

Poison in the Blood

Glory is Poison Book 1

Katy L. Wood

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Summary: Dustin Lockwood sets out on a cross-continental adventure through a post-post-apocalyptic world ravaged by plagues, wars, and vampires with his younger brother Russell to rescue their sister Shae ten years after she was kidnapped, desperate to ignore every sign that things might go wrong.

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Let's go on an adventure.

Prologue

Shae

"I get why you're doing this, but does it have to be him? He just... looks like a slimeball," Shae's girlfriend Helen said, face screwed up in distaste as she studied at the cracked laptop screen over Shae's shoulder.

"Him being a slimeball is why I picked him," Shae told her. On the screen was the profile of a local talent agent, the last standing of the twenty or so Shae had been considering ever since she'd started this plan.

Helen made a dissatisfied noise.

"Or I could not do this, and we could stay stuck in this place forever," Shae responded, standing up and throwing her arms wide to make her point. Both her hands smacked into the opposite walls of their "apartment." It was a single room, four-and-a-half feet wide, twelve-feet long, and seven-feet high. A twin bed was crammed at one end, supported by milk crates filled with their clothes. There was a tiny desk, a hot plate, and a mini-fridge. Helen's books were scattered in haphazard stacks across the floor and Shae's good dresses hung from the ceiling. There were ten other such apartments on their floor, the sixth floor of fifteen, and each floor shared a single bathroom with two toilets and one shower stall.

"Keep it down!" The neighbor to Shae's left growled, voice clear through the thin wall. Shae gestured in its direction to further make her point.

“Okay, I’m not saying you’re wrong. Living in The Park sucks, but we’re right on the edge of London and we both work in the city, anyway. We’re barely ever here,” Helen replied.

Shae threw her hands out a little harder this time, causing dust to rain from the ceiling while she stared at Helen, making sure exasperation was clear on her face.

Their neighbor shouted again, threatening to call the super and have them kicked out. Shae didn’t much care if he made that call. Their super was Turned and Shae had bought him off with a small jar of her blood before. Not that Helen ever needed to know about that. It would upset her. Partially that upset would be over Shae bribing someone official, but it would also launch Helen into a rant about the unfair distribution of blood to the Turned and the rising costs of blood infused foods.

“I just... I worry about you getting famous,” Helen sighed. “Being an actor can be dangerous. Putting yourself out there like that, in front of the Turned, especially with who you really are...”

Shae came over and leaned down in front of Helen where she sat on the edge of their bed, cradling Helen’s face between her hands. Helen was a beautiful woman, maybe not by the standards of the post Plague War world, but beautiful to Shae. Bright blue eyes, blond hair, tall and lithe frame. Her naturally tan skin kept people from noticing her now, but Shae liked it. Liked the contrast with her own intentionally pale skin. Meeting Helen a year ago had been an unexpected sidetrack in Shae’s plans, but it had turned out to be a good one.

“I love you, Helen,” Shae said, leaning in for a quick kiss. “But I can’t keep living like this. I have a way to get everything I want,

something I've been after for nine years since I ran away from my family, and I will not waste that."

"What about your adoptive parents, Barbra and Devon?" Helen tried. "I know you don't talk to them, but—"

Shae cut her off, gently, "Barbra and Devon are good people, but they have their own lives to take care of."

Helen sighed, giving in with a slight nod. "Go get famous then."

Shae smiled and kissed her again, deeper this time, before pulling away. "It'll be fine, Helen. Besides, it's the anniversary of the declaration of the Plague Wars today. They say it's a lucky day."

"I've never understood how the declaration of the wars that nearly ended the world could lead to luck," Helen returned. "Besides, it isn't even a major anniversary."

"Oh, come on, the wars didn't nearly end the world. Just. Shook it up a bit," Shae said, straightening up and starting to gather her things.

"Four billion people died, and almost a billion of those left got turned against their will!"

Shae blew out a breath, aware that she'd stumbled into one of Helen's interests that she could go on about for hours. Actually, Shae realized she'd stumbled into two of them. The wars and the turning process.

"Well," Shae said, scrambling to head off the lecture, "maybe people consider it lucky because we survived after all that."

Helen had a knowing smile as she watched Shae. "You don't want to listen to me going into this again, do you?"

Shae smiled sheepishly and nodded. "I'm just not into that stuff the way you are. And you were talking about the wars all day

yesterday.”

“I was lesson planning! Half my students don’t even know what year the wars started!”

“Does it matter?” Shae asked. “It was three centuries ago.”

“Three-and-a-half, Shae. 2029. They started in 2029.”

Shae was edging towards the door. “Fascinating, really. But I’m... ah... gonna be late.”

“You’re leaving three hours early,” Helen pointed out.

“Late!” Shae said, grabbing her purse as she smiled at Helen, who was laughing. She could still hear Helen’s laughter once the door was closed. Yeah, Helen had been a good sidetrack.

Shae’d spent all her money on this new dress—a slinky corseted number with a late Victorian cut to the shoulders and a hint of bustle, the fabric all black with a touch of red shimmer, and the skirts slit up to her thigh—so that meant walking to Mr. Buckholt’s office. She didn’t mind. The whole point of today was getting noticed, maybe even starting a rumor or two among those who were really paying attention.

Most of the people she passed only spared her a glance before going back to shuffling along the dirty Park streets. Some asked her for money, holding out little cups in her direction. She had no money to give, not yet, but she did give them each a sympathetic smile. They likely hadn’t asked for their lives any more than she’d asked for her real parents to destroy hers, and it was because of her parents she knew what it was like to live on the streets, even if it had only been for a year. Leaving them, and her siblings, behind had been the right

choice. If she'd followed them to the all-human settlements in northern Canada her life would've been miserable forever, rather than just for a handful of years.

Within a few blocks she was out of The Park and into the edges of the industrial side of London, though that didn't improve things much. Really, the only difference was that now she was among the poor Turned rather than the poor humans, and the poor Turned took a little more notice of her walking in their midst. Their pale, grayish faces lifted, following her progress down the street, instincts to feed warring with the knowledge of laws against feeding directly from humans.

London, and the coven that controlled it along with most of the northwestern parts of Europe, were technically one of the richest covens in the world when it came to blood. They had a healthy balance of humans and Turned, unlike many other covens. But even the richest countries always had poorer citizens, and that was who Shae walked among now. She had sympathy for them as well, but didn't show it. An unfriendly beggar could stab her, but an unfriendly Turned could drain her dry in five minutes, laws be damned. She wasn't famous yet, so her death wouldn't be worth anything. Just another footnote in the paper and the whole point of today was to be worth a hell of a lot more than that.

"Derringer, Anastasia," the front desk attendant droned. Shae had been listening to her call out names for the last two hours and not once had the woman looked up from her phone.

"That's me," Shae said.

"You've got five minutes," the attendant told her, waving at a door to the side of the front desk.

At eye level on the door was a gaudy gold plaque proclaiming the office belonged to "Evan Buckholts: Renowned Talent Agent." Renowned was one word for it, but underhanded and greedy were more accurate. That was why Shae had picked him. She went through the door and into the office beyond, sweeping the whole room with her eyes. The walls contained lots of photos of a portly man with an arm around the shoulders of famous English actors, both ones he represented and others he didn't. Jeremiah Doven, Ricardo McHill, Ariane Cordova, Jaysie O'Halligan. No family photos. Nothing personal at all that she could see.

Shae turned to face the portly man in question where he was sitting behind an oak desk that was far too big for his office, leaving little room for anything else. He had scant hair to speak of and there was a beady quality to his eyes. The photos on the walls had clearly been altered to improve his appearance. Somewhat.

Time to get things rolling.

"My name isn't Anastasia Derringer," Shae said.

"Get out then. I don't work with people who lie their way into my office," Mr. Buckholts replied, waving her away.

"It's Shae Lockwood," Shae said, hands on her hips, accenting her corseted waist. This dress was the most expensive she'd ever owned as an adult. Hopefully it would be worth it.

Mr. Buckholts' hand froze mid-wave, his little eyes narrowing as he studied Shae. She'd been planning this day for over six months and she knew she looked the part, looked like her mother had twelve years

ago, the last time anyone who mattered had seen Isabella Lockwood. Shae's caramel brown hair was cut to her shoulders and pressed straight, light brown eyes framed with just a dusting of deep red eyeshadow, matching lipstick, a splatter of freckles across excessively pale skin, veins tracing along her arms and neck.

"Can't be," Mr. Buckholts muttered, lowering his hand but still looking intently at Shae. "The Lockwood family vanished twelve years ago, all nine of 'em—ten if you count that Isabella was pregnant—ran from Mendez Coven after their oldest son murdered the politician's kid. Rumor had it they stayed in the Baja Rebel Camp for a couple years, then went north. Haven't been seen or heard of since. Probably died in the Sonoran desert...." He seemed to be talking more to himself at this point, and Shae didn't interrupt. "Can't be...."

"You'll find that I can be," Shae stated, producing a folder from her large purse and placing it in front of him on the desk.

Settling herself into a chair, she watched as he opened it. The first thing in there was a glossy, full-page portrait glamor shot of Isabella at a press event for her movie *Oranges in the Ashes*, the last movie she'd ever made. Shae had found the photo on an old gossip website and printed it at a local shop. Mr. Buckholts lifted the photo up and held it in front of him, eyes dancing between the paper and Shae's face. For once Shae was glad she looked so much like her mother. Ever since she'd ran away nine years ago, she'd hid the resemblance, kept her head down, dyed her hair darker, contoured her face, waited. But now, well, twelve years was enough time for the world to have forgotten the sting of murder accusations lobbied at her brother, forgotten the sting of her parents betraying everything they'd stood for to protect him. And she was an adult now, not a kid being dragged

along on an adventure she'd never asked for. There'd be sympathy for her if she played this right. Sympathy, and adoration.

Mr. Buckholts face split into a leering grin and he set the photo back down, reaching out a thick finger to press a button on his desk phone. "Cancel the rest of my appointments for today."

Shae allowed herself a modest smile. "Thank you."

"I'll need more proof, before any contract is signed," he returned.

"Of course," Shae nodded, pulling out a little glass vial and her pocketknife. Mr. Buckholts eyebrows crawled up his forehead as Shae slit the tip of her left pointer finger open and squeezed several drops of blood into the vial before screwing the lid back on. "A DNA test should suffice, I think? I know my parent's DNA will still be on file with Mendez Coven."

"Drawing blood like that is dangerous in this part of town," Mr. Buckholts said, but he took the vial. "Lots of poor, hungry vampires around."

Shae shrugged, pressing her bleeding finger between her lips. "If I were worried about the Turned wanting my blood I wouldn't be trying to become an actress, would I?"

He eyed her appraisingly for several long minutes and Shae let him, lounging in the chair.

"I met the Lockwoods once," he said after a while. "Isabella and Christian Lockwood were quite the duo. Lots of rumors about them, especially after the murder."

"They were famous actors in a part of the world that never quite clawed its way back to being civilized after the Plague Wars," Shae said simply. "Of course there were rumors."

“If what you’re telling me turns out to be true, we’re going to have to play this carefully,” he said.

“That's a given.”

He contemplated her for several minutes. “What do you want from me, Ms. Lockwood?”

Shae grinned at the use of her true name. She had him. “I want you to make me more famous than my parents ever were.”

1: Lunch with Ariane

Shae

Shae Lockwood looked like a faded version of the photograph of her mother she'd used to gain her fame nearly two years ago; the same eyes, the same smile, the same oval face, but all of it bleached of color. She had only a slight dusting of the Lockwood freckles now, barely visible on skin she kept so pale her veins were as clear as roads on a map. Her hair, grown out to chest-length and allowed to stay its natural lighter brown was swept to one side, crafted waves spilling over her right shoulder. The only true color to her was what she added herself. Today it was a deep red dress cut in a mid-Victorian inspired style with subtle dull gold embroidery in a pattern that accented her curves. A petticoat helped the skirts flow out around her and sweep along when she walked. Black stilettos with a red iridescent sheen and a few bits of ruby jewelry mimicking bloody slashes at her throat and wrists completed the look. It was not a look her mother ever would have worn. Isabella had favored tight, expensive jeans and silk blouses and, while she'd been pale, she'd never pushed it as far as Shae did.

There was still enough left of Isabella in Shae's features for people to comment on her resemblance to her long missing mother, however. Comments that had started as whispers once her agent started getting her small parts, then grown steadily over the last two years as her parts got bigger and bigger, until finally, just recently,

there had been a tearful official reveal. She was indeed, as everyone had been speculating, a Lockwood. It went exactly as Shae and her agent had planned.

Her hansom-cab lurched to a stop in front of a cute little bistro, earning an annoyed honk from the regular taxi behind them and pulling Shae back into the present. Outside stood a cluster of reporters being monitored by a Turned police officer. It was easy to spot who among the photographers was Turned and who was human. The Turned photographers didn't have to jostle for position, knowing that neither they nor anything they wore or held would show up on the cameras. Meanwhile, the few human photographers had been forced to the back where they'd be out of the way.

The officer monitoring them was leaning against an artificially distressed column at the entrance, arms crossed and only glancing at the crowd when their energy revved up at Shae's arrival. Shae's newest friend and current co-star, Ariane Cordova, was waiting for her at the edge of the sidewalk, standing with his best side to the cameras, two large Turned security guards at his back.

"Shae-Shae, looking as radiant as ever," he said, his voice low and mouth twisted into the slightest smirk beneath his sleepy eyes.

Where Shae was a faded photograph, Ariane was one that hadn't been exposed quite long enough in a dim room. It was hard to find his edges, but once you did you realized they were rather sharp. His skin was far too deep a shade of brown to naturally show his veins, no matter how much he avoided the sun, forcing him to get vein tattoos and implants to appeal to his Turned audience. But aside from those limited modifications, hardly even worth considering modification in today's world, he was a blank canvass. Shaved head, fake earrings, no

other tattoos or scars. At any moment he could slip into being something else because he was already nothing at all.

“Nice top hat,” Shae snickered from the seat of the cab.

Ariane rolled his eyes and offered her his arm to help her out. “Says the woman wearing a dress that involves a petticoat.”

“It’s in fashion. The Riddlesdale Coven *loves* its Victorian throwbacks.”

And they did, especially in their actors. To be an actor in the post Plague War world was to be elite and beloved. Turned could not be captured on film or audio in any manner, meaning humans were the only ones capable of making most permanent forms of entertainment now. The only ones who could make movies, audiobooks, radio shows, any of it. There was value and adoration there. But that love could be snapped away if an actor wasn’t careful, and Shae worked very hard to be careful. It had taken over a decade and abandoning her family to get this far, and she would not ruin it by wearing the wrong dress.

They paused, arms still locked, to entertain the small cluster of photographers that swarmed forward, stopped only by the glares of Ariane and Shae’s combined security. Inside the restaurant was a lunch meeting, one they were late for, with their co-stars and other people involved in the movie the two of them had starred in. It was some ridiculous survival movie about a plane crash called *The Odds of Two*. More specifically, the meeting was about the month-long press tour they were about to embark on. Late or not, though, there was no reason not to spend a few minutes outside entertaining the tabloids.

Shae waved and gave a slight smirk and a playful tilt to her hips. She knew exactly what angle she needed to set them at to get the

open-fronted style of her skirts to drape just right to show off her legs. The dress may have been inspired by five-hundred-year-old Victorian styles, but it had modern influences in the amount of skin it showed off. Ariane merely inclined his head to show off his neck, directing focus to the snaking faux varicose vein implant winding up the right side.

“What was it like filming in the Maldives?!” A Turned photographer with a video camera shouted.

“Filming in the Maldives was a bit too sunny for my taste,” Shae chuckled, repeating the question in her answer so it would be on the recording.

“Great setting for a plane crash, though, and the locals were delightful,” Ariane added, giving the camera a mischievous wink.

“Do you miss your family, Shae?” Another photographer shouted.

Shae arranged her face in the properly remorseful expression and lied. “I miss my family every day.”

It had been over a decade since she’d left them behind, living on the streets for a year before being adopted under a false name to avoid their mistakes, and in those years she’d felt a lot of things about her choice. Most of those feelings could be summed up as anger towards her parents for putting her and her siblings in the position that they did. The family had had everything they could’ve ever wanted until the murder, and then her parents tucked tail and ran, destroying it all.

“What do you think of visiting Wood’s Coven for this tour with so much unrest there due to the blood shortages?” A human at the back of the crowd asked.

Ariane shrugged. "A little unrest keeps life interesting."

"Anastasia, Anastasia! Ms. Derringer! Over here!" One photographer shouted.

"Come now," Shae said, her smile hardening a touch for a fraction of a second. "My name is Shae Lockwood. It has been two months now since the story of my real identity broke, and two weeks since I proved that I am one of the missing Lockwoods with that silly little DNA test. No need to call me Anastasia Derringer anymore."

With that she and Ariane turned and strode into the restaurant, letting the door swing shut behind them and cut off any further questions. Their security remained outside, and Shae assumed they'd be splitting up to cover all the entrances as usual.

"Enjoying being London's newest movie star?" Ariane asked. He tossed his top hat onto the floor now that they were inside. Unlike Shae, who wore the height of fashion to tempt her fans with the blood running under her skin, Ariane didn't care in the slightest about fashion trends. An actor since he was fourteen, nearly eleven years now, he'd already managed to permanently ensnare the public eye enough to keep his ego satisfied. He still wore fashionable things, they just weren't *in fashion* things unless his publicist forced him into it.

"As soon as our movie is out, I'll be famous in more than London," Shae said. "That's the whole point of all this."

She leaned over to look in a mirror hanging on the wall of the restaurant lobby, pulling a tube of lipstick out from where she'd tucked it in her corset and under her breast, using it to touch up the maroonish color of her lips. Ariane was watching over her shoulder, making no attempts to hide it. They'd only known one another for about a year, since Shae had auditioned to star alongside him, but

Shae had decided the man was worth getting to know. She had no interest in a relationship. Her girlfriend Helen was perfect, but that didn't mean a connection with Ariane wouldn't be useful. He knew this industry, knew this world, better than she did. Until recently she'd only ever existed on the fringes of it. Her childhood didn't really count, as her parents kept her well clear of their work.

"You certainly raise a lot of questions that pique the average person's interest," Ariane commented. "The daughter of Isabelle and Christian Lockwood, two of the most famous actors in the world until they turned against their coven and vanished all those years ago. The only one of their eight children to ever be seen again. Keaun, Rose, Dustin, *you*, Russell, Darius, Corman, their unborn daughter, all gone with Isabella and Christian in one night. Not that anyone ever saw much of any of you in the first place. Always secreted away in that compound on the coast of Mexico."

Shae met Ariane's eyes in their shared reflection, forcing away the shiver that Ariane saying her siblings' names sent down her spine, especially Dustin's. Plenty of people had asked her about them since the reveal of her identity—mostly about where they were—but none of those questions had been as direct as Ariane's plain statement. She tucked her tube of lipstick back in its place, rolling her lips to even out the color as she did. "My parents didn't want us in the public eye. They felt it was safer that way."

"Safer from what?" Ariane purred. "The dangerous little vampires that swarmed the world following the plagues, getting high off all that sick-blood? Your parents' whole lives revolved around entertaining the Turned, just like yours now does."

Shae moved to look him straight on, hit with the realization that

this was the first time they'd talked since the DNA test results had been published. His interest was unexpected, as was his knowledge of her family. Though, to be fair, if anyone would seem intimately familiar with the details of her past, it made sense it would be him. He was from the same coven she'd grown up in before her parents fled, The Coven of Mendez, after all. Still. Something seemed to be hiding under his questions that Shae couldn't pin down.

"We would have made for quite tasty snacks for the Turned, and even better bargaining chips," Shae said eventually. "My parents *were* loved. Perhaps a little too loved."

"And yet here you are. Rising from the ashes after living under an assumed name for ten years, surfacing again with a daring story of familial kidnap and miraculous escape after they all died, all at twelve-years-old. Quite the story."

"The press is rather fond of my story."

"As am I," Ariane said. "I just happen to be aware that it is a *story*."

Shae shrugged and gave him a little smile. "The truth doesn't matter, nor does anyone's belief, as long as people are interested."

Ariane barked out a laugh, breaking the tension that had been welling up. "And that, Shae-Shae, is why you are such an interesting creature."

They slid into the last available seats at the far end of the table. Everyone else already had drinks and appetizers. The scent of fried cheese mingled with the scent of salsa mingled with the scent of half a

dozen soups. Shae found the contrasting odors annoying and resolved to purchase something that would overwhelm everything else.

Something fishy.

Picking up the menu, she started scanning it for options. It was all the usual small restaurant fare; burgers and chips, soups, salads, a few pastas. Each option listed the standard ingredients, then the options for human blood additions and substitutions. A ketchup blood sauce, bloody marinara, and other such things. It seemed like every day they came out with new ways to mix blood into food. Had to keep the Turned fed somehow and adding it to the food had proven to work better than just providing pure blood to be purchased at donation centers. Easier to distribute. Infused food and pure blood from the centers were the only way the Turned could *legally* get blood, anyway, as feeding straight from humans was outlawed.

The director of their movie, Nadia, stood up at the head of the table and clapped her hands for attention. She was an older woman, somewhere in her sixties, and highly respected in the film industry. She had never worked with Shae's parents back in the height of their fame, however. This had been a disappointment. Working with one of her parents' former directors would've gotten the press in even more of a tizzy.

"Well, now that the last of us have arrived," Nadia said, shooting a pointed look at Ariane and Shae.

"Can't help the traffic, Love," Ariane said.

There were some hushed laughs and murmurs from other members of the party insinuating that it wasn't traffic that had kept he and Shae. Neither bothered to correct their cast and crew mates.

Before Nadia continued a mousy waitress, a human boy no more

than eighteen, asked Ariane for his order. The boy looked star-struck, taking several tries to get Ariane's order of a margarita written correctly. To save time, Shae asked him to bring her the same for now.

"Drinking before noon, how naughty," Shae quipped.

"I prefer to think of it as drinking after midnight," Ariane returned. "And did I not hear you order the same thing?"

"Our little secret," Shae said sweetly. "Helen must never know. She already thinks you're a terrible influence."

"She's your girlfriend, not your mother. It's not as if you and I are having some saucy tryst together, much as we may encourage the odd rumor here and there." He reached over and tucked an errant strand of hair delicately behind Shae's ear, both of them aware of the tabloid camera outside the window behind them. The photographer had crammed himself between an ornate bush and the window, a very uncomfortable looking position. It had been worth it, though, for him to get that photo. Shae wondered what headline would be plastered over it tomorrow.

"If everyone could please turn their attention back to our reason for being here," Nadia said pointedly.

Satisfied that she had everyone's focus, she ran over the plans for the press tour. Technically, it was her sister running the tour. That was how the two of them worked; one making the movies, one marketing them to the world. However, that sister, Elaina, was sick with the flu and legally confined to her home until it passed. Wouldn't want any Turned getting tempted by her sick-blood for a quick high. That had been what kicked off the Plague Wars three centuries ago, after all. Good old Ebola had been bad enough, but when the Turned,

still a thing of myth back then, discovered that the blood of Ebola victims gave them an enjoyable high, things had gotten dicey. One domino after another fell, plagues led to Turned losing control led to attempts at extermination led to wars led to half the world dead. People were a little more careful about getting sick after that.

“So,” Nadia said, “we leave in one week, as planned. However, there have been some last-minute changes. We will still tour across Wood’s Coven, most of the tour going through the United States. As you all know, we had rented a private plane to escort us from stop to stop and we were going to stay in local hotels. However, due to the North American Fuel Worker Strikes having doubled over the last month, that is no longer a financially feasible option. We just can’t afford the jet fuel. Thankfully, Ariane’s father has graciously offered the use of his private electric train for the duration of the tour, so long as we add a few stops in his coven, The Coven of Mendez. In the end this should work out better for all of us. We’ll have a lot more room, won’t have to constantly pack and unpack, and we can make a few more stops along the way, aside from the ones in Mendez.”

“What sort of man is your father to have a private train that he can lend out for his son’s movie tour?” Shae asked, her suspicions from earlier beginning to build once more. No one in Mendez could afford a private train. No one good, anyway.

As much as Ariane and Shae had grown to like one another over the months since they met, she hadn’t gotten to know much of the particulars of his past, nor had they discussed hers. Ariane had never spoken of his family, and Shae had never spoken of hers beyond dropping the necessary hints for the revelation of her true identity. All Shae knew of Ariane’s father was that he was some sort of politician in

Mendez Coven, the overseers of much of Central America. Mendez had brought together Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua to help end the wars, much like the United Kingdom and parts of northern Europe had been brought together to form what was now Riddlesdale Coven. Each country within a coven was technically still self-ruled, but the covens helped handle the Turned populations within them. Shae also knew that Mendez was one of the poorest covens in the world, both in money and blood. A private train given away for a month was a lot of wealth for a man who lived in such a place.

The rest of the table's occupants looked interested as well. It was a mark of how good Ariane was at manipulating the press that no one else seemed to know his background either.

Ariane tilted his head at Shae's question, a calculating look in his eyes. She got the strangest sense he was waiting for her to notice something. After a beat of silence he answered; "My *stepfather* is a senator in the coven. One of the highest rated human politicians there, though he has applied to be Turned. He's responsible for lovely bills like making it illegal to be in same-sex relationships and requiring all women to have at least two children by the age of fifty in an attempt to bolster the blood supply." His voice was heavy with disdain. "He uses the train for political transport since Mendez Coven doesn't have a good air transport system in place. Not that they could afford the fuel if they did."

A memory niggled at the back of Shae's mind, awakened by Ariane's comments. She couldn't make it form into anything solid, though. Perhaps she had just seen the man on TV when she'd lived in Mexico as a child. It seemed the most likely answer as she'd almost

never left the family compound there until the family fled. The only people outside her family that she'd known were the servants.

"Is that really the sort of man we want to have sponsoring our tour?" The head costume designer asked. She was a Turned woman who looked nineteen but, if Shae remembered correctly, was closer to one-hundred-and-fifty. Those on either side of her, humans, had set their chairs a few extra inches away.

Ariane shrugged. "He's well-liked by most people, technically. He keeps the limited blood supply for the Turned steadier than it ever was before he was elected, even if his methods for doing so are rather reprehensible."

"What does he get out of offering us his train?" Shae wondered. She couldn't shake the feeling that there was something else she wasn't quite remembering right, and it was starting to annoy her.

Nadia had moved on to the finer points of the tour, leaving Ariane and Shae to talk in lower tones.

"Who knows. More 'I'm pretending to be a good person' points, I suppose. Though, perhaps he wants to torment me by giving us the ability to make more stops. He and I have never gotten along."

"Oh, the adoring fans aren't that bad, and they must be appeased," Shae replied absently, still puzzling over what she couldn't recall. The memory was floating right at the edge of her mental grasp, taunting her like an itch she couldn't reach.

"No one will be appeased when I've been stuck on a train for a month."

Shae shrugged. "Just bring plenty of your little distractions. I imagine LSD would be quite fun on a train while zipping through the countryside."

A slow smirk wound its way across his lips. "True. And I could always pick up one or two of those adoring fans to distract me as well."

"Now you're seeing the benefits."

The waiter returned and set down their drinks. He looked like he'd overheard the last bit of their conversation and rather liked the idea of being one of those fans, something Shae found adorably amusing. Ariane would sleep with people and Turned of any gender, but she knew he'd never go for someone so meek.

"No picking up fans for you, though," Ariane said once the waiter left. "Not with Helen coming along on the tour."

"And why would I need a fan when I've got Helen? She provides plenty of distractions."

"Oh, please do explain, I love hearing the wild details about your sex life," he said with only a hint of sarcasm.

"Alright," Nadia said a little louder. "Before Shae and Ariane continue down a road of conversation none of the rest of us want to listen to, I'm calling this meeting over. We've covered everything pertinent. Shae, Ariane, given that you've ignored the majority of what I've said, would it be worth my time to type up everything and send it to you, or would you ignore that as well?"

"We'd ignore that as well," Ariane said.

She rolled her eyes, too used to the two of them by now to bother being mad. "Just make sure you're packed and ready to leave in a week. I'll send someone to collect you."

She dismissed everyone, though most stayed at the table to order full meals. Shae was still intent on something fishy, reaching for her menu again only to be stopped by Ariane's hand on her elbow

pulling her up from the table.

"Come on, there are much better places to spend a Friday afternoon," Ariane whispered in her ear.

"Will those places get me in trouble with Helen?" Shae asked as they maneuvered outside, Ariane not bothering to retrieve his jacket and hat.

"Most definitely."

"Delightful."

"Delightful, hmm?"

"As you said, we're going to be on a train for a month. I want to have some fun before we go. Helen will live with it."

Ariane grinned. "Such a delightful creature."

"Glad you think so, because this will have to wait for tonight," Shae told him, stopping just outside the door. "I have to pick Helen up from work. There's a surprise at home that I've been planning for a month. But I'll join you tonight, I promise."

Ariane put on an exaggerated pout. "You know I am terribly impatient."

"It's only clubbing," Shae assumed with a laugh. "Besides, the clubs won't be interesting until sundown anyway."

"Perhaps it's not clubbing I'm interested in," Ariane returned. "There's a conversation the two of us need to have."

Shae stilled, reminded once more that she felt as if she was missing something crucial, and now she sensed Ariane knew what it was, that he was playing with her.

"But, if you do have to go pick up Helen," Ariane said over her confusion, "you should be going. Meet me at the corner of Fifth and Downing at ten?"

Shae agreed with a slow nod as the cameras and their personal security swarmed them, switching to a smile as Ariane bent to kiss her cheek. More titillation for the tabloids she was happy to provide, even if her mind wasn't on them anymore.

2: The Attack

Dustin

Dustin Lockwood took in the little town he visited so often, set right on the border between the Nahanni Settlement for Humanity and the surrounding Wood's Coven, stomach sinking as he surveyed everything. The military supply shop that had been on the south end of town smoldered, walls folded in on themselves and charred black, a faded and dinged up firetruck spraying the remains of the structure with a lethargic jet of water. Six bodies lay on the opposite sidewalk, eerily cheery yellow tarps covering them and weighed down with broken bricks. Four other bodies dotted the sidewalks along the length of the street, all covered in the same tarps. A soft breeze carried the gut churning scent of burnt flesh towards him and he tried to focus on something, anything, else.

Closer to Dustin, the town inn loomed up, one of the tallest and oldest buildings in town. It had technically been here since before the Plague Wars, but the amount of renovations raised the question of if it was still the original building despite every piece having been replaced one by one over the years. The Yukon winter, several months passed now, had not been kind to it this year. It would need a new roof before winter came again. Though, after this battle, that was the least of its problems. All the windows on the first floor, which housed a bar, were broken. Windows were hard to get out here in the middle of the wilderness with the coven on all sides. A lot of things were hard to get, but it was worth it to not be under the rule of the vampires.

Dustin mounted the steps to the raised sidewalk in front of the inn, taking it slow and noting with interest that the glass was broken outward, shards glimmering against the warped wooden planks of the walkway. His heavy elk-skin and tire-sole boots cracked the glass further, the sound grating in the silence.

"Hello?" Dustin called through one of the broken windows. He knew better than to just walk in the front door of this place right after an attack.

"Lockwood?" A smokey old voice sounded. Dustin let himself relax a little at the familiar tone.

"Yeah, it's me," Dustin replied, opening the door and stepping into the dim bar.

It didn't look much better inside than it had outside. The pool table was overturned, worn green felt facing the windows and rifles still propped along the back. Balls were scattered everywhere, drinking glasses decorated the floor with more broken glass, a newspaper had gone to pieces where it seemed to have fallen off the bar. The room smelled of the drinks that had been spilled, their sharp scents mixing with used gunpowder and old wood. A few shocked looking patrons sat at one end of the counter nursing drinks with shaking hands.

The innkeeper, Ramona, stepped around the bar, holding a shotgun longer than she was tall. It wasn't that it was a particularly long gun, it was just that Ramona was somewhere around ninety-years-old and had never been all that tall even before age shrunk her. She always gave Dustin free drinks and told him the best times to get out of the settlement unnoticed based on the patrol schedules, since it happened to be illegal for him to leave at all. She wasn't supposed to have the patrol schedules, but she knew them anyway.

Ramona, as usual, looked unfazed by whatever had occurred. Thick glasses settled tightly on the bridge of her nose, silver hair braided out of the way, faded plaid button-up shirt tucked in to prevent it snagging on anything as she worked the bar.

"You picked a hell of a time to come home," Ramona said.

"I'm sorry," Dustin told her. And he meant it. He might have been able to make a difference. Might have saved at least a few lives. "What happened?"

"One of the cults from the starving towns attacked around dawn."

The starving towns. Dustin hated that term. It was accurate, it just didn't seem quite right. It wasn't enough.

Nahanni was isolated in northern Canada, Yukon Territory, surrounded on all sides by area claimed by Wood's Coven. The isolation had allowed it to become possibly the biggest all human settlement left in the world, though that isolation made it hard to say for sure. It had been built up out of the ashes of the Plague Wars by people who didn't trust the covens when they appeared suddenly with an offer to help end the violence. The offer had been simple: help build a system to feed the vampires without anyone having to die, and they would help humanity reign in the swarms of new vampires that had been accidentally created by uncontrolled feeding during the plagues. Maybe it had started well, Dustin didn't know, but it hadn't lasted. Those who'd seen the failure of the new system coming never bowed to it, isolating themselves in ever-shrinking pockets all over the world.

There were a handful of small coven towns within a hundred of the Nahanni border, and they were all struggling. It seemed the ruling coven of the area, Wood's Coven, had been failing to supply them with

the blood they needed to survive. Dustin had heard rumors this was causing cults to form around various figures promising as much blood as the citizens could eat. Problem was, that blood came from Nahanni residents. The laws against feeding directly on humans didn't apply outside the coven that made those laws, the cult leaders would assure, so no punishment could be given.

"The military didn't... help?" Dustin tried. He wasn't particularly fond of their military for a lot of reasons, but they had to have done *something*.

Ramona laughed once, the sharp sound startling the patrons at the bar. "Oh, there were a few clouts in town when the attack started, and a few more happened to wander in halfway through. Didn't get here until after the shop blew, though. Quite the light show, all those explosives going off. We handled most of it ourselves, as usual."

"You seem to have done a lot of the handling," Dustin pointed out, gesturing at the destroyed room.

"Oh, they sure tried to come in. We didn't let them, though," Ramona replied, affectionately patting her shotgun. She pointed a thumb over her shoulder at the other occupants of the bar. "Had a bit of help too, though I must emphasize that it was only a bit. Not the best shots, those three."

Dustin felt a small smile quirk his lips at Ramona's grumbling. "Well, I'm glad you're alright."

"I am indeed."

"Let me help you clean up in here," Dustin offered, moving to take off his pack, the tin pot and cup hanging on one side clanging together lightly as he moved.

She held up a hand to stop him, glancing over at the patrons at

the end of the bar. They'd gone back to sipping their drinks without paying Dustin and Ramona any mind.

Her voice was low as she spoke, "I appreciate the offer, kid, but it might be best you head out."

Dustin frowned. "No one saw me cross the border. Nothing illegal about living rough within Nahanni itself."

"All true, however... that little brother of yours, the soldier one, he's in town."

"Russ?" Dustin said, heart leaping into his throat. Images of Russ torn to bits or burned to ashes clawed through his mind, ripped the breath out of his lungs. He couldn't lose another sibling.

"He's fine," Ramona assured. "I saw him right before you showed up. Came in to check for bodies. Amazing how much you Lockwood boys look alike."

The tension left Dustin so quickly he felt his knees almost give out. A steadying hand on a crooked table kept him standing.

"*But,*" Ramona pressed on, "he might be a bit more suspicious about seeing you here. I know damn well your family doesn't know what you get up to."

"Neither do you," Dustin said without thinking.

Silence stretched between them for a painful amount of time.

"I know you leave," she said. "That's enough. Back door's unlocked."

Dustin dropped his shoulders and nodded, taking a step in that direction. The sound of the front door scraping along the floor broke the quiet before he made it to the hallway. He stopped, staring at the cracked mirror behind the bar, eyes locked on the equally frozen reflection of his little brother standing in the doorway.

Dustin had only been away from home for two months, but Russ had been deployed for six. It was the longest they'd ever gone without seeing one another. Russ hadn't changed much and while there certainly was a resemblance between them like Ramona said, it was only a genetic one. They had the same soft brown eyes, the same wide nose and slightly thin mouth, the same thick eyebrows, but their lives had led the rest of their appearances in different directions. Dustin, who went south frequently, was absolutely covered in freckles, while Russ only had a smattering of them on the most prominent parts of his face. Russ' hair, a few shades lighter brown than Dustin's, was buzzed, and he was clean-shaven. Dustin's hair was currently down to just below his chin, the top layer pulled back in a ponytail to keep it out of his face, and his full beard was nearing in on an inch long, the longest he'd ever let it get.

Despite being in a battle only hours earlier, Russ didn't look all that geared up. He had on military issue pants with protective plates built in to prevent vamp bites, which was something. His shirt, though, was a regular long-sleeved shirt meant to go under their armored jackets. It would be nothing more than tissue-paper when it came to a vamp bite. At least Dustin's toughened buckskin jacket would slow a bite down.

As they'd stared one another down without moving, Ramona had busied herself pouring two generous glasses of whiskey. "Sort your shit, boys," she declared before vanishing into a back room.

Russ seemed startled by Ramona, watching the door she'd gone through with wide eyes. Sometimes Dustin forgot how strange people found such a brash yet tiny old lady. He turned to face his little brother.

"So... you're here," Russ said, finally stepping all the way inside and closing the door behind himself.

"Yeah. I was swinging by to visit Ramona, she's a friend, and I saw the town had been attacked. From the smoke, I mean."

Dustin saw the other patrons glancing furtively at them, curious as to the tension in the room.

"Are you coming home?" Russ asked.

"Of course," Dustin said. "I never leave for too long, you know that."

Russ hummed noncommittally, eyeing the glasses of whiskey Ramona had set out. One glass was missing a rather large portion of its rim.

"I *am*, Russ. I was on my way there, I swear. This was just a stop on the way."

Russ stared at his brother for a moment before softening, shoulders dropping and lips curling up slightly.

"I missed you, Dustin."

"I missed you too, Russ. I didn't think about how my being gone worked out with your deploy—"

An earsplitting shriek tore through the shattered windows, interrupting any further apologies. Russ spun and darted out the door, pulling a pistol from a holster under his left arm. Dustin cursed and ripped at the straps of his pack, letting it smash to the floor as he followed his brother, drawing his own pistol from his right hip to cover him.

Out on the street stood six vampires, ranged in a half-circle across the road. At the center of the arc was a tall woman, crisp blond hair cut to her shoulders. She had on nice jeans, a deep purple shirt,

and a dark black suit jacket that had been nice as well, but one arm was badly singed. One of her hands, sharp nails painted pink, twisted tightly in the hair of a young boy, the other clenching one of his shoulders.

A human boy.

No more than ten-years-old and flushed with life, a clear contrast to the woman who held him. She was the blue-grayish sort of pale the vampires got when they hadn't fed. All the vampires were. Another woman, Dustin assumed she was the boy's mother due to their similar features, was sobbing in the arms of a Nahanni soldier who was holding her back from running to her child and getting killed. The boy himself, however, was furiously stomping at the vampire woman's shoes and pulling at her fingers. Even starving, she was strong enough to not care about his attempts at escape. Dustin admired the kid's effort, though.

"We weren't finished eating," the woman said. Her voice was crisp and authoritative. "So let's make a deal—"

"Fine," Dustin interrupted before she could name her terms.

Russ, still a few feet in front of him, startled and glanced back, eyes going wide when he saw Dustin standing there. Russ opened his mouth to say something, probably to the effect of "shut up" or "go back inside" if his face was anything to go by. Dustin pressed on before he could speak.

"You want blood, right? Six of you, eight pints in me. Let the boy go."

"Dustin—" Russ' tone was frantic.

Dustin wished he had time to explain his ruse to his brother. He didn't, though, so he continued to ignore him and plowed on, lowering

his pistol and taking a few steps forward.

“A kid won’t feed all of you.”

The vampires all surveyed him, stances shifting in his direction, but Dustin kept his focus on the one holding the boy. Her gaze was intent, assessing, as her followers shuffled around her. Their fingers clenched and unclenched, jaws hanging open and lips pulled back, fangs slid out over their regular teeth and dripping saliva. They looked so inhuman Dustin guessed they hadn’t had a good meal in days. Before she could make a decision one of her pack let out a frustrated growl and in a flash of movement he had ripped the boy from her grasp and sunk his teeth into the child’s throat.

Dustin dove past Russ and into the fray, ignoring the risk, ignoring the screaming. He had to get the boy, get them off the boy. The other vampires, scenting the blood, piled on as well, creating a mess of flailing limbs and guttural noises. Dustin couldn’t even see the boy. Abandoning his pistol, he slid a hunting knife from his boot and grabbed the blond hair of the leading vampire, yanking her head back and sliding the knife across her throat. He finished with a quick and practiced twist of the knife that slipped it between two vertebrae and sliced her spinal cord. The body went limp, still tangled with the others. But it was enough. The others knew there was a threat now.

A cacophony of screams and hisses descended on Dustin as all five still standing vampires turned their attention to him, taking him to the ground. He felt two of them gnawing at his limbs and knew he only had a minute or less before they made it through the toughened leather and hit skin. There was just enough room for him to wrench his knife around and bring it to the throat of one creature gnawing on his left arm, sawing awkwardly upward into the flesh of her neck until she

gagged and released, scrabbling at the blade with slick fingers. She had nowhere to go, though, tangled together with everyone else, and Dustin finished her off the same way he'd done with the previous creature.

He was distantly aware of shouts and possibly even shots as he brought his knife to the next biting vampire. This one was ready for him, rearing back out of range. Whatever. Dustin didn't care what order the vampires died in, he just cared about the fact that if they were on him they were off the boy. Kicking out at another vampire he managed to push it back enough that whoever was shooting got a clear shot, the vampire's head exploding from a high caliber round. The three remaining vampires slowed their attack, glancing at their fallen friends, and Dustin felt something yank at his shoulders, dragging him backwards out of the pile.

"WHAT THE FUCK?! WHAT THE FUCKING FUCK WAS THAT?!" Russ shouted. One of his hands stayed firmly on Dustin's shoulder, preventing him from standing as he took shots at the remaining vampires, all three of whom had run off into the woods.

"The kid," Dustin demanded, spinning around in a desperate search for the boy.

He found him splayed out on the ground several feet away, unmoving. His mother knelt next to him, rocking and screaming his name, as the other soldier checked for signs of life. The soldier tried a few times with a few different pulse points before shaking his head and dropping his hands.

"Landen! Landen! Landen!" His mother screamed, pulling his limp little body to her chest and rocking him.

Dustin felt himself going numb as he watched the scene,

memorizing more detail than he wanted but unable to look away. The limpness of Landen's arms, the gory mess that was his throat, his blood soaking into his mother's gauzy white hijab as she clutched him to her, no longer able to form words.

Russ broke the moment, hauling Dustin to his feet.

"You—you," Russ spluttered, running his eyes over Dustin, pistol still raised slightly in the direction of the woods. Dustin realized Russ was shaking, eyes wide with fear. "You just fucking dove in there. You should've been... They could've...."

"I'm—I'm fine, Russ," Dustin said, wishing his voice was steadier. "They didn't make it through my jacket."

Russ shook his head, eyes still wide. The look of fear and confusion set Dustin's nerves on edge. Russ was looking at Dustin like he didn't know who he was.

Ramona broke the moment as she walked silently through all of them and knelt by the mother's side, reaching out an arthritic hand to rest on her back.

"Bring him into the inn, Sabiha, we'll make sure he's warm," Ramona said, tone gentle.

"He's, he's only eight," Sabiha hiccupped, puffy red eyes turning up to Ramona. "He has a soccer tournament this weekend."

Ramona nodded. "Great sport. I've got a few soccer books at the bar we can put with him, alright? Let's bring him inside."

Sabiha nodded shakily and scooped Landen up, cradling him to her chest as she followed Ramona inside. Dustin, Russ, and the other soldier waited, staring at the empty doorway until Ramona reappeared, alone. She stood in silence, surveying the scene. The three injured vampires sprawled awkwardly on the ground, none

showing signs of healing yet, though the second one whose throat and spinal cord Dustin had slit was scowling and baring her teeth at them. The other soldier had a high-powered rifle slung across his back and he walked over to shoot her in the forehead, tears in the corners of his eyes.

"You're going to die pulling stunts like that, Dustin Lockwood," Ramona said eventually.

"I had to try," Dustin returned.

Ramona grimaced but gave one curt nod. Behind her the few people who had been at the bar warily poked their heads out of the shattered windows. Other citizens wandered into the street to stare, peering tentatively at the scene without coming close. A few had followed Sabiha into the inn, but most were watching Dustin and Russ. Dustin winced, trying to avoid their questioning faces and wishing there hadn't been witnesses to the fight. Too late now, though.

Ramona shuffled out into the street, kicking at a fallen vampire once she was close enough. The vampire's hand twitched towards her foot and she shot the hand with her ever-present shotgun.

"It was still a fool move, Lockwood," Ramona muttered. "And if anyone knows how badly hostage situations with vamps can go, it is me."

Dustin had no idea what she was referring to. Based on the haunted look in her eyes, he wasn't sure he wanted to.

He dropped his eyes and gave a small nod. "Point taken."

"You got a lot of fight, though," Ramona admitted, "for a kid raised in the covens."

An uneasy silence settled over their little group. The Lockwood family having only been in Nahanni for about nine years was an

awkward topic for everyone aside from Ramona. She had no qualms about diving into awkward topics. Leaving a coven was not an easy thing to do as a single person, and for parents to escape with their eight children was unheard of. Well. Seven children. Dustin and Russ' parents had pulled it off, though, escaping Mendez Coven despite their worldwide fame. But trust was a hard-won thing in Nahanni. It would take a lot longer than nine years for the Lockwood family to find complete acceptance here, if they ever could.

"We weren't raised in the covens," Russ mumbled. "We were raised on the run. Same as so many people that didn't have the luck to be born in a settlement."

"There isn't time for this," Dustin interrupted. "Those three other vampires ran into the settlement, not back to the coven."

"They could be miles away by now," the other soldier pointed out. Dustin felt like he should know the man's name. He was sure they'd met before, if only in passing.

"Vampires may be fast, even when starving, and better coordinated than humans, but our forests are a mess on this side of the settlement," Dustin said. "They haven't burned since the wars. There's deadfall and brush everywhere that will slow them down. They may not have gotten far at all. Call in a chopper if you can. The thermal sensors can't see them, but one is wearing a bright red jacket. It will stand out."

The man and Russ glanced at one another uneasily.

"There's no chopper," Russ said. "We've only got six and the other five are up north doing water drops on a fire that's threatening the geothermal energy plant. They left one for us, but a bolt failed on one of the blades last week. It's grounded until we can make a

replacement.”

Curse their cobbled together military, Dustin thought. Everything they had was ancient Plague War equipment or bits and pieces stolen from the coven over the years. He picked his pistol back up from where it had fallen in the fight, holstering it slowly to give himself time to think.

“The border road has a northern turnoff about three miles out of town,” Dustin said, stringing together a new plan. “It goes north six miles and then there’s a turn west back this way. If we hurry, we might be able to cut them off. Ramona, can you get these ones beheaded and burned?”

Ramona nodded, and Dustin turned to Russ expectantly. Russ stared at him for a short moment, then groaned.

“Fuck it, alright. Mike, you’re with us,” he said to the other soldier. “We’ll radio for backup on the way.”

They climbed into a military truck parked on the north end of town. Russ and Mike took the two front seats while Dustin climbed into the high-set bed. Two benches ran the length of each side, providing seats for up to ten soldiers. The metal shell encasing the back had a few badly welded patch jobs, light filtering in along parts of the edges. Dustin crouched behind the front seats, open to the back, as Russ threw the truck into gear and sped through town, turning so fast and hard they drifted around the corner onto the border road. Mike radioed in their plan, frowning at the poor signal as he did.

“You’ve been fucking lying to us,” Russ shouted over the roar of

the truck once Mike finished.

"Says who?" Dustin asked. He'd maneuvered to kneel so he could look through the windshield and see where they were going, eyes roving the forest around them for any sign of their targets.

Mike, for his part, seemed very intent on not involving himself in a fight between the two Lockwood brothers, and was studying the forest even more intently than Dustin.

"You didn't learn to fight like that in the damn Nahanni woods," Russ said. Clearly, he'd gone from freaked out to mad and Dustin wasn't sure that was any better, so he didn't answer.

"I swear, if you've been leaving the settlement," Russ hissed. When Dustin didn't rebuke this statement Russ went a bit pale. Apparently he hadn't believed Dustin had been leaving, not enough to keep from being shocked that it was the truth. "You... you could be killed! Dammit, Dustin! If the covens knew there was a Lockwood in their territory they'd destroy you! Not to mention what *our* government would do if they found out! You'd be labeled a damn traitor, *especially* with our family history! They barely trust us as it is!"

Dustin thought about lying. Before today it would've been easy. Even though he usually just lied by omission, he could've come up with a story. But now Russ was suspicious and had very good reasons to be.

"I was in Colorado..." Dustin said slowly, still unsure how to proceed.

"Colo—*Why?*" Russ ground out.

"I've been trying... trying to find Shae," Dustin said, just loud enough for Russ to catch his voice over the roar of the truck.

Shae.

Speaking her name forced the images of Landen's battered body back into his mind, except Landen's face was replaced with Shae's the last time Dustin had seen her. He gulped in some air, shaking his head in a physical attempt to rid himself of the mental picture. He'd seen more than enough like it in his nightmares.

She'd been missing for a decade now. Abducted from their ramshackle camp when the family was on the run. Of his seven siblings, Dustin had been closest to Shae. She was a few years younger than him, a couple years older than Russ, and the only family member who hadn't made it to Nahanni when they'd fled the accusations of murder levied at their oldest sibling, Keaun. All Dustin had left of her was memories and one old snapshot from when she was ten years old. And all the terrible imaginings of what might have happened to her.

Russ stiffened. "She... she's gone, Dustin. Probably dead...."

Dustin's first instinct was to snap at Russ. Shae was not dead. She couldn't be, no matter how often his nightmares told him she was. She was alive, somewhere, and just needed someone to help her get home. But there was something in his little brother's face, something in the tense set of his shoulders.... He was lying.

Before Dustin could follow up on his second instinct, which was to figure out what the hell Russ was lying about, Russ slammed on the breaks, nearly sending Dustin flying into the front seats. Regaining his balance, Dustin looked through the windshield to see that five new vampires were standing in the road twenty yards ahead. Instinctively he twisted around and saw that the three who fled from town were now behind them, along with four others.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," Russ hissed.

They had nowhere to go. To their left rose thick forests, to their right a steep drop-off that led to a river a-hundred-and-fifty feet below the road. Beyond the river was empty wilderness that turned into coven territory in less than a mile.

"I can handle this," Dustin said. He even sort of believed the statement, despite twelve vampires out in the open being more than he'd ever handled alone.

He'd already moved to jump out of the truck and do just that when Russ snapped, "No you can't, sit down and shut up."

Dustin didn't have time to object as Russ floored it straight at the vamps standing in a line across the narrow road in front of them, didn't have time to warn him that this was probably a much worse idea than Dustin's.

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