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Barclay, Hayleigh (2019) *De Volonté & the vampire bite: how Gothic vampire literature of the 19th century influences female members of the Goth subculture*. DFA thesis.

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De Volonté

&

**The Vampire Bite: How Gothic Vampire Literature of the 19th Century Influences
Female Members of the Goth Subculture**

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**Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctorate of Fine Arts,
Creative Writing**

School of Critical Studies

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October 2018

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisors, Dr Zoë Strachan and Dr Carolyn Jess-Cooke, for their continued and unwavering support throughout the past three years. Thank you for always listening and believing in me.

I would like to thank all the participants who took part in my interviews. Without their time and effort my research couldn't have been possible. Wherever you are in the world, whatever you are doing, please know that I will be forever grateful. I may not know your name, but you know who you are.

I would like to thank my family and friends – in particular Victoria Shropshire, Gary Nelson, and Connor McQuade – for making me laugh during the hard times, and reminding me to step away from the laptop and go outside sometimes. Thank you to my Mum, Nana, and Craig for putting up with the stress and telling me I could do it – it's official, you were right.

I would like to thank all my support staff at the Red Cross, for having faith that this thesis would actually be complete one day, and for telling me each day that I was nearing the finish line.

I would like to thank the staff at the University of Glasgow for their assistance and guidance.

Abstract

This thesis consists of two separate elements which, when combined, form my practice-based research into 19th Century Gothic vampire literature, and the contemporary Goth subculture.

The novel is set on a fictional Scottish island during the 19th Century, and features a female assassin who discovers she's part of a long lineage of vampires. Only by confronting her own fears, uncovering an ancestral curse, and stopping a war designed to wipe out her kind, can she find her true identity.

The critical component investigates if/how the identity of female contemporary Goths is inspired by 19th Century literary female vampires. The research uses interview-based data and textual analysis of vampire literature, e.g. *Dracula* and *Carmilla* to demonstrate how readers' interactions with literary characters can provide insight into contemporary social culture and interpretations of the past. Within the study, the analysis demonstrates the opportunities for creative writers to develop and evolve the figure of the literary female vampire to appeal to contemporary female audiences. The interview demographics include individuals who identify as female; between the ages of 18 and 56+; and span 14 countries.

By combining the two elements, they work together, to deliver an analysis of contemporary approaches to writing/reading the literary female vampire.

De Volonté

Prologue

Present day

Somewhere, about eight hundred miles from here, there is a gravestone with my name on it. Peyton de Volonté: 11th March 1876 – 7th November 1897. May She Rest In Peace.

A century on, and the peace inscribed on the stone has yet to find me. I have hunted through decades in search of revenge against those mortal men who torture others like me. They kill us for following the Old Ways when they would have us chanting and kneeling in front of the statue of their Idol.

Three hundred and fifty years ago, the Councillors of the Inservium overthrew the Government and Monarchy of my homeland, Loch Fala. Claiming divine right had ordained them rulers, the Councillors rose to power, and reached out to the common man by promising to ease their suffering in exchange for faith and devotion. Impalement awaited aristocrats who did not yield to the power of the Inservium, their corpses displayed outside the city walls. The starving collected scraps of bread; widows and orphans sought sanctuary; and the blessings of the Councillors protected the citizens from unholy horrors such as vampires and Pagan gods.

Situated northwest of mainland Scotland, between the Isles of Lewis, and Shetland, sits the isolated island of Loch Fala. Despite the inhabitants' reclusive nature, migrants who stumbled upon its shores received welcome: disheartened Jacobites fleeing Culloden; French aristocrats escaping the Revolution; African slaves on the run from their British captors; and Irish farmers hoping for a new start after the Great Famine found refuge. The townspeople lived in the delusion of goodwill and tolerance.

I was twenty-one when I witnessed the evil of the Inservium. Blackmail, torture, corruption, fraud and murder all served to keep the Councillors in power. Death was evoked in name of religion, but death was laughing and taunting each Councillor whilst blessing their enemies.

I was one who survived.

I travelled the four corners of the Earth, all in the hope of finding my other half, Jacque: at first by carriage, followed by steam train, then automobile, until man commanded the skies with aeroplanes as his wings. Every time I was close to finding him, the Inservium found me instead.

For the foreseeable future, my residence is London, England. Four days ago I arrived by train from Paris, and headed straight to the address supplied by my sister, Amelie.

Leaving St Pancras station, I walked along a secluded cobbled alleyway hidden behind a row of restaurants. The smell of rotting cabbage, hamburgers and sour milk seeped into the damp, mouldy brickwork. An overflowing gutter dribbled onto the street and gurgled in the drainpipe. A group of rats scuttled behind dustbins, eating scraps – two of them were mating inside an upturned lid. Behind, the sound of footsteps edged towards me. Slowing my pace – it seemed only polite to give them a fighting chance – I searched my surroundings for the appearance of any would-be witnesses. There was a CCTV camera about twenty feet ahead and kitchen staff clattered away indoors, listening to a radio.

The footsteps quickened but I kept my pace steady, permitting the ambitious hunter to come within arm's reach of me. I halted and spun round to face them. Standing before me was a young man holding a knife, and wearing a black cloak, with a gold medallion embossed with the image of the Councillors' Idol.

The sound of glass smashing from one of the kitchens distracted my opponent. I removed a dagger from my belt and tossed it towards the CCTV camera, slicing the wires. As he thrust the knife towards my chest, I twisted his wrist until the bones snapped, and the knife fell to the ground. Grabbing him by the throat, I pinned him against the wall, causing the radio perched on the window to topple over. I reached over to turn up the volume, and the warbles of a bubble-gum pop princess masked the henchman's cries, whilst I plunged a series of knee strikes into his ribs and groin. Before his body slid down the wall, I threw him to the other side of the alley, causing him to tumble onto the cobbles. I sauntered forward, and kicked him in the face, gouging his cheek with my boot buckle. Trying to regain his composure, he threw a few limp punches in my direction. I drew a poignard from my trousers, stabbed his throat and pulled the blade forward to sever his jugular.

I dumped his body into a dustbin for the rats to feast upon. My reflection in the metal lid revealed a face covered in blood but I was beyond caring. Wiping the blade of my dagger along the purple fabric, a red stain appeared on my coat. I placed the poignard back inside a pocket, retrieved my machete from the cobbles and carried on with my journey – not once glancing back.

The streets buzzed as zigzagging corporate suits babbled into their mobiles; tourists hauled novelty suitcases out of black cabs; and the homeless begged in doorways with empty plastic cups. I stopped and placed a few coins into a young blind woman's hand.

“Thanks, love,” she whispered.

“You take care,” I replied, squeezing her hand.

Long ago, I had been in her position, and hoped her fate proved happier than mine.

As I continued towards my destination, the tide of passers-by parted as people stared at my blood-stained appearance.

“Street theatre,” I said.

Passing signs for Phoenix Road, Camden Town and, crossing the canal, I arrived at Gloucester Avenue and found Jacques’s residence.

It was a still autumn evening, but as the violet and magenta hues of the sky turned grey, a storm was brewing overhead.

I stood in front of the black doorway, and towards the little white button beside Jacques’s name.

What would I do if he rejected me? Perhaps his life was better in London, and that is the reason he never searched for me. For all I know he may attempt to kill me. Reality never lives up to anticipation.

I tapped my fingers against the wall. An electric shock from a loose wire shot up my hand, causing me to inadvertently press one of the buzzers.

“Shh!” I pleaded with the droning tone.

“Hello?” proclaimed an Eastern European voice out of the speaker, “Who is it?”

“What? Nothing! Nobody!” I stuttered.

“Who is it you’re looking for?” the man demanded.

I hesitated, attempting to think of a logical answer. “I’m delivering a parcel.”

The man grunted. “For who?”

“Jacques. Jacques Angou.”

“He’s not in. I saw him leaving with a redheaded woman last night.”

I felt foolish for believing he would have remained faithful to me. Before the full extent of my regret took hold, I backed away from the doorway.

Behind me, the man’s voice continued, “Your accent sounds familiar. What is that? Scottish?”

I ignored him.

“She sounded the same. Although her accent was a little harsher.”

It dawned on me who he was referring to, “The redhead was Scottish?”

“Yes, I believe so.”

“Are you sure?”

“Definitely. Goodbye.”

A click ended the conversation.

To face Jacque would be one thing, but to face the redhead would be problematic, to say the least. Nothing could persuade me to wait outside the flats any longer. So I left.

Perhaps to catch a glimpse of Jacque's life without me, I decided to stay in London. I found myself searching for him in places I thought he might frequent. I skulked in bars which offered two for one deals on Tequila shots; peeked through windows of dilapidated books shops; and loitered around a steak house which claimed to have the best rib-eye in town.

The first time I caught sight of him was an accident. I think. He was coming out of a record shop in Camden Market and I was on the opposite side of the road. His dark hair was tied in a ponytail and his eyes still had their icy blue stare. The obsession with tattoos and kohl hadn't waned over the years, although the black blazer and ripped jeans were a reinvention of the style he once sported. When I saw him, the noise of the traffic ceased and the bodies stopped dead around me. I wanted to run but I couldn't breathe let alone persuade my limbs to move.

Jacque didn't see me.

That night I snuck back to the whitewashed maisonette. Trying to avoid confronting the buzzer system, I chose instead to climb a drain pipe and dismounted onto a balcony outside Jacque's flat. I'm always grateful that city neighbours take very little to do with each other's business – unless it involves stepping out with redheads.

I unpicked the catches on the window and let myself inside. The flat was empty and dark. I flicked on a side lamp which shed some light into Jacque's living arrangement. There were no signs of another woman. Good start. In fact there were no indication of who lived in the flat at all. It was a generic minimalist room, containing only a bed, a wardrobe, chest of drawers, a side lamp on the floor and a guitar perched in the corner.

I rummaged through drawers to find more clues. Amongst a pile of socks I found an oval portrait of a young girl from 1897. Me.

The phone inside my jacket pocket vibrated. Upon answering the low thumping sound of night club music muffled a familiar Russian accent.

"Peyton, it's Natashka. Have you done it yet?"

"I know it's you. And not yet."

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

Looking down at the portrait all doubts left me. "I do."

"Very well then. I'm sure it will be very melodramatic. I'm going to need every detail later! That's if you two aren't too busy."

“Is your mind ever out of the gutter?”

“No. I’m starving; I will meet you back at our usual haunt.”

“We don’t have a usual haunt. We don’t actually live here.”

“Minor detail! Remember to at least crack a smile when he appears. I know you have been practicing. See you later, *Rybka*.”

Natashka blew a kiss down the phone and hung up. I still didn’t know where I was to meet her.

Clutching the portrait, I began reminiscing, and remembered those innocent days. The girl was smiling. A mass of dark ringlets hung beyond the shoulders of her coat and strayed into one of her eyes, rimmed with black kohl. The artist hadn’t been too impressed by Jacque and me that day we entered his studio, but he took our money anyway.

That girl in the portrait had dreams and summer sweetness. In the years following my birth, the Orient Express journeyed across Europe; the symphonies of Brahms, Tchaikovsky, and Bach played in concert halls across the world, and the Inservium launched the Second Cleansing of my kind, killing entire families.

Queen Victoria had her golden jubilee; Jack the Ripper terrorised the streets of Whitechapel; according to Oscar Wilde, Dorian Gray sold his soul to a portrait; and Bram Stoker wrote *Dracula*.

I died.

Gas lamps gave way to electricity and the darkness of the cities transformed into strip lights of neon jazz halls. Skirts grew shorter as heels got higher. Women put away their baking trays and vacuum cleaners, choosing instead to burn their bras for the sake of equality. Androgyny took to the stage led by frontmen such as Robert Smith of The Cure and Peter Murphy of Bauhaus. Somehow, the image made its way to the catwalks of London, Paris and New York. Siouxsie Sioux and Patricia Morrison from Sisters of Mercy outplayed any male musician without batting an eyelid. The outside world would label this new wave of expression as Goth, but to me it was fleeting nostalgia of my true home. I recognised the corset, the fishnets, the leather trousers, the thick eyeliner and chalk white skin which would have fitted in well to my previous existence.

Nothing really changes; everything remains the same. Some scars do not fade and some memories should not be left untold. Whilst the world replaced one leader with another, invented one miracle after another, or advertised the newest fad, I was in the background, wandering the streets between lives. Any human I came into contact with quickly forgot my name. I erased all records relating to my existence. The only trace left is that gravestone eight hundred miles away.

I tucked the portrait back inside the drawer and retrieved my diary from my coat pocket. After placing it on a pillow, I then left.

Hiding on the balcony, I awaited Jacque's return and promised to sit as he read every word of the diary, started more than a century ago. As night descended, the waxing moon materialised behind the clouds. Natashka would call it a good omen for regaining what is lost.

The street lamps shone on a man crossing the road towards the house. Jacque. A deep roll of thunder rumbled in the distance as spots of rain tumbled from above. Jacque quickened his step, but I daren't watch him too long for fear of courage abandoning me. As I crouched against the cold brick wall, I heard Jacque's keys rattling at the doorway. He may not forgive me. He may not love me. But it is time for him to discover how many people I have killed for him.

Chapter One

1897, Loch Fala

As I stood outside the Inservium's gate, the clock tower bell struck eight. Thunder rolled in the distance, and rain started to fall. As I walked along the path, between rows of gravestones, a group of townspeople stepped out of the large, white, wooden building, having finished their morning prayers.

"Isn't that Marius de Volonté's daughter?" whispered one woman to the other.

"Yes," the second answered, with her hand concealing her mouth. "Just look at the state of her."

"She looks like a boy in those clothes," piped up a man, in a tweed coat and bowler hat.

"And her hair is down," added a woman, holding his arm. "In public!"

All four aimed sickly-sweet smiles at me as I walked past and entered the building, shutting the door in their faces.

White, tapered candles lit up the sanctuary, and a blazing fire pit flickered against a statue of their Idol, hanging on the wall. As I made my way up the centre aisle, a cold, eerie silence seemed to breathe throughout the room.

In the corner, a group of Councillors huddled together, glaring at me as I sat in a pew and began rifling through the pages of a prayer book. From a back room, the muffled sounds of chanting drowned out the prostrations and sermons of the trainee Councillors.

A candle flickered as a gust of air swept through the hall, and a stone slab on the floor receded underground. From the vaults underneath, a tall figure, wearing a black cloak emerged, and stepped onto the floor. As the figure's footsteps grew closer, I turned around to face their Idol, and slid along the pew to make room.

A shadow cast over me, and a wrinkled hand appeared from under the cloak, taking the prayer book from me.

"Here for morning prayers?" came a familiar man's voice from beneath a hood – Councillor Bothwell.

"You know I don't do that anymore," I replied, avoiding looking at him.

"It's such a pity the boy turned you against us," Bothwell said, taking a seat beside me. "You used to be so devoted to the Idol."

"Hmm."

"I remember you as a little girl, singing in our choir," he said, patting my knee.

I didn't reply.

"Not the most glorious of mornings," he continued.

"How is Jacque?" I asked, ignoring him.

Bothwell lowered his hood, and his cold, black eyes stared at me. "It's good that you got our letter this morning. We are never sure if that landlady of yours is reliable."

"She's suspicious," I said, removing an envelope from my pocket and handing it to him. "She was fine when it was a letter every few weeks, but two and three a month is drawing attention."

His thin lips curled into a sneer. "Do you not want Jacque back?"

"Of course I do."

"Then what is the problem? I keep telling you, these are righteous missions we send you on."

"I'll handle it," I replied.

"Good," Bothwell said, scrunching up the letter, and tossing it onto my lap.

"Besides, we have sent you to some rather nice places."

I sighed, and stared at the statue of their Idol, wishing I could tear it down and burn it in the fire pit. "How is Jacque?"

A young man – jolly-looking, with rosy cheeks, shiny skin, and wearing a brown cloak – approached and stood beside Bothwell. "Excuse me, sir. When you have a moment, could you help me with deciphering the Prayers for Sinners?"

"Of course, my son. I'm always happy to help our Initiates," Bothwell replied, grinning. "I'll meet you in the vestry – we can practise the one forgiving fornicators, liars, and murderers. Do you know that one, Peyton?"

I frowned, and kept my eyes fixed to the floor.

"She's very shy," Bothwell continued.

The young man tutted, before shaking Bothwell's hand, and leaving.

"He seems eager to please," I said.

"He's from a good family," Bothwell replied. "Like you were. Pity you ruined it!"

"I had Jacque."

Bothwell sniggered, deepening the lines on his face, and handed me a piece of paper. "Here, I have written down a name for you. You know what to do."

"Are they in the records?" I asked, placing the paper in my pocket.

"Yes, this one is on the island," Bothwell replied, standing up. As he moved to leave, he turned his head to me and said, "Don't make this one so messy. You're showing off now."

"He put up quite a struggle," I said, shrugging.

Bothwell held up his hand, not wanting to hear any more. “Do as you’re told, and you’ll see Jacque.”

After he left, I sat waiting for the sanctuary to clear. One by one, the Councillors and trainees came and went – wafting incense, collecting prayer books, and emptying the donation box – until the room was finally empty.

As the clock tower bell struck ten, I walked behind the pulpit, and pulled down on a hidden wooden lever, which opened a safe in the wall, containing a large, silver box. When I opened the lid, a streak of sunlight burst through a stained glass window, onto a treasure trove of weaponry – hatchets, iron chains, whips, razors, and blades in every shape and size – encrusted or engraved with jewels and runes.

“Earth-stars-moon-sun-I-choose-that-one,” I repeated, selecting two daggers. Before closing the box, another – with rubies around its hilt – caught my eye. “Oh, all right, you can come too. But you’ve been on the last ten missions. The others will think I’m playing favourites!”

As I slid the daggers down my boots and closed the safe, a group of Councillors appeared from the vestry.

“Leave!” said Councillor Boyd, glaring at me.

“I need to check the Masses Records,” I said, edging towards a corridor.

“You have five minutes,” Boyd replied, pointing at me with a prayer book in his hand. “Or I’m reporting you to Councillor Bothwell.”

Nodding, I ran past the Councillors, keeping my head low.

I made my way through the Inservium passageways, and downstairs into an underground chamber, no more than six feet wide. The dark, damp, and claustrophobic room contained one item – The Masses Records, the sole purpose of which was for the Councillors to keep track of every citizen – native or immigrant – of Loch Fala. Nothing was hidden – except the Councillors’ records. Removing from my pocket the piece of paper that Bothwell had given me, I found, written upon it, the name Viktor Auldwyrd. I ripped it up, and threw the pieces out the small window, and heaved open the battered, smelly, old book.

Page by page, I searched until finally reaching the relevant record:

Viktor Auldwyrd – Address: 74 East Row.

According to the Inservium, his estate far exceeded his position as a schoolmaster; he committed no known crimes; and his family tree only extended to his wife – a blot mark

on the page concealed her name – his mother, Juliska Bavos, and father, Alexander Auldwyrd.

Nothing suggested a reason as to why the Councillors would take a dislike to such a boring man.

After closing the book, I made my way upstairs, into the sanctuary, where Councillor Boyd was sat in a pew.

“That was ten minutes,” he said, looking towards the statue of their Idol. “I will forgive you. This time.”

As I opened my mouth to reply, a young man and woman, walking arm-in-arm, entered the Inservium. The woman radiated a warm glow as she hurried towards the Councillor.

“Ah, Miss Perkins,” Boyd said, taking her hand. “Here to discuss wedding plans, I assume?”

“Oh yes, yes we are,” the woman replied, all smiles and bright eyes. “John and I are beyond excited.”

The young man almost tripped over himself as he rushed down the aisle to join his fiancée. The pair giggled and gazed at each other when he moved a strand of hair from her face.

“It won’t last,” I muttered under my breath, whilst walking past them to leave the Inservium.

As I walked into the town square, thunder rolled in the distance, and the faint smell of rain clung to the air. Amidst the streets, market vendors paced up and down the cobbles, waiting for customers; men sat on stools, reading newspapers whilst getting their shoes polished; and women stepped out of carriages, lugging behind whining children.

“Oh!” said a little girl, pointing at me.

“Shh!” the nanny replied, slapping her hand.

“Shouldn’t you be in school?” I said, narrowing my eyes at her.

The nanny looked at me, appalled, and ushered the little girl away.

Whilst continuing along the road, I passed a large house, where a young woman, wearing a straitjacket, was being escorted outside by two gentlemen. As she collapsed to the ground, screaming for help, one of the men turned to the other and said, “Ignore her, it’s classic hysteria.”

“Will she ever be normal again?” said the second man.

“Oh, yes, we’ll take her to the mainland,” replied the first, with a chuckle. “It’s just a small operation.”

Feeling the sickness rise in my throat, I ran around the corner and hid. It reminded me of the times my father told me that he had put girls like me in asylums. That was before I lived in sin with Jacque, turned into a murderer, and developed supernatural abilities.

I peeked my head around the corner to see the woman being manhandled into a carriage, and then driven away.

A short while later – after passing Poska’s Inn, and watching the drunks from the night before attempt to drag themselves from the streets whilst leaving behind puddles of vomit – I arrived in Linton Road.

“She’s absolutely baying for your blood,” said Peter, as he passed me on the street.

“For crying out loud, she’ll get her money!” I replied, walking up the path towards the front door of the manor.

“Well, if I hear any shouting from upstairs, don’t expect me to come save you.”

“You’re such a good neighbour,” I called over my shoulder. “Arsehole!”

When I opened the door and stepped into the hallway, a sour, damp smell from a pile of damp clothes hanging over a clothes horse, hit me. It just about disguised the foul odour of the rotten woodwork along the staircase, and the ‘old woman’ fragrance of shit and urine. As I checked for signs of my landlady and closed the door, a woman’s voice called out behind me.

“What *are* you wearing?”

“Oh, not you again,” I said, turning round to find Katie Norris, standing outside her door. “I told you, I’m not interested.”

Katie grabbed my hand and dragged me into her small garret, overflowing with mannequins and sewing tables – each one displaying satin and velvet evening gowns; morning dresses in florals and pastels; and button-down blouses, finished off with ornate brooches and pins.

“Can you believe I made all of this in a week?” she said, making a pathway through the hoard of leftover fabric. “I’m sure we’ll find you something.”

“We won’t!” I replied, turning to leave. “Save it for your shop. I have to get upstairs before Miss Agatha finds me.”

“Oh yes, she was here about an hour ago, asking if I’d seen you.”

“What time is it?”

“10:30,” Katie said, glancing at the carriage clock on her mantelpiece.

“Hmm, I’ll wait another ten minutes, for her nap time.”

“You’ll have to pay her eventually,” Katie replied. “You and Jacque should have known that nothing comes for free when you rented a room here.”

“The Misfits’ Manor,” I said, rolling my eyes.

“Charming!”

“Always,” I replied, and stuck out my tongue.

“Just stand here a moment,” Katie said, placing me in front of a full-length mirror, and motioning towards me. “What was one thinking when she put on this morning’s attire?”

Looking at my reflection, it was a sharp contrast to the woman standing beside me, with her tailored skirt, and jacket with puffed-out sleeves; rosy cheeks and lips; and blonde hair sat high in a bun.

“There is nothing wrong with me,” I said.

“Your hair looks completely wild,” Katie replied, ruffling my long, dishevelled black curls. “And your eyes-”

“What about my eyes?” I asked, examining the deep layer of smeared kohl around them.

“Oh, don’t get me wrong, they’re a *lovely* shade of grey, it’s just this black muck makes your skin look even paler.”

“That’s none of your business!”

“Actually,” she continued, “you always seem to be wearing black.”

“Why is everyone so obsessed with my looks? I do have a brain, too, you know.”

“Sure you do,” Katie replied, stroking my cheek.

“Excuse me,” I said, swiping her hand away. “I can read and speak fluent French, Italian, and Spanish; can recite passages from Shakespeare to Dickens; and know how to dissect a man’s body from head to toe.”

Katie laughed. “Oh, what’s the point of a woman having a brain?”

Aware of the daggers hidden inside my boots, I replied, “You don’t know what I can do.”

Katie walked over to a drawer, and removed a pale pink, chiffon dress, with bows at the collar. I took it as the perfect opportunity to hide my necklace, containing a vial of Jacques’s blood. No doubt nosy Norris would ask questions about it. “What about this?” she said, holding the dress in front of me.

“No.”

“It’s very popular,” Katie replied.

“No.”

“But it’s far more elegant than this,” she said, pulling at my coat.

“Don’t touch it!” I snapped. “It has sentimental value.”

Waving the dress at me, Katie sighed and said, “But maybe this will make *Jacque* come back to you. Men like beautiful women.”

“*Jacque* bought this!” I said, tracing my finger along the ivy pattern embroidered on the purple velvet.

“Oh,” Katie replied, with an awkward smile, placing the dress on the chair. After a brief pause, she continued, “Do you know that there’s blood on it?”

“I cut my hand.”

“Didn’t you think to clean-”

“Goodbye, Katie,” I said, running out the door.

As I went upstairs, I heard the sound of snoring coming from Miss Agatha’s room.

“You’re lucky, Peyton,” said Mr Mills, poking his head around his door. “You know she’s looking for you?”

Ignoring him, I reached my room in the attic, inserted the key in the lock, and stepped inside. The air within was cold and dank, making me curl my toes, and hold my arms close to my chest. As I walked across them, the floorboards creaked, and a spider crawled out from underneath.

“Don’t even ask,” I said to it, holding my hand up. “It’s been some morning.”

Removing the daggers from my boots, I tossed them onto my bed, where they landed on a set of bedsheets, blackened, charred, and ruined by massive patches of scorch marks. Again.

“I see you haven’t changed the bed,” I said to the spider, as I took off my coat, and wandered to the wardrobe, opening the doors. “I’ve done it for months, now. Surely it’s your turn.”

The spider scurried beneath the desk in the corner.

As I hung up my coat, I caught the faint smell of *Jacque*’s aftershave lingering on his shirts. Taking one off the hanger, I held it close to me, and took a deep breath, inhaling his scent. My *Jacque*.

After wrapping the shirt around my waist, I delved into a pocket of a pair of *Jacque*’s trousers and removed a pocket knife.

Five... ten... fifteen... twenty... all the way up to two hundred and five, I counted, carving another tally mark into the wall above my bed. As I stood back, the ruined bed sheets caught my eye, distracting me from admiring my handiwork. With a sigh, I walked over to the wardrobe and took out one of the last sheets remaining on the shelf. Stripping the bed, I thought of the woman being forced into the carriage and what she’d done to deserve being carted off to the asylum.

Had an affair?

Took no interest in motherhood?

Read too many novels?

If that's what they did to *her*, then what would they do to a woman who bursts into flames while sleeping?

Chapter Two

In the distance, the clock tower bells struck ten o'clock. It was time. I finished my last bite of stale bread and cheese, before retrieving the daggers from under my bed and leaving. Downstairs, the high-pitched screeches of my neighbours arguing echoed through the walls – Mrs Mills accused her husband of pawning her wedding ring to pay for his gambling. Mr Mills responded by reminding her of the promise to bear him sons, but instead, all he got was two stillborn daughters. Across the landing, Miss Agatha – my landlady – opened her door to poke her nose – along with the stench of patchouli – into other people's business; the baby next door started to cry from the disturbance, followed by his mother's boots scampering across the floorboards; and the struggling poet on the ground floor bounded up the stairs, muttering profanities, and banged on the offending neighbour's door. As I passed him on the stairwell, he called to me over his shoulder, "What do you make of this?"

"Nothing," I replied, and left the house.

Dense clouds eclipsed the black sky, threatening to rain. I wandered along the cobbled streets, passing Poska's Inn, Dante's Café, and a pack of men fawning over the scantily-clad ladies outside Mistress Lucille's "establishment". Keeping to the shadows, I lifted my hood over my head, and continued along the street. One of the women approached me, patting my shoulder. When I turned, she withdrew her hand and frowned, looking down at my trousers.

"Sorry, little dear. I thought you were a man," she said.

I rolled my eyes and walked away.

"I didn't mean to offend you," she cried out.

"I know," I said, staring at the pavement, to avoid the on-lookers' stares.

I crossed into MacLeod Avenue, and the rain started to pour, causing the streets to empty. As I travelled past rows of houses, silhouettes of men and women lighting lamps and drawing curtains appeared at the windows. A sharp pain shot through my ankle, as a dagger jabbed into it. Whatever occupied the families – eating supper, making polite conversation, or falling asleep, trying to ignore their spouses – at least I wouldn't be murdering them. Yet. I leaned down, readjusted my boot, and the pain in my ankle disappeared.

Soaked to the skin, I ran across the road, traipsing through puddles, and slipping on cobbles. A blustering wind almost knocked me off my feet, but nothing could make me turn back.

As thunder rolled in the distance, the rain battered across my face. Numb, my fingers trembled inside my coat. Lightning struck a tree, causing it to collapse and smash the windows of a house.

As I ran through alleyways – taking the quickest route past the slums and town square – the clock tower struck eleven, and the storm settled. Broken street lamps, and a dog howling, welcomed me as I reached East Row. Shivering from the cold, I arrived outside Viktor Auldwyrd's three-storey house, and a black cat crossed my path.

"Shoo!" I whispered, and it scampered into a dustbin, rummaging for scraps.

I walked towards the porch, and searched the house – with its crumbling walls and dilapidated roof – for signs of easy entry. As I moved around the side, a figure, wearing an overgrown coat, appeared in the neighbour's garden and lit a cigarette. I crouched down, hid behind a rose bush, and kept watch.

"Did you find him?" said a woman, leaning over a balcony.

The figure, taken aback, took a quick drag before stomping out the cigarette. From under the hood, a girl's voice stuttered, "Um, no, not yet."

"Oh, that little bugger," said the woman. "He'll be absolutely sodden."

"Rupert!" called the girl. "Rupert! Where are you?"

"Ah!" I cried, feeling something brush against my leg.

"What was that?" said the woman.

I turned around to find the black cat nuzzling into my trousers.

The girl went inside the house, and came back out, holding a gas lamp. She held it up. "I don't see anything, ma'am," she said.

The cat meowed.

"Rupert?" said the woman.

I grabbed the cat, and tossed it towards the garden. As it climbed through a gap in the fence, the girl shouted, "Rupert!"

"Nancy!" the woman said. "The neighbours. Be quiet, this instant!"

"Sorry, ma'am," the girl said, lifting the cat.

As the two women returned to the house, I sighed with relief, and collapsed upon the wet grass. Once again, the street was silent. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a broken catch on one of Viktor's kitchen windows. I sat up – cautious of either of the two women reappearing – and crawled over a row of plants. Reaching the window, I climbed inside, onto a worktop, and found the house in darkness.

The only sound to be heard was my boots squelching as I jumped down and landed on the floor. I took the matches from my coat, and struck one against the wall. As I crept

around the kitchen, the flame flickered against a shelf, overflowing with utensils, cookbooks, and herbs. Rifling behind jars, I found a set of candles and a holder, which, upon lighting, helped guide me through the rest of the house.

Room by room, I searched for Viktor – whilst concealing a dagger behind my back. All were elegant and pristine, with full china dinnerware covering the dining table, crystal chandeliers dangling from the ceilings, and gold, silver and porcelain figurines dotted throughout.

Except the library.

It was a large room, well lived in, judging by the worn fabric of the chairs; stacks of newspapers; and a pipe and tartan slippers resting by the fireplace. Tables, cabinets, and windowsills overflowed with books and magazines, adding an antiquated smell to the already dusty air.

As I was about to leave the room, a magazine illustration of a shadow looming over a woman caught my eye. The scene was more humorous than horrific, with crude, cartoon claws drawing nearer as the woman fainted on a futon. I put the dagger into a coat pocket, and lifted the magazine from the armchair, to take a closer look. On the opposite page, there was a poem – *Little Girl of the Ashes*.

*Rest in peace in shrouded dreams,
Beneath where spirits dance between,
Here lies a little girl of the ashes,
With hunger born of blood-soaked sashes.
Wherever the bones and red rivers grow,
You'll find the girl, lurking below,
Where does she rise? Nobody knows.
A mortal life, how the death knoll marches,
And grieving mourns for missing chances.
Upon the tomb where the reaper passes,
Here dies the little girl of the ashes.*

(Written by N. Mikhailov)

Jacque would have liked it.

I tore out the page, and put it in my pocket, to give to him when he returned.

After dropping the magazine to the floor, I left the library and went upstairs. Reaching the landing, I tried the door handles of each room – all locked. As I walked through the narrow corridor, the floorboards creaked under my feet. Then, within the darkness, I heard a door opening, and I hid in an alcove, waiting for someone to appear.

Nothing.

“I’m in here,” said a man.

I remained silent, refusing to move.

“Nobody else is here,” the man said. “You are quite safe.”

Removing the ruby-encrusted dagger from my boot, I held it at the ready, and crept towards the door. I looked around, ensuring no one was about to pounce, before stepping inside the room. On the floor, flies buzzed around plates of uneaten food and bundles of unwashed clothes. Cracked perfume bottles and a shattered mirror sat upon a dresser. The name “Emmeline” was scrawled across the bare walls. A torn, satin evening gown lay crumpled against the wardrobe.

“It’s time, then,” said a man.

I turned around and, raising the candle, saw a bald, middle-aged gentleman, with an unruly beard, and small round spectacles, lying on top of a mattress. Judging by his filthy shirt and waistcoat, he hadn’t moved for more than a week.

“What is your name?” he asked, watching me circle around the bed.

I shook my head.

“I don’t suppose it matters anyway,” he said. “Are you going to kill me?”

“It depends. Are you Viktor Auldwyrd?”

“I am,” he replied.

“Then, yes.”

He smiled.

I placed the dagger at his throat. He didn’t move or struggle. In fact, he didn’t attempt to do anything. That was a first.

“You can fight back, you know,” I said.

He closed his eyes and sighed, as though already defeated.

I pressed the blade further into his skin, causing blood to drip onto my fingers. Viktor just stared at me, and remained still.

“Stop doing that,” I said.

“What?” he mumbled.

“Looking at me. It’s unnerving.”

Viktor turned his head away from me. Confused, I removed the dagger and knelt on the bed.

“It’s almost like you’re begging me to do it,” I said, shoving him.

“Why haven’t you?” he said.

“It seems like an unfair fight,” I replied, shuffling closer to him. “I’m used to punching, kicking, stabbing – even decapitation. But here you are, using emotions against me.”

He ripped off a locket from around his neck, and handed it to me.

“Open it,” he said.

Dagger still in hand, I undid the clasp. Inside was a miniature of a familiar-looking, dark-haired woman, with emerald eyes and a playful smile.

“What do you think?” Viktor said.

“She looks like she wants to haunt me,” I replied, snapping the locket shut, and putting it in his pocket.

“The dead often do.”

“Hmm,” I said, “I know.”

“Did you murder her?” said Viktor, turning around.

The room fell silent, as I found myself unable to look at him.

“It’s all right, I already know the answer,” he said.

“Her last words were about you,” I muttered. “She said ‘Tell him I love him’.”

“Well, I guess now you have,” Viktor muttered. He frowned, reaching up to touch my hair. “Is it raining?”

“It was,” I replied.

“Emmy used to love the rain. She said it was good for the ducks. We don’t even have ducks.”

We both laughed.

“You must be frozen,” Viktor continued.

“Oh, yes, maybe a little,” I replied.

He whimpered, and I bent down to hear what he was saying. His dry lips brushed against my ear. “Do it. It will be a kindness,” he said. “I just want to be with her.”

I sat up and sighed, gripping the dagger.

“Sorry if this wasn’t more eventful. I’m just a fool in love,” he smiled. He held my hand and guided the blade to his throat.

“So am I,” I whispered.

He patted my arm to offer reassurance, and I sliced the dagger across his jugular. I had never seen a man, nor woman, die with such a look of contentment.

Chapter Three

The next morning, I woke up to the sound of someone banging on my door.

“Peyton, get out here!” said a gruff woman’s voice.

I groaned, and climbed out of bed. “Coming, Miss Agatha.”

Bang. Bang. Bang.

“Peyton, if you don’t answer, I’m going to-”

“What?” I said, opening the door.

Miss Agatha pursed her lips and folded her arms, looking me up and down. “Good morning.”

“Good morning,” I smiled, keeping my bloodstained hands hidden.

“Did you sleep in your clothes?”

“Yes.”

The old, wart-faced woman narrowed her eyes, and sniffed.

“What can I do for you, Miss Agatha?” I said.

She gave me a letter, sealed with black wax.

“Thank you,” I said, waiting for her to leave. She didn’t.

“Aren’t you wondering who it’s from?”

“I know who it’s from,” I replied, turning away.

“I want my rent money. You’re three months behind already.”

“I paid you last week.”

“No, last week you said you were going to pay me this week.”

“I did?”

“Yes! You owe me twenty-five shillings.”

My nose started to twitch, as I felt a sneeze rising. I grabbed a handkerchief from Miss Agatha’s pocket. “Ah-choo!”

After blowing my nose, I handed the frayed, patchouli-soaked rag to her. “Idol, have mercy,” she said, looking at it with disgust.

“I’ll get you the money,” I assured her, and closed the door in her face.

In my room, a spider descended from a chair’s armrest, towards the floor. “You are so lucky that you don’t have to deal with annoying landladies,” I said, breaking the seal on the envelope. The penmanship was instantly recognisable – Bothwell, summoning me to the Inservium to provide details of my next victim. I ripped up the letter, and sneezed again. “Urgh! These murders will be the death of me.”

I looked over to the bed, and saw my bedsheets ruined by scorch marks. In a desperate attempt to conceal them, I gathered all my pillows and blankets, and dumped them on top. It is a universal truth that if one does not see something, then one does not have to deal with it.

After washing and changing into a pair of Jacque's trousers and shirt – alongside my boots, fingerless gloves, and coat – I left, and walked down the stairs. As I turned into the stairwell leading to the ground floor, the weapons hidden inside my clothes rattled against me. The poet was screeching away on the violin, and the distinct smell of absinthe wafted into the hallway. For once, the baby next door was quiet. I couldn't help but smile as I reached the bottom step. Despite the fact that three apartments had been advertised when Jacque and I arrived, Miss Agatha had only offered us the dingy attic. The furnishings might have been scarce, and the walls and floor bare, but it was ours.

Then, all of a sudden, there he was. Black hair, tied at the back, with stray strands around his face; icy blue eyes, smudged with kohl; and tattoos peeking out from under his collar and sleeves.

"Jacque!" I cried out, running towards him.

As I wrapped my arms around him, his limbs and torso melted, and clotted into a mass of flesh and bones.

"What's happening?" I said, gripping him tighter.

"You were too late to save me," Jacque replied.

Bits of his body broke away until he disappeared.

"Jacque?" I whispered, collapsing onto a step.

Behind me, a door creaked open.

"You all right?" said Mrs Mills, coming down the stairs. "You're as pale as a ghost."

"I'm fine," I mumbled.

"If you're fine, why are you shaking?" she replied. "Has Peter been giving you opium? Honestly, he should stick to writing those ridiculous sonnets."

"No, really," I said, clinging onto the bannister, to haul myself up.

Keeping my head down, I turned to face Mrs Mills, and offered a half-hearted smile, before running from the house towards the Inservium.

It was only your imagination, I told myself, approaching the large iron gate guarding the Inservium. Clutching at the bars, I stared towards a group of Councillors huddled in the graveyard – Jacque would be safe. He had to be.

I stepped inside the building, and was met by a middle-aged, obese man, with ginger hair, and missing two fingers from his left hand. Councillor Lennox. He grunted, and held out a folded piece of paper. As I reached out to grab it, he let go, and the paper fell to the floor.

“Was Viktor Auldwyrd expecting me?” I said. “He wanted me to kill him.”

Lennox snorted, and walked away.

“You’re getting rid of husbands and wives now?” I called out. “What next, whole families?”

The Councillor paused, turned to me with a threatening stare, and left.

I leaned down and placed the piece of paper in my coat pocket. As I stood up, Bothwell took a firm grip of the back of my neck, and guided me into a dark corner. His hand moved up my throat, and towards my chin, squeezing tighter until he pinned my head against the wall. Despite not being able to see him, I felt the flutter of his breath against my lips. His voice was low and measured.

“Should I tell Jacque that you no longer care about him? Hmm?” he said. “Do you remember the last time you asked questions?”

I nodded, and he pressed his fingernails into my cheeks.

“It would be a pity if the same thing were to occur again,” he said, before continuing. “The poor boy screamed for hours. And it was all your fault. Do you want that to happen again, Peyton?”

“No,” I mumbled.

“Why didn’t you bring back the weapons last night?” Bothwell growled.

“There was a storm.”

“And?”

“I thought it best to wait to bring them back.”

Bothwell laughed. “That was your second mistake. Poor Jacque.”

“I promise to bring them back tonight,” I said.

“Say you’re sorry,” Bothwell whispered into my ear.

“I’m... I’m sorry.”

“Now, what was that about Viktor Auldwyrd?”

“Nothing. Nothing, it doesn’t matter,” I said.

“Good for you,” he replied, slowly kissing both my cheeks before releasing me.
“Now, go.”

Feeling the sickness rise in my stomach, I ran from the Inservium. As I stepped outside, the warmth of sunlight washed over me. I walked across the graveyard, and leaned against a willow tree. “Jacque will come back,” I muttered, sweat dripping down my forehead as I struggled to breathe. In the distance, Councillors were toing and froing, flicking through prayer books, and prostrating to their Idol in the sky.

For the first time since I was a child, I climbed the tree and sat a while. With the branches and leaves wrapped around me, I felt safe knowing they sheltered me from the world.

I removed the piece of paper from my coat, and couldn’t believe whose name was written upon it. Mhayree Du Loire. Why would the Inservium want my mother’s best friend dead? As far as I was aware, she posed no threat to society. She had done what was expected of her – got married, had a child, and kept a clean, respectable household. Although, perhaps the same could’ve been said for all my victims.

At least she would be easy to find.

The longer I sat, the more I found myself imagining her death. Strangulation. Stabbing. Decapitation. I considered the different options, attempting to find one which was more humane than sheer annihilation. Maybe I should have felt guiltier about the prospect of killing her. After all, she was the one who, when I was a child, sneaked me an extra biscuit during teatime; let me play dress-up with her gowns, hats, and fur coats; and bought me my favourite porcelain doll.

But I didn’t.

Dusk was setting in. I tore up the piece of paper and fed it to the wind.

Later that night, I had a small dinner of fish pie at Poska’s Inn, and a shot of whisky at Dante’s, before walking to the Du Loire house.

The building was just as I remembered – cream stone walls, arched windows with balconies, turreted rooftops, and a red door with a silver crescent-shaped handle.

Finding the windows and door locked, I tightened the scabbard around my waist, and started to climb a large stretch of ivy, growing on the lattices. Every few feet brought me to a balcony, whereby I manoeuvred across and attempted to open the windows. All locked. So again I went back to climbing the makeshift ivy ladder, until reaching the top of

the five-storey building. Unlike the houses commissioned by Councillors for the townspeople, the older ones always had secret hatches hidden in the rooftops. Stepping onto uneven tiles, I scrambled onto the turrets, and through the hatch into the attic.

Waiting for me was Mhayree Du Loire, holding out a cup of tea.

"It is either Earl Grey or a good thrashing. Your choice," she said with a Scottish lilt.

She hadn't aged a day in the past fifteen years. Her hair was still bright red and her blue eyes had maintained their youthful innocence. She stood in front of me with a hand on her hip, chin in the air, giving me a sideways glance, as though daring me to make the wrong choice.

"I thought they might try to kill me," she said, with a sarcastic smile. "I didn't think they would send one of our own, though."

"One of your own?" I asked.

"Oh, that's right, you don't know," she sighed. "How very sad."

As she moved towards me, the pieces of fabric hanging from her white nightgown swept along the ground, like tentacles.

"What do you mean?" I said, grabbing a dagger from my pocket.

"How are you sleeping? Any scorch marks yet?"

I held the dagger in front of me, and narrowed my eyes. How could she possibly know?

"Hmm," she said, raising an eyebrow. "I suggest you go home, my dear. Your mother misses you."

"I highly doubt that."

"What did you expect her to do, Peyton? You know how your father is."

"Aren't you the slightest bit worried that I'm pointing a dagger at you?" I said.

Mhayree laughed. "I heard you got involved with some boy. Does he know you're doing this?"

"Do not talk about him!"

She tapped the blade with her finger, before smacking it from my hand, and leaned down to stare at me. "Is that how the Inservium got to you? Is that how they turned you into a murderer?"

"What would you know?" I said, slapping her across the face.

Without flinching, she grabbed my wrist. "Tell me, my dear, how good does a lover need to be to make you want to slaughter dozens of innocent people?"

As raw anger took hold of me, I punched her in the chest. She sighed, rolling her eyes, and tossed the cup of tea in the air, before tackling me to the ground.

Within seconds, she stood up.

Not to be outdone, I kicked her in the groin, and she fell to her knees. As she whacked the bridge of my nose, the impact caused my eyes to water.

I removed a bronze-gilded dagger from my scabbard, and swiped at her throat. She jumped back and twisted my arm before the blade could touch her skin.

I hit her in the mouth, and blood trickled from her lip.

“Not bad,” she nodded, and kicked me in the stomach.

Shocked and winded, I collapsed on the floor, unable to breathe. She pulled my hair, ripping out chunks, and slammed my head into the floorboards.

Every time we kicked, punched, and scratched, we crashed through furniture, or collided with the walls.

Suddenly, Mhayree stopped fighting. “Darling, you shouldn’t be out of bed,” she said.

I turned around to see who she was talking to. By the doorway stood a brunette girl – no more than six years old – in her night dress, clutching a doll.

“I heard noises,” she yawned.

Mhayree lifted the broken cup and saucer from the floor and handed it to me.

“Noises? I didn’t hear any noises,” she said, whilst trying to hold me up.

“We’re having tea,” I said.

Mhayree patted my back. “Earl Grey. Good decision.”

“Thank you.”

“Go back to bed, Freya,” Mhayree said. “I’ll be through shortly to tuck you in.”

As the young girl wandered away, Mhayree turned to me and whispered, “Mama has a family to protect!”

She gathered up my daggers, paying particular attention to the runes engraved on each one. “Nemes,” she whispered.

“What?” I said.

Mhayree grabbed me, and dragged me from the attic, down five flights of stairs, until reaching the front door.

We went outside, and she placed the weapons into my pockets.

“I am trusting you won’t be attempting to attack me again,” Mhayree said.

With a swollen lip, half-shut eye, bloody nose, possible broken ribs, and what felt like a dislocated shoulder, I thought it best to shake my head.

She walked me to the gate, and whistled. Within seconds, a carriage drew up in front of us. When we stepped onto the pavement, the driver – with his black cloak, top hat, and black leather gloves – bowed his head to Mhayree. She spoke to him in a foreign language, and he turned to face me. As I looked up, it was clear that he was no man, but a skeleton. Instead of eyes, two flames watched me as they flickered in his sockets. A maggot emerged from the right one, and dropped onto my boot. He leaned down, and his decayed skull sniffed me, and nodded to Mhayree. She reciprocated, opening the carriage door, and shoving me inside.

“*Tutta va illna dentka. Kusta na va tulan laupnoom. Pukktan?*” Mhayree said to the driver, before turning to me. “And as for you, Peyton, tell the Councillors that death has blessed this house and given us a free passage. Their Idol may not be as merciful! Now. Go. Home.”

She slammed the door shut and walked away. The crack of a whip made the horses rear up, and bolt into the night.

Chapter Four

The next morning, I woke on my bed, with yarrow and witch hazel leaves wrapped in bandages around my body. Beads of sweat dripped down my face as my temperature spiked, causing my eyes, cheeks, and chapped lips to burn. Above me, a spider descended from its web, and swooped towards me.

“Most peculiar,” it said.

“Shh,” I replied. “Spiders can’t talk.”

The little arachnid stared at me, with its big red eyes. “You make the most peculiar choices.”

I held my hand out, in protest, and saw it covered in blood.

“Most peculiar choices,” said the spider.

As I looked down, the blood oozing from my flesh floated into the air. The spider’s legs popped the droplets like bubbles, making them disappear.

Landing on my chest, the spider examined my wounds as a doctor would a patient. “Very interesting, Little Girl of the Ashes,” it said.

The spider perched, as though sitting at a spindle, rubbed its legs together, and produced a piece of silk thread.

“What are you doing?” I mumbled, as my eyes grew heavy.

“Being peculiar,” the spider said, knitting together the layers of my flesh.

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” I said.

The room turned black.

Footsteps stomping.

“Who’s there?” I whispered, still half-asleep.

The door creaked shut. Behind my closed eyes, I felt sparks sizzling, desperate to be released. I peeled back my blanket to let the cool air hit me, and opened my eyelids. Instantly, searing hot sparks shot from my eyes, crackling and smouldering before fizzling out.

“It has to be madness,” I directed to the spider, sitting on my pillow. “I’m resigned to the fact that I’m mentally unhinged. And will commit myself into an asylum once Jacque is safe.”

The spider scurried up the wall.

On the other side of the room, I caught my reflection in the mirror. My clothes were torn, and the bed was covered with strips of fabric. I ran my hand across my chest, bound with tight bandages. The yarrow and witch hazel's mushy leaves and white petals seeped through the cotton. The cuts and bruises on my face had gone. There was no blood on my hands. I unwound the bandage covering my shoulder, and raised my arm. No pain. As each bandage was removed, the gooey, green plant mix slid off my body, leaving no trace of wounds, broken bones, or stitches – not even a scar.

"Perhaps the asylum won't be so bad," I said to the spider. "Mrs Johnson just got released, and she seems fine."

The spider didn't answer.

All of a sudden, I remembered hearing footsteps – someone had been in my room whilst I was sleeping. As I bolted upright, I noticed a scrap of parchment, scribbled with red lettering, stuck to my door. I scrambled out of bed and ripped it down:

It has come to our attention that your lack of competence failed to ensure the success of the instructions imparted to you by those better than you. Failings such as these have forced us to spill another's blood. Henceforth, you have until midnight to complete your holy assignment. We have decided to demonstrate leniency towards you. The boy has not been as fortunate. Rest well, Peyton.

B.

"Jacque," I whispered, tracing my hand over the red ink. "What have they done to you?"

Walking across the room, the parchment tore between my fingers. I undid the latch on the window, and opened it. As I threw the pieces outside, the wind carried some off to far away, forgotten places, and others landed in a puddle outside the house. A woman strolled past, pushing a pram, whilst a little boy trailed behind.

"Why is that puddle turning red?" he said.

"Come along, Nathaniel," said the woman, ignoring him.

Jacque's blood seeped onto the street.

I closed the window, leaned against the wall, and slid towards the floor. At least this time, Bothwell hadn't sent a piece of Jacque's flesh – although who knows how he got the blood. Maybe it meant Jacque was dead.

“No, no, that can’t be possible,” I said.

All I had to do was kill Mhayree before midnight. I stood up, ran over to the wardrobe, and opened it. Rummaging through a pile of Jacque’s clothes, I found, at the bottom, one of his books – *Plantes Dangereuses*. I skimmed through the pages, filled with Jacque’s notes and corrections, until reaching a page, titled “Belle Mais Mortelle Femme”. Underneath was a sketch of a delicate, purple flower with tiny black berries – Belladonna. According to the author, Monsieur Boucher, ingestion of said berries would induce hallucinations, convulsions, delirium, and death. Perfect – and I knew just where to get it.

After a quick wash, I threw on some clothes, boots, and a scarf from the pile on the floor. Looking at the mass of herbs and yet another set of scorch marked bedsheets, I decided to leave the clean-up until later – surely that would keep the madness away. Finally, I grabbed my purple coat, and left the house.

The sun was high in the sky, and the streets were busy with gentlemen in top hats and ladies with parasols. The sort of people who would stare at Jacque and me with contempt and make ugly comments under their breath. Packs of women were huddled together, concocting dinner party plans, and little trysts that would keep the call of the embroidery needle at bay. The men congratulated themselves on their latest financial triumph, and made lewd jokes. The prostitutes were still in bed.

“Fresh apples! Five for a shilling!”

“Meat pies! Best in Loch Fala!”

“Nice, juicy haddock! Caught this morning!”

“Milk! Cheese! Fresh from the farm!”

Walking past the market vendors, the smell of warm, newly-baked bread filled the street, causing my stomach to rumble. The baker’s window was filled with rows upon rows of scrumptious cakes – lemon buns, vanilla slices, and custard patties – tempting me inside. Just looking at them made me all the hungrier, until I could almost taste them. A bell rang as I opened the door and hurried towards the cake stand. After picking out two almond tarts, I shovelled the first into my mouth – savouring each and every bite. Mrs Lovell, the baker’s wife, stood behind the counter, with a look of disgust on her face.

“Hungry, are we?” she said.

“It would seem so,” I said, with pastry crumbs spluttering everywhere.

“And how do you intend to pay for those?”

Swallowing the last bite, I dipped my hand into my trouser and coat pockets, searching for coins. None.

“Umm...”

Mrs Lovell looked me up and down, as though concerned. “You’ve lost an awful lot of weight lately.”

“Things are just a little difficult at the moment,” I said, removing a ring from my hand, and placing it on the counter. “Would you accept this? It’s not much, but the silver should get you some money.”

Mrs Lovell, without glancing at the old, tarnished piece of tat, placed it in her pocket. “Of course. Just this once, mind.”

“Thank you, Mrs Lovell,” I said, smiling. “How is Mr Lovell?”

“Oh, grumpy as always,” she replied, laughing. “The damned brute locked me out of the house for three hours last week, just for eating one of his pastries.”

“I hope you gave him what-for.”

“Well, these things happen,” Mrs Lovell said, as another customer walked through the door. As I turned to leave, she called after me. “Be sure to enjoy the other almond tart. They’re my favourite.”

I looked down at the perfect, deliciously sweet tart sitting in my hand. It might have been my only meal that day, but it didn’t matter. Mrs Lovell was busy packing bread and various cakes into a bag, whilst the customer complained about the unpredictable weather. I slipped into a corner, keeping ever watchful of the women behind me, and placed the tart on a table. Removing a dagger from my coat, I sliced into the pastry, and cut it in half. After hiding the dagger, I bit into my half of the tart, and placed the other upon the counter.

“For you, Mrs Lovell. Don’t tell your husband,” I said.

Taken aback, Mrs Lovell stuttered, “Thank you.”

I opened the door, and a gust of wind caught me by surprise.

Outside, a newspaper vendor hollered at the top of his voice. His ramblings were indiscernible, but I almost choked on my last morsel of pastry as I read the headline on the front page: *Murderer on the Rampage: Auldwyrd’s Throat Slit*. I walked over to the vendor, and, shaking, accepted a copy of the *Daily Isle*.

“Shocking that, innit?” the vendor said, with a heavy Cockney accent. “You sure you want to read that, Miss?”

Ignoring him, I quickly skimmed through the story.

“Not even a suspect,” the vendor continued.

“Hmm,” I replied, whilst reading about “poor” Councillor Bothwell, who found the body, and thought it was his duty to inform the innocent citizens of Loch Fala. Of course he did; he wanted me to know how easy it would be to expose me.

“Come on sweetheart’, are you takin’ that or wha’?” the vendor grumbled. “Tell you wha’, give us threepence and I’ll throw in a *Phantasma* for ya’.”

I looked up at the unkempt fifty-year-old man, wearing a navy flat cap, fingerless gloves with holes, a ragged ruby scarf, and a patched up tuxedo jacket. “I don’t have any money,” I said.

“None?” he said.

“No.”

“You sure?”

“Yes!”

“Wha’ are you ’ere for, then?”

“I’m reading.”

“This ain’t a library.”

“I’ll be done in a minute.”

“I’ve got a livin’ to make.”

“Then do it. Work around me,” I said, waving my finger at potential customers.

The man grabbed the newspaper out of my hand. “If you read it, you buy it!”

Rolling my eyes, I snatched the newspaper back. “Fine! Would you consider taking my scarf?”

“Wha’?”

“You seem to need a new scarf. Would you take mine as payment?”

The man thought for a moment, before nodding his head. “All right, that’ll do.”

“I’ll be naked at this rate, if this continues,” I whispered to myself.

“Wha’?”

“Nothing,” I said. Glad at the thought of getting rid of him, I handed over the scarf, and accepted the purchases.

“Enjoy *Little Girl of the Ashes*,” he said.

Startled, I said, “Why... Why did you call me that? What have I got to do with ashes?”

With a blank stare he replied, “It’s a story in the *Phantasma*.”

Making my apologies, I clutched the *Daily Isle* and the *Phantasma* to my chest, and scrambled to make my way back into the bustle of the street. As I stepped into the middle of a puddle, I caught the reflection of the vendor, eyeing me with suspicion. As the crowd huddled around the market stalls, he disappeared.

In the distance, the clock tower bell struck one. It was now or never for getting the belladonna. It seemed that Mhayree was right – I had to go back to my family.

After walking the length of town, I arrived – for the first time in over a year – at the de Volonté manor. The grey stonework was dilapidated and claustrophobic against the imposing three storeys. Warts of moss nestled along the walls and sprigs of dead weeds tormented the corners of the windows. The house looked grief-stricken for hopes that had been lost. The rusted iron gate groaned as it opened.

I entered the house, but only silence welcomed me. The musky scent of the antique furnishings filled the air. The green and gold wallpaper was peeling from the walls, and the oak floorboards were scratched and scuffed. Portraits of past generations hung in the hallway; all except mine. The fire had been allowed to go out – ashes and soot dirtied the Persian rug. The glass photo frames had been smashed, layers of dust covered each surface, and the windows looked blacked out from streaks of dirt. From the corner, the mahogany grandfather clock chimed two o'clock. My father would still be at work, my sister, Amelie, would be in school, and my brother, Étienne – well, I didn't care where he was.

As I wandered through the parlour, a woman's sad and lonely voice called out, "Nobody is here."

"It's me, mother."

No reply.

"Kitty! Fran! Are you there?" I shouted, walking into the dining room. "Mother, where are the maids?"

Sitting at the table, my mother stared at the ceiling. "Not here. Nobody is here."

I stood behind the chair, and wrapped my arms around her. She didn't respond, even when I sat opposite her, and held her hand.

"Why are you so warm?" I said. "Look, your fingers are turning bright red."

Again, no response.

Underneath her dishevelled, white-blond hair, tearstain streaks covered her pale face, and her bottom lip quivered. Her ivory-laced corset and snow white petticoat drowned her skinny, fragile body.

"Why didn't you dress today, mother?"

For the third time, she gave no reply.

"I brought a *Phantasma* for Amelie and Étienne," I said, throwing it onto the table, alongside the newspaper.

The noise jolted my mother out of her daydream. “Peyton?”

“Yes, mother,” I said, continuing to read about Viktor Auldwyrd’s murder. “Don’t worry, I’ll be gone before father arrives home.”

She patted my hand, and sobbed. “Peyton, my little girl, how did this happen? I’ll make it better, you’ll see.”

“Have you seen Mhayree, lately?”

She hesitated, before answering, “Why?”

Before I could reply, she caught a glimpse of the *Daily Isle*, and snatched it from me.

“Mother!”

“I won’t believe any of it!” she cried, ripping the newspaper, and throwing it out the window.

“What did you do that for?” I said, jumping out of my seat.

My mother composed herself and brushed the strands of hair from her face, before turning to me. “My goodness, you still have your coat and boots on.”

“What about the newspaper?”

“If you wear them indoors, you won’t feel the benefit when you go outside.”

“I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

“It’s winter, you know.”

I laughed, and shook my head, knowing there was no use trying to make sense of her. “You’re right. I’ll go and take them off.”

“No, just put your boots in the usual place, and I’ll take your coat.”

“No, really, I can do it,” I said, feeling the weight of the daggers inside my pockets.

As I walked into the hallway, I turned back to see her staring into thin air and fidgeting with her petticoat. “I’ll be back in a minute, mother,” I lied, heading towards my father’s study.

The door, as usual, was locked. However, I had long since learned that my father was as lazy as he was stupid, and hid the key in a vase outside the room. After retrieving it, I let myself inside, and was taken aback by the putrid stench of stale alcohol and tobacco. Finding the belladonna was easy, as he kept samples amongst jars of eyeballs, tongues, and vials of body fluids. As I rummaged through drawers – searching for his medical instruments, to extract the poison from the plant – each one was filled to the brim with sketches of his experiments on patients: dissections, mutilations, and lobotomies. Of course, despite the countless men, women, and children who died, the Councillors hailed him as a genius.

“Forget it!” I hissed, looking at the room, lying in disarray. “Back to basics.”

Amongst a pile of empty port bottles, sat a bundle of old, tattered books. Standing at the desk, I removed the belladonna’s berries, placed them in an ashtray, and squashed them with a hardback copy of *Gray’s Anatomy*.

It would be easy; all I had to do was show up at Mhayree’s house, feign a few “damsel in distress” tears, offer a heartfelt apology, ask if we could sit down to tea, and slip the belladonna into her cup.

Once finished with the berries, I poured the juice into an empty vial, and – with meticulous care and attention – cleaned up, leaving the room exactly as I had found it.

As I locked the door behind me, I caught my mother placing an envelope on a side cabinet, before sneaking back to the dining room. Walking past, I noticed my name scribbled on the front.

“What’s this?” I called out.

No reply.

Upon peeking round the door, into the dining room, I found my mother, standing with her back against the wall, gazing into the distance. Knowing there was no point talking to her, I placed the envelope in my pocket, and, without a second thought, decided to leave. As I opened the front door, I heard my mother sigh, “Goodbye dear.”

When I reached the street corner, I removed the envelope, and opened it to find ten pounds. Part of me wanted to go back, and throw it in my mother’s face, but another part – the more sensible one – remembered the amounting costs of rent and food. Damn.

The clock tower bell struck three. Father would be home soon. My footsteps quickened.

As I headed back into town, I stopped by the linen shop to buy a pile of bedsheets. I was convinced that the owner, Madame Ruthyard, thought I had either a black market business, whereby I resold the new sheets for a tidy profit, or some sort of fetish, the evidence of which could not be easily cleaned away.

As usual, Madame Ruthyard was waiting behind the counter, peering over her glasses.

“The usual young lady?” she said, with a haughty tone.

“Yes, thank you,” I replied.

Without taking her eyes from me, she pointed to a pile of sheets sitting on the counter, and held out her hand for payment. I removed the envelope from my pocket, and handed over three shillings.

“Until next week,” Madame Ruthyard said, sniffing.

Before I could answer, the air grew thick and hot, causing the room to spin. As I dropped the sheets, and steadied myself against the counter, Madame Ruthyard ran towards the storeroom.

“You better not have scarlet fever!” she shrieked.

Then, standing behind her, he appeared. Jacque. Black hair, tied at the back. Random strands around his face. Blue eyes staring right through me. Tattoos along his arms. Blood pouring down his face, throat, and wrists.

I lifted the top slate of the counter, and edged towards him, with my hand outstretched. Head tilted to the side, he watched, willing me to reach him. He held out his arms and smiled. The blood pouring from his mouth dripped onto the floor, spelling out the word “Peyton”. The room turned black until there was nothing left but him and me. As I stood inches away from him, the blood pooled around me, creeping up my legs, until it covered my entire body. Jacque frowned, and turned his back to me.

Suddenly, in the distance, I heard Madame Ruthyard’s voice. “Insubordinate little urchin! What do you suppose you are doing? Customers stay behind the counter at all times – at all times behind the counter!”

Within seconds, the blackness faded, and I found myself, once again, standing outside the storeroom. Madame Ruthyard was pressed against the wall, looking flabbergasted, and turning a sickly shade of rosy pink.

Jacque disappeared. It was the last time I saw him.

“I’m so sorry,” I said, fighting back the tears. “I don’t know what... I... I... I have to go.”

Slamming the coins onto the counter, I grabbed the sheets, and left the shop. As soon as the door closed behind me, I ran down the road and around the corner, into an alleyway. Alone and tired, I collapsed onto the cobbles, and tried to catch my breath. It wasn’t real, I told myself, over and over. None of it was real. The streets fell silent as the market vendors packed up for the night, and the customers moseyed back to their houses. The sun was setting as the clock tower bells struck five.

Across the road, men and women sauntered into Danté’s to sample his infamous watered-down whisky, and mutton pie. Within minutes, I joined them – if only for a few hours, I would forget about killing Mhayree; forget about seeing Jacque; and forget about the Inservium.

As night descended, I left the inn – stomach full of pie – and headed towards Mhayree’s house. With every few steps, I checked my pocket to ensure the vial of belladonna was safe. I knew she would be suspicious of me, but how dangerous could a girl be – in particular, one laden with bedsheets, offering an apology, and with a craving for tea?

Retracing my steps from the night before, street by street, I carried on until I arrived to find the house in complete darkness – and the front door ajar.

“Hello?” I said, edging into the hallway.

No answer. The streetlight shone through the door, onto an oak table, upon which was a wooden box, alongside a note addressed to me.

“Mhayree, are you there?” I shouted, as I read.

Dear Peyton, take this box to the Inservium. Do not open beforehand.

“This is absurd,” I said, searching room to room for any signs of life. The furniture was intact, and the morning newspaper sat on a desk in the drawing room. The nursery and wardrobes were empty – except for a man’s suit and shoes.

As I stood in the hallway, curiosity got the better of me. I tried to open the lid of the box, only to have it snap shut on me.

Take the box.

Don’t take the box.

Take the box.

Don’t take the box.

How to save Jacque if Mhayree isn’t dead?

Take the box.

Don’t take the box.

Lie to Bothwell. Tell him she’s dead.

Take the box.

Don’t take the box.

Bothwell would never know any different.

Take the box.

Don’t take the box.

Take the box.

Carrying the box and bedsheets, I stumbled onto the street, and whistled for a carriage. Within seconds, the skeleton driver arrived, and jumped down from his seat, to open the door.

“No, no. I didn’t mean you,” I said.

The skeleton didn’t move. I whistled again, but no other carriage appeared.

“You can’t take me to the Inservium. What if people see you?”

The skeleton clapped his hands, and a mass of fog engulfed him. Suddenly, a layer of skin, curly black hair, fingernails, a nose, mouth and a pair of brown eyes materialised upon his body – complete with top hat and tails.

“None of this is real, is it?” I said.

The skeleton smiled, took my arm, and led me into the carriage. A whip cracked, and we were off.

When we arrived at the Inservium, the building was lit with candles, and organ music filled the air. No sooner had I stepped onto the pavement, the driver whisked off into the distance, leaving me standing at the gate, overloaded with linen and the box. Entering the graveyard, I walked along the path, and through the large, arched door, where I found the Councillors, kneeling in front of a fire pit, beside their Idol’s statue. I paid no attention to their prayers, and instead strode down the aisle and stood behind Bothwell.

“What is she doing here?” said the fat, decrepit Councillor Holt.

Bothwell looked around, and his eyes bore into me. He rose to his feet, poked me in the chest, and growled, “How dare you disturb our prayers! That Du Loire woman had better be dead, or so help me, I’ll kill the boy for this.”

“This is for you,” I said, pushing the box towards him.

“What is it?”

“A surprise.”

Placing it on the floor, he opened the lid, and grimaced. “A little theatrical, my dear. We don’t actually need to see evidence of your sins,” he said, pulling out a clump of red hair attached to a decapitated head. Mhayree.

“Well, I-”

“I believe she had a daughter,” Bothwell continued, throwing the head into the fire. “Was she there at the time?”

None of the Councillors reacted – or seemed to notice the bloodstained face melting in the flames.

“I believe not,” I replied.

“Kill her too. Oh, and remember to put the weapons back,” Bothwell said, patting my head. “The boy will remain safe. See what happens when you behave?”

Kneeling, he returned to his prayers.

Chapter Five

Knock, knock, knock.

“Go away,” I groaned, pulling the pillow around my ears.

Knock, knock, knock.

“You answer it,” I said to the spider, which had made itself quite comfortable crouching on my cheek.

Knock, knock, knock.

The spider turned towards the door, before looking at me, and retreated up a thread, onto a beam.

Knock, knock, knock.

“Wait a minute!” I yelled, climbing out of bed.

Within a few arduous steps, I reached the door, and with two hands, turned the handle to prise it open.

“Mother?”

“Yes,” she said, peeling back a crimson hood, to reveal her waif-like face, and red eyes.

As she wrapped her arms around me, she held me tight. I didn’t return the gesture.

“What are you doing here, mother?”

“I was just passing,” she replied, releasing me. Her whole body shivered, as though her bones may shatter, as she pushed past me, into the room.

“By all means, come in,” I muttered under my breath.

Standing against a wall, she couldn’t disguise her pain and remorse.

“It’s lovely,” she said, biting her lip.

“You don’t have to lie.”

She bowed her head, and stared at the floor.

“We liked it, though,” I continued. “Jacque and me. That’s his name, in case you are wondering.”

“Is he good to you?” my mother said, peering up at me through her strands of hair.

“Better than you and father!”

As I walked past her, she reached for my arm. “You look tired.”

“I *am* tired,” I said, pulling away.

“But your nightgown. Your hair. Your hands. You look as though you haven’t washed in weeks.”

I caught my reflection in the mirror. She was right. With dark circles under my eyes, hollow cheeks, greasy curls, and sweat patches staining my nightgown, I resembled something that had crawled out of a grave.

"I *do* wash," I said, throwing my coat over the mirror. "I just didn't sleep well."

"And do you eat?"

"When I can."

Taken aback, her eyes welled up, and she collapsed on the end of my bed. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

"Well, it's too late for that now," I said, handing her Jacque's handkerchief.

As she dabbed her eyes, I spotted scorch marks appearing from beneath the duvet.

"Jacque? French, I take it?"

"His great-grandfather was French," I replied, sneaking round the bed, to cover the marks. "They came here during the Revolution."

"Don't mention the Revolution," my mother said, holding up her hand.

"Why not?"

"It was a sad time," she sighed, gazing into the distance. "Where is Jacque, Peyton?"

"He's... He's... Working."

"You can do better than that," my mother replied, giving me a sideways glance.

Refusing to answer, I turned away, and looked out the window, at the grey skies overhead. "I think it's going to rain."

"Why don't you come for dinner?" my mother said, ignoring me.

"Absolutely not," I said, laughing.

"Please?" she pleaded, leaning towards me. "I will speak to your father. Come for me. For Amelie, she misses you so badly."

The thought of my father banging his fist on the table, demanding to be served; Étienne sniggering and leering at the maids as they presented the meal; and my mother's incomprehensible babblings less than thrilled me. But Amelie would be different. She would sing, giggle, and no doubt end up hiding under the table, pretending her knife and fork were dolls.

"We can have rabbit stew, with creamed potatoes and vegetables," my mother continued.

"I do miss Amelie," I whispered.

"And cheese and biscuits afterwards," she rambled on, sweat appearing across her forehead, and hands turning scarlet.

“Are you all right, mother?” I said, reaching out to feel her forehead.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” she said, waving me away. “The room is very hot, that’s-”

The spider appeared in front of us, dangling from the end of its thread.

“It can’t be,” my mother mumbled, as it descended past her nose, and landed on my bed.

“What?” I replied.

The spider crawled along the duvet, and under the pillow.

“No, no, no!” my mother said, leaping to draw back the bedding.

“Don’t!” I screeched, reaching out to grab her.

Too late. There the bedsheets were – scorched, torn to shreds, and singed through.

“My little girl!” my mother sobbed, drawing back her hand, as though not daring to touch the marks.

“It’s nothing,” I snapped, trying to strip the sheets from the bed. “It happens when you buy second-hand.”

“They go on fire?” my mother scoffed, lying on the mattress. “Or you bought them like that?”

“Could you move, please, so I can throw them out?” I said.

“Peyton!” she replied, frowning.

“I had some trouble with candles.”

“You have to tell me the truth!” she cried, as tears rolled down her cheeks.

Feeling the panic rise in my chest, I threw the sheets at her, and stormed across the room. “What else do you think happened?” I said, taking a deep breath. “Do you think I’m some sort of demon? What exactly are you saying, mother?”

She gave a blank stare. “Perhaps you were too warm.” Her eyes fell to the floor, and she nodded, whilst murmuring to herself, “Yes, that’s it.”

“I’ve had enough of this,” I said, opening the door, and pointing towards the hallway. “I’ll be at the manor for five.”

“What about the sheets?”

“I’ll be there for five,” I replied, through gritted teeth.

My mother stood up to leave. Walking past the mirror, her cloak caught the edge of my coat, causing it to fall. As she knelt to pick it up, she spotted a bloodstain on the side.

“That’s just-”

“Don’t worry, we will fix this! We will fix this, my little girl!” she interrupted, dropping the coat and running towards me.

“I cut my hand, that’s all,” I said, unable to look her on the eyes. “There was a lot of blood.”

She wrapped her arms around me, kissed my head, and whispered, “There always is.”

When I arrived at the manor, the gate had been chained and padlocked, and my mother watched me from behind a twitching curtain. A shadow of a man crept up behind her, and dragged her from the window.

Then came the shouting.

I rattled the gate, trying to unpick the lock and untangle the chains. My mother ran out the house in her bare feet, and wearing her best paisley gown.

The shadow slammed the front door shut.

“Peyton!” my mother smiled, reaching the gate. Her frail fingers unchained the gate, and guided me towards the manor. She never took her eyes off me.

As we entered the hallway, she searched for the shadow – but he had gone.

“Wait in the parlour,” my mother said, taking my coat, making particular effort to hide the bloodstain as she hung it on the coat stand. “I’ll be in the kitchen, finishing dinner.”

“Do the maids have the day off again?”

“Yes,” she said, after a slight hesitation.

I lost hope for an edible meal.

“Actually,” my mother continued, “we had to let them go. There was an incident with your father.”

“Again?” I said, rolling my eyes.

My mother sighed, whilst nodding, and left me standing alone. Heading towards the parlour, I passed the dining room, and my stomach sank. The table was set for six people, meaning only one thing – my father’s mother would be joining us.

The pitter-patter of footsteps ran up behind me, and two arms wrapped around my waist. As I looked down, a mass of honey curls, two dark blue eyes, and a cheeky little smile greeted me. Amelie.

“Are you here now forever?” she asked, exposing two missing front teeth.

“Just for a little while.”

“Oh... Do you have time to tell me a story?”

“I could try.”

“Good!” she said, clapping her hands.

Hand in hand, we went upstairs, where I noticed strips of wallpaper lying on the floor, and water dripping from the ceiling. As we reached the landing, Amelie turned to me and asked, “Peyton, are you still my sister?”

“Of course I am.”

“I’ll still be your sister then.”

“Well, I’m very glad about that,” I laughed.

“You should be. I’m a very good sister,” Amelie replied, as we entered her room. As soon as she opened the door, memories came flooding back of make-believe tea parties, toy theatres, and hours spent pretending to chase Amelie on her rocking horse. She jumped onto her bed, and snuggled into a stuffed white rabbit. “Would you like to cuddle Pippy?”

“You keep him for now,” I replied, climbing onto the bed beside her.

She rubbed his nose, and sat him between us. “We’ll share!”

“That’ll be nice,” I said, stroking Pippy’s ears.

“Peyton... Where have you been?”

“I just had to go away for a little while.”

Amelie’s eyes widened. “On an adventure? Is that why you wear trousers?”

“What do you mean?”

“All the adventurers in my stories wear trousers,” she said, pointing to two books sitting beside a broken doll’s house. “Étienne said you met a boy.”

I folded my arms and leaned back against a pillow. “Did he?”

“Did you meet him on your adventure?” Amelie said, springing up to stand over me. “Was he a knight? What was his name?”

“Jacque... His name was Jacque.”

Amelie giggled, twirling the frills of her dress. “What was he like?”

“He was my best friend.”

Amelie stared at me, frowning.

“Obviously, you’re my bestest best friend!” I said.

“Tell me a story,” she replied, dropping down to sit cross-legged beside me.

“About what?”

“The knight!”

“What knight?” I sighed.

“Jacque!”

“Jacque wasn’t a-”

“You said he was.”

I realised it was pointless to argue, and settled down for the story. “Fine,” I said. “Long ago, in a faraway land there lived a beautiful little Princess-”

“Are you the Princess?”

“No.” I replied, pulling her to lie beside me. “Do you want a story, or not?”

Amelie patted my arm, and put her head against my shoulder. “Carry on!”

The Knight and the Maiden

Long ago, in a faraway land there lived a beautiful little Princess, and an ugly, older Prince. Both were taken care of by a young maiden who did not care for royal titles. All three were imprisoned inside the towers of a giant, grey castle. But this was no ordinary castle – it held dark enchantments. The walls were made of poisoned spears; the sun had cursed the windows, forbidding light to enter; smiles and laughter were eaten away by mirrors; and a ghost mother haunted the chambers. Guarding the castle was an all-seeing demon, who claimed authority and dominion over each of his prisoners. The maiden knew of a legend that said the demon had once been an angel, but after drinking the water inside the castle, he became possessed like a rabid dog, and the demon took his soul. Some nights, the maiden heard the floorboards shaking, as the ghost mother wailed, lamenting the demon’s existence.

One afternoon, the demon and his captives sat by the fire after a large meal of animal carcass and gruel. He called the maiden to his side, and took her hand in his. “You are to marry my brother’s son.”

The maiden prised herself away, and said she would never leave the royal children or the ghost mother with the demon. Grabbing the maiden, he struck her across the face. “You are my property, and so will obey me.”

The maiden punched the demon and scratched her nails down his face. As punishment, she was locked inside a tower, forbidden to see another person.

Weeks passed, and nothing could persuade the maiden to change her mind. Each night, the demon pounded on her door, threatening bribery, blackmail, and guilt.

Finally, one night, on the stroke of midnight, the demon dragged the maiden from her bed, whilst the ghost mother stood back, crying. After he threw her onto the street, the maiden stood in the middle of the damp winter, wearing nothing but her nightdress.

Hours went by, but the enchanted castle had cast charms against the maiden, stopping anyone from seeing or hearing her, as she pleaded. Abandoning hope, she left her family behind, and wandered the streets, searching for a home.

Cold and frightened, the maiden quickly learned that the streets were not kind to desperate girls. By day, she moved from corner to corner, head bowed down to hide her shame, and palm outstretched, begging for food. At night, she slept in doorways, with only newspapers and litter to keep her safe from the world.

Women ushered their children away from her. Men made nasty jokes. Most of the time, though, she watched their boots walk by as people ignored her.

As the weeks went by, the maiden grew sick. Her bones protruded beneath her skin, her eyes sunk into their sockets, and she couldn't move without being in pain.

Everything in the world seemed lost, and death sat, patiently waiting.

But then, just as the maiden was about to give up, the shadows began to lift. She had been watching a lady, posing like a muse for her passing admirers. The gas light was her spotlight, and her red dress became the cape of a matador, teasing his opponent. She pouted and grinned through wisps of chocolate hair.

The maiden knew she could be just like the Red Woman, and so rose to her feet, and mirrored her movements. A young knight passed by, but was not tempted by the maiden. She cried out as pain gripped her stomach, and she collapsed. The knight ran to her side, taking her to the nearest tavern, buying her a hot meal and a bed for the night. That night, he never left the maiden. She was safe, and, for the first time in weeks, believed in the goodness of strangers.

Days turned into weeks, and weeks turned into months. A new kind of enchantment was in the air. Memories of the demon and his castle were far behind, left to rot in his dark kingdom. Happiness had finally found the maiden. She loved the knight. Nothing could have prepared her for what would happen.

One morning, as dawn approached, five men wearing black hooded cloaks burst into their home. They dragged the knight out of bed, and pushed the maiden aside. Fighting back, the knight kicked and punched free of the men. As he ran to protect the maiden, the five men grabbed him, and beat him, until he lay bloodied and bruised. The maiden cried out for help, but nobody came. One of the men slapped her across the face, as another pinned her to the floor. The knight, half-unconscious, pleaded for them to spare her, but they laughed instead.

As the maiden broke free of the men, a kick to her stomach and a punch to the face brought her to the floor. She watched the knight being taken away, knowing she had failed to save the man who had saved her.

The maiden had failed to save Jacques.

“You need better stories,” said Amelie, yawning. “That one didn’t even have a dragon in it.”

“You can tell the story next time,” I replied.

“I will,” Amelie nodded, climbing off the bed, and heading towards the door.

“Come on, let’s go get dinner.”

As my sister left the room, I wiped my eyes, and lifted my head, to find the pillow damp with tears. Turning it over, I called out, “Just coming!” and left the room.

Walking downstairs, the sound of muffled voices rumbled through the ceiling. My father and Étienne. Judging by their laughter, they were either sharing a joke, or congratulating each other on one of their cruel antics – harassing beggars, making lewd remarks to barmaids, or torturing a stray dog.

Amelie skipped on ahead into the dining room, leaving me alone in the hallway. From the kitchen, pots and pans clattered as the distinct smell of burning filled the air.

“*Zut alors, qu'est-ce que je fais!?*” I heard my mother groan.

As I paced between doorways, my father and Étienne pounded down the stairs. Since seeing them last, the scratch I had left on my father’s cheek had turned into a scar, and his beard and moustache had developed a slight grey tinge. Étienne was a foot taller – now towering over me. With their swaggers and dinner suits, they appeared like perfect gentlemen, but, as usual, their sweaty stench and dirty fingernails gave them away. Neither of them acknowledged me as they passed, and headed into the dining room.

“Peyton, are you coming?” Amelie said, poking her head around the corner.

“Of course,” I stuttered, following her.

As I entered the room, all eyes fixed upon me, as I took my place between Amelie and my grandmother. A rich, musky scent exuded from the old woman, and her large, pink gown cascaded over her chair, with the lace of the sleeves covering her bejewelled hands. As always, her hair was perfectly quaffed, and coated with white powder, giving her the look of a decrepit, aristocratic hag. She snatched her cane from under her petticoat, and rammed it beneath my chin.

“Peyton – the disgraced child,” she growled. “I no longer acknowledge you as a de Volonté!”

I narrowed my eyes and stared at her.

“*Putain!*” she spat out, before removing her cane.

My mother appeared with a tray of food. With trembling hands she served each of us a plate of brown water poured over chunks of red meat, wilted mashed vegetables and curdled mash. Amelie’s jaw dropped.

“Don’t worry, I will make you something else later,” I whispered in her ear.

She sighed with relief.

Grandmother pushed her plate aside, turned to my father and said, “Still no cook I see!”

Examining a piece of meat dangling from his fork, he replied, “We do what we can.”

“Do more,” grandmother said, pointing her nose in the air.

My father glared at my mother, and continued, “I thought she might have her uses.”

Grandmother snorted, and he smiled in agreement.

My mother, sat opposite my brother, gazed into mid-air. Étienne, for his part, wolfed into his food. Locks of his wavy blond hair fell into his gravy, and lumps of mash escaped his open mouth as he chewed.

“What is this?” Amelie said, poking at the meat.

“It’s rabbit,” I said.

Amelie gasped and slid under the table. “We’re eating Pippy!?”

“No. No, we’re not. Look!” I said, rearranging her food into the shape of a deformed face. She reappeared, and squealed in delight as the blood from the meat mixed with the gravy, and dripped into the carrot mouth.

“Just try to eat a little. For mother’s sake,” I said.

She frowned, and held her nose whilst chomping on a piece of rabbit. As she gulped it down, her face turned green.

My father had long since given up on the meal. He shoved his plate across the table with such force, that it collided with my mother’s wine glass. She didn’t react. Beads of sweat formed along her forehead, and the colour drained from her.

My father left the table, staggered towards the drinks cabinet, and poured himself a glass of port. He leaned against the wall – one leg crossed over the other – and stared at me.

“Mother, are you feeling all right?” I said.

“J’irai bien,” she replied, eyes glazed and brow furrowed.

“Why are you asking?” Étienne said, with spinach leaves hanging from his mouth. “She’s always like this.”

“Laisse-moi tranquille,” she mumbled, as her breathing grew shallow.

“Perhaps we should’ve been more concerned,” I said, making my way beside her, and placing my hand on her forehead. “She’s terribly hot. We need to get her into bed.”

Nobody moved but Amelie, who hid under the table.

“Which we would that be, Peyton?” my father said, taking a swig of port. “Us, or that mongrel you’ve been sharing a bed with?”

My brother, laughing, almost choked on a piece of meat.

“Oh yes, I know all about him,” my father continued, pouring another drink. “And now you come back... and sit at my table... eat my food. And expect me to accept it!”

My mother reached out to squeeze my hand.

“This is what happens when the daughters are the first born,” my grandmother interrupted, banging her cane on the floor.

“Thank the Idol for sons!” Étienne said, as his muddy brown eyes looked me up and down. “She was always an embarrassment – a *girl* wearing trousers? Those dark smudges around her eyes? Her hair! Is it any wonder she ran off with the first boy who offered?”

“I didn’t run off, I was thrown out, onto the streets!” I replied.

“Well, that is not how I recall it,” my father sneered, sucking his teeth.

“With the amount of alcohol you drink, it’s hardly a wonder you don’t remember,” I shouted.

The room fell silent as my father skulked towards me. My grandmother turned to get a better view. It reminded me of the stories she told me, about how her family witnessed the terror of the guillotine during the Revolution. Behind her sombre face, the slight glint in her eye always gave away her sadistic joy.

“You are my property, so whatever I decide to do with you is ordained by the Idol,” said my father, bearing down on me. “I should have reported you to the Inservium the second I found out you were living in sin with *some boy*! Do you have any idea what the Councillors would do to you?”

“Don’t!” I said, leaning into him. “Or would you like a scar on the other side of your face?”

He grabbed my hand and snorted. “Thank the Idol that the Councillors haven’t turned their back on the family. Bothwell visits at least once a week to ask if we have heard from you.”

At the mention of Bothwell’s name, my mother gripped my hand tighter and groaned.

Father took no notice, and continued. “He is so worried about our welfare. Not that you deserve such attention from the Councillors.”

“You know nothing about the Inservium,” I yelled. “Your time would be better spent kneeling at the feet of a street walker, than at the feet of a Councillor.”

Grandmother banged her cane on the table. “Defiant *putain*!”

I turned to her, and smirked. “The apple never falls far from the tree.”

“How dare you!” she screamed. As her eyes narrowed, the veins bulged from her neck. She picked up her wine glass and threw it – missing me and my mother by inches.

“See what you have done?” my father said. “You’ve upset your grandmother.”

“Get rid of her!” my grandmother added. “Deal with her like you did before.”

My father moved towards her, and placed his hand on her shoulder. “Don’t worry, mother, I’m not done with her. Why don’t you go sit in the drawing room?”

With a grunt, she rose from the table, glared at me, and left.

“What’s a *putain*?” Étienne asked, scraping the last morsels of food from his plate.

“Obviously, all those years of education have not been wasted on you,” I replied, sitting down.

“At least I’ve never brought shame upon the family,” Étienne said.

“This entire family is a shame!” I said, leaning back in my chair.

A gasp came from under the table.

“I didn’t mean you, Amelie.”

My father drained his glass and returned to the decanter for a refill.

“How have you been, Peyton?” my mother said, through shallow breaths.

“What?” I replied.

She burst into tears, and rested her head on my shoulder.

“Yet another bout of hysterics,” my father said rolling his eyes.

“Let me take you up to bed,” I said, feeling my mother’s clammy cheek.

She closed her eyes, and mumbled incoherent French.

“Is that what the boy said to you?” my father said, leering at me.

Picking up a knife, and twiddling it between my fingers, I considered tossing it into his skull. “Is that what you said to the maids?”

My father sat down and lit a cigarette. “They’re just silly girls who can’t take a joke.”

Étienne sniggered, and finished our mother’s wine.

“*Peyton, ma petite fille*,” my mother whispered, clutching my arm.

“I’m taking you upstairs,” I replied, prising her from the chair.

Étienne snorted, and wine flew out his nostrils.

“Do you ever stop?” I said to him, guiding my mother out the room.

As we climbed the stairs, my father followed – his shadow looming across the wall.

“Who knows what you let that boy do to you!” he said. “I hope you didn’t charge much. Then again, I doubt anyone would pay for a common little tart like you!”

“Marius!” my mother cried, clinging onto the wall.

“Don’t interfere!” he snapped.

My mother slid to the floor, and covered her head with her hands.

“It’s all right mother – I’m not afraid of him anymore,” I said, turning towards my father. “He has no idea what I’m capable of.”

He smirked and grabbed my hair. “You disgust me Peyton. Your mother should have bled you into her chamber pot. I would have brewed the herbs myself to help it along.”

“Walk away, Marius,” I said.

“Then again, you probably know something about that,” he continued – the reek of tobacco and alcohol on his breath. “Or do you have a little bastard waiting at home?”

“Leave her, Marius,” my mother whimpered, avoiding looking at us.

My father ignored her, and placed his hand over my stomach. “Or perhaps it’s wriggling inside you?”

“I’d love nothing more than to kill you right now,” I said, pushing him away.

He laughed. “Don’t worry Peyton, there are plenty of men traipsing the streets, looking for whores.”

“Maybe we could make money out of her,” Étienne said, arrived at the top of the stairs. As he handed our father a glass of port, Amelie appeared behind him, untangling a red yo-yo.

“No,” my father replied, taking a drink. “I’m not taking the blame for any diseases she might spread.”

“You’ve suddenly grown a conscience?” I scoffed, and knelt beside my mother.

“Let’s get you to bed.”

“I should hand you over to Councillor Bothwell,” my father said. “Then hopefully they’ll kill the boy!”

All I saw was the blood gushing from my father’s nose, as I pounded my fist into his face. “Say it again!” I yelled, dragging my fingernails down his cheek. “Go on, say it!”

Étienne hauled me away, and slammed me against a wall. My mother turned away and sobbed into her dress.

“Ring-a-ring-o-roses,” Amelie sang, grappling with the yo-yo. “A pocket full of posies.”

Étienne wrapped his fingers round my throat, pinning me into a corner.

“Get out of my house, you evil little tart!” my father spat, throwing the port in my face.

“Don’t worry, I’m leaving,” I replied, as my eyes stung with alcohol. “And I’m taking Amelie with me.”

My cheek stung as my father slapped me. “Stupid as well as reckless,” he said. “Do you really think a loving father like me would allow his daughter to live in squalor?”

“You will do to her what you did to me,” I croaked, feeling Étienne’s grip getting tighter. “And I won’t allow it!”

“Probably,” my father laughed. “But she is my property and she’ll do as I say. And, unlike you, she will be compliant.”

“In every way,” Étienne added, digging his fingernails into my neck.

“Look!” my father said, forcing my head round to watch Amelie, skipping around in circles. “Look at how she doesn’t react to any of this.”

My mother turned to her youngest daughter, and lowered her eyes, as though frightened and ashamed.

“Do you still want to kill me, Peyton?” my father whispered, leaning into me, until his moustache scratched against my ear. “Do it! Let Amelie see you do it.”

Watching my sister, I fought back tears, knowing he was right – I could not take care of her, and would never let her witness a murder. “I’ll come back for her,” I said, giving my father a sideways glance.

Étienne’s knuckles cracked as I bent his fingers back. “Argh!” he squealed, releasing me.

“Stop whinging, boy,” my father said.

Stained with port, and with my pride damaged, I walked downstairs.

“Bye, Peyton,” Amelie called out.

Not taking my eyes off my father, I turned back and kissed my sister on the forehead. “Just wait a little while longer. We’re going on a big adventure.”

Arriving home, I found Miss Agatha lurking in the hallway, outside my door.

“How are you not freezing?” she said.

“What?” I replied.

“You’re not wearing a coat – in the middle of winter.”

I looked down, and found myself wearing only a pair of trousers and a blouse. “Oh, I must have left it behind.”

“And you didn’t feel the cold?”

Before I had a chance to answer, she thrust a letter into my chest, before walking away, mumbling. “I still want my money, Peyton. Don’t care if he has left you.”

“Wait,” I called out, entering my room.

“If this is more excuses, I’m not interested,” Miss Agatha said, following me inside.

I walked over to the desk, and lifted the envelope full of money that my mother had given me. “Your rent money,” I said, handing it over.

“What are those?” she yelled, pointing to the tally marks on the wall.

“Oh, those. Those were here when we moved in.”

“No, no, that’s not right.”

“Look, you have your money,” I said. “Please, just leave.”

As Miss Agatha removed the coins from the envelope, her eyes widened. “There’s almost ten pounds here!”

“Minus a few shillings,” I said, ushering her out the door.

“But you don’t owe this much,” Miss Agatha replied, wriggling from my grasp.

“Just take it all. I don’t care.”

As I closed the door in her face, she shouted from the other side, “You’re an odd child!”

“Thank you!” I yelled back.

Looking at the letter, I didn’t recognise the penmanship, or its red seal, shaped like a bird. As I ripped it open, the spider crawled out from under the bed. “I still haven’t forgiven you for before, you know,” I said, reading.

Dear Peyton,

There will be a carriage waiting outside before midnight. Pack all your belongings, the Inservium must think you have disappeared.

Yours faithfully,

The Phoenix.

“Not another bloody mystery,” I said to the spider, as I threw the letter on my bed. “I don’t have time for this.”

The spider didn’t respond.

“You know I lost my coat?” I said, sliding my hand under the mattress, in search of a dagger I intentionally didn’t give back to the Councillors. One never knows when it might be necessary to slit someone’s – or Bothwell’s – throat. “I’ll get it back, though.”

After sliding the dagger into my boot, I filled the copper basin with cold water. “I just forgot it, that’s all. It’s not like I’m turning into my mother.”

The spider still didn’t respond.

“And I’m sure the adrenaline stopped me feeling the cold. But that’s the least of my problems.”

As I undressed and washed the port stains from my hair and face, I thought of my sister, and how much I regretted leaving her behind. “Jacque would have saved her,” I said to the spider. “I should have saved her.”

Grabbing a fresh set of clothes, I sat on the floor and watched the spider crawl up the leg of a table, and sit amongst the wax of a candle. “Then there is Freya,” I said, wrestling to put on a pair of Jacque’s trousers. “How can I possibly kill a child?”

The spider climbed up the candle. “Now, I know what you’re thinking, but there are some things even I won’t do – not even for Jacque.”

The spider descended from a thread, back down the candle.

“Jacque! That’s the only answer,” I said. “He has to come home.”

I stood up and placed the letter in a desk drawer, deciding to deal with it later. Taking one of Jacque’s coats from the wardrobe, the faint smell of aftershave lingered on the collar. The thick woollen fabric drowned me as I put it on and headed towards the door. As I turned the handle, I looked back at the spider, and smiled.

“Jacque is coming home tonight.”

Chapter Six

By the time I left my apartment, two men were lighting the streetlamps, whistling as they walked on by. Overhead, the moon cast its cold light upon thick fog rising from the cobbled stones.

As I headed towards the Inservium, the rustling of newspapers caught my attention.

“Any spare change?” croaked a boy, sitting on a street corner. As he slipped into a dark alley, his voice – along with the phony English accent – grew louder. “I’d make it worth your while, Miss. Do anything you like. I’m a good boy that way.”

“Pfft!” I snorted, walking away.

Within a few footsteps, the dim lamps of Poska’s Inn glowed through a broken window. The pounding rattle of a piano swept into the street accompanied by the hearty bellows of the customers. Between renditions of old bawdy folk songs, a brown-haired woman, wearing a tattered red dress, stumbled out the door way. Giggling to herself, she pirouetted into the middle of the pavement, with the ends of her skirt wrapped over her arm. Upon seeing me, she curtsied, and gave a wide smile. Even with her dark curls shading her eyes, I would recognise her anywhere – the Red Woman.

“Any spare change?” the boy said again.

As the piano thundered into song, the Red Woman offered her hand to me. Just seeing her made me think of Jacque. I shook my head, and a sad smile appeared on her face. A man approached, and whispered in her ear. She laughed, took his arm, and went back inside the inn.

“Would you do anything we like?” a man’s voice slurred. I turned around and saw two drunken men staggering along the street, and bouncing off walls until they disappeared into the alley.

“You did promise to be good,” whispered the second man.

I edged my way towards the sound of the boy whimpering.

“Maybe you could teach my missus a thing or two?” the first man sniggered, prompting the second to laugh.

Then came a thud against the wall and the ripping of clothes.

Two gas lamps glowed upon the figure of a woman in a second storey room of the inn. The light revealed the two men, unbuckling their belts, and running their hands over the boy’s body.

“If only they were all this handsome,” the second man said to the first.

They both sniggered.

Their laughter didn't last long.

I grabbed the first man by his greasy blonde hair, and pulled him from the boy. As I slammed his head into the cobble stones and kicked into his spine, his bones snapped, and he fell unconscious.

The second, turning pale, attempted to crawl against a wall and hide behind crates of alcohol. I jumped over the boy, and landed on the man, punching his face until his blood dripped down my knuckles.

Amidst his snivelling and cries, I wrapped my hands around his throat and squeezed until he choked. As he struggled, a medallion fell from around his neck. There, glittering in the darkness, was the image of their Idol, engraved within a bronze hexagon.

The symbol of the Inservium's first initiation stage.

"You're training to be a Councillor?" I said.

He didn't answer – or, rather, couldn't, from the amount of blood filling his mouth.

As sheer anger overtook me, I rose to stand over him. Without a second thought, I took a dagger out of my boot, and thrust it between his legs. Of course, like his friend, he passed out.

From inside the inn, a woman was singing a rendition of a quaint Scottish ballad, encouraging her comrades to join in. Behind me, the boy sat sobbing in the corner of the alley. As I crouched beside the curled-up ball of skin and bone, he flinched.

"I don't think they had any spare change," I said, wrapping my arm around his shoulder.

The boy trembled. He couldn't have been more than twelve years old. His heavy eyes refused to look at me as he buried his scraggy, blistered face into his knees.

"What do you want from me?" he muttered.

"Nothing," I said. "I know men like them all too well."

The boy sniffed and wiped his eyes. "Thank you."

"Take this," I replied, handing him the key to my apartment, "and follow me."

"Are you going to kill me like you did them?"

"No. Now are you coming or not?" I asked, with my hands on my hips.

After several reassurances that I wasn't going to drive a knife through him, the boy followed me. The inn's back door, creaking open, prompted us to run.

As we emerged from the alley, a crowd of revellers gathered on the street. In the middle, the Red Woman danced around three men who were all vying for her attention.

"Now listen carefully," I said to the boy. "Do you see the house over there, three rows down with an overgrown hedge and broken balcony?"

The boy nodded.

“Go to the top apartment and let yourself in,” I continued. “You’ll find food and a bed for the night. Take anything you please, sell it, pawn it, whatever you choose.”

The boy tossed the key in the air, and frowned. “That’s very kind,” he stuttered.

“But ignore the burnt sheets – I’ve had a few accidents with candles,” I said, forcing a laugh. “And leave the guitar. Understand?”

“Everything but the guitar,” he said, emphasising each word.

As he turned to walk away, I grabbed him by the collar and whispered in his ear, “Tell no one what you saw tonight.”

His cheeks rose into a mischievous smile. “Jacque would be proud of you,” he said, before running away.

As I moved to chase after him, a pair of warm arms wrapped around my shoulders – the hands holding glasses of red wine and vodka.

“Be careful, *Kulta*,” a woman’s voice muttered. “Secrets never remain secrets around here.”

She pressed the glass of vodka to my lips and poured the alcohol down my throat. Coughing and spluttering, I turned around to face the young blonde woman with a white powdered face, red-stained lips, and gentle kohl-rimmed, hazel eyes. She glanced towards the alleyway and took a swig from the wine glass. Then another and another, until the contents – too thick to be the watered down concoction served in Poska’s – disappeared.

“My name is Saara,” she smiled. “Did you like my song?”

She placed the two glasses – and the grey parasol perched over her elbow – onto the pavement, as her eyes darted between the Red Woman and me.

“What? Look, I don’t care who you are, I have to go,” I said.

She lifted my arms and began examining me – spinning me round and patting down my back and stomach.

“What are you doing?” I snapped.

“Are you injured?”

Shoving her, I said, “From what?”

“Hmmm... You seem fine. Did you like my song?” she asked, tilting her head.

At a loss for words, I sighed, before managing to reply, “Yes, it was very lovely.”

“*Kiitos*. It’s from back home.”

“Is that right?” I said, edging away.

“Yes, I’m from Helsinki. So, you enjoyed the song?” she said, moving towards me.

“Absolutely! You should be on stage,” I replied, quickening my pace. The blonde followed relentless.

“I didn’t see you in the inn.”

“No?”

“Perhaps you were outside?”

“Yes.”

“In the alleyway,” she said, slowing her pace. “Where you killed two men.”

I froze.

Soon, Saara was by my side, pointing up to the second storey of Poska’s. “I was standing by the window in the back room.”

Two thoughts crossed my mind.

First, if she informed the Councillors, then they would harm Jacque to punish me for my foolishness.

Second, she may be an Inservium spy, setting a trap.

She stood, and linked our arms together. “Listen to me; I am going to help you. Nobody else has seen the bodies but it is only a matter of time before they are found. I am going to take you to a safe place.”

“You are right,” I lied, knowing I had to get away. “But before we leave, let me make sure my friend is safe.”

I smiled and patted her arm to offer reassurance.

She thought for a moment. “Very well,” she said. “I will meet you back at the inn in fifteen minutes. I trust you, don’t let me down.”

With her parasol perched upon her shoulder, she walked away. Shining like a dark angel, with a tight, black corset and crinoline skirt, she joined the revellers. As Saara entered the inn, the Red Woman turned to stare at me, before disappearing inside.

Standing alone, everything seemed clear. Not so far away, a boy who knew Jacque was ransacking my apartment. There wasn’t time for me to go searching for answers. The only way to save Jacque was to kill as many people as the Councillors felt necessary. I looked through the windows of the inn, to ensure Saara and the Red Woman were distracted, and saw them both drinking and dancing by the piano.

I ran and made my way to the Inservium.

By the time I reached the old wooden building, it was impossible to see beyond the dense fog. As I opened the Inservium's gate, the trees and hedges shuddered in the breeze, and I could hear organ music drifting through the cracks in the windows. A Councillor stepped out of the building, and grunted as we passed one another – I gave no response, and entered. Inside was a group of ten or so townspeople, kneeling and praying to their Idol. I walked down the centre aisle, and not one person – including the secret mistress of Bothwell – raised their heads.

Standing behind the pulpit, I knelt down, and pulled on the lever. The wall containing a secret compartment opened, and I wandered over and raided the box of weapons. One by one, I shoved two daggers down my boots – one encrusted with opals, the other engraved with runes; wrapped a whip around my waist; and tied two iron chains through my belt.

As I looked out to the rows of bowed heads, I felt disdain and pity for the men and women, mumbling their prayers. They sat, lips moving in silence, staring at the ground as though divine intervention would rise through the floorboards. Rich townspeople to the left, and the poor to the right, but it didn't matter, as long as they filled the Inservium donation basket to its brim.

I removed three serrated knives from the box and stepped up onto the altar.

To play, or not to play? If Saara was going to tell the Councillors that she'd caught me in the act of murder, then I had very little to lose by exposing the Inservium's corruption. Perhaps a little scene would persuade them to reconsider their threats towards Jacque – after all, an angry girl who knows too much is not one to be underestimated.

Someone in the congregation coughed. A child fidgeted in his seat, as his mother reprimanded the behaviour and told him to kneel and pray. A man blew his nose as two elderly women tutted. But, no matter the distraction, it seemed as though nothing could distract them from their devotion to their Idol. I decided to put them to the test.

I held the three knives in front of me, took a deep breath and started juggling. Tossing, twisting and catching each blade, higher and higher – and nobody noticed.

Part one of test complete.

With the knives resting between my fingers like claws, I swayed my hips and arms like the Red Woman. The little boy looked up, wide-eyed and giggling. As he shook his mother's coat and pointed at me, she grabbed his arm and pulled him to the floor.

"I told you to pray," she hissed. "You've been so naughty this week. If you don't behave, the Idol will send you to the bad place."

The little boy's lip quivered as he turned to me. I winked at him and shook my head, to assure him his mother was lying. Nevertheless, he bowed his head, closed his eyes, and started praying.

Part two of test complete.

A hand grabbed my arm and dragged me down behind the altar. As the knives fell towards the floor, I stretched out, and caught each one before they had the chance to land.

"Amused, Peyton?" Bothwell smirked.

"Relax; apparently nothing can distract them from their Idol."

"*Their* Idol? I see that you've completely lost faith, Peyton," Bothwell said. "I'm concerned that if the other Councillors were to find out, it may jeopardise Jacque's safety."

"That's if he's still alive," I replied.

"Would you like his body delivered to your door to relieve your uncertainty?"

"I want names," I said, staring straight into his cruel, vindictive eyes.

"Of?"

"People you want me to get rid of. As many as you like."

Bothwell arched an eyebrow. "Have you killed the girl?"

"No. She's barely six if she's a day." I said, narrowing my eyes. "Even I have my limits."

"Poor Jacque. I'll be sure to let him know."

"She's just a little girl!"

"And little girls grow up to be... Dangerous," he said, looking me up and down.

"It's probably just as well you were never blessed with fatherhood."

Bothwell scoffed, stroking my face. "No, being a father was not meant for me."

"Let's call this a trade," I said, grabbing his wrist. "I'll murder everyone on the list, and, in exchange, you spare the girl's life."

Bothwell, pursing his lips, considered the proposition.

"And I want Jacque given back to me, tonight."

Bothwell laughed.

"Give me as many names as it takes to get him back," I said.

"You do not have the privilege of making demands," Bothwell replied. "Murder is an abomination. Do you know what we do to girls like you?"

I leaned forward and whispered, "You use us, and sit back and enjoy the performance."

Bothwell stared, watching me stand up. I hid two of the knives in my coat, and the third, I kept hold of, folding my arms to conceal the blade.

“You never know who I might kill instead,” I said, glancing towards the congregation.

As I made my way along the centre aisle, I heard the strained groan of Bothwell rising to his feet.

“My dear child,” he called after me.

I turned around and the heads of the townspeople shot upwards to worship his every word. Embracing the attention, he stood centre stage in front of the altar and held out his arms to me.

“The Inservium will always be your home. *Always*. Let me find the list of prayers you so desperately need,” he said.

“Thank you,” I said, with a smirk.

As Bothwell made his way to the vestry, I sat down, and a ruddy-faced woman with yellowing teeth leaned over to me. “He is such a gent isn’t he?” she said.

“I prefer to use another four letter word,” I replied, smiling through gritted teeth.

The woman furrowed her brows, confused. I patted her hand, and she went back to praying.

A short while later, Bothwell returned, and ushered me towards him. As I stood by his side, he slapped a folded piece of paper into my hand. “Three names to start off with,” he growled.

Before I had the chance to reply, he stormed off, snapping his fingers for his mistress to follow.

As I turned into Mitchell Lane, the thick mass of fog eclipsed the detached two storey white wooden house belonging to the Kreeks. With no light radiating from the square panelled windows, it appeared that the family must have already gone to bed. I searched up and down the row of houses for any sign of passers-by. All but two of the nearby houses looked to be in darkness, with the only noise coming from the whistling of a worn chimney. I climbed the steps onto the porch and peered through the glass door, searching for indication of movement. Finding no signs of life, I unclipped a pin from my hair and unpicked the lock.

The door slid open. As I entered the hallway and climbed the stairwell, the Grandfather clock chimed eleven times.

Before leaving the Inservium, I read the names written on the paper that Bothwell had given me. I knew full well that three lives would not be enough to save Jacque. Two of the names I did not recognise, however the third, Rasmus Kreek, was the son of our family physician. At twenty years old, he was only a couple of years older than my brother, and, in recent months, had got engaged to the daughter of a blacksmith. Her photo sat on the cabinet beside Rasmus's bed. As I stabbed her fiancé through the heart, her angelic face was spoiled by spattering of blood. Perhaps she would find comfort knowing hers was the last face he looked upon before he died. There was a time when my mother hoped he would take an interest in me. He was a handsome man, however, looking down at his dead body, I felt satisfied that his death brought me closer to Jacque.

Less than twenty minutes later, I was making my way towards the address of my next victim, Katja Ustov. The sound of hooves resonated in the distance as four black stallions and a carriage materialised from within the fog. The crack of a whip pierced the air as two of the horses reared upwards. As they galloped towards me, the carriage – made from human femurs, tibias and spines – rattled and pounded the cobbles. Each horse loomed ten feet over me; the satin of their manes glistened in the moonlight; and their noses pointed towards the sky in unison. Translucent skin exposed the outline of their skulls, hollow sockets replaced their eyes, and blood foamed from their mouths. The skeletal driver – much like the one I encountered outside Mhayree Du Loire's house – jumped down from his seat. Whip in hand, he walked towards me, blue flames flickering where his eyes should have been. With one flick, the braided leather wrapped around the door handle, and opened the carriage. He grabbed me, covering my mouth, and pushed me inside. As he climbed into his seat, he cracked his whip, and despite my kicking and screaming, charged into the night.

I rattled the handle, banged the doors and roof, yelled, cursed, and ripped the upholstery – on and on, for miles. Outside the window, the moon and stars were held captive behind a mass of clouds, and, as the gas lights from the town faded into the distance, we travelled onwards.

“Let me out,” I shouted.

The faint scent of violets filled the air. As I inhaled, my breaths grew shallow.

“Let me...” my voice croaked.

With the smell becoming overpowering, my eyelids fought to stay open. It was no use – I collapsed onto the floor, and drifted into the darkness.

Within seconds, I opened my eyes to find the carriage shining with a silver hue. As I sat up, I saw a girl reflected in the window. Me. Shadows dripped from her mouth like blood. The girl smiled, her face chiselled and radiant. She teased me, blew kisses, batted her eyelashes, and laughed at me. Her eyes glistened with a thousand constellations; her thick, black curls dominated her petite features; and her ruby red lips pouted, waiting to be kissed. She raised a finger and waved it, as though chastising me, and winked. Then, placing her razor-like fingernail against a raised vein on her neck, she sliced through the skin. As the blood dribbled down her collarbone, she wiped a drop with her finger and offered me a taste. For a second – and I swear, it was only a second – I leaned in.

As I drew back, she smiled.

The dream ended.

Upon waking, skeletal arms wrapped around my legs and arms, dragging me from the carriage and tossing me onto gravel. As the driver stood over me, he grabbed and rolled me over, hitting until fracturing and breaking his fingers.

“Get off of me!” I yelled.

After I kicked and punched him several times – dislocating his shoulder and jaw – he gave up and walked away.

“What the hell was that?” I said.

The driver spun around and pointed to his coat. I looked down and saw patches of my clothes singed and smouldering.

Confused, I stood up. Beside me was an old castle, with vast towers reaching high above the trees; buttresses protruding from the walls; latticed, stained glass windows; and piles of stone and ash scattered along the ground – some still clinging to the ruins.

“Where are we?” I said, turning and finding the carriage engulfed in flames. Smoke billowed into the sky, as the fire spread, ravaging everything it touched.

Three of the horses had managed to escape and stood side by side on the road. The fourth, however, was being burned alive. I ran, trying to release it from the carriage, but the driver restrained me.

Hair and bone amassed in piles of ash; fragments of tail floated like sparks in the air; entrails melted into the road; and bloody foam seeped into the stone.

The other stallions collapsed to the ground, lying on their sides, bucking their heads as though mourning.

“Did I do that?” I mumbled.

The driver nodded and let me go. He wandered over to inspect the charred carriage and kicked a dismantled wheel.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t-”

All of a sudden, a gargoyle swooped down, flapped his granite wings around my hair and growled into my face. Waving my arms, I swiped him away. In the distance, the driver was searching for his missing fingers and screwing them back into place. Needless to say, he ignored my cries for help.

My ankle caught the edge of a rock, causing me to fall. The gargoyle perched on my head, and his razor-like claws dug into my scalp. He bent over, snarled, and sniffed my scent. After letting out a gut-wrenching bellow, he dismounted, and landed on all fours on the ground. He narrowed his eyes, and bowed, before flying onto a watchtower, and solidifying.

“This is a dream, it’s just a dream,” I whispered, lying in a dishevelled heap.

The castle door opened, releasing a dusty gust of wind and musky aroma. The driver approached me, and threw me towards the darkened entrance, where I landed on a hard, wooden floor.

As the door began to close, I caught a glimpse of the horse’s ashes on the roadside. The ground grumbled, and a cloud of smoke burst from the remains. Out sprang an emaciated, blood-breathing muzzle, four sturdy front and hind legs, black shoulders and body, and a flowing tail.

With a strange mix of fear and amazement, I lay, unable to move. The door slammed shut. In the darkness, I heard debris falling from the crumbling brickwork, and the howling wind resonating through the walls. I crawled towards the door and tried the handle. Locked.

“I think I was safer with the undead driver and horses,” I found myself saying, out loud.

As I stood and attempted to make my way through the dark, a row of wall-mounted candelabras ignited, and shed light upon a Great Hall. Vast ivy-patterned pillars soared towards the domed ceiling. Luscious tapestries, spread across the walls, showcasing tales of mythic heroes and heroines. Armchairs, chaise longues, and drapes of black velvet, crimson silk, and plum organza added a touch of opulence to the otherwise gloomy surroundings. All of which were overshadowed by the imposing, winding staircase, sat in the centre of the room.

At the top stood a familiar red-haired woman, holding a decapitated head of her own likeness.

Mhayree Du Loire.

Chapter Seven

Mhayree raised an eyebrow and tossed the head into the air. As it landed and rolled across the floor, it stopped at my feet. Its ice blue eyes pierced into mine and strands of red hair clung to the serrated neck wound. I bent down to pick it up, and the half-shut eyelids slid open, exposing the gateway between life and death.

“Uncanny, isn’t it?” Mhayree said. “Just a little trick I learnt from an old friend.”

I couldn’t read the expression on her face. She turned away from me and removed a three-armed candelabra from the wall.

“Come with me,” she said.

I followed, still holding the waxwork head.

She led me down a darkened hallway, which felt like it would never end. A mouse squeaked as it scurried along the floor and a low hum reverberated within the walls. The faint candlelight shone upon rows of suits of armour. As we passed them, I heard the sound of moving rusty metal. Looking back, I saw that each one of the helmets had turned to face Mhayree and me. She appeared nonplussed and continued to walk.

“What kind of person fakes their own death?” I said.

“One who’s on a hit-list,” Mhayree replied.

“You could have just run away.”

Mhayree shook her head. “They would have sent you to find me.”

“Why you?” I said. “Why would they want you dead?”

Mhayree whipped round and stared at me. The flame from the candle flickered, exposing the anger in her eyes.

“Never mind,” I said, deciding it best not to push the subject.

Mhayree turned, and ushered me to continue walking. “Did they believe I was dead?” She said.

“The Councillors?”

“No, the Undertakers.”

“Well, I don’t-”

“Yes, the Councillors, Peyton,” she sighed.

“Yes... they did,” I stuttered. “We all did. Bothwell, in particular. He tossed your head in the fire.”

“How oddly appropriate. Did they give you any instructions?”

I stayed silent, hesitant to recall Bothwell’s last words to me. Mhayree stopped to face me. She said nothing, but her stoic serenity unnerved me.

“They told me to kill your daughter,” I mumbled.

A gust of wind extinguished one of the candles. Mhayree’s eyes narrowed and she gave me a sideways glance. “That won’t be happening. You do understand, Peyton?”

“I wasn’t planning on trying,” I said, holding my hands up.

She smirked, walked ahead a few paces, and led me around a corner, into a gallery. Within the darkness, a row of large gilded frames hung on the walls, featuring portraits of men, women and children through the centuries. Some appeared to be families, others were depicted alone. On the frames, wide, gold plaques revealed the names of those portrayed, alongside their dates of birth and death. As we passed them, the flames from the candelabra shone upon their faces – each one seemed familiar.

Mhayree turned around and caught me slowing down to study one or two of the portraits. She stood beside me and looked up towards a rosy-cheeked brunette woman who appeared joyous and full of life. Her bright, brown eyes sparkled against the candlelight and appeared to be following Mhayree and me as we walked away.

“Do you recognise any of the people?” Mhayree said.

“Perhaps,” I replied.

Mhayree stopped to face me. “You killed them, dear.”

Taken aback, I paused beside the figure of a woman dressed in an opulent blue dress with hooped skirt. Then I remembered. Her round, petite face appeared calm and radiant – unlike the night I drove a dagger through her heart and left her at the bottom of a winding stairwell. Street gossip said she lay there for five days before a neighbour found her. Unable to recall her name, I read the plaque: Joselyn Warcaster – March 15th 1653 – September 3rd 1897.

The date must have been wrong. She couldn’t have been 244 years old when I ended her life. Brushing it off as a mistake, I moved on and stood in front of Nicholas Bacchus.

Just before slitting his throat, I found myself thinking about his lovely, big blue eyes. He was in the bathtub, smoking a cigarette. The scent of it reminded me of Jacques. Trying to maintain his dignity, he didn’t put up much of a struggle. To date, it was still one of my easier kills. It was also the first time I tried a cigarette. I didn’t care for it much. Again, I examined the plaque under the portrait: November 23rd 1702 – October 5th 1897.

Impossible – 194 years old.

One by one, the memories of each murder came rushing back. I didn’t know what was more confusing – re-living the deaths, or the supposed ages of my victims.

“Over here,” said Mhayree, holding the candelabra up towards a tall, feisty-looking woman, with an aquiline nose, and dark, sensual eyes. “Did you know that you orphaned five children when you killed her?”

I moved closer to the portrait: Eleanor Dubois: February 29th 1716 – October 9th 1897.

Strangulation by whip that took longer than necessary. In the end, I had to sever her jugular, just to end her suffering. She lived and died in a small garret filled with canvasses of unfinished paintings. They say after an artist dies, their work increases in value. This did not happen to Madam Dubois. Instead, the Inservium confiscated her artwork to sell, and kept the profits for themselves.

“No, I did not,” I replied, hastily walking away.

A stone fell from the ceiling, causing me to trip over it. As I looked up from the floor, the imposing countenance of Fredrick Rowanson stared down at me.

Mhayree appeared beside me. “Wasn’t that one a bit messy?”

“That’s an understatement,” I said, closing my eyes. “It took five daggers and two swords to inflict thirty-seven wounds.”

“You counted?”

“He was one of my first. I was testing different methods. The counting helped me to focus.”

“Do you remember anything else about him?”

“No,” I said. “Bothwell told me that no amount of cleaning would take the blood off the walls. I hear the house has been abandoned ever since.”

Mhayree helped me to my feet, and I pointed to the plaque.

“What?” she said.

“How is that possible? 1705 to 1897?” I replied. “That makes him 192 years old.”

Mhayree didn’t answer, and stepped in front of Olivia Hathor: January 25th 1703 – August 12th 1897.

Miss Hathor put up a good fight! I came out, battered and bruised, with a bloody nose and burst lip. Despite Jacque training me to fight, each one of the techniques had been put to the test. Unluckily for Olivia, I carried enough chains to tie her up before driving a sword through her heart. One of the Councillors offered me her diamond necklace as payment. I declined and asked for Jacque instead.

“She was 194, Mhayree,” I said. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

No reply.

“And why are their portraits here? How did they all know each other?”

“All in good time,” Mhayree said, before walking away. “For now, just let it sink in that you killed them.”

Amongst others, I thought.

Looking up at my victims, I felt ashamed. Not for murdering them, but for not giving a second thought about the lives I was ending. Once they were dead, that was my job done. Their deaths were a means to an end. Jacque was all that mattered. It never occurred to me that somebody, somewhere, might grieve for these people.

Mhayree stopped in front of an arched doorway, engraved with an etching of the moon. She turned the handle and opened the door. “Go in.”

I stepped inside, not taking my eyes off her. The room was sparse, with bare floorboards, crumbling paintwork, and a leaky ceiling. Two chairs and a couch surrounded a fireplace. The glow of the fire shone upon two figures – my mother, with Amelie perched upon her knee.

“Peyton!” my mother exclaimed, putting my sister down. She ran, arms outstretched, and grabbed me, holding me close. “I was so worried about you.”

“No need,” I said, pulling away.

Beads of sweat appeared across her forehead as she dabbed a tear from her eye. “No matter now,” she said, attempting to smile, “you’re here now.”

Amelie wandered towards us.

“Hello,” she sighed, tilting her head.

I knelt down to hug her. “Thank goodness you’re all right. I’ve missed you so much.”

“A big fire brought us. And it went phtzzzz... Phtzzzz... Phtzzzz...” Amelie said, stifling a yawn.

“Fire?” I asked.

“Yes, well enough of that for now,” Mhayree interrupted. “I think it’s time for this young lady to join the others in the nursery.”

She prised my sister from me, took her to our mother for an obligatory good night kiss, and left the room.

As an awkward silence filled the room as my mother and I avoided looking at each other. My mother sat on a black, high-backed chair in front of the fire, and I paced the room. In the corner hung a portrait, bearing down upon us both. This one was impossible to forget – my first victim – Rebeka Toulouse: 7th February 1652 – 18th May 1897. Her eyes reminded me of my mother; even more so than when I drove a machete through her abdomen. In the portrait, she stood next to a man, and two children – a boy and a girl.

“Peyton,” my mother muttered, beckoning me to sit next to her. I sat down and placed the wax work head upon a table.

“Where are father and Étienne?” I asked.

She lowered her head. “At home. I could not let Amelie suffer as you did. As soon as you left-”

“I was thrown out of the house.”

“Yes. I knew I had no choice. I escaped with her in the middle of the night. Marius can't find her here. She will be safe now. You too – you'll never have to leave. That's why Mhayree sent you that letter.”

I leaned back in the chair as my mother braided the hair on the wax work head. “You mean the one signed from a Phoenix?”

“Yes,” my mother said, smiling to herself.

I folded my arms and watched her become lost in her own little world. She turned misty-eyed, and appeared deep in thought, as though gazing at a far-off land. “Is ‘Phoenix’ some sort of code word?”

“No,” my mother said, frowning, and avoiding eye-contact. She leaned forward and stoked the fire with a rusty iron poker.

I slouched down and waited for her to elaborate. She didn't. “So are you actually claiming Mhayree is a Phoenix?”

“One of many,” Mhayree said, as she walked through the door, carrying a handful of laundry. “You included, Peyton.”

“Me?” I said, unsettled by her sudden appearance.

“Let's not get into this now, Mhayree,” my mother said, tutting and shaking her head. “We've said far too much already.”

“No, I think we should get into this now,” I said, standing up. “You've invited me to a creepy, haunted castle-”

“Haunted?” my mother said, with a nervous laugh. “You have such an imagination, my love.”

With my hands on my hips, I tapped the floor with my foot in impatience. “What about the portraits, mother? Have you not seen the plaques?” I pointed towards Rebeka Toulouse. “How can that woman over there have been 245 years old when she died?”

My mother looked at Mhayree, worried.

“And what about the others in the gallery?” I continued. “None of them were under 100. That doesn't make any sense.”

Mhayree pursed her lips and started to fold the laundry upon a desk. My mother moved to stand in front of the window.

“Are either of you going to say anything?” I said. Both of them remained silent. “No? Fine. What about the letter? Who delivered it?”

“I did,” Mhayree answered, sorting the laundry into piles.

“How?” I replied. “When I went back to your house, you’d already gone.”

“I was in hiding, not gone.”

“Where?”

“None of your business,” Mhayree said, eyeing me with suspicion.

“And you couldn’t have waited for me?” I said, walking towards her. “You didn’t even try to help save me.”

Mhayree raised her head and glared at me. “What do you take me for? I-”

“And what about Étienne?” I interrupted.

My mother turned around and joined Mhayree and me. “Beyond saving. He is to join the Inservium. His father and Bothwell were very persistent.”

“He is his father's son!” Mhayree snorted.

“Yes,” my mother whispered, stroking my face. “But I'm doing everything to ensure that you don't end up your father's daughter.”

Mhayree widened her eyes, as if mocking the sentiment. The women sat down beside each other. Mhayree lifted the wax head and twirled its hair. “Talking of sons and daughters,” she said, “the Councillors are now ordering the killing of children... Starting with my Freya.”

My mother glanced up at me. “I'd hate to be the idiot who tried to harm her,” Mhayree said.

“Your daughter is safe,” I replied, rolling my eyes.

“Oh, I know she is!” she said, giving me a death-stare.

Neither she nor my mother took their eyes off me.

Mhayree continued to play with the wax head. “Who taught you how to make those?” I asked, trying to divert her attention.

“Madame Marie Tussaud,” she smiled. “She went to London to sell her paintings. We met at one of her exhibitions at the Lyceum Theatre. Luckily, she left behind that no-good, lazy husband of hers in France.”

“Does this have a point, dearest?” my mother said, with almost a tinge of jealousy in her voice.

Mhayree took no notice and continued. “And the stories she could tell of Marie Antoinette and Louis. Just shocking. *And then*, she showed me their death masks she created after they’d been guillotined during the Revolution...”

History was not my strongest subject, but even I knew that the dates didn't match up. “Correct me if I'm wrong, but, the French Revolution was in 1789-”

“Lasted ten years,” my mother interrupted. “Worst decade of my life!” Her cheeks flushed and her neck shone with sweat. I ignored her and assumed that she was rambling.

“And was Marie Tussaud a Phoenix, too?” I sniped, turning my attention to Mhayree. “I’m not letting that go.”

“I always had my suspicions, but no,” Mhayree said.

“And you *supposedly* met her in?” I said, pacing up and down.

“1803.” Mhayree said, stuffing her hand down the side of the chair to retrieve a packet of biscuits.

I leaned against a wall, and looked up at the ceiling, exasperated. “That was 94 years ago. Mhayree, you can’t be any more than 40.”

“What's the matter, Peyton? You look like you've seen a ghost,” she said, nibbling a digestive.

“Is that what you are?”

“Oh, no my dear. The only ghosts around here are the ones you created,” she said, narrowing her eyes. “You see, your auntie Mhayree here, is in her 150s. And your mother? Well she's still a baby, in her 120s.”

I looked to my mother for reassurance. None came. Instead, she dabbed herself with a handkerchief, and blew a sweaty strand of hair from her eyes.

So, this is the asylum, I thought. Here, delusions run free and madness reigns over the castle. Queen Mhayree thought she was immortal and my mother – her lady in waiting – bowed to Her Majesty's whims. Perhaps there was a princess hidden in a tower somewhere, waiting to be rescued.

“Mhayree, this may not all be necessary,” my mother cried.

“Mirella, she's displaying every sign of transitioning. You can't hide from it any longer.”

My mother nodded reluctantly and stood in front of Rebeka Toulouse’s portrait. Gazing up, she sighed, before turning to face me.

“What I am about to tell you will sound strange, but you have nothing to be afraid of.”

“Go on,” I said, wandering over to her.

“We are not like other women, Peyton,” she continued. “You, Mhayree, and I were born cursed-”

“Some of us prefer to consider it a gift,” Mhayree added.

“That depends on perspective,” my mother replied, before wrapping her arm around my shoulder. “Hundreds of years ago, a Hungarian noble woman called Erzsébet Báthory was imprisoned for the mutilation and murder of over six hundred and fifty young women. She believed that the secret of eternal youth was held within the blood of virgins, and so took to bathing in and drinking the blood of her victims.”

“Bearing in mind that the evidence against her was tenuous at best. Too many political enemies against one powerful woman,” Mhayree said, standing up.

My mother shook her head in disbelief. “She murdered hundreds of innocents, Mhayree.”

“I’m just saying, read some alternative books about the history,” Mhayree said, smiling. “And, if you’re pointing the finger about murdering innocent people, let’s not forget...” she added, pointing at me.

My mother’s eyes widened, offended. “Anyway, this earned Báthory the nickname ‘The Blood Countess’. One night on October 31st 1604, thirteen young peasant girls were summoned to the Countess’s castle on the pretence of becoming handmaidens. Instead, what awaited the young girls was a night of being whipped, impaled and having the flesh bitten from their bodies.”

Nice to know that there are worse people than me in the world, I thought. My mother kept watching me, as though waiting for a reaction. The worried expression on her face suggested I was disappointing her.

“The story goes,” she continued, “that one of the girls, Gizella Havasi, lay in a pool of her own blood and witnessed the Countess lapping up the drops as they seeped into the floor. At that moment, she made a blood vow that for every drop that spilled from her veins she would take back a thousand times over.”

Mhayree nodded, smiling, and I wondered if it was Báthory’s bloodlust, or Gizella’s gutsiness that impressed her. Still, my mother didn’t relent.

“As the life began to drain from the girls, the Countess soaked them in freezing cold water before tossing them out onto the snow. If it had been any other night, then the young girls surely would have died. However, unbeknownst to Báthory and her servants, the girls were followers of the Old Ways – they were witches.”

“If either of you two bring out wands-” I said. My mother ignored me and carried on.

“They cried out to the Moon Goddess to save them. On the stroke of midnight, as the moon hung directly over the castle, the Goddess appeared to them and offered each one a choice. They could either succumb to their wounds and die, or become children of the night and live forever – which of course would come at a price.”

Her hands trembled, and I guided her towards a chair. Mhayree kissed my mother’s cheek, and held her close to offer comfort.

“You should not encourage her fairy tales, Mhayree,” I said.

“Still not a believer?” she replied.

“I’m too old for ghost stories,” I added, before wiping my mother’s forehead with a handkerchief. “Perhaps you should concentrate on getting better.”

“I agree. The history lesson can continue at some other point,” Mhayree said, turning from my mother, to look me in the eyes. “The bottom line is, Peyton ... You’re a vampire. A Phoenix vampire, to be exact. Congratulations!” She then returned to my mother.

I burst out laughing. Between the Councillors forcing me to become a murderer, my father thinking me a whore, and my mother and scary Mhayree drinking too much laudanum, I considered my own madness to be closer to sanity than most. Watching the two women, I came to pity them. Inservium law was not kind to females. We were afforded no right to own property, our children legally belonged to their fathers and a mere hint of sexual or imaginative expression could land us a lobotomy. Perhaps Mhayree and mother were prime examples of a bored mind.

“You’ve been reading that book that just came out, haven’t you? The one by that Stoker fellow,” I said.

“Dracula? Yes. Why?” Mhayree replied.

“Have you, Peyton? I’m not sure I approve of you reading such stories!” my mother gasped.

“But her killing people you’re all right with?”

My mother shot Mhayree a look of horror. “Obviously not! But I think we can agree, Mhayree, that those blood transfusion scenes were clearly euphemisms,” she whispered.

Her eyes twinkling, Mhayree muttered, “Indeed. And we know all about that.”

With that, I was done. For all I knew, Jacque was already dead. If not, me staying in the castle wasn’t going to save him. I would continue my murdering rampage until he came back to me. Erzsébet Báthory would look like an amateur next to me.

As I left the room, I heard Mhayree whisper, “She will come back. We are the only ones who can save the boy.”

“Pardon?” I said, turning back.

“That didn’t take much time,” she said.

“What do you mean you are the only ones who can save Jacque?” I replied, prowling towards her.

“Who?” Mhayree grinned.

I threw a sharp right hook to her face.

She stopped grinning.

Then, grabbing her by the hair, I dragged her across the floor, and pinned her down onto the desk. From our previous fight, I learned not to underestimate her. So, I climbed on top of her back, wound one leg around her neck and under her chin, whilst my other leg stabilized my own weight. She began choking and banging on the table with her palms. My mother rushed towards us and tried to pull me away from Mhayree.

“Peyton, she’s going to die!”

“Yes, mother, I’m familiar with people’s expressions when they are dying,” I said, pressing more of my weight between Mhayree’s shoulder blades, and pushing her windpipe deeper into the desk. “Tell me what you meant Mhayree!” She let out a few gurgles whilst losing the battle to dislodge me from her back. “What do you know about Jacque?”

“Peyton!” my mother screamed. “I’ll tell you. I’ll tell you about Jacque.”

I stopped, and the room fell silent. My mother held my arm, prising me from Mhayree. “Peyton,” she whispered.

Keeping an eye on Mhayree’s every move, I released her and stood on the desk. She stared at me and rubbed her throat.

“I’ve got to hand it to you, you’re good. Even without your fancy weapons,” she laughed. “A promise is a promise. Come with me, and you’ll find out about your boy.”

Without hesitation, I leapt down from the desk.

“This had better not be a trick,” I said, as Mhayree wrapped her arm around my shoulder. She shook her head and guided me out the room.

“No,” my mother said, grabbing my hand. She looked up at the portrait of Rebeka Toulouse. “We start with her.”

“This isn’t more vampire nonsense, is it?” I sighed.

My mother gave a sad smile. “Humour me, if you will.”

I rolled my eyes, leaned against the desk, and drummed my fingers on the surface.

“Her maiden name was Havasi,” my mother said. “She was born in Marcali, Hungary. And this is her husband, Matheo Toulouse. He died during the French Revolution.”

My mother paused to face me.

“And?” I said, shrugging my shoulders.

“And,” she continued, pointing towards the boy in the portrait, “this is Pierre, who died at the age of seventy-nine. And the young girl – their daughter – is me, aged five and a half.”

As she stood under the figure of Rebeka, the family resemblance was impossible to deny. With a sick feeling in my stomach, I walked over to join my mother as the realisation of what was happening hit me. “All dead, except me. But, of course, you already know that, Peyton,” she said.

At that moment, neither of us could look at each other. We both knew that I’d murdered my own grandmother.

Chapter Eight

“How could you possibly not have known?” Mhayree replied.

“In my experience, it is best not to know too many details about my victims.”

Mhayree scoffed, and leaned against a chair. “You didn’t read about it in newspapers, or pay attention to town gossip?”

“I didn’t recognise her name,” I said. “It’s not like I’ve ever met her before. And whose fault is that, *mother*?”

“It’s all very complicated,” my mother stuttered, pacing up and down in front of the portrait.

Mhayree stood up, looking like a governess about to impart a history lesson. “None of that matters. This is a Second Cleansing, Peyton,” she said. “The Inservium have been hunting the descendants of the original thirteen Phoenixes and exterminating us like rats in a sewer.”

My mother reached out her hand towards Rebeka’s portrait. She smiled as though remembering happier times. As her fingers touched the oil paint, she stopped herself and pulled them away. “In 1667 during the First Cleansing, your grandmother and Gizella – your great-grandmother – travelled from France when they heard the Inservium were killing our kind. Your grandmother was in the heart of the battle. At only fifteen years old, she was the youngest warrior of the covenant. Luckily, the inexperience of youth didn’t dampen her ability to kill.”

“How many?” I asked.

“Enough. You’ve killed more, I believe,” Mhayree said, under her breath.

“Mhayree!” said my mother.

“Sorry,” Mhayree replied, taking a seat. “But you have to admit it’s a family trait.” She returned my sideways glance with a smirk.

My mother, oblivious to the catfight brewing between Mhayree and me, continued babbling. “Every night the Councillors hunted the families of the original Phoenixes. Men were beheaded, their severed skulls sent in boxes to their wives or mothers. Women were raped, paraded around for the Councillors’ pleasure and finally murdered. Their bones were buried within the walls of the Inservium. And the children – who your grandmother tried to keep safe underground – were kidnapped, rounded up and burned alive in a mass pyre.”

For several minutes, I remained silent, unable to find the right words. My mother and Mhayree watched me – scrutinising – and waited for me to say something. Anything.

“They don’t teach that in history,” I blurted. Those weren’t the right words. The two women stared at me.

“No, they don’t,” Mhayree said, her voice slow and deliberate.

I looked up to study the portrait of Rebeka Toulouse. “Am I like her?” I said.

My mother nodded. “You do look alike.”

“I didn’t mean that. I’m talking about the kill-”

“Let’s not discuss that,” my mother interrupted, closing her eyes.

I stepped forward, and examined the fine features of my great-grandmother’s face. The cold, blue eyes, striking cheekbones, and elegant, heart-shaped mouth. Not a woman to be messed with, I thought.

“How cruel and ingenious of the Councillors to force her great-granddaughter to murder her,” I mumbled.

“We will not talk of this,” my mother said, pointing a finger in my face.

“And now they come after you again. What possible threat could *you* pose?” I said, looking her up and down.

She didn’t answer. Instead, she continued to stare at the portrait as though lost in her own world.

Mhayree, watching my mother, reached out to hold her hand. “We are different from the humans. Which, to the Inservium, means we are unpredictable. We are the unknowable and the misunderstood. The uncontrollable. They use their religion and laws to excuse their crimes. They think their Idol is worth more than our Goddess and God. Our customs are not their customs. Our beliefs, history and existence are inconceivable to them. And the ultimate insult is... we refuse to worship them,” Mhayree said.

“No. We just hide from them,” my mother muttered, releasing Mhayree’s hand.

Mhayree lowered her head and crossed her legs. The Councillors would have accused her of promiscuity for baring her ankles; but for me, at that moment, the small rebellious display made her a heroine.

“Well they don’t permit drinking blood on the streets – only wine, water and the occasional sherry,” Mhayree said.

“Do not pretend that’s why we hide, Mhayree,” my mother said.

“You drink *blood*?” I asked, disgusted.

My mother ran her hand along the gold plaque bearing her name. Through her sadness, a hint of a melancholic smile appeared on her face. As her hand fell, she sighed. Walking past, she patted my shoulder and drifted like a dandelion seed out of the room.

“Don’t you think you’ve kept enough secrets from me?” I shouted to her.
“Bothwell wouldn’t have had power over me if you’d been honest.”

“Behave!” Mhayree said, standing up.

“Does this mean the Councillors never had any intention of returning Jacque to me?”

Mhayree’s face fell, and she looked at me with pity. “I don’t know.” She picked up a candelabra, and ushered me to follow her.

The hallway was chilled, with a fusty dampness lingering in the air. My wisps of breath lost themselves within the darkness as I looked up and down the narrow corridor, but found no sign of my mother. Mhayree remained silent and walked along the floor with the grace of a lily floating on a pond. Her skin was frosted opal, her lips drained to milkyness, and the whites of her eyes drowned in blood. The rise and fall of her girded mulberry corset ceased. She was an animated corpse.

As I pressed against the wall, I feared one day I would transform into a hideous yet alluring creature like her.

Mhayree looped her arm through mine to guide me. “Do not be afraid of what you will become,” she whispered.

“My mother said she would tell me about Jacque. Was that another lie?”

“Do not make assumptions about your mother. You have no idea what she has done for you.”

“I know she brought Amelie here... and not me,” I replied.

“Oh, she came for you. You were out murdering our kind.” Mhayree hauled me from the wall and linked our arms again. “Now, come with me.”

Seeing her elongated incisors slice through the words like a guillotine, I had no desire to disobey.

We climbed a rotten oak staircase to the third floor – the moonlight shining through the large gaps of missing stone exposed the buttresses outside. As we reached the landing, I sensed the presence of three beings, watching us. A flash of dark hair darted across the floor, and crouched behind a balcony. As she settled, the woman snarled and bared her pointed teeth at me. She lunged forward, and a young man wearing a top hat and veil held out his arm to stop her. A third woman – leather clad with snow white curls cascading to the floor – laughed whilst shaking her head, heckling me. Mhayree prised my fingers from her arm as my nails dug into her elbow.

“Not everyone will welcome you here. You would be wise to remember that,” she whispered.

We stood beside a wall guarded by a bronze statue of a masked woman. Mhayree clasped her hand around its outstretched palm and pulled it downwards. The wall opened to reveal a secret passageway concealing a stone staircase.

“This way,” Mhayree said.

As I climbed the winding steps, a pair of flapping bat wings skimmed past my cheek, causing me to stumble backwards. Within the darkness, Mhayree’s voice echoed, “Stay with me.” Regaining my footing, I counted the one hundred and ninety-nine steps leading to the top of the turreted tower, where an arched doorway greeted us. Mhayree laid the candelabra on the stone floor and dusted down her muslin skirt, before inviting me in.

We entered a domed room draped in scarlet, silver and violet rags; silk and velvet cushions were scattered across the dusty surfaces; grey and green furs spilled over a misshapen, wrought-iron bed; a cracked gold filigreed mirror hung upon the mouldy brickwork, and the musky scent of books entwined with the dusting of jasmine perfume. In the midst of the exotic surroundings, a young man knelt with his eyes half closed, staring down at a blank piece of parchment resting on his knees. His head was tilted to the side and held in place by a female’s hand clenching his slicked-back, dark brown hair. Behind him sat a young woman in a cobweb-covered wheelchair, with her lips pressed deep into his exposed neck, causing two drops of blood to slither down his collarbone. When he glimpsed Mhayree and me standing before them, he nudged the legs of the female. Her rapturous gaze darted towards us and her blood dripping mouth broke into a dirty chuckle. She swiped her wavy veil of blonde hair from her face and whispered into the man’s ear. Her stained tongue swiped the edges of her red coated fangs with every syllable. The man shot his head back and let out a hearty, “Ha!” With that, the female unravelled her arm from around his chest, placed her wrist against his lips inviting him to bite down and suck the vein.

“Mhayree, always good to see you!” the woman said with a Russian accent. “I take it this is Peyton, the-” she made a stabbing motion with her hand and gave a slight grimace.

“Yes, and the little madam just tried to kill me!” Mhayree replied.

“Again? Please don’t try to kill me, or I will be forced to retaliate.” The woman held out her free arm. “My name is Natashka Mikhailov.”

I leaned over, trying to avoid eye contact with the man, and shook Natashka’s hand. She caught me glancing at her guest, and asked “Are you hungry? He has plenty to go around.”

The man ceased feeding and faced Natashka. He gave her an incredulous look before shaking his head in amusement and returning to the vein.

“She’s not at that stage yet,” Mhayree said.

The blonde gave me a look full of pity, and peered over the man’s shoulder to examine the blank parchment. Frowning, she said, “Surely you have drunk enough of me to find inspiration.”

He released her wrist and gave a knowing smile. “Oh please, you enjoy it!”

Natashka raised an eyebrow at him.

With a cheeky tilt of his head, he continued, “Who knows you better than I do?”

She rolled her eyes and groaned in defeat. “Go with Mhayree. I have to speak with Peyton for a little while.”

The two began conversing in a strange language. Each time his hand gesticulated, her eyes would follow as though anticipating her next meal. She reached for a grey linen shirt draped on top of a wooden trunk. “Here,” she said, “I made you this. It should replace that blood stained one.” Standing up, he took the shirt, and embraced her.

Mhayree lifted the candelabra from the floor, and, with her finger, wiped the blood from the young man’s neck. Not once did she look at me as they walked out the door.

I bowed my head and stood with my hands behind my back whilst Natashka licked the remaining red stains from her mouth.

“Peyton,” she whispered with a half chuckle. I looked up and saw her impish smile and eyelashes flutter. “Maybe you should sit down, and take off your coat, which appears to be swallowing you.”

I gritted my teeth and smiled. Strolling over to the bed, I sprawled across the edge of the blankets, hoping my bohemian performance was fooling the blood thirsty Russian. As I took off Jacque’s coat, and placed it on the bed, I thought, for a brief second, a low growl came from under the green furs. Natashka wheeled herself in front of the cracked mirror, grabbed a pot of black kohl, and began swiping dark rings around her eyes.

“Am I the first person that you have seen like this?” she enquired.

“No, no I have seen people in wheelchairs before...” I reassured her.

“I meant a vampire who is feeding.”

I could feel my cheeks blushing as I cleared my throat. “Oh! I mean yes.”

“I see...” Natashka said. “And you have not seen people in wheelchairs, Peyton. They keep us hidden away or locked in institutions.” She peered at me through the cracks in her reflection and gave an enigmatic smile before applying crimson lipstick to her lips. “I hear you killed my horse!”

“What?” I said.

“The black stallion you set fire to – Veritas – he is mine.”

“I... I... it’s... funny story...”

Natashka brushed away my desperation with a wave of her hand.

“He is fine. We fed him some graveyard soil and he was back to his old self – before the cremation obviously!” She puckered her lips, blowing a kiss into the mirror whilst sprucing her hair and readjusting the black, mesh sleeves on her dress.

I’m going to wake up in an asylum, I thought.

As I looked down at a spider crawling along the floor, two rickety wheels and a pair of bare feet approached. Natashka laid her hand upon mine and said in her Russian coolness, “Do not worry Little Girl of the Ashes. In 1837, when I was in transition, I set fire to the Winter Palace of Saint Petersburg. The blaze lasted three days, killing thirty men, and believe me, they did not come back to life. That is a true reason for guilt!” She patted my hand as sadness teased away her smile.

“1837?”

“Yes. I remember quite vividly hearing the screams and smelling the burning flesh. Oddly enough, the royal ministers considered the imperial throne more important to be saved.”

“How old are you exactly?”

“Less than four-score... My grandfather devised a plan to tell Emperor Nicholas the fire happened because of smoke blowing into a vent and setting light to Peter the Great Hall.”

“I murdered four people tonight,” I confessed.

“You have murdered many more before. Why should those four be any different?”

“Because tonight, I enjoyed it.”

Natashka looked into my eyes, as though searching for a glimmer of a soul, and gave a sad smile. She manoeuvred herself to sit in front of a colossal stack of tomes, removed a book scribbled with disjointed symbols, and left the towering hoard to wobble.

“Little Girl of the Ashes?” I said.

Natashka didn’t answer.

“You wrote the poem in the *Phantasma*, didn’t you?” I continued.

A slight smile teased at the corners of her mouth. She called me to join her and opened the dusty relic to a page written in unfamiliar script.

“Do you read Bavossian?” Natashka asked.

I shook my head.

“Hmm... you will need to learn,” she said. “It is the language of the Phoenixes, first created by one of our founders, Juliska Bavos, so that others could not decipher our secrets. Have you never heard your mother or Mhayree speak it?”

I thought back to when Mhayree had spoken to the skeleton driver outside her house, and the whispers of the three vampires from the hallway of the castle. A vision came to mind of my mother sitting on a rocking chair, singing to me when I was a child. She would stay with me in the nursery – located far away from my father’s study – and wait until I fell asleep. She told me the songs were a secret, and that she would teach me one day. She never did. Night after night, I drifted to sleep to the sound of her sweet, safe voice, and would no longer be afraid of my father.

Mina da voina hakkan troita.

Soista na dollna.

Sipna kriina voikka.

I could not translate the lyrics, but they brought back lost memories, of a language repressed within me.

“I will teach you.” Natashka said. “Do you know how our families became vampires?”

“To be honest, I’ve been told a lot,” I said, folding my arms and tapping my foot on the floor. “Apparently, I murdered my grandmother, my mother is over a century old, and then the word ‘vampire’ gets thrown around. Can you guess at which point it all became a little bit farfetched?”

Natashka threw her head back and laughed. “Just wait,” she said. “What part of the origin story did your mother and Mhayree tell you?”

“They told me about Erzsébet Báthory. How she mutilated the original thirteen and left them for dead,” I said. “Then some goddess appeared and offered them a deal.”

“It’s not the most poetic version of the story I’ve heard,” Natashka said. “But you understand the basics.”

“Thank you,” I said, smiling.

The Blood Vow

“Now we get to the good part,” Natashka said, flicking through the pages of the book. She raised her arms as though conducting an orchestra. The flames of candles flared giving a spotlight to the wall opposite. Shadows crept along the wall, twisting and writhing into the silhouettes of dying maids. “To the thirteen girls the choice seemed simple – do whatever they had to do to survive. Now, the Old Ways tell us that on the night of October 31st the Moon Goddess visits the Underworld to mourn at the tomb of her dead lover, the Sun God.”

The silhouettes contorted into a melting moon whose tears formed the shape of a woman crying beside the sun. From the depths of the shadows a skeleton hand loomed towards the consorts. I faced Natashka and found her slumped forward, head down and her fingers tracing the words in the book. “Each year, the God sacrifices himself to the King of the Reapers to allow Death to take dominion over the Earth. As the Circle of Seasons revolves, the Sun God returns.”

I tilted Natashka’s head upwards to face me. My hand recoiled as, looking back at me, two black, hollow sockets replaced her green eyes. Natashka’s chin dropped to her chest. Caught between curiosity and stupidity, I couldn’t persuade myself to leave. Instead, I remained rooted to the spot, transfixed with the ongoing horror.

Without pausing, Natashka continued. “The Moon Goddess, upon hearing her thirteen daughters crying, abandoned her lover in the Underworld. With the waning moon suspended over the Báthory castle, the Goddess appeared to the girls and offered each one a choice: succumb to their wounds and die or become children of the night and live forever – which of course would come at a price.”

The shadowy figures turned red, as crimson fluid oozed from the wall and slinked towards my feet. Logic and reason finally convinced me to move, as I edged my way to the door and reached for the doorknob. It snapped from my hand. The lock clicked and I found myself imprisoned. Natashka’s voice echoed through the room.

“In return for the gift the Goddess demanded the blood vow crafted by Gizella be honoured by each girl as a forfeit for their humanity. One by one, the thirteen agreed and so succumbed to their long sleep in the tomb of the Sun God.”

Battering the door, I called for help. No-one answered. I banged my fist against the wall and rattled the doorknob. The door gripped on to its wooden frame. The crimson fluid pooled round my feet and receded into the floorboards. Again, I tried the doorknob, and screamed, pleading for someone to help.

“As the months passed, winter yielded to the blossoming buds of spring and the Sun God awoke in the tomb to reclaim his kingdom. The Goddess, standing by his side, rejoiced in presenting their thirteen daughters, who remained in slumber,” Natashka said.

“Day and night,” she continued, as the shadows on the wall contorted into a young maid under a pair of narrowed eyes, “the God and Goddess waited for the girls to reawaken. Summer green turned to autumn gold but none of the thirteen stirred. Once again the King of the Reapers took rule over the earth and the Sun God prepared for his journey into the Underworld. The Goddess, fearing the lonely darkness without her lover and daughters, vowed, before the God's sacrifice, the thirteen would be resurrected.”

“That night,” she continued, lowering her voice as the silhouette of a red moon rose on the wall. “The Blood Moon hung on a thread of a spider’s web high above the barren earth plain. The Goddess took a sword and sliced the moon into a crescent, collecting its blood in a cauldron.” A pair of pointed teeth emerged from the moon. “Descending into the Underworld, she knelt at the side of each girl and sank her teeth into their bare necks. As their blood drained into the tomb, she poured the moon’s blood from the cauldron into their mouths, giving them the gifts of night. Retrieving a piece of the moon's web from the sky, the Goddess sealed the girls’ wounds with the silver thread.”

“The Sun God, although weakening, embalmed the girls in his waning rays of fiery sunlight. In doing so he gave his last sacrifice and finally succumbed to his yearly slumber, yet again leaving the Goddess.” The shadows shuddered, wrapping around the figure of a maid. Natashka’s body convulsed as her arms rose, higher and higher.

“The flames ravaged the thirteen bodies; raging and undying, but never burning. On the third night, the Goddess sat on the snowy hillside where she once found the mutilated girls. Beneath the ice the earth shook as the snow charred and melted.”

A silhouette of a Phoenix glowed in the centre of the wall, wings outstretched, emblazoned, its head bowing to the moon. Scarlet droplets dripped from its feathers, burst into flames and dissolved into the ether. Natashka fell limp, and her arms collapsed onto her lap. “One by one, the thirteen rose from the ground and stood before their Goddess. Resurrected from the flames and thirsty for blood, the Phoenixes were reborn.”

The shadows scattered. The blood disappeared. The door unlocked, offering me a chance of escape.

But I stayed anyway. Curiosity and stupidity win every time.

The book slammed shut, snapping Natashka out of her trance. “Interesting, isn’t it?” she beamed. “Why are you standing at the door?”

I paused for several seconds, before managing to stutter, “I like it over here.”

Natashka raised her eyebrow, unconvinced. “Were you scared?”

“No, I don’t get scared,” I said, walking towards her, and hiding my trembling hands in my trouser pockets. A drop of blood dribbled into the corner of my mouth as I chewed my bottom lip a little too hard.

Natashka laughed and said, “You should not do that in front of a vampire!”

Unsure if she was attempting humour or issuing a serious warning, I frowned and shuffled a few steps away from her.

I licked a drop of blood, and a sharp pain shot through my gums. As I held my mouth and groaned, Natashka pulled me towards her and yanked my lips apart. “Finally, your fangs are preparing to grow! You have never tasted blood, no?”

“No!”

Natashka pondered for a moment, her eyes, sparkling with curiosity. Grinning, she concluded, “Well, you will taste plenty now.” She spun her chair and heaved another book onto her lap. “Come, there is more to see.”

“I’m not sure I can take much more,” I said.

“Oh, but it’s fun,” Natashka replied. “I never get to impart my wealth of knowledge. People just aren’t interested anymore.”

“Well... Now, this is just a thought... Have you considered not doing the freaky magic show?”

Natashka, taken aback, stared at me.

“No? Never mind,” I said. With my gums pulsing, I collapsed into an oversized armchair.

Natashka settled beside me and threw a cushion onto my chest. “Here, bite down on this. It helps to break them through.”

As I sank my teeth into the soft velvet, my mouth throbbed with a dull pain – a good pain – the kind of pain that means relief is on its way.

“How much of your family history do you know?” Natashka asked.

Muffling my mouth against the cushion, I answered, “My mother is an oddity, and my father is a complete fu-”

“We start with the original Phoenixes.” Natashka interrupted. She unclasped a silver moon shaped buckle which bound the leather book. Rifling through the worn corners of the pages, she stopped and showed me the sketched portraits of the thirteen women.

“This is Gizella Havasi, a direct ancestor of yours. After marrying a Hungarian artist she moved to France and began a French line of vampires. They had three daughters – including your grandmother, Rebeka. Your family settled in a little town outside Paris until your mother was instructed by her Aunt Colette to come to Loch Fala.”

“Instructed? I thought she was born here.”

“No, she only arrived twenty-five years ago and married your father a year before you were born. As your paternal grandparents were also French it made for an easy match.”

“Has everything about that woman been a lie?”

Natashka grimaced, and replied, “It’s uncertain. Mhayree and she are very secretive about it all.”

She held out her hand to halt any further interruptions and continued. “These women here are Lena Vadas, Lilianna Dali, Frida Katona, Nikolett Fodor and Renata Vida. Nobody knows what has happened to their lines. The Inservium killed many of their descendants and most of those who survived went into hiding. Juliska Bavos as you already know created our language and wrote many of the books you see here. Her line remained in Loch Fala and fought the Inservium during the first cleansing. Juliska died in 1703 trying to save her son, Viktor Auldwyrd from the Councillors.”

“Viktor?” I said, flinching.

“Yes Peyton, we all know you killed him,” Natashka sighed.

“Honestly, he didn’t put up much of a fight!”

“He and his wife had been infiltrating the Inservium for decades. After you killed her perhaps he thought he didn’t have any more reasons to live,” she said, raising her voice. She pointed to a picture of a round faced woman and continued, “This is Ilona Samsa. Somehow she ended up in Scotland and gave birth to four daughters who started the Scottish, Irish, English and Welsh lines of vampires. Mhayree is a direct descendant. There is a rumour that Ilona is still alive somewhere but nobody has seen her in seventy years-”

“I don’t mean to be rude,” I interrupted.

“Go on.”

“This is a little overwhelming. There’s too much to take in all at once. The Cleansing. The blood drinking. The mythology.”

“History, not mythology,” Natashka scowled.

“History... Not mythology...” I said, sighing. “And now you want me to memorise the entire family tree?”

“I struggle to see the problem.”

“My head is pounding,” I said, massaging my temples. “I think I’m getting a migraine.”

“And yet, you are still here. It would seem your need for the truth is greater than a slight headache.”

I said nothing. She was right. Damn.

“Everything you need to know is right here in this book,” Natashka said.

“Remember what you need to know at this moment, and, if need be, you can return to read again. The pages will remain the same... Perhaps a slice of *pirog* would help?”

“I don’t know what that is.”

“Oh, it is delightful! It is a round – sometimes oblong – piece of dough filled with berries, nuts, or if you prefer a more savoury variety, cottage cheese. Let me check if I have a piece lying around.”

“I am honestly fine,” I said, holding up my hand.

“No, no. I have a craving now. You keep reading,” Natashka said, manoeuvring herself to sit beside an apothecary table.

I continued looking through the book and found the portraits of two waif-like women. Noemi and Emilia Bokori. The sisters travelled from Hungary to Italy to start a range of vineyards to produce their own red wine.

“Well, they claimed it was red wine...” Natashka muttered.

Between them they raised fifteen sons and daughters, most of whom kept to Western Europe. A couple travelled to the United States and New Zealand, but they preferred hiding from civilisation.

Natashka squealed with excitement as I turned the page to find a portrait of a blonde, thin faced woman with a regal countenance. “Kamilla Nemes, my great-grandmother. Mhayree tells me you’ve been using her weapons.”

“When?”

“When you tried to kill her.”

“Oh!” I said, trying to focus on the book.

“What were they like?” Natashka said.

I gave her a sideways glance, and smiled. “They were very good daggers.”

Natashka squealed again. “Excellent! Anyway,” she continued, “Kamilla moved to Russia where she married into the Dvoryanstvo – our nobility – and became a Grand Duchess. My family and I spent our summers with the Tsar and his family in the Alexander Palace-”

“How do you know what pages I’m reading?” I said.

“I just do. Remember, our founders were witches as well as vampires,” she said, winking.

She turned to face me, and I narrowed my eyes at her. “You’re so suspicious,” she laughed.

“True,” I said. “So, are you a Russian Princess?”

“I’m a Duchess! I could have had you executed for not curtsying when you came in, but...” she shrugged.

“Mhayree didn’t curtsy either...” I said.

“Yes, but she already owns a severed head,” she replied. “Keep reading.”

I flicked over the page and found Dorika Jonas – the oldest member of the coven.

“After the coven parted ways,” Natashka said, “she left Loch Fala and established the Scandinavian line of Phoenixes. You’ll also see pictures of her children – twin boys who died of Tuberculosis, and a daughter.”

“Died? Aren’t vampires immune to illness?”

“The boys weren’t vampires. When a female is born into a Phoenix family she usually transitions naturally into a vampire – not always of course. My sister, for instance, was not destined to become a Phoenix. The males, however, have to be bitten by a female to induce the transformation.”

“And their mother didn’t bite them to save them?” I said.

“It was too late.” Natashka manoeuvred herself once again to sit beside me. “I do not have any leftover *pirog*,” she huffed. “My profound apologies.”

“Shame. Perhaps some other time,” I replied, without looking up from the book.

A spider crawled over Natashka’s hand. Instead of swiping it away, she let it crawl onto the arm of her chair, dangle from its web until it reached the floor, and scurry behind the fireplace. She lifted the book from my lap, and continued, “And finally we come to Katalin Arany. The dark haired beauty who weaves destruction wherever she goes. During the First Cleansing, there arose a rivalry between Katalin and Gizella as to who should lead the coven into war. Gizella wanted a humane method whereby the Councillors would be held accountable for their crimes. Katalin had other ideas. When the Councillors murdered her husband and three of her four children, she retaliated by slaughtering innocent

townspeople. And so, the other Phoenixes had no choice but to exile her, along with her son and unborn child.”

Natashka took my hand, traced a finger along an invisible line connecting Katalin and Gizella, and continued. “Before leaving, Katalin, captured Gizella and sliced open a vein from both their wrists. As the blood merged on the floor, Katalin cursed the descendants of her rival and vowed that if Havasi and Arany bloodlines united, misfortune would follow the lovers for all time.”

Natashka stared, prompting me to react.

“What?” I said.

She rolled her eyes and flicked through the pages of the Arany family tree. “Katalin’s offspring,” she indicated. “Two sons, one died at the age of nineteen with smallpox. The other was transformed into a Phoenix and married a Comtesse at the French court. They have one surviving son who secretly married a peasant girl and joined the Revolution. They too have a son who married twice. His second wife is a Phoenix on the Emilia Bokori side. In 1872 they had their first son. Jacque.”

Chapter Nine

December 1896

“If your father could see you now, he would have a fit!” Jacques laughed, watching me doing pull-ups on a timber beam. “How are you doing up there?”

“Are you still keeping count?” I said, sweat dripping down my face. “My arms are burning.”

“You’re either at twenty-six or twenty-seven.”

“Jacques, I only asked you to do one thing!”

“Indeed. But, there is something rather distracting about a lady exercising in her corset and *my* trousers.”

“Remember, dearest, this was *your* idea.” Lowering and thickening my voice into a French accent, I attempted my best Jacques impersonation and said, “There are many hidden dangers in the world, Peyton. There may come a time when you must defend yourself.”

Jacques took a cigarette from behind his ear and began searching for matches. The floor became a mess of scrap paper and books as he emptied drawers; pillows were scattered from one end of the bed to the other; trouser and coat pockets were turned inside out; and the armchair sides he scraped out offered no more than a few crumbs. I tried to remain focussed on my task but couldn’t help enjoy watching the furrowed lines on his forehead deepen.

“Right, where have you hidden them?” he asked, at last.

“You’ll have to come find them.”

“Sweetheart!”

“I’m sorry but I’m very busy right now doing pull-ups in *my* corset,” I groaned, pulling my chin towards the beam.

“Have you hidden the matches down your corset?” Jacques laughed.

“There is a distinct possibility that’s what happened,” I said.

Jacques’s smile widened, and the room filled with his hearty, boyish cackle. He lowered his head, and a shadow cast from the beam covered his face. Despite hanging fifteen feet from the floor, I sensed his shy blue eyes glancing up at me. He strolled over to our writing desk, removed a black band from one of the drawers and tied up his wavy hair. By this point, as my muscles seized, and my already aching arms started to cramp, all I wanted to do was give up. But I didn’t.

“You’re doing well,” Jacque said.

“For my first time?”

“For any time.”

Two hours had passed with Jacque helping me climb up and down the timber posts. Each time I hung from the beam, completing a set of five pull ups, until I was strong enough to attempt thirty. I must have looked a wreck; hair clinging to my head, eyeliner running down my cheeks and sweat dripping off my nose.

Jacque ran towards one of the posts, threw his arms and legs around the timber, scaled upwards, and bounced onto the beam. His acrobatics used to baffle me, however, over the past few months I had grown accustomed to his peculiar movements around our home.

“So, are we going to play?” he asked, dropping his legs and hanging by his hands.

“Always!” I replied, managing a sly grin through the pain. “As you failed to accurately keep count, I have decided to start from scratch.”

Jacque raised an eyebrow, impressed. “Just like we discussed – make sure your hands are shoulder width apart and facing away from you.”

“Uh huh.”

“Now ease your full body downwards until your arms are completely stretched.”

“You do know you’ve already told me this?” I said.

Jacque smiled. “And pull yourself up till your chin is over the beam.”

Although exhausted, I pushed through the agony it took to tense my upper arms. Fingers clenched until the knuckles turned white, face straining, teeth gritted, I was determined not to be beaten.

"Just a few more, Peyton," Jacque promised.

"One... Two... Three..." I counted, hoping each pull up brought me to the last. "Four... Five... Six..."

The extra sting came when, I turned to Jacque and noticed he wasn't breaking a sweat.

"Can you take any more?" he said.

"Oh, definitely!" I lied, blowing a strand of hair out of my eyes.

I could hear him laughing whilst studying me. "Up to ten."

Bastard.

It took whole-hearted defiance to complete the final set. Tears rolled down my face, disguising themselves as sweat. Nothing would break me.

“Eight... Nine... Ten,” I puffed, dragging myself upwards for the last time. The relief of resting my chin on the beam did nothing to ease the pain.

“Now, to get down,” Jacque said. I hadn’t factored this into the situation. “I know it hurts, but I need you to listen. Watch what I’m about to do.”

He swung his legs backwards, forwards and over his head, let go of the beam, somersaulted into the air, and landed in a squat on the floor.

“Your turn,” he encouraged.

My first instinct was to shut my eyes and pretend the challenge didn’t exist. I had trusted Jacque this far; through the bruises and lashes from learning hand to hand combat with bamboo canes; the afternoons of sprinting in the pouring rain, skidding through puddles and spraining both my ankles; the bouts of stomach cramps and hallucinations trying to build an immunity against poisonous plants.

“What if I do it wrong?” I said.

“Then I’ll get you a cold compress.”

“And you know where I’d tell you to shove it.”

I looked down to the floor and scrutinised the drop. Jacque was looking up at me and drumming the floorboards with his fingers. It wasn’t too far, and a broken leg can always heal.

My hands, slippery with sweat, started sliding from the timber. I can do this, I thought, just swing your legs. So, I did.

“Bend your knees,” Jacque called.

I complied. Feeling brave, I took a deep breath and released my fingers, letting go of the beam. The nerves in my stomach fluttered like moths attracted to a hungry, all consuming flame.

Something was wrong. A blur of tattoo-covered limbs, unruly hair and naked torso ran across the room, and tossed a mattress onto the floor. A thud. Then pain. Then there was darkness.

“Peyton ... Peyton, are you alright?” I heard Natashka shout, patting my hand.

“Hmm? Oh yes,” I said, gripping the ancient book of family trees which sat on my lap. “What happened?”

“You seemed to go into a little daydream,” Natashka replied. “I’ve been sitting here for ages waiting on you snapping out of it.”

“Sorry,” I said. “I was just thinking back.”

“To Jacque?”

“And me.”

Natashka frowned. “Perhaps it was too soon to have let you see the book.”

Part of me regretted opening the book. As I flicked through the pages, I knew I was reading family histories of which I was not a part, and yet, they defined me. It was impossible to deny the sketched portrait was of Jacque; the scrunched dark hair, the kohl eyeliner, the protruding cheekbones - it was him for certain. Scrawled beneath his name – Jacque Angou – lay his date and place of birth, and his parentage. As he had said, his family had been part of the French aristocracy, residing in Paris. His great-grandfather had been given the title of Comte to compensate for his wife being a mistress of the king. This little snippet of ancestral history, I noted, did not feature in the pages of the family tree.

With each page of the Angou family tree, I came to know his mother, Sabine, his father, Roux and his paternal grandparents, Beatrice and Georges. Beside Jacque there was a picture of a young boy, Rémy.

“I know him!” I blurted out.

“Who?” said Natashka.

“Him,” I replied, pointing at the picture. “I saved him last night.”

“You must be mistaken. The family rarely leave France – except for Jacque, apparently.”

“No, I can guarantee you that boy is on the streets of Loch Fala,” I said. “Or he might be in my apartment.”

Natashka stared at me. “You let a stranger into your apartment?”

“I felt sorry for him,” I replied. “I show kindness – sometimes.”

“This can’t be a coincidence,” Natashka said. “Money is no object to the Angous. Why would he need to be homeless? There must be some discord within the family.”

I frowned, thinking of the frightened, child who sat on the street, offering to exchange his body for mere pennies. “He’s been sleeping rough for a long time.”

“How do you know?” Natashka asked.

“I just do.”

In the picture, Rémy’s matted dark hair was transformed into thick shoulder length curls and his hollow cheekbones appeared plump and rosy. His eyes were wide with youthful expectation.

“What did you save him from?”

I failed to answer.

“Jacque has a brother?” I whispered to myself.

“He never told you?” Natashka answered.

“No... No, he didn’t,” I said, saddened by yet another secret. As I ran my fingers over the image of Jacque’s face, I wondered whether I’d truly known the young man who, out of nowhere, entered my life. Little inconsistencies to which I had once been blind revealed themselves. For instance, the reluctance to discuss his childhood in any detailed manner. Then there was his vehement revulsion of the Councillor’s practices despite claiming to have had no dealings with the Inservium. It also occurred to me that for a man who grew up in France, he knew very little of its language. On the few occasions that I pressed for information he diverted my attention with self-deprecating jokes or suggested a spontaneous trips to the artisan café where we’d end up sipping absinthe till the early hours of the morning.

“Does Jacque know what he is?”

“*Who* he is, would be a better term. And yes, I believe he does,” Natashka said.

“Does he know who I am? Does he know about the curse?” I asked with a slight shrill to my voice.

“That, I am uncertain of.”

The thoughts of mine and Jacque’s last training session lingered in the back of my mind. “*There are many hidden dangers in the world... There may come a time when you must defend yourself.*” How very prophetic of him. Or perhaps, like an excellent chess master, he planned how to manoeuvre and sacrifice his pawn to make way for his all-powerful Queen Katalin.

I scraped my fingernails across the picture of the Arany matriarch, Katalin, Comtesse d’Angou. A faded image of her husband lingered below her own. As I stared into her face it was easy to imagine her as vindictive, with sulphur running in her veins. I hated her with a deep guttural revulsion. We existed in the same world, but like two positively charged magnets our blood repelled each other.

Most of all I despised her for being a part of Jacque.

Natashka’s voice trickled into my head, “You do not need permission to be angry.”

“This isn’t anger,” I mumbled.

“Then what is it?” Natashka asked, peering beneath my bowed head. She cupped her hand under my chin and brought it up till we faced each other. “You need to say the words, Peyton.”

“Hurt. This is hurt,” I choked.

Natashka gave a sad pitying smile before releasing my chin. As I brought my hands up to cover my face, I felt the heavy weight of the book being slid off my lap.

"I will only ever tell you this once, Peyton. You can cry, you can scream and you can get pissed off. But you never... ever... let anyone defeat you!"

Now I was angry.

"I am not defeated," I snapped.

Natashka raised an eyebrow, and reached for a silver gilded vanity mirror sitting on a table. Turning it towards me, she said, "You look defeated."

Such a polite understatement. The girl's reflection was not of Jacque's Peyton. In the mirror was a scraggy little lamb with doe eyes and early signs of wrinkles around her mouth.

I shoved the mirror into Natashka's lap, and straightened my back and shoulders in defiance. "Beauty isn't everything! And what is the point of keeping up appearances if I am alone?"

Natashka shook her head and rolled her eyes. She wheeled herself in front of a large trunk sitting beside her bed. As she removed piles of books, and what looked to be various whips and blindfolds, she threw them onto a pile of furs lying on her bed. The ominous growl which I'd heard earlier sounded again.

"What is that?" I asked as Natashka opened the lid.

"Oh, nothing for you to worry about," she replied, with her arms buried deep inside the trunk. "*Ura!* Here it is!"

Out came a mass of purple velvet with familiar lilac ivy embroidered throughout. As Natashka gathered the material two ruffled sleeves escaped her clutches and flopped over her knees.

"My coat," I said.

Natashka sat beside me and gently placed the coat onto my lap. "Your mother brought it with her. She tried everything to get the blood stain out, but in the end she replaced the fabric."

Unfolding the soft material I found a small patch a shade or two darker than the original velvet stitched into the coat. The edging, laced with silver thread merged with the embroidered outline of a crescent moon cast behind two interlocking initials – M for Mirella and P for Peyton. My mother and I forever entwined.

"I'll leave you alone for a while, let you gather your thoughts," Natashka said, moving to the door. "Come downstairs when you are ready. Oh, and if you do decide to change... perhaps consider a wash at least... then be sure to do so behind the screen."

I searched around, checking the walls, ceiling, and stacks of books for signs of anyone she thought would see or smell me.

“There was no need to look so confused,” Natashka laughed. “In this room you can never be sure who may be watching.”

“Who? Never mind. How will you get downstairs?” I asked.

“One strange thing at a time, I think. You can’t imagine what surprises are lurking round the corner. That reminds me, when you get to the ground floor, take the second passage to the left and turn the corner. You will find me waiting in one of the rooms.” As her words faded, she left the room, closing the door behind her.

It only took a few moments of solitude to make me miss the Russian ice maiden. Her presence made the room feel less vast and cold. She brought normalcy to being a Phoenix – a vampire – a blood drinker. She gave hope to me surviving the transition. However, remembering the vagueness of her directions, it occurred to me that I still didn’t know where I was to meet her.

I draped the coat over my arm, stood from the armchair, sighed at the absurdity of wishful thinking, and walked behind the screen. A copper basin and jug filled with water sat waiting on top of a stool. Behind it, propped against the wall, was a cracked, full-length mirror. I hung up the coat, and, tracing the lines of ivy with my fingertips, thought of Jacque. As the old phrase goes, there’s a fine line between love and hate. A very fine line indeed. Despite his lies and secrets, I couldn’t help but miss him. I rolled up my sleeves and poured the freezing water. My hands turned raw against the bitterness.

Doubt is such an odd thing. Reading one page of an old book had made me question everything I knew about Jacque. A few untold secrets and I was no longer his. A few lines on a family tree had the power to erase every kiss, every bit of laughter and every piece of happiness. But he *had* lied to me.

Untying my hair, the pins scattered across the floor as my dark locks unfurled to my waist. As I washed my face, my cheeks stung from the severe scrubbing. Jacque’s shirt drowned my shoulders making me look like a wilted flower. My trousers sagged and my fingernails were encrusted with blood. I looked into the mirror and compared myself to Jacque’s Peyton. She would dance on top of a table at the slightest opportunity and strut down the street wearing only an overgrown coat over her undergarments. If anyone dared call her a degenerate lunatic, she drew them dirty looks and laughed at their stupidity. Where had that girl gone?

I grabbed the purple coat and, stepping out from behind the screen, heard a low growl again. I tried to ignore it, but as I took a step towards the door the noise grew

ferocious and so did my curiosity. As I crept towards the bed the growl softened. Edging closer I held out my hand to pull back one of the green furs. To my surprise what I found was not a poor dog or wolf but instead another captured creature – a young naked man with protruding fangs and granite wings bound by his wrists to the bedpost.

“Excuse me,” he said. His plummy English accent was a far cry from the guttural snarl. “Could you put that back please?”

To disguise my shock I offered a polite smile before returning the blanket. Without saying a word I scuttled out the room, down the winding stairwell and through the secret passageway into a hallway.

Trying to remember the directions Natashka had given me, I found myself in a dusty corridor echoing with the clicking of death-watch beetles. With every corner I turned, the whistling wind welcomed me into abandoned rooms adorned with family portraits. The period styles may have varied – Napoleonic, Renaissance, Edwardian – but one trait remained common throughout. Each face belonged to a person whom I had murdered.

Room by room, I opened the doors to find yet more relics of the past. An old grandfather clock, long since stopped, a creaky rotting crib and a lopsided piano resting against the floor on two legs. I walked away, and a sticky coating of cobweb covered my face. As I peeled the silky residue from my face, a tune rose from the piano. Haunting notes reverberated round the room, high mixing with low, ecstasy subdued by sadness. I turned round and saw the ivory and ebony keys rising and falling.

As disconnected rhythms vibrated into booming song, the splintered floorboards raised, and clusters of wrangled fingers, contorted arms and writhing heads emerged to answer the call of music.

The bodies climbed out, dragging their fellow wraiths from the depths of darkness. Decaying flesh dangled from their limbs. Eyeballs hung from sockets. Blood dripped from wounds across their throats and chests. Stabbings. Decapitation. Strangulation. I knew their causes of death, but not their names. I just called them my victims. They formed two lines at either side of me and faced each other. The women in their busty bodices, fishnet stockings and lace knickers posed like ruined beauties, with feathers in their hair. The men in their leather kilts, top hats and bare torsos stood to attention, as if awaiting the ladies demands.

They looked right through me. I was invisible to their eyes. In perfect synchronicity they bowed to their partners. Boots stomped with the intensity of pounding notes, legs kicked the air, and arms spiralled around heads. Burling faster and faster, a haze of bodies

merged into one. The room started spinning with swarms of dust. I ducked to avoid the flailing limbs, fell to the floor, and edged towards the wall. Smoke rose from under the floorboards, the broken grandfather clock toppled over, and the crib wobbled to the music. In the hive of madness time stood still, stone walls melted to blackness and the wails of the wraiths numbed my ears until the piano lid collapsed, silencing the room.

“They cannot see you, you know,” Natashka informed me. “They are part of our world but we will never be part of theirs.”

Taken aback, I turned to see Natashka and Mhayree at the doorway.

“What are they?” I asked.

“Restless souls,” replied Mhayree. “Unfortunately they did not receive the correct burial rites and so they are damned to roam here for eternity. Of course, you provided a helping hand in that.”

“What is it you want Mhayree?” I snapped, standing up and walking towards her.

“Oh, did I hit a nerve, dear?”

I narrowed my eyes and focused my attention on Natashka. “Who the hell was under your blankets?”

“You met Sebastian?”

“Natashka! Really, that poor Gargoyle,” sighed Mhayree.

“As he does not spout water from his mouth he is a Grotesque and not a Gargoyle,” Natashka replied.

“Fascinating,” Mhayree said, feigning a smile.

Natashka rolled her eyes. “We have a job for you Peyton.”

Mhayree, leaning against the wall with her arms folded, said, in an all too casual manner, “We need you to kill another Phoenix.”

Chapter Ten

November 1897

Mhayree and Natashka waited for my response. I remained silent, shocked by their blasé request for me to kill someone. Instead, I turned around and found the ghosts descending into the floorboards and disappearing. A faint *tick-tock, tick-tock* disturbed the silence of the music room. Attempting to decipher the source of the noise, I wandered over to the grandfather clock, with its charred wood and rusted metal, lying broken on the floor.

As I knelt down to study it, the first chime rang out.

Second chime.

Entombed in a shattered glass casing, its long, brass hands pointed towards four and seven.

“Peyton, did you hear us?” Natashka asked.

Fifth chime.

“We want you to kill for us,” Mhayree said.

Sixth chime.

Turning my attention from the clock, I squared up to the redhead and stared straight into her icy blue eyes. “What makes you think I’m the resident assassin for hire?” I said, through gritted teeth.

“For hire? Don’t be silly, Peyton, we’re not paying you to commit the murder,” Mhayree smirked.

Ninth chime.

“You mustn’t consider it a murder. It is a service. A mercy,” said Natashka, twirling her fingers to pluck a cobweb from her hair.

“I only murder to save Jacque,” I replied.

Eleventh chime.

“No, you murder on the command of the Councillors,” Mhayree said. “We don’t have time for this. Come with us.” As she placed her hand behind my back and guided me from the room, the clock struck midnight, and Mhayree and Natashka transformed into their vampiric selves.

Removing a match from her sleeve, Mhayree struck it against the boning of her corset, producing a flame which flickered against her beautiful monstrosity. As we passed a series of floor candelabra, she held out her arm like a Pre-Raphaelite painting and lit the tapered candles.

“We’re heading to the kitchen,” said Natashka. “I hope you are hungry.”

“Famished. I can’t remember the last time I ate,” I replied.

“Hmm, I can’t remember the last time I fed,” said Mhayree, biting her bottom lip.

“Of course, there is a difference between eating and *feeding*,” Natashka laughed.

“Which is?” I asked, unsure whether or not the answer would bring comfort.

“To eat is to consume that which nourishes. To feed is to receive what nourishes.

For example, humans eat food – potatoes, grains, meat. We feed from a blood source – animals and humans,” said Natashka. “Obviously, one has to make their own decision as to their preference between beast or man. Would you agree, Mhayree?”

Lighting the final candle, Mhayree formed her thumb and finger into a pincer. “I have never fed from a man,” she said, extinguishing the match in her hand.

As we stood at the top of a staircase, Natashka placed herself on the edge of a step.

“Do you need some help?” I asked, stepping forward to take hold of the wheelchair handles.

Smiling and fluttering her eyelashes, Natashka replied, “That would be wonderful, thank you. Would you mind shoving the chair forward, so as to make me somersault down the stairs?”

“What?” I shrieked.

“Mhayree, tell her it’s fine. We do it all the time and I’ve only broken my neck once.”

I turned to Mhayree, who was leaning against the wall with her head resting upon her forefinger. When I opened my mouth to speak, she held up her hand to silence me.

“Are you sure about this?” I asked Natashka.

“Of course,” she replied. She arched her back, stretching her arms above her head, and a rip appeared down one of her sleeves.

I moved forward and, trembling, wrapped my fingers around the handles. At the slightest push, the creaking chair rolled forward and the two front wheels shuddered as they tumbled onto the step below.

“I don’t believe this,” murmured Mhayree.

“Shh!” Natashka replied.

As I pushed a little harder, the chair slid further towards the steep drop. Natashka fastened her hands around the back wheels, anchoring them to the floor.

“You were playing with me, weren’t you?” I said, sighing with relief.

She turned, straining her neck to face me. “I just wanted to see what you would do, *Rybka*.”

“I don’t find it funny!” I said.

“I do.” Mhayree wrapped her arm around my shoulder. “That should ease the shock – or at least prevent you from soiling yourself when you see how she really gets downstairs.”

I edged away, feeling no desire to underestimate Natashka’s tricky nature. Mhayree caught me trying to sneak behind her. “Come out from behind my skirt and brace yourself, dearie.”

“Please, I need to concentrate,” Natashka announced, circling one of her arms above her head.

“It’s transmogrification, not a performance of Swan Lake,” Mhayree said.

“Jealousy is an ugly shade on you, Mhayree. Now move.”

Mhayree complied with Natashka’s command and ushered me out of the way. Natashka, still holding the wheelchair steady, bowed her head as her arm collapsed to her side. Her shoulders twitched and her head jolted. Tendrils of fog emanated from beneath her feet, the smoke growing dense until they covered the chair and her body. Black ink seeped from the roots of her blonde tresses, gliding through the strands until they melded to her skull and ears, which transformed into a pair of fuzzy protruding points.

“Wonderful, isn’t it?” Mhayree whispered to me.

I felt the corners of my mouth rise into an unexpected smile. I didn’t know if it was awe, bewilderment or an overwhelming willingness to suspend belief, but neither terror nor horror soured the delights.

“How does she do it?” I asked.

“Nobody knows. Natashka has her secrets.”

As Natashka released her fingers from the wheels, her two arms shuddered amongst the fog, causing the rickety chair to topple onto the next step. I lunged forward to grab the handles, but Mhayree hauled me backwards. All my attempts to wriggle free proved fruitless, as her tight grip held me to her chest, making it impossible to breathe.

The chair proceeded to tumble down the stairs. The black mesh and satin of Natashka’s dress unravelled and reformed into a leather lining, spanning over elongated, skeletal claws to create wings. As the fog consumed the chair’s entire metal frame, a fully-formed bat emerged from the dense cloud. Flapping her wings, Natashka soared to the ceiling and looked down her nose at the mere non-shapeshifters standing beneath her, before flying into the darkness. When the fog disappeared, Mhayree released me, and I began choking on a deep breath, full of dust. Mhayree slapped my back, but it only made the coughing and spluttering worse.

“You know my dear, for someone whose demeanour suggests a soulless lunatic, your heartbeat exposes your fear too often,” she said.

“You cannot possibly feel my heart through these,” I wheezed, clutching my coat and bodice.

After a final spine-rattling slap, Mhayree walked down the stairs. “I don’t have to feel it... I can hear it.”

“Is nothing private around here?” I said.

“Careful. Your heart rate is going up again,” Mhayree replied, laughing.

“I resent that violation, Mhayree.”

“If you’ve nothing to hide, then you’ve nothing to fear,” she said.

I’ve plenty to hide, I thought, and even more I’d like to forget. To distract me from such thoughts, I asked, “Mhayree, what is a *rybka*?”

“It means ‘little fish’. Natashka must like you,” replied Mhayree, turning round and holding out her hand. “Come on, she’ll be waiting downstairs for us.”

She held my hand, and guided me down the steep, narrow steps.

“Are there no more candles?” I said, looking into the pit of darkness below.

“No,” Mhayree replied. “You will get used to it.”

As we ventured into the stairwell, I placed one foot in front of the other, fumbling to detect the safest path. Mhayree grabbed me as I tripped on the loose stones. To keep myself steady, I trailed my hand along the wall’s rough serrated stonework. In the distance, footsteps came rushing up the steps. As they drew closer, an icy draught brushed against my cheek. Then it happened. Voices invaded my head. A chorus line of shrill men and women vying for attention. Screams, laughter and the taunting of shrieking ghosts. They knew my name. They told me to kill. They told me to die and be like them.

I clutched Mhayree’s hand, refusing to let go. Through the darkness, she hummed an old Gaelic tune, so familiar to me, from when my mother invited her to afternoon tea. Her sweet, dulcet tones swirled in my head, mingling with the cruel taunts of the ghosts, and cursed them to silence. Without losing her grace and dignity, Mhayree fought and claimed victory – and here I was, a murderer, afraid of the dark.

By the time we reached the bottom stair, Natashka was in vampire form once more, straightening the creases in her skirt and tucking the edges round her feet. She acknowledged us with a nod, before manoeuvring the wheelchair down the hallway.

“We are almost there,” said Mhayree, as we followed Natashka. “Keep hold of my hand, it’s darkness all the way in this part of the castle.”

“Remind me to buy you a stockpile of candles,” I replied.

“No need. I can see perfectly well without them, thank you. As will you, soon enough. The candelabra are only needed for human visitors.”

“Do you get many humans stumbling across the threshold?”

“Well, there’s you,” Natashka said, stopping outside a lopsided wooden door.

“She’s not human, she’s a vampire,” Mhayree said, opening the door.

Natashka’s voice resonated through the room as she entered. “Compared to this rabble, she is human.”

Mhayree and I followed Natashka into the kitchen, where a gagging ensemble of vampires gathered round a large rotten oak dining table. Pots and pans rattled; the stove crackled; kettles whistled and a cauldron overflowed with a bubbling red liquid. A feast spread across the table, with blood being poured over sponges, mashed into potatoes, soaked into black pudding, and piped along the edges of iced cakes.

They turned around to stare at me. In the midst of the sneers, growls and baring of fangs, I recognised the familiar faces of the three creatures who had accosted me in one of the castle’s passageways. Rising to her feet, the white-haired woman slinked towards me, her curly tresses dragging along the matted leather of her skirt’s train. She stood before me, and her scent of rosewood and lavender oil perfumed the air, enticing me to move closer. As she wrapped her hand around my throat, the sharpness of one of her fingernails traced my skin, forcing me to gasp against the strange sensation. Tears rolled down the chiselled contours of her face. She drew back her colourless lips, and a pair of fangs approached my neck. Powerless to resist her, my head rolled back, and I saw the crumbling stonework float from the walls and merge into a whirlpool of greys and black. As the blood rushed to my head, the scream of a woman broke the hypnosis.

One by one, the stones settled into their original formation, and the silhouettes of the vampires came into focus. Above me, suspended in mid-air, was a listless body with white curls, and a snarling, ruby red mouth. Natashka sat beside me – her outstretched hand, upturned like a vulture’s claw, was pointed towards the white-haired one. As the helpless vampire thrashed in agony, the remaining coven members sought safety under the large wooden table: all except Mhayree, who was perched atop a worktop with her skirt hiked up to her knees.

“I think she has learnt her lesson,” said a familiar-sounding voice hiding under the table.

“Very well,” Natashka replied. She snapped her fingers, and the white-haired vampire crashed to the floor. Whimpering in frustration, she crawled into a corner and curled up in submission.

“That was unnecessary, Natashka,” exclaimed the voice from under the table. She emerged, tall and elegant, to examine the damage.

“Wait, why do I know you?” I said, unable to place her name.

“Oh good, you’ve come round,” Natashka said, patting my hand.

“We’ve met before,” said the tall woman. “I’m the wine-drinking reveller from outside Poska’s Inn. Saara.”

“Wine?” said Natashka. “You mean blo-”

“Enough!” Saara yelled, and pointed to the white-haired vampire. “You went too far with her, Natashka.”

“Well, I, for one, enjoy a good show before dinner,” announced another woman, as she too appeared from under the table to join Saara. Her red, ragged dress swept along the floor and flowed around her hourglass figure as she stood up. The Red Woman. By this point, I wasn’t surprised. Everyone I met seemed to turn out to be a vampire.

“She was going to kill Peyton,” Natashka argued.

“And how many of us has *she* killed?” said a female vampire with intense, brown eyes, silver jewellery draped around her swan-like neck, and black lips, sipping from a goblet. The coven aimed a round of jeers in my direction.

“It’s an old argument, Beatrice,” Mhayree dismissed, climbing down from the stove. Out the corner of my eye, I glimpsed the white-haired vampire being comforted by her two companions. The gangly, dark-haired female crouched to whisper into her ear as the male kept his face hidden under a black veil. The four of us stared at each other with a silent understanding that a conspiracy was underway.

“How can you be so flippant, Mhayree? After all, she slaughtered one of your nieces,” Beatrice fumed, smashing the goblet against the wall.

“There isn’t a person here who hasn’t had a family member killed by her hands,” a man yelled as I kept watch of the three conspirators.

“She also murdered her own grandmother, so I think we are even on the family annihilation score,” Mhayree replied.

The wooden door creaked behind me. A hush fell over the room as my mother entered, looking bedraggled and restless. Mhayree walked towards her, pulled out a chair from the table and gestured for her to sit. My mother stood before me, and, with a melancholy smile, stroked my face, and sat down. She leaned over and massaged her temples, as Mhayree took a seat beside her. All eyes in the room glared at my mother.

“Out of all your failures, Mirella, that treacherous beast is the worst of all!” cried a petite, pixie-like female, who was parading as a velvet-clad Aristocrat. As she narrowed

her eyes, and scratched her nails along the wooden surface, Mhayree grabbed a goblet of wine and threw it in the upstart's face. In retaliation, the pixie vampire bellowed like a banshee and crawled over the table to take a swipe at Mhayree. In turn, a ruckus ensued throughout the room as the rest of the vampires began shouting and attempted to break up the fight. Rising to her feet, despondent and weary, my mother steered me against the pantry cupboard, away from the brawl.

"Do not move," she warned. "Today is not your fight." Abandoning me, she staggered, as if disorientated, towards Mhayree, who was struggling to fight off two male vampires.

As my mother attempted to prise away one of Mhayree's assailants, Beatrice leapt across the table and threw her across the floor. I ran and knelt beside her to help, but, amidst the commotion, forgot about the three vampires in the corner.

A hand grabbed me by the hair, ripped it out by the roots, and whipped my head round. In front of me, a mass of curls lunged forward. The white-haired one.

She growled.

"I don't have the patience for you right now," I said.

Swiping her ankles, I knocked her to the floor and catapulted myself on top of her chest. She let out a shrill cry and I stood and forced the heel of my boot into her throat.

I bent down and whispered, "This was far too easy."

As I dug my boot buckle into her chin, her two comrades pounced on me from behind. The veiled man pinned me to the floor as the raven beauty –instructed by the white-haired one – kicked me in the ribs. Their pathetic attempts did nothing but make me laugh. For a few more seconds, I allowed the three amateurs their moment of fun. Of course, whilst attempting to stifle my amusement, I offered the mandatory fake groans as they beat me. If I had to endure an identity crisis, losing faith in Jacque, being tormented by ghosts, and witnessing possession, then a moment of entertainment was owed to me.

As I raised my head to blow the hair from my eyes, my mother knelt before me, and presented me with a carving knife. I grabbed the knife, propelled myself from the floor – knocking my assailants sideways – and stood, ready to attack.

Grinning at my opponents, two retreated back to their corner, leaving the white-haired one to stand alone.

"Guileless ragamuffins!" she yelled. "She killed my brother. Have you no honour?"

Seeing her companions huddled like frightened children, she turned her attention to me. We stared at each other, goading one another to make the first move.

The white-haired one stepped forward.

I remained still, watching as she approached.

She smirked.

As she circled me, I turned to follow, keeping my eyes fixed upon her.

She stalked the ground, hands on hips, and her leather skirt curled along the stone floor.

Toying with my playmate, I inserted the knife into my pinned-up hair and held my empty, open palms in front of her.

She bared her fangs at me.

I raised an eyebrow, and for no other reason than to present temptation, took a step towards her.

It worked.

She lunged at me, and I back flipped onto the table, crouching into position. The room fell silent as the coven desisted squabbling to watch us. Mhayree shoved Beatrice and sat beside Natashka, who was preoccupied with dipping bread into a goblet of blood. My mother, looking weary and with ragged breath, stood in front of the crowd, with her arms wrapped around her chest.

The white-haired one slashed at my ankles with her claw-like fingers and attempted to climb atop the table. I leapt into the air, spun around to somersault off the wall and landed tip-toe on to the ground.

My opponent turned to face me. She grabbed me by the throat and squeezed, forcing the veins in my neck to throb. To relieve her grip, I ran my nails down her wrist, causing blood to ooze from the scratches. She yelped, slapped me across the face, and jumped down.

I booted her in the kneecap, and heard a crunch as a bone snapped. She collapsed, crying and pounding the stone floor in agony.

I walked away.

Leaning against the remains of a mouldy wooden cabinet, I took a few deep breaths, and tried to resist inflicting more cruelty upon the poor creature. I only kill to save Jacques, I reminded myself.

I only kill to save Jacques.

I only kill to save Jacques.

I only kill to save Jacques.

In the buckled rim of a copper pan, my eye caught the white-haired one's snarling reflection stalking my mother.

"Mirella," the white-haired one hissed. "Help me."

Her hostile plea persuaded me to turn and face them both. My mother's once gentle eyes now looked cold as she crouched beside the wretched vampire writhing on the floor. Wrapping the long white curls around her wrist, my mother clenched her hand, and pulled the vampire's head back, to expose her neck, and held it in place. My mother held out her hand, inviting me to sit beside her. I hesitated, suspicious of her expectations. Both she and the white-haired one stared at me – my mother in desperation and the vampire with contempt.

"She's too weak," said the white-haired one. "Just like you, Mirella." She sneered and turned to sink her fangs into my mother's shoulder.

"Peyton!" my mother called, wincing and reaching for me.

Without hesitation, I ran, prised away the blood-sucking parasite, and beat her into submission.

As I punched the vampire's ribs, my mother removed the knife from my hair and placed it in my hand. She held the vampire's head to the floor and wrapped her fingers around the neck. With a nod, she granted her approval.

One swipe across the throat and the white-haired one was dead.

I dropped the knife, ashamed that my mother had witnessed me kill. As it landed, she smiled and drew me towards her – safe and protected.

Chapter Eleven

“Good morning, *Rybka*.”

“*Rybka*? That’s not my name,” I mumbled, straining to open my eyes. When the room came into focus, I found myself lying in a creaky four-post bed, swaddled under woollen blankets. A hand patted my cheek until I roused. Natashka. She smiled, as though innocent of the part she played in Mhayree and my mother’s conspiracy.

“No, your name is Peyton de Volonté,” said Natashka. “Do you remember now?”

Swatting her hand away, I rolled over and turned my back to her. “Get out,” I hissed.

“Now, *Rybka*, I know-”

“Get. Out.”

Natashka sighed. After a few moments, a door groaned as it closed. A murder of crows cawed outside the window, and I thought back to the events of the previous night.

The white-haired one’s body lay at my feet. As I lifted the bloodstained knife from the floor, my mother took it from me, pinching it between two fingers, and threw it onto the table.

“See? I told you she would kill for us,” Mhayree announced.

I looked to the tearful Natashka. Mhayree sat at the table and munched on a slice of blood-soaked Eve’s pudding.

I stood to leave, ashamed that they had manipulated me. My mother grasped my hand, trying to appease me, but to no avail.

I withdrew from the kitchen and the coven of onlookers recoiled as I passed.

It was settled: I no longer only killed to save Jacque.

I staggered down the darkened hallway, and heard footsteps rushing to catch me. I ran, scratching my hands and face on rogue twigs sticking out of the stone walls.

“Peyton, stop!” my mother cried out, through the darkness.

“*Rybka*, wait! You must hear what we have to say!” shouted Natashka.

“Listen to your mother,” said Mhayree.

Their voices hunted me down the hallway, as I continued running. Like an animal caught in a trap, I struggled against the confines of the ever-narrowing, pulsating walls as they closed in around me, crushing my body. No amount of pushing or shoving halted them squeezing my lungs, suffocating me.

“Rybka!”

My arms and legs contorted and jolted out their sockets; my fingers dislocated from the knuckles and twisted towards my deformed wrists; the strain wracked my neck and rattled my spine.

“Stupid girl!” screamed Mhayree.

Bile rose in my mouth, and forced my jaw apart until it distended like a python about to devour its prey. A deep, tormented scream burst out.

A hand grabbed me, pulled my hair and pinned me to the wall. A second hand grasped my face and held my mouth open. A third hand held a glass bottle against my lips, and poured a bitter citrus liquid down my throat.

“What do you think she saw?” my mother said.

“I don’t know,” said Mhayree.

“Take her to the upper floor of the east wing,” Natashka instructed, her voice fading into the distance.

I slumped to the floor. Unconscious.

A knock at the door.

“Peyton? I have brought you some breakfast,” said my mother, as she opened the door uninvited.

“Leave me be.”

I pulled the blankets over my head and nestled into the soft furs beneath me. The sound of crinoline swishing along the floor drew closer.

“Perhaps I have left you be for too long,” my mother sighed, as she sat on the edge of the bed, turning down the blankets to look at me. She placed a tray over my lap and scooped a spoonful of runny boiled egg from its cracked, brown shell. “Eat this.”

I turned my head away.

“You need to get your strength up,” she said. “Amelie will want to see you today.”

I propped myself up against the pillows and ate the egg from the spoon.

“I would expect an exhausting game of Blind Man’s Bluff. And I believe she has found a skipping rope, tiddlywinks and some skittles.”

I smiled, thinking of my sister ransacking the castle during the night. “With any luck, she’ll be too tired to run me ragged.”

My mother fed me another spoonful of egg. “Hmm, not so. She doesn’t sleep past midnight these days, and yet has the never-ending steam to charge on like a train. Do you remember when I took you on the Express D’Orient?” she asked, hopeful.

I dismissed the question with a nod.

“Amelie reminds me so much of you at that age,” she said, placing her hand upon mine.

I snatched my hand away and took the spoon from her. “And look how well I turned out.”

She stood from the bed and wandered to the window. “We all have to make sacrifices, Peyton. It may surprise you that the woman you killed last night offered to die for us.”

I poured some tea into a chipped cup and dropped two sugar lumps into the caramel-coloured concoction. “I’m not a fool, mother, she begged you for help and you handed me the dagger to finish her.”

“Yes, because you denied her the dignity of a swift death. Instead you chose to toy with her like an alley cat teasing a mouse. You have turned cruel, Peyton.”

Sipping the tea, I said, “She attacked me.”

My mother turned towards me, her blonde curls shading the disappointment in her eyes. “We have learnt that provocation is the most effective way of inspiring you to respond. I heard Natasha had to intervene when you failed to resist Katja’s hypnosis. Sometimes we forget just how young you are.”

I slammed the cup down, causing it to smash against the saucer. My mother flinched, yet appeared undeterred as she strolled towards a wardrobe. “Of course, you recognise the name Katja? Katja Ustov?”

On hearing the name, I rummaged in my trouser pockets, searching for the list of names supplied by Bothwell. It was gone.

“It fell out your pocket when Revenik dragged you from the burning carriage,” my mother said.

“The skeleton?” I asked.

“He is a Reaper. Though, I suppose he does look like a skeleton,” mother replied. A flutter of moths escaped from the wardrobe as she opened its decaying doors. “Of course, he gave Mhayree the list as soon as he found it.”

I shoved the tray off my lap, spilling the food. “You will return that list to me. It’s the only way to save Jacque,” I yelled.

“No, my dearest girl, you will not be murdering any more of your kind.”

“Then you condemn him to die. I will not go back to you and father, if that is what you hope for!”

My mother turned around and slapped me across the face. “Do you not understand? We are at war. Katja died to protect us all. She sacrificed herself so the Inservium believes things are as they ought to be. You kill, we die.”

Beads of sweat began forming along her brow and neck as she turned to walk back to the wardrobe. I held my cheek, astonished that my mother had struck me. She was the one who nestled me to her chest and read aloud Grimm’s Fairy Tales when my father was in a drunken rampage. She did not do discipline – that was his expertise. Rifling through the wardrobe, she retrieved a black woollen gown from a shelf and shook off the dust. The elongated sleeves dangled to the floor, forming the shape of a trumpet, and a silver and gold belt swung against the high-waisted girdle.

“You will wear this to Katja’s funeral. We owe her the dignity of attributing the proper burial rites,” my mother said, draping the gown over the bed.

“I don’t think I’d be welcome,” I mumbled.

“The coven will think even less of you if you do not pay your respects,” she replied, walking towards the door. Before she turned the handle, she looked to me and asked, “What happened to Rasmus Kreek?”

My silence told her everything. He was already dead.

“This war is more important than you and Jacque, Peyton.”

Ding... Dong...

The bell tolled.

Ding... Dong...

Ding... Dong...

I awoke from a restless sleep.

Jacque had slayed the white-haired one.

But only in my dream.

“Peyton!” Mhayree hissed, banging the door. “Come out this instant.”

I woke, lying on a futon, and rubbed my eyes, burning my fingers on the embers caught in my eyelashes. When I managed to drag myself to stand up, the mourning gown, itchy and heavy, hung from my bones.

I opened the door to find Mhayree standing with her hands on her hips. A black veil shrouded her face, cascading like a waterfall down her waist and resting on a silver, moon-shaped buckle, which supported the weight of an exuberant black ball gown.

“I’m so glad the potion didn’t kill you,” she remarked in a sardonic tone.

“Potion?”

“Yes, the one I poured down your throat last night.”

“You will never cease to exceed my expectations,” I smirked.

“It was for your own good, your mother knew that. That’s why she pinned you down. You were becoming hysterical.”

I banged my fist against the door, eliciting no reaction from Mhayree. “This freak show of a castle was trying to kill me!”

Mhayree lifted her veil and narrowed her eyes to scrutinise me. “Go on.”

“The walls closed in to suffocate me... crushing until my body broke... it was agony. Didn’t you hear me scream?”

“I heard you,” Mhayree replied.

“Didn’t you see? I thought you could see in the dark?”

Her expressionless face bore through me. “Let’s discuss this after the funeral.” Beckoning me to move from the threshold, she leaned over to close the door. She pointed towards the futon to draw my attention to a cluster of scorch marks charring the delicate roses embroidered along the yellow silk. “That was an antique.”

“More expensive than almost a year’s worth of bedsheets?”

“Significantly so,” she replied.

The grey sky threatened rain as Mhayree led me through the courtyard and into the vast forest surrounding the castle. Leaves crunched beneath our feet. Branches snapped under the weight of some invisible entity. Crows and ravens flapped high above the treetops. Trickles of water weaved around us. The forest rustled and howled as we slinked through the maze of spruces, pines and rowans. At the same time, each tree guarded and escorted us deeper into the black undergrowth. A myriad of moths entwined amongst the gusts of wind twisting between the bark and rocks.

We reached a clearing, where stood a small, white granite mausoleum supported by pillars, hand-carved with suns and moons. Mhayree knocked on the arched door three times and the panels opened of their own accord.

“This way,” Mhayree whispered.

As I followed her, the speckles of sunlight creeping through the grey sky radiated over a line-up of four bodies, lying on stone slabs. Their faces looked bloated as their mouths and noses exuded blood, their desiccated skin clung taut against the protruding bones and their elongated fingernails curled at the ends.

“They are transitioning,” said Mhayree, as she led me through the centre aisle.

“Vampires?” I asked. Mhayree nodded. As we passed the slabs I was certain I heard an expulsion of breath coming from one of the bodies.

At the other side of the room lay a trapdoor. Mhayree opened the latch, and inside the dark tunnel, a wooden stairway reached into the darkness. We climbed down the narrow passage deep into the underground until we reached a vast cavern, lit by a succession of torches, mounted on the stone bricks. Rows upon rows of stacked coffins rested, interred within the walls. As Mhayree and I passed the burial sites, the plaques bearing the names of my vampire ancestors flickered against the flames:

The Vadas Family – Béla, Ádám, Endre, Zoltán, Aniko, Catherine, and James – Husband and children of Lena Vadas.

The Katona Family – Eliza and Eleanor – Daughters of Frida Katona.

The Fodor Family – Louisa, Annabel, Franklin, and Charlotte – Children of Nikolett Fodor.

The Vida Family – Christoph, Kelvin, Philipp and Rosa – Husband and children of Renata Vida. Her body lay in the centre.

The Arany Family – Romain, Gustav, Xavier and Cosette – Husband and children of Katalin Arany.

All of whom were killed during the First Cleansing, 1667.

In the centre of the room, the coven was sat around the body of Katja Ustov. The mourners sobbed into their handkerchiefs as the melancholy song of a harp played in the corner. Joined together in their sorrow, the coven’s midnight pallet of silk gowns, capes, leather coats and velvet gloves contrasted with the vibrant peacefulness of Katja. Her white curls covered the nakedness of her body; her stillness conjured the image of a tomb effigy; and the manner in which the corners of her mouth turned upwards made me believe her eternal sleep offered sweeter dreams.

In the midst of the gathering, Natashka held out her hand to me, beckoning me to sit beside her. I clasped our hands tight together and took my seat. As she dabbed her eyes, I saw streaks of black tears hiding behind a pair of tinted spectacles. We smiled at each other with a silent understanding of forgiveness.

Beatrice, who I remembered from the brawl in the kitchen, presided over the ceremony, speaking in a foreign language – Bavossian, no doubt. She lay two gold coins over Katja's eyes, and draped three ribbons of silver, red and white over her chest. As she chanted, she traced the outlines of a sun and moon into Katja's limbs with a dagger. Raising her hand, she encouraged the gatherers to stand and she removed one of the torches from the wall. The flame shimmered against the ebony of her arms as they trembled and lowered the torch to set Katja's body alight.

Beatrice stepped back, and four men gathered around the altar – posted at each corner. To my confusion, the skin and hair remained untouched as the flames engulfed the body. As the men lifted the stone slab and carried it towards its final resting place, Mhayree called out, "This wasn't the plan!" The coven snapped around to confront her. "The body has to be taken back to town."

"She was the descendant of Juliska Bavos. She deserves to be buried with her family," replied Beatrice.

"The Inservium must believe that Peyton killed her," said Mhayree.

"She did kill her," I heard a man reply.

"For *them*," Mhayree said, exasperated.

"Have you no shame, Mhayree Du Loire?" asked Beatrice.

A hand shot up in the front row, silencing the conversation. Standing, Saara faced the coven and removed her crepe veil. "Mhayree is right, we must carry on as though ignorant of the Inservium's intentions. Katja has received burial rites to ensure passage to the Underworld. It is safe to move her body." She moved and stood behind the altar. "My mother supports the decision. And as you all know, she is one of the original Phoenixes."

"And did Dorika express this to you personally?" asked Beatrice.

"*Joo*, she did," Saara confirmed.

No one dared look at Saara as she sat down.

"Who is to transport the body?" a woman enquired.

Everyone turned to look at each other, hesitant to volunteer. Amidst the silence, a voice echoed throughout the crypt. "I will take the body." Straining my neck, I turned around and saw my mother standing in the back row. The vampires muttered between themselves as she stared at me. "And Peyton will go with me."

Sensing the eyes of the coven on me, I thought it best not to argue.

Dawn broke over the horizon as a shroud of orange, red, and magenta blossomed across the early morning sky. In the hours that passed, the coven debated... and debated... and debated as to whether or not my mother was the most suitable person to escort Katja's body back to town – after all, I might go psychotic and attack her. The vampires returned to their human guises as the sunlight rose, forcing the older ones to go to bed, and the younger to continue arguing. Mhayree threatened to impale anyone who insulted or implied my mother wasn't capable of carrying out the task. By the time noon arrived, my mother had won, and we stood in the middle of an empty, grassy plain.

"Thank you. You can place the body on the grass," said Natashka. As the four men carrying Katja laid the slab down, she continued, "You may leave us."

The men tipped their hats to Natashka, my mother, Mhayree, and me, and departed. Natashka fumbled inside a beaded purse and removed five quartz crystals. She handed them to Mhayree and instructed her to place them in a circle formation on the grass.

"What's that for?" I said.

"She's creating a pentacle," Natashka replied.

"Black magic?"

"No, *Rybka*! It is the craft of the Old Ways."

"If you're going to judge things about which you know nothing, we can transport you elsewhere, if you like," Mhayree interrupted. "Salem, perhaps?"

"North Berwick is closer. Or Pendle. Or East Anglia," Natashka added. "Our British neighbours executed many a so-called Witch."

"Another history lesson?" I groaned.

"This isn't the time," my mother said, pointing towards Katja. "Mhayree, help me with this." She and Mhayree lifted the body and heaved it into the middle of the circle. As Mhayree stepped back, my mother gestured for me to move and stand in the centre. I hesitated, imagining all sorts of demons and magical chaos which might be summoned if I stepped over the quartz threshold.

"The body won't be fresh for much longer, Peyton," said Natashka.

My mother grimaced at the prospect. Natashka placed her hand on my back, nudging me towards the circle.

"At least you don't have to wear that itchy old gown anymore," Natashka said.

I nodded, shuffled forward, clutching my coat, and stood beside my mother. She took my face in her hands and kissed my cheek. Standing side by side, she squeezed my hand, offering reassurance. She nodded to Mhayree, who was holding a match in her hand. She struck it against Natashka's wheelchair and a flame sparked on the tip. As she hurled

the match at one of the quartz crystals, a line of flames erupted, connecting the five stones, to form a star. I made to run, however, my mother wrapped her arms around me.

“Do not worry, *Rybka*, I will make you some *pirog* for when you return!” Natashka said, waving.

I closed my eyes.

“*Kownos*,” whispered my mother.

The last thing I saw was a flash of light.

My mother freed me from her arms. Opening my eyes, I found myself standing in the middle of a smoke-damaged drawing room. The charred wallpaper tainted the air with its burnt aroma and the furniture sat in piles of ash upon the blackened fibres of a scorched carpet. My mother caught me surveying the room.

“Katja had a temper,” she said, smiling.

“She set fire to the house?”

My mother paused. “No, not in the usual sense.”

Katja’s body, naked and exposed, lay between us.

“I will fetch her a dress. You stay here,” my mother said, walking towards the door.

“And stay away from the windows. We don’t want anybody to know you are here.”

“That’s why I kill people at night,” I blurted out.

My mother froze, and I realised how chilling my words must have sounded. Neither of us acknowledged the statement. Instead, she walked away.

A dreadful silence filled the room, as I walked around, trying to ignore the body on the floor. However, all attempts failed, as a strange guilt kept building, forcing me to crouch down, and take its hand in mine.

“You are much braver than I am,” I whispered as a couple of tears rolled down my cheeks. “Foolish but braver.”

The room temperature rose to an unbearable heat. I unbuttoned my coat and loosened my corset, but couldn’t draw breath through the stifling, muggy air. My face and neck grew sticky with sweat and red, itchy blotches appeared on my hands.

As I bent over, holding my stomach, shaking and whimpering at the cramps, my mother entered the room carrying a long white gown and a knife. I wiped the tears from my eyes and lowered my head so as not to alarm her.

She stepped around Katja's body and with gentle precision dressed it in the gown. Afterwards, she splayed the limbs in such a way as to suggest collapsing after a struggle.

"Listen to me, Peyton," she said, slicing her hand with the knife and smearing the blood over the white dress. "When aiming to kill someone it is best to do it outright with the minimum amount of suffering. Do it with respect and dignity."

I moved my damp sweaty hair from my face and tried to draw breath through the heat. "What do you know about killing someone? About looking into their eyes as they are pleading to live?"

Ignoring me, she continued, "Aim for the jugular. Or, if that is not possible, there is an artery which runs down the inner thigh. Sever it."

Her voice faded and the room turned to a thick haze. My gums throbbed as fangs pierced through the flesh. Dizzy and disorientated, I heard myself slur, "Why didn't you tell me I was a vampire? That you were a vampire?"

"I'm not. I failed to – Peyton!"

The room turned black.

Chapter Twelve

I awoke, surrounded in darkness, lying with my arms crossed over my chest. Unfolding them to rest by my side, my hands brushed against ruffles of silk and a small cushion supporting my head. My head banged against a lid and hard wooden panels trapped my arms and legs. Unable to see and breathe through the thin air, I felt as though my body had been bound, constricted, and submerged under water, with no way to escape.

Far away, I heard the sound of muffled male voices:

“Et quod non prodest omnes in nomine Domini misericordia.”

A crowd chanted the words, *“Nunc Idoli.”*

The Inservium funeral prayer.

It was then I realised I was buried alive.

The prayer continued:

“Sed nunc dimittite eam ut huic mulieri peccata.”

Again, the chanting, *“Nunc Idoli.”*

“Fiat ei daemonium non peribit in nomine eius.”

Punch after punch, I banged my fists against the coffin lid until my knuckles split. I kicked to smash open the panels and screamed until hoarse for someone – anyone – to help. As panic and adrenaline set in, the sweat and blood from my palms and knuckles mingled with tears.

After several minutes of failed attempts, my body collapsed, exhausted. I lay and stared into the darkness, cursing, begging, and bribing deities, before forcing myself – through sheer defiance – to kick and scream all over again. Searing heat rose through my arms and legs, as sweat trickled down my forehead. As the last remnants of air disappeared, I wheezed and choked, gasping for breath. I banged the sides of the coffin, feeling the wood turn warm from the temperature of my hands. My head throbbed and eyes burned like a bonfire ravaged my insides.

All of a sudden, sparks flared across the coffin, and charred the bloodstained wood. As they fizzled into the grain, the rising heat surging through my body erupted into flames. My hands tingled as electricity rushed through my limbs reaching the crown of my head to the soles of my feet. My muscles contracted against the spasms and the intense heat forced me to draw breath before my lungs collapsed, dissolving like melted wax. The coffin’s foundations shook – the fragments snapped and splintered. Paralysed, I bit down against the helplessness and the nausea rising in my throat. As tears ran down my cheeks, I shut my eyes and pretended none of it was real. Instead, I was home with Jacque. As always.

Across my stomach spindly legs tickled my flesh, and crept into the flames. They crawled along my fingertips, up my arms, reaching my neck and settling between my collarbones. The sting of two punctures caused droplets of blood to ooze from my skin and slink towards my shoulders. The flames pounded, ebbed and flowed as though gravitating towards their mother. A woman's voice whispered inside my head;

"Inna talla manto. Ceelio!"

"I don't understand," I mumbled, covering my ears to drown out her voice.

She repeated her words as the flames consumed me. The dry earth bled between the crevices of the fractured wood and coated my body. Creatures of the underground infested me – beetles scurried over my face, worms squirmed between my fingers, and ants scuttled up my feet. With the lid of the coffin bowing more dirt seeped inwards. Wood and earth weighed me down.

The woman's voice grew louder;

"Wamutak, ceelio!"

The flames continued to burn. Beneath the embers my skin turned to ice. My vision and sense of smell intensified. I saw microscopic fibres fertilise the earth and smelled the soil laced with the oak odour of my coffin. I heard blood rushing through my veins, hammering against my heartbeat. The rhythm waned until silent. There was no pulse, no breath, and no heartbeat. I was dead. Yet, I was alive.

Fighting against exhaustion, I kicked through the coffin, creating a hole big enough for me to slip through. Crumbling soil and mud flooded the opening, gathering in my mouth and eyes. I scrambled towards the gap and shovelled the tumbling dirt behind me. As I rose, the flames singed through the earth, clearing a path. I planted my feet into the soil, stood, and used my hands to reach the surface and climb out of the grave. With all my strength, I pulled free and collapsed beside a gravestone.

I was thirsty for blood.

A dark figure appeared over me, casting a shadow over the streaks of sunlight through the trees. Beneath a black cloak, a familiar face peered down upon me with a finger pressed against her lips, hushing me to silence.

"This way," whispered Mhayree, placing a cloak over me. "We mustn't be seen."

"Mhayree!" I said, grabbing onto her. "Where is she?"

"Who?"

"The woman in the coffin. I heard her," I said.

Mhayree smiled. "You will find out soon enough. Now move."

I tied the cloak's cord around my neck, and strained to stand up. Lightheaded and adjusting to the brightness, I steadied myself against the gravestone.

Mhayree lifted the hood over my head. "Hide your face, nobody can see you," she said, ushering me towards a willow tree. Before moving any further, I looked back, examining the gravestone left behind: Peyton de Volonté: 11th March 1879 – 7th November 1897. May She Rest In Peace.

"Am I dead, Mhayree?" I asked, glaring at the carved angel perched upon the headstone.

"You are transitioning," she replied, holding my hand. "You are becoming a Phoenix vampire."

"I was buried alive. I was afraid, Mhayree. Why would you do that? Why would my mother allow you to do that?"

Mhayree pulled me close and wrapped her arms around me. "You did wonderfully. But we must leave."

Holding me by the shoulders, Mhayree led me behind a tree.

"Why should I go back with you?" I snapped, "Back to people who hate me. To a mother who lies to me. To a castle that tries to kill me."

"This is just confusion. It is perfectly natural during transition."

"Do not pretend you would miss me, Mhayree. That you wouldn't feel better knowing your daughter was safe from me."

"Don't try to provoke me by threatening Freya," said Mhayree, pointing a finger in my face. After stepping back from me, she turned her head left and right, as though searching for something.

"What are you doing?"

"Checking for witnesses. Nobody can see you – especially like this," she replied, studying me, head to toe. "Your mother and I faked your death. The Councillors believe you died trying to murder the third person on your list. It means they don't know about you becoming a vampire. You are safe. And we are safe. For now."

Safe? I thought, unable to remember how that felt, as I looked through the tree branches at my grave. In one day, I had gone from being a human and assassin, to a vampire and disappearing into the shadows. I used to dream of a time when Jacque and I would be free from the Inservium. I didn't know freedom could feel so empty.

"This was your funeral," said Mhayree. "The Councillors will be around somewhere. Your father and brother, also. We must go."

"What about Jacque?"

“If he is anything like his great-grandmother Katalin, he will survive,” Mhayree said, snorting.

I turned and glared at her. She offered a smile, as if regretting her dismissal. “We will find a way to help him,” she assured.

As she linked our arms together and prised me from the tree, two Councillors stood before us.

“Mhayree Du Loire!” exclaimed the gaunt, leather-faced one.

“Councillor Reid. It has been a while. I haven’t seen you since the Inservium decided I needed to die,” Mhayree replied.

“I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about, child. What say you, Councillor Garris?”

“Ravings of a mad woman,” said the second man, adjusting his spectacles to better scrutinise Mhayree. “And what of this one?”

Councillor Garris pulled back my hood and recoiled in horror. “Demon!” he screamed, raising his Idol medallion as though warding off evil. My reflection emerged within the gold plating, – a grotesque face with bulging eyes, yellowing, bloated skin, with reddish-black patches scattered around my lips. My forehead protruded due to my thinning black hair and receding hairline.

Words failed me as I lifted my hands to shield my face and felt my sharp, pointed nails dig into my head. Mhayree stepped in front of me like a lioness protecting her cub and covered the hood over me. She turned to face Reid – who was cowering on his knees, chanting a Latin requiem – and punched him in the face. His nose turned bloody as he grunted lewd profanities at Mhayree and me, before collapsing.

Garris unveiled a bejewelled dagger from under his cloak and swiped it towards Mhayree’s throat. She ducked and swept his kneecaps with her foot, causing him to fall. Out of her boots, she produced Scottish and French daggers – a sgian dubh and a laguiole. She turned and tossed the laguiole into my hand. As I caught it, Councillor Reid ripped off his medallion from around his neck, threw it into the distance and pleaded, “Don’t hurt me. Please let me live. I will renounce the Idol and worship your devils.”

“There are no devils in the Old Ways,” replied Mhayree.

“Lies. There is only one Idol. You sold your souls to false gods,” exclaimed Councillor Garris, as he thrust his dagger into Mhayree’s leg. She fell, cried out in pain, dropping her sgian dubh, and scratched her nails across his eyes.

I moved forward, knelt beside Mhayree and pulled the dagger from her thigh. As the blood flowed through her petticoats and onto her skirt, its intoxicating scent caused my

mouth to salivate. I felt both thirst and hunger, and knew neither one would be satisfied until I tasted the blood.

“Not yet, my dear,” Mhayree whispered. “We do what we have to, to get out of here.”

Garris turned to Reid and said, “I am disappointed in you, brother. You would be an abomination, like them?”

An abomination. Like them. No other words could have hurt me more in that moment. As a woman, I was mistreated. As a murderer, I was an outcast. As a Phoenix vampire, I was condemned. Judged and found wanting for being nothing other than what the world had made me. And the Councillors considered themselves blameless.

I did not.

I lunged towards Garris, pointing the bejewelled dagger and laguiole towards his jugular. He cursed me in Latin and called for Reid to help him. To his dismay, the Councillor crawled away, shaking like a coward. Without warning, my strength weakened and Garris managed to overpower and pin me to the ground. Mhayree stood, flinching against the pain in her leg, and limped towards Garris and me. She pushed him over, punching and stamping his ribs. As he yelped, he dug his fingers into her leg wound, causing her to drop to one knee.

“Peyton!” Mhayree cried.

As I attempted to move, I saw the sgian dubh lying beside me. I remembered my mother’s advice on precise methods of killing and decided it an opportune moment to test her theory. As Garris stood over Mhayree, I grabbed the blade and thrust it into his thigh, bursting an artery.

He collapsed and died, like a slaughtered animal, watching the vultures circling.

Mhayree lay on the ground, shaking. “Thank you,” she croaked.

“My pleasure,” I replied.

“If this had been night time, I would have been stronger. He would never have got the better of me.”

A gruff male voice interrupted, “Stronger at night? Now that is something we did not know.”

Mhayree and I looked at each other, knowing too well we had forgotten about Reid’s presence. As she took a deep breath, Mhayree composed herself, ready for another round with the Councillor.

“You didn’t fathom that out during the First Cleansing? We may have overestimated the Inservium’s intelligence,” she said.

Reid clambered to his feet and walked towards us. “You women always seem to have secrets.”

Mhayree tried to suppress a wry smile. As Reid approached, his cloak brushed along the puddles of Garris’s blood and wafted the salty, metallic scent into the air. I closed my eyes and the smell entered me, invading my nose and mouth, as though giving me life.

Feed or kill?

Feed or kill?

I felt Mhayree’s hand reach for me. Her trembling fingers locked around mine as the two of us lay still, too exhausted to move.

When I opened my eyes, I saw Reid straddled over Mhayree, with his hand covering her mouth. He reached across and snatched the bejewelled dagger lying beside Garris’s body and directed it over her heart. As the blade pierced her corset, I struggled to crawl across the grass, fighting against the bloodlust, and retrieved my laguiole. Before Reid could stab through Mhayree’s heart, I plunged my blade into his throat.

Mhayree shoved Reid away from her. He and Garris lay side-by-side, dead.

Mhayree stumbled to her feet, gripping the leg wound and removed the dagger from her corset. Gritting her teeth against the pain, she staggered forward and helped me to stand. “Well done, my dear,” she said, patting me on the shoulder. Again she studied the streets, in search of witnesses. She replaced the hood over my head and said, “We don’t have much time. You must finish your transition.”

“Finish?” I replied.

“Yes, you are still decomposing. You need to rest in the mausoleum, then the transformation can be completed.” Mhayree rifled through a pocket in her skirt, produced five quartz crystals, and formed a circle around the two bodies. “Step inside, Peyton. We are going home.”

“You’re taking the bodies?”

“I’m hiding evidence. Now hurry, before anyone else finds us.”

I stepped into the circle and Mhayree performed an incantation. A flash of light transported us into Castle Árnýék’s Great Hall.

“Mhayree! *Rybka*!” exclaimed Natasha, peering over an old, dusty book, titled *Daemonologie*. “A little bit of frothy reading.”

“We brought dinner,” said Mhayree, pointing to Garris and Reid’s bodies. “I will ask Beatrice, Ruben and Lucille to drain them.”

Natasha wrinkled her nose in disgust. “What about the bodies?”

“I thought your horse might take an interest.”

“Oh, Veritas does love a treat,” Natashka grinned, before frowning at me. “*Rybka*, you seem unwell.”

“Now is not the time for understatement, Natashka,” said Mhayree. “I’m taking her to the mausoleum. We should talk after I return. Can you meet me in the undercroft?”

Natashka nodded and Mhayree escorted me from the room. As we left, a man and woman entered holding hands. Watching how happy they looked provoked a tinge of sadness and jealousy within me. She – petite and delicate – reminded me of the twirling ballerina hidden within the music box my mother gave me when I was a child. She nestled into his chest and he gazed down upon her with copper, cat-like eyes. He wrapped his arm around her shoulder, and his blond hair covered her face, making their bodies appear as one. It reminded me of the times Jacque and I walked through town, facing the crowds of onlookers gasping and tutting at our displays of affection.

The two lovers acknowledged Mhayree and me with smiles. I found it surprising neither one grimaced at my appearance. It almost made me feel guilty for hating them. To distract myself from thoughts of Jacque, I attempted to strike up a conversation with Mhayree.

“Undercroft?” I asked.

“Yes,” Mhayree replied.

My efforts to extract further information were answered with staunch silence.

In the mausoleum, two of the four corpses had disappeared since our previous visit. The other two appeared to be at a similar stage of decomposition as me. Mhayree instructed me to lie on top one of the slabs between the female bodies.

“What happened to the other ones?” I asked.

“They transitioned three days ago. You passed them in the Great Hall.”

“Three days? Mhayree, how long was I buried in the coffin?”

“Nine days. Enough questions.”

“But-”

“You need to rest. Only a few hours more.”

Mhayree helped me onto the slab, removed my boots, crossed my arms, and closed my eyelids. “Mhayree, I am afraid.”

“Then you are sure to succeed,” she replied, kissing me on the forehead. “No one will disturb you here. Once you are awake, come back to the castle.”

“What if-” the door banged shut and an icy draught swept over me. I opened my eyes and found myself, yet again, surrounded by darkness. This time, buried alive in a mausoleum.

Lying awake on the stone slab for what felt like an eternity, I was scared to shut my eyes in case I never woke up.

I’m not afraid of death, I assured myself.

But who would save Jacque if I died?

The existence, or lack thereof, of an afterlife did not concern me.

Ceasing to exist and my life amounting to nothing but murdered bodies and regrets did not make me uneasy.

Perhaps it did, a little.

In that case, I thought, who would save *me*?

Do vampires have souls? Was it worth condemning mine to save Jacque?

Of course it was, I reminded myself. He would do the same for me. Maybe.

Too late to change my mind.

To pass time, I decided to hum a tune. Not one I recollected hearing from music halls or Poska’s Inn, but one which conjured faint memories of a time long ago. All of a sudden, from the darkness, a raspy, American female spoke to me, “Please stop that incessant noise.”

“Who’s there?” I exclaimed.

“Clara Price, descendant of Lilianna Dali,” she replied, as I heard her shuffling off a stone slab and stepping onto the floor. “When did you awaken?”

“I haven’t yet finished.”

“Then you had better get to it,” she said, whilst yawning.

“I’m afraid,” I stuttered.

“It will be worse for you if you fail.” The mausoleum door opened, allowing sunlight to sweep over her. I watched her shadow walk away and close the door.

How can anything be worse than living as a decomposing corpse? I wondered. After pondering options – contracting bubonic plague, yellow fever, or marrying the man my father initially chose – I decided I had nothing left to lose, so closed my eyes.

One sheep.

Two sheep.

Three sheep, I counted.

Moments later, I felt myself sinking into the black abyss. In the darkness, my body collapsed, dying, devoured by flames. A woman’s voice called to me. A silver light

materialised in the distance and she descended from it like a spider, emerging as a silhouette. Her outstretched arms and hair billowed like tendrils, extending into the void. Webs covered her eyes and her silver lips curled like a crescent moon. She spoke to me without moving her mouth.

“Inna vakat da channa, tios inna channa da vakat. Lukon inna olkkan. Ceelio.”

Fear paralysed me, leaving me unable to speak. Silken threads trickled from the woman’s fingers and crept towards me. They weaved inside my ears, eyes and mouth, penetrating me, until a cocoon enveloped my body and extinguished the fire.

She threw me into the darkness, unspun the threads, and disappeared. I hung in mid-air, helpless as the fire reignited over my body.

A whip cracked and hacked across my torso. I remained stoic against the pain, and growled in defiance. When two whips slashed my back and face, the sharpness caused the corners of my mouth to flinch. Hands grabbed my hair, forcing my head back to expose my throat. A dagger suspended fifty feet hurtled downwards and sliced through my jugular. Blood spurted from the wound, filled my lungs, and seeped along my collarbone. Despite the agony, I refused to show weakness. Only the sweat dripping from me hinted at my suffering and exhaustion. A sword stabbed through my stomach, ripping muscle. It drove into my spine, snapping the bones. A set of iron chains twisted themselves around me, and dragged me to the ground. As I lay, broken, beaten and dying, thirty ghosts formed a circle around me. They displayed their wounds like macabre marionettes, dancing to the tune of their puppeteer, and accused me of their murders. Then it struck me – the purpose of the attacks was to re-enact how I had maimed and killed my victims.

Death won.

Collapsed in a pool of blood, I felt numb and defeated, with only the strength to mutter apologies to the ghosts.

With hands and feet trembling, and hair matted to my face, the pain of my mangled body was excruciating and relentless.

The woman reappeared and knelt beside me, her face inches from my own. She placed my head on her lap and stroked my cheek. She felt soft and warm, yet not formed of flesh. Instead, she was like smoke mixed with intuition – intangible, but undeniable.

The webs over her eyes retracted, thread by thread, revealing two sockets with white irises and flames for pupils. Her eyes filled with tears. *“Lukkon dalla matam, Peyton.”*

A tear fell, creating an icy streak down her face. It reached the edge of her chin, dropped onto the ground, and transformed the surface into mirrors. The woman lifted my

head and raised it to show my reflection. Instead of wounds and a decomposing corpse, I saw scars form and fade until disappearing.

“*Peyton, da olkkan,*” the woman whispered against my ear.

I turned to face her in search of answers or reassurance. None came. She opened her mouth and revealed two rows of fangs and a bright red tongue like a lizard. She shrieked in triumph and cradled me in her arms like a mother does her child.

As she catapulted me into the darkness, I awoke inside the mausoleum.

Chapter Thirteen

I survived.

The mausoleum doors opened to reveal the full moon dominating the night sky. The frosty air swept through the room, nipping at my toes and fingers. Something felt wrong – or right. I was still Peyton de Volonté – daughter, sister, lover, and long-term murderer.

Vampire.

I stepped off of the slab – as the cold, silver moonlight swept over me – put on my boots, and left the mausoleum.

When I entered Castle Árnýék, a fire blazed inside the fireplace, and the crackling embers pierced my ears as splinters from toasted logs succumbed to the searing heat. Blended extracts of oak, birch and pine drifted through dusty air, giving a distinctive smell to the Great Hall; leftover cakes and abandoned tea sets lay scattered across coffee tables; and the laughter of children travelled from the nursery down the hallway.

“Peyton!”

“Saara!” I replied. “I am looking for my mother.”

Saara, holding a pile of tattered woollen blankets, walked towards me, her fangs displayed as she smiled. “Of course you are. I believe she is with Mhayree, in their bedchamber.”

“*Their* bedchamber?”

Saara looked at me in disbelief. “Yes. Why would they not share a bed?”

“And where would their bedchamber be?” I said, confused.

“Up the staircase and seven doors to your left,” Saara pointed.

“Thank you,” I said, smiling, and felt my fangs graze my bottom lip.

Saara placed her hands around my shoulders, examined my mouth, and beamed.

“Now, you are strong, like a Phoenix, *Kulta*.”

I nodded, not quite certain of her meaning.

“I must go and take care of the children. I will visit you and your mother soon. She will be very proud of you. It will put her mind at ease that you are safe. I’m only sorry I could not have helped you sooner,” she murmured.

“It’s not your fault I ran away from you,” I laughed.

“No, but your mother gave me strict instructions to bring you here.”

“My mother did?”

“She was livid when I arrived back without you. Mhayree had to restrain her. She’s quite the fighter, your mother,” Saara giggled.

“My mother, a fighter?” I said.

“Hmmm,” Saara nodded. “Then, of course, she demanded Mhayree send Revenik with the carriage.”

“No, my mother only saved Amelie.”

Saara frowned, shaking her head. “You should speak to your mother,” she said, turning to leave.

Watching Saara disappear under an archway into the parlour, I wondered which of my mother’s guises was truest – the one I pitied or the one Mhayree and Saara respected.

I climbed the staircase, growing conscious of how the wooden steps bowed beneath the pressure of my feet, and reached the landing with four strides at most. Locating my mother’s bedchamber, I knocked and, without waiting for a response, turned the doorknob. As I entered the room, a naked body clambered off the bed, as my mother untangled her legs from around its waist.

“My love,” my mother exclaimed to me, panting and looking flushed. As she lay sprawled on top of the bed, with her white nightdress soaked in blood, she attempted to conceal herself with a blanket. Beside my mother, Mhayree stood behind one of the four poster curtains and pulled a chemise over her bare flesh. Despite having her back to me, I saw, in the mirror, Mhayree wiping blood stains from her mouth.

“Have you been feeding from my mother?” I spat at Mhayree.

She stared at me through the mirror, wiping her sweaty hair from her face.

As my mother crawled across the bed towards me, her nightdress and blanket rose to reveal deep, fresh bite marks along her inner thighs. A line of blood escaped from the wounds, drawing my mother’s attention towards her exposure. She clutched the blanket around her body, lowering her head as if to shield the embarrassment. When she found herself able to confront me, she leaned forward. “Peyton, it is nothing for you to worry about. I am perfectly well. Mhayree needed to heal her leg, and my blood helped to do that. Isn’t that a nice thing?” she said, stroking my face.

“It’s nice to know that’s all it meant to you!” Mhayree snapped and stormed out the door.

As Mhayree left, my mother climbed off the bed, calling her name, but was interrupted when Saara entered the room, holding Amelie by the hand.

“Mama,” Amelie yawned.

“Anteeksi! But she will not settle until she has seen you,” said Saara.

“It is quite alright,” my mother replied, before turning to Amelie and continuing.
“One moment, my darling.”

My mother walked behind a screen, and Amelie ran towards me, with a tatty ragdoll in her hand. I lifted her into my arms and she prodded my nose with her finger.
“You look different. Why?” she asked.

“Don’t be silly, nothing has happened to Peyton,” my mother said.

“Are you a vampire, now?” continued Amelie.

“What? Of course not! Where did you hear such things?” my Mother called.

“Children talk,” said Saara. “There’s twelve of them downstairs.”

“Can I be a vampire when I grow up?” said Amelie.

“What? Listen...” my mother stuttered.

“Why are you still awake, young lady?” I said, sitting on the edge of the bed, and balancing Amelie on my lap.

She held out her doll and whispered. “Sugarplum won’t go to sleep. She’s very naughty. I told her she won’t get any gingerbread, but she didn’t listen.”

“Poor Sugarplum,” my mother said, as she reappeared, wearing a pale green, French-style dressing gown and stockings. She poured a glass of milk from a jug sitting on a nightstand, and handed it to Amelie.

Poor Sugarplum, indeed, with her one eye, scruffy, yellow hair, ripped floral dress, and triangles drawn in crayon at her mouth.

“What are these?” I asked.

“Fangs. She’s a vampire,” Amelie shrugged, before taking a gulp of milk and continuing, “like you.”

“Who told you Peyton was a vampire?” asked Saara, sitting down beside Amelie.

“Freya,” Amelie replied, handing me her glass.

“Amelie! You weren’t supposed to tell!” whined a young girl’s voice from behind the door. The handle turned, and in walked the little brunette girl who I recognised from my first altercation with Mhayree.

“It would seem this one can’t sleep, either,” said Mhayree, following her daughter and standing against the wall, refusing to look at my mother.

Freya sat next to Amelie and the two broke into giggles. “This is my sister, Peyton,” Amelie said, patting my arm.

Freya pointed to me and yelled, “I told you she was a vampire!” The pair collapsed on the bed, in hysterics, and Amelie replied, “I know! You were completely right!”

“Freya, how do you know about vampires?” asked Mhayree, concerned.

Amelie sat upright and said, “Suzie told Harry, who told Lyle, who told Julie, who told Lizzie, who told –”

“Drink your milk,” I interrupted, offering her the glass.

She took a sip, shared the rest with Freya, and the two snuck under the bed and recited pat-a-cake.

“So now, the children know,” Mhayree closed her eyes and sighed. “Can you imagine if they told their school friends in town?”

“I doubt anyone would believe childish tales,” I replied.

“And if word reached the Councillors, of children telling stories of their vampire families, what do you suppose would happen?” my mother asked.

“Hysteria, persecutions and slaughter. Exactly as it was before,” Saara said, standing from the bed to join Mhayree. “Our choice is obvious – we must go into battle against the Inservium. We always knew it would come to this.”

“Battle? What do you mean?” I asked.

“The covens must become one, and, like the original Thirteen, fight the Councillors – kill them,” Saara said.

“Saara, the children,” my mother whispered, pointing beneath the bed.

“You want to risk your lives just because a group of children know I’m a vampire?” I mocked.

“Not only for that reason,” Saara continued, “Now, they think you are dead, there is nothing to prevent them from replacing you with another vampire hunter. And now that the children know, we can never go home.”

“And what about Jacque? If we provoke the Councillors, there is no doubt they will kill him. Do you think, after all I’ve done, and all the people I have murdered – including your friends and family – I would let that happen?” I spat.

“And what about your sister? Would you risk her life for his?” my mother asked.

“That’s not-” I said, before being interrupted by the chandelier hanging from the ceiling shaking as Amelie and Freya’s childish giggles grew louder. My mother and Mhayree, concerned, looked upwards.

“Which one of them is doing that?” Mhayree said.

My mother frowned. “Girls, behave under there.”

“Shh,” Freya whispered, causing Amelie to burst out laughing. Again, the chandelier shook, almost dislodging.

“She’s far too young,” my mother said to herself. Crystal droplets fell from the silver arms and shattered across the floor. Amelie and Freya peeked their heads out from below the bed and crawled out.

“Careful!” Mhayree said, darting towards Freya and grabbing her. It was too late. The fragrance hit me – honey laced with essence of the sea. Blood gushed from the little girl’s foot as she lay on the floor, sobbing. My mother and Saara tore pieces of fabric from their clothes and the bed linen, and crowded round her. As Mhayree consoled her daughter, Saara picked out shards of crystal from the child’s soles. My mother and I gathered the remaining fragments scattered on the floor.

“This tastes nice. It’s nicer than mama’s bunny stew.” My mother, Mhayree, Saara and I turned to see Amelie dipping her finger into the pool of blood.

“No!” my mother yelled, snatching Amelie’s hand away from her mouth. My sister, frightened, burst into tears and ran towards me.

As she wrapped her arms around me and buried into my chest, I heard her mumble, “It just looked nice.”

“I know, sweetie. You were only a little curious,” I replied, knowing too well the temptation of blood.

Mhayree and Saara stared at my mother as though awaiting her next move. A look of pity appeared on her face, and she moved towards Amelie, prised her away from me, and held her close. Mhayree, looking relieved, returned to bandaging Freya’s foot.

Saara sat by my mother and stroked Amelie’s hair. “How old is she?” she asked.

“Six,” I answered.

As tears welled up in my mother’s eyes, she muttered, “She won’t survive this. Her little body won’t take it. She will fail, like I did.”

“What are you talking about?” I demanded.

“I will go to my mother and ask her if there has been anyone so young to go through it,” Saara said, ignoring me.

“How can this be happening?” my mother said. “So soon after Peyton?”

“Perhaps that is what triggered it,” Saara replied.

“One day apart?”

“Maybe it’s the curse,” Mhayree interrupted.

My mother, horrified, stared at Saara.

“We don’t know that,” Saara said, holding up her hands, as if trying to appease my mother. “But I will find out what I can.”

“Is anyone going to answer me?” I said.

“I will not have her suffering as I do. She’ll not be cursed to live between worlds,” my mother said.

Saara grabbed her by the shoulders and said, “You, too, are strong.”

“Strong! The fevers? Being trapped in my own head? How sheer existence is draining the life from me, and yet will not let me die? Immortality without a purpose? You would let a child suffer this?”

“I’m sorry, mama, I didn’t mean to make you upset,” said Amelie, raising her head.

My mother laughed, dabbing her eyes, and replied, “No, no, no, these are happy tears, because Freya’s foot is all better. Why don’t you go over and play with her.”

Amelie launched herself towards Freya, and, as Mhayree drew them both closer to her, they nestled into her shoulders, falling asleep.

“The Councillors will definitely come after her now,” said my mother.

“We will hide her,” assured Saara. “We can take her to Suomi.”

“No. Our children will not be separated from us,” Mhayree said. “No man has the right to decide whose land belongs to whom. Every Phoenix vampire has the right to come home. Why should we run and hide?”

“And what if it was Freya?” my mother asked.

Silence fell. As I watched my sister and Freya in Mhayree’s arms, I thought about them growing into young women, facing the challenges of a new century. What wonders would they see? Perhaps they would travel continents, embracing new cultures. Perhaps they would become what society deems as “New Women” and strive for independence by joining the Suffrage movement. All the while, being hated and hunted for being born different. That is, if they were not killed first.

I knew it was a question of sacrifice. Somebody had to end up dead. After all the times the Inservium forced me to kill for them, it was now my turn to decide who was next. Jacque’s life or Amelie’s?

Or my own?

Simple choice.

“Nobody is going into hiding,” I announced, “because we *are* going to fight.”

My mother grabbed my arm. “We? No! You will not be fighting with us, it’s too dangerous.”

I took her hand and placed it upon her lap. As I released her, I said, “I am a murderer, mother, whether or not you choose to acknowledge it. Night after night, I stabbed, strangled, and decapitated people without guilt. Do you understand? I murdered

almost one hundred people. And I don't remember most of their names. It meant nothing to me."

My mother bowed her head and, without looking me in the eye, said, "No, Peyton, that was for Jacque--"

"I may have been a murderer for the wrong side, but--"

"But now, she will be a warrior," Mhayree said.

My mother lifted her head, looked at Mhayree and me and sighed. As she stood up, the door burst open. Natashka, seething, muttered to herself in Russian whilst entering the room.

"The spell didn't work!" she exclaimed.

"What spell?" asked Saara.

"The spell, spell! Mhayree gave me a sample of Jacque's blood and asked me to locate him," Natashka answered.

I reached for my neck, searching for the necklace containing the vial of blood, and found it gone.

"But every time I went near it, it repelled me, and burst into flames. The damned stuff blocked me!"

"Where is my necklace?" I demanded.

"I snatched it when you were lying in the mausoleum," said Mhayree.

"*Rybka!*" Natashka squealed. "You look delightful. How was your transition?"

"It was--" I said.

"How do you feel?" Natashka interrupted.

"Well--"

"Oh, let me see your fangs."

Natashka positioned herself in front of me, with wide eyes full of expectation. I opened my mouth and half-grinned, fangs catching my bottom lip.

"Aww, they're perfect," Natashka said. "We will need to teach you how to feed. But right now we don't have time. Have this instead." Natashka produced a goblet full of blood from behind her back, and took a drink before handing it to me. "I laced it with vodka, so you're not overwhelmed by your first taste of blood as a vampire. We'll save that for your first feed from a vein."

"More importantly, what about Jacque?" I replied, taking a sip. Natashka was right, it was nothing special. If anything, the alcohol outweighed any taste of blood.

Natashka rolled her eyes. "The spell didn't work."

"They always work," said Mhayree.

Natashka spun around and stared up at the ceiling. “Something – someone – is obstructing me.”

“That can’t be,” said Saara. “Only somebody who knows our craft would have the knowledge.”

“Well, I didn’t do anything wrong,” Natashka said. She pointed up, to the broken chandelier. “What happened there?”

“Nothing. Don’t change the subject,” my mother replied.

“How many people know about Jacque’s kidnapping?” Mhayree said.

Natashka thought for a moment. “Everyone in this castle?”

“So not just the people in this room?” Saara said.

Natashka laughed. “With the gossip around this place? Everybody knows why Peyton is here.”

Saara knelt on the floor and placed her fingers over Natashka’s temples. “Think.”

Natashka sat silent, staring at Saara. Within seconds, her face fell. “Someone in the coven is working with the Inservium.”

Saara, sullen and despondent, nodded.

“Who?” I yelled, leaping from the bed. Amelie and Freya stirred, yawning.

“Everything is fine, go back to sleep,” Mhayree whispered. As the two girls settled into her shoulders, Mhayree frowned, warning me to be quiet.

“I cannot determine who,” Natashka said. “If they can prevent me from finding Jacque, then it is certain they have taken precautions to shield themselves.”

“I will find them,” I said, storming towards the door. “Even if it means killing every vampire in the castle.”

Saara sprung from the floor and held me back. “No, *Kulta*, this is not the way. We fight the Inservium, not ourselves.”

“I will not fight beside a traitor,” I snapped.

Saara turned me to face her, and looked deep into my eyes. “We forgave and will fight beside *you*, despite what you have done. Do not punish the entire coven because of one rotten apple spoiling the harvest.”

“Finally, one of you admits it – you consider me a traitor,” I replied.

“No, Peyton. You will be the one who trains us to fight,” said Saara.

Confused, I broke away from her grip.

“Saara is right,” Mhayree added. “I might be able to throw a punch or two, but your expertise is altogether different. Why else do you think the daughter of an original Phoenix would be sent here?”

“News of your rampage has reached the covens around the world,” Saara said, eyeing me, impressed – and yet disturbed.

Natashka, clapping her hands, announced, “I know what we must do. *Rybka* and I shall go to the Inservium and hunt for documents – anything which will incriminate the Councillors. We can expose them and their corruption. And Mhayree and Saara – you can call the rest of the covens to arms.”

Before anyone could object, Natashka grabbed my hand, dragging me out of the room. Mhayree and Saara followed, carrying the two children. Behind us, I heard my mother ask, “What shall I do?”

Nobody replied as the door closed.

Chapter Fourteen

In the Great Hall, Mhayree formed a quartz pentacle for Natashka and me to enter. Saara collected two cloaks from a closet and handed them to us for disguises. Natashka recited an incantation, set alight the crystals, and, in a flash, she and I stood in the middle of an abandoned road outside of town.

“You couldn’t have gotten us any closer?” I asked.

“And risk being seen? You have such odd notions, *Rybka*,” Natashka replied, as she negotiated her chair over the rocky road – avoiding muddy puddles and struggling against the uneven terrain. She inhaled a deep breath, sniffing the air. “Ahhh! I have not left the castle in almost eight years.”

“Have you never been to town?”

“No,” she sighed, “you will have to show me the way.”

I listened to the silent night air until a soft crashing of waves reached my ears. “The ocean is southeast behind us.”

“Roughly one and a half miles away,” Natashka replied, tilting her head to hear.

“Which means we are twelve miles from town,” I said, pointing in our intended direction.

We travelled all night for miles, along the countryside, over the river, through sleepy villages, until we reached the centre of town.

We spoke of Jacque and how we met. The first time I murdered, and how the guilt disappeared all too quick. About her family and how they abandoned her at Castle Árnýék soon after she transitioned. As we entered the town square, dawn broke through the night sky, and men and women emerged from their homes. The streets came alive with bakers lining their shop windows with breads and pastries; laundry women filling giant copper pots with water; and street sweepers cleaning up horse manure. As we passed, each towns person in turn either gawped or aimed a sly stare at Natashka.

An old woman approached us and said to me, “Is this you out on a little walk?” I nodded in contempt. Under her shawl, her wrinkled face offered a smile tainted by condescension and pity. “Should she be out in public, though?” she continued.

I opened my mouth to unleash a tirade against the woman, but Natashka clasped my elbow and guided me away. “Why didn’t you let me say anything to that old toad?” I said.

“As we say in Russia, *nu naxer*,” Natashka replied, shrugging her shoulders, and mouthing a profanity to demonstrate the translation. “Besides, I have an unfair advantage, in that I could rip out her throat.”

We laughed at the absurdity and entered the back gate of the Inservium grounds. Candles flickered through stained glass windows and green smoke escaped from the chimneys, signalling an initiation ceremony was in procession.

We made our way to the back door and found it to be locked. Natashka looked upwards to a chimney, before checking for passers-by. “Wait here and I’ll let you in,” she said, lifting her arms. Within seconds, she turned into a bat and flew into the chimney. The door unlocked, and on the other side waited Natashka, with soot covering her nose and cheeks.

We sneaked through the corridors, cautious not to alert the Councillors to our presence. The droning hum of chanting echoed through the marble walls, and the shimmering candlelight reflecting off the gold embellishments guided us through the labyrinth of passages.

“Do you really think Bothwell and his cronies would be idiotic enough to just leave a list of my murder victims lying around?” I whispered.

“Shh! We discussed this. What better way for the Inservium to ensure a Councillor stays in line than to record all his misdeeds?” Natashka replied. “Any Councillor involved in Jacque’s kidnap and your list of murders, Bothwell will have implicated them in writing. Secrets keep secrets.”

“I always thought money kept secrets.”

“Well, they didn’t acquire all these riches by magic. If we can find the documents, all the better – but mostly, we need their weapons. Or rather, *our* weapons that they stole from us.”

“Now I can definitely find those,” I smirked. “Follow me.”

We turned a corner, and travelled the length of a dark passageway with only our sharpened eyesight to cut through the blackness. Glass panels displayed golden chests and polished amulets sprawled against greasy oil paintings of their Idol. Large arched doors lined the passageway, each one refusing to open as we rattled the handles.

“I could try to pick the locks. Or unbolt the hinges,” I said.

“We don’t have time. Our priority is to retrieve the weapons. Afterwards we can-”

A series of footsteps rumbled at the end of the passageway, moving towards us. In the distance, a candle flame flickered against the whistles of a Councillor, holding a candelabrum. Natashka and I backed ourselves against the wall with hopes of remaining

unseen. As the footsteps drew closer, a tall, gangly man strode into view, with his black cloak billowing like an ominous shadow. He stopped five doors away from us, retrieved a key from his waistcoat, and opened a door. As he disappeared into a room, Natashka and I, looking at each other, sighed with relief. With diligence and swiftness, we crept past the doorways, easing our way towards the end of the passageway. We halted before reaching the room containing the Councillor to ensure whatever shenanigans kept him occupied prevented him from discovering us. Looking into a glass panel opposite the doorway, I saw a reflection of the Councillor dripping oils into a large incense burner, alongside powders and various other ingredients. Natashka and I took advantage of his distraction and we moved forward. But as soon as I stepped in front of the threshold, a voice shouted in the distance, "Councillor Walters! The ceremony is commencing."

Councillor Walters turned to face the door and flinched at the sight of two female vampires before him.

"Hello," Natashka said with a disconcerting calmness.

The Councillor opened his mouth to scream and I rushed towards him, slamming him against stacks of wax-sealed scrolls.

"Councillor Walters!" yelled the voice again. Natashka wheeled into the room and closed the door behind her, being careful not to make a sound. I covered the Councillor's mouth with my hand, stifling his pathetic cries. Outside the room, we heard footsteps pacing the passageway. The Councillor called for Walters again and door handles clattered, denying entry. Natashka and I looked at each other with nervous anticipation, awaiting the door to open. The footsteps grew louder as they approached nearer.

"Do something," I muttered to Natashka.

No sooner had she positioned her chair against the door like a barricade, the door handle turned. As the door creaked open, Natashka placed her hand over the latch and, with a silent motion, slid the bolt closed. Councillor Walters's muffled voice pleaded beneath my hand as he struggled under my weight. The door handle rattled once more, but held, keeping the monster outside at bay. Defeated, and no doubt confused, the Councillor retreated with the sound of his footsteps receding into the distance.

Again, Councillor Walters squirmed under my grip. Natashka raised her hand, inducing the Councillor's body to rise a few feet off the ground. She moved forward and, with her other arm, reached for one of the scrolls and bit down on the wax, slicing through the seal. After examining the parchment, she tossed it into the corner.

"It's nothing," she said.

“Where do you keep the confessions? Details about the Councillors? How did you choose my victims?” I asked Walters, removing my hand from his mouth. He spat at me in response and Natashka waved her hand, twisting his arm behind his back. As he grimaced, I asked the same questions again. No response. Natashka and I drew back our lips to bare our fangs and snarled, releasing a guttural growl. Again, no response. Picking up the incense burner, Natashka sniffed the contents.

“Garlic, hawthorn and ashwood. Do you really think these will save you?” Natashka asked, waving around the incense burner. “I’ve never understood the reasoning behind these silly superstitions. These won’t ward off vampires.”

With curiosity, I turned around, to inspect the offensive item.

“Look out!” Natashka shouted.

I glanced round to Councillor Walters, and discovered him reaching into his pocket and removing a vial of clear liquid. He released the cap and swallowed the contents moments before my hand reached out to stop him. Natashka lowered her hand, causing the Councillor to drop to the floor. I grabbed the empty vial from his fist and sniffed the glass, detecting a distinct aroma of bitter almonds.

“Cyanide,” I said.

Walters lay in a heap in the corner, clutching his chest as his breathing grew erratic. Natashka moved forward as I bent down to examine the body, finding the Councillor’s skin developing a reddish tinge.

“There’s nothing we can do,” Natashka muttered.

“If there was, would we have done it anyway?” I replied.

Natashka raised an eyebrow in consideration, without committing to an answer. Within minutes, Councillor Walters fell unconscious and his breathing ceased. I placed two fingers against the underside of his wrist and found no pulse.

“Well, this poses some problems,” Natashka said.

“What do we do?” I asked.

“You’re the murderer! Do you have any suggestions on how to hide a body?”

“The idea was for people to find my victims’ bodies. So the Councillors knew I had done the job right.”

Natashka turned up her nose and shook her head in disbelief.

“Besides, this one was a suicide,” I continued. “We can use that to our advantage.”

“Never have I heard such a chilling sentence. But alright,” Natashka smiled.

As I propped the Councillor's body up against the wall, Natashka rifled through desk drawers. After retrieving a piece of parchment and quill, she sat at the desk, and said, "I'll write the suicide note".

"Do you not think the other Councillors will recognise it's not his handwriting?" I asked, attempting to prevent Walters's head and torso from slumping forward.

Natashka ignored me and persisted with writing. The minutes dragged on as I paced the floor watching Natashka's arms flail in the air, in mock theatrics, whilst scribbling with the quill.

"Look, Sarah Bernhardt, you're not on stage," I said.

"Ah, the French actress! Mhayree knows her."

"Are you almost finished?" I replied, swiping the parchment from the desk and reading it. "Did you intend for it to sound like the ravings of a madman?"

"Well, he did join the Inservium," said Natashka, shrugging her shoulders.

I laughed in agreement and moved to place the parchment upon Walters's body.

"Wait!" Natashka interrupted. "We need to add his seal as a signature. Give me his medallion and the document I threw into the corner."

I removed the medallion from around Walters's neck and handed it to Natashka, alongside the two pieces of parchment. She placed the medallion on the desk and tore off the wax seal from the original document. As she positioned Walters's candelabrum under the seal, the heat from the flame melted the red wax onto the medallion.

"Hold the note flat," Natashka instructed me.

As I spread the parchment across the desk, she flipped the medallion over, pressing the wax into the document and peeling it away to reveal Walters's embossed personal seal.

"Leave everything as it is. The messier the better. It makes the scene more believable," Natashka said.

With neither guilt nor remorse, Natashka and I closed the door on Councillor Walters's lifeless body.

We continued through passageways and endless corridors, followed by the echo of the Councillors chanting a Latin requiem. As their words filled my ears, my mind washed away proclamations of an all-seeing Inservium and praises to their Idol, as though drowning out falsehoods which no longer mattered. As we reached the end of a hallway, we turned into the Inservium sanctuary. Natashka placed her arm in front of me to halt my steps. We hid in a corner and witnessed the Councillors gathered in a circle, holding anointing oils, and lifting their medallions towards their Idol's statue. On the outskirts, two Councillors swung gold-plated incense burners, the clouds of smoke masking the

ensemble's prostrations and veneration. Their chants, along with the overpowering scent of hawthorn and ashwood filled the room. The crowd parted, and in the centre knelt two men, wearing brown Inservium initiation cloaks. In front of them stood a Councillor, holding a jewel-encrusted goblet and raising aloft his medallion, as though offering it to an invisible deity. The two kneeling men declared their vows of fidelity, honour and subservience to the Inservium and the Idol, and removed their hoods to sip from the goblet. As the brown cloth fell, it revealed their faces – my father and brother, Étienne.

“What the hell do they think they are doing?” I muttered.

“*Rybka*, do you know those men?”

When I informed Natashka they were my family, her brow furrowed. “Has he always been that small and fat?” she said. “He isn't how I remember.”

I glanced towards her, confused, but found her to be distracted in her own little world.

“Natashka?” I said, breaking her reverie.

“He is, after all, the one who put me in this wheelchair.”

I clasped Natashka's hand to reassure her of safety. I felt no surprise of her involvement in my father's experiments. But I knew for certain that whilst I stood beside her, he would never touch her again. I'd kill him first.

My father and brother stood, received their black cloaks as ordained Councillors, and the initiation ceremony ended. As the Councillors dispersed, Natashka and I lingered, awaiting the opportunity to move. We watched as Bothwell shook hands with my father and Étienne and invited them to join the Councillors in private prayers. My father smiled as though the offer included a high-class madam, a cigar, whisky, and the keys to a seedy gentleman's club. Perhaps it did. Étienne, on the other hand, looked like a lost urchin, ensnared in a world in which he did not belong. I almost felt sorry for him. Bothwell wrapped his arm around Étienne's shoulder and guided him and my father from the sanctuary, leaving Natashka and I alone in the shadows at last.

Neither of us moved. Natashka kept her eyes to the floor, looking sullen as her hands trembled to adjust her lace choker necklace. With our hands still clasped together, I stroked hers, to offer reassurance, before taking the initiative to step forward into the room. Natashka pulled me back.

“I promise he cannot get you. We are far stronger than he could ever be,” I said, coaxing Natashka to move.

After deliberating for a few moments, she placed her hands on her wheels and edged herself forward into the sanctuary.

I led Natashka to the hidden vault, unlocked its seal, and opened the door to reveal the array of weaponry, all of which had once been at my disposal. One by one, I removed daggers, chains, razors and whips, and handed them to Natashka. “Hide these,” I said.

“Have you used all of these?” Natashka whispered.

“Yes,” I replied, inserting a silver dagger down the side of my boot.

Natashka raised her eyebrows with amazement before wrapping a whip around her thigh, concealing it under her skirt. As she struggled to find suitable places to hide the razors and daggers, I said, “Perhaps you should think about wearing trousers. More pockets for practicality.”

“They *are* an interesting alternative,” Natashka said, and, with trepidation, she attempted to slide a dagger’s blade down her corset.

“Before you stab yourself, consider this one,” I said, offering her a dagger wrapped in a leather sheath.

She accepted and inserted the dagger down her corset. “It’s surprisingly comfortable,” she remarked.

“I don’t really notice anymore,” I replied, filling my coat pockets with razors and chains. Once the vault was empty, I sealed the door and beckoned Natashka to follow me. We retraced our steps and left the Inservium.

Outside, streaks of sunlight pierced the clouds, as snow floated to the ground. As we returned to our human guises, we moved along the pathway, my footprints and Natashka’s wheels leaving markings along the icy blanket. We continued, and the snow grew heavier, but neither I nor Natashka shivered against the air’s frozen chill.

“Natashka...” I said.

“Hmm?”

“Can I ask you something?”

“It happened over twenty years ago,” Natashka said.

“My father?”

Natashka nodded. “Mhayree and I were in Edinburgh – she thought it was time for me to see life outside of Árnyék. We were staying with friends, and one morning, walking along the Royal Mile, a man pushed me onto the road, and under the wheels of a carriage.”

“And you survived *that*?” I said.

“Even in our human form, it takes a certain skill to kill a vampire. As you know,” Natashka smiled.

I narrowed my eyes, unimpressed. “Carry on.”

“Are you familiar with galvanism? Think *Frankenstein*.”

“I’ve heard of the experiments,” I said. “They run electrical currents through dead frogs to resurrect them.”

“Well, when I awoke, I was tied down on a laboratory slab. Your father was standing over me, driving electric rods into my body, and obviously – as one would – I screamed out.”

“And I’m guessing the idiot thought he’d brought you back to life.”

Natashka nodded. “I’ll never forget the way he looked – that sleazy smile – with his hands all over me. Like I was his plaything. His pet.”

Natashka’s voice trailed off. “He even cried.”

Stepping closer, I placed my hand on her shoulder.

“But cheating death wasn’t enough for him,” Natashka continued. “For an entire day, he subjected me to experiments. Injections, electrocutions – all whilst I was awake and gagged – until finally he tried severing my legs from my body.”

I gripped Natashka’s shoulder tighter, knowing I’d drive a knife into my father as soon as the opportunity arose.

“But then Torrin found me,” Natashka said. “I’m not sure how. He says it doesn’t matter. And, of course, it was late into the night, so, as vampires, we were stronger. Torrin knocked your father out from behind, and I managed to break free.”

“My father knows you’re a vampire?” I said.

“No. He was unconscious before he could notice the transformation.”

“Is that how you and Torrin met?”

“No,” Natashka smiled. “I’ve known him for much longer. He let me feed from him until I was healed. But the damage to my legs was irreversible.”

We both fell silent, watching the sun rise higher in the sky.

“Perhaps you should change the subject, *Rybka*,” Natashka said.

I thought for a few moments before commenting. “You look strange wandering in the snow without a coat or cloak.”

“Says the woman wearing trousers,” Natashka replied.

“Says the Russian who can transform into a bat,” I retorted.

Natashka and I laughed and turned back towards the Inservium, to find the snow disguising our tracks, making our existence disappear.

We wandered through the streets, keeping out of sight of the townspeople, until a scraggy boy wearing a tweed cap and jacket appeared in the town square, waving a newspaper above his head.

“Vampires attack Councillors! Read all about it!” he bellowed.

Natashka and I stopped and stared at each other. An eerie silence befell the town square until, all of a sudden, almighty hysteria broke out. From every household and shop, people flocked in panic towards the boy. Women and men pushed and shoved one another to ensure they reached the boy first. Abandoned prams lay strewn across the cobbled paths as droves of chubby, bumbling nannies threw pennies at the boy's feet and grabbed their copy of the *Daily Isle*.

"Vampires! Vampires in Loch Fala!" shouted the boy, drawing screams and cries from the crowd. "Two Councillors dead!"

"I think they'll find it's now three Councillors," Natashka whispered to me, as we hid in an alleyway.

I gave no reply, and instead watched as the townspeople erupted into a brawl. Horses reared as carriages overturned in the commotion. Starving looters ransacked the greengrocers, bakers and butchers, dropping cabbage leaves, pickled carcasses and baguettes. Ladies collapsed to their knees, wailing, as gentlemen bashed each other with canes to reach the front of the crowd.

"Councillors warn no one is safe! It could be you next, sir!" the boy yelled, pointing at a man grappling at the pile of newspapers on the ground. "Or your children," he added, playing to his audience.

As Natashka and I peered around the alleyway, a young man ran past, tripped up and banged his head against the wall, falling unconscious.

"How fortunate," Natashka said.

I looked at her, shocked by her cruelty. She rolled her eyes and pointed towards a rolled-up newspaper, squashed under the man's arm. "What does it say?" Natashka asked.

I crawled on my knees towards the man, pulling my hood over my face, and stole his newspaper. I retreated into the alleyway, crouched beside Natashka, as the boy in the square shouted, "The Councillors say only the faithful can be saved!"

Natashka and I sniggered at the absurdity of the claim. "What do they think we're going to do? Pillage graves and create an army of revenants who rise from the dead each night?" Natashka jibed.

I unfolded the newspaper and rifled through the pages, ignoring the sensationalised front page headline and grotesque portrait of a supposed vampire. As I skimmed through the sections, I glanced "Prayers for Protection," written by the Inservium; amulets for sale, to ward off vampire attacks – available for purchase in the Inservium; and requests for charitable donations to the Inservium, to aid them in their "invaluable" and "self-sacrificing" mission. I grunted in disgust, flicked over the page, and froze.

“Natashka!” I said, as a cold shiver ran down my spine. I turned the newspaper to face her, and splayed the pages open.

“We have to go. Now!” she replied, grasping the newspaper from my hands. She sat it upon her knee and, as I rose to my feet, a picture of a pale-faced, dark-haired girl, with a steely glare, looked out from the page. Me.

From the town square, we heard the boy shout. “Come read all about it! Real vampire found. Peyton de Volonté. Serial killer, vampire fakes death. When will she strike again?”

Natashka strained to smile at me. “Perhaps we move a bit quicker,” she suggested.

I nodded in agreement, as a strange fear gripped me. If, by chance, one or two townspeople spotted and assailed me, I could fight them off, no problem. However, the reality of staving off a full-scale, frenzied rabble would, without a doubt, end in my death – culminating with a stake driven through my heart and decapitation. Silly superstitions.

“Transform,” I muttered to Natashka, “and escape.”

“No, *Rybka*. We stay together. You do not need to protect me,” she replied, leading me into a backstreet, away from the crowd. “Tell me which way to go. It is up to you to get us home.”

I navigated Natashka through the vacant, run-down slums, hidden behind the merchant buildings surrounding the town square. We negotiated around leaky drainpipes, doped-up opium and gin addicts collapsed on the icy, cobbled streets, and putrid filth, amassed from animal and human faeces.

The young newspaper boy’s voice echoed in the distance. “Vampires! Vampires in Loch Fala!”

We turned a corner, out of the narrow depths of the slums, and disappeared into the snow.

Chapter Fifteen

Natashka and I arrived at an abandoned farmhouse, several miles outside of town, and found shelter inside a barn – the only purpose of which seemed to be providing a feast for woodworm. After forming a quartz circle around Natashka, I stepped inside, and waited for the incantation and flames. Within moments, we found ourselves standing in the middle of the Great Hall.

“We have a problem,” Natashka said to Mhayree as the redhead strode across the hall and stood before us.

“I’m aware of that,” Mhayree replied, holding up a copy of *The Daily Isle*.

“Where did you-” I said.

Mhayree interrupted, pointing her finger towards a set of doors and beckoning us to follow. “A lot has happened since you left.”

Mhayree slid the doors open and we stepped inside the drawing room, to find a crowd of people amassed in the centre.

“We don’t allow humans in the castle!” raged Natashka.

“They are family. They won’t hurt us,” said Mhayree. “Attention, everyone. This is Natashka, and our new local celebrity, Peyton. Now, I don’t want you to worry, she only kills vampires,” the room gasped in unison. “Me, on the other hand – two *human* Councillors and counting... this year. So if anyone would like to take issue with her, please let me know first.”

The room fell silent for a moment, before each man and woman, considering Mhayree’s words, thought it best to look away, as though busy with other matters.

I leaned into Mhayree and whispered, “Actually, I helped to kill the Councillors. And the Councillor count just rose to three.”

“They don’t need to know that, dear,” Mhayree replied then closed her eyes, exasperated. “Three?”

“We should probably talk, Mhayree,” Natashka said.

I looked around the room of faces – both vampire and human alike – recognising many from portraits and photographs displayed in the houses of my victims. In a corner, the Red Woman chatted to a man wearing a navy blue flat cap, with a Cockney accent – the one who sold me the *Phantasma*. She smiled at me, patted the man on the arm, and whispered in his ear, before the two wandered towards me. Mhayree, with her hands on her hips, nodded her head in the direction of a moustached man, standing by the window.

“That is Freya’s father,” she said.

“You mean your husband?” I replied.

Mhayree glared at me, disgusted with the insinuation. “On paper, perhaps.”

A tap on my shoulder distracted me from continuing the conversation.

“Peyton,” said the Red Woman, as I turned to face her. “I believe you have met my great-nephew, Joseph.”

I nodded, trying to hide my confusion as to how a man in his fifties could be the great-nephew of a woman who appeared to be thirty years his junior. “Yes,” I half-smiled, shaking the man’s hand. “As I remember, you recommended *The Little Girl of the Ashes* to me. Very cryptic.”

Joseph laughed, “I just do as I’m told.”

“Very wise,” chuckled the Red Woman.

“Are you a vampire?” I asked the man.

“No,” he laughed. “I was never turned.”

My face fell, scrutinising him. “Did you know I was a vampire?”

The Red Woman placed a gentle hand upon my arm. “There was no conspiracy, Peyton. No harm was meant.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted Natashka glancing towards the three of us. “Is everything alright?” she enquired.

“Oh yes,” said the Red Woman.

“No! No, everything is not alright. If you all knew I was a vampire, why didn’t you just tell me? Why, instead of all these games? You knew where to find me,” I said.

Natashka held her hands up, as if surrendering, and Mhayree turned around to join our gathering. She stood in front of me, with gritted teeth, and muttered, “Think about it, you stupid girl! There was someone out there killing vampires. If we had told you the truth, it might have put you in danger. At the time, we didn’t know that you were the dangerous one!”

I moved forward, stopping an inch from Mhayree’s face. As we stared at each other, I said, “If you and my mother had told me, a lot of innocent people would still be alive.”

“Enough,” Mhayree warned, narrowing her eyes.

“It’s your fault these people’s relatives are dead.” My voice hit a crescendo, silencing the entire room.

“*Rybka*, no. Don’t do this,” Natashka pleaded, pulling me back. Mhayree did not react, instead, she stood beside the Red Woman, whom she addressed as Hart, and enquired after her family.

Unclasping myself from Natashka's hand, I walked across the room towards the door. Amidst the silence and the stares, Beatrice called out, "Did you really kill 70 people?"

I turned around and found her, sitting reading a newspaper in the corner.

"No. It couldn't have been." I paused before uttering, "I don't know."

"What I take umbrage at is how ugly they make us look," said a regal-looking brunette woman, adorned with silver chains and dramatic rouged lips and kohl eyes. She sat on top of a dust-covered chaise longue, and flicked through a pamphlet. "I mean, hairy palms and faces? Drinking the blood of infants? And look at the crookedness of those fangs!"

"Apparently," interrupted a man wearing a top hat, clad in black riding boots, trousers and smoking jacket, "we can't enter cemeteries, are the children born out of wedlock, and committed suicide during our lifetime." I remembered him from the night I killed his friend, Katja – the white-haired one. Minus his veil, an array of nose, lip and eyebrow piercings glittered against luminescent skin. He shook his head, and turned towards another male vampire. "Torrin, have you read this?"

The young man – the one Natashka fed upon when we first met – sat beside him and lifted a newspaper from a stack scattered across shabby cushions and scoffed. "They say people born with red hair and blue eyes are more likely to become vampires."

The room looked at Mhayree. "What?" she said, as though daring anyone to answer.

Deciding not to wait around any further, I walked away. As I reached the door, I noticed, out of the corner of my eye, a short, unattractive woman swiping a finger along a cobweb-covered railing. "Doesn't anyone clean in this castle?"

She must be a human, I thought.

I walked the length of the hallway, listening to the familiar sounds of restless ghosts, stones falling from buttresses, and crows cawing in the towers. Sunlight beamed through the cavities in the walls and streamed across my face. I opened a door leading into the courtyard and stepped outside to embrace the heat of the winter sun.

"Enjoy it while you can," Natashka said, following me.

"I know," I replied, with a sad smile, remembering what Natashka told me after my transition. Within one century, maybe two, I'd never walk in sunlight again and instead be forced to live for eternity in darkness.

"Two centuries is a long time," I recalled telling her.

"Not compared to forever," Natashka replied.

I stepped forward into the full body of the sun, feeling the heat wash over me. Icicles and sprinkles of snow clung to the tips of trees surrounding the castle; sun rays skimmed across the frozen lake, as steam emerged from the surface; and as the red and brown leaves succumbed to the winter's chill and fell to the ground, a barren earth replaced the bloom and blossoms. Natashka edged beside me, holding a goblet. "Drink this," she said. "You look tired."

I accepted the offer, and, bringing the goblet to my lips, tasted the intoxicating, metallic saltiness of blood. After draining the contents, Natashka and I sat upon the snow, whereby she divulged the details of the humans' arrival to Castle Árnyék. All across Loch Fala, the Councillors preached of the vampire epidemic spreading throughout the island. Day and night, citizens endured the onslaught of questioning, as henchmen battered down their doors and brought them to confess or face torture in the Inservium vaults. Newspapers, flyers and posters declared warnings of vampire attacks, and offered rewards to anyone who captured one, dead or alive. Within three days, twenty or so innocent women and men received death sentences, with their final moments ending on the hangman's noose, the executioner's axe, or at the stake. Across town, market stalls and street charlatans sprung up overnight, trading in protection paraphernalia, antidotes for vampire attacks, and "ancient" Greek, Egyptian and Babylonian texts unearthed in recent excavations and reproduced on the black market.

The families of suspected vampires either fled their homes and the island, never to return, or pleaded their innocence, in vain, only to be exiled or coerced into accusing other families. Others – the families of real vampires – journeyed to Castle Árnyék to reunite and find safety with their relatives in hiding.

"What do you think will happen to Jacque?" I asked.

Natashka took the goblet from my hand and frowned after attempting to swig from the empty cup. "I don't know."

"He's in more danger now than before," I said, standing up, and pacing around in the snow, before stopping in front of Natashka. "Do you think he's already dead?"

"No," Natashka said, wiping snow from my coat. "The spell I performed rejected my powers, but his blood wasn't dead. Jacque is still alive."

A tear fell from my eye. Embarrassed, I lowering my head, trying not to draw attention. As a lump rose in my throat, I swallowed hard and focused on the snowdrop stems emerging through the snow.

"I'm guessing a slice of *pirog* won't help this situation?" Natashka asked.

I laughed, feeling grateful to have a friend by my side. “If you were me, what would you do?”

Natashka replied without hesitation. “What wouldn’t I do?”

Unapologetic of our violent natures, we remained silent, with mutual respect.

“We have to find out who the traitor is,” Natashka continued. “The Inservium are just playing with the townspeople. All these executions and tortures serve no purpose than to cause hysteria and blind devotion. They know who they are looking for, and somebody is giving them names.”

“We will start training. Tonight. Besides, we need to get ready for confronting my father.”

Natashka frowned, scared.

“Together,” I said, smiling.

Natashka nodded in agreement, and we made our way back to the castle.

“Has this place ever tried to kill you?” I said.

Natashka laughed. “Are you talking about what happened after you killed Katja?”

“Yes.”

“There is no need to worry, *Rybka*. It was a hallucination. The castle was preparing you for transition.”

“The castle?”

“Of course,” Natashka smiled. “It has many secrets. Your spider friend will be back, too.”

“How do you know about the spider?” I said.

“I still haven’t managed to bake some *pirog*. I might need to dust off the old baking trays,” Natashka said, ignoring me.

“Don’t tell the humans – they’ll only ask us to clean the place,” I said, knowing it was pointless to ask more about the spider.

Natashka grinned. “The last time I used a feather duster, I turned it into a boa.”

As we entered the castle, I heard rustlings in the woods, far off in the distance. I turned my head to search between the trees and strained to discern a doe, scavenging for food.

“Peyton? Are you coming?” Natashka asked.

“Yes, sorry,” I replied.

“We should get some sleep before everyone gathers for training.”

Taking one last look towards the woods, I noticed the doe had gone, and smiled at my own stupidity, before entering the castle.

Midnight struck on the old grandfather clock in the music room. As I walked past, the door creaked open, revealing the dancing ghosts, yet again rising from the Underworld. One by one, the spirits appeared and readied their positions in anticipation of the piano striking up the music. I stood watching, wondering if I'd reach a day when I no longer felt guilty about their deaths. It's doubtful, I concluded, and the door closed over, leaving me abandoned on the other side. Step by step, I treaded the groaning floorboards, carrying a bag of weapons Natasha and I confiscated from the Inservium. Whilst passing a mirror, I watched myself transform into my vampiric form. It reminded me of the first night Mhayree escorted me through the castle and her monstrous body overpowered her human guise. As I continued my journey, I heard faint whispers of "vampire killer," "traitor," and "murderer," creeping behind me.

I looked around, searching for someone or something following me, and found only darkness. Upon a wall, hung a portrait with a shadowy outline of a dark-haired girl, standing alone, dressed in purple velvet with an evil stare. At the bottom of the gold-gilded frame, a plaque read: PEYTON DE VOLONTÉ, 11TH MARCH 1879 –.

Moving closer to inspect the portrait, its eyes followed me, and a wicked smile teased at the corner of the mouth. Its eerie resemblance drew me in and, as I reached out my hand, I swore its lips moved and muttered "death to de Volonté." For all the unnerving sights contained within the castle, my portrait frightened me the most. I edged away, almost tripping over my own feet, before running down the remainder of the hallway. All the while, the portrait's taunts and threats followed my every step.

As my pace quickened, I reached the doorway to an empty room in the east wing and heard familiar voices arguing inside. I bent down and peered through the keyhole.

"The covens will not come," Saara said, handing a letter to Mhayree. "They will not fight beside Peyton."

Mhayree snatched the letter from Saara's hand. "I thought your mother was using her influence to encourage them to join us?"

"She's not the only original Phoenix. The others have sided against her," Saara replied.

Mhayree ripped up the letter, threw the pieces in the air, and walked towards the door. I straightened up and entered the room, pretending to be oblivious to the conversation.

“You’re here,” Mhayree said, startled. “Good! The others will be here soon.”

“How many?” I asked.

“Twenty or so. We decided not to contact the overseas covens,” Mhayree replied, smiling. “No need to cause panic when we can handle this ourselves.”

At the back of the room, Saara, failing to be inconspicuous, swept the scattered pieces of parchment with her feet and concealed them under her long, crinoline skirt.

“Twenty? The Councillors outnumber us two to one,” I declared.

Mhayree’s smile wavered. “You have us,” she replied, holding me by the shoulders.

I opened my mouth to protest, but Natashka entered the room, managing somehow to both manoeuvre her wheelchair through the door and apply eyeliner at the same time. Not far behind, my mother followed, holding five daggers under her arms. “This is all we had. Mhayree, I have your sgian dubh. Peyton already has the laguiole. I have Gizella’s sabre. And the rest are-”

“You’re not fighting, surely?” I said, scolding her.

My mother stared at me, enraged. “I may have failed the transition into a Phoenix, but I still have my uses. Do you think this is the first time the Inservium has attempted a second Cleansing?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

My mother leaned in towards me, in an almost threatening manner. “I mean-”

The door flew open as a crowd of vampires strode into the room. I counted each one, as they stood gathered beside a wall-mounted tapestry depicting the original thirteen Phoenixes. Including the newer vampires – Clara, the two lovers, and three I did not recognise – plus the older generations, our coven consisted of twenty-eight Phoenixes. The odds still did not favour us.

“Do not worry, *Rybka*,” said Natashka. “You will train us well.”

I nodded, feeling not altogether convinced, and invited everyone to form a circle in the centre of the room.

“She’s not lining us up to kill us, is she?” sneered an Irish woman.

“Be quiet, Bridget,” said Saara. “Or would you prefer the Inservium continued to kill innocent people?”

The room fell silent and I seized the moment to distribute weapons from my bag. Each vampire in turn received either a dagger, sword, razor, or iron chains, and took it in turns to pass them around. Tears welled up in the eyes of the older vampires, as they caressed and examined the weapons in awe.

“Ilona Samsa’s blade,” said Mhayree, studying a sapphire-encrusted dagger. “This was stolen almost two hundred years ago.”

“And this is my mother’s sword,” added Saara. “The silver hasn’t even tarnished.”

The pixie-looking vampire spun two chains in her hands and smiled. “Noemi and Emilia Bokori’s weapons. They’ll be glad to see these again when they arrive.”

Mhayree and Saara looked at each other with furrowed brows, knowing too well that no one was coming to help. As the vampires reminisced about the history of each weapon – from those owned by the original Thirteen to ones passed down from generation to generation – I spotted Beatrice holding a ruby-encrusted dagger with a silver handle. I held my hand out in front of Beatrice, and she placed the blade in my hand. “This one is a particular favourite of mine,” I said.

The vampires glared at me.

“That knife,” said Mhayree, “belonged to Katalin Arany. She used it to slice open hers and Gizella’s veins whilst cursing them both.”

I dropped the dagger to the floor, feeling sick and disgusted. “You mean cursing me and Jacque!”

I turned to leave the circle, but my mother stood in front of me and said, pointing to Mhayree. “Fight us.”

I laughed. “You will get hurt. Or worse.”

My mother held Gizella’s dagger to my throat, and as I continued to mock her, Mhayree lunged at me with Ilona’s knife. I ducked and side-kicked Mhayree in the ribs, forcing her to the ground. My mother grabbed my leg mid-air, and swiped the other with her foot, causing me to fall. She grabbed one of the Bokori chains from the pixie vampire and whipped it over me. I snatched Mhayree’s sgian dubh, entwined the chain around it, and pulled it, to slam my mother into a wall. I sprung from the floor onto my feet as Mhayree threw a dagger towards me. Managing to catch it before it hit my chest, I slid it into my boot and yelled, “Enough!”

Mhayree stood up and helped my mother to her feet, kissing her as she did so. “Are you alright?” she asked. My mother nodded and hobbled back to the circle.

“Shall we begin?” said Natashka, motioning to me, as though awaiting a performance.

I perused around the room at the faces, full of expectation. “This won’t be like the brawl in the kitchen the other night,” I remarked.

The vampires looked at one another, bewildered and nervous, until Mhayree stepped forward. “Form a line,” she demanded.

“We’ll start with the basics,” I said, holding up a sword. “How to kill a man.”

I explained the delicate details and nuances of the different weapons – how the serrated edge of a razor glides and slashes the throat with one swift motion; the correct way of lassoing a whip around a neck to cause an instant break or asphyxiation; and when to choose between a dagger or sword for up-close or distance combat.

“Why don’t we use guns?” asked a man with his arm around Beatrice. “It would be quicker and easier.”

“Guns are loud,” I said. “They draw too much attention.”

The hand of a tall, slender, leather-clad woman shot up. “If we end up spilling the Councillors’ blood, can we drink it?”

The entire coven stared at the woman in disapproval, and, with a tinge of sadness, she lowered her hand.

“If you intend to kill a man, you’ll be spilling his blood,” I said.

“Drink the blood of live Councillors?” Mhayree added. “Have some standards.”

The woman nodded and conceded.

“Next,” I announced, “defence and how to use the body for attack.”

I stood in the middle of the room and demonstrated the standard moves – a leg sweep, dropkick, and ducking and weaving. For me, the manoeuvres felt natural, however, it grew apparent the group did not share my abilities. Even Mhayree, who in previous encounters proved more than a match for my capabilities, laboured when trying to fight against my vampiric form.

“I’m sorry,” I said after slamming her into the door, inflicting a head wound.

She rubbed her head, and blood seeped onto her fingers. “Not at all, my dear. Keep going,” she laughed.

I knelt down beside her, and whispered. “We are nowhere near ready. This could take months, or years.”

“Have faith. You are your mother’s daughter,” Mhayree replied, pointing towards a corner. I turned around and saw my mother fighting against a male vampire twice her size. She twisted his arm around his back, bringing him to his knees and pretended to drive a knife through his heart. They both laughed, and once releasing her victim, she proceeded to give him advice about better defences.

“This is going well, *Rybka*, no?” Natashka shouted across the room, whilst feeding from a young, doe-eyed, female vampire. This, in turn, attracted the attention of Torrin, who ceased training and confronted the Russian. She rolled her eyes, lifted her sleeve, and, to satisfy him, offered him a vein. As he bit down and consumed Natashka’s blood, he

stopped, appearing distracted, and looked out the window. Natasha whispered to him, as he shook his head, and left the room.

“Natasha has an interesting way of fighting,” I commented to Mhayree.

“Hmm,” she smirked.

In a corner, my mother knelt on the floor, held a man in a headlock, and demonstrated how to break a neck.

“Mhayree, how did my mother learn how to fight?” I asked.

Mhayree’s face fell. “It’s to do with your father.”

“What about him?” I asked.

She looked at me with pity. “It’s nothing,” she said, and walked away.

“Mhayree?” I called after her. She ignored me, choosing instead to launch an attack at Beatrice.

The coven trained through the night, combining successes with failures. For every time someone dodged a punch or swipe, someone else crashed to the floor, or battered against the walls. I remained in the background, waiting to be challenged. It grew obvious that nobody dared come near me, and so I slipped into the shadows, out of sight. Amidst the darkness, I soon found myself performing a solo routine – a backflip off the wall, a spin into a side-kick, a parry and a riposte with a sword, a high-kick into a somersault and a leg sweep. Behind me, I heard a burst of excited applause and turned around to discover Amelie and Freya sitting by the door. Amelie leaned forward, resting her head on her hands, and watched with an intense stare. Something about the way she smiled unnerved me, as though she was capable of leaping up and killing at any moment.

“Are we actually getting anywhere?” interrupted a male vampire, slumped against the window.

“Shh!” announced Hart, in her half-mangled red dress. “I just managed to punch Saara in the face and swipe a knife across her stomach.”

“And I dodged it,” replied Saara.

“Once!” I remarked. “Everyone back to it. Now!”

Amidst the groans, Natasha lifted her arms, raising all the weapons into the air, and circling them above the vampires’ heads. “Anyone for decapitation?” she asked. Without hesitation, the group recommenced training.

As I walked towards Amelie and Freya, the two girls giggled and mimicked the fight moves. “Why are you awake?” I said, kneeling in front of them.

“A man was looking in our window,” Freya said.

“Don’t be silly,” I laughed, “nobody can find us here.”

“What are they doing?” Amelie asked, peering around me.

“Playing,” I replied.

“That’s what adults do at night,” Freya informed us both.

“Indeed,” I said, as though it was normal to be watching her mother bash a man’s head into the floor. As I steered them out of the room, Torrin reappeared, dragging the bodies of two dead Councillors.

“They’ve found us,” he said.

Chapter Sixteen

Torrin dropped the two bodies at my feet. “Sebastian and I finished them off. We found them skulking in the courtyard,” he said.

Mhayree and Natashka moved closer, enticing more of the coven to follow, as curiosity got the better of them.

I ushered Amelie and Freya towards the door. Amelie strained to see what was happening. “Why is that man bleeding from his head? I can see his brain.”

Mhayree knelt down to inspect the bodies and said to the children. “It’s time to go back to bed, my dears.”

My mother joined Mhayree.

“Mama?” said Amelie.

“Go back to bed,” my mother replied.

“It’s a game,” I lied, pushing Amelie and Freya out the room and closing the door.

“How did they get past your enchantments?” Mhayree asked Natashka, grabbing one of the Councillors by the hair to examine his face.

“I don’t know,” Natashka answered, worried. “Only someone who knows magic could break the defences.”

I leaned in towards Mhayree and whispered. “Someone in the coven?”

“Perhaps,” she replied, eyeing the group with suspicion.

“More importantly,” Beatrice announced, stepping forward. “How did they find us? This castle has been abandoned for two hundred years.”

“The humans must have led them here,” said Torrin. “I’m assuming accidentally.”

“I need some samples of their blood,” Natashka informed him, removing an empty vial from her pocket, and a dagger from her bodice. She handed them to Torrin, and, slicing across the Councillor’s wrist, he deposited the blood into the vial.

“What is that in aid of?” I asked.

“Come with me,” Natashka replied, taking the dagger and vial from Torrin, and departing the room.

I followed, abandoning the coven to argue amongst themselves about conspiracies and intrigues.

Natashka led me through the castle, down into the deep caverns of the earth, until we reached the undercroft.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“My laboratory,” said Natashka. “Nobody ever comes down here.”

The whispers of men and women echoed from inside the walls. They called our names, teasing us to join them.

“Do you hear that?” I said, stopping to listen as the voices grew louder.

Natashka nodded, emotionless.

The ghost of a weeping woman, holding a baby, emerged from the shadows. Head bowed, watching her child, she drifted towards us. A cold chill swept over me, alongside an overwhelming feeling of grief and despair, as she walked through me, and disappeared upstairs.

“The dead cannot hurt you here,” Natashka said, stopping outside a door. “Wait here.”

“What are you doing?”

“Just be patient,” she replied, disappearing into the darkness.

I waited behind the doorway, pacing up and down. The voices within the walls gravitated into the room, and crept beneath a crack under the door. From inside, a violent stream of bangs shook the stone foundations and a flash of light pierced through the gaps between the door hinges.

“*Chert voz 'mi!*” I heard Natashka yell in frustration.

A cloud of smoke leaked under the door, which preceded a further round of glass smashing, pots clattering, and muttered chants.

Over and over, the same sounds and flashing lights came from the room until – all of a sudden – silence.

The door opened, and Natashka appeared, with her hair in complete disarray and flecks of embers dotted over her dress.

“Is everything alright?” I said, trying to appear nonchalant.

Natashka nodded, patting her sleeves. I leaned over and removed a cobweb from her hair.

“The Councillors weren’t alone,” she said, holding up the bloodstained, empty vial. “The other three returned safely, back to the Inservium.”

“How do you know that?” I asked. A loud bang caused the ceiling to quake, drawing no response from Natashka. “What the fu-” I exclaimed.

“Spell,” Natashka replied.

“And it’s reliable?”

Another bang.

“Always!” Natashka responded. “Our defences are down. The Inservium could arrive at any time.”

“Then my sister is no longer safe,” I replied.

Natashka nodded, sullen and despondent.

“We both know what needs to be done,” I said. “Cast the circle, we leave now.”

Natashka retrieved five crystals from an apothecary table and handed them to me.

“What about the rest of the covenant?”

“There is a traitor amongst them, they can’t be trusted,” I replied, laying the crystals on the floor. “And besides, they haven’t trained enough to fight. They would all be dead within an hour.”

We entered the circle, and Natashka clasped my hand. “I will take us into the Inservium.”

“Won’t they see us coming?”

Natashka sighed. “We’re probably going to die anyway.”

In an instant, the stone walls of Castle Árnýék dissolved, and transformed into the Inservium vaults.

“I don’t know this place,” I said.

“I aimed for underground.”

Natashka and I negotiated the dark passageways, turning countless corners, wary of being caught at any moment. Each time we reached the end of one corridor, we soon got lost in another. As we neared the upper levels, the muffled sound of Councillors’ voices echoed in the distance. I removed my poignard and dagger from my boots and offered one to Natashka. She shook her head. “This one has already spilled Councillor blood,” she laughed, pointing to the dagger down her bodice.

I smiled in agreement, not daring to imagine how much vampire blood the dagger once spilled. Approaching the sanctuary, we wandered down the centre aisle with no fear of the Councillors discovering us. Let them find us, I thought, and let us hunt.

I drew back a curtain to an anteroom, and found it to be empty. Natashka searched the alcoves and vestries. “Nobody.”

“We can try upstairs,” I said. “I believe that’s where their chambers-”

“Peyton de Volonté!” cried a familiar voice.

“Bothwell!”

He moved towards us, with an unsettling calmness, keeping his eyes fixed upon me. "It has been such a long time. I hear that you died. And then became a vampire. Tell me, which was worse?"

He stood before me, and moved a strand of hair from my face. "You look different. More refined, almost."

"Remove your filthy hands," I said.

He laughed. "Did the coven welcome you with open arms?"

I stayed silent.

"Hmm?" he continued. "Peyton, the vampire murderess. Did you enjoy killing their families?"

I stared at him, but didn't move. Natashka's hand brushed against mine.

"It's very brave of you to come here all by yourself," Bothwell said.

"I'm not by myself," I replied.

Bothwell turned to Natashka, as though noticing her for the first time. "Shouldn't that be in an institution?"

I leaned into him, and bared my fangs. As he recoiled, I slashed his face with my nails, and Natashka thrust a dagger towards his abdomen. He grabbed the handle of the blade, evading the impact, and ran backwards, withdrawing a sword from his cloak.

"Councillor Bothwell!" shouted another Councillor, entering the sanctuary. Three more Councillors joined him, and flinched at the sight of Natashka and me.

"Vampires!" Bothwell yelled, pointing towards us.

The four Councillors ran towards us, wielding swords, and commenced their attack. Two of the Councillors brought down their swords around me, aiming for my head and chest. I struck both their blades with my dagger and poignard, deflecting the weapons, giving me enough time to side-kick one in the ribs, and slice through the other's throat. As the first lay on the floor, I saw Natashka's dagger floating in mid-air as she fought off her assailants. One dropped his sword, providing Natashka with the opportunity to thrust her dagger into his heart, and levitate the fallen sword to defend against the second Councillor. My second opponent attempted to swipe at my ankles. I kicked his leg, and heard the bones break. Natashka disposed of her remaining Councillor by bringing her dagger around the back of his neck, and dragging it forward, to decapitate him. Three of the four Councillors lay dead, with the other squealing beneath my boot. I aimed my poignard towards him. Natashka suspended her dagger over his throat, and drops of sweat dribbled down his forehead as he trembled.

"Where is Bothwell?" Natashka asked me.

I turned my head, in search of the Councillor.

"I was so close to killing him," I said.

"I know where he is," the trapped Councillor gurgled.

"Bothwell?" Natashka said, digging the dagger further into his throat. "Yes, take us to him."

"No," he replied, struggling against the blade. "The boy. I know where the boy is."

"Boy? What boy? You mean—" said Natashka.

I dropped my poignard, grabbed the Councillor's chest, and pulled him forward until we were nose to nose. He winced as Natashka's dagger scratched his throat.

"You know where Jacque is?" I spat.

"Yes," he croaked, avoiding my stare. "He is here."

I released the Councillor, and collapsed to my knees. Natashka spoke to me, but I heard nothing, and saw only her lips move. A deep feeling of guilt, resentment and shame took hold of me. All this time, the Councillors had imprisoned Jacque in the Inservium without me knowing.

The Councillor screamed.

"Enough!" I said. "If you thought watching her turn into a bat was terrifying, you should see her when she's hungry."

"I *will* kill you if you lead us into a trap," Natashka threatened the Councillor, as she returned to her human-like form. The Councillor led us beneath the vaults, hobbling along in front, with his fractured leg strapped up with wood ripped from a pew, and strips of fabric from Natashka's skirt. I walked behind him, pointing a dagger at his back, as Natashka suspended one at his throat. The Councillor did not reply, only his erratic breathing and pounding heartbeat broke through the silence.

"Move it," I growled, shoving him forward.

We ventured onwards, deep into the bowels of the Inservium, where I lost all sense of direction, surrounded by unfamiliar territory. Nerves crept into my stomach as I thought of seeing Jacque again – smelling his scent, hearing his voice, and feeling his warm body against mine. His secrets didn't seem to matter, nor did my being a vampire. At least, not at that moment. As long as he came back to me.

We passed the torture chambers, filled with racks, whips and thumbscrews. The overwhelming stench of sweat, pain and human waste – alongside the sight of impaled,

innocent men and women – nauseated me. Room by room exposed the Inservium’s horrific capabilities, and I broke into a cold sweat imagining them subjecting Jacque to the same treatment.

We reached a cell, and the Councillor removed a set of keys from his cloak and unlocked the door. I pushed him aside and forced myself into the tiny, freezing room.

“Jacque!” I cried.

Amidst the squalor of the dark, windowless room, sat an empty straw bed. But no Jacque. Enraged, I walked outside to the Councillor, and drew my poignard across his throat, leaving him to die on the floor. As tears welled up in my eyes, Natashka attempted to console me, but to no avail. I stumbled into the cell and collapsed onto the bed. Foolish idiot, never trust a Councillor, I thought.

“What is that?” Natashka said.

I looked up towards her, and she pointed to the corner of the bed. On top of the mattress, sat a piece of folded parchment, with a red wax firebird seal. I ripped it open and found within a letter addressed to the Councillors:

My Dear Councillors

The more attentive of you will have realised that the Honourable Jacque Angou is no longer under your care. In payment for your hospitality, you will find two of your brethren nailed to the walls in one of the cells. Do forgive the blood – disembowelment is such a messy business. If, for some reason, you find yourselves in need of Master Angou’s company, please do let me know. I see you have a vast collection of torture implements, and it would be most enjoyable to try them out on you.

Katalin Arany

“Rybka?” Natashka asked, manoeuvring beside me.

I handed her the parchment and said, “She’s back.”

“Who?”

“His great-great-grandmother,” I said, through gritted teeth.

“Katalin?” Natashka read the letter and closed her eyes. “Perhaps she heard Gizella is dead.”

I sat on the edge of the bed, head in my hands, and groaned, frustrated at losing Jacque, again.

“All I had to do was save him,” I said. “That’s been my job for months, and she’s taken him from me.”

“At least you know he’s alive. And, presumably, safe.”

I nodded in agreement, knowing Jacque’s freedom should bring me comfort. It didn’t.

“Although, judging by this note, she sounds almost violently unhinged,” Natashka said.

I scowled at her through my fingers. “You mean like me?”

Natashka, attempting to diffuse the awkwardness, said, “Perhaps you might like her.”

Standing up, I looked at Natashka in disbelief, and said nothing. Instead, I wandered around the cell, wondering how Jacque managed to survive the rancid conditions. He needed to come home – *our* home.

“We must find her,” I said.

“No need,” Natashka replied, shaking her head and giving the letter back to me. “She will find you.”

“Good,” I said, scrunching up the parchment, and tossing it into the corner. “Because I’m going to kill her.”

We retraced our steps, arguing at every corner as to which direction to take. Stairwell by stairwell, I ascended – and Natashka flew – until we reached the surface, and the sanctuary.

The sound of swords clashing, and men and women yelling and screaming, awaited us. As Natashka and I emerged out of the vault, the body of a young Councillor slid towards us. Dead.

Around the room, Mhayree, my mother, Saara, Hart, Beatrice, and Torrin, alongside the other coven members, fought the horde of Councillors. Bodies of both sides lay across the floor.

Natashka transformed back from being a bat and sat beside me. She yelped as a Councillor gripped her by the hair and brought a sword down towards her chest. Without hesitation, I flicked my boot to release the dagger hidden within it, grabbed the handle, and sliced through the Councillor’s jugular. His blood spurted onto Natashka, covering her hair, face and arms. She lapped up the drops running down her fingers, and said, “This one was dying anyway.”

The Councillor collapsed onto the floor, the life draining from him.

From all directions, black cloaks surrounded us as the Councillors fought the vampires. One by one, the Inservium succumbed to the strength of the Phoenixes as daggers and fangs ripped the Councillors apart.

I removed my poignard from my coat, and joined the battle. The indiscernible faces of Councillors flashed before me as my blades tore through them. Their screams turned to silence.

Beneath my feet, a river of blood seeped into my boots as I made my way through the sanctuary. Behind me, Natashka raised the Councillors who ambushed her into the air and hurled their bodies against walls and pillars.

A Councillor leapt in front of me and swiped me across the face. He let out a sinister laugh as his ring caught my cheek, causing it to bleed. I stabbed my dagger into his mouth and out through the back of his head. He stopped laughing.

In the corner, Mhayree dragged a Councillor across the floor and stood on his neck, before bending down, and snapping it with her bare hands.

The dead bodies of the pixie vampire, the raven-haired woman, the American Clara Price, and the two lovers – lying side by side – lay on the marble floor.

I stepped around Clara and spotted my brother, Étienne, skulking in an alcove. Shrouded in darkness, he peered out into the sanctuary. I turned to face him and saw, standing behind him, my father. Étienne stared. I imagined he was watching the horror stories from his childhood come to life. His confused expression turned to fear at discovering his fang-baring, blood-soaked warrior sister.

In the distance, I heard Natashka spouting Russian profanities. My mother – the only non-vampire on our side – stood on top of the altar, wielding a sabre. Just as she had demonstrated to me in Katja Ustov's house, she killed with swift, precise movements. Three, maybe four, Councillors attacked her in succession. Each of their bodies lay at her feet. One sudden strike against a Councillor's neck forced the sabre from her hand. It flew through the air, passing Natashka's face. She stuck out her tongue and licked the blood from the blade as it continued its journey mid-air. Before it fell to the ground, Natashka grabbed the handle, and launched the weapon back towards my mother, who caught it without looking.

"*Rybka*, behind you!" Natashka yelled, whilst raising her arm.

I spun around to find a fat, middle-aged Councillor, suspended upside down above me, and aiming a sword towards my head. I stepped forward, grabbed his wrist, and broke the bones. He dropped the sword. Before it landed, I cut his throat with my poignard.

Outside the windows, the dusky pink and orange hues of dawn streaked into the sanctuary. As the sunlight crossed over the vampires, our beautiful, monstrous forms gave way to our weaker, human-like guises. By then, another dozen Councillors entered the sanctuary to join the battle. Our strength waned, allowing the Councillors full advantage against us.

All around me, the coven members fought, and failed, to defend themselves.

“Raise them!” I yelled to Natashka, motioning to the vampires.

She lifted her arms, and the few surviving vampires levitated towards the ceiling. All except my mother, who avoided Natashka’s aim. The Councillors stood in disbelief, as their prey escaped their grasps. High above me, Mhayree and Beatrice protested, and Saara threw down her hatchet, killing a Councillor in the process.

As the Councillors surrounded Natashka and me, I unleashed a tirade of bone-crushing high-kicks, vein-ripping bites, slashes, and stabbings. My mother proved to be the more elegant fighter in our family. I was not my mother.

Natashka bared her fangs at the Councillors, provoking them to attack. Many of the men cowered. No matter, I killed them anyway.

“Leave my daughter,” said my mother, as she limped towards us. “She is only a child.”

The Councillors turned on her. She retaliated, and, with swift swipes, executed her assailants.

As she pushed a dead Councillor off her body, another seized the opportunity to grab her around the neck. I turned to see my mother choking and – whilst slicing a Councillor from groin to sternum with my poignard – drove my dagger into her attacker’s eye.

Natashka’s screaming pierced the air. A Councillor stabbing her in the arm with a switchblade caused the suspended vampires to plummet to the ground. Without hesitation, I tossed my dagger towards the Councillor’s chest, where it landed in his heart.

The vampires scrambled to their feet – only a handful of us remained against the mass of Councillors – and charged into battle.

Natashka removed the switchblade from her arm, as my mother and I warded off our attackers. I smelled the blood gushing from the wound.

Mhayree joined my mother and disposed of three Councillors in quick rotation. As she swung her arm around to stab an approaching Councillor, I ducked to avoid her sgian dubh. The blood from her blade splattered across my face, and the taste of dead Councillors filled my mouth.

Saara wielded her hatchet, severing limbs and heads with each swipe.

An Inservium sword struck a Councillor rushing towards me. I glanced backwards to find Beatrice withdrawing the weapon from his chest.

“You’re using their weapons to kill them?” I smiled, whilst side-kicking a Councillor.

“They did the same to us,” Beatrice replied.

Hart cracked a whip across the Councillors’ torsos and backs.

Natashka let out a faint whimper, as she grasped her wounded arm. In vain, she attempted to lift her hand to raise the surrounding Councillors. She screamed in frustration, removed her dagger from her corset, and stabbed it into one of their legs. As the Councillor collapsed, she retrieved the weapon and sliced it across his throat.

Whilst defending himself from an oncoming attack, Torrin slid up his shirt sleeve, and placed his wrist against Natashka’s lips. As she bit into his vein, the smell of her blood disappeared as the wound healed.

A Councillor punched me in the gut, causing an insurmountable surge of pain, and leaving me gasping for breath. Hunched over, I clutched my stomach, and watched, petrified, as the steel of his sword swiped towards my neck. Mhayree grabbed my shoulders, pushed me behind her, and within seconds, the Councillor’s body lay dead on the floor.

Across from me, a Councillor turned towards Torrin, and lifted his sword to strike. Natashka released her bite, and, with a wave of her hand, threw Torrin across the room. With the other hand, she suspended the Councillor and bent his body backwards, until his spine snapped.

The sunlight grew stronger, and a myriad of colours streamed through the stained glass windows. Geometric yellow, green, and blue motifs of their Idol shimmered against our blood-soaked bodies. Matted hair clung to red-stained faces, and the weight of our sticky, blood-encrusted garments restricted the most basic of movements. In that moment, it felt as though the sunlight sent a message – neither side shall win.

A pile of corpses lay at my feet. I clambered on top of the bodies to kill another Councillor, and saw Étienne emerging from the alcove, holding a sword. Despite trembling, he moved towards the battle – gripping the blade too tight, like an amateur. Hart charged towards him, baring her fangs.

“No!” my mother screamed. “Hart, don’t!”

Étienne dropped the sword, and darted towards the alcove. Hart continued her pursuit. My mother pushed aside two Councillors and, although limping in pain, ran after her.

One of the floor vaults opened, allowing Bothwell to enter the sanctuary. My mother, either ignoring or not noticing him, ran past, into the alcove. He narrowed his eyes and followed. I forced myself through the crowd, attempting to chase him. A greasy, blond Councillor with a scar across his cheek bashed into me, knocking me to the ground. He spat in my face and kicked me in the ribs. Lying on the floor, my attention never wavered from Bothwell, until he disappeared into the darkness. A blade swooped down towards me and – as I deflected it – clattered against my poignard. I slammed my boot into the Councillor's kneecap and – whilst he collapsed – slashed my dagger across his throat.

As his blood seeped into my boots, I climbed over his body and headed towards the alcove. Inside, amidst the blackness, I heard my mother's and Bothwell's footsteps. His increased, as hers slowed down, succumbing to her leg injury. I tracked their steps to the end of a passageway, until they faded. Unable to locate them, I turned a corner, and Étienne grabbed me, and placed the point of his blade under my chin.

"Don't be a stupid boy," I growled.

"You are a monster, Peyton. You seduce men and eat children," he said, shaking.

"You always did believe in fairy tales, Étienne."

He pushed the blade further into my skin. "Father told me."

"Been drinking again, has he?"

Étienne gripped me tighter and led me around a corner. "I'm taking you to Councillor Bothwell."

"Very well," I sighed, masking my gratitude at being led to my next victim.

We reached the doorway of a private prayer room, lit with candles, and walls adorned with coats of arms and flags displaying the symbol of their Idol. Étienne and I remained outside, hidden in darkness. From the shadows, I saw my mother, cornered by Bothwell. He pinned her against a wall, and forced a kiss upon her lips. Overcome with rage, I shoved Étienne away from me. The poor boy looked too shocked by Bothwell's behaviour to stop me – or prevent himself colliding with a pillar. To my mother's surprise, I stormed into the room, with my dagger and poignard at the ready. Bothwell turned around and laughed upon seeing me.

"Isn't this wonderful?" he said. "Mother, father and daughter, together at last."

My weapons dropped from my hands.

Chapter Seventeen

My mother pushed past Bothwell and stood beside me. She clasped my hand, and turned to my brother. “Run, Étienne. Before anyone finds you.”

Étienne, his face growing pale, crept forward, further into the room. “She’s his daughter?”

I launched myself towards him and bared my fangs. Terrified, Étienne stumbled backwards and fell to the floor. My mother grabbed my shoulders, and dragged me from him. “Go, Étienne. And don’t look back.”

She held me tight, as Bothwell walked up to my brother, and helped him to his feet. “Your mother deceived us both. And your sister is beyond saving-”

“You kissed my mother,” Étienne said.

“I loved her. I still do,” Bothwell replied.

“Liar!” I yelled.

Étienne flinched and hid behind Bothwell.

“Don’t listen to him, Étienne,” said my mother. “I can explain.”

“You mustn’t blame your mother. She is a troubled woman – not even our doctors could help her,” Bothwell whispered into Étienne’s ear. “But I fear what she will do to you.”

Étienne gazed up at Bothwell, hanging on to his every word. “What will you do to them?”

Bothwell tilted his head. “Help them.”

Étienne’s brow furrowed.

“Go and join the Councillors. You’ll be safe,” Bothwell continued.

My brother smiled, bowed his head, and turned to leave. My mother released me and moved to run after him. Bothwell retrieved his sword and placed it at my throat.

“Choose. Your daughter or your son,” Bothwell said.

My mother backed towards me, and watched Étienne leave the room. Bothwell laughed.

“Is it true?” I asked my mother. “Is he my father?”

She lowered her head, and sighed.

“Did he force you?” I said.

Bothwell laughed.

“Did he rape you?” I asked, preparing to kill him.

“No,” she whispered, unable to look at me.

“Did someone make you do it?”

She shook her head. “It was my choice.”

Feeling nauseated, I stared at the stranger who called herself my mother. “How could you? With him?” I spat, “You disgust me!”

“Peyton, I didn’t...” she trembled.

I grabbed her by the shoulders, and felt searing heat rising through her body. “Did you love him?”

“No!” she said. “It wasn’t like that.”

“She was pretty convincing,” Bothwell remarked.

My mother lifted her head and glared at him. “That was the point, you narcissistic bastard!”

“And you,” I said to Bothwell. “As vile as you are, how could you be so cruel to me – your own daughter?”

Bothwell sniffed and stared at me. “Logic. We needed someone to carry out the murders. And your mother would never have disgraced her other children by having us reveal that you are a bastard. And that she is a whore.”

I spat on Bothwell’s face. He didn’t react. The blade of his sword cut into my throat, causing a drop of blood to drip down my neck.

“She would never have risked exposing the Inservium as I could have outed her secret,” said Bothwell.

“I didn’t know Peyton was the murderer,” my mother interrupted.

“Are you sure?” Bothwell replied, unconvinced. “Who else but another vampire – or a highly-trained Councillor, of course – could kill one of you.”

My mother shook her head in desperation. “No. She didn’t have it in her to murder anyone.”

“And yet, she did,” mocked Bothwell.

“Because of you!” my mother replied, pushing me out of the way, and, seizing the sword. As the blade sliced through her hand, she refused to let go, and allowed the blood to flow down her arm. Beads of sweat formed on her forehead and her breathing grew heavy. I moved towards her, to help.

“No, my love,” she said, holding out her hand to stop me. “You have to let this fight be mine.”

“Tut, tut, tut, my old friend. Have you learnt nothing about me?” said Bothwell. He removed a dagger from the inside of his cloak, and stabbed my mother in the stomach. She bent over, clutching the wound, and Bothwell whispered in her ear, “You knew.”

As she fell to the floor, I rushed forward and grabbed her. Bothwell seized the opportunity to escape. She lay in my arms, and a tear fell from her eye. Her blonde, matted hair covered the black circles around her eyes, and her cheek bones protruded from her skin. I placed my hand over her stomach, to try and slow the bleeding. She cried out from the pain, and took my hand in hers.

The sound of footsteps walking through the passageway drew closer. I sat upright and stared at the doorway, ready to attack anyone who stepped into the room.

“Mirella!” Mhayree yelled, as she entered, with Natashka not far behind.

“Mhayree, please help me!” I sobbed, relieved to see them.

Mhayree ran, knelt beside my mother, and examined the wound. My mother struggled to speak as she and Mhayree looked at each other, heartbroken.

“Mhayree, help her,” I pleaded. “Do something.”

Mhayree wrapped her arms around my mother, remaining silent. Behind me, I heard Natashka crying. I turned to face her and said. “There must be some magic.”

Natashka shook her head. “I’m sorry, *Rybka*.”

My mother squeezed my hand and smiled. Her breaths faded. Mhayree leaned down and kissed my mother on the lips. “I love you,” she murmured.

My mother smiled, one last time.

“Mirella!” Mhayree said, shaking my mother. No response. “Mirella!” Mhayree tried again, before being overcome with grief. “Who did this?”

“Bothwell,” I stuttered.

Mhayree held my mother’s body against her, and wept.

“Mhayree, he’s my-”

“I know,” she snapped.

Natashka, sniffing, placed her hand on my shoulder. “We cannot stay here. The Councillors will find us.”

“We cannot leave her here,” I said.

“I will kill him,” Mhayree mumbled to herself.

“Then, we must bury your mother,” Natashka interrupted.

Mhayree stroked my mother’s hair and said. “She will have the proper funeral rites.”

“You know we cannot move the body that far,” said Natashka. “The coven lost, and used the crystals to retreat back home. We have to bury the body outside.”

I looked around the room, at the candelabra lining the walls.

“Do the rites here,” I said, standing up, and taking down two candles.

“We don’t have time,” Natashka urged. “We have to move fast, Bothwell may come back with other Councillors.”

“We can barricade the doors. Between the three of us, we could give any Councillor who finds us a good fight,” I said.

Natashka thought for a moment, before nodding. “The odds are not in our favour, but it is doable.”

Walking around the room, I closed the two sets of doors, jamming them with flagpoles taken from the walls.

Mhayree stared at the two of us. “You would have her laid to rest here, of all places?”

“We have no choice, Mhayree,” Natashka replied.

“She is my mother, and I should decide,” I said, holding back my tears.

“Well I was her...” Mhayree answered, before breaking down again.

Natashka wiped a tear from her eye and lowered her head to mask the sadness.

“I can’t do this on my own, Mhayree,” I said.

Mhayree closed her eyes, shutting out the world. I kneeled down beside her, and – despite Mhayree’s reluctance – unwrapped her arms from around my mother’s body. I lay my mother on the ground, and stood up, keeping my eyes fixed upon the peaceful expression on her face. As I gathered the lit candelabra around the room, I placed them, one by one, in a circle around Natashka, Mhayree, and my mother.

Mhayree, prepared my mother’s body with the grace and dignity befitting of a warrior. As best as possible, she wiped the blood from my mother’s face, and undressed her, folding each piece of clothing into a neat, precise pile. She removed a silver ring, entwined with a Celtic knot, from my mother’s finger and placed it on her own. After I finished creating the circle, I sat beside my mother, stripped her of her wedding band, and threw it across the room. Mhayree and I gave her one last kiss and stood by Natashka’s side. As Natashka raised her arms, my mother’s body rose into the air.

Mhayree removed a dagger from her stocking and traced symbols of a sun and moon upon my mother’s arms and legs. Natashka removed two gold coins from her pockets, and passed them to Mhayree, who placed them over my mother’s eyes.

“What will we used for ribbons?” I asked.

Mhayree lifted her skirt and tore a piece of white fabric from her petticoat. Natashka untied her corset and unwound the silver lace.

“Give me another piece of your petticoat and the dagger,” I said to Mhayree.

She ripped the fabric with the dagger and handed them to me. I sliced the blade across my palm, and stained the white petticoat with my blood. Natashka and Mhayree followed suit, drenching the fabric in red. We placed the makeshift ribbons over my mother's chest, and Mhayree proceeded to recite a funeral chant. Natashka instructed me to set the body alight. Candle by candle, the flames engulfed my mother. As the body burned, Mhayree smashed open a stained glass window, and the ashes escaped, free from this world.

Falling embers floated to the ground, spreading fire across the wooden floorboards.

I walked towards the door, picked up the weapons I dropped earlier, and removed the flagpoles. Natashka and Mhayree followed, and turned back to watch as the room set alight. As I opened the door, two Councillors stood waiting, brandishing swords.

"Wrong time!" I said, kicking him in the groin.

The Councillor fell to his knees, and I stabbed him. I turned around, finding the other Councillor impaled on a flagpole. The flames in the prayer room grew higher, spreading faster.

"What do we do?" Natashka asked.

"Let it burn," I said.

The three of us walked through the passageways, into the sanctuary, and left the Inservium, listening to the screams of the Councillors in the distance.

Chapter Eighteen

The town's clock tower bell chimed seven o'clock. Natashka, Mhayree and I sat amongst the snow, hidden amongst the trees outside the Inservium gates. Mhayree wrapped her arms around me as we both wept for my mother. Councillors ran in all directions, screaming, praying, and begging for water to extinguish the fire. We watched as the flames consumed the building, causing the golden symbol of their Idol to fall from the roof, and smash to the ground.

"Is it safe for us to be here, Mhayree?" Natashka asked.

"Probably not," Mhayree replied.

"I'm not going anywhere," I said.

"No, no, neither am I," Natashka assured. "I only ask because I found some *pirog* in the undercroft earlier, and wondered if this was a good time to hand it out?" She removed the cake from her bag and offered a piece to Mhayree and me. We both refused – too grief-stricken and angry to eat.

Smoke billowed for miles into the air, turning the white sky a putrid grey; shards of stained glass exploded into the surrounding graveyard, hitting – amongst others – my gravestone; and rocks and bricks crumbled to piles of ash, as the walls of the Inservium collapsed. The remaining few Councillors fled, escaping through windows, and jumping from the three storeys, to find safety.

"It was all pointless, wasn't it?" I said.

"What was?" Natashka replied.

"The battle. We lost. My mother died for nothing."

"We lost *this* battle," added Mhayree.

Amidst the commotion, townspeople braved the freezing temperatures, and arrived, carrying buckets of water and hoses. Natashka, Mhayree and I snuck behind an oak tree, to avoid being seen. In the distance, Bothwell stood, with his arms folded, watching in disbelief, as everything he held dear disappeared before his eyes. As I leapt to my feet, with intentions of attacking, Mhayree grabbed my arm.

"Not yet," Mhayree hissed.

I tried to break free of her grip, but she hauled me to the ground, pinning me down.

"When?" I answered.

"Soon, *Rybka*," Natashka added. "If you go out there now, all you will achieve is getting yourself killed."

"It will make me feel better," I said.

“And what of Amelie? She has no mother, she needs you,” Natashka replied.

“Especially now she is transitioning,” Mhayree interrupted. I stared at her, confused. “You must have realised,” Mhayree continued. “The signs have been there.”

I struggled to find words, and instead sat in silence, fearful for my sister’s future. Natashka placed her hand on my shoulder to comfort me – the gesture failed. When I turned to look at Bothwell, he was gone.

“We will find him,” said Natashka.

I nodded, feeling not altogether convinced. “Have you always known he was my father?” I asked Mhayree.

“Yes,” she sighed.

“Why was my mother involved with Bothwell?” I continued.

“She didn’t love him!” she snapped, before stopping herself.

“Then what was she doing?” I asked.

No reply.

A few moments passed until I grew impatient of Mhayree’s silence. “Mhayree!” I yelled.

“Shh!” said Natashka, looking to see if any of the Councillors or townspeople heard me.

“Mhayree!” I whispered, refusing to relent.

“What?” she growled. “Do you really think I want to discuss this now?”

“Tough!” I replied.

Mhayree groaned, and closed her eyes. “Before you were born, a few of us decided to bring down the Inservium. Your mother and I were amongst the warriors – that’s the reason she knew how to fight... and kill.”

“What has that got to do with Bothwell?” I asked.

Mhayree sighed and looked at me. “Mirella had a very specific job. She was to infiltrate the Councillors by starting an affair with Bothwell.”

“Wait! I think I’m missing something,” Natashka said.

“How long did it last?” I asked.

“About a year,” Mhayree replied. “Then she fell pregnant with you.”

Natashka took a giant bite of *pirog* and, with intense fascination, listened to Mhayree reveal my mother’s secrets.

“That’s when we decided she should marry Marius de Volonté,” Mhayree said.

“Your father?” Natashka struggled to mumble, whilst chewing.

“Apparently not,” I answered.

Mhayree kept her eyes fixed upon the blazing Inservium. “Of course, Bothwell wasn’t a fool – he knew Mirella’s child must have been his. I think it was a relief for him when your mother married Marius. By then, he knew he could use you against her...”

I pulled my coat around me – not for protection against the winter morning, but for an odd, comforting sensation – and felt the thread lining of the intertwined initials M and P.

“Go on,” I urged Mhayree.

Mhayree leaned against the tree, twiddling her sgian dubh between her fingers. She continued to watch the fire and said, “When you were a little girl, Mirella decided to leave Marius. She managed to travel with you and Étienne from Paris to Munich on the Orient Express. Bothwell sent his henchmen to fetch her back. I was supposed to meet you in Budapest.”

“Why did he care if my mother left?” I asked.

Mhayree placed her sgian dubh down her boot. “Control. After she came back, he convinced Marius to put her in the women’s asylum to modify her behaviour. By the time I heard and made it back to Loch Fala, the doctors had sent her back home. I won’t tell you the things they did to her.”

“Why didn’t he have her killed?” Natashka asked.

Mhayree rubbed her forehead, looking strained. “I don’t know. Perhaps he wanted to keep her alive to torment her.”

The three of us fell silent for several minutes. Try as they might, the townspeople and Councillors failed to extinguish the fire. Water turned to dustings of snow as soon as it hit the air, only to be melted by the heat from the blaze. From the wreckage, men attempted to salvage statues of their Idol. The Councillors seemed more interested in saving their riches, as they carried armfuls of jewels, gold chests, and silverware.

“Then, of course, he turned you into a murderer,” Mhayree said, breaking the silence. “And now, he has her son.”

“Where is Étienne and my father?” I asked, feeling a strange sense of concern for my brother.

“Bothwell?” Natashka said.

I grimaced at the name. “I meant Marius.”

“Oh! Hart let your brother escape, I think she felt sorry for the boy. But your father evaded her,” said Natashka. “They have both disappeared.”

“That is a pity – I so much wanted to have a word with my father about his experiments on you.”

“Maybe some other time,” Natashka smiled.

“Did Marius know about our vampire lineage?” I asked Mhayree.

She laughed. “No. Bothwell discovered Mirella’s secret – we don’t know how – and whenever Marius grew disturbed by her symptoms, he assured him it was a sign of hysteria.”

“I’m starting to think this Bothwell isn’t altogether charming,” Natashka said, whilst searching for more *pirog* in her bag.

“It all makes sense, now, how the Councillors decided on my victims,” I said. “If Bothwell knew about my mother-”

“Mirella never told him anything about us!” Mhayree interrupted.

“No. But he would suspect anyone she associated with,” Natashka added.

“Perhaps that is why he sent me to kill you, Mhayree,” I said.

Mhayree thought for a moment, before shaking her head. “It doesn’t account for everyone. Mirella only associated with a small circle of friends.”

“Does anyone else think it’s all too coincidental?” Natashka said. “Amelie is transitioning. Jacque’s brother turns up unexpectedly. Peyton transitions. I find the man who took *Frankenstein* a little too seriously. All within the space of a few weeks.”

“I don’t believe in coincidences,” I said.

“Neither do I,” Mhayree added. “I’m sure we will find out soon enough. Probably not today, though.”

The Councillors scattered across the grounds – treasures in hand – running for refuge. The townspeople, in their stupidity, continued to collect water from nearby wells. Two men ran past the three of us. By luck, the looming shadow from the oak tree kept us hidden.

“There are too many people around, we need to leave,” Natashka said.

Mhayree and I agreed.

We waited for a few moments, ensuring nobody saw us. As we moved away from the tree, and crept onto the street, we heard the sound of the last Inservium wall collapsing.

Snowflakes started to fall, and we quickened our pace, trying to decide the fastest route back to Castle Árnyék. We passed rows of townhouses, as men and women flocked from their homes, all too late to save their Inservium.

“You’re going the wrong way,” a middle-aged woman, wearing a fur coat over a nightgown, said to Mhayree.

Mhayree narrowed her eyes, and the woman carried on her business.

We travelled a couple of miles, through streets and alleyways, with the smell of smoke suffocating the town. As families welcomed their poor, homeless Councillors into houses to offer shelter, we hid out of sight, behind walls. The streets emptied, and horses stood, calm, along the roadsides, as Loch Fala descended into mourning for the Inservium. As an eerie silence fell over the town, we turned a corner, into the street where my old family house stood. We approached the abandoned, dilapidated building, with its windows boarded up and condemned notice on the door. I stopped outside the garden gates, and looked through the iron bars, wrapped in chains and padlocks.

“Perhaps Étienne came home and is hiding out,” I cried out to Natashka and Mhayree, as they continued walking along the street.

The two women moved towards me and waited beside the gate. Natashka removed her hairpins and handed one to Mhayree. “We shall see.”

As Mhayree and Natashka tried to pick the padlocks, I scaled the bars to the top of the gate, and back flipped into the garden.

“The locks are loosening,” Mhayree said. “Go on inside.”

I nodded – traipsing through the overgrown grass and weeds – and entered the house.

Walking through the empty hallway and drawing room, I called my brother’s name. Along the walls, darker, square patches of wallpaper marked where the family portraits used to be; silence replaced the ticking of the old grandfather clock; and where once stood Marius’s drinks cabinet, armchair, and the couch where he tried to sell me into marriage, now lay piles of dust and mould.

“There’s nothing left of her here,” I heard Mhayree say. I turned around and found her and Natashka behind me, looking around the room. When Mhayree realised she had spoken aloud, she continued. “Mirella, I mean.”

Despite feeling a strange relief for the ghosts of the house resting in peace, I thought of my mother spending days hidden in her room with supposed hysteria; protecting her children from her drunken husband; and the trip we took on the Orient Express. She told me we were going on an adventure where I could eat cakes every day, and make friends with Princes and Princesses. Little did I know she was trying to save both our lives. Now I would never see my mother again.

“Was there any sign of Étienne?” Natashka said.

I shook my head, walked to the foot of the stairs, and shouted upwards. “Étienne!”
No reply.

“I’ll go upstairs, to see if anything has been left behind,” I said.

“Mhayree and I will check the other rooms and the garden,” Natashka replied.

As Natashka and Mhayree wandered through to the kitchen and dining room, I went upstairs and searched the bedrooms, the attic and study. All traces of our family and maids no longer existed. My sister’s toys, my mother’s dresser and sewing table, and my brother’s insect collection remained only distant memories, as the rooms lay empty. A musty, damp stench greeted me as I entered my old bedroom. Traces of woodworm lined the wall panels and ceiling beams, and strips of wallpaper lay strewn across the floor. On one of the walls, faint markings of red and black caught my eye. I peeled back the remaining strips and discovered crayon scribbles of what looked like a spider, a young girl, with a circle of flames around her, and a giant moon with fangs. Perhaps the imaginings of children are closer to truth than the reality of adults. All of a sudden, I remembered being seven years old, and my father sending me to bed without supper for spilling his glass of whisky. I lay in bed, stomach rumbling, when a tiny house spider descended on its web, and landed on my pillow. I spent the night making up stories and drawing on the wall. The next day, my mother ordered the room to be redecorated.

As I stood up and turned to leave, a spider crawled between my feet, and scurried beneath the floorboards. *The house belongs to you now*, I thought, closing the door behind me, and walking downstairs.

I heard footsteps coming from the library, and opened the door, expecting to find Mhayree. Instead, I discovered a man, with his back to me, wearing a black cloak, standing in the middle of the room. He turned around, and a familiar, cold stare greeted me – Bothwell. The surprised look on his face gave way to anger. “I hoped you had died in the fire.”

“That’s very unfatherly of you,” I said.

“Where is the boy?”

“I don’t know where my brother is.”

Bothwell narrowed his eyes at me. “Not Étienne, you stupid girl. Jacque Angou.”

“Don’t you know? Perhaps someone has kidnapped him,” I replied. “At least they didn’t leave you for dead when they did. Not like you did to me.”

I removed my poignard and dagger from my boots, and edged towards him. He laughed and retrieved a sword from under his cloak. “Do you really intend for me to kill you and your mother in the same day?”

“No,” I replied, continuing to move forward.

He laughed again, until, all of a sudden, his face fell, as the library door closed. The floorboards creaked behind me, and the sound drew closer, until Mhayree and Natashka joined my side, daggers in hand.

Nobody said a word.

I stepped forward, and Mhayree and Natashka followed.

Bothwell swiped his sword in the air, to ward us off.

Natashka raised her hand, ready to throw Bothwell across the room.

“No,” I said. “Give him a chance.”

The three of us continued to close in on the Councillor.

He sliced the blade of his sword towards my neck.

I blocked with my poignard.

Mhayree swiped at his throat with her sgian dubh.

Bothwell leaned back and dodged the blade.

Natashka suspended her dagger in the air and thrust it towards Bothwell’s chest.

He ducked, spun around, and struck his sword across Mhayree’s leg.

As she fell to the floor, Mhayree stabbed her sgian dubh into Bothwell’s ankle.

He collapsed, and dropped his sword.

Mhayree struggled to her feet, and the three of us edged forward, backing Bothwell against the wall.

“It’s not just me, you know. Others will hunt you, too. And the boy,” Bothwell said.

“Then we will kill them, also,” Natashka laughed.

I pressed my boot over Bothwell’s chest, holding him down.

“Is there nothing you would say to me, daughter?” Bothwell smirked.

“No,” I replied.

I placed my poignard across Bothwell’s throat.

Mhayree aimed her sgian dubh over his heart.

Natashka hovered her dagger over his abdomen.

As one, the three of us sliced and stabbed Bothwell.

“For Mirella,” Mhayree whispered into his ear.

“And for Jacque,” I said, stepping away.

Natashka motioned for her dagger to return to her, looked at me, and said. “For you, too.”

We abandoned the corpse, and departed the house. Opening the garden gate, I turned back to look at the house, one last time. I thought of Bothwell lying undiscovered – as the condemned notice fluttered on the door – and walked away.

The smoke rising in the distance from the Inservium travelled across the sky, over the rooftops. I hoped Jacque could see the smoke – wherever he may be. I looked up and down the streets, wondering if, perhaps, he hid in one of the houses.

“Peyton, we must go,” Mhayree said.

“You go on ahead,” I replied. “I will follow you soon.”

“No, *Rybka*, you do not know the way,” Natashka said.

“I’ll find it. There is somewhere I have to go. Alone.”

As I turned to leave, Mhayree caught my arm. “He won’t have gone home. It’s not safe for him there. Or you.”

“And what if his brother is there?” Natashka said. “You don’t know what he’s capable of.”

“I’m not going home,” I said, releasing Mhayree’s grip.

“It’s not safe for any of us to be here. You must come with us,” Natashka pleaded.

I said nothing, and instead turned around.

“*Rybka*!”

“Wait!” Mhayree demanded, limping beside me. “Stubborn, as always. So, I’m going to help you. Do whatever you have to do, and once you are finished, wait outside my house. Revenik will be waiting with the carriage.”

I smiled in silent appreciation.

“Just remember to come back to us,” Mhayree added, before leaving me.

I continued to journey along the street. Behind me, Natashka cried out my name. I didn’t answer.

Chapter Nineteen

“Peyton ...” Natasha’s voice faded into the distance, as she called my name. For a split second, I almost turned back to join her and Mhayree, but before every new beginning, an ending must be resolved.

I walked the length of town, passing Dante’s and the linen shop – where a pile of fresh bedsheets waited on the counter for me. Through the window, Madame Ruthyard – unaware of the fire destroying the Inservium – scowled over her half-moon glasses, and waited, in vain, for me to collect the goods. The blaze continued to fill the sky, as the flames spread into the streets.

Men and women were running around, hauling furniture from their houses, and bribing carriage drivers to take them to port.

“I’ll pay you double a year’s wages.”

“I’ll give you any one of my daughters.”

“I’ll give you *two* of my daughters, *and* my wife.”

Amidst the commotion, a woman carrying a Spaniel bashed into me. “You must get off the island, my dear,” she sobbed. “It’s going to burn down.”

“I’ll be fine,” I replied.

“Did someone steal your dresses?” she said, looking at my clothes. “You can have any of mine if you’ll help us leave.”

“That’s the last thing I’d want,” I said, walking away.

“What do you want, then?” she called after me.

Jacque, I thought, disappearing into the crowd.

All around me, men were yelling at each other, and instructing their wives to take only the bare necessities. Women had their faces buried in handkerchiefs, wailing and praying to their Idol to save them. Some had children clutching at their skirts, others had pickpockets stealing whatever trinkets were close to hand. Suddenly, a man screamed and pointed at me. “It’s her! The vampire!”

“The one from the newspaper!” another man shouted.

The crowd turned to look at me, and the deafening sound of screaming erupted throughout the whole street.

“No, there’s been a mistake!” I yelled.

“She’ll kill us all!” said a woman holding a baby.

“Grab whatever you can. She must be stopped.”

“No, really!” I struggled to shout over the screams, as a group of men backed me against a wall.

Towering above me, a sea of faces looked on with hatred and disgust. The men brandished makeshift weapons, made from anything they could get their hands on – stones, walking sticks, small tables.

“Kill her!”

As a suitcase flew towards me, I removed my poignard from my coat, and held it against one of the men’s throats. “I don’t want to do this,” I said. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Idol help us all!” the man screamed, trembling as the colour drained from him.

The women stepped back, shrieking and flapping, but the men stood their ground.

“I’m not going to kill you,” I whispered to the man. “I just need you to help me get away.”

“It’s just one vampire, we can take her,” called out a man’s voice.

“Listen to me,” I said to the man with my poignard at his throat. “Nothing will happen to you.”

“If there’s one vampire, there’ll be more.”

“Kill her!”

“Who’s going to do it, then?” I yelled, grabbing the man and using him as a shield. “Who’s brave enough?”

As I edged towards the drainpipe, dragging the man with me, the crowd launched bottles, bricks and stones at me, but nobody actually had the guts to come near.

“I’ll do it,” I said, pressing the blade further into the man’s throat.

Suddenly, I felt his full weight upon me, as his body went limp, and he fainted. I dumped him on the ground, and the crowd drew closer, trampling over his body.

As I climbed up a drainpipe, I felt myself being pulled down, as a mass of hands grabbed at me, tugging at my legs, coat, and waist. Trying to release their grip, I batted them away, and climbed higher and higher.

Then it hit me. The sweet, overpowering aroma of blood. One by one, the men and women screamed out in agony, as a sword sliced through them. The crowd parted, with dead bodies lining the street.

There she stood – poised and graceful as a bird, with feral eyes, and a cruel, poisonous smile. She moved as though pirouetting, brandishing a sword, killing in swift succession. Katalin Angou.

Those who tried to escape were cut down where they stood. No one was spared, not even the children.

As the last man fell, she bent down, and licked the blood from his face. Wiping her lips, she walked towards me, looking me up and down. "Hello, Peyton."

All of a sudden, I realised I was holding my breath. "I know who you are!" I said, jumping from the drainpipe, to stand in front of her.

"Good, it will save time," Katalin replied, with a deep, Hungarian accent.

Looking at the bodies, I saw a little girl lying with her throat slit, and holding her mother's hand. "Did you know you were killing children?"

"Do you think I have a problem with that?"

I slapped her across the face, but she didn't flinch. Instead, she laughed, and sucked a bit of blood from her hair.

"Where is Jacque?" I said, pointing my poignard at her. "Where have you taken him?"

Katalin ran the blade of her sword along mine, and smiled. "Come with me," she replied, turning away.

"Not a chance,"

She faced me and smirked. "Who else is going to take you to Jacque?"

"Do you really expect me to trust you?" I said, pushing my blade towards her chest. "After what you have done to me."

Katalin grabbed my wrist and bent it back. Despite the searing pain running up my arm, I refused to give her the satisfaction of seeing me lose control. As I clenched my other hand into a fist, and thrust it towards her face, she wrapped her fingers around my throat, and squeezed.

"Don't do that," she said, bearing down on me. "I could be on the other side of the road before your body even hit the ground. If this is about the curse, then I suggest you come with me."

"Why don't you just kill me instead?" I croaked, feeling my grip around the poignard loosening.

"You are sweet, but you are stupid," Katalin said, releasing me. "Now, come with me. Jacque is dying."

"Get in!" Katalin demanded, shoving me through the door of Poska's Inn.

Inside, one of the barmaids sat, with her feet up on a table in the middle of the empty inn. As soon as she saw Katalin, she stood up, selected a bottle from behind the bar, and began pouring a thick, red liquid into a glass.

“No,” said Katalin, holding up her hand. “I don’t have time to partake in whatever pauper you obtained that from.”

The barmaid pushed the glass towards me, where the scent of blood caught my nostrils.

Before I could answer, Katalin took my hand and pulled me towards the stairway. “Don’t let anyone else in,” she called back, over her shoulder.

The barmaid nodded, keeping her head low, and decanted the liquid back into the bottle.

Climbing the stairs, Katalin’s grip on my hand grew tighter as we approached the landing.

“Is that barmaid a vampire?” I asked. “Is Poska?”

“Don’t ask questions,” she said, standing outside one of the four doors in the hallway. “Wait here.”

“Don’t think for a minute I trust you,” I replied.

“I can see why he likes you,” Katalin said, with a slight smile, before entering the room and shutting the door in my face.

Whilst alone, I paced up and down, taking note of every window and door, which could help me escape, if the need arose.

Within moments, the door reopened, and the distinct stench of blood washed over me. Out stepped the young man with the phoney English accent I’d saved from the trainee Councillors.

“Rémy?” I said.

He didn’t answer, and instead ushered me inside. Edging forward, I entered a cold room with mouldy brickwork poking out from underneath the bright yellow wallpaper; grand mahogany furniture crammed against every wall and corner; and Katalin, sitting in a rocking chair, holding the hand of a man lying in bed, wrapped in blood-soaked sheets.

Jacque.

He lay, half-unconscious, mumbling incoherently, and groaning as the fever and pain took hold. His sunken blue eyes looked unfamiliar without their kohl lines; his dark hair sat, lanky and greasy around his emaciated shoulders; his skin was black and blue, from the amount of cuts and bruises; and he looked older, somehow, with deep lines across his brow, and grey flecks in his overgrown beard.

I stood, numb, uncertain how to react.

“You have a choice to make, Peyton,” Katalin said. “Save him, or let him die.” She peeled back the sheets, to reveal a deep knife wound in his side, seeping with pus, and smelling like rotting flesh. “I reached him just in time, before the Councillors killed him.”

As I moved towards Jacques, Rémy grabbed my shoulders, and held me back. With one swift elbow to his stomach, he let me go.

“Uh uh!” Katalin said, holding up her hand. “You choose first.”

“There’s no choice to make,” I said.

“Very well, I’ll save him by turning him,” Katalin replied, standing up. “But, on one condition.”

“Which is?”

“The two of you can never be together. *You* have to leave him.”

As I watched Jacques’s breathing get shallower, I sensed Katalin walking towards me. “You’re mad,” I said. “I’ll turn him myself.”

Katalin smiled, with a hint of viciousness, and turned to face Jacques. “You can’t. Arany and Havasi bloodlines can never join. If you bite and consume his blood while he is human, then the curse will kill him.”

Rémy stood beside his brother, and placed his hand across his forehead. “We’re running out of time.”

“Do you think he could ever look at you the same way?” Katalin continued, walking away from me. “Knowing you’re a murderer, killing countless people. Do you think he would still love you?”

“Why are you doing this?” I said. “Why do you hate us so much?”

“I don’t hate Jacques. He’s my family, don’t be ridiculous.”

As Katalin sat on the edge of the bed, I watched Jacques slowly slipping away. “Save him,” I said.

“Are you sure?” Katalin replied, sliding towards Jacques.

Rémy, undoing the buttons of Jacques’s shirt, said, “There’s no point in wasting time, we know she’ll choose to save him.”

“Now, now, let’s not be hasty,” Katalin said, pulling back the collar to expose Jacques’s neck.

“Katalin!” Rémy said, narrowing his eyes at her.

She held up a hand to silence him, and stared at me. “There’s more. Jacques gave the Councillors the names of the vampires.”

I frowned and pulled out my poignard, wanting to stab it through her chest.

“What are you planning on doing with that?” Katalin laughed.

“You’re a liar,” I said, moving towards her. “Jacque would never do that.”

“Bothwell said he would kill you if he didn’t tell them.”

“Why should I believe you?” I replied, pointing the poignard at her.

“He also blocked the coven’s spells,” she continued. “Maybe he didn’t want you to find him. Maybe he doesn’t love you after all.”

“Enough,” I said, feeling myself pressing the blade further into her.

“And he brought down their enchantments upon the castle so the Councillors could get in,” Katalin said. “I’m so happy I taught him magic when he was a child.”

“My sister was in that castle,” I replied.

“Just imagine what the Councillors would have done to her. You could say Jacque was a traitor.”

“Oh, for crying out loud!” Rémy yelled. “It’s true. Enough of this.”

Katalin stood up, and pressed herself against the blade. “Are you really thinking of killing me? Who would save Jacque?”

“Him,” I said, pointing to Rémy.

“I can’t,” he replied. “I’m not a vampire.”

“Yet,” Katalin said, glaring at him, before turning to me. “Do you still want me to save him? It is Jacque’s fault that all those innocent people are dead.”

Lowering my weapon, I collapsed onto the bed and, taking a deep breath, closed my eyes, knowing that this wasn’t mine and Jacque’s time. “I’m so tired.”

A flutter of hot breath and strands of hair brushed against my cheek, as Katalin leaned into me. “Choose,” she whispered.

“Save him,” I sighed. “I’ve got my chance of redemption, he deserves the same.”

“And what about you?” Katalin continued.

“I’ll leave. For good.”

As Katalin moved away, I opened my eyes to find her, crouched over Jacque, and pulling him towards her.

“Peyton,” Rémy said, standing by the door. “It’s time to go.”

“Just a few more minutes,” I replied. “I need to know he’s all right.”

“No, you have to leave now,” he continued, with a hint of desperation in his voice. “She won’t do it if you stay.”

Taking one last look at Jacque, I stood up, and moved to leave. As I reached the doorway, I turned back to see Katalin sinking her fangs into his neck. Jacque’s body convulsed as his blood dripped down his throat, with Katalin pinning him to the bed. Rémy grabbed my hand, and pushed me into the hallway.

“Don’t come back, Peyton. She’ll kill him if you break the pact,” he said, closing the door.

Leaning against the wall, I told myself I had done the right thing. *Jacque* was safe. Hopefully. As I moved towards the stairwell, another door opened behind me.

“Finally,” came a familiar Russian voice. “*Rybka*, you do drag these things out.”

Turning around, I saw *Natashka* coming out from one of the adjacent rooms. I ran and wrapped my arms around her. “How long have you been here?”

“I may have been eavesdropping,” *Natashka* replied, squeezing me. “And I may have followed you. That little barmaid is too easily bribed. A compliment here, a compliment there, and I was upstairs before I knew it.”

“What am I going to do?”

Natashka tilted her head and thought for a moment. “Pact or no pact, we’ll find him again.”

“She’ll kill him.”

“Not if we get to him first. Then we’ll kill her.”

I sat on the floor, with my head in my hands, trying not to think about what was going on in the room beside me. “Perhaps we should try just now?”

Natashka patted my shoulder. “If I thought that was an option, *Rybka*, I would have come in and turned him myself.”

I nodded, reluctant to admit defeat.

“Let her have her big, bad moment,” *Natashka* continued. “And then, when we’re stronger, we’ll find them both. Right now, *Amelie* needs you. So does *Mhayree*, even if she won’t admit it.”

Twiddling my poignard between my fingers, I turned to *Natashka* and gave a slight smile. “How about we go after the Councillors instead, then?”

Natashka looked at me as though a new game rallied her spirits.

“Starting with *Marius de Volonté*,” I continued. “I believe he owes you a debt.”

Natashka’s eyes widened, all too willing to accept the challenge.

We took each other’s hands, and made our way towards the staircase, prepared to travel to the ends of the Earth to avenge our kind.

Two survivors, and two warriors.

Chapter Twenty

Present day

Sirens, delivery vans, and double-decker buses animated London's cosmopolitan landscape. A black cab pulled up in front of the row of flats adjacent to Jacques's, and two young men stumbled out onto the street and fell to the pavement. Sitting on Jacques's balcony, I smelled the stench of booze and cigarettes waft into the air as the pair staggered into their flat.

All through the night, Jacques read my diary, whilst I watched, outside his bedroom. Only once did he almost catch me. After finding the diary, he searched the entire flat, looking for the intruder. Hearing him approach the window, I launched myself onto the drainpipe, gripped onto the guttering, and climbed onto the rooftop. After he retreated back inside the bedroom, I wrapped a whip around the drainpipe, and scaled down onto the balcony.

Page by page, Jacques absorbed my secrets, confessions, and heartbreaks. Sometimes he paced the floor, other times, he sat on the bed with his nose buried in the book. The hours grew intense, as his emotions flicked between burning anger – where he kicked the sparse amount of furniture dotted around the room – to laughter, and despair. It would be a lie to say that as I watched him, I didn't feel compelled to charge into the room and rip the pages to pieces. But it never happened.

Jacques turned the last page of the diary, tossed it into the air, and harpooned it against a wall with a dagger removed from his waistband. The surprise I felt disappeared when, all of a sudden, he leapt to his feet. He stood in front of the new hole in the wall, and examined the blade. As he turned around and crept towards the window, I mounted the balcony and prepared to somersault to the ground.

"Peyton?" called Jacques.

I froze, and looked towards the concrete pavement beneath me, contemplating whether to jump and run away, or face Jacques.

"I saw your reflection in the dagger," he said.

Decision made.

Realising the pointlessness of avoiding the situation, I stepped off the balcony, and approached the windows.

I turned the handle. As I walked into the bedroom, Jacques and I stood face to face. Silence.

He stared at me, as though searching for the innocent girl who lives in the portrait kept in his bedside drawer. As casual as he tried to appear, the look in his eyes gave away the confusion and apprehension he felt.

Still silence.

I stood, hands on hips, with the weight of my swords and daggers pressing into me, reminding me of the henchman I killed less than a week ago. I wondered if the shock Jacque felt upon seeing me was anything like mine after finding him. Now, nothing else remained, except hope for his forgiveness.

Jacque edged forward and stood before me, bearing down, into my face. I remained still, not wishing to provoke a response from either of us. To my surprise, as he drew closer, butterflies erupted in my stomach for the first time in over a century. My palms grew sweaty, and I found myself unable to look at him. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Jacque smile and, despite resisting, I reciprocated.

Jacque leaned in, pulled me closer, and sank his fangs into my neck. A sharp pain shocked me, until subsiding to a pleasant sensation of being consumed. As Jacque released me, I returned the favour, by grabbing his t-shirt, ripping the collar, to expose his neck, and biting his throat. He flinched, before scratching his fingers across my back, and licking the drops of blood running down my shoulder.

As I tasted Jacque's blood, it felt as though no time had passed between us. Memories of the last hundred and twenty years faded into the ether. Once again, I was his Peyton, and he was my Jacque. Nothing else, in that moment, mattered.

Of course, the reality proved different.

I released my bite, and whispered, "How have you been?"

Jacque laughed. "After all this time, those are the first words you say to me?"

I narrowed my eyes, grinned, and kissed his lips.

"I've been good," Jacque muttered between kisses, as the blood covering our mouths mingled together. "How about you?"

I paused, and kissed him again to deflect the question, before offering a non-committal, "Uh huh," and reaching for his belt.

"I've missed you," he said, inhaling my scent. "You've changed."

"I had to," I replied.

Jacque removed my coat, and, as it fell to the floor, my weapons scattered across the room, distracting us.

"Still killing people, I see," Jacque said.

"I *am* a murderer, Jacque."

He placed his foot under the bed, and slid out a box of swords, hatchets, and maces.
“So am I.”

He watched me, trying to gauge my reaction. Judging by his confused expression, I showed none, and managed to conceal my disbelief. I knelt down to inspect the weapons – spinning them between my hands, slicing them through the air, and feeling their weight.

“Where did you get these?” I asked, admiring a blade inscribed with runes.

“Katalin gave them to me.”

Unimpressed, I tossed the sword back into the box. “Oh.”

As I stood up, and proceeded to collect my coat and weapons from around the room, Jacque sighed and said, “It was a long time ago.”

“I’m surprised she had any weapons left. I thought she gave them all to my sister,” I snapped.

“Don’t start!” Jacque replied.

“How is *your* Katalin?”

Jacque rolled his eyes. “My Katalin? We’re related, Peyton, get over it.”

I held up my hand in contempt, not wishing to hear any more. Jacque took no notice. “We’re all fighting the same fight.”

“I don’t kill humans just to piss off the Inservium!”

“No,” Jacque mocked. “You only kill Councillors... and, at one point, vampires.”

Taken aback, I glared at him. “Don’t you dare! Neither of us were innocent in that, remember?”

Jacque leaned against a wall, looking ashamed. “I didn’t mean that.”

I raised an eyebrow, unconvinced, retrieved my diary from the wall, and placed it into my coat pocket. I tossed Jacque’s dagger across the room, and it landed, embedded into the floor between his feet.

“Nice aim,” Jacque said.

“I missed.”

Jacque eyed me with suspicion, and I turned to leave.

“Why did you come to find me, Peyton?” he said. “Why now?”

I stopped and faced him. “I promised I would find you.”

“I remember,” he smiled.

For a few moments, I fell silent, and moved towards Jacque, before continuing.
“And it’s taken me this long. We’ve been searching since the day you died.”

“We?” Jacque asked.

“Natashka and me,” I answered.

“Ah, of course!”

“She is looking forward to meeting you.”

“Should I be worried?”

“It depends on what you do.”

Jacque, seeming to ignore me, wandered around the room, retrieving clothes from drawers, and tossing them onto the bed.

“I see you have been rummaging in my things,” Jacque remarked, whilst opening a drawer.

“Hmm?” I said, attempting to sound nonchalant.

“Were you looking for my cigarettes again?” Jacque smiled, and patted his jeans’ pocket.

I rolled my eyes in contempt, for both his filthy habit, and the accusation.

Jacque removed the small portrait of me hidden amongst a pile of socks. “It was face-down. I always face it upwards.”

I turned away, annoyed with myself for making such a simple mistake – in over a century of hunting Councillors, I never allowed for carelessness. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the portrait soaring through the air, and land – faced upwards – on the bed.

“Amelie gave me your address,” I said, breaking the awkward silence.

No response.

“I didn’t know you two were so close,” I added.

Jacque opened the wardrobe and grabbed a rucksack. “We’re not. I’ve never met her. It must have been her husband who told her where-”

“You mean Rémy!” I exclaimed. “You can say your brother’s name, you know.”

No response.

My phone vibrated inside my coat pocket. At first, I ignored it, but the incessant buzzing refused to relent. Exasperated, I snatched the phone, and saw Natashka’s name flashed on the screen.

“Hello,” I said, answering. At the other end, the pounding beats of a nightclub played in the background. “Haven’t you left yet?”

“No, *Rybka*. Can you chat just now?”

I glanced towards Jacque, who was preoccupied packing his clothes. “Hmm... a little.”

“Is he there?” Natashka said, excited.

“Yes.”

“Put him on the phone.”

“No!”

“Yes!” Natashka demanded.

“No!”

“*Rybka!*”

“No!”

“I’ll bake you some *pirog*.”

“You’ve been trying to use that bribe for over a century,” I said, noticing Jacques’s hand outstretched towards me, and motioning for the phone. I rolled my eyes, and passed it to him. As Jacques chatted to Natashka, I leaned against the wall, and strummed the strings of his guitar, pretending not to listen.

“Uh huh... I see,” Jacques spoke into the phone.

A muffle echoed from the other end.

“Yes, she rolled her eyes,” Jacques laughed.

Another muffled echo.

“Right... Uh huh... I’ll remember that,” Jacques replied, looking concerned. “I’ll hand you back to Peyton.”

I took back the phone.

“Are you satisfied now?” I enquired.

“Somewhat,” Natashka answered.

As I continued to fiddle with the guitar, Jacques prised off my fingers, dismounted it from the stand, and packed it into a case.

“What is it you’re actually doing?” I asked him.

“Packing,” he answered.

“Obviously, but-”

“*Rybka*, are you paying attention?” Natashka sighed.

“Yes. Of course,” I lied.

“Good, because Mhayree has just walked into the club.”

“Shit.”

“She’s with Saara, Hart, Romia, and Freya,” Natashka whispered.

I moved towards the windows, and stepped onto the balcony to continue the conversation in privacy. On the other end of the phone, Natashka mumbled an order of a Black Russian to a waiter. Inside, Jacques wandered room to room, gathering his possessions.

“Why is Romia De Rossi with them?” I asked Natashka.

“Is it not obvious?”

I waited for her to explain. Silence. After several moments, I realised she was anticipating my response.

“No,” I said, frustrated.

Natashka slurped her drink, and babbled. “This straw is proving ineffective.”

“Uh huh...”

“This tastes much better without it!”

“Natashka...” I urged, encouraging her to focus.

“Well, she is one of Emilia Bokori’s daughters, perhaps she is looking for her great-great... whatever... cousin.”

“You mean Jacque,” I responded, watching him hide a dagger under his Doc Martins, and cover it with the leg of his jeans.

“Well, his mother is related to Emilia’s sister, Noemi Bokori.”

“Yes, and his mother married into Katalin Angou’s family. I know all this,” I retorted.

“Maybe Emilia is taking a vested interest in the war and joining us,” Natashka answered, taking a gulp of her cocktail.

“Or both of the Bokori sisters are siding with Katalin. Maybe Saara and the others are, too.”

“I’m not sure there are only two sides anymore. I’ve lost track of whose family is allied with whose.”

“Anyone who is with Katalin is against *us*. It’s that simple.”

“Spoken like a true descendant of Gizella,” Natashka said.

“Perhaps.”

“What about Mhayree? Whose side is she on?”

“Well, if it’s not ours, I may have to kill her this time.”

Natashka did not respond.

“Have they seen you?” I asked.

“No, not yet,” Natashka said. “I am thinking of finding them before they find me.”

“Be sure to welcome them to London for me,” I said. “I will try to find out more from Jacque as to why Mhayree was at his flat last week.”

“Good idea. I’ll see you soon, *Rybka*.”

“Just one more thing.”

“What?”

“Where the hell have I to meet you?”

Natashka snorted, trying to stifle laughter. "I'll meet you on the South Bank, outside the Dungeons."

"Is that supposed to be our usual haunt?" I asked, confused.

"Think about it," Natashka replied, before hanging up the phone.

I leaned on the balcony railing and looked across the street. Within the houses, shrouded in darkness, the human occupants slept, oblivious of vampires roaming around the city. In a few hours, when the sun rises, men and women would awaken; scoff down their morning toast or cereal, gorge on caffeine and dash off to the daily grind of business meetings, shopping sprees, and congestion charges. Meanwhile, the city was hosting a war between vampire coven factions, with in-fighting involving the Inservium and an ancient grudge between family bloodlines. I envied the humans.

I straightened up, adjusted my poignard attached to my belt, and re-entered Jacque's bedroom.

"I have to go and meet Natashka," I called to Jacque, who was disconnecting plugs in the adjacent room.

"Should I be worried about her threats?" he asked.

"What threats?" I answered, smiling to myself.

"The kind that gentlemen do not repeat."

"Yes."

Jacque emerged from the lounge, looking unnerved, but remained silent. He opened the wardrobe, removed a leather jacket, and threw it onto the bed.

"Have you ever heard of a Mhayree Du Loire?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

"Yes, we've been friends for a few decades."

"I heard she was in town, that's all," I said, trying to sound casual. "Have you seen her recently?"

"She visited last week. Why?"

"What a coincidence, we are all in the same place at the same time."

"Indeed," Jacque replied, putting on a black beanie. "Although, she has been here for years."

"How did you meet her?"

"Through friends."

"Which friends?"

"Not Rémy or Amelie, if that is what you mean."

To avoid sounding desperate for information, I kept quiet and decided to let Jacque lead the conversation. I wandered around the room, watching him cover his sparse amount of furniture with dust sheets.

“Mhayree tells me that you and Natashka went on a hunting expedition,” Jacque continued.

“We’ve been on many,” I replied.

“This one involved your father.”

“You mean Marius de Volonté?” I said, grabbing a corner of a dust sheet, and helping Jacque to cover the chest of drawers.

“Yes, dear old Marius.”

“That is a story for another time.”

Jacque nodded. “Another diary?”

I smiled, but revealed nothing, trying instead to direct his attention back to Mhayree.

“You do know Mhayree was supposed to take care of Amelie?” I said.

“Maybe not mention Amelie to Mhayree,” Jacque warned, whilst taking one last look around the flat.

“Feeling guilty, is she?”

“What Amelie did is not her fault.”

“And what about Freya?”

“She’s trying to make amends,” Jacque said, removing a cigarette from his pocket.

Upon seeing my disgusted expression, he sighed, and placed it back into his jeans.

Whilst putting on his jacket, he turned to me and said, “Are you ready?”

“For what?” I replied.

Jacque smiled, shoving two Hungarian daggers into his belt. “To fight.”

He secured his rucksack over his shoulder, picked up his guitar case, and added, “I heard you’re quite good at it.”

I raised an eyebrow in modest agreement and – conceding the conversation about Mhayree was over – headed towards the windows, motioning for Jacque to follow. “Well, come on, then. We’ve got Councillors to track down.”

We both stepped onto the balcony, leapt over the railing, and landed on the ground. As dawn loomed over the horizon, we travelled across the streets of Camden, knowing only danger and death awaited us. Loss begets loss. Murder begets murder. Hand in hand, we would face the Councillors, and avenge every vampire man, woman and child, whose blood they spilled. We would be persecuted and hunted, until only one side is left standing.

The Vampire Bite: How Gothic Vampire Literature of the 19th Century Influences Female Members of the Goth Subculture

Introduction

Context of Study

This research questions if/how the female vampire character within 19th Century¹ Gothic literature influences/inspires the identity of contemporary female Goths. For the purpose of the research, the term “contemporary female Goth” is defined as anyone who self-identifies as female and a member of the Goth subculture² between the years of 2016 to 2018 (concurrent with the timeline of the research period).

The study juxtaposes representations of gender within 19th Century Gothic vampire literature and the contemporary Goth subculture. By examining the tropes of female vampires and positioning them against how female Goths recognise/interpret the representation of femininity, the research aims to create a dialogue between the study of Gothic texts and that of one of its consumer subgroups – the Goth subculture. According to Sara Martin (2002), the lack of crossover between Gothic literature and subculture studies prevents a deeper understanding of how the two interconnect. She proposes that the differing methodologies used by the two academic disciplines are stagnating the progress towards joint scholarly research – the reasons for which are as follows:

- First, the legitimacy of deploying “post-modern critical discourses” and “psychoanalysis” within Gothic Studies is best suited to reposition and understand historic literary texts.
- Second, to investigate subcultures requires a Cultural Studies methodology – that is an analysis of lifestyle, consumerism and production – which risks opposition from members within the subculture.

Despite such methodological barriers, Martin emphasises the importance of combining literary and cultural studies:

¹ A brief history of the development of the character throughout literature features in subsequent sections.

² As there are many subgroups within the Goth subculture, e.g. Lolita, Cyber Goth, and Victorian Goth, this study was open to all members of the subculture, and did not require participants to identify with a particular subgroup.

“...if Gothic youth subcultures can be regarded as the practical result of a particular interpretation of the philosophy of Gothic texts, and Gothic texts are the field of research of Gothic Studies, Gothic youth subcultures... could (perhaps should) be also part of Gothic Studies” (Martin, 2002, p.28).

In the years following Martin’s analysis a growing academic interest in the Goth subculture has emerged encompassing ethnographic and interview-based data alongside an in-depth exploration into gender politics, subcultural discourse and rhetoric, and identity construction³. Following the ongoing development in the study of Goth subcultures, my research aspires to construct a response to Martin’s proposition to combine Gothic studies and Goth subcultural scholarship, whilst contributing to the ongoing research dedicated to said subculture.

In addition to Martin’s suggestion of a gap between interdisciplinary investigations into how members of the Goth subculture interact with Gothic literature, the reasoning behind my choice of demographic goes deeper. For example, how can a literary genre that started more than two centuries ago – and continued in its various forms throughout the following centuries – still influence and resonate with contemporary members of a subculture which came to prominence in the late 1970s? As will become evident in subsequent sections, the stylistics/characteristics which define the literary genre and subculture are not as intrinsically linked as one may assume. Yes, a member of the Goth subculture may be inspired by and interested in certain aspects of Gothic commodities (literature, art, and architecture), however, the stereotypical “look” of black lipstick, pale face, and black clothes are not traditional features within what can be termed as the “Gothic Period’s” (established in 1764) literary tropes. Furthermore, research conducted by Spracklen and Spracklen (2014) and Goulding and Saren (2009) highlights how certain members of the Goth subculture adopt aesthetics (fashion, faux fangs, etc.) of the literary vampire as a way to assert (or subvert) sexual and social dynamics – or simply as a style statement. Therefore, my study aims to examine if the subculture’s engagement⁴ with the vampire character is more complex than a fashion statement, and is in fact based upon a social awareness of female cultural dynamics – and, if indeed, this contributes to their own identity.

³ See: Hodkinson, 2002; Goulding, Saren, et al, 2004; Wilkins, 2004; Sweet, 2005; Brill, 2007; Goodlad, 2007; Goulding and Saren, 2009; Miklas and Arnold, 2010; Spracklen and Spracklen, 2014; Ragusa and Ward, 2015.

⁴ Note: Not all interviewees based their appearance or fashion choices upon that of the vampire figure.

Methodology: A Step into the Dark Side

This study acknowledges the need for a bricolage approach into researching the Goth subculture's interaction with Gothic texts to investigate the interdisciplinary aspects of the respective fields. By providing a platform for participants of the Goth subculture to voice their opinion/experiences, I aim to examine contemporary female Goths' ontological relationships with the literary female vampire, and compare/contrast them with Gothic literary theory.

The research findings will also inform the basis of the creative element – the Gothic vampire novel – which I have written alongside with the critical component of the thesis. As the novel features a predominantly female ensemble, participants' responses, as well as close readings of vampire literature⁵, helped to inform the development of the protagonist and supporting characters. This includes – but is not limited to – a modernisation and evolution of the traditional interpretations of female vampires; how female sexuality is depicted; the female vampire's position within patriarchal societies; and how the female vampire embodies autonomy from males (both vampire and human).

The study is primarily constructed from two series of interviews, conducted with 68 females over the age of 18 who self-identify as Goths. The first set of interviews involved 7 participants, who answered 10 questions, and the data was collated and analysed for recurring trends/themes. To gauge a wider range of responses, the second set of interviews commenced, and attracted participation from 61 participants. Demographics from the second interviews revealed participant ages ranged from 18 to 56+, with the most populous age bracket being 36-45 (29.51%) closely followed by 26-35 (26.23%), with the least populous 56+ (3.28%). Participant locations spanned 15 countries – with 3 participants opting not to disclose. The highest number of respondents resided in the United States of America (45.90%), followed by United Kingdom (19.67%)⁶. Note: for the purposes of this research, the definition of “female” was not limited to persons who were biologically defined as female from birth. This research includes participants who self-identify as female, and/or self-classify as queer/transgender/transsexual. The inclusion of non-binary genders was in response to potential participants who expressed interest in taking part in the study, however were uncertain as to whether their non-cis normative identity excluded them. It was also advised (by Facebook respondents) that as the Goth community embraces

⁵ The relevant list of literature features in upcoming sections.

⁶ See Appendix C for full details of participant demographics.

diverse gender identities, the act of asking transgender Goths to participate would reflect upon the subculture ethos and encourage members to engage with interviews.

The Ethics Committee at the University of Glasgow approved the research on the 17th of October 2016 and both sets of interview processes followed the code of practice procedures. Subsequent to receiving the Ethics Committee authorisation, the first set of interviews took place between December 2016 and July 2017. Potential participants were approached through various online sites, including Facebook, Twitter, and websites/chat forums dedicated to the Goth subculture. Individuals who expressed interest received a full project descriptor, outlining the purpose of the interviews, alongside a set of 10 primary interview questions⁷. Each interview was conducted through email and/or Facebook Messenger as appropriate to participants' wishes and technological access.

During the course of the research timeframe, follow-up questions were sent to participants who agreed to continue with the interview process.

Whilst analysing the data for the 7 primary interviews, I identified a trend, whereby participants expressed an acute awareness of gender issues – with particular regards to social perceptions of gender and how they relate to both the self and to female vampires. Therefore, to investigate these trends further, it became apparent that more in-depth questioning was required, with additional participants, regarding (en)gender(ed) perceptions, the construction of identity within the Goth subculture, and the symbolism of the female vampire.

Subsequently, the second set of interviews took place between June 2017 and August 2017, resulting in a further 61 interviews. An online site was utilised for posting ten questions which aimed to understand female Goth's perception of genders and identity formation and how this encourages/repels an affinity with the literary female vampire. Questions were designed to allow participants to express their thoughts and opinions within comment boxes and multiple choice options.

At the end of the interviews, data was collated to compare participants' answers to ascertain if recurring trends and themes existed. All participants' identities remain anonymous in accordance with Data Protection laws. For this reason, individuals are referred to alphabetically (e.g. "Participant A") to signify a member of the primary interviews, and numerically (e.g. "Participant 1") to signify a member of the secondary interviews, for referencing purposes.

⁷ The questions for both sets of interviews focused on the female vampire as representative of social and gender issues; gender as a social and personal construct; differences between the male and female vampire as representative of gender subjectivity; and how the representation of the female vampire has evolved over the past century.

The criteria for participants to be eligible for interview only required that the individual self-identify as a Goth – whether that be as an autonomous practitioner of the lifestyle, or as a participant within the subculture (i.e. attending Goth nightclubs and festivals, or engaging with online groups). As the study aims to represent a non-specific prejudgement of the Goth community, participants did not have to adhere to any particular socioeconomic structure, cultural background, religion, or political affiliation.

Appendices A and B contain the list of questions given to participants and demonstrate the themes of investigation which constructed the study and characterisations for the novel.

When choosing the questions, there were specific areas of interest I wished to explore whilst investigating the interviewees' interactions with vampire literature, and how they express their own identities:

- Which piece of vampire literature written in the 19th Century was the most popular – to establish which texts dominate and create the iconography/representation of the female vampire.
- How female Goths interpret the female vampire, and how this reflects or influences contemporary (and historical) society – in particular, in relation to supposed female roles, and how these are represented or subverted within literature.
- How do interviewees react and/or interpret the female vampire as (overly) sexualised – this line of investigation was guided by readings of literary scholarship, which claim the character is symbolic of threatening female sexuality (this is discussed in subsequent chapters).
- How the literary female vampire has evolved over the past Century – this was to determine if the character continues to represent/misrepresent contemporary females and social issues.
- How female Goths define gender and if/how it is relevant to the construction of their identities – specifically how theories of gender continue to be renegotiated and reclassified.
- What are females' roles within the Goth subculture – are they respected, disrespected, and how is femininity defined?
- Which characteristics of the female vampire are favoured by the interviewees – not only does this reveal how the character should be portrayed, but also how the character should ideally represent contemporary females.

The reasoning behind the questions was dependent upon my own creative process of writing female vampires. For example, when devising the characteristics which made up the four primary female characters within my novel, the questions allowed me to investigate how vampires reflect and symbolise female social dynamics. The line of questioning was specifically designed to analyse interviewees' engagement with not only a literary character, but also their own place within society. To do this, it required an examination of gender representation and how identity is self-referential regarding an autonomous interpretation of historical and contemporary social constructs.

A Gothic History: How the Vampire Invaded

The term 'Goth' is historically understood⁸ to have originated from a Barbarian tribe, serving as auxiliaries within the Roman army during the third century AD. Having invaded and occupied territory between the Pannonian and Danube delta, the tribe split into 'Tervingi' and 'Greutingi' (Latin: Visigoths and Ostrogoths), translated as Western Goths and Eastern Goths (Groom, 2012, n.p.). Thus, in the late 17th into the early 18th Centuries, the linguistic appropriation of the term "Goth" attached negative symbolism harking back to an era and civilisation connected to barbarism and unrefined predilections (Raškauskienė, 2009, p.11)⁹.

Scholars such as E.J. Clery (2002), Jason Colavito (2011), and George E. Haggerty (1989) suggest that the Gothic literary genre began with the publication of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). However, this claim is disputed by Jarlath Killeen, who proposes that the relatively obscure Irish novel *The Adventures of Miss Sophia Berkley* – anonymously written by 'a young lady' – could qualify as the first of the Gothic genre, as it pre-dates *Otranto* by four years (Killeen, 2014, p.119)¹⁰. Nevertheless, as a seminal work of the Gothic genre, *Otranto* received mixed critiques, ranging from confusion to scathing mockery. For example, one reviewer commented "no boarding-school Miss of thirteen could get half through [*Otranto*] without yawning... He says it was

⁸ The use of the term first appeared between 16 and 18 A.D. as early ethnographers observed tribes with similar languages, lifestyles, and geographic settlements along the Danube and Black Sea, and subsequently coined the term "Gothic peoples". For more information, see Wolfram, H. 1979. *History of the Goths*. London: University of California Press, p.19.

⁹ The term also inspired numerous creations of architecture – easily recognisable with arch windows, grand spires, and imposing infrastructure. Examples are given in subsequent sections.

¹⁰ It is important to note that Killeen goes on to warn against the dangers of trying to establish the first text of a literary genre. By referencing Anne Williams debunking the myth of the Gothic literary origin as *Otranto* '[springing] fully armed from Horace Walpole's dreaming brow in 1764', Killeen states that this assumption relegates female writers into a position subordinate to male writers.

a dream, and I fancy one when he had some feverish disposition in him” (Sabor, cited in Clemens, 1999, p.30). Walpole himself claimed credit for creating the genre by attaching the subtitle ‘A Gothic Story’ to *Otranto* (Norton, 2006, p.1).

Indeed, when attempting to articulate the definition of “Gothic”, it is all too tempting to use what Eugenia DeLamotte (1990) terms the “shopping-list approach”, for example:

“...in literature... [the term ‘Gothic’] was expressed by dealing in the supernatural, with the inexplicable monsters of the forest and castle – spooks, witches, damned souls and corpses that rise at midnight; it is interested in... doctors in strange laboratories dealing in forbidden knowledge; it is fascinated with the abnormal and the hallucinatory – drug abuse, torture, terrorization, the fear of the victim...”
(Bloom, 2010, p.3).

Within her research into contemporary Gothic, scholar Catherine Spooner (2006) also references the “shopping-list approach” whilst discussing theoretical definitions of the genre. Instead of relying on a systematic categorisation of the genre, Spooner proposes that the reconfigured interpretations of Gothic are extensively variable, and, so too, popular within contemporary culture as a result of individualised interpretations, instead of one all-encompassing definition.

Thus, the characterisation and classification of the Gothic genre is not only complex, but also subject to the time period of the text, and dependent upon the sociocultural circumstance of the era when the text was written. Andrew Smith recognises the importance of positioning texts within political contexts, for example, how Gothic texts of the 1790s can be analysed to reveal certain writers’ affiliations with revolutionary ideas as instigated by the French Revolution (Smith, 2013, p.3). According to William Hughes, the genre came to define and mould the cultural capital of the 18th Century and its continual popularity spanned across proceeding eras, continents and languages (Hughes, 2013, p.1). Despite Hughes’s large claim, further examination into the genre offers insight into how cultural movements inspired Gothic novels. For example, Victor Sage proposes that Gothic literature of the 1790s was symbolically influenced by national politics, i.e. Jacobites, anti-Catholicism, Whigism, the French Revolution, and a desire for an English national identity (Sage, 1998, p.83).

The appropriation of politics by Gothic writers has garnered the attention of feminist literary critics, whose examination of the literature identifies how female readers

and writers positioned themselves into the text to renegotiate and transgress women's place in society (Meyers, 2001, p.26). It should be noted that such critical readings are not limited to texts written in a specific timeframe, as is evident from the ongoing feminist interest regarding Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1817), and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892)¹¹. Nor, too, are female-centric readings limited to texts written by women. Critical analysis of literature written by male authors also offer insight into sexual politics and the domestication of women – such as Edgar Allan Poe's *Ligeia* (1838)¹², and, as will become evident throughout this study, Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1872) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1879).

For the context of this study, the specific period of Gothic literature discussed is limited to vampire texts published during the 19th Century, when the Gothic genre's popularity was revived – most notably, according to Jerrold Hogle, during the *fin de siècle* of the 1890s, which saw the increase in publications of Gothic prose (Hogle, 2002, p.1). Hogle's claim challenges critics such as Maurice Levy, who argues that academic studies of the early to mid-20th Century only attributed the term "Gothic" to texts published between 1764 and 1820 (Killeen, 2009, n.p.). Furthermore, it contradicts Michael Sadleir's claim that the Gothic popularity "crashed and became the vulgar 'blood'" (Sadleir, as quoted in Davison, 2009, n.p.) after a forty-year peak between 1775 and 1815 (Davison, 2009, n.p.). As will become evident, 1815 was not necessarily the end of the Gothic era, but instead the beginning of a regeneration of the Gothic – the vampire era was looming. A year later, in 1816, in Villa Diodati, situated on Lake Geneva, a group gathered for a short summer break – Mary and Percy Bysshe Shelley, Lord George Byron, Claire Clairmont, and Byron's physician, Doctor John Polidori (Mulvey-Roberts, 2016, p.75). The tale itself has become iconic with the image of the group congregating one "dark and stormy night" (Braudy, 2016, p.118), reading a French translation of German supernatural tales, *Phantasmagoria*, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's vampire poem *Christabel* (Moore, 1844, p.394). The readings prompted Byron to challenge each member of the group to create

¹¹ See: Saunders, C.B. 2014. 'Incarcerating the sane: The asylum and female powerlessness in nineteenth century Gothic Fiction'. In: Purves, M. *Women and Gothic*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp.151-160 for insight into Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*; Gilbert, S. and Gubar, S. 2000. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (Second Ed.). London: Yale University Press, which discusses Jane Austen's Gothic parody novel, *Northanger Abbey*; Allen, J.A. 2009. *The Feminism of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Sexualities, Histories, Progressivism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹² See: Person, L. 2001. Poe and Nineteenth-Century Gender Constructions. In: Kennedy, J.G. *A Historical Guide to Edgar Allan Poe*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp.129-166.

their own ghost story – resulting in the formulation of both Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* and John Polidori’s *The Vampyre* (Butler, 2010, p.85).

Three years later, in 1819, Polidori published *The Vampyre* – regarded as the first English-language vampire novella (Meehan, 2014, p.24). Originally, the authorship of the poem was credited to Lord Byron (then subsequently Polidori), who is reported to have inspired the vampire villain Lord Ruthven (Melton & Hornick, 2015, p.62). As James B. Twitchell states, “the vampire was not just born in the novel but given an instant popular audience” (Twitchell, cited in Williamson, 2005, p.36). Befittingly, *Christabel* – the vampiric inspiration for Polidori’s seminal work – introduced the British literary vampire (Melton, 2011, p.136). Thus, with Coleridge’s creation of the vampiric character Geraldine, *Christabel*¹³ becomes the first British vampire text to feature a female vampire published in the 19th century. The creation of Coleridge’s poem commenced in 1797 – drawing inspiration from the prototype of female vampirism, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s 1797 poem, *The Bride of Corinth* – but it did not receive publication until 1816 (Snodgrass, 2014, pp.56-57).

However, it was not until 1872 that a female vampire, the eponymous Carmilla, created by Sheridan Le Fanu, would take centre stage within the literary genre (Hirschmann, 2011, p.12). Considered the first lesbian and female vampire protagonist in literature (Righi, 2012, n.p.), the novella’s subtext raises issues of sexual repression and gender, particularly by the vampire Carmilla transgressing traditional gender roles, and challenging societal views of binary gender by portraying the denial of female aggression (Andriano, 1993, p.99). This, too, according to André DeCuir, contests the Victorian ideals of sexuality whereby female desires were viewed as dangerous and unstable to patriarchal institutions (DeCuir, cited in Stockstill, in Fahs, Dudy, and Stage, 2013, n.p.). In vampire literature, authors utilized the opportunity to question societal opinions and subvert gender expectations. For example, Le Fanu forms a dialogue challenging the repression of female desire:

“That so many authoritative Victorians, particularly physicians, scientists, and clerics, answered no [i.e. females have no desires] is indicative of a climate of mind that Le Fanu fears,” (Veeder, 2004, p.118).

¹³ Although Coleridge’s poem *Christabel* does not directly reference blood-sucking, the ambiguous nature of the vampirism and the fact that a participant mentioned it in their interview means that the poem is included in this study.

As a result, the horror/supernatural ghost story of the 19th century produced a succinct justification for supernatural narratives, which commented on and challenged the dominant social ethos, which promoted oppression (Geary, 1992, p.106).

With regards to this study, analysis of the data is examined to determine if contemporary female Goth perceptions of 19th century vampire literature continue to offer a relevant commentary regarding gender issues, and if so, can these inspire future works of literary fiction?

Key Texts

When choosing to research vampire literature, it is necessary – due to the vast amount of texts available – to focus on a specific genre or publication era of the books/poems. In the previous section, I outlined how the 19th Century produced a re-emergence of the Gothic zeitgeist, and thus contributed to my decision to limit the research parameters to this era. After conducting an online search into texts published within this timeline (those of which fitted the criteria set out below), a small selection of literature was included within the interviews, however, participants had the option to discuss any texts they deemed appropriate.

I have chosen to focus my literature analysis on texts that:

- (a) Feature a female vampire (either as the protagonist or a secondary character).
- (b) Are categorised as 19th century Gothic¹⁴.
- (c) Have been referenced by at least one participant during the research period.

Throughout this study, the definition of “vampire” is limited to that which is mentioned in the Oxford Dictionary:

“A preternatural being of a malignant nature (in the original and usual form of the belief, a reanimated corpse), supposed to seek nourishment, or do harm, by sucking the blood of sleeping persons; a man or woman abnormally endowed with similar habits” (OED, 2018)¹⁵.

¹⁴ Note: contemporary vampire literature, i.e. texts published post-19th Century, will be referenced as and when appropriate with regards to participants discussing the texts.

¹⁵ The decision to only include vampires who ingest their victims’ blood was again an attempt to narrow the criteria for the research process. For this reason, Florence Marryat’s *Blood of the Vampire* is not discussed, despite being published in 1897, and featuring a female vampire. This does not negate the importance of the novel when discussing vampire texts, but as the vampire psychically drained victims of their life force, the text is not suitable for this study.

Taking into account the research criteria, the relevant texts included are as follows:

- *Christabel* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1816)¹⁶ – chosen as it is considered the first example of a female vampire protagonist.
- *La Morte Amoureuse* by Théophile Gautier (1836)¹⁷ – chosen as I wanted to include an example of literature written outside of the UK and Ireland.
- *Carmilla* by Sheridan Le Fanu (1872)¹⁸ – chosen as the text is heavily female-driven, as both protagonist and antagonist are female.
- *Dracula* by Bram Stoker (1897)¹⁹ – chosen as it is arguably one of the best-known examples of vampire literature.

Goth Subculture: The Goth(ic) Resurrection

As my study is concerned with if/how Gothic literature informs/inspires female Goth identities, it is necessary to examine how the Gothic genre and the subculture are connected. Two hundred years after the rise of the Gothic literary genre, a post-punk music culture emerged between the late 1970s and the early 1980s, with poetic lyrics and melancholic voices (Spracklen and Spracklen, 2014, p.91). The scene continued to gather interest from music fans throughout the 1980s with the emergence of bands such as The Damned, Siouxsie and the Banshees, and Joy Division (Gunn, 1999, p.37). Previously, in 1978, during a BBC interview, Joy Division's manager, Anthony Wilson, described the band's songs as "Gothic"²⁰ (Issitt, 2011, p.6). This – according to Caroline Langhorst – is consistent with the band's music sounding like a "...hollow claustrophobic landscape in a state of decay, where the subject is hopelessly doomed..." (Oksanen, as quoted in Langhorst, 2018, p.84) However – despite music magazines *NME* and *Sounds* negatively reviewing Bauhaus's first album – *In the Flat Field* – released in 1980, as lacking any Gothic connection (Carpenter, 2012, p.32) – it was not until 1979, with the release of Bauhaus's *Bela Lugosi's Dead*, that the Goth image – still present in the contemporary scene – emerged (Hodkinson, 2002, n.p.). According to sociological research conducted by Goulding, Saren, Maclaran, and Follett (2004), despite negative stereotypes labelling

¹⁶ Coleridge, S.T. 1816. *Christabel*. [Online]. [Accessed: 8 March 2017]. Available from: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/>

¹⁷ Gautier, T. 1836. *La Morte Amoureuse*. [Kindle Fire e-book]. The Library of Alexandria.

¹⁸ Le Fanu, J.S. 1872. *Carmilla*. [Kindle Fire e-book]. Carbondale: Bizarro Press.

¹⁹ Stoker, B. 1897. *Dracula*. [Kindle Fire e-book]. Public Domain Books.

²⁰ It is difficult to pinpoint the exact origin of the term "Goth" when referring to music. Spracklen and Spracklen (2018) acknowledge Ian Astbury's (Southern Death Cult) claim that it was David Dorrell who instigated the definition, as a joke when referring to Andi from Sex Gang Children as Count Visigoth.

Goths as morbid depressives, obsessed with melancholy and darkness, Goth individuals exude creativity. Furthermore, scholar of the Gothic subculture, Charles Mueller (2012), states the subculture's inception itself hosted a critique against masculinist power, and its celebration of femininity was particularly attractive to women²¹.

Moreover, as my study shows, in accordance with journalist Gavin Baddeley, this hybrid affiliation with the historical definition of Gothic – as an architectural design (famous examples include Notre Dame Cathedral, Westminster Abbey, and the University of Glasgow) and literary genre – is appropriated by contemporary Goths (Baddeley, as cited by Brill, 2008, n.p.). By blending aspects from Glam Rock, Punk, and New Wave alongside inspiration from pantheistic and monotheistic religions, horror movies, Avant Garde and Pre-Raphaelite artists (Goodlad and Bibby, 2007, p.2), the Goth culture “seemed to take the trappings of Gothic literature and film and convert them into a symbolic form of resistance to a suburban Britain” (Spooner, 2004, p.159). Therefore, I question throughout this study how much these trappings – in particular, Gothic literature – influence the subcultural participants' construction of their identity?

By analysing the literary character of the female vampire featured in Gothic texts of the 19th Century, my research delves into the construction of the female Goth identity. The interconnected study of gender and literature combines a critique of gender within Gothic texts with the tradition within gender studies to re-evaluate societal conventions of masculinity and femininity (Horner and Zlosnik, 2014, p.56). This corresponds with critical discussions of Gothic heroines of the 1700s and 1800s who – as DeLamotte states reflected female readers' lives by depicting patriarchal systems, i.e. family structures, education, human rights, and socioeconomic divisions (DeLamotte, 1990, p.152). Further to this McDayter attests that the scholarly components of 20th century feminism and 18th century moralism deconstruct female readers' enjoyment of Gothic texts as transference of their own suffering and oppression – either to be deciphered as masochistic gratification or self-projected variance (McDayter, 1995, p.58). As Belk et al. theorise, consumers select texts to experience the “Other[s]” existence by way of “contagion” (Belk et al. as cited in Miklas and Arnold, 2010, pp.574-575). This in turn revisits the literary fragmentations of the female vampire and how readers can vicariously redefine their own identity through her. For example, as Botting states, “the feminized monster of Gothic fiction rendered various romantic and domestic freedoms imaginable at the same time as they were configured as an imagined threat to familial and social values” (Botting, 2007, p.170).

²¹ Subsequent chapters examine how femininity is performed and represented within the Goth subculture, e.g. fashion, sexuality, and gender roles.

Despite the participants in my study living in a different era to those aforementioned female readers, my study aims to investigate if/how the 19th Century literary female vampire still represents the social domain of women, and if this relates to participants' identities.

Goth or Vampire?

It is important to note that the Goth subculture does not affiliate itself with the Sanguinarian/Vampire (as defined below) communities²²:

“I think this is a misnomer. I have been a Goth now for over 20 years and I do not associate my gothic-ness to the vampire community. In fact, I see this as a separate community” (Participant A, 2016).

Although some members of the Sanguinarian/Vampire communities may be practitioners of the Goth subculture and vice versa, it is important to differentiate between the communities. To avoid any such confusion, the definition of each group is as follows:

- Sanguinarian – The person needs to consume blood (either from human donors or rare animal meat), or else suffers physical illness, fatigue, intense hunger, and erratic emotions (Reece, 2012, p.89).²³
- Vampire lifestyler – The person adopts aesthetics of the vampire (black clothing, prosthetic fangs, make up, may choose to sleep in a coffin). Some members may choose to consume blood, but do not feel physically dependent on it (Laycock, 2009, p.6).²⁴
- Goth – Limits their appropriation of the vampire character to that of a consumer enjoying aesthetics, i.e. fashion and make-up, and artistic products, i.e. films (*Underworld*, *Nosferatu*, and *Blade*), and literature

²² Other Vampire communities feature in critical discourses relating to the subject, for example, Psychic Vampires – those who feed on other people's energies. For more information, see Russo, A. 2008. *Vampire Nation*. Minnesota: Llewellyn Publishing.

²³ Continued debate surrounds the subject of Sanguinarians as actually having a medical condition which requires them to ingest blood. For more information, see Stephanou, A. 2014. *Reading vampire Gothic through blood: Bloodlines*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.138-164, and Keyworth, D. 2010. The Socio-Religious Beliefs and Nature of the Contemporary Vampire Subculture. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*. [Online]. 17(3), pp.355-370.

²⁴ See Laycock, J. 2009. *Vampires Today: The Truth About Modern Vampirism*. Connecticut: Praeger Publishers regarding the friction between members of lifestyle Vampires and Sanguinarians as to the legitimacy of participants' right to use the term “Vampire”.

(*Dracula*, *Interview with the Vampire*, and *Anno Dracula*) (Venters, 2009, pp.99-104).

For the purpose of this study, only the Goth subculture will be included in discussions and so no connection to either Sanguinarian or Vampire communities should be inferred.

Throughout the subsequent chapters, different aspects of identity are examined to determine how participants perceive not only themselves, but also how the representation of the female vampire impacts and influences those perceptions. In order to ascertain an accurate and thorough insight into how participants' identities are formed, each chapter is dedicated to differing themes:

- Chapter One: Gothic Audiences and the Female Vampire – examines participants' favourite 19th Century texts, and if their choice is influenced by the female vampire. This is in conjunction with an analysis of participants' perceptions of the genre being dominated by the figure of the male vampire.
- Chapter Two: The Complexity of the (Vampire) Female – investigates how the categorisation of gender (if it exists) and performativity of the literary female vampire influence/inspire female Goths.
- Chapter Three: How to be a (Vampire) Woman – explores which characteristics of the female vampire are particularly appealing to participants. This coincides with an analysis of which traits are considered feminine²⁵, and if participants recognise said traits within themselves.
- Chapter Four: Good and Bad (Vampire) Girls – delves into participants' perceptions of the female vampire as a role model. This involves a comparative analysis of how the character has (or has not) evolved throughout 19th Century and modern literature.

The areas of identity which are examined relate to how the female vampire embodies and/or subverts traditional and/or contemporary models of femininity (both within the Goth subculture and society as a whole); the political significance of the female vampire's symbolism with regards to historical and contemporary women's issues; the

²⁵ By participants and academics.

female vampire's relationship with her male counterpart – both the view of which gender dominates the literature and the female vampire's autonomous or submissive roles; and if participants consider the female vampire's characterisation to have progressed between the 19th and 21st Centuries.

The subsequent conclusion will reflect upon participants' awareness of their own identity and if, indeed, it is inspired/influenced by the literary female vampire. By undertaking this study – alongside writing my novel – I aim to enhance my understanding of the character, and thus be part of the development of the vampire genre.

Chapter One: Gothic Audiences and the Female Vampire

This chapter examines the history of vampire literature with regards to the perception of either the male or female vampire dominating 19th Century Gothic texts, and investigates if/how this perception impacts contemporary female Goths' engagement with the texts. According to Claire Knowles, early "Gothic fiction emerges as a useful vehicle through which to trace some of the connections between late eighteenth²⁶- and early twenty-first-century configurations of female empowerment" (Knowles, 2007, p.141). This, too, reflects Heather Braun, who positions the femme fatale symbolising the dangerous result of transgressive femininity (early 19th Century); the social concern of women demanding and wielding autonomous power outside the domestic spheres (as depicted by the New Woman of *fin de siècle* art and literature); and the emergence of literary vampiric women personifying empowerment and sexual freedom whilst "...they embody the Romantic ideals of the submissive Gothic heroine" (Braun, 2012, p.95). With regards to Knowles and Braun's analyses (which, in turn, informed the interview questions surrounding the participants' enjoyment and favouritism of certain vampire texts), this study explores the popularity of female vampire inclusive 19th Century texts (*Dracula*, *Carmilla*, *Christabel*, and *La Morte Amoureuse*) and contemporary vampire literature. Additionally, data analysis was examined to ascertain if perceptions of male-centric dominance within vampire literature exist within participants' readings of the female vampire, particularly how the female vampire's representation is often viewed as being subordinate to the male:

"... in *Dracula*, the wives, though they seduce others, they are always under the leadership and guidance of *Dracula* himself. He treats them like children almost... A female vampire must always keep moving. She never seems to keep a mate. And if she does, the male vampire is always the leader. Though, the outside portrayal of beauty and finesse, it still shows always the female as lacking in anything permanent" (Participant A, 2016).

To contextualise the discourses of gender inequalities within vampire literature, it is necessary to outline the history of the genre to examine the participants' perceptions of the underrepresentation of female vampire narratives.

²⁶ Although my study focuses on 19th Century literature, Knowles's analysis is relevant, as it demonstrates how contemporary audiences can relate to literature written in previous centuries. Despite Knowles's and my own research subject being different by 100 years of literature, my results suggest that Knowles's quote is applicable to other time eras.

With regards to vampire literature, the subject matter of the folklore creature is both universal and enduring. Indeed, although not a vampire writer himself, Horace Walpole commented that George II “though not apt to believe more than his neighbours, had no doubt of the existence of vampires and their banquets on the dead” (Walpole, as quoted in Twitchell, 1997, p.32). Etymologically, the first use of the word “vampire” in English linguistics occurred in the late 1600s²⁷, but the term was notably absent within traditional folklore (Sherman, 2014, p.10). This linguistic reference is problematic when taking into account scholarly research recognising the existence of Anglo-Saxon poem *The Vampyre of the Fens*, created as early as the 11th Century (Frost, 1989, p.36) and discussed within an 1855 publication of *Household Words* (Senf, 1999, p.199). However, the existence of the poem is contested by Eugenio Olivares Merino (2005), who believes that scholarly citation of the text is based on a confusion related to the subject of the *Household Words* article and is subsequently a misinterpretation of the epic poem *Beowulf*. Furthermore, the lack of the word “vampire” does not detract from occurrences of similar figures featuring within literature. For example, Brian J. Frost, discussing Sir Thomas Malory’s 15th Century work *Le Morte D’Arthur*, acknowledges the existence of a female vampiric character who survives on bowlfuls of virgin blood (Frost, 1989, p.36):

“... their lady was sick, and had lain many years, and she might not be whole but if she had a dish of silver full of blood of a clean maid and a king's daughter...”
(Malory, n.d.).

In absence of the term “vampire”, cultures attached various terminologies to mythological creatures which shared the same characteristics as those now associated with the vampire, such as:

- The Malaysian *Langsuyar* – a woman who transformed into a demon after delivering a stillborn baby, and feasted upon other children (Melton, 2011, pp.413-414).
- The Romanian *Strigoi* (female: *Strigoica*), *Moroii*, *Șișcoi*, and *Oper* – variants of dead and alive vampires (reanimated corpses and people born as

²⁷ The exact date is contested by scholars such as Eugenio Olivares Merino, who states that the term was first used in 1734 (according to the Oxford English Dictionary). See: Merino, E.O. 2005. The Old English Poem “A Vampyre of the Fens”: A Bibliographical Ghost. *Miscelánea: A Journal of English and American Studies*. [Online]. 32, p.89.

vampires, respectively) whose origins and characteristics vary between regions (Murgoci, 1998).

- The Irish *Dearg-Due* – a bloodthirsty young woman who, each night, escapes from her grave to feast upon locals, in search of revenge against her tyrannical husband and father (Sherman, 2014).

From its origins in folklore, the vampire has since transformed into a cultural and artistic commodity, regenerating to reflect the zeitgeist in which it resides:

“...all vampires seem alike, but they are wonderful in their versatility. Some come to life in moonlight, others are killed by the sun; some pierce with their eyes, others with fangs; some are reactionary, others are rebels; but all are disturbingly close to the mortals they prey on... Vampires are neither inhuman nor nonhuman nor all-too-human; they are simply more alive than they should be” (Auerbach, 1995, pp.5-6).

Nina Auerbach’s quote is particularly relevant to the female vampire, who, according to Frost, embodies the ‘Fatal Woman’ presented within Victorian literature as lustful, charming and beautiful, which conceals her evil and sadistic nature (Frost, 1989, p.44) – more details of which will be discussed, as relevant, throughout this study. Vampire literature predates the Gothic literary genre by almost two decades with the first widely-accepted published poem to contain a vampire, *Der Vampir* by Heinrich August Ossenfelder (1748) featuring in *Der Naturforscher* (The Natural Scientist) in Germany. As Heide Crawford states “The vampire phenomenon in central Europe was investigated by Western scientists, who were thus able to develop theories about decomposition... Hence, the vampire phenomenon as it was investigated in the eighteenth century was initially a scientific phenomenon,” (Crawford, 2016, p.25). However, as stated by Lieselotte E. Kurth-Voigt, the subject of the dead returning to earth as spirits and vampires inspired writers and academics as early as 1725, when the newspaper *Wienerisches Diarium* reported the supposed resurrection of Peter Plogojovitz after his death and burial (Kurth-Voigt, 1990, p.247).

Across Europe, the subject of the vampire dominated the third decade of the 18th Century, with publications, academic texts and books dedicated to the subject, attracting the attention of prolific figures of the time, Rousseau and Voltaire, who stated “Nothing was spoken of but vampires, from 1730 to 1735” (Ruickbie, 2013, p.75). Going into the

Gothic period, beginning in 1764, the literary vampire figure had yet to reach the height of its popularity, as it would be almost 24 years before *The Bride of Corinth* by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1797) was published in German literary journal *Die Horen* – the first poem to feature a female vampire (Crawford, 2016, p.21). Scholars such as J Gordon Melton, believe that the first examples of vampire literature predominantly featured a female vampire (Melton, 2011, p.817), however, according to Leo Braudy, the preference changed to male vampires as of the 19th Century (Braudy, 2016, p.225)²⁸. The purpose of this study is not to prove or disprove Melton or Braudy's theories, however, in order to analyse participants' perceptions of male-dominated vampire literature – and how this impacts their engagement with the text – it is important to demonstrate the problematic methodology when attempting to ascertain one gender's dominance over another:

- In order to establish if the male or female vampire dominated the literature, it would be necessary to analyse all pieces of vampire literature from every country and culture.
- Focusing on published vampire literature, negates the value of oral folklore and any works which did not receive publication, or have been lost.
- The analysis of the vampire character depends on how the scholar defines the mythological figure (i.e. is the analysis limited to blood-sucking, psychic vampirism, or a mixture of both).

For these reasons, the following literary history of the vampire character is not exclusive or exhaustive, but provides an overview of the literature throughout the 19th Century, and contains examples of both male and female vampires.²⁹

In the first two decades of the 19th Century, the male vampire featured in European literature, in such poems and novels as *The Vampyre* by John Stagg (1810); *The Giaour* by Lord Byron (1813); and *The Vampyre* by John William Polidori (1819). During the Age of Enlightenment and Romantic eras of the 18th and 19th Centuries, the figure of the female vampire featured in literature such as *Wake Not the Dead* by Johann Ludwig Tieck (1800); *Thalaba the Destroyer* by Robert Southey (1801) – the first vampire featured in English literature (Twitchell, 1997, p.36); *Christabel* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1816); and *La*

²⁸ Interestingly, Braudy attributes many of the male vampire's characteristics as already existing in the female counterpart – blood-drinking, cold, and pale.

²⁹ Literary scholars such as Joshi (2011), Senf (1988), and Twitchell (1997), also acknowledge the impact that poems *Lenore* by Gottfried August Bürger (1773), *Lamia* (1820) and *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* (1819) by John Keats had on inspiring vampire literature. However, as the revenants within the poems can be categorised as either ghosts or demons, and not necessarily vampires, they're not included within the list.

Morte Amoureuse by Théophile Gautier (1836). Towards the middle of the century, as the Victorian era in Britain entered its second decade, the vampire figure's popularity in literature increased, and the male vampire featured in publications such as *Varney the Vampire* by James Malcolm Rymer and Thomas Peckett Prest (1847).

Of course, throughout the mid to latter stages of the 19th Century, there arose exceptions to the supposed male-centric vampire dominance – e.g. in France, Charles Baudelaire wrote *Metamorphoses of the Vampire* (1857). Towards the latter end of the century³⁰, Scottish writer Hume Nesbit wrote *The Vampire Maid* (1900); and in the United States of America, Julian Hawthorne wrote *The Grave of Ethelind Fionguala* (otherwise known as *Ken's Mystery*, 1887).

Most notably, during the 19th Century, two of the most well-known female-inclusive Gothic novels, *Carmilla* (1872) and *Dracula* (1897)³¹, were written by Irish authors Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu and Bram Stoker, respectively.

In order to ascertain both the popularity of specific vampire texts and literary awareness regarding female vampire characters, during the interview process, participants in both groups were asked to choose their favourite 19th Century/classic³² Gothic literature featuring a female vampire. The options provided included:

- *Dracula* by Bram Stoker.
- *Carmilla* by Sheridan Le Fanu.
- *Christabel* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge.
- *La Morte Amoureuse* by Théophile Gautier.
- *La Vampire (The Vampire Countess)* by Paul Féval.
- I prefer male vampire characters.
- I only read modern vampire literature.
- Other.

To establish participants' awareness of 19th Century texts, not all female vampire-inclusive texts were featured on the list. If participants wished to state a preference for a text not already featured, they could specify in the "Other" category. Interestingly, no

³⁰ During this period, Mary E. Braddon wrote *Good Lady Ducayne* (1896), which can be interpreted as a vampire text. Although Lady Ducayne does not directly feed from her victim, there is ambiguity as to whether or not her consumption of blood and the supposed mystery surrounding her age is a result of a medical experiment gone awry, or supernatural vampirism.

³¹ As *Dracula* features both male and female vampires, it can be included in both lists.

³² Note: The term "classic literature" was replaced with "19th Century literature" for conducting the second group of participants, as the original participants asked for clarification as to the definition of "classic".

participant favoured Féval's *La Vampire*³³, nor any other 19th Century text. Instead, the 4.92% who chose "Other" stated a fondness for contemporary texts and authors – in particular, the Anne Rice series and Christine Fehan – reasons, however, for the preference did not relate to the female vampire characters³⁴. Additionally, Participant 56 expressed enjoying *Dracula* and modern vampire literature, but did not specify if/how this related to the female vampire.

In answer to the question, 8.2% of second group participants selected "I only read modern vampire literature" – placing it in fourth position – with one participant also mentioning Anne Rice's *The Vampire Chronicles*.

Conversely, 5 of the 7 original participants also favoured contemporary texts (Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* and *Queen of the Damned*), with the majority of reasons relating to the female characters, as explained:

"[Claudia] represents so much in the book. She is 'rescued' by Lestat...but, though she is just a child when she is turned, turns out to be much more mature and worldly th[a]n the two grown men of Louis and Lestat, who are childish till the end" (Participant A, 2016).

"They had a lot of vampires of color which fascinated me as a woman of color, and particularly the evil Egyptian vampire, Akasha, the title character... known as the Queen of the Damned. She was a very well developed character, very powerful, very evil, and very unrelenting. I also loved the twins, Mekare and Maharet, especially Maharet, who coped with the loneliness of immortality by maintaining a relationship with the children of her lineage over the years" (Participant F, 2017).

What the above quotes suggest is that female Goth readers enjoy female literary vampires who exhibit empowering characteristics – particularly within contemporary texts. However, what will be demonstrated in subsequent chapters is that the character – in 19th Century and contemporary literature – is not universally represented or interpreted (by readers or academics) as empowered or powerful. This is particularly relevant, as it

³³ Although Féval's work features a vampire who steals victims' scalps, instead of relying on blood-drinking, I included the novel on the list to discover if participants would be attracted to other forms of vampirism. As no participants chose this option, there can be no conclusive evidence as to the impact of Féval's text on readers' engagement with the literature.

³⁴ The participants stated that their preference for Fehan and Rice's books were influenced by the romantic storylines and humanised vampires.

positions the evolution of the female vampire as requiring to respond to readers' desires of engagement with autonomous, empowered female literary characters.

Whilst analysing the data from the second group, a recurring trend occurred across all categories which suggests that participants were more likely to discuss and engage with literary stylistics instead of commenting on female vampire characters. In response to favouring modern vampire literature, 42.86% of reasons related to an unattraction towards 19th Century literary styles. For example, Participant 61 acknowledged loving 19th Century aesthetics, but is "not a fan" of the writing style, and Participant 11 revealed the narrative styles of "older Gothic literature" makes enjoyment of the text more difficult. The remaining participants disclosed not owning a broad range of "classic literature", or chose not to answer.

The overwhelming response from 45.90% of the second group participants favoured *Dracula* by Bram Stoker, primarily by the 36-45 and 46-55 age brackets. Furthermore, 42.80% of 18-25 year olds also chose Stoker's novel, revealing it to be the most popular choice within the age category. Conversely, with regards to those who took part in the initial focus group, only one participant stated *Dracula* as being her favourite Gothic vampire novel. However, as a side note, one participant (despite voting for Anne Rice's *The Queen of the Damned*) expressed a favouritism towards Lucy Westenra as a character/vampire, stating:

"... Lucy Westenra was my favourite female vampire. I liked her character in life. She was a vivacious woman who although said to be chaste, as women were supposed to be in her time, was beautiful, charming, and attractive to many suitors" (Participant F, 2017).

Receiving 18.03% of participants' responses, Le Fanu's *Carmilla* came third in popularity, most notably with the 26-35 and 36-45 age ranges. Nevertheless, *Dracula* proved more popular within the 26-35 bracket, however, further examination revealed 68.75% of participants in this age group voted for alternative options. This includes 25% of participants (one more than *Dracula* voters) who opted to favour male vampire characters, placing the category in second place overall, with 19.67%. In joint penultimate place, with 1.64%, Coleridge's *Christabel* and Gautier's *La Morte Amoureuse* received one vote apiece from the 18-25 and 26-35 age brackets, respectively.

Taking into account the seven participants from the initial focus group, the most popular canon of Gothic vampire literature proved to be Anne Rice's *The Vampire*

Chronicles series, with *Interview with the Vampire* (1976) and *The Queen of the Damned* (1988) receiving two and three votes respectively. The popularity of modern texts within this group coincides with the 8.20% of second group participants, who stated they only read modern vampire literature – with Anne Rice specifically being mentioned by Participant 11 regarding a preference for the male characters, except for Akasha (*The Queen of the Damned*) and Claudia (*Interview with the Vampire*). The subject of preference towards male vampires reflects the 19.67% of second group participants who expressed the same opinion. When analysing the reasons behind the preference, 25% of responses identified an underrepresentation of female vampires within Gothic literature:

“There is simply more of them to choose from, I haven't read many books with female vampires, and if they are in it they aren't super prominent” (Participant 26, 2017).

It should be noted that the question regarding favourite literature specifically queried 19th Century vampire literature, however, participants also chose to reference contemporary literature within their answers. When commenting on contemporary vampire literature, participants' responses included stating not reading any female vampire-inclusive literature; female vampires are not prominent characters within the literature; there are more male vampire-centred books to choose from, and – despite enjoying female vampires – the literature that includes them is not as easy to find. This opinion is also echoed within the original set of interviews, as evident in the quote below:

“There aren't really many with female lead characters that I have read – It seems to be a world for men” (Participant B, 2016).

“... a classic and favourite would be “Interview [With] the Vampire” however it is more focused on the male vampire characters. To be honest I'd have trouble coming up with a story where the female vampire character is the lead character” (Participant G, 2017).

When analysing participant responses regarding favouring *Dracula* and *Carmilla*, the overwhelming trend did not state female-inclusive characters as their reason. While only two participants identified *Christabel* and *La Morte Amoureuse* as their favoured text, respectively, no reason was given for *Christabel* but, when expanding on the *La Morte*

Amoureuse choice, the participant identified the female vampire as the attraction to the text:

“... the story shows how a dead vampire woman can seduce a priest and show how all humans need to be loved and seduced, because this is our natural instinct”
(Participant C, 2016).

With regards to *Dracula*, 18.18% of participants stated the “classic” status of the literature appealed to them most, whereas 36.36% of explanations referenced literary style. For example, across the 10 participant answers, categories listed included: liking the diary and letters format (Participant 48), atmospheric and absorbing (Participant 6), inclusion of love story (Participants 7 and 15), and sense of adventure (Participant 21). This trend corresponds to the 50% of responses from eight participants identified *Carmilla*’s literary aspects as their favourite – three of whom referenced female characters – e.g. one of the first stories with a female vampire (Participant 4) and inclusion of LGBT characters and lesbian subtext within a 19th Century novel (Participants 27 and 32). The remaining reasons included character development stronger than in *Dracula* (Participant 25), not a stereotypical vampire story (Participant 31), and more involved than modern stories (Participant 29). Thus the majority of literary reasons did not express any connection to the female vampire. Furthermore, 27.27% of responses from ten participants expressed personal connections to *Dracula*, e.g. first vampire novel the participant read (Participant 10), only 19th Century vampire literature participant has read (Participants 18, 36 and 45), and one of the best novels the participant has read (Participant 23).

Concurrently, 27.27% of explanations regarding *Carmilla* reflected similar sentiments – again, only two participants referenced the female vampire – e.g. features a lesbian character, and the participant is gay (Participant 25) and the participant liked the character of Carmilla (Participant 31). However, the other four participants did not reference female characters at all, stating instead, the first vampire novel the participant had read (Participants 9 and 19), interesting to read (Participant 27) and didn’t read others (Participant 17).

In connection to female vampires in *Dracula*, only two participants directly attributed the presence of female vampires as an attractive aspect of the novel – one mentioning three vampire women and the other referencing the women’s subservient natures:

“...the woman can't help but let the Count do what he wants” (Participant 50, 2017).

Although my analysis does not link the female vampire, or indeed the literature, as influencing/inspiring the participant's identity (despite a participant identifying with the sexuality of the lesbian character Carmilla, it cannot be determined at this stage how much of an impact – if any – the character and literature have on the participant's identity), the responses do offer an element of insight into how the female vampire is perceived. For example, despite the underwhelming response towards the female characters, data analysis revealed incidents relating to perceptions of political and gender issues highlighted by the symbolism of the female vampire. For example:

“[*Dracula*] describes so much about so many things prevalent at the time of Stoker, including the mistrust of Europeans, psychiatry (very popular at the time) and the sufferage [sic] movement (I did wonder if Mina was in fact a sufferagette [sic], due to her 'modern' outlook)” (Participant 14, 2017).

“... [*Dracula*] perfectly demonstrates the era-specific (or not!) male hysteria around rampant female sexuality” (Participant 24, 2017).

“Sheridan Le Fanu wasn't afraid to introduce homoerotic themes and the exploration of sexual identity, which during Queen Victoria's reign would have put many authors in danger of incarceration... “Carmilla” challenged the society it took place, its values and attitudes towards women, our sexuality, and dragged up the dark areas of civilisation” (Participant 46, 2017).

The above quotes pertaining to participants' perceptions of gender and social issues connect to Gothic studies' analysis of the female experience as depicted through literary characters. For example, the underlying commentary of repressed and/or homoerotic female sexuality symbolised through *Carmilla*; the dichotomy of female-gendered sexual transgressions represented by Lucy Westenra; and Mina Harker posing as a social commentary of the New Woman³⁵. Throughout my study, it became evident that the female Goths interviewed also recognised the same themes occurring within the literature. As will be demonstrated in subsequent chapters, participants' awareness of the female

³⁵ See: Signorotti, 1996; Davis, 2004; Prescott and Giorgio, 2005; Brock, 2009; Stockstill, 2013.

vampire's social subtext juxtaposes subcultural audience engagement with the literary character and that of Gothic research of gender. For example, with regards to early Gothic portrayals of female characters, DeLamotte states:

“Their disorder and illogic was the logic of the social order as women experienced it. Women in these nocturnal spaces is really woman in her everyday relations, ‘surrounded by [the] vice and violence’ of the social and political institutions that dominate her life” (DeLamotte, E. 1990, p.151).

By placing gender politics as the core narrative, the Gothic not only represents the readers' experiences, but also provides space for male and female writers to engage in different gender-centric subject matters. Feminist critics emerging since the 1970s, such as Ellen Moers, legitimised the vital gender components separating Male Gothic and Female Gothic (Williams, 1995, p.100). Both categories examined the hidden and often unspoken engendered expectations prevalent within society during production of the literature. For example, Male Gothic was seen to symbolically express the gender binary of masculinity as represented as effeminate (or homoerotic), as the opposition or “other” to heterosexuality (Brinks, 2003, p.18). Whereas Female Gothic is, as succinctly defined by Diane Hoeveler:

“...a psychological fiction exploring the fears and guilt attendant on sexual maturation, but these works can more accurately be read as elided representations of the political, socioeconomic, and historical complexities of women's lives under a newly codified bourgeois ideology” (Hoeveler, 2010, p.5).

Ellen Moers, who coined the term “Female Gothic”, described it simply as “easily defined...the work that women have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic” (Moers, as quoted in Wallace and Smith, 2009, p.1). In a critique of Moers's work, Lauren Fitzgerald acknowledges the problematic assumption on the part of Moers of identifying Female Gothic as property of only female writers – thus assigning a specific gender to said texts (Fitzgerald, 2004, p.11). Fitzgerald's argument has a clear impact upon my study, as – despite none of their favourite pieces of 19th Century literature being written by women – participants identified occurrences linking the female vampire representing women's political issues in both 19th Century and contemporary

society³⁶. For this reason, it is perhaps more appropriate to examine how gender and performativity are represented by the female vampire as an artistic creation symbolising cultural undercurrents, instead of relying solely upon what distinguishes between the Male and Female Gothic as an overarching genre. However, as far as constructing female vampires in literature, Melissa Edmundson Makala acknowledges that male and female Gothic writers do offer opposing identities when creating their female characters. For instance, male writers predominantly promote the virtuous female lover who continues to be faithful after death, or conversely, the woman is evil in both life and the afterlife. In contrast, women writers, whose characters exude submissiveness, become powerful, autonomous, and vengeful in death to seek justice from those who victimised them (Makala, 2013, n.p.)³⁷. What remains relevant to my study is how participants interpret texts whereby the character's gender is more important than the writer's³⁸; if their interpretations correspond to scholarly theories regarding how said characters are represented; and if, at all, this impacts on participants' identities.

³⁶ Details of which follow in subsequent chapters.

³⁷ These representations are not limited to the vampire, but to revenant creatures in general.

³⁸ As will become evident in chapter two, gender classification is complex, however it cannot be determined how the writers self-identified. Also, it should be acknowledged that, as a researcher, I aim to be, as much as possible, neutral when delivering research findings, and so there will be no inferences to myself as a self-identified female writer. It is hoped that the reading of my novel will be sufficient enough to demonstrate how the research has influenced my work.

Chapter Two: The Complexity of the (Vampire) Female

With regards to interpreting the symbolism of literary female vampires, literary scholar Deborah Wynne acknowledges the lack of knowledge about how 19th Century readers interpreted female literary characters (Wynne, 2012, p.22). In contrast, my study, with the juxtaposition of 21st Century readers' (the participants) and an analysis of 19th Century characters, provides insight into contemporary cultural interpretations – and therefore the readers' relationship with the text. Carol Senf recognises the rising trend of 19th Century writers depicting negative female traits³⁹ (through literature and that of the vampire) as reactive to the Feminist movement demanding rights for women (Signorotti, 1996, n.p.)⁴⁰. With regards to how novels as a whole represent gender, Cora Kaplan states:

“The rule-governed world of gender in the novel is, in part, an attempt to keep in place conventions that are already under strain, but its strictures, and the unhappiness they cause, also suggest, if only obliquely, that they are in need of revision” (Kaplan, 2012, p.511).

Kaplan's quote is relevant to 19th Century vampire literature, which, according to Heather Braun, blended the Gothic supernatural with the popularity of sensationalist novels to examine the elusive and suppressed nature of female seduction and ominous sexuality (Braun, 2012, p.96). However, the link between the Gothic and female sexuality was anything but new, as evidenced by accusations that the Gothic novel corrupted the moral and sexual decorum of its female readers – for example, an issue of *Scots Magazine* published in 1797 villainised the Gothic genre by suggesting women's gentle sensibilities could be diminished under encouragement from said novels (Stevens, as cited in Snodgrass, 2014, p.156). Despite this, contemporary critics such as McDayter acknowledge:

“Terror opens the consciousness to a new and deeply pleasurable space for gender and identity construction. Far from the critical claim that the female reader only identifies with the oppressed woman in the novel, the attraction of this type of

³⁹ For example, female emancipation and freedom of sexual expression.

⁴⁰ As demonstrated by the political movements undertaken by the Women's Co-operative Guild and Women's Labour League, who campaigned for women's suffrage and reforms regarding suppositions of women's domestic roles (Richardson, 2004, p.180).

novel is precisely the pleasurable space it allows for *multiple* identifications within the text” (McDayter, G. 1995, p.62).

These multiple identifications correlate to the theory proposed by Claire Kahane (2004) that the modern Gothic examines and subverts themes of identity – particularly gender identity – and challenges cultural structures to create new expressions of the self. With this in mind, the following chapter expands on the research from Chapter One by looking beyond participants’ awareness of vampire literature to that of their own self and societal awareness (particularly how they self-identify and their experiences within the Goth subculture). This chapter explores the structure and configurations of identity, i.e. gender identity and its construction, within the Goth subculture – specifically how the subjectivity of identity is interpreted by female Goths and its relation (if any) to the female vampire.

During the study, 61 participants in the second group were asked whether or not the female vampire was particularly favoured by female Goths. Overall, the majority (37.70%) expressed “Yes”, however, this was complicated when the majority of answers (split between the other four categories) – “No” (24.59%), “Maybe” (16.39%), “I Don’t Know” (6.56%), and “Did Not Reply” (14.76%) – outweighed the most popular vote. This suggests a more complex relationship between the female vampire and the identity of female Goths – and if indeed there is any connection between the two, not only as an interaction between reader and literature, but also the self-identification and/or performance of genders, social roles, and self-awareness. This, too, corresponds to research conducted by Milly Williamson (2005)⁴¹, which suggested that fans’ responses to texts are complex and conflicting, as they are dependent upon not only the participants’ “cultural capital” – i.e. their familiarity with the differing aspects of the genre – but also their individual experiences.

With regards to gender self-identification, out of the 61 participants in the second group, 68.85% professed to identify as feminine⁴², 1.64% identified as masculine, 4.92% identified as androgynous, 11.48% identified as other, and 13.11% did not respond. To collate data, participants were asked to select from 1 of the 4 aforementioned options and,

⁴¹ Although this study was not influenced by Williamson’s work, it should be noted that the book in question includes a study of female vampire fans and their engagement with vampire literature and film/TV. Despite Williamson’s research not primarily focusing on the Goth subculture and the female vampire, her studies coincide with mine to demonstrate a growing interest in the subject matter.

⁴² Despite all participants identifying as female, the purpose behind the investigation into the terms “feminine”, “masculine”, “androgynous” and “other” was to examine how social definitions of said categories reflect or differ from the social constructs of being female.

were given the opportunity to explain their reasoning in the comment box. Thus, the explanations herein are comprised of participants' own terms and statements. Analysis of these identities highlighted recurring themes within the categories as thus:

Out of the 42 participants⁴³ who identified as feminine:

- 22 did not expand upon their answer;
- 6 considered their biological status to determine their femininity;
- 5 acknowledged to possess – according to and referenced by the participants – masculine traits such as aggression, anger, and partaking in masculine hobbies, e.g. computer games;
- 4 regarded their identity ranging from feminine to “tomboy” (and yet considered themselves primarily feminine);
- 4 reported displaying aspects of androgyny;
- 5 regarded their aesthetics (clothing, hair, and make-up) signifying femininity;
- One expressed identifying as feminine, however considered herself to have a masculine body image;
- One participant pertained to have a feminine body image;
- One classed herself as feminine, but gender fluid.

Conversely, the participant who identified as having a masculine identity countered the claim by challenging societal gender definitions:

“I am more "masculine" if you go by the pre-2010's conventional gender concepts, however, I do not try to dress particularly masculine or feminine. I am me”
(Participant 31, 2017).

With reference to the Goth subculture, identity is formulated, according to Spooner, through an interweaving system based upon consumption of not only standard subcultural materials such as music and fashion, but also literature whereby the consumer can re-enact their desired identity through clothing, hairstyles, jewellery, etc. (Spooner, 2004, p.165). Furthermore, Sharon Miklas and Stephen Arnold argue that by consuming/purchasing/adopting aesthetics associated with the Goth identity, subcultural

⁴³ The breakdown of numbers is greater than 42, as participants often gave more than one reason.

participants perform and project their ideal identities through various, socially-accepted images and interactions – which can include taking on the persona of fictional characters:

“...through literature, the reader is not only transported to another place, but he or she is also provided with a description of the experiences, context, and possibly even the thoughts of another – often an admired or ideal “other”” (Miklas and Arnold, 2010, pp.574-575).

Indeed, Maria Purves echoes the same claim by stating the expression within Gothic fiction and art functions not only as a replica of the female condition but also assists in constructing its definition by “darken[ing] and devalu[ing]” the engendered status quo of social expectations (Purves, 2014, p.1). However, throughout this study, the participants expressed mixed opinions when questioned if the imagery of female vampires within 19th Century Gothic literature inspired their image, identity or persona⁴⁴. One participant stated:

“I don’t associate myself as a Vampire or part of a Vampire cult. I see aspect[s] of Vampire integrated in the Gothic cultures, but I don’t think being a Goth hinges on the belief of Vampire or being Vampire” (Participant A, 2016).

Another participant agreed that while the figure of the female vampire *does* inform part of her identity, she acknowledged the Goth scene and culture also added its influences:

“We feel different from other people; we are more sensitive, imaginative and creative. We wear different clothes and have another philosophy and point of view of life” (Participant C, 2017).

Although the statements convey varied views, the dialogue referring to the iconography and representation of the female vampire proposes a significant level of social awareness related to gender juxtaposition. The general consensus throughout the interviews, consistent to findings in Chapter One, identified the male vampire as the dominant species and the female as underrepresented – especially in 19th Century Gothic

⁴⁴ For the purpose of the interviews, the terms “image”, “identity”, and “persona” were used interchangeably to allow participants the freedom to use their own definitions without being limited to strict terminologies. Although I recognise there is a difference in the three terms, e.g. performance versus characteristics, etc., I felt this practice was more beneficial for the research.

literature. This opinion arose most prominently when throughout her interview, Participant B made comparisons between 19th Century female vampires and those of modern day:

“The classic vampire I feel put women in a submissive category, which I don’t identify with as much, but the new vampires – they seem to want to share something with their females. Even as a female vampire they want to protect their human mates and turn them eventually but they seem to understand how precious life is – unlike classic vampires who prey on their victims” (Participant B, 2017).

Further to this, when asked about her thoughts on female vampires within classic Gothic literature, she stated:

“I’m not a very big fan, I am more drawn to the male vampires as I feel the characters are always a bit more fleshed out and powerful (with the exception of Akasha [Anne Rice’s *The Queen of the Damned* (1988)])” (Participant B, 2017).

In contrast, Participant C acknowledged the empowering aspects embodied within the symbolism of the classic female vampire:

“They not only represent languid, thin with rosy cheeks, dislocated eyes, fleshy lips and almost inaudible voice[d] creatures. They represent, as I said before, independent and rebel women. Capable to get what they want with their beauty and intelligence” (Participant C, 2017).

The absence of a universally-acknowledged equal female vampire figure is in conflict with a significant predisposition of, as stated by Goulding and Saren, “privileging of the feminine” within the Goth subculture (Goulding and Saren, 2009, p.44). Indeed, the female vampire’s gendered performance challenges the female role by juxtaposing it against that of the male. This is evident when considering Goulding and Saren’s suggestion of her symbolism directly subverting such traditions through non-binary gendered appropriation, which:

“Stems from the fact that sexuality is expressed through combining qualities of the masculine (penetrative teeth) and the feminine (enveloping lips)” (Goulding and Saren, 2009, p.29).

Furthermore, Tom Pollard attests that the vampire challenges binary gender definitions to a point where gender roles become redundant and a “pangendered” definition – whereby genders interconnect – defies the Victorian patriarchal heteronormative culture (Pollard, 2016, p.62). With regards to the differing identities between the male and female vampire, the metamorphosis from male or female gender specificity into reconstructed androgyny reflects the Goth subculture as suggested:

“I find it interesting that occasionally the two genders are so interchangeable. In a way, I think this why [sic] so many trans-gender and alternative people gravitate to the Goth scene, for it too has this fluid gender” (Participant A, 2016).

To oversimplify the status of gender with regards to femininity and androgyny would be overtly problematic when analysing vampire literature and the Goth subculture – as both contain a complex system whereby the “rules” of gender performance are questioned. For example, regarding the female vampire, Lorna Piatti-Farnell (2014) states if she wishes to step out of the domestic sphere and become a warrior – a world for men – she is met with derision and confusion:

“For female vampires to take on the masculine role, and perform what is seen as male activities, they must abandon socially and culturally prescribed constructions of the feminine and, as Margery Hourihan puts it, ‘behave exactly like the boys’” (Piatti-Farnell, 2014, p.89).

For instance, the epitome of virtue that is *Dracula*’s Mina Harker poses a problematic dichotomy whereby it is difficult to articulate her place within the feminine paradigm. As an example, Sally Ledger interprets Mina as the image of maternal instinct, who represents and is resigned to be the “ideal” Victorian woman (Ledger, as cited in Prescott and Giorgio, 2005, p.488). However, Mina’s image, when further examined, is far more complex than Ledger would assume. For example, Lisa Nystrom (2009) suggests that, although Mina displays contempt towards the emergence of the pro-feminist “New Woman”, she does symbolise certain aspects of women’s integration into employment and outside the domestic domain. In a social context, the “New Woman”, according to Marilyn Brock (2009), was derided in 19th Century media as being more interested in books and acquiring knowledge than performing her “natural function” as a mother. Mina, however,

actively displays both sides of the educated woman versus motherhood argument, as evident from the references to her as a maternal substitute, as demonstrated when she comforts Arthur Holmwood after Lucy's death (Bartlett and Bellows, 1997, p.308). Regarding Mina's intelligence, it is important to remember that she was the one to collate the letters, newspapers and journals to make sense of the novel's events to assist Van Helsing, Jonathan Harker, et al. in understanding their enemy, Dracula:

“After dinner I came with Dr. Seward to his study. He brought back the phonograph from my room, and I took my typewriter... In this matter dates are everything, and I think that if we get all our material ready, and have every item put in chronological order, we shall have done much...” (Stoker, 1897, Chapter XVII).

Taking into account Mina's own self-awareness of her intellectual abilities, it is necessary to note that in the subsequent chapter, the patriarchal Van Helsing rather patronisingly refers to her intellect being linked to masculinity:

“Ah, that wonderful Madam Mina! She has man's brain—a brain that a man should have were he much gifted—and a woman's heart” (Stoker, 1897, Chapter XVIII).

So, too, when Mina is alienated from the meetings hosted by Van Helsing as to how to defeat the vampire, the mere fact of her being a woman overrides her intellectual ability and places her in a role, solely dependent on male heroism (Hughes, 2009, p.65). Additionally, Jean Lorrain (1999) reminds readers of Mina's involvement in the hunting down and eventual demise of Dracula, whereby Mina is vital when tracking Dracula⁴⁵ and takes up arms, wielding a gun to protect her friends, family, and own future.

Consequently, the men unknowingly rely upon both Mina's maternal and intellectual aspects. Therefore, she becomes the warrior – with aspects of both the Victorian ideal of the feminine and masculine – that the male protagonists come to depend on.

Within the Goth subculture, Paul Hodkinson (2002) states the iconic style since the 1980s has predominantly emphasised femininity for males and females, e.g. wearing makeup, fishnet tights and long skirts, however, according to Joshua Gunn, androgynous

⁴⁵ It is important to note that during this sequence, Mina is in the midst of transitioning into a vampire, after being attacked by Dracula, and thus her strength lies in resisting her natural sire.

styles and behaviours are primarily limited to men (Gunn, 2007, p.53). This analysis is corroborated by Dunja Brill (2007), who states:

“...goth style and the rhetoric surrounding it do not really promote a ‘genderless’ aesthetic, where masculine and feminine elements are toned down to such an extent that they practically merge” (Brill, 2007, p.114).

This characterisation of gender fluidity is subjective, as, with regards to gender, it is important to acknowledge the complex interplay between societal definitions and self-awareness. For example, the 3 participants who identified as androgynous provided 5 reasons for doing so:

- Participant believed the balance of androgyny is aesthetically pleasing.
- Participant considered their mentality androgynous – perhaps sometimes masculine (despite looking feminine).
- Participant viewed their interests as both masculine and feminine.
- Participant judged their attire to be both masculine and feminine.
- Participant acknowledged they had neither a male nor female personality.

Going further, 7 participants classified their identity as “other”, which revealed further complex ideologies. Scholar Rolf-Peter Janz identifies the terminology “other” as indicative of difference between the self and the subject/person in question (Schott, 2014, pp.9-10). In terms of this study, the term “other” comprises of participants who did not self-identify as strictly masculine, feminine or androgynous. When attempting to articulate gender (albeit with regards to females), Judith Butler (2010) theorises that the subjectivity and categorisation – and indeed labelling – of women, no longer adheres to fixed definitions. This is particularly relevant when considering the following statements from participants (from the “other” category) who identify the problems of defining gender – and question if such a construct is relevant in contemporary society⁴⁶:

“I am. I do whatever comes naturally with little concern over whether it's categorized as feminine or masculine. By being a woman I've been indoctrinated

⁴⁶ For example, several participants in the “other” category identified problematic limitations when trying to classify gender. This was particularly evident as one participant self-identified as gender queer, and two other participants self-identified as having mixed identities.

with female socialization, but I also respect and draw from virtues associated [sic] with masculinity - like courage, strength, self-reliance, and protecting those you care for” (Participant 17, 2017).

Further to this, three participants attested to having no interest in gender categories/stereotypes:

“I’ve never really thought of myself as having to create an identity - I kind of make it up as I go along. I’m a woman but I wasn’t brought up in a way that defined things as being suitable/unsuitable for a girl; if I was interested, I did it/wore it etc. My look is more based on ‘will it make me feel good’ and ‘does this have any stains/weird smells?’” (Participant 48, 2017).

This sentiment is echoed by Participant 34, who stated that her identity is based on more than gender:

“An identity comes from the heart. The mind feels what you desires [sic], so this question can be answered any way. Feminine is not being male sex” (Participant 34, 2017).

When considering Participant 17’s labelling of strength as a masculine trait – and how this is appropriated to create their own identity – it would be all too easy to equate said characteristic with masculinity. However, as will become apparent in Chapter Three, strength is also interpreted (by participants) as a feminine trait, and so the gender divide becomes redefined, whereby the genders cannot be strictly defined as separate entities. This blurring of gender dynamics, combined with the aforementioned exploration of the androgynous qualities of the vampire, and the non-binary status of vampire gender, suggests a multifaceted renegotiation of gender definition. That is, if gender within society and vampire literature:

- Truly exists as a sociological, definable concept;
- Is completely non-existent;
- Or if masculinity, femininity, and androgyny amalgamate to create a fourth space, devoid of definition.

If indeed vampire literature challenges the traditional concept of gender structures, it is, in fact, reflecting the social (re)understanding of how gender is defined and practised – for example, within the Goth subculture. However, Brill argues the result of gender transgression within the Goth subculture ultimately fails to maintain a balance between neutral masculinity and femininity, thus women are excluded from participating in subverting gender identity through demonstrating a mixture of masculine and feminine forms (Brill, 2007, p.124). Furthermore, according to Micah Issitt, female Goths are “...strongly discouraged from adopting masculine or even average dress and are instead generally expected to dress in such a way as to enhance their femininity” (Issitt, 2011, p.37). Yet, when taking into account the statements from participants in the “androgynous” and “other” categories, the blending – and, indeed redefining – of gender is present within the Goth subculture. This includes, in accordance with participant statements, re-appropriating clothes, hobbies, mentality, and traditionally-gendered traits (e.g. strength = male), to remove limitations on what is classed as masculine and feminine. Despite a low number of participants identifying as androgynous or other, it would be remiss to completely deny the existence of said practices/mentalities within the Goth subculture, as the data demonstrates that the alternative views of female gender do exist, and are available to examine.

In order to further examine Brill and Issitt’s theories, participant data was analysed to investigate the perceptions and definitions of femininity within the contemporary Goth subculture. To do this, the second group of participants were asked a series of questions investigating how womanhood⁴⁷ is viewed and respected/disrespected within the subculture and if any aspect that mirrored that of the literary female vampire.

In answer to the subculture respecting or disrespecting womanhood, participants’ responses were split into the following categories: “Respects,” “Disrespects,” “Both,” “Neither,” and “Respondent skipped question”. In total, 63.93% of respondents answered the question, with the highest and lowest proponents concluding “Respects” (22 of 61 respondents), and “Neither” (4 of 61 respondents), respectively. Concerning the relation of these views to the female vampires, participant responses adhered to four categories: “Yes,” “No”, “Maybe”, and “Participant skipped question”. The sum total of participant responses was 52.45%, with “Yes” (20 of 61 respondents) and “Maybe” (4 of 61 respondents) proving to be the highest and lowest categories. When collating the two

⁴⁷ For the purpose of this research, the term “womanhood” is used to signify how women are perceived/portrayed. My use of this term is not defined by social categorisation of gender, i.e. femininity, and instead denotes women as a whole, regardless of biological or cultural labels.

questions as a whole, what transpired was a complex system of opinions which, when analysed and categorised, revealed an array of 14 possible variants of combined answers, for example “Disrespects/Yes”, “Respects/No”, and “Disrespects/No”.

Disregarding the respondents who skipped both questions (13 out of 61), the majority of participants reported to believe that the Goth subculture respects women, and that they link this to the female vampire. However, when analysing the data across both questions, the answers revealed the overwhelming majority of respondents (49.18%) held other views – and so their responses cannot be devalued. For example:

“... there are many who believe that the likes of Romantic/Medival [sic]/Victorian Goths are the true representation of Gothic identity... you [also] have the gothic women who are into kink, BDSM and enjoy revealing their bodies, expressing their sexuality that is shamed... The ability to self-express in the gothic culture is very similar to the... female vampires because [they] have been described to explore both the traditional and modern woman, but of which both forms challenged society around them” (Participant 46, Disrespects/Yes, 2017).

Furthermore, Participant 18 expressed confusion as to what constitutes as a definition of womanhood:

“No idea, I've never had a conversation with fellow Goths about aspects of Womanhood, I myself am a little fuzzy what exactly Womanhood entails” (Participant 18, Neither/Did not answer second question, 2017).

Additionally, the participants' perspectives lead to more complex issues surrounding how the literary female vampire not only reflects or transgresses her gender role, but also symbolises the contemporary perceptions relating to societal limitations placed upon Victorian women:

“... while I agree that the dress and walking sticks are a fun aesthetic, they do reflect the sensibilities and laws of the time... However, the female vampire rises above these. She would have to in order to survive. She'd be required to be cleverer, more cunning, resourceful... That's why I admire a woman vampire more than a male. It would've been so much more difficult for her to survive the ages, to protect herself financially when women were not allowed to have bank accounts in

their name, own their own businesses, own property (only BE property)”
(Participant 33, Did not answer first question/Maybe, 2017).

The majority of the 9 participants who identified the Goth subculture respecting women, and linking the aspects to the female vampire, attributed both facets to a sense of freedom and transgression of female societal roles. For example, the following responses demonstrate women’s rights to choose, especially with regards to sexual expression, fashion, and empowerment:

“The subculture definitely respects womens’ [sic] rights to dress as they like, very supportive of so many different fashion styles, from extremely prim Victorian to avant garde to very risqué. I guess female Vampires can be linked to that - not so much in how they dress, but how they approach life. They transcend traditional roles, they are free from societ[y]’s expectations” (Participant 61, 2017).

“My own experiences are of being empowered to be whoever I wanted to be, being amongst equals, not feeling as if I was being judged as adequate or not based purely on my tits! My own goth mates were all very respectful of women - Siouxsie Sioux was the Ice Queen ruling us and we all had a bit of her power. I think this links to the vampire” (Participant 48, 2014).

“In my mind the goth community is closely related to FREEDOM, so any goth woman can be/look like what she wants, and yes I can link this to Vampires (female or male) because they all want to enjoy their freedom and forget about human laws / good and evil” (Participant 7, 2017).

When considering female empowerment within the Goth subculture, research conducted by Joshua Gunn proposes that female Goths subvert mainstream representations of femininity as an empowering declaration against regressive positions, subjecting women to men’s desires (Gunn, 2007, p.52). However, this is complicated when addressing Amy Wilkins’s (2004) study into female Goths’ sexuality. Her analysis suggests that, although women within the subculture are encouraged to express their sexuality freely (within or outside heteronormative parameters, e.g. homosexuality, bisexuality, and polyamory), and to dress provocatively as a sign of liberation, the expectation of such performativity negates the option to choose *not* to engage in said behaviours. Conversely, Brill (2008)

reiterates the empowering result of Goth women, re-appropriating a hyper-feminised persona to displace mainstream ideals of womanhood:

“[Goth females] seem to take control of their own image precisely by projecting an excessive femininity and sexiness which invites the male gaze only to confound it and keep it at a distance” (Brill, 2008).

In literature, the ideal example of a female vampire redefining femininity as an empowered reclaiming of the feminine self is the eponymous Carmilla, who, as Ellen Stockstill (2013) states:

“...blurs the lines between mother and monster, lover and abuser, and she frightens her victims because she does not fit completely into nineteenth century patriarchal notions of femininity” (Stockstill, 2013, p.46).

Indeed, Amy Leal (2007) positions *Carmilla* as a matriarchal text, insofar as the writer Le Fanu utilises Carmilla and Laura’s – her victim and lover – sexualised relationship and shared Karnstein bloodline (as traced through the maternal line) to usurp the dependence of the patriarchal lineage to define the characters’ heritage and identity. As William Veeder suggests, *Carmilla* represents the repressed state of Victorian womanhood – whereby the battle between vampire-human and lesbian-heterosexual are congruent with what society demands the characters *should* desire against what they *actually* desire (Veeder, 2004, p.118). Carmilla’s sexuality, devoid of the ability to procreate, reflected Victorian fears of women finding fulfilment outside the traditional tropes of heteronormative relationships and motherhood (Hobson and Anyiwo, 2016, p.12). Additionally, as the quote below demonstrates the relationship between Carmilla and Laura is not restricted or defined by conventional heterosexual limitations:

“But to die as lovers may - to die together, so that they may live together” (Le Fanu, 1872, Chapter IV).

Le Fanu’s words are not the traditional “’til death do us part”, what Carmilla promises is not bound by the 19th Century husband and wife dynamic, whereby wedding vows cease whenever a spouse dies. Instead, she offers eternal life and love that defies not only heteronormativity, but death itself. Deborah Lutz (2012) posits that Carmilla’s

sexuality becomes “Gothicized” through monstrosity, metamorphosis, and dark obsessions – which pre-empts liberation through death. Furthermore, Gina Wisker (2012) interprets Le Fanu’s description of the animalistic and bewitching Carmilla as indicative of men’s misgivings of female sexuality, which, to contemporary readers are reinterpreted as feminist empowerment.

Subsequently, Carmilla’s empowerment is not only depicted through her transgression of heterosexuality and embracement of homosexuality, it is her refusal to rely upon patriarchal structures to define her existence.

In contrast to *Carmilla*’s symbolism of limited Victorian femininity, out of the 61 participants, 36.07% believed the Goth subculture respects womanhood, with the 26-35, followed closely by the 36-45 age brackets, most likely to hold this view. After collating the interview data, participants’ responses revealed the following themes:

- Women are free to be feminine, masculine or androgynous.
- Women are free to be what they want and look how they choose.
- Anyone can be who they want/Differences accepted.
- The Goth subculture offers equal treatment of women and men.
- The Goth subculture is lenient with gender roles for men and women.
- Goths are respectful towards women (No further explanation provided during interview).
- The Goth subculture is inclusive of older women.
- Feminine traits are respected (dresses, elegance, etc).
- The Goth subculture doesn’t disrespect any woman.
- Goths respect femininity in men.
- Most people are respected (regardless of gender), but there are exceptions.
- Misogyny less prevalent than in other communities.
- Gender non-conformity is accepted and encouraged.
- Goth warps femininity rather than masculinity.
- Respectful of all female characteristics/females.
- Females are empowered.
- Female community very close.

To contextualise the list, the highest number of participants’ responses classified as “The Goth subculture offers equal treatment of women and men.” However, as only four

responses fell into this category, with the others receiving one or two responses apiece (“Anyone can be who they want/Differences accepted” received three), the reasons proved to be wide-ranging, and answers did not provide a definitive pattern to suggest a universal subcultural dynamic.

In contrast, 11.48% of participants identified the Goth subculture as holding disrespectful views of womanhood – the second-highest classification after disregarding responses which did not answer the question. Interview responses for the “Disrespects” category recognised the following themes:

- “Cute” disrespected, “hardcore” and “traditional” females respected.
- Disrespects non-feminine women (i.e. not wearing lace and frills).
- Goth culture not as liberal as it thinks.
- Roles for women are limited (vampire or victim/Victorian, BDSM).
- Disrespects women’s sexuality.
- Feeds on male fantasies.
- Disrespects aging women.
- Demonstrative emotion not respected.

Evidently, their comments allude to the same recurring themes (female sexuality, fashion, and women’s societal roles) as the “Respects” category. However, as the answers reveal opposing thoughts, it suggests that the subject of sexuality is dependent on both cultural and individual attitudes. For example:

“I think with all its attempts at being edgy and innovative goth culture isn't as liberal as it thinks it is. Roles for women are pretty limited. You can be the vampire or you can be the victim, the smoky eyed vamp or the white clad gothic heroine, the punk or the Victorian princess. Pick one. I think a lot of goth girls relate to the vampire because she gives them power. It's only later you realise how limited that power really is” (Participant 25, 2017).

“I think they get a lot of flack [sic] for showing their emotions and [I] don't link that to being a vampire” (Participant 47, 2017).

Furthermore, to contradict earlier comments which suggested the Goth subculture enables women freedom and empowerment (particularly through sexuality), Participant 31 claims:

“I think the Goth subculture disrespects women's sexuality at times. We are lolitas, we are slinky snakes balanced on black platforms... I think none of these depictions are healthy gender norms for a subculture. The opposite are S&M she-devils who bear whips... I think females in the goth subculture feed on male fantasies way too much” (Participant 31, 2017).

Views on the female vampire reflecting Goth views on womanhood varied amongst the “Disrespects” category. For example, one participant revealed she does not link the two together (Participant 47, as mentioned above) – whereas “Yes” and “Maybe” received 2 points apiece.

In the “Yes” and “Maybe” categories, participants identified similar themes:

- The female vampire has the ability to challenge society’s roles;
- The female vampire represents a limitation to female power, despite efforts to transgress roles;
- Aspects of fashion can influence a small number of the subculture participants.

Taking both the responses from the “Respects” and “Disrespects” categories, one participant from each identified views within the subculture regarding female aging, and how this is linked to portrayals of the female vampire:

“Ancients are always portrayed negatively” (Participant 44, 2017).

Whereas Participant 24 explains that her positive experiences within her local Goth community suggest an inclusive environment for older women. She states this attitude is in contrast to other sectors of society whereby women over the age of 40 become “invisible”, unless undergoing cosmetic surgery to compete with the younger generation. She contends the aspiration of eternal youth connects with the characteristics of the female vampire, which is romanticised within the literature (Participant 24, 2017).

In this matter, Piatti-Farnell (2014) claims that the vampire's trope of eternal youth – or immortality – is in response to human fears of ageing and the inevitability of death. This anxiety of the ageing process relates to the Gothic heroine, as Gina Wisker (2016) contends that women's obsession and striving for the perfect desirable body is in opposition to representation of warped female bodies within Gothic texts. As determined by Wilkins, the Goth subculture comprises predominantly of young adults (Wilkins, 2004, p.334), however, further research,⁴⁸ e.g. Paul Hodkinson (2012), reveals that ageing women still participate in the community, albeit signifiers (body image, fashion choices, and priorities, i.e. work and family) associated to Goth aesthetics change and adapt as participants grow older.

The complex relationship between how the participants perceive opinions on womanhood within the Goth subculture cannot be underestimated, as is evident from the “Neither” and “Both” categories. The categories, when combined, formed 16.39% of the overall results – receiving 4 and 6 participants respectively. Again, the variants of answers connecting perceptions of womanhood to the characteristics of the female vampire proved to be diverse. Only one participant from the “Both” category identified specific elements of the female vampire to the selective view of womanhood she believes is prevalent within the subculture:

“I believe that the goth subculture respects a women [sic] who is strong, women who are... feminine, selective, and who respect themselves. Those Women who are not respected are those who lack respect for themselves and sleep around”
(Participant 4, 2017).

However, 2 participants attested to the Goth subculture respecting femininity, rather than womanhood, but the relationship between said attitude and that of the female vampire proved to be divisive. For example, Participant 40 recognised how make-up and fashion can be a source of inspiration for female Goths, whereas Participant 9 dismissed any such connection. Furthermore, Participant 9 stated believing the Goth subculture disrespects women of colour, and women who do not “fit an idealised (objectified?) norm,” despite its history of valuing unconventional beauty (Participant 9, 2017). Indeed, academics such as Hodkinson (2002) and Wilkins (2004) recognise the Goth subculture as being predominantly comprised of white, middle-class members, and so the participant's

⁴⁸ See: Hodkinson, p. 2012. The Collective Ageing of a Goth Festival. In: Hodkinson, P. and Bennett, A. eds. *Ageing and Youth Cultures: Music, Style and Identity*. London: Berg, pp.123-133.

reference to the Goth subculture's attitude towards race – although not directly linked to vampire literature – poses interesting insight. In the introduction to *Race in the Vampire Narrative* (2015), U. Melissa Anyiwo states:

“...the vampire has remained ultimately the narrative of whiteness, and the most popular tales feature the outsider in the form of a white, cultured, heterosexual male” (Anyiwo, 2015, p.2).

The above quote concurs with the literature discussed throughout this study, as it is noteworthy that none of the 19th Century texts referenced by participants feature a female vampire who is not white. It would be inappropriate to surmise the reasons for this, as participant responses do not give direct indications. Scholarship has a history of linking symbolism of the 19th Century vampire to that of racial or xenophobic fears⁴⁹, or indeed, the disrespectful view associating black women with animalistic over-sexualisation⁵⁰. Subsequently, the only references to race – besides that of Participant 9 – included the aforementioned quote from Participant F, who discussed *Queen of the Damned*'s Akasha (see Chapter One). However, as will become evident in Chapter Four, participants' engagement with Akasha's characterisation suggests complex representations of the female vampire are ongoing throughout contemporary literature.

Of the four participants within the “Neither” category, 2 identified aspects of the Goth subculture's attitude towards females being related to that of the female vampire's characteristics. However, as their perception of the Goth subculture's view of womanhood adhered to non-gender-specific attitudes, their responses separated the category from those previously discussed. For example, Participant 42 claims the Goth subculture prioritises music and fashion over gender, and Participant 53 chose not to reference gender at all, and instead revealed a bricolage approach of using different interests to create an identity. However, despite the participants' lack of gender-orientated opinions, what arose demonstrated an understanding of socio-gender politics, as is evident from the following:

- Participant 41 recognised that ideologies dictate what an individual may or may not respect. With regards to the female vampire, the participant

⁴⁹ See: Malchow, H.L. 1996. *Gothic Images of Race in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

⁵⁰ See: Anatol, G.L. 2015. *The Things That Fly in the Night: Female Vampires in Literature of the Circum-Caribbean and African Diaspora*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

proposed that it is the aesthetics which are prevalent within the Goth community.

- Participant 18's aforementioned comment reiterates the complexity regarding not only the individual's definition of womanhood and/or femininity, but also the problematic articulation of defining it within a social context.

Indeed, for the purposes of this study the analysis of the data exhibits the intricate nature of establishing how womanhood/femininity/masculinity/androgyny/other is self-identified and projected/recognised within a subcultural setting. For example, recurring themes throughout the interviews demonstrate issues regarding female sexuality, freedom/empowerment, limitations and transgressions of perceived female societal roles, aging, race, and beauty/aesthetics. Whether or not these themes denote positive or negative opinions, the responses depict the prevalent criteria the participants attribute to womanhood.

Chapter Three: How to be a (Vampire) Woman

In order to examine how the female vampire's identity is interpreted by participants, it is necessary to determine how the performance and representation of femininity influences and/or inspires the identity of participants. This chapter aims to analyse how the construction of identity connects to the female vampire, and if indeed this is relevant to participants' idealised performance of femininity in contemporary society. As previously demonstrated, scholars attribute the performativity of the literary female vampire as symbolically indicative of her sexuality and transgression of patriarchal order⁵¹ – i.e. how she represents 19th Century fears of women's autonomy. To expand on academic theories, I use this chapter to examine how the participants articulate and define their own ideas of female performativity. Not only will this inform a social commentary on contemporary gender, but will also contribute to my understanding of how the literary female vampire needs to represent evolving definitions of womanhood. With regards to gender theory, Nick Mansfield states:

“We may be born with male or female bodies, the argument goes, but the way these are interpreted, and the roles and meanings ascribed to them, are purely a function of the politics and superstitions of each era” (Mansfield, 2000, p.73).

Therefore, to examine how gender politics affects the roles and meanings of participants' definitions of womanhood/femininity (in *this* era), the second group of participants were asked if they categorised any aspects of the female vampire as feminine. The overwhelming majority (49.18% of participants) answered “Yes”, followed by 18.03% answering “No”. The remaining participants' responses suggested a complicated interplay between gender definition and performance. For this reason, 16.39% of responses classified as “Yes and No” (4 participants), “Male and female vampires are the same” and “I don't know” (5 participants). The other 16.39% (10 participants) did not answer the question.

⁵¹ For other interpretations of the female vampire, see: The female vampire as symbolic of subversive motherhood – Almond, B. R. 2006. Monstrous infants and vampyric mothers in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*. [Online]. **88**(1), pp.219-235; addiction – Aikens, K. 2009. Battling addictions in *Dracula*. *Journal of Gothic Studies*. [Online]. **11**(2), pp.41-51; and politics – Ulin, J. 2015. Sheridan Le Fanu's vampires and Ireland's invited invasion. In: George, S. and Hughes, B. eds. *Open Graves, Open Minds: Representations of Vampires and the Undead from the Enlightenment to the Present Day*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp.39-55.

With regards to the “Yes” responses, the following list demonstrates which attributes the participants defined as feminine when discussing the female vampire:

- Beauty.
- Allure/Sexuality/Sensuality/Seductive/Femme Fatale.
- Strength.
- Danger.
- Commanding.
- Confidence.
- Having respect for oneself.
- Fashion/Make-up.
- Endurance.
- Charisma.
- Mysterious.
- Dark.
- Pale skin.
- Elegant.
- Powerful.
- Cold attitude/bitch.
- Lucy Westenra (*Dracula*) categorised as fun and carefree.
- Fearlessness.
- Independent/Liberated.
- Intelligent.
- Financially stable.
- Biological sex.
- Fragility/Delicate.
- Caring.
- Protective.
- Blood symbolism (menstruation).
- Dominant.⁵²

⁵² Two participants simply answered “Yes” with no further explanation.

References regarding sexuality proved the most popular trait, with 36.66% of participants including the characteristic within their answers. Secondly, 13.33% (4 participants) associated the female vampire's "Beauty" with femininity, followed closely by 10% (3 participants) attributing "Strength", "Fashion/make-up", "Powerful" and "Biological sex" respectively, as the definition.

Therefore, the majority of respondents connected outward/biological traits (i.e. attire, attractiveness and genitalia) as validating the female vampire's femininity. When discussing vampire literature, Joan Forry (2013) suggests the female vampire's appearance – including her sexuality, youth, and beauty – can be interpreted in two ways:

- Her appearance disguises her threatening nature – her femininity renders her unthreatening.
- Her femininity intensifies her as a threat – because her dangerous nature is underestimated.

Writing about Gothic literature, Susanne Becker (1999) states "The role of beauty is deeply connected to the myth of a 'natural' femininity which dominated Victorian thinking" (Becker, 1999, p.63). Her analysis of Female Gothic (Gothic texts written by women) challenging and subverting such ideals is in direct contrast to Stoker's imagery of Lucy Westenra during her vampiric transition:

"...she opened her eyes, which were now dull and hard at once, and said in a soft, voluptuous voice, such as I had never heard from her lips" (Stoker, 1897, Chapter XII).

And after:

"She was, if possible, more radiantly beautiful than ever; and I could not believe that she was dead. The lips were red, nay redder than before; and on the cheeks was a delicate bloom" (Stoker, 1897, Chapter XV).

"The sweetness was turned to adamant, heartless cruelty, and the purity to voluptuous wantonness" (Stoker, 1897, Chapter XVI).

The disparity between Lucy's radiant beauty to that of the threatening, cruel wantonness relates to what Barbara Creed describes as the "monstrous feminine" – that is, everything "terrifying" and "horrific" about women (Creed, as cited in Becker, 1999, p.56) and how Lucy's male suitors react to her. For example, Christopher Craft proposes that her ability to penetrate (fangs through skin) transgresses gender and social roles exclusive to that of male sexual performativity, which in turn terrifies Van Helsing et al (Craft, 1984, pp.119-120). However, as is evident from Arthur Holmwood's susceptibility to fiancée Lucy's seduction attempts, Lucy's vampiric beauty may be horrific and transgressive, but not altogether easy to resist.

Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik argue Gothic literature's endless challenging of gender definitions subverts and violates the rigid structures forced upon traditional identity forms. They pay particular attention to the staking of Lucy, whose phallogentric death acts as a saviour against her unrepressed promiscuity and transgression against the traditional image of motherhood. Only through dying can Lucy return "to the quiet passivity far more appropriate to Victorian ideas of femininity" (Horner and Zlosnik, 2014, p.63). As contextualised by Participant F, the opportunity for the female vampire to be associated with female liberation is not universal, and can, indeed, lead to punishment and thus undermine the embodiment of femininity:

"However, the original vampire myths, and the Victorian vampire stories based upon them, have a more derogatory view of womanhood. In *Dracula*, the price for women's liberation was death, and the women weren't that liberated, but they were slaves, concubines of the evil harem master *Dracula*." (Participant F, 2016)

This connects to the social awareness within the Goth subculture regarding subversive female roles, as is evident from Participant 28's response:

"I relate to Lucy a lot, because she's just a fun, carefree girl who kind of steps out of what is "proper" in her society, which I can relate to." (Participant 28, 2017)

As Participant 28 identifies with Lucy's transgression of socially-defined roles, it is inferred that such desires continue to be relevant within contemporary culture. This, in turn, poses questions about women's aspirations/ambitions in the context of their perceived social role and how this is exhibited through the female vampire. The following statements demonstrate that, like the previous question relating to feminine definitions, the

participants also prioritised independence, intelligence, and strength above exterior manifestations:

“Like I said, it's a femininity that is independent. The female vampire can fend for herself, and define for herself. I definitely aspire to be like that.” (Participant 32, 2017)

“My ideal female vampire is intelligent, at ease with diverse languages and environments, culturally informed, financially stable and knowledgeable... and charismatic. I learned another language, can usually fit in most places, I enjoy museums, theater, etc... I graduated college with honors. I'm currently in grad school. So, I do recognize some of those qualities but only because it takes those qualities to survive in a world dominated totally and completely by men.” (Participant 33, 2017)

“I tend to think of them in terms of endurance, which is often seen as a particularly feminine trait and I do see this in myself. I also see sensuality, rather than overt sexuality, which I think I identify less with.” (Participant 9, 2017)

“They show that you can be feminine and strong [and] liberated at the same time. I also see myself as feminine, strong and liberated.” (Participant 43, 2017)

These statements provide a direct insight into the acute gender and social awareness within the Goth subculture. As already demonstrated, issues – relating to both past and present eras – surrounding gender are understood and deconstructed by the participants to depict how said perceptions shape their autonomy and ability to communicate at a high level of self-awareness. Furthermore, the definition of male and female with regards to vampires reflects the non-binary and complexity of gender construction, as is evident by the participants who answered “No” and “Yes and No” in relation to attributing femininity to female vampires.

Reading further into the “Yes” participants’ responses, a new dynamic emerges connected to the number of traits associated with personality/social roles. These included (but are not limited to) “Confidence”, “Having respect for oneself”, “Charisma”, “Fearlessness”, “Independence”, “Intelligence”, “Fragility”, and “Dangerous” – and when combined, encompassed 73.33% of participants’ responses. This contrast reveals that the

least popular categories outweighed the prevailing theme of sexuality – thus suggesting a deeper investigation into the representation of femininity is required, as the least popular characteristics cannot be undervalued.

So, too, there occurred examples within the “Yes” category of characteristics associated with femininity which participants also referenced when discussing masculinity and male vampires. This suggests that gender roles and associations are subjective, evolving, existential, and dependent upon the participants’ individual perceptions. For example, strength, charm, sensuality/sexuality, and worldliness are interpreted as characteristic of male and female vampires, and indeed challenge gender parameters:

“First if all, femininity is a social construction!!! However, I would say that female vampires and I share general, non-gendered qualities such as strength, emotional maturity, fascination with the world, and persistence.” (Participant 24, 2017)

Participant 29 expressed a belief denying the existence of the archetypal female vampire, whereas Participant 46 suggested androgynous behaviour counteracts the feminised body. When discussing subverting gender roles, Participant 25 stated that the female vampire is ultimately punished through death for acting like a man (“aggressive” and “autonomous”) and conducting same-sex relationships:

“[The female vampire is] a bad girl who broke the gender rules and therefore she must die and her girlfriend is returned to her rightful owner/boyfriend and the world is made safe again... It took me a long time to realise that narrative is bullshit and sexist and patriarchal and I was unconsciously working through my issues as a woman and a lesbian through the vampire” (Participant 25, 2017).

Participants in the first group expressed similar opinions concerning patriarchy and relationships with men when discussing how the female vampire represents the female identity. This included proposing positive connections to female sexuality, freedom and empowerment outside the limitations of societal roles, and autonomy from the male:

“They do not need to be sustained economically by their husband nor please and live only for men because they are self-sufficient” (Participant C, 2016).

The participant's statement is reminiscent of Goulding and Saren's (2009) assertion that the female vampire represents a "sharp opposition" to outdated feminine traits (submissiveness, purity, and meekness) found in traditional patriarchal myths. In accordance to 19th Century Evolution Theory and social academia – as suggested by Charles Darwin and William Sumner – the female of the species "...Proved herself to be part of the crown of creation by being as passive, malleable, and focused on motherhood as she possibly could be" (Dijkstra, 1996, p.34). However, when interpreting the vampire Clarimonde in Gautier's *La Morte Amoureuse*⁵³, her self-sufficient and financially-independent nature subverts Darwin's gender theory, and instead positions her as a threat to the patriarchal status quo. The following analysis of the text is in direct contrast to that of Erik Butler, who states that Clarimonde "...has no real being independent of Romauld" (Butler, 2010, p.70). As evident from the text, the courtesan Clarimonde is dichotomous as both financially dependent on men (the palace in which she resides was given to her by the Prince Concini), and sexually empowered to use men to her own financial advantage:

"The great courtesan Clarimonde died a few days ago, at the close of an orgie which lasted eight days and eight nights. It was something infernally splendid. The abominations of the banquets of Belshazzar and Cleopatra were re-enacted there... The guests were served by swarthy slaves who spoke an unknown tongue, and who seemed to me to be veritable demons" (Gautier, 1836).

The above passage depicts the lifestyle in which Clarimonde was accustomed to before her "death", demonstrating both lavish riches and sexuality – independent of her life with the priest Romauld. Indeed, Julia diLiberti (2009) proposes that the doomed love affair between Clarimonde and Romauld is less to do with the threat of vampirism, but that of a woman (demonic sexuality) tempting – thus subverting her gender role – a man (pure and of God). Casting aside traditional interpretations of the vampire, it is possible that Clarimonde represents far more than subverted sexual roles. For instance, as Romauld and Clarimonde travel to Venice, he says "of gold she had enough", and describes their abode as:

⁵³ Although only one participant mentioned *La Morte Amoureuse* (Chapter One), the text is still worth analysing, as it offers an opportunity to examine an alternative view of the female vampire' autonomy – financial instead of sexual.

“...a great palace on the Canaleio, filled with frescoes and statues, and containing two Titians in the noblest style of the great master, which were hung in Clarimonde’s chamber. It was a palace well worthy of a king” (Gautier, 1836).

It is evident that as an impoverished priest, Romauld would need to rely upon Clarimonde’s financial provisions to pay for such riches. For this reason, Clairmonde uses sexual liberation, not only for gratification, but for financial independence.

As participants’ perceptions of femininity prove to be subjective, and, at times, contrasting, further investigation is required into how this influences their engagement with the character. This, in turn, will offer insight into how writers⁵⁴ can understand what characteristics readers find most attractive/appealing in the female vampire – and if, indeed, said characteristics are classed as feminine. When asked “Which aspect(s) of the female vampire attracts you most to the character?” (second group of participants), clear indications arose revealing the most popular features – Note: 9 participants (14.75%) opted not to answer the question, and so, their responses are not included within the list. For the purposes of this study, any category which received fewer than 5 votes (just below the median number of responses) were classed as least popular:

- Strength – 18.03%
- Power – 16.39%
- Independence – 14.75%
- Sexuality/sensuality/allure/seductiveness – 13.11%
- Mystery – 9.84%
- Characterisation dependent on narrative of literature – 8.20%
- Beauty/Appearance – 6.56%
- Intelligence – 6.56%
- Participant did not favour any characteristic of the female vampire – 6.56%

In contrast, the least popular answers included:

- Confident – 4.92%
- Violent/Brutal/Ferocious – 4.92%
- Fashion – 3.28%

⁵⁴ This includes my own writing and shaping of a female vampire character.

- Fragile/Vulnerable/Delicate – 3.28%
- Dominant – 3.28%
- Defining the vampire as female – 1.64%
- Charismatic – 1.64%
- Fearless – 1.64%
- Lacks vulnerability – 1.64%
- Loving – 1.64%

What emerges when analysing the categories offers insight into contemporary Goth females' relationship with the female vampire's ideological performativity. For example, when comparing how participants defined the vampire's femininity – as discussed previously within this chapter – with the characteristics of the vampire they find most appealing/iconic, a complex interplay is presented. This concerns “sexuality” – the highest category participants identified as a feminine trait of the female vampire – and how this contradicts the participants' favoured characteristics, “strength” and “power”. This suggests that the participants' ideologies associated with femininity are negated, and self-empowerment supersedes over-sexualisation. Furthermore, when comparing the data for the two questions, the analysis proposes a direct conflict between how the vampire's femininity is defined and what characteristics are valued. For example, when participants discussed the female vampire's feminine attributes, “sexuality” outweighed “strength” and “power”, however – as the above list demonstrates – the enjoyed characteristics depict the reverse.

This complex interplay between participants' definition of femininity and the characteristics which appealed to them reveals how the two interact:

- The aspects of strength, power, sexuality, and beauty were all recognised as feminine characteristics within the female vampire, and also proved to be amongst the highest-ranking enjoyable attributes of the character.
- Although ranking high as enjoyable traits, strength and sexuality also featured as attributes not linked to femininity within the female vampire.
- Despite scoring high in the enjoyable category, independence and intelligence were amongst the lowest characteristics recognised as feminine traits within the female vampire.
- The aspects of charisma, confidence, bravery, and fragility/vulnerability/delicacy ranked low in enjoyable attributes and also

amongst the least popular categories as recognised feminine characteristics within the female vampire.

- Despite recognising gender/biological sex, fashion, and dangerous/brutal/violent/ferocious as attributes regarded as feminine, these characteristics of the female vampire were amongst the lowest-ranking enjoyable traits.
- Although participants recognised having respect for oneself, endurance, and blood symbolism (menstruation) as feminine aspects within the female vampire, none of these traits featured amongst the list of enjoyable characteristics.

When analysing the data, revealing that sexuality did not ultimately define the female vampire's femininity – and, combining the list of participants' favoured characteristics – the following dynamic emerges:

- The preferred characteristics of “intelligence” and “independence” reflect those lower-ranking traits identified as feminine.
- The aspects of “power” and “strength” were high-ranking across both sets of questions.

Thus, the above characteristics outweigh the lower-ranking ones featured within both questions, i.e. “confidence”, “charisma” and “fearlessness”. However, it would be remiss to disregard these low-scoring characteristics, as their contributions (albeit low within the data) reveal how participants engage with the character. Despite sexuality's prominence in both sets of data, the overall evidence uncovers that the female vampire can be interpreted in alternative ways - this coincides with Hughes' (2015) assertion that critical analysis predominantly focusing on the vampire's sexuality is stagnating further theoretical readings.

When considering the importance of “power” and “strength” within the data results, it implies that these two characteristics provide insight into the definitions and values female members of contemporary Goth subculture prioritise and categorise as feminine and – to an extent – the performativity and representation of womanhood. For this claim to be fully examined, the remainder of this chapter investigates how participants define their own identity against that of the literary female vampire. However, in order to

fully analyse how the female vampire's femininity is defined, it is necessary to examine which favoured traits were *not* associated with femininity:

- Emotional.
- Goes against vampire stereotypes.
- Immortal⁵⁵.
- Introverted.
- Knowledgeable of the occult.
- Lack of vulnerability.
- Loving.
- Sassiness.
- Self-aware.
- Sensitive.
- Still retains aspects of human self.
- Threat against patriarchy/not dominated by men.
- Witty.

The list proposes that although these traits contribute to the appeal of the female vampire – according to participants' perceptions of the Goth subculture's view of femininity – they do not necessarily represent an ideological demonstration of femininity within the contemporary Goth subculture. Nevertheless, as this study contains a small percentage of the Goth subculture, further research would be necessary to make a definitive claim.

However, it would be remiss to completely ignore what the characteristics listed above reveal about how participants interpret the female vampire. For example, how she embodies transgression of cultural gender expectations – especially regarding the “Threat against patriarchy/not dominated by men” category.

To further evaluate the impact of this category, I analysed the interviews from the first group of participants, who were asked what draws them to the female vampire as an icon⁵⁶. Out of the 7 participants, 6 referenced varying characteristics of sexuality – including seduction and sensuality – as the character's most attractive trait. To state,

⁵⁵ Of course, the list contains attributes which are unattainable for humans, i.e. “immortal,” and “goes against vampire stereotypes,” and so these categories cannot be analysed with regards to identity.

⁵⁶ The use of the word “icon” denoted the representation of the character as a whole – characteristics, narrative, performance, etc.

however, that sexuality is the sole factor is both problematic and over-simplifying contemporary Goth females' perceptions of the female experience/embodiment. It is important to remember that participants from the second group – i.e. those who identified the female vampire as having “feminine” qualities; those who did not identify the character as having “feminine” qualities; and those who identified male and female vampires as the same – all discussed sexuality as a defining factor. What this suggests is that sexuality is viewed as transcending gender definitions, but the performance/associations of sexuality/seductiveness contribute, to a certain extent, to the appeal of the character. However, across both groups, participants rarely attributed sexualisation of the female vampire as the only reason for enjoyment, and instead often listed it alongside other influencing factors, such as:

“Strength, independence, being a threat to patriarchal control, sexual and sensual indulgence, embracing the dark and unknown” (Participant 32, 2017).

Participant F referenced the female vampire's intelligence, lack of limitations, worldliness, and glamour alongside sexuality, however, what her response demonstrated was a lack of dependence on a partner for sexual validation – as did Participant E's:

“I am also drawn to the unfettered sexuality and sexual freedom that the Vampire possesses. The Vampire represents guilt and consequence free sex and who wouldn't want that?” (Participant E, 2016).

This contrasts with Auerbach's statement that “when a woman becomes a vampire herself, she has no more agency than she did when she was human” (Auerbach, 1995, p.39). Also, the participants' interpretations of autonomous female vampires relate to how critics interpret the dichotomy of male/female interactions throughout Stoker's narratives of female agency. For example, Lisa Nystrom (2009) observes the instances where females achieve autonomy and/or sexual liberation – i.e. the vampiric Lucy and the three sisters – the novel removes their voices and supplants them with the male narration. Barbara Almond (2006) states that Dracula's intervention of the sisters' seduction of Jonathan Harker reiterates the dangers of female sexual aggression and male fears of sexual subordination. The scene in question, as examined by Christopher Craft (1984) subverts Victorian sexual propriety of gendered expectation, which placed the male in the active sexual role (libido and performance) and the female as receptive and submissive.

In fact, as the quote below demonstrates, the sisters' desire and satisfaction are not dependent upon Jonathan's pleasure – or permission – instead the females view themselves as the priority:

“The fair girl shook her head coquettishly, and the other two urged her on. One said:— ‘Go on! You are first, and we shall follow; yours is the right to begin.’ The other added:—

‘He is young and strong; there are kisses for us all.’” (Stoker, 1897, Chapter III).

The participants' statements suggest that, although sexuality is a defining factor for the literary vampire, the context in which it is interpreted is intermingled with participants' own perceptions of femininity, and whether or not this is important to female issues. Furthermore, the definition of “woman” is treated as a figure who reveals the repressed possibilities of empowerment, independent of the male, and thus represents opportunities for female autonomy:

“She is viewed as such a sex icon and it's something I've always been interested in. I love the kind of primal power being portrayed by a woman” (Participant 40, 2017).

This, in turn, necessitates an investigating into whether or not participants recognise any of the female vampire's characteristics within themselves – and, if indeed, they perceive said characteristics as feminine. As already discussed, participants revealed how they interpret/define femininity, and demonstrated the extent to which these aspects contribute to the enjoyment of the character. However, are the given examples representative of the participants' own identities, or aspirational to the participants' desired goal of what it means to be female in contemporary society?

When participants in the second group were asked “Are there any aspects of the female vampire that you categorise as being feminine, and do you recognise these qualities within yourself?” the data revealed contrasting opinions. In total, 22.95% of participants associated the female vampire with specific attributes of femininity, and also were able to identify the same characteristics within themselves. This pattern was predominantly evident within the 36-45 age bracket and residents of the USA. In contrast, 13.11% recognised no explicit femininity within the female vampire, and did not identify with the

character's gender specificity. This category comprised primarily of the 18-25 age bracket, and members of the UK.

The subject of identity raises issues about the participants' awareness of the stereotypical representations of Goths and their affinity towards vampires. What transpired suggested that the myths and narratives surrounding the stereotypes are not necessarily true:

"I worry when an association is [made] purely [that] Gothics are vampires and vice versa. I think this is propaganda from various books and movies" (Participant A, 2016).

"Just because I like goth rock doesn't mean I want to be a vampire... That's a dumb stereotype" (Participant 17, 2017).

Participants demonstrated a high level of acknowledgement of historic female Goth icons and their influence upon the subculture. These influences also included male and female writers and musicians, such as Byron, Percy Shelley, Bauhaus, 45 Grave, Christian Death, and T.S.O.L. With regards to female Goth icons, the list included – but was not limited to – Morticia and Wednesday Addams, Vampira, Siouxsie Sioux, Lily Munster, Harley Quinn, and Selene (*Underworld*). Although icons such as Vampira, Lily Munster and Selene are fictional vampires, the inclusion of non-vampires suggests a wider spectrum of female identities influences members of the subculture.

However, as my study focused primarily on the female literary vampire, the second group of participants were asked if the character influenced or inspired their identity⁵⁷. The majority of participants (45.90%) stated "No", 31.15% stated "Yes", 14.75% stated "Maybe", and 8.20% did not answer. As for demographics, the 36-45 age bracket overwhelmingly voted "No", comprising of 72.22% of the category. Subsequently, the "Yes" category encompassed the majority of the 26-35 age bracket (43.75%), as did the "Maybe" category (25%). Residents of the USA dominated all categories, but proved more likely to vote "No" (66.67% - 14 out of 21 participants), followed closely by "Yes" (42.86% - 6 out of 14), and finally, "Maybe" (83.33% - 5 out of 6).

Conversely, in the first group of participants, 71.43% recognised aspects of the female vampire as influencing their identity. However, unlike the second group,

⁵⁷ Note: In order to widen the scope for investigation into identity self-awareness, this question did not refer specifically/exclusively to the participant's gender.

participants did not reference aspects of sexuality, strength, or indeed any intellectual/emotional properties, when discussing either themselves or the female vampire. Instead, the participants discussed fashion, make-up, and hairstyles which inspire their appearance – matching the 4 participants (21.05%) in the second group.

Spooner (2004) suggests that literary and movie characters inspire Goths to enact personas, thus creating their identities through clothing. This corresponds with sociologist Diana Crane, who states:

“Clothes as artifacts ‘create’ behavior through their capacity to impose social identities and empower people to assert latent social identities” (Crane, 2000, p.2).

Goulding and Saren (2009) recognise female Goths’ appropriation of the female vampire’s “empowering image” of a deathly pallor, flowing tresses, and Victorian regalia is indicative of equality between the sexes. Beyond gender politics, fashion curator Valerie Steele professes that the iconography of the vampire negates a fear of death, and thus the enactment of the vampire transgresses being alive and dead simultaneously (Burnstein, 2007). Despite Steele going on to associate Goth clothing to sexuality, the absence of participants (first group) mentioning this topic suggests that their overall identity – including clothing – is not necessarily dependent on sexual imagery.

When analysing the data for the second group, many of the recurring themes discussed in previous chapters reappeared. However, instead of participants identifying the female vampire as intelligent or empowered, they in fact proved to have the opposite opinion. For example – disregarding responses which only stated “No” or “Not particularly” (28.57%) – the highest number of responses referred to the female vampire’s submissiveness (10.71%) and over-sexualisation (10.71%).

The subject of submissiveness highlighted the contrast between the female and male vampires’ perceived roles, and demonstrated that these gender strictures did not reflect contemporary identities:

“The stereotypical female vampire - the subordinate to usually the male master vampire, the slinky seductress snake - does not inspire or influence me”
(Participant 31, 2017).

“I’ve always found them absurd. In literature I’m attracted to strong female characters. Despite of what others might think, vampire female figures are weak

and laughable... Women are uber sexualized in vampire literature” (Participant 51, 2017).

Furthermore, participants’ responses portrayed how the female vampire is not only objectified, but also designed specifically for male gratification:

“I find most female vampires to be written for the male gaze, as it were. Overtly sexual, not as well-read or intelligent, not necessarily as culturally refined, the lover of powerful men over time.....In other words, exactly how women have been portrayed time and time again in real life” (Participant 33, 2017).

In relation, the female vampire was viewed as being *too* perfect and beautiful, which – according to Participant 56 – offered a negative and unrealistic representation of women, because these traits are not humanly attainable⁵⁸.

The highest number of participants who acknowledged that the female vampire influenced their identity stated her strength (36.84%), sexuality (31.58%), and mystery (21.05%) were the most dominant traits.

When commenting on strength, participants expressed a desire to be autonomous and free from patriarchal rule:

“I mainly take their strength as an inspiration - why be a weak creature in need of rescue or in someone's power (the trad[itional] scream queen) when you can be yourself and rule!” (Participant 48, 2017).

During the interviews, the “Yes” category, as like the “No”, alluded to the female vampire’s relationship towards men:

“Female vampires are strong, mysterious and sexually assertive. As a Queer woman I'm drawn to their association with lesbianism, and as a feminist I like the idea of a female monster that can terrify and devour men” (Participant 32, 2017).

⁵⁸ As previously mentioned, other unattainable qualities, such as immortality, were classed as a favourable trait of the female vampire. However, they were not seen to be representative of femininity, and so cannot be indicative of unrealistic expectations of women.

This theme recurred significantly throughout the study, whether connected to lesbianism, bisexuality, or a lack of references to males within the responses. During the interview process, members of the “Yes” category did not define their own sexuality or sensuality as dependent on males, or indeed another partner. The expressions of sexuality focussed on their own self-awareness and desires, which suggests a prevalent proportion of sexual autonomy, and empowerment:

“...the female vampire figure inspires and empowers me to be strong as a women [sic]. It also empowers my own sense of sensuality” (Participant 4, 2017).

In fact, in reference to literary vampires, a dependence upon the male vampire is viewed as a negative:

“... the female vampire is described [as] empowering (excluding the 'wives' in Dracula, who though were seductresses, were dependent on him for survival)” (Participant 46, 2017).

On the same note, the recurring theme of female empowerment – to which contrasts the “No” category’s view of submissiveness – advocates female-driven actions to attain independence:

“Yes, to be confident in oneself. That as a women we are not all the same weak damsel in distress” (Participant 21, 2017).

Thus, the emphasis on the female experience implies that participants are particularly attracted to narratives of empowered female characters, and how a woman can create an independent identity – for example, how women (re)negotiate their societal roles outside their perceived confines of a patriarchal system. However, the fact that the majority of participants denied the female vampire’s influence on their identity suggests that this view of empowerment as inspired by a literary character – and one who supposedly represents female transgression against social oppression – is failing to be effectively communicated, and/or indeed interpreted by the readership⁵⁹. This is indicative of the need for future literary representations of the female vampire to embody the empowered and

⁵⁹ Although my claim refers to texts and writers from the 19th Century, as will become evident in Chapter Four, the engagement between readers and contemporary texts is also complex.

autonomous characteristics as desired by the readership. Not only does this react to the needs of an audience, but also reflects how contemporary Goth females wish to lead their lives – independent of patriarchal limitations and in control of their own sexuality, destiny, and freedom. For modern female vampires to evolve and remain relevant to contemporary audiences, I argue that the participant comments throughout my study highlight the opportunities for writers to (re)create the literary figure to represent the current zeitgeist, and maintain its ability to offer social commentary on gender and 21st Century culture.

Chapter Four: Good and Bad (Vampire) Girls

To expand on Chapter Three's analysis of how the female vampire represents a specific version of femininity and how Goth female readers interpret the character's persona, further investigation is needed into the relevance of the female vampire's engendered social dynamics. According to Susanne Becker, the Gothic genre emphasises the dichotomy between the elusive social ideal of femininity and the impossibility of women living up to social expectations (Becker, 1996, p.77). Therefore, it is necessary to investigate how readers react to these depictions, and if they are influenced by, or identify with, specific social and cultural commentaries. With regards to Gothic vampire literature, Gina Wisker demonstrates how the character is positioned to reflect – and deflect – the constraints of the human condition:

“The vampire... Challeng[es] and cross[es] physical, psychological, and cultural boundaries of life/death, male/female, myth/real, self/Other... test[ing] and question[ing] the resilience of the human need for such boundaries” (Wisker, 2016, p.169).

Wisker's suggestion of the vampire challenging societal boundaries as a way of renegotiating social identities correlates to Julia Kristeva's theories of abjection. For example, Rina Arya's (2014) introduction to Kristeva's work positions the abject (that is, what a person both identifies and rejects – a separation of “I” versus “Other”) as imperative to constant confrontation of self-identity, and therefore performs a resistance to personal and social boundaries. Combined, Wisker's and Kristeva's theories of social and personal identities not only situate the vampire in relation to social representation, but also provide the opportunity to analyse how readers interpret and engage with characters who reflect their own identity. Literary scholar Wolfgang Iser suggests interaction with texts are dependent upon four perspectives (narrator, character, plot and reader); the reader's ability to separate between implied and explicit messages; and the various viewpoints which position the reader between alternate interpretations (Bennett, 1995). Additionally, Paul Mărgău claims that readers' interactions with Gothic literature – concocted through a complex mental system – influence their interpretations of the real world whenever they recognise parallels between the characters and themselves. That is, when readers identify with specific aspects of plot/characterisation, their relationship with said literature is directly indicative of how they react to similar real-life situations (Mărgău, 2015, p.34).

For this reason, an analysis is required to investigate which positive and negative traits the participants recognise within the female vampire, and how this affects their ideological and/or performative views of identity. Thus, participants in the second group were asked “Do you think the female vampire in literature published before 1900 is a better role model for women than in modern vampire literature?”⁶⁰ An analysis of the participants’ comments revealed the following percentages:

- 26.23% responded “No”.
- 13.11% responded “Yes” and “Neither”, respectively.
- 14.75% responded “Both”.
- 16.39% responded “It depends”.
- 8.20% responded “I don’t know” or did not answer the question.

The demographics show a divide of opinions across the age ranges. Members of the 18-25 group were most likely to state “Yes” – whereas members of the 26-35 group stated “Both”; the 36-45 group chose “No” and “Both”; 46-55 voted “No”; and 56+ split their answers between “No” and “Neither”. As for the “Yes” category, members of the United States were more likely to give this response, however, as a whole, participants from this country predominantly voted “No”. This, too, reflected the “Neither” and “I don’t know” categories. However, “Both” and “It depends” responses were split between the US and UK.

As demonstrated, the highest number of participants stated “No”, and when evaluating the answers, an assortment of reasons surfaced:

- Modern vampire literature has better character development.
- Modern female vampires are stronger.
- Modern female vampires are “more worldly” than their 19th Century predecessors.
- Modern female vampires are equal to male counterparts.
- Women written about better at turn of the century.
- Modern vampires not confined to sensuality.
- Female vampires in *Dracula* not compelling.

⁶⁰ For the purpose of this study, the term “modern” denotes any piece of literature written post-commencement of the 20th Century.

- More variety in modern day fiction.
- Each woman is different, and so is their role model/people choose their own role models.
- 20th Century is better for arts, music and literature.
- No, but it's a truer reflection of the period.

Responses included references contrasting the male and female vampire, suggesting that modern literature features powerful women who encompass and explore a wider range of characteristics, rather than being limited to sensuality. Similarly, female vampires are interpreted as being stronger and more experienced than their 19th Century counterparts, and thus equal to the male vampire. Furthermore, specific examples of 19th Century and modern literature offer clarification of the complex gender narratives:

“... I do not find the female vampires in *Dracula* to be very fleshed-out compelling characters. For more modern vampire novels, my favorite would be Miriam from *the Hunger*” (Participant 18, 2017).

“Not particularly. If the book is written correctly and doesn't romanticize abuse (...*Twilight*...) I don't see what's wrong with picking your own role model. Each woman is different, and so is their role model” (Participant 40, 2017).

As demonstrated by Participant 40, Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* (2005) isn't necessarily respected within Goth subculture. Accordingly, Catherine Spooner (2017) positions the Goth's acrimonious reception to the novels as a response to the “defanged” sparkling vampire. In reference to my study, only 7 participants mention the series⁶¹ – 3 positive and 4 negative comments – and so, the majority of participants' views of the novels cannot be definitively gauged. However, as far as analysing *Twilight* as a Gothic text, the position of the female vampire is worth examining to demonstrate the Gothic heroine's modern embodiment. Indeed, when examining *Twilight* as a Gothic text, it demonstrates the evolution of the genre, as, according to Conrad Aquilina, Meyer's vampires – with their human behaviours, i.e. feeding from animals and not humans, not sleeping in coffins, and a lack of reference to returning from the grave⁶² – are far removed

⁶¹ This is the combination of answers across all questions from both sets of interviews – 68 participants.

⁶² Although Meyer's vampires are usually close to death before being turned, they do not rise from the grave.

from their literary ancestors to the point of metamorphic annihilation⁶³ (Aquilina, 2013, p.24). Furthermore, the novels were indeed inspired, according to Meyer, by such Gothic texts as *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* (Pulliam, 2011) – notable for their female protagonists. Likewise, *Twilight* features the heroine Bella Swan, whose characterisation (human and vampire), Lori Branch states, Gothicises the subversion and redefinition of contemporary feminism, whereby “...we as a culture have already travelled a feminist road, and that it has left apparently not a few readers with very particular unfulfilled longings and misgivings” (Branch, 2010, p.66). Branch’s analysis of Bella negotiating her positions as either teenage human or vampire mother and wife place the protagonist as an elusive definition of a feminist ideal. Subsequently, in his chapter, “The *Twilight* Controversy”, Joseph Crawford (2014) examines how the series generated opposing reviews – from scholars, literary critics, fans (and “anti-fans”), and Amazon customers – in response to not only Meyer’s reinterpretation of the vampire, but also the gender and sexual politics positioning Bella as the embodiment of feminist or anti-feminist propaganda. Crawford’s analysis of how Meyer presents her female protagonist as a representation of contemporary females contributes to ongoing academic research into said subject, with the main areas of debate including: Bella’s status as a wife and mother (without a career or college education) and if this choice is regressive to feminism; her identity being dependent on Edward’s (her vampire lover) – and at times, her friend, the werewolf Jacob’s – definition of appropriate gender roles; her ability to subvert traditional gender roles by undertaking supposed masculine activities (motor biking and cliff diving); and the effectiveness of Bella’s ability to choose and direct her own life choices⁶⁴. Thus, like her literary predecessors, the contemporary Gothic (vampire) heroine continues to provoke questions surrounding engendered female representation, causing controversial and opposing ideologies of femininity.

When discussing how texts reflect women’s experiences in the world (both personal and social), Participant 10 demonstrated an awareness of the potential cultural impact that literature has the ability to replicate:

⁶³ Aquilina specifically mentions Polidori’s *The Vampyre* and Byron’s *The Giaour*, amongst other works.

⁶⁴ For examples of academic research, see: Silver, A. 2010. *Twilight is not good for maidens: gender, sexuality, and the family in Stephenie Meyer’s Twilight*. *Studies in the Novel* [Online]. 42(1-2), pp.121-138; Diamond, F. 2011. *Beauty and the Beautiful Beast*. *Australian Feminist Studies*. [Online]. 26(67), pp.41-55; Wilson, N. 2011. *Seduced by Twilight: The Allure and Contradictory Messages of the Popular Saga*. North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc.; Mukherjee, A. 2011. *Team Bella: Fans Navigating Desire, Security, and Feminism*. In: Parke, M and Wilson, N. eds. *Theorizing Twilight: Critical Essays on What’s at Stake in a Post-Vampire World*. North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., pp. 70-86.

“Women have been treated and written about in significantly better ways after the turn of the century. Modern vampires seem to focus more on exploring all aspects of life (or undead life) rather than being confined to sensuality” (Participant 10, 2017).

The participants’ articulation of gender representation is further developed when analysing responses from the “Both”, “It depends”, and “I don’t know” categories. In the “Both” category, 3 out of the 9 participants recognised that both modern and pre-1900 literature contain culturally-influenced attributes involving the female vampire. This includes:

“Female vampires were in contrast with the status quo of women in the past centuries, they were more empowered, [r]egardless of what the writer wanted to make out of this contradiction, it resembles the modern woman, so there is really not a big difference between old and modern female vampires” (Participant 41, 2017).

The participant’s statement poses considerable insights into how the female vampire is interpreted when seen through a 21st Century lens. Additionally, when analysing vampire scholarship, it suggests that the representation of females evolved to reflect ever-changing social dynamics. For example, Senf proposes, to coincide with sexual and feminist cultural movements, the female vampire of the 20th Century altered, to adhere to the emergence of female sexuality and resistance of oppression (Senf, 1999, p.209). So, too, Wisker credits second-wave feminist⁶⁵ vampire writers⁶⁶ with deliberately utilising the character to renegotiate and question gender and cultural strictures, thus developing and restructuring literary vampire tropes (Wisker, 2016, p.166). This is especially relevant when considering how different generations of readers interpret vampires written in different eras – as Auerbach claims, the eternal nature of the vampire inevitably induces their evolution, thus each generation produces and identifies with specific character versions (Auerbach, 1995, p.5). However, it is necessary to remember that participants are interpreting both pre-19th Century and modern literature from a contemporary stance based upon an awareness of social and political evolution. Critics of the Gothic, Chris Baldick

⁶⁵ Circa 1960s.

⁶⁶ Wisker pays particular attention to Angela Carter’s stories *The Lady of the House of Love* and *The Loves of Lady Purple*.

and Robert Mighall, emphasise that the interpretation of Gothic texts is predominantly determined by the reader's foregrounding of historical and political knowledge:

“Like the first Gothic authors, the critic knows the outcome of history and can depict the historical past as a battleground for the conflict between progressive individuals and the agents of reaction” (Baldick and Mighall, 2015, p.283).

Therefore, textual interpretation becomes a direct result of social circumstances and projection from reader to cultural understanding and awareness, as is evident from Participant 41's quote suggesting the female vampire demonstrates an interaction between female empowerment and transgression of female societal roles. By implying that the female vampire “resembles the modern woman,” it can be inferred she perceives contemporary women to be empowered and – although it cannot be definitively proven – the quote also suggests that contemporary women challenge stereotypical views of femininity. In this context, it can be understood that the female vampire represents and symbolises the myths and narratives of the contemporary female experience. If 19th Century Gothic literature served as a warning of the consequences of overt female sexuality and subversive female roles – as previously discussed in Chapters One, Two, and Three – then it can be argued that contemporary Goth readers challenge these perceptions as a way of renegotiating female identities. For example, the quote below demonstrates that, although the participant identifies no differentiation between the vampire of 19th Century and modern literature, the symbolism of sexuality and power situates them in a position not defined by males, but instead poses a threat to the male-dominated hierarchy:

“I would say [women] are treated much the same [as men]. They are feared, overtly sexual, and more powerful than the men. Female vampire characters should all be revered” (Participant 52, 2017).

This, in turn, relates to the first group of participants' positive attitudes about the sexualisation of the female vampire, including stating that this representation is integral to characterisation, and can indeed inform the participant's ideals of beauty and sensuality. However, outside the Goth subculture, the misinformed assumption associating Goth women to the vampire is problematic:

“... because some men who aren’t Goths associate our attire with sexy vampires, they may decide we are sexually available, an exotic sexual experience, or into kinky sex or playing with blood...” (Participant F, 2016).

In contrast, the participant continues by suggesting that the outsider assumption of Goth women’s over-sexualisation is not solely linked to the vampire’s literary representation. The participant instead attributes the inaccuracy to social ignorance before reiterating how a sex-positive attitude impacts upon interaction with literature:

“I also think that I like sexy vampires and wouldn’t want them to all turn into prudish Mina and Jonathan Harker” (Participant F, 2016).

When interpreting the relationship between the female vampire’s sexuality and how it redefines the female societal role, Participant C demonstrates an autonomous and independent sexual identity centred around the female, which is not exclusively dependent on the male:

“[The female vampire] represents the beauty, elegance and the sensuality of women; it [doesn’t have] to be a sex object for men” (Participant C, 2016).

The aforementioned comments from Participants 52 and C reflect how the female vampire represents 19th Century women’s desires and abilities to have an identity independent of men. This reflects the cultural evolution of female sexual emancipation, as, during the 19th Century, it was socially unacceptable for women to break outside their gender boundaries. According to Jennifer Hedgecock, the “outcast class of women” – those aspiring to social reform and autonomy – were subjected to public humiliation and labelled sexual degenerates alongside prostitutes and convicts (Hedgecock, 2008, pp.81-82). However, Elaine Showalter attests to the growing number of female intellectuals⁶⁷ fighting for emancipation and equality at the fin-de-siècle. Indeed, the aforementioned Darwinist perspectives (Chapter Three) was appropriated by feminists to reiterate that women were at the centre of evolutionary and sexual progression (Showalter, 2002, p.68). Despite the 19th Century ushering in first-wave feminism⁶⁸, the female vampire is academically

⁶⁷ Showalter also demonstrates how men contributed to the cause. Although not detailed within this study, it should not be inferred that male involvement was not valuable or visible.

⁶⁸ Between 19th and early 20th Century.

understood⁶⁹ to be indicative of the period's fears of dangerous female sexuality, as demonstrated through medical practices of clitoridectomies and removal of the ovaries to "cure" female hysteria, masturbation, and menstruation. Furthermore, Senf argues that the female vampire reflects the social evolution of women's identities insofar as the prominence of the character, simultaneously arises during such times when women's roles were being redefined (Senf, 1988, p.160)⁷⁰. This trend, however, is not restricted to 19th Century literature, as Andrew Schopp states that contemporary vampires allow readers to project their sexual or taboo fantasies – free from societal perimeters (Schopp, 2004, p.233).

In order to frame participants' opinions and differentiations between the female vampire in pre-1900 and modern literature, the data was analysed to determine the influence of each era upon participants' views concerning the subjectivity of role models. What emerged in the "Both", "It depends", and "I don't know" categories revealed participants' awareness of the opposing gender representations impacting the performativity of female characters in literature. This includes:

- Identifying female characters possessing stronger characteristics, such as "independence" and "fearlessness" in modern literature.
- Modern vampire literature reflects contemporary culture.
- Characters within modern literature contain too many vampire clichés.
- Strong female vampires are appreciated and not dependent upon the era.
- Pre-1900 female vampires acted submissive towards male vampires⁷¹.
- Female vampires across both eras have the same characteristics.
- Female vampires in modern literature are not dependent on the male.
- Pre-1900 female vampires are depicted as unintelligent and over-sexualised.

⁶⁹ See: Mulvey-Roberts, M. 2016. *Dangerous bodies: Historicising the Gothic corporeal*. Manchester: Manchester University Press; Parsons, M. 2006. Vamping the woman: Menstrual pathologies in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies* 1. [Online]. Pp.66-83; and Shane, B. 2016. Your girls that you all love are mine already: Criminal female sexuality in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. *Gothic Studies*. [Online]. 18(1), pp.16-33.

⁷⁰ For further details of Senf's analysis of the evolution of the female vampire, see Senf, C. A. 1999. Daughters of Lilith: Women vampires in popular literature. In: Heldreth, L.G. and Pharr, M. eds. *The Blood is the Life: Vampires In Literature*. Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, pp.199-216.

⁷¹ Note: This was perceived by the participant as a negative trait.

Participants who answered “Yes” proposed that literature published before 1900 featuring female vampires are better role models for women than those in modern literature. Reasons given include:

- Pre-1900 vampire literature encouraged women to be stronger and braver.
- Any vampire is better than those featured in modern literature.
- Mina Murray (*Dracula*) acts, Bella Swan (*Twilight*) reacts.
- Modern vampire literature featured female vampires who are relatable, instead of aspirational (specifically *Twilight*, *Vampire Diaries*, *Night World*, and *The Southern Vampire Mysteries*).

As is evident from the data collated across all categories, a pattern emerged whereby, despite participants conveying contrasting opinions, the consensus revealed similar ideologies. Overall, when discussing which traits qualified the female vampire to be a role model, the participants identified the characteristics associated with:

- Intelligence.
- Strength.
- Equality with the male vampire.
- Not defined or objectified by their sexuality.
- Independent.
- Not reliant upon traditional vampire stereotypes.
- Reflect contemporary values and culture.

Despite participants’ preferences for different eras, the recurring themes concerning female gender roles offer insights into the prominent values respected by contemporary female Goths. However, the divided nature of the responses regarding era preference poses a problematic dichotomy, whereby it is difficult to determine the sufficient merit of one era over another. The fact that the majority of participants voted “No” cannot be dismissed, but neither can the combined information from participants in other categories. In particular, it is necessary to examine how participants within the “Both” category gave divisive responses on how literature from specific eras influences their view of the female vampire as a role model – or is indeed symbolic of the female experience:

“... from what I've seen in the book to movie genre, it's all pretty much the same. Woman as predator, woman as prey, vampire as a metaphor for lesbians, there's been whole books written [o]n that subject. It hasn't really changed in a century it seems” (Participant 25, 2017).

Conversely, 33.33% of participants within the category identified positive aspects within literature from both eras, and emphasised the importance of the character's persona regardless of time period:

“If positive strong role model [I] don't have a preference for an era” (Participant 19, 2017).

With this in mind, it would be remissive to suggest that all modern vampire literature is perceived by participants to be more culturally valuable when representing female characters:

“I would say any female in literature, even from 40 years ago is a better role model than the empty headed bubble gum girls in popular culture now” (Participant 36, 2017).

This implies that, even within the perimeters of modern literature, the female vampire – or indeed any female character – is subject to scrutiny and can provoke contemptuous responses from readers. In contrast, 13.11% of participants stated neither the female vampire within pre-1900 nor in modern literature acted as a better role model for women. Thus, despite the complex juxtaposition of the themes contained within the “Yes” and “No” categories, there remains alternative factors which impact on how the female vampire is interpreted. Half of the participants in the “Neither” category stated that no vampire – male or female – is a good role model, and highlight how gender representations influence their perceptions:

“Vampires are not good role models at all. The female ones from pre 1900 were usually always framed in a negative manner, or were secondary to macho male heroic posturing” (Participant 24, 2017).

Similar to the other categories, participants referenced the relationship between the male and female vampire – citing her subservience and dependence upon him as unsuitable for a role model. Furthermore, participants recognised occurrences of these behaviours in both pre-1900 and modern literature – although they did not identify any particular novels. Participants also observed instances of literature containing cultural commentaries and how this relates to contemporary real life. This included identifying the purpose of the literature as “a tool to portray ideas and concepts. The different time periods reflect the different... ideas and concerns” (Participant 26, 2017); and the murderous nature of the vampire should not be inferred as justification to attack people, or as a misinformed interpretation of the Goth/vampiric subcultures⁷².

Out of the 61 participants spanning all categories, 14.75% stated their preference of literature was dependent on the author or text, and not the era in which it was written. When analysing responses, this answer was the highest from participants within the “It depends” category⁷³. The majority of responses did not provide further explanation, however, 4 participants explained how this influenced their opinion of the female vampire. This included the contrasting ways novels written in the same era portray the character:

“In Ca[r]milla the vampire has a strong sense of character that women today can look to as a role model. Whereas in the story of Dracula the "The Sisters"... were depicted as bottom feeders, unintelligent, and used sex to get what they wanted. Not exactly a role for women there” (Participant 4, 2017).

This was further expanded by Participant 48, who attested that modern texts are imitations of older books⁷⁴ – including those written 20 to 30 years ago – and rely on clichés. With regards to the female vampire, this impacts the participant’s choice of literature as thus:

⁷² This has been a particularly sensitive point since the Columbine shootings in April 1999, when two teens (who were mistakenly branded as Goths) opened fire in a high school, killing and injuring 13 and 20+ students, respectively. The incident led to the Goth subculture being labelled and depicted in the media as dangerous and linked to murder/ritual sacrifice. However, contemporary evidence disproved the popular myth of the shooters being linked to the Goth subculture, and subsequently removed false perceptions. For more info, see: Spooner, C. 2006. Contemporary Gothic. [Kindle Fire e-book]. London: Reaktion Books Ltd.; Griffiths, R. 2010. The gothic folk devils strike back! Theorizing folk devil reaction in the post-Columbine era. *Journal of Youth Studies*. [Online]. 13(3), pp.403-422; and Mason, D. 2016. Goth. In: Hughes, W. ed. The Encyclopedia of the Gothic. West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, pp. 283-287.

⁷³ A participant from the “Neither” category also gave this answer.

⁷⁴ Such as Polidori’s *The Vampyre*, which was described as “new and exciting, (but not very well written)”.

“I don't like the 'woman in need of a man/rescue' archetype in horror literature so the strong female vampires are always welcome regardless of era” (Participant 48, 2017).

Additionally, Participant 21 stated her preference for Anne Rice's female vampire characters as they do not rely upon a male vampire to rescue them. As demonstrated by the aforementioned Participants 4, 48, and 21, their awareness of cultural commentary within certain literature dictates their choice of engagement with novels – and directly relates to gender dynamics between male and female vampires. This, too, as demonstrated in the response below, is subject to how patriarchal systems are perceived in real life and reinterpreted as literary narratives:

“I think you have to really select your authors carefully so as to not choose ones that are perpetrating the same patriarchal notions prevalent in real life” (Participant 33, 2017).

Moreover, when participants in the first group were asked if they thought the image of the female vampire had developed through time, their responses were analysed to determine if Gothic literature continues to perpetuate and represent patriarchal systems. Indeed, academic readings of contemporary female vampires interpret her within such dynamics. For example, Donna Mitchell's (2013) analysis of Anne Rice's characters Gabrielle and Claudia depict the repercussions of women stepping out the bounds of motherhood and female submission to men, i.e. she must become like the male or die. Outside of these parameters, Elizabeth Hardaway (1999) recognises Kim Newman's *Anno Dracula* (1992) as raising the narrative potential of female characters⁷⁵ – more so than Stoker's original novel. Hardaway highlights the repositioning of Doctor Seward's affection towards Lucy Westenra as dependent on her vampiric sexuality, and not her passivity, thus subverting the place of women in Victorian society. However, despite acknowledging the progression of female vampires as independent and reminiscent of the modern woman⁷⁶, Nancy Schumann states that literature still lacks a “vampire queen” and that the possibilities of the character remain elusive (Schumann, 2013, p.119). Nevertheless, 6 out of the 7 participants stated “Yes”, the female vampire has developed

⁷⁵ Primarily, the vampires Geneviève Dieudonné and Kate Reed who, according to Hardaway, Newman positions to politically comment on Victorian femininity.

⁷⁶ Nancy Schumann (2013) primarily focuses on the *Twilight* series, *Vampire Diaries*, and the *Southern Vampire Mysteries* as featuring modern Gothic heroines.

through time (the participant who voted “No” stated that the female vampire continues to exude sexual power.):

“I believe as time goes, women (like men in today’s society) are given more of a presence. Some of the male attributes can now be seen in the female vampire – taking what they want, using seductive methods and emanating a powerful presence with men being the submissive ones. Women are no longer the damsels in distress (thank god)!” (Participant B, 2016).

Half the “Yes” participants referenced comparisons between male and female vampires – the remaining half cited the change in her physical appearance, and the portrayal of women in TV shows (*The Vampire Diaries* and *The Munsters*). Furthermore, participants discussing TV shows and films (*The Lost Boys*, *Near Dark*, and *Underworld*) cited them as examples of the subservient female vampire, who is manipulated by the male. Despite this demonstrating an awareness of the vampire genre and its underlying narratives, the focus of the data analysis remained on literature. Subsequently, the following list exhibits how participants interpret the evolution of the female vampire over the past two centuries:

- Anne Rice novels contain female vampires with a sense of humanity, who are strong, independent, no longer evil, or victims of patriarchy⁷⁷.
- Claudia (Rice’s *Interview with the Vampire*) is subservient to male vampires, i.e. trapped as a child until she dies.
- Akasha (Rice’s *Queen of the Damned*) is betrayed by Lestat.
- In *The Hunger*, Miriam Blaylock is killed by her former lovers.
- *Twilight* represents contemporary teenager existence. Bella Swan is more liberated than the female vampires in *Dracula*.
- Male and female vampires are sensual, beautiful, intelligent, and charismatic.
- Victorian-era vampires, i.e. Carmilla and Lucy Westenra, are depicted as evil, corrupt, unholy, indestructible, and unsentimental towards humans.
- Contemporary powerful female vampires are represented as amoral.

⁷⁷ The participant who stated this did not provide examples of characters to demonstrate this point.

Although the list contains minor references to pre-1900 literature, responses from participants established their awareness of how the contemporary female vampire contrasts with those written in the 19th Century. As demonstrated from the combination of responses across the two questions⁷⁸, the interpretation of the female vampire is heavily linked to that of the male.

To further investigate how the identities of the male and female vampire compare and contrast, the data was examined to analyse how participants differentiate between the two characters. The 7 participants from the first group were asked “Do you think there are differences between the identities of a male and female vampire within classic Gothic literature?” The answers were split into 3 categories as follows: “Yes”, “No”, and “Both are similar” (herein abbreviated to “Both”). The participants expressed ideas which contradicted those findings in Chapters One, Two, and Three, in which was stated that the female vampire’s identity conflicted and contrasted with that of the male. For example, 2 participants (“No”) identified the male and female vampire as having the same identity, 2 (“Both”) acknowledged aspects of the characters which are both the same and different, and 3 participants (“Yes”) recognised differences between male and female vampires.

What stood out across the “No” and “Both” categories was the participants’ perceptions that both male and female vampires are evil – however, this shared power dynamic is complicated when analysing the overall trends within the data. For instance, a participant within the “No” category expressed that both male and female vampires possess a supernatural, sexual power (Participant A). However, participants within the “Yes” and “Both” categories recognised an imbalance of power whereby the female is submissive to the more powerful male (Participants B and F). This, according to Participant F, relates to narratives where female vampires coexist with male vampires – or, in contrast, when discussing *Carmilla*, the depiction of a lesbian relationship positions the eponymous character to behave like her male counterpart. Furthermore, Participant E identified cultural narratives, which situate the male and female vampires’ identities within opposing political narratives:

“Male Vampires represent a different danger to society – they are corrupting rather than being corrupted... [Dracula] is a metaphor for the dangers posed by immigrants from Eastern Europe. ... ‘The Vampyre’ by Polidori... represents the dangerous but charming and enigmatic outsider. Male Vampires must be destroyed because they will corrupt society, female Vampires because they have been

⁷⁸ Relating to the female vampire as a role model, and whether or not she has developed as a character.

corrupted and are no longer what society demands they should be.” (Participant E, 2016)

As the data did not provide conclusive evidence attesting to the difference between the male and female vampire within Gothic literature, further information is required to investigate how Goth females feel about the representation of the female vampire. Within the responses from the second group of participants, data analysis revealed the following:

- Positive feeling – 36.07%.
- Negative feeling – 19.67%.
- Neutral feeling – 16.39%.
- Both positive and negative feelings – 14.75%.
- Did not answer – 13.12%.

Note: participants within the “Neutral” category either commented that they preferred vampires in TV or movies; suggested that their feelings depended on the author or story, but offered no further explanation; or did not provide any definitive opinion on either the female vampire or specific literature. For this reason, their responses cannot be analysed in relation to my study.

Within the “Positive” and “Both” categories, an array of opinions emerged which reflected the traits (examined in Chapter Three) participants found attractive in the female vampire. This included (but was not limited to) strength, independence, sexuality and resisting patriarchy. Additionally, when commenting on positive representations of female vampires, participants referenced several novels and authors, including *Dracula*, *Carmilla*, *Twilight*, Karen Chance, Kim Newman, and Charlaine Harris:

“We’ve come a long way since the three nameless ‘brides’ in Stoker’s *Dracula* and I think that’s great” (Participant 9, 2017).

However, the vast majority of participants (45.45%) referenced Anne Rice’s novels/characters (Akasha, Mekare and Maharet from *The Queen of the Damned*, Claudia from *Interview with the Vampire*, and the eponymous Pandora). This reflects the 44.44% of participants within the “Both” category who identified positive aspects within Rice’s works. Participant responses from the “Positive” and “Both” categories convey how contemporary female Goths perceive Rice’s female vampires. For example:

- Akasha and Mekare are powerful and strong.
- Anne Rice explores the roles and non-conformity of women, including issues surrounding eternal youth and beauty, and what it means to be a woman with strengths and flaws.
- Claudia represents both the independent, strong free spirit and psychological consequences of an adult woman who is eternally trapped in a child's body.
- The narratives of Rice's female vampires exist independently of the male.
- Maharet and Madeleine maintained elements of their human nature, i.e. maternal instincts.

Although this study primarily focusses on 19th Century literature, the instances where participants referenced modern literature – such as the above list – provide further examples of how contemporary female Goths interpret the ideal representation of womanhood and/or femininity. They also reflect participants' perceptions of the relationship between the male and female vampire – and, in this respect, the quote below demonstrates the similarities between the female characters within pre-19th Century and modern literature:

“I think they inspire us to break social norms of patriarchy to be very strong and powerful. Lucy, in *Dracula* was very persuasive. But it was the men's fear of that power that ended her. In the *Vampire Chronicles*, Claudia was always being held back by her male counter parts. If anything, I feel bad for them. These women are being defined by the men in their lives” (Participant 52, 2017).

In relation to male dominance, analysis of responses from participants in the “Negative” category also referenced Anne Rice's novels (but no other modern literature). Participants expressed that, alongside *Dracula*, the presence of a female vampire within Rice's works was predominantly low, and in the instances where she does appear, it is as a secondary character⁷⁹. Within this category, the majority of participants (41.67%) listed over-sexuality as the principal negative response⁸⁰:

⁷⁹ For example, Lestat's mother, Gabrielle.

⁸⁰ The only example of literature cited (albeit from one participant) was Rice's *The Queen of the Damned*.

“I do not like that even the most powerful female vampires in novels – Akasha comes to mind – can be overthrown by their own sexuality” (Participant 31, 2017).

It should not be inferred that Anne Rice novels are unique in containing sexualised female vampires, but, as participants did not reference any other texts involving this subject, it would be inappropriate to analyse them. To investigate further, it is necessary to examine the responses within the “Both” category – which also referred to over-sexuality as problematic (22.22% of participants – second-highest theme in this category).

Responses included:

- As vampire literature is intended for the male gaze, this influences the sexualisation of the female vampire – as evident within *Dracula* and *Carmilla*.
- *Carmilla* was identified as an ambivalent example of lesbian literature – as it served as a “cheap thrill” (Participant 25) depicting lesbian interaction.
- The predominant range of lesbian characters was limited to literary and screen⁸¹ vampires and so the participant only had a limited reference point when being influenced by LGBT+ characters.

Taking into account all elements of the data, a complex system of participants’ interpretations of the female vampire surfaces, whereby it is difficult to determine which era of literature is considered more representative of contemporary Goth females. However, it can be inferred that the individual characteristics of the female vampire are more influential when attracting the readership – specifically how the vampire is indicative of, and represents, an independent, empowered, and equal to (but not defined by) the male vampire. This suggests that contemporary female Goths are not restricted by era-specific literature, and are more interested in how the female vampire represents and can be interpreted to reflect contemporary social values – and indeed the idealised female performativity.

When analysing the data from all four chapters, a trend emerged, depicting a generational shift in attitudes towards the female vampire – thus impacting how my own novel could be placed within the market. For example, members of the 36-45 age bracket acknowledged specific traits of the female vampire which they associated with femininity;

⁸¹ Participant specifically mentioned porn.

however, the younger generation (18-25) did not. This is indicative of how perceptions of gender are evolving, and challenging traditional definitions. However, when considering how the female vampire is regarded in terms of being a role model, the 18-25-year-olds were more likely to view her 19th Century form more positively than her contemporary counterpart – whereas readers between the ages of 26 and 56+ held alternative views. Not only does this highlight how the younger generation engages with 19th Century literature, it gives further insight into their awareness of the genre and how they articulate their own knowledge of the canon. For example, only members of the 18-25 and 26-35 age brackets chose *Christabel* and *La Morte Amoureuse* as their favourite text; whereas almost all age groups chose *Dracula*. This suggests that although the arguably most famous piece of vampire literature was the most popular, readers in their teens to mid-30s are more likely to read a wide range of the genre.

For the purposes of my novel, the above data proposes that my targeted audience of Young Adult Crossover/New Adult (mid-teens to 18-30) reflects that of the participants most likely to engage with my text. Despite all age groups discussing both 19th Century and contemporary literature – in positive and negative ways – the fact that the younger generation prefers female characters from the 19th Century places my novel as an attractive option⁸². As participants referenced contemporary novels which depict the female vampire in positive and negative ways (i.e. Anne Rice and Charlaine Harris novels), it revealed the complex relationship between readers' perceptions of the female vampire and how she embodies the female experience. According to an article on BookRiot.com written by Kelly Jensen (2018), as of 2019 to 2020, a new surge of YA vampire novels are hitting bookshelves – predicted to reignite readers' love for the genre. For example, Renée Ahdieh's *The Beautiful* (set in 19th Century New Orleans, featuring 17-year-old female vampire Celine – released autumn 2019); and Kim Turrisi's retelling of the classic Gothic novel, *Carmilla* (released in May 2019). As is evident from these two novels, there is still an ongoing interest (and market) for vampire narratives which are set in the 19th Century – and with the inclusion of *Carmilla*, it suggests a growing resurgence in popularity for old classic novels⁸³.

⁸² De Volonté is primarily set at the end of the 19th Century, and so the characters reflect this society and culture. Although parts of the novel jump to modern times and the novel was written in the 21st Century, it is anticipated that the crossover between 19th Century and contemporary literary styles will be attractive to readers.

⁸³ The novel has previously been developed into a web series, spanning 3 seasons, and 121 episodes (IMDb.com, 2019). Additionally, with the announcement of *Dracula* being adapted for television by BBC and Netflix (BBC.co.uk, 2019), it is obvious that classic vampire stories can still attract audiences and be commissioned for various media platforms.

It is hoped that by including female characters with different (and, at times, opposing) personalities, my novel will attract a contemporary audience and challenge/comment on what it means to be female. By doing so, I aim to fulfil the needs of my potential audience (including the participants within my study) and create an independent, strong, and liberated female vampire, who can reach many readers, no matter their age, gender, race, or background.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate how the female vampire within 19th Century Gothic literature influenced/inspired the identity of contemporary female Goths. What transpired revealed a complex interplay of the participants' individual interpretations beside academic theories of gender definitions, social roles and sexuality (both pre-19th Century and present-day), and female performativity. At the beginning, I critiqued Sara Martin's response to the missing link between Gothic literary and Goth subcultural studies to demonstrate the problematic methodologies preventing an amalgamation of research opportunities. Whilst Martin acknowledges the necessity of using post-modern critical discourses and psychoanalysis to analyse Gothic literature, and the possibility of subcultural members opposing participation in research, my study reveals that the two subjects can be combined – and indeed offer valuable insights into contemporary perceptions of said subjects. What emerged revealed the high level of awareness contemporary female Goths possess when discussing which vampire texts contextualise historic and present-day societal dynamics – specifically female engendered cultural roles and identities.

As the research informs the character development within my novel, the data suggests that the creation of female literary vampires not only reflects shifting perceptions of females within contemporary society, but also contributes to the evolution of the vampire genre. The prevalence of participants identifying the genre as dominated by a male vampire – and indeed the lack of participants referring to the female vampire as a contributing factor when choosing their favourite literature – suggests that the character is being overshadowed by other factors (including literary stylistics) and thus needs to evolve to attract the contemporary female Goth reader. Certainly, as the majority of participants (second group) did not identify themselves as being influenced/inspired by the female vampire – due to her over-sexualisation and submissiveness – it suggests that the predominant interpretations of the character do not reflect the ideal embodiment of contemporary female identities. However, as participants recognised the various ways the vampire represents aspects of identity (e.g. transgression of gender roles and definitions), this suggests the importance of the female vampire representing social dynamics. The second group of participants who did acknowledge the female vampire as influencing/inspiring their identity credited her sexuality, mystery and strength. Also, the majority of the first group of participants regarded their choice of fashion and make up as being inspired by the female vampire. This suggested that identity must be regarded as

subjective and open to interpretation. Therefore, the subject of identity is indicative of both the participants' individualities and how they interpret the identities of the social structures surrounding them – localised, globalised, and historicised.

The analysis of gender definitions revealed the complexity of identity, both personal and social. The evidence pointing to the majority of participants identifying as feminine is clear, however, the instances of participants identifying as masculine, androgynous, or other (despite all participants self-identifying as female) suggests that contemporary Goth females are not necessarily constrained by societal gender definitions. Therefore, despite the claim that the Goth subculture predominantly values femininity over masculinity, the participants' self-identified gender renegotiates the reality of female engendered structures. This indicates that the application of social gender definitions ceases to be rigid – even perhaps relevant, if they do indeed continue to exist.

Regarding the female vampire, the participants' perceptions of her identity offers insights into the character's ideal representation. Factoring in participants' tendency to link the female vampire's sexuality to femininity (not exclusively, as it was also linked to masculinity), and yet classifying her strength, power (ranked high as a feminine trait), intelligence, and independence (not a high-ranking feminine trait) as the favoured characteristics, complicates how her identity is interpreted. Furthermore, the data proposes that – regardless of the literature's publication era – the traits related to sexual liberation and equality with men (both human and vampire) contributes to the character's appeal. Consequently, this reveals that the female vampire's ideal identity relies on non-gendered specifics – and are not restricted by academic readings interpreting the character as predominantly a metaphor for sexuality.

The subject of sexuality proved relevant when analysing both the Goth subculture and Gothic literature. Participants recognised that despite the Goth subculture allowing women sexual freedom and empowerment, female Goths are still subjected to negative stereotypes about their sexuality, fashion choices, and self-expression. So too, the female vampire's sexuality generates dichotomous representations of female performativity:

- It serves as a warning of the dangers of women's liberation and sexual desires.
- Alternatively, it represents the positive transgression of social restrictions, i.e. heteronormativity and dependence on males.

Participants also identified aspects of the female vampire as being submissive and subordinate to the male⁸⁴, which conflicted with those incidents whereby she was perceived as independent and rebellious⁸⁵. This suggests that the female vampire must be written to adapt and evolve to reflect the ongoing issues which females encounter, to both assert sexual independence, and give her an autonomous and distinct identity from the male. Not only will this allow the character to develop creatively, but will subsequently resonate with the contemporary female Goth readership.

As the majority of participants (first group) believed the literary female vampire's characterisation has evolved over the past century, it is important that she continues to challenge and reflect social issues – particularly those related to changing identities. Despite participants having conflicting opinions, the majority stated female vampires within 19th Century literature are better role models than their modern counterparts. Again, this related to negative depictions of over-sexualisation and the character's relationship with males – however, participants also recognised that the character is no longer necessarily limited to representing sexuality. Thus, it is suggested that these traits must evolve to create a dynamic and multifaceted contemporary female vampire, and, as a writer, it is evident that my own vampiric creations are subject to shifting social changes, cultural representations, and perceptions of femininity, which must negotiate the various themes and issues of female identity.

On a more personal note, the process of conducting this research has directly impacted my engagement with the literary vampire genre. For instance, when writing my novel, the findings throughout the study inspired the character development and relationships of/between the female characters. This was particularly relevant when writing the characters of:

- Peyton – as symbolic of the subversion of the traditional Gothic heroine by personifying traits which were traditionally seen as masculine during Victorian times (e.g. strength, violence, and adopting male fashion).
- Natashka – representing autonomous sexuality, and an independent spirit. She also revels in her own occult abilities, and is arguably the wisest/most intelligent character.
- Mhayree – it cannot be stressed enough how much Mhayree does not rely on men! Alongside her disdain for her husband/the Councillors and her

⁸⁴ Participants perceived these to be negative traits.

⁸⁵ Participants perceived these to be positive traits.

same-sex relationship with Mirella, she redefines her role as a woman, mother, and warrior (living in a repressive era).

- Mirella – embodies the dichotomy of the Gothic female. Her introduction depicts the oppressive results of living under a patriarchal regime – which plays out through her questionable maternal techniques and weak nature. However, by the end of the novel, it is evident that she possesses hidden strength and a mysterious past – therefore it is unwise to underestimate her.

Although these characters are not referred to throughout the study, by combining the critical and creative elements of the thesis, I aim to demonstrate how the two work in tandem to contribute to vampire literature/scholarship.

When engaging with the survey results, I chose to incorporate certain elements into the novel. For example, when creating the vampires, I wanted to reflect the diverse nationalities of the interviewees. This included characters from the UK (Peyton and Mhayree), France (Mirella and Jacque), and the USA (Clara). Although not all of the participants' countries are represented within *De Volonté*, there will be opportunity in future books to carry on this trend. Furthermore, I wanted to pay homage to the globalisation of vampire literature, and how such tales have been appropriated by almost every culture and country in the world. By creating multicultural characters – who, despite their differences, interact as a family – I also aim to carry on the tradition within Gothic literature to depict the political era in which the writer/reader resides, e.g. the current climate surrounding Brexit. While *De Volonté* does not aim to be overtly political, the subtext of various nations working together for a common good cannot be hidden – however it is ultimately the reader's choice as to how they interpret this specific narrative strand.

During the first drafts of the novel, the setting focused on a fictional island in Eastern Europe – situated between Finland, Russia, and Estonia⁸⁶. However, after submitting the opening chapters to a panel at the International Vampire Film and Arts Festival, one audience member asked why the story wasn't set in Scotland. After much consideration, I decided to move the location to that of my home nation, but create a fictional island in the Hebrides, whereby the lines between fact and fiction could be blurred. By setting the story in Scotland, it allowed me to add a Scottish "voice" to the overall narrative – including having a secondary character (Mhayree) originating from the

⁸⁶ This was to reflect the Eastern European influence upon the vampire genre, e.g. *Dracula* set in Romania.

mainland⁸⁷. Of course, the protagonist, Peyton, is Scottish, and with her French ancestry, her heritage pays homage to the Gothic tradition linking the genre to the political undercurrents of the French Revolution – as discussed in the Introduction. So too, in the novel’s prologue, Peyton references the island’s history and the immigrants who reached the island over many centuries (Hungarian vampires, Jacobites, French aristocrats, African slaves, and Irish farmers). Although set on a fictional island, the inclusion of this alternative history serves to demonstrate how the community was created through diversity (and subsequently overpowered by the Inservium) – which is reminiscent of the multiculturalism of the vampires. This is also evident during conversations between Peyton and Natashka about the diaspora of the covens all over the world – including, but not limited to, the four corners of the UK and ROI, Italy, USA, New Zealand, Russia, and Scandinavia. Although the first draft of the chapter included a full rundown of each original vampires’ descendants’ locations, it was removed during editing to prevent an “info dump”, however, the missing information may be included in future books⁸⁸.

As previously discussed (Chapter Two), the subject of race, and how it is underrepresented – sometimes misrepresented – within vampire literature and the Goth subculture, was explored by a number of participants. This in turn added clarity to my decision that the inclusion of black characters⁸⁹ would respond to the participants who suggested a need for more diversity within the genre. To do so, though, the subject had to be treated delicately, as I did not want to risk appropriating a racial voice or history that is not my own. Although I had every intention of including non-white characters within my story – this had already been decided whilst writing the chapter breakdown for the novel – it became apparent through interaction with social media that to do so, it must be done within clear parameters. For example, it is imperative to be mindful of black writers who are reporting on the difficulties they face within the publishing industry⁹⁰, and to acknowledge the need for more diverse voices within the writing community – without white authors attempting to appropriate non-white stories/narratives.

⁸⁷ Throughout the novel, it is suggested that Mhayree is Glaswegian. Her roots were inspired by my time at the University of Glasgow, as I wanted to reference where the novel started as a creative project.

⁸⁸ Whilst writing the novel, I also attempted creating family trees for each branch of the coven. During this exercise, I included links to Spain, the Netherlands, and Greece, amongst others, although not included in this project, the full illustration may be made available in the future.

⁸⁹ Although only one character is described as being black, it should not be inferred that she is the only non-white Phoenix. I want the reader to have the freedom of picturing the characters in various ways, so, at any time when the character’s race is not explicit, it should not be assumed that their default race is white.

⁹⁰ See: Adegoke, Y. 2019. *We’re in the midst of a black British creative renaissance. So where are all the black male authors?* (The New Statesman) and Green, A. 2018. *Diversity’s Bottom Line*. (www.publishersweekly.com) for details on issues surrounding diversity within the publishing world, and how the industry is aiming to tackle them to offer more opportunities for writers of underrepresented communities and backgrounds.

To expand upon the diverse nature of the novel, I chose to include two female characters who are in a same-sex relationship – Mhayree and Mirella. Although not explicit, the sexuality of each character within the novel represents varying points of the spectrum, i.e. Peyton (heterosexual in this story), Natashka (not specified), Mhayree (homosexual), and Mirella (bisexual)⁹¹. When attempting to explore the characters' different sexualities, inspiration came from engagement with vampire texts such as *Carmilla* and *Dracula*. For example, (as previously discussed in Chapters Two and Three) how the relationship between Laura and Carmilla is understood to be a warning against a supposedly subversive sexuality – i.e. homosexuality; and that of Lucy signifying the dangers of a woman actually *having* sexual desires. Not only are these depictions outdated, but they also no longer represent how readers want female characters – and sexuality – to be written. As indicated by interview responses, the notion of female sexuality (heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual) as being transgressive of traditional female roles not only perpetuates harmful myths about women's autonomy over their bodies, but also creates negative narratives about sexual independence and orientation. Within my novel, the female characters' sexualities emphasise the diverse nature of relationships and the importance of the LGBTQ+ community. Despite the majority of the narrative being set within Victorian Scotland when non-heterosexual identities were either misunderstood, criminalised, or hidden, the purpose to include said identities within my novel are threefold:

- To reflect contemporary society,
- To reflect how my vampires live outside the repressive boundaries of the human world,
- To challenge the political and social structures of Victorian society.

Therefore, the importance of female sexual autonomy and independence within *De Volonté* serves to offer an alternative representation of female roles, whereby the woman is in control of her own body and choices, and thus not dependent upon the male (human or vampire). This becomes evident when examining the sexual relationships of the novel's primary female characters. For example, various scenes in the novel depict Natashka's interactions with characters as having sexual undertones – this includes vampire and non-

⁹¹ Despite not all sexual identities being represented within *De Volonté*, e.g. asexual, it does not mean they don't exist within the world of the story, nor won't be featured in future novels.

human creatures alike, as she bites both male and female characters, and it is implied that she has engaged in BDSM practises with Sebastian the grotesque.

As discussed throughout this study, the act of biting and consuming blood is intrinsically linked to sex, however, within my novel, the process has numerous functions – other than simply being a food source. When the reader is first introduced to Natashka, she is feeding off of the vampire Torrin, however this is not to be interpreted as a sexual act – in the scene, Torrin is holding a blank piece of parchment, and it is implied that by exchanging blood with Natashka, the pair are attempting to spark his creative imagination to allow him to write. Of course, keeping in line with the traditional symbolism of blood consumption, certain scenes involving feeding are sexualised. This is evident during the depiction of Mirella and Mhayree having intercourse whereby the former's thighs are covered in bite marks. Not only does this lead to connotations of oral sex and intimacy, but there is a suggestion that by Mhayree ingesting Mirella's blood, she will be healed of the wound inflicted upon her during an altercation with a Councillor. The healing aspect of blood is also explored when the vampires are in battle against the Inservium – again Natashka feeds from Torrin to heal her arm – and in sections where characters transition into vampires (Katalin turning Jacque and Peyton being bitten by a spider). Therefore, the novel uses a mixture of traditional vampire tropes concerning blood and uses them to show an intrinsic link between sex, death, and transformation – all with the female figure in the central role.

It is hoped that by creating numerous and diverse characters, readers will be able to identify with at least one or have a favourite with whom to engage. The range of characteristics personified by the four central females⁹² aim to reflect the traits most favoured by the interviewees, e.g. strength, independence, and sexual autonomy – however, some characters act as a foil, such as Mirella during the first half of the narrative. Whether the character is old, young, disabled, heterosexual, homosexual, human or vampire, their most important factor is to offer a variety of representations of what it means to be female. Not only does the novel want to challenge perceptions of gender (particularly within the 19th Century), but it subsequently sets out to confirm that there is more than one definition of womanhood/femininity – and all are valid.

By engaging with the interviewees and Gothic texts from both the 19th Century and the modern era, I have become aware of which vampire tropes have stood the test of time, and which have become outdated. The ambition of my novel is to resonate and represent

⁹² But also including secondary characters such as Saara, Beatrice, and Hart, who may feature more prominently in future books.

contemporary females (and societal issues), whilst paying tribute to those stories and authors which have preceded me. By doing so, the novel will reflect past canonical traditions, whilst also attracting a contemporary audience. Furthermore, my engagement with vampire literature and scholarship has encouraged me to continue to explore this field – including embarking on a series of novels centred around the protagonists introduced in *De Volonté*, to further develop the artistic representations of female vampires.

Appendix A: Interview Questions for Original 7 Participants

1. What is your favourite classic Gothic literature featuring a female vampire? Why?
2. What do you think classic Gothic literature was trying to portray with regards to females and femininity? (In particular how this is represented through the female vampire)
3. Why do you think the figure of the vampire is so favoured for many of the Goth community?
4. What draws you to the vampire as an icon?
5. What does the vampire say to you about the female identity?
6. Many interpretations of the vampire aim to sexualise the character, how do you feel about this as both a woman and a Goth?
7. What are your thoughts on the female vampires within classic Gothic literature?
8. Does the imagery/identity/mythology of female vampires within classic Gothic literature inspire your own image/identity/persona? If so, how/why?
9. Do you think the image of the female vampire has developed through time?
10. Do you think there are differences between the identities of a male and female vampire within classic Gothic literature?

Further Questions Asked After Initial Interviews

1. Other than 19th Century Gothic vampire books, what vampire literature do you think is most popular within the Goth subculture and why?
2. Why do you think some vampire books are more favoured within the Goth subculture than others?

Appendix B: Interview Questions for Second Group of Participants

1. What is your age range and country?
18-25
26-35
36-45
46-55
56+
2. What is your favourite classic 19th Century Gothic story featuring a female vampire?
Why? Please expand in box provided.
Dracula by Bram Stoker
Carmilla by Sheridan Le Fanu
Christabel by Samuel Taylor Coleridge
La Morte Amoureuse by Théophile Gautier
La Vampire (The Vampire Countess) by Paul Féval
I prefer male vampire characters
I only read modern vampire literature
Other
3. Does the female vampire figure in literature influence or inspire your own identity?
Why or why not?
4. Do you think the female vampire in literature published before 1900 is a better role model for women than in modern vampire literature?
5. As a Goth and a woman, how do you feel about female vampires in novels? Please give examples of characters/books in your answer.
6. Are there any aspects of the female vampire that you categorise as being feminine, and do you recognise these qualities within yourself?
7. Do you consider your identity as feminine, masculine, androgynous or other? How do you create this identity?
8. Which aspect(s) of the female vampire attracts you most to the character?
9. What aspects of womanhood do you think the Goth subculture respects or disrespects?
Do you link any of these aspects to the female vampire?
10. Do you think the female vampire is favoured amongst female Goths? Why?

Appendix C: Interview Participants' Demographics

The following age range is for second group of interviewees

Age range	No. of respondents	%
18-25	14	22.95%
26-35	16	26.23%
36-45	18	29.51%
46-55	11	18.03%
56+	2	3.28%

Countries of second group

Countries	No. of participants
Australia	5
Canada	1
Denmark	1
France	1
Greece	1
Latvia	1
New Zealand	2
Norway	1
Philippines	1
Poland	1
Romania	1
South Africa	1
Split residence Spain/UK	1
UK	12
USA	28
Did not say	3

Favourite works by age range

	18-25	26-35	36-45	46-55	56+	Total	%
Dracula by Bram Stoker	6	5	8	8	1	28	45.90%
Carmilla by Sheridan Le Fanu	1	4	4	1	1	11	18.03%
Christabel by Samuel Taylor Coleridge	1					1	1.64%
La Morte Amoureuse by Théophile Gautier		1				1	1.64%
La Vampire (The Vampire Countess) by Paul Féval						0	0%
I prefer male Vampire characters	3	4	4	1		12	19.67%
I only read modern Vampire literature	2	2		1		5	8.20%
Other	1		2			3	4.92%

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