Chapter 1: I Hate My Life

*Only a true sacrifice will break the curse.*

Bolting upright, I gasped for breath as the last words of the dream ricocheted in my mind. My mouth was dry, and my throat felt like it was full of cotton. I coughed and sputtered until I could breathe comfortably again. It was only a dream. No, not a dream – a nightmare.

I turned back to see what had been smothering me in my sleep. Damn. I’d bitten another pillow. I hurled the offending object across the room. Tiny feathers wafted through the air in its wake, like miniature dust clouds. I sighed. It didn’t matter that she was dead. I saw her every time I slept, in my dreams.

The dream had started a little differently this time, however. Normally I didn’t have many dreams about my childhood, mostly because I didn’t have many memories from my childhood to dream about. But this time, this night, the dream began with one of my earliest memories, the one of my father teaching me the first lesson about being a vampire. “We can only take blood, my son; we cannot give it.” He’d been helping me put on my coat before taking me out for my first live feeding. I couldn’t have been older than a decade, though I would have appeared much younger. We vampires never looked our age.

I got out of bed, as if putting distance between myself and the tangled mass of sheets would also distance me from that haunting dream. No such luck. I could still hear my father’s warnings, his grave voice telling me, “Their blood brings us life, but ours brings death, because we are cursed as dark ones. You may share a little of your blood, but do so sparingly, for it forces the other to share our dark fate.” The mention of sharing caused the dream to change and suddenly, I could see a beautiful young girl, with dark brown curls and the bluest eyes I’d ever seen. And she was looking back at me, with such love in her eyes that I felt hope. For the first time in a long time, I’d felt the hope of not being alone as I looked back into her eyes and prepared to take the final steps…

I buried my head in my hands as I lectured myself. *Stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid!* What was I doing, allowing thoughts like that to invade my subconscious? Dreams of hope – ha! Jesse was the only one who’d ever had dreams of hope, the lucky fool. As for me, there was no hope. There never had been.

Regrettably, my perfect memory kept the soundtrack of that dreadful dream running in the background. As soon as my self-lecture ceased, the replay volume returned to maximum, and I heard my father’s voice interrupt. “But you must never share very much, for it would mean the death of you.” At the word “death,” the dreamscape shifted again. My father’s image returned, and behind him I could see the inside of a strangely familiar wooden shed. It was not the house I’d been raised in, but it was a place that haunted me all the same. My blood ran cold at the memory.

I stomped to my closet and yanked on some clothes without caring if they matched. I forced myself to focus on buttoning up buttons and zipping up zippers with the utmost care. Anything to keep my mind from finishing the highlight reel of that blasted dream.

Alas, it was to no avail. My father was still speaking, still telling me what it meant to be one of our kind, but I could no longer attend to his words. My eyes were focused on what lay behind him: a small, broken form, lying in a dark puddle. My father began to fade as my vision zeroed in on the lifeless mass, his image becoming as transparent as a ghost. Through the outline of the specter, I could clearly see the beautiful young girl lying on the floor of that ramshackle old shed, her blood pouring out onto the floorboards, billowing like a great red cape around her body. I could hear my father’s final warning through the haze that clouded my mind, and finally, it was over. The dream recall screen went black, leaving me free to go about my day.

I blew out my breath and wondered at his words. *Only a true sacrifice will break the curse.* I snorted. As if I had any idea what that meant. And, of course, my father was long dead, so there was no asking for clarification now.

Shaking my head, I tried to clear the cobwebs. I wasn’t sure if the dream was actually a memory or just a trick of the unconscious mind, imitating reality. What a strange sensation it was, to sleep. Vampires didn’t sleep. Not like the humans did. True, at the rising of the sun, we fell into a comatose state that appeared like sleep, but it was really more like death. I’d always assumed the “death sleep” was a protective reflex, warning us to stay away from humans and forcing us to keep out of the sunlight, which could seriously harm any of the younger vampires.

*Or perhaps it has nothing to do with protecting us at all,* I thought grimly. *Perhaps God simply did not want such evil creatures mingling with His prized creation.* Whatever the reason, the pull of the daily death sleep faded after the first thousand years, not that many of my kind ever lived that long. Of course, taking a “nap” after a large meal was common, regardless of age.

I half-smiled. “*Normal* vampires do not sleep,” I muttered to myself. “Nor do they dream.” I had Jesse to thank for that. One botched feeding attempt during the seventeenth century, and suddenly I had become the only vampire who didn’t age normally. For our kind, that is. I was the only one who could sleep, the only one who could dream. I had been frozen in time, just like Jesse – more like a human, yet not even close.

I kicked a laundry basket out of my path, and the flimsy plastic shattered against the bedroom door frame. It wasn’t fair. I had wealth. I had immortality. I was physically superior to humans in almost every way. I could go wherever I wanted, do whatever I wanted, have whatever I wanted (except, perhaps, a cheeseburger). I had everything man had ever wanted. So, naturally, I was miserable.

It was ironic, really, how humans spent so much time wishing to be like us. To be faster or stronger or more powerful. It was true that in life we held the advantage, but after death, everything changed. Humans had the possibility of life everlasting, but we of the supernatural realm had no such immortal souls. Once we died, we ceased to exist. Nothing but dust and ashes.

*Hmph*. *People say it is lonely at the top.* They had no idea. I was the only one of my kind who aged this slowly. Perhaps even the only one who had ever lived this long. And the only other person in the world who could commiserate with my situation was now human, currently living out his happily-ever-after with his wife.

I paced up and down the hallway as I thought back to the last time I’d seen him. Jesse had been at his wedding, with Emer. I had been watching in secret, from a high window – no one even noticed. They were all too busy gushing over the bride and groom during the reception, admiring them as Jesse led his new wife out onto the dance floor, where he tried to teach her the steps to one of the traditional folk dances from his home village. All the guests smiled as the two of them stumbled and laughed. *Fourteen hundred years, and the bloody fool still trips over his own feet,* I’d grumbled to myself, trying not to chuckle. But the hardest part had been seeing his smile. He was beaming from ear to ear the entire time, such a bright smile. *A human smile.*

I’d run away, of course. The irony that I was the one doing the leaving this time, instead of the other way around, did not escape me. But what was I supposed to say? *Congratulations, you two. Now, run along and enjoy your perfectly normal lives without me.* After a millennium and a half of friendship, I simply didn’t have the strength to say good-bye.

Granted, that friendship had held its own share of challenges. Friendship with Jesse was akin to following on the heels of a tornado. I’d lost count of the number of times he’d left chaos, destruction, and fire along his trail. Though, to be fair, I probably hadn’t been much better. Jesse could steal bread, but feeding a vampire was significantly more costly.

I sighed as I meandered downstairs. There was that old argument we used to have: who was more damned, the vampire or the son of Satan? I usually won. After all, Jesse was still half-human (not that you could tell from his manners) and more importantly, he didn’t drink blood, the very life-essence of mankind, in order to survive. Still, there had been times when I could not help feeling that the conclusion was unfair. After all, I’d had to put up with *him* for hundreds and hundreds of years. Surely that had to atone for something.

*Apparently not,* came the cynical voice inside my head. *Considering that you are the one who is all alone now.*

For the thousandth time, a spike of hatred and jealousy rose up towards Jesse. I fisted my hands in my hair as I fought it back down. I shouldn’t hate my best friend. After all, he’d waited long enough. He deserved some measure of peace and happiness.

But what about me? Had I not waited just as long? Why was there no hope for me as well? Perhaps it was simply because he had been born half-human that he had been redeemed. There was nothing human about me.

*Stupid, moronic, half-devil!* I cursed silently. I took a swing at the staircase banister and accidentally whacked off the top of the newel post. It was because of him that I longed for anything different in the first place. Before I met him, I hadn’t known there was anything else beyond the darkness. It was him, with his demon ancestry that bestowed eternal knowledge and his human blood that craved salvation, who had introduced me to hope. I could still remember our early conversations clearly. In the beginning, the priestess had spent most of her time sleeping and recovering from her crash-landing, and Jesse, suddenly hopeful after her arrival, had spent those first few days of our friendship explaining the prophecy from his youth and introducing me to the concepts of human faith. I’d picked up the basics quickly, enough that I had been able to assist him in telling the Christ-story to her only a few weeks later. But understanding salvation had not brought me any closer to being eligible for it.

I growled and slammed the door that separated the hallway from the kitchen. I heard the tinkling sound of breaking glass on the other side but chose to ignore it. *That thick-headed Viking.* What had given him the right to be so damn optimistic in the first place, anyway?! He was the son of the devil, for crying out loud! Dreams and old legends – hmph. He was nothing more than a stubborn idiot who refused to give up hope, even when there was none.

Yet that stubborn idiot was the one who’d gotten everything he’d ever wanted. Life truly was unfair.

I sighed again. Right about now, Jesse would be interrupting me, telling me to relax, that I was taking things “way too seriously.” He always had been the more cavalier of the two of us. I shook my head as the corners of my mouth started to twitch. Sometimes, you don’t realize the true value of a friend until you can no longer be part of his life. Despite everything, despite my words and my anger, he was still my friend. My oldest and only friend. And now he was gone.

Desperate for a change of scenery, I stalked down the hall. I didn’t bother turning on any lights as I made my way through the cabin; I didn’t need them. The early pre-dawn light filtered through the windows, but even without it, I could see perfectly fine. Creatures of the night always could.

Standing in the living room, I could see all the way down the front drive to the small copse of trees where Emer and I had shared our last (and only) moment together. I couldn’t help but smile at the memory. I had been impressed that she’d figured out I wanted a blood partner, considering that I hadn’t mentioned anything about it. Then again, perhaps I shouldn’t have been too surprised. She’d always been rather clever, especially at understanding people. *One of those things I always did admire about her,* I thought wistfully. Then my smile faded. She, too, was gone now, forever out of my reach.

Another sudden rush of anger overtook me. I’d had four years to come to terms with not being chosen. Clearly, I hadn’t made as much progress as I preferred to believe. The memory still burned under my skin. I’d sat there on that fallen tree, after decades of waiting for her to return, and what had I gotten to show for it? She’d been conflicted in her feelings and offered herself to me only as a way to make everyone happy. Not exactly the confession of love I had been hoping for.

Her tears of distress, however, had been genuine. I groaned, instantly hating myself for hating her. *At least she is human,* came the timely internal reminder. *God has blessed them with the ability to forget, to heal, and to move on.* She would not always remember that she had felt equally for the two of us. Unlike me. I would carry that burden forever, and it would never fade.

My hands gripped the back of the couch so hard my fingernails punctured the soft fabric. The truth was, as a vampire, I could lure any woman I wanted. Sadly, what they fall for is our “bloodsucker charm,” as Jesse liked to call it – the way we look, the manner in which we speak, that near-tangible aura of seduction – and not the vampire himself. The priestess was the first female I’d ever met who was immune to my skills, and that experience had been entirely refreshing. Even Emer had shown some of her resilience. She had been able to resist me better than most. But of course, she chose Jesse. She was his. She had always been his. Those two had been destined for each other ever since the first moment they laid eyes on one another in that cave. I shouldn’t have been surprised at the outcome, though a part of me couldn’t help but feel a pang of disappointment. After all, with Ce-

*Stop right there,* I ordered myself. *I am not thinking about her. Not today.* After all, it was Jesse and Emer’s anniversary. I should be thinking about them, even if they had forgotten about me.

I huffed. I knew I had been fooling myself when I thought I could have Emer. So, why was I complaining? I had never expected to win. From the beginning, from the moment that alarm went off on my computer, I had suspected Jesse would come out on top. That hadn’t stopped me from dreaming about her, though. That hadn’t stopped me from trying, from flirting. After – well, after *her* – the eventual reincarnation of the priestess had been all I could think about. The desire to touch her, taste her, hold her once more was burned into my very flesh, so achingly powerful. *God, was that what Jesse had felt every day for those 600 years?* And there I was after suffering for barely three-quarters of a century, ready to betray my best friend, determined to take away his one true joy to serve my own selfish desires. What horrible sort of monster was I?

*If only I had known what she was thinking, perhaps I would not have wasted my time.*

I grabbed a lamp off a nearby table and stared at it as I tightened my grip. But the shiny, polished surface didn’t show me what I wanted to see; it revealed only my reflection, and the truth. I had known. I had always known.

*Damn it.*

The lamp shattered against the fireplace, not unlike the day we told Emer the truth, when Jesse and I had our first real fight. There was something strangely cathartic in breaking things. I wondered briefly if Jesse’s fits of destruction were always as unintentional as I had assumed.

Of course, I had known what Emer was thinking. My vampiric gift was such that I could read the minds of those whose blood I drank.

You see, vampiric hypnosis came with the territory. Generally speaking, most of our food wouldn’t sit still if they were strictly aware of us drinking their blood, so a little persuasion was usually in order. It worked best when applied in a seductive, if not sexual, manner. That didn’t work on animals. This fact, combined with the reality that their blood did not satisfy the thirst, made them unappealing as prey. Also, many – if not all – vampires had additional gifts as well, such as the ability to alter memories, or catch glimpses into the future. (In my opinion, only a fool would truly want to know what the river of time looked like downstream, but I suppose we all have our own crosses to bear.) In my case, I could hear the thoughts of my victims, which had its own benefits.

It was limited, of course; total omniscience would have been a great burden. As the energy of the blood was used up by my body, so the ability to hear the blood-donor faded. However, it was a very useful gift when feeding, for it allowed me insight into how best to play off the night’s activities or what method of repayment for their generosity would be most appreciated. None of which had done me any good with Emer.

I looked down to discover I was pacing around the living room rug. I’d known who she would pick ever since I tasted her blood. From that moment until my next feeding, I could hear her thoughts and detect her feelings. I had seen the truth in the deep subconscious of her mind. Even before she realized it herself, I knew which one of us she would choose. Still, I had hoped. I had tried anyway, with that kiss. I hadn’t been able to stop myself. She was the star of my night sky, the shining light in the darkness of my wretched existence, the perfect reincarnation of my beloved, but that didn’t make a difference. I’d given my best shot in the contest for her love, and it just wasn’t good enough.

*You liar,* my pesky inner voice hissed. *You call that your best shot? Tell the truth.*

I didn’t respond to the internal chatter. It was bad enough talking to myself; answering back only made my sanity even more questionable.

*Tell the truth,* the nagging voice persisted. *Admit that you let Jesse have Emer because of your guilt over Cecilia.*

Cecilia. One single word, and the wall holding back my grief came crashing down. A flood of sorrow washed over me, and I was drowning all over again. Unbidden, her spirit rose before me, the memories surfacing, haunting me.

Cecilia had been my everything. I had realized right away who she truly was, but Jesse was off nursing his own broken heart, and, well, she liked me. Just me. Just the way I was. After she crossed my path that first night, we ended up rescuing her “boyfriend” (he never deserved her, believe me) from a grisly old witch, and once she dumped him, we became inseparable. Every day I’d walk with her after school, to her house at first, but once she was no longer grounded, to mine instead. We spent so many golden afternoons together. I helped her with homework, not that she needed much help, and she shared with me the trials and tribulations of high school life. And we talked. About anything and everything and nothing. Life had been wonderful.

She couldn’t stay forever, though. Initially her visits were only a few hours each day. When I discovered that her reason for leaving so early in the evenings was to eat dinner, I immediately started to buy groceries. It didn’t matter that I had no use for them myself, or even that I didn’t know how to cook. We learned together. Those were the best two years of my life.

My frantic circuits were starting to wear a path into the rug, but I couldn’t seem to stop myself. Or the memories. The illness was diagnosed during her senior year. From the first bruise that wouldn’t fade, it only got worse and worse. When she became so weak she could no longer attend school, I grew desperate. How could we see each other if she didn’t have the strength to leave her house? Sneaking in her second-story bedroom window soon became my only option. We’d spend night after night in each other’s arms, planning for the day when she was cured and thinking of all the places we’d like to go, all the things we’d like to do. Together, of course…

But that cure never came. Not from the medicine, not from her own magic, nothing. The pain grew stronger. She started to ask more questions about me, about being a vampire. I didn’t like where those conversations seemed to be leading. Was it not bad enough that I was trapped in the darkness? Now she wanted to join me? But the tears in her eyes were stronger than my reservations. When she finally asked, I couldn’t say no. The selfish side of me insisted it was for the best: she would be free of pain, and I would get to keep her with me, forever. Everyone would win.

We decided to use my house for the transformation. It was the safest place, the only location where we wouldn’t be disturbed. Back in those days, no one ever came to visit a house that was believed to be haunted. I would have preferred the downstairs living room, but Cecilia, bless her heart, didn’t want to risk getting blood on the Oriental rug. She had become attached to my house and treated it as if it were her own, and I was too concerned with making her happy to insist on anything. The toolshed out back had been her idea.

Sucking in a deep breath, I willed my mind to gloss over the next few details. If I weren’t careful, I would still see that scene in my mind. I would still recall, with perfect clarity, the moment when I realized the transformation hadn’t taken. I would still feel my fists shaking from the horror of what I’d done. Seeing the life leave her eyes… the very worst moment of your life is when you realize that someone you love is gone, and not only could you not stop their death, but you made it happen that much faster.

I’d never cried so hard in my entire life. At that moment, with tears of blood streaming down my face, I am certain I looked every inch the monster I had just become. The monster I had been trying so hard not to become.

My feet finally slowed to a stop now that the darkest part of my past was over. You see, it is a gross misconception that vampires always kill when they feed. Sure, it is possible, just as it is possible to get killed in a car accident every time you drive. When done responsibly it isn’t a problem, and there is great motivation for being responsible in the vampire world. Trust me, it’s always safest if no one believes you even exist. Humans give blood all the time with hardly any ill effects. Feeding a vampire is no different.

But transforming someone into a vampire – that’s where things get tricky. Not every human survives the process. In fact, more die in the attempt than those who succeed. At least, that’s what the others would say. So casual. So callous. As if Cecilia were nothing more than a statistic.

I snorted at that thought. “Perhaps it is divine punishment that her death continues to haunt me,” I mused bitterly. “Although, if that be the case, I am sure I deserve far worse.”

Coming back to the present, I opened my eyes and wondered, for the hundredth time, if the wretched agony I had felt watching Cecilia’s last moments was at all similar to the way Jesse had felt on the day the priestess died. *No,* my inner voice informed me. *Impossible.* *Jesse had merely been too late to save her, whereas, I had been the actual cause of death for my beloved.*

That fact wasn’t the worst of it. I had left her there. Like a coward, I had fled the scene, leaving her lifeless body behind and disappearing without a trace. There was no way I could have explained to her family without them discovering the truth of what I was, and I knew they deserved to know what happened to her, instead of thinking she had simply vanished. I had told myself it was better they didn’t know the full story, that I couldn’t search for more reincarnations if I myself were killed, but the truth was that I had been so horrified, so disgusted with myself that all I could do was run away. It had taken until that very night for me to finally understand why Jesse did what he did. And yet, I called him out for not burying the priestess. I was such a hypocrite.

The cowardice had only continued. It was as if fleeing that night had given me permission to be weak, to be selfish, to be afraid for my own life. As if my own life were actually worth protecting. That fear had resurfaced at the most inopportune time, right when Jesse had been kidnapped, and brave, darling Emer had been determined to save him.

Oh, sure, Emer had been gracious about it. She accepted my apologies, perhaps even carried a certain sympathy in her eyes as she swallowed my excuses. Not that any of my words had been a lie. Everything I’d told her had been the complete truth: hell was not a safe place for any dark creature, including vampires, but the truth changed nothing. They had still been the words of a coward.

I ground my foot into the floor, the floorboards splintering under my heel. I had been running away for my entire life, it seemed. Ever since the day my parents had been killed, when my mother told me to run – that was exactly what I’d done, and I had never stopped. No wonder I’d ended up all alone.

Just then, right when I was convinced I couldn’t feel any worse, that simpering, selfish voice inside my head spoke up. *You did not have to be all alone,* it reminded me. *You were the one who showed Emer the truth of her own feelings. You could have pushed the other way. She could have been yours.* The nagging voice paused just long enough for those buried desires to resurface. *And it would have been fair, too. Jesse certainly did not deserve her. And she did love you, too, even if she had trouble deciding. So why did you let her go?*

But I knew damn well why I said what I said, and my words had nothing to do with Emer loving me or whether or not Jesse deserved her. In fact, my decision had nothing to do with any of those things.

I slid one hand along the back of the armchair, only vaguely aware that I was slicing the cover to ribbons with my outstretched fingers. The reason I’d let her go was because every time I looked at Emer, every time I lost myself in those beautiful blue eyes, I saw *her*. The priestess, covered in blood. Lying in the street, her once-vivacious eyes closed forever. Her demise had been such a shock. The thought of her, something so vibrant and full of life, actually encountering death? I honestly hadn’t considered the possibility of her mortality until I saw her there before my own eyes. Her powers outstripped all of ours combined; who would have thought such an angel could fall? I hadn’t even been there when she died.

Then, inevitably, my mind would conjure up the image of Cecilia in exactly the same pose: lying on the floor, eyes never to reopen, blood everywhere. That’s when the guilt would strike. It wasn’t about them or what they deserved. My guilt had nothing to do with them. It was me who didn’t deserve her.

I picked up the tattered journal from where it lay on a side table. My fingers traced the forgotten symbols etched into the book’s cover. The words were once foreign to me, but now I knew them better than any other language I had learned, precisely because it had taken me so damn long to learn it. This journal was all I had left of her, the one and only love of my life.

The priestess. Cecilia. Emer. All were different facets of the same diamond, and I had failed all of them. With a flick of my wrist, I threw the diary into the fireplace, lit a match, and tossed it on top. I watched as the pages slowly burned, erasing my last connection to her.

So, what if Jesse had murdered hundreds of innocent people? I had slain the one person I’d ever truly loved and abandoned two others, and I couldn’t claim loss of emotional control, either. No, my killing and running away had been planned, on purpose, to serve my own selfish reasons. My crimes outweighed his beyond measure.

Another lamp smashed against the far wall, but this time, the destruction didn’t make me feel any better. Wrecking the furnishings didn’t change anything. I was still trapped in my own living hell.

I ground my teeth in frustration and flew out of the cabin. I was determined to find a distraction.

Chapter 2: Status Single – And NOT Looking for a Relationship

I went the same place I always went when I wanted to get away: Rocky Mountain National Park. Conveniently, my favorite hunting cabin was located on the outskirts of the park proper. The location provided me with easy access to bears, moose, and other large snacks. And when the animal blood just wasn’t cutting it – which, unfortunately for my kind, was often – it was also a great place to meet tourists. You know, the young, athletic types, always deviating from the set trails and wandering off into the secluded areas of nature, where there were no witnesses. But I was always careful. Deaths inside of state parks tend to attract notice, but appearing “dehydrated” after being lost in the woods was normal for humans. Or so I told myself.

It was a simple matter for me to cross inside without using the official entrances. People like me didn’t bother with park passes. I ran effortlessly through the trees, between the boulders, and leapt over fences and small rivers with a single bound. It wasn’t until I approached the more populated areas that I forced myself to slow down. It was early still, not many people milling about, yet the presence of humans could be seen everywhere in the paved roads, parking lots and visitor centers. Seeing the natural beauty of the world interrupted all for the convenience of man set my teeth on edge.

*Perhaps I am getting sentimental and maudlin in my old age,* I mused. But when I looked outside, I didn’t want to see concrete or asphalt or cars. I didn’t want to see man-made things. I wanted to see green: grass and trees and vines and flowers. When I went outside, I didn’t want to hear the humming of generators, the raucous laughter of men who’ve had a few too many beers, or the *whoosh* of the cars they flew down the highway. If there was going to be a *whoosh*, it should be the wind amongst the leaves of the trees in the fall. If there was going to be any raucous noises, it should be the birds and the squirrels as they argue over who gets the seeds. And if there was going to be any humming, it should be the bees and the hummingbirds spreading life as they go about their work among the flowers.

That philosophy, of course, explained my state of near isolation. I’d never been much of a people-person. Ironic that I depended on them to survive.

Being able to remember a time before the spread of modern civilization didn’t help my frame of mind. My many years had jaded me. *What is it with humans and concrete, anyway? Surely they realize they are killing their own planet.* I sighed. Tearing down trees, ripping up the land, building structures and monuments, all of which not only ruined the undomesticated elegance of the earth, but also allowed them to hide inside and never even see it. I harrumphed to myself. Perhaps it was their pathetically short lifespans. The vast majority didn’t even live to one century. They simply didn’t survive long enough to regret the damage they did, to truly see the devastation they wrought. I, however, had.

I stepped out of the trees and into a small meadow. Nearby I spotted a black cloud, flapping over the ground like an external projection of my poor mood. Unlike my attitude, however, the cloud soon began to dissipate as the flock of birds disappeared into the undergrowth. I paused and kicked a rock. It shot off the ground like a rocket before embedding itself in a nearby tree trunk with a dull *thud*.

*Stupid humans.* They declared themselves kings, determining that they alone were superior and that no one else deserved a chance. Though I supposed it was their prerogative. After all, God gave them that right when He chose them as His children and gave them His blessing, which allowed them to stomp all over the planet in their lead-lined boots, destroying all that lay in their path. Oh, if only they knew.

I sighed again. Reflecting on the unfairness of the universe wasn’t helping me any. I needed peace and tranquility.

I turned and set out for one of my favorite spots: Bear Lake. One of the advantages of living over a thousand years as a vampire was that I was no longer limited to nighttime excursions. Once I reached my first millennium, I had become strong enough to withstand daylight, and could now enjoy nature’s beauty in full sun. On a clear day at Bear Lake, for instance, you could see the mountains in the distance reflected perfectly on the lake’s surface, a mirror image of majesty. I always savored the view, knowing man would never be able to create something so perfect. Seeing this natural wonder was a nice reminder that no matter how much they destroyed, there would always be something left untouched, something that they could not replicate or synthesize.

It didn’t take long for me to reach my destination. I jogged up the trailhead to my bench, the one situated right on the edge of the lake. Not that it was specifically *my* bench, mind you, but that was where I usually went. I could sit facing the lake and get lost in thought as I gazed upon the water’s ever-changing surface, or I could face the trail and watch the many tourists, hikers, and families that paraded endlessly by.

It was a recent habit I’d developed, and I admit, I had rapidly become addicted. For a few, brief hours each day, I could almost pretend I was one of them. That fantasy was the one bright spot left in my otherwise dark and meaningless existence. Regardless of how much I might complain or berate mankind, the truth was that I was envious. I longed to escape into their reality. I wanted their ignorance, their bliss, their hope. The only problem with play-acting was when the sun went down and everyone else left, and I remembered that I was different.

Of course, no one ever paid any attention to the odd young man sitting on a bench by himself. I frowned at the thought that most people would indeed think of me that way. Any time I did interact with humans, they unfailingly treated me as though I were one of their young. Yet I had not been a child for who knows how many dozens of their generations. I released another sigh. I felt a million years old.

*I suppose I could track down some of my own kind to stay with, instead of living alone.* I shrugged that thought away, though. Somewhere in the past thousand years, this cursed, immortal life had lost its appeal.

And so that was why I stayed in my cabin and lived on the edge of society. By day, I spent a limited amount of time in a dream world; by night, I took what I hadn’t earned and could never repay. It wasn’t much, but it was all I had left. I ambled slowly through the trees, in no particular hurry to rush into the experience. After all, anticipation was half the fun.

There was just one problem with my plan. Today, someone else was sitting on that bench.

I stopped a good ten yards away and stared at the intruder. She was blonde and relatively young, if appearances were anything to go by. I frowned. The first time I’d met a stranger, it had been a blonde boy on a hill, and that encounter had dogged my every step for a millennium and a half. Now there was a blonde girl on a park bench. Clearly, God had a cruel sense of humor.

I walked forward slowly, still uncertain as to whether or not I intended to approach her. Perhaps I could just make a few passes around the lake loop, and she’d leave. Humans had needs that dictated their lives; she couldn’t sit there all day. Yet, I had been anticipating this spot of serenity, my last little joy-habit, to the point of near desperation. After the morning I’d had, a delay seemed unbearable. Almost against my will, my feet carried me steadily in her direction. Maybe, if I were polite, she would allow me to share the bench with her. Sooner or later, she’d leave, and I’d have the place to myself.

As I got closer, I realized that not only was she young, but she was actually quite lovely. This discovery in itself was significant, simply because it had been so long since I had perceived a woman to be attractive. In fact, for the past several decades I had failed to consider any female beautiful other than the priestess or her reincarnations. Yet the woman before me was nothing short of a goddess. Long blonde tresses tumbled down her back, her skin smooth and honey-colored, with lips the color of ripe berries. The casual pairing of a dark green hoodie with faded blue jeans and sneakers only made her more gorgeous. I licked my lips.

*You have not enjoyed yourself during a feeding in years,* came the internal explanation. That must be it. Purely physical withdrawal. It was a shame I wasn’t feeling hungry. I could have convinced her to go for a walk with me, somewhere private…

She turned her head as if listening to the breeze, and I caught a glimpse of her eyes. Blank, sightless eyes. *She is blind? Yet she bears no walking stick. How can she…?*

I edged closer. I made no noise on my approach, but she cocked her head in my direction anyway.

“I was wondering when you were going to speak to me,” she said with a coy smile.

I stopped breathing. I knew for a fact she was blind. One look in those empty eyes was all the confirmation I needed. Therefore, she couldn’t see me. Yet, she turned herself toward me, and she was smiling at me exactly as if she could.

Suddenly, she laughed, as if she really could see the surprise written all over my face. Patting the space beside her on the bench, she told me, “Have a seat. I’ve been waiting for you.”

I stared at her. Who *was* this girl?

She waited patiently as I settled myself onto the bench. She smiled gently, even though I continued to stare at her unabashedly. *What I would not give for just a drop of her blood so I could know what in the world is going through her mind at this moment.*

She cleared her throat and looked away. “By now, I’m sure you’ve noticed that my eyes are blind, and you’re probably wondering how it is I seem to be able to see.”

I finally found my voice. “I am wondering a lot of things,” I managed, my words surprisingly steady. “That seems as good a place as any to start.”

She giggled softly, a pleasant sound. It was odd, but just hearing her happiness made me smile. “I have a gift,” she told me in a whisper. “It’s a kind of Sight. It blocks my ability to see but allows me to detect things that normal people can’t. I can look beyond reality and peer into the truth of things. Sometimes I even have glimpses into the future. Of course, this gift leaves me legally blind, but I can ‘see’ enough that I’m able to live independently.” She smiled triumphantly, as though this ability were a great skill that not everyone could master.

I nodded slowly. Her explanation, however strange, made sense. I turned over the different pieces of this puzzle inside my head. “So, your Sight… it is like magic?”

She frowned. “Not really. It’s not like a spell or a curse, if that’s what you’re thinking. And it’s not something I have control over, either. It’s simply *there*. The Sight takes away my actual vision but grants me the gift of seeing beyond.” She shrugged. “It would be nice to be able to see the way other people do – shapes, colors, that sort of thing – but there have been many times when it was helpful to be able to sense what lay beneath the surface.” She grinned. “Cool, huh?”

“Very.” Utterly enthralled, I could only agree. “This Sight, is that what allowed you to see I was coming? You said you had been waiting for me.”

She nodded. “Our fates are connected somehow. I can’t see exact details. I just knew when I woke up this morning that I should come here, and I would meet you.”

An odd chill swept down my back. The words “fate” and “destiny” rang loudly inside my head, though I knew a certain former Viking who would correct such thoughts by insisting that only God was in charge. Whatever belief system was picked, there always seemed to be an external force of influence that had a funny way of intervening when you least expected it, and usually, it changed everything. My thoughts again returned to that boy on a hill and the chance encounter that had already altered my life once. However, I was growing tired of hiding and living alone. Tempting fate sounded like the best idea I’d had in a while. “Tell me more about yourself.”

As it turned out, she wasn’t a tourist. She’d grown up here and currently lived in an apartment by herself just inside the town proper. She loved small towns, and I agreed wholeheartedly. That thought brought back memories, and before I realized it, I had interrupted her with a sigh.

“There is something about boring, sleepy towns that make you feel like you’re in the middle of nowhere,” I mused. Suddenly inspired, I followed that train of thought down the nearest rabbit hole. “When there is nothing around to distract you, you can focus on life, the truth of things –”

“–and that’s when the magic happens.” She finished my thought for me. I looked away. I could recall precisely when the magic happened, in a different tiny town so many years ago, with Cecilia. I stared at the ground, ashamed of myself for letting my mind wander into forbidden territory. The blonde goddess next to me studied my face intently for a few moments, but when it became clear that I wasn’t going to speak again, she returned to the former conversation.

Her family was wealthy, and being blind, she’d never been pressured to work after graduating high school, though she did enjoy taking a few poetry classes at a community college the next town over. Normally she carried a walking cane, though she didn’t need it; it was just a prop. There was no way any physician could verify that she could see, and since explaining the truth was complicated, she normally just played along with what the rest of the world thought. “I’ve only told a few special people the truth,” she confessed with a wink. “Like you.”

And she loved coming to the park, just as I did. It was amazing that we’d never run into each other before, and I said so. She simply shrugged again and told me, “It wasn’t the right time.”

*If she knew what I really was,* I thought with a grimace, *she would probably think that it would never be the right time.*

I could have listened to her talk for hours; she was so engaging. Her Sight had blessed her with unique insight, and the way she saw the world had me reconsidering a lot of what I’d taken for granted. She had a calm disposition with a subtle sense of humor. She was a strong and capable woman, or I assumed she must be. To live by herself when she couldn’t actually see the world around her, even if she could sense what was going on – that took courage. Despite her visual limitations, she had this aura of confidence; she wore it like a crown. It wasn’t boastful, either. Rather, it was tempered by a graceful patience. I found myself strangely fascinated.

Half the day passed. She drank from her water bottle, munched on the granola bars she’d brought in her backpack, and made a solitary trip back to the public restrooms, but otherwise, she sat with me and talked. I pestered her about everything: her childhood, her family, her friends, her interests. I wanted to know it all. I hadn’t had a decent conversation in years – there’s generally not a lot of talking going on when I feed – and to have such an interesting subject to engage with, well, I couldn’t help myself. At any moment, I was afraid she’d vanish, and I’d realize this was all some elaborate dream inside my head, but until that moment, I kept asking questions.

Finally, around late afternoon, she stretched and told me, “All right. You get one final question for today. What will it be?”

“If you were any card from a standard deck, what card would you be?” It was just one of those random, personality-test questions, but it was the first thing that came to mind. Anything to keep her here, keep her talking.

She laughed. “That’s easy. I’m the queen of spades.”

I raised an eyebrow to ask for explanation. She didn’t disappoint.

“It’s the most dangerous card in the game of hearts.” Standing up, she gathered her sweater and her backpack.

*A clever answer,* I thought. I could feel myself grinning like a fool. *I wonder what that makes me?*

“So, now that I’ve told you my entire life story, will you tell me your name?”

My jaw dropped, and I stared up at her. I’d been so caught up in conversation that I had totally forgotten the basic introductions. *What a rude idiot she must think I am.* “Forgive me. I seem to have lost my manners today. My name is Alex – Alex Naktis. Technically, my full name is Alexander, but I have been called Alex for so long that it hardly seems worth mentioning.”

She smiled knowingly. “I would be happy to call you Alexander if that is what you prefer.” She turned as if to go, but I stood and caught her arm.

“What about your name? What may I call you?”

Her sightless eyes looked up. But not too far up; she was only about eight inches shorter than me. “Clare Anthony.”

“Clare? Your name is Clare?” For a moment I sounded like a complete imbecile.

She didn’t seem to notice, and merely nodded. “That’s what most people call me. My full name is Clarity, if you like.” She gave a half-shrug, since one shoulder was already burdened with her backpack. “My mom’s idea. She says she was inspired by a song or something like that.” Another shrug. “So, if I return tomorrow, will you be here again?”

“Maybe,” I answered, unwilling to commit. I still haven’t ruled out the possibility that I was dreaming. Or hallucinating.

Clarity smiled. “Good. I look forward to seeing you again. And it will be *my* turn to ask the questions.” She winked before striding off, leaving me to stare open-mouthed.

I was in so much trouble.

#

I ran all the way back to my cabin as fast as I could. It probably wasn’t the wisest course of action because my path did cross those of humans, and there was a possibility I could have been seen. Of course, what they would have seen would have been a blur of motion, impossible to distinguish details, and with the sun setting, my chances of truly being spotted were slim. But at that moment, I had too much on my mind to care either way.

Even after I was safely hidden inside my sanctuary, I paced, filled to the brim with excitement and anxiety. How had my life become so complicated in just a single day? What exactly was happening here? When I left my cabin this morning, I had been on the edge of anger and frustration. Coming back, I was full of a completely different mix of emotions. I hadn’t spoken with a woman who wasn’t on my menu in years. And I hadn’t felt this good in forever.

Then, there was Clarity herself. She was amazing. Truly amazing. She was self-assured and completely unafraid to go forth and meet her fate; she reminded me of the priestess and Emer in that way. She also hadn’t gotten all gooey-eyed, the way human girls normally reacted around me. Now, that was impressive; no female since the priestess herself had been capable of resisting my charms so thoroughly. Even Emer (and Cecilia) had been flustered by me, although in Emer’s defense, she had probably been disoriented from being kidnapped.

And I was going to see Clarity again tomorrow, which was precisely the problem. She said she would be the one to ask questions this time. That left me exactly two options: I could scare her off by telling the truth, or I could lie.

I flopped onto the living room couch and buried my face in my hands. She hadn’t run away after meeting me. She’d even wanted to see me again. The only conclusion I could draw was that she still didn’t realize I was a vampire. Her Sight simply must not be as good as she claimed it was. With a groan, I considered my two choices.

The practical option was to lie. I’d been doing it for centuries now, so telling lies wasn’t anything new. Some days I hardly even registered that lying was still a sin. But Clarity was special. It wasn’t that I couldn’t lie to her; it was that I didn’t want to.

*Although,* I mused to myself, *perhaps I can avoid telling an outright lie.* Vampiric hypnosis meant we could bring our prey into a highly suggestible state, which then allowed us to take what we needed while keeping the victim from realizing what was going on. We couldn’t completely hide the truth, but we could make the experience seem much, much more enjoyable than it really was. I had no intention of feeding from Clarity, as she was too precious to take that risk, but I could borrow a page from that book, so to speak. Perhaps I could use just enough of my gifts to persuade her not to inquire too deeply into my background.

I frowned. The problem with vampiric hypnosis was that it became impossible to know if a woman liked me for who I was. And I had been using my “charms” for so long as a way to survive, I wasn’t even sure I could turn them off. Not that it mattered. Charm or no charm, the moment the truth was revealed on what I truly was, they were sure to run away screaming. Very few things ruin a date quite like saying, “I’m a vampire and I drink blood.” Even Emer – lovely, accepting, forgiving Emer – had shied away from the idea of being my eternal partner.

This conclusion led me to the alternative. I could tell her what I was, but I’d lose her instantly. No amount of hypnosis could cover up the revealed truth. And I wasn’t willing to chase Clarity away just yet, even if it might be better for her in the long run.

I sighed. There was, technically, a third option. I didn’t have to go. I could just stay home, stand her up. She’d be mad, then she’d be sad, but eventually she would give up and move on, just like all the other humans did. Just like I couldn’t.

Staying away from her would be the right thing to do. I knew that, deep inside my soul, or whatever was left of my soul. I also knew I wouldn’t do it. After almost a century of waiting, alone, I wanted to step out of the sidelines.

My mind wandered back to this morning, to my very first glimpse of this enchantress. She was completely different from my last love, Cecilia. For one thing, she was blonde. I had always told myself I would never fall for a blonde, not even if I lived a million years, which technically was possible. Yet, there was something in the way those golden waves fell about her shoulders that was rather irresistible.

*You are not falling for her,* declared my inner cynic. *She just happens to be the most interesting girl you have met in decades, and that is all.*

I waved the mental commentary away and returned to my vision of the goddess. She also had green eyes. Beautiful, sparkling green eyes. Eyes that saw nothing, yet observed everything, as if she could see straight into my soul. I shuddered to think of what she might find there. Sighing again, I shook my head. She was appropriately named: her entire world had a sense of clarity. Everything was black and white, with clear-cut answers. My life had long been nothing but shadows and shades of grey. We didn’t belong anywhere near each other, and I told myself that was the way it should be.

The little voice inside my head was right. I couldn’t afford to fall for her, not now, not ever. There wasn’t any hope for someone like me. I couldn’t give her a future. Any promises I made would eventually be broken. And trying to take her with me into the darkness would only end in tragedy. I’d tried it once, and I refused to try again.

I sighed once more and got to my feet. Tomorrow, I would go to see Clarity one more time – and then I would say goodbye.

#

Despite my resolve that our second encounter would be the last time I saw her, I couldn’t get there early enough the next day. I had decided that I would tell her the truth, but at the end of our time together. That way, I had an entire day to enjoy with her, yet the look of absolute terror on her face when I made my confession would mean that we would never meet again, thus ensuring her safety.

I was the first to arrive this time. It wasn’t until I was pacing among the trees, waiting impatiently for her arrival and worried she somehow wouldn’t make it, that I realized I hadn’t had any dreams the night before. How odd.

When she finally did appear, everything changed. One look at her lovely smile and eyes that could see without seeing, and I stopped pacing. Her white t-shirt and worn-out jeans left even less to the imagination than I remembered. She was breathtaking. Even better was that beneath the beauty lay a fascinating soul. My heart stopped then started again, pounding twice as fast. I was as keyed up as before, yet content to be so. A grin broadened across my own features. Inwardly, I moaned. *I will miss this.*

Completely unaware of my sudden discomfort, Clarity strolled up. “Today, we’re walking around the lake,” she informed me as she adjusted the backpack across her shoulders. “Sitting all day yesterday made me stiff.”

“As you wish,” was my only reply.

We began to amble slowly along the trail. Suddenly, my determination to be good and tell her the truth today was crumbling. What was the harm of another day? I could tell her the truth anytime. There was no need to rush.

She broke my internal argument by reminding me, “I hope you’re prepared to do the talking today. It’s my turn to ask the questions, and believe me, I have quite a few.”

My breathing stopped. I had nearly forgotten about her threat. What would she want to know? I realized that I may not have days; my time with her could be down to mere minutes. The terror of losing her once my secret was discovered loomed before me. *Oh God, if you can hear me at all, please give me just a few more hours.*

Very calmly, as if she could see my thoughts just as clearly as she could detect the path in front of us, she said, “I already know what you are, if that helps any.”

Her words stopped me dead in my tracks. I stared at her, questions bubbling in my brain.

She heard the absence of my footsteps and turned back. With one finger, she tapped her temple. “The Sight, remember? I see everything. Literally.” She started walking once more.

I caught up with her immediately. “You *knew*? Then why in the world did you agree to see me again?! Do you not realize how much danger you are in just from being with me?”

She sighed. “I thought we agreed it was *my* turn to ask questions.” When I didn’t budge, she added, “I came again today because I can see more than just the fact that you’re a vampire. I can see your inner nature – your soul, if you like. I know you’re a good man and that I can trust you. As for the danger…” She frowned. “I suppose I can start with that one. Do you always kill when you feed?”

Apparently, she wasn’t the type to save the tough questions for later. That conversational thread wasn’t something I particularly wanted to talk about, but if she were willing to trust me, then she deserved the truth.

“I try very hard not to,” I answered quietly. Suddenly ashamed, I looked away. I wasn’t sure why. I hadn’t felt embarrassed of who I was with Emer or Cecilia. Perhaps, in my mind, that was because they each were a reincarnation of the priestess, and therefore they had already known and accepted what I was.

Satisfied, Clarity nodded once and kept walking. “What’s dating like for a vampire?”

I smiled. *Trust a woman to ask such a question.* “Complicated. Many women are agreeable to my having them for dessert, but most of them are not very comfortable being my dinner, also.”

She laughed. My smile grew wider. *Perhaps this relationship could work after all.*

I didn’t have much time to think before she fired off her next inquiry. “So, is it true that vampires can’t stand silver?”

I nodded. “Most ‘evil’ creatures have issues with silver. It stems from Judas, who betrayed Christ for 30 pieces of silver. And, of course, the aversion to holy water should be obvious.”

“What about garlic?”

It seemed she’d been investigating the popular myths. I shrugged. “Unless they were eating garlic bread at the Last Supper, I have no clue where that idea came from, but it really has no effect on us.”

She nodded as she processed this new information. “So, where do you find your…” She paused. For a moment she struggled to find the right word. “Donors?”

I gestured my hands wide, indicating the entire area around us, before I remembered she was blind. “Lots of places, really. Sometimes out here, taking a walk, just like this.” I leered at her, wondering if she would flinch.

She didn’t. Instead, she laughed. “Really?” she teased. “Does that mean I’m on the menu?”

“Absolutely not!” My answer was sharp. I was *not* feeding from her. Ever.

“Oh.” She grew quiet, and her expression seemed almost disappointed. But she soon shrugged it off and kept walking. “Do you ever go to those vampire clubs?”

I made a face. “No way.”

Confused, she turned in my direction. “Really? But wouldn’t that be easier? Just to blend in with the crowd?”

I snorted. “Not my kind of crowd, thank you. Contrary to popular culture, I feed to survive, not for fun.” I shook my head. Humans certainly had a knack for discovering new levels of depravity. Having performed the act thousands of times myself, I could certainly understand the sensual appeal in biting, but to actually *drink* each other’s blood? Blood was something sacred; you did not take it from someone without good reason. Clearly some humans failed to understand how morally and ethically wrong such an act was. Not to mention dangerous.

*Blood is the gateway to the devil,* I muttered to myself as we hiked on.

She asked more questions about being a vampire, which I answered as honestly as I could. The truth was not always easy. She handled it well, of course. Perhaps she could sense my answers before I gave them.

However, I got the feeling there was something she wasn’t asking, something she probably wanted to ask. As I reflected on her requests so far, they had all been for information on vampires in general. Hardly anything about me specifically.

*Surely she is curious,* I thought to myself. *Why does she not simply ask?* I had agreed to answer her questions today, after all.

I pondered the matter further. *Can it be that she does not actually have any interest in me personally?* Perhaps she was only here because she’d never met a vampire before, and being slightly supernatural herself, she thought it would be an interesting experience. Instant anger, with a hint of feeling let down, rushed through me. I forced myself to remain calm.

*She might have other reasons for not asking,* I reasoned. *Perhaps she is afraid of my reaction. Or afraid of what she might learn about me.* Studying her intently as she drummed up her next question – the way she clasped her hands together as she thought, the way her brow furrowed as she worked to phrase it properly – I wished yet again that I could hear thoughts, so I could know exactly what she was thinking.

“How old are you?”

The question startled me. Partly because it had been blurted out after several minutes of silence, and partly because it was exactly the kind of question I was beginning to think she wouldn’t ask. *Just when I think I have her figured out,* I mused, *she goes and surprises me all over again.* I smiled as I replied, “Over a millennium and a half.”

Her eyes widened to the size of tangerines. “Really? Oh, you must have such amazing stories about your past! You have to share them with me!” Her excitement was overflowing. Unfortunately, the mention of my past brought back dark memories, and the smile fell from my face. I saw her hesitate as she sensed my unease. “Well, perhaps not *all* of them,” she added half-heartedly.

“No?” I suddenly felt angry at her enthusiasm, like I was just another story to hear, just another way to kill time. I took a step closer, which allowed me to peer down at her. She didn’t quiver, but her lack of reaction annoyed me. I was a monster. Didn’t she want to see how monstrous I was? “Are you certain? I can tell you such stories. Perhaps you would like to know about the last girl I took on a walk like this.”

The words slipped out unintentionally. I hadn’t been intending to volunteer information about any of the other women in my long life. Suddenly aware of my error, I froze and stared at her, waiting for her to cower back. *Will she forgive me for scaring her? Or did I just ruin the last bit of happiness I had?*

She didn’t flinch, of course. She never reacted the way I expected. Instead, she arched an eyebrow and met my gaze head-on with her eerily perceptive blank eyes. “Why? Do you want to hear about my previous boyfriends?”

The question turned my emotions inside out. All my anger was instantly converted to jealousy, which I quickly stamped out. Of course, she’d had boyfriends in the past. She was beautiful and intelligent. I shouldn’t assume that her disability meant that I would be the only one to court her. It didn’t matter, anyway. Because I was not falling in love with this girl.

When I failed to give an answer, she smirked. “I didn’t think so. The other women in your life, however many, they don’t matter now. Let’s just say we’ve each had relationships in the past, but they are in the past. Deal?” I nodded. I felt so ashamed of my ridiculous behavior. *When did I start acting the part of the silly schoolboy?*

It was true, of course; there were numerous lovers in my past. I’d had to feed from humans to stay alive, and I preferred females. Sometimes the temptation had been too great. Not that any of them had been hurt, for I would not have chosen them in the first place if they had not been willing. Still, I found myself jealous of Jesse’s staunch refusal to even touch another girl. His sins may have been great, but at least he had been able to approach his bride with a clean conscience.

“However,” Clarity continued, as a gentle smile spread across her face, “I would very much like to hear about the other parts of your past. I’m sure a life as long as yours is much more interesting than mine. I’m curious to know more about the man that my future seems to be entangled with.” She winked and sauntered down the trail.

Well. I couldn’t exactly refuse an invitation like that, although I opted not to point out that our chances of sharing a future together were slim to none. She might not be opposed to my blood-drinking ways now, but eventually, she would want something more. There was a life I could not give her, and I would have to let her go, but not today. For now, I decided to honor her request and entertained her with tales of my adventures until the sun started to set.

Just before we parted ways for the evening, she pressed a folded map into my hands. “Meet me here tomorrow morning,” she instructed.

“Oh? What for?” I unfolded the map and studied the marked area.

“Your destiny awaits!” She grinned at me. Then she gave me a quick peck on the cheek. “And bring a picnic blanket!”

Without another word, she was gone.