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## This Terrible Thing

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*Bard College*

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This Terrible Thing

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature  
of Bard College

by

Ari Ray Agnew

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2021



To my little sister, who has exquisite taste in movies and who helps me polish all my geodes, even the ones that do turn out to be nothing at all.



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Eternal thanks to my mother, my first and last editor. And thank you to my whole family for insisting that my writing is, in fact, good.

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And thank you to Benjamin Hale for sharing the secret to killing vampires.



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## Introduction

Like most stories, *This Terrible Thing* has no definitive origin. It draws on many parts of my life. But its conception was reliant on two experiences, one overwhelmingly positive, and the other incredibly painful — a Dungeons and Dragons game, and a therapy session.

In February of 2020, before the start of the pandemic, I joined a Dungeons and Dragons game. Having a pre-existing affinity for the Dungeon Master and one of the players, I was ready to invest before I knew what game we were playing: *The Curse of Strahd*. It's a gothic horror module that draws on every classic vampire story there is to flesh out its titular vampire. It was fun but, initially, the game meant very little to me. We played once a week and that was it. When the pandemic started, it became more challenging to consistently make it to games consistently and I found myself beginning to detach from the group. Looking back, I honestly can't believe there was ever a time I wasn't deeply obsessed with it — all of my loved ones will attest that *Curse of Strahd* and my D&D character are all I talk about. The game appealed to my long-standing fixation on vampires and my love of tabletop roleplaying games. And it doesn't hurt that my D&D group has become some of my closest friends.

Nearly a year later, on January 21st, I told my therapist a story that made her cry. It wasn't a story that meant much to me but when she thanked me for sharing it, I started to realize how awful it had been. After our session ended, I laid down on the floor of my room and cried. It's the only time I remember crying this year.

January was a month of great stress for me. I had planned to spend all of it working and writing, after struggling to get the ball rolling on my Senior Project in the fall. Every

idea I had seemed to go nowhere. I was incredibly productive on all my other writing, but none of it would work for my Senior Project. By my count, I wrote 144,706 unusable words before tallying the many attempts I made at the project I thought would define my time at Bard. I recognized the problem immediately. I was compelled to write a story fueled by characters and relationships, but the story I was trying to write was driven by plot and I couldn't find a way to make it otherwise. Nor did I have characters with a relationship compelling enough to write about. My friends will insist that the real issue was that there weren't any vampires, which might also be true.

The aforementioned fascination with vampires has been ingrained in me since at least the third grade. One of the only nightmares I remember genuinely scaring me as a child was about a vampire. And so, in later years, I would study the vampire and make the creature my friend. I cannot remember a time when there wasn't some idea for a story about vampires in the back of my head. In fact, Dacian, the vampire at the heart of *The Terrible Thing*, first appeared in a story I tried to write when I was fourteen. He was different then. Unlike his current counterpart, he understood his flaws. I reworked his story into a one-act play, which I was lucky enough to see produced in my final year of high school.

The moment that finally united all of these experiences to create *This Terrible Thing* was completely unrelated. At the start of the spring semester, I rewatched one of my favorite Ghibli films, *Whisper of the Heart*, and was overcome by a need to write. And I was sick of failing to work on my Senior Project. I decided to write a story about vampires and remembered that I'd never really finished things with my original Dacian. But I wanted to

write about something I was experiencing. So I drew on that therapy session and on the tropes in vampire-focused gothic horror and romance I've come to know like the back of my hand. Lucere and Dacian, in their current iteration, existed by the end of the next day, and I was finished with the bulk of my first draft before the week was out.

Still, there was much more that needed to come together. Lucere's true identity wasn't solidified until one of my last drafts, and it took some time for me to realize how the ending needed to come together.

*This Terrible Thing* is a story about complicity and justification. It's a story about obsession and violence and the way we condone them when we believe they stem from love, even after we've moved on. It is, as the title suggests, a story about terrible things. I'm so thankful for the catharsis and growth this story has brought me. While I'm happy with this stage in its development, I look forward to continuing to rework it and for the self-reflection I know it will bring. It's a fitting project to end my time at Bard; it has been an uphill climb, but I'm happy to have undertaken it and am proud of the result.



“Every time I change wives I should burn the last one. That way I'd be rid of them. They wouldn't be around to complicate my existence. Maybe, that would bring back my youth, too.

You kill the woman and you wipe out the past she represents.”

— Pablo Picasso



One

The first time I saw Dacian, it felt like I knew him. It was a small classroom. I was running a little late so was the last one in. He sat near the front and glanced toward the door as it shut. We locked eyes. I had short hair, maybe chin length. It used to be blonde, but I dyed it so often in high school that now it's this mousy color. I was wearing a patterned sweater I like a lot. I saw myself through his eyes, brown hair, pale skin with a few freckles, gray eyes. And I saw him, black hair, chiseled features. Eyes like amber. We looked at each other and then he looked back to the professor. I spent the whole class staring at the back of his head, wondering about him. We ended up walking all the way home together.

My name is Lucere West. My mom liked the name Lucy but thought Lucille or Lucinda sounded too old and she liked that it sounded like "Sincere." I always thought that was sort of funny because no one calls me Lucy and "sin" is the part that isn't in my name. I'm not from Oregon, I came here to get my master's. I wanted to be a therapist but I don't know if I have it in me, anymore. My grades have gone down since I started here and I just don't have the energy for class or reading or work and I don't really know what I'll do after. Right now I'm a waitress and that's fine. Sometimes I think maybe I'm just too committed to something I shouldn't care about anymore since I decided to become a therapist early in life. Other times I really want to honor that dream.

I said something like that in class when we'd all talked about why we were in the program. Dacian had smiled and said, "Well, it's not like I have anything better to do." So when we walked home I asked if that were true, and Dacian ended up telling me his story. How he

moved around the country, parents fighting, the violence he'd endured, and when he told me what happened with Elizabeth, I even cried. He told me he looked for Elizabeth in every person's eyes and I could not fathom that. I thought about how much I loved Dacian, already, at that moment when we had just been pulled together, and then imagined him dying. I honestly could not.

The long walk rushed by. The campus trail and town roads, all the towering trees, blended together into absolutely nothing at all. There was only the man at my side and the stories he was telling me. I almost missed my house. I invited him in so that we could keep talking. It felt like I'd known him forever, and after that we never stopped talking. Other things in my life started and ended but Dacian was always there, in the back of my mind.

That night was actually almost the first time we got together. When the door shut he kissed me with so much vigor. No one kisses like Dacian. He dug his hands into my hips and his mouth was soft and sharp all at once, in just the right places, like he was trying to get inside of me. Normally I get so in my head when I do these things, but it wasn't that way with Dacian. I became someone else, a creature of passion and power, and I pulled him onto me. We practically fell onto my ratty old sofa as he kissed from my cheek to my collarbone. His mouth was like dry ice on my neck, cold and hot all at once. Then when I took off my shirt, I don't know how, I elbowed him in the face and he fell on the floor. The moment was completely shattered.

He sat back up and I totally freaked out, apologizing. He pointed to my neck.

"I didn't realize you were religious," he said. I looked down and realized I had my cross on.

"I'm not," I told him. "My dad was though."

“Did he give that to you?”

“He did.” I touched it. I knew it was worth a lot. “Everyone in my family has one.”

“Is that why you wear it?” Dacian sat down next to me on the bed. He put his hands on my bare shoulders. They were large hands, but dainty somehow, sturdy and soft. I felt secure in them, like a statue. Nothing could have moved me.

“Yeah.” I let my hand drop. I leaned forward and kissed Dacian again and he kissed me back but it was different now, gentler, and we didn’t go any further.

He remembered my cross, the next time he saw me without a shirt. I was changing for work and he was sitting at this little table I have. One of those small high tables that might be sort of nice, if it were outdoor seating in a coffee shop, but completely wrong for a kitchen. I couldn’t afford a proper kitchen table then. I rushed out of my bedroom with only my bra on, looking for the sweater I wanted.

“That cross.” He looked like a painting, there, with one foot resting on the other’s knee. His eyes shone with interest. They always reminded me of a cat. “The cross your mother gave you?”

“My father,” I corrected him. “I can’t believe you remembered.”

“It’s a lovely piece. Is it silver?”

I told him it was sterling and I put on my sweater and hurried to work.

I didn’t have it on the first time we had sex. He noticed that too. I could tell. He ran his hand down my neck and across my breast and I watched him see where it should be, realize its absence. He threaded his hands through my hair and kissed me and I became the sky for him, endless and alive and empty and shining. There was no world but him beneath me.

Two

One night, in autumn, Dacian surprised me with a trip to the state park. Every so often the Museum of Science and Industry hosted star nights. We must have known each other for only a few months at that point. I had just come back from a short trip back home and was pretty out of sorts. He bought our tickets, packed us some blankets, and even drove us. He went on and on about how excited he was to spend the night with me and show me something really special.

When we got there, the crowd was as big as a concert audience and had the same infectious excitement, but the group was more spread out, more mellow. It felt like the Fourth of July, with families and couples huddled together on blankets and looking up expectantly. There were telescopes set up, and an astronomer was pointing out the seasonal constellations. Dacian laid out our blanket and patted the ground next to him.

“Thanks.” I sat awkwardly. “I really wasn’t expecting something like this. I thought you’d want to go out.”

“Not tonight.” He smiled and reached over to ruffle my hair. “Tonight, I’d like to spend some time with you.”

I smiled back without meaning to. “That sounds really nice, actually. What made you think of this?”

He moved his hand but did not pull it back. Rather, he let it slide down to the side of my neck, not fully untangled from my hair. “I like the stars, and I like you.” He kept smiling at me. His eyes were bright, charged with affection. I wondered what kind of night this would be; he was always gentle with me, always doting, but Dacian did not want the appearance of being in a relationship and he sometimes held back for that reason.

“Do you like astrology? Since you like the stars. Or just astronomy?” I paused. “That was such a dumb question.”

Dacian laughed, falling back onto the blanket as he did. He crossed his arms behind his head. “I certainly prefer one to the other. But speculating’s fun, isn’t it? I like to speculate about the stars, and about myself.”

“You’re a Sagittarius, right?”

Dacian looked past me, up at the sky. “I believe I am, now. Do you like astrology?”

“I did, in high school.” I tore my gaze away from him to look up too. “I’m a Virgo. I don’t know where she is.”

“*Ahem.*”

I looked down. Dacian had flung one arm out over the blanket and wiggled it expectantly. “Aw, is that for me?”

“My darling, I am impatient.” I grinned and let myself fall onto him. He squeezed me and leaned over to kiss my forehead. “Much better. You were saying?”

“I wanted to know what got you into the stars.”

“Ah.” He shrugged. “Nothing, lots of things. You know, where I grew up — when I lived there it was always covered by a thick blanket of smoke. Smog. It hurt to breathe. I still remember the first time I saw the stars properly and breathed clean air. That’s what it was like when my life changed again.” He smiled, and I took note of how white his teeth were.

“Everything felt cleaner, clearer. Sharper. And you know, I’ve seen many things change. But the stars... they stay the same. I appreciate that. No matter where I go, I can look up and I’ll see my sky.”

“Do you have a favorite constellation?”

“Orion,” he answered, pointing. “So beloved by Artemis, she hung him in the sky so that he might live forever. It’s terribly romantic. And always easy to find. I keep him close to my heart.”

“Which part of it is romantic to you?” I asked. “The eternity?”

“Not at all.” Dacian took my hand in his. “The holding on.”

I turned to face him, so our foreheads were nearly touching. Our relationship was physical in that way. We spent a lot of time holding hands, leaning on each other. There were even sometimes we went further. I’d never felt as comfortable with anyone as I did with Dacian. I’ve heard people talk about being on fire around someone you love, but it wasn’t like that at all. He would put his hand on my shoulder and it was like I froze. My brain would go completely blank and I would stop thinking for a moment and just become an extension of him, like a cup being filled with water. “I think that’s very romantic too. Like the stars. We know what stars are, and we know that they’re probably dead — but we still admire them as if they were eternal. And their stories, even though we know it’s all made-up, we keep telling them. I think that’s beautiful. I love that people hear a sweet story, and decide to share it, decide to make dead light into love and history.”

Dacian’s eyes flicked down to my lips, but he did not close the space between us. “Look up,” he said.

I did. “Why?”

“I want to watch you seeing it. Seeing the sky.” Then he leaned forward and pressed his lips to my jaw. “And I wanted to do that.”

“Ha,” I said. “That’s all you wanted to do?”

“What do you think of the sky?” Dacian asked. I glanced over at him. “No, look back up. You think it’s eternal and infallible? You think it goes on forever?”

“I know it doesn’t.”

“But what do you think?” He rose above me, so his hands were on either side of my shoulders. “I don’t care what you know. How do you feel about it?”

“I feel... like it does. I think it does. It goes on forever.”

He bent down and kissed me. “It doesn’t.”

“I know. I know that.”

His breath was cold against my lips. “But it’s very nice to pretend.” He kissed me again. “To be honest, I think I prefer the charade.”

“I love you, you know,” I told Dacian. He pulled away from me. “Don’t you? You must know how much you mean to me. I hope I’ll always know you.”

He cupped my face in one hand and looked down at me. His gaze was warm.

“I know,” he said. “I love you too.”

Three

Dacian saw women besides me, but Iris was different. She reminded him of Elizabeth. I saw the picture he kept of her, and they did look similar. They both had such gorgeous red hair, and lovely green eyes. But Elizabeth looked sort of like a ghost. She was slim and distant. Iris was alive, robust, bursting. Maybe that was why Dacian was so drawn to her.

I honestly thought she liked him too. She would come over to watch movies with us and he would brush hair out of her eyes or put his hand on her knee. That made me jealous, especially because she would not move it away. Dacian never did things like that to me when anyone else was around, especially Iris. Dacian even became someone else around her. I knew the real Dacian, the one who struggled and suffered, but he tried so hard to be sparkling for her. He laughed a charismatic laugh and smiled like he'd never been hurt. He paid for Iris's coffee and played the part of a happy partner. It was a careful show. He took every sharp edge of himself and sanded it down. But he wasn't meant to be dulled like that, and I didn't like watching him turn himself inside out for her.

I didn't know what to think when she said he was stalking her. I was confused because I'd been with them plenty of times. How could he be stalking her when she clearly liked being with him? I really wanted to believe her, and I knew I was supposed to, I just couldn't.

So I trusted him. I think he must have shown up to pick her up from work or class without checking, brought something to her house — he was romantic like that, in that showy sort of way. Maybe it just made Iris uncomfortable because she decided she didn't want to date him, and he wanted to date her. And I understand, it would have made me feel weird too if I didn't have

the relationship I do with Dacian. That I had with him. After that, he stopped spending time with her.

Then Iris had the accident. I know this sounds messed up, but it was really tragic for Dacian. He never got as close to her as Elizabeth, but I think it's just so sad, that he'd found someone to get close to again and then she accused him of doing something awful, and then she died, too.

It ate away at him. What she told him and what happened after. He cried himself to sleep in my bed. He would grab at my clothes and say her name and I would hold him as close as I could. I wanted to be with him forever, cradling him, so he would never feel alone again. I pressed his head against my chest and imagined my heart pressing through my ribs to kiss his tears away, beating out his name as he cried out hers.

"I would never want to hurt her," he managed to say sometimes. I wasn't ever sure if he meant Iris or Elizabeth or even me. I would just stroke his hair and whisper that it wasn't his fault, and he would cry harder and squeeze me tighter. His grip was incredibly strong, crushing sometimes, but I never minded it. It just made me feel happy, to know he felt safe, that I was soothing him.

That was when he started to get dark. He'd been too hard on himself before but now he was something else. He was a sinner and priest all at once. One night, I took him into his shower because he wasn't cleaning himself anymore, he was so hurt. It was one of those showers with a bath, so he sat in it and I held the showerhead up to wash him. He stared at the soapy water running down the drain by his feet. Maybe it's strange to remember, but he had such perfect feet.

They were like marble. All of him was, as if someone had spent a lifetime carving him. His eyes were dark and red, glowing with fury and helplessness.

“I’m a monster.” He said it so casually, so matter-of-fact.

I put the showerhead down. “No.”

“I *am*.” I reached over and took him in my arms. The side of the bath dug into my stomach. It was cold, even through my shirt, and my sleeves were wet. Dacian did not respond or even move. I didn’t feel like I was holding him at all. He could’ve been mist. “Look at what’s happened. Look what I’ve done.”

“You’ve done nothing, Dace.” I pressed my lips to the top of his head like it would prove he was really there. “You didn’t deserve this.”

“Neither did she.”

“These things happen.” I pulled myself up to better grip him. I wrapped my body all around his, as much as I could without climbing into the bath. “But it will change.”

“Everyone goes.” His voice was so thin, like steam escaping a kettle.

“I won’t go anywhere,” I promised him. He laughed at that and took my hand.

“No, my darling. You won’t, will you?”

“I won’t.”

He made a humming sound. And then he released my hand and I carried on. I dried him off and put him to bed. I slept on the sofa. It was nearly six in the morning, and I had to get up for work in two hours.

Then things changed and he stopped coming over. My calls all went to a voicemail, and then the voicemail was full. And he wouldn’t answer my texts. Finally I couldn’t take it. I felt

like I was going crazy. I didn't mind if he needed space to mourn or to feel but he couldn't just ditch me. He needed to tell me he was alright. Only he wasn't.

Four

I haven't tried to be dishonest. Everything I've said is true, but there's another layer. Like those accordion books. You know those children's books? That you stretch out and there's one picture under a bunch of other cutout pages, and all together it becomes a beautiful three-dimensional scene. I have shared one or two cutouts, maybe, and they might even be pretty good ones, but it's just not a full picture. So I'll say more.

When Dacian told me he was a vampire, I believed him. I don't know what it was, it just felt right. It was late and we were at my apartment, only a day or two after we first met. We were in my room, sitting on my bed with our backs against the wall. It was dark and his head was on my shoulder. He cried for a long time, the dry tears that come from dehydration and uncertainty. He told me many terrible things about himself and I stroked his hair and promised him he was not a monster and he looked deep into my eyes and told me what he was. "Oh, Dacian," I said and clutched him against me. I wanted so badly to kiss the top of his head, but I did not. We weren't yet that kind of close. And yet we were, strangely, and I think he felt the echo of the gesture against his skin.

If there was any trace of doubt, it would soon be gone. To prove himself to me, Dacian drank my blood. I think of that moment often, the firm hand around my throat, the mouth so cold and the wound so warm. I felt like a bird held between hands. When he kissed me, his mouth was hot and salty and I kissed him back with everything I could, in the hopes it would tether him to me.

I think I'm the country's leading expert on vampires, which isn't saying much. I've never met anyone, besides Dacian, who knows much about the topic. But this is what I learned in my time with Dacian. Vampirism is a curse. Dacian did not sleep, but he did tire, he did not hunger or thirst, but he did crave. His body did not age but his heart did, hardening with each passing year. He told me that it often felt like a wilted flower, all of its water dried out, waiting to be touched so that it could tremble and burst.

Dacian needed to drink maybe twice a week but could probably have gone for a month without doing so before his body started to fail him. Often, his choices (victims is such a strong word) did not even remember meeting him, which always made me sad. I could not imagine encountering Dacian and then forgetting it. But he thought it was better that way. He also needed to rest every so often, and for it to mean anything it had to be in his coffin. Dacian hated this since he did not like to remember being buried, but it was better than eternal exhaustion.

In some stories, vampires have servants or familiars. You might guess I was something like that; you'd be wrong. The way I took care of Dacian wasn't the way a servant would do it. I took his laundry in a few times and helped him clean things up. I would have made him dinner if he would eat it. I would have cooked him my mother's spaghetti, hot and red, and he would have eaten it and told me how good it tasted. Instead, I sometimes forgot to cook for myself, since I was so caught up in him. I had no desire to become a vampire, so our friendship was an equal one. He made and broke no promises to me. Besides, if I had wanted to become a vampire, it would have been simple, because to become a vampire, you only need to drink the blood of a vampire who's drunk yours.

I did admire Dacian, even though I did not want to be like him. Dacian was beyond human possibility. He had the quiet strength of a predator, like a lion, and you could feel it when you touched him, but he was still pretty thin. His face was chiseled, a careful ice sculpture, with the kind of cheekbones that might cut you. Both his lashes and hair were dark, thick, and long. He sometimes grew a little gaunt, if he hadn't eaten, but even then he was still so beautiful. Beside him, I was only a shadow, something that followed in his footsteps. Dacian could go out in the daytime, but his complexion was very delicate, and being in sunlight weakened him significantly. A few moments or indirect rays were fine, but on bright and cloudless days he may as well have been a normal man. That was why he came to such a rainy region, so I guess Meyer was right about that one. He had very few true weaknesses; Religious symbols and garlic only repel vampires. and stakes can only kill young vampires. They immobilize the others, but the stronger a vampire gets, the harder it is to drive the stake in.

He might have thought I was weak. I was younger and more fragile. A dying thing, he sometimes called me. He probably did not believe I could hurt him if I wanted to, especially since I'm so much smaller than him. Maybe that was why he first trusted me, with his secret, because he couldn't imagine me doing anything with it. Dacian was just about a foot taller than me. I could not surpass my Dacian, would not have even tried. Someone else might have pressed a stake to his chest. But if it were still my hands holding it I am sure it would have snapped. Still, it stung that he laughed at the idea.

Sometimes he played with it, my weakness. He spun me up against a door, or onto my bed, onto my floor a few times, and pressed his mouth to my neck. He did not draw blood, just felt me shake beneath him with fear and laughter. He probably heard my heart quicken. He

would press his fingers to it to feel its frenzy. His voice was always so low, like I was the only thing in the world. He spoke carefully, knowing he had time. He always had time with me. “I could kill you, here.”

“I know,” I would whisper back. And then he would bite down, not drawing blood, just kissing me, and I would pull him close to me and call out his name.

Five

Dacian arrived at my house sometimes, unannounced. I would come out from the bedroom and find him at that silly little coffee table. It happened often enough that I ached a little when I awoke and found my kitchen empty. There was only one seat in that kitchen so I would lean against the stove while I ate or drank. Ironically, I chose my apartment because it had great lighting. But I was so used to seeing Dacian, so expectant, that I kept the curtains at each window drawn and my home dim.

“Good morning, my darling.” Dacian closed the book he was reading. The title was in Russian. “Did you sleep well?”

“Better than you.” We did this joke every morning.

“Any dreams?” Dacian was always curious about my dreams because he never had any. On that day I don’t think I’d had any dreams. I walked behind him to peek out the curtain, just to check the weather. It was foggy, with cracks of sun lighting up Portland in the distance. I touched his back as I returned to the counter to make myself an egg. When I turned back, Dacian was smiling faintly at me. His right arm was propped against the table, supporting his chin, the left still holding his book. His eyes were half-lidded and warm. He looked so content. I wish all of his mornings could have been that gentle, and all of his smiles so peaceful.

“My darling,” Dacian blinked, very slowly. “Is there anything you would not do for me?”

I tilted my head. “Why do you ask?”

“I would like to know.”

He did this sometimes. He liked to test me, tease me. It was all in good fun. “You know I’d do anything for you, Dace.”

“Anything?” He always sounded so pleased when he heard that. And then he would make his suggestion. “Would you kill for me?”

“Sure,” I said evenly. It was a joke. My egg tasted of nothing. “If you like.”

“Will you walk me to the library?”

I swallowed. “Oh, yeah.”

His smile stretched to show his teeth. They were white, gleaming. And then in one fluid motion, he rose. “Excellent. Let’s be off.”

I forced down one more bite and he whisked the plate away and to the sink. I followed him out the door.

Our school’s library was a flat and sprawling building. We stepped into the library and Dacian took me to the second floor. The shelves here were tall, and there were step-stools around the building, but none in sight. Dacian glanced back at me. “Could you keep watch?”

I went and stood at the next shelf over while he rose into the air to find his title. It was lucky I was watching because one of the library aides came by. I couldn’t remember her name but I knew she was an undergrad. She had unmistakable red curls and large pink-framed glasses.

“Excuse me!” I waved her over so she wouldn’t see Dacian. “Could you help me find Nabokov?”

She sighed, pushed up her glasses, and came over to help me.

“Thanks,” I said. “It’s good to see you.”

She brightened a little at the realization that I recognized her. “Sure, Lucere, it’s good to see you too. We should catch up some time.”

“Uh-huh.”

She went on her way and Dacian strolled briskly out. He was holding three copies of *1984*. “Nabokov?” He turned to head back for the stairs. “How pretty.”

I did not take a book with me. Dacian was, it turned out, getting three different translations of Orwell to compare.

“I have been thinking a lot lately,” he told me. “About the closing line. ‘He was back in the Ministry of Love, with everything forgiven, his soul white as snow. He was in the public dock, confessing everything, implicating everybody. He was walking down the white-tiled corridor, with the feeling of walking in sunlight, and an armed guard at his back. The long-hoped-for bullet was entering his brain.’ It keeps running through me. So I want to see it in other languages.” Actually, that’s the second to last line, but it’s not that important. I asked him why he needed to read the whole book and I remember so clearly, how he tapped me with the edge of one of the books and said “You, my darling, do not have a literary mind.”

“I suppose not,” I agreed. “Well, I hope you enjoy revisiting it.”

“I’m sure this will be a delightful romp.” Somehow, Dacian remained stony, even when throwing around words like *romp*. “Have you read it?”

“In English,” I said. Dacian raised an eyebrow. “Everyone does. It’s *1984*.”

“How charming.”

“I didn’t like it that much, my first time around.”

“You must have enjoyed the rat scene.”

“Aha.” I gave a cruel imitation of a laugh. “I did not.” I hate rats, Dacian knew this. Actually, I can’t remember now if I had that fear before I read *1984*. That might have been where it came from. I asked him if he could turn into rats since I knew Dracula could do that, and he would never tell me. He liked to tease me.

“Will you walk me back home?”

“Such a gentleman,” I cooed. “Always asking.” He was only continuing our game. He read parts of the Japanese *1984* aloud to me on our walk home and I did not understand a word of it. He wiggled his fingers, at one point, and I thought he might have been reading about the rats.

The thing about the rats, for me, was how they swarmed. In *1984*. They can in real life, or maybe they can’t. I’m not sure, but I know the stories about rat kings. And in *1984* they felt so blind. You only had to put them in a cage, put the cage on Winston — and he ceases to be a man and becomes meat. The rats don’t recognize that he is so much bigger. Of course, he is strapped down, but rats might not know that. They could recognize how big he is, but they don’t because at that moment they are blind and they are part of something bigger, because the head is isolated from the whole, and Winston becomes dinner. And so they burrow beneath his skin with their thin little claws and sharp little teeth, digging tunnels and eating their dirt. Or they would, they would try. I would have sold Julia out too, I think, if threatened with such a thing. I don’t know if I would have sold out Dacian. I don’t like to think I would. But that was why they bothered me. But I still laughed when he wiggled his fingers.

## Six

There were a few times when Dacian needed blood and I helped him get it. He used to drink from other women because he did not want to rely too heavily on me. I even tried to help him a few times, but I was really shit at picking up women and he didn't like to drink from men, but eventually he realized that it made more sense to work with what he had. Besides, I liked giving him blood. It felt nice. You'll think this is odd since it was an injury, but it really made me feel warm and fuzzy and loved. Still, sometimes, I could imagine Dacian killing me. I thought of it often, when I angered him, or when things felt too blissful. I would picture him lunging toward me and tearing my head off, or drinking too much without realizing.

"Do you love me?" Dacian asked me, one night. I was dizzy, half with blood loss, and half with delight. He lay in bed beside me, his arms wrapped around me. I ran my hand across his shoulder.

"Mmhmm."

"That's not what I meant. I know you care about me, Cere. But I sometimes think you *love* me." He pressed his head into my shoulder. "You'll have to stop treating me so well."

"You deserve to be treated well."

"So do you. Besides, I don't."

"You do."

"Treat *you* well." He let out a heavy sigh and looked up at me. His eyes were huge and dark, as soft as the sky.

"You do," I said again.

“Why don’t you go out with men?”

“I go out with men,” I told Dacian.

“Never for long, because I’m always around.”

“It’s not just that.”

“I hope you aren’t waiting for something. I’m not going to come around.”

“I don’t expect you to. When I meet a man and feel connected to him, I’ll go out with him.” See, it was really very balanced. I never worried that Dacian might be using me, or that he would drop me if I got involved with someone. We didn’t have that sort of relationship. He would even stay the night in my bed, sometimes, even though he didn’t sleep, just to keep me between his arms.

The next morning, I woke up and found him stroking my cheek. He ran his fingertip along it and I could just feel his nail. My bedroom was blue from the curtains coloring the sunlight. It always felt so serene with Dacian there. Those four walls and that large bed were my little oasis. So much of my apartment was ramshackle and small and shoved together, and that room was no exception, but the bed was really comfortable. I kept my eyes closed but Dacian could probably tell I had woken up, and let his hand slide down to the nape of my neck.

I rolled over to look at him, moving very slowly so as not to displace him. “Good morning.”

“Good morning, my darling.” His voice was a little ragged, dusky, and he pressed his forehead to mine. “How did you sleep?”

“Better than you.”

He smiled demurely. “Any dreams?”

I shook my head. Moving so gingerly, as if he were doing it for the first time, he went to kiss my forehead. His fingers glided across my collarbone and then he pressed, delicately, into the soft skin of my throat. His eyes lit up as he did, eagerly watching me breathe. My heart fluttered.

“She guessed not how her darling one wish would be heard,” Dacian recited. “And thus we sit together now, and all night long we have not stirred, and yet God has not said a word.”

“Did you make that up?”

He brushed some hair from my eyes. “No. It’s from a poem I used to be quite fond of.”

“How sweet.”

I don’t remember much else about that day, just that I had an appointment at a salon. I had recently gotten bangs and needed them trimmed but decided to get my hair cut shorter while I was at it. That stuck with me because I had some pretty nasty bruises on my neck and spent a good deal of time in the bathroom trying to cover them up, then I wondered if maybe the stylist would wash my hair and it would come off. I tended to get worked up about things like that, especially since Dacian was never getting bruises to worry about.

I cut my hair to about chin length, only a little shorter than now, and I don’t think the stylist noticed.

## Seven

The library aide was Iris. It's strange; I see two people when I remember what she looked like. They're both the same and both completely different. She was a little taller than me, and a little rounder, with a sweet cherubic face. When I first met her she had long frizzy curls and then she cut her hair, and learned to style it better. It was really cute. She would do this great half-updo sometimes. It used to reach her chin, or just below, but she was growing it out the last time I saw her. She had a few freckles and broad shoulders. I almost always remember her smiling. Except for the other version that I remember, that one always looked sad.

We ran into each other later that week, outside the coffee shop on campus. I nearly called her Irene or something else wrong. But she was a tour guide and had a name tag on. She caught my eye and waved, and when she came back after to say hello. Or maybe she just came back to get lunch and saw me. She still had the tag on. She ate a hummus and veggies pack they sold in the campus store and took small bites. It was misty outside, but not the kind of mist that hid the sun, and the trees and buildings towered over us. I loved how big our campus was, the way it dwarfed me. I felt as though I blended into it, became part of the trees, of the buildings.

It's funny, but I don't remember what we talked about. I was so happy with our conversation because it had been so long since I made a friend who was not Dacian. I really didn't know many other people, except for the men I sometimes went out with, and even then, there wasn't all that much to it. Once I dated a man named Fred, which I thought was sort of funny, because I never expected to meet someone named Fred and also find him remotely attractive or even likable. I liked Fred a lot. I didn't have sex with Dacian when Fred and I were

dating, even, and Dacian never said anything about it. But I think Fred was still jealous of Dacian. I wish he'd trusted me.

The conversation with Iris made me want to see her again. I think it might have been about a book she was reading, or a show. We swapped information and had lunch a few times. Not lunches we planned, but ones where we ran into each other and ate, and I always came home feeling a little happier. I saw her talking to Dacian a few times but assumed he only recognized her as my friend before she asked me about it.

"Your boyfriend's been talking to me a lot lately," she said to me one day in the dining hall. We were eating together at a corner table. It was raining outside, so the place was packed and noisy. I felt a little claustrophobic, but not so bad I couldn't stand it.

"My *boyfriend*?"

"That Dacian guy?"

I smiled. "Oh, we're not dating."

"Oh!" Iris's glasses slipped down a little. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize."

"You don't have to apologize." It did please me a little that she'd made that mistake. I was a little surprised he was talking to her, but not so sure why. "What's he been talking to you about?"

"I don't know. Not much of anything, I guess. But he asked for my phone number and I thought it was odd since I see him with you so often. I guess I assumed you were dating."

"No," I told her cheerfully. "Go nuts."

"Ha," Iris said. "I'm not really interested. But I still thought I should say something. But, someone like you—" she added. "You must *have* a boyfriend?"

“No,” I said, just as cheerfully, because I didn’t at that time.

“I wouldn’t have guessed.” She stirred her coffee awkwardly. “I mean, you’re very pretty. I’d honestly go for you in a heartbeat.”

“That’s sweet of you to say.”

“Yeah,” she said, and took a sip of her coffee. “Uh, I should go. But let’s hang out later, sometime.”

“I’d like that,” I told her, and she left.

## Eight

One day, I had some free time after a class and did not know where Dacian was, so I went to the library to return a book. By the time he appeared from the woodwork, looking for my company, I'd probably be done. If not, I might run into Iris and have a nice chat. Maybe she'd be getting off work and we could get lunch. Either way, I would have a nice afternoon.

I was surprised to see Dacian at the library, leaning over the front desk. Iris sat behind it, laughing at something he'd said. Dacian turned and beamed when he saw that I'd come in, and waved me over. He put his hand on the small of my back and pulled me closer to him, which made me feel pretty splendid. "We were just talking about you," Dacian told me. "I was telling Iris about the movie you showed me."

"Which one?" I showed Dacian a lot of movies since pop culture was, obviously, not his forté.

"The good one," he said, unhelpfully, and looked back to Iris. "She shows me so many good movies."

"I like good movies," Iris had her arms propped up on the desk, and chewed the end of her pen thoughtfully. "And good company."

"You should join us," Dacian told her, then looked over at me and raised his eyebrows as if to make sure I would allow it. Actually, I did mind. I'd told Iris we weren't dating but I liked to curl up against Dacian when we watched things and wasn't sure how I'd explain it to her, or if Dacian would even engage in anything like that with someone else present. But I also liked Iris and didn't want to make her feel unwelcome. And I thought it might be nice to share friends with

Dacian. Like having friends as a couple, even if we weren't one. I liked the idea of being a unit with him.

"You should," I agreed.

Iris beamed. "I'd like that a lot."

Dacian tasked me with picking a movie for us to watch with Iris. I decided on *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*, which was one of my favorites in high school.

The couch in my apartment was slouching and deep, and it fit the three of us pretty well. I put my laptop on a small coffee table, and that made up what passed for my living room. It was really more of a corner between the kitchen and the bathroom. We turned the lights off and for the first time in ages there were several inches of space between Dacian and I. Still, our pinkies were pressed against each other. My throat was dry and my chest felt swollen.

A little ways in, we couldn't have been far into the movie, I think the scene when Knives first finds out about Ramona, I needed to go to the restroom. But I didn't want to leave Dacian alone with Iris. I had this awful feeling in my stomach like they would both leave if I did. Just disappear — wouldn't even say goodbye. There would just be no one. So I put off going and then I realized how stupid I was being, how of course that wouldn't happen, and I was just holding on too tightly, so I stood up to go. It was a little hard to pull myself up from the sofa, and when I put my hand on his shoulder for assistance he flinched. He didn't look over at me or brush me off. It was like I'd imagined it. Iris leaned forward a little to look over me, not seeming to notice Dacian's sudden jerk as much as my shifting weight, and I pointed silently to the bathroom to indicate where I was going. Knives wailed that she didn't even know there was good music until, like, two *months* ago and her scalp started to burn.

“Do you want us to pause it,” Iris hissed. I shook my head. I knew the movie so well, I probably remembered every line. I looked down and saw that Dacian’s fingertips were resting over Iris’s. I missed, but overheard, Knives declare that she looked good. When I crept back out, Iris had taken Dacian’s hand.

I sat down beside him, curled up like a bat in the corner with my hands pulled around me. Dacian did not move toward me. After ten more minutes or so, I put my hand down on the couch between us. Moving slowly, with great deliberation, I snuck it toward him over the next half hour, waiting for the moment when I could jump and land back beside him. When it finally did, he was still as ever, like he was cut from ice. And then, just before the ending, there was a moment when he grabbed my hand, snatched it up. I think it was on one of Scott’s level-ups because I did think about the level-up sound a lot that next week. It made me feel so much inside, gooey and hot, a little like lava.

Iris yawned and stretched over the back of the couch when the credits finished rolling. I got up to put our cocoa mugs away. Dacian’s was untouched. The food and drink that nourished Iris and I made him ill, but I’d made him a cup so Iris wouldn’t say anything. I knew he would thank me for the thoughtfulness, the flash of cunning, later that night.

“That’s such a good movie.” Iris locked eyes with me as I passed the arm of the couch and smiled. “Thank you for inviting me over.”

I smiled graciously. “Sure.”

“And you made such good cocoa!”

Dacian came over and put his hand gently on the back of my arm. I looked over at him and he smiled at me, then nodded at the dishes. I let him take over.

“Thanks,” I told Iris. “The key is a little salt. And the Kahlua helps.”

“Wow! That’s cool.” I heard the microwave start. Iris stood up. “I never realized how big the age gap between Knives and Scott was when I was in high school. It felt so insignificant? I guess I thought of ages like, you’re eighteen or so, or you’re over twenty, and those are next to each other. Does that make sense?”

“For sure. It feels much bigger. Especially now that I’m closer to Scott.”

Iris’s eyes widened. “That’s true, you are! How old are you?”

“I’m twenty-three. Which is his age.”

“That’s so weird!” She laughed. “God, that sounded mean. I’m sorry, I just can’t even imagine being over twenty. I’m nineteen. Like, *barely* nineteen, I’m a Capricorn.” So that was February, in my second year, then, I guess. “Adult life is so weird. I guess it *is* like that. Everyone I meet feels like they’re the same age as me, but they’re all just generic over eighteen. Twenties, ha.”

“Can I borrow a cup?” Dacian asked.

“Sure,” I said, glancing back over. He opened up the microwave.

“I still feel like a baby sometimes,” Iris went on. She crossed to the front door to look for her coat on my hook. “I don’t even have my driver’s license. I’m literally walking home.” The walk to campus from my house was far from short, but Portland is a pretty safe city, so I saw no problem with her plan. I’m sure the worst thing that could have happened to anyone walking from my apartment to a dorm was a vampire attack, and that’s if you’re particularly unlucky. Which made what she said next a little strange. “I *hate* walking home.”

“Yeah,” I nodded amicably. I don’t think she was tipsy. She asked for me to put less Kahlua in her drink than mine, and I’d barely added any. But she did seem a little flustered. It might have been Dacian. He made me flustered sometimes, and it was clear something was happening with them. *She’d* taken his hand. I had seen her holding it. I wasn’t going to stop her, even if I was jealous, which I was not. And I wasn’t going to intervene with Dacian’s love life. But she was giving me this weird look, and there may have been shadows under her eyes. Maybe she hadn’t been sleeping well. But she gave me this imploring look as she pulled down her coat so I added, “especially this time of year. It’s so cold.”

“It’s not that. I hate walking home *alone*.” She looked down at her coat, then began to put it on. “It’s been weird. Maybe it’s because — I always sort of feel like everyone’s staring at me. I know this isn’t the biggest school but my anxiety always makes me feel like everyone is seeing me and watching me screw up. That’s been better lately. But then I started to notice — when I’m walking around at night I always feel like someone’s watching me. Not all the time. And sometimes, not at night. I thought I heard something when I was walking over here but it was just some rats in the garbage near the gym. And once a stray cat, I think. But it’s usually just the wind or my own breath or something dumb. And I know there’s no one, but it digs at me. Like... it just gets me.”

I was about to suggest I call her a ride when Dacian spoke. “I’ll walk you home,” he offered, and I felt my heart catch. I didn’t start anymore when he appeared without making any sound, I was used to his silent motion, but I still felt the shock. He leaned around me to hold out one of my to-go mugs. “Here, I didn’t drink mine.”

Iris stared at the cup, then furrowed her brow and looked up at him. Her eyes seemed just a little deeper somehow, richer, like she was drinking him in. “Thanks,” she said, and then she looked over at me and her eyes went right through me. I felt my windpipe tighten a little. “That’s really thoughtful.”

She turned and Dacian put his hand on her back to walk her out the door.

“Are you coming back over later?” I blurted before I could stop myself. I expected Dacian to react like he had before, to shudder, and was overrun with guilt, but he just turned sharply and pulled his scarf from the hook on my door.

“I’m sure I will.” He tucked the scarf around his shoulders smartly, and then tugged on his jacket. “You can wait up.”

“Okay.” My heart sank. I felt absolutely terrible for asking, and hoped I hadn’t somehow sabotaged him. I hated to feel so desperate. But the smile Dacian gave me stitched me back together again, and he blew me a kiss as he closed the door.

And then, well — something like five hours passed. They left around ten. After an hour I went over and realized that Dacian hadn’t cleaned the mugs the way I liked them, and there was a thin silky layer on them I had to scrub off. I texted him to ask if he really was coming back and then, thirty minutes later, again to ask if he could just let me know if he wasn’t. I told him I was going to take a shower and he could just let himself in when he got back. After another forty-five minutes I got in the shower, and then another forty-five minutes later I got back out again. I couldn’t will myself to get dried off so I sat down, dripping, on my already-ruined sofa until I finally had energy and then, instead of changing, I wept and I didn’t know why, until I hiccuped,

and then I texted Dacian that I was going to bed and he could call me if he needed anything. I sat on the couch for thirty more minutes before I finally moved to the bed.

I must have fallen asleep another hour or two later. I left my bedroom door open. When I woke up, I saw Dacian enter the apartment through the kitchen window. I didn't feel like I'd slept at all. Maybe I hadn't. Dacian moved into the doorway and looked at me, and I pretended to be asleep. I don't know if it fooled him, but he came and sat down next to me. The bed didn't shift at all, not even when he bent down, tenderly pushed the hair from my cheek, and kissed it.

I yawned, and stretched out my arms, rolling onto my back to look up at him.

"What time is it?" I asked, mumbling and trying to sound like he had just woken me up.

"Late," Dacian kissed my forehead. "You should be asleep."

"You just got back?"

"Yes. I got distracted."

I yawned again, to mask my nerves. I did not want to become some desperate, clinging thing in his eyes. "By Iris?"

"Yes." Before I could decide whether to ask if he'd slept with her, he answered me. "We just got to talking. Oh, Cere — it was nice. We stood outside the door to her dorm for at least an hour, we just couldn't stop talking. And then the door to her room, doing the same — it was so good to talk to her again, my darling. I'll tell you all about it tomorrow."

"You can tell me now." I pushed myself up to sit beside him. "You just talked?"

"Just spoke," Dacian put his hands on my shoulders. It did not feel like he pushed me, but I felt myself slide back down. "She kissed me, once, before I left. It wasn't much. But Lucere. My darling. I'll tell you all about it later, all of it."

“All of it?”

He put his finger on my lips. His eyes hung over mine, my two stars. “Will you sleep better if I’m here?”

I nodded and turned away. I heard some rustling as he undressed, then he slipped into the bed beside me, one arm beneath me and one above. My heart beat frantically. I wanted to see him once more before I fell asleep. I rolled back over to look at him and he looked back at me. The room was getting a little lighter and a little hazier, which meant the sun was rising outside.

Dacian smiled at me, the way our star smiles at her planets. “You’ll need to close your eyes.”

He leaned forward and pressed his lips to my left eye, then my right, but my eyes fluttered back open.

“You do it too,” I said. He closed his eyes, still smiling.

“And you must quiet this.” He pressed his fingers to my heart. I could feel how cold they were through my nightshirt. He tapped them against it, in time with its beat. “*Ba-bum. Ba-bum.*”

He tapped it until it slowed, and I only distantly remember his stopping, because I fell asleep not long after.

Nine

Of course I found out when it finally happened. Dacian told me all the intimate details of his life, following my arrival in it. And he gushed to me about Iris, how sweet she was, how endearing, how beautiful, how funny. So of course I found out. The first night he didn't come back after one of our movie nights. He showed up at eleven the next morning. I was asleep on the couch, I missed my morning class. I woke up to him gathering me up in his arms.

“Good morning,” I murmured, putting my arms around his neck.

Dacian's eyes went wide, and he looked down at me with a sad expression. “Don't wake up. I didn't want to wake you.”

I must have been so tired. I don't remember well now. But I remember pressing my head against his chest and yawning.

“Did you do it?” I asked as he carried me into my bedroom.

Dacian looked down at me. He looked surprised, for a moment, maybe that I'd asked, and then he looked delighted.

“She asked me to stay the night.” He beamed, and very gently, laid me down in bed. “Can you believe that? I wish I could've told you sooner. Only, I was there. So I wasn't here.”

“Yes.” I yawned again, which embarrassed me a little. Dacian, for obvious reasons, had never yawned in front of me. “You could have texted me. Then I wouldn't have waited up.”

“My darling! I'm so sorry. I always forget. Now, here.” He pulled the blanket up over me. I forgave him, in that moment, for waiting on Iris so often. I would give him that if he would wait on me too. “You must rest. We can talk more later.”

“No,” I said. “I want to spend time with you.”

“Alright,” Dacian said. “I’ll stay here. Is that satisfactory?”

“Next to me.”

Dacian sat delicately beside me. I moved closer to him and rested my head on his chest. I think he must have been reading *Wuthering Heights*, around that time, since we were on a Brontë kick. He moved his arm to accommodate me, rested his hand on my head, and I listened to him turn the pages and did not fall back asleep.

Iris and Dacian never dated. They would meet up places, and he would walk her home. Neither of them ever suggested labeling it. He groaned, once, that it was driving him crazy, and I asked why he did not just ask her out. He looked at me like I was fucking insane.

Iris might have still thought that he and I had something. And I did like that. She always looked nervous, when I saw them holding hands. They hung out about twice a week, which also drove Dacian crazy, but he said she wasn’t free more often. Of those times, at least once would be with me, to watch a movie or eat lunch depending on how busy we all were. I really hated whenever we did that because I hated to be around Iris and Dacian together. I didn’t like the way he preened around her, how attentive he was, dashing around to get her refills or a clean fork or a blanket. But I did like how anxious she was around us both. Dacian told me that she’d admitted she thought we were trying to proposition her for a threesome, which we both found funny. Him because he would have liked that, I think, and me because I found Dacian’s obliviousness to the publicity of our own relationship endearing.

Dacian had been involved with women before, but none of those relationships were like Iris, or like me. Usually he was pursued, not the pursuer, and he did not date the women quite so

much as allow them to date him. Dating, Dacian told me, was equally convenient and inconvenient. The ready supply of sex and blood was extremely helpful to him, and having a partner meant he didn't need to worry so much about the bruises he left behind. What was exhausting was the integration of a new person into his life, someone he was meant to remember things about and know, who also tended to fade back out before the year had passed. It required an extensive amount of effort on his part to commit people to his mind and memory when he had no reason to believe they would stick around for what, to him, must have felt only like moments.

Elizabeth, the girl he'd lost, had been his fiancée before he turned. He mentioned her on occasion, not often but not rarely, and said very little about the circumstances surrounding her death beyond two brief explanations. The first, provided to me before I knew the truth about Dacian, was that she had died in an accident that he survived. The second version was more complicated. There was another woman, one he called many things; his sire, a witch, a demon, a cunt, a monster. He never said her name. It was because of her that Dacian had eternal life. I wasn't sure if they'd been involved. What was clear, was that "the witch," and I don't know how literal that's supposed to be, was responsible for Elizabeth's death. After engineering her demise, Dacian had been bound to her and then forced to serve her. Eventually, she grew tired of that particular punishment, so she locked him in a coffin with a stake in his heart and left him to rot. He was excavated sometime during the Great Depression, it sounded like, by accident. Dacian looked for the witch, too, the same way he looked for traces of Elizabeth. The same way I looked for traces of him.

What Dacian *did* tell me more about was Elizabeth's reincarnation.

Apparently, after she died, Elizabeth came back. She was able to do this fairly frequently since she didn't tend to live very long, apparently being predisposed to tragic accidents. Twenty-two years, Dacian claimed, was her record so far. He tried to seek her out, once he found out it was happening, but realized pretty early on that this presented a host of ethical issues he wasn't equipped to handle, and once he took a step back, discovered that he had a knack for turning up in exactly the right place at the right time. He'd gotten into romantic entanglements before. He told me there'd been other people he loved, other people he missed. But there was something about Elizabeth.

"You must know how it is," Dacian explained. "When you meet a person and *know*. That they'll be in your life forever. That you'll care for them more deeply than anyone else. Have you ever felt that way?"

"Yes," I told him.

Iris did look a lot like Elizabeth. He carried a portrait of her. The witch, he said, had destroyed the one he originally had. She'd deliberated on doing so, on whether it would be worse for Dacian to remember what he lost or feel it slowly fading, and decided on the fading. When he resurfaced, one of the first things he'd done was hunt the new one down. He told me that before we met Iris, and showed me the portrait of her. Honestly, until Dacian pointed it out, I didn't notice any resemblance. But then, I only saw Elizabeth once and he saw her every day. He'd spent years piecing back together her face, and then nearly a century looking for it everywhere, so I guess he had more practice. And once he pointed it out it was pretty obvious. The same red hair, the same patient expression. Parts of Iris didn't quite match up, but those parts made sense.

Iris was walking around in the twenty-first century. Clearly, she had a little more life to her than a portrait of a girl from hundreds of years ago.

Until we found Iris, I wondered how much reincarnation was about appearance, anyway. Dacian only carried that portrait, none of the returning Elizabeths. I thought, perhaps, looks might not be any part of it at all, just souls that clicked together. Though to be honest, I'm not sure if I believe in reincarnation at all.

Ten

Finally, I think in late March, I stopped seeing Iris and Dacian around. I still saw Dacian every so often, and when I asked him about it, he said nothing was wrong. I assumed Iris and Dacian were spending time together on their own now, without me. Honestly, even if I didn't want to have that sort of relationship with Dacian, he was still the person I spent most of my time with and I felt more jealous than I ever had before, even when I *was* around both of them. It felt like I was always thinking about them without me, even when he and I were together. It was bothering me so much that I started looking for someone to date, which pleased Dacian endlessly — he was always a little frantic about my lack of a partner, and what it meant about our relationship, even when he'd been single too. I even got back in touch with Fred, for a little bit, but he was seeing someone new by that point.

“That’s a shame,” I remember Dacian saying. “I really liked Fred.” Dacian, who I’d seen stare daggers at Fred on numerous occasions, was either a liar or the most unaware person to walk the earth.

Another two or three weeks must have passed before Dacian found out the campus was officially asking him to cease all contact with Iris.

Iris and Dacian had broken up halfway through that first week when they weren't spending time with me. I hadn't realized, because what Dacian told me wasn't that she broke up with him, it was “Iris thinks she doesn't want to spend time together anymore.” So I told him she'd come around because love always prevails and Dacian was impossible to forget or something and assumed she would come back. I would have. There had been times when I was

uncertain about Dacian, sure, but I always chose him. Iris or Elizabeth, whichever she was, disagreed. Dacian didn't handle it so well. So Iris took the issue to campus officials. Dacian had been asked, by the school's security, not to approach her under any circumstances.

What hurt Dacian the most was clearly how insensitive Iris was to his feelings. He felt so deeply for her, and she was treating him as if that were a problem. It absolutely wrecked him. I spent plenty of sleepless nights after that, worrying about him. And a few comforting him.

"*You* believe me." He said it very pointedly to me, one morning.

"Well." I was sitting at that crappy coffee table because he was moping and had decided to sprawl out on the floor. I had been drinking a cup of tea and forgot it when I sat down on the floor next to him to run my fingers through his hair and tell him that everything would be alright.

"I *know* you. Believe you about what?"

"I mean, you know I love her." Dacian frowned at my ceiling. "You know what that means. That it's not just some passing notion, that it's real. And that she loves me." Then he fixed me with bright eyes, like a searchlight. "*You* could talk to her."

"That's not a bad idea. But what should I say to her? Do you want me to tell her that you're a vampire, and the reincarnation thing?"

He furrowed his brow. "I'm not sure. What do you think, my darling?"

"I think it's very romantic that you've crossed oceans of time to find her."

"Don't say that." Dacian hopped up, with renewed conviction. "Just don't say that. You can tell her whatever you feel will work. Just don't say *that*." He pulled me up from the hard metal chair and kissed me. "I don't know what I'd do without you, darling, I really don't. How I've lived without you all these years, I never know."

I have to admit, telling Iris about him wasn't really my goal. If she would just be reincarnated again, why bother? I figured Dacian could handle a girl being uninterested for twenty years or so. Better than watching her die prematurely. Besides, I was handling my rejections just fine. I figured I would just do it if it came up, but I wasn't seeing Iris around as often now, so it wouldn't.

As Dacian rose, he swayed a little.

"When's the last time you drank?" I asked. He shrugged dejectedly, which was how he did most things around then. "Was it last week?" Before Dacian started taking off on his own to spend time with Iris or, apparently, by himself, I'd been able to decently monitor when he needed blood and when he got it to help make sure he took care of himself. The last few weeks had made that job difficult.

Dacian rolled his eyes up as he thought, then shook his head. It must have been cold that week, because I was wearing a turtleneck — I remember that, and with incredible clarity, pushing up my sleeve. "Oh, you needn't do that," Dacian said, as I pulled the cuff over my elbow.

"You'll feel better," I said. "And you'll think more clearly. I know how *I* get when I'm hungry."

"You're entirely too good to me, my darling." Dacian crouched down and covered my wrist in his hand. I put my hand over his, and gently removed it. He smiled. "Alright, fine."

Being bitten by a vampire feels a lot like having your blood drawn. The cold presence of the foreign fangs. It hurts worse when they aren't fastened around a vein, but even then, you can still feel your blood scurrying out of you. There were a few times my blood clotted, and that hurt the worst. Dacian hated when that happened. A few times, I'd seen the face he made when I was

watching him drink from someone else. Like the face you make when you bite into an apple and it doesn't quite taste right. The hot blood makes Dacian's mouth feel warm, and the wound makes your skin more sensitive so you feel the tongue and lips and teeth just as strong as the fangs and the injury. The first few times you're bitten, it's fairly painful, especially at the beginning of the process, but by the end of the bite each time there's only the heat and the pleasure, so after going through it frequently and consistently, it doesn't hurt much at all.

When Dacian's fangs pierced my skin, it stung for one sharp moment, and then everything became a swirling mess of melting, electric heat. For one moment my life was gone, and I was adrift in a hazy world. There was only me, my body frozen up, and Dacian kneeling beside me and I felt more sure of myself than I ever had before, and then in the next he swept me up in his arms and was up on the couch beside me and above me, and he dug his mouth into my neck and I screamed and surged and scrabbled at his back to pull him closer. I remember sobbing and shouting out his name as if he'd left me. I felt so sure he was there and so sure I was alone. My body cracked and split open and I spilled out everywhere, and then Dacian pressed his mouth to me again and kissed me back together.

After, I felt so whole. Whenever I was around Dacian I felt complete. He kissed my slick temples and my torn lips and I tasted the salt of my sweat and my blood on him when I kissed him back. Oh, I loved him so much. He was my everything, there was nothing when he went away. I wanted to grab him and just keep screaming, and tell him that Iris didn't matter and Elizabeth would just come back later and that I was *alive* and I was here and I loved him. I wanted to kiss him and hold him and be held and to say "I love you, I love you, I love you" and I didn't even want to hear it back, I only wanted to tell him. I love you!

And didn't I love you better than any other woman? Then they did, then they could? Oh, my Dacian. When Beatrice told Benedick, "I love you with so much of my heart that none is left to protest," I love you fiercer than that. I loved you with so much of me, there was nothing left over, not for anything else. You didn't need to kill Claudio, I would have let you kill me. I can think of no sweeter way to die and oh, my dearest, all you had to do was ask. If you had only wished it I would have cracked like an egg in your hands. I would have run down your throat. Dacian, let me give myself to you, let me choose you every morning.

He ran his hand along my cheek, skimming it without touching it. I became the sea beneath him as the shadow of a bird traced over me. "Cere." He did not whisper but the words still felt intimate. "You will die. You are dying."

I said nothing. I kissed the tips of his fingers when they came to my lips.

"It is so beautiful." He pulled the fingers down gently, leaned forward, and gave me a chaste kiss. So soft, so cold. "Oh, you are so beautiful, so alive, my darling. And so you are dying." He would never die and that was so beautiful too. I imagined living in a little corner of his heart forever, him weeping my name. "Lucere, Lucere," he would cry, the heartbeat he did not have. "Come back to me, come back."

I tried to tell him with my eyes. You can kill me, Dacian, you can take me. I'll be yours, I'll be always yours. Whether it is ten years or two thousand I will belong to you, every trace of me. You will think of me and know "she was mine." No other woman could choose you so completely. Some might love you, no doubt they will, my Dacian is so easy to love. But I will press you to my neck and sob with ecstasy when you take from me. I will die for you and be born for you. You will make me as a spider does its web, I will become you as the sun becomes sugar.

But I did not die, I only fell asleep in his arms.

Eleven

I didn't think I would get to talk to Iris again. I tried to avoid her when I saw her in the library because I felt bad, I didn't think she would want to hear what I had to say and it was better to just not talk to her. But in the end we did talk. She saw me in the dining hall and asked if I could walk her to her dorm.

She was fidgeting the whole time. I didn't know what to say or do and she kept playing with the hem of her sweater. It was bright green, with little pink and blue flowers all over. Her voice was breathy and fast, so I couldn't quite follow what she said.

"I'm sorry," she said awkwardly when we reached her dorm. "Would you come in? I'd like to talk to you."

I raised my eyebrows. "We have been talking."

"No, I— would like to talk, to you. To have a talk."

"Oh, sure."

She opened the door to her building. "Sorry."

"You don't have to apologize." I followed her through the door and up the stairs. Her room was on the third floor. This, I thought, was how Dacian would have walked with her, only he would have brushed his hand against her. He would have grabbed hold of the handrail to pull himself a few steps ahead of her, then looked straight through the door to see down the hall and waited for her to pass him again. He would have leaned against her door frame when she opened it. He was so enigmatic when he felt romantic, and it brought life to everything around him.

It had been a while since I stepped into a dorm room. She had one of those tall college beds, and a roommate, who wasn't home and whose bed was made. Iris's blankets were half off the bed and there was laundry on the floor. She had the side with the window.

"Sorry," she said again and climbed up to sit on her bed. She glanced over at the chair by her desk and I sat down in it, careful not to push it over the laundry as I scooted it around to face her better. I could see that the books on her shelf were alphabetized and there was a colorful class schedule on her bulletin board. The top of her desk, like the top of her dresser, was bare. "And I'm sorry for apologizing so much. I don't mean to be so weird. I like you a lot. I miss getting to hang out with you."

"I do too." I felt incredibly uncomfortable. "I was sad when you and Dacian stopped spending time with me."

Iris let out a high peal of laughter. When her cheeks flushed, she looked especially pale. She pulled her arms across her chest so that the sleeves of her sweater were pulled taut over her fingers.

"Do you still talk to Dacian?" she asked. Her voice wavered, and she didn't let me answer. "I'm sorry — I'm sorry. Only I wanted to tell you what happened. I, I wanted to tell you when I did it — we weren't even dating. We weren't supposed to label things. But I still broke up with him, I guess? I meant to tell you but I never saw you after that."

Which, of course she hadn't. First I'd kept to myself, because with Dacian always away I came undone, and then I was with him because he needed me, he'd come undone. But I didn't tell her that. I just let her tell me in a choppy sort of voice, staggering like a storm, about what happened between the two of them. She said a lot of things about him. He wouldn't accept that.

He wouldn't leave her alone. I heard them all, I understood them all. I saw how she felt there was something wrong with what was happening to her, but I could not imagine being with Dacian and thinking anything was wrong. I really pitied her and when her voice shook I resigned myself to what I had to do.

I knew it would not work. Obviously it wouldn't work. Look, there's no *real* difference between men and women but men just don't learn to think about romance the same way. Dacian was so sure of his love, of his romance, that he believed it would sway her. He couldn't see he was chasing a laurel tree.

"Iris," I told her when she'd finished speaking. "I'm sorry things with Dacian got so messed up. You two seemed like a really good couple, and I liked spending time with you."

Her face did not fall, but a little bit of light went out of it.

"Oh," she said.

"No, let me finish. I'm sorry things went so wrong, really. I am. I didn't want them to. And this is clearly really hard for you and you don't deserve that. But you must know this is hard for Dacian too — you must know that he loves you."

Iris's lip trembled. "You can't *say* that. Do you love me? You've known me longer. I've known him maybe two months, Cere. We were two people who were hooking up. I didn't want to lead him on. So I *didn't*. I made what I wanted very clear. And I don't even know what I want— I don't know. But I do know I don't want to be with him. Not right now and now — not ever. And I *don't* need to hear him out because I already have. He's made sure of that. I'd really like to *stop* hearing him out now!"

My breath came out in a thin little hiss, and I dug my fingernails into my palm. I appreciated that Dacian trusted me to decide what to tell her, but I really just didn't know what to say. She wasn't going to change her mind. Iris bit her lip and twisted her brows and looked at me anxiously.

"Iris," I finally said. "You need to know this has happened before."

She shrank a little. Her hand, which had fallen to the mattress, dug into her sheets.

"Dacian has done this before?" she asked.

"That's not what I meant. I mean, yes — but so have you. I'm sorry. That won't make sense. But you've *met* him before."

"What? Do you even hear yourself?"

"Look." I took out my phone and pulled up a photograph of the portrait of Elizabeth. I zoomed it in and showed it to Iris.

"What is this?"

"That's you. In 1856, I think. Or maybe '57."

"Excuse me? You think this is *me*? Do you think I look like this? So what — Dacian thinks we were together in a previous life, do you hear yourself? That's *insane*."

"Not that. Here, look." I reached up to pull down my shirt collar so that Iris could see the bite marks. Her hand, still gripping the sheet, was white.

"Did he do this to you?"

"Yes, but it's totally fine. I mean, it's normal for me. I help him with this."

"With *what*?"

I couldn't believe she hadn't gotten it. "He's immortal. He's a vampire?"

Then Iris's face did fall. Actually, it was more like it collapsed. Her eyes went so wide that I could see a ring of white around them.

"No," Iris closed her eyes and shook her head. "No, no, no. One of you is completely insane. Just — just *crazy*. Do you hear yourself? Do you hear what you're saying? I'm not whoever this is." She shoved my phone back at me. "You need to tell Dacian I'm not whoever this is. I don't *know* him and I don't *love* him and I don't want to date him. And he needs to accept that. You can tell him to date *you* if you like him so much. But I think you should tell him to fuck off, actually—"

"Iris." I kept my voice even. "I know this all sounds very strange."

"Okay, what!" Her voice grew shrill. "What if he *is* a vampire? He's *not*. But what, you think that means I have to get with him now? I don't know him! I don't *care* if I knew him a century ago! If he were actually a vampire and he was drinking people's *blood* I would want to go all Buffy on him! Does he think I'll become his vampire bride or something? Even if this were real, I still wouldn't do that. I kind of think you should go now."

I stood up. "Okay, I will. I thought you'd freak out, but I'm really sorry I freaked you out."

Iris laughed again, very sadly, and pulled her blanket over her lap. "I'm sorry too. I used to think you were so cool and mature. And then I thought you were just conceited. And — I really hope you're okay, Lucere. But you should leave now. And I don't think we can talk again."

"Alright."

So I left. There was nothing else to do.

## Twelve

Dacian broke down crying that night. Really ugly tears, that ate up his beauty like acid. It was pitiful and it hurt me — I'd hurt before, seeing him in pain, but this really got to me. And then when he was calmed down a bit he went out for air. We were at his place and he didn't come back for ages and I tried to fall asleep while I was waiting for him, but it was too hard. I told Dacian he should just give Iris space. She couldn't think things over, couldn't reflect, if he kept showing up to remind her.

He was in a weird mood that whole week. He was always pacing. We were still hooking up but that week he became mechanical about it. He ran his fingers through my hair sometimes, or pulled me close and buried his face in my neck. Every gesture felt executed out of muscle memory. I was nothing to him again, just an idea. Someone who *might* be there. It just really got to me, I mean, how he was. I could really feel what was happening to him. Maybe Iris was right and I really am conceited. But she didn't love him. And I did, and I was there. He was like a part of me so I *felt* it. It sucked.

I took off work to take care of him and spent most of the week at his apartment. It was a nice apartment but it felt old, so the furniture shook if your footsteps were too heavy. His movements were light so I was always self-conscious when I moved around and felt the dresser trembling. Most of the furniture was massive and wooden and the rest was sleek and glass, so I also felt like I was about to break something. He lived only a bit further from campus, and aside from the coffin, it really didn't feel like the lair of a vampire. It was just Dacian's apartment.

“Have the other Elizabeth's remembered?”

“Sometimes.” Dacian’s voice was hoarse. He was lying in bed with me. We weren’t holding hands, but he was examining my palm and fingers, turning them over to look at them. His head was close to my chest. “Not at first, usually. But when I tell them the memories come back. At least one or two. Or they feel it somehow. She should feel it by now.”

“And there’s no way she’s not Elizabeth?”

“She’s *Elizabeth*.” Dacian’s breath hitched. “I know. I know her.” He pressed his hands to his head and squeezed his eyes shut. “I’ve tried it all. What I normally do. The romantic stuff, like the poem I wrote her, her favorite perfume— none of it did anything. She said the poem was *silly*.”

“Is there anything else more meaningful? Something that would be, I dunno, more effective?”

Dacian opened his eyes and stared at me.

“Maybe. Maybe.” He took my hand again. He pressed his mouth to the spot where he had bitten me the week before. There was still a yellow bruise and it stung a little, but he did not bite me. Or rather, his fangs didn’t go in. But he did bite down, softly, and ran his tongue across me. It stung a little. Then he kissed the spot very sweetly. “Did that remind you?”

“Yes,” I said. “It did. Do it again.”

He did, and this time his kiss lingered a moment longer. “Before she died, I did bite Elizabeth. It was my intention to give her my own blood to drink so that she could join me, so we would live together forever.”

I took his face in my hand and stroked down his cheek with my thumb. “But that didn’t happen.”

He put his hand over mine. “No.”

“It will all come together,” I promised him. “You should remember that this time went wrong. But she’ll come back. Elizabeth.” Damian made a growling sound in the back of his throat. “I hope that doesn’t sound insensitive, but she *will*. That’s how you know she loves you — not what Iris says now. That Elizabeth will come back to you.”

The snarl died down, and Damian’s eyes softened. I pulled his head to my chest.

“Until she comes back,” I said. “You’re not alone. And I can help you find her again if you want.”

Dacian pushed himself up and grabbed my face, and looked intently at me.

“You believe me,” he said. I nodded. “You trust me.” I nodded again. “You love me?”

“I love you.”

“Tell me the truth. It reminded you when I bit you. Of how I bit you before.”

“Yes. You want to know if I think it would work on her.”

“Yes.”

“It might. I don’t know. But it could. And — it would prove you weren’t lying.”

“Okay,” Dacian said. “Alright.”

His grip was tight, and I could feel the pads of his fingers digging into my cheeks.

“My darling. Is there anything you would not do for me?”

“Oh,” I said. “*Dacian*.”

## Thirteen

The silliest rule is the one about being invited in. But it's true. Dacian had already gone into Iris's room. He did not invite me when he returned, but he did explain what he was going to do. To become a vampire, Iris needed to drink Dacian's blood after he had drunk hers. First, he would try to bite her to see if that was enough, then he would drink from her properly. If both failed he would try to turn her.

The first night was the easiest. Dacian went to Iris's room. He did not even wake up her roommate. Afterward, he came to my place to tell me how easy it had been. It seemed to confirm he was on the right track. He went home just before sunrise.

The second night would be more difficult if Iris realized what was happening. Dacian asked me to come along in case she took any precautions. We left his apartment around one in the morning. By the time we got there, it was between two and three. There were still some students out, meandering to and from their dorms, but Iris's window faced away from the main street. Someone was smoking a joint in an alcove beneath it. When he left, I waved Dacian over.

Dacian took ahold of me around the middle and we lifted into the air. I guess I thought the first time I flew with him would be more romantic. Not that it wasn't. I mean, it did feel sort of special. I looked down and watched the distance between us and the cement grow. It wasn't like how Superman flies or anything like that. It was like being in an elevator. Still, my stomach flipped over, because if he dropped me, well.

Iris's window was dark. I hadn't considered the screen, but there was one fitted into it. I wouldn't be able to open the window with it there.

I put my hands on either side of it, but couldn't figure out how to take it off. Then I found the latch, but it was hard to move it without any ground to brace my weight against. "The screen," I told Dacian.

He took us back down to the ground so fast I didn't have time to start, and then he was back up in the air. I tipped my head up and watched him stand on the side of the building and pull off the screen. It came away in one clear movement, and I could see that he hadn't pressed, so he must have torn it off, but it was completely silent. Still holding it, he landed beside me, and set it down. "Better?"

I nodded and we went back up. This time, I was able to slide my fingers under the window and push it up. I moved so slowly. Dacian's grip on me was tight, so there was no rush. I lifted it, very, very slowly so as not to disturb Iris's sleep. Any sound could have roused her.

Then the window opened. Next, I had to open the shade. This was even harder since the material was so flimsy. It helped that Dacian could lift me. He did so very slowly, so the shade rose with us. It made a sound once or twice, but nothing inside moved so I looked around the room. Placing my weight on Iris's bed would be difficult to pull off, but I carefully managed to position myself in the window, in a really awkward squat, and then stand up on the inside with my feet still on the sill. I tried not to look at the body in the bed, worried that if I saw Iris she might somehow see me too.

There was a little light coming in under the door from the hallway. That and the moonlight outside made the room fairly clear. You know when it's nighttime, but you can see everything, and it's not dark or bright — it's sort of blue-gray? It was like that. It was just enough to see.

I had never done something like this before. Been where I shouldn't have, I mean. My behavior was good when I was a kid and I was never a rebel or anything like that. I guess I've never really been someone people notice. Their eyes go right over me. So I've been invisible before, but this was different. I looked at Iris's roommate. Iris must have said her name to me before. Tana, maybe, or Tara, something like that. I couldn't make out her form too clearly in the hazy gray light, but she had the blankets half over her and noise-canceling headphones on. I could see that she had long hair, and her mouth was open.

I looked down at Iris. She had the blankets pulled tight around her, with her head and one of her hands barely poking out at the top. I could see her better and she had a sheen of sweat on her forehead. Her face, as far as I could make out, was still. And so it was peaceful, the kind of peace that comes from stillness, but I could still tell she was distressed. From the sweat, and from the way her eyebrows were pulled down.

I didn't feel powerful or anything like that. But here I was, and no one the wiser. I felt strangely sure of myself as I slowly turned around. I held my arms out and against the wall on either side of me and slowly brought them up over my head until they found the garland of garlic over her window. I took it down.

He stepped around me and into the room effortlessly, the bed not even moving when he placed his weight on it. He took hold of me at the waist and set me down silently on the ground, then pulled the blankets off of her. Iris had fallen asleep holding a cross, it was no longer in her hand, just laying on the bed beside her. I grabbed it as Dacian tipped her head back to fit his mouth to her neck, one gentle hand at the back of her neck and one beneath her chin. She stirred a little when he bit in, murmured something, which made her roommate shift a little in bed. But

Dacian's eyes glowed and neither of them woke up. Still, I did my best not to move. If one of them broke through his thrall he could go out the window, but I would be trapped. My heart hammered in my chest. I watched the roommate to make sure she did not rouse, then I turned back to Dacian.

After he had drunk a little while, I put my hand on his arm. I could feel his strength through the sleeve of his sweater. He looked up at me and I set the cross down on the floor, so it looked like it had fallen. Dacian picked me up again and I rehung the garlic. He took me down to the ground, then closed the shade and window and joined me. We looked at each other for a little while. I was breathing quite heavily, overcome with adrenaline from what we'd done, and Dacian was shaking a little, then he saw the screen over my shoulder and quickly returned it. Then he kissed me long and hard and walked me home.

On the third day, Iris went to the ER. I visited her before open hours ended. All I needed to do was invite Dacian into the building, that was easy enough, he would be able to get into any wing even if they moved her. Dacian gave me a water bottle filled with his blood to bring her. I brought it to her room. It didn't matter if she didn't take it, I just had to make sure it was in the room so he could ensure she drank from him when he got there. She wouldn't drink it.

Dacian went to the hospital by himself that night. We thought about me going too, but decided it was a bad idea since I was easier to spot on camera and it was, technically, a crime.

Well, I'm sure you can guess what happened. When he woke Iris up she wouldn't drink, but Dacian drank from her anyway, and in the struggle, something went wrong. I don't think Iris died in his arms, but by the next morning, she was gone.

They sent an email out to the undergraduates. I guess they didn't consider that any postgraduate students, besides Dacian, might know her. Or maybe they didn't consider Dacian at all.

## Fourteen

I waited pretty anxiously at his apartment for a good few hours before he came in through the fire escape. I was sitting on his white leather couch, watching the window. Normally Dacian's movements were soft and swift, but on that night, he jumped in and landed so hard that a painting fell off the wall. I watched his glass coffee table shake, and then go still.

I had been preparing, the entire time, for him to frolic back in, in one of his romantic moods, and tell me what the next step in his plan was. Maybe even to bring Iris with him. She'd probably be scared, and so I had cocoa ready. But his expression was so dark, like I'd never seen him before.

"What's wrong," I stood, reaching toward him. "What happened? Did it—" I'd moved to take hold of his arm and he pushed me away. It was only a gentle gesture, but he was stronger than me and it caught me off guard so I fell back down onto the sofa. Dacian looked up sharply and snatched back his hand; his eyes were wide and white and his brows were twisted up with a horror I just couldn't understand.

"I'm sorry." His voice was raw and wet, like there was something wrong with his throat. "I didn't mean to do that."

"What's wrong?" I repeated. I stood back up but stayed where I was. But at this point, I could tell something had gone wrong. I'd considered that Iris might still somehow refuse him, and I'd even thought about what I would say, but Dacian's behavior made no sense to me. I expected him to be angry, hurt, and loud, not like this.

He did not move for a long time. His gaze fell from me and to the arm he'd pushed me with, held back by his own hand. He stared at it like he couldn't quite believe it was there or what it had done, and then looked at me the same way. He screwed his eyes shut but his eyebrows stayed frozen, like one of those tragedy masks, and his lips parted in a silent scream. I moved toward him again and this time he did not move so I grabbed him, put my arms around him, and squeezed as tight as I could. I did that for an even longer time, until he carefully put his arms around me too, and I felt him beginning to tremble violently.

"Squeeze me," I told him.

"No," he said.

"Do it."

He pressed into me.

"Harder."

"No."

*"Harder."*

Dacian made a pained moaning sound but did it. It hurt as his arms dug into me but he stopped shaking.

"It's alright," I told Dacian. "It will be alright, I'm here."

"No."

"Yes." I pulled back, and pushed the hair from his face as I moved to cup it. "Look at me. I wouldn't lie to you. What went wrong?"

Dacian shook his head.

“Listen to me,” I said. “She’ll come back for you. Elizabeth will come back, like you said. Iris wasn’t the one. But they’ll be someone else, some other time. It’s better this way.”

“She didn’t drink,” Dacian croaked. “She wouldn’t. I tried to make her.”

“I’m sorry.” I stroked his hair. “I’m sorry. It wasn’t the right time. She might understand later, but even if she doesn’t, she’ll come back. You love Elizabeth, so you’ll be waiting and you’ll find each other again. You can make it until then. You’ve made it — a century, haven’t you? Two centuries? You can wait. And you can watch this version grow old and see what life would have been like. Isn’t that special?”

“I can’t.”

“You can. I mean, the school has its stuff — but that doesn’t mean you can’t watch her—”

“It was too much — She’s gone,” Dacian reached up to grab his shoulders. I could see the muscles in his fingers straining against the fabric of his sweater like he wanted to pull himself apart. “She’s dead Lucere. Iris.”

It’s hard to describe the feeling I had, but it was like my face went numb, and the whole world suddenly felt very hot. My tongue felt dry and clunky in my mouth, like a wooden block. “What do you mean?” I asked stupidly.

Dacian searched my eyes frantically, like somehow my failure to understand could undo what he had said, and then finally repeated himself. “She’s dead.”

“*How.*”

“She wouldn’t drink.” The curl of his fingers changed so that now it looked like he had to hold himself together. “She just wouldn’t. She didn’t. So—”

“She didn’t survive the bite? Oh, Dacian.”

Dacian sobbed and I took him again, pulling him into my chest and then dropping us onto the sofa. Dacian grabbed my shirt, clenching his fist so tight I felt the fabric stretching, and howled.

I felt his grief. I mean that. I felt his pain in my soul, my heart, my gut, whatever part of me it was that held him, it all held his ache. It felt so eternal and so constant and so deep. It was an ocean. I could go the whole world and always know it was out there, always know it was so vast and endless, and that even finding somewhere far away would not change that. And I felt it in his body. He lost control of himself, his grip was too tight, his muscle too tense. There were moments when I felt less like I was holding him and more like I was being crushed by a bookshelf. I felt it because I was fatigued from seeing him so drawn up, so taut.

We were awake for three days together. I didn’t sleep, I couldn’t see him like this and sleep, especially knowing that he couldn’t either. There was no pause to his mourning, only to his expressions of it, and even when he was silent and his body was slack he still looked off into the distance and didn’t see anything.

I couldn’t feel anything, except his grief. All I felt was that pain, stretching back to before me and would carrying on after me, unable to be changed or altered. I searched desperately for anything I could do to help, to alleviate the pain for even a moment, but there was nothing. So I helped him to lay down and to brush his hair.

After the third day things started to fall apart. I was so nervous and I was afraid he’d traumatized himself. But after spending all that time around him I knew, I knew he needed to, or else it would only get worse, so I told Dacian he needed to feed.

To my surprise he agreed with me, and we decided that I would give him blood.

He drank from me and it was like it always was. I felt dizzy and delighted and he smiled at me. And it was *his* smile, not a smile stained with sadness, and the mouth he pressed to me was the same warm mouth, and he bit me as gently as he always did, carefully fastening his fangs to me. And I came apart same as ever, we both did, and it was the same hazy bliss it always was when it ceased to be about the blood and became about the bite. When he kissed me, I was his again.

I guess I expected something to change. Not for it to be fixed, but just to be different. But his grief overtook him again. I thought maybe if I could show him how loved he was, how cherished, it would help, so I tried a second time. Not with blood. The next night, when we were laying down, I kissed him and he kissed me. But that was worse, that time, when he wasn't feeding, he was still tight and pained and thin and grieving, even as he smiled at me, even as he kissed me, even as I poured my love into him and watched it do nothing.

He cried after that. I'd seen him cry before, when he was worked up, but never like that. He rocked back and forth and screamed until his throat was hoarse. Nothing I did made any difference. The words ran through him and away. But still, I stayed by him, until finally he wore himself down.

"I've done this." Dacian's voice was creaky, like an old floorboard. "To me. To her. To you."

"You haven't done anything to me," I said. "I love you."

"Not yet." Dacian ran his hands through his hair, pulling at it a little too tightly. "Maybe not yet. Oh, but look at my record. Look what I've done to *me*. Look what's happened to her. It

doesn't matter what I do or what I want or how hard I try, there's something in me that ruins everything. It's my fault."

"No, no." I couldn't stand to see my Dacian in so much pain. "No. You didn't want this. You didn't *do* this."

"I did, I did. My darling. It was me. I was stupid. I was an idiot. I thought it would work — I thought I could have something. I thought I could have her. Just like I think I can have you. But I can't be happy. It will never happen. Anything I desire — it goes away."

"No. Look at me." I lifted his hand and put it on my chest. "I'm here. You have me. Look, I love you. I won't go."

"*Love.*" Dacian smiled sourly. "You're sweet, Lucere, you are. But you can't understand. It's not that you don't feel love, but things we take that word to mean are very different. They must be, for you to believe you love me."

"Don't you love me?"

"Of course I do." Something in Dacian's smile shifted a little, in a way that made me feel cold. "I've never loved anyone like I've loved you before. You're strange like that. But it's no fault of yours that you can't return it, Lucere. You haven't the same opportunities I've had. Or the practice."

"Dacian." I put my hands over his. "You're refocusing your pain. You're taking everything in your life that hurts you, that scares you, and spreading Iris over it so that you can even it out. But that will only hide the things that could help it. I'm here, and I care for you, and it's too late to scare me off by telling me about how unloveable or monstrous you are because I've already heard it and seen it and decided to stay anyway."

Dacian's eyes widened a little. He must have been surprised at what I said, or my strength of tone, but then his smile fell. "You admit I'm monstrous."

"*No.*"

"It's all my fault. I may as well have killed Iris. I practically slew her. I was holding her life in my hands, Lucere, and I let it shatter."

"No, no, listen." I moved his hands away from his head. "You're being irrational. You want to blame yourself because it's easier, but I was there too. I helped you make this decision. I told you to remind her. I let you go there alone. And I always help you feed, Dacian — I should have thought to make sure you fed before or been there to help you. I'm here too, I understand. I'm responsible too. And it's awful. And we'll live. But eventually the awful will change and grow, and eventually, Elizabeth will come back, and it will right itself."

Dacian stared up at me, his face hollow, and then he frowned. It was a delicate expression.

"It's strange," he murmured. "How wise you are."

## Fifteen

A few days after that, we were at my apartment. I'd brought him there because I thought being somewhere different might help, and I reminded him to feed.

We did the same thing we always did. We started on the sofa, he bit my wrist, and once he'd tasted me he wanted more and carried me to the bed. Only things went different this time. He kissed me, mouth crashing into mine, and yes it was all the same — and then it was more, much more. Then I was giving my body and my life to him, to his perfect crooked smile, to his bright burning eyes, and I was ecstatic. He looked at me like there would never be enough of me and I felt like a firework. I screamed when he bit me, not consciously. I couldn't contain it. It was a scream of joy and love. Then I heard the sound I was making change, become shriller, and the world disappeared.

I woke up with Dacian's hand on my neck. It was cold. When I groaned, it hurt my throat. Dacian's hand left me and I stirred, but my whole neck felt stiff and swollen, and by the time I'd cracked open my eyes he had returned. He pressed his cold hand to my neck again, and a glass of water to my lips. He tipped it back and I drank until I choked, and then he pulled it away quickly. "Are you alright?"

I nodded, still coughing, and brought my own hand to my neck. "What's happening?"

"I hurt you. I'm sorry." Dacian bent forward to kiss my forehead. "It won't happen again. Here." He went away and came back with another glass. I watched him prick his finger. The drop of blood looked like mist in the water. "This will help you get your strength back."

"It won't turn me?"

“Not this much.” He held the glass up. This time, I held it myself, but he took it when I was done to set it down.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to pass out.”

“No, it was my fault.”

“But I haven’t slept properly. I didn’t think of that.”

“You should sleep now.” Dacian pulled away from my forehead and put a hand on my forehead. “So you don’t fall ill.”

“Alright,” I said. “I’ll sleep.”

He positioned himself around me, wrapped me in his arms, and then I rolled onto my side. I laid still for a long time. I’d slept so little, that week, it was like I’d forgotten how to do it. Dacian threaded his hands through my hair.

“You know I would never want to hurt you.” His voice was quiet. “Don’t you, Lucere?”

“Yes.”

Then his hand was on my shoulder and I was on my back. He was above me. He placed his other hand on my neck, on the spot where he must have bitten me. The wound had already closed up. He looked at it, and then at me. His eyes were shining.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he said again, voice wavering.

“I know.” I lifted my hands to touch him. “I know.”

“I want to kiss you.”

“Kiss me.”

He descended on me. I don't think we'd ever kissed so deeply before. He was urgent, desperate, the way I always felt when I kissed him. And then he jerked away and I realized that I was panting. He drew one hand along my cheek.

"Are you alright?" he asked me.

I nodded. "Yes. I'm fine. I'm good, actually."

He kissed me again. When he stopped I realized I'd forgotten to breathe, and had to suck in a lot of air all at once, until I felt lightheaded.

"This is wrong," Dacian said.

"What?" I laughed. "What is?"

He pressed two cold fingers against my throat and I sucked in air again. The strength behind them made it difficult to catch my breath but I did not stop smiling. Dacian smiled back.

"Oh. Lucere. My darling Lucere." He leaned down, so his lips were close to mine, so I could feel his words on mine. "You want me to do it again."

This time he did not kiss me back and when I pulled away, he took my chin in his hands and tilted it upwards. His gaze fell away from mine.

"It's good you can't see yourself," he whispered. "You would hate me."

"No."

"I would break your heart."

"No."

"You're so beautiful," Dacian looked back up at me. "I could look at you forever."

"You can."

“This is terrible.” He put his hand to my throat again. “This must be terrible. What I wish I could do to you.”

“Do it.”

We stared at each other. The air was thick and hot and hard to swallow, so I felt lightheaded. His face was a mix of surprise, of uncertainty, of hunger and desire.

He reopened the wound.

The last line of *1984* is not the long-hoped-for bullet entering Winston’s brain. It’s close but it’s not that at all, and I thought about it a lot after Dacian said that, wondering how he got it wrong. Actually, the last line is the one about Big Brother. I checked so I remember it now: “He gazed up at the enormous face. Forty years it had taken him to learn what kind of smile was hidden beneath the dark moustache. O cruel, needless misunderstanding! O stubborn, self-willed exile from the loving breast! Two ginscented tears trickled down the sides of his nose. But it was all right, everything was all right, the struggle was finished. He had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother.”

I asked Dacian about it, months after he read those translations. I said, “you know, the bullet isn’t actually the last line of *1984*. It’s loving Big Brother.” Dacian asked what I was talking about. “When you read all those *1984* translations.”

“You’re right,” he said. “But it’s really the same part. It doesn’t matter.”

“But they’re not the same. It’s two different parts of one part. They’re still not the same line.”

Dacian shrugged. “I guess I just didn’t care that much.”

## Sixteen

We fought the next morning. It was the first time we'd ever clashed before, and it was brutal. I suggested we change something about the way we defined our relationship because I wanted to spend my life with him as something more than his friend. He said he wanted me to have a normal life and I explained how I couldn't anymore. I didn't want someone who wasn't him, and besides, whenever I'd gone out with men before he'd been so angry and disappointed and crushed when I wasn't around no matter what he told me. He told me not to tell him how he felt. I told him that I wouldn't leave him now because I loved him and he told me that I was wrong so I told him not to tell me how I felt.

I just got angrier and angrier, and he did too, until we were both frenzied and I wanted to collapse and cry, and I did get teary, but for the first time that I could remember, he didn't rush to help me. I said I didn't understand because I had been there every time Iris let him down, and I wanted to be there any time anyone let him down, but he still wouldn't choose me, not even for forever, but just for a little while. I told him I would be there and I wouldn't die. He said Iris wouldn't have died either.

Then we both said a lot of awful things. I said Iris died because she met him, and he reminded me that I had been the one to say biting her might remind her. I had been the one who helped him go back after the second night, who saw how hard it was for him to stop, and then had let him go to the hospital alone. I was the one who told him when he should consider feeding, the one who made sure he had someone to feed on, and I hadn't gotten her to drink from

the bottle when she trusted me more, anyway. I asked if he thought it was my fault Iris died and he didn't say anything. I asked if he thought I wanted her to die and then he stormed out.

I spent the whole day sobbing uncontrollably. Anytime I thought about it for too long. I only slept one or two hours that night, and I kept imagining him coming in. Finally, before I fell asleep, I imagined waking up and walking out to see him at the coffee table and he would say "*Good morning, my darling,*" and I would start to cry again and throw myself into his arms and everything would be alright. I cried myself to sleep and when I woke up he was not there. My sheets and pillows were covered in blood, and it had dried enough that it was scratchy and flaking off whenever I touched it, so I was tinted red. I showered and washed it and he still did not come. Finally, just when I'd made up my mind to go look for him, he came.

He knocked on my door, which was odd. I opened it wide enough to let him in but he didn't enter. He had on his scarf, and he was holding a plastic bag of takeout. He offered it to me and I set it down on the ground. "Thank you."

Dacian took a step back from the door and put his hands in his pockets.

"I've been thinking about our argument," he said.

"Me too."

"Lucere, you know I love you."

"I do, I know. And I love you too."

"Yes." Dacian looked down at my feet. "My darling. I don't think we should see each other for a while."

The words hung in the air between us and then came to circle around my head, and I shook them away. "What?"

“Things have been wretched for me lately. And I don’t want to drag you into that, and every time I look at you — I’ve hurt you terribly and I’m sure you know, but it doesn’t seem like you care, and I think we want different things from each other. I do love you. I do want you. And I want you to be a part of my life. But I can’t be good for you, because good things don’t happen to me, and we’ve only made it all worse.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I can’t say it more clearly.”

“I don’t accept it then.” I took his hands in mine. “Dacian. Things *have* been terrible lately. Everything has been completely awful. But do you know what’s made it better? You. You’ve made my life so much better. And I can tell that I make your life better too — because of how you treat me. Because of how you brought me this takeout. Do you understand?”

“No, *no*. That’s not how this works. It’s the other way around.”

“It can be both. Because things are bad — that makes it hard. But I don’t care that it’s hard. I love you.”

“Love me.”

“I love you.”

“Tell me how you love me.”

“I love you more than anyone else. More than anything. I want to be around you all the time and everything I do I want to share with you.”

“Do you love me like I loved Iris?”

“No. I *know* you.”

“Answer me this, darling.” Dacian let go of my hands. “Do you believe I loved her at all?”

The question caught me off guard. I didn't know what to say. I felt dizzy.

"I believe you loved Elizabeth."

"And Iris."

"Was Elizabeth."

"Therefore...?"

"But she *wasn't*," I went on. "She was her but she wasn't. She didn't know you. You knew her for only a little while. It wasn't love. It wasn't *not* love, but it wasn't love either. Do you know what I mean?"

"No, go on." Dacian narrowed his eyes. "Do you think there's something wrong with me? Do you think I was obsessed with her?"

"I think that if you loved her, you would have understood that she wanted something different, and you would have accepted it, even temporarily."

"Why do you think that? I loved her, and I wasn't going to give up on that. That's what love is. It's not giving up."

"No. It's not giving up to choose someone else over you."

"Is that what you think I did?"

"No!" I shook my head. "I don't know how to explain this! I'm so sorry. I don't know what I mean."

"Keep going."

"I think you chose Elizabeth over Iris. So you didn't love Iris, because you loved Elizabeth. They're not the same person. It's not exact. Or else she would remember."

"You think I should have let her go."

“Yes.”

Dacian smiled at me. It wasn't his usual smile. This one was cracked and cold.

“Now tell me how you *know*.” His voice was soft, but each word was clear and designed to cut. “How do you know the right way to love, Lucere? How do you know you're meant to sit back and pretend that you're fine?”

“I—”

“Because that's what *you* do, is that right?” Dacian laughed. “You must think yourself such a martyr. Never jealous, never hurt, only loving. That's all you know how to do, isn't it? *Love.*”

“No!” I interrupted. “No, I was jealous! I hurt! Only I just wanted — I just wanted *you* to be happy, that was what mattered. I just wanted you—”

“Oh, you must have been jealous.” Dacian took another step back. “That was why you wanted her gone.”

“*No—*”

“Now listen. I'm leaving now. I won't see you again for a while.”

“How long?” I asked.

“I don't know.”

I swallowed thickly. “Will you check-in? To let me know you're alright?”

He shrugged. “Sure.”

“Will you stay a little while longer, before you go?”

Dacian thought it over and then smiled again. “No.”

He turned and walked down the hall slowly. He did not look back when he reached the corner, and then he was gone.

He never checked in with me. I called and texted but he never replied, so after a week I went to his house. I was going to be respectful, I was just going to tell him that I wanted to know he was managing, and then I would leave him alone and maybe he could remember to let me know things were okay. I did hope that seeing him would make things better.

But you already know this part. It was over already. He was gone.

## Seventeen

When I saw Iris in the hospital, she would not stop shaking. I remember that, really clearly. She held herself and her teeth were chattering and she had on a hospital gown. I was wearing a coat and carrying the bottle Dacian gave me.

“Lucere.” She sounded so miserable when she saw me. I set the water bottle on one of the chairs for her visitors and came to stand closer to her. She looked up at me. Her eyes were huge and shadowed.

“Hi,” I said. I thought about it and decided to put my hand on her arm. She smiled a little and put her hand over it. It felt clammy.

Her voice was thin. “Thanks for visiting.”

“Sure.” I stood there a bit longer, then sat down in the other visitor’s chair. “How are you doing?” It was such a dumb question. But her smile didn’t break.

“Besides the blood loss, I’m great.” She didn’t sound pleased, but I hadn’t expected her to be. “I didn’t expect to see you here.” I shrugged, and she kept going. “Am I dying now?”

“I don’t know.”

Iris raised her eyebrows. “Please don’t lie to me.”

“I’m not. I just, I don’t know what’s happening really.”

“He hasn’t told you?”

My cheeks grew hot. “That’s not what I meant either.”

“Lucere, please. Just tell me if he’s killing me.” Her tone held steady, but the breaths she took in after each sentence were a little too deep, and she rushed the words at the end.

I wanted to bury my face in my hands. I didn't know what to say to her. I thought hard about leaving. "He's not trying to. But he's going to. I think he's going to. That's why I'm here."

Tears sprang into Iris's eyes but did not fall. Her mouth was drawn in a straight line. "I see."

"He wants to turn you."

"Hmm." Iris pointed to her neck. It was bandaged. "He's bitten me twice now."

I wasn't sure what to say. I didn't feel upset, something cold grew inside my chest. "I know."

"Oh, you *know*. That's good. So he's threatening me now? If I don't like him back I become some kinda vampire servant or something."

"No, not that. I mean, I don't know how that works. But he *wants* to turn you." I stuck out my arm and pointed at the water bottle. "That's his blood."

"I see. He told you to come here."

"No. It was my idea. But he asked me to bring it to you."

Iris frowned. "Why?"

"To drink."

Her whole face wrinkled with disgust. "Drink *blood*? I'm vegetarian."

"I thought you just didn't eat red meat."

"No, I don't eat any meat now. I mean, I eat fish."

"You're a pescetarian."

"Yeah, I guess. But I still can't drink anyone's blood."

"That's how you turn."

“That doesn’t change my mind.”

I hadn’t thought it would. “The way it works is, he drinks your blood. And then you’re supposed to drink his. And then he drinks your blood again.”

“This seems very complicated.”

“And then he’s supposed to completely drain you. Then you’re a vampire.”

“Great. So I just have to not drink his blood. And then I don’t become a vampire?”

“Basically. I mean.” I rubbed my hands against my jeans.

“Do I die then, though?”

“Yeah.”

“Cool,” she said sarcastically. “Thanks.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. I don’t expect you to do anything, anymore.” That made me feel worse. “And I’m not going to drink his blood. So it’s whatever, I guess, I’ll just die then. It’s fine.”

“It’s really not.”

“No. It’s not.” Her voice hardened. “But I’m not becoming a vampire. And I’m never fucking him again.”

“I wish I could do something.”

“Could you get that through his fucking head?” I shook my head. Iris laughed. “I thought not. Then it’s fine.”

“I don’t want you to die,” I told her. “I don’t want him to kill you. I liked you. I still like you. And I like him. I don’t know why this is happening to you and I’m really sorry.”

Iris frowned again. The way she was looking at me had changed, sharpened. She tilted her head.

“I thought you were so cool,” she said. “I thought you were like Emma Watson in *Wallflower*. You showed him that one, right? And then he showed me. I thought he was too. But I thought you were cooler. I wanted to be like you.”

“Thank you,” I said awkwardly.

“I don’t want to die either. And I don’t want him to kill me. I liked you. But I don’t like you anymore.”

“I’m sorry.” The fabric was thinning near the knee of my jeans. I ran my finger over the spot. It wasn’t a hole yet, but it would fray soon. “I mean it. Is there anything I could do to make you drink it?”

“You do know why this is happening to me,” Iris told me. “It’s happening because he’s entitled and immature and powerful and because he can do it, and it’s happening to me because I had the audacity to say no. And if you ever say no to him he’ll do the same thing to you, but he knows you’ll never say no to him, so it’ll probably be even worse.”

“So there’s nothing I can do.”

Iris looked over at the water bottle. “Would you drink it?”

“Now?” I asked bleakly. “It won’t do anything.”

“I mean if you were me. Do *you* think I should do it?”

I ran my finger over the edge of my jacket sleeve. “I would do it.”

“You would become a vampire.”

“Yes.”

“Be with Dacian.”

“Yes.” I tugged the sleeve down slightly. I was fidgeting but tried to pass it off like I was just repositioning it. “But I don’t think you should do it.”

“Please take it back with you.”

“He’s going to try to make you drink when he’s here, too.”

Iris shrugged. “I might be fine, actually. I mean, I haven’t invited him in. But there’s also like, actual security here. And even if he kills me, they’ll probably be able to do something. Some kind of thing. I don’t know. Maybe not. But then I guess he’ll keep trying.” She looked back at me. “You could tell him I drank it. Would you do that for me?” I shrugged and nodded. “Thanks. In that case, I guess you should leave. I don’t really want to talk to you anymore.”

“Alright,” I said. “I hope you’re okay. Really.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Bye,” I said awkwardly, and I left.

I didn’t end up lying to Dacian about the blood. Actually, we never talked about it at all. I don’t think he remembered we’d spoken.

The school had a memorial for Iris. I told Dacian about it but he was completely inconsolable that day, and wouldn’t even let me near him, so I changed into a black dress and went alone. There were some student speakers. I didn’t recognize any, except for her roommate. It was strange to see her awake. She managed not to cry, but her voice shook the whole time. Everyone walked in a very dreamy line from the library to the reflecting pool, carrying little candles, then we gathered around the water. It was a little too warm outside for the jacket I’d worn, which made me feel kind of stuffy, and I stared at everyone’s reflection while the wax fell

in burning drops on my hands. When things were done, everyone milled around each other for a bit and looked sad, but I didn't have anyone to talk to so I took the shuttle home.

I couldn't find Dacian when I got home, which worried me. I opened every door to check.

"Dacian?" I called, then turned around. I jumped when I saw him there, behind me. "Oh my god. You startled me. Where'd you go?"

"Where'd *you* go?" He repeated. "I was looking for you."

"I told you, I went to the memorial. It was nice. Peaceful, I mean." He turned and stalked off. I followed after him. "I'm sorry you couldn't come."

He scoffed. "I'm not going to go mourn with some children. I can think of nothing worse than being in a sea of people who think they understand suffering because they're a little sad and pretending I feel just the same as them."

"Still," I protested. "I think that everyone coming together to say goodbye was very healing. And even if they don't feel the same way you do, it helps to see that everyone does feel something."

"*Everyone feels something,*" Dacian parroted back. "How wise. So true."

I flushed but held my ground. "I mean, that everyone feels something about her. Feels the loss, even if it's different. That's why people have memorials."

Dacian clicked his tongue. "Wrong. People have memorials to confront the reality of death. I have no need for such gatherings, particularly when the *mourners* can't even begin to understand the complexities of Elizabeth's existence, and what it means for their understandings of death and life."

“You know.” My patience with Dacian started to crumble. I knew his grief felt unfathomable, but couldn’t he find any sympathy? “Plenty of people believe in reincarnation. Besides, they were there for Iris.” I remembered that I still had my jacket on and took it off to hang on the back of my door.

“They were there for themselves, actually, but even so. *Iris* isn’t what I’m mourning.” Dacian flung himself onto my couch. His voice was raw. “I don’t know how I’ll manage now. I don’t know how I can feed myself without thinking about what happened. I shouldn’t be here. I wish I’d died when I should have. I can’t believe that bitch kept me alive.”

“Don’t say that,” I told Dacian sharply. “You need to eat.”

Dacian laughed coldly. “Well, if I don’t, I may shrivel up and die. It may be for the better. No, I can’t ask you to go out and find someone for me. You’re mourning too. I won’t ask you that.”

“You could drink from me.”

“Ha,” Dacian said. “You shouldn’t let me drink from you. You know what I did.”

“I will.” I walked over to the couch. His gaze followed my veins from my bare wrist to the sleeve of my dress, just above my elbow. It was hungry, but considerate, evaluating me.

“No,” he said. “I don’t think I’ll do that to you. Not in your black dress.”

“I’ll change.”

“No,” he said. So I sat next to him and he looked at me, and I offered him my wrist. He gently took hold of it, brought it to his mouth. He kissed it so lightly that he felt like a ghost. “For you,” he finally said. “I’ll do this terrible thing for you.”

“Thank you,” I said, relieved, and he bit me.

## Eighteen

I brought Dacian's scarf back. He had left it on my door after our fight, and I hadn't thought to return it when he dropped off the takeout. I spent the week before threading it around my hands, trying to find some trace of him in it, before I decided I should return it. That way I could tell him to keep his promise. I brought the water bottle back, too.

I reached his apartment in the early morning. I had not slept the night before. With great hesitation, I knocked on the door. Then, when there was no answer, I knocked louder. That time, the door opened, revealing Dacian. For a moment, his face was completely blank, then he opened the door wider. Relieved, I entered. It was dark in his apartment. When he spoke, his voice was raw.

“What are you doing here?”

I kicked off my shoes. Wordlessly, I set down my bag and gave him the scarf. Dacian held it out at his side, letting it unfurl. He released it and it fell into a pile beside him. “Thanks. I was looking for that.”

“I'm sorry.”

Dacian looked surprised. “For what?”

I'd only apologized because he sounded upset, but I swallowed thickly and continued. “For coming here. I know you didn't want to see me.”

“Mm.”

“And more,” I went on. “I’m sorry for our fight. I shouldn’t have pushed you. I should never have pushed you, especially not with something so important to you. I wanted to help you, I wanted to make things better, so I was selfish.”

Dacian cocked his head. “What is it you’re apologizing for, exactly?”

“Everything.”

“Ah. I see.”

“I miss you,” I blurted out, and almost immediately regretted it. But Dacian smiled and held his hand out to me.

“I missed you too,” he said and the warmth in his tone, the certainty in his eyes, broke me. I moved toward him and fell into his arms. I don’t think I cried, but I was shaking, and his arms were firm around me. Dacian whispered soothing words and then stepped back to look at me. He brushed the hair from my face and considered me, then kissed my forehead.

As my eyes adjusted to the gloom, I saw that his living room was a mess. His coffin, which I’d only seen a few times, now rested against the wall with the door hanging open and the curtains had been replaced. The old ones lay tattered on the floor beneath the windows. The stuffing of the couch spilled out in a few places and the bookshelves, while intact, were half empty. Their contents lay across the floor, opened books and broken trinkets, some of the pages torn.

I could see now why Dacian had not been checking in with me. Clearly, he was unwell. I looked at him intently. “How are you?” His laugh sounded like broken glass. He gestured vaguely at the room around us, and I smiled sadly. “Right.”

“I’ve been worse.” Dacian’s smile split his face. “I’ve certainly been worse.”

I recognized the raggedness in his voice instantly and saw now the telltale sharpness in his feature. “You haven’t fed.”

“No,” he admitted. “Not yet.”

We looked at each other for a moment, both reluctant to suggest it. Then I bent down to retrieve his scarf from the floor. He watched me, not moving.

“I can help you clean up,” I offered.

“No.”

We looked at each other again, then Dacian moved forward to cup my face. He pressed his lips to mine, then to their corner and my jaw, and then the curve of my neck, and then behind my ear, then repeated the pattern on my other side. I grabbed him at the sides to hold him close to me.

“Can I kiss you?” Dacian asked quietly.

“You just did.”

“Not like that.”

I nodded, and he descended on me. I kissed him with more fervor than ever before, so passionately I could not feel his tongue or his teeth. Only him, spilling into my mouth and down my throat. When he pulled back, I gasped for air.

“Don’t ask me,” he said. “I won’t do it.”

I nodded again and leaned forward. He kissed me and this time he did not stop. I sat down on the coffee table and he bent me over and I did not stop kissing him. I wanted to ask if this meant he’d thought about what I said but I did not stop.

Dacian finally broke away from me to let out a sound. I could not tell if it was a laugh or a sob, and he gathered me up in my arms to drop me onto the couch.

“I hate this,” he said.

“What?”

“I hate doing this. You’re so confusing.”

“Just what about me is confusing?” I tried not to sound upset, but I felt like I’d been very clear. Dacian shook his head.

“Not you, I mean, I’m confused. I am. Unmoored, you could say. Adrift. Buoyed.”

“Ocean words.”

He laughed, then made the sound again. “I feel awful.” I sat up and reached out to touch him. He was still standing, so I could only reach his lower arm. He looked down at me abruptly, like I’d shocked him. “What?”

“Dacian,” I said quietly. “If you feel awful...” I trailed off. Then he leaned down. His cold fingers grazed my neck, and he did not break my gaze. “I know it’s difficult but you should.”

“Perhaps you’re right.”

He tilted my head upward and glanced down at my throat, then back up at me. My heart quickened, anticipating the first pain of the fangs, the slow agony of the draining, and through it all, the dizzying heat of the blood and the ecstasy of his nearness. Dacian narrowed his eyes.

“You’re afraid.”

“No,” I said. “I’m not afraid of you.”

“Mm.” He closed his eyes and rested his lips against my jugular. I felt my skin shiver against his mouth as I drew in a shaky breath. He had never felt so cold. Then he plunged his

fangs into me and I clamped a hand over my mouth. He drank carefully, and I was grateful for it, but the slow movements made the pain worse than any time before. I could feel my blood crawling out of me, and bit down on the base of my thumb to keep from crying out. When he pulled himself out of me, the air came rushing to meet the wound and my blood poured out to meet it. The pain did not subside and tears sprang to my eyes. I reached out to Dacian for comfort, but did not find him, and looked around. The room was dark again, and I could not make out anything familiar. I pushed my hand into the couch and tried to stand, but could not. I pressed my other hand to my neck.

“Dacian,” I croaked, and then I felt him prying my hand away from my neck, and pushing something soft to it. He loomed over me. His red eyes were searching mine, and my breath shuddered at how alien they seemed. “Where did you go?”

“I did not go anywhere, my darling.”

“You weren’t here.”

“I did not move.” Dacian pulled his hand away from my neck and I saw his scarf, black with blood. “I was overcautious. This wound is too shallow, I can’t make it stop bleeding. I’m going to go find something to bandage you with. Can you let go of my arm?”

I did not realize I’d been holding it. I let my fingers relax and Dacian pulled away. He looked down at me, frowning. They were familiar again, though clearly distraught. Then he turned and vanished. I tried to take deep breaths, but the pain in my neck made it hard. Dacian returned. “This will sting.” He dabbed at my neck with something and the pain spiked, somehow doubling, then he pressed a pad of gauze to my neck. He held it still while I wheezed then, after a

few moments, began to wrap a bandage around it before pressing a glass to my lips. I could taste the rich salt of his blood in the water and drank eagerly.

“Something’s wrong with me,” I said when the pain began to dissipate.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know what happened. I was so careful, but that only made it—”

“No,” I cut him off. “It’s not that. I couldn’t see you, I, I didn’t recognize you. I feel,” I thought hard, trying to come up with a word to describe my disorientation, and remembered what he had said. “I feel like I’m unmoored.”

Dacian nodded in understanding. “Do you need to go to the hospital?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Then I think you should rest. I’ll stay with you.”

“Thank you.”

He picked me up to position himself on the couch beside me, with his arms around me. He kept his hand at my throat, pressing the gauze to me slightly. “This is why I’m afraid to be near you.” I tightened my grip on him, and he sighed. “We’ll talk more later. For now, you should sleep.”

Eventually the bleeding stopped. I lay awake, feeling it drying against my skin, and when Dacian shifted his weight the blood on the bandage cracked. I did not remember falling asleep, but I must have, because I remember the feeling of lying in darkness, between sleep and waking, and hearing voices around me. I could not make them out, except for Dacian’s, who I heard say “*my darling.*” I knew it was a dream. When I did wake up, my mind felt clear again, and my throat was no longer burning. Dacian lay beside me with his eyes shut but opened them when I

reached up to touch the stiff gauze. He moved to help me sit up, and then cleaned off the blood and replaced the bandage.

“I dreamt about you,” I told Dacian. “I heard your voice.”

“Do you still feel strange?”

“No.”

“Good.” Dacian kissed the top of my forehead. “I can order you some food, you haven’t eaten all day.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Then we should talk.”

My heart sank. “About what?” I could not stand to lose him again, not when I’d just come so close to him again. Dacian sat down on the couch beside me.

“I think,” he said carefully. “That I should tell you the full story about things. You deserve to hear it all, and understand what this means.”

“Oh.” I nodded slightly, careful not to disturb the bandage on my neck. “I’d like that.”

So Dacian told me about Elizabeth.

## Nineteen

“I wish I had known, when I met her, how much she would mean to me. My darling Beth. But the first time I saw her I had no clue. We were both just ordinary people. My parents had recently bought us a second home in the country, where we could spend our summers and winters. Elizabeth was from the same city as us and visited there with her friend Margaret. We all became close, but Margaret had a particular interest in me. Her parents wouldn’t have been pleased with our match, and I had no desire for an emotional relationship with her, but I was flattered. So I made no move to stop her advances. If I had known then how vile she was I would not have dallied with her, just thinking about it makes me queasy. That I had that awful witch. Eventually, she found someone new, got engaged. And Elizabeth and I began to grow close. I still remember — Here.”

Dacian stood and helped me to rise as well. He approached one of the bookshelves whose contents were mostly untroubled, then beckoned me over. He took a book down from its highest shelves, thick, with a title in a language I did not recognize. He opened it to reveal a rose, pressed flat and yellowed with age. He held it up gingerly so that I could see it better.

“This,” he said. “This is from the garden at Margaret’s estate. I must have seen those flowers a thousand times before, but they were never special to me. Then one day she brought me this. And suddenly I understood that they were the most beautiful gardens in the world because they made her think of me. I knew, when she gave this to me, that I would keep it forever. My whole life, I mean. I had no idea how long it would be. I never mentioned it to that vile woman, which is perhaps the only reason I’ve succeeded. Elizabeth enchanted my world. I was eager to

finally begin my new life with her. She had some reservations about finances and plans, but her family was pleased to see her paired off with me. When the time was finally right, after another year or so, we were engaged.

“Margaret, on the other hand, had been affianced and then abandoned. Occasionally some brief flame would reignite, but nothing that compared to the way I felt about my Elizabeth. Margaret never suggested that she resented Beth or I and truthfully, I’d never imagined that she had feelings for me. That demon played the part of our happy friend well, I mistakenly believed nothing was wrong. I had no idea of the wicked intent Margaret had for me, what jealous vengeance hid beneath her sweet disposition.

“Margaret’s financial state began declining. Her father made poor investments and was forced to sell their estate. Any changes in her demeanor I blamed on the sudden loss of her fortune, but there was a bright spot. She moved to the city and was able to spend more time with Beth, who still considered her a dear friend. Then one night, after visiting me, Margaret was attacked on her walk home. Some ruffian had clearly thought to rob her, or worse. She never recovered. One of her injuries became infected and she died before the month's end.”

“Margaret,” I asked. “This was your sire?”

Dacian nodded. “Naturally, Beth and I delayed our wedding to properly mourn the loss of our friend, but I would not grieve long. Because Margaret revealed herself to me. I was shocked when she told me her story, but how could she be lying? There she was in front of me! The living dead.”

Dacian drew in a shaky breath. “I am... not proud of what happened next. Enough time has passed that I can understand my actions and forgive them. I only regret them now because of

their consequences. I was so overcome by the loss I had felt, so relieved to see Margaret again. She sensed that weakness in me.” I could tell how hard this confession was for him. His voice wavered, and he could not meet my gaze or even look at the rose, still held between us.

“Margaret could not be touched by death and would no longer age. She was not the same woman she had been when she was alive. She bewitched me and I could not resist her thrall. I felt my body betray me, flesh beginning to wither and my atoms decay. And I saw it on Elizabeth too. After the apparent death of Margaret, a line appeared on her perfect forehead. I hated to see death already claiming her, and I, so absolutely. I knew that if I did not act quickly, its effect on us would be irreversible.”

He paused. When he resumed his story, his voice was strong again.

“I decided I would transform myself too. She was afraid of what she had become and could not reveal herself to anyone besides me. So I offered myself to her as a steady source of blood, and we continued our liaisons. It wasn’t long before she was practically begging to turn me, to save herself from the loneliness stretching out before her.

“But I underestimated how severe my transformation would be, or else I would have planned it better. Made some excuse as to why I would be unreachable. But when I fell ill, Elizabeth grew concerned. Then she found what she thought to be my corpse. I was buried in the coffin you see now.

“I was furious with Margaret when she dug me up, that she had not it made clear to me that I would be assumed dead. And worse, I had been brought out of the city to be buried near our country home. I may have appreciated the gesture if it did not distance me from my Elizabeth. Margaret begged me not to go back to her, telling me that we should leave the living

behind, that she now saw our existence was a curse and would not inflict it on her dearest friend, but I had only pursued this end to live forever with my darling Beth. Margaret, as my sire, had great power over me but I managed to escape and return to the city.

“Of course Elizabeth was happy to see me. Confused, but happy. When I told her my plan, she was afraid of what she would become, but I convinced her to think it over. I knew that with time, she would understand I had made the right choice for us. Until she was sure, I came to spend each night with her, but I feared our time was growing scarce. I knew Margaret would come for me. But to spare Elizabeth the pain of knowing the fate that befell our friend, or of my own betrayal, I could not reveal the threat to her. When I finally did sense my sire growing close I reminded Elizabeth of the love we shared, the bond that endured even through death, and told her it was now or never. She assented and I drank her blood and left my own blood with her to do the same. She swore to me that she would drink it all before we met again. On our love, on her life.”

Dacian fell silent. His gaze remained fixed on the rose, still held lightly between his fingers.

“I came back the next night. She was clearly anxious, as I had been, but was happy to see me. And so I did it. I opened her veins and drank her blood. But it went wrong. She didn’t resurrect. I tried everything. I even tore open my own flesh, poured my blood into her mouth, but it did nothing.

“Margaret, that vile woman — she was cunning, she did not target me. Instead, she went to Elizabeth. She told her of our affair, how I asked her to turn me. She lied to her. She convinced

Elizabeth that our undeath was hell, misery, and that she would be better off dead than accepting my offer. And so Margaret claimed the life of my beloved Elizabeth.

“My grief weakened me and Margaret was able to renew her thrall over me. She blamed *me* for Elizabeth’s death and said she should leave me to be found out and killed after what I had done to her friend. She dragged me away from my home, despite my protests, and how much I had grown to loathe her. Of all things, she cited her *love* for me as the reason for her actions. But eventually whatever wicked rage she’d convinced herself was ‘love’ subsided, and became fear. She might have released me but knew that more than anything, I craved revenge, to punish her for the loss of my love. A loss more profound than she could ever understand, not unless I showed her. So she was stuck with me, for some time, before she finally found the power to overcome me and imprison me in my coffin. It took tremendous strength on her part, and I doubt anyone could replicate the feat.

“I looked for her. When I was dug up. Obviously, Elizabeth was my priority, and always will be, but sometimes I make exceptions. Sometimes I think Margaret cursed me, to keep me from living forever with my true love. I’m sure she’s convinced I stole that chance from her too. Maybe she’s had the decency to kill herself — but I doubt it. But when she’s gone I think I can finally set things right.”

Dacian returned the rose carefully to the pages of the book and closed it gently.

“Do you understand?” he asked. “Why I’m afraid of this, of you. You complicate my goals, Lucere, but more than that — I know all too well what it’s like to destroy someone I hold so close to my heart. I could not bear to lose someone so precious again, but find I cannot let go of you, either. I see my life laid out without you, now, and find I do not like the picture. But I

must beg you, Lucere, not to let me drink from you anymore — or to be extremely careful, in doing so. I see now why Margaret thought our state a curse, and I have no wish to so afflict you.”

Dacian returned the book to the shelf. I took a slow breath, thinking through what he’d said to me. Dacian turned to look at me. “You seem troubled, my darling.”

“I am.” There was something discordant inside of me. I felt two waves, rising to meet each other. A thrill at Dacian’s refusal to let go of me, his proclaimed love for me, and the trust his vulnerability must have required. But I could not help but notice the contradictions in his story, and the eerie similarity between Iris and Elizabeth’s fate. I remembered how she trembled in the hospital.

“What’s wrong?”

I swallowed. Surely Dacian could put this confusion to rest, explain the story further. I must have misread his meaning. “I think I’m just a little... I’m sorry, I just *don’t* understand.”

Dacian looked a little annoyed, but he released a deep breath, and when he spoke, his voice was only soothing. “Of course. What are you wondering?”

“Just, Margaret. Did you ask her to turn you? Or did she ask you?”

Dacian was quiet for a moment. “She suggested it first, but I do not believe she thought I would accept it.”

“What do you mean, suggested it?”

“She told me she wished I could live forever with her.”

“And... you said you would?”

“No. I had no intention of making any promises to Margaret, so I asked her to consider turning me not long after that.”

So he had asked her. “And, I’m sorry, Dacian, I know you said you were guilty, I just want to make sure I know what happened.”

“Of course.” His tone was a little harder now, but still warm.

“You were cheating on Elizabeth, with Margaret?”

“... Yes.”

“Just after Margaret died?”

Dacian blinked. “I do not see how that witch’s undeath is relevant. There may have been one or two isolated instances, I can’t remember exactly.”

“Then... what was it Margaret lied about?”

Something in Dacian’s expression shifted, like the light in his eyes went out. “What do you mean?”

“To Elizabeth. You said she lied to her, but I don’t understand what the lie was?”

Dacian stared at me. “What do you mean?”

“I just,” I tried to articulate what I meant without making it sound like I did not believe him. “You said she lied to Elizabeth, but what did she lie about?”

“I don’t know, Lucere!” Dacian snapped. “I wasn’t there, or I would have stopped it! But she stopped Elizabeth from drinking. She *took* her from me!”

“I’m sorry!”

“For what? For doubting me?”

“I’m still confused,” I confessed. “I don’t doubt you, Dacian, I don’t. I love you. I know how this has scarred you.”

“Yes,” he said stiffly. “But you’re still confused. By what?”

“It sounds like Elizabeth killed herself.”

Dacian took a step back from me and looked me over without speaking. I could see that he was evaluating me; he looked shocked at my suggestion. “*What.*”

“Unless Margaret took your blood from her but, then, wouldn’t she have just told you? It seems like she decided she didn’t want to be turned. Like…”

My heart fell as a cold clarity gripped me.

“Like what?”

“Nothing.” I couldn’t say it, it would break him. But Dacian must have heard some note of dread in my voice and fixed me with a glowing stare.

“Like *what*, Lucere?”

The words spilled out of me. “Like Iris.”

“I see.” Dacian’s voice was like ice. “You think it’s no accident that she has gone this way twice now, then. Why is that? Is she so desperate to die, to leave me? Or am I overzealous in my pursuit?”

“That wasn’t what I—”

“No,” Dacian interrupted me. “Of course not. Then what did you mean? Do you really think a life with me would be so awful, Lucere, that she would rather die?”

“*No—*”

“*No!* Then what? Why did Elizabeth make a promise to drink, only to break it? I fail to see how anyone *but* Margaret is to blame. Don’t you?”

My voice shook. “No.”

The chill in Dacian's expression was subsiding, and fury, carved into his perfect features, rose to take its place. "No? You blame Elizabeth?"

"I — I don't know. No, no I don't blame Elizabeth."

"Me, then?"

"I don't know!" My throat still hurt, and I felt like I was spinning. I no longer felt the two waves. They had become a whirlpool, dragging me down, and I could not stop picturing Iris in her hospital bed, Iris with her hand so close to the crucifix, and then I remembered Iris in my living room. "Did you follow her?" I asked, and I realized from the way my voice cracked that I was crying. "Iris, did you follow her home before?"

"Why are you asking me that?" Dacian's voice grew shrill, and it shook the furniture. "What did she say to you? Why are you asking me that?"

"She didn't say anything, I mean, I, I just remember — has this happened before?"

"You think I've let this happen before? You have the audacity to suggest that? I thought you *knew* me, Lucere. You think I killed her? I knew her better than anyone, and you think I killed her — you, who recoiled from me whenever she was near, who told me to forget her, who let me — who — you blame me? *You* think I fucking killed her? You think I *killed* Elizabeth?"

My heart began to hammer in my chest. I realized, with horror, that Dacian's rage was only growing stronger, and I felt the hairs on the back of my neck beginning to rise. I took in one long, deep breath. This was Dacian. I knew Dacian, and above all things, Dacian valued connection, love. That was why he was so angry. He thought I doubted his love.

"Dacian," I started. "I love you. You must know I love you—"

He lunged at me and I broke off into a scream. I had never truly been afraid of him before, not in any way that mattered, but his movement was so sudden and the pain that flashed through my sides and my throat as he grabbed hold of me was more severe than I could have anticipated. He wrenched me off the ground so that my feet dangled in the air.

“You love me,” he snarled. “*You love me*. Then why are you saying these terrible things? Do you think you can undo me this way, undo my history? Do you think you can claim me for yourself, like Margaret?”

“No,” I gasped. “Dacian, I, I just — I only meant that I loved you—”

He threw me across the room. I collided with the coffee table and heard a sick snap, then the horrible sound of the glass and wood all shattering. I landed sharply on the floor and could not hold back my scream of pain.

“And I loved you.” I could hear the sneer in his voice. “How pathetic is that? I *still* love you. You, who think I’m a monster, a killer. Which one of us is worse, I wonder? Me, who tears you open? Or you, who sits there and lets me? It’s disgusting, we’re disgusting. Stop *lying* there. Get up.”

I tried to move, but felt thousands of pieces of glass, hundreds of splinters, digging into me on every side. When I tried to put my weight onto my side, my arm burned.

“Get *up*,” Dacian repeated, and I pushed myself up so that I was sitting. I felt something slick on my neck and my vision felt runny, like a Dalí painting. I felt the glass and wood dig into me again as I pulled my legs beneath me. They ached in protest as I put my weight on them.

“What should I do now, Lucere?” Dacian asked. I could not tell where his voice was coming from. “Should you go the same way as the other women I’ve loved? You would like that,

I think — that would prove to you how much you meant to me, despite all you've done to destroy me.”

I felt around on the floor helplessly, and my hands closed around the remains of the table's wooden legs. It wasn't especially big, but I set it down on the floor to support my weight. It helped a little, and I rose unsteadily, still holding it tight.

I took several more breaths, each shallower than the last.

“I don't understand,” I finally said. I could think of nothing else to say. “Why are you doing this? I love you.”

The apartment was so dark, and I was still reeling. I could make nothing out. Faintly, as if from another room, I heard the crunching of glass and a slight dripping and my own ragged breath. I blinked, trying to clear my vision, to make him out, but everything blurred together. Then, finally, came my Dacian's voice. No longer was it marred by wrath. Actually, it was quite peaceful.

“It's strange,” he whispered. “Sometimes you sound like her.”

I did not hear or see him, just felt the rushing of air and instinctively brought my hands up to protect my bleeding neck. I did not know what had happened for several minutes, I was so shaken, and then as my vision finally cleared and the pain eased, I saw his stunned face and put it all together. I had still been gripping the leg of the coffee table and, in his fervor, he had thrown himself onto the makeshift stake. I let out a strangled cry.

We stared at each other and then, slowed somewhat by pain, I brought my hands up to the stake. Dacian looked down at it.

“Dacian,” I whispered. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what’s happening, I’m sorry. Just let me—”

He roared and grabbed hold of me and I felt once again the piercing of his fangs. I was exhausted and slumped against him. Even with the stake in his heart, his grip was strong, and I had no escape. I felt the cold of his teeth and the pain of the blood loss, then the familiar warmth. It eclipsed me, drowning out the pain. I started to feel dizzy, to see white. He kept drinking. It was more than before, worse, better, it was everything. I realized, somewhere in the back of my mind, that I was close to losing consciousness. My vision began to fail me again, unable to focus, and I could hear my breaths failing me.

Then I thought again of Iris. I felt the stake, still resting beneath my hands, just as clearly as I could feel his mouth against me. I tightened my grip on it, gathered all of my strength, and pushed.

Dacian fell off of me and staggered back, shocked. He took hold of it himself and tried to pull it out, but could not. He looked back up at me again, his eyes wide and, I saw now, full of fear.

“Lucere,” he whispered. “Lucere. I’m sorry. I don’t know what came over me—”

I threw my weight against him. Dacian shouted in surprise and fell back again, this time stumbling into his coffin. I caught myself on the door, honestly more for the support. His eyes grew wider.

“No,” he said. “No, Lucere, you don’t understand. I see now. Lucere, I was wrong, I— you— I— my darling—”

“What,” the word came out more breath than question, butchered by my bleeding throat.

“*What.*”

Dacian gaped at me. With the last of my strength, I slammed the coffin shut.

Twenty

I collapsed against the coffin. It did little to support me and the door shook as Dacian scratched against it. The room was still spinning. I felt every awful thing, but most of all, nausea. I wondered, absentmindedly, if I might have broken my arm. Strangest of all, I could hear my heart beating with no rhythm, straining against my chest like it was trying to break free. Not unlike Dacian in the coffin behind me, pleading to be forgiven.

Forgiven for what, I wondered, but did not have the strength to say. I brought one shaking hand up to my forehead, and drew a line across it, then looked around the room. I realized I was shivering. It had been too late. I was still dying.

Then I saw, beside the door, my bag. Wincing, I pulled myself up and slowly made my way across the room. Each step hurt. I felt both the pain shooting through me and the broken glass piercing my feet. It seemed an eternity before I reached the door, and I fell into a heap on the ground beside it. I took out the water bottle.

I opened it, the plastic lid scraping quietly. I poured the blood into my mouth without any hesitation.

It was, without a doubt, the worst thing I'd ever tasted. I have no idea how old it was then, but it was rancid. Still, the effect was instantaneous. The beating in my head stopped, and my body began to relax. I drank gratefully and when it was all gone, gasped for air. My heartbeat had quieted and resumed its usual pace, and I realized I was crying.

As my strength returned, I could feel more clearly the growing exhaustion. I collapsed onto my bag and closed my eyes.

It was still dark when I opened them. Somehow, everything hurt worse now, with the ache that comes after rest. I reached into my bag, crumpled under my head like a pillow, and pulled out my phone. It was two in the morning.

My body screamed in protest as I stood up, and I groaned. The coffin, across the room, was still now. I took a step toward it without thinking, then stopped and looked down at my hands. They were red and raw.

I staggered to the bathroom instead. Dacian's first aid kit lay open by the sink.

The sun had risen by the time I had removed the majority of the splinters and glass. I washed off the worst of the blood with a towel, then stood in the shower and let the water rinse away the rest. My clothes were ruined, so I put on one of Dacian's sweaters and some pants I must have left there before. My arm still hurt too much to move, but I managed to push all of Dacian's books into piles and vacuum up most of the smaller shards and splinters. I even managed to put the tattered curtains and remains of the table into a trash bag. I had this idea that when I opened the door to help Dacian out, it would be better if the room were clean. Like the evidence of the fight would make it start again.

Only I did not open the coffin. I couldn't. Every time I approached it, I started to shake so violently that I could not even lay my hand on the latch. But I could not just leave. I ordered lunch and paid with Dacian's credit card and found that I could not eat it, either. The act of chewing made me feel physically ill. So I went about shelving all of his books. He still had every copy of *1984*, long past their due dates. Sometime in the early afternoon, my phone began to vibrate, and I realized I was scheduled to work. I let it ring.

After I had finished straightening out the room I approached the coffin again. I held one hand with the other to keep it still and set it on the door, let it slide down the latch. I was trembling as I pulled.

It did not move. It must have locked.

I slumped against it. The cool wood felt nice against my forehead. I listened for any trace of Dacian, any sound of breath or movement.

“Dacian,” I pleaded. “Talk to me.”

No answer came.

I turned to rest my back against it and looked around the living room, its floor bare. The absence of the coffee table made it seem empty. My eyes settled on the bookshelf we stood by earlier and I searched for the one he had shown me. I had to stand on my tiptoes to reach it. I found the rose disrupting its pages easily, and took it between my fingers. The brittle stem began to flake immediately. Even though I was not weeping, I reached up to wipe my eyes. I returned the rose to its place and put the book in my bag. I stood there some time longer, staring at the coffin, and willing myself to walk over and release Dacian, but unable to do so. Finally, as it began to grow dark outside, I went home.

I could not sleep until the early morning. I laid awake in my bed, not knowing what to do. Then dread settled over me as I realized the awful truth.

First, I went to the hospital and told them I had fallen through my table. My arm was not broken, in fact, it barely hurt anymore. They gave me some antibiotics to keep the wound on my neck, which I said was a gash from the glass, from getting infected. Then I bought a shovel. When night came again, I returned to Dacian's. I took the book with the rose, the portrait of

Elizabeth, and Dacian's scarf. I filled the water bottle and shook it vigorously, so the flakes of blood still left in it would disperse, and drank it for strength. Then I dragged his coffin to my car and drove away from Portland until there were no houses, no trace of the city. And I began to dig.

I did not want to bury him. I wanted, more than anything, to open the coffin, to take Dacian into my arms, to hear him whisper that everything would be right again. I felt like I might die if I did not, but I knew it could not happen. Just thinking of him made my neck throb faintly, the wound reminding me what he had done.

But I would set this right soon. I only needed to wait, to let time pass. Honestly, the burial was only a precaution. I doubted he would be in the earth long enough to make it necessary, but I was afraid to leave his coffin unattended in our homes.

When the hole was deep enough, I brought the coffin out from my car. I stood beside it for one moment. I tried to think of something to say.

"I'm going to come back for you," I promised. "I swear it, on my life. I need to find the key. And to think some things through, you should, too. I love you. I don't want to do this, I don't want this to be happening. I have your rose. I can't open the door and I'm afraid to but I'm going to leave it with you. I'm sorry. I love you. I'm sorry."

I waited for some time, to see if Dacian spoke, and then I pushed the coffin into the hole. I sealed the book inside a sandwich bag, and I threw it in too. I thought about laying the portrait of Elizabeth there too but decided against it. I refilled the grave and scraped leaves and stones over it so the earth looked undisturbed. I went home.

That was a week ago. I have torn apart Dacian's apartment, but there's no sign of the key. My injuries have all faded, except the bite on my neck, which I'm beginning to worry is infected. I've been feeling really feverish and getting chills, and I can barely sleep at night. I can't even keep down food. I hate myself for what I have done. I go to the grave sometimes and sit. Sometimes I even dig up the ground with my hands, but never enough for it to mean anything. When I do sleep, I dream of blood and teeth and dirt.