



RIN CHUPECO

Court of
Wanderers

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COURT
OF
WANDERERS

RIN CHUPECO

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*For Lil—
you're still a mad lad.*



REGRET

Remy complained, of course. Of the bad roads and of the storms that came upon them without warning, the winds stronger than they were accustomed to, even within rain-drenched Aluria. Of the way the carriage jerked them about at intervals, the way the vampire horses yanked their coach along at a dizzying pace, eschewing comfort for speed. Variations of *Malekh, slow the fuck down, you're jolting Xiaodan out of her bloody seat* frequently left his mouth, his language growing more colorful and more desperate as the days went by.

Malekh said nothing, and the more he said shit-all, the more Remy whined to make up for the silence. The vampire lord never rose to his bait. On the rare occasions he remained inside the carriage with them, he merely folded his arms across his chest, leaned back with his eyes closed, and pretended Remy wasn't there. For the better part of the journey, he stayed on the driver's perch outside where his helhests, undeterred by the rain and the fog, raced on down the path.

It had been four days since they'd first set out from Elouve, and Remy still didn't know where the hell they were; Peanut and Cookie could run from one end of Aluria to the other in a week if their masters wanted them to. On at least three occasions now, Malekh had halted the carriage inside some forest, uttered a terse *stay here* to him, and was off to Light-knows-where for a couple of hours. No badgering could convince him to tell Remy where he'd been, once he returned.

Malekh hadn't stopped at any villages or towns to rest, choosing to keep vigil outside the carriage at night while Remy managed a few hours' sleep within. And despite all his whining about seeing to her comfort, Xiaodan slept through it all anyway, never once waking to join in Remy's grievances.

Her head was currently in his lap. The rest of her was stretched out on his right, short enough that the soles of her feet were settled comfortably against the side of the carriage door. Her eyelids fluttered every now and then, and he hoped that she was dreaming of something better than where they were. Her heartbeats sounded loud to his ears, irregular as always.

She'd fallen asleep almost as soon as they'd left Elouve, and nothing could rouse her. Malekh checked on her frequently, his nonchalance over her condition Remy's only assurance.

There was only so much he could moan about when the scenery was beginning to blur together and his nitpicks about the roads' conditions were the same day in and day out, so eventually Remy stopped griping and started talking about anything else that tickled his fancy. Like whether or not plants had feelings. Or if bugs waged little insect wars with one another like humans did. Or how many undead chickens it would take, theoretically speaking, to defeat a vampire. In his nearly a thousand years of existence, surely Malekh had the answers to these and other philosophical questions.

Remy was just goading Malekh, really. He thought about shutting up. Silence had a far better chance of improving matters between them.

He did not shut up.

Sometimes, when he ran out of hypotheticals with which to annoy the vampire lord, Remy talked about how his father, the Duke of Valenbonne, was overseeing Aluria's defense in fresh new horrifying ways since assuming the position of lord high steward. How Queen Ophelia had permitted him to continue Dr. Yost's experiments on the mutations despite her obvious reluctance. Edgar Pendergast had played his hand well. Sending his creatures against the First Court vampires and whatever other mutations that still haunted the lands was better than sending in her Reapers. The queen did not want to incur more losses from the latter when the former was designed to be expendable.

Malekh likely already knew this, given his and Xiaodan's close friendship with Her Majesty, but Remy nattered on anyway. He was to serve as Valenbonne's spy for when the eight courts eventually convened—classified information he was supposed to withhold, but Remy no longer gave a fuck. So he'd told Malekh about how his father had manipulated his way back into power and how he intended to create an army of creatures devoted to him alone, using Yost's bloodrot to command their loyalty. How Lord Valenbonne's manservant, Grimesworthy, had been his prototype, a colossus mutation masquerading as a human servant.

Malekh said nothing. He crossed his arms and closed his eyes and checked on Xiaodan and his undead horses and did everything else but respond to Remy, widening the distance between them that had begun when Remy killed Malekh's brother Naji.

Remy was almost relieved when the ambush broke the tension. He spotted the approaching mob in between thunderclaps on the fifth night, when the rains were worse. A dozen at least, many wearing the red robes that declared them minions of the First Court. The rest wore plain, threadbare clothes stained in some mixture of mud and dried blood—victims from previous villages that had fallen to the horde, convinced to take up their former predators' cause after turning. Lightning streaked the sky around them, keeping Remy from using his Breaker at will.

It didn't matter. His daggers could cut through vampire flesh just as well as his scythes did, even if they weren't as sharp as he'd liked—he'd had no time to whet them back in Elouve, and he'd bitched about that, too. He plunged one into the eye of an undead attempting to pull itself in through the window, and then another through its chest. The vampire gurgled once, then let go.

It didn't matter to Malekh either, who tore through the other kindred with a ferocity that contradicted his usually precise, analytical style of fighting. He cut through the throng quickly; Remy could see nothing of his attacks in between the brief flashes of light, the explosions of blood erupting from their bodies in the aftermath the only indication that there had ever been a strike.

Remy had barely gotten his arse out of the carriage when he saw there were no vampires left. Malekh was thorough.

A faint creak told him that the vampire lord had returned to his position on the carriage, taking up the reins once more.

“Malekh,” Remy said.

The winds howled, but he knew Malekh could hear him.

“I can understand why you’re choosing to give me the shitty silent treatment, but I don’t believe this is a natural storm. It feels like the one at Chànggē Shuǐ when Vasilik attacked.”

Still nothing.

Remy was losing his patience. “We should wait till it passes. There could be more out there worse than this lot, and Xiaodan isn’t in any shape to deal with further surprises.”

He heard the puzzled whinny of the helhests when their master made no move to urge them onward.

And then Malekh’s voice, quiet and gravelly and well missed, penetrated through the barrier between them. “Rocksplen is up ahead.”



HED TOLD the innkeeper that they would be needing two rooms for the night, only for Malekh to interrupt, saying that they required only one, the biggest the inn had if you please, and that he would be compensated handsomely for the trouble. The innkeeper’s eyebrows climbed as he took them all in; Malekh as noble and as regal as ever, cradling the sleeping Xiaodan in his arms, and Remy, who still had enough self-regard to turn beet red. As if they needed more attention, what with the helhests loitering in the nearby woods just out of sight and the new rumors swirling of fresh vampire attacks within King Hallifax’s kingdom.

Once Xiaodan was snug and warm inside the surprisingly large bed they’d been provided, Malekh had left without another word. Logic told Remy that the man intended to scour the area, find any other vampires from the group that had tried to waylay them, and see whether the storm was as unnatural as suspected.

It rankled that Malekh hadn’t bothered to tell him any of that.

But Remy sucked it up.

For a *generous* fee he was sure Malekh wouldn't mind paying, he ordered a very expensive dinner—prime roast beef and *fresh* vegetables, even—sent up to their room so he wouldn't have to leave Xiaodan, who continued to dream. Once he'd had his fill, he'd asked for a bucket of water and a clean cloth and retreated behind a small screen to wash off the stink he'd accumulated over the last few days.

He no longer wore Reaper black, only traveling clothes chosen from his own wardrobe. Officially, it was because he was on a covert mission for Her Majesty. Personally, it was because he didn't realize how much he hated that damnable color until he'd had the opportunity to stop wearing it. And after days spent inside the cramped carriage, he should have relished in the idea of finally spending the night in a soft bed with goose feather pillows, but he was too keyed up to rest.

He stretched out beside Xiaodan and listened to her heartbeat for a while; an arrhythmic cadence contrasting with the steady hum of the downpour outside. He touched her cheek, relieved to see her expression relaxed in slumber, that her sleep was at least free of nightmares. The fringe on her forehead was starting to look uneven. The last thing he'd expected a vampire to need was a hair trim.

"He's angry at me," Remy told her. "Not that I blame him." His gaze drifted back toward the small window, watching the darkness beyond it. Minutes passed before he realized he'd left his last thought unfinished.

"I don't know if I can forgive myself, either," he said.



HE MUST have fallen asleep shortly afterward, because Remy woke up to a body sprawled on top of him. His first instinct was to shove, anticipating an attack, but strong hands pinned his wrists down, and no amount of struggle could wrest him free.

"Remy." It was a soft whisper, the voice familiar and loved.

"Xiaodan?"

The vampire straddled him, holding his wrists against the covers. She was wide awake now and staring at him with a ravenous look he knew all too well.

“Please,” Xiaodan whispered. Her hold on him slackened, no longer keeping him immobile, though she remained on top of him. She looked eager and needy and beautiful.

Remy’s hands found her waist. “Take all you need.”

He groaned when he felt her fangs bite down against his neck as she slaked her thirst. Her hands burrowed underneath his shirt, fingers fumbling with his braies, pushing them down.

She drew back momentarily. “Remy,” she breathed, “are you sure?”

It felt oddly touching that, even when she was not herself, even when she was fighting for self-control, she still thought to ask.

He reached up and cradled her face in his hands, watching those gorgeous brown eyes soften for him. “Never wanted anything more, my love,” he said, and gently guided her mouth down to his.



SHE FELL asleep soon after, still sprawled on top of him after finding her completion. Remy could only manage a tired laugh, his hand stroking at her hair. There was more color to her cheeks now, her pallor less sickly than before, and he hoped it was enough until they reached the Third Court.

He left her under the blankets while he staggered off to find something to clean her and himself with. That done, he disposed of the soiled linen and stopped by the wash basin to scrub at his face, feeling the stubble he’d accumulated over the last few days and wondering if he could pester the innkeeper for something to shave with.

He turned, and his heart nearly stopped at the sight of Malekh at Xiaodan’s side, pulling the rest of the covers over her. “The fuck did you come from?” he choked out.

Malekh nodded at the now-shut window. “Keep it locked next time.”

“You didn’t join us.”

The lord’s gaze drifted toward his fiancée’s sleeping face. “She needed someone gentler tonight.”

“And you don’t?”

The vampire's golden gaze was back on him. "I have an urge for something rougher."

"So I'm good enough to talk to now?" Remy asked, stung and still a little horny. "Now that you want to wet your cock you're going to—"

Malekh's teeth sank into his shoulder, and Remy shuddered. "It would have been irresponsible to vent all my pent-up frustrations on the road with Xiaodan incapacitated. I have been very patient, listening to all your aggravating talk about... insect wars. Chickens." He actually sounded pained, and the heat inside Remy only escalated. "I amused myself with the many different ways I might otherwise keep your mouth occupied on the journey here."

"So you wanted to rush all the way here because you were *raunchy* and Xiaodan couldn't—"

Malekh kissed him again, and this time Remy finally shut up.



NOT ON the bed, Malekh had said. They might wake Xiaodan, despite the latter having slept through terrible roads, a thunderstorm, and an ambush.

They wound up breaking the dresser, the only other furniture of note in the room. It was staved in now, having been slammed into the wall behind it so hard that the wood had broken from the impact. Remy was certain there were still a few splinters lodged in his hip. Worth it, though; he was sore in all the right, satisfying ways, and some of the hardness had left Malekh's expression, however slightly.

"Did I hurt you?" Malekh's voice was rough, husky.

"No," Remy said, slightly dazed. He'd been deposited back onto the bed, where he'd immediately planted himself face-first onto the pillow. His right arm throbbed; he'd bitten down hard on it, worried that he'd shout the place down.

Normally Malekh would take up watch beside the window as was his habit, always on guard. Instead, Remy heard him moving around the room; a minute later, he felt a piece of cloth against his backside, warm and soothing. The lord then found himself a spot beside Remy, hand combing slowly through his hair. It felt like he was waiting for

Remy to speak. And for the first time since leaving Elouve, it almost felt like he was willing to listen.

“Some days I wonder if I really should have left Elouve,” Remy mumbled. “Don’t know why I’d think that. Only Elke and Riones ever liked me, and I’m not even sure Giselle ever did. I was just a rare specimen she could parade on her arm and flaunt to the rest of the ton. Someone she could taunt Astonbury with.”

He paused. Malekh still said nothing.

“You said the courts look down on familiars,” Remy continued.

“The more militant of them, yes. Doesn’t stop them from taking humans of their own.”

“You’ve barely spoken a word to me. You have every reason to despise me for what happened to—to...” Remy couldn’t even bring himself to say Naji’s name. “But you agreed to bring me along. I could have stayed in Elouve if you didn’t want me here—”

“That isn’t the case.” Remy felt the man’s hand tighten against his hair. “And you would not have been happy in Elouve, for all your hesitation about leaving.”

“Why?” The words hung thick in his throat. “I would have hated myself in your place. I shouldn’t have let her use me to—I’m a liability. I can’t—”

Malekh yanked his head up—unexpected enough for Remy to start in surprise, but not enough that it hurt. Not enough to protest when Malekh’s mouth came crashing down on his.

The kiss was forceful, starved. And when Malekh lifted his head back up and the words came, they were harsh and angry, as they had to be. “Don’t you think I know how difficult it is to wrench your mind free, having spent the greater part of a century as a thrall to the Night King, unable to disobey him even as he sent me to kill in his name? I don’t blame you for Naji, Pendergast. The blame is on me. I should have ordered him to stay with Lady Whittaker at the farmstead. I failed Naji, and I failed you.”

Remy stared at him. Not once during the journey had he thought Malekh’s silence as guilt. “There was no way for you to know that the Night Empress was my mother. I won’t sit here and watch you punish yourself for that. The only sin you’ve committed is ignoring me and letting me think you didn’t want me along.”

There was no mistaking Malekh’s reaction this time, eyes back to a bright gold as if they hadn’t broken the damned furniture already. “Xiaodan and I will always want you

along.” He bent his head, and for a moment, despite his soreness and bruised back, Remy thought he was ready to go again, and his exhaustion fell away in anticipation.

Instead, he felt the lightest of touches on the side of his neck where Malekh had bitten him. The lord shifted to give him a more comfortable position on the bed. “Rest tonight,” the vampire said quietly. “It will take us a few more days to reach my court, but I intend to stop by Libéliard along the way.” The hand lingered; a thumb grazed at the spot where his neck met collarbone, and Remy shivered without meaning to. “Close the shutter behind me.”

He was out the window before Remy could yell at him to use the door like everyone else. Grumbling, he went and locked it, then slouched back down next to Xiaodan, who slept blissfully on. His hand wandered to the spot where the lord’s hand had been, then jerked back when he realized it.

“Bastard,” he muttered, not without affection and a good amount of relief.



TRANSFORMATIONS

Malekh settled accounts with the innkeeper the following morning, and the sorry state of the dresser was resolved with generous portions of gold and copper. The latter accepted payment with little fuss, he and Remy surreptitiously avoiding eye contact.

It was a strange night. Remy had dreamed of his nanny, Miss Grissell. She was singing the Tithian lullaby she'd taught him as a child. The song once put him at ease, before his mother had used it to invade his fucking mind. He'd bolted up from bed, panicked and still groggy, only to be pulled toward a hard chest and a gruff voice by his ear, telling him to go back to sleep, and to the warmth of Xiaodan cuddled at his other side. She was still sleeping when dawn arrived, but Malekh was gone again, leaving Remy shivering slightly from the cool morning air.

The bulk of the villagers' fears, as far as Remy could determine, was focused on the rash of attacks sweeping the border between Aluria and Kerenai, the latter being King Hallifax's kingdom—a good five hundred miles away, though the distance did nothing to ease their worries. “No attacks around these parts,” said one of the inn's other patrons as Remy took time to enjoy one last drink before departing. “Not yet at least, thank the Light.” Remy thought about the ambush only the night before and silently disagreed.

The helhests were where they had left them the previous night, damp from the rain but pleased to see them. Malekh laid Xiaodan gently down inside the carriage. Remy

paused by the side door.

“You said that we were heading to Libéliard?” It was a larger town than most, tucked into the northwestern part of the kingdom some hundreds or so miles from Rocksplen, and they were likely to reach it sometime that afternoon if Malekh allowed his horses freer reign. But it was an odd decision, considering how adamant Malekh had been about avoiding human civilization since starting out.

“Eugenie has set up shop there. She’ll know more about what’s been happening at Hallifax’s borders.” Malekh frowned. “I’m not sure I like the news coming out of his territories, but I want to separate what’s true from the exaggerated.”

“How’d you even know that she was at Libé—was that why you were skulking about the village last night?”

Malekh looked at him like he had never skulked a day in his unnatural life and was insulted at such a suggestion. “Eugenie has contacts in every village along the trading routes between here and Kerenai. It was only a question of ferreting out her contact in Rocksplen and gleaning the information from them.”

“Suppose it would be nice to have a roof over our heads for a second day running.” Remy liked Eugenie. The resourceful information broker was likely to know what was going on before anyone in Elouve ever caught wind of it.

Still, he lingered before climbing inside the coach. Malekh paused, watching him with a raised eyebrow.

“I had second thoughts about leaving Elouve,” Remy admitted. “But I’m glad I’m here. Wouldn’t have missed it.”

“And we are glad for your company, Pendergast,” Malekh said, moving to pat Peanut on the head.

The rains had since abated. Malekh had found no other vampires lying in wait, leaving them without answers as to the storm’s true nature. The fog was still shit, with Remy’s visibility down to no more than several yards beyond the carriage window. But Malekh seemed to know where to go despite the soupy haze, and both Peanut and Cookie soldiered on without hesitation at breakneck speed.

No other vampire hordes accosted them, leaving Remy with little else but Xiaodan and his own thoughts for company. He stared out the window and reflected on the First Court, on his mother.

He didn't want to think about having to kill Ligaya Pendergast. He didn't want to think about her song in his head, about being so powerless that he'd killed Naji.

Xiaodan shifted in her sleep, pressed the side of her face against his hand, and murmured something into it.

"You worry too much," Remy told her, resisting the urge to kiss her cheek. "I'll deal with it when I deal with it."

It took a little more than three hours to reach the town of Libéliard. Remy had never been here before; it was not in an area vampires were known to frequent, with a dash more sun than most places in Aluria. Already the rains were letting up, the fog lifting, and the clouds looking marginally less gray than before.

Libéliard itself was a bustling place, a nexus of trade. Just like in Ankersaud, merchants and peddlers were a constant presence, most traveling from the northern and eastern kingdoms to sell wares not often found in Elouve. Eugenie seemed to thrive when keeping herself at the center of human activity, an unusual lifestyle for a vampire. They threaded their way toward Eugenie's domicile, which turned out to be one of the larger residences in town: an impressive two-story brownstone made from a combination of whitewashed bricks and adobe.

As always, Eugenie was somehow dressed for both camouflage and attention. A protrusion of peacock plumes formed a nest atop her head, and her dress was sewn with hundreds of trimmed feathers in every color known to man. She soon had Xiaodan stretched out on a comfortable-looking bed, fussing over her form.

Paolo, her companion, was as crotchety as ever. He held a tray bearing several hot beverages, wordlessly proffering a mug to Remy with a welcoming grunt.

Eugenie affectionately brushed a strand of hair out of Xiaodan's face. "The poor girl. She's young by our standards, but already she's been through so much."

"It's very good to see you again, Eugenie," Remy said quietly. "I wished it was under better circumstances."

"There is much to do," the woman said, "and I am sure that Lord Malekh here is already quite pressed for time. Saracosa is gone, milord, as are many other villages."

Malekh stared at her. Remy was reminded of their first meeting, when she'd told them that Brushfen had been razed to the ground and its villagers killed. "Overwhelmed by kindred?"

“Yes. The majority of Hallifax’s soldiers have retreated to his stronghold at Wycaff, prepared to defend it and their liege to the death if necessary. But every village and town between there and Derila to the north has been reported lost to the waves of vampires who had emerged out of nowhere and had laid waste to their lands.”

“Since when?”

“We only received confirmation of this an hour before I sent a pigeon to my Rockspen informant.” Eugenie shook her head. “By all accounts, it was a massacre. Far, far worse than what had transpired at Brushfen. My source at Saracosa was fortunate enough to get out before the worst could befall him, and only because he was already near the borders at Parhi when the attacks began. You can speak to him if you’d like. He’s reliable, and has a cool head in desperate situations, and is currently fortifying himself with our ale reserves in the kitchen. He’s quite shaken—he had good friends killed before his own eyes in a coordinated attack.”

“But so quickly?” Remy asked hoarsely. If only Wycaff, Kerenai’s capital, remained standing in between, then that meant over a hundred miles had been taken by vampires in the space of one night.

“First Court,” Malekh said tersely, an answer more than a question.

Eugenie nodded. “There was no mistaking their scarlet robes, milord. Perhaps it would be better if you spoke to him directly, if you can forgive his state of inebriation. It is not something that I would wish on any human to endure, sober or not.”

Leaving Paolo to keep vigil over Xiaodan, they made for the kitchen. The informant in question was by the pantry, a nearly empty tankard of ale in his hands. His clothes were muddy and bloodstained, and he stank as if he’d been rolling around in a pigsty. But even in his distress, he was mindful of where he stood to keep the mud off Eugenie’s clean floor.

He took a swig from the tankard and nodded abruptly at them as they approached. His demeanor was calmer than Remy had expected, but there was no mistaking the haunted look in his eyes. His hands shook slightly as he tipped his head back to finish the dregs.

“Mason,” Eugenie said, in a gentle voice. “There are some patrons of mine who would like more information about what happened in the north.”

“What can I tell them that they cannot already imagine, Eugenie?” the man asked wearily. “Would you like me to recount how people were torn limb from limb by those vile crimson fiends? How they lapped up the children’s blood, toyed with the villagers who attempted to crawl away, taking their lives at the very last moment in horrible, painful ways? Demons spawned from the darkest pits of hell, one and all. I wish them all dead with every fiber of my being. Could you spare another tankard, milady? I still cannot wash the taste of copper from my mouth.”

Eugenie wordlessly passed him a second bottle. The poor man downed it all in one go.

“We can do little now to save those villagers,” Malekh said, “but trust that we will do our utmost to prevent more deaths. What of the kindred that attacked? How large was the horde? How did you learn that the same had occurred in the other towns?”

Mason squinted up at him. “You’re one of them, aren’t you?” he asked accusingly, but with none of the anger. “One of those fanged bastard nobles who want peace with the rest of us. Well, that peace is dead, milord, after everything I’ve seen. I wasn’t the only one of Eugenie’s people sequestered up north, just the one that got away. It was Rylen who came riding in with his horse all tuckered out, panicked and sounding the alarm. He’d just come from Ferilwen, he said, and the only reason they held out long enough for him to get away was because of all the soldiers coming in from nearby Lufthan on their way back to King Hallifax, a pox on his name for all eternity. Rylen had gotten a couple of those men drunk hours before, learned that Hallifax was pulling them back into the capital because of ‘certain incidents farther north,’ to quote him precisely. They knew little themselves, only that the king was adamant they return to the capital immediately.”

He barked out a laugh. “Turns out the vampires were only three quarters of an hour behind the regiment. Vampires and one hideous mutation that spewed poison. They were all silent, moved like strung-up marionettes, he said. Didn’t matter; they killed quick enough. Rylen barely escaped with his horse. Rode nonstop until he arrived at Saracosa, and even then, he beat the ghouls by only two hours. Enough time to relay to me everything he’d been told, before we were attacked in turn.”

He shuddered. “Rylen thought he’d gotten away, but he didn’t, milord. They must have gotten to him—some bite or mark that festered. Minutes before the vampires

showed up, he turned. Didn't realize what was happening himself. Thought he'd go into a frenzy, but it was far worse than that. He—" The man gulped. "He started growing. Massive-like, with awful scales popping up all over his body. His skin melted off before he even had time to scream. He looked like... them. Like some creature of the deep, eyes like hell. They turned him, I know they did."

"No. They couldn't have." Remy leaned forward, knuckles white against the table. There was *no way* the First Court could've gotten their hands on Dr. Yost's formula to create mutations of their own...

... Or could they? Vasilik, Malekh's former lover, had acquired a colossus of his own, using his own blood to make it his perfectly obedient thrall. Before his death, he had hinted at an alliance with the Night Empress herself. Any secrets he might have gleaned from Remy's father, he could have passed on to the court he served.

Malekh had already come to the same conclusion, several steps ahead of Remy besides. He grabbed Mason by his shirt collar.

"What are you doing?" Eugenie exclaimed.

But Malekh was already forcing the man's head back, ripping part of his shirt in the process to reveal a deep, ugly-looking gash that started from the man's collarbone and retreated farther down his chest. It was putrefied and decomposing rapidly before their eyes, flesh sloughing to reveal bubbling sores underneath.

"Mason," Eugenie gasped. "The good Light, Mason, what did they do to you?"

The man stared helplessly back at them. "Impossible," he rasped. "Rylen took a swipe, but there was no mark on me when I arrived. It can't be—Rylen got it different. Lost his mind before he started mutating. They overwhelmed Hallifax's towns. I'm—no. Got to warn everyone. Got to—got to—"

His face shifted—literally, as if something had burrowed beneath his skin and was scurrying up the side of his cheek under the flesh. The veins on his neck began to stand out, bulging forward as if they were a separate organism of their own.

"I'm so sorry, Mason," Eugenie whispered and lifted her hand. Remy hadn't noticed it before, but her nails were long and sharp.

The man's head dropped to the floor, shorn of neck. But even then, his body continued to tremble and shift, the muscles in his arms bunching up and swelling to double, then triple their sizes.

“Stay back, Eugenie,” Malekh ordered, though the point was moot.

“We have to evacuate the whole town,” Remy said, Breaker already in his grip. He slid the knifechain out, the spike attached to the other end swinging. “We need to at least get it out of this place before—”

He felt the sudden rush of heat from behind him as a great burst of light illuminated the room, and his instinct was to duck and cover his face with one hand while the other raised Breaker in anticipation of some new blow.

Lightning sizzled past them in the space between him and Malekh. It struck the still-transforming Mason, obliterating his body in an instant. It was a familiar brightness—one Remy had seen indirectly many times before.

He turned.

Xiaodan stood in the doorway, hands on her hips and glaring at them like they were all somehow at fault. Her eyes were a blazing gray. Beside her was Paolo, looking discombobulated.

There was a faint noise from the floor where Mason’s head lay, still moving and groaning, still transforming. Xiaodan leveled a finger at it. Another burst of light exploded at the tip, effectively blowing it into nothingness. Her arm wavered.

Malekh caught her just as she slumped to the floor, unconscious once again.

“I don’t understand,” Eugenie quavered into the silence. “You said that she was no longer able to summon the sun.”

“That’s what we thought. This changes matters. You must ask the captain in charge to inspect everyone in town and monitor those with suspicious injuries. It’s clear to me now that some of the mutations attacking the villages were born in this same manner.” Malekh paused, his gaze straying back to the floor where Mason had been. “I’m sorry about your informant.”

Eugenie sighed heavily. “He was dedicated until the very end. If you hadn’t been here when he had...” She shuddered. “I’m friends with the commander stationed here, and I shall send word to him immediately. I would not wish the same fate for this town as Brushfen and Saracosa. What do you intend to do next?”

“Any hope of treating Xiaodan lies within my laboratory at the Fata Morgana. And if the borders between Hallifax’s kingdom and Aluria are about to be overrun, then we must act quickly to prevent both First Court vampires and mutations from finding