

*Riders of the Wind
and
Blood Tastes Sweet:
Two Previews*

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Riders of the Wind (working title)

Chapter 1

Click.

"Look to the right."

Click. Click.

"Turn your shoulder a bit. Tilt your head toward it. Excellent."

Click. Click. Click.

"Give me a crouch. Hand over your knee. Look right at me."

Click. Click. Click. Click.

"Alright we got it. That was wonderful, Anastasia."

Anastasia. She needed no other name. She was the only one, the one and only. Anastasia had been a model for nearly fifteen years. She had been the highest paid for the last seven and showed no signs of slowing down. So many women in her profession were cast aside at her age, but even approaching 32, she was nowhere near done or over the hill. Many had attempted to pull the rug from under her, but each time she rose like the phoenix and made fools of her detractors. Some had learned and had given up trying to punch her number long ago. She had a rare combination of poise, grace, confidence, wisdom and humility that was difficult to resist.

She sat in her sparse dressing room removing the last of her outlandish makeup. Her "Afro-Gothic Chic" had made her famous. It was often emulated then counted out as irrelevant when that could not be done effectively. But Anastasia always made it work. Sure she dabbled in other styles and made them just as fly as she, but she always came home whenever she felt the need. No one else came close to doing it the way she did.

Anastasia slipped into her dark blue jeans and black mock turtleneck. Even without a trace of makeup, she had an incredibly stunning face: long, curvy eyelashes accented her dark brown eyes; the thick dark eyebrows arched just enough; the nose fell somewhere between flat and bulbous; the full mouth was one people now paid a fortune to attain. All were gifts from a missing nomad mother and a father she never knew. She could not hide the natural beauty that made her stand out, so people always noticed her and made it impossible to walk down the street incognito. She usually traveled by car and missed leisurely walks in the park.

"You already done for the day, Ana?"

"Yeah, Pete, I'm ready to go home."

Although she could drive, Anastasia hired Pete Winston as her driver/bodyguard nearly six years ago. She had known him for a while in their younger years, but they usually ran in different circles. She knew he often got into trouble and was not surprised to hear he had gone to jail for breaking and entering. However, she was surprised to see him in the park playing with his young daughter one day. He had been completely honest with her talking about his past – except he made no mention of how difficult things were for him trying to support his child. She figured that out herself. The next day, she tracked him down and asked him if he wanted the job. Pete and little Katra Winston had been part of her life ever since.

"Oh, Kam called while you were in your shoot. I'm sure he left a message though."

"Thanks, Pete," she said as she took the cell phone he always held whenever she was in the middle of a shoot. She checked her voicemail, skipping over all others until she heard his voice.

“Hey, baby, just calling to let you know the plane made it in okay. I’m on my way home now. I wanted to make sure you remembered we were meeting at *my* house tonight. See you then. Love you, sweetheart.”

She smiled as she saved the message to listen to it later. That was her Kami. The two of them had been a couple for nearly seven years. She fished out the latest CD from his band Kief and popped it into the player. Kami had been a pioneer in the sound now called industrial rock. Anastasia felt his music sounded like a clever cross between Goldie and Nine Inch Nails while vocally he resembled Chris Cornell. Despite this, Kami made Kief totally original and he managed to keep the same band members since before their breakthrough. That was one of the things she liked about him.

Pete dropped her off at the mini estate Zenana to spend the rest of the day with his daughter. Even though the name had caused much speculation about Anastasia’s private life and hobbies, the rather small Verde butterfly mansion was a haven for her. She refused to think of it as a gilded prison. She often spent days at home without emerging. She was happier curled up with a good book than at the latest A-list social gathering. She was happiest curled up with Kami.

She headed for the kitchen to prepare a light snack even though she knew she would stuff herself later when Kami served up a nice helping of whatever delectable delights his chef was preparing. Still, a little yogurt wouldn’t hurt.

Then she felt it.

The sharp, piercing pain started off rather dull then briefly intensified. She clutched at her heart. When she removed her hand, she saw where the symbol had raised itself through the skin. After all these years, it was back, the symbol of the Mazims.

They were calling her back.

She had not been back to The Nonetta since that day fifteen years ago. It remained clear in her memory, but she thought that would be the closest she would ever come to it again.

Anastasia headed for the secret room adjoining her bedroom. She retrieved the dark green cloak and affixed it to her shoulders. She then opened an old wooden jewelry box and gingerly took out the only item – a necklace bearing the symbol of the Mazims as its charm. She checked her watch. She might not have to manipulate time.

“Nuseht fodlo gek calb,” she chanted.

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She sat stoically at the head of the table. She knew they were trying to get a read on her, but she had perfected her poker face years ago. It was one of the reasons she was so good at business. She scared the hell out of the corporate boys.

Lionel Martin looked from Amel to his lawyer. She knew he would sign. His company would go under completely without her, but he resented having to turn over so much control to *her*. Despite her good looks and charm school demeanor, Amel conducted business with all the gentility of a school of sharks. She had not relented on a thing. Lionel sighed then committed his signature to the contract.

“You did the right thing, Lionel,” Amel said as she finally gave way to a smile.

“Let’s hope so,” he said as he and his entourage headed out the door.

“Don’t you just love the smell of humiliation in the afternoon?” Scott Bridges had been Amel’s assistant for two years. Unlike most of the employees at the company, Scott did not seem to mind the fact that she was his boss. For that, she let him get away with little things like the brandy he kept in his desk that he was now pouring for her to celebrate their latest conquest.

“Seriously, I thought the old man was going to cry,” Scott said rather gleefully.

“Have some sympathy, Scott,” Amel said flatly. “One of us has to. I can’t. I can’t respect anyone who avoids looking me in the eye.”

“Is that so?” He looked at her with a glint in his eye. Amel had known for some time that he had a quiet crush on her or at least acted as if he did. She never got involved with men from work, however. She always had to wonder if her detractors were trying to set her up. So despite that deep dimple in his left cheek, Amel let Scott twist in the wind when it came to *the* possibility. Besides, the beau du jour would not have liked it very much.

Amel sent Scott home before heading off herself. As she slid behind the wheel of her luxury car, she made mental notes of her evening plans. Even though she had scored a beautiful victory, she felt like staying in. She could order a nice catered meal from her favorite Italian place, Fellini’s. They made the best chicken tortellini on the coast and Amel indulged as much as she could. She could already taste it with a fresh salad, warm bread and red wine.

She drove into the exclusive Black Ocean neighborhood. She had decided against living in one of the overly spacious estates when she fell in love with the sky blue house seven years ago as she was still climbing the corporate ladder. She did not have a professional come to clean like so many of her neighbors, preferring to spend two Fridays a month lovingly disinfecting her own home. Once a neighbor mistook her for the maid. He never made that mistake again.

As she entered the door, Amel kicked off her heels, trimming her down to 5’6”. She had been thick all her life and she hated the attention her curvy physique garnered during her teen years. Now she picked and chose who she returned that attention to. And she was definitely choosy. She had to be. Fortunately, she was becoming good at weeding out the ones more interested in her money and status than her.

She put a few drops in her black eyes. They were a bit irritated after a long day. Amel settled down and stuffed her feet into the soft massager. She had just clicked on the television when the doorbell rang. Amel grunted and dragged herself to the door. Donny.

“I know you didn’t think I was leaving you alone tonight!” he said as he barged in. Amel made no attempt to stop him. She liked Donny even though she found him loud and boorish at times. He knew when to tone it down around her though.

He handed her a bottle of champagne and strawberries. She set it down then excused herself to slip into something more comfortable. She chose a dark blue wraparound skirt and a low-cut black blouse. She was about to step into her slippers when she felt it.

“Aagghh!” she yelled as she clasped her hand to the right side of her neck.

“Amel, what’s wrong?” Donny asked as he began to rush to her bedroom.

She rubbed at the symbol protruding from her neck. After all these years, it was back. They again called her to The Nonetta.

“Amel, are you okay?” Donny asked as he came toward her. “Why were you screaming?”

“Nothing. I just stubbed my toe.” She tried to keep turned away from him. She was not certain if he had the ability to see the symbol. “Go - go on back to the den. I’ll join you in a minute.”

“Maybe you should let me see that.”

“No, Donny it’s fine...”

“It’ll only take...”

“Delrow laci gam!”

Donny and everything around him froze in place. Amel had almost forgotten about the time stop charm. It came back to her just as Donny was about to touch her.

"Sorry, Donny," she said as she kissed him lightly on the lips. "But I can't have you finding out about this."

Amel stepped into her walk-in closet. She felt around until she found the loose panel. She removed it and stepped inside a dark room. She went to a display case and removed a ring. She gingerly traced her finger along the symbol not believing she was being called back to The Nonetta after fifteen years. Amel found her dark blue cloak and secured it around her shoulders. She took a deep breath and chanted.

"Nuseht fodlo gek calb."

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Ariel stepped onto the stage and took a bow. This was not the first time she had gotten a lengthy standing ovation, but this was by far the most satisfying.

The curtain came down and she ran to the wings. Miguel immediately enfolded her in his arms. They tightly embraced each other before heading back to the stage hand in hand for one last bow.

It took Ariel no time to change into her street clothes. She and Miguel clasped hands and set out to join the after party in their honor. When they first married fifteen years ago, Miguel promised her he would do everything in his power to see that her dream of staging her own ballet came true. He made good on that promise. Ariel thought back to her wedding day as she celebrated the triumph of her ballet.

Her dark green eyes shined like emeralds as she smiled at her fellow dancers and well wishers. Her thick, dark eyebrows formed clownish but pretty arches providing a frame with her aquiline nose and pouty mouth. Although she remained pleasant and composed, Ariel was anxious and jittery on the inside. She awaited the real celebration to take place later at home, the private one she and Miguel had planned.

"We're very proud of you, Ariel," Diane was saying. "We always knew you could do it."

"Thank you so much, Ms. Diane," Ariel replied as she kissed and hugged Diane. She then reached out to clasp the waiting hand of Diane's husband Sidney.

"Yes, we had a feeling you'd make it happen," Sidney said with a wink. He tended to wink at her a lot – at least in this world.

Ariel continued to work the room. Just as she felt she could not shake another hand or her face just might crack, Miguel appeared at her side.

"The dinner's about to start, Ari," he said. "We need to get out of here."

They headed back to the dressing room. No sooner did they get through the door than Miguel pinned her against the wall.

"Come on, Miguel. We don't have time."

"We could skip the dinner," he said between kisses.

"You know we can't."

"Then how about we skip appetizers and dessert and feign exhaustion. I mean we were just in a four-hour show."

"You got a deal."

They drove the short five miles from the theater to Rivière, the latest hot spot for the A-list crowd. Their party was already seated and started off a round of applause as they entered the restaurant. They were practically giddy fools holding hands under the table and sneaking glances back and forth. Their obligatory meal seemed to last forever.

No sooner than he finished his chicken cotillion did Miguel begin to yawn.

"I think I'd better get this one home before he passes out," Ariel announced.

"But it's so early! Surely you can stay for dessert and coffee."

"Maybe some other time. All the work going into that show is catching up."

"Yeah, we've got some more publicity to do in the morning. I should get some beauty rest."

"Okay, but we must get together again soon."

They were subdued during the drive home, barely speaking to one another. Ariel looked at him as he drove and studied his dark brown face as she often did when she thought he was not paying attention. She never tired of his face or the taut, lean body that came along with it.

"See something you like?" he teased never taking his eyes off the road.

"You bet I do."

As soon as they entered the vermillion house, all pretense was checked at the door. They tore at each other's clothes as if civilization itself depending on their coupling. All the while, they relished in each other's touch, scent and gaze. Their trip to the bedroom was quite eventful.

Yet it only hinted at what was to come.

Thousands of times over fifteen years and it never got old or dull to either of them. Miguel always took the time to explore her body as if it were the first and last times. Ariel showed her appreciation by giving back as much as she took.

She was almost there. She could feel it. So could he. He knew just how to get her there every time. He listened as her breathing grew heavier. She squeezed him tighter. Then suddenly she screamed.

Miguel thought for a moment that she had come on strong but quickly realized she was in pain. He pulled away from her as her moans changed from pleasure to agony.

"Baby, what's wrong?"

He ran his hand soothingly across her belly. He felt it. The symbol of the Imazims began to protrude through the skin.

"Miguel, they're calling me."

He helped her get dressed before ascending to the attic. He looked around the dark spacious room. He opened a chifonier and grabbed a small rectangular jewelry box. He carefully removed the bracelet and placed it on the table. By the time he retrieved the dark red cloak from the wardrobe, Ariel had made it to the attic.

"Are you coming, too?" she asked as she slipped the cloak over her shoulders.

"I wasn't called. You can tell me if I'm needed when you come back."

She kissed him tenderly as he affixed the bracelet.

"Nuseht fodlo gek calb."

~~~

"Once again I'd like to thank you for coming here today. I truly appreciate your time and support."

Aurora always came to Zouk first on her book tours even though her books now sold in the millions. The small indie outlet was one of the first to support her while she was still struggling to make a name for herself. So she made Zouk the primary source for her publicity, advanced books or anything else relevant to her work. That included the recent film and television deals in development.

She signed books for the next couple of hours. She recognized some of the faces although she had trouble with names. Aurora loved the diehard fans. They would

always be faithful as long as she remained true to her vision. She loved the new converts as well. They brought a good type of zealotry that kept her going through her worst bouts of writer's block.

Aurora looked out to the one seat still occupied in the slowly emptying bookstore. She winked at its occupant who sweetly smiled back at her. She definitely owed Phaedra this time.

The signing ended. Aurora gathered her belongings and gave her thanks and well wishes to Karma, the owner of Zouk. She finally walked over to Phaedra who sat reading a book, thankfully not one of her own this time.

"Ready to go, sweetheart."

"Yeah, Mom."

Aurora felt that at fifteen, Phaedra might have grown tired of accompanying her mother to book signings and other publicity events, but Phaedra had always shown such remarkable patience with the whole process. Perhaps her young mind matured early as she recalled the lean years having to wait long hours for her mother to finish shifts in restaurants and diners. She had already told her mother she did not mind being away from her friends and kids her age.

"If they're really my friends, they'll be there when I get back."

Phaedra had been her life for so long. Yet she still found herself in awe that the girl was hers. Phaedra's dark gray eyes were nearly a replica of her own, but the rest of her face bore a resemblance to the man Phaedra never knew as her father.

"You know he showed up."

"Who?"

"That man that used to come visit when you worked at the diner. Teddy. He sat in the back while you were reading then slipped out when you started to sign books. I think it was him. I don't remember his face that well and I didn't get a good look. I didn't want to stare you know."

Aurora grew quiet. Teddy had been there? She was glad Phaedra had not seen him well enough to be sure. Phaedra had been five years old the last time he came to visit, three the last time Teddy had held her. Since then Phaedra had claimed various sightings of him, none of which Aurora had ever seen. She wondered if her child's mind played tricks on her.

"It might not have been him, honey. It's been so long since we've seen him. Where do you want to eat?" Aurora hoped changing the subject would take Phaedra's mind off Teddy.

"I don't really care, but I guess I could go for some Chinese."

Aurora smiled. She loved Phaedra's confidence and charm, but she sometimes wished the girl was not so wise beyond her young years. She knew exactly how miserable too much wisdom could make someone.

They chatted over sweet and sour pork, Hunan chicken, won ton soup and white rice. Aurora knew everything about her daughter's life, but they always found something to talk about. She had finally begun to allow Phaedra to read her books last year. They spent hours discussing them. Aurora felt like a huge weight had been lifted from her head and an entire world had opened for the both of them. Still she kept a very crucial part of her of her life from Phaedra.

"You will accomplish great feats."

"In bed."

Aurora gasped with a smile. "What do you know about 'in bed'?"

"That's what you say at the end of a fortune cookie."

"I know I'd better keep an eye on you."

"I keep one on you. I don't think I've ever seen you with a man. I'm starting to think I was hatched."

"Check, please."

They had way too much room in their spacious off-gray house, but they loved every corner. When Phaedra retreated to her bedroom, Aurora strolled to her favorite room, the library. She may not have had rare books, first editions or collector's items, but she loved each and every book in her vast collection. She spent hours in this room formulating her ideas and watching them come to life. She treated each piece as if it had the power to make a sibling for Phaedra.

Aurora took a break to check her e-mail. She was not surprised to find a message from an agent who wrote her at least three times a day. He was in the midst of a four-month crusade to persuade her to come to his company and abandon her longtime agent.

She was just about to have a bowl of mint chip ice cream when it hit. Right in her left thigh she felt it. Aurora was more shocked than she was in any pain. She was the last person she thought the Imazims would call.

Aurora made sure Phaedra was okay before heading back to the library.

"Tahgis nilp nie dih."

A shelf disappeared revealing her dark silver cloak and small jewelry box. Aurora fastened it around her shoulders then reached for the anklet bearing the symbol of the Imazims. She tenderly stroked it before affixing it to her ankle.

"Nuseht fodlo gek calab."

## Chapter 2

Dark hues of purple and orange stretched across the vast sky. A gentle wind blew from nowhere. She tightly gripped her mother's hand. She was not really afraid, but she had no idea where she was or where to go. Her mother simply told her they were going to a special place for unique individuals. Not everyone could go. Not everyone knew of it. She was truly a chosen one.

"So many of the people you admire are like you. Like us, they belong to an exceptional kind called Imazims. This is our realm. Here you will learn all about the powers you possess. It's important that you understand them and learn not to abuse them. You will also learn about Morphs."

"Mommy, what's a Morph?"

"You'll learn, child."

They watched a dark figure from across the horizon. It seemed to float across the black ground. It stopped right in front of them then slowly pulled back the hood to reveal a withered but lovely face. Her mother made a ritual gesture touching her extended forefinger to her head and chest then pointing it outward. The elderly woman smiled and returned the gesture.

"Welcome back, Dragonfly."

"Thank you, Mother Galweh."

"This is she?"

"Yes. She's mine."

"She is ready?"

"Very much so, Mother Galweh."

"Very well."

Her mother took one hand. Mother Galweh took the other. She did not remember her feet touching the ground. She had no idea when the huge dark stone

mansion had materialized before them. Outside the mansion were statues, many bearing the likeness of beautiful women. The blue and grey stones seemed to illuminate. The immense building seemed to swallow them as they entered. She was still not frightened. She let go of her mother's hand. She moved automatically navigating the ancient mansion as if she had been there many times already. She stepped into the main hall where she found the other young ones. She walked past them all until she found them. She knew they were hers. They knew she was theirs. The four of them stood in a close circle appraising each other.

"I see you've found each other," said Mother Galweh as she materialized from nowhere. "This is your quadron. In this dimension, this is your family. You are each other's home. You all progress together. If one of you succeeds, you all succeed. If one of you fails, so does your entire quadron. However, it's very rare that a quadron fails. It never takes long to realize you are much stronger together than individually. After all, that is how we survived all this time – with each other. Now it's time you learned your names."

Mother Galweh drifted to the girl with reddish brown hair and placed her thumb on the back of the girl's neck. The girl gasped and light briefly flashed in her black eyes.

"Lyric," she said.

Mother Galweh moved to the girl who looked shyly at the rest of them. The same thing happened to her.

"Lyzette," she said in a cute, raspy voice.

Mother Galweh approached the girl who had been smiling the entire time. That smile never wavered as the light passed through her.

"Lyasia," she said breathlessly.

Then Mother Galweh approached her. When she felt the thumb on her neck, she found herself in yet another world. She walked barefoot through the black sands on a warm spring night. She looked into the sky at the whole noon. She knelt to the ground to brush away the sand from a shiny black stone. A butterfly descended on her hand just as she read the five letters in green carved on the stone.

Only a second had transpired from the moment Mother Galweh placed a thumb on her neck to the moment she uttered her new name.

"Lythe."

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The true power of an Imazim is indeed a wondrous thing. There once was an Imazim whose silence cast a curse over all the Nonetta. Not even her fellow Imazims could break the curse. She did not mean to curse them. She simply had no idea her voice held so much power in The Nonetta. Her voice was feared in The Airtha. Saphis had always silenced her when she used her voice. Morphs stole her voice and found it to be most beneficial to them. She grew disillusioned with her own beautiful voice and decided never to use it again. This one Imazim who would not use her voice put a curse over all The Nonetta. For an Imazim to not use her power, particularly a natural one, weakens all the rest. She began to dream and saw the slow destruction of the Imazims and The Nonetta. So she spoke.

The curse was broken.

~~~

"I'm sure our parents are allowed to visit us. Why would they separate us from our parents? This isn't a prison."

Lyasia looked at Lyric, Lyzette and Lythe with an emphatic enthusiasm as she spoke. "Anyway, we're supposed to be getting to know each other. My father told me about The Nonetta when he realized I was an Imazim as well."

"Both my parents are Imazims," Lyzette said. "I was never allowed to use my powers. They said I needed to learn more about them and how to control them. They said Imazims could destroy The Airtha if we so chose, but Imazims don't destroy. Instead, we do what we can to save it."

"I don't see why," Lyric said. "My mom said The Airtha is dying and if the Saphis won't stop it, we owe them nothing. If they destroy The Airtha, we'll still have The Nonetta."

"But don't you think we would suffer as well if The Airtha was destroyed?" Lythe finally piped up, embarrassed the rest of her quadron might realize she had been ignorant of The Nonetta until quite recently.

"You're probably right," Lyzette said in her quiet rasp. "If The Airtha didn't mean anything to us, we would have abandoned it long ago. There must be something in it."

The girls looked at each other unsure of where to take the conversation from that point.

"Should we tell each other our real names?" Lyasia offered.

"I don't think we have to," Lyric said. "That only matters in The Airtha. We're supposed to form our Nonetta identities now."

Silence overcame them again. Lythe studied her nails as Lyzette looked from her shoes to each girl. Lyric played with her hair as Lyasia surrendered a sly grin.

"Ariel!" she said proudly.

"Anastasia," Lythe said as she too began to smile.

"Aurora," Lyzette said as she moved to stand closer to Lyasia and Lythe. They all turned and looked expectantly at Lyric, who sighed dramatically then made her way over to the others."

"Amel."

They finally fell into a comfortable chatter. When Lyasia told the others she wanted to be a dancer, she demonstrated with a series of pirouettes then grabbed Lyzette to waltz with her.

"I'm going to love being an Imazim," Lyasia said. "Everyone I've wanted to be like is one: Katherine, Alvin, Bill, Debbie... I always wanted to be like them. My dad said I would be just as good. Better probably since they've already set out the path."

"That's what my mom says" Lyric said. "She says there are a lot of Saphis who were supposed to be Imazims but were afraid of their power. Most of them let Morphs steal their power, pretend it was theirs to begin with. That's why some Imazims don't want to stay in The Airtha. They always run the risk of having their powers stolen or worse: they give them away because they're afraid to use them."

"Well, that's why Morphs are so dangerous," Lyzette said. "They have no remorse about taking the powers of others and claiming it as their own. They'll say that it belongs to everyone, so it's not really stealing. That's what my mother says."

Lythe took it all in. Her mother had never mentioned the words Imazim, Saphi or Morph. She never even read her daughter fairy tales, saying they left little girls with grand delusions about life. She did not want her daughter embracing such silly notions of Prince Charming, evil stepmothers and happily ever after. But now certain things her mother said began to make sense.

"Never let anyone else take credit for your work."

"Don't be afraid to speak out."

"Never let anyone get away with treating you like less than you are."

"Don't be afraid to think on your own."

Lythe's mother constantly fed her gems such as these. She had seemed strange the day before as she watched Lythe eat her lunch. She finally brought herself to tell Lythe that they would be going somewhere special soon. They would have to pack no bags. When the time came, her mother told Lythe to close her eyes and hold her hand. Lythe then heard her mother chant.

"Nuseht fodlo gek calb."

When she opened her eyes, she saw the beautiful purple and orange sky of The Nonetta.

"You weren't told about being an Imazim, were you?" Lyasia was asking her.

"No," Lythe said quietly. "She only told me about this place yesterday. She said I would understand once I got here."

"Wow!" Lyasia's eyes were suddenly wide with fascination. "You must be a purus Imazim. We have a purus in our quadron."

"How do you know she's a purus?" Lyric said grouchyly. "She didn't even know she had powers until yesterday."

"That's how we know she's a purus," Lyzette said with a little more confidence than she previously had shown. "Some Imazims try to keep their children from the life or the kids have lost their parents somehow, so they don't know who they really are. But they get called anyway. Usually in their late teens or twenties. Only a purus would be called this young not knowing she was an Imazim. We have to embrace that."

Lyric clicked her tongue and sighed with exasperation. She stood apart from the others, daring to remain individual. Lythe looked at her and immediately thought of something else her mother would tell her.

"Don't ever think you'll make it in this world alone."

She had not been thinking aloud. She thought the words had remained in the confines of her mind, but Lyric had slowly turned to look at her as if she had spoken directly to Lyric. They gazed at each other curiously. Then as if being pulled by an invisible force, Lyric walked back over to the other three.

"If one of us succeeds..."

"... all four of us succeed..."

"...if one of us fails..."

"... then so do we all..."

This was what was supposed to happen. It was not their intention, but they felt it happening. Mother Galweh had told them the quadron would be their family in The Nonetta. They had not been told what they were now finding out.

They would be one.

~~~

Lythe drew her cloak closer to her as she looked around. There was an unnatural chill in The Nonetta. Still, it was just as she remembered, the most beautiful purple and orange sky she had ever seen. She had never grown tired of it as a child. She found even more to appreciate as a woman.

She walked toward the horizon although there was nothing in the distance. She had not decided her destination, so none appeared. She had not decided if she wanted to go directly to the mansion or detour to the black sands where she received her name. She felt the black sand beneath her toes as she unconsciously conjured the beautiful beach.

"It's always peaceful here," a familiar voice said. "I only hope we are strong enough to keep it so."

Lythe looked at the woman whose old voice did not match her young face. The woman smiled.

"You're thinking, 'Why does this 30-year-old woman sound 75?' Would it help if I sounded like this?"

Her voice had changed to match the face.

"Or would it help if I looked like this?"

She began to age. Slowly, Lythe realized why the voice was so familiar.

"Mother Galweh!" she exclaimed as she greeted the woman before her. "I know I was called, but it's been so long since I've seen The Nonetta. Mother Galweh you're young!"

Mother Galweh had returned to the 30-year-old. She was nearly as old as time itself. She was so powerful that she could choose her physical appearance at will. She was the most powerful Imazim in existence, but she said her power was contingent upon her fellow Imazims. As their powers grew, so did hers. She weakened when Imazims lost their way. But if she weakened, so did The Nonetta.

"Are you ready, Lythe?"

"Yes, Mother Galweh."

Mother Galweh took Lythe's hand. The mansion appeared before them. Lythe often asked herself why Imazims ever left The Nonetta. She already knew why because Mother Galweh had explained to them that The Nonetta and The Airtha were connected. The Nonetta was kept from those who dwelt exclusively in The Airtha. They could not fathom the existence of The Nonetta and believed those they actually did not know were Imazims were not as good as they. These were Saphis. Saphis did not realize that without the Imazims in their world, they would perish. Their existence would become empty. Morphs, on the other hand, knew the Imazims' true power. However, they wanted it for themselves. The Nonetta was the only safe space for the Imazims. But the Morphs grew stronger all the time. One too many trusting Imazims had shared with Morphs believing an alliance at hand. More often than not they were betrayed and found their powers stolen. In that regard, Morphs were worse than Saphis. Saphis believed Imazims were unnecessary, but Morphs wanted to steal the very essence of the Imazim, claiming it in the name of universality.

Lythe walked into the mansion, its dark beauty enveloping her. She knew that others were there even though the place seemed empty. The young ones were surely off in lessons. She could feel the security charm that surrounded the mansion. It was not strong enough to cover the entirety of The Nonetta. The Circle would have its own charm of protection. Once when she was a child taking lessons, Lythe and others had to stay put in the mansion for two days under protection. She never thought that would happen again.

Lythe walked into the Argen room. Her quadron spent many hours in this room perfecting their powers. They also studied The Labyrinth, their final task to complete their training. It was never to be. When their year nine approached, Lythe's quadron could not reunite to complete the year. The 144 was broken.

She approached the Argen stone. After all this time, she remembered the words to conjure the image of The Labyrinth.

"Noo meg naro."

The Labyrinth itself was a massive undertaking. However, the image before Lythe was simply a replica showing them what they could possibly encounter. It tested every dimension of their training and each member had to pass each part individually as well as together. Her quadron never got that chance.

"Maybe it's for the best we didn't make it. I'm getting dizzy just seeing the simulation."

Lythe turned to see the perpetually smiling face of Lyasia causing her to follow suit. They embraced in a tight hug, their black energy flowing between them. Even if they had not known it before, they would have found out then that they were both happy in The Airtha. Lythe smiled at her old friend. She had kept up with the success of all members of her quadron. Lyzette had gotten off to a rocky start, but she had persevered.

Lythe and Lyasia turned to see Lyzette approaching. Her serious gaze slowly gave way to a smile. All those years ago, she seemed uncertain of them as if afraid they may have meant her harm. That uncertainty had shown itself briefly then she remembered. Lyzette remembered they had sacrificed their training because of her. They never openly blamed her. In fact, it was believed they were so successful in The Airtha because they were not full-powered Imazims. So many others with talents greater than theirs had perished far too soon in The Airtha, a realm that could not fully appreciate their gifts and sought to harness them, to limit their full potential without allowing a Saphi or Morph to dictate their boundaries.

"It's beautiful and wonderful to see you again," Lyzette said in her distinct rasp.

"It certainly is," a sharp, cutting voice materialized. Lyric walked up to the rest of her quadron, her stoic face belying nothing. Instead, she extended her left hand to Lyasia and her right to Lyzette. The four of them joined hands letting the black energy flow through them. The past fifteen years of their lives in The Airtha became not simply shared memories but shared experience. They took turns living the lives of the others until each one had lived as the other three.

Mother Galweh beckoned them to sit down. "You'll have time for oruk later," she said benevolently as she illuminated the room. "I know you're wondering why you were called, especially now after all this time. None of you have returned to The Nonetta since the day you left. Very rare for a purus quadron, even one that did not complete tasks."

The flickering light cast ominous shadows behind Mother Galweh as she stood in front of the quadron. Her dark brown eyes began to lighten as she spoke. Her dark purple cloak spoke to her status as the leader of all Imazims, but her manner suggested equality among them. Mother Galweh was more concerned with preparing her young ones to survive in The Airtha rather than with having them worship at her feet. This was the quality that endeared her to generations of Imazims. Now as they looked upon her, Lythe, Lyric, Lyzette and Lyasia could sense the urgency with which she called them back to The Nonetta.

"We have reason to believe Morphs have managed to infiltrate The Nonetta. Not only that but we believe at least one has passed as an Imazim for quite some time. We're not sure how long we've been vulnerable, but none of our young ones are allowed to run about The Nonetta alone. If they must, they have to stay in their entire quadron.

"We've called you back for a purpose. Your quadron must complete tasks. Your generation was the last to have a purus among your ranks. But the quadron with the purus, well, you chose to stay together. That's why you've all succeeded as you have in The Airtha. It's rare for an Imazim to gain so much there without sacrificing so much of her essence, but you four have. Now you need to bring some of that energy back to The Nonetta."

Mother Galweh smiled at them. "Of course you are under no obligation. If you decide to solve The Labyrinth, call to The Onyx Guild. We will prepare the course for you after you've been given ample time to prepare yourselves. In the meantime less powerful Morphs may come, but they shall be easily defeated. The one or ones we fear will be far more clever."

Her expression had become uncharacteristically weary for a moment, but she quickly regained her composure. "Take some time to make your decision. You know how to call me."

With a wave of a hand over her face, Mother Galweh was gone. Being old as time itself, she had no concept of kept time. Things happened when they were supposed to. One second and 100 years were all the same to her. Yet the quadron knew that time would be of essence in this matter. They sat looking at the spot where Mother Galweh had been.

"You know what she means don't you?" Lyric broke the silence.

"Yes," Lyzette said grimly. "But do you think she really believes we'll abandon The Nonetta just because we walked away all those years ago?"

"Wouldn't we?" Lyric said sternly. "We haven't seen this place for fifteen years. We're not connected to it like others. What do we have to gain by helping?"

"It's not about what we have to gain," Lyasia said. "We all know damn well we are connected to this place and if The Nonetta is destroyed so is The Airtha. Are we really going to be that selfish?"

"Who says it's selfish? We were the last generation with a purus among us and The Guild simply let us go when we didn't do things their way. The Nonetta may not have changed, but The Airtha sure has. If they insist on staying intertwined with each other then perhaps they should have worked harder to keep The Nonetta from getting left behind."

Lyric's outburst gave them all pause. They all at some point had asked the same question, especially since none of them had to use their powers to climb their way to the top. Yet they all knew their training had contributed significantly to their ability to cope in a world that despised them for no good reason.

"We'll complete the Labyrinth because we can't help who we are," Lythe broke into the silence. "Even if we didn't use our powers, everything we are is tied to The Nonetta. Besides, we all have Saphis in The Airtha we love and protect. We can't let them be destroyed."

Lyric turned to Lythe stoically. To anyone who did not know Lyric, her expressionless eyes might have indicated she was dismayed. Since Lythe knew her well, that was just a great poker face and that she never smiled very often anyway.

"That's all I needed to hear."

"Honey, I missed your cynicism."

The four of them joined hands again, finishing the oruk ritual they had begun earlier. As the black energy flowed through them once again, they felt a charge neither of them had experienced since they last left The Nonetta nearly fifteen years ago. They sent their energy to protect the ones who were not yet strong enough to protect themselves. They felt the black energy of the Imazims not in The Nonetta sharing their energy to keep it safe.

Soon they would all be called, their entire generation of 144. They would reunite in The Nonetta to support the quadron through the difficult task that was The Labyrinth. Usually when the task was completed, the generation would partake in a huge celebration, coming together with the others and enjoying their accomplishments. They all knew this time, though, the Gala would probably be postponed if held at all.

They disconnected knowing it was time to return to The Airtha. They had some preparations and explanations waiting for them.

"I have to get back," Lyric said. "I have to break the time manipulation charm off Donny." She then gave a rare smile thinking of Donny frozen in place in her bedroom.

"Miguel will want me to fill him in on you guys, what he doesn't know already," Lyasia said.

"Phaedra doesn't even know I'm gone," Lyzette said wistfully.

"I might just be a little late for Kami," Lythe said as she wondered how she would explain her absence to him. "Until next time, Ukoknas."

They each raised their right hands then touched their charms and simultaneously said their magic words.

"Rever ofoton ruter."

And like that, they once again left The Nonetta.

Chapter 3

When an Imazim moves ahead too fast in The Airtha, Saphis become afraid. They do not know why they fear the Imazim's power, but they do everything they can to subside it. Some openly intimidate. However, most pretend to be friendly. They tell Imazims to go slow. If they try to get what they work for too fast, Saphis might feel threatened. "Go slow," they said. "Progress takes time." One Imazim refused to go slow. She had the right to work in her own time at her own pace. Why should she wait for the Saphis to be ready for her? The Airtha belonged as much to her as it did to them. So she moved along at her own pace though she was warned to slow down. She refused to be intimidated. The Saphis did everything they could to slow her down. When this did not work, she was destroyed.

An entire generation of Imazims was born in her place.

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She would be about fifteen minutes late. Anastasia quickly got herself ready. She slipped on a pair of black slacks and an emerald green blouse before finding her favorite pair of black sandals. She would only be in them for a few moments anyway. Anastasia was at home in Kami's place, so she never kept her shoes on there either. She grabbed her purse and the keys to her Nissan and headed off to meet Kami.

Kami owned an entire estate that required a full-time staff. In keeping with his favorite naming pattern, he called it Kali, the same thing he called Anastasia, his muse of the past seven years. Anastasia was waved through security then turned her car over to Kami's driver Dave. She had her own key to the front door, so she walked in without Richard announcing her. She went straight through the grand mansion to the small private dining room. He was already waiting for her.

"You're late," Kami said as he rose to kiss her. "I was starting to worry. You're always early."

"Sorry. I got a little hung up at home."

Anastasia looked at Kami. That first day they met all those years ago was definitely not love at first sight. Kami's band Keif was making its first music video for its debut single, a song called "Wyldfyre." The group's manager Nigel noticed Anastasia's picture in his girlfriend's copy of a French magazine *Si Vous Plait*. Her image jumped out at him and he spent the next two days trying to track her down. Her agency tried to convince him to use a different girl, someone more "mainstream," but Nigel was adamant about having Anastasia. He found her himself and set up a meeting between Anastasia and Kami to convince the two of them that her Afro-Gothic image was a perfect match for Keif.

She had looked at Kami as they talked. She had to admit the six-foot half-Asian, half-black man was incredibly handsome. On the day of the shoot, she found that he was just as attractive below the chin. She only had to work on the second day of the

shoot and the two got quite cozy during the interim. It did not take them long to become completely comfortable with their more intimate interactions. But at the end of the shoot, they shook hands and went their separate ways.

Anastasia thought that would be the last she would personally hear from Kami although she hoped the group would succeed. She loved the sound of Keif's music as Nigel had sent her a CD before they met. A month after the video shoot, she received a small package in the mail. Anastasia found a CD labeled "Kali" inside. That was when she found out Kami's secret: the man labeled the next big thing in rock was a classically trained pianist. She listened to his seven-minute ballad for two hours straight.

A couple of days later, Kami called and asked her if she wanted to join him for a night out. They went to a club to see a local band play then spent the better part of the night in a 24-hour diner. Anastasia found out that Kami had a poet's soul. She also found out that his attraction to her had nothing to do with her looks and occupation but rather the energy he received from her. She felt the same way about him. Three weeks after that first date, "Wylldfyre" debuted. After six years of hard work, Keif was an overnight sensation.

Kami and Anastasia became a premier A-list couple. At first, Anastasia's biggest obstacle in being happy with Kami was not the many groupies he encountered but his mother. For the longest time, that woman would not give Anastasia the time of day. That all changed five years ago when Kami's tour bus crashed. Anastasia had been in Italy at the time, but she immediately dropped everything and rushed to Kami's side to see that he recovered. Kami's mother "accidentally" leaked to the press that Anastasia's agency was threatening to drop her for walking out of an assignment to be with the man she loved. The two women had gotten along just fine since then.

In the five years that followed, Anastasia and Kami continued to grow closer. They never discussed moving in together or marriage but had to endure his mother's hints of being ready for another wedding and grandchild. They both tried to laugh it off and continue being happy as they were.

Anastasia felt she had no right to take Kami's name when she had not told him her most closely guarded secret, her true identity. She had wanted to tell him since the beginning, since the first time she felt his energy flowing through her and she gave hers to him. However, she had no idea how to tell him or even how to broach the subject. *How do you tell a man you're a creature of another dimension with powers this world finds too frightening to imagine*, she often asked herself. She asked herself that question every time she looked in his dark brown eyes and saw her future.

Despite their evening date, Anastasia and Kami were enjoying a meal of banana and strawberry crepes. Kami actually chose his chef based on how well she could prepare that particular delicacy. She was also great at making Anastasia's favorite, crawfish etoufee. While she made short work of her sweet treat, Anastasia thought of how she would tell Kami about her unexpected upcoming trip.

"You're staying the night aren't you?" he asked as he pushed his plate aside.

"Of course I am. Do you think I'd make other plans?"

"No, but you have seemed a bit far away since you got here."

Anastasia looked at him then noticed the room. It had been especially decorated in her favorite color combination of black and green. She noticed the green posies scattered throughout the room, the blue and green candles setting off the emerald green tablecloth. Everything was set to her liking and she had made no mention of anything.

"Kami, you went through all this trouble! It's not even a special occasion."

"I'm here with you. That's special enough."

"Oh you sweet talker, you."

"I'm serious. With the tour starting next month and all the PR, I'm glad to be here with you for a few days. Three weeks is a long time to be away from you."

"I've missed you as well. I try not to dwell on it because I know we'll be together before we know it. I always have something to look forward to."

"Yeah, but it would be nice if you were here."

Anastasia tried to smile, but it stopped before it reached her eyes. "You're right. Something came up before I got here. I don't have all the details yet, so I didn't want to worry you with it. I have to go away for a little while. I hate to do it before your tour, but I don't think I can avoid it."

"You have to work?"

"No. No it's not work."

"Well, if it's personal then I can come with you."

"No!" Anastasia exclaimed then quickly calmed herself. "I mean no. I can handle this."

Kami eyed her suspiciously.

"Kami, I trust you out there when I know there will be women younger and whiter throwing themselves at you. This is nothing of the sort, so I hope you can do the same for me."

He began to smile. "Ana, does this have something to do with your mother? I know you don't like to talk about it, but I'll understand if you need time."

Anastasia sighed. "To be honest, I'm not certain what it's about yet. Yeah it's the past and hopefully I can tell you everything soon. For now, I just need to do this."

Kami nodded then stretched out like a cat.

"Considering it's been three weeks and I won't be getting my full fill of you like I expected..."

He stood, headed to the door and pretended to shuffle about nervously. "I was wondering if you would care to join me in the bedroom."

She loved it when he did his Brando impersonation. They discovered they had an affinity for *The Wild One* soon after their first date. He led her to the bedroom he had decorated with candles, flower petals and potpourri. She knew the light piano music was Kami's favorite mix of Tchaikovsky and Mozart.

Anastasia thought he was so beautiful in the candlelight. She straddled Kami as he sat on the bed. She ran her hands through his soft, curly hair as he busied himself removing her clothes. As many times as they had been through it over the past seven years, it never got old to either of them. Anastasia had become much more open with her affections since Kami's accident, afraid to face life without him. Now, knowing that The Nonetta was in trouble, she unleashed all her passion onto him as if she would never have another chance.

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Donny was still exactly as she left him.

Amel made sure she was not still wearing her ring. She looked at Donny's watch, the only time piece that stopped with him.

"Emite mevig."

She watched the clock as it wound back to the time she had frozen Donny. She then used the charm to unfreeze him.

"... a second."

"Donny, I'm fine really. I'll just go sit down and take my weight off it."

She limped back to the den trying to remember which foot she said had been injured. When she reached the den, she sat down and picked up her cell phone. She

hit the speed dial to Fellini's and ordered her dinner for two while Donny busied himself giving her a foot massage. She tried to wave him away, but he really thought he was being helpful.

"Donny please!" Amel said as she hung up the phone. "It's alright now. Let's just wait for the food to arrive."

He tried not to appear to be sulking as he settled down on the loveseat next to her recliner. Normally, he would have asked her about her day and listened attentively to her version of her latest victory, but he sat quietly sensing she did not want to talk.

Amel had only been with Donny for about six weeks. She met him at a conference she attended annually. This time she was the keynote speaker. Donny had approached her afterward telling her how much he had looked forward to meeting her. She was surprised to learn that he was an executive at a well-known company with which she frequently did business. Amel did as she always did with a potential suitor. She ran a thorough background check on him. Everything he told her about himself was true, so she usually gave him the benefit of the doubt.

She tended to be unlucky in such matters. Amel had dated men from all walks of life. She took her time to feel them out never jumping in with both feet. So many times she was told that she was too cold and unyielding. Any potential relationship died when she pointed out that he was not exactly the warmest person in the room, so why should she be? Oddly, some complained that she was not invested enough in the relationship when she did not nag or attempt to change them like women were apt to do.

Even though Amel was willing to make some concessions for the sake of a relationship, the one thing she refused to do was change who she was. Anyone who asked was immediately shown the door. Amel was warned she would find herself alone and lonely should she continue to be so picky. She felt she had a right to hold out for the best she could possibly get and not settle.

She had the best once. Wesley. The eighteen months she had with him was the longest relationship she had ever had and far too short. Wesley was twelve years older than she and an artist. The two of them were complete opposites. He was a few inches taller than she was even in her heels. Amel was surprised to see this beige brown round-eyed man approaching her day in the park. She had decided to walk home and stopped in the park to rest her feet. She had been staring out at the playground when she realized he was speaking to her.

He asked her if she modeled. Considering she was in a dark power suit with her dark brown hair pulled into a tight bun, Amel thought it was an odd question and an obvious pick up line. Yet she did not give him her usual go away glare. Instead, she politely smiled, shook her head then turned her attention back to the playground thinking he would go away. He didn't. He asked her why or why not. When she looked at him questioningly, he smiled enigmatically. Amel was not easily flustered, but something about Wesley excited her. Nevertheless, she had no answer to his question.

Wesley began to tell her why she was perfect as a study in form and shape. Amel remembered the way he ran his finger along her curves without ever touching her. He said she would make just as perfect a sculpture as the Venus de Milo if not more so. He was not in the habit of passing up on a work of art. He was certain that he would immortalize her with a sculpture.

Amel only laughed. It was cute really, his cockiness. He possessed a boyish charm even in his late 30s. Sometimes he dressed like a beachcomber. Other times he dressed like a hippie. Amel was not sure why she took to him. He seemed so unambitious although he was able to make a living from his art. At times she hated his ability to be so laid back even if things were not going his way. For three months, she

waited for Wesley to lose patience with her for not modeling for him. He never did. He always said the same thing. "You'll do it when you're ready."

It was nearly a month later before she was ready. Amel was so nervous when she began to undress that she was visibly shaking. Wesley soothed her and told her she didn't have to do it. She relaxed after a few moments and removed her clothes. It only took him a couple of weeks to finish the sculpture. It might have taken him half that time had Amel not provided such a pleasant distraction when she went to him after work.

Wesley never criticized her for being ambitious. Amel kept her work life from him as much as possible. They talked to each other about their work, but she tried not to obligate him to show up on her arm for functions. She attended a few of his openings, but she did skip a few to catch up on work occasionally.

They had been together more than a year when she first realized something was wrong. Wesley did not seem to have as much energy as he had when they first met. He began to take to his bed quite often. Yet he still insisted nothing was wrong. She knew better. Wesley was never a big man, but Amel still noticed he was wasting away. Although she knew it could jeopardize her chances for advancement, she took family leave to spend her time by Wesley's side.

Those last few moments with him were forever burned in her memory. She had his hand in hers. She could feel the lifeforce leaving him. Amel knew it was forbidden, but the past eighteen months had been extremely blissful. She was not ready to let it go. She placed her free hand on his forehead.

"Rela ehe hot."

Her energy began to flow into him. His heartbeat got a little stronger and his breathing came easier. For the first time in two days, he opened his eyes. For the first time in as many months, Amel smiled. Wesley looked at her and returned her smile. Then she realized there was the enigmatic tinge to it. He lightly stroked her hand before squeezing it. She panicked when she realized not only was he returning her energy but he was also giving her his. How could he have known what she was doing?

Wesley died in her arms. He was 39. Amel fought hard not to let her devastation consume her. She made the arrangements for Wesley's memorial and hoped his family did not object to his wishes to be cremated. They didn't. Amel insisted they take Wesley's personal possessions even though he had left them to her. His father took most of them but said she should keep pictures and other things they shared. He assured her that in time her grief would subside and she would be able to look at them with fondness.

She never told anyone about the sculpture. She hid it away in the walk-in closet with another part of herself she kept from the rest of the world. Amel felt no one else had the right to look at it. No one else could see her in the way Wesley saw her. He made her feel so beautiful. Not just physically either. With Wesley, Amel felt a spiritual awakening she had not sensed since she left The Nonetta.

As much as she tried not to, Amel compared all beaus for the next four years to Wesley. She did not expect to find anything close to what she had with him, but at least she now knew the real thing. She saw no use in wasting her time on anything less. Her experience with Wesley taught her that life in The Airtha was too short to settle for something she found unfulfilling.

Amel looked at Donny as he slept. She liked him, but she knew she would never feel for him so strongly that she would be willing to give him her essence if he needed it. She had a strong physical connection with him, but she knew that would definitely not keep them together or fill the lack of a spiritual connection. Besides she knew the sex they both enjoyed would continue to grow lackluster when he began to neglect to take

off his Bluetooth before making his overtures toward her. And sometimes during when he was sealing the deal.

She hated to do it, but she had the ability. Like all the others, Amel knew she should not use her powers in The Airtha frivolously, but sometimes it seemed like such a waste not to use them. She placed her hand over Donny's head and chanted. She saw the images she needed to see if his intentions were honorable. She did not need to use her powers after all. She had known all along.

Amel settled into her side of the bed. She was more disappointed than hurt. She rather admired his patience and dedication to his job. Six weeks and he had not come close to fulfilling his mission in corporate espionage. He had even started to like her, possibly why he had not gotten around to his true intentions pursuing her. She would wait until morning to let him know she was firing him from her life.

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Miguel was asleep by the time Ariel got back. She knew he would be. She climbed in the bed and snuggled closely behind him.

"How bad is it?" he said sleepily.

"Eve of destruction bad," she answered. "We'll all be called back soon."

"We haven't been back there in fifteen years," Miguel said as he began to come to life.

"I know. I wonder if our entire generation stayed away, not just us. I always thought we were the only ones."

"Perhaps we weren't. We'll find out soon."

Ariel touched Miguel's dark brown face. The first time she had met him had been more than twenty years ago in the Nonetta. There she had known him as Eros. His quadron was a rare one. Male Imazims were already uncommon, but an entire male quadron of equates was unheard of. In The Airtha, his quadron mates were known as Michael, Michel and Mick hailing from Canada, France and England respectively. Miguel had been born in Peru. In The Nonetta they discovered that Erlic, Ermine, Erebus and Eros shared a birthday. They were all the best of friends.

They were still children learning the ways of the Imazims and understanding their power. Lyasia ran through the enormous hall fearing she would be late. In her haste, she neglected to mind the corner she rounded and barreled straight into Eros. Just as her books were about to go flying across the room, they stopped in mid-flight suspended in place. Lyasia then noticed Eros performing the charm. He gently lowered her books to the floor then smiled as he helped retrieve them. She thanked him sincerely then scampered off to class making it just in time.

She never saw him outside The Nonetta during those first few years. Whenever they did see each other, they were usually in the company of their own quadrons. Eros was always polite to Lyasia and the rest of the girls, but he always had an extra something in his smile just for her. It was during eighth year they both realized what had been going on between them all that time. Lyasia had become an exceptional dancer and choreographer by then. Eros had honed his skills in stage direction, something he had not even considered before he came to The Nonetta. That eighth year, they worked together to present their generation with its traditional Creative Works presentation. For the first time, they were alone planning and creating. It was a wonderful collaboration.

When the presentation ended, Lyasia and Eros joined hands and took a bow. Then he surprised her by handing her a beautiful bouquet of red roses. That was the first time she understood the feeling she got whenever she looked into Eros' golden-

flecked eyes. She saw what he had seen for years. Destiny. They were destined to be together.

Ariel and Miguel met for the first time in The Airtha the next day. Ariel saw that he was just as much his own man there as he was in The Nonetta. He introduced her to his family as the one he was supposed to be with for the rest of his life. She was accepted by them and her family adored him. They married after she left The Nonetta. Although they were still young, they made their relationship work. They were idealistic and they were artists. They both worked day jobs while they created dance recitals and staged plays. It was four years before they had their first successful show.

Ariel never joined a dance company or went through the regular route to perform. She combined her dance with Miguel's stories and poetry to create a unique form of performance art. They traveled to gymnasiums, community centers, cafes and wherever else they could book themselves. They almost did not know what to do the first time they landed a coliseum with a "legitimate" theater.

They had not looked back since then. Their reputation as a performer/director couple grew and their audience began to recognize them as an equal partnership. Neither one made a move without the other always coming as a package. This arrangement actually prevented them from working with some influential people who often wanted Miguel but not Ariel. Although they had managed to move into larger venues, they still had not played the most prestigious stages often associated with the pinnacle of success. For that reason, they named their production company Backway.

At one point, they talked about having children. They decided to put it off while Ariel still had years of dance ahead of her. She knew Miguel had no regrets. They each had a host of nieces and nephews on which they doted on every chance they got. They often brought the children to their vermilion house, letting them run about and enjoy the luxuries that came with their success. For a while, they were the normal well-rounded family.

But mostly it was just the two of them. Ariel would not have traded the time she had with Miguel for a lifetime guaranteed engagement on Broadway for the next five years. He felt the same for her. They were inseparable, of one mind. That connection intensified when they physically intertwined, neither of them having ever known anyone else in that way. Ariel knew that heaven forbid if anything ever happened to Miguel, she could never turn her body over to another.

Miguel held his beloved Ariel in just as high a regard as she held him. Even without their powers, they could read each others' minds. Their years together left them in perfect synch. Miguel knew when Ariel was happy or worried and how to respond to her in either case and all those in between. She did the same for him. They both learned massage techniques to help with the stress of their daily lives. They shared common interests and did not push each other on the ones they did not. If any couple had figured out the secret to a successful partnership, it was Ariel and Miguel. Then again they were both Imazims.

Ariel thought about the last day in The Nonetta. Miguel saw how upset she was when she told him her quadron would not be completing its final task. She insisted he stay in The Nonetta until his tasks were done. He made her promise that as soon as he returned to The Airtha she would marry him.

Their wedding was a small, intimate affair. They could not gather their families in one place, so their quadrons stood in as wedding guests. It was the last time Ariel had been with her entire quadron before being called back to The Nonetta. She now felt a little overwhelmed at seeing them again.

"It felt good to be back, didn't it?" Miguel said as he repositioned himself and took her in his arms.

"Not just The Nonetta," Ariel said. "Being all together again was something I never thought would happen. I was so grateful to have them at the wedding. When we renewed our vows, I wanted them to be there so badly, but there would have been so much to explain. Not everyone in my family is an Imazim. How could I explain to the kids how I know Anastasia, Amel and Aurora?"

"You're well known," Miguel reasoned.

"Yeah, that's true. We could have run through the same circles. I only wish we were meeting under different circumstances."

"How about when this is over, we renew our vows again. This time we could make sure everyone comes. You know the girls will be excited to have such prominent people right there in person."

"But what if we don't get the chance?"

"We will, Ari."

Miguel pulled her close and kissed her. Her doubts began to subside even if they did not completely disappear under his spell. Ariel drifted to that place he always took her. It was somewhere between The Airtha and The Nonetta. She imagined it was heaven. She had no worries in either dimension. No one else existed except the two of them. Miguel finished what he had started before she left. This time, they both got there.

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Phaedra was on the phone when Aurora went to check on her. Typical teenager. She had not noticed Aurora had been gone. That did not surprise Aurora. Phaedra was used to her disappearing into that study for hours at a time. At 15, she knew better than to disturb her mother in that sacred place except in case of an emergency. Emergencies included asking permission to go to a party or have a sleepover and other such matters of import. Aurora loved every interruption although she never said so to Phaedra.

Aurora did not return to the study instead opting to head to the kitchen and indulge in one of her favorite comfort foods, celery. She did not go to the dining room, the den or her bedroom. She just sat in the kitchen as she thought over what she had learned in The Nonetta. Just the thought of a Morph still scared her. The word itself still sent a chill through her as it did all those years ago when she was a child. Now she would have to come face to face with that fear if she was to do her part to see that The Nonetta and The Airtha were not destroyed.

"Mom!"

She looked at Phaedra not knowing how long her daughter had been trying to get her attention.

"Where were you?"

"Nowhere. Just thinking about the reading."

"I think it went well," Phaedra said as she grabbed an apple and sat on the stool next to her mother. "Nothing unusual except..."

Teddy. Aurora had nearly forgotten about him. She looked at Phaedra and saw the nose and mouth of the man who had fathered her daughter. She wondered if it was time to tell Phaedra the truth. But telling her about her father would mean telling her about The Nonetta and what she might really be. Phaedra had shown signs of being an Imazim. She did not seem to have the same talent for art and suprahuman skills as Anastasia and Ariel but exhibited an inordinate amount of intelligence at an early age. Aurora knew that if she allowed Phaedra to begin training now, she would not have the benefit of a quadron or a generation. However, in her case, she might not have suffered a bit for it.

Phaedra's father was unusual indeed: a veritus Imazim with Saphi parents. His parents did not become Morphs as they felt the Imazim's power was not theirs to take. Yet, they wanted their son to reap the benefits of the Imazim power. They enlisted a friend to take their son to the dimension they were not allowed to enter. In this dimension, their son became Phaedrus.

Lyzette was friendly to everyone. Kindness was natural to her. So was nurturing. Phaedrus appeared out of place among the others in The Nonetta. Lyzette wondered if that was why he always seemed so miserable. His quadron seemed to be the only Imazims to accept him. All the rest tended to avoid him. All except Lyzette.

On any occasion she found herself near him, she felt compelled to ask him how he was getting along, if he had had a good vacation or how he was coming along in tasks. The first couple of years, Phaedrus would merely run his hands through his ash-blond hair and give a one-word reply. Eventually his one-word expanded to three then to a reply with an explanation. At that point, they formed a tentative friendship at best, neither of them certain what the other sought in any kind of relationship.

They were nearly eighth years before they had a real conversation. Lyzette found Phaedrus one day as he sat under a baobab tree. She found out it was one of his favorite hiding spots. She asked if she could join him and was surprised when he said yes without hesitation. She supposed he had gotten used to her. She made the usual small talk before she got around to asking him the question she had wanted to ask for years. Lyzette asked Phaedrus why he never smiled, why he always seemed to want to be elsewhere. His sapphire blue eyes bored into hers momentarily. She thought she had made him mad. Then he answered. Phaedrus told her that he knew the others were suspicious of him. He never felt like he belonged in The Nonetta. He felt the same way in The Airtha. His parents tried to convince him that by some right of birth he was better than the other Imazims. He wasn't arrogant enough to believe them, but he heeded their warning of getting too close to anyone.

Lyzette told him they were all unique in The Nonetta, but that uniqueness put them in the same boat. Why not embrace it? She knew he was not a Morph and deep down the others knew it as well. She wondered aloud if his way of thinking kept him lonely. He admitted that sometimes he felt he missed out. He was expected to make connections that he could use in The Airtha, but he was not expected to bring back any lasting friendships for personal reasons.

Phaedrus did not realize they were touching hands until he heard the voice of a quadron mate calling him. He abruptly took back his hand. The light that had begun to shine in his eyes as he talked to Lyzette began to fade. He ran off through the trees to meet Phocion before the latter could find his secret lair or see him with Lyzette. He had come to enjoy feeling like she was his own special friend. He did not want to share her.

She noticed a change in him after that. Whenever they happened to encounter each other in the halls, Phaedrus' expression lightened and he seemed less tense. They began to meet regularly under the baobab tree. It was during one of those meetings Lyzette saw him smile for the first time.

They sat beside each other during the eighth year Creative Works presentation. At some point, they both noticed. Phaedrus' hand was on her knee. They sat in a nervous stupor not knowing what to do next. However, their overfriendly gesture was also noticed by two members of his quadron, Phantasm and Pharaoh. At the presentation's end, she saw them speaking to Phaedrus. Lyzette watched as he suddenly left in a huff. She started off to follow, but Lythe stopped her to ask what was wrong. She assured her there was no problem and asked her to give Lyasia her congratulations.

Lyzette knew where she would find him. She easily found the baobab tree even though it was dark. His back was to her as she approached. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders as she crouched down to meet his level. Lyzette was stunned when he turned to face her, even more so to see the tears that glistened in the moonlight. She asked him what was wrong. He did not answer. Instead, Phaedrus swept her off balance and laid her on the ground beneath him. He hesitated a moment then began to kiss her fervently all over her face. Lyzette felt his hands awkwardly probing her as she, too, was uncertain of what to do.

Although not entirely unpleasant, the experience was not exactly what Lyzette thought it would be. They held each other in an awkward silence letting energy flow between them under the dark moon. It was nearly daylight when they realized they had fallen asleep under the baobab tree. They rushed off in separate directions carrying their secret of the previous night with them.

Months later as she held the tangible result of that night in her hands, Aurora knew she could have no regrets. She named her daughter after the man who had given her such a precious gift. Aurora harbored no resentment against him, not when he left her with the best part of himself. Even though life had been difficult trying to raise Phaedra on her own, she never asked him for anything. She never held him to any obligation.

Instead, Teddy would simply watch her from afar and look as if he could somehow reach her. She saw the longing in his eyes each time. She saw the light return to his eyes whenever she noticed him watching Phaedra. She could sense the longing he felt to be her father. She also knew the reason he had made no attempts in fifteen years.

Aurora studied her daughter. She was nothing less than proud to be Phaedra's mother. She still did not regret the decision she made all those years ago. She only hoped the repercussions would not reach beyond her own life.

"Phaedra, there's something I must tell you. I should have told you before now, but I'm afraid you may find it difficult to believe."

"Is this about my father?" Phaedra asked with rare complete seriousness.

"Part of it is. The rest you'll have to see to believe."

Blood Tastes Sweet

Prologue

Pain. It was the only thing in her head. It was the only constant life had ever brought her. Pain. It overwhelmed her. It consumed her lifebreath so that she could not inhale without feeling it overtake her. Pain. She no longer wanted pain. She no longer wanted life.

Tanya had walked the streets since she was 17. By then, she was already adept at what would be her future trade. It had been easier in her youth. She could always find a John who wanted a young one. She passed herself off as 14 until she was about 22. Tanya then decided her youth did not need to be her main attraction. Her skill and experience were second to none. She knew how to sell those points.

She had never had a pimp. If a John did not abuse her, a pimp definitely would have. It was only a matter of which man tried to cheat her, so she avoided pimps. They still came after her. A couple had even given her a “preview” of their methods when she refused to work for them. She learned to use a gun after a few years. It had saved her in a few scrapes with pimps and Johns.

Now at age 32, Tanya had had enough. Tricks were becoming more difficult to come by. The real moneyed men wanted youth despite experience. In her profession, she had become an old hag. Her looks were far from gone, but she was definitely not the TV beauty that oversaturated everything. Then there was Internet porn. So many Johns kept asking her to do things that made her stomach turn. She could not keep up.

This last John had been the final straw. He wanted to play games. Tanya was not really averse to that. Role playing usually made things a little more interesting. But she had gotten a bad vibe from this one right away. She tried to run away, but he caught her by the hair and dragged her into the room. Her purse was out of reach. She could not get her gun. He bound her to the bed and struck her in the face as he told her what a dirty whore she was. Tanya blocked out the pain and focused on the crucifix that hung on the opposite wall. She did not scream and she did not cry.

She was raped. It had happened before, but such ill treatment had become much more frequent as of late as if the fact of being an old pro meant she had no feelings at all. In her youth, Tanya believed she would be forgiven for her actions because like everyone else she needed to survive. However, so many of her Johns lately felt the need to humiliate her and remind her that after 15 years she was still nothing more than what she was at 17 – a common whore. She had not gone to college like she wanted. She was never going to become a nurse. This was all life would ever offer her. Pain.

Tanya winced as she ran her hand over her bleeding, swollen lip. She could barely open her left eye. She wanted to scream at the people who passed her on the street trying hard to pretend they did not see her. It was the only time they did not look at her. Any other time they felt free to look her, cluck their tongues in judgment or shout obscenities at her. It all stopped whenever the visible scars showed, whenever her face gave evidence of her own occupational hazards. Apparently it was rude to openly gaze at an abused woman, even if she was a whore. Such an action might acknowledge a wrongdoing most people would rather ignore.

She stepped into an empty dark alley and checked the gun’s chamber. She only had one bullet left. She could not do it here. Even she had too much dignity to die in an alley. She knew exactly where she wanted to do it.

St. Lebuin always reminded Tanya more of the Taj Mahal rather than a church. She never understood how a church that preached nobility in poverty could scream

excess with every brick, every window and every door that provided its structure. She walked into St. Lebuin. It was empty at this time of night, but people were always welcome to come in and pray. The homeless who tried to sleep in the pews were directed to a mission for a proper bed.

Tanya went to one of the pews near the front. She knelt down and pretended to pray. She opened her purse and put her hand around the hard steel gun. This was the perfect place. This beautiful ornate building required to welcome all souls and sinners. Whenever these parishioners passed judgment on those less than they were, they would be forced to consider that maybe this judgment led to someone taking her own life. She would have an impact finally.

Tanya considered saying a prayer for forgiveness but decided that would be futile. She closed her eyes and began to take the gun out of her purse.

"May I help you with something?"

Tanya was noticeably startled. She had not heard him approach. She studied him as he stood over her gazing at her curiously. His hair was jet black and hung in soft waves between his ears and shoulders. His eyes were the darkest, iciest blue she had ever seen. But his skin... His skin was milk white, making his eyes and hair appear even darker. Tanya thought she might not be in her current predicament if more of her Johns looked like this. She immediately blushed at the thought when she remembered he wore a collar. Then again she knew better than to judge a man based on the uniform he wore, even if he was a priest.

"No, Father. I was just on my way home."

His face suddenly became completely benevolent.

"Do you mind if I sit here with you a moment?"

"Not at all." Tanya got off her knees and sat on the pew with the young priest. She nervously touched her swollen lip. He handed her a handkerchief.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Tanya dabbed at the tender flesh around her mouth and saw that it had begun to bleed again. Her ruby red blood stained the white cloth. She noticed the priest gazing queerly at the bloodied handkerchief.

"I'm sorry about this, Father. I'll replace it."

"No need. It has to be used for something."

"But my... you do know I'm a prostitute, don't you?"

"I do now. Do you believe you deserve this because of it?"

He slipped his hand under her chin and lifted her face. He looked over her wounds, lingering at the blood that continued to trickle from her mouth. Tanya quickly dabbed at it again.

"I don't know what I believe anymore."

They sat silently a moment as Tanya tried to will the blood to congeal as quickly as possible. She sat back when the bleeding fell under control. She knew talking irritated it, but something about this priest made her want to put off what she had come to do. Despite the pain, she kept talking.

"We went to a church similar to this one when I was a girl," she began. "My parents and my two sisters. We never missed a Sunday. They made me go to confession at least twice a week. I used to be such a good Catholic. Of course that all began to change during adolescence. I was miserable then. Confession was like the best and worst thing to happen to me. I could do whatever I wanted. The drawback was I had to tell a priest about it. The good part was I could atone with just a few Hail Marys and Our Fathers. Tell me what sane person will actually stop committing sins when all he has to do after that is confess, say a couple of prayers and the slate's wiped clean."

The priest smiled amusedly. His dark eyes twinkled. Tanya continued.

"I rationalized that way until about 17. That was when Father Reardon died. Father Jenkins took over after that. Everything changed. He was so strict. A couple of days after I made my last confession, I came home to find him sitting with my parents. He told them. His sense of duty to help my parents guide me to the right path overrode confidentiality. Everything that was supposed to be anonymous and in confidence was out there in the open. They had ransacked my room and gone through all my things. That was the first time I ever felt violated. I left that same day. I never went back."

She grew quiet again. Some of the pain had ebbed. She still knew what she had to do, but it would not be here, not with this priest. She would have to find another place. Not a motel though. Not the city dump either. She needed to go somewhere that would create a stir. Then it hit her. Those damn college kids who always thought they knew what was best for everyone could use a little dose of reality.

The priest was giving her an odd look again. The warm feeling she got from him earlier chilled. It was not quite the look she got from a John, but there was something odd. He focused on her mouth. Tanya usually knew what that meant, but this was different. He seemed fixated on the swelling.

"I should go now," Tanya said as she stood. She offered him the handkerchief before she realized she was offering him a bloody rag. He simply smiled and reached out to wipe a slither of blood that had begun to drip down her mouth again. She hurriedly made her way to the door. She took one last look at the priest. She hoped it was only a figment of her imagination, but she thought she saw him lick her blood from his finger.

Tanya was a block away before she remembered her plan. She stopped in her tracks. She was headed the wrong way. She turned around to head in the opposite direction. She stopped when she looked at St. Lebuin. She thought she saw someone standing outside the door, someone with skin so white it almost appeared to glow in the dark. She went back the way she had begun.

A strong, sudden breeze whistled by Tanya's ear.

"Most sacred heart of Jesus..."

Did she really hear that voice? The breeze rushed by her other ear.

"...I accept from Your hands whatever kind of death..."

The voice whispered to her through the wind.

"...it may please You to send me this night..."

She began to walk in a quicker pace.

"...with all its pains, penalties and sorrow..."

She did not look where she was going.

"...in reparation for all my sins..."

She began to run.

"...for the souls in Purgatory..."

She had no idea where she was.

"...for all those who will die tonight..."

She had reached a dead end.

"...and for Your greater glory..."

Tanya looked at the brick wall before her. This was the end of the line. She had no idea why it came to her. As soon as the word came from her lips, she found herself in unison with a voice from behind her.

"Amen."

She turned to see him slowly striding toward her. He was so bright that he was almost blinding. Tanya reflexively shielded her eyes as he approached. The fear that

had gripped her earlier intensified. Her fight or flight response overrode her desire to die at that moment.

He stood close to her. The first thing she noticed was that his collar was gone. She then moved to his eyes. They were no longer the dark icy blue they had been in the church. They were still icy but clear. That queer look he had given earlier was back. It was desire, but Tanya knew it had nothing to do with her body or any of the pleasures she could provide with it. He had something completely different in mind.

Tanya became paralyzed when he put his hand on her arm. She felt her body growing cold. She struggled to speak.

"What are you?" she choked out.

"You know what I am," he said calmly. "You know why I'm here."

"But you're not real. You don't really exist."

"You see me. You hear me. You feel me. You know I'm real."

"What are you going to do to me?" she squeaked.

"I'm going to finish what you came to do, but you won't have to die in sin. I can save your soul."

"But how did you..."

"It is my gift. I was given a sight. I knew you wanted to take your own life as soon as you walked into my church. If I take your physical life, I'll save your eternal soul. That's what you really want, isn't it?"

Tanya was trying to surreptitiously reach into her purse for the gun. This man terrified her and she would rather shoot him than allow him to put his hands around her neck.

"It won't work," he said as if reading her mind. "You know bullets can't kill me. Just relax. I've already said a prayer for you. Your pain will go away."

"My pain," Tanya repeated as if in a trance. "My pain will go away."

"You'll help me, too," he said softly as he brought his face closer to hers. "You'll satisfy my craving for blood with the taste of flesh. Are you ready?"

Tears fell from her eyes. "Just don't leave my body here."

"I won't," he said as he bared the razor sharp incisors and sank them into her neck. Blood always tasted different when it came directly from the source. Human blood was the best. A woman's blood – pure ecstasy. This woman was no exception. He need not fear tainted blood in this modern world. He always found that disease could not affect him. He knew from the slight caustic tinge to her blood that she had just been infected with that horrible virus. He would leave just enough of her blood for the authorities to find it. Whoever had beaten her had probably infected her, possibly intentionally.

She began to grow limp in his arms as he drained the life out of her. Her pain was leaving. She could not even feel the razor-sharp incisors piercing deeply into the tender flesh of her neck. Everything around her was growing dim. Then suddenly she saw a small powder blue light. It grew bigger and brighter as she got closer to it. Tanya saw a figure emerging from the light. As she got closer, she recognized the face of her mother who had died four years earlier. Tanya reached out hoping all had been forgiven between them. Her mother smiled and took her by the hand, leading her into the warmth of the blue light.

He took her body to the back of the church knowing there would be no one around for a few hours. He laid her down in the garden among the decorative flowers. He plucked a few of them and arranged them in her hair. Perhaps her gray, bloodless pallor would not look so grotesque when Sister Agnes found her in the morning. He remembered to take his handkerchief that she still tightly clutched in her hand. He knelt over her body and clasped his hands. The words may have lost all meaning to him

centuries ago, but he knew they would mean something to the poor lost soul he had just taken. He recited the words:

We beseech Thee, O Master,
in Thy mercy,
to have pity on the soul of Thy handmaid;
do Thou, Who hast freed her
from the perils of this mortal life,
restore to her the portion of everlasting salvation.
Through Christ our Lord.
Amen.

He wiped the dirt from his knees as he headed back into the church. Once he got back to his cell, he soaked his handkerchief in cold water. He checked himself in the mirror silently laughing at the old myth that his kind showed no reflection. He knew how not to get any blood on himself, but he always liked to be sure. He went back to his station near the pews until daylight began to break. He headed back to his windowless cell. He would have to get some sleep as usual or prepare for it so that nothing seemed out of the ordinary. The bishop would want to speak with him soon.

Chapter 1

Sister Agnes' bloodcurdling scream filled the air across the city. It rang out in echoes far beyond the churchyard from which it originated. It rivaled the sound of the early birds and the morning hustle. Everyone in the city of Freya's Fortune heard that scream. Everyone except Father Jonquil Montague who slept peacefully in his cell just a few feet away from Sister Agnes.

Bishop Gerald Lightfoot scurried through the halls leading to the cells. The police were on the way and he needed to see Jonquil right away. This awful tragedy had possibly happened on his watch. He knocked urgently on Jonquil's door and waited for the young priest to open it. In all his sixty-three years he had never met anyone like Jonquil. He had liked Jonquil since their first meeting when the younger man was transferred to his parish, but he was uncertain of him. Gerald found something odd about his pale, milk-white skin, but he believed Jonquil's explanation of photosensitivity. Imagine being allergic to sunlight. Gerald had seen Jonquil's hand once get caught in a beam of sunlight. The burn was horrible, but it had healed rather quickly. Gerald was glad the young priest was a nocturnal creature only keeping the fires burning overnight. He knew Jonquil was handsome and although he felt that fact alone might bring younger parishioners, it could also cause unnecessary complications. It was best to keep Jonquil partially under wraps.

Gerald knocked again. He finally heard shuffling as Jonquil got himself out of his bed and into his robe. He remembered then that Jonquil would have only had a couple of hours of sleep if that much. Jonquil might have been the only one in the entire city not privy to Sister Agnes' screams.

Jonquil opened the door. Gerald rushed in and quickly closed the door behind him.

"There's been another murder, Jonquil," he said. "Sister Agnes found the body just now – in our garden."

Jonquil offered Gerald the only chair in the room then turned on the only lamp. He took a small bottle of brandy out of his night table drawer and poured a glass for the bishop. As Gerald settled his nerves, he looked over the younger man. His dark black hair had always looked even darker against the pallor skin. So did those dark blue eyes.

Then Gerald noticed Jonquil did not seem quite as pale as usual. At certain times, there did seem to be a distinct pigment to his usually bloodless-looking exterior. Gerald could not remember when he had seen it before. He always assumed that perhaps this environment was somehow good for Jonquil's photosensitivity.

"Last night at any time did you hear anything, any commotion or disturbance of any kind?"

Jonquil appeared to think for a moment before he shook his head. "Everything was pretty quiet as usual. A few confessions and a lost soul. Otherwise, a rather quiet night."

"You didn't see anyone hanging about? Did you even have one of those constitutionals you like to take?"

Jonquil's midnight stroll. He may not have been able to tolerate sunlight, but he still enjoyed a good walk every now and then. Sometimes he would watch the night life while the city was alive with activity despite the darkness. Other times, he would observe as the city began to sleep. Every once in a while, he would even disappear until nearly sunrise. He still never seemed to miss a thing though.

"I was out before ten, but I'm afraid I was back inside well before midnight. Not much activity neither here nor there."

Gerald had finished his drink. "The police will be here soon. I don't know what to tell them."

"You can only tell them what you know. You found a wo – a body on the premises. Or Agnes did. Do you think she was killed here?"

"I don't know. No one heard a thing. No one saw a thing. It's just..."

"Just what?"

"She's pale – like the others. The other bodies were drained of blood, so I believe this has to be the same one as the others. I don't know about the others, but this young woman had a rosary in her hand. I have the feeling it was not hers."

"You think her killer placed it there?"

Gerald nodded. "The paper made no mention of the other victims holding rosaries, but after the first murders, a detective came to see me. He asked lots of questions about the faith. I think the others may have had rosaries, crosses or other symbols."

"Really?"

"Oh, this all began years before you got here, Jonquil. Two people had already been found with a few more in a couple of surrounding cities, their bodies drained of blood. The press found out that the victims had punctures in the neck. They believe the killer is someone into vampirism, but we don't have that particular culture here."

"Interesting. This woman in the garden, does she have those particular wounds. I think so. I only briefly looked her over."

Jonquil yawned and rubbed at his eyes. He had not been asleep that long. Sometimes he hated being nocturnal. Gerald noticed Jonquil's actions and stood to leave.

"I apologize for having to wake you before you've had adequate time to rest. I'm certain the police will want to speak with you when they arrive. If it's okay, we can just meet you in your day office."

Jonquil had a windowless office he used when he absolutely had to be up during daylight hours. It was one of his safe places.

"I'll get dressed," Jonquil said a Gerald left. He watched the door for a moment after Gerald was long gone. He already had his story ready about his previous night's activities. In the meantime, he remembered the taste of the young woman's blood on his tongue. So sweet.

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So much uselessness and futility plagued Freya's Fortune. Chantel Mason witnessed it every day. She never dreamed she would contribute to the futility of everyday existence that overran the city lately. She began to believe though that nothing she did diminished it. Seven years running the local shelter did nothing to actually combat homelessness. Lately she even wondered if it were a good idea.

Chantel wandered aimlessly through the city avoiding the shelter she no longer believed had any effective impact. It was all in vain: the shelter, her life, anything that sought to reverse the fortunes of the wretched of the earth was all in vain. The hope, idealism and naïveté that had brought her to Freya's Fortune nine years ago slowly evaporated like rain water on a hot day, the type of day that left her thirsty and dehydrated so much that she felt she would never be quenched. The hopelessness that replaced that thirst was just too unbearable and left Chantel feeling as if nothing could ever be cold or wet enough to satiate the most urgent of human necessities. Chantel no longer could tell which was worse.

Chantel wandered aimlessly through the city. She saw many of the people who had come to Francesca's Place then contribute to the shelter's poor retention rate. So many still slept on the street unable to imagine life any other way having been subjected to their lifestyle for so long. Such acclimation could not be undone within a matter of days at least that was what Chantel constantly said to reassure herself that she always did the best she could regardless of the fact that she failed much more often than she kept someone from returning to the freedom of the lifestyle that held no rules for anyone except one – survive. The woman who returned to an abusive husband had her very survival in mind when she sometimes made that fateful decision. The man who gave in to the pull of drugs had convinced himself that his very survival depended upon the very poison he shot through his veins or ingested through his nose and lungs. Chantel could not simply chalk this up to the old adage you can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink. She found that you could indeed do both; however, the horse resented the force making him drink. Chantel realized long ago that she was seen in the same light as the abuser and the drug, a force that restricted with rules and bylaws, a force that held the power to determine if he was worthy to stay in the shelter. She was just as resented as any drug or other abusive entity.

Chantel wandered aimlessly. No direction home and no means of getting there. She ignored the cell phone buzzing at her hip. She had not bothered to go into work that day. She had not called in to say she was not coming. Chantel had no desire to deal with quidnuncs and their inane gossip. Perhaps that was the problem. She knew too many people who liked to talk about what was wrong and sometimes offer a solution or two, but come time of inception for the actual doing and they suddenly had no time; they were already busy with the useless tasks they too complained did not do enough to help their causes. Chantel had tried to ignore the growing frustration she felt with the whole endless process, but she was only one person. If the people who felt the same as she were not apt to take action, then what could she as one lone entity do? What differences could she make besides a few symbolic dents into a system designed to keep the odds stacked against her and any efforts she made to change it? Hopelessness. That was all that was left.

The window display boasted an array of new fashions for the upcoming season: ankle-length and knee-high boots in earth tones such as brown and gray, cashmere sweaters in cream and other off-white colors, suede and leather slacks in black and dark blue. Chantel did not see any of them. Instead, she caught the reflection that stared

back at her from the dingy glass. She could hardly recognize the dark brown face that stared back at her. She still looked her 32 years, younger actually since she stopped aging around 23 or 24. Her thick, bushy eyebrows complimented the long eyelashes that protruded from the hazel eyes that stood in stark contrast to the deep brown of her skin that grew deeper in the summer. Her flat nose sat over her plump lips, the only feature on her face she bothered to decorate since she could not tolerate leaving them dry. When she did paint them, the color was always brown or dark purple when she felt adventurous. She knew she was beautiful among and beyond her own although she never relied on that fact. Her face was very much in tact and the hair pulled into a long black braid that reached the upper small of her back showed off every part of her face. Her face did not worry her. The fact that she was 5'7" and had recently dropped from a healthy 144 pounds to almost 125 pounds in a matter of weeks worried her.

A wiry young man came out and nearly ran her down with his ladder on his way to wash the windows. Chantel came back to herself momentarily and looked at the young man who went out of his way to make sure she saw him. She recognized him as a recent addition to the shelter. Chantel realized then why he had gone through such pains to make sure she saw him. He thought she was checking up on him. This was how they saw her: she was The Man, as much a part of the system as the ones who fed off their misfortune to gain power and /or profit, depending on which came first and would lead to the other. They were right.

She took one last glance at the now wet glass, adjusted her ecru cardigan and resumed her aimless wandering through Freya's Fortune. Maybe later she would indulge in a steak dinner, something she had vowed to relinquish all those years ago in order to set an example. Her financial sacrifices had not been as rewarding as she hoped and she now felt it was time to splurge. No one applauded her for bagging her lunch for the past nine years, saving restaurants as a treat for birthdays or special occasions or waiting on reserved lists for new books from the library. No one would notice that she was breaking her own rule on her own accord. Chantel simply did not matter that much in the full scale of mundane matters.

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"She stopped in for a while. I believe it was close to 4:30 in the a.m." Jonquil spoke to the detective whose name he had already forgotten. He could tell by her dark eyebrows that she was definitely not a natural blonde. He never understood why they all wanted to be blond. "I spoke with her for a while. She was troubled. She told me what she did for a living. She had been beaten pretty severely..."

"You're certain she had those bruises before she was killed?" the detective asked as if to clarify.

"The blood was still fresh upon her lips," he said with perhaps more emotion than he should have. The detective looked at him with a raised eyebrow then quickly made her face blank again. "She had been brutalized. She couldn't stop the bleeding at her mouth. The cut was severe."

"I see," she responded. She knew she would have to prod him for more information. She had broken his train of thought and put him on guard. "What did you talk about?"

"Faith mostly. She was raised a Catholic, but left it behind when she was still a teen. She had been on the streets since then. I believe perhaps she was tiring of that life. She had that look of the downtrodden. I actually had more fear that she would do harm to herself rather than someone would hurt her."

"She seemed suicidal?" the detective's eyes lit up.

"I come across it more than I would like. Sometimes the signs are obvious. Catholics take suicide seriously, detective. I believe her coming here was a cry for help. I know it may sound crude to say, but I think her soul was saved when someone else took her physical life. Tell me. Did she fight her attacker?"

The detective shifted as she pondered whether to tell Jonquil but decided it could do no harm. "Actually, she had no defensive wounds. She appears to have relented."

"I surmised as much. Gerald said she appeared to be smiling. I can only hope she found that peace she sought."

"I suppose that's one way of looking at it," she said as she rose. "If there's anything else you can remember, be sure to give me a call."

Even in the low-light setting, Jonquil knew she was studying his seemingly translucent skin. They always did.

"If you don't mind my asking..." she began then trailed off.

"I'm sure Gerald explained that I have a very severe case of photosensitivity. The tiniest bit of sunlight can burn my skin. So can high-watt bulbs. I have to keep low light."

"Is that the reason you chose this particular vocation?"

"Part of it," Jonquil said blandly. "But mostly because I was called to serve God this way."

"Of course," she said trying to hide her embarrassment. "I'll be seeing you around Montague."

Jonquil watched her leave, certain she would deliver on that promise to see him again. He knew he unsettled her and she would probably research his "condition" as soon as she got back to her office. He knew her type. She wanted to come after him because he felt wrong to her. He was out of the bounds of normal. So was her case. She would need to make him fit into it somehow. But he knew as well as she did that she could not go after him just because he had a skin disease. Doing so would damage her. Besides, she would never be able to explain why he would have killed that young woman then moved her body into his own backyard. He also knew she could not connect him to the other murders.

Jonquil smiled to himself. He had believed in his faith when he first became a priest nearly 600 years ago. He had hated killing even if it was for his own survival. He tried to survive from the blood of animals or other sources. It was probably around 200 years ago he began to doubt mankind's ability to save itself. He no longer sought forgiveness or redemption for his need to take human life. His collar was now a clever disguise. Those who believed in the existence of vampires also believed they were destroyed by religious symbols. Jonquil knew better.

He had made The Compromise all those years ago when he still felt guilty about having to kill. He still used his power to discriminate among potential victims, but these days he used it more as a protective measure rather than to protect innocent humans. He no longer saw any of them as innocent, only damned, especially the worst off among them. It amazed Jonquil that the people who benefited least from their beliefs held on to them more staunchly than the rest. He admired their resolve in a way. It made his life a lot easier. He would not have to feed again for some time, but in this place he had never had any trouble finding a victim.

The blood of a human female tasted best of all. Despite her disease, Jonquil had enjoyed the taste of the young woman's blood. Many of his latest victims had been vagrants, men. No one had missed them. By the time they were found their bodies had been badly decomposed and unidentifiable. However, because of The Compromise, Jonquil still killed those who had families or other loved ones who would miss them. They had the white light about them. The ones with the white light were not as rare as

he would have thought, not in Freya's Fortune. With the winter approaching, many more deaths were on the way, but these would not be attributable to Jonquil. The winters in the city could be brutal. As much as the homeless population dwindled during the frigid months, a brand new set of the underclass came to replace them. So Jonquil always had a supply of fresh blood at his disposal. He only feared he might have to leave Freya's Fortune in order to fulfill his end of The Compromise someday.

Jonquil returned to his cell and undressed again. He knew Gerald would grant him rest after waking him so abruptly that morning. He also knew Gerald and Agnes were probably already being inundated with questions and perverse curiosity seekers filing through the church. At least he did not have to deal with the questions, the assumptions and the lingering stares. Not yet.

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She remembered Tanya. Chantel had happened to be cleaning the vestibule that day. The running started off as a sort of rumbling, a small rumbling produced by the clack of high heels. A single high heel. Chantel looked up just in time to see her running in the door. Something instant transpired between the two of them in the brief moment they stared at each other; in that brief moment, there was an unspoken understanding between them. Chantel looked outside at the pursuer who began to withdraw once he saw Tanya had an ally. Chantel then directed her attention back to Tanya. She saw a woman getting old before her time, which was an anathema in the profession written all over her face. Despair marked every line and bruise on her face, set deep in her eyes and clung to her like a child nursing from its mother. It was strong enough to fill the building without her even having to leave the vestibule. Chantel set down her cleaning supplies and took Tanya by the hand.

"I suppose it's time for lunch."

Half of Chantel's deli sub went to Tanya when she decided she would like a bowl of the house soup along with her sandwich and dessert of peach yogurt. She knew Tanya had not come to the shelter to be fed or housed, but Chantel did not want to send her out without her knowing she still had a safe space to come back to when she needed.

Tanya Duffy.

"Well, Tanya Duffy, I'm Chantel Mason. Are you new here?"

"Actually, I've been in this town more than two years."

"Really? I've never seen you here before."

"Well, I sleep during the day mostly."

"Oh. Are you worried about that man who followed you here?"

Tanya shook her head to the negative. "I'm sure I could have handled him, but I try to avoid trouble when I can. I just finished a job. He wanted me to come with him. I wasn't in the mood."

Chantel automatically looked at her watch thinking it was a bit early in the day. Tanya released a grin when she realized why Chantel had checked the time.

"Honey, I get some of my best clients in the morning. I don't get the kind of clients who want to take me out on a proper date or a good hotel. They meet me when they can."

Chantel returned the grin as she finished her lunch. "You know you're welcome to stick around as long as you need. No need to hurry."

"Actually, the soup did me some good. I feel so warm inside. I think I can sleep now."

Chantel watched Tanya until the woman was no longer in sight. Women like Tanya were one of the largest reasons she had settled here and taken the position at Francesca's Place. Freya's Fortune was one of the worst areas in the country in terms of homelessness and prostitution. Chantel had ambitiously combined studies in social work and political science hoping to find a compassionate compromise between the two entities and change the system from within. She felt if she understood the politics as well as the social discourse, she could better serve the people who unfortunately needed institutions such as Francesca's Place. She was reminded of all that idealism as she watched Tanya walk away before she continued to clean the vestibule.

The last iota of that idealism evaporated as she looked into Tanya's still face. The serene smile on Tanya's lips did nothing to alleviate the pain beginning to spread all over Chantel's body. She could no longer ignore it and tell herself that someday she would be in a better position to help her constituents but until then she had to play by the rules that had already been set out for her. She could no longer tell herself that she was the stronger person for fighting the odds stacked against her, sacrificing money and other luxuries in her quest to save mankind. She could no longer see that day coming in the near future. Every time she told herself "someday," someone succumbed to the forces Chantel thought she was fighting. Every time she told herself she could save them even if it was one at a time, she lost one. Now this one had a face.

The doctor in the morgue said nothing as Chantel ran her hand along Tanya's bruises. She was so cold. Chantel's mind drifted to the coming winter.

"Tanya Duffy."

"Do you know of any next of kin? Friends or family?"

Chantel shook her head to the negative as she worked on maintaining her composure. She suddenly came upon the two punctures in Tanya's neck.

"Shit!" Dr. Tillman exclaimed. "Gallagher's going to kill me. You weren't supposed to see that."

"Someone did this to her deliberately?" Chantel asked in a stunned confusion. Dr. Tillman looked at her a moment then evaluated that she could be trusted.

"I'm sorry, but this is something the cops don't want anyone to find out yet. At first I thought this was part of some kinky sex game. I mean she was worked over pretty good before she was killed, so I assumed things went too far. But she's not the only one to come through here with those peculiar wounds."

"Prostitutes?"

"Well I'm not sure. The last few were men, but they were definitely vagrants, so we can't say for sure. They were completely drained of blood, but there were no signs of sexual activity. I began to wonder if we have one of those vampire subcultures here in Freya's Fortune, but I still haven't seen Hot Topic move to town."

Chantel looked at Dr. Tillman. The woman had to be in her early 50s at least. Chantel was certain she had been around death nearly that long. Her light grey eyes were the same color as her ponytail and eyebrows. Despite the rare sunny season that was not yet over, Dr. Tillman's skin was nearly as pale as Tanya's. Chantel could see she did not have live company in the morgue very often.

"So you think someone *drank* their blood?"

"Well, definitely drained. I still haven't figured out how they drained all that blood. Must be a hell of a device. Ms. Duffy here still had some of hers. Of course, we had to test it."

Chantel unintentionally let a tear fall. "This isn't right. No one should have to die like this – alone with nobody to give a damn about them."

"That's not exactly true, is it Ms. Mason," Dr. Tillman prodded gently.

She allowed it then. Her tears fell free down her face. She cried for Tanya, for the other vagrants and mostly for herself. This was not how she needed to start her day. Chantel received the phone call before she left home, so she went straight to the morgue. She had not expected to be greeted with Tanya's pale lifeless form. She did not bother to call the shelter to tell anyone she would not be coming in to work. Once she left the morgue, Chantel had simply begun to wander aimlessly through Freya's Fortune with no destination or purpose. Just like her life.

It would be sunset soon. Chantel had not eaten all day. It had taken this long for her appetite to return and the hunger pangs hit her with full force. She decided to do something she had never done the entire time she had been in Freya's Fortune. Chantel went home and pulled out the little black dress she had reserved strictly for fundraisers and other such special occasions. She refreshed herself with a hot shower. Chantel rarely wore perfume, but she was about to indulge so she decided to go all the way. She lightly spritzed herself with the Elegance she carefully rationed to last as long as possible. She refashioned her braid into a playful ponytail that swung freely about her shoulders. The strappy sandals that had been collecting dust under her bed were carefully dusted and given their proper due. Chantel still had no makeup, so she colored her lips brown as usual.

Chantel parked her car a little ways down the street from the one upscale restaurant in town, The Red Esplanade. She had long resented the open-air eatery since it practically flaunted its decadence for all passersby to see and envy. She had often walked by and silently clucked her tongue at those who had no remorse for their excess. This evening she would be among them.

She was actually seated at one of the tables furthest away from the actual esplanade area, which was fine by Chantel. Even though she planned to indulge in whatever she wanted, she had never acquired a taste for alcohol so she eschewed the popular house wine. She did try a virgin strawberry daiquiri. She needed one after she refrained from making a scene with her waitress, who apparently was a culinary genius. Chantel told her she wanted the steak well done, but the woman "suggested" she have it rare. Chantel insisted she preferred it well done. The waitress whined that would kill all the flavor. Chantel replied that it would kill all the bacteria as well.

Arguing about steak. She was actually arguing about a steak with a woman who was supposed to be serving it to her. When it came back to her cooked all the way through, Chantel checked it to be sure it had not been tampered with in any way. Detecting nothing amiss, she cut into the tender meat and savored the first bite. How could anyone ever want to have their steak rare? Chantel imagined the taste of blood tainted the actual meat. She wanted nothing to interfere with her ability to enjoy her meal, not even the recurring thought that the steak had to be as bloodless as Tanya's lifeless body. She tried not to think of blood as she kept cutting. Blood would not ruin this. None of it was on her hands. She was allowed to enjoy something on her terms. Hell, she was entitled.

Steak, a fully loaded baked potato and a banana caramel shortcake later, Chantel felt satiated. She had never felt quite so satisfied in her life. Instant gratification was much better than delayed any day. She began to walk the length of the red brick esplanade. For much of nine years, she had avoided this part of town believing it better to not go where temptation could get her in the first place. She had also let herself be disgusted with the ones who never ventured to the other side of Freya's Fortune just a couple of blocks away as if they were afraid the human misery and despair that infected the place was contagious. However, when the night gave cover, many of them dared to take the chance in order to satisfy their appetites for cheap women, men or drugs. They

were the true reason Freya's Fortune could never rid itself of the "undesirable elements" every politician used as a buzz word during election seasons.

"Excuse me."

Chantel turned to see a smiling face behind the wheel of a nice car she could not identify.

"Do you need a ride?"

"No, I don't," she said as she turned to look straight ahead again. He drove away. Chantel knew she did not look like the regular girls who worked the street. Besides, she was in the wrong part of town for that particular business. She saw the car park a ways down the street. The man got out and began to walk back toward her. She had no pockets and was not sure where the mace sat in her purse. She grew frantic as he got closer and she still could not find the mace. He stopped a few feet from her.

"You know there was a murder last night. The victim was about your age. It's not a good idea for you to be out here alone."

"But she was a prostitute."

"Yeah but that might not have had anything to do with why she was killed."

"You seem to know an awful lot about it."

"Look. I'm a cop." He slowly reached into his pocket and produced a badge. Chantel looked over him skeptically. "I can pitch over the badge if you like."

He tossed her the badge when she continued to eye him suspiciously. She caught it with one hand since the other was finally wrapped around a can of mace. Stephen Calloway. Chantel looked it over. The badge seemed authentic. She tossed it back to him and continued to watch him.

"If you're a cop that means you have a gun."

He smiled. "I'm off duty and I'm sure nothing I have on my person is as good a weapon as whatever you've got your hand on in that purse."

Chantel slowly withdrew her hand sans mace. He had not come any closer. "Thanks for the offer, but I'll be fine."

"How about I walk you? I really don't feel right leaving a lady alone after what happened."

"I don't live around here and my car is parked the other way down."

"If you were just out for a walk, I'll join you. Otherwise, let me take you to your car."

Chantel mulled it momentarily. "I'm not ready to go home just yet. Do you mind if we walk a little?"

"No I don't mind, but you haven't told me your name."

"Chantel."

They started off side by side. Chantel knew she was an average-sized woman, but Stephen towered over her. He was definitely built like a cop, his muscles clearly visible under his skin tight navy blue tee. His jeans showed his lower half was just as well-toned as the upper part. His neatly trimmed goatee framed a warm smile that brought light to his deep brown eyes. His dark hair was trimmed closely to his scalp. Chantel knew she would have remembered seeing him around before then. He was too handsome to be missed.

The moon glowed brightly a couple of hours later. Stephen pointed out his modest ecru house. Even in the dark, Chantel could see the well-kempt flower beds. He offered to show her the inside of the house if she trusted him. Normally, Chantel would have immediately declined to go home with a man she had just met that day, but she was not done getting to know him. She liked what she knew so far from their walk. Maybe she would like what she found inside the ecru house even more.

As the dawn started to break, she watched him as he slept peacefully on the couch. She had already made the bed and written him a note thanking him for its use. Chantel had not realized until then how much she did not want to be alone. She had no idea what she had been searching for all day, but Stephen had been a pleasant if unexpected distraction. Now as she watched him sleep with no worries, her own came back to call on her. She left her phone number on the note then took the walk back to her car. When she got back home, she ignored the answering machine and went straight to her bedroom. As she prepared to catch up on some more sleep, she wondered what Stephen's reaction would be when he awoke and found her gone.

## Chapter 2

Most of the day had passed by the time Chantel woke up for good. Her cell phone was still off and she had unplugged her landlines. As she stretched and yawned, much of the previous day began to come back to her. She remembered Tanya's death and Stephen's kindness. She also remembered she could not bring herself to spend another second at Francesca's Place.

Chantel finally rolled out of bed and plugged her phones back into the wall. She turned on her cell phone and figured most if not all of the missed calls were from Chauncey. She was no longer certain if she had told him she was going off to identify Tanya's body. He was probably the only person looking for her.

Although she heard the phone ringing, she took her time under the hot shower. There was a frantic knocking on her door by the time she stepped out and wrapped a towel around her body. Chauncey's emerald green eyes blazed with a mix of worry and anger. Chantel watched as he had a small inner struggle on deciding just where to place his eyes.

"Well, at least you're still alive," Chauncey said before she finally stepped aside to let him in. She returned to her bedroom to finish her grooming.

"Chantel, what the hell happened? No one's seen you since the day before and you won't answer your phone."

Chantel kept applying the lotion and said nothing.

"Everything was in chaos yesterday! You can't simply hire a temp for the day for the director."

She put on her bra and panties then spritzed herself with her strawberry scent.

"If you needed the day off, you should have called. If you need a sick day you need to call it in!"

She slipped on her dark jeans and matching blouse.

"I'll let it go this time since this has never happened before, but be certain it never happens again!"

Chantel stepped back out into the living room where Chauncey had been chastising her. She stopped a few feet in front of him and silently looked at him.

"Why aren't you dressed for work?" he asked.

"Tanya Duffy died yesterday."

She spoke in a monotone. No emotion or expression came through her voice. He looked at her oddly, unsure of how to respond to her declaration.

"Who is Tanya Duffy?" he finally asked.

"Exactly what I thought," she said as she headed to the door. "I'm not going back, Chauncey. You'll just have to do the work yourself instead of underpaying me to do it. It's not worth it anymore. I've had enough."

Chauncey looked as if he was going to faint. Chantel was unmoved.

“What do you mean you’re not going back?”

“I had high hopes when I came to Freya’s Fortune. I was willing to put up with the low pay and all the extra work that wasn’t in my job description because I believed in this work. I look around this place and you know what? I don’t see a damn bit of difference. I see write ups about the good work *you* do at *your* shelter. I see you going to banquets in your honor and fundraisers that don’t quite bring back as much money as you thought it would. And most of all, Chauncey, I am tired of you not giving a damn about the people you pretend to help.”

Chantel walked to the door and opened it.

“Look. It’s been a long couple of years, Chantel. Why don’t you just take a few days? Take a couple of weeks if you need. We’ll find the money to get you a raise...”

“What was her name?”

“What?”

“I just said it a moment ago. What was her name?”

“Chantel, what are you talking about?”

“A woman was killed and left out to find like trash. Her body was drained of blood. She was a prostitute, but that shouldn’t be important. She came to Francesca’s Place. Of course you weren’t there. I was. I wondered why I got such a promotion after only two years. Do you know how I’ve spent the past seven? I live with seeing the ones we can’t help everyday. Where are you everyday? Where are you when a junkie vomits all over the floor when he’s having withdrawal pains or a woman has had to drag her children out of an abusive home and has no idea how she’ll make it through the night? I was there, Chauncey. I don’t want to be anymore.”

Chauncey had sat quietly during her tirade. He then headed for the door but turned to say one last thing before he left.

“You clearly need some time off. Burnout happens to all of us. I’ll think of someone to fill in for you. I’ll check on you in a couple of weeks. I sincerely hope you’re feeling better by then.”

He hurried off thinking of how to explain Chantel’s sudden absence and a possible replacement for her. She was invaluable to Francesca’s Place. Losing her would spell disaster. He had to think of something quickly to assure she would come back to work. Chauncey did not want to explain to the board yet again why they had lost yet another great employee.

Chantel felt slightly vindicated when Chauncey left. The problems of others were no longer among her worries. In that case, she no longer seemed to have any. Life was going to be much easier. Chantel felt she could eventually put Tanya and all the rest out of her mind. She still believed time could be a healer. She hoped she was right this time. She knew the one thing she had to do was avoid fretting over what she would do with the rest of her life for the time being.

Right now, she would have some fun. She had lived in Freya’s Fortune for more than nine years and yet she did not know her adopted city. Chantel then decided her plans for the rest of the day. She would take a walking tour of Freya’s Fortune. She would get to know this dreadfully overcast city that somehow still seemed to draw a reasonable population.

Chantel checked the weather. Rain was expected for the evening so she grabbed her trusty golf umbrella. She was almost glad. She liked to have an excuse to carry something she could use as a weapon. She went through her closet to find the hemp field bag she always used whenever she went for a walk with no purpose. She did not have to fear it getting snatched from her shoulder. Instead of her cute boots, she found her sneakers anticipating being on her feet all day.

She mentally envisioned how she would spend her day. She still had time to have brunch at Florey Eatery, which was less than a mile from her home. After that, she might visit the city museum. Perhaps she would just walk through the west side of town and look at the nice houses she knew she would never be able to afford. Or she could take another walk along the Red Esplanade and see if she ran into Stephen again.

Chantel pictured Stephen's face as she walked out the door. How could she have been here all this time and never noticed him? Then again she had never gotten over her long-standing distrust of cops. She tended to ignore them in the street and had only had bad experiences with them on the job. It usually had to do with a vagrant supposed to be at the shelter or worse, death. She had liked Stephen though. She did not simply feel safe with him. She felt like she belonged with him.

As she devoured her blueberry, banana pancake, Chantel wondered if she should venture around his house. Whether or not he was home she did not know. Eventually, she decided against that small excursion. That particular move reeked of desperation to her. She might have resolved to have more fun, but chasing Stephen was a step too much right now. Baby steps, Chantel said to herself as she left Florey. However, she could not stop herself from checking her cell phone just to be sure she had not missed his call.

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Detective Trisha Gallagher sat back at her desk with her third cup of coffee. She slowly sipped it as she read the information that she printed from the health website. Apparently there really was such a thing as a sun allergy. That priest, Jonquil Montague, was telling the truth about his condition. Still, his skin seemed wholly unnatural to her. She had to admit, though, that he had come to the right place if he needed to avoid sunlight. Freya's Fortune was by far the grayest place she had ever seen. No wonder they could not keep most of their law enforcement officers long term. The suicide rate was unreal. Then there were the bizarre crimes like the one that had taken the life of Tanya Duffy.

Trisha knew there were self-proclaimed vampire enclaves spread throughout the country, but she also knew that many of them had prohibited the drinking of blood. Vampires. Father Montague certainly looked like he fit the bill. She had been startled by his appearance. She was certain he had noticed even though he had not said anything. He had to be used to such reactions. That did not make Trisha feel any less lousy about her reaction.

She had had to quickly recollect herself. His appearance unsettled her. Then the way he corrected her after she mispronounced his name. "That's yon-kill," he enunciated slowly. She could not trace his accent except to surmise it was Eastern European. By his last name, she would have guessed he was Italian. She just could not pin down his point of origin.

Furthermore, Trisha contemplated his theory that Tanya was suicidal. "Catholics take suicide seriously, detective," he had said. From what she knew about the religion, Catholics took many things seriously even when it had nothing to do with them personally. That was another thing that struck Trisha about Father Montague: he seemed to be lacking a certain self-righteous indignation she had come to expect from Catholic clergy. In fact, had it not been for this collar, she would have never thought him to be a priest. She would have thought a man of God living in Freya's Fortune might have a much stronger sense of urgency about all the tragedy that must come through his church on a daily basis. Maybe he was desensitized to it. Trisha hoped she would never be.

“Hey, T.G.,” Darwin called to her. Trisha was so engrossed in her thoughts that she had lost track of what she was doing. She set down her coffee mug and straightened up as Darwin sat down. He carried a huge stack of files with him.

“Congratulations. You have now inherited Freya’s Fortune PD’s longest series of unsolved murders.”

Trisha looked up at him with the alarm silently shining in her eyes.

“These cases go back twelve years. Not all victims were found in the city limits, but other victims in surrounding areas were found in the same condition as the others: no blood and two deep puncture wounds in the neck. Victims are usually female. Nearly all were homeless or otherwise destitute. Strange because the ones who had family or friends we could speak with all said the victims had been suicidal or depressed. Someone got to them before they could carry it out.”

Trisha began to flip through the files. There was a look of horror and shock on many of the blood-drained faces, surprised at whoever had attacked them. She thought of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and how the first victim was described as having a face contorted in fear. Trisha thought she would never see a real-life example of it. She could imagine the terror they felt in those last moments. However, like the victims who had peaceful or no expressions on their faces, they also had no defensive wounds. It was as if they had been terrorized into submission. Trisha had never seen anything like it.

“I know it may sound obvious or trivial, but has anyone ever found any type of underground culture that’s into – you know – vampirism?”

“Well, that was one of the first routes always taken in these cases,” Darwin answered. “Even though we’ve never found any groups or cults, we have occasionally spoken with ‘experts’ on vampire lore. They all agree on one thing – this isn’t a vampire, at least not one who’s a purist.”

“Why not?”

“All our victims had religious relics on them: crucifixes, rosaries, candles or something like it. Any contact with those symbols would kill a vampire.”

That leaves out Father Montague, Trisha thought to herself. “Well, the vampire thing is most likely a red herring. This person or people are taking blood and leaving these religious symbols on the body. Perhaps it’s someone who despises the church. He wants us to think it’s a Catholic. Why he would pose as a vampire I don’t know.”

Trisha looked at Darwin as she broke her thoughts. “I need to get copies of these. Is this all?”

“These are the murders here in Freya’s Fortune. There are seven other boxes with information about cases in the surrounding areas within a 50-mile radius.”

“Jesus.”

“Jesus had nothing to do with this.”

“Let’s hope you’re right.”

Trisha gathered the files and set off to find Bruce, the office assistant. While he copied the files, she began to make a list of possible leads. There was no organized atheist group in the area. She thought perhaps she could check with the local shelter to find out if they frequently had anyone come through with an ax to grind against religion – or if anyone who worked there had. Trisha could not imagine a poor vagrant pulling off such a sophisticated crime. She would also have to pay a visit to the blood bank. She needed to know if there was any medical equipment capable of draining an entire human body of blood all at once. Perhaps someone could also shed light on the puncture wounds.

She knew this would be complicated. No eyewitnesses had seen a thing and there had never been a physical description of the suspect or suspects. Trisha felt like

she was chasing the invisible man. How could these types of murders have gone on for so many years without ever leaving any type of trail to the killer's identity?

They stared at her as she left the building; she could feel their eyes on her. After three years, she was still the new kid. Trisha wondered if this vampire case was the last phase in the hazing process. So far she had mostly handled robberies, home invasions, domestic disputes and other such cases. She expected things to get more exciting now that she was in homicide and vice, but she thought she would be forced to handle more on the vice end, especially since there was much more of that particular crime than homicide. Now Trisha knew she would have to prove herself and get this case in the black.

She lugged the case files into the house when she reached home. Her husband Leon had not made it home yet. She checked the freezer to be sure they had an option for dinner. Two Marie Callendar dishes would be on the menu tonight.

Trisha had buried herself in the case files and did not hear Leon when he arrived. He was already upon her planting a kiss on her forehead before she saw him.

"You scared me," she laughed.

"Well, not my fault. That job of yours will give you nightmares."

Trisha smiled at Leon as he headed back to the kitchen. Married slightly over a year, the two were still getting to know each other. It was love at first sight for Trisha when she first met the museum coordinator on her first day off from the job. She had just gotten off a domestic dispute and needed to be away from everything. She went into the museum on a whim.

The place was nearly empty that day. Trisha slowly sloshed through the exhibits and displays not really looking at anything. She sat down on a bench for a moment trying to forget as much of the previous days as possible. She did not realize she was staring off into space until he was sitting beside her.

"We call this the re-creation room."

Trisha whipped around to face the olive-skinned specimen that had suddenly appeared at her side. He smiled at her with light green eyes that sparkled in the low light. She could not help but return her own cherry red smile at this gorgeous man. Trisha listened as he explained that the museum kept recreations of famous pieces of art for school field trips and such. She listened politely then had a discussion with him about what little she knew of art. Before she knew it, they were sitting over a candlelight dinner at the Red Esplanade.

Leon hesitated to ask Trisha to marry him for months because of her occupation. Then he decided if she could take risks, so could he. They were married after a brief engagement. He had been worried when she told him she would be transferred to homicide and vice. However, he knew Trisha could be as stubborn as any mule.

They talked as they had their TV dinners. Although she never discussed details, Trisha always told Leon what case she was on figuring he would either read about it in the paper or see it on the news. However, he had never before nearly choked on his carrots when she gave him the news.

"Trish, people have been whispering about that case, whispering not talking. There's something unnatural about it. I really don't feel good about you being on that case."

"What do they mean unnatural?"

Leon hesitated before he spoke again. "People around here don't believe that whoever doing the killing is human. These people are found with no blood in them. Who has the ability to do that? It's been going on for years."

“Honey, I appreciate your concern, but I’m sure there’s a logical explanation for this. I’ll be fine. Besides, this just might be what I need. I’ve waited three years for this, Leon. I’m not going to back out on this.”

“Have you ever asked yourself why they have so much trouble keeping homicide detectives here?”

Now it was Trisha’s turn to sigh. “It can’t just be these murders. Maybe people can’t take the gray sky. I must have a higher tolerance for it than most. You, too. As long as I can keep my head, I don’t think either of us has anything to worry about.”

Leon nodded, but he still looked unsure. They finished dinner in silence. While Leon went off to settle in front of the television, Trisha went back to the case files. The religious bent of the murders bothered her. She was no atheist, but she hated to think someone was deliberately trying to create a religious drama. Or worse – this could be some religious fanatic taking things too far. He definitely had the virtue of patience. Fifteen years was a long time to never leave a trace. Trisha knew this much: she was dealing with someone who knew how not to get caught. Now the difficult part would be finding the answer to that elusive question – why?

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The day had gone by rather quickly. Chantel found a few sites she had seen but never explored and a few she did not know existed. She enjoyed them all, particularly Flaneur from where she bought a double scoop of mint chocolate chip ice cream. She savored every single solitary drop of that delectable home-churned treat. A hunger had been awakened in Chantel. She could not get full. When she finished her ice cream, she found some apple slices with cream cheese dip. Chantel let Andes mints melt in her mouth as she strolled along the streets. As it grew dark, she found a hole in the wall eatery where she found a decent chicken pesto sandwich and steak fries.

Now as she walked through an unfamiliar part of town, Chantel munched on a bag of Raisinets. She was so into the chocolate treat that she lost track of where she was. Chantel looked around for a bus line but saw none. She began to walk down the street trying to find a familiar landmark. She had seen some of these buildings as she drove by sometimes.

The sudden clap of thunder distracted her. Chantel realized she was clear across town from her own home. She still wanted to continue her walk, but night had fallen and the rain would prevent her from seeing anything. She started out in the direction home.

The rain came down in a sudden downpour. Chantel huddled under her umbrella, but she could still feel her feet getting wet. She could barely see in front of her. She would have to wait for the storm to die down or find the number for a cab. She saw a church and decided to stand under its veranda while she made her decision. She ran up the steps and started to hunt for her phone. The sound of the organ caught her ear.

Chantel opened the door of the church and felt herself being drawn inside. “Ave Maria.” The organist was playing one of her favorite hymns. She walked up to the front pew and sat down. Chantel closed her eyes as she listened to sweet melodies from the organ. For the first time in many months, she felt at peace. She felt safe from the world waiting for her just outside the walk of this beautiful church.

She had not been to church in years. Chantel had nothing against God, but religion was not her way. Francesca’s Place did not allow a religious agenda as it did not want to scare away anyone who did not like propaganda. Chantel was just fine with that, but she had to admit there was a little solace in that moment in that grand building.

The music stopped. Chantel slowly opened her eyes, already losing the sense of safety she had felt. She realized that the lighting was dim. A couple of electric lights burned, but much of the light source was candlelight. Chantel then got an eerie feeling. She scanned the area ahead of her looking for the organ. She had to catch her breath when she noticed the man standing in front of the organ.

At first she thought he was an albino, but she realized his hair was jet black. He began to come toward her. Chantel wanted to leave, but she sat still in her place because she did not want to appear rude. Once he came closer, she noticed his eyes were a beautiful shade of dark blue.

Chantel tried not to let her nervousness show as the priest sat down beside her. She barely looked at him, but she knew he smiled benevolently. She did not want to stare at his incredibly pale skin. He was probably used to it, but that did not make it right.

"Is there something I can do for you?" he said benevolently.

Chantel looked at him and noticed the slight sparkle in his eyes. She smiled back at him.

"No. Quite honestly I got caught in the rain. I came up the steps to stand under the veranda. Then I heard the organ. I came inside because I heard the organ. It was so lovely. I've always loved 'Ave Maria.' I don't speak Italian. I don't know what the words mean, but I love it. It called to me."

"You've been having a rough time, haven't you? You feel sick in the heart. Perhaps fate brought you here."

"Perhaps. If I were you, though, I wouldn't go looking for me to be sitting in the first row come Sunday morning."

He laughed. "Do you not believe in God?"

"I believe in God. God believes in me. Organized religion hasn't exactly made the best impression on me. No offense."

"None taken. I find it refreshing when someone questions authority. It's not healthy to live as a mindless drone."

"I agree, but I am surprised to hear a priest suggest his way of life is unhealthy."

He grinned broadly again. "Maybe not unhealthy but not for everyone. I wouldn't recommend it for anyone with a weak disposition."

"I don't think I'd recommend it to anyone. It's hard enough to ask people to believe in something with good logic or reason. Asking them to just have faith in something you can't even prove exists seems unfair."

The priest sighed. Chantel wondered if she had made him angry, but when she glanced at him again, she saw the smile still curled at the corners of his mouth. He finally spoke again.

"I see a lot of people who come here destitute and spiritually bankrupt. We offer them hope and the will to go on."

"I see the same people. We offer them the will to do for themselves because they know they won't be abandoned if they try but fail. It's much easier to have hope when your stomach's not empty and you have a safe place to sleep off the street."

She saw him flinch, but he still smiled.

"Sorry. I don't mean to sound like a big cynic. I'm sure you care about the people who come to you for help, but it's not the same as being out there."

"No, it's not," he readily agreed. "The church does offer a certain amount of protection from the rest of the world. The trick is to remember how it affects the ones who still have to live in it."

"Sounds reasonable enough." Chantel stood. She wanted to see if the storm had passed or if at least the rain had slackened up. "I should get going. It was nice meeting you."

He stood and extended his hand. "It was a pleasure to meet you as well... uh..."

"Chantel," she said as she extended her own hand.

"Jonquil," he said as he clasped her hand. As soon as he enclosed it, his body tightened as if he had been seized with electricity. Something in his eyes changed; they grew bright and Chantel thought she saw a flash of light surge through them.

She tried to control her breathing and keep the fear that suddenly gripped her from registering on her face. The hand in Jonquil's began to shake as she tried to pull it away.

"I – I – I should go. I think I can make it now. Thank you, um, Jon-quil."

Jonquil slowly released her hand but kept his eyes on her. Chantel stared back at him uneasily a moment with no idea why he had suddenly grown so serious. When she realized she was backing away, she turned and tried to walk in her normal stroll to the door. She felt his eyes on her even as she stepped back out into the rain that was still coming down in torrents.

Chantel collected herself for a moment. She fished her cell phone out of her bag but found that her battery had died. She did not know if a bus stop was nearby. She was in for an all night walk. Any fear she had about it left as she thought about the look in Jonquil's eyes as he took her hand.

*What was that about*, she asked herself as she started on her way. He was not giving her a look like so many men had given her over the years. She could read that look right away. Chantel hated that look. That look always told her the same story: I'd like to use you for a few hours for my own gratification and no I don't care if you get anything out of it or not. She hated that look.

That was not the look Jonquil had given her. His look was foreign to her. He looked more like he had been possessed, like she had somehow bewitched him. His entire demeanor changed. She could tell he did not want her to leave.

Chantel felt cold, but she knew it was not from the rain. The chill that ran through her would not go away with the cocoa she planned to have once she got home. Everything she had eaten that day began to unsettle in her stomach.

Jonquil. She could not get his pale skin out of her mind. She could still see his dark blue eyes in the dark. She could still feel his hand around hers. His soft, warm hands. His soft, warm hands that commanded the organ to play one of the most beautiful melodies she had ever known. Could someone who played "Ave Maria" so beautifully really cause her any harm?

No matter how much she tried to assure herself, she could not still the rapid beating of her heart. She was miles from home a woman walking alone at night. Chantel had done it before, but she had never felt quite so vulnerable.

A sudden wind rushed passed her. It was not from the weather. Chantel stopped in her tracks paralyzed with fear. The strange wind rushed passed her once again. She began to run with no idea where she was headed. She suddenly found herself on a dead-end isolated street. She saw no signs of life around to help her, at least not until she saw the glaring bright light...

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### **About the Author**

Inda Lauryn is the author of two books, In Time and The People in My Head. Her suspense novel will be released later this year and she has many more projects in the works. You may preview more of her work at <http://conceding2kismet.weebly.com> and <http://c2kfantasy.yolasite.com> and leave your questions and comments.