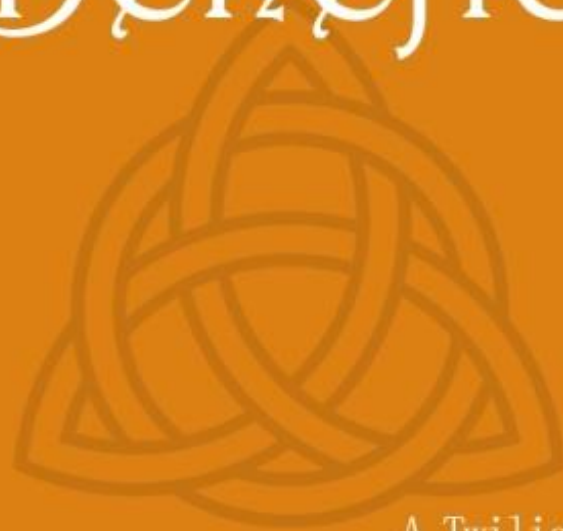


Stregoni Benefici



A Twilight
Fanfiction

g i s e l l e - l x

Stregoni

Benefici

A Twilight Fan Fiction

by

giselle-lx

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For Kayla

And it came to pass, as he
was alone praying, his disciples
were with him:

and he asked them, saying, Whom say
the people that I am?

—Luke 9:18 KJV

Prologue: Infant Lowly

London, England

February, 1644

The midwife was still sobbing.

Her choking cries rang through the tiny vicarage. She was a young wife, and Sarah was perhaps her tenth delivery.

And her first to die.

The sackcloth upon which Sarah had lain was stained dark red with the blood which had flowed from her as she shuddered in convulsions and bled from the afterbirth. The midwife had gone from reassuring to shocked, and then to near-hysterical. By the time William had been told what had happened, his wife was already gone.

Word traveled fast in this part of London, and it hadn't been long before several men of the parish arrived to wrap the body and carry it safely away. Funeral arrangements would be made, and William would preside. He would call on the gravedigger in the morning.

Kneeling beside the sackcloth, William ran his hand across it. It came back red, and he clenched his fist, watching as sweat dripped from his palm, made pink by his now late wife's birthing blood.

The child would die also. A son, as he and Sarah had hoped for. But he was small, born early, and now there was no mother to nurse him.

As he watched the bloodied sweat run off his hand, William realized that he did not hear the child. Perhaps he was already gone like his mother. And if so—William's heart began to race. He stood and strode into the other room, where the midwife sat hunched, tears still making pale tracks down her dirty face. Her hands, too, were bloodied, and so was the bundle she clutched. But as William drew nearer, he saw the bundle jerk. His body was flushed with relief. He reached out to the midwife and snatched the swaddled infant from her.

Rushing back into the main room, William frantically searched for anything that could be pressed into this service. If he could not save his wife, and if he could not save his son, at least he could see that they both would be received into Heaven.

At last his eyes landed upon the wooden bucket, which had been once filled with warm water for the birthing, now gone as cold as the winter outside. Bloodied rags floated on top of the water, and by the light of the fire William could see the water's faint pink hue.

He was revolted, and his eyes searched once more for anything he could use. But the child did not cry, and his movements were becoming slower already. There was not time to go to the well.

Plunging one hand into the cool water, William hastily laid the infant on his lap and pulled back the swaddling clothes. There was not time for a long prayer. He withdrew a hand of cooled water and poured it over the child's face. In a shaking voice, William said the words which he had said so many times before, on so many happier occasions.

"I baptize thee in the name of the Father"—he scooped again—"and the Son"—a third scoop—"and the Holy Ghost."

The water ran down the child's head in rivulets, leaving behind traces of the blood of the woman who had borne him. Still the boy did not move, except for the infinitesimally small movement of his chest as he breathed. Laying a trembling thumb upon his son's tiny brow, William made the sign of the cross, and recited: "*We receive this child into the congregation of Christ's flock, and do sign him with the sign of the cross, in token that hereafter he shall not be ashamed to confess the faith of Christ crucified, and manfully to fight under his banner against sin, the world, and the devil, and to continue Christ's faithful soldier and servant unto his life's end.*"

William stood, still holding the unnaturally quiet infant. To fight against sin, the world, and the devil. This boy would have task enough in merely fighting to breathe for a few more moments. Surely he was close to death now. He carried the boy back to the midwife, and thrust him into her hands.

"He will join his mother soon," he said quietly. "But his soul shall be saved with hers."

"Christened," the midwife said, her voice sounding awed as she looked down at the child, whose head still dripped from the three tiny handfuls of water. "And his name?"

William stopped. He was to be named William, of course. That had been the choice he had made when Sarah said she was carrying low and guessed the child in her womb to be a son. But if William were to use the name for another boy after this child died, he would never forget this horrible night. And so the name he uttered was not the name he had chosen, but rather the name Sarah had wanted: her father's name, the man over whose body William had said the funeral prayers just months before.

"Carlisle," he said quietly. "His name is Carlisle."

And as though he recognized the name as his own, the baby snapped open his milky blue eyes and began to scream.

Chapter One: Cheater of Death

Chicago

September, 1918

The day the first influenza patient arrived, Carlisle was in a foul mood.

It was a rare occurrence. He was often made fun of by his compatriots for his frequently irritating optimism. He had the vaguest of memories of having once screamed at someone in an adolescent rage—his father, he supposed—but on the whole his tendency was toward peace and harmony. From what he could remember of his young adulthood, he had always been even-tempered and good-natured, and these traits seemed to have been magnified to a point that his unflappability was superhuman.

This, of course, made perfect sense.

But this evening, his optimism had been stolen several hours before he'd come in to work. The shots had rung out just before twilight, startling him from his personal reading. At once his ears remembered the crack of the gunshot on the street in front of his building. The shooter had been aiming for someone else, obviously—who, the police had been unable to determine. A gentleman with a fine car had placed the little girl's bleeding body on the rear seat without hesitation, and sped toward the hospital, less than a mile away.

Four floors above the congested street, Carlisle had crumpled against the cool glass of his windowpane as he watched, horrified by the sight and by his own helplessness. For the girl—Maria, age eight, he had read on the death certificate later that evening—had been shot in full sunlight.

There was a loud thunk as his fist landed suddenly with a little too much pressure against the soft wood of his desk. He watched as a tiny fissure spread a few inches out from the point of impact. A human would not have been able to see it happen, but to Carlisle, time was at once incredibly slow and far too fast.

Cradling his right fist in his left hand, he muttered to himself, "Take it easy." He had been saying that to himself more often lately. He was good at control—this was something on which his compatriots had congratulated him repeatedly even as he knew they puzzled over the enigma he presented. Yet it seemed that with each passing year, his control was ebbing. It was going in tiny

increments, to be sure, but it seemed to be slipping. Inconsequential acts of frustration for a human, but for him, even something as simple as a pounded fist bore the risk that he would be discovered.

He drew a steadying breath. It wasn't worth it. There were too many lives to be saved, too many people who would benefit from his existence for him to be discovered and destroyed over the death of only one. His brothers in Italy gave him a great deal of leeway, but their grace was contingent on his unending temperance.

Sighing, Carlisle closed his eyes and leaned forward. The wood of the desk was cool and smooth beneath his cheek, and though he needed no rest, he pressed his face to the surface and lay still.

At night, the hospital was quiet, or very nearly so. No carts of supplies rattling, just the shuffling feet of the night nurses and the one or two other physicians on the graveyard shift. The occasional conversation murmured at a pitch low enough as not to wake the other patients in the ward. Carlisle worked nights because it kept his secret, but in truth he also enjoyed the peace. At night he was neither beast nor man—in the quiet of the hospital, he was only a healer.

That part, however, was changing. He longed for the days when he had been known; even tangentially. He had once made house calls by lantern light, nursing fevered bodies as they trembled, guiding squalling infants into the world in the wee hours of the morning. He had held patients' hands and comforted their families. Medicine itself had improved, there was no doubt. Every passing day it seemed they understood disease better—laboratories now examined blood and bile for tiny particles that were invisible even to his eye. Pasteur and Lister led the charge for sanitary practices, and as a result fewer patients fell under his now constantly-washed hands. Babies were born in clean rooms on white sheets while fathers waited in rooms down the hall.

Now when he put on the coat that marked him, he ceased to be Carlisle any longer. Those around him knew him only as "Dr. Cullen." He was only one more; another physician at Cook County Hospital, bearer of iodine, ether, and frequently, bad news. No one wondered any longer why he was all too glad to be assigned the graveyard shift year after year, why a man so attractive lacked a wife and children, where he got off to at dawn when he ambled away from the new brick building. Medical colleges were opening all over the country, joining the ones where he had kept up his training and honed his mind on new knowledge. New doctors joined the field seemingly every day. He was dispensable. Replaceable.

And always alone.

He opened his eyes and twisted in his chair. Where other doctors posted their diplomas and licenses, he had a single painting. It depicted the Boston Common at dusk in a hazy abstraction. Through the paint, one could make out the shape of couples strolling hand-in-hand down the tree-lined paths, of a man lying lazily on a bench, his arm draped downward, a newspaper on his chest. And off to the side, the image of two men, seated at a table. In the painting they were nearly indistinguishable from the green background, but Carlisle knew that the one was supposed to be a young blond doctor, the other a dark-haired painter, laughing over a disputed game of chess.

Thirty years later, the young doctor now sat alone in his office, communication having been cut between him and his chess companion. To stay in contact, of course, posed too great a risk. Yet the painting—a gift to Carlisle from Hassam before the painters' work had gained notoriety—had followed him, moving from office to office; from Maine, to Ohio, and now to Chicago, the only reminder Carlisle had of that short summer in Boston when he'd once had a friend.

Now he sat alone in the darkness, over a thousand miles from Boston, idly scanning the paperwork which was supposed to occupy his evening shift. At the edge of his wide desk, a single taper candle flickered, sending light skittering across the pages of charts. His night vision was impeccable—to his eyes, items simply shifted colors as night fell—and so he had no need of light at

all. But the candle reminded him of days when he had been a different being altogether and he enjoyed this, even as electricity had slowly made itself commonplace.

He had, of course, habituated himself to turning on and off the artificial bulbs when he entered or exited a room, but he preferred candlelight, the way its soft yellow glow seemed to arrive and hurriedly leave as he stared at the pages of forms.

For a moment, he thrust his palm over the flame, letting it lick his skin. His body registered the sensations—warmth, a bit of a tickle—and his experience could map that to what his patients would feel: painful burning. But such an intense sensation was no longer his to feel, and instead, he simply held his hand in the middle of the flame until a line of smoky char appeared on his palm.

“You’ll hurt yourself doing that, doctor.”

His hand withdrew quickly—too quickly. Knowing that the nurse who stood in his doorway hadn’t yet been able to register the movement, he replaced his hand in the flame and jerked it backwards once more, slowly. He quickly brushed the charred skin of his palm against his slacks, pressing his hand to his thigh so that she wouldn’t see. Already he could feel the tingle of tissue regenerating.

The night nurse’s name was Dorothy, and Carlisle liked her. She was a plump woman with a pleasant face and might have been a physician herself if she had been allowed to be. He didn’t doubt she had already deduced that it was no accident that his hand had been roasting over the flame on his desk. She said nothing however, sweeping to his side with a medical chart.

“We’ve got a problem down in the third ward,” she announced, plunking the chart next to him. On it was a list of temperatures, starting at ninety-nine and raising to a hundred and three. He blinked and looked again at the timestamp she’d put on each one. No, he’d read it correctly the first time, not that it was possible that he could’ve misread it. This was over the course of four hours. Carefully, slow enough that Dorothy could follow his movements, he thumbed back to the first page. *John Richardson*, age twenty-two. He frowned.

Young men didn’t run fevers this high.

He tapped a finger on the measurements. “This has been over four hours?”

Dorothy nodded and yanked the chart from under his hands, a move that other doctors might have felt was impudent, but which Carlisle almost appreciated. It bespoke a familiarity, an openness, that few were willing to share with him. He liked Dorothy’s forwardness and the way she handled herself around him. She felt comfortable, and that was a rare gift.

“He’s got a raging flu, Doctor. Shivers, fever, everything.”

“What was he here for?”

“That’s the thing,” Dorothy said, and she slid a single wide hip onto the desk, dropping the chart to the desk with a soft thunk. “He wasn’t here for nothing. He was visiting his momma. I heard a crash in the ward where she was, and when I went in he was on the floor sweating like a stuck pig, with his eyes all gone bloodshot. So I brung him to Third Ward, and I’ve been watching. But I’ve never seen a fever like this.”

Carlisle hadn’t, either. He rose at the same time that Dorothy did, and she had moved toward the door before he could instruct her to take him to the patient. As they exited the small, dark office, Carlisle extinguished the candle with a quick breath, and glanced down at his palm.

It was once again unblemished.

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He was a strong man, it seemed. A sailor in the Navy, on furlough to take care of his mother, who was in residence at the Cook County Hospital for whooping cough. Everything about his body said that he should be healthy. Carlisle was used to seeing the bodies that became ravaged by influenza—infants, elderly, those who were so ill with some other ailment that they could barely

stand already. This young man showed none of those signs, yet his cot was quickly drenching with his sweat, and it rattled against the floor as he trembled with chills.

When Carlisle laid his hand over the young man's brow, his patient let out a shuddering breath. Carlisle's hands were perpetually cool—lack of blood flow did that to a body—but he imagined that to this young man, whose body must feel aflame, his cold touch was for once welcome. He allowed his hand to linger a moment longer than it needed to, absorbing the warmth radiating off the other man's brow.

Dorothy hovered over the bed, her brow furrowed as Carlisle performed his examination. The lymph tissue was swollen, and even without the aid of a stethoscope Carlisle could hear already the crackle of lungs filling with fluid. He'd heard stories about the new bronchopneumonia; a disease which had supposedly hitched a ride home from Europe with America's young men. But he'd dismissed the reports out of hand as tall tales. He could tell the difference between myth and reality—especially given that he was closer to the former than the latter himself—and the stories of perfectly healthy, strong soldiers stricken down and dying in a matter of days had seemed impossible.

Yet the clattering of the metal bed against the floor said very differently.

Carlisle stood, replacing his stethoscope over his neck as he exited the room. Dorothy followed him, her eyes full of concern.

"Doctor?" she said when they were almost out of the ward.

"Get him a blanket," Carlisle snapped, his voice more clipped than he intended. It startled Dorothy so much that she tripped. He caught her, and she stared up at him, for a moment doe-eyed, but then quickly returning to shock. Fear. For a moment he thought about softening his gaze, telling her he was sorry, that he hadn't meant to come off so harshly. But he didn't, and she simply nodded deftly, turned, and was gone. He listened to her breathing and footsteps as she hurried away. Up the hall, down the stairs—the hospital laundry was in the basement of the building. At night, the quiet thrum of the machines' chugging was constant and Carlisle liked its constancy, as though it were the heartbeat of this building where so many lives met their own end.

As that of the sailor would, unless he was able to stop it.

Again a frustrated anger surged through him and he had nearly ripped a beam from the wall when he stopped himself, one hand grabbing the wrist of the other where it trembled. The irony almost made him laugh. He could tear down the building with his bare hands, pulling the walls in over himself, and he would still stand. He was all but indestructible, and yet all around him humans died because he was so weak in the face of their illnesses and their pain.

While he stood trying to decide whether to go back and examine the man again, walk his rounds, or return to his office, Dorothy's voice floated to him. One of the other night nurses had met her in the laundry, and she'd recounted her assessment of the sick man, Carlisle's examination, and his too-harsh order.

The other nurse's voice was awed when she answered. "Dr. Cullen is a looker, but he's frightening. I don't know how you walk right into his office the way you do."

Dorothy sighed. "He's a good doctor," she said firmly. "Smart. Wise, even though I'm old enough to be his momma." She chuckled at this. "But there's something that's off, you're right. I just think he don't like people, that's all. Prefers to sit alone up in that office of his. You know, when I went in there tonight, he had his hand over his candle, just sitting there. If I didn't know better, I'd think he was trying to set fire to himself..."

Not wanting to hear any more, Carlisle turned and walked quickly to get the women out of his earshot. He strode past his office, past the nursery, past the surgical rooms, until the women's voices were an indistinguishable murmur. He found himself in the large storeroom off the operating rooms, staring at rows of identical glass bottles. Ether, used for keeping the patients unconscious. He fingered them absently as he stood.

“I just think he don’t like people, that’s all.”

He moaned quietly. Nothing was further from the truth. His exile from humankind was anything but self-imposed. Clutching his wrist, he thought of the brothers in Italy, the way they would bring the weight of the law down on those they deemed transgressors. It had been only Aro’s bemused fascination with Carlisle and Carlisle’s convictions that kept him able to be with the humans in the first place. He remembered the heinous metallic ripping, the fire, the purple flame...

He gulped. There were times that he longed for his own body to come to that peace. He had cheated death in so many ways—first with his own, and now by healing the patients whom normal doctors couldn’t cure. Surely, somehow, Death would be coming for its retribution. It was one thing for him to live, but hundreds of others, too?

And if by some miracle it did come, he would welcome it.

Leaning against the cool wall, he closed his eyes, balling his hands into fists at his side as he inhaled the fumes of the ether. Humans drifted off into a sweet sleep under its spell. His left hand suddenly fumbled for a bottle, and he’d soaked a paper cone in the noisome fluid and pulled it to his face before he’d thought further—one of the terrible consequences of his being was his ability to move faster than he could rationally think.

He drew a deep breath...and waited. It was enough ether to have killed a patient on the first breath. He knew the signs—the slackened jaw, the lolling tongue, the heaving of a diaphragm against lungs which were unable to pull in air. And though he knew this would not come for him, a tiny piece of him wanted to test it anyway. So he inhaled again, waiting. But no chemicals were pulled into his bloodstream, no fumes made their way to his brain.

There would be no cessation of respiration for him. He had no need to respire at all.

The cone crumpled in his fist and dropped to the floor, and the ether bottle clanged back down on the shelf. He breathed deeply the clear air of the room, and although he was certain the ether had had no effect on him, his brain seemed clearer nonetheless. Picking up the cone, he threw it in the wastebasket and made his way to the deep basin on one wall to rinse his hands.

If the febrile man in the third ward truly had the bronchopneumonia, then he had only a short time. Wallowing in sadness was a luxury Carlisle couldn’t afford when there were lives to be saved. Quickly, he flicked the faucet on and cupped the cold water in his hands, splashing his face. The humans did that from time to time, but to him the shock of the cold water was nonexistent. Yet the gesture was comforting anyway. It was renewal—the waters of the font coming to grace him once more. He straightened, and strode purposefully toward the door.

A patient was dying, and as long as Carlisle was doomed to continue cheating death, the least he could do would be to heal those who had thus far barely lived.

The door to his office opened easily. He sat down at his desk, shuffling aside the reading he’d been doing to make room for a fresh sheet of paper to write down his initial observations of the young sailor. From his breast pocket he produced the matches he always carried, and a moment later his candle was burning again, sending light and shadow bouncing against the walls.

“He’s wise,” came Dorothy’s voice in his memory as he stared again at the flame that she’d caught him in front of only a few hours before. *“Even though I’m old enough to be his momma.”* Carlisle snorted. Old enough to be his mother, indeed. Dorothy was fifty-one.

Carlisle was two hundred and seventy-four.

Putting the nib of his pen to the paper, he began to write.

Chapter Two: Sarah's Son

London, England

April, 1667

The feel of the chisel was soothing beneath Carlisle's hands. He liked the constancy of it, the way the soft woods yielded and the hard woods fought back against his calloused hands. Bits of pale yellow curled their way in front of the tool, springing away from it as they dropped to the dirt.

Sunlight flooded down on his back, warming him, and Carlisle reveled in it. It had been a long and cold winter, and it seemed as though the people of London were as enlivened by the spring as were the grass and flowers. It was a spring of rebuilding—mostly homes and buildings from the great fire. Their parish had been lucky—the church itself sat over a mile from the fire, and its parishioners' properties had been unharmed. Now that the winter had passed, London was restoring herself, and even something as modest as a piece of furniture seemed to contribute to the same spirit.

As he worked, Carlisle found himself humming along with the gentle rhythm of his hands. It was Luther's hymn, one he liked, and the pattern of the music was a good one by which to keep his hands in motion.

"It is easy to tell when thy father is not at home, Sexton," a bemused voice said.

Carlisle's head whipped up to appraise the figure who cast a shadow across the sawhorses, and when he saw who it was, he smiled. The dark hair hung over a broad face which wore an even broader smile, and Carlisle beckoned the man to him, the lathe stilling beneath his hands.

"Thomas," he acknowledged, nodding. "Hello." Thomas Milner was the son of the blacksmith and a member of the parish. He was a year younger than Carlisle, but a good friend nonetheless. He approached curiously and gestured to the wood at Carlisle's hands.

"This is to become...?"

"A chair." The one in his father's study was showing signs of deep wear, owing, no doubt, to the fact that that the reverend slept in it more nights than not. This new one, equal parts holly and pine, would replace the one in the church, and that one could be removed to the study. "For my father, for the sanctuary."

Thomas's eyes ran over the wood that Carlisle was working, as well as the spindles that lay on the ground, already turned and ready for fitting.

"You're a good son," he said finally.

Carlisle shrugged. "I have little else to do." He pulled himself upright, brushing sawdust off his breeches with the back of one hand, and dipped his hands in the bucket of water he kept nearby. "It's not as though I have studies to attend to."

These last words came out harshly, but Thomas only gave his friend a knowing smile. Thomas had never had plans to go on in his schooling. Smithing was not only his duty, but his calling, and he enjoyed the work. Carlisle was different. He was bright, quick to pick things from his reading, and a fast learner. His plan had been to become a solicitor. He liked the idea of the education, and the work would put him in a firm position to take care of a family later.

The Reverend Cullen had not been amused. Carlisle spent almost every waking hour in the church, and his father's assumption had always been that he would grow to lead the parish.

It wasn't that Carlisle disliked serving the church. Far from it. Sometimes he felt, as he listened to his father lash out from the pulpit in fiery lectures on fornication, adultery, witchcraft and the other manifestations of evil in the world, that it was he who actually found more solace in the holy house than his father did. But to serve a church meant to put himself at the center of their community, to declare morality and immorality, to punish those who went astray. Given the choice, he would prefer carpentry to the church; if he couldn't have the law.

Thomas knew all of this, and so gave Carlisle a wry smile. "I see the question with your father has not been resolved."

"It never will be."

His friend sauntered over to the sawhorses, running his hand appreciatively over the smoothed wood. "And of the carpentry?"

"A hobby." Never mind that he was apprenticed to one of London's master woodworkers—or half apprenticed, really, as his work at the church was supposed to take precedent. He was Sexton Carlisle—Sexton *William*, really, according to his father, and the thought made his lip curl.

How was he supposed to make peace with a man who refused to call him by his name?

Carlisle's expression didn't escape Thomas's notice, and his friend's gaze dropped back to the chair. Thomas's hand ran over the spindle that Carlisle had been turning.

"Perhaps when he sees your work here he will understand," Thomas offered kindly, but Carlisle shook his head. He was destined for greater good than carpentry, but not the greatest good that his father envisioned. Rather than explain this to Thomas, however, he changed the subject.

"What brings you?"

"My work is finished for the day, and I guessed yours might be as well. The young men are meeting at the coffeehouse at dusk, and I thought you might join us."

Carlisle looked away, to the chair. He'd intended to finish it before nightfall, but it would require a few hours' work more. If he went with Thomas, the chair would stay unfinished—but then, it was to be a surprise for his father anyway. It wouldn't hurt his father's desk chair to be slept in for one additional evening. And he liked the coffeehouse, as much as his father despised it.

Dangerous ideas, his father thought. Charles had retaken the throne nearly seven years ago, but it didn't stop people from decrying the crown. Nor did Cromwell's decayed head outside Westminster Hall, much to the king's dismay.

Really, Carlisle thought his father should appreciate the talk, and the newspapers. After all, the restoration of the crown meant the restoration of the Church, and they were Dissenters. But Reverend Cullen preferred to keep Carlisle's mind on godlier things than politics altogether. The coffeehouse and its banter weren't appropriate for the young man who would succeed him.

But Reverend Cullen wasn't here, and Carlisle had no plans to succeed anyone.

“A penny for your thoughts?” Thomas interrupted, his eyebrows raised.

He’d stayed silent too long. “No,” Carlisle answered, a smile spreading on his face. “A penny for my freedom. At least for a few hours.”

Laying down his tools, and shouldering the two sawhorses, Carlisle began to move his equipment to the barn.

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William Cullen read by a lone flame in the waning hours of evening, as shadows stretched from the windows across his desk. He prepared his messages early, so that he might have time to think and pray over them before delivering the word of God to his small, but restless flock.

His son had been gone when he’d returned from his afternoon visit to the home of one of their parish. Mrs. Cuthbert had been ill for some time, and her husband had wondered if perhaps it were a spirit. He’d invited William to come pray over her, in the hopes that William’s prayers, coming from the lips of an ordained man, might be more fruitful than his own.

William had obliged at once. He hated the things that his parishioners did in the name of warding off sicknesses. Herbs, magic, even their own exorcisms. There was so little trust in God’s power. Their parish had been saved from the Great Fire by only a few furloughs, while wealthier churches of pastors who had stayed true to the crown had perished. How some in his congregation could fail to see that level of providence, he didn’t know.

Of course, then again, his own child could be rather thick about these matters himself. The younger Cullen was of the opinion that the fire was nothing more than a human accident, and that their own church had been saved was more of the same. It was dangerous, the way the young men thought these days. They spent time in the coffeehouse, talking about the crown, and the church, and science. They read vulgar works—William had all too recently had to eradicate a folio of a commoner’s play from where his son had hidden it under his bed linens. *Julius Caesar*, by that man who not only wrote plays, but also poetry to which William would never have had his child exposed. He had set his expectations years ago, but they seemed to stick less and less as the young man grew older.

The boy was in every way Sarah’s child. He’d inherited her fair hair, her clear skin, her fine features. He was almost too beautiful a man, and William had heard the murmurs among the Londoners they served. His son was yet too young to marry—but only slightly so. It would serve them both well if he were to find a partner young—William himself had been far too occupied with his seminary studies during his youth to spend time in a proper courtship. His parents had encouraged this. His own father had been a butcher, but had always worked with another, having never reached enough capital to even have his own shop. When William had announced his plans to become a man of the cloth, his parents saw an opportunity for a modest level of prestige and income for their son.

But in the end his drive had left him weakening, growing old, and with a son barely old enough to replace him.

And most importantly, it had left him alone.

He had finished seminary and become a young pastor, and his sermons had gained him some low-level of notoriety. He had been well past the age his son was now when a member of his church, a solicitor, had suggested that his younger daughter might make an excellent minister’s wife.

Sarah Crawforth was beautiful to behold; her features were fine, and she had been brought up to care for the home. But she was stubborn, the solicitor had warned him, and that, William suspected, was why she had relatively few suitors her own age. Sarah could read and write, and she sometimes composed her own poetry and song. The creativity made her defiant, hard to break, and ultimately, her father feared, would make her a poor wife.

But the first time she had looked deeply into William's dark eyes with her own light ones, she'd won his heart at once.

It was a fast courtship, and she became pregnant almost as soon as they were married. They'd been so overjoyed and felt so blessed to have begun a family so quickly that William hadn't thought he needed to pray over their unborn child—their unborn son, as both of them knew him to be. “Young William,” William had called him, but Sarah had called the boy in her womb not by his father's name, but by that of hers.

Carlisle.

And in the dark of night one frigid February, Sarah, with her fine features and stubborn manner had disappeared from his life altogether, to be replaced by a squalling, orphaned, infant. The boy who would grow into the man who slept on the bed next to William's own, a man too beautiful to attract his own wife, too clever to follow in his father's footsteps. The boy was stubborn like his mother, but William thought his stubbornness might serve him well in the church were it to be channeled correctly. What was conviction if not the stubborn resolve to follow God?

The candle flickered, throwing light and shadow across the page. It was nearly spring once again, and William could feel the energy in the members of his church. Spring brought London itself to life; not merely its flowers and trees, and especially after the hard winter and the fire, it seemed all of London was ready to rebuild.

The hulking Bible lay open to the sixth chapter of Luke and William leaned over it.

Whosoever cometh to me, and heareth my sayings, and doeth them, I will shew you to whom he is like:

He is like a man which built an house, and digged deep, and laid the foundation on a rock: and when the flood arose, the stream beat vehemently upon that house, and could not shake it: for it was founded upon a rock.

But he that heareth, and doeth not, is like a man that without a foundation built an house upon the earth; against which the stream did beat vehemently, and immediately it fell; and the ruin of that house was great.

It would be a good lesson to teach, with the building that was going on around them; even though their parish had been unaffected, all across London stood the shells of buildings that had succumbed to the fire--the shops of merchants his parishioners frequented, the homes of their relatives. To remind them that their foundation was first in Heaven would be something they would understand even more powerfully now.

But something about the words themselves were disturbing this evening. His son had not returned, even well after dark as it was. William would need to gather his raiding party shortly. Those willing to search London for evil were growing fewer by the season. It seemed that with each passing year, the people of his congregation grew less and less willing to acknowledge the presence of evil among them, even when witches caused deaths and illness around them and the Lord Himself dropped fury on the entire city of London for its depravity. People murmured that it was an accident, that more homes needed to be built of stone and brick, that the fire was merely a human act. How they could fail to see the terror that God had unleashed on their city--that they would say there had only been a handful of deaths, as though this meant the destruction was less severe!

William sucked in his breath, and the flame bent toward him on the quick ingress of air. Each day, there were fewer who listened. They were content to live in houses on sand. But he would remind them that such grounding was unstable. He would hunt down the evils of London and bring them before his church members so that they could see and understand their danger. God could save, and He would save only those who stood firm on stone. He was a rock, the foundation on which rested the salvation of his church—and that of his son.

Standing and pulling his cloak from the peg on the wall, William began to gather his supplies.

“My problem with Mister Bradshawe is that he knows nothing of Aristotle,” Carlisle grumbled.

“Nay, your problem with Mister Bradshawe is that he was gathered by a beautiful woman,” Thomas shot back, ducking before his friend managed to swing at him. Carlisle’s fist met nothing but cool night air at the spot where Thomas’s shoulder had been a moment before. Laughing, Thomas dashed down the street. Carlisle gave chase, enjoying the feel of his legs pumping beneath him.

He was faster than Thomas, and caught the other young man handily. The two of them nearly crashed to the stone road when Carlisle pulled Thomas backward by his waist. Both of them were laughing so hard their chests heaved and hurt as they panted. The street was dark, lit by only pools of light which glowed at intervals from the few lanterns still burning their last in front windows. The lamps cast shifting shadows across the two as they stood doubled over.

It felt good, Carlisle thought. He was wound up for a reason he couldn’t quite put his finger on—the run, even short as it was, had released an energy he hadn’t realized was waiting to claw its way out of him. Thomas stood upright and cuffed him playfully on the shoulder, beginning to walk further down the road. Carlisle followed, his thoughts elsewhere.

He and Thomas had stayed at the coffeehouse until well after dark. Truthfully, Carlisle knew exactly what he was doing. If he could miss nightfall, he could miss being recruited to skulk the streets of London with his father. So he and Thomas had stayed talking with the other men, and Carlisle had read all of the most recent issue of the *Spectator* before they had made their way toward the door.

There had been one other man waiting, and as Carlisle and Thomas made their way out into the evening, a figure had appeared striding toward the three of them. At first Carlisle thought it to be a cloaked man. He was a bit nearsighted, a product of the many books he had devoured as a youngster, no doubt. It wasn’t until the figure grew nearer that he recognized its stature to be too slight to be a man. Instead he saw a head scarf and a dress, and hair that glinted in the lamplight casting from the coffeehouse’s windows.

She said nothing to them, but simply collected the third man, who looked slightly surprised to see her. Carlisle had a moment to see her in the darkness and he was just able to make out high cheekbones and a gentle smile as the woman wrapped her arm inside Christopher Bradshawe’s, and led him away.

It was odd, really, for a wife to have come to gather Christopher Bradshawe. London’s streets weren’t ever safe for women and children, much less at night. He remembered his father’s ominous warnings about playing out with the other children, something which Carlisle had been largely forbidden to do from a very young age. Much of that, however, was simply due to the fact that playing was an un-Christian thing for him to do—it had relatively little to do, he suspected, with any sort of worry for his safety. He had been expected instead to stay home, take care of the church, read the bible.

He wondered what his father would think of the woman who had come to gather Mr. Bradshawe.

Thomas was grinning as he walked at Carlisle’s side, which perturbed him.

“What?” he finally asked.

“Thine eyes are far away, Sexton,” Thomas said. “If I didn’t know better, I might suspect thee to be thinking back on Mr. Bradshawe.”

His friend was perceptive; Carlisle had to give him that. He looked away. The woman who had gathered the argumentative man had been beautiful. She reminded him a bit of Katherine, the woman who had nursed him. She had fallen in the plague that had swept London not two years

before. As was his duty, Carlisle had attended to dressing the sanctuary, notified the parish, and dug the grave. He'd stifled the tears and banished all thoughts of his former nursemaid from his mind—until now.

One turn of dark hair, the way the lamplight from the window had made it shine in the darkness where it hung on her shoulder—the image was all but burned into Carlisle's mind.

The Bradshawes were not in their parish; the coffeehouse served a large district and it was not unheard of for men to come a ways to talk, or for visiting merchants to join in the lively conversation. However, Carlisle had met Christopher a few times before, always in some intense debate. Like Carlisle, Christopher was an educated man. But unlike him, Christopher would be a barrister, enjoying the benefits of the secular education Carlisle himself was denied. Envy was not a trait Carlisle prized, but he had to admit that this feeling above all drove his desire to debate with the other man.

However, Christopher was his age, if not younger. He, too, must have a year or two before he came fully of age. Yet he had a wife.

And a rather bold wife at that.

Thomas's laugh broke through his thoughts once more, and Carlisle looked up. They had nearly reached the street on which sat the small churchyard—the church itself, the tiny vicarage that Carlisle had always known as his home, and the small graveyard between. He could nearly make out the shape of the small building and he could see at once that no light escaped its windows. The Reverend Cullen was either still out in his pursuit of evil, or he had fallen asleep.

"She's quite captured you." A smirk played on Thomas's lips as they walked further.

"It is nothing," Carlisle answered, looking away.

"On the contrary, it is everything. I've not known you to take interest in a woman."

He frowned. Was that was this was? Remembering his nurse, thinking about the brown hair that had so captured his eyes—was that taking interest in a woman? And if so...could he justify taking interest in another man's wife? *Thou shalt not covet...*

"It is nothing," he repeated, but this was more for his benefit than Thomas's. Thomas was courting a woman from their parish, who had met with both their parents' approvals. Carlisle was more book-learned than Thomas, but he had to admit that this was an area in which Thomas's expertise was disturbingly greater.

Maddeningly, his friend didn't answer.

The two of them reached the vicarage a few minutes later. As he had seen from down the street, there seemed to be no life inside the small home.

"He is still out, I suspect," Carlisle answered Thomas's unasked question.

In answer, Thomas gestured through the window, where Carlisle could see his father's cloak hanging from its usual peg. Carlisle winced and a silent prayer went up that the reverend would be already asleep.

"I ought be in," he said, defeated, and his friend nodded. "I bid you good evening."

"Good evening to you also," Thomas answered, turning toward his own home.

But as Carlisle placed his hand on the door, Thomas spoke again.

"Sexton?"

Carlisle turned. "Yes?"

"The woman?"

"Yes?"

His friend grinned. "She is Mr. Bradshawe's sister, Carlisle. Her name is Elizabeth."

And before Carlisle had a chance to answer, Thomas turned and disappeared into the night.

Chapter Threø: The Young One

May, 1789

Volterra

Raindrops raced their way down the largest window in the great chamber, each droplet seeming set on its own path as it skittered its way toward the window's wide bottom. Everything had a pattern—even the most random things had their ways. A drop would find a miniscule groove in the glass and follow it from the top to the bottom, and if it were bumped, would simply join the next and continue on either its path or the other's. From where he sat, Aro could predict the paths that an individual droplet would take, simply from the way the dim light refracted off the glass.

The world seemed chaotic, he thought, but only if one lived an average life. Sixty years was not enough time to see patterns, the way everything fit into a larger picture. It was not enough time to understand that always the same events repeated, that human nature was the same. The same wars, fought over and over, the same sicknesses rising and falling, the same fears.

The same rain.

He wasn't the only one watching the rain, or at least, he wasn't the only one looking at it. Marcus also stared at it from a second, smaller chair, his eyes unfocused and glassy. He could sit like that for days, Aro had found. It disturbed them all, the way Marcus could be so still. Aro glanced at his brother-in-law where he sat, his pale hand supporting his paler jaw, his dark hair cascading over the hand and forearm both. For a moment he hungered to know what Marcus would be thinking as he looked at the rain, but he comforted himself in the thought that he would know the other man's thoughts in due time. He resumed his own intent stare out the window.

The rain kept the humans from the *piazza*, save those few whose business was dire or whose lives so depended on whatever meager trade they could manage even on a day like this. Heidi had been sent further today, to the shrine to St. Marcus. Pilgrims were the easiest—many of them didn't make it back even if they didn't encounter a beast like Heidi. No one suspected any wrongdoing other than the completely mortal kind, and that kept the secret well. Of course, they could break

their own laws here, if they chose—they could turn the whole town into a safe haven for their kind and no one stood above them to stop them—but there was a certain humility in keeping the secret anyway.

Of course, the young one had pressed those boundaries a bit.

When he looked past the droplets, Aro could make out in the square the tailored black coat, the high collar against the porcelain neck, the golden hair darkened by wetness. It wasn't that vampires couldn't tolerate the rain, of course, but Aro had always found it made him uncomfortable. The slickness made him feel uneasy in his own skin, and now that luxuries like indoor fireplaces and glass windows were a part of his everyday world, he tended to prefer the comfort they offered.

Carlisle seemed to feel exactly the opposite, which given everything else unusual about him, should never have surprised Aro. He confessed, however, that he had expected the younger vampire to grow tired of things like the rain. After a few years, Aro had suspected he would break, join them fully, share in the spoils of their hunts. Or Heidi's hunts, to be more specific.

But it hadn't happened. It had been nearly forty years, now, over a third of the younger one's immortal life, and still he clung to his convictions, never partaking in their group feasts, nor hunting their prey on his own. And on days when the sun didn't shine, he walked out among the humans. He even bought food in the market at times, especially imported spices, which he would leave lying about so that his quarters reeked of the mingled scents and his tabletops resembled those of an apothecary.

This amused Aro as much as it bewildered him.

Like today, it had been raining the day Carlisle had first appeared. One of the guard, Alrigo, had been the first to encounter the young one as he wandered aimlessly in the square. Alrigo had no special gifts save his brute strength, and occasionally had to be reprimanded for tearing an intruder to pieces before the council of brothers had managed an audience with the newcomer. But as they later learned he would do to everyone, Carlisle had stopped Alrigo in his tracks.

"He moves as a human," the astonished report had come. A blond vampire, English, it seemed, his immortal age unknown but his mortal age just barely into manhood. His Italian was flawless, and he walked among the humans without showing any sign of need for restraint. The rain sheltered him from the revealing effects of the sunlight, and under its cover he had seemed to make himself perfectly at home among the people of Volterra. And his eyes! An unsettling amber, like nothing Aro had ever seen. If he had not plucked the image directly from Alrigo's mind, he might have thought the other man to be lying.

Aro had sent out Alrigo and Rafael to collect the man, and no more than an hour had passed before the blond man stood in this very chamber, his clothes and hair dripping on the floor. Aro could have touched him and known everything of him at once, but for some reason the man gave him pause. The very way he carried himself—with dignity, Aro had realized later. His shoulders were upright, his bright, amber eyes eager as they searched out Aro's crimson ones.

"*Qual è il suo nome, visitatore?*" Aro had asked. The word had sounded strange. There weren't visitors to Volterra, not of their kind. There were transgressors, and trespassers, but never visitors. That this man had strode so purposefully through the gates of their city, passing himself as human, unsettled them all. The blond had looked him in the eye, then, and Aro had gotten chills. His eyes were that strange color, certainly, but it wasn't that. It was the way he seemed to be appraising Aro's very countenance, as though he understood Aro in the way Aro understood those he touched. But this vampire could not have a gift as powerful as his own—could he?

The visitor studied the three of them, seated before him, fixing each of them with a gaze that seemed to be filled with curiosity. Yet, Aro found his look uncomfortable. Others did not dare look on him as though he were an object to study, yet this newcomer dared do so even before giving his name.

“*“Il mio nome é Carlisle,”* the blond answered after a long moment. “Carlisle Cullen.”

This prompted raised eyebrows from all three brothers. Their kind did not use surnames, and often even sloughed forenames as well. After the bloodthirst that accompanied the newborn years, one was often lucky if he could remember his forename at all, much less the family of which he might have once been a part.

Marcus, oddly, was the first to recover. He did not tend to speak these days, preferring the silence that had shrouded him for nearly a century. But something in the newcomer's presence had startled him awake, and he frowned at the young one before going on in the tongue he obviously assumed would be their guest's native one.

“Cullen...it is an Irish name, is it not?”

The blond nodded slowly. “Ireland is my family's ancestral home,” he answered, “but I am English. A Londoner.”

It was even rarer that the blond would claim a place of residence. As far as the brothers knew, they, and they alone, maintained a home in a single city. The rest of their kind were nomads, roaming throughout the world. They knew the others, through reports or through punishing those who transgressed their single law, but they alone were the ones who maintained a domicile. This gave them a permanency, an edge over those who needed to shift locations with increasing frequency.

Like all things about Carlisle, that he claimed a home was disturbing.

“What brings you to Italy?”

The younger one nodded deeply, looking down to the floor for a long time. Aro was nearly going to ask him if he had found something fascinating in the stone when he fixed those odd eyes back on Aro and answered, “You do.”

This was enough to startle all three of them to rapt attention. The atmosphere in the room tensed at once, and there was a small shuffling of feet as Alrigo and Rafael moved toward the blond. But Aro lifted his hand ever so slightly, and the two guards shifted their weights away from Carlisle, giving their master puzzled looks. Aro agreed that the response was more than forward, but he felt little unease. There was something genuine about the blond, in the way he stood, his arms at his sides, his stance open but not defensive.

“You are here to seek us?” Aro replied.

Carlisle nodded. “There was one in France. Jean-Jacques, he was called. He told me where to seek you out, said I would be interested to meet you.”

Aro's eyebrows raised once more. Jean-Jacques had been turned two centuries before, by a second Jean. The first had met his destruction for allowing a newborn to fall into the hands of an angry mob in southern France--the mob had been destroyed of course, and the town had burned. The brothers had not discovered Jean-Jacques for several years, but he had done a well enough job hiding himself that the three had deemed him little, if any, threat. Like all of them, he had seemed grateful for the brothers' benevolence.

“What took you to France, my friend?”

“University,” Carlisle answered. “I went to study there.”

At this, Caius snorted, Marcus's eyes grew wider, and Aro felt a smile creep across his face. No, this one was nothing like those they had encountered before. Studying at university. A fine use of immortality, truly. Aro had attended more than a few universities himself, but always from afar, huddled in back alleyways to listen to a lecture with his far-reaching ears. For one so young to have discovered the temperance necessary to mingle with the humans enough to study with them was no small feat.

Aro studied their visitor even more closely. He was strong; that much was clear. His body was no older than early manhood, perhaps just over twenty years. If he possessed any gifts, they did

not seem to manifest themselves—and that seemed unlikely, in any case. Those with gifts tended to make their gifts known at once, either to show off to Aro and the other brothers or to defend themselves from them.

All Aro had needed to do then was stand, approach Carlisle, and simply shake his hand—a mere touch of skin and he would know every thought that had ever existed in this obviously exquisite mind. But there was something about Carlisle’s openness and the seemingly genuine gaze that rested upon the three brothers that made the act seem like a vile intrusion. So while Aro would tell Carlisle later about his gift and Carlisle would submit to its powers willingly, at that first moment Aro had merely leaned forward and asked the blond to tell him more.

That had been nearly four decades ago, and little had changed. Aro remained fascinated by Carlisle; the others tolerated him because he was Aro’s pet. But even Aro had to admit that after so long, he had expected the young one to gravitate toward their ways. That he had thus far shown no sign of doing so was both admirable and unsettling.

As though to underscore the point, Caius entered the chamber. He followed Aro’s gaze at once, and he and Aro both watched as Carlisle spoke easily to one of the vendors, a woman who sold medicinal herbs. He leaned in cordially as they spoke, unnecessarily mimicking the body language of the humans around him, who had need of getting closer to a vendor in order to hear her. His forearms rested on the woman’s cart, and he smiled at her. She laughed in answer to something he had said as she handed him a small cloth package. He tucked this into his overcoat, and proceeded to continue chatting.

“Those things he brings in are vile,” Caius said, his nose wrinkling in disgust as he watched the interchange. “Couldn’t you stop him?”

Aro saw little harm in Carlisle’s exploits. Carlisle kept himself out of their way, sometimes disappearing for years at a time—to Africa, to Siberia, to the Orient. His curiosity was unquenchable, yes, but as far as Aro was concerned, it was harmless.

“I see no reason to stop his mind,” Aro answered absently, gazing back out over the square. Carlisle had finished his transaction and was beginning to wend his way back toward the castle. Aro could see the black cloak and golden hair as they wove through the humans—so close to them that a single lunge would provide Carlisle with meal enough for weeks. But this was not to be, of course. The humans milled through the square, blissfully unaware that their predators stood watch from above, and that another dangerous being walked among them. And, his differences unseen, the blond disappeared into the castle’s door.

The truth was, Aro found Carlisle fascinating. He loved to study his people, The Chosen, as he often called them. He at times kept transgressors for months or even years before disposing of them simply because he wished to understand them more. Marcus found this cruel; Caius felt it was a waste of time; but Aro felt as long as the other existed as a possible object of study, he ought become one.

Yet Carlisle did not fit the usual mold for one of Aro’s specimens. He transgressed no laws—mortal, immortal or even divine, as far as Aro could tell. The young one maintained a purity of heart that to Aro made him at once entertaining and irresistible.

“He ought to leave,” Caius snorted, as the sound of the heavy door closing behind Carlisle reached them all. “He is not content here.”

Aro put a single finger to his lips, but he knew Caius had fully intended Carlisle to hear his words. The brothers shared a language—Etruscan—that Carlisle did not speak; to use Italian was an open invitation for the blond to take heed.

Sure enough, when Carlisle appeared a moment later, his eyes were clouded with apprehension despite his rather wide smile.

“It was a fruitful outing in this awful weather?” Aro asked.

The smile softened, and Aro recognized a genuine expression of happiness on Carlisle's face. "I find the weather far from awful," Carlisle answered. "And yes, the excursion went well." He fingered the cloth pouch he held in his hands.

Three sets of eyes shifted to it. It gave off a scent of earth, a reek of spice, which was no doubt transferring itself to the tiny grooves of Carlisle's fingerprints even as they spoke. Caius glared at it, but Marcus merely looked thoughtful. Carlisle's fingers shifted uncomfortably under the gaze of the three of them, and for a moment his eyes flickered toward Aro's right hand. It was a silent question Aro recognized a request for confirmation that one was okay not to touch him, that Aro had no need of using his gift to hear the other's thoughts. Carlisle never fought the request as did some others; even those in their own inner circle. Caius, for example, often accused Aro of mistrust when he was asked to reveal his mind. But Carlisle was steadfast, pure, even. His thoughts so matched his words and his actions that Aro had given up asking him for his palm decades before.

The spices and herbs were for medicinal purposes, he knew. He had laughed the first time the blond had told him of his ambitions to become a physician. Carlisle had studied the law but found it uninteresting; he'd studied music but found it not to engage him. No, this strange being who had so made himself at home with the brothers here insisted that he would one day control himself to be not only around humans, but to heal them—to stanch their blood instead of to drink it. Caius and Marcus thought this was absurd, and Aro had too—at first. But it had been decades, and Carlisle seemed to be making progress at least on his studies, if not on his practice. The thought was both rewarding and unnerving.

It was this unease that caused Aro to ask a question he'd not asked Carlisle in almost forty years as he nodded toward the door. Heidi was to return shortly with their quarry, an act which, while Carlisle tolerated, he looked down upon. Their blond guest would just as soon they all took up his lifestyle, but he was willing to concede them their way of feeding. But something in Caius's questioning remarks, as well as the discomfort that Carlisle exhibited standing before them caused Aro to make a different move today.

"Heidi will return shortly," he said, cocking his head toward the door. "Will you join us?"

The smile on the thin lips disappeared, to be replaced by a frown. "I believe it has been decades since you last issued that invitation, friend," he said quietly. "My answer of course has not changed."

This elicited a grunt from Caius and a concerned stare from Marcus. Aro ignored them both.

"Very well," he answered, gesturing Carlisle out of the chamber with a smile. A moment later, the mingled scents of salt and some unknown herb reached them, no doubt as Carlisle experimented crushing them in his mortar. Predictably, Caius's nose wrinkled.

"He is of no use to us," he hissed in their ancient tongue. "The way he moves among them. He behaves more strangely by the day."

Aro shook his head. "We will watch him. I have just as much knowledge of his movement as I do of yours."

Caius stared at Aro, and for a moment, it seemed he would have more to say. But they were interrupted by a scent that eclipsed anything coming from Carlisle's quarters. The scent was heavenly, and accompanied by the soft, buzzing hum of dozens of hushed human voices. Both their attentions were diverted at once, listening for the footfalls and the sounds of an immortal sweeping through the heavy doors on the way to their chamber.

"Heidi returns," Aro said quietly. "Come. We will talk more of the young one later."

Caius grunted. "He should be dealt with," he muttered, but his answer was halfhearted. He, too, was focused on the door. And so the two men fell as silent as their third brother, still slumped in his chair, staring out at the rain.

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Human screams were mostly muffled by the thick stone walls of the vampire castle, but not quite fully enough, Carlisle thought. They reached his ears as an oddly-pitched sighing groan.

Usually, he arranged to be away during the feedings, but he'd wanted to take advantage of the rain and so hadn't left the compound today. Plus, staying fed his other goal. At first, when he had stayed in the compound, he had stayed at the outer reaches of the castle. But with each successive feeding, he challenged himself to move closer and closer to the source. All that stood between him and the main chambers now was a wooden door and a hallway—easily torn down, easily traversed.

It was one thing to ignore the heady scent when it stayed safely within the body. It was another to ignore it when it flooded the floor. But it was crucial if he was to continue on the path he was hoping for, and he was managing, bit by bit.

As the keening sound reached him, he bowed his head over his work. It wasn't prayer, not really. It had been nearly a century since he had last sent his fervent wishes toward Heaven. But it felt somehow right to at least commemorate these whose souls were scarified for the continued existence of his brothers, or so they called themselves.

Beneath his fingers, a range of spices had been reduced to a fine powder as he thought and listened. When he'd first begun with the herbs, it had taken a few tries for him to keep the mortar in one piece as he pulverized the dried herbs with his fingertips. But he had learned, and now he could work with more ease.

The idea of studying medicine had occurred to Carlisle only since he'd been in Italy. France had been wonderful for art and music both, and in eighty years of sleepless nights, Carlisle had worked his way through the Greeks, the Romans, the entirety of the Christian canon, and the French masters. He'd studied civil law and common law, and even managed to travel eastward for a few years and spend time at Wittenberg. But it had been in Italy that he had seen the works of Da Vinci, the perfect proportion of the human form, and realized that here he could acquire a craft that was worthy of an eternal being.

If the purpose of his kind was to destroy human life, he would save it. A small measure, to be sure, but it was a tiny bit that he could do to absolve himself of his condition. Humans fell, always, to original sin, the state of imperfection, of a fall from grace. When he'd walked the earth as a human, his concern had been to right that state of godly affairs through prayer and study. As an immortal his gifts were more bountiful—and the necessity to make good use of them, in his opinion, was greater. He would not only keep from taking lives; he would prevent their loss by other means as well.

The herbs were a start. Humans were becoming less and less superstitious by the year, it seemed. Gone were the days of belief in touching a monarch's hand, or accusations of witchcraft for the ills that befell a woman's neighbor. Now it seemed people were concerned with cause and effect, with the ways some practices had effects on others. Lemon juice and fruit to treat scurvy, exposure to cow's pox kept people from getting the human kind. What one ate or did seemed to affect one's health, and the herbs were the way the future was moving. So Carlisle passed hours selecting and studying the combinations that had seemed to prove most useful. If a plant from the New World was supposed to assist with fever, and one that grew on his doorstep with the chill, then if he combined them...would they be weakened or strengthened? He had no way of knowing. Yet the herbalist, Martina, was happy to trade new herbs for his carefully prepared concoctions on the cloudy days when he could make it to the market in the *piazza*. She called him *dottore*, and this made him proud.

As the salt and herbs crushed under the pads of his fingers, Carlisle thought back to his earlier homecoming. "He is not content here," Caius had said of him. Of the three brothers, Caius

liked Carlisle least, and there had never been any question in Carlisle's mind that as far as Caius was concerned, he was unwelcome.

Perhaps it was time for another trip. He had made excursions away from Italy, but he'd been based out of the castle for almost fifty years. His trips took him as far as the Far East, but he would go for a few years at a time and return, always relaying his travels and his ideas to Aro through the tips of his fingers.

It wasn't that he minded Aro's gift. Aro had often commented on exactly what Carlisle felt; that his thoughts very purely matched his actions and the other way around. He had nothing to hide. Yet he couldn't help but feel that things were shifting, somehow. He frowned as he remembered Caius's intent stare as he'd come back in from his shopping. In the way the high brows knitted themselves together beneath the flaxen hair Carlisle saw an expression of contempt.

And then Aro asking him if he wished to feed. His brow furrowed as he worked the herbs more vigorously. The question hadn't been asked of him in years. That it had been asked today, following on Caius's comment... His brow furrowing, Carlisle worked the herbs under his fingers with increased vigor.

The three brothers each treated him differently. Aro was admiring, almost adoring, but in the way one might adore a cherished pet. Caius had always been aloof at best, contemptuous at worst. Marcus, however, stood between them. He found Carlisle interesting, it seemed, and while he didn't agree with Carlisle's lifestyle, he seemed very content to let him be, something Carlisle appreciated. He gravitated toward Marcus when he was in the castle—although that was becoming less and less frequent of late. On almost every rainy day he could be found in the square amongst the humans, and increasingly, on the sunny days, he flung himself far into the mountains away from where any mortal eyes might question who he was.

If he admitted it, Caius had been perfectly right. The castle felt more claustrophobic by the hour. Carlisle couldn't get away from this lifestyle he didn't wish to lead, and he was reduced to this, hiding away from the rest when they fed, pretending to be unruffled at the suggestion that he kill for his own sustenance.

But if he were to leave, where would he go? The years in France had been lonely at best, and at times, excruciating. Here at least there was community, others like him, even if they did not share his vision.

As though to reinforce this last, the keening sighs from down the hall became increasingly muffled, and the scent of blood grew stronger. The mixture beneath his fingers reached its optimal consistency, yet, agitated by the sounds, he still pressed it finer and finer.

At last there was only one still screaming, a man, his voice high enough that Carlisle knew him to be a young man, perhaps as old as he himself was in body. The killing of young humans frustrated him more than he let on to the other two, although Aro, of course, knew his true feelings. Humans had such short lives as it was, there was no need to shorten them unnecessarily by preying on the young.

Aro's voice broke through the young man's screams. "It is well," he said quietly. "It will be over in a moment. Be still, Young One."

The name brought him up short. Young One. The name Aro called Carlisle.

His ears tuning fully to the goings-on in the chamber, Carlisle heard the wet breathing as the man slobbered on himself with fear. He had seen Aro attack before, and could imagine his compatriot's snakelike moves toward his prey, the final lunge toward the delicate neck, the sticky blood spilling down into the collar. But this time in his vision, it wasn't a human Aro lunged for, but himself.

The final strangled cry rose and was silenced, and the scent of a new blood mingled with the others.

Beneath Carlisle's fingers, the mortar smashed.

Chapter Four: Motherless Child

Chicago, Illinois

October, 1918

The brow was still unnaturally hot under his palm as Carlisle gently pressed closed a pair of eyes that had once danced with life. Now they had gone as flat gray as the bedclothes on which their owner lay. He murmured an apology, faster than human ears around him would be able to hear, and then in a single motion lifted the body into his arms and stripped the bed beneath it. Strictly speaking, this was the nurses' duty, but there weren't enough hands to go around any longer, and he could easily carry both the human child and the bedsheet.

So light, he thought in dismay. No human body felt heavy to him of course, but the young woman in his arms was scarcely more than a girl—fourteen, he'd read on her chart. He hadn't known her at all. Yesterday, she had not even been ill enough to need to be moved from the temporary infirmary at the armory, and today, she was dead. The only twisted consolation Carlisle could offer his mind was that the nurse had reported the girl had already been orphaned and had no siblings. There was no one left to miss her.

He wasn't sure whether to be thankful or outraged.

It was as though the whole of Chicago had become ill overnight. Reports of the influenza were pouring in via telegram and telephone as doctors throughout the entire country tried to put a stop to what seemed to be the eleventh plague. Or perhaps it was merely the tenth plague, revisited—it did, after all, seem as though every other hour Carlisle heard a mother's wail as yet another firstborn child was taken.

He was in the hospital today, walking among frazzled nurses as they rushed from bed to bed. The most ill were to be put in a special ward, but some turned so quickly there was no time to get them there. Once there, they were often delirious with fever—a good thing, Carlisle supposed, as it kept anyone from discovering his dual life. He worked at two hospitals and an armory-turned-infirmary, leaving each position under the auspices of needing rest, only to turn up shortly after at another location. His apartment sat empty for days at a time now, although he doubted any of his neighbors had even noticed.

Carlisle wound his way through the rows of beds, the girl's body gently cradled against his own. The hospital seemed a frenetic hive of energy, bedpans clattering, patients talking out in their fevers, families shedding tears. And still the silence of the body in his arms was deafening as he pushed his way through the doors and down the stairs to the morgue. If there had been eyes to see, someone might have questioned that he did not use a stretcher, but every nurse and every doctor were too swamped with other patients to notice anything unusual about Carlisle's behavior. At last he reached the hulking doors that separated the morgue from the rest of the hospital, and when he slid inside, the clamor of the world around him disappeared.

It was early, and the girl was the only one so far today, although Carlisle had seen days when there had scarcely been room to lay a grown man in this space. He prayed it would stay this way. He laid the small body on a canvas gurney and arranged her limbs so that when rigor mortis set in, she would be easily transported. He wondered for a moment if she would be claimed. Many weren't, as their families were either too poor to bury them properly, or too afraid of infecting their household with the disease.

The girl's hair fanned out beneath her as Carlisle turned her in the winding sheet. It was a rich chestnut, and he allowed it to fall over her shoulders. She was utterly alone, left to die by family members who had all been claimed before her. He wrapped her carefully, as though she would feel pain, then chastised himself for thinking so.

When he reached her face however, his hand brushed her brow once more. The forehead was already beginning to cool, the body admitting its defeat. His hand lingered there a moment as he bowed his head over his patient.

He wasn't much for praying, not any longer. He made his peace with the Almighty on one night every year, which for a man whose life was unending, made sense. Humans repented every seven days—he every three hundred and sixty-five. But he still found comfort in ritual, the one part of him, he supposed, that was still a little bit human. And so he always said the same words over his patients, or to them. So as he pulled the sheet up over the small head, sealing off the body from the world around it and hiding it from view of those who might see it, he murmured the same phrase he always did:

"It has been a pleasure treating you."

Tucking the sheet under the body, he turned away and swallowed deeply. There were scores already who had died, and these words seemed to leave his mouth almost daily. Yet each one weighed on him. He hadn't seen this many dead so quickly since he had first begun practice, when he had served among the wars in France. Usually one had time to recover, to collect oneself before facing the next case that might end in the loss of life. Not here. Here almost every patient bore the weight of a death sentence from the moment he walked—or more likely, was carried—through the door. Healing meant less treating and more hoping, and it felt at times that all he could offer were a few words of consolation.

His steps were slow as he left the morgue. The girl was his seventieth death in a month. The Cook County hospital was bursting at its seams, and it hardly seemed that a bed was empty before another arrived to fill it. Sometimes the patients lasted two days, sometimes four, and once in a while, they made their way home—although those whose illness had warranted their arrival in the hospital were usually not able to achieve this last. Even the doctors were becoming sick now, their own bodies falling to the influenza as surely as did their patients'.

This disease had rendered him powerless.

The hospital was a constant assault to his senses as he walked back toward the patient wards. The influenza caused hemorrhaging of the capillaries, and it seemed every step he took, he was met with the salty scent of fresh blood as a new patient hemorrhaged. Patients rasped for breath, their lungs filling with the viscous fluid that would eventually claim them.

Carlisle wanted to plug his ears, his nose. He could leave, he rationalized. Many already had, hoping to save themselves and their families from this invisible killer. Deserters, the hospital called them, as though they were all soldiers at war. He would be missed, but it would not be unforgivable.

It would be, however, something he for which he could never forgive himself.

The din of the hospital fell away as he made his way to his office. He needed to fill out the death certificate for the girl, and while it was a poor use of his time, it gave him an excuse to back away for a moment. He flicked on the light and took his seat, finishing the paperwork in seconds. But he stayed there, hunched over the desktop for nearly a full minute, staring at the death certificate. Fourteen. He had lived as a human himself longer than that by half.

His hand turned black. He stared at it, puzzled, until he realized that he'd crushed his ink pen in his grip. The viscous fluid trickled down the backs of his knuckles to his wrist, where it soiled the hem of his sleeve in a perfect black ring.

"Dr. Cullen?"

It was Dorothy. As was her habit, she swept into the room, frowning at him and the ink that was now pooling on the desk. He jerked his arm as though to hide it, but there was no way. She looked from him, to the pen, to the stain on his shirt, then to the death certificate. This last she snatched up before the ink reached it, shaking her head at him in dismay.

"It's a long night," she said, her voice gentle. "How long have you been here?"

He looked at the clock, although he knew perfectly. It was just after dawn, and he'd come a few hours before dusk. "Fourteen hours."

She clucked her tongue. "You need rest, Doctor. You won't be of use to them if you go and get sick, too." Holding up the death certificate, she looked at it a moment. "This what's got you upset?"

Not really, he thought. What had him upset were the bodies piling up in the morgue; the mass graves in the heart of Chicago that reminded him of the massacred revolutionaries he'd seen in France. What had him upset was the way even with undetectable speed and senses thousands of times more sensitive than humans' he still lost just as many patients. What had him upset was that the girl had no family—and that they had this significant detail in common.

That she was only a girl barely scratched the surface.

But still, he sighed and nodded, as she studied the death certificate some more.

"Fourteen," she said, matter-of-factly. "Young to be so ill."

Young to be ill? It was young to be dead.

As though she had heard his thought, Dorothy added, "We can't save them all, Doctor." Giving a disapproving look to his still-blackened hand, she added, "And you won't be saving any, state you're in. I'll take this to the women. You get on home."

He didn't answer. Instead he stood there, flexing his hand open and closed a few times so that more ink squeezed from his palm onto the desk. This was the part that was difficult, when he had to pretend to be human, to force himself home instead of staying where he could be of real use. He knew he was supposed to go, and it was an overcast day—the reason he'd stayed so late to begin with.

Two hands appeared on the desk, holding a rag which blackened as the hands mopped up the ink spill. Then the rag moved to his own hand, and he found his palm gently burnished back to a nearly-clean state.

When Dorothy spoke again, her voice was a little softer. "Doctor Cullen, I'm not your mother."

It was an odd thing for her to say, and an even odder thing for him to react to. He kept to himself, for to talk about his past was to potentially travel down rabbit holes from which there was no escape. The less people knew, the less he had to fabricate. But Dorothy's words drew his eyes

upward. She had a son near his physical age, he knew, and it occurred to Carlisle that he was on the receiving end of a much practiced look—an expression that was at once both disapproving and kind.

“I’m not your mother,” she repeated when she knew she had his attention, “and I’m not the boss of you. I can’t make you do something. But you need to go home.” The rag disappeared back into the pocket in her apron, and Carlisle considered for the briefest of moments that the ink would stain her clothing as well. She didn’t seem to mind.

He could go home. It wouldn’t be the first day a shift would end with a death, and it was far from the last. But he was tired of ending his days with defeat instead of victory. And so he shook his head, causing Dorothy to sigh.

“I’ll go down to intake,” he told her. “I’ll see one more. Then I’ll go.” He stood, brushing his hand against his coat as he did so. It left no mark—Dorothy’s rag had done its job well. He nodded toward her pocket. “Thank you for cleaning that mess. You didn’t need to.”

She grunted, but a small smile played on her lips. “You just see that you don’t make another. And if you think that you will, you go on home.”

He nodded. “I will.” Replacing the shattered and bent pen with another from his desk drawer, he slung his stethoscope over his neck. The two of them departed the office together, Carlisle tugging the door closed behind them. Dorothy turned away, toward the wing of the hospital where the filing clerks worked, no doubt to deliver the death certificate for the young girl Carlisle had left in the morgue. They were a few yards apart down the corridor when he heard her mutter to herself, “The boy could use himself a mother.”

The pain that flooded him was unexpected, and for a moment, his steps stilled, and he squeezed his eyes closed against the dim light of the hallway. He drew a deep breath and found that it quavered, and he was thankful that Dorothy was far enough away now that she wouldn’t see. Exhaling slowly, he answered her comment in a voice too low for any human to hear:

“That’s because I never had one.”

Another deep breath—this one steadier—and then he willed his feet to move toward the waiting patients.

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It happened while they were arguing over Junior.

Elizabeth was tired of it, frankly. The two of them always made the same points, slung back and forth like mud—she coddled him; Edward pushed him. He wasn’t a baby; he wasn’t yet a man. To die for one’s country was noble; to lose their son would leave them childless.

This time it was about the future, as it always seemed to be these days. They were running a risk, she thought, arguing where Little Edward could hear them. Not that he was all that little any longer. He stood a head and shoulders above her, and now had several inches on his father. To Elizabeth, her son was perfect—a blend of her husband’s frame and her coloring. The boy had inherited her eyes, the unusual sea-glass green that had caused her own mother to joke that she’d somehow been bewitched as an infant. On her, she quietly had to side with her mother—the eyes looked odd and out of place. But set in her son’s strong face, the strange eyes softened him, gave him an air of perpetual inquisitiveness, underscoring his gentle nature despite his ungainly frame.

“If he wants to join up, we should let him, Lizzie,” her husband explained. “It will be good for him. Toughen him up.”

She barely repressed the snarl that formed in answer. In their circle, there was no one who supported the war. Other mothers had wailed when their sons had been called up; only two had enlisted underage. Toughen Edward up, certainly it would—but that was only if he came back alive. Thelma in the women’s circle at the church had already lost her son, Private Christopher Hadrick, nineteen years old.

Two years older. The thought alone could make her weep, and she did so sometimes, when her son was off at school and she was laundering his clothes. Her husband was known for his confidence—overconfidence, in her opinion. But she was the one who was left with the nightmares—the image of the wooden coffin sailing its way over the ocean, the sea glass eyes clouded and flat. She would wake from these dreams, disturbing her husband, who'd turn in his sleep and grumble a little before falling back into a deep slumber. And when he was fully asleep, she would slip out of their bed in her nightgown and tiptoe down the hallway to the room where their son slept.

Elizabeth would stand in the doorway, watching the moonlight shade over young Edward's cheeks, the way his hair spilled over the pillow, how he lay with a gangly arm flung over the side of the bed. He still looked like a boy when he was asleep, and when his eyelids fluttered, Elizabeth still saw traces of the plump baby who had once slept in her arms. On those nights she would stand there, too afraid of waking him to touch him, and simply watch him sleep. All young mothers, she had once been told, sat and watched their babies sleep, afraid that they would suddenly cease breathing in the night. But one was supposed to grow out of that, and she never had. Perhaps this was in part because her baby seemed so intent on increasing his chances to die.

Edward accused her of mollicoddling him, of placing too much importance on what he considered the boy's less-than-masculine pursuits. This was why, she supposed, he was so willing to support their son's bloodlust—and perhaps why Junior himself was so eager, also. A personally-acquired body count of Germans would go a long way toward offsetting any worries others might have about his virility just because of his skill at the piano.

As though he'd heard her thoughts, her husband added, "I won't have an Ethel for a son." "Junior is hardly an Ethel." He played football with his friends, much to her dismay, and she'd dutifully looked the other way when six months ago he had decided that it was high time for him to take up with Lucky Strikes. If anything, she desperately missed the boy who had cuddled against her when the world had seemed too overwhelming. "Just because he wants to go to the Institute of Musical Arts doesn't make him less of a man."

Her husband grunted. "Still. It'd be nice to see the boy making some headway on his own."

"Edward, he's seventeen. By law he can't enlist." Although who knew what Wilson would do next? Mere weeks ago he'd all but dropped the guillotine on the younger boys of his country, lowering the age of conscription to eighteen. It brought the jaws of death chomping ever closer to Edward Junior—he would be able to enlist on June 20. *Here's hoping we're out of this godforsaken war before then.*

"That's old enough," her husband answered gruffly. "You baby him. He's a man." "Barely." He still had one year left of high school, still struggled with his Latin, still resisted doing his reading. Could a boy whose mightiest battles to date had been fought against literature essays really be sent off to the trenches?

"What's more important," her husband added, his voice softer, "is that he wants to go. I'm not forcing him there, Elizabeth."

At this she hung her head, because it was true. Elizabeth looked away and stared at where their radio stood. Every night they turned it on, listening for the latest reports from France and Germany, the latest victories by their brave soldiers, the most recent body count. Edward Junior was raring to be over in Europe. He had wandered down to the enlistment office himself, but thankfully a teacher from his high school had recognized him and alerted the on-duty officer before Edward had been able to get his name down.

She had wanted to die that day, when the teacher showed up on her doorstep with her son in tow. Had she been the beating type, she would have thrashed him well—not because she felt he had done wrong, but because he'd scared her so badly.

She couldn't lose a second child.

Her husband had not carried Margaret. He hadn't even known her. He hadn't felt her kicking and moving, the way she would fail to sleep when Elizabeth meant to. He hadn't felt the agony of her trying to fight her way into existence from the wrong position, the pain—the physical, yes, but that was so distantly second to the pain of fearing, and then knowing, that your baby was going to suffocate before she ever took a breath. The little girl had been delivered blue, unmoving, having ripped through Elizabeth's insides in what would prove to be a suicidal struggle. It had been all Elizabeth had been able to do to even convince Edward that the baby should be named before she was buried, content as he was with "Baby Girl Masen." He had simply telegraphed her mother to come assist with caring for Junior, just barely three at the time, while Elizabeth convalesced from the birth which had preempted her daughter's life and nearly taken her own. Her woman organs were removed, the remainder healed slowly, but her heart stayed broken. There would be no more children.

Edward had simply commented that they should throw their energy into their son.

So she had. Junior had always had the finest things they could afford: the best schools, the nicest clothes, and a shiny Bosendorfer in the parlor. He'd shown aptitude for the instrument since just after he'd been left without his sister, and now he was nearly as skilled as any professional. If Elizabeth could have it her way, she would send him off to New York, where he could train with the very best masters and begin his career. There was nothing like the sound of Junior at the piano. She most preferred the Chopin, which he played often, simply because he knew she liked it. Elizabeth could walk into the living room and slide her fingers into Junior's hair as he played, and he would pretend to ignore her, only finally swatting her away when he reached the end of his song. When he played, he was at peace, and she was too.

There would be no piano in the army.

Turning back from the radio, she murmured. "I can't let him go, Edward."

But before her husband managed to respond, he leaned off the edge of the sofa and coughed up blood.

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Patients seemed to be swarming everywhere in the intake room. They sprawled across the metal chairs, leaned against the doorjambs, lay half-collapsed on the cold floor. Three nurses moved swiftly among them, writing down the names of those who were too ill to walk, sending those who merely had a light cough off to one of the infirmaries. In some chairs, patients sat alone, a hospital blanket clutched around their shoulders as they shook from chills.

The humans couldn't move fast enough, he knew. He would try to make up for them, but even he was only able to do so much. He'd told Dorothy he would see exactly one more. For some strange reason, he felt inclined to follow his word, even though he was not tired, nor would he ever be. He could see hundreds more patients, and no one would notice...

His eyes searched over the small mass of patients, looking for the one who most needed his assistance. He was just ready to turn to the nurses and ask whom he should see when he saw her.

Green eyes. An unusual, bottle green—not a color Carlisle had often seen on humans. Human eyes were flat somehow, the brightest colors dulled. But not this woman's. She stared around the room and alternately at the man down in her lap. Her husband? It seemed so, for next to them both sat a young man. He was a good head and shoulders above the woman, but he had her coloring--reddish hair, and the same strange green eyes. The son looked more worried than did his mother, casting furtive glances down at the man who lay trembling against his wife.

Moving carefully, Carlisle wound his way through the room, bypassing patient after patient to reach the woman. He stood before her for several seconds while she focused on her husband's

face, stroking it. Her own dress was becoming dark with his sweat, and the chairs beneath them both rattled as he shivered.

"Hello," Carlisle said quietly, and the woman's eyes drew upward at once. Her expression was plaintive, and he swallowed guiltily. There was so much need in a hospital, so many faces like this woman's. And he couldn't help them all. He remembered the small body he had carried to the morgue--what, an hour before?

Before he could stop himself, he had knelt beside the woman, and begun to assess the husband. His pulse was quick and Carlisle could feel the heat radiating from his fevered body. But his coughing was still clear, his skin yet showed no sign of the cyanosis. These were good signs.

"This is your husband?" he asked, and the woman nodded solemnly. Carlisle laid a hand on the man's brow, and the face turned into his palm, no doubt seeking the coolness there. Usually Carlisle needed to be careful about touching his patients, for the unnatural temperature of his body was off-putting to many of them and risked his secret. But in the midst of this epidemic, his cool touch was welcome, and he was finally able to use his excellent sense of touch in his diagnoses.

"Edward." The sound startled him so much that it took Carlisle a split second to realize the woman had spoken.

"I'm sorry?"

"Edward. His name is Edward. Edward Masen. Senior," she added, cocking her head meaningfully in the direction of the young man sitting beside her.

So the young man was Edward also. Carlisle took a moment to appraise him. He had his father's build--strong, tall, and the planes of his face were angular in a way that suggested that he would be a striking man when he grew into his limbs and out of his acne. But it was his eyes that truly did it. He looked at Carlisle with his mother's green eyes, eyes that made him look more vulnerable, that seemed to show that trapped within this young man was a boy worrying over his father.

Carlisle swallowed yet again.

"Will you be able to help him?" the young man asked. His voice was unexpectedly plaintive; high in pitch for his age, and Carlisle's ears could detect the tiny crack that the boy was obviously trying to mask. It was a fearful question, asked by a young man trying very much not to sound like a scared little boy.

His usual answer would be "I hope so," or perhaps "I'll do everything I can." If there was one thing Carlisle had learned over the years it was not to make promises he had no scientific ability to keep. It did no good to inflate expectations. For a moment his mind wandered three floors up and an hour earlier, as his pen crushed in his fingers as he looked at the young girl's date of birth. Fourteen. Snatched from this world before she'd ever really lived in it. These things tore at his heart, but that was the way things were, and while he could try to prevent it, it was ultimately unstoppable. Humans were mortal by definition, and it did no one any good to exaggerate their chances of survival just to make them feel good.

But something about the way this boy looked up at him, the way his expression matched that of his mother stirred Carlisle. He found himself desperately wanting to assure the boy and his mother that the man sprawled between them would live. Nevertheless, he'd nearly managed his usual carefully tempered statement, and the words were nearly on his lips when the man moaned.

"Elizabeth..."

Carlisle gasped and froze, and suddenly those two sets of green eyes were on him again, watching his face as though it might answer them before his voice did. But he found he couldn't answer her, that the words of cautious optimism were dead. The name stirred a longing for which he had no context, even though his mind raced to grasp at wisps of memories long lost to him. But no

face came to his mind, no person presented herself in his memory to ground his response, but he knew at once beyond reason that an Elizabeth was someone he had to help.

“He’ll live,” he muttered, standing. “I will save him.” He barely heard the coughing of the rest of the patients in the intake or the words of the nurses as they rushed from patient to patient. He didn’t see the people to either side; he didn’t smell the blood, the mucous, the spit. His senses dulled to everyone but the woman, her husband, and her child, as though the whole world had reduced itself to him and this small family.

“Just let me find a team with a stretcher.”

Chapter Five: Spectator at Tyburn

April, 1667

London, England

As dawn's light crept into the small house, William became able to see out into the churchyard. His son was sweeping the threshold of the church, a small cloud of dust swirling around his ankles. It was a warm morning, and the younger Cullen worked without his shirt, his golden hair spilling down between his shoulder blades.

The boy's hair was too long again. The Dissenter men increasingly felt that a length of hair on a man was unsightly; he should be distinguishable from the women to identify him for the work for which he was uniquely called. In Geneva, it was almost unheard of for a man to wear his hair long. William's own hair was cut reasonably short, just under his ears, and he liked it.

His son, however, wore a veritable mane at times, particularly if it had been some time since William had last been able to convince his younger part to get to a barber. It had now again been several months, and the hair, which had once been appropriately short, was now almost girlishly long, glistening with sweat as he worked.

Making the boy the church sexton had been a good idea. It kept him close to the church, even though he resented the work. William sometimes wondered if he had educated his son beyond his station. He was read in Latin and Greek, and could recite chapters of scripture from memory. He wanted to study the law. William wasn't opposed to this, at least on principle. His parents had wanted him to reach beyond his station by becoming clergy—he was the first in their family and the only one of his father's three sons truly attain any sort of education. Drive magnified by generations—it made sense that the younger Cullen wanted to move beyond where his father was as well.

But the work of the church needed doing. Leaning back in his chair, William gazed in the other direction, to where he could already see merchants moving up and down the street, ready to hawk their wares. Pots jangled as tinkers moved up the lane, wooden wagon wheels creaked and thumped in the street. Most of the passersby were on foot, a few traveled by horse cart. Some were Englishmen, clearly, in coats and ruffs. But increasingly, their section of the town, blessed by the

Lord in having avoided the fire, was becoming cursed by outsiders. Immigrants, traders, all those who made this place less desirable. They didn't come to church, they often failed to pay tithes, and among them slunk the very forms of evil: thieves, murderers, adulterers.

He turned his attention back to the paper on which he had been writing his thoughts on exactly this matter. Most Mondays, the wicked were brought to justice at Tyburn, and today, as many days, there would be one from his own parish. Trials were short when it was a clergyman who brought the accusations, and so those whom William prosecuted ended up in Newgate, and without any further pardon, hanged. The man in question was a branded thief—some other, more lenient pastor had given him clemency once before. When he had been caught in the act of taking money from the taverns, William had been asked to bring trial against him. Today the man would plead for clemency again, and William would deny it.

The words that William would give had to be thought through ahead of time, almost as much as a sermon. To look down into the eyes of a man on his way to the gallows was unnerving; to commend that man to his death was near impossible. Yet protecting others from the criminals was his duty to his country, his parishioners, his God...and his family.

He gazed out into the churchyard again. His son was now moving toward the small barn, his broom hefted over his shoulder. He would put the broom away and then tend to the sanctuary, clearing dust and cobwebs, polishing the collection plates, baiting mice. There was a calmness about the way Young William worked, an ease in his gait as he moved from house to church to barn. He was content to work alone on these chilly mornings, rising before his father and slipping out into the pre-dawn with a broom, a shovel, whatever tool he needed for the day. His son had always been hardworking and diligent—William could hardly remember times that he'd needed to cajole the boy or remind him to work as he had come of age.

The week before, the younger Cullen had presented William with a chair, a handsome one of pine and holly, to replace the worn one in the sanctuary. That one had been removed to the rectory study, and the study chair moved here to the table. As with all things, his son worked hard at his carpentry. He would become a master of it if William let him. But it seemed a trade ill-befitting his son—they were called as a family to the work of the Lord. Making furniture for the sanctuary was one thing; spending the rest of his life making tables and chairs for commoners was quite another. His son was meant for greater things.

And then there was the other problem. As though to remind him, the cup of beer in his hands trembled a bit, the brew sloshing back and forth against the sides and a few drops spattering the table, thankfully missing the paper on which he wrote. Slowly, he put the cup down, but the hand which held it did not cease its shaking. It was happening more and more lately. He had ordered his son to begin taking care of the altar candles, not because he felt that the boy's duties needed expanding, as he had explained, but because the act of striking a match had begun to require a finesse that he could no longer manage.

William was fading; the Lord was calling him back in increments. Someone would have to take over the church. Someone William trusted.

But was he guiding his son, or stifling him?

The door to the house swung open and his son's figure appeared, looking sanguine. The warmer weather agreed with Young William; his face and shoulders had become handsomely tanned. His son's skin had the tendency to freckle as had Sarah's—looking into his face, it was as though she were reminding them she still stood sentinel over them both.

"Good morning, William," he said, and the other winced. It was a topic on which they fought more than was necessary. In his haste, William had christened the boy with a name he less preferred, and the boy had been called this by his nurse until he'd been breeched. He had never taken well to being called by the name William preferred for him.

It was probably for this reason that the younger one turned a moment later and said brightly, “Good morning, Father. It appears the Lord has blessed thee with lovely weather for killing people.”

Blood rushed to William’s face, making him suddenly dizzy. This prevented him from standing up and confronting his son, and so he glowered from across the table.

“I will not tolerate thy dishonor,” he snapped back, and the boy spun, his eyes on fire. For a moment, they stood, appraising each other as though they were wild animals and either might spring. If the boy had been younger, smaller, or weaker, William might have considered taking his hand to his son’s cheek. Instead he took a deep breath and growled, “The commandment is to honor thy father and mother.”

The boy’s shoulders tensed, and the blue eyes clouded. His lips pressed together so firmly that they turned white. It took only a moment, however, for this expression to pass from his son’s face, to be replaced by the same feigned politeness.

“Then I shall ready for the day,” Young William said quietly, and moved toward the staircase that lead to the small bedroom. William watched him tensely; his son moved with a deliberate slowness, and his footsteps seemed to echo their way across the floor. For a moment, William thought that perhaps they were finished, and he breathed a short sigh of relief that the boy was willing to let the matter drop so quickly. But when he reached the stairs, he turned again, his brow furrowing as he seemed to search for words. When he finally spoke, his voice was icy.

“Tell me, Father, for you know better than I. The commandment says to honor thy father *and* thy mother. Do your actions honor her?”

And as William fought to regain his voice, his son disappeared.

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The streets were full, as they always were on a hanging day. The poor and the wealthier merged in mobs, barely leaving enough room for the carts to pass. It hadn’t been so long ago that the threat of plague had thinned these crowds—many too ill to leave their homes, and others too afraid of becoming ill to do so, either. But people feared death less now, and the crowd had grown again, curious faces pressing against windows as the carts rattled their way westward.

For the sake of simplicity, the guilty were transported sitting atop their coffins, their hanging ropes twisted around their bodies, and their hands bound before them as though they were praying. It was sickening, really. Many of the men were repentant enough without the need for forcing them to do so. Carlisle walked with his head turned away from the spectacle as much as he could manage.

As a boy, Carlisle had not been permitted to come to Tyburn. He’d heard reference to the place, of course—he knew what it meant to ‘go west’ and he knew that the ‘Tyburn jig’ was no ordinary dance. But for some reason he had always pictured the tree as a real tree—a stalwart creation of the Almighty Himself, on which the wicked were brought to justice for their sins. A holly tree, perhaps, or a pine—his thoughts on this matter were unspecific and he hadn’t known the proper names for the trees anyway—but something massive, befitting the way the world and the Lord had passed judgment on the wrongdoers.

He had been thirteen when curiosity had finally gotten the better of him. Carlisle had felt himself old enough to learn what was happening, and he’d been indignant that his father was keeping him locked out from this part of his world. So instead of staying safely in the churchyard, he’d slunk from the house a few minutes after William, burying himself in the crowds. He was careful to take a different route than he knew his father took, but stayed within earshot of the carts’ jangling tack so that he would not lose his way.

The square at Tyburn wasn’t so much a square as it was egg-shaped, with tall grandstands on either side in which those of higher station sat in their finery. The air was filled with the stench of rotten fruit, brought to be hurled at the prisoners as they passed by in the beds of wooden prison carts.

And then there had been the tree.

It wasn't a real tree, not as Carlisle had pictured it. There was no trunk and no branches, just six hulking pieces of roughly hewn lumber; as though it were a set of triangular legs that awaited some massive tabletop to be dropped upon it from the heavens. From it in places hung a few feet of leftover rope, swaying ominously in the summer afternoon breeze.

He hid himself in the crowd, being careful to stay away from the throng of neighbors he recognized from his own parish. Carlisle wasn't tall for his age, and for once he was thankful for this as it meant he could move virtually unseen. He watched as though he were a student, taking in every detail of the spectacle. The bystanders jeered, the prisoners sobbed, the ministers prayed for mercy on long-since-forsaken souls. And then the carts rattled their way under the hulking beams, and nine heads were fitted with dark hoods.

One man refused.

Carlisle learned later that the man was being hanged for the murder of a woman's husband; a woman on whom he had fathered a child. But he looked young and innocent, maybe ten years older than Carlisle himself. There was a childish stubbornness in his expression as the hangman rearranged the noose on his collarbone as gently as though it were a necklace.

He would imagine for years after that the man had locked eyes with him as he stood there, transfixed. Ropes flew into the air like swiftly uncoiling snakes, caught by men on ladders twelve feet overhead who tied off the slack quickly and without fanfare. The roar of the crowd surged with each one, washing over him like the tide. Some of the prisoners crossed themselves; more rotten fruit was thrown. The young man looked briefly skyward, perhaps offering some prayer of penitence, or maybe just judging how much give his own rope might have.

Abruptly came the crack of a whip against the flanks of the mules, and the cart jerked from beneath the young man and his companions.

It was over too quickly and too slowly. The bodies hurtled toward the ground for a foot or so, but then jerked like rabbits suddenly caught in a snare. Arms and legs went slack; heads wrenched to the side at freakish angles. The rapid sucking of air as the men strangled seemed to echo over the roar of the crowd. And the young man stared at Carlisle as his legs struggled a moment, scrabbling for purchase on an invisible floor, before the steely eyes went half-closed, and the tongue lolled from the opened mouth.

Carlisle remembered screaming, crying, and running, perhaps in that order or perhaps all at once. The crowd had crushed forward, still jeering, and he had twisted away from them, tears streaking down his cheeks and phlegm dribbling over his lips from his nose. He'd run far enough from the crowd that their sound dulled in his ears before he stopped, his breath heaving as he stood doubled over in a narrow alleyway. By the time he'd finished sobbing, dusk was falling, and he'd run as much of the rest of the way as his body would allow him. He didn't manage to get there before his father, however.

William Cullen didn't have need to punish Carlisle often, and the boy had learned to remain stoic when he did. But that night he hadn't been able to contain himself, and the table became wet with his tears and slobber as the belt in his father's hands whistled down onto his backside. Five welts from seven strikes—three landed true to the same mark and opened the skin.

The bleeding had been nothing compared to the nightmares.

The young man's face had haunted him for years, tearing him from dreams into pitch darkness. Flat gray eyes disturbed him in wakefulness and in sleep, and this was more than punishment enough to keep him away from Tyburn for half of a decade. It would have been longer had William not decided that it was an important part of Carlisle's clerical education for him to attend the hanging days.

Sometimes he made excuses—repairs that needed doing in the sanctuary, windows dirty with the chimney smoke produced by the ever-growing number of homes in the neighborhood. But his father wasn't a stupid man, and it wasn't long before the expectation had been made clear that Carlisle would tend to the church in the predawn hours, so that he could accompany William to Tyburn later in the day.

His father walked at his side now, his eyes darting from the crowd, to the carts, to his son. William wore his clergy attire to the hangings, which afforded him a few nods of respect as he and Carlisle moved through the throngs. Carlisle was no longer the scrawny child who had sneaked his way to the gallows a decade before. He stood a head and shoulders above his father, and his body easily cut a path through the eager spectators.

The tree loomed ahead of them, its three horizontal beams stark against the brilliant blue sky. It was ironic the way the most beautiful weather often seemed to accompany the hanging days—London was nothing if not gloomy and overcast, except, it seemed, on the days when the whole city was possessed with this fervor to kill its wrongdoers. The weather seemed to sit well with the higher class who were arranged in some of their best clothes in Mother Proctor's Pews, anxiously awaiting the hangings as though they were a fanciful sporting match. Around them moved vendors selling food, newspapers, and souvenir pamphlets purported to contain the last statements of those to be hanged today. As most criminals were unable to write, Carlisle highly doubted the accuracy of these.

At any rate, it was all quite disgusting.

As they reached the opening to the square, William tapped his son's flank. "We could meet at Fen Tavern," he said, searching behind them for the approaching carts.

Carlisle frowned. "You wish us to separate?"

His father's jaw set, but he looked across the crowd with tired eyes. "Thou hast seen the mantle which awaits thee, William," he answered, gesturing toward the gallows. "When thou shalt choose it." Beneath the tree, a small knot of other clergymen stood, awaiting the final requests of the dying. William locked eyes with Carlisle for a moment, then turned away—whether in anger or defeat, Carlisle wasn't sure.

Carlisle stood in shock as his father moved quickly through the crowd toward the gallows. Those who had brought the charges against the accused always stood closest, and Carlisle had been forced to endure dozens of executions at his father's side as William continued on his singular crusade to purge the world of all its evil. He had not stood on the grounds of Tyburn alone since that scarring first time he had come here as a boy.

Had it been what he'd said? The two of them kept an uneasy peace in the tiny house, and Carlisle spent as much time out of it as he was able to these days. Yet his comment this morning had been unusual, even given the general unease of their relationship. But if such statements meant he would be left alone...

Free to roam, Carlisle began to pick his way through the crowd, hoping duck to the tavern right away. There was little sense in staying. Moving across the field of bodies, he avoided the vendors' calls, and kept his head low.

It wasn't quite enough to escape notice, however.

"Mister Cullen!"

He spun at once in the direction of the sound, but saw no one he recognized. Then his eyes noticed a gloved hand waving in his direction. The hand's owner smiled at him, and from beneath the dark blue coif she wore, Carlisle recognized the chestnut hair that had so captivated him a week ago.

She beckoned.

He gulped, but before he had time to walk away, she moved toward him, and he moved toward her, much to his own surprise. They reached each other momentarily, becoming a tiny island around which the crowd flowed.

For a moment neither said anything.

"This is no place for a woman," he blurted, and as soon as the words left his lips, he at once felt foolish and rude for having said them. Thankfully, Elizabeth Bradshawe's face broke at once into a wide grin.

"Come, Carlisle, this is no place for anyone," she replied, laughing. "The carnival over this; the spectacle—it is depraved."

Carlisle. His heart made a little leap sideways. "How do you know what I am called?"

She smiled again. "I might have thought you would have known," she answered. "The way you stared at me that night I retrieved my brother from the coffee house. You looked as though you had seen a ghost."

He remembered at once Thomas's gentle chiding as he had stood, transfixed on the place where Christopher Bradshawe and his sister had met in the street. It was little wonder that the object of his attention had noticed as well.

"I give thee my apology for that unbecoming behavior," he muttered, and she laughed.

"It is nothing. I was flattered. But I thought you had certainly recognized me." She paused again and studied him for a moment before continuing. "My mother's sister is Katherine Hall. She always referred to you as Carlisle; that was how she knew you."

Carlisle's breath caught. Had that not been his exact thought? The dark hair, the form—she had reminded him at once of his late nurse. He had nearly forgotten this in the intervening week; but of course it made sense. It had been Katherine who had been responsible for his even using this name in the first place; this name given to him at an emergency christening and later course-corrected by his father's cramped handwriting in the church register: the letters W-I-L-L-I-A-M squeezed before the name that had been entered there in haste years before.

"Mister Cullen?"

Pulling himself back to the attention of the woman who stood before him, he shook his head.

"I am terribly sorry for the loss of your aunt," he said firmly.

"Thank you," she answered quietly, "but in her I lost only my aunt. You lost your mother...for the second time."

"It was nothing," he began to say, but all that came out was a half-strangled squeak. He fell silent at once, remembering. Katherine had not been a great part of his life after his breeching—he had been maybe five or six years old? But he had seen her from time to time, and her presence in his life had always been comforting. He remembered wishing fervently that his father would marry her, even though he knew her to be already married to another man. Her husband, too, had been lost to the plague; Carlisle had lost track of their children, who were older than he.

His silence did not go unnoticed. When he met her eyes again, he found Elizabeth was looking on him with an expression of mixed pity and sadness. He looked away.

"Your brother escorts you today?" His voice was gruffer than he intended, and Elizabeth looked shocked for a moment, but regained herself quickly and nodded.

"He tries to." She gestured in the direction of the surging crowd. A young boy of maybe twelve or so stood hawking cheese and fresh bread, but Carlisle didn't see Christopher in that vicinity. "He loses me often—or perhaps it is I who lose him." She smiled again. "And you? You are here with your father, are you not?"

Carlisle shrugged, cocking his head toward the gallows, beneath which two carts were finally parked. He could see, even from this distance, the dark hoods being taken from the hands of the condemned, which the hangmen pulled over their heads to cover their faces a final time.

His lip twitched as he turned back toward Elizabeth. "My father takes his place of honor—one of the accusers, next to the accused."

"And you do not join him?"

"His business is not mine."

Elizabeth chuckled. "It seems we are alike in that respect. Both here not by our own doing"

Carlisle frowned. Was he? He supposed he was old enough, now, to defy his father if he wished to. He wouldn't be turned over the kitchen table and subjected to a belt-lashing at twenty-three. He'd made excuses often, about work that needed to be done around the church, to keep himself from needing to come to the hangings at all, but in the end, he had succumbed to his father's demands that he finish his work in the mornings and come with him. Did that mean that he had chosen to come?

The question was somewhat disturbing, and so he chose to probe Elizabeth further instead. "Why does your brother have you accompany him?"

She laughed, but it was far from genuine. "Our mother does not know the places my chaperone prefers to take me. I needed to visit some shops, and she insisted Christopher accompany me. He, of course, delights in this." Her hand waved in the direction of the crowd. Cheers rose and fell one by one, and Carlisle could see in his mind's eye the ropes unfurling themselves as they were thrown upward to the waiting assistants to be tied. His lip curled.

"But I would admit," Elizabeth went on, "that I had the slightest suspicion that you might be here also."

"I am nearly always here," he answered her dumbly, and she laughed.

Her head whipped around suddenly as they both heard the call of "Betsy!" from a familiar voice. Christopher was winding his way through the crowd toward them.

Elizabeth looked at Carlisle expectantly.

"Your brother," he said.

"I see him." She made no move toward her brother, which Carlisle found bewildering. It was obvious Christopher was trying to call her back, but she still stood before him, looking expectant. His eyes darted nervously to the other man as the crowd continued to yell and jeer, and he could just make out in the distance the shout of the hangman.

His gaze did not go unnoticed. "If I didn't know better, Mister Cullen, I would suspect you wished to be rid of me."

"No!" he blurted, eliciting a wide grin from Elizabeth. His face grew hot at once. "My apologies," he mumbled.

"Not needed." She was still grinning.

"Forgive my impertinence. I—I rarely have another to talk to at these awful events."

Elizabeth nodded. Over her shoulder, he could see Christopher drawing nearer. "It is a pleasure talking with you also, Carlisle."

He looked nervously up at Christopher, who had seen him, and was looking perplexed. When he said nothing to answer Elizabeth, however, she continued, her voice lower in pitch as though she might be overheard in the crowd. "Some men in this instance might ask if they would be permitted to call on me."

Carlisle's eyebrows shot up. The thought hadn't even crossed his mind, but now that she suggested it, he realized he wanted nothing more. His heart sped, but he found he couldn't put the words to his lips. When Christopher was almost upon them but still out of earshot, Carlisle managed a voice just above a whisper: "*Might* I be permitted to call on you?"

Elizabeth grinned, and for a flash of a second, she took his hand and squeezed it, then dropped it quickly before anyone could notice. “You’ll have to ask my brother,” she answered. And with a second smile and a nod, she danced away. Christopher threw him a glance, to which Carlisle nodded his own greeting, and then led his sister away.

Carlisle watched them until the dark blue of Elizabeth’s coif became lost in the drab clothing around them. Satisfied that he could not catch her without causing a scene, he turned away: away from the crowd, away from the tree, away from his father. The crowd roared suddenly, and he knew that one of the carts had moved. Screams—equal parts horror and delight—erupted from the gallery as the men began to struggle against the ropes.

But Carlisle wasn’t watching. “You’ll have to ask my brother,” he repeated quietly to himself. Where Elizabeth had touched his palm, it tingled.

Chapter Six: Shy

Volterra

May, 1789

“This one is excellent, *dottore*. The pain? Like this.” Martina sharply drew her hand in a flat line across the air. “This is what she tells me.”

Carlisle smiled shyly, even as he swelled with pride. At times, his work felt more like chasing legend than applying science. He spent more time trying to understand the concoctions which wives made from their gardens to treat their families than looking at any book to guide him.

But his research had led him recently back to a source in England, strangely, another pastor in the English church by the name of Stone. Finding the bark of the willow tree to be bitter, the man had assumed it to be similar to the properties of the cinchona, and he’d dried it and given it to patients. He had written about this in a letter to the Royal Society more than twenty years ago; Carlisle had unearthed a copy of it in a library in Rome.

It had taken him a while to find a tree. He’d needed to journey northward to the mountains and almost back into France, and once he’d found the thing, he ripped down an entire trunk and come back with as much as he was able to carry without attracting notice. He had dried and pulverized the bark according to Stone’s instructions, and although he’d been fully prepared to run a second experiment, it had turned out there was no need. Martina had sold the concoction to a woman who had been suffering a debilitating pain in her back due to carrying a baby. Today she had confirmed its value.

“You have the most brilliant smile,” Martina commented, returning his with one of her own. “Like a gleeful boy’s.”

Embarrassed, Carlisle dropped his eyes from her gaze. “I am only pleased that your patient felt this was a success.”

The woman laughed. “She is as much your patient as mine. She will want to thank you. She has a sister, you know. Unmarried.” She put emphasis on this last word, and Carlisle’s smile faded. Martina took a bit too much interest in his love life, or more accurately, the lack thereof. He tried to deflect her comments by insisting that no Italian woman would want to marry a stodgy Englishman,

but she insisted that with his good looks and smarts he would have no trouble. It was a friendly tension, but the conversations made Carlisle more uncomfortable than he let on.

"Your patient's sister won't have any use for me, I'm afraid," he said with an uneasy chuckle. "I'm rather set in my ways."

"I suspect you like to pretend that you are more of a hardened bachelor than you are, *Dottore*." She came out from behind her cart, and out of habit, he flinched backwards, afraid of her touching his unyielding skin.

"See?" he answered. "Skittish. I would make no one a good husband."

Even as he said it, though, a pang shot through him. Was that actually true? His kind often mated quickly; a mated pair had advantages over a lone vampire when it came to hunting and defending territory. It usually took more than one vampire to kill another; a vampire and his mate would have the upper hand in a fight. If for no reason other than this instinct, the others often chose partners early. A mate made one more stable, less likely to wander, and he knew for this reason, the others here expected and hoped that Carlisle would take a partner. That Carlisle hadn't done so bothered Aro, he knew, but then again Aro, who could read Carlisle's every thought, also knew how much this lack of a mate bothered him.

He pulled himself from his thoughts to discover Martina staring at him. At once her face lit up, a wide smile spreading across it. The change was so sudden that it took Carlisle a moment to realize that she was smiling not at him, but at the person approaching from behind. He looked over his shoulder.

The woman who approached walked with some difficulty, which Carlisle realized at once was due to her pregnancy. She held a hand to the small of her back as she walked toward them. He breathed an inward sigh of relief; it was an excuse to get away from this discussion of his marital status and his own brooding on the matter.

"I should let you attend to your patient," Carlisle mumbled, backing away, but Martina frowned at him, shaking her head furiously.

"Annetta!" called Martina. "I have someone you should meet." She beckoned the other woman over.

"This is *Dottore* Cullen," she answered, and Carlisle's eyes dropped at once. He wondered sometimes if he had blushed often as a human, as he could imagine that if his body were filled with blood, it would be rushing to his cheeks now. He carefully avoided the women's eyes, tracing a little side-to-side pattern in the dirt with his foot.

"He is the one who has provided the relief you sought."

The other woman's eyes lit at once. "Oh, *Dottore*, I cannot thank you enough," she exclaimed. "This one is my third, and he must be the son we've wanted. My daughters did not cause me this kind of pain." She smiled a little at her own joke. "But this that you've made...with the bark of the willow?"

He nodded. "The properties were discovered by a rector in my home country. I am hardly a doctor, despite what Martina hopes."

Shaking her head in amazement, she said, "Doctor or not, you are a worker of miracles. I only hope you have enough to keep me until he is born!" She laughed.

He could make that happen easily enough. The trail from his home to the willows where he had acquired the bark was straightforward; given his memory, it would require little effort to retrace his steps.

"*Ma certo*," he answered. "It won't be a problem. Martina has more for you right now."

"Bless you!" His hand was grabbed, lifted, and kissed. He jerked away at once, and both women laughed.

“I tried to suggest your sister to him,” Martina said, raising her eyebrows suggestively. “But he pretends to be nervous.”

“My sister searches for an upstanding man,” Annetta said, giving Carlisle a gentle smile. “Martina has told me much about you.”

“Alas,” he said, returning the smile. “I haven’t time to court anyone at the present. But I do wish your sister every happiness. And I will continue work on this remedy.” He patted one of the packages he had just traded Martina—he had delivered several pouches of a strengthened willow bark substance in exchange for several different herbs that Martina had managed to procure from a trader from the East. They were substances with which he’d never worked, and he was anxious to explore them. “It is a pleasure to meet you, *Signora Annetta*.”

The other woman gazed at him confusedly, but she smiled. “It is my pleasure, *Dottore*.”

As he walked away from the stand, he heard the two women begin to discuss him. He tried as best he could not to pay attention to their speech; he felt it was only polite to the humans, who did assumed him to be one of them and thus did not realize they were not out of earshot. But Martina leaned over the counter and sent a single descriptor in his direction: “*Timido*.”

The word flew and connected with something. Most of his human memories were long gone; they disappeared like wisps of smoke on a slow-blowing wind. But every now and then he would grasp a tiny fragment of something that he was sure he had heard before; they came to him like dreams, and he often wondered if he might have fabricated the idea himself rather than truly remembered anything.

He repeated the stories to himself from time to time, in an effort to hold what he remembered. That he was an only child. That his mother died giving birth to him. That his father was a pastor. Details and facts that he had been able to verify by returning to London and checking against the church registers. He had followed his memories of his first waking days back to the narrow alleyway where he had met the beast that had changed him. The roads had led him back to the ruins of the church; it had burned not long after his turning, and a new one had been erected in its place. The house had still been there, and he’d slipped into it when the current pastor had been away. But to his dismay, nothing had ignited his memory as he walked through the rooms. He found a single, worn cross hanging on one of the walls with the name *William Cullen* carved into its back; this he had stolen.

In the churchyard adjacent to the house he had wandered among the graves; weathered soapstone markers which barely showed the names of those who rested beneath them. His fingers remembered the feel of the letters as he’d run his hands across one. The words had been obliterated by time, but there had been enough to know it for what it was. CULLEN, engraved deep, and beneath it the name William, the newest, and the least affected by age. Beneath that had been a name worn away completely; he recognized only the tip of a letter “A.” His mother, he supposed; her name lost to the ages, and to him. And beneath that, his own name, or what was left of it, really—“S-L-E.”

Unconsciously, he traced the three letters in the air with his forefinger as he repeated Martina’s words to himself. The observation had been made of him before. “*You are so shy*.” He remembered it said with laughter; the commenter had been delighted by the observation. He remembered his surprise, his instinct to protest the characterization; his fascination that he had never thought of himself this way.

He did not, however, remember the speaker.

There were two of him, he thought. The man who talked to Martina; who made progress with willow bark, who remembered only fragments of a life before this one. Then there was the other man, the one who had lived in the strange little house in London, who had maybe known the woman’s name carved into that gravestone and now washed away by time and rain.

His finger finished tracing the imaginary “E” for the umpteenth time, and he closed his fist, forcing himself to forget the feel of the rough stone under the pad of that finger. He had been that young man that everyone thought was laid to rest in that yard. And now he was someone else.

But he was still shy.

That was something, at least.

Shoving his hand back into his pocket, he closed his fingers around one of the small packages of herbs and turned back toward the castle.

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“Arruns.”

Sulpicia seemed to purr as she stretched languidly across Aro’s chest. He hadn’t chosen Sulpicia for her body, but it was exquisite nonetheless. They matched each other in their own strange way—tall, lanky bodies, long hair, skin the clear white color of the fired clay traders brought from the Orient. She was fair where he was dark, soft where he was hard.

Their mating was fluid, perfected after so many years, aided by his gift. In Sulpicia’s thoughts he could pick out what, to her, felt the most exquisite. She had in turn learned his rhythms, and together they were flawless. For this reason he preferred her. Although as the accepted ruler of his race he could have nearly anyone he pleased (and at times had), for a vampire, coupling with one’s mate had no equal.

She called him by his old name, the name he’d been known by in a life now lost to him. Even most of the guard had become one of the Chosen as much a millennium or more after he had; it was only Marcus, Caius, Sulpicia and Athenadora who had been in this life long enough to know the others’ former names.

It was an intimacy that was at once reassuring and uncomfortable.

“You seem farther away than usual,” his mate whispered, her lips so close to him that her breath tickled his ear. “My husband, always lost in his thirst to dominate the world.”

Aro chuckled. His mate saw him accurately enough. But Sulpicia and Athenadora spent enough time alone with their handmaidens and separated from the men that they developed their own views of their husbands’ exploits.

World domination, indeed.

“I seek not to dominate our world,” he answered her absently. “I merely intend to keep its peace. If others see fit to defer to me because I bring order...”

This time it was Sulpicia who laughed, her fingers working their way into Aro’s hair as she kissed him playfully. “Keeping the peace is what you call it, Arnza? This terror you wreak on the rest of our kind.”

He looked away. His chambers were the most plush of the three brothers’, consisting of several couches including this widest one on which he and Sulpicia lay. Many of the most expensive treasures in the castle were kept here: paintings, gold, jewelry. Ostensibly, the three brothers were equal in rank. Most often when decisions had to be made, it was put to a vote among the three of them. They had been raised with expectations of democracy, and Aro preferred to conduct his own affairs this way. But it was true that when a vote was called it was he who called it; he was often responsible for deciding who joined their ranks and who was exiled from them. There could be no denying that Aro was the leader, and the lavishness of his private quarters served to underscore this point.

But this was because their kind needed leaders. They needed laws. They were spread too far throughout the world; in tiny groups. It was for the greater good that the brothers held his place—they meted out judgment because their entire race did not deserve to suffer for the misdeeds of a few.

"It is hardly terror," he muttered, still staring across the room, and Sulpicia laughed again, moving so that her breasts grazed his skin. He let out a little appreciative sigh. There was a harmony in this; a reason for him to keep a mate. Male and female created a balance; complemented each other.

And, mated vampires were also easier to control.

His eyes flickered to the far wall, where hung a large painting by one of Italy's many master painters. The scene it depicted was an untruth; mayhem erupting in the *piazza* below their castle, the brothers looking on calmly from a balcony. They prized themselves on the lawfulness of Volterra; they often sent the most beautiful and powerful of their guard to cajole the peacekeepers of the city into doing their work. The unruliness depicted was certainly imagined. But what made the painting the least truthful was the golden-haired one pictured with them on the tower, looking down with the same unperturbed expression as the other three.

Aro could not imagine a moment when humans were creating danger for themselves and Carlisle would stand idly by and watch.

Sulpicia didn't miss his shift in gaze, and her eyes followed his. Studying the painting with the same intensity, she finally offered, "At times I feel as though Carlisle is in this bed with us."

The thought was shocking. In over a century, the blond hadn't mated anyone, nor had he ever shown interest—were it not for his gift, and that Carlisle was far too young for the practice, Aro might have assumed the man was a eunuch.

"I beg your pardon?"

"You spend so much time thinking about him," she whispered. "He consumes you."

Was that true? Aro did think of the other man often, but that was only because he spent so much time skulking in and out of the castle. Aro didn't want to be placed in a position where he might have to destroy him. As frustrating as Carlisle was, he was also supremely interesting, and to eliminate him would be a loss.

"Athenadora tells me that Caius is jealous," Sulpicia added. "He doesn't like him."

Aro snorted. "Caius likes nothing that disrupts his world." And if nothing else, Carlisle certainly did that. He challenged the things which made up the very core of their existence; the very necessity for their clandestine life. To Aro, this was fascinating; he'd never known one of their kind who had so thoroughly chosen a different path. But to Caius, anything which upset the norm was something to be feared.

His wife went on. "He also suspects you wish to include Carlisle in the brotherhood."

"I know this." Lately, Caius's thoughts and worries were directed more and more toward the young blond. Carlisle was not expected to perform the duties of the guard, except for remaining loyal to the brothers. But still, Carlisle dressed in the robes of the inner guard, at least, when he was willing to wear them, which was not often. But lately Aro had taken to imagining the dark charcoal changed to jet black, a fourth chair added to the main chamber. He didn't think Carlisle would be amicable, of course, in part because he didn't imagine his brothers could abide the young vampire retaining his absurd feeding habits. But if Carlisle were to feed from humans, then Marcus might agree. He liked the Englishman as much as Aro did; they both found his antics more amusing than threatening.

It would come down to a vote. And if Carlisle were willing, Caius would lose.

"He's not wrong; I've thought about it," Aro answered finally. "But I don't see any way to bring him to us unless he changes his manner of feeding. To have someone ascend even truly into the guard with his...*abnormality*...isn't tenable."

Sulpicia sighed.

"This upsets you?"

Rolling off him, she stood, gathering to her chest the sheet which had covered them both. She stared for a long moment at the far wall, at the painting that depicted Carlisle as one of the brothers.

"I like him," she said finally. "He's good for you. He challenges you, and he's smart. That's why you want to include him."

This time it was Aro who sighed. She wasn't wrong. He was readying his own answer when a voice called from the hall, "Master?"

It was custom to give a few seconds' warning, as this was all any of them needed. Aro and Sulpicia were both fully dressed when the knock at the door followed immediately.

"Enter."

Alrigo came through the door, followed by Caius. The white-haired vampire was glowering; the guard looked hurried. From Alrigo's uncomfortable shuffle, Aro suspected that Caius had physically moved him toward Aro's bedroom. The two stood silent, Alrigo appearing embarrassed by why he had obviously interrupted.

"Tell him," Caius snapped, giving the guard a little shove forward that caused the other man to stumble.

Aro's eyebrows raised.

"There is one of our kind in the city, Master," Alrigo said hurriedly. "We encountered his trail this afternoon while we were following the Englishman in the *piazza*."

From behind him there was a little noise as his mate sucked in her breath.

Unheard of. Others of their kind did not enter Volterra without seeking a fight. "Did you learn his identity?" Aro snapped.

Alrigo shook his head. "I chose to continue to follow Carlisle. But the newcomer seems to be foreign, and maybe wandered here by accident?"

"It is not possible to arrive here by mistake."

The guard numbered twenty-two, plus the five mates; others of their kind could smell the presence of such an immense coven from a ways away. Even those that were too new to this existence to be aware of the law in Volterra nevertheless knew they were well in over their heads before they arrived to the castle. Subsequently, they stayed away.

"Agreed," Alrigo answered. "With your permission, Master, Rafael and I will find the intruder and bring him to you."

Nodding, Aro waved a hand to dismiss them, and Alrigo turned at once and moved for the door. But Caius was still staring, his eyes narrowed, a sneer not quite erased from his lips. Aro glanced back at his mate, remembering the conversation they had just had. How much had Caius overheard, if he and Alrigo had already been on their way to Aro's chambers? He would know soon enough, but perhaps a small gesture would be prudent...

"Alrigo."

The other vampire turned, his eyebrows raised.

"Carlisle. Does he know of the intruder?"

Alrigo shook his head. "Not that it appears, Master. He went about his usual business."

Aro shot a look backward at his mate, and found her scowling at him also. He remembered what she had just said about liking the blond man and hesitated for just a moment before issuing his order.

"Please see that he doesn't find out. And if he does...I expect to be told at once."

The guard nodded. "Of course, Master." He left the room.

Caius looked slightly placated, but his brow remained furrowed. He said nothing, however.

"Do you take issue, brother?"

"No," he said quietly, "but—"

“But?”

He sighed. “Wouldn’t it be more...*useful*...simply to see what the Englishman does?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“If there is an intruder, and if Carlisle is truly loyal to us, he will behave as we would. Otherwise...” he shrugged, trailing off. “It would give you a great deal of important information about how he might act, were he to be considered more than just...on our periphery.”

Caius’s suggestion was intriguing. The last vampire to have entered Volterra unannounced had been Carlisle himself. As such, the man was completely untested when it came to this important type of encounter.

This idea of Caius’s was not so terrible.

Aro found himself nodding, and Caius’s expression softened even before he spoke. “Ask Alrigo to observe the newcomer. But Carlisle is not to be kept from him.” He glanced over his shoulder back at the painting, at the imaginary Carlisle who looked with identical disinterest on the humans below.

“Yes,” he murmured, to no one in particular, “let us see what the Englishman does.”

At this, Caius’s expression broke into a smile, small though it was. “It will be done.” He nodded and excused himself to the hallway.

A little noise reminded Aro that Sulpicia was still standing behind him, and he turned to find her standing still, her lips pressed together in a thin line and her arms crossed over her bosom.

“Did I do something to displease you?” he asked

She shook her head, and moved toward the door. “I will retreat to my own chambers. I’m sure Renata waits impatiently for us both.” As she placed her hand on the knob, she muttered, “Having him followed.”

So that was her problem. He bristled at once. “It is my right to do so.”

His mate rolled her eyes. “Of course it is. All of us in this place defer to you. Including Carlisle.”

“Including Carlisle?”

“He will surprise you, if you let him. I am convinced of this. Have patience.” For a moment it looked as though she might not continue, but then she faced him, meeting his eyes. “You know,” she offered thoughtfully, “in other worlds, husbands and wives mate for reasons other than exchanging intelligence.”

Aro scowled. “You take as much information as you give.”

“Yes, Arnza.” She let out an exasperated sigh. “That’s exactly what I meant.”

Then she glided through the door and was gone.

Chapter Seven: Suitor

London, England

April, 1667

The smithy reeked of cinder and ore, and Carlisle could see several new axe-heads cooling on sawhorses. The heat from the stoves was oppressive, and sweat began to roll down his nose at once when he entered.

“Thomas?” he called. There came no answer, but a moment later his friend appeared. His cheeks were streaked with black from the burning charcoal, and iron filings flecked his hair and skin.

A wide grin broke out on the sooty face when Thomas realized who it was.

“Cullen! How goes it?”

Carlisle nodded, looking down at the floor at once. He knew exactly why he’d come to see Thomas. The entire walk to the shop, he’d rehearsed the questions he wanted to ask, played the answers he thought Thomas might give, and explored the responses he might offer in return. But now that he stood here before his friend, he found his mouth had gone dry.

“I’ve not seen thee in weeks, it seems,” Thomas continued, “but then I’ve not been quite free, myself.” He gestured to the anvils behind him and the stoked fires. “Planting season—everyone needs new implements.” Studying Carlisle a moment, he added, “You’ve been to a barber.”

Carlisle’s hand drifted to his newly-cropped hair. It was not as close a cut as his father’s and nowhere near as short as the roundheads’ (whom, he guessed, his father would have preferred he look like), but it was still uncomfortable. The fashion was for men to wear their hair longer; his shorter cut now marked him as a Dissenter.

“My father gave me the deadline of Pentecost,” he muttered. “He says the Holy Ghost must know me for a man.”

Thomas let out his barking laugh. “Know thee for a man? Is Holy Ghost that easily confused? Perhaps it ought to ask you to take down your breeches instead.” Taking a step backward, he added mischievously, “Then again, it might have difficulty seeing what’s there...”

Carlisle tried to give Thomas a shove, but found his arm would no longer reach. “May the Lord grant forgiveness for thy jealousy,” he answered coolly instead. “It is only human nature to want the...*gifts*...that have been given to others.”

Thomas raised his eyebrows and shrugged. “What have I to be jealous of? Anne certainly has no complaints.”

Carlisle’s eyebrows shot up. Thomas had been courting Anne Nesbit from their parish for over a year. But as far as Carlisle had known, it had been a chaste courting. The furthest Thomas had managed, according to what he’d told Carlisle, was to kiss open-mouthed, which he had described to Carlisle as being a little like having a small live fish in one’s mouth, except more pleasurable. Still, Carlisle felt a little twinge of jealousy every time he saw Thomas go out, even chaperoned, with Anne; and these feelings had become all the more acute in the week since he had met with Elizabeth Bradshawe in the raucous surrounds of Tyburn.

Still, this was a new development.

“Anne has...become more familiar with thee?”

Thomas grinned broadly. “One could say that.”

“You are contracted?”

“In so many words. We’ve agreed on a marriage but our parents have not yet blessed it.”

“And so you’ve...”

This time, it was Thomas who looked down shyly. “Well, she’s seen it at least. And I’ve seen hers. We’ve not done all of it yet, but we will.”

This was fascinating. There was a brothel not far from Carlisle’s home, at which his father growled angrily whenever they made their way through the neighborhood. William would be plenty angry enough if he took up with a woman even from an upstanding family like the Bradshawes before he was married to her.

Which wasn’t to say he didn’t think about it. When he’d been a younger boy, he had been a little faster to ogle the revealed swell of a breast, or a beautiful form displayed by the perfect dress. His father had caught him in a wide-mouthed stare one afternoon when he’d been approximately fifteen—the resulting slap to his face had nearly knocked out a tooth. Since then, he’d learned to be a bit more clandestine in any displays of attraction, and when it was necessary, he pleased himself on his stomach so that he could stifle any noise into the bed linen. This was of course not to mention that even without a father like William Cullen, there were very practical reasons to stay chaste.

“Are you not afraid that you’ll get her with child?”

His friend shrugged. “Tis not an impossible thing to control. And if I do not come out in time—well, who could blame me for wanting the love of such a wonderful woman a little early?” That wide, boyish grin again.

Certainly not I. The very thought sent a flush of warmth through Carlisle’s body. Two mornings earlier he had awoken with a dream-memory of Elizabeth’s full hair that had been entirely faint—and an erection that had been entirely not. This was why he had come to see Thomas in the first place.

Biting his lip, Carlisle looked down at the stone floor. Like everything, it was flecked with soot and iron filings, and he studied these to avoid meeting Thomas’s eyes. “Well, congratulations are in order,” he mumbled.

His friend guffawed. “Why, thank you, Sexton.” Eyeing his friend, Thomas leaned casually against one of the sawhorses, his legs crossing at the calf as he redistributed his weight.

Carlisle had a thousand questions he wished to ask. What did it feel like? Would Thomas tell him when it actually happened? But instead of questioning, he settled for staring at the dusty floor

and slowly scuffing his foot back and forth. His father would disapprove; shoes were not inexpensive and although the tithes kept them clothed, the Cullens weren't wealthy men.

Thomas noticed the avoidance at once. "But surely you came not to talk about Anne."

Blood flooded Carlisle's face at once, making his cheeks warm.

"Or perhaps that is exactly why you come," Thomas said slowly, a grin spreading further across his face as Carlisle blushed even more. "Oh, my friend. A woman?"

"Christopher Bradshawe's sister," he mumbled in reply, and his friend's eyebrows shot up.

"Bradshawe's sister? Does he know of this?"

Carlisle shook his head. Despite Elizabeth's invitation, he had not yet made any overt questions to Christopher. Elizabeth's father had fallen to the plague, as had two of her younger siblings. With their father deceased, Christopher would be the one through whom Carlisle would need to proceed if he were to curry any favor from Elizabeth.

He was beginning to regret his love of heated debate. If only he'd agreed with the man a little more often...

Leaning back even more, Thomas smirked. "This shall be quite interesting, then, I think."

Carlisle frowned. "You mock me?"

"Of course I mock you. The idea of you being interested in a woman is quite possibly the height of comedy." Thomas's smirk dissolved into something that sounded more like a girl's giggle than the laughter of a man. "How did this happen, Carlisle? The last we discussed the matter, you thought she was his wife."

Moving over to one of the anvils, Carlisle sat down. Wringing his hands nervously, he detailed his encounter with Elizabeth at Tyburn—the way his father had left him alone, the way she had sought him in the crowd as though she'd always meant to. He had realized later, of course, that this was accurate—from her side, there had undoubtedly been far less coincidence involved in their meeting than there had been from his.

When he finished speaking, he continued to stare at his hands, until Thomas let out a low whistle.

"You are *finished*, Carlisle," he said, but he was grinning. "And here your father worries he will die with you still a bachelor."

This was news to Carlisle. He wondered where Thomas had possibly heard such a thing.

"How—"

"How do you court her?" The smirk turned into a grin. "Well, the first problem is going to be talking to Christopher, now, yes?"

Which was how, no more than two hours later, Carlisle found himself walking toward the Bradshawe's, with a letter he and Thomas had spent two hours crafting. The small family lived west, in an area which had been touched more heavily by the fire. The smell of cinder still hung in the air, even so many months later; the winter snows had done little to wipe the city clean of the devastation.

He fingered the carefully-folded paper in his breast pocket. Its backside read *Mr. Christopher Bradshawe* and after much debate, the signature had been penned as *Mr. William Carlisle Cullen*. He wished to use his formal name, for it was a formal letter, and yet the fact that Elizabeth knew him as Carlisle—well, that was important, too. So he had used both.

The letter was simple in its content. A reference to Carlisle and Elizabeth's meetings, another reaffirming that Christopher was valued as a debate partner, and then the request that, as his sister's guardian, might he consider allowing Carlisle to visit upon Elizabeth with a chaperone? Carlisle didn't much like the idea of having Christopher around, but he would put up with it if it turned out to be necessary. He hoped, however, that Elizabeth's mother might be tasked with the job.

His heart fluttered thinking about it. Elizabeth's mother was Katherine's sister. He had never bothered to learn much about his nurse's family, and until the meeting with Elizabeth at Tyburn, he

had never even known she'd had a sister, much less one who lived so nearby. Had Katherine talked about him with Mrs. Bradshawe, he wondered. Had she visited her sister while nursing him? Had Christopher perhaps been his playmate when they had both been infants? Might Elizabeth's mother look on him as a nephew of sorts? And if she did, would that be a good thing or bad?

Carlisle was so busy thinking about these things that he nearly missed the turn down the narrow street. Like his neighborhood in the East End, this part of London had homes practically atop one another, a building practice over which there had been much outcry since the fire. But the truth was, there was no other way for a city this size to accommodate so many, except to keep them literally within arms' reach of one another—the homes were squeezed so closely together that neighbors could shake hands through second-story windows.

The Bradshawe's home was three stories tall, and he felt a twinge of intimidation as he lifted the doorknocker. His own was far more austere; although the previous pastor of the parish had been father to several children, the rectory had only two floors. Carlisle and his father shared a bedroom on the second floor, the other was reserved for holier and more scholarly work. This had always seemed a fine arrangement, but now that he thought on it, perhaps the privacy granted by his own space would not be a terrible idea.

A creak sounded as the door opened, and he tensed for the second it took before a woman's face appeared.

She was older than Elizabeth, but had the same high nose and dark hair. This was pulled away from her face, making her look severe and lovely at the same time. She frowned at him as she appraised him on her door step.

"Missus Bradshawe?" he asked timidly.

The woman nodded curtly. "Yes?"

"It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. My name is Carlisle Cullen; my father is William Cullen, rector of St. James Aldgate. I am acquaintances with your son Christopher; we meet on occasion at the coffee house." To use "acquaintances" was probably stretching the truth to breaking, but to say they engaged in heated debates and got quite under each other's collars would probably not serve Carlisle very well at the moment.

The frown slackened a little, but the woman still looked wary, and the door did not open fully. Then Carlisle heard a confident and joyful voice pipe up from behind the door.

"Oh the Heavens. Mum. Carlisle was Aunt Katie's charge. He is just too polite to mention her."

At this, the woman's expression softened, and a smile appeared on her face. "Of course," she said quietly. "I had the oddest feeling I had met you before. You were somewhat smaller, however. And quite a bit less steady on your feet." She laughed, and the door swung wide. "What brings you today, Mister Cullen?"

He ducked his head apologetically, but he found a smile crept onto his face also. "Your sister was my nursemaid. Please, call me Carlisle." He allowed himself to be ushered into the small, but tidy entryway. Elizabeth was standing there, in a simple dress and apron, her hair tumbling over one shoulder.

Carlisle averted his gaze, but of course this meant he was largely staring at the stone floor. He felt a bit foolish not looking either woman in the eye. "I've brought a letter for Christopher," he mumbled quickly. "I presume he is not at home?"

Mrs. Bradshawe shook her head.

He had figured as much. "Well, then, I shall not intrude on your time. Perhaps you might give it to Christopher with my warmest regards." He reached into his pocket for the letter and was proffering it to Elizabeth's mother when Elizabeth let out a peal of laughter.

"You are so *shy*, Mister Cullen." She danced forward and took the paper out of her mother's hands. "This, I believe, is Carlisle's request for permission to court me. Is it not?"

Dumbstruck, he nodded.

"To court?" Her mother's eyes went from Carlisle to Elizabeth and back again, having regained a bit of the wary look. "When did you meet?"

He was almost ready to say "At Tyburn" when Elizabeth said, "On Fleet Street. You know how Christopher likes to take me there."

Carlisle gulped. That was right; she'd mentioned that her mother didn't know about Christopher's affinity for the gallows days. He'd nearly compromised her.

Her mother shook her head, a dismayed expression on her face. "It's not a place for a woman. All those alehouses."

"Oh, I don't mind. But I'm certain Carlisle would have ideas of more appropriate places he ought to take me." She winked.

"With a chaperone, of course," he added quickly.

Mrs. Bradshawe's eyes slid from one to the other again, but there was the slightest smirk on her face. "Christopher is the man of the house," she said. "It will be his decision."

"Of course, of course," Carlisle stammered. "I would think of nothing else." He drew a deep breath, and allowed himself to glance at Elizabeth once more. She was beaming. "I- I should leave you to your business." He was starting to retreat toward the door when Mrs. Bradshawe spoke again.

"Mister Cullen?"

"Yes?"

"Christopher is a good son. He usually listens to his mother." She smiled. "It was a pleasure to see you again."

"The pleasure is mine," he mumbled, bowing his head slightly, and barely managing to keep himself in a straight line as he went out the door. When it closed behind him, he let out a sigh of relief.

His hands shook as he turned away from the house. Elizabeth's laughter rang through the thin window, reaching him in the narrow street as he retreated. The sound at once filled him with an indescribable excitement. He stopped, closed his eyes, and prayed fervently that Christopher Bradshawe was the kind of man who listened to his mother.

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Ratcliffe Street was aptly named, William thought, although it was true that it was named for the red cliffs nearby rather than for the rodents which could be seen scurrying across it. It was nearly dusk, and the sun shone orange over the water and the ships as William made his way toward the docklands.

"Hello, me love," a voice called to him, and his head jerked toward the sound. A woman beckoned from the doorway of a building, where she leaned seductively. She looked unhealthy; her cheeks were rouged but beneath the color they were pallid and bony. A black crescent moon was painted upon on her cheek as well, a fashion which looked appropriate on the women in town, but which on this woman only served to accentuate how scrawny she was. A hiked underskirt revealed thin legs.

"A penny?" she said, and the skirt went a little higher.

William shook his head and averted his eyes from her. From the harbor came the low clang of the bells on empty ships, their decks creaking as the evening winds took out the tide. The cacophonous melody of sailors singing in the taverns filled the street; tankards clanked against counters and stone road.

The unhealthy woman would not lack for customers.

It was vile, this part of England. Fallen women, drunken sailors, souls in need of salvation that was never coming. William hated coming here, but it was important—this business could not be conducted in Aldgate.

He slid his way along the street to a home not terribly far from the docks. As he knocked, he listened to the steady slap of the waves lapping against the sides of the moored boats.

The door swung open and a wizened face appeared. He smiled slightly and beckoned William inside.

The house was simple, with only a handful of features at all—a table on which sat a few of the barber-surgeon's implements, a bed for his patients, a barber chair. The man lived in the back of the home, and there was often the faintest odor of slightly burned food wafting forward from the kitchen.

As a rule, the two men didn't talk much. William was more than a little embarrassed to have sought help to begin with; this was part of the reason he came down to the docklands where ship surgeons were plenty and his parishioners were not. He walked here once a fortnight, and when he could sneak the tithes out from under his son's careful bookkeeping, he would hire a hackney carriage to take himself home.

The younger Cullen assumed his father was out searching for evil. William had noticed the way the young man deliberately managed to duck coming with him of late—he seemed to continually find an errand that needed running, a repair that needed doing, or simply made a strategic exit to the alehouse or coffee house at dusk. He avoided the things that were most distasteful to him, which to William was a sign that his son was not yet the grown man he needed to be.

William had left the boy up to his own devices at the last hanging day a few weeks before. It had been his hope that his son would follow him to the gallows as he always did; that he would realize that it was his place to face the accused. One day, it would be his son who would need to make the accusations, and for almost six years, William had been trying to prepare him, only to be met with resistance.

He would need to learn, William thought. And quickly.

The barber gestured to the chair. His name was Frederick, and his usual clientele were the sailors coming in to port, which was why his shop was in such an otherwise unsavory location. Yet the secrecy worked in William's favor. A pastor was supposed to be strong, to lead his flock decisively and without sign of weakness or pain. Coming to Ratcliffe kept that image as it needed to be.

As the barber tied the tourniquet around his upper arm and slid the wooden dowel into his hand, William closed his eyes. A moment later he felt the sting of the lancet moving swiftly through his skin. Part pain. Part pleasure. He let out a little involuntary sigh.

"The tremors?" Frederick asked as he pulled the pewter bowl closer to catch the seeping blood.

William shook his head. "Still here. Lessened a bit, but perhaps we should take more this time."

The other man shook his head. "You barely walked from here last time, Reverend."

His jaw tightened. "I wish this ailment gone. If it is excess humor, we will remove it." As though to prove that he would control such matters, William squeezed his hand even more tightly. His muscle bulged, and the blood pinged into the cup.

Frederick's expression was a mixture of contempt and confusion, but he did not move to stem the flow. Sometime later—ten minutes? Twenty?—the room began to swim and William closed his eyes and fought to keep upright. If he slumped, the other man would take too much care, would remove the lancet before he was ready.

Soon enough he felt exactly that, the slide of metal against skin, a stronger hand coming to his shoulder.

“No,” he mumbled. “They...must...stop.”

“No, *I* must stop,” the other man said.

A surge of heat flushed through William’s body. This was the only solution; the way to keep him healthy in the midst of whatever this was that weakened him. He was not weak, and he would not be treated as though he were.

He tightened his fist once more. The lancet slid, and sticky dark red gushed down his forearm, a tiny river branching quickly off into tributaries which trickled across his wrist bone. His head filled with sounds—the pinging of the blood into the little pewter bowl, the tavern singing, the ship bells still clanging at the dock. They surged around him, through him, and the room spun and went dark.

An hour later, William arrived to a darkened and quiet house. The hackney carriage had cost five pennies; an exorbitant sum but one which the barber insisted he pay, even offering him a discount on his next service so that he might afford it. It was usual for a patient to become faint; that was the sign that enough humor had been removed from the body and the signal to stop. But after his stubborn outburst this evening, William had remained unconscious for several minutes.

He was exhausted now. There was a cup of beer waiting for him in the kitchen, no doubt left for him by his son, and he sipped it gratefully with steady hands before retreating to his bedroom and stripping for bed. He had always been modest and encouraged Young William to be modest as well; the two men did not often change clothes in each other’s company. This, coupled with his long shirts and coats, meant that his son never saw the marks of the lancet.

The younger Cullen was already fast asleep on his trundle, his breath heavy and even. He lay turned on his stomach, one arm flung over his head and the other trapped beneath his body so that his hips twisted backward at an odd angle. It appeared uncomfortable.

When William himself was prepared for bed, he knelt and gently pushed his son’s hip, flipping him upward and releasing his arm. At once, the other man rolled so that he lay fully on his side. There came a shuddering sigh, and a moment later his son curled into the position he had always slept in as a boy.

The boy was at least a dozen stone heavier now, and several feet taller, but in the peaceful lines of his face, one could still see the remnants of the child who had once inhabited this body. After rearranging the aging quilt, William stood over the bed for a moment, watching the broad chest rise and fall in the moonlight.

At last he climbed into his own bed, absently scratching at the single horsehair which closed the wound left by tonight’s bleeding. Through weakness, he would gain strength. And he would last to see his son succeed him.

Lord, please let it be so, he prayed to the darkness before sleep overtook him.

Chapter Eight: Psalmist

Chicago, Illinois

October, 1918

They refused to let her see him.

The doctors had ordered her home. Families of patients were instructed to return to their houses and wait for the bad news to come by telegram. She couldn't count any more the number of times a well-meaning nurse had walked her down the corridor, only to leave her when a patient cried out from one of the wards. Freed of direction, Elizabeth could duck up a back stairwell, returning again to the place where her husband lay.

Two days had passed, and she could not help noticing that in that time, approximately half the patients in the ward had disappeared--a quarter each night, it seemed. The newspaper reported over one hundred deaths per hospital per day. New admissions would now only be made with approval--the intake room had emptied, and police guarded its doors, urging the ill to one of the makeshift infirmaries which were springing up like a pox across the city. Still, those who did have approval to enter the hospital came in droves; filling beds that seemed to empty by the minute.

Her Edward couldn't see them, thankfully. He lay hidden behind the sanitary curtain around his bed, shielded from the stretchers of bodies that Elizabeth saw marching their way out of the hospital. They called it a bronchopneumonia, though it spread like an influenza. Some of the patients had chills, some had aches. Even in the area outside the men's ward Elizabeth could hear the groaning and screaming--some men seemed to merely have feverish aches, while others hollered as though parts of their bodies were being cut off.

The blood was the worst part. Not just her husband's, although his was terrifying, but that it was everywhere--patients with eyes crimson red, noses bleeding so furiously that they spattered the floor before rags could be found. It seemed to her as though the disease was little more than the body tearing itself apart. At least twice in the two days she'd been here she saw body and presumed it first to be a Negro, only realizing a moment later that the color was a splotchy blue-black instead of consistent brown.

Her husband's skin had begun to turn this morning. A small spot on his arm, larger ones in the beds of his fingernails. His lips turned the color Junior's had been one day when the boy been about seven and had insisted on staying out sledding with some of the older boys on their street.

"No, Mama!" Elizabeth remembered her son's childish, high voice calling when she'd tried to force him to come back in that day. The snow was too fresh; his Flexible Flyer was brand new. It was a way of proving himself to the bigger boys, and she wasn't to stand in his way.

He'd returned hours later, soaked to the bone from repeated crash-landings in snowdrifts, with his teeth clattering and his lips a bright blue. He insisted he didn't need her, reminded her the big boys didn't have their mothers looking after them, and then left a little sopping trail of first snowsuit, then trousers, then underpants on his way up the stairs.

She'd made him a cocoa and drawn a hot bath anyway. He'd grudgingly accepted.

Elizabeth shook her head. Junior was at home, practicing his piano, staying safely away from the influenza. It was such a funny thing, she thought, that sitting here in the metal chair outside the ward, listening to men screaming and crying in pain that her mind would go to such a pedestrian moment with her son. Just one small afternoon among thousands.

And so it was that she was thinking about Junior, with his blue lips and bare bottom when the voice interrupted her thoughts.

"Mrs. Masen?"

Her head jerked up. It was the light-eyed doctor, the one who had met them on Edward's admission. He was so young, she thought. If she hadn't encountered him in the hospital, she never would have thought him old enough to even be a physician. But there was an odd wisdom in him. Unlike the other doctors, he never appeared hurried or frazzled. He seemed to simply take whatever time he needed and then moved to the next person who needed his care. And maybe she was imagining, but it seemed as though he had taken a special interest in her and in her husband.

"Mrs. Masen?" he repeated.

"I am surprised you remember my name," she answered. "I barely remember yours."

"Cullen," he said quietly. "I'm Dr. Cullen." He dropped himself into the chair next to hers. "And I have an excellent memory. In addition, you remind me of someone...from my past." At this, his eyes glazed a moment, and she could see him working as though trying to grasp at something. It struck her as odd; that he would have such a good memory as to remember her name but not, it seemed, enough for whoever it was she reminded him of.

He came back to himself in a few seconds. "Your husband—" he said quietly.

And that was enough, really. Hadn't she just come to this conclusion herself; thinking about Junior and his blue lips after a day of sledding. Her husband's skin was already turning that same dark bluish-black, "cyanosis," she'd heard one of the nurses call it. And that was the moment at which they stopped. She had seen the way the doctors stopped visiting a bed, the way all the nurses would do was wipe a bleeding nose or spittle away from a face. The way the stretcher men came not long after.

So she nodded. "I understand."

The young doctor stared at her. "No," he said quietly, "you haven't been in there in a short while, if I'm not mistaken."

There was an assuredness to his voice that caused a chill to shoot down her spine. He was not mistaken. And somehow, without having never seen her there, he was certain.

She nodded.

"Mrs. Masen I—" he looked down, and drew a deep breath. "Mrs. Masen, I just arrived to my shift. I only work in the night, you see. And I went to check on your husband at once."

She waved a hand, looking back at the floor. "I understand the outlook isn't good."

"He's passed."

For a split second, she thought she hadn't heard him. Her next thought was perhaps in this context, those words had some other meaning, some sort of medical way of explaining something, like the way they referred to a whooping cough as pertussis. But then she met the strange yellow eyes—like a thin honey, she thought, not the kind you got at the orchard but the kind they sold at the market, the one that had been processed so that it would stay on the shelf. Those eyes went out of focus, the yellow becoming this strange blur.

It was a moment before she realized it was her eyes that had filled with tears.

There was still screaming and moaning coming from the ward, the sound of feet scuffling up and down the rows of beds. The doors opened and two nurses hurried out, giving Dr. Cullen a nod before disappearing off to some other part of the hospital.

The world needed to stop, she thought. Hadn't Dr. Cullen just said that Edward had died?

But it couldn't, she realized at once. Nothing was stopping for her; nothing could stop. Even Dr. Cullen had other places he needed to be.

Then she wouldn't stop either. Elizabeth sniffled and wiped her eyes with the back of one hand. She drew herself upright. Standing several feet above Dr. Cullen, she was struck even more by how young he appeared—hardly older than her son. He was staring at the linoleum floor, his hands moving rapidly over each other.

"May I collect him?" she asked.

The doctor's head jerked upward, and the honey eyes fixed on her, coldly confused.

"Have you access to an undertaker?"

An undertaker? There was a cemetery at their church, of course. She would call on the caretaker there and get his recommendation for the persons to use for the burial.

"Our church has a cemetery."

His head shook in reply. "If they are willing to take him, they may come for him. But almost no undertakers are willing to work, ma'am. They don't want to become ill themselves. The mayor has given instruction for the dead to be taken to mass burial."

She blinked. Mass burial. For her husband?

A particularly loud cry erupted from the men's ward, and both of them started.

"I am so terribly sorry," the doctor repeated. "You don't know—" There was a brief pause as he shot to his feet. "Please, wait a moment." And like that, he seemed to vanish, the hinge on the men's ward door creaking in protest behind him.

Elizabeth dropped back into the chair, her head in her hands. Just a few hours ago, Edward had been laughing, joking off his embarrassment at his wife seeing him so incapacitated.

"They feed me terrible things, Lizzie," he had told her, his blue lips turning up at the edges. "Make sure Edward Junior doesn't end up in here. He'll become even scrawnier than he is already."

It had been, what, five hours?

The linoleum floor was green, a funny, ugly hue. Black and white spots, some little, some larger. She wondered why the spots were there, if perhaps the ugly color was too overwhelming on its own and thus required the dots to break it up.

A little cloth package was shoved into her hands.

"Your husband's effects," came the quiet voice. "We don't usually—"

He coughed, and began again. "I simply thought your son might want to carry his father's things."

Elizabeth ran her hands over the package, unwrapping it a bit. There were her husband's eyeglasses, half-lens spectacles that he needed for reading but carried in his jacket pocket so they would never be seen. His pocket watch, the heavy brass thing that he carried every day so that his trousers always looked lopsided. His lighter, engraved with his initials.

E. A. M. Edward Anthony Masen. The same name they had given their only child.

It had been here, many corridors and floors away, she supposed. Her mother had insisted she come to a hospital; that was how the women were doing things these days and it was far safer. The pain had been terrible, yet somehow she had been astonished when she felt something give way, and she'd watched the doctor lift a squalling, smashed-face creature from between her legs.

Her arms had reached for him at once, and she had said the only word which came to her, the same word that would be the first word from his father's lips a few minutes later when he was told he'd been given a son:

"Edward."

Turning the lighter over in her hands, she rubbed her thumb carefully over the initials, burnishing them a little so that some of the grime of her husband's pockets disappeared. The world had seemed theirs that day as they held the little bundle. They had watched him for hours, mesmerized by every yawn and cough, making silent promises to themselves. They would raise their little boy, send him to a good school, cheer him on in sports. Elizabeth would teach him how to play the piano. One day they would sit in the front row of a church when he married a pretty woman. Not long after they might come to a hospital again and this time, it would be his baby boy they would hold.

There was supposed to have been time for all of these things. Their son was supposed to have a father.

Her Edward was not supposed to die.

It was hardly cool in the hospital; the crush of bodies seemed to keep all the air a thick, stifling warmth. So the coolness of the finger that brushed her collar made her jump as the doctor's hand came to rest on her shoulder.

"I am so very sorry," came the whisper.

On the floor, white dots merged with the black dots and finally with the ugly green before it all became one blurry mess. This time, Elizabeth did nothing to stop her tears.

~||x||~

The rates from Cook County hospital were reported in the Sun-Times.

They were losing forty percent.

It demoralized the physicians. It was true that more patients were walking out of Cook than were dying, but only by the tiniest amount, and on any given day, that number could seem imperceptible. The ones who were well enough to leave almost never saw a doctor at all; they were rerouted by friendly nurses or sent on their way by intake staff, redirected to one of the armories or churches which had been pressed into service as infirmaries as the epidemic wore on.

This meant, of course, that those Carlisle saw were the ones who would die--it seemed at times as though he saw the forty percent and only them.

The influenza struck hard and without mercy, and it seemed like every time Carlisle turned around there was another man or woman fallen. The fastest report was four hours--a patient who experienced his first symptoms at six in the morning and was pronounced dead by ten.

And in the midst of this, he was still trying to keep focus.

His steps were loud as he walked toward his office.

Carlisle always bought study shoes, shoes which withstood years of wear, particularly with the aid of a cobbler. There was some part of him felt he should wear good shoes, and he tended to listen to those parts. Those parts were the parts of him that came from before. The parts that kept him human.

He flexed his right hand. He had touched her, Elizabeth, the woman who had captured him with her striking green eyes only three days before. He never did that. He was too afraid that a human would notice the unnatural coolness, the way his skin was unyielding instead of soft. And he did not allow himself to become close to patients. If that was even what this was.

True, he had raced to the hospital both days since Mr. Masen's admission. True, the man's status had been his first checked at the beginning every shift, the last looked in on at the end. True, he had accepted the man's affects, hiding them in the bedstand in case an unscrupulous gurney man or gravedigger tried to take them from him.

He shook his head in dismay. All of this had been a mistake. Humans were mortal. Even something as small as worrying about them ended in this dull ache in his being that he couldn't shake. This, he suspected, was why the brothers in Italy looked down with such disdain on the mortals. It was simply easier.

Even if you grew close to them, they would still die.

He wouldn't do it again.

The groan of frustration ripped from him before he had the forethought to suppress it.

"Are you all right, Doctor?"

Startled, he whirled. Too quickly. Dorothy gave him an odd look.

"You're not becoming ill, are you?"

If only she knew how ridiculous a proposition that was. "I've just lost a patient." His voice was gravelly, almost growled, and he wondered briefly if she noticed the animalistic sounds he tried so hard to keep from his voice.

Dorothy, however, looked mollified by his admission. She clucked her tongue softly and moved closer to him, laying a hand on his upper arm. He jerked away out of instinct, and she frowned, but spoke anyway.

"There isn't a one of us seen anything like this, Doctor Cullen. But it won't do any of us good to dwell on what we don't have right now." She locked his gaze. "You're needed in the women's ward. You do what you need to"—a quick glance toward his office door—"and then come see to the patients. Just because you missed one don't mean you can't save more today."

Then she turned.

Carlisle stared down the hall toward his office. Then, shaking his head, he turned and followed Dorothy.

The women's ward was filled to overflowing. Any medical facility, or anything which could be pressed into service as a medical facility--churches, armories, libraries--they were all bursting at the seams.

A patient near the door was nearing death; even if his stethoscope might not catch the growing rattle in her lungs as she slowly drowned, his ears knew the sound. He stopped to look briefly at the chart at the foot of her bed. Her name was Alma, she was twenty-three years old.

My age, Carlisle thought, and it startled him. He didn't often think of himself as being anything other than over two centuries old. Her fever was high, and from the sounds of it, the pneumocystis had set in. There wouldn't be much time for her.

He leaned over her bed and took her hand. "Alma?" he asked gently.

Her eyes snapped open, revealing a vivid blue-gray gone only slightly clouded from the influenza. Like most humans did when they first looked into his eyes, she frowned, and he fought not to look away. An ocular condition, he explained to patients and coworkers who looked too closely. A rare disease which had nearly blinded him as a child and left his eyes this feline-like color. Others tried not to stare, and he appreciated that, but it also meant that he very rarely had the pleasure of having another look him in the eye. That this patient did so was startling and refreshing.

"How do you feel?"

She coughed, shaking her head, a bit of blood bubbling on her lips and dripped down her chin. There was a rag hanging from the head of her bed, and Carlisle took it, wiping her chin gently. When she had settled, she looked up at him again with half-closed eyes.

"Am I going to die, doctor?"

He sighed, and wondered if he should have even bothered to look at the chart. It was harder to answer, “Yes,” to a patient when he knew her name, when he had made that inevitable comparison to the end of his own human life.

But that was his job. And had that not been what he had thought when he had entered the ward? His ears had identified the woman as near death at once. Did it do her any good now, when she had asked, to lie? What would it accomplish?

His hesitation solved the problem for him, however. She was already shaking her head when Carlisle met her eyes again. “No need,” she rasped. “No need, doctor. I understand.”

And he was grateful. He ducked his head.

“I need to attend to the others,” he told her quietly. “Is there anything I can have the nurses do for you?”

She shook her head, and her full hair flopped across her face. But as he was turning away, her voice came again.

“Doctor? Are you a Christian?”

He froze. What kind of a question was that? Was he a Christian? He was a vampire. Did not the one preclude the other? He looked hastily around the ward to see if anyone else had heard this question, or had seen the way he had jerked in response. The patients to either side of Alma were already lost in febrile hallucinations, rolling and moaning and coughing so hard they probably had no way of hearing a single request of a patient, even one immediately adjacent to them. The nurses, for their parts, bustled from bed to bed, wiping brows, taking temperatures, attending to soiled bed linens.

No one had noticed.

He turned back to Alma and fixed her grey eyes in his own. “I was raised in the English church,” he answered quietly, “but I don't attend now.” It had been decades, in fact--shortly after the North and South war. He had gone to a church in Pennsylvania, Methodist, where the congregation was mourning its sons who had died in the war. He had run himself ragged--or as near to ragged as he might have been able to--attending to soldiers on the battlefields, and he had needed then to say something, to somehow give thanks for the fact that his new country had not torn itself in two. But since then, there had been nothing—over fifty years.

She didn't seem fazed by this answer, however. “I haven't been in a long time, either,” she said. “They've closed them all, the churches.”

He had forgotten this, but of course it was true. The city had declared that there was to be no public congregating in this time--bringing people together was simply a way to spread the disease more quickly. Gymnasiums had shuttered their doors, along with theatres and concert halls, schools, and of course, the churches. At times, the tollers still rang the bells, but even as he thought about it he could not recall a time in the last three weeks in which the bells of the churches near his flat had rung. The city was silent.

“Doctor, would you say an Our Father with me?”

He gulped, and again his eyes darted around the room. There was still no one looking at him. So he turned and went back to the bedside. Taking Alma's hand again, he knelt at her bedside. The mask he wore was of course unnecessary, just a part of his charade. He pulled it down so that she might hear him clearly, and bowed his head.

She closed her eyes.

“Our Father who art in heaven,” she began, and for a moment, he did not finish. But then she coughed, and he looked to her again, to the way a bit of blood dripped from her lips, and thought about the prognosis he had just given, or rather, had allowed her to figure out for herself. He thought about Edward Masen, his strong son, and his widow. He thought about the way the

boy had tried so valiantly not to cry, and how much he longed to console them. How terrible he had felt standing before them and admitting that he was powerless.

His voice rose, shaking.

"Hallowed be thy name," he whispered, and the gray eyes fluttered closed in satisfaction.

"Thy kingdom come—"

"Thy will be done—"

"On Earth as it is in Heaven."

So among the clattering of beds against wooden floor, among moans of pain, coughing, the dark rattling of breath--those dying and those merely suffering; it was impossible to tell the difference now--they prayed together, in whispers, one line at a time, in whispers. It was a prayer for her, certainly, but it was as much a prayer for the family he had left in the men's ward; a prayer for their safety; a prayer of penitence for his own inability to fulfill what he had promised them.

"Amen" came from both of them at once, and for a split second, it was as though there was silence in the ward. Gray eyes met yellow, locking them hard. They said nothing a moment, and then he leaned forward as though to feel her temperature with his palm. It was an odd thing, this fever; so many patients had fevers above one hundred degrees that he could finally get away with contact--they noticed his hands were cold, certainly, but a patient merely chalked this abnormality up to his or her own illness, and thought nothing of whether it was Carlisle who was abnormal.

When his hand touched her brow, the gray eyes closed.

Usually he didn't say anything. The best he offered his patients was his thanks to them for allowing him to treat them. His closure, and the only way he allowed himself to display any emotion for a patient at all. He didn't speak with them; he didn't sit with them, and he certainly did not pray with them, for them, or over them. Perhaps it was that the woman was twenty-three, or perhaps it was the way she had stopped him and asked, or perhaps it was going back on his word to take care of Edward Masen, but the words were already on his lips. The twenty-third psalm; not the beginning that everyone knew, but the end, the committal. The part a woman which he suddenly felt he owed to a woman whom he had not managed to tell outright of her own death.

"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow thee all the days of thy life. And thou shalt dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

He was saying it to her, yes. But as he said it, he imagined not the woman before him, but the other woman, the one with the red hair and the striking green eyes. With his words, he commended her husband, apologizing for his own shortfall to the mother and to her young son. If God would hear the prayers of a vampire—and he doubted this—then perhaps he might be forgiven for this failure.

Where was Elizabeth now? he wondered. Trying to press her way into the men's ward again? On her way home to take care of the gangly boy?

Carlisle squeezed Alma's hand one last time, stood, and stepped away quickly, before she could say anything. In his hurry, he nearly ran headlong into Dorothy where she stood a bed away. Her brow furrowed as she looked on him with a soft expression.

"Doctor, you are quite the extraordinary man," she said quietly. "To find God in this place."

He blinked. Turning, he glanced back.

The young woman before was staring, dazed by his addition. Then, when she saw him looking, she smiled, and he saw her lips had turned a dark, purplish-blue.

The panic and frustration that had seized him so powerfully a short time ago clawed back. He pulled his hand closed, remembering where it had touched the neck of the woman, Elizabeth. He had failed her. He had failed her son. And now he would fail this woman as well.

Locking eyes with Dorothy, he shook his head, slowly. When he spoke, his voice was ice.

"God has forsaken this place," was all he said.

Chapter Nine: The Student

Volterra, Italy

Early June, 1789

A burst of high-pitched Greek erupted from across the room, followed by a rich laughter, and Aro glanced over to see Marcus smile. At his feet, Carlisle sat, a wide grin on his face—he had been the one who'd burst out chattering.

It was one of the newer developments. Carlisle had grown tired of simply reading the histories and started seeking his tutelage directly. Caius, who was eldest, had been the first one he'd approached, but the older vampire had little patience for Carlisle's insatiable curiosity. Aro had tutored Carlisle a few times, but inevitably their conversations wound toward the younger man's bizarre feeding choices and devolved into heated arguments.

So Carlisle had lately settled on Marcus, and this seemed to be a good fit. He sat at the other man's feet like a true young scholar, listening carefully and peppering Marcus's explanations with questions. How much of the account provided by Thucydides was accurate? What of Homer and his writings of Hector and Achilles? Marcus, for his part, carefully unraveled the things that Carlisle had learned as a boy, or at least, as much of his teachings as Carlisle remembered, which was surprisingly a lot.

Alrigo snorted. He glanced in the direction of Carlisle and Marcus as well, shaking his head in annoyance as he pressed his hand to Aro's.

At Caius's suggestion, Alrigo had been set on detail duty with young blond. Each day he reported in the same way they all did, and Carlisle's movements were transmitted to Aro in an instant. The Young One had spent the better part of the day in the library reading an ancient book that had been a gift to the brothers from one of their kind in the Orient. The image was now burned into Aro's mind of the blond hair falling forward as Carlisle pored over the thick book, referring to multiple tomes and folios next to it to aid in his translation of the pictograms.

He was studying a new language again, which likely meant he would travel. It always happened that Carlisle would rummage in the Volturi library for a day or so, returning with some impossible text in a new tongue, and then proceed to bury himself in the library for weeks on end

while he mastered it. Then he would make the trek on foot to wherever it was he'd just studied, where he would mingle with the locals as much as he was able to solidify his grasp on the language.

Importantly for the moment, however, these studies kept Carlisle safely inside the compound, save for his occasional runs to the market to buy and sell his herbs. Alrigo's silent reports indicated that the intruder, whoever he might have been, had backed away. Caius, the most bellicose of them all, insisted on a headhunt when, after two weeks of careful searching, it seemed that the intruder had retreated. Aro talked him out of this, suggesting that if they destroyed the intruder, he might never get the test of loyalty he wished.

But it had been two weeks more, and there was no testing of Carlisle; at least, not beyond his knowledge of Homer.

Laughter erupted again, and Aro turned toward his brother. Marcus was explaining the origins of several of the god myths, many of which were based on human encounters with others of their kind. Humans always seemed to take beauty and strength as a sign of godliness instead of the mark of a superior predator. The legends of Ares in particular were based on an ancient Chosen One who had suffered a particularly painful transition to the new life; his desire for destruction and vengeance had been unparalleled. It was Carlisle who was laughing, his face bright as he listened to Marcus going on about some of the myth which humans were happy to believe.

"Is this wise, do you think?"

The voice tore Aro from his observation. Alrigo was staring absently at Marcus and Carlisle, who were now speaking rapidly about the appropriation of the Greek god myths by the Romans. Carlisle teased that perhaps Marcus might have been memorialized a god instead of a saint for his actions in "ridding" their city of vampires, if only the coven had settled a bit further south.

"The schooling? I see little harm in it."

Alrigo shook his head. "Not the schooling, Master. Everything." His gaze shifted again to the pair talking. "He spends nearly all his time with humans. And you've given up on changing him from his diet, it seems."

Given up? Aro's brow knitted as he thought back to what Alrigo had shown him, a scene which had taken place during their last group feeding. Carlisle, standing in the doorway, a look that was equal parts resolve and disgust across his face. But he'd stood there, for the better part of an hour. He'd stood there, breathing air that would have tempted any of their kind, his arms crossed defiantly over his chest.

Aro had stopped testing Carlisle. And now Carlisle was testing himself.

"I've given up on nothing," he snapped.

"I didn't mean to imply—" Alrigo stammered, but Aro held up a hand and waved him off.

"Thank you, Alrigo."

The guard ducked his head and resumed his position beside the others. His only duty of late was to track the blond, and Carlisle seemed to be either blissfully unaware that he was being tailed or was accepting of it. Either of these suited Aro.

Perhaps Alrigo was right, however. It had been a good deal of time since Aro had last "encouraged" Carlisle, as he called it. When the young one had first arrived, the tests had been more regular—first out of conviction that Carlisle would fail, and then out of fascination that he never seemed to. They had been simple tests; a blood-spattered robe, a single injured human. He had instructed Carlisle to prove he could resist, and although the other could have run from the temptation at any time, he never had. The first time Carlisle had pulverized the chair in his chambers as he held back his desire. The entire thing had been reduced to sawdust as the human bled to its death. Later, however, he learned to immerse himself in other pursuits, and on Aro's last attempt, over twenty years ago, he had returned to find the human lying face down in a river of cooled blood, and Carlisle sanguinely paging through a volume in Occitan.

Yet resisting a single human, especially when one was sated, was not difficult for one who was more than a few years old. Perhaps it had been the wrong task, Aro thought. It would be smarter to bring Carlisle into the midst of the feeding.

Although, it seemed he was already intent on being there, too.

Aro snapped his fingers, which caused every head in the room to swivel his way. The young vampire and his tutor cut their chatter at once, and two sets of dark eyes landed on Aro.

“Carlisle.”

“Aro?”

There came a soft hiss that was the collected intake of breath from several of the other guards. They did not dare address Aro as anything other than “Master,” nor would any of them answer him with their bottoms still firmly on the floor. Aro heard the word “impudent” muttered from somewhere near his shoulder.

Ignoring this, he tapped the arm of his chair. “Please.”

As the young one moved swiftly across the room, his hair it caught the light and shimmered in stark contrast to Carlisle’s dark gray robe. He stood before Aro, his arms open, and a gentle, inquisitive expression on his face. Around them, the other guards and Aro’s brothers came to complete stillness. Carlisle made no move to speak.

Aro cleared his throat. “Alrigo tells me that you wish to observe our feedings?”

The other man’s jaw flexed, and he looked away. “I observe them, yes. Do I wish to? That is quite a different question.”

“You are testing yourself.”

“I’m familiarizing myself.”

There were murmurs from around the room. Aro simply raised his eyebrows.

“Humans bleed,” the blond explained. When Aro did not speak in answer, he went on. “I will be a rather poor excuse for a physician if I am unable to tolerate a natural process which my patients undergo.”

For the second time in ten minutes the gasps in the room were audible. Aro lifted a hand.

“It is your intention, then, to treat humans directly?”

“That is my ultimate ambition.”

There were a few titters from around the chamber. The remainder of the guard knew at least a little of what Carlisle was up to; his constant disappearances out of the castle to the piazza market so that he could trade herbs could hardly go unnoticed, to say nothing of the stench which lingered in his chambers. But this was the first anyone beside Aro had truly heard of the young man’s true goals. And Aro had largely written them off—he saw many aspirations when he read a mind, and very few of these ever came to light. They were often far-fetched, with no plan of action to achieve them, and Aro ignored them as a matter of course.

He realized at once that when it came to Carlisle, he should have known better.

“So it is your intent to violate our laws of secrecy,” came the familiar, indignant voice. This time every pair of eyes swept to Caius, who leaned forward in his chair as though he were about to spring. The man’s upper lip twitched as he stared at the young vampire whom he’d never cared for.

“I see no reason why my practicing medicine ought to violate the laws.”

“Surely you do not expect humans to believe you are one of them,” Caius growled. “They will suspect you. We will be compromised.”

Carlisle’s smiled at Caius, the sort of smile an adult gives to a child. Aro suppressed a laugh. He was certain Caius had never been on the receiving end of such an expression, and judging from Caius’s scowl, he did not find this position pleasurable.

“Look at what already happens when I walk in the *piazza*,” he said, gesturing toward the windows. “Whether it is to our dismay or our advantage, I am not certain, but they do not fear us as

they once did. We are neither beasts nor gods”—he nodded toward Marcus—”and they have long since decided any threat we pose is only fiction.”

Carlisle moved toward the window, where sunlight streamed down in a narrow band on the floor. Stepping into the beam, he held his arms out before him turned them, a fascinated grin spreading across his face as his skin refracted the light into vivid rainbows across the walls. “Humans believe now in only what they can prove,” he said more quietly. “The sun is the center of the heavens; all the heavenly bodies are held together by the same force that keeps our feet on the ground. We can sail around the Earth without fear because of this, and we will return to where we began because our Earth is round. Blood runs in one system, not two. And it needn’t be removed to heal anyone. We can introduce foods into the body to cure illness and relieve pain.”

Still smiling, he stepped sideways out of the sun and faced the brothers once more.

“Once, we might have been hunted because humans believed their fears. But today?” He chuckled. “If I told a human that I was a vampire, he would declare me a drunkard.”

Shrugging, Carlisle went back to Marcus, who was still rather obviously stifling a smile.

There was an utter stillness in the room. Sometimes, even the air grew stagnant in the tower, and this was one of those times. Vampires were able to hold preternaturally still. Except, that was, for Carlisle, who occasionally shifted his weight from one hip to the other as he sat on the stone floor.

He looked...human.

Aro could see several whose gazes moved uncomfortably from Carlisle to Aro and back again. They were waiting for him, he knew. Such dramatic orations did not commonly happen in this hall, at least not from anyone other than himself. He thought back to Alrigo's comment a moment before. Was it wise, to let Carlisle continue as he did? He wasn't beholden to them the way the guard were, yet he was not an equal to the brothers, either. At the moment, he was looking away, intent on one of the tapestries on the wall. Carlisle wasn't defiant, Aro was certain. The Englishman did not desire power; in fact, this was probably what made him such a liability. The others came to them seeking power; to be in the guard of the Volturi was to stand next to the most powerful of their kind. It made them easy to keep near, easy to threaten—none in the guard wished to be ejected from the good graces of the three brothers, and so they would do as asked. Threatening Carlisle would not be possible. He was too assured, too steadfast in his own ways.

But then, perhaps these were the precise qualities which could be used against him.

“If you wish to practice,” Aro said thoughtfully, “then we ought to assist you.”

The blond head snapped around, and Aro found Carlisle's eyes fixed on his own.

“Your pardon?”

“If you wish to practice, then you ought to be given the most practice we can afford,” he answered, with a wave of his hand as though this was such a natural solution, Carlisle should have figured it out himself. “You will join us for feedings from now on.”

The other's face dropped. “I have no plans to alter—”

“I expect you to alter nothing,” Aro answered. “Nothing, my young friend. You may continue with your...diet...exactly as you please. But this way you will be able to practice your control even more, don't you see?”

Carlisle's jaw remained taut. “You mean this way you will be able to test me directly.”

“I mean nothing of the sort,” Aro answered. “If to be a physician will require your utmost strength and control, and I am to nurture that, then it only makes sense I provide opportunities for you to practice. In much the same way my brother helps you to practice your Greek.” He gestured toward the other vampire, whose face was now wiped of anything resembling good humor.

Carlisle's eyes locked his own, and Aro could see from the corners of his own vision that half the room was fixed on the blond, waiting for him to make another move in defiance. But finally, his face softened a little.

"As you wish," he answered, and then under his breath, added, "Master."

Pulling his cloak more closely around himself, Carlisle turned his back, and moved away from the brothers. He thanked Marcus for his time, and then in a flurry of gray wool and golden hair, disappeared toward his chambers. Alrigo made a motion to follow, but Aro shook his head.

Caius gave Aro an approving look; Marcus scowled. Aro nodded to them both. It was perfectly evident that he had won this round.

The question was, at what cost?

*

The wind whipped through Carlisle's hair as he raced into the purple dark. He preferred to hunt barefoot, and the dirt sprayed up between his toes, briefly turning his ankles black before sliding away from his impenetrable skin.

Feeding strengthened them all, and it was not uncommon for one to feel the need to run off additional energy after having had a good meal. He had not fed in over two weeks, longer than he usually allowed himself, and the surge of power was nearly overwhelming.

He swept his tongue across his lips as he ran, remembering the slick wetness of the blood which had just passed there. A mountain wolf, a hulking animal whose blood would sate him for at least a week. The animal had struggled pitifully beneath his hands as he pressed its shoulders into the earth; its legs kicking more and more jerkily as he slowly drained the life away.

Was he mistaken in thinking Aro was becoming more aggressive toward him? he wondered as he ran. Today's interaction had been...odd, to say the least. It was rare that Aro would confront him as he had. When they spoke about Carlisle's habits, it was usually in private.

And surely Aro had known of Carlisle's goal? He had gone to no effort to try to hide it. Hiding things from Aro was impossible anyway. Aro would have seen him imagining sitting by a patient's bedside, using his knowledge of the apothecary sciences and his superior senses to understand their illnesses, and at last, successfully healing them.

These had been the ends which had driven him closer and closer to the feedings; first from his own quarters, with the door closed, then with the door open, and now finally to where he could stand in the doorway to the main hall. The first time he had closed his eyes; not wishing to see the humans slaughtered, but the sounds and scents had been more than enough to leave a vivid image burned in his mind anyway. So he'd begun to stand with his eyes open.

He suspected this was what Alrigo had shown Aro. The other vampire had been following him disturbingly closely for several weeks. Stopping his pace a moment, Carlisle inhaled deeply, tasting the air. He smelled nothing. No one tailing him.

Well, that was good, at least.

He had called Aro "Master," something he rarely did. He wasn't stupid; he knew Aro would recognize his use of the term as effrontery. But he didn't care. If Aro wanted Carlisle at his side while he fed, then he would make that happen. Let them all come to grips with exactly how well-controlled Carlisle was.

Aro wanted to see this all backfire. He wanted to be right.

Carlisle had no intention of allowing either.

Letting out a frustrated growl, Carlisle suddenly launched himself into the woods, barreling forward at top speed. His legs pumped beneath him, and he barely registered the foliage as it rushed past. The earth pounded itself into submission beneath his feet. Purple dusk gave way to inky night, and he pressed himself onward, until the air chilled and thinned.

It wasn't until the terrain beneath him became rocky instead of lush and earth shifted to snow that he realized just how far from Volterra he'd run. The *Alpi* were two days' long drive by ox-cart for a human, and although he had been here before looking for ingredients for his medicines, he had never managed to run this far without intending to.

Was he running away?

He had thought about it lately. He'd begun studying one of the languages of the Orient, and he was finding steadfast wisdom in the teachings of its ancient scholars. To travel there to practice it, even as a vampire, would require a lengthy journey that would take him away from Volterra for years.

Carlisle continued to run as the trees seemed to shrink into scrub-sized versions of themselves. The air grew thinner, and he knew that this was the level where humans began to find it difficult to breathe. He found it easier--the air was like a watery soup, going down quickly instead of the thickened stew of a hot Tuscan afternoon.

It was easier for him to breathe here.

Easier, precisely because he was not human.

There was a thunderous crack like the beginning of a snow slide, and Carlisle whirled. It took only an instant for him to realize that it was not a snow slide at all—his right hand was covered in bark and sticky tree sap, and some hundred yards away lay the only decently-sized tree in the vicinity, which had been nearly three times his own height when he'd uprooted it and sent it spiraling into the dense forest below. Sickened by his own lack of control, he collapsed into a sitting position so quickly that he broke the stone beneath him before letting out a pained cry that echoed off the cliffs and snow. Somewhere in the distance, a wolf howled in answer.

He stared into the darkness, but saw no movement. *You should run*, he thought at the wolf. *I am a danger to you.*

Scuffing his feet against the ground, Carlisle thought back to the other vampire, the one who had sent him here in the first place. Jean-Jacques was a Frenchman, almost three hundred years old. He'd come across Carlisle in the abandoned, burned-out house in Paris where Carlisle had been living, sneaking to the *Collège de Sorbonne* from time to time to attend courses.

It had been the first time Carlisle had encountered another besides the small coven in London; and that coven had avoided him. He now knew why--they did not wish to be destroyed should the Volturi come to them and question them about Carlisle's existence--but at the time, it had meant that he had moved in utter solitude, and he, a mere child of twenty-three, had understood it only as rejection.

He had recognized Jean-Jacques' scent as an absence more than a presence. Unfamiliar with the scent of another of his kind, he did not recognize it. But he knew there was another being, and that for once, his throat did not burn for it. The other vampire broke in the door, expecting to find a beast ready to fight for territory. Paris was Jean-Jacques' hunting ground, and he was not interested in yielding it. His hands clenched into fists at his sides, and he entered snarling in French, demanding to know who Carlisle was.

"*Étudiant*," Carlisle cried, throwing his books down and backing against the wall, his hands upturned. "*Je suis un étudiant.*"

The other stared at him, puzzled, and Carlisle could see his mind working as he struggled to mesh the word "student" with the vampire who stood before him. The burned house was full of debris, but before Carlisle sat a volume of Aeschylus which he had smuggled from the library, and beside it, the papers upon which he was translating the Greek into French. When it seemed evident that the other would not harm him immediately, Carlisle had added that he did not hunt humans at all.

They had fallen into a long conversation after that. Jean-Jacques had been amazed at Carlisle's temperance; especially that he had chosen his lifestyle as a newborn. He was even more

impressed by Carlisle's desire to use his immortal life to better himself beyond any human measure. It had been then that he had mentioned that Carlisle reminded him of the Volturi.

Carlisle hadn't yet heard of them then. He wondered how differently his life would be if he never had? Or if perhaps he had been introduced to them the way it seemed most of his kind were: as the enforcers of the law, to be feared and revered, but generally avoided. Instead, his curiosity piqued, he had headed south.

He'd been happy at first, to discover the cultivation and sophistication of this coven. The brothers kept an expansive library, and Aro had brought scholars to Volterra from the same universities Carlisle attended. (The scholars never made it home, but Aro still prided himself on the knowledge he'd taken from their minds.) They appreciated art and funded Italy's masters; they invested in music and listened to it regularly. The compound was full of things that sparked Carlisle's imagination and intellect, and finally he felt he had some form of kinship. He spent years learning, observing, asking questions about the history of humans and the history of their kind, the Chosen, as Aro called them. He learned languages, mastered the pianoforte and the violin, taught himself to paint. Time and his mind were endless, and he planned to take advantage of both. Volterra had become home.

But all that was dropping away. The more Carlisle learned from the brothers, the more knew he would always be different. And that difference would leave him alone.

He lay down on his back and gazed up at the sky. Even though it was summer, the air here was chilly, and the cold cleared away the clouds that covered the sky down in Tuscany. The sky was a rich black, salted with stars. Carlisle could see them as a strange blue-white-red-purple, the way he imagined humans saw them through their telescopes. He had read Kant's treatise not so long ago, the bit which expanded on Galileo. According to Kant, these stars were spinning, a giant whirling disc spanning a distance so far man couldn't fathom it. The stars were uncountable, unknowable. And this planet was but a speck of dust in that larger picture.

And he was no more than a tiny bit of that.

He was just focusing in on a particularly bright star when he heard the whoosh of air that indicated a body moving somewhere behind him. At once, solid ground came beneath his feet and he stood, crouched, and ready to spring. Perhaps it was a wolf, or a mountain goat, in which case he might feed more if it attacked, or he might throw the animal on its way down the mountain.

Nostrils flaring, Carlisle sucked air into useless lungs, seeking the scent of blood. But it was not there. Instead he found the sickly sweet cloy of another of his kind. His mind flashed on Alrigo's face, with its gaunt lines and tangled hair, and then flashed away as quickly.

This was not a scent he knew.

Straightening up, he called to the darkness. "I mean you no harm." Remembering his encounter with Jean-Jacques, he added, "There are no humans to hunt here. I encroach not on your territory."

The trees gave no answer, and the wind continued whipping across the face of the mountain. But then behind him, a single twig snapped.

In the moonlight, the others' skin shone as his did, a blue-white like the Grecian statues Aro was so fond of collecting. He was the same height as Carlisle and of a similar build. Their hair differed by half a shade, although the other's was far longer, tied between his shoulder blades with a bit of leather. For a fleeting moment, Carlisle imagined that someone else could mistake the two of them for brothers.

"I likewise mean you no harm," the other said finally, his head cocked as he observed Carlisle. "I found you...kill."

When Carlisle's eyes stayed fixed on him, the man smiled and went on. "It *was* your kill, then. No wonder you claim not to encroach on territory. There are plenty of humans at the foot of these mountains. I conclude that the animal was slain instead of a human by your choice?"

Carlisle nodded slowly, and a smile spread across the other's face.

"You are English?" he asked.

Carlisle nodded again. "You also?"

The other laughed, a booming sound that echoed off the cliffs. "I am no English. I was born to both my lives in the New World. A Virginian."

"A colonist?"

The booming laugh came again. "Colonist no longer, my friend."

Of course. Being immersed in Tuscan culture, Carlisle had barely followed the war, but he knew that the English colonies in the new world had separated some scant handful of years ago. It was little wonder this other man took this as a point of pride.

"My apologies. Of course you are an American." He extended a hand. "My name is Carlisle."

For a moment, the other did not move, but then he bounded forward and took the offered hand in a confident grip.

"They call me Garrett."

Chapter Ten: Layman

London, England

May, 1667

“The peace of God, which passeth all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his son Jesus Christ our Lord, and the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, be amongst you and remain with you always. Amen.”

“Amen,” repeated the congregation, bowing their heads collectively. There came a shuffling sound as the parishioners moved from their pews and towards the door.

Young William stood at his side, and William glanced at him. The boy's eyes were distant, staring blankly toward the front of the church, where parishioners were beginning to slowly file out down the aisle toward them. Out of the corner of his eye, William watched him as he greeted the departing church members. A good number of them had words for Young William as well--the church members liked to call on him just as often.

The Milner boy was one of the last ones to leave the church, and William could see him searching out in the churchyard for another--Anne Nesbit, his intended. William had known Thomas his whole life; his parents were some years younger than William, and had come to Aldgate when Mrs. Milner had been carrying Thomas. It had been only a few short months after his own child had been born. William remembered baptizing baby Thomas and wondering if Thomas would become a companion to his own child, who was at nurse in the next parish. It had been still a handful of years before Thomas and Young William would meet, but when they had, they'd become fast friends.

He watched as the two young men greeted each other, his son saying something in a low voice to the other young man as he nodded knowingly toward the door. The women, who left the church before the men, stood in the churchyard awaiting their escorts home, and Anne waved a gloved hand in the direction of the two. A wide smile spread across Thomas's face, a much subtler one across Young William's.

Then the Milner boy was gone, bounding out of the church to take the arm of his intended, and William watched as a strange, wistful look clouded his son's face.

William could hear his voice offering blessings for the week, commenting on how the Lord had surely brought about the change in health for a woman who just a few weeks ago had been too ill to come to the church on her own, but as he spoke, his mind was with his son. The boy stood there, staring into the emptying churchyard.

As Thomas took the arm of his woman in the churchyard, and the two of them walked away slowly, William felt a tiny jerk in his own stomach. He'd hoped his son would marry early as well. Not because he needed a wife--his son was at times disturbingly skilled at women's work. He was a good cook and dedicated housekeeper, and cared for William as though William was more his ward than his father.

But no. It was, if William admitted it, more superstition than anything. Even though Sarah had been young, and even though it was nothing out of the ordinary for a woman to lose her life in childbirth, he had always felt that if somehow he had married earlier, if he and Sarah had met sooner, he would not be standing at the back of a church, saying goodbye to his parishioners without his wife at his side. His son would have grown up knowing a mother's care, perhaps be challenged in his own ways by the presence of siblings.

If he'd married younger, the two of them would not be so alone.

As the last parishioners trickled their way out of the church, Young William replaced the crucifix in its stand and moved toward the front of the church to collect the sacrament vessels. He would retreat with them to the small sacristy, clean them, and return to the vicarage to cook their supper, as their housekeeper was excused from work Sundays. The remainder of the day was to be a day of rest for them both, typically spent reading.

His son was beginning to make his way up the aisle toward the altar.

“William?”

The boy whirled, his blue eyes flashing. For the briefest of moments William considered whether he ought to call him by the name he preferred. It would save these murderous glares every time he wanted to get his son’s attention.

“Ah. Wouldst thou...I was thinking that perhaps we ought leave the vessels just yet.”

His son's eyebrows raised. “Leave them?”

“Yes. This work should not be done on the Sabbath, truly. Let us go in to the house and rest.”

Instead of compliance, William was met with a skeptical look.

“Leave the vessels.”

William nodded. “I wish to speak with thee awhile.”

The younger Cullen continued to frown, still backing slowly toward the front of the church. “I--I think it best if I at least lock them further into the church,” he said simply. “I’ll take them into the sacristy and lock them there, to guard against thievery.”

It was a reasonable thought. He nodded, and his son disappeared.

The other Cullen appeared again near the altar, having stowed the vessels safely. Still with the same doubtful look, he followed his father back to the vicarage. He offered to put on their afternoon supper, to which William agreed. The pottage today contained a good amount of venison, which the younger one had purchased from the butcher the day before. For a long while, they ate in silence, William unsure how to broach the topic.

“I understand the Milner boy is contracted?” William said at last.

His son snorted into his stew, a strangled sound that William couldn’t distinguish as to whether it was laughter or indignity.

“I simply refer to this because I thought that it might be of interest to you. I watched the two of you speaking today.”

“Thomas is my friend. Of course we spoke. It has nothing to do with Anne.”

William didn't say anything further, and for a long several minutes, the only sounds in the kitchen were their spoons scraping against their bowls, the occasional slurp of a bit of broth, his son's breathy gulps of his beer.

“Doest thou think of marriage?” William asked timidly at last.

His son's head snapped up. “I beg you?”

“Marriage. Doest thou think on it?”

The younger Cullen gave him a look. It wasn’t contempt, or anger, but...wariness? That was it. He looked entirely suspicious.

“Of course I do,” he said, and now he looked puzzled. “But I am not yet ready to marry.”

“Ah. Well, I was merely thinking, William,”

“Carlisle.”

His face grew hot. “That is not what I named thee.”

“It is what thou Christened me.”

He hadn’t expected this conversation to go smoothly, but this was even more resistance than he’d anticipated. William looked across the table to find his son scowling at him. When they caught eyes, his son averted his eyes.

Swallowing, William went on. "What of Miss Connor? She seems lovely." *And interested in thee*, he thought to himself. The Connor girl, who was of maybe sixteen or eighteen, William couldn't remember, had made it a point today to detour to say goodbye to his son.

At the suggestion, a strange, pained look flashed across his son's face. For a long moment, he did not meet William's eyes, and when he spoke, his voice was tight.

"Wishest thou to be my matchmaker, Father? That ought be the job of my mother." He scowled downward. "Except I have none."

"That is not my doing," William snapped. Except...hadn't that been just what he'd been thinking as they stood in the nave? That somehow, if he had done things differently, Sarah would be here. What kind of son would he have, if today there were three at this table instead of two? Or perhaps even more--Young William would have experience with leading a household larger than this one by far, for surely he and Sarah would have conceived again. They had spoken of six, or maybe seven, depending on how many sons the Lord would grant them. Their plan had been to have a large family; not for William to sit here with their only son, utterly alone.

As he took the spoon to have another bite of the pottage, his hand trembled so violently that his fingers lost their grip, sending the spoon splashing into the bowl, handle and all. His son shot to his feet, and William hardly had time to register what had happened before a rag appeared to clean the mess.

This was the urgency, William thought as his son replaced his utensil alongside his bowl, a confused expression clouding his face. The time to have his son succeed him, to study at seminary, marry, perhaps even produce a son of his own—it grew shorter and shorter by the day. He didn't have time to wait for his son to come around to his ways of thinking. He didn't have time to hold off while his son went to seminary, buried himself in his studies, and only once he served a parish, began to think about a wife. Despite whatever the barber-surgeon might tell him, William knew his future was certain. And that meant his son's needed to be, as well.

"I only wish thy happiness, like that of thy friend," he said.

"No, Father, thou wishest for me to be like thee," his son snarled. "That would not make me happy." The younger one's stool screeched as it shoved backward against the stone floor. His bowl was empty, as was his cup.

William bristled. "Thou shalt refer to me as *you*."

His son's jaw flexed.

"I will marry," he said finally. "But I will do so when I wish to. I need not your help, nor that of anyone else. *You* may wish me to be exactly like you, Father. But it is fully my intention not to make your mistakes."

And then he was gone, the door opening and closing behind him. When William turned back to his stew, he found it had gone cold.

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Carlisle's fists were still clenching and unclenching of their own accord nearly an hour later as he walked toward Elizabeth's. He'd told William he planned to take a walk and would be gone awhile; William had seemed only too glad to be rid of him.

He'd lashed out, which was unusual for him, and more than a little unreasonable, he knew. His father knew nothing of Elizabeth Bradshawe, and that was all Carlisle's doing. She was still his secret. Some part of him felt that to tell his father that he was courting would be to destroy all the beauty of the act. He was like some fiendish animal, hording the goodness away from someone he didn't even think would take it away.

He was still surprised at his father's choice of topic—they had never once talked about the likelihood of Carlisle choosing a wife. Never before had William in any way indicated that he was even interested in the matter. Although...he remembered back to Thomas's words, the day he'd

asked for help crafting that first letter to Elizabeth. “And here your father worries he will die with you still a bachelor.”

What did that mean exactly? It wasn't something Carlisle thought much about, if he were completely honest with himself. His earliest memories were of his fathers' stern guidance, teaching him to memorize scripture before he was able to read it, to work hard on the six days of the week and to work equally hard on more spiritual pursuits on the Sabbath. He'd learned to care for the church as he grew, first simply sweeping the nave and the doorsteps, and progressing to digging the graves in the modest burial yard by the time he was a young teenager. He had played on occasion with the other children of the parish, like Thomas, but it had been rare. William's entire existence was grooming his son to take the helm of his church. It was the only thing of which they ever seemed to speak.

So what was this business about Carlisle marrying, he wondered. And why had it come on so suddenly? Yes, it was true that Thomas and Anne came to church together now, separating only to sit in their appointed men's and women's pews. Carlisle had watched them this morning from where he sat toward the front of the church. Thomas steal a glance over his shoulder at Anne, who would sneak him a shy smile and then look down again into her apron. Their visits were growing more and more unchaperoned by the day, and it was common now for Thomas to go to Anne's home to bundle with her as they slept.

He was jealous, if he admitted it. But it was different than covetousness. He didn't covet Anne. She was a fine woman for Thomas, but Carlisle preferred Elizabeth—the way she gently teased him, the way she seemed to know everything about him before he even opened his mouth. The way she stood up to her brother, who had been appointed their chaperone on more than one occasion. This, Carlisle had discovered, was actually a good thing. Christopher seemed to have better things to do than watch his sister, and it wasn't unheard of for him to duck into a tavern and agree to meet them sometime a bit later, leaving Carlisle and Elizabeth to their own devices for a blissful hour or two.

The conversation about whether or not Carlisle would be permitted to court Elizabeth had been short and to the point, at the coffee house one evening three weeks before. Carlisle had been reading the newspaper when a body dropped onto the bench next to him, shaking the table so that the cups rattled.

“My mother tells me you wish to court my younger sister.”

Carlisle raised his eyebrows, attempting to sip his coffee and appear unruffled, but he could feel the heat beginning at the bottom of his neck and knew he would be entirely red in the face before long. But he managed to keep his voice from squeaking as he said, “Your mother is correct.”

Christopher stared at him. “What are thy intentions for her?”

He closed his eyes briefly then. His intentions. Carlisle wasn't one to remember dreams, at least, not terribly often. This had served him well in childhood, when at times his fathers' preaching of demons and devils lurking in the streets of London had led to nights of interrupted sleep, and of course, after that horrible day at Tyburn when he'd been such a young man he had been grateful for his amnesia when he often jerked himself awake in the dark of night.

Like all dreams, this one had been imperfect and short. The woman he'd dreamed wasn't quite Elizabeth, although some part of his dream-mind knew it to be her. She'd lacked the fine features, but had the dark hair and the gentle laughter. But the thing Carlisle remembered was the feeling—the love so intense it caused a physical ache in his belly that stayed with him long after he awoke. And then there had been the object of both their adoration. He couldn't remember the face, and this bothered him, but he remembered the feel of a small hand in his own, the heat of a body against his chest. Jonathan, they had both called him. And as Carlisle had walked hand-in-hand with

the dream-Elizabeth, the little thing had sped away from them on surprisingly steady legs, dancing and bobbing around them and giggling in the same high laugh of his mother.

Pulling himself back to the coffee house and to Christopher, he answered quietly, "Only the most honorable. Marriage, if she'll have me. Children, thereafter."

Christopher studied him. "And of your work?"

"My work?"

"You wish to become a solicitor, but your father wishes you to go to the seminary, am I correct?"

Carlisle nodded.

"And you are apprenticed to Mr. Tyne."

Carlisle nodded again.

The cup of coffee in Christopher's hands turned around once before he set it on the table again, still frowning. It took him a long time to speak. "I should think, Mr. Cullen, that it not be proper for my sister to marry a carpenter," he said at last. "But she would be an excellent wife to a solicitor. Or a minister. If those be your intended occupations, then I see no reason to bar my sister's wishes."

My sister's wishes. Carlisle's heart jerked. So Elizabeth had spoken to her brother and indicated a preference for him. The heat spread upward from his neck again.

Christopher was already standing, gathering his coffee and his own newspaper to move to a table which contained men he knew better. But he stopped a moment, leaning back. "And Mr. Cullen?"

"Yes?"

"If I should discover that you have opened her legs before you are properly wed, not only will you not have my sister, I will see to it personally that you are disfigured such that no woman in England will want you."

And then he had disappeared, off to another table in the coffee house, from which he had studied Carlisle for the remainder of the evening.

Carlisle had seen Elizabeth nearly every day since, stopping by the small house when his days' work was finished at the carpentry shop. He grew to look forward to the way her eyes would alight when she saw him over the half-door. Her younger brother George, known to all as Georgie, seemed to enjoy him, too—on one excursion with Elizabeth not long after Carlisle began his courtship, they had walked a mile with Georgie to a field to play a bit of ball. Carlisle had thoroughly enjoyed himself, running up and down the field and kicking the ball back and forth with Georgie as Elizabeth and Mrs. Bradshawe looked on. Asked about it later, Carlisle had explained sheepishly that his father had forbade him to do such frivolous things as play ball as a child, and so the opportunity to make up for lost time was more than welcome.

Today, his feet seemed to find their way toward Elizabeth's of their own accord, his fingers running carefully across the item in his pocket. It was a small box, made of cherry and holly, with a little lid that slid on in two pieces, like a puzzle. Carlisle had fashioned it himself in stolen moments during the week, between work on a large scroll desk ordered by the Milner. Inside the box, he had scribbled a verse from the Song of Songs: "As the lillie among thornes, so is my love among the daughters." Thomas had scoffed at him, encouraging him to choose one of the scriptures' more suggestive verses, or better yet, a bawdy limerick. But Carlisle stood his ground, and so it was this small verse he carried across London's busy streets.

Elizabeth was waiting for him when he arrived, standing in the doorway. Her hair was pulled away from her face, but just enough had been left to trail over her neck so that Carlisle felt a warm feeling start in his belly. He had taken to wearing his hose as tight as he could manage it, so that in the instance his body got away from his mind, this would at least be hidden from Elizabeth.

He was glad for this now as Elizabeth caught his eye, a wide smile spreading across her face. As he reached her, he bowed his head in a polite nod to her.

"Miss Bradshawe."

She rolled her eyes, pointedly answering, "Carlisle." She took his hand and squeezed it, and Carlisle felt an odd coolness shoot down his spine from his collar. Her hands were pliant in his, and he recognized the feel of soft cloth at once. He was unable to suppress his smile.

"You wear my gloves," he said, delighted.

She blinked at him, frowning. "Is that not what you intended? If you would prefer, I will leave them home so that no one will see that I have them."

He choked and swallowed, but before he was able to squeak out the lie that of course he wouldn't mind if she didn't wear them, he realized Elizabeth was laughing.

Oh. He was being teased.

Her arm found its way into his, and they walked together between the houses to the tiny yard at the back. This was one of the few places they were allowed without a chaperone, mostly because Elizabeth's mother and brother could see them from the back of the house. The yard was mostly dry dirt, with a small patch given over to where Elizabeth and her mother tended a small patch of vegetables and herbs. The Bradshawes also owned two hens, who wandered the yard and stayed out of the garden by virtue of grain-filled bellies and a small fence around the garden erected by Christopher. But importantly, there was a beech tree, which due to some force of nature, had grown one branch out sideways for nearly two feet before it stretched upward. The branch made a perfect seat for two, and the bright-green leaves above them a bower.

They sat there together awhile, her knee against his. The branch was just high enough that Elizabeth's feet did not touch the ground, and his grazed it just barely, if he pointed his toes. More often, though, he let his feet swing freely, as he did today, staring down at them as the toe of his boot became scuffed with dirt.

"You seem quiet today," she said after a moment.

This startled him. "Seem I?"

"You are always quiet," she answered, leaning into him a bit so that the swell of her breast brushed his side. He shivered. "But today, you seem more so."

He sighed, looking upward into the tree. Its branches swayed back and forth, leaving a shifting, dappled shadow on the earth beneath them. "My father and I quarreled," he said to the swaying branches.

"Quarreled about?"

You, Carlisle wanted to answer, but that wasn't true. William had absolutely no idea that Carlisle was courting anyone. He'd hidden this for fear his father would find it displeasing. But now he wondered if disclosing this would be harmful or good.

"He wishes for me to marry."

Elizabeth laughed. "Well, he's not alone in wishing for that."

This made Carlisle jerk upright. "I—your pardon?"

"Merely a thought." She patted his arm. "I am sorry you quarreled."

He stared up into the trees again.

"Wouldst thou marry a carpenter?" he asked at last.

"Do not you wish to be a solicitor?"

"My father is set against it, and thy brother is set against my trade."

At this, Elizabeth smiled. "Christopher worries overly much for me."

Of course, there was a way around both of these, Carlisle thought. Christopher would be satisfied if Carlisle became a minister, and so would his father be, also. If his father were still living, there might be reason to take a parish somewhere other than Aldgate. Perhaps even out of London

entirely. But he ignored this thought, and instead spoke of the Sunday, of his frustration with his father. She filled in with her week, with tales of caring for Goergie and helping her mother, the most recent places Christopher seemed to have ducked off to when she needed to run an errand. Elizabeth's leg rubbed his own as they sat, and the feeling was so warm and comfortable that Carlisle couldn't help but inch closer. They chatted easily as the sun began to set, making the shadows of their legs in the dirt stretch alongside the shadow of the branches, as though they, too, were simply one part of the tree.

It was as he shifted his body closer to her that he remembered the box in his pocket.

"Oh," he said quietly. "I brought something for you." He rocked his body a bit so that he could reach, and pulled out the small box. He pressed it into Elizabeth's palm, and he explored it with tentative fingers, turning it over in the light. It took her all of a minute to work the simple puzzle which opened the top. Her smile became even wider as she read the inscription

"It's beautiful."

"It wasn't too difficult."

"I do not take thee at thy word on that, Mr. Cullen." She leaned closer to him, and his face flushed with heat. "Thank you," she whispered, so close that her breath tickled his face.

He shifted uncomfortably. Did he move toward her? Allow her to get closer?

"It is my pleasure," he mumbled indistinctly, looking down, hoping she wouldn't notice his reddening cheeks. But she did not take the signal, instead leaning into him further.

"Christ was a carpenter, you know," she said, closing her eyes and leaning toward him.

A distinct chill, as surely as though they had suddenly had a winter wind, shot down his spine. Elizabeth's lips searched his, pressing insistently but gently. It took him a good few moments to overcome his shock, but then he found that by some miracle, his own lips knew what to do in answer. The two of them kissed hungrily, impatiently, and it was only when he'd nearly run out of breath that he muttered, "What if thy mother sees?"

She laughed, the sound oddly muffled by his lips. He could feel her breath escaping the corners of her mouth as it tickled his own cheeks.

"Were she angry with thee, I would imagine she would come out," she answered, "instead of standing at the window smiling at us."

His head jerked up. Sure enough, Mrs. Bradshawe stood at the back of the house, gazing out the window at them with a smile on her face. When she noticed Carlisle looking at her, she waved briefly, and then, as though to assuage him, turned away. Elizabeth chuckled, her face still mere inches from his.

"Mr. Cullen," she whispered through her laughter, "I do not believe I have ever seen a man turn quite this shade of red."

Then her lips were on his again, and he let himself quite forget about her mother.

Chapter Eleven: Infantryman

Chicago, Illinois
October, 1918

Heat from the tea radiated into Elizabeth's palms as she turned the porcelain cup carefully in her hands. October was coming on cold. The *Sun-Times* thought this was good—they hoped that somehow it would slow the transmission of the influenza.

Elizabeth had her doubts.

“Beth?”

She looked up. Theresa had been a mere acquaintance from the Ladies' Aid society at the church. But that was before Edward Senior and Theresa's Michael had been taken by the influenza only two days apart. Like Elizabeth, Theresa's children were nearly grown, and like Edward Junior, Theresa's son had a perverse desire to be at war.

Except that Charles was old enough to enlist, and therefore, already overseas.

“I was thinking about Charles,” Elizabeth muttered. “You know Edward Junior wants to be at war.”

Her friend nodded. “I recall you saying that—he went down to enlist, didn't he? Was caught by one of the teachers from the Latin school?”

She nodded. “If it weren't for the fact that keeping him alive is what I'm aiming to do, I would have killed that boy.”

They both chuckled but quickly fell silent again.

“Edward wanted Junior to go to war,” Elizabeth muttered at last. “Sometimes I think...well, is it silly to feel like Edward wouldn't be gone if I'd done what he wanted?”

Her friend smiled sadly, reaching across the table to take Elizabeth's hand. “I think the same thing. I lay awake at night making faces at God. Asking him if I go back and change things, if I do a little bit more of the things Michael wanted. Maybe if I let him buy that Chevrolet, or if we'd taken the train to the shore in Michigan, like he always wanted to do in the summer. The air in the car or the air at the shore would've made him stronger, maybe.”

Elizabeth smiled a little smile.

"I know. Doesn't make an ounce of sense."

She shook her head.

"But neither does sending Junior off to war. Your heart would break, Beth. Mine does, and I still have Janice here with her babies. If Junior goes over to the war, you won't have anyone."

It was true. Although, to be honest, the subject of the war hadn't come up once in the two weeks since Edward's passing. It was as if Junior's every desire had evaporated. He didn't play the piano; he rarely went out with his friends. There was a single package of Lucky Strikes on his bureau, that, as far as she could tell, was not being depleted. He had been reading Dickens and Doyle, but these novels were now upended on his nightstand.

Three weeks ago, any report from overseas was a chance for Junior to stare wistfully at the radio, and proclaim loudly what he would do differently if only he were allowed to go fight.

But now these proclamations were gone. He almost never turned the radio on.

As if she were reading her mind, Theresa asked, "How is Edward Junior?"

Elizabeth shrugged. There had been no funeral, for people were forbidden to congregate. And no burial, either. As the doctor had predicted, there were no undertakers willing to handle the body. When she'd come home from the hospital that day, Junior had been sitting at the piano, practicing her favorite Chopin nocturnes. He allowed her to run her hands through his hair while he played. When she started to cry, he simply rose from the piano bench and held her. He didn't need to ask what had happened.

In the days since, they hadn't spoken of it. Like his father, Edward Junior was a stoic. He spoke of assuming the management of the family's bank accounts without ever once referring to why this would be necessary. He sent a letter off to the keeper of the grounds at their church to find out what it would cost to order a headstone. He took to carrying his father's pocket watch and lighter, and the way he resembled Senior with his lopsided trousers caused tears to well in Elizabeth's eyes every time.

It was only at night, when the house was dark and all was still, that she heard the wet, quavering breaths echo down the hall as her child sobbed.

"He does as well as might be expected," she said. "He's a good boy."

Her friend nodded sadly. "I don't even know if Charles has received the telegram yet. I don't know if I'll even get a letter from him when he does...they say the French and English troops are marching on the German front. Don't know if our boys will be sent with them."

The news lately had been encouraging, if one ignored the death toll. Germany was receding--the line in France was supposed to be able to be breached by the Allies.

"Is it cruel of me," she said to Theresa, "that I hope for an end to the war not to end the war, but to keep Junior from enlisting?"

Her friend gave her a sorrowful look, and Elizabeth realized at once she was thinking about her own son. Charles had attended Latin school with Junior. He was a few years older, a few inches taller, and a good bit larger, too. Although she wouldn't admit it to Theresa, she had an easier time imagining Charles there, with the drab uniform and tin hat. But she couldn't imagine her own child in that dress. The hands, which were so skilled before a piano keyboard, holding a gun instead?

Her friend stared at her.

"I'm sorry," Elizabeth mumbled. "That was quite rude of me to say."

Theresa shook her head. "I understand, Beth. I don't want Charles over there, either." She reached across the table and squeezed Elizabeth's hand. "And I'll pray with you that the war ends before Edward can go."

The women sat in silence awhile, spoons clinking against china as each stirred her tea.

The knock was so aggressive that Elizabeth, who was taking a sip when it came, slopped tea down the front of her dress. It started to spread, a strange, light reddish brown over her breasts. She muttered a string of excuses to Theresa and stood from the table.

The boy on the stoop was blond and mousy, his eyes wide behind his thick glasses. She recognized him as one of Junior's classmates.

"Mrs. Masen? I'm Eugene. Eugene McElhinny.."

Eugene's face was flushed, and she realized a moment later, dripping with sweat. He appeared to have run to her doorstep—from where, she didn't know. She nodded for him to go on.

Later, she would wonder what she'd been expecting. Whether she'd been thinking that there would only be a brief announcement, perhaps an invitation for Junior to go out with his friends—never mind that he had been out with them for the better part of the afternoon. But she wasn't expecting the three words that Eugene spoke:

"It's Edward, ma'am."

Edward? She had barely begun to form the question, "I'm sorry?" when she looked over Eugene's shoulder and saw the others, nearly halfway down the street.

They were large boys, two of the backers or whatever they were called from the Latin school football team. She'd forgotten their names, but Edward spent time with them often, smoking Lucky Strikes and pilfering whatever bathtub gin they could get their hands on. It was a frigid day, and both boys were dressed in thick coats, their scarves flapping in the wind—one end behind their necks, tassels flying, and one end whipping the face of the boy who hung between them.

This third boy's feet moved of their own accord, but only barely so, and he'd slung an arm over each of the other boys' shoulders to keep himself upright. His face was hidden, but even in the faint light that was all of the setting sun hidden behind the clouds, she could see the reddish hair shining.

Elizabeth ran before she was even conscious of commanding herself to, and she nearly tripped and fell as she flew off the concrete porch stairs. She screamed to him, crying out his name over and over. "Edward" and "Junior" and even "Teddy," the nickname they'd tried to give him but which he'd refused since the age of four.

She nearly slammed into the boys carrying him. His hands slid from their shoulders and clasped around her neck instead, his face finding its way into her shoulder so that she could feel his hair, dampened with sweat. His body was unnaturally hot against hers. Edward had rarely been ill as a child, but when he had, he'd had the tendency to run high fevers and to suffer for days. Of course, then he had been small enough that even she had been able to lift him and pull his fevered body to her own. Now, it was all she could do to keep him upright as he stumbled forward.

At once, she began running her hands through hair already sticky with sweat, mumbling her child's name over and over. He collapsed against her, his head falling heavy against her breasts for the first time in at least a decade.

Her mind began to race. How long did he have? Senior had expired in only two days. There were stories of dozens who'd been stricken in the morning and died in the afternoon.

Edward's breath was hot and wet against her neck. He was panting as though he'd run several miles, when instead he was barely able to stand. Where would she take him? The hospitals were closed to new admissions. And how would she even get him there, with him barely able to stand? They didn't have an automobile, and even if they had, she wouldn't have known how to drive it.

"Beth?"

She spun halfway, her shoulders twisting as she kept her arms firmly around Edward.

Theresa stood behind her, her eyes wet. "Do you need help getting him inside the house?"

Elizabeth nodded, her eyes flooding. Theresa and Elizabeth took the place of the two large boys and Edward's body sagged between them as they turned back to the house.

"Thank you," she managed, as the boys began to walk away. Their steps were quick; and no wonder. It had been an heroic enough action simply to bring Edward home; she understood that now they wished to put as much distance between themselves and a so obviously-infected person.

One of the boys tipped his hat to her, and Eugene said, "You're welcome, Mrs. Masen." He looked nervously from her to Edward and back, and mumbled, "I hope he gets better."

Absently, still looking at Edward, Elizabeth nodded to Eugene.

"Thank you," she muttered, trying not to acknowledge the content of what Eugene had just offered.

Because they both knew the odds.

Edward shuffled slowly between the two women as they progressed back to the house. When they managed to make it inside, they helped Edward onto the couch in the sitting room. He groaned, throwing one lanky arm over his head.

"Edward," she murmured. "Edward, I'm going to help you. Mama will help you. I'm going to go get a cold rag."

Theresa, however, had beaten her to it. She thrust the dripping cloth into Elizabeth's hands—it felt as though it had been put in the cold box, and perhaps it had. She laid it on Edward's brow, and he trembled.

What was she going to do? Edward had been responsible for helping to get Senior to the hospital. She had no way of getting him there—if they would even take him.

"Mother," he managed a moment later, his lips shaking as though he'd just come in from a snowstorm. "The doctors."

He drew a shaky breath and then broke into a coughing fit.

At once, Elizabeth propped his back up, as she had done so many times when he'd been ill as a child. Her hands remembered the feel of the spindly body before them, the way he'd been so skinny that she could feel every bump of his spine. That wasn't the case any longer. Her son was still slender, but his body had filled out. The once thin back was now covered with strong muscle that contracted violently with each cough.

"It's all right, sweetheart," she murmured. "I'll take care of you."

His head shook furiously. "I need—a doctor," he managed.

It was the same thing his father had said. And in the same, authoritative manner.

"Beth?"

Theresa looked over Elizabeth's shoulders at them both.

"Let me go on," she murmured. "I'll get Janice's Michael. They have a new Ford, did I tell you that?"

Elizabeth shook her head, temporarily bewildered. A car? She hadn't mentioned it earlier, but it was odd to mention it now. "That's nice," she heard herself say.

"Beth, He'll come back. We'll come back. We'll come back with the car. And we'll take Junior to the infirmary."

The tears came so quickly she didn't have a moment to try to stifle them. Her breath escaped her in a shudder.

"Oh, Theresa, thank you," she managed. "Thank you..."

Her friend shook her head, and Elizabeth suddenly found her hand squeezed in a firm grasp.

"We can't lose our boys, Beth," Theresa murmured. "We've lost our men—we won't lose our boys."

The front door clicked behind her as she left, and suddenly, the house was still.

When Junior had been a baby, Edward had arrived home one day with a box. A clock kit, to assemble a grandfather clock. It was a nightmare, keeping the baby out of the parts, and Elizabeth lived three weeks in fear that he would crawl to the work area, shove a gear into his eager mouth, and choke to his death. So it had been to her great relief when Edward finally declared the clock complete, and she could freely let their baby crawl throughout the house again.

It had remained the centerpiece in their parlor for all the intervening years. She had measured Junior against it in her mind—just after his first birthday, when he toddled past, barely able to see the pendulum, his tenth birthday, when he'd reached the chimes, his fifteenth, when he'd stood level with the dial.

We've lost our men, Theresa had said. We won't lose our boys.

Settling in with her arms firmly around her son, Elizabeth listened to the steady tick and prayed her friend was right.

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The radio in one corner of the armory crackled. It was one of the few rallying points in the place—the flu patients, or at least, those who were able, would crowd around it to hear updates on the war. At any given time, the bodies around the radio might be as many as three deep, and the doctors and nurses would have to gently urge patients back to bed.

This was what Carlisle was doing now, half-carrying, half-dragging a man whose eyes were red and whose fingernail beds were already turning a violent shade of purplish-blue. He caught the slightest bit of the broadcast as he took the man's arm. The gravelly voice reported that there was to be an offensive against the Hindenburg line—all the Allied forces would begin trying to breach the German offensive in northeastern France.

The war was becoming harder and harder to fight. Farmers recruited into the armies in France and Britain had left food shortages for the wives and children left at home, to say nothing of the food for the soldiers themselves. As the death toll rose, there were fewer regiments available to refresh the exhausted men in the trenches, and although Wilson sent thousands of U.S. boys there every day, the reinforcements were nowhere near enough.

It was a fitting duality, Carlisle thought as he placed a firm hand on his patient's shoulder and pushed him onto the cot. In France, they fought a war against a physical enemy, who pressed closer and closer in on the country. Men died, more men came to their aid, only to be ripped apart by rifle fire and to drown in the gas. In the chaos that was Chicago, it felt as though a German offensive pressed itself against the windows of the armories and hospitals, claiming life after life as it rolled forward toward some ill-defined goal. And as in Europe, the reinforcements for the front line of this war grew more depleted by the day.

Carlisle was working two positions now, sneaking from one to the other at the change of the light, escaping only every fourth day or so to feed. The armory had no windows and so he could work here during the day, moving from bedside to bedside as he carefully monitored the patients. There were over two hundred of them, in neat rows of cots with a single sheet and blanket apiece.

It seemed they ran out of these every few hours. Some new patient would arrive and be relegated to a cot or even the floor without so much as a bed sheet to cover him. The nurses who volunteered their time boiled the sheets as quickly as possible when new patients left—either because they had become well, or, more often, when they were transferred to the hospital. And every now and again they would lose one or two, patients who slipped away before anyone could notice. This was the saddest, because it was their job to look out for these people, the ones who were so sick they needed to be admitted to the hospitals at once. But they couldn't do it. There weren't enough eyes, enough hands. The humans were exhausted.

And though there was no physical reason for this to be the case, Carlisle felt exhausted, too. "Doctor?"

He looked down. He'd nearly forgotten about the man he had just ushered away from the radio. The man's lungs were already crackling—not so much that a human would hear without a good stethoscope, but to Carlisle the sound was deafening.

“Doctor, how much longer do I have?”

Carlisle's eyes closed. He wouldn't lie—he couldn't lie, not when so many patients came in and out. He envied the human doctors with their fallible memories, the way they wouldn't remember the patients they'd lost the week before.

Carlisle remembered them all.

Three hundred and forty-seven, mostly at the hospital, but a dozen and a half here as well, in the two weeks he'd worked here. The woman who had already been widowed and who left five young children with their aunt. The father of four, his body ruined by bathtub gin long before the influenza set in; he hadn't lasted a day. The young man intent on making it to New York to make his fortune in the stock exchange. He'd come from Iowa, and his mother didn't even know he was in Chicago. Carlisle had been the one to send the telegram.

And then there were the children. Carlisle claimed to detest children, if anyone asked. This was his excuse for treating them as little as he could. The truth was he couldn't bear their loss. Losing a human who was old, who had children and grandchildren, who had lived a full life and was happy with his lot, that was one thing. It was almost beautiful, in its own way, and Carlisle could recognize in the peaceful eyes the way he himself would have preferred to leave his life. With younger adults, it was harder, but still there was some redemption—they had lived a while, many had families, they had lived past the age to which Carlisle had lived as a human.

But with children, there was nothing to hold. They hadn't finished school. They'd never experienced a world which was not run by their parents. They didn't know what it was to fall in love, or hold a job, or feel as though they contributed to the world themselves. When they died, it was the worst kind of loss, and it was liable to knock Carlisle off-kilter for days.

Here, however, it was utterly unavoidable. For all his supernatural strength and senses, he might as well have been the Angel of Death.

“Doctor? How much longer?”

Carlisle brought himself back to the present and looked down at the patient under his hands. He realized at once that he did not know his patient's name; he would need to look this up so that he could transfer the man to one of the hospital lists. But there was not a great deal which could be done.

“I'm not sure,” he heard himself whisper. “Not long. Is there anything I can do for you?”

“No,” the man sighed. “Not really.” He rolled away from Carlisle, staring at the seemingly endless rows of cots. His own creaked as he settled himself in, curling into a fetal position beneath the thin blanket.

Carlisle nodded. But as he moved away, he muttered, “I'm sorry” in a voice too low for human ears.

He made his way toward the doors of the armory, straightening blankets and taking inventory of patients as he passed. The nurses tried to keep track of everyone they could, but even clipboards at the ready, they couldn't keep track of everything. Bed 45 was lying in his own vomit; Carlisle mopped this with a dry rag and promised to return to clean further. Bed 82 had given his blanket to his daughter, Bed 84, and now lay shivering despite the humid air. Bed 107 looked badly in need of hydration.

Making his to-do list, Carlisle reached the end of the rows of cots just as the armory door swung open and a man staggered inside.

This wasn't uncommon. The influenza weakened even the strongest grown men; they often barely managed to stumble their way in the door. But what made this one different was that this

man staggered under the weight of a body; a boy, Carlisle realized at once, his heart sinking. For even though the body in the man's arms was lanky and tall, it was clearly that of quite a young man. His long, pale arms wrapped loosely around the man's neck, feet with untied shoes dangled. His head was turned into the man's collarbone so that all Carlisle could see was a shock of reddish hair.

A shock of reddish hair he *recognized*.

"Oh no," he muttered. "Oh, no, no, no."

It had been what, two weeks? At once, the woman's face swam before him, the way her eyes had filled with tears as their hands met, the transfer of a few personal effects. The way she'd stood before him, resolute in her need to move forward, already thinking about her son. Her insistence that she would manage to have her husband buried properly.

But she didn't look that way today. She stood, a little bit behind the man carrying her son, her expression no longer resolute. Those odd green eyes darted from the boy, to the man holding him, to the rows upon rows of influenza patients, and then, finally, to Carlisle.

He heard her gasp from the other side of the room.

Over the centuries, Carlisle had become accustomed to moving at the speed of his human compatriots. It had even come to the point that to do so no longer felt unnatural—his gait was preternaturally smooth, to be sure, but other than that, there was little to reveal that he was out of the ordinary.

Today, however, he cursed the need to move so slowly. He wanted nothing more than to dash across the infirmary, yank the boy into his arms, and lay him on one of the cots. It took only a few seconds for him to stride across the floor, but it might as well have been a year.

The man began to speak at once. "My friend's son has fallen ill," he explained. "This was the closest infirmary."

Carlisle was already nodding, his eyes fixed not on the boy, but on his mother. She stared at him, the green eyes neither tear-filled nor resolute, not as they had been the last time he'd seen her. Instead, today they were full of questions. He wondered, briefly, if she was feeling the same things he was—wondering what it meant that fate would throw them together twice, in such different places. It was rare, in a city like this, and that was one reason Carlisle enjoyed practicing here. The anonymity protected him, meant that even if a single person suspected he was more than who he pretended to be, it was unlikely he or she would ever encounter him again. No accusations would be leveled, and he would be free simply to disappear.

Not so this time.

The woman was shorter than he by perhaps six or seven inches. But she seemed even smaller tonight, as she stared imploringly up at him.

"Save him," she said.

Carlisle winced. Hadn't this been what had gotten him into so much trouble the first time? Pity, anger, his own feelings of helplessness. All these had led him to a promise he'd been utterly incapable of keeping.

He couldn't do that again.

"I can't," he heard himself say. "Mrs. Masen, I can't—"

"*Save* him," she repeated, and this time the voice and the eyes were harder. The resolute woman he'd met outside the men's ward had returned.

"I have faith in you."

Faith? What was there to have faith in? Overseas, the war raged, the country's young men came sailing back across the Atlantic in coffins instead of cabins. And at home the war was no better, nor was it any less deadly. And he had already failed this woman once.

But hadn't he been called to duty? Wasn't that exactly the point? Working two jobs, nearly nonstop, trying to save as many lives as he could manage? It was a different front line, but Carlisle stood on it, nonetheless.

Elizabeth Masen's eerie green eyes still stared up at him, and some part of him found himself nodding.

"I'll do my best," he whispered. "That's what I can offer. My best."

"Your best will do," she answered.

Reaching to the man, Carlisle pulled the boy into his own arms, taking care to feign a stagger as the weight was transferred. His skin seared; a high fever had already settled in. He groaned, his heavy head finding its way onto Carlisle's bicep.

That day at Cook County replayed in Carlisle's mind, the way Elizabeth had nodded first to her husband and then to her son, linking their names. He turned away from the mother and began scouting for an empty cot as he addressed the boy.

"Edward? I'm Dr. Cullen, and I'm going to take care of you."

Chapter Twelve: Friend

Volterra

June, 1789

Garrett was unlike any vampire Carlisle had ever met.

He was young, which accounted for some of it, but there was a maturity to his youth. Like Carlisle, he was forever inquisitive. He wanted to know everything he could about his new life and his old.

The first night on the mountain, the two of them talked for hours. Garrett asked how Carlisle came to be in Italy, and Carlisle explained, beginning with the dark street in Aldgate where he'd awoken to his new life and finishing in the Volturi Hall that morning as he informed Aro of the safety the Age of Reason had given them. Then, of course, Carlisle asked Garrett how he came to be here also. The other told of stowing away on a diplomatic journey, with the American Secretary of State aboard.

They traveled to spread their ideals, he said. To teach others a better way.

"The revolution, my friend," Garrett told him. "America is free, and so shall be France."

Carlisle frowned. "Is it right for our kind to meddle in the affairs of humans?"

Garrett laughed a booming laugh that seemed to rock the ground beneath them. "Is it right for our kind not to?" he asked. "Think of it this way. We have gifts beyond what humans have. Far beyond, as near as I can tell, though with my memory rotting as it is I find it more difficult to compare. As I am, I have the ability to pass on to the people of this country what I know from my country across the sea. Think of this, Carlisle. We amass knowledge as humans never can. They record history; we simply recall it. There is unlimited potential for us."

Strange warmth welled up inside Carlisle. Hadn't he had these same thoughts once? Aro, Caius and Marcus sought to beat this kind of thinking out of him, that much he knew. To be a physician, to walk among humans—for them, these were things that were beyond unattainable. Carlisle had always assumed he'd managed to resist the brothers' pessimism. But sitting with Garrett

on the side of the mountain, the wind whipping in his ears, Carlisle realized he'd internalized far more of it than he'd thought.

Garrett leaned back on his elbows. "It simply seems to me that we have a larger obligation, Friend."

Friend.

Despite the presence of another, even one who had, after only three hours' acquaintance, dared call him "Friend," Carlisle suddenly felt a deep loneliness wash over him. He'd lived this life for a hundred twenty-two years. Yes, he'd learned a great deal—languages, cultures, history, music. And medicine, of course. But what did he have to show for it? Three men who might just as soon destroy him as abet him, and a fear of becoming too close to any human.

"How...how do you reconcile who you are with what you do?" he blurted at last, and at once felt embarrassed. But Garrett only smiled.

"Who I am?" A pause. "You mean as a vampire."

Carlisle nodded.

Garrett laughed. "That's a good question. I've wondered that myself. Of course, I had no idea there were other options—you are quite the trailblazer. And far more disciplined than I." He flashed Carlisle a grin, his teeth shining in the moonlight.

The compliment made Carlisle uncomfortable. He was no saint. Only a thinker. "It was simply an abhorrent idea to me. But...I try not to judge others lest I be judged myself."

Garrett laughed again. "Spoken as only the son of a minister could speak. I'm certain the Almighty would be more than a bit impressed with you, whether you judge me or not." He shifted his weight. "And I believe you're right. Perhaps like you, I seek my penance. I have little choice but to feed from humans—your methods aside, of course—but perhaps I can repay them by making them free. It seems fair."

Leaning back into the frozen grass, Carlisle stared up at the night sky. Perhaps Garrett was right. Maybe their skill did pull them to a higher calling. It was, he thought with a laugh, exactly what his father's worldview might have been, if he'd been able to accept that his son had been turned into a demonic beast.

"And in France you are able to do this?"

"Oh, in France!" Garrett's contented sigh was almost girlish. "It's like the colonies with even more fervor. The monarchy is present here. They suppress the people to their faces, not merely with taxes from across the sea. And even taxes were suppression enough—I fought in the Virginia militia. What amazing days those were...and yet, France is even the more intense!"

"You also perceive it better."

Carlisle had seen wars as a vampire and a human; the memories from his human years being among the few which had stayed with him after his change. He remembered starving women and men; people begging for bread in the streets. Looting and fire. And he had been away from the actual fighting...

Even now, his stomach clenched. He didn't want to see that again, with his eyes and ears now attuned to every small detail. The very thought made him sick.

Another booming laugh. "I perceive it better. To be certain. You are so very serious, Carlisle."

For a long time neither said anything, and Carlisle simply stared at the stars. For him and for Garrett, with their enhanced vision, each star burned individually, some blue, some red, and dozens of shades in between. The stars would look the same in the New World, Carlisle thought. He had the vaguest memories of his father mentioning the country, and he knew from the diaries and the histories that it was men like his father who'd populated the New World. How different would his life have been, he wondered, had he been born there instead of in London?

Startled, he realized that he would not have lived to see the Revolution. He was twice as old as a human might live to be.

And more alone than any human would ever be.

"There is a need for more of us."

"I beg your pardon?"

"There is a need for more of us. In France. The people could use the help of another immortal. Particularly one who is resigned not to dine upon them after."

That same toothy grin.

It was something to think on. He had, after all, just been contemplating that he needed to be away from the brothers, if not forever, than certainly for a spell. France would give him the opportunity to move away. His French was good, and he even understood the dialect here at the border, the mash of slowed-down Italian and choppy, sped-up French that so characterized the small populace of the mountain.

"I had been thinking of leaving them," he muttered.

"Them—the ones who claim to be Rulers."

He nodded, and Garrett propped himself up on his elbows, peering at him.

"It is, I confess, something I don't understand," the other man said after a moment. "I saw very little of them. I was in the city briefly—I had heard that they ruled from that seat. But it was too obvious that their numbers were too many, and I did not wish to be tracked."

This Carlisle could understand. "They may be tracking you anyway. They are likely tracking me." He thought back to how he'd at first assumed Garrett to be Alrigo or Rafael following him into the *Alpi*.

A shrug. "Truly, they are welcome to have whatever issue with me they like. Frankly, I was far more interested in you, my friend."

"In me?"

"I saw you with the women there in the square. Selling herbs? What were you doing?"

Carlisle looked away shyly. He hadn't seen Martina in several days, in fact. The weather had been beautiful, which locked all of them in the castle except at night.

"She gives me supplies, and I make medicines, if I can."

Garrett didn't answer right away. The wind howled in their ears, but the short, cold-weather grass barely yielded beneath them.

"You truly are unique, Carlisle," he said finally. "You ought to come join me in France. You would be of great use there."

It would be fascinating to be in France. He would have the opportunity to practice medicine in a way he wasn't afforded in Volterra. The thought intrigued him. Could he withstand human blood thoroughly enough to trust himself to be safe?

But what he said instead was, "They'll expect me back in Volterra."

The booming laugh rolled over him again. "Certainly, Friend. It is better for us both if they don't suspect you of treason."

Treason. An image swirled in Carlisle's mind; nearly fifteen years ago now. The vampire who'd knelt, tearlessly weeping before the four brothers, his arms stretched by the guard. The sickening whine of ripping metal as head separated from shoulders, the purple smoke as limbs burned on a pyre. The way everyone reported his viewpoint after, touching Aro's hand...

"Aro will see this conversation," he blurted.

"I beg your pardon?"

"He sees memories. Everything you've ever thought, in detail, or at least, so I suppose—I've obviously never seen his. It is his gift."

A low whistle. "So this is why he's appointed himself the king."

Carlisle hadn't actually thought about it in so many words before, but he supposed Garrett was right. "I don't mind it," he said, but even as the words left his lips, he realized this wasn't the case. He did want to have a private conversation, or at least, one which would be his alone for more than a day or two. Aro always told Carlisle that his heart and mind were among the purest he'd ever encountered in his centuries of life, but Carlisle knew that somewhere, he was tempering his thoughts, being careful not to even think things that would cause friction, and ruin his ability to stay in Volterra.

And for what reason, exactly? Did he even want to stay?

"You don't mind?" Garrett turned toward him now, the edges of his lips curling. "I suspect you lie, Carlisle. Not to me. That's of little consequence. We have only just met. But I suspect you lie to yourself, and that is more troubling."

Was that true? He stared out over the mountains. It was nearly impossible to see, and a human eye likely would never be able to, but the faintest band of pale purple hovered in the east. He stared at this for a long while, realizing he didn't want the sun to rise. Not today. He wanted another twenty-four hours of this same, inky black, the thin mountain air revealing the brilliance of the stars.

Another twenty-four hours of having someone to talk to.

So he decided to ignore the sun.

"Tell me of America. What is it like there?"

Garrett's face alighted, and his speech tumbled from him at once. He told of the colonists and the simple, but excellent ways they lived. The land—so much of it. Corn—a staple food for Americans that Carlisle had rarely seen. The native people, whom Garrett had been raised to regard as savages but whom he had seen differently since having been changed. And the government, created by the people; the leaders elected, not born. The first ruler—president, he was called—a war general but also a farmer, who believed the country would be borne on the backs of other men of the land.

"It is our country," he said at last, with finality and a smile.

Our country. Was it possible for Carlisle to ever feel that way? He'd never thought of ownership of a place. Sure, he called himself a Londoner, which surprised others of his kind. But to call a place "our country"—that was a different proposition altogether.

By now, the sun was unmistakable, its faint rays making their skin glisten. Dawn and dusk were the safest times for them—away from the night prowling of others of their kind, and yet with the sun still so low that they still did not look otherworldly.

Garrett noticed it also. "We should part. If all you say about Aro is true"—Carlisle nodded vigorously—"then it is paramount that you ease his concern." He got to his feet, brushing bits of the stiff mountain grass off his breeches. "You ought come find me," he said. "I am in the southern region most, although I travel to Paris at times."

Carlisle nodded. "I may." He would, he thought. Standing also, Carlisle offered his hand. But instead of shaking it, Garrett gripped it and squeezed it firmly.

"It is quite an honor to meet you, Carlisle. I suspect you are one with whom I shall wish to keep contact."

Startled, Carlisle mumbled, "Likewise."

They started their different ways, but Garrett turned after only a few dozen paces.

"Freedom, Carlisle," he said. "It's worth fighting for."

And then he was gone.

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As usual, it was Caius who grew the most anxious when Carlisle did not return.

"He seeks to undermine us, Aro," he hissed, pacing back and forth before the massive desk that took up most of the room in the study. They stood in Aro's private chambers, the study adjacent to the opulent room in which Aro entertained his mate.

Marcus stood with his back against the wall, watching Caius with a bemused expression.

Aro turned to him. "My brother Marcus," he said, "certainly you know Carlisle's heart. Does he desire to defect?"

The younger man shook his head. "His ties to you are no weaker than they ever have been, Aro," he offered. Then, as if thinking better of his comment, he added, "Though they were never particularly strong to begin with, as you know."

It had been one of the risks of allowing Carlisle to join them. He did not feel loyalty in the same ways as Aro's brothers and his guard. Marcus had assessed Carlisle's ties to Aro and to Caius—he was always able to suspect the tiniest hint of infidelity and treason. Carlisle disliked Caius, Aro knew. He didn't find him trustworthy. But between Carlisle and Aro there was friendship and respect, and even more so between Carlisle and Marcus.

"Do you see? He becomes even more disloyal." Caius's scowled even more. "Aro, he is not one of us. He is not here to guard us, he is not here to serve us, and he is not here to feed us."

"Nor is he our prisoner," Aro added thoughtfully. "He stays by our invitation, and he lives by our rules. But he is free to go if he wishes, so long as he does not cause an insurrection."

Which was about the last thing anyone could expect from Carlisle.

Marcus chuckled as if to agree.

Caius crossed his arms over his chest, walking from one side of the room to the other, before sitting unnecessarily on one of the chairs. Aro prided himself on the furniture collection in his chamber and study—the works were some of the best each era had to offer, and the small bench on which Caius now sat had been constructed by one of the finest furniture-makers in the Ottoman empire.

"Brother, in fairness," Marcus piped up, and both Caius and Aro turned to him. He was the youngest of the three of them in both human years and immortal ones, and sometimes, like now, it was impossible not to smile at Marcus's reprimand. Were they human, Marcus and Caius would be separated by enough decades to be father and son—perhaps even with a generation between them. Caius's appearance was wizened, his hair more than streaked with gray. Marcus, who had not reached even twenty years as a human, radiated the confidence of a young man assured of remaining strong in body and mind.

That he now held up a hand as though to pacify the older man was, even after nearly three millennia, quite comical.

Marcus was by far the quietest of the three of them. Caius could be more than hot-headed, and Aro was known for constantly articulating his own positions to the other two. But Marcus—Marcus almost never spoke. So when he did, he commanded the room.

"Yes?" Aro said.

"We ought to wait for Carlisle to return. At this point, he and he alone knows why he's left. We have no way of knowing if he intends to defect or if he simply wished to be outside the compound awhile."

Caius snorted. "You give him too much credit."

But Aro didn't agree. The Young One, he knew, craved companionship above everything. He'd wandered alone for a century and a half—not a terribly long period, by anyone's count, but it had hurt the young blond. Carlisle stood in utter confidence and conviction in nearly everything he did; yet in the reaches of his mind was a yawning void. He despised what he was. He would spend the rest of eternity trying to atone for his very existence, were he allowed to.

And he would cling to those who supported him, even as meagerly as did the brothers.

Aro paced the room, feeling his brothers' eyes on him. This was frequently how they decided things. Aro would draw input from his brothers, but in the end, it was he who made the final choice.

As though he knew exactly where Aro's mind had wandered, Caius added, "He insulted you, Brother. He has no intention of honoring your request."

The image swirled in his mind at once. The shimmering arms. The impassioned speech. The scowling face. The deep voice, mocking him for the first time in decades, calling Aro *Master*.

Would Carlisle honor his orders? There had never seemed to be reason to ask this question before, but now it was nearly impossible not to.

The chamber remained utterly still as he thought.

"I will summon him when he returns," Aro muttered, more to himself than to his brothers.

"You ought to destroy him when he returns."

A pained look slid across Marcus's face, and Aro wondered if his own held a similar expression. It must have, for Caius immediately continued.

"You see? Both of you. You treat him as though he is one of us, and he is not. Aro, if any other being had dared speak to you as he does, Alrigo would have taken his head long before now. There would be no question of him leaving the compound."

"Carlisle is unique," Aro muttered.

Caius snorted. "No. Carlisle is a fool."

Aro looked over at Marcus. Of the three of them, Marcus was the closest to the young blond, on account of the schooling which took place most days. The two of them would disappear at times, strains of Greek and Latin and laughter floating from wherever they were. Keeping Carlisle around meant Aro had less worry that his brother-in-law would leave, and his valuable gift would disappear.

Of course, if Carlisle wanted to leave also...

"Aro, your history of dealing with those who wish to defect is quite firm," Caius reminded him.

Aro nodded. His fist clenched, remembering on its own the feel of the steely skin beneath it as he tore limbs from torso on that cold night so many centuries ago. It was the guards who did this, customarily; Aro gave the orders and they executed them. But that night he'd needed to be alone.

He'd asked his younger sister to come on an excursion with him. To find new places to acquire prey, he'd said. Didyme was a wonderful conversationalist; even without her gift, she was lovely to be around. She was speaking of the world, of the places she and her adoring husband would travel, now that she had her brother's blessing, when Aro leaned in and sank his teeth into her collarbone. Bone splintered, blood spurted—from them both, to be sure, as Didyme turned out to be a surprisingly good fighter. In the end, however, he merely ended up with his robes torn to rags and covered with venom, and it was his sister who went up in a cloud of hazy purple smoke.

It was as he'd lit the pyre that a twig had snapped behind him, and he'd turned to see Caius, a wretched, wicked grin on his face.

Aro swore the other to secrecy, and he was pledged eternal fidelity—but this didn't change the fundamental fact: Caius knew.

And his reminder now was sharp.

Get rid of Carlisle, he seemed to be saying. Before he becomes trouble.

Footsteps came in the hall, a good distance away, and all three of them caught Sulpicia's scent. A tick of a clock later, she was in the room with them.

"Aro."

"My Sulpicia."

"Athena wishes to see you. As soon as you're able."

He sighed. As though to add to this problem...

"We are finished here," he said.

Caius frowned. "Athena?"

"Your mate works on a project for me," he explained, and did not voice the understood message: *And it is not your business*. "I shall go." He immediately began to move for the door.

"And of the Englishman?"

"We will wait. He will return. When he does, I will question him."

Sulpicia frowned. "Carlisle? He's in his chambers. He returned an hour ago."

Caius scowled; Aro raised his eyebrows as if to say, *You see?* Marcus only smiled.

When they were somewhat clear of the other two, Sulpicia turned to him, her eyebrows raised. "You're questioning Carlisle?"

Aro sighed. "Caius is suspicious of how he's spent his time."

"Caius is suspicious of how everyone spends his time." She smiled. "I wouldn't worry. Carlisle seemed perfectly content when he returned."

This gave him pause. Perhaps he was right then, in thinking that Carlisle would not leave them. Someone as indomitable of spirit as Carlisle surely needed time to think after receiving an order such as the one Aro had issued.

It took a full quarter-minute to go to Athenadora's chambers, which were on the other side of the compound. When they reached her, Athena sat before a large table, on which lay piled a great deal of inky black fabric.

She smiled when she saw him. "Master. I hope it is to your liking." She stood, holding the top of the garment, and letting the black fabric cascade to the floor. Athena was not tall enough to display it all, and the bottom hem and maybe a palm of fabric remained pooled on the stone. But he could still see the finery of the top closures, the hood, the way the shoulders would move. He could imagine how it would appear on its wearer, how regal it would make him appear.

Taking the fabric into his arms and winding it carefully back and forth, he thanked Athena.

Sulpicia reached a hand out to stroke the fabric, nodding appreciatively.

"For Carlisle?" she said.

Aro turned the garment over in his hands, remembering everything of which he and Marcus and Caius had just spoken. Impertinence. Defection. Desertion.

"Maybe," he muttered. "Maybe."

Chapter Thirteen: Intended

London, England
May, 1667

“It is a joy, Elizabeth, to see you here with your intended,” the woman said, smiling.

Elizabeth smiled back, squeezing Carlisle's upper arm so firmly that it was almost painful. He beamed anyway. It was comforting, the way her hand squeezed around his. The warmth of her skin against his own even in the wet June air made the fine hairs on the back of his neck rise. Between them, Georgie looked up and giggled.

This was their third time to market together. The first time they'd come, they were met with surprise, a few confused nods, and requests that Carlisle introduce himself. But now there were smiles, friendly whispers, and greetings to them both.

“It is a joy to be here with a man like Mister Cullen,” Elizabeth answered, smiling up at him and causing his cheeks to warm. She paid for the bread, then gave a light tug on his arm as they moved toward the stall of a man selling vegetables. The baker smiled and waved as they left, and Carlisle had to twist around to return her gesture.

“It is his wife who tends the garden,” Elizabeth whispered as they approached the grocer. “Mrs. Jefferson. I buy from her directly most often.” She smiled at the man, greeted him cheerfully, and then began discussing with him the things she wanted to purchase.

The grocer had two chairs at his stand, which Carlisle recognized at once as coming from the Tyne shop. In fact, he was fairly sure he'd made them both, as he looked over the legs and the back ladders.

“Are these from Mr. Tyne?” he asked after a moment.

The grocer looked around, bewildered, and then, lighting on the chairs, smiled. “Ah yes, they are. And now I recognize whence I know you. You are Mr. Tyne's apprentice.”

Carlisle nodded. “I believe I made these for you.”

“Well, they are quite finely crafted. I thank you. Will you open your own shop when you come of your apprenticeship?”

He shook his head. "I intend to study the law."

"Study the law?" The grocer stopped his progress in loading Elizabeth's satchel bag.

"And my father wishes me to become a minister."

To say nothing of the edict issued by Christopher.

The man looked from Carlisle to Elizabeth and back again. "The world is full of solicitors and ministers, but has few excellent carpenters." He ran a hand over the back of one of the chairs appreciatively. "I would hope you'd reconsider."

Elizabeth beamed. "I've said the same. Carlisle is quite gifted in his craft."

"No doubt," the man answered. "It is always useful, I find, for a husband to be good around the house."

Husband. It made his heart jump.

"I am not her husband," he corrected.

"Thou art not *yet* my husband." Elizabeth stood on her toes and brushed his cheek with her lips, bringing a fresh round of giggles from Georgie. "An important distinction, to be sure."

The grocer continued to smile as he filled Elizabeth's satchel with vegetables. He handed the bag back to her, and she fished in her purse for coins to pay him.

Carlisle heard her mutter something less than ladylike under her breath.

Looking up at the grocer, Elizabeth gave him a wide smile. "Sir, it seems my brother must have needed to collect some of my money for the household. Might we negotiate a credit, or perhaps we can take fewer things this week."

Carlisle reached for his own purse at once. "Allow me," he said, pulling out a small fist of coins.

Elizabeth made noises of protest, but he gently laid a hand on her arm. An odd feeling bubbled in his stomach as he paid the grocer. How many times in his lifetime would he do this, he wondered? Give Elizabeth money for something they would need? Thinking of this, he slipped a halfpenny to Georgie, whose face alighted.

"What shall I buy with it?" he asked cautiously.

Carlisle gestured to the rest of the market. "Something thou would like."

Georgie looked to his sister for approval, and, when she nodded, a wide smile spread across his face, and he danced off toward a meat pie cart. Carlisle watched as the dark hair bobbed and weaved through the crowd. When would that be his child, he wondered? Running off into the marketplace with a tiny bit of money—not from the man courting his sister, but from his father.

Elizabeth tried to shoulder her bag, but Carlisle took it from her, slinging it over his own back instead. "I'll need to repay thee later," she said, sliding her arm into his.

Carlisle shook his head. "I suspect delicious things will come of these goods. Repay me with them."

She laughed and poked him in the side. "Thou thinkest only with thy stomach."

Better than with some other parts of his body, he thought, although he didn't dare make this comment aloud.

Besides, he thought with that other part often enough, too.

They wove through the crowd awhile, keeping an eye on Georgie. Now he danced in and out of the market-goers, pausing occasionally to look longingly at boiled sugar plums, pies, and berries on display.

Was this what having a family was like? Strolling arm-in-arm through the market, watching a child's wonder?

"What thinkest thou?"

The voice startled him a little, and Elizabeth giggled when he jumped.

He didn't answer right away.

"I think about what it feels like to walk with thee, and with Georgie," he answered a moment later.

"I imagine walking feels much the same, whether alone or with us, does it not?"

"Thou knowest what I mean."

This time it was Elizabeth's turn to be silent. Eventually her head found his shoulder, sending the odd chill through him again.

"Thomas marries soon, does he not?" she asked at last.

Carlisle nodded. "A fortnight hence."

Elizabeth went silent.

"What will you do?" she asked at last.

"What will I do?"

"About Christopher. And thy profession."

If that wasn't the important question. Carlisle threaded his fingers through Elizabeth's, feeling the way they gently filled the spots of softer skin between his own, and the warmth of her palm over his.

He wanted this. He wanted Elizabeth. He wanted a boy like Georgie, and to go shopping at the market. The desire for all of it burned in his stomach, a hunger that had nothing to do with food.

"The grocer is right, about thy craft," she murmured. "It is a gift."

Mr. Tyne said that also, every time Carlisle completed a project. He smiled, squeezing Elizabeth's hand, even as her brother's image swirled in his mind. *"I should think, Mr. Cullen, that it not be proper for my sister to marry a carpenter. But she would be an excellent wife to a solicitor. Or a minister."*

Law would mean disownment by his father. But the ministry would be giving up everything he fought against. He was not William Cullen. He was William *Carlisle* Cullen, and that difference seemed as wide as the Thames...

Could he negotiate with Christopher? And even if he could, would he have his father's blessing if he stayed in his trade?

Georgie materialized out of nowhere, his face smeared with juices and bits of pork from his hastily eaten pie. Elizabeth cleaned his face with her apron as he squirmed and whined, then suggested they turn themselves toward home.

They said nothing about the issue of which they had just spoken, losing themselves instead to Georgie's chatter about the different things he'd found at the market—the berries, the lamb pie he couldn't afford, the pork pie he'd eaten, the summer vegetables and the herbs, the way the fresh bread smelled from the baker's and how it was different from his sister's. They reached the small home before they knew it. Mrs. Bradshawe had also gone out for the afternoon, and Christopher was likewise nowhere to be found.

"Georgie, will thou go outside and feed the hens?" Elizabeth asked, earning a distinct pout from her brother.

"I am to stay with thee and Mister Cullen."

Of late, Elizabeth's mother had substituted one brother for the other in the way of chaperone; which was probably to her advantage, as Georgie was nosy and far likelier than Christopher to stay at his sisters' side and report on Carlisle's every gesture.

"It's only in the yard. Do as I say."

He looked from Carlisle to Elizabeth and then back again, his eyes narrowed. But after a moment of scrutiny, his expression relaxed, and he skipped out into the yard. They both watched him go.

"He is a joy," Carlisle said, and Elizabeth laughed.

"Thou sayest that only because he lives not with thee." She took his hand again, leaning her head on his shoulder.

"I think I shall go speak to Thomas," he muttered finally, letting out a little sigh.

"Speak to Thomas?"

"About my profession. And my father. And thy brother."

"My brother? Georgie won't oppose. I believe thou bought him quite thoroughly with that pie."

They both chuckled. Out in the yard, they could see Georgie sprinkling grain for the hens, who followed him around like feathered babes.

"Georgie is not the brother I mean," he whispered, and she threw her arms around him, pulling him to her and melding their lips.

When they pulled away, neither spoke for a minute or two. Finally, Elizabeth gave him a little shove. "Go," she said firmly. "If thou intend to ask for my hand, thou ought go. Plan. Then come back."

He still didn't move.

"I love thee," he mumbled.

Where the words came from, he didn't know, and he would have clapped his hand over his mouth in surprise had Elizabeth's lips not gotten there first. Her fingers entwined themselves in the thick hair at the base of his skull, and she pressed herself against him from shoulder to waist, causing his whole body to flush with heat. It was several moments later that she mercifully broke the embrace, and he found himself short of breath.

"I love thee also," she said. Standing on her toes again, she kissed his cheek, then gave him another shove. "Go, inquire with Thomas, and come back and inquire with my brother."

"I thought thou said I'd won Georgie?"

She smacked him playfully on the chin.

"Go, my husband. Go so that you may come back to me swiftly."

My husband. His stomach jerked again as he leaned in for one last kiss.

"I'll return as soon as I'm able," he said.

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"Could thou provide for thyself, were thou to study the law?"

Staring down at the cinder and iron filings which littered the floor of the smithy, Carlisle shook his head furiously.

"Myself, perhaps," he answered dully, "but not a wife and child."

Thomas's chuckled. "A wife *and* child? Is that not a bit fast? I believe thou were the one who wished to maintain propriety until marriage?"

Of course he did. But once he was married, all those restrictions would be gone.

"I wish to be a father, and she a mother," he answered.

They had talked about this much, when they walked with Georgie. Elizabeth would regale him with stories of what her brother had been like as a child, and Carlisle would laugh with her, all the while imagining those antics not to be coming from Elizabeth's brother, but from their own son.

"It will be my desire to get her with child."

His friend's laugh was more robust this time. "Getting her with child will go from thy thoughts quickly enough, my friend. I promise thee that you both will forget the reason you couple the moment you do so."

Carlisle looked away, which only caused Thomas to laugh even more.

That part was true, too. Elizabeth was bolder than he, and took risks he dared not. It had been the week before that her mother had left with Georgie for an hour, leaving them blessedly alone. It had taken no less than five minutes before he found himself with her in his lap as they kissed, her legs straddling his as she rocked their bodies together. He made feeble protests about what he'd promised her brother, and she reminded him that they were both still fully clothed—a fact

for which he was grateful ten minutes later when her movements got the better of him and he spilled into his hose.

That was yet another reason marriage would be wonderful.

He stared down into his hands, which were rough and dry from the woodworking he'd been doing that week.

"Christ was a carpenter," Elizabeth's voice seemed to sing to him.

"Carlisle?"

He pulled himself back to the present.

"I don't see..." He shook his head furiously. "How will I have this union blessed by my father and by her brother?"

There was an odd scratching noise as Thomas shifted uncomfortably on the trunk on which he sat. He said nothing.

He didn't need to.

Carlisle gritted his teeth. "I know."

"It would appease them both."

But it would kill him, he thought. To join in everything he struggled so hard against...

As though he knew Carlisle's thoughts, Thomas said, "Thou would not have to serve in Aldgate. Thou could serve outside London completely."

"I know this!" The force of his own voice startled him. Carlisle stood and began to pace, his shoes scuffing a clear path through the filings on the smithy's floor. His friend watched him for several minutes.

At last, Thomas stood and placed a hand on Carlisle's shoulder, stopping him mid-step.

"You are not your father, Friend" he said quietly. "Serve from who you are. Serve God not as William's son, but as Elizabeth's husband."

Carlisle didn't move. Was it possible it could be that straightforward? Go to seminary. Have his father's blessing, and Christopher's. And then leave this place with Elizabeth. He would forgive the wicked, bring them back in repentance instead of hanging them at Tyburn. Perhaps they would serve a parish in the countryside, and his children would run in the fresh air...

"Ah, see?" A smile slid across Thomas's face as he watched Carlisle. "Not here. Not as thy father. As thyself."

When Carlisle still didn't answer, Thomas shoved him. "Don't be a fool, Carlisle. Elizabeth is worth more than thy pride."

And Carlisle found himself abruptly on the stoop, the door closed at his back.

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It was shortly after dusk when Young William returned. The younger Cullen had been acting strange lately, disappearing from the house for long stretches of time with no explanation, but coming back looking sanguine and deliriously happy. Yet it seemed this happiness did not extend to his home; if anything, Young William seemed even more agitated every time the two of them spoke. They argued often; first over food, then over the cleaning, then over their housekeeper, and his chores in the sanctuary and grounds. Little, niggling arguments that seemed to amount to nothing, but which taken together seemed to indicate that something was bothering his son.

Today, however, his son was whistling, a strange minstrel song coming from his lips and a broad smile on his face. The smile disappeared, however, the moment he laid eyes on his father.

The boy nodded curtly. "Father."

"William."

His son's body went rigid.

"Where hast thou been?"

“With Thomas,” his son answered, not looking at him. He laid down his shoulder satchel and began unloading some vegetables. It was early in the growing season, but there would be enough for them to have a few dinners.

“I needed to seek his advice,” the younger one went on.

“Regarding what?”

“Nothing of particular consequence.” The vegetables made a *pith pith pith* noise as they landed in the baskets on the floor.

William stared. His son reached into his bag one more time and removed a loaf of bread, from which he tore a chunk before handing the remainder to William. The stool on the opposite side of the table creaked a little bit as he sat.

Tearing a chunk of the loaf himself, William set the bread between them on the table. They both nibbled in silence. It was several minutes later, when William was on his second tear from the bread, that he noticed that his son was no longer chewing, but instead was simply watching William eat.

He set down his own bread.

“Speak thou to Thomas about his marriage?”

His son's posture stiffened, and for a long moment, he didn't answer, choosing instead to stare at the half-eaten loaf on the table. It wasn't unusual. The boy had never been forthcoming; he and William rarely spoke about such things as his friends.

“William?”

“If I go to the seminary, will you cease referring to me as William?”

It was as though time stopped. No chewing. No creaking of the stool. No tiny scratch of cloth against cloth as his son straightened his legs. William suspected it was possible that even his heart had stopped its function. His jaw worked frantically a moment, trying to reposition words in his mouth. But all he managed was, “The seminary?”

“I do not wish to serve in Aldgate,” his son added at once. “The church here should not be passed from you to me. I would raise my family outside of London.”

My family.

He was thinking of a family?

William's mind raced forward. The church at Aldgate had been his thoughts as long as he had brought up his son. That he would grow to manhood and attend the seminary, and do the Lord's work right here.

But then his son had grown to manhood and wanted nothing to do with the seminary at all. If he led some church, did it truly matter if it was this one?

He swore he felt his heart jerk. He'd waited for the sign that his son was one of the Chosen; that he would work as the Lord directed him to. How long had William watched, hoping that his child would show some indication of wanting to follow the path laid for him? Some glimpse that the Lord had smiled on him and would accept him into His heaven? His health might be failing, but his that his son would join him in the afterlife now seemed surer than it ever had.

William wanted to say that he was excited. He wanted to share the utter relief that flooded through him. But instead, he moved to what he felt was the next logical step.

“I will be going out this evening.”

The blue eyes—Sarah's eyes—narrowed.

“And you expect I shall accompany you.”

“I expect you will behave as one of the Chosen.” Which he now assuredly was.

For a long minute, his son did not answer. Instead, he picked up the loaf of bread, turning it over in his hands as he thought.

“We are called to do this work, my son,” William prodded.

For a long moment, there was no answer. And when it came, it was spoken not to him, but to the loaf in his son's hands.

"I do not desire to kill people," he mumbled.

William felt himself stiffen. "I do not kill people, William."

"You as much do."

"I behave as one who is Chosen ought. As you will. As you choose to. Or is the talk of seminary a ploy?"

From across the table he watched the shadow on his son's jaw change subtly as the boy gritted his teeth.

"No ploy, Father," he said darkly. "But do you not think that perhaps the Chosen might be best shown by our good works than by routing out the bad?"

"God calls us to rout Satan and his demons where they lay," William began, but his son cut him off as he abruptly stood from the table.

"And Christ calls us to be fishers of men."

He didn't have a good answer for that. "William—" he began, and the boy whirled, his eyes suddenly dark. The boy looked unbearably angry, but also...sad?

"Father, my name is Carlisle," was all he said.

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"Oy! I could use a blessing, minister," came the slurred words as a hulking body stumbled toward William. He wore the clothes of a sailor, his breeches and shirt untidy and slopped with ale.

William snarled, and the young man chuckled.

"Or did you come down 'ere to join us?" The mouth opened wide with the drunken laughter. "I could bet you did. Seen the bad side of piety, have thee? C'mon, then, it's warm inside." He gestured toward the tavern across the street, from which issued lamplight and loud, drunken singing.

"No, then? Well, suit thyself, minister!" Laughing uproariously, he lurched back toward the tavern. William watched him go, thankful that they had not come into physical contact but still feeling strangely as though he'd been drenched in mud.

Except for the taverns, of which there were far too many for such a short stretch of road, Ratcliffe Street was entirely empty. It was just on dusk, and anyone who lived in the nearby homes had long since settled in for the night.

His son's words still hung with him as he walked. *Christ calls us to be fishers of men.* He was right, of course. After years of schooling, the younger Cullen was as well-versed in the scriptures as was his father—perhaps even more so, as William suspected his child paid attention to passages he did not.

Love, compassion, service. Those were the things Young William found in the Word. Somehow, even without a mother's care, William's son had grown up assured of his love, focusing on the passages which redeemed men instead of condemned them.

He wished to attend seminary. To lead a church, even if it was to be outside of London. This was wonderful, even if not quite what William wanted for him. But if his son didn't wish to rid the world of evil, did that mean the boy was not one of the Chosen?

The thought sent a chill down William's spine and caused him to walk faster. He wanted that. No, he *needed* that. If he was to lose his life, he needed the assurance that his son would be received into Heaven.

He was so deeply lost in thought that he nearly ran sidelong into a young woman, walking sanguinely up Ratcliffe street the other direction. Her satchel was full of something--herbs it seemed, as he caught a whiff of them.

"I am terribly sorry, sir," she said at once. "Please." She gestured to the street beyond her, and beckoned him to go on.

William frowned. A woman, out here, unchaperoned? He looked her up and down again. She was young, perhaps in her twenties, of marriageable age. Her dark hair fell over one shoulder in a long braid. Underneath her arm was a basket of something. She did not appear to be one of the whores who so freely roamed Ratcliffe looking for beer-emboldened sailors. If anything, she looked like a young wife.

“What brings you out at this late hour?”

She looked downward. “Nothing of consequence, sir.”

A quick glance over her shoulder toward a house with darkened windows.

“Surely you are escorted?”

Shaking her head, she answered, “My father passed away in the sickness, and my brother...well, I provide what he is unable to.”

“Your husband?”

“I am merely promised.”

“And your intended? Does he know you are here?”

“He—” She gave William an uncertain glance. “He is at his home.”

He frowned. “You should not be here. It is an area unsafe for women.”

Cocking her head slightly to the side, she narrowed her eyes. “I was merely running an errand. I was on my way returning, but” —she gestured to him— “I have encountered a delay.”

He had just barely opened his mouth to upbraid the woman for her cheek when he saw the barber-surgeon lean from his doorway and look up the street. The other man beckoned him, causing William's face to flush. The woman's back was to the barber, and she would not see him, nor know the reason William himself came to Ratcliffe, as long as he sent her on her way.

Waving a hand, he said, “Go then. Before it is too dark. But in the future, bring thy intended. He should accompany thee to a place like this.”

“I go with him wherever it is possible to,” she said, eyeing him warily once more. “Goodnight, sir.”

It wasn't his imagination, he thought, that the woman moved more swiftly up the street as she walked away from him. When she was far enough away, he turned, striding quickly himself toward the barber. The two men acknowledged each other with a nod, and it was only seconds before William sat in the chair, his shirtsleeve rolled to his upper arm.

The barber approached with the lancet and bowl, taking his usual perch on the stool. “And your health, Reverend?” he inquired.

But that was not William's concern this evening.

“Do you know the woman?”

The barber shrugged his shoulders as he tugged the tourniquet tightly around William's arm. “She is here more often of late, I see. She goes to the widow's across the street. Arrives with a basket and leaves with another. As you noticed, she is never escorted.”

“Do you know her business?”

“Only suspicions, sir.” He began to rub his thumb in circles over William's forearm, so as to expose the vein.

“Suspensions?”

The barber's fingernail stung as he snapped it against the skin. Nodding at his own handiwork, he reached behind him to take his instruments. He said nothing as he readied them.

“What are your suspicions?” William pressed.

“The widow meets with a number of women,” the barber answered carefully. “They come and go. At dusk. Like that one did. Sometimes in groups. Sometimes alone.”

William's intake of breath was sharp. So it was as he'd thought. It made sense; the woman as forward as she was. Brazen with him, really.

Of course.

“And that one I met?” he asked. “Know you her name?”

Holding the lancet up to the candlelight to be sure it was positioned correctly in his fingers, the barber then laid it against William's skin, the cold metal causing the minister to jump.

“Her name is Bradshawe, I believe,” he muttered.

There came a little shove and a searing sting, and then William began to bleed.

Chapter Fourteen: Night Watchman

Chicago, Illinois
October, 1918

“Mother, go home.”

Junior snapped at Elizabeth when she stroked his hair for what must have been the thousandth time since she'd arrived to the hospital. The first few days that Edward had been here, she'd yearned for him to be awake, but she'd been learning lately that her son's temper had a habit of flaring right along with his fever.

“They—don't want—you—”

His voice halted between violent coughs, but he rolled away as she tried to wipe his chin. “You've—heard them.” Another cough. “Go home.”

“Edward—”

But he jerked away from her hand, rolling so that the cot's springs creaked. Every bed here had its own small cubby, cut off from the one next to it by a draped sheet. “To slow the spread,” the doctors said, but she suspected it was more for appearance than anything. The hanging sheet her son faced was a strange, brilliant white, grossly out of place alongside the bedclothes stained with mucous and blood.

And Edward yelled and cursed, and refused her. Insisted she follow the orders of the doctors. Rolled away from her as he did now.

But the truth was her child was terrified.

And so she had no intention of leaving his side.

It was the same here as it had been at the infirmary. The nurses and the doctors told Elizabeth to go home, that they would put her contact information with Edward, and that she would be telegraphed at once if there was substantial change in his condition. She should stay home. Draw the blinds, and stay away from others.

Make sure that at least someone in her family survived.

She didn't waste time telling them it wouldn't be worth it; that she was barren, that her whole life was these two men with their identical names and identical looks. Or at least that it had been until that awful day—had it been only three weeks ago?—that the young, light-haired doctor had delivered that awful news.

He had been the one who transferred them here within only two days of their arrival at the armory. Junior clung to his health, and nearly seemed to be improving, wandering unsteadily from his bed when he grew bored of lying down. He'd constantly needed to be pulled back from the far reaches of the armory, where he went to play craps or read the news with other patients, ignoring his own inability to keep a steady stride.

The nurses, Elizabeth thought with a chuckle, must have been glad to see such a pest go.

Here at Cook County, however, the younger Edward Masen had become much more sedate. He grew weaker by the minute, it seemed. A body which had once been able to keep still now trembled with fever, and his lips and nail beds were beginning to turn that pale shade of blue she recognized from his father's face and hands three weeks before. Even if he'd wanted to, he lacked the strength to wander across the ward by himself, and the boy who four days ago had driven the nurses crazy was gone.

Or to be more accurate, he was dying.

Elizabeth was terrified. And so was Junior. But the older Edward had taught his son bravado, not fear, and today, bravado was taking the form of anger.

Running a hand absently over his back, Elizabeth felt each vertebra of his spine. Her Edward had lost several pounds. His face appeared gaunt, and his limbs, already gangly as they waited for his body to grow into adulthood, were now spindly and fragile. He had never been exactly filled-out, but he now appeared starving—which was little wonder as he hadn't managed to keep down even what little food he ate since arriving at the armory.

Edward coughed. Except for the timbre, the deep pitch that was the result of a chest that was many times over larger than it once had been, it could have been the same, wet, gurgle-cough that had greeted her the day he was born. His lips reddened a little—with blood, she realized in horror. She reached for the rag which some nurse had hung on the post of his cot and wiped, her hand trembling.

How stupid, she thought. She'd worried about that infernal *war*, and sending him off to be one of Wilson's boys overseas. She'd obsessed over it. Argued with Senior over it. And it had all been for nothing. Her son would die here, in a cot in a hospital in the hometown he'd left only a handful of times. He would never see Europe—he would never so much as see Ohio. He would die without a soldier's glory, or without knowing a woman's love. He would die without a high school diploma, let alone the law degree Senior had always intended for his son to have.

The rag disappeared from her hand. Startled, she looked up into the eyes of a woman. A nurse, who carried in one hand a basket of fresh rags, white and warm, and in the other, a hamper for collection.

"Now you shouldn't be here, ma'am," she said as she dropped the bloodied rag into the hamper, but even though the voice was authoritative, it was kind. "We don't want you sick right alongside your boy here."

Elizabeth looked away from the nurse and back to Edward, running a hand through his coppery waves. "I have nothing left to lose," she murmured, her breath hitching.

It was the first time she'd said this thought aloud. The nurse stopped what she was doing, and the two baskets settled onto the floor with a scratching noise as she knelt next to Elizabeth's stool. For a long moment, neither of them said anything, both just staring at Edward's chest as it rose and fell.

"Your husband?" the nurse asked finally.

"The influenza took him two weeks ago."

"And your other children?"

"We were only able to have Edward." Elizabeth shot the nurse a look. Her face was kind and sad, and for a moment Elizabeth nearly told her the story of Margaret, of how her son had almost had a sibling. Of how she still carried the terrible weight of a mother who'd already had one child die.

The nurse nodded. "I understand."

"Do you have children?"

"Three," she answered. "Billy is the oldest--he's thirty-five. Got two of his own. Joyce is his sister, she's thirty. She went to school to become a teacher, got married late. Her boy is just two right now and she's getting ready for the next one. And Tommy is the baby. Twenty-two." When Elizabeth gave her a curious look, she added with a chuckle, "Tommy was a mistake. But the best kind."

"Is he in the war?"

The nurse shook her head. "No, thank Heaven. God gave him a club foot. Kept him out of the draft. Kept my heart from breaking." She reached down as she said so, feeling Edward's forehead for the fever, stroking his bangs a bit as she did so.

He grunted.

Elizabeth glanced at the bed. Aside from the six pounds or so gone from his body thanks to the influenza, her son's body was perfect. No club feet. Strong muscles. Legs that could run a few miles. Nothing to keep him from rushing headlong to his death.

No matter which side of the Atlantic he died on.

A hand squeezed her shoulder, and Elizabeth realized that the nurse had been watching her watch Edward.

"He wanted to go," Elizabeth said quietly. "And I keep wondering, if I'd let him—" The tears welling in her eyes cut her off before she could finish.

Another squeeze. "If you let him go over there, would he not be here?"

She nodded.

"You can't think like that, Mother," the nurse said quietly. "Wasn't there nothing to be done about this."

The wet cough came again; the large body contracted and released. He *was* asleep, it seemed. The nurse handed her a new rag, and she used this clean one to wipe away the fresh bit of blood and spit that gathered at the edges of her son's lips.

"How much longer?" she whispered, when her son had gone still again.

The nurse shook her head. "We don't know that. Some, they go right away. Some, they hang on for days. And some, well—they get all the way to looking like your boy, and they get up and go on their way home in a few days anyways."

There was another *scritch-scritch* as the baskets went back onto wide hips, and the nurse squeezed Elizabeth's shoulder once more. For a moment they both stared at Edward, at the way his chest now rose and fell evenly despite his rattling, wet breath. Elizabeth took his hand. Despite his fever, it was cool to the touch—as though he were becoming a corpse from the outside in. Tears welled in her eyes.

"You go on and stay here," the nurse said quietly. "I'll tell the doctor when he makes his rounds."

"Thank you," Elizabeth muttered.

The nurse turned to move to the bed across the narrow aisle.

"Wait..."

She turned.

“What is your name?”

The woman gave a small smile. “Dorothy,” she answered. “You can call me Dorothy.”

Elizabeth nodded. “Thank you, Dorothy.” She gestured to the bed. “I’m Elizabeth, and this is my Edward.”

A slow nod.

“Well, I’ll be praying for you and your Edward, Mrs. Elizabeth. God bless you both.”

Elizabeth listened to her footsteps as she made her way down the ward—a few steps, the baskets on the floor, a creak of bedsprings, more footsteps. Slowly they grew quieter and quieter, until the only sounds on the ward were the sounds she was used to—rattling breath, the occasional groan, the clang of a bedpan against the edge of a cot. But importantly she listened to the steady breathing of the child before her. Interrupted by coughs, and every bit as raspy as any other patient in the ward, but still, very importantly, there. Steady. Ongoing.

When he’d been little, and ill, she had sung to him. The old Irish lullabies, the ones her mother had sung to her, and of which Edward Senior made fun.

At first, it seemed her voice wouldn’t come. It rasped a bit at first, and she had to swallow several times. But then it did, in a whisper so quiet there was hardly a melody at all.

Sleep my child and peace attend thee,

All through the night

Guardian angels God will send thee,

All through the night

Her voice shook as she made her way through the stanza, but she did, and kept right on going. Edward’s breathing came evenly, almost in time to the song. In. Out. In. Out. Cough. In and out again.

And as the sounds of the ward washed over them both, Elizabeth Masen sang to her son and stroked his back.

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Singing.

So faint it was almost impossible even for Carlisle to hear, and yet—no, it was unmistakable.

Singing.

It was unheard of. Quite literally, he thought, and chuckled to himself as he strode down the hall. The influenza wards were filled with many sounds. The squeak of bedsprings as patients rolled from side to side. The hacking retch of stomach bile and blood being vomited onto the floor. The murmur of nurses as they delivered prognoses in hushed tones. The clip of the doctors’ good shoes against the wooden floors.

But no one *sang*.

The singing was coming from the second-floor men’s ward, and Carlisle’s feet moved him toward it, even though he’d made rounds there only a few hours earlier. The closer he got, the more distinctly he could hear it—still too far away for human ears to manage to hear the whispered verse, he could make out a woman’s voice. And by the time he was within a few yards of the door to the ward, he recognized the voice itself.

His stomach wrenched, leaving him to question for a moment why it was that his body had such human responses to an emotion like guilt. Because *guilt* was exactly what this was.

The voice was the voice of the red-haired woman. No one had succeeded in getting her to leave her child. He had warned her, the other doctors had warned her, the nurses had warned her. The disease was highly contagious, they said. She would certainly contract it, staying around all these who were ill. And what if she became ill and died and her son recovered? What if she left him motherless?

But she'd stood firm. If it came to it, her son would be all right on his own, she said. He knew how to manage a home, and he would do just fine without his mother.

It was an overly optimistic thought, in Carlisle's opinion.

The boy—Edward, the same as his late father—didn't fare well in the late night, the only time the nurses and doctors could manage to wrench his mother from his side. The other doctors couldn't explain it. They charted his temperature, and measured his breathing, and looked for the cyanosis setting in. They attributed the young Edward Masen's circadian decline and rebound to some strange goings-on within his body that they couldn't quite pin down.

It was all about the science, nowadays. The doctors rushed around looking for unsanitary procedures, people too close to each other, unwashed hands. Bathed in knowledge and books and research, they had long since embraced the euphoria of knowledge and forgotten the wisdom that came from ignorance—that intangible healing power that a mother had over her child.

The singing stopped as the door to the ward opened, and the green eyes searched for the door. He knew she could not make him out as easily as he could her, but he imagined she might, at least, see his hair. And she seemed to, because she showed no surprise when he skipped the half-dozen intervening beds and came straight to her and her boy.

His condition had worsened, Carlisle realized at once, as he laid a hand on the sweating forehead. The boy turned his face at once, seeking the coolness of Carlisle's touch. He let his hand linger there a moment, as though he needed more than a split-second to ascertain that no, the fever was not breaking. The boy's teeth chattered as he shook from chill. But as he turned, Carlisle saw the eyes—those strange green eyes that he shared with his mother—and they were still bright. That was the last part to go. You could watch for days, listen to the lungs rasping for breath, see the lips turn from red to purple to blue. But it wasn't until the eyes went dull that the body was close to giving in.

And Edward Masen simply wasn't there yet.

"You needn't have stopped singing," Carlisle said as he bent over the bed, but Elizabeth only leaned in anxiously.

"Doctor, please..." was all she managed, but Carlisle understood.

"Edward?" he asked.

The boy looked up at him with baleful eyes.

"How are you?"

He tried to shake his head, but he wound up coughing instead, his whole body convulsing and causing the bed to shake. A moment later, he coughed so violently that blood escaped his lips and dribbled down his chin.

"Oh, Edward," his mother said, reaching for the rag she'd hung on the edge of his bed, but the boy pulled away, wiping his own mouth on the pillow.

"Make my mother go home," he whined. "Please, Doctor."

At once, Elizabeth Masen burst into tears, putting her head in her hands and crying with such force that the stool she sat on clattered against the floor.

Carlisle reached to her laying a hand on her shoulder.

But what could he say?

He was reading as much as he could on the virus, although no one truly had time to write anything down. Even the institutions—Harvard, Hopkins, Mayo—they couldn't manage to keep up with the research. And so Carlisle had been reading everything he could find about any other form of influenza. Everything the doctors understood about what the virus was, how it spread, how it was attacked. He had carefully traced the progression of this virus—they called it Spanish Influenza, as though it came from overseas, but the nearest he could tell, it had its origins in the midwest. And it attacked the healthy every bit as virulently, if not more so, than it did the weak.

Carlisle knew all this. But none of that knowledge let him know what he was supposed to do in an instance like this. There were no papers on what to do with a mother who sat before a child, her only child, who would imminently lose his life.

"Please..." The boy coughed up blood again, and again refused his mother's trembling hand. Carlisle took the rag from her, and when he reached to wipe the boy's face, he grunted, but did not turn away.

This only had the effect of making Elizabeth look more defeated, however.

"I don't believe it's you," Carlisle said quietly. How could it be, when her son fared so poorly without her? He might be drenched in the obstinacy of youth, but even the boy himself must have noticed that his health was better with his mother at his side.

"Then why—"

"Because I'm dying!" the boy snapped.

This was said with such tremendous force it surprised them both, and prompted a fresh round of tears from Mrs. Masen.

"Shhh." Carlisle wasn't sure where the hushing noise had even come from. It certainly wasn't something he'd ever done to a patient or his mother before. He stopped himself short. What did he do now? Pat her shoulder? Offer her a hug? It was one thing to touch her son, whose fever raged so severely that he would never notice the oddity of Carlisle's cool hands. It would be quite another to have physical contact with the boy's mother.

"Mrs. Masen, would you be willing to step out of the ward? Not forever," he added when he saw the stricken look cross her face, "but just for a moment, so that I might speak to your son?"

For a long moment, she didn't move. But finally, she nodded, scooting her stool away from the cot and standing. She began to walk toward the aisle, but she'd reached only the end of the bed sheet which hung between Edward and the young man to his right when she turned back around. Saying nothing, she leaned over the bed and pressed her lips to the sweating forehead, holding them there. Edward's eyes closed as his mother kissed him, and for once, he was still. Then his mother pulled away from him and disappeared, and Carlisle listened to her footsteps move further and further, becoming part of the strange symphony of sounds of sickness that echoed across the ward.

When he heard the door open and close, he turned to the boy.

"Edward—" he began, but the boy cut him off.

"When—will it—happen?" he asked between coughs.

"I'm sorry?"

"When will—I die?"

How many times had he been asked this question, Carlisle wondered. By men and women at the armory, by children far too young to lose their lives. And the problem was, it was a question without an answer. He'd admitted patients who looked as though they merely suffering a mild cold, and by the time he reached them on rounds some hours later, they had already expired. And then there were patients like Edward, who by all accounts should've been dead the day he came in, and yet who by some miracle clung to life with their fingernails.

What made the difference, he wondered? Tenacity? Stubborn will?

Love?

"We don't know," Carlisle answered, and immediately, he wondered at his use of we. Who else was involved?

"I don't know," he corrected himself.

The boy looked away for a moment, and when he spoke again, it was almost to his curtain.

"I don't—want—my mother—" He didn't finish this last, bursting into another coughing fit.

"I know." Carlisle pulled up the stool next to Edward's cot, and perched himself on it in the same way that Elizabeth had. "You're her child, Edward. It's extremely difficult for a parent to watch her child die."

"But she's my mother!" No break here. It was as though the sheer force of his statement managed to keep his coughing at bay. The voice was unsteady and high, as though the young man were slipping away into a petulant child.

This was the irony, Carlisle thought. Parents didn't want to see their children die. But children thought their parents were invincible, or at least, that they should be. Elizabeth Masen was so hell-bent on seeing her son cured that she'd forgotten that he had every bit the same desire to see her live on without him.

He coughed again and went for his pillow. Before he'd even thought it, Carlisle's hand reached out and stopped the boy's chin. Had he moved at his full speed? He wasn't sure. But Edward didn't seem to notice it if he had, and in either event, he accepted Carlisle wiping his face before he pulled away again.

"Make her—stay away."

"I can't," Carlisle said quietly. "Your health improves when she's here."

"Damn my health!"

Carlisle winced.

"You—take care—of her!"

"Edward—"

This last outburst seemed to have taken it out of Edward, and he coughed uninterrupted for nearly a minute. Carlisle slung an arm under his shoulders, helping him to sit upright. Spit and blood and perhaps a bit of vomit, Carlisle wasn't entirely sure, dribbled down the boy's chin. He wiped this away as the thin body heaved with each cough. It seemed an eternity before Edward was able to take a deep breath. And as soon as he did, he used it to argue again.

"My father"—a gasp—"wouldn't want"—another—"her to die."

Ah, and here was the real fear, Carlisle thought, squeezing Edward's shoulder in sympathy. You name a boy after his father, you give him expectations; shoes to fill. He had noticed the lighter which he'd removed from the boy's trousers that first day at the armory, the same worn metal, the same initials carved into the lid. Carlisle remembered giving it to Elizabeth Masen, the day he told her that her husband had died. And now the son had inherited the lighter, and the temperament, and the obligation to protect his mother.

"It's not your job to protect your mother," he muttered, but he knew these words would fall on deaf ears. The boy was strong. Even in the face of death. Even only seventeen.

A human doctor wouldn't have seen the brilliant way the green eyes shone in the dark, the way they caught the lamplight. The way, in that instant, it was as though the fever had gone. The eyes were clear, and Carlisle could make out each eyelash from beneath which the boy gave him a baleful expression.

"Please?"

Again, was Carlisle's immediate thought. Again this family would catch him by surprise, tempting him to make promises he couldn't keep. First a woman's plea to save her husband, then her plea to save her son, and now the son's plea to prevent his mother dying by the same way that he would.

And so he offered to the son the same answer he had offered to the mother, four days—had it only been that long?—ago.

"I'll do my best," he said.

The boy nodded, and rolled over to his other side. He coughed again, but this time, turned away.

Standing from the stool, Carlisle hung the little rag on the edge of the cot for the nurse, or for Elizabeth Masen, if she managed her way back in. But when he reached the end of the aisle, he stopped. There was an odd feeling burning in his stomach; one he hadn't felt in centuries. A strange thickness; a feeling as if parts of him could break.

Crying, he realized. He was holding back *crying*.

Over the boy? Over his mother? Over the lost father?

Over his own sheer ineptitude?

He leaned against the wall next the door, letting the sounds of the ward wash over him--rasping breaths, wet coughs, fevered moans. He could make out the boy's sighs among them--higher pitched, shallower, for he was so skinny.

There was, however, no singing.

How many patients had he lost in his lifetime, Carlisle wondered. He could add them up, he was sure, if he took the time to comb back through the memories scattered through his mind like junk in a dank cellar. He had deliberately stopped counting the influenza patients, and although a portion of his brain was no doubt accumulating the tally, the number was growing too large for him to allow it to weigh on him.

There had been so many over the years. So why was it that he felt this odd pain? Perhaps it had been the singing, or the way that Elizabeth stroked her son's back. Perhaps it was whatever it had been that drew him to them in the first place. Or his foolish promise to save the father, given in haste and stupidity, the one he hadn't been able to keep and the guilt over which gnawed at him.

I don't want him to die.

The thought startled him. But he never wanted a patient to die, Carlisle thought at once. He always wanted to save them, because wasn't that who he was? His whole purpose for all of this, for living alone, for wandering, for denying everything about his own nature.

Of course he wanted to save them.

But it wasn't only that, he realized, as he reached the last beds on the ward. This wasn't just not wanting humans to die.

He didn't want *these* humans to die.

It was an odd feeling. He was so careful not to get close. Not to care too much, because by definition, humans were mortal. They couldn't grow close to him, and so he didn't grow close to them. And so he cared about them en masse; he saved humans, but not people.

Had that been his problem? Sitting alone in his apartment, with his artwork, and books. No one could know *what* he was, but did that mean that he had to never allow another to know *who* he was?

And he liked them. The mother with her insistent care for her husband and son. The boy with his fiery temper and stubborn protectiveness of his mother. The fate that was this Great Influenza had thrown them together twice.

Carlisle wanted Edward Masen and his mother to live.

It was freeing, though terrifying, to admit. At once his step quickened. He would tell her that, he thought, as he put his hand on the doorknob. He would tell her that he was invested in Edward, as much as she was. He would try to keep her safe by keeping her away from the hospital, but he would keep his promise to them both.

He would do everything he could to keep them both alive.

The door opened easily in his hand, and he stepped into the brighter lighting of the corridor outside the ward. And at once, he stopped short.

Elizabeth Masen lay in the hall, unmoving.

Chapter Fifteen: The Fourth Brother

Volterra

June 1789

“You could be a prince if you wished to be, *Dottore*.”

Martina laughed as she leaned over her cart. “This whole land would come together under you. I don't doubt it. That smile—it is the kind of smile that gathers others.”

Carlisle looked away. “I would be a poor ruler,” he answered shyly. “I possess no ability to force others to do my will.”

“Except maybe this one,” Martina's sister piped up, patting her belly. “When you give him things to make him quiet, he is quiet. And he doesn't hurt me so much any longer. Well, aside from the fact that he's strong.” She laughed.

The baby was close to being born, Carlisle knew, even though he'd had little experience with the phenomenon. But in the past several weeks Martina's sister's body had changed dramatically as her belly grew more and more taut. He'd kept up with the growing child, creating more and more of the willow bark tea, and preparations for poultices to ease the pains of her stretching skin. The others in the castle thought he was crazy—even Marcus—but it felt good to have someone he knew he was helping.

“You should feel this strong boy,” Martina said, and before he'd had a chance to step backward, Carlisle found his hand yanked forward by the wrist, his palm placed on the growing belly. He was rewarded with a firm kick--muted, yes, but still firm, a fascinating, tickling pressure across his palm.

He couldn't help his smile.

“See?” Martina's sister's grin was even bigger. “He likes you. He is happy for what you do for us.”

“It is nothing,” Carlisle answered. “I am learning, just as much as you are.” And thank goodness this was her third child, as it meant that Carlisle had a far easier time learning from her.

She smiled, wagging a finger at him. “Well, please learn quickly, because he'll come soon.”

Both women laughed.

Carlisle gulped.

He'd been researching childbirth for months now of course, even though all the while he prayed for an uneventful birth to which he would not be summoned. Was he ready? It was one thing to spend time up in his chambers at the castle, preparing salves and teas. It would be another to throw himself into childbirth, with its blood and birthing fluid and the demands of knowledge he did not yet possess.

And it was nearing the summer solstice—what if the child decided to make his appearance on a sunny day?

"I am certain this will be a healthy birth which will not require my intervention," he said.

Martina's sister shook her head. "Perhaps we'd wish you there, anyway, *Dottore*."

He winced. "I am not a doctor, you know. I've not apprenticed."

This time it was Martina who shook her head, and she came from behind her cart to lay a hand on Carlisle's arm.

"You are better than a doctor," she answered, smiling. "Doctors don't laugh. And none of them are shy, or admit they might not be correct."

Her sister nodded. "And that's not you. You, *Dottore*, are human."

Human?

His breath caught, even as he realized that of course she meant the term figuratively. "Thank you," he said quietly.

"And as a human, you can't have so much time for us," Martina added. "I'm sure you have other things to take care of. Not the least of which being my sister's further health."

He nodded. "Be certain you rest," he said. "The child won't be born for some time yet, and it's important that you be strong and rested for the birth."

"Rest?" Martina's sister grinned. "I have two other children. How I am supposed to rest?"

"*Men*," Martina answered, rolling her eyes, and they both laughed.

Carlisle chuckled. "Perhaps we do have it too easy," he added. "Nevertheless..."

"Rest," came the answer from both of them. "I'll do what I can."

"I bid you a good afternoon."

The women continued to laugh as he began to make his way back to the compound.

Human, he thought as he walked. Perhaps she was right. It was true that within the compound, laughter was scarce, at least, it was for him. Even Marcus seemed to grow increasingly aloof—their study sessions had grown shorter, the jovial nature all but disappeared. What laughter there was within the Volturi headquarters was mostly at Carlisle's expense.

He gazed up at the walls as he walked, one thumb absently tracing the spot on his other palm where he'd felt the baby's kick. There had been so much to take in, that first time he'd approached this place so many decades ago. The refinement, the civility; how so many of his kind could live here peacefully, without moving from place to place like a pack of wolves. He remembered stepping into the library the first time—he'd been in only a handful himself. That here, they had amassed a collection of volumes so extensive that it would rival any library in Europe...Carlisle's excitement had been nearly uncontainable.

Yet it was Martina, her sister, the open market where people knew him, that made this place his home. It was the freedom to walk around on the overcast days, the ways in which he at last had learned to interact without fear.

And be called *human*...

It seemed only a few short minutes before he reached the compound's alleyway doors and pressed them to admit himself into the dark underground tunnels which would lead him back to his own chambers. The compound was a labyrinth of staircases, rooms, hallways and tunnels, broken up

only by the occasional courtyard. A winding set of stairs took him from the tunnel to the hallway nearest his own door. It was customary for him to go to the great chamber, to greet Aro and offer his palm, but today, he craved a moment alone with his own thoughts before they became the purview of someone else.

It wasn't to be.

He'd barely managed to lay his bag on his desktop before a light breeze tickled the hairs on the back of his neck.

Aro was the tallest of the three brothers; part of what gave him such a commanding presence. His dark hair hung to his shoulders, billowing curtains of night framing an otherwise gaunt face. Little daylight made its way into Carlisle's chambers, but the tiny sliver that did bounce through the window set Aro's ruby eyes aflame.

Had Aro ever even been in his chambers alone before?

"Yes, Aro?" he managed.

"Alrigo informed me you had returned from your" —he gestured helplessly toward the table and the herbs— "errand."

The word had an odd tone to it.

Carlisle nodded. "I have, indeed."

"And how is the market this day?"

Did he wish to make small talk? Carlisle turned to face him fully.

"What is it you want of me?" He held out his left hand. Not the one where the baby had kicked, but the other. Aro took it, and for a moment, bowed his head as he evaluated all that had changed since the last time Carlisle had done this.

"Fascinating," he murmured, making Carlisle wonder what it was he was seeing. The baby's kick? The way Martina had called him human?

The other hand slid away after only a moment.

"These women," Aro said. "They are your friends?"

Friends? Could he count them as such? His mind flashed instantly back several weeks, to the conversation with the sandy-haired colonist up in the Alpi.

"*Friend*," Garrett called Carlisle.

"Clients," he answered carefully. "They are clients."

"The one with child is your patient, I feel. Or at least, she considers herself so."

That much was true. But he didn't have patients. He was no physician. Untrained. What skill he had was entirely based on trial and error. And it always would be—how would he ever learn alongside a human doctor? To resist the blood here, in the controlled confines of the castle, that was one thing.

He shrugged. "She allows me to experiment. Nothing more."

Aro gave him a skeptical look. "Still. You treat her."

"I suppose."

Aro paced the length of the room, his dark robe swishing at his ankles. This was odd, Carlisle realized. The brothers only wore the robes when they needed to display command. The last time he'd seen Aro in it had to have been a few years ago or more.

What was going on?

"I confess I didn't think you to be serious," Aro began quietly after a moment. "So many years ago, when you said that you wished to work alongside the humans, and even to treat them, to become a physician. I did not know you, then. I'm afraid I underestimated you."

Carlisle shrugged. "It has happened before."

"I imagine it would, with you." Aro began to pace again. "You are entirely different. The things which drive others do not drive you. I confess I find you unpredictable in that regard."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be! It makes you fascinating. And I enjoy fascination. There is so little of it, after so long. One day, you'll understand this, Young One." A hand reached out, and a thumb caressed Carlisle's cheek.

He fought not to pull away.

Aro frowned as he read Carlisle's thoughts. "You are confused."

"Why are you here?"

The long hand pulled away from Carlisle's cheek and disappeared into the recesses of its owner's cloak, appearing again clutching a wad of black. For a brief moment, Carlisle could barely discern what it held, as it was utterly identical to the clothing of the man who held it. It wasn't until Aro held up the second item and shook it, allowing the yards of inky fabric to spill to the floor, that Carlisle understood what it was.

His eyes flitted across the room to the hook on the far wall. His own robe hung there, the dark charcoal gray worn by the inner guard. He was no guard, and he felt no obligation to wear it, though he did on occasion for no other reason than simply to keep from drawing attention to himself.

Aro didn't miss his shift in gaze.

"That one would no longer be yours, Young One." He held out the dark robe, gesturing for Carlisle to take it. An odd feeling shot down Carlisle's spine as his fingers closed around the black fabric.

Aro's face broke into a triumphant smile. "We haven't added to our number in several millennia."

Carlisle turned the robe over in his arms.

"The others?" he said finally. Marcus thought him a friend, certainly, but Caius hated him—and would any of them accept him as he was?

"The others do what I say, in the end," Aro offered. "Democracy ultimately results in chaos; it is why our great *Roma* fell."

Carlisle frowned.

"And my habits?"

This time it was Aro's face which fell. "By which you mean your feedings. Or lack thereof."

"I feed on that which keeps me human. That upon which humans also feed."

Aro shuffled away to the other side of the room. For a long moment, Aro said nothing, and when he did, it was the wall he addressed rather than Carlisle himself.

"You haven't seen what we've seen, *cucciolo*," he muttered. "The ways humans destroy themselves. They fight needless wars; they starve one another; they murder one another for no reason but sport."

The hairs on the back of Carlisle's neck rose. He and Aro had engaged in this exact argument before...but it had been years.

"And so that justifies our killing them, despite that we are men of reason?"

"I did not say that."

"You as much did." Carlisle laid the robe carefully over the end of his couch. "I don't believe as you do, Aro. You know this."

The other man chuckled. "I do, of course. Your optimism is fascinating to me. Inspiring, even."

"But you think it won't last."

Another chuckle. "You are just barely a century old, Sweet One. You have only just outlived the humans who lived with you. Of course it is easy to feel compassion when those upon whom you feed might have been your contemporaries."

“This is not a phase I will simply grow out of,” Carlisle answered darkly.

“Oh, I’m not suggesting that you will, of course! I’m only suggesting that perhaps your conviction is born of circumstance more than conscience.” He gestured to the robe, which now lay puddled on the cushions. “Join us. To balance us, Brother. Three can vote without problem. Four must reason with one another to avoid a tie.”

“I thought democracy ultimately results in chaos?”

Aro smiled. “See? And you learn quickly.” He turned on his heel. “I will leave you, Brother. But know this offer is not given lightly.”

“And if I do not take it up?”

The other man’s face pulled into a tight frown. “There would be consequences to such a decision of course.” He looked into Carlisle’s eyes, the ruby burning in the fading daylight.

“Were I you,” he added, “I would be certain to make the correct one.”

Then he vanished, leaving Carlisle standing alone.

At once, he sank into the chair at his desk, dropping his head into his hands. It was a habit left over from his decades as a human; he had no need of rest now, and even emotional fatigue required nothing of his body. He had no need to slouch; but to do so felt oddly restful.

He would be the fourth brother. The only one brought into the fold after they had formed. Would it mean power? Freedom?

Freedom.

It was the word Garrett had used, in speaking about the new World, and the uprising in France. Worth fighting for, he’d said—had it really been only a week ago when they’d sat together on the mountain? When Carlisle couldn’t be certain if he was in Italy, France, or some other place altogether?

The other man’s voice came swirling back. “I suspect you lie, Carlisle. Not to me. That is of little consequence. We have only just met. But I suspect you lie to yourself.”

Was he right?

He remembered the savage beast who attacked him in London, and the others he’d met since. Nomads. Placeless killers. Men and sometimes women who might never open a book, much less keep a roomful of them. Others who would not tutor his Greek, give him a home base from which to begin to do the work which, if he admitted it, he felt supremely called to do.

Brother. They’d never been used the word for Carlisle; he was always The Young One, or The Pup, or The Englishman. He was very rarely even “Carlisle.”

He stood and walked across the room, picking up the cloak and turning it over in his hands. The fabric draped over the back of his wrists, heavy, as though it were sopping wet.

Brother, Aro had called him.

But Garret had called him *friend*.

The robe fell back to the couch in a puddle of inky black. And by the time the fabric settled, Carlisle had already disappeared.

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It was a rare overcast day, and so the contingent of guard in the Great Hall was light when Aro returned from Carlisle’s chambers. They grew restless, his brethren, when the sun shone so relentlessly. And in the Tuscan country, this near the summer solstice, “relentless” was the only way to describe the sun.

He made his way back to his seat slowly, turning over the encounter he’d just had with the Englishman. Would the fiery blond join them? He would provide balance, Aro knew that much. He had been completely truthful in saying that four meant the brothers would be forced to reason, where three meant a vote always won. Just as the vote had been handily won the previous evening, when Aro announced that he would invite Carlisle to join them.

Caius fought, as always. He insisted that they could never be joined by someone whose loyalties lay so surely with humans. What if he attempted to block their feeding? What if he caused an insurrection?

He would not do those things, Aro insisted, and Marcus agreed. Imagining the mild-mannered Englishman planning a coup against them...most of the guard didn't even like him enough to take his side.

Most of the guard didn't much like Caius either, but Aro decided not to point this out.

They would insist on total fidelity, Aro told the other two. Down to his feeding habits...which would change over time even if they didn't force things, he thought.

Marcus agreed.

Keeping Carlisle around would be a mess, Caius insisted. He was better disposed of now, before he became too big a threat.

The memory made Aro cringe.

"Brother? You are all right?"

The words came not in Italian, but in Etruscan, the language the brothers shared and the one language Marcus had refused to teach the Englishman. They used it to speak without being overheard, even in the Great Hall.

Aro drew himself upright in the chair before looking over at his dark-haired brother. Marcus's face wore clear concern.

"The discussion?" he inquired. "Carlisle? His answer?"

"I told him to consider it carefully and to choose correctly."

A sigh. "With joining us being the correct choice."

Aro's eyes narrowed. "He will be best served here. How long will this physician nonsense last? Until the day he grows bored with humanity and their inane pursuits and gives in to the lifestyle he was born to lead. He knows this. Or at least, he fears it. Otherwise, why has he stayed for four decades?"

"To learn, perhaps?" A smile played on Marcus's lips. "He is thirsty like a dry sponge for all he can imbibe from us."

Aro did not answer. He stared out at the handful of guard scattered around the room. Some were engaged in conversation, others playing an elaborate game of stones. Still others stood, bored expressions on their faces.

It was true that Carlisle didn't fit here. His curiosity; his intellectual pursuits—they made him exceptional even among others of an exceptional race.

"Or keep him," Marcus said. "Use Charmion to strengthen his bond to you."

Aro shook his head. "He must choose. The Young One is useless to me if his will is broken."

"And if he chooses otherwise?"

"Then he will leave us and never return."

Marcus's eyes widened.

"There is no other way."

The other vampire shifted in his seat as though he were somehow uncomfortable. He stared wistfully toward the floor, to the spot where the blond sat whenever the two of them had their teacher-pupil sessions. For a moment, Aro knew that Marcus was imagining as he was, the young vampire moving from his place at their feet to a fourth chair beside them.

But if he rebuffed the offer...

"I cannot allow him the option to stay. I will appear weak."

"If strength is what you wish to display, why not simply destroy him?"

An odd strangled noise choked from Aro's throat.

The thought of destroying Carlisle was repulsive. Aro had told the man that he found him fascinating, but it was more than that. He thought back to that first day here, as Carlisle stood before them. Unflinching. Unafraid. At the time, Aro had chalked his brashness up to the naivete of inexperience, but he knew better now. The blond knew what he wanted. He knew who he was, and what he was called to do.

"I would rather see if he succeeds in this...*unorthodox* path he's chosen."

"Or which perhaps you will force him to give up."

Aro nodded. "Loneliness is a powerful motivator."

Especially for someone like the Young One.

"A powerful motivator for whom?" piped up a gentle voice, and Aro found a pair of soft hands make their way to his shoulders from behind.

"For the Englishman," Aro answered his mate. "You were across the compound, I thought?"

"I was near enough to hear this conversation. I thought you were merely tracking Carlisle. Now you're setting traps?"

Aro bristled. "I am not setting traps."

"It sounds as though you are."

"I offered him a place with us."

"And gave him an ultimatum, from what you said to Marcus."

He growled, loudly enough that it startled several of the guard, and several heads swiveled their way.

"I will not allow him to make me look like a weakling," Aro hissed in a whisper.

Sulpicia raised an eyebrow. "Perhaps his caving in would make you look more like a weakling than not? Arruns, the man who is so insecure in his own seat that he must bully someone who poses no threat?"

The echoing smack of the back of his hand against Sulpicia's cheek reached Aro's ears before he realized he'd made the decision to strike. His mate's delicate hand rose to her face, fingers feeling gently as though feeling to make certain all the pieces were there. Her guards were upon her in an instant, cooing and taking her arms, even as they nodded in deference to Aro.

"I will not tolerate this kind of disagreement," he snarled.

Sulpicia backed away, her eyes narrowed. Shrugging off the attention of Corin and her other guards, Sulpicia drew herself to her full height—impressively towering, and one of the reasons he'd mated her in the first place. For a long moment, she stood there silently, staring at Aro.

"You fear him, Arnza," she said. "And you fear someone from whom there is nothing to fear."

Then she turned and was gone, nearly crashing into Alrigo and Raphael who came barreling in the other direction. They both looked hurried, but stopped short at the expression on Aro's face.

"Master?"

Aro raised his eyebrows, extending his hand to Alrigo. At once the images flooded Aro's mind—hunting, a human dead in the forest, one in the square, Alrigo's childhood, a fight with Raphael, an argument with another of the guard, commands from Aro, obeyed, obeyed, obeyed. All the pieces of Alrigo's mind swirled in Aro's until he found the new piece, this latest bit of memory that was the one his guard had intended to convey.

The Englishman's chambers, reeking of odd herbs, but with his own scent still recent enough on the air. The door, ajar, the chair, hastily pushed back. The bag, gone.

And the robe, the black robe which invited him into the Brotherhood, puddled unceremoniously on the stone floor.

Aro jerked his hand from Alrigo's as though the other's was on fire.

“He's gone?”

“Ten minutes, at best. Through the tunnels.”

Ten minutes in a place unseen by humans could put the Englishman anywhere. In the forests north of the compound, in the city to the south—just as the guard enjoyed the overcast day, so would Carlisle take shelter in it.

Where would he run?

“Master?”

“Find him,” Aro growled, but no one moved. Even Alrigo looked nervously from Marcus to Aro, as though he were waiting for further instruction.

“Find him!” Aro bellowed. “All of you! The Englishman. Find him and bring him back to me! Go!”

The Great Hall emptied at once, a drain with its plug just pulled, its inhabitants swirling out the doors murmuring to one another. Within seconds, the hall was empty, save Marcus, who sat more upright in his chair.

For a long moment, he said nothing. It wasn't until Caius appeared in the doorway, a perplexed look on his face, that Marcus addressed Aro, who stood, his hands balled into fists at his side.

Marcus arched a single eyebrow.

“Loneliness is a powerful motivator,” was all he said.

Chapter Sixteen: Improper

London, England
June, 1667

The crowds of Londoners were at their thickest at dusk—commoners coming from market, tradesmen coming home from their work, and of course all those who catered to them: boys hawking pies, tinkers, minstrels, whores. William averted his eyes from all of this as he made his way down the crowded streets.

Perhaps staying indoors for the rest of what would assuredly be a short life would not be a terrible idea.

Three hours earlier he'd been at the gaol in Southwark, being hissed at by the woman from Ratcliffe street. Questioning of her neighbors and of William's barber confirmed the suspicious activities—a pregnant woman with whom the widow had argued had lost her quick baby, a man who stepped accidentally onto the widow's yard developed boils. After three nights of wakefulness, she had confessed her beliefs and relinquished her familiar, a tawny, yellow-eyed cat, which had at once been put to death.

Convincing the judge to remand her to prison had been a simple matter, and a small smile spread across William's face as he thought on it. It would be his first trial in months, and he would bring down the woman and her coven.

Impending death would not keep him from his work.

William experienced an odd surge of energy to his step these last few days. Perhaps the taking of his blood was working, or perhaps it was simply that to do this, to return to God's work, brought him healing beyond what a mortal barber-surgeon might offer. It had been a great deal of time since his raids had been common, despite his son's irreverent accusations. Hunting the possessed and the servants of evil had gone down with Cromwell; long past were days when men like Matthew Hopkins had ruled the night and purified the city.

Hopkins called himself the Witchfinder General. He, too, had been the son of a minister. And though William thought the moniker was a bit prideful on Hopkins's part, a part of him wished his own son had anywhere near that zeal.

But he did not. And so William worked alone.

The girl from Ratcliffe street lived in the next parish over, the reason he had never seen her in his church. But Londoners were nothing if not gossips, and gaining information about another family was simple, especially for a man of the cloth. With nothing more than the last name and her description, he had traced her to her address several neighborhoods to the west. Her mother had been made a widow by the plague; the man of the household was survived by two sons, one older and one younger than the girl.

Whether the girl had been truthful about her betrothal would have to be seen.

"Aye, Reverend!" a voice called, cutting through the clattering of wheels and hooves, the shoes scuffling against the street, and the shouts of those peddling their wares and services. "What brings you this evening?"

William tipped his hat in the direction of Daniel Newcomb, a man of his own parish. He was a young husband, a butcher by trade.

"A search," he said. "I come to rout evil where it may lie."

"To rout evil?" The man arched an eyebrow. "I might not ask in what form."

"Women who consort in the night," William answered firmly, and the other man nodded.

"Understood," he said. "I am on my way home this evening. Johanna awaits with her takings from today's market."

Johanna was Daniel's wife. William had watched her lately as she grew with their third child.

"Johanna will deliver soon, will she not?"

"We expect soon enough." Daniel beamed. "Perhaps a daughter to balance our sons and to help care for our home. She kicks less than her brothers."

William offered a small smile. "Excellent, then. I shall keep your family in my prayers. We'll baptize the child when she arrives."

"Thank you, Reverend." The smile was returned. "I should bid you on your way."

William nodded. "Good evening, Daniel."

The other man took a few steps, and then turned, remembering something. "If it is also your son you seek, I saw him not so long ago near the neighborhood market."

His son?

"Your pardon?"

Daniel gestured in the vicinity of where William planned to go. "That direction. He was with his woman and their chaperone."

His *woman*?

Trying not to let the utter surprise of these words show on his face, William nodded. "Thank you for alerting me. I will see if I might find him."

The man smiled. "Good evening, Reverend."

"Good evening to you, also."

Now William's pace quickened. Could what the Newcomb man said be true? If his son courted a woman, it would explain much about his behavior of late; his strange peacefulness, the way he seemed never to remain at the vicarage after finishing his chores. And his sudden desire to attend the seminary...at once, it made sense.

"I would wish to raise my family outside of London," the younger Cullen had said.

His family.

Was it possible the boy was already in the process of forming it?

William's stomach twisted with an odd twinge of...guilt? Anticipation? He wasn't certain. If his son were indeed courting a woman, it was cause for celebration. He would be cared for, even in William's absence. And if the prospect of marriage had brought the boy around to the consideration of seminary, to the work of God...William couldn't help but beam. If there was a better sign that his child was one of the Chosen, he wasn't sure what that sign might be.

A wife. Children. Many children, the way William and Sarah had planned. And his son would not suffer alone for so many years before coming to find his wife, as William had. No, he would marry now, become a father right away. A warmth spread from what seemed William's very center. It was possible that he might hold his son's son before his eyes closed on this world.

He could swear that he felt his body cease its tremors just at the thought.

You'll marry, William, he thought, and your wedded bliss will heal us both.

So caught up in thought, William found his legs carried him the rest of the way through the less-familiar neighborhood, to the street to which he'd been directed. Like much of London, the street here was narrow, with alleyways twisting off it like the legs of a spider, the houses so close together they blocked out the orange glow of the sinking sun. The house where the girl supposedly lived was unremarkable, a narrow two-story which jutted out over the crowded street. William had to push his way past several who came the other way in order to reach its door.

There was no knocker, and the sound of his fist rapping on the door was damped by the passing crowd.

He knocked again.

It took a long moment for the door to swing open, revealing a woman who might have been near William's age. The widow, no doubt. Her hair greyed at the temples, but otherwise was a strangely familiar shade of chestnut.

"May I help you?" she asked.

"Good evening, Missus Bradshawe. My name is Reverend William Cullen; I am the rector of St. Helen's Aldgate."

Her eyebrows raised. "You are Carlisle's father."

He nearly stepped back in surprise. "My son is William Carlisle, yes," he answered tentatively.

The woman frowned. "You do not look like him."

"He favors his mother." An understatement. The boy exuded Sarah's countenance in every plane of his body.

For a long moment, the woman did not respond, simply studying William with a hard gaze. He shifted his weight nervously. Usually, when he came to make an accusation, he was accompanied by the judge, and sometimes some of his parishioners, as well. But fervor had fallen steadily during the rule of Cromwell; it was as though the people of London no longer cared if evil lived among them. Even Hopkins had long since been disgraced.

And so that left William standing alone on the doorstep, being made uncomfortable by this woman and her uncanny knowledge of his son's appearance.

He cleared his throat. "How is it that you know my son?"

If it were possible, the woman's face dropped into an even deeper frown. "What is it that brings you here, Reverend Cullen? Surely it is not Carlisle, as you seem to be unaware that I had made his acquaintance."

He tipped his hat. "My apologies. I seek your daughter." And perhaps he ought to question the widow herself—it was becoming perfectly apparent where the daughter had inherited her forthright cheek.

"For what reason?"

"Are you aware that your daughter visits a widow on Ratcliffe Street?"

A look of surprise passed over the woman's face, but it was subdued quickly.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I encountered your daughter visiting a widow on Ratcliffe some nights ago. Unchaperoned."

A shrug. "Her brother was likely nearby. He frequents many pubs around the city."

"I am certain she was alone, Madam."

Mrs. Bradshawe cocked an eyebrow.

"And why, then, did you believe her to be there?"

"She visited another woman. A woman who has been taken to the prisons in Southwark, Mrs. Bradshawe. On charges of witchcraft."

This, at last, drew a response. She took a staggering step backwards, and one hand flew to her heart. The color drained suddenly from her face.

"Witchcraft."

It was a whisper.

"Yes."

"You believe my Beth to be involved in witchcraft?"

William hesitated a short moment. If he couldn't apprehend a woman right away, it was best to alarm her family as little as possible. He'd lost pursuits over the years as women fled to the country, to Scotland, even to France, out of his reach and never to be heard from again.

"I merely wish to question her about her acquaintance," he said gently. "Of course it is necessary to rout the world of evil. To be certain to remove this woman from Ratcliffe Street, we must gather testimony from all with whom she consorts." He didn't bother to mention that the testimony from the neighbors, to say nothing of his own eyewitness testimony from the night at the barber-surgeon's, would suffice handily.

"And what should I do?"

"Bring her to me," William answered. "St. Helen's Aldgate; the vicarage shares the churchyard. I will return tomorrow if you are unable to bring her by."

The woman gulped and nodded.

"Good evening, Missus Bradshawe," William said, tipping his hat to her. Then he thought once more. "And my goodwife?"

"Reverend?"

"You should pray for your daughter. I will also."

A slow nod. "I will do that. Thank you."

"Good evening to you."

"Good evening."

Then William turned and slid back out into the crowded streets. One less possessed soul. One less evil creature lurking in the neighborhoods of the city. One barrier removed in making this world a righteous world, one that would be welcoming to William's child, his new wife, and whatever children they might have.

He smiled, and murmured a small prayer. "Lord, guide me on the path of thy choosing; strengthen me in my fight to bring righteousness to this realm."

As though his prayer had been answered at once, he felt a sudden spring in his own step. He reached the main street, and turned himself back toward Aldgate, toward the church and his home.

Toward his son.

~ || x || ~

The dirt caught between Carlisle's toes as he curled and uncurled them, but it felt good. The day was hot and humid, and the cool mud gave him some respite from the relentless heat.

Half the day had been spent in the carpentry workshop; Mister Tyne took in a large order for a staircase rail in one of the grander estates near Fleet Street, and Carlisle spent the better part of two days turning spindles at the lathe. But now he was free, and as was common for most of his evenings now, he was with Elizabeth.

A tiny cattle pasture jutted into Elizabeth's neighborhood only a few streets from her home, and it provided just enough green space for Georgie to play, and for Carlisle and Elizabeth to enjoy each other's company while her brother raced himself dizzy. The grass was soft and lush—the spring had been generous to London—and it felt wondrously comfortable beneath them.

"I do not believe I have seen thy feet before, Mister Cullen," Elizabeth murmured. She, too, had doffed her shoes and sat in her hose beside him. He could see the graceful arch of her foot and the shapeliness of her legs. It was a sight far more enticing than any depicted in the bawdy poetry that Thomas had shown him over the years.

He laughed. "I suppose that is true enough. Do they meet thy expectations?"

Elizabeth leaned forward so that her hair fell over her shoulder as she pretended to scrutinize his legs.

"They have quite a bit more hair than I would have expected."

Carlisle glanced at her, only to find her face held an entirely serious expression. But then it broke into a wide smile and she gave him a playful shove. They both began to laugh.

"I apologize that my feet do not meet with thy approval," Carlisle answered a moment later, still laughing. "Shall I shave them?"

Elizabeth made a show of bending over his feet, leaning in to inspect them. "Perhaps not all of the hair," she muttered just loudly enough for him to hear. "But right here." She laid a hand on his right instep. "This part thou could cut a bit? It is nearly curly. Thine hair is not curly, why is the hair on thy feet?"

He shook his head, still laughing. Elizabeth did not lift her hand, however, instead caressing his foot for a moment. It felt wonderful.

Touching was still rare enough to be thrilling. As he had yet to reveal his courtship to his father, Carlisle had been unable to enjoy such rituals as bundling with Elizabeth, and all their moments of physical contact were stolen and brief.

He inched his right foot over to Elizabeth's leg and tickled her ankle with his toes. She giggled, giving him a playful shove.

"Stop it, Carlisle," she said, laughing. "That's more than enough of your silliness."

"I do nothing," he replied, giving her a look of complete innocence and earning himself another shove.

Across the pasture, Georgie ran in circles, arms outstretched as he scared away a flock of songbirds. They seemed to be playing a game; the birds landed, Georgie would send them scattering about, and then the birds would simply land once more. Each time the birds took off in a flurry of feathers around him, Georgie let out a shrieking giggle, and then waited for them to land again before repeating the act.

"He does look as though he's having fun," Elizabeth said quietly, leaning in to Carlisle's side and causing an odd chill of excitement to shoot down his spine.

"I remember those days," Carlisle said quietly, not taking his eyes off Georgie. "Except that they were Katie's hens I would send fluttering away. She disliked that so much—I remember being scolded every day." He smiled. "Often through her paddle."

Elizabeth laughed. "I have difficulty imagining you being so improper."

"Impropriety furnishes the home of childhood," he answered.

He gazed back out at Georgie, who'd temporarily given up chasing the birds and now lay on his back in the grass, staring up at the darkening evening sky.

Elizabeth followed his gaze. "That is true enough," she said.

A hand shot out toward him before he had time to move away, and he suddenly found himself on the receiving end of a relentless tickling. He let out an undignified shriek, leaping to his feet and taking off at a run across the pasture. Elizabeth lit out after him only a second later. Together they ran across the pasture, scaring no small number of birds themselves, the grass and bare earth mashing beneath their feet. He was faster than she, and had the lead easily, but when he approached Georgie, he slowed, giving Elizabeth just enough time to reach out to him, throw her arms around his waist, and knock him off balance. They both tumbled into the grass, chests heaving with laughter.

"What was that about my impropriety, Miss Bradshawe?" Carlisle teased, causing a fresh round of laughter from them both.

Georgie appeared above them a second later, his small body casting an odd, long shadow over them both. He stood with his hands on his hips, his very best commanding look on his face.

"You act oddly," he told them, his voice stern.

"We act oddly, brother?" Elizabeth grinned at him. "As I recall, we do not chase innocent birds into the sky."

Carlisle grinned. "I shall show thee odd behavior." In one motion, Carlisle threw his arms around Georgie's knees, buckling them so that Georgie landed atop both of them, where he promptly fell under a four-handed tickling attack. It was only when Georgie's laughter reached a pure, high-pitched shrieking that they relented, leaving him gasping for breath in their laps.

For a long moment, the three of them simply sat together, watching the shadows grow longer and the tiny herd of cattle ambling uncomfortably in the other end of the pasture.

"We ought to return to thy home," Carlisle said at last.

"I wish I could stay out here," came Georgie's immediate reply.

Carlisle did also, though he was not nearly as free to whine his disappointment as the boy. *Soon*, his mind told him. *Soon this will be the life you can lead.*

And with greater freedom, also—he'd informed his father that he had no intention of serving the church at Aldgate, but that he would raise his family in the countryside, where his children would be healthier and he could enjoy the fresh air. It seemed the closer he came to marriage and to a family, the more London grated on him; the crime, the crowds, the filth. Every rat seemed a reason to get away; every time he was accosted by a tinker or a vagrant was one more link in his resolve to have his family grow up away from this.

"Carlisle?"

He shook his head, forcibly bringing himself back to the present. Elizabeth stared at him, a bemused smile on her face.

"Of what were you thinking?"

"Of us," he answered. "Of our home, and our marriage." Gazing down at Georgie, whose attention had been caught by the cows across the way, he added, "And our children."

Elizabeth reached for his hand, squeezing it tightly. "Soon enough, Carlisle. Soon enough." She laid her head on his shoulder, her hair tickling his neck and the sensitive spot at his ear.

"When will thou ask my brother?" she said a moment later.

"For thy hand?"

A nod.

His stomach twisted. Were he completely honest with himself, he had put this off. Christopher had joined them so rarely, and when he had, he had a tendency to disappear to the tavern and leave Elizabeth and Carlisle to wander alone. Whether this was indifference or trust, Carlisle wasn't exactly certain.

But he had lain the groundwork, now, he thought. His father knew of his desire to go to seminary, and he would do so. Absent the plan to serve his father's church, a life in the clergy seemed more appealing. He would make good wages; he could satisfy his love of carpentry by building in the church and in his parish; his family would be well looked-after, just as the Aldgate parish had looked after their widowed rector and his son.

Yes, he would give up the law. But, sitting here, in the waning daylight, with Elizabeth and Georgie, free to imagine this as not just an impermanent moment, but a lasting state of his life...it seemed fair.

Entirely fair.

His dreams were worth more than his pride, just as Thomas had said.

"Tonight," he heard himself say, and the resolve in his own voice startled him.

"Tonight?"

"I will go to the coffee house, after dark. Christopher is almost unfailingly there. The crowd will help pressure him to say yes."

"Fear you that he will say no?"

Carlisle grinned. "I merely feel it best to give it the best possible chance."

"My brother will be grateful to be rid of me. He will beg thee to marry me as soon as thou can." Elizabeth stood, tugging Carlisle, and by extension, Georgie to their feet. She took Carlisle's hand in hers, laying her other hand firmly on Georgie's shoulders.

Squeezing her hand, Carlisle added, "Your brother's loss is certainly my gain."

Elizabeth grinned at him, and pecked his cheek, causing him to blush red.

"My gain also," she answered, and together they began to walk toward her home.

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It was several hours later, well after darkness had fallen, that Carlisle and Thomas made their way toward the coffee house. As he had such a short time before, Carlisle carried a letter in his breast pocket, one which seemed as though it might burn a hole—if not in the fabric, then perhaps in his skin itself.

Because this time, he asked for far more than mere permission to court.

"Thou acts like a frightened rabbit," Thomas teased him, shoving him playfully, but with enough force that Carlisle nearly went spilling to the street.

He grit his teeth. "And I am certain thou were completely calm when thou asked for Anne?"

Thomas laughed. "I was a wreck, of course. But I had always assumed you to be more composed."

Composed. Was that even possible in this situation?

To be sure, he had felt more composed as he and Elizabeth had walked so serenely back to her house after their evening in the paddock. But he couldn't help but feel that something had gone awry since then.

"Her mother acted oddly, when we returned this evening," he muttered, more to himself than anything, but Thomas answered nevertheless.

"Oddly?"

"Yes."

Mrs. Bradshawe had treated him almost as her child from the day he'd first arrived with the initial letter for Christopher; from the moment she knew he had nursed at her sister's breast, she seemed willing to accept him. She kissed him and hugged him easily, and greeted him joyously each time he turned up on her step.

But tonight, if anything, she had seemed wary of him. Her greeting had been stiff and strangely formal, and she'd seemed to gather Elizabeth and Georgie in as though she needed to

protect them. They had been ushered quickly inside, and Elizabeth's goodbye to Carlisle consisted of little more than a squeezed hand and a prolonged gaze.

"She took Elizabeth and Georgie into the house as though she feared me," Carlisle answered.

"Is that so?" Thomas's brow furrowed. "No one has any reason to fear thee."

Carlisle rolled his eyes. "Why thank you. I am glad to know I am no formidable opponent."

Thomas grinned. "I intended no offense, but now that you mention it..."

Carlisle shoved him, and they both laughed.

They walked several paces more before Thomas spoke.

"I wonder at what might have happened to cause her to behave in such a way?"

"I know not." Well, he would ask. They would reach the coffee house, he would speak to Christopher, deliver the letter, and perhaps inquire as to the behavior of Mrs. Bradshawe. And if nothing else, he would see Elizabeth soon enough and could ask her himself.

The streets were nearly empty at this time of night, and almost completely dark, save for the handful of taverns and lodges which hung lamps from their door posts. The light spilled into the street at odd intervals, casting shadows in different directions. Muffled sound issued from the taverns; drunken singing, snippets of conversations, tankards heavy on wooden bars.

The coffee house, like the taverns, hung a lamp outside its door, and the light from the lamps inside leaked invitingly through the windows. When Carlisle paused a moment before the coffee house's door, Thomas stopped short also. They peered through the windows, and could see Christopher sitting there with a group of his friends, his dark hair reaching down to his shoulders.

Thomas nudged Carlisle. "Have you the letter, Sexton?"

He patted his breast pocket. "I have."

Thomas grinned. "Dost thou need a drink? Perhaps we ought to have stopped at the tavern first."

Carlisle blushed, but his heart was racing. "I shall be fine," he attempted to answer, but what came out was more of a squeak.

More laughter from Thomas, and then a firm clap on the shoulder. "Let us go in, then, Friend."

The coffee house was alive with sound; voices in heated debate, rustling newspaper, the scraping of stools against the wooden floor. Coffee cups clinked against one another and the tables. There was laughter.

But as Thomas and Carlisle entered, the entire room fell silent. Newspapers dropped. Cups clattered to the table. Voices fell to whispers.

"What..." Thomas barely managed to whisper, before a single stool two tables over was shoved so firmly it screeched and fell to the ground with a loud thwack.

Christopher Bradshawe was shorter and skinnier than Carlisle, and in a fight with adequate warning, there wouldn't be much of a competition. But this wasn't a fight, and there wasn't adequate warning, and Carlisle had only barely managed to get out the words "Mister Bradshawe" before he found himself crashing backwards into a table, a stabbing pain in his jaw.

The table was sturdy and held his weight; the cups, however, were quite a bit more delicate. Behind him came the tinkering of broken china and the clatter of tin as it fell to the floor. His back soaked at once with spilled coffee, and it burned through his shirt to his skin.

And then there were men, dozens of them, it seemed, leaning over him. Someone tried to grab him but no, there was Christopher, standing over the table. The fists flew again, making a thick slapping sound as they made contact with Carlisle's face. At once, Carlisle could see the hands were covered in blood—his? He drew a hand across his own lips and it came away drenched in red.

So he swung, and was rewarded with the solid THWOCK of his fist meeting flesh.

The coffee house exploded into noise. Christopher's body was warm as it rolled over Carlisle's and onto the floor, his blood spilling from his lip down Carlisle's knuckles. Men shouted, some for help, some to egg them on.

"You bastard," Christopher hollered, as he grabbed Carlisle's shoulders, knocking him off balance and into a second table. More clattering cups. The reek of more spilled coffee.

"What?" Carlisle answered, but it was drowned out by the jeers of the crowd. He threw Christopher off him, and the other man tumbled into yet another table.

Some of the men grabbed Christopher's arms, wrenching him up from the table and flinging him back across the room with such force that both he and Carlisle lost their balance and went careening across the floor. Carlisle felt his shoulders mash into the wood.

Finally he got a good look at the other man. Both were breathing heavily, their chests heaving as they lay sprawled on the coffee house floor. Blood and slobber and phlegm dripped from Christopher's face; Carlisle could feel a spreading wetness on his own.

"Christopher..." Carlisle began, but he was cut off at once.

"You bastard," the other man cried, his voice high-pitched and strangled. "My sister..."

His sister? Elizabeth?

"What..."

But he was once again cut off by a blow. This time it was to the side of his jaw, and he felt something there give way. His ears began to ring.

"You bastard, you bastard, you bastard!" Christopher screamed, each iteration of the insult punctuated by another blow. From somewhere, Carlisle could hear someone shouting for them to stop, but it sounded distant...

He lifted his arms to his face.

"Please," someone whined, and it took Carlisle a moment to realize this sound had come from him.

The blows kept coming.

"My"—to his jaw—"sister"—his right ear—"is"—his temple—"not"—the cheekbone—"a"—his jaw again, was that his tooth loosened?—"witch!"

A witch?

The thought barely had time to register before the fist landed again squarely in the middle of Carlisle's face. Something made an odd scrunching noise, and it his whole head became engulfed in a fiery pain. Fresh blood gushed over his lips and jaw. When he tried to turn himself over, he found his arms didn't seem to answer.

"She's...not...a witch," he heard himself say feebly.

Then the sounds of the coffee house blended into a dull, ringing roar in his ears as everything went black.

Chapter Seventeen: Invisible Man

Chicago, Illinois
October, 1918

The streets below Carlisle's flat were eerily quiet, reminding him of the days when the city would wake up to a blanket of snowfall; no cars, no carriages, no men and women off to the factories, no children off to school. Just an eerie calm, a street utterly undisturbed.

Were it not the cause of the silence, he would almost call it peaceful.

Above his bed sat an old clock; its maker dating back to just after Carlisle had arrived in the new world. It had been one of his first purchases at the time, and now it had seen him through thousands of miles of travel, dozens of small flats and houses, through hospital after hospital and disease after disease. Cholera, scarlet fever, tuberculosis...

Now, once again, it ticked out the hours until Carlisle could return to his work.

Once, he'd gone to the armory to while away these hours. But now he was too scattered, his mind constantly flitting back to Cook County Hospital, to the red-haired woman and her recalcitrant son.

"Fool woman," the orderly had called Elizabeth, as he helped Carlisle put her on a stretcher the night she fell ill. "No sense. How many of us told her to go home?"

Carlisle only shook his head.

"He's her child," he answered.

Her only child at that.

Elizabeth Masen's body rolled easily onto the stretcher. She was lighter than she looked; in hindsight, probably evidence that she'd suffered influenza symptoms for days without acknowledging them or speaking about them. To keep her son from worrying even more, Carlisle suspected.

Sometimes, there was a very thin line between bravery and foolishness.

"Where do we take her? The women's ward?"

At first, Carlisle had nodded, but then he remembered the room on the second floor. A room usually used for quarantine, but which in the face of this widespread contagion, had remained empty. Just scarcely enough room for two beds and a lamp while still leaving room for a doctor or nurse to enter. And so he moved the boy and his mother in together, where he could look in on them both at once.

At least if Elizabeth Masen or her child were to die, they wouldn't die alone.

And so now instead of working, Carlisle came home only to hide, to count down the hours until he could return.

Leaning against the cool wall, Carlisle closed his eyes and took himself back almost two months. To that night, at the very outset of this horrible disease, when that little girl was shot. Here, right below his window, in the street that now sat still. When he sat alone in his office, singeing his skin in candle flame. When he stood in the storage room, hoping to snuff himself with ether.

And then came the flu, and with it, the woman. With first her husband, and then her child, the scrawny seventeen-year-old with the fiery temper and a sense of obligation that easily matched Carlisle's own.

Yes, he'd promised her. And yes, all things considered, it had been a foolish thing to promise.

But who was he, if he was only average? Only able to do the same things every other doctor was able to do?

Useless.

The mattress was in two before he even recognized he'd attacked, the bed frame mangled almost beyond recognition, the bedclothes flung into a pile on the dilapidated floorboards.

At once, he froze, flattening himself against the wall. He had learned, over the years, to incorporate the habits of humans, the way they would fidget, run their hands through their hair, shift their weight, cross and uncross their legs. His kind had no need of such things; he could sit for all eternity in the same position with no consequences. But these things had become habit for him, so much so that he often did them even when no human would see them. To become so still felt odd.

Had he cried out? Had anyone heard the noise?

The clock ticked.

No one came.

Alone.

Because who would notice him? Who would care, if the blond doctor with the strange eyes disappeared? They would chalk it up to the influenza, assume him buried in one of the mass graves surrounding the city.

He could run. Except...

Elizabeth Masen would care. She would see that he did not return. She would inquire after him.

Elizabeth Masen and her son noticed him.

Perhaps that was why he felt so much like running.

Just seven years ago in Columbus, Ohio, there had been a girl nearly the age of Mrs. Masen's son. She, too, had been stubbornly brave, just like the Masens—ignoring the fractured bone which had ripped through her leg in favor of conversation with him. What he did, how her body would heal itself, what the effects of the laudanum would be. She spoke to him, not in the deferent way that so many patients did, but as though Carlisle were already her friend.

She asked his first name, and when he gave it, proclaimed it to be odd.

"I believe it was a surname," Carlisle answered, laughing. "Perhaps my mother's."

"Perhaps?" the girl replied. "Do you not know?"

He looked away then, pretending to be very interested in the plaster which he used to set the bone. "She died giving birth to me," he replied. "I did not know her, and my father never spoke of her."

"Oh."

"Esme is not exactly a common name either," he commented a moment later, still not looking up from her leg. "One wonders why you are not a Mary, or a Margaret."

The girl giggled. "I don't like common names."

"So then you like mine."

"I like yours. I've never met a Carlisle before."

"Nor I an Esme."

She beamed. They both did.

Her whole appointment had taken, what, maybe a three-quarters of an hour? But it had been more than enough to frighten him. *Unseen* had always been his method. He would arrive in a town, and be known only as the doctor. And if people became too familiar with him, he would leave. Familiarly was risk; risk meant the Brothers in Italy; and the Brothers meant death...

The following afternoon, he bought a train ticket out of Ohio.

That was what would happen to Elizabeth and her son, also. They would die....on the one hand, a good thing, for it meant they wouldn't tell of the strange doctor who had met them twice and cared for them. Yet on the other, it meant he would lose them.

The girl in Ohio. The boy with red hair. The mother, with her striking eyes and insistent pleas.

He would lose them. Again.

Carlisle delivered another solid kick to the bed frame; it groaned and split into even smaller pieces.

The clock ticked another hour before Carlisle grew tired of the mess. It was an overcast day, so he hoisted the mangled bed frame and the ruined mattress over his shoulder and hauled them two miles to the dump casting them atop furniture and destroyed clothing. The debris onto which he flung his own was singed and blackened, an attempt to rid items of the influenza. The burned items were lighter than those which were not, and the wind lifted pieces of them up and sent them fluttering around, turning them into a murder of sinister crows. He stood and watched them rise on the updraft, only to come fluttering back down again on the pile of trash.

This was what humans were to him, he thought. A glimmer of hope, a fleeting moment of flight. Rising on an updraft, then falling, slowly, back to earth.

Humans all died. That was their very nature.

The walk back to his building took him through streets full of homes. Most were darkened; perhaps the families which inhabited them were all lost to the influenza. Or maybe they simply had drawn the curtains against the world, insulating themselves from the terror of the outside.

But he saw a flickering light from one, and as he drew nearer, he could see the light came from a fireplace in the drawing room, flickering merrily and warming the home against the cruel October winds. Inside a family sat by its light, crowded around a low table, on which sat a game of some sort, checkers, it appeared. A young girl, a boy, a mother, a father.

They were laughing.

In the midst of all this silence and darkness and death, a family sat, firelight dancing on their faces, and they were laughing.

Outside in the cold wind, alone on the street, Carlisle stared in longingly and began to cry.

~||x||~

The dirt wall was nearly four feet over Elizabeth's head. The trench smelled sweet, an odd mixture of wet earth and men's sweat. She heard boots shuffling back and forth, hushed whispers. Were the German troops advancing? They were across the field, wherever across the field was.

In the darkness, she couldn't see. Her heart sped as she scanned the rows of men. Dozens, down here—how large was this unit, exactly? Their uniforms blended with the earth so that she could scarcely make out one young man from another.

And young men they were. Eighteen. Twenty. One was small, skinny. If she'd had money to bet, she would have guessed him to be no older than sixteen.

A year younger than her Edward.

The clacking of shuffling rifles, the click-click-click of preparing for rapid fire filled her ears as she moved strangely unnoticed between the men.

"The Germans advance!" a young man hollered, galloping unsteadily through the small crowd. "We see their shell fire!"

As though merely saying it made it so, a fountain of dirt launched into the air six feet away, the deep boom of the hand grenade causing the ground to vibrate. Some of the boys screamed. Others clutched at their ears.

The air came alive with the sounds of fire—individual shots from rifles, the rat-a-tat-tat of a machine gun, the deep, tympanic blast of a second grenade.

A deep voice shouted, "Go, men, go!"

All around her, boys began scrambling up the side of the trench, and the air became a flurry of boots and falling dirt. And as they surfaced into the field, at once came the sounds of more screaming, war-whoops, return fire. More fountains of dirt as grenades flew in both direction.

The boys throwing themselves out of the trench gave Elizabeth more room to run. She could feel her heart beating in her throat as she made her way through them—this one, no, too short; that one, no, blond hair. Each boy, one after the next, scrambling out of the trenches and into sunlight and shell fire.

"Edward!" she cried out. "Teddy! Edward!"

But no answer came.

At last, the right amount of sunlight shifted its way into the trench, and she saw it; the glimmer of red hair, the little bit of herself in her child's coloring. His hand was outstretched, reaching for his comrade's, ready to hoist himself out into open battle.

A grenade whizzed through the air and exploded behind them.

He turned.

"Edward!"

"Mother!" His voice came out high-pitched, strangled. "Mother get out of here!"

"No!" The tears dripped down her chin—when had she begun to cry? "No, baby, please! Please come with me! Stay with me! Stay with me, I'll save you!"

He turned toward her, and for a moment she saw him, standing there upright, his gun over his shoulder, one foot already lifted onto the makeshift wooden ladder embedded in the dirt.

But he'd paused, and that was enough for her to close the distance, to reach out with her hand and grab his. Sweat, dirt, tears...

And then the trench exploded around them, blasting her backwards and tossing her child into the air like a rag doll.

"Teddy!" she screamed. "Edward, no! Edward! Edward!"

"Mama..." came the feeble reply. It sounded weak, injured...and very close...

"Please, Mrs. Masen, it is quite all right," said another. "Wake up, Mrs. Masen. Edward is right here."

The shell fire faded; the trench disappeared. The smell of sweat and dirt left her nostrils, replaced with the sharpness of antiseptic, the coppery scent of blood...

The hospital.

She was not in Europe. Edward was not either. There were no Germans, no rifles, no machine guns, no grenades.

But Edward was dying just as surely.

A cool cloth was placed on her forehead, and water dripped from it down her temples and her nose, making a puddle on the pillow beneath her head.

"It's all right," a voice told her. "It's all right. Only a dream, ma'am. The fever does that, but it's only a dream."

She fought her way out from the cloth, and pulled herself into a sitting position. The room swam. But she could steady herself just enough to see, curled up next to her on the matching cot, her son's lanky body. It *was* Edward who had replied "Mama," but whether he'd even truly heard her, she couldn't tell—his eyelids fluttered as though he was asleep, but his body still convulsed with the shivers of fever.

Did he see the same horrors in his delirium?

She struggled to swing her legs over the edge of the bed.

"Now, that's not a good idea, ma'am," said the nurse, but Elizabeth shushed her, reaching out for Edward's shoulder. She ran her hand over it, feeling the bones through his thin shirt. He'd lost so much weight.

"I thought I'd lost you," she whispered.

"You didn't lose him," said the nurse, patting Elizabeth's hand. "He's right here, just as always."

Elizabeth ran her hand over Edward's back, feeling each of the little knobs of his spine. She had done this so often when he had been a baby; running her hands over the little back. It amazed her, then, that this fully formed little human body had come from her; that the squalling red-faced creature was her creation. His perfection had floored her.

It still did.

"Did he...was that him who replied?" she asked the nurse, and the nurse nodded.

"Heard you crying out for him, I believe. He doesn't want to upset you any more than you do him. But please, Mrs. Masen. The doctor worked hard to make it so that you and your Edward could be here together. Please take care of yourself, too, and don't hurt yourself taking care of him."

A hand gently pressed her body back toward the cot and the bed sheets, and at once she began to cough again, feeling the sick, wet feeling of blood and phlegm drawing their way upward. The nurse gave her a rag to cough into; it turned pink.

"There you are," the nurse answered sweetly. "Go on and lie back, and I'll see to it that your boy gets his care." Hands reached out and arranged a blanket over her body—when had that appeared, Elizabeth wondered. She'd given her blanket to Edward last night.

It wasn't until she was fully back in her own bed, her eyes no longer examining her child, that she recognized the nurse. The robust woman with the kind smile, who'd sat with Edward that night when Elizabeth herself had fallen ill.

"Nurse Dorothy," she said, but her voice came out as a mumble instead of the clear address she'd intended. The woman seemed to have made it a point to check on the Masens; in their two days in this room, Elizabeth couldn't remember having seen any other nurses enter.

Of course, she had also just been at war in a trench.

Elizabeth gestured toward Edward. "How...is he?" she managed.

Nodding, the woman laid a hand on Edward's forehead and neck, opening his eyelids to gaze at his eyes. Her expression remained somber.

"He's still here, Mother," she said. "He's warm, but he's still here." She tugged something toward Elizabeth's bed—Edward's arm, Elizabeth realized. She felt her own fingers being opened, and her son's palm slid against hers.

"There. You stay in bed, but hold his hand, so that he'll know his mother is here."

The room went blurry as Elizabeth's eyes filled with tears.

"Thank you," she managed.

"Take care of your boy," the nurse said. "And I will, also." She placed a cool rag on Elizabeth's forehead, and another on Edward's.

"The doctor?"

"I can go get a doctor if you wish," Dorothy answered.

No, not any doctor, Elizabeth thought. The doctor. The one with the soulful eyes. Their doctor.

"No....Doctor Cullen."

The nurse smiled. "He'll be on shift in an hour or two, Mother." She patted Elizabeth's hand. "I'll tell him to come right here. But he'll do that anyway, I imagine. He's taken to you both."

She moved from Edward's bed to Elizabeth's and straightening the covers.

"It's good for him," she added quietly after a moment. "Has trouble growing to care about people, I think. He's a strong man; wise, like he's lived a lifetime already." She chuckled. "Scares some folk, I think. He knows too much. But he's afraid of people. He won't get close to them. He's careful."

She pulled the blanket up to Elizabeth's shoulders, patting them.

"But he's not careful with you," she muttered. "You should've seen the fit he pitched about getting you and your boy this room. Surprised folks. Doctor Cullen doesn't lose his temper. But there he was hollering to beat the band..."

Dorothy paused, and smiled down at Edward. "You mean something special to him," she answered. "And that's a good thing for you and him."

After re-arranging the blankets once more, she exited the room, leaving Elizabeth alone with Edward once more.

Her son hadn't spoken in at least a day; each ingress of air seemed to crackle in his throat. Yet the rhythm was steady, a peaceful reminder that, yes, her son still breathed. Her child still lived. There was no mortar fire, no trench. No screaming commander, no battalion mates scrambling over the edge. No grenades.

But Edward was dying, just as surely...

She stared up at the ceiling. Wooden, painted white, with sections flaking, and still others showed signs of where the relentless Chicago rain had made its way through the shingle. Odd brown-tinged shapes, a circle, a spider, a sea monster...

The last time she had spent any significant amount of time here herself, she had been in recovery from losing Margaret. Margaret, who had nearly gone to her grave as simply BABY GIRL MASEN, until Elizabeth fought hard for her daughter to have a name, and some acknowledgment of the life she would have lived.

Margaret Masen, who is survived by her mother, father, and brother, Edward Masen II.

Had been survived by them, at any rate. But only for fourteen more years.

"I'll see your sister," Elizabeth said aloud, and her coughs kept themselves at bay just enough for her to get that much out.

Edward wheezed—in answer, she wasn't certain.

"You won't," she added, rubbing her thumb across Edward's hand. It felt slightly warm to her, but not much more than her own. "I won't—let you go. You'll—stay here."

A groan of protest.

Even near death and almost delirious, Edward still just as stubborn as his father.
“You *will*,” she whispered, and the force of this caused her to erupt in coughs. “You *will* live, Edward.”

She just wasn't sure how.

So instead she listened to Edward breathe.

In...out...one.

In...out...two.

When at last her child's breathing lulled her to sleep, Elizabeth slept without dreams.

Chapter Eighteen: Englishman

Volterra

Late June 1789

Aro's hand slid free of Alrigo's as the other man backed away. His shoulders slumped, and he refused to meet Aro's eyes as he walked backward from the thrones into the main chambers.

"My apologies, Master," the other vampire muttered. "The Englishman's timing was perfect."

Aro nodded, but his jaw locked. Alrigo was the last of the guard to return. The Volterranean vampires had fanned out over the whole of the area, from the Kingdom of France all the way to Rome. But the clouds which kept Carlisle from being noticed by humans also hid him as he ran; a torrential downpour washed his scent so thoroughly that even Aro's best trackers had difficulty.

And so one by one, they returned in failure.

Aro clenched his hand, remembering the other's memories. A bit of Carlisle's scent, perhaps going northward, but then washed away. No evidence in the road of a vampire; though this didn't surprise anyone. Carlisle was equally as likely to travel as a human as he was to seem like one of their kind.

"Nothing, Brother?" Caius's voice piped up from the other throne.

"Nothing."

A soft *crack* ushered from the area of Aro's right arm; it took him a part of a second to realize that he'd broken off the clawed edge of the arm of his seat.

This didn't escape the other two.

"Peace," Marcus said quietly, getting to his feet. "Nothing is more important to Carlisle than companionship. I don't doubt our friend will return."

"Friend," huffed Caius. "Subject."

"Friend," Marcus repeated more firmly. "He deserves our courtesy. And Aro, you failed to tell him he was not free to leave."

Aro's fist slammed to the chair arm again. "That should have been obvious."

Marcus grinned. "Yes, of course. Because as you're aware, all of us are intimately familiar with every thought which *you* have..."

Caius snorted.

Aro scowled. "He should know better, regardless."

Anyone would have known better. Aro scanned the handful of guard members who milled about in the chamber. Every few months, it seemed, one of them tore another to shreds. For superiority. For power. Those who wore the robes of light gray fought for the darker colors, to be recognized as being so useful to the Brothers that they were given higher station.

No one would turn down an invitation to the highest post. To join the brotherhood? To be not only more than a servant, but to be made an equal?

"He is an abomination," Aro muttered in the language he shared with his brothers.

"Carlisle?" Marcus smiled. "Brother, I know as well as you do that it is precisely the fact that he never does what you expect which fascinates you so."

Before Aro could rejoinder, Caius cut him off. "Aro is right. The Englishman is heady with youth, and a fool. He is a threat to us. We should order him destroyed."

Shifting in his seat, Aro stared out at the small knot of guards.

"I do not make it a habit of destroying my subjects without cause," he said finally.

"He is not your subject, Brother," Caius answered. "He is your pet. And at times, a sickly pet must be taken to slaughter."

Aro made a strangled noise.

"What of the other?" Marcus piped up, causing the other two to stare.

"The other?" Aro asked.

"The other of our kind. The one Alrigo found the last time the Englishman disappeared."

Aro sat back in his chair. He hadn't connected the two—he'd had other things on his mind—but now it made all too much sense. Carlisle's most recent disappearance had been right after that other vampire had made his appearance in Volterra. And now...

"Do we know where the other ran?"

Caius shook his head. "You called Alrigo off him, remember? Asked him to follow the Young One instead." His face made clear his opinion on this decision.

"As I recall, the idea to trail Carlisle instead of the intruder was yours, Brother."

This stopped Caius short. His lip curled.

"This was a consequence which I did not foresee," he answered darkly.

"We are all alike in that," Aro said.

Marcus moved back to his own seat, and the ancient wooden throne creaked as he settled. It took him a long time to speak.

"The intruder went north, correct?" he said at last.

Aro nodded.

"The Kingdom of France is at war with itself," Marcus answered coolly. "The fighting spills into the southern countryside. It is an ideal place for one of our kind. The other can hide amidst the war and go unseen. So send part of our guard into the French country and keep part of it here. Whatever Carlisle is doing, he's not running away. He doesn't run away. He runs toward."

"And?"

Marcus shrugged. "Cut off his access to what he runs toward," he said simply. "Send our guard into the French country, and let them wait out the Englishman. He'll show himself eventually. And then you can—"

"Order him destroyed," Caius interjected.

"—deal with him as you see fit," Marcus finished, frowning.

Caius rose and began to pace, the heels of his shoes clicking against the stone floor. "This never should have happened, Aro. This was your idea and Marcus agreed, and so you outvoted me."

Aro sat back in his chair. Several of the guard stared at the three; although no one but they and their mates understood their language, it was no doubt obvious that the brothers were quarreling.

He rose. "Leave us."

For a moment, no one moved at the sudden request. But then a few of the higher guard began ushering others toward the door. Confused whispers rose, as though the Brothers could not hear every word. The room emptied slowly, until Alrigo who left last, let the door slam behind him with a quiet thud.

Marcus sat back in his chair, his eyebrows raised. "Was there something you wished to share privately, Brother?"

Aro gestured to Caius. "I wished to give our Brother a chance to express himself freely."

Caius grunted. "I've said all I need to. You are the one who made the mistake." He gestured wildly to the closed door. "Any of them... *any* of them would be beside themselves to be given the honor of joining our ranks. And instead you offer to someone who is little more than a disobedient dog. It is an affront to us all."

That much was true. Was that not what he himself had thought, just moments ago? Carlisle should have known better than to run.

He should have known better than to turn them down.

"Perhaps you are right," Aro muttered, gesturing to Caius and then the door. "Go to the guard. Send at least four into the French country."

"Do you expect to find him this time?"

Aro's eyes narrowed. To cut off what Carlisle ran toward...

"Tell them to kill with little discrimination. That ought to draw out our doctor friend rather quickly. "

A grin spread across Caius's face. "Certainly, Brother." He vanished at once, leaving the other two sitting still in the chamber.

Marcus only stared.

"Brother?"

For a long moment, his brother-in-law did not answer. "Is this wise?" he asked at last.

"It will dispense with both Carlisle and the intruder," Aro answered. "And perhaps we will find reason to apprehend the other, also."

The other seat creaked a bit as Marcus got to his feet. He, however, said nothing.

"Do you disagree?" Aro asked.

It appeared momentarily that Marcus was going to say something, but then he only sighed and started toward the door.

"Marcus."

He turned.

"What is your quarrel?"

"None, Brother. It's simply..." He trailed off.

"Simply what?"

Turning to face Aro, Marcus crossed his arms over his chest. "I ought to know better, Aro," he answered. "After all, you and I are closer to true brothers than either of us to Caius."

Aro frowned. "What do you mean, 'Know better?'"

"Even after two thousand years, you remain this insulted by the idea that someone might not want to share your post. After all, it is not as though Carlisle is the first not to want this life. To desire peace instead of power is not a killable offense, Brother."

Then he placed his hand on the doorknob and vanished, leaving the chamber empty and silent.

Marcus might as well have slapped him, Aro thought, so stung his words. But at once, Aro's mind reeled through memories—his and Marcus's. His sister, with her infectious laughter and warm smile, the way Marcus slid his arm into hers. The vivid thoughts in both their minds of their happiness together, apart from the castle and away from him.

And the feel of her hair, slick and yet rough under his fingers as he twisted her neck...

"Not a killable offense," he muttered to the empty room as he stood.

They would see about that.

~ || x || ~

Versailles, Kingdom of France
Late June, 1789

Versailles burst at the seams with people. Commoners, supporting the National Assembly, handing out bills and talking of liberty. The crowds pressed in on Carlisle in the square, making him glad for his practiced self-control as he wove through them.

France was on the verge of chaos, as near as Carlisle could tell from the conversations he'd been able to have on his journey. Their three-part assembly had split; the commoners demanding rights akin to those demanded by the Americans in the new world. The people were as exuberant as they were frantic; the royalty and the clergy were grasping at any means of control they still had.

And Versailles was the seat of it all.

Garrett's scent was faint in the square, trampled into the dirt. But Carlisle managed to follow it to a door on a side wall of the palace. Where was his friend, he wondered? If he could even call Garrett that.

He sank onto an upturned bucket outside the door. Propping his elbows on his knees, he dropped his face into his hands.

Aro would want to know why he'd run, and Carlisle didn't have a good answer for that. The moment he saw that black robe in the other man's hands, such conflicting emotions arose that Carlisle didn't know what to do. First was pride; that these others whom he'd once considered the height of refinement wanted him to be part of their inner circle. The fourth brother. That even though he did not share their ancient roots, or their long tenure in Tuscany, he might be accepted for his knowledge and curiosity.

But pride had been usurped by fear faster than Carlisle could think his own name. He would lose his freedom; there was no doubt about that. Aro, Caius, and Marcus rarely left the compound, and when they did, it was with an entourage of guards. No longer would he be able to slip into the square at the slightest hint of rain, walking among the humans and interacting with them. They would expect him to feed as they did—this wouldn't be possible, of course. He would never take a human life if he could help it; and he'd helped it for over a century and a half.

Though...

At first, he'd associated feeding on humans with the savage nature of the beasts he'd met first in London, then in France. The half-crazed looks in their eyes; the way every moment was calculated around keeping the secret and fending off humans who might discover the grisly, bloodthirsty murders. Then he'd met the Brothers, and although the feedings were every bit as grisly, the brothers lived with a distinct refinement. A library. Musical instruments. Languages. Travel. Civility. And most importantly, company.

And Garrett also killed, and he, too, was nothing close to a savage...

Carlisle sighed.

"Are you all right, mister?"

It was a young boy, probably just over breeching age. He had a sweet, innocent look about him; his blue eyes were wide as he stared at Carlisle.

Carlisle nodded. "I'm just fine, Child. I'm awaiting my friend." The French felt strange after so long; in Tuscany, he used either English or Florentine, or occasionally Greek if he was studying with Marcus. But he'd spoken French growing up, and to slip back into it felt strangely comforting.

It felt like the tiniest return to being human.

Which was, of course, impossible.

The child pointed to the door. "Your friend is in the palace?"

"I believe so, yes." Carlisle turned and scrutinized the door at his back. It was a plain, wooden door, and the bucket on which he sat smelled of animal manure.

The child also examined the door. "He is a servant?"

Carlisle shrugged. "I believe so." Garrett hadn't told him anything of why he was in France; just that he knew Carlisle was running. Did it mean Garrett was, also? And if he was a servant, then why was he so bemused by Carlisle passing so easily among the humans?

The boy plopped himself down next to Carlisle in the dirt.

"You'll dirty your breeches," Carlisle said and stood, gesturing to the bucket. "Sit here. Where is your mother?"

The boy sat. "My mother is dead," he said matter-of-factly. "And my nurse is busy minding my sister."

"And you ran away?"

"I grew bored. The palace is more interesting than the square. Sometimes, I can see the nobles or the priests. Or the commoners, but they aren't as interesting."

"They come from the side doors?"

"At times. Especially now. The noblemen do not wish to be seen."

That was true enough. In a crowd of people who were willing to call for the head of the King, a nobleman took a large risk.

Carlisle crouched next to the boy. "What do you see, when you see them? What do they talk about?"

The boy shrugged. "Laws. And commoners. And the king. Whether or not the King will agree to the demands of the people. "

"And what do they think?"

"They fear us, I think." The boy grinned.

"What do you mean, they fear us?"

They believe that we will ultimately take over, perhaps. That would be exciting. I have heard that people took cannons in Paris. And guns."

Cannons and guns would of course be exciting to one so young. Carlisle smiled.

"You are not a nobleman?" The boy looked at him wide-eyed, clearly concerned at having suddenly made this guess.

Carlisle chuckled. "No. I am not even French. I am an Englishman."

The eyes grew even wider. "English! You sound French."

"I was taught French when I was very young, like you." He smiled at the boy. "And that was a very long time ago."

An understatement, to be certain.

At that moment, a harried-looking woman found her way around the corner.

"Bernard!" she called. "Bernard! I've searched everywhere for you. You will make me die of worry!"

The little boy blushed.

"You should go," Carlisle said gently.

"It was nice to talk to you, Mister."

He nodded. "You also."

When the boy left, Carlisle resumed his seat. He was interrupted after a short moment, however, when the servant door opened. Expecting a human to exit, Carlisle did not rise.

"Something told me that you would take my invitation," a deep voice said.

The other man stood over Carlisle, his arms crossed over his chest and a smirk playing on his lips.

"Garrett." Carlisle smiled.

"Hello, Friend." A wide grin broke out on Garrett's face. "Your scent pervades the palace. At first I feared it to be another, but then realized it was you. How did you find me?"

"If mine pervades the palace," Carlisle said carefully, "then yours pervades the entire countryside. It was not exactly a difficult matter."

Garrett guffawed.

"But I thought you were in Paris?"

At this, Garrett's face alighted. "You should see what goes on here, Englishman! You who have never experienced revolution. The commoners here are outvoted by the nobility two to one. They take up arms in Paris even as we speak. It is the most glorious kind of uprising. Liberty and brotherhood, they say."

"And you are in the palace proper?"

Another grin. "The ship on which I stowed my way here was the American Ambassador's. A great man, and also a Virginian. He is here having an audience with the King. Discussing the ideas of the great Declaration he helped write, when America freed herself from England's tyranny."

Carlisle must have frowned, because Garrett quickly added, "Of course, this was long after your turning, Friend. And one might consider you Tuscan by this time in any event."

"Perhaps not," Carlisle muttered, staring into the crowd.

"Oh?" A smirk appeared on Garrett's face. "Tell me."

And so Carlisle did. The entire story began spilling out of him—his work with the herbs, his desire to become a physician, the way all of his learning in Volterra was slowly agitating the Brothers, especially Caius. And then, the presentation of the robe; the invitation to join the inner circle.

"So you ran."

Garrett made this sound as though it were the most logical thing in the world.

Carlisle nodded.

Much to his surprise, Garrett began to laugh.

"This is humorous to you?"

Garrett clapped him on the shoulder. "Don't you see? You know what you wish. You wish the same things the people want. Freedom. Self-governance. Choice." Grabbing Carlisle by the elbow, he jerked him to his feet. "Come. Let us go to away from this place, and I will tell you of all that has happened here."

He began to walk down the lane away from the palace and the crowds. The dirt was well-worn, trampled with human shoe prints and hoof prints alike. Garrett led him through a gate and up a small hill, where they came upon a run-down farmhouse. It had once been carefully built of stone, but now angry black scars marred the windowsills and half the roof was caved in.

Garrett shrugged as he gestured to the door. "My residence, at least for now," he said, and as Carlisle ducked through the small door, added, "I'm sure it's nothing like as lavish as what you are accustomed to."

The building still reeked of cinder and dirt, but Garrett's scent was unmistakable.

"How long have you been here?" Carlisle asked.

"A fortnight." He gestured to the table beside him, next to which stood two chairs. Carlisle sat at once, and Garrett dropped into the other.

"I've followed the American Ambassador through his travels," he said. "He is a great man. When I am recently fed, I go in with his other footmen; he believes me to be a shy ensign with whom he is simply not as familiar."

Carlisle's eyes widened. Was that even possible, for another to be as close to humans? The Brothers refused to go near them; as far as they were concerned, there was no value to humanity whatsoever. Humans amounted to little more than cattle.

"You look shocked, Friend."

Carlisle shook his head. "Not shocked; simply surprised that another moves as easily among humans."

It had taken him a century to perfect his own control.

The toothy grin appeared again. "That was why I said, 'When I am recently fed.' Today, for instance. I was out hunting just last night, and it seems and doubly to my benefit, as it seems that drew you here."

Carlisle winced at the thought of the other vampire and his prey, but he had a point. The trail had been easy to follow; even for such an inexperienced tracker as he.

"And I hold my breath and speak little." He grinned and added, "This is probably why I am well-liked."

Carlisle smirked. "If only they knew you."

Garrett let out a booming laugh and clapped Carlisle on the shoulder. "Indeed, Friend. If only they knew! It is worth it, however. I learn so much from the humans about this situation, and even more from the Ambassador's counsel."

"And this Ambassador? Who is he?"

Garrett's eyes alighted at once. "A great man. A true intellectual, first, but one of the men on our continental congress who first wrote our Declaration to King George. His name is Jefferson. He speaks of such things as protecting the people's rights, and of educating the common man. I believe it is his wish to found a great University to educate America's common students. He is a man with great vision."

"You admire him."

"There is much to admire." Garrett leaned back in his chair so that the front two feet lifted themselves from the ground. "And you, Carlisle. He would like you a great deal. He would admire your passion, if only he could truly know it." He grinned. "A vampire physician."

"A vampire who wishes to become a physician," Carlisle corrected.

Garrett shrugged. "It seems to me that you have your own patients in Volterra. I would think you've earned the title by now." He smiled, and leaned in across the table, his chair giving a soft thunk as it landed again on the singed floorboards.

"So. Do you plan to stay in France?"

That was the question. Would he stay in France? Had he run from Volterra in order to think, or was this a more permanent solution? And if it were the latter, would he even be allowed to?

"Aro...doesn't appreciate defection," he said carefully, and Garrett guffawed again.

"An understatement, to be sure." He grinned. "Nevertheless; you are free of them now. I also suspect he likes the illusion of free will, does he not? He strikes me as one who would."

"The illusion, yes." Carlisle thought back to the order to watch the others feed; that had been scarcely two months ago. It seemed like so much longer. He stared into the room. It was dark, due to the partial roof and the utter lack of lamplight. Vampires didn't need it, and so of course

Garrett had not bothered, but lamps fascinated Carlisle and so he had several in his chambers in Volterra.

Was this to be his life if he ran? Hiding in burned shells of houses, without lamps, without books, without company?

His stomach gave an odd jerk.

“Carlisle? What are you thinking about?”

“This place,” he answered. “If this will be my life should I leave Volterra. Hiding. Running.”

Garrett looked around the room, his gaze alighting on the sparse furniture, the bare floor, the collapsed fireplace and the huge black char in the northeastern corner.

“As I said,” he murmured, “It is not what you are accustomed to.”

He rubbed his chin a moment, seeming to think.

“How long have you been in Volterra?” he asked at last.

“With this year as 1789? Forty-two years.”

The word sounded larger than the stay had seemed.

Garrett nodded. “And before you lived in Volterra, you lived like this, yes?”

Or worse. The beasts in London whom he'd known inhabited London's alleyways and the ruins of the Roman sewers. He had done the same for years, fearing contact with humans would break his resolve.

He nodded.

“I've seen you with the humans. You don't frighten them at all. At first, I thought that meant you were a weakling, but now I understand it as the source of your strength. And your eyes—they make it so much easier for you to walk among them.” He gestured toward the door—toward the hill and toward Versailles. “You, my friend, could live among the people now. Who would suspect the true nature of the handsome bachelor who lives in the house next door? The one who so easily intermingles with them, who even treats them as their physician? It would be easy for you, Carlisle.”

Would it be?

He stared.

It was something he hadn't truly allowed himself to consider. He assumed that if he left Volterra, he would leave again for the nomadic life he'd lived before; ducking into lectures and concerts when he could, but living in abandoned homes, always transitory, never able to have a home as he did now. But as he thought back to even that afternoon, with the little boy taking a seat so easily at his side, Carlisle realized Garrett was right. His tolerance let him slide through human bodies which pressed in on him from all sides in the palace square; it let him stand resolute in the Great Hall in Volterra even as the Brothers and their guard slaughtered humans by the dozens.

He could live among them. He could vanish—not literally, not because he had to move from place to place, but because they would not know him for what he was. They would know him as Carlisle Cullen. Not the vampire, but the man.

“See?” Garrett's voice was hardly more than a whisper. “You are smiling, friend. It could work. It is only up to you.”

“It could work,” Carlisle repeated quietly, and Garrett grinned. He took one of Carlisle's hands in his own on the table and squeezed it.

“Perhaps this revolution is meant not for France, but for you. Will you accompany me back to Paris? There is no doubt in my mind that what happens here will reverberate there. The people are hungry for change.”

Hungry for change. It was an interesting way to describe it, and yet, it made sense.

Carlisle was hungry, too.

He nodded.

“We'll go.”

Chapter Nineteen: Tempest

London, England
June, 1667

“Father!”

The door slammed open with such force it rattled the walls of the house, and the scream which accompanied it was feral, as though the young man who'd just entered the vicarage was more wild animal than man.

Young William's shoulders heaved as he caught his breath in huge gasps. He appeared to have run flat-out from wherever it was he'd come: sweat dripped from his brow and the ends of his hair. His eyes were wild, darting from floor to walls until they landed on William.

His heavy boots thunked ominously as he stalked across the room.

The screams continued in that strange, anguished pitch. “How dare you! How could you! You bastard! You imbecile!”

The boy swept his hand across the table, sending William's Bible, pens, and paper crashing to the floor. The bottle of ink flew into the stone and smashed. At once, a dark river of black began to run under William's feet.

Now that he was closer, William could see his son's face more clearly. One eye was half-closed, his cheek and lip were gashed, his nose had swelled to nearly twice its normal size. His doublet was covered in blood.

William leapt to his feet. “My child, what happened?” He began to reach out but found his arms were slapped away.

“You,” came the scream. “You happened!”

“I—”

“How did you find her, Father?” he growled. “Tell me! How did you find her? Where did you take her?”

Take who?

Confused, William backed up a few steps, putting his arms before him to act as a buffer. His son was the larger man, in both weight and height, and if he swung...well, William would end up looking not so different from his son, he imagined.

"William, please," he murmured. "I do not understand..."

"Carlisle!" the boy shrieked. "Call me by my name, you sniveling coward!" He leaned in. William backed up again. His hand fumbled behind his back, in case he needed—he could hit him over the head with the chair, perhaps, or a broomstick...

"Who?" he managed asked as he groped for something to use as a weapon.

He was answered by only a snarl.

"She was to be my *wife*!"

His wife?

And at once everything snapped into place. Why Daniel had known that Young William courted a woman. Why his son had seemed so unusually happy. Why the woman on Ratcliffe Street had regarded him so especially warily.

His heart jerked, and at once, his right hand began to tremble with such force that it slapped against this leg.

"The girl..." he muttered helplessly.

"Elizabeth!" roared his son in answer. "Her name is Elizabeth!"

"My son—"

His tankard clanged against the wall behind him before William even managed to get the rest of his sentence out. At once, he flattened himself to the cold wood of the table, just narrowly missing being hit by the ladle from the pottage, which clattered to the floor next to his chair. It was shortly followed by the pot itself, slopping stew onto the table as it went. Young William's fury was mad enough that he was a rather poor shot, however, and few of the items made contact with William, instead crashing loudly against the wall and floor around him.

"How could you," the boy cried over and over as he flung item after item. "How could you!"

"Son—"

Another crash. This time it was one of the table stools; one the boy had crafted himself. He flung it at William's head; it missed by inches and exploded against the wall.

"Enough!" William roared. "Stop this at once!" He was panting as though he'd gotten into a fistfight, even though all he'd managed to do was duck projectiles.

For a brief moment, his son stopped. His chest, too, was heaving. Odd streaks had appeared in the tracks of blood smeared across his face.

He was crying.

The boy gulped. "Where did you take her, Father?"

William backed up again. His leg trembled beneath him so violently he thought he might lose his balance and fall to the floor.

"Where?" This time it was the same, high-pitched shriek. "Tell me where, you bastard!"

Flattening his back to the wall, William threw his arms in front of him for protection.

"William, she confessed! She confessed to what she did, and the woman in her coven, also." Never mind that his mind was still trying to process his son's earlier words. *She was to be my wife.*

What did that mean for his son?

"If...anything...I've saved thee," he panted.

William didn't think it was possible for his son to become any more enraged, but he was. The eyes which had been wild were now completely on fire.

"Saved?" He took a step toward William. "Saved? You believe yourself to have saved me?"

This time it was William's voice which was strangled and oddly high-pitched. "William, thou art a Christian! We believe in the devil! We oust him where we find him! She is not worthy to be thy wife!"

"Christian?" came the answering snarl. "You claim authority to murder my wife in the name of *Christ*?"

And before William could so much as lift his voice, his son reached out for the cross which hung on the wall next to the fireplace. It easily weighed several stone; hurling it was no small effort. But it presented no problem for William's enraged son.

He swung it in a huge arc as though it were an axe, and brought it down on the floor with a crash so loud it caused the table and stools to shake. The crossbar broke from the upright; the upright splintered into two.

William could only stand and stare in shock.

"You are the one whose soul is blackened by the devil, Father. *You*. Not her."

William found his whole body trembled. Was it the ague? He had not been to the barber-surgeon in a fortnight. His son's eyes still held the crazed, fiery expression. Both their breathing echoed in the small kitchen—wet, ragged.

"William..." His own voice sounded feeble. Nothing like the authoritative tone he wished to take; the commanding voice that would make it clear to his son that it was he who was in charge of this situation. Instead, he sounded like a weak, old man.

Which was exactly what he was.

Perhaps that would help cool his child.

"I am ill, William," he managed. "Son, I am ill."

The words sliced through him like a freshly forged knife, hot and painful. At once, William dropped his gaze to the floor. There was no way he could look into his child's eyes. Not those eyes; the clear blue, as wide as the sky, as deep as the ocean.

He couldn't look into Sarah's eyes.

Because if he failed Young William, wasn't that who he was failing? The woman he loved; the woman with whom he was supposed to raise his family and grow old.

His son was silent.

"I am ill," he repeated.

"You are dying." There was an odd edge to the voice.

Was it anger, or remorse?

Dying. Exactly what William had been trying to avoid saying, or even thinking. That he grew nearer and nearer to losing his life with every bloodletting, every tremor, every passing day. That he would not live to see his son take the helm of his own church. That he would not live to see his child become a father.

And he wouldn't become a father now anyway...

William nodded.

"How long?"

William shrugged. "There is no way to know how long. That is in the hands of the Almighty."

His son shook his head, the blond hair whipping back and forth furiously. "Not how long shall you live, Father. How long have you known? How long have you been ill?"

He began to search his mind. The tremors had been with him this Ascension Day, and the Easter before that, at the Christmas, at St. John the Baptist.

"A year," he muttered.

"A year," his son repeated. "A year you have been ill, and you did not see fit to tell me?"

Because I wished to spare you the pain, William wanted desperately to say. Because what father wished to tell his only son that he would soon live the rest of his life alone?

Yet, he'd spared his child no pain, it seemed.

"I only wish to care for thee," he said.

Young William's lip curled into a snarl. "*Care* for me? Not telling me that you are dying, sending the woman I love to the gallows—this is what you consider caring for me?" He nudged the broken pieces of the cross with the toe of his boot. They made a scratching sound as they slid, making William wince.

It was destroyed.

The cross. His son's betrothed. The future minister. The family that was to be. The banns were not yet read, the children were not yet conceived.

Even William himself.

All destroyed.

And in the name of what?

"I do this, to see..." He choked. Now, his purpose seemed feeble. But he swallowed and prayed briefly for strength, and when he continued, his voice was stronger.

"To see thee accepted into Heaven," he said. "I do this to make the world safe for thee, and for thy family." Even if it were to be a different one than expected.

A long silence.

"Oh, I will be accepted into Heaven, Father," he said darkly. "It is your soul I fear will burn in Hell."

He made it partway through the doorway before he turned.

"And, Father?"

William raised his eyebrows.

"You do not make the world safe for my family. It is my family you intend to hang."

And then he was gone, like a summer storm; blown in strong and washed away by rain.

~ ||x|| ~

The long blades of grass stung Carlisle's ankles as he moved swiftly up the hill. It was dark, the locusts having already given up their twilight chirpings.

As a boy, Carlisle had found the small grove behind the church a welcome retreat; he could disappear among the branches and leaves and revel in their shelter. Forget that he came from the little house down the hill. In the wood, he would pretend; he would tell the trees about his mother, who doted on him, and his father who taught him and loved him. He would come here to refresh himself, and to allow himself space to think. And when he grew old enough to understand that such things required seclusion, this was the place he came when he needed to cry.

When Christopher accosted him in the coffee house, it was all he could do to protect himself and try to understand what the other man was telling him. He'd lost consciousness for a good minute, and even upon awakening, had still been clumsy enough that he needed Thomas to partially drag him from the room.

By the time he'd regained his wits, Christopher's friends had restrained him, and Thomas, doubting Carlisle's stagger, had done the same. He'd landed a few choice blows to the other man, of which he was proud. And all told, he was far too wound-up to notice much of his own pain, though he suspected his nose might forever be out of joint.

So it was the accusations more than the blows which caused the pain. For as they stood there, struggling against their friends, they shouted at each other until they were both blue in the face.

"She was selling from our garden," Christopher screamed at him. "Vegetables, Cullen! She needed the money!"

At once Carlisle's mind raced back through the times he and Elizabeth had gone to market. The way she reached into her purse and came up short of coins. The way she seemed to worry about

how they spent. He'd paid so little mind to it; it felt so good to provide for the woman he wanted to be his wife, but now he saw it for the pattern it was.

"If she needed the money it is only because you are profligate with it. You are to care for your mother and your sister. Instead I do it!"

Christopher attempted to spit on him again, but the two of them were held too far apart and it landed on the floor between them instead.

"This is your fault, Cullen. Your father wouldn't know her if it weren't for you! And because he's the vicar..." His lip curled into a snarl. "Our own mother won't believe her, you dog."

He didn't know her, Carlisle wanted to say, but his mind was racing too quickly to keep up. Witch. Money. Gardening.

His father...

At that moment, Thomas managed to drag him out into the cool night air.

"I beg you to think, Sexton," he said quietly. "We could go to my home if you wish."

Carlisle actually growled at his friend. "My father deserves the fruits of my thinking," he snarled. "And possibly also the fruits of my fist."

And so it had been that a scant half-hour later he stormed into the vicarage and destroyed everything in sight.

Even the cross...

He'd never seen his father look so afraid. If he thought of himself, he still pictured the skinny boy, so easily held down and whipped for his disobedience in attending a hanging day. He still thought of his father as the strong one; the one to fear.

It was inaccurate, he realized. He was the strong one. He stood a head and shoulders above his father, now. He winced as he remembered the sickening sound the cross had made as it shattered against the wood floor.

He'd told his father that he would burn in Hell.

And it would be soon...

Pressing his back to one of the solid, ancient trees, Carlisle inched his way down until he was sitting on the forest floor. The summer rains soaked this part of London almost every night it seemed, and the ground was wet and pliable beneath him.

His mind raced in several directions at once. Death. That was all that this day was. Elizabeth's. His father's.

He could ask his father to bargain for Elizabeth, to pardon her. The clergy could do that. But if William Cullen had been the one to bring the accusation, then for him to pardon would mean he would have to recant—which was unlikely.

He could attempt to break Elizabeth out of the prison, and they could run. Maybe he could bribe a guard. They would go together, perhaps to France, or even to the New World. It seemed almost daily now that new handbills were posted, calling for healthy young couples to go to the colonies, to work the land and populate the new England half a world away.

But if he were caught at that, he would end up on the gallows himself.

Which, now that he thought on it, didn't sound so terrible.

A strangled yell echoed off the trees.

His muscles felt twitchy, as though to keep them still would be to do them harm. The same feeling which had driven him to begin hurling things at his father. His hands clenched, remembering the feel of the items in his hands, the easy way the things in that room shattered. The noise. The furor. The way his father cowered in the corner.

The Reverend William Cullen was no match for Carlisle any longer, and that realization felt strangely good.

As he sat, he absently yanked up small tufts of grass from around where he sat, until only a ring of churned mud remained. This wasn't enough. It took less than a minute for him to begin ripping branches from the smaller trees, uprooting the small bushes. His low, keening wail echoed off the trees.

When he was out of leaves and branches, he turned on the huge oak at his back. It was ancient, nearly as big around as Carlisle was tall. At first his fingernails scrabbled at its bark, trying to rip it to pieces. But they were utterly ineffectual. Little flecks of dark brown lodged their way under his fingernails, a splinter jabbed him in his nail bed, causing him to cry out. Yet this was a tree he could not take down.

So he kicked it.

Even through his boot, the pain reverberated through his toes and up his shin. But it was a good pain; the pain of doing something, *anything* in a situation where his father had rendered him completely impotent. He kicked it again and hollered.

The next thing he knew, he was kicking and punching the tree, his efforts making no visible change to anything but himself. His toes ached—he was certain he'd broken more than one of them—and his knuckles became shredded and bloodied by the tree bark so that his repeated assaults left wet red stripes on the trunk.

"Father!" he screamed as he punched.

"I hate you!"

Punch.

"I hate you!"

Punch.

"You will not control me!"

Punch. Kick.

"You will not kill her!"

This blow caused one of his knuckles to seem to shift.

"You will not rule me!"

Because that was the true point. He had been willing, for a short time, for Elizabeth, to do what his father wished. To go to seminary. To be a parson. To raise a family of his own.

His mind swam back to the dream, the dream he'd had so shortly after meeting Elizabeth for the first time at that hanging day. Holding her hand, laughing. The little towheaded boy darting between them.

His son.

And his father dared say he did this because he cared for Carlisle's family?

Another scream rent the air, but this time, it fueled nothing. All at once it crashed back to him. A stinging pain rose in his knuckles and in his toes, his nose and lips throbbed from the beating he'd taken only hours before. The world swam; he fell to his knees and was sick in the grass. He crawled a yard and became sick again. Collapsing next to it, he panted in exhaustion, the disgusting smell permeating his nostrils as he thought.

If only he'd noticed the pattern. The missing money. Christopher's profligate ways.

If he'd told his father the truth.

But Carlisle had favored secrecy, his and Elizabeth's, preferring to revel in love than face anything which might stand in their way.

He deserved it, he thought, to lie here alone, in the woods, in pain. To have his insides tear themselves in two.

It was his fault, and he deserved this.

The earth was soft and wet, and his hands pressed into it, the cool mud soothing his bloodied palms. He'd been fighting for hours; first Christopher, then his father, then even a tree. More and more fruitless with each iteration.

His intended would die. And his father would die.

He would be alone.

Carlisle almost couldn't remember the last time he'd prayed, at least, for any reason other than show. Of course every Sunday, he recited the prayers, bowed his head when he was supposed to, spoke the words he'd memorized years ago. But how long had it been, he wondered, since he had said words of his own, had made a plea from his heart?

And would God even bother to listen, given the subject? Elizabeth was no witch; he was sure of this. But he was mortal. Wasn't it every bit as arrogant of him to proclaim to understand Elizabeth's heart as it was for his father to do so?

So when the words came, they were half-incoherent. Not a rational plea; not the demands or the rage that had accompanied his tempest in the parsonage. They were the words of a tearful, desperate man.

"Lord, please," he moaned. "Please, spare her. Please save her. Please."

And finally, he let his body go slack and began to sob.

Chapter Twenty: Miracle Worker

Chicago, Illinois
October 18, 1918

Carlisle was hiding.

Oh, he could justify it, if he had to. He'd promised numbers to his supervisor, a full write-up of the results of his little experiment in keeping the Masen boy with his mother in the second-floor quarantine room. And they were as ill as any other influenza patients in the hospital, the terrifying purple-blue of cyanosis seeping into their skin as though someone were pouring ink into their hearts.

He could come up with all sorts of reasons to be here. These two needed him. He needed data. They were a good experiment.

But the truth was, he was hiding.

It was an overcast day, but as Carlisle sat between the beds, a single ray of sunlight hit the glass of water on the bed stand, at once shattering into a rainbow which flickered over the boy's face.

Edward grunted in his sleep and haphazardly batted at his own eyes before rolling over and tangling himself in the bed sheet.

Were it not for the severity of the situation, Carlisle might have laughed.

He took Edward's arm and lifted it, gently rolling him to his side and tucking his hands under his chin. Then he rearranged the blanket over the slim body, lifting it to the boy's chest so that it better covered him. Instinctively, he laid a hand on the forehead, feeling for the temperature. Searing hot, as he expected; a completely unnatural state for the human body to reach. A hundred and four degrees, perhaps? That seemed about right.

His hand continued its way from the forehead back through the coppery hair. The pads of his fingers stroked his young patient's scalp.

The boy sighed.

"I'm sorry, Edward," Carlisle said quietly, perching himself on the edge of the bed. But who was he sorriest for, he thought at once. Edward? Edward's mother?

Himself?

Carlisle stared into the shaded room. Across, in the other bed, Elizabeth slept soundly, a look of utter peace on her face. He wondered what that was. Was it because she knew she was safe? Because she knew there was no other option for her except to succumb to the illness?

The mother was even further gone. The last time she'd been awake in Carlisle's presence, she'd stared blankly at him and demanded loudly to see her husband. She insisted that her son would still go to the Institute for Musical Art, and then on to law school. He would make his father proud, she insisted, and wouldn't the doctor be so kind as to bring his father in?

Carlisle had only nodded, his voice becoming choked as he said, yes, he would retrieve the boy's father, if only she would sleep.

She'd closed her eyes and complied. When she was asleep, Carlisle snuck out of the room.

People were dying everywhere he looked. He would be with a patient and take their pulse, note that their fever had increased a degree, maybe two, jot the locations of the cyanosis, and move on. By the time he reached the end of the ward and started back, a patient or two from the beginning of his round had already expired.

It was useless.

He was helpless.

Sometimes, if he allowed himself the luxury of wallowing in his own fear, he would sit in his office and think that perhaps this was the end. That this would be the final scourge that would result in humans being permanently wiped from the earth. Blood, boils, locusts, flies—he would trade for those things, he thought. At least, even with the death of the firstborn, the Israelites could paint their doorposts, and be passed over.

There would be no passing over here.

And so he spent his time hiding here, in the dark room with the boy and his mother, doing everything he could, but counting the hours until the moment in which he would lose his ability to help them, too.

He dropped onto the stool between the two beds, putting his head into his hands, and was sufficiently lost in his own thoughts that he was startled a few minutes later.

“Now Doctor, what has you hiding in here?”

Even if he hadn't recognized her scent, Carlisle would've known the tone of voice at once. There was only one person in the hospital who dared approach him with such an opening; scolding him as though he were a slightly misbehaving child.

Oddly, he found it welcome.

“I'm not hiding,” he answered at once, and smiled as he realized he'd fallen straight into the role. Caught with his hand in the cookie jar, he denied what he was doing, just like any child before his disapproving parent.

Dorothy chuckled. “Sure you aren't. Lucille says she saw you duck in here, right as you came in the door, and then she didn't see you again.” She gazed over the two beds, taking in the Masen woman and her son, how peacefully they lay—well, peacefully now that Edward had settled into a deeper sleep.

“Makes you think, doesn't it?” she whispered. “How a mama and her boy could both get struck down by this infernal disease.”

“And his father,” Carlisle mumbled.

“I'm sorry?”

He spoke louder. “I treated his father first. Delirious on admission. I don't believe the son ever got to say goodbye.”

Dorothy shook her head. She moved over to the boy's bed, laying a hand on his forehead as though to check his temperature, but Carlisle wondered if it wasn't simply more to make contact

with him. Surely, Edward reminded Dorothy of her own sons. Like any boy whose body was trying desperately to turn him into a man, Edward's limbs seemed to outstrip the rest of him, giving him a gangly appearance that was only exaggerated by the weight he'd lost in the hospital. As Edward had been bedridden for a week, a stubbled beard had begun to grow in, but in patches—the sideburns first, the chin, a decent amount on the upper lip, but only a tiny bit on the cheeks.

He looked so young.

The bed creaked as Edward rolled over in his sleep, muttering.

“And you treated his father,” Dorothy answered quietly after a moment.

Carlisle nodded. “I—” he gulped. *Made a mistake* was the correct way to finish that sentence. He made a promise he'd known the moment he made it he would never be able to keep. And yet he made it anyway, and felt it still bound him.

“I promised him I would help his father,” he muttered, looking over at the boy. “I promised him I would save him.”

Dorothy made a tsk-tsk sound at him. “Now, you know you can't keep a promise like that, Doctor.”

“Of course I do.”

“But you up and did it anyway.” She frowned. “And now that silly promise is what's got you stuck in here, trying to cheat Death as though he plays his cards fair.”

Trying to cheat Death. The words caught him. Because hadn't that been the way he thought of it himself?

His head dropped again into his hands. It was a good two minutes before he felt a firm hand on his shoulder, a thumb stroking up and down the side of his neck. By instinct, he flinched away, but the grip on his shoulder only strengthened.

So he went still.

“What's done is done, Doctor,” Dorothy's voice said quietly, as he continued not to look at her. “There's nothing you can change here. You can't turn back the clock, and you can't make this be something other than what it is. You've done your level best here, and that's all the world asks of you.”

All the world asked of him? He laughed darkly.

“For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required,” he answered.

“Yes, but it's the world going to do the requiring, Doctor. Not you.” She rubbed his shoulder again. “And the world asked you about these two. It asked you to do exactly this. And you've done everything you could.”

Everything he could? Was that even possible? Everything he could would've included researching instead of treating; perhaps if, instead of working at the armory, he had instead figured out the disease, he could have cured it instead of sitting here, helpless.

That would be “everything he could do.”

And there were other things he could do also...

He shut this train of thought down at once. He would heal these humans as their human doctor. To do anything otherwise was beastly.

The hand on his shoulder squeezed.

“Come on, Doctor. There are others here who need you, too. Save them, and let their lives stand for these two.” She nudged him gently to his feet, shoving a clipboard into his hands.

He glanced at it. A young lady, a year older than Edward Masen, spiked fever and cyanosis already set in.

He raised his eyebrows. This woman was no better off; if anything, she was maybe even closer to death.

“I believe you can do something, Doctor,” Dorothy said. “Let us go help her.”

Carlisle expected her to go ahead of him, but instead she hung behind. When he caught her eye, she cocked her head in the direction of the door as though to remind him where the exit was.

He nodded, moved, and Dorothy carefully herded him out the door.

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Edward was gone. His solid body wasn't there, the skin always too warm, the blankets always kicked around his knees even if it left Elizabeth freezing. His arm always over her chest, warming her.

It wasn't like her husband to leave in the night.

Elizabeth's heart pounded as she groped for the other side of the bed, her hand looking for the cool sheets her husband had vacated, whenever he'd left them. The cry was already rising in her throat.

She couldn't cry out. She'd wake Teddy, and he was so hard to get to sleep. She would swaddle him, and feed him, and rock him, and sing to him, and if she was lucky, he'd stay asleep for three hours.

Waking the baby wasn't worth it. Edward likely hadn't gone very far.

And besides, her hand didn't meet bedclothes, only air.

The room swam when Elizabeth opened her eyes. She was in a single bed—that was why the air—white ceiling beams.

A grown man lay in the other bed.

Her heart leapt to her throat.

“Edward?” she called feebly, but there was no answer.

Where was her husband?

Her baby?

Against her better judgment, she rolled over far enough to see who was in the other bed. Whoever he was, he seemed to be asleep, with one arm flung over his head and the blankets tangled around his thighs.

The way her husband liked to sleep.

But he was too young, and his hair was the wrong color...

“Teddy,” she whispered.

The man grunted.

The truth crashed down at once. She didn't have a baby any longer. Seventeen, old enough to be mistaken for a man. She was alone in the bed, not lying with Senior, but in the Cook County Hospital, lying in a room that the yellow-eyed doctor had procured. Both riddled with the influenza; both, to hear the doctors say it, on the verge of death.

And her husband was gone.

But as she rolled over, she could see that her son had kicked off all his blankets, and lay shivering in his thin nightshirt, curled on his side.

She swung her own legs out of bed, causing the room to wobble again. But it lasted only for a moment, and then her balance returned, and she found herself able to lean forward to her child's bed.

Her son lay shivering; the posts of his bed clattered against the floor. Carefully she leaned over him, pulling the blankets back up over his shoulders and tucking them in under his chin.

He grunted, but stopped shivering. But within a few minutes, the chills came back in full force, his body shaking so violently he began to retch. So she slid into bed behind him, pressing her chest to his back and wrapping her arms around him. She kissed the back of his ear; it was as hot as the rest of his skin as he lay burning with fever. His torso beneath her arms felt fragile and thin.

He was losing weight fast, now, she realized. Quite literally being destroyed from the inside out.

The influenza meant he had difficulty eating; Elizabeth found herself constantly cleaning spit up and vomit as she had done when Edward had been a child. The illness showed on his face; his high cheekbones seemed pronounced; his eyes appeared sunken with dark circles beneath them.

A glass of water sat on the nightstand between them; it appeared freshly filled. This meant, of course, that the nurse or the doctor had been here. The doctor, she realized at once, as she thought her way through her memory. She'd heard his voice, speaking to another.

Something about a promise. He had sounded guilty. Sad. Though of course, that was if he'd been here at all.

Perhaps the doctor wasn't even real.

She hugged her baby to her chest, and briefly worried she'd crush him, even as her arms told her that she was holding an adult and not an infant.

But she had to keep him from falling out of bed, or he'd die...

The room swam again. The doctor's voice floated in her ears.

"Of him shall be much required..."

"I require you to save my baby," Elizabeth said aloud.

But there was no answer.

And Junior wasn't her baby any more, she reminded herself.

Her son convulsed suddenly, his bed jerking so that the glass on the nightstand fell and shattered on the floor. The door crashed open and the doctor came flying into the room, his coat sailing behind him like a driver's scarf.

But then he stood there and did nothing.

She blinked.

The doctor disappeared.

Edward groaned.

Rolling away from her child, she could see the glass was whole, the water within it completely still. And Edward lay still, too.

The doctor hadn't stood there. He'd helped Edward, and Elizabeth had been in the other bed...had this been last night? The night before?

Years ago?

Whenever it was, his purpose had been sure. He seemed to understand things by intuition alone; he walked into the room and his expression would change before he even lifted the stethoscope from his neck.

The yellow-eyed doctor knew things.

That much she could see.

She kissed the back of Edward's neck. It was searing hot.

"Doctor," she called, but all that came out was a whimper.

She strained to look near the foot of her bed, and was surprised to see her mother sitting there.

"The doctor isn't coming, Libby," her mother said quietly, patting her feet. "He's not magic, you know. There's no such thing."

She blinked.

Her mother smiled, her red hair cascading over her shoulder and shimmering in the waning daylight. The red hair she'd inherited. The color she'd passed on to her child.

"Good Catholics don't believe in magic, Libby," her mother went on. "God's will is fate. You pray to God, and God will change your fate, if He sees fit to do it. But the doctor isn't God."

"He could be," she croaked, but by the time the words got out of her mouth, her mother had faded away.

With a trembling hand, she stroked her son's face.

"I'm so sorry, Edward," she whispered. "Mama is so sorry."

A deep voice in the hall caused her thoughts to shift once again.

The doctor?

The doctor isn't God.

Elizabeth took to staring at the ceiling again. The brown water stains were still there, but now they seemed to swirl a bit.

At once, the nurse was there again. The hefty one, with the gentle smile; the one who seemed to like the doctor.

He's not careful with you...he's wise...he knows too much .

New words? Or old? Elizabeth wasn't sure.

And just as soon as the nurse appeared, she was gone.

Nurse Dorothy was right. The doctor was different. It was, perhaps, why Elizabeth had felt drawn to ask him twice to save her men, first in the grungy intake room in this very hospital, and then again at the armory only a short time ago. He knew something.

She stroked Edward's hair, and he moaned, his eyes opening just so slightly. Just enough that she could see his eyes in the twilight.

But the brilliant green was cloudy; the pupils wandered lazily, and before long, his eyes closed once again.

Dead.

She screamed. Her heart pounding, at once she shook him so hard that his head bounced against the pillow, his hair flopping in front of his face. Briefly the eyes fluttered open again, and then closed.

Elizabeth loosened her grip. Instead she laid her head on her son's shoulder, letting the tears that had already overtaken her in her panic drip down into his collarbone.

Not dead. Alive.

But would she ever look into those eyes again?

Her mother had always said the sea-glass eyes made Elizabeth look bewitched, otherworldly, as though she weren't human. They had the opposite effect in her son; the green gave him depth and humanity in what otherwise would be the face of an unfeeling, stubborn man. The doctor's eyes were like that, she thought. That odd yellow, like a cat's—it made him look alternately soft and hard, at one moment the most humane of humans, at another, like a man possessed.

He knows too much.

Was it possible that he knew something that he didn't let on?

She had asked the doctor for a miracle. Each time she'd asked him for a miracle, and he'd agreed. He hadn't been able to deliver for Senior, and she remembered his face—as crushed as hers, if she had to recall it. He'd failed her, and he'd known it. And when she'd asked for one again, he hadn't wanted to promise. She remembered the startled expression, the way he told her he couldn't, the way he tried to wave them off. But then she remembered the soft look in those yellow eyes, the gentle way his arms had cradled her child as he carried Edward off to a bed.

Growing up, she had always loved fairy tales, and of course, she'd shared them with Edward . In fairy tales, it was always three...three houses, three huffs, three sisters to try on the glass slipper.

Always in threes. There was magic in three.

And if anyone needed magic, she did, now.

She ran her hand through Edward's hair and he grunted; he was still here. For now.

"There could be such a thing as magic, Edward," she whispered.

She'd asked doctor Cullen for a miracle...but only twice.

So tonight, she would ask him one more time.

Chapter Twenty-One: Taoist

Paris, Kingdom of France
July 12, 1789

The streets of Paris were nothing like what Carlisle remembered. Paris, to him, was a serene city, its stately buildings and its cathedrals making the landscape purposeful. Saint-Sulpice, Notre Dame—he felt like a disobedient child, going into these houses of Catholic worship, but they made him entranced with the city.

And unlike Volterra, Paris had always felt like home. Perhaps it was the Seine, twisting through the city as a tamer, less foul-smelling version of the Thames. Perhaps it was the libraries; the way he could find peddlers selling books for him to read. He made camp outside the city and prowled it mostly by night; like the creature he wished not to be. Yet even in the dark, even without people, something about the city was invigorating and irresistible. The air itself thrummed with possibility.

Carlisle remembered Paris for its beauty.

But it was not beautiful today.

As he and Garrett picked their way through the crammed streets, Carlisle couldn't help but to feel crushed and out of place. Even with his height, he could barely see; the streets were so filled with people in protest. Everywhere he looked it seemed his eyes landed on scores of red, blue, and white rosettes.

“Is it not exciting?” Garrett asked, a wide grin on his face as they pressed their way through the crowds, the bodies so close that Carlisle could nearly feel the hearts beating against his own skin.

“How is it that you manage?” Carlisle asked, his voice low enough that only another of his kind might hear it.

“Manage what?”

“With the humans so close.”

Garrett laughed, the broad, booming laughter that Carlisle was just barely becoming used to. They did not laugh often in Volterra, and certainly not as heartily.

"Distraction," he answered. "The same mechanism you employ, if I am not entirely mistaken?"

It had been distraction, he supposed, especially at first. Though now...the idea of killing a human had grown so utterly repugnant that he could scarcely fathom ever having had the urge. But he had been older than Garrett when he first went so freely among humans, and that Garrett was as resolute to pass among them was surprising.

"Not to mention that this place is too exciting," Garrett added. "Look about you, Englishman. Have you ever seen something so glorious?"

"'Glorious' is not quite the word I was thinking of," he muttered in answer.

In the intervening days since he and Garrett had met, the King had ordered the French army into the grounds near Versailles and into the streets of Paris. They stood here, now, soldiers resolute with their bayonets; their firepower and weaponry far too near the people. The people, however, seemed not even to recognize the threat—they jeered and yelled and pressed in toward the castle and toward the prison at the city's heart, swarming in the streets. People looted, and thieved and burned—the sun was blotted by at least as many fires as clouds.

It was madness. There was vibrancy, yes, and the city seemed to tremble with energy, but this was not the Paris Carlisle knew.

"Necker dismissed! The people call for the arms at the Bastille!" shouted a young boy off to their right. "Read the demands of the National Assembly! Read about the ways the Estates General has refused to serve the people of France! Brotherhood! Equality! Liberty!"

Carlisle stopped and fished in his purse for a coin, bringing a wide smile to the boy's face as he gave Carlisle one of each of the pamphlets he sold. He skimmed these quickly as they continued through the crowd.

A demand for a constitution. A poor transcription of the Bill of Rights written by the National Assembly in Versailles, what, three days ago? The firing of the finance minister yesterday; the King's restructuring of the finance ministry. A statement of intent for the people to take over the monarchy.

He was still reading, fascinated, when over his right shoulder, a window shattered, spraying Carlisle and Garrett both with shards of glass.

Carlisle whirled, at once finding the culprit, a young man with dark curls, who stood mere few feet behind them, poised with a second rock in hand in case the first did not make its target.

For a split second, the boy appeared shocked at having been seen.

At once he ran—but not away. He ran instead toward the destroyed window—a bakery, Carlisle realized after a moment, though it looked as though it were abandoned. Then the young man was clambering through the broken window, the broken glass tearing at his breeches and shirt.

"Run!" Carlisle yelled to Garrett, realizing at once what would happen. "I will find you."

But it was too late. The glass ripped through the breeches and into the young man's thigh. The cut was small, and it seemed that the thief had planned for this, because he barely winced with the pain, instead pressing his way further into the shop as though nothing had happened.

Carlisle acted instinctively. He turned just in time to block his friend as Garrett lunged. Grabbing Garrett by the shoulders, Carlisle pulled him to the stone street, and the two of them rolled over each other, growling and snarling like a pair of wolves. They crashed into the wall of the building across the street, causing several stones to dislodge. Yet Carlisle managed the pin, immobilizing his friend as he snapped ineffectively.

"Run," Carlisle repeated in English. "*Distraction*, Garrett. Run from here."

Because there would be no mercy for them were they exposed. For all Carlisle knew, Aro's guard were already following them; if Garrett attacked this boy in broad daylight, perhaps one of their kind would leap out of the shadows and tear off his head...

But the other man still lunged helplessly toward the boy. Carlisle shook him. At last, their eyes met.

"Run, Friend," Carlisle ordered. "You must."

Garrett blinked, but then nodded, and Carlisle eased on his friend's shoulders ever so minutely, until he could feel movement. Garrett was ready to spring—but this time, away from the bakery.

He released, and Garrett flew down the street, away from the throngs of people and the bleeding boy.

It had been what, perhaps a second? Two? Carlisle turned back to the bakery.

The thief had actually stopped. Pausing halfway through the shattered shop window, he gaped with wide, terrified eyes at where the two vampires had been.

"You must go," Carlisle managed to scream. He repeated himself at once, just in case in his panic he had accidentally yelled in English. "Don't steal the bread."

The boy stared. He gazed longingly into the bakery, with its loaves set out on shelves.

"My family—" he murmured. "The bread. My younger sisters—"

Carlisle looked around anxiously. They seemed to be alone, but if Garrett hadn't fully fled the scene...it could be disastrous for them all.

"It is not worth your life!"

Strangely, the boy seemed to understand. He nodded, his dark hair shaking up and down. He climbed out of the shop window, shrugged his satchel over his shoulder, and took off running down the narrow street toward the crowd. A moment later he had disappeared, his body obscured by shouting men.

It took Carlisle the better part of a half-hour to comb the streets for Garrett's scent. He'd run several different directions, as though he'd doubled back and changed his mind multiple times. He at last found the other in at the mouth of an alley, near enough to the main crowds and yet effectively hidden in the shadows of twilight.

Garrett had recovered himself, and was dusting debris from the street from his own breeches. He glared at Carlisle, but if anything, the expression was also one of relief.

"I could not let you hunt him out here," Carlisle offered. "We would be exposed."

"You could not let me hunt him, simply put." Garrett grimaced, looking askance at the street. His eyes darted from the darkness of the alley back out into the crowd, searching.

"I doubt we will be suspected," Carlisle answered his unasked question. "It would be difficult to believe that your back nearly took down a wall."

For a long moment, Garrett was silent.

"How is it that you are able to resist," he muttered at last. "Fresh, Carlisle. He tore his own skin breaking that glass. And yet you calmly advise him to leave as though you are the town magistrate."

Carlisle shrugged. How were people growing so desperate, he wondered. Word had spread even as far south as Volterra of the piteous state of the French people. But for them to reach a state where a shop would be looted in broad daylight—he shook his head in dismay.

Was it simply the people rejecting the rule of law, as they rejected their nobility? Or was it that in the face of others doing the same, even good, reasonable people saw no cause to continue being guided by their own understanding of right and wrong?

Garrett stood examining him.

"You astound me, English," he said and gestured to the street. "Come. Let us walk."

Leaving the alley behind them, the two friends made their way deeper into the city, delving further and further into chaos.

Men stood on makeshift barricades, aimed at stopping the King's army from advancing on the people. In homes, curtains were drawn and candles extinguished as the Parisians blocked their city and its crime from their view. He and Garrett walked up one street, dark between the crowded houses and the overcast day.

"He was young," Carlisle muttered.

"Who?"

"The boy. The bread thief."

Garrett stopped walking. "And this bothers you?"

Of course it did, Carlisle thought. He remembered also the young boy peddling pamphlets. Was the money needed for food? Would he go home for a supper prepared by his mother, or was he one of Paris's orphans, out in these unforgiving streets?

They passed three uniformed soldiers, their bayonets glistening even in the overcast day. The men regarded Garrett and Carlisle with a wary indifference.

The soldiers were everywhere. But Paris's children were starving.

"They're not prepared," Carlisle muttered. "Garrett, if the army turns on them, they won't live."

His friend shook his head and pointed. Carlisle hadn't noticed where they walked, he'd been content simply to walk with his friend and talk. They had made their way to the very center of Paris, and ahead of them loomed a huge structure, all stone, its thick walls appearing every bit impenetrable.

"That," he said, gesturing grandly, "is why the people will win. And why I brought you to the midst of things."

To the midst of things? "I beg your pardon?"

It was the prison, which Carlisle had seen on many of his previous visits to the city. Eight towers and thick walls, a short drawbridge leading to the shops and neighborhood nearby. Here everything was thicker--the crowd crushing in on all sides, the extent of the looting, the smoke.

"The Bastille?"

Garrett nodded, his eyes wide with a crazed excitement.

"We're going to seize it."

~ || x || ~

Volterra

The study seemed almost small with all three brothers inside it. The heels of Caius's shoes clacked against the stone floor as he paced, echoing off the walls and making Aro feel hemmed in.

"We should clear his chambers," Caius snarled. "At a minimum, Aro, if you are not willing to destroy him, then throw him out."

Throw him out. That could be done easily enough. All they needed to do was to station the guard in such a way that the Englishman would encounter them on his way home. They would tell him he was unwelcome, divert his path from Volterra as though he were any other of their kind.

Aro leaned back in his chair, running a hand across the large book on his desk.

"But you would prefer I destroy him," he said.

Caius snorted. "I think he is of no use to you, Brother, except perhaps as an oddity. But you can't keep around every bauble which catches your eye. He shows himself to be unwilling to obey you, and unwilling to fully join our ranks. He cannot be trusted not to turn. It is best that he remain far from here."

Instead of answering Caius, Aro turned to the book. The tome was large, and, in the Englishman's absence, had slowly become covered in dust. Aro knocked this off with one hand as he opened it.

Aro's study was situated off the library, where it could share resources freely and easily with the books the brothers had amassed over the centuries. The book he read now had come to them from the Orient; it exhibited the exquisite pictograms which had at first seemed so puzzling but which over time had revealed themselves to be a language, just like any of the others he spoke.

He'd begun to peruse it because it was drenched in Carlisle's scent. Reading this had been one of the Englishman's final pursuits before this odd outburst that had sent him into flight. Now that he thought on it, Aro recalled that he had even heard the other vampire talk about it; learning the language of the Orient and traveling there, walking around the great Mediterranean Sea and through the Ottoman Empire. The idea had been welcome at the time; to be rid of Carlisle for another short stretch of years would probably be good for them all. It would remind the young one that above all else, he prized companionship.

It would keep him bonded here.

But that hadn't happened, and instead, the Englishman was gone.

Aro aimlessly turned several pages before addressing Marcus. "And you, Brother? You are the one who has schooled him."

Marcus let out a long sigh. But instead of making a statement aloud, he stood from his chair and walked over to Aro, placing his hand against the other's palm. His thoughts and memories flickered across Aro's consciousness like tiny flames, bursting into fire in some places, fizzling to nothing in others. But among them, Aro found what he sought—Marcus's peculiar gift. The pull between two individuals, as though there were some physical tie keeping them from going too far. His with Sulpicia, as strong as ever, neither able to pull away from the other for too long. His Brothers, less so than his mate, but still firm. Caius to Athenadora, Charmion to the brothers, Alrigo, Rafael, Renata, his servant—he flicked through them quickly, seeking the ones about which he was concerned.

The Englishman. There. First to Marcus, a strong, fraternal attraction. Memories of laughter and the rapid-fire Greek lessons, the unfolding of the Brothers' personal history intermingled with a deepening of Carlisle's understanding of the formation of the whole Western world.

Next, Caius. The faintest of connections, which was no surprise. The enmity there was palatable; if anything connected the two men, it was the intensity of their mutual dislike.

And then to Aro. Even more confusing. At times, Marcus's thoughts revealed the strongest of attractions on the Englishman's behalf. Admiration, even adoration.

And then, at times, sheer disgust.

When Aro nodded, Marcus sat back down. There was an awkward silence.

"*Will* you destroy him, when he's found?"

"Did I not just repeat this to Caius? Carlisle has broken no laws. For me to destroy him would be to admit that our enforcement of our laws is not what it seems."

"And if you destroy him, you'll have to admit the offer he turned down," Caius muttered.

Aro growled.

"It's true, Brother," Caius answered, turning toward the desk. The clicking stopped at once. "That's the true problem here. Had you not asked him to join us..." His lip curled. "And now you have no reason to destroy him because he has not broken our laws."

"Caius—" Aro said sharply, but Caius made his way swiftly toward the door.

"You and Marcus created this problem," he snapped. "And if you won't take my advice to simply dispose of him, then it can be the two of you who find a solution."

The door to the study slammed behind him with such force it caused Aro's desk to rattle. For a long moment, neither he nor Marcus said anything.

"And if he did break our laws?" Marcus offered at last.

Aro hesitated. The idea was completely foreign.

"He will not break our laws," he answered, which was true. "And while he abides by them, I wish to be fair."

Marcus laughed. "Aro, you have done plenty of things which are not fair. Keeping Carlisle here, when he refuses to join the guard—that is not fair."

Aro frowned. "I was under the impression that you liked Carlisle."

"I do! I am not advocating that you destroy him, Brother. As you say, he has broken no law. And would that all of our kind were as inquisitive as he. Perhaps then we would achieve the superiority which you so long for." He stood, walking toward the window. It was another sunny day, and scores of humans milled in the *plazza* below. Marcus watched them a long time.

"He may be of use," he muttered finally.

Aro sat up straighter. "Of use?"

Marcus nodded. "His ability to slide among the humans. The only other of us who does that so easily is Heidi."

"You're not suggesting he hunt for us."

Marcus laughed. "Of course not. He would never do that. And Brother, I believe it is his desire to leave. Our banishment of him will be meaningless. He arrived nearly forty years ago, and I don't believe he intends to stay."

The other had a point. But instead of replying, Aro paged absently through the book before him. He wondered what it was that the younger vampire saw in these pages of ancient poetry? Carlisle's thirst for knowledge was utterly insatiable; he, Aro knew, would be one of the rare beings of their kind for whom eternity would present endless challenge and discovery instead of unending drudgery.

A hand stopped Aro's page turns, leaving the book open to a page on which the other's scent was strongest. Marcus's eyes wandered over it, reading the text again.

"Allow him to go," Marcus said, after he'd read the verse a few times. "Caius is right; I believe at this point, he must. You, for all the right reasons, try to hold him back, but he won't be held. He is not meant to be one of us. We could contain him only for a short period, and that period has come to an end. Yet, Aro, I believe there is much to be learned from him. He will mingle with humans for the rest of time, in a way that no others of our kind have ever managed. Because he refuses to hunt them, his purity will guide him to know humans in a way we cannot. He will prove an asset to us, I am convinced of this."

"And if he does not?"

Marcus moved closer, a thin smile on his lips, but again it was a long moment before he spoke. He re-read the verse again.

"You know, Brother," he said thoughtfully, "I believe the problem with Carlisle is not that he threatens to expose our kind to the humanity around us." He tapped the page. "The thing which so unsettles you is that he tends to expose our kind to the humanity within us."

Aro said nothing. Marcus only grinned.

"Let him go, Brother. It is right. "

And then the door opened and Marcus was gone, leaving Aro alone to stare at the page to which his brother-in-law had turned. He re-read its contents carefully, considering the implications that this was the page, it seemed, that the young vampire had read most.

Knowing others is intelligence; knowing thyself is true wisdom.

Mastering others is strength; mastering thyself is true power.

If thou realizes thou hast enough, thou art truly rich.

If thou stayest in the center, and embrace death with thine whole heart, thou will endure forever.

He stared.

No one else would be like this one. Somewhere, Aro had always known this, from the moment Carlisle had wandered into a city which reeked of others of his kind and presumed that they desired his company rather than his destruction. Others came near Volterra and ran; he walked to its center and demanded change.

Marcus was right. They couldn't contain him. And Aro wasn't sure he even wanted to. To hold Carlisle was to stifle him, and they'd done enough of that. But then--there was the pull that Marcus saw, the connection even Aro's mate felt.

Things which were fascinating were things Aro had always been loathe to let go.

Allow Carlisle simply to vanish.

Was such a thing even possible?

Aro closed the book, pulling it into his lap as he thought.

Chapter Twenty-Two: Beloved

London, England
June, 1667

The cock's crow awoke William before sunrise on the morning of the hanging day, and he swung himself out of bed despite the early hour.

Were there ever a day to be awake and fresh, this was it.

Kneeling on the cold floor, he carefully pushed the trundle back beneath his bed. Again, it was perfectly made up, the old quilt taut across the bedding.

His son had not slept here again last night.

The boy had all but disappeared after his outburst; coming home only the following morning to plead the woman's case. When William hadn't budged, the boy disappeared. To Thomas's, William supposed, though he hadn't been down to the smithy to check.

But he pulled out the trundle each night, just in case his son chose to come home.

The boy hadn't known, he rationalized. And that he didn't back away just yet, well—if anything, it was a sign of how bewitching the woman's power was. Once she was gone, the spell she had over his son would break, and he would return to the good Christian man he was.

He was not in possession of the devil himself.

William's shoes were on the other side of the room, and he padded across in his hose. Next to his shoes, leaning against the wall, were the two pieces of the cross from the kitchen. There were no other adornments in the house besides this one; William had carved it himself just upon starting seminary.

He winced as he recalled the look of furor on his son's face as he brought the hulking cross down on the floor, the way the wood had groaned as it splintered. The way his own child had renounced not the devil but their God. The tears of anger that had streamed down the boy's face as he stormed out of their home.

Without thinking, William found himself kneeling before the pieces of the cross.

Broken.

Like everything.

"It all happened so quickly," he whispered, running his fingers across the wood. "I was happy for him, Lord. He was righteous and true. Turned to thee. His strength shone in all that he did." He recalled the joy which had flooded him that afternoon that his entire world had exploded; when he learned that his son was courting a woman. That he would go to seminary, serve the Lord, and raise the family William himself had been unable to. He had even felt healthier—he almost could have guessed that Young William's strides were healing him as well. Perhaps this was what the Lord had intended for them both; for William, healing; for his child, a family.

And then it had all shattered.

This was a test, if ever there were one. A test of his own commitment. Could he stand by and watch his child break so that others might be spared the presence of evil among them?

What would Sarah have thought, he wondered. To be wrenched so completely from joy to pain; knowing their child was to marry, to be a seminarian, to become a father—only to learn that in truth, he'd been seduced by evil?

She would not have stood by, came the answer from deep within him. For while a father could sit idly at a table while his child screamed and sobbed, no mother would be able to bear that sight.

Did that mean he was stronger, or just more foolish?

"It hurts," he continued his prayer. "It hurts, my Lord, to see this. I pray for thy strength. I pray thou to give Young William strength. For he shall need it this day and in the days to come. Please give him strength, and bless his soul to keep it from corruption. Forgive him his errors when he asks your forgiveness."

He placed a trembling hand on what had once been the bar of the cross, which now leaned vertically against the cold stone wall. Did it tremble because of his sickness? Did it tremble as a sign that he was close to death?

Or did it tremble because of his own sorrow?

"Protect my child, Lord," he whispered. "Protect my child."

Then he stood, straightened his collar, and made his way toward the stairs.

~ || x || ~

"You. Vagrant. Awake."

Carlisle barely managed to force his eyes open through the thick crust of his own tears. Between these, and the fact that for several days, one of his eyes remained swollen, opening his eyes to awaken in the morning had become difficult.

His breath left him so abruptly that he felt the effect before he registered its cause: the guard's boot as it landed a kick square to the middle of his chest.

He growled, but staggered to his feet.

"You should not even be here," snapped the guard.

"Then stop holding my wife," Carlisle snapped back.

At this the guard only laughed. "Your wife? What, is she held for cuckolding you?"

The blood from the man's lip spurted several satisfying feet when Carlisle's fist slammed into his jaw. Unfortunately for Carlisle, the guard was a bit sturdier a fighter, and the fist which answered was powerful. A throbbing pain ripped through Carlisle's head and little white pinheads appeared at the edge of his vision. As the world began to swim, Carlisle dropped to his knees.

The guard spat on him.

"Try that again and you will find that it is you locked here instead of your woman," he snarled.

Carlisle fought his way to his feet, staggering slightly. He did appear a mess, he realized at once. His shirt was stained with grass and mud from his multiple nights of sleeping outdoors. His

breeches were ripped at the knee. He knew that if he lifted his hand, he would feel several days' beard on his cheeks.

He'd been in Southwark for a week. They kept Elizabeth and the others in a tiny debtor's prison here, which before the Great Fire had been used for only the pettiest of criminals. There was word of making Newgate into an even more formidable prison on its rebuild, but that would be years away.

So the prisoners were held in a tiny building here, across the river where the buildings were untouched by the Fire. Thomas had tried to convince Carlisle to stay safely in Aldgate, but he would have nothing of it. The prison had a small yard, and it was here he made camp, sleeping outside like a dog. He hadn't eaten in days. Like all the prisons, the guards here were easily bribed, and while he hadn't been able to negotiate a visit, Carlisle had spent his money sending Elizabeth blankets and baked goods and paying for her to have a bed.

He would be the one who shivered and starved. That seemed more than fair.

"When will they bring them out?" he managed to ask when his vision stopped swimming.

The guard laughed, his grin spreading wide and showing a set of very crooked teeth.

"Wanting to see your woman one last time, eh? I would go home, boy. Lovesickness is not cured by twisting your own heart."

Lovesickness? Was that what the guard thought this was?

Nevertheless, he pulled himself to his full height, squaring his shoulders as he regarded the other man.

"She is accused falsely," he answered. "And not by me."

The guard laughed again. "Then you had better take that one up with the judge. Sleeping out here like a lost dog will not undo the judge's orders." Gesturing to the gate, he added, "And it's too late for that."

And Carlisle heard it. The jangling of tack as it was hooked to the mules which would pull the cart to Tyburn. The creak of the wheels as the cart maneuvered into place. The whistling of a minstrel tune.

Someone was whistling?

They were readying the cart to pull people to their deaths, and someone was *whistling*?

His stomach clenched so violently he doubled over and was sick. Only bile, as he'd not eaten in three days.

The guard shot him a look of disgust.

"Get out of here," he snarled. "Go. Meet the cart and your woman later." He shoved Carlisle with such force that he stumbled.

But he did go, at least a little ways. He walked across the street to a small bakery, from which wafted the scents of freshly-baked bread. Ready for the crowds, no doubt. It was a hanging day, and people would gather as far as this to take part in the spectacle. He leaned against the doorpost and closed his eyes again, allowing the scents to bathe him.

He wasn't sure how much time had passed; perhaps it was possible that as tired as he was, he'd fallen asleep standing up. But he became aware of his surroundings again when a voice asked, "You all right, Boy?"

It was the second time in an hour Carlisle had been called "Boy." How odd.

In the doorway of the bakery stood a woman, shaking down a small mat, which she beat with the palm of one hand. With each strike, particles of dirt and dust fell to the ground like snow. He stared.

Was he all right? He was ripping apart. He was becoming a madman. He was starving. He was afraid.

"Boy? Are you all right?"

He shrugged. But then, as though the mere act of being asked was too much, he fell to his knees and started to cry.

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Dawn's light still crept across the Tyburn field, the sky still shone a purplish blue. Yet Mother Proctor's Pews were already beginning to fill. On some days, the stands would be packed with people, but today William expected the crowd to be modest. There would be no extraordinary criminals hanged today; not the kinds of people which drew large crowds. A thief, a wife who had cuckolded her husband, a man who murdered his mistress.

And Elizabeth.

His son's betrothed.

The witch.

Would the boy cause a scene? Would he even show?

William walked the length of the gallows, thinking. The "tree," as they called it, was in three parts, a triangle, so that the weight from the hulking beams was distributed evenly. Eight could be hanged on each side, but the most William had ever seen was a total of fifteen, and that was after a stretch when a series of saints' days interrupted normal legal proceedings.

Above him, short bits of leftover rope swayed in the wind.

"Reverend," a man said, and William turned. It was the judge, Jonathan Porter. They were long-acquainted, brought together by William's work.

"Mr. Porter." William nodded.

The other man stood, his hands crossed behind his back as he stared out into the place where the crowd would sit.

"I am surprised to see a crowd this early. They will have barely begun to bring the prisoners."

William nodded. "I am surprised to see them, also."

For a long moment, neither of them spoke.

"I understand that one of the accused is your son's betrothed," the Judge said finally, his voice quiet, as though somehow they would be heard over the hundreds of yards between them and the spectators.

Some said London was the largest city in all of the countries. It was certainly the largest in England by a long shot. Yet news and rumors moved as quickly as they did in any tiny hamlet.

"*Was* my son's betrothed," William answered, his lip curling. "He has denounced her, of course."

The judge nodded. "Of course."

But the look on his face was odd.

"Do you not believe me?"

The judge winced, but continued staring to the gathering crowd. "I received word that a young man with golden hair has slept outside the prison for the past half week."

Slept outside the prison. So he was not spending his nights with Thomas, after all.

"And you suspect this to be Young William."

"I know it not for certain," the judge said. He turned, and like William, paced the length of the gallows, gazing up occasionally at the beam with its scraps of dangling leftover rope, saying nothing.

William watched him.

"Plan you to purify the girl?" he asked finally.

This was the final step in dealing with women accused of witchcraft. They were hanged first, of course, as with all criminals. But the devil could be exorcised from the body posthaste, through burning.

He nodded.

“The body must not play host to the Devil after today.”

Again the judge took a long time to speak. When he did, he spoke not to William but to the hanging pieces of rope.

“Perhaps you ought to pardon her, Reverend.”

At once, William's face grew hot. “Pardon her? Her superior confessed! She is a practicing witch, Judge. I will not have her host the Devil among us. And I will not have her near my son.”

“And your son? He agrees with this course of action?”

“Of course he does.”

Judge Porter rocked on his heels once more, pursing his lips so tightly they turned white.

“Then may God's blessings be upon you to be rid of this scourge.” He began to walk away, toward the place where he would sit, along with the other judges in attendance, and William and the two other clergy who'd brought the charges.

Young William had sat there, too, once, William thought, as he eyed the empty chairs. When he thought his child would follow in his path. He'd imagined the day when he would stand to the side and instead it would be his son listening to the final confessions, blessing those who carried out the noble duty of execution, bidding the souls which were worthy toward Heaven, and damning the others to Hell.

He stared from the Tree to the dias. This was the vantage point the guilty had; viewing those who had accused him.

What would the girl see, he wondered? Would she think of him as the man who might have become her father-in-law?

Or only the man who condemned her to die?

He folded his hands and bowed his head. Was the judge right? Pardoning the girl would heal his child. It would bring back the joyous man who'd inhabited William's house these short months. It would bring them back together. Turn them back into a family.

But he was already a weakened man, and it would make him seem weaker...

He bowed his head. “Strength, Lord,” he whispered. “I pray thee to give me strength.”

In the distance he heard the jeers of the crowd, the jangling of the tack.

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She was as beautiful as she had ever been. Resolute, her shoulders squared as she sat. Even though he had attended the Tyburn processions since he had been a child, Carlisle had never before thought of how grotesque their form of transport truly was—each prisoner sat shackled to his own coffin, so that the return trip would be easily coordinated.

It was disgusting.

The roads which led west to Tyburn were crowded, though not as much as usual. Part of him was relieved; the other part wanted to scream from the rooftops that more people should care. Unless he could do something, this morning they would take the life of an innocent.

The lies. All the lies. If his father had told him of his sickness, of the treatment he was receiving, perhaps Carlisle might have talked it over with his beloved. She would have known where William Cullen saw his barber-surgeon, and she might have avoided the area entirely.

He had always been taught that lying was the very root of evil. He'd disagreed at the time, but here, now, he understood the truth in that.

Lying had gotten them here, with the woman he loved, sitting atop her own coffin, jerking and rattling her way toward her death.

So he ran alongside the cart quietly, ducking between the people so as not to be seen.

Over the years he had seen men in his exact position—distraught, running alongside the cart, grabbing for their loved ones' hands. Inevitably they were arrested, or beaten by the crowd. In the

worst scenario, one woman who ran sobbing after her husband at the end of the journey was found guilty of colluding with him and they'd put her on the cart and strung her up right next to him.

Carlisle ducked and dodged the crowd as he jogged to keep up with the guards and the cart. Occasionally, he lost sight of it in the jeering people. Small crowds stood on the streets, little children flung rotted vegetables and fruit so that the streets reeked. Most of them were unsuccessful, but one little boy had particularly good aim, lobbing a rotten turnip which smashed on the cart's wall next to Elizabeth.

He grabbed the boy's wrist so firmly he worried a brief second that he might accidentally break it.

The boy screamed.

"Would thou prefer it that people threw rotting food at thee?" Carlisle growled.

Wide-eyed, the boy shook his head.

"Then thou ought not do it either," he snapped. He threw down the small arm with such force it nearly knocked its owner to the ground. But the boy regained his balance and ran into a nearby house for safety.

"Imbeciles," Carlisle muttered.

The cart jingled and squeaked its way through the streets as Carlisle alternately lost himself in the crowds and appeared alongside the cart. He was a good runner; he and his father ate well and he had grown up strong. He kept up with the cart easily, at times even slowing to a walk.

It was during one of these walking times that he heard a low voice say, "Cullen."

Carlisle looked over his shoulder.

There Thomas stood, his arms crossed over his chest, his feet planted wide. At once a look of sorrowful pity crossed his face.

"Thomas."

"You look awful, Carlisle," he said quietly. "Why did you not come stay with me?"

Carlisle shook his head. "I needed to be near her," he answered, as though this were a foregone conclusion.

His friend blinked. "And were you?"

"I have been outside the prison these nights."

Thomas eyed his clothing, looking over Carlisle from head to toe. "Aye, that you have."

The cart jerked its way ahead of them, the jeers of the crowd moving with it. Carlisle stared longingly for a moment, but then realized he could catch up.

"I'm sorry, Friend. Truly, I am." Thomas laid a hand on Carlisle's shoulder.

Carlisle looked down at the street. He wouldn't cry again. He'd already cried today, and that was enough—if Elizabeth saw him, she needed to see the strength of the man who loved her, not a sniveling child. So instead he bit his lip so hard he drew blood, its salty taste rolling back into his mouth.

This did not escape Thomas's notice, either.

"Do you wish that we should walk together?"

Carlisle stared. "Needn't you stay here?" Now that he'd stopped, Carlisle recognized his surroundings at last. He was near the smithy, not far from his own home, which the procession did not pass.

Thomas shook his head. "My father will understand." He squeezed Carlisle's shoulder. "I am so sorry, my friend."

"It is my father's fault," he said. "She is innocent."

"Did you plead her case with him?"

Carlisle nodded. The morning after he collapsed in the forest, he came back to the vicarage just at daybreak to find his father asleep in the kitchen chair. He'd nearly cleaned the kitchen, but thought better of it upon seeing the cross, the last thing he'd broken, lying still in pieces on the floor.

His father had no idea what it meant to be a Christian.

He had thrown nothing. He had, however, attempted to make food for himself, and it was as he was lighting the fire that his father awoke. At first, William recoiled from Carlisle, flattening himself against the far wall, waiting to be bombarded with anything else his son could throw at him. But the rage that had so consumed Carlisle was gone, snuffed out by his ineffectual tantrum in the forest and the night of sleep.

When he realized he was safe, William approached his son. "I only wish to do what is best for thee," he said quietly, and Carlisle whirled.

"What is best for me? What is best for me, Father, is to have the woman I love." He snapped a few twigs they kept by the hearth and threw them in as kindling. They went up at once, causing the fire to blaze briefly. Like his temper, he thought. You could throw kindling or even oil onto it and it would flare, as it had the previous evening. But usually he was like the logs, burning steadily, glowing more intensely at times, but keeping the heat locked in deep.

"William—"

"Carlisle, Father. At least, if you plan to take away all that I care for, call me by my name."

His father seemed to ignore this, moving across the room and leaning against the wall. "She and her superior were found guilty. Her superior admitted to training her."

"She is innocent."

"William—"

"She is innocent!" Unbelievably, his voice choked. He thought certainly he had cried himself dry the previous evening; whatever water was in his body was long since depleted. But no, here the tears were again, stinging at his eyes like some kind of menacing insect. He stood there a moment as the fire crackled to life behind him, clenching his fists.

"You have no evidence beyond the word of a woman you tortured," he said. "You keep her awake all night, make it impossible for her to think, tell her you'll send her to the gallows anyway, and then you assume what she tells you is the truth? What sense is there in that?"

It was hard to make out in the dim light, but Carlisle could've sworn he saw his father's cheeks redden.

"The law, William."

"To hell with the law!" He saw his father cringe. "Father, you are the law! What do you want of me? To run the church at Aldgate? To kill innocents as you do?"

By this time he was shrieking.

"Just tell me! Tell me what to do, and I will do it! Pardon her, and I will do what you want."

An odd look had crossed William's face then, as though he were considering. But then the stony expression returned.

"She has you bewitched, Son," he said quietly, when he'd reached the other side of the room and clearly considered himself safe. "When we remove her; when we exorcise the Devil from your life, you will awaken to yourself and understand."

A hot rage flushed through Carlisle's entire body, seeming to start at his head and shoot straight through to the soles of his feet. For a moment he said nothing, only stood there, trembling.

"Just because you are incapable of love does not mean that I must be bewitched, Father," he said at last.

Carlisle walked straight out the front door, slamming it behind him.

He hadn't returned to the house since.

"He believes me spellbound," he told his friend now, as the crowd of people surged down the street toward Tyburn. "He thinks that once she has been hanged, I will come back to myself, and follow the path I offered." He laughed ruefully. "He of all people should understand that the things which drove me are all related to her. I have no reason to live once she is gone."

For a moment Thomas said nothing.

"Carlisle," his friend said finally, "think you not that this solution is a bit extreme?"

He blinked, then gestured toward the cart, which had now rattled its way to several hundred yards ahead of them.

"Were it Anne?"

Thomas did not answer. But after a moment, he replaced the hand on Carlisle's shoulder.

"Come. Let us go there together."

It took them another three-quarters hour to walk to Tyburn, and when they reached the place, it was already packed. Mother Proctor's Pews were filled, and scores of people milled about. The usual entrepreneurs were here; boys selling meat pies, women selling crosses to ward off any demonic forces which might escape the wicked as they died.

And, of course, the pamphlets of last words.

Carlisle fished into his pocket and removed the handful of coins he had, and purchased a little pamphlet from the young boy selling them. They were fake, he believed, yet his curiosity had gotten the better of him. What would even a person who did not know the story, or knew it only as hearsay, think that Elizabeth might say in her final hours?

But when he flipped through the small pamphlet, he saw only her name, and her crime: witchcraft, treason against the sovereign.

He pressed his eyes closed and dropped the pamphlet into the dirt.

"Carlisle?"

Thomas's voice again. He nudged his friend forward toward the javelin masters who kept the crowd of people who could not afford a seat in the gallery away.

"Get back, ye," shouted the javelin master, as he shoved at them both.

"This is Reverend Cullen's son," Thomas shouted in answer, as he pointed to the dais on which sat the accusers and the judges. Carlisle could see his father there, sitting with his legs outstretched languidly before him, in his finest hose and shoes.

Sick.

The javelin master looked from Carlisle, in his torn and dirtied clothes, to the man sitting so near the gallows. His brow furrowed as he tried to figure out whether what Thomas said was indeed true.

But then William stood and beckoned.

The guard nodded, allowing Carlisle and Thomas to pass.

"I was not certain I would see thee, Child," William said when Carlisle was a few feet from him.

"You think me a coward," Carlisle shot back. "And I am not." He spat for emphasis, only to find his spittle had turned pink from bleeding from his lip.

William gestured to the chair next to his own. "Come. We need to speak." Carlisle's throat went dry. They needed to speak? Was it possible that his father had experienced a change of heart? The confessions still had not been taken.

The words barely squeaked: "Have you changed your mind?"

There was no answer. His father seemed to stare past him, to the approaching wagons, the javelin masters, the crowd.

Carlisle's heart pounded.

"Will you pardon her?" he repeated.

"I care for you," his father said quietly. "And I wish you to understand. If you are to take up doing God's work, you must understand that at times, to do it breaks your own heart."

He gestured to the chair next to him. "Sit with me."

His father might as well have punched him in the chest. Carlisle's breath came short, his eyes

As quickly as the hope came, it disappeared. Carlisle shook his head. "I will not be at your side, Father. I will be at the side of someone I love."

A surging roar from the crowd announced the arrival of the wagons. Carlisle searched out the crowd for the one he needed, the one where the woman with the chestnut hair sat, looking every bit as regal as she always had. At once, he hopped from his father's side, using his weight and height to press his way through the crowd toward the Tree.

"William!" his father's voice called after him, but he did not turn.

One by one, the prisoners were helped down from the wagons and onto the short, horse-drawn cart which would serve as their foothold until the last minute. Ropes which had been wrapped around bodies were unfurled and thrown into the air like sinister snakes, uncoiling as they reached the hangman's assistants who precariously rode the beams overhead. Several of the prisoners joked about their own fates, encouraging the spectators to wager on how long they would hang.

Sickening. Carlisle stepped away.

And then she was before him, as though he'd divined the spot to stand. Someone had brought her a beautiful dress to wear. Tendrils of her hair fell forward over her face, swaying in the light breeze.

She should have looked this beautiful on the day of our wedding, Carlisle thought.

"Elizabeth," he called softly. "Elizabeth, I am here."

And for the first time all morning she met his gaze.

He reached a hand up to her as the world became blurred by his tears. As it often did, again his height worked to his advantage, for he was able to reach her—not her whole hand, for it was bound to its mate, but at least her fingers.

As their skin made contact, her fingers closed around his.

That was all it took for the dam to break. He started to sob, his hand shaking so badly it was all he could do to keep it in Elizabeth's. She stayed resolute, but even through his tears, he could see that she cried, also.

"I'm sorry," he sobbed. "Elizabeth..."

Still, she said nothing. His arm began to ache, for even as tall as he was, the floor of the cart was at his shoulder and their tenuous handhold was awkward. But Carlisle held on.

He didn't hear the other carts drawn up. Somewhere, an ordinary must have appeared, perhaps it was even his father, to take the death day confessions. The crowd must have roared. Boys must have hollered to sell meat pies and pamphlets. Men must have taken wagers.

But he didn't see any of it. The only thing he saw was Elizabeth, her pale skin against his, her fingers interlaced with his own. The only thing he heard were the soft sighs of both their tears.

And when Thomas came, he didn't hear his friend's voice shushing him. He did not feel his friend's arms grasping his shoulders and pulling him gently backwards.

All he felt was his hand slide from hers, her fingertips raking across his palm.

And then the words; her only words the whole day through. Carried over the roaring crowd; or perhaps it was that Carlisle's ears could hear only those words.

"I love you."

Thomas pulled him.

"I love you," he called in answer. "I love you."

Somewhere, a whip cracked against the flank of a horse. Somewhere, a cart creaked its way forward. Somewhere, slackened ropes went taut, men fell.

But where Carlisle stood there was silence. Where he stood, there was only the whisper of wind as it blew chestnut hair across a pale face. Where he stood, there were only three words still on both their lips. And only his outstretched, empty hand, reaching out and finding no hand in return.

Chapter Twenty-Three: Savior

Chicago, Illinois
October 17, 1918
"Black Thursday"

The morning of October the seventeenth dawned bright and warm, as though somehow God Himself had decided to chase away the chill of the oncoming Chicago winter. That the influenza had occurred in the fall seemed so appropriate; the worsening weather mirrored the death and destruction taking place among the people. So it wasn't until the sunlight flooded into Carlisle's room that morning that he realized how long it had been since he'd seen it.

His apartment had a large, east-facing window. Usually, he kept its curtains tightly drawn, in case another should somehow happen to see into his home. But he threw them open this morning, allowing the sun to bathe him so that every inch of his exposed skin shimmered in the light. He stood and turned around in it.

The mark of his kind. The sign of immortality, this bit that made him so unlike humans. He remembered seeing it first, in the forests of his homeland. Now the lore was that the sun should destroy him, but at the time of his turning, his kind hadn't even been so much as legend. He had no reason to believe the sun would harm him, and when he'd stepped into its rays, he'd been amazed by his own appearance.

But this was what kept him here, he thought at once. Locked in the apartment on a beautiful fall day, unable to go out, and unable to go to work.

He wondered if the weather would be good for his patients. Certainly there would be mothers and fathers who tried to smuggle their children into the sunlight—either for the benefits of the fresh air, or simply to give their child one last glimpse of sunbeams before their eyes closed forever.

Desperation. He saw it again and again. Husbands and wives, mothers and children, even some children with their parents. One last touch. One last hope.

Would the Masen woman push her son closer to the window today? She continued to ignore Carlisle's admonitions to stay in bed, instead getting up to care for Edward. From Carlisle's standpoint as a physician, her behavior was ludicrous: the boy had been all but dead from the moment he'd arrived in the armory; the influenza having ravaged his body like a wildfire over dry underbrush. But Elizabeth had been well, and no doubt her own illness was directly due to her inability to take herself away from her son.

And through all this, Carlisle passed almost unnoticed. He was no more than another physician, there to diagnose, to predict the hour of death, and to confirm death when it came.

He couldn't die. But if he were human, who would be there to see that he got to see one final sunbeam?

He knew the answer to that question.

Backing away from the window, Carlisle went to sit on his bed. It was new, replaced from the one he'd destroyed only a week ago in his anguish. He'd covered it again with his aging quilt, given to him by the Ladies' Aid association at the hospital where he'd worked some thirty years before. Like the sun, it was bright; yellows and blues and whites, as though someone expected his home to be cheerful.

They knew nothing.

Were he to trade places with any of his patients, there would be no one. No one who would risk their own health for him. And had there ever been? Certainly not the brothers in Italy. If anything, they would be willing to kill him for risking theirs, not the other way around. Or his friends—Garrett, the feisty American whom Carlisle saw only once or twice a decade. Eleazar, who'd proved to Carlisle that one could escape the Italian Brothers without unending fear of pursuit.

They were his friends, yes. But they would not stand for him the way Elizabeth Masen stood for her husband and son. No one loved Carlisle like that.

His jaw clenched.

But you did have someone, his mind spoke up. At the very beginning, when you first came into this world. Then you had someone who was willing to lay down her life for yours and did so.

It had been three hundred years since he had experienced a love like Elizabeth Masen's. Perhaps that was why she so fascinated him. To have a mother...someone who would gladly sacrifice her own health for yours, someone who would not leave your bedside...it would be unlike anything Carlisle had ever known.

Women would make him quilts, defer to him as the doctor, love him for who he was as a man with power and knowledge. But no one would look to him as a son, or as a husband. There would be no Elizabeth Masen in his life.

Because there couldn't be.

His fingertip made its way around the pattern of the quilt. To be loved, he realized, was to be known. And to be known was something he could not allow.

One of his only possessions, save his books and his art, was an old grandmother clock, which sat on his shelf, keeping the time. Its ticking was at once comforting and frightening—the steady beat, like the heartbeat he no longer had, but at the same time the reminder that while Carlisle lay here, the world and its time marched on without him. Humans would continue to die. He would continue to become at once older and yet stay ever the same, tick after tick.

He flopped down onto the bed, staring up at his ceiling, listening to the clock. It was seven-fourteen in the morning. Sunset was usually around six-thirty.

There would be no armory today. And perhaps more frightening, he had not said goodbye to Mrs. Masen and her fiery son.

Would he lose the chance?

Would the Masens have made it one more evening?

"Please," he said quietly, to the empty room. "Mrs. Masen, please make it."
Staring at the ceiling, Carlisle lay still and listened to the tick of the clock.

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So this was what it felt like to drown, Elizabeth thought as she lay. Every breath she drew seemed wet, difficult to pull. Her lungs felt full, as though instead of light air, there was instead water, sloshing from side to side. She could only draw the shallowest of breaths, and when she did, her breath rattled.

It was the same sound she'd been hearing from Junior's bed for at least a day now.

Coughing, she swung her legs over the edge of the bed, leaning in toward Edward. He was curled up on his side like a baby—hadn't she heard somewhere that this was what humans did when they died? Went back to that same position in which they had spent such a long time curled up in the womb?

Her child's knees were tucked up nearly to his chest, his hands clasped together and pulled tightly to his abdomen. He shivered constantly now; the extra blanket she laid on his body in the night did him no good. She wasn't even sure if he was awake or asleep—Edward didn't seem to know his own surroundings any longer.

As though to test this, she laid a trembling hand on his shoulder. "Edward? Edward, it's Mama."

There was no response.

She wasn't sure if the hacking sound that came from her was a cough or a sob.

This was what it would come to. This dingy room in Cook County Hospital; her child succumbing to his own death mere floors from where he'd been born. All her worry about Wilson's war, and what had really been waiting to take her child away from her was influenza! The same illness he'd suffered so many times as a child to no lasting detriment; for a day or two she'd have a quiet child, only to see him become well and begin tearing up the house again within the week.

The thought almost made her laugh.

"Do you remember, sweetheart?" she whispered. "Do you remember how you used to whoop and holler? We bought you that horse—the head on a stick. How old were you then? Were you four? And you pretended to be a cowboy, galloping around the house so that you destroyed everything in sight."

A floral-patterned china platter had been the casualty of the stick horse. She scolded Junior so loudly he'd cried, and Senior took away the horse for a week.

She wanted that boy back. The one with too much energy; the rambunctious boy. The one who couldn't be contained. She wanted this boy, the one curled up here and shaking with his rattly breath to turn back into that one. The pale skin would color again; the sunken eyes would brighten.

And even without a little stick horse, perhaps she could see to it that he went galloping off somewhere...

A chair sat at the end of her bed, and she stumbled to it, barely managing to drag it so that she could sit at Edward's bedside. His hands were away from her, his back exposed. She could count the knobs on his spine. How was it that the back of the tiny, red-faced baby that she had swaddled only seventeen years ago had become this broad strong back; that the child she'd nursed had grown into this man? And how could it be fair that he would lose his life before he even reached twenty?

"I am so sorry," she whispered, and was met with a yawn. The hands flexed; the back stretched, and for a moment, his eyes fluttered open. He stared at her, causing her heart to pound.

"Edward? Teddy?"

But his eyes were blurred, unfocused. No longer the sea glass green that gave her child such depth—they were cold, flat, lifeless.

Her mother's voice came back to her, as clearly as though she sat in the room also. "Your eyes make you look bewitched, Libby. Your eyes look like they belong to the Devil himself."

Like they belong to the Devil himself...

Her mind swirled. First she was in the waiting room, here—yesterday? Three weeks ago? With Senior...

"This is your Husband?"

"Edward. His name is Edward. Edward Masen. Senior."

At once, seconds later in the room outside the men's ward, as he'd pressed the items into her hand.

"Your husband's effects." "We don't usually"—the cough—"I simply thought your son might want to carry his father's things."

Then, just as quickly, in the armory, the rows upon rows of ill people lying in their cots. Her child, in the doctor's arms...

"I'll do my best. That's what I can offer. My best."

The hospital again, the nurse who knew him so well.

"He knows things...he's wise."

Wise.

Striking eyes. She had them. Her son had them. And so did this doctor.

Was this why? Why he'd shown up everywhere they were; why he'd come down to take care of Senior? Why was it, exactly, that the blond doctor with the strange yellow eyes kept showing up? Why was it that he sat with her when her husband died; carried her son when he was too weak to walk; given them a room to stay together?

Was it fate?

Her mother didn't believe in fate.

Elizabeth shook her head so furiously her chair rattled. It was the influenza. It was her own mind closing in on itself, deciding that it was near its own end. The doctor was only a doctor; one with a great deal of skill for his age, yes, and compassion...but he was only a doctor...

Edward shivered, and at once Elizabeth reached for him. She would hold him; she thought, as she had seventeen years ago. His skin was hot, and even though he lay here, starving, he was heavier than she.

Caring for him will be the death of her, she heard the nurse's voice swim in her mind.

But she'd held him in his first moments of life, and if these were to be his last...

As she reached out, she lost her own balance and fell, her head striking the edge of his bed.

Blood gushed down her forehead and her cheek, dripping down to her chin and pooling on the floor.

The room spun.

Because of the fever?

Because of her head?

She closed her eyes.

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Carlisle was frantic by the time he arrived at the hospital. The sun was late going down for October; perhaps that was the curse of the beautiful day.

A day he'd been unable to enjoy.

After the influenza passed, he thought, he would move to the country—buy a home somewhere near completely open pastures, where he could run and hunt freely and where others wouldn't see him on a sunny day. He liked cities for their density; it was easy to be anonymous in a city. Blend in with the humans, and none of them batted an eye when you didn't want to get too

close. That was what cities were for. No one bothered to get to know you. Cold, perhaps, but in its own way, comforting.

But limiting, too.

His throat felt oddly tight as he pushed his way through the huge double doors. How would he find the Masens? He'd been thinking of them all day. Elizabeth, with her incredibly motherly nature; Edward Junior with his fiery temper.

Please, some part of him said as he pressed his way into the corridor, *please let them have survived the day.*

The room which he'd fought so hard to give them wasn't far from the door—this was on purpose. It made it easy for him to check on the two of them the moment he arrived. The other doctors and nurses had taken notice, some had even asked if perhaps the boy was his nephew. He insisted he did not know them, but talked about the way Elizabeth's presence seemed to calm her son.

"If they're both to have the best outcome," he explained to his supervisor, "then keeping them close for as long as possible is the best idea." He promised to write it up as research when he was done; to make it scientific.

But how did one quantify the effects of a mother's love?

The room was oddly dark when he arrived, even the electric lamp was turned off. It was of little consequence to him; Carlisle saw as well in pitch darkness as he did at noon. The boy's state was virtually unchanged. His shivering seemed to have stilled to a point, and all that issued from his side of the room were the raspy, rattling breaths of imminent death.

Elizabeth lay on her bed, seemingly unconscious, a fresh bandage on her temple. He frowned. When had this happened, he wondered, making his way to her bed and running a finger over her brow. The blood there was fresh, no more than a few hours old.

"Elizabeth," he muttered, "what did you do?"

She didn't so much as stir.

The boy's lips had turned purple the day before yesterday, but now Carlisle could see the splotches on his arms. If he focused, he could hear the capillaries breaking, one by one. Edward's breathing was shallow and labored—but for the first time in several days, so was his mother's.

It was the first time Carlisle had encountered Elizabeth Masen unconscious. Each time he came into the room, she was caring for her boy—giving him extra blankets, rubbing his back, holding his hands.

"You'll weaken," he warned her, but she only rolled her eyes.

"Edward is more important," she repeated every time.

But tonight, she did not lean over Edward's bed, and her own blanket remained fixed firmly around her torso. Someone had given her an extra pillow—a nurse? Which one?—but its effect on her coughing was minuscule. Her lungs couldn't drain, and no amount of propping would solve that.

A chair sat between the two beds. She must have moved this here, he guessed, and at once he could imagine the scene; the mother leaning over her son as he lay. In fact—

He looked more closely. Yes, there it was. The tiniest amount of blood on the bed frame. Someone had cleaned it with a rag—amazing, seeing how short the hospital was on nurses now, but it of course hadn't been cleaned nearly to the point that Carlisle couldn't sense it.

Of course. Elizabeth had fallen trying to care for her son.

"Oh, Elizabeth," Carlisle whispered. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry this has happened." Now it was he who sat in the chair between the beds. He took Elizabeth's hand in his. At once her fingers interlaced with his, no doubt sensing the coolness of his body.

Carlisle bowed his head in shame.

He'd hoped.

He'd prayed.
He had promised.
And he would fail.

Edward's breathing was even, with shallow breaths that rattled on their way in and out. How many times had Carlisle heard that sound? The breaths growing close to never drawing again. The erratic tattoo of a heart on its way to giving up.

And before he knew what was happening, he was crying again.

He meant to whisper to Elizabeth that he was sorry, that he had done his best. He meant to apologize, to let her know that for a brief moment, he'd felt a part of them; that he'd remembered what it was to have a family, and that he would mourn them.

He meant to admit defeat.

But what came out was a prayer.

Carlisle didn't pray often—ironic, he felt, given that he'd grown up the child of clergy. But when one lived eternally in the flesh, it seemed somehow less important to square oneself daily, or even weekly, with the Lord. And with who he was, he was hardly worthy to pray on behalf of another.

He was a killer by nature, even he never killed.

Praying was futile, he told himself long ago.

But this night it was all he had to cling to.

"God," he began. "Lord, I am sorry. I am sorry I haven't been able to keep this family together. I regret the mortal foolishness in promising them that I would. I know my own limits. I confess that I am not humble before them, but I will be humble before you."

He thought back to the destroyed bed; the junk heap, the ashes. Standing despondent outside the window where the small family played board games. The Masens would have played games in front of their fire, enjoyed popcorn, sang and laughed. They were a family.

And he had failed them all.

Carlisle had lived for almost three hundred years. He'd practiced medicine for nearly two centuries of that. How many scores of patients had died?

How many scores of patients had he lost?

And why was it that these two made him feel as though he was losing his own life with them?

For them to live would be a miracle. But miracles were exactly why one prayed.

"Please, Lord, save them," he said, squeezing Elizabeth's hand in his. "Save them."

"Save *him*."

The words were so quiet at first Carlisle wasn't even sure they'd come from Elizabeth. But then, as though his prayer had somehow awoken her from a deep sleep, she sat bolt upright. The green eyes she shared with her son—those striking eyes—stared blankly into nothingness.

Did he even know he was here?

"Save *him*," she repeated. And then the eyes did fix on him, sharp and unyielding, as hard as emeralds.

"Save him!"

Carlisle swallowed. The promises had all but done him in. The promises had brought him here in the first place, terrified of the death of these two who, by their own tenacity had somehow brightened him; had made him at once finally feel as though he belonged to them.

And when they died, he would be alone once more.

No more promises.

He gulped. "I'll do everything in my power," he said.

The green eyes widened. "You must. You *must*." Through some reserve of power, Carlisle wasn't sure, she shook his arm, her eyes piercing him once again.

“You must” —a cough— “do everything in *your* power.”

His breath caught.

Had he imagined the emphasis? In *his* power, as though his power was not the same as hers? It was a cough. It had to be a cough—an extra expulsion of air, and because he was paranoid, he was imagining things...

But then Elizabeth squeezed his arm again, the emerald eyes bored into him.

“What others—cannot—do”—she drew a deep breath, and the effort of it seemed to nearly knock her backward— “You—must do. For my Edward.” For a moment, the eyes closed, and Carlisle thought that certainly, that must be the end. But they flew open once more, and she croaked one last word:

“Please.”

Then the eyes closed and she fell back to the pillows.

Carlisle dropped her hand as though it had burned him.

He backed away from the bed, his hands shaking. Elizabeth lay there, unconscious again, it seemed. The frightening eyes were closed now, but an expression of discontent was still etched into the lines of her face.

What others could not do.

Was it possible she knew?

It was not until something solid met his back that he realized he'd backed himself all the way to the wall like some sort of frightened tomcat. It wasn't such a stretch to imagine standing here, hissing in fear.

Never had anyone discovered his secret, or even come close. And yes, he'd spent more time with Mrs. Masen and her son—exactly the sort of thing he usually avoided for his own safety—but he'd done nothing unusual. His inability to showcase his true abilities infuriated him, held him back, but he kept it all safely tucked inside lest anyone even begin to suspect...

Elizabeth had done considerably more than begin to suspect.

Did he run? Certainly, no one would fault him for running away. Dozens of doctors had, and nurses, too...just came in one morning and disappeared the next. What did he need? Some of his artwork, his books—these things could be in trunks within the hour.

But Elizabeth Masen would die within the hour.

Then why did she want to scare him so? There was nothing for her to exploit.

Except...

Carlisle let himself take a step away from the wall. In the other bed, the boy slept fitfully; though whether it was sleep or simply delirium from the influenza, Carlisle couldn't tell. He made little mewling noises as he shivered, and with each breath he seemed to fold more completely on himself, keeping himself warm like an animal or a baby.

Save him.

His stomach wrenched so violently that he was sick, right there in the hospital room, with such suddenness and speed that he had no time to even gather a bowl. It splattered onto the floor, a sticky, pinkish mixture of blood and the odd substance that had replaced blood in his veins.

Carlisle wiped the back of his wrist across his shaking lips. He was still trembling.

He couldn't do that.

If Elizabeth Masen truly knew what he was, she would never ask for her son to join him. If she knew how alone he was—the crushing weight of centuries coming to bear on a single man. The way his choices set him apart from others of his kind; the way he walked such a delicate line, neither fully human nor fully beast, finding home and solace in neither world.

She couldn't have meant that.

Her breath came shorter now.

A woman burst into the room, wide-eyed. She regarded the vomit on the floor—he panicked: did it look human enough?—but then spoke to him directly.

“Doctor Cullen you need to come. To the women's ward. You have to come.”

He frowned. It was odd, that this other nurse would come to fetch him.

“Where is Dorothy?” he asked.

The other nurse blinked. “I beg your pardon, Doctor?”

“Where is Dorothy?” he repeated. “Dorothy has been caring for these patients. Where is she?”

The nurse's name was Lucille, he remembered, and she was young, maybe nineteen or twenty. But she looked as young and as frightened as any other right now, as she began to back her way out of the room.

“Where is Dorothy?”

She shook her head. “Did no one tell you? She's gone, Doctor.”

The blow of the word was physical, as though the young nurse had struck out at him with a bat instead of a statement. He felt suddenly winded.

“Gone?” he mumbled feebly.

The woman nodded, still in an odd posture as she tried to avoid his eyes.

“When?” His voice squeaked at an oddly high-pitch, as if his voice box had suddenly decided to have a second go-round with puberty.

“This afternoon, before your shift began. It hit her in the morning, and she went delirious. Never came to. It was only six or seven hours; there wasn't anything anyone could do.”

Nothing anyone could do.

Carlisle let out a strangled yowl, causing Lucille to jump.

“I'm sorry, Doctor,” she mumbled, slowly stepping backward. “I didn't know you hadn't heard.”

He stalked to the other side of the tiny room, placing a hand against the wall and dropping his forehead against the wallpaper. Lucille seemed to freeze in place.

“I'm sorry,” she repeated.

“Leave me.”

The words were low and dark, half-growled. A timbre he fought to keep out of his voice; to his ears it made him sound more animal than man.

“Doctor, they need you—”

“*Leave me!*” He slammed his palm against the wall so hard the room shook. Lucille jumped. At once, she began nodding furiously.

“Yes,” she squeaked. “Take your time. The women's ward; whenever you are ready.”

Then she disappeared, leaving him again alone in the tiny room.

He wanted to cry. He needed to punch something. The sick feeling in his gut persisted, making him even more angry: why was it that God would rob him of human interaction and yet give him these horrid human responses?

Another strangled yowl clawed its way out of him, and then he slumped against the wall.

Dorothy. Gone.

Her gentle voice came back to him. “*I'm not your mama, Doctor.*”

But she had been, he thought. She had taken that role, however briefly—wiping his hands free of ink, chiding him for foolish behavior, urging him to continue in the path which was best for him and his patients.

“Stupid, stupid, stupid,” he told himself, the words calming him like a meditative chant.

Twice. He'd fallen twice in the midst of this disease. To the Masens, who he knew he couldn't save, and to Dorothy, who he hadn't realized he'd needed to.

He let himself have hope. Like an idiot child, he had pretended for a moment that these people cared for him, and it was intoxicating, their love...

The word startled him.

Love?

Had this been love?

These people barely knew him. How could they love him?

Maybe it wasn't that they'd loved him, he thought, as his gut seemed to twinge once more, and his chest actually ached.

Perhaps it was that for some reason, something about this moment, something about Dorothy, and Mrs. Masen, and her husband and her firebrand of a son—some constellation of things had formed a key and had unlocked something Carlisle had locked down centuries before.

Perhaps it was he who loved them.

Elizabeth's breath hitched. Her heart beat frantically, as though it would tear from her chest. He could hear it from across the room, where he still stood, plastered to the wall by his own anger and fear.

She'd made her plea. She'd protected her child. And now she could go.

"Stay with me, Elizabeth," he whispered.

But like so many, she didn't listen to him. Her breath came in short, rattling gasps, slowing, slowing...

The last exhale might as well have knocked down the building next door. It seemed to echo in the room: long, low, final. He was certain the whole hospital could hear; and he waited for someone to break down the door, to come in with a clean winding sheet, to begin carrying her to the morgue.

Certainly, everyone around him knew what happened here.

But he only stood in the darkness, and no one came.

It was a full three minutes before he tiptoed over to Elizabeth's bed and laid two cold fingers on her neck. Her body still scalded him, but that would change shortly, he thought. There was no heartbeat. No comforting gentle thud; no reminder of the bit of humanity which separated her from him.

She was as dead as he was, now.

But Edward...

The boy was having difficulty also; it was as though he could sense his own mother's passing. His breathing had suddenly grown more labored, his chills more intense. The cot rattled against the floor.

Carlisle laid a hand on the boy's shoulder. It was bony from his time in the hospital; Edward had lost at least a half-dozen pounds since Carlisle had picked him up at the armory so many weeks ago. Yet even ravaged by influenza, his body was strong. For a moment, Carlisle imagined the boy running, jumping, twisting in midair. Faster, stronger, more lithe than he had ever been before...

He shook his head. *No fantasizing*, he chastised himself.

The boy was human. And humans died.

He sat alone in the darkened room. Elizabeth's face remained pulled into a frown; even in death, it seemed, she was not at peace.

But what if she had really understood?

In one swift motion, he snatched Elizabeth's body into his arms, where it hung limply. He would carry her down to the morgue. The morgue was three floors down, in the basement. That would allow him enough time to drop this insane idea.

Under normal circumstances, they would lay bodies out on tables, allowing for autopsy if necessary, or preparing them to go to the undertaker otherwise. But in the midst of this, the morgue

was packed and reeked—the uptick in the weather outside had made it warmer inside, too. Bodies lay everywhere: two abreast on the tables, on the long shelves which lined the walls, in nearly every inch of the floor. If it were possible, the bodies were wound carefully in sheets and tagged with their names—yet many had been dumped here in haste; with no sheet, and no name.

So many would go to a steam-shovel grave, dumped in with hundreds of others, without anyone ever knowing who they were. No one would mourn Elizabeth, who'd lost her husband and bravely fought for her son; no one would tell her story. No one would talk about how her son wanted to go to war, how he'd lost his life here in Chicago instead. No one would feel badly for him that he'd watched both his parents die as a young man.

No one would even know who Edward Masen was.

He found a corner where her body would fit. The startling green eyes were flat now, utterly devoid of life. He pressed them closed, and then, by some strange impulse, leaned in and kissed her cooling forehead.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

He wound her carefully, as though even in death, she might feel discomfort. Then he gently laid her among the others.

The walk back to the tiny room took seconds—he wasn't even certain he'd walked at a human's pace, and the thought frightened him.

He was losing his mind.

Edward Masen still lay on his cot. He still breathed, a steady, raspy in and out. His chest rose only slightly, and every breath was punctuated with a wet cough.

No one had come in. There weren't enough nurses. There weren't enough doctors. Not enough hands, eyes, not enough space in the morgue.

He lifted the boy into his arms. The body seared him, the fever seeming to brand Carlisle everywhere his skin made contact with Edward's.

Out of the room, Carlisle headed for the stairs.

There was a back door in the morgue; it led to the alleyway behind the hospital where the hearses could come to collect a body to the undertaker. If anyone saw him go in, they would assume the boy had died.

And no one would see him leave.

The boy whimpered.

“Shhhhh,” Carlisle hushed, as though he were trying to calm a baby. “Hush, now, Edward.”

Pushing open the morgue door with one hand, he picked his way carefully through the bodies; tiptoeing between the rows of bound humans. Elizabeth lay near the back. He stopped before her body, and knelt with Edward in his arms.

So many failed promises. But now, he would make one he could keep.

“Thank you, Elizabeth,” he whispered, holding the boy with one arm while he laid a hand on the mother's cheek. “I will take care of him. I will never leave him. You showed me how to love him, and I will love him as you love him. For all of forever.”

Nothing stirred, including the boy. The morgue was entirely silent.

“*Save him*,” Elizabeth's words echoed in his mind.

He gulped, and this time, it was to the boy's still-burning forehead that he pressed his lips.

“No, Edward,” he whispered, “*save me*.”

Then he pressed open the door and raced into the cold, unforgiving night.

Chapter Twenty-Four: Doctor

Volterra

July 13, 1789

“You will be seen as backtracking on your earlier position, Brother,” Caius snapped. “You will appear insufferably weak. Of course, if that is what you wish...”

He shrugged.

Aro got the message. When he answered, it was in a level, authoritative tone.

“No man who has the power to kill those who disobey him is ever weak, Caius. Perhaps it is you who need to rethink your position.”

The older vampire frowned, but sat in his chair with a huff. “Fine. Aro, you do what you wish. You are not beholden to me, nor I to you. I'll simply be glad to be rid of him.”

To be rid of him. Aro massaged his temple.

The talk with Marcus a few days before had decided him. Of course Aro could destroy another simply for the desire to defect. He had done it before, and Caius was well aware. But to give Caius the satisfaction of destroying Carlisle just gave him one more thing to lord over Aro. So it was decided. If the Englishman returned—which Aro felt he would, he still had many possessions here—he would be banished. Asked never to return to this place. But Aro would order the guard not to attack. To lose Carlisle would be to lose this fascinating experiment which had such potential for helping them understand their nature.

“I do not understand why you choose not to destroy him,” Caius muttered.

“It is simple, my fiery Brother. We let him go so that we can learn from him.”

“He learns from us. What have we to learn from him?”

Everything. Aro thought. But his answer to Caius was measured.

“Imagine he succeeds at living this life of his. Continuing to deny his natural food source. Becoming a physician.”

Caius raised his eyebrows, but said nothing. Aro went on.

“He will show us how best to do this, Brother. We have to send out our sisters and brothers who are gifted; Heidi must use her extraordinary allure to draw in our prey. Why? Because we stand out so badly. What if we simply understood how to blend in?”

The white-haired vampire cocked his head, a small smile appearing on his lips.

Marcus, however, rolled his eyes. “Always the exploit, Aro. Only you could take such an extraordinary man and find a way to use his uniqueness to your eventual gain.”

A cold rage shot through him, but just as quickly he suppressed it, saying coolly, “It is a collective gain, Brother, which is exactly what we hope for from any of our kind.”

Caius shrugged. “If we allow him to leave, it is only fair that he be supervised.”

At this, Marcus actually stood. “Only fair? He arrived here of his own free will. He has transgressed none of our laws—in fact, he transgresses no laws, including the ones we so regularly do. He arrived as a visitor, and he ought to leave as one.” He frowned. “Aro, I would argue that we should put this question of tracing him to a vote, except that I understand that I would lose. So I simply beg you to reconsider. Carlisle has not wronged us. He has simply not agreed with us. And if we've crossed such a line that we now feel a need to keep an eye on everyone who disagrees with us—well, the list is long, Brother.”

With a swirl of black fabric, he disappeared from the Great Hall.

“Idiotic,” Caius muttered, a bit loudly. He pushed himself from his chair, turning to face Aro. “Do what you wish, Brother. But when the Young One exposes us all and you are forced to destroy him—remember that I counseled you otherwise.”

Then he, too, disappeared.

It took Aro the better part of an hour to leave his study. When he did, he walked to the Englishman's room. The desk was bare, save for the mortar and pestle and a few crumbs of the last herbs the man had been working with.

A tiny sliver of sunlight stretched across the stone floor from the slit of a window in the room. Aro was reminded of the day, not so long ago, when Carlisle had stood before them in the Great Hall, turning in the sunlight and sending rainbows skittering over the walls.

He'd appeared fascinated with himself; even as he explained that what had once been extraordinary would no longer even be believed. Science would rule, and their kind defied science...

Humans were not afraid of them any longer. For all intents and purposes, they had ceased to exist.

Carefully, Aro began to put the other's things in order. There were so few of them—a handful of journals, the mortar and pestle. Carlisle's only truly significant possession was a hulking wooden cross which had appeared the last time he'd returned to Volterra from England. When the others laughed, he shrugged and explained that it was carved by his father, and he wished to keep it.

It stood leaning against the wall now, and Aro moved it so that it was nearer the other man's couch, running a hand across it as he did so.

The cloak still lay puddled where the other man had dropped it, in rippling on the stone like a puddle of ink.

Aro picked it up, turning it over in his hands.

It would have been interesting, to have Carlisle with them. He hadn't lied about that. To have a voice that valued something entirely different; someone who saw the world in a way that Aro found uncomfortable.

But now—

Carlisle's chamber had a small fireplace, and Aro flung the robe into it. It was aflame before Aro even realized he'd ripped the torch from the hallway. The flame licked at the fabric, slowly shriveling the fabric into ash.

Watching the robe burn ate at him in an odd, unexpected way. It would have been different, having Carlisle among them. He was nothing if not a singularity; his uniqueness would be an asset and would strengthen them.

But it would also keep him from ever wanting to join them.

The fire burned for the better part of thirty minutes, and when the room again went dark, Aro left.

Several hours later found him standing in the Great Hall, with all of those from the compound assembled. They stood by rank: darkest robes in front, the closest to the inner circle, fanning out to the lightest gray, the ones he could easily lose, and who, frankly, often destroyed one another in their squabbles.

The orderliness pleased him. The situation had set everything else into disarray; but here were his guard, in order according to their importance to him.

Neatly. As they should be. Only one of their number was missing, and he was the reason they were assembled in the first place.

Aro rarely called the full guard. If he traveled, he took Renata, or perhaps Charmion, or, Alrigo if he needed brute strength. When he needed messages to go to the guard, he told them in pieces and let the message spread. After all, he would double-check the accuracy of the transmission later, with each and every member.

But to see them here now before him was comforting.

He stood.

“My good people,” he said. “I’ve asked you here because as you know, one of our number is not with us.”

Around the room, heads nodded. The whisperings grew more intense by the day, he knew. Where had the Englishman gone? France? Back to England? Would he return? And if he did, would Aro destroy him?

The others began to murmur.

“Silence,” Aro ordered quietly, and at once, the room went still.

“We expect that he will return,” he went on quietly. “And when he does, no one is to harm him.”

The murmurs began again at once. Aro held up his hand.

“He has been asked to leave us,” he said. “To keep one who is such an—aberration—to our kind has proved useful neither to him nor to us.”

“Then why allow him to live?” a voice piped up. Alrigo, of course, his fists already flexing as he prepared for a fight.

“Because he has done nothing wrong.” This time it was Marcus who spoke. “We are not tyrants, and we will not become so. Our law is singular and it is absolute. When Carlisle reveals us for who we are, then we will take action. But as yet, he’s done nothing of the sort, and as such, we find no fault with him.”

The guard all stared.

“But he will be asked to leave,” added Caius, and there was almost a questioning tone to his voice, as though he needed Aro to confirm that this was true.

Aro nodded. “It is best for him and best for us. But I wished to make it clear to all that Carlisle is not asked to leave for transgression, nor is he to be attacked. Anyone who attacks him will be treated as though they have attacked one of us.” He gestured to his Brothers.

“Will you track him, Master?”

Rafael, the consummate tracker. Of course.

Aro pursed his lips. To be perfectly honest, he hadn't come to an entire conclusion on this himself yet. Would he keep tabs on the blond? See if he would truly adhere to the odd lifestyle he'd chosen? Verify if he indeed, become a physician as he so fervently hoped?

"We will not follow him," he answered. "But I will remain interested in him."

Which was an understatement of epic proportion.

He waved his hand in the direction of the guard.

"That is all," he told them.

For a moment, no one moved, and it wasn't until he waved his hand for a second time that the crowd began to dissipate; first the lower guards sliding in pairs out the doors, and then the higher guards, who milled confusedly for several long minutes before following them.

When the last guard exited, Caius stood.

Instead of saying anything, however, he simply shrugged, and disappeared.

"You make him unhappy," Marcus commented. "He would prefer the opportunity to kill."

"Keeping Caius happy is not my aim. And we've lived together for two thousand years. He will come around."

Marcus chuckled.

Aro stood, and made his way to his own chamber. He was there, studying the Solimena, when pale arms slipped around his waist.

"Arnza," Sulpicia purred. She laid her head on his shoulder—as always, it fit perfectly. He'd chosen her for this—sought out a human for his companion, with the plan that she would be endlessly devoted to him. And she was.

She followed his gaze.

"In the painting, he looks so much like he could be there with you and Marcus and Caius."

And he did. The painter had depicted Carlisle enrobed just as the other three were, although in the man's imagination of them as gods, they wore robes of white rather than black. It appeared perfectly natural.

Except that Carlisle would never pose as such.

"With all those people in distress below him?" Aro chuckled. "Carlisle would never stand for that."

His mate laughed. "You've mentioned this before." Stepping out from behind Aro, Sulpicia put a tentative finger out to stroke the painting-Carlisle's face.

"You'll miss him," she said quietly.

At once, Aro stiffened. "I don't need him."

"Of course you don't need him. But that's exactly why you'll miss him. He is interesting to you, Arnza. Neither of you need the other." She turned back to him, a sad smile on her face. "You know, if you had ever stopped trying to force him to be someone he's not, you might have ended up friends."

In one fluid motion, she was behind him again, gently squeezing his shoulder.

"I think this solution is for the best."

And then she disappeared altogether.

They might have been friends.

He'd never thought of it in quite that way.

Aro stared at the painting for another long stretch; whether it was a half-hour or a half-day, he couldn't be sure. Time was not that important to him.

Finally, he reached out, and removed the painting. Two seconds later, he stood with it in Carlisle's chamber.

He leaned it next to the wooden cross.

~||x||~

Paris, France
July 14, 1789

The smell of imminent freedom was what Garrett called it.

Carlisle would've called it piss and sweat.

The crowd surrounding the prison had grown every day they'd been here. They shouted at the walls and fired muskets into the air; demanded that the prisoners be set free and the governor sent to the guillotine. The crowd surged around him, pressing in on all sides so that he could smell their sweat and hear the blood rushing through their veins.

"Distraction," Garret had called it, his reason for being able to resist being utterly surrounded by his prey. And it was true enough—Garrett stood at the head of the charge. They called him "The American," and were impressed with his French and that he had come aboard the same ship as the American ambassador.

He stood near the front now, talking to several of the human protesters. He stood on a bucket, Carlisle believed, though he couldn't see very clearly. But in any event, Garrett stood a good head and shoulders above the other people to whom he spoke.

"We cannot let deLaunay decide for us what the people shall have!" he shouted.

A resounding cheer.

"We demand the release of this last bastion of the elite to the people!"

The cheer which followed was deafening.

Carlisle, for his part, hung back, picking his way among the people. Most were men, disgruntled workers of Paris who'd gathered at dawn this morning, and a few defectors from the Royal Army. But there were women and children here as well. Some of the children seemed to be having a rollicking time, particularly the boys, who galloped about near their fathers, pretending to fire guns into the air and whooping.

He hoped they would be all right. The death of children had been a reality when he'd been a human, but it had become more and more difficult to take with each passing year of his immortality. He'd lived a hundred forty-five years now; fourteen times as long as a ten year-old boy.

It was impossibly cruel that the world would see fit to allow someone so young to die, and yet never take Carlisle.

In this frame of mind, he skulked his way through the back of the crowd. He nearly tripped over a young man, who sat on the stone road so that a tiny break appeared in the crowd above him. Bodies flowed around him, making him a pebble in a river of disgruntled Parisians.

The boy had his leg pulled up to his chest and had both arms crossed over it, rocking himself back and forth. He was crying.

Carlisle knelt next to him.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

The boy looked up. He had piercing blue eyes, and dark hair. When he looked up at Carlisle, however, he immediately recoiled, scooting away so as to put more distance between himself and the other man.

Carlisle frowned. It was the reaction he had expected when he was first turned; that every human would see him as exactly the beast he was and recoil. But he'd become accustomed to blending in, at least to a degree.

"Come, child," he said quietly. "What troubles you?"

But as the boy stared at him again, Carlisle recognized him. He was the thief from the day before, the one whose looting of the *patisserie* had been unexpectedly thwarted by the extreme likelihood of a vampire attack. He was much younger than Carlisle had originally thought; in that

flash of chasing him through the window, he'd seemed the right age to riot and loot for the sheer enjoyment of it, perhaps just coming of age, but still rambunctious enough to want to be a part of this destruction. Now, looking at the way the wisps of brown hair fell over the boy's eyes, Carlisle realized he was much younger—twelve or thirteen, at the most.

And he was frightened.

"For my family," the boy muttered.

"The bread?"

The boy nodded.

"That was noble of you, then," Carlisle said gently. "You were in danger; that was why I chased you away."

The boy only stared.

"Why do you sit?"

"My leg," he answered, gesturing, and Carlisle remembered at once—the way the broken glass had gouged into the boy's leg, drawing a good deal of blood, to say nothing of Garrett's attention.

"May I?" Carlisle said, and as he did so, he at once doubted himself. What right did he have, asking to see someone's injury? Yes, he could restrain himself when Aro presented him with a body, or even when all the others in the castle in Volterra were feeding, but to examine a wound?

The boy looked at him skeptically. "Are you a doctor?" he asked.

I want to be, Carlisle thought, and his stomach wrenched. He'd left Martina and her sister in Volterra. Had the baby been born yet? Was the mother in pain?

"I know a good deal about medicine," he replied.

Reluctantly, the boy showed him his breeches. They were rolled up nearly to his hip. A wide gash, probably a third the length of Carlisle's forearm, stretched down the boy's leg. Its edges were jagged, and the entire area had turned a dark red and swelled.

At once, Carlisle began to run his fingers over the boy's wound, holding his breath as he did so. There was considerably less blood than there was a gooey yellow substance. He wiped some of this away with his sleeve, causing the boy to cry out.

"I'm sorry," he muttered, and in doing so, drew breath.

The smell of fresh human blood washed over him, intoxicating and sweet and lovely.

And yet...

He found he was still thinking. Still examining the skin, the way the two pieces met unevenly, and the way the yellow-greenish liquid seemed to stick the two parts together. He was fascinated by this.

"When was the last time you bathed?" he asked.

The boy shook his head.

"You don't know?"

Another shake.

Carlisle had read something about this, though the article had been nothing but observation. Some physician here in France who was learning about wound care, who had begun advising the Royal Army to bathe more often, particularly if they had been injured. There was no good explanation for why, but there seemed a connection between the amount a soldier bathed and his decreased likelihood of dying from a wound.

Now, this boy wasn't in any danger of dying, but...

"I'll be right back," Carlisle said, and in an instant, he was running down the street. It wasn't long before he discovered what he sought—a bucket of water, carelessly left on a stoop, its owner nowhere in sight. Snatching it up, Carlisle ran back to the boy as smoothly as he was able.

Tearing a rag from the hem of his own shirt, he plunged his hand into the tepid water and began to gently wash the boy's wound. The boy made a low grunt, but gritted his teeth.

The yellow substance washed away at once, which reopened the wound, causing it to begin to bleed again.

Instinctively, his entire body became taut. Every muscle coiled, ready to run the split-second he felt himself lose control.

But his fingers kept working. His mind remained clear.

An odd warmth rushed through him. He could do this. At once, he actually laughed. He dunked the rag in the water after each swipe to rid it of the blood—but it was unnecessary, it seemed.

He was inches from a bleeding, living human and he was fine.

The boy gave him an odd look as he sat with his leg outstretched, allowing Carlisle to work. When the wound was clean, it appeared pinkish, the blood flow already slowing as it began again to heal itself.

Ripping another rag from his shirt, Carlisle tied this clean one over the wound. A tiny splotch of red seeped through, but it seemed to be controlled. Carlisle pulled the leg of the boy's breeches back down so that it covered the bandage.

"You should do that each day," he told the boy. "I understand it is painful, but wash the wound, and put a clean bandage on it."

"What will it do?"

Carlisle laughed. "You know, Boy, I am uncertain," he admitted. "But it's been found to help." He helped the young man to his feet. There was a bit of a stagger, but then the boy was fine. He could put weight on his leg.

"Would you like to come to my home?" he asked timidly. "My mother would give you a meal for helping me."

Smiling, Carlisle shook his head. "My good friend remains up there, exciting the crowd. He'll not want me to disappear. But you ought to go. Have your mother give you a meal instead—and tell her what I said about washing yourself." Mothers had a knack for insisting on that kind of thing, Carlisle thought.

"Thank you again, *monsieur*."

Carlisle nodded, watching the boy disappear back into the crowd. Then he made his way back toward where he'd last seen Garrett. He felt like screaming with joy.

He had done it. He had treated a human, pressed his fingers into the sticky mess of human blood, and washed it away.

He could do anything.

As he began to jog, a bark of laughter bubbled up from his chest.

You see, Aro? I will succeed, no matter what you think of me.

His mind began to swirl with the possibilities. He'd leave Volterra, of course. But where would he go? Back to England? To France?

Or...he could go with Garrett...

This last thought caused his pace to quicken.

Carlisle ducked and weaved his way through the heaving mass of people, searching for the sandy hair he knew so well. But just as he began to reach the front of the crowd where Garrett had stood, a loud CRACK! split the air, and suddenly the people surged forward like an uncontrollable tide.

The drawbridge. They'd dropped the drawbridge. The Parisians swarmed into the outer courtyard, and suddenly the air became filled with the POW! POW! POW! Of musket fire—from the Parisians, yes, but also from the walls of the Bastille.

Chaos.
Screaming. Shouting. Gunfire. Cursing.
And a sudden yelp of pain...
From the corner of his eye he saw a man fall. Quickly, Carlisle darted to him, picking him up.
Blood already seeped through the man's shirt, a tarry, dark substance.
A gunshot wound.
Carlisle gulped. This would not be as simple as washing a the leg of a fifteen-year-old boy.
"Sir," he called to the man. "Sir! Can you hear me?"
But the eyes remained unfocused, and the chest heaved only twice more. The eyes closed halfway, and the limbs went frighteningly limp.
Horried, Carlisle dropped the body. It flopped to the ground with a sickening, hollow sound.
He'd never held a dead human before.
Arms tingling from where the man had lain, Carlisle began darting between the people. The gunfire and shouting continued, but his ears were open only to cries for help.
He dragged a woman and her child out from beneath a fallen wagon. He covered a young boy who'd landed in direct line of fire of the guards of the Bastille. He dug musket shot out of a man's leg wound with his bare hands—in his desperation not to have another die in his arms, he didn't even notice the way his palms and wrists became covered in blood.
There was shouting and gunfire and smoke, and screaming and crying and surging and running—and in the midst of it all was Carlisle, darting back and forth, catching fallen bodies, creating makeshift bandages from anything he could get his hands on, helping men and sometimes women and children stagger their way to the edge of the horde.
The first cannon blast shook his whole body. A hole appeared in the rock of the nearest wall. A deafening roar rose from the crowd.
Where did they get cannons? he thought for a split-second, but at once plunged back in. These weapons were deadlier. He'd have to work harder.
Time ceased to matter. It was two minutes, or two hours; Carlisle couldn't be exactly certain without stopping, and stopping was not possible. His clothing soaked from pink to red to tarry black as he dragged bodies from the fray. He washed their wounds, gave them what water he could draw from the putrid Seine, left them lying free of the fracas.
He didn't see Garrett, and could only assume that his companion had charged off at the beginning of the battle.
He kept working.
At last, however, from somewhere Carlisle picked out the shout, "They open the gates! DeLaunay surrenders!"
And the crowd surged once more, this time into the inner courtyard, cheering.
Carlisle remained outside.
Gun and cannon fire had been replaced by silence; screaming and shouting by moaning and crying. Those who were able surged into the inner courtyard, leaving only the wounded and the dead outside. There were scores; bodies lying in the path of the revolutionaries. People trampled into the dirt. Men dragging themselves to safety.
He wasn't sure where to begin.
"*Médecin!*" someone called. "*Médecin*, over here!"
It took Carlisle a moment to realize the person meant him.
How many had he helped, he wondered? How many would live?
"*Médecin!*"

It was a young man, beckoning to Carlisle with his whole arm, as he held his friend upright with his other.

Doctor. Martina and her sister had called him that for several years. But today, for the first time, it felt true.

From inside the stronghold, he could hear cheering.

“Liberty! Liberty! Liberty!” came the chant.

Liberty.

Doctor.

A smile creeping onto his face, Carlisle jogged toward the beckoning man.

Chapter Twenty-Five: William's Son

London, England
June, 1667

There were two hundred seventy-eight cracks on the bedroom wall.

Lately, Carlisle had ample time to count.

The weight of Elizabeth's body lingered on his forearms, as though she lay there as a phantom, even in death. Witches were to be purified after they hanged, but Carlisle was stronger and faster than his father and amid the chaos at Tyburn, he'd cut down his beloved and, weeping, delivered her body into her brother's arms instead.

Her mother, who stood there screaming, slapped him.

Carlisle stumbled home in a daze, went immediately to the second floor, stripped to his shirt, yanked out the trundle, and crawled under the quilt.

That had been days ago.

He had nightmares. Nightmares which began as wonderful dreams; he was married, he had a child, and then the world would literally fall apart, chasms opening in the earth and ripping his family away from him. He dreamed he failed at Tyburn, and watched the surgeons take Elizabeth's body, screaming as they cut into her. He would cry out in his slumber and awaken himself, only realize that the nightmares were true.

So he tried not to sleep.

His father acted oddly. At times he came into the room and hollered, demanding that Carlisle pull himself out of the spells "that woman" had cast upon him. Other times, when he seemed to think Carlisle was asleep, he prayed over him, stroking his hair and neck with a tenderness Carlisle had never before experienced.

But Carlisle didn't move.

One afternoon the door opened, and it wasn't William.

"Eight days, Friend," Thomas said, as he crept into the room. "Eight days you've been here." Carlisle opened his eyes. Eight days? He supposed that was possible. He blinked.

Thomas bent over and made eye contact. "So you *are* awake. Your father said he was uncertain."

Carlisle didn't answer.

Thomas sat down on the floor, folding his legs beneath him. He spoke to Carlisle as though he were having a conversation, despite receiving no answer from the still being on the trundle bed.

"You once knew this, but I do not know if you are even aware the date any longer," he said. "Anne and I will wed the day after tomorrow. We both would wish to see you there."

The wedding. Of course. Carlisle's stomach knotted.

"I realize it is a great deal to ask," Thomas went on, "and that you must take time to grieve your own loss. But we would like it if you were there. Life will move on from this day, my friend. No matter how improbable that feels at this time, it will. You will move on."

Carlisle swallowed. He didn't want to move on. He wanted to die. And he was getting there, partially, he thought. Not eating made him weak, weakness made him ill.

How long would it take for hunger to kill him, he wondered. A fortnight? A month?

As though Thomas had read his mind, he said, "You cannot expect to starve yourself to death, Carlisle. For one thing, it is unlikely to work, and for another, what kind of revenge does that take on your father? If you die, he gets his way."

Except that William Cullen would die before long also. And then what? The world would be left up to its own devices.

That would be fine.

His friend met his eyes, brown upon blue, and Thomas reached out and squeezed his shoulder.

"Carlisle, please do not be foolish. I will see you at my wedding."

Then he stood, and was gone.

Thomas's words swam in and out of Carlisle's consciousness.

"It is a great deal to ask...you will move on....do not be foolish...what kind of revenge does that take?"

He hung on that word. *Revenge*.

Carlisle wasn't a vengeful person. In fact, if anything, his easygoing temper had always been his undoing; something which his father struggled to beat out of him. He wasn't prone to angry outbursts; he wasn't prone to deciding who was with God and who was not.

And so death had occurred to him before revenge.

He still did not move, simply lying there and staring at the wall while he thought. It was nearly nightfall before he understood how to undermine the force that was the Reverend William Cullen.

As he climbed out of bed for the first time in over a week, the first thing Carlisle reached for was his chisel.

~ || x || ~

The congregation was large and joyous, and Thomas Milner and his betrothed both looked radiant. William couldn't help but to beam as he began to pray over them.

The prayer came easily; he'd said these words so many times before. But as he looked up into the congregation, his voice cracked ever so slightly. Thomas Milner had come to their home two days before, and had spoken to Young William, asking him to come join in the wedding festivities. And so the boy was here, shaven and in clean clothes, but there was no joy in the lines of his face. Instead, the blue eyes stared blankly, as dull as his mother's had been the day that she'd died.

One of his hands clenched involuntarily as he stared out into the congregation. The witch on Ratcliffe Road confessed, and she implicated her coven: the Bradshawe girl and two others. It was of no consequence that his child had fallen for one of them. If anything, he'd saved his son.

Someday, he thought, Young William would see this.

He just hoped he would be around to appreciate it when it happened.

“...we proclaim you married, in this day, the twenty-seventh of June, Anno Domini sixteen hundred and sixty-seven,” he heard himself say, and this startled him. Somehow, he had reached the end of the service, without thinking a whit about either what he was doing or the bride and bridegroom.

The couple embraced each other, and the congregation cheered, and the next thing William was aware, people were standing and flocking to congratulate the two and rib them both about their wedding night. William smiled broadly but insincerely, as he found himself searching the congregation for his own child.

A sharp pang shot through him when he finally saw the boy. He had not moved an inch, simply allowed the men around him to clamber over him into the aisle.

And instead of standing and cheering, he sat completely still, his arms crossed over himself, tears rolling down his cheeks.

William looked away.

It was late afternoon by the time William returned to the parsonage. Young William had not appeared at the tavern for lunch. Probably for the better, as the laughter and singing and general merriment would’ve been spoiled by such a sullen presence. A few times during the celebration, William caught Thomas Milner’s eye. The groom scouted William’s vicinity as though expecting to see the younger Cullen at any point.

William had only shrugged.

When he entered the house, the scent of stewing pottage met him at the door. He looked to the table to find his place set with a bowl and flagon of beer.

William’s pace slowed as he entered the room. It had been, what, a week or more since his son had spoken to him? And the last words they’d exchanged had been screaming... He winced as he recalled the kitchen items flying at him, and at once he began to tally the things which were available for his son to throw—the pot, the ladle, the bowl, the cross...

The cross?

He stared. No, not the same cross. This one was subtly different, and more impressive. Three different colors of wood ran through the upright; the edges were finished with a twisting design. The Geneva doctrines required simplicity, a rejection of the extravagance of both the Catholic church and now even of the Church of England. This new cross flirted carefully with that line; just ornate enough to be interesting, and yet simple enough to warrant a place in their home.

He had always thought his son’s insistence on carpentry to be merely a diversion, a childish, recalcitrant way to delay the inevitable decision to attend seminary and follow in his father’s footsteps.

This cross, however, was the work of an artist.

“Thou hast made a new cross,” he said, approaching it cautiously. His son shrank back defensively, but then nodded.

William examined it more closely. The design on the edges appeared as though it were a wooden rope, drawing to mind the crucifixion without making it overt. Subtle beauty, and superior craft.

“It is beautiful,” he said, reaching out to touch the wood. “Mr. Tyne has taught you well.”

He studied his son’s face for a reaction, but the boy’s expression remained stony. The blue eyes were blank.

Was this to be taken as a peace offering?

The table, he realized, was not set for two.

“Thank you, William,” he said quietly. “This quite makes up for the other.”

A snort.

William gestured to the table. "Will you have supper with me?"

The boy shook his head.

He wasn't sure what to do. He settled for bringing his bowl to the pot of stew, and ladling out a portion for himself. It wasn't until he returned to the table and sat down that his son finally spoke.

"I wish to take over the raids, Father," he said.

Take over the raids?

"I beg thy pardon?"

His son shook his head. "You heard me. Your health is compromised."

William's spoon fell into his bowl with a loud clank. For a moment, he only stared.

"And thy opposition to punishing evil?"

"There is no evil."

He should've expected as much. "William—"

His son's fist dropped to the table with such force the bowl clattered. "There is no evil!"

Then he gulped, and took a step back.

"But you are right about one thing," he said. "I must prove you so. And I will. I shall take over the raids."

"This is about the woman."

"Her name was Elizabeth."

William winced.

"Fear you hearing the names of the innocents you've killed? I cannot imagine why."

His son circled him now, coming around to the other side of the table. Instinctively, William pulled his bowl toward himself.

"I do not plan to throw things, Father," he said. "Not today. But you are a man of faith. Surely, if God intends for you to find evil, I will find it also. If you are right that you follow His path, then He will make sure that I follow it also."

The stool squeaked against the floor as the boy sat.

"I will take over the raids," he said. "And if you are right, you will be proved so. And I will go to seminary to serve our congregation as you have asked."

William's heart leapt. "And if you prove me wrong?"

"I become a carpenter. And I leave London."

The Milner boy hadn't spoken to William when he came to plead for Carlisle's presence at his wedding. But on his way out, he'd given William a piteous glance. "You made a mistake, Reverend Cullen," he'd said. "And I hope that mistake does not cost you your son."

But he'd made no mistake in his handling of the woman. If anything, he had saved his child from certain corruption. And his son would discover the truth. He would understand the reality of evil.

William found himself nodding.

"Then we have an agreement?"

"We are agreed." He looked at the cross. "When will you begin?"

His son followed his gaze, turning his body so that he appeared in silhouette. In the rapidly darkening room, the light from the fire flickered against his skin, casting ominous, fast-moving shadows across the sharp planes of his face.

"Tonight," he answered.

~||x||~

Early August, 1667

Growing up, Carlisle had always been known for his ability to concentrate. The way he could sit for hours reading, or spend a whole day sweeping the sanctuary—people praised him for this. They called him disciplined and dogged, and they thought him virtuous for it.

But if there was any part of him which was evil, it was surely this part, the part which could focus so singularly on facilitating the downfall of his only surviving relative.

The nightly raiding parties were small. Some of those who came suspected that his father grew weak; for them, this was only one more reason why it made sense that Carlisle take his father's place. A few of them even mentioned it, that they looked forward to the day that Carlisle would stand at the pulpit.

That day would not come, he thought. Not if he had anything to do with it.

Summer stretched on; weeks passed and the days slowly grew shorter again. Carlisle went out every night, sometimes with others in the congregation, often alone. Thomas spent nearly all his time with his new bride, which suited Carlisle perfectly. He was as through with his raking days as was his married friend.

He stopped those he thought his father would stop, but instead of leveling blind accusations, he asked for explanations and looked for proof. A neighbor insisted a witch made his cow sick; Carlisle discovered a child had mixed nails in with its feed. A man claimed a demon possessed his home; a further search found a roost of bats in his attic.

But instead of validation in these small triumphs, he found restlessness. And so he roamed the streets, increasingly alone. Carlisle had never been an angry person before. Now the anger licked at him, flames of a fire deep in the pit of his belly, slowly reducing him to ash from the inside out.

So it was he was wandering the city, lost in angry thoughts, when he heard, "Ho, there, Mister Cullen!"

Carlisle looked up to see Judge Porter, the man who had presided over the executions at Tyburn that awful day. He was a young man, not more than ten years older than Carlisle, and he walked even in the darkness with a casual assuredness.

"Mister Porter." Carlisle nodded his hello, but didn't slow his pace, walking so quickly that the judge needed to jog to keep up with him. The other man said nothing, however, and simply walked alongside.

They were nearing St. Paul's; entering the section of the city hardest hit by the fire ten months before. Already people were rebuilding; clearing old lots of charred rubble. But in this section of the city, the air still reeked of char and ash, a smell so powerful that in places it managed to overtake the stench of waste and debris of the open trench sewers which ran the streets. It was darker here, too—flattened lots and no remaining windows to shine lamplight into the street.

Before long, he found himself in a wide expanse, the grounds of the cathedral itself. He stopped, staring up at the ruins of the great cathedral. The hulking building had fallen in on three sides, its remaining blackened walls sagging freakishly toward each other.

"It is frightening, is it not?" the judge said quietly. "Our great St. Paul's, destroyed thus."

Carlisle nodded, staring upward. The great spire in the center of the building was completely gone, opening a hole in the roof wide to the heavens. Paul's Walk was all but destroyed, with only a handful of soot-covered columns still standing, defeated sentries oblivious to the fact that there was nothing left to guard. He held out his lamp, which illuminated the walk oddly, casting menacing shadows on the burned walls.

"I was educated here," Carlisle muttered, gesturing toward the ruined cloister.

A smile spread across the Judge's face. "It does not surprise me, Mister Cullen. Educated with the common man and the gentleman. Such an education gives one a broad worldview. Dare I say—a thoughtful worldview?"

Carlisle didn't answer.

"I wanted to be a barrister," he said at last

Even in the dark, Carlisle could see the surprised expression on the Judge's face.

"Of course that would not be possible," he went on at once. "I was settled to become a solicitor, but I had not my father's blessing to attend law school."

There was a long moment before the judge answered.

"Your father said you had agreed to join the ministry."

He nodded. "A condition of my marriage." His voice cracked on this last word. For weeks he had not spoken of this. He would not give his father the pleasure of seeing him broken. But now the mere thought of Elizabeth sliced through him with such ferocity that he nearly doubled over.

The judge again was silent, and together the two men stared up at the blackened stone.

"I asked for her pardon," came the voice a few moments later.

"Excuse me?"

"I asked for her pardon," repeated the judge. "Of your father. That day at Tyburn. Your father insisted that she had bewitched you. But I believe you to be no more bewitched than he. Besotted, perhaps. But not bewitched. And I am sorry that I did not press him more."

The judge clasped his hands behind his back and began to wander in the direction of the ruined cathedral. His feet seemed to pick out sure footing among the rubble, and so Carlisle followed.

After twenty yards or so, the judge stopped.

"You are fairer than your father," he said, "and I speak not of your countenance. If I might be of assistance to you ever, Mister Cullen, I beg you to ask." He took a deep breath and added, "To minister means to care for. Or to give aid. And it is not always the case that it is those we appoint who truly do the ministering."

Carlisle snorted. "My father believes my skepticism will send me to Hell."

Much to Carlisle's surprise, the judge laughed.

"Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness," he said, smiling, "for they shall be filled." Placing a hand on Carlisle's shoulder, he turned him away from the rubble.

"We should go from this desolate place," he said. "And you, it seems, ought to rest."

Did he look that haggard? Carlisle wondered, but he nodded and began to turn.

His lamp wasn't large; just enough to light his path in these areas where there were no longer taverns and homes to keep the streets lit after darkness. So as he swung it to turn, its beam did not go far.

But it went just far enough.

The man, if he was that, looked gaunt. Even weak. His hair hung in stringy ringlets, too long even for one who was not a dissenter. The moon had risen, and its light caused the other's skin to glow a pale silver.

And then there were the eyes. At first, disbelieving his own sight—he *was* nearsighted after all—Carlisle assumed them to be brown. But then the lamplight caught them just so he saw them for what they truly were: a deep ruby, the color of fresh blood.

Carlisle yelped. Maybe the demon did, too, he couldn't be certain. The lamp fell from his fingers and smashed on the stone.

"Run!" yelled Judge Porter.

Heart hammering, Carlisle's legs churned beneath him, propelling him away from the ruins of the cathedral and down the darkened street. He didn't dare look behind him, and instead simply dropped his head and ran. It was only when he stood a few streets from his home, back amongst houses from which issued the warm glow of oil lamps, when he finally slowed and allowed himself to discern if the other had given chase.

The judge was a ways behind him, but still unencumbered. And there was no one behind him. They were alone.

“What was it?” Judge Porter’s voice wheezed a little as he spoke.

“I know not.” Carlisle’s chest heaved as he leaned against the wall of the nearest home. Sweat poured off his face, blurring his vision and stinging his eyes. He wiped at them with the back of his wrist as he frantically tried to catch his breath.

It was only then he realized it wasn’t merely sweat causing his eyes to sting. At once, his hands began scrabbling at his cheeks, furiously wiping with such force that his fingernails scratched his own skin. He didn’t want to cry. Not like this. These were tears of frustration. Of anger. Of humiliation.

In the ruins of Saint Paul’s lived a demon. A real one.

And that meant that his father was right.

~ ||x|| ~

It took Carlisle three days to muster the courage to go out again. He used the church chores as an excuse, sweeping, dusting, and polishing until his knuckles ached. But he’d been on the fourth go-round sweeping the sanctuary for the day when he burst into a fit of anger and snapped the broomstick over his knee.

Then he’d gone to find Judge Porter.

The judge was swift to agree, as was Thomas. Carlisle spread the word no further, and so it was just the three of them this night, their lamps swinging from their arms as they stood in the rubble of the once-glorious cathedral.

They would destroy the demon.

And then Carlisle would pretend nothing had ever happened.

“Over there,” Carlisle called, pointing to the center of what had once been the nave. Ironic, he thought, that the creature had chosen the very center of the church in which to live.

The other men paused, looking at one another nervously.

He sighed. “I will go.”

“Carlisle, wait—” Thomas began, but one look from his friend was enough to silence him.

“It is my problem,” he snapped. “It is not your livelihood on the line.”

Thomas looked as though he might make a second overture, but then, at the judge’s urging, he hung back.

Inside the cathedral, the smell of smoke and char was still so heavy that it seemed to suffocate him, as though from somewhere deep within the church, the fire still burned. His footsteps echoed on the tiled floor. Moonlight shaded through the wrecked roof, casting shadows across the debris—ruined pews, windows exploded, their frames mangled from the heat.

Like these walls, it had taken mere days to reduce Carlisle to little more than rubble and ash. All that had remained of Carlisle was this fragile hope, charred and in danger of falling, the hope that at least, he could prove his father wrong.

Now the demon had stolen that, too.

And for that, it would die.

His poor eyesight meant that even with the aid of his lamp, he didn’t see the forms until they moved, their clothing having obscured their brilliant skin from the moonlight. There were two of them, near where the altar had once stood: the same ruby-eyed one he’d seen three days ago, but also a second, gaunt-looking, his hair bedraggled and his eyes as black as the night around them.

“Run,” the red-eyed one said, and it startled Carlisle to hear a strange Latin, not like the one he’d learned in school.

“Run,” it repeated. “Run, human, or die.”

Reaching down, Carlisle yanked his dagger from his boot. “You mistakenly assume that I desire to live,” he said.

The pain was devastating and utterly complete. One moment, Carlisle stood upright, the next, his face was on the ground as fire ripped through his neck and shoulder and arm.

He screamed. Maybe. He wasn’t entirely certain. He attempted to push himself to his feet with the arm that wasn’t burning—was his arm burning? There was no flame that he could see. Just searing, unbearable pain. He collapsed back onto the floor, his right arm clutched in his left.

Three lamps exploded as they hit the ground, and went out, plunging them into darkness. A scream—Thomas? But Thomas was a fast runner, and whatever these demons were, they’d attacked Carlisle first...

Squinting, Carlisle just managed to see the screamer. It was the judge, flailing as he was dragged by his feet... Carlisle realized at once that Judge Porter had run to his defense, coming from behind him. He tried to yell and found he couldn’t. The demons and the judge vanished into the dark.

As suddenly as the clamor had arisen, everything went silent. All that was left was a gasping, raspy noise accompanied by ragged cries of pain—coming from him, he realized.

He struggled to push himself up enough to see. There was no sign of Thomas. His friend seemed to have managed to run.

Thank God.

Still gasping, Carlisle collapsed onto his back.

The invisible fire spread, and soon his whole side was engulfed.

He had been cursed. Or maybe he was dying, he wasn’t sure. How could he be on fire if there were no flames? Perhaps he’d already died, and this was Hell?

But his heart hammered in his chest. His eyes still welled with tears of pain and shame and anger. His breath came in ragged gasps that hurt.

He wasn’t dead.

Yet.

When he squeezed his eyes closed against the pain, he saw the flames lapping the skin of his father’s victims, the women accused of witchcraft. “To cleanse them,” his father had said, his firm hands holding Carlisle before the fire, even as he’d wanted to run. “To purify them.”

His father would purify him, too.

The fire was spreading faster now, and he couldn’t manage to stand. Carlisle’s stomach heaved as he pulled himself to his hands and knees, but somehow he refrained from becoming sick.

Dizzied, he stared up at the ruined walls of the Cathedral. Even burned and crumbled, they still stood true, a straight line to the sprinkling of stars overhead, as though even in ruins, they still pointed the way to Heaven itself.

His voice was scratchy and weak; whatever this fire was, it would overtake him before long. But Carlisle fixed his eyes on the walls and gazed up.

“Please, Lord,” he whispered. “Please have mercy on my soul.”

Then, carefully, with his knees and one good arm, he pulled himself away.

~||x||~

At midnight, Young William had not returned. Nor at one o’clock. Nor did he appear at two.

William was pacing when the Milner boy arrived to the parsonage just after dawn. He appeared bedraggled and frantic, his face dirtied with streaks of dried tears.

The other man had barely managed to choke the words, “St. Paul’s” when William took off as fast as he could manage. *To prove him wrong.* The words rang in William’s ears as he half-walked, half-ran. His son had wanted to prove him wrong. And so it had been he who was out in the darkness, skulking the streets of London...

He bit his lip so hard it bled.

By the time he made it to the Cathedral, it was nearly noon, the sun beating down on the open expanse where the ruined building now stood. A small knot of people had gathered, having heard the news. At least two dead in a gruesome attack. A pile of mangled, rotting bodies found among the rubble of the cathedral. The crowd ambled about, morbidly picking through the ruins for valuable possessions.

William turned to the nearest person. His hands shook from exhaustion, and his voice was hoarse.

“Where are the bodies?” he demanded.

“Oh long gone, Sir,” the man answered. “Taken by horse cart. Mangled. As though an animal attacked them.”

Mangled.

It wasn’t until the other man caught him that William even realized he’d begun to fall.

“Are you all right, sir?” he asked, helping William back to his feet

“Did anyone see them?”

“The bodies?”

He nodded.

The man shook his head. “Seek you someone?”

William found it nearly impossible to say the words.

“My son,” he managed weakly.

Sadness crossed the other man’s face. “I am sorry, sir,” he said. “Perhaps he was not among them?”

But William was already moving toward the rubble. A single boot, ripped free of its owner, was somehow still here, not stolen yet—because it was mateless?

Next to it lay a dagger.

William’s hand trembled as he went to close his fingers around it. He recognized the hilt at once. Originally only a simple wood, later carved by an apprentice carpenter with an intricate, knotted design, and oil worked into the wood nightly until it shone.

He turned the dagger over in his hand. The blade was completely clean.

Had his child not defended himself?

Had his attacker been too quick?

Tears bit at the corners of William’s eyes. He gripped the hilt of the dagger so tightly his knuckles turned white, and pulled it to himself. He ducked deeper into the shadows of the cloister walk, behind a wall where he could not see the blood, and where he would not be seen. Here where the walls met, it was dark—the tall stone walls blotted out the sun so that William huddled in complete shadow. Like the wraiths his son had hunted when he met his end.

He wouldn’t have been out here if it weren’t for you, came the sickening thought.

He ran his hand over the hilt of the dagger. It was carved every bit as intricately as the cross that now hung in their kitchen. Despite William’s misgivings, his child had become an expert craftsman.

Carved into the pommel of the dagger were three letters: *W.C.C.* William had seen this on the back of the cross, also—*W. Cullen* was carefully scorched into the back of the wood. For even with all his denial, his son had still used the name he was given. He had not once relinquished the tie to his father, even as he fought against it.

And what had William done in return?

“I prayed to protect him,” he said to himself. And then, louder, “I prayed for you to protect him!”

The walls didn’t answer.

The Lord hadn't protected him, William thought, because William hadn't protected him. His son. Sarah's son. The only thing he had left of the woman he loved.

He closed his eyes, hugged the small knife to his chest, and sank against the cold wall.

"Carlisle...Carlisle, I'm sorry! I'm so sorry," he screamed.

Then, huddled in the shadows, William began to weep.

Chapter Twenty-Six: Sirø

Chicago, Illinois
October 18-22, 1918

He'd gone insane.

There was no other explanation for this.

The influenza, the utter devastation, the quiet Chicago streets, losing Dorothy—it had all caused him to take temporary leave of his faculties. Yes, he'd considered this before, creating the companion he wanted. But he'd imagined perhaps a mate, if he were ever capable of falling for one, or at the least a man his age.

Not a seventeen-year-old boy.

This was crazy.

No one had seen him racing through the cold night; for once, the influenza and its utter evacuation of Chicago's streets had played in his favor. And he'd traveled the rooftops, at his full strength and speed, the wind whipping his hair as he clutched the feverish body to his chest. When he reached home, slowing to climb the stairs like a human was agonizing.

He laid the boy on his bed gently, as though the body with its spindly limbs might break if it landed too hard. At once, the boy coughed, blood spattering the quilt and dripping down his chin. Carlisle immediately began searching for a rag. There were none, of course. He didn't have use for such things.

He was so utterly unprepared.

Stripping off his shirt, Carlisle used it to wipe the boy's face, earning another incoherent moan. His shirt became a gooey red mess, so much like the rags at the hospital. The ones Carlisle had learned to ignore with such ease.

But the boy wouldn't, not right away.

All the bloodstained clothing. The blankets. The mattress. He would need to burn it all, before the boy awoke.

And if that wasn't enough?

Carlisle's stomach wrenched. What if he didn't want to stay? What if he ran? Newborn vampires were impossible to control at times. And always, always stronger than their sires. If Edward ran, Carlisle would be helpless to stop him.

He had to take the boy back to the hospital.

Carlisle's was already reaching for the slim body when Edward uttered a long, gurgling wheeze.

He didn't have the lung volume to cough any longer.

Which meant he would die before Carlisle could return him anywhere.

"Oh, God," he moaned.

If he waited, the boy would die in his apartment. If he tried to take him back to the hospital, could he ensure he was able to steal his way in as easily as he'd gotten out? If he turned him, how could he ensure he would create a man and not a monster?

He'd gone insane.

Carlisle had been to the asylums not so long ago. Rooms not too much unlike his own, in fact, if one removed his chair and his artwork and the cheery quilt. A single, creaking bed, perhaps a sink, the same mice and cockroaches fighting to make their way inside. The same bare bulb hanging from the same cracked ceiling.

And the same, single occupant. Solitary confinement. In the asylums, they used it for the most severe punishment. To drive the worst of the worst to their very brink. The patients went mad in as little as a few days.

Of course, he wasn't human, he corrected at once. But the differences between humans and him were not absolute. They were always an order of magnitude. He was stronger, faster. It simply took more force to kill him; but he could be killed.

Perhaps it was simply that for him, madness had taken centuries instead of days.

He backed away from the bed and its shivering occupant.

He didn't even know how this was done. His own attack had been so furious and fast—he remembered falling onto his back, remembered the pain ripping into his shoulder and racing down his arm. And of course, he had the wounds: two ragged crescents where his neck met his collarbone.

It had hurt. A lot.

It would be reckless to inflict that pain on Edward.

Shaking his head, he moved again to the bed. He would take the boy back. That would be best. Edward would no doubt die in his arms, but he would simply carry the boy into the hospital as though he'd come from another staircase, take him down to the morgue, and lay him next to his mother.

His arms were reaching for the boy when the green eyes snapped open. They were still hazy with fever, unable to focus. But his grip on Carlisle's arm was surprisingly strong.

"Please," he croaked. "Please."

Please.

His mother's final word.

Please save him. Do everything in Carlisle's power. Save the boy, don't let him die. Don't let Edward Masen die.

Edward Cullen.

The name flashed in his mind, unbidden, and startled him.

Edward Cullen.

It was a name of arrival. A name that implied a companionship, a name that made a family where now there was only a boy on a bed and a terrified vampire.

It was a name of hope.

Edward's plea threw his body into convulsions. He shook on the bed with such force the legs rattled against the floor. His breathing came in tiny, choking gasps, like a doomed swimmer barely keeping his head above water.

He was drowning in his own lungs

Kneeling beside the bed, Carlisle ran his palm down Edward's face. As always, he turned into the coolness, and at once, Carlisle took both sides of Edward's face in his hands. He leaned over, putting his face so close to Edward's that he could feel the wet heat of the boy's breath.

The green eyes opened again.

"Edward?" Carlisle asked.

A blink.

"Edward, do you want me to save you?"

And there it was. Almost imperceptible, but still there. A nod.

And then unexpectedly, the parched body did what it wasn't supposed to do. Every fraction of an ounce of water should have been conserved, every fluid retained.

But instead the green eyes went glassy, and out of the corner of Edward's eye a single tear formed. Carlisle watched as it rolled slowly across the pale cheek, down to the bedsheet beneath, where it disappeared into a tiny dark splotch.

Laying a hand on Edward's cheek, Carlisle wiped where the tear had fallen with his thumb.

"You're certain?"

Another nod.

This time, Carlisle nodded back. Gripping Edward's chin in one hand to expose his neck, he leaned forward once more.

Edward Cullen.

The name of his brother?

The name of his son?

"I am sorry," Carlisle whispered. "Please, please forgive me, Edward. I am so alone."

And then, for the first time in his entire existence, Carlisle's teeth pierced human flesh.

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It was the screaming which made him stop. Not the hands clawing at his face, for he couldn't feel those, and not the body twisting its way out of his grip. And even with the screaming, it took several moments for him to even truly hear it, to register it as a sound of distress, and to recognize that he was the cause...

Carlisle flung himself against the wall with such force the plaster chipped around his body and little white flecks rained to the floor.

He was drinking from a human. He was *killing* a human.

But Edward isn't dead, his mind told him just as quickly. He's still screaming.

And there was still the soft whisper of blood through the valves of the heart.

Swish-thump. Swish-thump.

Edward kept right on screaming.

Lifting a trembling hand to his face, Carlisle wiped his lips. His hand came away sticky and red, making his stomach roil.

I could have killed him, he thought.

He very nearly had.

Aro had been right. To smell human blood was one thing; to taste it, however, was beyond incredible. Sweet, filling, rich. Unconsciously, a hand drifted to his throat. It burned, but not simply with the usual discomfort of having gone too long without feeding. It burned as it had when he'd first been created. *Please*, it seemed to call him. *Please finish him off*.

And he *wanted* to.

It wouldn't be the end of the world. His kind had killed humans for millennia. He had abstained for almost three hundred years.

One wouldn't matter, would it?

It was only when the iron sink broke from the wall and crashed to the floor that he realized he'd even grabbed it. Water spurted from the wall, and at once, he began scrabbling for the pipe valve. Even though he found it in inhuman time, his pants still became soaked.

The water, however, cleared his head just enough. At once, he moved to the lone window, flinging open the sash so that the frigid night air rushed in. The scent of the blood lessened at once. Not to the point that it dulled his thirst, but at least enough so that he could think...

Edward let out a guttural yell, making Carlisle wince. He remembered this; the way the venom worked its way through the body, taking it over section by section. That every now and then it would make a jump that seemed monumental, that intensified the pain seemingly a hundredfold. Two hundred fifty years ago, he hadn't known why, but now he could imagine—the venom flowing through the bloodstream, through the capillaries to the veins and then—*whoosh*—into an artery, where it would behave like a car sent out onto a speedway.

It was this thought which brought him back. Simply cataloging the direction that the venom would travel, from the neck to the heart to the torso, to the legs...

He again became the doctor. At once, he glanced at the clock. How long had it been? How much blood had the boy lost?

How much blood did you drink from him was what you meant to ask. His stomach twisted with guilt.

The bed creaked as Edward writhed, and slowly, Carlisle crept back across the room. One step at a time, taking a deep breath with each step, stopping, making himself accustomed, just as he once had in France and Italy.

It took him nearly five minutes to cross the room.

It took him another five to take Edward's hand.

He remembered a small bit of this; that he'd been able to discern place, smells, the utter lack of people. The way, even in his pain he'd found the pile of rotten turnips, with their nauseatingly sweet smell, and crawled between them to hide. That even while he contemplated his own demise, he'd been able to think—to question if he were in Hell, or if anyone would come to find him, or what his father might do were he found. He remembered the darkness that slowly became light. Not because the larder in which he lay became lit, but because his eyes became able to see.

And he had heard everything.

"Edward," he whispered. "Edward, it's all right. I know it's painful."

Edward only gasped in answer. The grip on Carlisle's hand became stronger.

Was it his imagination that the boy's strength was already beginning to match his own?

Already Edward's blood was changing; Carlisle could smell it. The change was ever so subtle, but it was there—the edge of his thirst taken off. Dulled, not as painful as before.

Gently he released Edward's hand. At once, the boy's hand groped, the fingers opening and closing ineffectually in the air.

He was reaching for Carlisle.

Carlisle grabbed his hand again and squeezed it. "I'll stay with you," he said. "I promise."

Letting go of the boy's hand, Carlisle crossed the room. The sink sat on the floor, the pipe broken in half. Above it was the mirror, and even through the dust, Carlisle could see an image which made him sick—his eyes, sunken and haggard-looking as always, but now an odd reddish-gold. Not the color of his compatriots' in Volterra, but not his own, either.

He looked like a monster.

Would it go away by the time Edward awoke? How much human blood did one need to ingest in order for the red color to stay? And how much, exactly, had he ingested, anyway?

The sink basin screeched in protest as Carlisle pushed it across the floor. Edward grunted and cried out. At once, Carlisle flew back to his side, grasping the pale hand once again.

The boy's next groan came through clenched teeth, which amazed Carlisle. Even in the midst of this, the boy was trying to remain strong. But then, he, too, had clenched his jaw, kept himself from crying out, for fear of being found.

It seemed Edward had more in common with him than he thought.

Carlisle ran a hand through the sweaty hair, and Edward curled toward him slightly. As though he recognized him, as though he wanted to be near him.

But why would he want that?

"I—I'm an awful man, Edward," he whispered. "You didn't deserve this, and I'm sorry."

Because truly, how could he explain this?

He could tell the boy what he'd been through, he thought. It would be a series of pitiful excuses, no doubt, for at what point did one justify murder?

And even if he could justify this, where did one even begin? When had it been, exactly, that his life had drifted so far as to lead him here, in an apartment with a boy he'd just bitten.

Carlisle leaned against the bed, the cold metal digging into his bare back.

Swish-thump. Swish-thump.

The blood still flowed. Faintly, quietly, the heart still beat.

He leaned his head next to the body on the bed, so that his hair touched Edward's skin. "I'm sorry," he said again, because that seemed as good a start as any. And then he decided to begin at the only place that made sense.

"Edward, I was born in England," he began, and his voice cracked. "Centuries ago—I know that's hard to believe. It was during Cromwell's rule. And my mother died giving birth to me..."

And as Carlisle sat listening to the boy's beating heart, he began to talk.

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On the second day, just before sunrise, Carlisle stopped talking. He stood, threw the bedclothes and his shirt in the sink basin and carefully set them on fire.

His eyes looked less red, he thought, but perhaps that was just a trick of the firelight.

When the blood was nothing more than a pile of ash in the broken sink, he returned to the bed. There was enough room for him, he thought, between Edward's body and the wall. So he lay down on the bed, too, and started talking again.

In the evening, he stopped talking long enough to examine Edward's body. The bite had already closed itself, becoming two thin crescent-shaped scars. The pale skin was becoming less pliant, the once-weakened muscles more defined.

He laid two fingers just below Edward's jaw and felt the gentle throb of the pulse.

The morning of the third day, Carlisle stopped abruptly in the middle of the explanation about Jean-Jaques, and how he'd wound up in Volterra.

Edward had been in the hospital for the better part of a week, and in the infirmary several days before that. His body was yet immature enough that the resultant beard was patchy and almost nonexistent, but it was there. And it would be more easily removed while Edward was still at least partially human.

Carlisle opened his center desk drawer. He'd bought one of the new Gillette razors from the druggist some years ago. He did this, sometimes—bought an item simply out of intrigue for the invention.

He'd never thought he would have occasion to use it.

He had no water or shave cream, but it wouldn't matter in the long run. Edward thrashed as Carlisle shaved him. Carlisle cut his face several times

The skin healed at once.

In the evening, Carlisle lifted Edward with one arm, and put fresh sheets on the bare mattress.

He burned the old ones.

When he returned to the freshly-made bed, he put his arms around the thin body and continued to talk.

It was the fourth day that Carlisle reached Cook County Hospital in his story, with the woman with the green eyes.

"She intrigued me," he said to the boy in his arms. "And I don't know why. You'll think I'm crazy."

Was it his imagination that the heart beat faster?

"She reminded me..."

He stopped. Because that was it. He couldn't say what Elizabeth reminded him of; or whom, just that something about her felt familiar. Just that something had drawn him to her, caused him to change his very nature—to do the unthinkable...

No, he wasn't imagining it. The boy—*Edward*, Carlisle had to start using his name—lay gasping in slow, rattling breaths, his heart speeding.

Was that right? Was there something wrong?

"Edward?"

The heart thrummed faster, and Edward began to tremble.

"Edward?"

There came an odd choking noise, and Edward drew one breath—a long high-pitched gasp that hung on the air. Then came the low, long whoosh of the diaphragm going slack, of the lungs emptying completely.

Swish.

Thump.

And then the heart was still.

Carlisle froze. It was their nature, this stillness. Over the years, he'd taught himself to fidget; to shake his leg, to shift his weight from foot to foot. But the reality was, his kind had no need to move, unless they intended to.

So they both were still.

The clock on the bookshelf ticked off several seconds.

It wasn't until now, with the boy as silent as his own, that Carlisle even realized how full of sound Edward's body had been; the pumping heart, the breathing, the rasping of mucous in the back of his throat. He'd vomited about twelve hours after Carlisle brought him home, and that, too, had been noisy.

But now there was nothing.

The human boy was gone.

Carlisle didn't even realize Edward had opened his eyes until he pulled away and sat up. His hair was tousled, standing straight up in the back. He blinked.

At once, Carlisle pulled his arms back to himself, but an imprint remained; the ghost of the body that had been in his arms still exerting a strange pressure on his muscles even as the boy himself made as though to stand.

Then Edward turned, and Carlisle gasped.

He'd forgotten about the eyes. Even as he'd worried about his own countenance, he'd forgotten to consider Edward's. The last time he'd seen someone new to the life had been at least a century before, and it had been decades since he'd seen another besides himself.

As foolish as it was, a part of him had expected the boy to turn to him with the same bottle-green eyes that had so captured his attention a month before.

Instead, they burned red, the crimson of the new to this life, the remains of the human blood still very much in this no-longer functioning body.

Edward blinked. For a moment, his lips moved, but no sound came out. A moment later, however, he found his voice, and spoke.

"You are so sad," he said, frowning. "Why are you so sad?"

"Sad?" If anything, Carlisle was panicking. Was Edward all right? What made him think he was sad?

"Because you said so. I *felt* it—how did you do that?"

How had he done what, exactly?

Carlisle's mind began to race. No, he wasn't sad, certainly. He was terrified. He reached out and took Edward's arm. It was muscled, strong—no longer the weak arm of the dying boy he'd known. Edward would be stronger than him for the better part of a year. What if he wasn't able to control him? What if Edward ran away? What if the Brothers stepped in to destroy him?

But the boy was scared.

Carlisle pulled himself upright, and planned to affect his most soothing bedside manner possible.

"I didn't do anything, Edward. What is it, exactly, that you are hearing?"

Edward pulled himself away slightly, his knees curling toward his chest.

"I don't want to run away," he said quietly.

He didn't want to run away?

Had Carlisle said that aloud?

Aro's face swam in his mind. The smug look of their leader in Volterra, as he read the thoughts of another unsuspecting vampire.

Carlisle dropped Edward's arm as though it was on fire.

How appropriate, he thought. In such an unbelievably eerie way. Of course, he, who had begged for a companion, who longed to be known, would be sent a young man from whom he could hide nothing. He, who had fled from the constant assault on his privacy that Aro's gift presented, now found himself a continent and nearly a century and a half away, only to find someone with the exact same gift.

His mind went a million directions at once. It meant he would need to be careful with what he said in his mind, censor his thoughts so as not to overwhelm Edward.

He let his voice take on the most soothing tone he could muster. "I'm glad you don't want to run away," he said quietly. "You will be safer here, with me."

The young man curled himself away from Carlisle again, staring up at him warily. "Who did you leave? And what gift? Where am I?"

Carlisle frowned. Edward was now entirely curled up on himself, his knees locked to his chest, his bony elbows sticking out as he clasped his arms around his legs.

He looked terrified.

Did he notice how fast his body moved? Carlisle wondered. Did he feel that somehow this posture in which he sat was easier to achieve than it had been before?

Did he notice that he was still hearing?

"You're still talking; of course I'm still hearing you," Edward snapped. "Dr. Cullen, what happened to me?"

For over two hundred years, Carlisle had been alone, trapped with his own thoughts. But there would be no way to hide himself from Edward. He'd prayed for a companion, and had instead been sent a telepath...

"Sent a what?" Edward said, his eyes wide.

Carlisle took a step back. How jumbled it must sound, the way his mind reeled out of control. All his fears and his hopes, and his desire to take care of this boy, all crashing like a weight—

His loneliness.

His stomach wrenched.

He had for four days been telling Edward his story; pitiful excuse as it was for what he had done to the boy. And through that ran the undercurrent of his very existence; his inability to find another who could share his way of life, the way he'd meandered from country to country, seeking out others like himself, only to be thwarted at every turn.

It was crushing to live with, and now he'd begun his companion's existence by thrusting all that pain onto him.

I felt it, Edward's voice said in his mind. *Why are you so sad?*

Carlisle's hand found Edward's shoulder. He could see there the pale crescent of his own teeth on the boy's neck above his thumb. He stroked this area gently, closing his eyes as he remembered, letting his mind flood with the concern he already felt. He knew, now, that Edward would see it with him, and so he allowed his mind to wander, from the bite, to Carlisle's recoiling from Edward's writhing body, to the four days spent caring for him while he underwent his transformation.

To the room at Cook County Hospital; to his discovery of how Edward's mother cared for him even to the point that she'd fallen against his bed. Edward winced, but at once Carlisle showed him the memory of the night he came to find Elizabeth singing to him.

Edward's eyes widened, and then squeezed closed, as though he was trying to stem the tide of tears. Tears which, Carlisle knew, would never come.

Carlisle took him back even further, from the hospital to the armory. He felt again the sinking feeling, the terror that he would not be able to help the unconscious boy. And so Edward felt it, too.

And then the concern which had ripped through Carlisle the moment he took the lanky body into his own arms; as he had clutched the boy to his chest, and felt himself flood with feelings he barely had names for.

Tracing the scar on Edward's neck, he repeated these feelings, allowing himself to attempt to understand it, even as he allowed Edward to peer in at the mess of thoughts. Joy at having found a companion? Fear for what the future held for them both? The sadness and shame, crashing over him, for what he had done? The deep, guttural happiness that Edward had said he didn't want to leave?

Edward's posture relaxed ever so slightly, and his eyes fluttered closed again.

Dr. Cullen. Edward had called him *Dr. Cullen*. Which meant, that for whatever else might be falling to pieces in his mind, he remembered being treated. Perhaps he remembered that Carlisle had been a benevolent force, someone who cared about him and cared for him.

Did he dare hope for that?

Carlisle let his mind continue on. From the armory to the morgue, four nights ago, as he wrapped Elizabeth. As he made his promise to her.

"I will take care of him. I will never leave him."

Edward shivered, and Carlisle squeezed his shoulder.

He couldn't take the place of Elizabeth. There was no way for him to do that. But he could be whatever it was that Edward found he needed. He could be a friend.

And a friend was what he'd waited almost three hundred years to have.

He moved closer. "Edward," he said, "there's much I need to tell you. But to begin, you should probably start calling me Carlisle..."

Then, both aloud and through his mind, Carlisle opened up to his friend.

Chapter Twenty-Seven: *Stragone Benefico*

Paris, Kingdom of France
July 14, 1789

The Bastille was in flames, and Carlisle was exhausted.

An impossibility, he knew; his kind required no sleep and could stay in motion for weeks without feeling a single twinge of fatigue. Yet he felt as though he ought to curl up into a ball and wait for rest to bring him back to life.

But instead of rest, he got Garrett.

“We did it, English,” he said, a wide grin spreading across his face as he approached. “We forced De Launay out of power. We've stolen the munitions. The people will have their way. Government by the people, for the people.”

“By the people?”

“An American saying. The principle upon which we were founded. And now France shall have her democracy, too.”

It would be a long time before that happened, Carlisle thought. He peered across the yard, which was strewn with debris and carnage. Every now and then, a wailing cry would go up as some family member or friend discovered the body of a loved one lying in the grass.

Carlisle had saved the lives of dozens, it seemed. But it was nothing against the tide of the attack, and dozens more were dead despite his efforts.

He stared in silence.

“What think you, English?”

He looked up. Garrett seemed to be ready to run off any moment. His posture was erect; his eyes bright.

And the dark burgundy of one who had recently fed.

“I think there were a great many sacrifices here today,” Carlisle answered evenly.

Garrett, clearly understanding this comment, hung his head.

“It was impossible to resist,” he muttered.

“Not impossible,” Carlisle answered. “But, I accede, it is perhaps a great deal to ask of you.” He got to his feet and began to walk away from the prison. When Garrett didn't follow at once, he beckoned to the other man.

“I do understand,” he offered kindly.

Men sat drinking outside their taverns and at the foot of barricades. Many more shops had been looted, their broken windows glinting in the fading daylight, and several buildings still smoldered.

Had Garrett's country looked like this, Carlisle wondered? Was this revolution—dead bodies, burning buildings, wailing loved ones?

It would be a long time before France was at peace.

Carlisle continued to wander. Garrett followed him a few paces behind.

“You walk toward Italy,” the other commented after a while.

Did he? It hadn't been his intention to particularly walk in any direction other than away. But Garrett was right; his feet had pointed him automatically toward the place from where he'd come.

He stopped short.

“Are you planning to return to Volterra, English?”

They were not yet so far from the prison that they could not still hear the shouts—some of joy, others of mourning. He allowed himself to conjure the images he'd already tried to block from his mind: the bleeding humans, the limp bodies lying in the courtyard outside the drawbridge to the prison. The bloodstained earth beneath the injured and the dying.

But humans die, he told himself at once. And they choose to do foolish things, such as attack for munitions.

Garrett cocked his head as he looked at Carlisle.

“A penny for your thoughts?”

Carlisle pursed his lips. “I am thinking of all those who died today. My knowledge was not enough to save them.”

“No one's knowledge would have been enough to save them. And that you did save so many, when they rushed headlong into danger—and when your very instinct is the same as my own—” He shook his head, and placed a hand on Carlisle's shoulder. “I don't know how you did it, English. When I found you, you were literally up to your chest in human blood.”

Carlisle shrugged, but began to walk again.

“I confess I don't know either,” he said quietly. “It was the moment, I suppose. Were I thrust into a group of bleeding humans, I would've had difficulty, even after all my practice in Volterra. But there was purpose to my actions. I could no more stand there idly than I could carve myself to pieces. And each time I saved someone—it made me drive harder.”

Garrett turned so that one shoulder faced the Bastille. A violent snapping sound issued from the site, and the sky glowed a pulsing orange from the flames.

“Perhaps this is what you were meant for, English,” Garrett answered, gesturing toward the site. “Heavens knows that there are none like you, who can so freely ignore that which fuels us. Perhaps that constitution was given to you so that you could atone for the rest of us.”

Carlisle frowned, and studied the stones beneath his feet as he walked at a pace that would have been slow even for a human. This life gave him great gifts, he knew. When he thought he could get away with it, he had darted from Frenchmen to Frenchmen at his full speed; appearing before one in the same instant he left another. His eyesight allowed him to see others in distress; his ears allowed him to hear a cry for help from across a thunderous battlefield.

“I haven't the knowledge to truly be a physician,” he muttered, but this only caused Garrett to laugh.

"Lack you the time to acquire it, my friend?" He clapped Carlisle on the shoulder. "There are medical colleges now, you know. You could study."

How freeing that would be, Carlisle thought. Not to take his information piecemeal, as he was able to find it, nor to experiment on some humans willing to make him trades, but to sit and learn the way human physicians did. So much of what he had done had just been instinct; based only in the loosest way on his knowledge.

What if he had known more? Would more have been saved?

A grin spread across Garrett's face as he saw Carlisle considering the idea.

"I suppose there is even medical study to be done in Italy," he prodded. "That is, if you still wish to go there."

Carlisle frowned. "I'm not certain I'd wish to stay in France."

Garrett laughed. "It is not my intention to stay, either—an American diplomatic tour is unlikely to decide to try to survive another country's unrest. And trading ships move often between the continent and the Americas."

"Are you suggesting I return with you?"

"I cannot imagine that those who seem to consider themselves our....royalty"—he blanched at this word—"would exactly welcome you home with open arms after you declined the honor of their invitation."

Garrett had a point, and Carlisle's insides twisted. He'd been trying to pretend differently, but the facts were that he'd run. To the best of his knowledge had not been followed, but there was no reason to believe that he would be welcome to return as he once had been, the quiet student, sitting with Marcus and learning Greek.

Aro was no fool.

But as soon as this thought came to him, it was followed by a swirling memory of just a few short weeks before. Of Martina teasing him, calling him human, of all things, utterly unaware that she was bestowing a quality upon him which he did not possess. Of her sister, standing with her hands folded over her growing belly.

Of the tiny, strange flutter against his palm as she held his hand over where the child grew.

"You disappear often, English."

"I'm sorry." Carlisle took a few more steps. "I was thinking of my—" he trailed off. Did he dare call them his patients? "Of a woman I trade herbs with. She gives me new things to work with, I distill them into medicines. Or at least, I try. The art is somewhat subtler than I wish it were."

Garrett only shook his head. "And you say you haven't knowledge."

"Not enough."

"So these women—you wish to return to Volterra for them?" Garrett winked.

"I do not wish to be with either of them, if that is what you insinuate."

Garrett guffawed. "Certainly, English."

"The one—the sister—is with child. I've made preparations for her to handle the pains of carrying the baby, but I still worry for the birth."

"I wouldn't have taken you for a midwife."

"I don't mean to be one. But perhaps childbirth isn't so much the work for women."

"You would risk your life for her? Because that is what you'd do."

A memory flashed vividly in his mind. His day in London, only some twenty years before, standing before the tombstone which marked his parents' graves. His finger, tracing the tip of the letter "A" on the dilapidated sandstone.

A half an "A." All he had left of the woman who'd borne him. Her first initial? Perhaps she'd been an Anne, or an Alice? Or perhaps it was somewhere in between, in which case her name could have been anything...

What would it have been, he wondered idly, if someone more schooled had attended his birth?

I wouldn't be standing here.

The thought felt like a physical blow.

Had his mother not died, he might have lived a different life. With siblings. With a father who was not so hardened. He would have died, what, eighty, a hundred years ago?

Died as a human.

“English?”

Garrett stared at him curiously, and Carlisle realized he'd gone silent.

“My mother died in childbirth,” was all he said.

~ || x || ~

Volterra

July 15, 1789

Garrett's Tuscan was awful, but Carlisle's was impeccable, and the human guards at the city gate let them in almost without question. They claimed to be cousins, come to visit Carlisle's sister, who was with child. The guard examined their similar build and hair colors and, after a moment, swung the gates open to allow them through.

They had stopped in several towns along their way, and discovered a ship was to sail from Naples toward Portugal in three days. From Portugal, they would bill themselves as colonists; Garrett was convinced he could pass his way onto a ship with his English. He would sail straight for Virginia, leaving Europe behind.

But first, they would stop in Volterra.

“This place reeks, Carlisle “ Garrett muttered as they skulked through the streets. Humans could not perceive it, but the city was drenched with the scent of their kind. “How many are there?”

“Three,” he answered absently. “Aro, Marcus, and Caius.”

“Not the brothers. The guard.”

He didn't know, to be honest. The outer guard were prone to fighting amongst themselves, and their number changed regularly. Shrugging, he answered, “Dozens.”

“Dozens,” Garrett repeated, and then, more quietly, added, “Wonderful.”

The streets of Volterra were less streets than alleyways that snaked between buildings, self-directed tributaries of a stream that all flowed into the city center. It was no wonder the brothers had landed here so many millennia ago; the city itself kept its own secrets tucked away in the nooks and crannies of its twisting roads.

He didn't know where Martina lived, much less her sister.

How many market days had he missed? He'd been in the Kingdom of France the better part of a month; he'd left before the solstice, and it was a good ways after it, now. Martina was used to him not appearing for many days in a row; his need to wait for overcast days often kept him inside. But he imagined she wondered now if he had utterly disappeared.

He was so lost in his own thoughts that he almost missed picking up the scent—lavender, willow, thyme.

An infusion.

His infusion.

“Do you find something?”

The scent was still a long ways off, but at least he could follow it—it wafted down the twisting road from some home. He started to run. It was a ways after midnight, and only in a

handful of houses was there any light at all; a single candle burning its way out, or embers glowing merrily as the last remains of a dinner fire reduced the logs to ash.

Garrett moved alongside him.

"If she is in childbirth," Carlisle said, "there will be bleeding. A great deal of it."

"A great deal of bleeding," the other repeated.

"You'll need to leave."

His companion's eyes had grown steadily darker as they traveled. Carlisle suspected that Garrett felt sheepish about hunting his normal prey in Carlisle's presence—which, as far as Carlisle was concerned, was not a bad thing.

Garrett frowned. "Yet you are willing to take the risk?"

"I've proved myself."

"You've proved yourself in the heat of battle. But in a moment where you have time to think on how the blood calls to you..."

"Shhh!"

The scent was strong. And it grew weaker by the tiniest amount, it seemed, when Carlisle stepped away from the spot where he stood. The home was modest, two stories tall, and narrow—a single window revealed a candle burned almost to its stub.

Then from the second floor came a shriek.

He pressed on the door and found it unlocked.

"Martina?" he called out softly, as Garrett slipped away.

There was an odd flurry of sound, and then a woman came shooting down the stairs. Her whole face was pulled taut, but as she laid eyes upon Carlisle, her mouth and brow relaxed.

"*Dottore*," she breathed. "How did you know?"

"Know?"

"We thought for certain you had left Volterra." She has labored for this whole day."

"I did," Carlisle answered, turning himself toward the stairs. Now he could hear it, a tiny, quiet whimper below what Martina could hear. A heartbeat, fluttering quickly, as though it belonged to a sprinter. And a second heartbeat, almost unheard even to him, as fast as a candle flicker.

Another shriek.

"Is there no midwife?"

Martina stared.

"I am the midwife, She came here when her pains began. I prepared more of what you made for her, but it is nothing against the birth of a child..."

Carlisle nodded, filing that fact away in his memory. He gestured toward the stairs. "May I?"

"I imagine she would welcome you."

They made their way up the stairs together. In a room just at the top, Annetta sat on the bed, her legs folded in front of her so that her knees made a diamond. Her face shone with sweat in the candlelight.

"*Dottore*," she whispered, but it came out as a fatigued squeak.

"Carlisle," he corrected. "Please, call me Carlisle." He leaned in, reaching a hand to her belly. "May I?"

She nodded.

As soon as his hand made contact with her shirt, there came the discernible flutter, still strong against his palm. Instinctively, he closed his fist, as though to capture the feeling of the baby's kick.

Both sisters looked up at him anxiously.

"He still moves," Carlisle said quietly. "But you know that."

Annetta nodded, and then clutched her middle and let out another wailing groan.

At once, he began to rack his mind. Childbirth was the purview of women, and so the male scholars did not often bother to write about it. But he had read a few treatments by the midwives themselves, that women could walk to coax the baby down, that they could kneel beside the bed.

"Have you walked?" he asked.

"She has walked all she is able," Martina said. "But her waters broke hours ago..."

The waters. He didn't know much about birthing children, but he knew that much. When the waters broke, the child appeared shortly thereafter.

Unless there was a problem.

Annetta suddenly shrieked and grabbed for her sister's hand. Even in the dim light, Carlisle could see the ripple of the muscle under her shirt.

How foolish was he, thinking that simply dragging bodies away from the Bastille, running around making sure that the near-dead did not complete the process, qualified him to handle this?

The bed shook, and Annetta screamed.

Martina was quick. She nearly shoved her sister into a supine position on the bed, rucking up the bedclothes beneath her and yanking her shaking legs so that her feet were flat against the straw mattress. Her legs fell open as she gasped in pain.

Carlisle looked away.

Garrett had been right, He was out of his depth.

Martina fixated to where her sister would give birth, and Carlisle moved to the head of the bed and offered his hand. That much, he thought, he could do. She could squeeze his hand for hours and he would feel nothing.

Another rippling in her belly; another yell. This one was shriller. Pain, certainly, but more than that.

Fear.

Annetta's eyes were wide as she panted.

"Can you—see—anything?"

"I do not see the baby's head," Martina answered evenly, frowning. "We should see him now." She put a palm against Annetta's belly and pushed back; her sister groaned, but nothing changed.

Annetta's heart raced now, and the tiny flutter Carlisle had heard before seemed to slow.

"He has—to be—born!"

Another scream. This one nearly rattled the walls.

The flutter slowed even more.

An odd knot formed in Carlisle's throat. He didn't have the knowledge to intervene here. He would put himself at risk, have his "death wish" as Garrett put it, and mother and child would lose their lives anyway.

"Do—something," Annetta panted.

I want to, Carlisle nearly said aloud. But he didn't know what that could be.

"*Dottore*." Martina beckoned. "Can you see?"

He actually took a step backward. Even as a vampire, among others who utterly did not share his standards of modesty, he'd never had occasion to glimpse...well, this. But if he could help...

He stepped in closer.

It didn't resemble anything he'd read about, nor any of the vulgar drawings he'd come across in his century of life. He'd seen newborn babies, marveled at how impossibly large they seemed in comparison with a woman's passage; but in this moment he understood. The human body was meant for this.

At once, the scientist replaced the modest Englishman. Carlisle stood, fascinated, before a shrill cry rent the air yet again.

"I should be able to see his head," Martina said, her voice shaking.

There was flesh there, Carlisle realized. But not hair—were babies even born with hair? He thought he had seen some. The bulge was oddly small, disproportionate for what should have been the largest part of the child.

It took him a few precious seconds to realize he was seeing the child's shoulder.

Carlisle didn't have much knowledge of the birthing process but he knew enough. Babies were born with their heads first, to make it easy for them to fit through. Sometimes a foot would come out first, and those mothers often died.

Headfirst, mostly, feet first, sometimes...but babies could not be born sideways.

But a shoulder meant a neck, and a neck meant a head wasn't far...

"Dottore?"

He realized he'd gone silent.

"Annetta," he said gently, "I need to move the baby."

Her eyes flew even wider as another of the pains ripped through her body.

"Move?"

"Yes." And he would have to do it quickly, for with every one of her pains, the heartbeat inside her grew slower.

Another pain. Another shriek. Her hands scrabbled at the sheet, bunching it between her fingers. Tears of pain rolled down her cheeks.

He would have to use his hand...

"May I?" he asked, but she just yelled.

"Anything," Martina said quickly, clutching her sister's hand. "Anything! If you know what to do."

His fingers found the shoulder—so impossibly tiny!—and he gently pressed it backward.

The fluttering heartbeat slowed.

He kept his fingers moving. He could feel bone beneath his fingertips, and then a large, round mass. And then his hand was somehow beneath the shoulder, and then the round part was in his palm...

Annetta screamed continuously now, the sheets bunched beneath her hands. But the mass in Carlisle's palm followed his hand as he drew his arm back toward himself—a head, and shoulders, arms, a short body, and stumpy, kicking legs. He put out his other hand to catch it.

The next cry that cut the air was not Annetta's, but came from the slime-covered creature in Carlisle's hands.

A bark of laughter bubbled up from within him, and a wide grin spread across his face.

"Annetta," he whispered, handing over the writhing body, "you have a baby girl."

Annetta reached out, looking down at the baby with awe.

An odd warmth flooded through Carlisle as he sat back on his heels. This was not the rush of the Bastille; the shouting of injured people crying out for his help. This was a mother, laughing, an aunt, beaming, a new baby, crying.

"And I thought she would be a boy," Annetta said quietly. "So strong!"

"Perhaps she will be every bit as strong as a boy," Martina said, smiling.

When Annetta quickly took out her breast to nurse, Carlisle averted his eyes and stood.

"I should be on my way," he muttered, but Annetta shook her head, jiggling the baby a little bit so that she quieted.

"How do I ever thank you, *Dottore*?"

He shook his head. "Take care of the child," he answered. "That will be more than thanks enough."

Annetta smiled.

Did he tell them he was leaving for good, he wondered? He hadn't mentioned to anyone when he'd departed for France. But Martina and Annetta would miss him; would need an explanation for why he wouldn't be here to see the girl grow. He had no sooner opened his mouth than a loud bang issued from downstairs.

At once, the smell of lavender and willow and embers on the fire disappeared, replaced with the sickly sweet perfume of his kind.

"What—" Martina barely managed, and then a tall figure appeared in the doorway.

It was Rafael.

And Carlisle was still covered in birthing fluid and blood.

He didn't even think about springing. His mind registered the presence of the other vampire, and the next thing Carlisle knew, the floorboards were splintering beneath Rafael's shoulders and then Carlisle was tumbling head over feet down the stairs.

Rafael's breath came hot and wet against Carlisle's neck as he snarled.

"Unhand him!" another voice cried.

Garrett's voice had possibly never been so welcome a sound.

Of course, Carlisle thought. It was nighttime; the guard were out prowling, or at least some would be...had his friend given up his position, or had they insisted Garrett bring them here?

"Dottore!"

Another voice, this time, Martina's.

The humans. The humans who were upstairs.

And the baby was there, too, still covered in its mother's blood...

Rafael's head jerked upward

The other vampire was stronger, there was no doubt about that. He'd been a slightly older man as a human, and was taller and better proportioned than Carlisle. But he was still new to the life. For all his strength, he did not know how to fight.

Pulling his legs up sharply beneath him, Carlisle kned the other in the groin with enough force that he saw Rafael's eyes roll. The momentary lapse gave him just enough time to spring to his feet.

He had never attacked another of his own kind. But he'd seen it enough; the ways the others used momentum to their advantage. Force, leverage; all these things the great physicists talked about. Book knowledge, for Carlisle, until this moment.

His hands were on Rafael's head in an instant, one palm at the forehead, another at the chin. And then he thrust outward with both elbows at once, torquing the neck in opposite directions. A sickening crack, then the head went skittering and bouncing across the floor.

Martina screamed.

Garrett descended on the body before Carlisle had even changed his posture, and in a fraction of a second, had twisted off one of the arms. In the blink of an eye, the two reduced the body to only a torso.

It was only when the other was in pieces that Carlisle stood. He faced the woman on the stairs. In the firelight, he could see Garrett's eyes flickering, the dark ruby every bit as shocking to Carlisle as he was sure it did to Martina.

"Martina," he mumbled.

But she was already sobbing.

Garrett nudged him, cocking his head from the body to the fireplace.

The fireplace. Of course.

The head went first, followed by the arms; the venom which ran through the others body igniting like lamp oil and sending an odd, purple smoke into the chimney. He watched it, mesmerized, as Garrett made quick work of the rest of the body; ripping it into pieces small enough to fit.

It wasn't until the last body part crackled on the fire that Carlisle turned again to Martina.

"Martina," he said quietly. "I'm sorry..."

But she simply stared, wide-eyed.

Carlisle's heart seemed to leap into his throat as he realized the severity of what he'd done. Destroyed a guard. Killed another of his kind. And exposed himself.

He began to back away from her. "Please," he said quietly. "Please do not tell anyone what happened here. You are safe, but I must go. I won't be back."

She shook her head furiously, and he winced, waiting for the damning words. For her to take up a cross and chase him from the house as the demon he was.

But when her trembling lips parted, she mumbled, "*Benefico*."

Benefico? He blinked. He had just murdered a being in front of her, not merely murdered, but dismembered and torched him, and she called him good?

Carlisle gaped, but Martina was nodding. "*Stregone benefico*," she repeated.

The knot in his throat dissolved. A demon, yes. She saw him for who he was. But she also saw him for what he'd done...and why.

He nodded. "Take care of the baby," he said. "Take care of your sister. And if anyone asks—"

"I attended my sister alone," she whispered.

Garrett shifted nervously from foot to foot near the door, in a posture as though ready to run at any moment.

Carlisle looked out the window. The street was still dark, but that didn't mean that more of Rafael's comrades weren't on their way to find them. "We have to leave. Please, Martina—"

She lifted a finger to her lips. "No words."

Carlisle nodded, backing toward Garrett. The two of them had already turned toward the door when she spoke again.

"Dottore?"

He turned.

"May God go with you."

It was not at all what he expected. He, who had just sullied himself, even if in service to another, and who was now needing to run to the other side of the earth—and she was wishing God to be in his midst?

"Thank you," he choked. "Goodbye."

Then he and Garrett rushed into the night.

~||x||~

Naples

July 18, 1789

Naples reminded Carlisle of what little he could remember of the East End of London. , Sailors' rowdy behavior as they flowed into the city's taverns. The clanging of ship bells, the rhythmic slap of sea at high tide against the sides of the ships.

"Are you ready, English?" Garrett asked, cocking his head toward the docks. The two had sat in shade the better part of the afternoon, waiting for the sun to disappear on the horizon. Now its rays were gone, leaving only its ephemeral glow in the sky.

It was time.

He and Garrett had fled Volterra in a single sprint that took them all the way to the south of the country. They ran as much of their path as they could in rivers and streams, in hopes that the water would wash away their scent, and when they reached the coast, they even dove into the sea and swam for several hours. .

It had worked. They'd waited here two days for their ship, their fares negotiated under a ruse: Garrett, the wealthy American landowner, would bring the Englishman back as his indentured servant. In the time they'd been here, they'd seen not another of their kind.

Whatever had been sent after them in Volterra, it had not followed them here.

Together they made their way across the busy street to the dock below.

When Garrett gave their names to the shipmaster, however, the man looked surprised.

"Cullen?" he said, eyeing Carlisle suspiciously.

Carlisle gulped, but managed to squeak, "I am he. Is something the matter?"

The shipmaster shook his head. "Simply that you have a trunk there. Sent for you."

A trunk? Carlisle looked where he gestured. Sure enough, a hulking trunk sat next to a pile of freshly-caught fish; on its side was hastily painted the name "Cullen."

He frowned.

"It's been here a day," the shipmaster answered his unasked question.

It had been a long time since Carlisle had been on the water, and the way the floor rolled beneath his feet, even with the ship safely in port, made him uneasy. But he and Garrett made his way over to the trunk. He swung open the lid, and together, they peered inside.

There were only a few items inside. Several sets of shirts and pants and a pair of sturdy shoes. A hulking wooden cross, the edges an intricate twisted pattern, burnished smooth from the century-plus that it had hung in the parsonage in London's East End. A mortar and pestle, tucked into the bottom corner where they would not jostle around the rest of the trunk. Tiny pouches of herbs, gathered into a large sack which had come open at the top so that some spilled over the lip.

And a large, rectangular item, wrapped in cloth. Carlisle reached for this, unfolding one corner so as to expose the contents of the package. A single slip of paper fell out.

Garrett peered over Carlisle's shoulder, craning to find the identity of the sender. But Carlisle had no need to read the signature, or even truly the note. He held it up anyway.

A few things for your continued journey, Young One

He handed the note to Garrett as he unfolded the larger package. Beneath the cloth sat the painting; the Italian painter's vision of him as god, gazing without compassion on those below. Carlisle's eyes, half-closed as though he derived some sort of pleasure from the chaos of humanity beneath him.

An expression, he thought, he would never take on.

Garrett folded the paper carefully, and thrust it back. Carlisle didn't take it, however, and Garrett slid the paper into his own pocket, instead.

"He is wishing you well?" he asked.

Carlisle shook his head.

"He is reminding me that he can find me at will," he answered.

And yet, Carlisle thought, he was also saying something. He could have sent an ambush. One of the guard who supported Rafael; who would want to see Carlisle destroyed for what he'd done. And he had not done that. He had sent along Carlisle's things, and a gift.

"It makes you fascinating," Aro had said of Carlisle's work. "And I enjoy fascination."

He was valuable. Perhaps only in that he was willing to defy them, but Aro was strange that way. Sycophantic adoration was not what he most desired from his followers. Carlisle had presented him a challenge, and this trunk seemed to be Aro's way of saying, "I accept."

When would they meet again, Carlisle wondered? Decades from now? Centuries? And who would he be, then?

The sky was beginning to darken, inky black overtaking the greyish tint of twilight. A handful of stars had begun to appear.

"I won't return to Volterra," Carlisle muttered.

"As you shouldn't," Garrett answered, nodding. "My country awaits, English."

"I'll be an American." Carlisle said, finally.

Garrett laughed. "You'll be Carlisle, Friend. And I think that's definition enough."

He smiled.

They stood on deck until the sky went dark. Then, under the moonlight, they hauled the trunk to their berths and prepared to set sail.

Chapter Twenty-Eight: Carlisle

England and Scotland

August-October, 1667

Carlisle was thirsty.

Everything about him felt parched, and when he went to try to make a noise, the only sound he managed was a feeble squeak.

His hands thrust beneath him, at once squashing the vegetables on which he lay. Turnips; long since spoiled in this dark, burned-out larder. They mashed beneath his palms as he pushed himself to a sitting position.

Something like moonlight shone down the ladder that led to where he lay. He frowned. Moonlight meant darkness, but it wasn't dark. If anything, the larder was more brightly lit than it had been when he'd crawled into it—how long had it been? Two days? Three?

That he wasn't sure frightened him.

He inhaled, and was at once overwhelmed with scents. Not merely ash, but what had been burned—this ash smelled faintly of iron ore, that one of oak. The rotten, squashy turnips, but amidst them he could smell turnip, and not only rot. The acerbic scents of vomit and dried urine—his own, he realized after a moment. While he easily imagined that his pain had been great enough that he had wet himself, he did not recall this having happened.

The room spun when he tried to stand. How far away was the floor? The wall? A strange nausea rose in the pit of his stomach, and he retched once, but nothing surfaced.

He forced his eyes closed, and at once recovered his balance.

It was his sight.

He took a few steps with his eyes closed, and, when the floor stayed very solid, opened them again.

Everything was so *clear*.

On the far wall there was a fly, scampering its way toward the cracks in the stone. He could see it from where he stood, just as easily as he might have if he stood with his nose against the wall. Its tiny body, its miniscule wings...

How could he see something so small? And in the dark, no less?

The panic gripped his chest with an iron fist and he found his breath coming short—which strangely did not seem to matter. He remembered being lightheaded when he could not breathe; the way the world would spin around him and spots would appear at the edges of his vision as his heart began to race. But no such thing happened.

Especially not his heart.

He lifted an arm to his own breast, resting the heel of his palm on the middle of his chest.

If he thought about it, he could possibly make out each individual thread in his shirt with his fingertips; count them, and find even the slightest mistakes in the weave of the cloth. And through the shirt he could feel his own body; the fair hairs on his chest, standing one by one.

He could feel everything, and yet one sensation was missing.

His heart was still.

At once, his mind seemed to go in a thousand directions.

Was he dead? But he couldn't be. He remembered crawling into the larder. Days ago, perhaps, but he was still where he remembered himself to have gone.

And then he was on the street. Hoof beats echoed from somewhere to his right, clapping against the stone.

In the direct light of the moon, he could see his own skin. He had always been pale, burning easily. But now his skin shone almost a brilliant white; reflecting back the blue moonbeams and making his arms seem aglow.

How had he gotten onto the street?

The hoof beats drew nearer, and as they did, his throat erupted with a dry, burning feeling as though he had never had water before in his life.

He needed to drink. At once he began to search for a well. In the moonlight, he could see the ghastly shadows cast by the ruins of St. Paul's; the way the walls sagged toward each other as though trying to reach across the nave. He hadn't managed to crawl far when he'd been attacked.

Before he had a moment to process this thought, his throat all but screamed at him for relief.

Right. If he was at St. Paul's, then he knew where the river was from here. He could find water.

The hoof beats grew louder. And with them, a second beat; this one steadier and oddly muffled. It was more a sound of the rhythm of liquid sloshing back and forth.

Swish-swish.

It took him several repetitions to realize he was hearing a human heart.

The most wonderful sound he'd ever heard.

The driver's scream was undignified for a man. Carlisle nearly looked for the small girl who had issued it but saw instead the tall figure in his traveling cloak, in the driver's seat of the cab, with its dark horse. Still a ways away down the street.

The heartbeat sounded so *lovely*.

And the man's scent was incredible. Not the smell of sweat and days' old clothing that permeated the rest of London, but the best, most succulent dish. Salty, heady, refreshing. His whole body seemed to call out for it, whatever it was.

He needed that.

A whip cracked, the tack jangled, and the horse reared and bolted, taking the man and the cab with it.

As the hoof beats pounded away from him and grew quieter, the air cleared, and the intoxicating smell went with it.

Had it been one second? Five?

His throat felt as though it would rip in two.

He should give chase, he thought. But then he looked behind him and was startled by what he saw.

St. Paul's wrecked spire was lit in the moonlight, reaching up toward the sky with its thousands upon thousands of stars. Even burned as it was, the spire still stretched taller than the rooftops around it...

...of which there were dozens.

He blinked.

He was, somehow, at least a half mile away.

The house where he had spent the last days—where was it? He could barely make it out among the other ruined homes.

How had he gotten so far, so quickly?

An image came to his mind. The demon, as it moved in the ashes that were left of the sanctuary. The way his eyes couldn't track it, the way he had not seen the attack, but only felt it.

And the salty smell that seemed to light his whole body aflame with need...

He found himself before the neighborhood well before he'd fully thought to run there.

He drew the leather bucket up with such force the water slopped down his front, and then, plunging his head in, he sucked it down. It sloshed down his insides and landed in his stomach audibly; his stomach began to distend.

The burn subsided at once.

So that was it, he thought. Just that whatever had happened, it had depleted his water. That made sense, seeing as he had awoken next to his own vomit.

He would go home, and he would find food. He would look for someone who could cure whatever this illness was. Pressing his hands against the edge of the well, he pushed himself upright.

The pain rocked him so completely he fell to his knees before he was even aware of it; his stomach wrenching. Water and sticky bile spewed from his mouth, splattering the dirt and turning it to mud. The burn ripped again through his throat and his hands flew there, scrabbling ineffectually with his fingers and raking at his neck with his nails.

It did nothing to dull the pain.

He couldn't drink water. Or had the well not been filled with water?

On all fours, he crawled back to the well, and peered down.

At first the shimmering reflection at the bottom looked wholly familiar. The ragged cut of his hair, the way it curled just high of his collar. The nose, still jagged from the fight...

He blinked. He had been in a fight. He remembered that much. The sweaty body of another man, tumbling over his. The searing pain as his nose was smashed into his face.

This line of thought, however, was cut off abruptly when he noticed his own eyes.

In the darkness, reds appeared a different color, somewhere between brown and purple. But he had seen a red, in the window of one of the homes, and he recognized the color in his own countenance.

Run.

It had been what the beast had said, and the memory seemed to call to him. To beckon him to remember the moment when another had squared off with him.

Another who shared these eyes...

He stumbled backward with such force he fell on his bottom.

The burning. His eyesight. The way he could move. How he was suddenly able to pick out individual scents, feel things through his shoes.

And the cab driver, with his hat and his girlish scream. His heartbeat. That tantalizing whooshing sound. The intoxicating aroma—the burn in Carlisle's throat.

Iron and salt.

The smell of human blood.

The reek of what this new body craved.

For the second time in mere minutes, a horrified scream rent the air, but this time, it was Carlisle's own.

~ ||x|| ~

He was still running half a day later. Dense forests crowded the landscape of this part of England, and Carlisle dashed through the trees as though it was some sort of game. With every step he grew more afraid.

Was he to spend the rest of his life desiring to kill? This awful thirst that ate at him like fire; was there no way to quench it, except through the blood he knew he craved?

"You will not starve yourself to death," he heard a voice in his memory say. His friend, he remembered, who had come to visit him when he had lain on the bed and counted the cracks in the wall.

Thomas.

His thoughts came to him as though in a drunken haze. Like his vision, it seemed whatever he had experienced before the days spent in the larder had been experienced with a dulled consciousness; his very mind had been nearsighted. The past half day, however, came back to him in perfect clarity—the sweet rotting stench of the turnips, the sharp smell of stomach bile and urine. The coolness of the packed dirt beneath his body. The precise direction his stomach twisted when he vomited the well water.

And, of course, the red-eyed beast that stared back up at him from the well.

He shook his head again, trying to clear these fogged thoughts.

Perhaps it was that before had been dead, and now he was alive. Could that explain why now he thought with clarity, saw everything through perfect eyes?

As seemed to happen now, he found himself sitting on the forest floor before the thought even occurred to him to sit. Leaning his back against the trunk of a hulking tree, he realized he could feel every indentation in the bark through his shirt.

Thomas was the name of the dark-haired man. What had happened to Thomas?

He had suggested that Carlisle was trying to kill himself. Why had that been? Surely, he had not been like this beast before. He pressed his eyes closed and at once an image spun in his mind. A woman, her dark hair falling over her shoulder as she stood, staring resolutely out over a crowd.

"Elizabeth," he mumbled, and at once, his chest clenched; his breath drew in short gasps.

The Elizabeth woman hurt to think about.

He recognized the ragged ingress of breath, the panicked feeling that he couldn't breathe over the emotion he felt. Yet his shoulders heaved and no sound came; no mucous ran from his nose, and no tears fell from his eyes.

Again, he found himself lying down before he'd truly thought to do so, as though his body had responded to the very kindling of the desire. The soft grass and moss felt comforting beneath his cheeks; the ground felt solid as he lay upon it.

He was terrified. What if he killed someone? He was impossibly fast, now. And so little in control.

And whatever had happened, he had lost people.

Elizabeth.

Another flash came through the haze. A giggle. Teasing him for blushing so easily. Soft lips on his.

He had loved. And she had loved him.

And now they were both gone.

His gut twisted, and he pressed himself to the forest floor once again.

~ ||x| ~

It was several hours later that he stepped out of the shade of the forest, and then, in the same instant, found himself back within it.

He had exploded.

Running his hands up and down his arms, he found them as pliant and solid as ever. His chest, his legs—all there. But he had seen a brilliant light, white as fire. Yet just as the night in which he'd been attacked, he smelled no burn.

Cautiously, he stepped out from under the trees again.

At once, his whole body went alight. His arms and his neck, and the small swath of skin between his breeches and his stockings; they shone as though they had been illuminated from within. But it was not he, he realized at once. He stepped back so that his body was still in the shade, but the sun shone on his forearms, which emitted the near-blinding light. Now that he examined it, he realized it was a shimmering light, bouncing off one section of his arms and onto another.

It was no wonder he had encountered the other demons in the dark of night. A human would see him and be terrified.

Of course, they had good reason to be.

As the day stretched on into darkness, he waited for sleep to overtake him. But he didn't feel tired.

He lay all night with his eyes wide open.

~ ||x| ~

Three nights passed before Carlisle conceded that sleep would never come for him again, and instead began to use the nights to his advantage. He found an axe in a farmer's yard, but the blade snapped in two when he brought it down on his own thigh. He stole a pistol from the bedroom of a sleeping couple and fired it into his chest. The shot flattened into a disk.

Knives, pitchforks, awls...in the dead of night he stole them and tried them all. None of them so much as made a scratch in his skin.

And so he found himself after a week standing at the edge of white cliffs, the furious wind whipping through his hair. Another hazy memory floated up from somewhere deep in his consciousness: asking his father if he could see Dover.

It was too far for them to travel, he remembered. Too much money.

But now he was here, in the darkness, with the moon making the cliffs shine an eerie, almost translucent, white. The wind buffeted him, though it didn't cause him discomfort. Below him, the tide in the water below him was high, the water pummeling the rocks. It was a deadly night. A night when humans would drown from so much as being too near the edge.

Humans.

Had he already stopped using that word to describe himself?

One moment he would exist in the current world, the next, he would be assaulted with the hazy memories of the life he had lived until such a short time ago. Elizabeth would appear and he would feel as though he had been rent in two, then Thomas would laugh somewhere near his ear. The earth would reveal itself to him in all its splendor—every blade of grass, every small creature in the wood. He would notice the spots on the back of a mouse, the single ant crawling out of line on the tree fifteen feet ahead. Elizabeth would hold his hand. He would scream and yell at a man who must have been his father.

William, that man called him.

“Carlisle,” he said feebly.

The wind only howled in answer.

His throat still burned. It had been what, six days? Eight? Everything in his body seemed to cry out for the deadly nourishment.

He would never allow that to happen.

The cliffs were a drop more than long enough than the distance necessary to kill a man. Even as strong and fast as he was, surely the Earth's behavior would not bend for him. The wind still blew, the seas still churned, the rocks were still solid.

The woman's image swirled in his mind. Elizabeth. He repeated her name to himself.

Would she be looking for him? Wondering where the man she'd kissed had gone?

He reached out to the open air, letting it smack his hand. Below him, the waves slammed into the rocks, then rushed back out to sea as quickly as they'd come.

And then he felt something. Not a real sensation, he realized quickly, but the ghostly memory of one. A hand sliding into his outstretched one, fingers sliding against his as the entire body to which the hand was attached went slack.

Someone began to cry.

Was it him crying, now?

Or had he been crying then?

Clenching his hand, he tried to remember the sensation. He would hold it here, he thought. The gentle feeling of a hand sliding against his, the way his palm tingled against another's. If he focused, if he forced all his mind to it, he could hold the sensation and it wouldn't slip.

And he would hold it for only a minute, anyway. Elizabeth was gone. And that was the source of his pain.

He would not repay her love by becoming a killer.

Below him, the water spun wildly. Even with his new eyesight, he could see that its surface was menacingly dark.

For a moment, he stared.

Then, with the image of Elizabeth fixed firmly in his mind, he leapt.

~ ||x|| ~

As the waves crashed over his body, Carlisle found himself staring at the night sky; the stars splattered across an inky background.

He'd landed on rocks; the huge boulders carved out by how many centuries of flow through this strait, their sides smoothed by the ingress and egress of tides. There had been a huge booming sound, and a boulder had smashed in two, leaving Carlisle lying on the beach pebbles as he refused to open his eyes.

For the better part of an hour he lay there, hoping that somehow, he would find himself shattered. But then he opened his eyes and forced himself to acknowledge the truth.

He had destroyed the boulder, not the other way around.

A large wave washed over his face as he took a breath, and water rushed into his mouth and nose. He rolled onto his stomach and pushed himself onto his hands, sputtering and spitting, the water turning the sand dark. At once, he recalled the way the dirt had turned to mud beneath his feet as he vomited the well water.

As soon as he'd thought it, he found himself inside a sea cave, tucked safely within the cliffs. Waves rushed in and out, leaving the walls of the cave dripping. He crouched on a ledge, just a foot or so above the sea. The tide would come in, he knew, and when it did, the whole cave would be filled in a rush, too quick even for the fastest to escape.

Sitting with his back to the cave wall, sliding against the algae, he allowed himself to try to think. Again, he found his insides twisting as he thought of the woman.

It was his fault.

He clenched his fist, remembering the touch of her palm in his.

That much he knew to be true. But he'd gone over a week with no sustenance, and his mind was weakening already. The dulled memories of what he was already beginning to think of as his other life slipped from his consciousness like wisps of smoke.

It is your fault, his mind told him, but what "it" was, he could not pull through the haze.

Had he murdered her?

But if he had been a murderer once, then why was he so repulsed by the idea now?

With each hammer of the waves, his throat seemed to scream for nourishment.

For human blood.

"I won't," came the defiant reply, echoing in the darkness.

Had he said that?

Or had the sea?

He thought of the woman, and of the man who was his father, and of the man named Thomas. Of the demon. Of the days in the larder. The burning—had that been his body turning into this new one? Or was he indeed still dead, and that was why he remembered so little?

Perhaps that was what hell was, he thought. Not fire and brimstone, but simply loss.

A loud crack issued from outside the cave. The darkness around him went to an odd, milky blue/black, as the sunlight bounced in the water. It pounded in his ears, throwing him back against the wall of the cave, and tangling his feet in tiny crevices he hadn't noticed.

He did not try to break free.

By instinct, he held his breath as the water swirled around his head, and he closed his eyes. His body floated to the top of the cave and sank, and he was thrown from side to side like milk in a churn. When he finally did take a breath, water rushed into his lungs instead, burning their way down his throat and making his chest feel as though it would explode. He coughed the water out, only to suck more in, and, in doing so, lost his precarious hold on the cliff wall.

His head slammed against the rock, and he heard a sickening crack.

He closed his eyes and prayed that death would come quickly.

As he floated, the sound slowly died. The water slowly ceased its rushing and went still. With his eyes open, he could see out into the channel. A school of some medium-sized fish swam past the mouth of the cave, the sun glinting off their scales and making them shimmer.

The water stopped burning his chest, and he found himself breathing it. In, out...it was no different than breathing air, now. Gradually, he wriggled himself free of the cave, and swam back to the beach.

~ || x || ~

When he left Dover, he turned north. He found himself skulking around the darkest hiding places; those which would keep him and his brilliant appearance from ever showing in sunlight. He huddled in the darkness during the day, again consumed by fire. But this time not the fire of whatever it had been those days in the larder. This was not the fierce, consuming flame that caused him to writhe and cry out and wet himself. This was a slower burn, the dying embers, taking the charred log and reducing it to nothing but ash.

The Thomas man had told him he would not be successful at starving himself.

Perhaps now he would be.

A memory of himself had swirled in his mind the day before; screaming at his father. Beasts did not exist. There simply were no such things as the demons he hunted.

Was this his punishment for being such a wicked young man? Someone who was willing to inflict pain on his own family by taking his own life—that he be rendered into a being whose entire existence seemed to call out for the lives of others, yet who could not destroy himself?

At first, if he caught the scent of a human a long ways away, he could force himself to turn and run. He was the one who deserved to die, he told himself. He had been a terrible person.

No one deserved to die because he had been stupid. But each day, his resolve weakened. One week turned into two. He couldn't think any longer. The burn was no longer in his throat, but it consumed his entire body. He felt it from his fingertips to his toes.

Kill. Kill. Kill.

It hammered at him, taking over all rational thought.

Every day he pressed himself farther.

His memories became even foggier. The man with the dark brown hair. The woman. The other man who called him William.

His name was not William. It was Carlisle.

But Carlisle who, exactly?

Had he even had a family?

~ || x || ~

The day came when he no longer remembered the woman's name.

Her memory caused him pain, that was all he knew.

He was north, somewhere. Had he managed to get as far as Scotland? It seemed so, because wherever he was, it was cold. The cold didn't bother him, but the altitude did. Not because he couldn't breathe—obviously, after the cave at Dover, he knew that was not necessary—but because the terrain was steep and he was weak.

Carefully, he put one foot in front of the next. But he stepped on a pebble that slipped out from beneath his shoe and suddenly he was stumbling face first into the dirt.

He stayed there.

He had been strong. He had been fast. But now his body weakened. When he walked, he stumbled. And when he closed his eyes, his mind swirled—memories hurling themselves at him and springing off in every direction. The drunken memories of Before—that was what he thought it, now. Before. Before now. Before this.

Without nourishment, his mind wouldn't function.

But to feed would be to become the monster he feared himself to be. He didn't have the strength to put out his arms, and he slammed into the earth with such force the ground shuddered. For a long moment he lay still.

Above him, the stars began to swirl. He closed his eyes. The near-dead hallucinated, did they not? They would see things like swirling stars...

When he spoke, his lips trembled. "Please," he begged. "Please...I'm ready."

Then he curled up on the cold ground and prepared himself to die.

The mountain wind whipped over his body, and the stars whirled themselves into a frenzy as they fell, silently, landing on Carlisle's skin, tiny pinpricks of cold that sat there, waiting for him to move. It didn't make him uncomfortable. He had learned that about this body—that it did not feel cold or hot, that it did not register discomfort no matter how he twisted it. And so these little bits of white landed on his skin like sawdust.

It was snow.

Staring at the sky, at the way snow appeared, first flake by flake, and then, in a rush, a whiteness so thick even he had difficulty seeing. His body became covered; the snow barely differing in hue from his own skin.

He would be buried before long, and perhaps that was just as well.

Squeezing his eyes closed, he tried to draw forth the memories from Before: the young man, whose name had become lost these weeks as Carlisle's mind became as feeble as his body, the woman, whose memory caused him such pain. The father, who had called him William. But so little of them came to him, now. His starved brain no longer could draw forth enough memory for him to

understand. Had he killed the woman? Had the young man been his friend? Where had his mother been?

These things he had no answer to, and for that, he sobbed some more.

“Please,” he begged. To God? God wouldn't listen to a demon. To the wind? To the snow? *To whatever will listen*, he thought. He would beg whatever forces would listen. “Please, I have to die. Please let me die.”

~ || x || ~

He heard thunder a day later. Or perhaps it was a few minutes later, he couldn't be certain. But he heard thunder, so loud and so furious that the ground beneath him shook.

As the ground continued to vibrate, and the low rumble continued toward him, Carlisle realized it wasn't thunder at all. Someone was running his way—a lot of someones.

The move was utterly automatic. He'd thought himself safe because he was so weak—how could he attack in this state?—but like all bodies, his still contained the crucial element of being able to protect its own well-being. His teeth sank into flesh, ripping it. The body struggled beneath him, but he grabbed it and held it still, feeling the sickening crunch of bone as he pressed the body into submission.

This was his. This life was his. This kill was his.

And he would have it.

He felt a pulse, the way the body pumped blood into his mouth in a rhythm. It was amazing, this. He felt his strength returning as though he were a fire just doused in oil. And the taste—not the seawater or well water he'd vomited, but a taste so pure, so heady, that he thought that he'd faint just from the sensation of it on his tongue.

This. This was what he was made for.

He drank, and drank, feeling his mind and his body come back to him. Beneath his fingertips, the sensation of fine hair; obviously, he would have grabbed his victim's head. The neck, he knew as if by instinct, was where one bit. Where that lovely sensation of pulsing blood would be felt; where the body would feed you; where you didn't need to suck.

The pulsing slowed. The struggling body went slack.

Dead.

Triumph and horror at once waged war in his mind.

He shrank back, squeezing his eyes closed.

Had it been inevitable? Given his speed, and his strength, and his weakness—was this his way of protecting himself?

The body stank. It didn't smell anything like the sweet scent he'd been drawn to these past months. It was almost enough to cause his now filled stomach to turn.

Perhaps this was the smell of death. Rotten.

He had killed.

His anguished scream echoed ominously off the rocks.

The rocks.

The ground.

His fingertips remembered the way the ground had shook beneath them. Where had the others gone, he wondered?

Unwilling, he opened his eyes to search. And when he saw what lay beneath his hands, he fell back.

A stag, magnificent in size, with eight points on its antlers. Its coat shimmered in the moonlight, the blood that Carlisle had missed glistening where it ran, stickily, down the animal's neck. a huge wound exposed its innards at its throat, cutting from just below its head almost the entire way down its chest.

He, too, was covered—dark red dripped down the ragged remains of his shirt and spattered his breeches, making him appear ghoulish. A true murderer, bathed in the blood of an innocent.

But it wasn't a human he had killed.

The laughter bubbled up from somewhere deep in his chest.

Not a human.

And had he not eaten venison before?

His mind began to return to him, and with it the dulled memories; now even duller for the time he'd spent lying weakly here on the mountain. He could stand. He could maybe even run.

He stood, beginning to walk away from his kill.

The burn in his throat was still there, a twinge which reminded him that no, he was no longer human and never would be again. He would live with this...for how long, he wondered? Sixty years? Eighty?

His mind took him back to the hazy memory of the other, the only others of his kind he knew. The odd Latin they spoke, so unlike what he had been taught in school.

Was it possible they were old enough to have spoken the language when it was still the common speech?

The idea caused his stomach to wrench.

It would perhaps be a long time, then. But he could. This little bit of pain, this tingle of a reminder that he was not human; he could endure it. He would kill animals as often as he needed to, and he would find a way.

"I am Carlisle," he muttered.

William, his mind told him at once.

William.

The name he refused to use, but the name he and his father shared. William Cullen.

As he looked out over the mountain, up into the swirling snow, he laughed.

"My name is Carlisle Cullen!" he screamed. And, with his name echoing off the rocks, he ran—but this time, he ran down the mountain. Toward the humans.

Toward life.

Epilogue: Father

Northern Wisconsin
Late November, 1918

The sun streamed down through the trees, casting a dappled pattern on the forest floor. Each beam glinted off Edward's skin as he dashed ahead of Carlisle, sending tiny rainbows skittering across the snow.

They were running. Carlisle couldn't remember running for fun; he did it only when he needed to hunt, and he kept that practice brief; a perfunctory act required by his nature, but certainly nothing in which to revel.

But he and Edward had fed and were satiated, and now they were running.

For fun.

Edward was wonderful. Carlisle could never have conceived that he would enjoy having a companion; he had been so desperate to take himself out of his own melancholy that he had barely paused to consider what having another share his home might mean. But Edward brought joy and laughter. Even his incessant questions were useful; why vampires were driven to kill, why Carlisle had chosen another way. Why did Carlisle choose to be a doctor? Why hadn't Carlisle taken a mate? Who had the brothers in Italy been, and why did they abhor Carlisle so much?

It seemed every day Carlisle found himself forced to reexamine his own life in more detail than he'd ever forced himself to look at it before. Edward took nothing for granted, and as they talked, Carlisle understood himself better in turns.

They had moved away from Chicago that night. Carlisle took the boy out hunting; they ran together all the way to the woods of northern Wisconsin where they came across a herd of moose. Edward killed as Carlisle had in the beginning; with fierce determination and almost no forethought; his kills became little more than splatters of bloody entrails and fur. But even in six weeks, he had gotten better. He was more careful now, and even though Carlisle still insisted that the boy hunt nearly every three days, his willpower seemed to already be increasing.

Carlisle had not created a monster; he had saved a young man.

Edward laughed as he ran. He was faster than Carlisle, which was to be expected for a newborn. Carlisle's own speed had slowed substantially around the time he had been a year into his new life, and he suspected this would happen to Edward also. But Edward would remain fast, he thought. The boy seemed most at home when he ran like this, dashing into the forest, even when he was not in pursuit of prey. He enjoyed this new life in a way Carlisle had never been able, and his joy was Carlisle's.

His heart swelled as he watched Edward.

He loved him.

Edward halted so abruptly that snow sprayed into the air. Carlisle nearly ran into him, and only managed to avoid this by dodging Edward at the last minute, running several steps to the boy's right.

"What did you say?" Edward asked when Carlisle had come to a stop.

"I didn't say anything," Carlisle teased. This had become an ongoing joke between them—when Edward would overhear something Carlisle had not meant for him to, and Carlisle would insist that anything that was not audible didn't count. At first, hiding his thoughts from Edward had been nearly impossible, and he had divulged many things he wished he could have delivered to the boy with more finesse. Yet as the weeks went on and Carlisle grew more adept at keeping the boy from knowing his thoughts, he also felt less and less the need to do so.

"No, but you thought—"

He had thought the words he hadn't dared say aloud.

Carlisle took a step closer.

"Edward?"

A faraway look had come over Edward's eyes, and frowned. "Is that true?" he asked.

"Is what true?"

"That you love me."

Carlisle's instinct was to say "Of course," but such answers did not work for Edward, he knew. Placating him was as good as patronizing him, and Carlisle had no intention of doing that.

But there wasn't much another word for it. His human life had long since faded, save a handful of recollections that occasionally flared like a flame which had been blown on just enough. If he had loved; if he had been loved—he didn't remember. But with Edward, it was different. At first, the fear of losing Edward had purely been a practical one—if he lost the boy, then he would be responsible for setting a newborn on the loose, and that might mean the Volturi. And then there had been the fear that Edward himself would reject him, that the boy would think of him, rightly, as having created the monster that he still saw himself as.

But now?

Now it was Carlisle who would break if Edward were to be lost. It was irrational, he thought, but maybe that was the point.

Rational was the head. Love came from the heart.

Slowly, Carlisle nodded, and his whole body tensed as he waited for Edward's reaction. Surely, others had told him he was loved before? His mother, of course--Carlisle had been there to hear those words. And his father.

"My mother," Edward answered, still frowning. "I don't remember that my father ever did."

At once, Carlisle remembered the man whom he'd met at the hospital. Edward Masen, Sr. had been delirious upon arrival. But even he had tried to throw his wife out of the hospital, had insisted that they take "Junior" home, and keep him away.

For a brief second, the forest spun, and his memories shifted. To one of his earliest memories from this new life, not so long after he had discovered a way to live. He hung in England at first, hunting in the forests and, only when freshly back from a large feeding, around the towns

and hamlets. It had taken him the better part of a year to feel sure enough to make his way back to London and its overwhelming population, and when he did, he'd found his father was already gone.

He had skulked around Aldgate in a cloak, and from what he had been able to find out, the Reverend's illness had hit in full force after he lost his son. "As though he didn't have the will to live," one woman had said.

William had died not long after Carlisle had.

And so Carlisle had left London entirely, running again to Dover and swimming across to France, where his new life began.

It was funny that he should think of this now, when he was talking to Edward about his own father, for the two had been so different—Edward Masen, with his protectiveness, and William Cullen, with the choke hold on life and death and everything in between...

But then...

Carlisle thought of Edward, running. The way every time the boy took off before him, it crossed his mind briefly that he might never come back. How thoroughly his heart would shatter if that happened. How much his new happiness and joy depended on this child; how much he could not bear to lose him.

And what was that, if not a choke hold?

Edward was still staring, his eyebrows now raised as he listened to Carlisle's thoughts.

Carlisle cleared his throat, closing the gap between the two of them and resting his hand on Edward's shoulder. "Your father loved you," he said quietly. "I know it. You changed his life, as you've changed mine." He squeezed Edward's shoulder gently. "I do love you, Edward."

It was the first time he had spoken the words aloud.

For a moment, Edward didn't respond. Then he nodded, solemnly, and placed his palm on the back of Carlisle's hand. Saying nothing, he flashed Carlisle a shy smile. Then suddenly the tiny embrace was broken, and Edward took off like a shot.

"Catch me, Carlisle!" he called, his laughter echoing in the trees.

Carlisle blinked as he watched the figure retreat. As he watched the sun glinting off Edward's hair, turning it from brown copper to the color of coal fire, he understood why his mind had made the connection he'd been unable to.

He had been meant to get here. His father, the Brothers, all those years alone—they were meant to lead him here, to this moment, with this boy. And now he was being given the opportunity to do it differently, to make sure that Edward understood that he was everything. To be certain Edward understood he was loved.

And he would seize it.

Edward's footsteps were already growing quiet as Carlisle stood; he was so amazingly fast. But instead of dashing after him, Carlisle bowed his head. He still wasn't sure if the God of men listened to him, but he occasionally directed a few words Heavenward, just in case. Today, he uttered only two:

"Thank you."

Then, with the sun alighting his skin and laughter bubbling up from his chest, Carlisle dashed off to catch up with his son.

Acknowledgments

This fic was the fic I always wanted to write. The one that I began literally the moment I posted my first one-shot, “The Talk.” Then it was called *Absolution*, I was planning to write it simply from the beginning of Carlisle’s life to the confrontation with the Volturi in *Breaking Dawn*, and had no idea of the incredible depth of the character I’d just stumbled onto.

Fortunately, I waited. Waited until I knew where I wanted to go, waited until I’d figured out the right structure, waited until I knew Carlisle better. And I think the story that emerged is all the richer for it. Most importantly, waiting gave me time for a lot of wonderful people to come into my life who have been utterly invaluable in the process of writing this novel.

My beta, Openhome, saw me through two full years of writing this fic and then some, correcting historical errors, correcting canon errors, telling me where things didn’t mesh, where I was being too repetitive, and much, much more. Many times over the course of this fic, the thing for which I would get the most compliments in a chapter would inevitably be something she had told me needed to be changed in the draft, and the change made the chapter so significantly stronger that everyone noticed. And along the way, she went from reader, to beta, to one of my dearest friends. A friend whom you can trust with every aspect of your creative self is worth all the treasure in the world. So I thank her first and foremost.

I also owe a lot of thanks to: Viva Viva and Julie for betaing the early parts of this novel; to twitina and sleepyvalentina for holding my hand and prereading chunks when I was struggling to write them; to malianani for her wrenchingly thorough evaluations of each chapter that always left me seeing connections in my own work that I hadn’t even noticed I’d made; to kittandchips for asking the right questions, and to minisinoo for helping with initial sources.

And of course, I owe a great debt to my readers—those of you who were willing to go on a journey the length of *Twilight* and with barely a hint of Edward and no Bella at all. To you all who love Carlisle as much as I do, or who’ve come to love him as much, thank you from the bottom of my heart.

As always, I wish you happy reading.

Historical Notes

Chapter 1: Cheater of Death

1. Ether was commonly used as a surgical anesthetic from the mid nineteenth to the mid twentieth centuries. One of its dangerous side effects was that it occasionally caused suffocation as either the tongue would loll back and block the airway, or the glottis would close and not allow respiration. This state usually resulted in the death of the patient unless the surgeon noticed it quickly enough.
2. In Ithaca, I went with canon over historical fact, even where the two contradicted (i.e., a house from the 1600s in New York State.) In Stregoni, I will be choosing history over canon. Twilight cites Edward as having “died” in August; however, in August 1918, there were no identified cases of the influenza in Chicago (although some deaths during that month were undoubtedly overlooked influenza cases). The bulk of deaths in that region occurred during October and November, and it’s reasonable to believe that this was when the Masen family succumbed to the illness. Thus Carlisle meets his first patient here in September, the earliest time that known flu cases were identified.

Chapter 2: Sarah's Son

1. Early Modern English (EModE), also known as Elizabethan English, was the language of Carlisle’s time. The seventeenth century was a time of great linguistic shift, and I will be trying to capture some of the tenor of that shift in this story, particularly the gradual loss of the informal/formal distinction in the second person (thou vs. you). However, for the sake of readability, as well as because EModE is certainly not a language I speak fluently, I won’t be writing all the dialog in EModE, but rather using its features just to give the text the flavor of the speech of the day.
2. The Great Fire of London began on September 2, 1666 and burned until September 5. It began in a bakery on Pudding Lane and burned out the homes of nearly 80% of London’s residents. In Stregoni, I am writing Carlisle and his father living to the north and east of the city center, one of the only areas to be untouched by the fire. (It also was slowly becoming rather seedy—a nice place for vampires to hang out.)
3. Coffeehouses were very common places of male bonding in seventeenth century England. They were a place for the men of the town to meet to swap news, do business, and talk politics—in some ways, much as they are today. They were often quite egalitarian in terms of the men who frequented them—every male was welcome who could afford the penny cost of admission (cup of coffee included...eat that, Starbucks). The Spectator is a real circular from the London coffeehouses at the time Carlisle would have gone.
4. Often when I hear discussions of Carlisle’s human life, it is assumed that he was somehow late for the game at 23, with people getting married very early in his day and age. The opposite is actually true. There were so many bastard children and poor parents in that time

that the age at which young men came out of their apprenticeships was raised to 24, in an effort to keep them from marrying and fathering children before they were financially prepared to do so. Most marriages in Carlisle's time were between men and women in their mid to late twenties, not in their teens. So, while Carlisle himself is a bit clueless when it comes to women for a number of reasons, the timing is right—age 23 is right around when he might have been expected to begin to court.

5. The House Built on Rock, Luke 6: 47-49. All biblical quotes are from the 1559 King James Translation; the orthography, however, has been changed to match present-day.

Chapter 3: The Young One

In 1789, the language we now know as Italian had not yet been standardized, and Italy was full of people who spoke dialects that were often mutually unintelligible. However, it was the Florentine dialect of Dante that became the standard Italian language in the nineteenth century. Because Volterra is part of that region, I am using modern Italian phrases, because they would be somewhat close to what was spoken there. I fully acknowledge the anachronism.

Many thanks to Starlight Succubus and her friend for the help with the Italian.

Chapter 4: Motherless Child

1. The tenth plague of Egypt: Exodus 11:1–12:36: “This is what the LORD says: 'About midnight I will go throughout Egypt. Every firstborn son in Egypt will die, from the firstborn son of Pharaoh, who sits on the throne, to the firstborn son of the slave girl, who is at her hand mill, and all the firstborn of the cattle as well. There will be loud wailing throughout Egypt—worse than there has ever been or ever will be again.'”
2. The Institute for Musical Arts was the name of the school that would be renamed Julliard in 1927.
3. The Selective Service Act, which required registration of adult men for the service was passed in 1917. The conscription age was twenty-one, although it was not uncommon for younger men to enlist for the pay. (The age was dropped to 18 in September of 1918, hence Elizabeth Masen's worry.) However, there was not much pro-war sentiment among people of Edward's class—that he was so gung-ho to enlist was actually quite unusual.
4. One of the danger signs of the Spanish Influenza was that the patient would begin to show signs of cyanosis: a blue tinge to his skin as a result of the lack of oxygen caused by the obstruction of breathing. Those who exhibited this symptom often died within hours.
5. Edward's acne is a fun bit of fanon first introduced by minisinoo in “This is My Son” and perpetuated by thatwritr in In the Blink of an Eye. blondie_AKA_robin is the originator of the idea of Carlisle worshipping on the Solstice in Dark Side of the Moon.

Chapter 5: Spectator at Tyburn

1. Tyburn was the location in West London (near present-day Marble Arch) where executions were carried out by hanging during much of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It spawned a number of euphemisms—to “go west” was to go to one’s hanging, the “Tyburn jig” described the flailing legs of a person as they were hanged. During the late sixteenth century, the “Tyburn Tree” was constructed, a triangular-shaped gallows where at one point, two dozen were hanged at once, eight to a side. Apprentices in London were often given holiday to attend a hanging day, and as many as 100,000 people might swarm to Tyburn to watch the executions.
2. “The man in question was a branded thief.” When a person was given clemency by the clergy, he was branded on the right palm with a symbol that indicated the nature of the crime from which he had escaped the punishment. If he came to trial again, his previous crime would be evident by his brand. This is the reason why today, a person is required to raise his right hand before testifying in court.
3. Nursing and breeching—children whose mother had died in childbirth necessitated a wet nurse, and in the seventeenth century, few women of the higher classes nursed their own children. Thus this occupation was a common one among women of childbearing age. Often a child would be sent to the country to nurse, however, it’s probable that William, being of some money and stature, would be able to afford a London nurse for his son. Breeching is the term for the first time a boy was put in pants instead of the skirts and dresses worn by younger boys. It was usually a celebrated occasion, and the time at which a father would begin to take more interest in the upbringing of his sons. For Carlisle, it would have meant the end of having contact with his nurse, and was probably traumatic.

Chapter 6: Shy

1. Willow bark and cinchona—cinchona is a Peruvian tree whose bark was in wide use in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a cure for fever, pain, and malaria. An English clergyman, Edward Stone, while suffering from chronic pain, was led by the doctrine of signatures (the idea that an illness particular to a given area will also have its cure in that area) to nibble on the bark of willow. Finding it bitter, like the cinchona, he dried a pound of it and gave it to 50 patients, who found relief from pain. As it turns out, willow is an excellent source of salicylic acid, the primary ingredient in aspirin. Stone published his results in 1763 in a letter to the Royal Society of England.
2. Etruscan Praenomen: One thing missed in SM’s books were the actual names of the Volturi brothers. The Etruscan praenomen that are traceable are few, however, there’s reasonable evidence that “Caius” is a Latinate version of the Etruscan “Cai/e” and “Marcus” was “Marce.” “Aro” apparently came from SM’s mind. However, there was an Etruscan male name “Arruns,” which took the diminutive form “Arnza.” For the sake of historical accuracy, I’ve done a little dance with Aro/Arruns; and if I have space and it makes sense later, I’ll work in the backstory of why everyone’s names changed. Thanks to minisino for putting me on the right track about this detail.

Chapter 7: Suitor

1. Ratcliffe Highway is a road in the East End of London (now known simply as The Highway). During the 17th century, it was a place for traders and other ilk to congregate and was known for its seediness, particularly the alehouses and prostitutes who served London's sailors. It later became infamous for a series of murders that took place on sections of the road in 1811.
2. Medicine in the 17th century was just barely beginning to move away from the theory of the four humors, that is, that blood, phlegm, black bile and yellow bile controlled the health of the body, and that instability and lack of good health were a sign of an excess or deficit of one of the humors. Bloodletting was a common medical treatment for a number of issues, as excess blood was considered to make one hyper, feverish, prone to anger, and a host of other problems. The act of bloodletting was delegated by the educated physicians to the barber-surgeons.

Chapter 8: Psalmist

1. During the influenza, drastic measures were taken to stop person-to-person transmission. These included the closure of public venues like churches and theaters. Often people who still wanted to seek spiritual comfort would hold church meetings outside.
2. The mass graves were a reality in almost every major city; they were often dug with steamshovels and yet still rarely managed to keep up with the mortality rate. The forty percent rate for Cook County Hospital Carlisle reports in this chapter is a real statistic, as is Elizabeth's observation that about a quarter of people in each ward died on any given night.
3. Alma, in addition to being a reasonably common name in the 1910s, means "fostering" or "nurturing" in Latin, and "soul" in Spanish.

Chapter 10: Layman

1. "The peace of God, which passeth all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his son Jesus Christ our Lord, and the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, be amongst you and remain with you always. Amen." Benediction from the Book of Common Prayer, 1662 (Spelling modernized.)
2. Bundling was a common practice for courting couples in the seventeenth century. The suitor would be permitted to spend the night with his intended under the supervision of her parents. The suitor would be wrapped securely in bedclothes so that he was not able to reach the girl, and sometimes a board would be placed between them. However, rules regarding bundling could often be very lax, and in Carlisle's time, something north of a quarter of all brides arrived at the altar pregnant (likely a low estimate, as the bride would either have to be showing or be willing to admit).
3. Pottage is a thick stew which was common food in Great Britain from the middle ages into the eighteenth century. It could be kept over the fire for a few days as some would be eaten

and more ingredients added. Although the poor ate pottage for almost every meal middle class families like the Cullens ate it frequently also, although they could afford to add more expensive ingredients, like meat.

4. One courtship custom in seventeenth-century England was for the man to buy a pair of gloves for the woman. By wearing them in public, the woman signified the acceptance of her man's affections.

Chapter 12: Friend

Although Jamie Campbell Bower and Christopher Heyerdahl have, by their casting, gotten this quite backwards (or SM changed her mind about how these characters appear—never an impossibility), I'm relying here on the data from *The Official Illustrated Guide*, which lists Caius's physical age in his mid-fifties and Marcus's age as in his teens. I found this image to be a rather intriguing add-on to the dynamic between the brothers and wanted to include it, as Carlisle's friendship with a young Marcus also goes a long way in explaining why he chose a seventeen-year-old as his first companion a few centuries later.

Chapter 15: The Fourth Brother

1. Cucciolo is Italian for “pup.” That it might be a term Aro would use for Carlisle is a nod to my favorite Aro/Carlisle one-shot, “Seraphim,” by duskwatcher2153.
2. The Etruscan language is a dead language, and all its relative languages in its language family, Tyrsenian, died out fully by around 300 AD.
3. The Fourth Brother, the title of this chapter, was the original title of *Stregoni Benefici* (well the second original, after I decided that *Absolution*, my fic that was going to barrel straight through Carlisle's history from 1644-2005 was not going to work as a coherent narrative.)

Chapter 16: Improper

1. “At the gaol in Southwark.” Newgate Prison was the main prison in London during Carlisle's time. It was here that people were held awaiting trial; a great many crimes during his time were punishable by death. However, it was destroyed by the Great Fire of London in 1666 and not rebuilt until 1672. During that time, prisoners were held at one of the prisons in Southwark, across the Thames, where the fire did not reach. (And yes, for those who wonder, this means there's an anachronism in Chapter 5. I'll be fixing that shortly...)
2. Matthew Hopkins, AKA the “Witchfinder General,” was a real witch hunter born in the 1620s. He was the son of a minister, and a zealous witch hunter, who over the course of his lifetime was responsible for the execution of over 250 people. Hopkins's witch hunting was very much carried out according to law at the time; he would find suspected witches, gather evidence, and then that evidence would be presented before a judge. However, Hopkins died in 1647, which, in this story, would put him out of the picture right around the time Carlisle was being weaned, and after the English Civil War and the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, there was a sharp decline in skepticism of witch hunting more generally. Thus by the 1650s and 1660s, when Carlisle was becoming a man, witch hunting had largely fallen out of favor; and it is no surprise that Carlisle, who would've encountered more enlightenment-style ideas in his own schooling, would reject it.
3. Witch trials and familiars — during the heyday of witch hunting, a witch was determined so based on the evidence provided by her neighbors. Often this included things such as

miscarriage or boils, or a cow which refused to give milk or some such affliction. Women were also examined for the “mark of the Devil,” a mole or spot which was considered to be a sign that they were touched by evil. Hopkins kept a woman in his employ so as to conduct such examinations while respecting the dignity of the woman being accused. In addition, one other thing used to identify a witch was her “familiar,” a cat or dog or other animal which was loyal to her and thought to be a conduit for her power. Once accused, women were often held and tortured for information via starvation or being kept awake for several days, as is Rev. Cullen's technique in this chapter.

Chapter 18: Englishman

1. In May of 1789 amid political turmoil and fiscal disaster, the general assembly representing the people of France, called the Estates-General, met in Versailles. The Estates General consisted of one group representing the nobility, one representing the clergy, and one representing the commoners. As each group voted equally, the commoners were consistently outvoted, and, as they were the largest of the three estates, became enraged. This Third Estate in June declared themselves their own assembly, and while they invited the other two estates to join them with voting apportioned to the size of the groups, they vowed to set France's laws with or without the nobles and clergy. In June, this new National Assembly took the “Tennis Court Oath” (so-called because the king attempted to close the salon where the Estates-General met, forcing the National Assembly to meet in a nearby indoor tennis court in the palace), declaring that they would not separate until they gave France a constitution.
2. The ideals of the French revolution drew heavily from the ideals of, and success of, the American revolution. During the time of the Estates General, the American Minister to France Thomas Jefferson was nearing the end of his five-year visit in France, and directly counseled the French king on his actions. Although Jefferson did not initially side with the National Assembly, he did correspond regularly with several pamphleteers and others who would go on to be instrumental in the promulgation of the ideals which drove the French Revolution.

Chapter 19: Tempest

“the banns not yet read” In the Church of England, it was customary that two people intending to marry announce their intent via the public announcement of the banns, which were read aloud in the home parishes of both parties, usually for the three Sundays prior to the wedding. This allowed others to come forward and indicate if there were reasons the couple should not marry; for instance, if one were already married, had taken a vow of celibacy, or if they couple was too closely related. The practice was codified by Lord Hardwicke's Act of 1753, in order to prevent clandestine marriages—any marriage which was not preceded by the reading of banns and a the obtaining of a marriage license was void. While no longer a formal necessity, the banns survive in the marriage rites of the Book of Common Prayer (and derivations from it, such as those used by the Lutheran church) as the well-known line, “If any man sees reason why these two should not be joined, may he speak now or forever hold his peace.”

Chapter 20: Miracle Worker

1. The ten plagues of Egypt. Exodus chapters 5-12.

2. Luke 12:48 (King James Version) “For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more.”

Chapter 21: Taoist

1. In 1789, one of the first steps the French government took was to send the French army into the streets of Paris and Versailles. This actually didn't work nearly as well as they'd have liked, as many of the enlisted were unwilling to take aim at their own people and defected, leaving the streets guarded mostly by foreign mercenaries. This did little to stop the violence in the streets of Paris, and looting was widespread (also driven, as Carlisle notes here, by the dire financial straits into which France's economic situation forced its people.)
2. Jacques Necker, the finance minister of France. He was beloved by the people for being forthright about France's finances (and disliked by the King for the same reason). He also advocated for greater representation of the people in the Estates-General, although he offered them two votes as opposed to the head-count vote the people called for. He was dismissed by the King on 11 July 1789, and the ire this action provoked heavily contributed to the storming of the Bastille three days later.
3. The Tao Te Ching, or “The Book of the Way,” by Lao Tzu, is a book of Chinese philosophy (you could call it Taoist philosophy, but as the philosophy comes from the book, the term is a bit circuitous here), about living life in harmony with the world and with oneself. Evil is not seen as an outside force, but rather the result of disharmony with the universal process. Perhaps this is a bit of me interpreting too much, but as I personally consider the Tao, I surmise it would be a document which would speak to Carlisle, especially as it contrasts so thoroughly with the judgmental, self-deprecating Puritan beliefs which he was taught growing up. The chapter quoted here is the 33rd; I use Stephen Mitchell's New English Version translation, though I retranslated it back into the Early Modern English in which Aro might have considered the words.

Chapter 23: Savior

1. “Black Thursday.” In Stregoni, I have chosen to go with history over canon where the two conflict. Meyer has Edward dying in August, but in August 1918, there were no known cases of Spanish Influenza (though there were no doubt a handful of deaths that no one knew the cause of.) The vast majority of influenza deaths were in October of that year, which is when I've chosen to place it for Stregoni. On Thursday, October 17, 1918 (ironically, basically exactly 94 years ago today) the greatest number of deaths in the entire influenza were recorded; 381 people died in Chicago in that 24-hour period alone.
2. Although legends of vampire-like creatures date back to prehistory, vampire lore as we know it, including the idea that vampires die in the sun, was not common in Western Europe until the eighteenth, and really the nineteenth century. You may have noticed that it is not a concept that 1667 Stregoni Carlisle is familiar with; this would've been true for his time, and while his father certainly would have been on the lookout for the possessed and for corporeal demons, the idea of a “vampire” would not have been on either of their radars.

Chapter 24: Doctor

1. On the morning of July 14, 1789, Paris was in chaos. The people had gathered a great deal of arms (somewhere in the neighborhood of thirty to forty thousand), but were largely without

gunpowder or shot. This, in addition to the symbolic capital of taking down the main prison, formed the reasons for attacking the Bastille—although it held only a handful of prisoners, it was home to a great deal of ammunition. The attack began mid-morning, escalated throughout the afternoon, and finally ended when the Governor of the prison, Bernard-René de Launay, surrendered around five o'clock. The crowd which attacked the Bastille likely numbered less than a thousand, and of those, ninety-eight were killed in the fray. Though the French Revolution had been bubbling up to that point, and truly began with the Tennis Court Oath in Versailles, the Storming of the Bastille is recognized as the official event which snapped the revolution into full force.

2. In 1789, little was known about germ theory, although Leeuwenhoek first observed microorganisms almost a hundred years before. However, papers were beginning to be published which anecdotally observed that soldiers who washed their wounds fared better against infection than those who did not. Carlisle undoubtedly would have found these writings, and, given his general inclination toward scientific discovery, implemented these ideas as soon as he was able.

Chapter 25: William's Son

1. I know that some of this doesn't match the story Carlisle tells in *Twilight*. Unfortunately, Stephenie Meyer isn't the greatest researcher, and she often inserted anachronisms when she didn't have her facts correct. So there are several historical corrections present in this chapter.
2. The existence of vampires. The lore of vampires did not become popular in England until the middle of the nineteenth century, and they were unheard of until the eighteenth century. In the seventeenth century, Carlisle would've had no knowledge of a creature which sucked the blood of its victims. Hence he refers to them only as "demons" and has no other knowledge as to what might happen to him and his companions.
3. Witch-hunting raids. In the seventeenth century, especially the latter half, witch hunts were very much going out of vogue. As England entered the Age of Enlightenment, fewer and fewer people were willing to persecute others on the basis of hunches alone. Thus here, instead of the mob that Meyer describes, I had Carlisle hunting with only two people, both of whom might be willing to help him simply out of a gesture of friendship, rather than out of a desire to hunt witches themselves (which they likely did not have).
4. London sewers. The London sewer system as it exists today was not developed until the mid-nineteenth century, with the first large sewers being laid in 1859. In the 1660s, the only sewer system were open trenches which ran in the streets and directed sewage to the river Thames. These were hardly a place where a fully-grown vampire could hide. But in 1667, there were many ruined buildings from The Great Fire, and so I picked one which would have a little bit of dramatic irony.
5. "Blessed are they which doe hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled." Matthew 5:6, 1611 King James Version

Chapter 26: Sire

1. In 1901, King Camp Gillette invented a razor with removable, disposable blades. It quickly took over the market from old straight-blade razors. And of course this would be the beginning of Gillette Co. I always figure that Carlisle is a bit like Mr. Weasley in that respect—that he has a great appreciation and fascination for new inventions, and thus it would make sense for him to have some human accouterments around the house.

Chapter 27: Stregone Benefico

Stregoni benefici is plural for *stregone benefico*. *Stregone* might be translated as 'witch doctor,' *benefico* as an adjective means beneficent or benign. Thus the *stregoni benefici* = the beneficent witch doctors—a very suitable adjective for Carlisle.

Many years ago when I was starting this piece, kittandchips commented, “Man, Carlisle must've done something spectacular to ignite that particular legend.” She had a point, and I ran with it all the way through these 1789 chapters.

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