

# Hunter's Garden

A Remembrance

*HexDSL*



## **Things.**

Hunter's Garden by HexDSL

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For my father who will not get to read this.

*Dad. I'm sorry I didn't finish in time.*

# Chapter 1: Vampires.

I planned on opening in the usual way these things do, by talking about the rain, the moonlight, the smells of the city at night. The truth is that any of those would have done just fine, but I have chosen to do something different; I have chosen honesty.

My name is Michael. No, no I can't go through all of this with my real name, that's too much honesty even for me. My name is Gabriel. No. That sounds stupid, okay, how about I just stick to Mike. Yeah. Honesty.

My name is Mike. I kill Vampires. Wow, that really does sound cheesy. A friend once told me that you can't tell people you fight monsters because you sound deeply fucking unstable. She was right. Well, there's no other way I can say it without sugar-coating it or talking in some complicated abstract way. I guess whatever I could come up with has already been the topic of some overly romanticised teen literature. Yeah, cheese or no cheese, here's the truth with none of that romanticised crap to shine the nasty bits.

My name is Mike and I kill Vampires. This is my story, oh crap, what now? Am I setting myself up for a fucking movie-of-

the-week? No, shit this is going badly. I have to stop overthinking this and just get the hell on with it.

My name is Mike. I kill Vampires. I'm writing this because I have fuck all else to do and I'm scared. For the first time in... Well, as long as I can remember. I'm scared and I regret that there's no one I want to talk to one last time. There's no family to mourn me and there probably won't be any friends left to bury me. These may be my final hours, and I'm using this letter to explain it all. Why? Because I hate that my profession is little more than the topic of TV shows and fantastical books.

It all started something like six months ago to the outside world. Not that time means very much to me anymore. I came home from work. It was about ten at night and no, I didn't come home to find my family slaughtered or a Vampire in my bed. Nothing quite so exciting I'm afraid. I came home to my one-bedroom flat in the middle of an area that resembled a landfill. The lift was broken (again) so I had to walk up to the sixth floor. Into the sixth door of the sixth block of flats. Into my boring untidy little home. I lived alone back then because I was a loser with no girlfriend, no pets and no interests.

I put my fresh twelve-pack of cider on the kitchen bench and turned on the TV. Its glow lit my open-plan living room and kitchen. It was a ritual for me; after a long day at work, I would come home and watch whatever brain-dead spoon-feeding distraction was on television. Drinking whatever was on special offer at the store and wondering when life would start for me. Tonight I was fortunate, life was going to be starting.

I sat in my chair for a while switching between nineties sitcoms and music television. I must have fallen asleep, for a while at least. A sound woke me. The television was showing

late night shopping advertisements and the can in my lap was warmer than usual. The large window at the front of my living room opened a crack. I could hear some arguing coming from the street below.

I was a little drunk and a lot tired. The window was letting in both the annoying noise of the city outside and a chilled breeze. I wandered over to close it. If I had chosen to stay in the chair then my life would have gone in a very different direction. I would have probably kept the same job for the rest of my days. Eventually met a girl who didn't hate me and I would have grown old. Probably got run down by a bus in my twilight years. But no, I had to look out of the fucking window.

You see, at the time I didn't know it but I was living in a place that was what I now know to be a 'void window'. A place that is in an ancient or even future holy site. Or, in my case a cursed number. Six hundred and sixty-six, the number of the beast is what people call it. I'm not sure if that's very accurate but because of this, I was able to see events with a purer view, less shrouded by the expectations of the mundane world.

You see, if I had lived in flat number five or flat number seven, I would have seen an average everyday stabbing. I would have seen a young man in the street get stabbed by a larger man. But no, I lived in flat-six, on floor six of block number six. Because of this, I saw what I should not have been able to see. I saw a huge bald, grey and winged creature put its hand into the chest of a young man and suck out his life. The city lights became a little more vivid than usual and the air looked somehow crisp and frozen. There was a wave of energy that left the victim in a glorious white glow.

The creature stood taller for a moment as it pulled back

the glow that was so eager to leave. The body looked suddenly lifeless and fell to the floor. It's hard to describe how you know, but if ever you witness it, something inside of you just knows. I had witnessed a soul being removed.

I can tell you one thing for sure, I was a little shocked. This wasn't something I was ready to see. Not that anyone ever really is, not the first time. But then, I did something that was really, really stupid. I banged on my window and shouted some very morally sound things, probably "Noooo" or "why God? Why!" or some other shit. To be honest I can't remember exactly what I said. It's not important because the point is, I drew attention to myself.

When you're in a void the window works both ways. That unnatural beast heard me. Instead of looking up and seeing a man who has witnessed what he thought was a random act of violence, it looked up and saw me as my true self. It saw all the things inside me that I never even knew were there. Infinite potential or wasted possibilities. I don't know. I'm not sure how we look to them. I reckon that it's probably a good thing that we never get to see our own souls. I must have looked good though because it tilted its head at me, like a curious dog and then started coming my way, eyes fixed on the window as it strode towards my building.

If you were looking at the event from outside its intricate layers you would have thought that the stabber (is stabber a word?) was going to silence a witness. If I had lived in any other flat then that may have been exactly what I thought was happening too. I lived in number six, and because of that, I knew that a huge almost stone-like monster that could suck a soul out of someone's body was coming for me.



I was scared.

I pushed across the blinds with a desperate panic. I turned off the TV and I backed away from that door. My heart was pounding as I had never known before. I had no idea what I was going to do. No idea what that thing was going to do to me. I wasn't even sure what I was waiting for. Would a monster knock on the door or ring the bell? What was I going to do? Was I supposed to grab a knife? A baseball bat? You see so many movies, you figure you'll know what to do if something like this happens to you. Trust me, you panic. If you're a selfish useless slice of shit like I was, you hide and cry and pray to a God you don't believe in. I sat on the floor at the side of the door. It seemed as good a place to cower as any other. I was Pathetic.

It turned out that monster's ring the bell. It rang the bell again, and again, and eventually banged at the door louder and louder. Soon it stopped banging the door and I stepped closer, then closer to it. I was breathing so heavily that it's a wonder it couldn't hear me. Maybe it could. I was shaking all over. I leaned in a little closer, perhaps to get a better sense of the thing. I could see a shadow in the crack of light at the bottom of the frame. The breaks in the strip of light told me that it was still out there. It rang the bell again.

I actually laugh to myself now when I think back to what I was; scared, confused and so sure that this was a dream or a mistake or joke or, I don't know, something not real. I should have grabbed the biggest knife I could find from the kitchen and tried to kill the bastard thing. Maybe even turned it on my own pathetic neck and rid the world of such a waste of skin.

The crack of light cleared. I heard the footsteps of the thing leaving my 'welcome' mat. A few seconds later I heard the door

at the end of the hall swing closed. I sat on the floor for what seemed like hours. Eventually, I moved to my sofa. I cried, from confusion; from fear. I cried like a child until dawn.

It was at dawn that for some reason I felt safe again. I looked out of my window and there was a police car and an ambulance, as well as some people by the body of the man I had seen killed, had seen destroyed. I was sure that it was only a matter of time before the police would knock on my door asking me if I knew anything. What would I say? What can you say after that? It was just about then that my mind cleared. I was still scared to my core but that urge to live had kicked in. I had somehow formulated a plan.

Eventually, the knock came. I could hear the pops and bleeps of a police radio from the other side. As I expected, they were doing their job. I opened the door, was greeted with a polite “Good morning sir, I’m sorry to bother you but there has been an incident and we were wondering if you...” I’m not even sure I let him get that far before I blurted out the rambling line I had rehearsed in my head just moments before. “Yes! Yes, I saw it all and the guy who did it saw me. He came here and banged on my door!”

What happened next was a blur of questions and answers and more questions. The next thing that’s relevant to the story happened a few hours later at the station. I had been through my story at least five times and each time I gave an honest account of what happened, but I used the word ‘attacker’ instead of ‘monster’ and ‘attacked’ instead of describing how the victim’s soul was pulled into the hand of the monster. I even told them that I couldn’t describe the ‘attacker’ because it was too dark, even though when I had looked through my window it wasn’t

dark at all; it should have been but it wasn't.

I was starting to relax at last. I was genuinely beginning to feel like I was safe. Surrounded by police and treated like a star pupil. I was, after all the only witness to a violent murder. It was when they told me I could go home that the fear set in again. The police officer assured me that he would 'post a man' outside my door and I would be perfectly safe. That always works right? He even started telling me how no one would try anything with a police presence at my house. Even if I wasn't hiding from a monster I wouldn't have trusted that one!

I was scared again and when I was scared I was stupid. I had convinced myself it would come back for me. The thing would come back as soon as it was dark and kill me. It would walk away from my corpse without a second thought.

I told the police officer that I would rather stay at the station and that I didn't feel safe going home. He assured me that the attack was completely random and the knock at my door could have been anyone. He was even amused at how scared I was. That's when the desire to live made me do something that I am fairly sure saved my life. It was also incredibly stupid. I hit the wanker in the face. I hit him so hard that I broke his jaw and then when he hit the floor I kicked him in the ribs. Not proud of that bit. Not even a little.

I was cuffed and ruffed up just a little bit before ending up in a cell by myself. There was a lot of chatter and shouting around the station. I was surprised about the excitement, to be honest, I would have thought that police officers got punched in the face often enough for it to be a normal occurrence but they were taking the whole thing very seriously. I hadn't resisted arrest. Actually, I had apologised for my behaviour. I wasn't

violent by nature, not back then. I did feel bad about hitting the officer but it kept me in the station for at least the immediate future. I figured it was a good move. Locked in a nice safe cell in a station full of police, the safest place I could be.

Other than the verbal abuse I was getting from the police, a loyal and protective bunch of public servants, I felt safe. I was fairly sure that the monster I saw wasn't going to do a rendition of the Terminator and come into a fully manned police station to get me. Not even in the middle of the night. I slept well, oddly. I have no idea what time it was when I was woken up by the smell of smoke. Not the smoke of fire but of a cigarette. I sat up fast and with a jolt. The aged mattress in my cell gave off a telling squeak. Holding cells are not what you come to expect from the education of television. They are tiled rooms with clean floors and a not altogether unpleasant chemically clean odour. Most of all, there are not entire walls made of bars like you see in westerns. They have large metal doors with little windows covered by a sliding panel. Very civilized.

I could smell smoke. It was dark and there was only a subtle light coming from the edges of the cell door, the moonlight streamed in from the little window. I backed into the corner of the little cradle-like bed. The telling squeak sounded again. The door of the cell opened and the light from the corridor streamed in, it took a moment for my eyes to adjust.

I was scared, again. A feeling I was starting to think of as familiar. As my eyes cleared I could see a tall thin man dressed in jeans and a shirt standing in the doorway. He was the source of the cigarette smell. The man sauntered into my cell and I knew there was no way he was a police officer. He was too relaxed and rugged, too elegant. He sat down at the end of my

little mattress and took a long drag of his cigarette. "You've had a hell of a day haven't you Mike." The words left him with an effortless charm. He looked to be in his early fifties and had the demeanour of a war veteran. Steely confidence with a little bit of madness in his eyes.

I swallowed hard, my mouth was dry with fear. "You could say that, yeah" I said. I wasn't really sure what to make of this situation so I thought it was best to just be honest. "I only punched that guy so I could stay in the cell. It's safer here" I added. The man took another drag of his cigarette and spoke again. This time with some laughter in his voice. "No shit" he said. "My name's Howard. I know what you really saw Mike, question is do you?" I was starting to feel better. This was it. This is how it's supposed to happen. If you get into some fucked up supernatural shit there's supposed to be a powerful stranger. Someone to come and get you out of it. That's how all the story's go. I sat up. "Well, I saw something. It killed a man. It looked to me like that thing sucked out his soul. It was a white light that came from all over that guy and just got sucked into the scary bastard's hand." Howard flicked his cigarette into the hall. "Yeah, that's about the gist of it I suppose." He stood up and began to leave. "Come on then, we had better get to work."

I followed Howard through the hall and to the desk where the night officer was sitting. He stood up as we approached. "Hey, he can't just leave!" The officer probably had more to say but Howard interrupted with a cold and somehow eerie tone "Fuck off." The officer sat back down and pushed the buzzer that opened the door. We just walked straight out of the station. No one so much as gave us a second look after that.

When we got into the street outside, he changed somehow.

He looked older, less confident. He began to talk as he walked. "What you saw was a Vampire, big one too. It knows you saw it. It has your scent. It's going to hunt you down. Kill you and keep your soul." At this point, I was ready to believe anything. I was about to ask if leaving the safety of the station was a good idea when Howard began to talk some more. "I had to get you out of that station. I need to get you up to speed before it's too late for you." I was worried, that didn't sound good. Howard lit another cigarette and began to walk a little faster. "Your flat is what we call a void window, it's the sixth flat, on the sixth floor on the sixth block and other shit like that. I know that doesn't mean much to you but that makes it a window. A place that allows you to see through The Wind. Not this everyday crap that you think is reality. There's a lot more underneath that." He sounded crazy. Like the sort of people that write massive paranoid rants all over the internet. I believed him. There was no other explanation on offer so it would have to do.

He talked for another twenty minutes or so. I won't try to remember the exact conversation but Howard told me about Vampires. He explained that there are different types of Vampires but they all want to consume your soul. Some suck it out of you through your blood. Some, like the one I saw, just reach in and take it. Some torture it out of you. They are all Vampires, some old, some young, some don't even know what they are themselves. The part that freaked me out was that apparently now I had seen something through one of these windows I smelled different. I smelled better to Vampires and I had to toughen up before I was lunch. I was scared again. I wanted to believe he was talking shit. I wanted to believe he was a lunatic... I believed every word.

We stopped walking. We were outside a garage. Nothing fancy. Just a garage where you put your car. It was a small single car garage with a blue metal door, there were six garages. One was missing its door. There seemed to be teenagers getting drunk in it. Howard took a key out of his pocket. The key was old, it looked like the key to a castle but somehow it fitted the little padlock that kept the door sealed. I literally can't describe how it fitted. Even now I understand all the little tricks and tools I can't actually describe it. It's like your brain doesn't want you to know some things.

Howard tugged at the bottom of the door and it swung up and open just like any other garage door. Inside the garage, there was no car. There was no oil-stained stone floor or anything else that would make any kind of sense. There was a large green field, a blue sky and a man in the distance who appeared to be playing golf. Yeah, I know how this sounds.

This was a magical thing I was seeing. My mind had nothing to compare this to. I think that's the key to dealing with impossible events. Don't try to rationalise it. Just accept it as something new. Normal life doesn't equip you with a frame of reference for ancient magical workings.

It was the middle of the night in the city. It was dark and I was looking into a garage and watching a man playing golf on a sunny afternoon. It was impossible. I knew that I was about to sound naive to Howard but I didn't care. "What am I seeing? Is that the future or something?" Howard laughed "Don't be stupid; if time travel was possible I'd just go and stop Eve eating that fucking apple wouldn't it! This, my friend, is the Garden and you are very welcome here." With that, he walked into the garage and I followed.

I looked back to where I had come from. It was a swirling hole in the air. There was a static hum. Howard reached back and pulled on the garage door, as it slid closed the swirling doorway vanished. As the last glimpse of the city faded I noticed how dark and lifeless it looked. The humming faded. I felt sick. The change of air and light made me nauseous. Like waking up when light hits your face after a long night's sleep.

"We're safe now, Vampires don't exist here" Howard spoke with confidence. I knew I really could relax. I had known Howard for less than an hour but I knew that I could trust him. If he said that I was safe then I knew it was. I did not doubt that much.

The man that had been in the distance playing golf was walking towards us. As far as I could see in any direction there were massive rolling hills and blistering sunshine. The man looked to be in his early sixties and wore golfer's clothes. He was shorter than Howard but just as thin. He looked a lot healthier than Howard too. Though he did have a very slight limp. He seemed to glow with warmth. As he got closer he put his golf bag down. He mopped his brow with a little white cloth and waved for us to come closer. We did. Howard shook the man's hand and introduced me "This is Tom, he's kinda my boss. The boss" Tom nodded at me and with a well-spoken voice, he said "Hello Mike. I'm sorry you got dragged into all this."

The three of us talked as we walked. I wasn't sure where we were going. I was just happy to feel safe. These men seemed to know what they were doing. I understood at the time that Tom was like a Vampire hunter manager. He sort of oversaw the 'war' as he called it.

As we walked across the rolling hills Howard and Tom tried



to gently tell me about this new world I had fallen into. It seemed like no one ever actually 'signed up' to hunt Vampires. People like me just got mixed up in it when we stumbled on the right conditions to open a 'Void.' Once we had, we were targets. We could either join the 'war' or get killed. I tried begging Tom to let me out of this unfair deal. He genuinely seemed to feel sorry for me. He explained that I really only had the two options. I could train to be part of the 'war' or I could go home and be dead before morning. Thinking back, it was nice of him to bother explaining it to me so gently. He should have told me to shut my mouth and be grateful that Howard had the time to save my pathetic hide.

I could see a building in the distance, it was a large white house with ornate little stone walls defining its gardens from the rest of the grassland. It was like a delicate historical manor house. The sort of place you go and visit when you're on one of those boring school trips as a kid. There were people everywhere. Some sitting at little metal Garden tables with soft white table cloths drinking tea; some dressed like it was a formal Victorian Garden party and others in quite modern jeans and T-shirts. Most carrying assorted weapons. From swords and knives to staffs and what looked like wands. I had a flash of headache every time I considered what I was experiencing. I was inside a garage that was in what I assumed was another dimension or some other sci-fi bullshit. I was watching people wandering around a wonderful garden in the sunshine. But it was nighttime outside the garage and I was supposed to become a Vampire hunter or die. My mind was blown. I had very little logical thought going on. I did manage to ask "What the hell am I supposed to do now then?" Howard looked at Tom then

at me, with quite an honest and dry tone he said “It’s easy Mike, you try not to get killed.”

Tom had arranged a room for me in the large white house and instructed me to take a well-needed shower and to get some sleep. Howard walked me into the house and through the endless corridors. The house was luxurious and as clean as the day it was built. There were ornate old fashioned light fixtures and expensive-looking ugly carpets all around. It was like a living museum. It had not one single sign of wear. Everything was pristine without a single exception. The house itself was vast like it had been built to house a small platoon of occupants. It looked way smaller from the outside. No magical geometry was at play though, it was just a lot longer than it looked from the front.

Howard stopped outside a heavy-looking white door with a brass knob in a corridor that had red floral wallpaper and a vase next to the door. “This is your room now” he said. I looked at the door. There was no lock and no number, it was just a plain white door with an oversized knob. I wasn’t sure what I had expected but at the very least I thought I would be shown around a little. “Is there anything I need to know?” I asked sheepishly. Howard yawned, he was tired and didn’t want to tolerate my silly questions for much longer. “Just take as much time as you need and take what you like out of the wardrobe. I’ll be around when you’re rested.” With that he walked off, in a rush to get to sleep I think.

I looked at the door before opening it. I reached down to the large brass knob that protruded from it. The door was as heavy to open as it looked. Inside my room, I was surprised to find a massive bed as you would see in the grandest hotels. No duvet

though, instead layers of thick blankets were draped across it. It was decorated as I expected from what I had seen of the rest of the house. There was a large wooden wardrobe and a window that seemed to be screwed shut. There was also a smaller door on the far side of the room. I quickly found that this opened to my very-own Victorian-style bathroom. It contained a raised bath on tiny metal legs and had one of those shower heads that was screwed onto the taps. There were towels aplenty and even an assortment of colognes with some shaving supplies. It was like this room had been laid out for a visiting dignitary. In the bedroom, the wardrobe was stocked with clothes and shoes. Lot's of them. I didn't investigate that too closely. I closed the thick curtains and crawled into the bed for the best sleep I had ever had.

There were no clocks in the house and my watch had been taken from me by the police when I was rightfully slammed into a cell. I had no idea what time it was. I slept for hours, I assume. When I awoke the sun was still streaming in through the gap in the curtains. I wasn't sure what that meant but as no one had woken me I assumed it was okay and that I had not slept past my quota. I took a quick bath as an indulgence, and because I didn't actually understand how the shower tap worked. The towel that I found next to the tub was of the finest quality that I had ever felt. It was fluffy and soft but also heavy and large. Granted I wasn't that well travelled but I knew quality, even then.

I was feeling rested and energetic. My jeans however did not have the same glow of freshness that I had acquired. I investigated that wardrobe in more detail. It was well stocked with various garments. The main door revealed shirts of assorted

designs. Mostly single colours. Suits, cargo pants, jeans. It was crammed full of options and all in my size of course. This made me smile to myself and for some reason came as no shock at all. This place was as perfect as it could be. The deep drawers at the bottom of the wardrobe contained assorted footwear, from classic dress shoes to the most modern running shoes. The more modern stuff looked oddly out of place. The chest of drawers next to the wardrobe contained an indulgent assortment of underwear, including an oddly extravagant amount of socks. I took some fresh blue jeans of superb quality, a black T-shirt and a rather nice brown suede jacket. Granted my fashion sense wasn't very advanced but I thought I looked good. I decided to stick with my own trainers, they were nice and breaking in new ones seemed pointless. I checked myself in the mirror, I looked good. I passed my own test of style and to be honest, at that point I didn't much care what anyone else thought.

I hadn't been told what to do next so I wandered through the house. There were lots of people, they all ignored me for the most part. They all looked like they were busy going somewhere, meetings maybe? No laptops in sight. I did get the occasional smile and nod. I felt like I had been there forever. I eventually found myself walking out of some already open patio doors into the wonderful garden where I could see Tom sitting in a little chair drinking tea, alone. He waved me over.

"Hello Mike, did you sleep well?" asked Tom politely as I sat down. "Yes, thank you. How long was I out for?" His response really didn't come as a shock to me at all, in fact, I think I half expected it "Oh. It doesn't actually matter, time has no real hold over us here. You slept as much as you needed and that's a good thing." I had a feeling that my relationship with Tom was going

to be filled with cryptic lines and half-truths. I was not to be disappointed.

There was quite a range of fruits, cheese and bread on the little table. Tom told me to eat. Unsurprisingly the food was exquisite. Rich flavours and bold colours struck me with everything I sampled. I was starting to get the idea. Everything in the Garden was always going to be perfect. I asked the obvious question "What is this place? It's like a dream."

Tom smiled and poured me some tea from a little pot. I added my own milk. There were still a lot of people in the garden. Some were obviously on the way somewhere and some were just sitting reading, or like us taking tea and nibbles in the sun. Tom took a deep and filling breath "This place is our sanctuary. It is anything we need it to be."

He asked me about my life. He listened intently to all the events that had led me to this afternoon tea. He listened about how I had not been popular at school and how I went from pointless job to dead-end job to no job and then to crappy job. He honestly seemed interested in me. No one ever had been before. He listened to how I came home and got drunk. How I looked out of the window and saw that thing, that monster. How I saw the Vampire kill a stranger. He listened to how I sat cowering in fear for the whole night. He didn't judge me. He didn't tell me I was a coward. He understood that I was a civilian and I had witnessed an impossible event. Something I wasn't ready to deal with.

He then went on to tell me about void windows. That any place derived from significant numbers or a holy patch of land, from the past or future, could, on occasion serve as a void window. They could become a doorway under the right conditions.

He explained that the reason I had never seen anything through the window of my flat up until then was probably that there had been nothing to see before.

He told me about the unseen hand that they called the 'Wind'. The Wind is the reason that people do not see these strange things every day. The Wind is the ethereal misdirection that makes most people see impossible events as everyday ones. No one really knows how it works but you can rely on it to cover your tracks. It will make the slaying of a Vampire in a public place appear to be a work of entertainment to the crowd. A chase between you and a pack of Vampires to be looked upon like a policeman chasing a crook. The Wind is nature's lie that keeps the two worlds apart. Only after someone has seen through a void for the first time is it possible for them to accept the world without the Wind and even then, it takes dedication of will to see the world for what it truly is.

One point was repeated to me over and over. If you are killed by a Vampire you're not just dead. Your immortal soul is trapped inside it until it dies. A person killed by a Vampire is not at peace and will not move on. They are forced to endure in the darkness where every moment is a thousand years of torment. It's this darkness that allows them to live for so long and with enough souls as fuel, they will have limitless power. When a hunter kills a Vampire they are putting the souls of all its victims to rest. This, I was told, was work to take pride in.

I remember clearly the final thing that Tom said to me while we drank tea, it was haunting at the time. He took the last sip and leaned forward and said "I'm sorry Mike. You are part of our world now. Through no fault of your own. You are part of it nonetheless." He leaned back again and added, "If you must die,

then die well.” He leaned further back in his chair and looked up at the perfect clouds for just a moment. He then stood up, smiled at me and walked away from our little table.

As he left he called over a young woman who was standing by the wall to the side. She was a soldier, she carried many weapons and made no effort to hide them. Her hair was in a neat ponytail and her jacket was a flattering fit. It was the kind of thick material, not especially military looking but the kind of jacket you see those hunting types wear. Her legwear matched, functional and well-fitting. He spoke to her briefly; I couldn't make out what was said but she briskly walked over to me as Tom slowly walked away. She was quite short and looked to be in her twenties. She didn't sit down. “Mike?” she asked. I nodded. “I'm going to get you combat-ready. Come with me please” she spoke sternly. I followed her without saying anything. We went to the far wing of the house and entered what appeared to be a training room or dojo of sorts.

There were one or two groups of people training with swords and some practising martial arts. The room was large enough that you could play football in there if you wanted to. The floor had rubber padded training mats scattered around and what I assumed were training weapons on the walls. There were also some very interesting wooden chests and cupboards around the edges of the room. I didn't get to inspect them closely. There was one much larger cupboard in the middle of the wall directly opposite the entrance. It was slightly sloped towards the top and had a different look from the rest of the room. It was a rougher older looking wood.

The young woman, who had not bothered to properly introduce herself, handed me a leather wristband that she had

fished out of one of the chests while I was taking in my new surroundings. "Put this on" she barked.

The wristband looked like a cheap TV prop, it was thick and chunky brown leather, looked mass-produced and had some holes punched in it. It was about six centimetres wide and had a brown lace tied to one hole. I realised this would be how I fastened it. I put on the wristband using the string and holes to make it snug. "What is this?" I asked as I messed with the fit. She took hold of my arm and tightened it properly for me. "Just because you saw one Vampire it does not mean you're free of the Wind. This is a training tool. It will help you see more clearly" I nodded, it seemed to make sense that seeing through this supernatural force would require some training. "How does it work?" I asked. The woman grinned menacingly "Pixie magic." I wasn't sure if she was joking or not but thought it best not to challenge her further.

She asked me "Do you have any experience with weapons?" I answered honestly "No, I'm sorry. I'm more of a video games and pizza kind of guy than a..." she nodded and waved a hand as if to silence me. She took a small charm out of one of the drawers closest to her. She tied the charm to my wristband. It looked like a blue crystal wrapped in a thin red string. It seemed to glow. "You're going to be a warrior soon. This charm will give you the knowledge. Then it will be gone" she said cryptically. I had no idea what that meant but I nodded anyway.

She then handed me two small daggers. They were unimpressive to look at. They were simple straight pointy things with red fabric wrapped around the handles and tied off at the base. There were no other ridges on them but there was a sharp-looking blade on each edge. She asked if I knew how to



use them. I shook my head while I admired them, studied them. I had never held an actual weapon before.

The woman took a sword from the wall and without warning, she swung it at me. Shocked, I stumbled back and instinctively I tried to block her attack by pushing the flat portion of my blade flat against my wrist and allowing the sword to impact that. Something that made perfect sense to me but I had no idea why at the time. I was oddly impressed with myself. I held the other dagger in the air ready to attack. I could see the blue charm on my wrist glow vibrantly for a moment. It grabbed my attention away from the actual attack. I hadn't had a close look at the charm before. It was a tear drop shape tied haphazardly but very firmly with the red string. The charm itself caught the light, or did it glow? It was quite pretty.

My training partner while still pushing against my dagger leaned in to catch a glimpse of my charm. She nodded and stepped back, releasing her attack stance and lowering her weapon. "You're ready now" she said. "What? I don't get any training? That's it?" I must have sounded so desperate. She closed the doors to the cupboard she had opened. "We don't train anyone here. You train yourself, we just give you the tools to do it properly" she put her sword back on the wall and instructed me to go and find Howard in the garden.

I admired the daggers for one last moment and offered them back to her. She shook her head "Keep hold of those for a little while until you fancy something a little more refined." She pushed them gently back to me. "Okay, thanks. I think" I paused for a moment while I realised that I was likely to injure myself. "Do you have a box or something?" I asked earnestly. She sighed with very real irritation. She snatched them from

me and effortlessly flipped them over in her hand. She stepped a little closer and slid one into each of my jacket pockets. "We're done. Howard is looking after you. He's out front."

As I tried to find the right path back to the exit I had used earlier I was thinking to myself about the events of the morning. I stopped at a window in the hall and looked at my reflection in it for a moment. I wanted to fit in here. I didn't want to die and I liked Howard. I wanted to pass inspection. My focus changed for a moment and I saw the people carrying weapons openly outside. I moved my daggers from my pockets and pushed them down the back of my belt so the handles were pressing into my spine. It probably wasn't that safe but it would look a lot smoother when I pulled them out. Howard was bound to ask if I had everything I needed and I didn't want to fumble my armed debut.

Sure enough, Howard was waiting at the door to the garden. He was smoking, as I had come to expect. I hadn't paid much attention to how he looked the last time we met but I did this time. He was wearing a dark shirt with an old jacket over the top and jeans with baseball shoes. He carried a black canvas messenger bag. His hair was grey and his stubble was too little for a beard but too much for a day's growth. He was also quite scrawny. There was nothing particularly remarkable about him. I had a feeling that this was by design.

"Are we ready to get your Vampire now?" He asked. Howard seemed well rested now. I asked him what the plan was and he said that he didn't like plans. We walked a little way away past the garden wall. Howard took two sticks from his satchel and banged them together. The sticks looked like thick drumsticks with a short thin black ribbon hanging from each. In the time it

took for him to strike them together again I blinked. Instantly I was somewhere else. I was standing in the garage, the door was half open and it was dawn.

The city Snapped into focus a few moments later and my ears were flooded with the sounds of my world again. I felt sick and a little disoriented.

There was no field, no sunshine and no white house. I shook off my moment of confusion and then I tasted the air. No longer the crisp clean country air of the Garden but instead the tainted oily air of a city. I was back where I belonged. Back in the real world. Back where there was no magic and no sword fights with attractive strangers. No tea with interesting gentlemen and most worryingly none of the promised safety from supernatural soul-stealing monsters.

## Chapter 2: Birth.

Howard opened the garage door all the way and the sounds of the city streamed into focus. For the briefest of seconds, it was overpowering. “What do we do now?” I asked. Howard zipped up his jacket, it was cold outside, “Well” he began, “it knows where you live. I suppose we should go to your flat.” I could see his logic but I thought he had overlooked something. “Won’t the police have been there by now? May still be there?” I asked. Howard pulled out yet another cigarette. “Tom takes care of that sort of thing.” He took a deep drag of the now lit cigarette and continued as he exhaled “Just like he sent me to look for you. That’s what he does.” We started walking as he continued, “He makes sure society, you know, the masses, don’t get in the way of our job.” That seemed a fitting purpose for someone of Tom’s temperament.

He had struck me as calculated and methodical from the moment I had seen him. Compared to everyone else that I had met in this new world he was by far the least jaded. Or at least not as pissed off as everyone else had seemed. I wondered to myself if this life, whatever it was, attracted this sort

of temperament or if it created it.

My flat was quite some way away, “Why don’t we just get a taxi?” I asked. Howard shook off my suggestion, “We walk whenever possible. If we are on the streets then we have a better chance of stumbling across one of them.” Howard’s confidence and demeanour made his unnerving statement sound almost reasonable. I looked up at the morning sun “Daytime? Vampires?” He actually smiled a little. “Oh, Vampires don’t like the light, but they do tolerate it from time to time.” I found myself slowing down at that revelation and had to speed up to stay in polite conversation distance. “What do we do if we find one?” I inquired sheepishly. Howard petted his satchel and said with another little smile “Oh, Vampires? We kill them before they kill us.” At the time I couldn’t understand how it was possible to be so sure of yourself. I was (on some level at least) looking forward to seeing Howard show off his skills. Even though I knew it would mean that I would be in mortal danger.

The streets were never empty in the city. It was just beginning to get fired for the day. Commuters bustling past. Some with headphones on, oblivious to us. Most rushed by clutching coffee cups. We were barely at the edge of the city’s heart but even here, the cogs of the modern world could be seen moving. The morning was crisp and a little cold. We kept walking. I felt like an outsider now. Not a man who lived here and had lived here for years. I was not quite attached to this world now. I assumed this was the shock of the recent events taking their toll.

It must have taken us an hour or so of reasonably brisk walking to get to my home. Just as predicted, there was no major police presence at my flat. There were just one or two

officers still at the site of the attack though. "How long were we gone again, Howard?" I asked. "I don't know exactly. It took us a while to walk to my Garden entrance. Then an hour or so to get here." Howard answered as he threw his cigarette end into the road. He took a good look at my building from the edge of the street.

It took me a moment to process what Howard had said. I shook my head as I spoke "Yes, I know that. But we were in the Garden all morning and I have no idea how long I was asleep for." Howard shook his head back mocking me a little, or at least that's how it felt. "Look, kid, it doesn't matter how long you're in the Garden. You arrive back just as you left." I mused about the reality of that. How long would have passed in the Garden before we returned? How did all this work? I opened my mouth to ask about all the practicalities but Howard got there first "Don't ask. It's mysterious and ancient magic. Not the kind of thing that us mere mortals can ever really understand. It works. Accept it. There's no point trying to figure it out." He had certainly had this conversation enough times that he had that stern question stopping reply in the barrel without even thinking. He was back to eyeballing my building before he had finished the first word. Howard's experience again shone through. It was starting to feel a little intimidating.

My building looked uninviting and needed more than a little maintenance doing. I looked at it for the first time realising how depressing it looked. I was filled with an oppressive sadness looking at the place I had called home for so long now. The memory of the Garden seemed like a neon dream compared to the grey concrete that was my reality again now.

As we climbed the damp concrete stairs to my floor a reali-

sation hit me “The police took my stuff, I don’t have my keys” I barked with frustration. Howard sighed with irritation. “Stop thinking like a civilian Mike.” We pushed the rough old fire door open that separated the staircase and the hall. I almost ran to my door. Oddly pleased to be back at a place that felt like normality.

The door was a pastel blue with a silver metal handle and a bronzed letterbox that didn’t match that handle at all. There was a single long and stained maroon carpet strip running the length of the corridor, it was tattered at the edges. Other than that it was all the same concrete grey. The rest of the doors had matching letterboxes. Not that it mattered. The post was collected downstairs in the entrance hall. I tried the door, knowing it would be locked. I was trying it for effect, to illustrate to Howard that we were locked out. Not to actually gain entry. “I should go see if the caretaker has a set of keys” I said as I started back towards the staircase. “He has an office in the basement.”

Howard lifted the flap on his bag, fished around for a moment and pulled out a rather long and very thin blade. “I think I have a solution that doesn’t involve six bloody flights of stairs.” He then effortlessly stabbed the dagger into my lock. He twisted. The door opened. The lock, however, was destroyed. “Great, and now I’ll need a new lock.” I gestured my hands towards the door to signal my annoyance. “You do realise that you don’t live here anymore? You do get that right?” He said as he pushed into my tiny flat, judgmentally looking around. It hadn’t occurred to me at all. I hadn’t thought about what happened after this one Vampire was gone. I had just assumed that life would go back to normal. I wasn’t ready to leave it all behind and join a war that I cared nothing about. I didn’t think that telling Howard

about this feeling would have been a good idea though.

Howard sat in my armchair and started picking up all the things around him. My little coffee table was piled with crap. Empty cans; old magazines; a Laptop; even some cold Chinese food containers. Howard looked out of place. Up until now, I hadn't seen my new friend interacting with the 'real' world like a normal person.

"So..." I muttered as I started making coffee in the little open plan kitchen. "Vampires? You've not told me much about them, all the stories true?" I asked, more to make conversation than anything else. Howard didn't answer.

He didn't speak again while I made the crappy instant coffee for us. "I don't have any milk. You want sugar?" I absent-mindedly asked as I double-checked the grubby fridge. "No milk. No sugar. Just strong" he called back. I walked the coffee over to him "I don't think it's as good as the Garden will have." I apologetically muttered as I handed it over. He looked happy, just a little. He seemed pleased to get the shitty coffee. He looked up at me from the armchair "When all you ever get is perfection, a cup of dicey tasting brown goo can be a wonderful change."

We sat, basically in silence for quite a little while. Howard wasn't a man interested in small talk. After a few short sips of coffee that I was fairly sure was too hot to drink he took a knife and a stone from his bag. He started sharpening the blade while he looked out of my window. "So we wait?" I sighed. "I'll wait. You do whatever you want" he replied. I was starting to realise that Howard's demeanour occasionally slipped. His stern words and direct nature were occasionally punctuated with a warmer tone. Like he was working hard to be aloof with



me. I decided that I didn't understand this man at all. I also decided if I would be at least vacationing in his world then I should get a few things together.

I looked for a backpack or satchel in my bedroom, to take one or two things along. Maybe make all this less painful. Howard had started rummaging about in my refrigerator. He called through "Yeah, so. Nocturnal evil. Not massive fans of crosses, garlic or running water." Was he beginning to warm to me? I heard him open a can of something. I had beer and a couple of ciders on the counter. He must have decided it was a better option than the coffee. "They can come out in the day but they just don't see too well. If they have to, they can hide in society. Moving about like normal people, just with worse eyes. Never seen one sleeping though." Howard spoke about Vampires like he was describing cattle or rats. To him, they were targets, nothing more. "So what about coffins?" I called as I reached under my bed, "Not sure where that one came from, to be honest." That was a first, there was something about the enemy that Howard had no answer for after all. I pulled the old dusty rucksack out from under the bed and brushed it down. No spiders. A win, finally.

I considered Howard's wisdom for a moment and came up with another question. "A coffin would be where you wake up when you first become a Vampire, maybe?" I was pleased with my hypothesis. Howard replied quickly and sternly. "No, you have that wrong. Sometimes when a Vampire takes a soul the body keeps on going and a body with no soul is just a newborn Vampire. Some are born Vampires. No one gets buried as far as I know."

I walked back into the living room to get some clarity on

this matter. "Some people just aren't using their souls?" I asked, expecting to get shot down again. Howard took a bite of a sandwich he had finished making from the remains in my kitchen. He swallowed, looking at it suspiciously and answered with his uniquely eerie sincerity "Yes, that's right. Some people are born to become Vampires and that soul they have is just an anchor that slows them down. Soon as they lose that, the change happens fast." He took another bite then continued. "You get to recognise them eventually. They're nothing more than well-behaved evil. Until they lose that anchor." Howard's tone was serious and dark, his next line hammered home his point perfectly "Sometimes I think that it's best they do become Vampires. Can you imagine the atrocities that could be done by a thinking, feeling human? At least Vampires have simple needs." I thought it best not to work this topic any longer and wandered off to find some stock for my rucksack. "Of course. The word Vampire is actually a general term for any evil that feeds on souls. There's not just one type. Not all start human." He raised his voice as he heard me moving things around in the other room. "We don't much bother with the ones that don't bother us. If they're not eating people, well souls at least, then it's not a high priority for us."

I found myself realising that there was a lot more nuance in the monster world than it had first appeared. I took my toothbrush and one or two other items that I thought I may need, including a spare wristwatch and my ageing laptop. I also felt that the remaining cans of cider from the fridge deserved a space with me. Looking back it seemed so childish to take these material things as if they mattered. As for the wristwatch, there's day and night, every other way to measure is a waste of

time.

I had more questions, and as Howard was, for whatever reason now willing to talk. I pushed forward. “Do they have friends and jobs and all that?” I sat on the sofa and packed away my laptop and charger. Howard finished his can. “Sort of” he said. “They seem to have packs sometimes, like wolves. But past that, I don’t really know. Not that chatty.” He stood up to inspect the view from the window a little closer. His sandwich was finished now, he shook the crumbs onto the floor.

A few hours passed. A little quicker now we were finally talking a little. I was still not used to my weapons. I adjusted them, tried various ways of concealing them. Nothing seemed practical. Howard was sitting in the armchair watching cartoons on my television, smirking at my awkwardness. Eventually, he took pity on me “Just shove ’em in your belt” I did, it was practical but not exactly hidden “Yeah, if I want to get arrested as soon as we leave here, this is definitely the way to go.” Howard changed channel on the TV and opened the last can that wasn’t already stashed in my bag. “I see the training is as good as ever then. Those weapons you have are from the Garden. The Wind hides them because they are...” Howard paused as if trying to find a word that was descriptive enough “Let’s say magic.” I looked at one of my daggers. It didn’t look very magic. It looked old and a little battle dented. To be honest I still wasn’t sure I even knew what to do with it. “Magic, huh?” I observed as I stuck it back into my belt. Howard nodded, “Yeah, for now, let’s say magic. If you turn out to be any good at this I’ll go to the trouble of explaining properly” I knew what that meant. It meant that he didn’t see the point in explaining anything to me because he was still of the mind that I would

likely end up dead in my first real fight.

We sat and watched the television for hours. We even ordered pizza in the afternoon with help from an emergency credit card that I kept in my wardrobe. Howard never said very much that had any relevance. He would comment on the crap television show we were watching but it was obvious that he didn't want to get to know me anymore. I think his earlier chatty moments were a result of him forgetting to distance himself. Distracted by a comfy chair and a TV. I suppose that was a compliment, the less he knew about me the less it would bother him if, or when I got killed.

The hours ticked by and eventually, the lack of conversation broke me. "I'm shit scared you know." I blurted out. Howard lit his last cigarette. He had smoked two packets while we had sat there and watched the terrible shows that he had deemed worthy of not flicking away from. He seemed to really like cartoons for some reason. He looked at me for a long second "I know you are. We're all scared to start with. Nothing I can say will change that. Look, when this mother fucker who took your life turns up here, kill him; don't be sorry. Just kill him." He fixed my gaze "Then, I think it will all be just a little bit easier." I wasn't sure that it would be any easier, I wasn't sure if I could fight. I knew I didn't want to though.

We walked to the local shop and got more cigarettes for Howard. I walked to the checkout and paid for them. Evidently, Howard didn't carry money. That didn't surprise me. I was right there at the checkout, the lady looked at me and didn't say a word about my two huge knives. They were right there in plain view. Hanging from my belt. Howard was right, things were different for me now. It was empowering to know that I

was standing in a shop with a handful of people, two weapons right by my hand and no one could see them. It made me feel powerful, safe. I was told that it worked as a warning system. If someone took a double-take at my weaponry there was a good chance they were a hunter or a Vampire. I kept a keen eye. We walked back to the flat and watched more TV, the conversation was kept to a polite minimum. I could see how this life could also distance me from the very people I was charged with protecting.

Eventually, it began to get dark. I sat at the window, I knew it was a void window, I knew that I would see it coming. I wasn't sure how dark it needed to be before it would risk coming out. How dark it needed to be for it to be able to see well enough to hunt. To hunt me. Howard was still watching TV, relaxed, enjoying himself I think.

It had been at its darkest outside for hours before I saw it coming, the beast; the thing that knew I had seen. It was coming now though. It was moving slowly in the shadows but it was there. It hugged the wall of the building across the street, eyeing up my window. I assume it saw me too. "I see it!" I exclaimed softly. Howard just sat there. He glanced at the window to the street. "I know Mike." He said, finishing his drink and stubbing a cigarette out in an empty can he was using as a makeshift ashtray.

Within a few minutes, I couldn't see it in the window anymore. I knew it was inside my building. Howard finally decided that it was time to move. He stood relaxed in front of the sofa. He turned the TV off. He stretched his neck from one side to the other; like a prizefighter warming up before the main event. He began to loosen his arms with a shake to check his muscles

were still in order.

I heard the thing coming. It was coming to kill me and all that stood in its way was a tall thin man who smoked too much. A man who was almost definitely a little drunk. The beast's shadow was in the open doorway, tall and stocky. Moving with elegance. Then as the shadow slid into the room, the beast, the Vampire filled the opening. I hadn't seen it this close before. The thing was over six feet tall and its massive wings sat behind it; pinned like a cape. It wore denim jeans filled with holes and smelled like rotting meat. Its body was sculpted like the mightiest of bodybuilders or the finest of lions but the skin was a mottled dusty grey. The face was what I noticed next. Its face was as human as mine, albeit grey and dirty. The head was completely hairless. It lacked the will to make that cold face make any expression at all. The thing looked dead when it didn't move. Like a shark moments before the kill. It didn't look like a man, not really. More like the remnants of a man; calling it the remains of a victim would have been more apt I suppose.

The thing seemed to growl when it saw Howard. Its mouth opened a little, like it was trying to show its teeth; like an angry dog. It lacked the facial dexterity to truly pull it off. It knew that this was not going to be the easy pickings it had planned for. The beast spoke with a voice that didn't match its body. It sounded human, even a little warm. "Are you a Hunter?" it asked, Howard just looked at it. He had no desire to get into a conversation. The beast looked at me next. I must have looked pathetic clutching weapons I didn't know how to use and hiding behind my guardian. The beast smiled at me, or was it trying to bare its teeth again? It was hard to tell.

The stand-off lasted only a few seconds. It was the beast that made the first move. It lunged forward with a definite supernatural grace that was defiant of its bulky mass. Instead of showing a weapon or even punching the thing, Howard simply stepped aside. It had come for me. Howard never intended to stop it. What was happening? Was he just there to document my death?

It was the electric tingling in my wrist that I noticed first. In the fraction of a moment I had to process it I felt like the little charm on my wrist was crackling with static and energy. Shining as bright as the sun, just for me. I felt the teachings it held sink into my mind. In the single second that lay between me and the beast, I felt myself turn from a scared child into a skilled warrior. As a warrior, what did I do? As the thing fired itself towards me, I simply stepped aside. It didn't have time to stop itself from smashing through the window, it almost hit the floor outside before its great wings stretched with a single mighty flap. With the same grace that it had charged at me with, it flew back to the opening. As it came to a landing I knelt and with timing that I never knew a human could have, I pushed both daggers upwards into the air piercing the heart of the thing. Using its own momentum to seal its fate. It fell, like a stone it dropped in front of me toppling against the television crushing it. Little sparks were coming from the debris under it. It was dead. I had killed it, and it was easy.

I looked at the charm on my wrist, it was white and pale, the energy had gone from it. It looked like a little costume trinket that a child would wear now. Drained of any magic, I assumed. I pulled it off my wrist. The leather ties snapped and I tossed it at the corpse.

Howard gave me a clap, "Looks like you have what it takes then!" I took a long look at the corpse I had just made. I hadn't killed anything before, aside from the occasional troublesome bug that is. "It was the charm, not me" I replied without thinking as I wiped the black blood from my weapon. "That's only partly true Mike. Only about twenty percent of people can absorb charm's" Howard sounded apologetic. There had been an eighty percent chance that him stepping aside would have condemned me to death. Even though I now realised that the best way to deal with the forward motion of a stack of meat like that was in fact stepping to the side. I too had instinctually stepped away the moment the little trinket on my wrist had shared its wisdom. But he had stepped away knowing it was coming at me.

Eighty percent chance I was going to get thrown out of a window and die. I mulled it over for a moment. Howard got a little extra information in, thinking I was going to be angry at him "The first charm has to be absorbed as a reflex, there isn't a way to test without real danger" I thought about that again. I didn't care... I was a hunter now.

I looked around my home, there was a lot of damage and blood sprayed about the room. I realised that this place could mean nothing to me now. I had absorbed the charm and the foundations for a life as a hunter had been laid down within me. I knew that the little charm had changed some part of me but I didn't care. I knew that attachment to my life was a hindrance and I was better off without it. I also knew that it was the charm that had made me believe this. It was a strange feeling. Like waking from a sleep that had lasted my whole life and thinking how silly that dream had been. Anything was possible for me now. Making sure my weapons were clean was now far more



important than the state of my home. Looking around that place I was ashamed of the shallow existence that I had led. The whole time as I thought these things, I was aware that it was a perspective that had been pushed into my mind by the charm. I didn't care.

I snapped myself out of my internal reflections. "What do we do with the body?" I asked. Howard smiled "Waiting for it to turn to dust are you?" He was right, I suppose I was. Howard lit a cigarette, took a deep drag, then flicked it at the corpse. It lit up instantly. "The dead ones burn real well, it's the lack of moisture. Even the bones burn, but we don't need to worry about it. We just kill them." I picked up my bag and pushed the daggers back into my belt. We walked away as my home began to burn, "Other people live here you know." I pointed out as we walked out of the building. Howard shrugged it off. "They all have fire escapes." He seemed heartless at first but he took the time to call the fire service at the payphone at the end of my street. Maybe he did care.

We headed back to the garage, this time while we walked Howard was more talkative. He took the time to share his knowledge. Now he knew I had the ability to use these charms. It was like I was a real person to him. Maybe before that, I was just a potential decoy; or a burden.

He told me about the Garden and how the ancient hunters had made a deal years ago with the last living pure daemons to get access to it as a safe place to operate from. There was more to the story but it was far more than Howard himself knew at the time. The old pure daemons were not like the Vampires we hunted now. They were basically gods. The name 'Vampire' was given to them after some war that fractured most of them

into these monsters we now had to deal with.

We entered the Garden again. Stepping from the dark city into the light of the summer sun. It felt like coming home after a long time away. I suppose in many ways it was. Everything in the Garden was as it should be. By comparison, the city was a shadow of a place with nothing to offer us. Not when compared with this perfection.

It was a common sight for weary Hunters to wander into view covered in blood. In this place, wounds were not as real as they were in the city. In this wonderful place blood and cuts seemed to matter far less. Just being in the Garden was a form of healing. Usually by the time that we had walked to our rooms the worst of broken bones were just stiff muscles, those cuts and slashes that had covered us in blood were just grazes and best ignored. As for ripped and torn outfits, somehow the laundry service in the Garden cleaned those away too. The strange thing was that no one acknowledged these little miracles, it was just taken as everyday life for Hunters.

After we both cleaned up in our rooms we met Tom by the little chairs at the back of the house. I was wearing a grey vest and some long track shorts. Howard wore a casual white shirt and some boot cut jeans. The casual attire seemed fitting and a little celebratory. I don't think either of us was in the mood to try and impress Tom. We ate burgers and drank tea. There were some tents in the Garden now offering food and drink. We felt a connection, Howard and I. Now that he knew I was able to absorb the charms I was a recruit to him, not an irritation. I guess I was Howard's partner now. Like buddy cops on an adventure. We talked about my future. Tom told me that now the first charm was absorbed my training could really begin.

He also took a moment to apologise for the danger he had put me in. As he spoke I realised how cold it had all been. They could have faked an attack to activate the charm, but if it hadn't have worked I would have been a liability. They would have been stuck with me. Letting a Vampire kill me was the easiest solution for them. The charm worked for me though. I had been baptised in blood. This realisation tainted Tom's warm smile somewhat.

Howard and I spent what seemed like months training in the little dojo. I could absorb or as Howard called it 'drain' the charms now by getting my adrenaline flowing and working up a sweat. Howard let me drain more charms than I could count. Some were tiny ones teaching me specific techniques for blocks or counters. Some were massive and contained whole tomes of knowledge about Vampires and their history. It was like the information was being placed into my mind as I sparred with my partner. The best I can explain is that I had known these things and learned these skills a long time ago, the charms were just helping me remember. Draining them was an obsession for me. I wanted to be the best Hunter I could be. Not only so I could stay alive in battle but so I could keep people safe, protect civilians so they wouldn't have to fight as I did. That was what it was all about. I couldn't help but feel like this new life was a gift. I felt confident and powerful. I knew that when I returned to the city, I would be a predator.

As much as I enjoyed seeing the little stack of empty charms build-up, it was exhausting. I had to keep training physically to let the charm's wisdom soak into me but at the same time, it was a mental workout. The headaches and fatigue were all part of the normal training side-effects I was told. Even if there was

more to it than that, simply being in the Garden for extended periods cured every medical issue that the Hunters had ever encountered. I noticed that there were no Hunters wearing glasses.

I asked about Tom's occasional limp I had noticed once or twice. Howard and I were sparring as usual. "He spends a lot of time out of the Garden." Was Howard's response to my observation. "The old ailments come back" he continued as I went for a low sweep of his legs. He hopped over my attack and countered with a kick aimed at my head. I rolled away and effortlessly returned to my feet. "We hardly ever actually make contact anymore. Why do we keep training even when I'm not draining charms?" I asked, a little out of breath. Howard smiled as another of his kicks ended with a theatrical spin. "Well, Mike my friend. After years of civilian life, you need all the exercise you can get!" He gestured to my sweaty brow as proof of this. We were starting to find a beat with our back and forth now. Mostly me claiming I was already as good a hunter as him, all the time knowing that it was a total over-statement. He would tell me that I had spent too long as a civilian and wasn't cut out for this life, knowing that I had taken to my training like I was born for it. The banter made the training sessions far more enjoyable than I thought they should have been.

A few days after my initial training sessions I was shown a library that was in the back section of the house. It was truly massive and was stocked exclusively with the kinds of books you see in old movies about wizards. Leatherbound and hand-written with ornate flourishes. I spent each of what I considered to be my evenings reading diaries and mission reports of hunters long retired or killed. I wanted to know everything I

could about this world. It was liberating and wonderful. Because it was always the middle of the afternoon in the Garden I could spar and train as hard as I could, take a bath and read in this wonderful Gothic room until I could keep my eyes open no longer. Then every morning when I would wake up it would be just in time to meet Howard in the Garden for breakfast. Howard was fond of fruit but I had discovered that one of the buffet tents usually contained far more appetising bacon and eggs. Every few mornings Tom would wander over with a cup of tea in hand. He would ask about what I had learned and offer stories of other hunters missions. I was starting to feel very happy with my new life.

One sunny morning Tom had a job for Howard and me. He had written a name and an address on the back of a photograph of a woman. "This woman is our enemy, she feeds Vampires. Take care of the matter." That was exactly what Tom said. "Take care of the matter." The photo was black and white and of a happy looking woman. Slim and confident looking. She wore a dark suit and appeared to be oblivious to the camera. We had no other mandate or information than that. Howard said that Tom was in favour of giving hunters room for interpretation. I was just pleased to be given a task. This was my first real mission. I was a hunter and this was my mission. Was this woman to be killed? Were we to murder a human? I shared my concern with Howard. "I've been given a lot of missions that sounded sketchy but they have never ended in any ways that stopped me sleeping at night." He got up to leave. I followed him.

## Chapter 3: Momentum.

Instead of heading to the house, he made a beeline for one of the food tents that was always dotted around when people were eating. We casually greeted the catering staff as we walked about the tent “Where do we even hire all the staff from anyway?” I asked. Howard glanced back at me “We don’t. They are all Hunters.” “What?” I exclaimed. “Hunters cook the food in the buffet tents every day?” Howard nodded as he grabbed an apple while briskly walking to the back of the tent. “Look, you know how time works here. After doing this for a while you’ll want to help out in other ways. Trust me.” He said all this in quite a matter-of-fact way. “But training, hunting, missions?” I barked. “Mike. Time doesn’t work here. Not sure you noticed this but things are screwy. People get bored and stick to the stuff they enjoy. Help out in different ways.” I was still a little confused “But don’t we have an enemy to fight?”

Howard had reached his destination, a large storage shelf at the back of the tent. There were at least six or seven people working in this area, none with weapons on show. As he assessed the shelves he spoke again “I had a mission go bad a

while back. Needed some time to decompress. I almost died. I was outnumbered by some big fuckers. When it was all over I took some time off hunting and peeled potatoes for a bit. It's good work in here and no one is trying to eat *you*." He took a long box from the shelf. "What are we even doing in here?" I asked. Howard shook his box at me "Where did you think I got my Cig's from?"

I stopped off at my room to get a jacket and some proper boots. Now I was closer to being a properly trained Hunter I didn't want to be in combat without the right footwear. Trainers were not good for fighting. Howard looked around a little "Do you do anything in here? This place has no personality at all. It's the same as the day you moved in. Have you even turned that laptop on since we got here?" He gestured to the bag I had brought back from my old life. "No", I said. "Do you see a power socket in here? And I doubt that the Garden has Wi-Fi!" Howard ate a bite from his apple "I don't know anything about computers. I barely know what one is but if you want or need this 'wife-eye' then the Garden will have it. Also, you don't need to charge batteries here." He said as he chewed.

I honestly hadn't considered that this amazing magical place could have modern world internet and a computer would just feel out of place. "You should go see the technical guys on the third floor" Howard finished and took another bite of his apple. "We have tech guys?" I queried. "Ha! You must love that library if you've not even had a proper nose about the house" he smiled, which looked odd on him.

We left my room and I turned to head to the patio. "Time for a new lesson" Howard said as he gestured to the other hall. We walked to the far side of the house, near the library. Instead

of going straight ahead to where I had been making my regular pilgrimages. We turned down to the left, heading for where I knew the rear Garden area was. Before we made it to the rear patio door though we turned again and down one or two steps. I had seen a staircase in the main hall of the house, ornate and wooden but these three or four metal steps down seemed to not match the rest of the hall.

All the doors in the house were heavy and large but this one was the first I had seen that wasn't painted white. It was striking metal with no markings at all and a bar across it like a fire exit, not a little brass handle like the rest. This door at the end of those few steps made me realise how little I had explored. "How did I not notice this?" I asked, more to myself than Howard. "Don't feel bad. The house, the Garden. It has a way of making you miss things until it becomes relevant to you." Howard pushed the bar down as he spoke and the door opened under its own power.

The sound hit me even before I had stepped through, hums and talking and sounds of activity like nothing else in the Garden. The smell was pungent and tropical and accompanied by a wave of cool air. Inside the room was a lot larger than I expected. Impossibly large. I was in an aircraft hanger but with rows and rows of storage shelves. They were high too. There were a few free-standing ladders on wheels and a few people with clipboards who looked like they were cataloguing things. The place was busy and loud. There was a massive door at the back of the huge room. It was open and I could see tall thick trees outside blowing in the wind, being pelted by large raindrops. Not the Garden at all. I was in awe. "Just when I think this place makes sense it all gets bigger... Again..." I



trailed off as I basked in the sight of the place. Howard nodded in agreement. “Wait until you meet the Gardener” he joked as he gave me a friendly slap on the back to snap me out of my moment.

We walked towards a large table with a tall woman standing next to it. She looked like she was in her early thirties and wore the more serious military-looking jumpsuit that I had seen a few hunters opt for. She signed something on another woman’s clipboard and handed her some papers. The woman left. The tall woman spotted us. “Howard!” she exclaimed. Stretching out her long arms to my friend. He gave her a mighty hug. Her hair was long and dirty blonde, fixed into a loose knot at the back. She wore a little more make-up than I had seen other hunters wear and her nails were painted in a striking purple.

“Mike, I would like you to meet my dear friend Anne. She runs this little warehouse of wonder.” Howard looked a lot happier than usual. I shook her hand politely. “Ah, Michael. The new guy!” She spoke with a shrill voice but her tone was warm and friendly. It tells you a little about someone when you are introduced as ‘Mike’ and they instantly call you ‘Michael’. I’m not sure exactly what it told me. I noticed it though. “I swear, they like to keep the warehouse a secret just to watch all the new recruits look as shocked as you do right now.” She smiled gleefully. “I get a kick out of it too, if I’m honest.” She was nice. I liked her instantly.

“I’ve not seen you around the Garden, or the house have I?” I asked. It was a little to make small talk and a little because I hadn’t seen her before. “No, no. The Warehouse services multiple sites and we have our own sanctuary.” The words had a casual ring to them but the implication was anything but.

“What?” I almost barked. I was instantly shaken by the idea that there were more Gardens. Howard had one hand on Anne’s shoulder. It didn’t strike me as a flirty gesture, more the relaxed interaction that comes with a very old friend. Howard smiled and gestured towards a metal chair near the table.

“Right, as I said. Lesson.” Howard began as he pulled in his own chair. The table was covered in documents and clipboards containing what looked like inventory reports of some kind. There was a very rugged looking laptop directly in front of Anne. Howard took a cigarette out of his packet almost sub-consciously as he spoke. Anne shot him a look and he put it back as automatically as he had removed it. “We have to get supplies right? Before a mission, we may need some gear. A new weapon. Specific equipment for the task at hand perhaps. Maybe we need some cash for this one? Maybe we need to make sure a vehicle is waiting for us. Oh, the dojo; those weapons have to get replaced as we break them. The food deliveries, tools, equipment. All of it. It all comes from the warehouse.” He nodded at me as if being firm with his words was going to make it all make more sense. Something he did often. He continued “Well. All the Gardens” Anne interrupted with the word “Sanctuaries” Howard carried on talking. “Whatever, They all need supplies. All the sanctuaries need stuff. Well, rather than them all sourcing it themselves, they all come to this place. It’s a room within all the Garde...” He stopped himself before finishing and selected a new word “within all the Sanctuaries.” Anne smiled at his correction, he didn’t notice “And it’s the only overlap we get with other Hunters.” Anne rolled her eyes and corrected “Operatives,” sternly.

I sat and looked in awe at this place again, now with renewed

interest. "There's more than one Garden?" I asked. Picking it out as my first question of many to come. Anne smiled and put out a hand to stop Howard from talking again. "Yes. Every hot-spot area has its own sanctuary. Its own operatives who are trained and optimised to deal with regional supernatural threats." Her voice was less warm now and more like someone giving a presentation. I had not heard anyone use the term 'supernatural' in reference to Vampires. I had also not heard the words 'threat' or 'operatives' being used before. She continued "A long time ago, it was decided that we would centralise resource management and logistics. This place, the warehouse, was set up as a stand-alone supply chain." She spoke like middle management, not a Hunter. She was nice but she was clearly not in the same fight as the people I had been spending time with.

She continued now about how the sanctuaries supplied healing and the crystals that trained us. What wasn't supplied were food, other than the fruit trees that grew in some of the sanctuaries, weapons, clothes and other such consumables. The 'structures', as she put it, were supplied with the Garden but could not be built on or changed in any way. Which explained all the tents that were in our Garden.

I also gleaned that all of the 'sanctuaries' were not the same. Ours was a wonderful Victorian house with rolling hills but the warehouse was in a forest of some kind and it seemed like early evening. Anne also mentioned the unfortunate team that got stuck with a cave, and rain.

Our conversation, or lesson I suppose, carried on for about an hour. Mostly me asking questions that were either replied to with Anne's clinical observations or Howard's signature 'ancient

magic' line. Either way, I had a much clearer idea of what I was part of now. Up until this point, I had assumed that our Garden and its Hunters were the only people taking part in the war. The last thing that was explained, very clearly before our lesson was over, was that all of the sanctuaries were independent and had no knowledge of other teams' locations. No method to communicate at all with each other. We were all alone and the only backup we had were the supplies that Anne organised. Anne also made clear that she was under strict orders not to share a single event or name between groups. Howard quickly added that we were free to talk to anyone else we bumped into here though. Just in an 'off the record' way. The reason for this was so that if one sanctuary was lost then others would not be put at risk. The warehouse itself was the only overlap.

When Howard and I stood up, I assumed we were leaving. The tone shifted to actual business. "Well, it's been wonderful chatting as usual Howard." Anne was being more professional now. "I know what you're here for though. It's fixed." Howard Grinned at her now. It was a grin of actual joy. Anne gestured to a young man at the far side of the nearest shelf. The man left and a few moments later arrived at the table with a wooden box. A tiny chest would be more accurate actually. He placed it down in front of Howard and waited for him to open it. Howard, who was still grinning, opened it up. The lid opened towards me. It wasn't until he took out the contents that I knew what it was. Howard pulled out a large revolver. It was silver and had an oak coloured handle. I didn't know a lot about guns and no one in the Garden had spoken much about them. This was an old six-shooter. It was quite a bit larger than I expected a gun like that to be. "We use guns?" I asked, or exclaimed I suppose.

“No” replied both Anne and Howard at the same time. After a brief and lustful look at the gun, Howard stood up, flipped it around in his hand like a sheriff from the old west and slid it effortlessly into a holster on his right hip. A holster I had failed to notice up until this point. I raised an eyebrow to myself at this oversight.

“We don’t use guns, but you do?” I asked, pointing back and forth between us. Howard smiled and patted his weapon like it was a pet. “I’m the exception. It came with me when I was recruited.” He adjusted the holster’s belt loop a little “It got busted up pretty good a while back. Anne here called in a favour with a friend of hers. Got it fixed for me.” Anne admired it on his belt “The bullets are pretty hard to find, so he doesn’t get to fire it as often as he would like’’ she looked at Howard affectionately. “I think he has it more as a security blanket at this point.” She then nodded to the young man who delivered it. He scurried away with the box the moment Howard had taken all the ammunition out of it.

“The other reason you were here though? I assume you’re looking for something for Michael?” Anne enquired. Howard nodded and said “Yeah. He’s still using the training Knives at the moment.” Anne scrunched up her face in disgust. “Ewe” she said absentmindedly. She tapped some buttons on her laptop then reached for a clipboard in the pile closest to me. She flipped some papers over and asked me “you like the knives?” I took them out from my belt “They were given to me on the day I arrived. Not given it much thought honestly.” Anne took them off me and put them on the corner of the desk. Again, looking a little disgusted. “You know we literally have every hand weapon you could ever want and they still pass newbies the worst stuff

they can find. How any of you don't die on day one is beyond me!"

Howard was still distracted by his new (or old) toy and was adjusting it to get it to sit just right. He had also put some of the bullets in little loops on the belt. "He's trained in all the usual stuff. He likes staffs but has more natural skill with those daggers." It warmed me a little to know that Howard had noticed that I liked staffs. We didn't talk about preference while we trained. I needed to be effective with every weapon the training room had. Preference hadn't come into it. "I suppose if they throw duel knives at every recruit they'll get it right at least once" Anne added.

She nodded to herself for a moment intently studying the clipboard and then barked "DX three, slot four" at Howard. "Get it yourself and then clear out. I have a delivery coming in any second now." Howard nodded, looked at me and said "DX three, slot four." We walked down the seemingly huge arrangements of shelves. It reminded me of one of those secret storage facilities you see in movies. Then it occurred to me that this was exactly what it was.

We used our extensive knowledge of the alphabet to navigate to the third aisle marked with a 'DX' sign. Slot four was a glass drawer on the edge of the shelf. Howard opened the drawer and, for the third time that day, grinned. "She certainly does have the best toys." He gestured for me to take my new weapons. I stood in front of the drawer and peered in.

On a bed of what looked like ash were two old looking knives, daggers really. Curved blades, edged in red with ornate handles. The tips of the leather tied grips were themselves tiny blades also edged in red. There was a familiar-looking charm

between the two. "Wow!" I said "Nice." Howard nodded "And assuming you get along with them, they're yours." I took the charm first and tied it to my wrist strap. I had gotten pretty good at this. Every charm I had drained had lived on my wrist for a little while and it was a little embarrassing asking for someone else to tie it for me each time. Everyone else could do it with one hand so I had learned too. "It should be a little one. Just the finer details of how these specific blades are best handled." Howard said with a little reverence in his voice. "Anne must like you." He added.

I reached in and took the blades both at once. They were heavy but felt good to hold. I tapped the flat part of one blade with the point of the other to see what the red edge was made of. It appeared to be a red crystal, just how it looked. The blades felt amazing to hold. None of the training weapons ever felt truly dangerous. These would have felt dangerous in anyone's hands.

I pulled back my jacket to push them into my belt and smiled to myself when I realised my belt had changed. It wasn't the simple leather with a silver buckle that I had put on that morning. It was thick leather with an old chunky metal clasp. There were red metal loops on it that I already knew that daggers would hold them perfectly. I flipped the blades in my hand and slid them into the loops. There was a satisfying clink as notches in the blade lined up with the loops to secure them. "Ancient magic." I said, with a laugh in my voice. Howard Nodded "See, I knew you'd get it eventually." We both laughed and made our way to the door we came in through. We gave Anne a wave as we left. The hall of the house was a little warmer than the warehouse had been. I was glad to be back.

On the way back to the front patio we stopped off at Howard's room. He hadn't invited me in. He slipped in for a moment and emerged with his jacket and bag. I wondered if Howard had just popped into his room for a moment or was it a lot longer to him? How local was this time 'thing' that the Garden did? Could he have had a full night's sleep in these few seconds?

We walked out past the front wall of the Garden before Howard used his 'void sticks' to take us to the garage. Walking away from the main area was traditional I was told. Leaving, walking away before a mission was an important part of the ritual. Howard's portal opened exactly like last time, but now I embraced the sickness, as I swiftly switched from one place to another. Thanks to the training I had received I knew how to cope with uncomfortable feelings and nausea. I took a deep breath and held it inside. By the time I let it out the feeling of sickness had passed. This was a good start. I was returning to the city as a professional. I instantly noticed that the weather was the same as the last time we were in this world. To me, it had been weeks, maybe more. To the city, I hadn't left at all.

My life was fractured now. I had spent so much time in the Garden. I had then returned to the city on the same evening I had left. For all practical purposes, I was always in the city, constantly travelling from the exit to a mission and back again. I would not be able to form attachments or keep friends in this world. To the city, Hunters had not a moment's downtime. To our enemies, it would appear that injuries would be gone impossibly fast and we would never appear to sleep. Maybe that was the point, we were a never-ending onslaught upon them.

There was an address on the back of the photo that Tom



gave us. We walked there. It was a large shopping centre and it was open for business. It looked like one of the big ones that only closed for a few hours just before dawn. The note on the back of the photo said the word 'Office' at the top.

We approached the building from the front. There were a lot of cars passing by, the place was alive with motion. A massive neon sign loomed over us as we stood at the entrance. The street lights were a little brighter than they needed to be and the car park was anything but silent. But even with all this, as we entered the building, the noise and brightness of capitalism in action hit us. I mused that it was its own portal of sorts. There was jingly pop music quietly playing through the distant speakers and the hum of shoppers exploring the pointless little stores filled our ears. It wasn't busy but certainly more active than I would have liked.

We ignored all the shoppers and neither of us had any interest in the stores. We went on without speaking or even glancing at each other. I was trained now, I was at last on the hunt I had craved. We were eyeing up every passer-by, seeing if they gave our weapons a double-take, an obvious sign of someone who wasn't what they appeared to be. Making sure no one was watching us and keeping an eye out for potential traps or cameras. We followed the signs and headed for the shopping complex offices on the top floor. The layout was an open area like an indoor courtyard. The shops in rings around the edge of each floor. There was a fountain in the middle and elevators on each side. I had been here a few weeks ago in the timeline of my old life. If I recall, I was looking for a vacuum cleaner. How childish and distant that memory seemed to me now.

"What are we going to do, walk in and cut her down?" I

asked. Howard was in the mood for work, “No, we aren’t assassins. We were told to take care of the situation; not go in and kill her.” At the time I failed to see a difference. I was still a little naive and very eager. “What do we do then?” Howard was taking a good look around as we walked. “We go into the office, if she is human we talk to her. If she’s not human then we kill her. At some point in the middle of this, we figure out how she’s helping the enemy. And why; if we can.”

In my training, I had discovered that there were many degrees of Vampire. Some were still human but on the path to becoming a Vampire. Some were a different breed than the one I had fought my first time. They were human in appearance but just as deadly. There were and still are so many different degrees of Vampire that it’s impossible to catalogue. That’s how they stay so populous. They diversify with every generation. The way to identify them was simple though; if it took souls for power it was a Vampire and it was our enemy.

To Howard, however, there were only two categories that he cared about. There were Vampires and not-Vampires. I wasn’t even sure if he recognised humans as people anymore. Maybe to him, they were just cattle to be ignored. He was an exceptional hunter. Even though I was still fresh to all this, I knew how good Howard was just from the way the other hunters in the Garden treated him. They were all deeply respectful and a little jumpy around him. The ‘almost’ friendship he had forged with Tom was another sign. Tom was not the sort of man who would waste time with anyone but the best.

We took a few minutes to double back and casually walked around the shops. Before I was trained I would have wondered what purpose this served, would a hunter need to buy things or

even want to? What we were doing was looking at the security guards and cameras. We were also seeing what supernatural trinkets the new-age shops were selling. We were hunters and this time we were hunting for anything out of place. Would a security guard be able to see our weapons or would the old man on the bench be a Vampire guard in wait? We needed to know what we were up against. This time however it looked like we would be standing against nothing more than one enlightened woman. Or, at least that's what the evidence was telling us.

The shops were dying down, probably due to the time of night. Not that I had any concept of time now. It was a broken part of my mind. We took our chance and began to seek out our target. We found an entrance to the offices; they were up a flight of stairs behind a very subtle but purposeful door next to a shoe store.

With my new training and Howard's veteran expertise, we strolled up the staircase feeling almost invisible. No security guard stopped us and not a camera could see us. We were aware of every blind spot and trick of body language to pass both unchallenged. As for locks, Howard made short work of the few we passed with a well-placed dagger, not subtle but it was very effective. We went down a hall following the only sounds of activity we could hear in the offices; it was subtle and mixed in with the faint rumbles in the background coming from the shoppers in the stores on the floor below us.

There was a receptionist behind a little desk in front of the office at the back of the room. I checked the name on the back of the photo in my pocket. I also took another look at it, so I would be sure to recognise our target. We approached the receptionist and I asked if Miss Penn was available. The

receptionist told us it was late and began to ask if we had an appointment. She got sidetracked by a phone call that appeared more important than we were. Howard leaned over the desk and pulled the wire of her headset out of the phone. His voice changed, as it did in the police station all that time ago. "We are going into her office now" she nodded in response. I still wasn't sure how Howard did that but assumed it would be revealed to me eventually.

We entered the office to see the woman from the picture sitting at her desk, she was well dressed and very attractive. We stood in front of her, waiting for her to say something. "Hello, gentlemen. You both are hunters I assume?" She looked at my blades, she could see our weapons but wasn't at all phased by our presence. She had been expecting us. I noted to myself that this could not be good, not at all. Howard pulled his sword from the lip of his satchel, "What are you?" He demanded. The woman smiled at him with almost magical confidence. "Human, all the way, I assure you." I could tell that Howard believed her. He lowered his sword, just a little. "If you know who we are, you know why we're here?" He asked softly. The woman didn't seem to like Howard's directness, she began to show signs of stress. "He'll kill you if you don't answer him." I added as if playing the classic good cop. The woman slowly opened a drawer in her desk, she was careful not to aggravate Howard's paranoia. She reached in and carefully pulled out a folder.

Howard gestured to me to get the folder. He just stood there with his sword drawn watching every movement the woman made. I stepped forwards and grabbed the folder from the desk. I quickly backed away. Part of my training was to never underestimate an enemy and I followed my training, always.

I flicked through the folder, holding it up making sure that Howard could see too. It was pages of addresses and numbers. Some of the numbers looked like radio frequencies, the next column was more of a mystery. Every page was laid out the same. "What is this?" asked Howard. Miss Penn looked at him with confusion "Oh, they really do keep you front-liners in the dark don't they!" She smiled, amused by our ignorance perhaps. I couldn't work out what Howard planned to do next but it looked to me that we had what we came for. Even if we didn't know what it was. Had we completed our task though? It became obvious that Miss Penn had the same question in mind. She pushed away from her desk on her wheeled office chair and regarded us carefully. "What now, hunter?" she asked.

She began to stand from her chair. It began to become clear at this point that she was not being entirely honest when she claimed to be human. The desk was pushed away and Miss Penn kept rising, from the waist down she was made of, something I can only describe as 'shadow'; tentacles of shadow. Howard stepped back and raised his sword. "Great!" He exclaimed with a genuine thrill. "What's great about this?" I asked as I drew my Daggers. Howard suddenly appeared younger and more focused, his voice became more gravelly. "Now we can kill her!" He exclaimed with a half-smile. As the last word left his lips he lunged forwards into the tentacle of shadow. I noticed how strange it was to see a well dressed and attractive woman's body sitting on top of a monstrous unreal knot of black, indescribable energy.

I ran towards the mess of darkness and jabbed wildly with my weapons but they passed right through my target. Howard was having the same problem. We looked at each other with

increasing concern and it became clear that this was new territory to Howard too. Taking our eyes off the tentacles was a mistake. The shadow cleared around one section of the monster and something like the arm of a Kraken left the darkness. It swiped with incredible strength. Howard responded instantly and jumped over it as it came with its blinding speed. I tried to do the same. I had the training, I had the knowledge of how to move like I needed to. It was in my mind; my body however was not there yet. It hadn't quite become an instinct for me. I was a moment too slow. The tentacle hit me and I was swept into it and out through the wall, the rubble and brick fell far beneath me into the shopping area. The limb, the tentacle turned back to shadow and I felt gravity take hold of me. There was a brief gap in my consciousness as I hit the floor. I was hurt but aware. I could hear people shouting and running.

The next few minutes were a blur of pain, sound and noise and more pain. I had no idea how things got to the next stage. I opened my eyes and I was in the fountain in the open area on the ground floor of the building. My fall and the accompanying debris had broken the edge of it and water was running out from it into the open area. I was soaking wet and looking up at the monstrous Miss Penn climbing across the roof above me. She looked like a spider, a huge black spider with patches of more clear reptilian green flickering in and out of the darkened shadowy energy. I was vaguely aware of screaming around me. As my vision cleared and my senses came back I realised how badly hurt I was. My ribs were throbbing and not in a gentle bruised kind of way. They were broken and I could certainly feel it. My back was just as messed up. Trying to sit up felt like being electrocuted. There was so much pain that my

mind couldn't process it. As I lay there, I watched Miss Penn crawl across the ceiling above me and I noticed in those great flickering patches of lizard green I could see Howard hanging from his sword, he was alive and for the most part still fighting, or at least waiting for a chance to fight.

I thought I was going to die right there. How could we win against this? This was no Vampire. This was something different. I think I lost consciousness again for a moment. That's when salvation arrived. Just at the last possible moment, as salvation often does. A woman appeared above me leaning over to look at me. I couldn't see too well with the water running into my face still. She was attractive but rugged. Her long dark hair in a tight ponytail. She wore the strangest outfit, leather, layered, like a mediaeval adventurer, the archetypal ranger of old. She looked down at me and smiled. She knelt and took my hand, "Get up!" She ordered in a soft yet stern tone. By the time the woman pulled me to my feet the pain had entirely left me, my body was healed. "How?" I asked as I watched the cuts on my wrists and arms heal and fade in moments. The woman pulled out a small knife from her belt and stared up at Miss Penn. She was sizing up her target. "I'm the Gardener!" She said as if that explained everything. With that said, she leapt into the air as if she was being rejected by gravity. She rocketed towards the monster above me. While it was a jump, it defied everything that I knew about what was possible, for a second I thought she could fly. She moved with a precision that I had not seen even Howard match. She crawled along the shadow portions of the beast having no problems taking hold of it as he had. She made her way up to its human torso. I heard Miss Penn scream for a moment as this new woman cut her throat. Howard took her

hand and they fell to the ground like two cats. Behind them fell Miss Penn in a plume of dust and blood. The force shook the whole building and it sounded like an explosion.

The shadow was fading and for the first time, her entire reptile-like body lay visible. Visible and dead. Her body from the waist down was made of tentacles now; her elephantine size betrayed all pretence of humanity. The people in the building had all fled and we could hear the sounds of fire trucks and police cars outside. "Who the hell are you?" Howard asked, the woman responded again as she did to me "I'm the Gardener." This meant more to Howard than it had to me. "Oh shit!" He said, "I thought you were a legend!". I picked up the folder from the floor, it had flown out of the side of the office with me. For the most part, it was intact, if a little wet and caked in drywall. We began to walk towards the exit of the building. I glanced back to the carnage and corpse behind us. Pieces of the building were crumbling still and there were dents all over the walls. I must have been unconscious for quite a while judging by the fallout. It looked like a bomb had gone off. Maybe that's what the police and the fire officers would believe had happened but how was the magical force called the Wind going to explain away the dead monster?

As we got closer to the exit of the building. The Gardener stopped. She looked with a keen eye out of the glass door in the distance. "We can't go that way, there's a news crew." Howard was confused "So? They'll just think we are survivors of the... Whatever they think happened." The Gardener raised an eyebrow at him, "Don't be stupid Hunter. The Wind will mask our identity from the masses but do you want every Vampire in the city to see you on the news?" Her tone was patronising, she



knew best and she knew it.

We walked back the way we had come, out of the way of the doors. The woman, this Gardener, knelt and took a stone from her pocket. "Give me your void key" she ordered, "It won't work here, it's keyed to this car garage a few miles away" Howard said as he passed her his key anyway. The woman thrust the key into her stone. It went in like the stone was made of water. She turned the key and we felt as if the floor had fallen away, or had we suddenly been turned upside down? It was like being folded but from the inside.

Whatever had happened was over and we found ourselves flat on the floor of the Garden, and not at the edge as we would usually enter but right next to Tom's table. The Gardener was the only one of us who had kept any dignity. She was still kneeling, holding a small rock and a key, she tossed the key to Howard and sat at the table next to Tom. She passed him our prize folder. He never even opened it, he just slid it under some other papers that he had.

We regained our senses and dusted ourselves off. We join them at the table. There were enough seats; I assumed that this meant that Tom was expecting us. The other Hunters were looking at us interestedly. We learned that Tom had contacted the Gardener and asked her to come and help us when he had found more information about our mission. Apparently, Miss Penn had already killed another Hunter. The Hunter was named Elaine. I had met her, she was the woman that gave me my first charm and picked my weapons when I had first arrived. She was a good warrior, a veteran. She had been left at her travel location hanging like meat with no skin. As Tom told us how she was found I imagined for a second how scared she must

have been. Facing something like Miss Penn, but alone with no one coming to save her. I felt sick, sick and ashamed that not one other hunter could help her or even knew she needed help.

Tom broke the tension by pouring tea, it seemed as appropriate as anything else I suppose. "As you know, Vampires don't skin people, they drain them or just take what they want and leave the victim for dead with all their skin, traditionally. This was different, it was a message and only a daemon would be so bold" said Tom softly. "All the daemons are dead, that was the deal wasn't it?" Asked Howard, with a grave tone. "No Vampire or even a pack of them could have done this to Elaine, not when she was so close to a Garden entrance. The Garden would have opened a portal itself and we would have flooded out in moments, from their perspective that is." Tom spoke in the dry tone of a man filled with regret. Howard slapped the table in frustration "But a daemon Tom?"

I had no idea what they were talking about. The Gardener must have realised, she decided to explain it to me. As she spoke it was like she became the only thing in existence. Like a light at the end of a tunnel. Her voice was soft and exacting. Every word being spoken timed perfectly as if she had told this story a thousand times. "The original generation of hunters lived thousands of years ago." She began. "They were more powerful but not as well trained as the ones we have today. It wasn't like now, they had no sanctuary. They would hunt in packs across the human realm and one by one, in epic battles they hunted and killed every daemon alive. Their numbers dwindled. They did kill the daemons but only a few survived each encounter. The packs got smaller and smaller. Only the best and smartest hunters were left when they faced the last daemon in the human

realm.” The Gardeners story was intense. She sipped some tea and told of how the final pack of the greatest hunters who ever lived faced off against the most deadly daemon of all time, the last daemon. She told of how something went wrong with the ancient magic weapons of the hunters. There was too much hate and loss, too much pain in them. They all expelled energy in the battle. This mixed with the pure shadow power of the last daemon, a tall and wild woman. Somehow it exploded and opened a hole in reality, it fractured the world. The fight stopped and it was apparent that all of creation would be sucked into the void. Even the last daemon itself had no desire to see all thing’s die. Without a world, there would be no more hope for either race. The last daemon expelled all of her shadow energy into the void and closed it. With its shadow energy went its evil and its need to kill. The daemon almost died in the process.

The story was captivating, in no small part because of the storyteller. It was like hearing a myth recounted, but it was actual history. The story went on. “One hunter convinced the rest to allow the daemon to live. The daemon had saved all of reality after all. The hunter nursed the daemon back to health. They fell in love, the daemon’s shadow energy was replaced by the energy of light and love. It was that light that created the Gardens, all of them inside pockets of what was left of the void that almost took reality.”

I looked around the Garden and at the big white house. It was strange to think that something so clean and so pure could have been created by a daemon. Howard had been right, it truly was strange and ancient magic. “What happened to them?” I asked. The Gardener smiled and looked at the house. She glanced back at me as she took another delicate sip of tea.

Tom, took a deep and thoughtful breath before taking over the story. "With the death of the daemons and the last one turning its back on evil, the universe needed balance. Somehow in the battle, one of the hunters had been tainted by the shadow energy. He became dark and sickened, the other hunters thought that he would die but he began to recover, at least his body did. His soul passed away. A lot more happened in the middle of all this but eventually, he began to hate the other hunters. As you can no doubt guess, he became the first Vampire." There was a sadness in Tom's eyes that I had not seen before.

Tom took a moment, then went on to tell me about how the first Vampire tried to kill the last daemon; how he failed but wounded her greatly. She and her lover hid in one of the Gardens, in our very Garden and sealed it from the world of men. They watched as the Vampires spread across the world, first like a shadow and then like an army. The last daemon and the last few hunters used all the power and skill they had and they slowly made a new pack of heroes. The war had begun and they swore that they would not let evil win, not when they had tasted victory. That's where the charms came from, they are the experiences of those hunters, the lifelong training that they had somehow bottled. Their skills trained all the hunters that followed.

Tom took a break for thought. This story wasn't something that he enjoyed telling but I needed to hear it. The Gardener took her turn to speak "A lot more happened during this time, and I do mean a lot, but the result is what we have now. New hunters are usually just told that humans and a pure daemon created the Garden. That's the important part of this. It's the facts and without the romancing effect of time and legend,

making it all seem more than it was. It was not a good time for the human race.”

Howard raised his cup to the Gardener. “Thank you for coming out of retirement. I think Mike and I would have been; well dead as fuck without you.” The Gardener smiled at Howard’s choice of words but she appreciated the sentiment nonetheless. “Yes, I was just glad I managed to get there before it did any real damage to you both”.

“Real damage!” I found myself exclaiming, “I was pretty messed up when you arrived! How did you fix me up anyway?” I heard myself ask. The Gardener laughed, lightening the tone a little “I’m not a hunter Mike, I’m The Gardener. I can do many things.” Howard snorted as he added a little extra “Many things? Like basically one-shotting a daemon and strolling off like it was squashing a spider. Yeah, Many fucking things.”

Tom rubbed his chin, “This Miss Penn, there’s no doubt, she was a daemon then?” He glanced at the Gardener, she shrugged. “I wonder, how are they back after so long? It’s a problem I didn’t think our generation of hunters would have to face.”

Howard stretched, he was tired from the fight. “And now Mike, you know everything I know. Can we continue this tomorrow?” he asked. Tom nodded to him and the two of us took our leave.

I lay in my room, the curtains closed tightly. I knew it was a sunny day outside. I finally understood that it was actual, real magic that powered this place. There was something comforting about knowing that I literally couldn’t apply logic to it. It made me smile that Howard had summed it up the first time I asked when he had told me that it was just best not to think about it.

I wasn't sure how long I had lay there but I was sure that it didn't matter. No matter how long I was going to be in my room, it would be just about the right time when I left. Once you realise that you can sleep for as long as you like, you suddenly don't want to. I lay there thinking about the story I had been told. It was crazy to think that all this had been going on for so long. It bothered me that somehow, I had gone from a depressed, normal guy who lived alone in a shitty flat to a supernaturally powered defender of mankind. Thinking back, maybe I should have just enjoyed it for what it was. Most people spend their entire lives wishing for something interesting to happen to them and here I was wishing I was better at being special.

I lay there still. I wasn't sure when I went to sleep, you never remember falling asleep, do you? Waking up, however, I remember that well. I felt good, I felt rested. I always felt rested when I slept in the big white house in the Garden; I'm pretty sure that everyone did. One thing that I had noticed though was the food, it tasted good but it was always the same, fruits and teacakes, sandwiches and rolls. There was never pizza or Mexican or anything new. I suppose it was to give you a reason to leave. It was as close to perfect as a place could be and this morning I wanted burnt bacon and bland eggs for breakfast.

I took a shower and left my room, as usual. As expected, I was just in time to meet Howard in the hall. Howard lit a cigarette the moment we were through the patio door. Something was happening in the Garden today, something different.

There was a great white marquee, we wandered in. Inside there were hunters and support people all busy, Tom standing by a large table. It was a real operations room. It reminded me of an old war movie I had once seen. "Hello, gentlemen." Tom

greeted us as we entered. We greeted him back and had a good look at the table; it was a map of the city. There were lots of little pins in it."What is all this?" I asked. Tom pointed to an area on the map. "This one here is Howard's exit point. An, err, garage I'm told. The pins mark every hunter's access point to the Garden." This was the first time I had seen it all mapped out, the access points weren't random, they were evenly distributed across every major area of the city, parks, highways, churches, there must have been more hunters than I knew about to make use of all these exits.

"What about the rest of the country, or the world? Are Vampires just in the city or everywhere?" I knew my question was basic stuff but I had never thought to ask. Tom was flicking through a folder and answered me without a thought. "The Vampires are everywhere. So are we, but here we just deal with this city." It made sense, I suppose no single hunter was ever to know the whole operation, for obvious reasons.

Tom showed us the folder we had secured from Miss Penn. "The information you retrieved turned out to be rather interesting. It's the exact location of every portal in the city, as well the energy frequency that opens it." What Howard said next pretty much summed up what I was thinking. "Well fuck!" I nodded in agreement. "Indeed" replied Tom, glancing up, away from his paperwork.

Tom went on to say that he had no idea how this information had gotten out but it was what he called 'an issue.' He also said that there was no way a Vampire could cross the portal into the Garden. There was some protection in place, that's all he said about it, 'some protection.' As Howard and Tom talked it was said that no one was certain that the 'protection'

actually extended to daemons. It had only ever been tested with Vampires.

Howard didn't seem as concerned as I was. "What do you want us to look into today?" He asked as if it was a foregone conclusion that there would be a mission for us. Tom passed him a yellow note square that had been stuck to the side of the table. He then added a little chess piece to his map. I leaned over a little, it was the address of Howard's garage. Howard read the note and passed it to me. It was a handwritten scrawl "Simon Clementine. Thirty-two St Claire Avenue." I put the square of paper in my pocket. "Is this all we have to go on?" I asked. Tom wrinkled his face at me apologetically. "Yes, I'm afraid that even with all this going on its still business as usual, for now at least." With that, his attention shifted to a young woman who was organising paperwork for him. She was a Hunter, like me. I wondered how a hunter ended up helping with office work but I suppose it was essential.

Howard and I checked our weapons were secure. Now that the Vampires knew where to find us there was no telling what would be in our little garage when we entered the city, not that any time would have passed, not really. Howard performed his ritual and with an unsettling burst of life, we went from the quiet and safe Garden with its eternal summer to the road outside the derelict garage, in the middle of a city where so many oblivious people may die in the coming battles. I shivered. The thought of their ignorance terrified me.

It was cold. I fastened my jacket. Howard lit a cigarette and shot me a serious look. "We need to be on our 'A' game for this one buddy. Let's make sure we know we got a Vampire before we piss it off. I don't want to risk getting daemon tanked again. I



should have been better prepared for that fucker Penn.” I smiled, we began to walk. “So you’ve trained to fight daemons?” I asked. Howard’s brutally honest reply made me chuckle “Fuck no! I thought they were all dead. Everyone did. Do you really think I would have chosen now to train a new hunter if I thought borderline immortal demi-gods were looking for us!?” Howard did have a point there I suppose.

As we walked down the road we passed an electronics store with TV’s on in the window, the news was showing pictures of the shopping centre that we had fought in. It was at least a day ago for us but the news was talking about how the fire crew was still arriving at the scene. We stopped to watch for a moment. “I don’t get this, you know. I can’t process that the world stops when we are in the Garden.” I said it almost rhetorically. Howard flicked his cigarette at the window and began to walk away “Yeah, it’s our blessing I suppose. For us, it’s all real and endless. We fight, battle, win and die. Whenever we have a mission, we do whatever it takes because someone has to. To the city, we’re always there. Go down an alley, into a garage, maybe a phone box or a van. Pop-out healed from pretty much anything a second later. We’re always here, wondering the fucking city.” I watched mesmerised as the cigarette’s lit tip faded in a puddle of water on the floor. I followed Howard “Think about it Mike” he continued. “To an outsider, it was just a day or two ago when I walked you out of that police station. Then a few hours later you fought the Vampire. Then you had a massive fight in a shopping centre. Now the police and fire crews are arriving at the shopping centre. You’re here, for you it’s been weeks, maybe more since all this started.” I was starting to see why all the hunters I had met were a little odd. I could

even see how you could lose sight of the consequences of your actions. When I kept thinking about it though, I could only see how this gave us a massive advantage and helped us keep our city safe.

We walked on.

## Chapter 4: Activity.

We eventually arrived at St Claire Avenue. It was still raining. It was a nice area, nice cars, nice houses and a police car parked outside number thirty-two. "Should we wait for the police to go?" I asked. "No! If there's a Vampire problem we're more qualified than them to sort it out." Howard, as usual, had more experience in these matters than I. The correct cause of action was always obvious once you viewed it through his lens. We walked towards the house careful to make sure that nothing was waiting to jump us. The police car was empty and no one was looking out of any of the windows of the house. Howard placed a hand on the car's bonnet as he passed. "Warm." He said as if it meant something.

We knocked on the front door, which seemed unimaginative to me at first but it wasn't like we needed the element of surprise; we were hunters and whatever was inside this house was our prey. A lady answered the door, she looked scared. "Hello, can I help you?" She asked. Howard and I looked past her, we could see a police officer in the room at the end of the hall. "Good evening, my name is Howard and this is Mike, can

we speak with Mr Clementine?” The woman was hiding her feelings badly. More than a few tears were drying on her cheeks and she was shaking. “I don’t think so” she said as she began to close the door. Howard stepped back. “That was short and sweet” I observed. Howard drew his sword. “There’s something in there, that guy I could see was just as scared as the woman and he’s supposed to be the damned law.” Howard held his sword at arm’s length. With a flick of his blade, he looked younger again, he looked ready to fight.

We both hit the door with the butts of our weapons, the weapons always hit things harder than you would expect but even I was surprised when the door flew inward and free of its hinges; it almost exploded into the house. Howard and I strolled in feeling like walking tanks and ready for work.

In the room, there was a dead police officer on the floor. There was also the woman and an obviously out of his depth police officer shaking in a chair. Lastly, there was a man; a tall pale man with rippling muscles and a long grey beard. His eyes pale red. He was one of the more human Vampires and he was at his peak. He had just fed. He was still only a Vampire, no daemon or other unknown thing. He was a Vampire and we were going to kill him. It knew hunters when it saw them and it knew enough to want to run. It looked around for an exit, there wasn’t one. It would have to fight us. It coiled back, ready to pounce.

It looked at me, then at Howard, it would attack the one that it thought was weakest. It leapt like a cat towards Howard, a compliment to my confidence no doubt, but a very bad selection on his behalf. Howard cut at it casually as it came into range of his sword. It moved in the air the way only Vampires can;

not quite in line with what I knew about physics. Changing direction without effort, defying all our learned expectations of the way things move. Its face was bleeding. Howard had cut it but missed its neck. It was coming for me now. I let it come. As it hit me in my chest I calmly buried one of my daggers into its chest. We both hit the wall. Howard was already in position. As it stood fighting back the pain in its chest Howard effortlessly took its head from its body with a mighty slash of his sword. The beast's body fell towards me, I pushed it away without a thought.

The woman began to cry and scream. The police officer finally regaining some composure had started trying to see if there was life left inside his dead friend. We knew there wouldn't be. The Vampire had consumed his soul, even if the body was unmarked there would be no life in it. "Who are you people?" Barked the police officer as he closed his fallen friend's eyes.

Howard sheathed his sword and gestured to me. "We are from the, err, terrorism division!?" I knew that the actual lie didn't matter as long as it was grounded in something real. This place was not any kind of void window, the Wind would do its thing if we gave it the ingredients. The civilians would be in a mess when it came to recalling facts, they would believe anything that made sense to their version of what was possible.

The police officer got up and hugged the woman. "I'm Simon Clementine and this is my wife Ali, how did you know that we were in trouble?" He asked. Howard was already losing interest in this cover story and just said "surveillance" and shrugged. "This your partner?" I honestly wasn't sure if police have partners outside of TV shows.

He wiped a tear from his face. "Yeah, Darren." He sighed and pushed back a sob. "That fucking Monster was a suspect in some gang killings. He came here to kill us. Ali called me when she saw someone in the garden. When we got here, he just jumped out at us. Was waiting around back. He did this to Darren, only a few minutes before you arrived. Told Ali that he was going to kill me if she didn't get rid of you." He sobbed a little more as he spoke, trying to control the emotions. I assumed he was close with Darren.

"Where was the gang trouble?" Howard asked without any sympathy in his voice. "That old club by the city park. Something-loft its called" he mumbled the words as he held his wife. "Okay, well. You're safe now. I would call this in if I were you." I said. Not entirely sure how to finalise this conversation.

"That is sound advice." Howard said as he cleaned his sword off. "What division did you say you worked with again?" Simon asked. "Don't worry about it, the people upstairs know all about it." Howard lied as if it was the most natural thing in the world. "Yeah, okay." Simon said as he went glassy-eyed. His wife and he seemed to stop, paused as if frozen. Howard gestured towards the door.

We left quickly without saying another word, leaving both of them and the corpses. We strolled down the street a little, as soon as I thought we had gone far enough I stopped. "What the fuck was that Howard? Did they snap or something? They both froze up." Howard nodded to me "Our mission was over, when the mission is over things sort of have to unpack. It can't unpack while we are there, so it waits for us to leave." I shook my head in confusion and a little frustration. "Come on! Aren't we past riddles yet?" Howard laughed at me "Mike pal, I'm not

dodging the question. That's the only explanation I have. We did our mission. Now the Wind takes over. If we can't get out smoothly it does that shit to give us a chance to not get mixed up in the outcome. I know you don't want to hear it but it's quite literally ancient magic at work." I sighed in confusion and frustration, accepting the explanation. What else could I do? In the end, it felt good that we had protected some people but I was unhappy that we had not gotten there soon enough to save the man, Darren.

"What about the Vampires body?" I asked. Howard lit his victory cigarette and exclaimed "No fucking idea. But it's the last we'll hear about it unless you want to go torch the house? Just to be sure." I was fairly certain that Howard was joking, I ignored him. "I still got a credit card, you want to get Chinese food?" I asked. Howard nodded excitedly and we strolled away from a successful mission. I felt like a superhero in that moment. Trying my best to reconcile that we might have saved everyone if he had arrived a little sooner. Maybe we shouldn't have stopped at that TV store on our way here. Maybe it wouldn't have mattered. My relationship with time was not what it once was.

Within an hour we were enjoying a truly human meal. It was not the best Chinese food I had ever had. It was actually pretty shitty but that's why it was so great. It was food with imperfections, something that was not on offer in the Garden.

The little restaurant was unremarkable in every way. It was on the corner of the first street we saw with shops on. It was so incredibly average as restaurants go that I quite honestly had no idea what it was called. I bet the locals just called it 'that Chinese place down the road.' Still, it was exactly what I wanted, what we needed.

As we finished our meal I tried to probe Howard for a little more information. "What happens now then? Do we just go back to the Garden and wait for another mission?" Howard lit a cigarette, no one in the restaurant seemed to mind, oddly. "Yeah, we go back and sit on our asses for a few hours, days, whatever, then Tom sends us out again. When we finish our mission, we go back and do it all again." Howard seemed to have fallen out of love with the hunter's life. "Is that it? No reward or fun?" I asked naively. Howard looked me straight in the eye "No. No fun. No friends. No life. No escape. We hunt and we wait because that's how people stay alive." I ordered some more beers from the waiter.

"So, when we go out we just enjoy it while we can?" I asked half sarcastically. I don't recall what I expected as a response but Howard, as usual, knew just what not to say, and then said it. "Not really. No matter what we do, when we are out of the Garden trouble will find us, it's just the way it works." With that, he finished his beer and reached for the fresh one. As he raised his glass I saw movement reflected in it, I turned around and saw a large well-built man arguing with the waiter.

"Not our problem right?" I asked. Howard laughed a little. "No, not him, but the waiter is." I looked on. I was desperately trying to see what Howard could see, what was the telling sign that he had noticed since we walked into the restaurant? I saw the sign over the bar, the restaurant was called 'The Tasty Mountain' I took some small victory in finally having that question answered. I noticed the flurry on the letter 'M' in the word mountain hung down like two fangs and wondered if it was my imagination.

The larger man was drunk and irate about something. He



pushed the waiter with all his force, the waiter never even budged, it was like the man had just shoved a wall. Howard leaned forward and put one hand on his sword and in a whispering tone he said to me “The angry idiot is no threat at all to him but Vampires have a violent temperament. You shove a Vampire and they break you, eat you or just keep it simple and murder your family.” The waiter changed the way he was standing only just a little but a trained hunter could see it. He was no longer pretending to be a man, he was a little more like a snake now, bending rather than moving. He pulled his arm back as if to tear his enemy’s head from his body, as his arm shot forward something hit his face and distracted him. Howard was standing next to me, with a basket of bread rolls. The thing that hit the Vampire was now clear.

“You know your food is pretty shitty right?” Howard yelled. “Mine was okay actually.” I said with a grin. The Vampire pushed the man who shoved him. The man responded like he had been hit with a car, hitting a wall and leaving a dent. Our waiter strutted towards us. “Bread rolls are the natural enemy of Vampires” Howard said, actually having fun and preparing another volley for action. “Well that’s just silly” I muttered while drawing my daggers.

As I stood up Howard leaned towards me a little without taking his eyes off the waiter and whispered “We need to get him someplace a little quieter, I don’t want to do this in public unless I have to.” He was right, I could see a couple of options from where we were standing. I pointed out the kitchen door. The other diners looked at us nervously. Howard grunted in agreement. We backed up, letting the Vampire think we were frightened of him, they like fear. The other hungry patrons

were still uncomfortably trying to ignore the argument.

We backed into the kitchen. As he followed us Howard drew his sword and dropped the breadbasket. The cooks began to shout at us to leave until Howard shook his sword as if to say no. This demonstrated to me that civilians could see our weapons if we pointed them out. Good to know. They began screaming at each other in a language that neither of us understood. The Vampire followed, slowly moving towards us with a grin. His arms went limp for a moment then curved up again, like two snakes. It looked like they had no bones in them at all. He lunged towards us with unsettling speed covering the space between us in a blink. Howard took hold of one of his arms and was pulled over in an instant. I pushed a dagger out and as he moved to avoid it I brought the other up as fast as I was able. Howard had found a pan of bubbling soup as he righted himself. He pushed it over the Vampire without shielding his hands. He winced as he tipped it. He hit the waiter who screamed and took a few steps back disappearing amid the soup's vapours.

The steam was rising in ways that didn't seem quite natural, more than just the result of the soup attack. There were noises all around us. We could hear movement underneath the sounds of burning food and extractor fans and the clattering of the staff going out of a door that we couldn't see.

We stood in the steam cloud, adjusting our position to be back-to-back cautiously tracing every sound and shadow. I was afraid but my training was ruling my actions now and I had Howard with me. I felt how I thought hunters should. I was wielding my fear like any other weapon at my disposal. It kept me sharp. I was confident that I was going to kill my prey. The fog began to clear from the room as the last cook ran out of an

open door and we could see once more. Three angry Vampires stood in front of us and our friend with arms was rising from the ground, looking pretty good for a man that should have been suffering from scalds over most of his body.

“What’s the game plan?” I asked. Howard, spun his sword around in a single hand to showcase his expertise. “Well, looks like we don’t have to pay for the meal, so that’s good.” He laughed and then threw his sword like a javelin into our waiter’s neck. For a moment he looked confused then fell in a boneless heap on the floor. Howard leaned into me and took a dagger from my hand. I was happy to release my grip for my partner. If anyone else had tried that I would have taken their hand without a moment’s hesitation. A Vampire attacked each of us as if executing a carefully rehearsed dance while the third checked on the waiter. I grabbed my attacker’s wrist and with the most vicious blow that I had been trained to use I buried my weapon deep within the joint of his elbow. I felt it separate and I pulled; he screamed with a shriek that no human could have produced. I set him to the floor with a well-placed knee, not entirely sure that his arm was still attached. Howard had been even more direct and was using the butt of my other dagger on his target’s face like a hammer to a nail.

I dashed for his sword and freed it from the waiter’s corpse. I was not very adept with swords, not compared to Howard. Still, I had been trained in the basics of all weapons that a hunter may use and I had no reason to hesitate. I lunged a powerful slicing action. I missed our third prey and fell forward. By the time I had regained my balance Howard had already pulled his gun. He shot, the Vampire’s head exploded. Howard spun his six-shooter as he slid it back into his holster. We stood survey-

ing our work in the now silent kitchen. This was a bloodbath. We were truly skilled hunters, brutal butchers. I wasn't proud of our accomplishment but with four Vampires dead and us only a little bruised, this was a win. We had saved many lives by removing these killers. Howard grinned at the death in the room. I was never sure if it was the thought of the lives we had saved that made him so happy or just the glee of the violent release. Howard nursed his burned hand. "I couldn't throw this stupid curved blade. Had to waste a bullet" he said remorsefully as he handed my dagger back. I gave him his sword and gestured to his hands. "You okay?" He nodded, wrapped it in a less than pristine kitchen rag he found on one of the kitchen benches. "Nothing an hour in the Garden won't solve."

We took a moment to clean the mess from our weapons before stowing them away again. Howard looked around the little office just to the side of the kitchen while I used a large dish towel to tie off the door between us and the main restaurant. I could see people eating and laughing just a few feet away. How strange that we had finished such a battle here while people just the other side of the door were so happily oblivious. Howard came wandering out of the little office with a pile of papers and some crackers. He stood above a corpse of a Vampire eating his crackers and telling me about his find.

The reality of this brutality dawned on me as I watched a few crumbs gently fall on Howard's shoe, they slid into a pool of blood and were absorbed by it. I traced the blood back to a Vampire's corpse. Howard had been the one to strike all the final blows but I knew that I would have killed them all myself if I had got there first. I looked for a second at the massacre and Howard's excited voice faded into the background. I felt

a little dizzy and sorrowful. The smell of death finally made itself known over the cooling food odours. The smell of death travelled deep into me and uprooted my recent feast. I threw up with vigorous intent. My vomit landed straight on a corpse. I looked on and lost more feast. This time I turned away shamed by the murder that I was so happy to be a part of. I dashed out the back door to the ally for some cleaner air.

A few minutes later we stood in that ally at the back of the building. Howard had shoved a selection of papers into a rucksack he took from the locker room next to the kitchen, it had probably belonged to one of our victims. I was trying to apologise to Howard for my moment of weakness but became distracted by a smell. "Is that Gas?" I asked. Howard pulled the fire alarm by the door, waited a few seconds and then threw a lit cigarette into the doorway. We dashed a little to get out of the way as the explosion smashed a few windows.

"What the fuck Howard! There are civilians in there, you could have killed someone" Howard just started walking away from the scene of his crime and explained his actions as if it was the most natural thing in the world. "I gave them a few seconds to start leaving. The fire door from the kitchen would have shielded the blast, they were perfectly safe, probably. More importantly, we cleaned up the mess" I was confused "What? I thought those kinds of things just took care of themselves?" Howard was very calm "They do, I helped. Also, I sent a clear message to any support network they may have had."

That evening taught me one thing at least; I had learned that Howard was being honest when he said that trouble would always follow me now I was a hunter. I would never be free as long as I could spot a Vampire. Even if I quit, the war would

follow me, presenting these situations regardless of my desire for civilian life.

When we eventually got back to the Garden, we sat and told Tom our story. We told him all about the boneless waiter and the three human-like Vampires we killed. He wasn't as attentive as usual and was preoccupied with the stash of papers that Howard had brought back with him. It appeared that Howard had found a few snippets of information that showed that this operation had been in place for years.

They would get peoples addresses from credit cards that they had used to pay for their take out food and put a slow-acting drug in the meal when it was collected. Then pick up the victims later at home. Easy kills. Always making it look like a suicide. In a city as large as this one there were probably dozens of suicides every night and if one or two a week was Vampire related who would know the difference. Tom told us how well we had done and was adamant that we should rest as long as we wanted before going out again. Considering how little time meant to anyone in the Garden this wasn't much of a reward. Howard's hand had healed within a few moments of arriving back to the Garden. If nothing else, this reinforced something inside me. It didn't matter how much I got beaten or broken, as long as I got back to the Garden I would be safe.

I took some time in my room to wash every drop of blood from me. Then I sat in the bathtub, making sure the water was clean. I didn't want to be reminded of this the next day. I wanted nothing to remind me of my brutality. I hung my daggers and belt in the wardrobe and pushed my clothes into the laundry basket knowing that the Garden would make sure that they got clean for when I needed them. I felt safe in my room. I was

away from anything that could harm me. I thought back to my day. Then of the dead police officer. Then of my fight in the shopping centre. And now in my arsenal of horrific memories was the meal that ended in a slaughter. My mind turned to the mysterious Gardener as I fell asleep.

I awoke with a stretch, I wandered into my little bathroom and looked into the huge mirror behind the sink. I decided not to shave. I also decided that I needed a haircut. I also decided I didn't care. Without so much as a comb through my hair or a brush across my teeth, I moved on to the wardrobe. A simple shirt and jeans today, with my weapons hanging from my belt. I had decided not to follow the usual protocols this morning. I wanted to know what would happen if I did different things for once. I wandered towards the dojo without first looking for Howard by the patio.

There was always someone in there. Some sparing, some hitting training dummies, some would just sit and meditate in the corner. Today I wanted something specific. I ignored everyone and opened a weapons chest. The one that Elaine had fished my original daggers from when I had first been given them. I searched through the various bundles of weapons and found a selection of throwing knives in a tray, I looked in a cupboard just next to the chest and found a selection of harnesses. I wore my new knives across my upper arm like a tribal warrior I had once seen on television. I missed television. I had no idea how to use the knives effectively but was sure that there would be a charm to aid me.

I put my hand on the large wicker stack of drawers where the charms were kept. A voice came from behind me. "You like knives?" It was the voice of the Gardener. I turned around a

little startled. “No, not really” I responded, as I slowly turned around. No one else was in the dojo now apart from her and I. I didn’t recall hearing the rest of the occupants leave.

The Gardener wasn’t dressed like a fantasy ranger anymore. This time she was in the more contemporary wear that would be fitting of a modern city street, not a mystical forest. Simple trousers and a speckled grey woollen jumper. She was still a flawless beauty though.

“Am I not supposed to be taking new weapons? I’m sorry, I just...” I stumbled over my words. She smiled at me and then brushed past me and opened the charm drawer. I waited as she browsed through them and softly spoke to me “as is always the rule, take from the Garden whatever you require.” I adjusted my new knives. “I was in a fight today, I realised I had nothing ranged. Seemed like an oversight.” The Gardener smiled at me; for a moment the world seemed to get dimmer against her radiance. Out of nowhere, she softly said “I can see the future you know?”

She turned around and handed me one of four charms she held. I wasn’t sure if the last thing she said was a question or a statement. I couldn’t not follow up on that though. “What do you see?” I asked. “I see change. Nothing here has changed in so long that I was beginning to think that this place was eternal.”

I gripped the single charm tightly in my hand and let its wisdom flow into me. The thoughts and memories, the knowledge filled my mind. It was like taking a drug that lasted moments but left you better than it found you. I knew how to use my band of knives now. The charm was white and drained. It seemed the usual methods of draining charm by first sparing and generating adrenaline was not required when The Gardener was



there. One of her abilities I assumed.

The Gardener passed me another charm and spoke softly again. “You don’t like to kill do you?” she asked, or observed. I shook my head. I was a little ashamed of my guilt. “Why not?” she asked. I looked into her eyes, she was so beautiful that I honestly doubted she was human. “Because I don’t think it’s up to me to take the lives of anyone, not even Vampires. I know I have to though.” I spoke sheepishly. She smiled and asked, “So you kill because that is what is expected of you?” I protested a little too quickly, I didn’t want her to think me so shallow. “No, I do it because it’s the right thing to do.” She nodded subtly in agreement and I drained the little charm in my hand. This one filled me with the training to defend against knives like the ones that I now had. It made sense to know how to counter a weapon that you carry. I opened my eyes and felt a new sense of confidence with my weapon.

The Gardener asked me another question as she passed me the third charm. “Do you think Howard is a good teacher?” I knew there was no point in lying to her. “No, he’s a terrible teacher but he’s a remarkable mentor and that makes up for it.” I gripped the charm, this one was different to the last, it wasn’t filling me with information about knives or battle. It was filling me with symbols and ideas, I felt my eyes open with a startling jolt. I opened my mouth to speak and a jumble of words came out, none of them made any sense. They were like the half words of a drunk. I shook my head to clear my mind. The Gardener chuckled at me playfully. “Relax, that charm held a new language, you can speak in ‘Demti’ now” she said softly, “That’s my language.” she added. My mind was clearing, it was true. I was now so fluent in this new language that it was taking

a moment to choose what tongue to think in. I took another few seconds and chose the first words to speak in 'Demti' "Why have you given me this?" I asked. 'Demti' sounded soft and delicate. The Gardener replied in the same language "Because you will need it." I was still trying to sort out the languages in my head but managed to ask in a hybrid of words. "What do you mean? Your language?" She closed the drawer of charms and almost apologetically said "It's the language of daemons." I took in a quick shot of air. "Don't worry, things are not that tripe. I'm not a Daemon, you can relax." I was a little stumped, not sure how much more to ask. "But your native language is the Daemon one?" I realised as I spoke that I had begun to sound suspicious. I had no right to be. The Gardener was a revered figure. I was lucky she bothered speaking with me at all. She grinned again "It's way more boring than you would think, and I'm sure there's a better time to tell you the story. I can see the future after all."

She pushed the fourth charm into my hand, but this time she didn't let go. The charm activated. It was not a pleasant injection of new information or a sudden knowing like it usually was. This one was a roller coaster ride of feelings and power with no knowledge attached. I was being given a gift of sorts. I was being given clarity. I opened my eyes and the Gardener was still holding my hand. The charm pressed into our palms. Not even a moment had passed. But the room seemed somehow less magical now. As I thought about all the things I had done it was all a little more real now, more grounded.

"What did you give me?" I asked in a whisper as I reluctantly released her hand. She held a strange expression, she was deep in a memory or thought. "I have given you... Yourself. The

charms take a piece of you. You become a hunter and the person you were had to fall away. I have given you back what you have lost." I wasn't sure what that meant but I had a feeling that this was the only explanation I would get.

The Gardener looked at me, she looked straight into my eyes. "You will feel better soon." She said happily. Then as I blinked she was gone. I was left standing alone in the dojo holding four drained charms and, for all she said she had given me, I felt like I had lost something.

I wandered out and headed towards the patio just in time to see Howard stroll into view. Had the Gardener made sure that I had arrived just on time or was this just the Gardens usual work? Howard looked at me, "nice knives, trying something new?" He asked. "I spoke with the Gardener" I told him. Howard nodded and lit a cigarette as we walked towards the marquee "Okay" he said, showing his signature lack of interest.

We stood outside of the marquee while we waited for Howard to finish his smoke. This was becoming a ritual for me but today for the first time it was an irritation. "You smoke too much." I said in a bursting sigh. "You talk too much." He replied. I took my few minutes of waiting to take a look at the other hunters. Some were leaving the marquee with little scraps of paper, on the way to a mission. Some were coming into view from afar, tired and a little banged up. I noticed something; every hunter came back tired. They all went straight to their rooms after speaking with Tom or another one of the people I thought of as generals. I thought back to my own experiences. I was rarely out of the Garden for more than a few hours but when I returned I went straight to sleep.

Howard finished his cigarette and we went into the mar-

queue. Tom was there, as expected looking at his paperwork and maps. "Good morning Hunters" he said warmly. Howard kept looking straight at Tom, waiting for orders. I looked around the war-room as I had come to think of it. There were many people there again today. All busy reading papers and making charts. I wondered where all this information came from.

Tom eventually looked up and announced that he had a mission for us. He passed us one of his little squares of paper. Howard looked at it for a moment then passed it to me. Again, something I was noticing was a ritual. It read 'Under-Loft, Central West, City-Park.' I knew the place it was referring to, it was the one that our policeman had talked about. Was it our information that led to this mission or was it unrelated? Were we following up on a lead or did Tom have this planned before? How much time had he had to check up on things?

Howard turned and left the tent. Usually, I would follow without a second thought but today I was feeling more like my old rebellious self. "Who got you this information? Was it our information?" I asked boldly. "A hunter brought back some photo's indicating that it's a Vampire hunting ground" replied Tom casually. "Yes, and we told you that our cop had said something about it" I added. Tom raised an eyebrow, "Yes." I nodded and left quickly to catch up with Howard. I wasn't sure what I expected to gain from grilling Tom. Maybe I just wanted to make clear that I wouldn't be blindly following his note squares anymore.

Howard and I stood at the edge of the patio area. Howard struck his sticks together and we found ourselves outside the old garage in the middle of the city. It was nighttime. The rain was drizzling. Howard and I began to walk in the direction of

the park. The bar wasn't too far.

"Howard." I enquired "What's with the Gardener? How come you don't know her? Where has she been?" Howard grunted. "You saw that thing in the shopping centre, the daemons have returned. We need her now." I considered this for a moment. "Yeah, I suppose that's true but why now? What's so special about now? Daemons could have waited for another hundred years to show themselves, so why now?" I stopped myself babbling before Howard lost interest. He considered my point for a moment as we walked "Bad luck, I guess." "No, there's a reason behind all of this." I mused with a defiant tone.

Howard told me that it wasn't our place to worry about this kind of thing. As hunters, it was our job to kill the bad guys, nothing more. I wondered whose job it was to worry. We eventually reached our destination as the rain started coming down faster.

The bar that I had expected to see turned out to be more of a nightclub. It had a massive queue out front. From the looks of that queue, it was a place that appealed to the more Gothic, pale-faced and black-clad clientele. There was a large well-built man at the door deciding who got to come in and who didn't. We stood across the road watching for a while as the excited party seekers got selected or rejected based on first impressions and social proof.

"Are you going to use your voice thing on him?" I enquired to Howard, "What?" He replied. "You know like you did with Miss Penn's receptionist and in the police station" silence fell for a moment. "That's not a 'thing' Mike. Its people respecting my confidence is all." Howard knelt down on one knee and studied the building across the street. I considered his words. Could it

be that Howard was unaware of his abilities? Finally, Howard spoke again “We go in the back” and with that we strode with defiant purpose across the road and into the ally at the side of the ‘Under-loft’

The building had few features at the side but soon enough we reached the end of the alleyway and hit a large steel gate. Obviously, we were not the only ones who had tried to find alternative access to the club. Howard pointed to the large padlock that kept the gate secure. I shoved the tip of a dagger deep into the lock and felt the mechanisms fall away. Our weapons were far more destructive than they ought to be. I tossed the lock away.

We walked around to the back of the building casually, paying little attention to the security camera that watched the gate so diligently. There was a large door and bin. Just what you would expect to find. Howard and I rarely spoke in these situations. It was an understanding that had emerged. Howard made short and quiet work of the door lock and we stepped in.

We entered a storeroom, mostly bottles of beer and spirits but also a few boxes of typical bar snacks decorated the walls in stacks. Howard put a bottle of whiskey and some beers into his satchel. I looked at him judgmentally. “What?” He responded indignantly. He was not above taking a prize when the opportunity presented itself.

We checked through an open doorway at the side of the room, there was a corridor and various doors. We could also hear deafeningly loud music leaking from the direction of the bar or dance-floor area. We headed up the corridor investigating every room. There were crates of drinks in stacks up the corridor. The first few doors were various storerooms. One

was filled with boxes of promotional shirts with the club's name on them. Another filled with yet more beers. Another seemed to be the barrels that attached to the bar pumps.

We came to an open door, we could see, and hear that this led to the back of the bar. We left it for now. The next door was further up the corridor, it led to a larger room. This one was not as aged or dilapidated as the rest, it was an office of sorts with an untidy desk and a nice carpet. There was a sofa and TV in there too.

We walked in and Howard began to dig through paperwork looking for anything that would lead to evidence of Vampire activity, anything that was not of use would get thrown on the floor. I sat on the sofa, I was beginning to see a pattern in the way Howard worked. Luck was his guide for the most part.

I watched him dig through draws and discard anything that didn't instantly look important. "What about the computer?" I eventually pointed out gesturing to the little laptop in the middle of the desk. Howard stopped and looked at it. "You know how to make them work?" He asked as if I was offering the holy grail. "Yeah" I said and I stood up to turn the thing on. "Assuming there are no passwords on it" I added. Howard watched in awe of the thing.

"How long, exactly have you been hunting Howard?" I asked casually. He sighed and lit another cigarette. "Long time; before you were born and then some." He answered solemnly. I waited while the ageing computer flickered to life. I thought about what Howard had said. If he had been hunting longer than I had been alive and time didn't pass in the Garden then he had been at this for lifetimes. This was why Howard was so detached from society. He really didn't understand it. To him,

the years must have crawled by while he hunted day after day. Eventually, life in the city must have become a mess to him. Time must have lost all meaning to him at some point.

The laptop had started up. I searched about the files, recent documents and deleted files. I found little of interest. I kept looking, I was hoping to find at least something on some level just to appease Howard. "What did you do before you were a hunter?" I asked. Howard kept digging through draws in a large filing cabinet "I was a carpenter" he mumbled at the cabinet he was searching and then added "I carved the wood for churches. Pews, crosses, lecterns." "Really? Churches?" I pressed. "Yeah, I did the lord's work or some shit. Until he showed me a better way to help." I considered his words. "What happened?" I asked, Howard ignored the question. "There's nothing Vampire related on this computer, it's all accounts and emails about cheap beer" I said thinking it best not to push Howard for any more information. We left the room, a mess now.

We went a little further down the corridor to a doorway that was missing its door. There were stairs going down and a rickety old light dimly showing us our way. Howard and I considered this for a moment then drew our weapons and started cautiously down.

The stairs led to a basement. It was dark and smelled terrible. I searched the wall for a light switch. All I could find was a large handle attached to an electric box on the wall, it was dark and there was nothing else so I pulled the handle down. With a thundering crack, the lights came on. Fluorescent tubes were hanging from the ceiling by chains, they stretched across the vast room. It was like a small warehouse in size. There were



desks with computers and drawers that stretched far down one side of the room and the far side was covered in guns, swords and other weaponry. In the middle were large tables that ran the length of the room. Boxes were filling every desk. Howard walked straight to the wall of weapons. He admired the guns, ignored the blades. He could get blades anywhere but guns were a little rarer to him.

I opened one of the boxes on the tables in the centre strip of the room. What I found startled me “Howard! You need to see this.”

I hadn't been sure what I expected to find in the box. Drugs? Money? Bullets? Bibles? Anything would have made more sense to me than what I had found. I checked every box within reach. They were all the same, every box was filled with clothes. There were boxes of shirts, boxes of socks, hats, jeans, shoes. One box even had spectacles inside, the lenses were just glass though. “I don't get it!” proclaimed Howard. We walked down the long room periodically checking the boxes. It was the same the whole way. “Is this Vampire stuff?” I asked. Howard made no attempt to reply, he was just walking and checking boxes, looking for a clue. Eventually, I turned my attention to the desks.

The desks were just as much a confusion. Each desk was a self-contained station that had a strange printer, assorted papers and strangest of all the drawers above each desk was filled with cash. I turned a computer on while Howard opened one of his beers.

The computer started up quickly, there was no log-in or other security. It started up directly into some strange art-related software that I hadn't seen before. I rummaged about

in the desk drawers trying to figure out the purpose of all this equipment. Howard suddenly squealed with excitement “Worth the trip!” showing me a box of money he had found. He took a large handful of notes out of the box and put it into his satchel. “Smoke money” he grinned.

This was amusing Howard a great deal. I assumed it had been a long time since hunting had offered him any surprises. I tried to ignore this out of character elevated mood and continued looking for clues. Then I found one inside the big drawer under the printer. There were passports and driver’s licenses, all without a name or picture attached. They were perfectly new and each seemed packaged legitimately. I showed Howard my find. His mood changed back to his usual stoic self. “So, this is it. They come in one person and leave another” he said in a moment of revelation.

“Good work!” Said a voice that boomed in from the front of the room by the entrance. Howard and I instantly snapped into fighting stances. Our eyes met a familiar face. It was the Gardener. “Not very clever though, if I hadn’t already killed the guards in the security room you would have been knee-deep in Vampires by now.” She informed us smugly as she walked in. She was wearing a green leather jacket and jeans, yet somehow made it look mysterious.

I was pleased to see her. “Did you know about this?” I asked. She smiled at me warmly as she approached the desk “You’re speaking Demti you know?” she said softly in the daemon’s tongue. I must have slipped into my new language when I saw her. Howard opened a beer that had somehow appeared in his hand and looked at the two of us suspiciously. “Right.” he said as if he had solved a puzzle.

“You aren’t the type to waste time on lowly Vampires so what brought you here?” I asked. She smiled at me and answered as she began looking through the boxes of clothes. “I think this place is more than it seems, even now.” With that, she dropped the clothes back into the box and rubbed her fingers together with disdain, as if they were unclean.

“What are you talking about?” Asked Howard snappishly. I wasn’t sure if he was annoyed with the Gardener’s cryptic lines or if we had been speaking in Dementi again. The Gardener looked around the room some more as she explained to us, in English. “I saw the reports that some hunters brought back about this place. There are too many Vampires and not enough missing person reports. I think it may be some kind of safe-house.”

Howard checked his weapons, more out of reflex than anything else. This place suddenly seemed a lot more dangerous to him. “Vampires don’t have safe houses” he said as if it demanded an answer. The Gardener nodded “I know, that’s why I came straight here.” I knew what that meant. Daemons. I realised I was checking my weapons now too.

The Gardener looked through the computer with me. We realised that the software was for printing details onto the documents. It was a literal forgery station. One press ID for all. Just enter the details, load the printer and it would generate all the ID you could ever need. The computers also seemed to have a serious network set-up. I was starting to wonder if these documents may even check out if they were tested by the authorities.

“There’s a reason that this is a nightclub. I’m sure of it” said the Gardener as we finished our assessment. “Why?” I asked.

“They can generate documents, have enough street clothes to outfit a small army. Why have all this in the same place as masses of civilians? That’s not a mistake. That’s purposeful.” Howard and I both saw the logic. It was worrying. There weren’t many conclusions that could be drawn.

We carefully made our way back to the door that led to the bar, this time treating the place like an enemy stronghold not a stroll in the park. We watched the bar staff through the door, serving drinks, checking their phones and generally acting like regular people. None of us saw any telling signs that they were anything other than regular humans. We turned our eyes to the stage. We saw an opportunity when all the staff were checking something on a pump at the far side of the bar and slipped out into the main room.

The music was modern and intense. It was easy to slip into the sea of people, dancing, kissing or fighting. The tables were mostly empty even though the venue was packed. Everyone wanted to be dancing and moving. I could feel a crispness in the air, an electric clarity that made us want to be part of the music more than anything, an out of character desire for me. I reminded myself that I was a hunter now and I was working. We sat stoically and watched, waiting for something out of the ordinary. After a while, we relaxed a little and began to talk with each other.

The music was deafening but lip-reading was one of the basic skills that a hunter is given and The Gardener seemed to have no problems hearing us, even when she wasn’t looking at us. She was captivating even in this lighting with the flashes of neon and shadows. As we spoke I was glad that she knew I needed to read her lips, it gave me the excuse I wanted to look

at her more attentively. What was she?

As we talked we began to forget about the busy dance floor and it became just three people talking about work. Everything else faded to the background. It was when I was telling her about my first Vampire kill that our attention shifted. We could hear a rumbling that was a far deeper tone than the music. Howard was already standing at the edge of the dance floor, sword drawn, looking across the room. The civilians couldn't see his weapon. The Gardener and I quickly glanced across the room, wanting to see if anyone was reacting to him. Howard was waiting for the rumble to evolve into an event. No one was looking at him, all human. Nothing new yet.

The rumbling turned from a deep vibration of sound into an earthquake. The floor shook and the dancers screamed with joy and excitement, to them this was part of the club's experience. The music got louder as if to mask the sound; it didn't work.

The Light in the room dimmed and the sounds became muffled. The dancers seemed unconcerned. The three of us were the only ones aware that this was happening. Was it 'the Wind' at work?

Suddenly a strange light appeared in the air in the middle of the crowd, vibrant and bright. The dancers all moved away from the centre of the room but didn't respond at all to the strange glow. The light shone even brighter until Howard and I had to turn away for a moment shielding our eyes with our hands. The Gardener looked on.

I struggled to look at the light. There was a defined shadow within it, the shadow became more defined to the outline of a man. He was writhing in pain. I could see him fall to his knees and then as if a switch had been flipped the light and the

rumbling was gone and the music came back into clarity, the crowd whooped as if on some level aware that something had gone on.

The crowd began to slowly spread back across the dance floor. The man was on his knees in the middle of the floor dressed in dirty rags. I knew he was a daemon and was waiting for him to attack. Howard was just as ready as me, his eyes were fixed on the enemy and his hand tight around his sword. It was The Gardener who took the job of dispatching our new enemy, she strolled forward and knelt down next to the man. Her hand stroked his hair as if she was tending to a sick dog. They spoke for a few moments in Demti, I could see the words on their lips. "Who is supposed to meet you here?" she asked "I don't know" he said, some blood dripping from his mouth. The Gardener took a blade from her pocket "I can not let you leave this place" she said, and with that, she slit his neck. I swear I saw a tear on her cheek as that tender touch took his life. Her other hand began to smoke as if it was on fire and she placed it over his wound, the man exploded in a burst of smoke that looked like it was made of darkness itself. I walked over to her and helped her to her feet, not that she needed me but I wanted to show her that I understood that it was a hard thing to do, offer symbolic support.

The Gardener straightened her green jacket and looked around at the dancers. "Should we go now?" I asked. She nodded and rubbed her eyes. We turned towards the exit when we realised our companion was missing. Howard had gone.

We frantically scanned the room but we could see no sign of him. The Gardener closed her eyes and tilted her head from side to side as if sorting through the layers of sound. She opened her

eyes and darted to the edge of the dance floor where we could see Howard behind the bar, with a tall lady bartender holding his chest. "What's happening?" I asked, guessing that the Gardener could see more than me in this light. "It's some breed of daemon, she is filling him with her shadow." She dashed towards him. I could see that he was moments from death.

My new skills came to the front of my mind and suddenly I felt like I knew what to do. I took a knife from my arm and with a twitch of my wrist, I fired it across the room, a throw that the finest marksman would be proud of. The knife gracefully cut its way through the air. As it approached Howard's captor she turned gracefully. She knew it was coming, she had actually turned to let me see it go into her chest. She smiled. It was nothing to her.

She pulled it from her skin with her free hand and licked the sharpened edge with a grin. She wanted to intimidate me. It was working. I realised that I was the distraction. The Gardener's small blade was upon her. She batted the Gardener away as if she was an irritating wasp. She dropped Howard, leaving him for dead and leapt over the bar towards me ignoring the confused patrons. She was tall but built like a brawler, short hair, good for fighting, tight trousers and a fitted shirt. If she were human I would have said he spent a good portion of her life in a gym. This wasn't the case. Another bartender began to serve customers, ignoring all of this strangeness, this was not the Wind at work this was something else that masked us even more expertly.

I could see the Gardener getting to her feet; she was heading to Howard now. I had experienced her healing skills. I did not doubt that my mentor was going to be fine if she could get to

him.

I knew that I would need to buy a few more seconds so I began tossing knives as fast as I could. The daemon didn't even flinch as my knives met with her flesh but I did have her attention. I was backing up as fast as I could but the moment my armband was empty of knives I turned and ran towards the entrance to the club. It felt like the woman was playing with me. I had seen the Gardener move unnaturally fast in the past, I was sure she would have got to Howard but I wanted to give her time to heal him. I burst through the door at the front of the building and fell to the ground in the street. There were still people queueing to get into the club and a bouncer at the door. I could tell at a glance from this distance that he was a Vampire. His stance was too bold and his movements too slick for a human but I had bigger fish to fry, or at least run from.

The daemon woman strolled after me. She pulled the blades from her skin and dropped them on the floor as she walked. She was in control of this situation. I knew this feeling. She was hunting me just as I would have hunted a Vampire. This was a fight that I couldn't even engage in, never mind survive.

I pulled my daggers from my belt and rolled backwards on the floor, then with a snap I pulled myself to my feet. I may not have stood a chance in this fight but at least I could try to hold my own until the Gardener could aid me. The doorman pulled a rope across the queueing patrons and announced that the club was closed, the crowd screamed abuse at him but most began to disperse. He turned to watch me get slaughtered. He smiled and leaned against the wall, he was settling in for the show.

I thought that gaining time was still my best bet so I spoke



to her in her own language. "Who are you? What do you want?" I asked. She grinned and stopped her approach for a moment. "Who taught you to speak in this tongue?" She asked. "I picked it up from hearing your kind beg" I said proudly. I was going to get slaughtered, there was no point begging for mercy. I may as well try a bluff. She began to walk in circles around me, I kept turning to face her but I knew she could take me at any moment. "You speak it well" she commented. "Who are you?" I demanded. "Who taught you?" She fired back. She was losing interest in me rapidly. My time was running out. She moved as if her limbs teleported and snapped my left arm. She slapped me as if I were a fly while holding my broken arm. I screamed. I was just pleased she didn't snap my neck, but at least that would have hurt less. I screamed and waved my one good arm at her, my dagger cut at her, she didn't respond at all. I could see the deep cuts healing as I struggled.

The voice of my champion interrupted my execution like the sound of the cavalry's horns. "I taught him" yelled the Gardener. She was standing at the door of the club, Howard was standing next to her, sword drawn and cigarette alight. He was back on form and ready for revenge. "You okay buddy?" he called, I nodded. Somewhere in my soul I switched from prey to hunter again.

"And who are you?" asked the daemon to the Gardener. She never bothered to reply. The Gardener was ready to work. I think she knew that this daemon was more powerful than her. She simply whipped out the blade of her little knife and walked towards her adversary. Howard engaged the Vampire bouncer at the door and I looked on waiting for a moment to be of use.

I will remember that fight for the rest of my life. It was

the first time I had seen the Gardener really fight. I had seen her kill in the shopping centre when we had met but that was simple murder. She was far superior to that prey.

This time she was facing a skilled enemy. She moved with a liquid quality that I had never witnessed before, not even in the most elaborate science fiction or the most imaginative martial arts movies. This was something beyond all of that. She moved like every muscle was perfection. Her opponent was just as fast though not as graceful. The Gardener was like liquid the daemon was like smoke, her body would turn to darkness as the Gardener's blade touched her and allowed it to pass right through; then as she retaliated with a blow the Gardener's reflexes would prove too much and she would dodge or block every attack.

Howard had quietly silenced his prey in the backdrop of the moment. We both watched the fight unfold in front of us, unable to help in any way. We could see that we would be no real adversary or even distraction to this daemon. Especially since my one arm was smashed and I was already half beaten.

The fight was mostly blocked or dodged by both sides but on the occasions that one did land a blow on the other, the force was mighty. The Gardener had blocked a blow that had so much force the pavement beneath her had cracked in two. All we could do was look on and hope that the Gardener would win.

Howard made his way around the fight and put his hand on my good shoulder. "We should go. If she loses we're dead if we're still here" he whispered. I knew he was right but I couldn't leave her, not yet. Howard pointed out a few people over the road watching the fight. Within moments a crowd was starting

to build. I don't know what they thought they were seeing, probably a street brawl but even the Wind could not hide two people blatantly battling to the death in the street.

The daemon woman finally struck a lucky blow in the Gardener's face. She was knocked back with the force. The daemon knew this was her best chance and struck once more. The Gardener was again knocked back. With a mighty kick, the daemon spun with the force of a truck into the Gardener's stomach. She slid across the floor. Howard whispered his advice to me again. "We need to be leaving *now*" he said sternly. I turned to run, then I saw the Gardener stand. Her arm was bent out of shape and there was a gash across her stomach. She flicked her arm and it snapped back into position. She looked down at the blood on her body and her skin glowed with the dark light I had seen before. The wound sealed itself in a web of shadows and within moments it was gone. Her eyes blackened and she straightened her jacket. The daemon woman stared on as if entertained. Confident in her own looming victory. The Gardener stretched again, this time every muscle in her body began to swell, her skin tightened and stretched as she suddenly seemed a little more muscular. While the changes were subtle I could sense them all with my hunter's eyes. There was more power circulating around her body now and her eyes seemed sharper. It was like she had flipped a switch and gone from an elegant ranger of fantasy to a brutal barbarian. "You seeing this Howard?" I asked with a head tilted to the side so I didn't have to take my eyes off the fight. I was still nursing my arm. Howard was silent for a moment "Well, it looks like the stories are true. She's a legend for a reason I guess." I made a mental note to ask about 'the stories' if we got out of this alive.

For whatever reason, the crowd had begun to disperse. Maybe the stakes just got high enough for the Wind to make them leave. Or maybe another bar had just opened and they all got the call. Either way, it was clearing out.

Howard called my name with an urgent tone and pointed towards the roof of the club. Figures were moving between the shadows and the lights. We saw one of them turn to smoke and dissipate into the air. "That's a lot of problems." I agreed. We took this as our time to leave. This time all I could do was hope the Gardener knew what she was doing and what was going to happen. I caught her eye, she smiled and nodded to me. I felt that this was her way of telling me it was okay. She knew that Howard and I were out of our depth. I was pretty sure she was out of hers too.

We made a hasty exit as quietly as possible. Turned a few corners and disappeared into an ally, stopping for a moment so I could turn my jacket into a sling for my arm. It hurt like hell but it would make it easier to run. Howard took his chance to berate me. "What the fuck was that about Mike? We should have left the moment we had a chance. We can't help her. This shit is above our level." I knew he was right "I wasn't stopping you from leaving!" I replied as we jogged to the main road, he shot me a look. We didn't speak another word as we made our way to the garage.

## Chapter 5: Retreats.

We entered the Garden and were greeted by Tom. "Hello, gentlemen. I hear we know the location of a daemon void gate." Tom was excited. "How did you know?" I whispered almost to myself as my arm went from feeling like it was on fire to feeling like it had been put out. Howard and Tom got into a deep conversation about the events of the club. I wanted to be part of this talk. "The Gardener was in some serious trouble when we left." I injected my statement into their conversation. I could feel my fingers again. Tom sat down on one of the little chairs by a table. Tea was delivered within moments. "Yes, I know" he said as if that was the end of the topic. I stretched my arm out, it was mechanically working again, still hurt though. "We should group up and go back with more hunters, there may still be time to help her" I suggested. "The Gardener does not need our help, she will be back with us soon enough I'm sure" answered Tom as he poured us all a delicate cup of tea. "You've heard from her already?" I asked excitedly. "No, but the Gardener comes and goes as she sees fit." I didn't think Tom was grasping what I was telling him. "She could be dead damn

it! When we left she was fighting a daemon who was at least as powerful as her! We saw more of them coming from the roof of the club” I was speaking too fast. Tom became stern. “We do not get involved in the affairs of the Gardener! Now, I suggest you get some sleep” and with that Tom stood up and left. He showed genuine anger towards me, I hadn’t questioned him before, not really. I don’t think anyone had.

Howard wouldn’t talk to me about returning to help her. I knew that time was a thing that meant nothing in the Garden so I returned to my room. I think on some level I was hoping that she would be waiting for me there; magically with no explanation that made sense. I opened the door with my now only throbbing arm and of course, there was nothing. I looked up and down the long corridor for some sign of her but just one or two hunters were scurrying about the halls of the house.

I wasn’t tired this time. I didn’t get some sleep as Tom had instructed. I had a shave and finally brushed my teeth. My arm was healed now. I noticed that an old scar on my shoulder from when I was a kid was also gone. I changed my clothes. I could see my backpack at the bottom of the wardrobe. It was all that I still had from my old life. It had only been a few months to me since all this had started. That life was a distant memory to me now.

I thought about the Gardener. She must have known what she was getting into. I couldn’t understand why she would put herself on the line like that. I hadn’t yet been given my own method for exiting the Garden so I decided that I needed to talk to the one person that I trusted.

It didn’t take me long to find Howard’s room. There were no door signs in the house, I had been to his door a few times

but it was easy to get lost in the house. Some other hunters were happy to point me in the right direction. I was fortunate even though hunters didn't socialise much beyond the occasional shared lunch. Howard was something of a legend himself and everyone knew where his room was. I wondered why paying him a visit had not occurred to me before.

I politely knocked on his door and waited. His door was just like mine. I wondered how any of us ever found our rooms. There was no answer so I knocked again. Soon enough I found myself pounding at his door for attention. Eventually, a pissed-off looking Howard opened it, wearing little more than a pair of shorts he peered through a gap enough to talk but not enough for me to step in. "What do you want?" He asked groggily "The Gardener, she taught me her language." "So" he responded. "Why would she do that?" I countered sharply.

Howard opened the door as to invite me in, and then collapsed back onto his bed. I strolled into his room and opened the curtains. His room was almost identical to mine except for the window being on the other wall. Howard had lived here a long time; even though the furniture was what I assumed to be the standard-issue, he had decorated his home with trophies and trinkets from his adventures. There were all sorts of strange things dotted about the room, Vampire teeth, weapons, a wolf rug that looked a little too human-shaped. Even a gas mask that looked like it was from the first world war. I looked about the collection thinking that Howard would object but he seemed more focused on waking himself up. He was perched at the end of his bed searching a pile of washing for a clean shirt, cigarette lit as usual.

I couldn't help myself, I had to ask about his laundry sit-

uation. "You know, the laundry kinda works mystically well." I pointed out. "I've been here for a while now Mike. I know how the laundry basket works, I just don't bother using it" he barked while breathing out smoke. He was right, he had his own way of doing things and it was none of my business. "All these things from your kills?" I asked as I looked at a collection of rings stacked on a large claw that he had apparently glued down to use as a stand. "Yeah, I like to keep reminders." He said, finally locating some Jeans. "Reminders?" I asked. "Yeah, reminders that there's always someone who can kick my arse." I smiled, he really was macabre, wise and a little crazy.

"Why ain't you asleep?" Howard asked. "Because I've only been up a few hours, why *are* you asleep?" Howard rubbed his chin, he needed a shave. "Don't know, mission, sleep, shower. That's life I suppose." He made his way to his bathroom and pissed away his beer from the club. He left the door open and called through "What do you want anyway?" For me, this was the moment where I had to choose how much I trusted this crazy chain-smoking old cowboy. I thought for a second. At worst he could kick me back to my own room with a good telling off. "I think Tom is hiding something. I want to know what he's up to. He seems to always know too much about everything." Howard wandered back into the room. "What do you mean? Tom is **the** boss. It's literally his job to know things." I thought back to the conversation with the Gardener. Howard and I were friends, as unlikely as this seemed when we first met. I told him about the talk that the Gardener and I had shared in the dojo a few hours ago. I told him about how she had given me some clarity to whatever effect that the charms had on us. I told him about how she had told me she could see the future



and how she had given me her language.

I was waiting for Howard to tell me I was imagining things or something and march me to Tom but he sat on his bed and rubbed his stubbly chin. "I don't understand." He began "Tom is our leader and I've been working with him for... Well, for as long as I can remember. But he's always told me that the Gardener is our best hope for an end to the war." He seemed almost trance-like. The clarity that I had been given was like a veil being lifted and suddenly I wanted to question everything. Howard seemed desperate to not question anything. Maybe without the same gift, Howard wouldn't be able to see the sinister undertone of the Garden. Maybe I was imagining it.

His dubious trance was becoming deeper after a few seconds he shook his head as if he was trying to wake himself up. "No, you're just being a wanker" he said and ordered me to leave so he could get some sleep. I did as I was asked and left without arguing, there seemed no point in pushing this matter anymore.

I wandered the halls of the house for a while exploring the area's that I hadn't been to before. None of the other hunters ever deviated from their usual routines. All going from the Garden to their rooms and occasionally to the dojo when needed. It seemed amazing to me that I hadn't noticed how robotic it all was. The strange thing is that I never considered myself to be like this. I was certain that there was something not right. I was also worried that I had gotten more than a little paranoid.

I eventually found myself sitting in the Garden. There were the usual mix of hunters around but no Tom. I looked over at his marquee and considered it as a symbol of my mistrust. I was lost in this moment. I was sure nothing would change here until I went to sleep. I wondered if whatever magic was at work

wouldn't move along the day for any of us until I slept. But how could I think of sleep when I knew the Gardener was still out there. I needed Howard. I needed him to act like the hero I knew he was. I needed the Howard who killed Vampires and smoked too much. Not the man in short that lay sleeping in his untidy room. I needed him because I had no way of leaving on my own. He was my only real friend. I got sick of my thoughts and accepted defeat. I went back to my room. I lay in my bed and wished for sleep, feeling as helpless as the day I arrived at the Garden.

My eyes opened, slowly at first then the memory's of the previous day flooded my mind. I jumped out of bed. I picked up my weapons and smiled to myself as I noticed that my armband of knives was somehow full again. I opened the door of my room and headed toward the patio. Sure enough, the Garden had done its work and a fresh-looking Howard was standing in the doorway. "We need to go back to the club, check for more Vampires." I said to him expectantly. "We need to see Tom first." He replied defiantly. "No, we don't, I've already spoken to him." I lied. I could see that Howard didn't believe me for a moment but something within him was fighting his domesticated spirit and he nodded in dubious agreement. We wandered to the edge of the Garden and Howard raised his sticks in the air. Within a blink of an eye, we were standing at that familiar garage, I looked up at the night sky. As expected it was still dark; still evening, no more than a moment had passed since we were last here. We set off towards the club in something of a run.

I could see that Howard was having issues with his decision to believe my stark lie. "This is about The Gardener isn't it?" He asked as we jogged our way. "Yes." I replied without remorse. "I

need to at least try and help her, Howard. I can't live with myself if I do nothing." Howard slowed down our pace a little to catch some breath "We were outnumbered and by daemons. How are you going to help her this time? What changed?" His point was valid but I had a plan. "Were not going to get ambushed this time. We know what to expect. We're going to get into the club and instead of poking about like idiots, we're going to use your love of setting fires and raze it to the ground. Kill every Vampire we can find, then grab the Gardener. She can open a portal to the Garden while the whole place burns!" I explained it as if it was sensible. Howard grinned at me. "That's the stupidest thing I have ever heard. You want to set fire to a building you're inside so everyone leaves and then find a magic woman who is probably already dead in the hopes she can snap her fingers and get us out of there?" I was about to reply and he hushed me with a wave of his hand "If she *is* dead, we die. If she's alive and out of magical gas, we die. If daemons spot us before we find her we die." He laughed aloud "Sure, fuck it. Let's go save your crush and get killed. If we manage to pull it off I may retire!" I waved down a taxi and handed the driver a handful of cash from Howard's satchel. "We're in a rush" I said.

We reached the club quite literally five minutes later. It looked different now, no people were queuing to get in. A lot were coming out though. It was late in the night, or early in the morning. Just as we did before we went in through the back door. No way they would have been able to fix the cameras yet, and we planned on killing everything we could anyway. Less to face on the way out, should we need to escape.

We searched every room on the ground floor. I looked up the stairs this time. Sure enough, there was a lot of blood

and some broken camera equipment. The Gardener had done a good job of breaking it all. There were a few people or Vampires in the room with the clothes and printing equipment. Seemed like they were worried we had done something. They also seemed to be laying out clothes and had a few computers on.

We could hear the sound of people, or worse, in the other side rooms, we quietly peeked in to see if we could find The Gardener. We avoided attention and headed towards the bar. There was no way they would expect hunters to return, not so soon. Not to a place that was know known to house daemons. Their assumption about our sanity was the very reason that we got back in so easily.

“She’s not here Mike.” Whispered Howard as we ducked back into the security room. “Even if she is dead, where’s the body? Where’s that daemon woman?” I whispered back. “I have no idea but from the way they are working in that room back there, they are looking to outfit a non-trivial amount of daemons for city life. We need to do something before we’re knee-deep in scary.” Howard’s tone was grave. That’s when I had a moment of inspiration. “You’re right Howard. They are expecting someone to come through that portal right? Maybe That’s where she is!” I was quite sure; there was nowhere they could be hiding her. We had searched the whole place. Our least conservative estimation of the time that had passed gave them no more than half an hour since our fight. There should still be fallout even if she had lost. “Well fuck. Okay then. Yeah. Let’s go meet new people. Maybe we’ll make friends.” Howard said manically with a devil may care smile.

We carefully made our way to the back of the bar and slid out into the crowd much like last time. The difference was that

we weren't assuming the Wind would protect our identity. This time we knew what we were facing. We were careful that the bar staff didn't spot us and careful not to highlight our presence by standing around and watching the patrons with swords out like last time. This time we stayed in the now thinning crowd.

We waited. It wasn't long before we felt the rumbling again. This time we knew what to expect. As the crowd danced its way subtly away from the centre of the room Howard and I held our ground dead centre of the floor. "What's your plan then?" asked Howard as our presence was being noticed. "When the daemon came through the portal it was helpless and weak" Howard nodded in agreement. "Well, when another one arrives I'm going to ask it some questions."

Howard sighed, "I suppose you need me to keep you alive while you have your little conversation?" Howard wasn't confident about this at all but he was the best, if anyone could do this it was him.

The rumbling began to hit its peak and as expected we were standing in the ball of light. We could see that some people were coming in through the doorway behind the bar. We couldn't tell yet what they were though; Vampire or daemon, it was unlikely they were human.

The light was blinding and we were in the middle of it. The whole room was lit like daytime to us. It was starting to get hot like we were standing next to a fire. The light vanished in a sudden blink and I pulled my daggers from my belt. Sure enough, there was a daemon slowly appearing as a shadow next to us. This one looked like a young man, dressed in rags and as weak as I expected. He looked hardly even an adult but he was a daemon and given enough time to compose himself he

could kill both of us with little effort. I knelt behind him and put my arm around his neck as firmly as I could. I didn't know if daemons needed to breathe but at the very least a neck could be broken. With my other hand, I pushed my dagger into his back firmly enough to break his skin. I wanted there to be no doubt that I was serious.

Howard drew his sword and waited to engage the figures dashing towards us from the bar. As they got closer I could tell with a single look that they were Vampires nothing more. "Make it quick" demanded Howard as he readied his sword. I put my lips close to the daemon's ear. His hair was long and blonde, it smelled like burnt wood. In slow and soft Demti I asked him a question, "Your kind took a friend of mine, I need to know where she is." The daemon was confused and still trying to get his bearings. I pushed my dagger a little deeper into his back. He wriggled with pain and moaned; I squeezed his neck a little more. "Where is the Gardener?" I asked. He stopped wriggling and I could almost feel the smile creep across his face. "She is inside our void." He spat the words with hatred. "She's well known to us. We were pleased to have her visit us." I was filled with rage. Howard was locked in battle with at least five Vampires. He was impressive and in trouble, he needed help. "How do I get to your void then?" I asked "Release me and I'll open a gate for you here and now." He said it with a smile. "If I release you, you'll turn on me" I pointed out. "No, I'll open the gate for you. Why would I not? If you are stepping into it then I don't need to kill you. It's suicide anyway." I believed him. "Do it!" And with that, I pulled my dagger from his flesh and I released his neck. I stepped back. "STOP!" he commanded in English. The Vampires scuttled back from Howard. They

were in the presence of a superior power now. “What the fuck Mike?” Exclaimed Howard when he saw me help the daemon to his feet. “It’s okay Howard, we’ve come to an arrangement.”

The daemon muttered something that sounded like Demti but I couldn’t quite understand it. His hands began to steam with darkness. He finished his mutterings and stretched out one arm, the darkness changed from smoke to ball around his hand. He blew it and as if it had its own mind, it travelled slowly towards us. With a single word that again I couldn’t quite catch, he commanded it to open. It stretched itself out like a floating hole that led into the source of darkness. Through it we could see a red glow through a hazy fog.

“You’re actually mad, you know that right?” Muttered Howard from behind me. He was probably right. I looked at the gateway, just like our garage it was a simple entrance. “You don’t have to come.” I shrugged at Howard. “Yeah, I’ll just stay here and have a little dance shall I?” We stepped forward into the swirling hole. As we entered it, Howard turned and drew his gun. He let a single bullet leave the barrel. He couldn’t have had any idea as to if it would kill the daemon or not but he couldn’t help giving it a go as he left.

## Chapter 6: Declamation.

I had no idea how long it was before I awoke but the first thing I saw was Howard's face. "Wake up, Mike! MIKE! We need to move!" I heard as I went in and out of consciousness. I was disoriented and in pain, my body was ringing like a bell inside. It was like being electrocuted with fire. I tried to move but my body just twitched and the shock wave of pain hit me again. I was on my back and above me, there was no sky, there were things like birds flying around gliding through something, not through clouds but smoke. Above them was a ball of lava floating like a burning sun. We weren't in the city anymore that was for sure. Howard began to help me up. I could hear explosions and screams and what sounded like dragons or demons screeching and roaring. As I got to my feet my vision blurred but not like I was stunned. It was like the world was out of focus, not my eyes. My consciousness slipped from me as I passed out again.

There were a few more waking moments for me before my mind cleared. I remember occasional visions and images. The world was almost in focus one time when I saw the flashes



of steel and roars of battle. I was aware each time I gained something resembling consciousness that Howard was fighting for his life. For our lives. I reached down for a blade, I wanted to help. The pain shook me and darkness took me again.

The next thing I remember, the first thing I actually can remember clearly was waking up on a stone floor. The pain had left me. I sat up and looked around. From what I could tell I was in a church. I pulled myself to my feet, there wasn't any pain anymore but I was numb from head to toe. I pulled myself to a pew and sat. I looked at the place I had found myself in. It was a church but it was like a version from an old horror movie.

The walls were old stone masonry and the windows were not the ornate jigsaws of glass but shards of red and black like it was made of old smashed pieces carefully puzzled together in layers. Outside the windows, the sun did not stream in. A red fiery glow from that ball of hate and flame I had seen in the sky lit the night. The pews around me were wooden and old, as you would expect in a church. It was old redwood and in bad disrepair. There were signs of where the glorious decorations of a church had once been but everything was gone or broken. Like it had recently survived the blitz and someone was pretending everything was fine. I looked forward. I didn't see a crucifix or a symbol of any other religion that I knew. There was a statue of sorts. A stone carving of the earth. The stone ball sat in a metal pit of barely burning coals, moments from losing its glow. This was no subtle way of showing what this place was worshipping. I gazed at the embers for a moment.

All my emotions and confusion hit me at once. I stood up and checked my weapons, letting my training guide me. One hand on a blade and my eyes keen. I had allowed myself to be

vulnerable, it was stupid of me and I was angry with my lack of control, lack of discipline. Where was Howard? How did I get here? Where was I?

The large wooden door at the end of the massive room swung open with a creak. I drew my other blade and prepared myself for battle. "Relax, it's me!" called the familiar voice of Howard. He sounded different, calmer than I expected maybe. He secured the door behind himself. He looked okay, I was relieved. As he had entered I saw the outside for a moment, a red and dry heat streamed in. "I had to check outside, make sure we're still safe." He said as he walked towards me. As he turned to me from securing the door I saw that he was covered in blood, none of it looked like his. I suppose that meant we *were* safe, now.

"Where are we?" I asked. Howard washed his face in what looked like a baptismal font, the water looked as dirty as he did. "When we came through the portal you were a wreck. You looked like you were having a seizure of some kind." He splashed his face some more before continuing. "This place, this world. It seems to be pretty much in the middle of a civil war. I've not worked it out just yet but it looks like they stay clear of these churches. Other than that, this whole place is either in ruins or on fire." He began using the font water to clean some fresh looking chunks of something from his sword.

I took a moment to gather my thoughts while Howard explained to me how he dragged me into a ruin while he had scoped out a safe place. Then how he carried me between a group of battling daemons and ended up at this church. He had realised that the monstrosities that roamed this world were all avoiding the church like it was scarier than even them.

I realised that he wasn't being entirely honest with me. I gripped my blades tightly but didn't draw them from my belt. "Howard!" I demanded with my most commanding voice. He looked up from his sword which was now cleaner than it had been just moments ago. "Yes Mike?" he questioned. "Why didn't the portal affect you like it did me?" Howard stared at me with a scary intensity. We were locked in each other's hunting gaze until a new voice made itself known. "Because he's a Vampire." We both looked around and locked eyes now on a man dressed in robes standing in the shadows at the side of the room. "Who the fuck are you?" demanded Howard with poignant directness. The man stepped forward and dropped his hood, he was clean and young with not a blemish on his face, his robes were black and charred, "I'm one of the good guys; I assure you." He said while making a gesture to show he had no weapons. "And you sir, are a Vampire." He added, looking at Howard as he stepped forward a little. "Is this true?" I asked sharply.

"Yes."

Howard turned away as if polluted by his own shame.

"How?" I asked.

The angelic man walked closer into the room "I've been watching you both for a few hours. It was your soul that was burning when you arrived, and the pain you felt was an effect of your attachment to it." He then gently put a hand on Howard's shoulder "But you. You gave up that soul to protect your friend didn't you? You knew good and well what was happening. I saw you. You just let go of it as if it were simply in your way. You needed to shed it to finish your mission. I respect your resolve."

Howard looked over at me with sorrowful eyes. "Yeah, there was no point in us both dying. When I felt the burning start

to set in. I knew what I needed to do. It wasn't hard to let go. I guess I wasn't using it much anyway." Howard was not a broken man or monster to be feared, not yet. His soul had been tormented since I had known him. He seemed no worse off without it. As worrisome as that was to me.

"Why am I not burning any more then?" I demanded. Howard put away his sword with exaggerated motions to make sure there were no misunderstandings between us. "You were a mess for hours. Mostly catatonic. I carried you here and then you started getting better." Howard didn't look away from me even for a moment. His eyes were wet but his one tear had a red tint. He broke my gaze; he quietly added "I carried you. I protected you." I don't know if it was the stress, the worry or the sincerity that got me but I laughed a little. We laughed together but only for a second.

"How did it happen?" I asked. "Like the fella said, pretty much. I've been around long enough to know a few things. When the burning started inside me, I knew what it was. I pulled myself together long enough to see the things that roam this world." He paused as if trying to find words that would make it make sense. He wasn't looking at me anymore. He was still looking towards me but absently now. "I knew it was death for the both of us. That's when I knew what I had to do. I pushed out my soul and I got on with my mission." I looked at him. He knew what he had done. He did this for me. I didn't know how much time had passed. How long before he began to change. Before the hunger set in?

"We good? I mean, for now?" He asked. I nodded and turned my blade towards our visitor.

I raised one of my blades with dramatic effect and pointed

it squarely at our visitor's nose. "Now. I'll ask again, once very clearly. Who the fuck are you?" I demanded the information with all my fury. "My name is Charles" he said as if it should be enough to impress us. Howard put his hand on his sword handle and took a deep breath. "Okay, Charles. What are you? Some sort of guardian fucking angel?" He asked. Charles smiled. "I think you're in the wrong realm to run into those vile creatures." I thinned my eyes as I tried to get a sense of this man. "And..." I prompted gesturing with my blade. Charles was calm, he didn't fear us and he seemed a little entertained by our lack of knowledge. "This realm is a dumping ground for Vampires and daemons, it's a midway point between the hellish paradise that daemon's come from and your world. It's at war because daemons are trying to get to your world and Vampires are trying to get to daemon worlds, each needs the blood of the other to open a doorway to their destination."

Charles seemed trustworthy enough for my liking so I lowered my dagger. "What kind of daemon are you?" Howard asked. "None! I'm a Wraith." He said almost offended. He could see our confusion at what he thought was an obvious statement.

He explained himself, "I'm a native to this realm. Aeons ago before the travellers set waste to our world we were all one with it. In perfect balance. When the travellers started beating the life out of each other it fractured us. The result was, well..." He gestures to himself. "My kind were born." His words were filled with a strange pride in his people. "'Wraith' is the name given to us by the first of the travellers. We had not learned to take a form back then. We existed as wind and shadow. They weren't even sure if we were alive."

He raised his hand and showed us it against the light, his

skin though solid in darkness was plainly less so in the light. He was made of a kind of a blurring of light. His form was very undefined and seemed held together by his attention to each part of himself. As he spoke his face gained focus and as he gestured his hands became more clear while the rest of his clarity faded in some way. He stepped back into the shadow away from the window's light and he again seemed as real as any other man. His robes never lost clarity; they were real and old. He wore them, I suppose to save himself from having to conjure a whole form.

Charles continued to tell us about his people with the same sense of pride. They were eternal and could not be harmed by anything because their only forms were made of their thoughts, their attention. As the years went by they began to learn to interact more directly with the world around them. The first of the things he kept referring to as 'travellers' built the churches to honour the old ghosts of this world. The first ones were not like the daemon's that we knew now.

The time before the travellers had come became a distant memory. They took names and became individuals. Recently however the traffic of travellers had increased dramatically and their little world had been devastated, only the churches were left standing. Both sides feared the power of the first ones and thought it best not to anger them. The churches had become homes for the Wraiths. I was touched by the story and ashamed that as hunters we were not even aware of these people, our potential allies. For every daemon or Vampire we killed in our world there was one less potential traveller to decimate theirs. I told Charles about this thought. He understood already "Just because you don't know about us it doesn't mean we don't

know about you.” He said with a smile. “You owe us no apology hunter.” That’s when Howard finished pretending to clean his sword. “Well, I don’t give a shit either way. Not my world. Not my problem. Now, where’s the Gardener? I want to go home.”

“How long before being here affects Mike’s soul again?” Howard asked in a touching display of concern for me. Charles looked at me with intent for a moment. “He feels okay now because he has had time to acclimatise, his soul is numb. When people arrive here they are usually consumed by travellers before they get this far.”

Howard grunted. “We would have been consumed too if I hadn’t been able to fight.” I nodded to him, a bittersweet thank-you. Charles considered for a moment longer and then added “This building seems to hurt the travellers, it may be healing you in some related way. I would guess another few hours or so out there and the numbness would turn to rot. You’ll begin feeling pain soon after you leave I would guess. I doubt being here is fixing anything, just easing your pain.”

Charles seemed very well versed in the affairs of the soul. Maybe because that’s what he was made of, in some way. “Fine. We had better get moving.” I proclaimed. “There’s a fortress of sorts far north of here. It is where the daemons run their affairs. That is where they will have taken your friend” Charles informed us. “How do you know?” Howard asked suspiciously “I’m a Wraith. We know all” he said, again with great pride, yet without a hint of arrogance.

We checked outside and while there were many sounds and flashes of power in the distance, our immediate area looked safe enough. I hadn’t gotten a clear look at the area before now. It was a strange place, it looked like a Victorian city after a war.

Except that the sky was black and red and lit with fire. Every building was a ruin and only the vaguest imprints of what once was still remained; except the church. It was ancient, yes, but untouched by the devastation around it.

Once we were sure that nothing was in the immediate area we left the church and dashed for the nearest ruin. Charles joined us. Howard and I dashed and ducked behind cover as we went, Charles simply gestured as if he was to move and before we knew what was happening he was at his destination. It was a strange thing. It wasn't that he was teleporting or moving too fast to see. He was simply somewhere else and my brain didn't want to allow me to decode what was happening. I just knew the results and I also knew that there was something else going on that I couldn't understand. Ancient and powerful magic at play, *again* I suppose.

The burning of my soul began to tingle the moment I left the church. It was at the edges of my senses, constantly eroding and consuming attention. It was like when you know you have a headache and on some level, you subconsciously think that you can use the pure force of will to conquer it by refusing to acknowledge it. We trekked on.

We skilfully sneaked around a battle between three large winged Vampires and a daemon the size of an elephant. The daemon was shifting between its human form and its gigantic true self effortlessly but the Vampires were well-armed and were not easily defeated. "I don't get it" Howard whispered, "In our world, the Vampires are working with the daemons why are they fighting here?" I was just as curious. We waited for Charles to enlighten us. "Your world is one of many, and here they all converge when they travel. Not every world has such



weak-willed Vampires as yours. Some worlds have nothing but Vampires left on them. Others have nothing but daemons. But here Vampire blood allows daemons to open portals and vice-versa.”

We moved further north as fast as possible. I was beginning to feel the effects of my burning soul more consciously now. It was like a sadness inside me and a sickness in my stomach. We came to a relatively safe area where there was nothing but burned terrain in front of us. There were no travellers, of any kind for as far as we could see. We talked as we walked. “This place is called ‘The Meadow’ by my people.” Charles told us. “When the first travellers came to this world it was a grassland with a lake in the middle, now it’s a burned plane.” Listening to Charles was oddly comforting. He had existed in this world forever. He knew everything about it. The war had taken its toll on his world but there was very little hate or sadness left in Charles. He had existed for so long and somehow all of the negative emotions had gone from him. The endless war in his world just irritated him. He wanted it over but had no hate left. I suppose that knowing you will exist forever changes the way you look at things. Even the longest war seems of little consequence and the greatest love could be nothing more than a brief fling.

We had been walking at quite a pace for over an hour. I felt as weak as I did on my first day as a Hunter. I was tired and sick; every step felt like a struggle. It was made worse by my travelling companions, a wraith that never tired and never rested and a man who was becoming more of a Vampire every moment. I thought about what would happen to Howard as we walked. Would I have to kill him? Could I? Even if I had the

will, he was a better fighter than me and now he would have Vampire abilities, who knew how they would manifest.

I snapped back to reality when I heard him say "I'm hungry." He said it softly and with shame. "For what?" I asked, far too quickly with one hand on my blade. "I want a soul." He replied absentmindedly. Charles was strangely supportive of Howard's needs. "You should kill the next daemon we see, another Vampire won't sustain you. They have no soul to consume." Howard agreed "Yeah, I know that, I've been hunting them for a little while you know. I'm not sure I even know how to feed. This is my first meal as the enemy."

I thought about this, Howard had resided himself to his fate. "You're not the enemy Howard." I was trying to be supportive but I wasn't sure how long Howard's humanity would last with no soul to support it. Eventually, I figured the hunger would take him and he would be less picky about his lunch. Charles however seemed genuinely convinced that Howard was different even now. "You didn't have your soul taken from you Howard. You gave it away for someone else. That makes you a different kind of Vampire." Howard was not so convinced, I could tell from how he brushed off the comments and walked a little faster so I couldn't see the self-hate in his eyes.

Something dawned on me "Hey Howard, you've not had a cigarette since we got here!" I pointed out, impressed with him. He grunted in agreement and continued on. Charles let him lead the way and stayed back with me. "Lesser addictions can have no hold over him now I'm afraid, it's not a good sign." Suddenly Howard's lack of smoke made me worried, not proud.

We came to the edge of the wasteland abruptly. The edge was a little drop in front of us. Below we could see a large dip;

like the mouth of a massive crater. Was this where this lake once was?

There was a large stone building in the middle and as far as we could see no fighting. This place was patrolled by daemons alone. “What is all this?” I asked as we ducked down to avoid detection. Charles was as informative as ever. “This is our destination. It is the place where the first daemon crossed over to our world. This crater was left by the explosion. It is their stronghold and where your friend will be.”

We looked for an opening, watching the patrols go past for a long time. Charles continued to educate us “They have to hold this place. It is the weakest point between this world and theirs. If they lose it then crossing over to their world will be a lot harder.”

At least one of the patrols were less enthused by their work than the others, skipping checks and being more interested in chatting. We waited for the two human-like daemons to come around again. I gathered my energy and pushed my doubts and fatigue aside. We scrambled down the side of the cliff as fast as we could. There were a few places where it wasn't as sheer and the spot we found seemed safe enough. At the bottom, we hid behind a cobblestone wall.

Howard nudged me and pointed at the patrol. At the edge of a stone wall. They were the lazy ones, not patrolling as the others did. “Lunch!” Howard grunted with a menacing grin. His humanity being overrun by the desire to feed. I think the only reason he hadn't looked at me with those hungry eyes was that my soul was on fire and unappealing. I was thankful for that small mercy at least.

“Be realistic Howard! We can't take on one daemon, never

mind two!" I reasoned frantically. Howard however was not in agreement "No. As a hunter, I couldn't take a daemon. But as a Vampire with hunter training, the odds are much better. And with a Hunter and a Wraith as backup, I think that this may be an even match!" Howard began to carefully sneak around the edge of the wall. We followed as I tried to talk him out of his attack. "You're not even sure what you are now? Do you even know if you have any, you know... Vampire powers?" I said hastily. "Do you have any idea how much focus it takes to keep these robes from falling off me? I don't even know how to fight!" Charles added. Howard was resolved and ignored both of us. In the end, I took a deep breath and tried to push my fatigue and sickness to the back of my mind, again. It was time to fight no matter how bad an idea I thought it was.

Both daemon's looked alike, they were tall and had skin like sandpaper with jeans and dirty shirts. I was sure that when they were in our world they would have masqueraded as body-builders and hung out in gyms and at football games. They weren't that powerful though, I could tell by looking at them. They lacked the killing eye that the other daemons I had seen always had. But even a weak daemon is still a daemon.

We were just a few feet away from them. They were chatting about a recent kill. They spoke Demti. They were stupid. They spoke with a very basic grasp of their own language. "Go distract them" ordered Howard to Charles who sighed and nodded. He owed us no loyalty but was glad to help in any way he could. It must be nice being so sure of your immortality. "Mike, take my robes for me." Charles said as they dropped to the floor and his form faded away. A few moments later the daemons were distracted as promised.

They heard a sound conveniently in the opposite direction to us. The dirt and dust on the ground in front of them began to whip around and spin as if inside a small tornado. As it moved any rock that it happened to suck in was quickly fired at the two like little bullets; it did little to actually injure them. They were entertained though. They laughed and pointed at the stupid wraith trying to fight them. Obviously, the wraiths had tried to fight the daemon's like this before. So much so that they weren't remotely worried by the attack. What could the wind do to them?

They began to relax and tried to taunt Charles knowing full well what he was. They put their knives away and lowered their guard. That's the moment Howard saw his chance and with his newfound Vampire speed and agility, he launched himself like a bullet at his prey. He was effective in knocking them both off their feet. The tornado vanished and the whipped up dirt fell to the floor. A few of the rocks that Charles had fired at the daemons began to roll towards one of them while Howard punched the other in its face as hard as he could. With his new abilities, Howard's fists were like hammers. Even the strongest Vampire I had seen didn't have the power to pound a daemon in the way Howard was doing.

I was still feeling sick but I knew it was my time to get involved. I fired a throwing knife at the other daemon's neck. It wouldn't stop him for more and a second but every second gave Howard the time he needed. The daemon tried to scream as my little knife went into him. Thankfully a neck injury makes it hard for you to call for assistance. He opened his mouth wide for air as he pulled the blade from his windpipe. I fired another at his stomach as he raised himself to his knees. The rolling

rocks forced themselves into each wound as Charles intended. A little unsettling to watch but quite effective as a means of inflicting pain. I ran at my enemy and cut at him with my daggers. He batted me away like a rag doll as he sucked in more air. With each breath, the wounds healed more and his power returned. The other daemon gurgled with pain as Howard's hand entered his mouth. He reached deep inside its throat and as if by instinct alone he pulled its head with his other hand and pushed his arm again deeper inside it. It was a grotesque feat of skill but sickening to watch. Howard's whole body lit up and then the light spun around him just for a moment. It faded into his skin. He had taken the daemons evil soul and it powered him in ways that I had never seen before. He removed his arm from the daemon's corpse by ripping it through its body and with his unnatural grace he used his sword to remove the other daemon's head. It happened in such an effortless and quick motion that it took me a moment to process what had happened.

Howard and I looked at each other across the two corpses. I was horrified at the brutality of my friend and mentor. He was ashamed of how much he had enjoyed it but still, he had. He looked down at his blood-soaked arm. He raised his hand and looked at it in the soft light of the lava sun that we fought under. He licked his finger gently. He used the daemon's torn shirt to mop away the bulk of the guts and crap from himself.

I was appalled at the sight of it and turned to see Charles once again fill his robes. "Good work" Howard called to him. "Thank you. I may not be able to fight directly but it is fun to stretch out my form." Charles adjusted his robes so that they hung more naturally. He stood by me and quietly said "don't

judge your friend too harshly. He's going through a lot."

Now that Howard was 'fed' he was showing more signs of his condition. His muscles swelled with power and he carried himself with far more ease than I had seen him show before. I had to accept that Howard was becoming a Vampire and as a Vampire, he would lose much of what was his old self. I had never seen one so fresh before. I assumed the darkness and arrogance that usually filled Vampires would soon replace his humanity. For now though, we walked carefully on, to the stone building that promised to hold our Gardener.

The fortress we were slowly entering was vast and guarded more with an imposing decor than actual guards. We sneaked carefully around a stone wall to avoid any more conflict. Charles was an excellent help to us. It wasn't his eyes that he saw with. As he pointed out, he was Wraith and he didn't have eyes, not real ones. His vision was all around him and stretched out for a few meters. As early warning systems went he was the best we could possibly hope for. It was slow and monotonous to duck between walls and storage containers waiting for the next patrol to pass. It took us a long time just to make it past the first gate. As for Howard, he was grilling Charles about why Vampires couldn't take his soul, he even went as far as asking if he could 'give it a try.' Charles was understanding about Howard's new needs and took no offence, he told us that Howard's mind would settle in the future and his training gave him a sense of identity that would help him retain his values. I knew how lethal Howard's skills were before he was turned; now he genuinely frightened me.

We came to the end of a series of small walls and guard structures. This whole place was drastically under-guarded.

There was a gap between us and the main building. The area out front was filled with Vampires and human-looking people we assumed were daemons. These ones were working together. They were the ones that had been coming to our world. “There are too many to take on, even for all the hunters in the Garden” I said. “Are you sure the Gardener is even here?” asked Howard. Charles nodded “Yes, this is where they would bring any prisoner. I’m sure. The forces that attack your world have no other stronghold here.” We watched the activity for a while. It looked like daemons were returning to the building. They looked very weak. We talked among ourselves and decided that these travellers must be the ones that had returned to this realm from our world and were heading home.

My chest was tight and I had begun to feel shooting pains down my neck. My headache was getting worse. My soul was in pain. Charles could see all of this in my eyes and he was showing himself to be a good friend even though I had only known him a few short hours. “Don’t worry. As soon as you are out of here you’ll feel better. Just hold on to that pain or you’ll end up like your friend” he said gesturing to Howard as he offered his most coherent smile. The way he looked had stopped bothering me shortly after we met. It was like the Wind worked even here and my acceptance of him as a person forced me to see him as such. Howard had not warmed to him the way I had. “Mike. If you let go of your soul I’ll shove it right back into your ass. I didn’t give up mine so you could fuck up later.” Howard smiled a twisted grin. I don’t know if it was the pain I was in or the stupidity of Howard’s statement that did it but I lost my temper “Shut the fuck up!” I was still whispering but I did so with a deep flash of anger. Howard had no rage to return



to me. He just smiled, a little sadly.

We knew that we needed to strike right now. My sickness was getting worse and if we didn't take our chance soon I would have been in no condition to fight anymore. It was Howard who came up with the plan "Charles, how big of a dust storm can you kick up?" He asked. Charles looked across at the dust and rocks around the building and smugly said "Enough!" Howard and I smiled. "Well get to it then!" I ordered with a jovial tone. "Here, take my Robes, I'll meet you inside when it's safe." Replied Charles. I nodded in agreement as his robes fell to the floor, I slung them over my shoulder and waited for the storm to start.

Within a few moments, the wind had built to a scary bluster. The daemons and Vampires alike laughed and shouted about how the Wraiths were 'at it again.' There was a melancholic thought passing through my head about how hard his people must have tried. How relentlessly they threw their rage just to be laughed at by the people who destroyed their world. It must have been a regular and tragically pointless attack.

As the dust clouded the air and the daemons called abuse at the wind a tunnel appeared down the centre of the cloud that was forming. Right from us to the door. We took our moment and dashed straight and without hesitation.

In truth, we hadn't thought much about what we would do once we were inside and instantly froze up as we closed the door behind us.

Inside it was lit by flaming torches and reminded me of an old castle, mostly made of sandy stone and the walls were covered in an assortment of skulls and hides. I wasn't convinced that all of it was animal hide.

We carefully avoided the noises and like the finest ninja

of legend we stealthily scurried down the entrance hall. We checked through the broken and reused glass that was strapped across every door, looking for any sign of the Gardener. We smelled food, or at least meat of some description being cooked. We avoided getting close to what we assumed was a dining room, or whatever passed for one.

We scurried along some more until we heard a scream. We hurried to the larger corridor. There was a guard outside. He was a daemon, he had a lizard-like face and a build the finest henchman would be proud of. He stood, arms crossed directly outside the door we needed to get into. "If we try anything he'll call his buddies" I whispered to Howard. "Did You forget? I'm a Vampire now" grinned Howard, happy that his new status was yet again of use. "You go first and I'll to the talking" he took the sash from the robes I was carrying and tied it around my hands loosely. "You don't speak their language." I pointed out. "They are the ones who come from our world right?" he replied as he made sure I could free myself from his authentic-looking knot. I shrugged, it was a better plan than anything else we had. Howard walked brazenly towards the daemon, pushing me with the tip of his sword, I pretended to be his battle beaten prey. Given how I was feeling it wasn't hard. The pain from the sickness all over my face made my role particularly convincing.

"Open the door, I have another one" demanded Howard. The daemon grimaced at me and took hold of my throat. He peered at me, checking my skin and muscles like I was a prize cow. "Oh. I'm not sure what he's worth in interrogation but he would make a fine meal." The daemon said in broken English while chuckling at his own sickening words. Howard joined him in smiles and laughter for a moment. He opened the large

wooden door and showed us in.

There she was, in all her beauty; our Gardener, my Gardener. Chained to a stone table and covered in blood. She saw me instantly and a small smile cracked her weary face. A tall man was standing near her. He wore clothes that made him look like a medieval wizard, pristine and new. Not ragged and reclaimed like everyone else we had seen. He had an assortment of torture devices “Oh you’ve brought me another subject!” He exclaimed with delight. “You’ll have to wait my dear” he said as he pulled a small knife from my Gardener’s side. He came darting over to check out how much fun it would be to break me. “Oh, a human” he said. “How disappointing!” Howard’s charade wasn’t over yet. He sniffed the air. “You’re one to talk! You smell like a human to me.” He said accusingly. “My skills with interrogation out-way the limitations of my species. I assure you!” He spat indignantly. “Good!” said Howard as he launched at him with his bare hands.

I untied the sash around my hand and hooped it over the guard’s head pulling him down a good two feet so I could stab him in the eyes. It was the most effective attack I could think of at the time. I saw the shadowy outline of Charles appear by the Gardener “Are you okay?” He called to her as he struggled to form enough of himself to untie her. “I’ll live.” She said with bloodthirsty gratitude.

I wrestled the guard to the ground and threw a knife in the direction of Charles, it passed through him and entered the wall behind him. “Oh!” he exclaimed, taking the knife and using it to pry open the Gardeners metal restraints as I had intended. The moment one of her arms was free she took the knife from him and quickly released her other hand. “How did these flimsy

things hold you?” Charles asked. “They didn’t.” She said as she rolled off the table to reveal a large bloody bone spike coming out of it. “The chains just kept me lying down, the table’s cursed. Made me delicate.”

She began to heal the moment the spike was removed from her. “It’s an old trick” she said. “It’s a daemon bone” she coughed up blood as she snapped the spike from the table. A moment later she pulled the daemon from on top of me and flung him against the wall with the effortless grace that I had come to expect. She spun around and pierced his head with her spike, he fell to the ground silently as the life left him.

I embraced her tightly, partly because I was so pleased we had found her and partly because I was exhausted and needed her help to stand. She smiled at me and with a momentary flicker of green light in her eyes my fatigue vanished. My strength began to return and my pain left me.

“Howard looks happy” she noted. I turned to see him stringing up an unconscious torturer by his feet with one of his own tools, a rope from the ceiling. He noticed us watching and gave a victorious wave “Hello! Glad you ain’t dead yet!” He called as he began selecting a torture blade. “Is he developing a sense of humour?” She asked. “Yes, it makes up for his lack of soul” I said dryly. She sighed, I’m not sure what kind of sigh it was but it was loaded with a deep understanding. Howard cut at his victim until he awoke “Humans **don’t** work with the enemy!” He screamed waving the blade in the man’s face. The torturer was terrified. He knew a Vampire when he saw one and knew that nothing good would happen to him from this point on.

I turned to the Gardener, “Who is that?” she asked as the robes I had draped over my shoulder was pulled away from

behind me. I quickly turned to see Charles filling them. "He's a friend." I said confidently. "He's a Wraith" she replied astonished.

Without another word, she kissed me. "You came for me!" She said and kissed me again "I don't know how you got here but you came for me!" She was larger than life to me, at that moment I knew she had expected to die here. If she were human she would have been in shock but she wasn't and I continually had to remind myself of that. Whatever she was, she wasn't human. Breathing in deeply from the air for a few minutes was all that it took to heal her wounds and steady her mind.

I could hear a conversation behind me as the tortured man lost consciousness again. Charles was being very calm, as I had come to expect. "You can't kill him, Howard. You know that." He said with that eerie certainty that he had constantly shown us. Howard was either frustrated or just angry, I wasn't sure. "I know! I wouldn't have even considered it before I came on this fucking field trip but as it is, I'm a Vampire now and I want to watch him bleed some more!" Charles shook his head like a disappointed parent. "No, you are a hunter with a brand new edge. As soon as you kill a human like this, you're not a hunter anymore and *then* you're just a Vampire." Howard threw down his knife and screamed at his prey "I was doing so well!" Charles smiled. He was getting through to Howard and he knew it. As he always seemed to know things. "You can still do well! You just have to relax and take hold of your nature. Force the man you want to be to the surface." Howard stepped away from his prey. "I know... I'm sorry." He said as he crouched down on the floor.

The Gardener, who was looking far more like her old self,

already let out a commanding “Good!” And then pulled one of the knives from my armband. She took a few steps towards the man who was still hanging from the cling.

“I am the queen of the human void world. Defender of the realm of Earth and keeper of life. I am The Gardener! I am not a victim and I am not prey. I am the green glow of nature that thrives in all of the light.” She threw the knife with such force that it went straight through the man’s head. She turned and as if to settle any judgement that may have begun to form in our minds she added, “And I have no spiritual reservations when it comes to removing evil, daemon, Vampire, god, devil, *or Human.*”

“Well thank fuck for that!” said Howard with a clap. Charles looked over at me uncomfortably. Howard was searching his pockets. He found what he was looking for. His last cigarette. Watching him light up and almost look like his old self was a relief to me. If only all Vampires could replace blood and souls for a good smoke the world would be a better place.

“Do you have an escape plan?” asked the Gardener. “No” I replied. She laughed. “So it’s my turn to rescue you then?” Her clothes were bloodstained and torn; somehow she still looked elegant.

Howard walked over to the rest of us, it wasn’t far but I felt like he was symbolically standing with us, as a hunter once more. “I was fairly sure that this was a suicide mission but I’m glad we came. If nothing else it’s been a wonderful afternoon” he said with grim humour in his voice. The Gardener nodded dubious of Howard’s optimism. “Thank you for coming” she said, it seemed all that was appropriate.

Charles sprung into life, looking as coherent as he ever did,

saying that we needed to find a way out of the building “No we don’t” said the Gardener. “All we have to do is find a daemon who can open a portal and get us out of this realm. There must be a gatekeeper here.” She was already coming up with a viable plan. Howard who was listening at the door threw some logic on the whole idea “Even if we find this gatekeeper, how the fuck are we going to convince it to open a portal and not get killed in the process?” Charles tried to help “If you think it’s too dangerous you’re welcome to stay with me, in the church”

The Gardener tied a rag around the base of her spike, making it into a more weapon-like tool. “Thank you Charles but it’s time we stopped playing prey and started acting like hunters.” She swung the spike around her hand much like Howard did before a fight but unlike Howard she was not showcasing her skills to unnerve the enemy, she was getting the feel of her new weapon.

## Chapter 7: Fighting.

The Gardener looked at us for a second. I think that she was assessing our chances and taking stock of her soldiers. At the time I thought our little group was sharing a moment in solidarity. She issued her commands. “We head for the large hall where they eat, I saw it on my way in. That’s where most of the daemons congregate when they are in the compound. It’s probably our best chance to find a gatekeeper. We can’t take on all of them but there will be lots of lesser daemons there making up the numbers. They are no more of a challenge than a Vampire; maybe a little faster, when they attack, is all.” She paused and took a deep regal breath.

“Charles, float about the enemy. Don’t focus on any single target just keep the ones at the back distracted so we can focus on them, one wave at a time.” Charles nodded, as usual, happy to be of help in any way he could.

“Howard, use that new blood lust you have to sniff out the lesser daemons, rip out their souls as soon as you get a chance. It’s not like you can be overfed and it’ll have an impact on them, they will perceive you to be the largest threat and head for



you. I'll be there to back you up." Howard grinned widely in agreement.

"Mike!" she snapped, looking intently at me "Take the Vampires that'll be mixed in there. Just them though." I knew what she meant by that. I wasn't to try and help her or Howard if they were in trouble. I should focus on my own problems. She and Howard were in a league above me and I had to remember it.

Howard was checking his gear and stretching his arms out, casually limbering up for the single biggest fight any of us had ever willingly walked into. "What if there isn't one of these gatekeepers in there?" He asked. The Gardener raised an eyebrow "Well my little hunter. Once they are all dead, we just wait for one to turn up." He nodded and smiled at her. She had called him a hunter, not Vampire. We all noticed that. She knew where his loyalty still lay.

She planted her fists on her hips in a hero's pose and let out a beaming yet nervous grin of a warrior's apprehension and excitement. "Whatever happens there. Thank you for coming for me."

"Take these" Said Charles as he handed me his robes. He vanished from sight. It looked like he had been blown away like the smoke from one of Howard's cigarettes in a light breeze. The Gardener turned to Howard who was by the door "Let's go and introduce ourselves" and with that Howard spun his sword around his hand in that way he liked to do and kicked open the door, looking as bad-ass as any action hero I had ever seen.

We walked down the corridor. That's important. We walked down the corridor. We never ran. We never jogged. We walked. Because we were hunters and we knew that if we were going

to take on this fight we would do so with pride and vigour. We walked into the belly of the beast with our eyes open and our weapons drawn.

We turned to the left, the direction we never dared walk the first time through this place. We entered the large hall that we had seen on the way in. The Gardener took the lead, she walked up to the large wooden door and with absolutely no doubt in her mind, she strolled in as if she was an honoured guest. We followed her steps but not her stature.

The room was large and smelled like bile and rotten flesh. The daemons sat about tables with no organisation. Some eating meat and putrid fruits, some devouring the freshly killed victims that they had trapped and brought here with them. They numbered almost fifty and every single one looked at us and stood, dropping their vile meals.

The Gardener set the tone for the encounter “Hello.” she said calmly “I’m the Gardener and I need a gatekeeper to send my associates and me back to a city that we’re rather attached to.” They looked at us as if we were insane, we probably were. One of the larger muscular animalistic daemons looked around at his army. He gave out a sound that may have been laughter, or a battle cry, I’m honestly not sure. He waved a hand for his allies to stand their ground. He stepped aside and revealed the daemon woman who had beaten the Gardener outside of the nightclub.

The daemon woman spoke a few words to another daemon who was smaller than the rest but robed similar to Charles. He took down his hood to reveal a burned and green face that was formed like a bald dog. He began to nod repeatedly, getting faster and faster while he made a croaking sound. He raised a

necklace out of his robes and the croaking turned to a scream or perhaps it was more of a warble. He took a knife from his sleeve and stabbed it into his own arm. He didn't bleed, instead, a thick and wet looking smoke began to stream from his wound. The smoke formed into a portal of swirling black with electric sparks of blue light. It drifted back towards the wall where it formed into a full-sized and solid-looking portal.

The woman pushed the strange monk away with a violent shove. She stood in front of the portal. "Here is your way home" she said in a coarse voice using the Demti tongue. She sat down and carried on eating some putrid fruit as if nothing was amiss. The room filled with the daemons laughter. "Thank you." Said the Gardener, in a suspicious tone. The woman gestured for her to stop. With a mouth full of her meal she decreed "Assuming you can make it through that is."

With her last word spat the room erupted and our enemies ran towards us from every direction, with knives, hammers, claws and fists. Time seemed to stop for a moment as my training took over.

The first thing to feel the Gardener's fury was a lesser daemon that looked like a large rat. She put a hole in its neck with her spike that was so wide its head came off with just one movement.

She pulled her weapon back to its attack position and lowered herself as she did. She spun around and impacted the legs of another lesser daemon. The daemon fell. She pulled the spike around again as she carried its momentum and pushed it up and straight into the side of a Vampire. Her fluidity was mesmerising. It all looked like a choreographed dance and played out in moments.

As I watched the dance, I realised that I had my own problems. I instinctively blocked a bone-like blade from a Vampire on my left, he looked larger and angrier than the Vampires I had fought before. Maybe he was not from my world, maybe he was just angry. It didn't matter. He was so focused on his one blade he forgot that daggers tend to come in pairs. I let his own momentum keep him moving and as he leaned a little past me I viciously let my other blade impact into the back of his neck. He screamed but I had no time to make sure that he was of no further threat to me. I just moved forwards to another Vampire. This one I simply punched in the face with the butt of a dagger and as he stepped back to get his balance I flipped it over and buried the end in his eye, he fell away from me and I moved to the right to be a little closer to Howard. I would be overwhelmed if I was isolated.

Another well-armed enemy came towards me, this time a large woman whose body was more like that of a spider than a person, she was gripping a large hammer and had the strength to use it. She was a lesser daemon but I knew even a lesser one was out of my league usually. In this mess of movement and death though, I had no time to pass the fight along to a more qualified ally. I dropped to the floor as her hammer came swinging for my face. I rolled on my back and kicked at her, impacting her knees. She screamed or screeched at least. The hammer came falling down into my shoulder. It hurt but I had no time for such worries. It was my first injury in this fight and no doubt little more than a footnote in the damage that I was sure I would receive.

I jumped back up to my feet to see Howard walking through lesser daemons like they were angry paper. All he had to do

was get a grip on their chests and they were paralysed, then he would use his power to suck out their souls. When they ran dry, the husks of body's would fall to the floor. His training and experience when added to his new Vampire speed and strength made him much more than any of us had realised. The ones he couldn't soul drain for whatever reason he despatched with unsettling levels of violence.

The wind and debris were blowing around the room like being in the eye of a storm. It kept many of them distracted and out of view. This was the power of Charles. He had kept the levels of the storm in the room rising slowly but steadily until lightning was striking out of the wall of wind. I didn't even notice the storm start. The walls were beginning to show signs of the pressure that was building.

I caught a glimpse of the daemon woman, this group's leader. Still sitting at the edge of the room relaxing, guarding our portal home. Then the dust and wind obfuscated her away from me. But I knew she would be there until the end.

I had been distracted for a second. A clash of swords meeting appeared in my gaze. Howard had blocked a weak human-looking Vampires blade from cutting my neck open. He made short work of the little Vampire and it was a lucky reminder to me that I had a job to do. I carried on carving and jabbing my way through every enemy that came at me.

The Gardener was fairing better than even Howard. While we had many a cut and fracture, she seemed to be as calm and methodical as she was on the first strike. She was still effortlessly jumping from one kill to another as if it was all pre-planned.

There was a change in the air. Charles stepped up his wall

of wind and it gave Howard and me a chance to organise for a moment, we stood back to back knowing that any second more daemons would come through the storm. "How's it going?" He asked over my shoulder. "Better than expected but I can't keep this up much longer" I replied. "Me neither" He called back. "I thought Vampires had more stamina than that" I yelled. "Let me know if you want to see how the other side lives, I always got room for one more soul you know." Howard said, taking a moment to show me how his teeth had grown during the fight.

That's the moment a new blade came through the storm this one was large and imposing and attached to a massive daemon. This daemon was not making any attempt to look human, he was like a giant statue that had come to life. He was no smaller than nine feet tall and his muscles easily matched his mighty stature. His eyes were a smoking black and his blade steaming with shadow. He was also coming right at me.

I nudged Howard who was still standing back to back with me still. He turned and the moment he saw it we both rolled in opposite directions away from it. I whistled as loud as I could and called out for the Gardener in Denti. She finished off the four daemon's she was battling in mere moments and turned to her new enemy. "Shit!" she mouthed softly. Behind him came another four smaller but very confident daemons of a similar breed. Moving statues with stone skin and oversized weapons.

The wind and the sand that was blowing accurately around us began to fall, we had been fighting in the eye of a storm for a while now taking each enemy as they came and now that storm was falling away. We could finally see the mess we had made. There were only two or three regular-sized daemons and Vampires still capable of moving and they were in no shape

to stand against us now. Howard looked at me and we knew what to do, for better or worse we needed to keep the smaller daemons away from the Gardener so she could focus on the big one.

I was first to engage them, I fired my throwing knives as fast as I could, they all bounced off but served to get their attention. The larger one swung his black blade at the Gardener. This was no time for me to focus on her.

I threw the rest of my blades frantically. One went in. I was more than a little shocked. Of all the blades I had thrown there was only one to stay stuck. It was in one of the daemons lower back. "Howard!" I called and gestured to my own back, then to the daemon. Howard looked confused for a second then realised that I was trying to tell him. We knew their weak spots.

The daemon reached back and pulled the blade out, There was no blood but stone dust, a grey sand came seeping out. It didn't like being injured and came running at me, not realising that it was crossing the stride of the larger one who smashed through it like it was chalk. One down. Three to go.

Howard ran towards two of them with his blade dancing frantically. The final one heading to me. Getting hit would be like being run over by a bus. I needed to bide my time. I dodged.

Meanwhile, the Gardener was doing something similar, letting the daemon attack and simply slipping away before it landed. She was trying to get it to swipe its sword at one of the tables. It took three or four more strikes that I could see before it paid off. The sword was stuck deep in the heavy old wood of the table.

The Gardener ran up the daemon's arms and like it was a gymnastics springboard. She flipped over and keeping the force

of her fall she pushed her bone spike into its back. It reacted like a horse rearing on its back legs and crushed the Gardener's blade with whatever passed for its muscles as it straightened its back. It whipped its arms out wildly impacting the Gardener and smashing her against the wall, then the floor.

I saw my own chance with my foe and launched towards its back with both daggers out. They hit their mark but barely. The daemon smacked me as it turned to dust. I was right, it did feel like being hit by a bus.

I pulled myself to my feet and coughed up something black. I wasn't in a good way. I turned to see the last of the daemons that Howard was fighting, throwing him around like a rag doll. I looked over to the Gardener and saw the massive, albeit injured daemon pounding her into the ground with both hands clasped together.

I stepped forward and fell to my knees. The explosions of pain on my body faded to the background as one of the onlooking Vampires saw its chance from the periphery of the fight and leapt onto me. Then as my own blood ran into my eyes I looked at my Gardener through the red haze; the Woman I had risked so much for. She looked back from under the fists of the daemon. That moment froze in my mind and time itself slowed as everything faded to black.

Inside the blackness, I was sure I was in the process of dying. Never again to open my bloody eyes. Then I realised something. I wasn't inside the darkness of my mind at all. I was lying on the floor in a black room.

I stood up disoriented but in no pain "Hello?" I called first in English then in Demti. I could see nothing. I put my arms out looking for a wall or a table or anything to give me a sense



of place.

Then a blinding white light appeared in front of me. Slowly as my eyes adjusted it took the form of a person, as it fell into focus I could see Charles. The light coming off him was not hitting anything, there was no reflection from the floor, it was like there was nothing here except he and I.

“It’s okay Michael. Don’t be afraid” he said with a crisp and vast voice. “What’s happening? Where am I?” I tried to look around. There was still only the light that was Charles and his glow upon me. “Where are the others?” I asked hurriedly. Charles walked closer to me “It’s complicated but they are still in that moment. On the precipice of defeat.” He said, again with that crisp voice that I could not fail to understand completely. “My people have been watching you since you came to this realm you know.” He said it softly and with regret. I wasn’t interested in his people. I wanted to get back into the fight and die with my friends. Charles continued. “For us, this battle has raged forever” he said cryptically. “Look, I’m interested. I am but is now the right time for this?” I snapped. He put his finger to his lip as a gesture for me to shut up and listen.

“We have been watching everyone who has come to our broken utopia. Looking for a weakness, a way we could fight. Some of us, like me, have taken a more active interest. Some have left our world to see if they could become form enough to fight in other realms” he circled me as he spoke. I listened still.

“The wisest of our people, exist without any form at all. They look at everything at once, they are present in all places and they know things you couldn’t ever understand.” He stopped circling directly in front of me. “They can see the future and the past and they see no hope for us.” I wanted to apologise or offer

my help but I cared more about my friends than the plight of his people right then. "The wisest of my people have decided that they will give themselves to the fight, but they have no form... You will be their vessel" He said. "What?" I asked with genuine confusion.

Silence filled the already silent place. Then slowly balls of light faded into the room or wherever I was. They didn't make an effort to take a form as Charles had, first there were few, then countless more. Within a few moments, there were lights all around me stretched out in every direction. "They offer themselves to you. Accept them and you will be human no more." I looked around "I don't understand" I said. Charles continued. "You will no longer be Human. But I promise you. You will be a hunter still." The words that left Charles were solemn and weighty.

He spoke one last time but without that supernatural crispness. He was speaking outside of the script his wise men had given him. "You will lose something small, but gain more than you can imagine."

I had one question "What happens if I say no?" Charles began to walk away. As he faded he turned his head to me and said in a whisper "then there will be no one to save her." and with that, he was gone.

I was alone in the black room surrounded by balls of light. Little made sense to me but I knew what I wanted now. In a bold and proud Demti tongue, my last words as a human were uttered "I accept."

The balls of light began to spin around me and then the black room was too bright for me to keep my eyes open. I closed my eyes and as I blocked out the light without, the light within

began to blind me.

I have no words for what happened in that moment that lasted forever. I sometimes think I'm still there now. Time was returned to me. I felt reality encompass me like a blanket. As the world was brought back into focus I was aware that the Vampire was beating me in the face with its powerful hands. It didn't hurt. It was an irritation though.

I ignored it and stood up, throwing it from me. It didn't understand what was happening but I couldn't let its ignorance buy it any mercy. I waved my hand at him and asked for the force of gravity to take him. He was pinned to the ground for a moment and screamed as he was crushed like a cockroach under an invisible boot.

I noticed Howard now. He was in pain being held around the neck with one hand while the daemon's other punched him in the stomach. Howard was beaten and broken but alive. I waved my hand and pulled the daemon off him. He slid screaming towards me. Within a moment his neck was in *my* hand, I looked into his eyes and burned him within. All it took was a mere thought.

I brushed the dust from my hand and turned my attention to the Gardener's enemy. He was an elder daemon and the most powerful I had seen since coming to this world. I snapped my fingers mostly for showmanship as I turned his own black eyes into balls of furious pure light. He screamed and clawed at his face and the light consumed the daemon's energy that was his own version of a twisted soul. I smiled as it fell to its knees. With a wave of my hand, his massive sword was ripped from the table it was stuck in and entered his back, then it burst out of his chest. He fell sideways onto the floor and shattered into

sand.

I looked over to the front of the room where our portal was. The daemon woman stood in front of it but this time not as an epic guard but as a refugee. She ran into the portal, closing it behind her. I did not attempt to stop her. I looked around the room. There were a handful of things alive in there. I blew a thought out of my lips and they simply died.

The Gardener stood up and breathed in deeply. Her wounds healed as the air filled her. I could see the magic she was leveraging now. Not with my eyes, but some other sense I now had. I traced it with my mind and pushed a little more power into it as she breathed. She looked at me from the other side of that room. "How?" She asked with her lips alone. I looked across to Howard, he was pulling himself to his feet. As long as he was alive there was little that a Vampire wouldn't heal from given a little time.

I walked towards the Gardener and as I did I answered her silent question. "The Wraiths. They are with me now" I said. "Your eyes, they're blue" she said with shock. "I know" I answered. "No, they are totally blue, glowing almost" she said with intrigue.

I hugged her, and helped Howard to his feet, hugging him too. Charles began to take form, I could see him clearly now. He was still his usual hazy self to others but I could see the energy that made him up. He was as real and physical to me as anyone else in the room. "You going to explain all this then?" I asked him. "No. It's not my power. Let's get out of here." He answered.

I picked up a bench that was left mostly intact and let Howard sit for a moment so he could use some of that soul

power he had soaked up to fix himself. “Got some new moves have you?” He joked as he picked up his sword. “Something like that” I answered.

I looked at the wall where the portal had been. It was not my understanding but the minds of those wraiths that travelled with me that understood the mechanics of reality itself. But it was my hand that waved and with a powerful thought that they used my mind to bring forth the power that saw the embers of the portal, still cooling.

I pushed a little power into the not quite closed door and it burst open again as if it had never gone. I gestured for Howard to go first. Then I sent the Gardener.

“Charles, are you coming?” I asked. “Am I welcome?” He queried with a nervous tone. “Your people travel with me. I need you, my friend.” I answered with sincerity. He nodded and as wind he blew past me and into the hole. I looked at the destruction that we had caused and was glad to leave this place, then stepped into the portal myself.

## Chapter 8: Home.

We all arrived together, emerging from the portal like we had been carried by an avalanche. It was fast and a little painful. There was quickly fading electrical energies and a strange purple glow. We had emerged outside of the club. Not in the middle of the dance floor as we had expected.

“Everyone here?” I yelled as I tried to stand. “Here!” Howard called, he used my shoulder as support for a moment. We were both disoriented and stumbling. “I can’t believe we made it back!” yelled the Gardener triumphantly as she lay on her back looking at the dawn sky. “Charles?” I called. A gust of wind lifted and a disembodied voice echoed around us. “Thank you for your concern.”

Howard scurried to the shadow of the building, unsure if the dawning light would burn him. I smiled and looked at my two friends. Then around the air where I knew Charles to be. “Fuck. We actually made it!” I exhaled to myself. I felt Charles breezing around. He was exploring this new place.

The power I had wielded in the daemon realm was far less potent here, this reality obeyed different rules but the guiding

voices of the wraiths were still inside me. It wasn't like they literally spoke with me or were inside my thoughts. It was more like an inner knowing. Their power was still there too, but it wasn't an infinite torrent like it was in the daemon realm. Now it was like a Well ready to be dipped. That's the only way I could describe it.

Howard spoke loudly from his shade. "Guys, I hate to be a pain in the arse but from the feeling that the sunrise is giving me, I think I may be 'that-kind-of-Vampire'" I looked over at him and I felt the wraiths that were with me chatter like a bee inside my head for a moment then a surge of information filled me. "You'll be fine, you've fed on a lot of daemons recently. You should be able to withstand the sun for a good few weeks" I said with a commanding certainty. "How do you know?" He snapped. "The wraiths have been watching Vampires since the dawn of time, they know a little bit about them" I answered. Everyone looked a little puzzled at me for a moment.

The Gardener studied me. "You're different now. You have become who you were meant to be." She said as she put a hand on my cheek. "I'm still me, I think" I answered. "Yes, but you don't have that doubt in you anymore," she said and she looked into my flickering blue eyes.

The three of us walked back towards the garage, none of us having enough energy left to even think about rushing. The Gardener was too weak to take us to the Garden directly so we had to rely on Howard's usual methods for now. I could feel Charles never too far away, excited to see so many new things. He was spread out like a field of energy, in some ways so was I.

As we walked my friends asked me about my newfound power. "I'm still trying to understand it myself," I told them

with sincerity. "It's like my mind is quiet now. I just know things. I don't have to think things through. The information is in my head as I need it. When we were in the daemon realm I could literally see that ancient magic that Howard always talks about. Could see it working and nudge it, touch it. Made some pretty incredible things seem sort of obvious." I realised how far fetched it sounded but they had seen it in action.

"That's when the wraiths lend you their power," Charles said as if he were just walking behind me. Not that we could see him. "They could do it easier there than they are able to here, but whatever power they have here they will give to you." Charles continued. "It may take them a while to understand how this world's magic's work but whatever they can lend to you, you have it all, every drop." There was a warmth and a truth to his voice.

Howard grumbled to himself for a moment. I asked what was on his mind. "So, an entire race of ghosts just lives in your head now? Are you still really you?" He asked with some concern. The buzzing, the knowledge of the wraiths filled me for the briefest moment before I answered. "As much as you're still you, now you are a Vampire. I suppose it's not dissimilar." Howard accepted this. As well as the implication that we were both different people now.

Howard was uncomfortable. The sun had risen and he felt a now instinctual animosity towards it, he could feel it burning him but his recent feed was enough to counter the effects. "How powerful are you now?" He asked. I thought about it and the wraiths again filled me with answers. "I don't have control over the energy around me here. I can't wave my hand and make things happen like I did back there but I have a lot of knowledge



available to me, as well as... An awareness that wasn't there before." This meant nothing to Howard so I continued. "You know how when you're in a fight with a Vampire and you get that clarity that training and experience give you?" Howard nodded he knew this feeling well, it was what made him such a great hunter. "I have something a little like that all the time now" this meant something to Howard now, he hummed in contemplation. "I also have the memory of an entire species of immortals available to me so there's probably more but I haven't figured it out yet." Howard approved of all this and patted my back "You know how to keep me on the straight and narrow now I'm a Vampire?" he asked. "Yes," I replied, with genuine certainty.

A combination of the time of day and good route planning meant that we hadn't actually encountered anyone who gave us a second glance on the way back to Howard's garage. I knew on some level that the force we had called the Wind was doing us a favour. I felt in touch with it now in ways that I never realised I could be.

"Vampires can't get into the Garden," Howard said sadly as he stood in front of the place the portal would be called. The Gardener sighed. "That's not entirely true," she said. "The Garden is built on energy, you haven't fed on a human so it really can't tell the difference" Howard smiled and opened the door.

The Garden, as usual, was bright and inviting with a sense of home. I felt Charles behind me; he was captivated by the Garden's beauty. We stood for a moment in the glow of the light. Finally home.

Someone in the Garden was walking towards us. After a

moment we could see that it was Tom. We stepped through to meet him. “The sun here, it doesn’t burn me,” Howard muttered. “It’s not real. Nothing here is real. It’s all made of ideas and energy” replied the Gardener. “I should know, I’ve been here since the start,” she added. Howard and I looked at her surprised “I am called The Gardener” she said. “Still with us Charley?” Asked Howard as the portal closed behind us. “Where else would I be?” Came the disembodied reply. Howard made a noise of agreement and we strolled towards Tom.

Tom got close enough to call out “welcome back” to us as he walked. “Fuck you!” The Gardener called back. “What?” He replied indignantly. “You never sent anyone to rescue me? Really?” She spat the words, filled with rage.

“I thought you were dead.” He said apologetically. The Gardener slapped him in the face, the moment she was in range. She did it more to let him know she was angry than to hurt him, she could have put enough force in a slap to knock him into intensive care. It was symbolic more than anything else.

“Guys. Please fill him in. I have to get some more appropriate clothes for Charles and me” and with that, she stormed off. Charles followed her, or at least an energy that I was now beginning to be aware of did.

Tom looked at my eyes nervously. He looked at Howard and stepped back a little in shock “Howard is a Vampire.” I said as he went white.

Howard nodded in agreement. “Yes, and Mike has been possessed by the ghost of a dead race of immortals.” I nodded and smiled. “That’s everything right?” I asked Howard performatively.

“Oh we brought a wraith back with us, he’s a hunter now.”

We felt that we had explained everything we needed to and walked towards the house.

Tom was awestruck by our new demeanour. "Who's Charles?" We heard him ask as we walked away. Howard and I walked through the walled area that led to the house and every hunter stared at us. We may have left this place as hunters, but we had returned something new.

"What's the plan?" Howard asked. "I'm going to take a bath and get some sleep" I replied, warmed by the prospect of a good night's sleep, for real this time. Though I was dreading the thought of the conversation with Tom that would come after.

"Doesn't feel very welcoming here for me now you know." Howard shrugged to himself. "No, things are different now. No more following orders. As soon as I wake up I'm going to shake things up a little." Howard nodded in approval. "Yeah, I'm going to find Charles, smoke a pack of cigarettes and hang out in the dojo, see what my fellow hunters think of the new me." he smiled. "Don't bite them" I added as we parted. "Hey Howard," I said, he turned to look at me. "I'm sorry about your soul. I just wanted to say it, you know... Thank you." He nodded and looked intently for a second. "You know what, I had been done with all of this for a while now" he gestures around him to the house, the Garden. A shrug that encompassed it all and he added "whatever happens, I'm glad that things are going to be more interesting now." I nodded. I hadn't realised that Howard was so unhappy with his life but I thought it best not to pry more.

I opened the door to my room and slipped in, a little surprised to find that it wasn't flooded with light from the perpetual mid-day sun. The curtains were closed about halfway.

In my armchair was a figure, the contrast between light and dark made it seem pitch black in the room, my new abilities instinctually took over and a pulse of light filled my mind in a way that I could see with my eyes. The purple light left me like a ripple and I knew exactly who was in my chair.

“Gardener?” I asked as if unsure. “First I took a shower, then I had a good nights sleep. Then it occurred to me. You never told me *why* you came after me.” She asked in a judging tone.

I took off my jacket and sat on my bed. “That was quick,” I said dryly. “Time doesn’t work how *you* expect. But here it always works in *my* favour.” She said with a friendly but stern tone.

I shook my boots off and put my daggers on the nightstand. My eyes were beginning to adjust to the light and some sort of switch-over happened, the purple light faded and my own vision took over.

“Are you really asking me?” I sighed as I leaned forward and rested my arms on my knees. I wasn’t feeling great. I was pretty sure I smelled terrible and I needed to sleep. She knew all that. She was looking fresh as a summer morning. “I wanted to know what you would say,” she added.

I looked at her, the wraiths inside me began to buzz; with a force of will, I silenced them. I didn’t want or need them for this question. “The person that I was when I decided to risk everything did it because he had irrational feelings of attraction for a girl who was well out of his league.” I began.

She gestured as if she was about to say something; I gestured for her to hold it back and continued. “Then I got the wisdom of these wraiths and the power to match. I now realise how

absolutely absurd, and unfair that was.”

The Gardener looked to the crack in the curtains, the light lit her cheek. “Yeah, that’s what I thought.” She said quietly, almost embarrassed. “Gardener. You don’t owe me a damned thing. I made some bad choices and was lucky enough that it mostly turned out okay. I’m suddenly self-aware enough to know exactly how fucked up all of this actually is.” I thought for a moment about the very real prices that Howard had paid for my crush.

“You don’t have an attraction for me now?” She asked, with genuine sincerity.

“Of course I do, you’re beautiful, interesting and elegant. You’re also magical and purposeful. I also have no doubt whatsoever that you have more important things to do than pander to my childish crush.” I lay back on my bed, feet still planted on the floor.

The Gardener didn’t glance back from the curtain. I wasn’t hurt. I was being as honest with myself as I was with her. She was worldly enough to know exactly why I would risk it all for her. I also knew she was a lot older than she looked and I had no doubt that new hunters had risked themselves for her before. “There are some things that you should know then Mike.” I lifted my head to see her properly. “Huh?” I exclaimed.

She stood up with a start and took a loaded breath. “You’re right. I knew. While it’s always flattering it’s rarely fair on the maiden in distress.” She paced to the window and back. I lay on my bed. The old me was half hoping she would tell me how she wanted me to and we could live happily ever after. The new wraith-wisen me knowing better. “Mike. I came here to tell you all the reasons why it could never work.” I grunted in

agreement. “But I wasn’t being honest” I lifted my head again and felt an eyebrow raise. She tilted her head at me “Oh, don’t look at me like that! I just.. I don’t know. You’re different now and I want to get to know you better.”

I sat up on my elbows. “What?”

“Michael. I’m saying I would like to spend time with you in a non-combat scenario.”

I nodded. “Okay,” I said with as much enthusiasm as I could muster while in such abject shock.

“But I want to say some things first,” she said nervously. I nodded again.

“I’m very old and I have lived a very unusual life. Other than in recent events, I’m not someone who needs saving. I demand to be treated as such.” She said boldly as if rehearsed. I realised that it wasn’t the first time she had delivered that line.

I sat up to deliver my honest reply. “I have no idea what or who I am right now. But if you don’t mind how messed up that is then I would like to spend time in a non-combat scenario with you too.”

She smiled and nodded at me as if a deal had been struck. “Then I would like to invite you to have lunch with me when you wake up. My room is on the top floor of the house.” With that, she left me hurriedly. I lay there for a little while longer before the wraiths buzzed again. They wanted to make sure that I realised this was a date.

As I slept that night I was stalked and harassed. Not by my own nightmares and the shadows of the battles I had fought as you would expect. Instead, I was trapped inside the nightmares of the wraiths that now walked with me.

I wasn’t sure if it was a side-effect of the pact I had made

or their way of maximising my time but I was strangely aware that I was dreaming. I walked around the frozen images of the wraith's world when it was a utopia.

It was not as vivid as other dreams I have had since but it was strange to be so aware of my own slumber. I watched frame by frame the fall of the wraith world and how one mind fractured into that would become individuals desperate to be one again. It was terrifying, even though what I was experiencing was little more than a broken memory.

It was when the mind I was watching realised that it was alone and the perfection was over that the sense of fear and loss forced me out of my dream.

The light streamed into my eyes as they opened like a switch had been flipped. I felt instantly awake and wanted nothing more than to see what changes this first new day would bring. I closed my eyes to make sure it wasn't all an imagined dream. The buzzing and the knowing were there and the things that travelled with me seemed as excited as me to see what was in store for us. Then I remembered my first task and grinned with warmth and nervousness. Maybe I was still very much human after all.

I took a bath and shaved. The whole time posing silent questions to my wraiths. Learning little things about my new self. I very much thought of 'them' as separate from myself but was beginning to realise that it wasn't true.

While there was a separation between 'Mike' and 'Wraith' there was also a connectedness that I didn't quite understand. It was clear to me that I needed to stop thinking of them as a resource or tool and simply accept them as an extension of myself.

I realised that I had taken forever to just get dressed. The Garden had presented me with the exact selection that I required. As always.

I wore jeans and a loose shirt. Nothing fancy or unusual but as functional as I could get given that I had no idea how my day would pan out. A meal with the Gardener would be the most predictable portion of the day, oddly. It was how Tom would respond to Howard and me that really concerned me. That was my second task though.

I left my room, daggers hanging from my belt and headed to the first staircase I could find. The Garden's habit of revealing things as you needed them was as reliable as ever but it wouldn't work as well in the future.

The part of my mind that housed the wraiths was sending out that purple pulse and mapping the whole place for me as I walked. It was happening with barely a conscious thought. Given the vastness of the house, I wondered how I would find the Gardeners room on the top floor.

I got to a staircase that led to large double doors going up. I took a subconscious look at my map. It was on the top floor. I climbed the staircase and the doors opened as I got close. Theatrical as ever.

"Gardener?" I asked with a moderate call. "Over here" came her voice. I stopped for a moment, stunned by her 'room.' It was a studio apartment, and a big one. It was the entire top floor of the house.

It was a mess of different furniture and designs. With shelves and chests dotted about barely blending in. The windows on each side of the massive room were taller than I was and seemed to be the entire length of the building in single



panes of glass.

It looked like the ceiling was floating. There was a mezzanine at the back of the room that appeared to be a bedroom area with a kitchen area underneath it. I glanced around and while at first, it seemed like one massive space, I was starting to see how each area was delimited.

There was a training dummy and a weapons rack in one area; some sofas and old books in another. Each little area using shelves to define its limits. There was also a busy looking desk with books and notes all over it and a chalkboard at its side. The most striking thing was that there were books everywhere.

The Gardener came out from behind one of the shelves. Beaming with a smile, she was dressed in a loose green t-shirt and denim shorts. Her long dark hair wore loose for the first time since I had met her. She was looking the least combat-ready that I had ever seen anyone in the Garden. "Come on, I have toast."

She led me the not insignificant way to the back of the room. I looked at the strange collections of antiques and weapons that were all about the place along with so many books. Some were piled high and used as shelf supports.

"Wait, did you say toast?" I asked as her words finally registered. "Yeah, toast is the best," she said. We sat down at a large rustic wooden table that looked like it should be in an old farmhouse.

She quickly started clearing the books and papers from the table and brought over a large platter of cheese, butter and jam. Then she lit the grill on an old range cooker.

I didn't say anything while she grilled enough bread for an army and then sat down at the other edge of the table, to the

left of me. "So toast?" I asked as if it were an actual question. She smiled as she began buttering a stack.

"Well, where else can we go to get to know each other? The moment we both leave our rooms at the same time we will somehow find ourselves in the company of Howard and Charles. Then the moment we step into the Garden we'll be ushered into Tom's tent." She pulled the crust from her slice and chewed on it with glee. I smiled "so our choice for a date was your room or mine?" She nodded. "And because all the actual food is down in the buffet tent in the Garden; all I ever have here is bread. It's not like I can pop out and get supplies without the Gardens time 'stuff' making things happen." She ate more toast. Looking less like a regal warrior than I knew she could be. I ate some toast. It was great toast.

We talked for hours, we ate toast with every strange topping we could find in her kitchen. We laughed and grilled things and she showed me around her home. She still referred to it as 'her room' even though it was larger than most houses.

She told me about how she hid herself away in her room for what could have been months at a time in-between her missions and tasks. She said that a lot of the more long term people who lived in the house embraced the strange flow of the clock, basking in their own company for unhealthy amounts of time.

Her books had become an obsession for her. She had read everything in the library many times and her own vast collection of books was made up of materials that the library didn't want because they were all in Demti. She and Tom were the only people who could read them. Tom was far more interested in his grand plan than the history of the war.

We sat on the sofa in what felt like the evening and drank wine. She asked me about my life before the Garden, interested in what 'normal' life had been like for me. I asked her about how the Garden and the hunters had changed over the years. We were both fascinated by what the other thought of as mundane. Once the wine bottle was empty we shared a kiss or two and sat in each other's arms for a little while, unexpectedly content and oddly comfortable with each other.

"Well Mike. This has been wonderful but it's time to venture into what awaits us," she eventually said with sadness. There was no reason that we couldn't stay here forever but the stress of what was to come loomed over both of us. This day had been the calm in the eye of the storm and we needed to get out of the damned storm entirely before we could relax any more.

"Before we go," I asked, "do you have a name? It feels kind of strange still thinking of you as the 'Gardener' after today." She laughed a genuine and heartfelt laugh. "Ohhhhhh... My name!" She said gleefully. "It's Sophia. We have been sitting here all day and it didn't occur to me that I hadn't told you."

I sighed "I thought it was some kind of big secret!"

"No! Not at all. 'Gardener' has become like a rank, or co-dename over the years and no-one seems to think much more about it than that" she said, still very amused by it.

"I expected some big reveal or to be sworn to secrecy!" I told her. She just shook her head and beamed with an entertained smile.

The Gardener, Sophia, got changed into trousers and one of her green leather jackets that I now knew she had many of. She went to her weapons rack and selected a large bow and a quiver. She wore both across her shoulder and pulled a short-sword,

or long dagger from the other rack. As she flipped the blade over and a scabbard seemed to pop into existence, strapped to her leg. My wraith senses took careful note of how the energy of the sword's power flowed out of it like a living smoke and formed the scabbard in moments "So that's how that works!" I said absently.

Sophia looked at me puzzled. "You can see that now?" She asked. "Yeah," I had already told her about how my new wraith senses worked. As far as I understood them anyway. "Useful ability," she said, getting more professional and cold each moment as she prepared herself for talking with Tom.

## Chapter 9: Letters.

We walked through the mostly empty house towards the patio doors where we found both Howard and Charles standing in wait for us. Charles had a very solid and physical form now. He was wearing some new pristine black robes with silver trim, he looked less like the scuffed monk that we first met and more like a pilgrim of modern times.

Sophia and I were holding hands. We both let go as we saw our friends, our perfect day was over. “Charles! You look great!” I said with excitement. “Yes. It’s taken me a little time but I seem to have figured out the way your world’s energies work. This Garden you have is so calm, it’s easy to be a solid form here. No distractions or noise.” I clapped him on the shoulder and took a good look at his face now I finally could. He looked like a man in his early fifties. Clean-shaven with neat long black hair tied into a ponytail.

I shook Howard’s hand. “You still good?” I asked. “Charles and I have spent some time together. He’s helping me through this,” Howard said. I was pleased that they had bonded. I couldn’t help but wonder how much time had passed for them.

I looked at Charles again. He looked so holy; both pious and proud. As I had that thought the chatter of the wraiths filled my mind. This was something I would have to get used to. It was like I was in a crowd for a moment but everyone was talking *to* me. The knowledge would then simply manifest inside me. I didn't have to actually consider it; I just knew it.

"The Gardens healing power has affected you like it heals the hunters. But for you, it supplies energy. You have never been given more energy before. So it allows your form to come through with less effort" I said, I pointed towards my head and added, "I'm told." Charles bowed to me a little. It dawned on me at that moment that Charles was like family to me now. I squirreled that idea away to consider later.

"Well. Time to talk to the big guy I reckon." Said Howard through a plume of recently ignited cigarette smoke.

We stepped out of the patio doors, there were many hunters in the Garden today; more than usual, all pretending to drink tea and talk about their missions but all watching us. Every one of them is armed. Sophia whispered in my ear "I think we can take them if it comes to it." I hadn't realised that it actually could come to that.

We walked to Tom's marquee, his war room that was still erected at the edge of the patio area. Two well-built hunters were guarding the door. One had a war hammer, an interesting choice for a weapon. The other simply had a whip. These were the more heavy duty of hunters. I had seen them around before, they were always sent on missions that involved direct combat. No information gathering or protection for these two. We ignored them and walked past. Tom must have been nervous to have these two so close.

Tom was sitting behind the map table, we were alone with him. I looked at the table, I wasn't sure how much time had passed in the Garden since we entered the daemon realm but things were going badly. The city map showed many areas that were marked with red pins to denote 'enemy.' Many of the blue pins that had symbolised hunter entrances to the Garden were now replaced with black ones, I assumed that it meant they were either no longer working, or daemon held locations.

The four of us stood in front of the table. The Gardener, Sophia was the first to speak. "I know we have an agreement that you won't bother me but really? You actually told them not to come and rescue me?" She was angry. Tom was his usual self, very calm and calculated "It was a suicide mission. Look at the facts. One has come back tainted by evil and the other has been possessed by ghosts"

"Wraiths" I corrected.

The Gardener continued "Maybe if you had organised a proper team it would have gone better."

Tom leaned forward in his seat "You're right. But, I'm not sure it would have done much better. Look at the map. We may have gotten you out smoother but there would have been fewer hunters guarding the city. If I had sent a full team we would have lost even more ground." He wasn't proud of his decisions but he stood by them. I couldn't help but respect that.

"How long has passed in the city?" Howard asked sternly.

Tom rubbed his chin and said "Two weeks since your disappearance."

Howard whistled, "Damn, that's a good while in Garden time then!"

Tom was visibly fatigued. "Look at this map, lesser dae-

mons have started working alongside the Vampires. This city is almost lost to us. I'm told it's the same all over the world, every hunter sect is reporting the same losses. How could I have willingly risked my best soldier and his very talented student to a suicide mission?" He gestured in the with a defeated shrug.

"Best soldier" Howard grinned and nudged me in the side "Best!"

"Fuck you Tom! They came alone with no support and no exit plan. No backup at all and still here we are. If you had sent two or three more hunters with them and a properly enchanted key, they could have just strolled in and out of there!" The Gardener spat the words like bullets at Tom. He looked angry "No! I was not going to risk good hunters for you, not for a..." He slapped the desk. Silence filled the room for longer than it should have. "For a what?" Sophia asked, knowing the answer. Tom shook his head "I'm sorry, I spoke out of turn." He was obviously under a lot of pressure. "For a daemon?" Asked Sophia with genuine hurt. "Daemon," she said again. "I'm not a daemon Tom," she added with venom.

Silence filled the room again. "I know, I'm sorry," Tom replied sincerely. I instinctively reached out with my wraith abilities. I looked at Sophia's biology. She wasn't human that was for sure, but a daemon? "Look, I made a call. It wasn't a good one. I'm sorry." I heard Tom add as I snapped my attention back to the conversation.

I half expected her to leap over the table and rip his head from his body. I would have stood with her and fought off every hunter that came to avenge their leader, but it would have been the wrong thing to do.

Instead, she stayed calm. I could feel the power and rage



emanate from her like heat from a fire but she controlled her anger. She was no wild daemon, she was the Gardener. “Fine,” she said. “But when all this is over, the Garden won’t support you as its leader anymore.”

“I know it was a bad call but be reasonable!” Tom was threatened in a way I hadn’t seen before. “No Tom. The control you’re using over the hunters isn’t right. If I hadn’t seen a glimpse of something in my own future, I wouldn’t have removed your control from Mike here and I would be dead now. How many others have died because of your will?” Sophia said with a haunting venomous calm.

“What?” exclaimed Howard. “You control us?” He asked angrily. Sophia turned to him. “Yes, Howard. All the doubts that every hunter has had in the field, totally correct. His will changes you. That’s why he makes a point to personally meet every recruit.” Howard gave Tom a snarl that was accompanied by some suddenly quite visible teeth that Tom knew well enough to be wary of.

“You’re still in charge right now Tom. What’s the Plan?” Sophia asked sternly as she put one pointed finger on the map.

“I haven’t got one.” He replied with shame and defeat. “We did everything we could. They took out every team we sent. We lost hunters with every mission, every victory we had came with more losses than I have ever seen before. I ordered everyone back to the Garden.” Tom slouched in his chair he was at the end of his tether and almost out of hope. “When you came back through the portal, I hoped *you* would have something we could use against them. Instead, you have brought a Vampire; a possessed hunter and a ghost.” Tom allowed his true feelings for us to show through in a way that I didn’t like.

“I may have something you can use,” Charles said sheepishly. All eyes were instantly on him. “Go on...” encouraged Sophia. Charles looked nervous and stepped forward to Tom’s desk. “The daemons are using my realm as a staging ground. If you remove it then the flow of daemons will stop.”

“I’m sorry, what?” asked Tom with a dubious tone.

“The reason they need my realm is to be a staging ground for portals. You can’t open a portal to an opposing charge directly,” added Charles.

“What does that mean?” Tom pressed impatiently.

Charles messed with the cuffs of his robes nervously and continued “You can open a portal to here from the City because that realm is human, neutral energy. You can open a portal to my...” he paused and corrected himself. “You can open one from the daemon realm to the city but if you tried to open a portal from here directly to the daemon realm it would be mixing light and dark energy. It would ignite.”

The room went silent.

“Can that be done?” Asked Howard decisively.

“The Garden has infinite energy so fuel isn’t a problem. How do we make a portal to the daemon realm though?” mulled Sophia, deep in thought.

“I know the spell.” Said Charles sheepishly, finding all eyes on him once again. “But you need a form to work the energies. I can’t do it and it would take years to teach. There are many fundamentals and schools of thought that are all needed.” Charles didn’t enjoy being the centre of attention. It probably came from a life of being invisible most of the time.

My wraiths buzzed for a moment, they didn’t know how to do this. It concerned me that they had gaps in their knowledge.

“The charms!” Sophia said with excitement. “The charms are provided by the Garden, but the original hunters had people with the ability to turn to energy. That’s how they imparted their training on the Charms. Charles! You can put the spell into charms. We can all learn it in moments.”

Then all at once, we realised the price we were to pay. We would destroy the daemons’ route to us, but at the cost of our own home. The room was silent again but this time because we were all weighing the price.

Tom broke our silence. “We still have all the daemons in the human realm to deal with, they are powerful, them alone may be enough to defeat us, especially without the Garden.”

I thought about it and was about to support the plan but Sophia spoke before me. “We know there are more hunters out there. Different sects, Gardens, sanctuaries, whatever we are currently calling them. *We* may be finished but they’ll have a chance to carry on.”

Tom stood up with renewed energy. “Start preparations for the mission. I’ll start arranging to evacuate what’s left of our people to the warehouse. Anne won’t like it but she’ll have to take our people.”

We all nodded in agreement. “Make enough charms for the people in this room and not one more.” Tom added, “the ability to open portals to new locations isn’t something I want to arm everyone with, especially not if it can destroy entire realms.”

With the plan made we left the tent.

“Charles and I will prepare the charms,” Sophia said with a regretful resolve. This place was her home even more so than ours.

“I need to talk to Anne before Tom gets there. I need to

make sure she is aware of my new situation.” Howard said, gesturing to his teeth. “I just hope she doesn’t shoot me on sight,” he said with a half-joking melancholy. He cared about Anne and if we were to be evacuated to her warehouse it was only fair that she knew of his situation.

“I have some things I need to work out with the wraiths,” I said. “I need a quiet place and a little time.” The group began to go separate ways.

“Sophia, can I talk to you for a second?” I asked. “SOPHIA!” Howard exclaimed with glee. “Your name is Sophia!” We all glared daggers at him for a moment. “Sure,” she replied.

Charles and Howard walked towards the house, Howard chuckling to himself. “You want to know why Tom said I was a daemon don’t you?” She asked the moment it seemed like they were out of listening distance.

I nodded. “I don’t know what I am. Honestly Mike.” I must have looked disbelieving because she sighed and continued without me saying another word. “When I said I was old. I was being honest. But I’m probably older than you think.” I raised an eyebrow and nodded “I figured.”

She smiled and stepped a little closer to me. “Mike, I’m as old as the Garden.” I recalled the story she told me about the way the Garden was created. She had said that it was thousands of years ago. “What are you saying?” I asked intently.

“When the Garden was created. The first hunters entered and the house was still forming. They found me there,” she said. “A baby?” I asked?

“No. I have not aged a day since the first moment I remember.” She looked nervous and stared deeply into my flickering blue eyes. “I have told many lies about who I am over the years

but the truth is, I was there in the Garden when the first hunters arrived. Naked and confused. I had no memories and the only thing that I know for sure is that when they came in I spoke in Demti.” She stopped for a moment and looked away, then continued. “As far as I know, I was born with the Garden.”

I was lost for words. She looked human, she ate toast and read books, how could she be anything other than human? The wraiths buzzed at me again. I pushed them back. I didn’t want them interfering with my feelings. “What happens to you if we destroy the Garden?” I asked. “I don’t know,” she replied, “but we don’t have a choice.” With that said, she smiled and walked away from me.

I sat down right there next to Tom’s tent and closed my eyes. The wraiths began to chatter and buzz, this time I wanted everything they had to offer, including some answers about the things they didn’t know.

I began my conversation with the Wraiths. While they had delivered information to me a few times now, closing my eyes and actually focusing on them as something separate from me resulted in something new happening.

I was in that black place again where I had talked with Charles and been offered the deal. There was only a single ball of light there now. The ball represented the single infinite and un-fractured mind of the wraith, all of them. It didn’t speak or communicate with me, it simply showed me feelings and deposited information within me.

“The deal. You promised to help me.” I barked. The wraith filled me with love and hope. They confirmed. I instantly felt bad for assuming they were being dishonest with me. I didn’t trust them yet and I was worryingly aware of them being liter-

ally inside my thoughts.

“Show me how to make portals,” I asked. They filled me with nothingness. A confirmation that they didn’t know. Even though on the surface their communication was simple there was a complexity in my mind that I can’t quite express in words.

“Charles knows.” I both stated and asked at the same time.

Something unexpected happened and then I needed to open my eyes again.

It’s a funny thing the way that time works in the Garden. When you’re in your room, or someone else’s room you have all the time in the world. But when you are in the open Garden everything can happen in moments.

I opened my eyes as Sophia and Charles were leaving the house. Howard was sitting next to me and Tom was sitting at a table talking with high ranking Hunters. In the few moments I was inside my mind with my wraith mind, they had completed their missions and the wheels were turning to set the plan into action.

I stood up and strolled over to Charles and Sophia. With all the energy and force I could muster with the power of every wraith inside me I swung a right hook. I swung it with as much physical force as I could muster, hunter training, raw muscles, a will of stone and on top of that with all the psychic energy that the wraiths could muster. It was the full support of the entire race of ghosts and the blessing of righteousness.

It may be the single most righteous punch in the history of this whole damned war. For what I believe the first time in the history of his race, Charles was hurt. He was hit so hard he burst. Not to *avoid* the contact, but because of it. His robes floated genitally down to the floor.

Sophia looked at me stunned. Howard came running over and every hunter in the Garden switched instantly to a combat stance, weapons drawn. Charles reformed in a flickering mess of smoke and electricity. It took him literally minutes to return fully, his robes slowly filling and taking shape again. The whole time every hunter stood ready and didn't flinch.

Tears ran down my cheeks. Eventually, Charles spoke. "They told you then?"

I nodded.

"Michael. I, I wanted to tell you. But... I didn't know how," he said with a static filling his voice.

I looked him in his eyes that were still not quite solid. Then I waved for the hunters to stand down. They were suspicious but after a moment Tom backed me up with a wave of his own hand and he returned to his talks. They stood down.

"What was that?" Sophia asked. "How was that even possible?" Howard added. "I was a little confused when Charles seemed to know something that his entire species was unable to tell me. Given that they literally know everything, it was a concern for me."

I stepped closer to Charles, he flinched but stood his ground. "I asked them about it. And about portals." Charles looked at the floor. I grabbed his face and forced him to look at me. He tried to disappear but the wraiths gave me the power to hold his form in place.

"You know why the daemons discovered his world?" I said for the benefit of Howard and Sofia. Charles stopped trying to escape me. "Because he opened the first portal. Invited them in," I let go of him. He didn't run or fade away.

"What the fuck?" Howard eloquently asked. "He discov-

ered portal magic. He was the one who actually invented the damned spells. Opened a few. Found the human realm. Found a few more nice places. Then he stumbled across the daemon's homeworld." Sophia snapped her head towards Charles and fired a cutting glare.

I continued. "He decided to try and communicate with the daemons. Told them all about the things he had seen." Charles interrupted me. "They were at peace in their realm. I had no idea what they were. They were children compared to what they are now." Sophia gasped in shock at his words. Howard put his hand on his sword.

I continued again. "The daemons were at peace because they had nothing left to consume. They were like children because their realm was out of energy, they were dying."

Charles couldn't cry but I'm sure he would have if he could. "I wanted to save them. I could see they were close to oblivion. They had nothing and we had so much."

Howard actually growled at him.

"They convinced him to give them portals, and the maps he had made," I said. Charles spluttered an apology and began to ramble about how he couldn't have known. "Then they consumed his world. Just like he said."

Howard bent down taking deep breaths. At first, it looked like he was emotional but I quickly realised from the grip he had on his sword handle that he was desperately suppressing his Vampire need for violence, as well as his human rage. I patted him on the back to silently support his effort.

Sophia was as pale as the crisp white clouds in the sky. Her eyes glazed, after a moment she spoke, "Tell me more," the words were like spit.



I continued telling them what I knew, Charles not so much as blinking, totally frozen in shame, or fear or something else.

“Most of the rest of what he told us was true. With a few omissions. The Churches we saw in his realm were built to honour him. Him personally. The rest of the wraiths threw everything they had at the daemons to try and hold them back. They ran out of energy. That’s why they couldn’t take a form like he can. That’s why the wraith attacks amused the daemons so much, it was nothing compared to what they faced from them in the years past.”

Charles opened and closed his mouth for a few moments before eventually committing to making a sound. “I won’t insult you with trying to apologise. It was the greatest mistake of my existence and everyone paid for that mistake,” he looked down with the purest shame I had ever seen in someone.

“I was exiled from the one mind that we shard. The single thing that united all of my people. When they removed me from the ‘whole’ your people were still living in caves. They never gave up the fight to push back the daemons. It went on for a thousand years at least. I have been alone for as long as human civilization has existed. I wanted nothing more than to make it alright again.”

As much as he sounded sincere, this was the man who opened the door to the daemons. He allowed Vampires to exist. Every death at their hands was blood on his. It was even possible that ours wasn’t the first world that the daemons had waged war on. How many lives had been extinguished because of Charles?

Sophia wiped her eyes. Howard wiped his too, even though I’m pretty sure vampires can’t cry. “This doesn’t change any-

thing,” commanded Sophia. “The plan is a good one,” she added. “And old Chuck here just gets away with everything? Is that it? Is that all?” Howard said with venom.

If Charles had been something that Howard could have killed I have no doubt at that moment he wouldn’t have hesitated. I tried to put a comforting hand on his shoulder but he batted it away.

“Howard!” I demanded, grabbing his attention. “He was tried and convicted by his people. He has been alone for a thousand years at least.” I tried to explain.

“Alone! ALONE! Why the fuck is he even alive?” Howard shouted in Charles’s face. “Why are you alive?”

Charles sat down on the grass. Partly because there was nothing else he could do. “I agree,” he said calmly. “I wish for nothing more than to pay the price for what I did. It was a mistake. I never once sided with them but I’m still the reason they escaped their world. I did a lot of stupid things. I want to die. I deserve it.” He said the words quietly.

Howard stopped yelling and posturing. “Why don’t you?” He asked with a menacing tranquillity.

“There exists no force that I know of that can do any real harm to my kind. I’ve searched. I can’t even feel pain, not really.” He said, again with pure regret and hopelessness in his voice.

“Hit him again Mike!” Howard demanded.

I shook my head “Everything I had in me was in the first one and all it did was turn him into a cloud for a moment.”

Sophia put out a hand for Charles, gesturing for him to stand. “Howard, Mike, it doesn’t matter. The war is over. Win or lose. This is the end one way or the other.”

“So we just forgive him?” Howard asked.

“Howard, we’re literally planning on blowing up the Garden, and their entire realm. It... It doesn’t matter.” Sophia said with a tone that was too complicated for me to understand.

“Let this go for now. I’m saying that as the Gardener, not as your friend.”

We both nodded. I was relieved. I was furious but Charles made his mistake so long ago and his people, while they couldn’t forgive him, they no longer had any anger left in them. By extension neither did I. As a Hunter I lusted for retribution though. Perhaps I was starting to understand Sophia’s tone a little more now.

We stood silent for a moment. I tried to let go of my rage, to shake off the emotions. “You made the charms?” I asked. “Yeah, Let’s go learn to make portals,” Sophia replied.

“Tom!” she called and gestured inside. Tom nodded and we went into the house. Charles walked behind us. Howard began to whisper something to me. “Let it go!” I barked and kept walking.

It appeared that while for me only a few moments had passed that wasn’t how things had gone for Sophia and Charles. The Library was a mess. Some of the shelves had been moved away and there were some magical looking symbols burned into the ancient stone floor. There were piles and piles of paper and scrawled notes. They had obviously worked hard on whatever it was that they had done. In the middle of the room was a small table and on it were two charms glowing a little with power.

“Only two?” I asked.

“I can’t use Charms,” said Sophia with a shrug. “Never could. Have to learn everything the old fashioned way.” Her books made more sense to me suddenly.

“No matter how hard I try and stay on the straight and narrow there is no way they were ever going to offer a Vampire the ability to open portals to different realms Mike,” Howard smiled. He had seen this coming. I still wasn’t thinking of him as a potential time bomb the way that Sophia and Tom seemed to. It made sense from their point of view I suppose.

“Was it hard to make them?” I asked. “Took a few days, for us. Mostly understanding the original hunter’s notes. They were in some odd middle English dialect with Demti words thrown in. I assume they wanted to make sure that daemons wouldn’t be able to instantly recognise it if they got into the Garden.”

I studied the charms. They seemed to resonate with power. There was a huge amount of training stored in them.

“Do you remember the first hunters?” I asked. “Not really. They were distrustful of me at first and I had to learn everything, literally everything. I only had the most basic skills. Wasn’t very useful to them.” She seemed a little bitter.

“Wasn’t a fan?” I asked casually.

“They were warriors of legend. Not socialites. They knew how to kill things that needed killing but teaching me things, or even talking to me wasn’t high on their list of things to do.”

I was filled with a feeling of sadness at how lonely she must have been, how confused. I glanced at Charles and that feeling of sadness stayed.

Tom entered the room, he had changed clothes. The Gardens time trickery still confused me occasionally and trying to coordinate all the things that were happening was getting tiresome.

I had decided I would stop thinking about it as best as I

could. Then I flashed back to a conversation with Howard that I had when I first arrived and he had told me, "It's easier to just not think about it." I smiled to myself. At the time I had thought him to be avoiding my questions. I had finally learned enough to understand him.

"How was it accomplished?" Tom asked. "We have never needed to make them before." He added.

Sophia pointed to her massive piles of paper and books. "At its most basic, we use the magic circle," she pointed at the burns on the stone floor. "That forms, or summons a raw crystal, then you have to use some meditation techniques to get your mind in a very specific place. Charles floats into them and after that, it just happens. The charms absorb the information and the circle is broken. In literal flames." She pointed at the burn marks around the library. "I'm oversimplifying of course. It was Charles who had to get into the meditative state."

Tom and I took a charm each. He looked at Sophia, "And there is absolutely no way you can use one? Even after you learned all this?" he asked. She shook her head. "I tried. I tried a lot," she said with a defeated tone.

"Okay, Mike. I guess you're officially fully trained. Welcome to the inner circle." Tom said with a big charming smile and tightened his grip around the charm. He had done this many times before. No need for the ritual of the event for him.

A flickering rainbow of light came from the gaps in his fisted hand and as he took a quick breath and his eyes sparkled. It was done.

He stumbled and sat down on one of the library chairs. "Okay! That was a lot to take in. I can see why it's not a well-known skill." He was breathing deeply and trying to regain his

composure.

He nodded to me to absorb mine. I gripped the charm and pushed my force of will into it to activate it. I had gotten pretty good at it, and with the massive amount of will that the wraiths gave me it was easy to summon the required focus.

The charm began to activate and I started to receive the impression of the information. Suddenly my mind began to burn and scream. I dropped the charm and fell backwards my hand burning. Howard caught me.

“What happened?” asked Tom with concern. I shook off the pain and looked at my hand, it was a little charred and still smoking.

“The wraiths, they won’t let me have this knowledge!” I said even as my mind was still being filled with the wraiths scorn.

“Why!?” asked Tom.

“I was afraid of this.” Said Charles. “It is forbidden knowledge. You are bound by their rules.” He said.

“You can’t use charms anymore?” asked Howard.

“I can’t use this charm,” I replied.

“Are you sure?” Tom asked me.

I nodded. With a purposefulness I didn’t expect, Tom picked up the charm and walked to the chair he had been sitting on. He lifted the chair and slid the charm under its leg. He let go and it smashed into shards, the pieces glowed and smoked for a moment as the glassy dust lost its magical charge in a little rainbow of light.

“That was absolutely the correct thing to do,” said Charles gravely. Tom sat on the chair.

“I understand this now. It’s too much power.” Tom was staring into space absorbing his new information now it was

bedding into his mind. "Charles is it true that you and I are the only ones in existence with this knowledge?" Tom asked earnestly.

Charles considered his words for a moment. "There are two types of portals. The ones that take you from one energy to another are not uncommon in the realms I have seen. But the ability to force open new paths is ours alone."

Tom sighed, relieved. "You present yourself as a holy man. You know what could happen if this power was abused?" Tom asked.

Howard went to say something and Sophia shot him a glare that would silence an army.

"I know very well Tom" Charles replied.

"Will you swear to me, and to whatever god it is that you worship that you will never share this information again? It is the ability to destroy worlds," asked Tom with desperation and fear in his eyes.

Charles smiled with an understanding that was deeper than Tom knew. "Sir, I swear that I know better than you can imagine how dangerous this power can be. If it weren't that you wanted it to destroy the daemons, I wouldn't have even let you know that it existed."

Tom nodded hoping that he could trust the words that Charles had said so sincerely. "Is there a way to remove this knowledge from me once the mission is done?" He asked.

"No."

An hour or so later we were in the Garden and the plan was in motion. Hunters were packing up equipment and taking it through the door to the warehouse. The place was being stripped and evacuated with precision and purpose.

Tom was overseeing the work but the rest of us sat in the Garden at one of the little tables that no one seemed to think was important enough to take with them.

“How did it go with Anne?” I asked Howard. “She threw me out of her warehouse. Banged some void sticks together and the next thing I knew I was in the middle of a snowstorm. The Arctic or somewhere I guess,” he said.

“How do you get back?” I asked. He showed me his void key. “Does that even work outside of your garage?” I asked. “Works at any entrance. The garage is my assigned one is all. If Anne can open an exit from the warehouse, I can return to the Garden in the same way,” he said pocketing his key as he talked.

“I wonder if Anne knew that when she dropped you there?” Sophia asked. “Vampire or not, no way she wouldn’t hurt me. We go back too far.” He said. “Given the evacuation it happening, it went better for Tom I assume,” I observed.

“It seems strange that we are all being so relaxed when according to Tom’s map, the city is on the brink of a Vampire Apocalypse” Howard noted.

“You know how time works here Howard,” replied Sophia. “No, I don’t. I never did,” he said. She laughed. “And that’s how things work.”

Charles was quiet. I understood. He didn’t want to give Howard a reason to scream at him again. I suppose after his exile and all the time he spent alone, being a little quiet around people who knew your dark secrets were as good as friendly conversation. I was lying to myself with this thought but I couldn’t bring myself to include him right now.

“What about your things Sophia? Are they being packed and taken to the Warehouse?” I asked. “No,” she replied. I waited for



more information but nothing came. I pressed for a little more. "You want me to help you get it organised? There are a lot of books to get sorted," she looked at me and her eyes thinned a little "I am going to have a fresh start. Assuming we all get through this."

There was something else in her voice. It didn't take the wisdom of my wraiths to tell me that she was worried about what would happen to her if the Garden did get destroyed as we planned. I didn't know what I could say to help her, in part because I had already been thinking about it myself. She could leave the Garden for as long as she wanted and she had never had an ill effect. I assumed what although it created her, she wasn't tied to it. I hoped.

Tom walked over to us. "I have asked everyone to write a letter to future hunters. To leave them here. If something of this place survives then something of us will last too. It's pointless I expect; I think it will give them all some closure. Some hope. This has been our home for a long time. Some more than others, I think you all should do it too." He said. "I told everyone to leave the letters in their rooms," he added.

I was beginning to realize that even though Tom had some strange ways, he was a good man who cared about his hunters.

"I like this idea" Sophia agreed. "We should do this. And by going back to our rooms we will no doubt emerge when it's time to act." She added. We all agreed. "Mike." Sophia asked, "Come visit me before we leave." I nodded. I was glad that whatever bond we were forming hadn't been shattered by the day we had had.

Here I am in my room for what feels like days. Looking at the pile of paper that's in front of me, perhaps it has been days.

Tom said to write a letter and I wrote a book.

Whatever happens, when this 'letter' is done I'll know that I wrote it, I wrote it all. I left a chronicle of it in the Garden for when it all burns.

Whatever may happen in the future, I'm glad I did this. Sorting it all out in my head has been good for me. I felt like I was telling the story to the wraiths and the Garden has given me this time as one last beautiful gift.

I'm scared and I'm sad. I'm pretty sure I'm not making it out of this alive. I'm also grateful that for a brief part of my life, I lived like I never imagined I would. I fought for my own reasons and it was everything I ever wanted.

...

...

...

Goodbye.

## Chapter 10: Endings.

Howard was in his room. There were piles of screwed up paper around him. But this time he was sure he had written his feelings and emotions in a way that he was finally satisfied with. The note had been screwed into a ball a few times and then flattened out as Howard changed his mind about it being his epithet. He argued with himself about if it was actually worth doing one of these things.

He looked at his note, his letter reading it back to himself aloud “Fuck Vampires and fuck demons.” It was signed with a cigarette burn at the bottom. It really did sum up his feelings at the moment. He stuffed it in an envelope and tossed it to his bed.

His feet were up on the desk and his curtains were closed, he had even put a blanket over the curtain rail to try and suppress some of that midday glow from the Garden. Because of his ‘condition’, he could see clearly even without light. Actually, he could see better without it. The light made his vision over saturated and hazy. He thought to himself how he would have to find a pair of dark glasses. He then started to think about

how stupid he would look in dark glasses all the time.

“Fuck it!” He said aloud. He found some clean clothes and washed his face. He checked his weapons and stood in front of the door. He stood there thinking about all the times he had left before. How many lives he might have saved, how many Vampires he had killed and the things he had done in the name of the war.

Since he had given up his soul to save Mike’s life he had felt so different. He had bounced between rage and hatred and fought with his desire to feed and kill. He wasn’t sure if it was all the demons he had ‘fed’ on or being back in the Garden having a healing effect on him but right now he felt oddly happy.

They had a plan to blow up the Garden. Whatever that meant the result would be a return to the human world. No more ancient magic fracturing his life. He felt like he was on the edge of freedom. At the same time, he knew he was a Vampire now and this sense of freedom and levity scared the shit out of him. He had become the thing he always feared he might and he didn’t care. Was that part of having no soul? How long before the hunters would need to kill HIM? He knew it would have to happen eventually.

“Fuck it!” he said again and opened the door. The light streamed in, he left and closed the door without looking back at the room he had called home for so long.

He went down the long hall and passed Mike’s room. He put the palm of his hand on the door and thought about his friend. He decided not to bother him and hurried off to the patio area.

The evacuation was almost done, there were only one or two hunters around now, talking with each other and moving

papers around Tom's desk. Tom's war desk was simply in the Garden now and his tent was gone. All the tents were gone and the furniture was disorganised for what may have been the first time. Tom waved Howard over.

"What do you need from me?" He asked. Tom walked around the table and took Howard a few steps away from the remaining hunters. "Howard, I need to know. Honestly. Can I still trust you?" Howard was surprised that Tom didn't already consider him an enemy. "You can trust me Tom. I'm not sure if that will always be the case, but at the moment, I'm still more hunter than Vampire," he answered. "That's great," Tom replied.

"Then, hunter. I have a final mission for you," Tom put his hand on Howard's shoulder and continued. "I have to get to the nightclub, get into the daemon realm. I need you to keep me alive and cover my exit, while I open the portal from there back to the Garden."

It seemed that Tom had refined the plan somewhat. "Why can't you just open it from here?" Howard asked. "Wasn't that the plan?"

"That was the plan, yes. Now I have the knowledge of portals and I understand it all so much better, the plan has changed. The daemon realm is out of energy. Charles tells me that the daemons use some sort of shaman to open portals, they use their own energy."

"Why does that matter? Doesn't the Garden have lots of energy?" Howard asked.

"Yes! That's the problem. The Garden is the bomb and the daemon realm is the target. We need to angle the blast. Directing the energy towards the daemon realm."

Howard rubbed his chin and thought about this for a mo-

ment. “Both sides go boom when the energy mixes, what difference will it make?”

Tom again nodded in agreement and added, “about a hundred and ninety seconds.” Then Howard understood. “Enough time for the daemons to open a portal and escape to the human realm.”

“Any more details I need to know?” Howard asked.

“No. You cover the club to make sure I’m not followed, Charles and I go into the daemon realm. I cast the spell and it’s all over.”

Howard instantly saw the hole in the plan “Your soul will start to burn the moment you enter that realm.”

Tom smiled with deep resolve, “yes and you showed me how to conquer that issue Howard.”

“You can’t!” he said in an almost panic.

“Whoever opened the portal was *never* coming back, Howard. This is the only way.”

“Then there’s something you should know about Charles.” Howard said. He didn’t want Tom to sacrifice himself without all the information.

“He opened the first portal which allowed the daemon’s into his realm,” Tom replied, cutting him off with a calm tone before Howard could drop his bombshell.

“You already know?” Howard exclaimed.

“Yes. The charm, it wasn’t just the raw information, it was a lot of his memories too.”

Howard was stunned “So, why take him with you?” He asked.

“I’m not taking him. He’s just coming with me.”

It took Howard a few moments to realize why. “Because

the realm and everything in it will be destroyed!” he whispered as he realised the truth. Charles wanted to die and there was an excellent chance that destroying an entire realm would do the trick.

“I’m in!” Howard replied.

## 10.1 Warehouse.

Anne had accepted the operatives from the sanctuary called ‘Garden’. There was no protocol for this and to her knowledge, no other hunters had ever tried to blow up their base of operations before. There was a certain poetry that the first sanctuary to be inhabited by hunters also being the first to get blown up.

She was still stunned when the hunters came through the doorway. Stunned because there were so few. She knew the war was going badly for many of the sanctuaries but there were no more than twenty hunters came through. The Garden had housed over a hundred last time she had asked Tom.

The logistics of taking all the Gardens equipment and supplies turned out to be the hard part. She had expected the people to be the main problem. In the void realm that the warehouse existed inside it was always raining outside and the hunters had sat by the delivery entrance watching the rain with great interest. While most of them had been to the warehouse many times, a lot of them hadn’t realised that it was a sanctuary, like their Garden.

The perpetual rain in this place never quite began to flood things, it was just always wet enough to be annoying. For a great many years Anne had enjoyed the sound of it on the roof but now it was a noise she was so familiar with that she didn’t

even hear it.

She asked a few of the hunters who else was left and how long before their plan was to be actioned. It was imperative that the door be closed when the portal was opened or the warehouse could be destroyed too. One of the older hunters she had met a few times passed her a note as she came through the door.

Anne opened it and began to read

"Anne,

When The Gardener comes though please close the door.

DON'T WAIT.

Thank you for everything.

Tom."

Anne was suddenly overwhelmed with the reality of the situation. This wasn't a backup plan, this was happening. She ran to her desk and asked some of her people to begin the work to seal the Garden from the network of doorways.

There were just one or two more things to do and she would be ready.

## **10.2 Garden.**

Mike entered Sophia's room. The door was left open for him. He looked out of the window and down to the patio below. There wasn't any sign that the tents had ever been there. When he had gone into his room there were yellowed patches of grass and signs of wear where the hunters had walked so often but the Garden had already healed itself.

"Hello, I didn't hear you come in," said Sophia as she looked over from her raised bedroom area. "I'll be down in a second."



She came down the stairs with a large backpack and an old-looking suitcase. She had changed clothes again. She was wearing a leather, silver-buckled armoured shirt that looked like something from the dark ages. Her legs however were covered in a modern-looking cut of jeans, she wore ornate boots. Her hair was tied up into a functional ponytail with a length of leather lace.

“Battle ready?” Mike asked. She smiled at him. “It’s the armour that the first hunters wore. Not something that I usually wear but it has some hidden tricks.” She looked like an action hero, but she always did to Mike. “And the first hunters wore jeans?” He observed. She laughed at his comment. “Yeah, they made great armour but if I’m going into the city even the Wind can’t mask leather trousers and sandals in the modern world. Also, they never figured out pockets.”

She placed the bags on the floor by the doors. “You decided to pack some things after all then?” Mike asked.

“I wasn’t going to, but there are a few bits I figured wouldn’t hurt to have around.”

Mike decided not to ask what ‘bits’ she had packed. It seemed too personal.

Sophia walked over to the window where Mike was still standing. “You know, this window isn’t visible from the other side?” He noted.

She laughed again, “You know every room in this house has a window? Even the ones that can’t possibly have walls facing the outside?”

“Yeah, I did notice that, and the whole place smells like fresh laundry. I have no idea how else to describe it. Fresh laundry. Never seen anyone do any laundry but the damned smell is

everywhere.” Mike wasn’t very good at small talk. There were many things he wanted to say. Things he wanted to do. But he knew that the room’s doors were open. Sophia’s room was being exposed to the passage of time within the Garden. This wasn’t an accident.

Sophia lent against Mike’s shoulder for a moment. “Mike. If I, if we live through this, can we spend another morning eating toast and talking about things that don’t involve Vampires and daemons?”

He wanted to comfort her, he wanted nothing more than to tell her that this was their future, but he had one last question he needed answering first. “I thought you could see the future?” He asked. It was a little while before she spoke again. “Sometimes. Every so often I see a big event. Sometimes a moment that may one day make sense to me. I don’t usually tell people,” she said, a little defensively. He knew why. His wraiths have already informed him that future-sight was a well-utilised daemon skill.

“Did you see my future that day you came to me in the dojo?”

She sighed “Yeah. I had a vision the moment I walked in there.”

She suddenly stepped away from him towards the impossibly clean glass of the massive window. She leaned against it. It didn’t look safe to Mike but he knew how the Garden worked now and assumed his worry was a leftover reflex from his old life. Sophia pressed her head back against the glass and looked at the ceiling in thought before she spoke.

“The visions never made sense until after the events. I saw you in the rain. There was energy and darkness. You spoke to me, in Demti.”

“What did I say?”

She smiled widely and he could see the conscious effort she took not dwell on her vision. “That’s not for you to know Mike. Not yet.”

She went to the doorway and picked up her bags. Mike knew better than to offer to carry them; she was far stronger than him and it would have been insulting to pretend otherwise. There’s a fine line between self-aware chivalry and nonsensical misogyny. Especially when the woman is in enchanted battle armour orders of magnitude stronger than a normal person.

“At the time” she continued “I was very confused by how confident and controlled you seemed.”

They walked down the stairs towards the main house.

“When I met you, you were filled with self-doubt, a fledgling hunter with very little natural talent.”

He was a little hurt by that comment.

“When you burst into my torturer’s cell in the daemon realm there was a fire inside you and I could see how you were to go from what you were to what I knew you could be.”

They walked down the long corridor to the warehouse entrance.

“I only taught you Demti because I knew at some point you would know it, sort of self-fulfilling I suppose.”

They arrived at the door to the warehouse.

“Anyway, I look at you now, after the wraiths joined with you. I can see that person now. It’s sort of amazing how fast it all happened,” she said with a soft hopeful glow.

Mike and Sophia stepped through the doorway and closed it behind them.

## 10.3 Under-Loft.

Tom, Charles and Howard were just arriving at the nightclub. Empty and boarded up. When last any of them had seen it just a little while ago, it had been just a few hours after they had entered there in the cities timeline.

Howard looked puzzled at it. He had been expecting a fight to get in. “How the fuck is this empty now?” he asked aloud.

“Whatever time tinkering the Garden does has become a little less predictable since the daemons started winning. Hunters were entering and exiting as usual but sometimes days would pass not moments.” Tom explained. “I assume this is one such occasion.” He was happy that they wouldn’t be battling hordes of daemons and Vampires though.

The whole city seemed like a ticking bomb. There were sirens of police cars and shouting almost constantly since they had left the Garden. They had heard more than a few gunshots and there was a tension in the air that you could feel all around you. These were the early signs of the scales tipping in favour of the darkness.

“I wonder why they abandoned it,” asked the detached and ethereal voice of Charles who still couldn’t quite form himself in the human realm. Howard sneered at the air. He had accepted Charles into the group but wasn’t happy about it.

“Because they knew that this place would be a priority target for us as soon as we got the information,” Tom answered.

“But they know it’s an access area to their realm,” Howard noted.

“They also have no idea that we know how to make portals on our own,” Tom replied.

“We?” Howard said with a raised eyebrow.

“Fine, me.” Tom rebutted.

They carefully went around the back of the building where they had entered before. Howard had one hand on his sword and the other on his revolver; he was ready for anything at this point.

Tom didn’t carry any weapon. He was a specialist in hand to hand combat. As far as Howard knew he hadn’t been on a mission for years. He couldn’t recall one since he had been a hunter and he had been a hunter for a very long time.

“The building is empty,” came the eerie voice of Charles echoing on the empty walls. Howard didn’t release his grip on his weapons.

Tom stood a little straighter and began walking around in a less guarded manner.

“This way,” the voice called. Tom looked to Howard for confirmation. Howard nodded. They soon found themselves in the very dark abandoned nightclub dance floor.

Howard found it quite easy to see everything. He looked around the room. “It’s clear.” He confirmed.

Tom opened his bag and pulled out some fist-sized rocks. He mumbled something to the rocks and rolled them out across the floor in different directions. As they moved they began to glow with an amber light. It made the room look vast and eerie.

They got brighter and the room lit up. “Magic balls?” Howard observed. “Rocks from the Garden. They store light.” Tom replied casually. “Of course they do!” Howard said with a sarcastic tone.

Tom pulled a large staff out of the air.

“How did I not see that?” Howard asked.

"I've been at this for a lot longer than you Howard."

"It feels wrong being here without Mike, or the Gardener."

"As far as they know we are waiting for them in the warehouse, as soon as they go in, the door is getting closed. No sense them risking it all too," Tom replied as he waved his staff around most mystically.

"The plan is very simple and very easy. I *have* to go to the other side. Charles *wants* to and we can't risk daemons escaping through this place if they realise what's happening. So you stay here until it's done. I think it's an elegant plan," Tom stated for clarity. More to convince himself than anyone else.

"And after you blow yourself up?" Howard asked.

"I have no idea but I'm pretty sure Anne knows what she's doing. Probably more so than I. Once the mission is done, the fight will be a lot easier." He added.

Tom began to mutter some inaudible words and started spinning his big stick around like a baton. At first rhythmically and then faster and more randomly, like he was trying to hit targets that only he could see. The chanting got louder and louder but Howard still couldn't make out what was actually being said.

The glowing rocks began to spark and pop. A wind began to rise in the room and a humming began to sound. Then in a flash a rip opened in the air. A blue and purple electric tear. The amber glowing rocks sparked. The tear widened a little and the red glow of the daemon realm shone through it.

Tom stopped the staff spinning in a single direct motion of his arm and it vanished from sight. He turned with the portal to his back. "Howard. Be a hunter for as long as you can. I believe you may just be able to make it," he said with a commanding

voice. With that said he turned and vanished into the hole.

A shadowy figure appeared in front of the opening. It was the silhouette of Charles “Goodbye Howard. I enjoyed your friendship for the moment I had it.”

Howard took a step towards the portal and it blinked out of existence like an old TV being turned off. The amber rocks that had been so bright just moments ago flickered and then were again simple rocks. Howard stood alone in the darkness with a feeling of lonely dread that he had not experienced in a very long time.

## **10.4 Warehouse (again.)**

Sophia was revered by the Hunters from the Garden as well as the operatives of the Warehouse. She was treated like a visiting general by the warehouse clerks but despite everyone’s eagerness to help her with just about anything, no one seemed to be able to tell her where Tom or Howard was. She had called for Charles but he didn’t seem to be around either. Sophia was starting to think that something was happening that lay just outside of her knowledge and that always concerned her a great deal.

Anne came into the main hanger soaked through from being outside the main building. “What happened to you?” Mike asked. “The perks of leadership,” she said with a thoroughly pissed off tone. One of her people passed her a grey Towel as she got to the large desk that seemed to function as her office. “We have a few compounds here. Travelling between them can be a chore.” She said as she tried to dry her hair. “Had to go over to the housing hanger, make sure there were enough beds

for your people” she added.

“Anne, thank you for taking us in. Where is Tom?” Sophia asked. “You’re welcome. He’s in the housing complex, he’ll be over shortly,” she lied. Mike watched Sophia, she was scanning the room and taking note of its layout.

He then noticed that Anne had noticed too. She rolled her eyes a little and took a quick survey of the room with a glance. “Put your guard down Gardener. You’re safe here,” she said supportively.

Sophia lay her bag on the ground and took the bow from across her back, laying it on the table with its quiver.

“Gardener. I’ve never seen you in a fight. *Are* you as good as they say?” Anne asked, a little because it was an opportunity to talk to a legend and a little because some of the stories she had heard bordered on absurd.

Sophia glanced at her and then at Mike. “Yes,” she said confidently.

“Then that may be interesting,” Anne said as the sounds of many footsteps came from the direction of the entrance. Sophia’s demeanour went from nervous visitor to warrior so fast that the change happened between moments.

Her bow was back in her hand and drawn. Pointing at the sound of boots on concrete. Her weapon being drawn was enough to prompt Mike to do the same. The footsteps stopped.

“Weapons!” Called Sophia to her hunters. They all drew and took defensive positions without so much as a moment of questioning. If the Gardener said it was time to fight then no hunter would question her.

The warehouse staff, clerks and operatives alike were all frozen in place, none of them trained past the basics. The ware-



house was a logistical institution, not a barracks.

The silence was thick and tense for those few seconds before a truck came through the air and landed on its roof sliding into the Hunters at the front of the building. The creasing sound it made echoed around the barn sized room and glass shattered like a grenade from its windows. It sparked as it came to a stop. The Gardener started releasing arrows in the direction it had come from and strafing herself to get a better view of whatever was to come next.

Mike couldn't see anything from his side of the table. He ran around to the other side and positioned himself behind Sophia to get a look. He instantly went pale. There was an army out there. Just as he was getting a sense of how screwed they were, the army moved. It was daemons, the army that they stood against was entirely daemons!

This wasn't a daemon realm, and Mike instantly knew that his godlike control over the nescient energies was essentially nothing. He would have to rely on his training and whatever edge his wraiths gave him. He looked on, knowing that he could only see the first wave and that alone was enough to finish them all. "How!" He heard himself ask with a stunned whisper.

In the first few moments of the battle, many of the Gardens hunters were smashed, not just beaten, stabbed or hit but smashed. At least a few of the daemons were the size of trucks and they moved like bears that had training. It was terrifying. It was a slaughter.

Sophia burned through her arrows before they got past the threshold of the hangar door. She dropped her bow and quiver and pulled out a knife. In a few moments that seemed like an eternity the army was upon them.

The noise was incredible; it was an ocean of screams and roars. The warehouse staff were being ripped limb from limb, in quite a literal sense.

Within a few more seconds Mike and Sophia ended up back to back fighting both sides. Mike's wraiths powered him up as well as they were able but he wasn't the godlike killer he knew he could be, given enough energy. He was however being fed enough awareness by his wraiths to allow him to go toe to toe with three or four daemons at a time. Sophia was doing the same on his other side.

Mike's wraiths usually gave him information as he required it but this time they had dumped everything they knew about violence into his mind at once. Then the enhanced vision and awareness that they had given him were turned up to something akin to prescience. The result was that Mike was able to counter pretty much everything the daemons threw at him, for the time being.

He changed his fighting style to mirror each opponent as he switched between them. His blood red-edged blades moving like a dance. When he pushed back his wave of aggressors he spun around the see Sophia kick a lizard looking daemon in the chest sending it flying into three more of the same type. It gave them a moment to think.

"Where's Anne?" Sophia barked and she sliced at a small goblin looking thing that was running towards her. Mike looked around frantically for a moment.

"I lost track of her," he barked back.

Sophia went back into the melee. "IS SHE BEHIND THIS?" She screamed as she wildly stabbed and sliced everything that came into range.

“Cover me a second, I can do a thing!” Mike exclaimed. Sophia nodded and batted away attackers as Mike knelt, eyes closed. He trusted her completely to keep him safe as he stretched out with his wraith mind. He was able to see everything in the area in every direction all at once, but just for a moment.

He found what he was looking for and his eyes popped open as he reacted to a thrown knife that Sophia had missed. He batted it away with this blade as it flew through the air towards his head.

“She just left. Went into the Garden!” He said springing to his feet. They both sprinted towards the doorway almost ignoring the onslaught of violence, almost ignoring their fellow hunters being utterly destroyed. They were focused on a concern that outweighed the deaths of their allies. The woman they were chasing had the potential to be more dangerous than all of those daemons.

As they got to the entrance they saw the door close. “What do we do?” Mike asked. “If she has a way out she could end up anywhere in the city. We have to follow!” Sophia said without hesitating. They followed.

## **10.5 Garden (again.)**

The door had been closed, it was only closed for a moment but it was closed. Mike and Sophia knew what that meant. The Gardens time power would have been invoked and Anne had a head start, they had no idea how much of a head start. They slowed at the end of the first corridor. The house was somehow darker than it usually was. Perhaps it was because it had been empty for the first time in forever, or perhaps it was a reflection

of its briefly singular occupants soul.

“Where would she go?” Mike asked. “I don’t think she’s ever been into the Garden. She’ll be looking for an exit I assume,” Sophia replied.

They explored the ground floor quickly and efficiently, silently checking every room as they passed. They knew this house well. It was just a matter of time before they found her, they were sure of that much.

As they got to the patio exit they heard a static sound. Like electric sparks. They glanced at each other knowing that this was her. They dashed outside to see Anne brandishing two void keys in the form of two small stones, bashing them together frantically. Her hair was dry and her hands were burned. She had been at this for a while.

It was the sky that stunned them though. The eternal sunshine of the Garden was for the first time suddenly moving closer to dusk. It gave the usually pristine greenery of the patio area a look of foreboding. “Anne! Stop it!” Mike called. She looked over at them startled and began backing the stones together more frantically.

“What have you done Anne?” Sophia screamed.

“You know how many new hunters I arm each day?” She croaked through tears. “The sanctuaries. They recruit new hunters every day and it’s not enough! IT WILL NEVER BE ENOUGH!” She started walking backwards away from them. Backing up towards the edge of the patio area.

Mike and Sophia edged towards her. “I contacted the daemons. I made a plan for them. I armed them and integrated them into the city. I gave them the club and the resources. All of it. The whole thing!” She screamed at the top of her voice “IT

WAS ALL ME!” Then she turned and ran a little way making sure to keep her distance from her accusers.

“But why?” Asked Sophia.

She stopped running and turned. “Because hunters can’t stop the Vampires Gardener! They can’t stop them! But the daemons can. They can control them! I let daemons into the world to take control of the Vampires and fewer people will die!” Anne was sobbing and screaming all this with pure spiteful rage now.

“That’s like calling in the devil to stop the sunrise. There are no winners with that!” Sophia said with genuine pity in her voice.

“No! The daemons don’t care about souls, they won’t kill humans, they just want control,” Anne screamed back. She backed away a little more and screamed again.

“Then Tom had to go and try and fucking ruin it all! Blow up their world! Well no! I have worked too damned hard! I called them! I let them into the warehouse to wipe you all out. The human realm can be their hub now!” And with that, she was over the threshold of the patio and the next time she frantically smacked the void keys together she vanished.

## **10.6 Daemon realm.**

Tom had managed to stay lucid long enough to release his soul. Just as Howard had told him, it wasn’t actually hard to do once you acknowledged the thing. The burning had stopped instantly and he was regaining his composure.

Charles had a form and was helping him to his feet. “Are you alright? How do you feel?” asked the ghostly half forming

man, with genuine concern. "I feel fine. I'm not going to snap just yet," he replied with a newfound sense of power running through him. Charles was concerned that he may change his mind about his mission once he had released that soul. Tom was single-minded enough that he hadn't even considered that.

He stood tall and began the chant to open the new portal directly into the Garden. To his utter surprise another portal opened behind him, with a buzz. Out fell, Anne. She scrambled to her feet and started to run away. "That was unexpected," said Charles as the portal began to blaze and grow behind her.

Tom and Charles both looked into it as the last image of the other side began to be covered by flames. "The Garden!" Tom exclaimed. "TOM DO IT NOW! Before anything here escapes!" Charles pleaded. "Yes, of course!" He replied as they backed away from the quickly growing portal.

## **10.7 Under-Loft (again.)**

Howard was sitting in the darkness of the nightclub wondering how he would know when the mission was complete. He was also wondering if anyone was going to come and get him or was this the end of his involvement with the war? He considered this while he drank a bottle of whiskey that he found still left in the storeroom.

The amber rocks flickered into life again and a portal opened with an electric fizz. A figure ran through and it instantly blinked out of existence. The amber rocks flickered for a moment and then went out. Howard's eyes adjusted to the darkness quickly, he recognised the figure instantly.

"Anne?" He called from his seat at the abandoned bar. "Anne,

how are you here?" He asked. "YOU!" she screamed. "Get away from me Vampire!" She said and she headed for the door.

Howard blocked her exit quickly standing in the way. "Anne, the only portals that open here are from the daemon realm!" He said confused. "How did you get to the daemon realm?"

Anne tried to push Howard aside. He smelled the blood on her hands. He knew it was her own. "Anne, you seem in good shape for someone who's just come back from a daemon realm! How did you stop your soul burning?" Howard asked.

"What burning?" she spat.

Howard pushed her back and stole a last look at his oldest friend. He knew what Anne's confusion meant. He recalled once telling Mike about how some vampires are born when someone simply isn't using their soul and it dies. How some people are cold and evil and destined to one day just be vampires without even noticing. He recalled all of this and knew what needed to be done.

"Anne. I'm so sorry," he said as he drew his sword and in a single fluid motion, he separated her head from her body.

He threw his sword across the room and took a long draught from his bottle. A tear made of blood trickled down his cheek. "I'm a Hunter. Not a Vampire." He corrected as he slid down the doorway finally knowing what it would take to break him.

## **10.8 Garden (again, reprise.)**

"What do we do?" asked Mike.

The spot where the portal had blinked out had left a hole. A rip of some kind. Red sparks were coming off it and it was growing fast. "We leave!" replied Sophia as they ran back to the

house. They ran down the corridors of the house as fast as they could, to the warehouse door.

The door was closed. Sophia pulled on it with all of her incredible might and it didn't budge. "Try the wraith thing!" She said frantically.

Mike stood in front of it and with the combined efforts of the wraiths he tried to use his control and all the energy that lay waiting in the Garden to rip open the door. The walls around the door cracked and bent but the door stayed fixed in place. He shook his head.

"City exit?" Mike asked. Sophia nodded and they ran back to the Garden. They slid to a stop as they got to the outside door. It was raining now. It was raining in the Garden. "That can't be good," said Sophia. "We can lock ourselves in one of the rooms, may buy us some time if the magical lights are still on," Mike suggested with panic in his voice.

Sophia stepped into the rain and looked at the now-massive opening that was covering most of the sky with rain all around. "Mike. It's raining! It's raining in the Garden. The magic is gone."

Mike ran out into the patio area and looked up at the electric fire in the sky, it covered the sun and for the first time, the Garden was visited by dark and menacing nighttime.

He looked back at Sophia and in Demti he said to her "Sophia. I don't want to die yet. I've only just started living," he paused and looked at the portal, then back to her. "We're at the start of our adventure, not the end." They stood in the rain and shared a kiss. "I don't think I can see any more futures," Sophia whispered to him as she lived the moment that she had seen in her vision.



A force hit Mike in the mind, in the soul and in the chest all at the same time. He was thrown away from Sophia like he had been hit by a tank.

“MIKE!” She called as she ran to him. She slid in the mud and rain and lifted his head. “Mike, are you okay!” she cried. “What happened?”

As Mike opened his eyes the rain stopped. The daylight returned. “Sorry about that,” he said calmly as his mind was distracted and a buzz with wraiths.

Sophia looked around, the floor was wet but the Garden was returning to its own version of normal again. No rain and no fire in the sky.

“Tom did it,” Mike said with a regretful smile. “He can’t have done it. We are still here,” she replied. “No,” said Mike. “He saw Anne. She was in the daemon realm. She wasn’t burning. He realised that she was the one behind it. He gambled that we were the reason she was running. He opened the portal as planned but to the warehouse. The outgoing portal was faster than the incoming one. He blew up the warehouse and it stopped the spread here,” Mike said breathing deeply as he lay on his back recovering from whatever blast he had been hit with.

Sophia lay down on the grass and mud next to Mike. “How do you know?” She asked, already having a pretty good idea. “Turns out wraiths really can’t be killed. The smack I just took was Charles returning to the wraith mind in my head. His exile is over.”

They lay on the wet grass for a while before they tried to move.

## Chapter 11: Revelation

When Mike and Sophia left the Garden to retrieve Howard, some changes happened. It was empty for the first time since the explosion, since the loss. The flow of time was its own for the first time in forever.

Upon their return, the Garden had undergone some changes. The most striking change was that it was no longer an infinitely large field but now it was sporting an orchard and a forest to one side. When they went inside the house the door to the Warehouse had completely vanished. Like it was never there. There were more subtle changes to the layout of the house that they discovered as they explored.

It took Mike, Sophia and Howard a while to piece together all the events and the order that things happened, the Gardens flow of time had muddled a lot of it.

It seemed that by opening a portal into the Warehouse it had instantly exploded ceasing the progress of the one in The Garden. No one was quite sure why the Garden portal was so slow to spread but the prevailing theory was that it was because of Gardener's link to it. She was there and didn't want to die.

So the Garden fought back as best as it could. Mike's wraiths weren't convinced.

Sophia couldn't bring herself to forgive Tom. Even though he had destroyed all the daemons from the human realm who flooded into the Warehouse. She was convinced that she and Mike could have gotten the remaining hunters out of there if they had been given a little more time. Mike and Howard knew she was wrong but it helped her cope with the loss so they never challenged her on it.

They all knew that it had been a gamble. Tom had no way of knowing that opening a portal to the Warehouse would stop the one in the Garden. He had assumed he was destroying both places.

"What will we do now?" Howard asked after a few days of quiet and calm. "We rebuild. The daemons are gone but there are still Vampires, and stragglers," said Sophia as they sat in the new, more natural patio area next to the forest.

"We recruit?" Mike asked.

"I don't know, that's up to you Mike," Sophia answered.

"Why?" Mike asked.

"There are three of us. One is a sort-of Vampire. One is a sort-of daemon and one is mostly a human with the wisdom of an entire race of magical experts. Who do you think should be our new Gardens leader?" Sophia asked with a laugh.

Mike's wraiths buzzed with their wisdom in agreement. Mike smiled, to himself more than to anyone else. "Tell you what Sophia, I'll take the job on the condition that I answer to you."

"Whatever happens now, we all need to figure out what we are." Said Howard thoughtfully. Sophia looked at them. The

two last hunters and said, “come on guys, stop being so serious. We’re only just getting started.”

*THE END.*

# About HexDSL

HexDSL is a creature of the internet that has existed for many years now. Hex enjoys video games, trash science fiction and old detective stories. All of which appear in his writing with stunning regularity.

He currently lives in England, the Midlands to be overly specific. He has a daughter who is far cooler than he has ever been. He tries hard to be a good human. He intends to write much more in the future. As well as talk about things endlessly on his Website.

<http://hexdsl.co.uk>

He wrote the book that's attached to this page mostly in NeoVim on his Linux computer, with the buckling spring keyboard he loves so much. He listened to a lot of Synthwave music when he wrote this and it may have sent him a bit strange.

If for any reason you want to know more about him, the website is a good place learn start. He reads, and he often replies to emails too. You can email him at his email address:

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He will write again in... 'Denouement.'

*Thank you for taking the time to read this. It was a blast writing it.*