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THE HOUSE OF ALEXANDER

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CHAPTER 1

THE BAND OF MEN WERE AFRAID. Rough-hewn, dirty and tired, they nevertheless stayed close behind their young master. Many of them kept looking ahead, seeking out his fair hair in the shadow of the hill, seeking reassurance by his presence. This was odd because he appeared one of the youngest of the lot, and although as tall as any of the men, far more slender. The size of the sword he held in his hand offered some degree of explanation for the trust. It was nearly as large as the youth himself. He swung it easily, planting it in the dirt in front of him as he paused. The men stopped abruptly in response.

The boy, for he was little more than that, cocked his head to the side as if listening to something. The men strained, but could hear nothing. He turned back to gaze at his second-in-command, nodding grimly. Although the boy's face was startlingly beautiful, the eyes within that face were both ancient and frightening. He motioned to close ranks and they began moving up the hill.

The band stopped on the rise and although the men had been hardened by the last few days of horror, a few still vomited. The fair-haired one looked down on the valley below, his expression indecipherable.

There were bodies strewn everywhere, men, women, children, even animals. Some had been cut open, some had been strung up by their heels, some apparently had been beaten to death. Many were

nearly unrecognizable as human, so badly mutilated were their features. The smell of death and decay wafted towards the band as the breeze shifted.

The youth glanced over at a nearby cow that had been gutted and whose entrails were strewn about the ground, now attracting flies.

“I did not realize that cattle were Protestant.”

The voice was smooth, melodious, and far too old for the youthful figure from which it came. The comment was incongruous and caused startled, nervous laughter from a few of the men nearby.

The second-in-command glanced over at his master. The grizzled man knew him better than perhaps anyone else in the band, but that was not saying much. “I think we should continue moving.”

The boy nodded. “I agree. We are far from home and in a country that has lost all sanity.”

Days passed and the troop continued on. The scenes of carnage repeated themselves throughout the countryside. The band would occasionally get word from frightened peasants who relayed that the Church had declared war on all Huguenots. Some would zealously profess their loyalty to the Catholic Church, at least until they realized the band was not there to bring the Lord’s justice, but was simply passing through.

The band would less frequently run into those perpetrating the carnage, but the zealots generally would give the well-armed troop of men a wide berth. Those who did not regretted their lack of judgment.

“You there, what is your business here and where do you stand in the eyes of God?”

The gray-haired man stopped at the voice behind him. He had been unaware of the horses as they approached, but knew that his master had not. That was evident by the fact the youth was nowhere to be seen.

The men in the band all turned towards the horses, eyeing the arms the mounted men carried.

“We are but friends passing through. We mean no harm and take no sides in matters of religion.”

Even as the second-in-command finished the sentence, he winced, noticing the priestly garments the man on the horse wore.

“Everyone chooses sides. Either you are with the Church of Christ and the Blessed Virgin Mary, or you are a heathen and a traitor to God, worthy only of death.”

“I am probably more worthy of death than anyone here,” came a voice from the trees. “But that won’t happen today.”

The youth strolled from the forest, causing the men to turn upon their horses to see him. His presence caused the horses to stir, and a strange and alien fear stirred in the men as well.

The lead priest gazed down at the youth, feeling icy fingers along his spine. Something was not right. The boy possessed an unnatural beauty and moved with grace to match. He showed no fear, and if anything, displayed indifference to the heavily armed men. To the priest himself the boy was nearly contemptuous.

“Do you intend to butcher us as you have so many idolatrous cattle? I had no idea that heresy among farm animals was such a threat to the Catholic Church.” The boy’s voice hardened. “Not to mention the women and children that were tending those animals.”

The priest’s fear disappeared in apoplectic rage. “How dare you mock the Church and those who carry out God’s will! You will pay for your insolence and your heresy.”

The fair-haired youth bowed disdainfully. “Then by all means, follow your god’s edict and strike me down.”

The priest could barely contain the sputum frothing from his lips, so angry was he. He spurred his horse forward and it whinnied in protest as he brutally slapped its flanks.

What happened next would be repeated endlessly, the details changing with every retelling. But certain events would be consistent throughout. The priest rode forward at top speed, but did not ride very far. The youth, completely unafraid, languidly raised his hand and the horse responded by sliding to an abrupt halt. This vaulted the priest forward over the horse’s head and into the air. In a seemingly impos-

sible move and without apparent haste, the boy drew his sword and leveled it at the careening airborne priest. In the ultimate irony, the priest's arms were thrown outward so that his body impaled itself upon the sword in the outline of a cross. Although the full weight of the priest was thrown forward into the youth, the youth did not budge and it appeared almost as if the flailing man had struck a wall.

The priest gazed into the youth's eyes in horror and disbelief. In a casual gesture, the boy reached up to fleck a speck of dust from the priest's collar. He then grasped the collar firmly, and pulled his sword from the cleric's torso. He dropped the dead man to the ground.

The boy turned to the men still on horseback. He lightly flipped the sword, then threw it with blinding speed at the man nearest him. It passed right through him and sliced through a fair-sized tree, felling it to the ground. It was only after the sword came to rest with a "thunk" into a second tree that the man realized he had been cut in two.

The mounted men stared at the creature before them as their fatally wounded comrade fell from his horse. It was obvious that they were dealing with something far worse than a Protestant. When the boy genuflected towards them with an intense degree of sarcasm, the entire band turned their horses and fled.

The fair-haired one watched the dust cloud disappear. He was aware of the fear of his own men. It was finally his faithful second who approached.

"My lord, we should probably leave. Those men have fled in the direction that we must go and word will spread, making our passage difficult."

The youth turned his impenetrable gaze on the older man. "If I am a danger to the men, I can always leave."

Only the lieutenant would have dared rebuke the young lord, and even he proceeded gently. "You know we will be safer with you."

The young man relaxed, unaware he had been holding so much tension. "I'm sorry, Galois. I just had bad experiences with priests when I was a child."

CHAPTER 2

THE SWORDS FLASHED BRIGHTLY IN the daylight streaming through the trees. The two combatants were a contrast in both appearance and style. The man was taller, broad through the shoulders, dark-haired and wickedly handsome. He fought with amazing skill and strength, the power of his blows creating sparks with every contact.

The more slender of the pair was fair-haired and beautiful, with fine features and eyes of indeterminate color. He fought with impossible speed and ferocity to match that of his opponent. Although he should have been easily overpowered, he was instead easily holding his own.

Neither of the two appeared to be exerting any effort, their battle so equally matched it gave the impression of a dance. It was only the din caused by the clashing metal and the occasional severed tree trunk that indicated the power of the match.

Perhaps it was this great noise that drowned out the approaching roar, but so engrossed were both participants in the battle they failed to notice the low rumble heading towards them. It was with some surprise, then, that both turned to observe the rather incongruent sight of a BMW 740i careening around the corner and then coming straight at them.

The dark-haired one was not in the path of the racing vehicle,

but his young companion was dead aim of the hood ornament. The car struck him at the knees, sending him toppling over the hood and smashing into the windshield, then vaulting up over the roof. The brake lights of the BMW came on and the tires squealed as the car skid to a stop.

The smoke settled and the dark-haired one thrust his sword into the ground. There was no horror or concern on his face, but rather a look of mild exasperation as he made his way to the crumpled body in the roadway. The boy groaned and turned over, and it was apparent for the first time that it was not a boy but a striking young woman. The man helped the girl to her feet as she brushed herself off, seemingly untouched by the violent collision. They both turned as the driver of the BMW stepped out into the sunlight.

True to the oddity of the situation, the woman did not appear the least remorseful for running down the girl, although she was a bit amused. The woman was as stunning as the pair, uniquely beautiful in her own way.

"That wasn't very funny, Marilyn," Victor said dryly, releasing his companion.

"You know," the raven-haired woman replied, "You two really should stop playing in the roadway." She peered closer at the young woman. "No cuts, how unfortunate."

Ryan smiled without humor. "Always looking out for my welfare, I see."

"Mmm, yes," Marilyn said, her eyes lingering on the girl, then turning to her father. "That is, in fact, why I'm here."

Victor gave one last look at Ryan, belying his studied lack of concern. "Then let us go inside."

Victor handed Marilyn a glass of port.

"There was a time when you would serve me more than wine, my lord," Marilyn said, settling into one of the study's overstuffed chairs.

Ryan cleared her throat from the doorway, and Marilyn did not

miss a beat. "Or allow me other, unauthorized pleasures."

Ryan, after nearly six hundred years, still could not control an involuntary blush. How this woman could continue to affect her was beyond her understanding.

"The port is A. A. Ferreira Garrafeira, 1863," Ryan said. "I purchased it in Portugal when it was new."

"You always were one to defer your pleasure," Marilyn said.

Victor settled opposite Marilyn while Ryan chose to stand a safe distance away near the mantle of the fireplace. "So what brings you to our humble castle?" Victor asked, his tone of voice indicating he already knew at least some of what she was to say.

"Ancient enemies and new alliances, my lord," Marilyn said. "I don't believe that you and your offspring," she said with a pointed look at Ryan, "can settle into obscurity once again."

Victor nodded. That was one consequence of the trial he fully expected, but did not welcome. He gazed into the fire. Ryan had been tried and convicted, ironically enough, of his own murder. It had been by his design that the tribunal had been assembled, and it had served its purpose in reuniting him with his wayward child. But it had also brought to light issues that were not going to go away.

Victor turned his attention to the young woman standing by the mantle, who was young in appearance only. Ryan, as his sole progeny, had vaulted in status through their hierarchy, and not simply because Victor was the very Oldest of their Kind.

Ryan was uniquely powerful among them because she was the only one who had been born Changed. Although their Kind had all once been human, they had been Changed by the sharing of blood and were no longer capable of reproducing. They could Change other humans through the sharing of blood, but could no longer have children as their anatomy was radically altered by the transition.

Ryan was the exception, born to Victor and a human woman in the 14th century, Victor had accomplished the impossible. No one had known that Victor had a prodigy for the first 100 years of her life. He had kept her apart from the Others. And no one certainly knew the secret of Ryan's origin until six centuries later. Ryan herself had been

oblivious to the circumstances of her birth until she began to sense it through Victor's Memories as they shared blood.

"I knew I shouldn't have killed you," Ryan said casually.

Victor's response was equally understated. "Tried, my dear. Only tried." He crossed one long leg over the other. "But I agree that the trial has stirred up issues that will not easily go away."

Marilyn was not finished with her news. "They have reassembled the Grand Council."

"What for now?" Ryan asked sarcastically, "Have they found something new to charge me with?"

Her father's response was calm. "I know they have reassembled."

Ryan turned to him. "Without your permission?"

"Without my permission, but not without my knowledge." Victor said.

Ryan frowned. "I have little interest in the affairs of the Others, and I have a feeling this conversation is going to do nothing but anger me. I will bid both of you adieu for the moment."

Ryan turned to leave, but out of the corner of her eye caught a movement that gave her pause. Victor ever-so-slightly winced, almost as if he were in pain. So imperceptible was his flinch that Marilyn did not notice even with preternatural senses.

But not only did Ryan see the flinch, she felt it as well, and it went through her like a shock of electricity. So quickly did Victor recover, however, that Ryan thought she had imagined it. Marilyn noticed nothing and Victor continued their conversation, aware that Ryan was regarding him thoughtfully from the doorway. She finally turned away, walking down the hallway

With Ryan gone, Marilyn cut to the chase. "You know it's time."

Victor was calm. "Yes, I know."

"They will choose her," Marilyn said.

Victor gazed off after his departing child. "If they are so foolish to do so," he turned to Marilyn, "then so be it. I cannot save them from a catastrophe they wish to unleash upon themselves."

CHAPTER 3

THE SMALL BAND OF MEN CONTINUED through the wasted land, led by their young master. The boy drove them mercilessly, but they understood they needed to move swiftly to stay ahead of the wave of destruction behind them. Night fell, however, and the men were exhausted. They would not reach the sea tonight.

“My liege, we need to stop.”

The boy turned to Galois, glancing at the tired and dirty men behind him. They hung their heads, ashamed of their fatigue. The boy reluctantly agreed.

“Very well. We will camp here.”

Fires were lit, and the men stuffed moldy bread and cheese in their mouths. There was little conversation and without preamble, most fell into an exhausted sleep.

Galois, however, was still awake and gazed across the fire at the boy. The fair-haired one stared into the flames, the light reflecting in his eyes like some creature of the night. He glanced up at the grizzled man.

“Go to sleep, Galois. I will keep watch.”

Galois nodded. He knew the boy would keep watch. He knew the boy could hear everything that moved in the forest and had no need of food or rest. He knew that the boy would already be home if it were not for them.

Galois settled by the fire, pulling his rough blanket over him. The boy returned his gaze to the flames, and Galois took comfort in the strange glow in his eyes.

Galois' dreams were monstrous, full of gory battles and severed limbs, of tortured and maimed women and children, of pus-filled wounds and rivers of blood. He awoke with a start, reaching for his sword. His hand was stayed by a firm grasp, and he looked up to see the boy kneeling over him.

"What is it, my lord?"

"There is something in the forest," the boy whispered, gazing off at something Galois could not possibly see. "I must go."

The boy's words struck terror in the old man's heart. They were softly spoken, with no hint of fear. But there was an edge to them that Galois rarely if ever heard.

The boy stood, still whispering. "You must keep watch. If I have not returned by dawn, continue without me."

Marilyn found Ryan in the courtyard, chopping wood. Although wealthy beyond reason, Ryan split firewood because she enjoyed the pure physicality of the act. She set each piece solidly on the stump, then cleanly split it in two without effort. Marilyn watched the girl for a moment, admiring both the rhythm and her form. Movement itself could be an art when it came to Ryan.

Ryan was so immersed in her task that she was oblivious to her surroundings, including Marilyn. She appeared to be in a dream-like state, so lost in thought was she. Her rhythm quickened and the strength of her blows increased. Her face was expressionless, but somehow it was apparent that whatever world she was in at the moment was not pleasant. In a final, immense blow, Ryan split a piece of wood and the stump beneath it, clear to the earth below.

Ryan stared at the ax for a long moment and the stump. She was surprised by her actions, not only that she had split the stump, but that she had been chopping wood at all.

“You seem a bit distracted.”

Ryan glanced up at the dark-haired woman. She had become aware of Marilyn’s presence instantly, once shaken from her reverie. She opened her mouth to speak, then closed it, saying nothing.

Marilyn was intrigued. Ryan almost always had a ready and sarcastic reply.

Ryan set the ax down, brushing her hands on her pants. She was hesitant, then spoke quietly. “I’ve been dreaming a lot lately, and I’m not certain why.”

Marilyn restrained her own normal banter, mindful of the girl’s mood. “You always did sleep much more than any of our Kind,” Marilyn said thoughtfully. “Victor once told me it’s because you bear much more than any of the Others.”

“I don’t know what it is that I bear these days,” Ryan said somberly, gazing off into the distance. “It seems my life is a waking dream, that I no longer need to sleep to see that world. But many things from the past are weighing heavily.”

Ryan shook her head as if to dispel her own thoughts. “It’s of no matter. I’ll show you to your quarters.” She glanced back at the woman following her, a trace of mischief returning. “They are as far from mine as possible.”

The boy moved through the forest. It was dark, even for his preternatural sight. As he progressed, it grew even darker. The trees here were twisted, grotesquely formed. It was all very odd.

The boy stopped, cocking his head to the side. He was trying to get a fix on whatever was ahead of him. His senses strained the blackness before him, although it was neither his sight nor his hearing that he was relying on.

When he first sensed the presence at the campsite, he thought

that it was near. But he realized that the strength of the presence was not a function of its proximity, but rather of its power.

The boy knew he was sensing one of his Kind, someone who was extremely powerful. He tried to compare it to those he knew, but it was different somehow, more malevolent. It was at least as powerful as many of the Old Ones.

The boy started forward once more, his misgivings growing, but unfortunately not as much as his curiosity.

Once Marilyn was away, Ryan found Victor seated in his study once more. Ryan stared at him a long moment until he looked up.

“Yes?”

“How are you feeling?”

Victor laughed. “You mean now that I’m back in one piece?”

Ryan had the grace to appear embarrassed. “Uh, yes, now that you’ve pulled yourself back together.”

Victor gazed at his child a long moment. Their Kind were notoriously difficult to kill, and grew more so as they aged, passing into immortality. As he was the most ancient of their Kind, he should have been invulnerable to any attempt. But none of their Kind had ever faced anyone like his offspring. When Ryan tried to kill him, she finished the job, or nearly so, by eating his remains.

Consistent with the extreme predatory nature of their Kind, Victor was rather proud of her ingenuity.

“I feel fine. Your contributions to my welfare have helped immensely.”

Ryan gazed at his throat. He was talking about her blood, which he returned in kind. She knew that they both had strengthened from the exchange.

“Don’t change the subject. If you’re fine, then what did I feel earlier?”

Victor’s expression sobered. He attempted to maintain a light tone, but he would not lie to Ryan.

"I'm not certain. It's not the first time I've felt it."

Ryan felt a coldness in the pit of her stomach, although she attempted to match Victor's nonchalance.

"Can you describe what you're feeling?"

Victor was thoughtful for a moment. "It's a flash of weakness, a stab of pain. It's brief, then disappears. I thought at first it was still the aftermath from my injuries."

Victor's voice trailed off.

"But you no longer think that," Ryan said quietly.

"No," he admitted, "it's been only recently that the weakness has appeared. I think it would have appeared much earlier in my recovery if it were related, and if so, not persisted to this day."

Outwardly Ryan was calm, but it felt as if a sheet of ice water were flowing down her back. Victor was describing what seemed to be a very mild malady.

But her father was immortal, invulnerable, and not prey to maladies. She was greatly concerned.

She hid her unease, at least from her voice if not from her father.

"Well, one good thing. I know a most excellent doctor."

CHAPTER 4

RYAN STOOD ON THE PRIVATE RUNWAY, the wind whipping her coat around her lithe form. She was again lost in thought, but glanced up when she heard the distant roar of an airplane. It was still far away, and no normal creature could have detected the noise at so great a distance.

The plane was moving fast, and it was only minutes before the sleek jet began its final approach. It lightly touched down in a smooth landing, then taxied toward the lone figure on the field.

The cockpit was blacked out, as were the windows, but Ryan nodded to the pilot, whom she could see. He nodded back deferentially as he brought the jet to a halt in front of her. The door opened and the stairway was extended downward.

A young woman and a small boy stepped from the doorway. The wind caught their red hair, tousling it in the breeze. The boy caught sight of Ryan and sprinted down the stairs.

“Ryan!” he squealed, running full-tilt at her. Ryan caught him in mid-leap and in an astonishing move, tossed him a good ten feet into the air, easily catching him before he hit the ground. He laughed with reckless abandon.

Dr. Susan Ryerson approached with a little more dignity. She glanced at her son, then at Ryan. “You know it scares me when you do that to him.”

Ryan gazed down at her, mischief in her eyes. “What’s the matter? You want a turn, too? I’m fairly certain I could toss you into the air, dear doctor, a good deal higher than that.”

Susan was a little nervous, never certain when Ryan was joking. “Uh, no thank you. I would be happy with just a hug.”

The pilot of the airplane watched the warm greeting with some incredulity. He had never seen his lordship demonstrate that kind of affection with anyone, let alone a human woman and child. He knew that few were invited to this estate, but he had been unaware of the caliber of his passengers. He was glad he had shown the two respect, both for the sake of his employment and the sake of his life.

Ryan glanced up and the pilot had the sudden, frightening thought that she could read his mind. But she merely nodded and he returned the gesture, then began easing the jet toward the sole hangar at the end of the runway.

A black limousine pulled up and Ryan opened the rear door. Jason scrambled inside and Susan moved to settle in beside him. Ryan paused, scanning the horizon, then the sky overhead. Satisfied, she climbed in behind them, and the limousine pulled smoothly away.

Once inside the sleek black car, Jason immediately began pressing every button he could find. Ryan watched him with some merriment, and Susan with much less.

“Jason, cut it out.”

“Ah, mom...” He promptly obeyed, however, and began peering through the black window separating them from the driver. “Hey mom, I think the same guy is driving the limo that was flying the plane.”

Susan cleared her throat at the observation. Ryan’s “help” did have the same kind of eerie, nameless, faceless sort of persona, blending into the background as if they weren’t quite real.

Susan glanced over at Ryan. As much as she had been around the woman over the last few years, she still found Ryan’s presence over-

whelming. Ryan, in typical fashion, was oblivious to the effect she had on those around her.

“Thank you for inviting us to your estate,” Susan said.

Ryan turned her attention to the redhead. “You’re welcome. And you may stay as long as you wish.”

Susan glanced out the window, observing Ryan’s usual opulent surroundings. “If it weren’t for my research, you might not be able to get rid of me.”

Ryan smiled. “You know how I am, dear doctor. I don’t wish to separate you from your work.”

Susan was suspicious. “What are you saying?”

“Ah, there may be ‘facilities’ available to you during your stay. I hope they meet with your approval.”

Susan settled back into her seat, shaking her head in wonderment. She was certain the “facilities” would be more than adequate. The last time she had needed somewhere to work, Ryan had purchased an entire hospital.

Susan and her son had just settled into their suite when there was a knock on the door. A quiet, circumspect servant led them to the dining room, then disappeared. Jason settled into his high-backed chair a little nervously. “Mom, what is all this silverware for?”

Susan glanced down at the formal place setting, the crisp white tablecloth, the spotless crystal. It was as elegant as a five star restaurant.

“Most of it is pretty redundant,” Ryan said as she strolled into the room. “Especially for people who don’t eat.”

Marilyn and Victor entered the room from the opposite side. Her hand was on Victor’s arm as he showed her to her place and she settled into her seat. She had heard Ryan’s comment, and now addressed him. “Your child is a barbarian.”

Victor settled into his own seat at the head of the table. “Yes,” he said without the slightest misgiving, “I know.”

Ryan sat across from Marilyn on Victor’s right, next to Jason.

Susan was across from Jason, and now uncomfortably close to Marilyn. Susan toyed with her napkin, smoothing it in her lap. She had not known that Marilyn would be joining them. Victor and Ryan created enough heat and light on their own. The intensity of the three of them together was unbearable. Susan understood how these creatures seduced lesser beings so easily. She glanced over at Jason, feeling strangely protective of her son at the moment.

Marilyn was aware of the doctor's discomfiture, and true to her nature, was enjoying it. She poured Susan a glass of wine. "Here you are, Dr. Ryerson. Perhaps some wine will relax you."

Victor glanced at Marilyn, but said nothing. He nodded to a servant in an alcove and food was brought out for the two human guests. Jason began eating with relish, and as uneasy as Susan was, she realized she was more hungry than nervous. The fact that the food was delicious aided her appetite.

Ryan swirled wine in her glass, gazing deeply into the red liquid. Victor, too, was enjoying his spirit, but was also the perfect host.

"So Dr. Ryerson, how is your research progressing?"

Susan wiped her mouth with a napkin. "Excellent, thank you. Your patronage has been a godsend, and has relieved me of the burden of the public arena. There are few researchers who get to study whatever they want, and none so well-funded as I am. Thank you again."

Victor nodded. "I'm sure you're making wonderful progress."

"So what exactly are you studying now?" Marilyn asked, swirling the red liquid in her own glass. "And are you managing to keep our Kind off the cover of Time Magazine?"

Susan folded her napkin. "I'm keeping to the agreement. I haven't published anything."

"So what are you studying?" Ryan prompted, giving a sideways glance at Marilyn.

Susan unfolded the napkin, a trace of excitement evident. "I've been examining the cellular process of foreign DNA integration, testing new methods to prevent undesirable genomic alteration from non-homologous DNA insertion."

The silence at the table was loud, broken only by the clink of

Jason's fork on the plate. Marilyn nodded politely as did Victor.

"Yes," Victor said, "Sounds interesting."

Ryan was thoughtful. "So you're trying to find a way to insert DNA that's dissimilar to its host." Both Victor and Marilyn turned to her, eyebrows raised.

Susan nodded excitedly. "I'm actually examining DNA that apparently has mutated from a nonhomologous insertion into the genome, resulting in extremely favorable alteration."

Victor's expression was suddenly impassive and Marilyn cocked her head slightly, also understanding. Ryan, it seemed, was the only one still in the dark.

"Really," she said, puzzled, "how interesting."

Susan leaned across the table slightly. "It's yours, Ryan. It's your DNA. I was waiting for a good time when I could share some of what I've found."

Silence again settled on the table. Marilyn gazed into her glass of wine, twirling the stem in her fingers. The motion caused the liquid to swirl, creating patterns of red light on the crisp tablecloth. She finally spoke. "You realize, Dr. Ryerson, that you continue to cover very dangerous ground. There are many who would go to almost any length to acquire the knowledge you possess. Perhaps it would be wise for you to seek another area of study."

Heat rose in her cheeks and Susan felt the need to defend herself. "I will stop if Ryan wishes me to, or if her father thinks it best I not continue."

Jason sensed his mother's agitation and stopped eating. He glanced at Ryan.

Ryan was watching Victor. He gazed at her impassively, in a way infuriating her. Even possessing his deepest Memories did not give her access to his thoughts when he was shielding them, as he was now. Ryan turned her attention to Marilyn.

"Dr. Ryerson is under my protection. Even now, Edward is covering her tracks from her journey here. If there are those who want knowledge of me, I suggest they come find me themselves."

Marilyn was not dissuaded. "At the risk of stating the obvious,"

she said, her sarcasm evident, "it will be easier finding Dr. Ryerson."

Ryan felt the heat rise in her own face, and it was certainly warmer than Susan's. But before her anger could peak, something caught her attention that abruptly stayed her reply. It was a slight movement, a motion that she could barely see out of the corner of her eye, but it was enough to send another shock of ice through her veins.

Victor winced, the gesture again nearly imperceptible. But Ryan felt it as clearly as she saw it, and her sense of time and field of vision both expanded. Time slowed to a stop as microsecond events occurred over hours. Ryan saw Susan slowly, painstakingly begin her turn towards Victor, a puzzled look on her face.

Impossibly, the table's human occupant was becoming aware of something that an inhuman occupant was not. Perhaps it was because she was a trained physician, but Susan was definitely noticing Victor's malady when Marilyn had not.

Yet, Ryan thought to herself, not yet. Marilyn would not read it from Victor and would not sense it from her, but she would surely pick it up from Susan. A disaster was in the making.

"Ouch," Ryan said aloud. All attention at the table was riveted on the thin line of blood that appeared on the knuckle she had apparently cut while brushing a crumb from her mouth. It was easy to do. Although her skin was incredibly resilient, her teeth were sharper than cut diamonds.

"Hmm," Ryan said thoughtfully, "After 700 years you'd think I'd be used to these teeth."

Marilyn was not fooled, knowing the mishap was not accidental. But she mistook Ryan's motives. "You could simply disagree with me, my dear," she said, her eyes drawn to the blood, "you don't have to win an argument unfairly."

Faster than even preternatural eyes could see, Marilyn's hand flashed across the table, snatching Ryan's wrist. She snapped Ryan forward until Ryan was pressed against the edge of the table, instantly reminding her how incredibly fast and strong Marilyn was.

The abrupt action startled both Susan and Jason, and Jason looked fearfully towards his mother. Susan herself could not look away

from the unfolding drama. But in the back of her mind, she knew there had been no crumb to brush away.

Victor looked on, still impassive. The drawing of blood had increased the tension at the table a hundredfold, and his internal tension by equal degree. The sight of Ryan's blood created an ache that could be removed in only one way; he knew Marilyn felt the agony as well. But because he fully understood Ryan's deception, he could not intervene.

Marilyn's eyes never left Ryan's, and she held the wrist between them. Very slowly she turned the wrist, putting an obvious strain on Ryan's arm. The cut was now centered over Marilyn's wine glass, and the small stream of blood ran from Ryan's knuckle down her wrist. It was suspended as a droplet for an eternal instance, then gravity overcame it and it plopped into Marilyn's wine glass.

Marilyn released Ryan's arm, and Ryan leaned back rubbing her wrist in a distinctly human gesture. Marilyn raised the glass, swirling the blood into the little wine remaining.

"To you, my dear," she said, raising the glass to Ryan. She held Ryan's gaze as she finished the drink.

Ryan felt the sensation ripple through her and Marilyn smiled. Susan swallowed heavily as Jason sat across from her, his eyes nearly the size of his plate. Ryan glanced down at the wound, which was already healing.

Victor regained his composure, although outwardly it was not apparent he had lost it. He glanced over at Ryan who was still staring at the healing cut.

"Perhaps I could give you some first aid with that?" he said somewhat sarcastically.

He rose from the table, nodding to Susan. "I know you and your son are tired from your journey." He motioned and a servant materialized. "Please escort Dr. Ryerson to her suite." He turned to Marilyn, "I will discuss more with you later."

Marilyn dabbed her mouth with a napkin, making no attempt to disguise her delight at the situation. "I live to serve you, my lord."

Ryan gave Marilyn a baleful look as she got up from the table and followed her father, feeling as if she were twelve years old again.

Ryan followed Victor into his chambers. She could sense his exasperation with her.

“Must you always tempt Marilyn so?”

Ryan hid a smile. “You were the one who was nearly falling into your plate. I was hardly tempting her. It was more of a tactical diversion.”

“Ah, yes,” Victor said, settling into a chair. “But you always seem to find a tactic which nearly sends her into a frenzy. It’s a good thing she exercises self-control.”

Ryan sprawled next to him in an oversized easy chair. “Hmm, interesting characterization. Self-control is not something I would normally associate with Marilyn. Besides, you were the one who promised me to her in payment.”

Victor picked up a nearby newspaper, reading the headline. “Yes,” he said absently, “I’m afraid I’ve created a monster.”

Ryan wasn’t certain if he was referring to her or Marilyn. “No, dear father,” she said, assuming he meant her, “you did that nearly 700 years ago.” Ryan grew serious, changing the subject. “What’s wrong with you? Are you in pain?”

Victor set the newspaper down. There was a fatigue surrounding him that disturbed Ryan almost as much as his more obvious symptoms.

“I’m not certain,” he said, “it has been only recently that I’ve felt...”

His words trailed off. Felt what? he thought to himself. There was no precedent for what he was feeling. Although their Kind could feel pain (and withstand it in great measure) he had never felt it without an immediate, discernible cause, such as a knife stuck in his chest.

“I feel almost as if I’m getting sick,” Victor said finally.

Ryan stared at him. “That’s impossible. We don’t get sick. We don’t fall ill. We do not age, we do not die. You told me that yourself, and nothing in my seven centuries has shown it to be otherwise.”

Victor nodded. “I don’t disagree.”

He fell into a contemplative silence. Ryan fell silent as well, but her restlessness soon overcame her and she rose to her feet.

“Dr. Ryerson will be rested by the morrow. As soon as Marilyn is on her way, Susan can begin examining you. If anyone can figure out what’s going on, it will be her.”

Victor glanced up at Ryan. “Where are you going?”

Ryan’s eyes were filled with dark humor. “To make certain that Marilyn is quickly on her way.”

Susan tiptoed down the long hallway, feeling slightly ridiculous. She was jumping at shadows. All she wanted was something to drink, and she didn’t want to bother the servants. They could all probably see her, anyway, in their spooky, ephemeral movement about the castle. It felt as if they were all around her, ghosts from a different time, from a different place, and perhaps a different species.

Susan realized she was holding her breath, frightening herself with her ridiculous thoughts. Nothing would happen to her while she was under Ryan’s protection.

A figure materialized out of the shadows directly in front of her, startling her. She barely stifled a scream, struggling to retain her outward composure.

“Hello, Marilyn. I didn’t see you there.”

Marilyn gazed down at the red-haired woman, and Susan inadvertently took a step back. Marilyn smiled, showing her teeth slightly. She seemed to disappear and simultaneously reappear behind Susan, leaning over her shoulder, so close they were touching.

“So, Dr. Ryerson,” she said, whispering in her ear, “while you are so busy revealing the secrets of my Kind, have you given any more thought to becoming one?”

Susan steeled herself, willing herself not to move.

Marilyn continued whispering, now in the other ear. “I understand I have the chosen lineage, that you will become one of my offspring. Perhaps I could accelerate that process, make it happen right now?”

“And instead you would kill her instantly,” Ryan said dryly from

the shadows. "You know your blood is too powerful to Change her, so unless you have one of your 'children' readily available, I suggest you stand down."

Marilyn smiled and stepped back from Susan. Susan staggered, because although they had not been physically touching, the dark-haired woman had definitely been holding her. Ryan caught Susan's arm and steadied her, guiding her so that she stood behind her.

"I was just looking for the kitchen," Susan said, embarrassed. She tried to shake her feeling of disorientation, knowing it had nothing to do with the layout of the castle.

Ryan nodded her head in the direction opposite that which Susan was heading. "It's down the hall, through the courtyard, and to the right."

Ryan watched Susan move unsteadily down the hall, then turned to Marilyn.

"That wasn't very nice."

"You say that as if it's a characteristic you would normally associate with me."

"You're right," Ryan replied, "I stand corrected."

Marilyn moved closer to Ryan, and Ryan felt the dark-haired woman's influence settle over her. She, like Susan, had to will herself not to step back. Susan was lucky Marilyn had not killed her on the spot. Marilyn's voice again settled into a conspiratorial whisper.

"I'm concerned about you, little one."

Ryan tried not to bristle at the nickname. Marilyn had used it against her for almost six centuries and Ryan still could not quell the irritation it aroused.

"And why are you concerned about me?" she replied. "You had no concerns for my welfare when you pulled me from my seclusion and put me on trial."

"Ah, yes. The trial." Marilyn stared off in the distance as if reminiscing about a fond memory. She brought herself back to the present and her expression darkened. "That will seem a very small thing compared to what you face now."

Ryan's frustration was evident. "Then perhaps you or my dear

father could bring yourself to let me in on whatever horrible thing it is that I face. The sooner I meet it and destroy it, the better off I will be.”

Marilyn shook her head. “Actually, I’m afraid that’s exactly what you will do. But it’s not my place to tell you things that should come from Victor.”

Faster than any human eye could see, Ryan pinned Marilyn against the wall, surprising the other woman completely. Although Marilyn was slightly taller than Ryan, they were now eye-to-eye.

“There are other ways I could find out,” Ryan whispered between clenched teeth. “Ways I’m sure you would find enjoyable.”

Marilyn’s gaze traveled down to Ryan’s lips, then to her throat. “You should be careful, ma Cherie,” she whispered, “you will get the information you seek, but I will get far more than that. And your father will not be happy about either.”

Ryan realized that she had made a tactical error. In terms of sheer power, Ryan was probably the superior. But in terms of seduction, Marilyn had few if any equals among their Kind. Ryan became conscious of the fact that Marilyn was now holding her waist as tightly as Ryan was holding her shoulders.

“So what now, little one?” Marilyn asked languidly. “Do you want to finish what you started at dinner?”

Ryan stared at the woman, at a loss. No matter how powerful she had become, Marilyn still seemed to have her at a disadvantage. Marilyn wielded some sort of influence over her that belied understanding.

“Ahem.”

The sound of a throat clearing caused Ryan to look over. Susan was standing in the hallway, an uncomfortable look on her face, a diet coke in her hand.

“Um, excuse me. I think my room is that way.”

Marilyn gave Ryan one last languid look, then pushed her away. She stood upright, smoothing her clothing.

“Ah, dear doctor. Perfect timing as always. When you are my offspring, we shall have to remedy that.”

Ryan involuntarily shuddered, trying to shake her dazed feeling. Marilyn’s lips twitched into a smile. As she moved past Ryan, she

brushed a kiss on Ryan's neck. She turned again to Susan.

"I will be taking my leave this evening. As much as I have enjoyed this brief stay, I have business to attend to." Marilyn turned to Ryan again, "Please pay my respects to your father."

Before Ryan could frame a response, Marilyn was gone. Susan did not even see her leave, so instantaneously did the woman vanish. Ryan stood staring down the empty hallway.

"I hate that woman."

Susan took a sip of her diet coke. She raised an eyebrow as she brushed past Ryan.

"Yes, I can see that."