of my brothers-in-arms have them for that reason.”

“Once I sell one of my drawings, I’m also working on a project for this Winterfest, something special,” she smiled.

“Dad?” I asked. “Would it be alright if I went to my chamber to work a bit on my speech?”

“Yes. Everything seems to be underway smoothly, Dear. I can spare you the rest of the day.”

“Thank you,” I said.

I gave him and my mom a quick hug.

“Be careful of the winds going back up,” said my father.

I nodded and headed up toward the windy stairs to my chamber.

I had been working on my speech, in between patrols. However, my nightmares were returning and I wasn’t sleeping well. I felt tired and out of sorts, and scared to death about speaking in front of everyone.

My dad was right though, if I wanted a place in the council, to be a guardian here, I needed to find the words. I had an old typewriter that sat on a simple black iron desk in my chamber. When I was little, I envied my father’s writing, its intricate loops, but whenever I tried to write, it was legible but blocky and not impressive, I also wrote very slowly, trying to get letters to be precise.

Uncle Mouse saw me struggling when I was about eleven or so and gave me an old typewriter that he had supposedly found. My mother taught me how to use it, she even said I could use the word processor on the computer used for mapping. I declined her, there was just something about the heavy clack of old keys and the winding of paper, setting and inking the ribbon.

I grabbed a sheet of paper and wound it into the typewriter. I thought of the words, the words that our world would need; we were still rebuilding. My fingers clicked away a steady rhythm onto the paper. I went through a few drafts, leaving the crumpled paper on the floor surrounding me. When I was satisfied, I took the sheet of paper out, waited until the ink dried and folded the paper in half leaving it on the small table by my bed. I checked my clock, it was nearly 2 am. C.C and Mel decided to stay the night and came up to my chamber with cots and blankets.

“All work and no play make Cordy a dull girl,” laughed C.C.

I yawned and stretched out.

“I think I should go to sleep; Winterfest is the day after tomorrow, and I hope I’m good enough,” I said.

“You will be,” said Mel. “This place is wonderful, and even if you fail they’ll forgive you.” She smiled.

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” I said.

They fixed the cots with some blankets, and we spoke for a bit before finally falling asleep.

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The next day my father and Jacob led the procession down the hall of wind. I was in the middle of the crowd with C.C and Mel. I was a hand shorter than the people surrounding me and would occasionally jump up to see what was happening. My father now, with my brother's help, opened the huge wooden door to the great hall. Then they both shut it against the wind. The great hall was dark and I shuffled in and moved to the table where my family sat and picked the chair next to my mother.

"These tunnels have existed for centuries, even before the cities and people lived and took shelter in them," said my mother, lighting one candle.

"Back then, sounds in the darkness brought fear and men fought men with weapons," said my father. "But then, nearly sixty years ago, Father, and senior members of the council, many who have passed on, created a world where we would help each other and the sounds became welcome, and not met with fear." He lit a candle.

"Th... the world was still hungry, people held together and made it better," said Uncle Mouse, lighting other candles.

"With helpers, our world thrived, we built vast networks of tunnels and communications to help those around us, and with the help above," Pascal said as he lit a candle.

Then Jacob blew out half the candles. "Fifteen years ago, the city was attacked and the towers fell, much of the upper floors were knocked down by the blast, and our world was plunged into darkness once again."

Kittie took her candle and relit the others, followed by Piper, Bell and the dozen of now young adults saved from the towers.

"But we persevered through the darkness and rebuilt what we could. Children now orphaned needed us more than ever, and we filled the call," said Kittie.

"And we will continue to persevere, not only through the darkness but through change," I said. "The world outside becomes ever more connected, yet people lose themselves from truly connecting to each other. May this place be warm in the comfort of candlelight and merriment, instead of the cold comfort of screens, and bright neon lights. May this place keep the peace, while everyone is bombarded with noise, and may we have civil discourse when everything screams in echo chambers. May this place always be a haven from the world outside."

I, C.C and Mel lit the remaining candles, and in unison, we all lit the candles on the chandelier.

The great hall lit with a warm comforting light. We had a meal and the children played classical tunes on flutes, violins, and harps.

"I feel like I'm at the Renaissance fair," said C.C "You grew up with this?"

"Every year we have Winterfest to celebrate our helpers," I said. "It's rather soothing after all the industrial and heavy metal we've been listening to."

"Fair, you can't go wrong with the classics," she said.

I nodded.

A triangle bell tinkled and everyone's attention looked toward the stage. Mel was in front, she was fidgeting with her dress.

"Hello," she said nervously. "My name is Melissa Chen, I am grateful to this world for giving me a place to heal, to be myself. I know nothing I can do can really repay any of you, but I am a practicing artist. I know that there was once a woman named Elizabeth that lived in the higher tunnels. She painted beautiful works of the history of this world. However, after the attacks, much of her works were lost, and she was taken as a casualty. They're only rough sketches now, but as a work in progress, I am working to restore these works on canvas. "

She went to the sidewall and unveiled several charcoal drawings on canvas, while they were rough, they had beauty and accuracy to them. "Thank you, these drawings have also let me heal."

My father went up to her and gave her a hug.

"Mel, these are beautiful, thank you. You kept Elizabeth's memory with your work."

"They'll be better when they're done," she said quietly, fidgeting with her sleeve before pulling it down over her scars on her arms.

I smiled and gave Mel a hug myself.

My mother then got on the stage.

"A week before Winterfest, eighteen years ago, my daughter came into this world," she announced.

"We waited until that Winterfest for her naming ceremony," said my father. "Before she was born, I lost my father, and he was the father of this world. I knew that she would bring light to this world when everything was so dark and that she would be my truth."

Blood rushed up to my face.

"Oh father, I love you," I said.

"Mel and I got you a present," said C.C "Happy eighteenth; I guess this makes you an adult now."

They handed me an ornate gold box with a black ribbon. I carefully opened it to reveal a cloak made of plush velvet, red on one side and black on the other. I put it on and it went down to just past my knees.

"It's beautiful!" I said. "And it fits!"

"We got a child's XL," laughed C.C "Just kidding, we figured you could use something a bit warmer than hoodies in winter."

"That is very generous of you girls," said my mother.

"It's our own Little Red Riding Wolf," said Bell.

"Very funny," I smirked. I walked away to review some of the other gifts when my spine grew cold.

Help me! Please! Somebody! Screamed a voice in my head. Followed by incoherent screams

and roars followed by gunshots.

I smelled pine needles and I felt I was being dragged away on a forest floor. I was actually being dragged on the ground by an invisible force. I dug my claws into the floor leaving deep gashes in the clay. I was slammed against one of the walls. I blanked out and just started counting in my mind, as my mother taught me to do since I was little. My parents both rushed over towards me and I had made it to the count of 150.

My father held me.

"Are you alright?" he asked, smoothing my hair.

"Try to focus," said my mother. "Just focus on the wall, you're here now."

C.C looked dumbfounded and grabbed a glass of water and handed it to me.

"Are you alright? What happened?"

"The other, she was calling out for help, she's in danger," I shuddered. "The other being."

"Your darkness?" asked my father.

"It's not my darkness - it doesn't even feel like it's part of me. The other is another being."

"I've fought that other being most of my life.."

"Vincent!" said C.C, a bit annoyed. "Sorry, but if your connection to other people, what say Cordelia can't be connected to another person, like you?"

"There is no other like us, we are alone."

"How do you know?! How?! What studies have you done? Have you ever even left the city or do you just believe what you've been told? There are cultures and mythologies full of beings that could be like you. What's to say Cordelia isn't connected to someone like her?"

My father took a deep breath and moved us into a small alcove.

"When I was Cordelia's age, I became very ill, I began to see things that were not there, I had waking dreams. I've been so very worried about her."

"Father," I said. "Feel my brow." He put his grey hand against my head. "Do I have a fever?"

"No."

"When I have my dreams, it's of forest and another being calling out to me. C.C could be correct. I don't feel ill at all, just the feeling that someone is trying to reach out to me. Mel, did I throw myself into the wall?"

She shook her head.

"No, you were pushed, by something."

"Someone is out there calling to me," I said. "I must find them."

"This is insane!" said my mother.

"Is it not you that tells people to stay open?" I asked.

"Yeah, but an open mind with no direction. You smell a forest, that's good, but do you know how many forests there are in the area? This person could be calling out to you from Bavaria for all we know. Just block them for now, until you can get a handle as to what is going on."

"You always tell me to help people, but now you want me to stay put while someone is screaming out to me. Father would you stay still if any of us was screaming to you in the same way?"

"It isn't fair for you to ask that," said my mom.

"Isn't it?" asked my father. "Her gift is very strong if that is the truth. If you must leave, do so, but not blindly. You said you saw a forest, was there anything else in this dream?"

I shut my eyes and concentrated.

"Yeah, it was a pine forest, dark and there were large towers, guard towers I think?"

"Fire towers," said C.C. "I see those on digs all the time, and pines?"

"Yes, and the smell of salt, seawater perhaps."

"Sounds like the barrens in New Jersey," said C.C. "There's a lot of cryptids reported out there."

"Oh, come on!" said my mother. "She can't be running through the pine barrens looking for some ghost that isn't there. "

"I saw a small town, abandoned, and a bridge that had fallen," I said.

"There are a few ghost towns there," said C.C. "We practice digs out in that area for class sometimes," she said. "I can borrow my mom's car and go down there, it'd take a couple of days at most."

"Absolutely not! what if someone sees her?" said Jacob.

"Shh," said my mom. "Just everyone is quiet. We can do this but we need to follow a plan."

My mom then led us all to my parent's chamber and cleared off a desk. She unrolled a map of New Jersey and took out a red pen circling the Warrenton National Forest.

"David?" she asked.

The shopkeeper came forward out of the confused helpers.

"Can we use your shop and computers?"

"Of course, I closed early for today, but we could head over there now."

We ran up to the shop, on foot it took nearly an hour and a half.

My mom took the map and went to the computers. She looked up ghost towns in the pine barrens and one with a sunken bridge.

"Is this what you see in your dreams?" she asked.

"Yes!" I said,

She took a red pen and circled the map.

"C.C, how fast can you get your mom's car?"

"It might take me an hour, we need to go to Brooklyn."

"Good, Cordelia, you wait here until we come back, this should only take us half a day."

*Help us!* screamed an echo. I could only hope an hour was enough time.

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## The Forest

C.C shoved me in the back of the car.

"I need you to hide from people looking in," said mom.

I slid into the back seat and curled up with the hood over my head, C.C drove and my mother gave directions to her with a laptop borrowed from David. I could feel the desperate calls for help coming closer, but when I listened for the voice they were dim, like a loud echo.

"I'm gonna need you to focus," said my mom.

She then put some classic rock on over the radio. We drove for nearly three hours, the second two hours growing faster as we left the traffic of the city. I saw the tall canyon of buildings softening to the quiet suburbs, then to the houses of the exurbs, then the trees of the forest.

We traveled past the suburbs in New Jersey to country roads, then from the country roads, we turned onto a dirt path, heading into a forest. Dark green pines towered over us just like the towers did back home. There were signs for Warrenton State Park and trail markers. Warning signs for 4-wheel drive only dotted the road. C.C parked the car on a turn off that lead to a smaller path. I breathed in the air marked with the scent of damp mud and the sharp spicy smell of evergreens. I could feel the echoes so loudly in my head. I broke off into a run down the muddy path.

"Wait! Cordelia!"

I could hear C.C and my mother called out in the background. I ignored them and kept running. I left the path, dodging thorns and branches until I came to a pond.

*I am here, help me!*

I saw a vision of a woman that looked a lot like my father in a way. The same golden hair in youth the same sharp blue eyes, and the same teeth and claws. There were tears in her eyes as she held a small bundle.

*We'll let you go, just hand us the child.*

I heard another echo, a deep male voice. I then heard a roar and a gunshot. The woman was knocked back into the pond and a hand reached in and withdrew the screaming bundle.

I shook my head and saw nothing but a pond again, partially frozen over.

"What would you have me do!?" I screamed into the air.

*"Find me, granddaughter", she whispered.*

With that, I shrugged and plunged into the icy water. It cut into my skin like a knife, my heart skipped a beat. At least the pond was rather shallow and muddy and it had not been cold enough the past winter to fully freeze the water or the ground. I reached the bottom of the pond and dug my claws deep into the mud. There was nothing, I dug down again and felt something round, I grasped it and wrenched it out of the soil and cleaned it off in the icy cold

water.

It was a skull, but the canines on the skull were far longer than a normal person, and the jaw bone was missing. I stood staring at it, dumbfounded.

"Alas poor Yorick, I knew him well," said C.C

I shook my head, shivering. "No, it's '*alas poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio, a man of infinite jest...*'"

"We get it!" said my mom, trailing behind her. Her eyes widened when she saw the skull in my hands.

"This," I said trembling from the cold. "This is who has been calling out to me! I'm afraid I'm a bit late to do anything to use now."

"Shhh," said my mom. "We don't know if there's anyone nearby, we don't want to attract their attention. C.C, throw the cloak over, and you, get out of that water, you'll get hypothermia."

"Yes mom," I said C.C threw the cloak over my soaked body.

"Don't worry, it's machine washable," she said while rubbing my arms vigorously to warm me. I handed her the skull.

"What do you make of this?" I asked.

"I dunno," she said, looking at it. "It's been here some time, I'm surprised it didn't decay further, I'd have to carbon date it to find out more information."

My mother then took the skull and held it; she traced the teeth over with her finger. I told my mother about the pull I felt and the vision I saw.

"Why now?" she asked.

"I've always had a vision of some other entity, something outside of myself. Since I was a little girl," I said. "Father always thought it was some sort of darkness to be controlled. Perhaps father heard the same voices, the same calling but shut it out where I listened."

"Your father saw his darkness as part of himself, it's the only thing that scares him," said my mom.

"See, with my visions, when I was little, I didn't feel fear, I only felt fear when I was told to suppress them, but they never felt part of me, except when I was really mad, but I knew to not count on anger."

"We should head back; we'll take the bones with us," said my mom "We need to get you into a warm car."

"I'll come back with some equipment and dig around," said C.C.

"I don't want there to be too much attention," said my mom.

"It's for my own curiosity. I'm not going to share anything with the university, probably not ever. We don't need a bunch of people pawing over your relatives as a great scientific discovery, you guys deserve better. I just want to dig the bones out, take her to your home and give her a decent burial in the catacombs."

"She would like that," I said. "I think she just wanted to be found, to let us know that we

weren't alone, and that we weren't the monsters, and that my father was wanted."

"I wonder if Jacob has had dreams about her?" asked C.C.

"No," I shook my head. "Jacob told me in confidence, but he has dreams of his mother guiding him."

"Of Catherine?" asked my mom.

I nodded.

"She guided him to find the children after the towers crashed, and guided him through his missions. She's at his side, doesn't leave much room for other visions."

My mom frowned.

"There's something I haven't told you; I wasn't hiding it from you, but I thought you were a bit too young."

"I'm the age of majority today mother," I said.

"Yes, but this stays between you girls. Your father doesn't need his wounds reopened."

I raised an eyebrow.

"Go on?"

"Jacob's mother didn't just pass away after his birth, she was murdered. I was the detective called to investigate her case."

"That's terrible. Did her killer pay?"

"I was the one that made sure he did."

"And I can be the one to bring my grandmother justice," I said. "Though it's a bit late for any vengeance, they probably passed long ago."

We walked back to the car, C.C turned the heat up and I sat huddled. We stopped by Goodwill and C.C bought me some used clothes to change into. It was a sweater and a long skirt.

"It's not a band shirt, but it's warm and dry," she said.

"Thank you."

We stopped one more time, to get some gas and hot chocolate. I hid under in the back seat letting my long hair cover my face. The pull was silent and I felt very tired and fell into a deep dreamless sleep until we returned to the tunnels.

On my return, everyone was glad I was back so soon and relatively unscathed. I asked to speak to my father in private. I told my father about the vision and showed him the skull. C.C let him know that she would be returning to the Pines to find if there were more bones. He listened silently.

"We were never alone, father," I said. "You weren't left unloved and forgotten, but stolen away."

"I see...," was all he said. He held the skull gingerly in his hand. "I have had so many theories, have been told dark truths, that I never knew what to believe was true. After a time the only truth I needed was this world and my family."

"Then I was born, and you realized the truth..."

"This truth isn't for my child, it's for you. I see my truth in you, in Jacob, in your mother in everyone who loves me or has loved me."

"Of course, you would say that, you're a romantic old soul," I smiled.

"There are dark lies I've been told that you really don't need to know."

"It's all right father. Just know I can be at peace now - once I find out what her name was, how she lived, her family, how much she wanted you as a son."

He smiled wistfully.

"I suppose you're old enough to know now. Remember the stories that I told you about Paracelsus when you were little?"

"The despot that wanted to take over this world?"

He nodded. "He told me that I killed my mother, that these hands.." He looked at his hands, and frowned. "The same hands that were bestowed upon you."

"That was a lie! I was born, mom's fine!"

"I know that now, I didn't know until... Father said that I was found but I didn't know if it was the whole truth. And then you were born. I had tried to convince your mother to have a cesarean but you were born so quickly, and then I saw it was just you and her and that she was well." He started to weep. "I worried for you, I worried, still worry about your safety, but that day I knew that what Paracelsus told me was a lie."

"Daddy, it's all right, we're not the monsters, whoever stole you away is."

"There's been enough bloodshed over us, enough. Keep who you love, know that this world, your mother and I love you."

"I'll take that as truth, but grandmother, your mother, deserves peace as well. We'll find the rest of the bones and lay her to rest here."

"Yes."

I then gave him a bear hug and went to my chamber to rest.

The next day I was walking through the caves when I heard the young children ask for a story. I stepped into the room.

"I'd be happy to tell you a story," I said

"Yes," said a little girl. "Tell us the story of how your father was found, by St. Vincent's," she said.

"And how the topsiders didn't want him," said a little boy.

"That isn't true," I said. "The story changes, I found the truth in the woods." I set the skull out and their little eyes grew wide.

"I'll tell the story of how my father was stolen, and planted at St. Vincent's and how he very much was wanted by people like me, like him. See children, we can't say all the topsiders didn't want him, without knowing everyone up top, the eight million people above. Do you know them all?"

The little girl frowned and shook her head.

“Topside and underneath, we’re all the same world, and we’re all connected. We get more connected every day, with the pipes, and the internet. We can’t lock out the top side, we can’t separate into a world where it’s us versus them. No matter where we stand, we are all connected, we are all as one. We all have to work together, remember that, for her.”

They all nodded, dumbfounded. Of course, in time they would have questions, but for now, that was the only truth I had, the only truth I knew.

“I’m very proud of you,” said my father as I left the chamber.

“Gah!” I said turning around. “I wish you wouldn’t sneak up on me like that.”

“You need to listen to your surroundings more,” he laughed.

“You’re starting to sound like Jacob,” I said.

“I’m proud of you for saying that we’re all connected, that we’re all one heart.”

“It’s true now, with technology the way it is. We can’t stay separate much longer.”

“I have always believed so.”

“You said the truth was those who loved you, those who believed in you. I choose to believe in my grandmother, whoever she is. She is my truth and if I can bring her legacy to this world so be it.”

“Let your voice ring true, and find your conviction. That voice is what our world will need to move forward.”

“Thank you, Daddy,” I smiled. “Just know that we were never alone, to begin with.”

He nodded.

“Do you think there are others like us, somewhere in the world?” I asked.

“Anything is possible,” he answered.

“There could be hundreds, if not thousands. Hidden away, and glad of it,” I said. “I think I’ll just be there for this world and the people that love me. There is rest in that.”

“I’m glad,” he said.

I sneezed violently. “I think I should go to bed. Sitting in cold pond water in February wasn’t the best decision I’ve made for my health.”

“You should rest now,” he felt my forehead. “You’re a bit, warm Dear.”

I headed to my chamber. For the next week I had a nasty cold. Nothing life-threatening, but enough to make me miserable. Knowing the truth made it all worth it in the end.

CC found the rest of the body, as well as five others, she got the carbon date back and found that the bones were about seventy years old. We had a funeral in the catacombs and laid them to rest. No other documents were found about their life, for now there was nothing but silence.

## The Catacombs

*Sleeping Lyca lay;  
While the beasts of prey,  
Come from caverns deep,  
View'd the maid asleep*

...

*While the lioness,  
Loos'd her slender dress,  
And naked they convey'd  
To caves the sleeping maid.*

("Little Girl Lost" - by Sir William Blake)

I had traveled to the catacombs. The tombs were of the lowest parts of our world. The air here smelled of decay and spice. I sat by Lyca's tomb cross-legged. I was breathing slowly in meditation trying to find some place in my mind that would open up to her.

I was startled by a fuzzy grey hand resting on my shoulder.

"Father!" I yelped, as I nearly fell backward.

"Forgive me, I didn't mean to startle you."

"It's alright. I was just meditating."

"Strange place to meditate," he said, looking back towards the tomb. "There was once a woman named Narcissa who lived near here. She believed in magic, and spellcraft, of the Vodoun nature. You would have liked her."

"Perhaps if she was alive, I may have," I said.

"She always said it's better to let the dead rest, that they're shadows of what they once were, and to leave them in peace."

"Father, I'm not trying to disturb the dead, I'm trying to find a way to get the dead to rest. Night after night she's been speaking to me in my dreams, speaking of Úlfhéðnar."

"Úlfhéðnar?"

"Warriors, berserkers, those that take on the characteristics of beast in battle. In the times of Vikings they wore no armor and appeared as wolves. At least that's what C.C told me when I asked her."

"You think there's another explanation?"

"From my dreams, that we could be descended from them, or another being by another name. Werewolves, Kitsune, the Egyptian gods, the Wampus Cat, and the Jersey Devil," I sighed. "I could go on forever, the truth doesn't come any closer to me, so if my supposed grandmother

says that she is Úlfhéðnar who am I to say otherwise?"

"I've had theories of why I, we, were different than others. Those theories change over time."

"This isn't just about theories, Father, this is about getting my dreams to be silent, about finding out who Lyca is and what she wants. I don't know and I just want some sort of peace. Unfortunately, she doesn't say much on command."

I got up and my legs were numb. I held myself against my father's shoulder to steady myself. Just then I felt a rush of energy pulse through me. It was the same energy I felt at Winterfest. I could feel myself speaking but had no control of the words.

*"My dear boy, let me look at you."* I walked around to face my father. *"You're an old man now, and I have come far too late. I tried to speak to you before, but you didn't know how to hear me. Your daughter does know how to listen and hears me well."*

*"Cordelia listens because she has no fear of herself. Her only fear is failing you, and this world that you and your "adopted" father built. It is so noisy here. I cannot hear the birds sing or the footsteps of animals, only trains and constant clanging, boy."*

*"My name was Lyca, I was of the forest to the south. I lived in relative peace with my family, away from the eyes of men. It was all well until I met your father. I loved him dearly but his brother, Frantz Pater, found us. They ran my people into the swamps and killed us all, and they ripped you away from me. I tried to hold on but even my hands are weak against the guns of men."*

*"I only wanted to tell you, child, that I loved you, even when they ripped you away from me. I loved you and I am glad you are well now. You have a son and a daughter and have known love and a family, and I am grateful for the man they called Father, that raised you, not the cruel men that took you from me, my son. Tell your daughter that I love her, and thank her, but I will trouble her no longer, my message was for you, she is only the messenger."*

I woke up on my hands and knees sobbing and out of breath. When I composed myself, my father helped me up and he had tears in his eyes.

"What on earth happened?" I asked. "Everything went blank, I don't remember."

"Your eyes, they turned from amber to blue, your hair turned from red to gold, and you spoke to me as my mother," he said.

"You believe me now?"

"I never disbelieved you, Dear> I just thought it was your own way of interpreting things, but, there is truth in what happened."

"The only truth is love, Father."

"Let's go home," he said. "You need some rest and your mother is worried, I think your dreams will be more silent."

"Why is that?" I asked.

"Because, she said what she needed to say to me," my father said, cleaning off Lyca's name. "She's at rest now."

"Good, I was getting a bit tired of her answering service." I said, "I should probably see Jacob

tomorrow, ask him what it's like to have a guardian angel."

"I can ask him to come by tomorrow, leave a message on the pipes."

"Only if he's not too busy, the hospitals have been understaffed lately."

He nodded. "For now, go back to your chamber."

"I'd like to say goodnight to mom first, let her know I'm alright,"

"I'll let her know what happened. I need some time to myself to think of what has happened."

"You're not going to be all mopey, are you?" I asked.

"No. Just until now, I never knew my mother. Now that I'm an old man, I suddenly have one or had one. I just need time to pay reverence to her."

"She'd like that," I smiled, tiredly.

I walked up to the higher levels and then to my chamber. I saw Mel there and she embraced me when I walked in.

"You were gone every night for days. I was worried about you."

"It's fine. I just had an ancestral specter that needed to relay a message to my dad."

"And I thought my family was weird," she laughed. "But seriously, you're ok?"

"Tired, but fine." I said

"I have some good news!" she said. "If you're not too tired that is. I can tell you in the morning."

"No, go on," I said.

"So, I was taking my artwork to some local coffeehouses to see if they wanted to buy anything. On my way back, I stopped into a tattoo shop to get an estimate for some work I want on my arm. The owner of the shop saw it and wants to hire me as an apprentice."

"That's great!" I said, "But be careful, you don't know the intentions of some shop owners."

"She's a sweetheart," said Mel. "She went over certification requirements, and said it would take a year or so, and to start with I'd only be filling ink bottles and reception work, but I'll be working with art."

"And flesh will be your canvas." I said

"Just as good as any other."

I hugged her.

"I'm very happy for you, just remember us."

"I'm not going anywhere, not just yet," she said, "I still need to get certified and to practice."

I grabbed a piece of typing paper and drew a Norse protection wheel. It was a simple hex design made into a circle.

"Do you think I could have this on my upper arm somewhere?" I asked.

"Once I get trained on how to use a tattoo needle, sure," she answered. "Already asking for favors?"

"It never hurts to try," I yawned.

She then hugged me and left my chamber. I stretched out on my bed and slept the deepest and soundest sleep I had slept in months.

My mother shook me awake the next morning.

"Jacob is here to see you," she said. "You must have slept well, I could hear you snoring down the hall."

"Sorry," I said.

"Don't be, I think it's cute."

"Did dad tell you what happened last night?"

She nodded. "I try to keep an open mind; it looks like it was some sort of evocation that happened."

"That's a term for it I guess," I said.

"I just want to say thank you, you don't know how much you've helped your father."

"Mom, I'm just the messenger."

She hugged me and started to brush and braid my hair.

"Honey, I want you to know something," she said. "I and your father love both you and Jacob very much, but I think your father has learned more about himself through you, more than anyone else."

"Because of the way I am," I said defensively.

"That's part of it, yes; but you're also willing to find the truth, to dig to the bottom of things. You don't just take answers at face value, you go deeper."

"I learned it from you, mother."

"Your father goes into dark places that I can't know, that very few people know."

"I'm one of the lucky ones," I said.

"That's not what I meant," she said. "When you were born, he was no longer alone in what he was."

"And he blamed himself for my "deformities"."

She looked down.

"A little bit, he wasn't ashamed, just worried for you. He always loved you and wanted the best for you."

"I know," I said

"But now that there's actually a people, an actual tribe of people."

"It's no longer a deformity, but a minority," I smirked.

"Yeah, I guess that's a way of putting it," she said. "That he didn't..."

"It's not a curse mom; it's a duty that I didn't really want to sign up for, but it's not a curse."

Whatever I am, whatever dad is, we've been around for a very long time. Since the first caveman needed a protector to ward off the saber-toothed tiger I imagine."

My mom chuckled.

"Look at it from evolution, how could a hairless ape make it so far without defenders. They began to worship us like gods, Bastet and the Úlfhéðnar, then they developed weapons, realized they didn't need us anymore and hunted us to near extinction. No matter what we were it doesn't change what is now. Granted, I can slip by on the East Village and they just see an art student or furry, but I go to Brooklyn, I'm still going to be met with pitchforks and torches."

"It's not your fault."

"It's no one's fault, but it's my responsibility to deal with it. It's not like I can start a civil rights movement online and get very far."

She touched my shoulders gently. "Look, I'm sorry I brought it up, I just wanted you to know your father has closure that he needed for a very long time. Thank you."

I hugged her.

"I'm sorry. Don't forget that I'm your daughter as well. I have met my aunts, but not my grandparents on your side."

"My parents and I didn't get along as well. I wish it was better but they're no longer with us."

"Would they hate me?" I asked.

"They wouldn't understand," she said.

"I understand," I said. "At least I know Aunt Beth, and there's always Jacob, the golden boy."

"You have to understand. Jacob has always loved order, needed order in his life."

"I swear, he schedules when to tie his shoes," I said.

My mom just shook her head and sighed. "Come on girly, we'll be late to see him at this rate and never hear the end of it. Get dressed, I'll meet you in our chambers."

I got dressed. I wore my usual band tee shirt with black trousers and a pair of Doc Martens that C.C gave me second hand. I threw my cloak on over it, red side out and headed toward my parents chamber.

I saw my father, mother, Jacob and Kittie waiting for me.

"Long time, no see, pipsqueak," He said.

"I think she's gotten taller," said Kittie.

I stood up and found that I could almost look at my mother's eye level now.

"I suppose I have," I said.

"I'm glad that scare you gave us all was nothing more than a ghost story," said Jacob. "This world needs a council member with discipline not chasers of the supernatural."

"Jacob, give your sister a break, please," said my mom.

"You should speak about seeing ghosts," I said. Jacob glared at me with blue eyes begging me

to say no further. "It worked itself out, I think whatever was bothering me is at rest now."

"Good," he said.

"How is work?" I asked.

"Unbelievable, all the hospitals are on code yellow, I haven't had time to scratch my nose, let alone think lately."

"I only just got time off enough to see Mouse," said Kittie. "I'm going to check up on him, we got him a CPAP, it should help."

"Hon, we should probably tell them," Jacob whispered to Kittie.

"Tell us what?" I asked. "You do realize that at least two people here have enhanced hearing before you whisper behind our backs."

"That doesn't mean you should lack tact and acknowledge it," said my father.

"It's alright, we were going to tell you eventually anyway," said Kittie. "I'm ...," she grabbed Jacob's hand. "We're having a baby."

"You're pregnant?!" My mother looked stunned, my father was silent and put his hands together as he did in thought.

"So, I'm going to be an Aunty?" I grinned.

"Yes!" said Kittie.

"Is it a boy or a girl?"

"Too early to tell," she said. Kittie was absolutely glowing.

"How far along is she?" asked my father.

"About two months," said Jacob. "We were going to tell you, but things have been so hectic."

"You do realize that the child may develop faster than normal, and may not be normal," said my father.

"Does it really matter daddy?," I said. "I'm alive and well aren't I?"

"Yes, but it's only fair to assess the risks that may be."

"Anyone's life is a risk today." I said.

"The child will be loved," said my mom. "We have a place here, that's all that matters."

My father took Kittie's hand.

"You know, I was there when you were born," he said.

"I know, and I have been loved here."

"Apparently!," I smirked. Everyone then glared at me.

"Father?" asked Jacob. "Kittie and I want to do this right, we were going to get married eventually anyway, but I wanted to know if we could have the wedding in the great hall?"

"I'd be honored to host your wedding," said my father.

"That's awesome, we have a lot of plans to go over."

"Not everything has to be planned, dear," said Kittie.

“Are you sure you know my brother?” I asked. “He probably has the due date scheduled.”  
Everyone chuckled.

“If only it were that easy,” said Jacob.

“What date did you have in mind?” Asked my father.

“March 15th,” they said in unison.

“That’s only a month from now,” I said.

“Yeah, you better get started telling the council, tell them at the next meeting. We’re also going to make arrangements for the main hall. I think one of our helpers is a florist, can you inform them too?”

“Your sister isn’t an errand girl,” said my mom.

“You guys aren’t going to be around forever, and celebrations are part of council duty,” said Jacob.

“To be handled by all the council,” said my father.

“Yeah bro,” I said. “But congratulations.”

I went over and gave him a hug and a noogie. I smiled , I was going to be Aunty Cordy.

## **A Wedding in Spring**

The night had grown restless after my brother’s announcement. I decided to go back to Club Orpheus. Perhaps C.C would be there. I went to Mel’s chamber but she wasn’t there, then I remembered that she was probably at the tattoo shop working on an apprenticeship.

I walked under the tunnels following the beat of the music when I found it. It went to my heart and I climbed up the stairs to the basement. I know that I was cheating the system by going up through the basement, avoiding the long lines and ID checks. I remember how Jermain and C.C distracted the bouncer the first night and I slipped through.

Speaking of Jermain, I saw him speaking to a thin girl with glasses and frizzy hair. I felt completely out of place and awkward, but I also felt happy for him. Good, I hoped he would find solace in this girl and forget about me, how I embarrassed myself. I’d rather him speak to another woman than remember me as a mad woman.

I didn’t feel like dancing and just headed to the balcony and watched the dancers. It was all just costuming, no one was really who they were here. The illusion came crashing down as if someone lifted a curtain off of my eyes. The next morning ,the people would remove their costumes and go back to school or to work, to live normal lives above, and I would return below because I was real, not a lie created to avoid drab reality.

“Ooo, I love cat girls!” said a voice behind me.

I turned to see a thin man in a black bomber jacket. He was eyeing me hungrily and grabbed my hand. I pulled it back and snarled at him.

“Bad kitty!”

I sighed, and headed downstairs toward the ground floor. I went outside to get a breath of air and a quiet sob left me. Nothing was the same anymore. Now that I knew what I was, everything else just seemed shallow.

"No one will love you for yourself in there," said a voice in the darkness.

I turned around and saw Chad, his unkempt beard and flannel shirt.

"I can at least I can be there for you; I can love you when they don't see you."

"You're not worthy of me!" I growled at him. "You attacked my best friend; you judge others for how they live and now you want me?" I began snarling, low leonine growls.

"I... I'm a nice guy," stammered Chad. He leaned in and touched my shoulder. "They're all pretending, with their tattoos and costumes. You are real - you don't need to be around these posers. You can be a god to them."

I grabbed his hand off my shoulder and squeezed. He knelt to the ground and I kept squeezing until I felt something pop and he screamed in pain.

"You think that you're worthy of being with a god? Really? I just see a frightened little boy trying to take advantage of someone they perceive as socially weak. I'm not weak. If I ever see you anywhere near me or my friends, this pain will be the least of your worries," I snarled, as I threw him back toward the wall. Chad curled into a crying ball of insecurity, I ran toward the basement of the club and back to the world below.

The next day I told C.C and Mel what happened.

"Wow!" was all C.C said.

"Next time you decide to go to Orpheus, you should take us with you," said Mel.

"I know," I said looking at my hands. "I... I really hurt him," I sighed.

"It was self-defense!" said C.C

"I could have killed him, easily," I sighed.

"But you didn't," said Mel."

Just then I saw my mother's head show around the corner. "Are you girls ok?" she asked.

"It's fine," I said.

"Which is code for something's wrong," said my mom.

"We'll discuss it later," I said.

"All right. You know I can find out eventually anyway."

"I wish you would respect my privacy. You and Father both need to stay out of my head!"

With that, I saw my friends back up slightly and look warily at each other.

"Forgive me, Mother. I've just had a bad experience. A young man tried to make advances and I may have broken his hand to defend myself."

"You had every right to!" said my mom. "No means no, I'm glad you can defend yourself."

"I could have killed him," I said.

“But you didn’t, and he’ll keep that as a reminder. Now stop guilt-ing yourself about it. You did what you needed to do. Also, I don’t want you going out on your own. Take your friends with you.”

“Yes Mother,” I sighed. “It’s a sad state of the world when even I can’t go out on my own. *‘Frailty thy name is woman’.*”

My mother rolled her eyes skyward. “Honey, I’m not worried about you so much as I am worried about the other person. There’s camera’s everywhere now. If you get caught doing something you’d regret, there would be no way for us to hide it.”

“Why are we still in the city, perhaps I should go to the forest like my ancestors,” I sulked.

“You’re a grown woman now. If that’s what you want to do, I won’t stop you. Your dad would miss you, so would the council, but you’re clever. You’d be fine.”

“I’m sorry,” I sighed, finally defeated.

“Is this a bad time?” asked C.C

“Actually, I was going to ask you girls if you could help decorate the Great Hall for Jacob and Kittie in the next week or so.”

“Oh yeah,” I said. “Jacob and Kittie are getting married and I’m going to be an aunty!”

“That’s awesome!” said C.C “Kittie’s a lucky lady.”

“Until she puts one of his shirts in the wrong spot,” I snickered.

“Come on now,” said my mom. “Jacob and Kittie have been living together for the last couple of months.”

“Which is probably why I’m going to be an aunt,” I grinned.

With that my mom smacked me lightly on the head. “I need you to stop being a pain, Cordy, and you girls are ok with helping the next few weeks?”

“Sure Mrs. Diana,” said Mel.

“You have an artistic eye; I’m going to put you in charge of flower arrangements and dresses for you guys, if that’s ok.”

“That’s fine,” said Mel.

“C.C, I’m going to need your help carrying things in and cleaning them off. You don’t seem to mind getting your hands dirty.”

“And what am I to do mother?”

“You can work out the seating arrangements and being an usher. You can also work with your dad on the main speech, just try not to get possessed again.”

“Very funny,” I said.

“It looks like we have a lot to do in the next couple weeks,” said C.C

“Not as much as Jacob will have to do for the next twenty years,” I smirked.

“You might fall in love one day,” said Mel. “You can have children as well, if you want to.”

“I first need to have someone who accepts me for who I am, that won’t try to possess me as an

object. Good luck in my situation.”

“Hon,” said C.C, “it’s all our situations, as you said *‘frailty thy name is woman’*.”

“It should be *‘frailty thy name is human’*.” I said, “Jacob and Kittie are lucky, I’m happy for them. They both have been saving people since the towers. Now they can settle down and be happy with a family. It’s almost quaint, but I have to be here to run the tunnels.”

“It’s not just you,” said Mel. “You have us to help you.”

I hugged both my friends. “I do, don’t I?”

We all three then started to make a plan to put together a grand wedding for Jacob.

Mel showed me my bridesmaid dress. It was of gothic lolita style and was purple and black with two bows for my hair. C.C decided to wear a simple knee-length purple dress and Mel decided to wear a purple victorian gown.

“Now girls, try not to upstage the bride,” said Aunt Jamie as she passed by.

“Of course not!” I chuckled. “How fares Uncle Mouse?”

“He’s been doing better with the new C-Pap machine Jacob gave him. He’s also helping design a new computer system with Diana, to help flag tunnel breaches.”

“Do they need any help, or input?”

“Na. You girls just have fun - you only get to be young once.” She smiled and tugged at a bow in my hair. “You look very cute.”

“Why thank you,” I said. “All right, let us get back into street clothes and help put up these flowers and things.”

We got back into our usual fare of black pants and black band tee-shirts. We all tied our hair back, except C.C, who decided to cut her hair short, and headed back into the great hall.

“I’m glad the flowers didn’t all just blow away!” said C.C, carrying in a weighted crate of purple lilacs and lavender.

“Yeah, the wind tunnels can get pretty rough,” I said.

I saw Jacob and Kittie near the alter, my parents called us over.

“Just in time for rehearsal,” said my father.

“Ok, you girls stand in a row over there, a bit back from Kittie,” said my mom, beaming.

“I thought I was just an usher. Now you’re having me and my friends in matching gowns.”

“My mom is coming up from Tennessee today,” said Kittie. “She’s going to be my matron of honor. But I grew up with you Cordelia - I’d like you to be one of my bridesmaids, and your friends are part of who you are now.”

“That’s very sweet of you, Kittie, but I always thought of you and Piper as more of my brother's friends, I was just kinda there.”

“It’s rough being a little sister, always being overlooked,” said a new voice.

I saw near my father was my Uncle Devin, a man I haven’t seen for years. He was balding, with the rest of his dark grey hair pulled back into a ponytail, and he smiled at me.

“Wow, Cordelia, you’ve really grown up.” He held me back at arms length.

“Your shirt, it says KISS, good band, though your grandfather would be rolling in his grave,” he said.

“I still enjoy the classics, Beethoven, Bach, Mozart and others - just their tee shirts are lacking,” I said. “Also if I ever wanted to join a metal band I could get away with it.”

“Until you couldn’t anymore,” said my mom.

“Tell that to Marilyn Manson, Alice Cooper and Gwar,” I said.

“Forgive my daughter’s wayward taste in music,” chuckled my father. “I’m sure you, of all people, could convince people on stage, if that’s the life you really wish to live.”

“Nah, I’m just teasing, Dad. Someone has to stay behind and look after you, make sure you eat your oatmeal and take your afternoon naps on time.”

“It seems that Cordy might take after me,” said Uncle Devin. “If you ever want to hit the road to be a rock star I can work that out.”

“Don’t give her any ideas,” sighed my father.

“No ideas. Good to see you Uncle Devin, but I’m going to work on the flower arrangements.” As I moved off, I gave Uncle Devin the Metal Horns sign with my hand, which he returned.

“Rock on Cordy,” he said.

The doors once again opened and I saw Ms. Lena walk in. She was wearing a conservative pants suit, her blond hair was done and she had a full face of makeup.

“Mama, the wedding isn’t till tomorrow!” said Kittie.

“I know, darlin’,” said Lena, her New York accent faded into a Tennessee twang. “My goodness, you grow more beautiful everyday.”

“Thank you,” said Kittie.

“How’s my future grandbaby?” asked Lena.

“Growing, I just wish I’d stop feeling sick so often.”

“I had the worst morning sickness for the first couple of months. It goes away. Have you tried eating saltines?”

“I was there when you were born,” said my father. Lena looked at my father sadly and then averted her gaze.

“I helped deliver you, Cordy,” interrupted my uncle. “We needed a catchers mitt, you were born so fast.”

“I guess I just really wanted to be here,” I shrugged. At this, my mom chuckled and the tension left the room.

For the rest of the day, I and my Wyrd Sisters would talk amongst ourselves while arranging flowers and decorations.

C.C mentioned theories of werewolf trials back in Europe during the Middle Ages, and how my line could have come from there. There was even a man in fourteenth century France that had

the same condition. He was treated as a beast, until a scholar found him and made him a prodigy. A noble woman married him off to an aristocrat and they had fourteen children, and one of his daughters was killed in the trials.

Mel would interject with stories of the Kitsune, and Nine Tails. She was a fox woman that seduced the emperor of Korea, but was seen as such a threat that they turned her into stone. I told them of my vision of Lyca, my grandmother and the mention of the Úlfhéðnar and how I most likely descended from them.

"Does it matter in the end? I'm here now," I said to C.C

"I guess it doesn't," she said. "But it's good that you know. You have an explanation."

"Which is more than I ever had," said my father. "It's how you live, more than where you came from, and yet, I'm grateful for what you found out for me, for us."

"Tomorrow is about Jacob and Kittie," chimed my mother. "You can talk about theories all you want after, but today lets focus on your brother."

"She's right," said my father.

"Dad, how does it feel to become a grandfather?"

"I'm very happy for Jacob, and worried about the child. Either way, I think they'll be great parents and learn so much from their children. Both you and Jacob have taught me things about myself that I could never have known."

"My father, your words are so eloquent. Mine are blunt and harsh by comparison."

"Yet they speak the truth, and seek the truth. Let that always guide you."

"The only truth is love," I said.

"No, Cordelia," said my father. "For you the only love is truth; let that guide you. Now I must speak to your brother."

I hugged my father and went back to my friends. My family finished the rest of the day running through wedding rehearsals and having conversation. I decided to have another sleepover in my chambers, so we could all be up early for the big day.

I woke in the middle of the night and was very thirsty, I decided to walk to the falls to get a drink of fresh water and calm my nerves a bit. When I arrived at the falls Reverend Lena was sitting on a rock looking over the water. The makeup was removed and her hair fell loosely around her face. She looked younger but also tired.

"Just came to get some water," I said.

"I'm sorry about your father," she blurted. "It's just we're gonna be family now, and it feels so strange, almost surreal."

I raised an eyebrow. "Why would it feel weird? Kittie is your child. Children grow up, fall in love and have families."

"Her name's Catherine actually," Lena interrupted. "And after today she'll be Catherine Chandler. The Lord works in mysterious and bizarre ways."

"That's only if she takes my brother's last name, she might stay Catherine Greene, or Kittie

Greene, if that's what she prefers."

"Her and her stepfather don't really get along, that's why I didn't bring him, and why she stayed up in New York City rather than move down to Tennessee with me."

"Kittie does good work. She's a great nurse and loves Jacob very much. Anyone that can put up with his perfectionism is great in my book."

At this Lena chuckled. "Well, they'll have Vincent and Diana, and you," she shrugged.

"And a couple of tunnel dwellers, not including the tower children, though they're growing up and finding their own ways in the world."

"And you're findin' your own way?"

"I have some guidance, my parents and friends. It's more that my way is finding me instead."

"I saw your friends, they look like nice people, strange but nice. I was young once too, and made some mistakes. I'm just glad that no one remembers them. Now everything is documented on social media and everyone points out your mistakes 20 years later. It's best that Greene Ministries doesn't remember Lena before she was Reverend Greene."

"No one is perfect," I said and smiled.

"Thank you for talking to me, you seemed a little on edge earlier," she said.

"I know you loved him once," I said. "I can sense it and that's why it's awkward now, but just know that my father very much loves my mother, and my brother is marrying your daughter, and this isn't Game of Thrones."

"Or that part of the South," Lena giggled, seeming relieved rather than offended.

I let out a large and toothy yawn. "I need to go to sleep. Me and the girls need to get ready early tomorrow to lead people to their seats and look cute."

"I'm gonna hang down here for a bit, thank you."

"Anytime Reverend," I said, and went back up to my chambers to go to sleep.

The next morning C.C shook me awake. I tumbled out of bed and we headed to the bathing chambers. Afterward, Mel helped us get dressed in our bridesmaid outfits. She even put a purple bow in my hair to mimic cat ears.

"You are so cute!" said C.C

My mom then came in.

"You look like you popped out of Alice In Wonderland," she smiled.

"I'm more the Cheshire cat," I said.

"Ok girls, lets head down."

We followed my mother to the great hall where we helped with the finishing touches on the flowers. The whole hall had the heady scent of purple flowers; lavender, hyacinth and lilac. Metal chairs were laid out in rows and a royal purple carpet laid on the stone floor leading up to the altar.

C.C, Mel and I led the guests to their seats and went and stood by the front, bouquets of

flowers in our hands. Kipper stood at the front in the best man's place, with Uncle Mouse behind him. Uncle Mouse seemed to be breathing a bit better and wasn't stifling his coughs as much.

At this, I was glad to have Kittie as a sister in law. She'd go out of her way to help everyone here, perhaps with a lecture, but she'd always be there for them. She had always been a bit of a big sister to me. Even after I hit womanhood and everything became awkward between me and my father, her and my mother were there to guide me. Now she would be my sister-in-law and mother to Jacob's child. To be honest, I wouldn't trust anyone else to do the same.

The music started, the older children had an orchestra and a choir and started to play '*Here comes the Bride*'. I saw Lena walking Kittie down the aisle. Lena had a pale pink dress that went up to her neck and down to her knees. She was wearing heavy makeup and her hair was once again country singer big.

Kitties' dark hair was pulled into an up-do and white and purple flowers studded her hair. Her dress was a classic lace dress with amethyst jewelry, amethyst that Jacob had gathered from the crystal caverns on his few days off. My father was too old to travel, but gave him directions and Uncle Mouse helped set the stones. Kitties' favorite color was purple, and it was newly spring. She was beautiful, and I was glad she wasn't getting married in the violet scrubs I often saw her in.

Jacob came down with my father next to him. My father was wearing a ruffled shirt and Jacob was wearing a gray suit with a lavender undershirt. He had a hyacinth boutonniere. He stood at the altar and held Kittie's hands.

My father went and stood behind the altar. His white hair flowed freely and his eyes still almost glowed blue. My mother stood next to him; her pale ginger hair pulled up with dark purple flowers complementing her royal purple dress.

*“Love is not love Which alters when it alteration finds,*

*Or bends with the remover to remove:*

*O no; it is an ever-fixed mark,*

*That looks on tempests, and is never shaken;*

*It is the star to every wandering bark,*

*Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken”*

*My father's voice echoed the sonnet from Shakespeare through the great hall.*

*“Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind,*

*And therefore is winged Cupid painted blind.”*

The crowd murmured.

“I first met Catherine Greene when she was but a babe born into this world. A world that was harsh and cold, her mother came down to our world to seek the light and give a better home

to her daughter. My son was born a year later and taken to this world that was safe from harm. I have seen them both grow, become heroes in tragic events that would follow the attacks on our city, our country and our world. My son left the city to become a hero above, and Catherine, who chose the name Kittie, became a nurse to take care of the people in need.”

“Okay I’m good, ok I’m fine,” interjected Uncle Mouse. Everyone chuckled politely.

“It is with my blessing that you become my daughter through marriage,” said my mother.

“And my blessing to you son,” said Lena.

“Jacob and Kittie have written their own vows,” said my mother.

“Kittie,” stammered Jacob, “we grew up together. I remember when we were little you were this girl that dared me to jump off the highest cliff into the pool, and I was terrified, but I did because I wanted to impress you. Then after I hit my head you made sure I got bandages and got lectured by Father. After Father passed and the city crashed down behind us, I knew you’d save me from falling. When I was away in the army, you would write to me every week to make sure I was sane, after I lost my brothers in combat and saw things no one was ever meant to see. Since the day I met you, I’ve been falling for you, and I just ask that you take me.”

“I do,” said Kittie. “Jacob, I thought you were an idiot for jumping from the highest cliff.”

The audience chuckled.

“But other than that, you’ve always done what is right, and what is good. You were a guardian, both here and abroad for so many people. You protected and rescued those that needed saving. When the towers crashed, it was you, out of all of the children, that dug around in the rubble for the other kids, you didn’t sleep for a solid week and worked weeks after to make sure all kids you could save were saved. You helped rebuild this world, and be a big brother to Cordelia, who’s coming into her own now. No, this world isn’t quite the same, but in some ways it’s better after you Jacob, and my life has been better because of you Jacob. But we have to keep working to make sure that this world is better for our child and our children’s children. Do you keep this promise to stay with me and make the world better?”

“I do,” said Jacob.

“You may kiss the bride,” said my mom.

Jacob held Kittie’s face in his hands and gently kissed her. A tear left my eye as he did so and I breathed deep to prevent myself from sobbing.

“I now pronounce you husband and wife,” said my father.

Jacob and Kittie walked down the aisle and flower petals were thrown after them and I let myself cry in happiness for once.

I met up with C.C and Mel at the reception, after I composed myself. The children’s orchestra was playing Canon in D by Pachelbel followed by a Midsummers Night’s Dream.

“I’m so happy for your brother,” said Mel.

“Me too,” I said.

“I’m happy too,” C.C yawned. “But this isn’t the most happening party. We’re all dressed up,

we should go out after the reception.”

“Last time I went out wasn’t good,” I said.

“Oh, come on Cordy, you’ll have us with you,” said C.C. “Nothing will happen.”

“Let’s wait until after the cake and bouquet throwing,” I said.

“A’right,” said C.C. Mel shrugged.

We witnessed Jacob cut the cake and proceeded to smooch it into Kitties’ face while the crowd giggled. Then Kittie got up on the stand and threw a bouquet of purple flowers behind her, and it landed at my feet. I quickly gave them to a little girl standing near me before anyone could notice, not wanting the attention. The little girl with chestnut locks proudly displayed her flowers to the crowd.

We waited about an hour more until the crowd thinned down. I told my parents that I was going out, and they told me to be home before 2 am to help with the cleanup. I agreed and headed out with my Wyrd Sisters for a night out.

## **Powder Keg**

Before heading out to Orpheus, C.C wanted to see her mother to give back the car. Mel, C.C and I drove down to the Brooklyn row house. She got out of the car and motioned both Mel and I to the doorstep. As I got to the doorstep I raised an eyebrow.

“It’s a’right, my mom, well she’s pretty open-minded,” said C.C

“That might be true, but I still need to be careful, not everyone is going to accept me or be so kind, and with cameras everywhere.”

“My mom barely knows how to operate her smartphone, she keeps calling me about it,” chuckled C.C.

The door then swung open. I saw a middle-aged woman with a salt and pepper hair. She had on thick glasses with a purple chain going around her neck, she was wearing pink blouse and slacks. I could smell a faint hint of wine on her breath.

“Cecilia!” She and gave C.C a huge bear hug. “Mellie! it’s so good to see you too!”

She stopped and looked at me and looked me up and down and cocked her head to the side like a confused dog.

“You, you must be Cordy.”

I glared at C.C

“Yes, this is Cordy, the girl that likes to wear the cat costume, it’s really good! I bet you watched all the animes.”

I let out my breath slowly and shut my eyes and shook my head.

“I used to go out at night all the time when I was younger,” sighed Ms. Clark. “Back in the day when CB GB’s was open, I used to go out all the time. I met Cecilia’s father at a Ramone’s show. Now, now they plowed over CB GB’s and built a café over it, can you believe it? A bougie

café. I tell ya, this gentrification is getting out of control.”

“Ma, we should be going,” said C.C

“You guys look really nice.”

“My brother’s wedding was earlier,” I said. “We’re going out for the rest of the evening. We’ll be back in no more than a few hours, I assure you.”

*Please, come back home, there is danger!* I heard it in my head as almost a roar. I shook my head.

“Cordy, are you all right?” Asked Mel gently.

“Yes, I just thought I heard my father.”

“Did he call you?” asked Ms. Clark. “Those newfangled smart phones, they can always call and check up on you.”

“In a way yes. Look, I don’t think going out is a great idea. I should probably head back home,” I said. I then got a gut feeling that if that they went without me things would be much worse.

“Perhaps we should just stay here and watch some movies.”

“You girls are so dolled up,” said Ms. Clark. “Go out, have fun, Cecelia isn’t going to be in the city much longer.”

Both Mel and I looked at C.C intently.

“I got an internship with the department of anthropology,” said C.C “It’s in the Valley of the Kings in Egypt. I was gonna tell you, but with the wedding and school, I never found a good time.”

“That’s great news!” I said.

“That’s awesome!” Mel said.

“I leave in two weeks, it’s just digging and grunt work, but I like getting my hands dirty.”

“Most people would be crawling over themselves to get an internship but you got it,” said Ms. Clark. “My girl actually found some Viking artifacts in New Jersey and gave them to the dean.”

The look that I gave C.C could have burned through steel.

“You girls, go and have fun, enjoy the city while you’re still here.” Ms. Clark kissed C.C on the cheek.

As we walked away to head for the subway system I grabbed C.C’s wrist and glared at her.

“Viking artifacts? You robbed the graves of my people.”

“I just took a small piece of jewelry, a stone necklace, not even that precious. I made sure all the bones were moved before I even said anything. Just a find not that great. Look I could have mentioned I found a whole new race of people, but kept it quiet and to myself.”

I crossed my arms and grumbled.

“Look, I can’t make you trust me, but this is a big opportunity for me.”

“I’m happy for you,” I sighed. “We will miss you though.”

“That’s why we’re going out to this party!” said C.C

"I got hired full time at the Full Ink Tattoo," said Mel. "I might make enough to get a place of my own. I love the tunnels, but I feel like I need to be above, but I am staying in New York," said Mel.

"Our world is meant for a home for some, and healing for others. If you're sure you'll be fine?" I asked.

"Yes," said Mel. "One of the tattoo artists, she goes by the name Trixie, we've been getting along." Mel blushed slightly at this.

I hugged Mel and patted her shoulder. "I'm happy for you."

"I haven't forgotten my promise to finish my drawings for the tunnel wall, and I still owe you a tattoo on your shoulder."

"That will come in time."

*Come home now!* My father roared at me through the connection.

I shook my head and severed the connection, bringing up a mental wall of ice, blocking any connection from reaching me. I didn't want to think of any responsibilities back home. I didn't want to worry. I just wanted to go to Orpheus and dance and revel in not being alone.

We reached the club and I went in through my usual backdoor entrance. I saw Jermain speaking once again to the skinny girl with glasses. They walked up to me on the floor.

"Hey Cordy!" he said. "You look really nice."

"Thank you." I said as I curtsied.

"This is my cousin, Chantelle," he said.

"Nice to meet you, Chantelle," I said, shaking her hand.

Chantelle looked at me in awe and looked at my nails. "Your costume is awesome! And this nail art, who did it?"

"I did," said Mel proudly.

"I knew Melly was an artist but to do makeup and this well? I have got to come see you on Halloween!"

Jermain motioned me to the back where it was quieter.

"I want to say sorry about the last time we met. You have a lifestyle you're really into and I should have no place to judge. That, and you look really adorable tonight, purple is a good color on you."

"Thank you." I said, my cheeks felt very warm. "I was at my brother's wedding earlier."

"Congrats to your brother, tell him I said hi."

"I will," I said.

"And Cordy," he glanced nervously around, "If you want to meet at Tower Games for some coffee and Magic The Gathering I'd be up for it."

"Can we try and play chess, just for a few rounds? I have a rather nice chessboard."

"If that's what you wanna do, sure. I gotta go check on my little cousin and make sure she stays

out of trouble.” He walked back onto the dance floor.

The song *She’s Lost Control*, by Joy Division began to play it’s slow moody beat over the speakers.

I smiled and I saw Tom dancing by his boyfriend, he had a red stripe painted over his eyes and across his forehead in a retro fashion. Then on his forehead I saw a glowing red dot.

Instinct took over and I dove into Tom knocking him to the floor.

“Bitch!” Tom cried, “What is your issue!” Just as he said that, a bullet hit the stage behind knocking shrapnel everywhere.

“Get down!” I roared over the crowd and the music. I heard a few more pops, someone in the background screaming loudly.

A wave of panic hit the crowd and everyone rushed toward the door. I felt the panic rush through me and felt like a scared rabbit, then that panic was overtaken by a burning rage. I saw the red dot on the second floor, and it was sweeping over the crowd.

I ran toward the stairs as fast as my feet would carry me. Boiling rage rushed through me and I roared as loud as I could, the roar cut over the music and made everyone pause.

Reaching the balcony, I saw Chad holding a rifle. He whipped around quickly and I felt a hot sharp pain in my leg.

“You come into my world! My Church! The below of above and murder my people!” I shrieked at him.

“Your church is full of sinners that need to be cleansed. It’s not too late. Stay with me and repent, and I’ll stop.”

“We’re all connected - you are not one to hold judgment.” I yelled as I delved deeply into my gift. I gathered up all the fear and panic in the room and fed it to him as my rage boiled. I roared and slashed his jugular vein with my claws. Chad screamed in pain, blood splashed against the wall and the floor, my bow fell out of my hair and got covered in the red ichor. Searing hot pain screamed loud in my leg and everything faded to black.

## **The River Styx**

I woke up and I was floating on a river from the world below. I had heard stories of this river from my father, though it was too far to travel. I was in a long wooden boat and a tall dark hooded figure was steering in the caves below.

“Father, is that you?” I asked. “You know you don’t have to hide from me of all people.”

“I am not your father,” answered the figure, though his voice matched the same timber of my father’s growl. “Had you listened to him, and obeyed, I would not be here.”

I stared as the next figure came out of the darkness. He looked very much like the portraits of my father in his youth, with golden hair and bright blue eyes, but he wore a thick pelt of wolf skins.

"I am Vseslav the prince. I protected my kingdom from the outside. I was revealed as a hero, the Úlfhéðnar. I died in battle and in honor and I rest in Valhalla. You can join me, granddaughter, and we can spend the rest of our days feasting in paradise."

"I'm not ready to go yet."

"To die in battle is an honorable thing, when the Church took over, so many of us were slaughtered, set to dishonorable deaths, forced to cower in distant forest or deep under cities."

"How long has our kind been here, protecting and guarding the rest of humanity?"

"Since we lived in caves. Possibly before then, they needed us to protect them from the darkness, from the beast in the night. When they discovered fire and spears they no longer needed us and sought to slaughter and control us. Some were lucky, like myself, revered as warriors or as gods. If you join me in Valhalla, I'll tell you such stories."

"I can't go now."

"And you still chose to live in the cave under a city. Farewell then, granddaughter," he said, as he faded away into the background.

I looked out the side of the boat and I thought I saw Melanie, but the figure on the shore had deep ruby hair where Melanie's was black. She also had the same cat-like features of mine. She was wearing an ornate red and white kimono and obi.

"They called me nine tails, the Kitsune. I kept my people safe from danger. The emperor fell in love with me and wanted me as his own."

"I know this story," I said, "they said they turned you into stone."

"Not exactly," she turned her head to the side and it was wounded and marred. "They stoned me instead. Heed warning little sister."

Nine Tails faded into the darkness, much as Prince Vseslav did. A scream shot through the darkness and I saw a young woman in medieval peasant garb hoisted on a stack of fire wood and tied to a stake. The priest threw lit torches onto the pyre and the young woman screamed. I heard a loud roar in the background. A man with dark hair and leonine features showed on the bank, his face and hands covered in blood.

"I am Peter Stubbe," he said in German, and I understood him, despite only knowing the most basic of the language. "They murdered my daughter for witchcraft and being the offspring of a demon, so I murdered their children for the next generation. They finally caught me and had me drawn and quartered. Are these the people you want to go back to, cousin? "

I shut my eyes and turned away. When I opened them, I saw Lyca standing there, as she was when she was young. Her golden hair braided and her blue eyes sharp and bright.

"Put being shot into perspective, does it not granddaughter?" she said. "Are you ready to join us?"

"No," I said. "I still have so much I need to do, not all people are cruel, there are people that love and care for us still, people that still need our protection from the darkness, and the men who have become monsters."

"I understand," said Lyca as she smoothed my hair and cleaned the dirt from my face. "We love you, all of us. You have discovered your ancestry, your legacy, but if you are not ready yet, we cannot force you."

She kissed me on my forehead and embraced me.

"Farewell for now," she said as she faded into a bright light.

I turned around and saw a small woman with graying, sandy hair and large gray eyes. She had a face that I only saw in a few photographs and paintings, though it was aged here, as if she had aged thirty years since her passing.

"You must be Catherine! I wonder why they sent you to meet me, you're my father's dream, not mine."

"Nice to meet you too," she said.

"I... I'm not upset that you're here, just confused."

"We both meant a lot to your father, and we're both here," she said, matter of factly.

"I can't stay here; I have so much I need to do."

"So did I."

"You already watch over Jacob," I said.

"I watch over all of you," she said. "I'm going to be a grandmother soon. Time flies by so quickly. I'm proud of you, and I'm glad Vincent found Diana."

"I am too, I wouldn't exist otherwise."

Catherine's ghost chuckled. "You're so much like him, a noble heart, but so much darkness."

"Yet I constantly question that darkness, of why I was chosen for this, not Jacob."

"Jacob needed to be normal, so he could prove Vincent was human," she said. "You were chosen to be like him to find the truth. You're not afraid of your other side like he is; your darkness, you look it in the eye and question it and find answers."

"In that way, I take more after my mother than my father," I said. "She always finds the answers too, even if it hurts her. My god, she must be terribly worried about me."

"It's a little late for that now," she sighed.

"No, it's not!" I roared. "I may not fear darkness, or my inner demons, but I do fear failing, of losing our world to poverty or to floods from rising waters, violence from the outside world or godforsaken rats. If I die, I fail and everything falls."

"The sun will rise with or without you, people you thought couldn't survive without you live on and even flourish. I learned that the hard way."

"The Tower Children wouldn't be here without your guidance. Jacob may have been killed in battle without you being his guardian angel. You make an impact in the flesh, or in the spirit, by just being there. You can ask Lyca about that."

"You make your case better than most lawyers I've met," she said warmly. "It seems you've made up your mind."

"I have," I said.

"You can go back," said Catherine, "but there's one more person you have to see."

"Who?" I asked, but Catherine faded away into a bright light.

The whole cave faded away and was replaced by blue sky and a hot bright sun beating down on me. I looked around and saw a vast desert, golden dunes flowing into eternity.

"Looks like ya could use a guide," I turned around and saw C.C. She was wearing kakis and a large brimmed hat and sunglasses.

I immediately embraced her. "It's so good to see you!"

"I'm glad to see you too. We're in the Valley of the Kings. I was sent to get you."

"Sent by who?" I asked.

"You'll see." She smiled and gave me a drink from her canteen, it was cool against the desert heat. She took my hand and we walked across the dunes for what felt like miles, until we saw the three pyramids and the sphinx in the background. The sphinx still had its face and the pyramids were so white and polished, that looking at them was nearly blinding.

C.C led me through a small doorway into the largest pyramid. The inside was an ornate room with a small pool and polished marble stairs that led to a throne. In front of the throne there was a scale. In front of the scale was a beautiful cat-faced woman with black skin and azure eyes. She had on a blue dress made of the lightest silk and her arms were dressed in ornate golden bands. Her glossy black hair fell over her breast and she smelled of sand and spices.

"Bast?" I asked

"I am she," she purred.

"I thought Anubis guarded the gates?" asked C.C

"Not for our kind," said Bast. "I was one of the first of our kind to be revered as a goddess while living. I protected my people and they treated me well. Pity such reverence could not last."

"We are not gods," I said. "We're not demons. We are warriors and protectors, but most importantly, we're human."

Bast began laughing. "Human? You would degrade yourself to a glorified ape?"

"Hey, I'm right here!" said C.C

"I would, we have loved men, had children with men, protected men."

"Only to have men turn on us and slaughter us with the same hands that paid tribute."

"Mankind has always slaughtered each other. They have lived to some degree of ignorance and fear. I was taught to rise above it, to love."

"Love is as good a reason to live," said Bast. "If you choose to stay, you will be loved as a hero and as a goddess to your people, if you return, those same hands may turn on you."

"That is a chance I will take."

"Very well," said Bast. On the scale there was a feather and a heart.

“C.C?” I asked. “Are you coming with me?”

“I’m going to stay here,” she said. “Tell my mom I love her.” She embraced me tightly.

“I’m glad I was your friend Tell everyone I’m gonna be with them, that I’m not really gone.”

I wiped a tear from her eye and C.C walked back to the doorway and faded away into the bright sunlight.

Bast then pressed the heart back into my chest and kissed me on the lips. I breathed in deep and the scent of sunlight, sand and spice filled me.

I opened my eyes and saw the cave ceiling of home and sounds of medical machinery whirring near me.

“Vincent!” shouted my mother. “Jacob, Kitty, come here! She’s awake, I think she’ll pull through.”

She squeezed my hand. “Please baby, pull through for me.”

“Mom,” I managed to cough weakly. “I’m back. I’m not going anywhere.” I then blacked out again, but to a warm, dreamless sleep where I could hear my breath and the beating of my heart.

## **Recovery**

I opened my eyes again once more and saw the infirmary. I was in a small cot ... and I was restrained.

“Mom!” I called out.

My mother burst into the room. “I’m here baby,” she said as she came toward me and ran her hand over my forehead and felt my pulse. Jacob came in and put a stethoscope to my chest.

“Cordy, I need you to breath in,” he said. I sighed and breathed in deeply. “Your pulse is normal again, lungs are clear.” He took a flashlight and shone it in my eyes. I growled slightly.

“Eyes dilated normally, and her fever is broken.” He put on a blood pressure cuff and pumped it. “120 over 80, everything is normal.”

“Are you going to ask me what day it is?” I barked.

“March 20, 2016.” He said wryly. “Good to see your humor is back.” He removed the restraints.

“March 20? Last I remember it was March 15th and your wedding,” I shook my head. “I’m so thirsty.”

My mom handed me a small paper cup of water, which I swallowed quickly.

“Careful,” said my mother, “Not too fast.”

My father walked into the room and held me gently. “Cordelia, you had us so worried, I tried to warn you but you walled me out.” Tears were in his eyes, “I’m so thankful you’re alive; you lost a lot of blood and your leg may take some time to heal.”

“Huh?” I said.

"You were shot," said my brother. "By a Smith and Wesson bolt action hunting rifle, it barely missed the Femoral artery. You're lucky to be alive. You lost consciousness for five days, you woke up once and nearly tore the bed apart."

"Hence the restraints," I said.

"I'm sorry, it's not something I wanted to do, but for your safety..."

"I understand," I interrupted. "I vaguely remember Orpheus and then passing out, how did I get here?"

"A young man," said my father. "Your friend, Jermain, he carried you under the dance hall and I met him there and brought you back here. In the chaos people scarcely noticed."

"Even if they did, I doubt they would care, they're hardly judgmental."

"Cordy," my mother shook her head. "They're not judgmental towards your appearance but your actions."

"Another time," said my father. "She has had enough to worry about."

I could feel the pain in my leg, now dull and throbbing, I looked under the sheets and saw it was bandaged, I was wearing a white linen gown with brown stitching.

"Cordy, you pulled through the worst of it. It might take a while for you to walk again, but you're out of shock. You're going to need physical therapy for your leg," Jacob said. "Kittie has some training in physical therapy."

"Is she all right?" I asked.

"She's fine, just stuck at work at the moment," he said.

"I ruined your wedding night," I sighed.

"You're still alive, and you haven't ruined anything. I'm an EMT and a former medic. I'm used to emergencies, it's what I do. I just need you to rest and focus on feeling better."

"You said there was a shooting? Was anyone else hurt?"

"Just rest for now," said my mother.

"I've been resting for five days; I want to know if my friends are ok?"

I felt a pull of some sort, someone busy at study being distracted by an outside thought, taking a moment to shrug it off and then relenting to the feeling and gathering up all their things.

"We'll move you back to your chamber You have your books to read and your music," said my father.

"We can get you a dvd player so you can watch some movies too," said my mom.

"Make sure it's something from the Criterion collection," I snarked. "Can't be having low art in these chambers."

Kipper then showed up in the infirmary, he had a note in his hand.

"Hey, my man," said Jacob, "Look who's finally awake."

"Cordy, I'm glad to see you're doing better, I have a note for you, it's from Jermain."

"Jermain knows of this place?" I asked.

“We led him back here and he helped carry you, there was no time for questions.”

“He’s been sending messages on the pipes everyday asking how you were, I guess he knows you’re awake now.”

“That was quick,” I said, as I took the note from Kipper.

“*Cordy, can I see you?*” it said.

I handed the note to my father. He looked it over and handed it to Kipper. “Have Mellissa meet him at the entrance by Tower Games.”

I tried moving my leg slightly, and wiggled my toes and winced.

“Cordy, you’re going to want to be gentler on that. It’s going to take some time to heal, Even if you take after Dad, it can be at least several weeks, to several months before you’ll be able to walk normally. You’re lucky he got mostly muscle but the bullet did chip the bone slightly.”

“Ow,” was all I said in retort.

I was wheeled back to my chamber and moved to my bed. Jacob picked me up and gingerly moved me, careful not to upset my leg. My mother brought me a plate of sandwiches, which I devoured ravenously.

“Hey, slow down there,” she said, stroking my hair.

“Mom, I haven’t eaten in a week.”

“Just don’t make yourself sick,” she said.

At the door of my chamber I saw Mel and Jermain standing there. Jermain had a bouquet of lilies and set them on shelf.

Mel gave me a hug, “I’m glad you’re ok.”

“Mostly. I’m not out of the woods yet. I still have quite a lot of healing to go through. I’m glad you came so quickly.” I looked quizzically at Jermain.

“I’ll head out,” said Mel. “We’ll talk later.” She walked quietly out of the room glancing back at us before leaving.

I saw Jermain’s deep brown eyes looking at me with curiosity and wonder, but I also sensed fear in him.

“You saved my life,” I said. “I don’t know how to thank you.”

He took a moment and paused. “I just ... after everything happened, you were passed out. I saw you leave through the basement before, so I just carried you and I saw your brother and this huge dude in a cloak.”

“My father,” I smiled.

“Yeah, your dad, There’s definitely a resemblance. They just took off with you down these passages and tunnels. I ran to keep up and before they even turned around to notice, they realized I was with them. Your dad made me swear I would never tell anyone, and to be honest no one would believe me if I did.”

“So now do you believe me?” I asked.

“Cordy, I would have believed you even without this place, the way you can roar. Normal vocal cords don’t have that ability and ...” he paused and took a deep breath and a light sweat formed at his temples, “...the shooter, you... you ripped his throat out, I was there and saw the everything, there was so much blood.”

I paused and looked at Jermain, he was now quiet and glanced at me nervously. I looked down at my hands.

“I don’t regret what I did,” I said. “He would have hurt other people if I didn’t. In fact I probably should have killed him sooner. But you, you never hurt anyone. I have no reason to harm you, or Mel, or C.C.”

“Where do you draw the line Cordelia? What makes you have the right over death and life?”

“What right does a soldier or a police officer then? Or anyone in the position to protect.”

“Don’t get me started on cops. I’ve been pepper- sprayed. And have you heard of the ‘stop and frisk’ program? Do you know how many times I have middle-aged women with cell phones trying to call the cops on me for being in the wrong place.”

I smiled ruefully. “That makes two of us. I can’t really go out into the general public either. I thought I found a loophole, but, even that can’t exist anymore. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to hurt you. It’s just a lot for me to process.”

“You and me both.” He then took my hand and ran his finger over my claws. “And to think, I just thought you got your nails done.”

“I tried to tell you the truth.”

“I didn’t think you were violent.”

“Well neither did I. Just he attacked my friends, my family from above. I couldn’t let him rampage, I had to stop him somehow. I wish I stopped at incapacitating him.”

“What’s done is done, Chad’s not coming back from that.”

“I should have seen the sign, he gave C.C. Difficulty before he even knew I existed. By the way, how is she?”

Jermain’s face went blank. “C.C didn’t make it, the first bullet went through her heart.”

“No!” My face tightened and my chest hurt. “No no no no no!” I started to hyperventilate and I remembered in my dream:

*“I’m going to stay here,” said C.C. “Tell my mom I love her.” She embraced me tightly. “I’m glad I was your friend, tell everyone I’m gonna be with them, that I’m not really gone.”*

A senseless act of violence took my best friend, my sister from me, and left me helpless to do anything. I curled into a ball and bawled, screaming with rage into my pillow. Jermain slowly put his arms around me and started rocking me.

“I miss her too,” he said. We both wept together and I let him hold me. I felt so small in his embrace, but he was warm and I could hear the beating of his heart. It soothed the hurt that I felt, and his skin smelled of soap and some sort of spicy cologne. Part of me just wanted to crawl inside his heart and stay there.

After what seemed like hours, I pulled myself up and took a drink of water. I managed to breath steadily. Jermain handed me a cloth and I blew my nose and dried my tears. My face felt swollen.

“How did you know I was awake?” I asked.

“I checked in on the pipe system you guys have.”

“But so quickly?”

“Cordelia,” he paused, “after you were shot, I felt a pain in my leg. It burned like fire and I ran upstairs after you. When you passed out I felt you dreaming. I didn’t know what the dreams were, but I knew you were someplace else. Your dad said that we were somehow connected and it’s inherited somehow.”

I sighed and shook my head. “You didn’t ask for this, and I don’t want to bring this upon you. We have this ‘gift’ with people we’re close to, we feel what they feel. I can control it a little, but that would mean ignoring you.” I looked at my hands. “I wouldn’t blame you if that’s what you wanted.”

He took my hands and studied them again, then he pulled my hair back and kissed me gently.

“No, whatever ‘this’ is, we’ll figure it out. I guess I’m stuck with you.”

I curled up next to him, tired of my grief. I plucked out a book from my shelf and handed it to Jermain.

“Please read to me, Love. Spare my mind from grief and pain if only for a few hours.”

Jermain picked up the book and read to me in a soulful timber.

*“It was the best of time, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us,.....”*

I listened to a Tale of Two Cities, as Jermain read it, until I eventually began to doze off. He tucked me in and kissed me and left the tunnels for another day.

Over the next two weeks, Kittie came by to my chamber for hours a day and showed me exercises on how to move my leg to keep it from getting stiff. They also supplied me with a pair of crutches that I hobbled around in.

Mel came by with paintings she showed me and spoke of the tattoo parlor in detail.

When I was tired of books, we would play movies on the DVD player. She also got the series “*Breaking Bad*” that we watched together.

“This is obviously a modernization of *Macbeth*,” I said.

“Why do you say that?” She asked.

“Well because it’s about a king or rather kingpin and his downfall, replace the three witches with the three kingpins and there you have it. His brother-in-law is definitely MacDuff.”

“Interesting,” she said. I knew C.C would debate with me and challenge me with other questions. I felt a pang of grief so deep it physically hurt in my chest.

"We could watch *'Sons of Anarchy'* instead," said Mel. "I heard it's based on *'Hamlet'*."

"No, thank you. I would prefer to watch the rest of this show, and I get this odd feeling from the guy that plays Clay."

"To each their own then," said Mel.

"How is Mrs. Clark doing, it's been a couple of weeks since I have seen her and she was a little broken even then?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen her since the funeral," said Mel. "We should definitely check in on her. I miss C.C so much, but she wouldn't want us to give up, you know?"

"I know."

"Can you walk?"

"I have crutches, I can limp, there's no urgency, but we should check in on her."

"It's still daylight, we should wait until nightfall, and remember the cloak that... we got you."

"Of course." I said.

I told my parents of where I'd be going and I'd take care of my leg and wouldn't be gone long. They thought it to be a kind gesture and said as long as I took care and moved slowly and minded my injury it would be all right, as long as Mel and Jermain went with me.

They both came with me, Jermain supporting half of my weight as I limped and hobbled through the tunnels.

"Damn, I never remembered it being this far," I said.

"Well, Brooklyn is a distance from Manhattan," said Jermain. "If you keep, your hood up, we could probably take the train down."

"I don't think that's wise right now," said Mel.

Jermain then picked me up off of my feet.

"I'm not too heavy?" I asked.

"Hon, you ain't no bigger than a chicken dinner," he said smiling.

Mel looked at us confused. "Wait are you guys?"

"We don't know, we're just going with it," I said.

"Good for you!" said Mel.

We all made the arduous journey into Brooklyn and took one of the tunnel exits. We found Mrs. Clark's brownstone house and I rang the bell. I then saw her peep through the window, then I heard the unlatching of locks and she flung open the door and embraced me so tightly, I nearly lost all of my breath.

"You saved so many people, you saved them, I just wish you could have saved her too," she said. I could smell the wine on her breath.

"We were just checking in on you, Mrs. Clark," said Jermain.

"I've lost everything," she wailed. "First my husband, then my own daughter in this senseless act."

"I'm glad you're alive, hon," she eyed me with a sense of wonder.

"Well, my leg has seen better days," I said. "It'll be a while before I can walk on it fully."

"You take your time and heal up, just don't let them see you, you're all over the news."

I raised my eyebrow.

"How rude of me," said Mrs. Clark. "You guys should come in. We went in past the door and I saw two empty bottles of Menischewitz in the living room. The room comprised of overstuffed furniture and plush carpeting.

"You know, she was going to the Valley of the Kings? For an assignment. So much potential just snuffed out by an asshole with a gun."

"I know," I said. "She wanted to let you know that she's watching down on you and she's staying in the Valley of the Kings, at least in spirit."

Mrs. Clark then brought out a huge book with a pillow cover, she opened it and started flipping through the pages. I saw pictures of people with spiky hair and cut up tee shirts, spikes in all places.

"Believe it or not, this was me and her father back in the day."

I looked at the picture of a man with a bright green mohawk dressed in a spiked leather jacket. I wondered why my father was looked at in fear, if this is how people dressed even before I was born. She then flipped through C.C.'s childhood pictures, a small child with mousy brown hair until about the age of thirteen, then her hair was a vivid array of colors.

"Her father died of a heart attack a few years ago, now she's gone too. I have nuttin' left to live for."

"You do," I said. "You can bring justice with her memory to make sure that this doesn't happen again."

"There is that, hon, there is that," she said. "You're real, whatever you are, I know that you're real, it's not a costume."

I nodded.

"I'm not gonna say anything. I'll find a way, just thank you, thank you for seeing me. "

"Mel, I'm going to need you to stay with her, my own family isn't far," said Jermain.

"Do you need me to stay here too?" I asked.

"No, they want to meet you."

I opened my mouth and then shut it again, wanting to protest if it was a good idea with my injury. He then plucked me up and took me to a townhouse several blocks over. He then knocked on the door and a middle-aged African American opened the door. She was slightly overweight with her hair feathered out slightly. She was still in a business outfit and looked like she just returned from work.

"Hey, Mom, this is Cordy," said Jermain, setting me down. I winced slightly and he handed me my crutches.

"Cordelia Wells," I said. "Nice to meet you, Mrs. Rhodes."

The woman then embraced me so hard that the air was nearly choked out of me.

"You are the woman that saved my son, and the others. You saved them like an angel from the Lord."

"I beg of you," I said. "I'm not an angel or a demon, just a very confused girl."

"I don't care - you saved my son," she said.

"Your son is special to me," I stammered.

"I know, and who am I to judge?" said a middle-aged man behind her, his skin was dark and he was a bit round. "You know, Jermain, your great grandmother was Irish. She tried hard to keep her marriage secret, but they found out, and then lynched your great-grandfather. Your great-grandmother was forced off on another man and took her own life shortly afterward. Who am I to cause you that pain?"

She took me into the house and removed my hood. "If my son loves you, and you saved his life, you are no less than our daughter."

"I don't know if it's love... it's so soon," I said.

"Take your time," said Mrs. Rhodes.

"Come on in," said Mr. Rhodes.

I nervously entered. There was a worn easy chair and nice but well-worn furniture in the living room. I sat on the couch and watched the news on the television. The news went over the current election and weather, it then went to news of the shooting at Club Orpheus and the death of Cecelia Clark, and a pang of loss hit me. It was then followed by a report of a small woman with the furry lifestyle that killed the shooter, and that woman was now being sought for questioning by Councilmen Joseph Maxwell. I turned off the television and turned toward Jermain.

"It looks like I may have to go under for a while, lest anyone see me. I cannot risk being found or bringing your family to risk."

"But Cordelia!" he said. "It's just the news, they'll get tired of shootings in a couple of weeks, they usually do."

"And that's the problem, this violence cannot be forgotten," I looked at my hands. "From both ends. Now bring me back home so I can sort this thing out. I need to speak with my father."

"In a little while, just rest with us for a while."

I laid my head on his chest. "I have to face this and bring peace to it. It's not just us, but my world. I need to sort this out so I can protect my world and my family as well."

He sighed reluctantly and plucked me up to return to the world below.

Jermain carried me back towards the tunnel entrance in Brooklyn. it was several blocks and I curled tightly into the red cloak that C.C gave me.

"Hurry, we only have another block to go," I said.

"I'm trying," he said.

"Place me down."

He set me down, I had been carrying my crutches and I set them under my arms and moved quickly into hiding. Red and Blue lights flashed, and the police car stopped near Jermain.

"I thought I saw you carrying somethin?" asked the officer. He was older and looked more tired than threatened.

"So, what if I was? Is that illegal now?"

"Depends on what or who it was," said the officer. "Can I see your ID?"

"Am I being detained?" He asked.

The officer groaned at this. "Look, you fit the description of a witness, we only want to ask some questions, you're not being accused of anything."

"Am I being detained? If not I'm legally free to go."

"Look," the officer kneaded his temples, "You could help us out a lot if you would just go into the station and answered a couple of questions. You're not being held or detained, but you and the person in the red cloak you were carrying need to answer a few questions, look, kid, don't you want justice?"

I growled low in my throat. The officers glared in my direction.

"Look, ma'am, I don't know what kinda voice equipment or special effects people of your lifestyle use, but I'm just trying to get some answers, that's all. I know who you are, if you would just take off the costume and come in."

A roar erupted, much louder than my own. The officer's eyes widened, a few boxes toppled over in the distance and the man cocked his gun and ran towards it. Taking advantage of the distraction, Jermain scooped me up and we ran into the alley between two buildings, we found a staircase at the end and a doorway. I knocked a special code Uncle Pascal taught me the door opened and shut behind us.

"That was your dad, wasn't it?" asked Jermain.

"Aye, I'm surprised he came above with all the commotion.

"What makes you think I would not have come for my own daughter?" said a low voice in the dark behind me.

"Father!" I said. "I nearly jumped out of my skin. Try not to startle me like that."

My dad chuckled slightly but his expression grew serious. "It's not safe for you to go above right now, or to have visitors from above."

Jermain set me down and I kissed him gently before grabbing my crutches.

"Father, I can't cast him away. Things are complicated now. You wouldn't understand."

"I understand more than anyone else you know ever could!" he roared at me. "If you care for each other as deeply as I believe, you'll go back to your own worlds, at least until this has settled from the media above."

"There is no separate media for the above anymore!" I roared back. "Everything is connected now, nothing is separate."

"Stop!" said Jermain. The blood looked a bit drained from his face and his eyes were wide with

fear. "I'm not important enough to fight over, but if I go back now, the police are going to shake me down, they might even arrest me. It wouldn't be the first time I was shaken down for mistaken identity."

I gave him another kiss. "Love, I'm going to call Melissa up here and hand her my cloak. You answer the officer, but you both be as vague as you can, answer in riddles and talk in circles."

I clanged the code out on the pipes and in a quarter hour Mel came out. I explained the plan and handed her my velvet cloak, and she and Jermain left.

"That was extremely clever," said my father, his rage calmed. "Though it puts your friends at risk."

"Sometimes it's better to be a fox than a lion," I sighed. "They will find a way out of this."

\*\*\*\*\*

I sat at the main library with my parents. The council members surrounded me as well, there was Uncle Pascal, Piper, Bell, Uncle Mouse, Aunt Jaime, Jacob and Kittie.

"The world above has footage of the shooting at Club Orpheus," I said. "And footage of my actions - everyone has a smartphone and I lost myself and I put us all at risk."

"Is there any footage of you leaving, of where you are?"

"We made sure to seal off that gate," said my father. "Even if they were to look, they would only find brick."

"How long has this been out?" asked my mom.

"I don't know," I said. "Since the shooting, I would imagine."

"That's the price we pay for having our heads in the sand," said Bell. "If we had access to digital media, we could have acted on this sooner and had some sort of damage control."

"That's a good idea," said my mom. "Bell, you should go to Tower Games with David and check on the news feeds and trends every week, let us know when public interest starts to fade."

"I'll do my best, but City Councilman Maxwell is hunting this one pretty hard. It's a bit weird that he would be so interested in a case outside of his district. He was all gung ho about giving relief to 9/11 heroes, making sure they got funded, and you think he'd care more about gun control and bringing hope to the victims family, instead of hunting a vigilante, who most the city claim is a hero herself by the way," Bell said as he nudged my shoulder.

"I used to work for Joe Maxwell," said my mom. "A long time ago, when he was still with the D.A., he's not going to let this go easily."

I felt as though my parents were hiding something else from me, a reason why this member of the city council was trying so desperately to find me.

"Right, Cordelia just has to remain hidden for a while," said Jacob. "Kittie, you should contact your mom to see if the Ministry has an extra cabin in their campground, one they can spare for a while, we can move Cordy to Tennessee for a while."

“NO!” I barked. Jacob’s eyes stared daggers of ice into me. “I can’t do that now. It’s ... it’s complicated.”

“Cordy, I’m trying to help you,” he said. “You can go into the forest, and see nature and have some fresh air for once. Uncle Devin can take you. He can teach you some survival skills, like hunting and fishing, maybe basket weaving.”

“What about my friends?” I asked.

“We can get you a laptop, and I’m sure a secure internet connection so you can talk to them,” said Bell.

I looked toward the ground, my chest hurt and I felt a tear trickle out of the corner of my eye. I could feel everything that Jermain felt, I felt the annoyance, fear and frustration that he felt now and I was sure he was being questioned the same way I was.

“I’ll consider it. It’s my fault that I got into this situation.” I looked at my hands. “I do want to talk to my friends first.”

“That’s fair,” nodded Jacob. “Just be careful, if they see you now, they could be at risk.”

“I’m aware.”

“Everyone keeps an eye out for intruders, urban explorers, anyone. They all have cell phones with cameras and video now, there’s no escaping it. If they show up anywhere near here, use the pipes to call a sentry,” said Uncle Pascal.

“Is little Cordy going to be ok?” asked Uncle Mouse.

“Cordy’s not little anymore,” said Aunt Jamie, as she took his hand. “We all grow up, sometimes it’s the hard way.”

The council left the room leaving me with my parents.

“I think Jacob has a good idea,” said my mom. “Spending some time outside the city might be good for you, it also helps to know of our backup location.”

“Backup location?” I asked.

“In case of rising waters due to climate change or another disaster, or if the city becomes too expensive or impossible to live in,” said my Mom.

“Reverend Green has some property in the Smoky Mountains, so that this world would never truly fall,” said my father. “I was hoping to not have to go there anytime soon. As beautiful as seeing the colors and the wilderness would be, this place is ... these tunnels are where I grew up, where I lived and made my home.”

“Then I’ll do what I can to keep it your home, to keep you here, only let me speak to my friends first, at least let me say goodbye, that’s more than Cecelia ever got from me.”

My father nodded. “As far as Jermain, you love him now?”

“I think so, just things have been happening so fast around me, everything is spinning out of control. I have to set this right somehow.”

“Jermain is a good man, and I know that he means well. If you were not being hunted, I would have no issue with you seeing him. Just at this time, you risk both safety to yourself and to

him.”

“I know, he’s already singled out enough as it is, I don’t want to be more of a burden.”

“Just after all this time, people are so hateful and cruel to each other.”

“Yeah, and they call us the monsters, they call us animals, well scientifically humans are animals, either way you’re a monster, human or not, it’s a Catch 22.”

“It’s how you treat others that make you human,” stated my mom. “I’ve had enough Byronic posturing from both of you. Just treat people with empathy and lay low for a bit, whether it’s here or away. This will blow over in a couple of months and you can see your boyfriend again, just be careful and don’t do anything rash or stupid that will attract more attention.”

“You say that,” I said. “But Joe Maxwell has been on the warpath for what? Thirty years nearly. I’d hate to have to look for an answer that long and never find it, and then have my top investigator disappear out of the blue. Aren’t you declared dead above?”

“Yes I am, but I did it to take care of my family, and this world. There were cases that I couldn’t go on solving. There was so much death in the world above and I couldn’t take it anymore.” Tears were starting to form in her eyes. I hugged her tightly, then grabbed my crutches and nodded and headed back toward my chambers.

After several hours Mel and Jermain showed up.

“Did anyone follow you?” I asked.

“No, we made sure, the sentries already asked us,” said Mel.

“Good, we can’t be too careful.” I said.

“Yeah, I’ve seen it all over YouTube,” said Mel. “I wish I would have warned you earlier.”

“I should have paid more attention,” said Jermain. “The cops had us in for questioning, I did what you said and kept it vague, I might have to get a lawyer.”

“It was brutal,” sighed Mel.

“I’m sorry, I should have never put you, my friends, at risk.”

“I think I’m more than a friend now,” said Jermain, as he held my hand.

“They’re thinking of shipping me off to Tennessee for a few months, until things die down,” I said.

“Can I go with you?” said Jermain.

“I never said I was going,” I said. “Look, I feel that both my parents are hiding something from me. I can feel it a bit in my gift.”

“All parents have their own lives, I’m sure they have things in private that they don’t want to share with their kids,” said Mel.

“No, this is something more significant. I can just put myself into Joe’s shoes. He’s been looking for answers for three decades, and that gnawing curiosity that has faded in that time has been brought back by me.”

“What happened thirty years ago has nothing to do with you, Cordy,” said Jermain.

"I wouldn't exist if what happened thirty years ago never came to pass," I said. "I know that councilman Maxwell is owed the truth, and the only love is truth, so that's what I will provide to him."

"You can't be serious," said Jermain. "Your leg is still hurt."

"Which is precisely why I need you both to help me," I said. "I need you both to carry me out of here and to a safe place above, and we need to move quickly before my family finds out."

We decided on going to Jermain's apartment for a safe place. We went up the fire escape, I rode piggyback and Mel carried my crutches.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" he asked.

"I need some time to think and get my words together."

"And you couldn't have done this from home?"

"I need access to a computer with the internet," I sighed.

"Ah, understood."

Mel knocked on the window and Tom and his boyfriend came and opened it, we climbed through and Tom gave me a giant bear hug.

"I am so sorry I yelled at you. You saved my life - you saved everyone's life!"

"Not everyone's," I said sourly.

"Cecilia. I'm so sorry, we all miss her."

I began to tear up but was given another embrace by Tom's boyfriend.

"I'm Al, by the way," he said. Al had always appeared at Orpheus with a buckled overcoat, his hair was dark and he had a fu manchu and several piercings dotted his eyebrows. He would wear contacts that made his eyes ice blue and I always saw him as a bit intimidating. Now he was wearing an Invader Zim t-shirt, and his eyes were a warm hazel, and his smile was kind and genial.

Tom was tall and lanky, with blond hair and blue eyes. His fashion always seemed to be from the eighties new wave, but now he just wore a tee shirt and black track pants. The couple seemed so normal this night.

I knew that the option of normality would never be something that I could own, and that I was always going to be different, hidden in the shadows, and my one adaptation had been ripped away from me, at least for now.

"Hey Al," said Mel. "Been a while since I've seen you at Full Ink."

"You two work together?" asked Jermain.

"We used to," said Mel, "but now he's just a frequent customer."

"Sorry hon, money's been a little tight, been trying to get a gig with an actual gallery, and devote my time to scratchboard and paint"

"I know the feeling," said Mel "Cordy, I promised you one."

"Are you sure now is a good time?" I said, quirked an eyebrow.

“Well, now’s as good a time as any. Al, do you have your kit?”

Al left the room and came back with a box, I rolled up my sleeve to my upper arm.

“Hon, I don’t know how to put this, but, well, you have a lot of peach fuzz on your arm,” said Al  
“Oh,” I sighed and pulled down my sleeve.

“Her wrist will work fine, the underside is a bit fuzzless,” said Mel, as she cleaned my wrist with some alcohol.

“Now hon, what do you want on there?” asked Al.

I thought for a moment, “I want in memory of C.C.” I paused. “Can you do the other wrist?”

“Sure, if that’s what you want,” said Mel.

“On my other wrist I want the word Cryptid, I may as well have a sense of humor about all this.”

About an hour later they were done. The pain was similar to falling down as a child and skinning my wrist, it was nothing compared to being shot.

“The tigress now has her stripes,” said Mel. “Are you going to go to battle?”

“I’m not going to battle, this isn’t a fight, I’m going to ask for leniency, to make my case for self-defense and defense of others.”

“You mean you’re going to be dragged into a court of law and be questioned, you can’t do that, they’d kill you,” pleaded Jermain.

“Not exactly that either, that’s why I needed to research. Maxwell has been seeking answers for a very long time, and I will provide them without exposing my father, my brother or my world. But I need to know more of what I’m getting into before I do anything.”

“I have a computer in my room,” said Jermain. “We can research from there.”

“I take that it’s my cue to leave,” smiled Mel.

“No, you can come with us,” I blushed, realizing what I said. “I mean, we’re just going to research the net for some answers, you’re my friend and welcome to join us, any extra input and opinion is welcome.”

I walked back to Jermain’s room and Mel, Al and Tom followed. I figured the more the merrier and we’re all freaks here, and Tom and Al were now part of my underground above now too.

I asked Jermain to handle the search, as computers were more his forte. I had been forbidden from this technology for much of my life and I had no idea where to even begin.

We researched the recent news first; headlines of the shooting were already starting to fade away. There were mentions of Chadwick Parker, and how he had been socially isolated, a misogynist and he had been on INCEL websites and Reddit groups. He had a vendetta against people with alternative lifestyles and was part of several alt right groups. He had hidden himself in echo chambers of ignorance and hatred, and my injuring him had only triggered a time bomb destined to go off.

I read articles on a mysterious young woman of the furry lifestyle that defended the club with her bare hands. There was a cell phone video of the club and my roars, and the the aftermath

of Chadwick Parker. How his jugular was slashed and how this young woman must have had her hands surgically altered and sound effect equipment. Articles on how I was a hero, and that the police did not help the alternative community, so a vigilante did. Young girls with Alice in Wonderland style pinafores and cat ears standing up for me in protest to councilman Maxwell's desperate search for me.

"The world has truly gone mad," I said, shaking my head.

We continued to follow the trail and researched city Councilman Joe Maxwell. He was the former Manhattan District Attorney and served from 1990 to 1998, and took a brief hiatus after the disappearance of Diana Bennett. She had been a detective for special cases and went missing on an investigation of a known serial killer. She was presumed dead and there was a search for her body that still continued with a phone number to report any tips to the cold case files.

In 2002 Joe Maxwell was elected to city council. His wife Erica had been on the 10th floor of the World Trade Center when the planes hit, leaving him a widow, and his daughter Sadie without a mother. He had passionately put all his effort into relief of the Trade Center attacks, as well as obtaining funds and medical assistance to first responders. He had been re-elected for four terms and was up for election again in 2018.

"It seems like we hit a dead end with Mr. Maxwell," said Jermain. "Just what are you looking for exactly? All of our searches have given us more detail, but have only really told us things we already knew."

"There's something not mentioned, something glossed over, he doesn't know that I'm Diana's daughter and he wouldn't turn his efforts to me so harshly if there wasn't something driving him," I said.

"Like a shooter and in his district?" asked Jermain.

"Yes, but if that were all, the shooter would be his main focus, and the victims, not me."

He raised an eyebrow. "Wait, your brother, he's nearly thirty and your mom didn't disappear until 1997, when she was pregnant with you."

I nodded. "Jacob is technically my half-brother. he took his birthmother's last name, Chandler. She was murdered after his birth by a man known as Gabriel Lannister."

"Why didn't you mention this honey?" Jermain said. "This could have saved us some time."

He then typed in Catherine Chandler, and we found my sister in law's marriage record as well as the name of a popular doctor in the Bronx area. Jermain shook his head and typed in Catherine Chandler murder case and a bunch of YouTube ghost stories, also known as creepypasta, came into the search. We clicked on one by Corps Husband, the narrator had a voice like deep velvet. He went over the case of Catherine Chandler, my brother's mother.

It went over how she was attacked and left for dead back in 1987. I saw the faded newsprint and saw a pretty young woman with her face slashed in several places. It also went into how she mysteriously appeared several weeks later, a fairly cut and dry case. Then the narration went into how she changed her lifestyle, how she broke off an engagement with her fiance, and quit her father's firm, to work for the district attorney and Joe Maxwell was her employer.

It went on how she took increasingly more dangerous cases and a major trial put her in the public eye. It then went to how she discovered inside information of corruption and a mysterious book. This book nearly had Joe Maxwell killed in an explosion, and how Catherine Chandler was kidnapped and kept alive until she gave birth and then unceremoniously executed with an overdose of morphine.

The story then went to how Diana Bennet found Gabriel Lannister and killed him in self-defense, and how the case was officially closed. Then it went off in a different direction. It went into asking why Gabriel was so interested in my brother to begin with. Since Catherine Chandler became an investigator for the district attorney, there was a string of brutal murders that followed. The people murdered started with the people responsible for her injuries in 1987 and escalated over the years. The attacks all had a similar pattern. It looked like more of a mauling than a human attack. There were claw marks that went down to the bone.

The cases were similar to how district attorney Morino was killed, as well as a fire of a drug den back in 1990. Same attack pattern same M.O. The YouTube cast then showed a grainy CCTV video that showed my father in one of Gabriel's buildings roaring in rage and attacking men, my father in full fury, in rage I have never seen before - except once through myself and by my own hands.

The YouTube video went into love letters to Catherine left by a man named Vincent, and how he could have been her guardian angel, killing the corrupt. It went on how Vincent could have been an early prototype of the furry lifestyle and how it could have been taken to far. Or was he someone or something of supernatural origin?

We read the comments and they were filled with remarks on how the disappearance of Diana Bennet may have been related, as she investigated the Chandler case and seemed distant in her work since then. Also, a more recent post on how the cat-girl vigilante could be a copycat of him.

I felt numb, I never knew my father had been violent to that extent. It now made sense on how my mother pressed me into controlling my anger at a very young age (not that it worked), and how my father had always seemed a bit uncomfortable around me and why they wanted to hide me away.

I considered going back home for a moment, hiding away in the mountains, only to be mentioned in the occasional urban legend, but if I did that, me and my father would always be hunted. I needed to tell the councilman the truth, but keep my father's identity and location secret. I would take my father's sins on my shoulders and take the fall for him if that was needed.

I stood out on the fire escape to get some air. *"I love you my father, to my bond and my duty, and I will set you free."* I sent this thought to him.

*"Where are you?! Please come back home!"* I heard back in response.

*"My only love is truth father, and I know your truth now, and I will take your truth and stand in as your tribute. May the sins of the father be passed onto me. I love you my father, to my bond and duty, nothing less."* I then slammed my mind shut creating an icy wall between us.

I kissed Jermain. *"I will go to the councilman tomorrow after sunset. Today I will rest."*

“Be careful,” said Mel. Tom and Al gave me a hug as they left the room.

“Mel,” I whispered, “I may not be coming back. It all depends on his reaction, but I do ask to leave me and Jermain. If I am to sacrifice myself for honor, I may as well be a woman when I do.”

She nodded and a tear left her. She embraced me. “You will do everything you can to live, I didn’t live just to have my best friends die.”

“It’s out of my hands now.” I kissed her on the cheek and shut the door, leaving everything in silence.

When I awoke to the sunset painting the city in hues of purple, orange and red. I looked out the little bedroom window wondering if this was the last New York sunset I would ever see.

Jermain strolled back into the room. “Hon, I was up for a few hours. I made some coffee if you want some.”

“Thank you.” I said and held him.

“You know you snore like a freight train?” he chuckled.

“I didn’t mean to wake you, I’m sorry.”

“Na, it’s actually kind of adorable. I don’t know if it’ll be adorable in six months, but we’ll work around it.”

He had a smile that was sad and wistful, and I could feel his doubt. It made my chest ache. A knock sounded at the door.

“Jermain, Chantelle is here to see you,” said Tom.

“I’ll be right back,” he said as he gave me a quick peck on the lips.

When he left the room, I took my crutches, opened the window and went down the fire escape as carefully as I could. I hobbled away, hiding in the shadows as best as I could. I hobbled about twenty blocks away to Tower Games, and was thankful that the store was still open.

The store had its usual DnD group meeting but was otherwise empty this time of night. I entered the shop and the bell tinkled. David glared up at me with a disapproval and came up to the door.

“You shouldn’t be above ground,” he whispered.

“Please, I need your help, may I use one of the computers here?”

“For what?”

“I just need to send a message to someone, then I’ll be out of your hair.”

“Make it quick,” he sighed and then led me to the back of the shop.

I found the city council website and found Joe Maxwell’s district and left a message to him using Jermain’s email stating I had information on the vigilante. I got a message back almost immediately asking me how I knew. I sent a link in response along with the YouTube video, stating *everything is more connected than you think, love*. I left an address to the shop, and I waited.

In an hour I saw a tall man with brown eyes and short cropped gray hair. A pretty young woman with dark hair and thick horn-rimmed glasses followed him. I kept the hood over my face.

“Are you who I think you are?” he said, his voice wary.

“Who do you think I am?” I asked. “And are you who you think you are?”

“Look, I don’t have time for bullshit and riddles. Either tell me what you know or I’ll charge you with a false report.”

I shook my head. “You’re a councilman, your job is to create laws now, not enforce them. For you to catch me legally, you would have to employ police. I see none. I know that you’re here on personal business.”

“I can get a cop if you’re turning yourself in,” he said.

I briefly considered using my gift to lure him away and leave him for dead in a dark ally, just as the skinwalkers and mermaids seduced men away myths of the past, and how easy it would be to have freedom from all of this, if I just gave into the darkness. I breathed and pushed the thought from my mind.

“But, if they capture me, and you know they will, you’ll never know the truth.”

“What, that you know Vincent, or you idolize him, and you’ve become a copycat vigilante?”

A peal of laughter left me. “Is that what you think? No, love, I knew the shooter, somewhat. He even attacked me beforehand.”

“Then why didn’t you come to the police earlier?”

“Oh, extenuating circumstances, it’s not like the police would listen to me or take me seriously anyway, and I’m more than capable of defending myself.”

“We all know that, it’s all over the internet,” said the young woman. “You don’t need to hide yourself, we all know what you look like.”

I sighed and pulled my hood down. “It really kills the mystery.”

“So how do you know Vincent?” asked Joe.

“That will come in time, but I need your assurance that you’ll leave us alone. You want to know the truth. I can give that to you if you leave us in peace.”

Joe shook his head. “I follow the laws. I can’t knowingly be told a confession of crime without following repercussions.”

“Then I’m afraid, love, we are at an impasse.” I gave him a doe-eyed look. The young woman raised an eyebrow.

The door burst open and Martha walked out. “She’s a true hero for saving all those kids, you wouldn’t want to arrest a hero? Not for self defense,” she said. “I’m sorry about your friend C.C, but you saved everyone else. Isn’t that worth something?” Martha glared at Joe.

Joe then sighed and shook his head. “There needs to be laws ma’am. We can’t have everyone serving vigilante justice like the wild west.”

“Like your laws have fixed anything. My rent has tripled in the past ten years, minorities can’t

cross the street without being patted down, the rich get richer and the poor just sink. Three hundred people flee this city every day, is that what your precious laws give us?"

"Ma'am , I've done my best to make sure the poor and middle class get funding. I've put my votes in for the hero's we forgot."

"Then stop picking on little girls that defend their friends from mass shooters. Is that too much to ask?"

I gave my most doe-eyed look to Joe and he shrugged and sighed.

"I guess that this does leave us at an impasse, I'm done here. Sadie, let's get to the car."

They both left, I waited a minute and then trailed behind them. I could hear snippets of conversation between them.

"Well that was completely useless," said Sadie.

"We have a location, I can have the police investigate."

"Daddy, don't do that."

"Why not, she's a wanted criminal."

"She's seen as a hero by most of the internet, you'll be seen as the bad guy."

"My term ends two years from now anyway. I don't care for how I'm seen. I care for what is right."

"Just, Daddy, I have this feeling that things are more than they seem."

"How so?"

"I can't put my finger on it, I just know, that there's something special about her."

Joe stopped and looked at his daughter quizzically, "This is bringing the past back for me. I guess it might be better to let it lie for now. I don't know, I'll think about this in the morning."

"After the meetings?"

He rolled his eyes. "Don't remind me."

They both got into a modest blue sedan. I took note of the licence plate and they took off in city traffic, but city traffic being what it was I could keep up with the car fairly well. I had forgotten my crutches back at the shop and my leg was screaming at me after a couple of blocks, but I managed to keep up. The sedan then stopped at an apartment complex next to NYU and Sadie got out.

Perhaps there was a way I could appeal to her. She seemed to be more on my side than her father was. At any rate I could try to appeal to her. I just felt that I should be near her.

She went up several floors, and the stairs were murder on me, but I kept up as best I could. I then saw her get to her hall and two strangers came to her, wearing hooded jackets in red.

"I hear your father might be trying for senate?" said a female voice.

"He might think against that if his daughter goes missing," said a male voice with a southern accent. "The last thing we need is another libtard in power."

They then turned as I growled from behind them. I remembered how Jacob taught me to turn

my hand into a closed fist to use my elbows to throw blunt attacks and resort to my claws as a last resort. I remembered this as I throat punched the woman and gave the man a swift kick between the legs and they both doubled over.

They limped off into the darkness, only to be seen on an alt right website out of New Mexico.

Sadie grabbed me by the cloak and yanked me inside her apartment locking the door three times.

“How the hell did you keep up with a moving car?” Her eyes were wide.

“Very carefully,” I said. “Owwwww.” I then found her sofa and crumpled on it, pain throbbled through my leg like hot iron.

Sadie then called her father, and Joe came right over and saw me holding my leg on the couch.

“Before you start anything, Dad, she saved my life and only beat them up.”

“Did you call the cops?” he asked.

“Do you really think that’s the best idea now?” said Sadie looking towards me.

“Wait, how did she keep up with a moving car?”

“Very painfully, especially with a bullet wound,” I said. “Sadie, may I have some water?”

They both looked at me with wide eyes. Sadie went to her refrigerator and plunked a bottle of Deer Park in front of me. I greedily drank it when there was a knock at the door. Joe looked through the peephole with a shocked expression. He unlocked the door and my mother was on the other side.

“I’m looking for my daughter,” she said.

“Diana? I thought you were dead! We all thought you were dead. Just what the hell is going on here?” said Joe.

“I’m just here to get my daughter,” she sighed and sat beside me. “Your father felt your pain and sent me here to get you, I figured you’d try to pull something crazy like this. You know you risked everything and everyone?” She put her head in her hand and sighed. “People depend on you, and this is how you repay them?”

“Well it’s too late now. I hid myself as well as I could, not that anyone even cares anymore. I’m tired of everyone’s paranoia. I just wanted it to end, and well, the truth will set us free, isn’t that so Jean Valjean?” I asked Joe.

There was another knock at the door.

“Mom, is it all ok in there?”

“Yeah, Jacob, just give us a minute.”

Sadie opened the door and my brother stood on the other end, he had my crutches and a stretcher.

“Hello Miss, my name is Jacob Chandler. Look I’m just here to get my sister. I’ll be out of your hair in a minute.”

“Jacob Chandler?” said Joe, as he looked at the broad-shouldered young man on the other side.

"Yeah, nice to meet you sir."

"Catherine's son?" asked Joe.

"I am. I heard you knew her," said my brother.

"Then that makes you Vincent's daughter," said Joe.

I clapped my hands. "Astute one, isn't he Mother."

I don't need you to be a smart ass now!" said my mom. "You have no idea what mess you've created!"

"We won't tell anyone," said Sadie flatly.

"Sadie!" said Joe.

"Look, Daddy, this girl, she saved my life, she saved a lot of lives - it's the least we can do for her. Apparently, a lot of shit went down before I was even born, a lot of things you never told me. It's been eating at you for a long time. This is your chance to get answers. Don't punish them for it, or I'll never forgive you. I mean I will never speak to you again."

"Sadie you can't be serious. This is the law."

"The same laws that allow corrupt politicians and CEOs to thrive while everyone else starves? What's more important, laws or justice? They're giving you justice."

"Fine, Sadie, you win, but I want the whole truth, everything."

"All right, but it's a long story, and you need to follow us," said my mother. "Jacob, can you get Cordelia on the stretcher, and make sure her face stays covered, everywhere has cameras now. We're going to need to get Mouse to wipe the camera feed from this building if we can."

"It's a good thing Cordelia is as light as she is," said Jacob. "The next entrance is about two miles away."

"I can drive you guys," said Sadie.

"Thank you!" said Jacob. "Before we go can I use your restroom real quick."

"Sure," said Sadie.

I heard a tapping coming out of the pipes as he washed his hands. I smiled slightly.

"Well they might as well know everyone, the cat's out of the bag, isn't it Cordy?" asked my mom. "Dad's meeting us at the entrance."

"A family reunion," I said.

Jacob lifted me gently and carried me to Sadie's car. Jacob decided against the stretcher and just carried me gently to the tunnel entrance through an old warehouse. The door opened and a large cloaked figure on the other side.

"Vincent," said Joe.

My father removed his hood and his long white hair tumbled down his leonine features. "Joe," he said.

They stood staring at each other for what seemed like hours.

"Why didn't you come to me, all those years ago?" said Joe, on the brink of tears. "We could

have saved her.”

“You wouldn’t have understood. You would have crucified me, and there is so much grief in the past. So many things we could have done.”

“I wish I would have asked Erica to stay home. That day has haunted me for fifteen years, I know how you feel.”

“The past is behind us. What exists now is my family, and we only wish to live in peace.”

“Is this where Catherine was going all those nights? Underground to see you?”

My father nodded.

“It explains so much,” said Joe. “Diana, you disappeared down here and didn’t tell a soul. We all thought you were dead.”

“I found out I was pregnant; I did what was best for my daughter.”

“Your daughter has bigger balls than all the criminals we’ve busted, I don’t know if she’s really brave or really reckless.”

“A bit of both,” grumbled my father. “I can manage this world or manage my daughter; I can’t do both at once.”

“Hey!” I said.

“World?” said Joe.

“There is a place in these tunnels, where people depend on us for shelter and safety, and to keep everything secret.”

“You promised to tell me everything,” said Joe.

“I’ll make sure he keeps everything as a secret,” said Sadie. “Secrecy for closure.”

“Well, worst case scenario there’s the Ministry,” said my mother. “It looks like we’ll all end up there eventually anyway.”

“You must not tell anyone, Joe,” said my father.

My father opened the door the rest of the way and my father led them underground. We walked for what seemed like hours when we reached the hospital chamber. Jacob laid me down on a cot and left the room for me to put on a gown.

In the other room I could hear Kittie.

“Diana, Jacob, I’m so glad you found her.” She kissed Jacob. “Hi, I’m Kittie, Jacob’s wife.”

“Yeah,” said Jacob. “We’re expecting our first.”

“Catherine would be a grandmother?” asked Joe.

“Yeah,” nodded Jacob.

“Is the baby going to be normal?”

“So far so good, and it doesn’t matter what it is, as long as it’s healthy and happy,” said Kittie.

“Normal is overrated,” I said from the other room. “I’m dressed now.”

Jacob came in and checked the wound. “I am going to have to redress this, you’re bleeding

again, it might even get infected.” He then took a bottle of antiseptic and I growled in pain as he worked. He then turned my hands over. “You got inked?”

“Yes, I thought you didn’t have a problem with tattoos,” I said.

“I don’t, but you’re going to itch like a mother when everything starts to heal at once.”

“Can I see?” said my mom as she turned my wrist over. “That’s really sweet for C.C, but Cryptid, really Cordy?”

“I have to have a sense of humor about things, or I’ll go mad,” I replied.

Mel and Jermain came into the room.

“You had me so worried,” said Jermain. His eyes then widened. “Councilman Maxwell?”

“Good to meet you, are you another resident here?”

“Na, I’m just here to see my girlfriend,” he came over and gave me a hug. Joe just stared at him.

“Do you have an issue with our relationship?” asked Jermain.

“No, not at all. It’s just a lot to take in.”

“I hear you,” Jermain said. “Cordy, you had me so worried, you just dipped out on me.”

“I had to finish what I started; I didn’t want everyone to live in fear of a good man that just wanted answers.”

“It could have gone badly. You could have had cops running everywhere around here and shutting this place down,” said Jermain.

“That’s not going to happen,” said Sadie, “but we have to think of a story for the investigation.”

“You mean a cover up!” said Joe.

“The government does it all the time,” said Sadie.

Joe just shook his head. “So Vincent, is there a whole nation of cat people down here?”

“No,” I laughed. “There were people like us, but genocide has nearly wiped us out of existence.”

I then told them the story of Lyca as well as my theories on everything from Bast to the Kitsune, to Skinwalker creepypastas.

“They are only theories, they may not hold water, but it’s what C.C believed in and what my dreams have told me. I may be the last one of my kind standing, there may also be thousands of us hiding in the shadows Your guess is as good as mine.”

“We were put here to protect people,” said my father. “That is why we are the way we are. Whether we’re alone or many does not matter, only those that love us and those that depend on us that do.”

“I guess I’ll have to be someone you can depend on,” said Joe. “I have my closure, the least I can give you is justice, but can you give justice to your victims?”

“They were criminals that attacked an innocent woman,” said Sadie. “Would the justice system have brought actual justice?”

Joe shook his head. "I'm just going to have to drop everything, aren't I Sadie?"

"It's probably best to, Daddy. You have enough work to do without chasing cold cases from three decades ago."

"You're right, I'm just going to let this go, I'm going to let it all go. As of 2018, I'm going to retire and get a nice place in Florida. You can visit me in the winter."

"I'll be your resident snowbird," said Sadie. "Anyway, we should just head back home, there's a police report of a few thugs we have to file."

"Better yet," said Joe. "Come back to my house tonight, we'll file the report tomorrow, after some footage is collected."

"I'll lead you out," said Jacob. Both Sadie and Joe Maxwell left the main chamber.

My parents went to the medical bed to see me in a gown with Jermain sitting beside me.

"So, my daughter was with you last night?" asked my mother.

"Are you a woman?" asked my father.

"I became a woman when Lyca pulled me to truth in my dreams. I became a woman when I took a bullet for my friends. A man will not turn me from a girl to a woman as much as my actions will," I said.

My mom sighed, "What your father is trying to say is be good, if you can't be good be careful, if you can't be careful, name it after us."

I felt my face getting warm.

"Nothing happened, Mrs. Wells," said Jermain. "I swear."

"Just call me Mom," said my mother.

"You're a good man, Jermain," said my father. "I know that you love Cordelia and that's what matters. Just be careful of her reckless ideas and keep her safe."

"Thanks Dad," I said rolling my eyes, then smiling. "Thank you, for understanding us." I kissed Jermain chastely.

"I'd be a hypocrite if I said otherwise," said my father. "Your grandfather thought that love was forbidden and would end in tragedy. If I had followed his view neither you or your brother would have existed."

He turned toward Jermain "You have my blessing. Just make sure she stays at home so she can heal."

"You're not shipping me off?" I asked.

"I don't think there will be a reason now, not after what you've maneuvered, though this makes you the most frightening creature imaginable."

"And what is that?" I asked smugly.

He smiled and then said, "A politician," as he left the room.

Over the next few weeks, I rested and healed. Jacob was right about the unbearable itching that came with healing came with both the tattoos and my leg. Kittie had me working on

physical therapy exercises daily, and over the next two months my leg healed back to normal, although I can tell when it's going to rain.

In the news, an EMT by the name of Jacob Chandler found a redheaded woman that met my description that died of an overdose of PCP. They doctored her life so that it was a young woman of the furry lifestyle that was stalked by Chadwick Parker and attacked him in a drug fueled rage before her heart stopped shortly after. While I felt sorry for the young woman, I was glad my name was cleared. Also, there was mysteriously more police at certain tunnel entrances to discourage urban explorers and drug addicts.

Jermain and Mel came to see me every day and helped me from going absolutely stir crazy as I healed. Jermain spoke to the council about coming to live in the tunnels, they agreed as long as he continued with his studies.

"The world needs more environmental scientists with all this climate change," said Piper. "We could certainly use your help with water testing and soil levels."

"I'd rather use it here than rotting away at a corporate firm," said Jermain during the meeting, "and I get to be with the person I love."

He moved into my chamber shortly afterwards, though many of the nights I was called out for sentry or patrol duty, and he was called to his studies. Our lives settled into a calm routine.

During this time, we saw Kittie's belly grow, the child was a boy and was developing normally. After eight months, my nephew was born in the midwife chambers in the world below. The child looked completely normal, beautiful even, with a fluff of dark hair and soft gray eyes.

Joe and Sadie were invited to the naming ceremony. I remembered Joe saying that the child had Catherine's eyes.

"We bring the child gifts, so that we know that it is loved," said my father. "We then give the child a name, so that it is known."

"Vincent," said Jacob and Kittie in unison. My father smiled warmly.

"The child shall be known below and above as Vincent, and may he always be loved." My father then cradled his grandchild and he cooed.

"Alright Dad, can I have my kid back?" asked Jacob after a half hour. My dad pouted and handed Vincent the second back to my brother.

"You know, Kittie and I might have a few more of these, start our own little army," said Jacob.

"Do we make enough to feed an army?" asked Kittie. "I'm calling it at three."

I held my nephew carefully and wondered if I would ever be a mother one day, and I heard C.C's voice in the back of my head, *'I'm not gone forever, I'll be back in this plane one way or the other'*.

"What are you thinking?" asked Jermain.

"Nothing, love, just wondering about our future."

"We'll take it day by day," he said. Then in front of the council he called an announcement.

"Vincent, er Wells, and Ms. Wells I have something to ask you," he said.

“Yes?” said my parents.

“Do I have your permission to have your daughter’s hand in marriage?”

I spit out my wine.

“I believe the permission would have to come from her, but you have our blessing,” said my mother.

“Of course, I’ll marry you, but you could have asked me in private.” Talk about putting me on the spot.

The next month, a week after my nineteenth birthday we were married. I wore a red gown and Mel had painted my claws red with ornate gold designs.

I remember being at the altar, everyone dressed in an array of red, white and black.

“Father, I love this man with all my heart, and I can love him because you loved before me. There is no great tragedy, only comfort here, he drives away my darkness and lets me rest, here there is only peace.”

“When I first saw you,” said Jermain, “you were this goofy little girl that cracked her head on the pavement trying to scare us away.”

The congregation laughed.

“Then you told me the truth and I turned you away, only to see who you really were when you protected us. You are the fiercest, most passionate and most reckless person I have ever had the pleasure of meeting. We feel each other’s emotions and know each other’s pain, you are everything. This marriage would have been illegal a century ago, even if you were normal, because of my skin tone. People will always find a way to hate and separate each other, but because others have dared to love and changed the laws above, we can be together, and bring each other peace.”

I could see tears in my father’s eyes and my mother embraced him. I kissed Jermain and we were wed.

That night we walked outside to look at the buildings and saw the New World Trade Center, the giant oblong building that had been constructed over the ashes of the twin towers.

I knew no matter how grave things became, and how dark humanity was, there was always hope. There are no happy endings, because nothing ever ends, and we would have to fight my darkness and reckless nature in the future, but that is a story for another time.

END