the alchemical wedding

by qqueenofhades

Summary

Discovery of Witches AU. When Dr. Lucy Preston, historian and reluctant witch, stumbles on an enchanted alchemical manuscript, Ashmole 782, in Oxford University's Bodleian Library, she crosses paths with the mysterious vampire Garcia Flynn. They must work together to discover its secrets, their conflicted family legacies, and the shadowy enemies who want to claim it. As they do, they are increasingly and unwillingly drawn to each other, but that may be the most dangerous and forbidden magic of all.

Notes

I 200% blame extasiswings and letmetellyouaboutmyfeels for this. I'm not sure how fast I will be about updating, and I do still intend to finish The Procurator at some point, but they planted this idea and then swiftly enabled me into it. We all know how it went from there. I'm hopefully rating this one M at the outset, but we all know how it goes when Someone is involved. I promise nothing. Except for garbage, now with more supernatural shenanigans.
The pale autumn sun turns the bleached amber stone of the Bodleian Library to gold, the courtyard flows with chattering students (it’s Week 3 of Michaelmas term, so as yet they still appear to be enjoying themselves, but that will be deceptive), and for half a second, something makes Lucy think that she is being followed. It’s enough to make her turn her head sharply, but the only thing there is a crowd of camera-wearing day-trippers, noses buried in Oxford Walking Tour brochures as their guide tells them about Harry Potter filming locations. This is nothing out of the ordinary, and Lucy shakes her head, slings her bag off her shoulder, and opens it up for the entrance inspection. It’s a little silly, she’s been working here pretty much every day for the past month and a half, they know her by now. But rules are rules, and the polite mid-fifties porter in a monogrammed jumper gives her things a poke, ascertains that she’s not smuggling any crack manuscript-theft equipment past the keen watching eyes of the Bod, and says, “Thank you, Dr. Preston. Have a lovely day.”

“Thanks, Simon.” Lucy pushes through the turnstiles with the feeling of importance that has not entirely dwindled, at getting to venture in here while the tourists must remain gazing wistfully from afar, and takes the stairs to the first floor. More sunlight stripes the corridor at intervals, casting a gilded, musty glow through the tall windows, and she reaches the entrance to Duke Humfrey’s Library. If a time will in fact arrive when she is not utterly delighted to walk in here, Lucy almost hopes it won’t come. It is the oldest and most impressive part of the Bod, with hammer-beam vaults, an intricately muraled ceiling, and long mahogany bookshelves crowded with old and valuable volumes, most of which you are not allowed to touch yourself on pain of instant death. You fill out a call slip indicating your desired item, and a librarian goes to fetch it, whereupon you consult it in the reading room and return it when you’re done. A good chunk of special collections has now been moved over to the Weston Library across the street, but the manuscript that Lucy is working on is still here. It’s one of the items in the Ashmole collection, donated by the antiquarian, astrologer, and alchemist Elias Ashmole in the seventeenth century. Ashmole 782.

As with the porter, she hardly needs to tell the librarian what she wants, but protocol demands that she fill out the slip anyway. Once Lucy has scouted out an unoccupied table in the west wing, by Selden End, she goes to submit her request, and collects the foam wedges and weighted cord required for the proper handling of antique books. You don’t wear gloves when working with old manuscripts anymore, and Oxford has made efforts to get with the times and provide digital scans for the most fragile material. Yet for some reason, none of that seems to exist for Ashmole 782. Lucy’s life might be easier if it did, but in the meantime, she has to go consult the physical artifact every day. Needless to say, it could be worse.

In a few minutes, the librarian returns with the codex, and Lucy takes it with a murmured thanks. She carries it carefully over to her work station and sets it on the wedges, opening the parchment leaves and searching for the place she left off. Copying down the diagrams and transcribing the crabbed, confusing Latin shorthand proceeds at a pace of about three pages a day, if she’s lucky, and it may take the rest of her fellowship to get through it, but –

There. Just for a second, again. She had the oddest feeling that someone was watching her from the balcony above. But obviously, no one.

Frowning, Lucy pulls up her chair and takes out her notebook and pencil. You aren’t even allowed to use ink around some of the most sensitive material, which means she has worn a lot of number-twos down to nubbins, and for a moment, she’s briefly tempted to use a spell to preserve this one. Nothing much, just a small one. But Lucy and magic have an uneasy relationship to start with, and she feels like she should be careful doing it around this book. Like a match near gunpowder, with
effects she can’t control or predict. She can’t tell everything, not yet, but she knows that Ashmole 782 is magical, deeply so. It sparks in her fingers when she touches it, the painted figures seem to move and writhe out of the corner of her eye, and sometimes, she’s not entirely sure that the words are the same when she turns back to check as they were the first time. She is too stubborn to just return it and choose another from Ashmole’s collection, so she’ll cross her fingers and hope for the best.

Lucy opens her laptop, which she keeps on hand to Google obscure alchemical referents (even a woman with degrees from Stanford and Yale does not know everything on sight), and begins typing up yesterday’s transcription. She has to set her Word language to Occitan or Welsh or something so it won’t constantly bother her with supposedly misspelled words, and she can’t always find the right character to represent some of the abbreviations. She’s far enough into the text that she should have an overall sense of what it’s talking about, but it comes and goes. Renaissance alchemists aren’t exactly known for their clarity and brevity of argument to start with, and there are gaps, smeared-out sections, or other lacunae in the manuscript that frustrate as much as they tantalize. Maybe she should have gone for something easier, but then. That would defeat the point.

Lucy hums under her breath, looks around guiltily in case another user of the reading room thinks that is too much noise, and again catches sight of a dark blur on the balcony. Probably just a skulking librarian dusting the shelves, so she bends back to work. This section of the text is talking about some kind of figurative or chemical transformation, the mystical process of transubstantiation that lay at the heart of historical alchemy. At first they just wanted to turn lead into gold, but they grew interested in altering the substance of other materials as well. The symbols here are nothing like Lucy has seen before. She can’t read the inscriptions; they’re not Latin, the script is unfamiliar, and when she turns the page, she discovers a jagged space where the rest of it should be. It’s impossible to imagine anyone having enough of a death wish to actually tear a page out of this book, but that’s what it looks like.

That is definitely rather odd. Lucy checks again, but the section is definitely missing, and there’s no way to tell if that’s been the case since the book arrived, or if it’s a recent development. She moves on with her work, produces a few more paragraphs of transcription, and finally, rubbing the crick in her neck, decides that while academic industry is all well and good, it definitely needs to be supplanted with coffee. She promised Jessica that she would actually meet her this afternoon, anyway. Maybe she’s heard about this.

Lucy closes Ashmole 782, returns it to the librarian, collects her things, proves to Simon she likewise has not taken anything out, and emerges into the westering sun. She leaves the Bod, crosses Broad Street, and heads inside Blackwell’s, up the stairs to the Caffe Nero on the second floor, where she spots her friend holding down a corner table and perusing a biography of Lucrezia Borgia. Jess looks up at her approach. “Hey.”

“Hey.” Lucy drops her things on the spare chair and heads over to join the queue. Once she’s in possession of a small cappuccino and a butter croissant, she returns to sit. “How are you? I’m sorry I’ve kept having to reschedule.”

Jessica raises one eyebrow, but politely doesn’t mention whatever might have occurred to her about Lucy’s delinquencies as a friend. Instead she says, “It’s good that you’re settling into Oxford, I suppose. You know I have people I could introduce you to, though, if you ever wanted to do anything apart from study.”

Lucy glances at the other patrons, but nobody’s paying attention to them, involved with books or headphones or laptops or conversation. Still, something makes her lower her voice. “Jessica, you know I’m not – you know. Other witches. I don’t really feel like I’d be comfortable with that.”
Jessica raises the other eyebrow. It’s no secret that they have different opinions on this, and Lucy has already put off enough of her social invitations that Jess might be pardonably wondering how much friends they actually are, but still. “Come on, Lucy,” she says. “You need to be around your own kind more. Especially here. You can’t keep shutting us out forever. We just want to help.”

“I – I know.” Lucy manages a smile, since she knows this is true, and she isn’t sure Jessica wants to hear her entire litany on the subject. Maybe she should seek out the company of other witches; there have to be plenty of them here, and Jessica’s part of a local coven that she’s offered to introduce to Lucy. But her reckoning with her heritage has been – well. Complicated. One of the attractions of Oxford has been that’s a fresh start, it’s far away, though Denise and Michelle still call her fairly regularly. Lucy knows she’d probably further isolate if they didn’t, but the connection feels forced, unwanted, as if she indeed just wants to be left alone. She doesn’t want to be a witch right now. She just wants to be Dr. Lucy Preston, a regular academic. And ne’er the twain shall meet, or at least that’s the idea.

Lucy debates asking Jessica if she knows anything about the missing leaf, but she doesn’t want to get drawn into a magical conversation, and steers the topic to other things. They make half an hour of enjoyable small talk, Jessica complains about the students in her Renaissance Italy tutorial (apparently none of whom can hand in an essay on time) and Lucy makes sympathetic and commiserating noises. Maybe she should ask. They’re both American and their historical specialties have some overlap, which is part of why they became friends, and of course, Jess is a witch. At last, conscious that she’s been doing most of the talking, Jessica says, “So, what’s up with you? What were you working on – one of the manuscripts from the Ashmole collection, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, it’s going… slowly.” Lucy is no stranger to totally baffling manuscripts, given that she wrote her PhD thesis on the famous Voynich. She argued that it was in fact a handbook for women’s health based on the *Trotula*, the medieval gynecological and medical treatise created under the sponsorship of Trota of Salerno, a twelfth-century female professor at the University of Salerno medical school. The Voynich, MS 408 in Yale’s Beinecke Library, is one of the biggest mysteries in scholarship, since nobody was able to read it, and everything from an elaborate forgery to (naturally) aliens has been proposed as the source of its existence. To Lucy’s mind, there is something devastatingly ironic about the answer probably being related to women’s health, since that is indeed a total mystery to the patriarchy, and she published a few articles on the subject that basically said as much. She worked on several other lesser-known manuscripts, got a prestigious grant or two and considerable attention in the medieval nerd world, and here she is on a visiting research fellowship at University College. It still feels like any day now, someone is going to turn up at her door, inform her that she has been unmasked as a fraud, and has to leave.

“What was that?” Jessica asks. “Ashmole 1511, the bestiary?”

“No.” Fine, she might as well. “Ashmole 782.”

Lucy is taking a sip of her cappuccino, and thus misses the immediate expression on Jessica’s face, but she definitely sees it when she puts her cup down. “What?”

“Ashmole 782?” Jessica looks at her like she thinks Lucy’s pulling her leg. “The missing one? I don’t think that’s possible, right?”

“What are you talking about?” Lucy frowns. “It’s not missing. I’ve been working on it for at least a month.”

Jessica continues to look her with a funny expression, starts to say something, then stops. Then she says, in a tone of voice which implies that Lucy would know this if she was more connected to the witch world, “Ashmole 782 has been lost for hundreds of years. Creatures of all kinds have had an
interest in reading it, in getting their hands on it, but nobody can, because it’s not there. I definitely know people who’ve tried to recall it. It’s gone.”

“It’s not gone.” Lucy feels an uncomfortable prickle down her spine, as if she needs to run away, and she tries to quash it. “Like I said. I’ve been working on it.”

Jessica’s face remains caught between disbelief, wariness, intrigue, and confusion. She obviously doesn’t think that Lucy is outright lying to her, or that she’s such a sloppy scholar that she can’t be sure of the reference number of her own material, but something is clearly off here. At last she says again, “Ashmole 782 is missing.”

“Maybe they found it. They were moving things over to the Weston, they were rearranging collections, maybe it had been mislabeled or put under something else for all those years. I know it’s a real book, I’ve seen it.”

“Okay.” Jessica seems to be humoring Lucy’s suggestion, though Lucy herself thinks it’s a perfectly reasonable one. “That’s possible.”

Lucy thinks then of her momentary conviction that she was being followed. Wonders if she should mention that too. She knows this is a magical text, after all. Jessica could be right that creatures want to look at it. But all Lucy did was fill out a call slip and hand it to a man named Nigel. It wasn’t exactly a complicated spell or a torturous mystic ritual. If they want it, they can take five minutes and do it themselves.

There’s a slightly awkward moment as the conversation stalls, both of them trying to move on from that little bombshell, and after about ten minutes more, they wrap it up. Jessica says that she needs to get home and do some lecture planning, and Lucy thinks about going back to the Bod for one more crack, but the reading rooms will be closing for the evening and she could admittedly use a break. She’ll head back to her flat on Merton Street and make some pasta, watch some escapist television, and forget about this.

The shadows are lengthening to hoary violet when Lucy steps out onto Broad Street, and the lamps are starting to come on. Bells sound from the college chapels, calling Evensong, and she hurries up the cobbles, past the Bridge of Sighs on the left and the Radcliffe Camera on the right, through the narrow walk of Catte Street and out onto the High. Oxford at twilight is one of the most purely magical places on the planet, something that ordinary humans without a drop of creature blood can feel, and Lucy loves it so much that it sometimes scares her a little. She will lose it, somehow. She always does.

As she passes All Souls, she once more has the sense that the shadows might have shifted, that someone might have passed by in a blur. But there is nothing but a pool of empty golden glow when she looks, and the only creature in the night is her.

Lucy Preston never asked to be a witch. Might not have ever chosen it, if she was given the chance to do so. But she was born one anyway, and so here they are.

It comes primarily through her mother’s side. The Prestons have a long history through the centuries, ancestors involved with this or that famous event or person, all the generations of foremothers that Lucy can’t help but be aware she must severely disappoint. Contrary to the popular stereotype, witches aren’t only women – they can be both male and female, and there’s no need to have different terms for each gender. But witchcraft is and remains a particularly powerful trait for them, for the sisterhoods of the covens and the secret gift between mother and daughter, the worship of the Goddess and the spells that all use “she” as the default pronoun for the caster. Maybe it would have
been different if her mother had lived, Lucy thinks. Maybe she would have felt as if she properly belongs.

As it is, Carol Preston and Henry Wallace died when Lucy was young. She was mostly raised by her godmother Denise and her wife Michelle, alongside their kids Mark and Olivia, and it was the two of them who have always tried to encourage Lucy to embrace her magic. They’re both witches, and Denise, a former Homeland Security agent, is a reassuringly tough and competent kind of woman, while Michelle provides the mothering. They bought a rambling old farmhouse in upstate New York, after Denise retired from the feds and the kids flew the coop. Lucy mostly lived there while she was finishing her PhD at Yale, commuting to New Haven for supervisor meetings and research weekends. She insisted on going to Stanford for her undergraduate program, because Carol Preston taught there for many years, and she wanted to feel closer to her, chasing that ghost that always remains so elusive. She knows her mother wanted her to do her very best, and so anything less than perfection has never been acceptable. Her inexplicable failure at and aversion to magic, the terrifying knowledge that she is not good at this, is thus even more of a source of anxiety. She knows she’s not a Squib. She can do it, technically. She just never knows when or how or where, it’s never when she sets out to, and it’s hard to control. It’s probably all psychological. Have to want it. But she doesn’t. Contrary to all the stories, living in a magical world is exhausting and alienating.

Lucy reaches her flat and steps inside, scooping the post off the doormat and heading up the creaky stairs. She unlocks the door and turns on the light, takes out her phone, and sees a message from her stepsister, Olivia. She’s going to be in London for a few days at a delegation (Olivia has some very high-powered job at the UN and thus is rarely in one place for longer than a week) and wants to know if she can pop up to Oxford and see her.

Lucy hesitates. She loves Olivia, but she also suspects that Denise and Michelle have tasked her explicitly to get the firsthand report, rather than relying on sporadic and uninformative phone calls. She appreciates their concern, but she also feels that as a thirty-four-year-old woman, she is long past the place where she needs to be helicopter-parented. Unless it’s not that, but something else. Something to do with magic, again. Olivia is good at that too, because of course she is. One more attempt to turn on the faucet and make her gush?

After a long pause, Lucy decides that she can’t refuse without seeming paranoid and ungrateful, and she does want to see Olivia anyway, even if for just a quick chat and coffee. She types out Sure, let me know when you’re coming, and sends the message.

Just then, the lights flicker. Not for long, and not very much, but enough of an aberration to make Lucy look up, frowning. There’s not much wind, it’s not likely to be weather-related, and Jessica’s insistence that Ashmole 782 is, to use the technical term, some freaky shit has admittedly unnerved her a little. She peers suspiciously out the window, as if a fiend in a ski mask might be out there pulling fuses. Nothing. God. She has to get hold of herself.

Lucy breathes deeply a few times, looks around once more, and finally satisfies herself that it’s all in her head. She has to give a talk at the Bod on alchemy tomorrow morning, and then it will be back to research. At least her teaching commitments are minimal, though she misses it a little. But the aim of the fellowship is to produce a publishable monograph or series of articles, and if she wants to convert this into a permanent appointment, she should –


Lucy stares at the ceiling fixture until her eyes cross, looks around for something stout and heavy that she can take into the bedroom with her just in case, and makes sure the doors and windows are locked. She’s definitely not going to call 999 just because the wiring in an old building is acting
gimmicky, and she’s annoyed with herself for being unnerved. She will go back tomorrow and get the book, like before. No problem.

No problem at all.

Despite her insistence that everything is fine, Lucy sleeps shallowly, wakes up before her alarm, and gets up and boggles off for her nine-AM talk in the Divinity School lecture hall. She doesn’t think she says anything unforgivably stupid, at least, and afterward, she heads upstairs to Duke Humfrey’s as usual. Requests a selection of the Ashmole manuscripts, including 782, and waits. The reading room seems slightly busier than it normally is at this hour, but that doesn’t mean anything. People come to Oxford from everywhere.

In a few moments, the librarian returns with the books, and Lucy lugs them off to a table. She carefully undoes the clasp on 782, smoothing it open, and turns the pages. Something looks distinctly strange about the text today. As in, she’s never seen any of it, and when she opens her notebook to check, none of it matches her transcriptions. It starts to appear when she lifts each page to the light, as if it’s been written in invisible ink, and the illuminations have changed as well. Not to mention, the book is whispering, in a clamorous, hissing sound like a leaking teakettle, and as Lucy reaches out to turn the page, the text leaps off it and inks itself onto her fingers, her hands, her arms. A sudden gust of wind blows through the reading room – which is, of course, impossible – and then, all the lamps go out.

The other readers look up in consternation, a few muttered questions of confusion, as someone gets up in search of the librarian to ask if there’s been an unexpected power cut. Lucy is still trying to shake Ashmole 782’s words off her and back onto the paper, and an infernal orange glow rises from the gutter of the pages, the hand-stitched binding, as if she could lift it to her face and see through a doorway into hell. The hissing gets louder, she can’t understand why nobody else hears it – and then she slams the cover shut, and it stops.

Badly rattled, heart racing, Lucy sinks back into her chair. Only then does she become aware of a sharp pain in her right hand, and when she looks at it, sees a burn in the rough shape of a horseshoe, red raw flesh as if she’s touched a branding iron. She clumsily wraps her scarf around it, as the lights are belatedly flickering back on, but the presence of strong old magic in the reading room remains intense, thick and crushing on her chest, buzzing around her head like a swarm of bees. There’s no chance of concentrating like this, she doesn’t know that she dares to open the book again anyway, and heads are definitely turning, people staring. With as much dignity as she can muster, she gathers her things, returns the manuscripts to the safety of the pneumatic-tube void, and marches out.

She’s just on her way across the Bod courtyard, still blundering, when she clips shoulders with someone coming the other direction. He is tall, dressed in black, and for a split-second, something in Lucy’s witch instincts reacts in a way her human senses do not. She knows that he is – that he is not, and her head jerks up as if drawn by a string. His features are rugged, sharply carved, dark and handsome, his eyes black under strong brows, nose long, hair neatly parted and shirt collar pressed. She catches a whiff of laboratory chemicals, and something else. Murmurs only, “Excuse me,” and hurries out onto the street.

Once in the comparative safety of midmorning Oxford, Lucy struggles to think what to do. Did she activate something in 782 that had remained dormant until now, set off a trigger? Was it only because she mentioned it to Jessica yesterday, she let out a secret that would have been better to be kept? It definitely feels like everyone she passes is looking at her, turning their heads and whispering behind their hands, and she walks faster. She’s not really a sporty person – she tends to trip over her own feet too much for that – but she feels an urgent need to burn off some of this. She returns her things to her flat, changes into workout clothes, and goes for a run on the Thames towpath.
An hour later, sweaty and out of breath but no less anxious, Lucy goes home, decides that sitting on her ass and freaking out is not going to help anyone, and girds herself for another crack. Once she’s assured herself that she looks presentable, she determinedly returns to the Bod, looks up another book, and climbs up the steps to reach it. Except it’s just out of her reach on a high shelf, she is a petite five-foot-five, and much as she strains, she can’t grab it. Then a swoop of magic burns out of her fingers, knocks it free, and she snatches at it in mortification, as it sails over the railing. She cringes, waits to hear it hit the floor –

– but it doesn’t.

Lucy turns around, and sees that it’s been caught adroitly by someone standing just below her. It’s him, the man in black from earlier, and he’s looking up at her with an intense, avid expression, as he holds up the book. “Yours, I presume?”

He has a faint accent, not British. Something Slavic, if she had to guess, though she remains tongue-tied. She expects him to be instantly smote by another lightning bolt for talking in the library, but she climbs down the stairs and holds out her hand. “I’ll take it, thanks.”

He pauses, then passes it over, with a nod just gracious enough to seem subtly sarcastic. He is very tall, so much that it puts a slight crick in Lucy’s neck to keep looking directly into his eyes. At this close range, there’s no question at all, and the words stumble to her lips, almost stupidly. “You’re a vampire.”

Once more, he nods, as if to say with brains like that, it’s no wonder she made it here. But this – oh no. This is bad. Vampires and witches have basically hated each other since – well, since forever. That’s partly why the Congregation exists, in an attempt to keep an uneasy peace among the races of creatures who have been forced to withdraw into the shadows, as the world becomes ever more modern and scientific and human. There are strict rules, an effective apartheid, governing how the various species can interact and use their powers, and Lucy, untutored as she may be, knows that even talking to a vampire is, for a witch, not a great idea. She takes an instinctive step backward. “What do you want?”

“You’ve had an interesting morning, Dr. Preston.” He does not bother with any trifling formalities such as explaining a damn thing about who he is or why he has appeared out of thin air. “I thought you might want to talk about it.”

“I’m fine.” Lucy gives him a demure, closed-mouth, fuck-off smile, and a cascade of disapproving hushes crash down on them from the surrounding tables. Tall, Dark, and Brooding evidently does not possess enough shame to give a damn, though he does look briefly chagrined. Since he does not get the point, Lucy adds, “You can go now.”

“What happened to your hand?” He cuts his eyes at it. “Did you look at Ashmole 782?”

That is the second time in as many days that someone has evinced an unusual interest in that manuscript, and if Lucy was uneasy about it from Jess, a fellow witch, she has no taste for it at all from an unhelpful, sassy vampire. (She can just tell. It emanates from every pore of him.) They stand there in the middle of the library, staring at each other, as he plainly does not know when to quit. “Did you access it?” he presses. “Call it up?”

“What happened to your hand?” He cuts his eyes at it. “Did you look at Ashmole 782?”

“Who are you?” Lucy knows they are skating on very thin ice by continuing to make noise, but she’s not the one who came barging in with the social grace of a flaming dumpster. “Have you been following me?” If the time she ran into him outside the Bod wasn’t the first – if he’s been skulking around and trying to do God knows what –
He ignores that question, as she had a feeling he was going to. Instead, he palms out a crisp ivory-stock business card and hands it to her. Prof. Garcia Flynn, All Souls College, Faculty of Biochemistry. A phone number, address, and college email follow. He’s looking at her like he expects it to mean something. It doesn’t.

“Professor Flynn,” Lucy echoes. She wishes he would blink once in a while. Vampires generally don’t need to do anything as much as humans, but he’s taking the unsettling stare thing to a whole new level. “It was – nice to meet you, I’ll just – ”

She has tried every polite tactic imaginable to ease him out of the conversation, to drop anvil-sized hints that she would like him to remove his bloodsucking behind from the premises, and yet. He is still standing there. Indeed, he takes another step. “I’ve been looking for that book for a very long time,” he says. “If you were able to call it up and consult it, that’s very interesting to me. And just now, something happened. You felt it. We all did.”

Lucy can’t exactly deny that, but she is also far from sure that she wants to discuss any of this with a gatecrashing vampire. She edges around him, since he does not appear inclined to move, and lets him face the collective opprobrium of the reading room as she speeds out of the Bod in ignominy for the second time that day. What the hell is happening? Mysterious activations of enchanted alchemical manuscripts, and then a vampire turns up to grill her about it? The temptation to just ignore it is still very strong, but no matter how much she wants to keep her distance from the magical world, Lucy knows it would be foolish. She has to do something. Ask someone. And definitely not him.

She muddles distractedly through the rest of the afternoon, runs a few errands, and at dusk, her phone pings. Olivia’s here, at the train station, and thinks they should grab dinner. So Lucy puts on her jacket and shoes, grabs her bag, and heads down Hythe Bridge Street to the station, navigating through the endless fields of bicycle racks before she spots her stepsister, leaning on a pillar and having a smoke, which she snuffs out quickly at Lucy’s approach. They wave, run to each other and hug, and Olivia coughs. “Don’t, uh, don’t tell Mom and Mama about that. I’m still trying to quit.”

“Sure,” Lucy says, eager to establish that there will be no tattling on each other. “Where were you thinking about for dinner?”


“I – uh, sure, okay.” Olivia’s apparent conviction that she’s been having a social life that involves actually going out at night and meeting people is flattering, if somewhat depressing. It’s getting darker, a deep orange sunset smeared in the western sky, and the silhouettes of the dreaming spires are inked sharp and black against the horizon. As they start to walk, Lucy asks, “Are you heading back to London tomorrow?”

“Thursday,” Olivia says. “Don’t worry, I won’t be all up in your space. I booked an Airbnb.”

“I – I don’t mind if you wanted to sleep on my couch,” Lucy says, feeling once more like a disloyal sister. “It’s old, but it’s comfortable and all.”

“I figure you’re busy.” Olivia glances at Lucy again, apparently sensing that this is more than just a question of lodging arrangements. “Hey, are you okay?”

“I’m sorry, I’ve just – I’ve just had a very weird day.” Lucy blows out a breath and navigates them a few hundred yards up to the Oxford Retreat, a riverside pub that should do fine for a semi-nice dinner. Unless Olivia wants to go to the Bird and the Baby or other famous literary haunts, though that will probably be crowded. She doesn’t object, though, and they get a corner table, ordering drinks and appetizers. Then Lucy says, “I’m sorry. The first thing I asked was when you were
leaving, and I haven’t even said that it’s good to see you.”

“It’s okay.” Olivia shrugs. “It was kind of last-minute. And I promise I’m not here to snoop on you. But Mom and Mama are a little worried.”

Lucy debates what to say to that. Maybe Denise and Michelle think she’s not over Noah, since they were together for four years and he even popped the question before things… well, she doesn’t even know how to describe it other than the depressingly generic just didn’t work out. She initially accepted the proposal, but got increasingly colder feet, kept making excuses to delay wedding planning, and it finally became clear to everyone that her heart wasn’t in it. So she called it off and returned the ring and while she definitely did not go to Oxford just to get away from a man, it was nice to know that she was no longer in danger of running into her ex every day. Noah did his M.D. at the Yale School of Medicine and still works around there, so their paths would have crossed if she stayed. Lucy can’t even figure out what it was. If she wanted a normal, non-magical life, Noah should have been the one. He’s a sensible, professional, genuinely decent guy, they’re both a pair of high-powered academic overachievers, he supported her through her various breakdowns at the end of her degree and never made her feel bad about it. In fact, Lucy never even told him that she was a witch, since it feels like a doctor, a sober man of science who doesn’t believe in woo-woo, would side-eye that no matter what, and maybe that was part of it. Even if she doesn’t want it, she knew that she was keeping a huge part of her life from him, something that she might be forced to reckon with eventually, and just didn’t want to face that fact. She was a coward, perhaps, and he deserved better. But she also doesn’t want to marry another witch, and having that conversation with a human is… nerve-racking, to say the least.

“Lucy?” Olivia says. “Seriously, what’s wrong?”

“I’m sorry.” Lucy jumps, realizing that she’s spacing out again and otherwise continuing to be deeply rude, whether or not she intends to be. She rubs her eyes. “A lot of work, you know. And I –”

“Lucy, that – what were you doing that you ran into one of them? Was he from the Congregation? I thought you weren’t even practicing magic.”

“A vampire?” Olivia repeats, loudly enough that heads turn, and she hastily lowers her voice. “Lucy, that – what were you doing that you ran into one of them? Was he from the Congregation? I thought you weren’t even practicing magic.”

“I’m not.” Lucy is at pains to have that fact established. “But I was working on some kind of alchemical manuscript that – I don’t know what happened, and I –”

With that, more or less (or less) coherently, the strange recent happenings with Ashmole 782 spill out of her, as Olivia listens with a frown drawing down between her brows. She doesn’t interrupt, though when Lucy reaches the part about Professor Garcia Flynn, she looks like she’s going to. At last she says, quietly, worriedly, “Lucy, that book has been missing for centuries. And two seconds after you get it to do something very strange, a vampire turns up looking for it and you? I don’t like this. Maybe we should call the parents.”

“You promised you weren’t here to snoop,” Lucy reminds her. “I don’t want to worry them.”

“Well, maybe you should worry them.” Olivia nibbles restlessly on a cheese stick. “This is serious. Flynn – Garcia Flynn, I swear that name sounds familiar from somewhere. But anything a vampire wants with you can’t be good.”

Lucy has to admit that Flynn didn’t exactly make a comforting entrance (if certainly a dramatic one), but she doesn’t want to automatically assume that everyone else from other species is up to no good. Racism in the creature world works differently from the human world in some aspects, though it can
be just as damaging. There are the stereotypes: vampires are rich and ruthless, witches are sly and secretive, daemons are flighty and irresponsible, so on and so forth. Trying to change the subject, Lucy says, “Either way, I’m not going to call it up again. There have to be other texts that I can work on without – whatever that was.”

“Mmm.” Olivia’s frown doesn’t lessen. “Look, Lucy. You’re a grown woman, I’m not going to tell you what to do. But… yeah.”

“I’ll call Denise and Michelle,” Lucy promises. “I’ll see what they have to say. Okay?”

“Okay,” her stepsister says, after a slight pause. “Sounds good.”

They make conversation about non-vampire-related topics for the rest of dinner, as Olivia tells Lucy about cool stuff she’s doing at the UN and Lucy explains how she’s settling in here. Olivia listens attentively, they both agree that Mark really needs to get a job (he is in his fifth year of “finding himself,” whatever that means), and trade theories about a TV show they’re both watching. Then they finish up, pay the bill, and head out. Olivia says that the place she’s staying is out in Jericho, which is the opposite direction from where Lucy’s going, so they hug again, bid each other good night, and part ways.

Lucy’s almost back to Merton Street when she feels that sudden coldness that doesn’t come from the autumn night, like ice under her skin. She knows all at once what, or rather who, it is, and spins around so fast that she almost loses her balance. “You are following me!”

Garcia Flynn shrugs. He has been standing under the eaves of the university church as if he has nothing better to do (who knows, maybe he doesn’t). He saunters out toward her, and Lucy notices that he’s wearing a different black jacket from earlier. Apparently he has to keep his stylish brooding wardrobe changed up. “I don’t think you should be wandering around by yourself at night.”

“I beg your – ?” Vampires, by their long-lived nature, can tend to be prissy and old-fashioned, doggedly adhering to eighteenth-century social conventions and refusing to use modern technology, and Lucy is in no mood for patriarchal bullshit about how a decent lady should not be unescorted past sundown, in case someone mistakes her for an actress. (Which is usually code for a prostitute, so yes.) “Why does that have anything to do with you?”

Flynn makes an impatient noise in the back of his throat. An instant ago, he was standing by the church sign, but in the next, he’s in front of her, with that unsettling speed that it’s normally considered bad manners to employ around non-vampires. Not that such a concept ever appears to have occurred to him. “You really have no idea what you did today, do you?”

Lucy starts to answer, then stops. She can’t say it’s nothing when he’s clearly here because of it, and she takes a step back. If he wants to escalate this, she’s going to be in trouble. “If you’re wondering,” she says, “I don’t have the book. I sent it back, and I’m not going to take it out again. So if you want it, go get it yourself.”

“I can’t.” Flynn keeps pace with her, which is easy since his legs are twice as long as hers. “That’s the point, Dr. Preston. None of us can, and many of us have tried. Yet you are somehow able to call Ashmole 782 up, and to do something with it. Why?”

“I don’t – ” Lucy tries to dodge him. No luck; it’s like trying to swerve around a Mack truck on a motorbike. He is obnoxiously large, and just about as annoying. “I didn’t actually do anything. I just opened the book, I – ”

“And as I keep saying, nobody has been able to get that far for centuries.” Flynn remains planted
firmly in her path, arms folded. “Every creature in Europe wants, or has wanted, to get their hands on
the Book of Life. Your little feat today got attention – mine, others, more we don’t know about. And
you appear to have no idea that you might be in serious danger as a result. That doesn’t strike me as
very smart, Lucy.”

“Oh, it’s Lucy now?” She glares at him. “How do you know all this, anyway?”

“Not all of us ignore our origins, Dr. Preston.” He edges the title with just enough sleek sarcasm to
let her know it’s not really a surrender. He’s just doubling down on the provocation instead. “The
truth of who we are, how we were made, why our powers are fading, everything – it could be
contained in that text. Go on playing stupid if you want, but I wouldn’t advise it.”

Lucy opens her mouth, makes an angry sputtering noise, and shuts it. They reach Merton, turn down
it, and she still can’t shake him. He appears set on marching her all the way to her front door, and
who knows what he intends after that. Go upstairs and see if she’s hidden Ashmole 782 under a
laundry basket? She wouldn’t put it past him. “Professor Flynn, thank you very much for your
concern, but I’ll take care of it.”

“No you won’t.” He stares her dead in the eye. “Not like this.”

Lucy backs up another few steps, with a half-recalled memory that she shouldn’t run from a vampire
floating to mind – it might trigger hunting instincts, it might make him chase her, no matter how
urbane and civilized they like to be, no matter how many pretensions they make to not being
monsters who periodically have to drink human blood to survive. She isn’t quite so stubborn as to
totally ignore the fact that this is clearly a bad situation, but Flynn himself could be one of the
malefactors drawn to Ashmole 782 and willing to hurt her for it. She has no reason to trust him, and
he certainly is doing himself no favors with this blunt, take-no-prisoners, explain-nothing, insult-her-
intelligence flamethrower tack he’s taking. He’s a vampire, for God’s sake. He surely has to know
that a witch can’t view him as any kind of ally, and that doesn’t seem to be what he’s offering
anyway. A whole lot of other nonsense, but not that.

“Listen to me, Dr. Preston,” he says behind her, as Lucy trots as briskly as she can without running.
“They’ll come for you. They all will. You’re going to need help.”

She might answer, but at least he seems to have stopped tailing her, and right now, she’s mostly just
keen to get inside with a door that locks (not, admittedly, that that would be much of a deterrent to a
vampire who really wanted to get to her). So she doesn’t turn around, she doesn’t respond, and when
she gets to her flat a few minutes later, her hands shake so much that she almost drops her keys.
Once she’s in, she leans against the wall and tries to steady her knees. Yes. All right. She’ll definitely
call Denise and Michelle tomorrow.

She goes into her room, changes, and gets into bed. She’s wound too tight to relax, and jumps at
small noises. Then at last she closes her eyes, and doesn’t sleep for hours. And when she does, her
dreams are shadows and terrors.

It’s close to eleven PM by the time Flynn finally makes it back to the biochem lab, but this, of
course, is no deterrent for someone of their nocturnal hours. Sure enough, there’s a light on inside,
and he scans his ID card to unlock the door, stepping inside with an aggravated huff. “Well, she’s
clearly going to get herself killed.”

“What?” Dr. Jiya Marri, his research assistant (among other things), looks up from the genetic sample
she’s coding into the computer, one dark eyebrow raised in unflattering skepticism. “What did you
do this time?”
“I didn’t do anything.” Flynn strides across the floor, possessed of a frenetic energy that usually means he’s in need of a proper hunt. But it’s something else as well, and the most likely explanation seems to be total frustration that a presumably brilliant woman can be so damn stupid. “The witch who called up Ashmole 782 today, who’s been working on it. Dr. Lucy Preston. She’s going to get herself killed.”

Jiya raises the other eyebrow. “And I’m sure you were very clear and patient about explaining everything to her?”

Flynn utters an indistinct grunt. He doesn’t feel that he should have to explain the magical basics to this deliberately ignorant witch – he almost can’t believe that anyone could be so cavalier. It’s like seeing someone play blithely with a nuclear bomb, with no apparent awareness that it could be dangerous, and since he can still feel Jiya regarding him censoriously, he says, “I was trying to warn her. She won’t listen to me.”

“You’re a vampire,” Jiya points out. “I’m not surprised.”

Flynn grunts again, tempted to look around and see if she has any wine in the lab; he’s feeling as if it might be helpful. It’s not the case that vampires can only drink blood, though the alcohol isn’t going to affect him for more than a few seconds. Immortality has obvious benefits, but the inability to get drunk, at least via conventional methods, is not always one of them. “It shouldn’t matter that I’m a vampire,” he grouses. “If she gets every damn creature within a hundred miles swarming down on us, then –”

“Look –” Jiya glances around, evidently decides that it’s late enough and there’s nobody else here, and she can drop some of the formality. “Dad. Did you actually try talking to her? You know, like a normal person, even if you’re not?”

Flynn tenses. Jiya, remembering his hang-up about the word, sighs and says, “Sorry, O vampire who sired me. Did you try talking to her or not?”

“Of course I talked to her.” Flynn can’t figure out why that point was in dispute. Jiya is his blood daughter; he turned her in 1888, after he pulled her out of a San Francisco brothel, but even after over a hundred years, he’s never been able to get comfortable with her calling him that. Maybe some scars still go too deep, never entirely heal, not with endless time, the never-forgotten loss. “We’ve established that it went badly.”

Jiya makes a noise of her own that sounds a little too much like she’s wondering exactly whose fault that was, but decorously forbears to say so aloud. “Maybe don’t be a creepy stalker about it,” she suggests instead. “Women don’t tend to respond to that well.”

“Maybe they won’t,” Jiya says, more with a tone of vain hope than that she really thinks it is the case. “Other creatures. Come, that is. Maybe they didn’t feel it.”

“No.” Flynn moves to the plate-glass window. Stares out at Oxford dark and quiet, but not peaceful. Not with what, after so long, is finally waking up. “They are coming.”
Lucy wakes up the next morning feeling as if she’s been running for her life all night. She groans and throws an arm over her face; she’s been trying to get better about getting up the first time her alarm goes off, rather than several snooze cycles later. But the problem with that is that it’s always easier to give into inertia, the same way it’s always easier to stare at the wall and make internal howling noises rather than do your work, and the vivid and terrifying nature of her dreams did not help. Shadows and spiders and twisted, monstrous things, and even more than that – so clearly she woke up more than once swearing they were in the room with her – her parents. She remembers what Carol and Henry look like more from photographs than her own memory, but there was no doubt. They were here. She can’t shake the conviction, even as she knows that, obviously, they’re dead. Something about a research trip going wrong in remote Eastern Europe, rural villagers killing them after mistaking them (or rather, not mistaking them) for witches. The superstitious pitchfork peasant mob story is unfortunate, but they were both devoted to their work, no matter what. Lucy just wishes they’d thought a little more about their eight-year-old daughter, before going off somewhere that was apparently so dangerous. But no. Needed more stuff for Mom’s book.

Lucy debates an instant longer, then reaches over to her nightstand and pulls her phone off the charging cord, opening WhatsApp to place an international call. She listens to it ring, and realizes just before it’s answered that she has forgotten about the five-hour time difference between England and the East Coast of America. Her godmother’s voice says with sleepy concern, “Lucy? Is everything all right? Did something happen to you or Olivia?”

“I’m sorry.” Lucy calculates that it is presently four o’clock AM Stateside, and even Denise has gotten somewhat out of the habit of being up at the crack of dawn every day since she retired. “No, nothing’s wrong, we had a good time last night. I just – I need to tell you about something, and I don’t know if I’m overblowing it, or – ”

“What?” She can hear Denise getting out of bed, Michelle’s groggy, questioning murmur in the background, and imagines her heading down to the sunroom on the back porch, which opens onto the garden. “Lucy, you sound upset.”

“I’m sorry,” Lucy says again, the way she does whenever she feels as if she’s imposing too many of her needs on someone, is too there, too burdensome, making them do too much emotional labor or causing them any discomfort at all. It’s probably not healthy, but it’s still so reflexive. “I just – ”

With that, she once more attempts to explain the saga of Ashmole 782, her encounter with Flynn, and now the very strange dreams. Or at least, that’s what she’s going to mention next, but Denise doesn’t let her get that far. “A vampire?” It’s the exact tone that Olivia used last night, since there has never been any doubt in the Christopher household that they are witches and they follow the rules (once more, the old law-enforcement side of things), and this patently does not include fraternization with vampires. Especially, it seems, this vampire. “Garcia Flynn? Lucy, stay away from him, you hear me? Stay away.”

“Look, he didn’t jump on me like I vant to suck your blud,” Lucy jokes weakly, which doesn’t do much to break the tension. “He just – ”

“You said he was asking you about the manuscript,” Denise interrupts. “Trying to make you get it for him? Lucy, if that is the Book of Life, they can’t be allowed to have it.”

“And who is allowed?” Lucy rubs her eyes. “The Congregation?”
There’s a slight pause. Even Denise, eager as she is to shield Lucy from the mess of whatever this is, apparently doesn’t want to suggest that they rush off and get the Congregation involved. Whatever is brewing beneath the surface will blow up times a thousand, there will be magical legalities and complications, and other possible dangers. If they get it into their heads that Lucy has been conspiring to keep Ashmole 782 for herself, or acting to break the fragile accords that have kept the creature world, if barely, from outright war…

“Maybe I should come over there,” Denise says. “If this is going to –”

“No, you don’t have to do that.” If Lucy is ambivalent about having Olivia here for two days, the prospect of Denise blowing in under full sail and trying to take charge is definitely a Do Not Want. She loves her godmother dearly, but she also did want a little space away from Denise’s tendency to control and micromanage things, including her family. “I’m fine, honestly. I’ll figure it out. Okay?”

“Oh.” Lucy looks at the clock. She actually did promise Olivia that they’d meet for breakfast, even if it sounds like weaseling out. “I need to get going. I’m sorry for waking you up. I’ll call you back, right?”

With that, while Denise is still starting into a protest, Lucy hangs up, jumps into the shower, and gets dressed, then heads out, trotting a few steps up to High Street and the Grand Café. It’s a cool, murky morning, intermittently spitting rain, and she waits outside with her hood up, until Olivia, who had to walk twenty minutes from Jericho, appears on the sidewalk. “You know,” Lucy says, as they push inside the warm, elegant tearoom, fog glazing the windows. “I promise you could have stayed with me.”

“Okay,” Denise says. Lucy can hear the screen door opening in the background, and knows that Michelle has come down to see what’s going on. Great, might as well put her on speakerphone. “But Lucy, I’m serious. I know you don’t use your magic very much, and this is – it might be more than you can handle. Has it happened again? Have you tried?”

“I just… small things. I was trying to get a book down, and…” Lucy trails off. She knows that Denise isn’t trying to patronize her about her lack of magical knowledge and disconnection from other witches, but it can’t help but feel that way. “Anyway, what do you know about this manuscript, aside from the fact that it’s been lost for a long time and a lot of parties seem to want it? Flynn said something about… origins.”

She can feel Denise’s wince at the repeated mention of the vampire’s name, even if she can’t see it. Then Denise says, “You probably know more about Ashmole 782 than any other creature alive today. You’re the only one who’s seen it, read its text, drawn its illustrations. But it’s supposed to tell the secret of why we exist. Vampires, witches, daemons. That would be invaluable knowledge, in the wrong hands.”

“Weaseling out. I need to get going. I’m sorry for waking you up. I’ll call you back, all right?”

With that, while Denise is still starting into a protest, Lucy hangs up, jumps into the shower, and gets dressed, then heads out, trotting a few steps up to High Street and the Grand Café. It’s a cool, murky morning, intermittently spitting rain, and she waits outside with her hood up, until Olivia, who had to walk twenty minutes from Jericho, appears on the sidewalk. “You know,” Lucy says, as they push inside the warm, elegant tearoom, fog glazing the windows. “I promise you could have stayed with me.”

“It’s all right, I already paid.” They take a seat and order a cream tea apiece, as Olivia shakes droplets off her umbrella and hangs it on the back of the chair. “So, anything else, uh… happen? Last night, I mean.”

Lucy wonders what exactly she wants to say to this. Having already received one earful from Denise, she isn’t sure she wants another from Olivia. She’s sure it would be well-meant, and her stepsister is good at critiquing all your life choices but in a loving way (she has to do a lot of that at her job, and keeping politicians feeling important while you’re telling them that they suck is a very valuable skill). She is also sure that Olivia would be very alarmed to hear that Garcia Flynn followed her home, and while Lucy herself is also alarmed, she just wants to not talk about it again, at least for the time being. “No,” she says. “Night was normal.”
Olivia gives her a fish-eye, as she knows Lucy well enough to be aware that if it’s a choice between opening up with her problems or clamming up and pretending it’s fine, she will select the latter. But she says, “Okay,” and reaches for the teapot, pouring herself a steaming cup of Earl Grey. “I got to see a little more of Oxford on my walk over. It’s really beautiful.”

Lucy agrees that it is, and they make inoffensive and general conversation until their scones arrive. Lucy is pleased to see that the menu promises bottomless refills on the clotted cream and jam – she’s not even from here, but she feels that any place that shorts you on the cream in a cream tea is fundamentally un-British and should possibly also be shot. She and Olivia munch away, perking up with the application of processed sugar, and it’s late in the morning by the time they pay and head out into the drizzle. “I have to go down to the department,” Lucy says. “Are you okay to knock around by yourself for the day?”

“Yeah, I’ll visit the museums.” Olivia glances at her sidelong. “The Ashmolean – that was founded by the same guy who donated 782, wasn’t it? Elias Ashmole?”

“I – as far as I know.” Lucy hopes that Olivia isn’t going to conduct any amateur gumshoeing into the manuscript mystery – or, more horrifyingly, go looking for Flynn by herself. “Liv, promise me that you’ll just be a regular tourist, all right? Everything’s fine. I talked to Denise earlier, she knows what’s going on. Don’t worry.”

“I will behave myself.” Olivia holds up both hands. “As long as nothing else weird happens.”

Lucy once more stresses how firmly everything is fine and under control, perfectly fine here, and finally induces Olivia to head off. She stands in the wet watching her stepsister go, then decides that she’ll swing by the History of Science archives, next door to the Sheldonian, and pick up the books she set aside. Then – well, she still has to work, lurking vampires or otherwise. There are other manuscripts on her list to consult. It’ll be fine.

That, at least, is the plan. When Lucy walks into Duke Humfrey’s, she can’t help but notice that a large proportion of the tables are occupied, and most of them by readers she has never seen before. Not that she knows everyone in Oxford, of course, but you get to recognize the people who are researching the same insanely niche nerd shit as you, and none of these ring a bell. They all have more than a whiff of magic around them, there’s definitely a low-level murmur as she passes, and heads turn to watch her. It’s a good thing that she didn’t get out 782, whether or not she believes in its power. This lot might all swarm on it like sharks on a bucket of chum. It’s an unsettling feeling.

Lucy has just set down another of her incunabula and opened the cover, when she catches sight of who is sitting at the table across from her with an annoyed expression, for all the world as if he’s been waiting for her to show up and is put out at her lack of punctuality. God knows, maybe he has. “Good morning, Dr. Preston,” he says, in a self-satisfied, library-appropriate undertone. “Getting a late start today, aren’t you?”

Lucy stares at him, as if to see if the overwhelming urge to stake a vampire with an antique table leg will leave her. It doesn’t, but actually trying it would get her permanently banned from the reading room, and she’s not risking that on his behalf. As icily as is humanely possible, she says, “Professor Flynn.”

He smiles, with just the faintest flash of a too-sharp white canine. He appears oddly gratified that she remembers him, as if she could ever forget someone very tall, very vampire, and very pain in the ass. At least he looks as if he isn’t enjoying being crammed into a tiny chair, his knees joggling the underside of the table, but that is a hollow victory. Lucy hisses, “Stop stalking me.”

Flynn pays no attention to that. “You need to know what you’re dealing with.”
“Is that why you’re here?”

“I’m allowed to read, aren’t I?” He gives her the world’s most insolent stare, holding up whatever dusty brown-leather-bound volume he is presently consulting. “It doesn’t only have to be about you, Lucy.”

“I told you, it’s Dr. Preston.” Lucy stares down grimly at the page, which gets her all of two seconds of concentration before she has to glance up again. “And that really looks like the most cutting-edge biochemistry research. Or was that a lie too?”

“I haven’t lied to you.” He looks insulted that she would have concluded that, and perhaps, indeed, it isn’t his style. Atomic bombs of blunt-force truth, that appears to be what he’s going for – though why, or why this pestiferous immortal has inserted himself overnight into her life and appears set to stay there no matter how much she swats, remains unclear. “Besides, I happen to have other research interests.”

“Such as what?” Lucy turns the page. “Ashmole 782?”

She keeps her voice down as far as possible, but still not far enough – half the readers in here have super-strength hearing, given as they’re creatures, and heads swivel as if on ball-bearings. She has half a sense that they might push back their chairs and jump up if she says anything really juicy, and Flynn’s eyes flick from side to side, scanning for anything hiding in the underbrush. Then he says, “Yes. But we shouldn’t talk about that here.”

Lucy knows this is a fairly obvious ploy for her to ask where they should talk about it instead, and refuses to give him the satisfaction of biting. Instead, she flicks her own gaze at the tall picture window he’s facing, as if to say that he might be the one who wants to move. “I’m just surprised you find a southern exposure comfortable.”

“You shouldn’t believe everything you hear, Dr. Preston.” He sounds half-amused, half-irritated, as if her lack of knowledge about the basics of other creatures is embarrassing herself more than him. Indeed, it would be too much to hope for him to crumble to dust at dawn, and she can tell that he’s old. How old, she can’t be sure, but vampires strengthen over time, and England’s piddling attempts at sunshine hold no power to harm him. “Otherwise, I’d be asking about your broom and pointy hat.”

They’re still trying not to be completely obnoxious, but they’ve been talking for several minutes now, and the poor fools who actually are ordinary humans and are just trying to study are getting very fed up. There are disapproving hisses and sharp gestures in the direction of the exit, and Lucy can tell that it’s no good. Whether because of him or because of the peanut gallery waiting to see if she’s going to do another trick with Ashmole 782, she’s not getting any work done in here today either, and is once more forced to cut her session short. She walks to the covered market, orders a midday pick-me-up coffee, and opens her laptop. If she’s going to keep running into this idiot, she needs to know more about him.

A Wikipedia search for Garcia Flynn doesn’t turn up anything – not that the fine people of Wikipedia, no matter how hard they work to altruistically provide knowledge to the public, would be clued into anything about who he really is or what he might have done, why Denise seems especially afraid of him. Lucy does get several hits for papers he’s published in prestigious biochemistry and science journals, focusing on blood types and genetic transmissions, and hopes he isn’t a creepy pseudo-eugenicist obsessed with the imagined purity and supremacy of supernatural heritage. Those kind of creatures do exist, feeling that their extraordinary powers clearly make them preferable to boring, feeble humans, and that natural selection should be given a little kick in the behind to speed up getting rid of them. Humanity very obviously does suck, but if Flynn is mixed up in that, Lucy
doesn’t want anything to do with it. But then why make it so clear that he wanted Ashmole 782, unless he actually is arrogant enough to think he can cozen her into getting it for him, no matter what she actually thinks about him or this or anything?

Frowning, Lucy opens the All Souls site, just to double-check his bona fides. All Souls is famous as the only college in Oxford with no students – just research fellows paid a lot of money to be reclusive and brilliant geniuses. If you’re not appointed on the merits of your career, you can try to get in by passing a notoriously and ridiculously hard entrance exam, and its famous Hawksmoor Towers are the origin of the “ivory tower” metaphor for being shut up in an academic bubble away from the real world. In other words, it does not get more posh, pretentious, and intellectually elite than this, even for Oxford, and maybe if Flynn’s been in there for a while, he’s totally forgotten how to interact normally with the unwashed masses. Though it’s bold of her to assume he ever knew in the first place.

Professor Garcia Flynn is indeed listed as one of the Senior Research Fellows (possibly very senior) on the college’s website, however, and Lucy stares at the screen, grudgingly impressed. He’s clearly not an idiot in this sense, even if he very deeply is in other ones, and at least he’s put his centuries of life to use in contributing to the sum of human knowledge. But that does not answer the important question of whether he is a vampire Nazi, and Lucy is just wondering if she can contrive a visit to All Souls and ask about incriminating things Professor Flynn might have said at fancy dinners in the Great Hall, when there’s a low, amused chuckle from the door of the café. “It would be faster to ask me.”

“You – !” Her entire face burning, feeling like she’s been caught by the principal looking at porn on a school computer (which is ridiculous – it’s publicly accessible information that she has every right to be curious about), Lucy slams the laptop shut and spins on him like a deck gun. Of course it’s Flynn, and of course he’s conveying the maximum amount of sass possible with folded arms and cocked eyebrow. He really has no shame. “Are you literally going to turn up everywhere I go now? You – you – ”

“We didn’t finish our conversation from earlier.” Flynn struts in and sits down on one of the stools. Hopefully at least some of the lore about how vampires can be killed is correct, because Lucy is still very close to performing an empirical examination. “And if you did want to know about my research, I’m happy to tell you.”

Lucy eyes him balefully. She can’t tell if he’s just that rude or just that oblivious about how he comes off (possibly both). Perhaps this is a good sign, because if she felt weak and dreamy and dizzily attracted to him, that might indicate he was using vampire hypnosis on her – the mesmer, the power of suggestion by which vampires calm down panicky prey who might bolt before they can be fed on. The fact that she’s in no doubt that she can’t stand him is… paradoxically, better than if she wasn’t. Not that this induces her to ask for more details or cozy getting-to-know-you chats, but at least he’s playing honestly, if obnoxiously. There’s another excruciatingly awkward pause. Then he says, “You must have noticed how many people – how many creatures – there were in the library. Word is getting out. One of them could assume that you still have the manuscript with you, and if that happened – ”

“You can’t take books out of the Bodleian,” Lucy says, in a look-who’s-the-stupid-one-now voice. “I told you several times, I returned it.”

Flynn takes that in, tapping his long, elegant fingers on the countertop. The natural colour of his eyes is a greeny-hazel, the vampiric black just edging the pupil, and Lucy once again tries to guess where he might really be from, originally. The name sounds Spanish-Irish, the accent sounds Slavic, the looks – well, they could be from anywhere, but something makes her think Slavic too, maybe the
nose. He would be classically handsome even without supernatural elegance, but that gives him a sleek, powerful gloss, a raw charisma, to which even she, vastly irritated with him though she is, isn’t totally immune. But come on. Dark, handsome, brooding, solitary, overdramatic vampire. It is just too much of a cliché.

“You should be careful,” Flynn says at last, having evidently reeled through all the possible things he could say and selecting the most enigmatic and least helpful one. “Another witch might have used their powers to baffle a human librarian and steal the manuscript anyway. After all, it is missing. Nobody would think to look for it.”

“Yes, well.” Lucy looks at him coolly, stuffing her computer into its neoprene carrying sleeve and shoving it into her bag. “I’m not that witch. Good day, Professor Flynn.”

With that, not leaving him time to get in the last word, she marches out of the café, in her apparently endless quest to find a vampire-free space to work. She’s walking briskly down Turl Street, past Exeter and Jesus Colleges, when someone sidles up at her elbow. The lane is narrow, crowded with bicycles, and Lucy can’t easily get away. “Good afternoon, Dr. Preston. I was hoping to have a moment to talk.”

Lucy looks up with a start. Her newest interlocutor is a well-dressed older white man, which frankly should set off anyone’s alarm bells by his very nature, in a double-breasted overcoat and felted trilby that makes him look like an extra from Inspector Morse. He smiles at her, and she feels the unmistakable fizz of power that means he is another witch. “My name is Benjamin Cahill,” he goes on, when she does not contribute anything to the conversation. “I’ve recently arrived in Oxford, and I heard what you did the other day with Ashmole 782. A remarkable achievement, wouldn’t you say?”

“I’m sorry.” Lucy stares at him. He seems almost familiar, in a very distant, hard-to-place way. “Do I know you?”

Cahill chuckles unctuously. “I knew your mother when we were teenagers. Carol Preston was always a very bright light. It’s terrible what happened to her. And your father, of course. But I’m sure you make them proud.”

Once more, the words fade off Lucy’s tongue before she can be sure what to say to him. If the fact that he’s a witch, ostensibly one of her own kind, should make her trust him more than Flynn, it… isn’t quite doing that. He too swanned up out of thin air and seems to think that he’s entitled to her time, attention, and explanation, and that calculated anecdote about knowing her mother seems a little too on the nose to be entirely genuine. It’s possible that Cahill did indeed know Carol, but it certainly isn’t for the sake of any old dear friend that he’s in Oxford now. Lucy says, “Are you from the Congregation, Mr. Cahill?”

“I have some connection with their interests, yes.” They reach Brasenose Lane and turn down it, as he continues to stroll at her side, hands in his overcoat pockets. “But this doesn’t need to be a bureaucratic nightmare, Lucy. And frankly, we don’t need to give all the other creatures a chance to sink their fangs into it and tear it to pieces. We can handle this more discreetly, witch to witch. I could be very helpful to you.”

Even if she can’t be sure if Cahill knows about Flynn, Lucy is in no doubt that the “fangs” metaphor was extremely pointed, literally. In other words, he means that the vampires can’t get hold of it at any cost, and even if he is here in an official capacity from the Congregation, he’s intending to see that the witches get it instead. Fleettingly, Lucy wishes that Olivia was in fact here, the UN attaché used to negotiating with rogue governments who don’t want to play by the international rules, as this is definitely out of her wheelhouse. They emerge into Radcliffe Square, and she says, “Why exactly do
Cahill gives her an odd look, as if she’s asked why he wants to breathe, or walk on his feet, or anything else so blindingly obvious as to beggar explanation. However, he clearly scents an opportunity to establish his side of the story, and smiles. “Ashmole 782 is the Book of Life for our kind,” he says. “We’ve had questions for years – centuries – about the mysteries of our origins. It could tell us how witches made vampires to start with – and perhaps it could tell us the reverse. How to unmake them.”

Maybe it’s just because she’s been vetting Flynn for any sign of Death Eater tendencies, but that sets Lucy’s hackles up. “Unmake them?” she repeats. “Is that what you want to do, Mr. Cahill? Destroy other creatures?”

“I want to be sure that the balance of power is equitable.” Cahill glances across the square, at the Hawksmoor Towers on the far side. It could just be because they’re an iconic sight, and everything is very atmospheric with the drifting fog, but Lucy likewise isn’t about to believe that he came to Oxford for the scenery. “Your mother believed in what I wanted to achieve, if you’re wondering. Your father… distracted her from it, unfortunately, and I can assure you that she would never have died if she had held firm in her commitment. But you have a chance to fulfill her legacy, Lucy. Isn’t that worth something?”

Lucy feels as if the rain-slicked cobbles have gone out from beneath her feet, turned into quicksand, as if she might take a step and be sucked down into the depths. She can recognize that this is fairly blatant emotional manipulation, but like all good manipulation, it’s running a decent chance of working. After all, her mother’s shadow, and her absence, has driven Lucy in ways she has never fully dealt with or felt capable of unearthing, and lies at the heart of her struggle whether to accept the mantle of witchhood, whether or not she wants it – her mother did, her mother was, her mother was so much and so much better, whether in magic or in history. That was why Lucy went to Stanford, after all. Why she spent so much time desperately searching for something that made her feel connected to what she’d lost, forgot herself a little or more than that, and never even really let herself grieve, because it felt too annoying, too presumptuous of her, to have the little-orphan-Lucy sob story. Yeah, everyone knows Batman’s parents got murdered. Boo hoo. Get over it. She had Denise and Michelle and a comfortable place to grow up anyway, plenty of other kids didn’t. She wasn’t in some grim Dickensian orphanage. It felt like anything else, like still suffering over it, would be ungrateful of her. So she tried not to. She’s tried so much. And yet.

“That’s very interesting, Mr. Cahill,” Lucy says, when she trusts that her voice will be even. “But I’m afraid I can’t help you. I hope you enjoy Oxford. Good day.”

And with that, leaving a powerful supernatural man considerably nonplussed for the second time that day, she goes.

Flynn is in a strange mood for the duration of the walk back to the university scientific complex, which is located off South Parks Road roughly between Keble and Linaacre Colleges. He wishes he could say bad, as that would make the most sense, and yet again, he is frustrated by Lucy Preston’s apparent desire to give him nothing useful at all (an honest if unwelcome voice in his head remarks on that old saw about sauce for the goose and sauce for the gander, but he ignores it). She still hasn’t sorted out the first thing about Ashmole 782 or how she’s going to protect herself or what the hell she’s doing, she mostly seems inclined to yell at him when he appears, and if the entire Bodleian Library is a smoking crater tomorrow, Flynn feels as if he would be fully justified in a pointed I-told-you-so.

And yet. Something about her has gotten under his skin, in a way he does not want or appreciate. He
keeps recalling the sound of her heart, the smell of her hair, and while it might be an uncontrollable physical reaction for vampires when a certain human sets off encoded proteins in their DNA – Flynn is a supernatural and a scientist, he knows this sometimes happens, entirely out of the individual’s volition or desire – it’s considerably more disconcerting when it happens to him. If the craving starts up in earnest, he’ll need to get out of here, fast, and given what’s currently going on, that is an operational disadvantage. Why hasn’t anyone invented a hyperbaric chamber that you can just stick a vampire in and turn off this part of their brain once it starts acting up? Feels like it would be useful.

At that, Flynn is forced to admit that since the only person in the world liable to invent such a device would be him, and he hasn’t done it yet, he’ll just have to quash it by other methods. It’s an instinctive chemical response, one of the fun little quirks of being a vampire, and Flynn tends to put off human feeds as long as he can, which is not helping his current susceptibility. If Lucy does not trust him now, it would be made several orders of magnitude worse by abruptly chomping down on her neck, and even he does not need Jiya to tell him that that would be unforgivable. He’s not going to. He’ll just… do something else.

Flynn does not succeed in coming up with an alternate plan as he turns down Sherrington Road to the biochemistry building, which seems like a disappointing performance for an All Souls Senior Research Fellow. He brusquely swipes in and goes up the stairs to the lab, about to burst in and update Jiya on their woes, when he sees just in time that she’s not alone. It’s him, the colleague from Mechanical Engineering, the human. Dr. Rufus Carlin, who has been helping to build modeling simulators and software for their experiments, still does not have a blessed clue that he’s working with two vampires, and if Flynn has anything to say about it, never will. He puts the brakes on so he doesn’t blur in there, manages not to yank the door off when he opens it, and says, “Hello, Rufus.”

“Uh, hey, Professor Flynn.” Rufus has never quite gotten comfortable enough to call him by his first name, which is fine with Flynn. He is by no means oblivious to the fact that Rufus and Jiya clearly have a thing for each other, have gone out for after-work drinks too many times to be strictly professional, and while he knows that outright forbidding her to date a human would instantly backfire, that doesn’t mean he approves. It isn’t that he thinks humans are inferior to creatures or any of that nonsense, but just that it never works, Jiya would end up heartbroken one way or another, and his instinct is to protect her from that, if he can. “I was just showing Jiya the new genotype indicators I developed. Do you want to look?”

What Flynn really wants is for Rufus to clear out so he can talk to Jiya privately, as well as reducing the risk of Rufus ever indicating any part of his genotype on her, but that would be difficult. He grunts and moves over to the screen, looking at the glowing diagram. It’s currently mapping an ordinary human, but he needs to see it for one of their creature subjects to know if it’s helpful. Trying to block Rufus’s view with his shoulder, he clicks to open the file from the vampire they tested a few weeks ago.

Jiya shoots him a warning look. “Hey,” she hisses. “Should we really – ”

Flynn is tempted to point out that he’s not the reason Rufus is here, and if he just checks quickly, Rufus probably won’t notice anything amiss. This vampire tried to turn his friend, in a desperate attempt to save his life after he was hit by a car – an extremely ethically squirrely thing to do, if the vampire hasn’t explained and asked for consent and otherwise confirmed that the person is remotely okay with acquiring a new life as one of the undead, but still – and yet, he couldn’t. Failed sirings are becoming more common, and if vampires can’t make more of themselves, that obviously has implications for their long-term survival. Even they can and do die. Flynn’s own blood father – well, stepfather, his mother’s husband – was killed, and their family has arguably never been the same since. It drove Maria mad with vengeance for decades, and now this, with Ashmole 782, with witches, with Lucy –
“Hey,” Rufus says, interrupting this foreboding train of thought. “What’s that? That’s the weirdest-looking genome sequence I’ve ever seen. Maybe the coding broke. Here, let me tweak that.”

“No, the coding’s fine.” Flynn doesn’t want Rufus destroying this important piece of genetic evidence. “It’s supposed to look like that.”

“Are you sure?” Rufus scrolls down, checking his prized invention carefully. “That marker right there, M – what’s that supposed to stand for?”

“Methylcytosine,” Flynn says, slightly brittle. “Obviously.”

“Are you sure? Because that’s already gridded there.” Rufus points. “Hold on, if it’s duplicating, just let me –”

“You’re a mechanical engineer and a software programmer, Dr. Carlin, not a geneticist.” Flynn is not about to tell him that the surplus M stands, rather banally, for Magic, which is the simplest way to describe the unnatural element common to all creatures’ DNA. “I think you can trust me when I say that it’s not –”

“Look, if it’s glitching, I just want to fix it so it doesn’t –” Poor Rufus is just trying to make their lives easier, and he is a computer programmer who is therefore used to spotting tiny anomalies in code. “Or I can just… what’s that?”

Flynn looks at the notes in the bottom of the spreadsheet. Vampire, male, aged 267 (ca. 1750, Bristol). Failed siring, repeat incident. Subject DOA JRH. He lunges to scroll it out of sight, but not fast enough. Admittedly, you do not need a DPhil in genetics from Oxford University to interpret that, and there is a very long and very loud pause. Then Jiya says hastily, “It’s a joke. It’s just, you know. A mock-up. We were playing around.”

Rufus gets a squiggle-eyed expression, as if to say that no offense, Flynn has never struck him as a big jokester. Even if this isn’t his area of expertise, he’s a brilliant scientist, he’s spent a lot of time with them and working on this project, and they can see wheels spinning in his head. He’s an atheist, it’s not as if he believes in the supernatural, but there comes a point when no matter how absurd the evidence or the hypothesis, Occam’s Razor kicks into play. “Wait.” He glances between them again. “You two, you’re not –”

“No,” Jiya says. Just as Flynn, deciding that fine, the milk is spilled, and he might as well give the man the courtesy of the truth, says, “Yes.”

Rufus’s eyes bug out a little. Pieces can be seen clicking into rapid-fire place. It’s not clear what’s worse, that he doesn’t believe it or that he just might. He pushes the stool back from the workstation, getting some space between him and them, as his eyes whiz back and forth. “Wait, you didn’t – bring me up here to have as an hors d’oeuvre, or – whatever?”

“Of course we didn’t,” Flynn says impatiently. “That’s not how we work in the first place, and besides, you would never have known anything if we did.”

Jiya utters an outraged hiss, stamping on his foot, as if to remark that first he’s gone and dropped the vampire bomb, and now he is being completely insensitive about following it up – he should realize that it might, it just might, be a bit of a shock for Rufus to take in, as well as summarily torching their romantic prospects. That’s not what Flynn wants, he’s not really trying to drive him away, but if that happens, it’s just further proof that interspecies relationships aren’t a good idea. Rufus says, “This isn’t some Punk’d episode, is it? Someone jumps out with a camera and it’s Scientist Thinks Vampires Are Real, Panics! with eight million hits on YouTube tomorrow? Because honestly, guys,
“We’re —” Jiya clearly decides that she doesn’t want to lie to him either, and her eyes well with tears. “I… Rufus, I was going to tell you, it’s — it’s not what you think.”

Rufus continues to look between them. It’s plain that he’s not seeing his familiar colleagues and collaborators, the woman he’s been sort-of-lowkey-dating and her grumpy boss-dad, but a pair of unknown and potentially monstrous impostors. There comes a moment when even if a human’s rational brain insists there’s no such thing, their animal instincts (and their sphincter) know exactly what is up, and the force of the fight-or-flight response overwhelms any further futile protestations. Rufus grabs two pencils and holds them up in a makeshift cross (it does nothing to ward them off, but they don’t move). “Stay away from me.”

“Rufus —” Jiya starts pleadingly, holding out her hand. “Rufus, please, it’s still us, it’s still me, just listen, I can —”

Rufus isn’t listening. He ejects his flash drive with shaking fingers, grabs his bag and jacket, and runs out of the lab, slamming the door behind him so hard that the frame shakes. Flynn knows that Rufus’s brain is overloading with chemical signals to get out of here, that it’s out of his control in the way Flynn himself can’t stop his reaction to Lucy, but he can’t help but feel briefly uncharitable. Well, that’s no good for their research, is it? And if Rufus starts talking, or spreading the news to dangerous third parties –

“Wow,” Jiya says, breaking the silence. “Thanks, Dad. Thanks. You handled that really well. I’m so glad we got to have that conversation so tactfully and reasonably.”

Flynn opens his mouth, decides that nitpicking the “Dad” is only going to get him deeper in the mire, and feels his stomach fall uncomfortably as he looks at Jiya’s face and realizes how upset she actually is. He didn’t totally ruin that, did he? It would have been destined to failure anyway, if Rufus can’t wrap his head around vampires then he’s not much of a scientist, it might just blow over in twenty-four hours and he won’t have to put a new advert out for a research assistant, which would be –

And yet, any and all excuses, explanations, or justifications aside, Flynn can see that Jiya is very angry – her eyes have turned almost totally black, that sure sign that a vampire is about to go off with a bang – and he should probably kick into damage control mode, fast. Viz., leaving immediately. He clears his throat. “I’ll just… I’ll be over. Over there.”

With that, since he doesn’t feel like anything he could say would improve the situation, Flynn pulls back on his own jacket and hustles out of the lab. He wonders if he’ll catch up to Rufus outside, which even he can’t drive like a total lunatic the whole way due to the presence of human road users (he can thwart the speed cameras and bamboozle policemen, but still). He’ll pick up the M6 at Birmingham and take it north of the border, probably be driving all night, but he can make it up to the family estate in the Highlands by early morning tomorrow. They own (among numerous other properties) a remote, rambling mansion house and ten thousand acres in the Cairngorms, empty and wild and a long way from anywhere, and right now, Flynn does not feel fit to be in the company of anyone, human or creature. There are red deer there, and while not a total substitute for a human feed, one of them might tide him over for a while. At least he will be prevented from further calamities with
Flynn doesn’t need to stop for food or bathroom breaks, only for petrol, and the further north he gets, the emptier the roads are, enabling him to make decent time. He is very much looking forward to being alone, having some space, and trying to figure out what the hell to do about a stubborn witch, an enchanted manuscript, an angry daughter, a possibly compromised research project, half the creatures in Europe swooping down on Oxford with doubtless more to come, and Christ knows what else. The dawn is a thin pink fingernail in the east when he finally turns through the gates of the estate and crunches down the long drive, to the Jacobean mansion set in solitary splendor at the end. He parks, looks up at the house, and to his confusion, sees a light on inside. Is one of his brothers here? He’s not in the damn mood to put up with either Gabriel or Wyatt, and he deeply hopes not. Then the door opens, and he has to struggle not to groan.

The family – Maria has taken the surname de Clermont, from the place in France where she lived the longest, and the rest of them use it to some degree, though they’ve also kept their own names with familiar associations – has long employed a particular daemon as a sort of all-purpose butler, assistant, fixer, and other man for odd jobs. However, the fact that magic is actually real has never ceased to profoundly get his goat. Erik Weisz was born to a Hungarian Jewish family in the late nineteenth century and immigrated to America when he was four years old. He got into the circus and vaudeville business and achieved considerable fame under his stage name: Harry Houdini. He learned his tricks the hard way, was committed to debunking spiritualists and other occult nonsense, and even now, he will wince if you suggest that any of his success was due to his daemonic nature. How he ended up as a consigliere for a powerful vampire family is surely a vastly interesting tale, and he seems to like the job well enough, but he and Flynn have always had… well, differences. Flynn inadvertently terrifying him on their first meeting seems to have stuck, and even though Houdini has been an informal part of the family for years and years, they still butt heads.

“What are you doing here?” is the first question out of Houdini’s mouth, when Flynn opens the car door and steps out into the still, cool Scottish dawn. “Aren’t you supposed to be in Oxford?”

“Good to see you too, Harry.” Flynn arches an eyebrow. “Aren’t you supposed to be in Paris?”

Houdini shrugs. He most recently moved to the City of Light with the eldest de Clermont brother, Gabriel, who has owned an elegant townhouse on the Rue de Rivoli since the Jazz Age parties of the 1920s (he will still, if you let him, go on and on about what a thundering bore F. Scott Fitzgerald was and how he stole most of his material from Zelda anyway). Gabriel is the very essence of vampire wealth and power and class: he works as an antiques and art dealer, attends events at the Louvre and the Sorbonne and other such institutions of haute couture, goes to Sotheby’s auctions and donates millions of euros to philanthropic causes. He is, in short, an annoyingly perfect and successful son, who regards his younger brothers’ turbulent careers with a sort of arch pity. Wyatt’s an idiot, that can’t be denied, but Flynn has always somewhat resented Gabriel’s dismissal of him. He’s a respected scientist with a senior position at one of the most pre-eminent centres of learning in the western world, he’s not a crack-smoking loser, but that conviction seems to have unavoidably rubbed off on Houdini. The daemon enjoys the glamorous Parisian lifestyle, has been thinking about starting a new showbiz career, so to find him up here in the rural ass-crack of Scotland is something of a surprise. Not, as noted, a particularly welcome one.

“I needed a break too,” Houdini says casually, following Flynn up the steps and into the dim mansion. “What did you blow in Oxford, then?”

“Who says I blew anything?” Flynn snaps, with exactly enough defensiveness to make it plain that that is precisely what he did, and repeatedly. “You must have felt it as well, even up here. Ashmole 782. A witch found it, woke it up, and all hell’s about to break loose.”
He senses more than sees both of Houdini’s eyebrows shoot up. “I did notice something,” he admits. “So what, it’s going to be another pissing contest between vampires and witches to get their hands on it? While daemons are treated like third-class citizens, again.”

Flynn muffles a sigh, as while Houdini’s feelings on the persistent marginalization of daemons in creature politics are valid and important, he is not in the mood for yet another screed. “Trust me, Harry, it’s for the best. You don’t want to get mixed up in this.”

“Except if you are, then the de Clermonts are,” Houdini says. “And that means I am too. You’ve been looking for this – how long, Garcia? At least since Darwin.”

“Longer,” Flynn says tersely, striding into the kitchen and pulling a wine bottle out of the dumbwaiter. He twists it open and pours it into a glass; vampires only drink red, and the house is well-stocked on that front. “And the witch herself – she’s not listening to anything I say to her. She refuses to practice or learn about her magic, she doesn’t know what she’s stepped into the middle of, she’s still pretending everything is –”

Clearly he is prepared to go on at length as to the grievances Lucy Preston has caused him, but Houdini is standing there with a too-knowing expression that makes his spine prickle uncomfortably. “And?” the daemon says. “There’s something else, isn’t there?”

“Yes.” Flynn stares at the faint outline of his reflection on the window (vampires do in fact have one, but old-time mirrors were backed in silver, which repels them, and hence gave rise to the legend that it applies universally). “She – I just thought it would be better if I was away from her from a few days.”

“It’ll make a nice change from you constantly turning up underfoot, no doubt,” Houdini comments, which makes Flynn once again feel that a butler (even one who is more of an independent colleague) really should not be so eager to roast his employer to a crisp at every opportunity. “But let me get this straight. You think she’s in danger, that there’s about to be a major incident in Oxford and that’s why you followed her everywhere, and now you’re all the way up in Ballater for some bracing Scottish rain? Garcia, what’s really going on?”

Flynn chews it over grimly. He has his doubts that Houdini will say anything helpful in this department, but so be it. “I’m craving her,” he says. “And I… would rather not.”

There’s a fractional pause. For once, Houdini does not have something smart to fire back. He knows that this can be a serious situation for a vampire, and one that the vampire him-or-herself physically cannot prevent. If you imprint onto a particular human, if they affect you just so, sometimes the only way to break the lure is with a feed. Vampires have gone mad trying to resist the craving, or giving into it too violently. It’s not something to be messed with, in other words, and even Houdini can understand that Flynn would prefer to be here in Scotland rather than risk losing control around Dr. Preston. Sometimes it goes away after a few days. Sometimes it doesn’t. But he isn’t going to think about that.

“Fine,” Houdini says, after another moment. “I’ll get the Land Rover. We can go stalking.”

For once, Flynn’s grateful that the daemon knows what to do and is practical about carrying it out. He doesn’t need to sleep, even after the long drive from Oxford, and Houdini gets the keys, tosses them to Flynn, and they walk out to the garage. They drive up the long single track into the high, rugged mountains and moorland, bumping the undercarriage over a few of the rougher sections, until Flynn catches the scent. He pulls over, steps out of the Land Rover, and spots the eight-point stag about two hundred yards away. It is also aware of the presence of the hunter, and after another moment, it bolts.
After that, it’s a straight chase, across the heather and stones and windswept glens. Flynn is almost as fast as the stag, it’s been a long time since he’s had a chance to really unleash, and he lets it get ahead a few times just to extend the exercise. But at last, necessity beckons, he cannot put off the need anymore, and pulls even with the stag, cornering it and cutting off its escape, catching it in his thrall. It goes to its knees, surrendering, and Flynn approaches slowly. They respect each other, and he does not want to drain the beast totally dry. But he needs a clear head, he needs to be able to face whatever is coming next, and the stronger he is, less prone to distraction and weakness, the better.

Afterward, the rich, gamey taste of the stag’s blood lingering in his mouth, he goes back to the Land Rover and the waiting Houdini, and they drive down the mountainside in silence. The sun is well up by now, though the day is grey and cool, and there’s a nip in the air that seems to promise snow. As they reach the main house, Houdini says abruptly, “Is it just craving, then? Whatever Dr. Preston’s sparked in you?”

“Yes.” And that, Flynn thinks, is bad enough. But while the craving is perfectly capable of happening on its own accord, it’s true that there’s often an element of attraction in it, sexual or otherwise. He’s definitely not going to try anything with that, doesn’t want it, doesn’t think it’s wise. He’s not such a thundering hypocrite as to chase off Rufus from Jiya and then get in too deep with a witch. Especially when the old boundaries and ancestral prejudices of the creature world are once more about to be sharply drawn, when the mystery and the danger of Ashmole 782 is only going to deepen. He can sense what else Houdini’s asking, and adds rather tartly, “Her virtue is in no danger from me.”

Houdini makes an indeterminate noise in his throat. The subject of Garcia Flynn’s romantic history is one best avoided, as it is limited in extent and disastrous in execution. The loss of his human wife, long ago, and then exactly two lovers, Eleanor and Matej, over almost a thousand years. Neither ended well. They don’t bear repeating.

“You’d better be sure,” Houdini says. “Before you go back to Oxford. That you can control yourself around her, in. . . whatever fashion.”

“I will be.” Flynn stares out through the windshield. “You have my word on that.”

The daemon glances sidelong at him, but doesn’t say anything else. They get out of the Land Rover, and head inside. Flynn can’t stay up here too long, and some of the pounding need of the craving has subsided after his feed on the stag, made him feel more like himself again. But while they don’t talk about Lucy Preston for the rest of the day, and no matter how diligently he ignores it, it hasn’t gone away entirely. But it will. It has to.

It has to.
Lucy does not get much done for the rest of the afternoon, even after finding a spot in Univ’s college library where neither Garcia Flynn nor Benjamin Cahill (hopefully) can get to her. She keeps staring aimlessly at her typed notes, changing two words, and putting in a comma, which is about as busywork as it gets, and finally gives up in disgust. She needs to be in the Bodleian with proper access to manuscripts, and she can’t hide here forever, no matter how long any number of creatures intend to stake out the reading room. She’s not suggesting some major battle among the books, but can’t they just give up and go away? Or try to call it up themselves, if it’s so important? The standoff isn’t going to go on forever. Eventually, one way or another, someone is going to lose patience and try something drastic.

That thought gives Lucy a chill, and she’s on edge as she leaves Univ that evening. She’s had about all she can take of weirdoes appearing from thin air and wanting to talk to her, to the point where she’s considering whether she might invest in some pepper spray. There’s not really much need to carry it in Oxford otherwise, but as Lucy hurries in the direction of Little Clarendon Street, where there’s a new Indian bistro that she and Olivia are going to try, she’s pretty sure that a red-haired woman is drifting casually along in the crowds with her, at just enough of a distance to make it seem coincidental. In contrast to the others, she isn’t going for the upfront bombastic approach, just keeping an eye from afar. Or maybe she isn’t following Lucy at all, and could have perfectly normal reasons for going the same direction. How much paranoia is too much paranoia?

Somewhat to her surprise, Lucy doesn’t see Flynn anywhere, which is… not disappointing, given as she couldn’t wait to get rid of him, and he for one has been extremely unsubtle about popping up like mushrooms after a hard rain. But as she stands outside the bistro and glances up to see that the red-haired woman is leaning against the alley wall and enjoying a leisurely cigarette, Lucy half-wishes he would in fact turn up. Even just for five minutes, which would be annoying but at least predictable. Besides, she can tell that the other woman is a witch, and a powerful one. She might clear out if there was a vampire from further up the food chain to roll in. But of course, Flynn can’t even be accidentally helpful, and thus nada.

Olivia arrives in a few more minutes, they go in to get their seats, and prepare to rate the authenticity of the place by how spicy the curry is. Growing up with Denise’s family cooking has given Lucy a more tolerant palate than your average white girl, though she’s not going to go too crazy. “So, did you have fun today?” she asks. “Back to London tomorrow?”

“Actually…” Olivia pauses delicately. “I was thinking about going to Venice.”

“Venice?” Lucy may be relatively untutored in creature politics, but even she knows that Venice is the headquarters of the Congregation, the place where vampires, witches, and daemons (or rather, their semi-elected representatives, which usually functions as a nepotistic oligarchy instead of any proto-democracy) meet periodically to discuss matters and settle issues. Issues such as, say, Ashmole 782. “Liv, you’re not going to tattle on me, are you?”

Olivia raises an eyebrow at this turn of phrase. She is the daughter of a Homeland Security agent and works at the UN; she loves Lucy, but her overriding belief is that they need to let the appointed government channels take charge and work through this by established protocol. “You know there could be more trouble if it looks like you’re trying to hide this,” she points out. “At least if I go there pre-emptively and try to get things sorted out, that could lower the amount of misinformation floating around. Show we’re not… conspiring.”

Lucy takes a bite of her benne dose and tries to think how to answer. Olivia could well be right that
just turning themselves in and trying to get ahead of the curve, before anyone runs away with
dangerous delusions of what she has supposedly been up to, has some merit. God knows she does
want this to be someone else’s problem and to get back to her research without every creature in
Oxford breathing down her neck, but something – she can’t say what – still instinctively resists this.
“Are you sure?”

“I think it’s better than trying to cover it up,” Olivia says. “I promise, I could explain that it was just–
well, whatever it was.”

“Mmm.” Lucy should be agreeing to this idea, she should have Olivia’s same implicit trust in the
Congregation to listen and do the right thing, and yet, she isn’t sure that she wants the most powerful
creatures in the world given concrete confirmation that she was able to access a manuscript all of
them are apparently extremely interested in. If nothing else, the unwanted advent of Flynn and
Cahill, and now the red-haired woman smoking in the alley, have proven that these people aren’t
going to stop coming until they get something, and it doesn’t matter in that case what Lucy thinks.
“I’m not saying it’s the wrong thing to do, but…”

“You’re not saying that, but you don’t sound very enthused.” Olivia cocks her head, her expression
questioning. “I thought you wanted this to be over with.”

“I do, but…” Lucy trails off. “There was someone else today. A witch. He said that he was from the
Congregation, or had something to do with them. They might know already.”

“Oh?” Olivia looks startled. “Who?”

Lucy tells her about Benjamin Cahill, his insistence that he knew her parents, his insinuation that if
she just gave Ashmole 782 to him, witch-to-witch, he could smooth everything over with the brass.
That comment about “unmaking” other creatures, which she isn’t sure she really likes, and the
attempt to manipulate her with the reference to her mother’s legacy. “I don’t know,” she finishes up.
“I’m not sure the system can help us on this one.”

Olivia blinks, frowning. This is, of course, not her usual instinct. “Benjamin Cahill alone isn’t the
Congregation. We have no proof they actually sent him or that he’s doing what they want. And
what’s the alternative, letting a vampire get it? Garcia Flynn is one of the de Clermonts, Lucy. Did he
tell you that? I’m guessing not.”

That, despite herself, catches Lucy off guard. The de Clermonts are possibly the oldest, richest, and
most powerful vampire clan in existence, and all of them have had eventful careers down the
centuries – millennia. The family matriarch, Maria, is infamous as a witch-killer, after her husband
Asher was murdered many years ago and she blamed them for his death. Her blood children all have
prominent roles in mortal and immortal politics and society, though Lucy can’t remember their names
offhand – obviously, or she would have twigged on that Flynn was one of them. “What?” she
manages, shaken. He didn’t seem like an outright murderer – socially catastrophic and unwarrantedly
smug, yes, but still. “Really?”

“Yes. There are three sons. Gabriel, Garcia, and William – well, that was his original name, but I
think he goes by Wyatt now. Gabriel lives in Paris, Garcia’s here, and Wyatt is their representative to
the Congregation. If Garcia told his brother about this, we’re already well behind the eight-ball. You
need to let me go to Venice and find out what they know.”

“You’ve been doing some research of your own,” Lucy says, a little weakly. Apparently Olivia
didn’t spend the day just larking around Oxford and taking in the sights, for which she can’t be
blamed. Against the alarming facts that Flynn’s mother is a noted witch-hater and his brother is on
the Congregation, it hardly feels as if she can muster “well, he didn’t try to hypnotize me?” as a
defense. Maybe he was sent in to sound her out first, was just actually so bad at his job that he tricked her into feeling sorry for him, and then something something dastardly plan. Yet it feels as if Flynn could have made everything a lot easier on himself than he did, and… Lucy doesn’t know what that means, but if he is outright evil…

“Yes,” Olivia says. “I talked to Mom too, and she told me that she thought he was one of them and there were a few places I should check. You know there’s no way we could ever trust a de Clermont, Lucy. So if that’s the case – ”

Lucy takes another bite of her supper, rather than risk saying something ungracious. She resents the fact that Denise apparently tasked Olivia with doing this and then communicating it to Lucy, rather than telling her directly, and that even from afar, her godmother is trying to call the shots. She knows that it’s in the name of protection, but it’s also clear that Denise does not entirely trust Lucy’s decisions on this, and that she might have given Olivia marching orders to proceed straight to Venice regardless of what Lucy protests. “Well,” Lucy says, as lightly as she can. “If you two have this all figured out, I guess I just – what, rubber stamp it? Does it even matter that I am the one who called it up?”

“Of course it does,” Olivia says. “But that’s why we’re trying to make sure you’re safe. We – well, we both know a lot more about the creature world than you do. I’m not blaming you, I know it’s been complicated. But we’re fully qualified witches, and you’ve said plenty of times that you don’t want to be one. So how about letting us handle this?”

“Right, yeah.” Lucy’s cheeks sting, but she forces a smile. She can’t really muster much else to say for the rest of dinner, though Olivia can clearly tell that she’s struck a nerve and keeps trying to coax Lucy out of her shell. They decide the food was authentic, pay, and part somewhat stiffly outside. Lucy says, “Well, have a safe flight to Venice, then.”

“Lucy…” Olivia looks at her with troubled concern. “I’ll just – I’m going to make sure this gets handled properly, all right? You know it’s what I do.”

“Yeah. Of course.” Not wanting to part on bad terms, Lucy reminds herself to deal with this like a mature adult, to see it in the loving spirit in which it is meant, and nods as bracingly as she can. “I appreciate it, Liv. I really do. Let me know how it goes, all right?”

“As soon as I can,” Olivia promises. “I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

They hug quickly, then head their separate ways, as Lucy feels guilty for being relieved that Olivia will be gone tomorrow, and trying to figure out whether she wants to call Denise again and ask for more information about Benjamin Cahill. Denise and Carol were friends since freshman year of high school, so if Cahill did know her mother since they were teenagers like he claimed, Denise would be able to vet that story. But Lucy isn’t sure she wants to talk to Denise again just now, even if she should. What she really wants is to go home, put on flannel pajamas, and eat spoonfuls of Nutella and peanut butter directly out of the jar (shut up, she’s an adult). Maybe also binge some more Real Housewives, which she as an educated, feminist intellectual feels accordingly guilty about, but it’s comforting to remember that there are plenty of people out there whose lives are far bigger messes than yours. Basically, wrapping up in a blanket and having stupid things not happen. That, or –

She looks up sharply. She can hear footsteps, not far away, casually marking hers, and knows without a doubt that the red-haired woman is following her. Weirdly enough, she would almost prefer that it was Flynn. At least she knows what he would probably do (say something obnoxious and pester her about Ashmole 782). Why didn’t he just grab her the first time, mesmer the shit out of her, and force her to call it up, if the de Clermonts are so power-hungry and untrustworthy? It’s pretty clear that whether magically or physically, she probably wouldn’t be able to stop him. Unless
this is some kind of ridiculously complicated long con to earn her trust, and frankly, he doesn’t seem
clever (or remotely able to pull it off, socially speaking). So what –

Another crunch, a flicker at the edges of sight, and Lucy loses her patience. She stops short in the
middle of Cornealmarket and yells, “Fine. Come out! Get it over with!”

A long pause, and then her pursuer – shadow – whatever she is – steps into sight. She is indeed red-
haired, green-eyed, and freckled, her gaze cool and her presence commanding. If Cahill was the
carrot, it is clear that she is the stick, and she regards Lucy up and down with a sense that she is not
very impressed. “So,” she says. “You’re the one who started all this fuss? Not exactly what I
expected.”

“What were you expecting?” Lucy has to admire that the other witch isn’t even pretending to play
nice, not bothering with any glib palaver or sugarcoating. She knows why she’s here, she knows that
Lucy knows why she’s here, and now they can get down to the brass-knuckles part without any
irksome diplomacy. “Did Cahill send you, after earlier?”

“Benjamin Cahill is an idiot.” The woman snorts. “A grinning Halloween pumpkin, and just about as
useful. I’m not surprised you blew him off. Frankly, I would too. Where’s the manuscript, Lucy?
Still in the Bodleian? Even if so, I know you have notes, transcriptions, drawings. You can give
those to me now, or – ”

“Or?” Lucy clutches her bag a little more tightly. For all this talk about how she can never trust
vampires and Flynn is going to turn on her the instant he has the chance and the de Clermonts can’t
get their hands on it no matter what, the witches sure aren’t providing a compelling counterargument.
“You’ll kill me?”

The other witch laughs, low and husky in her throat. “Oh no, princess. I’m not going to
kill you. But
we can definitely see how well your magic stacks up against mine, if you like.”

“Princess? So what are you, the wicked stepsister?”

“Emma.” The red-haired witch still seems amused. “Emma Whitmore. The Bod’s closed now, I
know there’s no point in trying to retrieve Ashmole 782 right this instant, but what about first thing
tomorrow morning? Seems like the easiest way for everyone.”

“I’m not getting it for you.”

Emma smiles, one corner of her sharp red lipstick turning up like a stab wound. “So you want to play
hardball, then? All right. Witch after my own heart. But aren’t you afraid of the poor little humans
that could get in the way? Meet me there tomorrow morning, this doesn’t have to get any messier.
Oh, and where’s that vampire? We can handle him while we’re at it.”

“I don’t know.” Lucy’s almost grateful for it. “And I’m not – ”

She doesn’t know what it is, some unused perception, some sixth sense or innate magical warning
system, that alerts her that Emma is about to attack, and her hands flash up before she knows what
she’s doing. They burn with eerie orange light, flaring in a protective force field around her, as
Emma’s serpent-quick blow thunders and splatters off into harmless sparks on the cobblestones.
Lucy reels, isn’t sure what she did or if she can sustain a second volley, but Emma looks surprised
enough, apparently expecting that to be shooting fish in a barrel, that it gives her just enough time to
collect the ambient energy, spin it up like rolling a ball out of clay, and throw it back at her
adversary, in a flashing, bursting parabola. If Emma was remotely prepared for her or treating her
like a serious opponent, it probably would have done nothing whatsoever, but at least everyone
underestimating Lucy or treating her like a child or a weakling has finally backfired, literally. It blows Emma off her feet, a car alarm goes off and a light comes on in the Lloyd’s – probably the night watchman wondering if someone’s about to break in – and in the split-second of time that this affords her, Lucy bolts.

Lucy feels like she’s passing out on her feet as she runs, her veins dried out, her fingers charring and burning with too much magic to be controlled or used at once, her head reeling and her knees buckling. She feels like she might be sick – that curry will burn a lot more coming up than it did going down – and has to swallow ferociously, even as she feels like a puppet where someone has cut the strings. She barely stays upright the rest of the way, as she dodges down King Edward Street past Oriel and Christ Church, veers onto Merton, and claws on hands and knees up the stairs to her flat. Mercifully, none of her neighbors are getting home at the same time, or they would likely assume she was having a stroke and call 999. She isn’t sure she’s not, and it’s an arduous, exhausting ordeal to find her keys and unlock the door, then tumble bonelessly through. She lies facedown on her doormat, gasping, before she pulls her feet through, kicks the door shut, and struggles to lock it. Her hands are too big and too small and too clumsy all at once. She feels like Alice down the rabbit hole.

Lucy lies there for some indeterminate amount of time, unable to control or move her limbs, seeing bright sparks, and seriously wondering if she is in fact dying. Eventually, however, the painful, nauseated haze subsides enough, like the aftermath of a terrible migraine, to allow her to crawl into the kitchen and get a cup of water. She still gags when she sips it, as her throat is too parched to accept it, but in small degrees and tiny portions, she manages to get it down. Then she drinks another one, since she feels so thirsty that her eyeballs are withering in her skull. Jesus, what the hell. She just went very seriously after another witch, and that wasn’t any kiddie-pool, beginner-level spell. Something in her wanted to kill Emma, or damage her very badly, and she doesn’t know what she did, or how.

Jumping at every small noise in the hallway, Lucy drags herself into her room, manages to strip her clothes off, and bundle into her pajamas. She’s woozy again by the time she finishes, collapses onto the bed, and struggles to recollect enough higher motor function to plug her phone in to charge. She has things to do tomorrow, she knows she does. Responsible things. Not getting Ashmole 782 out for Emma Whitmore, which is clearly a terrible idea, but others. She can’t just – she can’t – she can’t…

The next thing Lucy knows, it’s light in her bedroom, she’s sprawled out in a tangle of mashed pillows and drool, she feels as if every inch of her has been beaten, and she is deeply regretting her conscientiousness in plugging in the fucking thing, since it’s shrilling repeatedly at her to get up and start acting like a human. She pushes herself upright with a shaking hand, almost collapses again, and has to admit that there’s nothing she’s going to do for anyone, much less herself, in this state. She slaps at the phone to shut it up, puts her head back down, and passes out again.

She remains in this catatonic state for the rest of the day, finally waking up for good around four o’clock in the afternoon and feeling like gritty-eyed, stiff, cramped, desperately-needs-to-pee total crusty dogshit. Lucy stumbles out to do this, wonders if there’s any point getting dressed, and decides there isn’t. She blunders out to her kitchen, feeling like Bigfoot waking from winter hibernation, and makes herself a cup of tea and a biscuit. She nibbles cautiously, in case her stomach is still revolting, but it makes her realize that she is in fact ravenously hungry. She manages to put together a makeshift dinner, sits staring at her wall, and finally decides that enough is enough. Her stubbornness and denial and I’ll-go-it-alone mentality have served their purpose, but not anymore. She takes out her phone and dials Denise.

She has a sense that her godmother might have been waiting anxiously for a call, since it’s answered on the second ring. “Lucy? We’ve been trying to reach you for hours. What’s –”
“Sorry.” Lucy rubs a hand over her face. “It’s – yeah, never mind. I haven’t been feeling well. I’m better now, I think. Anyway, what do you know about a witch named Benjamin Cahill? He turned up in Oxford yesterday, and he said he knew Mom.”

“Benjamin Cahill?” Denise sounds wary. “It’s been thirty years since I heard that name. He – yes, he knew Carol, when we were young. He was crazy about her, actually. But he got involved with some… well, with some witches that had certain ideas, and she had to tell him to stop contacting her. She didn’t trust him by the end, and your father didn’t either. If he’s in Oxford, you need to be careful.”

“So what, he was Mom’s Snape?” Lucy had a sense this might be the case, but she’s still displeased to have it confirmed. “But last time, you were telling me about how the vampires couldn’t be trusted, and I had to stay away from Flynn, and now even the witches are bad news? Is anyone the right person to confide in about this?”

“I’m trying to work that out,” Denise says. “Has anything else happened?”

Lucy hesitates. “There was another witch, last night. Emma Whitmore. I don’t know if she was working with Cahill or not, she didn’t seem very impressed with him. But she wanted me to take the manuscript out. I refused, and it got a little… heated.”

“What?” That’s Michelle’s voice, so clearly Denise has once more shared this whole conversation with her wife. Not that she shouldn’t, but fine, it’s a family party. “Lucy, you did magic?”

“Yeah, it was….” Lucy tries to decide if this should be played off as ordinary or not. “I don’t know what I did, but it startled her.”

She can almost feel Denise and Michelle exchanging significant glances on the other end of the phone. Then Michelle says, “Emma Whitmore – I think I know the name, but it’s likewise been a long time. She’s been off the grid, some remote cabin in Finland or somewhere. From what I’ve heard, it wouldn’t surprise me if she and Cahill were in fact in with the same people. Once Olivia gets to Venice, we need to make sure this doesn’t – ”

“Yeah, about that.” Lucy wants to control herself, but the bitterness spills out a little anyway. “You told Olivia that you thought Flynn was a de Clermont, but not me. You wanted Olivia to go handle things with the Congregation. Were you ever going to tell me?”

Another pause. Then Michelle says, “Honey, we did tell you.”

“No, you had Olivia decide whether or not she would. I’m not much of a witch, but I’m not a toddler, okay? If this is this important, if you’re making major decisions and involving the top levels in it, maybe clue me in, all right? If nothing else, I’ll know what’s being done about it, and I won’t risk messing things up. Like you apparently think I will.”

“We’re just trying to protect you,” Denise says. “And if you’re sure you wouldn’t rather have us come to Oxford in person – ”

Lucy wonders if she should in fact invite them, now that things are getting physical. But it would also give Emma and Cahill more targets, and she can’t say that it would be worth what it could possibly cost. She can’t lose another set of parents, not again, and she’s still bristling at being kept in the dark, even with good intentions. At least Flynn was baldly upfront about what he wanted, practically wouldn’t shut up, freely offered to tell her about his research or whatever else she wanted to know. Lucy is still slightly annoyed that he’s managing to redeem himself in absentia, even if only by virtue of all the other options seeming worse, but there you have it. She doesn’t know where he
is, if he did in fact slope off to some remote Transylvanian castle to brood, but she still has his business card. What else is to lose?

“No,” Lucy says. “It’s all right, I thought of someone I might ask. You two should stay in New York, it’s probably safer for you anyway. I promise, if something major does come up, I’ll let you know. But in the meantime, that’s that. Okay?”

Both Denise and Michelle start into protestations, then stop. They can sense that they might have been a little heavy-handed, and Michelle finally says, “All right, we’ll let you have another crack at handling this. But Lucy, just remember that we’re here for you, no matter what. We don’t care how dangerous it is, it’s better than having you face it alone. If it gets bad, call us. We’re coming out there.”

“I promise,” Lucy says again. “I love you.”

Both of them echo it back to her, and the call ends on that somewhat constructive note. With that, Lucy is left with the actual prospect of some sort of interview with a vampire, and wonders if she should call him now. It’s the evening, but that might be just starting the day for him. If he’s in Oxford. Is it wrong to think that if he was, he would have turned up last night when she was fighting Emma? If nothing else, he wouldn’t want his own meal ticket to Ashmole 782 jeopardized. That, or maybe he found another witch to do his dark bidding, and discarded her like an empty coffee cup. For no discernible reason, that stings.

Fine, Lucy thinks grimly. If she doesn’t do it, she’ll just sit here for the rest of the night worrying about doing it tomorrow, and it can’t hurt to get a jump on things. She gets up, digs through her bag until she finds the business card – somewhat bent, but still intact – and takes a deep breath. If she is going to ask a vampire, and a de Clermont vampire, to help her, she really must be desperate. But, it would seem, she is.

She puts in the office phone number on the card, and listens to it ring. She’s just about to hope it goes to voicemail, or maybe she can hang up before then, when it’s answered. “Hello? Biochem 110.”

It’s not Flynn’s voice. It’s a young woman’s, and she sounds wary. Lucy opens her mouth, blanks on words, and it’s only after the other woman has repeated herself, as if to check if anyone’s still on the line, that she manages to answer. “Uh – sorry – is this Professor Flynn’s office? Professor Garcia Flynn?”

“Yes.” The young woman now sounds considerably surprised. “Who is this?”

“My name’s Lucy, Dr. Lucy Preston. We – I sort of – met him the other day.”

“Oh.” There’s a little too much knowing in that word, until Lucy wonders what sort of impression exactly she made on Flynn. “I’m Jiya, Jiya Marri, I’m his… research assistant. He’s not here right now. He went up to Scotland last night.”

There is just enough ice in Jiya’s tone to make Lucy suspect that she is also presently ferociously annoyed at Flynn, and it makes her feel an unexpected spark of kinship with the other woman. At least it confirms her theory that Flynn was in fact not in Oxford, and she isn’t sure whether or not that’s a good thing. “I’m sorry,” Lucy says. “Should I call back?”

“It’s all right,” Jiya says, thus confirming herself as more helpful in thirty seconds than Flynn has been in several days. “I heard there was some kind of witch throwdown in city center last night. There’s not any chance that was something to do with…?”
She is clearly trying to restrain vulgar curiosity, but has also heard rumors, and Lucy isn’t sure whether it’s a good idea to set the record straight or not. But she might as well be honest about why she’s calling now, if that’s going to help. “A witch went after me last night. Emma, Emma Whitmore. I got away from her, but I’m feeling a little… at my wit’s end.”

Jiya mutters an extremely uncharitable-sounding comment under her breath, that of course this would happen the instant the idiot has run off. Then, remembering that she’s still on the phone with an important person, she clears her throat. “Sorry. I’m just a little – never mind. But there are other witches in Oxford, aren’t there? I know there’s at least one coven. I’m surprised you aren’t asking them.”

“I…” Lucy hesitates. It has not escaped her attention that almost immediately after she told Jessica what she was working on, and Jessica had that odd reaction, things started going sideways – the very next day, in fact. She doesn’t want to think that Jessica might have tattled on her to the coven, who then sent an urgent message to the Congregation, but Cahill and Emma sure have turned up in Oxford fast, and knowing exactly what and who they were looking for. Surely Jessica wouldn’t have done it maliciously – they’re friends, they’ve marathon-marked papers in Boswell’s tea room and complained to each other that even presumably intelligent Oxford students can’t always cite their damn sources. There was one moment of friction when they were both applying for the same history grant, but neither of them got it anyway and they laughed about it later. That’s not the kind of thing you plot your revenge over, is it? Not Jess’s style. But if she thought she was doing the right thing, the same way Denise, Michelle, and Olivia all still feel it’s advisable to involve the Congregation, trying to protect Lucy…

Realizing that Jiya’s still waiting for an answer, she coughs. “I – sorry. I’m just not sure I trust the witches right now. That’s all.”

“And you do trust the vampires?” Jiya’s tone isn’t rude, but she’s clearly suspecting there might be some kind of catch or ulterior motive, something that she might do better to flesh out upfront. After all, it just doesn’t make sense, and they’ve clearly established that Flynn was by no means a sterling ambassador for the cause. “You know who we are, right?”

“My stepsister told me.” Lucy rubs her eyes. “The de Clermonts.”

“Yeah.” No wonder Jiya can’t understand why she’s not screaming and running for the exits. “And that’s… okay with you?”

“Look,” Lucy says. “It’s pretty apparent that I’m not much of a witch, or at least I don’t know half the things that a regular witch would. I’ve heard a lot of dark hints from my family, believe me. But I, personally, don’t know any of this, and I… well, I need someone to help me with this. So if you don’t want to, that’s fine, but I just – ”

“I didn’t say that.” Jiya sounds half as if she might be doing this against her better judgment, but is also kind enough not to leave Lucy completely in the lurch. “Come by the lab tomorrow morning. I’ll see what I can do.”

Lucy thanks her volubly – that is the most helpful conversation she has had with any creature since this started – hangs up, and crawls back into bed like a grub burrowing underground. She falls asleep quickly, but once more has strange dreams. Her parents flit through endless, formless corridors, and when Lucy screams voicelessly for her mother, Carol’s head turns to show nothing but a smear of blackened blood where her face used to be. Garcia Flynn is there as well, in some undefined, uncertain capacity, and she’s never sure if she’s running to or from him. Finally, she falls and falls like a stone down a well, and wakes up with a gasp.
It’s atrociously early, six AM or something, but Lucy feels wide awake, as if she’s finally had enough sleep and then some, and bolts out of bed like she’s been turbocharged. It’s probably a little too early to call on Jiya, though she assumes that the research assistant is also a vampire and this might be the end of the day for her. So Lucy throws on her jogging clothes and goes for another run along the silent, misty Thames, houseboats bobbing on their moors along the canal. She may anxiety herself into getting fit yet, which seems alarming.

When it’s a somewhat more sociable hour for visiting, though still early, Lucy changes into a smart blazer, slacks, and scarf, does her makeup and tries not to look like a bog creature, and hurries off through the slowly wakening streets. She heads up Parks Road, past Wadham and the Museum of Natural History, and turns off into the Science Area, nervously double-checking the address on the card. She pushes through into a modern, glass-walled foyer, looks at the directory, and confirms that it’s number 110. She takes the stairs, heels clattering on the industrial metal, makes her way down to the lab at the end, and knocks.

The walls are also glass, so she can see the dark-haired young woman wearing a lab coat look up, lock eyes with her, and trot over to open the door. “You must be Lucy,” she says. “I’m Jiya. Come in.”

“Thanks.” Lucy steps in warily, glancing around. It’s all very modern and high-tech, and while she’s not quite such a useless humanities person as to have a heart attack when she sees complex mathematics on a whiteboard, it’s still not her forte. Jiya has been working in front of a computer terminal with some gobbledygook genetic readout (to be fair, the arcane scribblings of seventeenth-century alchemists probably look just as nonsensical to the uninitiated), which she closes hastily. Lucy nods at it. “Don’t worry, I don’t understand anyway.”

Jiya either doesn’t hear that or decides not to answer. At this close range, Lucy can tell that she is in fact a vampire, though considerably younger than Flynn. She looks to be in her late twenties, but there’s no telling how long she’s been that old (at least she technically doesn’t have to lie about turning thirty?) After another awkward pause, Jiya beckons at a chair, and Lucy sits down. They continue to stare at each other, twisting their fingers together, until Jiya finally says, “What do you want us to do for you?”

“I’m not sure.” Lucy isn’t sure what she could even feel entitled to ask for, aside from the most basic aspect of – well, protection. An ally, someone who could explain something or keep her safe from bodily harm. Flynn would fail spectacularly on the first front, but he might do all right on the second, and Lucy can’t keep up those untrained bursts of powerful magic, not when the first time nearly killed her. (If it didn’t, she doesn’t want to know.) “Just this whole mess with Ashmole 782 and all the creatures wanting it and… everything. I admitted I can’t handle it by myself, but I don’t even know why. I did not call it up trying to start some kind of magical war. I just wanted to do some damn research.”

Jiya remembers belatedly that her guest is human and might want some coffee, gets up, and puts a pod in the futuristic-looking perc, which gurgles and burbles out a frothy cup of more-or-less-cappuccino. Lucy sips it, looking around. “So it’s just you right now?”

“It might have been Rufus,” Jiya says, still with an edge. “Rufus Carlin, the engineer we were recently working with, he’s at Mansfield. Except now I’m pretty sure I may never see him again, so –”

She catches herself, as if not to spill her grievances onto her visitor, and forces a smile. “Anyway. Sorry. I can try to keep an eye on you if that would help, and I’ve definitely noticed a lot of unfamiliar witch activity ever since you woke up the book. Can I see your hand?”
Lucy extends her palm, still branded with the fading mark from where Ashmole 782 burned her, and Jiya inspects it carefully. It stings a little when she presses it, and Lucy hisses. Jiya murmurs an apology, but continues for another moment, then sits back. “Well,” she says. “I can’t be sure, but I’m guessing that’s an omega. It looks like the Greek letter, Ω, and it was a kind of magical lock that some older sorcerers used to put into their books and grimoires, to stop them from being read by anyone who wasn’t worthy. That could explain why Ashmole 782 has been listed as missing for so long – as long as the omega was intact, it would hide itself from anyone who was looking. But it’s like it’s transferred onto you, imprinted onto you, so you can get the book, but no one else can. You are literally the key.”

Lucy isn’t sure if she likes the sound of this. She looks down at the ring of reddened flesh, rubbing it with her thumb as if to get it off her skin. “But why me?”

“I don’t know,” Jiya admits. “I might need to run some diagnostics. We’ve been charting the genomes and the genetic structures of any creatures we can find. Do you happen to know your blood type?”

Lucy has to briefly wonder if this is like asking about the roast at a gourmet coffee house for a vampire, or a certain vintage of wine, but Jiya has been nothing but courteous, and seems to be asking for scientific purposes only. “AB negative.”

“Mmm, okay.” Jiya considers. “We’ve only managed to test one other witch – you know, not exactly many of them eager to get pricked by one of us – but she was AB positive, so it’s possible that’s the usual subgroup for witches. We just don’t have enough data, though. I really don’t want to come off like I lured you here for vampire and/or science blood-drawing purposes, but maybe if you let me do some analysis…?”

Lucy really isn’t fond of blood (she doesn’t faint anymore, but it was definitely another stumbling block in her relationship with Noah, who would sometimes come home still smelling of it). She’s trying to decide if she should just suck it up and let Jiya do it anyway, when they both hear footsteps coming down the corridor. The next instant, a tall, grouchy-looking vampire in a black leather jacket powers into sight, pushes through the lab door, spots the two of them sitting there all companionably with Lucy clutching a coffee mug, and opens his mouth very wide. It is probably a good thing for everyone that nothing manages to come out. Then he snaps it shut and says, “I… don’t recall arranging this?”

“Of course you didn’t.” Jiya is clearly not afraid to give her boss a continued piece of her mind, and Lucy briefly wonders if there’s more to their relationship. Not in a romantic way, but just that their dynamic doesn’t strike her as strictly professional. “Seeing as you were in Scotland. From which I assume you just returned?”

“I… yes.” Flynn crosses the lab in about two strides (he really is very tall) and shucks off the jacket, hanging it on a coat tree in the corner. “I left late last night. Would have made it back sooner, but traffic in Manchester was a nightmare.”

“Good morning, Professor Flynn,” Lucy says loudly, since it appears to be incumbent upon her to observe any social courtesies that are in fact going to get observed. She is already wondering if it was a wise decision to seek him out, and he is determinedly staring at the wall adjacent to her left ear, rather than at her face. “I met your assistant. She’s been very helpful.”

As opposed to you hangs obviously in the air after that statement, but no use conducting further wars of attrition just yet. There is another horrendously awkward pause, and then Flynn harrumphs and spins around fast enough to startle her. “Yes, well,” he says. “Hello, Dr. Preston. I wasn’t expecting to see you here.”
“I wasn’t expecting to be here, if it helps.” No matter how tempting it is to barb back at him, Lucy reminds herself that she is, at least theoretically, interested in brokering some kind of truce. “But I want to know what’s going on with Ashmole 782, and I… I’m willing to see what you know.”

Flynn looks almost comically surprised, as if she’s asked if he would like to dance a mazurka with her, and Lucy has to bite her lip at the mental image. After a final pause, he snorts, a graceless winner as always. “I told you it would have been quicker to ask me.”

Jiya is the one to loudly clear her throat this time, she and Flynn exchange another distinctly familial look, and Lucy tries to guess – kid sister? Blood, probably, if not biological. At any rate, the chastisement is totally lost on Flynn, who still seems to be setting a record for – well, something, Lucy doesn’t know what, but it’s not good. Then he says, “Did anything else happen while I was away? With the book?”

“Tangentially.” Lucy smothers a sigh. “Another witch tried to make me get it. Emma Whitmore.” By the way both of Flynn’s dark brows fly up, then draw thunderously down, she has a feeling that this is not the first time this particular witch and vampire have crossed paths. Flynn mutters something that sounds extremely uncomplimentary under his breath, in whatever might be his native language, then apparently has to take a moment to decide how he wants to proceed. Finally Jiya says, “I was going to suggest that we take a sample of her blood and do a gene marker map. See what it is about her particularly.”

“That might answer part of the question, but it wouldn’t stop the rest of it.” Flynn taps his fingers against his thigh, even as Lucy wants to remind him that she is still here and he can look at her when he is talking about her – heaven forbid he talk to her. He still seems slightly antsy and distracted, as if bad traffic in Manchester wasn’t the only reason for his delay, and the air buzzes a little with the force of his presence, the way reality knows that it does not quite obey the same laws around him. How old is he? How much of the world has he seen, what does he remember? What great or terrible events has he lived through, and what did they make of him? Lucy finds herself oddly intrigued – if certainly not by his winning personality, then because he is a living object of priceless historical study, a source who can actually speak in the way that all these dusty old manuscripts can’t, the one thing historians, especially of the distant past, always wish they had. You can’t exactly sit down with an eyewitness to the sack of Constantinople in 1204, or ask someone who knew Samuel Pepys personally to transcribe his journals. Except now, possibly, she could, and Lucy would almost be willing to put up with more of his nonsense to get more time to talk to him. Not that she would – it could be very personal, maybe you just don’t go asking a vampire how old they are for the same reason that it’s rude no matter what species you are, or maybe there are painful memories associated with it. But Lucy Preston loves history and always has, God help her, and if nothing else, Flynn is that. She can’t help but be interested.

“Well?” Jiya looks at Lucy. “Would you let us take a little of your blood?”

“If it would help, then… all right, sure.” Lucy hopes she won’t pass out, like the last time she had to get her blood drawn, and she can just hear what Denise and Michelle would say if they knew she let a couple of vampires take it from her. But they aren’t here, and she marches over to the lab equipment as stoutly as she can. “Over here?”


“No,” Flynn interrupts. “I’ll do it.”

Both of the women glance sideways at him – especially Jiya, who seems to be thinking of something particular about blood, Flynn, and Lucy that the latter doesn’t catch. But after a pause, she nods,
stepping away, and Flynn snaps on a pair of blue rubber gloves, rolls up Lucy’s sleeve, and expertly prepares a clean syringe and vial. His hands are… well, she didn’t expect him to stab her with a railroad spike, he is a professional, but the gentleness still surprises her. “Quick jab,” he says, as if to comfort a kid about to get a shot. “Not bad.”

Lucy is briefly surprised that he can tell she’s nervous, then remembers that he might be able to hear her heart, and if her adrenaline is spiking, it probably sounds like a brass band to him. He positions the tip of the needle, there’s a bright brief pain like a pinch, and he draws out the plunger until the sample is filled dark crimson. He seals it up, puts it in a rack, and dabs away the small spot welling in the crook of Lucy’s elbow. For half a moment, she feels – well, not in danger exactly, but conscious of the fact that she’s bleeding in front of a vampire, even a very old and well-controlled one, and by the way his eyes flick up to hers, half-black beneath his lashes, she is certain he’s at least a little affected by it. Then he blots it with a cotton ball, gets a band-aid (at least it isn’t pink) and tapes it into place, stepping away briskly and disposing the gloves into an incinerator. “All done.”

“Th-thanks.” Lucy doesn’t know why her voice trembles, though she’s just glad she got through it without swooning dramatically on the floor. “So what, you’ll make sure I don’t have magical AIDS or something?”

“We’ll run some of the standards checks on it,” Flynn says, predictably not explaining what those checks are. “See if there’s anything unusual in the sequencing, any irregular patterns. It should take about a week, we’ll let you know. But in the meantime, I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to be running around Oxford unescorted.”

“Unescorted?” Yes, Lucy was hoping he’d help out on the protection front, but that makes her sound like some cossetted Victorian damsel who cannot set foot out of the house without her chaperone, let her marriage prospects to Sir Humphrey Mustache be irreparably ruined. “So what, are you going to move into my broom cupboard?”

“Only if you want me to, Lucy.” He does something that looks like it’s supposed to be a friendly wink, and she’s struck by the horrifying impression that this may be his attempt at flirting. Or at least trying to display a cuddlier and more approachable side than his gruff and snark, which… yeah, it’s not working. “Though I’m fairly sure I might not fit.”

Jiya is suddenly overcome with an attack of coughing, Lucy decides it’s better for everyone if they pretend that never happened, and speeds right on past it. “I didn’t mean like a permanent guard, but if Emma or someone else tries to go after me again – ”

“I’ll look into it,” Flynn says, with the matter-of-factness of a Mob hitman assuring the don that someone’s going to sleep with the fishes tonight. “In the meantime, you should think about learning to actually use your magic.”

“You can’t just go attacking witches,” Lucy warns him. “I don’t know much about creature law, but that has to be against it. And if you make even more of a mess – ”

“I wouldn’t make a mess.” Flynn sounds impatient, as if he can’t believe that she would ever question him on that front (yes, truly baffling). “And I’m not going to attack them. But until you can properly defend yourself, you need to be kept safe one way or another.”

Lucy eyes him. She can’t tell if his insistence on serving as her vampiric watch dog (she thinks that’s what he’s offering, anyway?) is anything but not letting her get disemboweled before she calls up Ashmole 782 for him. She’s surprised he hasn’t asked for that already, given how keen he seems to get his hands on it. “So?” she says. “What does that mean? Are you just going to keep following me around again?”
“I’ll… run interference,” Flynn says, once more not quite answering the question. “But if this level of activity keeps up, we may also have to think about getting you out of Oxford for a few days. I have a place in Woodstock.”

Lucy is rather surprised at the implication that he would volunteer to take her to – well, one of the places he lives, that awkward quip about broom closets aside. She can also sense Jiya glancing curiously between them, as if this is quite a sudden turnaround from how all of it started out, and, well, yes, it is. But while she still has a few unavoidable doubts, Lucy does believe, however reluctantly, that Flynn doesn’t want to hurt her, and may actually be on her side on this. She feels bad about going behind her family’s back and consorting with a vampire, but if the witches wanted her to trust them, maybe they shouldn’t have sent Emma after her last night. That woman is straight-up terrifying.

After a bit more throat-clearing and awkward shuffling, they agree to have Jiya accompany Lucy back to town, since while she is also a vampire, she is much less notorious than Flynn, and for the obvious reason that Lucy would probably prefer to spend time with Jiya anyway. She hopes that Flynn does whatever he’s going to do fast, as she’s used to being by herself and doesn’t want to trundle around with a supernatural sidekick forever. But she also, admittedly, is curious. “So, you and Flynn, are you just… work colleagues, or…?”

Jiya looks surprised, then horrified. “If you mean, are we dating – ”

“No,” Lucy says hastily, since Jiya’s reaction that they could ever have given that impression is proof enough. “I definitely didn’t think that. You just seem like you… know each other.”

“We do,” Jiya says, after a slight pause. “Obviously. He’s my – he’s my sire, actually. The vampire who made me, which makes him my blood father. It’s just – well, it’s complicated.”

Lucy has to restrain from further questions, which are still clearly not her business, but there’s a small, bewildering spark of relief, which she doesn’t know what to do with, at the confirmation that Flynn and Jiya’s relationship is definitely platonic. They reach Broad Street, now busy with its midmorning hustle, and Lucy can imagine that Jiya doesn’t want to hang around on witch babysitting duty all day. “Hey, let’s just go by my flat and I’ll get my books. Then I can work wherever, and you can get back to your own stuff.”

Jiya agrees, and they return to Merton Street. They head up the stairs, Jiya sneezes as if the strong smell of other creatures is getting up her nose, and as they reach the top, Lucy sees a thick manila envelope that has been squashed under the crack in her door. Maybe it’s just someone returning a late paper, though why they’d drop it off at her house instead of her office is confusing, but –

Lucy tugs it out, unlocks the door, and goes to get her bookbag. Jiya waits in the hall outside (do vampires have to be invited in, or does she not want to set foot in a witch’s house just in case?), but she glances at the envelope. “What’s that? Was it here this morning?”

“No, not when I left.” Lucy turns it over. There’s no postmark, stamp, or address on it, and while it might be a bad idea to open unmarked parcels in the middle of a crisis, curiosity gets the better of her. She undoes the catch and pulls out a sheaf of eight-by-ten color photographs. They don’t quite register, and then –

A numbing shock goes through her from head to toe, she feels like she’s about to be sick, and drops the pictures, stumbling backward. It – well, it’s either an incredibly convincing forensic fake, or it’s the actual photos of her parents’ dead bodies. Carol Preston and Henry Wallace sprawled out on the ground, eyes open and staring, faces caked with drying blood – like that dream last night, where Carol’s mutilated shade was stalking in the shadows. Lucy doesn’t know who would have these
pictures or why anyone would have sent them to her, and presses a hand to her mouth until her gorge subsides. What the hell.

“Hey, are you – ” Jiya, of course, has not failed to notice this reaction. She steps over the threshold (well, that answers that question), scoops up the pictures, and stares at them. Her dark eyes go dead black. “These smell like witch,” she says flatly. “Like that witch.”

“Who?” Lucy can barely answer, her voice sounding small and strangled in her chest. “What witch?”

Jiya takes a moment to answer, still on point like a hunting dog, the first time Lucy has ever seen a vampire clearly roused and ready to attack. It’s not aimed at her, of course, but the sight is formidable, and if Jiya, who looks like a pretty mid-twenties geek girl, has suddenly turned this dangerous, she can only imagine what it must be like for Flynn. “Cahill,” Jiya says, and somehow it is not any surprise at all. “Benjamin Cahill.”
Flynn is bent over the computer, inputting the results from the last round of testing on the failed-sire vampire, when the lab door flies open and starts him out of his chair in a blur. He’s lucky he doesn’t knock over the vial rack, or end up on the ceiling like a bat, though he does nearly give the new arrivals a heart attack. As his rational faculties belatedly kick back in, he snaps his fangs out of sight and glances up to see Lucy Preston looking as if she really did not need that excitement on top of everything else. Jiya is giving him a chastening stare, and Flynn wants to point out that he’s not the one who barged in unexpectedly on a vampire in the middle of a magical crisis. “I thought you were going back into town to work,” he says, noting that one of the overhead lightbulbs is still swinging. “Did you forget something?”

“No,” Jiya says tightly. “We went to Lucy’s flat to get her things, and discovered that someone had left her an envelope with pictures of her parents’ murdered bodies. It smelled like Cahill. So if he’s trying to – ”

“What?” Flynn rears back like a cobra, and has to restrain himself from once more flashing across the lab to them. Lucy is clutching the envelope, which she thrusts at him as if it’s poisonous, and Flynn flicks through the sheaf of pictures. Yes, well, that’s something that nobody wants to see, especially when the individuals in question are your mother and father. Jiya’s right, they stink of witch, and more properly, of Cahill. If he’s sent these to Lucy trying to blackmail her or twist her arm or remind her that she can’t trust anyone outside her own species, whatever he’s doing – if he thinks he’ll so much as –

“Well,” Flynn says, scowling ferociously, as he slaps the pictures down on the table. “That was some sort of shot across the bow. And if Emma Whitmore was skulking around – I don’t like this. Maybe I should take her to Woodstock.”

He senses more than sees Jiya’s gaze on him, and turns his back to tidy the sample tray – which doesn’t exactly need it, but still. He hasn’t mentioned anything about the craving, but Jiya has known him for over a century, and she must have taken note of that moment of weakness when he was drawing Lucy’s blood. She’s clearly trying to repress the suspicion that Flynn is intending to swoop this tempting human off to a private location and then either snack on her or induce her to fetch Ashmole 782 for him, one way or another. Obviously, Jiya knows that is not his usual M.O., but it is clear to both of them that Lucy is different. She’s having an effect on him that neither of them have seen or can quite predict, and Flynn can detect a tinge of protectiveness in the stance Jiya takes up in front of the witch. If he’s going to blow this the way he did with Rufus, that look says, she will throw hands. Or fangs. His pick, but either way, he had better tread carefully.

Flynn stares at his daughter pointedly, as if to telepathically communicate to her that he’s perfectly in control of the situation and his only concern is to avoid another crime scene like the one in the pictures. Lucy looks between them, as while she might not be able to guess the exact content, she can clearly see the heavy-duty glares being traded, and clears her throat a little too loudly. “So, is anyone going to explain what that is, or…?”

At that, Flynn feels a brief admiration. Even though she’s been deeply shaken by having to look at her parents’ dead bodies, she’s been stalked and harassed by witches (and admittedly by vampires, or that is one vampire, but Flynn prefers to think he was offering her a professional service), she still doesn’t know what’s going on, and she’s standing in a laboratory between two immortals who are decidedly on the outs, Lucy Preston is still equal to the task. She has firmly folded her arms and joined the pointed-stare party, for that matter, and he sighs. “Woodstock. I have a place we could go.
Just until things… die down."

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Jiya says. “If Cahill did this, he’s probably not just going to sit back and let Lucy run off with you.”

Flynn wants to remind her that they are not eloping, for God’s sake, but that feels dangerous. “I’d be very surprised if Cahill tries to get onto territory that’s been de Clermont since the twelfth century, even with reinforcements at his back. Speaking of which, he can’t just have turned up in Oxford without the local coven knowing about it. If they didn’t want him here, he wouldn’t be. So if they’re working with him – ?”

“I don’t know,” Lucy says, breaking into the conversation as if to remind them that they can’t keep talking over her head, literally. “I don’t think Jessica would have – ”

“Jessica?” Flynn and Jiya exchange a sharp look. “Jessica Proctor, the early modernist? At Corpus Christi?”

“Yes.” Lucy frowns. “Do you know her?”

“My idiot brother knew her. A few years ago.” Flynn blows out a frustrated breath. Trust Wyatt to screw them over even long after the event, as it is his special talent. “They were – well, like I said, they knew each other. If she’s still holding a grudge against the de Clermonts, she might be especially motivated to thwart us any way she could. Christ, why didn’t you mention her before?”

“Was I supposed to give you a detailed rundown of my friends and associates?” Lucy’s nostrils flare. “Especially witches? What are you – who’s your brother? What happened with him and Jessica?”

“Wyatt. Well, his real name is William de Logan, he’s from Scotland, twelfth century. But he picked up the name Wyatt after he spent the entire nineteenth century in the American Southwest, and it stuck. He’s the youngest de Clermont brother, and as I said. An idiot.”

“Your interpersonal family struggles are fascinating,” Lucy says icily. “But still not helpful.”

“Fine. He and Jessica had some sort of… short-lived fling that ended badly. It was illegal anyway, and Wyatt’s our representative on the Congregation, so he clearly wasn’t going to break creature law. So if your witch friend has been tattling on us to get back at my brother for what happened – well, Wyatt would deserve it, but that doesn’t mean – ”

Lucy is still looking slightly boggled, as well as upset at the idea that yet another of her own kind has stabbed her in the back, and Flynn feels an oblique pity. If nothing else, he’s used to having his family, the fiercely close-knit (if prone to spectacular bouts of rivalry) de Clermont clan, who pull together and look out for each other’s interests and, no matter how much they fight, always are there for each other when the rubber hits the road. Lucy must be feeling considerably isolated as her support systems are broken off one by one, as the people she’s supposed to be able to count on blow away like dust in the wind. In Flynn’s opinion, that’s about all you can expect from witches, but he recognizes that this is neither unbiased nor the most pertinent to the situation. Finally Lucy says, “I don’t want to think so, but it would explain why Cahill and Emma turned up so fast. But I wasn’t aware that vampires and witches could have relationships. I’ve never heard of it.”

“They can’t,” Flynn says grimly. “Hence why it had to end. Anyway, Jiya, perhaps you should look into that. Lucy, I don’t think anyone would expect to find you on vampire territory, so while we’re sorting this out – ”

Lucy’s dark eyes flick up at him. She doesn’t know much about the creature world, but she’s a smart
woman, and she’s clearly not buying that he’s offering this out of a sudden altruistic concern for her personal safety. They’ve known each other for about a week (at least formally, since he’s been watching her since she got to Oxford and started work on the Ashmole collection) and for most of that time, he’s apparently been making himself a noted pain in the hindquarters. Is she really going to trust a vampire, a de Clermont vampire, to take her off somewhere they’re alone and not do – what? Flynn himself can’t be entirely sure. This could be an extremely stupid idea. Why deliberately subject himself to temptation?

At that, Flynn reminds himself that the craving is chemical, involuntary, nothing he’s not experienced before in his very long life, and he would be a poor excuse for a vampire if he actually gave into it. Houdini’s adjurations from Scotland are still in the back of his head, about making sure he can control himself around Lucy and sounding dubious that he could, but Houdini is demonstrably not his biggest fan. Someone needs to make sure Lucy doesn’t get kidnapped by Cahill and his minions, unless that’s actually what she wants, but it seems not, and Flynn would be unfortunately honor-bound to prevent that anyway. He says, “Anyone have a better idea?”

“Fine,” Lucy says, after the breath of a pause. “But not for long. I have to be back in Oxford by Monday anyway, I have a lecture series.”

As it is presently Friday, this seems to imply that she thinks Flynn is whisking her away for the weekend – which he might be, just because it’s convenient. He dodges another one of those looks from Jiya and says in turn, “Fine. That won’t be a problem.”

Neither of them say much as they walk out of the biochemistry building and toward All Souls to get Flynn’s car. He wonders if he should suggest returning to her flat so she can pack an overnight bag, but she might not be keen on a return visit so soon after the shock of the pictures, and they can stop at Boots if she needs to pick up any toiletries. Jiya’s probably left some clothes there that Lucy can borrow, though she might not be keen on smelling like vampire. As they step into the car park behind the college, he says, “So do you want to get some things from your flat, or should we just go?”

“I’ll get them,” Lucy says fiercely. “I’m not going to let Benjamin Cahill scare me out of my own house.”

Flynn turns away to hide a smile, presses the key fob to unlock the car, and Lucy looks briefly impressed. “A Maserati?”

“The de Clermonts don’t lack for money.” Flynn wonders if he should open the door for her like a gentleman, can’t decide if that would come off as patronizing, and ends up doing an odd, involuntary motion as if his arm has been stung by a jellyfish and suddenly paralyzed. He beats a smart retreat to the other side of the car, leaving Lucy to get in herself (there, see, he’s demonstrated that he trusts her capabilities). “And when you live forever, there’s no reason not to enjoy the finer things.”

“I suppose.” Lucy gets into the passenger seat and shuts the door. “And I can’t see someone like you driving a Volkswagen.”

Flynn is about to answer that he wouldn’t drive a Volkswagen anyway, given as the company was founded by the Nazis and he still holds his father’s death in World War II against them, but that’s probably a little too personal for this stage of things. They drive into town and down Merton, clattering on the cobbles, and Flynn insists on checking the door of Lucy’s flat before he lets her go up. He doesn’t sense any currently present intruder, but he doesn’t entirely relax until she returns ten minutes later, overnight bag in hand, which she tosses into the back. “Okay,” she says. “Let’s go.”

Flynn turns them around, manages not to take out any wheelie bins, and they make their way out of
the slow-moving traffic and flock of buses and bicycles in city centre, through the various roundabouts, and finally north toward the A44, in the direction of Blenheim Palace. Once they’re out of Oxford, the countryside turns greener and more pastoral, the sort of thing you’d put on a postcard for traditional English life; this is a cushy, affluent region that borders the Cotswolds, dotted with picturesque villages, hills, meadows, and parkland. Flynn has seen it over eight hundred years, changing a great deal in some places and almost not at all in others, and Lucy, apparently reading his mind, glances sidelong at him. “You said that wherever we’re going has been de Clermont territory since the twelfth century?”

“Yes.” Trust a historian to be curious. “Eleanor – Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine – donated it to me. The Plantagenets spent a lot of time here, there was a royal manor at Woodstock. Richard the Lionheart and King John were both born in Beaumont Palace in Oxford.”

Lucy makes a noise that sounds very much like a restrained squeal of delight, and it does something odd to Flynn’s insides. “You – you knew Eleanor of Aquitaine?!”

“I. Yes.” Flynn coughs. “Actually, we were, er, particular friends. Well, for a short while, and much later. She wanted to get back at Henry, and I was a vampire, there was no chance of an accidental child. It didn’t – well, it couldn’t have ended any way other than it did, I suppose.”

“You – ” Lucy looks stunned. “You and Eleanor – you were – ?”

“Yes,” Flynn says again, feeling a brief, poignant pang of missing her. Their affair was all on Eleanor’s volition, of course. Furious at her husband Henry II for imprisoning her and threatening to take away her territories, determined to spite him for flaunting his mistress Rosamund Clifford, desperately lonely in her enforced solitude – he was there, and he was sympathetic, and he had served with her favorite son, Richard, and one thing led to another. He has no notion how, even now, but that didn’t matter. Eleanor was sharp-tongued and wickedly intelligent and beautiful and feisty – a bit like Lucy, for that matter – and what she wanted, she got. In that case, it was Flynn. Sometimes it seems impossible that she’s been dead for eight hundred and thirteen years. Time is strange and time is nothing, and everything. He sometimes still goes to her tomb at Fontevraud Abbey in France, hers and Richard’s, though nothing of their mortal dust remains. He has lived so very long.

Lucy opens her mouth, shuts it, makes another small squeaking noise, and Flynn is struck by the amusing impression that she’s deeply jealous of him for the amazing opportunity of getting to sleep with Eleanor of Aquitaine. (And yes, it was very good, thanks.) He clears his throat. “Historical heroine of yours, I take it?”

“Yes, obviously.” Lucy looks as if she’s overloading with all the questions she wants to ask him, but – rather impressively – restrains. Her cheeks remain pink, her eyes glowing with a scholar’s mad fervor, and it’s – well, it makes Flynn damn sure that he stays concentrating on the road. It feels like the first moment they’ve actually gotten along since they met, and it almost makes Flynn want to offer more anecdotes about his life, since that seems like a successful strategy. However, that would entail opening himself up for questions that he doesn’t want to answer, and he has to remember not to blur the lines.

Conversation lags somewhat as they get held up in roadworks, finally start to move again, and pass the turn-off for Blenheim Palace, the extravagant seventeenth-century stately home of the Duke of Marlborough that’s now a visitor attraction. A few minutes on, Flynn turns down one of the unnamed side roads on a private part of the estate, drives down through the wooded track, and comes to a halt at the end. As might be guessed from the similarities between this place and the Cairngorms manor, vampires like their seclusion, their luxury, their old-fashioned style, and a general far remove
from the urban madding crowds. Unlike the Scottish house, which is owned by the entire family, this place is Flynn’s alone. It’s much smaller, not much more than a large half-timbered Tudor farmhouse. The original building burned down sometime in the fifteenth century, and he’s had to sporadically renovate this one as it aged. (He has also had to repeatedly chase off the National Trust, which will list the place or die trying, and he is quite sure that he can recognize authentic Elizabethan architecture much better than some obsequious, clipboard-waving twit with an Oxbridge arts degree and a double-barreled surname.) As they get out of the car, it’s quiet except for the crunch of gravel underfoot and the distant rush of wind. Lucy says, “You live here?”

“I spend most of my time at All Souls.” Flynn leads the way up the front walk, through the somewhat overgrown garden, and digs the key out of his pocket. “But I come here when I need to get work done, or to get away. Good hunting in the woods, too.”

He regrets that remark almost as soon as he utters it, since Lucy is probably only too aware that she is now alone in the lair of an apex predator, and he hurries to clarify, “You know. Small game, birds, foxes, hares, that kind of thing. Not, uh. Not people.”

Lucy raises an eyebrow as they step inside. The place has that ubiquitous old-English-building smell that’s usually found in ancient country churches, the whiff of must and damp and furniture polish, with a faint hint of dusty books and leaking plaster. Flynn has patched and chinked and caulked religiously, but the rain still finds its way in. It calms him to work with his hands, to build things, though sometimes he wishes he had more to show for his efforts. He waves a hand awkwardly at the entrance hall, lit with that indeterminate yellow, filmy light, the greyish sun just enough to cast stripes on the floorboards. “I, ah, I haven’t been here in a while.”

Lucy pays no attention to him, glancing at the antlered chandelier and the grandfather clock in the front foyer, the crooked halls and the low-beamed ceilings. For someone of Flynn’s particular stature, those can be a pain. “So is there a particular guest room?”

“Up the stairs,” Flynn says. “Last door on the left.”

She nods, swings her bag over her shoulder, and heads up the creaking stairs, as it falls to him to scout the perimeter and make sure that it has not been breached in any way. He doesn’t think so, but he’s not in the mood to take chances, and he has finally satisfied himself with the territorial integrity of his kingdom by the time Lucy reappears. Clearly, she does not expect that she has been packaged off to the middle of nowhere to sit on her rear end and do nothing for two days, or to be protected and coddled like a fragile flower. “What are we doing?” she asks. “Do you have a library? Is there a chance you could actually tell me something about Ashmole 782?”

“Ah.” Flynn coughs. “This – this way.”

He leads her back through the house to the large room at the back, crowded with as many shelves as can be made to fit in and a handsome claw-footed desk heaped with newspapers from the 1970s, dog-eared dime novels, Jiya’s old notebooks, increasingly strident notice letters from the National Trust, and the other detritus of decades, which slowly piles up in here and should probably all be taken out and burned. But the rest more than makes up for it. Antiquities dealers, legal deposit libraries, university special collections, and secondhand and rare-booksellers would gnaw each other’s arms off to get in here. Lucy’s eyes go wide as they whiz around, she looks as if she can’t decide what to grab first, and Flynn feels that inexplicable swoop in his stomach again. “So,” she says, clearly trying to control herself. “Where are we supposed to start? Do you have some kind of dossier on this?”

“I’ve been looking in countless places.” Flynn pulls down one of the books and opens it, releasing a flurry of dust bunnies and parchment flakes into the air. “Until recently, I wasn’t sure if it was the
only copy. There could be others, in other collections. I looked through the oeuvres of Nicolas Flamel, Johannes Trithemius, Johann Weyer, Thomas Rudd, John Dee, Paracelsus, even some grimoires by Faustus. I thought he if no one else could be trusted to have found another copy, if one existed. Then the *Key of Solomon* and the *Lesser Key of Solomon*, the *Hygromanteia*, the Grand Grimoire, the Picatrix, the *Liber Officium Spirituum* and the *Ars Goetia*, among others. But Ashmole 782 remains the only copy that I’ve ever heard of, and it, of course, was lost. Until recently.”

Lucy looks considerably impressed at this casual reeling-off of occultists, alchemists, astrologers, magicians, and their related books and texts. “Wow,” she says, almost slyly. “That’s a lot of history for a biochemist.”

“I never said I was *only* a biochemist.” Flynn turns the page, sending more browned edges scattering. “When we met the other day in the Bod, I did tell you I was reading. And searching for the Book of Life for a few centuries provides somewhat of an unavoidable expertise in medieval and early modern paleography and codicology.”

Lucy gives him the fish-eye, as if to remark that “met the other day” is a rather genteel way to put “turned up repeatedly and annoyed you into listening to me,” but apparently decides to focus on the rest of that instead. She moves past him, her sleeve brushing his shirt, and Flynn breathes the scent of her hair, the underlying notes of her, lily and cinnamon and cedar, honey and saffron and cold clean sunlight, something strong and fragile and sweet all at once. It momentarily makes him light-headed, and he takes a rather large step away from her, wondering if he should assure her that he finds her repulsive if that would help them continue to work together in amity. He opens his mouth, makes a faint croaking noise, then snaps it shut hard enough to hear his teeth click. Then he mumbles something about going to get a glass of water, and dives out of the library as if it is on fire.

Outside, Flynn leans against the wall, takes a few deep breaths, reminds himself that if nothing else, he is not going to give Houdini the satisfaction of being right about this, and gulps until the strongest thrall of the craving has passed. All right, maybe it’s a little worse than he thought, but still not completely beyond the pale. Maybe later tonight, when Lucy’s asleep, if it does get any worse, he’ll make arrangements. He doesn’t *want* to, but most vampires never really *want* a human feed, unless they’re the sort who feel that humans exist only to serve creature needs. There are plenty of people who will happily accept £50 and a mesmerized memory of a slightly-too-awesome night out in exchange for a feed. Flynn hates doing it that way, since it feels like prostitution, but sometimes exalted morality just can’t enter into it. The other option is feeding on *Lucy*, and that is 100% not happening.

Once he has controlled his features sufficiently and realized too late that Lucy may wonder why a vampire needs a glass of water anyway, he opens the door and walks back into the library with as much cool and collected dignity as he can. Lucy glances up at his return, but if she noticed anything particularly hasty about his exit, she doesn’t say so. Instead, she cocks her head at the book. “You were saying something about Ashmole 782.”

“Yes.” Flynn is deeply grateful that they’ll just ignore the last two minutes, which is his preferred strategy in the usual course of things. He harrumphs and moves over to the far side of the table, since standing across from her seems less daring than directly beside. “The point is, there’s only one copy anywhere. He harrumphs and moves over to the far side of the table, since standing across from her seems less daring than directly beside. “The point is, there’s only one copy anywhere. I’m sure you know this better than me, since it’s your area of specialty, but the Renaissance magicians borrowed from each other constantly and rewrote each other’s texts and modified each other’s formulas, so for there to be only one of anything is... singular. Literally. A particularly influential text would often be printed or circulated among an educated circle or between master and student. But we don’t even know who wrote Ashmole 782 to start with. There have been a few guesses, but nothing certain.”
“Hmm.” Lucy absently twirls one dark curl around her finger, staring down at the page. Flynn is aware of her slim shoulders beneath the heather-grey cloth of her slouchy turtleneck, the pale line of her throat beneath. Apparently she was taking no chances with exposing her jugular vein to a vampire, but he can sense it anyway. “I had done several pages of transcription, but that was before the book woke up, or whatever happened. I don’t know if it’s changed now. The illuminations, the writing, it was all different. I think it’s a palimpsest, a book within a book. Vellum and parchment used to be at a premium, so a scribe would scrape off existing text with a knife to reuse it for a new manuscript. It could have been just an ordinary codex before, and the unknown author was trying to hide its new magical content by disguising it as one. But – ” She stops, suddenly uncertain. “That’s just a guess.”

“Keep going,” Flynn encourages her. He has a sense that Lucy doesn’t always trust her own instincts, even with several advanced degrees and pieces of published research on the subject, and even though she’s the one individual of any species who has handled Ashmole 782 in living memory. “What else?”

“You and Denise both talked about origins.” Lucy looks up. “So did Cahill, for that matter.”

“Yes. I think this text is essential to our survival. Witches, daemons, vampires – our power is weakening, and it’s not coming back. If we don’t find the book and unlock its secrets, we could all end up going extinct. Once the world was full of wonders, but it belongs to humans now. We’re only a shadow of what we used to be.”

“Is that a bad thing?” Lucy tilts her chin back and looks him in the eye. “I’m not sure I want to be doing anything that gives people like Cahill and Emma any more power.”

“I don’t either, but it’s complicated. We can’t just pick the creatures we like as the ones to save, and do nothing about the rest. We’re bound together. We live or die together. If our power goes out, it affects all of us, the entire balance of existence. In some way, we have to.”

“And what?” Lucy cuts her eyes at him. “You just want to do this for the benevolent good of all creatures? Selflessly save the world, is that it?”

“Not exactly.” Flynn keeps looking at the page, as it seems easier than meeting her gaze. “Maybe I was just hoping to find some peace.”

He can sense that he may have startled her, but he still doesn’t look up. There is so much that he can’t explain right now, about the Order of Lazarus and about his father and about everything he has not come to grips with, about the strange and elusive destiny that it is to be a de Clermont, that a millennium and a half later, he’s still not certain if he actually merited eternal life, or if he has done anything useful with it. That he misses Eleanor and he misses Matej and he misses Lorena and Iris, who have almost faded entirely into the mists of impossible time, far longer lost than human memory was ever designed to stretch. Even for Flynn, vampiric ability cannot preserve everything, especially that which he only had prior to his transformation. He cannot recall their faces, or the exact color of Lorena’s hair, or the sound of Iris’s laugh. He knows that it used to be there, once, but not when it was gone. In a sense, looking for Ashmole 782, for the answers, for the beginning, is the only thing he can do. Only then can he embrace the end.

Seeing that Lucy is still watching him, he coughs again and straightens up quickly. “You can stay in here and read,” he informs her, perhaps too brusquely. Her face flickers and falls, as if wondering if she’s somehow insulted him by praying. “I – I’ll be out.”

And with that, he goes.
Venice is, in Wyatt Logan’s opinion, just about the most impractical place in the world to locate anything involving vampires. At least if all the legends were true, which thankfully they are not, because otherwise an unsuspecting bloodsucker could not get two feet in here without being felled by one thing or another. For a start, it’s crammed chockablock with churches and crucifixes, every restaurant and private home uses wagonloads of garlic, there are mirrors and sunlight and moving water everywhere, and it’s made Wyatt wonder if all the rumored ways to repel vampires were actually just ways to repel Italians. As noted, there is a large gap between truth and fiction, but given the popular stereotypes, Wyatt still suspects that headquarters of the Congregation in Venice is a thinly veiled fuck-you to the vampires.

For that matter, it’s not like Venice is that historically great for witches, given that little fact about Italy being the home of the Roman Catholic Church and them being, shall we say, less than keen on beings of this particular description. There are plenty of gory manuscripts in the Vatican archives, countless manuals on witch-hunting alongside the famous ones like the Malleus, until Wyatt finally had to admit that maybe Venice was just chosen out of spite for everyone concerned. The Inquisition obsessively persecuted magicians and creatures as well as Cathars, heretics, Muslims, and Jews, because the institutional Catholic church has never once succeeded on being on the right side of history, and maybe that’s the point. Maybe by having the Congregation in Venice, it’s a defiant statement that the creatures are still here, still alive, still stubbornly surviving right underneath the noses of all those who want them gone. There’s something poetic about that, almost. But there is still a lot of garlic, and either way, it makes Wyatt sneeze.

Of course, there are far worse places he could be spending his time. Venice is of course beautiful, even if it’s crowded with tourists to the point of oversaturation, it’s sinking into the lagoon, mammoth cruise ships are a constant sore spot for the locals, and you can get charged €60 for a single espresso and bottle of water if you want to sit outside and enjoy the view in St. Mark’s Square. There’s still something attractive and stylish about whizzing down the canals in a gondola or vaporetto, or wandering among the winding narrow alleys, or gaping at the ornate architecture. The de Clermonts own a splendid baroque townhouse near the Doge’s palace, overlooking the waterfront, and whenever Wyatt’s in Venice on Congregation business, he usually has the place to himself. He could get anything he wanted in the world, and yet, he often finds himself sitting and staring out the window. Not that he doesn’t enjoy the high life. He does. He just still isn’t sure how he ended up in it.

Tonight, however, there is going to be no leisure for depressing evenings in. Tonight, there are a lot of angry creatures who very much want to speak to Wyatt prontissimo (his Italian is functional, though English tends to be the language of choice), and he has a sinking feeling that yet again, he’s going to get stuck taking the flak for Flynn’s nonsense. Wyatt has always had a tumultuous relationship with his older brothers. Gabriel is elegant, patrician – he’s from something like the first century B.C., looks like a Roman senator and probably was one, though that name might indicate Jewish heritage. Garcia is from sixth-century Ragusa, though he moved to France as a young man. Against that, being from twelfth-century Galloway, in the Borders of Scotland, will always make you feel both impossibly young and impossibly country-bumpkin. Wyatt has lost his accent, though it comes out on certain vowels and when he’s stressed, and speaks with a faint Texas twang from decades in ranching and the gold rush, out west where he didn’t have to feel like a failure. He can’t shake the feeling that when compared to his brothers, he has done absolutely bumfuck nothing with his life, and he volunteered as the de Clermonts’ representative to the Congregation in hopes of being taken seriously as a member of the family, as a politician and a leader. Not that he even knows if he wants to be one, but it was better than humiliation.

The flip side of that is when Flynn picks a fight, Wyatt is the one who gets punched, and while his brother is somewhat better about minding his own goddamn business than he used to be, it still flares up at deeply inopportune moments. Such as now, which is why Wyatt is riding up the Grand Canal
in a private gondola at sunset, toward the Ponte di Rialto. After a few more minutes, the gondolier backs water and drifts into a quay, Wyatt steps off, and pays him with a tap of a contactless card, because the modern never collides more jarringly with the medieval than it does in Venice. He waits until it moves out of sight, then sets off into the warren of alleys. Reaches a certain door, knocks in a certain way, waits. It feels a little much, cloak-and-dagger, since they obviously know damn well it’s him and have probably been waiting for hours. But rules are rules, and right now, it’s preferable that he doesn’t break any of them.

After a moment, the door shoots back, Wyatt’s identity is tersely confirmed, and he is conducted through into the headquarters of the Congregation. For a governing body tasked with making decisions and setting laws for creatures across the world, inclusivity is not its strong suit. Three witches, three vampires, and three daemons sit on the council, and given their longevity, the same individuals can occupy their seats for centuries. This is not the recipe for either swift change or adaptation to the times, and Wyatt’s surprised they don’t hold their meetings by candlelight and record it all with quill and ink. Creatures do love their modern comforts, especially smartphones. But modern ideals of democracy, human rights, organizational transparency, and not dressing like supervillains are apparently still a stretch.

“Logan.” The vampire sitting at the courtyard table, tapping his fingers, rises sleekly to his feet. “I have been wondering when you were going to grace us with your presence.”

Wyatt bites back an instinctive response that he’s not coming here as some random Scottish minor gentry, but as a de Clermont, and he would appreciate being addressed as such. Then again, Michael Temple is one of the vampires who is definitely struggling with the no-supervillains part. Chronologically, he’s from the same era as Wyatt – the twelfth century – but he was turned in his fifties, so he looks several decades older. He used to be, as far as Wyatt can tell, a Knight Templar, and while it may be depressingly cliché that a former Templar is in fact evil (paging Dan Brown), Temple is. . . well, he’s a piece of work. The fact that he’s been waiting here, clearly determined to be the one to get the story first, is. . . not encouraging. The Congregation doesn’t have a mechanism for getting rid of its members, so they’re stuck with Temple until somebody stakes him. Wyatt has been tempted a few times to do it himself, but the other vampires resist it. Temple makes sure they’re top dog, that they defend against the machinations of the witches, and that’s evidently the most important.

“Temple,” Wyatt says coolly. Even if they’re colleagues, he doesn’t trust the other vampire, never has. “I don’t know what my brother’s doing.”

“That’s disappointing.” Temple has a practiced patter, a used-car-salesman air, never entirely loses the smile even while he’s tearing you to shreds. “Aren’t you here because you’re supposed to? If Ashmole 782 has in fact come to light, are you telling me that we might not be able to trust the de Clermonts to retrieve it for the vampires?”

“I’m sure Flynn is managing the situation.” That’s a lie, if only because Wyatt’s not sure Flynn has ever managed a situation in his life. But obnoxious as he is, he’s still Wyatt’s brother, and thus Wyatt will defend him, especially against a snake in the grass like Temple. “I’d rather talk about this with the full gathering.”

“Of course,” Temple agrees, not missing a beat. “But before we go in, I thought you might want to share anything particularly pertinent with me, privately. They’ve sent that sneaking rat Benjamin Cahill to Oxford, did you know? And it’s rumored they’ve dug up that loose cannon, Emma Whitmore. If that is what the witches have done, they’ve broken the rules first, and we’re perfectly justified in retaliating.”
“Are you sure?” This is one of the many times when Wyatt feels like it would be helpful to have a system of magical courts, lawyers, checks and balances, rather than the obvious pitfalls of having a small group of powerful people ruling the many and enabled to make any decision they want, no matter what. “That’s pretty flimsy grounds for declaring a violation, don’t you think? I didn’t come to Venice to start a war.”

“No, presumably, you came to Venice to tell me why your brother hasn’t managed to get Ashmole 782 yet.” Temple’s eyes glitter ferally in the low light. “It can’t be that difficult. Dr. Lucy Preston, I believe her name was? She can’t be that formidable of a prospect. A witch who won’t use her magic, who certainly couldn’t fight him – what else do we need?”

Wyatt is slightly insulted on Flynn’s behalf, that Temple thinks he’d just go through this Dr. Preston like a bulldozer if need be, but then, he doesn’t entirely know. According to family lore, Flynn has a spectacularly dark and bloody past, did not take his transformation into a vampire well, and spent a few centuries bent on getting revenge on everyone associated with the people who killed his human wife and daughter. He’s certainly more than capable of it, and Flynn’s apparent inaction has stumped Wyatt as well, admittedly. Flynn has been looking for the damn book since he learned about its existence, and he’s just – what? Sitting back and playing tiddlywinks? Is he really going to let tender sensibility for a witch’s well-being be the one thing to separate him from his goal? It’s never a good idea to get between Garcia Flynn de Clermont (rather like Wyatt, he acquired the name Flynn somewhere along the way and remained attached to it) and what he wants. So to stop just short of the mark – it’s baffling.

“Maybe he just wants to be careful,” Wyatt says, knowing it sounds feeble. “Making a move too fast would show his hand, and set the witches off.”

“We can deal with the witches.” Temple shrugs. “That is, if you still know what it means to be a vampire with a seat on this institution, Wyatt, and everything that is at stake if our enemies get hold of Ashmole 782 first. If Dr. Preston is in your brother’s power, we have to force him to do something about it. If she can call it up, he must make her do so.”

“Or?” Wyatt says. “You’re really going to push your luck that far? The rules –”

Temple chuckles, the sound thin and silver in the night. “I sit on the Congregation,” he says. “I make the rules. A fact you seem to have forgotten yourself. Very well, I suppose we must go in and offer ourselves to the others. But we’ll talk again after.”

With that, leaving Wyatt with no time to answer and a foreboding feeling in the pit of his stomach, Temple sweeps his way into the inner chamber, the second door on the far side – normally sealed until unlocked with three keys, one held by a witch, one by a daemon, and one by a vampire – and into a smaller room, lit with a ring of candles overhead. Nine chairs are set in a circle, though only three are presently occupied. Cahill, who holds the first witches’ seat, is absent in Oxford, and Anton Sokolov, the Russian witch who holds the second, is looking at Wyatt with his usual expression of crew-cut blond suspicion. Sitting next to him is a young woman Wyatt hasn’t seen before, trim and professional, and she gets to her feet as they enter. “You must be William de Clermont.”

She’s looking at him as if he’s something scraped off the bottom of her shoe, and Wyatt resists the urge to grip her hand a little too hard when she offers it. The name is technically correct, though if he wanted Temple to acknowledge him as a de Clermont, it’s clearly now being flung at him as an accusation. “I am,” he says. If he shows a flash of fang, well, she isn’t being that friendly either. “And you are?”

“Olivia Christopher,” the witch says. “Lucy Preston is my stepsister. I’ve come to set the record straight, and to assure the Congregation that she has no malicious intent. Jessica Proctor has
apparently passed the word on about what she found, and –"

She keeps talking, but Wyatt suddenly isn’t listening anymore. The name has caught him like a punch in the chest, momentarily depriving him of his ability to focus, and he shakes his head halfway as if to chase it away. Jess is – well, on an intellectual level, he knew she was at Oxford now, that there was a statistical chance she was part of this. But the Covenant has always been excruciatingly clear that interspecies relationships are forbidden, and Jessica didn’t forgive Wyatt for making it clear that he would always choose his de Clermont allegiances, his vampire bloodline, over her. He didn’t even want to, necessarily. What did she think he was going to do, defy all of creature law and existence and precedent for her? He did think about trying. Got into a lot of trouble for it, got chewed out by his mother and Gabriel and pretty much everyone, fucked it up, and. . . well, obviously it didn’t work out. What is Jessica doing now? Is she actively working with Cahill and the others? Or –

“I’m sorry,” Wyatt says, realizing that Olivia is staring at him with an expectant expression. He looks around, trying to buy time. The third occupant of the chamber is one of the daemon delegates, Nicholas Keynes, who has always struck Wyatt as a slimy little shit – no offense to daemons, he’s sure they’re otherwise great. Keynes has likewise always seemed somewhat too fond of the creature-superiority rhetoric, and he’s sitting there with his fingers steepled. Everyone’s gaze is turned to Wyatt, and he has no idea what he’s supposed to be doing, or saying. The best course of action seems to be to apologize for whatever Flynn’s done now, but he’s not in the mood, and he’s not even sure what that is. “What were you –?”

Olivia makes a slightly impatient noise. “I just wanted the Congregation’s assurances that Lucy would be protected from any – retribution. I can explain the full version of events if need be, there’s nothing to hide. And I also wanted your assurances, William, that your brother would stay away from my sister.”

“That depends.” Temple glides forward, smiling obsequiously. “Ideally, we would want Dr. Preston to come here to Venice and explain by what method she gained access to the manuscript, as well as anything else we can recall. The Congregation does want the full facts about such a momentous occasion. Surely we’re owed that? Nothing else, I promise.”

Anton Sokolov clears his throat. “What you mean is, you want to steal book for yourself. Nobody believe you, Temple. And Lucy is witch. Vampires cannot compel her.”

Temple gives the Russian an irritated look. “Surely my esteemed colleague would have to agree that I have asked for nothing outside the boundaries of well-established law? And given what I have heard about one of the Congregation’s own witches, Benjamin Cahill, making unauthorized contact with Dr. Preston first, we are by no means the first offenders.”

“Benjamin Cahill is dick,” Sokolov says. “Everyone know this. That does not mean all witches have suddenly –”

Keynes clears his throat. “As ever, vampires and witches are politicking away on this, and daemons are left in the dust. But it does give us a rather useful position as a neutral third party. If Dr. Preston was to retrieve Ashmole 782, would it not be wisest to give it to me? I could keep it safe, and ensure that nobody had to get too. . . enthusiastic.”

Temple, Sokolov, and Wyatt agree on the first thing in the meeting to date in the involuntary skeptical look that gets shared among them. Tension crackles in the dim chamber, liable to go up with a bang at any small spark. It’s clear that nobody on the Congregation, exalted rhetoric about working together for the good of all creatures far aside, trusts anyone of another species to lay exclusive claim to the Book of Life, and certainly not any of their own colleagues, who they know far too well to ever trust with suddenly unlimited power. Temple’s eyes are black, and the glimmer of
witchfire crackles around Sokolov’s battered knuckles. Wyatt briefly wonders if this is in fact going
to devolve into a brawl before anyone can stop it, but Olivia Christopher coughs pointedly. As the
only woman in the chamber, it’s clear that she feels this pissing contest was entirely predictable and
entirely pointless, and that she’s the only person who cares about her stepsister’s actual well-being,
rather than as a useful tool to claim a priceless treasure. “I’m sure the Congregation will follow the
law in any formal questioning of my sister,” she says. “I can return to Oxford and ask her to present
herself at the court, but as I said, I need assurances.”

She looks at Sokolov, the only other witch in the room, who might be expected as her natural ally,
and who has voiced concern about shielding Lucy from the vampires. He pauses, then nods. “I
agree. Dr. Preston comes, then you, Temple, you keep hands off her.”

“I will behave myself,” Temple says. “So long as Benjamin Cahill does.”

A few other promises and diplomatic niceties are mouthed, and Olivia finally agrees to return to
Oxford and ask Lucy if she’s willing to submit to a deposition and interrogation (the actual words are
nicer, softer, but it’s clear that they’re willing to pry and keep prying for answers, and Wyatt feels a
sudden pity for the witch, even without having met her – he would not want to be in the middle of
this) in exchange for an unconditional promise of safety. This mollifies everyone enough so that the
meeting breaks up without open conflict, though the looks exchanged are far from friendly, and
Temple and Wyatt walk out onto one of the balconies overlooking the canal. Temple waits until
they’re sure the others have left, then says, “You are going to make it clear to your brother what he
should do with Dr. Preston, I hope?”

“What makes you think I can get Flynn to do anything?” Wyatt would like to be on his way home,
please and thank you, but he has a distinct feeling that he’s not going anywhere, not just yet.
“Besides, it’s not like I can suddenly – ”

“Earlier,” Temple says, interrupting him. “You had rather an odd reaction to the subject of Jessica
Proctor. Refresh my memory, but wasn’t that the witch you were briefly... involved with? Even
knowing the very clear dictates of the Covenant on the legality, or rather illegality, of such a
relationship? That was smoothed over, but not even the de Clermonts are above the law. What with
Jessica’s apparent role in passing the information about Dr. Preston, it may look as if that personal
connection is still of interest to both of you. Do you really want me to pursue my suspicions in that
department? I might find all number of interesting things, and the skeletons that could tumble out of
the closet – ” He pauses delicately. “It really would be best, for everyone’s sake, if your brother saw
the light.”

Wyatt curses under his breath. Part of him wants to say that Temple has the fuck of a lot of nerve,
telling him that he’s not above the law when Temple himself made clear earlier that the rules can be
made as he likes, but that would just get him in deeper. He is damn well aware that his relationship
with Jessica is a weak spot, for him and the family, and it will never be entirely in the past, not as
long as it is useful for blackmail purposes or otherwise. Temple could make a stink, drop
incriminating information, possibly get this to spill over onto Gabriel and Flynn and their successful
careers and high positions, the entire network of de Clermont power and patronage that stretches
through the mortal and supernatural worlds alike. Wyatt’s always known he’s dangerous. That
elegant threat seems to be telling him that if he’s so inclined, Temple’s more than happy to show him
just how much.

“Do try to convince him, won’t you?” Temple says, sleeker than ever. “Wyatt?”

“Yeah. Fine.” Wyatt’s throat feels like dust. “Guess I’ll give him a call.”
Dinner With A Vampire

Lucy reads all afternoon, steadily working her way through anything in the library that looks remotely relevant, until the sunlight recedes off the walls and she gets up in search of a light switch. She half-wonders if there’s even electricity here, but if nothing else, Flynn probably doesn’t want to risk an open flame near so much dry paper (and for that matter, himself – aren’t vampires flammable?) She finally summons an antique green banker’s lamp to life, looks at the pile in the grainy amber glow thus provided, and tries to decide if there’s any point in continuing. While she has been furnished with a fascinating amount of new knowledge on sixteenth-century alchemy, historical manuscripts, odd diagrams written in grease chalk that may or may not be intended to summon the Devil, and so much ornately finialled gothic script that it is permanently tattooed on her eyeballs, she is still none the wiser about the origin, purpose, or contents of Ashmole 782. Maybe that’s the point. The only way she’s going to learn about it is by calling up the manuscript, or trying to call it up, from the Bod again. And the instant she does that, everyone pounces.

Lucy rubs her strained eyes, decides that she can’t think of anything else immediately relevant, and besides, she needs a break. There’s been no hide nor hair of Flynn all afternoon – he just said he was going out, then disappeared – and she tries not to speculate unduly on where he might have gone. He’s probably going to turn up again at some point, presumably. This is his house. Is he – what, out snacking on trespassers? At least there’s been a lack of distant explosions, but then, that does not mean all is well.

Shutting the books, and searching among the gilt-stamped spines in search of the correct places to re-shelve them, since she was not born in the jungle, Lucy replaces her research material and ventures into the cold, dim hallway. She makes her way in the possible direction of the kitchen, wondering what such a place looks like in a vampire’s house – bags of fresh O-negative chilling in the refrigerator? Is there going to be any food that a human can eat? It’s not going to look like something from Dexter, is it? Flynn doesn’t strike her as someone who’d leave the place filthy and blood-splattered, in contrast to the rest of this tidy English-rose countryside cottage, but she still doesn’t know much – anything – about him. Except that he slept with Eleanor of Aquitaine, apparently. The people can be excused for wondering just how the hell he pulled that off.

Holding her breath and somewhat annoyed with herself for it, Lucy steps around the corner and peeps into the kitchen. She is deeply relieved to see that it does not look like something from a horror movie, but when she braces herself and opens the fridge door, there’s nothing there either. Flynn is coming back, isn’t he? Nothing happened while he was out, right? She’s not going to steal the Maserati keys and casually drive an expensive supercar into town in search of dinner, but also, she would like something to eat. That, or just –

“What are you doing, Lucy?”

She jumps almost out of her skin, bangs her elbow painfully on the door, and stumbles back, clutching it while trying not to have a heart attack, at the sudden and totally silent materialization of none other than the vampire in question. He’s laden down with Sainsbury’s bags, which is a deeply incongruous sight, and swings them off his arms onto the countertop. “If you’re looking for food, I’ve got some.”

“Oh.” Lucy shuts her mouth hard enough to hear her jaw click. “I was – yes. That sounds good. Thanks.”

Flynn raises an eyebrow, but doesn’t answer, unloading the groceries and putting them away. It’s clearly been a while since he’s attempted to shop for a human’s tastes, since the items are decidedly
eclectic, but it’s better than whatever the alternative was. They remain there in awkward silence for thirty more seconds, until he says, “I have some wine.”

“I – all right.” Lucy doesn’t think she should drink too much on an empty stomach, and she’s a small woman who can sometimes get giggly after a single margarita, but honestly, a little alcohol as a lubricating agent sounds nice. “Should I make some dinner for myself?”

Flynn gives her a somewhat affronted look. It is clear that he does not consider himself quite such a terrible host as to drive her out to the middle of nowhere, leave her starving, and/or then expect her to shift for herself. “No,” he says. “I’ll cook.”

“You cook?” Lucy didn’t see that coming. “Don’t you… I mean, only…”

“Drink blood?” Flynn rolls his sleeves up and digs under the counter for a saucepan. “We can eat other things, if we want the taste. It just doesn’t nourish us. Turns to dust.”

“Oh.” Lucy is glad he added that last part, as it spares her the excruciating need to ask if vampires ever have to, you know, drop the kids off at the pool. She’s probably being inappropriately nosy as it is, as you don’t go asking new acquaintances about their dietary habits and bowel movements as polite small talk, and for the first time, she genuinely rues her lack of connection to the creature world. She hasn’t wanted anything to do with it, has repressed her power and turned her back on the witches and insisted that she’s normal, but throughout this whole mess with Ashmole 782, she’s starting to wish she wasn’t so stubborn. But it’s starting to look like all the knowledge in the world wouldn’t have helped her. Flynn doesn’t know, and he’s been searching for a cool few centuries. Against that, it seems optimistic to the point of naivety to think that she could crack the mystery in a few days.

There’s another too-lengthy silence as Flynn pulls out some meat and vegetables, remembers that he offered her wine, and opens a low door at the back of the kitchen. He ventures down narrow, creaky steps into a root cellar that requires him to bend almost in half, and returns with a very dusty bottle that may have been produced when Benjamin Disraeli was Prime Minister. He brushes the dust off, uncorks it, and pulls two glasses out of an overhead cupboard. Having duly let the wine breathe, he splashes a rich, mellow red into both glasses, and hands one to her. “Here.”

This is rather an understated way to present a vintage that would probably sell for £500 a glass in some ultra-exclusive London restaurant, and Lucy has to bite her lip. She sniffs the bouquet, otherwise acts like she is in fact a wine connoisseur, then takes a sip. It’s – maybe it’s just the two hundred years of aging or whatever it is, but damn. It’s smooth and rich and flavorful, sweet and tart all at once, and the taste lingers on her tongue after she swallows. A little hoarsely, she says, “Holy shit.”

The corner of Flynn’s mouth twitches. He seems amused by her earthiness, or perhaps that hint of dropping her guard. He’s not just trying to get her drunk, is he? No, if she keeps reverting to the most paranoid explanations for everything, this isn’t going to get anywhere. He takes an obliging sip of his own, as if to demonstrate that he hasn’t poisoned it (not that that would be likely to have any effect on a vampire) and she watches him cook in silence for another few minutes. It’s almost full dark by now, since it’s the end of October – close to All Hallows – and the autumn days are short. Flynn turns on the lights somewhat belatedly, which she senses is more for her benefit, since he doesn’t need them to see. God, he is… she doesn’t know what. Fascinating, she has to admit. To stand here next to someone who’s been alive since – when? She keeps trying to guess, but she can’t be sure. At least the twelfth century, probably longer. Who isn’t human, who interacts with the world in an entirely different way and who is clearly very dangerous if he wanted to be, but hasn’t felt like that to her. Annoying and confusing and standoffish and many other things, but not dangerous.
The kitchen starts to smell of savory meat and herbs and cooking vegetables, Lucy gets a few things out and passes them over to Flynn, and he slings them in with an easy competence that is enjoyable to watch. Clearly, if you don’t expect him to talk or display social skills of any measurable degree, and just set him loose to do things without reference to anyone else, he’s in great shape. That is fair, though it does make her wonder why he’s putting up with having her around. Just because of Ashmole 782? That’s what she keeps thinking, and it could still be the case. If he was playing a long con, how long would he wait to strike?

Flynn finishes what he’s doing in another few minutes, takes down two plates, and serves them both, which they carry over to the table and sit down. He reaches for the wine bottle to top them off, and they eye each other over the rim of their glasses. It strikes Lucy that Flynn may also wonder if she’s playing him, pretending to be ignorant and harmless, and at some opportune moment, she will craftily reveal her true colours and start mercilessly wringing him for information. It’s almost flattering to think that she could pose a threat to him in any circumstance. He seems like a force of nature himself. Eternal and indestructible.

They eat without saying anything for a few minutes. Then Lucy decides to hell with it, they’re sitting here by themselves, he did just make her dinner and is eating it with her even though he’ll get nothing out of it, and she is curious. “How old are you?”

Flynn choked on his wine, which he has just ill-advisedly taken a sip of, and coughs, putting it down. Solid start there, Lucy. “I beg your pardon?”

“How… how old are you?” Not much room to misinterpret that question, though it’s possible she has committed a considerable faux pas. “You were talking about the twelfth century earlier, and I just… I can’t help it. I’m a historian, I… you don’t have to say, I…”

Flynn gives her no help, letting her flounder for a few moments more, but at least he doesn’t seem angry. He sits back, regarding her under hooded eyes. “How old do you think I am?”

Lucy honestly can’t say. She doesn’t have enough experience with vampires to make a guess, though she’s heard of ones who never give up the customs of their origin era and still dress like eighteenth-century dandies in modern twenty-first-century cities (thus to be explained as method actors, no doubt). Flynn isn’t one of those, dresses stylishly and has a position in an advanced scientific field, so he’s clearly kept up with the times, but that doesn’t change her sense, acquired at their first meeting, that he is in fact old. “I don’t know,” she says. “You served with Richard the Lionheart – in the crusades?”

“I was on the Third Crusade with him, yes.” Flynn pauses to take a sip of wine. “The Knights of Lazarus were originally a crusading order anyway. I fought in most of his territorial wars in France afterward, too. I was with him until he died.”

“The Knights of Lazarus?” Lucy has heard of the Templars, the Hospitallers, the Knights of St. John, the Teutonic Order, and various others, but not that one. “Who are those – ?”

Flynn gets a look like he wasn’t supposed to say that, and she decides that it’s best not to push. There’s a note of wistfulness in Flynn’s voice when he mentions Richard, like an old friend who died relatively recently and whose loss can still be felt, and it stabs at Lucy’s heart in a particularly poignant way. She honestly doesn’t know if she’d have the emotional chops to be immortal. It hurts too much to lose one loved one. Having to go through it over and over sounds brutal. Presumably Flynn has had his vampire family as a constant through the centuries, but getting attached to humans can never end well, and she doesn’t want to make him rehash anything too personal. Trying to smooth over the awkward moment, she says, “So, the Norman Conquest? Did you see that?”
“Yes.” Flynn surveys her. “Preston – does your family have any connection with the city, in Lancashire? I was there when it was Prestune, in the Domesday Book.”

“Oh?” Lucy leans forward. “What was it like?”

“Awful,” Flynn says. Well, then. “It escaped the Harrowing of the North, but it wasn’t much more than a few stinking sheepfolds and cottages. You could argue it still is, but now in a different way.”

Lucy chews her cheek. Another man might have assured her, truthfully or otherwise, that her namesake place was a lovely little medieval hamlet, but that’s not his style, apparently. Even when a white lie or two might seem to help his cause, Flynn still goes for the direct flamethrower of truth. It’s reassuring, if not always comfortable. Everyone else seems determined to distort, shade, or withhold the truth, and at least he doesn’t do that. “Come on, it can’t be all terrible,” she says. “It was a very important market town in the Middle Ages, and during the Industrial Revolution. I’m not from there, as far as I know, but still.”

Flynn makes a noncommittal sound, as if they will agree to disagree on Preston’s awful or non-awful status. He seems to be enjoying this, seeing what she knows, giving her a chance to ask her historical questions, even if there is no guarantee that he will answer them helpfully. “Well,” he says. “Are you finished guessing?”

“Not yet.” Lucy considers him. “Did you meet William the Conqueror?”

“No.” Flynn’s mouth twitches again. “There was some sense that if he knew who I was, he might demand to also be turned into a vampire and live forever, and that did not seem fair to everyone else.”

Lucy snorts. “France. Your family are the de Clermonts. So… Charlemagne?”

“Yes,” Flynn says. “The Carolingians were… not easy neighbors. They were obsessed with divine approval and communal moral purity, and I can assure you that they would have seen us as godless monsters who had to be destroyed for the salvation of the people’s souls. We mostly stayed in Sept-Tours until they all died out.”

“Sept-Tours?”

“Our ancestral family home. In Poitou. That was how I got into Richard’s service originally – by the demands of territory, we were his vassals. It used to be a monastery. That always seemed somewhat ironic.”

Flynn is actually being somewhat forthcoming, at least by his standards, and Lucy can’t help her delight at this whole conversation. The supper is delicious, but she’s almost forgetting to eat, hungry as she is. “Your accent doesn’t sound French, though,” she says. “Mediterranean? Southern Europe?”

“Getting warm.” He looks amused. “Though I moved to France when I was a young man. Or Gaul, as it was still often known at the time.”

“Roman Empire, then?” Lucy tries. “Don’t tell me you stabbed Julius Caesar.”

It’s Flynn’s turn to snort. “No,” he says. “My older brother Gabriel is the consul among us. Very well, I was born about the year 500, in the city of Ragusa, on the Adriatic. It was variously a Greek frontier outpost, a former Roman colony, or conquered by the Slavs. That was one of the reasons I left, in fact. Life seemed as if it might be more sedate elsewhere. I arrived in Gaul around 522, and became a vampire in 540.”
“Oh.” That leaves a good eighteen years that Lucy still wants to know about, but he’s already given her more than she expected, and the details of his human life aren’t her business. “Ragusa – that’s the historical name for Dubrovnik, isn’t it? In Croatia?”

“It is Dubrovnik now, yes,” Flynn acknowledges. “Richard and his men washed up in the harbor, on Lokrum island, when we were shipwrecked on the return from the Holy Land in 1192. It was the first time I had been there in six hundred and seventy years.”

Lucy’s mind boggles a little at the thought, of the sheer expanse of time he has seen, the grand-scale sweep of history as well as the small details of the everyday. She could probably pick his brain forever, if he was willing to keep talking. “Fifteen hundred years,” she says at last. “Give or take. And you’re not even the oldest in your family.”

“No.” Flynn raises an eyebrow. “My father was born sometime in 1200 B.C.”

“Your father?” Lucy doesn’t recall that he’s been mentioned. “Is he – ?”

“No,” Flynn says again. “He died. In World War II.”

“I’m – very sorry.” Lucy has the sense that she may have ventured onto dangerous ground. “I just – well, you know my parents were killed too, and I… I know it’s hard.”

Flynn looks as if there’s quite a gulf of difference between the two things, but decorously decides not to say so. Lucy remembers from her conversation with Olivia the other night that Maria de Clermont, Flynn’s mother, is infamous as a witch-killer since she blamed them for her husband’s death. But that’s definitely a dangerous question to ask, could shatter whatever fragile détente they have found themselves forging, and anyway, still not her business. But she must be thinking very loudly, or it’s written on her face, because Flynn glances up with an ironic expression. “The Nazis murdered him, if you were wondering.”

“Oh.” Lucy doesn’t want to say that’s a relief, since it’s obviously horrible, but at least the witches weren’t directly responsible for Asher de Clermont’s death. So is Maria mistaken in her blame, or is it just a supernatural game of telephone that got out of –

“Of course,” Flynn goes on, determinedly offhand, “the witches did prevent us from reaching him until it was too late, and thought that him being tortured to death was preferable to allowing the de Clermont patriarch to survive. The story was that Mengele experimented on him personally, trying to find a way to extract the essence of his immortality and administer it to the best and brightest of the Nazi high command. That was after they tried to force my father to turn Hitler into a vampire himself, but he refused. My father was a hero, he underwent unspeakable things rather than give in and make humanity’s greatest monster into a real one. The Nazis would have loaded our family with honors and gifts, and if we only cared about ourselves, we would have taken that offer. My father died so Adolf Hitler would too, and the witches didn’t let us rescue him. So yes. My mother holds a grudge.”

Lucy looks at the bite of dinner she was about to eat, and puts it down rather abruptly. Flynn hasn’t raised his voice or even directed this accusation at her personally, since it’s clear that she had nothing to do with it, but the force of his anger is like a blow to the chest, and it rocks her backward in the same way. “I,” she says weakly. “I didn’t know that.”

Flynn surveys her, decides that this is probably true, and some of the shadow that has fallen on the room lightens. “So,” he says, as if she’s just asked him one considerably personal question and he has the right to return it, tit for tat. “Why don’t you use your magic?”
Lucy has been about to take a fortifying sip of wine, but discovers that she can’t do that either, and puts it back down. They stare at each other across the table in silence, so that she can hear the ticking of a distant clock in the hall. His tone isn’t hostile, but it’s not exactly friendly. If this is the moment of reckoning, if she is in fact somehow biding her time undercover and waiting to spring the trap, he clearly wants to know about it. Now.

“It’s… complicated,” Lucy says at last, both hands twisting knots into her napkin. “I was eight when my parents died, and I was told that they were killed for being witches. That’s… not a way to make an orphan girl want to be one, and I was adopted by my godmother and her wife. They’re witches too, so’s their daughter, but I already… I’d repressed my magic and I just… I have this memory, I don’t remember when it’s from. When I was very young, probably even before my parents died. I’m sitting in the middle of a big stone room, and there’s this one man – he’s looking at me, and he’s poking and prodding, and he says that I’m – I don’t know, I don’t remember that either. But it’s not what he’s supposed to say, and I’ve disappointed everyone, somehow, and I just… magic makes me feel sick, and ashamed, and small. I want to be a historian. I’m good at being a historian. I worked hard and I earned it on my own merit and I got prizes and grants and I was reassured that I could at least do that. They wanted to offer me a permanent position at Yale, but I turned it down to take the research fellowship at Oxford. I was here for a year as an undergraduate, it’s when I first met Jessica. But now everyone wants me to use my magic, thinks that I can do these great things with Ashmole 782, and I just…”

She trails off, absurdly close to tears, since she hasn’t said that much since Denise tried to make her see a psychologist in her freshman year at Stanford, where she really was a mess. But the psychologist was an ordinary human, not a witch, and thus was conspicuously patient about putting up with Lucy’s “magic metaphors until you’re ready to face reality.” In other words, not helpful. She’s also never mentioned that memory to anyone, since it tends to trigger her off into panic attacks, and if Flynn is going to throw that in her face, she isn’t sure she can take it. She tenses as if she’s about to get up and flee, while he’s sitting there with a rather pole-axed look. Then he says awkwardly, just as she did earlier, “I didn’t know that.”

“Guess that makes sense.” Lucy manages a laugh, even though it grates like broken glass in her chest. “Why would we?”

Flynn nods as if to allow that indeed, they wouldn’t, and they both go silent again for a few minutes, applying restorative quantities of wine and deciding that further conversational minefields can be avoided at least until the end of dinner. Lucy manages to get down most of the rest of her food, then pushes her plate away, as Flynn gets up to clear them off. “Do you want dessert?”

“Is dessert on offer?” Lucy feels like it would not come amiss, and while it turns out to be just foil-lidded chocolate mousse cups in a four-pack, it tastes good. She spoons up her portion, as Flynn sits and watches her. He doesn’t eat one himself, so those appear to have been solely for her benefit. It’s nice of him, in a clumsy, unspoken way, and some of the raw tension from earlier subsides a bit. “Thanks,” she says, confused and aggravated to find her throat is still a little thick. “I – I’m glad someone’s helping out with all this.”

Flynn shrugs, rather diffidently, as if to say that they both know this is once again a generous term for how he started off. He glances at her under his eyelashes, then away, and Lucy can’t help looking back, however fleetingly. He is, obviously, not the most hideous man she’s ever seen (all right, he’s really working that dark, rugged, handsome look and his jaw could probably cut glass) and she’s so unused to sustained attention from anyone that it’s hard to judge what is an actual interest and what is just pitiful gratitude for having her basic needs met. God, her standards are on the floor, apparently. It wasn’t Noah’s fault, he was perfectly lovely, but he was also a busy professional with a demanding career, and when the choice was Lucy or taking an extra shift at the hospital, it
was usually the latter. (The American healthcare system is fucked, that’s a whole other rant.) For someone like her, who has felt on the outside of everything for her whole life, isolated and unsure and driven further and further away from the witches who should have healed her childhood wounds and only deepened them instead, she just… she doesn’t… God. Flynn just seems steady, like you could hit him with the wrath of Khan and he still wouldn’t budge, if he has survived fifteen hundred eventful years and remained exactly who and where he is, and Lucy Preston would so badly like to stop spinning. Maybe just for a little while, a little bit. That’s all.

She finishes her mousse, scraping the inside of the plastic cup for the last bites, and Flynn once more courteously gets up to throw it in the garbage. Lucy wants to tell him that he doesn’t have to, but he seems determined to prove that he can at least be a considerate host to his non-vampire guest, and he clears his throat. “There’s, ah, there’s a washroom upstairs, if you wanted to have a bath.”

Soaking for a while does sound nice, even if Lucy can’t repress the guilty suspicion that she should still be working. “What about you?”

She realizes an instant too late that this sounds like she’s inviting him to have a bath with her, and her cheeks burn like a furnace. “I mean,” she rushes on. “What are you going to – is there something else you were still going to –”

“I think I’ll…” Thankfully, Flynn doesn’t even seem to realize that she accidentally semi-propositioned him, which makes Lucy wonder if there has in fact been anyone since Eleanor of Aquitaine (yep, still jealous). “I’ll go out and… see to things.”

It’s possible that this is a delicate euphemism for “have an actual feed,” but he has been gracious about attending to her dietary requirements, and she’s not going to go prying into his. They nod awkwardly at each other, Flynn turns to the sink to do the washing-up, and Lucy speeds upstairs, cheeks still vaguely glowing. The WC is tucked under the eave of the house, with a sharply slanted roof overhead, and the tub is deep and provisioned with a variety of feminine bath products that must belong to Jiya. Lucy runs the water, dumps in some rose-scented bubbles, and undresses, standing on the mat until the tub is filled. Then she dips a toe in, winces and waits, then the other. Once she’s acclimated to the temperature, she sinks in, lets out a groan like a trampled wildebeest, and rests her head on the edge, staring at nothing. God. She feels about a hundred and twenty years old. And to her companion, that would be nothing more than a tender young spring chicken.

Lucy soaks until the water grows lukewarm, reminded of just how much stress has managed to accumulate in her neck and shoulders and the fact that her spine is probably permanently messed up from all the hunching over manuscripts in dim archives (to say nothing of her eyesight). Finally, she splashes out, wraps herself up in a huge towel the size of a sail, and applies various of Jiya’s lotions, hoping that she won’t mind. Finally, she tugs a comb through her wet dark hair and puts on her pajamas. It’s not that late, but there does not appear to be much else to do around here, and she is exhausted. Then she opens the door of the steamy bathroom, is hit with a blast of cold air, shuffles into the guest room, picks up her phone, and sees a message from Denise: Are you still awake? Need to talk re Olivia/Cong.

“Oh, Jesus,” Lucy mutters, rubbing her eyes. The responsible thing would be to call Denise back and find out what’s gone on over on that end – she supposes that she should be grateful that they are in fact including her, and not just going over her head. But that would entail explaining that she’s having a sleepover with de Clermont (not with him, but in his house, on his territory, with no one else present) and she really does not get the sense that Denise would be very thrilled about that. But if she doesn’t answer, with everything going on, she’ll probably worry them, and she doesn’t want that either. She sighs deeply and hits Call.
“Lucy?” Denise sounds relieved when she picks up. “It’s been a while, are you –”

“Yes, yeah, fine. I was having a bath.” This, after all, is the truth. Lucy settles down on the bed, stretching out. They might as well get this over with. “So Olivia is in Venice?”

“Yes,” Denise says. “She spoke to the Congregation – well, a few members of them – earlier this evening. They agreed to grant you safety and legal immunity if you consented to go to headquarters in Italy and explain what happened in person.”

“I’ve already told you what happened,” Lucy says, a little tightly. “And Olivia. And Michelle. Repeatedly. I promise, there’s not some big plot twist that I’m keeping back for shock value. So –”

“I know, Lucy,” Denise says placatingly. “But you know the Congregation will want to hear it in person, there are rules and regulations to follow and important people who need to be mollified, and this is very major. It’s worth a shot, I think. If you go and just have your side of the story on record, they can’t say you haven’t cooperated, and then –”

Lucy doesn’t answer. Of course it’s Denise’s instinct, ex-Homeland Security agent as she is, to trust the system and the legislators and the rules. She can’t even say that it’s wrong. But a small voice in the back of her head warns her that she can’t go to Venice at any cost, that if she does she won’t come back, and it will cause complications far outside anything that anyone is prepared for. More than that, it’s just – it’s dangerous, it’s the same reason you wouldn’t walk into traffic on an eight-lane highway or play around high-voltage power cables. But she is so unused to trusting her instincts on anything magical, or indeed defying authority, that she doesn’t even know how to say it. Denise is still talking, explaining that it should be quick and Olivia will wait there until she arrives, she’ll help her with any of the formalities, when Lucy finally says, “No.”

“What?” Denise sounds like she’s blinking. “Lucy, what do you mean, no?”

“I don’t want to go to Venice.” Lucy curls her feet up beneath her, can feel her knuckles going white on the phone, as if she’s preparing for the first big drop on a roller coaster. “I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“Lucy…” Denise clearly doesn’t quite know what to do with this. “If you refuse, it does start looking like you have something to hide. I don’t know if we’d be able to protect you. This is the simplest way, for you and for everyone. I know it might be an intimidating experience to go back into the creature world like this, but I promise, Olivia would be there, everyone –”

Again, Lucy doesn’t answer. She doesn’t want to sound like she’s low-balling Olivia’s abilities by saying that she isn’t sure if she could protect her, but it would be a lot to expect that one witch, no matter how talented, could stand between her and the entire Congregation if things did go bad. She knows that she sounds like the unreasonable one, that to all appearances, this is an eminently efficient and tidy solution to get the matter out of her hands and passed up the food chain – problem solved, door closed, Christopher family not in any trouble, everyone goes on with their lives. But even though Lucy initially just wanted to wash her hands of the whole situation as fast as she could, she’s starting to feel somewhat attached to Ashmole 782. For whatever baffling reason, it chose her as the one which to appear. The omega mark, even if fading, is still branded onto her palm. Of all the creatures in all the world, everyone who’s been looking for this thing since time immemorial, she, Lucy, received it, even if she never knew exactly what she was asking for. It feels like a small animal or child, something that needs her for protection, and that she would be morally remiss in throwing to the wolves. (Figuratively, since even though there are vampires and witches, she’s never met an actual werewolf.) And this…

“Is Benjamin Cahill on the Congregation?” Lucy says. “Did Olivia confirm that?”
“He apparently holds one of the seats, yes,” Denise admits. “But I know one of the other witches, Anton Sokolov. In passing, at least. He’s good, you can trust him. So –”

“Benjamin Cahill sent me pictures.” Lucy twists a loose thread from the comforter around her finger, almost hard enough to cut off the circulation. “Of Mom and Dad. Murdered. I don’t know why he did that, but I – if any of this involves more of him, of trusting that he –”

“He what?” Denise demands. She did say at their earlier conversation that Carol and Henry did not trust Cahill by the time they died, and warned Lucy to be careful of him. That cannot be entirely smoothed over or disregarded, no matter how strong the impulse for a quick fix. “Are you sure it was him?”

“Yes, there’s no doubt, his scent was all over them. That’s what J –” Just in time, Lucy catches herself. If she isn’t mentioning the whole “oh yeah I’m hanging out with the de Clermonts” thing, that is a subject they need to stay off. “It was definitely him.”

“Scent?” Denise sounds puzzled, as obviously Lucy does not possess a bloodhound’s talent in this department. There’s only one creature that has that kind of heightened senses, and after another pause, she puts the logical pieces together. “Lucy, are you still – with the vampires, I told you that wasn’t a –”

Lucy badly wants to say that the vampires, or at least these two, are apparently the only semi-helpful people in all of Oxford and certainly the only helpful creatures, but that would definitely lead them into dangerous waters. She definitely can’t ask Denise about what happened to Asher de Clermont without revealing where she heard it from, and while she doesn’t like having to keep things from her godmother, she also isn’t willing to stonewall Flynn just yet. Ironic, since that was the one thing she desperately wanted to do when he first appeared, but if nothing else, he’s here. Right now, for better or worse, that counts for something. Half the effort is showing up, as the saying goes. “I have it under control,” Lucy says. “Honestly.”

“Are you –” A tinge of suspicion darkens Denise’s voice. If Lucy is refusing to go to Venice and being evasive on the subject of vampire associations, she clearly can’t help but fear that Lucy has been mesmerized or influenced or otherwise darkly manipulated into serving their interests. “Lucy, you’re – you’re not making any sense. You’re worrying me. Please, just go to Italy and meet Olivia. Once that’s over, you can –”

“I’ll think about it,” Lucy says, which is close as she can come to deflecting it without outright lying or making Denise expect things she doesn’t know if she can deliver. “I’ll talk to you later, okay? Give Michelle a hug from me. Bye.”

With that, knowing that it’s teetering on the brink of outright rudeness and that she’s never done this before, Lucy hangs up. She feels somewhat stunned by her own nerve, to the point where she almost crumbles and calls Denise back to apologize, but she doesn’t. For once, for once, she’s certain about what she should do, the magical decision she should make, and she doesn’t want that taken away from her. But if this is getting out on the grapevine, it’s possible that Flynn’s about to hear it too, and she should head it off at the pass, if she can. She swings her legs over the side of the bed, gets up, and goes downstairs, bare feet padding on the hardwood. “Flynn? Flynn, are you –”

She thinks she hears him in the study, steps up, and knocks on the slightly ajar door. He has been bent over the desk, but he straightens up in a flash and whirls around, in that too-fast vampiric speed which feels like a film on fast-forward. Then he sees her, and something odd happens. He turns into a statue except for his eyes, which are blown wide, the pupils almost black, and his fist curls involuntarily on his thigh. It’s just then that Lucy wonders if the sight and smell of her – soft, pink, damp, rosy, tender and vulnerable – is a little too much for him, when he’s in a state of heightened
susceptibility and was possibly thinking about going out for a proper human feed. She freezes on the threshold, unsure whether to enter or back away. Don’t run, that old instinctual command. Her mouth is dry. The world briefly seems to tip to a teetering halt, a top about to fall. What if he –

After a very tense moment, Flynn lets out a jagged breath, and some of the inky blackness in his eyes recedes, washing out to sea. “Lucy,” he says, too formal, too careful about it, his accent somewhat stronger than usual. “What is it?”

“I…” She struggles to remember. She still doesn’t feel quite safe enough to actually step into the room, though not even because of him. “I just – I talked to my godmother. Apparently the Congregation has decided that they want me to go – to go to Venice and explain what happened, and I just – I don’t know that it’s a good – good idea.”

She isn’t sure if she’s expecting Flynn to object or not. It’s clear that he’s a solo operator and does not consider himself unduly constrained by the shackles of bureaucracy, he patently does not trust the witches and she isn’t sure she blames him, but he could still disagree just on the grounds that it causes more of a mess. Not that he’s averse to messes, at least. He just seems to prefer the ones he makes himself. After a moment he says, “That’s funny. My brother just called me. He likewise seemed insistent that I take you to Venice, and if he thinks that’s a good idea, I’m inclined to suspicion on principle.”

“Your brother…?” Lucy tries to guess which one. “The one you said was an idiot? William de Logan?”

“Yes, that one. Wyatt.” Flynn looks grim. “He’s our family representative on the Congregation, he’s the one who’s dealing with this. Though ‘dealing’ is apparently a very charitable word for it. Besides, if there’s any chance Michael Temple is anywhere near this, and I’d be quite sure he is, it stinks to high heaven.”

“Michael Temple?” Lucy hasn’t heard that name before. “Another witch?”

“No,” Flynn says, even more grimly. “Oh no, this one’s a vampire.”

Lucy starts to say something, can’t think of it, and stops. She was expecting to have to spend a lot more time convincing Flynn to take her side, but it seems that he’s already independently come to the stay-away-from-Venice decision without reference to her, and that is… well, heartening doesn’t seem like the word for it. “It probably would cause trouble,” she says, not sure why she’s playing devil’s advocate against herself. “A lot of trouble. If we didn’t go to Venice, and we didn’t say why, and it looked like we were about to take Ashmole 782 for ourselves and make some kind of major power play – ”

Flynn tilts his head at her. “Do you want to go?”

“No.” Lucy crosses her arms tightly across her chest. There’s a draft coming from somewhere in the old house, and it makes her feel shivering and small. “No, I don’t. I just thought you – I don’t know. I don’t usually expect anyone to agree with me.”

Flynn regards her with an odd, almost indignant look, as if he wants to have a word with whoever has left her in such constant doubt of her abilities and instincts, and it catches her in a sudden and vulnerable spot in the heart. For half an unhinged instant, Lucy wonders what he would do if she crossed the room and kissed him. Not that she is remotely graceful or confident or smooth enough to pull that off, not that she would, not that she wants to startle him again or deliberately push at the bounds of his possibly fraying self-control, but just, for a simple, painful instant, because she wanted to. But that’s never good enough as a reason for anything, especially not for her. She’s an
intellectual, an academic. There’s always something else, a competing perspective, an extra piece of evidence, another argument to consider, and besides, Flynn was very clear earlier that his vampire brother paying court on a witch, on Jessica, was highly against the rules. Probably not a good thing to run away from the law and then add another charge to the rap sheet. Not at all.

Lucy swallows, looking down until the thought goes away, or at least can again be safely ignored. “So,” she says tentatively. “If I refused to go to Venice, would you...?”

“I’d back you up.” Flynn turns away, across the study. He’s a large man, but he makes no sound on the creaky floorboards when he moves, and it’s almost eerie. “Anything that came after you would have to get through me, and I can promise, that would not be easy.”

He says this so completely casually, not even looking at her or acting as if he has offered her anything more remarkable than the morning paper, that Lucy can’t be sure if this is a noteworthy thing for him to have done. The words are a significant promise, that he’s willing to physically put his body between her and harm if the need came to it, and it feels as if the world is turning under her feet. She doesn’t understand this, she doesn’t understand them, why she has somehow gone from wanting him out of the way immediately to experiencing that brief, poignant urge to be close to him, closer. He’s disregarding out of hand what his own brother advised, at least, and while it’s clear that Flynn thinks said brother has a room-temperature IQ, that’s still a major step. He’s siding against the de Clermonts, against the Congregation, against one of his own kind, this Michael Temple, out of the apparent belief that Lucy is right and he’ll fight for that, and that... it affects her. She can’t help it.

“Oh,” is what Lucy says, just about as understatedly. “So what are we going to do?”

“We’ll go back to Oxford tomorrow morning,” Flynn says. “It’s the weekend, hopefully there won’t be as many looky-loos in the reading room. You try to get Ashmole 782 out again, and if you do, we’ll take it somewhere safe and properly examine it.”

“You can’t take manuscripts out of the Bod,” Lucy reminds him, though she doubts he’s actually forgotten. “Unless you’re planning to bamboozle the librarian, or the watchman, and I don’t know if that’s a – ”

“Given what’s at stake,” Flynn says firmly, “I think I may have to scramble Simon’s memory briefly, yes. Besides, the damn thing is still missing, technically. I can protect you while you have a look at it. It seems to be the only way we’re going to get real answers.”

Lucy is tempted to object that if they do get caught stealing a priceless manuscript from the Bodleian, they are going to have problems with law enforcement quite apart from the Congregation, and she would like to avoid getting blacklisted across the United Kingdom, thanks. But Flynn seems perfectly confident in his abilities, and she doesn’t have any real reason to doubt him. Her old good-girl sense still objects, that there have to be other ways to solve this apart from grand-theft larceny, but frankly, she doesn’t know if there is. All the other avenues appear to be turning up as dead ends, and if they’re going to take such a brazen risk as defying a direct order from the Congregation, they had better have something to show for it. It strikes her that she’s already started thinking of them as partners, quite the team, and this is a Rubicon that cannot be, as it were, uncrossed. This is more than just theoretical or abstract or toying with the idea of breaking the rules. This is going for it.

“Oh,” Lucy says, feeling her conscience cringe as she does. “We’ll go back to Oxford tomorrow and steal something from the Bodleian. Okay. Fine.”

Flynn’s mouth quirks. “Do you need a few hours to have the vapors first?”

Lucy huffs a little, even as she wonders what sort of things he’s done over the centuries (probably far
more than she really wants to know) that this prospect is utterly unconcerning for him. She turns on her heel, smelling a whiff of the rose bubble bath as she does, and leaves the study, conscious of the weight of his eyes on her back, following her the whole way. Her heart is in her throat as she climbs the stairs, and she shuts the door with her pulse tripping in her fingers. Of all the things she was worried about, going off to Flynn’s house with him alone, being attracted to him was not on the list, nor was it even something she considered a possibility. But if he might be fighting some kind of physiological response to her, she’s likewise not unaffected by him, and that could be dangerous. It will go away, though. It’s just deprivation and confusion and loneliness. Or, you know, he’ll open his mouth and say something else stupid, and the problem will take care of itself.

What with everything, Lucy sleeps shallowly, starting awake at the various creaks and thumps of the old place and listening for anything that might be lurking in the woods outside. She thinks Flynn might have left, going for a long midnight run (or snack), since she hears the front door open and shut, and tries to fight an inexplicable anxiety about being here by herself. The idea of doing something proactive, rather than just playing defense, is appealing, but if this is what it entails… if this what they have to do… and there’s no guarantee that everything won’t go instantly to hell even if they do get Ashmole 782 out and away…

At last, Lucy’s spinning thoughts fracture into spinning dreams, and she opens her eyes with a start, grey light filtering through the curtains and onto her face. She feels stiff and groggy, but at least somewhat rested, if no more settled in her resolve about what faces them, and sits up slowly, grimacing. She scrubs her eyes with the heels of her hand, finally musters enough momentum to get out of bed, and dresses quickly, fine gooseflesh rising on her skin. When she peers through the fogged window, she sees the pink flush of sunrise on the eastern horizon, just spilling onto the tops of the black trees. Birds rise into the mother-of-pearl sky like traceries of ink. It is very quiet. She can’t tell if Flynn’s back yet, though the car is still there. He can’t have gone far. Hopefully, at least.

Lucy goes to the bathroom to perform morning ablutions and do her makeup, brushing her hair out into loose dark curls and wondering if she should eschew any more scented shampoo or lotion, so as to avoid any more inadvertent moments like last night. It’s not like she prances around drenched in Chanel No. 5 all the time, but she is conscious of the fact that Flynn can clearly smell her, or feel her, or something else outside the usual realm of a human’s five senses, and it’s better to play it safe. She finishes up, throws her things into her bag and hurries downstairs, and finds him up and dressed, looking as if he’s trying not to pace. “Do you want breakfast, or should we just go?”

“The Bod won’t open until 10am on Saturday anyway,” Lucy says. “We probably don’t have to race back.”

“Maybe,” Flynn says. “But I’d prefer to be there earlier rather than later, so we can see what, or who, might be waiting for us. We can pick up something on the way, if you preferred.”

“All right.” He’s clearly antsy and would like to prepare the heist as soon as possible, and Lucy’s anxiety has returned to the point that she’s not very hungry. She follows him outside into the chilly autumn morning, and they get into the Maserati, heading out down the drive and out of the Blenheim Palace estate. The roads are all but empty this early on a weekend, so the drive back to Oxford takes less than twenty minutes. It’s almost jarring, since Lucy felt as if they were somehow much further away, and she has to fight an odd sense of disorientation as they reach All Souls, turn into the car park, and return to Flynn’s assigned space. They have Oxford all to themselves, still and crisp and magical in its own way, and she inhales a deep breath, letting it out in a fine mist. No lurking ambush parties or outraged Congregation delegates, at least. That’s a good start?

All Souls is just across from Radcliffe Square and the Bod, so they could practically sit on the walls with a pair of binoculars and keep watch for any suspicious persons entering the premises. But
Lucy’s appetite is finally starting to wake up, the Covered Market opens at eight, and it’s probably better to face what they are about to do with some food in her stomach. So they trek over to the market, buy her a cappuccino and a pastry, and hope that no one spots them together. That seems to be Flynn’s concern, at least, since he keeps rotating his head like a searchlight in case anyone is sneaking up on them. Finally, when they have allowed a decent interval, it’s close to ten and they can be there the instant the Bod opens, they get up and head over. Flynn sticks close to her side, glaring at innocent passersby, until Lucy wants to inform him that people will get suspicious if he keeps carrying on like that. But they make it to the library, stand in the courtyard until the door is unlocked, and stroll inside, not at all like a pair of imminent literary felons. At least, so one dearly hopes.

They reach Duke Humfrey’s just as the librarian is opening up shop for the day, and is somewhat surprised that he already has customers. But Lucy fills out the call slip for Ashmole 782 and hands it over, then bounces on her toes, too anxious to stand still. Flynn looms away at her back. It’s kind of nice to have him there, a promise that at least she is not attempting this insanity entirely by herself, and that he could level anyone who took a swing at her. Though once they have the manuscript in their hands, it might be a lot more than that.

Lucy is trying to brace herself, doesn’t feel ready either way, and is startled to see the librarian already returning, empty-handed. “Sorry, Dr. Preston,” he says. “The stack record says that item isn’t there. In fact, it’s missing. Since 1859, apparently.”

“What?” Lucy looks down at her hand, as if to check that the omega is still there. It is, and yes, everyone has been saying that the damn thing is missing, but… “Are you sure? I’ve been working with it, I’ve gotten it out several times. Maybe it was misfiled?”

The librarian gives her a polite but dubious look, as if she did not just come in here and accuse the Bodleian Library of not knowing how to do their jobs properly. “I’m quite sure it would be in the correct place, Dr. Preston. Between Ashmole 781 and 783.”

Lucy has the feeling that she’s just been politely sassed, though she still wants to order him to look again. Why would she be able to get it out all this time, and now that she actually knows what it is, she can’t? “Did someone else take it out?”

“No,” the librarian says again, with a customer-service, cannot-tell-them-they-are-idiots smile fixed firmly in place. “Because it is missing.”

All right, buddy, back the snark truck up, up, up, or at least bother to consult her reader record. Surely it would flag up in the system that she has had it out before, and Lucy digs in her wallet for her Bod card. “I’ve accessed that manuscript before. This term. If you could just send someone down to make one more check?”

The librarian looks irked (maybe it’s still too early in the morning for administrative difficulties) but sighs and heads off, presumably to instruct his colleagues to walk past the shelf where it should be one more time. Once he’s gone, Lucy glances nervously at Flynn. “Do you think someone else stole it first? Why wouldn’t I be able to get it out again?”

“I don’t know.” Flynn looks frustrated. “Maybe some other part of the enchantment activated, it sensed that there was a threat, so it isn’t letting itself be found. Not even by you.”

Lucy is about to respond that this isn’t very helpful, as if that’s going to do anything, when she hears footsteps behind them, senses a chill, and knows, in some sudden and instinctive way, who is there even before she turns around. Flynn feels it too, throws out an arm as if to shove her behind him, and – maybe she should have guessed that he would be staking the place out, that maybe he’s been
waiting for her to turn up since he sent the pictures, and yet –

“Good morning, Dr. Preston.” Benjamin Cahill smiles. Behind him, sleek and cold and menacing, Emma Whitmore follows at a few paces. “Very curious to find you in company with a de Clermont vampire, I must say. But no matter. We will sort that out, along with all else. You’ve come to get Ashmole 782, and now, at last, everything will be put right.”
There were plenty of problems that Rufus Carlin was expecting to have when he went to Oxford. As a black kid from a working-class neighborhood on the West Side of Chicago, he is unfortunately used to people thinking that he doesn’t belong in elite academic spaces, and while Britain isn’t racist in the same way as America, that doesn’t mean it’s any less so. They’re bewilderingly and horrifyingly steeped in imperial nostalgia, that’s not even touching the slow-motion car crash exercise in deluded xenophobic populism that is Brexit, and Rufus has lost count of the well-meaning people congratulating him on getting out of “the estates,” by which they seem to mean the ghetto. The porters always seem to ask for his Bod card a lot more than they do with others they see regularly, and while Oxford is making efforts, black people are still something of an unusual sight. Rufus gave a talk at the Museum of the History of Science the other night, and afterward, someone still mistook him for the janitor.

That doesn’t mean Rufus regrets it. It’s obviously a beautiful city and a great opportunity, he loves his colleagues, and Mansfield College was founded by nonconformists and still sticks to a tradition of secularism, so it thankfully cuts down on the stuffy High Church Anglicanism that is part of the others. Rufus is right at home among a bunch of other sceptical, offbeat geniuses, and there’s always something fun about putting both MIT and Oxford on your resume, even if for just a moment of smug self-congratulation (and then panic about paying back your student loans). Rufus’s actual appointment is a lectureship in astrophysics, but he also does tutoring in mechanical and electrical engineering, because why not get you a man who can do both. It was in that capacity that he met Jiya Marri, a research fellow in biochemistry, and she asked if he would be willing to build some software models for a project she was working on with her – well, Rufus doesn’t remember how Professor Garcia Flynn was defined the first time the topic arose, apart from that. He was at All Souls, he was a big deal among the Posh, and it seemed like a good idea at the time.

Now – Rufus isn’t sure what it was, but a good idea is not it. After he ran away from the biochemistry building tout suite, is not sure he can go to the Science Area again without wearing several cloves of garlic around his neck, and is wondering if there are even rules about this kind of thing, he is experiencing what might be called an existential crisis. He had a pretty bad one in his senior year at MIT, melted down and shut himself in his room for days and otherwise gave into the inevitable mental crumbling of a Gifted Kid, but Connor Mason pulled him through that. Mason is the one who suggested Oxford, actually, since as a British kazillionaire he has various connections and strings and people he be knowin’, but Rufus insisted that Connor have nothing to do with his application, so he could be sure he got in on his own merits. But maybe there’s something to be said for the principle of the thing, and after two days of jumping every time there’s a breeze, Rufus is not sure what he has to lose.

Connor sounds somewhat bemused when he picks up. “Yes, hello? Rufus?”

“Well, hi, Connor.” Now that he’s actually on the brink of confessing it to another person, Rufus realizes once again how utterly, totally demented it sounds. His brilliant scientist brain has been working this over, deconstructing it from every angle, and come up with countless alternative explanations. Just a shared hallucination, a severe psychological disturbance, an unfortunate commitment to cosplay, black mold in the vents, a certain kind of fungus in the food – anything, in short, to make two otherwise sane and accomplished academics convinced that they are vampires. He doesn’t think Jiya would joke about that, he believed it for a second in the lab but he was completely blindsided and panicking and he very definitely wanted to run, but… Jesus. Say this, and it’s little green men and psychedelic unicorns. Rufus is the one who will end up in a nice British mental hospital, watching reruns of Doctor Who and being fed pudding by competent butch nurses.
“Rufus?” Connor says, somewhat confused, when he stalls for anything else. “Everything all right? I’m about to pop off to another meeting, but if it can’t wait –”

“Fine,” Rufus blurts out, which is obviously a lie, but he can’t do anything apart from skate around the one huge, massive issue that lies at the heart of this. “Connor, do you know a Professor Garcia Flynn? Senior Research Fellow at All Souls College? Tall and kind of scary-looking? Works on biochemistry?”

“I – have heard of him, yes,” Connor says, after a pause. “Why, is something wrong? Don’t I recall that the two of you were working on some project, or –”

“Did you know that he’s a friggin’ vampire? Him and his research assistant. They’re both vampires. Apparently. I’m sorry, I know it sounds totally insane, but oh hey, guess who found that out this week and is pretty sure it was nonsense and I don’t even know why I’m calling you, but I needed to run it past someone and –”

Rufus knows that he is babbling like a lunatic, is waiting for Connor to cut in and tell him to take a deep breath and maybe cut down on the turkey sandwiches before bed, but the trenchant silence on the other end of the phone is the answer he both did and very much did not want. It’s not the reaction you’d expect from being suddenly ambushed with a nonsense story, in other words, and sounds very much like oh-shit-how-did-he-find-out. Rufus hopes, he hopes he’s just projecting, but when Connor still doesn’t say anything, he has to be sure. “What?” he says croakily. “You knew? It’s true? And you just – was anyone planning to be like, oh hey Rufus, careful around that guy, he could literally drain your blood?!”

“I –” Connor blows out a guilty breath. “I – yes, I did know, yes. My apologies for never mentioning it, but it just… well, it didn’t seem… relevant.”

“Relevant?” Rufus is so steamed that he has to leap off the couch and pace angrily back and forth, wishing that he could reach through the phone and strangle the man who has sponsored him since middle school and given him many great opportunities and who he generally regards as a surrogate father (his own having run off when Rufus was too young to remember him). “He’s – he’s an actual vampire, vampires are real, and you know this – how?!”

“Well,” Connor says. There’s the sound of flicking pages in the background, as if he’s checking his diary to see just how long it might take to talk Rufus down, and if there are any important engagements he has to run to in the meantime. Connor Mason, inspiring success story, who likewise rose from humble beginnings in inner-city London to billionaire inventor, entrepreneur, and tech genius, has a lot of places he could otherwise be, but Rufus wants, nay demands, an explanation. “To be entirely frank, Rufus, we’re both creatures. Supernatural creatures, that is. I – that is, I’m a daemon.”

“A what?” Oh, this is really getting out of hand. “A demon?”

“No, a daemon,” Connor corrects, stressing that æ, the ash, which may indeed be important when distinguishing whether you’re a – whatever a daemon is – or a marching minion of Satan. “I’m technically not supposed to tell you this, but as it appears the milk is spilled, it might help with your understanding. In brief, there are three races of supernatural creatures. Vampires, witches, and daemons. I am one of the latter. We are often regarded as particularly creative, easily able to see patterns and possibilities that elude others. Know what people are going to say before they say it, sense their thoughts and feelings, have premonitions – it’s called intuition or empathy, usually. Quite useful in business, as you might imagine. I can often predict the London stock exchange a fortnight
in advance.”

“That’s very nice for you,” Rufus says grimly. “But what, so – vampires and witches? Are there werewolves? Aren’t there supposed to be werewolves in these sort of things?”

“They do exist, in small numbers,” Connor says. “But they aren’t an established race like the others. They are loners, far away from cities and human society – there are many of them living in the Alaskan bush or Siberian tundra, for example, but they don’t identify themselves or take any part in creature politics or have seats on the Congregation. Good old-fashioned classism. It’s felt that the werewolves are too beastly, and too *common*, to make policies for the others, and it’s not something they give a damn about anyway.”

“Great. At least the werewolves live in Alaska.” Rufus suddenly needs to sit down again, so he does. “Or in Soviet Russia, werewolves eat you, *literally*. But vampires, they actually eat people too, so it’s not like – ”

“They don’t,” Connor says. “At least not many of them. And they tend to be wealthy and they don’t actually physically transform into an animal, so you can imagine that they consider themselves much superior. After all, all kinds of monstrosity is excused as long as the perpetrator is human, good-looking, and has a lot of money, isn’t it?”

Rufus can’t argue with that, although he still wants to know what the odds are that he would end up as an entrée (and for that matter, why he didn’t). He rubs a hand weakly over his face. “So Flynn and Jiya are both vampires,” he says. “Actual vampires.”

“Yes.” Connor pauses. “Dare I ask how you found out?”

“Not really.” The thing that upsets Rufus the most is that this is probably curtains for his burgeoning – well, whatever it was – with Jiya. Maybe *romance* was too optimistic, since he’d never managed to actually make a move, but it felt like it could be going in that direction. He liked her, he *really* liked her. She never gave any indication that she was a cold-blooded hunter of the night who periodically needed to do shots of human blood to survive. She was probably grooming him, right? Getting him used to her presence, making it so he would think it was just a love bite when she clamped on? That doesn’t fit with the funny, kind, wickedly smart woman Rufus knew, but he doesn’t know anything, apparently. His heart hurts. He doesn’t want to leave Oxford, but it’s going to be really weird if he sees her around town. What should he do? Point and yell, warn the masses that a predator stalks in their midst? He wants to believe what Connor is saying, but also… *vampires*. Maybe they just sparkle harmlessly, though he’s never observed that either. But it feels like it would be the best outcome, and really? Friggin’ *Twilight*?

“She’s not a danger to you,” Connor says, reading Rufus’s mind, though that probably wasn’t hard. “Vampires feed mostly on animals, and if they do have to take a human feed, they do it with consent and they don’t kill the victim. That’s been the law since at least the eighteenth century. I imagine she didn’t tell you for the exact reason that she didn’t want you to think any less of her. I can’t tell you what to do, but this doesn’t have to be the end of everything. Unless, of course, you would be more comfortable that way?”

“I don’t know.” Rufus pauses. “You wouldn’t lie to me about this, Connor? Right? Even though you already kept it a secret for years and I’m not sure how I feel about that?”

“You are human,” Connor says apologetically. “There are very strict laws about when and how we can reveal ourselves to humans, especially since our numbers are dwindling and we’ve been hunted mercilessly in the past. In all the time you’ve known me, Rufus, have I seemed like a monster of any sort to you?”
“No,” Rufus admits. “And yes, obviously, humans are terrible and I have no trouble believing they hunted you, but… I mean… not even a warning?”

“Would you have believed me if I had hinted any such thing?” Connor says, reasonably enough. “And Garcia Flynn can be a terrible grump, but his most notorious days are a few centuries to the hindmost. He’s one of the de Clermonts – one of the richest and most powerful vampire families – and these days, they’re most respectable.”

That is not entirely comforting to Rufus, since it strongly implies that Flynn had said notorious days and still might be a shark at the scent of blood, but he’s been working with them for a while, and their project involves testing blood samples and mapping genomes and whatever else. As long as they haven’t been keeping the human subjects in the back shed for snacks when they’re done, there’s clearly some possible measure of control. They’ve wanted to find something, understand something. This is all increasingly ludicrous, but –

“Are you sure?” Rufus repeats. He doesn’t know how old and/or powerful Flynn might be, but he could probably Highlander out on him in more ways than one, and since Connor fell down on the job of telling this to him in the first place, he wants to be sure he has the complete information. “I don’t know what his deal is with Jiya, if they’re just colleagues or if he looks after her, but I mean, we were kind of going out, so –”

“You were seeing his –?” Connor coughs. “Well, of course you should be fine, just –”

“I was seeing his what? What is the Addams Family situation here?”

“His daughter,” Connor says delicately. “His blood daughter. But yes, I’m sure it’s fine.”

Rufus rolls his eyes at the heavens in mute appeal until he’s pretty sure they will fall out of his skull. So nobody, not even Connor, felt the need to tell him that he was seeing the Dracula Terminator’s daughter in a social capacity? Can this get any worse? Hopefully Flynn isn’t some patriarchal fossil who feels that he is entitled to keep his daughter locked up in a tower, and he didn’t seem like that before (although not entirely friendly). But then, nothing seemed like they were goddamn vampires before. Jiya has eaten regular food on nights out with him, drunk beer. He didn’t make her sick, did he? She wouldn’t do that just because of him? Rufus is used to knowing most things, but he doesn’t know this. It’s frightening.

“You really have my back, Connor,” he says at last, hoping that it isn’t dripping with quite as much sarcasm as it feels. “So if I turn up in a shallow grave with bite marks in my neck, I hope you feel bad about it.”

“Rufus…” Connor can sense that he’s justifiably pissed. “I would never knowingly put you in real danger, all right? If I didn’t say anything, it was because I trusted that you were perfectly safe with them. If I was a witch, who have rather less positive views of the vampires, perhaps that would be different. But another daemon acquaintance of mine has worked for the de Clermonts for many years, and is quite close with them, knows many of their secrets. So if he had ever said something to make me genuinely fear for your safety, I would have spoken up at once, rules or no rules. I do hope you can believe that.”

Rufus pauses. He is still wrestling with everything this means, his understandable wariness and shock and feeling of betrayal. “So they’re just… immortal mostly-humans who feed on blood, but are otherwise kind of normal? No offense, I can’t see Flynn being normal.”

“Well, I can’t say we’re normal,” Connor acknowledges. “But they’re not monsters, and they’re not planning to kill you. If you don’t want to see them again, that is your choice. Yet I thought you
deserved to know. I hope you understand why I didn’t say so before.”

“Oh.” Rufus blows out a breath. “I guess that does make me feel a little better. I don’t know what I’m going to do, and this is all batshit insane, but… okay.”

Connor sounds relieved, they awkwardly exchange a few more how-are-you, what-are-you-doing sentences, and then hang up, leaving Rufus in possession of the casual information that the supernatural world is in fact real and he has been inadvertently part of it for several months. He doesn’t know what to do. He’s an astrophysicist, engineer, an atheist. He loves science fiction and has not forgiven Disney for jossing the original Star Wars Extended Universe with the new trilogy and Whino Ren, but has never believed in the actual existence of magic or God or whatever else. He’s had to allow for the possibility of inexplicable forces, dark matter, quarks and Higgs-Boson particles and all the things we don’t know about how the universe works, because he would be a bad scientist if he arrogantly figured he had all the answers. But the ultimate end point for all of that has also been science, even if far advanced and refined beyond what humans can currently comprehend. “Magic” is just a word for the stuff that analysis and understanding hasn’t caught up to. That’s it.

At that, Rufus grudgingly supposes that this could be the same. After all, Flynn and Jiya themselves are scientists, they’ve been taking blood samples and analyzing the genetic composition of other creatures – if that note about a vampire from Bristol born in the eighteenth century, the one that let the cat out of the bag, is anything to go by. He might not understand everything, but he can work with that. Maybe even help. It would be very hard to put that on his CV, but it might mean he got to see her again, though that’s going to be finicky with her fanged dad breathing down his neck. And, well. He likes Jiya. Like likes her. And if there’s any chance that pursuing something might not end up with him drained of blood and/or starring in Mormon vampire romances, Rufus might just be inclined to try.

He lets out a groan, says, “Oh God, what am I doing?” and picks up his phone. Scrolls to her number, is glad he didn’t delete it in his initial moment of panic, and rings it.

There are a few seconds where he figures that she’s not going to answer and/or ever speak to him again either, but then, she actually answers. She sounds a little breathless, disbelieving, which is understandable given how their last meeting ended. “Ru – Rufus?”

“Oh.” Rufus has never been all that smooth, romantically speaking (yes, a sci-fi nerd with advanced degrees in engineering and astrophysics wasn’t a ladies’ man, shocking). “Hey.”

“Hey,” Jiya says. “I – was actually just about to call you. My – uh, Flynn is out of town, and I – well, Rufus, I’m really sorry, I’m really sorry, that was no way to find out. I don’t want to explain everything over the phone. You can say no, but would you like to get coffee?”

“You can drink coffee?” Rufus asks. “I mean, you did before, but I don’t know if you were just doing it to be nice, or – it didn’t make you sick, right?”

“No, we can eat – and drink – other things.” Jiya sounds tentative, perhaps touched that he would still care about her welfare. “Can we meet at Café W today? Whenever you’re free.”

“I’m between things, I can head over.” Rufus finds himself already looking for his shoes. “Should I just… grab a table? Waterstone’s on Broad Street?”

“Yeah, that one. I have to finish up one thing, but I’ll be over right after.” Jiya sounds almost abjectly relieved. “Okay. See you soon.”

With that, they hang up, Rufus puts on his sneakers (sorry, trainers) and jacket, and speeds out. It’s a
quick walk into town and down to the Waterstone’s, a large, multi-level bookstore with a glass-walled, third-floor café overlooking city centre. Rufus orders a coffee and a muffin, then stakes out an unoccupied corner table, glancing at his watch until Jiya appears at the top of the stairs, sees him, and breaks out into a smile that twists his insides. She jogs over, slinging her bag and scarf onto the other chair. “Hey. Hi.”

“Hi.” Rufus takes a deep breath, scrutinizing her for signs of unnatural pallor, sharp teeth, or whatever else. But she still looks… well, like Jiya. “So… the other day, huh? That was… something.”

“Yeah.” Jiya lets out a shaky breath, digs her wallet out of her bag, and goes to order a drink of her own, clearly in solidarity and a demonstration of as much humanity as possible. She returns with the cappuccino, sits down, and sips the foam, as the two of them eye each other in increasingly strained silence. Then she blurts out, “I’m really sorry. Really.”

“It’s...” Rufus supposes that it might not be any different from finding out that your significant other (if that isn’t too optimistic a word) has a rare, serious, chronic disease that they have lived with and managed, that’s just part of them and which is something they have had to come to terms with. He wouldn’t just drop Jiya like a hot potato for something else (though it’s true that other diseases do not come with a risk of getting eaten by her dad), and he does have questions. “I did kind of freak out.”

“It’s understandable.” Jiya looks down at the table. “You had a human adrenaline reaction telling you to get away from predators. But I’m not – I would never hurt you, Rufus, all right? I would never hurt you. And D – Flynn, he growls a lot, but he –”

“He’s your dad, right?” Rufus figures that was what she was about to say, and at her startled look, hastens to explain. “I called a friend of mine. Connor Mason. Apparently he knew about you two all along, and I was pretty pissed off that he didn’t explain. But he said that Flynn’s your – well, your father. So I guess in this context, that means he made you into a vampire?”

“Yeah.” Jiya sighs. “It’s – complicated, he doesn’t really like it when I call him that. So we’re mostly just research associates who are also family. It’s more like I’m his sister or something. But yeah. We’ve known each other a long time.”

Rufus can imagine that they have. He takes another sip of coffee. “You said you were from California, when we met. Is that true?”

“Yeah.” Jiya says again. “Just... nineteenth-century California. I was born in 1861. Flynn turned me in 1888, in San Francisco. I was working in a tavern in Chinatown, and there was a major fight between gangs of rival prospectors and drunks looking for trouble. It was a bad situation, and he saved my life. I’ve been part of his family since then.”

Rufus blinks. She looks pretty good for someone born the year Abraham Lincoln became president, but he doesn’t want to say that and come off as creepy. “So, uh, about that. Connor said the de Clermonts? Is that right?”

“Yeah.” Jiya nods. “Just… nineteenth-century California. I was born in 1861. Flynn turned me in 1888, in San Francisco. I was working in a tavern in Chinatown, and there was a major fight between gangs of rival prospectors and drunks looking for trouble. It was a bad situation, and he saved my life. I’ve been part of his family since then.”

Rufus blinks. She looks pretty good for someone born the year Abraham Lincoln became president, but he doesn’t want to say that and come off as creepy. “So, uh, about that. Connor said the de Clermonts? Is that right?”

Jiya nods. They glance at each other, then away. Rufus searches for his next question, since he doesn’t know what’s considered off-limits by vampire standards, and he’s slavishly grateful that they are in fact talking somewhat normally again. He had some of the “why didn’t you tell me” part answered by Connor, and he does once again have to admit that he would not have believed her. “You said Flynn’s out of town?”

“He went up to our place in Woodstock,” Jiya says. “He’s taking – well, there’s this witch we’ve accidentally gotten mixed up with. Lucy Preston. It’s a long story, but she might be in some kind of
danger, and we were trying to get her out of Oxford.”

Rufus wonders if he really wants to ask what that danger is, right now when things actually seem to be going well. Yet, with his newfound knowledge of the supernatural world, some other part of that sentence leaps out at him. “Wait, a witch? Connor said that vampires and witches didn’t like each other. Is this some kind of, I don’t know, magical grudge match?”

Jiya gets a slightly exasperated expression that makes Rufus suspect he has accidentally stumbled onto a minefield. She takes a bracing slug of coffee before she feels up to answering, then says, “I honestly don’t know what’s up with him and Dr. Preston. He’s been following the poor woman around for weeks, for a start, and then she dug up something he’s been looking for, so he decided to actually talk to her. That was a disaster, obviously. Now there are other witches after her and he is definitely not completely impartial about it and he’s been giving her these looks that make me think he’s trying to – ”

At that, Jiya seems to realize that if she is trying to convince Rufus to give the supernatural world a shot, this might be more information than it is wise to dump on him. She screeches to a halt, and coughs. “That is, uh, I’m sure he has it under control.”

Rufus has heard more convincing lies from his undergraduate students assuring him they definitely understood the assignment (spoiler alert: they didn’t). He is surprised by Jiya’s patent lack of trust in her sire’s abilities, as Flynn always seemed, to outward impressions, like he was doing pretty well for himself. Prestigious academic position, nice car, looks like James Bond, vague references to an older brother who lives in Paris and does everything and knows everyone. Yeah, he’s kind of grumpy and anti-social, and may or may not sleep in a literal coffin, but that’s the standard expectation for brusque, eccentric geniuses, right? They always have to be assholes, it fuels their achievements. Or something.

“So,” Jiya says. “Do you – would you still be willing to work on the project? Your software has been really useful, we’d – we’d like to have you back. If you want to, of course.”

Rufus considers this. “What’s it actually about? Are you sticking vampires with needles for – why? I feel like there’s a line there about just biting them, but I don’t want to be that racist jackass making jokes that aren’t funny. You know, I’m obviously sensitive to that, and…” He trails off. “Anyway. Forget I just said all of that. The project is – what?”

“We’re testing creatures,” Jiya says, graciously overlooking his crass implication that she might like to chomp on her scientific objects of study. “Mostly vampires, since those are our own kind and who agree to work with us, but a few daemons, and one – well, two now – witches. It’s complicated and involves a lot of creature politics and history, but the main thing we want is to discover why our powers don’t work as well as they used to. If there’s some kind of physical reason for our decline. We’ve managed to get our hands on a few historical genetic samples, but there’s still a lot of investigation. We could use your help.”

“I don’t actually know any creatures,” Rufus says. “Well, except for Connor. Who’s a demon, apparently.”


“Right. Not, you know. Horns.” Rufus puts up his fingers on his head to indicate devil horns, before wondering if he is torching his chances with this woman for reasons altogether apart from the vampirism. “No. God, let’s just forget that too. Can we agree that I get today as a mulligan, for anything criminally stupid and/or offensive that I say about the supernatural world? I’m trying, I promise.”
“Sure.” Jiya looks like she’s biting her cheek, or at least that she is finding this adorable, rather than excruciating. “You’re doing really well, honestly. I’ve had people find out and just never talk to me again. Someone I thought was my friend even tried to get me committed to a mental hospital, and…” She shivers, until Rufus is possessed with an indignant urge to kick this unknown person’s ass and buy an “I Heart Vampires” shirt from Hot Topic like an Edward Cullen Fangirl. “Anyway. That’s part of why I’m careful about telling humans. I just didn’t want you to see me as a freak, or a… I’m sorry. You had a right to know, and…”

“Hey.” Rufus reaches across the table and takes her hand, startling both of them. “Don’t beat yourself up, okay? We should be judging me, for all these racist-uncle-at-Thanksgiving cracks I’m making. I’m sorry, it happens when I’m nervous. And I – well. I would kind of like to keep seeing you. I don’t know how it would work, but…. yeah.”

Jiya looks up at him with shy gratitude, Rufus wonders what she would do if he leaned over right now and kissed her, and is half-tempted to find out. But he doesn’t, though her fingers briefly clasp around his. Then she says, “Hey, uh. Like I said, Flynn’s out of town, I don’t have a lot to do at the lab. If you wanted to come over to my place for dinner tonight…?”

“Dinner?” Rufus grins wryly. “Like, pizza?”

“Yeah, we can order pizza,” Jiya promises. “And we left things undone with that last round of Dragon Age, so if you were still up for it…”

Rufus finds no objection at all in agreeing, says that he has to get back to college and be marginally respectable and answer some emails, but will be over around five or six PM tonight. They giggle and stammer a bit as they part, he almost goes for the cheek kiss but decides against it, and speeds through the remainder of his work back at Mansfield, hoping that Count Chocula won’t pop up and ruin what’s set to be an actual nice evening. Then he grabs his things and heads out. Jiya has an apartment out in the direction of Cherwell Boathouse, about a ten-minute walk from the Science Area, and Rufus stops to pick up flowers on the way. Then he straightens his collar, reminds himself to not just say anything that pops into his head no matter how funny it is, and sets off for dinner with a vampire.

Jiya has been waiting by the door, by the looks of things, and exclaims over the flowers, puts them in a vase, and leads him in. For a girl from the nineteenth century, Rufus has discovered that she is extremely good at video games, and he’s happy to get his butt waxed by her, since it feels like things are getting back to normal. He also has a bunch of questions, obviously, but he’s put his foot in his mouth more than enough for one day. The pizza is very good and extra-cheesy, and Jiya starts telling him a bit about her family. There’s her grandmother Maria, the family matriarch, who definitely sounds terrifying, and her uncles, Gabriel and Wyatt. Gabriel is the brother from Paris, who is disgustingly accomplished and has actually put his immortality to productive use, and Wyatt… well, Wyatt tries hard. Jiya thinks he gets a bad rap in the family. He is on something called the Congregation, which sounds boring and government-y, and that takes up most of his time. Whether that time is spent wisely still seems to be a bone of contention between Wyatt and the others.

“I mean,” Rufus says. “By virtue of being however many gigazillions old, he’s still going to do way more than your average human, right? Or does it work differently with vampires?”

“It’s just difficult,” Jiya says. “With Gabriel. He speaks something like thirty languages and has gotten a degree from pretty much every prestigious institution in the world at some point, he does lots of philanthropic work and rescues citizens from war zones because he’s immortal and stuff like that. And the whole art and antiquities dealer for the rich and famous thing. He likes to remind us how many universities and curators and museums and billionaires and whatnot will only work with him,
because they know they can trust his judgment. I like him,” she adds hastily, lest Rufus start thinking that Uncle Bigwig is just a *bit* too full of himself. “He’s always taken me on really great vacations and stuff. It’s just… yes.”

“*Literally* the worst case in history of perfect oldest sibling making the rest of us feel bad?” As the oldest sibling himself, Rufus can’t decide whether he thinks Gabriel de Clermont should dial it down a few notches or not. Rufus only has a kid brother, Kevin, and is not the golden child of an immortal uber-rich supernatural dynasty, but tomatoes to-mah-toes. “But, like. Your family has all this money and power, and you’re living in a student flat in Cherwell? I mean, a nice student flat, but still. You could be renting a whole palace. This isn’t like Edward constantly going to high school for some utterly bewildering reason, is it?”

Jiya giggles. “I had no idea you were such a Twihard.”

“I am not,” Rufus says, with great dignity. “But like U2 albums, some things plant themselves in your internal storage whether you want them there or not.”

Jiya laughs again, almost spraying Coke out of her nose, and Rufus thinks that he actually might be willing to risk an introduction to the world’s most terrifying and/or overachieving family if he got to hang around her. For a while, for longer, he doesn’t know, and he doesn’t want to broach the thorny “so would you be cool if I grew old and died” question on what is really their first proper date. Maybe they can enjoy each other’s company for now without worrying about major existential dilemmas and if she would one day have to pull the plug on his life support and other questions that have been lurking in the back of his mind. Not the funny ones, obviously. He can’t assume this would work only because they want it to. It seems like there’s a chance, a real chance, but will that just make it worse when there isn’t?

They have played a few more rounds on other games, finishing off the last of the pizza, when Jiya, getting up to take the dishes back to the kitchen, stops, frowns, and peers out the window. Rufus’s first and paranoid fear is that an apoplectic vampire father is storming up the front drive to put an end to all this *courtship*, but Jiya doesn’t look like that. She turns away with a slight frown, shakes herself, and finishes the washing-up in the kitchen. But when she comes back out, she takes another look, which impels Rufus to ask, “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah. I’m sure it’s fine, I just…” Jiya keeps looking out the window. “I thought I saw the witch that’s been hanging around recently. One of them, at any rate. That Emma Whitmore woman, she – well, she and Dad know each other.”

“And to judge from your tone, and what we’ve established about witches and vampires, it isn’t just from nice work cocktail parties or whatever?”

“No.” Jiya’s fingers tap restlessly on her thigh. “Emma has known, or at least suspected, about Dad’s interest in Ashmole 782 for a long time. He fought her off about ten years ago, it was a huge battle, and she vanished – went off the grid in Scandinavia somewhere. We know she’s back, that she’s in Oxford, because she attacked Lucy the other night, but if she’s *here*…”

Rufus notices that Jiya has slipped a bit on calling Flynn “Dad,” which she seemed to be trying to avoid at the start of the night. It’s a little weird to call your parents by their first name anyway (or other name, or co-name – Rufus doesn’t know what the situation is, all the de Clermonts seem to have several). But it’s understandable that it’s come out when she’s nervous, and he gets up to stand protectively next to her. Yeah, a software geek who needs to hit the gym more is going to be a big help here. “You don’t think she – ?”

“Wants to attack us?” Jiya finishes. “I don’t think so, I’m not even sure I saw her. But if she *is*
lurking outside, I… I don’t know if I want you walking home by yourself. Do you mind staying over? I’m probably just being paranoid, but the couch is really comfortable, and tomorrow’s Saturday anyway, you don’t have to rush off for work. We could have pancakes or something in the morning, so…”

Rufus is ever-so-briefly tempted to say that he doesn’t have to sleep on the couch, but he also doesn’t want to rush things or get too carried away on the euphoria of one successful evening with a girl (this is rare enough for him that he should take it step by step). Besides, it’s touching that Jiya is concerned for his safety and wants him to stay under her supervision. “Okay,” he says, battling a sudden realization that spending more time with her isn’t just going to be funny stories about insufferably pretentious immortal uncles and whatever else. That it could be, as he realized the first time and freaked out about, genuinely dangerous. “Sure, that sounds fine.”

Jiya apologises again and once more insists that she’s probably being too cautious, but he sees her eyes flicking to the door once more as she makes up a bed for him on the sofa and says that there’s a spare toothbrush and some other stuff under the sink he can use. Rufus assures her that he will be fine, and once Jiya has withdrawn into her room, he climbs into the couch bed and settles down to play on his phone for a while. Jiya still hasn’t explained exactly why Flynn went to Woodstock with this witch they’ve acquired, or what Dr. Lucy Preston’s connection to this whole thing is, but…. one thing at a time. Rufus has had a lot to swallow today. He doesn’t need the horrifying details of her father’s love life. (Jiya hasn’t said that, not exactly, but something makes him wonder.)

Rufus puts his phone down. Closes his eyes. See, it’s fine, it’s –


Nonetheless, it is a long time before he goes to sleep.

It takes a very long moment for the reaction from Lucy’s stunned brain to percolate through the rest of her body, reaching her frozen feet last. She is aware that she should move, but Flynn has already shoved her behind him, and if he could lay his ears flat, that is exactly what he would be doing. He lets out an actual growl and bares his teeth, like a cornered animal, and Lucy can almost see the tension vibrating in the air around him. “Get the hell out of here, Cahill.”

“With all due respect, Garcia.” Benjamin Cahill is as oily and obsequious as he was the first time Lucy met him, but while he hasn’t made quite as open a threat display, it’s clear that he’s not here to play around. “My presence isn’t the one that requires special explanation – oh, and I believe you will know my associate, Miss Whitmore. If you feel inclined to continue abducting and manipulating a witch, you will suffer the consequences.”

Flynn lets out a barklike noise that is apparently supposed to be a laugh. He and Emma trade a loathing glance that hints at volumes of possibly literal bad blood between them, and he takes an extra step in front of Lucy. “Want to get beaten up again, then? You know, you can still back down. Run off with your tail between your legs.”

“I don’t think so.” Emma prowls out past Cahill, casually rolling up the sleeves of her stylish grey blazer. Lucy prays that the librarian will take a long time on the double-check for any number of reasons, not least because if he walks back into the middle of this, he’s probably going to get killed. “You’re holding a witch hostage. Even that idiot brother of yours should be able to tell you that’s against the rules.”

Flynn looks for half an instant like he’s going to high-five Emma for agreeing that Wyatt’s an idiot,
before remembering that he hates her. “I didn’t kidnap her.”

“Of course you did,” Cahill says. “And I can assure you, that is the account I will be presenting to my associates on the Congregation, unless Lucy would like to tell them so herself. As a witch representative of that august body, I have the legal right to compel her, as a member of my species, to appear in front of the court for testimony.”

“If we’re arguing law,” Flynn shoots back, “you’ll remember that only a vampire has any right to apprehend me. Not that I think you give an actual shit. Get out.”

“I’m afraid that isn’t happening.” Cahill looks at Lucy. “Be a good girl and call Ashmole 782 up for us, won’t you? Much simpler for everyone.”

It’s on the tip of Lucy’s tongue to tell him that she was just trying to do it, it’s gone again and she can’t do anything about that, serves you right jackass, but she doesn’t. She has a feeling that she should be doing more to help Flynn, but it’s already a lit match by a powder keg, and they might take it as proof of her brainwashed state if she moved to help the big bad vampire. It’s almost insulting that they think actual hypnotism and extensive coercion is the only reason she would side with him, rather than the witches mismanaging this and alienating her on about eighty different levels, and she says, “No.”

“No?” Cahill’s voice drips with faux sympathy. “Lucy, I know you’re very confused right now, he probably has you under a very strong mesmer, but you have to trust us, we’re your own kind, we’re your friends. Just fight back, resist it, and – ”

“He’s not hypnotizing me.” Lucy takes a step out from behind Flynn’s arm, which makes him hiss and flail it angrily, as if to chase her back into the safety of his looming colossus. “And I’m not giving Ashmole 782 to you. So you can go back and tell the Congregation that, if you want. I don’t care. Or you can tell me why you thought sending me pictures of my murdered parents would be a great way to get me on your – ”

Her voice almost cracks, but she manages to catch it. Cahill looks surprised, as if he hadn’t realized that she knew he was behind that little stunt, but recovers. “Lucy, you have to understand how dangerous the world is for creatures – for witches – if we don’t get Ashmole 782 first. I can protect you and all of us if I know what’s in that book, and nothing else has to happen to any witch that happened to your parents. So if I made it clear what was at stake – that was all, I surely didn’t – ”

Just then, with exquisitely terrible timing, the librarian returns, still empty-handed. “I’ve had them give one final look-through, Dr. Preston, but it’s really not there. So – can I help you?”

“Were you?” Cahill turns to Flynn with an expression of vindictive triumph. “You were forcing her to take it out for you! You broke creature law first – you and all the de Clermonts, you’ve finally gone one step too far. And if that’s the case – ”

Lucy opens her mouth, realizes that nothing she can say is going to help them now, and jerks her head frantically at Nigel the librarian, trying to warn him to run off. But he is stubbornly planted behind the enquiry desk, even as the look in his eyes means that the awareness of a serious problem is dawning on him. He reaches for the phone, clearly intending to ring university security, but Emma stalks forward. “I wouldn’t do that, little man.”

“Excuse – I’m very sorry, but I must ask all of you to leave immediately, please – ”

“Where’s Ashmole 782?” Emma raises her hand, and the librarian is swept off his feet by an invisible force, gagging and clutching at his throat. “Did she just try to get it? What did you do with
Lucy almost wants to point out that Emma can’t expect poor Nigel to answer if she’s strangling him, but she gets the sense that Emma is a punch-first, ask-questions-never kind of witch. “Let him go!”

“Oh, princess?” Emma whirls on her, slackening her magical grip enough to let the librarian wheeze a breath. “I’m ready for you this time. Besides, haven’t you ever read *Dracula*? It never ends well for Lucy, hanging around a vampire.”

Once more, Lucy has to admire that this nearly baits her into starting an academic argument about *Dracula*, about whether it’s nineteenth-century “invasion literature” reflecting the British Empire’s existential angst about foreigners trying to move there (so, some things never change), a coded piece of anti-Semitic propaganda, what it says about Victorian unease over the social and sexual liberation of women and the portrayals of Mina Murray and Lucy Westenra – but, fascinating as all that is, it is manifestly not the time. Lucy doesn’t know what to do, since her last outburst of magic against Emma left her feeling like death for a full day and night, and it’s definitely the case that she’s not taking the other witch off guard again. Like it’s going to do anything, she repeats, “Put him down. Now.”

Emma flashes a make-me smile, tightens her grip, and hoists poor Nigel off his feet again. He may have been a little sassy earlier, but that does not equivocate to wanting him strangled in front of her eyes, and Lucy darts out from behind Flynn, even as he makes an abortive grab at her. This appears to be what Emma was waiting for, since she drops Nigel in a heap and lunges at Lucy, as if she will grab her and shake her until this produces Ashmole 782 –

– only for a blur to flash past too fast for Lucy to follow, hit Emma so hard that a nearby bookshelf quakes (they are lucky that it does not avalanche its load of old and valuable volumes onto the floor), and for this to resolve into the spectacle of a vampire and a witch abandoning almost all their extraordinary powers and just going bare-knuckle, full-bore slugfest. Lucy has never seen Flynn in action before, and the sight is – well, it’s probably not even as hard as he could go, not for any notion of taking it easy on Emma, but because they’re still in a library filled with unsuspecting humans and breakable objects. Nigel hasn’t yet staggered to his feet and called security, but getting more people mixed up in this could definitely lead to fatalities. That is, unless Cahill and Emma just –

Seeing that Lucy is now unguarded by her “kidnapper,” Cahill himself spots his chance. He rushes toward Lucy, as if to make her try one more time to call up Ashmole 782 while Flynn is distracted, and she raises her hands reflexively – she doesn’t know what she’s going to do, just half an unformed plea to nothing and no one, *help me* –

The windows rattle, the antique wood groans, the papers swirl madly into midair, and with a sound like a speeding freight train, a crashing wall of hurricane-force wind hits them all broadside. It rips Flynn and Emma apart, sending them somersaulting, and takes Cahill out as directly as if bowling a perfect strike. He backflips like he’s auditioning for Cirque du Soleil, slams into the wall hard enough to make several framed oil portraits pile down on top of him, and Lucy’s horror at causing violent property damage in the *Bodleian Library* is almost matched by her sudden, unexpected flare of savage delight. But she doesn’t know what that was or if she can do it again, and while she doesn’t feel quite as sick and awful as she did after her volley the other night, she buckles to her knees. The wind howls wildly, she doesn’t think she can control it or turn it off, and she tries to grab onto a crack in the floorboards, to prevent herself from being swept up in her own maelstrom and thrown bodily through a plate-glass window. She’s obviously a small woman, and if it doesn’t –

The next instant, Lucy is aware of a shadow falling over her, something jumping toward her with all its might, and then she barely avoids being crushed by a vampire falling out of the sky. The vampire
in question is, of course, Garcia Flynn, and he throws himself on top of her, anchoring her down with the size and weight of him, as the wind continues to swirl and howl through the Bod and alarmed shouts echo from the reading rooms. People hurry down the stairs, the fire alarm is droning, and Lucy can just hear sirens outside, which means someone has called security and/or the emergency services. It strikes her that she still hasn’t seen Nigel actually move, and he could be dead. Her panic is shrieking in her head, and it feels like a frozen tap turned on and then exploding, but she needs to stop it. Stop this.

Her tears scoured off her face in the force of the wind, Lucy digs her fingernails into Flynn’s biceps hard enough that she would almost think she was hurting him, if they weren’t rock-hard and he wasn’t a vampire. Whatever she needs to do, she knows instinctively that it has to go through him. He has to channel and stabilize the mad outrush of her uncontrolled magic, with his weight and years and gravity, and while she has no idea what that looks like, she tries. She is aware of nothing but the vortex, the howl and the chaos, as she battles to bring it down. It slips out of her hands like oiled silk, like she can’t grasp it, like she can’t –

God, no. God, come on, Lucy, come on. She pulls harder, jerks and bucks up into Flynn in a way that would mortify her if it wasn’t a matter of life and death, and finally feels the raging magical beast come under rein. The wind cuts out abruptly, a crashing silence falls across the library, and papers and books and any other loose items start thudding to the floor like hailstones. She lies beneath Flynn, gasping and crying, until he belatedly hoists himself up on an elbow, realizes where they are and what it looks like, and springs off her as if she’s turned radioactive. He stares wildly around, but Cahill and Emma appear to have been physically blasted out of the room by the force of whatever elemental she just unleashed. That is not to say they won’t come back, but he paces a few steps, rubs his mouth in a daze, then demands, “Did you know you could produce witch-wind?”

Lucy is still flat on her back and crying, thus she cannot answer, and Flynn, for once, looks somewhat chagrined. He steps over gingerly, bends down, and takes hold of her under the armpits, hoisting her to her feet like a broken toy. They join the exodus of other people leaving the building with the fire alarm, congregating in the inner courtyard as the Thames Valley Police start to pull up, and Lucy struggles to control herself, wiping her eyes with the back of her wrist. She feels shaken and stunned by what just happened, by what she seems capable of doing when the chips are down, and the world continues to reel unsteadily beneath her, rocking like a ship in heavy seas. She has to keep clinging onto Flynn’s elbow so her legs won’t give out. Are they gone? Is Nigel all right? What just – is that going to be the same until one side blinks, until she gets Ashmole 782 for one of them or another, an endless immortal war that can only lead to –

“Dad? Dad, what are you – what just – ”

Flynn and Lucy look up with a start, just as none other than Jiya comes shouldering through the crowd, trailed by a guy Lucy might have seen around the science archives once or twice. They both appear considerably alarmed at the ruckus, and as Jiya reaches them, she stares at them with a judgmental expression. “I didn’t know you were back from Woodstock already. Was that – I’m guessing that was you?”

“It wasn’t us,” Flynn says. “Strictly speaking. We made an attempt to call up Ashmole 782, and Cahill and Emma turned up instead. Then things went somewhat to hell, yes.”

Jiya looks as if she can’t decide whether to be relieved that he’s all right, or smack him upside the head for being such a total imbecile. “You tried to get – ? Knowing those two were hanging around? I’m sorry, what exactly did you expect to happen?”

“I’m sorry,” Jiya’s companion says. “I’ve only been in the know for like… forty-eight hours, but uh,
kind of would appreciate some actual explanations. If it’s all the same to everyone.”

“Hello, Rufus.” Flynn glances over curtly. “I wasn’t sure if you’d be back.”

“Neither was I,” Jiya says. “And I’d appreciate it if you didn’t immediately scare him off again, all right?”

This appears to reference whatever was going on earlier, when Lucy had the sense that Jiya was just as pissed at Flynn as she was, but right now, it feels safer to move away from the Bod as quickly as they can. The four of them retreat through the milling crowd, Flynn looks suspiciously both ways before stepping down into Broad Street, and while it feels as if father and daughter have by no means concluded their argument, it has to be put on hold. Lucy looks over at – Rufus, she heard Flynn call him – and mouths apologetically. He’s definitely a human, by the sound of things he literally just learned about all this, and getting mixed up with these crazy supernaturals is a lot for anyone.

“Whatever just happened back there,” Jiya says, when they’ve put some distance between themselves and the scene of the crime, “I have a feeling that it’s definitely likely to happen again. I don’t know what you did, but if Lucy is just going to be stuck waiting for every creature in the world to descend on her and try to make her – ”

“No, she won’t,” Flynn says, even more curtly. “Woodstock wasn’t far enough. We need to get out of here, and we need help.”

“What?” Jiya stares at him. “Are you actually going to Venice? I didn’t think the Congregation was going to be any help, and if you’re intending to make her – ”

“Of course we’re not going to Venice.” Flynn looks completely incredulous that anyone thought that possibility was ever on the table. “You can cover for us here, and maybe finish the lab work on Lucy’s blood, so we know what exactly we might be dealing with. No, there’s only one thing for it. I have to take her to Sept-Tours.”
Sept-Tours

The next several hours are a blur. At least the fact of having come directly from Woodstock means that they still have Lucy’s things and don’t need to make a very risky trip back to her flat, and Flynn really wants to get out of here. He keeps looking over his shoulder, staring evilly after presumably innocent passersby, and it is not long later when he has bundled the still-shocked Lucy into the car and they are driving back up the A44 anyway, in the direction of Oxford Airport. Jiya has come with them so she can take the car home, but she keeps throwing dark looks at Flynn from the passenger seat. Finally, just as they’re about to turn into the airfield, she mutters, “Do you really – do you really think this is a good idea? Taking her to Sept-Tours? Grand-mère is not going to like this.”

“It’ll be fine.” Flynn is, of course, well aware of his mother’s feelings on witches, some of which he was just explaining to Lucy the other night. “She knows what I’ve been trying to do with Ashmole 782, and she doesn’t even have to see Lucy if she doesn’t want to.”

“You’re still asking her to welcome a witch wanted by the entire creature world and hunted by the Congregation into her house,” Jiya says, low-voiced. “With no warning at all. Dad, just – call Cecilia ahead of time or something, okay? Please.”

Flynn utters an impatient noise in his throat, even as he knows this suggestion is made with preventive intent. Cecilia is, apart from Houdini, the de Clermont family’s other long-term servant. She’s from eleventh-century Normandy and still mostly only speaks Old French, pretending not to understand when anyone addresses her in “that slang,” but she has lived as Sept-Tours’ chatelaine, seneschal, and general manager of the estate for centuries, and is, if nothing else, used to interceding with Maria de Clermont on behalf of her idiot sons. Cecilia is formidable and sharp-tongued (she used to be an abbess at Holy-Trinity in Caen, and Flynn can imagine her absolutely terrifying the novices), but she is fond of the boys, and will probably at least prepare the way. So much as it can be prepared at all.

“I’ll call her once we’re en route,” Flynn says at last. “See if she can have a car waiting at Poitiers. But still – ”

“Just don’t walk up the drive with Lucy for the first time and spring it on Grand-mère like that, all right? Are you sure you couldn’t do this in Woodstock?”

“Yes.” Flynn accelerates through the automatic barrier and looks around for the car park. “It’s too close to Oxford, all the horns’ nests have been kicked, and all my archived work is at Sept-Tours. Besides, it’s the one place the Congregation or anyone else absolutely won’t dare to go. I can’t get this finished if I’m keeping one eye on Lucy the whole time.”

“She just conjured witch-wind, from what you said,” Jiya counters. “Are you sure she really needs your help?”

Flynn has the distinct feeling that this is offered as a condemnation of his help, rather than high praise of Lucy’s novice abilities or any suggestion that she should actually be left on her own, and settles for an affronted harrumph. They turn into an empty bay, he parks, takes out the keys, and tosses them to Jiya. She is wearing the expression that means she suspects her advice has gone in one ear and directly out the other, and slides over into the driver’s seat. “At least text me when you get there and nobody’s dead, all right?”

Flynn agrees, opens the back door, and shows Lucy out, as she grabs her bag and gives him a worried look that might suggest she did in fact overhear all that. “Is everything going to be all right
with this? I mean, I’m a witch, and you said your mother hated witches.”

“Yes.” Flynn is rather regretting that now. Never tell anything about yourself to anyone, that is clearly the takeaway. “As I said, it will be fine. I’ll make some calls on the way. Let’s go.”

Lucy looks at him for another moment, seems to decide that all right, she’ll continue on this odd, unspoken alliance, and trails after him as he strides toward the terminal building. Oxford Airport isn’t a public airfield; it’s mostly used for the local aviation academy and a few private flights. But it has a business charter service that will deposit them in London Heliport, in Battersea, in twenty-five minutes, and from there, they can take an Uber or something to London City Airport. There’s a scheduled commercial route to Poitiers from Stansted, but as that would involve a) going forty miles out to Essex and b) flying Ryanair, Flynn is just going to hire a private jet at City. There’s a charter service there too, and even if not, he has not yet met a door that de Clermont money could not open. He’s not going to just get on his phone and buy a Piper Malibu off eBay, gently used, but they are getting to France tonight.

They go inside, are informed that the next helicopter shuttle to London departs in forty minutes, and Flynn has to restrain himself from barking that they want to go now. He takes out his credit card and pays for two places, and as they sit tensely on the uncomfortable chairs on the waiting lounge, Lucy looks alarmed. “I don’t have my passport with me, I just thought. If we’re going to France –”

“Don’t worry about it, we won’t be going through official customs.” She clearly does not yet understand how rich people do things – i.e. exempt from the rules that bind everyone else – and they’ll just go straight from plane to car in Poitiers. They still have some time to wait, so Flynn takes out his phone and stares at the house number. Cecilia won’t carry a mobile, so if she’s home, he’ll have to reach her there. He grits his teeth, reminds himself that this is all in the name of science, and dials it.

Cecilia picks up on the second-to-last ring. “Maison de Clermont.”

“Ah, Ceci, bonjour.” Flynn remembers himself, and switches into langue d’oil (though even that can be dicey, and he must remember to pronounce his g’s as w’s and so forth, as Cecilia is an extremely proud Norman and suspicious of any attempts to sound too Parisian). He explains, as briefly and non-incriminatingly as he can, that he is having to make an unexpected trip home tonight, and he is bringing a guest. If she could arrange to have a car waiting at Poitiers-Biard, and maybe also tell Maman to expect company, that would be helpful. It is not until they are just about to hang up that Flynn slips in, with exemplary casualness, the small fact that said guest is a witch. A very nice and educated one, no trouble at all. Make a room up in his tower, if she would be so kind. Bisous, Ceci, see you very soon.

With that, while Cecilia is still too stunned to launch into any sort of tirade, Flynn opportunely ends the call and looks at Lucy. “There,” he says. “All settled.”

Lucy gives him a look of somewhat unflattering skepticism. “Who were you talking to?”

“Cecilia,” Flynn says. “The family chatelaine. She’ll take care of it on that end.”

Lucy opens her mouth, can’t seem to decide if she actually wants more details, and shuts it. The helicopter arrives soon after, they trot across the tarmac, and climb in. Flynn notices that Lucy seems oddly reluctant about climbing up into the small passenger well behind the cockpit, as they’re handed ear protectors against the roar of the rotors, and jerks his head. “Come on, keep moving.”

She once more seems about to say something, shakes her head, and takes the seat next to him, gripping hold of her knees. She looks somewhat ill. It might be some kind of magical hangover from
the witch-wind, not that much talking will be possible for the next thirty minutes, and Flynn imagines that she doesn’t want him displaying any overt fuss anyway. He sits quite straight, without looking over at her, as the pilot gets in, the hatch doors are shut, and they lift off, whirling into the air as the rolling green downs of Oxfordshire fall away below. There, see. Everything under control.

They quickly begin to see the endless, sprawling exurbs of London, more or less following the snaky grey coil of the Thames, and the view has changed to city by the time they land twenty-five minutes later. They step out of the chopper, Lucy still looking a little green, and she takes a moment to steady herself before she hands the earmuffs back. Flynn feels that the ride wasn’t that bumpy, though it’s possible she’s never flown in a helicopter before, and graciously allows her another minute and twenty-two seconds of recovery time. Then he gets on his phone, orders a ride to LCA, and marches Lucy out to wait for it. He can’t help checking their surroundings again, even here. It would be very unlikely that Cahill and Emma knew where they went, much less made it here in the same amount of time, but he is not about to let his vigilance slacken now.

They’ve arrived in advance of the worst of the afternoon traffic, but it’s London, traffic is always bad, and it still takes almost an hour to drive from Battersea to East Greenwich. Once they reach the airport, it requires further negotiation to acquire a plane. Most business travelers going through here have chartered one already, and while the de Clermonts do in fact own a private jet, it’s currently hangared in Paris, because Gabriel needs it to fly on his various important enterprises. Even an extremely rich man can’t walk in here off the street and immediately expect to hire a bizjet and a pilot, but after repeated emphasis that cost is not an object and he is prepared to make himself very annoying until they find one, a few phone calls are placed. Flynn takes out his credit card with the de Clermont name on it, just because that is extremely well-known among the super-rich, and suddenly, everyone gets a lot more accommodating. It takes until the end of the afternoon, but they finally get a plane and someone able to fly it. The light is low and grey as they cross the damp tarmac and climb on board. Lucy looks around with the same slightly queasy expression. “These things are safe, right? I mean, it’s always small planes that seem to crash more often.”

“It’s fine, we’re not going to crash.” Flynn takes one of the six seats and buckles in, more as a formality than anything. “Besides, even if it did, it’s not like it could kill me, could it?”

Lucy does a slight double take, shakes her head, and sits down next to him, which Flynn finds surprising; there are other options further away, after all. He wonders if he should get up and move, just in case. For whatever reason, her adrenaline is definitely up, he can hear her heart going at an almost distracting tempo, and the knowledge of the nearness of her blood reaches out and caresses him silkily on the cheek. He swallows hard, shifts himself away from her, and endeavors to look as disinterested as possible. That is what she wants. Safety. As long as he assures her that he finds her repellent, she doesn’t have to worry that he might bite her or otherwise be overcome by his baser impulses, and that is all to the good.

They take off in another few minutes, on the steep ascent out of LCA and up into a layer of fine cirrus clouds. Lucy keeps looking anxiously from side to side, twisting her fingers together, and Flynn thinks that this can’t be the first time she’s been on a plane – she came over from America, presumably she had to fly to get here. He knows she’s had a trying day, but still. He is just about to offer whatever further platitudes are necessary on the unlikeliness of them crashing, when Lucy blurts out, “Earlier, in the library, I had to – well, when I was trying to control the witch-wind, it was a little… I just… You know, I wanted to make sure that you knew it was just that, and I wasn’t… trying… anything.”

Her face is the same rich colour as the sunset outside the plane windows, and Flynn decorously pretends that he has gone temporarily deaf, as he assumes that is what she wants. He hadn’t even thought of the unexpected and enforced moment of intimacy in the library until she mentioned it, and
he’s quite sure she does not actually want to discuss it, or hear anything he would have to say. He remains staring straight forward, at the cheap carpet tacked up on the wall of the bulkhead, in polite exhibition of his deafness, until Lucy’s cheeks have turned crimson and she mutters something about never mind, she just… never mind. There, then. It’s a difficult situation, but he thinks he’s doing rather well.

They sit there in absolutely stone-dead silence for several more minutes, until Lucy muffles a yawn with her hand. Well, it has been a very long day, starting before dawn this morning in Woodstock, and to say the least, a highly draining and eventful one. She still does not look at ease, and since her heartbeat is getting extremely distracting, Flynn finally turns to her. “It’s just a plane ride. I’m sure you’ve had one before…?”

“Of course I’ve had one before.” Lucy’s tone sounds as if it’s only barely restraining from lashing out, which he finds puzzling. “I’m just – I’m pretty claustrophobic, all right? First the helicopter and now this, and – obviously I’m worried about going to your house with your mother who hates witches, and whatever happened earlier when I attacked Cahill and Emma and I still don’t know what, and you just – I’m sorry. I’ll go sit over there.”

With that, she gets up and moves to the other side of the plane, sitting down across the aisle, as Flynn stares after her in confusion and consternation. It belatedly dawns on him that this might not be going quite as well as he thinks. Her hurt and upset swirls around her like a dark mantle, until he opens his mouth in search of comforting words, makes a faint noise like a stepped-on frog, and shuts it. He would go over there, but he doesn’t think she wants him to. Maybe he should just continue to sit here and prove he’s not a threat? Christ, is it women or witches that are this bewildering? Both? It seems like both.

Flynn eyes her sidelong, as Lucy curls up like a shrimp, leans against the window, and drifts off into an uneasy doze. She looks small and soft and vulnerable, and it twists something in his gut. He wasn’t trying to make her upset with him, he knows she’s strong, and he’s considerably impressed by how she’s managing to hold it together. She wouldn’t like it if he patronized or bent over backward or anything like that, and since she is about to have all the vampires she pleases and then some, he does not need to force any premature closer approach. Cecilia will smooth this over with Maria, but… no, never mind. It’s fine.

In about another forty minutes, they descend into Poitiers’ tiny regional airport, touch down, and surf to a halt in front of the low-slung terminal. A pair of jet stairs are pushed up to the door, Lucy sleepily gets up and grabs her bag and jacket, and they step out into the French late evening, stung with autumnal frost. It’s dark and chilly, a sudden contrast to the light and warmth of the plane, and Lucy’s breath billows silver as they cross the tarmac. Not Flynn’s, because he’s a cold-blooded creature, but there’s nobody there to notice. Before they reach the building, a man in a dark suit materializes out of the night at Flynn’s side. “Monsieur de Clermont,” he says. “Will you and the young lady please follow me?”

Lucy gets a look on her face like she wants to remind him that it is docteur, n’est-ce pas mademoiselle, and Flynn notes with approval that she speaks French. Still, there is no time to quibble over terminology, as they follow the man through a gate in the fence and out to the car park, where a black Jaguar is waiting for them. The man hands Flynn the keys, wishes him bonsoir, and glides into the night as elegantly as he came, leaving Lucy rather taken aback. She might just be grasping what it actually means to be a de Clermont, and stares between him and the car. “Did whoever you call just order a brand-new Jag in what, five hours and have it delivered personally to a random regional airport in France?”

“Probably not, just had it rented.” Flynn opens the boot, directs Lucy to throw her bag in, and then
gets the passenger door for her. It strikes him that it’s been a while since she’s eaten, and he could offer to stop in Poitiers for dinner, but it’s going to be at least a two-hour drive to Sept-Tours, mostly on narrow, unmarked, twisty back roads that he wouldn’t take if he didn’t know them very well (and for that matter, wasn’t blessed with vampiric eyesight). It always gives Flynn a brief frisson of unreality to look up at the city – it’s modern now, at least in its trappings, but it remains deeply medieval in character and layout, with a warren of narrow side streets among the churches and shops, built atop steep bluffs and fortified by rambling walls and rivers. He still remembers being here eight hundred years ago with Eleanor and Richard, as it was the provincial capital of the county of Poitou, the place Eleanor was born, married Henry, and most often held her court. He half-expects to see torches flickering on the gatehouse, the twin lions flying above the castle, to go inside and find them there, gracious and elegant and beautiful and witty as they always were. It seems impossible that he can’t.

“Flynn?” Lucy says. “Are we going?”

There’s a slight roughness in her tone, implying that he spent enough time chivvying her along, so she might as well return the favour. He jumps and snaps out of his reverie, opening the driver’s door and sliding across the smooth leather seat. The Jag guns to life with a growl, and while there is not much chance of getting up a good head of speed on the roads they will be driving, he can’t resist testing the acceleration anyway. “Do you want something to eat?” he asks, since even he is aware that he should try to limit the damage for the evening. “Most places will be closed by now, but we could stop by the E. Leclerc.”

“Let’s just – ” Lucy looks as if she can’t decide whether to just get this over with, or if there won’t be any food fit for humans in a vampire castle. “I don’t know that I’m that hungry.”

This is fine with Flynn, and he points them out of the airport premises, into the night. Out here in the French countryside, the city ends fairly quickly, another medieval feature of the landscape; there is civilization, and then, aside from a few farmhouses here and there, there isn’t. The night is inky dark, they make their way into the hills and start climbing, and Lucy is clearly dozing off again, lulled by the heater in the car and the broad blackness outside the windows. Flynn glances over at her once or twice, though he needs to keep his attention on the road. He’s driven this route for many years, but still.

Lucy is breathing softly and slowly, dead to the world, by the time they descend the far side and into the valley. There’s a small town outside Sept-Tours, as charming and rustic as any bucolic French village, and the inhabitants are well aware of the de Clermonts’ true nature and deeply loyal to them nonetheless. It’s not quite as archaic as Sark, in the Channel Islands, which is regarded as the last proper outpost of the duchy of Normandy and a place where medieval feudal law still applies, but most of the residents prefer to go to their local lords when anything goes wrong, rather than to the gendarmerie or the bureaucracy of the modern French state. Their ancestors have been the vassals of the de Clermonts – the same ones, down all these centuries – for generations and generations, and it’s inherent in them, part of their world, even as they are regular twenty-first-century citizens with TV and internet and complaints about Sarkozy/Hollande/Macron otherwise. (No matter who is running the country, the French do not like him. They are thus often liable to be on strike about it. It is a comforting constant of the universe.)

At this late hour, everything is shut down, and Flynn drives through the cottages on the outskirts and up toward the main house. Sept-Tours used to be a monastery, built sometime in the seventh century, but its present tenants moved in about a hundred years later, and it has been theirs ever since. They have built and expanded and refined it, and it does in fact have seven towers, arranged around a central keep. Once upon a time, there used to be one tower for every member of the family, but they have not all been occupied for quite a while now. As they turn up the drive, between the carved wolf
and lion that are the heraldic emblems of the de Clermont family, Flynn catches sight of two women standing out front, the night wind tugging at their clothes. One is the tall, striking Cecilia. The other is the deceptively slender and petite figure of Maria de Clermont herself. Even from here, Flynn can feel a chill in the night that has absolutely nothing to do with the temperature.

Deciding on the instant that he sees no call to wake Lucy up just yet, he parks at the end of the drive, sets the handbrake, and gets out of the car. He does his best to adopt a casual, nonchalant stroll toward his mother, as if this is no different from any other homecoming. As he reaches them, he holds out his arms. “Maman!”

Maria de Clermont takes half a step that is more dangerous than all the armies of Attila the Hun. She is too well-mannered to slap her son in public, even with no witnesses, but barely. Her eyes are completely black, and her voice is an outright hiss. “Garcia, are you insane?”

This is somewhat less of a promising start than Flynn was hoping for, and he throws a slightly betrayed look at Cecilia, as if to say that he was counting on her to serve as his John the Baptist. Cecilia throws him a look right back that clearly promises that he is on his own and in the deep end on this one, and while she did inform Maria that a witch was arriving, she did absolutely nothing to talk her around to the necessity or purpose of it. Flynn takes up a defensive stance, as if his mother might suddenly fly at the car and rip Lucy out of it, but she clearly sees no point in shouting at an unwelcome, unfamiliar stranger when he, the originator and executor of this decision, is standing right there. “How dare you,” she says. She speaks rapid-fire, colloquial French, with somewhat antique grammar and a pointedly formal vous. “How dare you bring a – a witch here, to our home? Even your brother, when he was engaged in that nonsense, was not stupid enough to do that!”

Flynn is somewhat rocked at the implication that he has managed to out-Wyatt Wyatt, but he is also obliged to defend himself. “Maman, listen, this is nothing like what happened with Jessica.” Too late, he remembers that speaking her name is liable to enrage his mother further. “This is just about Ashmole 782, that’s all. We couldn’t stay in Oxford, we had to –”

Maria throws him a searing look. “Have we not suffered enough from the consequences of your romantic follies? Surely you have not forgotten what came on us, your family, with that army captain? On your own nephew?”

Flynn cringes. The subject of Matej Radić, captain in the eighteenth-century Prussian Army, is still an unhealed wound for all of them, and while he managed to tell Lucy about Eleanor, he isn’t sure he can ever unearth the tragedy of this one. All to the best, because he must hasten to correct his mother’s crucial misapprehension immediately. “Maman, no, I just said it’s nothing like that. We have no relationship at all. She doesn’t even like me.”

“And that is supposed to comfort me?” Maria takes another step, her fine brown hair coming undone from its knot. She looks somewhat younger than her son, in her early thirties, and her perfect alabaster cheekbones are flushed an ugly red. “You bring a witch who doesn’t even like you into our home? What will stop her from backstabbing the rest of us?”

“She wouldn’t, Lucy is – she is a –” Flynn flails for the words. “She can’t even use her magic, she doesn’t really have any control over it, she can’t deliberately –”

“She cannot control her magic?” Maria’s voice is now at a register usually only audible to dogs and small children. “So at any point, it could merely break free and – what? Garcia, what? Do you have anything to say in your own defense, or is this – are you trying to punish me, do you want – Garcia, why would you do this?”

Flynn stands there and does not answer, unhelpfully tongue-tied. He once more throws a desperate
glance at Cecilia, to see how long she’s going to let him drown, but she appears to be in no hurry to toss him a lifebelt. There is an absolutely hideous pause. Then Flynn says, striving for some semblance of control over the conversation, “So, should I just fetch the bags from the car, or. . .?”

For a moment, it’s not clear that Maria isn’t just going to throw him straight back out on his ear, but she can’t deny him sanctuary in the family home, and if nothing else, that expression says, she will require a full and extensive explanation. She makes a gesture to which the word icy barely does justice, turns on her heel, and stalks back up the drive without a backward glance. Cecilia lingers behind, and Flynn is briefly of the optimistic conviction that she is going to offer a word of support. Then she says, “Garcia, you are the stupidest man I have ever met. Very well, get the bags, and the witch. Try not to arse that up too.”

Relieved to escape from under the chatelaine’s hawk-eye, Flynn speeds back to the car, opens the door, and shakes Lucy. She stirs with a little too much surprise at having reached their destination, making him suspect that she woke up earlier, saw the argument, and decided to stay right where she was. He supposes he cannot fault her for that, though he also wonders if, in that case, how much she heard. “Lucy, we’re here.”

She undoes her seatbelt and slides past him, waits for him to get her bag, and looks up at the looming shadow of Sept-Tours. “This is your house.”

“I don’t suppose you expected some miserable shack?” Flynn raises an eyebrow. “I’ll show you around more when it’s light out. This way.”

Lucy trudges after him, shivering in the chilly night. A little too casually, she says, “How did your mother take. . . all this?”

“He thinks he hears Lucy take a small breath as if to say something, or perhaps in disbelief, but when he glances over, her face is studiously blank. Yes, well, that could charitably be called bending the truth, but Lucy has had an extremely trying day and the rest can wait. He leads them up the broad steps, under the plastered portico, and through the heavy, studded-oak front door, into an echoing hall with elegant brickwork arches and lamps set in sconces. They’re electric, but the effect is close to candlelight, as if you could still hear the sonorous chant of a Te Deum drifting on the night, smell the incense and wax from the chapel. Flynn helped to build much of the present structure with his own hands, and it is one of the vanishingly rare places in the world that he feels anywhere close to peace.

He leads the way across the foyer to the southeastern spiral staircase, the one up to his tower, having to duck as he leads Lucy up the steep, narrow steps. They emerge on the first floor of the donjon, and he unlocks another door, beckoning her through. Philosophical objections or otherwise, Cecilia refuses to let it impede her duty, and has made up the room for a visitor. Flynn drops Lucy’s bag on the chair, and nods awkwardly at it. “All yours.”

“Thanks.” Lucy shirks in the doorway, still hugging herself. She doesn’t sound terribly enthused. “So, like. . . your mother’s not going to come in here in the middle of the night and kill me, is she?”

“No. She wouldn’t do that.” Flynn knows that if nothing else, Maria would refuse to dishonor herself by spilling the blood of a guest beneath her roof, and since she has accepted Lucy’s presence, however loathingly, the bargain has been struck. In search of something comforting, he adds, “Don’t worry, I told her that we had no relationship or anything like that, it was just because of Ashmole 782. So she has no reason to see you as a particular threat or challenge to the Covenant.”
“Thanks,” Lucy says again, even more acidly. She moves past him in what Flynn can only describe as a cold shoulder. “I think I’ve got it from here. Good night.”

Sensing that he has once more somehow come out on the losing end of a conversation with a woman and should withdraw while his dignity is intact, Flynn nods at her again and does so. The door shuts smartly in his face, and he hears her putting the bar in, as if to ensure there will be no unwelcome nocturnal prowlers. He is tempted to tell her that if there was the slightest chance she was in any danger, he would not have brought her here, he would not have left, he would sit outside all night if he had to. But she does not want to hear that, and it has already been an endless and very eventful day, and even he, immortal though he is, could do with some sleep. He has to text Jiya that they’ve made it, but then, yes.

With that, Flynn goes up the stairs to the master bedchamber on the floor above. He steps inside, and is grateful to be home, despite everything. It was a bit of a rocky start, admittedly. But things will improve tomorrow. At this rate, they have to.

He closes his eyes. In this state, vampires don’t dream, don’t stir, don’t wake. It’s close to death itself, and just now, he gratefully welcomes it.

Lucy does not remember much in between peeling off her travel-rumpled clothes, discovering a small bathroom through a door off the tower room, and just managing to wash and brush her teeth without totally losing it. It seems melodramatic to give this peculiar ache any kind of acknowledgement at all, when it was nothing more than a passing thought in a moment of weakness late at night. But Flynn has made it repeatedly clear all day long that their relationship is strictly and stiffly professional, that he still could not give a damn if she died in a ditch as long as he got his precious Ashmole 782 first, and he and his entire family do in fact hate her. Lucy was watching from the car, she saw the shouting. She is sorely regretting her stupid decision to trust him and come here at all. On vampire ground – on the vampire ground, where Denise and Michelle can’t reach her if it goes bad – God. What was she thinking? Maybe she can get up very early tomorrow and run away. Lucy doesn’t know where she’ll go after that. She has a vague idea of trying to rendezvous with Olivia, even if she still doesn’t want to go to Venice. They may in fact have to return to the motherland (literally) in upstate New York, but she’s supposed to be back in Oxford. She has academic commitments, article deadlines, tutorials, other work that didn’t just vanish because her life decided to go up in supernatural flames. She’s stubborn enough that she might just go back, Flynn or no Flynn (at this point, his absence seems like an active benefit), but if Cahill and Emma are still lying in wait…

Either way, it’s very late, she’s dog-tired, she’s not trying to run away from a family of vampires at night on their land, and she needs badly to sleep first. She caught a few winks on the flight and then some more on the drive, but she’s still wrung out and shaky and a little, however stupidly, heartsore. Fine, then. No use pining over what was cut off before it ever got started. She appreciates clarity. Fuck all men, especially all tall ones.

Lucy turns back the thick coverlet and crawls into the bed. It is an impressive four-poster, with a carved bedstead and heavy hangings of dusty red brocade. The pillows are bolsters, soft and squishy, and she sinks a full inch into the featherbed when she pulls the quilt up. She almost wants to stay awake to enjoy it (and to curse Garcia Flynn de Clermont once more), but it’s entirely beyond her. She can physically feel herself losing consciousness to a degree that she briefly wonders if she’ll ever regain it, and with that, she is gone.

Fittingly, Lucy sleeps like the dead, and is only stirred to the waking world sometime the next morning by a crack of light through the curtains. She feels very much like she is pushing aside a
coffin lid as she swears under her breath and struggles to sit up. She would be perfectly content to hide in this room and indeed this bed all day, but she is starving, parched with thirst, and desperately needs to pee. In other words, no matter if she is deep in a lair of socially maladroit vampires and the mothers who judge them, her humanity is going to have to take precedence. God dammit.

Groaning under her breath, wincing at the sunlight in a furtherly ironic way, Lucy swings her feet over the side of the bed and gets up, pushing her tousled hair out of her face. The tower room looks almost as medieval by day as it did by night. The walls are dressed white stone and hung with tapestries gone shiny with age, there are exposed beams on the ceiling, the windows are narrow and filled with diamonds of ancient, ashy lime-glass, and the furniture – canopied bed, trunk, chair, writing desk – is old and well-used. She can’t even tell if there’s an electrical outlet. There was running water in the bathroom, thankfully, but it doesn’t look as if the de Clermonts have made much effort to modernize the ancestral seat. It is obviously beautiful and historical and Lucy would love the chance to stay here if she wasn’t so worried about being snacked on. She isn’t afraid of Flynn, but she is terrified of his mother, and she hasn’t even met her face-to-face. All the gruesome, bloody terrors of which vampires are allegedly capable seem plausibly embodied in one smallish, elegant woman. Maria could rip off a hundred heads and daintily sip tea atop the mess. Lucy is going to be careful.

She freshens up a little and gets a drink of water, but the only place she’s going to find food – of whatever sort – is in the main house. She grimaces, pulls the bar out of the door, and peers warily out onto the stairs. It’s no use trying to sneak around in a house full of creatures with supernatural hearing, but Lucy does her best, barefoot and still only wearing her pajamas and a baggy sweater. She has made it into the front hall without incident when she hears the raised voices from the main solar across the way. The door is half-open, and she catches sight of Flynn, remonstrating with someone who, when he turns around, makes Lucy flinch. He looks quite similar to Flynn, in fact, but more, with dignified streaks of silver by his temples, an indefinable whiff of expensive cologne, a flashy watch on his wrist and a presence that can be felt like a forest fire. He is currently chastising Flynn in a language that Lucy can almost understand, but it slips past too fast, confident in the mouth of a native speaker, to be reconstructed when she’s only read it in ancient books and manuscripts, never heard it used out loud. Latin. Classical Latin, if she had to guess. This has to be the oldest de Clermont brother, the one Flynn said was the Roman consul among them. Gabriel.

She backtracks hastily, not wanting to be caught eavesdropping on this particular sibling squabble – she can guess what it’s about, it doesn’t exactly take clairvoyance – and wonders if anyone will notice the half-dressed, hungry woman lurking in the hall, or if she would really wish they didn’t. Lucy is just debating the merits of getting her things and running now while they’re distracted, when a voice from behind her says, “Good morning, witch.”

Lucy spins around and knocks into an endtable, making a no-doubt-priceless vase wobble before she steadies it. It’s the other woman she saw last night, the one with Maria. She has spoken in modern French, but with a conscious, careful intonation as if she’s thinking hard about it, and her cool grey eyes sketch over Lucy, assessing her thoroughly in the light of day. She looks maybe in her fifties, though it’s always hard to tell with vampires, her golden hair streaked with grey and pinned up in a Catholic-schoolteacher bun. She is very clearly not a person to cross, but the look she turns on Lucy is not unsympathetic. “I am Cecilia. I run the estate for the family. You must be hungry. Breakfast, this way.”

Abjectly relieved, then hoping that this doesn’t mean she is the breakfast, Lucy cedes to the older woman’s charge, following her through a warren of low stone corridors into a glass-walled porch. It’s clear that Cecilia has been instructed to take her here away from the house and feed her privately, or she decided to do it on her own, but the small table is set for one. There is a bowl of fat, luscious strawberries, a meltingly soft wheel of fresh Camembert, hot bread still billowing with delicious-
smelling steam, a cup of drinking chocolate, boiled eggs, and plenty of butter, cream, and jam. It all looks amazing, Lucy’s painfully empty innards twist in longing, and Cecilia pulls out the chair for her. “Sit.”

Too grateful to question this bounty, Lucy does so, is indicated to eat by another nod from the chatelaine, and tries not to wolf it down like a *petit sauvage*. The light in the room has that jewel-box quality of the French countryside, textured and faded as if filtered through bleached linen, and Lucy realizes with a bit of a shock that tomorrow is Halloween. It seems like an important date, what with everything going on. She has filled a few cracks with her first salvo on the food, though she’s still munching industriously, as Cecilia watches her with an expression that seems like amusement. When there is a chance of Lucy decently holding up an end of the conversation, she says, “Welcome to Sept-Tours.”

What with everything, Lucy isn’t sure she’s not making fun of her. “Thank you.” She hopes her French isn’t too bad – understandable, at least, and sees Cecilia’s eyebrows lift in appreciation that at least the American witch the cat dragged in has the decency to speak the mother tongue. “I’m sorry about last night. It wasn’t my idea to come here. If Maria – if Madame de Clermont wants me to leave, I – I’m happy to do that right away.”

“That is why she has granted you houseroom, however unhappily. Madame will not raise a hand against you while you are staying beneath her roof. You have my word and that of the de Clermonts.”

Startled, Lucy looks at her. “Are you – I mean, are you a – ”

Cecilia ghosts a laugh. “No,” she says. “I am not of their lineage. I was given the gift by a Gerbert of Aurillac, in 1112. Gerbert was a most esteemed scientist and sorcerer, a humanitarian and a scholar, a cleric and a consulter of demons. You will know him as Pope Sylvester II, most likely. He had many accomplishments, and I learned much from him. But he was also cruel, ruthless, and a harsh master and sire, who disapproved that I could never hold him as such compared to my human father. In 1307, Garcia and Gabriel killed him, and in gratitude, I entered the service of the de Clermonts. I have been with them ever since.”

Lucy tries not to blink. She has heard in passing of Gerbert of Aurillac, aka Pope Sylvester, and the occult and magical legends that surround him. He is rumored to have built an all-knowing brazen head some two hundred years before Roger Bacon, but the common date for his death is 1003. That, of course, is notwithstanding the fact that he appears to have also been a vampire, and she is conscious that Cecilia has extended her some limited and conditional measure of trust by telling her this story. “1307,” she says cautiously. “Would that have been during the trial of the Templars, by any chance?”

“You are a clever witch.” Cecilia half-smiles. “Or a historian, at least. It was, yes. Gerbert was working with Philip IV to exterminate the Templars, who he viewed as a grave threat to the existence of our kind. He ensured that many of them were convicted and executed on the basis of false confessions and torture. But that is an old story. You must still be hungry. I can fetch more.”
“I’m feeling a little better now. Thanks.” Lucy is, admittedly, insanely curious about the de Clermonts’ long and tangled skein of history, even as the de Clermonts themselves seem, to say the least, prickly. (Or frankly, just pricks.) “Ah – earlier. When I came down, I saw – in the solar with Garcia. Is that his brother? Gabriel?”

“Yes. He arrived from Paris very early this morning.” Cecilia raises an eyebrow. “Madame phoned him at once, when she heard that Garcia proposed such lunacy as to bring a witch to the house. Though I must remark, you are quite a strange witch.”

“Thanks.” Lucy thinks it’s just the usual French bluntness, the total lack of care as to whether they come off as simperingly polite by American standards, that prompts this, and not outstanding malice. Cecilia has fed her and made conversation, it would be an unusual time to turn suddenly rude, and it’s true, she is a strange witch. “I take it you already know why I’m here, then.”

“Yes. Ashmole 782.” Cecilia continues to evaluate her, as if she was going to say something else, but doesn’t. “So Garcia would like us all to believe, at any rate.”

This seems like a non sequitur to Lucy, since Flynn already made it clear that it was in fact just that stupid fucking manuscript, but before she can answer, they are interrupted by the entrance of a young – well, young-looking – man. His face is boyish and open, inherently good-natured, and Lucy swears for a second that she recognizes him from somewhere. He’s wearing a suit and an overcoat, the latter of which he strips off and drapes over his arm, as he makes for Cecilia like a bee to honey.

“Ceci, ma chérie. Don’t have a spot of breakfast for your very favourite daemon, do you? Bugger of a journey from Paris, especially with – ”

At that moment, he catches sight of Lucy, apparently realizing that a) she beat him to the breakfast, and b) this must be the witch everyone’s fangs are in a fluster about, and his jaw drops. He stares at her for a long moment, almost blatantly enough to be rude, and then collects himself, bowing extravagantly over her hand. “Dr. Preston, I presume?”

“Not Livingston, no,” Lucy says, noting that he’s switched to English in apparent deference to her presence. “And I can speak French, it’s fine.”

“I am not trying to insult you,” the young man assures her. To her surprise, his accent is also American, if not quite modern. “I just thought you might have had enough of huffy French vampires for the morning. My name’s Harry. I’m the – well, I also work for them. You must be Lucy. Dr. Preston, that is. From Oxford.”

“I am.” Lucy still feels as if she knows him from somewhere, but still can’t put her finger on it. “How do you know me, exactly…?”

“Garcia turned up in Scotland a few days ago,” Harry says. “I was at the house, I heard some things then. Then Gabriel rang in a snit last night and said we were going to Sept-Tours straightaway because his brother had done something stupid, which seems about on brand for him. I assure you, however, I am completely enchanted, and find her in no way stupid at all.”

Lucy blushes, even as his flattery sounds practiced and polished, more like stage patter than an actual, genuine compliment. She’s not going to reject a kind word, that’s for sure, and the de Clermonts’ servants have been far more welcoming than the family itself. Cecilia gets up to fix Harry a second tray of breakfast and pull up another chair, and he sits down next to Lucy, regarding her with lively interest. “I have a strong feeling that I’ll have to apologize for something Garcia said. Knowing him, probably several things. You’ll have to excuse him, he doesn’t get out of the laboratory much these days. I’m sure Ceci has provided well for you, but if I can be of any help, let me know.”
“Thanks,” Lucy says again, somewhat more sincerely. “You said you were a daemon…?”

“Yes.” Harry spreads cream and raspberry jam on his bread. “Maybe a bit more well-preserved than the usual, but working for the de Clermonts has a few benefits. Often outweighed by the exasperation, it’s true, but there you have it.”

Lucy laughs wryly, since both Cecilia and Harry seem to be under no illusions about the fact that their employers can be difficult, dramatic, and completely infuriating. (Or, you know. One of them in particular.) She relaxes a little under Harry’s warm attention, practiced or otherwise, and is just about to ask him what he does in Paris aside from working for Gabriel, when they are once more interrupted by the sound of footsteps in the hall. These sound considerably more official, and witch, vampire, and daemon all startle up out of their chairs. Then the door opens, and Maria de Clermont enters the room.

Lucy’s first reflex is to rear backward as far as she can, which she restrains with difficulty. She doesn’t want to be outrageously rude, when there’s already a not-zero chance Maria has come here to – well, Cecilia said she wasn’t going to hurt her, but that leaves a lot of leeway. Maria’s face is cool and considering, neither openly hostile nor in the least friendly, her eyes unreadable and her jaw set. She is wearing a cashmere sweater and fitted slacks, pearls and lipstick despite the still-early hour, and she looks Lucy up and down without a single flicker in that magnificent, imperturbable façade. Then she says, in English, “Good morning.”

“G-good morning, Madame de Clermont.” Lucy fights the urge to bob an awkward curtsy. She wonders if she should compliment her hospitality, or at least Cecilia’s, or if that would sound either sarcastic or insincere. It’s clear to both sides that it’s not anyone’s pleasure for her to be here. All that comes out, obviously and unhelpfully, is, “I’m… Lucy.”

“I am aware.” Maria’s nostrils flare, but her tone remains level. “The witch that my son decided, with no more preliminary than that, to bring home to us. The one who, as I understand, called up Ashmole 782?”

“Yes.” Lucy knits her fingers together, feeling like she’s back at her PhD dissertation defence with the particularly persnickety examiner. “I understand it was a… a shock.”

Maria utters a short, brusque laugh, as if to say that’s one word for it. Her hair has been swept and pinned up, but a strand falls loose in her face, and she absently tidies it back. She looks younger than Flynn, almost around Lucy’s own age, but he said that his father was born in 1200 B.C., and Maria could be at least that old. She likewise has a trace of an accent, though it’s difficult to place, and her scrutiny remains regal, unwavering. Then she says, “I accept that it was not your contrivance or your intention to come here, and that the circumstances that impelled it were beyond your control. But your presence here endangers all of us, my entire family, and if I had been given any proper notice of it, before it was already a fait accompli, I would never have agreed.”

Lucy ducks her chin and bites her lip, telling herself that she is going to keep it together, no matter how much she is accused by members of this godforsaken family. But Maria isn’t even accusing her, really. She is stating a well-established and self-evident truth, and one which everyone aside from Flynn seems to be perfectly clear about. Lucy isn’t sure if this is her cue to offer to go back to Oxford, but if it is, it gets stuck in her throat. She shoots a look at Cecilia and Harry, hoping for support, but neither of them quite dare to jump in before the mistress has said her piece. The silence gets increasingly agonizing – until for the third time that morning, the breakfast room is invaded, and this is somehow the most awkward one yet.

Side by side, Gabriel and Garcia de Clermont are an extremely striking pair. They’re not biological brothers, but they look as if they could be, and Gabriel is only a half-inch shorter than Flynn. He’s
dressed in a finely tailored suit, and his manifest air of immaculate grooming, wealth, refinement, taste, and seasoned maturity fills the room like a tidal wave, sweeping up everyone else and making them instantly, instinctively aware that the alpha is now present and will be calling the shots. Even Maria takes half a step back at her eldest son’s arrival. It’s clear that after Asher de Clermont’s death, Gabriel has taken over as patriarch of the family, and he wears a golden signet ring on his little finger, emblazoned with the wolf-and-lion crest. His eyes are very dark, his brows like thick strokes of ink, his fine mouth firmly and severely set, and while he is extremely handsome, it’s formidable bordering on forbidding, something to admire from a distance and not venture too close, not get your grubby mortal hands on. Like one of his own paintings procured for the Louvre, perhaps. Look, admire, stand in awe, but don’t dare touch.

Lucy opens her mouth, discovers that there is no way she can speak first in the presence of this titan, and shrinks back against the breakfast table. Flynn, by contrast, is rumpled and as unshaven as a vampire can ever look, wearing a black T-shirt and jeans, and while he’s always seemed very impressive and commanding to Lucy, he is clearly eclipsed by Gabriel, and both of the brothers know it. His eyes flicker to her, half-imploring, then to his mother. Nobody says anything for several moments. The silence gets ever more hideous.


“Y-yes.” Lucy clenches her fists. She doesn’t know if Flynn would get in the way if his brother suddenly went after her – he did last time, in the Bod against Cahill and Emma, but who knows now. Besides, it’s abundantly clear that he is not top dog here, and defending her might involve upsetting the entire family hierarchy. She’s being wildly optimistic to think that he even would, after how he was going on yesterday. “The witch. Obviously.”

She realizes a split-second too late that this sounds considerably insolent, and bites her tongue. Gabriel, however, does not appear perturbed. He inspects her with that same intense gaze, until she wants to tell him to back off, buddy, but he’s not a dickhead cat-caller on the street and he has good reason to ascertain at once and thoroughly if she poses a threat. Not that this makes her any more comfortable about being cross-examined, and Flynn clears his throat. “You can see she’s there. You don’t need to get out the microscope.”

Lucy glances at him, but Flynn keeps his gaze steadfastly and infuriatingly averted. Gabriel steps forward, pacing a cool and considered circle around her, until the back of Lucy’s neck prickles with the awareness of a predator. Somewhat unexpectedly, it’s Harry who says, “All right, Gabriel, you’ve made your point. Back off, you’re scaring her.”

Gabriel raises one of those exquisite eyebrows at being spoken to in such an upfront fashion by his butler (Lucy thinks that’s what he is?), but he decorously retreats a few paces. Then he says, “I remain astounded that you had the effrontery, Garcia, but perhaps I should not be. We all hope that Jiya remains safely in Oxford, do we not? Since the last time you decided to introduce a – “

Lucy can tell by the communal flinch that Gabriel has deliberately and defiantly struck a still-raw nerve, and Flynn’s face goes white. It half-sounds like a threat against Jiya, which hopefully it’s not – Gabriel is her uncle, after all, and Lucy likes Jiya. But to judge by everyone’s faces, it doesn’t seem to be that, not quite. Almost like a stark and sober warning, and Lucy can tell that they are verging on some family history which is almost too dark and too painful to be spoken aloud. Something to do with something – or someone – that Flynn knew before, and which Lucy, in her very presence, is in danger of repeating. She was just wondering about the de Clermonts’ history, but as both a historian and a witch, she knows that you should not ask that question unless you are prepared for the answer. And just now, she isn’t sure that she – or anyone – truly is.
“It will not be like – like last time,” Flynn says, his voice close to a croak. Lucy has never seen him so cowed, completely off his footing, and even though she’s still angry at him, the sight isn’t very enjoyable. “I swear.”

“You swear.” Gabriel repeats it lightly, without a particular intonation, dark eyes still fixed on his brother. Despite the fact that she, along with everyone, has been openly castigating Flynn’s abilities to pull off just about anything, Lucy feels a sudden and inexplicable defensiveness. The oldest de Clermont son smiles, but without any warmth or trust at all. “For all our sakes, Garcia, I dearly pray you mean it.”
Fantômes

“Ah. Wyatt.” Whatever Michael Temple is about to say next, given the ultra-sleek tone, the murder eyes, and the bared teeth barely describable as a smile, can in no possible way be good. “Do you know, exactly, what your brother appears to have done now?”

Wyatt takes a moment to curse under his breath – profusely and imaginatively, though there is absolutely no purpose it will serve, not even making him feel better. “Should I?”

“You would think.” Temple leans on the wall, staring out at the sleeping silhouette of the city as if sizing up where to take his next bite. “My instructions were very clear, and I should hope, achievable even by an immortal of your modest abilities. Call your brother Garcia and oblige him to transport the witch here, to Venice. Not squirrel her off down the de Clermonts’ bolthole. Would you like to tell me what went wrong in that execution?”

“I called him,” Wyatt snaps. “I told him of the Congregation’s decision that he should bring Lucy here. And considering you blackmailed me into it, Michael, that was clearly an upstanding and legitimate political decision that had nothing to do with – ”

Temple chuckles, as if it’s adorably naïve of Wyatt to think that any political decision, ever or anywhere, is upstanding and legitimate. “You will be familiar with a certain son of Venice’s great rival?” he asks, looking out at the moon-scattered water of the canals. “Florence? It was such a pity for our kind that Niccolo Machiavelli never received the gift. He would have been an invaluable asset to us. Then again, he would surely have passed it to Il Valentino, and that could pose considerable difficulties.”

Wyatt starts to say something, then stops. He’s not surprised that Temple idolizes Machiavelli, especially in that twisted “total sadism is fine if you win!” interpretation favored by fuckboys everywhere, rather than Machiavelli’s actual point, which is that while a truly effective ruler cannot be encumbered with empty appearances of morality, a regime built on nothing but cruelty will eventually crumble like sand. (Ever since Wyatt got this seat on the Congregation, he has been valiantly trying to familiarize himself with some political philosophy, especially of the Italian variety.) There’s another pause. Then Wyatt says, “What makes you think I can make my brothers do anything? Exactly?”

“Well, you could. If you had the stomach for it.” Temple drums his fingers on the baroque railing. “You do sit on the Congregation. By all rights, you do have the authority to demand Garcia’s compliance, not as a matter of private family drama, but as one of inviolable creature law. But you’re the youngest son, you’re – let us be frank – not as talented or as smart as they are, you’re not used to asserting your authority, and when you do, it backfires. You aren’t ordering Garcia to obey because we both know very well that you’re right. You couldn’t make him do anything. And once you realize that, you’ll face the fact that you’re still the most expendable member of the de Clermonts, that nothing you ever do will really matter to them apart from out of pity, and that can’t be comfortable, now can it?”

Once more, Wyatt is on the brink of an answer, but that catches him in the face like a brick. He turns away, trying to affect nonchalance, even as he wishes that he could chase Temple’s words out of his head. They match up a little too well with his own fears about himself, the voices that whisper that he could have been a lot more forceful about making Flynn bring Dr. Preston here, and of course he wimped out. It’s always difficult with brothers, especially older brothers, and Gabriel and Garcia were very close for centuries, even after Wyatt joined the family in 1179 (sometimes it feels like especially after). Then, well. They weren’t. But the breaking up of that fraternal alliance didn’t result
in a new one, in any combination. The three of them just blew in their own directions, and…

“I can help you,” Temple goes on, when Wyatt still doesn’t answer. “I am rather surprised that your family put you in this position, to be honest. It was unfair of them. Then again, Gabriel wanted nothing to do with the Congregation and all its tedious, mucky bearbaiting, so you were the poor sod stuck with the job. Don’t you want to make them listen to you for once, Wyatt? I’m sure you want to see your brother follow through on the decision the Congregation made. Or are you still loyal to the de Clermonts first, and the law second?”

Wyatt does not miss the implication – well, he’d have to be really stupid, given how thick Temple is laying it on – that this is his big break in life, that he can finally achieve everything he’s been working for, if he just puts aside any hint of inopportunely divided loyalties and lets himself be guided by this wise older mentor. In real terms, there are only about twenty years between them, but it does seem like Temple has acquired far more practical experience down the centuries. But Wyatt knows Temple is a douchebag, and he was just threatening to blackmail the entire de Clermont family and let the Jessica secret slip, so why this sudden volte-face? Vinegar before, and now honey? Is it possible that he doesn’t give a damn which tactic ends up working, as long as it does? What has Flynn done this time, or perhaps who? If it’s another Captain Radić situation –

“I’m loyal to my family,” Wyatt says. It sticks in his throat more than it should. “But – ”

“But any honest officer of the law would have to arrest his brother, if his brother should be caught committing a crime, rather than turn a blind eye and thus break it himself,” Temple says, in a Civics 101 voice. “If you’re admitting that you won’t pursue penalties against the de Clermonts just because they’re your family, I think we can see about relieving you of that Congregation seat, can’t we? And handing it to someone who will do the job. I’ve long thought it was a mistake to let the most powerful vampire family hold a place at all.”

“No,” Wyatt blurs out, too fast. It’s still unbelievably hypocritical of Temple to insinuate that the de Clermonts are unfairly gaming the system for their own advantage, when that is literally what he is standing there and doing right now, but in the course of just one conversation with him, you can start to doubt your morals and your beliefs and even your understanding of reality. Without that seat, he pretty much is nothing, and he’s afraid that he’s already let Temple see that he’ll do anything to keep it. “I mean, I don’t see that that’s necessary, is it?”

“You tell me.” Temple lifts one shoulder in an elegant shrug. “If you want to prove that you’re worthy of that seat and will act in a truly fair and impartial way that the whole creature world can count on, you will do what is necessary, Wyatt. Not what is convenient for your unruly and insolent brother, who has shown no inclination to respect you, the decisions of this organization, or the rules of our entire kind. For someone purportedly concerned with saving us, his actions demonstrate the opposite. We can force him to do the right thing, you and I, but you will have to work with me. I am your most natural ally. It should have been the case quite some time ago.”

“Yeah, no, still don’t trust you.” Wyatt suspects it isn’t news, but he might as well have it out there anyway. “You’ll play the used-car salesman until you have whatever you want, then leave the rest of us out to dry. That, or you’ll just – ”

“Let me ask you something,” Temple turns toward him, expression still mild. “You used to have a nephew, didn’t you? Your brother Gabriel’s son, Christian de Clermont?”

Wyatt should have been prepared for anything, given how many skeletons Temple has clearly dug out of the closet to throw at him, but that catches him badly off guard. It’s even worse because he was just thinking of the Captain Radić mess, giving him the brief and not at all unwarranted suspicion that Temple can read minds. After a long pause, he says, “Yes. He died quite some time
ago.”

“Rather a sedate way to put it, don’t you think?” After his opening moves, backing Wyatt into a corner and cutting off routes of escape, Temple has made his pounce and is sinking his teeth in. It is the masterly work of a predator, though you shouldn’t expect anything less. “He was murdered. 1762, wasn’t it? Near the end of the Seven Years’ War? In all fairness, the de Clermonts should have been fighting for the French-Austrian coalition, as French vassals for centuries. But then your brother met that Prussian army captain, and it was a lurid tale of assault, murder, arson, betrayal, and treachery. Ironic that he’s now taken the witch to Sept-Tours itself, isn’t it? Did you ever entirely rebuild the dear old place?”

Wyatt’s mouth is dry. This has too many devastating and specific details for Temple to be just guessing, and there’s no way the family can survive going through that again. They barely survived it the first time – indeed, as he just admitted, not all of them did. That happened because the de Clermonts did just what Temple is accusing them of now: they ignored the law, they flouted their obligations both mortal and supernatural, they acted as if they could do whatever they wanted, and it all stemmed from Flynn’s reckless, individual, emotional attachments. In other words, Temple is delicately informing Wyatt that if he stands back and lets it happen again, there is absolutely no justification for it, not when he could have prevented it. Wyatt still does not necessarily believe that allying with Michael Temple would do that, but if Flynn has learned absolutely nothing from last time, and if it just –

Temple can clearly see that Wyatt has no answer for that, but he waits a few extra moments, just to be sure. Then he says, “I’ll make you a deal. You work with me, for a fortnight or so, and we see how it goes. You may discover that you like the taste of actual power, of success, of making things happen because you said so. Just until this mess with your brother and the witch is sorted out. After that, you are under no obligation to continue with me. Unless, of course, you want to.”

Once more, Wyatt can do nothing but swear fruitlessly under his breath. He knows that Temple is going to betray him – that has to count for something, right? Keep his eyes open and jump first, or maybe stab the bastard in the back on his way out the door? If he does nothing at all, he waves the white flag and lets the entire Congregation know that he’s just an impotent sock puppet who got this as a sinecure for family connections, nothing else. At least if he works with Temple to some degree, he’ll be able to keep an eye on him. Manage and contain the threat, protect the family – and sure, all right, maybe he wants Gabriel and Garcia to look at him with a crumb of respect, just once. Maman can’t possibly be happy about this either. She’ll want the witch out of there. They all do.

“Fine,” Wyatt growls. “What are you asking me to do?”

“Nothing onerous,” Temple says placidly. “I just want you to go down into the Congregation archives and look at the file for Dr. Lucy Preston. I have certain suspicions about who or rather what she is, and it would be useful for our further purposes to have them confirmed.”

“I’m a vampire,” Wyatt points out. “And my brother just kidnapped her. If I get caught looking at a witch’s file, especially that witch –”

“Well then, don’t get caught, would you?” Temple utters a small scoff at the thought that Wyatt would be so clumsy. “Retrieve the information, bring it to me, and we will discuss our next move. I suppose for the moment it is preferable to have our key to Ashmole 782 safely in vampire territory, though we cannot discount the witches trying to get to her. Doubtless I do not need to remind you what they did to your father.”

He does not, thanks, and Wyatt struggles to think of one more objection, just for the sake of form. But it’s true that someone needs to unravel the mystery of Dr. Preston and why she’s connected to
this thread that entangles all of them, and maybe he tells Temple and maybe he doesn’t. He makes a noncommittal noise, fondly imagines that he will stake the bastard when all of this is over, and takes his leave.

The Congregation’s archives are not held in the same place as their meeting chamber, because Venice is a mazelike city and things have been shuffled and rearranged and moved over the centuries to keep them away from the flood. Presently, they are held in the monastery of Saint Lazarus on one of the small islands in the lagoon, San Lazzaro degli Armeni. The Mekhitarist monks, the Armenian Catholics who keep the archives, are well aware of what they safeguard, and obviously the name is no coincidence. The Knights of Lazarus have stationed a brother there since 1717, and the Mekhitarists have worked diligently to locate and preserve supernatural texts hidden among the leaves of ancient books. In this, they are following a very long tradition of studying forbidden sorcery in the cloisters, monk-magicians who turned to the mystical and cabbalistic arts alongside their prayers and devotions to God. Wyatt is both a member of the Congregation and a brother of the Order, they have no reason to prohibit a visit, and whenever a creature is born or created or otherwise comes into existence, they have a dossier started on them, the same way any government keeps data on its citizens. He just has to get access to Lucy Preston’s.

Wyatt takes a vaporetto from the Ponte di Rialto out to the small, neat square of San Lazzaro, lying low among the still waters of the dark lagoon. The vaporetto bumps against the dock, and he steps onto a green lawn outlying a handsome red-brick abbey. This place is mostly known as a centre for studies of Armenian history and literature, but there won’t be any human researchers here at this hour, which is for the best. He strides toward the monastery gatehouse, where there is a single lamp burning. Then he knocks in a certain fashion, and whispers a certain password in Latin through the latch.

A moment later, the door is opened. The Knight of Lazarus who presently guards the archives has been in post since 1822, and obviously knows Wyatt by sight as son of the founder and brother of the current grandmaster, but waits until he has additionally produced his signet ring for verification. Then he escorts Wyatt through the dim cloisters, toward a heavy door, and takes a ring of keys from his belt to unlock it. “Until dawn, signore,” he says in Italian. “And only among those who you may.”

Wyatt nods his thanks, makes certain of his footing on the steep, narrow stairs, and starts down into the dark. With the blessing of vampire eyesight, he can see fine anyway, and once the brother has closed the door above, sounds quickly fall into a tomblike, muffled silence. The damp is never far away in Venice, and the rough-hewn stone walls glimmer with condensation, but a diligent system of pumps, vents, drains, and fans make sure that the precious documents of the archive stay dry. As he reaches the stacks, Wyatt can make out the three sections, divided (as is everything in the creature world – apartheid still seems to be going strong) by species. Each creature is registered in the documents of their place and age, so the entire spectrum of written human history is represented here. There are tablets carved in Sumerian cuneiform, parchments in Egyptian hieroglyphs (the Book of the Dead was originally written by vampires), Greek scrolls and Latin codices and charters, Japanese rice paper etched with characters in fine strokes of ink, Chinese and Indian scripts that still whiff faintly of the incense of an emperor’s palace. There is a lost book by Avicenna, the great medieval Islamic polymath, down here somewhere, and the annals of the Songhai and Ashanti Empires are particularly rich. Timbuktu was once the capital of magic in West Africa, a learned and scholarly utopia where humans and creatures could mingle freely and study with each other in peace. That, along with much else, was destroyed by the coming of greedy and intolerant imperialists, white European men hungry for gold and slaves.

Compared to all these treasures of history, Lucy Preston’s file is quite ordinary, a sheaf of carbon-paper documents rubber-banded in a manila folder and left to gather dust. It certainly does not look
like the repository of some mystical wisdom, and Wyatt wonders if there’s been a mistake. He’s found it easily enough, since the archives operate on the honor system and the shelves are open, but when he reaches for it, a warning crackle of orange sparks make him snatch his hand back. Apparently the file isn’t so unguarded as all that, and Wyatt eyes it, considering his next move. He’s not a witch and thus can’t undo any too-complex protection spells, so his best chance might be to bash his way in by main force. But will that set off an alarm, bring someone storming down here, provide them with the very bad optics of one de Clermont trying to steal Lucy’s file after another has kidnapped the witch herself? Temple isn’t going to like that. Nor, for that matter, would the family.

Wyatt debates a moment more, then removes one of the neighboring files, pulls off the top page, rolls it up, and taps it on Lucy’s. The protective spell detects the presence of another witch, at least for a split second, and therefore doesn’t fire immediately. Of course, it catches up to the trick pretty quick, but by then, Wyatt has already weaseled the file free. He carries it to a side chancel, lit by dim amber-orbed lamps, and flips it open.

The details are basic. Lucy Diana Preston, born January 24, 1983, in San Francisco, California, to Henry Wallace and Carol Preston. It’s somewhat noteworthy that she took her mother’s surname rather than her father’s, but the Prestons are an old and eminent magical family with roots dating back to early colonial America, and almost all of the women have been witches. It makes sense that they wanted to align Lucy, the heiress of this lineage, with it, even though Henry Wallace himself was a witch of some power. But something strange happened when Lucy was six. She was duly taken here, to Venice, to be presented and registered with the Congregation, and to have an assessment made of her potential abilities. It’s usually a quick and painless test, and the young witch doesn’t even remember it – like a visit to the doctor’s office, getting bribed with treats afterward. But that’s not what seems to have happened, in Lucy’s case.

Wyatt turns the page, frowning. The date of the examination – November 1, 1989 – strikes him. All Souls, which is still a day of some significance in the creature community. 1989 was obviously an eventful year for other reasons, and it might have been dangerous for an American family to travel too near the collapsing Iron Curtain, but as he reaches the bottom of the form, the signature of the examining witch leaps out at him. Benjamin Cahill.

Benjamin Cahill inspected Lucy as a six-year-old, and according to the dry bureaucratic language of the report, found “no evidence of magical ability.” He recommended that she be raised essentially as an ordinary human, with her exposure to the creature world minimized, for the “comfort of the child.” To say the absolute least, this is very strange.

Wyatt stares down at the page until his eyes cross. He shakes his head, trying to guess if perhaps Cahill was just mistaken, but that seems very unlikely. Lucy clearly has magic, even if she has been considerably haphazard about employing it, and furthermore, of a particularly strong strain. So what would Cahill gain by saying that she didn’t? Trying to get her to repress it, for her parents to believe that she could never fully understand their world – for them, perhaps, to be disappointed in the daughter they had reposed such brilliant hopes in, whether or not they ever said so? Never bother to really teach her magic or encourage her to embrace it? This would drive her away from her family, her roots, her past and present alike, and make her feel insufficient and isolated, never able to correlate the two halves of herself, the crushing expectations. It is an act of almost breathtaking cruelty to inflict on a child, and the consequences have by no means faded. If anything, they are only getting stronger.

Wyatt has never met Lucy Preston, but he feels unexpectedly outraged on her behalf. He is sure that Temple would be very interested in this tidbit, though he doesn’t think it’s a good idea to pass it on. He really wants to see someone squash Cahill like a gnat for this, at least, and with the bastard now running around Oxford, this has to be part of something greater, some long-unfolding plan. Wyatt turns the page, and has just seen something about the death of Henry and Carol on June 20, 1991, on
the Ukrainian-Russian border, when he thinks he hears footsteps in the shadows. He hasn’t heard anyone else come down here, but now he is quite suddenly certain that he is no longer alone.

He grabs at the papers, shuffling them back together and flipping the folder shut, before he realizes that he can’t put it back without once more getting nailed by the protective spell. Did Cahill cast it himself, trying to cover up the evidence of his deliberate deception? But as Wyatt scans the shelf, his eyes fall on another file, archived just a few slots down from Preston, Lucy, and it makes his stomach twist in knots. Proctor, Jessica.

For the longest moment, Wyatt is sorely tempted to take it down too, no matter how much trouble he is liable to get in. His hand makes a convulsive movement, knocking Lucy’s file to the floor with a clatter, and as he whirls to pick it up, the other figure stalks forward, hand upraised and flickering with witchfire. “You.”

Son of a bitch. It’s Anton Sokolov, the Russian witch on the Congregation, who seemed highly skeptical of everyone’s plans for Lucy earlier. Discovering a de Clermont skulking in the archives, having just pried unlawfully into her file, seems to immediately confirm all his worst suspicions, and he looks set to unleash the witchfire in spectacular fashion. Wyatt slowly raises his own hands. “Hey. Easy, all right? Easy.”

“You move muscle, vampire, I light you up like Christmas tree.” Anton seems more than prepared to carry out this threat, even in an archive full of priceless and irreplaceable documents, and Wyatt decides not to call his bluff. “Why you are snooping around poor woman’s file? Lucy is witch. One of my kind. Bloodsuckers have no right. You and brother have done what terrible things to her? I like to set him on fire too, yes. But you first.”

“I have no idea what Flynn did with her, okay?” Wyatt tries to turn his head far enough to see if the Knight of Lazarus is aware of this intrusion, without making Anton do something flammable. “She went with him to Sept-Tours, but I don’t think he hurt her, he just – ”

“You do not think?” Anton’s voice echoes among the shelves, as if several large blond Russians are standing in collective condemnation of the de Clermonts and their life choices. “I know you. And your family. Lucy is freed at once, or – ”

“I don’t – know that that’s a good idea.” Wyatt tries to choose his words carefully. “If Michael Temple gets hold of her – ”

“You were one whispering with him like schoolgirl,” Anton says. “I need to send message to my own brother. Get him to come at once. Two of us against two of you is better odds.”

“No,” Wyatt says again, noting with a further sinking feeling that apparently there are two Sokolovs. Great. The last thing he needs to do is escalate this into an outright witch-vampire war, no matter how small-scale. “You don’t have to – ”

“I say what I have to do, vampire. Is not stupid things, like you.” Anton brandishes the witchfire beneath Wyatt’s nose, making him cringe; that can definitely hurt him. “Gennady is in Siberia, learning from old witch, Baba Yaga. But he is here very soon, yes. You have brother release Lucy Preston, or we break into house and get her. Make big mess.”

Wyatt briefly contemplates the sordid spectre of Anton and a doppelganger Sokolov bursting into Sept-Tours and valiantly slingling Lucy over their shoulder to whisk her off to safety, bowling over family members and expensive art left and right. As far as it goes, he can’t argue with Anton’s white-knight instincts. It’s clear that nobody else on the Congregation gives a damn about Lucy herself, and the head witch on that body, Benjamin Cahill, may in fact be directly responsible for more of what’s
going on than anyone has ever guessed. But Wyatt obviously cannot consent to have two large and angry witches break into Sept-Tours, on top of everything else, and while part of him might pay good money to see them go mano-á-mano with Gabriel and Garcia, he was just trying to avert this exact situation. “Look,” he says, a little recklessly. “I can help you, all right? I did see a few things in her file, and – ”

“Why should I trust you?” Anton asks. “You are in league with Temple. And stupid. Not good plan for me.”

Wyatt winces. Blunt broadsides of truth it is. He can’t blame it, not exactly, but it still stings. “We have to fix this situation somehow,” he says. “You have a brother you want to call, my brother snatched Lucy. Temple wants information, but we need to watch him carefully. I know it might not look like it, but we’re more on the same side than not. I – I want to help Lucy too, all right? But I can’t let you go after my family.”

Anton studies him warily, not lowering the witchfire. He has no reason to entertain any overtures from a vampire, especially one backed into a corner and caught spying on sensitive documents, but the other option is to push the red button, and a Russian obviously knows the significance of that. He finally consents to extinguish his fingers, though with a look warning that he is still perfectly willing to barbecue Wyatt at the drop of a hat. “No funny business, vampire. And we do this, you follow my lead.”

Wyatt is about to protest that he should make the calls, especially since he’s the one who has to put Temple off the scent if he is in fact going to turn double-agent on him, but decides not to quibble for now. “Fine,” he says. “Partners?”

Anton doesn’t answer, regarding him with an inscrutable, light-blue gaze. Then, finally, he offers his hand, and they briefly and tersely shake. “Partners,” he says. “For now. But if you screw this up, as you often do to witches, I kill you. Very dead.”

Not leaving Wyatt a chance to answer, he turns on his heel and marches out of the archives, in clear expectation that he is about to be followed post-haste. Wyatt remains where he is an instant longer, then straightens up with an aggravated sigh. He’s more used to trailing in the wake of his older brothers, but now he gets to change it up with someone else’s older brother, and this one a grumpy Russian knucklehead. Wonderful.

He looks around once more. He had the momentary thought that someone else, not just Anton, was watching from behind one of those shelves. But there’s no one, it’s almost dawn, there is an indistinguishable grey light starting to flood in, and with that, still muttering dire imprecations under his breath, Wyatt goes.

There is not really enough room on the porch for four vampires (two of the large male variety), one witch, and one smart-mouthed daemon (of course Gabriel had to bring Houdini along, because Flynn has clearly not suffered enough). Nor does there appear to be any consensus about what they are doing next or how, and Flynn has the distinct impression that both Maria and Gabriel would cheerfully strangle him if it would not be clearly impolite. He should not trust that their sense of etiquette will outweigh their anger forever, or even for very long, and he’s still reeling from the added nasty shock of his brother’s crack-of-dawn wrathful appearance, like the angel at the gates of Eden. He should have expected that their mother would call for backup, especially from the only sensible, successful, and stable son that the de Clermont family has ever produced, but part of him cannot help but resent it. And if Gabriel lays a finger, a flicker, a single wrong look, on Lucy –

Cecilia orders them to stop looming over the poor woman while she is trying to finish her breakfast,
and with one final glance over his shoulder, Flynn allows himself to be chivvied out. This is not an improvement, as it means he is alone in the front hall with Gabriel, and the older de Clermont is nowhere close to being finished with his objections. “I don’t want to expose you to unnecessary danger,” he says, with a very sharp undertone reminding Flynn that that is exactly what he himself has done to the rest of them. “I won’t order you to return straightaway to Oxford if it would be demonstrably unsafe. But if you think that you’ll just keep that witch here and it will all be –”

“She has a name, you know,” Flynn snaps. They’re once more speaking in Latin, the go-to language when Gabriel doesn’t feel like bothering with French or English, and it is another reminder of how thoroughly his brother holds the reins, dictates the terms, sets the very structure and framework of the argument from the ground up. “It’s Lucy.”

Gabriel stares at him icily. “I had not forgotten that. However, I am wondering if you have forgotten other things. As I said, I will not order you to return, but –”

“Order me, is it? Because this is just your house and you can throw me out or keep me in as you please?” Flynn folds his arms. It seems a little ridiculous that this is the longest conversation he has had with his brother for – he doesn’t even remember how long. Time gets flexible and relative when you have all of it in the world, and they’ve been involved in their separate lives, Gabriel in Paris and Garcia in Oxford, buried too deep to come up for air. It used to be that they didn’t go a day without talking, and they were often fighting together on the same military campaigns, so they saw each other all the time anyway. When Richard died at that pitiful castle in the Limousin, only forty-one years old, in April 1199, and Flynn’s world ended yet again, Gabriel was the one who helped him pick up the pieces. Gabriel always used to be there for him. Now it’s this, and Flynn knows it was his fault, his fault, with a guilt he can never expunge or expiate. The damage goes too deep for trite apologies. The de Clermonts are merciful and generous, by vampire standards, but they never forget a wrong, even one done by their own kind. Reconciliation might be managed, for political reasons, but deep down, Flynn knows that Gabriel will never truly forgive him, and that is unbearable. And yet. It is no more than he deserves. He will never forgive himself either.

They stare at each other, as it briefly seems as if they might fly at each other’s throats. Their ongoing estrangement is a source of profound grief to Maria, who has tried many times to make them talk it out, but it always ends up worse than before, and now Flynn has blithely thrown this oil-soaked kindling on the fire. Finally Gabriel says, “According to Maman, this is just about Ashmole 782, and I accept that you have legitimate reasons for researching it, for being interested in Dr. Preston’s connection to it. But I know you, Garcia. You think I can’t smell it on you? You’re craving her, you’re drawn to her. And if you act on that in any way, if you give into it –”

“I’m not.” Flynn uncrosses his arms for the purpose of running both hands angrily through his hair. It’s tempting to then wrap them around his brother’s neck and squeeze, but not yet. “I’m – all right, I had a brief moment of weakness, but I’m over that now. I’m over it. I wouldn’t – I would never.”

“You’d better not.” Gabriel might be slightly shorter than Flynn, but his presence, the space he takes up and the air he charges, is even larger, filling the hall and echoing almost physically off the old stones. It’s been a long time since he had to fight, since he lives as a cultured businessman and philanthropist these days, but Flynn remembers him all too well on a battlefield. Richard knew they were vampires and did not care, because they were such overwhelming tactical advantages. They could rip through twenty or thirty human soldiers at a time, indeed rather the way Richard himself could, though he was not a supernatural – just a singularly gifted mortal man. Indeed, Flynn had to learn the trick of killing just enough enemies, but not too many, lest he inadvertently outshine the king in glory, and that of course was an unwise idea. But he knows the way his brother can tear through entire flanks, whole battalions of heavily armed men, spears and swords and later even cannons that never stood a chance against him. If Gabriel does go after Lucy, Flynn won’t be able to
There is a very tense moment as the two de Clermonts stand almost nose to nose, still staring each other down. Then Gabriel takes half a step back, but only as a concession, not a conciliation. “You shouldn’t have put Maman through this again,” he says. “I accept that the witch does not seem as faithless and self-serving as the ones who stopped us from saving Papa. But she brings a whole different war with her, Garcia, and once more, you have led it to our doorstep. This family has suffered enough because of you. And can you promise that we will not do so again? No. You cannot. So –”

Just then, he catches sight of something behind them, at the same time Flynn himself senses it. The two of them turn sharply to see Lucy Preston in the flesh, clearly nervous about confronting two very tall and still-arguing vampires, but her chin is up and her shoulders are set. “Excuse me,” she says. “I don’t want this mess to go on any longer. I already said that I was willing to leave, and if this is going to destroy creature law and your family and whatever else, I’m more than ready to do that. I’ll need a ride to the airport, but coming here was clearly a mistake, and I’m prepared to go before it gets any worse.”

This has the effect of catching both Gabriel and Flynn off guard. Flynn bites his tongue on his first, instinctive utterance that she can’t, she can’t leave, she can’t go out there alone, and to hell with his brother and everyone else, he will go with her. Gabriel also clearly isn’t sure whether this is a clever reverse-psychology ploy to gull him into letting her stay, or a defiant and outright statement of fact, regardless of the personal danger it puts her in. As he looks at her, Flynn can’t help but notice a flicker of reluctant admiration in his eyes. Absolutely nobody gets in Gabriel de Clermont’s face, especially not a witch half his size, and Gabriel isn’t such a git that he will fail to properly acknowledge this bravery. “Dr. Preston,” he says after a beat, in English. “Apologies for the discord. Perhaps we have not have been as hospitable as we might.”

“I know you want me out of here.” Lucy stares directly back at him. “You don’t need to mouth empty platitudes. All I want is a straight answer. Should I leave now? Yes or no.”

Gabriel looks even more surprised, and Flynn half-wants to savor the moment to its utmost, half-wants to ask Lucy what the hell she is doing. He shifts position, getting himself between the two of them, and Gabriel’s eyes flick to him with an unsettling sharpness; he saw that movement, he saw Flynn preparing to defend her, and it seems to make him realize that no matter what Lucy has offered, he is not getting her out of here without a serious fight from Flynn. After a frozen moment, he jerks his head. “Very well. I understand that Maman has granted you leave to remain, so I shall not gainsay it. Welcome to Sept-Tours, Dr. Preston. The liberty of the main house and Garcia’s tower are yours, but I would not advise venturing into the other ones. Garcia, we will speak more this evening. Good day.”

With that, he sweeps off down the hall like a thunderstorm, and they hear the main door open, then slam shut, as Gabriel bursts outside and vanishes down the drive, toward the rambling, wooded acres that surround the house. He is probably going for a good long hunt to work off his aggravation, and Flynn and Lucy stand there in mutual stunned silence. Then Lucy says, “I see the manners must run in your family.”

“You shouldn’t –” Flynn was going to say something else, but his heart is still in his throat, and it makes him somewhat less careful than he should have been. “You shouldn’t – challenge him like that. Gabriel is – he could be dangerous to you.”

“All of you could be dangerous to me.” Lucy looks back at him coolly. Flynn has an odd, fleeting feeling that she seems to fit into the house, that it was a missing part it did not even know it lacked,
that the stones were waiting for her shadow to cast over them, that the morning sunlight picks out reddish streaks in her otherwise dark-brown hair. When it is contrasted with the smooth paleness of her face, she looks like a medieval painting herself, something worked in stained glass for sinners to kneel before, a queen of heaven or a martyred saint. “Why did you bring me here, Garcia?”

The sound of his first name, his oldest name, when before she’s called him Flynn or Professor Flynn, catches him in a peculiarly vulnerable spot. He looks away, finding her eyes too uncomfortable to meet. “We needed somewhere to go away from Oxford, to rest and regroup. Especially after what just happened in the library. I thought –” It sounds almost deliberately sarcastic. “I thought you would be safe here.”

“Safe?” Lucy’s mouth lifts, almost twisting. She could clearly salt that wound if she chose to, though some lingering, innate kindness might hold her back. “Or just throw everyone off the scent of Ashmole 782? We still aren’t going to learn anything about it if we aren’t in Oxford, and no matter what Cahill and Emma are trying, we –”

Just as it moved Gabriel, however unwillingly, Flynn cannot help but admire her tenacity, her courage, her spirit, the way she keeps volunteering to face dangers that she cannot possibly countenance or counteract. Maybe it is that alone, the simple bravery of ignorance, but nothing about her seems ignorant to him. It keeps refining sharper and finer and stronger, steel and silk. “We need a breather,” he says. “And I have a great deal of my research here. I’ll look at it, and then once we have a plan, we’ll go back. I’ll – I’ll look after you.”

Something like muted surprise registers in Lucy’s face – and something like hurt, as if she thinks he’s sadistically making fun of her. She bites her lip, her hands twist into fists, and she takes a step away. Then she says, very politely, “That’s kind of you, Professor, but you’ve made it clear that Ashmole 782 is what you ultimately care about. I’ll try to get it for you, once we return. After that, we don’t have to see each other again.”

And with that – while something is twisting in Flynn’s chest like a blade, like a stake or a silver bullet, and he doesn’t even know what – she turns, the sunlight of Sept-Tours still radiant in her hair, but her eyes more shadowed than ever, and walks away.

The rest of the day is a slow-motion exercise in agony. Flynn recalls that he offered to show Lucy around the place, but it seems awkward to offer now, and a few hours later, he hears the sound of talk and laughter, looks out the window, and sees her in company with none other than Houdini, who seems to have assumed the role of tour guide. Lucy’s eyes sparkle as she looks at him, Flynn experiences an overwhelming and inexplicable urge to just murder the dratted daemon, and steps quickly away, breathing deeply. This is more of a human reflex than a vampire one, since it does not make any difference to the roaring in his ears, and when he looks out again, he sees Houdini gallantly helping Lucy up the steps to the wallwalk. He immediately pops back out of sight like a jack-in-the-box. Apparently it only seems destined to get worse. Houdini did – up in Scotland, he – is he deliberately trying to torment –

At that, Flynn reminds himself very sternly of what Gabriel said this morning (and for that matter, what he did), that he has no feelings on this matter whatsoever, and Lucy is perfectly at liberty to spend time with whoever she pleases, which is – at this point – manifestly unlikely to be him. That does not stop him from peering around the edge of the window again, watching Lucy and Houdini stroll along as Houdini explains some bloody fascinating story. Oh, he’s – what, he’s giving her his arm? And she’s taking it? And they’re laughing? This is entirely and completely –

“Garcia,” a voice says behind him. “If you are through with your skulking and brooding, you may come with me to the parlor. Sophie is here, and she has not seen you in some time.”
Flynn jumps, spins around to see Cecilia, and immediately tries to dust himself off and pretend to be examining a loose bit of wood in the window frame. “That needs fixing,” he informs her. “I’ll see to it later.”

“Mmm.” Cecilia eyes him with an uncomfortably perceptive expression. “Conveniently on a window where you may look out at Harry and the witch?”

“It’s just – ” Flynn scrambles for an explanation. “She’s my guest, she – ”

“And yet,” Cecilia says. “Here you stand in a hallway by yourself, making no attempt either to be her host or to do the work you said you came to Sept-Tours to do. I know you are useless, Garcia, but you should try to be less transparent. Now, please. Sophie.”

She snaps her fingers at him, in a way that would make anyone think she was the lady of the estate and he was the servant, and he meekly follows her into the sitting room at the back of the house, where the little old lady waiting for him offers warm French effusions of delight. Sophie Mérignac is one of the de Clermonts’ tenants, and she is now in her nineties. Her family and friends and parents are all long dead, and she likes to come up to the main house to reminisce about them with the immortal seigneurs, who remember just the way it used to be in the village, and how her sister Alice looked on May Day 1937. She was so pretty with the flowers in her hair, non? Of course that was before the war, and Alice, who went to Paris to volunteer with the Résistance, never came back from it.

Flynn has heard all these stories before, of course, but Sophie is old and sweet and lonely and forgetful, and he should at least try to do something constructive while he is home. So he sips tea with her and assures her that he does in fact remember exactly how Alice looked, the peonies were pink and the weather was perfect, and all the shop fronts were scrubbed and white as snow. They get through another half-hour of nostalgia, the doorbell rings which will be Sophie’s grandson Bertrand here to drive her home, and as Flynn is getting to his feet, Sophie says, “Who is the new young lady, Garcia? I heard she came with you.”

“Oh?” Flynn has forgotten just how fast gossip travels in a small village, and Gabriel’s entrance this morning must have been cause for quite some comment. “That – ah, that is Lucy Preston. A colleague of mine, from Oxford. We are here to do some work.”

Sophie eyes him with the uncomfortably beady expression of an old woman who scents a prime matchmaking opportunity. “How long is she staying?”

“I – I don’t know yet. A few days, perhaps. It’s nothing, really.”

Sophie considers, then holds out her hand so he can help her to her feet, and he chivalrously fetches her cane. As he escorts her toward the door, her white head barely reaching his elbow, she says, “She is very pretty, Garcia. Does she have a gentleman friend?”

“I don’t know.” It seems rather intemperate to bark at a sweet old lady who has known him for her entire life, and Flynn thinks poignantly that he will have to go to her funeral sooner rather than later, when her father first brought her up as a little girl to meet the de Clermonts and learn their fantastic secret. He remembers Alice, yes, and he also remembers Sophie, a pink-cheeked toddler with fat blonde pigtails, running and squealing through the sitting room while Jiya played peekaboo with her. It makes his chest hurt. “Sophie, we’re not – there’s nothing like that. As I said. Just work.”

Sophie pats his arm in an affectionate way. “Garcia, ma petite imbécile. You are still such a very bad liar. And you are very lonely too. I am not the only one. Yes, yes, Bertrand, we are coming. Garcia, you have dinner with Mademoiselle Preston tonight. Oui?”
Flynn opens his mouth, decides he can please her, and nods, which makes Sophie give him a warning look as if she will ascertain for herself tomorrow whether this happened. They arrive in the front hall, Flynn hands her off to Bertrand, and she totters down the walk, as he watches them go and feels very strange indeed. Once the car has crunched out of sight down the drive, he turns around—and almost walks straight into his mother.

“Maman.” He has performed the duties of a good son, he has stayed out of trouble and refrained from any more indelicate entanglements with the witch, and if Maria is here to castigate him again, Flynn hopes she will be quick about it. He feels weary, heavy, not up for another battle, but he braces himself. “Yes?”

“I…” Maria seems to be searching for the words. “I just— I am worried, Garcia. I am worried about this, and for you. I have not seen you properly in—what is it? Months? Years? And then you turn up from the clear blue sky with a witch in tow and a story about being attacked in the Bodleian Library over the Book of Life? Perhaps I should not have been so swift to call your brother, but you are frightening me. Please. Please talk to me.”

Flynn averts his gaze, oddly ashamed, even though her tone is no longer accusing. He almost finds the love and the fear harder to bear, the knowledge that he is endangering them, that he has once more acted recklessly and out of the arrant belief that the simple fact of being a de Clermont can protect them from anything, when he knows in the most shattering way that this is not the case. He takes half a step, and Maria reaches up to cup his cheek. Her fingers are slim and cool, tracing over the lines in his face, the permanent burden that he bears, like a statue of the Blessed Virgin reaching out to comfort a supplicant. “We should not have shouted so much,” she says quietly. “Sometimes I fear that one day you will walk through this door, you will leave, and then you will never come back.”

“I acted—foolishly.” Flynn blows out an unsteady breath. “Arrogantly. You were right to be angry. But Lucy is—she is not a danger to you, Maman. There may be danger from the people who want her, I cannot lie, but she—I know what witches did to Papa. Believe me, I’ve never forgotten. But she’s different.”

“Yes, I see that.” Maria lifts her eyes to her son’s, an unspoken remark of some kind lingering at the end of the sentence. “But you know why I am afraid.”

“Yes.” Flynn would not honestly expect anything else. “But this is not Matej.”

“Is it not?” Maria steps up beside him, the fading daylight receding off the stones, leaving the pair of them where they naturally belong, in the shadows. “I remember that, Garcia. You—you were madly, blindly, passionately, obsessively in love with him. I think perhaps, in some way, you still are. You never truly stop loving anyone you have ever loved, no matter how long it has been since you lost them. If Matej walked back in tomorrow, some part of you would still want to return to him, even after—”

She stops, and Flynn is grateful for it. He does not need the crimes and the grief laid out row on row, fallen bodies on the battlefield. The treason was paramount on every level, and he dragged the rest of them into it. He says, “It’s not.”

“I want to believe that,” Maria says. “But I know the way you love.”

“I don’t love her.” Flynn wants to recoil from hearing it spoken so openly in the air, to force it to go away and hide in the safety of the unconscious. “I—I’ve only known her for less than a fortnight, I don’t—”
“Very well,” Maria agrees. “You don’t, not right now, not yet. But it would take one blind, deaf, and dumb not to see the way you look at her, the way you hold yourself around her, the way you must constantly remind yourself to remain under control when she is near. She has a grip on you that no one has had, that no one has come close to having, since Matej Radić. And that frightens me. It cannot be otherwise.”

Flynn once more searches for a denial that does not seem quite willing to come. It is true, after all. Since 1762, he has lived in a world of walls, of islands and fortresses, barred gates and unquiet ghosts. The one person he truly, completely let himself fall for since Lorena’s death over a millennium earlier, and the disastrous repercussions have still not ended. He saw it in Gabriel’s face today, and in Maria’s now, and the way Lucy Preston walks outside in the twilight, and he knows exactly where she is. It’s not love that he feels, not exactly. He is not lying about that. But it flickers dangerously close to the edges like a flame hungry to catch, as if something closed and locked inside him has been broken open and left bare, and it makes him want to run. Run, and never stop.

He wants to tell Maria that it frightens him too, but that seems too close to opening the wound. Instead, he only nods. “Supper?” he says. “Peut-être?”

Given the atmosphere still thick in the house, this is close to inviting everyone to a fireworks exhibition, and Maria looks at him sharply. But she, lady of the manor, might see the use in a ritual gesture of peace, and she nods in return. That is how they all find themselves, an hour or so later, seated around the table in the formal dining room, in what is surely the worst dinner party since the Red Wedding. At least it has not turned literally red, which is not at all a theoretical concern, and everyone is making a painful effort to be polite. Gabriel has put on the persona with which he wines and dines ultra-wealthy clients, showering Lucy in warm attention and asking about her work, though Flynn knows that he means absolutely none of it and is visited by a brief and overpowering urge to tie Gabriel’s balls around his throat. Lucy can clearly sense the insincerity, though she gives soundbite answers for the sake of form. The conversation then hits an excruciating lull, until Houdini says helpfully, “More wine?”

Everyone accepts immediately, whether or not the alcohol will affect them, and Lucy glances at the daemon in clear search of an ally. “So – how long have you been with the family?”

“A while,” Houdini says. “It’ll be coming up on – what, a hundred and twenty years?”

Lucy looks very surprised. “I didn’t know daemons usually lived that long.”

“Well, they don’t,” Houdini admits. “Not usually. But as I said, working for the de Clermonts has some benefits. They supported my magic career, and –”

“Wait.” Lucy blinks. “Who exactly are you? Where do I know you from?”


Lucy’s jaw drops. Then she looks totally delighted, Flynn has to fight the greatest turmoil in his gut yet, and must therefore listen to Lucy be in voluble admiration of Houdini (who is absolutely lapping up this attention and is not above throwing Flynn slightly goading looks). Then, of course, she says that this explains why he was so magical, if he was literally a supernatural creature. Flynn entertains the fond hope that this will abruptly cause Houdini to rethink all the court he has been paying her, but he only rolls his eyes and groans a little. “No, no. I never used actual magic in any of my tricks. I learned them all the hard way.”

“Yes,” Cecilia says. “He must go on about that at very great length.”
Flynn glances sidelong at her, as he notices that Cecilia has abandoned her usual Old French policy and is speaking modern French instead, clearly to charitably include Lucy in the conversation. What is it about her, that she has managed to have such an effect on all the de Clermonts in such a short time? Even Maria, who has been obliged to entertain a witch at her supper table all evening, has allowed just a bit of the ice to melt, and Gabriel looks as if he has backed down from the possibility of sudden violence for the first time since he arrived. Not that they are about to be making friendship bracelets or holding sleepovers, but –

They manage to finish dinner and dessert without any further scenes, and Lucy thanks them and says it was delicious. That alone went better than Flynn thought there was any chance of it ever doing, when they arrived last night, and he clears his throat, glancing over at her. “I have some things in the library for us to look at. Could we – ?”

Lucy agrees that yes, they can get to work for a few hours, and rises gracefully to her feet. She follows him out of the dining room, and Flynn has to wrestle not to immediately ask if she had a nice day with Houdini. He will do himself no favours with such a line of questioning, and he is still determined to prove to Lucy that he has no unnatural interest in her whatsoever. So they walk through the dark house without exchanging a word, reach another handsome oaken door, and he unlocks it. Then they step inside.

The library of Sept-Tours is not is impressive as the Bodleian, but it is nothing to sneeze at, and he can sense Lucy’s brief, breath-catching gasp with a clarity that almost hurts. Just then, nothing else in the world seems important aside from the fact that he has actually managed to make her happy, and he keeps his face turned away, terrified of letting her see the raw hunger on it. Hunger for what, he doesn’t even know. But he has done his best, for both their sakes, to promise her that there is nothing like that, that she is safe, and he is not about to inopportunely ruin that now. He feels like the Beast, taking Belle to the library in the enchanted French castle (he wonders if that makes Gabriel the obnoxious singing candlestick). A fire has been laid in the hearth against the encroaching October chill, the light is low, and for half a mad, delirious moment, Flynn wonders what she would do if he bent down and kissed her. Then he remembers that the answer is slap him, or run away, or hit him with a poker, that there is no way he would remotely manage it without something going very wrong, and they have actually come here to work. He steps sharply away from her and goes over to the shelf, digging for longer than he needs to. Then he says, “Here.”

He is grateful to see that Lucy appears to have noticed nothing, or rather, she looks as she normally does around him. Flynn carries over an old book written in German, opens it, and turns through the fine, crumbling pages, until he reaches the leaf that has been folded carefully in the middle. He takes it out, smoothing it on the table, as Lucy looks over his arm. “I got it from a bookseller in Prague, 1875,” he explains to her. “He claimed that it was a lost page from Ashmole 782, but I think he was having me on. Paid far too damn much for it, at any rate, and I’ve never been able to make heads or tails of it. It’s some incomprehensible gibberish, but I thought you might recognize it, since you’ve actually looked at the manuscript. At least be able to say whether there was a fair chance.”

“It’s... possible.” Lucy looks startled. “Several folios had been removed, they were cut out. I noticed that, when I examined it the last time. I don’t know when that might have happened, but yes, theoretically, someone could have – oh my God.”

Alarmed by the tone in her voice, Flynn looks down almost frantically. “What!!”

“This...” Lucy touches the leaf, running her finger along one of the lines. “I’m – I’m almost positive that this is the same cipher used in the Voynich manuscript. The famous one in the Beinecke Library at Yale, the one I wrote my PhD thesis on. It’s very... distinct. But that... no, it... no, that has to be wrong. I don’t – I don’t understand.”
She sounds truly rattled, and Flynn has to fight the impulse to attack the bookshelves just minding their own business nearby. He knows for a fact that Benjamin Cahill and Emma Whitmore cannot be here this time, and indeed they are not, but that does not seem to make any difference. Why does she look like she has just seen a ghost? What is it about that page? Can she read it? Is it indeed from Ashmole 782? Or is it some kind of –

“What?” he says urgently. “Lucy, what?”

“It’s just –” Lucy stares down at the paper for a long moment, then lifts her head and looks at him. Even in the firelight, her face is pale. “That’s my handwriting.”
So, Tumblr is the absolute worst. I am still working on getting it back, and have not given up all hope, but... who knows. I love and miss you all horribly, but cannot bring myself to start a new one just yet, because that is six years of work and fic and projects and of my life, and I want it back. I will make another if I absolutely have to, but yes.

I will keep you updated. In the meantime, have a chapter. Come say hi to me?

The silence following this pronouncement is almost loud enough to echo. Lucy keeps looking between the worn, age-faded scrawling on the brown paper, and her real, physical surroundings, briefly tempted to pinch herself, though she’s not sure why. Flynn said he got this in Prague, 1875, and to say the least, Lucy was not around then, nor at any earlier date convenient for its composition. For a moment, a well-honed reflex, she instinctively doubts her own conclusions. Maybe it’s just similar, maybe some other person cracked the Voynich cipher and used it to transmit secret messages, secure in the knowledge that nobody else would be able to read it. But she spent countless hours of her life that she is never getting back in the Beinecke Library, painstakingly transcribing long sections of the manuscript. She’s pretty sure she knows what her own handwriting in it looks like.

“Are you – ” Flynn, obviously, has the same question. “Are you sure?”

“I copied enough of that thing when I was writing my thesis, I – ” Lucy feels shaken, reaching out to grip the back of the chair. “I’m pretty sure.”

She expected to spend more time convincing him, but her word is apparently enough for Flynn. She can see his brain switching gears almost that fast, from the origin of the leaf to how it’s possible for her to have written it. The riddle this entire time has been why Lucy is connected to Ashmole 782 and is able to access it, so maybe – but also how? She didn’t write it, she is quite sure she would remember doing so, and she hadn’t even heard of Ashmole 782, except in the obscurest of footnotes, before she came to Oxford. “I don’t know,” she says, because she has also learned that a scholar’s first, gut-instinct interpretation is rarely right and always needs more evidence. “It could be Cardan grille.”

“It could be what?”

“Cardan grille.” Lucy looks around for something to write with, and with Jeeves-like swiftness, Flynn is holding out a piece of monogrammed stationery and a Waterford pen. This is a cut above the torn notebook and Bic rollerball that Lucy was expecting, but she takes it. “It’s one of the popular explanations for the Voynich. It’s a sophisticated forgery technique that produces a large amount of authentic-looking text, but it’s all actually gibberish. That was the theory that held that the Voynich itself was just some kind of fraud or bad copy of something rather than an authentic work, which I discounted in chapter one, basically.” She is trying to talk and transcribe at the same time, which is going only moderately well, and has to focus on the complicated, impenetrable shorthand for a few lines. “It was hard enough to write a book, especially one with all the Voynich’s illuminations and diagrams and supporting material. The ‘fake’ explanation always felt so lazy. It’s ridiculous that the theories about it being by aliens or in a lost Atlantean language – all real suggestions I came across –
were treated as more plausible than it being written for women in a coded language that we just
didn’t have the key for. Of course they’d want to transmit that knowledge, and they wouldn’t want
people – men – reading it and interfering.”

“So you’re suggesting that the Voynich shorthand could be a sort of specifically feminine Latin
cryptograph?” One of the nice things about Flynn is that she doesn’t have to explain anything to him
more than once, even if it’s something with which he has only passing familiarity. They are
intellectual equals, if it’s not too presumptuous to compare herself with someone fifteen hundred
years older and who has, obviously, far more language and life experience. “And in that case, there
might be interest in witches learning it?”

“It’s possible.” Lucy keeps scribbling, so vigorously that she almost tears the paper. “Witches could
have been the ones who wrote the Voynich collectively, in a feminine Latin that was well-known at
the time, but there’s no chance that would get preserved in the mainstream historical record. This is
the only other example I’ve seen of that writing, though. Maybe they destroyed the other documents,
or someone else did. Also, the women accused in the early modern witch hunts were often the ones
who knew about health or healing or herbcraft, and I argued that the Voynich is a handbook for
women’s health based on the Trotula. Even if its authors weren’t actual, magical witches, that could
get them arrested.”

At that, she catches a look on Flynn’s face that makes her insides do something odd. It’s – no, doting
isn’t the right word, but it also isn’t far off. It’s an expression of starry-eyed, misty pride, like he’s
watching someone be so brilliant and amazing that his little vampire heart can’t stand it, and Lucy
cannot help but wonder how that fits in with his recent brusque (to say the least) treatment of her.
Then he sees her looking and it immediately vanishes, replaced with his usual cool, reserved
inscrutability. “So,” she finishes up, a little thrown. “Cardan grille was originally invented to transmit
secret messages in ordinary letters. It was a parlor and literary curiosity for educated seventeenth-
century men, and it fell out of vogue pretty quickly. I’ve never heard of any other manuscript
supposedly faked at full length, since that would take even more effort than writing it as a genuine
work. And this is… oh.”

“What?” Flynn demands. “Can you read it?”

“Give me a minute, I’m a little rusty.” Lucy studies her finished transcription. If she was in any doubt
that it was in fact her writing, she isn’t anymore. The two pages match almost perfectly, the old one
with its faded brown letters and the new one with the ink still glistening wet. She can feel Flynn
frowning over her shoulder, and they stare down at it together. Lucy wonders if there’s any chance
he just happens to have a copy of her book (The Voynich Manuscript as Women’s Historiography:
Gender, Material, and Medicine, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2012), since that has a helpful
table with all the abbreviations. This isn’t a long message, and she can possibly cudgel her brain back
into action, but she needs a fresh piece of paper. “Hey, do you have – ”

Once more, almost before she needs to ask, Flynn hands her a new sheet, and she allows herself half
a wistful thought about how they make a pretty good team, before she puts it out of her head and
turns back to the task at hand. By laborious chicken-scratching, a lot of muttered cursing, writing and
rewriting, and smacking her forehead in hopes it will jar loose the dusty memories of dissertation
research, she manages to copy out a preliminary translation. She doesn’t know if it makes sense, but
as she stares at it, a deep chill goes down her back. Then she hands it to Flynn. “Would this mean
anything to you?”

He takes it, looks at it, and his dark eyebrows draw together. Then he clears his throat and, with a
slightly self-conscious air like an actor surprised to find himself on stage, recites:
“If you are reading this, we have been successful. With the assistance of the School of Night, the book has been concealed in the archives and the spell cast to ensure its preservation. Those in search of it cannot be allowed to succeed. You who are the key, unlock the message in the same manner as before. When the time comes, you will have their names. The alchemical wedding makes the bridge. Beneath the wolf and lion lies the ring.”

There is a long pause after Flynn finishes. He glances back as if to see if there’s a second half that she’s working on, but nope, just that. Lucy knows they might be the first people to read this since whenever it was written, and her scholar instincts want desperately to start banging out an article, even if she would have a very hard time explaining to any reputable peer-review what exactly her sources were. Then he says, “Well.”

“Couldn’t be any more cryptic, could I?” Lucy jokes weakly. If they are going with the idea – she isn’t sure if it’s insane or just insane enough to be the truth – that she herself wrote this, it’s as riddle-me-this as it gets. Maybe she didn’t think that even the Voynich cipher was enough for security, if there were other hostile witches who could possibly read it, and had to couch everything in as oblique and allegorical terms as possible. But even within those few lines, there are about eight hundred questions. “Does it mean something?”

“I think so.” Flynn puts down the paper as carefully as if it might explode. “But I don’t understand. If the School of Night did have something to do with hiding Ashmole 782, I would know about it. I was there.”

“What?” Lucy goggles at him. Belatedly, she remembers that Flynn’s past is very long and he could have been just about anywhere, but it still comes as a surprise. “The School of Night – I’ve heard of them. A group of poets, scientists, astronomers, and alchemists in late Elizabethan London, suspected of atheism and devil-worship, organizing treason against the state. Walter Raleigh was their leader, and Christopher Marlowe was rumored as a member.”

“Oh, he was a member,” Flynn says decisively. “Until that tavern brawl in Deptford, which always seemed highly suspicious. Yes,” he adds, off Lucy’s look. “I knew them, I knew all of them. I was in London in the 1590s, and I studied with them. If, as I assume, the ‘book’ is Ashmole 782, I would have learned about it then. How could they have helped hide it, and – what? Never told me?”

“Don’t look at me.” Lucy is feeling very much out of her depth, as well as making a note of several more questions she wants to ask him one day. “They were your friends, apparently. And… you who are the key, unlock the message in the same manner as before? Wait. Does that mean – ”

Thinking suddenly of what Jiya said about the burn on her hand, that it was an omega, a magical locking mechanism, she is struck (hey, it happens every so often) by a flash of genius. The brand has faded, but it is still visible, a reddened horseshoe on her palm, and Lucy hesitates, braces herself just in case, and presses it to the bottom of the old page.

For an instant, no reaction. Then another white-hot pain sears through her, she hisses, Flynn whips around like he is about to dismember Hannibal and the hordes of Carthage, and when she removes her hand, the brand is once more raw and angry-looking. But the discomfort is trivial next to the fact that, smoothly as if traced by an invisible quill, more words are appearing in the blank space below the cryptic message. Lucy told Flynn that Ashmole 782 was a palimpsest, a text within a text, where old letters had been scraped off to make room for new, and that’s roughly what’s happening here, but it’s like writing a letter in lemon juice and holding it up to heat to make it legible. They stand there, totally transfixed, as several more lines curl elegantly into existence. Lucy nurses her wounded hand against her stomach, and Flynn looks utterly thunderstruck. “What did – did you?”

“Jiya said that the burn was an omega, that it was the reason I was able to get to Ashmole 782. The
magical key. And I guessed that if it was me writing that, I was the key again.” Lucy nods at the paper, as if to show the immediate proof of a hypothesis. “That the rest of the message was under the same enchantment, and I would have to access it personally. Whoever it was – if it was me – really didn’t want anyone else reading this.”

Flynn looks between her and the smoking page with an expression of something close to awe. It strikes Lucy that he’s had this dusty scrap of parchment for almost a hundred and fifty years, has never been able to get it to make any sense and only hung onto it out of the conviction that it had to be useful someday, and in one evening, she has marched in, translated it, unlocked deep and powerful magic, and pointed him to a troublesome mystery about his own past. He looks as if he might be in the presence of a goddess, isn’t sure if he should fall to his knees just in case, and the dim library crackles with the unknown and static strange, the smell of sorcery – and Lucy’s own need, briefly so overpowering that there is space for nothing else inside her – to touch him. Just that, nothing else. Just to close the gap, to set off a reaction, to pass a spark from one alembic to the other, some alchemy she still doesn’t have a word for. It would certainly transform everything, possibly including both of them, and she can’t risk that right now.

Swallowing hard, Lucy pulls her good hand back, as it has crept a few traitorous inches toward Flynn without her permission. He hates her, or couldn’t give a damn about her, or at least she’s fairly sure he does, given as that is what he has both said and done at repeated intervals. She’s too old to pine over emotionally unavailable asshole men anymore, and she’s just going to satisfy herself with the intellectual collaboration and nothing else. When they’re sure that no more text is going to appear, she bends over it. “Hold on.”

The translating goes faster this time, at least partly since this half of the message isn’t stringently coded. It’s a bullet-point list, and it’s fairly short, starting off with names. Bathsheba & Abiah Foulger. Amelie Wallis. Agnes Sampson. Then there are a few random references to what sound like historical places in London, another mention of the alchemical wedding, and some kind of sketched sigil that Lucy doesn’t recognize. It looks like a great seal: a pot-helmed knight on a horse, a green cross on his shield, surrounded by tiny Latin writing. By following around the inscription and mentally expanding the abbreviations, like reading a coin, Lucy is able to make it out. “Ordo Militaris et Hospitalis Sancti Lazari Hierosolymitani,” she ventures. “The Military and Hospitaller Order of Saint Lazarus of Jerusalem? Wait, you mentioned that! The Knights of Lazarus? At Woodstock.”

Flynn gets an expression like it’s news to him, as well as rather alarming, that she actually remembers things he says. “Ah,” he says, much too casually. “Did I?”

“Yes, you did.” Given as it has now turned up under magical safeguard in a piece of Ashmole 782, Lucy thinks she is entitled to more explanations, but it is anyone’s guess whether she is going to get them. She looks back at the paper. “Agnes Sampson – I know that name. She was the first victim in the North Berwick witch trials, in 1590. James VI of Scotland, James I of England, accused her of causing a huge storm on his return from marrying Anne of Denmark. It’s not quite as famous as Salem, but it started the witch-hunting era in England in earnest. James was obsessed with witch-hunting, he wrote Daemonologie, and that’s – ”

“The same time as the School of Night, yes,” Flynn completes. “The 1590s. I’m going to guess on fairly good authority that that was either when Ashmole 782 was written, or when it was first hidden in the Bodleian. But if it was donated after Elias Ashmole’s death in 1692, that’s a full hundred years too early. So the ‘archives’ the message refers to, that can’t be Oxford. It was originally hidden somewhere else.”

“Maybe…” Lucy’s heart is pounding with the thrill of unprecedented historical discovery, the way
the two of them are volleying information off each other, catching one piece and building the next, finally making some real, actual headway on this stubbornly impenetrable mystery. She once more has the sensation that Flynn is trying a little too hard not to pay attention to it, remembers that he can hear it, and tries to calm herself down in case it’s annoying, like the buzzing of a fly. “These Knights of Lazarus? Do you think they could have also been involved with it?”

Flynn sighs, sounding somewhat aggravated. “I’m not supposed to talk about the Knights, though at this point, yes, that seems rather past concern. Once more, I will say that is unlikely, given my personal familiarity with the order. But now I can’t be sure.”

“Personal familiarity?” Lucy studies him. “Are you a brother of the order, by any chance?”

Flynn grimaces, as if to say that he really is trying for secrecy, woman. “Yes,” he says, after another pause. “In fact, my father founded it. 1098, in Antioch. It took Jerusalem as its headquarters after the city’s capture in July 1099, at the end of the First Crusade.”

“Your father?” Lucy’s burning curiosity about Asher de Clermont has likewise continued to grow, though that is definitely something else off-limits. “So if the Knights of Lazarus knew anything about this, he would have told you?”

“So I always thought.” Flynn turns on his heel, looking out the dark window. “My father was… a complicated man. Brilliant, and very accomplished, and… I suppose I would say loving, in his way. He was a soldier from ancient Greece, he was already nine hundred years old when he marched in Alexander the Great’s army. Fond of wine, women, and war. He and my mother were married in about 200 B.C., and Gabriel was their first son. They sired him jointly, something that is still unusual. Papa was… always very proud of him.”

Lucy looks at him awkwardly. Flynn’s back is turned to her, she doesn’t want to interrupt this, and it goes without saying that Asher’s memory is a sensitive subject around here. She tries to imagine Asher and Maria’s marriage of over two thousand years, of ever finding someone that you would love and want to be with for that long, and the depths of rage and revenge that it would have driven Maria into, to lose someone you had been the other half of for all eternity. No wonder she won’t forgive the witches for whatever role they played in Asher’s death, the way just seventy-something years would feel like less than a few seconds. She must be a widow grieving as if it happened yesterday, and it shakes Lucy, as the de Clermonts are doing increasingly often. She can also tell from Flynn’s tone that he’s suddenly wondering if his father was ever the man he knew and venerated, and as someone who is asking more and more questions about her own past, her parents, everything they might have done or not, Lucy knows how disorienting it is.

She debates fiercely, telling herself that she shouldn’t do it, but something makes her get up and move closer. She doesn’t like seeing other people in pain, and Flynn has shared a small personal shard of his heart. Lucy puts a light, tentative hand on his arm, feeling it like cords of iron beneath his sleeve. “I’m sorry.”

Flynn’s eyes flick down to where she is touching him. For a moment, he remains exactly where he is, magnificently impersonating a statue, and then he jerks away. He takes a few sharp steps toward the presumable safety of the window, as Lucy winces and tries to keep it off her face. She needs to quit putting herself in this position, however implicitly, if she’s just going to get rejected. With his back to her again, Flynn says, “It’s fine.”

“Okay.” Lucy doesn’t know if he’s just saying that to get her to stop nosing around his business, even though he’s the one who brought up the subject. Her voice trembles, despite herself. “You’re right. We don’t have to talk about this.”
“We’ve learned more about Ashmole 782 in an hour tonight than the creature world has for centuries.” It’s not clear if Flynn is offering this as a consolation prize, explaining why he’s unable to keep going just now, or obstinately trying to change the subject and get them back to safer ground. “And we haven’t answered all the questions it brought up. But you must be tired. If you want to go up to your room – ”

Lucy isn’t really tired, not right now. But she can tell that Flynn is shutting down the shop for tonight, and she isn’t sure that she would be able to get far on her own, without him on hand to answer her questions. He strides to the table, folds up the leaf and tucks it back in its book, and returns it to the proper place on the shelf. Still not looking at her, he says, “Is your hand all right?”

“It’s – ” Lucy glances down at it. “I’ll – do you have some Neosporin? That should be fine.”

Flynn utters a short, wry laugh, as if to point out in a household full of immortals who can’t be hurt by any ordinary means, having a first-aid kit is a bit superfluous. “I can send Cecilia down to the village to buy some,” he says. “There’s a small pharmacy, though it won’t open until tomorrow morning. Do you need anything else?”

“No. I think that’s all right.” Lucy is also realizing that yes, she needs to be alone for a while, to either attempt to process this or just ignore it so she doesn’t go insane, and though as he said, there are plenty of outstanding mysteries they didn’t get to, enough is enough. Her chest feels cold and crumpled, and she isn’t even sure why. “Good – good night.”

Flynn looks at her like he wants to say something else, but of course, he doesn’t. He turns back to the shelves, looking appropriately vampiric in the shadows and apparently much too interested in the proper organization of dusty old books, and Lucy practically flees.

She prays that she doesn’t run into Maria or Gabriel in the front hall, but Sept-Tours is quiet, almost eerily so. Right, it’s nighttime, this is probably when they go out for exercise or running or hunting or whatever else, not having to constrain themselves in deference to human sensibilities. Their tenants all seem to know about them, but there are very clearly strangers here now, not least Lucy herself, and everyone is on guard. It’s almost funny to think that these super-powered, incredibly strong, blood-drinking predators could be afraid of her, but maybe they should be. Why is her handwriting on that ancient fragment? What does that cryptic message mean? Why does Flynn always have to be so – Flynn?

Lucy blunders upstairs, which is hard to do on the steep, dark, uneven steps of the tower, and barks her shin more than once, reminding herself that she’ll break her neck if she falls down them. She gets to the top without killing herself, pushes the door of her room open and practically topples through, then shuts it behind her. It seems foolish to put the bar in as a threadbare pretense of safety, but she does so anyway. Through the narrow window, she can see the silver-bone moon rising over the dark trees, and wonders if Sept-Tours’ masters are running free out there, what – or who – they are chasing. Thus far, Flynn has seemed mostly like a human to her, even if a socially terrible and deeply unhelpful one. But tonight, here, staring out from a castle at this forest, on a view that might have barely changed for eight hundred years, Lucy feels for the first time the unsettling nearness of monstrosity.

Shivering, she changes into her pajamas, hunts around until she finally finds a lone electrical outlet, and plugs in her phone, hoping it won’t blow up the antique wiring (they would definitely regard her very dimly if she burned the place down). When it powers up, there are about eighty-three messages from Denise, who has clearly heard from somewhere – possibly Olivia, when Lucy didn’t turn up in Venice as the Congregation expressly ordered – that things have gone sideways. Lucy is not sure she is up to the job of talking Denise off the ledge, especially since that will involve telling her that she is
in fact in the de Clermonts’ lair, but it will get worse if she doesn’t. She sits down with her back against the wall, jumps at muffled thumps from below and the bang of the front door as if Flynn is also leaving for the night, and braces herself. This is going to be fun.

The phone rings a few times, and then it’s Michelle who answers. Her voice cuts in and out, as the mobile coverage here is clearly not the greatest. “Lucy? Honey, are you all right? You can’t just keep going out of contact for hours like this, with everything going on. Denise was about ready to jump on a plane to Europe and search for you herself.”

“I’m fine.” Lucy wonders how much one person can humanely say this. “I’m sorry, I just – Michelle, don’t flip out, all right? Please don’t flip out. But I’m in France. I don’t want to say exactly where, in case the witches get hold of – well, it’s just better, all right? I’m doing more work on Ashmole 782. There’s a – a local archive here with some documents on it, and – ”

“France?” Michelle sounds bewildered. “Olivia called saying that you were supposed to go to Venice, that this had been arranged and decided, and she was going to take care of everything for you. What do you mean, France?”

Lucy looks at the ceiling. They’re probably going to hear this from somewhere, and maybe it’s best if she tries to get out in front of it. “I’m with Garcia – with Professor de Clermont. He took me to his… place. Just for research, I promise.”

As she was guessing, that gets quite a reaction. Michelle falls totally silent for several excruciating seconds, then starts into the expected objections, which Lucy doesn’t have the energy to rebut individually. She waits until Michelle is done, then says, “I know it sounds ridiculous. But I’m not going to Venice, and – I just need you to back me up on this, all right? I have my reasons, and I promise I’m not some naïve girl tragically led astray by the vampires. Trust me, Flynn is doing everything he can to prove that he’s not interested in me, but I don’t – I don’t think he’s going to hurt me. Can you trust me on that?”

There’s a long pause. Michelle has always been the warm one, the motherly one, the source of kisses for scraped knees and shoulders to cry on after the idiocy of boys. Not that Denise isn’t loving too, because she is, but she’s the firm one, the disciplinarian and the strategist and the organizer, who sees in terms of things that need to get done and orders that need to be given. Finally Michelle says, “Garcia Flynn de Clermont? And that – that whole family? Even if he won’t hurt you, what about the other ones?”

“They won’t, as long as he’s here.” Lucy rubs her eyes. “And she – his mother – said that I was a guest in their home and she wouldn’t dishonor that. Well, the chatelaine did, but I believe it was her decision. There’s a lot going on, and I need to be here for a while longer. I know it’s putting you in a difficult position, and Olivia’s your daughter, and – ”

“You are our daughter too,” Michelle says, very firmly. “Don’t doubt that. Ever. Okay?”

Lucy tries to answer, finds her throat too choked up, and blows out an unsteady breath. Then she says, “Can you just… run interference, for a little while? I know it’s going to be a hassle, but if you could cover for me on this, it would mean a lot.”

“While you’re at the de Clermonts’ house.” Michelle sounds like she wants to trust Lucy, she really does, but this is asking a lot. “You know we want to help, but…”

“Yes,” Lucy says again. “Please.”

“All right,” Michelle says, very reluctantly. “I’ll do my best. I don’t know how I’m going to explain
this to Denise, but you let me worry about that. Just call or text regularly, so I know you’re safe. Deal?”

“Deal.” Lucy feels embarrassingly close to tears, curled against the rough stone wall of a medieval tower, utterly and impossibly and eternally alone, in a night fraught with shadows of more than one sort. “Th-thanks.”

“Honey,” Michelle says. “I’m giving you the biggest hug right now. Can you feel it?”

In fact, Lucy can, the way the air buzzes slightly pink around her, the sensation of warmth and comfort that engulfs her. It takes considerable skill to cast a spell at such distance, from upstate New York to rural France, but it gives her trust that Michelle means it, that this isn’t just lip service, and she will let Lucy handle this as long as she feels like she can. Lucy wishes sorely that she was enough of a witch to cast the spell in return, but she has to hope that Michelle can feel the essence of it, even without the fact. She murmurs one more thanks, and hangs up. Goes into the bathroom, washes her face and brushes her teeth, and then crosses the floor to climb into bed. She’s just gotten in, burrowing under the covers, when there’s an extremely unexpected knock on the door.

Lucy considers, then gets out of bed and crosses the cold stones, grimacing at the chill on her bare feet. Clearly, if you live around here as a warm-blooded mortal, you should invest in some good throw rugs. She pulls back the bolt and opens it a bare crack. “Yes?”

“It…” A pause, uncomfortable shuffling. “It’s just me, Lucy.”

Something about the clumsy, implied familiarity of that, the awkward attempt at comfort, wrenches at her much-wrought heart. She pulls it further, to behold Flynn standing in the dark stairwell and hunching his shoulders, apparently as much in an attempt to look non-threatening as to fit into the small dimensions of the tower. He is holding a plastic box, which he shoves at her. “I, ah, I went down to the village and looked until I found someone who was awake and willing to let me borrow their first-aid kit. For, uh, for your hand.”

Lucy takes it almost by reflex, too surprised to demur. Clearly he decided that he was not going to wait for the morning and send Cecilia to purchase it then, and she is once more left utterly uncertain about what, if anything, he actually feels about her. It’s not even that she’s fishing for evidence of romantic feelings, because that seems annoyingly juvenile, wanting the popular boy in school to have a crush on her, the wallflower. It’s not like she’s hideous, she gets her fair share of male attention (welcomed or otherwise, usually otherwise, because men are terrible). Plus, there are all the other very good reasons which argue against any closer attachment. But she just – she doesn’t know. Something about her changes around him, literally. She was able to control the witch-wind by hanging onto him. Her handwriting turned up on a manuscript fragment he’s had for literal centuries, and there was that reference to the wolf and the lion, his family crest. They’re connected somehow, that’s undeniable. It’s not unreasonable to hope that he has some kind of genuine emotion about her, of whatever sort. Unless vampires really are cold and heartless killers who toy with humans like cats and mice, but for better or worse, she doesn’t get that sense from Flynn. He cares, he cares deeply, he cares like he can’t do anything else. He’s just catastrophically bad at it.

They stare at each other for a loaded moment. There is something in the way their eyes meet, the way he turns his head and lowers his gaze, licking his lips nervously, that makes her wonder if he is as completely indifferent to her as he has been valiantly masquerading. This is not the time to find that out, and Lucy takes a step back, back into the safety of her room, away from whatever leap she might have been in danger of making. “I’ll just – thanks.”

“Ah. Yes.” Flynn raises a hand to the back of his neck, rubbing self-consciously. “Yes, of course. I hope it’s – well, I’m sure it’s been quite a – yes. Good night, Dr. Preston.”
With that, he practically warp-speeds out of sight up the tower steps, toward his own room on the floor above. Lucy withdraws into hers, shuts and bars the door again, and sits on the bed to tend to her hand. The burn’s not bad, but it is raw and painful, broken open from where it was starting to heal, and that feels like a slightly too on-point metaphor. She hopes that she will not be obliged to unlock any more magical texts at least for a few days, hisses where she touches the blistering, and applies antibiotic cream, before she winds it up in a gauze bandage. Then she takes a few ibuprofen to dull the throbbing, puts the kit away, turns out the lights, and gets properly into bed. She wants to sleep for a hundred years.

Lucy drops under quickly, but her rest is fitful and punctuated with unsettled, vivid dreams. She wakes up at some point in the dead of night absolutely, blood-chillingly convinced that her mother is in the room, is standing by the bed and looking down at her like the notorious white lady of a haunted manor, as if she might open her mouth in a voiceless scream and step through some sort of infernal doorway if Lucy does not heed to her. Lucy sits bolt upright, heart hammering against her ribs, but it is just the moonlight, the shifting shadows. The tormented revenant of Carol Preston has not wandered all the way here. Surely.

Still, it takes Lucy several minutes to lie back down, and she’s convinced that she can smell something, a faint trace of shampoo or perfume, that sparks some ancestral memory in her, a scent her mother used to wear. Perhaps she has. It’s All Hallows Eve, when the worlds of the living and dead are closest, when departed ancestors come to visit, benignly or otherwise. Lucy lives in a magical world and is temporarily resident in the house of immortals – ghosts and spirits and the very real possibility that her mother is trying to contact her from beyond the grave cannot be discounted. But what does she want? When Lucy was sixteen, Denise and Michelle gave her letters that Carol had written for her, and Lucy hoped they would allow her to feel more connected to her mother, to imagine them as cozy best friends who gossiped over coffee and got pedicures. The reality was… different. Carol’s wishes for Lucy tended to the strict and the high-achieving and the grandiose, whether in magic or in history, with a clear sense that she would be very disappointed if they weren’t precisely followed. At times when she was reading them, Lucy was almost perversely grateful that her mother was dead, that she didn’t have to deal with the domineering, difficult person that the flesh-and-blood woman seemed to be. Then she felt even guiltier.

“Mom?” Lucy whispers, just in case the phantasm is near and waiting to be called. She isn’t sure if she wants to conjure it or not. “Mom, are you there?”

Still no answer. The shadows are still. She looks around once more, but there’s nothing. For now. All Hallows Eve is only beginning.

Lucy closes her eyes. She smells the shampoo again. She isn’t sure she should open them. Whatever is going on, she is oddly sure that, no matter what, she is not alone.

Somehow, despite the strong possibility of lurking spooks, Lucy gets back to sleep, and manages to slumber relatively peacefully until dawn. She dozes intermittently until it is a somewhat more decent hour, though that may or may not apply around here. She gets up, tests Sept-Tours’ ancient plumbing to the utmost in running a hot shower, and scrubs until she feels somewhat less like a train wreck waiting to happen. Then she dries off, dresses, and pads downstairs, in an oversized sweater, socks, and leggings. It strikes her that this might be a somewhat too casual look, as if she’s already settled right in when she should stick to the distant formality of a not-entirely-welcome visitor. But she follows the scent of food out to the glass porch, though the chilly air makes her teeth chatter. The old place is clearly not insulated very well, not when its inhabitants don’t notice the cold. Over and over, in small ways and large, their true inhumanity is inescapable here.

Cecilia, for her part, has apparently just realized that, and Lucy almost collides with her coming the
other way, carrying the breakfast tray. “No, no,” the chatelaine says firmly. “You will eat inside today. To the dining room, vite.”

Lucy is about to ask if Maria is all right with her brunching in the main hall, but then again, they did manage to get through supper last night without any huge calamities. Not that this should be put repeatedly to the test, but she’s grateful not to freeze, and once more tucks into a delicious French breakfast. “Do you…” She tries to think how to ask this without being rude. “Do you have to feed humans often?”

“The family likes to eat mortal food upon occasion,” Cecilia points out. “For the taste and for the sociability, even if it does not nourish them. They hold formal dinners with their tenants on the old feast days, and they must try the soups and the breads that are brought up for them, to be polite. I am not sure if some of the old women of the village realize that the lords will not starve if they do not feed them. And Harry must eat human food as well, of course. So it is not unfamiliar.”

“It is lovely,” Lucy assures her, as if this nine-hundred-plus-year-old woman really cares about one witch’s opinion. She looks again at Cecilia’s elegant, fierce face, the greying golden hair pinned back over cheekbones that seem to have been carved by some medieval sculptor’s chisel to gaze severely down over the cathedral garth. She looks like a Valkyrie or an angel, something that does not merely come from immortal beauty and must be a legacy of her human bloodline. Lucy remembers Cecilia saying yesterday that she would not revere her vampire sire, Gerbert of Aurillac, in preference to her mortal father, and wonders suddenly who that was. Someone important, possibly, to continue to command her respect and loyalty so many centuries later. But that is definitely too personal, and while Cecilia has been relatively welcoming, her allegiances lie unquestioningly with the de Clermonts. Lucy represses an uncharitable suspicion that Maria has told Cecilia to be strategically kind to her, to see what she might let slip if she feels herself in friendly company. She indeed can’t get too comfortable here, slouchy sweaters or otherwise. It would be dangerous to forget.

Lucy finishes up, Cecilia clears the plates away, and Flynn appears a few minutes later, looking windswept and smelling of cold air in a way that hints he was out for a predawn jaunt of his own. “Are you – are you ready to go back to the library?”

“I think so.” Lucy sees his eyes flick to her wounded hand, as if he wants to ask how it is, then decides that that is a stupid question and she clearly isn’t dead, so there’s no point. She doesn’t know if she’s ready to confront what might be waiting today, after round one last night, but no point stalling, and she is curious. As she trails through the morning-cool halls after Flynn, she ventures, “Where’s the rest of the family?”

“Maman is… out.” The tone of Flynn’s voice leaves it unclear whether he’s going to tell her where. “Gabriel had to attend to some important business or other – he does not often stay very long in Sept-Tours – so he went somewhere closer to civilization. He’ll be back later too, I imagine.”

It is equally unclear if Flynn is hoping that his brother stays away longer, or indefinitely, and Lucy herself wouldn’t mind if Gabriel kept his distance; no matter if she confronted him yesterday, the oldest de Clermont does scare her. It would be foolish if he didn’t. Families are always difficult, and then you add in everything that this family has: wealth, power, centuries of history, the complicated, delicate dynamics of living and fighting together for so long and the losses they must have endured. At least ordinary families only have one lifetime of stupid shit they did, but the de Clermonts have an endless catalogue of it. How do you get over that? Just develop selective amnesia every few hundred years, so you don’t want to kill each other for that one bad argument in 1457? But it seems like more than that. Whatever is going on here, whatever unspoken current that Lucy can sense but not define, an anxiety about her presence that goes beyond the mere fact of her witchness, she can’t be sure. But it doesn’t seem like something that should be touched unwittingly, or broached lightly. Like an old
but still-armed grenade, that could go off at any moment and destroy everything.

They reach the library, palely aglow with frosted autumnal sunlight. It looks different by day than it did in the atmospheric firelit gloom of last night, more benevolent, and Lucy can almost believe that the sight of her own handwriting on an ancient piece of paper was nothing more than an uncanny coincidence or honest mistake. As Flynn is fetching down the book again, she says, “Happy Halloween. Though I’m guessing you don’t exactly get trick-or-treaters here.”

Flynn glances over his shoulder at her. “All Hallows,” he says, in apparent cryptic answer. “And no, not in the American sense of the word. Sometimes the children of the village will come a-soulin’. Things are… old here, still. Perhaps you can tell.”

“You’ve been here for centuries,” Lucy says. “You and your family. Their great-however-many grandfathers and grandmothers have known you, and you’ve known countless generations of them. Do humans ever just… blur together?”

Flynn almost drops the book, and has to bend with lightning-quick reflexes to catch it, snatching it out of the air before Lucy fully realizes that it had begun to fall. “Some,” he says, after a pause. “It’s impossible not to. Their lives are so short compared to ours. Others you… you never forget. It would be like forgetting how to breathe, or eat, or stand on your feet.”

Lucy notes with a certain poignancy that vampires don’t need to breathe, that what they eat is, to say the least, a specialized diet, and even if they do stand on their feet, they are capable of doing quite a few more things on them than a human. As Flynn carries the book to the table, another leaf falls out of it, and Lucy picks it up. It’s covered in ornate gothic script – not her own this time, thankfully – and as her scholar’s curiosity kicks in, she dimly recognizes the name across the top. “Gilles de Rais? Where do I know that from?”

Flynn looks startled. “What’s that?”

“It fell out of the book.” Lucy shows him. “Wait, I think I do know it. He was a fifteenth-century Marshal of France, wasn’t he? A close associate of Joan of Arc, during the last years of the Hundred Years War. Except he was arrested in 1440, nine years after she was burned at the stake. Accused and executed for crimes including black magic, necromancy, demonology, heresy, sodomy, and murder.”

Flynn looks impressed, though the case is relatively famous in early modern witchcraft studies. Except as far as Lucy has heard, Gilles de Rais was not an actual witch, not like her and her ancestors, but just an ordinary human determined to acquire supernatural powers by whatever horrifying methods necessary. She wonders why this leaf, looking as if it might be part of his trial records, is kept in this book. Maybe Flynn hides all his sensitive documents in one place. Or –

“Did you help stop him?” Lucy asks, before she thinks better of it. “Cecilia said that you and Gabriel killed Gerbert of Aurillac. Were you called in to deal with Gilles de Rais too?”

“Cecilia said what?” By Flynn’s tone, it’s clear that he didn’t know, and might not approve, of whatever sensitive bits of family history the chatelaine has been passing. “When?”

“Yesterday,” Lucy falters. “She didn’t – she just said that you and your brother had – that was why she came to work for the de Clermonts. I’m sorry, you – you don’t have to answer.”

“We did kill Gerbert, yes,” Flynn says, after a long pause. “Gabriel and I – we used to be close. Much closer than we are now. It’s not worth going into why. Anyway, Gerbert had become a threat to the human and creature worlds alike, and had conspired with Philip IV of France to destroy their
mutual enemies, the Templars. Philip was heavily in debt to them and Gerbert felt that they would exterminate the supernatural world, by which he meant himself and his own ambitions, if they were allowed to survive. Templars were known to be dedicated vampire hunters, so it was not an unfounded fear. Gerbert was very powerful by then. Gabriel and I were some of the few who were strong enough to tackle him, and the fight still nearly killed both of us. And yes, the next century, we were asked to intervene again with Gilles de Rais. We refused.”

Lucy wasn’t expecting Flynn to be so forthcoming, though he is yet again managing to avoid looking at her once. “He was a nasty piece of work,” she says. “As far as I remember. Wasn’t he the inspiration for Bluebeard, by Charles Perrault? But he was human. He wouldn’t have been able to resist you, surely?”

“No.” Flynn glances up at the windows. “And that was why we couldn’t do it. Gilles did practice black magic, offered up the butchered body parts of children to secure the services of demons, was rumored to rape the corpses of his victims – and, most shockingly, especially the male ones. A self-confessed serial killer and violent pedophile. It was a terrible scandal for France, they went to great lengths to keep it quiet. That a war hero and a companion of the martyred Maid of Orleans could have engaged in such terrible things, while he was marching into battle with a holy flag and a blessing to destroy the English barbarians. They only tried him in the provincial courts of Nantes, never took him to Paris. But beforehand, word was sent to the de Clermonts, discreetly, that we should simply make him disappear, and to make everyone forget that such a thing had ever happened.”

“So why didn’t you?” Lucy knows it’s pushing her luck, but she can’t help wanting more. “You stopped Gerbert, so why not Gilles?”

“We could not.” Flynn turns, almost inadvertently, and meets her eyes for the first time. “Gerbert was a vampire, and therefore our business, a fair fight. Gilles, however sick and horrible, was still a human, and my father held very strongly that we would be establishing an extremely dangerous precedent. Making ourselves arbitrators and overlords over humans, usurping the right to solve their problems, serving as the courts of their justice, or merely the blunt instrument of it – it could only end terribly. That was why we could never turn anyone in a position of power, no matter how close to them we were. Humans die, pass away, change their minds, evolve, live, grow. You cannot have one immortal ruling over an endlessly changing mortal world for hundreds of years. It is unfair as keeping a shark among seals.”

Lucy looks at him in even more surprise. She wouldn’t have guessed that Flynn had this impassioned legal oratory in him, this disquisition on the morality of power between the living and the undead. At that, she thinks of something. “Richard,” she says. “Richard the Lionheart. You said that you served with him as long as he was alive. And I’m guessing that he knew you were a vampire, and wanted you to make him into one.”

Flynn looks extremely startled. “What – how did you – ?”

“Just a hunch.” Lucy leans against the table. “He was brutally pragmatic, he was clever and fearless and known for every advantage in warfare, and being immortal and indestructible probably sounded like an awesome deal for him. You said that you never met William the Conqueror, in case he asked you to turn him, and that wasn’t fair to everyone else. So Richard asked to be made into a vampire, and you – you refused him. Didn’t you.”

Flynn’s expression turns even more alarmed, as if she never told him that she could read minds. Finally he says, “Yes. Richard asked for the gift, many times. He requested that I turn both himself and his – companion, Andrew de Chauvigny. He wanted to live forever and I clearly had a way to
do it, so why was I being so unfaithful as to refuse? I was a great warrior, I could not be hurt by mortal instruments, and he wanted that. But I didn’t. I loved him. I loved him until the day he died, and yet I did have to let him die, had to watch him die, in a slow and agonizing and horrible way, because I could not go against my father’s word and turn a king who could rule for centuries over humans. If Richard had been someone else, if he had been an ordinary man, I could have done it, perhaps. But he was never ordinary, he was a king, and so I had to lose him.”

Lucy opens her mouth, then shuts it. She can hear the rawness in Flynn’s voice that warns her she should stop picking at this scab, but it makes her suddenly understand why he keeps this dirty old parchment in the book, alongside the mysterious extract of Ashmole 782. He has to hold the memory of Gilles de Rais in mind, to remember what he can interfere in and what he cannot, that in searching to uncover the secrets of the creature world, there is the potential for serious harm to humans, which cannot be transgressed without grave consequences. She’s heard enough to know that Flynn has a dark past, that he’s acted plenty of times without thinking about said consequences, and she suspects that he has many things he would rather forget, or wishes bitterly that he had never done at all. She has been both fascinated by and wary of him this whole time, the way she can almost fully trust him but not quite, but this is the first thing to make her feel on some soul-deep level that she can. That he knows the cost of what he has done, and what is still before him to do, and he has enough old sins that he would prefer not to add more. And he knows that this principle was the center of everything the de Clermont family stood for and believed in, that Asher let himself be tortured to death rather than give in and turn Adolf Hitler for all the money and fame in the world – and for an immortal that old and powerful, it must have been truly unspeakable torture. Now Flynn is the one left with that legacy, and that damage. It moves Lucy in some unspeakable and huge and terrifying and tender way. At that moment, she physically feels herself fall, just a little, in love with him, and that is the most terrifying of all.

“Was there – ” It’s absurd, she has no right, but by this point, one more grossly and outrageously personal question is almost academic. She hates that she is invested in the answer, but she is. “Was there ever someone you – you were willing to break that rule for?”

“Yes.” Flynn’s voice is so quiet that even if Lucy had vampire senses herself, she would struggle to hear it. “One.”

Lucy struggles to quash the brief, unpleasant clench of jealousy that twists her gut. The pause that towers between them is pregnant with God, divine and terrible. When people see angels, they can only remember holy dread, something too shocking for mortal ken, and this isn’t that, exactly, but it’s somehow close. Lucy wonders suddenly if Flynn is Catholic – well, he almost surely is, after centuries of living in France and having fought in the crusades. The sixth-century Ragusa of his birth would have been pagan, since the Slavs and the Balkans didn’t convert until relatively late, but he most likely did so in his human life after moving to Frankish Gaul, which the Merovingians had just finished Christianizing. Or is he still anything now? Can you have faith as one of the undead, when you spit in God’s face, when a crucifix and the sign of the cross and holy ground, holy water, are the things long rumored to drive you away? Or do you know yourself damned, and do not care, because you have already lived a private hell for centuries, and there can be nothing worse?

“Well,” Lucy says. She is achingly aware that this is dangerous, that the moment has gotten far too soft, and that in some way, it’s almost worse to know that Flynn can care, that he cares so much. When she believed that he was in fact an unfeeling monster, at least she never had to deal with the sting of false hope. Now she knows that he can feel, he does love, but he does not – well, again, as much as she hates thinking of it this way, he does not love her. Which is entirely for the best, so at least one of them won’t be tempted to do something stupid. She’s had crushes on handsome, competent, safely unavailable older men before, notably her favorite professor in her master’s degree, and they’ve gone away, so this will too. Even if it feels like a fishhook in her heart, like it might
never fully come out, as if there are some people who, once you have let them in even a bit, stay there forever. “We were going to...?”

“Yes. Ashmole 782.” Flynn shakes himself, and thrusts the Gilles de Rais leaf roughly into the book, breaking the spell. He pulls out the one they were working on last night, scanning through it as if to remember at which of the baffling mysteries they left off. “Yes,” he says again, tone determinedly businesslike. “Did we ever work out what the names were about?”

“It said that when the time came, we would have them.” Lucy doesn’t know what that’s about, and it leaves her with an unsettled feeling in the pit of her stomach. “But I didn’t recognize any of them, aside from Agnes. Did you?”

“No.” Flynn scowls down at the paper, as if mentally chastising it for not being more helpful. “The alchemical wedding, though. That sounds familiar, why?”

“It’s a pretty common motif in these kinds of manuscripts.” Lucy moves up next to him, aware of his height and presence, the way he doesn’t quite give off warmth. “It was also known as the Chemical Wedding, or the Sacred Marriage, and alchemists saw it as the highest goal of their work. There’s a German book from 1616 – The Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz – that lays out most of it. There are seven keys and seven days and influence from the Kabbalah, it’s an allegorical romance where he has to assist in the royal wedding of the king and queen. When the Great Work has been completed, two are made into one, soul is joined with body, lesser things have been made greater. Alchemy is usually set up in pairs of two. Gold and silver, sun and moon, earth and water, body and spirit. The goal is to marry them harmoniously, to produce new substance and understanding. The Chymical Wedding was supposedly one of the foundational texts of the Rosicrucians.”

Flynn snorts, but doesn’t say more, unfortunately precluding her from what is doubtless a very entertaining rant on the Rosicrucians. “So,” he says. “The alchemical wedding is just the stock metaphor for what alchemy wanted to achieve. Couldn’t narrow it down a bit?”

“The two elements, whatever the alchemists wanted to join together, were often represented as the red king and the white queen. There’s a quote from the Rosary of the Philosophers to that effect.” Lucy squints, trying to remember. “Something like, when the white woman has been married to the red man, they will become one, they will perfect each other: from the two bodies they were before, they will become one single body that is susceptible for perfection. It was called coniunctio, conjunction, coitus. The Aurora consurgens has a lot of explicitly sexual illustrations depicting this union, some of which were defaced by later disapproving copyists because of it. It was often incestuous, forbidden, taboo by its very nature, unless you had the key to the secret knowledge, and –”

At that, she becomes aware that Flynn is staring at her with an expression akin to a clubbed ox, and shuts her mouth with a snap, cheeks burning. Apparently all this talk of sex is rather horrifying to an ass-old vampire who doesn’t seem to get out much, and Lucy struggles not to ask if his morals might also date from the sixth century. “I see,” he says, after another too-long pause. “But that doesn’t help us much as to what it means here. It just says that it makes the bridge, but if what you’re saying is true, that’s what it’s supposed to do in any context. Bring two things together, transform them into new substance. What things?”

“I’m not sure.” Lucy looks down at the page, also willing it to make just a little more sense. “And beneath the wolf and lion lies the ring. The wolf and the lion is your family crest. Is there a special ring in your family, something that might be stored somewhere secret? Rings were often objects of great power to Renaissance magicians, places where they stored their power, used as talismans. I’ve seen Gabriel wearing one. Do you have one like that?”
Flynn looks down at her with the startled expression he seems to be wearing more and more often. “That’s our signet ring,” he says. “But unless Gabriel is Sauron – well, he might be, I’ve never asked – it doesn’t have any special powers. Most old aristocratic families have one. I have one somewhere, yes, but I don’t wear it anymore.”

Lucy glances at him under her eyelashes, wondering if there’s a particular reason, a moment in time, when Flynn took it off, when he no longer wanted to be known as a de Clermont, or felt that he did not deserve the name. “Should we get it, just in case?”

“If you want.” He looks away from her, yet again. “It won’t do anything, though.”

With that, he turns rather sharply and leaves the library, leaving Lucy waiting for several minutes until he returns, with a golden signet identical to Gabriel’s. They press it to the page, and rub it on the words, and otherwise see if there’s any other omega or hidden message that might be activated, but Flynn is right. Nothing happens. “Told you,” he says. “Well, that’s the end of all the clues we get. Anything else?”

“No.” Lucy struggles not to feel that their grand breakthrough has sputtered to a rather pitiful halt. They’ve dug up a ton of new material, but getting it to make any sense might take another hundred and fifty years, and she, at least, will not be around that long. It’s very strange to think that Flynn might live as far into the future as he has into the past, that he might be still around when it all ends, the curtain comes down (which seems like it might be sooner rather than later, at the rate humanity is going). Or will he live even longer, eons and eons, until the heat death of the universe, the last stars going out? It doesn’t seem possible that one organic vessel can survive that long, immortal or otherwise. All things break down, decay, pass away. She wants to ask him if vampires have ever died of simple old age, and what that age was, but she has definitely done enough.

There’s another long pause as Flynn considers the page, frowning still more deeply. Then he looks up and demands of her, “Can you timewalk?”

“What?” Lucy stares at him. “Can I what?”

“Timewalk,” Flynn repeats. “It’s an extremely rare skill, and I haven’t heard of it for a very long time, but if you could, it might – I’m not saying it does, but it might – explain some of this. If you were in the past, if you wrote this, then – ”

“Are you suggesting that I – ” Lucy feels the need to sit down, which she does rather abruptly in a handsome studded-leather chair. “Are you suggesting that I traveled to the sixteenth century and wrote this? I can’t timewalk. I can barely light a candle with magic.”

“But you can conjure witch-wind,” Flynn points out. “That’s another rare skill, at least in this day and age. It used to be much more common, but it’s also died out. We’ve already established that your magic does unpredictable things when you’re under threat, that you have powers you might not be aware of. Is this all that different?”

“Yes,” Lucy says, a little hysterically. “Yes, it’s different.”

Flynn shrugs, as if to say that he doesn’t see it, and resumes his glowering perusal of the page. Lucy, meanwhile, is fighting the urge to put her head between her knees for any number of reasons, as she reminds herself sternly that under no circumstances is she going to swoon into a quivering heap, thank you very much. Instinctively summoning up a gale to defend herself against Cahill and Emma is one thing, and it could probably be managed by any witch put under a sufficient amount of pressure. Deliberately, consciously traveling almost five hundred years into the past and writing this and whatever else Flynn seems to be suggesting that she might be responsible for – no. Obviously.
She hasn’t done it, so she didn’t. Yet there’s a small voice in her head whispering that she might not have done it yet, and the idea of what might be ahead, what is waiting out there, is almost blindingly terrifying.

Ignoring her distress, as usual, Flynn is now deeply absorbed in an old book about alchemical illuminations, until Lucy thinks crossly that she should go ahead and faint just to see if he noticed. She valiantly overcomes this petty impulse, however, and straightens up. “Is there any other explanation you can think of?”

“For why you appear to have written it?” Flynn raises an eyebrow. “I suppose someone could have kidnapped you and forced you to do it, though I don’t know why it would be that old.”

Great. His explanations get less comforting all the time. Lucy decides she probably doesn’t want to hear what the rest of his theories might be. “I don’t suppose you happen to have any original alchemical manuscripts here? Since you seem to be a connoisseur?”

“You’re the expert, Lucy, not me.” He doesn’t look up from the book, until Lucy experiences an overpowering urge to rip it out of his hands and smack him upside the unbelievably obstinate noggin with it. Nor does she buy it when he underplays his knowledge like this, even if she is a goddamn expert, thank you very much. Flynn has never questioned her authority on it, or acted as if he automatically knows more on her subject by virtue of being a (much) older man, and Lucy does appreciate that. He just – why must he – why is he –

They work steadily for several more hours, although it’s debatable how much more they get done. They check through all of the books that Sept-Tours does have on the subject, and Flynn unearths his archived notes, with several hundred years’ worth of research. It gives Lucy a turn to see an original letter from Charles Darwin among them, part of a larger correspondence between him and Flynn on the subject of Origins, and she forgets some of her annoyance as she reads in fascination. This, at least, is proof of Flynn’s claim that he’s been looking for the answers for longer than Lucy has been alive, and there are notes to a few other manuscripts in Oxford’s collection – Ashmole 1416 and 1487, as well as Bodley 951 and Corpus Christi 221. At that, Lucy thinks suddenly that Jessica is at Corpus Christi – was? She hasn’t heard hide nor hair of her friend since this whole mess started, and yet, with the possibility that Jessica sold her out to the Congregation willingly or otherwise, it would be unwise to make contact. Besides, Flynn said something about Jessica and his brother Wyatt, and the last thing she needs is to lay another landmine for the de Clermonts.

Interesting as this descent into scholarly arcana is, however, it still does not produce many more tangible answers. They leave off around five o’clock, as darkness has fallen and Lucy’s stomach is croaking with hunger, her eyes sore and her neck strained. When they trudge out of the library and into the main house, they discover that Gabriel, Maria, and Harry (Houdini, which admittedly delights Lucy) have all returned. The former two greet Lucy with cool politeness, the latter with effusive warmth. Gabriel asks what they have discovered, and when Lucy starts to answer, Flynn cuts in sharply and says it wasn’t much.

Lucy eyes him, as while this is unfortunately true for the second half of the day, they definitely did find something beforehand. But it’s clear that Flynn would prefer to keep that under wraps for the minute, even from his own family, and that getting into the possibility of timewalking and secret messages and chemical weddings and whatever else is a little too far off the ranch. Cecilia offers to prepare dinner, and while this is under way, Flynn says in an undertone, “Let’s take a walk.”

Lucy eyes him even more at that, since it’s chilly and dark outside and on All Hallows Eve, there might be other things waiting. But Flynn is insistent, and she gets her jacket and shoes and crunches after him into the star-flecked night. The air stings Lucy’s cheeks, her breath puffs silver, and blown
on the wind, she can faintly hear what sounds like the Sept-Tours village Halloween party. Flynn strides ahead of her, each step about twice as long as hers, and she has to jog to keep up. Once they have reached what he judges apparently a safe distance from the main house, she says, “What the hell is this about? It’s freezing.”

“I just – ” Flynn reflexively checks over his shoulder. “I just don’t want to tell Gabriel what we’ve discovered yet. I wasn’t planning on him being here, and he wouldn’t be if Maman hadn’t decided to – well, never mind. He can be – anyway.”

“Finish a sentence, would you?” Lucy has tried to be patient, but that is running low. The half-answers, the evasions, the abrupt conversational shutdowns – or, conversely, blunt-force dumps of truth. He never seems to guess how to get it right, and if he wants to talk out here in private, she trusts he has a damn good reason for it. “Why shouldn’t we tell Gabriel?”

“He’s – ” Flynn stops. “Fine,” he says. “Gabriel is the grandmaster of the Knights of Lazarus, after our father died, and after what we discovered in that fragment, I’m not sure they should know immediately. They could very well be looking for Ashmole 782 too, or have had something to do with why it had to be hidden, or – there are any number of possibilities. Once, I would have trusted that Gabriel would take my side over the rest of the Order, no matter what. Now, I – ”

He doesn’t finish that sentence, as Lucy thinks of him wondering last night if his father ever told him everything, or if that withholding of information might have been passed onto Gabriel at Asher’s death. It’s clear that there is a lot wrong between the de Clermont brothers, like a bone that was broken badly and never healed properly, and she wants to tell them to just suck it up and make up, damn it, but she knows that will never work. They are men, for a start, and spectacularly stubborn ones, for another. “What exactly are the Knights of Lazarus? What do they do? Or can’t you tell me that?”

“It’s a secret order of knighthood for vampires,” Flynn says reluctantly. “Lazarus – obviously, Lazarus died and was brought back to life, the way all of us have been. I can’t really say more, but their – our – role is complicated. Gabriel and I were asked to take down Gerbert of Aurillac in our capacity as brothers of the Order, maybe you can infer from there. But – ”

Whether or not Flynn was going to tell her more, Lucy doesn’t find out. That is because at that moment, a blur bombs out of the night, hits him full-on, and tackles him off the narrow catwalk. One moment he’s standing next to her, and the next he isn’t. She’s only aware of an almighty struggle going on below her, somewhere in the old moat, piled with fallen leaves. It’s a plunge of a good fifteen or twenty feet off the walls, and she briefly forgets that he’s immortal as she rushes to the edge in horror. “Flynn? Flynn! Garcia! Garcia, are you – ?”

Flynn doesn’t answer, if only because he’s currently engaged in fighting something – someone – on the ground below. Lucy is convinced that it must be Cahill or Emma, that they have tracked the two of them to Sept-Tours and dared to trespass onto vampire ground, even as Flynn was convinced they wouldn’t. Lucy tries to follow what’s going on, but it’s dark, the combat is nothing more than blurs, and here and there, she hears a masculine-sounding grunt. It doesn’t seem like Cahill was that great at this kind of fighting – the manipulation and political intrigue and so on, yes, but not full-speed throwdowns. What the hell – ?

The fight continues, until Lucy can just make out two struggling, entangled figures. One of them is Flynn, and the other is a man almost as large, who has to be a creature of some sort if he was able to take on a vampire even for this long – but just then, she feels something familiar, like a half-heard music, and knows it’s another witch. Oh no. Oh God, this is very bad. If she’s attracting them here, if they descend in swarms –
Flynn rabbit-punches his attacker very hard, they kick and wrestle in an undignified fashion for another few moments, and then Flynn finally gets the upper hand and slams his assailant down flat. In the light from the main house, as she leans dangerously far over the edge, Lucy can see that his eyes are fully black, his fangs bared. “Who are you?”

The man currently at a disadvantage beneath a large and furious de Clermont looks, at least, as if he isn’t a total stranger to this sort of situation. He’s a witch, Lucy can sense that, and a well-built, brawny blond who looks like a wrestler. He spits, makes a move as if to get up, decides that this would be a bad idea, and then, over Flynn’s shoulder, he looks up and sees Lucy gawping in horror over the wallwalks. He attempts a friendly wave. “Do not worry,” he calls, in a thick Russian accent. “I am HERE NOW. I rescue you, when I am done with IDIOT.”

“Who are y – ” Lucy has never seen him before in her life, but he seems to know her. One also has to admire his optimism, though he has definitely missed the memo that she doesn’t need rescuing. (Maybe.) “Garcia, let go of him, wh – ?”

Flynn does not let go, though he does loosen his grip enough not to imminently strangle him. “What the hell are you doing?” he snarls. “Why are you on our land? Who sent you?”

“Name is GENNADY SOKOLOV.” The Russian witch stares him down. “Attacked you because you are HOLDING LADY PRISONER. And otherwise acting like FOOL. So yes. You will give me lady, vampire. Come now, Lucy. You are safe. Is TIME TO GO.”

“No.” Flynn grins, almost ferally. Pulls back a fist, and with one swift and surgically efficient blow, knocks Sokolov senseless. “I’m very much afraid it isn’t.”
Still miss everyone, Tumblr is still a butt, still holding onto some hope to return to the people soon-ish. If not (let us not think of that) I won't really have time or emotional effort until at least Easter break to start a new one, and I obviously do not want to do that. But once again, let us Think Positive. I appreciate the comments/waves/saying of hello. Consider me waving back to you from afar.

At least Garcia Flynn is still an utter disaster. It's nice to know that some things never change.

“This is outrageous.” Gabriel’s shadowed profile in the firelight cuts as sharply as a knife, his magnificent face set cold as stone in bitter disapproval. “A witch attacking a de Clermont on our land, on our very house, and thinking he has some right, as if he had any – no. It cannot be countenanced.”

“I thought the same.” Flynn is briefly heartened that his brother appears to be taking his side on this, but he recognizes that lashing, furious prowl all too well. There is more of this tirade coming, and he should brace himself for when it does. “I subdued him – he wouldn’t stop insisting that he was here to get Lucy – and I’ve thrown him into the old cells. But if we can’t figure out who sent him, or what he thinks he’s –”

“Of course we can figure out who sent him!” Gabriel whirls around fast enough that even Flynn takes a step back. “How could this possibly be a surprise, Garcia? You kidnapped a witch, to all appearances a brazen affront, and took her to a place where their kind have no reason to believe she would be safe! We’re lucky it was one gallant Russian nincompoop, and not an entire army! And you said his name was Gennady Sokolov? There’s an Anton Sokolov on the Congregation, holds one of the witch seats. This must be some relation of his. Which means you have just assaulted a Congregation representative sent to carry out their decision to take the fucking witch to Venice, and that makes us look even worse!”

Flynn takes that like a blow to the chest. He also feels a prickle of anger at Gabriel referring to Lucy in such a disrespectful fashion, but he doesn’t think that this is the time to pick more of a fight. “What happened to the part where you just said it was outrageous for a witch to attack me in Sept-Tours itself? He trespassed on vampire territory, he –”

“He may have.” Gabriel’s fist clenches around the carved edge of the mantelpiece until a chunk of it breaks off. He tosses it into the fire with a disgusted snort. “And I stand by my belief that it was an unforgivable insolence. But can’t you see how bad this looks? Now that you’ve gone and thrown him into the bloody dungeons –”

“What was I supposed to do? He attacked me, and he wanted to take Lucy! I should have – what, offered him bed and breakfast?” Flynn can’t keep the snarl out of his voice. “Or perhaps I should have –”

“Perhaps you should have let him take Lucy.” Gabriel turns on him, slit-eyed. “I presume she would have been safe enough with him, and it would be an easy way to demonstrate that she, according to
you, came here of her own free will and was able to leave just the same! But you and your ridiculous obsession with Ashmole 782, and – we warned you this would happen, Garcia! Maman and I both told you that bringing the witch here could provoke exactly this! Now it’ll be a miracle if we’re not under some kind of sanction by morning, or worse!”

“Or maybe Wyatt should be useful for once in his life!” Flynn snaps. “What’s he doing in Venice, playing tiddlywinks? If the Congregation did send this Sokolov, why didn’t he warn us ahead of time? Was it supposed to be some kind of stern lesson about – ”

“I doubt Wyatt knew,” Gabriel says icily. “This could have been arranged privately between the witches without any reference to all the vampires, and most likely was. Why would they be so stupid as to let a de Clermont learn about a secret rescue plan in advance and thus allow us to thwart it? And Wyatt is far from the biggest idiot in this family right now, Garcia, so why don’t you consider that?”

“Enough!” Until now, Maria de Clermont has been sitting in a chair without speaking, white-faced, but at that, she rises with preternatural speed to her feet. Both of her sons are much taller than she is, but they shut their mouths rather abruptly and take a step back. “Savaging each other does not help us! We may trade blame until Judgment Day, or you two may act like brothers, however little you have seemed to remember it lately, and decide what is to be done. Where is the witch, Garcia? In the cells? You have made this mess, so you will go down and oblige him to talk. If he does not, you will obtain the information as the necessity presents itself. Gabriel, you must make sure that we and Sept-Tours are safe. I will attempt to contact William in Venice and see what can be understood of this. Until then, the witch does not leave our custody. Do you suppose that can be managed?”

Both Gabriel and Garcia flinch at that, for different reasons. They glare at each other over their mother’s head, but they cannot come up with immediate objections, and a mutinous silence falls over the solar. One beat passes, two beats, three, and then Flynn says, “You want me to torture him, Maman? Is that what you are asking for?”

“I said nothing so indecorous.” Maria’s fine lips are grim as granite. “But by feeding, you might acquire his recent memories, yes? And perhaps it would restore some sense to you.”

Flynn turns away, rubbing his mouth. It’s true that when a vampire feeds on a person, they can often see or experience their memories, draw them in with their essence and their blood, and if he did that to Gennady Sokolov, it would certainly be the quickest way to learn how he came here. Then again, the witch might be prepared for that, have expected it as a potential consequence of going after vampires, and cast a magical shield over his mind. In that case, Flynn can still probably get in, but it will be messy, and it will take a lot longer. He is prepared to do it if he has to, but it gives him a slightly nauseous feeling. It is something that he would have once carried out without scruple, but Asher de Clermont’s brutal death made Flynn deeply question his habitual and instinctive recourse to violence, made him never want to do it again if possible, shaken him to the core. In contrast, it seemed to push Gabriel in the other direction, made him more willing to play rough, not less. And it was hardly as if Gabriel was known for pulling his punches before.

An uncomfortable, unnatural hush lingers in the room, except for the ominous crackling of the fire. All Hallows Eve, Flynn thinks. Never a night known to pass sedately, and he can unfortunately see his mother and brother’s point that he in some sense has invited this down on them, that if they don’t handle this very carefully, it could be all-out war by morning. Which is why he wants to get the information out of Gennady Sokolov without bloodshed, of whatever sort, but he doesn’t know if that will be possible. Part of him doesn’t want Lucy to see him torturing a witch, as if that might confirm all her worst suspicions. Maybe he should ask her if she wants to go with this idiot, but –
“Very well,” Gabriel says. His voice is clipped and very cold. “I will ensure that no other interlopers are lurking on our lands or preparing to threaten our family. Can I trust that you will do your part, Garcia, or is this something else the witch has made you forget? I can no longer be sure.”

Flynn bites his tongue on a response he might not be able to take back, about how Gabriel isn’t the only one wondering if his brother is still somebody to count on. The moment feels dangerously fragile, as if one more fight might permanently do them in, and Gabriel backed down from Lucy earlier rather than go after Flynn, but that was before he might have started World War Three. Flynn says, “If I go down to the cells to interrogate Sokolov, then Lucy – ”

“Cecilia will stay with her,” Maria interrupts coolly. “I already said that we will not yield her up without proper explanation and full assurances of protocol. If the Congregation wants her, they may apply for her in some way other than sending someone to snatch her from our property in the dead of night. Does she know this Sokolov?”

“I don’t think so.” Flynn wants to inform his mother that there are no imaginable circumstances in which Lucy is leaving, in which he would hand her over to anyone no matter what empty promises they gave, but as before, the bear does not need more poking. “He seems to be under the impression that he knows her.”

Maria’s mouth turns even more sour, and she turns away, muttering in Greek under her breath. That is not a good sign; the de Clermonts have been speaking in Old French, which is essentially their shared native language, but when Maria is cursing in Greek, matters are very bad. After another fraught pause, Maria says, “If only your father was here – ”

“But he is not, is he?” It explodes out of Gabriel with the force of a mortar round, indiscriminate and deadly. Some people take up the space around them, charge it, own it, but Gabriel de Clermont eviscerates it, smashes it into abject submission. The very force of gravity seems to reshape itself around him. “He is not, Maman, and we both know why. We also know why my son is not here! Am I supposed to sit back and let the rest of our family be picked off, one by one? Do you think that is what Papa would have wanted for us? I for one do not. And if Garcia is going to once more subject us to the consequences of his – ”

“I did not kill Papa!” Flynn snarls back. “Not even you could possibly blame that on me, and since we’re apparently pretending you’ve never done anything wrong – ”

Gabriel stares him down, with a frozen, immaculate mask barely recognizable as a living creature. Jiya asked once if Gabriel had ever had a proper good time in his life, and Flynn was sorely tempted to tell her about the several centuries that the two of them spent as knights, fighting on the various battlefields of medieval Europe under a succession of ambitious and bellicose princes, dukes, and kings. Sometimes it was for a secret purpose of the Order of Lazarus, sometimes just because they were damned good at it and enjoyed it thoroughly, and every law of the world told them that violence was their right and provenance. Gabriel took full advantage of everything that life offered, enjoyed an attractive lover (or several) and a goblet of strong wine afterward, riotous revelry and total disregard of any scandalized cleric that happened along. For his part, Garcia was usually too stiff and awkward and solitary to join in, no matter much how Gabriel cajoled him, and had to periodically rescue his older brother from the more outrageous of his entanglements. The libertine, laughing playboy is literally several dozen lifetimes removed from the wealthy, successful, important, serious businessman that he now presents himself as. Jiya has never known him as anything else. After 1762, Gabriel has rarely even smiled very much.

“I have certainly done wrong, yes,” Gabriel says, after another moment. “But I don’t recall that it is my sins which are the greatest issue here. In fact, you might want to hope that I’m willing to commit
a few more, if the need comes to it. I had to destroy the grotesquerie of your last folly, Garcia, so it might be the least I can – ”

At that, Flynn doesn’t know what it is exactly, but he feels something snap inside him, something he can’t control or take back. A torrent of white-hot rage rises in his chest like a tidal wave, and the next instant, he has vaulted several pieces of furniture in a single bound, hits Gabriel broadside, and the two of them go somersaulting across the solar floor. If they were at their twelfth-century warrior peak, this would be a bloodbath, but both of them are out of practice, living their settled, respectable, professional lives, and it’s faintly pathetic, like a pair of middle-aged businessmen pounding on each other in an attempt to recapture their frat-boy glory days. But nothing can be trifling or incidental when two very strong and very powerful vampires are seriously going at it, and Flynn is only aware of an overpowering need to tear all four of Gabriel’s limbs off his body and burn them at the crossroads. His entire skeleton shudders under the force of one of Gabriel’s blows, he bites his tongue, and tastes his own blood, cool and old and slow like quicksilver. They roll around a moment or a minute or a century longer, who knows, pummeling blindly – until they’re hit with a soaking, frigid blast, and break apart, spluttering.

“I SAID, ENOUGH!” Maria de Clermont looks transcendentally furious. She’s standing next to Cecilia, who has thrown a bucket of freezing water on them, and both women wear expressions of bitter disapproval. Indeed, Maria looks as if her next move might be to grab a stake and put herself out of the misery of parenthood. “How dare – Gabriel, how dare you say that to him. Garcia, how dare you attack your brother to boot, after what we have already – ”

Flynn lies flat on his back on the wet stone floor, chewing his lacerated tongue rather than respond. Gabriel appears equally determined to die in silence, then finally rolls over and rises to his feet. “I regret that scene, Maman,” he says, coldly correct. “You did not deserve it. But I will not apologize for promising to protect this family. One of us should.”

He pulls his dripping jacket straight, and offers half a nod to Cecilia, who stares back at him unflinching. She steps over and offers a hand to Flynn, but he ignores it and gets up by himself. Gabriel has started to leave, but Maria grabs him by the arm. “Both of you. You will abjure this disgraceful behavior and remember your kinship. If we destroy each other first, does that not make our enemies’ task that much simpler?”

Gabriel and Garcia stare at each other in clear wish that the other would abruptly drop dead. Neither makes any move whatsoever to speak first, and Maria utters a sound of total despair. “How long?” she asks. “How long must it be? Two hundred and fifty-five years, and still the ones you punish most are yourselves. It cannot be undone, all of us would give anything to take it back, but will you live the rest of eternity without ever – ”

“You tell me, Maman.” Gabriel glances at her with an expression of studied, mild interest. “When do you expect to forgive the witches for Papa’s death? That is when I expect to forgive Garcia for Christian’s.”

With that, he jerks free of his mother’s grip, flashing out the door and rumbling down the corridor like a juggernaut. Flynn experiences a horrible, paralyzing fear that he will run into Lucy out there, that he will forget his promise – Gabriel implicitly threatened her earlier, that was the reason Flynn lost control and attacked him – and feels as if his heart has been ripped afresh from his body. He leans against the wall, trying to steady himself, but it’s no use. To hear Gabriel state so clearly that he will never forgive him – Flynn knew that, doesn’t deserve it, still remembers the feeling of seeing Iris’s little body, and the delirium of rage and agony that came over him and made him a monster for the first time. He has never entirely forgiven those men, anonymous sixth-century bandits on the road, for taking his daughter away from him. He is the reason his own brother lost his son, inflicted
that pain on his closest family in turn. He did not kill Christian with his own hand, but he might have.

“Garcia.” Maria reaches for him, her face a mask of pain and guilt. She called Gabriel here in an attempt to manage the situation, after all, and now she has only made it worse, driven a wedge between her two eldest sons that seems impossible to ever pull out. “Garcia, sweetheart. You must believe me, I did not intend – ”

“No?” Flynn speaks hoarsely, still tasting the trickle of blood in his cut mouth. “What did you want, Maman? You made it very clear that you would go to any lengths to prevent me from bringing a witch here, and look, you have succeeded. Since there was nothing more terrible than that you have to see one, apparently, so who is at fault for this? You did not need to summon Gabriel here. You did not need to demonstrate, yet again, that you trust him more than me and that even my private decisions are subject to his approval. I have done wrong, I have never said any differently. We can be content that I will always pay the price for it.”

Maria reaches for him again, even Cecilia looks as if she wants to say something, but Flynn bowls past them, out into the darkness of the hall. He can’t take another instant of his godforsaken family’s company, is driven by a desperate need to make sure that Gabriel and Lucy did not cross paths, and slumps against the stones. Jesus, this is a disaster. He should have listened to Jiya, should never have come anywhere near Sept-Tours, or at least stashed Lucy somewhere safely far distant and returned only to collect his research and the Ashmole 782 fragment. None of this had to happen. Gabriel is right about that. But if Flynn was the foolish one for thinking that their old grievances and grudges could ever be overcome, that he was ever more important to them than what he had destroyed –

“Garcia?”

His eyes flash open, he springs off the wall as if it might electrocute him, and spins around to see a worried-looking Lucy standing a few feet away. It’s impossible for her not to have overheard the mayhem, and she does not look as if she has had any inopportune encounters with his brother, but his anxiety still spikes through the roof at seeing her there, alone and undefended. “What the hell are you doing?” he says. “Stay in your room.”

“I just – ” Lucy does not need to explain why she’s concerned. He knows damn well why. “It sounded like something was going on – there was a lot of shouting and crashing, and I just – wanted to know if you were all right.”

Flynn fights the strong desire to turn into smoke and vanish through a crack in the flagstones. Vampires can’t actually transform into it, or into bats, though the nature of their matter is not the same as mortals and can possibly be rearranged if necessary. “I’m fine.”

He expects that this completely convincing lie will be enough to chase her back up the stairs to the safety of his tower, but to his consternation, it is not. She looks at him like someone who has spent enough time uttering this platitude to know that if it must be insisted upon this much, the truth is usually the opposite. “Did someone hit you? Someone else, I mean.”

“Yes. My brother.” Flynn works his tongue around his mouth, encouraging the cuts to heal. Gabriel is a fellow vampire, therefore capable of physically wounding him, but they will go away. They always do, don’t they? Then only the scars are left, somewhere deep and out of sight where you can almost forget about them. “Just a minor family squabble.”

Lucy looks as if that was a squabble, she hopes she never sees an actual fight. “Was it about Gennady Sokolov? Or was it about – ”

She doesn’t finish that sentence, but it’s clear what she was about to say, and they can hear it
hanging in the air. Flynn wonders if he should concoct some comforting lie and say that no, of course it wasn’t about her, but Lucy isn’t an idiot. She knows that her presence in this house was a point of serious contention from the start, and she might get even more suspicious if he said it wasn’t. “My brother was – he thought he – never mind.”

Lucy considers that. Then to Flynn’s total horror, she moves closer, as if she too cannot help herself. She looks up at him, at the hell of a night he has clearly already had, and a look of troubled sympathy crosses her face. She reaches out. “Flynn, I – Garcia –”

Flynn looks down at her, can see it happening almost in slow motion, as if he has every chance to step back or out of the way or otherwise dodge it, but his brain has disconnected from his body and it doesn’t quite get there. The next instant, Lucy’s hands are pressed flat on his chest, as if she’s the one holding him up despite being much smaller and much more mortal than he is, and it almost wrecks his fragile self-control completely. His own hands lift up to encircle her waist – they can almost span it – and pull her hard against him, almost knocking her off her feet. Her head is tipped back, her mouth half-open, eyelashes fluttering, and her blood is rich scarlet wine beneath the fine porcelain of her skin, her hair casting dark shadows like sketches of spilled ink. He is sore and starving and breathlessly, sweetly, savagely desperate for her – for what exactly, he doesn’t even know, and at that moment, it does not seem particularly important. The nearness of her is like milk and honey and sunlight in the aching salt of his wounds, and he – Jesus, he –

No. No, no, what – what is he doing. Just because she has caught him at a compromised moment does not mean he can arrantly undo everything he has been fighting for, when it’s already cost her and him and them and everyone, and the sacrifices could have only started. He could not be gentle with her, would break this and break her, and she did not, she did not, come out to considerately check on him, just to be ravished and ravaged by a half-delirious vampire. He can’t be near her like this, in this heightened, frenetic state of bloodlust and heartbreak, can’t betray whatever small measure of trust she has put in him not to hurt her. It feels like tearing his skin off, but he pulls back from her, out from under her hands, with a sensation as if she too has branded him where they touched. “I need – I need to go.”

No, he blunders away through the serpentine warrens of Sept-Tours, not looking back or slowing down, anywhere he can get that is far away from her and what he was so terrifyingly close to doing. He opens an old grate and pushes through, descending the steps into the catacombs. It’s been a very long time since they kept real prisoners down here, but it’s still a forbidding place, with rusting bars and irons bolted to the wall. He doesn’t stop until he reaches the cell at the end, under the drum of the tower. He feels dangerously as if he might be up for a little hardball, and desperately tries to rein himself back. He can’t come down here and torture a witch to work off his frustration, no matter how considerable it is and in any number of ways. But if Sokolov won’t talk –

“You.” The voice booms from the dimness, and there is a rattle of chains as the Russian struggles to sit up. Evidently he has recovered from the knock Flynn gave him earlier. “You let me out of this PISSPOT. You let me take lady to safety, OR ELSE –”

Flynn studies him coolly, coming to a halt outside the bars. He can respect someone who has Lucy’s welfare genuinely at heart, if that is actually what that is and not just some clever ploy by any number of their enemies. “You’re not going anywhere.”

Gennady Sokolov glares at him through one blackening eye. “I have friends. You will REGRET. Brother on Congregation.”

“I also have a brother on the Congregation,” Flynn says, with dangerous pleasantry. “He’s not very
useful. Wyatt – William de Clermont, have you heard of him?"

“Anton Sokolov? You have heard of him?”

“No,” they chorus in unison, which is probably a lie on both ends, but masculine bravado must be upheld. They continue to glare at each other, until Sokolov rouses himself for another salvo. “If you have hurt witch, like DICKHEAD – ”

Flynn is about to answer that he hasn’t, but just because he’s managed to keep her (barely) from physical harm does not mean that he hasn’t hurt her, and he’s not in the mood for more lies, not even to this annoying Russian trespasser. “She’s alive,” he says shortly. “She decided to come here by herself. She did not require rescue.”

“Oh, yes,” Sokolov says scathingly. “Because all that BANGING, shouting, everything clearly going VERY WELL.”

Flynn starts to flash back a response, even if he is not about to be called out like this by the witch who is supposed to be his prisoner. “Nobody asked for your interference,” he growls instead. “If you’re willing to behave yourself, I might let you out, but – ”

“Clearly action of INNOCENT MAN.” Gennady leans back against the wall. “My brother and I, we have HEXED PUTIN. You do not want to cross us.”

“Good job,” Flynn says. “Seeing as Putin just collapsed and died yesterday. Actually, wait. He didn’t. You might want to hex him harder next time.”

Gennady aims a look at him as if he knows exactly who he is going to hex harder next time, and there will be a smoking crater where one too-sassy vampire is presently standing. Flynn doesn’t want to physically torture him, perhaps, but nobody said he couldn’t let off some steam in other ways, and Gennady at least is a safe and legitimate target for his outrage. “You trespassed on vampire territory,” he says. “Onto the de Clermonts’ land. And you attacked me. So if we’re trading violations of creature law – ”

“You took witch,” Gennady says stubbornly. “YOU STARTED IT. Congregation wants her to speak to them, and since that is so – ”

“The Congregation is about as useful as one dirty gym sock.” Flynn has never had high opinions of the creature governing body, which seems idiotic, unenlightened, and signally inefficient to him (no wonder Wyatt’s on it) and his convictions have only doubled now. “Nor do any of us think there’s any chance they just want Lucy to ask her a few polite questions. The whole thing is a mess of intrigue and backstabbing, they would all be competing to get Ashmole 782 for their own race first, and then – ”

It’s Gennady’s turn to start into a hot reply, then discover abruptly that he isn’t sure what to say. He can’t deny it, at least, and there’s a long pause. Then Gennady says, “Michael Temple. You know him?”

“What?” An unpleasant turn goes through Flynn’s gut at the name. That is, the last he knew, the present alias of one Michel of Antioch, second-in-command of the Parisian Knights Templar at the time of their destruction. He was the mole inside the organization, provided information to falsify confessions and convict the grandmaster, Jacques de Molay, and the rest of his own sworn brothers on trumped-up charges. Michel was a vampire himself, a close associate of Gerbert of Aurillac, and had hidden his true identity in order to infiltrate the Templars, rise through the ranks, and report to his master on any plans they had to destroy the supernatural world. He was a key figure in turning them
all over to Philip IV to be executed, their very own Judas. To say the least, he bears Gabriel and
Garcia de Clermont a formidable grudge for killing Gerbert and stopping their plans for world
domination, and Gennady mentioning him now is a very nasty surprise. Flynn takes a sharp step.
“What about him?”

“He is on Congregation,” Gennady says. “Did you know? No, from STUPID LOOK on your face, I
am thinking not. Very interested in Lucy. My brother and yours think that BAD.”

“Wyatt didn’t – ” At last, Flynn is forced to admit that his policy of interacting with his youngest
sibling as little as possible, and informing him of even less, may have finally backfired. He never told
Wyatt enough about the whole Gerbert mess for Wyatt to know that Michel of Antioch was a traitor,
much less that he’s rebranded himself as Michael Temple and is doing – what? He surely must want
to get back at the de Clermonts, played a patient long game to do it, and Lucy is central to that
diabolical plot. Wyatt would have no reason to warn the others about Temple, or think that he was
specifically important, especially since Gabriel and Garcia tend to blow him off anyway. Flynn prays
that even Wyatt has been able to tell that Temple is bad news, but even if so, Temple has been
putting plans into place for God knows how long, totally unopposed. Gennady is right. This is very,
very bad.

For his part, Gennady can clearly tell that he has possession of valuable information, and it is not in
Flynn’s interest to damage him too extensively if he wants any chance of learning it. He folds his
arms, as much as is possible in shackles, and sets his very square jaw. “You want to know more?
Maybe you let me out of STINKING JAIL CELL, yes?”

Flynn curses under his breath. He is not about to unleash the Red Peril on Sept-Tours, but if
Gennady isn’t just bluffing, he does need to know more about this. Maybe get Maria to ask Wyatt
when she calls him, though that could put them all in even more danger, as Flynn does not trust
Wyatt to handle any of this with the necessary subterfuge and delicacy. They stare at each other
balefully, to see who will blink first. Then Flynn says, “You could just tell me and save yourself the
pain. You must know who I am, don’t you? The notorious de Clermont brothers, and what they
did?”

“I have heard STORIES of you, yes.” Gennady eyes him, patently unimpressed. “Partly why I
wanted to RESCUE WITCH FROM YOU!”

Flynn realizes rather belatedly that talking up his dark and terrible deeds of yore is not going to make
anyone believe that he acquired Lucy without violence, and he should probably change tack before
he digs himself a deeper hole. He is clearly not going to overawe this stubborn Russian, or club him
into submission, and he can sense an innate decency in the man, wretched, interfering witch though
he is, that makes him reluctant to use brute force. He does seem genuinely concerned about Lucy’s
safety, at least, and very few other people seem to be, including most of Flynn’s own family. The
news about Michael Temple is extremely concerning, and if this does connect back to some larger
spider web in Venice, Flynn would be well advised to pay attention to it. However little he wants to.

“Well?” Gennady says. “You stand there and HAVE CRISIS, or you get me out?”

“I will kill you later,” Flynn promises him. He tersely dispenses with the padlock on the bars, unlocks
Gennady’s cuffs from the wall, and jerks him to his feet. “But try to lay one finger on me, and that
will be immediately.”

With that, he frog-marches the witch down to the small, spartan cell that used to belong to the prison
warden, which is far from luxury accommodation, but has a bed, trunk, writing desk, and bowl and
pitcher for washing. It smells like mold and must, and there’s a dead rat in the corner, which
Gennady regards with arch distaste. “Are you plan to make me EAT IT?”
Only if you want to,” Flynn snarks, shoving him into the chair and locking his wrists to it again. “Otherwise, I’ll get our chatelaine down here to bring you some actual food. Gerbert of Aurillac was her sire, and she knows all about what Michel of Antioch was capable of. She’ll verify your story. If it checks out, we’ll talk more after that. If not – ”

“Yes, yes. THREATS, HUFF, PUFF, all very MELODRAMATIC.” Gennady Sokolov is evidently not a witch to shy away from telling it like it is. “You throw me in IRON MAIDEN, maybe chop off nuts. Or do you still have RACK? I am ready. Not surprised. Vampires are barbarians, yes? Especially your family.”

Flynn stares at him angrily, which seems to vengefully please Gennady. It isn’t clear if he actually thinks this or is just throwing Flynn’s rhetoric back in his face, to say that if Flynn wants to pitch a temper tantrum and act like a big bad scary vampire, Gennady will hold him to his word. Sensing that this bombastic approach may be backfiring, Flynn restrains from adding several good rejoinders that he thought of, and unlocks one of Gennady’s wrists. “I’ll get Cecilia,” he says. “You stay here and think about what you want to say.”

Unable to repress a sour feeling that he has somehow been gotten the best of yet again, he ducks out of the cell and stomps upstairs. It is quite late by now, dinner long forgotten in the kerfuffle, and he briefly hopes that Lucy did not have to go to bed hungry. An uneasy quiet hangs over Sept-Tours, as if one storm has broken but another one may be brewing, and Flynn is wondering if he really wants to go to his mother’s private rooms in search of Cecilia, as Maria has probably taken her there to talk this over and enact damage control, when – startling him considerably – his phone buzzes in his back pocket.

He takes it out, stares at the glowing screen, and sees that the call is from Jiya. He did send her a text after they arrived that it had gone fine, which was definitely a big fat lie, so he hopes she didn’t realize that. Still, it would behoove him to get a status report from Oxford, and he grits his teeth, then swipes to answer it. “Yes?”

“Hello to you too.” Jiya sounds as if she isn’t sure what she expected. “Is everything okay at home? I called Cecilia last night, and – ”

Narced out, yet again. Flynn runs a hand over his face. “It was a little rocky at first,” he says. “But we’re working on it. Why are you calling?”

Jiya can clearly tell that he’s on edge, but she doesn’t rebuke him for being short. “The lab was broken into,” she says. “Rufus and I discovered it, just a few hours ago. We can’t tell who exactly it was, or what they wanted, but they stole the report we were compiling on Lucy’s bloodwork. They’re looking for something, information on her. I thought it was Cahill, obviously, but I’m not sure. It doesn’t smell like him.”

“The lab was – ?” Though this is very obviously yet more bad news, Flynn feels almost perversely relieved. This gives him the perfect excuse to leave Sept-Tours for a few days and run back to Oxford, and he is feeling in considerable need of space. From Maria, from Gabriel, from stupid Houdini, and from Lucy, because he’s not sure he trusts himself around her right now. “I’ll head back right away.”

There’s a slight pause on the other end. “But everything at home is fine?”

“Your uncle was…” Flynn struggles with how much he wants to say. Jiya didn’t join the family until 1888, after all. She doesn’t know most of this. She’s vaguely aware that she had a cousin named Christian, and that he died long ago, but they’ve never talked about the specifics. When Jiya first joined the family, Gabriel clearly had an attitude of oh-well-that’s-nice-for-you-isn’t-it. But he
softened to her, became fond of her despite himself, has always treated her well and bought her expensive presents, even as his relationship with Flynn remains frosty. Flynn never actually intended to sire a blood child, but it was that or letting Jiya die in front of him, and he couldn’t do that, not again. It’s also part of the reason he’s uncomfortable with letting her call him Dad. He doesn’t feel like he deserves it, and it seems like a deliberate flaunt in Gabriel’s face, a reminder of what he does not have. And, perhaps, he has received confirmation that it always will be. It plays in his head on a haunting loop. That is when I expect to forgive Garcia for Christian’s.

“Hey,” Jiya says. “Are you still there?”

“Yes.” Flynn shakes his head. “Sorry. Things were just a little – well, you know what Gabriel can be like. I’ll leave as soon as I can, though there won’t be a flight back until the morning.”

“And…” Jiya pauses delicately. “Lucy will be safe, if she stays there by herself?”

“Maman and Cecilia will look after her.” Flynn intends to fully exploit any and all guilt they feel over that mess in the solar, and Maria hates witches, but she loves him. If anything happens to Lucy, he will – well, he’s made it plenty clear that he won’t like it. As angry as Gabriel is, actually hurting her would be irreparable for the family, and so Maria won’t let him. “I’ll call again when I’m on my way. Let me know if you discover anything else that was taken.”

With that, not giving Jiya a chance to ask why noted witch-hater Maria de Clermont, whose objection to this was the chief problem in the first place, is now the individual to be trusted with Lucy’s safety, he hangs up. He takes the stairs up to his room three at a time, throws his things back into his bag and grabs the Jag keys, thinks that he can text the information about Gennady to Cecilia rather than waiting to find her, and pulls on his jacket, scarf, and shoes. He is just bounding out into the hall when a voice says, “Garcia, where are you going?”

Caught like a teenager trying to sneak out past curfew, Flynn screeches to a halt, turns around, and sees his mother. Even worse, Lucy and Cecilia are standing behind her, so it is a triumvirate (triumulierate?) of female disapproval. He struggles for several moments, then says, “Jiya called me. There was a break-in at my lab in Oxford. I’m going back to sort it out. It may take a few days.”

“You’re going back to Oxford?” Lucy looks alarmed. “Shouldn’t I go with you?”

“No.” Flynn says it too fast, and she flinches. “No, you should – Jiya said they stole the report on your bloodwork, it might be dangerous. You – yes. Should stay here.”

Lucy looks at him in utter incredulity, as if to ask how leaving her at his house without him, when he’s just pissed off his very formidable brother to kingdom come, is a good idea. Not even to mention the Russians trying to mount kamikaze rescue missions, Michael Temple on the Congregation, the mystery of the Ashmole fragment, and everything else, only half of which she knows about. “How is it any less dangerous for me to be here? I emailed Univ that I had to take a brief leave of absence, but it’s unprofessional for me to just vanish into thin air. And since things have clearly gone to hell in a handbasket – look, just let me get my – ”

“No,” Flynn says again, backing away from her as if from a hungry wolf. “Lucy, stay here, all right? Stay here. It’ll be – it’s best for everyone.”

“It is not.” Lucy takes a step, cheeks flushing furious red, eyes snapping. She looks inclined to get into his face again, which Flynn tries not to enjoy, especially not right now. “It is not the best thing for everyone, and since I don’t want to be left here with your – ”

“Maman and Cecilia will look after you.” If they don’t back him up on this, Flynn is screwed, but
he’s counting on the fact that they won’t refuse if he throws it out there and runs away before they can object. “It will only be a few days, like I said. So just –”

“So just what?” Lucy looks like she wants to slap him. “What exactly am I supposed to do, cross-stitch patterns? Maybe see if they need a cashier at the boulangerie? Or –”

“It’ll be fine.” Flynn reaches the door and pulls it open, the cold night spilling over the threshold, then strides out into the front drive. Lucy runs after him, as he clicks to unlock the Jag and opens the driver’s side door. “Lucy – Lucy, just –”

The next instant, she has two fistfuls of his shirt, he flails in a futile attempt to dislodge her, and she seems set to hang on as tenaciously as a barnacle. “You cannot leave me alone with your insane family,” she hisses. “Take me with you. Take me out of here right now. Garcia, I – I thought that you – that we –”

“They won’t hurt you.” Flynn twists awkwardly, like a fish trying to get itself off the hook. “Let go of me, Lucy.”

She looks up at him. Something crosses her face, something slow and shattering and unbearably painful, as the moon comes out from behind a cloud and she stares up at him like fine, all right, she can see it, she understands. Whatever that is, Flynn has no clue, but she opens both hands with too-cold, too-precise movements and steps back from him. “Okay,” she says, barely able to force the words out. “I get it. Fine.”

Flynn is relieved that she has grasped the sense of his errand and his efforts to protect her from further harm in Oxford, and climbs behind the wheel of the Jag, pulling the door shut and doing up his seatbelt one-handed (he doesn’t need it, but he doesn’t want some interfering French highway patrol giving him a hard time). He puts the key in, starts the ignition, and peels out of the driveway, seeing her silhouetted small and silent, stricken and motionless, in the rearview mirror. It tears at his heart, but Maman and Cecilia will – it will – it has to be.

It starts to rain heavily as he drives through the village. He turns on the windshield wipers, and does not look back.

Lucy stands there until the taillights of the car have disappeared, the night is once more dark and still, and she becomes aware that it’s raining, heavy, freezing droplets splashing in her hair and bouncing off the cobblestones. It was clear when she went out, but a cold front must have blown in while she was standing here in utter disbelief that she has in fact wasted any more of her precious and possibly very limited life over this – over this total and absolute buffoon. She isn’t sure whether she’s righteously furious or just furious with herself for persisting, when it would have been far more sensible to call it a day long since. She kept getting just enough uncertainty, enough hints that Flynn might feel something back, that made her want to try again, but no, not any more, not again. She keeps forgetting about that whole little caveat against vampires and witches getting together, whenever she’s around him, and maybe him running off like a little bitch for a few days will be helpful in clearing her head. If his goddamn family doesn’t drain her dry first.

Lucy turns around, wipes her sodden hair out of her eyes, and to her considerable surprise, sees Cecilia proceeding toward her with a rain jacket. Cecilia reaches her, pulls it over her head, and walks her back to the main house like a child she’s found lost and wandering in the storm. Lucy thinks about objecting, but she is in fact soaked, and she is not above vengefully dripping on the de Clermonts’ doorstep, a tangible reminder of just how much inconvenience they have also caused her. She never asked to come here. She kept offering to leave. If they’re still mad at her – she doesn’t even know.
Cecilia, however, is uncommonly solicitous, urging Lucy to keep walking, come on, step into the solar, sit down close to the fire and get warm, she will fetch a cup of hot cocoa. Lucy can’t seem to stop shivering, as if the chill has permeated her to the bones and cannot be easily dried out, and Cecilia fetches another blanket to wrap around her shoulders. Rain continues to slap heavily on the dark windows, dripping from distant leaks, and Cecilia considers, lips pursed. Then she turns to Lucy. “Witch-rain, is it? I am sorry. We might wish we cared less than we did, but it is difficult to do.”

“Witch-rain?” Lucy has been sitting in a numb trance, staring at nothing, but that rouses her. She frowns. “Do you mean I did this?”

“It’s possible,” Cecilia says. “Have you had other instances of heightened power, some sort of elemental magic? It can come out at moments of strong emotion.”

“I conjured witch-wind.” Lucy wonders if she should be telling Cecilia this, but she is the only person in this house (well, aside from Houdini, but as a daemon servant, he’s decidedly lower on the food chain) who seems to genuinely care about her. “In the Bodleian, when Benjamin Cahill and Emma Whitmore tried to steal Ashmole 782. I suppose it was an instinctive response to danger. But aren’t witch-wind and witch-rain two different elementals? One is air and the other is water. Aren’t most witches just one?”

“Yes.” Cecilia’s handsome face is guarded. “Usually they are. But we have already learned that you are no ordinary witch, Lucy Preston.”

“And?” Lucy is out of patience with the de Clermonts and their nonsense. “Now that Flynn’s gone, are you just going to – what? Are Maria and Gabriel really willing to babysit me for a few days, when they never wanted me here to start with? If you can make separate arrangements for me to travel back to Oxford, please do. I don’t want to stay if I just – ”

“Sit down, please.” Cecilia places a light but firm hand on Lucy’s shoulder, impressing her back into the old brocade cushions of the davenport. “It would be better not to act in haste. As for that, despite Garcia’s truly atrocious methods in handling the matter, I do believe he has your safety genuinely at heart, and feels that we would be best equipped to see to it. Madame will not suffer another intrusion onto her lands or to the threat of herself, her sons, or her guests, and yes, that does include you. I would not, of course, gainsay a woman’s decision on her life. But you are not in danger at Sept-Tours, even so long as Garcia is gone, and you may be greatly so elsewhere. And in my own opinion, if it can be offered, the reckonings that you have brought on are long overdue. It is difficult for you to be in the middle of this, I know, and I shall suggest strongly to Madame and Monsieur that they think of that. But you should not run thinking we will devour you in the night. We will not.”

Lucy opens her mouth, stops, and is forced to consider that, however unwillingly. It’s true that even if Flynn has done something reckless and impulsive, she does not need to follow suit, and haring back to Oxford without any protection at all in the name of proving some stupid, prideful point would definitely be very bad. Her teaching commitments don’t start until Hilary term, so it’s not like she’s missing tute, but it is obviously poor academic form to disappear from your home institution with no warning and no estimated return date, when a lot of prestigious grant money is being paid for you to do important things. Then again, she’s pretty sure that Oxford did not design the Visiting Research Fellowship with the needs of supernatural creatures and/or magical wars in mind, and this is just going to have to go down as extraordinary circumstances. At least if she can get a WiFi signal, she can catch up on email and make sure there’s no other time-sensitive business she’s missed, but . . .

“Fine,” she says. “But not actively hurting me is a long way from actually wanting to see me around. Should I just… stay in Flynn’s tower? Have my meals sent up, or – ?”
“No,” Cecilia says, even more firmly. “You are a guest, not a prisoner. And at its heart, it is not truly you that they are angry about. This should have been dealt with long ago, and never was. Now the scabs have burst open, but that is not your fault. I will not see you punished for it. And as I am the mistress of this estate in matters of protocol, my word runs.”

“Thank you.” Lucy looks up at her, taking another sip of the cocoa. “But either way, I’ve caused them a lot of stress and heartache, and I never wanted to do that.”

“I am sure you did not.” Cecilia moves to put another log on the fire. “You seem a kind soul. Yet no matter any appearances to the contrary, the show they wish to put on, this is a broken family. Perhaps now they are only realizing how much.”

That twists at Lucy’s heart, no matter how annoyed she is with the de Clermonts and their inability to communicate or function like regular people (they obviously are not, but the standards should not be so different). She is just about to venture another question, see if Cecilia’s apparent spirit of détente extends to giving her more information about what exactly this is about, when there’s a noise at the door of the solar. She looks up, thinks for a painful, hopeful split second that Flynn has thought better of his stupidity and decided to come back, and then realizes, of course, that it’s not him. It’s Gabriel.

Cecilia reacts in a flash, too fast for Lucy to see, jumping between the two of them and taking up a stance that makes it clear that if Gabriel plans on coming any closer, he will need to establish proof of benevolent intentions. Given that he is the head of the house and the family and Cecilia’s employer, Monsieur, the highest-ranking male de Clermont, this is an act of considerable defiance. Lucy can tell by that hair-trigger reflex that Cecilia didn’t entirely trust that Maria and Gabriel were going to hold up their end of the bargain, and startles to her feet, tripping slightly. If he does try anything, she probably can’t stop him, but maybe some other elemental will come opportunely to her assistance and –

“Peace,” Gabriel says, in Latin. “Where is Garcia?”

“He left.” Cecilia answers in French, rather pointedly, as if she is not going to let him freeze Lucy out of the conversation while they are in the same room. “You may ask Madame if you wish the full details. His laboratory in Oxford was broken into, so he returned to sort that out, and entrusted us with the witch’s safety. If you are of a mind to pursue your grievances with your brother on her account, I have to warn you that I will not – ”

“No.” Gabriel shakes his head, scattering droplets. He looks as if he too has just come in from the deluge, possibly having gone out for a long run to avoid what must be the overwhelming impulse to murder his idiot sibling. (You know what, Lucy sympathizes.) As he stalks into the solar like a large, sleek black jaguar, she keeps her eyes warily on him, not even quite daring to blink. No wonder Flynn feels overshadowed – physically, intellectually, and emotionally – by this man. It would be impossible not to. His Mediterranean coloring is a few degrees darker than Flynn’s Slavic origin, as if even in appearance, Garcia is a pale copy of his brother. He is very tall, very beautiful, and very uncomfortable to have too close.

“If you wish something,” Cecilia says, “you may ask Harry for it. Or is it that you – ”

“No,” Gabriel says again, slightly impatiently. “I was hoping to find Garcia. The scene earlier was regrettable, and I thought some amends could be made. But he is gone. I am somehow not surprised that he has managed to disappoint me yet again.”

Lucy makes a small noise, as if to say join the club, everyone is sick and tired of Flynn’s clown-about-town act, and Gabriel’s gaze flashes to her. She flinches, since drawing his attention feels
dangerous, but it looks rather as if Gabriel is almost relieved to have someone else to commiserate with over it. There’s a long pause, and then he addresses her directly, with the first remote hint of sincerity she has heard from him in regard to her. “Dr. Preston. I apologize that you had to bear witness to the spectacle of our disarray.”

“I’m – I’m sorry.” Lucy feels too tongue-tied to know what else to say. It’s hard to look at him directly for too long. “Monsieur de Clermont, I – I didn’t intend to – ”

Gabriel looks amused, and not altogether unsympathetic. “You may call me Gabriel,” he says. “If I may in turn address you as Lucy. I suspect that if nothing else, we presently hold common ground on the subject of Garcia’s failings, and since he is not here to atone for it in person, I once more find myself begging another’s pardon on his behalf. I hope you do not think too poorly of us for it, though I could not altogether blame you if you did.”

“Thanks.” Lucy still isn’t sure what to make of him, his courtly, old-fashioned, well-rehearsed formality, designed to induce the other party into agreeing – if nothing else, for fear of being thought bad-mannered. Not that that seems to be constraining Flynn at all, but Gabriel at least has some thought for appearances, and seems to be promising that he will not be visibly discourteous. It makes her think that no matter how old Flynn is, Gabriel is as old as the entire Common Era. It’s like having a conversation with a statue in the Parthenon. “Look, it’s been a really long day, and then night, and I should just go – go to bed.”

“Please,” Gabriel says, with that same reserved, inscrutable courtesy. “Allow me to see you properly to your chamber.”

Lucy looks at Cecilia, in case this is a ploy for him to get her alone and then crunch, but Cecilia, who seemed to have the same idea, stares at him narrowly, and something unspoken passes between them. Cecilia nods fractionally, stepping back, and Lucy is left with no choice but to take Gabriel de Clermont’s proffered arm and let him escort her into the dark halls of Sept-Tours. They have to climb single file up the tightly winding steps anyway, but they reach her door, he stops, and bows with infinitely correct decorum over her hand, planting a cool, impersonal kiss to the back of it. “Good night, Lucy,” he says. “I trust tomorrow will be somewhat more sedate.”

“Ah – thanks.” Lucy steps into her room, looking at him towering silently in the dimness. “Let me – if – if Flynn calls. . .”

“You will be informed.” Gabriel’s fine lips turn up in something not quite a smile. He bows again, hand on his heart. “Nor shall I stand in the way if you wish to continue your work among his papers in the library. As I said. Good night.”

With that, he is gone in a blink, and Lucy can feel the crushing exhaustion that she is starting to associate with the inadvertent expenditure of powerful magic, the way it overloads the system and leaves no space for anything else. It has, as noted, been the hell of a twenty-four hours, and she just wants to pass out and get away from this stupid supernatural family and their interpersonal drama for a hot second. The issues of the morning can goddamn wait until then, and she barely manages to change into her pajamas and wash her face before she collapses.

She’s been more than a little afraid that the ghost of her mother is going to be back, but the roster of unsettling dreams that she seems to be cycling through has once more changed. In this one, she’s sitting in the stone room, the one she was in as a child, the memory she told Flynn about at Woodstock. It’s the memory that she always comes down to when she tries to figure out why she’s so ill at ease around magic, why she feels shunned and estranged and sick and anxious. This time, she sees more than she ever has. She can make out the painted frescoes on the walls, Doric columns, a balcony looking out over a busy canal. Venice, are they in Venice? Then she can see the watching
faces of her parents, bright with hope and expectation – and the way those expressions slowly fade as the man tells them something. Who is the man, who is he? He’s almost familiar. Six-year-old Lucy sits with her fingers in a knot, not knowing what’s going on, but he has the tone of a pediatrician delivering bad news after a well-child checkup. Is she sick? Is she going to die? Did she do something wrong? Mommy and Daddy said this would be a quick, fun trip, just to –

The fear rises up her throat, choking. She’s not good enough. She wasn’t what they wanted. She’s always known that she’s a witch, in the same way she knows she’s good at reading and art and doesn’t like math very much, and that one day, like her parents, she will do magic. Real magic, beautiful, deliberate, useful magic. Except what the man is saying right now is changing all of that. She leans forward, her feet dangling off the edge of the table, as he goes on in that unctuous, regretful tone. *Recommend that you raise her as – well. As an ordinary child. I’m sure she’s perfectly delightful. It was good to see you, Carol.*

*No,* Lucy wants to say, but the adult woman’s knowledge cannot reach the frightened, humiliated little girl. *You’re wrong, you’re wrong. I have magic, I have more magic than most people know what to do with, or what I know to do with. What are you doing, what are you – stop. You’re wrong, you’re –*

As if she’s said this out loud, as if he’s heard her through the years, in the dimness of a repressed memory, the man turns his head and stares her straight in the eye. And at that, Lucy does recognize him. It’s Benjamin Cahill.

A scream starts to erupt in her throat, but gets caught halfway through. She feels it as if she was standing at the edge of a cliff and he gave her a push out into thin air, to fall and fall. She doesn’t know what that was about, doesn’t know if he did that deliberately or not – Denise said that Cahill used to be crazy about Carol. Did he do that as a purposeful act of revenge on her daughter, to punish her for marrying someone else apart from him? Did he already know that Lucy had some connection to Ashmole 782, and didn’t want her developing her talent independently? What did he – was he honestly just mistaken, and her magic was buried so deep he couldn’t see it? It doesn’t seem likely.

Lucy, however, is still falling. She can’t stop herself, she can’t slow down. She’s just falling, she’s going to keep falling forever, and a brief, desperate, pointless thought flashes through her head that if Flynn was here, he could catch her. But he’s not here, whether in the dream or reality, and she doesn’t need another betrayal, not after seeing this one. She’s still plunging, *plunging,* and if you hit the bottom in a dream you die, really die, right? That’s just an urban legend, but she’s awake and not awake, something horrible, a stasis between the two as if she’s been ripped from the ordinary constraints of time and place, and – *can you timewalk,* Flynn said. Did she just timewalk back to 1989 and see herself at age six? Is this not a dream but an actual experience of the past, like when she might have gone all the way to Elizabethan London and –

Lucy opens her eyes with a muffled scream, jerking up off the bed, and feels frantically to either side before she can content herself that she is back in the here-and-now, everything is fine and quiet and she’s in bed at Sept-Tours on a misty, cold All Souls morning. That likewise seems important, as if the ominous dates are just hitting in full force, and she strains to remember anything else from her dream-vision. That doesn’t feel like she was recalling some fractured memory through the perspective of a frightened child. It was like she was there, she was seeing it for herself as a grownup, and understanding much more. Cahill. Cahill did something. Cahill knew something about her when she was a child. No wonder he’s popped up now, having patiently bided his time. He’s like a pantomime monster, elusive as shadow and smoke. Strike him one place, he’s already somewhere else.
It’s early, but Lucy can’t get back to sleep with the nausea and anxiety boiling in her gut. She gets up, drags herself into the shower, and when she emerges, decides that she really needs to see about doing laundry. She only brought her bag originally packed for a weekend at Woodstock, and she’s running low on clothes (and clean underwear). She still feels shitty, so she doesn’t want to be slumming it and moping over a man who, it turns out, is totally unworthy of any and all time or hope she has put into him. Operation Get Over Garcia Flynn is a go, she tells herself defiantly, but even as much as she enjoys mentally roasting him for a few minutes, she still feels bad when it’s over. No eating ice cream wrapped in blankets on the couch and romcom binge watches, though. She has work to do.

Lucy musters the wherewithal to go downstairs in a more or less presentable fashion, and cautiously enters the dining room – whereupon she screeches to a halt. She was expecting Cecilia, but instead, it’s Gabriel, with a demitasse cup of a single black espresso set daintily in front of him. He appears to be waiting for her, looks immaculately put together despite the hour, and they eye each other for a very awkward moment. Then he rises to his feet. If Flynn is a shark, Gabriel is a megalodon, something vast and primal and terrifying, surfacing from the deep to devour anything nearby in his maw. In English, he says, “Good morning, Lucy.”

“Good… morning.” Lucy resists the urge to fold her hands behind her back and straighten her spine as if on parade inspection. “What do – what do you want?”

“I would like,” Gabriel says, with just enough of a careful intonation to make her think that he learned English relatively late and doesn’t speak it very often, “to apologize for my brother’s behavior. Not all of us are so completely uncultured, and Cecilia and I have spent the night in the cells, asking some questions of our unwilling guest, Gennady Sokolov. He maintains that he was attempting to rescue you, and furthermore, he had some particular things to say which concerned us. It is possible that my mother and I…. overreacted, upon your first appearance in our home, though I hope my brother managed to inform you of that much at least. We are not used to having witches here. Nor would it by our choice be so.”

“Yes, thank you.” Lucy definitely was not in any doubt on that point. “But – ”

“But,” Gabriel goes on, “it is evidently the case that we have not obtained the full picture of events, and you are by no means the gravest threat that may presently confront us. My brother and I have a… troubled relationship. It was not always, but it is now. And we have been unfair to you. I do not apologize easily or lightly, but I believe you merit one, on behalf of the family, and as its head, I wish to offer it.”

Lucy is too surprised to answer, having thought that was going in a much different direction. Flynn also said something about things with Gabriel being distant and difficult, which hurts her to remember, before she reminds herself that she no longer cares what Flynn thinks about anything. They continue to stare at each other. Lucy isn’t sure if there’s another part of this speech forthcoming, or if she should prod for it. Then she says, “So, were you going to actually do it, or. . .?”

Gabriel actually almost smiles, startlingly transforming his face. “Very well. You have the formal apology of myself and my mother for we have heretofore treated you, and as Cecilia says, you may expect to be afforded all the benefits of our protection, until such time as my brother returns. As I said, the library is yours. You may go down to the village as you like, though it is unwise to wander too far by yourself. There may be other miscreants awaiting their chance, hoping you would run away from Sept-Tours. Is there anything else?”

“I don’t think so.” Lucy hesitates. She is not asking him about laundry arrangements, and she
certainly isn’t touching the raw subject of Flynn. “But if someone else does attack me –”

“If someone else does attack you,” Gabriel says, with complete matter-of-factness, “I will kill them. I do not intend to suffer another insult to my patrimony or upon my family’s honor. Cecilia will have your breakfast shortly. Excuse me, I must place a call to my brother in Venice. I will be interested in his explanations. Good day, Lucy.”

With a brusque nod to her, he is gone from the dining room almost that fast, she looks around several times to make sure, and sits down, waiting until Cecilia appears with the food. Lucy eats, asks about the laundry, and Cecilia promises to take care of it. She refuses to ask if Flynn has given some positive indication of his arrival in Oxford, and figures that if nothing else, Jiya would have been in contact if he didn’t turn up. Instead, she asks Cecilia if there’s a place she can do some work, and Cecilia says there’s a café in town with free WiFi. Sept-Tours does not really have internet, probably why Gabriel has to go elsewhere to reconnect to civilization. Maybe they should put it in, but that is also a question for a later time.

After breakfast, Lucy pulls on her jacket and scarf, loads her laptop, phone, chargers, and notebook into her bookbag, and sets off down the hill. It’s sunny but sharp, fallen leaves scuffing around her feet and icy rivulets trickling from the downpour last night. It smells wet and clear and cold, and after a few days cooped up among unfriendly vampires, the liberation is practically intoxicating. Mindful of Gabriel’s warning not to go wandering too far alone, she turns her head sharply every time a car passes, but this is France. Nobody gives a shit.

She reaches the village of Sept-Tours in another ten minutes. It’s got that cute, picturesquely old-fashioned French rural aesthetic, with shingled houses of amber stone, narrow side lanes, a war memorial in the square, a church with a bell tower, flowerboxes in windows, a small library, and a bureau de poste. There are a few mom-and-pop shops, an artisan butcher, a boulangerie, a convenience-store version of a French supermarket chain, several cafés, and the pharmacy Flynn mentioned, which makes Lucy note the green cross. That was the same sigil as the Knights of Lazarus, and she’s trying to remember if there’s some historical association with pharmacists, or health, or the reason they use that symbol. But she can’t bring it to mind, and she really is trying not to think about Flynn. Good riddance, etc. and etc.

It’s early enough that most of the village still isn’t up yet, and Lucy walks around a few times, remembers to text Michelle that she’s not dead, takes some pictures on her phone, and then heads for the café when it opens at 10am. They seem somewhat taken aback to have customers already, but Lucy purchases a small cappuccino and a deliciously flaky croissant and after several tries, manages to connect to the internet. Then she opens her inbox (nightmare, as expected) and valiantly gets to work.

She passes a few productive hours in this fashion, wonders if she shouldn’t take up a seat indefinitely (though there are only two other patrons) and gets up to order lunch. When she takes out her wallet, she remembers that she doesn’t have any more euros, and since she can’t see a credit card machine, she flushes. “I’m sorry. I’ll just – is there an ATM around here?”

“Are you the doctor from Oxford?” the man asks. “Staying with the family?”

He of course does not need to define which family; there can only be one around here. Lucy should not be surprised that word has traveled, as the presence of a new human woman must surely attract attention, but it still catches her off guard. “Yes,” she says. Is he asking her to present her neck for inspection, to see if she’s been snacked on? “But I can just –”

“No, no.” He pushes it at her. “You take it. My name is Marcel, my grandmother is Sophie, she was up at the house the other day. She would kill me if I didn’t let you have it.”
Lucy vaguely recalls that there was an old lady dropping in for a visit, at which the topic of her must have come up. She thinks about protesting, but she’s hungry, so she thanks Marcel and graciously accepts the plowman’s sandwich, fruit, and cheese. The café is filling up with other customers, in what passes for Sept-Tours’ lunch rush, and she can’t help but notice all of them glancing casually at her. What did Sophie say about her? Something favourable enough to induce her grandson to provide a free lunch, perhaps, but the scrutiny is mildly unsettling. Do they think that Lucy has come as a spy or saboteur, can they sense that she’s a witch, do they know about the divisions in the creature world? Oh God, they aren’t literally going to torch-and-pitchfork her, are they? Maybe she should go.

One of the gossipers, a middle-aged woman, evidently notices Lucy’s unease, since she comes over, introduces herself as Yvette, and welcomes her graciously to the village. Will Madame be attending the Martinmas supper, ten days from now? Or perhaps they should expect to see her generally at family functions? Madame speaks very good French, they are impressed. And either way, it is about time. Monsieur Garcia has been lonely for as long as anyone can remember. She seems like a lovely woman, and will certainly –

“I beg your –” At that, Lucy realizes what is in fact going on, and flushes incandescently. She almost might prefer it if she thought they were reaching for the pitchforks. “I’m so sorry, there’s been – there’s been a mistake. I’m not – Flynn and I – we’re definitely not – no. We’re just colleagues, at Oxford. He brought me here for a research project, and now he’s – anyway. No, I’m – no. It’s strictly work-related.”

She thinks there might be a flicker of disappointment on Yvette’s face, before the older woman apologises for the mistake and assures her that either way, they would be happy to see her about. She returns to the others with a look of profound disillusionment, and their conversation takes on an oh-well-that’s-a-pity tone. It’s slightly excruciating, and Lucy finishes her lunch, thanks Marcel again, and scuttles out.

She stops at the ATM to make sure she won’t be caught short again, investigates if the library is open, and finds that it is, but only until four o’clock. This is fine, since she should probably be back to Sept-Tours before dark, and she plows through as much of her in-tray as she can, then near closing time, gets up to leave. But as the librarian is about to show her out, he makes a shocked sound. “Madame!”

Lucy thinks briefly that he’s addressing her, and frowns – only to realize that he isn’t. None other than Maria de Clermont is standing just inside the door, looking wildly out of place in a small, slightly dingy public library. She is wearing her pearls and cashmere sweater and tailored tweed overcoat, makeup done just so, hair perfectly styled, as if she expects to conduct Lucy to a philanthropic gala or five-star Paris restaurant. The poor librarian is completely flustered. “Madame, you – it is an honor, you should have told me you were –”

“No, Paul, it’s fine.” Maria waves off his objections. For the villagers, this is definitely as if the Queen dropped in unannounced. “I’ve come to take Dr. Preston.”

Lucy looks at her in surprise. She hopes the rest of that sentence was take Dr. Preston home, and not take Dr. Preston out somewhere and do something without witnesses. She is relatively sure that Gabriel would not promise her one thing in regard to her safety and then Maria do something entirely different, but if Gennady Sokolov said something particularly incriminating, or circumstances have otherwise changed, that could be once more up for grabs. “I – Madame de Clermont, is everything all right?”

“Yes, as much as it was this morning.” Maria eyes her up and down. It’s hard to say if she approves
of Lucy’s air of scholarly dishabille or not – aristocratic women, after all, do not work for a living. “But it is growing dark, and my son said that you were in the village. He was willing to come down and fetch you, but I said that I would go myself. I think it is past time that we spoke as women. There are things you should know.”

Lucy isn’t sure how to answer. She has, of course, been dying with curiosity over this family, even as much as they frustrate her, but now she isn’t sure if she actually wants to know. If that is even what Maria is offering. She can’t point-blank refuse, and maybe she’ll actually learn something useful. “All right,” she says. “Yes, of course.”

“Thank you.” Maria inclines her head half an inch, though it is not a capitulation. None of the de Clermonts surrender easily, and she beckons to Paul to open the door for them, out into the falling night. “Please. Come with me.”
Bloodlines

Chapter Notes

Any decade now, Tumblr. Timeless Season 3 is back, apparently, which we all hope is a good sign. Maybe this week? Maybe?
I shouldn't jinx it.

Flynn barely pays attention to anything for the whole trip back to Oxford. Even for him, arranging two off-book, unscheduled, last-minute charter flights is a stretch, so rather than heading back to Poitiers, he drives two and a half hours south to Bergerac airport, in Aquitaine. It has a scheduled British Airways service to London City, though when Flynn gets there, he discovers that this is only seasonal and will not resume until next March. This does not do him a great deal of good at the moment, so he is obliged to drive like a maniac a further hour and a half to Bordeaux, buy a ticket on the morning easyJet departure to London Luton, and fly out of their truly, truly terrible budget airlines terminal. He manages to text his arrival time to Jiya and ask if she can pick him up, since she does not have better things to do today than drive fifty miles in each direction to retrieve him. Perhaps he should have just gone back to Poitiers and taken the Stansted service, but that would be even longer.

All things considered, and after being crammed in economy class next to some idiot who is watching nonstop Manchester United highlights on his tablet without headphones, Flynn’s patience is at a very low ebb. They land around noon, he thinks he deserves a medal for not biting his seat partner, has to cheat with mesmer to get through customs without a passport, and strides off into the cheerless concrete warehouse that is Luton, looking around for Jiya. When he finally spots her, he can tell from her face that he should tread lightly, and waves in what he hopes is a reassuring fashion. Reaching her, he says, “Glad to see you made it.”

“Yes, I did.” Jiya does not, in fact, look reassured. “I’m expecting you’ll explain what happened on the drive back? Where’s Lucy?”

“I – left her with the family,” Flynn says. “Like I said. It’s safer there, I didn’t – ”

“You said Grand-mère and Uncle Gabriel were going to look after her?” Jiya’s expression is intensely dubious. Aren’t children supposed to have more trust in their parents’ judgment than this? It feels like they are. “That is a completely – ”

“Let’s go,” Flynn interrupts, grabbing the car keys from her. “You can tell me about the laboratory break-in, that’s why I’m here. Did you call university security?”

“Of course I did, as soon as Rufus and I got there and found it was a mess.” Jiya trots at his heels as they head out to short-term parking, locate the Maserati, and get in. Jiya does have a car of her own, but she has apparently driven his to make a point. “Everything was broken and overturned, they did a pretty good number on the place. But I still think they only stole Lucy’s information, and that means they know about her, they know we’re working with her, and probably everything that’s happened over the last week or two. So – ”

Flynn is briefly distracted by the need to pay a monstrously extortionate parking charge, receives the
attendant’s compliments on his ride (“oi, nice wheels, mate”) and accelerates out into the jungle of roundabouts. Everyone wants to get out of Luton as fast as possible, but they make this correspondingly just as difficult. None of this is any help for Flynn’s frayed temper, and by the time they are finally on the A418 westbound, he is gripping the wheel so hard that he is in danger of snapping it off. He relaxes his grip fractionally, but he is still preoccupied with thoughts of Sept-Tours. He didn’t totally blow it, did he? No, Lucy let him go, she understood. But if a single hair on her head is harmed –

There are roadworks, because the one infernal constant of British driving life is that there are roadworks, and it is mid-afternoon by the time they finally get back to Oxford – which, since it’s November, means it will be dark in another hour. Flynn wants to go straightaway to the lab, so they steer in that direction, park, and head into the biochemistry building. As they climb the steps and walk toward the door at the end, he tenses, sensing the presence of someone else inside, and nearly flashes in at battle speed before Jiya grabs his arm. “Jesus! It’s just Rufus!”

Flynn notices with disapproval that they have become once more quite chummy, but if Rufus is helping clean up, he can’t protest (and is also aware that he can’t complain about potentially unsuitable associates). Rufus has been sweeping up broken glass and reorganizing the scattered equipment, but he stops and turns around. “Uh, hey.”

“Hello.” Flynn surveys him coolly. He liked Rufus more before it transpired that he does in fact appear to be dating his daughter. “I made it back from France as fast as I could. What’s the status report here? Have you figured out who did this?”

“It was a witch,” Jiya says. “I can smell that much. But not Cahill, and not Emma. The security footage was scrambled, we couldn’t see anything, and the building staff didn’t remember seeing anything unusual. It was in the early hours, while we were – not here.”

Flynn has the urge to ask if they were elsewhere, or elsewhere together, and decides that the Spanish Inquisition can wait. “You said they stole Lucy’s report. Did you finish that?”

“More or less.” Jiya goes over to the computer, clicks to login, and types intently. “We’d almost finished the workup on her blood sample, and it… it’s like nothing we’ve ever seen. It was more similar to a sixteenth-century witch than a modern one. She has the indicators for every elemental, and some we couldn’t even identify. She’s possibly much more powerful than other witches – than any witch – alive. We’ve thought our power is waning and it isn’t coming back, but not for her.”

Flynn needs a moment to process that. The comment about her genome being similar to a sixteenth-century witch strikes him as significant, given the discovery of everything in that Ashmole fragment that points to 1590, and the outstanding question as to whether Lucy herself was somehow there. But that doesn’t explain how she was born with it. “So she just has… every witch ability? Somehow?”

“We don’t know what she has.” Jiya looks at the black-and-white chromosome pairs on the screen, the helixes of DNA, and then back at him. “She’s a chimera. And if you had brought her back here, we could have done more tests. But since you left her in France –”

“I told you, it’s fine.” Flynn glances at Rufus, to see how he’s taking all this talk of witches and magic and fell powers. “So who knows about this? Who took it? If it wasn’t Cahill, then who could it possibly –”

And at that, he stops. Whoever raided the lab has been very careful, but he has a suspicion in the back of his head that he’s been meaning to follow up for a while, and there’s no time like the present. He gets to his feet. “I need to pay a visit.”
Jiya gives him a look like he hasn’t so much as thanked her for spending the entire day to come get him, so he makes a note to do that later, and speeds out. It’s not worth driving, he can get there faster on foot anyway, and it might get messy when he does. He isn’t sure where exactly Jessica Proctor might be, but he knows she has a post at Corpus Christi, and might just be leaving for the day. Otherwise, he’ll track her across the city.

Flynn makes it to Corpus Christi in double-quick time, loiters by the porter’s lodge, and surveils the quad until he spots Jessica. She’s hurrying down the path, looking grim and distracted, and he steps deliberately out, right into her way, so fast that she nearly crashes into him. “Good evening,” he says, with dangerous politeness. “Been a while, hasn’t it?”

“Fly – Flynn?” Jessica stares at him. They obviously know each other, from the ill-fated days of her attachment with Wyatt, and their relationship wasn’t exactly warm. Flynn thought it was stupid for a vampire to take up with a witch (no comment) and that Wyatt was endangering too much for her, risking his position and their family and the entire Covenant. “I thought you were – that is, I mean –”

“Thought I was in France, maybe?” Flynn can scent a weakness. “Is that why you decided to break into my lab?”

That was a stab in the dark, since he still doesn’t have any solid proof that she did it, but there’s just enough of a flicker on her face to tell him that he’s struck home. He takes a sharp step, blocking her back against the wall. “Care to explain why?”

“Let me go,” Jessica says. “You can’t –”

“You stole Lucy’s information.” Flynn takes another step. “She’s your friend, and yet you’re selling her out to – to who? Who are you working for? Benjamin Cahill? He didn’t want to be spotted getting it himself, so he asked you to –”

“Cahill would have sent Emma.” Jessica looks as if she didn’t want to say that, and bites her tongue on it, but it’s too late. “I didn’t –”

Flynn smiles, allowing her to see that his fangs are now present and very sharp. “If you don’t want to tell me on your own accord –”

Jessica flashes up a hand, trying to conjure a spell to knock him on his heels, but Flynn is ready for that, and ducks away. They engage in a brief and furious struggle, a light goes on in one of the quad windows overhead, and if he does not want to explain why he is accosting a member of faculty on college premises, he should be careful. They break apart, but Flynn once more cuts her off when she tries to dart past him. “You’re not going anywhere until you tell me who you gave that to!”

“I –” Jessica stares at him, white-faced and furious. “You don’t know what you’re messing with. I – I’m sorry. Lucy’s my friend, like you said. I didn’t want to do it, but he – he made me. He said that he would – look, he knows about –”

“Who?” Some of Flynn’s anger dissipates, replaced by suspicion and confusion. He could be totally wrong, but thinking of what Gennady Sokolov said last night has him on edge. “Temple?” he says. “Michael Temple? You’re a witch. Why the hell would you help a vampire? That vampire?”

Jessica’s face flares in shock. “What – how did you –?”

“Trust me,” Flynn growls. “I know Temple. Is it him, yes or no?”

Jessica chews her lip, angry and mutinous and scared. Finally she says, “Yes. He made me. He said
that he would – I had to.”

There’s a very fraught pause as they eye each other, and Flynn tries to decide if it would get him anywhere to push for what blackmail material Michael goddamn Temple has on a witch. Not just any witch, that is true – Jessica nearly had a Covenant-destroying relationship with Wyatt, could usefully be cultivated for hard feelings against the de Clermont family, might know their dark secrets and be incentivized to spill them, and since Flynn is already ten steps behind the cunning bastard, there’s no way to know how long Temple has been making use of Jessica. After another pause, Flynn demands, “Did you already give it to him? Lucy’s information, whatever you took from the lab?”

“I emailed it this morning.” Jessica looks away. “I don’t know what he wanted, I didn’t dare to ask. Like I said, I’m sorry. But I had to do what’s best for – for me. I don’t know how you know him, but if you do, you know it’s hard to say no.”

No matter how angry he is at her for breaking into his lab, stealing his work, and exposing Lucy to a very dangerous enemy as a result, Flynn is unable to deny that. Michel of Antioch has deceived, tricked, and manipulated countless people, including the entire Templar order and high-ranking members of church and state alike. In some ways, as dangerous as Gerbert of Aurillac was, his right-hand man was even more so, and they only half finished the job when they killed Gerbert. Indeed, Flynn had a chance to go after Michel, badly wounded though he was, but he gave it up to save Gabriel. Gerbert had stabbed him with a silver-tipped cedar stake, the most lethal combination for a vampire – it luckily just missed the heart, but if Flynn hadn’t done something right away, Gabriel would have died. And back then, of course, there was not even a question of losing his brother. Not even a whisper.

His mouth tightens, and he shakes it off. No matter if Jessica has insisted that she was forced into doing it, and he has no reason not to believe her, this does not guarantee that she will not do it again. If Temple has made her betray a friend and fellow witch in order to break into vampire property and pass critical information to him, another vampire, he must have something spectacular to hold against her indeed, and it can’t just be vague unflattering rumors about her old relationship with Wyatt. That was almost seven years ago, they are already well in circulation among the de Clermonts’ enemies, and Jessica is an ambitious, capable woman who is not about to be deterred by obnoxious little men scheming to derail her career with some ill-advised past boyfriend. If it came to that, she might publicly reveal the information and own it, rather than wait to be hamstrung. So this can’t be that, but –

While Flynn is stumped, Jessica has taken advantage of the opportunity to slip past him, through the gate and out into Oriel Square. He starts after her, but he can’t attack her in the middle of a public street, and there’s still the question of whether doing so would tip Temple off before time. Since he has such an advantage already, the element of surprise might be crucial, as long as Flynn can make it look like he doesn’t know about him. And there’s the obvious possibility of yet more drama with Wyatt if Flynn goes after Jessica now. But given as Wyatt has already failed to warn them about Gennady Sokolov, and since it’s not Flynn’s witch ex-girlfriend that has teamed up with their oldest enemy –

He runs out into the street, deciding that to hell with family equilibrium, he has every right to stop her. But Jessica has vanished, and if Flynn starts angrily asking passersby about the blonde woman that just went by, he is going to look very creepy, very fast. He sniffs, trying to catch her scent, but there is a large party of rowdy Christ Church toffs across the way, all in black tie and reeking of champagne, and they have pretty much obliterated it. Flynn swears under his breath, decides that if they stop Michael Temple first it won’t matter, and with relations between creatures on a knife-edge, he does not need to do anything more. He’s learned enough for now, and he whirls around and
heads back to the laboratory, muttering.

University security is there again when he returns, wanting to take his statement, because it is his lab. Flynn explains tersely that he was out of the country for work and Jiya, his assistant, discovered the mess. He can’t be sure whether to give Jessica’s name to them. Human police interfering with this could blow up quickly and cause even more damage, and he would then have to explain why an early modernist at a college across town would have any motive to steal from a biochemist. It’s not like they have rival research, or are competing to publish a paper in the same field, or anything else that might motivate academic skullduggery in the normal course of things. So he promises that the lab will review CCTV footage and pass on anything useful, and practically shoos them out.

“What’s going on?” Jiya says, the instant they’re gone. “Where did you just disappear to? Again, I might add? You can’t keep doing this, it’s ridiculous. I understand not telling me everything, but if you’re going to ask me to cover for you and trust that you have this under control – which you are not doing, I might add – then you need to – ”

“I went to see Jessica.” Flynn leans against the table, arms crossed, toes tapping. “She confessed. She did it.”

“And you didn’t – ” Jiya does a double take. “You didn’t tell security, who were literally just right here?”

“Sorry to interrupt and everything,” Rufus says. “But who’s Jessica, what the hell is going on, and what exactly are we doing about it?”

“Do we mind clearing the human out of here first?” Flynn grouses. “I’m not up to giving the SparkNotes version of the supernatural world right now.”

Jiya gives him a searing look. “Rufus stays. He’s been a lot more helpful than you. And I’ve been catching him up on plenty, thanks.”


“Speak for yourself, Nosferatu.” Rufus folds his arms in return. “At least I’ve been here.”

It is possible that there is about to be a highly undignified bitch fight, or at least lethally sustained round of sass, before Jiya utters an exasperated noise and both of them snap to attention. Flynn manages to convey that Jessica Proctor is a figure of considerable interest to them from previous unfortunate events, that she fessed up to breaking and entering, and has put Lucy in more danger by sending on her findings to Michael Temple. That name isn’t familiar to either Jiya or Rufus, and while they look worried, they also look confused. “So, like,” Rufus says. “I’m guessing he’s evil?”

“Yes,” Flynn says. “He’s a vampire, and he’s on the Congregation now, apparently. He has considerable motive to hold a grudge against the de Clermonts, since Gabriel and I killed his master back in the fourteenth century and ruined some long-held pet plans of theirs.”

“Fourteenth century?” Rufus’s eyes bug out slightly, perhaps at the revelation of just how old they in fact are. “I mean, I might hold a grudge that long if someone spoiled The Force Awakens or whatever, but hasn’t he gotten a hobby this entire time?”

“This probably has been his hobby.” Flynn blows out a breath. “This isn’t good. Temple’s very dangerous. I had a chance to kill him too, at the end of that fight, but I didn’t take it.”

“You what?” Jiya’s not used to hearing about him as a hardened soldier and ruthless killer, has only
known him as the retiring, reclusive, eccentric academic. She frowns. “So you let him go? If you spared his life, why would he want—”

“It’s complicated.” Flynn looks down at his hands. “I had to. To save Gabriel.”

Jiya looks at him with an expression of troubled sympathy. She is aware at least that things did not always used to be like this, even if she does not have all the answers. For his part, Flynn does not want to drag this sordid family history out in front of Rufus, is wary of how much Jiya seems to have told him already, and isn’t sure if he should once more try to frighten Rufus off from this, or if it will just put him in more danger. However little Flynn likes it, the cat is out of the bag, and Jiya will be very mad at him if he blows this for her, again. He does not have to approve of their relationship to admit that as her father, he has a duty to look after her and whatever annoying, smart-mouthed software geek she has unfortunately decided to attach herself to. Maybe Rufus will get intimidated and drop out on his own. And if he does hang in there, well. There might be some argument about him actually being good enough for Jiya.

“Okay,” Rufus says, clearly striving to get them back on track. “Jessica’s a witch, right? Correct me if I’m wrong, but don’t witches and vampires super hate each other? So why is she working for Temple, who’s a vampire?”

“He blackmailed her, I think. I don’t know with what, she… got away.” Flynn could have been far more assertive about taking her down, but… much as he and Wyatt don’t really get along or have much in common, they are still family. Flynn can’t just unload the A-bomb on Jessica. He tried to bluff and intimidate her, but that didn’t work, and he’s pretty sure Wyatt has not entirely gotten over Jessica. He’s not going to tell his brother that he just flat-out murdered his ex-girlfriend, and there are practical considerations against it. The entire creature world thinks he kidnapped Lucy and may soon find out about him imprisoning Gennady. Maria’s history is likewise well known. This seems to be confirmation of what everyone already thinks about the de Clermonts, and if that’s the case—

“Hold on,” Rufus says. He has wandered over to one of the work stations and picked something up, and Flynn realizes that it is the photographs of Lucy’s murdered parents, which Jiya apparently brought back to the lab for evidence purposes. It’s obviously a grisly thing to look at, and Rufus could just be possessed with morbid curiosity, but he frowns down at it as in deep thought. “Didn’t you say that Benjamin Cahill dropped off these pictures? The really creepy older dude who attacked you and Lucy in the library? Should we be asking why he just happens to have a copy of these?”

Flynn frowns in turn. It has struck him as passably odd, but what with everything, he didn’t have time to think about it. “What does that have to do with Jessica?”

“I don’t know, but it seems weird that all this effort to blackmail witches is suddenly happening, right? First Lucy and now Jessica?” Rufus turns around. “And I’m no crime-scene investigator, but how were these people supposed to have died?”

Flynn and Jiya exchange a startled look. “I’m not sure,” Flynn says, “but I think the story was that they were killed by villagers. Some episode of rural hysteria. It was unfortunate, but—”

“If that was the case, there would be physical wounds, right?” Rufus takes the pictures over, and they all look down at the bodies of Carol Preston and Henry Wallace. Flynn is suddenly grateful that Lucy isn’t here, as Rufus flips through the stack. “Look,” he says. “There are a couple angles. And there’s blood and stuff, but I don’t see any actual wounds, in any of these pictures, on either of them. If a bunch of superstitious hayseeds stabbed them with pitchforks or whatever, shouldn’t there be multiple, ugly, visible injuries?”

“You’re not wrong,” Flynn has to admit. This would be the cleanest mob killing he’s ever seen, and
neither Carol nor Henry appear to have been so much as lynched. Obviously, he is grateful that they weren’t, for Lucy’s sake, and that they at least appear to have died quickly, but Rufus is correct that the physical evidence does not match up. “So…”

“So,” Rufus says. “That Cahill guy has these pictures, and either he was so arrogant that he didn’t realize that they disproved the entire story, or they were more than just blackmail. They were…. I don’t know. A warning.”

“What?” Jiya stares at him. “Are you suggesting that – that witches killed Carol Preston and Henry Wallace? That doesn’t make any – Carol and Henry were witches themselves, why would their own kind turn on them and stage a cover-up? You can’t be suggesting that Jessica has anything to do with this, are you? She’s about the same age as Lucy, she’d have been just a child when this happened. And I don’t – she couldn’t possibly have been friends with her this long if she had helped kill her parents –”

“No, I don’t think Jessica did it,” Rufus says. “I mean, technically, vampires could have killed them too, right? But if that was the case, the witches would have made sure to broadcast that fact. It would be to their advantage to prove that the other side broke the rules first and barbarically murdered some innocent witches and orphaned their daughter. But if they pinned it on some random-ass villagers in butt-fuck nowhere, nobody asks any questions, no suspicions are raised, the vampires don’t get all pissy about false accusations. It’s written off as a senseless tragedy and everyone gets on with their lives. And nobody has any reason to suspect that Carol and Henry were betrayed by their own kind. But why?”

Flynn stares at him, unsettled. He wants to make a comment about how Rufus seems to be taking this rather well, settling right into playing PI for the supernatural world, but then again, Rufus’s genius has never been in question. And now that he has pointed all of this out, it is unsettlingly obvious that the story and the evidence don’t match up. Someone is lying somewhere about something, possibly several someones and several somethings, and it doesn’t take much effort to suspect strongly that it’s Cahill. There’s a pause. Then Jiya says, “So whatever the rules usually are, they don’t apply?”

“Maybe.” Rufus continues to frown. “If witches are killing witches and covering it up, why couldn’t a witch work for a vampire? Maybe Jessica knows something about this and was going to blow the whistle, maybe she has something else going on, who knows. Maybe Temple sailed in promising her that he’d help get justice for her friend and expose endemic corruption in the supernatural world? I’m just spit-balling here, and I’ve known about all of this for like five days. So if either of you want to help out, feel free.”

“You’re right that Temple likes to play the chivalrous, sympathetic, supportive older mentor.” Flynn rubs his chin. “He used to be a Templar – well, he joined the order to help destroy them, but still. Likes to act as if he’s generous and selfless and just doing what’s best for everyone, and you’re the bad one if you don’t listen to him. He could have manipulated Jessica, but I don’t know if it’s with this or not. And she said that he forced her. It didn’t sound like he’d fed her some high-minded plan to do the right thing. She was scared.”

There’s another pause as they communally rack their brains. Then Rufus says, “Should we go to Venice? That’s where these Congregation people are, right? Maybe if Jiya and I went there and tried to –”

“No,” Flynn says sharply. “The two of you, a relatively young vampire and a human, aren’t remotely prepared to handle Michael Temple on your own. There’s no way I could put you in that kind of danger. And if you leave here, Ashmole 782 is completely unguarded. We can’t give Cahill and Emma free rein to do whatever they want in Oxford. And you think you know a lot, Rufus, but you
“Did you find out anything at Sept-Tours?” Jiya looks at Flynn. “That was the point of going there, right? About Ashmole 782 and whatever you and Lucy could do there?”

“Later.” Flynn is not explaining that in front of Rufus. “And I don’t know if I should just – ”

“Maybe you should tell her,” Jiya says, more than a little pointedly. “She deserves to know the truth. I’d want to know, if I was her. But for God’s sake, can you do it tactfully? It’s going to be enough of a shock hearing that her parents might have been killed by their own kind, and I think you’ve done enough to that poor woman.”

Flynn wants to protest that he’s handled this fine, but he suspects that Jiya will be talking to Cecilia again soon, and does not want to give her more rope to hang him with. It’s true that Lucy has a right to know this, though he can’t imagine it will do anything for her deeply anxious and ambivalent relationship with magic and her own kind. They’ve also just learned that that is considerable – that it indeed might be virtually limitless, especially in comparison with modern witches – and this is a lot to throw on her. But Lucy’s strong. She’ll handle it. He both does and does not want to go back to Sept-Tours. He has to, eventually. But when nothing has changed about what they can and cannot be, when he’s still so terrified that he’ll lose control and do something to her, damage her, or worse –

“I’ll think about it,” he says instead. “In the meantime, you two, don’t do anything stupid.”

Jiya and Rufus exchange a look that makes him feel as if they’re silently judging him in this department. He has to at least call his mother at some point and update her that there might be even more tentacles of the kraken than previously feared, but he can’t let himself think about Lucy, not too much. It starts an ache in his chest and a hollowness in his gut, which he hopes is just the craving, the unfulfilled hunger that he refuses to give into, has been tormenting himself trying to beat into submission. If nothing else, Harry bloody Houdini cannot fault him in this department. He told Flynn to be sure that he could control himself around Lucy, and Flynn has not slacked from that vigilance from an instant, never forgotten what could happen if he did. But he feels it up and down his body and soul like a raw bruise, and while he knows it’s for the best, that makes it no easier to bear.

Flynn gets to his feet. “I’ll finish cleaning up here,” he says. It’s the least he can do, they’ve been covering for him, and once more, he prefers to be alone with a clearly defined task to accomplish. “You two, go – get some pizza or something.”

Jiya can probably tell that something’s wrong if he’s actively encouraging her to spend more time with Rufus, and as they’re pulling on their jackets, she drifts in his direction. “Dad – ” She looks as if she damn well knows he has hang-ups, but she wants to say it, and wants him to hear. “You don’t have to deal with this by yourself, all right? Whatever’s going on, whatever you’re going through. Let me help, okay? Please. I don’t like seeing you this way.”

“I’m fine.” Flynn manages a smile. “Just a lot to take in, that’s all. You go have a nice time. I’ll let you know what I decide.”

Jiya puts an awkward hand on his shoulder – they’re not really physically demonstrative, since their relationship tends to professor and assistant, or at most, older brother and younger sister – and pats him gingerly. Then she pulls back, wraps her scarf around her neck, and takes Rufus’s arm when he offers it. As they walk out, Flynn has to fight a renewed ache. Yes, this will end disastrously. Yes, he has good reasons for not wanting Jiya to date a human. Yes, Rufus has been helpful, but he is still a liability, and they have to expend time and effort protecting him. Yes, all of that. But they look happy, even in the middle of all this chaos. They look like they could have something, together, and Garcia Flynn de Clermont, knowing how deeply he cannot, is just a little heartbroken.
He watches them until they’re gone, and he can be sure that no further calamity has befallen them. Then, when the lab is empty, the only sound is the buzzing fluorescents overhead, and nobody has to see his face, he blinks hard, tells himself it is only the dust in his eyes, and starts to sweep.

The village square is swathed in chilly November dusk as Lucy follows Maria out of the library and tries to decide if she should in fact be suspicious. She doesn’t think Maria will hurt her, not exactly, but her conception of keeping Lucy safe might differ from everyone else’s, perhaps drastically. She did say that they should talk as women, that there were things Lucy should know, but somehow this doesn’t feel like a prelude to cozy chatter or girls’ night out. She keeps her eyes on Maria’s back; the de Clermont matriarch is a few paces ahead, looking abstracted. Then she turns to Lucy. “Come. This way.”

Lucy hesitates, then speeds up to walk at Maria’s side. This feels a bit more equal, though Maria may not want a witch presuming to place herself on such footing, in the village and the castle where she’s lived for centuries and where her rule runs unquestioned. But Lucy has apologized all she possibly can for something that was not her fault, and she’s not going to grovel, no matter what. Thry reach the far side of the square and the ancient church with its slightly leaning bell tower. Maria looks up at it, then opens the kissing gate and proceeds up the walk. The lawn is neatly trimmed, and the old gravestones have been carefully kept straight and neatly maintained. There must be countless generations of Sept-Tours’ residents buried here, and their memory has clearly not been forgotten. Apparently vampires can in fact enter churches, because Maria pushes open the unlocked door and crosses the threshold, though she does not touch the small bowl of holy water held by a serenely smiling stone saint. She tilts her head, beckoning Lucy through.

Lucy carefully steps down to the floor, looking around. It smells like an old church, is filled with eerie, dusty twilight, and they are the only two people there. A rack of prayer candles is set at the front of the nave, and there is a community noticeboard pinned up with some items for sale, village potlucks, and an invitation to a retreat with some local Jesuits. Everything is in French, as this is a humble working church, well off the tourist circuit. The floor stones are worn smooth with centuries of feet, and while Lucy isn’t religious, per se, she has found herself wanting to believe in a higher power, an organizing purpose, a reason for things happening one way and not another. It’s different from magic, and sometimes she doesn’t know if it’s just her historian’s brain retroactively projecting a pattern, trying to narrativize chaos, a comforting delusion. But it feels like she has been supposed to be here for a while, like there is a reason she is – almost as if she has known it long since. It’s very strange.

“Here,” Maria says, her voice soft, but startling enough in the hush to make Lucy jump. “This is what I wanted you to see.”

She is standing near the altar, near the tombstone that has roped off from being walked on. It looks relatively new, or at least has been periodically replaced after growing worn over time – and the time has been vast. Lorena et Iris, the etching reads, surrounding an elegant, floriated cross. Carissime uxore et filia. Morte in anno DXL. Beati es innocentes.

For a moment, Lucy can’t figure out why Maria is showing her this grave – it’s touching, of course, especially since there’s still a relatively fresh bouquet of flowers lying nearby, but she can’t figure out what it’s to do with her. Then she looks back at the inscription. Lorena and Iris, beloved wife and daughter. Died in the year 540. Blessed are the innocents. And back in Woodstock, Flynn told her that he became a vampire in the year 540. Is this – are these – ?

Maria has been watching her face, waiting for it to dawn on her, and Lucy looks up with a start. “Yes,” Maria says. “They were Garcia’s wife and daughter. They lived here in the village, before he
was a vampire. He helped build this church originally, and has preserved it and rebuilt it all these
many years. I imagine there is very little of them left now – bone dust and fragments, if that. But he
will tend it until the end of the world.”

“I…” Lucy doesn’t know what to say. She sits down on a pew in the front row, looking at the shared
grate. “What happened to them?”

“They were killed,” Maria says. “A senseless tragedy. The family met with robbers on the road, not
far from here. They had traveled to Clermont – Arvernis, as it was called then – to visit the fair there.
Iris had begged to go. Instead, she and her mother were murdered for the sake of a few silver denarii
and a scrap of silk. Garcia brought them home to be buried, then gathered a dozen men from the
village and went out to hunt down every single one of the bandits who had done it. Their heads were
mounted on stakes for the crows, but it brought Garcia no peace. I cannot be entirely sure whether he
leapt from the bell tower, the night after he returned, or fell. Either way, I found him on the stones
below.”

The mental image of Flynn, broken and bleeding, having flung himself from the tower in utter
despair, cuts into Lucy’s chest like black acid. She almost wants to tell Maria to stop, she doesn’t
need to know any more, but her tongue has gotten stuck. For her part, Maria seems half in a trance,
until she continues matter-of-factly. “I knew him in passing. He was, after all, one of my villagers,
and I had been greatly grieved to hear of Lorena and Iris’s death. When I found him there that night,
mortally wounded, I had a choice to make. I had no time to send for my husband, or for the matter to
be formally discussed. So I gave Garcia the gift, made him my son, to save his life. This meant that
he became a de Clermont, and so his very name was now a constant reminder of where he had lost
those he loved the best. But as I said, there was no time. The effect of the siring is different on
everyone, and not all of them succeed. In this case, it did. But Garcia had been turned in a moment of
darkest desperation and rage, and as a new vampire, he was…”

Maria trails off again, looking up at the rose window above the altar. “Difficult,” she settles on,
which seems like a colossal understatement. “Wild and angry and violently bloodthirsty, determined
to continue hunting the brothers and the sons and the sons of the sons of anyone who had anything to
do with his family’s death. Asher and Gabriel tried to restrain him, to help him, though I wonder
what they thought of me for landing them with an uncontrollable new member of the family, when
before we had been entirely happy as three. Eventually they did get through to him, he settled down
somewhat, and we fashioned ourselves anew as four. He and Gabriel became the closest, the best of
friends, brothers in arms and fellow soldiers. Once upon a time, there was nothing in the world that
could come between the pair of them, or stop them. Long ago.”

Lucy can hear the deep pain in Maria’s voice, and makes a small sound to show that she’s listening,
and she is sorry for it. Maria does not continue for several moments, and Lucy thinks the story is
over, until Maria says, “Garcia did not love anyone the way he had loved Lorena. Not until Matej
Radić. And that was an even greater tragedy, for him and for all of us. So you see. It is not your
fault, nor should you even wish for it. It is better this way.”

“I – what?” Lucy can once more feel her face flushing like a fire engine. She isn’t sure if Maria has
been listening to the gossip in the village, or has just drawn her own conclusions. “Did you – did you
just tell me that he couldn’t – do you actually think that we – ”

“I am not blind,” Maria says. “I have seen the way my son looks at you, and acts around you, even if
he has never been able to easily speak his heart. And I have seen as well how you react to him. But
Garcia has only ever truly, deeply loved two people in his very long life, Lorena and Matej, and both
of those ended in unspeakable, irreparable tragedy. You must understand how scarred he is, how
damaged, how unable to embark upon it for a third time – if that was even possible, which of course
it is not. Surely you will agree? You have set your mind to forget about him, after all. It should not be difficult.”

Lucy feels as if she’s been hit in the face with a tire iron. She doesn’t even know what to respond to first. She feels guilty over being frustrated with Flynn’s utter inability to say – well, to say anything, or act like a normal person, or why he won’t do anything when he wants (she thinks he wants?) to. It makes sense if his romantic history is so deeply traumatic, how badly he must question his own judgment or whether he deserves anything good. She even has a sense that Maria is giving this as an awkward peace offering, venturing up Flynn’s tragic backstory in an attempt to explain why things have constantly derailed with Lucy. But at the same time, the overall purpose of this conversation is plain. Maria does not want Lucy anywhere near her son, if she is going to be the cause of a third such emotional cataclysm and indeed might have already started it, and as far as it goes, Lucy cannot blame her. If Maria has to reveal just enough raw truth to make it very clear, then she will. This is not an invitation to bond, but to put her hands up and back away.

Lucy looks down at them, her fingers twisted together between her knees. Perhaps she should be perversely gratified, since Maria evidently thinks there’s enough of a chance that Flynn has feelings for her that she needs to issue this formal warning, but it just makes her feel unhappier than ever. Jesus, this is such a mess, such a fucking mess, and being essentially told to shut up and take it on the chin by your crush’s mother just ups the mortification factor all over again. It isn’t clear if Maria actually thinks she’s being comforting – none of the de Clermonts are what you would call emotionally intuitive – or what. Lucy sits and stares at the altar without saying a word.

“Oh,” she says at last, the word echoing in the empty church. It is almost completely dark now, though some outside light filters through the windows, the stained glass of Virgin and Child, her veil worked in Chartres blue. Mother Maria and her son indeed, Lucy thinks, if that is not verging on blasphemy. “Should we go now?”

Maria looks at her again, as if waiting for something else, perhaps some confirmation that Lucy has received the message and will cease all efforts or intentions on Flynn, but Lucy can’t say anything else right now. She rises to her feet, gets her bag off the pew, and pulls her jacket close, leading the way out of the church and letting Maria, for once, be the one to trail behind. Part of her, apparently not enough of a glutton for punishment the first time, wants to ask who Matej Radić was, but she also doesn’t want to hear whatever Maria might tell her. And if she truly wanted to get over Flynn, or thought she was really going to do it, she might welcome this development. But she doesn’t.

It’s a silent walk back to Sept-Tours. Lucy is shivering by the time they reach the main house, doesn’t think she can take the ordeal of eating with the family, and requests Cecilia to send her supper to the library. She will of course take care to eat separately and wash her hands before she touches any of the books, and she doesn’t know if she’s going to get anywhere, but she should be useful. She should be doing work. Making progress. Being a strong woman. She should – she should –

Lucy eats alone in the library, puts the dishes by the door, and makes a valiant effort to restart her research, but it doesn’t take long before she’s staring down at a beautiful, priceless, hand-illuminated sixteenth-century codex on angel magic without seeing it. She can’t even enjoy the delights of Sept-Tours’ collection properly, and she rubs the heels of her hands over both eyes, resisting a traitorous and deeply unwelcome urge to cry. She shuts the book and restores it to its place in the stacks, browses determinedly for another one, and –

“Good evening, Lucy,” a voice says. “Am I interrupting?”

Lucy jumps, almost knocks a book off with her elbow, and manages to catch it. She peers cautiously
around the edge of the shelves, to see Gabriel leaning against the unlit hearth. He’s dressed as casually as she has ever seen him, and seems to have shed the expensive suit and cufflinks as a gesture of—who knows, maybe a demonstration of sincerity, an attempt to meet the plebeians on their level. As ever, she did not hear him come in, though that is beside the point with a vampire. They stare at each other. Then Gabriel says, “My mother spoke to you earlier.”

It isn’t a question, and it’s hard to tell whether he’s here to apologize for what she said or not. Lucy wrenches her jaw apart. “Yes.”

“Ah.” Gabriel’s long, elegant fingers tap on the mantel. “Her words came from a mother’s natural love for her son, and desperate desire not to see him hurt again, not when we all doubt he could survive it. Or for that matter, if we could. Surely you understand?”

“Yes,” Lucy says again, very stiffly. “But I’m not sure if you do. Garcia is—I don’t think he actually has any kind of—”

“Him?” Gabriel ghosts a chuckle. “Say something to anyone he fancied, or be remotely successful in pursuing it? Not likely. I used to attempt to arrange pleasurable diversions for him, or encourage him to take part in mine—there was plenty to go around—and that met with chronic and frankly pitiable failure. He pined after Matej for months before I forced him to go and actually speak to him. Of course.” A shadow crosses his majestic face like stormclouds sweeping over the plain. “I had long and bitter leisure to repent of that.”

Once more, Lucy is consumed by the desperate desire to ask who Matej is, if he (not that Flynn’s sexual orientation is the most pressing question, and he was married to a woman and slept with Eleanor of Aquitaine, so maybe he also bats for both teams) was the person that Flynn said he was willing to break the rules for, the other day. The person he wanted to turn into a vampire against all of his father’s prohibitions to the contrary, the elusive ghost who seems to hang over this house and be responsible for so much of the damaged hearts inside it. But both Maria and Gabriel seem completely unsurprised that Flynn would biff it spectacularly with someone he actually liked, and while this is not the time, it lights a small, flickering spark of hope inside her. Lucy asks herself feebly what happened to getting over him, but with what they seem to be hinting—if he really does—Never mind. She is not going to act like a moony schoolgirl, and this is absolutely no guarantee that Flynn will not resume digging to China when (if?) he returns. Once more, she and Gabriel regard each other in the awkward silence that appears to be their métier. Then Gabriel produces a bottle of wine and two glasses from nowhere, fills one, and holds it out. “I suspect you could use it.”

“I—thanks.” Lucy takes it, hesitates just long enough before taking a sip that Gabriel makes a gesture as if to assure her that he has not poisoned it, and discovers that it is in fact very good, though in France, that’s not a surprise. She sinks down on one of the armchairs in front of the hearth, and after a moment, he takes the other. They sit there, sipping the wine without speaking. Then she says, “Did you find out more about—about the witch?”

“Gennady Sokolov?” Gabriel glances over at her, one dark eyebrow cocked. “He remains insistent that we guarantee your safety, and I believe he has told us most, if not all, of what he knows. I did phone my brother in Venice, and he confirmed that he has been in some sort of contact with the elder Sokolov, Anton, the one on the Congregation. Evidently Gennady decided to bypass the preliminaries and go straight to France to rescue you, when he was informed of the need for it. Rather worrisomely, however, Wyatt did say that Michael Temple has left Venice, and he is not certain where he has gone. He was displeased with me for not warning him earlier that the man posed a grave threat, and I noted in turn that he had not mentioned the name to us. If he had, we might have done something then. But Wyatt is insecure about his position on the Congregation, and
reluctant to do anything that looks too much like asking for my help. The world largely assuming, after all, that I would be better suited for it. Yet I wanted nothing to do with that farce, so it became his instead.”

Lucy glances at him. Given what Flynn has said about the youngest brother, Wyatt, there isn’t exactly an abundance of trust, affection, or communication between any of the three de Clermont sons. At least not these days. Maria said that Gabriel and Garcia used to be inseparable, and Lucy can only wonder how that crumbled. She takes another sip of wine. “Are you going to let Gennady go, then? Surely he’s not a threat?”

“I have not decided.” Gabriel continues to regard the unlit hearth. “He was the one who made the intemperate choice to attack us, after all, and under the laws of our kind, there is some right to hold him prisoner for that. Nor do I wish to give the impression that future trespassers on our lands could expect a smack on the wrist and an overnight stay before being set at liberty. I do not intend to harm Sokolov, but nor can I immediately agree to release him.”

Lucy considers that. As the reason for Gennady Sokolov’s daring solo raid on Sept-Tours, she feels obliged to intercede for mercy on his behalf, but it’s clear that Gabriel is not about to budge, and she is not about to push too hard. She drinks more wine, holds out her glass for a refill when Gabriel offers it, and reminds herself not to shotgun it. She’s had just enough to feel relaxed, and before she can stop herself, it breaks free. “Who’s Matej? Matej Radić.”

Gabriel goes tense from head to toe. Lucy thinks that he will be gone in a literal flash, pulling Flynn’s favorite trick of vanishing every time the conversation veers too close to the emotional, but he doesn’t. He remains unreadable, until he finally turns back to her. “My mother also mentioned that, did she?”

“She – yes. And I…” Lucy hesitates. “It just seems… important to whatever’s happening here. I completely understand if you don’t want to tell me, but – ”

“I am not sure if I could, or should, tell you all of it.” Gabriel takes a long slug of his wine, as if in some ancestral need to fortify himself. “I understand why my brother did not, but I… very well. In briefest sum, Matej Radić was a captain in the Prussian army. Originally from Dalmatia, the land of Garcia’s human birth. You will perhaps know that in the eighteenth century, it was common for men from across Europe to serve with the Prussians to gain military experience, since they were regarded as the best soldiers in the world. Garcia and I had joined the Prussians for a time as well – the reasons are complicated, we do not need to rehearse them all. That is where we met Matej. But when the Seven Years’ War began in 1756, we were legally obligated to return to France, as French subjects, and take France’s side. However, France had allied with Austria, Prussia’s archrival, and if we had done this, it would have meant that Matej was now our enemy, that we might have to face him across a battlefield. Garcia refused to countenance the idea, and I refused to leave without him. We had been French for over a thousand years, and he turned his back on it, for the sake of love.”

Lucy tries not to look too interested in this part of the story. “So they were – they were, you know… together?”

“Yes,” Gabriel says, with a grim smile. “Garcia loved him passionately. Such things were not publicly accepted, but far from unheard of either, especially in the army. However, there were those who resented our presence and influence, and the unnatural character of this attachment. They made it clear that unless Garcia left at once, they would go to the authorities and report him as a vampire and a sodomite, and he would be executed. We did not fear whatever they could try to do to us, but did not want to put Matej in danger – I cared for him too, you understand. We were willing to go, but he insisted that we stay, and so we did. For the whole seven years of the war, we were traitors to
France, to our homeland and to all of our previous lives. We fought for Prussia, and in 1762, our side won. That was when Garcia decided to take Matej here, to Sept-Tours, to introduce him to the family and announce that they intended to be together. I am not sure if he had already conceived a plan to give him the gift, but it is possible. Garcia did not want to do it himself, as by creature law, that would make Matej his son, and that would be awkward for their continued intimacy. But he had been speaking of making Matej immortal, that he wanted it to be forever, so the thought must have been there. I believe he may have intended to ask Cecilia.”

Gabriel trails off, tips the wine bottle to his mouth, and drains the rest of it. It’s clear that they’ve reached the part of the story he doesn’t want to tell, and Lucy fights the urge to say that it’s fine, they can stop, she can guess from here. But she can’t, she doesn’t know how this went so suddenly and systematically and unstoppable wrong. Once more, she struggles with unwarranted jealousy over the fact that Flynn clearly did love someone this much, was willing to break all human and supernatural laws for them. But that’s nothing to glorify, not if it ended in flames. “So,” she says carefully. “Flynn brought Matej here, and that’s why you didn’t want me to be here too? Because something…?”

Gabriel doesn’t answer for a long moment. Finally he says, “We forgot, of course, that the rest of our family had not been traitors. My son, Christian – he was part of the Secret du Roi. One of the agents charged with pursuing Louis XV’s private policy aims, on personal orders from the king of France himself, and sometimes at odds with the state’s public position. I had been away, I had been with Garcia, I did not know. So Christian met Matej, and realized that he was the reason we had engaged in years-long, high-level treason. He…”

Lucy thinks with a thrill of horror that she never knew he had a son, and that does not bode well for where this is going. She doesn’t want to guess, but maybe Gabriel just doesn’t want to say it out loud. Quietly she asks, “Did Christian turn Matej over to the French?”

“No.” Gabriel continues to stare at nothing. “He asked me what he should do, even though I had not been there for him for seven years, had blindly supported Garcia’s folly over the welfare of the rest of our family. I told him to keep it quiet, that the war was over now and it did not matter, that Garcia loved Matej and they deserved to have a future. But at the same time, Matej realized that Christian was an enemy agent, and… I do not think he knew exactly what he meant to do. Perhaps he only meant to frighten Christian, or perhaps he had a moment of temper – he could be very hot-headed and impulsive, he and Garcia were unfortunately alike in that way. Either way, Christian was leaving Sept-Tours that night, to return to Paris, and Matej told a group of vampire hunters where to find him.”

Lucy feels as if she’s been punched. She again wants to tell him that he can stop, but Gabriel doesn’t look like he can. “It was not the first time,” he says, in a rush. “We had dealt with other people who disliked our continued presence in the Prussian army. We had to kill several of them to keep Garcia and Matej’s secret, including some who had been our friends. Perhaps it was only what we deserved. In any event, Matej broke down and told us what he had done, and Garcia and I rushed out to try to stop Christian. It was – the hunters had caught up to him and it – it was – ”

Gabriel’s voice breaks, which he tries to disguise as a cough, and Lucy reaches out to put her hand on his before she can think better of it. He doesn’t acknowledge it, eyes blank and unseeing, as if this is playing out before him all over again. “We brought Christian back to Sept-Tours, gravely wounded. Perhaps we would have been able to save him, but the hunters had followed us. We were vampires and we were traitors to France, they – they brought many of their friends and fellows, and it was an all-out war. Sept-Tours was attacked, many of the villagers were massacred, their cottages burned. In the chaos, Christian – as I said. Perhaps we could have saved him, if we had a proper chance. But we did not.”
“I am so sorry.” It doesn’t feel in any way adequate, but it’s all Lucy can manage. “Gabriel, I’m – I’m so sorry. You don’t – ”

“One of the hunters went after Garcia,” Gabriel says tonelessly. “Matej got in the way, took the silver bullet meant for him. He was dying, and Garcia tried to turn him, to save him, even after everything their relationship had cost us. I intervened, I tried to stop him, I didn’t – in any case. The process went wrong. Matej survived, but as a horrible half-creature, mad and violent and thirsting ceaselessly for blood, without human reason or faculty. Garcia still could not bear to kill him, so I had to do it. So. That is who he is.”

An overpowering silence hangs over the library as Gabriel finishes his terrible story, as if he has run out of words or strength to keep going. Lucy tightens her grip on his hand, which does not move or stir under hers. She can understand all too well why the de Clermonts would be extremely upset at the idea of Flynn bringing another paramour home, how it seems as if he’s learned nothing and is willing to put them through that nightmare all over again. But she is still, technically, just a work colleague. Or does this mean that she’s not, that she’s something more, whether or not either of them want to admit it? She’s already attracted hostile outsiders to the house as well, even if Gennady Sokolov isn’t a maddened, murderous mob of vampire hunters. She asked for the story and she got it, and she doesn’t know what to do with the sheer scope of the tragedy. Combined with Asher de Clermont’s death two centuries later, they must have pretty much just shut down. This is a broken family, Cecilia said, and that was grandly understating it. No wonder Flynn has been bad at everything with her. No wonder he won’t, he can’t let himself take the risk.

“Thank you,” Lucy says, very softly. “For telling me. I know it wasn’t – it couldn’t have possibly been easy for you, and I am so sorry you had to go through this.”

Gabriel turns his head, looking at her. His eyes are very dark and drowned with grief, and – Lucy doesn’t know what it is, exactly, but they’re still holding hands and he’s somewhat too close, and half a flickering smile pulls at his mouth. “I can see why my brother likes you.”

“I don’t think he – ” Lucy stops. “I don’t know that anyone really – ”

Gabriel shakes his head. Then he leans forward, and she leans in, and –

It’s a very nice kiss. It’s soft, surprisingly so, and gentle, and it’s the first time she has felt as if he too might have any kind of human heart beneath the magnificent, polished, impeccably perfect exterior. They turn their heads, and he puts his hand on her cheek, and half of her wants to go for it. He’s obviously extremely gorgeous, and actually knows what he’s doing. But she’s not twenty-two and stupid any more, she doesn’t need to throw herself into things that she doesn’t really want, accepting the stopgap and the coping mechanism rather than the truth. A little flushed, breathless, she pulls back. “I’m sorry. I – I can’t.”


“I…” Lucy almost doesn’t say it, but Gabriel has been agonizingly, brutally honest with her, and it doesn’t feel like the time to repay that with cowardice. “Yes.”

“Oh?” Gabriel glances at her wryly. “What exactly about his winning ways was it?”

“I don’t know.” Lucy looks at her hands. “I just… I feel like I can do anything in the world when he looks at me. I’m not sure how he feels and I know all the reasons we shouldn’t, and I know – now – all the reasons your family wouldn’t want it either. But I didn’t – I certainly didn’t ask for it, and he ran off to Oxford, and – ”
“I believe you,” Gabriel says, with startling certainty. He rises to his feet, collecting the bottle and the empty glasses. “I have done enough. I will leave you in peace. Good night, Lucy.”

“Good night, Gabriel. I – again. Thank you.”

He inclines his head, and then he’s gone. Lucy leans back in the chair, feeling shaken and raw and tender and very sad, head whirling with everything she has heard tonight from both Maria and Gabriel. Her anger at Flynn has evaporated, and she just wants him to come back and for them to try to have a conversation about this, like adults. He might be angry that his mother and brother have spilled his secrets, or he might be abjectly relieved. It is sometimes easier to have someone else do that emotional heavy lifting, especially when he’s too close to the events and just not good with feelings in the first place. Lucy thinks that if she knows all this and it hasn’t scared her off, surely there has to be a chance? For what, who knows. But something.

At last, she gets up and makes her way into the dark tower, up to her room. She then discovers that Cecilia’s idea of doing laundry was to provide her with an entire new wardrobe, as piles of folded clothing, painstakingly selected in her size, are lying on the bed. Lucy moves them onto the chair, changes into her pajamas, and goes into the bathroom. As she is brushing her teeth, she becomes aware of a small, stinging pain in her mouth, and discovers a fine cut on the inside of her bottom lip. It’s not serious by any means, though it seems to have bled a little, and she winces. How did she –

Just then, Lucy wonders if Gabriel bit her ever so slightly, during the kiss. Used just enough fang to take a hint of blood, and test it for veracity. After all, no matter what she’s said, he needed proof, an unassailable reason to trust her. Vampires can supposedly see people’s memories or feel their emotions by tasting their blood, and if he did that to her – he was suddenly and surprisingly emphatic about believing her, after all. If he has quietly checked for himself that she doesn’t have any ulterior motives, and that she (God help her) does in fact appear to be in love with his brother – is that a good thing? Or… what?

Lucy can’t help but feel somewhat tricked, even as she understands why Gabriel would have done it. But it certainly makes her see an element of cold calculation in that whole moment. He didn’t kiss her because of a sudden surrender to emotion, in other words, but for a deliberate purpose related to his ongoing effort to defend the family from all enemies, external and internal. Like Maria, he might have told her that story in an effort to convince her that it could never be worth it, to give up, that the cost is just too high for everyone. It seems to fit with how the de Clermonts do things – meaning well, but emotionally tone-deaf. And yet, it makes her miss Flynn even more. He would not have done that (true, it’s highly unlikely he would get so far as kissing her, but never mind). He believes her the first time she tells him things, **without** secretly stealing her blood. His past is heinously tragic, and the last thing Lucy wants to do is add to that tragedy, but she feels as if she finally does understand why he is this way, and what it would mean if he – if they – were anything else. She doesn’t know how, or in what way, or even if they will get a chance. But she wants to try.

She goes out, turns down the covers, and glances around to see if he will somehow be there, if wanting will have brought him back, if it ever did for anyone or anything. But he is not, and she closes her eyes, whispers some sort of unformed, tender prayer, and sleeps.
Lucy does not stir until relatively late the next morning, which is a relief insofar as it means that she didn’t have any more disturbing dreams. In fact, she could probably sleep for a few more hours, but her brain is always suspicious of letting her lie still and not do anything productive for too long, and the pale November sunlight slanting into the room is fine and clear and crystalline. It has a chilly lightness to it that makes Lucy wonder if it snowed, and when she gets up and makes her way to the window, she can see a hard frost glittering on the crenels of the walls and the branches of the leafless trees. It gives everything a slightly ethereal, fairytale look, and she wonders if that does in fact make her the princess in the tower, waiting for her knight to come. Hardly. But she would like to know what they’re doing next, she cleared most of her Oxford work yesterday so she doesn’t have to panic too much over falling behind, and she has plenty more questions.

Lucy washes and dresses, heading downstairs and realizing that she’s gotten pretty confident about wandering around Sept-Tours by herself. At least the parts where she has been expressly permitted to go. There is a lot more of it she wants to explore, but she’s not about to venture into anyone else’s tower uninvited, and she has just been issued with a stark reminder that the de Clermonts remain very wary about her presence here – but not even necessarily because she is a witch. Because of the effect that she could have or has already had on Flynn, and that goes much deeper.

When she steps into the dining room, Cecilia and Houdini are enjoying a morning coffee and chinwag, and the daemon rises out of his chair with a dashing grin. “You look lovely this morning, Lucy,” he says gallantly. “Can I offer you a pastry? Not quite as delicious as what we can get in Paris, I’m afraid, but still rather good.”

“I’m sure it’s wonderful,” Lucy says, taking a frosted choux bun and a tenderly flaky butter croissant from the plate that he offers her. The delight of it being the actual Harry Houdini has not totally worn off, and she takes the seat next to him. She has the sense that they might have been talking about her before she appeared, and wonders if she should play dumb. She knows a lot more about the family than she did yesterday, and while the two of them have been the most welcoming, that is still a delicate dynamic. “Are Maria and Gabriel – ?”

“Madame went to….” Cecilia considers. “The village,” she says, although Lucy isn’t sure that is what she means. “Monsieur had more questions for the witch.”

“Gabriel? He said yesterday that he thought Sokolov had told you everything. Why does he need more?”

“Most everything,” Cecilia corrects, with a slight stress on the first word. “Monsieur is not a man to leave a job partly done. And we received a call very early this morning from Garcia, with some disturbing new information. It was thought best to be sure.”

“O – oh?” Lucy’s stomach does a flip, and she tries not to look too interested. “Flynn called? So he’s
in Oxford? Did he find out something about the laboratory break-in?"

“That and other things.” Cecilia gets up abruptly, vanishes down the hall, and returns with a steaming French press, which she pours into Lucy’s cup. “He said that he would prefer not to relate it over the telephone. When he called, he was en route to the airport. He hopes to return to Sept-Tours by this evening."

“Flynn’s coming ba – ?” Lucy’s stomach does another flip, along with her heart. She wanted this, she was praying for it last night, but now that it actually appears to be happening, it feels alarmingly sudden. She could have done with a day or two to process what she’s learned about him, to not look at him and have him instantly know that she knows about his darkest personal tragedies – she can’t keep it off her face, he’ll be able to tell, and what if he feels his confidence has been unforgivably betrayed, or worse? “Shouldn’t he – stay?” she says lamely. “Maybe to the end of the week? Just to make sure it’s all been sorted?”

Cecilia gives her an uncomfortably penetrating look, as if she knows a little too well the reason for the sudden cold feet. “What he found was quite disturbing. And as I understand it, Jiya was insistent that he come back, after learning that he had left you with us. I did of course offer complete assurances of your safety, but Jiya has… a kind heart.”

Lucy takes another bite of her choux bun, which seems safer than answering. Jiya seems much too emotionally competent to be a member of this family, but she’s grateful for it anyway. Lucy thinks again of that carefully kept grave in the Sept-Tours church, with the name of Flynn’s long-dead human daughter etched on the stone. The reason he jumped from the bell tower in a desperate bid to make the pain stop, and instead became a de Clermont, eternally bound to the name and memory of that loss. She can likewise understand better now why his relationship with his vampire daughter is so complicated, but it reassures her that Jiya feels entirely confident in repeatedly calling out her sire’s nonsense. Jiya wouldn’t do that if she was afraid of him or worried that she would be hurt, and it once more hints that behind the gruff and grouchy and general standoffish demeanor, Flynn isn’t any kind of monster. He’s just a lonely, broken man, who has lived far too long by himself and misses the people he loves, estranged from his family and the brother who used to be his other half, all of them too clumsy and proud and vulnerable to make the first move toward forgiveness. Cecilia said the other day that she thought these reckonings were long overdue, and if this has been their life since the eighteenth century, you can’t help but agree. The loss of Asher took away any chance they had of finding their way back to each other, and Lucy, as a witch, is the ultimate reminder of that.

Houdini is just offering to entertain her for the day, maybe take a car and explore the countryside, when a shadow falls over the door. Gabriel appears in his usual soundless fashion, as Houdini once more jumps to his feet. It’s clear that he holds the eldest de Clermont brother in something close to hero-worship, or perhaps healthy fear, as even he keeps the smart remarks to a minimum around Gabriel. “Good morning, Monsieur.” he says. “Anything else come up with the witch?”

“Not much.” Gabriel’s sleeves are rolled up, his hair tousled and his collar undone, in a way that, while undoubtedly very attractive, makes Lucy hope that he hasn’t been using Sokolov for a punching bag. If nothing else, the Russian looks capable of giving as good as he’d get, though he’s not an immortal and would not immediately bounce back from repeated blows. “He does not know anything else about Michael Temple, apart from what he already told us. He and his brother Anton hate him, though that’s not surprising. He has no sense of what his plans were or are, but he did say that he thought Temple has a witch source of information. Of course,” Gabriel adds, with a grim smile. “That did take some persuading.”

Lucy looks at him sidelong. The small cut in her lip twinges, a reminder that Gabriel, no matter how urbane, sophisticated, polite, and reserved to outward appearances, is at heart possibly even more of
a berserker than Flynn. He did say that they were in the army together, likely for centuries, and it’s plain that the inclination to violence has taken even deeper root in Gabriel, perhaps as a consequence of the loss of his father and son in body, and his brother in spirit. He’s made it repeatedly plain that he’s willing to do whatever it takes, to anyone, and while Lucy is a woman with eyes and can’t help but admire him, she still doesn’t feel very safe around him. Flynn is a lot of things, but she’s not in danger with him.

Gabriel pulls up a chair and accepts some coffee when Cecilia pours it. He nods politely to Lucy, as if in recognition that they did have a moment last night, and she nods back, somewhat awkwardly. At least his suspicion of her seems to have dissipated, if he tasted her blood for himself and assured the veracity of her story, and he looks almost relaxed, sipping his dark roast. Cecilia and Houdini exchange half an oblique glance. Then Cecilia says, “Did you hear that Garcia is coming back?”

“Is he?” Gabriel puts his cup down with a jerk. “That is rather a swift turnaround. Matters in Oxford already concluded, then?”

“He’s leaving Jiya and this new attachment of hers to handle it,” Cecilia says. “A human, apparently, one of their colleagues. Rufus Carlin. He is himself returning here, as he says that he has important information.”

“A human?” Gabriel does not look particularly impressed. “Have we not learned our lesson about meddling with those? Does he want another death on his conscience?”

“Gabriel,” Houdini says. “Bit melodramatic to assume that he’ll die, don’t you think?”

Gabriel does not answer, though he has a look on his face as if he cannot be blamed for thinking that. “I do not feel that it is wise or fair to involve humans in this sort of supernatural concern, no,” he says, after a moment. “Though I understand my opinion will count for rather little with my niece. In any event, you said that Garcia was returning. Today, I presume?”

“I think so, yes.” Cecilia considers him closely. “Must we brace ourselves for another round of the boxing match in the solar?”

Gabriel utters a short, barking laugh. “No. I will restrain myself from that, though I will be interested to hear what he believes himself to have accomplished. I thought he would be gone several more days at least.”

“We all did,” Cecilia says, with another glance at Lucy. “But if you were planning to run off to Paris before he returned, to avoid seeing him again for another ten years, I must say the fault seems equally shared between both of you. So are you going to apologize?”

“Apologize?” Gabriel’s voice remains level, but there’s a dangerous look in his dark eyes that makes both Houdini and Lucy nervously shift their weight. “I am not sure what good it would be at this juncture. Or at least without him endeavoring to offer the same first.”

“And you see!” With no warning, Cecilia slaps both hands down on the table, hard enough to make it (and everyone) jump, coffee sloshing. “That is your very difficulty! You regret what you have said, you wish you had not, you have both said to me many times that you greatly rue how matters stand – so what? Do you think that I exist merely to hear your lamentations and allow them to go on ceaselessly, when it is so easily within your considerable powers to do something about it? You are both waiting for the other to apologize first, as if it is some contest as to who has done the more wrong – has it not been enough? And if not, when can it possibly be? I am very close to murdering you both myself!”
Everyone blinks, caught totally off guard, as the elegant, dignified, deeply French chatelaine has finally had it up to here with her boneheaded employers, and is not about to hold back from telling them (well, one of them) exactly where to stick it. Gabriel looks totally blindsided. After a long pause, he starts, “Cecilia –”

“I do not regret it.” She throws him a furious look. “I only blame myself for not speaking up before, or at least apparently not strongly enough to make sense to you. Is this what you want? Is this what either of you want? Somehow I do not think so.”

Lucy and Houdini squirm in their chairs, determinedly avoiding eye contact, with the awkward feeling that can only come from sitting in the middle of a family argument which you’re not technically part of. Gabriel still seems thrown, and somewhat chagrined, though it’s hard to be sure. Then he inclines his head, as if gracefully consenting to take his medicine, and does not say a word as he finishes the rest of his non-spilled coffee. Then he rises to his feet. “Well, I have other matters to attend to. Harry, are you coming?”

Houdini glances between Lucy and Gabriel. “Do you need me immediately?”

“In other words, can you continue to pay court upon the lady at your leisure?” Gabriel eyes him. “You may, I suppose, feel free, though I can assure you with considerable certainty that you are barking up the wrong tree. I shall inform you if I require your services.”

With that, he’s gone, though Cecilia continues to look after him with a narrow expression. When Houdini has finished his breakfast and excused himself, and the women are alone, Cecilia turns to Lucy. “What did he mean, just then? What is he certain about, exactly?”

“Oh – ” Lucy feels her cheeks starting to heat again. “He – I think he – if Harry had any ideas about – not that I think he does, we’re just – but Gabriel – well, last night, he – he told me about… about Matej Radić, and then…”

She trails off, mortified, and aware that Cecilia has flinched at the sound of the name spoken aloud, as if she’s been physically hit. There is a long pause. Then Cecilia says, in a very strange voice, “Gabriel told you about Matej?”

“Yes, he…” Lucy looks down at the tablecloth. “Then we – it didn’t – he kissed me, and he… bit me, a little. He wanted to make sure that I was telling the truth about Flynn.”

Cecilia’s face is imperturbable, smooth as polished stone, but a distinct and darkening anger burns in her eyes. “I will be having another word with him about that, then. The fact that it is illegal to bite someone, human or creature, without their permission cannot have suddenly slipped his mind, though it seems much else has. He clings very hard to his veneer of utmost responsibility, competency, success, but in some ways, he does it because he fears to fall utterly to pieces without it. If he did in fact tell you about Captain Radić, perhaps you may understand why, but that does not excuse it. And – Lucy?”

Lucy, who has started to get up from the table, glances back with a start. “Yes?”

“Be careful,” Cecilia says quietly. “I agree that you had a right to know, and indeed, I may have told you myself, if they continued to withhold it. But you are an intelligent woman. You can see that they are still at sea, that you may understand more about them than they do about themselves. I cannot tell you what or what not to do, but… be careful.”

“I will.” Lucy is touched by Cecilia’s apparent and sincere concern. “I just… still get the feeling that Maria and Gabriel would prefer it if I wasn’t here.”
“They are frightened.” Cecilia gets to her feet. “Sometimes with reason, and sometimes without. I am sorry that they have felt entitled to treat you however they please, a scapegoat for their own issues, and as I said. I will speak to them about it.”

“Thank you.” Lucy looks at the other woman, and finds herself momentarily lost for words. “I – I really appreciate it.”

Cecilia nods fractionally, her expression already turning faraway, frowning and abstracted, and Lucy also excuses herself. She finds herself constantly looking at the clock, trying to calculate how long it might take Flynn to drive from Oxford, fly from London, and return from whichever French regional airport he left on the way out. Poitiers again, or somewhere else? It doesn’t matter, he’ll have to drive for a few hours anyway, and that’s assuming that nothing else crops up as a major delay en route. It’s clear that there are several more moving pieces than anybody foresaw, and they’re changing places on the board faster than any of the de Clermonts are entirely aware. Whatever Gennady Sokolov said, it made Gabriel increasingly anxious, and everything is at breaking point already.

Lucy decides regretfully that as much as she wants to, she can’t countenance running off with Houdini all day, and heads to the library. She is determined to crack the reference in the Ashmole fragment to the wolf and lion, which contains some kind of ring – the ring of the alchemical wedding, perhaps? Is there perhaps a statue in Sept-Tours that is hiding a magical artifact, a hollow seal or a secret compartment where it could be concealed? Or is this a reference to some other wolf and lion, far away from here? The de Clermonts have been across most of the world at some point in their very long lives. They could have built a Chamber of Secrets anywhere, anywhen, anytime. Really, it couldn’t be any more specific?

Lucy digs up everything that might relate to sigils, symbology, and the usage of animal motifs in secret, especially supernatural, purposes. She then goes down a truly fascinating rabbit hole on the Order of the Dragon, founded by Sigismund of Luxembourg in 1408. Sigismund – King of Hungary, Croatia, Germany, Bohemia, and Italy, and eventually Holy Roman Emperor – led a crusade against the Ottoman Turks at the end of the fourteenth century, which ended in disastrous failure, and later established the Order of the Dragon to fight them. The interest for supernaturals comes from the fact that Vlad Dracul, voivode of Wallachia, was a founding member – “Dracul” literally means “dragon” in Romanian, and he took his name from the order. But it was Vlad’s son who became the most infamous, as “Dracula” means “son of the dragon,” and Vlad the Impaler is the reason that they have to #NotAllVampires this. The Order of the Dragon was open to humans as well, indeed was mostly or entirely human, whereas the Knights of Lazarus seem specifically restricted to vampires. But if the Order of the Dragon fought the Turks, the Knights of Lazarus fought – what? The same enemies, or others? Is there a connection? The Order of the Dragon did use the dragon seal and symbol to pass secret messages or items, and Asher de Clermont founded the Knights of Lazarus, as Flynn told Lucy the other night. Is this a reference to his lineage, to a similar method of transmission, or something much simpler that she doesn’t know enough about the family to guess? Flynn seemed baffled too, though. If it was something immediately obvious, surely he would have known?

Lucy stares down at the piles of paper covered in old handwriting, sketched reproductions of the dragon sigil, court records, various accounts of Vlad the Impaler’s horrific crimes, and suddenly wonders if the Knights of Lazarus killed him in 1477, when he is supposed to have died, or possibly at a later date. From what Flynn said, calling them in to deal with an out-of-control supernatural menace would not be out of the ordinary. If they’d already had to kill one insane, power-maddened vampire, Gerbert of Aurillac, in 1307, it’s entirely possible that they had to do the same with Vlad. Is that what the Knights of Lazarus are? A secret society of vampire assassins, but assassins who only kill their own kind, to prevent any of them from rising too high and running violently amok among helpless humanity? You’d definitely want to keep that quiet, then. Plenty of vampires would feel that
this was nothing more than their rightful place, and you were cowardly traitors to stop it.

All of this is raising about a thousand more questions that Lucy would very much like to ask at some point, but is not getting her any closer to solving the riddle. Should she ask if she can snoop around Sept-Tours and check any family crests for hidden compartments? She can’t even say why she thinks it would be here, but unless there’s another aristocratic vampire family that uses those specific two animals as their heraldry, this has to do with the de Clermonts somehow, and this has been their home base since the sixth century at least. Or is the ring a metaphor? The symbol of the alchemical wedding being completed, and not a physical object? Why is this so confusing?

Lucy briefly debates asking Gabriel for help, then decides against it. He might not be in the most chipper mood after Cecilia’s promised dressing-down, and besides, Flynn specifically did not want to tell him what they had discovered. They were discussing that, right before Sokolov attacked. The Knights of Lazarus wouldn’t consider her a threat, would they? Someone as dangerous to the creature world as Gerbert or Vlad, who had to be removed at all costs? But it would surely break at least fifty other laws for vampires to extrajudicially assassinate a witch, and Gabriel has had plenty of chances. Not least last night, when they were alone together. Since she’s already so inexplicably and inextricably entangled with one de Clermont brother, Lucy doesn’t want to further complicate the picture with another. And this is her project, hers and Flynn’s. She’s not going to unilaterally involve someone else in it before running it by him, and he made his opinion on this avenue clear.

Lucy considers, frowning. She sifts through more of the pages, but no bolt from the blue strikes to provide sudden clarity. As she was telling Flynn earlier, alchemy is usually divided into pairs, two significant things which are then brought together, so maybe the lion and the wolf are figurative metaphors for other elements. Maybe they match to the red king and the white queen, though it’s impossible to say which is which. She wastes a lot of time searching through various bestiaries and zoologies, obscure astrological diagrams of the constellations and the animals of the zodiac, but even at the end of all this miscellany, she’s still pretty sure it has to do with the de Clermonts, and nothing else.

Eyes crossing, Lucy puts down the books, grimaces as her back cracks, and has to admit that dedicated academic effort is going to take her no further on this one. She replaces the texts and manuscripts that she has been consulting, decides to get some late lunch, and makes her way out of the library. Halfway down the hall, she runs into Houdini, who raises a sympathetic eyebrow at the look on her face. “Working hard?”

“Yes, but I’m not sure how much good it’s doing.” She’s not sure if telling Houdini qualifies as telling Gabriel, but she needs a second pair of eyes on this somehow, and since Flynn still has not deigned to show up, he is all she has got. As they head into the dining room, she says in an undertone, “The other night, we were translating one of Garcia’s old manuscript fragments, and it—it had a reference which I’m trying to work out. Beneath the wolf and lion lies the ring. This might be a weird question, but is there any place in Sept-Tours with the de Clermont family crest, which could be used to hide a ring?”

Houdini blinks. “There are plenty of family crests in the house,” he points out. “What, do you want me to go shaking each one down or checking for trapdoors?”

Lucy resists the urge to tell him that that might actually be helpful, and obviously a man of Harry Houdini’s particular skill set would be extremely deft with secret compartments or sleight of hand or other such practical illusions. Plus, it would be more explainable to have the de Clermonts’ butler rummaging through the place, rather than her. “I mean,” she says, as offhandedly as possible. “If you don’t have anything better to do…?”
“I’ll give it a look,” Houdini promises. “What kind of ring?”

“I don’t know.” Lucy rubs her tired eyes. “Anything that turns up, I suppose.”

They eat, then get up to return to their tasks. It’s mid-to-late afternoon by now, and Lucy once more calculates in her head. Was Flynn’s flight delayed? He didn’t have an accident on the drive back, did he? Did the witches send a hit squad to snatch him, the instant he set foot out of Sept-Tours, to make him pay for his imagined crimes against her? She hasn’t seen hide nor hair of Maria all day – if she is in the village, it’s a long visit. Or maybe –

Lucy doesn’t see much point in returning to the library, but she can’t exactly hang around Houdini weirdly while he goes to search. She goes to the main solar and sits on one of the old-fashioned sofas, trying to fight her nerves, until the door opens suddenly and shifts the twilight shadows on the wall. Gabriel’s voice says, “Lucy?”

She starts to her feet, and turns to face him warily. He holds up his hands, as if promising not to come any closer unexpectedly, and they eye each other up and down. Then he says, “I have been informed in no uncertain terms that certain aspects of my behavior last night were very much out of line, and that I owed you a prompt and unrestrained apology. I had my reasons for it, but it was still less than what I expect of myself. For that, I find myself, for the second time in two days, sincerely begging your pardon. I hope for any number of reasons that this does not become a habit.”

Lucy starts to say something, then stops. Gabriel already told her that he does not apologize easily or lightly, so even if Cecilia had strong words with him, he wouldn’t have done so if he didn’t agree. If nothing else, Gabriel has proven willing to admit that he’s been an idiot, but everything is so unsettled and undefined that Lucy isn’t sure how to respond. Should she just forgive him and call it square, or note that if he keeps finding himself in this position, maybe he should think about why? If nothing else, it’s clear that under all the poise and polish, Gabriel is just as much of a disaster as Flynn. Possibly even more. At least Flynn knows it.

As they’re still staring at each other in the usual wait for the other to speak, Lucy hears the crunching of tires in the driveway. It might be Maria, it might be one of the villagers coming up to visit the house, it might be Benjamin Cahill in an evil Rolls-Royce because why not – but she doesn’t care, doesn’t need to hear anything else Gabriel has to say. She practically pushes past him, runs down the hall, and out onto the front portico, into the chilly dusk.

Her heart skips a beat as she realizes that it is in fact the Jag, that Flynn has just switched the engine off but not yet gotten out, and she clenches her fists and makes herself stand exactly where she is. She has not forgotten the humiliating memory of him literally peeling her off last time, she is not about to beg and plead or otherwise stick her neck out and get shut down again, and if he has somehow gotten even stupider in his absence (seems difficult, but he could have), she is going to try yet again to abide by all her feeble promises to forget him. But her heart, having restarted, is now hammering against her ribs so loudly that she can hear it in her ears, and she’s somewhat short of breath. He – is he – will they –

Flynn opens the door, swings out, pulls his bag out of the back, and straightens up. He glances over, catches sight of her standing on the porch, and opens and shuts his mouth, looking extremely awkward. Flynn has a few moments to despair that everything is in fact going to be just the same, until Flynn finally gathers himself and proceeds gingerly over, as if she might suddenly go up with a bang. “Ah – ” He clears his throat and shuffles his feet, somehow managing for a rugged, formidable six-foot-four vampire to look like a nervous schoolboy. “I, well. I’m sorry. For – how I left here. And for most of what I did before that. I was trying to help you, but I’m… not sure I did.”

Lucy blinks, having expected his first words to be of a considerably more aggravating vein, and
wonders if Jiya had a few firm things to say before she packed him out of Oxford. She has certainly thought of plenty that she’d also like to say, but all her intentions to shout at him seem to have drained out of her. She tilts her head back to look up into his shadowed, gaunt, weary face, eyes soft and sad and the only part of him that shows his true age, and bites her lip. “Garcia – ” she starts. “Garcia, I just – ”

She struggles to keep her voice level, and he raises a clumsy hand as if to touch her cheek. She instinctively lifts her own hands to mirror his, and their cold palms brush together, fingers interlocking. They stand there on the spot, saying nothing, swaying, as Flynn strives to pull himself together enough to speak. “I’m sorry,” he says again. “I’m sorry. I’m – I’m not good at this, I didn’t – I never meant to hurt you, Lucy. I never did.”

Lucy tries to answer, discovers that she can’t, and just nods once, fighting tears. Flynn’s grip tightens on hers, almost painfully, but she doesn’t want him to let go. Their faces are close together, his head bent over hers, but neither of them seem quite brave enough to bridge the final space, the absence between each other. She feels once more as she did the other night, as if he might go to his knees before her and pray, and wonders how can she can possibly be worthy of such sheer, soul-bending devotion. Doesn’t he know that she’s not enough, that she never has been? She can’t fathom it or understand. It grips her as powerfully as the times and tides, and sweeps her out into a deep and dangerous sea.

After another moment, Flynn releases her hands, harrumphs again, and bends to pick up his bag. He gets the door for her, as if reminding himself that he has a lot of making up to do, Lucy steps back inside, and he follows. “I’ll just – ” he says. “Take my things upstairs.”

Lucy nods, still a little stunned, and he disappears. Then she hears a small noise from the other end of the foyer, looks up, and sees Cecilia, who has plainly also taken note of the prodigal’s return. Her eyes flick over Lucy, but she doesn’t say anything. Instead she turns and glides silently down the hall. Possibly she has gone to forewarn Gabriel of this, so there are no more spectacular sibling rows, but Gabriel must know already. That, or he just –

“Lucy?”

She jumps and turns around, to see Flynn silhouetted in the doorway, having to stoop slightly as usual. “I – ” He coughs. “I have some things to tell you. You should come up too.”

“Okay,” Lucy says slowly, making her way into the tower after him. Apparently Flynn doesn’t want to run the risk of anyone overhearing, and she struggles whether to tell him what happened with Maria and Gabriel while he was gone. She doesn’t think she’s going to be able to keep that secret long, anyway, and she doesn’t know how he’s going to react. At least if it blows up, if they were down in the solar, she would have more space to get away. He’s not going to hurt her, but he may justifiably not want to see her again – but it wasn’t her fault, his mother and brother told her, Maria was insistent about it, it’s not her fault –

Lucy’s anxiety is filling her head like white noise as they reach the very top of the staircase, and the door to Flynn’s room. She’s never been in here before, and her stomach performs another odd flip as they step inside. It’s mostly bare, as he must have moved his things to his house in Woodstock, and the only furniture is a four-poster bed and a writing desk. It must be as strange for him as any adult returning to their childhood bedroom, but then, he was never a child here. It’s somewhat larger than Lucy’s room on the floor below, and the roof is high and raftered, the plaster showing water damage in places. There are no personal effects or pictures or anything else. He has not left much of himself in this place.

Flynn shuts the door, then turns around and waves a hesitant hand. “Sit.”
There isn’t anywhere to sit apart from the bed, still with his bag thrown on it, so Lucy pauses, then pushes it aside and perches awkwardly on the end. True to form, Flynn is busily sabotaging any romantic potential inherent in this setup, but he looks tense and worried, pacing back and forth and rubbing a hand over his face as if he has something difficult to say and doesn’t know where to start. Lucy leans forward urgently. “What happened in Oxford? Cecilia said you didn’t want to tell her over the phone, but…”

“I don’t…” Flynn blows out a breath. “I’m not sure if I… well. We did find out who was responsible for the laboratory break-in, and they took the work that Jiya and Rufus had been doing on your blood sample. I tried to confront them – her – about it, but things went wrong.”

“Who?” Lucy demands. “Who took it?”

Flynn looks at her directly for the first time. “Your friend Jessica Proctor.”

That catches Lucy like a punch. She did, after all, suspect that Jessica had been compromised somehow, but hearing it confirmed is different. Gabriel also said this morning that according to Sokolov, someone named Temple has a witch source of information – it must be Jessica, it fits, even as Lucy wishes it didn’t. “I – ” She doesn’t expect that Flynn is anything other than completely sure, but she wants there to be another answer. “Did she – willingly?”

“I don’t think so,” Flynn says grimly. “Someone blackmailed her.”

This is an even more alarming development, and Lucy struggles to take in Flynn’s following explanation about Michael Temple – formerly Michel of Antioch, vampire, traitor Knight Templar, right-hand man of Gerbert of Aurillac, and bearer of a very potent seven-hundred-year-old grudge against the de Clermonts, Gabriel and Garcia in particular. Furthermore, Temple is on the Congregation, which gives Lucy a jolt; if she had gone to Venice as ordered, he would undoubtedly have his hands on her by now, and that would be no good at all. If she hadn’t listened to her bad feeling, if she had naïvely trusted them to sort it out…

“So?” she says, not entirely certain that she wants the answer. “What does Temple want with me? Just for me to get Ashmole 782, like everyone else?” It’s getting exhausting keeping track of everyone’s byzantine evil schemes.

“Maybe,” Flynn says. “But Jessica stole the results of your blood work, and sent it to him. So he knows now that you’re the most powerful witch in possibly four hundred years. That was what the results showed, by the way. You have powers that witches haven’t had since the sixteenth century, at least. Any number of elementals, mutations that we haven’t even catalogued. You’re more than a witch. You’re the witch. And the last thing – ”

Once more, Lucy has some cause to be glad that she’s sitting down. She thinks of her dream the other night – if it was a dream, and not an accidental timewalk to 1989, the moment when Benjamin Cahill declared her resoundingly ordinary and recommended her to be raised in isolation from the creature world. He must have known. He couldn’t have missed it, it just doesn’t seem possible. It wasn’t accidental negligence or benign incompetence, it was active, horrifying malice. Trying to keep that power a secret from everyone, including her own parents, until he could get to her as an adult and tap it for himself? It ruined her life, it made her into someone who can never trust her abilities or feel comfortable around her magic, an outsider and an orphan. Is that what he – what he –

Lucy leans forward, pressing a hand to her mouth, half-afraid that she’s going to throw up, and Flynn is at her side in a flash, crouching anxiously next to her. His hand hovers over her back, not quite touching, as she struggles to pull herself together, stomach heaving. “Lucy?” he says, sounding slightly panicked. “Lucy? Are you all right?”
“I’m…” Lucy swallows something burning and braces her hands on her knees. “I just… never mind, I’ll… I’ll tell you later. What was the last thing?”

“I…” Flynn looks suddenly apprehensive. “That’s enough for tonight, isn’t it?”

“No.” Lucy reaches out and grabs him by the shirt front, half-tempted to shake him. “What aren’t you saying? What was the other thing?”

Flynn’s eyes flick to her hands. Then he once more tugs them off him, but more gently than before, and moves to sit next to her on the bed, as if to physically put himself between her and the impact of whatever he’s about to tell her. “Rufus looked at the pictures of your parents,” he says. “He doesn’t think they added up to the story about how they died. They were supposedly murdered by villagers, wasn’t it? Somewhere in the Soviet Union?”

“Yes, but – ” Lucy stares at him. “What do you mean, don’t add up?”

“We can’t be completely sure,” Flynn cautions. “But there are no wounds on their bodies. Blood, yes, but no wounds. If they had been torn apart by a baying mob, they should have been – well. Considerably more mutilated. We think your mother and father weren’t murdered by a convenient pack of superstitious peasants. They were murdered by witches.”

Lucy feels again as if a giant invisible fist has driven all the air out of her in a single blow. She was obviously too upset by seeing the pictures in the first place to kick into Sherlock Holmes mode and perform detailed forensic analysis on them. She can’t move or react at all, even as an even more horrible part of her isn’t completely surprised. Every witch she has ever known, outside Denise, Michelle, and Olivia (and possibly Gennady Sokolov, but it’s hard to be sure) has turned out to stab her in the back somehow, even Jessica. She might not have wanted to, since this Michael Temple sounds like the saddest of bad news, but still. Lucy’s own kind have betrayed, lied to, manipulated, and attacked her at every turn, and if this – if her parents knew something, if they had discovered Cahill’s lie in Venice and might have been about to confront him, or if they too had some connection to Ashmole 782 that Lucy has inherited, but refused to play ball, or if they simply would not consent to their daughter being taken and used for whatever end –

“Lucy?” Flynn says tentatively. “Lucy?”

“I’m fine.” It scrapes out of her like a rusty nail, patently the largest fib she has ever wrapped those words around, and it tastes like ash in her mouth. “I just…”

“No,” he says, very quietly. “No, you’re not.”

No, Lucy thinks. No, she’s not. It’s bubbling up again, being eight years old and seeing Mrs. Christopher, her godmother, coming unexpectedly to get her at school. Taking her out to the car and saying very seriously that she needed to give her some bad news, that something had happened to Mama and Daddy, on the trip they had been on. Lucy’s own voice demanding to know if they were all right, weren’t they? They were all right? And Denise reaching over the gearshift, her stern face cracking, pressing Lucy into her shoulder and the starchy smell of her blazer, saying softly that no. They weren’t all right. She was so very sorry.

Lucy sits there in total silence, but she can feel a howl of agony forcing itself up her throat, and she is determined not to let it burst through her teeth, not least because she’s not sure she could ever stop it if she did. She starts to shake with the force of the contained destruction inside her, and is afraid it might explode out in every elemental at once, witch-wind and witch-rain and possibly even witch-fire, scour Sept-Tours from the face of the earth in a violent magical maelstrom. Cecilia said that her powers appear to be linked to moments of strong emotion, and this seizes Lucy in its teeth, even as
she fights ferociously to control it. No, she can’t, not like this, not to them, not again. The exact thing they were afraid of, when bringing Matej here led to betrayal and assault and murder, to blood and fire and rage, and she doesn’t want to, she doesn’t. But she can’t, she can’t. She can’t.

Flynn is saying something, but Lucy hears him only dimly, slurring, as if drunk and underwater. It can’t get through the ringing in her ears, the flashing in her eyes, and she isn’t entirely sure that she won’t whirl off into space, plunging from the swiftly turning planet into the abyss of silence and unbeing. She would almost welcome it. Her fists contract until her bones creak, her hair raises eerily around her head in a floating dark corona, and the air spits and crackles, sings with the awareness of power. She could grasp it, now. It’s unlocking, spilling forth from wherever secret, shameful places inside her it has been stuffed and forgotten. Cahill did this. They all did. She could seize them and shatter them, hunt them down, make them pay. The urge is overwhelming. It tastes like hot metal.

And then, just as Lucy is about to fly off the handle completely, someone grabs hold of her, very hard. Her face is pressed into something solid, and her magic flows off her in jerking, choking pulses, soaked up as if by a shock absorber before it can get free and do any broader damage. It takes her a moment to realize that the solid thing is Flynn, and that he has seized her and used himself as a sort of buffer. It’s not clear if this is related to what happened in the Bod, when Lucy grounded herself through him, brought the witch-wind under control, but for an instant, the crushing pressure inside her leavens. He has both arms tightly around her, holding her against his chest, and she thinks dimly that perhaps they have finally solved it. The instant she is truly, genuinely in distress, he crumbles.

She doesn’t want him to let go, both to keep her magic from accidentally taking out the room and because it feels as if she can properly breathe for the first time in God knows how long. He keeps hold of her, not saying a word, just allowing her to lean on his steadiness, his strength, a still point while everything else keeps spinning. Lucy buries her nose in the hollow of his throat, wraps her hand around his upper arm, hard as cordwood beneath her fingers. He rests his chin lightly on her head, and doesn’t say anything.

After a very long moment – several minutes, more, she can’t be sure – Lucy feels the last of the dangerous magic drain out of her, returning her to a normal, if shaky and sick-feeling, state. She pulls her face out of Flynn’s neck, suddenly embarrassed, and relinquishes her death grip on his bicep. “I – ” she starts. “I didn’t – ”

“It’s all right.” He can’t quite meet her gaze, licking his lips nervously. “It’s all right. I – I’ve said enough for tonight, I think. It was a lot to put on you all at once, and – ”

With that, he starts to get to his feet, as if forgetting that this is his room and she is the one who, if anything, should be leaving it. But Lucy reaches out reflexively, catches his hand, and tugs. All it takes is the slightest downward pressure, the lightest of motions, to bring him crashing back down, almost helpless, totally at her will. She should tell him now. She should tell him about what Maria and Gabriel said, about Lorena and Iris and Matej. He deserves to know that she knows, and she does not want to keep that from him. But they have just summoned her old ghosts, the room is thick with them, and he is looking at her once more as if he is a man in a trance, struck dumb by heaven’s light, and she cannot get her tongue around the words. All she can do is stare at him, their faces close, his eyes glassy and his lips parted. Her breathing is short, and even he seems to notice the lack. They are equally mesmerized, held in thrall. The room, the tower, the entire world falls silent.

Lucy puts her hand against his cheek, very slowly, as if afraid that he is going to run away. Given his track record, this is far from a baseless fear, but Flynn doesn’t move. His eyes flutter half-shut, he presses his face into the curl of her fingers, and she wonders if it has been centuries since anyone touched him like this, with softness and gentleness and their own simple, hungry need. He clearly
has all but shut off since Matej’s violent demise, and she can’t imagine him possibly managing to have anything like a casual affair. She can feel a hundred years of solitude and a hundred more, etched in the painful sinews of his skin, and it takes her breath away. They are so lonely, both of them. They have lost so very much.

Slowly, impossibly slowly, frightened of spooking him and aware that she’s likewise out of practice – there hasn’t been anyone since Noah, though at least that is just two years and not two hundred – Lucy leans forward. She tilts Flynn’s head a little, and once again, boneless, unresisting, he lets her mold him exactly as she wants. She parts his lips a bit more with her thumb, cups the back of his head in her other hand, and then –

Their lips brush for the first time, the barest, the lightest peck, as an almighty shudder goes through Flynn from head to toe. He still seems stunned, eyes half-closed, but at that, she has the distinct sense that he has to restrain himself from grabbing her at full strength and speed. The tension vibrates in his hand as it floats up to cup her chin, his long fingers stroking the underside of her jaw, circling her neck. Of course that might hold particular attractions for a vampire, but he doesn’t move to go near it with his mouth. Their heads turn at the same time, spontaneous and searching, and the kiss abruptly deepens. Both of them utter small gasps, indistinct moans, as Lucy shifts position and slides forward on her knees, into his lap. His hands wander down her back, lifting her up against him, and she slides further until she’s straddling him. Yes, something in her keeps whispering in a rush, over and over like a mantra or a prayer. Yes, oh yes, oh yes.

The kiss roughens, deepens still further, as Lucy puts her hands on his shoulders and senses that she could push him down beneath her with another light touch, with barely any pressure at all. The knowledge of complete control is dizzying, almost giddy, when she has so rarely felt as if she has had it in the rest of her life. Flynn has utterly yielded himself to her, responds to her smallest movements or shifts, pulling back when she hesitates and going full steam ahead where she lets him. It’s like nothing Lucy has ever known, no one she has ever been with. Her magic rises again, but not in a torrential, destructive crimson rage. It’s softer, brighter, smoother, a delicate pink glow like the inside of a rose. Something inside her blossoms, unfolds to the light. She never wants to stop.

She hitches one knee up on Flynn’s hip, urging him to roll them over, to bear her down onto the bed, and after a split-second pause, he does so. Lucy lands on her back with him halfway on top of her, gripping at his hair with both hands as they kiss raw and savagely and frantically, the cut on the inside of her lip stinging again, but she does not give a damn. Flynn starts his way down, unbuttoning her blouse after a look and a breathless nod has given him permission, kissing the smooth swell of her breasts and the slender line of her torso. Then he stops, resting his chin on her stomach, as Lucy groans and arches her hips insistently, wet and aching and starving for satiation, demanding him to go still further. But he seems to have come back to himself, as if aware that this is a heightened emotional moment for both of them, that she’s in a fragile place after the revelations about her powers and her parents, and he doesn’t want to push it. He kisses her belly, her hipbone, but does not venture any lower. Muffled, he says, “Lucy… Lucy, maybe that’s… for tonight, we should…”

Lucy does not answer, breathing in short gulps. On the one hand, she finds his tender conscientiousness and painstaking concern for her well-being quite touching (it makes a very nice change after being completely convinced that he hated her) and perhaps it’s a good thing that one of them wants to be responsible in this situation. On the other hand, after all the frustration he has put her through, and the sheer delight and ease and glory that it was to be with him just now, she wants the rest of it, the culmination and the release. It would be a bad idea to actually sleep together, she doesn’t deny that. But come on, at least he could –

“Garcia,” she says, making another insistent little motion. “Garcia, don’t – ”
Flynn smooths his hand along her side, along her thigh, curling under her knee, as if wordlessly trying to assure her that he isn’t rejecting her, this isn’t back to square one, he isn’t going to forget—he just doesn’t know if it’s wise to jump into the deep end all at once. Indeed, although there has been this tension and attraction bottling up between them since they met, and they have finally let the cork out for it to spectacularly overflow, they have just gone from zero to sixty, physically speaking, and may need to dial it back and sort things out. All of this is true and very sensible, and Lucy, knowing his history, can more than understand the need not to overwhelm him all at once. She still wants it, wants him, wants more, but she pauses, then nods. She sits up slowly, spilling out of her bra, and sees his gaze flick to it with a look of black-eyed hunger. It almost makes her crack.

“Are you…” Flynn seems to be having trouble getting his breath, if that’s something that vampires notice. “Are you all right?”

Lucy nods again, pushing her hair out of her face. She isn’t sure she trusts her voice just now, isn’t sure that it wouldn’t give her away. They stare at each other until they have to look down, as if afraid that another kiss might shatter their self-control and their exalted intentions, and she pushes herself off the bed, jelly-legged. “I should… I should probably go.”

Flynn is too numb to answer, though he continues to stare at her as Lucy buttons her shirt with fumbling fingers. Even if it is just a few steps down to her room below, she is taking no chances of anyone seeing her in this particular state of dishabille. She feels as if they have done something far more compromising than they did, as if by finally giving in even this much, they have gone past the point of no return. Everything was premised on holding the other off, on acting like there was nothing more between them than whatever awkward professional solidarity had been forged by the shared mystery of Ashmole 782. She isn’t sure she can be around him again and not want to do that, not want to finish it, not to know what everything tastes and feels like, and that is death to the cause. All the reasons why not have not changed: the Covenant, the Congregation, Flynn’s brother Wyatt and his doomed relationship with Jessica, Denise and Michelle, Maria and Gabriel – in fact, Lucy realizes in mirthless amusement, absolutely every single person in the world, human or creature, is going to object to them being any sort of thing. Vampires and witches don’t mate. Those are the rules. Those have always been the rules. And while they might be treating the rest of them with a certain light-fingered disregard, they had better remember this one if they know what’s good for them. That, or else.

Lucy and Flynn mumble excruciatingly awkward good-nights to each other, and she speeds out into the darkness of the tower steps. But when she reaches her room, she discovers that she can’t go in and lie there in a state of unbearable, burning frustration, knowing that he’s just above her and she cannot at any cost go back to him, not tonight, not right now – perhaps not ever. It drives her into a sort of frenzied fury, an unstoppable movement, and she grabs her shoes and jacket and shrugs them on. She doesn’t know if it’s altogether wise to be outside by herself at night. But it’s not that late, Gabriel said that he was hunting down anyone else who might be trespassing on de Clermont land, and she has no reason to believe that he didn’t mean it. Besides, she can’t be close to Flynn right now. For once, she understands him and his own need to flee from her. It is blinding, overwhelming.

Lucy manages to make it down the stairs and through the front hall without running into Cecilia or Gabriel, and pushes out into the star-flecked darkness. The cold hits her flushed, heated skin like a slap, her breath billowing silver as she walks as hard as she can, trying to work off the lightheadedness of arousal and the twisting fist of need low in her belly. Lights glow from the windows of Sept-Tours like flickering spirits, the deceptive will-o-the-wisps that drown lost travelers in marshes. The night smells like cold air and trees and wet earth. She’s trotting so fast that her legs are burning, half-imagines herself as a vampire out to stalk unsuspecting prey, but she still can’t make it go away.
Lucy can feel her magic rising again, coiling around her and spreading out in ripples, as if from where a rock has been thrown into a pond. It doesn’t have Flynn to muffle it, he has powerfully awoken it in other ways, and she is tempted to let it rain or burst or blow. Perhaps she should try to consciously summon it, to refine and control it, and it would at least give her something to channel her feelings into. It’s too much. It’s all too much. She wishes she could just blow on the wind for a while, empty herself out, stop thinking. Oh God, how she wishes for the quiet dark peace of oblivion.

As she continues to run, twigs and bracken crackling underfoot, ducking the half-seen dark branches, something occurs to Lucy. Gennady Sokolov – he’s Russian, isn’t he? If there was a famous murder anywhere in the Soviet Union, if witches died at the hands of either their own kind or humans sometime in 1991, he might have heard some story about it. He might be able to confirm Flynn’s hypothesis about what happened to her parents – he might even have an inkling about who really did it. She should ask him, no matter what Gabriel thinks. She’s desperate to know if there are any other witches she can possibly trust, or if the branch is broken, rotted through. Is Olivia all right? If Temple used her as some kind of bait, or decided that Lucy did not appear to be coming to Venice on her own –

Just as Lucy thinks that, she becomes aware of something moving overhead, hidden from view by the trees. She is in fact not a vampire and does not possess superlative night vision, so she skids to a halt and looks around, raising her hands as if in expectation of a sudden attack. She’s gone a long way, and she knew this was risky to start with. She should go back to Sept-Tours, right now. But if she moves and exposes herself, if she – maybe it was nothing, just a bird, something else passing over. But if it wasn’t –

Lucy stands very still, looking from side to side. Nothing moves in the silvan shadows. All the small animals must know to run for it whenever a hunter comes stalking, and the wood is almost unnaturally silent, dappled in the cloudy, flickering shafts of moonlight. Perhaps it’s another strange side effect of her magic, if she is the one changing, becoming something that she was always meant to be. You’re more than a witch. You’re the witch.

When she has finally satisfied herself that it was nothing, Lucy turns around and starts back. And yet, she has not gotten more than a few paces when she hears something, a rustle like huge wings, and the moon is blotted out by the shape of something diving for her. It’s like a bat, or an eagle, but it’s far too big to be either.

The next instant, razor-sharp talons, long as knives, close around Lucy’s shoulders, and she is jerked bodily off her feet, up into thin air. She screams, twisting and struggling – but if she breaks free, she’ll fall, and the ground is already shearing away beneath her, as she’s hoisted up into the black sky. She raises her hands – she’ll kill it if she has to, she’ll destroy it, but the plunge – she wanted to fall, she wanted nothingness, but not like this, not like this –

She screams again, torn out of her chest, stolen away and dissolved to nothingness on the wind. She can just see the distant glimmer of Sept-Tours, far below. And then a raft of cloud sweeps over it, her monstrous captor tightens its grip and flies faster, and everything is gone.
Reap the Whirlwind

Chapter Notes

Tumblr sucks and can die a painful death.

My new blog is qqueenofhadess (same url, extra s). Come find me.

It’s midday, the heavy curtains are drawn, and Wyatt is fast asleep in the splendid rococo-ceilinged master bedroom of the de Clermonts’ Venetian townhouse, when something startles him just at the edge of consciousness and causes him to roll over with a snap, staring around the dim room as if expecting to find any number of people lurking in the corner with a stake. Some of the urban lore about vampires is correct, though it usually only applies to the very young ones, who haven’t built up their strength over centuries and can be set sneezing by garlic or salt, given a rash by a crucifix, or burned badly in the sun. Wyatt is plenty old enough that daylight doesn’t bother him, but at high noon, even he is not at his best, and he’s been run off his feet by the business of trying to plan an alliance with Anton Sokolov when neither of them trust each other, the horrible news that Anton’s idiot brother has gone and done something rash at Sept-Tours, and then the realization that Michael Temple has craftily elected this moment to disappear and Wyatt still isn’t sure where the hell he is. He’s still furious with his brothers for never mentioning that oh hey, Temple’s actually one of our oldest enemies no big deal, but the idea of then having to confess that he’s lost him again is mortifying. If he and Anton can cobble something together – though when their respective brothers are possibly starting a war over in France and Wyatt doesn’t know why anyone ever has siblings, because it seems like the worst idea that could possibly –

Just then, the soft noise comes again, Wyatt throws the covers back, jumps out of bed in his underwear, and looks around for the silver dagger that he keeps at hand for possible situations like this. He grips the hilt tightly, advances toward his bedroom door, and can sense the intruder on the opposite side. Flattening himself to the wall, he waits tensely as the door opens a crack, then starts to leap –

The next instant, a fellow blur meets him head-on, there are several moments of scuffling, he catches the scent, and drops the knife in horror. “I – what?” he splutters.

“Maman?”

“Good morning to you too, William.” Maria de Clermont’s aristocratic nostrils flare in stern disapproval of being jumped by her underpants-clad youngest son, even if he didn’t manage to do any damage. “If I realized that you were expecting such trouble, I would have rung the bell, but I did not think it necessary in my own home. Do you wish to explain?”

Wyatt doesn’t answer, still wrong-footed by the sight of his mother. She is wearing boots, a jacket, scarf, and sunglasses as if out for a bracing constitutional, but for the most part, she stays in Sept-Tours these days. When she does leave, she is not particularly fond of cars, planes, or trains, or modern transport in general. The fact that she is standing here, windblown and irritated at her poor welcome, means that she must have run just over five hundred miles east to Venice, which at top speed wouldn’t take her more than the morning. Evidently she decided that whatever was going on with the Congregation, it was time to take a hand, and the appearance of the de Clermont matriarch in person means that things have managed to get even worse. Has she come to insist that Gennady Sokolov be punished? Maria does, after all, have a reputation. Getting off with a slap on the wrist
would be lucky for any witch who attacked her home and threatened her family.

“Sorry,” Wyatt says, after another pause. “I just – with everything, I was… on edge.”

“Yes, I see that.” Maria surveys him up and down. “Well, go get dressed, William. Do you have anything to offer me for a drink?”

“I’ll look.” Wyatt doesn’t usually keep fresh blood in the house, since most vampires prefer it straight from the source, but either way, he should be having this conversation with more clothes on. “Go to the living room, I’ll… be right out.”

Maria nods graciously and withdraws, while Wyatt changes, sticks his head under the tap, and slaps himself back into semi-wakefulness. Then he emerges to see his mother sitting primly on the striped moiré settle, indicating him to take the gilded armchair across from her. Wyatt represses the urge to ask if she’s come to audit his Congregation decisions, since he knows he’s not good with taking advice from anyone else in the family. But if it had to be anyone, he would rather it’s Maria. Finally he says, “Gennady Sokolov – ”

“Is being held in custody at Sept-Tours.” Maria clearly does not care for the subject. “I am given to understand that you know his brother. How did that happen?”

Wyatt struggles to explain that he was given no warning, that Anton must have contacted Gennady and sent him haring off, and that Anton himself seemed taken aback that his brother would decide on something so rash without consulting him. Wyatt has more sympathy than he might otherwise, since his own are so unsatisfactory, but he thinks it might be politic to counsel his family to mercy. Good luck getting any of them to let go of the insult to de Clermont pride, though, not to mention de Clermont territory. “Lucy Preston,” he says, at the end of whatever little sense he has managed to make. “Is she also still there?”

“Yes.” There is an odd look on Maria’s face. “Though it has recently transpired that we will not, in fact, be handing her over to the Congregation as part of any bargain, and that is an altogether separate mess, trust me. Nor do I believe that any of us trust their intentions, not even from our own kind, if Michel of Antioch is involved. What has he said to you?”

“He…” On the one hand, Wyatt wants to tell her about all of Temple’s slimy insinuations and unsettling implications, and he is somewhat relieved that he has not been totally left at sea to deal with this by himself. On the other hand, it would be a lot easier to kick his messes under the bed if his mother had not turned up to investigate them. “Mostly just threatened to blackmail me if I didn’t cooperate with him,” he says, since it seems the easiest way to summarize. “I’m not entirely sure with what, but… Jessica’s name did come up.”

He says this with a preliminary wince, since he knows Maria was never fond of that particular folly, and sure enough, she doesn’t look pleased. Then she says, “Given what your brother Garcia has said, we suspect that the two of them may be in league.”

“Flynn said what?” Wyatt swears under his breath. “Jessica working with – she’s a witch, why would she work with him? He’s a vampire, and not exactly the biggest fan of interspecies collaboration or – ”

“I need no reminding that she is a witch, William.” Maria’s tone could cut diamond. “But it seems indeed that Michel is targeting that particular aspect. If there is anything especially damaging about your past relationship with her, outside the mere fact of breaking the Covenant, anything that he could publicize to detrimental effect, I need to know that now.”
Wyatt stares at his mother’s lovely, forbidding face. He doesn’t want to confess his embarrassing romantic missteps, but anyway, he can’t. He has no idea what Temple might have called in to coerce Jess, and he has to fight the part of him that wants to angrily rush to her defense, even now. “I don’t know,” he says. “I don’t know what Temple has over her. I didn’t even know he was friggin’ Gerbert of Aurillac’s top henchman until yesterday. Really, nobody thought to share that with me?”

“The fault goes both ways.” Maria looks at him kindly but firmly. “You are so insecure about one of your brothers poaching your position, that it will be taken from you and leave you with no status in the family, that you tell us almost nothing about who you meet or what you do. If you are to safeguard de Clermont interests on the Congregation, you need to know what those are, it is true. But first you must trust Gabriel and Garcia. They are your family.”

Wyatt doesn’t answer. He knows she’s right, but the problem always is brothers, isn’t it. As noted, he joined the family relatively late, in 1179. He was serving in France as one of the Scottish men-at-arms of Henry the Young King, the eldest son of Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine, since Scotland had been forcibly added to the Plantagenets’ territories after the humiliating defeat and capture of William the Lion in 1174. The Young King had been rebelling against his father since the year before that, and since every Scot hated Henry the elder for reducing them to his personal footstool, Wyatt spitefully decided to help out. The Young King – they called him Hal – was known to pay generously and enjoy a good time, and if it spat in Henry senior’s face, so much the better.

The only other problem, which Wyatt quickly realized, was that Hal was an idiot. He was an empty-headed pretty boy constantly ready to believe the worst of his father and to listen to terrible advice, reckless, feckless, and changeable as a weather vane. He was charming, funny, and a good enough soldier, but totally lacked the formidable, ruthless resolve of his much more talented and intelligent younger brother, Richard. Hal and Richard hated each other almost more than their rivalry with their father, and it was during a skirmish onto Richard’s lands in Poitou when Wyatt was badly wounded. Badly enough, in fact, that he should have died, but instead he was found by the mysterious Maria de Clermont, who all of Hal’s army feared and hated for her reputation as a mistress of sorcery and tendency to attack Richard’s opponents; it was common knowledge that her sons, Gabriel and Garcia, were his close confidantes and companions in arms. In fact, when he saw her, Wyatt was sure that she was there to finish him off. He was in enough pain that he wouldn’t have minded, and yet…

He has some muzzy memory of her asking if he wanted to survive, that she could save him, but there would be a price, and it would change him forever. He didn’t want to die, and so he might have said something, told her that she could, even without knowing what he was agreeing to. It was only much later when he learned.

Even now, he doesn’t know exactly why Maria saved him, chose him as her son, and he isn’t sure he wants to ask. Maybe she just felt sorry for him, but he knows now that that isn’t something that comes immediately or easily to her. In the depths of her revenge against the Nazis for Asher’s death, she came home with a bag full of SS pins taken from every officer she killed, and they never counted how many there were. Obviously, Wyatt feels that Nazis were not a loss to anyone, but he has seen her blood-splattered, dripping in gore from head to toe, standing atop a heap of bodies that she tore apart single-handed. Gabriel and Garcia are trained soldiers, and so is Wyatt, but they still can’t match Maria when she’s fully unleashed. She can be more merciless than any of them, and has been, repeatedly. Once she was done with the Nazis, she moved onto the witches who prevented her from reaching her husband in time, and she was just as savage. She never sank to indiscriminate brutality, didn’t kill anyone just for being in her way, but she’s also never said much about the details. Perhaps she feels that she could never instruct her sons not to fight, if they knew it all.

Wyatt thinks that all of them have more sins than anyone could bother tallying up, but she is their
mother. As for him, from the first moment he joined the family, Gabriel and Garcia thought he was an untrustworthy upstart, a random henchman from their beloved Richard’s greatest rival who might betray them at any moment. Hal died four years later, in 1183, and Richard became heir to the Angevin empire, but it was too late. Wyatt became a de Clermont because of an irreparable estrangement between brothers, and that was how it stayed. They got used to each other eventually, but the relationship between the three of them never warmed fully to affection. It was always Gabriel and Garcia. Until Matej, and now… apparently they got their own irreparable estrangement. Happens to everyone in the end.

“Okay,” Wyatt says, after a long moment. “I’ll think about it. You give this speech to them?”

Maria’s lips go tight. “Yes,” she says. “Cecilia and I were most explicit about our wish for them to stop fighting. A bucket of cold water was involved.”

Wyatt’s almost sorry he missed that. He looks away again, thinking of Temple’s casual mention of his late nephew, if there’s some way he can, even after two hundred and fifty years, still make that worse. It doesn’t seem possible, not when it was bad enough to start. Christian was just – it sounds rich of Wyatt to say, since Christian was three hundred years older than him, turned in the early ninth century soon after Charlemagne’s death – a good kid. The sunny optimist of a family of melodramatic, brooding pessimists, cheerful, slightly reckless, and always up for an adventure, but also capable of being serious, thoughtful, and kind. He was the one who welcomed Wyatt into the de Clermont family and helped teach him the ropes, who never made him feel like a scabrous Scottish ruffian from the wrong side of the Plantagenet wars, and Wyatt sometimes misses him as if he was his own son. As a Carolingian Frank, Christian had a very strong belief in the divine legitimacy and personal moral right of the king, which was why he took that job with the Secret du Roi and worked for Louis XV, the assignment that ultimately cost him his life. Wyatt knows that technically, it was the vampire hunters who killed him, but Matej Radić told them where to find him. Seven years of active treason on Gabriel and García’s part wasn’t enough already? Choosing this random Prussian soldier over Christian, their own son and nephew? Yeah, yeah. García was in love with him. That never goes well. At least it hasn’t happened again.

“Okay,” Wyatt says again, seeing that Maria is waiting for an answer. “So are you here to see the sights, or….”

Maria cocks an eyebrow, as she can surely sense that this is a rather transparent attempt to get rid of her. “I think,” she says, “I would indeed like to have a look around Venice. You do not have to accompany me, if you are concerned about being spotted, but – ”

“No, I’ll – ” Wyatt isn’t such a cad as to leave his mother to wander around the city on her own. Even if Temple is gone (and that does not rule out a later inopportune reappearance), there are plenty of other creatures who might want to take their chances with such a high-profile, and controversial, vampire matriarch. As noted, Maria is in no way in need of Wyatt’s protection, and could tear them all promptly to pieces if the necessity arose, but they could try other things apart from physical attack. “Hold on, we can go together.”

He scrapes himself into something more befitting a man about town, since he doesn’t want to be spotted by his Congregation colleagues in sweatpants and scruff, and accompanies her out into the afternoon. The autumn sun isn’t very warm, going in and out behind the clouds, and at least it’s the off-season for tourism, so the place isn’t quite as much a zoo as it normally is. In this case, however, Wyatt might have welcomed the extra crowds, as an extra layer of disguise and anonymity. As Maria hails a gondola in fluent Venetian and they step down into the narrow vessel, he can’t help but glance around warily, for anyone who might be peering down from an ornate window overlooking the canal. His sense of foreboding increases when Maria orders the gondolier to make for the Ponte
di Rialto. As they move off into the current of traffic, Wyatt says in an undertone, “Maman, are you actually planning to walk right into headquarters? If they see you –”

“And why should they not see me do that, William?” Alone among the family, Maria still calls him by his birth name, rather than the name he picked up (and much prefers) in the nineteenth-century American West. “I have as much right as any creature to visit the Congregation – perhaps more, given the rumors that they seem to be spreading about our family – and I have some questions of my own.”

Wyatt bites his tongue on anything else he was going to say, and they sit in silence until they reach the Ponte, Maria opens her pocketbook and pays in cash, and step off, making their way into the twisting side streets. Wyatt admits them to headquarters, with another shifty glance around, and Maria strides in as if she owns the place. Nor does she appear much inclined to preserve secrecy. “Hello,” she calls. “Yes, hello?”

“Maman –” Wyatt plucks at her sleeve, thinking that all they need is for Nicholas Keynes or some other interfering third party to come slithering out of there. “Are you sure this is –”

Maria brushes him off, just as a curtain rustles at the far side and none other than Anton Sokolov emerges, with a wary look on his face and one hand upraised as if in anticipation of trouble. On the sight of Wyatt, he lowers it a fraction, but his eyes flick between them with deep suspicion. “Who is this? You bring her here?”

“This is my…” Wyatt grimaces. “My mother. Maria de Clermont. This is… Anton Sokolov.”

“Sokolov?” Of course Maria has taken note of that. “So you are related to the interloper who attacked my son on the very walls of Sept-Tours itself?”

“I did not tell him to do that.” Anton folds his tree-trunk arms, and the huge Russian witch and the petite French vampire stare at each other dangerously. “Only told him that we had problem, and he was to come here to Venice first. He did not listen. Gennady can be impulsive. Is surely never a problem you have with your perfect sons, is it?”

Wyatt chokes slightly, though he manages to convert it into a bland expression. He has to admit that Anton has a point, though it probably isn’t the time to admit it. He shifts his weight, as if in anticipation of throwing himself between them, as Maria says, “Supposedly your brother wanted to rescue Lucy Preston. She is not in need of rescue.”

“She is safe with you?” Anton arches a categorically skeptical blond eyebrow. “I am working with your son there because we both do not trust Michael Temple, but that does not mean I believe either of you are actually –”

Maria looks impatient. “It does not matter what you do and do not believe. I need to know more about this witch. Are the archives still here?”

“They are not,” Sokolov says. “On San Lazzaro island. But you are not Congregation member, you do not have right to come here and rummage in –”

“The archives are open to any creature,” Maria counters stubbornly. “And my husband founded the Knights of Lazarus, my son is the current grandmaster. If you think they will keep me out –”

“You have Lucy Preston at your home,” Anton interrupts. “You find it easier to come all the way to Venice to search for her secrets, rather than ask her yourself? But yes, I forget. She is honored guest? You have treated her with nothing but hospitality?”
For a moment, what Wyatt can see of Maria’s face looks strange, almost guilty. She starts to say something, then stops. Wyatt wonders if he should save everyone some time and possibly a fistfight, and tell his mother what he already discovered in Lucy’s file, but he isn’t sure how much to let on in front of Anton. There is a very nasty silence as the three of them continue to stare at each other, until Maria clears her throat. “You can apologize for your brother’s behavior later, but if you know something about Michael Temple or what he is planning – ”

“I will apologize if your son apologize first for snatching Lucy!” Anton says heatedly. “And Temple is your kind, your other son has been plotting so cozily with him, and is not my fault if de Clermonts are stupid and do not speak to each other. If that was not the case, you might have known long before. So – ”

Wyatt thinks they’re about to leap at each other’s throat, was really not planning on getting dragged by Anton friggin’ Sokolov in front of his mother, and braces himself to play policeman. Maria’s fangs are bared, and witchfire sparks in each of Anton’s ham-sized fists. But after a very fraught moment, both of them come begrudgingly to their senses and back down. “Well,” Maria says, with very clipped politeness. “We’re sorry to trouble you. We’ll make our way to San Lazzaro now.”

“Oh?” Anton takes a step. “It happens I have project to do there too. I go with you.”

It’s patently clear that Maria doesn’t think he has any other reason to go other than to spy on them, but he is a Congregation member, and if he can’t deny her access, nor can she deny it to him. That is how they find themselves taking the world’s most awkward boat ride out into the lagoon, Maria and Anton still trading evil stares when they think the other is not looking, and Wyatt sitting in the middle with a profound new sympathy for Cecilia when she is caught up in their various spats. They debark on San Lazzaro, and having presented their bona fides to the knight on the gate, all three of them traipe down into the archives where Anton caught Wyatt the other night. Remembering his sense that they were not alone, Wyatt glances instinctively among the dim shelves, but he can’t make out anyone.

They then run into more trouble when, as before, Maria cannot access Lucy’s file due to the protective spell on it, and Anton refuses to remove it without extensive explanations as to what the de Clermonts have been doing with her. Maria insists that she has not been hurt in any way and they have been looking after her while Garcia went back to Oxford, but Wyatt can sense that there’s something else she’s not saying, and so, apparently, can Anton. Voices are being raised, the knight might come running down here in the expectation of breaking up a scuffle, when Maria says furiously, “Very well. Garcia will not – he has made her protection a matter of his personal interest. Does that satisfy you?”

Anton and Wyatt blink hard, for very different reasons. Then Anton says, “How? By running off again and leaving her there?”

“No.” Maria’s jaw is very tight. “He has… some connection with her. That is all.”

Even with his mother’s carefully framed and evasive explanation, Wyatt can read between the lines. Oh, what the hell? Flynn has another crush, when he was just thinking about the damage the last one did? Then again, it feels slightly ridiculous to call it a crush, when his brother falls in love like the world is ending and usually inadvertently somehow causes it to actually do so. No wonder it’s only happened once in Wyatt’s memory, since Flynn’s human wife died centuries before he was born. Once was bad enough, and the question of whether it is another Matej Radić situation must have already occurred to everyone. But Wyatt got raked over the coals for having a relationship with a witch, never dared to bring Jess within a hundred miles of Sept-Tours, and now they’re closing ranks to protect Garcia and his witch at the family home? That does not, to say the least, seem at all fair. He
starts into an indignant exclamation, then bites down hard.

Anton’s gaze flicks to him ironically, as if he knew what Wyatt was about to say, and there is another unpleasant lull, enough to hear the distant hum and whir of the pumps keeping the underground chamber dry. Then he shrugs, reaches up, and undoes the spell on Lucy’s file, pulling it down. “Very well,” he says. “Whatever you can get from it. Will not be much.”

Wyatt wonders why he’s so certain, but as Maria opens it, Wyatt can tell that it has been substantially picked through since he had it. It looks as if most of the documents have been removed, including the record of Benjamin Cahill’s examination of Lucy when she was a child, and what’s left is uninformative to the point of banality. Wyatt has a distinct sense that they’ve just been played, Anton forcing them to give up sensitive details while knowing they wouldn’t get any in return, and looks up angrily. “What happened to the rest of it?”

Anton shrugs. “I do not know.”

“Did you take it?” Wyatt wonders if he was in fact the idiot for ever trusting a witch who makes no secret of believing that the de Clermonts are all brutes and barbarians. “Sokolov, I swear, if this is some long-con setup and you – ”

“I did not,” Anton says, just as angrily. “Was like this when I returned to check the other day. Who else could have stolen? I do not know.”

Whoever was down here with us, Wyatt thinks. Whoever that was. There is no way to know if that was witch, vampire, daemon – why not, everyone else is getting in on the action – or someone, something else. A human wouldn’t have the means or the motives for getting down here, and Wyatt would have known if Temple followed him. He might be an idiot, but not that much of one, and he stares around as if in expectation of the missing pages suddenly rematerializing. He tries to remember anything else he might have read last time, then notices suddenly that Jessica’s file, the one that so tempted him to grab, is also missing. He’s sure of it. It was just a few spaces down, Preston and Proctor being close together alphabetically, and he knows he saw it. “Hey,” he says instinctively. “What the – ?”

Maria and Anton, who are still disagreeing over who was responsible for the disappearance, break off and look around. Wyatt pushes a few of the files aside, just in case someone had it out and put it back carelessly, but it’s definitely not there. “They could have been stolen at the same time,” he says. “The papers out of Lucy’s file, and all of Jess’s. Someone’s been messing with the archives. That’s definitely against creature law, and only a witch could have gotten into Lucy’s.”

“You did last time,” Anton says uncharitably. “You cheated.”

“Yeah, but – ” Wyatt doesn’t want to look as if he’s pinning this all on the witches, but he can’t shake the feeling. Especially since he would have noticed a vampire on his tail, but possibly not a witch. “Lucy and Jessica are both witches, they’re connected to this somehow, and they go missing together? That seems a little more than coincidence.”

Maria and Anton frown at him, but in a way that means they can’t think what to say. They spend several hours searching the stacks, looking to see if other files have been moved, disturbed, or censored, and which at least keeps Maria and Anton from biting each other’s heads off, figuratively or literally. The daylight fades outside, and it gets dark enough that they have to light lamps, but they eventually discover that both Gabriel and Garcia’s files appear to have been recently thumbed through and rearranged. Maria’s lips go white at this clear evidence of threat to her family, and her eyes turn black. “Did witches take these too?”
“I don’t know.” Anton scowls. “Maybe was Temple, all the goods he seem to have on you.”

This is not an implausible theory, and Wyatt suddenly feels the need to check his own file. He can’t be sure if it’s been looked through, since he didn’t see it before to compare, and tells himself that it’s quite stupid to hope that he has been snooped on to the same level of importance as his brothers. He and Maria are just debating whether they should suspect the knight of the gate either of incompetence or complicity in this theft, when Wyatt’s phone buzzes in his pocket, startling him. He pulls it out, and sees to his even further surprise and disquiet that, speak of the devil, it’s his brother.

Wyatt debates whether he wants to deal with this, or foist it off on his mother, though Flynn could be calling to demand where she went. Either way, the reception down here is not the greatest, so he takes several quick steps to the stairs and answers quietly. “Yes?”

“Where the hell is she?” So much for pleasant sibling greetings and building new bridges, forgiving old wrongs. Flynn sounds as if he’s on the brink of total explosion. “Who was it this time? Some other sneaking Congregation weasel you couldn’t be bothered to notice or warn us about? I swear, if I find out that you – ”

“What the hell – ” It takes Wyatt a moment to cut into the wall of accusation pouring through the phone. “Hey, fuck you, what about a ‘hi, Wyatt, how are you, I’d like to ask you something?’ Or is that too far beyond your – ”

Flynn inhales a snarling breath as if to say that if they were in the same room, he would immediately attempt to murder Wyatt to relieve his feelings, or at least throw him into the nearest wall. Maria looks around sharply, as her vampire hearing must have picked that up (even without it, it wouldn’t be hard, he’s practically roaring), and frowns at Wyatt. There’s a split-second pause as Flynn talks himself off whatever ledge he’s on, then says, barely more politely, “Did the Congregation send someone else to Sept-Tours? Aside from Sokolov?”

“Not that I know of.” Wyatt shifts the phone to the other ear, so Flynn can yell into that one for a while. “What are you talking about? What’s going on?”

“She’s – ” Flynn growls again. “Lucy. She’s – she went out for some kind of evening walk, and now she’s – she didn’t come back. I don’t know what – but since last time, I was attacked by some flying Russian moron, if you’d managed to overlook another attempt to send someone here and whisk her off to –”

Wyatt covers the phone reflexively and looks at Anton Sokolov. It seems pointless asking if he heard that. “Did you send someone else?” he demands. “Or know anyone who did?”

“No. Gennady already imprisoned, I am not about –” Anton looks even more suspicious. “Who is that? Your brother? Tell him I want to talk!”

Wyatt is not about to let Flynn and Anton get into it over the phone, even if he’s tempted just to let someone else be the target of Flynn’s wounded-rhinoceros bellowing. Maria looks alarmed. “What is going on? What does Garcia – did he say Lucy is gone?”

“Yes, apparently.” Wyatt swears under his breath. “Fine,” he says. “Do you know what happened to her?”

“Of course I don’t know, otherwise I wouldn’t be calling you!” It sounds like Flynn is pacing, lashing back and forth on the stones, and Wyatt can hear Gabriel and Cecilia muttering in the background. “She might have been snatched from the grounds – since Gabriel apparently couldn’t do his fucking job either and make sure no one was –”
At that, there’s a loud interjection from Gabriel which threatens to devolve this into a three-way fraternal free-for-all, and Maria looks briefly despairing at the proof of how utterly dysfunctional all of her sons have become. She marches over and holds out her hand, Wyatt is only too happy to give her the phone, and says “Garcia? What on earth?”

Flynn gives her the angry recital, causing Maria to frown, then scowl deeply, then look worried. When he finishes, she’s quiet for a moment, then says, “We will return to Sept-Tours immediately. Do not do anything rash before we arrive.”

Wyatt suspects that his mother might be wasting her breath on that one, and apparently so does she, because she makes him repeat it before she hangs up. She looks shaken, and stands still for a moment before coming to herself and handing the phone back to Wyatt. “We must go quickly,” she says. “I did not – I hoped this would... well. Garcia is... upset.”

Wyatt bites back a tart rejoinder about how they all noticed that, and probably so did everyone within fifty miles of San Lazzaro. But there’s still the question of how they are going to do that. Any mode of transport will take them several hours, even Maria might not want to run from the Auvergne to Italy and back twice in a day, and if the clock is ticking, Flynn isn’t going to sit on his hands and wait for them – especially not Wyatt. Or will he just decide to hell with it, and –

Anton Sokolov clears his throat. “It happens,” he says, “I can fly. Not all witches can, but Baba Yaga teach me and my brother. I have interest in going to Sept-Tours as well, as you might imagine. I take you there, you release Gennady. Is fair bargain, yes?”

Maria and Wyatt stare at him, then turn to each other. The last thing they want to do is invite more hostile witches to their family home, but then, Flynn got a jump on that with Lucy, and that has led in domino effect to this. It is also clear that they need a ride, fast, and since Wyatt has already decided that the Sokolovs are essentially honorable, it might be that they can actually trust Anton to do as he says. But trusting a witch to take them thousands of feet into the air and not drop them – it wouldn’t kill them, but it would not be pleasant – or worse, spirit them off to some captivity of their own, some payback for their treatment of Gennady –

“Well?” Anton says. “Take or leave. I am busy man. I am thinking you want to go back, but perhaps I am mistaken?”

There does not seem to be a great deal of choice, not if they’re going to stop Flynn from igniting like a mortar round and blasting off to do something irretrievably and irreparably stupid. Maria was already hinting that Flynn had a connection to this witch, and much as Wyatt wants to have a very long chat with everyone in the family about the definition of the word ‘hypocrite’ and whether it might apply to them, this is not the time. It’s this, or – he’s not even sure he wants to think what.

“Very well,” Maria says, cool and magnificent, and Wyatt echoes it. “Let’s go.”

Flynn cannot concentrate after he hangs up. He continues to pace back and forth, barely paying attention to Gabriel, Cecilia, and Houdini in the background, obsessively replaying the last hour in his head and trying to think if there’s anything else to be done while they wait. They have already searched the house and confirmed that Lucy is not in it, followed her scent out to where it suddenly ended among the trees, and he feels certain that there must be something else, a lurking malefactor that he missed. No, that Gabriel missed. It was Gabriel’s job to secure the perimeter, to make sure there was no one else, and it feels more comfortable, easier, better, to blame Gabriel. Of course he was offensively lax on Lucy’s safety, of course he was punishing Flynn again. Why would Gabriel care?
(You were supposed to keep her safe, a voice whispers in Flynn’s head. You were supposed to be here. She begged you to stay. And you ran off, because you were a coward.)

Feebly, he tries to justify it. He did need to go to Oxford, it was a genuine crisis, he needed to sort it out. He wouldn’t have learned about Jessica’s troubling link to Temple if he hadn’t, or that Lucy’s powers possibly surpass all those of her peers. But he can’t shake the feeling that that’s exactly why she’s been taken. Obviously, the entire creature world has been trying to get their hands on her since the Ashmole 782 kerfuffle started, but it would take one of serious and merciless talent to risk a second assault on de Clermont lands, after they were already on guard from the first. Was it another witch? Was it – ?

Discovering that he can’t stay in the kitchen an instant longer, Flynn turns on his heel and blunders down the hall, through the front door, and out into the pitch-black woods, following Lucy’s trail once more. It weaves and rambles through the trees – where was she going, where was she running? Why now? Why couldn’t she just stay inside after dark, like she was told to do many times? He determinedly forces out of his head all memory of everything that came before, since he doesn’t think he can wrap his mind around it and isn’t sure that it wasn’t a terrible mistake. Was that what she was doing? Running away from him?

Flynn can see in the dark, but still finds himself clipping trunks and having to duck branches in the nick of time, until he thinks disgustedly that anyone who was in fact hanging around could see him coming from a mile off. He reaches the point once more where Lucy’s scent vanishes, gets down on hands and knees, and searches through the chilly, damp forest bracken in search of something she might have dropped. Her footsteps come this far, and then they just – did she turn into smoke, did she disintegrate, did she –

Letting out a roar of frustration, Flynn turns around to punch the nearest tree and instead almost punches his brother, who is standing right behind him and nearly gives him a heart attack. It looks as if Gabriel also ran out of the house in some dishevelment and has been following him, and Flynn didn’t even notice, too caught up in his own head. If he failed to notice a vampire on his tail, who knows what else could have slipped through? Failed. Failed. Failed. Didn’t protect Lucy and didn’t solve the mystery. None of it. And now she’s in danger and he doesn’t know where she is or how to get to her, and all his exalted intentions about keeping her safe, about protecting her from himself, matter less than half a damn.

“Get out of here,” he growls at Gabriel. “I know what you thought about her. If you’re just happy that she’s out of our hands and not our problem – ”

“Garcia – ” Gabriel grabs his arm before he can commence denuding the nearest tree of its bark, its leaves already long gone. “Do you think you’re doing any good, crashing around out here like this? Wait until Maman gets back, at least.”

“And she’ll do what?” Still breathing as if he’s been chased by a train, Flynn jerks at Gabriel’s iron grip, but it’s unyielding. “Also tell me that she’s very sorry? I told you two to keep Lucy safe while I was gone. I told you!”

“We did keep her safe while you were gone,” Gabriel points out acerbically. “This happened after you got back, in case it slipped your notice.”

It has not slipped Flynn’s notice, even if everything else might have. He wants to hit Gabriel for saying it, though, and the fact that he’s standing there with that infuriatingly calm expression, as if nothing whatsoever is wrong, provokes Flynn further. He could throw down right now, but another round of punching in the forest might poison Gabriel even further against him. Not as if he’s going to help. There’s a teetering, tenuous silence, and Flynn snaps, “Go back to the house. I’ll be back in a
Gabriel gives him the look of someone who has heard many times that Flynn would be just a minute, only for him to run off and blow something up. “Will you?”

“As soon as I figure out how she just disappeared off the face of the earth.” Flynn wrestles at his trapped arm once more, causing Gabriel to clamp down even harder. “Was this another witch? Sokolov could fly, that’s how he tackled me off the ramparts. If someone – ”

He stops. He doesn’t want to say it’s Jessica, he doesn’t want to think that even she could go that far. But it’s clear that Temple does have her under his thumb, and she got away from Flynn in Oxford. If she decided to pay a little visit to Sept-Tours, in revenge for never being allowed to go there while she and Wyatt were – she knows where it is, at least. But the thought briefly makes Flynn feel as if his spine has been torn out, and Gabriel takes advantage of his momentary lack of resistance to drag him back toward the house. “You idiot,” he says, slightly muffled. “Why did she run out like that?”

Flynn is about to say that he doesn’t know and it’s none of Gabriel’s business anyway, but there’s a note of genuine concern that catches him off guard. Last thing he knew, Gabriel was hoping Lucy would drop dead, or otherwise get off their property and never come back, but his older brother can’t disguise that odd, unexpected worry. What happened while Flynn was gone? Gabriel hasn’t been gloating about this, at least, which Flynn grimly thought he would seize the chance to do, and instead is just hauling him like a broken puppet, with a cold, angry determination. “Quit it,” Flynn says roughly. “I can walk.”

“Then walk.” Gabriel comes to a halt, but doesn’t entirely let go of him. They stare at each other, something crackles, and then Gabriel steps back and folds his arms defiantly. “What did you do to her?”

“I…” Flynn searches for the words. He by no means thinks that his brother needs to hear the specifics, but there is the fact that he is not guiltless. “We were – talking about what I found out in Oxford. I told her some things about what might have happened to her parents. She was… upset, and I comforted her. Then we – thought she should get some sleep.”

He can’t quite meet Gabriel’s eyes as he says this, and it’s just as he’s looking up that he surprises an even stranger expression on his brother’s face. Gabriel rubs a hand over his jaw, glancing away as if he’s suddenly the one that can’t look Flynn in the eye. Then he says, “You comforted her? Indeed.”

“Is this the Spanish Inquisition or – ” Flynn knows that extra defensiveness is not going to help him, though there is a note of unflattering skepticism in Gabriel’s voice that he could ever manage any such thing. “What does it matter? She decided to go for a walk, and some witch or God knows what snatched her. It’s not as if she – ”

Gabriel still seems to be struggling with something. Flynn is about to exasperatedly demand him to spit it out, since he’s tired of trying to guess Gabriel’s thoughts and being wrong, of being shut out and put down and otherwise made to feel as if his brother, who used to be his best friend in the world and his battle companion in arms and his other half, the person he confided in for everything and trusted above everyone, is just somebody that he used to know. Gabriel likes to act like he’s so much better than all of them, and maybe he is, but Flynn is torn between missing him until he can’t breathe, even though he’s standing right there, and wanting to kill him and get it over with. As if this truly can’t be mended, it’s better to put them out of their misery, rather than lingering and lingering like a horse with a broken leg. You used to be the wild one, he wants to say. The reckless playboy, the one I had to rein in, the one who took any risk, who went to any length, who asked forgiveness instead of permission. You used to love me more than anything that got in the way. Why? Why don’t you do that anymore? Why?
And yet. He knows, and knows that he deserves it. There’s the thinnest and most fragile of pauses, and then Gabriel says in a rush, “I told her about Matej.”

“You what?” That catches Flynn in the back of the head like a rock. He can feel the air forced out of his chest, as if a crushing blackness is closing over him. He reels on the spot. He can’t believe that Gabriel would do that, would sink that low in his depths of betrayal and revenge, to dig out that most sordid of skeletons and pick over its bones like carrion birds. Told Lucy to – do what? Prove that it was impossible that he could ever start over or feel anything like that again? The horrifying thought occurs to Flynn that maybe he can’t, that he is in fact permanently broken, that is why he did this to her. “You what?”

“I didn’t – ” Gabriel holds up his hands. “Garcia, I thought she deserved to know, she – ”

“Thought she deserved to know?” Flynn’s voice comes out as a sepulchral snarl, eyes flooding black, as he feels himself bending instinctively into a crouch, the prelude to a hunter’s leap. His fangs scrape the inside of his lip, and he bares them further. “Like hell – like hell you did! You never do anything without another reason for it, and if you suddenly decided that the witch you hate, that you and Maman have been trying to get rid of since she came here – what? She needed to know that, she needed to know that I – that you – ”

“I – ” Gabriel starts to say something, never looking away from Flynn, as he drops into the same position of tense readiness for an attack. They circle each other like rival stags, Gabriel’s own fangs flashing white in the dimness. “I did not tell her to prejudice against you. Maman had taken her to the church, told her about Lorena and Iris, I – ”

“SHE WHAT?” Flynn’s roar causes a stir among the trees, birds wakening and rising in flaps of alarm. “So that’s what you call keeping Lucy safe? Telling her all my worst secrets, my darkest past – things that were never yours to tell, in hopes she’d think better and run away? Promise to my face to look after her and then try to – ”

“You ran away!” Gabriel bellows. “I was going to come back, you know. I was going to apologize for what I had said, about never forgiving you for Christian’s death. But then you were gone again, and I wondered why I should, and – for some reason, some unimaginable reason, she cares for you, truly. I tasted it in her blood, and yet – ”

“Tasted it in her blood?” Flynn’s ears are ringing with a strange, tinny sound, as if his own blood has been turned to white-hot fire in his veins. “You bit her?”

“It was wrong of me. Cecilia told me to apologize, and I did. But to make sure that she could in fact be trusted, for our family to be kept safe – I was gentle, it was only in a kiss, she – ”

At that, something does in fact snap inside Flynn, the same as in the solar when Gabriel implicitly threatened that he might have to kill Lucy, the same way he had to kill Matej. To hell with any idea of forgiving Gabriel or making it right. He just wants to finally get this over and dead and properly buried, and he throws himself at his brother in a blind, snarling rage. Gabriel crashes into him halfway, a proper clash of the titans, and they roll around in a fury of blurs, throttling and kicking and punching and ripping and rending and tearing. Flynn sinks his fangs into the side of Gabriel’s neck and bites down, tastes his brother’s blood in a cool slow rush, sees the images of him with Lucy in the library – sitting close, Lucy’s hand on his, their faces together – kissing – it gets stuck there and replays over and over, until it’s burned into Flynn’s memory past all chance of ever forgetting. Is that – is that why she ran away from him? Decided that she cares for Gabriel more, and didn’t know how to tell him? He’s put up every appearance of not giving a fig for her – it wouldn’t be surprising, it –
A gut punch of agony rises up inside him and almost incapacitates him, makes him want to give into it until he never comes up again. Then there’s a bright sharp pain in his own neck, as if Gabriel has decided that fine, if biting is now on the table, don’t dish it out if you aren’t prepared to take it. Flynn can feel the memories bubbling up – don’t, don’t look at that, you can’t, it’s private – can see it playing over in front of him, knows that Gabriel is seeing it as well. Flynn and Lucy kissing, her borne down on the bed beneath him, her shirt unbuttoned and her head moving down her stomach, and the way it came to a rather sudden halt. Lucy getting up, flushed and breathless, practically running out – the way he stared after her as if he’d been concussed, the way his entire world felt upended – half tempted to go down to her room and finish where they left off, breathless and burning and gasping, but too late, it’s gone, she’s gone, it’s all, it’s all –

Flynn is still struggling, but in a jerking, convulsive, weakening way like a dying creature in its final throes, as Gabriel releases him, eyes savage and mouth dripping scarlet, as if to show how he could have properly bit Lucy if he cared to. Flynn flails out and punches him again, by reflex, even as the ragged holes in his neck continue to burn. He’s conscious only of the need to kill his enemy and make this stop, make all of this stop, when something flashes between them and rips them off each other, so hard that Gabriel flies ten feet and crashes into the gatepost. Flynn can hear someone swearing furiously in Old French, and rolls away on the grass, tempted to just stay down, stay there until the earth takes him in and closes over his head. He lies there, unmoving, as the shadow drops down next to him, and takes on the familiar proportions of Cecilia. “Garcia.”

Flynn doesn’t answer. He doesn’t have the strength for it, and he doesn’t want to know if Gabriel would have in fact killed him if she hadn’t torn them apart. Perhaps she should just have let it happen. He thinks he can hear Houdini yelling at Gabriel in the background, but he still doesn’t care. Not for the first time in his very long life, he devoutly wishes he was dead.

“Garcia,” Cecilia says again. Her hand touches his back, trying to roll him over. “Are you all right?”

No, Flynn thinks. No, I’m not. Just go away and leave me be. But she won’t leave him alone, gets him to sit up, and her mouth vanishes into a furiously cold line as she looks at his neck. She takes a handkerchief out of her sleeve and blots the wounds, then shouts, “GABRIEL!”

Gabriel appears balefully out of the night, chin defiantly lifted as if to demonstrate that the damage was entirely reciprocal, Flynn bit him first, and Cecilia looks as if she can’t decide whether to shout at them or to cry. He has never seen her cry, except at Christian’s funeral. Cecilia crying seems like the worst, the ultimate chaos and disorder, the end of all things. She looks between them with an expression that sorely wishes both of them were six feet under, then demands, “What was that about? Does it even matter? Both of you are a disgrace to your family and to yourselves. How dare you.”

Gabriel resentfully pulls out a handkerchief and blots his own neck, though the wounds Flynn has left him aren’t as deep, and in both cases, are already starting to heal. At least physically, though the memory is going to take a lot longer to fade. Both of them seem a little stunned, avoiding each other’s eyes, and Houdini is regarding Gabriel with bitter disapproval quite alien to his usual solicitous admiration. Something feels permanently broken among both the de Clermonts and their servants and friends, as if the entire planet has spun off its axis, and finally Gabriel mumbles, “I… should not have done that.”

“That seems to be the theme of your last several days, does it not?” Cecilia speaks harshly, and her hand tightens on Flynn’s shoulder. “Both with Lucy and now with your brother. How much worse are you determined to make it for yourself, Gabriel? When does it stop?”

Gabriel flinches. His eyes flicker to Flynn’s torn throat, then to his face. He himself looks almost ashen in a way not resulting from blood loss, shaken and heartsick and sore. “I just – ” he starts, then
stops. “I don’t understand how you could just – how she could just –”

Flynn keeps his mouth shut. He doesn’t know what he might say if he opens it, and he doesn’t want to enquire into any reason for Gabriel’s penitence, his dawning sense that he might have gone too far. Once again, the image of Lucy and Gabriel kissing burns itself against the back of his eyes. If Gabriel is – if he blames Flynn for Lucy leaving, for running away from the safety of the house into the exposure of the dark woods – if that attack was motivated at least in part because he thinks that without Flynn being so unfortunately Flynn, if he’d just given Lucy what she wanted, she would still be here –

Flynn doesn’t know if it’s the case or not, though the thought makes his entire body hurt until he can’t stand it. He feels as if he’s sinking into quicksand, as if nothing can or will be real again, odd and numb and dreamlike. Cecilia helps him to his feet, and she and Houdini drag the battered combatants back into Sept-Tours. Gabriel seems almost meek, still rattled, and finally he says, “Garcia. Garcia, I didn’t –”

Flynn still doesn’t look at him, doesn’t want to answer. The holes on his throat have almost healed themselves, though he can feel a trickle of blood running down beneath his collar. His shirt is splattered with red, and by the time Cecilia gets him to a chair and heaves him into it, he feels as if he is floating along behind his body like a balloon on a string. The four of them sit there in appropriately dead silence. Then Cecilia says very quietly, “Shame on you.”

It’s worse than her shouting and swearing, and it makes both the de Clermont brothers cringe. Cecilia gets to her feet, rolls back her sleeve, and offers her wrist to Flynn, clearly an invitation to feed and regain his strength, and while Houdini does the same to Gabriel, it’s with a pointed stare that tells him he had damn well better be civilized about it. There’s an interlude as they both do that, and while the tension in the room has not eased at all by the time they finish, Cecilia seems increasingly confident that neither of them are going to move a muscle if they do not want her to instantly destroy them. She doesn’t need to worry. Flynn doesn’t know if he is ever going to feel like himself again in his life. As if whatever progress he thought he made since Matej is just a hollow and translucent illusion, and has been shattered into a thousand pieces. As if no matter what, he will always remain there, fixed and frozen at the moment of pain and terror and loss, and everything else is just a shabby masquerade.

The silence continues to reign, he doesn’t know how long. Then there’s a bump and a rustle outside, Cecilia looks up sharply, and they hear noises in the front hall. They all get to their feet rather quickly, united against the incursion if nothing else, but as they catch the scent, they realize who it is. The next moment, the door opens and a windswept Maria de Clermont enters, followed by Wyatt. They take in the tinderbox atmosphere, start to say something, then stop. Then Maria demands, “What on earth has gone on here?”

“It is a long and disgraceful story, Madame.” Cecilia’s voice is quiet, but it remains sharp with anger. “How have you returned so swiftly from Venice?”

“We were – flown here.” It clearly pains Maria to admit it. “By a witch, Anton Sokolov. He agreed to wait at the boundary of the house, but he expects us to release his brother, Gennady, from custody in payment for this service. Have you found no trace of Lucy?”

“No,” Cecilia says. “Gabriel and Garcia nearly killed each other instead.”

Maria looks as if she has been hit, and Wyatt’s startled blue gaze flickers between his older brothers. The feed has helped, but they’re still tousled and scuffed and otherwise disreputable-looking. The twin punctures on their throats have healed to small pink spots, but are plainly visible, as is the dried blood on their clothes. Maria makes a faint despairing sound, and sinks into the nearest chair as if her
legs are about to give out. Head in her hands, she says, “Is it never enough, between you two? Can it never be finished?”

“Maman, we – ” Gabriel looks furtively at Flynn. “We did not – ”

Maria rubs her eyes, taking a long moment to compose herself. They have not seen her this visibly upset in decades, and Gabriel and Flynn’s gazes meet accidentally, both of them shamefaced. Wyatt looks extremely awkward, as if he has inadvertently parachuted into the middle of the biggest familial conflagration since Asher’s death, and clears his throat. “Uh,” he says. “Hey, Cecilia, Harry.”

They both nod back at him, but everyone’s attention remains on Maria. It’s hard to tell if she’s finally going to crack, and for a split second they think she might, but she is not two-odd millennia old for nothing, has not endured so much to give into a fit of hysterics now. She lifts her head, gets up, and walks over to Flynn, cupping his face in her hands. “Garcia,” she says quietly. “We have all done such terrible wrong by you, these last several days, even in the name of thinking we knew what was best. In our fear and defensiveness about the possibility of you being hurt, we hurt you more, and in the places we knew it would be the worst. I don’t know if you can forgive us, but I am more sorry than I can ever say.”

Flynn’s throat feels thick as he looks up at his mother, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. He knows that when she broaches the possibility of him never forgiving them, it is far from an academic or theoretical concern, since it seems that once the de Clermonts have good and broken, they can never be put back together as they once were, no matter how much time has passed. She strokes his cheek, and he wants to give into her comfort, wants to be held as if he was a small boy again, but he’s still furious at her for taking Lucy to the church and telling her about Lorena and Iris, when he knows she would have done that to ward her off, to use his secrets as weapons, to tell Lucy not to waste her time. Meaning the best, as she said, but that does not change the wounds. Then Gabriel took it as an opportunity to disinter Matej, and everything snowballed from there. His neck throbs. Everything hangs from a thread.

“I see,” Flynn says at last. His voice sounds strange, hoarse, forced from his scarred throat like it does not quite belong to him. “So that makes it better, does it?”

“No.” Maria shakes her head. “No, it does not begin to atone. Tell me, sweetheart. Tell me if there is anything we can possibly do to repair this.”

Go to hell, Flynn thinks. That is what you could do, all of you, and frankly, I might not mind. But he doesn’t say this, and he can sense everyone’s attention on him, tense and tender and guilty all at once. He’s still burningly furious and broken-hearted, wants to throw their betrayal in their face, to blame them for what’s happened, but he knows he has not done anything to make anyone’s lot easier. They might have lit the fuse, but he was the one who poured oil everywhere and struck the first spark. God, what a mess. He might be completely justified if he never spoke to them again, perhaps. But he’s tired of counting up who has done the worst wrong, and right now, nothing else in the world, not even his anger at his family, comes close to the one, the greatest, the only thing that matters.

“Fine,” he says, and can feel them all hanging on his every word, leaning forward. His voice is calm and level and cold as ice. “Then you’re going to help me rescue Lucy.”
In The Wastelands

Lucy has no idea how long they are in the air. All of her attention is devoted to not freezing to death, as the night wind scourcs her face like ice, numbs her extremities to blocks of wood, and squeezes tears out of her eyes until it starts to crystallize in her lashes, almost blinding her. Not as if there is much to see. She isn’t even sure what has hold of her, aside from some sort of monstrous, overgrown harpy, its claws still digging into her shoulders and almost drawing blood. She isn’t wearing much, her jaw is chattering like a nutcracker until she’s briefly afraid she’ll bite her tongue off, and she’s lost one shoe, her socked foot dangling limply in the slipstream, a mile above the rough dark ground. She desperately wants this to be over, but she’s more afraid of what might happen when it does.

Furiously, she tries to rally her magic. It was just spilling over, back in the bedroom with Flynn – it seems impossible that it can’t come to some kind of defense now. But if she struggles too hard, she’ll fall, and unlike whatever is carrying her, she doesn’t have wings. The time to figure out any new magical abilities she might be able to unlock is not when she is plunging to her death in the middle of nowhere. Which way are they going? At night, it’s impossible to tell, and she fights a sudden fear that they might head out over the Atlantic and drop her into the sea. But if it was a matter of just killing her, the harpy-thing could let go of her anywhere, and Lucy knows that she is far more valuable alive. She’s being taken somewhere, a prize of war, for whoever has craftily arranged to snatch her directly from Sept-Tours. The same person who sent Gennady Sokolov? Or worse?

Lucy tries to take deep breaths, to control the panic banging in her head, since completely losing it is not going to help her. Squinting through her streaming eyes, she tries to make out any recognizable feature on the landscape blurring by below. It still looks like France, and she doesn’t think they’ve flown far or fast enough to have crossed into a new country. Here and there, the isolated pinpricks of car headlights curve down a deserted motorway, or a few farmhouses are visible in the rolling green downs, but for the most part, they stay well clear of any populated centres. Lucy has turned to a human block of ice by the time they dip below a low-hanging cloud, and she spots a spectral ruined castle on the hilltop ahead, something straight out of a Gothic novel. She can’t be sure, but it reminds her of the fortified city of Carcassonne in the south of France, which she visited a few summers ago. Are they somewhere in the Languedoc? That would fit with the duration of flight, at least, but what –

No time to ponder. They’re decelerating fast, they’re close enough to the crumbling tower wall that Lucy thinks they’ll hit it and instinctively jerks her legs up, and hurtle down toward the remnants of the bailey, nothing more than a cleared space of dirt surrounded by broken stones. The moon flits eerily through the empty windows, the roofless hall, and the harpy negligently lets go of her, causing Lucy to tumble for the last several feet and do a clumsy somersault. It knocks her wind out, and she lies flattened, gasping vainly, as the harpy descends with unexpected dainty grace, shifts and transforms, and hits the ground in heeled boots as if it – as if she – has just strode off a catwalk somewhere. She regards the wheezing Lucy in cool, cruel amusement. “Evening, princess.”

Somehow, this comes as both a wrenching shock and no shock whatsoever, even as Lucy feels it lurch through her to the back of her spine. She remains where she is, staring balefully up at Emma Whitmore, who seems to be thoroughly enjoying the effect of her dramatic entrance, red hair tossed in the night wind and green eyes glittering triumphantly. “Surprised to see me?” she goes on. “You know, I didn’t underestimate you this time. You had a few powerful accidents, the last few times we crossed paths, but I know what I’m doing. That makes a difference.”

Lucy imagines that it does, but her mouth is full of cold dirt and her lungs still aren’t working, and all she can do is stare at Emma and wonder if some other undiscovered elemental will conveniently come to her aid. It doesn’t. As she scrambles to her feet, Emma jerks up her hand, and Lucy feels her
legs lock as if in frozen mud. “Ah-ah-ah,” Emma drawls. “Let’s take things slowly, shall we? Wouldn’t want to overexert yourself.”

“You –” Lucy struggles in vain against the cold, coiling strictures of the spell. “So you what, you just – snatched me out here so you and Cahill could –”

“Cahill?” Emma arches a cutting eyebrow. “Cahill? Oh, you think I’m still working with him, don’t you? Yes, I suppose you would.”

Lucy stares at her in confusion, since obviously she has seen the terrible twosome together around Oxford, they both made a concerted effort to attack her and acquire Ashmole 782 in the Bodleian, and since they’re both witches, she can’t think on who else’s behalf Emma would have arranged to kidnap her. But then she senses movement in the dark corner of the ruin, and someone else steps out. He’s tall, magisterially white-haired, wears horn-rimmed glasses and a tailored suit, and looks like a successful Wall Street executive. He’s also a vampire, as she can tell when he bares exquisitely kept fangs at her in the unsettling simulacrum of a welcoming smile. “Dr. Preston. How wonderful to meet you at last.”

Still held in place by Emma’s spell, Lucy looks between them wildly. This makes no sense. Why would a vampire and a witch have banded together to lay hands on her, when their aims would be so wildly divergent? Well, they would presumably be the same – get Ashmole 782 for their own species – but that would involve a bloody fight to see which species it would be. As if to spare her the suspense, the newcomer inclines his head graciously. “My name is Michael Temple. I hold one of the vampire seats on the Congregation, and you will, I think, be familiar with Miss Whitmore. Isn’t it delightful to see us all here, forging new connections and cooperation among creatures?”

It is not delightful at all, as he damn well must know, and that name sets off an alarm bell in Lucy’s mind. That was who Flynn was just telling her about, the ex-Templar who helped betray the order to the king of France and holds such a virulent grudge against the de Clermonts for killing his master, Gerbert. “You,” she blurts out, before she can dissemble or try to pretend she doesn’t know. “You were the one who –”

“Ah, so you have heard of me.” Temple inspects her with mild interest. “Then surely you must understand my interest in a face-to-face conversation. Miss Whitmore has also found herself dissatisfied with how matters were progressing on her end, so as I continue to expand my network of witch contacts, I thought it would be easier to send one of your own kind to – ah – retrieve you. Surely you can’t have been having a good time of it at Sept-Tours? Madame de Clermont does have rather strong feelings on the subject.”

“I want to go back right now.” Lucy knows it’s not going to do any good, is hollow and pointless, but she puts as much righteous outrage into it as she can. “You – you kidnapped me, you’ve taken me to – wherever this is, as if I don’t know that you want to –”

“Do you?” Temple continues to regard her with that placid expression. “Indeed, do tell. What is it that we want with you, Dr. Preston?”

Lucy falters. She assumes it’s either Ashmole 782 or revenge-related, but doesn’t want to give them ideas, and her mind is already spinning, trying to figure out how Temple and Emma ended up on the same side. Flynn confirmed to her that Temple was blackmailing Jessica, forcing her to work for him, which must be what he meant with that comment about his network of witch contacts. But Emma doesn’t look like she’s been threatened or coerced, and she just willingly handed Lucy over to a vampire, even after all that talk about how Lucy herself couldn’t go near them. It’s clear that Flynn and Emma also have some kind of fraught history and have fought each other for a while, so maybe it’s just a case of all of Flynn’s old enemies ganging together to get back at him, but it is alarming for
any number of reasons that they have settled on Lucy as the best method of doing that. She’s still trapped, unable to do anything but watch both of them circle like smug sharks, and she’s drawing a blank. Oh God, this is bad. There is no way Flynn or any of the others can know where she is. She’s stuck here at their mercy for who knows how long, and until they get what they want –

“So what?” she says, trying to inject some bravado into her voice, which still sounds thin and frightened. “Just decided to ditch Benjamin Cahill and – ”

Emma scoffs. “Please don’t act like you’re offended on his behalf. I told you the first time we met that I thought he was an idiot. Besides, after watching him bungle it so badly when we tried to get Ashmole 782 from you, I decided that my talents would be better applied elsewhere. And you’ve learned some troubling things about him, haven’t you, Lucy? What he did to you when you were a child, all those questions about what happened to your parents?”

Lucy’s throat is dry, despite herself. Her shock must show on her face, because Emma laughs again, short and sharp. “Oh yes,” she says. “I know about that. I know more about it than you do, I imagine. I paid a little visit to the Congregation archives in Venice, and I collected parts of your file for some light reading. Want to know what I found out?”

Lucy bites her lip until she tastes blood, even if that might not be a wise thing to do with a dangerous vampire present. She doesn’t trust anything Emma might tell her, but it’s true that she knows Cahill did something bad, that memory she returned to the other night. It’s also clear that Emma is going to string this out in drips and drabs, make Lucy beg for the information before she reveals any of it at all, with a predator’s exquisitely attuned instinct for playing with their food. And with what Flynn also said about Carol and Henry being murdered by witches, who covered up the crime by pinning it on some random Russian peasants – what does Emma know? Is that why she turned on Cahill, even if it meant crossing species boundaries to work with Temple? Is it just their shared loathing of Flynn putting them on the path to cooperation, are they intending to kill the other first the instant Lucy gets Ashmole 782 – but she tried last time, right before Emma and Cahill attacked. She tried to get it, and she couldn’t. There’s no guarantee that she still can, if it’s vanished for another two hundred years, or anything else. Should she pretend that she knows, bluff them into thinking she has as much value as she can, so they don’t kill her and drop her drained corpse on Sept-Tours’ doorstep as a calling card? Her mind whirls frantically, concluding nothing.

“Anyway,” Emma goes on, when Lucy doesn’t answer. “You might decide that I’ve done you a favor tonight, princess. If nothing else, I did get you away from that family and their ridiculous melodramatics. How this goes from here is up to you. Be a good girl and tell me what I need to know, and I can have you back at Univ by morning. Or…”

She delicately trails off, leaving the end of the sentence open to all sorts of unpleasant implications. From the look on her face, she wouldn’t at all mind if this got messy, to pay Lucy back for the humiliating defeats she managed to get over on them in Oxford. Lucy tries frantically to summon up her power – if it’s linked to strong emotion, surely her life being in manifest danger would qualify – but still nothing. She has only ever been able to consciously control and channel it when Flynn’s around, indeed when she is physically touching him, and he is very far away right now, probably oblivious that she has gone missing at all. Observing her futile efforts, Emma smirks. “Don’t get too feisty, now.”

Lucy grits her teeth, forcing herself to hang limp in the air, feet still dangling several inches above the ground. Temple takes a step, but Emma throws out an arm. “I get her first. That was the agreement, if you recall? In exchange for procuring her, I had the first crack.”

“Of course.” Temple smiles. “Let me know when you’ve finished, won’t you? Oh, and Miss
Whitmore. Please do remember that we have a good deal more uses in mind for her. So don’t leave any lasting marks.”

Emma shrugs, as if to say she’ll do what she feels like, thanks, and Lucy’s terror jacks up a few notches as Temple strides away into the dimness of the tower. Not that she thought he was going to do her any remote bit of good, but now she’s alone with Emma, and the look in her eye is speculative, dangerous, considering and thorough. She is clearly envisioning any number of things she might want to try here, and Lucy comes free from the invisible grasp of the spell, falling once more onto the hard-packed dirt. She scuttles backward on all fours, then jumps to her feet and runs to the remnants of the portcullis, but she’s once more snapped by a magical whip, a tongue of fire that coils around her throat and yanks her bodily back toward Emma. She gags and kicks, more fruitlessly than ever, and Emma regards her with a bored, critical air. “Stop it. You’re just embarrassing yourself.”

“Let me go.” It’s not going to do any more good than it did the first time. Lucy’s fists clench, but remain depressingly, dreadfully devoid of magic. “Let me go, Flynn is going to – ”

“Oh, so you’re counting on him to stop this?” Emma bursts into incredulous laughter. “To heroically save you? No, no. I really have to see this. After your little friend Jessica already went around the block with one of the de Clermont idiots, you think you’re doing it again?”

Lucy doesn’t answer, neck still burning from the force of the whip, trying to prepare herself for whatever’s going to come next, but her mind remains a useless blank. Emma paces nearer, not in a hurry, looking at her with something almost like pity. “You’re not much of a witch, are you? You could have been, you could have been so much more, but instead you’re just this. Not that you should be underestimated, and I don’t believe you’re quite as pathetic as you’d like everyone to believe. What’s the secret? How did you get Ashmole 782?”

“I don’t know.” It comes out strangled, defiant, as Lucy once more endeavors to stand up, to face this head-on. “And if I did, I wouldn’t tell you.”

Emma considers her for a moment, lips curling in an amused smirk. Then she slashes her hand, the ground tilts away, and for a moment Lucy thinks she’s been swept up into the air again. This is not entirely wrong, since she is dangling upside down, several feet off the ground, as Emma makes a motion as if conducting an orchestra and a circle of fire rises around her, crackling and spitting. “I’ll ask again,” Emma says. “Where did you learn it?”

“I didn’t.” Emma struggles to speak through the rush of blood to her head, the dizzy, blinding angle, doing her best to keep her upside-down adversary in sight. “Weren’t you the one who was supposed to know everything about me?”

Maybe it wasn’t the best idea to sass a woman who clearly has no compunctions about torturing her, and Emma raises both eyebrows this time, lips vanishing into a less amused line. She strides through the ring of fire and very close to Lucy, her gaze almost as scorching as the magical blaze. “What have you learned about the de Clermonts? What does Flynn plan to do if you give him the manuscript? Or Gabriel? Is this for the Knights of Lazarus?”

“I Don’t. Know.” Lucy swings gently, like laundry hung out in the breeze. “So just – ”

The rest of her sentence is cut off in a gurgling, gasping gulp as Emma raises one hand and directs a thin line of fire into her back like a surgical laser. It hurts as if her skin is being peeled off, Lucy isn’t sure that it’s not, and she can practically feel it banging against the inside of her ribs, slicing into her, as if she might open her mouth and blaze like a lighthouse. She lets out a strangled scream, thrashing and jerking in a pointless attempt to get away from it, and Emma lowers her hand. “Do you want
another taster?"

“I told you, you’re wasting your time.” Lucy can taste soot in her mouth, and spits feebly. “I don’t know.”

“You’ve been with Garcia de Clermont all this time and you haven’t learned anything?” Emma laughs scornfully. “Forgive me if I expect you’re lying, princess. Or no, don’t tell me you have actual feelings for him and think you’re nobly protecting him. It never ends well for anyone, getting involved with them. And it’s against the Covenant. Or are you such a bad witch that you’ve never even heard of that?”

Lucy needs to save her strength, needs to somehow come up with a way to get her magic going and not get distracted by taunts that Emma is clearly throwing at her with the intent to wound, but she really does not want to be reminded of the sore place where things left off with Flynn. She knows it was a stupid idea, doesn’t know if either of them would have given in if it wasn’t a heightened emotional moment, but it’s possible anyway that she’s never going to see him again and she can’t – she can’t let it sap her defenses any more than it might have already done. If she could just fool herself into thinking that he might be coming, it could help activate her magic, but she needs it now, for herself, and not on the off chance a handsome idiot might bestir himself to realize she ran out of the house in a fit of sexual frustration and got inconveniently abducted as a result. This is not the time, it is not, and yet –

“Still not talking. Princess.” Emma aims another agonizing spear of fire into Lucy’s back, and this time, she properly screams. “Or do you get off on it? I don’t know what you might be into, but I am going to need that information. What – have – you – found?”

For half a second, Lucy actually contemplates telling her about the fragment of Ashmole 782 that Flynn got in Prague, that they deciphered together with all its mysterious riddles, but just as quickly, the thought goes away. She presses her lips together, but as Emma ramps up the intensity and it feels like her body is splitting in half, she can’t help it, she screams again. Tears run down into her hair and drip to the ground, she shakes uncontrollably even when Emma takes her foot off the gas again, and dangles there, smoke rising from the singed edges of her clothes. It takes an impossible effort to force words through her scorched throat. “I don’t. Have. Anything. To tell you.”

Emma considers her critically, then clicks her fingers. Once more, Lucy falls, and if she hadn’t twisted awkwardly in midair, she would have hit her head on one of the stones. But she doesn’t have long to enjoy her reprieve. Emma makes another careless gesture, and she’s thrown back into the air, limbs pulled out grotesquely as if she’s being stretched on the rack. Bolts of stabbing pain judder through them, as she whimpers and struggles uselessly. “I said.” Emma’s eyes are almost as black as a vampire’s, her face taking on a slightly demonic aspect through the billowing smoke. “What’s your connection to that manuscript?”

Lucy once more has the overpowering urge to snap back that Emma clearly has all kinds of problems if she thinks the best way to get this information from someone is to torture them, but she can’t catch her breath. She feels like she is flying off in every direction, tasting burned bile in the back of her throat and hearing her eyeballs rattling in her skull. She tries to think of something she could tell Emma that wouldn’t be too compromising, that sounds promising enough to make the pain stop but wouldn’t give her anything she could actually use. She’s a smart woman, God damn it. She should be able to think herself out of this. But this isn’t some intellectual pissing contest, isn’t a matter of cleverly rebutting her opponent’s arguments or publishing a more thoroughly researched journal article. Emma is sheerly and simply attacking her, savaging and slashing her with no more refined weapons than as much pain as either of them are prepared to take, and Lucy is not trained to fight anyone on this level of brutality. She has plenty of admirable qualities, but this is wildly out of her
depth. She can talk, or wait for Emma to get frustrated and hand her over to Temple. Either way, that doesn’t seem conducive to survival.

Emma slackens the pressure for an instant, Lucy’s limbs sag as if puppet strings have been cut, and once more, she throws all her effort into reaching for her magic. She can sense it, like running water far below a thick carapace of ice, and the only way to reach it is to bash her way in. But she has a feeling that Emma might try more direct methods of assault and interrogation next, might try to break right into her mind since Lucy won’t offer the information voluntarily, and she will need all her strength to fend that off. There’s another fraught moment as the two witches regard each other, Emma perhaps grudgingly impressed with Lucy’s resistance despite herself. Then she says, “Don’t you just want to tell me, Lucy? Make it stop? We don’t have to be enemies. We’re alike, you know. You could tell me, and I could tell you what I know about Cahill, and about your parents. Hmm?”

“You think I’m going to…” Lucy doubles up, almost retching. “You think I’m going to tell you anything?”

“You could.” Emma grins, which looks practically obscene. “You heard what Temple said, he’d prefer that I didn’t leave any marks. Vampires have that trick, you know, where when they bite you, they can see your thoughts and memories, feel your emotions. I believe he has some notion of trying it on you, if I don’t get you to break. But you see, with how deep he would have to dig, all the barriers he would have to get through, it would almost certainly kill you, and neither of us want that. So why not just be a good girl, and get it over with? Hmm?”

Lucy swallows heavily once again, trying to stall for time as much to keep herself from throwing up impressively. If she calls Emma’s bluff and declares that she’ll hold out to the bitter end, she might be able to avoid actually dying, but she doesn’t know that she wants to subject herself to horrifying pain until then. She doesn’t want to betray the de Clermonts and she doesn’t want to put herself in the hands of these two lunatics as a useful tool to the unlimited power of Ashmole 782, she can’t tell them about the fragment of the manuscript with the encrypted clues, and she genuinely doesn’t know if anyone’s coming for her. She wants to think that Flynn would, maybe even that Gabriel would too, but she was whisked out of sight, in the dark, away from the house, and now she’s been taken however many hundreds of miles to a remote, ruined fortress that is the haunt of one of their oldest enemies. Would Maria possibly countenance risking two of her sons to save a witch, what with everything that happened to Asher? Or would she just consider it karmic payback?

“Come on, princess.” Emma raises her hands, glowing with infernal light. “I don’t want to let Temple at you, you know. You and I, we’re still the same kind, and I could teach you better. I know you have power, and so do you. You’ve just never been able to do anything with it. At least as far as the Congregation knows. Come on. Come on, give it a shot. You think it’ll be another witch-wind? Or can’t you even manage that?”

Her taunts pierce into Lucy’s skull like drill bits, as if Emma has become the manifestation of all her doubt and inability, her shyness and clumsiness and confusion, her constant sense that she was never good enough as a witch or a historian, the lingering hint of her mother’s high standards and unfulfilled expectations. Her legs feel like water, but she forces herself to once more get to her feet. She can’t get her magic to stir, she has no weapon, but she doesn’t want to cower in the dirt. Her branded back burns, her blood beats behind her eyes, and she wonders if she could grab a sharpened rock and bash Emma to death with it. Unlikely, but Lucy is low on options. And if this is it for her, betrayed and murdered by fellow witches just like her parents, she intends to go down fighting.

For a brief moment, something like unease flickers across Emma’s freckled face. Then all at once, she and Lucy both move, and Lucy throws herself aside as Emma’s blast hits the wall behind her. It carves a substantial sooty divot out of the stones, leaving Lucy to only wonder what it would have
done to her, and she can sense her magic slipping just out of reach, sliding like a skin of oil atop the water, eluding her every time she tries to snatch it. It feels as if something is crumbling inside her, snapping like the staves of a barrel, so physically painful that she thinks her ribs are breaking. It has come to her unconsciously, reflexively before – this is not the time for *just relax and it will happen*, which never works for anything, but if she let go of the expectation of having it, of trying to frantically force it – now, come on, *please* now, she doesn’t think she has the strength to jump away from too many more –

Lucy ducks again as Emma lashes out her fiery magical whip, which entangles on the roots growing through the broken portcullis, and Emma curses and pulls it free. Lucy grabs a branch and uses it to catch the next stroke, jerking hard in an attempt to rip it out of Emma’s hand. It doesn’t work, but it briefly throws her off balance, and Lucy fumbles out and gets hold of a rock with the other. She heaves it with all her might, clipping Emma’s cheek and leaving a shallow, bloody cut. It is in no way a debilitating wound, but it’s the first blow she has managed to strike in return. Emma stumbles, and Lucy lurches upright, hands outstretched. It’s coming now, it’s surging up as if to the break in a dam, and if the force of it kills her, fine. As long as it takes Emma with it.

*Witch-rain,* Lucy thinks. That was what she inadvertently produced when Flynn left, out of her anger and abandonment and betrayal, and while this is a different kind of pain, it’s close enough. If it’s the flood that comes when she’s most enraged – *après moi, le déluge* –

It’s not quite the rains of Noah’s Ark, but it’s something. It bursts from the stones, from the earth, the root and rock, and sweeps toward Emma in a frothing torrent, a ferocious mudslide that engulfs the courtyard and hammers the walls. Emma has tortured her with fire, and so Lucy conjures water, sends pillars of steam hissing up where it strikes the pockets of smoldering embers, soaks them both as if they’re standing under Niagara Falls and Emma reels backward. She raises her hands to summon another attack, but Lucy forms a giant watery fist and punches her in the face, sending her flying. Water keeps coming, pouring in seething currents – she can’t go forever, she has to turn it off, but she doesn’t know how to do that by herself, the effort is exhausting her almost that fast, and –

Emma swears, struggles to her feet, sweeps her sodden hair out of her eyes, and changes tack. She makes a violent whipping motion with her hands, and Lucy is plucked skyward and carried above the muddy waters, into a ruined corridor and toward the mouth of a narrow well. She jerks and kicks wildly – no, she can’t, she’s not at all good with small, enclosed spaces and if she goes down there – left in the dark to think about what she’s done and awaiting Temple to come and drain her dry –

The opening of the well is a narrow dark slit, and Emma lowers Lucy into it. She too seems to be losing control and strength of her magic, as if Lucy’s onslaught has badly weakened her, stripped her of her primary abilities, and the thread on which Lucy dangles is quickly fraying. Lucy’s screams echo in an odd, muffled way off the enclosing walls, the sensation of total entrapment embracing her like a tomb, as she falls the last few feet and lands on the bottom with a thump. She is sobbing breathlessly, a reflexive, mindless panic that she has to get out of here, it’s too close, it’s too *close,* but there is no more than a few square feet of space and the top is now a good thirty feet above her, a tiny circle of greyish light in which she can just make out Emma’s snarling face. Then it vanishes.

Lucy reels in a panicking circle, hands fumbling wildly on the wet, jagged stones. She can’t create any more space, if she fills the dry well with water then she will drown, and she tries to climb up the wall, but she is not the most coordinated person in the world, has already been tortured, and it’s blind and black and slippery with moss and mud. She gashes her arm open and falls again, winding herself completely. Something cracks beneath her in a way that sounds horribly like bone, and she tries desperately not to think that someone else might have fallen in and drowned a long time ago.

“*Please,*” she begs, beyond all pride, hyperventilating. “*Please. Get me out! Emma, get me out!*”
No answer. She thought this clear evidence of her desperation might be enough to convince Emma that she’s won, but there’s still no sound from above. She’s trapped, she can’t get out of here. She can’t fly. Her back aches fit to burst, and something rattles inside her every time she takes a breath. She’s going to die down here. Nobody’s coming. She’s going to die.

Lucy sinks down in dreamy slow motion, feeling her limbs giving out on her. Her cheek hits the mud, soft and thick and cool, almost soothing. Almost comfortable.

Darkness is reaching for her. Its hands are gentle.

She goes under.

They can’t be entirely sure where Lucy is. An emergency council held at the dining room table barely avoids another shouting match, but at least everyone seems to be in agreement that things have gone too far and they need to be on Flynn’s side. He’s still too angry to entirely appreciate this, and half of him just wants to leave the lot of them in Sept-Tours and strike out by himself, since it feels as if any “help” they can offer will just make everything worse. He is convinced that Michael Temple has something to do with this, since he is the one who just obtained the report of Lucy’s full powers from Jessica, and to his vast surprise, Wyatt – despite getting a very odd look on his face at the mention of Jessica – backs him up. “He was definitely plotting against us,” the youngest brother says. “He knew – well, he knew a lot. Still really wish you’d warned me, but I take it that’s for later.”

“Yes.” Flynn rubs his face. “And it’s the sort of thing Temple would want to do, the exact kind of revenge that would appeal to him. God, why didn’t I just kill him and finish the job last time?”

Gabriel’s eyes flicker, but he doesn’t say anything. There is a communal and unpleasant pause, and then Cecilia says, “If it was a witch that snatched her, we presently have two witches in residence, who might be able to detect the presence of a fellow. And since Anton Sokolov is already expecting his brother to be released in return for his service – ”

The four de Clermonts exchange looks. Maria already made the promise and cannot renege on it now, but it’s also clear that she would like to avoid getting the family into further entanglement and obligation with witches. But when nobody has a better idea, she is the first to rise to her feet. “Very well. Where is this Gennady Sokolov being kept?”

While Maria and Wyatt go out to get Anton, Flynn, Gabriel, and Cecilia march down to the dungeons. Gennady is dozing on his bed, but at the sound of their echoing footsteps, he scrambles to his feet. Flynn can’t help but notice that he looks distinctly the worse for wear, and wonders just how much Gabriel has been working him over. As they come to a halt in front of the cell, Gennady regards them out of a black eye and utters a disapproving huff. “What, is now THREE MUSKETEERS?”

“It’s your lucky day, Sokolov,” Gabriel says, tone clipped and cold. “Your brother flew my mother and other brother back from Venice, and has requested your freedom as repayment for that service. Once you are released, you will demonstrate your stated concern for Lucy Preston’s safety, and help us discern who might have abducted her earlier this evening. After this, if you have committed no more outrages against the de Clermont family, you will be set free and at liberty to continue on your way. Is that quite clear?”

Gennady regards him with patent (and not unwarranted) skepticism. “Lucy is STOLEN?” he demands. “Again? You are all very BAD at looking after her, and now you want me to SAVE YOUR ASS? After what you have already – ”
There’s a screech and rend of metal, making everyone jump. Flynn glances over to see that Gabriel’s fist has contracted on the bar of the cell, bending it almost double, and the air practically vibrates around him. Gabriel’s eyes are pitch black, his jaw set like stone, and nobody looking at him would be in any doubt that he is very ancient, very powerful, and an uncontrollable force of nature only barely bridled. In contrast, his voice is eerily calm. “Did I misspeak the first time, witch?”

Even Gennady blinks at that, and Cecilia and Flynn shift an instinctive step backward. There is a very tenuous pause, and then the Russian jerks his head in half a nod. “Very well, I HELP. But only for Lucy. Certainly not for you, TRASH VAMPIRE MEN.”

Gabriel’s cheek works as if he sorely wants to sink his fangs into their prisoner next, but he steps icily aside as Cecilia unlocks the cell and beckons Gennady out. Both Flynn and Gabriel tense instinctively, in case Sokolov still feels like trying his oats, but he marches haughtily, head high, looking neither left nor right, as they make their way up into the main house. They emerge out the front door and head down the lawn, there’s a shout from out in the night, and in a few moments, they reach Maria, Wyatt, and someone who must be Anton, since he looks exactly like his brother. Thus surrounded by twin colossi of glowing blond Russian disapproval, Flynn clears his throat. “Are you going to help now, or what?”

From the looks they give him, both Sokolovs would be happy with continuing this at any later date they choose to name, Anton and Gennady vs. Gabriel and Flynn, but circumstances are pressing. The five vampires and two witches head deeper into the woods, to the spot where Lucy was snatched, and Anton kneels down, working a small spell. A vaporous, ghostly image rises out of the ground, and Flynn feels it like a punch. “Emma?” he demands furiously. Perhaps he should have also expected that, as she is his personal nemesis, but still. “Is she the one who – she’s a witch, why would she be working with Temple?”

“We are witches working with vampires,” Anton points out. “Not that anyone likes it very much. But old rules are changing. Boundaries are breaking down. Are you sure is Temple?”

“I would be very surprised if it wasn’t,” Flynn growls. “Can you get anything else?”

Anton looks annoyed that his contributions have not been properly valued, but works the spell again. The same image of Emma rises and recedes, and Flynn looks around unwillingly at his brothers. “If it is Temple, if they are in cahoots, where would she have taken Lucy?”

“I expect Michel would feel entitled to Gerbert’s old territory,” Gabriel says, with somewhat too much politeness. “The south of France, from Aurillac to Carcassonne. Does that correspond, witch?”

Anton gives him a dirty look, as if to remind him that he has a name, thanks very much, but nobody seems willing to push their luck with Gabriel too much right now. He checks, then nods. “Yes. They flew off in south direction. I cannot tell anything else.”

“Gerbert had a favored fortress outside Albi, near the mountains,” Cecilia says. Her voice has the cool, deliberate tone it always has whenever she speaks of her hated vampire sire, the one that warns them never to ask how she knows any of this. “It was a place he often made use of for certain dark and disreputable purposes. Temple may have claimed it for his own.”

“A helicopter would be fastest.” Gabriel doesn’t appear inclined to waste time on quibbling. “Unless our dear witch friends would like to fly us again?”

“Have done enough for one night,” Anton starts. “And if you think we are – ”

Gabriel turns on him. It isn’t particularly fast, but it is so threatening that absolutely everyone feels
the temperature in the clearing drop by several degrees. “I thought you were claiming to help Lucy?” he asks. “Especially Gennady? Or you could forswear that promise, reveal yourself as liars, and thus be standing on de Clermont territory without any claim to protection from any of us. Is that what you were intending to say? I presume not.”

The moment balances on the edge of a knife. Gennady looks braced for an attack, Maria, Flynn, Wyatt, and Cecilia aren’t sure if there won’t be one, and Gabriel smiles with enough fang to scare the living daylight out of everyone. Apparently that includes Anton, as he likewise offers an extremely stiff nod. “Very well. My brother and I will take two of you to this place. If Lucy is there – ”

“She’ll be there,” Flynn interrupts. He can’t think about the alternative. “Let’s go.”

And thus, a few minutes later, they are rising into the dark sky, Sept-Tours and Maria, Wyatt, and Cecilia’s anxious upturned faces dwindling below them. Gennady has categorically refused to fly Gabriel, so Anton has taken him instead, and Flynn isn’t entirely sure he won’t just accidentally drop the bastard in the River Tarn en route. He might not mind if Anton did, but they need to keep their fragmented focus on rescuing Lucy. Flynn himself is riding shotgun with Gennady, which might be more fun if he wasn’t still sore at Gennady for jumping him on the walls, and if he wasn’t so worried about what they might find in the fortress. Lucy there, or not there? Temple and Emma, one or both? Neither? Or just a body, and nothing, no chance, no hope? In his mind’s eye he sees the dread figure of Matej, neither living nor dead, and the look on his mad, blind face as Gabriel killed him. No. Jesus, no.

Flynn struggles to banish the memory from his mind, to focus on clearing it, making it blank and calm and ready for action. Anton and Gabriel are fast-moving blurs off to the right, swooping in and out of low clouds, and Flynn thinks grimly that it’s good they’re getting in a little more interspecies cooperation these days, even with the threat of violent murder potently undergirding it. Two witches flying two vampires – this can’t have happened for decades, centuries even. The races were not always so stringently divided. They were never the best of friends, but they needed each other, as the sun needed the moon, the earth needed the water, the stars needed the sky. In the periods of most intense creature persecution, in the witch trials of the early modern world, vampires often stepped up to protect and help them, whether genuine witches or simply innocent human women wrongfully accused (as was often the case). There were alliances, marriages. The Covenant in its present form dates from the seventeenth century, influenced by Puritan thought. It was not always thus.

When did it all go wrong, Flynn thinks? When did they all become increasingly convinced that survival lay in separation, in the strict prohibition of miscegenation, of any chance to learn from each other and break down the barriers of fear and ignorance? At its heart, that is what he has wanted with Ashmole 782 and the search for their shared origins. Perhaps it was only ever a damned-fool idealistic crusade that nobly deluded itself to think that better information could change people’s minds, overcome their deep-rooted biases, rather than digging them deeper. If he could prove – scientifically, logically, unassailably – that they all sprang from the same root, that they were more alike than they were different, that in a world increasingly belonging to humans, they had to come together – well, maybe it wouldn’t make any difference at all. But maybe it would. And perhaps it would help him with the secret of his own family, who are so estranged and heartbroken and solitary that coming back together like this has almost destroyed them all over again. Maybe Ashmole 782 would tell him how to fix that. To save them, the people he loves. That is all Garcia Flynn de Clermont has, at his deepest heart, ever truly wanted to do, and yet even with all the power of immortality, cannot.

They fly for a while, Flynn isn’t sure how long. It’s very late, the wee hours, when they come in sight of a castle tower on a mountainside, and all of them know at once that this has to be the place. It bears the scent and scars of recent powerful magic, glimmering in the darkness like a shimmering
reverse-colour aura, and Anton and Gennady swoop as low as they dare. Then Gennady yells, “I let go, YOU JUMP!”

“Wh – ”

Flynn doesn’t have time to object to this plan, however, as Gennady does exactly as promised, lets go of his arm, and he free-falls through thin air, twists around, and just manages to land in a crouch, fifty or sixty feet down, on the grassy berm. An instant later, Gabriel hits next to him, light and graceful as a sleek, stalking panther, and the de Clermont brothers straighten up as the Sokolov brothers reverse in the skies above. Flynn hopes they plan to stick around long enough to give them a ride home, but then, that wasn’t part of the deal. If they did take off, it would be hard to blame them.

No time for that, though. He can smell Lucy, he knows she’s here somewhere, and it almost drives him wild. He and Gabriel run through the ruins, side by side and united in their aims for the first time in two hundred and fifty years, and it gives Flynn a pang he almost can’t bear. The entire place has clearly just been the site of a pitched magical battle royale, and it jacks his anxiety through the roof. What is – where is – are they too late, are they –

“Well, well,” a voice says. Flynn hasn’t heard it in over seven hundred years, and yet he recognizes it instantly. “I was wondering if one of you might make an inopportune appearance. But both? That, I can say, I was not expecting.”

Flynn and Gabriel pull to a halt so fast that they leave skids in the mud, staring at the besuited, patrician figure who has just emerged from the shadows across the way. The last time they saw him, Michel of Antioch was dressed in the red-crossed white tabard of the Knights Templar, soaked with blood, spitting and furious, and for a moment, Flynn flashes back to that fight, the sound and smell and pain and desperation of it. It took him and Gabriel almost two days to overwhelm Gerbert and bring him down, and even they were at the end of their strength. As noted, he abandoned his chance to finish Michel too in order to save Gabriel, and now – it feels odd, unbelievable, as if it might still be 1307 and none of them have noticed. Temple, as he calls himself now, is mud-streaked and somewhat disheveled, but the cruel black gleam in his eye is just the same. “Isn’t it nice to finally see you two again,” he goes on. “Even for our kind, it’s been a long time.”

“Get out of the way.” Gabriel clearly is not about to be drawn into a reminiscent catch-up session with a very old enemy. “Now.”

Temple smiles. “Are you in fact here to retrieve the witch? Don’t worry. Once I’m through with her, she’ll be of far more use to all of us, and much less trouble. I daresay you know that my dear master had a witch kept in a certain kind of bondage, as an all-knowing brazen head. Meridiana, she was called. Portable, compliant, and unable to repeatedly present an intrusion to his plans. Once I have placed Lucy Preston in similar straits, the vampires can conveniently access Ashmole 782 and have it done. Isn’t that what you want, Garcia?”

Flynn flinches as if he’s been hit, and he can’t even answer hotly. He remembers Gerbert’s captive witch, carried about in a banded box of iron as a disembodied head and fed blood, forced to prophesy the future and illuminate Gerbert on the secrets of the darkest art, tormented and half-alive, never allowed to die. Flynn would tear the entire world apart before he let Lucy come to a similar fate. He can’t let Temple see that worked, how desperate he is, the way Temple could in fact have a spectacular revenge so easily. Panic drums in Flynn’s veins, constricts his chest like an iron vise. Where is she? Where is she?

“Then again,” Temple continues, more sleekly than ever, “perhaps the de Clermonts aren’t quite what they used to be, these days. Dealing with your idiot brother in Venice has left me rather underwhelmed, to be frank. Not the sharpest knife in the drawer, or indeed in several drawers. And
that’s who you send to safeguard your interests on the Congregation? Perhaps you lack the skill or ambition to see our kind raised to our rightful place? Or perhaps – ”

“Don’t call Wyatt an idiot,” says Flynn, who calls Wyatt an idiot at least once a day and twice on Sundays. “And if you thought we’d ever help you – ”

“I suppose it was worth a try.” Temple lifts one shoulder in a negligent shrug. “Let bygones be bygones, and all that. It certainly would be a more productive use of everyone’s time for us to be united in our aims, but then, you tediously killed Gerbert, the last one of us who ever got close to achieving this. Yes, you two always were Asher de Clermont’s little foot soldiers, him with his backward, self-sabotaging cowardice that he always managed to mistake for enlightened morality. How did that work out for him, by the by?”

“Get,” Gabriel says, in a growl so low it rumbles the stones, “out of the way.”

Temple smirks. “Don’t you ever wonder, Gabriel?” he asks. “If you had listened when Gerbert offered you the chance to become one of us, what could have gone differently? You might still have your son, for one thing. Or at least been able to save him from that most common and humiliating death, torn apart by a pack of frothing human zealots. But you chose to keep yourself restrained, blinkered, to commit high treason and turn your back on your own child for the sake of your unworthy brother’s tawdry love affair – well, it’s not what I’d have done. But if you consider yourself so much better than me, I’d be interested to hear your reasons. We should always be open to the chance to learn.”

“Gabriel,” Flynn says reflexively. “Gabriel, don’t – ”

“Remember what happens whenever you listen to him?” Temple bares his fangs. “Whenever you even try to trust him? Isn’t it again thanks to him that you’re here, like a trotting lapdog that just can’t help itself? On some level, Gabriel, you already know I’m right. Garcia is never going to change. So why don’t you just put us all out of our misery, do what you’ve always wanted to, every year since 1762, and kill him? You can even tell your family that it was me. I’m sure they’d believe you, and I would be happy to take the credit. Nobody would ever find out. Come on. Put this right. Avenge your son. It’s what he deserves.”

Neither of the de Clermonts say anything or move a muscle, still inadvertently paralysed by the thrall of Temple’s poisoned words. Flynn can’t breathe, knows they need to get to Lucy, need to get to Lucy now – but he’s terrified that Temple is in fact voicing the darkest desires of Gabriel’s heart, things that he has never admitted to himself or tried to push away, but came the closest to giving into back at Sept-Tours just now. That he would be happier if Flynn was dead, would have done it himself if there was a way to get away with it, and now he has a golden opportunity. Flynn wonders if he should take it – but he can’t just kneel and accept it as his condign punishment if Lucy is still out there, if she’s still in danger –

The moment remains frozen for an instant longer. Then like a fist through glass, it shatters, and Gabriel leaps – but not at Flynn. Like a thrown thunderbolt, he goes after Temple so fast that there’s a crack of bent air, and it is then when Flynn realizes that perhaps Gabriel isn’t out of practice after all. Perhaps he was, in fact, still holding back. Because this – there is nothing even close, nothing to compare it. It is shattering and singular.

Flynn has just enough time to see a look of sudden fear on Temple’s face, as if he’s gotten used to dealing with the third-string de Clermont and has comfortably fooled himself that they are declawed and harmless these days. Then Temple has no further chance to talk or to do anything but try frantically to defend himself, as if he’s the one who has gotten used to a sedentary life of bureaucracy and business and really needs to remember all that fighting acumen ASAP. He staggers, blasted
backward, valiantly endeavoring to muster a counterattack, but it is taking all his effort not to be flattened into jelly. He’s plenty old and powerful on his own accord, but this is entirely something else.

While Temple is unavoidably distracted, Flynn doesn’t waste another second. He sprints past the combatants and into the broken halls, looking around in case Emma is lurking behind a column, but he doesn’t see her. He doesn’t care, anyway. “Lucy!” he bellows. “LUCY!”

He thinks he hears a faint answering voice from nearby, and veers wildly in that direction, but he can’t see her. It’s just more mud and broken stones, roots torn from their foundation and holes punched in the crumbling walls, ravens circling overhead, by the horns of the setting moon. Temple said he wanted to enthrall Lucy – but he hasn’t done it yet, right? Oh God, if he already has – if there’s no more help for her, the only humane thing to do will be to kill her. And once more, Gabriel will have to do that, because Flynn cannot contemplate the possibility and stay sane. If it’s like that – if it is in fact Matej all over again, despite all their efforts, a sick and twisted self-fulfilling prophecy –

Just as Flynn is about to fly off the handle completely into full-blown terror, he hears the shout again, and thinks that it’s coming from the castle well, which stands in the shadows nearby. He throws himself at it, grasps the edge, stares down into the dark pit. “LUCY!”

He can see something moving at the bottom, frightened and filthy but alive, and as it – as she – looks up, he can see that it is, it’s her, and something far beyond relief explodes in his chest like a bomb. His knees almost give out, he has to hold on to keep himself upright as much as anything, and he swings one leg over the rim before he knows what he’s doing. But vampires can’t fly, and even he would be hard pressed to climb up with her. He pulls back, but cranes desperately over the edge, trying to let her see that it’s him, he’s here, he’ll find something, he’ll get a rope. “Hold on,” he says. “Hold on, we’re here.”

Lucy stares up at him with a look of almost terrified hope, as if momentarily convinced that he is a hallucination and will vanish if she blinks too hard. The world falls almost silent, except for the sounds of the ongoing battle behind them, and she heaves a gulping breath. “Fly – Flynn?”

“Yeah, yeah.” He tries to sound as comforting as he can, as if they are anywhere but here and this is not happening. He scans her frantically, looking for visible wounds. She looks severely battered, and he experiences an overwhelming urge to hunt down and kill Emma on the spot. If she was ever here. Did she have to retreat, did Temple drive her off or double-cross her, or did Lucy manage to hurt her in return? “We’ll get you out,” he says, though he presently has no idea how. Maybe they can get one of the Sokolovs, but he cannot bring himself to leave the well for anything, to let it remain unguarded for another instant. “Are you – ”

“I. . .” Lucy doesn’t seem to know how to say it. “I just want to get out of here.”

Flynn nods encouragingly, trying to keep her distracted, and for that matter, himself. He’s suddenly aware of a silence behind him, turns around as if not sure he wants to see what’s happened, and sees a bleeding Gabriel striding toward him. He seems to be paying no attention to the source of it, a jagged cut across his shoulder and chest, and Flynn reaches for him in sudden concern. “What did – ”

Gabriel shrugs his hand off. “Temple got in a fluke blow,” he says curtly. “Only one, however. He had to run for it. Is that Lucy?”

“I – yes.” Flynn almost wants to ask why Gabriel didn’t go after Temple and finish the job, if he likewise gave up his chance to land the coup de grace out of a sense that someone else had to be saved first, and yet he doesn’t know if he could get it through the ache in his entire soul. “She’s
trapped in the well. I don’t – I’ll have to go down and get her, but – ”

“No,” Gabriel says. “You wouldn’t be able to get back out. We’ll have to think of something else. I don’t suppose either of those useless witches could possibly – ”

“Wait.” It’s Lucy’s voice, echoing up thinly from below, and it causes both de Clermonts to freeze. “I just – hold on. I – I could try something.”

Gabriel and Flynn exchange a look. Their shared feeling is clearly that this is not the opportune moment for uncharted magical exploration, but they don’t know if Gabriel has in fact chased Temple off for now, or if Emma might still be skulking somewhere. They really don’t have time to go on long hunts for ropes or anything else, and Flynn is possessed with the need to get her and get out of here. “Are you – ” He stops. “Lucy, are you – ”

“Yes.” She still sounds faint, but determined. Christ, this woman is so brave and so strong and so far beyond anything he deserves, and his fragile heart can’t bear it. “Just stay right there, okay? So I can see your face.”

Flynn remains where he is as if bolted down, and Lucy fixes her gaze on him, eyes wide and dark in her white, frightened face. She takes a deep breath, squares her shoulders, and concentrates hard, as they can all sense the presence of magic like a rising tide, coiling around her, engulfing her. None of them quite dare to breathe, but then Lucy herself starts to rise – like a phoenix from the ashes, like a princess wakening from sleep in another ruined castle like this, passing through the wall of thorns. Her feet leave the bottom of the well, and she’s a few feet up, and then a few more, and then she’s gliding almost gracefully, faster and faster, like an arrow to the target. Gabriel and Flynn reach out at the same time, each grab one of her hands as she reaches the top, and haul her over the edge. Lucy trips, loses her balance, and the next instant, she falls into Flynn’s arms.

He can’t breathe, he can’t breathe he can’t breathe he can’t breathe, oh God, oh God. He wraps her against him until he half-fears she can’t breathe either, as she is small and soft and shaking against his chest, gripping hold of his shirt with both hands, and he cannot seem to get her close enough. He murmurs breathless nothings in old Dalmatian, his first native language and the only one that comes to his tongue right now, cuddling and nuzzling her, burying his face in her hair and smoothing it out of her eyes, cupping her cheek in his large hand and stroking the bone, trying to ensure for himself if she is whole and intact. She hisses a little where his other hand is on her back, and he feels some kind of rough wound beneath the torn cloth of her shirt. She’s putting up a good show, but she is pale, exhausted, and in a lot of pain. Jesus. He’s going to murder Emma.

Flynn shifts his grip, swings Lucy over his chest and lifts her up, still cradling her protectively against him and not intending to let her go until they get back to Sept-Tours (and possibly not even then). She reaches up and puts both arms around his neck, pressing her head into his shoulder, and Flynn catches sight of an extremely strange expression on Gabriel’s face as he watches them. For half a second, it looks as if Gabriel is having his guts ripped out, which makes no sense at all. Then it’s gone, and he nods at them graciously. “Very well,” he says. “I think we should get out of here.”
It is midmorning by the time they finally return to Sept-Tours. Two of them, at least. Gabriel informs them that he’ll stay behind to sweep the castle and the countryside, see if he can find out where Temple and Emma have gone or anything they left behind, and since they have only two witches anyway and need to get Lucy back, Flynn doesn’t argue. He finds it incredibly difficult to let go of her long enough for Gennady to pick her up and fly off, and keeps looking over at her as Anton ferries him alongside. She’s cold, she’s hurt, another midair extravaganza is the last thing she needs – is Gennady keeping her warm? Is this going to make the effects of her ordeal worse? There was no faster way to get her home, but he keeps looking around in wary expectation of Emma dive-bombing them from above. She can fly too, after all. What if she strategically decided to fall back and wait until they broke from cover, vulnerable without Gabriel and with a wounded Lucy to protect?

Mercifully, however, the flight remains free of terrible harpies (even when she doesn’t have the claws, if you ask Flynn) and they come in for a landing on the Sept-Tours grounds with the sun well up and the trees sparkling in frozen dew. The instant they’re down, Flynn recovers his feet and scrambles over to Gennady, who is holding up Lucy. She is white as parchment and doesn’t look as if she’s entirely sure where she is. Flynn scoops her into his arms and turns toward the house, as Gennady demands, “Will she be ALL RIGHT? We have not got her back only for you to BLOW IT in – ”

“You’ve done your jobs, you can go.” Flynn does not care if they go directly to the Congregation and report him, or if they put up wanted posters with his face. Nothing matters right now except for Lucy. “You’re free. Get out of here.”


“This is de Clermont territory, you can’t just decide you’re going to – ” And with that, Flynn gives up. They have saved everyone’s posteriors several times tonight, and it might be uncharitable to bundle them out without so much as a cup of tea. They jog after him toward the house, just as the front door opens and a pale, tousled Maria, Cecilia, Wyatt, and Houdini hurry out. They have clearly been keeping a tense, sleepless vigil, and the next moment, Flynn is engulfed to all sides. He appreciates it, but he does not intend to be delayed. “Get out of the way,” he says brusquely. “I need to take her inside.”

“Garcia – ” Maria clutches at his arm. “Garcia, where’s your brother?”

“He’s coming later.” Flynn doesn’t break stride. “He was going to run reconnaissance outside Albi and see if there was anything else we missed.”

At that, Flynn thinks again of that wound Gabriel took. It will heal quickly, or at least it should, but who knows what nasty tricks Temple might have up his sleeve? Maybe Flynn should call a halt to
whatever further self-sacrificing bout of nobility Gabriel appears to be on, but Anton and Gennady are exhausted – Anton in particular has made three long-distance flights in under twelve hours, he’s dead on his feet – and they can’t keep using the Sokolov brothers as a magical taxi service for de Clermonts who have gotten themselves into sticky situations. Seeing that his mother still looks worried, Flynn repeats, “He’s fine. He – never mind, I’ll tell you later. Excuse me.”

He speeds up, breaking free of the crowd, and leaves them to sort out where to accommodate their renewed round of witch house-guests. (Theoretically not the dungeons this time, at least.) He steps inside, as Lucy stirs in his arms. “Are we back?”

“Yes, we’re here, we’re in Sept-Tours.” Flynn shifts her over his shoulder to make it easier to climb the narrow tower steps. Her skin feels unpleasantly chill against his, and he has no body heat to warm her with. He pushes open the door to her room, lays her on the bed, heaps her with quilts, and tries to think what would be the quickest method of raising her core temperature without increasing any damage. He goes into the bathroom and fights the old plumbing until the water runs somewhat hot into the large porcelain tub, but he remembers that you shouldn’t overheat a hypothermic individual too fast. Is that warm enough? Not warm enough? Should he try the radiators, start a fire in the hearth?

He ducks back into the bedroom and lifts Lucy off the bed, quilts and all, carrying her into the bathroom. God, she is such a little thing, would be a featherweight to him even without supernatural strength. It seems impossible that so much bravery and intelligence and strength and spitfire can fit in there, and he sets her down on the rug, carefully testing the water temperature again. It seems all right, and he glances at her. “I’ll go get Cecilia if you need – ”

“No.” Lucy still looks like a princess carved from ice – the white queen, he thinks, suddenly and irrelevantly – but she shakes her head. “I’m not – I don’t think I’m going to drown in the bath, at least. I’ll manage. I just – can you sit… sit outside the door, or something? I’d feel better if I knew you were nearby.”

She flushes as she says this, bringing a faint pink hue to her otherwise colorless cheeks, and looks away, as if she’s ashamed to be asking. Perhaps she doesn’t want to come out and find that he’s buggered off to Oxford again, and Flynn feels a brief sting of shame in his own chest. “Ah, sure,” he says awkwardly. “I’ll just – I’ll be out here.”

With that, he crab-shuffles backward, nearly banging his head on the lintel, and sits down against the wall outside, suddenly aware that his undead heart has awoken in his chest to hammer much too sharply against his ribs. He pulls the door closed most of the way, but leaves it open a crack, as if to run in and intervene if Lucy should suddenly start to die. He can hear the soft sounds of Lucy undressing, and then the splash as she gets into the tub. He thinks of her surprising him after her bath in Woodstock, damp and soft and pink and glowing with life, and grips his knees ferociously. “Lucy?” he calls. “Are you – ?”

“I – yeah.” She sounds a little breathless, choked, perhaps as if she’s trying to hold back tears now that she’s alone and doesn’t want anyone to see. “Fine.”

Flynn shuts his mouth like a trap, as he doesn’t want to impose on whatever private breakdown she might be having, but it makes him ache to go in there, to hold her, until he almost gets up and does it anyway. But she didn’t ask for that, she asked for him to be out here, and he has to respect her boundaries. Maybe she doesn’t want him to witness her coming to pieces, or he’s not the comfort she would have chosen. He thinks again of Gabriel reaching out to help pull her from the well, that odd, gutted expression on his face when he looked at Lucy with Flynn. Should Flynn have insisted on being the one to stay behind, and sent Gabriel with her? He was injured too. If she would have
Flynn rubs a hand over his weary face. Even for a vampire, he hasn’t properly slept in days and days, has been engaged in several heavy-duty fights and international travels, and it’s playing havoc with him, skewing his perceptions and making him second-guess everything he has done. He’s rescued Lucy, yes, but is she going to be all right? What if they did permanent damage? He doesn’t care that much about Ashmole 782 right now, doesn’t know if his dearest ambition of over two hundred years even matters anymore. He obviously wants to safeguard it from falling into the wrong hands, but as far as whether Lucy can get it – that used to be all he thought about, and now it barely registers.

Flynn hears the tap running periodically as Lucy adds more hot water to the bath, and twists his head back with a faint, poignant smile. God, of course she’s doing her best to face this, to hold it together, and he feels it well up and spill over inside him until he can’t stand it. Just then, as much as he would like to pretend it’s something else, he can’t. It felt like Matej because it is like Matej, or somehow even more. It has pervaded him, sunk down to the sinews of him, and filled every missing piece. He can feel it in his head, almost giddy with mingled worry and relief, the constant image of her stamped in his thoughts. His eyes that always keep searching for her, that cannot get enough of the sight of her. His mouth that yearns to taste again, to taste more, that had its old and weary breath stolen and cannot get it back. His shoulders, his arms and hands, which have lifted her up and carried her and which burn to have her near him, against his chest, which feels soft and hot and white and fragile as a dove, that blazing ember inside him that might char his flammable soul to ash. His ribs, that place deep between them where she lives now, where she has anchored herself in his viscera and won’t let go. He wants her, she wants her, can feel it low in his stomach and between his legs and in the tremble of his thighs, can imagine the ghost of her fingers on the back of his knee and around the bone of his ankle, the arch of his foot. It has spread to every corner of him, being in love with Lucy Preston, and that is how it feels. And it terrifies him.

Flynn lets out another shaking breath, rubbing his eyes with the heels of his hands. He reminds himself that she might not feel the same for any number of reasons, and he rescued her in the full knowledge that that could be the case. It doesn’t matter if she loves him or not, even as he wonders if he’s just trying to convince himself of that in hopes of pre-emptively softening the blow. She owes him nothing, and he would never demand it. But God. He does not know how to be away from her again, and the time is inexorably coming when he must.

Lost in unquiet thoughts, exhausted and drowsing against the wall, he must drop under for a few moments, or longer. He’s woken by the sound of Lucy stepping out of the tub, rummaging around for a towel – and then suddenly, ominously falling silent. There is a long pause. Then she calls, “Flynn?”

“What?” He scrambles to his feet. “Are you –?”

“I just…” She hesitates again. “Can you… come in?”

Something like a grenade goes off in his head, as he tries desperately to decide whether he should ask if she’s decent first. Does she want him to look at something, or – no, she nearly died, throwing all else aside for an interlude of blazing passion would be extremely out of character for a woman as sensible and self-contained as Lucy. But he’s still sitting there like a slack-jawed idiot, frozen in place, and he can hear her about to call again. Eyes screwed up like he is about to behold Medusa, he gingerly ventures inside.

To his relief, Lucy is mostly wrapped in a towel, but as he comes nearer, she glances up at him and lets it slide off her back. He can see a webwork of raised red brands, looking as if they were carved
into her skin with a hot knife, and he chokes on his fury. He raises a hand, reminds himself not to touch, and inspects them visually instead. They look like crude stick figures of a lion and a wolf, as if Emma has mockingly marked Lucy with the de Clermont seal. Taunting her for taking up with vampires, reducing her to nothing more than their chattel or their drone, their discarded property. It makes Flynn so angry that he can’t see straight. If he could get those marks off her in any way, he would.

“I…” He clears his throat. Tries to focus, to sound matter-of-fact, to give no evidence of the inferno burning in his brain. “Did – did Emma do that?”

“Yes. She…” Lucy struggles for the words. “She wanted me to tell her about my connection to Ashmole 782, about – about you. She said she knew about me, that she had gone to the archives in Venice and stolen things out of my file. About Cahill, about my parents.”

“And?” Flynn hates that even more, the idea that Lucy might have undergone any of this because of him. He was the one who forced them to meet, who was so insistent that they work together on the mystery, when she was skeptical and dragging her feet. Guilt pummels him again, and he glances away. “Did you…?”

“Did I tell her anything? Of course not.” Lucy makes an impatient noise, as if even torture is not a good enough reason for breaking his trust. He doesn’t know what to say, doesn’t feel that he deserves it. “I couldn’t, anyway. And I wouldn’t. Whatever she knows, we can find it out another way. It’s…” She stops again. “Is that what you think? That I’d just give you up?”

“I don’t…” Flynn has no idea what he’s trying to say, and should probably shut up and think about it, but his brain has disengaged from his mouth and he is suddenly terrified about what might come out of it as a result. “I didn’t think you’d – but you were tortured, Jesus Christ. And I hate that, I hate it so much, that you had to – that I didn’t protect you. And now you have this, and I – I failed you and I’m sorry. I wish – I wish I could take it off you. Away from you. I’m. . . I’m sorry.”

He trails off, unable to even look at her or the ugly scarification on her back, as she twists around, trying to catch a proper glimpse of it in the bathroom mirror. This causes her towel to shift, tumbling dangerously low on the glistening damp curve of her breasts, and Flynn swallows very hard, turning away. That buzzing noise in his head, the heightened awareness of her, is almost deafening him, he feels very soft in some places and very hard in others, and he needs to get the hell out of this bathroom before he makes her day even worse. He can’t tell where the floor is, or where the ceiling. He is reeling, cast adrift without a lifeline, and he can smell the clean fresh scent of her, mixed with a lingering foul taint that must be Emma’s. He wants it off her, he wants to scrub her pristine and perfect again, and his hands clench and spasm at his sides. His fangs press against his bottom lip, and so do other items elsewhere. He is, at that moment, genuinely afraid that he is going to die.

For her part, it’s (mercifully) unclear if Lucy has noticed this. She holds back her wet dark hair with one hand, regarding the brands with an unreadable expression. Then she says, “Is that supposed to be the de Clermont seal? The lion and the wolf?”

“I think so.” Flynn sits down heavily on the toilet lid. “Emma was. . . I imagine she was mocking you. About how she thought you were just some mindless slave for us, our prisoner. I’ll – I don’t know how to get it off, but I’ll figure it out. There has to be some way to remove spell damage. I can go look in the library, I – ”

He bolts to his feet, as if he is about to rush down and start researching right now, but Lucy turns around unexpectedly, and they end up almost nose to nose (well, nose to sternum – there is a significant height difference). She is still only wearing the towel, and the thought flits through his head of how easy it would be to undo it. She tilts her chin back to look into his face, and he stares
down helplessly into hers, as if he is the one placed into magical thrall, existing only as an extension of her will. Quietly she says, “Thank you. For coming for me.”

“Ah. . .” Flynn knows many languages, but he can’t think of words in any of them. “Of course, I – I wasn’t – I never would have left you there.”

Lucy bites her lip, as if she was never going to give him up but couldn’t be sure if he would in fact trouble himself to rescue her, and once more, his shame rises up like a poisonous black tide. He casts his eyes at the floor, unable to meet hers, wanting to apologize again until he loses his voice, and finally coughs weakly. “I’ll . . . let you get dressed.”

With that, he once more makes a dive for the door, resumes his position against the wall, and takes gulping breaths, trying to wrest himself under control. He is still attempting to do that when Lucy says, “Could you get me some clean clothes, then?”

Right. She doesn’t want to put back on her filthy, torn ones. Flynn lurches obediently to his feet and scouts around the room for a soft T-shirt and leggings, then hands them to her through the crack in the door. She takes them, there’s a long pause, and he thinks he hears a sniff, which practically glues him to it. “Lucy?” he ventures again. “Lucy?”

“I’m fine,” she says, but this time, he can hear very clearly that she isn’t. Her voice breaks, even as she tries desperately to get it under control – and it strikes him that she thinks she needs to hide it from him, that he is uninterested or uncaring, willing to risk his life rescuing her but not to give two shits afterward, even when her back is branded with that crude effigy of his family’s seal – and after what all of them, Flynn and Maria and Gabriel, did to her. The guilt is corroding, but for goddamned once, he doesn’t let it stop him. He still isn’t sure if he is who she wants, but right now, he is who she has. Thinking only far too late that he doesn’t know if she’s dressed yet, he bursts through the door. “Lucy?”

She’s wearing a shirt and underpants, at least, but she has sunk down onto the bathmat and curled up into a tight defensive ball that makes her look smaller than ever, crying silently and shaking like a leaf. The sight absolutely wrecks every plan or thought he has ever had in his life, and he sinks down to his knees next to her. “Lucy,” he croons, reaching for her, and she rolls over like a pillbug and nestles into him as far as she can go. “Lucy, shh. Shh.”

He wraps both arms around her as she continues to shake, as she grips hold of him with both hands and he can sense a momentary indecision about whether to do that or slap him. He might merit it if so, but he rests his chin on her tangled, still-damp hair, scooping her into him and offering as much comfort as he can by his large, solid, silent presence. He thinks about rubbing her back, doesn’t want to aggravate the burns, and settles for stroking her arms instead, each of his hands easily encircling the slender lines of shoulder and forearm and wrist. When she’s finally calmed down a little, he swings her up across his chest and carries her out into the bedroom, as she hiccups miserably and remains burrowed into him. He sets her down on the bed and attempts to detach himself, but she won’t let go.

“Lucy. . .” He covers her hand with his, as gently as he can. “You need rest, you’ve been through a terrible ordeal. You should sleep.”

“No,” she says, indistinctly but very stubbornly. “I don’t want to be alone.”

Flynn’s heart trembles again, like a coin flicked with a thumb, and he discovers that he has no ability to turn her down. He hesitates, then tugs out the covers, takes off his filthy shirt, jeans, and shoes, and crawls in next to her, pulling the quilts up over both of them in hopes it can replace some of the warmth he can’t give her. She once more rolls over into him and attaches to his chest like a barnacle,
ducking her head beneath his chin. “Are you warm enough?” he murmurs worriedly. “I’m not – I’m not warm-blooded, if you sleep too close to me when you’re cold, I might – ”

Lucy responds to that by digging in her heels and moving still closer. Flynn thinks that she’s certainly going to notice that he’s in a state of attention (he has been since the towel slipped in the bathroom, more or less), and he lets out an involuntary groan as she tucks up against him. The urge to thrust back against her is very strong, but he is not going to presume on her further, the state she’s in. If she was more in command of herself, she wouldn’t – the last time, after he told her about her parents and now this, she’s distressed and she feels very alone and she’s just clinging onto the first thing that feels real and present. He can let her do that, but he can’t give into anything else when she’s in no state to make an informed, rational decision. “Lucy,” he murmurs again, close to a gasp, as she has become very cozily wedged between his legs indeed. “Lucy, sweetheart, you’re – ”

He bites his tongue with his own fangs upon hearing what he let slip out, tastes his own blood, and is thus briefly distracted from trying to put space between them. He doesn’t think he could, anyway. She’s anchored like seaweed, and if this is all he can give her, what she needs, what will help for now – he can’t make her cry again, can’t put her through an instant more pain. He tucks the quilts more warmly around her, thinks that if she starts getting too cold he will pull away and go get her a hot water bottle, and gives up fighting it.

Exhaustion gulps up both of them in minutes, and they sleep like the appropriately dead for the rest of the day. It’s past dusk when Flynn wakes, noting muzzily that he is flat on his back and Lucy is curled up on top of him, her fist still clamped onto his undershirt and her hair tickling his unshaven chin. Vampires’ hair does continue to grow, albeit slower than a human’s, and Flynn is currently sporting a dark scruff that he will need to do something about. (After all, being mistaken for a werewolf would just be embarrassing.) But to do so, he would have to dislodge Lucy and wake her up, and he doesn’t want to do that. So he lies there beneath her, content to be used as a pillow, watching her sleep and hoping this is not too creepy, until she finally stirs, groggy and gritty-eyed and yawning. “What – what time is it?”

“Sometime after dark.” Flynn sits up slowly, but she stays in his lap, and they lean back into the pillows together. “Are you hungry?”

Lucy considers that, then nods. “Bring something up here?” she says. “I’m not sure I’m up to – I just would prefer not to, you know. Get the ninth degree.”

Flynn does not want to make her recount the traumatizing details of her ordeal just yet, and slides her off his lap, getting out of bed, and hoping that the kitchen will be empty. He opens the door and heads down the tower steps, into the main house, and it is only as he is reaching the dining room that he hears voices from inside, realizes that he is only wearing his undershirt and boxers and looks rather tousled, and as he has been out of view with Lucy since they returned, the rest of the family might draw erroneous conclusions about their activities. Vehemently denying it might look even more suspicious, but he is insulted at the idea that they might think he has been taking advantage of an injured woman in a cold, fragile, and emotionally vulnerable state. He’ll just – he’ll have to –

With that, he pushes the door open, and the heads of everyone currently resident in Sept-Tours turn to stare at him, with expressions of mingled hope, concern, and curiosity. Anton and Gennady, looking as if they too have slept all day, are chowing down on a hearty supper, and Houdini is eating too, though he drops his spoon when he sees Flynn. Maria is sitting at the head of the table, fussing over Gabriel, who looks tired and hollow-eyed, covered in dried blood. Cecilia is dabbing at the gash on Gabriel’s shoulder, as he bats her away like an ill-tempered bear interrupted from hibernation. Wyatt is looking as if he is not sure what he got himself into by coming home, and might actually have preferred to stay in Venice. But the din falls silent as everyone turns to behold Flynn in his
underthings, he fights an instinctive urge to cover himself, and there’s a very long pause. Then Wyatt says, “Morning, sunshine.”

“Shut up.” Flynn proceeds into the room with as much dignity as he can. “Cecilia, Lucy’s hungry. Could you get her some – ?”

Cecilia is already moving to put together a tray, as Houdini gets to his feet as if in search of some way to help. “Is she all right?”

“She’s – on the mend.” Flynn decides not to mention the brand, or indeed the rest of it. Defensively he adds, “She’s been sleeping all day, I just – she didn’t want to be alone, that was all. So if you thought – ”

Wyatt rolls his eyes. “Come on, all of us know you. We never thought for an instant that there was a chance you slept with her.”

Flynn can’t decide whether to be insulted at this brutal assessment of his romantic ability, but he’s also aware that he has no leeway to say anything to Wyatt re: relationships with witches for the next hundred years. He is just going to have to shut up and take his medicine, and notices that Gabriel seems to be trying a little too hard to look uninterested in this topic. “Hey,” Flynn says. “When did you get back?”

“Recently.” Gabriel grimaces as he reaches for his glass of wine. “I couldn’t find Temple or Emma. They both must have decided to cut their losses, retreat and regroup for a more opportune moment. But I very much doubt that they’re going to give up. They want Lucy very badly, and now that Temple doesn’t have to worry about keeping himself secret, now that we know who he is and that he’s in the game, he can strike more openly. I think we should move her out of here. Sept-Tours has already been enough of a lightning rod, and – ”

He eyes Gennady Sokolov balefully, who eyes him balefully right back. Flynn, however, is startled. “You don’t think it’s safe?”

“I haven’t done a very good job of it, have I?” Gabriel says, voice brittle. “You were attacked first and then she was, by two different witches. That has never happened before in the history of the de Clermonts, and I am the one who failed to prevent it. And I assume everyone would prefer that the possible repercussions were moved away from endangering the rest of the family. I am unsure whether that means back to Oxford, as that seems even more ill-advised, but yes. For everyone’s safety, you should leave.”

Flynn bites his tongue on a response on whether this is not what Gabriel has wanted all along, but he knows his brother well enough to read between the lines. Gabriel is blaming himself, the way he took on all the guilt for their father’s death, for not keeping the family safe and for not doing more. He of course lost his son the last time there was a major attack on Sept-Tours, and as Flynn tries to catch his eye, Gabriel steadfastly looks away. “Your shoulder – ”

“It’s fine,” Gabriel says, even more curtly. “Maman and Cecilia have made sure to flutter over it, you can be assured it is under control. Temple had some sort of weapon that is making it slower to heal than usual, but that is once more my error for not being quick enough to dodge. I intend to continue my investigations into how he remained hidden from us for so long, even while openly holding a Congregation seat. Are we truly so blind, deaf, and dumb that even with my own brother upon that body, we had no warning?”

Wyatt shifts uncomfortably, as Gabriel is spitting like a cobra and this looks destined to progress to a sustained roast on him. “I didn’t – if I ever had reason to think that he posed a threat, I would have
“I had heard the name Michael Temple.” Gabriel gets to his feet, knocking the table back, and everyone flinches. “I did not realize it was Michel of Antioch. But since you tell us nothing, William, and now have proved to be more damaging than if you did not hold the seat at all, I am wondering if there is any need for you to continue to do so! If this estate would not fall to pieces in hours without her, I would suggest Cecilia, as perhaps she would actually be of use! You always fear that you have failed this family. Well, you have.”

Wyatt looks like he’s been stabbed, as Flynn feels an instinctive protectiveness toward his younger brother, despite himself. He takes a step. “Hey,” he says again, a bit more roughly. “You already nearly killed one of us, you don’t need to –”

“I did not try to kill you.” Gabriel’s face is stone white, a muscle working in his jaw. “I wanted the truth, and I was carried away, but I think you saw back there what me trying to kill someone actually looks like. If it has slipped your uncommonly dense mind, it also took place after Temple tried to bait me into doing it to you. Speaking some sorely overdue truth to our unfortunate William does not qualify as killing either, I am afraid. Or have all of us become far too fed on comforting lies, that it tastes as such poison?”

He’s practically shouting, the entire dining room is shrinking back in the way that people do when Gabriel de Clermont is angry, and Maria reaches imploringly for his hand. “Sweetheart,” she says. “Gabriel, please. You shouldn’t – not when you’re already hurt –”

“And whose fault is that, Maman?” Gabriel lashes away from her. “Mine, once again. I truly apologize that you chose to give your blood and your life and your name to three such appallingly unsatisfactory sons. I do not exclude myself from that reckoning. In fact, I suspect that I may be the greatest disappointment of them all. At least Garcia and William had the decency to own to it, not try so hard to pretend otherwise. So indeed, if I do not botch this yet again, I intend to find Michael Temple and kill him! Does anyone object?!?”

There is a ringing silence, as Flynn thinks that his biggest worry coming down here was that they might assume he had slept with Lucy. He wants to say something comforting, his heart twists painfully, but he has been so long out of the habit that he has no idea what Gabriel wants to hear, or if he would accept it if he did. He can recognize a man who does not want to be touched, who does not want his wounds bared, who just wants to go somewhere dark and alone and not be seen when he weeps, since that is where Flynn himself has spent so much time. He yearns more terribly than ever to go to him, but Gabriel does not want anyone, much less Flynn, to see the full extent of the cracks. He has to keep dragging himself together, to present himself as the ultra-successful businessman and head of the family, or he, like Wyatt with his precious Congregation seat, like Flynn with his precious Ashmole 782, has nothing. They have latched onto these things, these quixotic ideals and desperate quests, as a poor and sore replacement for their broken family, and just then, Flynn would burn Ashmole 782 to cinders and never think about it again if it would help. He aches unspeakably. He wants to beg Gabriel’s forgiveness, but it still echoes in his head that it will never be his.

At last, Flynn gathers himself, as Anton and Gennady are steadfastly pretending they are not there and/or have gone temporarily deaf. “I’ll just,” he says weakly. “I’ll just – Lucy. Yes.”

“Yes.” Gabriel echoes it even more bleakly, turning away. “Yes, do go up to her. I expect she is waiting for you.”

Flynn looks at him in mute appeal, but Gabriel remains facing the wall and is once more
impersonating a statue, as Flynn scoops a few extra pieces of bread onto the tray, picks it up, and scuttles out, heartily relieved to escape. He climbs into the tower and pushes the door open, as Lucy is looking concerned. “Is everything all right? I thought I heard – ”

“Fine.” Flynn sets the tray down. “Gabriel’s back. We’ve just – everyone’s been discussing what to do next, that’s all.”

“Is he – ?” Lucy looks worried. “Wasn’t he injured?”

Flynn reminds himself that Lucy is a kind person and would naturally be concerned about anyone who been wounded while trying to rescue her, and she cannot have failed to hear some of the shouting from downstairs. “Yes, but he should be fine. That wasn’t what it was about. He suggested that we would have to leave Sept-Tours, that it’s not safe here for us anymore. And I – I can see the sense of that.”

“Where would we go?” Lucy looks alarmed. “Oxford must be crawling with creatures – I know we have to return there eventually, but – ”

“I don’t know if Oxford’s a wise idea either.” Flynn thinks of Rufus and Jiya, wonders if he is hanging them out to dry, or if they’re safer away from him. “But I can’t be sure if – ”

“I had an idea.” Lucy’s voice is small, but steady. “I thought – I want to go home. Home for me, that is. To Denise and Michelle’s place in Madison County, in upstate New York. They’ve been worried sick about me this whole time, and if there are things to know about my parents, I might find the answers there. Not just through whatever warped and terrible version Emma would give me. They’re both very powerful witches, they could help defend us if need be – I don’t want to put them in danger, but we could probably fly under the radar for a little while. And I just – I feel like we should.”

Flynn has to take a moment to process that idea. Her usage of we seems to hint that she expects him to go with her, and if she just had to endure the tribulation of coming to his house and meeting his suspicious family of another creature species who hates her kind, it seems only fair that he has to do the same. He tries to envision being introduced to Lucy’s godmother and her wife, who have been so vocally opposed to her getting mixed up with the de Clermonts, as… as what? Research partner is technically accurate, but they both know that’s not the real truth, not any more. They’re not together, and yet they’re not apart. They exist in some intermediate, undefined place, halfway between one state of being and another, as if the alchemical process has not yet completed, the transformation not fully taken effect. “Well,” he says guardedly. “It’s a possibility.”

Lucy gives him a somewhat amused look, as if now he knows what it felt like for her, and he hands the tray over, sitting down on the bed with her and watching as she eats. Her color is somewhat better, though she still looks fragile as fine porcelain, and there are smudged shadows beneath her eyes. Flynn watches her with utter, unbearable devotion, with his usual sense that he is in the presence of something rare and magnificent, royal and divine, who could raise him up or lay him low in an instant. Let your mercy spill on our burning hearts in hell, he thinks. If it be your will, to make us well.

Lucy glances up, must surprise this in his eyes, and looks down, in that embarrassed way she has whenever she catches him silently worshiping her. She finishes eating and sets the tray onto the bedside table, wiping her mouth. She looks down at her hands, knotted tensely in her lap, as both of them can sense unspoken words mounting to a pitch between them, in the hush of the dim room. Then Lucy blurts out, “Do you remember what we discovered in the Ashmole 782 fragment? The part about the alchemical wedding?”
“Yes.” Flynn glances sidelong at her. “Something about the red king and the white queen, about how this was a metaphor for the entire discipline of alchemy, represented what they wanted to achieve by its practice. It was a sexual union, taboo, forbidden love, the key to secret knowledge. It made the bridge, it revealed –”

At this, he becomes aware of what he is saying, and shuts his mouth hard enough to hear his teeth click. It did occur to him in passing, when she first read it, that it might have an uncomfortable real-world application, but of course he dismissed it. If the same connotation has also occurred to her, and if she is about to propose it seriously as a hypothesis –

He tries not to look as if he’s panicking, though he is, and manages to keep an expression of mild, academic interest, waiting for her to go on. She darts a look at him under her eyelashes, then away, throat moving as she swallows. He can hear her heartbeat, fast as the beat of a butterfly’s wing, taste her anxiety and her fragile hope and something, darker and deeper and sweeter, that he drank from her mouth when they kissed, the ripe spring scent of a woman in arousal. Jesus, this is doing nothing for his desperate urge to grab hold of her and have his wanton way, which is as utterly unlike Garcia Flynn de Clermont as dressing badly, not being sassy, or otherwise succeeding in social interactions.

Should he sit on his hands? Maybe bite them off, just to be sure? He’s dizzy, blinded, breathless. Jesus.

“I’m starting to think –” Lucy pauses, tongue wetting her lips. “Maybe this is completely pretentious, I don’t know. But I’m… starting to wonder if I’m the white queen.”

“Oh?” Flynn manages to force this out more or less normally, though bands of hot iron are now constricting his chest. “You are?”

“I don’t know if I’m – important enough for it.” Lucy looks away, fingers twisting again, as if she can’t believe she suggested that she could ever be that powerful or relevant or strong. “But it was my handwriting on that fragment. I’m the one who has this mysterious connection to Ashmole 782 that nobody can explain. Cahill did something to me when I was a child, something relating to my magic, and now you told me that the results of my bloodwork mean that I could – I could possibly be this insanely powerful witch. And I feel… I don’t know, I feel different, after what Emma did. While you were off getting dinner, I was experimenting with my magic, and now I can use it. It’s like the tap has been turned on. I couldn’t get to it when she was torturing me, but it came up little by little until I could use witch-water against her, and then when I was looking at you, it focused. It’s like I’ve been just out of step with it, I’ve never been able to touch it, but I – look.”

With that, she raises her hand, makes a little motion, and the candles on the sideboard, on the other side of the room, flare into sudden life. Lucy points at Flynn’s dirty clothes, left in a crumple on the floor, and they fly across to the hamper and throw themselves in. Other small things appear to have been rearranged, as if she has been experimenting with her power for the first time in her life – not under threat of imminent death or emotional devastation, but just because she can, like every other witch. Except she’s not like every other witch, and magic has been nothing but a source of struggle and shame to her. This new Lucy, this Lucy shyly curious about experimenting and using it freely, is altogether different, and Flynn stares at her, trying to work out the reason for this startling change. Finally he says, “Is there – is there any chance you were spellbound?”

“Was I what?” Lucy frowns at him. “Wait, isn’t that the thing they do to witches who have broken the law or who pose a danger to the public? Restrain them so they can’t use their power, like a magical straitjacket? I don’t – why would they do that to me?”

Flynn can hear the confusion and fear in her voice, that someone might have considered her a dangerous liability even as a six-year-old child, and once more wants to murder anyone who ever
hurt her. “I don’t know that you were,” he says. “But if so, if Emma took it off, that might mean it’s finally gone, that you’ve been freed. It was a horrible way for it to happen, but – ”

“If Cahill did it – ” Lucy starts. “If he recognized that I was – that I was especially powerful, and wanted to preserve me from getting too tainted before I was old enough to be any use to him – if that was what Emma meant, that he – ”

Flynn’s desire to kill Benjamin Cahill, already considerable, jacks up another few notches. But much as he has no trouble believing the absolute worst of the slimy git, it doesn’t quite fit. Lucy’s parents were both witches, powerful ones. They would have to be completely unobservant imbeciles, as well as criminally negligent, not to notice that their daughter had been spellbound, or not to know who had done it. Was that their idea of protecting Lucy from herself, or trying to shield the creature world from taking note of her power at a too-tender age? Intending, of course, to release it at the appropriate time and explain everything to her? But then they were killed, they never got the chance, and left her trapped, to grow up like this? Denise and Michelle, do they know? How many people have been lying to Lucy, or trying to use her, or thinking they knew what was best, never asking her, damaging her further? How many?

“Garcia?” Lucy puts a hand on his arm, having apparently sensed the thunder in his expression. “Are you – ?”

Flynn looks down at her fingers, curled into the hollow of his elbow, and experiences a need for her so profound that he practically sees double. “I just…” Words are a tremendous difficulty. “I hate both that that might have been the case, and that was how it ended. And then I came along and dragged you into the Ashmole 782 nonsense all over again, if this might have been an attempt to keep you away from it. I’m sorry. You don’t have to keep doing this, Lucy. You don’t have to spend another instant on it. It’s me, my wild-goose-chase obsession, my stupid pet project. It’s cost you enough, and you can walk away.”

Lucy regards him, their faces very close, her hand still on him, her fingers playing in the rough dark fur of his forearm. “I thought about it,” she says. “But I don’t want to.”

“Are you sure?” Flynn grimaces, shifting position in a futile attempt to ease the constriction in his nether regions. He wonders if there’s any casual way to sweep a pillow over it without Lucy immediately noticing. “I don’t – ”

“Yes,” Lucy repeats firmly. “If this has been about me all along, I want to know. I’m tired of being shut out, I’m tired of not being enough, I’m tired of everyone else deciding my fate and keeping it from me. I’m tired of being powerless and ignorant and frightened, Garcia. I’m tired of it. And with this, and with you, I feel – I feel different. Better. Stronger. I don’t know if that’s a coincidence, but I – ”

She stops, flushing almost incandescently, head turned toward the wall, until he puts his thumb under her chin and makes her look up at him. Her big brown eyes are welling with tears, as if she doesn’t want to say this, she doesn’t want her secrets ripped out of her because she is so paralyzingly terrified of rejection, of putting her heart in someone else’s hands and having it broken. Flynn has not been the best guardian of such things, and he too panics that he’s about to drop it, but God, how he does not want to. He remains there with his thumb under her chin, stroking her cheek and throat, until he decides that words are not likely to serve him in this situation and will only get them even more off track. Carefully, slowly, immensely cautiously, as if both of them are walking in a dream, he lowers his supplicant mouth to hers, and kisses her as lightly as a snowflake.

For a long moment it remains that way, still frozen, both of them waiting to see if something has
gone horribly wrong and should be swiftly stopped. But when neither of them pull away, when they press instinctively closer and closer again, as Flynn slides up on his knees to cup the back of her head in his hands and lift her up toward him, Lucy grabs hold of his hair, pulling him half-frenziedly down on top of her. Flynn just manages to catch his weight on his elbows so he doesn’t crush her, and they roll over and over on the bed, kissing as if they will in fact die if they stop. It’s wet and raw and rough, teeth scraping, lips bruising, tongues tangling and tasting, as he nips at the underside of her jaw (without any extra mustard) and it makes her entire body shiver in gooseflesh against him. “Do that again,” she manages into his mouth, half in a whimper. “Do that again.”

Flynn is marginally horrified at the idea of actually biting her, as he was hoping to ease into things, but there is no denying that she appears to like that, and that is, after all, a plus when making love with a vampire. If that is indeed what they are doing, or what they should be doing, but God, if Lucy doesn’t want this, she’ll have to tell him so, because he’s not sure he has the strength to pull away again. He settles his hips between her legs, stroking her face, settling her on the pillows, kissing her again because she’s there and she is so beautiful and because he feels like a man dying in the desert, and her chin tips up and her mouth opens and she tugs at him with small, insistent mewling noises. “Please,” she whispers, a hungry, private prayer. “Please.”

Flynn considers carefully, looking down at her sprawled and flushed and desperately willing, and doesn’t think he can deny her this. But he wants to be careful about it, and as it has been several eras of history since he was with a woman, he experiences a moment of sudden self-consciousness that he will not remember what to do, or be less than satisfactory. There is that old adage about it being like riding a bicycle, but he has never actually ridden a bicycle, since he could get everywhere faster by moving at vampire speed. He hedges again, and Lucy looks up at him with that renewed nervousness that he’s once more going to tell her they shouldn’t, she should leave. “Garcia – ”

“Hold on.” He still isn’t entirely sure what he’s doing, but he runs his hands down her arms, her sides, taking hold of her hips. He plays his thumbs in the tender hollow of the joint, then hooks them beneath the hem of her underpants, glancing back up at her. “Hmm?”


“Oh.” Flynn is taken aback, but also shyly flattered, at the speed of her acquiescence. He slides them down, she kicks them off, and then her legs are bare and soft and open and it is far more than he is prepared to take. He feels dizzied. He starts slowly, kissing the bone of her ankle, encircling it with his fingers, stroking up the slender line of her calf, then kissing the back of her knee. All the soft places where he has imagined her, where her presence has taken root in him, inch by inch, piece by piece. He works on both legs, climbing up to her thighs, planting kisses like seedlings. As he is just feeling bold enough to venture between them, his rough stubble scrapes the tender skin on the inside of her groin, Lucy squeaks, and he immediately pulls back. “I’m – I should shave. I’ll give you rug burn.”

“You.” Lucy crooks a finger at him, as he immediately feels himself crumbling like a sand castle in the waves. “Are not going anywhere. Get back here.”

Flynn huffs a surprised laugh, and takes her thighs in each hand, running his long fingers up to the curve of her ass, letting her get used to the idea of him touching her more intimately. He works in deliberate circles, broadening the map he is tracing into her warm skin, as she whimpers again and tries to hook her leg around him, pulling him closer. But he adamantly refuses to be hurried, and Lucy leans back on the pillows, implicitly surrendering to his judgment. Her face is pink, her lips parted, eyelashes fluttering. Her breath comes in a little gulp as he slides his hand slowly, slowly, slowly to the front, and then finally parts her with a swipe of his thumb. She is already quite wet, and he raises an eyebrow at her. She stares back at him, completely unapologetic, and once more, he
ducks his head, biting his lip on a delighted laugh. She – she does, somehow. He has no idea why or how, but she wants him.

Flynn continues to take his time, sliding his thumb up and down, before he ventures lower, to her entrance, and again seeks permission from her eyes. Having received it, he eases the tip of one finger into her, her soft wet heat, and presses on her inner walls, as she gulps and moves her hips convulsively, trying to thrust against him, but he holds her gently down with his other hand. He slides his index finger into her up to the fork of his hand, then adds his middle finger, filling her more substantially. Moves them deeper, curls them up, then presses on her clit from both sides, and she utters a louder squeak, which does terrible things to his self-control. He does not let himself give into it. One thing at a time. Step by step. It pays to be methodical.

Lucy is flushed brilliantly, practically whining, as he continues to work her with fingers inside and thumb outside, watching her face the whole time to be certain that she’s enjoying it (answer: yes, you idiot) and where it feels better, if she likes light pressure or rougher friction, as she clenches tightly around his fingers and it sends a jolt of fire through his entire body. His hand is sopping wet by the time he slides it out from between her quivering thighs, having not quite stimulated her all the way to climax. He lets her swear and shake, unwarrantedly pleased that he will not, in fact, be the worst lay in the history of time. (One dearly hopes, at least.) He almost asks her if she’s in pain, if her injuries are playing up and they should stop, but it’s clear that pain is the last thing on Lucy’s mind right now, her body flooded with endorphins, and she makes a grab at him as he starts to shift away.

“Garcia, come back here.”

Flynn hesitates. He wants to tell her that she is beautiful, unbearably, unbelievably, breathlessly beautiful, and he’s trying to be careful because he wants her so much, not because he doesn’t. But it’s true that the milk has been at least somewhat spilled, it’s cruel to take a lady to the dance and then abandon her before she has finished the waltz, and he is hot and hungry and black-eyed and roused almost painfully with need. He considers, then lowers himself down again, shucking off her T-shirt with a lightning-fast movement that surprises both of them. She tugs at his undershirt to return the favor, and then the only scrap of clothing remaining on either of them is Flynn’s boxer shorts. He thinks it prudent to leave those in place, but there are plenty of other entertainments that can be obtained even so. He lowers himself down onto Lucy, kisses her collarbone, and buries his face between her breasts.

She gulps, clutching at his hair again, moving in delightful little wriggles and squirms beneath him, as he kisses each one, takes the nipples in his mouth, and toys them to tight peaks with his tongue. Her skin glistens wetly as he moves down her chest and stomach, urged in that direction by an insistent pressure on the top of his head, and considers that unsure as she may be about other things, Lucy Preston certainly knows what she wants in this department. He pauses briefly, very low on her stomach, then dips his head, kisses between her legs, and feels both of them jerk and tremble.

Flynn grips hold of her hips, pressing her down into the bed, as his mouth begins to familiarize itself with the places his hands have already explored. He tastes her musky wetness, licks and suckles with exquisite care as she sighs and moans, and then, having noticed earlier that she was fond of the nibbling, decides to perform a scientific experiment. He flexes his jaw to bring out his fangs, then moves up to her clit, sucking it lightly and lifting it with his tongue. Then, with the care of an artisan making a stroke with a fine-tipped paintbrush, he slides the tip of his fang into it – not biting, just enough of a sting to cause a startling new sensation. Apparently it works, because Lucy arches off the bed and makes a noise that has Flynn hastily shushing her. He really does not want the others knowing just yet, and everyone in this house has supernatural hearing.

Lucy obligingly bites her lip, but as he alternates the lightest prickle of a fang with gentle licking and open-mouthed exploration, she grabs hold of the sheets so hard that she almost yanks them out. He
slides his tongue into her, increasing the pace, remembering vaguely that he is going to leave her quite chafed with the stubble, and maybe he should take it slower. But he can’t, and neither can she, and since he is here, it seems a pity to do anything other than go well and thoroughly down on her. Her hands are wild in his hair, tugging, urging, pressing, pulling, burying his face between her legs as he continues his work. It’s a good thing that he does not need to breathe, since it allows him to proceed uninterrupted and at greater intensity than she will have experienced with any human lover, and he is not above a moment of self-satisfaction at the thought. Maybe this is in fact not going terribly after all.

It’s only a few more moments until Lucy’s legs twist, her back arches, she yanks madly at his hair and scrabbles at his shoulders as if in desperate search of something to hold onto, and he can sense the wild white onrush of climax surging through her, sweeping her away and causing her to lose all powers of sense and reason. Her blood would be sweet as honey, the richest wine, and since he already has his fangs out, it just about kills him not to sink them in, anywhere would do, and take a taste. Instead, he pulls back and rests his chin on her thigh, watching in amusement as she shakes and shivers. Then he says, “Mmm?”

Lucy is nowhere near being able to speak just yet, eyes closed, face and shoulders drenched in sweat, but she utters an indistinct groan and bats out a hand in search of him, grabbing him by the ear and hauling him up the length of her naked body to kiss her again. Surely she can taste herself on his lips, her hands wrapping around the heavy muscles of his upper arms and holding him there as if she never intends to let him go. She mumbles something that might be, “Jesus.”

“No,” Flynn says playfully. “Garcia, remember?”

Lucy groans again and swats at him, their noses brushing, as his rests in the hollow next to her cheek and she half-turns her head to kiss his stubbly cheek. “Didn’ know vampires grew beards,” she mumbles indistinctly. “Like it.”

“The hair and fingernails of dead people supposedly still grow,” Flynn remarks, wondering too late if it might not be the most sensual of pillow talk to remind her that her lover is, technically, also a corpse. “Well, they don’t, not in usual dead people, but they do for vampires. Slowly, though. If I was too rough on you – ”

“Mmm. No.” Lucy kisses him again, as if she can’t get enough of doing it, and he shifts position, sliding in next to her so they can spoon. He wraps his arm around her waist and curls protectively around her, careful not to put too much pressure on the brands on her back. He does not want to remind her of any pain or violation, any fear that she may be nothing more than a piece of useful property, and after a pause, she wriggles around to face him. “That was,” she says, still breathless. “That was amazing.”

“Oh?” Flynn nuzzles her nose with his, ducking his head to kiss her chin. “Not completely out of practice?”

Lucy scoffs, glances at him, can tell that he isn’t fishing for compliments and is genuinely concerned, and softens. “If you were, I couldn’t tell.” She threads her fingers through his hair, looking so dreamily delighted that he still cannot believe it. It terrifies him, as much as he loves it. He knows what happens after this, what happened last time, which could far too easily happen again. He wants to coil himself around her like a dragon and breathe fire at anyone who tries to harm her again, but she has just discovered the truth of her power, the rightness of it, and he cannot keep her from wanting to know it, to know everything. He will help her as much as he can, but he cannot coddle her. That will have to be the bargain.

They lie there in comfortable postcoital silence, until Lucy remembers that she was the only one to
have an orgasm here, and looks at him in concern. “Did you – I mean –”

“No.” Flynn does not want her to feel obliged to give him a reciprocal blowjob, and since she is looking as if she is about to fall asleep again, he will just decorously handle matters by himself. Nor is he entirely sure he could bear it without his ancient heart giving out. “It’s fine, Lucy, it’s – it’s been a very long time for me, I’m used to it. That was for you.”

Lucy still looks somewhat worried that she has been selfish, which breaks his heart a little – why has no one given this woman anything that is for her alone, expected nothing in return, done so often and generously and well? She nudges him to sit up, and he’s briefly frightened that she might insist out of that sense of unworthiness and guilt, and he’ll have to stop her if she does. But she just turns him so she can look at his broad back, the knots and ripples of old scars seamed down the muscular column of his shoulders and hips, wounds that never entirely healed. Some were made with silver weapons, some by fellow immortals, some by Gabriel, in the almighty battle they had after Matej was dead. Lucy makes a soft murmuring sound of sympathy, and presses her lips to one. “What happened to you?”

“Life.” Flynn wants to tell her that he should be the one fussing over the wounds on her back, wonders if he is just as uncomfortable with accepting unqualified affection and comfort as she is, if they are both going to have to trick each other into the habit. “And many wars. I was a soldier for most of my centuries. It wasn’t until after the Second World War that I stopped, pursued my academic career instead. I’m a – I’m a violent man, Lucy. I’ve done many terrible things. I’ve killed more people than I can possibly remember, and I enjoyed doing it. Sometimes I had a good reason, sometimes it was across a battlefield, and sometimes they were just in the way and it was the easiest way to get them out of it. I swear, I will never hurt you, I will never touch you at all in any way you don’t want me to. But you deserve the right to know that about me, and if it changes how you feel, whether you want to be around me – ”

“It doesn’t.” Lucy’s voice is low and very firm, and she presses another kiss to the scar that slashes across his spine. Took that one in the Albigensian Crusade, from a silver-tipped spear. The Knights of Lazarus were ordered to save civilians during the sack and massacre of Béziers in July 1209, but could not stop it entirely. The crusaders and Abbot Arnauld Amaury, giver of the infamous command to slaughter them all and let God sort them out, knew that there were supernaturals in the city, considered them proof positive of the Cathars’ unforgivable heresy, and offered no quarter to anyone. So much of Flynn’s very long life has been writ in battle and bloodshed, in violence upon violence, and it was not until his father’s death in 1944 that he was permanently shaken and alienated from it. But it’s still in him – he would have no trouble calling upon it if faced again with Emma and Temple, for example – and that frightens him. Because after centuries, he is once more no longer alone, has something precious to lose, and he cannot survive that again. When her life is done, so is his.

They sit there in silence, Lucy’s chin on his shoulder, as she strokes his arms in the comforting way he did with her earlier. This bed is a small island in the dark, a warm secret sanctuary with just the two of them, and Flynn loathes the thought of having to leave it to return to this new kind of war. They do have to go to New York, perhaps. He has to meet Lucy’s adoptive mothers, who will be less than impressed with him, and they have to work out this mystery that grows deeper and more entangled with them all the time. He takes some heart from the idea that it may in fact be them, together. That they are not two creatures, wandering helplessly alone and apart, but one, united. However that may be.

Just then, Lucy makes a small noise of surprise, and Flynn turns sharply, too attuned to any hint of her distress. It’s then when he realizes that the room is not entirely dark after all. There’s a strange white glow filling it, from no discernible source – the overhead lights aren’t on, the candles that Lucy
lit earlier have burned out, and he’s briefly baffled. But then, as Lucy lifts her hands, it becomes
clear. She is haloed in a shimmering pearly aura, which seems to come from every part of her and
makes her look even more like a goddess than usual. She is snow and lily and moonlight, uncanny
and ethereal, and as he stares at her, Flynn can glimpse the shadow of a crown, like dewdrops
tumbling onto her dark curls. It lights up the room and casts odd reflections, as both of them look at
it, at each other, and then back at it. Lucy’s face is confused, awed, and yet. Something comes over
her as if she was right, as if she did in fact know, as if she has always known. It is starting, now. The
transformation and the Great Work have properly begun.

At last, Flynn lifts her hands in both of his, and bows over them, pressing a kiss to each, turning them
over, kissing her palms as well, and closing her fingers over them. “La Reine Blanche,” he whispers,
into the silence, into the awakening. “À votre service.”
Song of Home

Lucy and Flynn are awake early the next morning. There’s a lot to do and not much time to do it, and while the essential logistics are more or less easily attended to, it’s still going to be tricky. They should probably let Denise and Michelle know they’re coming, for one thing, and while it might be fastest to get to Paris on the TGV, Flynn is paranoid about being trapped on a train or at the mercy of the general public, and has insisted on driving. It’s about four and a half hours to Charles de Gaulle, from whence they will catch an Air France flight to New York JFK. It is then another four-and-a-half-hour drive to Madison County, and that is reckoning without the likely possibility of terrible traffic. Or rather, that is the plan, until Flynn remembers that you can just take a commuter jet from Clermont-Ferrand to Paris, which cuts out one of the driving halves. It’s going to be a long haul either way, though, and both of them, especially Lucy, are still feeling the effects of their ordeal.

And yet, that is not her chief concern. She’s been afraid that they’ll wake up this morning and it’ll be gone, everything they did last night, the tender new realization that has arisen between them and the intimacy which it brought. It would be just like Flynn to develop sudden amnesia about the whole thing, after all. But they wake in the predawn hush, he looks at her with worshipful eyes as she lies on the pillow across from him, and finally leans over and dares to steal the tiniest and most chaste of all imaginable kisses. Hardly the assertive and passionate ravishment that the crap vampire romances have given one to expect (though she appreciates that about him, and he did get to some of that last night) but it’s so adorable, and what it means is so important, that Lucy can’t bring herself to care. She kisses him back, but they can’t get too distracted, alas, and roll out of bed to get dressed. She keeps catching him trying not to look at her, and finally says, biting a smile, “You… you can, you know. If we’re, well. Together.”

Flynn blinks at her dumbly, as if she has said something truly shocking, and Lucy wonders if they should have saved the “so, should we put a label on this?” conversation for later. But something definitely has changed, and it feels like – well, obviously she doesn’t know what’s going to happen next, but they are partners now, in more ways than one. If he is going to accept the actions but not the definition, agree that they can explore a few pleasurable diversions but God forbid they talk about it… well, she is trying to be as respectful of his past trauma as he is being of her boundaries. But still –

“All right,” Flynn says, surprising her. A small smile crosses his mouth, usually so grimly set, so unaccustomed to openness or ease or delight. “I just… I’m not… I’m not used to it.”

“We can work on that.” Lucy steps over to him, delighting in the way she has to tilt her head back to meet his eyes, the solidness of his chest beneath her hands. A pleasant thrill of anticipation and attraction goes through her, the promise of later scientific investigation to come (well, he is a scientist, it’s necessary). It might be extremely awkward to roll up at Denise and Michelle’s place and announce that the de Clermont they were in so horror of is, oops, now her boyfriend, but… one thing at a time. “I want it, okay? This. Us. You.”

Flynn ducks his head and blushes, in the utter inability of a tall and formidable fifteen-hundred-year-old vampire to hold it together at all when a small witch historian compliments him, and Lucy grabs hold of it, standing on her tiptoes and pulling him down for another kiss. His hands settle comfortably on her waist, they touch noses before they step away, and offer each other a tremulous little smile. Then Flynn says, “Are you packed?”

“I think so, although Cecilia decided to get me a bunch of new clothes.” Lucy glances around the room. “I’ll email Oxford and tell them it’s a medical emergency – well, it sort of is, with what
happened yesterday. That’s the only way I can really justify a longer leave of absence, and I feel guilty about it, but…”

“It’s all right,” Flynn says. “We’ll figure this out, Lucy. Are you going to hold up for a long international trip, though?”

“I’ll do my best.” Lucy is still sore from head to toe, the brands on her back stab into her if she moves too quickly, and she isn’t looking forward to a transatlantic flight even if she has a feeling that Flynn will refuse to be cramped in coach class, but Michelle is especially good at healing magic, and may be able to help. Sept-Tours has exhausted what it can give them, and they need to get out of here before they put Flynn’s family in more danger. It crosses Lucy’s mind to wonder what the de Clermonts are going to do – they know what’s happening now, they’re not the sort of people who take well to sitting around and playing tiddlywinks – but there are a lot of things with the Congregation and other shadowy avenues of politics that they’re likely to chase up. Plus Michael Temple. It seems clear that he’s a particular bugaboo for them, a particularly vengeful old enemy, and needs to be hunted down at all costs.

Flynn and Lucy gather their things and descend the tower steps, into the main house. When they enter the kitchen, Cecilia glances up. “Ah,” she says. “Eat your breakfast. Harry will drive you to the airport at eight o’clock.”

Lucy nods her thanks and sits down as Cecilia puts a plate of delicious-smelling pancakes in front of her, but Flynn (who of course does not need this kind of breakfast) looks around with a frown. “Where’s Gabriel?”

“He tried to leave this morning, before dawn.” Cecilia’s lips purse judgmentally. “I caught him and informed him that there were several matters still to be arranged, and as head of the family, he would remain here until they were. He is in the solar, I expect.”

“I need to talk to him,” Flynn says. “I need to ask him to call up the Knights of Lazarus, as the current grandmaster of the order. The odds of a creature war have never been higher, and if necessary to protect the family, to protect Lucy, from whatever is coming after us – ”

“Gabriel is well aware of the necessity.” Cecilia regards him with something odd in her eyes. “But very well, go talk sense into your idiot brother, Garcia, if you can succeed where the rest of us have failed. Though I hardly need to add that if any word should get out of this, it will give the witches all the proof they need that the vampires are planning to launch an all-out attack on them. Anton and Gennady Sokolov are still here, though they did say they would be leaving later. So if you are going to ask Gabriel to send out the call to arms, it is imperative that you are discreet.”

“Of course,” Flynn says, looking offended that Cecilia apparently doesn’t think he can be discreet (no clue where she got that idea). She looks at him as if still about to say something else, but doesn’t, and he heads out of the kitchen. That makes Lucy wonder if Cecilia misses anything at all that goes on in this household. She doesn’t think so, somehow. But she and Flynn are going to field enough awkward questions on her end, and while it may seem ridiculously optimistic to want one day, one day, to enjoy this before the barrage of objection and criticism that will inevitably hit, Lucy still does.

“Uh, Cecilia?” She clears her throat. “Is it possible you can just – I mean, we don’t really know what it is either, and if you… could maybe… not mention anything? With the family, and with the Covenant, and…”

At that, she trails off, reminded that their fledgling relationship is forbidden not just by the mutually and deeply entrenched dislike of their respective kinds, but by inviolable creature law, and that Wyatt and Jessica were not able to escape its effects. Just because Lucy has lived her life to date in general
ignorance of their rules and customs does not mean that she is exempt from them, and Flynn already has suffered enough tragedy when attempting to swim against the current for a lover’s sake. It might not be merely a matter of wanting to avoid embarrassment, but of actual survival, and Lucy’s fingers clench in her lap. “I just,” she concludes weakly. “I’d appreciate it.”

Cecilia regards her with that cool, regal stare she seems to have perfected, and there’s a moment of deeply uncomfortable silence. Then Cecilia says, “I have kept the de Clermonts’ secrets for seven hundred years, whatever it has cost me. You may have no fear that I will tell this one. But in return, I must ask you to be careful.”

“I – I know.” It sticks in Lucy’s throat. She is not unaware of the perilous path that she is embarking on, and this poor family has been through enough pain and loss. “I don’t want to take him away from you. Does Madame – does Madame know?”

“She has been informed,” Cecilia says, still inscrutable. “She of course is worried and does not strictly approve, but accepts that she does not have the right to prevent her grown son from going where and with whom he will. Though to send Garcia to a witches’ lair – do I have your word that your godmothers will not hurt him?”

“They won’t hurt him.” Lucy doesn’t know what else will happen, but they won’t do that, and in the absolute worst-case scenario, she wouldn’t let them. “I… I can’t promise they’ll be all that happy, but they love me, and they want to help. And I’ll talk to them, I’ll make them understand. Once we figure out what it is about Ashmole 782, maybe we can fix it, we can… I don’t know. I just want to know who I really am.”

“An understandable wish,” Cecilia says. “We should all have that right. To strike back against the disrespect and durance vile in which we have been kept, and to forge a path more powerful than anything that has been allowed or believed of us. When that which has been repressed, forced down, tried to be stamped out, and then rises again against all odds, it rises all the more powerfully, and it can change the world, the very course of history. If it is not too strange to say, you remind me of my father. He had that same soul.”

“Our father?” Lucy is startled and slightly wary, as this doesn’t seem like an unqualified compliment. Cecilia’s sire was the infamous Gerbert of Aurillac, after all, and Cecilia hated him for what he did to her; he had to be assassinated so as not to take over the entire world, the reason she joined this family in the first place. “I – well, I don’t plan to end up like him, but if Michael Temple is still planning to destroy Gabriel and Garcia for what they –”

“Gerbert?” Cecilia utters a small, bitter laugh. “Oh, you thought I was speaking of him? No, I meant my true father. It is not for nothing that they carved *invictissimus* on his tomb, the bastard son of a peasant girl who rose to win the crown of the most powerful kingdom in Europe at the time, and to forge a line that endures until this very day. So yes.”

“Wait –” Lucy stares at her. Can feel pieces clicking into place, wonders suddenly if even the rest of the family knows this. “You were turned in – 1112, you said? You were the abbess of Holy-Trinity, in Caen? And you’re Norman, you speak Old French, and you – wait. Cecilia of Normandy. Is your father – ?”

Cecilia raises an eyebrow. “Does it surprise you?”

“No, it… it doesn’t at all.” In fact, Lucy thinks, it makes complete sense that William the Conqueror’s eldest daughter is sitting across from her with that air of assured and complete command. “Oh my god, I even remember hearing that when you supposedly died in 1126, your tomb was blocked up in the abbey walls so that nobody could see it or get to it. That was to stop
anyone from seeing that there was no body in it, wasn’t it?”

Cecilia inclines her head. “You are a good historian, Lucy.”

“Oh my god,” Lucy says again, briefly inclined to ask for her autograph. She remembers Flynn telling her that he never met William in case he demanded to be turned into a vampire, so perhaps there can be some posthumous vindication for the man that his daughter ended up as one, even if he didn’t. It also flatters her to realize that that was who Cecilia was actually comparing her to, even if she doesn’t feel anything like a victorious conqueror. “I… Cecilia, thank you. For what you’ve done for me, and for… for them.”

“It does not feel like much.” Cecilia’s voice is quiet. “It is, as you must know, very difficult to watch a family fracture around you, even as you wish most dearly that you could hold them together, that you could simply click your fingers and force them to heal. But you cannot, not if they will not adhere. Gabriel helped to save you, as I am sure you remember. Maria and Wyatt agreed to make terms with witches to assist in the rescue. I know they have not dealt with you as honorably as they might have, and I have been sure to remind them of that, but they did try to help you.”

“I know.” Lucy can tell that no matter how much Cecilia critiques and challenges and otherwise kicks the de Clermonts squarely in the obstinate supernatural behinds, she loves them all very much and is deeply hurt by their continued inability to just come together as they used to, once upon a time. “I hope I’ll get to thank them, but – ”

Once more, Cecilia gives her that strange look. Then she says, “As I told Garcia, Gabriel is in the solar. You still have some time until you leave. Perhaps you could do so.”

Lucy agrees, though with a slight, unexplainable flutter in her stomach. Once she has finished her pancakes and brushed her teeth, seen Flynn coming back down the corridor and made a note to ask later what’s going on with the Knights, she steels herself and ventures in that direction. She doesn’t know why she’s suddenly nervous again. Gabriel did help rescue her, after all, and he was wounded in the course of it. He’s a vampire, it’s probably already healed, but the least he deserves is a proper thank-you. Lucy reaches the solar and taps carefully on the half-ajar door. “Excuse – excuse me? Gabriel?”

She hears a rustle from within, a slightly too long pause, and then a murmured assent. She pushes it open, steps inside, and catches sight of him on the far side of the room. He looks more like a Renaissance artwork than ever, sketched in contrasting halves of light and shadow, swirls of chiaroscuro charcoal. He’s wearing a half-undone white shirt, revealing the ugly gash that cuts across his shoulder and chest, and his thick black hair is a tousled mess, a faint unshaven shadow clinging to the elegant crag of his jaw. Lucy is firmly in love with Flynn, but she has noticed that Gabriel is impossibly beautiful and impossibly sad, and it catches her short. “Ah,” she says timidly. “I’m sorry for interrupting you, but Garcia and I are – well, we’re about to leave, and I know he came to talk to you already, but I also wanted to – to thank you. For what you did for me last night.”

For another moment, he doesn’t look up, and then he does, as if he has had to consciously arrange his face into the same pleasant, unrevealing mask. His eyes are so dark that they seem to absorb the morning sunlight, as if he casts his own eclipse. His lips lift into a well-mannered smile that does not give off any warmth. “Thank you. I am glad to hear it.”

Lucy waits, as if he is going to say something else, or if she’s fulfilled her obligation and can go with a clear conscience. But that seems like a rather abrupt and perfunctory way to take their leave, and perhaps selfishly, she wants some indication that the rest of the de Clermonts agree with this. Not that they were ever likely to be big fans of a plan that involved sending Garcia to the mercy of a bunch of witches, but Gabriel was the one who suggested that they leave Sept-Tours. Just a case of wanting
them gone again? Lucy can’t read him, can’t be sure, but can feel a palpable chill in the air around him that wards her off any closer approach, any impulse she might have to be mushy or sentimental. She doesn’t, but she does understand Maria and Cecilia’s frustration and urge to knock the boys’ heads together until they ring like church bells. Idiots. Stubborn, beautiful idiots.

“I just – ” Lucy ventures, into the forbidding silence. “It was kind of you, and – ”

Gabriel’s lips twist again, almost mockingly. He gets up fast enough to make her jump, moving across the solar with that gliding immortal grace that doesn’t quite touch the floor, and comes to a halt a few feet away, leaning casually on the fireplace. “I am relieved that you seem to be on the mend,” he says, as if making an effort to be even nominally polite. “I am certain that Garcia has taken good care of you. I… I am happy for you both.”

Lucy is caught off guard. She wonders if their big plans for keeping their relationship secret have already gone down the drain, if Flynn told him, or if Gabriel has obviously known him for a millennium and a half and can tell just by looking at him. “I…” she says. “We’re not… I mean we don’t… it’s not exactly….”

Gabriel looks up at the painting over the fireplace, as if to focus on something that is not her face. One hand clenches and unclenches, like a lion talking itself out of a leap on a wounded gazelle. Then he says, “How long have you known my brother? Something under a month, is it not? You have come most unexpectedly into his, into all of our lives, and now here you are, the pair of you, so touchingly attached to each other. I know Garcia, you see, and thus I do not doubt what he feels for you. But loving him is a difficult and dangerous profession. You have to mean it, and all those he has loved before have come to some…. unfortunate end. Even if he means to protect you from outside enemies, you are still vulnerable. More so, perhaps, than you were before. Why was it so easy for you, witch? Why did it only take you weeks to be able to reach him, to hold such power over him, and now – ”

With that, he cuts off, but not quickly enough. The cords in his neck are standing out as if it’s taking all his self-control to keep from biting her again, in a much less gentle and pleasant way than he did last time, and Lucy fights the urge to run. She’s not sure he wouldn’t chase her, is whiplashed by the memory of the all-too-present danger she’s in around him even when he is behaving nicely, and that “witch” didn’t sound very gentle in his mouth. She wonders suddenly if Gabriel is agonizingly jealous of her, if he has been estranged from Flynn for two hundred and fifty years, if their old closeness is ruined beyond repair, and now Lucy herself walks in and manages to connect with him so quickly. Gabriel’s hand continues to tattoo against his thigh. Then he says, “Garcia was my companion and my soul for many centuries. That did not prevent what became of us. I wish better fortune for you, of course, but if in the end it is nothing but ashes, that cannot be a surprise.”

“I’m…” Lucy looks helplessly at him, has no idea what to say. Any words seem risibly inadequate, and his anger and his loneliness and his utter, unbearable grief enshrouds him like a dark and impenetrable fog. She wants to help him, would give anything to help him, but doesn’t know that she can, or that he would want it. She looks at his shoulder, but it seems as if the last thing he wants is any more reminder of his open wounds. “Is that… are you…”

“I am quite well, thank you,” Gabriel says. “Once you arrive in New York – ”

He is clearly trying as hard as he possibly can to shut her out and act like everything is hunky-dory, at which he is not being remotely convincing, and Lucy is tempted to just let him do it. But she is getting used to this family and their particular brand of emotional ineptitude, and she takes a step closer instead. Gabriel is the one to flinch as if she’s hit him, as if he can’t stand having her so near, and retreats a corresponding pace. “Apologies for my discourtesy,” he says, sounding strained. “I
realize that I have made it something of a habit. You may have my word that if there is anything in
my power that can be done to protect you both, it will be. I will pursue and destroy Michael Temple
or die trying, and will also call upon the full capabilities of the Knights of Lazarus in doing so, as I
told Garcia earlier. You are not alone in this fight, so much as it is any consolation.”

“I know I’m putting you in a difficult position,” Lucy says. “With the Congregation – ”

“To hell with the Congregation.” Gabriel’s smile this time is completely mirthless, dark as a rushing
rainstorm. “Since I too seem entirely incapable of learning my lesson, yet again, I will take Garcia’s
side over that of the law and anything else more sensible. And if it has become nothing more than a
toothless puppet for the likes of Temple and Cahill and Keynes, perhaps it should be burned down
and scoured from our very memory. So.” He shrugs, then grimaces as this catches his wounded
shoulder. “There is that.”

Lucy isn’t sure if she should thank him, since it sounds like Gabriel just promised to kill a lot of men
for her and Flynn, but that seems to be a legitimate way for these ridiculous vampires to show
affection. Plus, she can’t deny that their enemies could very well use some culling, of a fatal sort or
otherwise. Then she says, “Gabriel, I’m sorry.”

“It is not your fault.” He turns up those drowned-creature eyes at her, as if seeing her from the
bottom of another well, and one in which he is trapped, not her. “Do you know, Lucy, that I
sometimes have the oddest feeling that I have met you before? Long ago, I cannot think where or
when, and it eludes me whenever I try to pin it down. A dream I had once, perhaps. As if that is why
I am so – ”

He stops. There’s a long pause. Then Lucy says, “Can I please take a look at your shoulder? I don’t
know if there’s anything I can do for it, but you did get hurt on my behalf, and I…”

“That is kind of you.” Gabriel reaches to do up his shirt (which is, you know, something of its own
tragedy), concealing the gash. “But I do not see it necessary for you to trouble yourself. You and
Garcia will be on your way soon, surely?”

“At eight.” Lucy looks at the clock. It’s seven-fifteen. “I won’t insist if you really think it’s fine, but
my magic – my magic works now. It’s different, I can use it, I can control it. Just quickly, I promise.”

Gabriel finally nods reluctantly and sits down, exposing it for her perusal and looking away with a
defiant expression, as if he will not have either the injury or allowing her to examine it to be
interpreted as any kind of weakness. Stubborn is truly a word that does the de Clermont brothers no
justice at all (Lucy hasn’t really met the youngest, Wyatt, but she figures he shares in the family trait).
It’s a nasty cut, deep and raw and blackened, spanning from Gabriel’s right shoulder to halfway
across his chest. It doesn’t look any better than when he first got it, and Lucy frowns. “Don’t wounds
usually heal for you within hours?”

“Not if they’re made with silver, or other substances to which we have lower tolerance. Or if made
with particular… intent, by our fellow immortals.” Gabriel grimaces as she prods it. “I still have scars
from the fight after – ”

He stops again, as if he’s definitely not going to finish that sentence, and Lucy looks at him sidelong.
Then she says, “Could Temple have hit you with something particularly bad?”

“I have no doubt he would have equipped himself with every dirty trick he could think of.” Gabriel
still does not appear unduly concerned. “Perhaps my brother has told you something of our fraught
history. If there was any chance he could get into striking distance, he no doubt would want to
increase the odds of striking a lethal blow.”
“This could be poisoned, or something.” Lucy frowns. “Don’t you think –”

“It’s nothing I have not seen before,” Gabriel says. “Do what you will, if you must. But again, I repeat that there is no need to trouble yourself.”

Lucy isn’t entirely convinced, but goes to work, summoning up the white light from last night. Gabriel looks startled, his eyes flick to her as if he is about to ask, and then he doesn’t. Lucy carefully smooths her glowing hands above the mangled flesh, not quite touching it, and hopes that some of the worst damage is repaired. Gabriel lets out a slow, shaking breath, as if he is not used to not being in pain in any sense of the word, and when she finishes, he catches her hand, his thumb pressing into the hollow of her palm. Then, quietly, entirely without expectation or entitlement, he lifts it to his mouth and kisses the back of her knuckles. “I think I should keep,” he says. “Thank you.”

“You’re – you’re welcome.” Lucy looks down at him; like Flynn, he is barely shorter than her even when he is sitting. She has the odd feeling that this terrifyingly formidable, ultra-hot, extremely competent old vampire would do anything she asked him to, that he is charmed and entranced by her despite himself, and completely devoted to keeping both of them safe. If she is the queen, then Gabriel is a knight (her knight? Their knight?), the grandmaster of the Order of Lazarus, sworn to their service. “Is there anything else I can do for you?”

Gabriel smiles faintly, bitterly. He gets to his feet with another grimace, shrugs his shirt back over his shoulder, and does it up again, but doesn’t answer. Lucy is just thinking that this is a cue for her to go, when Gabriel says abruptly, “My son. Christian. I do not suppose Garcia has told you how he came to join the family?”

“No.” Lucy learned her lesson about digging for the de Clermonts’ skeletons, didn’t want them to have to unburden any more of their tragedy to her, or to be the object of receiving it as a pointed warning about causing more. “Was it… to do with him?”

“In a manner of speaking. It takes on a twisted symmetry, when you look at it all.” Gabriel glances at the floor. “Garcia spent his first few centuries as a vampire in a fury of bloodlust. Our father and I tried to help him, to teach him, to stop him, but he was violent and dangerous and determined to kill enough to slake his grief. One of us always had to be with him, we could not leave him by himself for fear of what he might do. I thought there might be little else to him, no deeper fundament of his character, until the day we stumbled upon a young Carolingian soldier, sorely wounded. We generally avoided the Carolingians, and they had persecuted us before. I thought Garcia would insist that we kill this one too, but he…"

Gabriel’s eyes are distant, centuries past, as he rubs his hands over his face. “Something changed in him, then. Or perhaps I should say, something resurfaced. He wanted to save the boy’s life, to give him the gift, but he was in no way ready to try the siring process himself, or to be a father again – since that, of course, would have made the boy his son. Nor did he trust himself to do it, to make anything alive again, to save something that he touched rather than destroy it. Nor was I a man who had ever seen myself as a father. In my human life, in Rome, I had a wife – she was a praetor’s daughter, it had been arranged, we were not close, and like many men of my rank and station, I saw fit to take my amusements wherever I pleased. She had borne two sons that died in the cradle, and I confess, I was no support to my wife in grieving them. I saw only that she had failed to provide me with an heir, that most expected stalwart of an aristocratic family, and punished her. I did not lift my hand to her, though other men would have, but I merely… was not there. She was… very lonely. I think of her now, sometimes, when I have only begun to understand how truly lonely a single soul can be, and can only hope that she knows I repented of my evil.”
Lucy wants to ask about Gabriel’s wife’s name, wants to assure this poor woman that someone remembers her, but that is a question for later. The more she learns about the de Clermonts’ past, the more it hurts. “And?” she asks quietly. “Did you agree to turn this boy – Christian – because Garcia couldn’t?”

“Yes.” Gabriel looks up at her. “That was the day that I understood who he really was, the man he had been and could be again beneath the revenge and blood and blindness, the force and the pain of the loss that drove him. So I turned the boy and we took him home. I was afraid that he would be like Garcia when he awoke, that I would have another reckless, wild, uncontrollable new vampire on my hands, but from the moment he opened his eyes, I… like a human parent when their child is laid in their arms, I… I loved him until there was space for nothing else inside me. Christian was – he was wonderful. He took to our family as if he had always been there. He did not say a word that we were ungodly abominations, a threat to the divine approval and moral order of the society in which he had been raised. He was… he understood, more than anyone I have ever yet met. He delighted me. And from that day forward, Garcia changed as well. He became more himself again. We grew very close, we fought together, we lived together, we were two halves of one thing. And so you see, he gave me my son, in a way. Until the day he took him away, and so us, and so everything.”

“Gabriel…” Lucy reaches out, putting her hand on his arm. “Gabriel, I’m so sorry. I don’t know if that helps. I know it’s not my crime. But I am.”

“Thank you.” Gabriel looks down at her hand, as if he still isn’t sure he’s allowed to be comforted, then reaches down and tucks it into his elbow. “I think it’s time to go.”

He escorts her out to where Flynn is waiting with their bags, along with Cecilia, Houdini in an overcoat and holding the car keys, and – to Lucy’s great surprise – Maria. She is pale but composed, and turns to Lucy. “I understand that you will be leaving us,” she says. “I wish you good fortune where you go next, and you will be welcome if you return to Sept-Tours in the future. And please. Take care of my son.”

“I’ll – I’ll do my best,” Lucy says awkwardly. It still seems ridiculous to ask her to look after anyone, but the Lucy leaving here is certainly not the same as the Lucy who arrived, in any number of ways. The white queen, she thinks again, and it does not seem so impossible. “Thank you.”

Maria inclines her head, then reaches into her pocket and removes a small velvet box, which when opened proves to contain a de Clermont signet ring, fitted for a woman’s hand. “If you do not wish to wear this,” she says, “I understand. But if you would, it would indicate that you are under the whole family’s protection, not merely Garcia’s, and that no human or creature could touch you without provoking our wrath. It is not full recompense for how we have treated you, but perhaps it is a start.”

Startled, Lucy takes the box, and then removes the ring and slides it onto her right pinky finger, where Gabriel wears his. There is a very odd expression on both the boys’ faces as they look at her, but they duck their heads when she tries to catch their eyes. They are trying very hard not to look at each other, for that matter, which is difficult as it is a small hall and they are both quite large. Lucy says, “Merci, Madame.”

“You may call me Maria.” The de Clermont matriarch moves closer, a whiff of sandalwood perfume hanging in the air, then reaches out and takes both of Lucy’s hands, leaning in to kiss each cheek in the French fashion. “Whatever blessing I may give you, you have it.”

Lucy is too moved to speak, knowing the weight of this, the ghosts of all those that Flynn has loved before, and the fact that Maria is trusting her to do differently, to break the cycle, to heal the broken pieces. She nods back, wishing that she had a more eloquent response, and then lets go, moving to
Cecilia. Cecilia looks down at her, then takes hold of her and kisses her forehead. “Our hopes and our love go with you both,” she says. “Be brave.”

Houdini picks up the bags and starts out to the car. As Flynn and Lucy follow him into the grey morning damp, Lucy nudges him in the ribs. “Aren’t you going to say goodbye to Gabriel?” she says in an undertone. “It doesn’t sound as if you two see each other very often, and I – I think you should.”

Flynn looks at her, half-startled, half-alarmed, as if such an outlandish notion never occurred to him. The family has remained inside, watching them, and Lucy has never seen an expression of such pure, unbearable, harrowing longing on any living creature’s face as she sees on Gabriel’s just then. She is about to see if her magic can physically frog-march an idiot vampire back into his house to say a proper goddamn farewell to his brother, but after a moment, Flynn makes up his mind, strides back across the rain-slick stones, and barrels up to Gabriel as if determined to do this before he can talk himself out of it. “Ah,” he announces. “Good – goodbye, then.”

“Goodbye,” Gabriel echoes, and they stand there a foot apart, staring at each other, neither of them making any move to reach out. They make convulsive shuddering motions as if they thought about a handshake and then decided against it, as Lucy marvels at the fact that it’s not just her that Flynn is an utter and complete disaster with. Then as Flynn starts to turn away, something snaps in Gabriel, and he reaches out, claws him into the world’s clumsiest hug (Flynn looks alarmed, as if briefly thinking he was being attacked again) and holds on ferociously. He turns his head, closes his eyes, and kisses Flynn’s ear, as if he was aiming for his cheek but missed, and for several seconds, they stand there, swaying. Then with the greatest effort imaginable, Gabriel pushes himself back. “Get out of here.”

Flynn opens his mouth and shuts it several times in a row, which seems about right when he is confronted with strong emotions, and nods jerkily. He clears his throat, harrumph, permits his mother to kiss him as well, and makes his way back out to the car like a robot, climbing in while still in something of a trance. Then Lucy slides in on the seat next to him, takes his hand, and he looks at her with unbearable tenderness, melted eyes, that look of sheer and staggering devotion that makes her feel like a lioness indeed, and neither of them glance back as Sept-Tours vanishes behind them in the rain.

They drive to Clermont-Ferrand airport, wipers swishing steadily, and step out on the departure curb. Lucy is briefly worried about taking a commercial flight without a passport, but Flynn produces it for her; apparently he picked it up from her apartment while he was in Oxford. He goes inside with their luggage, and Lucy turns to Houdini. “Thank you,” she says, finding herself strangely choked up. “You were – you were very kind to me.”

“Of course.” The daemon tilts his head, looking at her from beneath the brim of his hat. “Take care of yourself. And Garcia. You might have seen that he doesn’t have a clue.”

Lucy manages a strangled little laugh, and they step forward and hug hard, Houdini giving her an extra squeeze before he lets go. Lucy looks over her shoulder at him waving as she heads inside the terminal, feeling as if despite everything, she might have found a family, and from the unlikeliest quarter imaginable. Well, she has obviously found a family, but it could, perhaps, be her family too, and that thought gives her strength.

It’s a quick hop from Clermont to Charles de Gaulle, where they have several hours to kill before they leave for JFK. Lucy tries to do some work, even though Oxford is technically not expecting it due to her medical emergency, and finally decides that she really does need to warn Denise and Michelle that she’s coming with a vampire plus-one. She taps out a text message, sounding as casual
as she can, and then turns off her phone, as it feels easier to deal with once they are on the other side of the Atlantic. Flynn buys her something to eat (at least he will not have to put up with airplane food), and then they finally board the big Air France jetliner. Lucy has never flown first class before, and once they have settled into their cushy seats, has to investigate the various amenities, as Flynn regards her with that expression of delighted amusement that she is coming to associate with him watching her enjoying herself. Lucy says, “When was the last time you were in America?”

“I don’t remember.” Flynn frowns. “It – it might have been 1888, in San Francisco, when I – well, with Jiya. I imagine it’s changed since then.”

“Yes,” Lucy says wryly. “Rather.”

He smiles at her, gentle and soft, and she reaches out to hold his hand again. She cannot imagine that she will soon be tired of it, if ever, and they sit that way in silence as they push back from the gate, roll down the runway, and take off, Paris falling away into the fog. It’s just under an eight-hour flight, though with the six-hour time difference, it will still be mid-afternoon by the time they arrive. Just in time to hit maximum New York City rush-hour traffic, great, though Lucy hopes they might skate out just ahead of the worst of it. God, this is strange. So much has changed, and yet so much still lies ahead of them.

She dozes intermittently, pages through the in-flight magazine, reads a few chapters of the book she threw in her bag, and leans on Flynn’s shoulder, trying to ignore the renewed throbbing in her back. He seems to sense that she’s in pain, and keeps his hand on her arm as if trying to absorb it from her. By the time they start their descent into New York, emerging from the clouds to a palely sunlit, late-autumn day like a crisp apple, Lucy feels utterly alienated from any solid concept of place or time. She was going to suggest that they get yet another flight up to Albany, which is closer to Madison County, but in an utterly baffling logistical decision, you can’t actually fly from any major New York international airports to its capital city. So the driving it is, and when they finally touch down, shuffle through customs, and collect their luggage, Lucy is flagging badly. She leans against the wall as Flynn rents them a car, remembers too late that they could have flown to Syracuse as they’re sitting in traffic on the Van Wyck Expressway, and practically tears up when she apologizes for forgetting. Flynn is concentrating on the road, but he leans over and says, “Shh. Lucy, Lucy, it’s all right. It’ll be fine. How about you try to sleep?”

“I tried to sleep a little on the plane, but – ” Lucy rubs her eyes. She knows it’s not really that which she’s upset about, and takes a deep breath, trying to compose herself, as she stares out the window. God, it’s strange to be back in America. After the charming old-world environs of Oxford and the deeply medieval Sept-Tours, the wild ruin of the castle in Albi, everything seems much too large and loud and technological, giant SUVs and endless fast-food places, Trump bumper stickers (god, the horror) and the endless tailbacks of cars crammed on the George Washington Bridge, the skyscrapers of midtown Manhattan and cement and steel and smog and crowds. Her magic feels choked, diluted, forcing her back into that small and powerless place, and she grips her knees hard and focuses on not losing her mind until they finally battle through the city and make it onto I-87. Lucy looks down at her phone, which she still hasn’t dared to reactivate. Roaming charges, she tells herself. Her British plan would not be covered in America. She’s being financially sensible by keeping it off, that’s all.

The sun has vanished below the hills by the time they reach NY-17, the city now well behind them and the surroundings starting to take on that almost aggressively Americana, postcard-perfect autumn in New England aesthetic, with red barns and apple orchards and hay rides, farmer’s markets and pumpkin patches, flags hanging from old porches and signs for attractions like The World’s Biggest Cement Foot. Flynn drives steadily, face intent and thoughtful, inward-looking. If he has nerves about imminently meeting a pair of unfriendly witches, he doesn’t show it. They stop for gas and to let Lucy get some food and a bathroom break, and twilight is falling fast by the time they set out
again. It’s dark and spacious and quiet, headlights shirring past as if they are all on their own lonely roads, and Lucy leans against the seat, starting to wonder if she will ever be able to stand up properly again; her body has turned into one giant cramp in a sitting position. God, she hurts everywhere.

It’s full dark as they finally turn off the highway, and she wakes up enough to give Flynn directions, since Google Maps cannot always be trusted on this point. Madison County is not the most immediately obvious place for an interracial lesbian couple, one born the daughter of Indian immigrants as Dhriti Sirivastava and the other an African-American poet who has published books about tracing her descent from slaves, to settle down in their quiet retirement. It’s one of the whiter and more Republican enclaves in an otherwise solidly blue state, and not long after Denise and Michelle first moved in, they received a delightful anonymous letter from a “concerned neighbor” advising them that they should have picked somewhere else. But they took it to the police, people seemed indignant that they had been subjected to it, hung up rainbow flags in solidarity, and otherwise embraced them in the community. They seem happy, at least, and Lucy lived there for the latter half of her PhD. If anywhere is home for her, she supposes this is it.

They make a few turns, take a winding road past a farm, and turn down a gravel lane to the rambling old Victorian at the end. A light is on in the kitchen window, and at the sound of car tires, the front door opens. A dark figure comes down the steps and stands in wary attention at the bottom, clearly not sure what to expect. By the porch light, Lucy can see that it’s Michelle. Maybe that’s easier than trying to start with Denise, but she isn’t sure.

Flynn switches the car engine off, they look at each other, and squeeze each other’s hands once more in silent preparation. Then they open the door and get out, and Flynn lets Lucy take the lead as they advance toward Michelle, the cold night wind stinging their cheeks. Lucy comes to a halt before her, musters up her voice, and squeaks, “Hi.”

“Hi.” Michelle looks her up and down, eyes lingering on Lucy’s neck as if checking for bite marks. Her gaze then moves to Flynn, who attempts to hunch himself and look less large and menacing than usual. “I’m – I’m very glad to see you’re safe, sweetheart. Come here.”

She reaches out and hugs Lucy hard, a proper embrace after the one she sent by magic earlier, and Lucy hugs her back, desperately relieved to have this much at least. Michelle lets go and takes hold of her by the shoulders, studying her critically. Then she frowns. “You’re in pain.”

“I… yes, I was…” Lucy wonders if she wants to start right away with the whole saga of her kidnapping and torture, and decides she doesn’t. “It wasn’t Garcia, all right? He and his brother rescued me. It was Emma. Emma Whitmore. You told me that she had a reputation – she’d been in Finland or whatever, and now she –”

“Emma Whitmore?” Michelle’s brows draw down in deep concern. “What did she do to you?”

“It’s a long story, and… it’s been a really long day with a lot of traveling, and I need some proper rest, but maybe you can help with that later. But I – this is – this is him.”

Lucy beckons very awkwardly, and Flynn steps forward, offering his hand to Michelle, who does not move to take it. She considers him, then says, “Yes, you must be the de Clermont. We are – well, you can imagine that we weren’t expecting to have you here. Lucy says you’re to be trusted, and we’ll proceed as if you are. But if you –”

“Don’t.” Lucy says, startling both of them. “Michelle… I know you want to protect me, and I know this was unexpected, and I know you don’t really want him here. But Garcia is – he’s not negotiable, all right? He comes with me. He’ll be treated the same as anyone else. I just wanted to make that clear.”
Both of them blink, since to say the least, Lucy is not usually nearly so blunt about saying what she wants or how she expects things to go. Michelle pauses, then nods. “Very well. Welcome to our home. Please come inside.”

Flynn and Lucy glance at each other, decide to send Lucy first as the vanguard, and she follows Michelle up the steps as Flynn returns to the car to get the bags. They step inside the warm, spicy-smelling house, and Denise emerges from the kitchen, wearing an apron and holding a spoon, but she puts it down quickly on sight of Lucy. She hurries over to hug her, ascertaining her physical integrity for herself, and when she lets go, Michelle steps over and says something in an undertone. Denise’s brow furrows and her lips go tight, but she doesn’t object – outwardly, at least. The door opens again, both witches jump, and turn around to see Flynn silhouetted on the threshold, bags in hand. There’s a very awkward pause. Then he says, “Good evening, Mrs. Christopher.”

“Good – evening.” Denise’s lips are even tighter, but she seems bound to at least outward civility. “Lucy, I’ve made up your old room for you. Mr. de Clermont is in the guest room. If you’d like to take your things up – ”

“Ah, we...” Lucy wonders if she should just let Denise persist under the comforting illusion that they will in fact be sleeping in separate beds, and sneak in later. But if they’re going to be here for any length of time, the bull should be taken by the horns, and she is trying to get better about confronting things. “We’ll – actually, we’ll both just be in my room.”

Denise’s eyebrows fly up to her hair. The nearest glass breaks without her touching it, she waves a hand to mend it, and there is a very nasty pause. Then Denise, in a well-that’s-a-horrible-surprise sort of voice, says, “I see.”

At that Flynn, doubtless feeling an understandable urge to excuse himself from this situation, zips up the stairs with the bags, leaving Lucy to face the collective obloquy of her godmothers alone. (Useless, useless man.) Michelle then notices the de Clermont signet ring on her finger, they both get an expression as if their worst fears have been confirmed, and look at each other as if to draw straws as to who is going to say something first. Then Michelle says, “Lucy – honey – ”

“Please don’t.” Lucy raises her hand. “We came here because we need you to help us, not to side-eye him the entire time. I know you don’t trust him, I probably can’t talk you into doing that in a few days, and everything that goes with the obvious complications of having him here. But I was with his family at Sept-Tours for a while, and Madame de Clermont gave me the ring.” She holds it up. “I’m under their protection. I promised them I would look after Garcia. Now that responsibility includes you. Just so you know.”

Denise and Michelle exchange another look of silent marital communication, trying to decide whether to agree or to keep pushing. When they don’t speak, Lucy goes on, “Not to mention, the witches are the ones who have been hurting me and betraying my trust and doing everything they can to make sure I feel like I don’t belong. And after what just – did you – did you know? Did you know that I was spellbound? Did Mom and Dad do it to me?”

She was planning to wait, she was trying to save it for a more opportune moment, to do it more diplomatically, but it bursts out of her. The light fixtures swing overhead, sputter out as if there’s been a power surge, and a knick-knack falls off the mantel and breaks, the echo of Denise’s moment of magical anger before. Both of them look stunned, as to say the least, these things have not usually happened around her. Michelle says, “Honey, what – what are you talking about? What did they tell you, exactly?”

“They didn’t tell me anything, if by that you mean that you think the vampires have been lying to me.” Lucy’s fists clench. “I’ve been trying to – I’ve remembered some things about Benjamin Cahill
from when I was a child, and all this secrecy about what really happened to Mom and Dad, and that
witches killed them and lied to me, and now – “

Denise and Michelle flinch as if she has swung a heavy weight into their faces. They exchange
another, half-helpless look. Then Denise says, “Come have some dinner.”

Lucy wants to say that she’s not hungry, but she is, and she follows Denise grudgingly into the
savory-smelling kitchen. She sits down at the table, Denise dishes her up a large portion of whatever
is on the stove, and there’s once more a communal tension when Flynn reappears in the doorway. He
nods in acknowledgment that he’s interrupting, but it is clear that he does not intend to be summarily
exiled from Lucy’s side again, and things might get messy if Denise and Michelle try. Wisely, they
do not, and he takes the chair next to her, looking much too big for its small, rickety frame. He leans
back with feigned casualness, folds his arms, and says, “So. What were we talking about?”

Denise and Michelle glare at him, as it seems clear that Flynn only has a limited capacity to play nice
at any one time, and he will deliberately poke the bear whether or not they are under orders to
maintain harmonious relations. Denise says, with somewhat too much politeness, “Do you eat human
food, Mr. de Clermont?”

“I can,” Flynn says. “But right now, I’m more curious about your answers to the questions Lucy just
asked you. Well?”

When they all look at him askance, he shrugs. “I have supernatural hearing,” he reminds them, with
absolutely no attempt to pretend that he wasn’t eavesdropping, whether accidentally or on purpose.
Both Denise and Michelle are sporting distinct the Lord-is-testing-me expressions, but for Lucy’s
sake, they restrain themselves from taking the bait. Flynn eyes them expectantly, there is another
pause, and he glances around. “I wouldn’t say no to a glass of wine if you were offering it, though.”

Michelle moves to get a glass and uncork a bottle of red, pours it, and passes it over. Flynn takes a
sip, but his attention remains on them, unwavering. With no apparent escape, Denise sits down
across from Lucy and says, “What happened to you, what Carol and Henry did, it was…
complicated. I know that most likely that doesn’t seem like enough. But they, we, all of us, we only
wanted to protect you.”

“So?” Lucy demands, not quite as steadily as she wants. She makes another grab for Flynn’s hand,
which has become almost an ingrained reflex over the course of two days, and he holds on. “What
did you do? What did Cahill do?”

“When you were six, your parents took you to Venice to be tested for magical power and registered
with the Congregation,” Michelle says, after another pause. “As happens to every young witch, and
it was expected to be a mere formality, as it usually is. They were shocked and confused when
Benjamin Cahill told them that you didn’t have any, because they had already seen evidence that
your talents were, or could be, quite prodigious. This seemed very suspicious to them, and they
realized that your abilities could be more unique and dangerous than they were aware of. They
believed that Cahill was trying to set himself up to take advantage of you in some way when you
were older – as we told you, your mother knew him when they were teenagers, but she did not trust
him by the end, and the more she and your father thought it over, the more they didn’t like it. They
knew he wanted something from you, and – well. They did have an idea as to what. Carol did some
work on Ashmole 782 as a young woman, and while she was never able to access it herself, she had
a strong belief that you would be able to, and this would change everything for creatures
everywhere. She thought this was what Cahill must want, that he could not be allowed to have it,
and… your mother was difficult, Lucy, but she loved you. She wanted to protect you.”

“And?” Lucy’s voice seems to get higher every time she speaks. “She thought spellbinding me was
“If they had openly ignored Cahill’s recommendation, that would have been suspicious. Your powers could also be somewhat uncontrollable. So she and your father decided that they would do it, that it would be the best way to defer suspicion and keep you off the radar of all the shadowy factions that would be drawn to you, if word of your abilities got out, what Cahill suspected you could do. I believe they intended to release you when you turned thirteen, when you would be old enough to understand, but not too old to learn magic. You would be entering adolescence, everything would be changing anyway, they would help you. But then they…”

“They were killed,” Lucy completes. “Just two years later. And – what? You didn’t tell me? You didn’t release me instead? You just raised me with Olivia and with you, in this house of witches, and let me think I wasn’t good enough?”

Her voice cracks in earnest, and Flynn reaches out to pull her protectively into his side, as her fingers close on his shirt. Denise and Michelle look at them, at him holding her with a literal bite-me expression on his face, and glance away, almost shame-faced. Then Denise says, “Lucy, we were… it’s not an excuse, we were wrong, but we were trying to protect you. You were struggling so much, we didn’t want to heap this additional terrible destiny onto you when you had just lost your parents, and we didn’t know what would happen if we took it off. Perhaps it could kill you, or change you permanently, or do something else unspeakable. We told ourselves we would do it, the next year. Then the next year became the year after that, and you were – if you had said you wanted to be a witch, if you had asked for it, we would have taken it off, I promise. We would never have deliberately kept you from it if we thought it was something you wanted. But you said over and over again that you didn’t want magic anyway, you wanted to be normal, you wanted to be a historian, you wanted to live in the human world. So we… well, we took you at your word, and we told ourselves perhaps it was better this way, and we…I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

Lucy looks at them, their ashen-faced, pained expressions, and doesn’t know what to say. It’s true that she did insist many times that she didn’t want to be a witch and she wanted to be away from all of this. But that was partly since she never felt like she had a chance of being one, and they never gave her a real choice, never explained that this was what was preventing her, that it existed and that it could be removed. She doesn’t think they did it in malice, would never have actually wanted to hurt her, and she can hear Gabriel in her head saying that he never saw himself as a father, until the moment he was, and yet he cannot forgive himself for his own blindness and culpability in Christian’s death. With the best of intentions, in nothing but love and indulgence – too much, too willing to excuse his beloved brother until it was too late – he lost Christian, and lives every day with the shattering consequences. So too do Denise and Michelle. Lucy wants to yell at them, but doesn’t know if it would do any good, or say anything they don’t already know. She doesn’t – she doesn’t.

“Oh,” she says at last, in a whisper. Perhaps they want her to absolve them, to say that it’s all right. She wants to, and she doesn’t want to, and she doesn’t think she could get her tongue around it. Her appetite has suddenly deserted her, and she pushes her plate away. “I see.”

“Lucy…” Michelle reaches for her other hand, but she snatches it back. “Lucy, sweetheart, if we can do something, if we can make it right – ”

“You could have taken the damn thing off her,” Flynn says. Lucy has rarely heard him sound so angry. He isn’t shouting, but it reverberates through every word like a thunderclap. “You could have told her about it. You could have done any number of things that would not lead to what has now happened to her, as a result of your insistence that you were keeping her from harm. And you still have the gall to think the de Clermonts could not be trusted with her either. We might be filthy vampires, but at least we’re not hypocrites.”
Denise winces, but does not deny it. The silence fills the kitchen, the night beats against the windows, nobody says a word. There are countless things Lucy wants to say, justified accusations she could level, about how they trusted Olivia to handle all this because of course they did, because it became easier for them – for all of them – to live this way. Lucy knows that they’re right, she did say it, she claimed that she was not a witch and did not want to be – were they expected to read her mind and know otherwise? She didn’t open up to them even when they tried to talk to her. One of the most painful parts of growing up is realizing how profoundly human and flawed and fallible your parents are, that they have made bad choices and hurt you even from a place of love, and that even if you want to forgive them, you can’t just whisk away the effects. She has seen that firsthand living among the de Clermonts, who are so broken that they can barely be in the same place, when their cumulative mistakes and miscalculations and grudges have calcified into a separation of years, of decades, of centuries. Lucy and Denise and Michelle don’t have forever to stew, don’t have the luxury of immortality in just getting to avoid each other and discover that that has somehow not fixed the problem. If nothing else, Flynn and his entire family are one hell of a cautionary tale.

“I don’t know,” Lucy says at last. “I don’t know that I can just forgive you for it right now. I know you wanted what was best for me, and so did Mom and Dad. But I – after all of this, I don’t – for this to somehow be the right thing to do, I don’t…”

“We are sorry,” Michelle says softly. “We are so sorry. Lucy, if you want to just – go upstairs and be away from us for a little while, we’d understand. Take your time.”

Lucy nods as if her neck has broken, can barely feel her feet, but gets to them anyway, as Flynn gets up as well with a look double-dog-daring Denise and Michelle to say anything. They can sense that they don’t have the moral high ground here, and so they don’t, as Flynn and Lucy make their way out of the kitchen and head up the dark stairs. Lucy walks down the hall to her old bedroom at the end, with the slanting roof under the gable, and Flynn has to duck once he has followed her in. It still has her things, her books and posters, her piles of notes and marked-up drafts from her PhD, some strange dream of her old life. She feels like she’s floating, as if she shares nothing but a name with whatever woman was living here last time. Flynn looks at her; it’s clear that he feels powerless to help, and hates it. Then he sits down next to her and says, “So do you… want to talk about it?”

Since Garcia Flynn de Clermont is utterly horrible about talking about things, this is a truly gallant offer for him to make, and Lucy offers him a watery smile. She doesn’t know that she does, but she remembers then that he is a father too. “Would you have…” She has to stop again. “Would you have done that to your daughter?”

She isn’t sure whether she means Iris, the long-ago human child who is nothing more than dust and a name on an old stone in a French church, or Jiya, the living vampire child, the real person she knows, she likes. Perhaps it doesn’t matter, and Flynn flinches a little, but doesn’t completely close off. Then he says, “It would be easy for me to say no. That of course I would not have. But I tried to protect my daughter once, and I ended up getting her killed. And I have not – for Jiya, I have not… I have not been remotely as good a parent to her as I should have been. I know myself well enough not to say that I would have known better. I would not have known better. I would have hurt them. And I did.”

Lucy looks up at him, with an ache in her throat and in her chest and in her entire soul, more than just her battered body, more than she can possibly say. She understands that in some sense, Flynn was shouting at Denise and Michelle that they should have done the right thing because he knows that he should have done the right thing, and didn’t. He’s not lecturing or chiding them from any imagined self-righteous superiority, but from someone who feels his own mistakes much too keenly, and wishes he could save them from that if he could, could stop that pain somehow – if nothing else, for Lucy’s sake. It twists her heart until she can’t stand it, and she moves over without another word,
Flynn lets out a half-stifled sigh, his hands coming up to cup her face and draw her closer, as they turn their heads and kiss again, her arms wrapping around his neck. God, it feels like the only time or place in the world, the only moment that matters, when he holds her. Her mouth turns hungrier, raw and breathless and needy, and he shifts his weight, lies her down on the bed, and their trembling fingers collide as Lucy undoes the buttons of her jeans and slides them down her hips. She clutches at his hair as he moves down between her legs, as his dark head bends in supplication, as she arches her back and presses herself into the delicate taste and touch of his tongue. For all that he insists he’s out of practice, she can’t tell.

Flynn is just as thorough the second time around as he was the first – more so, even, as if he can’t take the pain and the hurt and the confusion away, can’t do any of that, but for once, he can stop it from getting any worse, and give her another orgasm while he’s at it. He licks and muses at her, holding her hips firmly as he works, sucks at her clit until she is devoutly grateful that Denise and Michelle, at least, cannot hear what is happening two floors above them. When she finally comes in a quivering, boneless huddle, as the tension and cramp and pain drains out of her and she can only see white, he sits back on his heels with a pleased expression and wipes his mouth with his hand. Then he slides up next to her, curls around her, and murmurs, “Mmm?”

Lucy rolls over and nestles into his chest, almost frightened by the strength of what she feels, the need to be close to him, to complete their separate halves. If she is the white queen, is he the red king? Are they the two halves of the alchemical wedding, is it them who are the key to all this? Beneath the wolf and lion lies the ring. She physically has the wolf and lion branded on her now, and Maria just gave her a ring. It seems impossible, and yet it is increasingly the only thing that makes any sense.

She is feeling the overpowering urge to sleep coming on, from the travel and the jetlag and the emotions and the orgasm, but it has not escaped her that she has let Flynn take care of her twice without returning the favor. Not as if they’re keeping a running tally, but she wants to, and reaches for his belt. “Garcia,” she breathes. “Come on, let me…”

He shifts himself away from her, ever so slightly. “Not now.” He kisses her ear. “You need to sleep, moja ljubav. Hmm? I’ll be right here.”

Lucy is drowsy and dreamy and feels simultaneously heavy as lead and light as a feather, doesn’t know if she would stay awake but wants to try anyway, but she can sense that she would not get anywhere by insisting. She gets up, undresses properly, and changes into her nightclothes, and Flynn decorously vanishes into the bathroom to do likewise. He might be slightly too long at coming out, but she can’t be sure, and he looks the same as ever, as they turn back the covers on the double bed and crawl in together. It’s a bit of a tight fit, but Lucy does not mind. She reaches out to turn out the lamp, and lets herself be engulfed. As long as she holds onto him, holds on, she can do this. Maybe. Maybe.

(She loves. She loves.)

(It terrifies her.)
Once again, Lucy is awake very early the next morning. No matter the jetlag and the lingering travel hangover and the aches and pains and everything else that would seem to recommend staying in bed for the next few days, she suddenly can’t sleep any longer. It’s still dark, but she lifts Flynn’s arm off her waist where it has fallen, slides out of the warm nest of covers, and swings her feet over the side, hissing when they touch the freezing floorboards. She fumbles around to get dressed in the dimness, not wanting to turn on a light, though it probably wouldn’t wake Flynn anyway. Vampires sleep differently than humans, and he looks like the carved stone knight atop a sarcophagus in the cathedral, with no discernible breathing or movement or flicker of life. Even though she knows it’s just him, it unnerves her, and she leans over to kiss his forehead quickly. Then she puts on her shoes, shrugs on a sweater and a jacket, and makes her way down the creaky stairs as quietly as she can. Pushes the door open into the silent, misty trees that surround the house, and runs.

Lucy is not much of an athlete, but that doesn’t matter. She lowers her head and goes as fast as she can, ignoring the screaming in her stiff, abused muscles, vaguely aware that she doesn’t need to be a hero and tear a tendon way out in the woods when she hasn’t even brought her phone, but she doesn’t care. It’s the only thing that seems to help, feet pounding in the murk and moss, arms pumping, breath sawing in her chest, branches lashing at her face. She is well aware that the last time she went running by herself in the woods, trying to work off her sexual frustration at Sept-Tours, Emma swooped down from the sky and snatched her, but God, just let something try it right now, just let them try. Lucy feels like a pot about to boil over, desperate to unleash the full force of her magic on a deserving target, to destroy, to smite, to shatter. Let some other goddamn enemy descend from on high and have a go. Everyone else wants one. Everyone wants something from her.

At last, out of breath, she slows down, as the woods have turned pearl-grey in the advancing sunrise. The November air is chill enough to sting her cheeks and make her breath gust silver, and the stands of bare, leafless trees rise into the rose-pink mist like an ethereal fairy ring. Lucy knows where she is; she spent a lot of time going for stress-busting power walks in the last days of thesis revisions. There’s a cache of things not far from here, from the Revolution or the French and Indian War or some other eighteenth-century conflict, and Lucy has found various interesting old artifacts before. A canteen and a bit of a musket and a scrap of a requisition, a British sixpence from 1740 and pieces of Native American wampum and beadwork. It’s always been a pleasurable diversion for a historian, picking through the detritus of an earlier age, a different time. But she doesn’t know if it would be anymore. History was always a refuge, something she could make sense of, something that she was good at on her own terms, could understand. Now nothing does.

Lucy reaches the huge old tree that was felled by a lightning strike in the thunderstorm that one August, still carbonized black and smelling faintly of ozone, and sits down on one of the slain giant’s sprawled branches. But she can’t stay even there for long, and finds herself back on her feet, desperate for something to throw, until she picks up a good-sized rock and hurls it as hard as she can. It clatters away unsatisfyingly, so she points at it fiercely, and the next second, has to duck as stone shards spray like cluster shrapnel. The air seems charged as if in anticipation of another bolt from the blue, another spear of lightning to carve everything down, set it on fire and burn until there’s nothing left. Spellbound. Her parents heard Cahill’s poisonous, self-serving lie about her powers, and decided the best thing to do was… do as he said? They didn’t just tell her, even though she was a child? Explain anything? And her mother worked on Ashmole 782, apparently, and had some kind of precognition that Lucy would be able to get it. How long has Lucy been chained to this godforsaken manuscript? Is everything in her life either pushing her toward or pulling her away from it, depending on what everyone else thinks? Even Flynn – the man she loves, the man she wants, who feels like something that is really hers – met her as a result of it, and that was initially all he cared
about. Is it some remorseless, relentless hand of prophecy, grasping hold and twisting, *twisting*? Lucy never asked for this. Is she nothing more than a tool, a vessel, a magical pawn that has to be restrained for its own good? *Spellbound.* Yeah. Fuck everyone.

Lucy picks up another rock and throws it at the tree, feeling frustrated and foolish and childish, like she can’t even be angry about this without apologizing to someone for the inconvenience. Like if she was a real adult, she would compartmentalize and see the bigger picture and acknowledge that it was a necessary evil and her parents *never meant* to die and leave her like this. But Jesus. It’s left her so scarred for so many years, inadequate and adrift and even Denise and Michelle, who loved her, who raised her, didn’t just take the goddamn thing off. She’s been living blindfolded with both hands chained behind her back, and she thought it was her fault. Worse, that snaky little voice in the back of her head whispers that maybe it was. That she should have done something else. Done it better. Anything.

Lucy picks up rocks in both hands and hurls them wildly, almost blinded by her tears. She gulps a shaky sob and then another and then her surge of rage-fueled violence runs out. She staggers back to the tree and climbs into the refuge of the branches, wraps her arms around the cracked stump and leans her head against it, shaking. She said she wanted to know who she really was. She said she wanted to know the truth. Well, now she knows it. Great.

She rubs her hand over the back of her eyes, trying to control herself. She should probably get back to the house before Denise and Michelle and Flynn start worrying, especially given as she was literally just kidnapped the last time she wandered off. But some vengeful part of her wants to make Denise and Michelle worry, and she wishes she could just go back to being straightforwardly angry at Emma and Temple. Yet if Emma did in fact do her a sick favor, what does that mean? Not as if Lucy is ever in danger of sympathizing with or wanting to join the woman who tortured her, but since Emma took this off, and that was more than her own *parents* did for her, whether birth or foster – the witches have comprehensively betrayed her on every level, Anton and Gennady Sokolov are the only ones who seem all right, and –

“Lucy?”

She almost jumps out of her skin, falling out of the branches and nearly breaking her wrist where she catches it under her. Just what she needs, more injuries. But she avoids it, springs to her feet and brushes off the dead leaves, and catches sight of a half-dressed Flynn, who is clearly extremely anxious. He looks as if he woke up, found her gone, predictably panicked, and tracked her scent out here, bracing to discover another battle or abduction or something worse. At the sight of her face, he foregoes any other questions and flashes across the clearing in an instant. “Are you all right? You frightened me.”

“I just…” Lucy doesn’t want to explain herself, even to him, though she wraps her arms around his waist and is happy to let him hold her up. “I just needed to be alone.”

She expects Flynn to remonstrate with her, to remind her of the obvious and selfish dangers of running off by herself, that she could have been taken again, but he doesn’t. His arms tighten around her protectively, as if he understands a little too well what that feels like, and he doesn’t answer. Lucy buries her face in the wall of his chest, trying to control her breathing, as he cups the back of her head in one hand and traces light circles with his thumb behind her ear. Some part of her wants to pull him down right here in the cold bracken, something primal and ritual and ferocious, a pair of druids coupling in the shadow of a standing stone and sealing the oath by earth and water and sky. But she can tell that he isn’t comfortable with that, or doesn’t want it, or only feels that he can give it to her but cannot accept it in return. It’s still early, she reminds herself. They don’t need to rush.
At last, when she sounds a little steadier, Flynn gently tilts her head up to meet his eyes, as if checking if she wants to discuss whatever that was all about. They walk over to the tree and sit down again, staring out at the woods, starting to come to life with the morning creaks and croaks and whistles and chirps. Once again, their cold fingers link together, and Lucy tips her head onto his shoulder. Now that she's actually able to touch him, that it seems to be something they can do and that he's not going to suddenly wig out about again, she can't make herself stop, can't pull away or keep her hands off him. She is so starved for proper love and unconditional affection, for touch and care and comfort, and Flynn at least seems more than willing to lavish her with it. If the trade-off is that they don’t talk about it, fine. That always seems to lead them awry anyway.

“Thanks,” Lucy says at last, turning her head to kiss his shoulder. “I’m sorry I scared you.”

“Ah, it’s all right.” Flynn sighs, pulling his hand out of hers so he can drape his arm over her, and Lucy huddles into him like the lee of a cliff. She really does very much like the size of him. (And wouldn’t mind inspecting it elsewhere, if you know what she means.) “You’re… you’ve been through too much recently, and you should be allowed to get angry about it. Everyone else has ignored or disregarded you and seen only what you can do for them, and…” He trails off, with a look of deep guilt on his face. “Even me. Especially me.”

“Yeah.” Lucy doesn’t see any point in denying that. “But you… you’ve been the only person who realized that you were doing it, and you stopped, and you told me that I could stop it too. You were willing to give up something that you’ve been at for two hundred years, this one thing that you thought would fix your family, and you agreed to let it go, or at least accept the possibility of never knowing, never solving the riddle, if it would help me. And that… I feel like everyone else only wants me because of Ashmole 782, that that’s all they have ever wanted. So for you to say that you’d give that up…”

“I would,” Flynn promises, as if he doesn’t want her to be in any doubt on this point. “We could run away. Never think about any of this nonsense again. Vampires don’t do very well in long-term hot weather or bright sunlight, we might have trouble escaping to the Caribbean, but if you wanted…”

Lucy lifts her head off his shoulder to look at him, delighted and touched and slightly startled that he’s practically offered to elope with her, would be willing to acquire a permanent suntan if it meant doing what she wanted, making her happy. “You couldn’t leave your work in Oxford,” she says at last. “And Jiya, and your family, and – and Gabriel. If you would just… he loves you, Garcia. He loves you so much, he misses you, I know it’s so difficult because it’s been so long, but I wish you two could see past that somehow. I wanted to run away this morning too, that’s why I was out here, but I guess we’re not supposed to let each other do that. That we have to stand and face it, even when it completely sucks.”

Flynn laughs a little, painfully. He leans down and kisses her hair, cupping her arm in his hand. “I thought I was coming out here to talk you out of running away,” he says. “Not the other way around. But maybe it shouldn’t surprise me. You’re brave, moja ljubav. One of the bravest people I’ve ever met. Do you want to explode a few more rocks first?”

Caught by surprise, Lucy giggles as well. “No,” she says. “I think I’m all right for now. But I want you to teach me how to fight.”

He gapes at her. “What?”

“Teach me how to fight,” Lucy repeats. “If the odds of a creature war are getting higher, and we’ve been attacked multiple times and probably will be again, and you and Gabriel won’t always be around to defend me, then I should know how to do it myself. I can try to use my magic, but I still need practice, and… I just feel like it’s something I should know.”
“You’re not wrong,” Flynn allows, though he still looks somewhat skeptical of the idea that he, a soldier of several dozen lifetimes, a Knight of Lazarus, and a very strong and powerful immortal, would be able to instruct a petite academic in the art of hand-to-hand combat without accidentally squashing her. “I – well, I’ll have to think about it. Come back to the house and have some breakfast first, though. We might as well scandalize your godmothers some more. I don’t think Denise likes me very much.”

“She doesn’t get to say what’s good for me right now,” Lucy says defiantly. She gets to her feet and takes Flynn’s arm when he offers it. They walk out of the woods together, reach the house, and go inside, where Michelle is interrupted in the act of putting on her walking shoes and reaching for a large stick. Upon seeing that they are safe, she desists, though her eyes still flicker questioningly between them. Lucy hastens to assure her that they were just out for a little dawn stroll. Nothing else, it’s fine.

Michelle can clearly tell that it’s not fine, but she graciously declines to press, leading them into the warm, woodsy kitchen to serve up breakfast. She seems to be especially careful with Lucy, avoiding any loaded topics and pressing second helpings on her, as if they might not have fed her properly in Oxford and/or Sept-Tours. Flynn doesn’t eat, though he sits and watches her, and accepts a mug of black coffee when Michelle offers it. Finally Michelle says, “Lucy, how are… how are you feeling today?”

Lucy looks down at her plate and takes a bite of scrambled egg. “I don’t know,” she says. “Angry. I’m probably going to be angry for a while.”

“That’s valid.” Michelle’s career before she retired was in psychotherapy, and while Lucy doesn’t want her to pull the shrink act, it helps that she at least knows how to constructively listen. “Is there anything I can do to help you right now?”

Lucy tries to decide if she wants to allow Michelle to look at her back or not, or if the sight of the ugly brands, the mockery of the crude de Clermont seal, would put them back at square one in re: whether the vampires can be trusted to take care of her. She doesn’t feel like another argument right now, even if she still has plenty more things that she wants to get off her chest. Then she says, “You said yesterday that Mom was also working on Ashmole 782. How long did she do that? Why did she think I’d be able to get it? Has my entire life just been preparing me for some kind of – I don’t know, some magical MacGuffin moment where I got this stupid book and everyone finally laid off me? Why did nobody tell me?”

Her anger, too close to the surface, starts bubbling up again, and Michelle flinches, though she tries to avoid letting Lucy see. “Carol did do some work on Ashmole 782, yes,” she acknowledges. “She was never able to recall the full manuscript, but she came into possession of three leaves from it that, she believed, clearly referred to you. I’m not sure why she thought that, because we never saw them ourselves. But she felt it very strongly.”

Lucy and Flynn exchange a look. They obviously have a leaf of their own from the manuscript, with Lucy’s handwriting on it; it’s one of the things they brought from Sept-Tours. Lucy saw there were folios missing, cut out, the last time she had it in her physical possession at the Bodleian. It’s not out of the question that Carol could have found more of them somewhere, and been pointed even more explicitly to Lucy as a result, which is an unsettling thought – she wasn’t an adult back then, she was still a first-grader, how would her mother be sure beyond all doubt that it was her daughter? What did she see, what has been taken out of Ashmole 782? To hide it, or – or what? Just how deep does the rabbit hole run?

And yet, something still isn’t adding up. Lucy frowns. “I read Mom’s letters,” she says. “The ones
you and Denise gave me when I was sixteen. They didn’t mention Ashmole 782 or me having been spellbound or any of this. It was just a list of the things she expected me to have accomplished, in magic or in history or whatever else. Was she presuming that you would have told me? Or were there others, and you hid them from me too?"

Her cup bursts apart with a crack of china, sloshing hot coffee across the table, and Michelle jumps up to get a dishtowel. Lucy wonders if she’ll discover that they kept another secret, refused to give her the full sum of whatever paltry inheritance she’s been left with anyway, to cover up their cowardly decision to withhold the truth. “Did you read them first?” she demands. “Take out the ones that referred to all that, so I wouldn’t ask any awkward questions, I would be content to be comfortable? Maybe you and Denise magically censored those too, just to be sure?”

“Lucy – ” Michelle looks pained. “I promise, we gave you all the letters that Carol left with us. We didn’t keep any of them back. Maybe she wrote another set and they were lost, maybe she thought she would have more time, maybe she didn’t want to put anything in writing that could be stolen or spied upon or used against you. It would have been incredibly dangerous to leave it lying around, even with all the protection we could have given it. Carol could be difficult, but – ”

“If you say one more time that my mother was complicated, but she loved me, I’m going to scream.” Lucy jerks to her feet, knocking the table. Everything Michelle says, even if it makes sense, is just making her more angry, not less. “Why is that the only thing you can say about her? I know. I know she was complicated and difficult and domineering, I read those letters, and they made me feel worse about being her daughter, not proud. You know what? I was almost glad she was dead, and I didn’t have to deal with her, if I would have just disappointed her too. If that makes me a horrible person, fine. But I don’t want this hollow party line, whatever soothing soundbite you and Denise have concocted to make me feel better! I want the truth! I want to know what my mother was doing, what she thought I would do, and why! Maybe she was wrong. Maybe it was never me connected to Ashmole 782. Or maybe it was, and don’t you think I would have liked to know that beforehand? ”

She has never ranted and raved so much, feels it pouring out of her like vomit, as Michelle continues to look stricken and Flynn reaches out a hand for her. Then there’s a noise at the kitchen door, and they turn to see Denise in a bathrobe and slippers, having obviously heard the shouting and looking concerned. “Lucy?” she says. “Lucy, are you – ?”

Lucy can’t force “fine” between her teeth one more time, and sits back down with a snap instead. She can sense Denise and Michelle having another one of those silent spousal conversations over her head, and if they patronizingly tell her that she has a right to be upset, she will also scream. But Denise looks tired and old and very sad, doesn’t try to defend herself or them, and finally comes in and sits down at the breakfast table. “Lucy, I’m sorry,” she says. “I wish, I wish so much, that I had more answers for you. When we say your mother was difficult, that’s... it’s true. Carol and I were best friends for thirty years, but I’m still realizing how much she didn’t tell me either. She was headstrong and stubborn and used to doing things her way and for her reasons, and I know she certainly didn’t plan to die. That sounds foolish, I know. None of us plan to. Maybe Carol did know exactly how she wanted to raise you and what she wanted to tell you when, but we didn’t.”

Lucy eyes her. She wants to keep venting, though a tinge of shame creeps in over her anger. She can at least feel vindicated that her mother kept things from her best friend and the woman she trusted to raise her daughter in the event of her absence, but no more enlightened. “Why didn’t you at least mention Ashmole 782 to me?” she says, with somewhat less heat. “Or no, let me guess, then you’d have to tell me about being spellbound, and we’ve already established that you weren’t going to do that?”

“We didn’t want to force it on you.” Michelle looks up at her, eyes haunted. “We knew that your
reaction to reading your mother’s letters had been… ambivalent, at best, that you thought she had unfair expectations for you, and would have been disappointed in what you’d done. If you knew that there was this entire project that had been seemingly foreordained for you, even if just as a history research interest, and that your mother had expected you to do that… I don’t know that it would have been anything we could countenance forcing on you. If we didn’t tell you, we could raise the odds that when and if you discovered it, it would be by your own choice, and not because you’d been told to.”

Lucy pauses, then sits back down. Isn’t that what she wanted – people valuing her for herself, rather than her connection to Ashmole 782? Denise and Michelle might have been a little clumsy about it, and erred on the side of keeping too much information from her, but it sounds at least as if they wanted to give her a fair chance of growing up without this crushing weight on her, that even the supposed fate of the creature world, or whatever is at stake here, didn’t matter if she didn’t want it. She eats another determined few bites of breakfast, half-expecting to bite her own tongue off, as they all watch her in apprehension. Lucy doesn’t know what she feels right now, if they should have told her or if they were right in keeping it from her, but either way, she wishes they would have trusted her a little more. Is that what she is, how they see her: to be loved and protected, but not given any weight of responsibility, a china doll or an emotionally damaged orphan, needing to be shielded from any more trauma, nothing she couldn’t handle? She appreciates it, and she doesn’t, and she agrees with them, and she doesn’t, and she can’t sort any of it out, can’t make any sense. She feels like the contents of a crockery cabinet thrown violently and smashed onto the floor.

“Oh,” she says at last, because that’s still the only thing that comes to mind. She finishes the rest of her toast and eggs and bacon, pushes her plate back, and gets to her feet. “Garcia, come on. I said I wanted you to teach me how to fight.”

Both Denise and Michelle look slightly alarmed at this, but are once again aware that their opinions are not going to be welcome here. Thus they make no comment as Lucy goes upstairs, changes into workout clothes, brushes her teeth and puts her hair in a ponytail, pulling on her sneakers, leg warmers, and neoprene jacket. Then, with Flynn having likewise changed, but still looking somewhat skeptical, they make their way back to the woods.

The sun has risen by now, but the chill lingers among the trees, and Lucy does some jumping jacks and other calisthenics and stretches to get the blood flowing. Flynn watches her with a patient, slightly amused expression; he, of course, does not need to bother with this, but he waits until she’s ready, pink-cheeked and prepped for action. “Well,” he says. “Have you ever taken a self-defense class before?”

“I took a few sessions of Krav Maga in grad school.” Lucy can’t remember much of it, though she did accidentally break a classmate’s nose once. (His name was Chad and he kind of deserved it.) “There were some basic things, how to deter a rapist, hapkido pressure points, that sort of stuff, but I’m not sure how much of that will help against creatures.”

“It can’t hurt,” Flynn says briskly, moving into position across from her, getting her to make a fist, and correcting her grip. “Show me what you remember.”

They spend the next half-hour running through Lucy’s stock of half-recalled moves. They both know that she couldn’t stop a vampire moving at full speed, but she could at least slow them down, and would be able to fight a witch or daemon more directly hand-to-hand. Flynn holds up his palm to give her a target to hit, and Lucy realizes quickly that she can’t possibly hurt him and can feel confident going as hard as she can. She even gets him to rock back on his heels with a surprised whoof once, which feels good, and another, gets her thumb into his elbow, jams it until his arm bends, and leverages his momentum into a clumsy but effective judo-throw onto the leaves. He lands
on his back with a startled expression, Lucy starts into her ever-present urge to apologize, and he
shakes his head. “No,” he says. “That’s good.”

She flushes, abashed but pleased with herself, the idea that she could take down (even one operating
at twenty-five percent capacity, and more concerned about not hurting her) a very tall and very
strong immortal soldier with a millennia and a half of experience in just about every war the Western
world has fought in the years A.D. She has never really been told that she should do that, she should
keep doing it, and while it would otherwise seem like a very bad sign for a fledgling relationship, she
can’t wait to get her boyfriend to his feet so she can punch him again. Flynn coaches her through a
few useful places to hit a vampire that don’t take much main force (apparently there’s some kind of
inborn reflex to submit if you get them really good in the jugular, since that’s where they’re most
likely to be bitten) and they go through the basic array of kicks, punches, pinches, strikes, pokes, and
grabs until Lucy can feel relatively confident of getting away from any normally-powered individual.
This does require certain sacrifices on Flynn’s part, and after several hours of being used as a crash
test dummy, even he needs a breather. They sit side by side on the dirt, mussed and scratched and
sore, and he glances at her. “Does it help?”

Lucy knows that he’s referring to the frustration she’s trying to work out, that she’s hitting him since
she knows he can take it and she can’t get to anything else, and starts to answer, then stops. Her back
is burning again, but she doesn’t want to tell him, since then he might insist that they stop, and
painful as it is, it is in fact at least somewhat cathartic. She stretches gingerly, feeling the half-pleasant
ache of intense exertion settling into her muscles; she will be unbelievably sore tomorrow, unless she
avails herself of Michelle’s healing magic. Which would be the sensible thing to do, the easy and
comfortable way, but if she has spent so long with them trying to make things easy for her, she
almost wants it to hurt instead. That way, at least she knows she’s feeling it. Knows that it’s real.

“I don’t know,” she says, looking down at her hands. “Before today, I wouldn’t have described
myself as a vengeful person. I don’t even – it’s not what I want on them, not really. They were trying
their best. But I still – I just – I still want to punish them, whether or not they objectively deserve it.
Does that make me completely horrible?”

“I’m the last person who would say that.” Flynn’s voice is very quiet. “The very last. I – I said back
at Sept-Tours that I’ve done terrible and violent things, spent centuries murdering everyone
associated with the death of my family. Even after that, just because it felt as if there was no other
way left to live. I made things very hard for the family I did have, my father and mother and brother,
the ones who had chosen me and saved me and wanted me with them, for some reason I still
sometimes cannot comprehend. And after Christian – ”

He stops, as Lucy thinks poignantly back to what Gabriel told her at Sept-Tours, about how that was
the moment where Flynn recovered his lost humanity, in wanting to save an innocent, dying child
when he had not been able to save his own. There’s a long, echoing pause. Then Flynn says, even
more quietly, “I know it was my fault. That I was the one who brought Matej there, and still tried to
choose him even when it was far too late. That I betrayed everyone else who loved and depended on
me, and…”

He blows out a breath, and shakes his head. “I don’t want to talk about my shit,” he says frankly.
“We were talking about you. But if I could have killed enough people to bring Christian back, I
would. For me, and for our family, and for Gabriel, but I already knew it couldn’t. So I didn’t lash
out. I just… I ran. I’m not sure that was any better.”

“Less murder, at least,” Lucy says wryly, but with a squeeze of his arm to make it clear she isn’t
about to give him any Sunday school-teacher lectures. Given the number of witches that Maria is
rumored to have killed in retaliation for Asher’s death, and how long Gabriel and Garcia have been
estranged, it’s clear that the inclination to revenge runs deep in the de Clermonts, and that they know it won’t ultimately repair anything, it feels so good while you’re doing it. Maybe it isn’t noble and self-sacrificing, but Lucy has tried her whole life to be a good person, to make everyone else comfortable and happy, and maybe she just wants to be less than that, for once. She doesn’t know. She still feels like everything’s a lie.

They sit there for a few moments longer, in the weak sunlight. Then Lucy says, “Do you think I really wrote that Ashmole fragment? I don’t see how it’s possible, but now that we know my magic works, that I have powers we don’t know about at all…”

“I don’t know,” Flynn says. “We both agreed it was your handwriting somehow, and it was a cipher that only you or very few other people would know, but there could, I suppose, be some sort of trick or fake or doppelganger, someone who magically assumed your identity in hopes of acquiring whatever power you have. It still doesn’t have to be you, Lucy. Whatever your mother found, whatever she thought she knew, it doesn’t have to define you.”

Lucy looks at him with deep gratitude, and he does that head-duck thing of his, deflecting even the smallest acknowledgment that he’s done something or said something that matters to her. Then he seems to come to himself again, clapping his hands. “So,” he says briskly, as if doing them both a favor by steering them out of these choppy emotional waters. “We did some good work on regular fighting, but we know that whoever’s coming after you is likely to be using magic of some kind. We need to figure out how to use yours as a weapon.”

This is true, but it still startles and somewhat unsettles Lucy. She is only on something like day three of having full access to it, and playing around with lighting candles and picking up things without touching them is several orders of magnitude different from using it as a targeted, offensive, dangerous attack. Not to mention, it occurs to her that trying to practice it with Flynn could actually hurt him in a way that was not possible with garden-variety kicks and punches. “Are you sure this is a good idea?”

“Yes,” Flynn says decisively, getting up and offering her a hand to her feet. “Magic is often channeled through emotion or temperament, and we’ve seen that yours comes up in an organic way when you’re threatened, but we need to make it cleaner, more controlled, something that you can proactively get to even before your life is in danger. It took Emma torturing you repeatedly before you could get to the witch-water. Does it feel different now?”

“I’m obviously not being tortured,” Lucy points out. “And I suppose, yes, since the spellbinding is off, but I’m still not sure what to do with that.”

“Could we get some kind of laboratory-conditions threat?” Flynn frowns in thought. “Trick you into thinking that there’s enough danger to activate your magic, and see how that feels?”

“Maybe, but…” Lucy’s about to say that she’s not sure how they can do that, until something occurs to her. She glances up at him. “Chase me.”


“You just said we needed some kind of threat,” Lucy points out. “And I’m pretty sure being chased by a vampire would do something, even instinctively, because I’m a witch and something in my DNA will treat you as a danger either way. If it is witch-water that comes up, you can’t drown, can you?”

“No,” Flynn says, “but I don’t – Lucy, are you sure you could – ”
“Look.” Lucy grabs hold of his forearms, looks up into his face. “You just spent several hours letting
me do everything I could think of to you. I trust you, I know you’re not going to really, actually hurt
me. Now you have to trust that I can take it, that this will work. That’s – that’s what Denise and
Michelle didn’t do, they never thought I was strong enough to know everything or handle the stress.
I am not fragile. Let me prove it.”

“Yes, but – ” Flynn looks as if that’s not quite what he meant. “Lucy, I know you’re tough, I know
you’re brave, but if I went after you with full speed and strength – I could do something I can’t take
back, if you didn’t react in time. We can work up to it, we can – ”

“No,” Lucy says stubbornly. “Now.”

Flynn stares at her in apparent expectation that she will change her mind, but when she folds her
arms, sets her jaw, and stares back with even more obstinacy, he mutters something that sounds
suspiciously like a curse under his breath, shakes his head, and steps away. He rubs a hand over his
face, looks as if he is doing this vastly against his better judgment, and backs up a few paces. “I’ll
give you a minute’s head start,” he says. “From… now. Go.”

Lucy lowers her head, turns around, and starts to run, sprinting through the tangled underbrush and
jumping over fallen logs. She quickly notes the way she can feel some muted awareness of the
power of the sleeping forest, even with the sap drawn down for winter and the branches bare and
leafless. It seems for a moment as if she’s totally alone out here, as if she could run across the entire
Adirondacks and fly off into the sky. Then – it’s not even hearing a noise, it’s not that, something
else on the very edge of hearing, and she knows for a fact that she is not. That she is being stalked,
hunted, and it is coming fast.

Lucy puts on another burst of speed, though there is no way she can outrun a vampire, and sees a
flash above, as if he is in the treetops, racing ahead to cut off her escape like a one-man pack of wild
dogs. She throws herself out of the way, rolling in the leaf mold, as something hits the ground next to
her like a meteor, can’t even make out any identifying human shape or sense, nothing more than a
large dark blur. Her magic strains like a bucking bronco in the rodeo gate, she isn’t sure if she should
let it go at full blast but can’t hold it back, and the clearing booms as if a bomb has hit. There’s a
blindingly bright flash, another broken tree reeking of ozone, and she uses the split-second of
distraction to keep running. It’s difficult to tell if this is fake or not, like an exercise in army boot
camp using live ammunition – the circumstances are controlled, but the danger is real. He’s still
coming.

All at once, the ground falls out from under her, she loses her footing on a crumbling bluff, and
plunges several yards off a rock outcropping to the pile of leaves at the bottom. She’s lucky to hit
them, since it winds instead of wounds her, but she can’t afford to lose a second. Flynn springs down
after her with impossible lightness, landing on his feet like a big cat, and she’s already tearing through
the trees, gulping vainly for breath. She flings out her hands, and she can feel the woods coming
alive, responding to her presence. *Witch-woods.* This place is redolent, ancient, pregnant with very
old magic. Maybe that’s why Denise and Michelle bought a house here; the current Victorian version
has been rebuilt on a much older colonial-era one, and this must be an extremely potent place for
doing spells, known for hundreds of years. The trees are waking up, and they are at her service. The
queen commands the wood and the wind and the water. All she has to do is ask.

Lucy whirls around, raises both hands hard as if lifting something heavy, and the coiling roots punch
through the cold earth like the arms of the kraken. They slash and hiss, snatching blindly at the
interloper, the intruder who dares to breach the sanctuary of the kingdom and the coven. The
branches clack and rattle curses in the tongue of the wild, the bushes burst from the earth and throw
out coils of gorse, and while the sky was previously clear, a shadow falls over the sun and the next
instant, they’re slashed in a tempest of freezing rain. But it doesn’t touch Lucy, it doesn’t soak her, floats away from her like beads of mercury, until she stands at the heart of the storm but does not break or bend, stands there and lets it rage, all the grief, all the confusion, all the betrayal and the inadequacy and the fear, Lucy who was not enough, Lucy who could not be trusted, poor fragile little orphan Lucy, who had to be kept in the dark rather than risk her snapping like a twig. God, she could devour the world.

She doesn’t know how long she lets it go on, how she doesn’t care if Denise and Michelle’s neighbors are taken aback by a sudden and localized hurricane, if she is breaking and snapping and destroying the countryside for miles around. But something, some awareness dimly penetrates her brain that it’s enough, the threat is gone, she’s safe now, she can stop. It feels like ripping off her own skin to pull back, to halt the lash and howl of the storm. The last burst of rain does fall on her, soaking her to the skin, and the wind cuts her to the bone. Then it’s enough, it’s over, the tumult and the roaring chaos is gone, and there’s nothing but silence in the clearing, trees flattened as if a giant has stepped on them to every side, heaped in stacks of broken sticks, a dam burst in the face of the flood. There is no sound anywhere, except for her own harsh breathing. Suddenly she’s terrified. “Garcia? Garcia!”

Lucy looks around wildly, can’t see him, can’t see anything moving, and it clenches at her insides like an icy fist, until she can’t think of anything but the fact that she may actually have killed him. She scrambles through the wrack and ruin, the flotsam and jetsam, until she finally spots Flynn, pinned beneath a fallen branch. Panicking, she throws a burst of magic at it, which picks it up and flings it like a toy, and throws herself to her knees next to him. “Garcia. Garcia, are you – I’m so sorry, I – Garcia, are you hurt, I – ”

Flynn is completely winded, soaked in mud and rain, bleeding from a deep scratch on his cheek that is closing even as she looks at it, and clearly in no shape to attempt getting to his feet for several minutes, but he gives her a smile that is so dazzlingly proud that Lucy feels it break through like the sun from the clouds, like all and everything. She sinks even further down as if all the strength has drained out of her, lifts his head into her lap, and pets worriedly at him, in search of other injuries. “I am so sorry. Oh my god.”

“No,” Flynn manages, coughs, and grimaces. “No, you are not, you shouldn’t be. I’m not sure I can handle any more training for the day, but that was – Lucy, I’ve never seen anything like that, from anyone. What did you do?”

“I’m not sure.” Lucy can still feel it, even as it is receding from her like the tide rushing back to sea. “I just… drew on the woods somehow, and they defended me. I guess it worked, it treated you as a threat, so – we have to hope that I get attacked in a forest somewhere?”

“It could adapt to other places.” Flynn is still recovering, but his mind is clearly whirring. “I wasn’t cutting you slack, as you ordered. That was a genuine counterattack, and it took down someone at least as powerful as me. How do you feel?”

“Strange.” Good, Lucy thinks, and also damp, and cold, and rather shell-shocked, and if she has just come down from a too-powerful acid trip, dizzy and reeling. “How about you?”

Flynn chuckles, still breathless. “About how I look.”

“Mmm.” Lucy cuddles his head in the crook of her elbow, and presses her lips to his forehead and to the cut on his cheek, as it vanishes at the touch of her kiss. She is still in disbelief that they could both go full power at each other, him as a vampire and her as a witch, meet halfway, knock each other for six, but not break, not go too far. There is clearly some sort of soul trust, some innate knowledge of the other’s limit, and she has never felt remotely like this with anyone. It’s buzzing and brilliant and,
to be frank, very arousing. It might be unfair to keep tormenting the poor man after what she’s already done to him, but she doesn’t care. She lowers her mouth to his neck and, since she keeps wanting him to and he just will not do it, bites him. Not hard, not enough to break the skin, and she obviously is not a vampire anyway, but she wants to see what he’ll do.

The answer to that is that it makes Flynn jerk, arch his back, and utter a very strange noise indeed, his eyes turning jet-black and his fangs baring in almost instinctive response. “Lucy,” he says, sounding strangled for a distinctly different reason. “Lucy, are you –”

“Shhh.” Lucy runs her fingers over his lips, and he shuts up like a steel trap. God, it is intoxicating, this level of power and freedom and control. She lets go of him, shifting her position so she can slide on top and straddle him, taking hold of his wrists and pushing them above his head. She leans down, following his mouth with hers, as he utters half a growl and tries to catch her, but she won’t quite let him. If he wanted to, of course he could break free or pull loose or flip her over or do anything else he pleased. He has supernatural strength and is twice her size even without it, but she can feel the awareness in both of them that he will not do a thing while she holds him down, as long as she wants him there. It practically makes her dizzy, and she finally, slowly lowers her mouth onto his. Breathes again, “Shhh.”

Flynn has no intention of being shushed. He kisses her like a hurricane itself, pulling her lower lip between his teeth and stinging it with his fangs, as if to pay her back gently for the bite from earlier. She lets go of his wrists, giving him permission, and he wraps both arms around her back, as they roll over and over in the leaves and kiss with increasing wildness. He muses at cheek and jaw and the vulnerable hollow of her throat, the point of his teeth against the hammering pulse, could break the skin with a particularly forceful jerk. It walks the line deliriously between control and surrender, between kiss and bite, between flesh and blood. He still doesn’t bite without her say-so. He is utterly at her will.

“Come on,” Lucy whispers shakily, hands in his hair, her body jerking up against his. She means it in more than one way, wants it, him, everything. Maybe somewhere else than in the mud and leaves and broken branches of the witch-woods, but then, she almost doesn’t care. This is her power, her apotheosis, her becoming, and she wants it done in full. “Come on, I want you to.”

Flynn stares down at her like a man in a dream, eyes glazed, lips parted, hand cupping her face and thumb stroking her cheek. He has already had all the necessary proof that she can take whatever he throws at her in the realm of fighting, but this is still different. He doesn’t seem willing to entirely believe it. Then, as if to say that she did ask and he is powerless to refuse her completely, he lowers his head very slowly to the place where her pulse pounds in her throat. Pierces her very lightly with the tip of each fang, just enough to draw a bead of blood but not fully clamping on, and presses his mouth in a supplicant’s kiss.

Lucy whines, shuddering, half-tempted to just crush his head down the rest of the way, but she must play her part in the delicate, careful dance the same as him. He is taking his time with her, and she knows that this is not easy for him. Cannot rush them past some invisible barrier, cannot make him feel as if they have gone too far and too fast, and she wraps her arms around his neck instead. It is an immensely pleasurable sensation, to be fed on, and she imagines it would only be stronger if he had gone all the way. The brief sharp pain of penetration, and then a relaxing, dreamy feeling of total euphoria, probably a holdover from the days when vampires had to forcibly subdue their unsuspecting prey – make them dizzied and drugged and less inclined to fight back, totally in thrall and helpless to resist their draining. But Flynn is clearly making sure that she feels anything but helpless, takes little pauses to signify that she can push him off whenever she decides that he’s had enough, and licks lightly at the punctures in between taking a few more drops. Lucy whines again. Jesus.
The least she can do is allow Flynn a proper feed to help him recover from the gauntlet she just put him through, and besides, she’s in no hurry to cut it short either. She is so wet that she can feel it slickly between her legs when she moves, and she recalls that vampires can see or experience people’s thoughts or memories when they feed on them. She sees no reason to try to conceal what she is imagining right now, could almost get off on this alone, and can feel Flynn increasingly straining at his jeans. He feels most satisfyingly sizeable, though she has not had the chance to make an up-close inspection, and while it may be shallow of her, Lucy Preston can certainly appreciate a well-endowed man. They continue to move, rutting and grinding on each other through their clothes, her breath coming faster and faster, in shallower, gulping keens, until she hits the peak, her legs twist and shake, and she is quite sure that she has just ruined her underwear. Not that it matters, since their clothes are overall filthy already. They lie there entangled, his head on her shoulder, a few droplets of blood still running from the shallow punctures in the hollow of her throat. Then he turns his head and licks them until they close.

It takes them several minutes to get to their feet, since they are both battered, jelly-legged, flushed, and totally done for in any number of ways. They lean on each other like a pair of village drunks staggering back from the tavern, giggling helplessly, wading through the epicenter of the witch-storm until they reach clearer ground. Lucy has rather spectacularly wrecked the landscaping for a good square mile, and she hopes that she didn’t do too much property damage. They do pass a campervan with a branch punched through the window, Lucy wonders if you can put “accidental witch explosion” down on your insurance claim form, and scurries guiltily past. By the time they make it back to the house, they are out of the immediate blast radius and things look as if they’ve been blown in a high wind, but aren’t actively smashed. Denise and Michelle can obviously sense that powerful and destructive magic has just been done, though, and they are waiting anxiously on the porch as Lucy and Flynn come nearer. “Are you – ” Denise isn’t sure who might have come out on the worse end of that. “Is everything. . .?”

“Yeah,” Lucy says, though she knows they both look as if they’ve been dragged by the heels through a tornado. “We were just doing some fight practice.”

Her godmothers goggle at her, but since nobody is dead, decide not to ask too many questions. Lucy and Flynn knock off as much of the mud as they can, then head inside and up the stairs, twigs and leaves still stuck in their hair and on their clothes so that they look like a pair of dryads come to life. Lucy coughs. “Maybe we should take a bath.”

Flynn glances sidelong at her, as if to check whether she meant that as an activity for two, or one at a time. Unfortunately, it’s probably the latter by default, as the tub isn’t big enough to fit two people (especially when one of those is Flynn). So they both shower and scrub off (individually, alas), which takes quite a while, and it’s dusk by the time they emerge, pink-faced and somewhat cleaner. Denise and Michelle are still treading carefully around Lucy, as if she could yet again go off with a bang, but some of her immediate desire to lash out has been expunged, and they meet almost civilly in the dining room for late tea. Flynn and Denise are being conspicuously polite, though it’s clear they don’t yet trust each other, and when Michelle asks what they were doing all day, Flynn hastens to assure her that Lucy was the one beating him up. This helps somewhat, though Lucy doesn’t think they need the details.

“So,” Flynn says, when they’ve finished. “If Lucy’s mother had material on Ashmole 782 – papers, notes, research files, anything – would she have passed it onto you? Do you know where Carol’s things were kept? Or do you have any suspicion as to who might have killed her and Henry, if it wasn’t who you always believed?”

Denise and Michelle exchange a look. Then Denise says, “We did receive Carol’s estate, since Lucy was her legal heir, but we went through her possessions and her books and we didn’t find anything
like that. As I said, I don’t think she wanted it anywhere where someone could have discovered it who wasn’t supposed to. She talked about it, but I’m not sure if she ever wrote anything down. As for who could have killed her and Henry. . .”

She trails off, as if not sure she wants to say this aloud, especially in front of Lucy. Then she says, “It always did strike me as rather odd that Benjamin Cahill knew so quickly what had happened to them – almost before anyone had called me and Michelle. That he was dropping by and asking if there was anything that he could do. He was especially interested in supporting Lucy, thought it would be terrible that she would be without her mother. I believe he even suggested that he could adopt her, if we didn’t want to be burdened with taking in an extra child. That was how he put it, as if it was clearly a great favor. Carol had already changed her will to make clear that Michelle and I were Lucy’s legal guardians, he wouldn’t have gotten away with it, but. . .”

“What?” Lucy wishes she could say she was surprised, but it hits her stomach with a cold fist anyway. “You think – you think Cahill might have killed my parents to get to me?”

Her voice shakes, Flynn silently takes her hand again, and she has to suck down several deliberate deep breaths, to avoid jumping to her feet right now, running out, flying back to England or Venice or whatever miserable shithole Cahill has slithered down, and tearing him into a thousand slimy pieces. Whatever she was able to do today, she’ll do a hundredfold, and her blood bangs behind her eyes with the need for it. “So you – you didn’t think he – ”

“We knew he was obsessed with Carol, we weren’t going to let you go to him either way.” Denise rubs her eyes. “But we didn’t connect it at the time to a thought that he might actually be responsible for their deaths. He made several more attempts to convince us otherwise, but we weren’t having it, told him that we’d get a restraining order if he kept contacting us. He finally gave it up, or so we thought, but. . .”

Lucy doesn’t answer. No matter their failings at revealing important information to her, she knows that she is vastly fortunate to have ended up with Denise and Michelle, rather than whatever house of horrors might have awaited her with Cahill. She doesn’t even want to consider it, frankly, and a constrained shudder runs through her. No wonder they were so alarmed to hear his name again. Cahill must have known or guessed about Carol’s connection to Ashmole 782, her belief that her daughter would be able to properly access it. He’s been lying in wait for Lucy’s entire life, like a snake in the grass, and now –

“We don’t have proof,” Michelle cautions, at the look on Lucy’s face. She can only guess what it is, apart from murderous. “But as suspects go, he’s. . . near the top.”

Flynn mutters something under his breath that if he had only known this before, he would have destroyed Cahill into a smoking crater back at the Bodleian. None of them know what to say for a long moment. Then Lucy gets to her feet. “I think I’m going to go upstairs.”

She can feel their eyes on her as she leaves the kitchen, blunders up the stairs in enough inattention to bark her shins, wants only to get to the sanctuary of her room and a place she can break down in private. No matter her complicated emotions about her parents, about her mother in particular, the idea that they might have died to protect her, or at least been slaughtered for getting in the way, makes her feel sick. It makes a sordid sense, this way, that Denise and Michelle didn’t tell her. If she puts everyone in danger just by being herself, and if she knew that, she would never have gone anywhere or done anything or trusted anyone. Whether or not she wants to be, she has been shackled to the possibility and the danger of this godforsaken fucking manuscript since she was a child. If she ever gets her hands on it again, she’s going to burn it to ashes. It seems like the best solution.

Lucy reaches her room, shuts the door, and barely makes it to the bed before she collapses, burying
her face in the pillow and shaking with silent sobs. She cries until she is utterly drained and wrung out and dry as dust, all the tears she has never shed, the counterpart to the rage and the destruction and the anger, the grief and the loneliness she always told herself she shouldn’t feel, not when she still had a loving family, not when she was lucky, so lucky. She lies there, feeling dead herself, not wanting to get up or face this or try again, when there’s a tentative rap on the door. A voice says softly, “Lucy, can I come in?”

Lucy lifts her sticky, ugly, tear-stained face out of the soaked pillows enough to murmur an indistinct assent, and a crack of light falls over the floor from the hallway as Flynn steps inside. He shuts it again, crosses to the bed, and sits down on the edge, hands dangling between his knees, as if he will wait to hear whether she would like him to touch her or just to sit there and be silently comforting. Lucy doesn’t know how he can be like this, how he can be so utterly crap at emotions or human interaction and then reveal these unspeakable depths of gentleness and consideration and care. He is such a paradox and an enigma, this beautiful mess of hers, and yet, he makes the most sense of all, of anyone. She starts to apologize for looking like shit, remembers that he probably doesn’t want her to do that and she’s trying to break the habit, and just crawls into his arms instead.

Flynn holds her without saying anything, humming low and deep in his chest, so that she can almost feel it rumbling like a far-off avalanche. She nestles her head against his heart, though it doesn’t beat in the same way as a human’s, and thinks briefly about asking if they could continue what they were doing in the woods earlier. But he’s going to walk on eggshells around her, especially since she is clearly upset and in a bad emotional place, and she likewise doesn’t want their first time to be on the back of a breakdown about her parents. Wants to choose it freely and joyfully and (how vainly) not when she looks terrible. He just sits there patiently, hand lightly on her back and making careful circles so as not to aggravate the brands, and finally she sniffs and wipes her nose with her wrist. “I’m okay now.”

“Thanks.” Lucy laughs shakily, since she is in no mood to turn down these sort of homicidal declarations of devotions. She looks at him again, deciding that while it may make sense to continue to take it slowly, she really does want to keep exploring this strange and sweet and tender thing between them. “Can I – can I try something?”

“Would it make you feel better?”

“Yes.” She can sense that he’s asking because if he can tell himself that it’s for her sake, for her comfort, then he can justify accepting it, when he could not do it merely for himself. That hurts her, but she leans up to peck at his lips. “Take off your shirt and lie down.”

Flynn pauses, then does as ordered, shucking off his shirt and settling down on her bed, as she climbs on top of him again and commences a careful, step-by-step exploration of all the scars she can find with her mouth. He sighs, draping his arm over her back, as she presses kisses into the faded silvery slash under his ribs, the smaller knots of raw tissue elsewhere, the mark that looks distinctly like a savage bite in his chest, over his heart. She doesn’t want to make him recount how he got each of these, just wants to silently return a fraction of the adoration he has given to her. It feels steadier, this way. For both of them.

As she works, she begins to notice that the white light from the other night is beginning to well up again, growing stronger and stronger the more she kisses Flynn, and it is matched by a faint reddish
glow that seems to emanate from him, like a distant hearthfire. Lucy can hear a rushing sound, though the windows are shut and there’s nowhere it might obviously be coming from. Maybe it’s another storm, maybe she is conjuring something even greater and more terrible, but it doesn’t feel like that. She isn’t in control of this, but she isn’t afraid of it, either. It seems... right.

She kisses her way down Flynn’s chest, the rough-hewn muscle and the taut line of his stomach, and glances up at him once she reaches the button of his jeans. She toys at them, is in no doubt that he definitely wants her very much, but it’s the question of whether he will let himself. “Can I...?” she whispers. “Please?”

Once more, she can see him struggling with it, his impulse to shut it down by noting that she’s not in control of herself, she might regret it later, she’s too emotional – anything else. But if nothing else, they have had to trust each other today, to believe that the other knows what they want and what they are capable of doing, and after a pause, his head bobs in half a nod. He lies almost preternaturally still, watching her with hooded eyes, as she undoes the button and the zipper, shucks the jeans and boxers down his lean hips, and takes him in her hand, stiff and silky and quivering against her fingers. (He is, she is pleased to see, at least as large as it felt like earlier.) She strokes him lightly, circling the tip with her thumb, then lowers her head and takes him into her mouth.

Flynn utters a small sound as if he’s afraid of sudden heart failure (well, he is an old man, you never know). He grips hold of the sheets very hard, careful not to thrust up too sharply into the back of her throat, letting her set the pace and deciding how deep she wants to take him. Lucy licks a stripe up the shaft, swirls her tongue again, and sucks him thoroughly, lips moving up and down as his eyes roll back in his head. He makes a clawing motion as if to grab her hair, drops his hand, and exerts a truly staggering amount of self-control not to move too fast or break her rhythm. It is clear that he’s still not entirely sure he should be letting her do this, but that is a reflection on him and not on her. He would very clearly do anything she ever wanted, if it would help, if it would make her happy, and God. She loves him until there is nothing else. She loves him until it burns.

All the while, the white glow around her and the red glow around him have been getting stronger, and they start to overlap and intermingle, like two sets of flames catching each other and rising into the pillar of fire to lead the Israelites to the Promised Land. Lucy is still intent on her work, but she is aware of it illuminating the dark room until neither of them can ignore it any more. As Flynn is losing it entirely, he is shaking so hard that she has to wonder how long he has been this tightly wound and if it has been literal centuries since his last orgasm, she wipes her mouth and sits up. She stares at the light growing stronger and stronger, can hear it happening, whatever it is – and then, all at once. Both of them do. It has to be.

The alchemical wedding.
Absence and Desire

Long after the eerie glow has faded and Lucy has fallen asleep, finally succumbing to the exhaustion, Flynn sits up next to her and stares out into the darkness. Whatever just happened was undeniably powerful – the room remains transformed, things look different, as if they have stepped into an enchantment – but it has not yet done so in full. They activated some of it, but did not see it through to completion (in more ways than one). Dancing around the edges, touching the flames, but the heart of it remains locked away. They knew that Lucy was the white queen, but does this make him the other half of that cryptic prophecy, or whatever it is? If so, the sexual mystery and secret magic of the alchemical wedding must have started only when Lucy took the initiative, did it to him, rather than being the passive recipient of his attentions. This all turns on her, her power, her desire. That has never been in question. But if something else awaits at their full union, if she yet again is burdened with the knowledge that she has to do it, how does that ever allow her to choose it freely?

Troubled, Flynn glances down at the sleeping witch. He can hardly stand it, what it feels like to be with her, to touch her, to taste her, to trust her and have her return it in kind to him. These past few days feel like something out of a delirious dream, even with their attendant physical pain and family difficulties and lurking threat of all-out war. He is not at all sure that he will get to keep anything this good and sweet and beautiful, can’t hand over all the pieces of his broken heart not from the fear that Lucy will break them further, but that something else will. This is, objectively speaking, the worst moment they could have chosen to start something (not that there was ever likely to be a good time). Maybe if he was stronger, if he did the right thing, he would have continued to hold it off. But for now, it’s making Lucy happy (and god, him too, him too, which is what worries him so much) and he doesn’t have the heart to take that comfort from her.

At last, he slides down next to her, as she sighs in her sleep and instinctively snuggles toward him. Flynn puts an arm around her and tucks her into his chest, dropping a kiss on her tangled hair. He isn’t sure whether he should tell her what he concluded or not. He’s well aware that Denise and Michelle Christopher’s failure to do so on multiple important points has led to the current strained state of affairs, and he does not want to repeat that. Lucy deserves the truth. But if she knows that they appear to be the alchemical wedding – though she is likely to have figured it out, she is obviously very clever – and that some sort of necessary and transformational magic could result from their union, what does she do with that? Is she going to feel obliged to do it, with him? He doesn’t want that for her. And if she chose not to do it, they could never be fully together. Which may be for the best, and yet.

Flynn reminds himself that there are other kinds of love, of the soul and the heart and the mind, which do not rely on physical consummation, are no less valid, and indeed are the sort that he, after centuries of solitude and celibacy, might be more comfortable with. It almost seems hypocritical for him to complain about the possibility of a sexless relationship, and it does not make any difference to him either way. He will be with Lucy as long as she would like it, no matter what form that takes, and if they are only allowed to please each other in this fashion – well, they will get used to it after a while. But he wants Lucy to have that choice. She should not be prohibited from properly enjoying herself however she likes, just to avoid some dusty old patriarchal bullshit about marriage and prophecy and possession and whatever else might happen. Weren’t there other ways to do this? Or is that the point?

If she wanted it, Flynn would be willing to marry her tomorrow – a strange and perhaps premature thought, since they have not actually known each other for very long, but he knew how he felt with Lorena and Matej almost that soon after meeting them. (Of course, it then took him ages to get anywhere, but still.) But no matter what the prophecy thinks, marriage is not the only acceptable
format for their relationship, and it could be more of a metaphorical or figurative sense anyway, referring to their compatibility and the power embedded in them both, brought to fullest form now that they have found each other. Flynn is old-fashioned enough that he would prefer there to be some sort of formal recognizance for a long-term partner, a lifetime lover, but that is definitely far ahead of their present situation. They could be dead by next week, after all. It’s entirely possible.

He closes his eyes, finally manages to shut off his anxious brain, and wakes the next morning before Lucy, who looks as if she might sleep the several days that she sorely needs. He slides out of bed and gets dressed, grabbing his phone and making his way downstairs. He isn’t sure if he has been granted leave to go wandering about the house by himself, and understands what Lucy must have felt at Sept-Tours, circumscribed into a few approved zones by the need not to step into some long-simmering family tragedy that is not even hers. He detours onto the glassed-in back porch, dewed in cold condensation, and sits down on the wicker chair with its flowery cushions. It’s five hours ahead in England, six in France, so it’s midday, and he needs to get the lay of the land. He opens his phone and calls Jiya.

It rings a few times before it’s answered, long enough to make his anxiety spike. She sounds both harried and relieved when she does. “Dad?”

“Hi.” Flynn should probably stop trying to get her to quit calling him that. He admitted to Lucy yesterday that he has been a failure of a father to Jiya on many levels, and even now, he has left her behind in Oxford to face a possible onslaught by herself. “I’m in New York. I’m sorry for not calling earlier, there’s been a lot going on. Are you all right?”

“I’m not sure.” Jiya lets out a sigh. “Something is definitely following us, wherever we go. I think they’re waiting to see if we try to get Ashmole 782 ourselves, or anything else. I’m getting paranoid about letting Rufus go back to Mansfield alone, someone almost got him the other night. I had to – I had to take care of them, in an alley. I didn’t tell him.”

Flynn winces, feeling the full force of shame. “Who was it?”

“I don’t know,” Jiya says. “A daemon, but not anyone I knew or had seen before. It doesn’t matter. Oxford is crawling with creatures. Vampires, witches, daemons – I’ve even seen a few werewolves, and they never come within fifty miles of civilization. People I’ve never heard of keep dropping by the lab and asking if I’m Jiya de Clermont. And Jessica Proctor’s disappeared. I just – ” She stops. “It’s hard.”

Flynn swears inventively to himself. “Jessica’s disappeared?”

“Yes. We were keeping an eye out after what you said about the lab break-in, and apparently she hasn’t been in to Corpus Christi and nobody in the coven has seen her. I don’t know if Temple decided to make sure all his assets were under control and she couldn’t run her mouth to anyone inconvenient, but that seems the most likely. We tried going to the police about it, but like you said, human police aren’t that helpful and they wanted to know why we knew she was missing, and…” Jiya trails off. “Are you coming back soon?”

“I’m not sure,” Flynn says, once more reminded that he can’t fling aside his long-established responsibilities and the welfare of his daughter even in the heat of a torrid new love affair. “But I’ll pay for tickets for you and Rufus to come here. We’re in upstate New York – Madison County. Syracuse will be the closest airport. I’ll give you the address. It’s not your responsibility to guard that manuscript, and I don’t want you in any more danger.”

“Are you – are you sure?” Jiya sounds startled, which further ashamed Flynn; has he really been so inadequate that she would be surprised by basic precautions for her safety? “If we did need to stay
“No,” Flynn says, as firmly as he can. “No, you don’t. Bring my notes and the work on Lucy and anything else we might need to consult, but get out of there. Let me know when you’re on the way, I can drive out to pick you up or something.”

“Thanks.” Jiya takes a deep breath. “I think we’ll do that. I’ll be in touch.”

“Okay. I’ll see you soon, all right?”

With that, they hang up, Flynn sits there and reproaches himself for a bit longer, and then faces up to the next call, which he does not particularly want to make. But if he is giving familial responsibility a whirl, it cannot be avoided. Besides, it can’t be too terrible, can it? Can things have gone any more to hell in a few days than they were before? Fine. Fine.

Somewhat to his relief, it is Cecilia who answers the house phone. It does not have a caller ID, but she seems to know that it’s him anyway. “Garcia?”

“Yes. Hello.” Flynn coughs. “Lucy’s godmothers haven’t killed me, if you were wondering. We’re here, we’ve found out a few things about her past, and – well. It’s been illuminating, at least. What’s going on back there?”

“Madame returned with Wyatt to Venice to ask a few more questions of the Congregation,” Cecilia says. “Anton and Gennady Sokolov went with them, so they can at least agree that both vampire and witch are telling the same story about what happened to Lucy. As for Gabriel, he is… he has become quite fanatical about the idea of hunting down Michael Temple at once, and Harry and I have been left to suffer the full brunt of his obsessions. Frankly, I would like to hit him with something until it breaks, but I doubt he would notice.”

Flynn debates if he wants to enquire into Gabriel’s evidently rather precarious present state. They left things the best they ever had in two hundred and fifty years, but if even Cecilia is reaching her limit, he must be truly insufferable right now. Rattling wildly around the house, seized with far-fetched plans to kill their old enemy single-handed, make up for whatever he feels he has failed or lost. “How’s his shoulder? Better, yes?”

“I don’t know,” Cecilia snaps. “He has not yet permitted me to look at it. He seems convinced that whatever Lucy did for him before you two departed has been sufficient. If the damned fool dies on the spot, Garcia, I will not be held responsible.”

Flynn is struck with the sudden and uncomfortable realization that this might be what it is like to deal with him, and makes a mental note to be twelve percent more communicative in the future. He wonders if he should pass on the information about Jessica’s disappearance. Wyatt isn’t there, at least, and Flynn feels an odd urge to protect him from potentially distressing information, but since the moral of the story seems to be tell your damn family about your shit, maybe he should do it, just in case it’s helpful. And if it helps Gabriel at all in tracking down Temple, you never know. So he sighs to himself, then tells Cecilia.

“I am…” Cecilia considers. “Not surprised, but still. You said that you arranged for Jiya and Rufus to come out? Perhaps there is something to be said for sending Gabriel as well. I have altogether had enough of him storming about, and perhaps his fit of pique could be put to use more profitably on the far side of the Atlantic. As well, much as I hate to think it, it is most likely that Temple tries again to go after Lucy wherever she is, and that would be New York. I shall… put the idea to him.”

“Ah – ” If Flynn already has not run the idea of bringing his vampire daughter and her human
boyfriend past the Christophers, the thought of having Gabriel descend with no prior warning in all his melodramatic gothic-prince glory is – well, it might be worth it for the look on Denise’s face, at least. “Do you think he’ll agree?”

“Oh yes,” Cecilia says sweetly. “Or I will kill him. Please tell me where you were again?”

Flynn supplies it, wonders if this is in fact a bad idea – but too late now, it’s done. Once they terminate the conversation, he is left with the question of how on earth to casually explain to Denise and Michelle that they are about to play host to several more supernaturals, as if he has gone right ahead and made himself comfortable and turned this into his own base of operations – piling de Clermont family drama on Christopher/Preston family drama, if nothing else, seems ripe for disaster. But they are trying to stave off internecine conflict between vampires and witches, aren’t they? There is something to be said for establishing diplomatic contact between a few members of each species, though “diplomatic” might be the optimistic word. All in all, he is actually doing everyone a favor. Eventually.

With that, Flynn gets up and returns inside. He will inform his hostesses of this development at some point, but it will take Gabriel, Rufus, and Jiya at least three flights to get here, even assuming they leave immediately, and they won’t arrive until tomorrow. He is wondering what to do with himself, if Lucy sleeps all day and in the absence of a sudden new lead (or attack) being visited upon them, when he hears movement in the kitchen. It sounds as if Denise and Michelle are up and making breakfast. Carpe diem, Garcia.

He strides in as casually as he can, as the witches look up with their customary wary expressions. It is clear that he’s not expecting to share their human food, though they could offer him some to be polite; Lucy was never obliged to subsist on a liquid diet at Sept-Tours, after all. The silence goes on just long enough to be noticeable, and then Michelle recovers herself. “Good morning. Would you like some coffee?”

Flynn accepts, Michelle pours him a cup, and he thinks that of the two of them, he likes her better. At least she has been willing to extend an olive branch and speak to him as if he’s actually there, while Denise still hasn’t warmed much past suspicious looks and small winces whenever Lucy touches him. If she could throw him out of here, she probably would, but they are bound to a mutual pretense of civility for Lucy’s sake. Flynn is grudgingly willing to admit that they do love her, but he’s unsure if they will extend him the same courtesy. Still the big bad vampire lying in wait, plotting to gulp up the helpless innocent. They don’t know Lucy at all if they think that’s the case, but he should avoid picking a fight first thing in the morning. Especially without her to play buffer between them. No need to tempt fate.

And yet, just because he can sense that Denise would prefer him to go and sip his coffee somewhere else, Flynn plonks himself down at the breakfast table with a snarky smile. He can’t help it, he’s like a cat spotting something ripe to be knocked off a shelf. “So how are you two this lovely morning?”

“Fine.” Michelle pauses, then considers that. “Well, as much as is… as is possible right now. What happened yesterday in the woods, exactly? Lucy said you two were fighting?”

“Training,” Flynn corrects. “I already told you that she was the one hitting me. And your precious goddaughter is a lot stronger than you think. The magic in those woods is… substantial. How long have you lived here?”

“We moved here after Mark left for college,” Denise says, somewhat unexpectedly. “You haven’t met him, he’s our son. So… ten years or so, but we’ve known about this place for much longer. The house has been associated with Lucy’s family since the 1600s, though this version of it was rebuilt after a fire in the 1860s. It’s passed through a variety of owners before we bought it back. We felt it
was... safer to have it under our control.”

“Oh?” Flynn’s attention is piqued. He leans forward. “Meaning what?”

“I traced its history back as far as I could,” Michelle says. “The first record of it was in 1650, built by a Jebediah and Amelie Wallis, who were distant ancestors of Lucy’s father, Henry Wallace. In the 1680s, it was inhabited by Bathsheba and Abiah Foulger, who were sisters – Abiah was actually Benjamin Franklin’s mother, that was an interesting bit of trivia, we could probably get it listed for protection if it was still the original structure, but – ”

Flynn feels a bolt of lightning go down his back. He’s just remembered why those names sound familiar: they were in the Ashmole fragment that Lucy translated back at Sept-Tours. After the mysterious prophecy bits, there was more, that list of names and miscellaneous details. Bathsheba & Abiah Foulger. Amelie Wallis. Agnes Sampson. Lucy recognized Agnes Sampson as the first victim of the North Berwick witch trials, but as far as Flynn recalls, she didn’t say anything about the other three. There is a connection here, there has to be, if the house was built and used by other people – other witches? – who knew something about the manuscript. “I thought the Foulgers were in Nantucket,” Flynn says. “Massachusetts. So why would they come out to New York?”

“I couldn’t figure that out,” Michelle admits. “Unless they also knew something about this spot’s particular magical potency. Amelie was a witch, and we can’t be sure about Bathsheba and Abiah, but it’s possible they were too. Bathsheba lived in Salem during the trials, but she managed to avoid being accused. So if so, she knew how to keep her head down.”

“What about Amelie Wallis?” Flynn demands. “What do you know about her? You said that she and her husband were Lucy’s ancestors?”

“I did look into her,” Michelle says. “She immigrated from England in 1646, a few years before the house was built. She was born in Essex, and had been accused by Matthew Hopkins, the infamous Witchfinder General. I presume you’ve heard of him.”

Flynn has. Matthew Hopkins was the seventeenth-century English witch hunter active for only three years, between 1644 and 1647, but in that time, managed to send almost three hundred accused witches to the gallows, more than all the other witchcraft executions for the past century and a half. He wrote the tract The Discovery of Witches to justify his excesses and abuses, collected a handsome fee from each town that he promised to rid of its satanic scourge, traveled around eastern England rounding up women to be questioned and tortured, and had his career cut short by a sudden and fatal illness. Flynn hopes that an actual witch cast it on him, since it seems like no more than he deserves, but he’s more interested in Amelie’s connection to Lucy. “So she came to the New World to get away from him, I presume? And must have recognized the particular power of this place. Do you know if she ever wrote things down – texts or grimoires or spells – or owned magical books?”

“I’m not sure,” Michelle says. “She and her husband had six children, Henry descended from the youngest son. I mapped out the family tree through various regional archives and local history collections, as much as I could, and discovered that she may have been able to – ”

At that, she stops short at a sharp look from Denise, who apparently feels that they need to be careful about divulging sensitive information to the vampire, and may already have said too much. Flynn, however, does not intend to be denied. “Well?” he says. “Discovered that she may have been able to what?”

Michelle glances at her wife again, Denise minutely shakes her head, and Flynn lets out an exasperated huff. “You can tell me,” he warns them, “or I’ll go through all your damn papers and books and family pictures one by one, which I presume you don’t want. What do you think I’m
going to do, post them on Reddit? Unless you still think it’s your job to prevent me or any of my kind from getting our hands on the Book of Life, and hence will make sure I never learn anything useful? In that case, Lucy and I will just be on our way, if you won’t – ”

“All right, all right.” Michelle holds up her hands in surrender. “Fine. We discovered that it’s possible that Amelie was able to timewalk. As I said, she was born in England in about 1622, and died here in 1688, but I discovered her recorded in other places, both before and after those years. It could have been a descendant or ancestor with the same name, but witches have a particular signature, a trace of identifiable magic like a fingerprint, and it felt the same to me each time. It’s a rare and unusual skill, and its last appearance in the Wallace line, as far as we knew, was with Henry’s grandmother. But – ”

“But Lucy had to get it from somewhere,” Flynn mutters. Does this mysterious ancestress hold the key? Is she the source of Lucy’s combined and formidable powers, all the abilities that skipped generations or were only partially present finally achieving their fullest and complete expression? He’s a geneticist, he works on creatures, this is the exact sort of conundrum he has been trying to answer. Ashmole 782 was already written in the 1590s, thirty years before Amelie was born, but if she traveled in and out of her own lifetime, could she have assisted with its composition or enchantment anyway? Maybe even gone to significant points in the future, to ensure that it remained hidden? Is this seventeenth-century English witch some sort of extra-chronological guardian of the manuscript, and is that the gift she also passed to Lucy? Is it remotely possible that if they made contact with her somehow, she could tell them?

Denise and Michelle exchange glances, clearly able to tell that his mind is racing. Then Michelle says, “Amelie is also Lucy’s ancestor on her mother’s side. One of her great-great-granddaughters, Marjorie, ran off with an Arthur Preston, and the two families, both witches, had a periodic tendency to intermarry after that. We don’t know exactly how Bathsheba and Abiah Foulger fit into this, but if they were also witches, they could have been trained by Amelie, designated as her successors. As I said, she died in 1688, and Bathsheba and Abiah were here at least for a few years after 1681. That could have been their apprenticeship.”

“Thank you,” Flynn says, barely paying attention. “Thank you, this has been extremely helpful. Do you have any of these papers still on hand, by any chance?”

Michelle considers, seems to decide that the milk (or perhaps blood) has been spilled, and sighs and says that she has several boxes of them in the attic, he can come up and look at them if he wants to. Denise does not look happy about this, but does not openly object, and she holds her tongue as Flynn follows Michelle up the stairs and to the ladder leading to the attic. They climb up and get the boxes down, and she bows herself out and shuts the trapdoor behind her. Flynn represses the unworthy suspicion that she will ram a bar through it and leave him stuck up here like Mr. Rochester’s wife, and gets to work.

Flynn gets deeply immersed in the old papers, covered in faded, elaborate handwriting, and scouts out a yellowed notebook to write things down. The hours fly past, he rummages through all of the Christophers’ Christmas decorations and broken furniture and old lawn ornaments and the other crap up here, and pulls out everything he can get his hands on. He feels no shame about this snooping whatsoever, though he stumbles on a picture of Lucy at her Yale graduation in her newly minted doctoral robes, Denise and Michelle standing proudly on either side, and represses a pang of – he doesn’t know what, exactly. Part of the allure of hiding up here is to put off the moment where he has to suggest to Lucy that perhaps they hit pause on this, or at least think it through again. There will be enough to deal with when his relatives suddenly appear (he has still not in fact mentioned that) and that can occupy them instead.
Flynn works all day and into the evening, unencumbered by the need for food or bathroom breaks, and finally clambers out of the attic as a very dusty vampire around seven PM, cobwebs sticking to his sweater and a certain amount of crick forming even in his immortal spine. He grimaces and stretches it out, looks at his phone again, and sees a text message from Jiya from several hours ago, noting that they’ve just boarded the plane to New York and will be getting here early tomorrow morning, after their red-eye connector to Syracuse. There is no such comparable status update from Gabriel. Maybe he decided not to come at all, or is just keeping it a total mystery. Idiot.

Grumbling, Flynn brushes himself off and makes his way downstairs to see if Lucy is awake yet. She is, though she’s still in her pajamas and her hair is tousled, as if she woke up so late that it was not worth the bother to get showered and changed, and she’ll just go back to bed in a few hours anyway. She’s eating what is breakfast for her and supper for Denise and Michelle, and Flynn is amused at the stereotypically vampiric schedule she is keeping for the day. But at the sight of him, she gets up, hurries over to kiss him, and then sneezes at the army of dust bunnies still trailing in his wake. “What have you been doing all day?”

“What have you been doing, Sleeping Beauty?” Flynn raises an eyebrow, manages to dodge the kiss without being obvious, and sits down. “I’ve been having a look at some very interesting papers. I’ll tell you later.”

He can feel Denise and Michelle’s eyes on him, wanting to know what he found out, and takes a certain amount of petty satisfaction at denying them. When Lucy is finished eating, she tilts her head at him, and experiencing a sensation as if he is the one walking up Matthew Hopkins’ gallows, Flynn follows her. They make their way up to her room, the covers still warm and tousled from where she has been buried in them all day, and he looks at her solicitously. “Are you feeling better?”

“A little.” Lucy rubs her eyes. “I decided that I should let Michelle look at my back, and she said that she’d search for a spell to take them off. So there’s that.”

“Oh? Ah? That’s good.” Flynn twits his fingers together. Should he blurt this out all at once, get it over like a clean break, or should he try to be considerate and explain in depth? “Lucy, I was – I was thinking about last night. Something happened with – with us. I think it was – ”

“The alchemical wedding?” She looks up at him, eyes intent and serious, but with a hint of something else, awe and excitement. “I thought it was that too.”

Flynn is heartened that she has also recognized it, and has surely come to the same conclusions about the necessity of re-establishing some space, at least until they can be sure that they have all the facts. “Yes, that. So of course I’ll – you’ll want me to go to the guest room? I – I know it’s for the best, I’ll just – ”

“What?” Lucy looks at him askance. “What are you talking about?”

“I just…” Flynn is flustered. “Obviously we can’t do it right away, or maybe we shouldn’t do it at all. It’s not fair to you, is it? Having your power or your transformation or whatever might happen to you as a result of this, tied to having sex with some random man? You still don’t know if you want all this, and after yesterday and the way you felt as if it was being forced on you – it’s too early to make this choice, and it’s – ” He flails, waves a hand in the air, and sputters to an underwhelming halt. “Like I said. Not fair.”

Lucy looks as if he has hit her, as apparently that was not the direction she was expecting that speech to take. Then she says, “I’m sorry, I didn’t – that’s very sweet of you, truly. But I didn’t think it was a bad thing. And if it is us, you’re not just some random man, are you? You’re the red king. Why do you think it’s so possible that I’m the white queen, you can believe that so easily, but you’re just – ”
what? Something the cat dragged in?"

Flynn is taken aback at her ferocity. “Lucy – I just, I wanted to make sure that you – ”

“I know.” Her hand lands on his thigh, rubbing distracted and distressed circles, and he should move away, but that seems liable to make her more upset. “I’m glad that you’re thinking about this, really. And shock, horror, a prophecy from however many hundreds of years ago, if that’s even what it is, is inherently sexist. Film at eleven. But that’s the thing. It’s not about one of us. It’s not about just me or just you being able to do all of this on our own. It’s about us, together. Making something that we can’t do alone. It seems a little weird for us to get this far if you don’t actually want me like that, and maybe something you could have said before. I don’t think it’s really the case, by the way. I think you just feel like you don’t deserve it and you have to punish yourself and make sure you’re not allowed to be happy, and that hurts me, Garcia. But it’s not true, all right? It’s not true. I know what happened to you and your loved ones, I am so sorry for it, but I’m not Lorena and I’m not Matej and I’m not just the ghosts of bad things from your past. I want you to see me as Lucy, as me. That’s what I’ve wanted with everyone!”

It’s Flynn’s turn to feel as if he’s been slapped upside the head. Her voice is raw and agonized and pleading, and he hates to hear her in pain, especially since he has been trying so hard to avoid causing more of it. He doesn’t even know how he ended up doing it this time, since he once more thought he was doing the right thing and trying to give her space and ability to make the right choice. She can apparently sense that, since her face is tender and at least somewhat sympathetic rather than totally angry, but there’s that as well, and her eyes snap like coals as she stares at him. “Well? Am I right?”

“I – ” Flynn’s tongue appears to have become locked to the roof of his mouth. “I just – if something happens – if something will happen when we’re, you know. Fully together. I just know that it could be… we didn’t know what it….if you wanted…”

He’s mumbling feebly and rather nonsensically, and Lucy’s hand stops its circles on his thigh, as if it might be needed to strangle him. They sit there in fraught silence for another few moments, until she says quietly, “That wasn’t what I thought, when I realized it could refer to us. I just – it felt right. I don’t know why. Maybe I was mistaken.”

Guilt perforates Flynn’s insides once again. He tugs out his arm and puts it around her shoulder, trying to offer clumsy comfort even if he isn’t sure what else to do right now. Is it possible that he’s making a mistake by trying to go one direction when Lucy favors the other? How could the idea not frighten her? Flynn is – well, as partners go, he may possess surface-level attractions, but he also has so many cracks and missing pieces and fears and anxieties, so many regretted pasts, so much violence and so many ghosts. If he is the red king, it is because of all the blood he has spilled, all the men he has killed over so many centuries, and how that damage has so often been turned, however inadvertently, against everyone he cherished the most. Maybe she doesn’t understand that, or just thinks he’s being willfully contrary or deliberately insensitive, but he – he’s not. He just fundamentally cannot reconcile the idea of him ever being good enough for her, or what she wants, or what she truly, permanently needs. If she chose him, if she sealed the alchemical wedding now and then somehow couldn’t go back, what if she regretted it? What if she couldn’t get away? Even among all his various missteps and failures, he’s tried to leave the door open for her to walk away, has indeed insisted that she knows she can do that. If this is forever –

After a moment, Lucy starts rubbing his thigh again. “I don’t know what’s going to happen with us, or any of this,” she says. “But this isn’t seventeenth-century Puritan New England. Sleeping with someone once doesn’t mean that you have to marry them and stay together permanently. It means a lot to me that you were worried about this, Garcia. It really does. But I want you. I don’t know how
many times I have to say that, or show it, but what – what about any of this makes you think that I don’t? What exactly have I done to give you that impression? Because no offense, I don’t think I have. It’s just that you never trust any of it.”

“But –” Flynn starts. “If real magic happened, different, uncontrollable, and it tied us together –”

“What, we’d end up in a pair of literal handcuffs? That old ball and chain metaphor?” Lucy raises an eyebrow. “Either way, we still have free will, don’t we? If we choose to start this, we could also choose to end it. Not that I want to,” she adds quickly, looking exasperated, and Flynn shuts his mouth in some chagrin. “It’s not entering into eternal, irreversible magical bondage. So –”

“But…” Flynn can’t help it. “What if it is? We don’t know. If you can’t get away –”

“Well then, you’ll manage to run away twice for both of us,” Lucy says, with an edge to make it clear that she would really prefer if he knocked it off. “Do you want this? If you don’t, if you really don’t, then please say so. But if you do –”

Flynn opens his mouth very wide as if about to swallow an egg, makes a faint croaking noise, and discovers that he doesn’t remember English. He has to take a moment to reboot his brain, while Lucy is looking up into his face in increasing concern and distress, as if she’s somehow the one who has hurt him with their sexual explorations to date. Then he manages to shake his head. “No,” he says. “I mean, no, it’s not that I don’t want it. That is, yes. I just – I’m sorry. I’m – not good at it. Asking for what I want.”

“No shit,” Lucy says, but somewhat more playfully. She lifts her face, in search of reassurance, and Flynn leans down to kiss her quickly, in apology for shirking it earlier. Then she pulls back. “I could use another night of sleep, anyway. So we don’t have to think about this now.”

“Okay.” Flynn watches her tentatively. “Do you want me to go to the guest room, then?”

“No.” Lucy rolls her eyes heavenward. “You can stay. We can just… spoon or something.”

Flynn supposes that this is an acceptable compromise, and consents to crawl in with her, as Lucy’s yawning seems to indicate that she will shortly be headed back to the Land of Nod anyway. But after a few moments, she wriggles around to face him. “What did you find out earlier? You said you were looking at things.”

“Ah. Yes.” Flynn hasn’t found the smoking gun just yet, the exact proof of who any of these women were or what they did, aside from what Michelle told him. There were plenty of old property records and tax liens, birth and marriage and death certificates and other non-magical documents for many generations of Lucy’s family, which is interesting in itself, but once again, anything relating to Ashmole 782 specifically has been scrupulously kept off paper. He tells her about her ancestress Amelie Wallis, his suspicion that Lucy inherited her power directly or was otherwise chosen as her heir, and the fact that that would explain why Lucy’s genotype is so similar to a sixteenth-century witch’s. It is a sixteenth-century witch’s (or seventeenth, technically). “If Amelie could timewalk,” he finishes up, “she might have traveled into the future and seen when you were born, known that you were the one she wanted to take over. I don’t know how or why or any of that, but it’s… worth a thought.”

Lucy blinks, looking considerably intimidated. “That’s good that you managed to figure out those names, though,” she says, as if deciding to address the less-terrifying part of this information first. “Do you think that those four women – Agnes Sampson, Amelie Wallis, Bathsheba and Abiah Foulger – were part of some kind of, I don’t know, coven through time? Maybe a secret witch sisterhood, similar to what the Knights of Lazarus are for vampires? Remember, the page was written
in the Voynich cipher, and I said at Sept-Tours that it could have been taught as some kind of secret feminine Latin, especially among witches. Is it possible that I didn’t write that page, Amelie did, and her handwriting just looks like mine?”

“Anything is possible,” Flynn admits. “I think you’re probably correct to suspect that they were connected somehow, and they used the Voynich cipher to pass secret messages. It also seems very likely that they were involved in the production and concealment of Ashmole 782, which would have been only in Agnes’s lifetime, but she called Amelie, Bathsheba, and Abiah back a hundred years to help. In that case, either Amelie’s gift was passed from descendant to descendant in the usual way, down to the present day, or – however she managed it – it was transmitted directly to you, with no intermediaries and no dilution. You have everything that she did, exactly as she had it. Possibly.”

Lucy bites her lip, her hand once more tracing absent, anxious circles on his chest. “Is there any way we could find that out?”

“Not without suddenly finding a lot of your blood relatives to do genetic testing on,” Flynn says dryly. “Do you even have any left?”

“No.” Lucy tries to say it casually, but he can sense the pain, the fact that while she does have a loving adopted family and is grateful for it, she is the only one of her bloodline left alive – the last heiress of the old and esteemed Preston witch family, a considerable status even on its own. “Not that I know of. My parents are dead and I didn’t have any siblings. I never knew of any blood aunts or uncles, any cousins I might have, and my grandparents died before I was born. My family always seemed important, but lost, remote, removed.”

“It sounds lonely,” Flynn says quietly. At least he has had a family, dysfunctional and disconnected as it may now be. Had a father (for a while, at least), a mother and a daughter and Harry and Cecilia, even if his brothers were, after 1762, a source of nothing more than distance and pain. “I’m sorry.”

“I had Denise and Michelle and Olivia and Mark.” Lucy tries to shrug. “It could have been worse. If I nearly got adopted by Benjamin Cahill – ”

She cuts off, unable to finish that sentence even in light-heartedness, and Flynn holds her tightly as another shudder races through her. She slides her arms under his and tucks herself closer, melding into him, and they lie there in silence. Flynn strokes her hair soothingly, until the deepening of her breathing, the slowing of her heartbeat, and the way the tension drains from her tells him that she has fallen back to sleep. He gently pulls back without waking her, rolls over, and sets the alarm on his phone so that he can wake in time to drive to Syracuse and pick up Rufus and Jiya. He’ll leave a note for Denise and Michelle, then when they get back, go in first and assure them that it’s just his daughter, she’s lovely, and her human boyfriend. (He will, it seems, have to choke out that word. Alas.) It may not be the best way anyone has ever handled this, but it would be awkward to traipse into their bedroom now and deliver a public service announcement.

Flynn sleeps dreamlessly, as vampires do, and wakes before the sun and the alarm alike. He slides out of bed with a light kiss on Lucy’s forehead, then gets dressed, grabs his jacket and car keys, and crunches out to their rental, which is parked in the driveway. It’s forty-five minutes to Syracuse International Airport usually, according to the GPS, but the roads are almost empty, and Flynn makes it in just under half an hour. He parks and walks into the deserted terminal, which feels slightly surreal in that way that airports do in the early hours, harsh fluorescent lights and periodic announcements chorusing over the tannoy, a few sleepy business travelers shuffling past to catch puddle-jumpers to New York City for morning meetings. He paces back and forth, eyeing the boards, and at last, the 7:55am Delta Connection arrival from JFK changes to “landed.” It’s not a big airport, so it’s only about ten minutes later when the throng of groggy passengers heads through the
barriers and diverts into baggage claim. Flynn spots Rufus and Jiya, and waves.

Jiya sees him, looks stunned that he has actually turned up, then sprints toward him, dark ponytail bouncing, and hugs him hard. Flynn can feel her shaking a little, and hugs her back, finding himself unaccountably choked up. Rufus hangs back awkwardly, but Flynn manages a semi-polite nod for him over Jiya’s head (having spent a few days being treated as the undesirable boyfriend, he has somewhat more sympathy for Rufus’s plight). When Jiya finally lets go, she sniffs and says, “I didn’t think you’d actually come.”

“Yes, well.” Flynn fights away the stab of shame. “I’m here. Is Rufus hungry?”

“I got a Cinnabon in JFK before we left,” Rufus says. “I told Jiya she could, like, chomp on me if she wanted the flavor or something, but she didn’t think we should do that in public.”

Jiya snorts weakly. “I told you I could actually eat it if I wanted the flavor,” she reminds him. “And no, I was not biting you in the JFK international terminal. Though it was sweet.”

“Yeah, we would probably get the place shut down,” Rufus comments, as they wait for their bags. “Even the TSA couldn’t miss that. Where are we going again?”

“Out to Lucy’s godmothers’ place in Madison County. Not too far from here, thirty or forty minutes.” Flynn lunges to pull Jiya’s suitcase off the carousel. “I – ah – may not have actually told them that you were coming, so when we get back, I’ll go in first and explain. If they absolutely won’t have you there, we’ll get you a hotel or something, but there’s room in the house, and I’d rather have you where I could see you.”

Rufus raises both eyebrows at the news that they are uninvited houseguests, but decides not to press. Both of them look like travelers on the tail end of a long international trip, which is that they would appreciate somewhere to crash soon, and their eyes are drooping as they tramp out to the car. Flynn pulls out, grumbles as he has to pay an extortionate parking charge, and heads for I-81. “No problems getting out of Oxford? Or at least not many?”

“Someone was tailing us as far as Heathrow,” Jiya says, looking troubled. “We managed to lose them there. At least I think we did. We can’t count on being sure that nobody saw us leave. If we bring that here –”

“It’s not your fault.” Flynn changes lanes and overtakes a slow-moving goods lorry. “Either way, you’ll be safer with me. I’m sorry I left you alone so long. Lucy was kidnapped, and –”

“What?” Jiya looks shocked. “Lucy was kidnapped?”

Flynn realizes belatedly that there are certain crucial portions of the story he has forgotten to share, even if it is obvious that they did get her back, and updating Jiya on that saga takes the rest of the drive back to the Christophers’ place (Rufus listens with an expression halfway between fascination and horror). But as they turn up the driveway, Flynn notices that there appears to be a commotion going on front. What, did they miss his note? Did Lucy wake up and think he’d done a bunk? What is going on and why has this gone sideways right when he needs to walk in and inform them that they –

“Stay here,” Flynn orders Rufus and Jiya, who don’t really need to be told. He parks the car and dashes up the drive, whereupon he discovers Denise, Michelle, and Lucy, all in their nightclothes and wearing expressions ranging from anger to concerned confusion, face to face with none other than Gabriel de Clermont in his full splendor. He is carrying a Louis Vuitton luggage set, his collar is pressed just so, he is sporting mirrored aviator sunglasses and elegant stubble that make him look as
if he walked off a *GQ* cover shoot, and the odds are good that every single scrap of clothing he has on are Gucci, Prada, or Chanel. He could not look more out of place in front of this rustic upstate New York farmhouse if he just teleported in from Mars, and Lucy seems to be trying to explain to her godmothers that she knows him but doesn’t know why he’s here. Denise and Michelle are very startled that another de Clermont has turned up out of thin air without so much as a by-your-leave, and Gabriel, for his part, looks as if he would literally die rather than ask for it. He is just starting into a haughty explanation that these frumpy middle-aged witches have no right to prohibit him from going anywhere (including apparently into their own house), when Flynn pelts up. “Gabri – Gabriel, what are you doing?”

“Oh, there you are.” Gabriel’s nostrils flare in an expression very reminiscent of Maria’s when she’s trying to keep her composure. “I did think it was uncommonly ill-mannered, even for you, to invite me here and then not bother to be present when I arrived, but perhaps this is a new breed of postmodern etiquette with which I am somehow unfamiliar?”

“I’m – ” Denise stares wildly between them, taking in the similarity (and, perhaps, the habit of terrible first impressions). “Excuse me, do you know – who is – ?”

“Gabriel de Clermont,” Gabriel informs her, with a tone strongly suggesting that this is really on her for not knowing that. “I was told that I should make my way to this hovel – sorry, cottage – and assist in whatever was going on, but as I was not told that it appeared to be the abode of a pair of witches and their various – ”

“I told you, that’s Garcia’s brother,” Lucy interrupts, looking rather stunned herself. “I thought he was in France, but if he – ”

Gabriel’s eyes flicker to her, as if he would prefer not to be in this highfalutin’, self-important, bombastic persona in front of her, but he is far too stubborn to turn down the shock and awe even a little. Flynn swears, not under his breath this time, grabbing Gabriel’s arm and trying to drag him a few paces back. It is like trying to move the Rock of Gibraltar. “Gabriel,” he hisses. “What the hell did you – ”

“We were woken up by the sound of a helicopter.” Denise folds her arms and looks every inch the formidable Homeland Security federal agent she used to be. “A helicopter. Obviously we were confused and alarmed. We came out, discovered it landing in the backyard, and this – individual climbed out and informed us that apparently he was expected. To say the least, he was not expected, and since he’s also a vampire, this is extremely – ”

“A helicopter?” Flynn turns to Gabriel incredulously, as Gabriel stares back at him as if to say that only the plebeians travel commercially. He probably took the private jet most of the way and saw no reason in contaminating himself with the difficulties of the hoi polloi. Flynn experiences an overwhelming urge to murder his brother (so in other words, the last few weeks) and glances back at Denise and Michelle. “I should have – all right, I should have told you that I talked to our chatelaine, Cecilia, and that she was going to send him here, but then he didn’t say anything and I didn’t think he was coming. Fine, but – ”

“Where were you?” Michelle interrupts. “Something about running off to the airport? How many more vampires have you invited here without our permission?”

“Only one,” Flynn says defensively. “My daughter’s in the car. Jiya. She’s perfectly lovely, you’ll have no problems with her. Her and her – boyfriend, Rufus, who is human. It wasn’t safe to leave them in Oxford any longer.”

“So what? You brought them here?” Denise throws up her hands in total disbelief. “Do you think
“Believe me, madam,” Gabriel says. “Given that it does resemble some sort of shabby public group home, you might want to think about –”

Flynn hauls on his arm even harder, Gabriel ignores him as thoroughly as a buzzing fly, and just then, disregarding his instructions to stay in the car, there are footsteps behind them. Jiya’s voice says in disbelief, “Uncle Gabriel? What are you doing here?”

Gabriel pivots on the spot, sees his niece, and is briefly startled out of his condescending dickery. “Ah,” he says, mustering a hearty, fake smile. “I see that it is indeed a proper family reunion. Good morning, my dear. I hope you were more informed about the particulars of this than I was.”

“Not really,” Jiya admits, “but I’m happy to see you, I just – didn’t know you were going to be here, but it’s – I mean –”

With that, while someone is surely making the comment about how that seems to be the theme of the morning, Jiya hurries past and hugs her uncle. Gabriel was clearly not expecting that, as his arms twitch awkwardly before he finally gives in and hugs her back, not without another evil stare at Flynn. Rufus, for his part, glances around, takes in everyone’s stony faces, the transparent air of tension, and lets out a whistle. “Well,” he says. “Awkward.”

Denise and Michelle stare at the three newcomers with expressions nicely caught between outrage, resignation, and annoyance. Lucy coughs. “Ah, Gabriel,” she says timidly. “I – well, we’re glad you’re here, we really are. We just – well, we can –”

Gabriel’s gaze flickers to her again, then Flynn. Then he hitches his fixed smile back into place and bends to retrieve his bags, brushing dirt off the LV monograms and swiveling magnificently on Denise and Michelle. “Well? Are you going to show me in? Don’t worry, I will see to my own refreshment. I don’t much care for toadstools.”

Denise has a look as if toadstools are going to be the least of this asshole’s problems very soon, but after a long pause, she makes an icy motion, and Gabriel sweeps after her with the utmost icy self-possession, as if to make it clear how utterly fine and in control and otherwise great he is here now, thanks. Rufus and Jiya throw deeply apologetic looks at Michelle and tiptoe after him, and once they are all back inside the house, Lucy spins on Flynn with a look containing not inconsiderable judgment of her own. “What did you do?”

“I just thought Rufus and Jiya should get out of Oxford, and… well, I called Cecilia and she pretty much threw Gabriel out of the house. I can see why, if he’s acting like this.” Flynn blows out a breath. “I was going to tell Denise and Michelle. I left a note.”

“I don’t think a note was the best way to do this,” Lucy says, gently but pointedly. “Now we have three more vampires – well, two vampires and a human – on their hands? And if Gabriel is going to just run around and be an abrasive jackass –”

“Denise and Michelle might realize that I’m the nice brother?” Flynn cracks weakly, but it doesn’t get much of a smile. “Maybe you can say something to him. If anyone, he might listen to you. Besides, we could use having the grandmaster of the Knights of Lazarus here. If Temple or Emma tries to attack again –”

Flynn decides not to mention that it might be Lucy’s presence which draws them here, and suddenly wonders if he has made Jiya safer at all, or just moved her closer to the epicenter of the threat. At least he can defend her personally this way, which is the least he owes her, but Temple would love
the chance to attack Flynn’s daughter as well as Lucy, and not to mention, Rufus is powerless and will need to be protected. In which case, Flynn could in fact very much use Gabriel’s help; there were entire army battalions that could not resist the two of them, and he feels a pang of desperate longing for the good old days. But is Gabriel actually on the mend? Did Lucy’s magic fix him? He has to be fine, he has to. Even as long as they’ve been estranged, even for the days and years and decades that they have not spoken, Flynn has still known that he’s there. Life without Gabriel would be like life without the sun and moon and stars, utterly unnatural and unbearable. He’s lost many people in his long life, and even many members of his family, but that feels like the one he finally could not survive.

Nonetheless, it seems advisable to send Lucy to shout at Gabriel first, since the de Clermont brothers seem to share a certain weakness for being told where to stick it by small and feisty witch historians. Indeed when Gabriel reappears, having changed out of the name-brand suit into a silk button-down shirt and a pair of name-brand jeans (heaven forbid he lower himself too much) he looks chastened, and is somewhat less caustic when he speaks. He even deigns to accept a cup of coffee, albeit after asking if they have espresso and sighing deeply when told they don’t. Jiya is eyeing him with curiosity and confusion, and goes to sit down next to him on the couch. “Uncle Gabriel,” she says in an undertone. “Are you all right?”

Gabriel shoots a startled look at her. “Of course, my dear. Is there any reason I should not be?”

Jiya looks at Flynn, who told her in the car that Gabriel was wounded in the course of rescuing Lucy, and he shakes his head slightly, sensing that this is not the right moment to bring it up. In any event, Gabriel looks at Rufus, as if determined for a distraction. “This must be the – er – young man that you’re seeing?”

“Ah, yes. This is Rufus, Dr. Rufus Carlin.” Jiya makes a move beckoning Rufus to come closer, which he does very warily. Flynn can’t blame him; Gabriel terrifies other vampires, let alone humans. “Rufus, this is my uncle Gabriel.”

“The super-rich one from Paris, right?” Rufus gamely offers his hand. “Uh, pleasure.”

Gabriel looks him up and down, wrinkles his nose at Rufus’s crumpled Star Wars T-shirt and falling-apart Converse sneakers, and finally extends two fingers and shakes his hand very abbreviatedly. “Yes,” he says. “I suppose that is one word for it.”

Rufus shoots a look at Jiya with a clear is-this-because-I’m-a-black-guy question in his eyes, and Jiya shakes her head apologetically, as if to say that when Gabriel is in Le Mood, not even the Queen of England would be good enough for him. For his part, Flynn is feeling unaccountably protective of the poor human bombarded with all this supernatural family drama, and clears his throat roughly. “Hey. Rufus helped us figure out that witches murdered Lucy’s parents, and he’s been very helpful with the work on our project. So you can just – ”

It’s hard to say who looks more surprised at this: Gabriel, Rufus, Jiya, or Lucy. But Gabriel refrains from any more pointed barbs, sips his coffee with his best attempt at cool disdain, and yet can’t stop his eyes from periodically flicking between Flynn and Lucy. He still looks fantastically out of place, and though it’s hard to tell, he seems somewhat off his usual ultra-confident footing as well. In Sept-Tours he is the head of the family and the undisputed alpha, but when he makes some sort of comment on how all this appears to be going and Denise and Michelle more or less ignore him, he is clearly taken aback. He is not used to being ignored or disregarded for his opinion to be any less than the most important, and Flynn privately thinks it’ll be good for him. The last few weeks are the most time he has spent with Gabriel in he can’t remember how long, and it seems more than clear that indeed, he is still a conceited, arrogant, holier-than-thou son of a bitch. God, Flynn misses him.
Once accommodation arrangements have been sorted out, Gabriel has been put in the guest room and Jiya and Rufus have taken Mark’s old room, they go upstairs to sleep. Lucy goes to look at the papers that Flynn was working on yesterday, and he wanders out to the back porch and wonders if he should seriously propose his suspicion, or if he’s totally off base. But it’s getting harder and harder to repress the notion that they are going to have to find a way to contact Amelie Wallis directly. Whether that involves timewalking, or a spell, or a séance invoking her spirit, or whatever else, he doesn’t know. Maybe it is contingent on completing the alchemical wedding first, but he’s not just going to peremptorily announce to Lucy that they need to sleep together now, after all the trouble he went to avoid it yesterday. If nothing else, it proves that whoever did write the fragment has been guiding them into closer and closer orbits around Ashmole 782 this whole time, and even here in New York, away from the Bodleian and the physical artifact, the dragnet is tightening.

That afternoon, Denise and Michelle think they sense something in the woods, Flynn is reminded uneasily about what Jiya said about someone following them from Oxford, and the three of them go out, united for once, to check for threats. They can’t find anything, but Denise and Michelle perform several spells to deter invaders, and they all look over their shoulders as they get back to the house. “I think it’s best that nobody wanders too far,” Denise says, low-voiced. “Just in case.”

Flynn agrees, and they communicate this to Gabriel, Rufus, and Jiya when they awake, and Lucy when she comes down from the attic. Upon receipt of this intelligence, Gabriel turns immediately on his heel and goes back upstairs, and Flynn thinks grimly that he would not be surprised if Gabriel has hared off on some other stupid adventure (no comment from the peanut gallery). But then twenty minutes later he comes back downstairs – and everyone chokes on their tongues. And for that matter, thin air.

Gabriel has changed into his full Knights of Lazarus regalia, which Flynn hasn’t seen him wear for at least four hundred years. He is clad in a long chainmail hauberk, a white linen tabard worked with the green cross of the order, and a green velvet cloak trimmed with pearls and tied with a gilded cord. His hammered-steel vambraces are inlaid with niello, and his longsword is strapped around his waist, along with his silver dagger and misericordia. At close range, the effect is absolutely breathtaking, dazzling as a small sun, and everyone looks as if they have been hit with a communal meteor – even Denise and Michelle, who aren’t attracted to men to start with. Gabriel is not unaware of their slack-jawed expressions, and half a smile curls his mouth as he swishes the cloak to just the right elegantly careless degree. “I brought it along,” he says. “Just in case. I brought yours too, Garcia. You did say to call the Knights, and I thought it best to be prepared.”

“I…” Flynn experiences a sudden, bone-deep desire to do just that, to put on the clothes of his old life, what they used to wear as knights together, fighting side by side. It seems like a clumsy, wordless peace offering, perhaps the only kind Gabriel can manage, and after another moment, he makes a decision. Nods once, and goes upstairs.

It is there, as Gabriel said, laid out on the bed with painstaking care. The under-tunic, the cote-hardie, the padded gambeson, the hauberk and tabard, the braises and chausses and boots, the vambraces and greaves and gauntlets, the hood and cloak, and the longsword which he has not drawn since the end of his last war. He has used countless guns, but there were times when only the grip of a sword felt familiar enough, since it was his weapon of choice for almost seven hundred years. He wraps his hand around the hilt and pulls the gleaming blade a few inches from the scabbard. It’s still in perfect condition. Gabriel must have kept it that way for him, since Flynn has not touched it in decades himself.

Flynn feels a sudden and overwhelming wave of grief rise in his chest, one that he can’t voice or give into, not yet, and bends forward, hunched and shaking, until it subsides. With hands somewhat steadier, he strips off his modern clothes and changes into the old ones, which still linger ever so
faintly with the scent of smoke and sweat and blood, undetectable to anyone save a vampire. Finally he straightens up, conscious of the unfamiliar weight of the mail and armor – well, it is familiar, it is shockingly familiar, but he has not felt it on his body for centuries, though it has been engrained far too deeply to forget. He belts on his sword, and tries not to think that girding himself for battle will summon it here, *speak of the devil and he shall appear*. Then he crosses the room, opens the door, and stops short.

Lucy is standing in the hall outside, and at the sight of him, completely loses all power of speech. She stares at him, eyes dark with desire, until Flynn can almost feel it thrumming in the air around them. He is rather pleased that he makes no less an arresting spectacle than Gabriel, and is tempted to hold out his arms and preen a little. He, however, does not get the chance. Lucy takes two steps forward, stretches herself up on her tiptoes, grabs him by the head, and kisses the daylights out of him.

Flynn is flabbergasted and somewhat wrong-footed, but his first, valiant impulse to push her away does not get that far. In fact, it gets nowhere at all. He is tempted to point out that he just went to a lot of effort putting all this on and it would be a waste if they were to strip it off again, but he can’t get the words out in between kisses, as his gloved hands cup her waist and lift her off her feet, pinning her against the wall. He is wearing a lot of mail and pointy things and does not want to poke her accidentally, but her arms are around his neck and she does not even appear to care that the steel rings of the hauberk are digging into her flesh. He kisses her back just as hungrily, reminding himself that he’ll stop after the next one, he will – but he still can’t. Lucy keeps turning her head and going after him again, the inside of her lip scrapes against his fangs, which have decided to join the party, and he trembles all over with wild, desperate, blinding need for her. He could just rip all of this rigmarole off and have her, have her over and over, and he might not even care – God, God *almighty* –

It’s just then, however, when they both become aware of the glow from last night, which has returned stranger and stronger and brighter than ever. They break apart in confusion, though Lucy’s arms are still around his neck and her feet are dangling off the floor, and Flynn keeps his arms wrapped around her waist. There is a rustling and a hissing like distant flames, wind over the water, and the glow turns red-hot, burning like the heart of a star. It is hanging in midair a few feet away from them, bobbing up and down, and they stare at it in stupefaction. What the – is this actually a warning, Flynn thinks? Have they got it wrong, they are not the alchemical wedding, and it is a reminder that their relationship is forbidden in creature law, may have terrible consequences, and could destroy everything and everyone if they don’t –

And yet, the glow does not grow larger, or attack them, or anything of the sort. Instead, it sucks inward, like water in the bay rushing out to sea in advance of a tsunami, and then spits something out, as several papers flash into existence and tumble to the floor in a soft clatter. Lucy and Flynn let go of each other the rest of the way and kneel down in utter confusion to retrieve them. They look almost familiar, old parchment covered in gothic script and elaborate illuminations. They also appear to have been torn out of something, and Lucy makes a stunned sound. “These – are they – ?”

Flynn doesn’t know what she’s going to say, not for sure, although he too suddenly has a stunning idea. He picks up the top page, fine as onionskin, worn with age, and bearing three lines. The two of them stare down at it together, as if to be sure they are seeing the same thing. As for what it could mean, what they have just unlocked, what has remained hidden in this house under deep magical safeguard for God knows how long –

*It begins with blood and fear.***

*It begins with absence and desire.*
It begins with a discovery of witches.
The Unraveling

It takes a very long moment for Lucy to recollect her wits. It’s a considerable effort to switch her train of thought anyway, since until now it was proceeding in a far less intellectual direction, but she picks up the papers – there are three of them, and unless she’s very much mistaken, these are the missing pages from Ashmole 782, the ones that had been cut out of the folio. She’s almost sure of it; the writing and style of illumination is almost identical, and when she touches it, the text seems to spring off the parchment and scurry across her skin in the same way it did in the Bodleian, when she woke it up. The almost-faded omega on her hand suddenly flares with renewed pain, and she hisses and drops the pages. Flynn looks at her with a gobsmacked expression, and ventures, “Are those…?”

“I think so.” Lucy sucks at the heel of her hand, trying to soothe the burning. “I’m – I’m honestly not sure what else they could be. It looks as if they were hidden in the house under some kind of enchantment, and what we just did – if it was related to the alchemical wedding, if that was what was needed to break it – ”

She can feel her cheeks heating, and looks away. All right, her intentions in going upstairs weren’t exactly noble – she saw what Gabriel looked like in that outfit, she could guess what Garcia would, and it was her full intent to jump him the instant he walked out resembling a medieval sex god. That part was in fact going surprisingly well, but now they have been interrupted, and it unfortunately demands their attention. She reluctantly gets to her feet and carries the pages over to better light. Two of the three are covered in complicated alchemical recipes or spell formulae of some sort, with only minimal decorations, but the third is taken up with a handsome, lavish full-page illumination. It’s prepared with gesso, painted with oil and finished with shellac, its blues mixed from crushed lapis lazuli, its reds from saffron, and its borders decorated with gilt, gold flake, and seed pearl. It unquestionably depicts the alchemical wedding: the white queen and red king hold hands over a stylized sun and moon, there are various paraphernalia and paired animals in the margins, and it still looks as beautiful and new as if it has just been removed from the workbench in some candlelit scriptorium. That, however, is not what makes Lucy gasp out loud.

Flynn whirls around in a panic, and flashes to her side. “What? Did it – ?”

In answer, Lucy points down at the page. It takes Flynn a moment, but then he sees it too, and his eyebrows fly up in shock. The white queen and the red king are clearly recognizable as – well, as them. The queen has Lucy’s face, and the king has Flynn’s. As if that wasn’t explicit enough, their names are worked in the banners held up by a white doe and a red stag: Lucia Regina and Garcia Rex. Lucy’s been wondering this whole time why everyone’s so sure that it’s her who had to get Ashmole 782, what kind of obscure or mystical clues they could have possibly pieced together – well, it turns out it wasn’t exactly rocket science. It’s literally right there for everyone to see.

She and Flynn stare down at the page in total, stunned silence, as if waiting to see if it abruptly morphs or mutates or pops up Aprilus Foolus. At last, Lucy turns up to him and stammers, “Did you know? Did you see this?”

“No.” Flynn looks white as a sheet, rubbing a hand over his face. “I’ve never seen this before. Someone must have taken it out of Ashmole 782, or made sure to hide it – trying to protect you, or conceal your identity, or cast at least some doubt about who it was, but – ”

Lucy starts to say something, then stops. She still feels as if the air has been driven out of her lungs. Knowing, or at least strongly suspecting, that it’s you, that you’re the white queen and the central figure of this mystical drama, is not the same thing as seeing your goddamn face illustrated with
loving care on a medieval manuscript, next to the man you were hopefully, if random local enchantments had not suddenly intervened, about to get to home plate with. For his part, Flynn’s brain seems to still be largely offline (though there is an unkind comment to be made about how it tends to that way in many of his daily dealings). Finally he grabs for the other two pages, as if it might include the instruction manual. “What are these?”

“I don’t know.” They look like meaningless grids of numbers to Lucy. If these were deemed as important as the telltale illumination, they have to be some kind of super-powerful spell or explicit instructions for using the rest of the book, but she can’t make heads or tails of them. “Should we show these to the others?”

Flynn hesitates. They have obviously been cagey about sharing their research or findings with anyone else, and the instinct is still to keep them close to the vest. But they have spent the last several days grilling Denise and Michelle for any information they might possess on Ashmole 782, Lucy’s family connection to it, the witches who could have passed on that power, and everything else they can think of, and they have, however eventfully, gathered the various factions of their families together in hopes of actually figuring it the fuck out. He stares down at the illumination for a moment longer, then nods jerkily, sweeps it up, and strides out of the room, cloak swirling atmospherically behind him.

Lucy wipes her mouth on the back of her hand, has to grimly admit that her plans for the evening have been postponed yet again, and follows him out. She admittedly wants to get a load of everyone’s reactions to him in his knightly grandeur, and as she hurries down the stairs after him, she catches sight of Gabriel. He looks utterly blank, stunned, transfixed, as if he cannot tear his eyes away from the sight of his brother in his matching regalia, the image of a partnership and a brotherhood lost for a quarter of a millennium. His jaw drops, he takes an unsteady step, and rubs a hand over his face, as Jiya and Rufus spot Flynn as well and likewise stare. Jiya says, “Wow, Dad,” and Rufus just keeps blinking wildly. He finally offers some comment about real-life Assassin’s Creed, which is probably a compliment.

Flynn reaches the bottom of the stairs and can’t help a slight sassy cloak flourish of his own, as Gabriel makes an indeterminate strangled noise and still can’t turn around. Denise and Michelle look equally floored, and raise appraising eyebrows at him, then at Lucy, as if everyone might have shamefully guessed her purpose in hurrying upstairs earlier. Fortunately, nobody says it out loud, and Flynn is also not above enjoying the effect he’s having. “What?” he says. “I used to look like this all the time.”

Gabriel makes another half-laughing, half-sobbing noise and folds his arms tightly, Lucy glances at him, but he does not look around, as if he doesn’t trust himself to see this and not completely break. Given that he was the one who brought Flynn’s things and encouraged him to put them on, there is certainly an element of being hoisted by one’s own petard, but one should never presume that just because garbage men do things that they are prepared for the consequences. At last, much too slowly, he turns around, and still can’t look at Flynn directly. “Ah,” he says, addressing the wall over his left shoulder. “Yes. What is it?”

“We, uh.” Flynn coughs, looks at Lucy, and apparently decides to forego precise explanations of what they were actually doing. “Talking,” he says, because he manages to make that sound super convincing. “And these, well, these papers appeared out of thin air, and we think they may be from Ashmole 782. More than that, they’re… they’re rather specific, and…”

While everyone is looking confused, Lucy decides to bite the bullet. They’re going to have to know sooner or later, and as inventive relationship reveals go, this certainly ranks up there. “There’s a picture of us,” she says, spreading the page out on the coffee table. “Literally us. It looks like
someone cut it out of Ashmole 782 and hid it here in the house, under a protective spell. And we have no idea how or why.”

Everyone moves to gape at the picture, to which they again evince a medley of different reactions. Jiya looks startled, Rufus confused, Denise and Michelle alarmed and mystified, and Gabriel twists his head away as if he’s seen something revolting. Lucy glances at him, trying to catch his eye, but he remains steadfastly pivoted toward the wall as if he might burst into flames if he sees it again. Then Denise, stating the obvious, says, “That – that’s –”

“It’s us.” Lucy rubs her face. “Someone drew a picture of the two of us four hundred years ago or whenever the manuscript was written, and who knows how long this has been hidden here. Maybe it was waiting for me to understand what it meant, or there were certain conditions under which the spell would break. So the white queen and the red king aren’t just some generalized alchemy metaphor. Whoever was writing this manuscript was writing it about…” She hesitates. It sounds too awesome and impossible and ridiculous to be said aloud, and yet. “They were writing it about us all along. Personally.”

“It has to be Amelie Wallis, then?” Michelle scrutinizes the illumination, brow furrowed. “If she traveled to the future or if she saw you somehow, she would have known that it wasn’t just an abstract circumstance or placeholder figure. I don’t know if that means she made you the white queen, or she just knew –”

“Amelie Wallis?” Jiya looks startled. “I know that name from somewhere. What does she have to do with this?”

“She’s an ancestress of Lucy’s on both sides,” Flynn says. “A powerful witch, a timewalker, possibly directly involved with the making of the manuscript. At least, we’re fairly sure she was, and were speculating if she passed her power to Lucy personally. If she did –”

Startling all of them, Gabriel slams a hand down on the coffee table, hard enough to crack it, and Denise and Michelle stare at him in alarm and anger that he is wantonly damaging their furniture. He doesn’t even elaborate what has caused him to take such offense, but his eyes are totally black and it takes him an overwhelming effort to speak. “And this has – what? Been part of it the whole time? And nobody ever saw it?”

“It was hidden.” Flynn straightens up and surveys his brother grimly. “Someone took it out of the main manuscript, we don’t know who or when. And also, by the looks of things, magically concealed it here in the house until it was the right time for Lucy to retrieve it.”

“Did you know?” It sounds as if Gabriel is forcing it out through his teeth. “That that is who she – who both of you were?”

“We suspected,” Lucy says, because Gabriel looks as if he is going to put that authentic Knights of Lazarus getup to good use by challenging Flynn to a duel, and they really do not need that in the living room. “But we weren’t totally sure until we saw it. I don’t know why that warrants breaking coffee tables, so –”

Gabriel growls a short and unfathomably bitter laugh. “I apologize,” he says. “Yet again. There does seem no doubt that it is in fact the pair of you, vampire and witch. The Congregation would piss themselves if they saw it. It might outright prove that their laws are nonsense, their fear of miscegenation conceals the existence of a far greater magic, and they are small and petty creatures playing with small and petty power. Tell me, do you feel any sudden urge to overthrow all of supernatural society? How great danger are all of us in, do you think? Surely more than anything they could ever visit upon us, to warrant such drastic measures for its exclusion! Shall we back
away? Shield our unworthy eyes?"

Everyone turns to stare at him. Gabriel’s face is dead white, except for the patches of wild color burning in his cheeks, and they all take an instinctive step back from the inferno. Jiya reaches out to put an arm in front of Rufus, as if suddenly fearing for the safety of her human boyfriend even from her uncle, and Lucy is swiftly starting to fear that they have made a horrible mistake. She doesn’t know exactly why Gabriel is lashing out over the page particularly, though she might have a suspicion, but either way, he does not intend to leave them in suspense. “So is that indeed what this is?” he goes on, voice dripping with scathing sarcasm. “A witch plot from the very start, tangling us in its baneful threads? Does it matter what happened to any of the de Clermonts, so long as we served our purpose? Perhaps it was part of this unspoken grand design for them to ensure my father was murdered, so there was no remote chance of us ever pulling back together? A dalliance with a witch to break my poor stupid brother Wyatt’s heart? A witch come to attack Garcia in Sept-Tours, another to spirit Lucy away and torture her to within an inch of her life – yes, I think we have ample evidence and then some whether to trust anything they have concocted. If they have indeed connived from the first days of the Book of Life to trap you two together in unholy matrimony, perhaps you should run. And yet. We already know it is far too late.”

Lucy stares at him in petrifaction, as his words hit her like thrown knives. The worst part is that Gabriel is echoing all the angry thoughts she’s had about her own kind, about how they have constantly abused, betrayed, and belittled her, about how she has suffered far more at their hands, for much longer, than she ever has from the vampires – and they’re the ones who supposed to be her enemies. Given how much the de Clermont family has, as Gabriel also points out, suffered from the interference of witches, is he altogether right to fear that this is another sadistic trick or secret trap to destroy his brother? Flynn has already been leery about the implications of the alchemical wedding, and if it is something outright evil, if it has yoked them together in the crushing thrall of prophecy and will only bring them pain –

No, Lucy wants to say. No, that’s not it, it can’t be. It’s a good thing for us to be together, it’s right, it’s what I want, it can’t be wrong. And yet, is it? She does not know for sure. As Gabriel also said, their relationship is flatly forbidden in creature law, possibly for very good reason. They don’t know who drew this picture or what their motives were. Her own experience of shadowy witch plots is that they bring suffering and pain. Even if she was determined to make this a good thing, would that be enough? Or just make it worse?

“Well?” Gabriel goes on viciously, when nobody answers him. “So our family truly are the pawns of some witch prophecy, some demented game? Is that what I am to understand here? I am delighted to know beyond all doubt that all our suffering was nothing more than cruel and endless mockery. But, of course. The greater good was served?”

“Gabriel –” Flynn reaches out a hand, but Gabriel rips away. “Jesus, Gabriel, that’s – that’s not what it means, don’t go terrifying the –”

“Is it?” Gabriel’s ears are practically laid flat, his fangs bared, and everyone takes another few steps back. “Is that really what you think, Garcia? That it’s a good thing, another benign development from generous creatures who have always wanted the best for us? I daresay Papa might even agree with you, if he hadn’t been tortured to death! What was it that Temple called us, Asher de Clermont’s little foot soldiers? ‘His backward, self-sabotaging cowardice that he always managed to mistake for enlightened morality?’ Temple is a bastard whoreson bitch who I will tear into a thousand pieces, but perhaps he wasn’t wrong about that!”

“No you’re agreeing with Michael Temple?” A snarl enters Flynn’s voice as well. By now, everyone else has cleared off almost to the edges of the living room, leaving the de Clermont brothers
facing each other. The knightly garb is no longer attractive, the provoker of burning lust, but a terrifying threat that they used to be overwhelming, unstoppable soldiers who tore through everything that dared to stand before them. That they could, if they choose, be that again, and throw it all into one final fight that neither of them might walk away from. Flynn spreads his arms, as if sheltering the others from a sudden lunge. “Have you lost your mind?”

“I don’t know, darling.” Gabriel spits the word at him like poison, in what must be the maddened echo of a teasing, tender endearment. “Have I?”

Flynn looks as if he has in fact been physically attacked. Even Gabriel looks as if he wants to bite it back, but it’s too late, he can’t, it has been too late for years, for centuries. There is a nauseatingly horrible pause. Then Flynn says, “If you’re now our enemy –”

Gabriel moves so fast that everyone gasps, there’s a ringing scrape, and the next instant, his sword is in his hand. There’s a crackle as Denise and Michelle conjure defensive fireballs, preparing to take him down if he goes after any of them, and Jiya screams. Somehow, that seems to cut through the madness. Gabriel’s black-eyed death stare flickers, and he lowers his arm, sheathing his blade again. Flynn’s hand has wrapped around the hilt of his own sword and doesn’t let go, as Lucy knows in despair exactly how Maria must have felt all these years: trying to force the brothers into the same room under the belief that it has to, it has to, go better this time just by the law of averages, and then it inexplicably manages to get even worse. The gambler’s fallacy, the belief that if the roulette wheel has rolled black twelve times in a row, it is more likely to roll red by some accumulated probability, whereas the odds actually reset and have the same chance every time. Gabriel stands there, a fine tremor running through him from head to toe. He opens his mouth as if to choke out one more trite apology, and cannot bring himself to it. He throws a look at the image of the alchemical wedding, half-disgusted and half-desolate. Then he says, “No.”

“What?” Flynn doesn’t let his guard down. “No what?”

“No, I am not your enemy.” Gabriel steps back and holds up his hands. “But go ahead, Garcia. Just kill me and have done with it. I imagine we would both be happier with it finished. That is what you want, is it not?”

Flynn gets a look on his face as if never, in fifteen hundred years of life, has he heard a statement so wildly removed from any remote actionable human concept of truth and reality (and he must have heard plenty of them, especially from him). He stares at Gabriel as if he has sprouted an extra head. Then he says, just as choked, “No.”

“What?” Gabriel echoes back at him, with deliberate, goading precision. “No what?”

“I don’t want you dead, you –” Flynn fumbles for a word bad enough to call him. “Is that what you think? Is that what you’ve thought all this time?”

“I –” Gabriel starts into a heated reply, stops, and looks as if all the strength has drained out of him. All he can manage is, “How the fuck should I know what you think? We haven’t talked in two hundred and fifty years!”

Flynn opens his mouth as if in search of a rebuttal to that, can’t find one, and ends up looking something like a goldfish. He takes another step, but Gabriel retreats, looking anguished and angry and ashamed all at once. Then he turns on his heel, the door bangs, and as papers swirl and lamps tremble, lights flickering, he’s gone. There’s a rushing sound as if he’s plunging away through the witchwoods alone, in the darkness, and silence falls like thunder.

“What was –” Denise is the first to recover, though even she looks rocked. “He could have seriously
hurt one of us if he – do I have to go out there and –”

“He wouldn’t hurt us!” Flynn swings on her fast enough that Denise jumps backward into a bookshelf, sending several of them toppling, and for a moment, it seems as if this can still get worse even after Gabriel exited as dramatically as he arrived. For her part, Lucy notes that even when Gabriel is at his worst, badly wounded and at the end of his rope and faced with the ashes of his entire life and whatever this could be, when he is pushing everyone away as if to make sure there will be no unwarranted grief on his account, Flynn’s first and unshakeable instinct is to defend him. Of course, God forbid he actually say that to Gabriel’s face, but it is clear that if any of the witches want to run after Gabriel, they will have to get through Garcia first. Defending his brother’s weak side, the way they used to do all the time, the way these clothes are a reminder of it. It doesn’t matter if it’s a muddy battlefield in medieval France or a living room in modern New York. It’s just the way it works.

“Should –” Jiya’s voice breaks the hush, faint and shaken. “Should someone go after him?”

Flynn and Lucy exchange a look. They can’t help but feel as if this is their fault for bringing the bombshell into their midst, though there was really no way to break it gently, and they can’t be sure if Gabriel wants to see either of them right now. There was also the warning about not wandering too far, though of any of them, Gabriel is likely the one who could handle whatever is out there by himself. Might even feel as if it’s the only thing he can usefully do, and by now, he’s bitterly used to going it alone. Lucy takes a step, about to volunteer – she has nothing to fear from the woods, they are hers and so is their magic – but Jiya moves past. “I’m going to – I should –”

Flynn makes a grab at his daughter’s arm, but Jiya dodges – poor girl, this is the worst imaginable to learn about your family’s centuries of buried pain – and darts for the door. They hear her push it open and hurry outside. “Uncle Gabriel? Uncle Gabriel!”

“Look, if there are creepy-crawlies out there, or magical hitmen, or whatever, shouldn’t I –” Rufus makes a move to follow her. “I mean, it can’t be safe to –”

“No, you wouldn’t help anyone,” Flynn snaps. “Unless you’d solve equations at them?”

Rufus gives him a wow-fuck-you-too look, and seems dead-set on continuing after Jiya even if she is far more powerful than he is, as an ordinary human. When both of the men have disappeared in pursuit, still bickering, that leaves Lucy, Denise, and Michelle by themselves, communally shocked. Nobody can think what to say for a long moment. Then Lucy looks up. “Is this – could this be some kind of witch plot?”

She can see that both Denise and Michelle obviously want to assure her that it’s not, but the thing is, they don’t know either. As before, Lucy can’t shake her conviction that while Gabriel’s methods of handling this news might have been the wrong kind of spectacular, his motives aren’t wrong. Why does he have any reason to trust this or welcome it as a development? She knows that Flynn has been worried that this is some kind of sinister long-game prophecy, and the idea that all the de Clermont family’s pain and loss hasn’t mattered as long as it wedged Garcia into position to do this, to be this, for the witches’ benefit whether or not he wants to – if she was Gabriel, she might blow her stack too. He is already so rocked and reeling, so unable to put up even a shabby pretense that he’s fine, and now this… taking him even further away from Lucy, from Flynn, in the grip of some pitiless prophecy… well, it’s clear that he has deep feelings of some kind, and this has to burn.

“I should go,” Lucy says. “I should go after them too, I’m the one who can control the magic in the woods, I don’t want them to –”

“Lucy –” Denise starts. “It could be dangerous –”
“Yes, and they’re out there!” Lucy flares. “And if something is after us, then –”

Deciding not to waste any more time with explanations, she ducks under Denise’s outstretched arm and runs down the front hall into the night. The cold air slaps her cheeks, she’s only in her socks so the ground is rough and pointy underfoot, and she hop-runs across the yard and in the direction of the dark woods. She can’t smell Gabriel, Flynn, Rufus, and Jiya, the way a vampire could, but she can sense them anyway, like following a golden Ariadne’s thread out of (or into) the labyrinth. She speeds up, ducking branches, tempted to walk with hands outstretched so one doesn’t abruptly put her eye out. The woods feel different again by night than they did by day, as if the magic here is different beneath the light of sun and moon. She doesn’t know that it’s darker, exactly, but it is certainly wilder and less contained and less friendly. She hears murmuring, like the creatures of bark and root and branch are stirring to peer out at these invaders, these vampires, with unfriendly gazes, and walks faster. These are, after all, witchwoods.


No answer. They’re here, they’re just ahead, and then just ahead after that, until she starts to wonder if they have already crossed some magical pale, stepped into the full flow of the enchantment or the otherwhere that moves thinly just alongside the ordinary night. There’s a creaking and croaking and rustling to every side, though everything that lives in the forest must be asleep. She raises her hands, as if to remind the woods that they are hers, they should follow her orders, but it’s more difficult this time. They aren’t sure they can trust her.

Lucy hears a strangled grunt from up ahead, sounding like a man in pain, and breaks out into a run. She jumps over one of the broken branch piles from her hurricane, and spots the giant old lightning-struck tree up ahead, the one she was sitting on the other day when Flynn found her. It has opened up its trunk like a mammoth shark rising from the deep, and entangled Gabriel, Flynn, and Jiya in it, coiling them with countless vines and binding them together like heretics about to be burned at the stake. They’re struggling ferociously, but can’t get free even with their combined supernatural strength, and Rufus is frantically whacking at the vines with a stick, which is very sweet and totally useless. “Oh, come on, evil tree!” he’s yelling. “I swear, where’s Treebeard when you need him?”

Lucy arrives in the next instant, decides that the role apparently falls to her, and throws out both hands, trying to pry the tangles loose by main force. The tree is still resisting her – it’s not disobeying, it is her servant, but it thinks that the little queen should just step back and trust that it knows what to do with these foreign, invading bloodsuckers. Lucy isn’t sure how to correct it that no, these bloodsuckers are her friends, and she would prefer it if they were not squeezed into juicy pulp. But she doesn’t have the right kind of magic, she has not tried to match her will to an ancient force of pure elemental power, and it feels as useless as if she has tried to rip it off with her bare hands. Even a vampire will notice if you literally tear it in half, and Gabriel, Flynn, and Jiya’s struggles seem to be weakening – not, not this, not them –

And with that – Lucy isn’t sure what she does, exactly. Just that she knows she needs more magic and she doesn’t have it here, and she has to change what the tree thinks, she needs to convince it otherwise. She doesn’t consciously know what she’s doing until she’s about to do it, and thinks that this is a horrible way to hurl your conscience out into the trackless wilds of unformed space and the tangled immensity of passing time. But it’s that or watch all three of them physically torn to pieces, and the choice isn’t even a choice. She gulps a raw, frantic breath as if about to go under for a very deep dive, and timewalks.

It is the first time she can remember that she has ever tried to do it consciously, and the effect is like walking into a mashing meat grinder. She is buffeted from side to side in abyssal darkness, frantic to keep hold of her own mind and self before it can be split and peeled or pummeled into oblivion, sees
sparks and flashes of other moments, other people, nothing. A speeded-up film of the tree’s memory plays in front of her eyes as there’s a blinding flash, the lightning strike zips up into the sky in reverse, the trunk stands tall and towering again, and four seasons pass in a fractured kaleidoscope, pink buds of spring and green leaves of autumn and yellow crowns of autumn and bare winter branches laden with snow. She spins as wildly as if she is on an out-of-control merry-go-round, isn’t sure how far she should go back or what she would do once she arrives, other than give it a stern telling-off and tell it not to eat three vampires at some point in the future. She can sense exits from the stream like more golden threads, plucks frantically at them like a drowning woman, but they all unravel in her hands. She is about to be cosmically sick, perhaps, but that doesn’t matter. Not until –

And then, Lucy falls out on her face in deep, thick black mulch. It’s night again, but not the night she left. The world is enveloped in a mantle of soft onyx velvet, the sky is luminous with stars undimmed by any light pollution, and she knows at once that she has gone somewhen much older. She can’t be sure of the precise date, but the tree stands in front of her, whole and young, jacketed in silvery bark that glows ethereal in the moonlight. Gabriel, Flynn, Jiya, and Rufus are not here. Lucy left them potentially hundreds of years in the future. It is only her, and it, and the silence of a wild New England night.

Gulping uselessly, feeling as if her lungs might have also been left in the twenty-first century, Lucy raises her hands and tries to probe the tree’s consciousness, its deepest thoughts. But she doesn’t speak the language of leaves, and doesn’t understand what she finds there, or whether she is having any long-term effect on its predilection to snatch vampires. What if there was a reason it was trained how to do that, and by meddling with it now, she will disrupt some vital event that will in turn have butterfly-effect ripples? The old saw about the dangers of time travel, after all. She doesn’t know what magic her ancestors embedded in here, or whether she is being unforgivably reckless by meddling with it. She just knows that she can’t let them die, and that is all that matters.

Lucy reaches for one thread within the tree’s glowing heart, then another, but it doesn’t seem to like that, the same way you wouldn’t like an unskilled neurosurgeon getting in there with a scalpel just to have a poke around. It seems poised to lash out at her, which could really have calamitous consequences, when all of a sudden, she becomes aware that she isn’t alone. Someone is standing behind her. She whirls around, in a sudden panic that it’s Michael Temple, that he has obliged Emma or Jessica or another witch who somehow knows how to do this to chase her here, or –

It’s not Temple. It’s a woman. She’s dressed in seventeenth-century Puritan clothes like something from The Crucible, a white mob cap and collar and sensible dark dress, a woolen cloak pinned over her shoulders and buckled shoes peeking from beneath her skirts. She reaches out both hands, and her magic flows over Lucy’s, similar in feel and form but a thousand times more elegant and refined in practice. It seizes hold of the tree, and shifts, shifts, spinning around and around, faster and faster. Lucy isn’t sure what’s going on or if she should try to contribute to this process in any way; she already feels swept up in a raging wave. But then she turns, and gets a look at the witch’s face. It’s considerably like hers, if not identical. Light brown hair tidied beneath the cap, brown eyes, something very similar in the proportions of cheek and jaw and nose. Enough to make her suddenly certain that this –

Too late. Lucy does not have time to speculate or to say a proper word, as just then, she can feel the timewalk correcting itself like an onrushing train. She plunged into the distant past like stretching a rubber band back, and now, since she doesn’t have enough strength to hold it or to permanently translocate herself, it’s snapping like the rubber band has been let go, and launches her bodily back across the chasm of centuries. She falls like a stone, head over heels over head over heels, and slaps something hard, feels her head break the surface as if she has returned from her dive, and is aware of cold air and worried voices.
“Lucy?” Someone kneels down, falling to all fours over her. “Lucy!”

She tries to answer, but can’t get her wind back, or open her eyes just yet. Hands grip at her arms, lifting her up, and at that, she finally screws up enough wherewithal to see that it’s Flynn, clearly about to panic. He looks ruffled and filthy and frantic, his white tabard streaked with dirt and leaves and sticks still tangled in his hair (this is now the second time that the woods have tried to kill him in the last few days, though at least the first time was a deliberate test run) but he is alive and uncrushed, as are Gabriel and Jiya. Rufus is crouched anxiously at her side as she coughs and wipes her mouth, but the tree – completely inexplicably, for them – has abruptly relinquished its grasp, its vines slithering back down into the earth and its trunk closing up. It falls still, sleeping.

“Lucy,” Flynn says again. She can feel his arms beneath her, hard as a statue’s in their mail. He and Gabriel are lucky they were wearing it. “Moja ljubav, say something.”

“I’m all right.” Lucy’s not sure if her internal organs are ever going to return to their accustomed places, her inner ear is still convinced that she is spinning, and her mouth is almost too dry to work. “I meant to do that, I just – Garcia – I timewalked. I had to save you and it was the only thing I could think of. I don’t know when I went, exactly, but I was trying to convince the tree to let you go, and I – I’m not sure, but I think I met her. Amelie Wallis.”

Flynn stares down at her, the expression on his face hard to make out, half-shadowed in the moonlight. He clearly doesn’t think she’s had a sudden psychotic break, at least, but this is still a lot to take in all at once. “You met her?”

“Yes – I mean, I’m not sure, I think I did. It was all just swirling chaos and darkness, and then I must have – sensed her somehow, or her magic drew me there. I couldn’t convince the tree to let you go after it had you, so I had to do it before. Amelie helped me with it, she used her magic to strengthen mine, and then the timewalk collapsed and I was thrown back here. I don’t know when I arrived, or – any of it, but I’m pretty sure that’s what happened.”

Flynn blinks several times, and has to take a moment to process that. Then he looks down at her anxiously, hands renewing their search for possible injuries. “You just – what, timewalked possibly close to four hundred years in the past, met your ancestress, convinced a tree not to murder us, then jumped back here, and weren’t – what, completely pulverized?”

“I think so?” Lucy doesn’t feel pulverized, at least. She is justifiably dizzy, but she doesn’t even have that nauseous, dehydrated, collapsing feeling that she did before when she was trying to use too much magic, which must have resulted from the innate constraints of the spellbind. Now that she’s been freed from it, now that it’s not fighting the bondage, her body doesn’t rebel physically. She’s testing herself like a performance athlete, but not damaging herself. Wow. She actually did that?

“We should get out of here,” Lucy says instead. “I don’t know if I convinced the tree to let you go permanently, or just this once. When you showed up, angry, armed vampires clearly in some kind of fight, I suppose its protective reflexes were triggered, and…” She looks over at the others. “Are you all right?”

“I think so.” Jiya is gingerly massaging her midriff, which has angry red whip marks on it. She allows Rufus to give her a hand to her feet, and then they all glance warily over at Gabriel, who still hasn’t said anything. Jiya ventures, “Uncle Gabriel?”

It takes a long moment until he turns around, looking very much as if he has done a truly terrible job at disguising his emotions. “Yes, my dear?”

“Are you…” Jiya starts toward him, but Gabriel flinches. “Can we… what just…?”
Gabriel eyes her with utter, bone-deep weariness, as if he doesn’t want her attempts to help but can’t think how to bat them off without causing another scene. They are distracted, however, by the sound of twigs snapping in the woods, an erratic rustling and cracking, as if someone or something is blundering closer in the darkness. All at once, no matter absolutely everything else that just happened, Gabriel and Flynn snap into battle mode with an instinct that no time or estrangement can break. They draw their swords in perfect unison, shove the other three behind them, and stand shoulder to shoulder, poised on edge to attack anything that comes charging out. It isn’t charging, though. It sounds as if it’s staggering, as if it might be badly hurt. A human-sized shadow appears through the thick undergrowth, out into the moonlight. It – she – looks at them, then collapses.

Lucy stares. Can’t be sure what she’s seeing, and yet.

“Jessica?”

Her (former?) friend doesn’t answer, as she’s semi-conscious on the ground, looking as if she too has fought her way free from something terrible – marauding trees or angry vampires or whatever else. Whatever she’s doing here in New York, Lucy doesn’t know, or if she was what followed Rufus and Jiya from Oxford, but it doesn’t matter. Dried dark blood mats Jessica’s blonde hair, it looks as if it took all of her strength to make it this far, and Jiya lets out a startled-sounding squawk of recognizance. “Wait, what is she – ?”

Gabriel and Flynn exchange a look. It is clear that they don’t know what to make of their little brother’s witch ex-girlfriend suddenly appearing and looking like she’s been through actual hell, but fraternal instinct, no matter how reluctant, can’t just countenance leaving her there either. There’s the fact that Jessica broke into Flynn’s lab and stole the information on Lucy to give to Temple, but Flynn said it sounded as if she was definitely forced. None of them can be sure that her presence here isn’t another trick, but what are they supposed to do?

Lucy pushes past Gabriel and Flynn, who make a grab for her arms, and hurries across to Jessica, kneeling next to her. When she rolls her over onto her back, Jess is still breathing, but her eyes are only showing their whites and her pulse is fast and shallow. Lucy looks at her friend, who she shared coffee and griping sessions and commiseration over the academic job market and whatever else, and decides that she’s not going to hold whatever Temple made her do against her. She beckons to the boys. “We need to get her back to the house.”

Gabriel and Flynn glance at each other again, and then Gabriel gives half a shrug, comes forward, and bends down to hoist Jessica into his arms. He utters a muffled grunt as he does so, wincing in pain, and since this would ordinarily be no issue for a vampire at all, Lucy looks at him worriedly – how is his shoulder holding up? Gabriel, however, sedulously avoids her eyes, straightens up, and gets a better hold on Jessica. Still without a word, he marches off through the woods, toward the distant lights of the house.

They cause quite a stir when they reappear, dirty and tousled, three of them having survived an assassination attempt by a tree, one of them having timewalked to sometime in the seventeenth century, and an unconscious witch having been added to the mix just for the hell of it. Gabriel thrusts her at Denise and Michelle. “Here,” he says roughly. “Another houseguest, if you can stand it. This one is a witch, you’ll have to help her. Though she did sleep with my little brother, so be careful. You might get the reek of vampire on you anyway.”

Michelle looks a little offended, but apparently decides that fighting with him now will just lead to everything getting set on fire. She takes charge of Jessica and puts her down on the couch, trying to assess and treat her various injuries, as at least everyone seems to have briefly forgotten about the bombshell of the Ashmole pages in the fluster of a new crisis. Gabriel and Flynn are still in their
Knights of Lazarus regalia, pacing around the living room as if to be sure nobody crashes through the windows, and Rufus is looking as if he had known that he was really jumping headfirst into the supernatural family garbage, he might have just stayed home with the doors locked and had a Netflix binge. When Jessica finally, feebly returns to half-consciousness, Lucy moves over to look down at her. “Hey,” she says. “Jess. Do you know where you are?”

“I’m…” Jessica shudders, makes a dry-retching noise, and closes her eyes again. “Lucy?”

“Yeah, it’s me.” Lucy hesitates, then perches on the arm of the couch. “Where did you come from? Do you remember what happened to you?”

“I’m not…” Jessica is clearly struggling to stay awake. “I don’t, I’m… not sure. I was in Oxford, and then I… wasn’t. This isn’t it?”

“No.” Lucy isn’t sure if she should say where it is instead, if there’s some kind of magical spy or tracking device or something else in Jessica’s head, using her as a scout whether voluntarily or involuntarily. “You look like you’ve had it bad.”

“She was missing,” Jiya says, low-voiced, to Flynn. “Like I said. Someone must have taken her, and I’m guessing we know who. What if she’s – didn’t she and Uncle Wyatt get into major trouble for whatever – “

Flynn gives her a warning look, and Jiya shuts her mouth rather abruptly. Lucy looks back at Jessica, decides that they can give the interrogation a pass for now, and helps Michelle carry her down to the couch bed in the basement. Once they have gotten her comfortably settled, they shut the door and start back up the stairs, but Michelle first performs a complex series of spells that embed glowing wards in the door and tangle across the walls. Lucy looks at her in surprise and alarm. “You don’t think she’s going to – what, get up at night and attack us?”

“I don’t know what she’s going to do,” Michelle says. “She’s clearly hurt, and she’s your friend, as well as a fellow witch. We do have a responsibility to provide care. But she doesn’t know where she came from or who sent her or why she’s here, and we already know that she’s been working for Michael Temple and stole sensitive information on you. We have actual pages from Ashmole 782 lying around upstairs, along with whatever else – including you yourself. We can be compassionate without letting our guard down, and I think we would be wise to remember that.”

Lucy reluctantly has to agree, even as she deplores the necessity of it. They climb out of the basement and back into the main house, and she glances around, trying to decide if she should tell Michelle about her timewalking episode. Gabriel and Flynn have disappeared, presumably to change out of the chainmail, and Jiya is offering to help Denise wash up from dinner, as if in apology for all the chaos they are causing. Rufus is squinting down at the image of the alchemical wedding with his tongue between his teeth, and copying out the symbols from the other two pages onto a notepad. He might not be a witch or a vampire, but he is a damn good scientist with an eye for complex puzzles, equations, and codes, and can recognize patterns even without understanding their underlying system or language. “Hey,” he says, after a moment. “Does the date April 6, 1590 mean anything to anyone? Followed by a bunch of… math gizmos that I need to work on, but yeah. Something about the Strand in London, what looks like some kind of secret password, and I don’t know what else?”

“1590?” Lucy glances up sharply, and sees Flynn, who has just returned in his regular clothes, also look startled. “April 1590, in London? Why?”

“I’m not sure.” Rufus scribbles some more. “Something about Walsingham?”

“Walsingham,” Flynn says. “Sir Francis Walsingham, Queen Elizabeth’s powerful and influential
“Yes.” Rufus frowns. “Clairmont House?”

Both of Flynn’s eyebrows fly up at that. After a pause, as if not wanting to let everyone else in on this but having no choice, he says, “As I told Lucy, I was in London for several years in the 1590s. That was the name of my house. Why is that in Ashmole 782?”

“Don’t look at me, you’re the expert here.” Rufus erases something and recopies it in. “But your face is literally already in the damn thing, so maybe it’s not surprising. You were actually in, like, Elizabethan London? For real?”

“Yes,” Flynn says dryly. “Among many other places. Immortal, remember?”

“That’s still very weird.” Rufus shakes his head. “Why would Walsingham’s death be significant?”

“Because after that is when the School of Night properly formed,” Flynn says. “As long as Walsingham was alive, there was a certain amount of healthy fear that he would uncover our activities and report them. There were significant political dangers associated with the accusations of treason and atheism and unholy study, though John Dee, of course, held high office as a respected advisor to Her Majesty. Elizabeth was fond of Raleigh and might have indulgently overlooked the occultic tinkering common to any well-off gentleman of the time, but her ministers, the rest of England, and Catholic Europe would not have. Any excuse to portray England as a bunch of heretically Protestant black magic demons who had to be overthrown for the good of Christendom. The country had just defeated the Spanish Armada in 1588, they didn’t need another all-out war.”

Lucy and Rufus both goggle at him, since knowing that he has lived a very long time is still not quite the same as hearing him casually refer to major figures and events of European history with whom he has personally spoken and experienced. Flynn did mention the School of Night connection back in Sept-Tours, but he also thought that if they had been involved with Ashmole 782, they would have told him. But now direct references to them, and to Flynn himself, have cropped up in missing parts of that manuscript. Her handwriting was on the last part, and it mentioned her ancestor. It’s their goddamn faces. What the…?

“Right,” Rufus says. “Moving speedily along. I think this doodad might be some kind of star map, and you can trust me when I say that because I’m an astrophysicist. This is the astrological symbol for Aries, and this one here is for Sagittarius. I think it’s calculated for the traditional tropical or Western zodiac, because there’s also the sidereal zodiac, and the dates for the sun being in their constellations are a different thing altogether according to the International Astronomical Union, but – ” At that moment, he catches sight of Flynn’s face and realizes he should probably cut to the chase.

“Fine, you’re the only one who gets to ramble about science here, I see how it is. Anyway, I would have to take it outside and check it against the sky, which seems like a very bad idea right now, but we’re just about to enter Sagittarius, date-wise. It starts in late November. Aries starts at the spring equinox and goes to roughly April 20. So April 6, this date here, that would be in Aries.”

“So what?” Flynn’s arms are folded in a dangerous sort of way, long fingers tapping on his elbow. “Fascinating as that digression is, what does it mean?”

“Wow,” Rufus says. “I come in here and start solving all this for you, and you’re just grumpy about the fact that I am fully intending to make all sorts of passionate – ”

“Focus,” Lucy interrupts hastily, before that vein twitching in Flynn’s temple can pick up any more speed. “It doesn’t surprise me that there’s an astrological referent of some kind, because everyone
was into astrology and alchemy and all these mystic sciences. But you said it was a map, Rufus. A map to where?” She almost says when, but doesn’t.

“To…” Rufus checks something else. “If these are coordinates, and I think they are, that’s 51.48 N/0.00 E. I don’t have to Google that, because I’m smart, and also because 0.00 E is the Greenwich Meridian, the place where longitude is calculated from. Because England’s the center of the world, yay. Anyway, you can stop me if I’m getting off track, but it looks like this is a detailed set of instructions for how to successfully travel to April 6, 1590, in Greenwich. I haven’t figured out this half yet, but if the star map corresponds to how the heavens need to look on our end for the journey to be successful, that has to be happening soon. It’s only a few more days until the start of Sagittarius. So…”

Lucy and Flynn exchange an alarmed look. “Wait,” Lucy says. “We’re supposed to go?”

“Since it’s your faces on that thing,” Rufus points out, “I’d say the odds are good.”

Lucy opens and shuts her mouth. She wants to ask if Rufus is actually convinced of all this talk of time travel and magic and casually bombing into late Tudor London out of the sky, but then, he is an astrophysicist, and time travel is entirely possible within that theoretical framework. Only for quarks and sub-atomic particles and whatever else, but the universe does a lot of extremely weird things on the quantum level, and at least it isn’t totally off the ranch. In fact, perhaps too unsettlingly on it. They have been pointed toward 1590 for a while now, it seems inextricably tied up with the mystery of Ashmole 782’s origins – and, well, Lucy did just outright timewalk. But there’s a major problem with all this. She couldn’t hold herself in the past for more than a few minutes. Is she supposed to go permanently, and manage to take Flynn with her? Maybe she could work up to it with practice, like a few years of practice, but by the sound of things, the time may be approaching within a matter of weeks, if not days. If that celestial gateway closes, it might never open again.

“This is ridiculous,” Lucy says a little faintly, more to buy herself time than because she actually thinks Rufus is wrong. “Who put the pages in this house? Who did that enchantment? Denise and Michelle said that it burned and was rebuilt in the 1860s, so it would have had to be someone after that. Was it my mother? She supposedly knew about my connection to Ashmole 782 for years, and had access to fragments even if not the whole thing. If she got these pages, and hid them from everyone else who was looking for them… or maybe…”

She grabs the other page, the one headed with the three cryptic lines about blood and fear, absence and desire, a discovery of witches. Remembering how she induced the fragment in Sept-Tours to produce its hidden text by pressing the omega on her hand against it, she does the same here, but there’s no jolt of pain, no sense of revelation. No more writing appears on the paper. Great. More cryptic, unsolvable clues. Just what they need. The frustration almost rises up in her throat like a scream, but she manages to hold it back. Did Carol put these here, conceal them with a protective enchantment that would only break at the right moment, and then never tell anyone about it? It seems like the sort of thing her mother might do, Lucy has to admit. But for what? Is Gabriel right? Is this an inescapable prophecy trapping them both, her and Flynn, all the way down? Maybe Flynn is right to want to put the brakes on whatever is happening with them, much as she hates the idea. Or should they just give in? What?

As they are all still staring at the pages, there’s a noise at the door, and they look up with a start to see Gabriel, who has changed back into his usual clothes, though his face is drawn and greyish and Flynn starts up with an alarmed noise. Gabriel waves him away, making his way across the living room and sitting down in a chair, with a coldly expectant expression as if he is a king waiting for the courtiers to gather before the throne. “Where are your godmothers?” he says to Lucy, as if he wasn’t just shouting at everyone and drawing his sword on them and storming out into the darkness. “We
need to talk."

“Gabriel – ” Their last attempt to talk just turned, as noted, into Chernobyl, so Lucy’s not sure what he’s expecting this time. He really doesn’t look well. His hands are gripping his knees as if he’s physically trying to hold himself together, and she doesn’t think he needs more arguments. “Do you really think this is the time for – ”

Gabriel ignores her, glancing at Rufus. “Fetch Denise and Michelle. Then we – ”

“I’m sorry, what?” Rufus doesn’t budge. “First of all, I’m not your little errand boy. I don’t care how rich and important and immortal you are, you don’t get to pull some Driving Miss Daisy bullshit. I don’t give a crap if either you or your brother don’t approve of me dating Jiya – though from what I’ve seen, your insane family tree could only be improved by adding me to it. So no, I’m not going to scurry off and get our hostesses just for you to continue to not deal with whatever deep personal issues you clearly have going on. I take it that extensive therapy is something you’re also too good for, but I don’t know. Maybe check into that? You look like you could afford to pay for it.”

Gabriel looks blindsided. He opens and shuts his mouth, can’t seem to think how to answer that, and finally is forced into a stiff, short nod. “You make a pertinent point, Dr. Carlin,” he says. “It has been… an eventful evening, and I realize that I myself am the cause of a great deal of that. Perhaps it is indeed better that we wait for tomorrow. Yet I cannot help but wonder if even that would be too late.”


“Because it seems more evident than ever that the war is coming.” Gabriel’s eyes are a black shadow, his face still and carved and spectacular as a master sculptor in marble. “As the grandmaster of the Knights of Lazarus, I am prepared to do my part, as I said back in Sept-Tours, so long as I can. But if there should come a moment when I cannot, Garcia, I – ” He hesitates for a long moment. “I want you to succeed me. Once I thought Christian would be my heir, but he is… well. You are my brother. It is right that it should be you.”

“What?” Flynn looks startled, and downright afraid. “Gabriel – what are you talking about? Why wouldn’t you be there? You’re the grandmaster, Papa always intended it to be you. I don’t – you know I’m not – ”

Gabriel doesn’t answer, still staring at the wall. Rufus clears his throat, seems to decide that this is indeed a conversation he doesn’t need to sit in on, and gathers up the Ashmole pages, scurrying out. That leaves Gabriel, Lucy, and Flynn, and both of the latter regard the former in tense confusion. Gabriel seems about to say something, wrestling madly with himself, and then he doesn’t. At last he looks up. “Earlier. I reacted… poorly.”

That is clearly one word for it, but neither of them feel like baiting him over it. He rubs a hand over his face, suddenly looking every one of his two thousand years. “Thank you for saving us, Lucy, though I recognize it was my fault that it was necessary at all. But if we are to have any chance of success in the war, then Denise and Michelle, and the other witches, will have to join with us against the forces of evil, from whatsoever species they may spring. Benjamin Cahill may be a witch, and Michael Temple a vampire, but they both must be defeated, and this short-sighted, blinkered urge to only protect our own kind, and damn the others, must be done away with. I have been… as guilty of that as anyone. Perhaps more than most, and repeatedly, with what I have said and done about the witches. I still have no reason to trust the prophecy or whatever was meant by Ashmole 782, but that does not matter now. I still have to make a choice about what I want to fight for and fight with, in the time I – about what I should do, should have always done. I want it to be you, Garcia. I always have.”
Flynn looks very startled, and even more confused. He opens his mouth awkwardly, trying to come up with some sort of response, as Lucy glances sidelong at Gabriel and understands. She also understands something else, and feels a block of ice slide into her stomach. She doesn’t ask permission, because he would just try to deflect it one more time, and she can’t let him, not one more time. She gets to her feet, strides across the living room, takes hold of Gabriel’s shirt as he tries too late to stop her, and rips it open.

A communal, horrified gasp echoes between both of them, as Gabriel grabs at his sleeve and tries to pull it back over his shoulder, but too late. They’ve seen, all of them, what has happened to his wound. It has gone black and rugged and violently raw, angry red streaks radiating outward, and the flesh around it has a withered, greyish, shrunken look, as if it has died on the bone and not yet decayed. The rot has spread across most of his chest and around the back of his shoulder, and as Gabriel stares up at her, Lucy can tell that he already knows. He knows how bad it is, he knows that it – that he –

“Oh my God.” Her voice comes out thin and shaken and totally insufficient. “Gabriel. Jesus. Why didn’t you tell us – tell me about this?”

“I didn’t –” Gabriel tries to knock her hand off and get to his feet, and staggers. Flynn flashes over in half a millisecond, catching him around the waist, with a look on his face as Mount Olympus itself has threatened to crumble into dust. “Leave it. There’s no point.”

“No point?” Flynn sounds like he doesn’t know whether to laugh or cry. “Is this why – Gabriel, what is – Lucy could have fixed it! I could have fixed it, we – something, there’s – no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. You fucking idiot!”

“Lucy can’t fix it.” Gabriel’s voice is a rasp, as Flynn manhandles him back into the chair and looks like he’ll sit on him personally to make him stay there. “It’s manticore venom, Garcia. There’s no cure. The last manticore was slaughtered in the sixteenth century, and if there was ever an effective recipe for an antidote, it was lost then too. I suppose Temple kept some hoarded down the centuries, for the chance to use it if he ever got in striking range of either of us again. There is nothing either of you can do.”

“No.” Flynn’s face is chalk white. He has already lost so many people – his human wife and daughter, his vampire father and nephew, his lover Matej, and effectively his brother afterward, as well as never having the relationship with his vampire daughter that he should have. It’s also clear that even after so much loss, this might be the one that he cannot take and stay sane, cannot have the pillar of his entire world kicked out for good. “Gabriel! You fucking idiot! Why didn’t you – we could have tried other things, we could have –”

“Could we have?” Gabriel’s voice is soft and depthlessly bitter. “All this time, Garcia? Perhaps we could, and yet. None of that matters now, does it? I will fight this as long as I can, I will buy you as much time as I can, but listen to me. That may not be very much. You have to take up my ring and my place. You have to be the grandmaster when I am gone, lead the Knights of Lazarus and become the head of our family. You have to.”

Flynn looks as if his guts have been torn out of him at the words “when I am gone.” He turns away, rubbing his face, shaking his head in mute, frantic denial, hands opening and closing as if in search of a tangible enemy to fight. They were just wearing their regalia earlier, it was like old times – and no wonder Gabriel brought it, if he wanted to see them together in it one last time before he died. And then Lucy walked downstairs with the image of the alchemical wedding and the knowledge that it might be for nothing, that Gabriel could not even ensure Garcia’s safety as his last legacy, and it was gone, all gone. No wonder he lost his mind a little. She doesn’t know how he even pulled
himself back. This can’t be happening, this can’t be real. Gabriel is older than modern history. If they lose him, if he can die, nothing lasts, nothing can stand, nothing will survive. And neither will Flynn.

“There has to be something,” Flynn says, in the tone of a man scrambling for answers. “You could feed on me, that helps a vampire heal. Or Lucy could use her magic on you again, now that she’s so much more powerful. Or we can take a sample of your blood and go back to Oxford and my laboratory, try to extract the venom and derive the antidote that way. If you took your private jet, we can go right now, we –”

“Garcia.” Gabriel tries to raise a hand, and grunts with pain. “You can’t, all right? You can’t. If I was a human, I would have been killed instantly. Manticore venom is one of the things that can take down even creatures, and now –”

“So what?” Flynn whirls wildly on his heel. “You weren’t going to say anything right up until you dropped dead? You wouldn’t let Cecilia look at it, you wouldn’t let any of us tend it, so even if we could have done something before it got this bad, we won’t know? Instead you let the wound fester past healing, just like we’ve done for years? Was this your idea of a fitting end, an appropriate punishment? You son of a – I’m going to –”

At that he chokes off, as if remembering that a typical threat is now a horrifying reality, and briefly looks as if his legs are about to go out from under him. Lucy reaches for him in concern, but he doesn’t even notice. There is a horrible pause as the de Clermont brothers stare at each other in anguished silence. Then Gabriel says again, less steadily, “It wouldn’t matter even if I had realized immediately what it was. It was already too late. And I – it just felt as if perhaps it was something I deserved, I –”

“You didn’t plan to tell us you were dying, because you felt like you –” Flynn breaks off again. “I swear, Gabriel, if you somehow survive this, I am killing you.”

“I asked you to kill me earlier.” Gabriel tilts his chin up, unflinching. “I would still prefer to die at your hand rather than some slow, miserable wasting. If that is the final solace we can give each other – if you wished to ultimately repay me for what I had to do to Matej –”

“No.” Flynn almost sounds like a little boy, completely terrified. “You fool, you idiot, how can you – Gabriel. Gabriel, moje srce, I don’t –”

Something half a smile plucks at Gabriel’s mouth, trembling and tender. Lucy isn’t sure that even she should be here, as if they’re suddenly grappling with the fact of how little time they have left, when they had every right to expect all of it in the world. Vampires, after all, do not have to live with the fear of mortality that grips every human. They do not have to worry about making things right before they die, do not have to fear that their existence might be snuffed out with so much left undone. If Gabriel and Garcia are reckoning with that fact, that one thing that an immortal is so fortunate to forget, that they will lose each other and they have wasted all this time, in the awareness of the uttermost end –

Neither of them say anything. They can’t. They reach out and grab wildly at each other’s hands, holding on ferociously, as if by their considerable strength alone they will somehow keep Gabriel in this world. If after two hundred and fifty years, they can only make peace over the deathbed of one of them – well, in some sense, it is more than fair. They have had all this chance, and never taken it, far more than anyone else ever would. And in another, it so desperately is not. Lucy doesn’t know what she’ll do, what she possibly can do, but she has some confused notion that if she was able to save them from the tree earlier by going back to before it happened, she can do it again. Travel through time and space to a few days ago in France, intervene before Gabriel is ever attacked, and –
And just then, she catches sight of movement at the top of the stairs. Looks around – and frowns.

It’s Jessica. She still looks battered and bloodied – and yet, she’s somehow managed to break through Michelle’s wards. Lucy starts to ask if she’s all right, but something stops her. Jessica’s eyes don’t look right. Oddly glazed and opaque and unfocused, and she’s holding something in her hand. A short curved blade, and the wickedly sharp edge drips black.

At that, in complete and utter horror, Lucy realizes what’s going on. Michael Temple sent Jessica here, somehow, as a puppet or a tool. Knew that the de Clermonts, for all their estrangement and anger, would not be able to countenance leaving their brother Wyatt’s old love to die – or if worse came to worse, Lucy would insist on saving her friend. The manticore venom worked so well on Gabriel, after all, and now Jessica is here to finish the job on Flynn. A final stroke, a fitting death, that neither of them can avoid, only –

Lucy jumps to her feet, though she doesn’t know what to do. She raises her hands, as Jessica flies across the room, Gabriel and Flynn realize something is wrong and jump to their feet, as they all spin around, and one, or none, or all of them scream, “NO – ”

But even above the lot of them, it’s Gabriel’s shout that echoes the loudest. He moves faster than seems humanely or inhumanely possible, so that the air almost seems to snap with a sonic boom, and throws himself in front of Flynn at full length. For a moment he seems to hang there, perfectly suspended, as if all time has stopped. Then it comes crashing back in, and – with the blade embedded up to the hilt in his collarbone, a black ooze trickling in slow inky fingers down his chest, and his eyes open and clear as a summer’s day, a half-smile of something almost like relief on his lips – all at once, almost that simply, he falls.
The chilly winter sun is setting over Venice in lagoons of bone and gold and violet and onyx, the last light still catching on the higher windows, as Wyatt and Maria de Clermont speed down the Grand Canal in the wake of a solitary flock of American tourists, who probably didn’t read the fine print in the cruise ship offer and hence did not realize it was only valid for the winter months. Not that they should complain; they’re getting this place as close to low season as it ever comes, and while it might be a little cold for a romantic twilight gondola ride, they seem to be having a good time anyway. Wyatt watches them out of the corner of his eye, just in case they’re not actually tourists but undercover informants for one or another of the creature factions. They do send them out in plainclothes, industrial espionage, trying to sniff out what their rivals are doing or where they’re going or, say, if they’ve been in the archives where they shouldn’t be. Though as far as that goes, that is the least of Wyatt’s concerns, and he doesn’t see why the Congregation would send spies out or why he should waste time worrying about it. They already know they’re coming.

He glances over at his mother, whose magnificent profile resembles one of the marble angels on the basilica. Maria has made no secret of the fact that she considers all of this to be horribly beneath her to start with, and Wyatt isn’t sure he disagrees. He’s a member of the Congregation himself, after all. He should not be brought up in a kangaroo-court trial to answer for a mess that is none of his fault and which he could not reasonably be expected to prevent. But he knows that it does look bad that Gabriel and Garcia have been running amok, some kind of procedure does need to be followed, and if major accusations are the name of the game, he’s definitely going to mention that little kidnapping stunt and torturing a witch in Gerbert of Aurillac’s old fortress and everything else egregious that Michael Temple has presently committed. Plus, apparently, Benjamin Cahill has also done something bad, which shocks Wyatt exactly none at all. If they’re going to all this pomp and circumstance, smoke and mirrors, to frame him and distract attention from their own misdeeds, he’s going to – he’s definitely going to – that is to say, he’ll –

Wyatt leans back against the hard leather seat and muffles a groan. His defense strategy basically rests on the Sokolovs confirming the de Clermont version of events and vouching that Lucy wasn’t hurt and nothing improper happened, despite the outrages involved in transporting her to Sept-Tours (and for that matter, away from it). And if that’s the case, he really feels like maybe, just maybe, Gabriel and Garcia shouldn’t have gone so hard on Gennady Sokolov beforehand. The Russian witches are honest, or at least they’ve been this far, but that could change fast with the lot of them up before the Congregation and a chance to force the de Clermonts to answer for their accumulated chicanery. Honestly, Wyatt’s not sure they wouldn’t deserve it if the Sokolovs screwed them over in the eleventh hour. It’s not like they’ve done anything that would merit proper trust. It was an alliance of convenience, and it’s run its course. Why aren’t his stupid brothers here? They should explain this.

Wyatt reminds himself that they can go back to the villa and sleep and feed as soon as this is over, and while the Congregation might slap them on the wrist for everyone to feel that appearances have been satisfied, they’ll probably leave it at that. They’re de Clermonts, for God’s sake. They’re bulletproof (literally). It’s like when a celebrity gets caught drunk-driving and winds up with some light community service and a charitable donation. There might be plenty of things to say about the law being an instrument of the rich and powerful and blah blah evils of capitalism, but Wyatt’s not going to complain. He just wants things to go back to fucking normal. Then they can get on with their busy schedules of ignoring each other and living their separate lives in peace.

The gondola bumps up against the quay, and he climbs out, offering a hand to his mother, though of course she doesn’t need it. They make their way into the dim, winding lanes, reach headquarters, and enter. If there’s anything to be said for the fact that they didn’t try to avoid this, turned up here
because they have nothing to hide, and are strolling defiantly through the front door, Wyatt hopes it counts for something. He notices at once, however, that he has never seen the place so crowded. Full convocations are rare and reserved only for major emergencies; otherwise, for routine business and boring meetings, you can be lucky if two-thirds of the Congregation show up. Good to know that even the nine most powerful creatures in the world can’t be bothered to actually do their jobs, though once again there is a cautionary tale about how this is common to all politicians. Wyatt makes a mental note to start actually attending a few more himself, and is just elbowing through the crush, when someone materializes directly in front of him. “Good evening, Wyatt. You know, I really wasn’t sure whether you were going to come.”

Wyatt stops short and then springs back, a spike of reflexive adrenaline burning through him as he bares his fangs. Somehow, even he didn’t think that Temple would have the nerve to just walk right up to him and engage in casual conversation, when they both know exactly what he’s done. But perhaps that would require Temple to have shame, and he clearly feels invincible, wearing a sharply pressed navy-blue suit and tie, gazing around at the hubbub with a sleekly confident air. “ Seems like an event, doesn’t it?”

“You bastard.” Temple was battling his brothers in a ruined castle less than a week ago, so Wyatt doesn’t really feel much obligation to be polite. “What did you do, invite everyone to watch?”

“Me? No, no, of course not.” Temple shrugs. “But technically, there is an old proviso in our bylaws that require us to notify the supernatural public of their right to attend Congregation meetings. I daresay none of us have been terribly conscientious about exercising it before, but if we’re all turning over a new leaf, beginning a renewed era of organizational transparency, what better time to start? Don’t you think?”

Wyatt eyes him loathingly. He is well aware that if Temple went to all this trouble to bring in an audience, he has something big planned, and it’s probably better that he doesn’t walk into the chamber without knowing what that is. “What the hell are you trying to pull?”

“I don’t know that I’m trying to pull anything.” Temple spreads his hands. “I really have been very generous with you. Mentoring you, warning you against the threats to our kind, encouraging you to speak to your brother about Lucy Preston, to get the situation under control without the need for anything like exactly this. I have given you so many chances, Wyatt, and yet like you have with everyone, you have only disappointed me. As if I don’t know that you were conspiring against me with Anton Sokolov, of all people? Poor, honest, stupid Anton and his blundering buffoon of a brother – though surely you can relate to that, can’t you? Once more left to take the fall for the rest of your more talented family? We can make other arrangements, you know. This doesn’t have to be a spectacle.”

“Like I’d ever – ” Wyatt chokes. “You’re not getting anything from us.”

“Aren’t I?” Temple smiles oddly. “We’ll see about that. Tell me, how’s your brother Gabriel?”

Wyatt stares at him, can’t think how to answer or what that has to do with anything. “I heard he kicked your ass in Albi, so do you really want to know?

Temple remains smiling, as he always does, but something flickers in his eyes, something feral. It’s clear that he doesn’t like the reminder that he was completely overpowered and driven off before he could complete whatever fuckery he was up to with Lucy, and that even if he’s gotten used to toying with Wyatt as the easiest mark of the de Clermont clan, he discovered that he still couldn’t beat the top dog. After a pause he says, “Perhaps I’m only wondering why he’s once more sent you to clean up his mess. That, or – ”
“I’m on the Congregation, asshole. I’m not some flunkey.” Wyatt takes a step, trying to make Temple back up, but he doesn’t budge. “Since that’s the case –”

“Oh, you have to say that, don’t you?” Temple has turned utterly silky, which means he is at his most dangerous. His eyes are black, and his own fangs are bared. “Have to remind yourself of that as much as possible, since that’s always what it feels like. This is your last chance, Wyatt. Do you want to arrange this privately and discreetly, between the two of us as vampires and gentlemen and Congregation fellows, or would you like to go in there and have all the muck raked up about you and your entire family? I am a forgiving man. We could come to an arrangement. It would not be to your dissatisfaction. I have no wish to see the noble de Clermont blood completely stamped out.”

“Oh really?” Wyatt stares him dead in the eye. “Is that actually how you feel, Michel of Antioch?”

Temple’s face goes briefly blank, then startled, and then even more inscrutable. “I beg your pardon?”

“Yeah,” Wyatt says. “I know who you are, who you actually are. Pissed at my brothers since 1307, isn’t it? Gabriel and Garcia killed your creepy wannabe-world-dictator master, and you’ve held a grudge ever since. So all you really want is to destroy my family, and use me to do it.” He doesn’t want to say that Temple might have come close, that his brothers didn’t tell him about this until too late, and neither did he. That such a void of trust and communication exists between them that they have brought this on themselves, all of it. “And you still think you can lie to and manipulate and mislead me, so –”

“Well, you see,” Temple says genially. “I can. Because you, my boy, are stupid. You try hard and you mean well and you know you can’t do it anyway, all of which makes for a potent and complex combination of buttons to push. Do you really want to see what I could do in front of the entire Congregation and so many watching members of the public?”

Wyatt hesitates. He knows he shouldn’t goad Temple into being even more ruthless than however much he originally planned, and he wishes sorely that Gabriel had just finished the job in Albi the other night. He’s not going to get tricked into some secret arrangement or unbreakable bargain, and part of him still wants the chance to accuse Temple in return, in open court. Bring him down in front of everyone, if Temple’s so goddamn confident this can only end one way. “I don’t have anything else to say to you. See you inside.”

“Very well.” Temple regards him up and down an instant longer, then turns away. “We should be convening in a few moments. I expect you’ll want to prepare yourself.”

With that, he strides off toward the doors of the council chamber, and Wyatt watches him go with a leaden feeling in his stomach. He pulls his own jacket straight and angrily looks around for Maria. It’s not like he wanted his mother to be holding his hand through that whole thing, as it would only confirm Temple’s suspicions that he can’t stand up to him alone, but Jesus, it would be nice to have some backup. He can’t see her, though, and experiences a brief and irrational terror that that was all a scene staged by Temple to distract him while some thug (or rather, several thugs) snatched her. His certainty that this is only going to be a show trial, a piece of performance art, is eroding fast. Maybe they shouldn’t have come here tonight. Maybe they should have done anything but.

The chamber is more packed that Wyatt has ever seen it. The torches burn in the iron ring overhead, the old carvings on the walls seem to whisper and writhe, and of the nine chairs of the Congregation, seven are occupied. He’s not even sure he’s ever seen all of his colleagues together before, and all of them are stone-faced. Except for Benjamin Cahill, who is also shameless enough to be here in the flesh. He’s wearing a small smirk, as if all of this is very amusing to him, and steeplets his fingers like a Bond villain awaiting a white cat to stroke. Aside from Wyatt’s chair, the only other empty one is that belonging to Anton Sokolov. Since he’s technically also under investigation here, he can’t sit in
judgment. The crowd is filing into the observation gallery that surrounds the room, taking long-empty chairs thick with dust, murmuring to each other until it sounds like being caught in a light wind. All of them are staring down at whatever drama is about to unfold below, and Wyatt has a sinking feeling that he’s about to be thrust on stage without ever having learned his lines. Shit. Is it too late to just run out of here, or would that look even worse? The whole point was to prove they had nothing to hide and nothing to fear. They can’t back down now.

He looks around again, but still can’t see Maria. Instead, he spots Olivia Christopher, plainly here to speak in her stepsister’s defense. They didn’t exactly get off on the right foot last time, and Wyatt is aware that her family hates or at least thoroughly does not trust the de Clermonts, so this doesn’t feel like a particularly good thing. He tries to catch her eye, to see which way she might be leaning, but Olivia avoids his gaze with decorous diplomatic blankness. Wyatt’s bad feeling about this gets worse. Temple has clearly stacked the deck. What did he mean, with that pointed question about Gabriel? Wasn’t Gabriel hurt when he got back to Sept-Tours? What if –

Wyatt, however, has no more leisure to ponder this. Benjamin Cahill has just gotten to his feet and rapped a gavel to call the room to attention, and a hushed, expectant silence falls. Clearly, as the most senior witch on the Congregation, he has assumed command of the investigation into the possible mistreatment of a witch – which is a pile of bullshit, given everything that Cahill himself has done to her. Wyatt thinks again of what he found in Lucy’s file, about what happened to her in November 1989. But it is ever clearer that there is no justice about to be done here, and he can only watch as if a train is plunging off the tracks in slow motion. He stands idiotically, alone, in the middle of the floor, everyone’s gazes fixed on him like a hundred spotlights. Where the fuck is his mother?

“Good evening, honorable ladies and gentlemen of the Congregation, fellow creatures,” Cahill begins, in a voice dripping with obsequiousness. “We are pleased that so many of you have been able to join us for such a serious and important proceeding. We are here to formally compel William de Clermont to deposition and testimony regarding the recent and repeated illegal actions that he and his family have visited upon an innocent witch, Dr. Lucy Preston. As many of you will know, the de Clermonts have always felt they were better than all of us, and if they have done nothing wrong, they have nothing to fear. But we wish to demonstrate to you that the Congregation can be trusted to hold even the most powerful among us to proper account, and that sinister secret societies – such as, say, the Knights of Lazarus, who think it is their right to serve as judge, jury, and executioner all at once – should be comprehensively rejected. It was, of course, the late Asher de Clermont who founded it.”

A shocked murmur goes around the chamber, as Wyatt starts up with a barely suppressed exclamation. The Knights of Lazarus are – well, like Cahill friggin’ said, they’re secret. Their existence is not common knowledge even among ordinary vampires, and certainly not to the creature public. And now Cahill has just announced it to everyone here? What the f –

“Excuse me,” Wyatt says loudly, feeling as if he needs to assert some kind of control before this turns into any more of a farce. “I’m not on trial for the Knights of Lazarus. And since I assume everyone can see that this is a total –”

“Silence.” Cahill raps the gavel again. “Interrupting the court out of turn shall be regarded quite dimly, Mr. de Clermont. And since not even your brothers, the chief perpetrators of this crime, could trouble themselves to appear, nor anyone else of your shameless lot, I have no choice but to conclude that you are well aware of your –”

“Do you?”

Heads swivel madly, another shocked whisper goes around the chamber, and all at once, Wyatt grasps Maria’s strategy in staying out of sight until this precise moment. With an instinct for the
dramatic to rival any of her sons, she has remained in the shadows and let everyone acquire a false sense of confidence, allowed Cahill to make it plain that he intends to railroad them without any proper procedure, and now that the subject of Asher de Clermont has been raised, his widow’s appearance here to defend a witch will make the most striking point imaginable that the real story is not what the Congregation is selling. Wyatt can’t help but shake his head in rueful admiration, hiding a smile in his hand, even as he wonders if his own look of panic was supposed to help convince everyone that he wasn’t expecting this. Maria strides out, measured and slow, possibly the most dangerous vampire in the room for being a petite woman in a tailored fawn jacket and pearls. Even Temple looks taken aback. Then he flashes his sleek smile. “Madame de Clermont. Such a pleasure.”

“Good evening.” Maria utters it in the tone of an aristocrat who can tell you to your face to drop dead while never breaking court protocol. “Please, Mr. Cahill, do not let me interrupt. You were just saying how my son had brought no other members of our family to vouch for the events, I believe. Was that it?”

“I see that I was evidently mistaken.” Cahill’s own smile has turned slightly plastic, and he is struggling to regain the thread of his self-important bombast. “Has it not been a long time since you left the family home, Madame? Or are those witch-killing days not yet behind you? I believe the total count was nearly fifty of my kind that you took it upon yourself to murder. Unless, of course, you have added more? Including Dr. Preston, perhaps?”

Maria shakes her head with a tiny, derisive smile on her perfect lips, as if she truly cannot believe that she is standing here and being vexed by an irritating, hopping flea. That look plainly says that she can and will squish Cahill the instant he stands still, so he had better keep dancing (and so digging himself deeper). “I have taken the liberty of already submitting a full record to the Congregation, earlier this afternoon,” she says. “Surely you are not telling me that in a case of this importance, you did not read it?”

Cahill has the distinct expression of a bear who broke into a hive ready to gobble down honeycomb, and is now getting tormented by the bees. “I – what?”

“Send someone to fetch it,” Maria says. “I deposited it on San Lazzaro island, with the rest of the archives. I take it that either you were not informed, or decided it might challenge the whole-cloth fable you are spinning here, and thus ignored it. But if it had been consulted by the court first, it might have spared us this need for all this disgraceful scenery. Unless of course, Mr. Cahill, it was your intent to convict us of a crime regardless of any supporting evidence? Your own actions in regard to Lucy Preston have been far from blameless.”

“I don’t – I am not – an old friend of the Preston family, could not possibly be – ” Cahill’s face is turning puce. He bangs the gavel hard enough to make the table shake. “The guardian of the archives is a Knight of Lazarus! How could we possibly presume that even if you had been truthful in your report, he would not keep back any parts of it which harmed your reputation? Surely I cannot be the only one who finds it outrageous that our entire history is looked after by a vampire, and a vampire in the pocket of the de Clermonts? You and your entire family have seen yourselves as untouchable royalty for far too long, Madame! Even now, both of you, you stand there shameless in your arrogance, convinced that no petty dictates of lesser creatures can touch you! I will break you! I will break you!”

The whispers in the observation gallery are getting louder, and there are a few open sounds of alarm. Temple, apparently sensing that Cahill is in danger of steering them off track here, clears his throat. “My honored colleague forgets himself. Of course, Madame de Clermont, we shall be happy to admit your report as evidence. Whilst we send someone to retrieve it from the archives, which is rather a curious place to leave it if you knew it would be needed here tonight, do you mind briefly
recapitulating the main points for us? We know that you hold a certain… view of witches. Did Lucy Preston come to any harm in your home?”

“No.” Maria’s face is even paler, her eyes darker, but her voice allows for no dispute at all. “I protected the witch so long as she was under my roof. It was only when she was out from under it that she came to grief. My sons, Gabriel and Garcia, rescued her at great personal risk, after she had been snatched and taken to a remote castle near Albi to be tortured. I need to say no more about why she was there, given that you, Mr. Temple, arranged it!”

The other Congregation members exchange startled looks. Nicholas Keynes clears his throat. “I beg your pardon, Madame de Clermont. Are you inferring that Mr. Temple was himself involved in committing misdeeds against the witch?”

“Far more than that.” Maria isn’t openly baring her fangs, but not far off. “Both he and Benjamin Cahill sit here to persecute us in this hypocritical spectacle, precisely to conceal from the rest of you what dishonorable collusions, what traitorous violence, they have engaged in, in hopes of seizing the Book of Life for themselves! Where is Anton Sokolov? Have you thought that it was better he did not speak, if his version of events could not be assured to concord with your own? Could not bribe or threaten or beat an honest man into compliance, so – what? Shall he turn up floating in a canal, your dagger in his back?”

“To suggest that I would murder my own colleague and witch compatriot – ” Cahill rises half to his feet. This is quickly turning ugly, a mood rising in the room as if fisticuffs aren’t far off. By the sounds of things, there are already a few localized scuffles breaking out between vampires and witches in the gallery. “That, Madame de Clermont, is your own course of action. Is this a confession, laying before us that you – ”

“Silence!” Maria has finally raised her voice, and it cracks like thunder. It makes even Wyatt flinch, and there’s a ripple around the benches as if everyone has pulled instinctively back from her, leaving her alone in the middle. As she takes a step, nobody can forget that this small woman once destroyed an entire Nazi tank division in one night, and left their mutilated bodies dangling from the winter branches of the Ardennes. “Since it has evidently not been made excruciatingly clear, let me spell it out one final time. Lucy Preston is under the protection of myself, my family, my sons, and my servants. There is no basis for this trial nor for anything else you have contrived here. Fetch the report, dismiss this ludicrous stage play you have forced upon your colleagues, and let it be at an end!”

More glances are exchanged. Nobody knows what to make of witch-hater Maria de Clermont offering this impassioned defense of the one she is supposed to have kidnapped, and if nothing else, it is making them think again about what Temple and Cahill are actually doing. Wyatt isn’t sure if this whole trial is coordinated between them, if they have put aside their rivalry and obvious vampire-witch hatred long enough to destroy the de Clermonts, their mutual enemies. Temple apparently has hated them for seven hundred years, and for Cahill, they are an active pain in his ass at keeping Lucy (and thus Ashmole 782) away from him, when he clearly feels as if he deserves it, has been biding his time since she was a child, and now had the prize snatched away at the last minute. There’s no doubt that they’re both planning to kill each other when it’s over, but even as a temporarily united front, they can (as well demonstrated) cause a lot of trouble.

There is a very long and slimy pause. Then it’s Nicholas Keynes, again, who leans forward. “Pardon me if I misunderstand,” he says. “But for Madame de Clermont to be insisting that the witch is under her entire family’s protection, that is most unusual. And earlier she said that her own sons rescued Dr. Preston from the…. predicament in which my honored colleague allegedly placed her, at considerable risk to themselves. What is the reason for this certain concern, if you please? Surely we
cannot have forgotten that the Covenant quite firmly forbids this level of fraternization? Can you assure us, Madame, that either or both of your sons are within the law, in their relations with Dr. Preston?”

Shit, Wyatt thinks. Temple and Cahill are, of course, trumping up charges like crazy to paint them in the worst possible light, but Keynes has managed to pin down the one place where they actually are breaking the law. If Temple has conveniently circulated the information about Jess, to make it clear that the de Clermonts did this once already and escaped the hammer being brought down on them, that could be worse. Dammit. Of course Keynes wants to wade into the fray now, to get vampires and witches turned on each other and the leaders of both Congregation contingents discredited, to give the daemons a clearer shot at Ashmole 782 while all the fuss is going on. Son of a bitch, Wyatt hates them all.

“My sons are…” Maria hesitates. “So far as I know, they have not broken the Covenant.”

“Is that so?” Keynes glances at Olivia Christopher. “Miss Christopher, I believe you are Dr. Preston’s – stepsister? Can you confirm to the court where Dr. Preston is now?”

“She – ” Olivia shoots half a look at Wyatt. “She left Sept-Tours several days ago, she returned to my parents’ house in New York. I spoke to my mothers, they said she was there.”

“And who was with her?” Keynes enquires, more sleekly than ever. “Did she travel alone, or in company? Have others joined them since that original moment?”

“She….” Olivia is clearly fishing for what she should say, and that makes her, makes them, look guilty. “She traveled with Garcia de Clermont.”

“Did she? How fascinating.” Keynes turns a mild look on Maria and Wyatt. “Would you like to confirm or deny this allegation? Did your son and brother go with Dr. Preston to America, and for what purpose? Did any other members of your family?”

Wyatt glances anxiously at his mother. They’re dangerously close to hitting a corner that they might not be able to get out of, and even Maria seems briefly stymied. Then she says, “Yes, my son Garcia traveled with her. They had business – research – to do together. That is perfectly permitted. If vampires and witches could not even be in the same room or work in company, the entire Congregation would be illegal.”

“What sort of research?”

“Historical research.” Maria says it as neutrally as she can. “They had business – research – to do together. That is perfectly permitted. If vampires and witches could not even be in the same room or work in company, the entire Congregation would be illegal.”

“Research on Ashmole 782, I daresay?” Keynes presses. “If that was true, it would be singularly dangerous for all of us. A de Clermont vampire with the witch whose connection to the Book of Life remains unexplained and has already been the cause of unprecedented disruption in our communities. Both my honored colleagues – ” he gestures deferentially at Temple and Cahill – “stand accused of employing underhanded methods in order to get at her. An attack at the Bodleian Library? A midnight kidnapping and bout of torture? And this could just be the tip of the iceberg. Clearly we must make a strong response. If allowed to proceed unchecked, it could only lead to open war, and none of us want that, do we?”

Wyatt grimaces. They had the upper hand briefly, when Maria fought back against Cahill’s manufactured allegations, but he can feel them losing it. The mood in the chamber is turning against them, the whispers getting darker and angrier, and people point and mutter behind their hands. Maria’s intimidating display earlier is now starting to backfire, everyone remembering how much
power the de Clermonts have and have always had, and Keynes seems to shine like a beacon of impartial reason among vampires and witches and their perpetual grubby power-jockeying. He offers a saint-like smile. “So are any of us prepared to believe that there is nothing else afoot here? I for one think that seems considerably naïve. Tell me, Madame de Clermont. Why is your son so attached to the witch? Why has she already warranted a promise of unconditional protection from your entire family?”

“For a man to respect a woman is not a completely shocking fact,” Maria says. “Even if sometimes it feels as if it is.”

“Intellectual equals? Professional colleagues?” Keynes raises an eyebrow. “So that’s what you’d have us think lies beneath this unexpected generosity? Do you defend all your sons’ business partners so dearly, Madame de Clermont? Miss Christopher, surely your parents have said more to you about the nature of this connection. I doubt two witches were altogether thrilled to welcome a de Clermont scion into their home. Or were they?”

Olivia looks awkwardly at Maria and Wyatt. It’s clear that all three of them know what’s going on, are forced onto the same side to protect Lucy and Flynn respectively, but they’re stuck between a rock and a hard place as to whether to lie to the Congregation to protect them or tell the truth and have it seriously blow up. Finally Olivia says, “I don’t know.”

“How do you?” Keynes bares his own teeth in something not very much like a smile. “I think you do. I think all of you do. In the absence of immediately compelling evidence to the contrary, I must formally charge Garcia Flynn de Clermont and Lucy Preston with a serious breach of the Covenant, article three. Against the intimacy and admixing of disparate bloodlines, and the prohibition of interspecies relationships. That being the case – ”

“What is this?” Wyatt says loudly. “The 1950s? Interracial marriage is still the most terrible thing in the world, and we’re working off nineteenth-century eugenic bullshit about purity of blood and how they can’t – Jesus Christ, if this is what the Congregation is working with, then no wonder we’re sixty years behind the times and completely – ”

But even as he says it, no matter how right he is and no matter how much of a point he has, he knows he’s made a terrible mistake. It is as good as openly admitting that this is in fact what is going on, and the chamber explodes into an uproar. All the gaveling in the world by the agitated Cahill cannot restore order, there are more fights starting in the gallery, the torches leap and flicker wildly on the echoing stone walls, and Wyatt and Maria look at each other and realize that the night is lost. There’s no coming back from this, not for them and possibly not for the rest of the family. Wyatt knows as well that once again, it is his fault, even if some smoking gun would have been tricked up eventually. He’s the one who opened his big mouth and stepped directly in the trap Keynes set – he was so busy looking out for Temple and Cahill, the obvious snakes, that he forgot about the other one lurking in the grass. “I’m sorry,” he starts, though he isn’t sure that even she can hear him above the tumult. “I’m sorry, Maman, I shouldn’t have – ”

Maria doesn’t answer, but her look is of affection and exasperation and weariness and grief, as if while she loves his impulse to defend his brother, his hot-headed recklessness has once again screwed the pooch. Just then, a ragged, fractured half-hush falls across the chamber as Michael Temple, sensing his opportunity, rises to his feet. “I agree,” he pronounces in ringing tones, “with my honored colleague. I do here and now charge Garcia Flynn de Clermont and Lucy Preston with formal violation of the Covenant, and exclusion and damnation from all creature protection and society. Let no witch, vampire, nor daemon raise a hand to succor them, or to defend them, until they have repented and abjured their sin. If any should be found to harbor them, they shall suffer their same fate. In no place or far corner of the world shall they escape this sentence, and by no magical
method evade it. If they come to their senses quickly, they shall be forgiven. If they persist in their defiance, they must die.”

His voice is thunderous, and his words echo with the old cadence of the excommunication ritual, read in a circle of chanting monks holding candles, dashed down to break on the floor and to symbolize the damned soul’s exclusion from Christianity, from all divine grace and hope of salvation. *Dies irae*, day of wrath, day of rage. Wyatt stares wildly at him – he is possessed by some wild notion of hurling the dais and attacking Temple right here, right now, finishing the job no matter if he dies in the effort. But he can’t, he knows he can’t, and even if both he and Maria did it together, they’d also be sentenced to die. This is insane, this is impossible. This can’t be happening. How has this gone completely to hell?

“No, now,” Keynes says, raising a hand. For one stupid moment, Wyatt thinks he’s actually about to help them, to claim that Temple has gone too far, and offer a modified version. But that, of course, is not at all what he has in mind. “The operation of democracy must not be prejudiced. We must place it to a vote. Who here among our august number agrees that Garcia de Clermont and Lucy Preston should face exclusion and sanction among all creatures until they separate and swear never to be in contact again? And that if they should deliberately and repeatedly breach these conditions, stricter punishment is warranted?”

There’s the briefest pause, the last breath before the plunge. Then all seven of the sitting Congregation members raise their hands, the first time they have ever been in unanimity about anything. Wyatt feels it like a punch. Where is Anton? Clearly he has been kept out, as the one honest man and honorable witch who would kick up a stink about this, and Olivia looks horrified. “No,” she starts. “No, this isn’t Lucy’s fault, you can’t –”

“And do we furthermore agree,” Keynes goes on, gunning over her, “that William de Clermont should be deposed from his seat on the Congregation with immediate effect, and no longer acknowledged or welcomed at any of our gatherings, in any capacity, until such time as this situation is resolved? That indeed, the de Clermonts have placed themselves outside any ordinary measures of the law, and extraordinary measures are justified?”

Once again, all seven members raise their hands. Wyatt tries to say something – wants to point out that nobody, as far as he knows, has been thrown off the Congregation, that there isn’t even a recognized legal mechanism for doing it. How can it just take one split-second vote, when there’s no precedent for this at all? That, however, is ridiculous. Temple, Cahill, and Keynes, whether alone or in concert, have whipped everyone up to an emotional froth, and the last thing they want is for tempers to cool or rational decisions to be taken. They’ll bull this through while everyone is still reeling. “No,” Wyatt starts uselessly. “You –”

“Lucy must not be harmed,” Cahill insists. “Not until we understand why she alone among all creatures can reach the Book – Garcia de Clermont can die, but not Lucy –”

“If you touch my son,” Maria says. “If you lay a single slimy finger on him, Benjamin Cahill, then I am more than delighted to show you why your kind fears me so.”

“See there! There, a threat, an open threat of war!” Cahill’s cheeks are flushed, his expression frenetic. “Seize them!”

Wyatt looks around, sees several large-sized witches shouldering toward them, and decides on the instant that while he’s sure Maria could rip them to shreds, it would in fact land them in a dungeon somewhere under the city and bound for execution, and this has already gone so badly that they need to get out of here right now, run back to Sept-Tours and start preparing for the worst. He grabs his mother around the waist and lifts her off her feet, even as Maria is still struggling to be let at them like
a lioness on a leash, and makes a break for it. He bowls through more onlookers outside the chamber, doesn’t stop until he fights out into the night, sprints down the steps, and jumps into the nearest boat. Its owner will probably be alarmed to find it gone in the morning, but it’ll turn up later. They just need to get out of here.

Wyatt rips off the ropes and guns the outboard motor, as they tear off down the canal in bald defiance of all noise regulations and speed limits alike. Fortunately, there are very few other vessels out at this hour, and Maria sits as if turned to stone, burning with barely restrained volcanic fury. She does not ask why he dragged her out of there before she could kill everyone, but she looks as if she sorely wishes that he let her. At last she starts, “William – ”

“I’m sorry,” Wyatt says again. “I know it was – I shouldn’t have said – ”

“They meant to frame us one way or another.” Maria is still vibrating with rage. “This is the end of the Congregation, this is the end of all fragile peace accords or uneasy alliances that have held us together all these years. Cahill, damn his hide, is not wrong. This is war.”

It gives Wyatt a deep, unfathomable chill to hear her say it, and he prays that she’s somehow mistaken, that everyone’s heads will cool overnight and they will think twice about plunging the entire creature world into this cataclysm. He starts to ask if they’ll be running all the way back to France tonight and if they should stop for a feed beforehand, when – buried in her pocket, a tinny warble that startles them both – Maria’s phone rings.

She stares at it in disgust, as she still does not care for technology and is known to almost-literally eviscerate anyone who calls her on it. Then she frowns, and picks it up. “Oui?”

There’s a long pause. Then it keeps on going, and going, and by the uncertain light of the moon, going in and out behind the clouds, Wyatt sees his mother’s face change into something he has only seen once before, the darkest hour of all the de Clermonts’ thousands of years. The moment they reached the remains of the bunker, at last, and found Papa. It was him and Gabriel and Garcia and Maria, the one time post-Matej that all three of the de Clermont brothers put their differences aside long enough to fight together. When they broke through the door, Gabriel killed the last half-dozen Nazis on guard, Wyatt and Garcia cleared the path and smashed the glass into the laboratory, and Maria reached Asher, hanging in his silver chains, not an inch of him left unscarred. She thought he was still alive, that after two and a half thousand years, even the greatest human evil could not touch him, could not take him from her. Her face, Wyatt remembers, was alight and teary and desperately hopeful. Then it began to crack, then it changed, then it became what he sees in front of him at this very moment. The sound of her scream has never left his memory.

Cold terror falls on him in a choking shroud. Maria does not scream, this time. She does not move. She makes no sound. The phone falls from her lifeless hand and hits the bottom of the boat with a distant click. The world trembles on its foundations. Dies irae.

“Maman?” Wyatt starts to panic. He keeps one hand on the rudder, trying to stop them from crashing, but reaches out, seizing her shoulder, almost shaking her. “Maman!”

He’s almost afraid that she’s somehow had a stroke, that Cahill has cast a black magic spell on her from afar, but there is still something living in her eyes, something strange and mad and wild. She looks up at him, starts to speak, then stops. Then in an almost matter-of-fact voice, completely at odds with the terrible words, she says, “Your brother Gabriel is dead.”

Everything is chaos. Lucy doesn’t know what’s going on or if she’s still moving, if she is still screaming, if anything anywhere is happening, or if it has all fallen to a halt, the entire world burned
down and broken in the ashes, because it seems impossible that anything could ever go on. She becomes aware that she’s jumping at Jessica and grabbing hold of her, wrestling her down and forcing her into improved magical handcuffs – she doesn’t know if they will hold her, if Jessica broke through Michelle’s wards, but her friend doesn’t struggle, almost eerily blank, evidently with no further or at least immediate orders now that the assassination mandate has been carried through. There’s a frantic banging down the stairs, and Jiya, who has obviously heard the ruckus, pounds into the living room. “What’s – what is –”

“Take her,” Lucy orders, barely recognizing her own voice. It is terrifyingly cold and level and snaps like ice, and it clearly does not occur to Jiya for an instant to disobey. “Make sure she doesn’t get free, do whatever you have to. Get Denise and Michelle, they –”


Flynn does not answer. He does not move, he does not stir, from where he has fallen on hands and knees above Gabriel. Lucy hauls on Jiya’s arm; she does not want her to see it, not now, not like this. “Denise and Michelle,” she repeats. “Get Jessica out of here. Go!”

Jiya stares at her father and uncle – she can’t see the dagger in Gabriel’s chest, since Flynn’s body is blocking it, but it’s clear that something terrible has happened. Lips white, she grabs the limp Jessica and pulls her toward the door, and Lucy turns back to the de Clermont brothers. She is seized by an awful fear that Flynn must have caught some of the manticore venom too, and runs to him, throwing herself down beside them. “Garcia. Garcia!”

He does not look up, he does not answer, he still does not move or stir or seem to react in any measurable way, as if it is completely and altogether beyond him. He is half-atop Gabriel, staring down at him, waiting for him to open his eyes, to do something at all, to wrest the dagger out from where it is gouged into his chest, the slow leak of old blood and black venom that stains his expensive shirt. Lucy has to be careful – touching a drop of it could kill her instantly, and without thinking, she conjures magical shields around her hands, grabbing at the hilt, trying to loosen it. It doesn’t matter, it’s too late, the stroke might have missed his heart, but barely. His eyes are still open, but they are windows into an empty house, the lights turned off, the inhabitants gone. He is – no, he can’t, he can’t be –

“Gabriel,” Lucy says, pulling at the knife, as it comes free with a horrible grating sound. Her hands flare with incinerating fire, and it is consumed on the spot, leaving no trace of itself behind. She tries to summon the white light that she used to heal him before, but her panic is drilling into her head, and she can’t focus enough to bring it up. “Gabriel. Gabriel, come on.”

Flynn does not help her, or hinder her. He clearly does not know where he is or what to do or possibly even his own name. Lucy pushes at him, trying to get him to move so she has better access to Gabriel’s wound, and he falls backward without even trying to catch himself. He is catatonic, completely numb, his own eyes utterly void of any reaction or belief or soul. He just sits there, arms braced loosely on his knees, staring into space. He still has not made a single sound. She realizes just then that he does not remember how to stand up.

Lucy works desperately for a few minutes with no apparent change – she’s pretty sure CPR would be no good in this situation, and she’s also increasingly aware that she’s deluding herself, she’s in denial, he has a massively catastrophic, poisoned chest wound on top of the earlier one. You can’t exactly check for body heat or a pulse or breath as signs of life in vampires, but it doesn’t matter. She can see it, she can sense it. He’s gone. He’s dead.

“No,” Lucy says. She rolls up her sleeve, wonders if her witch blood will work, and doesn’t have any way to cut herself. “Garcia – Garcia, can’t you –”
He still stares at her. It’s not clear he can understand what she’s saying, as if all comprehension of modern English has been knocked clean out of him. Lucy looks around, spots a glass on the coffee table, and breaks it with a quick spell. She seizes hold of one of the shards and cuts the underside of her wrist, ignoring the sharp flash of pain. She pushes open Gabriel’s mouth and lets several fat droplets of blood fall in, trying to see if his fangs will come out. Still nothing. She is only aware that she cannot, she cannot let this happen, she cannot watch Garcia go through this, cannot see him brought to his knees and demolished and destroyed, as surely as if Jessica’s blade had struck its intended target. And Gabriel – Lucy still hasn’t decided what she thinks about him, if she’s afraid of him, if she pities him, if she’s attracted to his beauty or to his sadness or something else, but she simply knows that she’s not going to let him die, not going to let the de Clermonts be torn apart by tragedy one last time. They could not recover from this. None of them could. It’s not fair.

And so – she doesn’t know exactly what she’s doing, only that failure is not possible. It’s not timewalking, which was what she thought she should do right before this happened. It’s something different, it’s a prayer half-spoken, half-thought. My lady, Lucy pleads. Help us.

She has never called on the Great Mother before, not like this. The entity known as Artemis to the Greeks, Diana to the Romans, the patroness of the wild and the moon and the hunt, the woods and the crossroads and women. Her worship persisted well into the medieval period, in secret shrines and sisterhoods and rituals, and disapproving clerics complained that local women were rumored to leave their houses and husbands at night and run in unholy consort with Diana upon the hills. Some legends figure her as Queen of the Witches, the first and greatest of their number, and it’s Lucy’s own middle name, after all. Lucy Diana Preston. As with all beings of ancient origin and great power, you should not call upon them lightly, or expect that their aid will be obtained without a price, but she can think of nothing else.

For a long moment, nothing happens, nothing changes, and Lucy cannot face it, cannot countenance any sort of world where this is the case, where Garcia is nothing but an empty husk of himself and everything they might ever have been is gone. Then all at once, something shifts. They’re no longer in Denise and Michelle’s living room. The darkness smells of green things and growing and running water, and slender trees bunch in swaying stands. The moonlight etches silvered shadows on the thick turf, and even Flynn lifts his head in vague awareness that they have been snatched sideways from reality. Confusion flickers across his glazed eyes. “Lucy. . .?”

“Shh.” She reaches out to grab his hand. His fingers feel like ice, until she fears that unless she can do this somehow, he will die too. “Trust me. Please.”

Flynn doesn’t have enough strength to ask any questions or mount a challenge, and lapses back into silence as Lucy looks around. She can’t see anyone, but she knows somehow that they are not alone. The voice that speaks comes from everywhere and nowhere, heard and unheard, in the ears and the bones and the soul all at once.

“Yes, child?”

“My lady.” Lucy is already on the ground, but she feels the urge to kneel. “I need – I beg for your help. Please help me save this man. Gabriel de Clermont.”

“This man? The voice is not angry, exactly, but it is far from warm. This vampire, you mean. I am the mother of witches, not of the blood-drinkers, the night-stalkers. I can do nothing for him. Do not pray me so idly, child, or you shall –

“Please.” Lucy’s voice cracks. “He’s Garcia’s brother, and Garcia – he can’t live without him. And I – it’s us, we’re in the manuscript. The white queen and the red king. What is that worth, what does that mean, if he doesn’t survive? I can’t – please. I can’t.”

Cannot live without him? And yet spent two hundred and fifty years doing just that. It is not worth
asking how Diana knows this; she is a goddess, after all. *Even if I was to restore him, would they not carry on as before? They had the chance to make it right. They had many chances, over and over again. Still they did not.*

“I. . . I know.” Lucy isn’t sure how much of this conversation Flynn can hear, but even if he could, he doesn’t look like he would be listening. He can’t, he doesn’t care, he’s not here. “But still. Please give them another chance, please. It can’t end like this.”

*Can it not? Gabriel made a sacrifice. He made a choice. Diana seems unyielding. He died for the one he loved, and so the red king still lives. So far as it goes, nothing is done that cannot be undone. I am sorry for their loss, and for yours, but –*

“I’ll give you whatever you want.” The promise is out of Lucy’s mouth before she can stop it. It is dangerous to put yourself into debt to a goddess, to give her a blank check to ask anything she wishes from you, but she doesn’t care. “I am the white queen, I am – I could be of use to you, and to our sisters. Please.”

There is a very long pause. Lucy still can’t see anything, any tangible body or face, but she has a feeling that she is being regarded carefully. Then Diana says, *I will make you a bargain. I will set you a quest, you and your king. In the tales, the knight must save the princess, must defeat great obstacles to prove his valour and slay the dragon. Now, the two of you must save the knight. He has been poisoned with manticore venom. There is no cure that exists in this day and age. Even if I was to waken him to life, he must die again. So, then, I will preserve Gabriel as he is in this moment, and restore enough life to him that he survives, but sleeps. You must find the antidote, give it to him, and only then will he wake.*

“But – ” Lucy can see a fairly obvious problem with this. “You just said that there is no cure in this day and age. How are we supposed to – ”

*Indeed, I did. But you have uncovered a great skill within yourself, Lucy Preston. You are a timewalker. There are other roads leading you there. My gift of sleep will not last forever. You must find the antidote within six months, or Gabriel de Clermont will die. If you win back his life this way, together, then the chance was not given in vain. Do you agree?*

“I. . .” Lucy doesn’t think this is the time to go brass-tacks, that she can haggle the Great Mother, the Goddess herself, into a better deal over Gabriel’s life, when this is the only chance they have to get it back at all. Six months to find an antidote that does not exist, has not existed, for four hundred years seems impossibly short, and yet. “I. . . I accept.”

*Very well. If you fail, you will still owe me anything I may ask of you. Good luck, child. You may not call on me again before that time. When you return, he will sleep. Farewell.*

With that, as before, the world around them changes, shifts, and the walls of Denise and Michelle’s living room rise up again. Lucy feels as if she’s opening her eyes, suddenly not sure if she herself has been asleep, and then looks down to see Gabriel is still lying where he was before. The ugly slash across his chest has closed to a ragged black seam, the bleeding has stopped, and he does in fact appear to be sleeping, as far as Lucy can tell. She stares down at him, still shaken, and then looks across at Flynn. “Garcia?”

He looks as if he has just surfaced from a very deep dive, doesn’t know how to breathe, and isn’t sure that he shouldn’t just slip beneath the water again. “What just . . . what just . . . Gabriel? Gabriel? Is he – ”

Flynn crawls over to his brother and stares down at him, grasping him by the shoulders and pulling
him into his arms, as if he might shake him awake, and Lucy puts a hand on his. “He’s alive,” she says quietly. “But it’s complicated.”

Flynn stares at her with desperate hope, as if he has heard nothing other than “he’s alive,” and Lucy isn’t sure whether she should explain the bargain she has just struck with the Goddess, that they have been set a great quest, and they are going to have to find an antidote that has not existed for four hundred years. Flynn is still gripping Gabriel hard enough that he could practically crack his bones, and it takes Lucy considerable effort to persuade him to let go. “It’s all right,” she says. “But Garcia, it’s—we have to save him.”

“What? How?” Flynn’s head jerks up. She has never seen him so utterly uncertain of himself, so completely lost, flailing for any lifeline. “If he’s alive, why won’t he wake up?”

“The Goddess put him under a spell,” Lucy says. “We have to find the antidote for manticore venom. It’s—it’s a quest, I think. We have to prove ourselves, we have to win him back. He’ll sleep for—until we bring it to him.”

“But we. . .” Flynn rubs his face, still utterly unable to muster coherent thought, clattering along like a kite on the end of a string. Words are an impossible effort. “Gabriel said—before. He said that the last manticore was killed in the sixteenth—”

At that, Flynn stops short. Seems suddenly to grasp it. They knew already, perhaps, and yet it has become imperative. The only thing that they can do. *There are other roads leading you there.* Is this why they go? Why—as strange as it sounds to say—they already went?

Lucy does not know how to timewalk both of them to 1590, and keep them there. She does not know the first thing. And yet. It is not possible. It is necessary.

“We’re going,” Flynn says, barely more than a whisper. “We’re going to the past.”
Twisting Threads

Nobody sleeps much for the rest of the night. There’s not much of it left anyway, and indeed, even less than they thought. It turns out time does not quite run the same between Earth and wherever magical dark otherwhere Lucy took them to speak with the goddess, and when they manage to look at a clock, they see that four hours have passed, even though it felt like just moments for them. This means, of course, that Jiya came back, saw Gabriel’s body, was unable to wake Lucy and Flynn when she shook them, and rather understandably panicked, called her grandmother, and may have told Maria that one or several of them were dead. Now that it’s been confirmed, apparently, that they aren’t, Flynn thinks dully that someone should call her back and correct the record. But Jiya is a mess, so is he, he doesn’t know what to tell her anyway, and has no wherewithal to string words together. Finally Lucy volunteers to do it, only to report with a furrowed brow that Maria isn’t picking up.

That seems bad, but nothing can really reach Flynn through the numbing grey fog that surrounds him. This has been the absolute bummer of a night – the missing Ashmole pages, the confrontation with Gabriel, nearly getting murdered by a tree, the revelation of Lucy’s timewalking ability, the realization that Gabriel was dying, nearly getting murdered again by Jessica, and then whatever just happened in the glade back there – and Flynn very sorely wants it to end before anything else can hit them like a freight train. Since he’s the only person who’s strong enough, he is the one who has to carry Gabriel upstairs to the guest room and set him down on the bed. According to Lucy, he is in fact sleeping, but he is otherwise in all respects indistinguishable from a tomb carving.

Flynn stands there, staring down at Gabriel until the room seems to tilt out from under him. He has just lived through what might have been the worst moment of his very long life, and he still can’t trust if it has entirely ended. He understands that they have bought a six-month reprieve, in which the Goddess’s magic will maintain Gabriel in this enchanted sleep, while Flynn and Lucy themselves travel to 1590 and among everything else with Ashmole 782 that they have to do there, try to find an antidote for manticore venom and get back in time. If they do that, Gabriel will wake up, he’ll live. If they don’t –

Flynn doesn’t even want to think about that, can’t consciously let it cross his mind. This seems massive, impossible, until he almost wonders if the Goddess is just stringing them out to prove some point about being careful what you wish for. He hopes not, even if the Great Mother of witches would have no incentive to help a vampire, and indeed, apparently had to be argued into it by Lucy. God, she is so brave, so beautiful, so strong, so amazing beyond any words he feels able to articulate, now or ever. To face down an actual deity and bargain coolly for his brother’s life, to snatch it from the jaws of death – but does it matter? Lucy admitted that she has no idea how to timewalk permanently, and the clock has already started to run. The moment indicated by the star map, if Rufus is right, could arrive in just a few weeks. She does not have much time to practice. So much could go wrong. So much has.

Flynn lets out a shaky breath and sits down on the edge of the bed, unwilling to leave Gabriel alone, even if he might as well be keeping a dead log company for all it notices or cares. He should go. There are living people who need his help and comfort, not least his daughter, and if Maman is under the mistaken impression that Gabriel is dead, she could react the way that she did after Papa. He knows why Jiya desperately reached out for someone, for her grandmother, but couldn’t she have called Cecilia? Cecilia would have held her together and not threatened to rip apart the entire world. If Maria doesn’t know –

Angry with himself, Flynn shakes his head. It is selfish and pointless to blame Jiya for not reacting
with perfect logic and control upon seeing what she had every right to believe was her uncle’s murdered body and her father and Lucy unresponsive. If anything, this is his fault, because he was the one who left her to deal with everything by herself. Rufus is a supportive and sweet boyfriend, and Flynn is annoyed by how fast the sassy git is winning him over, but he can’t help or advise or really know much about the supernatural world or de Clermont family dynamics, and he is obviously not a replacement for parental support. And even now, Flynn is proposing to do it again. Run off to 1590 with Lucy, and leave Jiya behind.

He rubs his face with both hands, feeling almost disconnected from his body, floating outside his own head. He sorely needs a feed and to sleep for a year or both, but that is something they definitely do not have time for. Are they going to leave Gabriel here like Sleeping Beauty, occupying Denise and Michelle Christopher’s spare room for six months? If he’s lying here unguarded, Temple or Cahill or any other of their currently numerous enemies could just walk right in and stake him, no convoluted manticore-venom plots required. Even if Denise and Michelle work protective spells and serve as guardians, which they are doubtless eager to do on behalf of a vampire who arrived in a helicopter, insulted their house, threatened everyone to their faces, and otherwise caused an uproar, they’d be made a target.

No, Flynn thinks. They’ll have to find a way to get Gabriel to the custody of the Knights of Lazarus, who will be charged to ensure their grandmaster’s safety in a secret place until he can be fully revived. He briefly wonders who will do that, who will give the order, if Gabriel himself is non compos mentis, until he remembers what happened, what Gabriel said, before. I want you to succeed me. Once I thought Christian would be my heir, but he is… well. You are my brother. It is right that it should be you.

Jesus, Flynn thinks. Apparently that does make him, until further notice and God forbid if they fail, permanently, the grandmaster of the Knights of Lazarus. He does not feel remotely qualified for the job. Papa always meant it to be Gabriel, everyone knew it was him. Flynn was never jealous of that, or expected otherwise; he was always content to be his brother’s right-hand man and second-in-command. Flynn doesn’t really think of himself as much of a leader. He hates delegating, isn’t good at explaining things, prefers to just do it himself rather than risk incompetent underlings screwing it up, and tends to assume that everyone is stupider than him, in which case he’s usually sadly vindicated. None of this makes for a man to inspire the confidence of others, especially in battle, when your soldiers have to trust you absolutely with their lives and their decisions and their loyalty. He saw Richard at it, the best commander he’s ever known or will know, and he can’t come close. Gabriel can do this. Gabriel always could. But now, one way or the other, Gabriel is gone.

Another shudder of dizziness goes through Flynn at the thought, and he leans forward, putting his face in his hands. That is apparently part of why the Goddess refused to merely restore Gabriel to life in an instant, as if no doubt if She truly wanted to, she could heal him even from manticore venom. But because the brothers wasted so much time, remained so stubbornly estranged when they had years and years to make it right, they have to prove that they will not waste it, that they will finally forgive each other. Flynn cannot just be handed Gabriel back if they might merely return to their old bad habits and squander the Goddess’s gift. He has to earn this restoration and reconciliation, show that he has done the work, completed the quest. It makes sense to him, that way. He understands why it has been asked. But since it presently seems so completely impossible, he has no faith that it means anything.

Flynn glances over at Gabriel again, decides that it doesn’t make sense to be so unwilling to leave him now when they’ve already been apart for years, for centuries, and that he has to face up to everything that awaits. Feeling like a grave robber, hoping that this is the right thing to do, he lifts Gabriel’s hand and slides off his signet ring. It has a small cross incised between the lion and the wolf, designating his grandmaster rank, and Flynn puts it slowly onto his own finger instead. He
continues to stare at it for a moment, then bends his head and kisses Gabriel’s hand like a vassal making homage to a lord, as both of them did many times to many kings. He pauses, kisses it again, and then sets it down on Gabriel’s chest, folded in peaceful repose. Gets up, knows he can’t look back, and goes.

He blunders down the hall to Lucy’s room, deciding that whether or not she’s there, he needs to not be here for a while. He fights the ever-present guilt that he has no right to check out of what is still a very serious situation, but he is about to lose his mind and he will not be any help to anyone. He pushes through the door, lies down on the bed, and loses consciousness.

It is some undetermined time later when Flynn finally struggles back to wakefulness, and he briefly fears that he has slept for ages and missed it all, missed everything. When he gropes for the clock, it’s just past six PM, meaning that he too seems to have been out all day, like a proper vampire. However, he feels only marginally restored. His head is gritty and buzzing, and he is sore and dull and slow in a way that means he desperately needs a feed. Yet the only other vampire present is Jiya, she has already been through more than enough, and no matter your species, a child having to feed a parent seems rather backward. For centuries, whenever Flynn did not want to go to the exhausting bother of having to hunt down a more-or-less-willing human to dine on (which was most of the time), his usual go-to option was Gabriel. That is also, for obvious reasons, out. Denise and Michelle certainly aren’t about to offer to be his hors d’oeuvres, and even if he and Rufus are getting along if you squint, Rufus is not up for being chomped upon either. It seems he’ll have to ask Lucy.

Flynn considers that grimly, then swings out of bed and makes his way stiffly downstairs, feeling every inch of his fifteen hundred years. When he stumbles into the living room, everyone looks around with a relief that seems to suggest they thought he was dead too, and Lucy jumps to her feet and hurries over. “Hey,” she whispers, putting her hands on his shoulders and running them down his arms. “How are you holding up?”

“I’m –” Flynn doesn’t think even he can make a convincing go of “fine,” and settles for an indeterminate mumbling noise. “Is everyone all right? Were you able to reach Maria?”

“We…” Lucy bites her lip. “We haven’t, we tried calling your brother Wyatt too, but maybe they just… well, I’m sure we’ll sort it out soon. Jiya’s upset, she’s blaming herself for it, and Denise and Michelle have been trying to help her. I have too, it’s just… a lot. I’ve been trying to practice timewalking all day, and I still can’t hold it for more than a few seconds.”

“Mmm.” Flynn looks down at her, her pale, drawn, worried, exhausted face, and wonders if it would be too much to impose if he asks for a feed on top of it. “All day?”

“Most of it. Rufus has been working on the star map, he’s trying to pin down the moment that we have the best success of traveling to 1590. Something about planetary alignments matching in both centuries and making a shorter path through space-time, I’m really not sure.” Lucy rubs her black-circled eyes. “We’ve also had to make sure Jessica doesn’t escape again, although she hasn’t tried. I don’t know if that would change if she realizes she didn’t kill you, if it will make whatever thrall Temple put on her reactivate. How would he even do that? Is there some way a vampire can control a witch?”

“Yes,” Flynn says, as she tows him over to the couch and they both sit down heavily. “Gerbert of Aurillac had a witch kept in bondage, Meridiana. Temple taunted us with it when we were trying to rescue you. It was what he wanted to do to you – place you into permanent captivity, disembodied, tortured, only existing to answer his questions and submit to his will. I suppose Temple figured out a modified version of the process, to enable Jessica to keep her own body and to travel independently, but still remaining totally subordinate to him, a puppet to be controlled from afar. It will be very
“Something else we need to do in the sixteenth century?” Lucy asks, as if trying to make a joke, but her voice is raw and tired. She leans her head against Flynn’s chest, and he puts a clumsy hand in her hair, stroking it as if to gentle a spooking horse. “I’m not even sure when I’ve been today. I have to jump back as far as I can, out in the woods, and hope that I don’t arrive in the middle of some storm or battle or anything else. It’s a huge effort every time, and after a few minutes, I’m thrown back to the present. I’ll keep practicing, but I just – if I’m supposed to go all the way to 1590 London and take you with me – “

She stops, as if afraid of confessing her fear that they’re doomed before they even begin, that she has locked them into an impossible bargain and everything else riding on this, as well as Gabriel’s life, is slipping away like quicksand. Flynn grips hold of her arm and hugs her against him, the two of them able to just silently take a moment to be together for the first time since all this madness began. He has not forgotten what seemed to be her clearly stated intentions in coming upstairs to kiss him in his Knights of Lazarus regalia, but since that was what started all this mess, he feels leery of doing it again. If more Ashmole pages burst into existence, if it somehow makes this worse… everything that Gabriel said about the chance that this was some cruel witch trick, and the fact that Gabriel himself now owes his life to the caprices of another witch, cannot be overlooked. Flynn wants to think it’s not, but he doesn’t know. Maybe they should avoid complicating anything any more than it already is.

Still, though. If he doesn’t feed soon, he’s going to be no help to anyone, and while he’s old enough that he can more or less control his hunting urges, he doesn’t want to take the risk of them getting triggered now. Awkwardly, he clears his throat. “Lucy, is it… I know it’s not been long since the last time, but with everything that I… it would be helpful if…”

She pulls her face out of his chest and looks up at him. “Yes?”

Flynn swallows hard. “I was hoping I might be able to – if you don’t want, I’ll just go and find someone else, but I – I need to – “

“Feed?” Lucy completes, charitably saving him from his struggles. “Yes, of course.”

Flynn blinks, somehow having expected that that was going to take a lot more effort. “I can just – I know you cut your wrist already, if – “

Lucy eyes him with a fond but exasperated expression, as if she really cannot believe that a man with this much life experience is still such an utter blockhead. Then she shifts back, tipping her chin up to expose the slender white line of her throat. Flynn can see the traceries of blue veins beneath the skin, the bump of her pulse in the side of her neck, and looks down fast. “Should we – go somewhere else?”

“Do we need to?” Lucy raises an eyebrow. “If you think we should – “

Technically, Flynn supposes, they don’t need to, but he also doesn’t want Denise and Michelle to walk in unexpectedly and find him clamped down on Lucy’s jugular, especially if they’re going to draw the wrong conclusion. He also doesn’t want to go up to her bedroom, as that could lead too far in dangerous directions. So they get up and make their way to the study, which has a door that shuts, and a comfortable old loveseat crammed beneath the shelves of books and potted plants and other witchy items. They sit down on this together, and Flynn carefully brushes her hair back. He’s bitten her once before, but only partially, not full in the throat, and even if he is as gentle as possible, there will be some initial pain before the pleasure of the feed kicks in. “Are you sure? It’s still going to feel like – “
“I trust you,” Lucy says simply. “You’re not going to hurt me.”

Flynn tells himself that that’s what matters, clenches his hands until they stop trembling, and cups the back of her head in his hand, tilting her toward him. He has been subliminally imagining this moment almost since they met, forced it down so far that he arguably overcompensated in the opposite direction, and he still isn’t quite sure that it’s happening. He brings out his fangs, leans in, and presses the tips of them lightly to Lucy’s pulse, enough to let her feel them there, as she gives an involuntary wriggle and squeals. It is very adorable, makes him huff a reluctant laugh, and he nips without breaking the skin. “Ticklish?”

“It’s just…” Lucy shivers again. “Go on.”

Flynn is really having a hard time holding back by now, but he still refuses to do this with anything less than the proper care. He shifts his position, opens his mouth further and gets both the upper and lower fangs around the vein. Then, fast and cleanly as he can, he bites.

Lucy shifts again and utters a muffled sound of pain – it does, after all, feel like having two sharp needles jabbed into a sensitive portion of your anatomy – and Flynn hates that thoroughly. He almost pulls away, but she claps a hand into his hair, keeping him there, and he sucks a few drops, since that starts the process of making it feel good. She tastes just as divine as before, smooth and rich and sweet, like a finely aged vintage or crisp champagne, with small fizzy sparks that must be her magic. She wraps both arms around his shoulders, lifting herself up into him, and he leans into her, face buried into her neck, listening carefully to be sure that her breathing has changed into sounds of pleasure as the lazy glow of euphoria spreads through her. He can taste her worry and her struggle and her exhaustion, the countless jumps she has made into the past, everything she has been trying so hard to do for everyone today, and he strokes her in what he hopes is a comforting fashion. He wants to keep drinking, but he takes only as much as restores him to some faint semblance of sanity and satiation. Then he pulls back, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand. “Lucy?”

“Mmm.” She looks at him, eyes heavy-lidded, and he leans in and licks the bite marks to encourage them to close over. “That was nice.”

“Have you eaten?” Flynn asks anxiously. “Especially if you’ve been working all day, and now I’ve just taken some blood – ”

Lucy agrees that supper sounds like a good idea, and they make their way into the dining room, where Denise, Michelle, Rufus, and Jiya are having a spirited discussion over something that Rufus appears to have found in the star map. But at the sight of the other two, they break off and look around, and Jiya smiles wanly. “Hey, Da – Flynn. Are you…?”

“It’s – it’s all right,” Flynn says gruffly. “You don’t – I mean, you shouldn’t have to stop yourself from saying that. Have you been able to get hold of Grand-mère or Uncle Wyatt?”

Jiya flinches, biting her lip. “No. I shouldn’t – I shouldn’t have called her the first time, but it had already been hours, and none of you were waking up, and I was – I saw – ”

Her voice breaks, and with that, for once in his life, Garcia Flynn de Clermont overcomes his well-attested emotional paralysis at doing anything useful. He practically vaults the table, pulls out the chair next to Jiya, and sits down next to her, putting his arm over her shoulders and letting her lean against him as she shakes with restrained sobs. “It’s not your fault, okay?” he says, rubbing her back like a colicky baby, as he has only the faintest memory of doing with his human daughter, with Iris. “It’s not your fault. You were frightened and you had every reason to think it and you needed to reach out to someone. We never told you any of this, you – you couldn’t know how deep it really ran. Your dad’s an idiot, okay? Okay?”
Jiya sniffs, and he can feel her head move under his chin as she nods in wry agreement. “Is Uncle Gabriel going to be all right?”

“We – we think so,” Flynn says, since that’s the easiest and most optimistic answer, rather than explaining the intricacies of deals with fey powers and the sheer magnitude of the task that awaits them. “Lucy and I just have to find something extra when we go to 1590.”

It startles him to hear himself say that so casually, as if in reference to a trip coming up quickly for which they have still not booked tickets. It also gives him another pang at the explicit reminder that he has for once managed to get over himself and sit here and comfort her properly, but is once more proposing to run off and leave her behind. He keeps rubbing her back, Jiya sniffs again and pulls herself together, and lets go of him. Flynn is just about to ask what had everyone’s attention with the star map, when his phone buzzes.

Startled, he looks down – and sees with something half-relief, half-apprehension that it’s Wyatt. Suddenly thinking that he might not want to have this conversation in front of everyone, he grabs it and absconds into the back hallway. “Yes?”

“Flynn?” By the sound of Wyatt’s voice, he was expecting Jiya to pick up. “Wait, so you’re not – whatever happened earlier? Jesus, we’ve been –”

“It’s a long story. We’ve been trying to call you. Why didn’t you answer?”

“We’ve been on a plane,” Wyatt says tersely. “Because last night we got a call from Jiya that Gabriel was dead and something had happened to you and Lucy. Everything’s gone completely to hell with the Congregation, I’m sorry. Maman is –”

He stops, and Flynn wonders if now is the pertinent moment to jump in with the encouraging news that Gabriel is, as they say, only mostly dead. Whatever went down in Venice sounds like an equal emergency, however, and he isn’t sure what to prioritize. Then he says, “Why have you been on a plane? Where are you?”

“Rochester,” Wyatt says, even more tersely. “We just got off the flight from JFK at Rochester. We have Cecilia with us, and Maman is – she wants to see Gabriel, she’s –”

He stops again, and Flynn understands that Wyatt must not even be able to articulate how utterly beside herself Maria de Clermont is right now, believing that she has lost her eldest son and the last link to her beloved husband. But that means that Wyatt, Maria, and Cecilia are about to descend on this place in – oh, an hour or so, depending on how long it takes them to retrieve their luggage, rent a car, and drive out to Madison County. They’re coming here? Even if Gabriel isn’t altogether kaput, Maria clearly feels that he traveled to a witch’s house under the implicit guarantee of protection, and instead was scurrilously betrayed – when the witch who struck the nearly-fatal blow at both of them is in fact –

“Wyatt,” Flynn says. “Wyatt, there’s something you have to know. Gabriel isn’t dead, he’s – he’s asleep. It’s a long story, Jiya was upset when she called Maman, but anyway, he’s not. But the person who did it – she’s been enthralled by Temple, it wasn’t her fault, but anyway – it was Jessica. He sent her to kill us.”

There is a long, very horrible pause. Then Wyatt audibly blanches. “Jessica? What the hell are you talking about? She tried to kill you?”

“Like I said, it wasn’t her fault.” Flynn switches the phone to the other ear and looks furtively down the corridor. “We found her in the woods, she wasn’t right. Gabriel was – he –”
His throat closes, he can’t replay the moment or picture it or allow it to dwell in his memory in any way, and he’s quite sure he’s making a hash at explaining or actually alleviating anyone’s worry. “It’s complicated,” he says. “Gabriel’s not dead, not right now. But if Maman gets here and finds out that Jessica did it –”

“You have to –” Wyatt cuts himself off, swears under his breath, almost stammering in his agitation. “Listen to me, Garcia, you have to get her out of there, all right? There’s no way we could guarantee that Maman wouldn’t go after her. You know what she – what she was like after Papa, and she might not even care if Gabriel was technically alive or – look. I just stood up for you and Lucy to the Congregation. Partly the reason it all went to shit, but whatever. You – come on. I know we’ve never been close, not like you and Gabriel, before. But you are my brother, and I stuck my neck out for you. Please, man. Please.”

Flynn hesitates. He wants to point out that Jessica could still be dangerous, that they don’t know that the enthralment won’t reactivate, and if they just let her go, Temple could swoop in, pick her up, and turn her loose on a new set of targets. But if whatever happened in Venice did so in part because Wyatt put Flynn above his precious Congregation seat, the one thing that he’s always insisted he can’t lose, clung to so jealously – well, it’s true that in that case, Flynn owes him the same in return. Finally he says, “How long until you get here?”

“We just got our bags, I’ll have to get us a car. I can stall, but –” By the sound of things, Wyatt really doesn’t want to be the one standing between Maria de Clermont and her stricken son any longer than he has to, for which he cannot be blamed. “Forty-five minutes, maybe an hour. Just make sure she’s gone by the time we get there, all right?”


“Yeah,” Wyatt says. “You too.”

With that, any further explanations or clarifications will have to wait, and they hang up. Flynn pockets the phone and steps back into the kitchen. “My mother, brother, and our chatelaine are coming here,” he announces. “We have to get Jessica out before they arrive.”

“They’re what?” Denise looks as if the addition of three more vampires, including the notorious witch-murderess Maria de Clermont herself, is really altogether back-of-beyond enough. “What do you – Jessica could still be a danger to herself or to others, and either way, we aren’t turning her over to your mother to just arbitrarily –”

“That’s the point,” Flynn snaps. Call him a stubborn cuss if you want, but he still does not like or see eye-to-eye with Denise Christopher very much. “If we don’t want my mother, who has believed that her eldest son is dead for twenty-four hours, to do something reckless, we have to get her out of here, and somewhere that Michael Temple can’t just collect her. We have an hour. So if anyone has any ideas –”

“I’m sorry.” Jiya presses both hands to her mouth. “I’m the one who told Grand-mère that, I’m the reason she –”

“No, it’s not your fault,” Flynn repeats, as stoutly as he can. “I told Wyatt that Gabriel isn’t dead, but it might not matter either way. But if we just throw Jessica out of here, then as I said, Temple can get her, and –” He sighs. “Wyatt still has feelings for her. That’s why we couldn’t let her die in the first place. It’s a pain in the ass, but there you have it. We have to send her somewhere she could have some assurance of safety, but I don’t know –”

“Somewhere?” Lucy says slowly. “Or somewhen?”
Everyone swivels around to stare at her, as the realization strikes them at the same time. Lucy gets to her feet, face pale and intent. “Think about it,” she says. “If I could manage to send Jessica somewhen else, even temporarily, that would keep her away from both Maria and Temple. There might be witches on the other side that could help her break the enthrallment. I don’t – I don’t believe that she would voluntarily want to hurt me or even Gabriel and Garcia. Everything that she’s done, she’s done because Temple forced her to, somehow. This isn’t her fault. And I just thought – Jessica’s an early modernist, remember? She works on Renaissance Italy. If I could send her there for a week or something, she would be able to get along. And that’s about the exact time frame we need to aim for, if I’m going to get myself and Garcia to Tudor London. And I know there are witches and warlocks and magicians and astrologers every block in Renaissance Italy. Someone would help her.”

Everyone exchanges wary glances. It is an audacious and daring plan, to say the least, and it might even work. But Lucy’s timewalking efforts are still decidedly amateur, and a week would still be longer than she has maintained herself anywhere outside the present. Unless it’s different if she’s focusing the energy and the intention on someone else, and hence has a greater degree of control, rather than trying to use it on herself. It’s true that they don’t have a ton of options if they want to keep Jessica away from the many factions who would see it worthwhile to get their hands on her, and an hour does not leave much time for brainstorming or concocting elaborate hypotheses. After a long pause, Flynn says, “Could you do it?”

“I have to try.” Lucy’s face is set. “Someone go get Jessica.”

Denise and Michelle glance at each other, decide that this is a two-witch job, and leave the kitchen, as Flynn, Jiya, and Rufus aren’t sure how they can be of help here. They clear aside some of the furniture, as Lucy says it helps to make sure that anything (or anyone) won’t be inadvertently taken along, and wait in tense, expectant silence until Denise and Michelle return, escorting their prisoner. They set her down in the circle, and Lucy clears her throat. “Jessica? Can you hear me?”

Jessica stares back at her with that unsettlingly blank expression, making no move to tug against her magical restraints. They also can’t be sure that Temple isn’t listening in on everything, and Lucy makes sure that she is the only one of them standing in Jessica’s line of sight. “I’m going to send you away,” she says. “Somewhere else, just temporarily. You’ll – it’ll make sense when you get there. We have to do it to protect you. If it doesn’t work, I – well. I really hope it’s going to work. Okay?”

It’s clear that there’s not much point in waiting for an actual answer, but Lucy is a kind person and does so anyway. Then she takes a deep breath, raises both hands, and concentrates as hard as she can. Flynn has never properly seen her do this, as he was detained by a tree the first time she tried, and unconscious while she was practicing today. It fills the living room with eerie golden light, and he has the sense that Lucy is standing at the center of a giant spiderweb, threads and filaments and tangled paths leading into the warp and weft of space and time. Lucy searches among them, finds one, and shapes and focuses it, face screwed up with effort as she concentrates on forging some kind of stable translocation pathway between here and fifteenth-century Italy. It must be a wandering, rambling, back-and-forth journey, and there is no direct or easy way to traverse it. But the living room glows more and more intensely, like the heart of a star, until everyone has to squint or turn their faces away and shield their eyes. Then Flynn thinks he hears the distant bonging of church bells, merchants shouting in what he dimly recognizes as the Florentine dialect, and smells a whiff of muck and mess and the oil paints from some master’s studio that opens above the labyrinthine streets. There is a crack of a whip, the clatter of iron-shod wheels on cobblestones, someone imaginatively curses the Medicis, and then in a flash, Jessica is gone.

The glow cuts out, the echoes of the otherwhen on the far side of the doorway are cut off, and time settles warily back into its accustomed contours and operation. Lucy lowers her hands, looking grey-faced and shaken, and Flynn darts forward to catch her around the waist, in case she’s about to lose
her balance. She clings to him tightly, as everyone stares at the spot Jessica was, to see if she comes boomeranging back. After several minutes have passed and she still has not reappeared, Lucy ventures, “I think it worked?”

“I think so too.” Flynn hugs her protectively against him, proud and anxious and relieved and worried all at once. He hopes they have done the right thing by dropping Jessica in medias res like this, at large in history – does the enthralment still hold, can Temple control her six hundred-plus years ago? He doesn’t think so, but they didn’t exactly have time to conduct a detailed risk assessment. At least it has kept her out of reach of his mother, and he glances around at the others. “No word about this, do you hear me? We don’t mention Jessica. We say it was some witch, we don’t know who, and we took care of them already.”

Everyone nods more or less compliantly. Rufus, for his part, is still looking bug-eyed, as even if he has fully accepted the existence of the supernatural world and that his girlfriend is a vampire, it is quite something to see someone magically vanish into the past directly in front of you. He rubs his face, muttering under his breath, and finally says, “So. Do you think she’s going to, like, steal the Mona Lisa while she’s there or something?”

“If we suddenly forget that it was ever important, we can worry about it then.” Flynn turns to Denise and Michelle. “Are we clear?”

They both eye him, but they aren’t about to sell out one of their own kind to a vampire, and promise that no word of Jessica Proctor’s role in the recent unfortunate events will pass their lips. Everyone does their best to look casual, or at least as casual as might be expected, and it’s just over half an hour later when they hear gravel crunching in the driveway. Flynn decides that it’s probably up to him to head this off before Maria can come blowing in here at full hurricane force, and goes outside, stepping down the porch, as the car rolls to a halt. It has barely done that before the passenger-side door opens and his mother gets out.

Flynn feels the look on her face as viscerally as if he has been stabbed himself. If he had thought Gabriel was dead for a full day and then some, he doesn’t know how he would be standing upright, and Maria looks wild, disheveled, dangerous. Her sleek composure and cool reserve has totally shattered, and at the sight of him, she whirls around. “Garcia?” Her throat is raw. It sounds as if she has been screaming, whether aloud or only in her heart. “Garcia, is that you? I want to see your brother.”

“Maman.” Flynn crosses the driveway as Wyatt and Cecilia are also getting out, and puts a hand under Maria’s elbow. She does not acknowledge the touch in any way, does not even seem to be sure that he is there. “Maman, did Wyatt not say that Gabriel is – ”

“He said that we had been initially misinformed.” Maria clearly does not believe it, or does not care. “I want to see your brother. Take me inside.”

Flynn decides it best not to argue. He exchanges a look with Wyatt, silently communicating that the Jessica business has been handled, and Wyatt struggles not to look too relieved, turning away quickly to help Cecilia get the bags. He escorts his mother up the steps and into the house, as Maria draws a sharp breath, nose wrinkled, as if unimpressed with the scent. She clearly is not remotely interested in the pretense of proper etiquette or making introductions to their unwilling hostesses; nothing matters until she sees Gabriel with her own eyes, and maybe not even after. As they climb the stairs toward the guest room, she says, “Who did this, Garcia? I want to make them pay.”

“It was a witch, Maman, we don’t know who. Some puppet that Temple enthralled and sent after us.” Flynn does not look down at her, just in case. “Gabriel is still alive, we are going to save him, I promise. What happened in Venice?”
“The Congregation is at an end,” Maria says. “They have torn themselves apart. Exiled you and Lucy from the society of all creatures, for breaking the Covenant. William has been deposed from his seat. We can count on no one but our family now, Garcia. It is war.”

Flynn feels a chill go through him from head to foot. He clearly had strong opinions on whether Wyatt had ever done them any good while he had the seat, but him losing it is also bad. And if he and Lucy have in fact been formally condemned – well, it might be a good thing that they’re going to the sixteenth century, but this raises the danger immeasurably for everyone they’re leaving behind, including Jiya. He wants to ask more, but Maria is not in any mood for long-winded explanations, and they reach the guest room door, pushing it open. “In here,” he says, voice hushed, as if at the bedside of an ill patient. “He sleeps.”

Maria utters a choked cry, lets go of him, and rushes over to Gabriel’s still form, bending over her son and kissing his face, as if even her indomitable spine of steel has finally snapped and she cannot be strong right now, cannot be the one trying to hold their family together. That is most likely why Wyatt insisted that they stop off and get Cecilia, and Flynn turns his face away, as if he cannot intrude on this moment of crushing grief. He wonders if Houdini has been informed. He is the member of the extended family who has lived with Gabriel in Paris the longest, practically hero-worships him, and surely must have feelings about this one way or another, even if it is not (God, please) permanent. But he does not want to ask his mother now, and backs out of the room, to leave her to have some time with Gabriel alone. He practically floats back down the steps, to find Wyatt and Cecilia making careful introductions in the living room. As ever, Cecilia is a model of poise and civility, but her eyes look red. It is deeply strange to see her out of the familiar surroundings of Sept-Tours. Flynn can’t remember the last time he has.

“Hey,” Wyatt says awkwardly. “Maman, is she – ?”

“She’s with Gabriel.” Flynn isn’t sure he can hold up much longer. “I decided it was better to leave them in private.”

Wyatt pauses, then nods. He rocks back and forth on his heels, as if wanting to ask about Jessica, but knowing he can’t do that just yet. After another moment, he says, “I’m sorry. About what happened in Venice. I was overconfident and I thought it would just be a show trial kind of thing, and I… well, I blew it. As usual, I guess. Now if you and Lucy – ”

“Cahill and Temple want to destroy us.” Flynn doesn’t have the heart to blame Wyatt for it, doesn’t want to keep pushing his last brother away. “They would have figured out something no matter what you did. I’m sorry you lost your seat.”

Wyatt glances away, throat moving as he swallows. “They’re a bunch of dicks,” he says, with a faltering attempt at scoffing dismissal. “So it’s not really a loss, I guess.”

Flynn doesn’t know how to answer, isn’t sure how to proceed, or how to comfort him. They have rarely had a conversation that lasts this long without bickering or butting heads or blaming each other somehow, and he is grateful to accept the diversion of Denise asking if anyone wants tea. She is clearly doing her best to manage the large creature contingent now having descended on the house, and this is the sort of endeavor that Cecilia can profitably assist in. She disappears into the kitchen to help, and they end up gathered awkwardly in the living room and sipping in silence. Wyatt looks curiously at Rufus, who he hasn’t met, and Jiya makes tentative introductions. “So you’re – ” Wyatt is surprised. “You know about us?”

“Yeah,” Rufus says. “I was working with Flynn and Jiya for a while before they dropped that little bomb, and I panicked, but then I handled it. I may not have any magical powers or anything, but if I can science it up, then I’m happy to do that.”
“You’ve done a lot,” Lucy assures him. “We wouldn’t have figured out any of those extra Ashmole pages if it wasn’t for you.”

Rufus gives a sheepish shrug and waves a hand, and everyone returns to their sipping. Cecilia, as if trying to grease the conversational gears, tells Denise and Michelle that they have a lovely home, and they thank her. Flynn thinks luridly that this is one way for the families to meet each other, though not the one that anyone would have chosen, and glances up at the ceiling, wondering if he should go check on Maria. But at last, there is a whisper at the door, and she appears like an elegant, soundless spirit, everyone starting to their feet in reflex. She regards them up and down, then says, “I would like something to drink.”

It isn’t clear if she means a glass of wine or a proper feed, but Denise goes to pour her the former, and Maria accepts it with a clear attempt at her usual savoir-faire. She can’t get drunk on human alcohol, but she looks as if she wishes very much that she could. Everyone watches her, aware that she is the centre of gravity, that whatever she says or does next will determine how this goes in any number of directions. For her part, Maria seems in no hurry, still lost in a reverie. Then at last she looks up. “Who killed my son?”

“Maman,” Flynn starts. “I told you, he’s not – Lucy made a bargain with the Goddess, we have six months to save him. So it’s not – ”


“Madame de Clermont,” Michelle says. “When it first happened, there was some confusion, and when Jiya first called you, she didn’t know that he – ”

“I do not blame my granddaughter for that. Her reaction was understandable.” Maria drains the last of the wine and delicately sets down her empty glass. “Garcia said that it was a witch. I want to know who.”

Denise and Michelle exchange a look. Denise says, “We don’t know.”

“Do you not?” Maria’s mauve lipstick splits to reveal the white points of her fangs, and everyone tenses. “I realize that as witches yourselves, you would be inclined to conceal the name of the culprit from me. Perhaps you even think it was fortuitous that a vampire of such stature as my son should be attacked, even if I shall not go so far as suspecting you of tacitly permitting it to happen. But you must not mistake my trust of Lucy, as an individual, with a broader acceptance of your kind. I have been given no reason in recent days to rethink my conviction that the witches as a whole do not and have never meant us well. Am I wrong?”

Denise and Michelle look as if they’ve been slapped. After all, this is a highly provocative thing for anyone to say, especially Maria, and Flynn and Lucy glance at each other nervously, as if their mother/mother figures might be about to have a knock-down, drag-out mud fight. In hopes of forestalling this, Flynn says quickly, “Maman, I told you, Temple enthralled her, she didn’t do it by choice. And if there is about to be some kind of war, the last thing we need is to get distracted with private campaigns for vengeance. So – ”

“I do not wish to be unreasonable,” Maria says, in a voice that could freeze a glacier. “I realize that, as you say, the situation is delicate, and that we may no longer be able to count on any allies outside of this room. But let me make myself plain. I will not let this stand.”

Wyatt shifts his weight, clearly in agony, and Flynn tries to warn him off looking too guilty without also attracting their mother’s attention. It’s clear that Maria does not intend to be deterred by any
platitudes or pleas of ignorance, the look in her eye the same as when she began her Nazi-killing campaign, and the de Clermonts have always known that she is the most dangerous of them all when fully unleashed. “You know,” Flynn starts helplessly. “You know I am as upset about Gabriel as you, Maman, but if there is nothing we can –”

“NO!” Maria flashes to her feet too fast to be seen, eyes utterly black, her empty glass falling and smashing on the floor. “Do not lie to my face, Garcia! Do not act as if you feel the same as I do, I who have watched, who have begged, who have flayed my pride raw, over and over, trying to get the pair of you to apologize, to forgive each other, to so much as utter a single word, only to watch it fall to dross in my hands, over and over! Do not! When I made Gabriel with your father, when he opened his eyes the first time – I nursed him on my blood, as I had never nursed a human child in my first life, when I knew at last that I was meant to be a mother! He is all that I have left of Asher, and the way we used to be, when we were happy! I have borne up somehow, I have lived seventy-three years without him, and that is seventy-three years more than I ever meant to! We were always fated to die together. We pledged it, even. But I lived, I struggled to survive, in madness and in vengeance, for you, my sons, my children, and even then, even in that grief, you pushed each other further away! Not even that could induce you to forgive each other! What have I lived for, all this time? What has it even been worth? I want to be with your father again. I have wanted it every day, every moment, since he was taken from me. I know you grieve your ghosts as well, Garcia, even and above the living that were left. Do not say you are as upset as me. Do not.”

Flynn and Wyatt both flinch as if hit by a bullwhip. They can’t meet each other’s eyes, as Denise, Michelle, Lucy, Jiya, and Rufus clearly aren’t sure if they should pretend to be part of the wallpaper. Cecilia makes a move as if to get up and help Maria back into her chair, but Maria makes a slashing gesture, and Cecilia smartly subsides. Nobody says anything for what feels like forever. Finally Maria says, “I am very tired. Is there somewhere that I might sleep? Or better yet, hunt?”

“I don’t think it is wise for you to go into the woods around here,” Denise says. “There was already an – incident, the other night. You may use our room, if you like. Michelle and I will make up a bed on the couch.”

Maria pauses, then nods in icy acknowledgement of this courtesy, sweeping from the room as Cecilia looks after her with a pained expression. It is clear that all this is wearing even her ragged, that she has never felt more unable to hold the family together than she does right now, and as her eyes flicker over Flynn and Wyatt, Flynn cannot help but wonder what she knows, or suspects, about the identity of Gabriel’s attacker. She sips her tea and keeps her silence, as she has always done, but he can see the strain on her face and he knows what it costs her. Nobody seems to know what to do. Jiya still looks as if she might cry again. Then she turns to Flynn, her face clearly asking if he blames her.

He shakes his head, but since further socializing seems likely to cause more rifts rather than mend them, everyone awkwardly disperses. The house is relatively large, but still not enough to accommodate all of them totally comfortably, and they are left to sort out into whatever spare corners and couches might be available. Flynn tilts his head at Wyatt under the pretense of leading him down to the basement, the bed having been vacated by Jessica’s departure to the Renaissance, and shuts the door behind them. Wyatt is looking wary, as if Flynn might have brought him down here to kill him out of sight of the others, and flinches when Flynn takes a step. It’s clear that Maria’s outburst has shaken both of them, a reminder of how much they have failed at being brothers, and finally Flynn says, “I need to ask you something.”

Wyatt glances sidelong at him, but doesn’t quite answer. Then he runs both hands over his face, looking deeply haggard. “If you think we should just hand Jess over – I don’t know what you did with her, but –”
“No, it’s not about that.” Flynn sits down, as if to show that he’s not about to pounce, and after a pause, Wyatt cautiously does the same. “Lucy and I are going to have to go somewhere. To the sixteenth century – 1590 London, to be exact. It’s a long story, I can’t explain everything now. While we’re gone, someone has to lead the Knights of Lazarus here and defend the family. Gabriel wanted me to do it. But it has to be you.”

Wyatt stares at him as if awaiting the punchline, if this is some other cruel joke, since he sees no other reason that Flynn would actually offer this to him. “What?”

“You just lost your Congregation seat, and you wanted – you’ve always wanted to prove that you were good enough, that you were strong enough, that you could be everything the family needed and expected.” Flynn stares at the wall, reminds himself that this is cowardly, and jerks his gaze back to his brother’s face instead. “I know you’ve always been jealous of me and Gabriel, and what we used to be. That was... its own thing, but never mind. I need you to do this, all right? I need you to look after my daughter while I’m gone, and our mother, and Lucy’s family. Benjamin Cahill and Michael Temple and everyone else who’s after us – I need you to have my back. Our back. All right?”

Wyatt looks flabbergasted, and more than a little as if he might cry. He turns his head, trying to control his expression, clearly resisting the urge to ask if Flynn is sure, in case he changes his mind. Finally he says croakily, “You’d actually trust me to do that?”

“Yes.” Flynn draws a deep breath. “I should have done it long ago, like Maman said. I – here. I don’t think I should be wearing this anyway. But you should.”

With that, he takes off Gabriel’s signet ring and hands it to Wyatt, who stares at it, not sure if he might burst into flames if he puts it on. “I can’t wear this.”

“Yes, you can. I need you to.” Flynn is so unused to actually acting like a supportive older brother that he too might be smote by a bolt from the blue. “Right now – it’s just you and me. We’re the only two de Clermont sons left. If we can’t trust each other, we can’t trust anyone.”

Wyatt still looks as if he doesn’t know what to do with this information, but at last, carefully, he puts the ring on. He flexes his fingers as if waiting for it to bite them off, can’t quite take his eyes off it, and slides it up and down a few times as if to check the fit. At last he says, “You realize I have no idea how to do this, right?”

“What makes you think I know any better?” Flynn ghosts a laugh, gets to his feet, and claps his brother on the shoulder. “I’ll leave you to figure it out.”

He climbs the stairs out of the basement, wonders if he should go find Jiya again or if she has pardonably had enough of the family right now and just wants to be cuddled by Rufus, and does not want to switch from deadbeat dad to helicopter parent in a heartbeat. He stands in the dark house, supposes that they’re lucky it’s not on fire, and then finally decides that everything else being as it is, and even with everything they do not yet know, there is only one place he wants to be right now. He goes upstairs and down the hall, knocks lightly on the half-ajar door, and whispers, “Lucy?”

There’s a pause, a rustle. Then she says, “Come in.”

Flynn pushes the door open and steps inside, shutting it behind him and glancing over at her shyly. She’s sitting on the bed in her pajamas, hair tumbling dark and loose around her face. She looks even smaller than usual, and he experiences a desperate urge to wrap her up against him like a stray kitten, even if she is the last thing from weak and helpless. She looks up at him, and he can see the shadow of repressed tears. “Did we do the right thing? With Jessica, and with – with not telling your mother the truth?”
“I don’t know.” Flynn comes over to sit down on the bed across from her, and they reach out, their fingers interlocking on the quilts. “But we weren’t going to take the risk.”

“I wouldn’t have let my friend die,” Lucy says. “I don’t regret that. Yet everything your mother said, and all the pain she’s been through, and . . .”

She stops, struggling for the words. Then she says, “If Gabriel was right, if the alchemical wedding is some witch plot. . . if we shouldn’t. . . I don’t think it is. I want – I want us, and I think one way or another, it’s meant to be. But I know you’re not comfortable with it, and with everything that has happened to your family, what has happened even now, because of witches – I’d understand. If you wanted to. . . not. Not ever. I – I would.”

It clearly takes all of Lucy’s strength to say this, and she can’t look him in the eye, as if that might make her crack, lose her resolve. But he has offered her a choice, has bent over backward to do that and ensure that she does not feel coerced or pressured in any way, and she clearly intends to do no less. It makes Flynn’s fragile heart twist in his chest, and he leans down and kisses her forehead. “You are very kind,” he says. “And I – I won’t deny that I’ve been afraid of what this all means. But I’ve been afraid for centuries. And like my mother, like the bloody Goddess, like everyone has been saying, this is where it’s led me. This is how much I’ve wasted, and I don’t want to do that any more. Either way, moja ljubav, we don’t live our lives for my mother. Or for yours.”

Lucy considers that, gives a brave little nod, and he kisses her forehead again, her nose, the side of her mouth. Her arms come up, tangling around his neck, and he pulls her close, chin resting on her tangled hair, as her hand traces absent circles on his chest. “I don’t want to do it right now,” he says. “We’re both tired, we have too much on our hearts, and I would prefer not to take the risk of our entire families inadvertently listening in. But we’ll – we’ll find a way, wherever and whenever we’re supposed to be going, to understand what all of this means. We’ll fight for this together. As a team. That is my promise to you tonight. All right?”

“All right.” Lucy looks up at him, her voice small, but she firms her chin and nods. “Can we just. . . be together a little, then? Only that?”

“Of course.” Flynn gets up, changes properly out of his rumpled clothes for the first time in several days, and puts on his own pajamas, then returns to the bed and climbs in next to her, letting her curl up with her head on his chest. He doesn’t have a heartbeat in the same way as a human, but she puts her ear where it would be, the two of them lying together in the dark, not yet sure what the daylight brings. Then he says, “You timewalked Jessica. Properly.”

“I think so.” Lucy snuggles closer. “It was the threads. You have to find the right threads, and connect them, and weave them together to make a bridge. You can’t try to go all at once in one shot, that was the mistake I kept making. You have to find the pieces and connect them from one time to the other. I still need to practice more, and I need to work how to do it with myself and someone at the same time, but I think I know the theory now. I’m going to get us to London, Garcia. I don’t know what’s waiting for us there, but I will.”

“I know you will.” Flynn strokes her back, listening to the creaks and cracks as the old house settles, filled to the brim with heartbroken creatures, likely more vampires and witches than have ever been together in a non-Congregation location for centuries. He wonders if he should tell Lucy about the anathema and exile that has been pronounced on them, that running off to the sixteenth century to escape official retribution might in fact be a very smart idea. There are still preparations to make, plans to enact, and there is still the moment of waiting for the heavens to be aligned, according to the star map. “You’re amazing, Lucy. You really are. It must take most witches years to master this, and
you’ve done it in days.”

“I don’t have a choice.” Lucy shifts against him. “And we only have six months until – well, until we have to be back. If we – ”

“We’ll save Gabriel.” Flynn cannot countenance anything else. “And besides, you’re a historian. Actually getting the chance to see the past, to live in it – that has to be worth something, doesn’t it?”

Lucy smiles softly, leans up to kiss him, and he threads his fingers through her hair, the two of them tangling together like an ouroboros, the alchemical symbol of the serpent that eats its own tail, never at an end and never at a beginning, but only one thing, eternal. That is not strictly true, Flynn thinks. There is a great beginning to come, a wakening and a reckoning. But just now, for one last night, it is only them, and the softness of solace, and in the dark, with this witch he loves, he is unspeakably grateful.
Winter's Tale

The mood in the house the next morning has a deliberate air of détente, as if everyone has taken note of the near-calamities of last night and put on a hearty pretense of their best behavior, but has also not forgotten the reasons for them. Denise, Michelle, Maria, Cecilia, Wyatt, Rufus, and Jiya are all sitting at the breakfast table when Lucy and Flynn come downstairs, making a painful effort at conversation, which falls to a halt at the sight of them. There’s a long pause, and then Cecilia, ever the diplomatic manager of difficult situations, gets to her feet and goes to the stove. “Breakfast?”

They both accept, even Flynn, as if he will eat witch pancakes in the name of solidarity, and sit down between Wyatt and Rufus. Lucy glances awkwardly at the former, as she doesn’t know Flynn’s younger brother all that well aside from a few passing interactions in Sept-Tours, and he nods at her. “Morning, ma’am.”

“You can call me Lucy.” She looks around the table, feeling as if they might have walked into the middle of an important meeting. “Did we…?”

“We were merely discussing what would have to be done, once you and my son travel to the sixteenth century.” Maria speaks with her usual cool, queenly demeanor, as if she has once more walled off all her emotions and must react logically, dispassionately, to face the challenges at hand and nothing more. “As William and I have told the others, one of the most dangerous players at the trial was not Temple or Cahill, as we might have expected, but the daemon leader, Nicholas Keynes. He was the leading voice in arguing that Garcia and Lucy be condemned and exiled, and posed it directly to the Congregation for a vote. If this is the case, if he has been lying in wait and planning to maneuver his kind into a greater position of power, whether via Ashmole 782 or otherwise, he shall have to be accounted for. We have phoned Sept-Tours and explained to Harry how it stands with Gabriel. We have also told him that he must prepare to play a traitor.”

Lucy chokes on a bite of pancake. “I’m sorry, we were what? Condemned and exiled? By the Congregation, for – for what exactly?”

“Evidently Garcia forgot to tell you that part,” Maria says, aiming a severe look at her middle child. “They seem to feel that the two of you have enough of a relationship to warrant a breach of article three of the Covenant, the section which forbids interspecies… intimate fraternization. I do not know if they expected material proof, or if it was merely a convenient pretext to cut you off and increase the pressure upon you, but so it is.”

Lucy can feel her cheeks getting warm, and keeps her attention studiously on her plate. Perhaps it’s a good thing, as Flynn said, that they have not properly consummated their relationship, especially with their entire family available to be recruited as witnesses if they did. Not that she thinks that anyone here would stand up and spill embarrassing details to an actively hostile government body, but still. Rather hastily, trying to change the subject as much as anything, she says, “Harry – Houdini, is he all right? I know he was close to Gabriel, and we spent time together at Sept-Tours. What do you mean, play a traitor?”

“He is…” Maria pauses, as if she still does not trust herself to discuss Gabriel’s almost-death. “He is most upset, and willing to do whatever necessary. As you know, he is a daemon, and if Keynes poses a threat, we need a source of information close to him. It has been arranged. In a few days, Harry will publicly denounce us and all the de Clermonts, blame us for Gabriel’s fate – the news cannot be kept secret for long, we have already had to tell the Knights of Lazarus, and rumors spread – and stage a defection to Keynes’ side, announcing that he has learned his lesson about consorting with vampires and wishes to promote the interests of his own kind instead. There he will remain, as
long as necessary, and see what can be learned.”

Lucy takes this in with both admiration and trepidation. Houdini, with his open, earnest, lively nature, doesn’t seem like the obvious candidate for a double agent, and she resists the urge to ask if Keynes will suspect the conveniently timed defection of the de Clermonts’ daemon servant from the start. Then again, Houdini is the ultimate showman, the master of misdirection and subterfuge, making you look in one direction while he is accomplishing something completely different in the opposite, and in some ways, this will be his greatest trick, the role he was born for. Lucy shouldn’t wager against his ability to pull it off, and all of them are going to be in danger anyway, but still. “Just him, then?”

“I know a daemon,” Rufus pipes up, most unexpectedly. “Connor Mason. He’s actually the one who explained all this supernatural bullshit to me in the first place. You’ve probably heard of him, he’s that billionaire tech guy who has feuds with Elon Musk on Twitter. We’ve known each other for a long time and he’s done a lot for me. I can ask him if there’s anything he can pick up on that side of the tracks.” He shrugs, suddenly self-conscious. “If it helps.”

Everyone glances at him in surprise, until Maria agrees that yes, if Connor Mason can collect any intelligence in that regard, it will be useful. It has also been established – last night, apparently – that Wyatt will step into Gabriel’s shoes as acting grandmaster of the Knights of Lazarus, and they will take charge of transporting him to a secret location in Liechtenstein, which it turns out has various interesting connections with its establishment as an independent principality from the Holy Roman Empire in the eighteenth century. (Why Liechtenstein? Why not Liechtenstein?) With Gabriel safely interred in a vault in the remote Swiss Alps, the odds that anyone can get to him and commit mischief prior to Lucy and Flynn’s return with the antidote are low, but Wyatt will still be keeping a sharp eye out. He also has to assign the Knights to defend Sept-Tours and other important de Clermont properties that might be subject to attack, and now that he’s short his Congregation seat, they are behind the 8-ball on keeping up with whatever is being plotted there. Nor is there an immediately obvious replacement for how they are going to acquire that critical intelligence. There is still no word from the Sokolovs, and no chance of pulling off another “oh I totally hate the de Clermonts, let me join you” confidence trick. Their best hope is that Houdini, having presumably ingratiated himself with Nicholas, will be invited to attend meetings, or at least have some sort of access to their results. Not that Temple, Cahill, and Keynes are going to air all their nefarious schemes in public, but if they’re confident that they’ve purged their enemies and garnered support for their plans, they could get cocky.

As she listens to the discussions, it increasingly sinks into Lucy that everything is changing, for all of them, and that while she and Flynn might be the ones proposing to move to Tudor London for six months, this is going to take extensive planning and coordination among both their families to pull off. It’s almost touching, if you think about it. Denise and Michelle are going to search thoroughly through Carol and Henry’s old things for anything about Ashmole 782, and continue to work on other forms of magical research and defense. As for Jiya, since Flynn is leaving Oxford for the time being, there’s not much reason for her to stay in the lab just to keep the lights on. Instead, she and Rufus have the job of keeping tabs on Lucy and Flynn from the present. They have to visit archives and auction houses, check anything that dates from the late sixteenth century, track any historical anomalies that might suddenly arise, and otherwise monitor the effect that the timewalk is having on the present. They also need to conceal these items from Temple and Cahill, who will be suspicious about where Lucy and Flynn have gone, and have to be put off the scent for as long as possible. “Well,” Jiya says, with a brave stab at cheer. “It’ll be nice to get the chance to travel a bit, anyway.”

Flynn glances at her, but doesn’t say anything. It is clear that he is struggling with the guilt of leaving his daughter behind when they’ve only just started to properly connect, and even Maria and Wyatt’s assurances that they will look after her are only of incidental mollification. It isn’t clear what Maria
will be doing, though she will be offering support in any or all of these fields as necessary. She may return to Sept-Tours, but it will be a magnet for the wrong kind of interesting events, and it would be safer for her to go into hiding at one of the family’s lesser-known properties. Up in Scotland, perhaps, at their hunting lodge in the Cairngorms, the one that Flynn ran off to soon after meeting Lucy. It’s the first time Maria has been forced to leave her home possibly in history, and Lucy fights her own guilt. “I’m sorry,” she says. “All this trouble that we’re causing all of you, I… I’m sorry.”

“It is not your fault.” Maria smiles obliquely. “It could not be avoided. And it will all be worth it if you save my son.”

Lucy hopes that this qualifies as a vote of confidence, since everything they have to do in 1590 (not least get there – she needs to go outside as soon as breakfast is over and keep practicing) feels staggeringly difficult. The reminder, yet again, that Gabriel’s life is hanging on this makes her insides bubble with anxiety, and at that, she thinks of something else. “Garcia, you said that you were in London in the 1590s. Does that mean you’re already there? What if you run into your past self? That can’t be good.”

“We do have to get me out of the way, yes,” Flynn says. “When we arrive, before we go into the city, I’ll send a letter explaining that Matthias Corvinus’ lost library has been found in Dalmatia, and that many rare and magical texts are available for perusal and purchase. The Raven King,” he adds to Lucy, who has in fact heard of Matthias Corvinus, fifteenth-century king of Hungary and Croatia and the owner of one of the largest and most splendid libraries of the Renaissance, the Bibliotheca Corviniana, which was tragically lost during an Ottoman invasion in 1526. She wants to ask if Past Flynn will fall for this, but it’s not like there’s social media or news websites for him to look it up and confirm it, and presumably Present Flynn will know what to say to make it sound convincing to himself. “With a journey from England and back, that should take me at least six months. If I return unexpectedly, I’ll think of something else, but it should work.”

Everyone coughs, just because the logistics of this are so demented that you have to, and agrees that they’ll take his word for it. Lucy hopes that Past Flynn packs up and leaves town quickly, because they can’t really get started on anything until he does, and refrains from asking whether this will hopelessly confuse everyone as to why he is not only back the next day, but has an unfamiliar witch in tow. As they are getting up from the breakfast table, she says, “What is our story going to be, exactly? Who am I supposed to be?”

“I was known as Lord Garcia Clairmont to the world at large, but to the School of Night, I was called only Flynn. It’s where I got the name, actually, and I became fond of it, so I kept it. It’s less conspicuous as a surname than any version of de Clermont, and I have wanted to put some space between me and my family at various points in my life.” He shrugs. “Long story – it involved Irish connections, service to Grace O’Malley, the pirate queen of Connacht, and needing something that did not trace the mysterious associate of alchemists and atheists to the respectable courtier and wealthy London landowner. I suppose you’ll have to be my wife, married unexpectedly after a short affair. Lady Lucy Clairmont, unless you wish to go by another name too?”

“I – no.” That will definitely get too confusing, and Lucy is going to have to pretend enough, so she wants to hang onto her own name at least. “But who am I supposed to be? Family connections and background and bloodline are all very important, and if you turn up having just married this random nobody who isn’t the daughter of Sir So-and-so, won’t that make people gossip?”

“I imagine it will. That’s all the city and the court does with any remotely interesting scrap of information, and everybody’s bloody busy screwing everyone else behind closed doors anyway, so yes, I would get ready for a lot of Elizabethans far too up in your private business.” Flynn says this remarkably casually, holding the door for her as they head out into the cold morning. “We’ll have to
keep you out of sight, at least for a few weeks. You’re going to stick out no matter what we do, and the less unnecessary attention, the better.”

Lucy wants to think that as a historian, she will have a head start on this, but books can only take you so far, and there is nothing to prepare you for being plunged headfirst into actual sixteenth-century London. There is dialect, accent, custom, protocol, dress and behavior, food and drink, social mores, religious observations, general decorum and deportment, and the fact that as the wife of a wealthy aristocrat, Lucy will be expected to attend court, manage the household, and engage in any number of other important public-facing roles that she’ll have to pretend she’s known her whole life. She can’t help but be excited, even as terrifying as it is, but it’s not just an extra-special research trip. They are already well out in dangerous waters, and there is no way to be sure of what is waiting for them.

They crunch out into the witchwoods together, as Lucy needs to practice taking Flynn with her when she timewalks, rather than just going alone. By day, the trees have once more returned to their docile and sleeping state, and she hopes that since she already convinced them not to grab Flynn, they won’t have to go through that again. Once they reach the clearing they were using for fight practice, she takes a deep breath, stretches her arms over her head, and turns to him. “Are you ready for this? It’s not going to be particularly fun, the first few times. And probably the times after that.”

Flynn nods firmly, stepping up to her and holding his hands up to hers. “Say when.”

Lucy takes hold of him, grips hard, and closes her eyes. It’s an entirely different process when you’re trying to transport someone with you, a shifted center of magical gravity, a new set of threads to weave and stopovers to account for, and she has to fight the fear that she will irreparably Splinch both of them somewhere between now and 1590. Indeed the first few times, they don’t even go anywhere, aside from a weird skip a couple seconds back like a glitch in the Matrix. It takes Lucy at least ten repetitions to actually get them out of the twenty-first century, and even then, they only crash glancingly into something that might be 1916 before they’re back, flat on their faces and feeling as if elephants are standing on their lungs. “So,” she wheezes, when they can finally talk. “This is going to take work.”

Once they have moaned, groaned, gotten to their feet, and brushed themselves off, they valiantly repeat the process until noon, at which point they have to stop because it feels as if they have been beaten with a nightstick. Lucy still can’t get them further back than the nineteenth century at best, where they manage to wander around for a few minutes in 1863, notice that the house is just being rebuilt so the fire that destroyed the original must have happened recently, and then once more are violently catapulted back to the present. She doesn’t understand why it’s so hard, when she finally got the knack of sending Jessica yesterday. As they traipse painfully back in search of lunch, she says, “Are we forgetting something? Why is this so different? What if I can’t figure it out?”

“We’ll get there,” Flynn says reassuringly. “This is only your first day of proper practice, remember? I’ll check all the Ashmole fragments again, just in case, but – ”

“The fragments.” That makes Lucy think of something. “Remember the one that had all those miscellaneous details about historical places in London? It was on the same scrap that had the names of Amelie and Bathsheba and the others. That must be some kind of road map for us. Whoever wrote that – whoever will write that – they knew we’d be traveling to 1590. Those must be places that are important, that we need to visit when we get there.”

Flynn glances at her, eyebrows raised in surprise, then nods slowly. They retrieve the piece in question, the one they brought from Sept-Tours, and the three pages spat up by the house the other night, riffling through them in search of more information. All that jumps out to Lucy, however, are
the cryptic instructions from the first one, the ones she has been trying to riddle out this entire time. When the time comes, you will have their names. The alchemical wedding makes the bridge. Beneath the wolf and lion lies the ring.

“When the time comes, we will have their names,” Lucy says, hoping this will make sense if she puzzles through it aloud. “That has to mean that when we timewalk and arrive in London, we have the names of people and places that we need to look into, like I said. Contact Agnes Sampson, maybe? And the alchemical wedding makes the bridge – that has to be a reference for what it takes to get us there. Where’s that picture?”

She rustles around and pulls out the illumination, the one that bears their faces, the king and queen staring glossily up at their real selves with painted eyes. Lucy wonders if they’re both supposed to hold onto it, if it has a particular spell woven into it that needs to be activated, or something else. She doesn’t want to use it for too many test runs in case it’s a one-and-done thing, and needs to line up with the precise moment in the star map as discerned by Rufus’s painstaking calculations. They have to try something, however, and she looks at Flynn. “Is there anything you can think of that makes this work? I assume they don’t mean fold it into an actual origami bridge, so…”

She’s joking, but she looks up to see an expression on Flynn’s face as if he might have been about to suggest that. Something else then occurs to her. “You don’t think – ” She stops, coughing, no longer able to meet his eyes. “I mean, the last time we were – you know. That was what made the enchantment hiding the pages break. Maybe we’re supposed to. Well.”

Flynn doesn’t blush like a regular human, but she can sense the heat boiling off his ears anyway. He glances away, rubbing his mouth, and does not seem capable of an answer. For her part, Lucy isn’t sure if she wants it to be the case or not. The idea of having sex with the sole purpose of properly sending them on a dangerous time-traveling jaunt doesn’t seem very conducive to tender passion or romance. Stilted, forced, mechanical, everything they’ve been trying to avoid. A bit too rote and perfunctory, not the way she wants it to be for the first time, and they don’t know if it would work anyway. Besides, she has only known Flynn for barely two months, and it has taken longer than that, at least in most cases, for her to sleep with people she’s dated. If dating even is the right word for what they are. That seems casual, ordinary, go out to dinner with someone a few times and see if you like them, if there’s chemistry. Whatever this is, it’s far beyond that. She wants it, in some ways she’s too far in now either way, but it’s still frightening.

“We don’t – ” they start at the same time, as if to hasten to put the other at ease first. “We don’t have to – I’m sure there’s another – ”

Hideously embarrassed, they also shut up in unison, and several moments pass in excruciating silence. Then Lucy looks down at the alchemical wedding page, squinting at it from every angle in case she’s missed anything. When it looks in such perfect condition, as if it’s spent the past several hundred years away from the rest of its codex, she half-wonders if it was originally part of Ashmole 782 at all. Maybe it’s some kind of elaborate fraud or forgery, made at a separate time for unknown reasons and never incorporated into the full manuscript. Maybe this yet again isn’t the answer, but only another twist on the mystery. Some of the gilding on the border by the white queen’s skirt looks as if it’s been split, by an X-acto knife or other fine-bladed razor, and the two layers gape slightly when Lucy touches them. It looks as if someone cut in under the illumination, and when she turns the page and shakes it, she hears a faint rattling. A tiny slip of paper, onionskin-thin and folded into a triangle, falls out.

“Oh my God.” Lucy picks it up. “Look. Someone hid something in here – a letter or a note or something. Maybe this is the – ”
Even as she unfolds it, she can feel her heart skipping a beat, because she recognizes the handwriting. It’s the same as on the letters Denise and Michelle gave her, the ones from her mother, that she read and felt so dissatisfied with. And once more, it’s addressed to her.

My dearest daughter,

I hope you will find this when it is time. I have arranged matters so as to give you the best chance. You must forgive us, your father and I. We always knew your abilities were very special, and it was the only choice we had to keep you safe.

I do not know who the man is, your red king, but I have every confidence that he is a great witch indeed, and you will do wonderful things together for yourselves, our family, and our kind. We are all counting upon you.

I wish I could give this to you in person. But for all our sakes, it must be hidden instead. You will, I think, know more than I ever did.

Your loving mother,

Carol Preston.

There’s a long pause as Lucy and Flynn stare at the letter together. Neither of them seem to know how to react to it. Then Flynn says, “So it was your mother who hid these pages in the house? Is that what that means?”

“I think so.” Lucy feels rather numb. “She wants me to forgive them – for what? For the spellbinding? For lying to me? All this time, I’ve wondered why, if she knew about Ashmole 782 and whatever connection she thought I had to it, she didn’t just tell me, she didn’t just tell me, she didn’t mention it in any of the letters she left for me. I know what Denise and Michelle said, that they wanted me to choose it freely and not because anyone told me to, or that it might have been too dangerous to write any of it down, but this…”

She continues to stare at the tiny scrap of paper, not sure what on earth she wants to feel. “A great witch,” is that it? Carol saw her pictured here with her unknown consort and assumed, probably defensibly, that it was another witch? Bit of a nasty shock that he turned out to be a vampire, and not just a vampire, but a de Clermont? Yet again, that expectation that Lucy will splendidly carry on the family name and the honor and legacy, the reminder that they are counting on her? Frankly, the last thing Lucy wants is to do great deeds in the name of “our kind,” given how shitty the witches have, by and large, been to her. She experiences a mad urge to tear up both the letter and the illumination, and clenches her fists, even as they crackle with witchfire, called by her rage. She doesn’t want this.

It’s her, perhaps, but it’s not.

“Hey.” Flynn puts his hand over hers, large and strong and solid, quenching the sparks. “Hey, it’s going to be all right. Remember what I said? We don’t do things just for my mother, we don’t do them just for yours. Take a breath, eh? Breathe.”

Lucy tries to remember to do that, until the constriction in her chest eases somewhat. She is spitefully tempted to lean over and kiss Flynn right now, just as a subliminal fuck-you to the paper and to prove that he is in fact a vampire, hah, didn’t see that coming, did you? But she also doesn’t want to use him as a grubby emotional pawn in the middle of her struggles with her dead mother, and rubs her free hand over her eyes. “Maybe we should go back and keep practicing,” she says instead. Throwing this energy into something constructive, solving a problem, seems like the best thing to do, rather than collapsing into angry brooding. “Don’t you think?”
Flynn pauses, then diplomatically agrees that if she wants to, they can do that. They finish their lunch and head back out, whereupon they spend the rest of the afternoon running into the brick wall over and over. Lucy is in agonizing pain by the time it’s getting dark, Flynn finally forcefully insists that they stop, and carries her back to the house. “I’m doing something wrong,” she mutters. “I had it, with Jessica. I had it yesterday. Maybe I forgot.”

“You didn’t forget.” He pushes the door open with his shoulder and steps inside. “This is just different. I think we might have almost gotten to the eighteenth century on the last one.”

Lucy mumbles something incoherent, feeling an exhaustion beyond mortal ken, as if it is dragging her down to drown and each time, it’s more difficult to swim back to the surface. She isn’t even sure they are back in the present, though they are; it’s just that the temporal lobe of her brain feels like scrambled eggs and loathe as she is to admit it, they can’t just keep definition of insanity-ing this until they finally get through. Flynn carries her up to her bedroom, says he’ll get her some supper, and shuts the door.

Lucy falls asleep before he does, has vivid and disturbing dreams, and wakes up in the wee hours – according to the bedside clock, it’s 3:23 am. Flynn is asleep next to her, as if he came in and lay down quietly rather than wake her, and she looks at him tenderly, reaching out to put her hand on his back. He is such a pain in the ass sometimes, he’s awkward and stubborn and solitary and shy, he is as unlike a stereotypical suave vampire lothario as could possibly be imagined, and yet, she is deeply fond of that. Yes, he could tone down the interpersonal catastrophes a smidge, though she has a sense that she luckily missed the worst of them by several centuries. And if she met him back when he was a bloodthirsty agent of chaos tearing apart anyone who stood between him and his revenge, she might have had a very different opinion. But she’s met him now, like this, a professor and a father and a man with a family that he loves very much but can’t sort out their shit, someone who has experienced a life of years and years and years. Even despite all the tragedy he’s gone through, which has indeed just struck again, he’s still here. He’s still trying.

Lucy moves closer to kiss his forehead, a small spark of magic glows white between them, and Flynn stirs, looking at her in confused concern. “Lucy?” he murmurs, voice thick with sleep, accent somewhat stronger than usual. “You all right?”

“Yeah.” She strokes the flip of dark hair out of his eyes. “Right now I am.”

He smiles, still mostly asleep, then catches her hand, brings it to his mouth, and kisses it. They snuggle instinctively nearer, as he wraps his arm around her back and scoops her up into the lee of him, a mighty cliff standing against the storm. He’s already sinking back under into the dark sea of slumber, and Lucy lets herself fall with him – protected, held close, cherished, safe. They’ll do this somehow. She doesn’t know how, but they will.

They wake up the next morning somewhat restored but ravenously hungry, at least on Lucy’s part, and head downstairs to eat. At their entrance, Cecilia looks up briskly. “I did find them, Garcia,” she says. “I have them here, whenever you are ready.”

Lucy glances over to see Cecilia holding out a handsome brushed-steel case, which Flynn takes and flips open. Inside are about half a dozen prepared syringes, which Lucy eyes leerily. She is not fond of needles and tends to faint at the sight of blood, and since Flynn is a vampire and can’t catch human diseases, those must be for her. “And these are…?”

“Vaccines,” Flynn says. “Smallpox, measles, typhus, diphtheria, so on. I couldn’t get one for scarlet fever, and the only one available for malaria takes four injections, but we still need to give you as many as we can. I assume you had your childhood immunizations, but these will be different and stronger strains, and plague is recurrent in London throughout the sixteenth century. There was an
outbreak just last year, in 1589, and it returns in 1593 and 1594. We should miss that if we’re going to 1590, and I’ll make sure we take along an emergency course of antibiotics just in case, but still.”

Lucy has to admit that this is a sensible precaution, but she really hopes that she is not expected to sit there and get them all jammed into her arm at once. She is relieved that the subject of taking modern medicine into the past has been raised, at least, as her desire for full historical authenticity does not stretch that far. “So can I take tampons and toothpaste and soap and shampoo and whatever else? I’m not sure I really want to use a rag and lye and olive oil. And I’m definitely not wearing lead makeup.”

“You can bring those, yes,” Flynn allows. “As long as they stay in the house, and with the awareness that whenever you run out, you won’t be able to get any more until we return. I’ll bring an industry-standard first aid kit, but for any major injuries or other illnesses, we – ” He stops. “Well, let’s just try to avoid those.”

Lucy also hopes that they can get through this without being exposed to genuine Elizabethan medicine, thank you very much. Flynn is looking at her expectantly, and she grimaces, sits down, and rolls up her sleeve. “Just to warn you,” she says through gritted teeth. “I faint.”

“I’ll take care of you,” Flynn says, which is really rather sweet of him. She supposes that she managed to get her actual blood drawn at his lab just fine, so she can power through this, and he puts on blue rubber gloves, swabs her arm with disinfectant, and holds her hand with one of his as he expertly thumbs the syringes with the other. It’s definitely no worse than getting bitten, as far as the brief prick goes (though getting bitten is much more enjoyable). Lucy’s arm is throbbing by the time they’re done, but he looks pleased. “All set.”

“Thanks.” Lucy waits as he conscientiously applies a bandage to each of the injection sites, then gets to her feet. Between this and the gauntlet she ran yesterday, she’s not feeling completely up for another day of timewalking practice, even if that is kind of the whole point. “Is there anything else I should know about or try to prepare for?”

Flynn considers. “I don’t think so. Once we get there, though – ”

He’s interrupted at that point as Rufus and Jiya come into the kitchen, and he goes over to offer Jiya an awkward side hug. “Where’s your grandmother?”

“The Knights of Lazarus are arriving today to get Uncle Gabriel.” Jiya clearly does her best to be matter-of-fact about it. “She and Uncle Wyatt went to pick them up.”

Lucy cannot help but imagine the spectacle of half a dozen vampires marching solemnly through Syracuse Hancock Airport in their full chainmail glory (she hopes they changed for the occasion). Denise and Michelle, it seems, have tactfully decided not to be at home when the delegation arrives, and have driven to a playhouse in Rochester that is doing an authentic Shakespearean-style production of *The Winter’s Tale*, in hopes of borrowing some costumes. They are thus left to sit in nervous anticipation until the car pulls up in the driveway, there are voices outside, and the door opens.

Everyone gets to their feet as Maria, Wyatt, and four Knights of Lazarus stride into the sunny kitchen. Lucy’s first impression is that they are all very tall, very solid, and could start at inside linebacker for an NFL team (even if they don’t know the first thing about the game, good luck to anyone trying to hit them). They aren’t wearing chainmail, at least, and are impeccably clad in designer suits, as if to honor their fallen grandmaster with their sartorial flair. They incline their heads respectfully to Flynn, then glance at Lucy. They are too well-mannered to ask directly, but they’re clearly curious, and more than slightly wary. After all, not long after meeting her, Gabriel is
essentially dead, Garcia is about to head to the sixteenth century, and they’re down to the third-string de Clermont as interim leader. No offense to Wyatt, he’ll try hard and do his best, but it’s still not what anyone was expecting. Least of all him.

Upon being informed that Gabriel is in the guest room, the Knights vanish upstairs – for such large men, they don’t make much sound on the stairs, moving with vampire lightness – and return with him carried on a makeshift pall. “We shall inform you when we have reached the Schloss,” one says. “How long will he be there?”

“Six months,” Lucy says, surprising herself by daring to speak in front of them. “Or – or shorter. Certainly no later, or – well, never mind. Is there anything we need to know about how to find you?”

The Knight gives her an amused and rather insolent stare. “My lord Garcia will manage that. It is nothing that a witch needs to know.”

Flynn clears his throat. “And you can speak more politely to her.”

“Apologies, my lady.” The Knight bows. “Do any of you wish to say farewell?”

The de Clermonts look at each other, as if they do, but none of them want to make a public spectacle about it in front of everyone else. Maria and Jiya bend to kiss Gabriel, Wyatt says, “Uh – see you soon, I hope,” and Flynn stands in front of the pall as if in a trance, staring down at Gabriel’s magnificent, impervious, unconscious face. Finally he stoops, kisses him quickly as well, and steps away, as if he can’t think about this as anything except a temporary goodbye, an interim measure. He tries to say something, but can’t, and nods brusquely at the Knights. They start to pick Gabriel up, but Lucy says, “Wait.”

They’re still not entirely sure if they should listen to her, but one look from Flynn makes them step back, and she moves up to Gabriel’s side. She feels a little ridiculous, since he can’t hear her, but he took the poisoned wound in the first place helping to save her, and she can’t help but struggle with that guilt. “I’m sorry,” she whispers. “We’re going to save you too. We’ll get the antidote, I swear.”

With that, she turns her head, awkwardly kisses his cheek, and straightens up, stepping back, as the Knights ensure that everybody has had the necessary amount of closure and carry Gabriel out to the van. Lucy assumes they aren’t taking him back via a commercial flight – most likely the helicopter that dropped him off the first time is returning to ferry him away again. Once they have left, a solemn shroud falls over the kitchen, nobody sure what to say or do, until Maria says, “Have you mastered timewalking with a partner yet?”

“I – not yet.” Lucy rubs her eyes. “I had it the other day, but this is different. I’ll get there, I’ll figure it out. But until I do – ”

“What?” Maria’s gaze sharpens. “What do you mean, this is different from the other day? Did you timewalk something else before? Someone?”

“I – ” Lucy is caught short, as Flynn and Wyatt exchange an imperceptible look. “No, I just mean from when I did it to save Flynn and the others from the tree the other night, when I jumped back then. That’s all.”

“Mmm.” Maria continues to look at her, her eyes flickering to the de Clermont signet ring on Lucy’s finger, as if she does hope that she has not given it to her in error. She decides not to press just now, however, and they all eat a rather subdued brunch. When it’s finished, Maria gets to her feet. “I want to hunt. I was told that it might be dangerous for me to go into the witchwoods, but surely there is another choice?”
“There are several state forests, not too far from here.” Lucy is eager to be helpful, and to move Maria away from the delicate subject of who she might have timewalked before. “If it’s safe to do it by day, I’m sure someone can take you there?”

“I’ll do it,” Wyatt says, clearly thinking along similar lines of getting his mother away from any incriminating scents. He exchanges a silent glance with Lucy, thanking her, as he must have understood from that what they did with Jessica, if Flynn didn’t explicitly tell him. She nods back, just a fraction, and Wyatt gets to his feet and ushers Maria out.

When they’re gone, as is Cecilia, Jiya frowns. “I don’t like lying to Grand-mère.”

“Me neither,” Flynn admits. “But it’s for everyone’s best good. As long as we get the antidote and come back in time, nobody has to know about Jessica. You – well, you didn’t see the full extent of what she was like after your grandfather was killed. We all tried to keep you from the worst of it. We don’t want her to be like that again.”

Jiya looks uncertain what to think about this. She glances away, then back at her father. Then she says, “Maybe I’d like to know. Maybe I’d like to know all these things. All this dark, messed-up family history that you’ve kept from me, everything you’ve held at arm’s length, all these secrets that I’ve had to learn in terrible ways – I’m not made out of china, Dad. I’ve been a vampire for a while, and part of this family for over a hundred years. Do you really think I could see something that would shock me or disgust me or make me want to run away? Is it that you don’t trust me, or – ”

“No.” Flynn gets up and moves toward her, but doesn’t quite presume to reach out. “No, it’s not that. I just – I… I was ashamed. All of us were. We didn’t want you to see us at our raving and heartbroken worst, our lowest and most ignoble selves. You’re the best of us. In some ways, you always have been. And I just…” He trails off. “I thought I could protect you from it, from me, by never letting us get too close. But I’ve blown that too.”

Jiya regards him. Lucy and Rufus decorously pretend they are not there. Then she says in a small voice, “I had to kill that daemon, you know. The one who was following us in Oxford. I’ve never actually done that before. I didn’t want to, but I did, if it would keep me safe, if it would keep Rufus safe. Do you think I don’t get it at all?”

Flynn looks anguished at the reminder, the fact that he should have been there to keep her safe, or at least take the burden of killing upon himself, he who has done it so many times and so customarily, rather than let Jiya stain her soul with a new sin. “Jiya,” he starts. “I – ”

“Maybe it was one of Nicholas Keynes’ friends, or one of his spies.” Jiya hugs herself, looking rather fragile. “Maybe that’s why he was so vindictive toward you and Lucy at the Congregation the other night. Maybe that was my fault.”

“I – no. Draga, no, it’s not – it’s not your fault, just as it wasn’t when you were frightened and called Maria. All right?”

Jiya looks at Flynn, wanting to trust him, not sure if she should. Then she takes one step, and then another, and finally the two of them collide almost clumsily, still so vastly unused to showing physical affection that the simple act of a comforting hug is like climbing Mount Everest. She winds her arms around his waist, he practically engulfs her with his, and the two of them just stand there, rocking back and forth. He rests his chin on her head, not looking very steady, and closes his eyes hard, as if to wick back traitorous tears. “I’m sorry,” he says. “I’m sorry you had to do that. And when I get back from 1590, I’ll tell you everything else you want to know about our family, all right? I promise.”
Okay.” Jiya lets go and steps back, looking up at him. “And I want you to do whatever you have to do, and not worry about me. I know you asked Uncle Wyatt to keep an eye on me, but I can also take care of myself. Don’t cause too much trouble, all right?”

Flynn snorts weakly. “I’ll do my best.” He leans down and kisses her forehead, cupping her face in his hands. “Same to you.”

After that, the rest of the day passes quietly. Lucy is feeling a little woozy from the combined effects of yesterday and the round of vaccines, and goes upstairs for an afternoon nap that turns into several hours. She wakes up at dusk, thinks she will be lucky if she ever gets back into an ordinary sleep schedule again, and comes groggily downstairs to discover that Denise and Michelle have returned with their costumes. They’re a little early—Tudor rather than strictly Elizabethan, and they are flimsy stage outfits, not intended to stand up to the rigors of everyday wear. They’re made with modern fabrics, stitched on modern sewing machines, but they’re just something for Lucy and Flynn to wear temporarily so they don’t bomb into Greenwich in jeans and T-shirts, and will be replaced by proper garments once they settle into Flynn’s house. The man’s costume also doesn’t quite fit Flynn, and he grumbles about it, while Denise informs him that it was the largest size they had, they did their best. He appears set to go on at further length about inaccuracies in the design, but Lucy says quickly, “Thank you. I’m sure these will be fine for short-term use.”

“I hope so.” Denise cocks her head, knowing Lucy well enough to tell that she’s not quite herself. “Are you all right? Did something happen? Something else, I mean?”

“I just…” Lucy does not think she can possibly unburden herself of everything on her mind right now, or figure out how anyone could be expected to deal with it. Finally she says, “There was a letter from my mother, tucked in the alchemical wedding page. It was her, apparently. She hid the pages in the house, she found them somehow and she put them under an enchantment, presumably to break when I was here with the red king. She thought that it – that he – would be another witch, I guess she didn’t know everything. But she knew about Ashmole 782 and that I was supposed to be the white queen. She apologized for the spellbinding, I think. But all this time she just… was grooming me or something, or I don’t know what. It feels gross. Why didn’t she even tell you?”

“I don’t know.” Denise looks startled and sympathetic. “Like I said, Michelle and I will go through all your parents’ old things, anywhere we can think of. We’ll see if there was anything else she might have left, I promise.”

“Okay.” Lucy is fairly sure at this point that she is never going to reconcile herself to her mother’s ideas or expectations or anything else about her, but Denise is trying to be comforting, and this isn’t really something to take out on her. “Sounds good.”

Denise gives her another worried look, clearly sensing that all is not yet copasetic, but they sit down for supper, where Rufus announces that he’s pretty sure he’s figured it out. He wants to re-run the equations just in case, but the optimum date for their journey to the past is, as far as he can tell, three days from now, at the start of Sagittarius. Flynn wants to know if that means they’ll come out in November 1590, but Rufus doesn’t think so. It should be April, since the matching sign and original date was in Aries, but due to something something quantum slippage/switching back to the Julian calendar/slight drift in constellation position due to the visible starlight being almost half a millennium younger/differences in schemes of zodiac classification/blah blah blah, it could be earlier, in March, or later, in May. That is assuming they get there at all. A stab of terror has gone through Lucy at the news that she has exactly three days to figure this out. Fine, it’s time for emergency measures. As they get up from the table after supper, she says quietly, “Garcia, can I talk to you? Upstairs?”

He looks startled, but follows her up into her room, where she locks the door behind them and feels
like a high schooler on prom night, trying to fumble her way toward this with no idea how. Finally she gulps a breath and says, “I know everything we said earlier, everything we’ve both said. But I think we – we need to try, um. You know. That.”

She is a thirty-four-year-old adult, she’s not a virgin, she’s been with both men and women, and there is no need for her embarrassment to be so profound that she wishes for immediate death. Not daring to meet his eyes, she plunges on. “How about we don’t say that we’re going to sleep together? We just – you know. See where the night takes us.”

With that, Lucy stops, since she physically cannot utter words any longer and is realizing that no matter how much game he may not have, she really does not have it either. There is a deeply mortifying silence. Then Flynn says carefully, “I see.”

“I know it’s not really. . .” Lucy rubs at her eyes. “Like I said, we just kind of. . . mess around, and whatever. That, or –”

“I can –” Flynn takes a step forward, as if he is prepared to drop to his knees on the spot and perform cunnilingus if she thinks it would be useful as a scientific contribution. “If you –”

“Let’s just. . .” Lucy isn’t sure if they should wait until the rest of the house goes to bed, or if the ordeal of sitting here in stunned silence for several hours beforehand would be too much to bear. “Like I said, we don’t actually commit ourselves to anything in particular. We can both stop at any time if we’re uncomfortable, and we don’t have to explain to the other person why. But we just. . . See. What happens.”

It’s clear that Flynn is not entirely sure what he thinks about this, but he did promise the other night that they were going to face this as a team, and three days is rather an immediate deadline. After a pause, he nods. “Very well. Should we start now?”

“I don’t – ” Oh, what the hell. They have spent long enough delaying, for whatever reason, and Lucy doesn’t want a chance to talk herself out of it. She reminds herself that it’s just Garcia, it’s just him, she’s kissed him before (and done more, even) and she’s not afraid of this, of them. She rocks back and forth as if about to jump off the high board, then strides across the room, takes hold of his head, pulls him down, and kisses him.

Flynn manages to be caught off guard by this even with the knowledge that that was literally what he just asked her, and takes a moment to re-combobulate and kiss her back. His hands slide along her sides to her hips, and he lifts her effortlessly off her feet, as Lucy wraps her legs around his waist. She does enjoy climbing him like a tree, and they spend several pleasurable moments making out properly, turning their heads and diving deeper and experimenting with teeth and tongue, as he gets a hand in her hair and presses her closer. His fangs graze the inside of her lip, very lightly, and she shivers all over. Apparently this is why people are attracted to vampires (at least the useful ones that are willing to bite them without reading the Geneva Conventions first). Their breathing, or at least hers, gets shorter and shorter, and finally he walks her back to the bed and sits her down. They pull apart, regarding each other anxiously, until Lucy whispers, “Can I take your shirt off?”

He hesitates, then nods once, a single down-and-up tilt of the head, eyes never leaving hers. Lucy’s fingers shake as she works at the buttons, then pushes it down his arms and drops it on the floor. If stubborn is barely adequate as a description for this man, solid really doesn’t do him justice either. Her hands run over his arms, the fine faded weals of scars, the breadth of his chest and the beam of his shoulders, as he utters a small, muffled grunt and shifts closer to her. She works her fingers between his, which are long and deft and strong, and they link together, the callused tips of his scraping against the softer skin of her palms. Then he turns his head, they kiss again, and this is so enjoyable that it is several moments until he whispers, “My turn then, yes?”
When Lucy instantly agrees, Flynn is just as economic about shucking her blouse off, though he has to stop and look at her again before he ventures to touch her bra. She gives him a fond but exasperated nod, and he spins her around and sets his teeth to her shoulder, sending gooseflesh rippling down her from head to toe. He kisses the back of her neck, works his way down to the clasp, and springs it with his fangs – which, frankly, was a level of game that nobody was expecting from him. He slides it off her arms, and runs his hands over her torso and stomach before moving up to cup her breasts. He strokes his thumbs over the nipples, kisses the back of her neck again, and buries his face in her hair, making a sound that raises the hairs on her arms and which she doesn’t even think he realizes that he is. Even if she wasn’t the white queen, even if none of this prophecy nonsense existed, he would look at her the exact same way he already does. He thought she was special long before they knew about any of that. She still doesn’t know what to do with that, and much as the prospect of intimacy clearly scares him, it almost frightens her too. She has never been this afraid of having something, or someone, taken from her. It seems too good to be true.

Lucy turns around abruptly, enjoying his attentions but needing to kiss him again, and they tumble down on the bed together, topless and tangled. She nips at the underside of Flynn’s jaw, and is rewarded by that black flush in his eyes, the way his back arches and he practically snarls, jerking his hips up against her as she climbs onto his lap and straddles him. Then she rises on her knees, unbuttons her jeans, and pulls them off one leg and then the other. That leaves her only in her panties, and while she does remember that they made no promises one way or the other, this does seem to be going well, and she wants to.

Flynn, for once, actually appears to agree. He makes a sound of growly approval that she very much enjoys, sits up halfway, and rolls her over beneath him, landing on his elbows atop her and kissing his way down between her legs, breathing on her and working her through the increasingly damp fabric. He makes a move to shift his weight and get hold of his belt, actually manages not to bring everything to a screeching halt while ensuring that this is an acceptable development to her, and with some help from Lucy, kicks the trousers off. They kiss and wrestle and giggle and kiss again, as Lucy remembers belatedly that a good portion of this house has supernatural hearing and if they do not want to be fielding slightly too-knowing questions about how their night went, they should probably keep it down. But it feels good, it feels good, to grip hold of him and pin him and kiss him until her mouth is raw and wet, they are only in their underpants, and at this point, it’s clear that it is certainly not a question of want on either of their parts. Dare she hope that maybe –

Flynn shifts them again, reaching a hand between her legs and sliding beneath the waistband of her underpants, and Lucy moans as he finds her wetness, easing a finger into her and playing at her clit with his thumb. She rides one leg up along his hip, the other sprawling open, and he grips hold of her thigh hard enough to leave the mark of his fingers. Lucy works up enough momentum to torque them over, sending Flynn flat onto his back in the pillows with a startled expression, and bends down again to kiss him. His other hand is still inside her, and though she doesn’t have fangs, she cannot resist the urge to bite him again. Sets her teeth to the vein in his neck, harder than she would ordinarily love-bite a partner, and then –

Whatever happens, it does so in a blur. Flynn rises out of the covers like a thunderbolt, too fast to be seen, and flips her all the way over in midair, slamming her down. Lucy’s head snaps back, she hits the mattress hard enough to wind her, and she is momentarily startled out of amorous distraction, trying to catch her breath. That, however, is nothing to the effect on Flynn. He lets go of her as if she has started to burn, falls back on his rear end, and looks completely mortified, rubbing both hands over his face. “I,” he says thickly, as if struggling to get the words out. “I’m sorry, are you –”

Lucy is definitely a little taken aback, since at least the time that she asked him to chase her in the woods, it was in a pre-agreed fashion and for the purposes of training and as a matter of magic. She has never forgotten that Flynn is a vampire, obviously, and thereby much stronger and faster than she
is, and it occurs to her that biting him like that most likely set off some kind of innate reflex he can’t control. She’s fine, really, she is, and she sits up, reaching for him. “You startled me, that’s all. Come on, come back here.”

Flynn looks wary. It’s not like he’s had a bounty of past lovers to start with, Lucy knows – with Eleanor, it was just a casual affair, it was not a deeply felt emotional bond, he could remain in control of himself and concentrate on pleasing her. With Matej, he probably felt more confident playing rough, if they were in the army together and Matej was a tough full-grown man. Lucy is both rather small and not accustomed to physical combat – and more than that, she is someone that Flynn can’t hurt in any way and live with the guilt of it. She means too much, has slipped too far inside his defenses, and she did agree that they could stop for any reason and not have to explain, so she tries to stay quiet and give him time to work through this, if that’s what he needs. Then he says, still shaken, “I’ll – I’ll just – ”

Looking as if he does not trust himself not to go off like a bomb, Flynn pushes her gently down onto her back, hooks his thumbs under her panties, and pulls them off, setting to work between her thighs. This is obviously very enjoyable and Lucy does not mind it in the least, but she knows that he’s offering it as a substitution, an apology, and while she grips his hair and sighs into the release of climax, she knows that they have to talk about this, they can’t just leave it like that. As he’s sitting back on his heels, wiping his mouth, she reaches out for his hand. “Garcia, you don’t have to apologize, all right? You didn’t hurt me, I’m not frightened of you, and I wasn’t expecting it, but it’s not – I’m fine. See? I’m fine.”

“I know.” He looks her up and down with eyes both desperately devoted and desperately anguished, the warm flush of her, the glow that hangs in the room – evidently, or at least hopefully, they have done enough to power up the enchantment. “I just – for a moment there I – I didn’t know who you were or where I was or anything I wanted to do except – ”

He doesn’t finish that sentence, though Lucy can guess what the impulse would have been for a vampire in the primal need to feed and fuck, without consideration or limits or care, savage and shattering. Flynn is clearly someone who appreciates his partner taking charge in bed, this might go against his usual preferences, but that’s just it. Vampires aren’t human. He is old and strong and controlled, but he could still crack, be driven into pure raw instinct, especially with someone he is as bound to as Lucy, so mastered and matched and made a second part of. Flynn clearly does not trust himself not to hurt her inadvertently, even if Lucy wants to remind him that she’s a witch and has doled out plenty of blows to him. But it’s different when you’re training for war in the woods and when you’re in bed with your lover. You’d hope it was, at least. You don’t want one thing to be the other. And Flynn is so scarred and scared already, so deeply at odds with his past trauma and his reluctance to damage anything with her, that she has to take it seriously.

“Okay,” Lucy says, trying to be comforting. “We can – we can leave it there, for now. That was nice, that was – I mean, of course it was. But I promise, it’s fine.”

Flynn looks at her again, runs his hands over her arms, and kisses her forehead, clearly ashamed of his own reaction, when he can tell she wanted this and really does hate to disappoint her again. As they get up to put on their pajamas and settle down to sleep, he murmurs, “You’re not – ?”

“No, no, I’m not angry.” Lucy cups his face in her hands. She has never seen such sad eyes in any human or creature, except perhaps for Gabriel. Flynn’s eyes look dark in certain lights, and when he’s in vampiric thrall they are pitch-black, but they are in fact greeny-hazel, like polished agate. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have pushed. I just – I thought, if we needed it – ”

Flynn takes her hand to his mouth and kisses it. “It’s all right,” he says, as if both of them need to
hear it, as if they have failed themselves for different reasons, and need to be reminded that it’s not a complete catastrophe. “Let’s go to sleep.”

They do so, wake up early the next morning, and spend the day run off their feet with more preparations. Flynn is teaching Lucy everything about Elizabethan manners and etiquette that he can think of on the fly, and makes her try to mimic the accent and word choices, as well as eating without a fork (still not in common use, though as aristocrats they will probably have one), not looking too Catholic, and remembering the byzantine terms of address for the different ranks of people they are going to meet. By the time she can recite the full list of majesties, graces, lords, ladies, excellencies, sirs, dames, dukes, counts, earls, barons, bishops, priests, gentlemen, goodwives, ministers, masters, mistresses, manservants, maidservants, bastards, blackguards, whores, and knaves to his satisfaction, it is dusk, her head is aching fit to burst, and they will be leaving the day after tomorrow while she still does not feel remotely ready for this. Wyatt and Maria have returned from their hunting trip, and Maria seems somewhat more sedate, but the way she keeps slipping in casual questions about Gabriel’s attacker make it clear that she has not given up on finding the answer. “We will remain here long enough to see Garcia and Lucy off,” she says, at dinner that night. “Then, William, you will take me to Scotland – it may be nice for you to see your native land again, yes? – and continue to Liechtenstein to assure your brother’s safe arrival. We will make further plans from there.”

“Of course, Maman.” Wyatt nods decorously. “I’m sure it will –”

“As for you,” Maria goes on, glancing at Denise and Michelle. “Whenever you see fit to tell me who attacked my son, we may discuss more formal terms of cooperation between the de Clermonts and whichever of the witches you rally to the cause. I know that you are hiding her from me, and that you have colluded in keeping her from justice. That being as it is –”

“Justice?” Michelle interrupts, gently but dubiously. “I’m sorry, Madame de Clermont, but I’m fairly sure that killing a witch without any recourse or trial at all, when your son isn’t even actually dead, doesn’t count as –”

“And we have seen that the Congregation’s idea of trial and justice is truly something to be aspired to?” Maria puts down her wine glass with a jerk, splashing red droplets over the rim. “The old world is over, do we not all understand this? If you will not deliver the witch to me, if I am left to conclude that this is nothing but a –”

“Denise and Michelle aren’t responsible for this,” Lucy says, as Maria’s stone-dark gaze swings to her. “They had nothing to do with it. You can’t blame them for –”

“Can I not?” The de Clermont matriarch regards her with her head cocked, ostensibly casual, clearly dangerous. Flynn shifts anxiously in his chair, as if once more worried that he might have to throw himself between his mother and Lucy. “Do you know something about it, then?”

“I…” Lucy doesn’t want to lie to her, even if the truth is plainly insuperable. Wyatt is likewise looking as if he’s about to die, and the tension at the table is so thick that she can feel it on her shoulders like a physical weight. She twists the de Clermont signet ring on her finger, the symbol of the trust that Maria placed in her. “It’s complicated, it –”

Maria looks her up and down, expression unreadable, cold as ice. Then all at once, she rises to her feet, jostling the table. “Cecilia,” she announces. “I do not wish to sup here any longer, nor remain beneath this roof. Please collect our things. I am ready to go.”

“Maman.” Flynn gets to his feet as well. “Maman, don’t be like this. Don’t make us leave this way. You just said that you would remain here until we went, until we –”
“I would, Garcia, if it was only you.” Maria gives him a look both upset and tender, angry and soft – for all her flaws, the fact that she loves all three of her sons fiercely has never been in question. “But I cannot be here with those who would do this to us, to your brother, to our family. I hold nothing against you, my sweet boy. But I do not wish to stay. Cecilia?”

After another pause, the chatelaine gets up and sweeps upstairs to fetch their things, returning with the bags as Maria shrugs on her traveling coat. Wyatt gives Flynn and Lucy an anguished look, but clearly still can’t bring himself to give up the truth. Maria stands on her tiptoes to kiss Flynn goodbye, looks at Lucy coolly, and finally nods at her hand. “You may keep the ring,” she says. “I meant it when I gave it to you, and you will need it where you are going. I will only hope that one day you mean it in return.”

With that, she swings smoothly on her heel, kisses her granddaughter as Jiya comes hurrying up, and follows Cecilia and Wyatt out into the night. She does not look back. The door closes. That is that.

Maria’s departure can’t help but feel like a bad omen, and Lucy spends the last day in a blur. She keeps trying to think of modern things that she is going to miss, that she needs to cram in before she’s without them for six months, and can’t focus or concentrate or sit down for longer than a few minutes. Distracting herself by any more physical interludes with Flynn is out, given how awkward and careful the two of them are being around each other after the other night, and the gathering storm on the horizon, the magnitude of the unknown that awaits, makes her sit down on her bed that afternoon and completely dissociate, staring at her hands until they don’t feel like hers. Tomorrow, she has to do this tomorrow. It does not seem remotely possible. Nothing does. The war is coming. The war is here.

Denise and Michelle cook them a big going-away dinner that night, trying to keep everyone’s spirits up, and Rufus makes jokes in an attempt to leaven the tension, but Lucy can only pick at her food. She begs off early, goes upstairs, and lies down on her bed, trying to adjust to the reality that tomorrow night and four hundred and twenty-odd years ago, she will be sleeping in some lodging house or coach inn in Tudor London, while they wait for Past Flynn to leave. She stares at the dark ceiling until it begins to blur in silent tears.

Flynn comes upstairs a little while later, knocks and lets himself in, and lowers himself onto the bed next to her, not quite touching. They lie there in communal silence, until their hands reach out and clasp onto each other’s, holding hard, the link that they will have to trust to guide them into the past, and which will be their only safe harbor from here on in. It changes, now. It all changes, and it will never be the same.

They sleep, somehow, and wake in freezing, misty greyness the next morning. Lucy takes her last hot shower for a long time, gets out, dries, and dresses in her costume, staring at herself in the fogged mirror and the bright lights of the bathroom. She does her hair in a braided crown and pins it up, then walks downstairs to find Flynn in his own outfit and Denise, Michelle, Rufus, and Jiya waiting in tense expectation. It feels like leaving early for any other long trip, as if the Uber might pull up outside and take them to the airport, and yet it doesn’t. They sit and eat breakfast, Flynn goes to check their bags – makes sure they have the medicine, Lucy’s things, all the Ashmole pages, and so forth – and Jiya reaches out unexpectedly to squeeze Lucy’s hand. “Look after my dad,” she says. “Okay?”

“I will.” Lucy squeezes back, trying to muster a smile, her heart hammering in her throat, as they finish up. She brushes her teeth and returns to the living room, aware that she is shaking all over and can’t stop. She clears her throat, and everyone jumps. “I think we should go out to the witchwoods.”

Everyone agrees, pulls on their jackets and shoes, and falls in on either side, like an honor guard, as
she and Flynn crunch out into the desolate, foggy trees. They reach the clearing before the huge tree, the place where Lucy timewalked before, and she can feel something, like a buzzing in her bones or a whisper in her soul, undulating and swirling around her fingers, ready and waiting. The gate is here. All she has to do is open it.

Lucy hugs Denise and Michelle fiercely, while Flynn hugs Jiya just as hard and exchanges an awkward handshake with Rufus. Then this is it, this is the moment, there is nothing left to do, no more preparations or practice left to try. Flynn shoulders their bags and turns to Lucy, holding out both hands. “Moja ljubav,” he says. “Take us.”

Lucy draws a deep, shuddering breath, lets it out, and takes hold of his hands. She closes her eyes, conjuring the glowing golden web, the tangled threads that they must follow back into the darkness and the daybreak and the terror of unbeing, the place and time that they must hope they can reach. The light grows stronger. Denise, Michelle, Rufus, and Jiya are faded shadows far outside the circle of white fire that encloses her and Flynn, and Lucy focuses it. She can hear a great rushing. Can feel the door between years swinging open, and in the last instant before they go, knows that this time, they are going to make it.

And so – exit pursued by a bear, if you will – into the unknown, they jump.
Epilogue

The only light on the dank stone walls is the flickering torch in Michael Temple’s hand, as he descends the steep steps with measured care, dragging his burden behind him with the other. It leaves a broad shiny streak through the centuries of accumulated dust, which floats eerily in the dark air like conjured spirits – and down here, there’s nothing to say they’re not. He is one of the first people of any kind to venture here in years. The Italian authorities closed it completely in 1968, and it has fallen into urban decay, the sort of destination that attracts young white people who illegally sneak into abandoned ruins in the middle of bustling metropolises, take artfully filtered Instagram photos, and make pseudo-profound commentary on the inevitable death of us all. It amuses Temple, because in some sense, they’re not wrong. And in another, perpetually, they are.

The island of Poveglia in the Venetian lagoon is, to ordinary people, one of the most terrifying places in the world. It lies well south of the city, isolated from the others, and was once a thriving outpost of the republic, but it was abandoned in the fourteenth century and never repopulated. In the eighteenth century, it became a lazaretto for quarantining plague victims before they could spread the sickness to Venice. It persisted in this capacity until the twentieth century, where it was converted into a mental asylum, complete with a cruel doctor who tortured his patients, then threw himself off the bell tower of the old church, claiming to be driven mad by their ghosts. Despite repeated efforts, the Italian government, badly strapped for cash and willing to sell historical landmarks and locations indiscriminately, has – funnily enough – not been successful at finding anyone willing to buy and redevelop it. There was briefly some noise about attempting to turn the old asylum into a luxury hotel, and Temple’s almost sorry that fell through. It would have been extremely funny indeed.

All this contributes to Poveglia’s reputation as severely and violently haunted, various paranormal shows and investigative film crews periodically do features on it with spooky voiceovers, and Temple supposes that really, there is no more fitting place for what he is going to find. It was not easy to discover, and he had to be careful about it. But he’s searched the San Lazzaro archives top to bottom, he’s combed through every scrap of paper and every old file, every old chronicle or letter in languages he never learned or only half-remembered, and as ever, hard work is its own reward. He is, he is quite sure, the only living creature in the world who knows this secret, and tonight, it will bear fruit.

Temple reaches the bottom of the steps and glances around. He is in a secret passage under the old church, of which nothing remains but the bell tower, and if the map he consulted is correct, the door is just ahead. He wonders what the builders thought they were keeping out – or keeping in. In either event, it has been repurposed, and Temple makes his way along the narrow, slippery stones, lapping with black water from a leak that nobody has been down to spot or mend. Even the attendants and inmates of the asylum were not likely to know about this place. The air is hushed and damp and still, but in the way that a harp string quivers just after being plucked. Somebody, something, must know that he is here.

Temple reaches the end of the corridor, gives his burden an extra tug over a rough stone, and surveys the old etching in the door in front of him. His torch is guttering, and he doesn’t need it to see, so he puts it down, lets it snuff with a hiss of steam, and reaches out with his free hand to run it over the words. In every human supernatural horror film (doubtless several of which have been set in this place) there comes a moment where the plucky band of adventurers read an ancient inscription that they really should not have, duly unloose some eldritch evil that devours them in messy fashion, and must spend the rest of the time trying to figure out how to cage it up again. Temple, on the other hand, knows exactly what he is doing. He reads it aloud, rather disappointed that nobody is around to appreciate the perfection of his pronunciation, and watches the stone grate back of its own accord,
releasing a strong whiff of dust, must, and dried blood. It is utterly dark in the gaping abyss beyond.

Temple ducks through, hauls the burden after him, and makes his way down the passage, further and further underground. The stones underfoot are broken and sporadic, and at one point, the water becomes almost knee-deep, obliging him to heft the burden over his shoulder so as not to have it spoiled entirely. It’s a cramped and filthy scramble through the flooded sump, he wonders if it might climb over his head (he can’t drown, but the thought is not appealing) and is relieved to spot a solid ledge on the far side. He climbs out, resumes dragging the burden with some relief, and the passage opens down into a small, circular room. The crumbling brick vaults are held up with flaking mortar, the air has a faint rotted tinge, and Temple grimaces. Not the sort of place he’s usually to be found skulking around, and he hopes that all the stains will come out of his suit. But there are bigger things at stake.

He drops the burden, brushes his hands off on his trousers, and surveys the only item that the room contains: a heavy stone sarcophagus, with several big chunks of rock placed on the lid in the way that people sometimes did with the rumored undead, stop them from crawling out of their coffin at night to trouble the living. There used to be a much different relationship between humans and creatures, Temple thinks. In the medieval world, everyone knew that they existed, accepted it as a matter-of-fact reality, and did not question their influence whether to do good or ill. No matter how much the church harangued against it, the common people were to be found visiting their local witch for charms or spells or anything else that they wanted and which God seemed slow to provide. Likewise, they knew that sometimes the dead did not stay that way, were to be observed returning and walking around long after they should have been dust, and measures had to be taken to remind them of their unliving state. It was not the stereotype of superstitious peasants waving torches and pitchforks, though monastic chroniclers did advocate the use of brawny and brave-hearted young men to wrestle the wandering corpse back into its grave, with burning only reserved for the truly hopeless cases. People just knew. They saw no particular wonder or terror in it either way. The modern world has a great deal to answer for, and it’s true that now creatures seem to have become objects of fanciful fiction rather than agents of nocturnal woe, but this is an age of arrogant unbelief and imagined superiority, comforting and self-congratulatory notions of “progress,” of all the other stories they tell themselves to feel better than their poor, unenlightened ancestors. A little of that old terror is the least of what they deserve. Especially the de Clermonts.

Temple’s mouth tightens as he paces around the sarcophagus, trying to judge what protective measures have been laid on it. It’s not as old as the rest of the room; it’s also from the eighteenth century, perhaps built in secret with the plague pits. The Congregation would have thought that this was the one place to confine their most troublesome enemy, once they (or rather, the man they had to ask to do it) finally defeated him, and Temple supposes that they’re right. Yet that enemy was not always that, someone they had to denounce and defeat. Indeed, the exact opposite. He was once one of their most respected members, who made it what it was, who helped shape five of the nine articles of the Covenant. This man literally wrote their laws and founded their organization, and this is how they repay him.

Never mind that. That injustice, along with many others, is about to be remedied, and Temple steps back. Even he would be advised to know what he is doing before he opens the coffin, and he runs through the strategy again. The enthrallment process worked on Jessica Proctor, but she was only one witch of ordinary power, and this is going to take quite a bit more. Fortunately, that’s why Temple has the burden with him. He has some witch abilities, as long as the feed lasts, and that should be long enough. On three, then. One – two –

With that, he shoves the rocks off the lid; they fall with muffled crashes, and there is another inscription revealed beneath, thick with dust and cobwebs, warning whoever might have found this coffin not to open it upon pain of the Congregation’s extreme displeasure. Temple smirks; he is, of
course, one such member himself, and seeing what his colleagues consider “extreme displeasure” makes him wonder what they think that is: taking away toys? A strongly worded letter? Informing you that they’re very disappointed and will send you to the principal? They have been almost totally defanged (as it were) as a useful political entity, and a large part of that is thanks to Temple himself. He’s held his seat for years, he’s helped write their laws, he’s encouraged the infighting and intrigue, he’s played far more relevant and dangerous individuals than poor, poor William de Clermont off each other, he’s broken down any impulse to trust or cooperation that might exist, all in the name of a modern, progressive, more streamlined result. He’s not wrong. This is the world now.

Temple raises his hands, conjures witchfire, and recites the unlocking incantation, hoping it will work: draining any more blood from the burden might kill it, and he needs it alive for further resupply. There is a grating noise as the lid begins to move, more plumes of dust rise into the air, and then it Scrapes away, revealing the dark interior of the sarcophagus. There is a man inside, hands folded on his chest. His eyes are closed. He resembles a waxwork, bone-white, flesh drawn and sunken, and is not the most imposing dread warrior that could be imagined, no dark, majestic Transylvanian impaler or prince of vampires. He is short, grey-haired, and wears spectacles. He looks, in fact, rather like an accountant.

“Wake up,” Temple says, the first words he has spoken in English since his descent into the tomb. “Wake up. I charge you and compel you. You are mine now. My thrall.”

He removes a short black blade from the pocket of his jacket, strides over to the coffin, and cuts his hand, allowing several drops of blood to fall on the ghastly white face. Then he cuts a small gash in the side of the neck, and a thick black sludge seeps out like an oil spill. The enthrallment ritual is not the same as the turning ritual, but it shares some elements, the intermixing of blood, the repeated bites, the drawing and replacing of vital fluid, until the other creature becomes bound to you, forced to your will, a dumb and broken mount to ride as you please. It is, of course, fantastically illegal, and has been for many centuries. But as Jessica has escaped him somehow – he does not know where she is, but he suspects the question is when – and as he needs a better servant, Temple does not care in the least.

Temple works quickly, since he does not know how long he has until it properly awakes. He knows the steps by heart, speaking the final command and feeling it lock into place. Again he orders, “Wake up.”

This time, with a thrill, he sees it work. Slowly, jerkily, like a rusted clockwork man that has been not wound for two hundred and some-odd years, the figure sits up in the tomb. Its eyes open, beneath the dusty glass of the spectacles. They are white and blank as a hunting shark’s, and following Temple’s command, it obediently clamber out of its coffin and shambles to stand before him. That will have to be improved, Temple thinks. It will draw attention if it blunders blindly around like this, unable to look more like a zombie if it tried. He’s once more grateful for the Congregation’s incompetence. If they were smart, they would have killed it long ago. But they didn’t know how. They still don’t. It – he – was too powerful. Their best chance was to lock him up and throw away the key, somewhere they thought no one would ever find him. And until now, that plan has worked. They tried to erase his name, they tried to erase all records of him, but Temple studied his history. He knows all the secrets now.

“David Rittenhouse,” he says, addressing the fetch as if they have met in a gentlemen’s club for supper, somewhere in the eighteenth century of the other’s human life. “Welcome back to the land of the living. I have a task for you, and you will carry it out. I know who you are, and what you are. The Covenant prohibition against vampires, witches, and daemons mixing or marrying. Article three. You helped create that so nobody would be able to match your power. You are, of course, a rare and unique being, a chimaera of sorts. Born a witch, turned into a vampire, and fed regularly on
daemons. You are not one kind of creature, but a monstrous hybrid of all three.”

David Rittenhouse does not answer, continuing to stare at him with glassy eyes. Temple is in no hurry to curtail his speech, as someone should properly appreciate his genius, and this is all the audience he, unfortunately, can have. “You always knew that creatures could interbreed and potentially increase their abilities, didn’t you?” he goes on. “Indeed they had, many times in the past. So you proposed keeping them separate in the name of ethnic purity, of preserving the characteristics special to each race, but what you really wanted was to make sure you would never have a rival. And besides, as long as they were divided and estranged, as long as no trust existed between them, as long as they viewed the other as dangerous monsters, nobody could ever band together long enough to stop you. It even worked for a while. You do, of course, possess a marvelous magical gift, inherited from your great-grandmother, Amelie Wallis. You are a timewalker. Thus you could move among centuries, to the beginning of the Congregation and the establishment of its laws, and to at any point in the future where their enforcement might be questioned. And I know who defeated you and imprisoned you down here, who stopped your reign of terror. The grandmaster of the Knights of Lazarus. Asher de Clermont.”

That, at last, gets a response from the monster. It snarls, baring its twisted yellow fangs, and briefly seems as if it might lunge at Temple’s throat, on the off chance that he himself is Asher. He raises a hand, restraining it, and it subsides, still growling. “The Congregation erased your name from history and concealed all traces of your role in founding the organization and its laws,” Temple goes on. “And yet, you were successful enough that the creature world still believed wholeheartedly in all the poisonous philosophy you had taught them, and does to this very day. So you may have some solace in that, I suppose. As for Asher, you will doubtless be pleased to learn that he is dead, and has been for some time. But his sons still survive, including one Garcia de Clermont. He has drawn closer and closer to Ashmole 782, the Book of Life, and the secrets that you fought to withhold from ever being known. He has a witch in league with him, Lucy Preston. I have reason to believe that they have timewalked to escape the censure of the Congregation, and indeed, to achieve a much grander scheme. That, therefore, is why I have awakened you. You will, on my command, travel after them, into whichever place and time they have gone, and kill Garcia de Clermont. Then you will bring Lucy back here for me.”

David Rittenhouse appears pleased at the idea of getting to revenge himself on Asher de Clermont’s spawn. He smiles, revealing those hideous fangs again – really, Temple knows the man has been trapped down here for ages, but he could do something about that vile dentition. He utters a growling noise that sounds like approval and takes a step, as if to do it now, but Temple again stops him. His enthralment over Jessica broke when she was sent into the past, and he needs to be quite sure that this one will not do the same.

Once he has performed several more spells to be sure that his control over Rittenhouse is absolute, Temple is finally satisfied that it will hold even when he leaves the twenty-first century and goes well, he’s not yet entirely worked that out, but he expects to, very soon. He has a spy that the de Clermonts will never see coming, and furthermore, he intends to profitably re-establish relations with a very old friend. Of course, he knew his master Gerbert’s blood daughter Cecilia, the one who never deigned to acknowledge him as her father and held too proudly to her human sire, the Conqueror, instead. Cecilia has lived for a long time among the de Clermonts, has vowed herself to protecting their secrets, and will not be turned easily, but Temple knows her weak places. He saw everything Gerbert did to her, how it took two hundred years for Cecilia to finally run away. Once Cecilia betrays or breaks or however it is accomplished, that accursed family will crumble like sand. Michel of Antioch has waited a long time for his revenge. He can wait a while longer.

In any event, Temple cannot walk out of here with the dread ghast of David Rittenhouse in tow, so he orders him to step out of time and await the command to return. Rittenhouse does as told,
conjuring a door in the air and vanishing through it. His magical powers, overwhelming in his own
day, do not appear to have been tarnished at all by his long sleep, and Temple regards it in
satisfaction. But the coffin is still open and empty, and an alarm will be sent up if it is left that way.
There will be some kind of magical detection system, fuss and feather, and Temple is not about to be
careless and discovered prematurely. He’s already let Benjamin Cahill think that he’s getting one
over on him, that Cahill has the pole position, that Temple actually trusts him and is willing to
properly work together and share sensitive information. He’s going to kill him, of course, but Cahill
intends the same, and Temple knows everything he does. He’ll see the moment coming a mile off.
He will be the victor. He will be on top. It is very close now.

Temple looks down at the burden, the one he dragged down here for this express purpose, on which
he has extensively fed in order to absorb temporary witch abilities: the drained, pale, almost-
bloodless body of Anton Sokolov. He is still alive, but only just, and will be maintained in this near-
death state as long as required, then disposed of. Temple really did want both the brothers. Anton
was the one on the Congregation and thus needed to be dealt with in more urgency, but Gennady got
away and has gone on the run. No matter, Temple supposes. He can deal with one gallant Russian
blockhead whenever he reappears. It is hardly the most terrifying or formidable foe he has ever
faced.

Bending down, Temple seizes hold of Anton and hauls him into Rittenhouse’s coffin. Even with
supernatural strength, it’s a bit of a chore, and Temple is breathing hard by the time Sokolov is laid
out inside the sarcophagus, a dummy replacement for its freed inhabitant. Nobody will know the
difference without actually opening it, and that, of course, they all have no intention of doing. It is
really a diabolically clever scheme.

Temple grabs the lid and hauls it back onto the coffin, heaps on the rocks as they were before, and
makes sure that the place looks undisturbed. Besides, as he noted, nobody apart from him knows
about it, or Rittenhouse. Damnatio memoriae. They are paralyzed, helpless, in denial. It is about to
become very fun indeed here in Venice. This is only the beginning.

After a final glance around to be sure that it is only him, and whatever other unquiet ghosts may lurk
in the dimness, Temple straightens up. Leaves the tomb, wades back through the water, shuffles
through the low passage, reaches the door and unseals it, retraces all his steps back through the
warren, and climbs the stairs. The shock of fresh air at the top, when he steps outside into the night,
is almost like a slap in the face, raw and bracing. It is very late, the stars are fading, and the lagoon is
silent, fittingly, as the grave.

Temple strides across the overgrown lawns, past the spectral ruins, to the place he left the vaporetto.
He steps inside, powers the motor to life, and reverses from the haunted shadows of Poveglia,
turning back toward the sleeping, unaware silhouette of Venice. The wake forths white, the waning
moon reflects its fractured glow on the black water, and so, a king triumphant, Michael Temple
vanishes into the dark.

To be continued…

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