

[A Wayward Path]

In a country riddled with turmoil, there lie those souls who remain as passive observers to this ever-changing place. Those that sidestep the normal stresses of everyday life are only hiding the truly sinister things in their lives. Many of these souls are the victims and pawns of fate and its cruel games.

Once upon a time in Liam there were two sisters. Both were equally set in their looks. The sister with grey eyes had received their father's natural skill for fighting, while the other merely received their mother's cold, bitter heart. The bitter one, who beheld blue eyes like the sea, was seven years older than her sister was.

The sister named Neva stood upon the balcony of her home in the Nobles' Division of Viland. A gentle wind carrying the stale, acrid scent of the city air gently swept across her stern face, etched with an unforgiving frown. Neva was far from being a noble herself, but it was her father's residence. Her father needed the homestead to deceive the passersby into thinking them ordinary nobles. The last thing Neva wanted was publicity. Her name was infamous, but it was wrongly so.

Neva's blue eyes swept over the bland scenery. Overly decorated homes with intricate, pompous designs lined the stone roads. Men and women looking as prim as their homes sauntered down the streets. The sun was slowly falling behind the towering abodes of the materialistic aristocrats. Neva sighed as she thought of the life she had led thus far.

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A young, eight year old Neva timidly followed her father into the forest. He was a strong, determined man with a violent temper. Her father had blue eyes that shone like crystals, giving him a sensitive appearance. His looks deterred his true, sadistic self. The man was notorious for his violence, and his name was Nikolai Acrolith.

They continued through the thick forest. Neva endeavored to cover her fear. Her inner being quivered with trepidation as she followed her vicious father. He stopped immediately and turned his head. Neva cautiously peered over her shoulder to see what he was looking at. She turned to see a glimpse of her mother running with her sister in a basket. After her mother came four Lycans, each ratty and disease-ridden.

Her mother was Yomi Desiree, and her sister's name was Aeyla. Neva had a strong dislike towards her sister since she was born. Her parents had given all of Neva's old things to Aeyla. Neva envied the attention her young sister received and couldn't care less about her.

She watched the child in the basket whimper and fuss. Neva closed her eyes as the Lycans drew nearer to her mother. She heard her sister cry out. Then, the Lycan's snarling grew louder as her mother screamed. Neva opened her eyes to see them maul her mother. Neva screamed and fell to the ground in tears. Her father sent a kick to her side and glared at her. Neva wiped her face and sniffed as she stood up. The Lycans charged towards Nikolai, and he began to fight them off.

Neva, in fright, ran away from all the brutality. She tripped over surfaced tree roots and fell to the ground. As she brought herself to her knees, Neva saw a large grey Lycan pick her sister up and drag her into the basket a few feet away. She watched as the Lycan wrapped the blanket, embroidered with Neva's name, around the child. The Lycan took the handle of the basket in his teeth and disappeared into the surrounding foliage.

Neva wondered where the Lycan was going, for she could see he wasn't a normal one. Then, her father came behind her and placed a hand upon her shoulder.

"Where did your sister get to?" he asked firmly.

Neva replied distantly, "A...a dog carried her off."

"Right then," Nikolai said. He turned and began to walk away from the disturbing scene.

Neva followed him, feeling deep in shock. They returned to their home just outside of Helix, which was now quieted from the lack of residents.

A few days later a man dressed in a black robe came to their home. Nikolai opened the door and perked a brow. Without a word, he motioned for the man to come in. The man stepped inside, and they walked to Nikolai's office. Neva curiously followed them. She sat outside the door as they began to speak.

"Master Acrolith," said the man in black, "I come bearing news of your child."

"Neva?" Nikolai inquired.

The man answered nervously, "Th-that is what he c-calls her, Master..." Nikolai peered at the man inquisitively.

"He?"

"Yes sir," he replied. "The man who...who found her. He claimed of finding a child in the temple of the village he lived in. He says the child's name is Neva, so I came to you as fast as I could."

"Neva!" Nikolai boomed in a deep voice.

Neva, still seated outside the door, quietly snuck down the hall. Then, she walked back to the door to give the pretense of not having been there listening.

"Yes, my father? You called?" Neva said.

Nikolai's blue eyes focused on the man before him menacingly.

He said in a low tone, "Who do you think you are toying with, Othedius?"

"That is n-not the child the man had, sir. She...she was merely an infant," the man named Othedius replied nervously.

"Aeyla," Nikolai growled. "It just seems so improbable..."

"I was sure it was your child sir. She looks just like your wife," Othedius said.

Neva slowly backed out of the room. She remembered the Lycan in the forest. He looked like an aged one. She couldn't figure out why he took her sister as he did, but he did it. Now, a nice man adopted Aeyla, while Neva was stuck with their father.

"Hmm," her father mused. His cerulean eyes scanned Neva as she stood nervously at the doorway.

"You can leave, Othedius," he said after a moment of silence. The man in the black robe nodded and walked out of the room.

"Now, Neva..."

"Yes sir?" she said nervously.

Nikolai looked at her with her cold, blue eyes and said, "We have some things to do." He got up from his desk and looked out the window. Neva peered up at her father in fear as he grinned to himself.

For the next nine years, Neva's father trained her to be a skilled fighter. He trained her in every aspect of combat that could be fought. He never taught her the dark magicks he had learned, but anything else he knew soon became her knowledge. All the while, Nikolai kept a close watch upon young Aeyla as she grew. Neva came to loathe

her sister for being adopted by a caring man, while she had to stay with her father. She loathed her even more for stealing her name.

One evening, Nikolai walked in the door with a young Vampire behind him. They approached Neva, who was now nearing eighteen years. She looked up at both of them and started to get out of her chair. Nikolai placed a hand upon her shoulder. Neva sighed, and she returned to her seat without saying anything.

“Neva, this is Orion Relas. He’s a prince of the Vampire clan in the north,” Nikolai introduced. The Vampire smiled showing his large canines. He took Neva’s hand and kissed it. She cringed in disgust and pulled her hand away.

Her father continued, “I know this may seem unorthodox for both parties, but I would like for Prince Orion to marry you, Neva.”

“I...marry that thing?” she asked feeling revolted. Nikolai perked a brow as Orion furrowed his brows.

“Please, Lady Neva, I beg of you. I am more than what I appear. I feel it would be in the best interest of both families for our marriage,” the prince pleaded.

“Neva will think about it, I am sure,” Nikolai said as he glared at his daughter. She sighed and averted her cerulean eyes, much like her father’s, down at the table.

She mumbled, “I bet Aeyla won’t have to put up with this.”

Nikolai lifted his hand to slap her, and Neva instinctively raised her arms up to block any incoming blows. The prince merely watched the two of them curiously.

Nikolai replied angrily, “I’m sure *her* father will offer *her* men to marry as well.”

“Yeah, that’s just it, *Father*,” she said defiantly. “*Men*. I wish not to sound like spoiled royalty, but to bring me home a Vampire is almost disgracing. I’d sooner marry a drunk. No offense to you, Vampire prince. You’re not my type, much less breed.”

“Go up to your room and study lesson thirteen from volume three of your books, Neva.”

“Oh, of course. I know that one by heart. ‘Honor Thy Father,’ right? Well, unfortunately *my* father is a selfish beast!” Neva yelled.

Immediately, Nikolai’s infamous anger rose, and he brutally backhanded Neva, sending her to the floor. Prince Orion instantly grabbed Nikolai by the throat.

He yelled deeply, “How dare you hit the woman!”

Nikolai pried the Vampire’s hands off his neck and threw him against the wall. The Vampire hissed and glared at Nikolai. Then, he lunged at him with exceptional endurance. Before Nikolai could react, Orion had his fangs pressed to his neck. Then, he stopped as he peered at the man before him.

“No, I’m not going to kill you. I have something else in mind. The Western clan needs a...specimen such as you,” Orion said threateningly.

Nikolai’s eyes grew wide at the mentioning of the Western Vampire clan. Never before had Neva’s father shown fear to any creature. Neva grinned sourly at her father. He began to fiercely struggle, but Prince Orion dug one of his nails Nikolai’s neck. With a sigh, he fell to the ground at Orion’s feet.

“Do not worry, my lady. It was merely poison with which to make him unconscious. Unless it is not in your favor, I wish to take this madman to the Western Vampire clan,” he said as he picked up Nikolai’s motionless body.

“Please, be my guest,” Neva said as she smiled.

Prince Orion smiled in return and replied, “Someday I will gain your favor, if this

does not prove myself to you.”

She said as she began to walk away, “I wouldn’t hold my breath if I were you.”

“We shall see, Neva,” he said. Then, in a white flash, Prince Orion disappeared with her father, and Neva couldn’t have been happier.

She decided to leave the house in favor of something more. Neva wondered if she should find her sister, but she doubted if she could face her without wanting to kill her first. Neva put a few things together to take and left the house she had so longed to leave behind since childhood. She had the foreboding feeling that this would not be the end of all dealings with the house, her father, or the Vampire prince.

Neva, with her leather bag upon her shoulder, walked into the large city of Helix. She walked into a small tavern and up to the barkeeper.

“Well, hello there. Don’t get many of your type in here. What’d you like?” he said with a smile.

“By my type you mean *what* exactly?” she asked. “And I’d like a brandy.” She threw a few pieces of silver on the bar as the barkeeper turned to his collection of bottles.

“I mean women...that aren’t prostitutes. You aren’t a prostitute, are you?” he asked. He set a full glass of brandy in front of her and swept the coins off the table in one fluid motion.

Neva replied as she looked at the glass in front of her, “No. Far from it, if I do say so myself.”

She sniffed the glass and held it to the light briefly. The barkeeper raised a brow and watched her as she did so.

“Uh, miss...?” he inquired.

Neva answered, “Just checking.”

“For what?” he asked.

“Hmm, anything. Poisons, excess alcohol...” she replied.

The barkeeper shrugged and said, “You’re an odd one alright. I can tell you’re a foreigner. Where did you come from?”

“Around,” she replied as she took a sip.

Neva found that it was simple brandy. She leaned back in her chair and placed her feet atop the bar as she drank. The place was small and quiet, but it was much neater than those she had seen before. The smell didn’t reek of sweaty men and beer. It smelled pleasantly of alcohol and fresh pine.

A man in a dark green cloak entered the tavern and seated himself next to Neva. Removing his hood, Neva found that he was a rather handsome man. His hair was black and short. The very ends of his bangs hung gently over his soft hazel eyes. The man’s face was stern, yet his smile was bright and cheerful.

“I’d like the usual, Rod,” he said placing a few silver coins in the barkeeper’s hand.

The barkeeper nodded and poured him some custom brewed ale. The man took a drink before turning to Neva, who was still sipping at her brandy.

The man smiled and said, “Here’s a new face. Who might this filly be, Rod?”

“Well, I’ve yet to ask her name,” replied the barkeeper.

The man turned to Neva and peered at her expectantly. She merely shifted in her seat, facing away from the two. Neva continued drinking her brandy silently.

The man laughed and said, “I see how it is. My name’s Lee Bennett. The

barkeeper's name is Rodney. May I ask yours?" He placed a hand on her shoulder and flashed a charming smile.

"Yes, but there's no telling as to what I'll answer with," she replied as she gingerly pushed his hand off her shoulder. She turned in her seat and flashed him a faux smile. Both Rodney and Lee laughed. Lee took another sip of his drink.

"I like this girl already," Rodney said as he poured another patron a drink.

Lee asked, "So, Mystery Woman, do you plan on staying in Helix for long?"

"Hmm, depends," she replied as she downed the last of her brandy.

"On what?" Lee inquired.

Rodney offered to refill her glass, and Neva shook her head.

Neva then turned to Lee and said, "If I can find work. Why so curious?"

"Well, just making conversation," he replied with a smile.

"Is that so? Well," Neva said as she stood from her chair, "I should just end this conversation."

Neva heaved her bag onto her shoulders and began to walk out of the tavern. At the door, Lee stopped her.

He put his hand on her shoulder and said in a hushed tone, "I can find you work."

"What kind?" she whispered back.

"Come with me," he said.

Neva looked at him cautiously and replied, "Why should I trust you?"

"Why shouldn't you?" he asked. Again, he flashed his charming smile.

Neva shrugged and followed him out of the tavern. *I've been well trained*, she thought. *If this is a scam, I can handle this.*

Lee led her down the narrow streets of the city. People seemed to flood everywhere in every direction of the city. They crammed themselves in like cows. The noise and the smell soon diminished as they made their way to the older, unpopulated region of Helix. It was in the shadow of the great wall surrounding Helix that a lone building stood, looking larger than others.

Lee stopped and said, "This is headquarters for the gang."

"You brought me here to see a *gang*?" she said slightly aggravated.

"Not just any gang. We're those live under the shadow of the southwest wall," he said with a grin.

Neva replied, "Which means absolutely nothing to me. I think I'll pass."

"Ah, don't sound too put off yet. Just wait and see," Lee said.

He led her to the side of the building. There was windowless door with a keyhole hidden amongst the ivy climbing chaotically up the side of the white stone building. Lee withdrew a key from within his cloak and unlocked the door. They entered the building to find the inside was very nicely furnished. He escorted her down the hallway and stopped in front of the door. Lee knocked twice and walked inside. He motioned for her to come in.

"Hello Bennett," said a woman sitting by the window. She had the look of a fighter. Her voice was hoarse, and her body was unfeminine.

Lee smiled and replied, "Greetings ma'am. I have brought someone to help us. I'm not sure what work she's able to do, but I am sure you can use her for something, right?"

"Of course. I have a use for many different kinds of people in this world," she

replied as she stood. Neva looked to Lee as he kept his eyes focused upon the woman.

“What’s her name?” she asked.

“I...don’t know...” he replied.

The woman peered at him inquisitively and said, “Why bring a woman in when you don’t even know her name?”

“Well, she just wouldn’t tell me. That’s all,” Lee said.

The woman walked up to Neva and looked her in the eyes. The woman’s dark eyes searched Neva’s blue ones.

“You think you’re better than all this?” the woman asked.

“And if I do?” Neva replied in a challenging tone. Lee cleared his throat nervously.

The woman said, “If I were a scrawny wench like you, I’d learn to keep my mouth shut in such situations.”

“Seeing as you’re far from it, how would you know?” Neva retorted with a sneer.

Lee’s hazel eyes opened widely as he peered at Neva. The woman began to laugh, and she seated herself behind a desk with a smile.

“Well, you’ve picked up yourself an interesting character alright. So what *is* your name?” the woman asked.

“My name is Neva,” she said.

“Very well, Neva. I am Master Kelly. *You* will call me Master and Master only,” she said watching Neva closely.

“Alright,” Neva said as she nodded.

“What *can* you do exactly?” Kelly asked.

Neva answered, “A lot of things, my main forte being fighting.”

“Really now. Anyone can fight. Can you fight good?” Master Kelly asked. Neva perked a brow and looked at her.

“Well,” she said. There was a pause as Kelly glanced at her quizzically.

Kelly inquired, “Well what?”

““Can you fight well?” I was correcting your sentence grammar,” Neva replied. Kelly glared at Neva. Lee looked at both of them in silence.

She continued, “Anyway, yes, I can fight fairly well. My father trained me in many different combat styles. I feel as though I would be fit for all the types of combat needed.”

“We’ll see how good you truly are then. I’d like to see you in the ring with another applicant of ours,” Kelly said. “He, along with a few other matches, have some skills.”

“Has,” Neva corrected with slight exasperation. Once again, Kelly glared at her.

She said, “Let’s go already.” Neva nodded and followed her out. Behind Neva, followed Lee.

“I want to see *this*,” Lee said with a smile.

Neva replied, “Oh, you’ll see something alright.”

“Yeah, well the other guy we have in there is pretty good,” he said scratching his head.

Neva scoffed as all three made their way to the back of the building. A door led to the fighting ring. Standing beside the door was a man dressed in mismatched articles of armor. He was tall, but Neva found it obvious that he would have a lack of finesse or

grace in his moves.

Kelly motioned towards the man and said, "This is Charlie. He's...skilled, I'll say. Take a weapon from the wall behind you. I don't care what. This isn't a death match, so just neutralize each other."

Neva nodded and grabbed a wooden staff. She knew her varied skills wouldn't let her down. The man laughed and pulled a mace from the wall.

"You're going to defeat me...with a stick?" he said.

Neva smiled and nodded as she replied mockingly, "Yes, I will defeat the man who can't seem to pair two gauntlets of the same material...with a stick." He glared at her fiercely.

"We don't have time for children's games. Let's go," Charlie said as he opened the door to the ring. Both he and Neva entered, and Kelly closed the door behind the two.

"Remember," Kelly shouted, "just neutralize. Don't kill." Neva nodded and prepared herself. "Go!"

Charlie took a step forward, and Neva braced herself. Her hands tightly wrapped around the slim, wooden pole. Then, Charlie jumped forward in a meager attempt to attack her. She effortlessly evaded his assault. Neva swung her staff, sweeping it across his legs. Charlie was sent face first onto the dirt floor of the fighting arena. Unfortunately for him, his mace fell first, and he landed on top of it. The spikes dug into his weak leather cuirass and pierced his abdomen. Neva held her staff ready, but Charlie didn't move. He groaned, and Neva threw her staff down.

"Come on, Charlie," she said as she bent down. She slowly picked him up and dragged him to the door of the arena. Kelly opened it and looked at Neva.

"Charlie? Charlie! Come on, man!" Kelly yelled.

Charlie merely groaned in response. Kelly sighed and took him from Neva. Then, she began walking down the hall.

Kelly yelled over her shoulder, "I'll be right back, Neva. Don't you go anywhere now. I need to see you against someone who's not an oaf..."

Droplets of blood became soaked into the wood floors in the building as she carried him off. Lee turned to Neva and stared at her.

"Was that...intentional?" he asked.

Neva shook her head and replied, "No. Even if I had the skill to do it purposefully, I wouldn't have the heart. I've no quarrels with the man; therefore I wish no ill tidings upon him." She watched the two disappear down the hall before looking at Lee. His hazel eyes were focused upon hers intently.

"There's...something about you. I just can't quite put it into words," he said.

She perked a brow and inquired, "Is it a good something?"

"I don't know," Lee replied. "Just something different, which I suppose can be good." He smiled at her beguilingly.

She rolled her eyes and focused her attention down the hall. Neva wanted another fighter to challenge. She wanted to prove to both Kelly and herself that she could fight. After a few moments, Master Kelly walked down the hallway followed by a young man.

"Now, let's see how this will go. His name is Clark. This young man may be green, but he has some talent no doubt," Kelly said.

Neva nodded and looked at the young man. He looked as plain as plain could be and wore no armor. He grabbed a longsword from the wall and made his way to the door.

Neva entered the ring and picked up her staff where she left it. After Clark entered the ring, Kelly closed the door and watched from the window.

“Alright, ready? Go!” she yelled.

They slowly circled each other for a few paces before Neva struck out with her staff. Clark parried it quickly with his longsword and attempted to make a hit to her left side. Neva was too fast and caught his sword. Neva took the staff in both hands to block his next strike. Clark’s sword bit into the wood of the staff.

Neva took the opportunity to disarm her opponent by kicking his abdomen. He doubled over, letting go of his sword, and Neva flung the staff to the other side of the arena. Clark attempted to run to his sword, but Neva grabbed him by the neck and slammed him to the ground. He lay stunned before he placed one hand in the air, signaling his surrender.

“Very good!” Kelly shouted.

Neva helped Clark get to his feet. They picked up their weapons as they walked in. Clark was in full health other than a few bruises. Kelly opened the door for them smiling. Neva placed her weapon upon the rack.

Neva turned to Kelly and said, “So, assess me on my skill, if you’d be so kind.”

Kelly replied, “Well, you’re not bad. I can say that much. I’d be honored for you to join us.”

“What do you call yourselves?” Neva asked.

“Nothing,” she answered. “We have no name. Others call us ‘those in the shadow of the wall,’ but that’s only for lack of a better name. I’ll call on you when I need something done, Neva. Now for housing...hmm. Lee, would you take her to the living quarters?”

“Yes ma’am,” he replied.

Lee motioned for Neva to follow him, and he led her down a series of halls, past numerous doors whose inner recesses were only mysteries. Lee directed her to a hall of paneled wood. The doors looked freshly painted, and each had its own number. The numbers didn’t run numerically or by any organization method. There were simply numbers. Neva was sure the numbers upon the doors were as mystifying as the things kept behind them. Lee stopped at a door labeled ‘617’. Its neighbors were ‘599’ and ‘45’. Neva found there was a white room with a sofa and fireplace. There were two doors in the room, each painted white.

Lee pointed to the door on the far side of the room and said, “You can sleep there I guess. I sleep in the other room there. It wouldn’t hurt anything if we slept in the same dorm, right?” He smiled with his pleasant grin.

“Well, if certain people snoop about when they shouldn’t, things may come to harm,” she replied with a sarcastic smile. Lee grinned at her as she walked towards her room. Neva opened the door to a blue room. There was a bed and two dressers. The solo window in the room was adorned with a sky blue curtain. The light filtered through the curtain was pale.

Neva placed her bag on the bed and said to Lee as she turned around, “Thank you. This is great.”

“Of course,” he said. Lee walked into his room, and Neva lay on her bed.

The next day Neva went down to the same tavern as she had the day before. Rodney was working behind the bar and there were a few other patrons laughing

lightheartedly. Neva seated herself up by the bar and waved to Rodney.

“Hey there,” he said with a smile.

Neva greeted in return, “Hello.”

“I didn’t think I’d see your face again,” Rodney said.

“Yeah,” she replied, “I’ll be around for a long while. Give me a brandy, would you?”

“Well, good. Maybe in time I’ll finally understand you,” he commented as he laughed. He quickly poured her a glass of brandy.

“Through many glasses of brandy, I’m sure you will,” she said as she raised the glass. She held it to the light and smelled it as she did the day before. Rodney smiled and shook his head as he watched her.

“You know, if you’re going to be here awhile, you might as well trust me,” he said.

She replied, “That’s what someone who would poison my drink say.”

“Okay, fine. I did poison it,” he said sarcastically. “Tons of it too.”

“Now that you put it like *that*, I don’t think I want it now,” she said with a smile.

Rodney rolled his eyes and attended to another patron. Neva drank heartily and left in high spirits.

After a couple days had passed, Kelly assigned her to a few errands. After awhile, the errands became more serious and involved as Kelly opened up to Neva. Kelly was a very serious woman who had lived a hard life. Neva grew to know and befriend many of the secretive members within the gang. It had been long since Neva felt the warm feeling of family, and she enjoyed it.

Her most common duty was patrol duty around the headquarters. Neva would silently walk through the darkness, always looking out for any intruders. She often thought about her past on these nights. Occasionally, Lee would join her in patrolling the headquarters. They talked quietly about current affairs, but neither ever dared to ask about each other’s past. Weeks passed in the same fashion.

One night as Neva was patrolling the premises, she faintly heard the noise of light treading. Her blue eyes narrowed as she attempted to see through the night’s obscurity. Quietly, she moved towards the headquarters’ door. *They won’t be passing by me*, she thought. She saw a shadow rolling on the ground only a measurable distance away. Neva instinctively placed a hand upon her blade.

“Neva,” a voice called. She tightened her grip on her blade and continued to stare into the darkness.

She demanded, “Who calls?”

“I am Prince Orion,” he answered, “if you can recall, my lady.” Her hand fell from her blade as she heaved a soft sigh.

“Why are you here?” Neva asked. She could finally see him in the dim light. His pale Vampiric face could easily be seen against the darkness.

Orion stated, “I told you that you had not seen the last of me in that house. Long has it taken me to finally locate you, but here I am, again asking for your hand in marriage.”

“I still refuse, Orion. My apologies,” she said apathetically. “I plan on marrying a man of *my* choosing.”

“One day, my lady, it will be I whom you choose. I could swear by this,” the

prince said with a definite tone. He spoke no more as he disappeared into the darkness. Neva spent the rest of her patrol thinking about the Vampire's bold words.

The following week Kelly asked Neva to see her in her office. All Neva had heard was that she had something important to say. Neva made her way to the office. She knocked on the door briefly before going inside.

"Master?" Neva said as she closed the door behind her.

Kelly glanced up from her paperwork and said, "Good, you're here. We got this other gang hanging around. They've been coming around, and I didn't pay much attention. They seemed pretty mediocre at the time. They're threatening us, Neva. You said you had fighting skills, and I know you do, so I'm putting you up against their leader."

"The...leader?" Neva said in shock. Kelly nodded affirmatively. Never before had Neva had such a task. "This will be something of an arena match?"

"Yes, most likely it'll be in the alleyway behind their new base. If you kill the leader Neva, I will reward you very well, and you'll have the honor knowing you defeated an enemy of ours, earning my trust," Kelly said. Neva stood in silence as she thought over everything. *How good is this leader*, she thought. After some time, Neva nodded and left her office.

On her way out she said, "Tell me when, Master." Kelly nodded once more. Neva made her way down to the dorm to prepare herself mentally.

Late that night, Kelly woke her and led her outside the headquarters. Neva sleepily rubbed her eyes.

"Snap awake. See over there?" she asked pointing. Neva looked and saw two men waiting just outside an alley.

Neva asked, "Who are they?"

"They'll lead you to your opponent," Kelly answered. She thrust Neva's sword and sheath into her hands and pushed her in that direction. Neva shook off her sleepiness and prepared herself as she made her way towards the men.

"Halt, are you Neva?" one of them asked as she drew nearer. She didn't answer right away.

The other demanded, "Answer the question."

She looked up at them and said, "Yeah." They proceeded to lead her down the alleyway. It was dark, and Neva could not find herself at ease. She was constantly looking around, unaware of where she was headed. They stopped at a place where four alleys met. The darkness continued down each alley.

"Wait," said one of the men. Neva's hand involuntarily drifted to her blade handle. She nervously gripped the smooth metal. To her left, the sound of approaching footsteps echoed soundly. She awaited the person's arrival apprehensively.

"Are you...Neva?" the approaching man asked.

"What is your name?" Neva inquired. Her only answer was a cold-hearted laugh. Then, from behind her a man grabbed her, covering her mouth. The more she fought, the harder the attacker held her. She stopped fighting as soon as she felt the sharp edge of a blade against her skin.

"Now we have you," the man said. Neva still could not see who was talking. He continued, "Neva, Neva, you had rejected me with such scorn that incited such a fervent passion to prove you wrong."

“Who are you?” she mumbled.

He replied, “Your beloved Prince Orion.” Neva’s thoughts immediately froze. His voice had sounded so harsh that she couldn’t recognize him.

“You’re crazy, Vampire,” Neva said harshly. She felt the man behind her grip her harder, and the blade was further pressed into her skin.

“Don’t be so rough on her,” Orion commanded. At once, Neva was thrown to the ground. She roughly massaged her neck and looked around frantically. “I may be crazy. Perhaps it’s crazy with love, crazy with hate.”

Neva said boldly, “This will not persuade me to marry you in any way. Your efforts are in vain, Orion.” A strong silence followed her words. “Well?”

“Even in detest, you said my name, Neva. That alone causes my heart to swell. I’m afraid I must keep you until I have persuaded you to marry me.”

“Such a task is impossible, Vampire,” Neva said with disdain.

“You will see. Head out, men. Take the woman,” he ordered. Neva refused to go with them. She stood and began to run down one of the alleyways. She heard the men tailing her. A man emerged from the shadows directly in front of her. Neva collided with him and fell into his tight grasp. She heard the sound of a projectile whizzing past her ear. It was followed with three more sounds, and after the third, the man grasping her sighed and fell to the ground. Neva stood in the dark alleyway alone and scared. She heard noises but was too afraid to call out.

“Neva!” a man’s voice called to her. Her feet were firmly fastened to the cobbled alleyway below her. The man called out once more.

She finally answered in a weak voice, “Who’s there?”

“It’s Lee,” he answered. She heard him approaching her. Neva stared into the darkness until she could finally see him.

She sighed in such relief and said, “Oh, Lee, it is you! Are they gone?”

“I killed three of them, but the rest ran off,” Lee replied. She felt him take her hands, which shook violently from the trauma.

Lee said quietly, “Let’s get you to bed.” He led her back to the headquarters. All the way, she constantly peered over her shoulder, worrying about Prince Orion. She felt slightly more at ease as she entered the building. Kelly rushed at her with a worried look in her eyes.

“Neva, what happened? I heard the shouting and became worried. Lee decided to see what was happening, so what happened?” she said apprehensively.

“It was an ambush, Master,” Lee informed her. “Some Vampire with an eye for Neva tried to capture her. She just barely escaped, and I had almost been too late.”

Kelly swore irately and said, “I knew I shouldn’t have done that. I was filled with regret as soon as I shoved that sword into your hand. Well, get some rest, however much you need. In fact, have a break. No work for you for at least a week.” Neva heaved a small sigh and nodded. Lee took her to the dorm and helped her to bed.

As he pulled her blankets over her, she whispered, “I was afraid. I was...so scared, Lee.”

“I understand,” he said as he looked down at her.

“I...I couldn’t even stand my ground and fight...” she said. Lee said nothing but merely nodded sympathetically. Neva closed her eyes and fell into an uneasy sleep. Violent dreams poisoned her mind as she slept. She awoke only somewhat better than as

she had gone to bed. She decided to head to the tavern to get a drink. It was fairly early in the morning and there were few patrons around.

“Morning Neva, you’re in early,” he said cheerfully.

She merely sighed and said, “Get me the usual, Rod.” He simply nodded and did as asked. After serving other beverages he returned to Neva.

“You seem...down. What’s the matter?” he asked.

“I just had a bad night,” Neva replied.

“Well,” said he, “that’s why I’m here. Go on and tell me, Neva.” He leaned over the counter with interest as she related the previous nights’ events.

Rodney commented after she had finished, “Wow, sure sounds like you have a mighty hard task ahead of you.”

“What?”

“Well, beating that dirty Vampire, of course! I know you can do it Neva. Through all the brandies I’ve given you, I’ve come to know you real well, and I think that you can get rid of that no-good cretin.” Neva smiled to herself and thanked Rodney for his kind words and left the tavern.

She returned from the tavern to find the entire headquarters in a blazing inferno. She stood petrified with shock. Then, Neva regained her senses and ran towards the building. She kicked open the burning door and covered her mouth. The heat was intense the further she went in. She called out for anyone, but received no answer. She ran to the dorm she shared with Lee. When she opened the door, she found him lying on the sofa. The white couch, just beginning to light on fire, was covered with his blood.

Neva said to him, “Lee!”

Lee mumbled weakly, “Run. Go...” She shook her head and picked him up. Neva dragged him through the fiery halls. Searing flames licked up at her, scalding her severely. Neva cringed and bit her lip. She ran even faster through the halls. When she finally reached the door, she found that it was engulfed in flames. She pulled off her leather boot and threw it at the fire-weakened door. It collapsed into fiery debris, and Neva hobbled over the hot coals on the floor. Once out of the building, Neva took a deep breath of fresh air.

“Neva...” Lee groaned. “You...” He coughed and leaned even further on Neva. He was breathing heavily. Neva summoned what little strength she had left. She carried him all the way to a city street before she passed out.

Neva woke up in a temple some hours later. She could feel cool cloth being pressed against her skin. She could feel searing pain throughout her body. Neva’s eyes opened to find two priests standing over her, one young and one old. As her eyes began to come in focus, the two priests looked at her.

“She’s awake,” said the younger one.

The older one smiled and said to Neva, “Yes, you’re finally awake. It’s something of a miracle really.”

“What?” she asked weakly.

“That we had come across you when we did,” he answered. The young one nodded in agreement. Neva turned her head to see Lee lying in the next bed. She attempted to get up, but they held her down.

“You should lie down,” the young priest said.

The older one nodded and said, “Your burns are severe, so it’s best not to move.”

“What about Lee?” she asked.

“Oh, your friend. He is in a critical condition. We are not sure that he will survive, but there is hope,” he replied sadly shaking his head. Neva couldn’t bear the thought of Lee dying. She moaned in agony at the thought.

“Hush now. We’ll do our best,” said the old man. They continued to heal her burns as Neva gazed at Lee’s unmoving body lying in the next bed. Neva’s eyes closed and she fell into a deep sleep. She awoke later to find the young priest standing over her. She opened her eyes, and he immediately looked away. His face turned red slightly.

“What time of day is it?” Neva asked quietly.

“It’s...it’s almost sunrise,” he answered. “I was just...making sure you were sleeping well. That’s all.”

She said, “Really now. What’s your name?”

“Joseph,” he replied. “The father’s name is Father Crowe. Who are you?”

“No one important,” Neva said sighing slightly. “Where exactly am I in the city?”

“You are within the gates of Fort Derelict,” he said. Neva’s blue eyes searched the room. There were tables in the far end with potions and bottles. The grey, early morning light was reflected in the stone room. As Neva lay, the grey light became orange then turned to gold as the sun rose. Father Crowe entered the room as the light started to turn from yellow to the sun’s natural white luminescence.

“You look much better this morning, ma’am,” he said with a smile. Neva sat up and felt pain surge through her body. Her skin stung painfully, but she continued to sit up. She looked at Lee in the next bed. His skin was burned and pale. His chest was covered in fresh bandages. His hazel eyes were shut away in sleep.

“Be strong Lee. You have to...” she whispered. Father Crowe seated himself on the edge of her bed.

He said, “I think he will make it. His body is showing signs of healing.” Neva smiled to herself and looked out the window. She could see young men running across a field. She assumed this was training for the young Elites of Liam.

Her eyes followed them as they moved up and down the field in their bright armor. The sun’s bright radiance shone viciously upon the young men’s chest plates. Then, their captain shouted to them, and they gathered around. Their youthful faces were red with the previous exercises’ effort. The young men laughed at each other and smiled gleefully. Neva averted her eyes elsewhere and wrung the white sheets upon her bed in her hands. She turned to find Father Crowe standing at the far end of the room mumbling to himself as he peered over his tonics and balms.

“Where did that one go? Ah, here...now...” he said in a low tone. Soon, Neva drifted off to sleep. After days of healing Neva was back to her usual self. Her skin was deeply scarred from the burns, but she didn’t care. Lee was conscious more and more often. Neva helped the elderly father in return for all his gracious deeds.

She did odd jobs like lifting objects too heavy for either the old man or the young one. Neva ran around the city collecting different things for Father Crowe. All the while, she kept her name secret from either Joseph or Father Crowe. Her trust in humanity had been lost since the fire. Neva became increasingly secretive, except with Lee.

Before long, Lee was able to get to his feet. Then, walking and running soon followed. He was back to his normal self. After saying their goodbyes to the father and young boy, they finally departed from the temple within Fort Derelict. They headed back

to the rubble that was the headquarters. The rubble and ash stood as a memorial site to the headquarters. Everything was dark from the city wall's shadow. They both stood in silence together.

"We should look through all this and see if we can find anything," Lee said.

Neva sighed and said, "We should rebuild it." A gleam of bright determination shone in her azure eyes as she sadly peered unto the ruins of the place she had so warmly called home. Lee felt that it was the best thing to do for her and for all the others. For the rest of that day, Lee and Neva sorted through all the rubble.

At the end of the day, tired, covered in powdery ash, and disappointed from their lack of findings, they made their way to the tavern to seek out a temporary answer to their problems. Rodney, as kind a friend he was, offered to let them stay in the old room in the back of the tavern. Though it was dingy and dark, both were thankful for the generosity. They laid blankets upon sacks to make beds. Neva sighed as she sat upon her makeshift bed.

Lee said, "It'll be alright, Neva." He lit a small candle as he laid upon his bed. Before long, both drifted off to a deep sleep. In the morning, they arose in the same somber mood that they had gone to sleep in. Neva made her way out into the main room of the tavern. There were merely three early patrons, and Rodney was busy bringing things in and out of the storage room. She sat down at the bar. It was the seat she always sat in, since the first time she drank there.

"Morning Neva. Can I get you anything?" he asked cheerfully. She shook her head silently and watched him place bottles onto the wooden shelves behind the counter. Each glass contained dark or clear liquids, all with the potentials of taking away her suffering. She hadn't any money for it, nor wished for it. Neva was set upon carrying her sadness, like a great beast of burden. She knew, in whichever state of mind, the sun would rise the next day. It was a message the elderly priest had told her as she laid dreading the worst of Lee.

Then, she felt a cold hand gently grace her shoulder. It lingered there, but she almost refused the urge to see whose it belonged to. Curiosity got the best of her as she spun around to find herself staring into the coldest eyes the gods could suffer man with. The bearer of these eyes was none other than her father, Nikolai. He stood before Neva darkly, filling her with an unnerving sense of fear.

"F-father..." she managed to choke out. The sight of her father standing before her had caused her such mortification that she could hardly breathe.

"Neva, since escaping from the hell you sent me to...I have been searching for you," he said. His voice was deep and scratchy. Neva could see fresh scars running deep on his arms, as well as black markings.

She stammered uselessly, "I...had...it was..." He slowly slid his hand up to her neck. She was paralyzed with terror under his cold hand. Then, his grip tightened around her slender neck.

Behind her, Lee walked into the room and said, "Neva!" Nikolai released his grip upon her neck, now bruised. She nervously backed up away from her father. Lee stepped towards her and placed an arm around her.

He shook his head at Nikolai, "Who do you think you are?"

"Her father," he replied darkly. Lee gasped slightly and looked down at Neva. She looked away from both Lee and her father.

Lee whispered into her ear, "Don't worry, I won't let him hurt you." She shook her head and pulled herself from his grasp.

"Your word has no good against him. He's..." Neva couldn't find will to articulate the things running through her mind then. Lee, in sadness, watched her walk towards her father.

"What is it you want with me, Father?" she said quietly.

"Come. We have many things to discuss," Nikolai replied. He slammed the tavern door open and Neva followed him out reluctantly. It was the last of Neva that Lee would see for a long time. Neva's mind pondered what her father would do to her. While death was among the possibilities, she attempted to keep it from her thoughts, for it scared her. She didn't know what kind of man her father had become, and she was afraid to find out.

Nikolai walked in silence through the crowds rushing in and out of Helix. Neva lost much conscious thought. She simply followed after him. Her attention was averted to a horse ferociously rearing up in a stable. The man attempting to control the beast was knocked to the ground. The demon standing in the stable looked towards her. Neva averted her eyes elsewhere and continued to follow her father. She followed him for a long time, losing track of where they were. Then, he stopped, and Neva accidentally collided into his backside. He turned around, scowling unpleasantly.

"S-sorry Father," she said nervously. Nikolai had filled her with more fear than he ever did. She felt as much fear as she had that night in the alley with Prince Orion and his men. Neva did not completely understand why she was so afraid of her father, but she certainly felt it. She was uncertain of the man before her. She could not even tell if he was sane. As she thought, she wondered if Nikolai had ever been sane. He seemed to be a man with an off mind. Images of Nikolai watching his wife being mauled quickly flashed through her mind. She turned away and sighed heavily. *Why*, she thought.

Neva averted her grey eyes upwards. She saw the home she had escaped from only years ago. She sighed as she saw the now-dilapidated shutters hanging loosely. The roof had caved in, and all was in complete disrepair. Neva shook her head slowly as she looked at the home. *Hell*, she thought. *The home of hell*.

"This," Nikolai said, "shouldn't have happened. We, Neva, are going to rebuild this home from *scratch*." His voice sounded eerily dark as he spoke. The strict annunciation of each word placed a powerful tone in his voice, as was never heard before. Neva looked at her father in shock.

She asked, "How do we rebuild *this*?"

"Doesn't matter," said he, "but it *will* be done." He built a small fire just in front of the home. Then, he took a large tree branch and lit it on fire. In one thrust, he sent the flaming branch towards the home. It was only a matter of seconds before the entire house was engulfed with flames. Neva watched sadly, thinking of how the headquarters had burned down. She remembered walking through the smoke and heat in panic.

The crimson inferno continued as the sky darkened overhead. The light from the flames illuminated Nikolai's dark face. Neva could see the fine scars running across his stern, sallow cheeks. His face painted the mural of all things apathetic and beleaguered by fate. Nikolai's eyes had fallen into a deeper shade of blue. No longer were they as bright as they had once been. They more appropriately suited his malicious nature.

"And so it goes," he mumbled to himself. Neva sat underneath a tree. It was the one she had sought comfort under for so many years before. Now, she could only feel the

rough tree bark, and the roots coldly entangled into the ground below her. Its leaves were a sickly green color, and the branches taken over with wilt. Neva closed her eyes and lost consciousness as the fire demolishing the house continued onwards late into the night.

Neva awoke the next morning to the smell of smoke. She coughed in disgust and gazed at the ashes blankly. Her old home was no longer there at all but merely a soggy mass of ashes and debris. The dew had covered her body, chilling her. She saw her father staring at the ground before him silently. Neva rose and approached Nikolai nervously.

“Father?” she said.

“Aeyla,” he said.

Neva shook her head and replied, “No, I’m Neva.”

“We must find Aeyla,” Nikolai stated firmly. Neva stared up at her father in shock. He had never before talked about his other daughter unprovoked.

“Why?” Neva inquired. Her father turned away from her without saying a word. Neva still despised her sister for having such fortune in her life. Neva’s natural bitterness only grew more solid as she thought of her sister. *Aeyla, she thought angrily, fate will soon cripple you, just wait.* Neva waited patiently until her father would speak to her again. Minutes had passed before he made a noise.

He began laughing and said, “Yes, of course.”

“Father?” Neva said inquisitively. She looked at him curiously.

Nikolai replied with a twisted grin, “Let’s go.”

“What are we doing?” she asked nervously.

“We’re going to Viland,” he replied. “Then, Sekei will find Aeyla.” He chuckled to himself silently as he turned and began to walk into the surrounding woodland. Neva hurriedly followed after him, unsure of his intentions.

For several days, they walked on foot to the town of Viland. Each passing day was slower than the previous. Nikolai remained shut away in his mind, and Neva dared not speak to him, though she did wonder what he was thinking. Neva thought about running away back to Helix. She thought about a lot of things as they traveled. She wondered where Kelly and the others had gone.

When they arrived at Viland, Neva almost smiled to herself. She was relieved to be in a city finally. She wondered about her chances of escape and thought out possible runaway schemes. However, Neva decided that there was no escape from her father’s cruelty. Nikolai continued onwards into the city. His blue eyes viciously scanned everything that moved within his reach.

Then, Nikolai stopped and stared down a long cobbled road. Homes of great wealth lined the street. Many of the aristocrats were sauntering past other homes, talking in small groups. A small grin was forged upon his ever-humorless face. He quickly began walking down the road. Towards the end of the street, he paused once more, gazing up at a wonderfully white stone house. The windows reflected the sun’s rays with a blazing shine. Everything was groomed to self-satisfying perfection.

“Stay here,” he ordered. Neva turned away from the house and spotted a number of people, all overly dressed, looking at her.

“Wench,” she overheard one say.

Another remarked, “Must be a relative of the Dirkensons.” The others sniffed haughtily and ambled off together. Neva’s eyes averted back towards the home. Nikolai came out the front door soon after, dressed in new robes.

“Ah, there you are my darling,” he said with a suave smile. “What are you doing in your work clothes at *this* hour? Come honey. Just wait until your mother sees!” His false accent almost caused her to laugh. She choked it down and walked inside.

“Father, what are you doing?” Neva asked as soon as he shut the door.

Nikolai asked as he gazed at the artwork seemingly littering the place, “Wonderful isn’t it?”

“It’s...great,” she said with a sigh.

“Yes, yes. Get some better clothes on. You’re a noble now, for this is the Nobles’ Division. Then, you should go out and see the city! It’s quite magnificent really,” Nikolai said as he stood grinning like a fool. Then, his expression returned to its regular state as he said, “What a travesty we have at hand.” Nikolai then walked down the hall and disappeared into a room. Neva went upstairs to search for clothes. After looking through four rooms, she decided to wear what she had.

Neva left the house in search of a tavern. Neva needed to calm down and collect her thoughts. She silently made her way down the street to the very edge of the Nobles’ Division. Neva found a small tavern by the gate. She entered and found it to be much like the old tavern she had gone to for so long. She missed Rodney and Lee and wondered when she would see them again. Neva seated herself as a woman approached her.

“Drink, ma’am?” she inquired.

“Brandy,” she said simply. The woman nodded and hurried to the bar. She spoke briefly with the barkeeper. Both of them stared at Neva as she waited for her drink. The woman returned moments later with a glass of brandy. She handed the woman payment and inspected the brandy thoroughly. She recalled doing the same thing in Rodney’s and Lee’s company. She closed her eyes and reminisced about it all. Her thoughts were disturbed by a rather ponderous man seating himself next to Neva. She opened her eyes and stared at him. He began to talk with her cheerily.

“Hey there, miss,” he said with a smile. The man wore nice clothes and looked trim. She could tell he was a resident of the Nobles’ Division. She sighed and leaned forwards, placing her head in her hand.

The man continued, “I’m guessing you’re the wife of the new man here.”

“What?” she said looking at him curiously.

He replied, “I forget the fellow’s name, but you’re new here, yes?”

“Yes, but I’m not his wife. I’m his daughter,” Neva answered. *Too bad nobles don’t get paid to talk*, she thought in slight disgust.

“Oh! That means you’re not married. My name’s Daniel Brooks,” he said with a wide grin.

“Yeah,” she said shortly. Neva took a quick drink of her brandy.

“Hmm, you hear of that villain that just passed by?” he asked.

“What villain?” Neva was curious to know who he was speaking of.

Daniel answered, “It’s a woman in a blue robe. She’s a fearful fighter, I’ve heard. She’s been challenging all kinds of people to fight and *killing* ‘em! If I were them—and sober—I’d steer clear of that ‘un.”

“What’s her name?” Neva asked.

“Hmm, what is it...oh, right. Her name is Neva. She’s got it on her robe. Tch, I’d say the girl was out of her mind.” The brandy Neva was about to swallow became stuck in her throat. Her mind went completely blank. She finally swallowed her drink and

turned to the man.

“Neva? You...you said her name was Neva?” she inquired hastily.

“Yes I did,” Daniel replied earnestly. *I cannot believe that*, she thought in shock. *It’s her. It’s Aeyla. May the Gods damn her for taking my name and ruining it.* She slammed her drink down upon the wooden table and stood.

“What’s the matter?” he yelled. Neva immediately left the tavern and headed back towards the home. She entered and slammed the door as she headed towards her father’s office. Neva brusquely rapped on his door.

“Yes?” she heard Nikolai’s voice.

“Father,” she said, “I have news.” Silence followed her words. Moments passed before the door opened before her. Nikolai perked a brow and looked at her.

“What?” he asked. Neva related to him what she had heard about Aeyla at the bar. Nikolai stood silently, thinking over his daughter’s words. Then, a small grin formed on his face. Neva was curious as to what her father was thinking. His reactions to things were always a mystery to her.

Neva inquired, “What is it?”

“Nothing, nothing. It’s just amusing,” he replied before returning back into his office. Neva heaved a small sigh and retired to her room. Only hours later, there was a light knock. She opened her eyes and looked at the door.

Sitting up in her bed she said, “Come in.” She heaved a small yawn and rubbed her eyes. Nikolai entered the room with another man behind him. As her eyes came to focus, Neva found that the man was Prince Orion. There was a wide smile upon the Vampire’s pale face.

“Neva, I hope you remember Orion,” Nikolai said. Neva’s eyes narrowed fiercely as she glared at him.

Neva yelled, “Out! Get out! I don’t want to see that...creature!”

“Whatever did I do, Lady Neva? I haven’t hurt you, so why you shun me is...beyond me,” he said. Neva knew there was truth in his words, but she refused to trust him. He may have been a prince, but he was still a crazed Vampire. She hadn’t forgotten the night of the alley ambush, though truthfully, she *wasn’t* physically harmed by him.

“Prince Orion will be staying with us, Neva,” Nikolai said. A small grin formed upon Orion’s face. His wicked, Vampiric teeth shone brightly against the darkness. Neva heaved an audible sigh. Both exited the room, and Neva lay on her bed feeling completely downhearted. A furious rage set it and burned within her. She sat up and slammed her fists against the wooden wall. She banged them repeatedly, until the sides of her hands were raw and full of splinters.

“I hate my father,” she whispered to herself, “and I hate my no-good sister even more. She’s taken my *name* and soiled it with her villainous deeds. What a life to live. One day, Aeyla, fate will mangle you too but hopefully not before I do myself.” Neva sighed heavily and finally fell into an uneasy sleep.

‘~*~’

[Shadows and Blood]

Neva, now twenty-six years old, turned away from all the shallow glamour and returned inside as the natural darkness had penetrated the heavens above. Violent and turbulent memories burned in her mind as she slipped inside the silken curtains and out of the view of the public. She found her father waiting at the bedroom door.

“Father,” Neva said in a direct manner, “why do you not take command over Aeyla as you have over me? She is your daughter as much as I am, yet you seem to treat her *better* than you do me. Have you not forgotten who she is?” Nikolai’s answer didn’t come immediately. His azure eyes averted towards the window as he ran a hand through his freshly cut, blonde hair.

“Neva, she is beyond my reach right now. You are here, so I take command over you. Do you understand?” he said in a tone unlike his own. Neva stood silent as her eyes scanned him.

“You found *me* after having spent time in the Vampire sanctum,” Neva said irately, “when you could have so easily found *her*.” She had never before mentioned the sanctum where he had been imprisoned. Nikolai stopped, and she saw his entire body shudder.

He fiercely backhanded her and yelled, “Aeyla is like a wolf of gold, but you, you’re like a fox of silver, Neva.”

“How can you say that, father? You truly must be mad. I have been here all this time while she is off playing with swords!” Neva shouted as she glared at him.

Nikolai sneered and replied, “You haven’t half the power she has. *She* is destined for great things. I can feel it.”

“I have twice the power she has, and I will prove it!” Neva said angrily. She stormed down the hall and out the front door without a word. As she made her way down the road, she bumped into a woman.

“Excuse me, ma’am,” the woman said. Neva instantly recognized her as one of the members of the gang.

Neva said in a low tone, “Lily.” Lily smiled and Neva returned the same grin.

“An unexpected pleasure it is to see *you* again. We had all scattered when that fired started, and I didn’t think I see any of the others again,” she said. Neva thought about the old gang for a brief moment. Then, an idea came to her.

“I have a proposition for you, Lily,” Neva said. They walked out of the public’s view into a nearby alley. There they discussed Neva’s plans of revenge against her sister.

Neva said, “My sister needs to be dealt with.”

“You have a sister?” Lily said inquisitively.

Neva nodded and said grimly, “Unfortunately. I need to take her out.”

“Who is your sister?” she asked curiously.

“Aeyla,” Neva answered, “however, she has taken *my* name.” Lily let out a slight gasp as her green eyes grew wide.

“*She’s* your sister? Wow, I’d never have thought...” Lily said in marvel.

“Yeah, yeah, I’d like her dead still,” Neva said darkly. Lily remained silent for a moment as if thinking.

Then, she replied, “Well, apparently she’s a good fighter. We may need more people and a very cunning plan.” Neva glanced at the woman before her. She felt slightly put off by her words, but Neva knew Lily was right. Her sister wasn’t a force to be taken lightly. She knew this would take a lot of planning and care.

“Yes,” Neva said, “you’re right. We’ll need more people.”

“I can take care of that, Neva,” Lily said with a smile.

Neva said, “Don’t call me Neva.”

“Oh, sorry,” said she hastily. “What should I call you?”

A wicked smile formed upon Neva’s face as she said, “Silver Fox.” Lily nodded and disappeared down the alley. Neva took off in the other direction to return home.

For a long time that night, she scoured over the books in her father’s study, looking for any possible ideas. She wanted an unconventional plan. She wanted something to make her pay, something more torturous than death. Neva’s hate towards her sister was deep and sore. As she was about to give up, her father entered the room.

“Neva,” he said, “I have some things to do. I’ll be spending some time away from the house. Orion will be here though. Don’t forget that.” Neva didn’t bother to ask why but let the man take his leave. Then, as soon as he left the house, she began to wonder about her chances of escape from the house under Orion’s watch. She didn’t think she could force her way through him. *If Father could not fight him*, she thought in despair, *how will I get rid of him?*

Neva spent the majority of the day in her room thinking and planning until finally Orion’s knocking sounded at the door.

“What?” she said, her voice resonating with a hint of agitation. Orion slowly opened the door and gingerly walked inside. Orion seated himself at the edge of her bed, gazing at her as she sat by her fireplace.

He said quietly, “I wanted you to know that your father told me to ensure you stay in Viland.”

“I see,” Neva replied.

“However,” said Orion, “If you promise to return before your father goes, you may do as you please.”

She glanced at him curiously and said, “What? Why?”

He stared at her in silence for a few moments before replying, “I’ve never been one to cage a bird, especially one who has a nest to tend to.”

Neva turned away from the Vampire, wondering about his words. She didn’t fully understand what he was implying, but she decided to take the chance to gain some freedom. Quickly thinking, her mind went over all the possibilities. She could do a whole entire assortment of things, but she couldn’t help but think about returning to Helix and looking for Lee. She knew he would be out there somewhere in Helix. Taking the spare horse from behind their home, she fled from Viland towards Helix and arrived there in just a couple of days.

When she arrived, it was nighttime. The streets were quieter and looked lonesome in the dark. The women and children remained shut away in their homes, and the men, if not at home, ambled down the streets. Neva walked alone that night, wondering if she’d find anything. That’s when she spotted her father, dressed as dark as the night, heading down an alleyway. She quietly snuck behind a house to keep from being seen by him. Then, when she felt it was safe, Neva headed towards Fort Derelict, to scan the city from the walls.

She quietly crept through the sleeping fortress. Finally, she climbed up a ladder to the battlements surrounding Derelict. Neva stood and looked out to see a great view of Helix. Neva could see over the rooftops of buildings. The city didn’t look half as large as

it was if you were within it. Neva smiled lightly as her blue eyes continued to scan the city. She thought to herself, *What if this was all mine? This city alone has enough power to conquer half of Liam.* Then, she looked back towards the fort. She saw a figure standing upon the wall. She slowly made her way towards it.

“Hello,” a young male voice said. Neva pulled her hood up a little and saw a man similar to Lord James. The armor on his broad chest gleamed in the moonlight. It didn’t take long for her to realize that he was Lord James’ son. She nervously fidgeted with her cloak as she wondered what to say.

She merely replied, “Hello, sir.”

“Enjoying the evening?” he asked politely.

“Yes sir, what about you?” Neva answered.

The Lord’s son heaved a contented sigh and said, “I just met the oddest, yet most beautiful woman. I came here to think.”

“To think about the woman?” she asked.

“Well,” he said, “I want to marry her, and I have to find a way.”

Neva paused and then inquired, “You’ve just met, and you wish to marry her?”

“Yes, it sounds foolish; I know, but I just know she feels the same about me,” the Lord’s son said.

“Tell me about her,” Neva said, feeling slightly interested. He looked to Neva and rubbed his chin in thought.

“Well,” the man said, “I won’t tell you her name, because it’s somewhat secret, but she’s smart and funny. She’s a rather odd character. Her life’s been difficult though because she doesn’t know her parents; she’s an orphan. She’s also a good fighter. It’s like she has some kind of natural skill.” He sighed happily and looked back towards the city.

Neva replied, “Well, I hope the best for you two. I should be going, sir.”

“Oh, what’s your name?” he asked before she left.

“Let’s just keep that a secret,” she answered as she walked off. The sky’s azure essence was just beginning to fade into existence above. Neva found a small but expensive inn just outside the Helix gate. She turned towards the battlements just before going inside. Her blue eyes scanned the tops but found no sign of the Lord’s son. She then slipped into her bed and fell asleep for a long while.

Neva was awoken late in the afternoon by yelling. She lazily rose from her bed and stretched. The late noon sun shone through the windows brightly. Neva rubbed her eyes as she looked out the window. She could hear the yelling from across the way. A soldier was running around furiously in front of the dorms in the fort.

“What did they do?” he yelled. “This isn’t the bears’ room! These signs are in the *wrong* places!” Neva shook her head as she walked back inside her room. *Rogues*, she thought to herself as she slipped on a robe. As she tied the sash around her waist, she heard a small rapping at the door.

“Who is it?” she called as she stood by the door, preparing to open it.

An annoyed and dark voice called back, “Your loving father.” Neva’s eyes widened as she stood motionless. She didn’t know how to face Nikolai. Finally, she struck up the nerve to open the door and face him. Silence passed between the two as their eyes met.

Nikolai then said, “We should go...back to Viland...home. I’ll need to work on some things.” With a small sigh, Neva gathered her things and headed down to the

horses. As she mounted her horse, her keen blue eyes caught site of the Lord's son standing at the edge of the training field. His eyes were on one of the faster soldiers. Neva mounted her horse and patiently waited for her father to appear. Finally, he emerged from around the corner of a building, and they both left the city for Viland. The entire way back though, she couldn't help but wonder, *How did he find me? Why isn't he angry?*

When she returned, Orion greeted her with a wide grin. His dark eyes found Neva's as he welcomed her back into the home. He gently took her hand as he closed the front door. Neva grimaced as he laced his fingers with hers. Orion led Neva up to her bedroom and out to the balcony. He stood with her hand in his hand, gazing into her eyes. Neva's brows furrowed slightly as she glared at him. She had a lingering and firm distrust in the Vampire prince.

"What do you want?" she asked with a demanding tone.

He replied with an innocent face, "Just gazing at you, my love." Neva sighed and took her hand from him. She seated herself atop the balcony railing and looked at him.

"Orion, I just don't understand you," she said.

The prince replied with a small bow, "Ask anything you wish, milady."

"Why are you doing this? How important is it that we marry?" she inquired.

Prince Orion looked out to see the sinking sunlight. A small grin came to his pale face as he turned back to Neva.

Orion answered, "The importance it first held is not half as significant as it was. Our marriage would bring a small sense of peace between the Northern Vampires and humans, but it's more than that now. You have my heart Neva."

"I don't want to marry you, Orion," Neva said with a small sigh. She had never given marriage much thought. With a father like Nikolai, she had always had other things on her mind. A small frown formed on Orion's face as he looked back towards the fading sun.

"I'm afraid you have no choice in the matter. Both our fathers have agreed to this. I'm sorry if you love another man. I was hoping that somehow I could make you love me," he said quietly. Neva shook her head silently as she turned away from the Vampire.

"Love? That's all?" she said inquisitively.

"That is all that is in my heart, milady," the Vampire answered, his dark eyes looking at her. Neva had never fallen in love before, but she knew that she did not love this Vampire, nor would she ever.

She arose early the following morning and walked to the alley where she had met with Lily before. No sign of her, nor anything else, was there. Neva quietly strode down the alley, looking for anything at all. She passed several empty buildings, but the one that caught her eye was a run down tavern. Neva grinned lightly and nodded affirmatively.

"This," she whispered to herself, "shall be the new headquarters. We'll fix up just the insides, and together, we'll take down my sister and maybe even my father too."

Neva found Lily a day later. They quietly discussed Neva's plans. Lily agreed that the abandoned tavern would be a desirable place to keep business. Both left to see the place together.

As they entered, Lily remarked, "I think people thought it was haunted at one time."

"Haunted tavern?" Neva said inquisitively. "I'm not superstitious."

They found a lot of things in the tavern, but it was simply an old tavern. As Neva was attempting to pry open a chest, Lily called out to her.

Neva answered, "What?"

"Well," Lily said pointing to a portrait on the wall, "that looks a lot like you."

Neva looked at her curiously and moved closer to inspect the picture. It was an artistically drawn sketch of a woman wielding a blade. She gave it some thought and wondered if it was her mother.

"It's not me. I don't know who it is," Neva answered.

Lily shrugged and continued searching through the tavern. Neva did likewise, but her eyes constantly veered towards the picture.

A few days later, she returned to the old tavern. She found Lily with several people there already. They were seated at one of the tables talking quietly. When Neva entered the room, all fell silent. She greeted Lily and looked to the people. There were three men and two women looking about her age or older.

"Found some people, eh?" Neva said. Lily nodded as she began to introduce each one to her.

"This is my husband Bernard," Lily said. "He's light-footed and as smart as they come. That is Kiev there, and his friend's name is Jacob." Kiev gave her a friendly nod. Then, she turned to the two women and said, "This is Denali and Dana. They're twins, but you can't confuse them, or so they say."

"Yes," they both agreed.

"I'm Dana, and I have an orange velvet belt," said one of them.

The other added, "And I'm Denali, the one with the green velvet belt."

"Who cares?" mumbled the man named Jacob. The twins exchanged displeased looks but said nothing in response to his cheek. Lily's eyes narrowed slightly as she turned to Jacob.

"That's Jacob. He's Kiev's friend who has a bit of an attitude problem, but he is as reliable as he is dimwitted," Lily said with bitter demeanor.

"You make me sad, Lillian," Jacob replied.

Kiev chuckled amusedly as Jacob perked a brow. He glanced at Neva cautiously, waiting for her reaction.

Neva simply said, "Interesting." Jacob's eyes shifted from her to Lily and back before he stood and wandered over by the dusty counter.

Jacob turned to Neva and said, "This is a tavern, so how about some drinks?"

"Go look for yourself," Neva replied as she glanced at the bar. It was dusty and appeared empty. Kiev stood and joined his friend.

"Speaking of," Lily said, "this *is* a tavern. Can you not think of a name for this place? Something we can all remember, perhaps?" Neva thought a moment as she glanced around.

"The Wolf's Head," Neva said with a grin. Lily nodded in confirmation.

"So what's your name?" Denali asked.

Neva smiled and replied, "Just call me the Silver Fox."

"Alright," she said.

"Found some!" Jacob yelled as he held up two bottles.

Neva conversed and drank with the new members throughout the day. She got to know them quickly. Lily had found her a good starting crew; Neva felt that she could

trust them. The twins were both interesting in their own ways. Each had their own stories. Neva couldn't tell them apart no matter how hard she tried, but she figured she would as time passed. Bernard was a quiet character. He said little to Neva, and he looked a man who'd spent many days within the walls of a prison. Kiev was quiet as well, but he was friendly to those close to him and appeared to have a great thirst for alcohol. The last one, Jacob, was certainly a character. His sarcastic wit and comedic nature was entertaining. Neva could see a use in each of these people, and she was glad for that.

Before leaving, she said to Lily, "What a collection we have."

"This is just the beginning of what I'm gathering up for you," said Lily.

"Thank you very much. I appreciate it," Neva said.

Returning home was a disappointing thing for her. Nothing else matched the darkness that clutched her chest as she stepped into the stolen home. Her father didn't inquire where she'd been. He seemed more and more distant, sometimes not even being at home at all. This concerned Neva only because of his questionable mental state. She didn't have time to worry about him though, she had her own plans to fulfill.

Neva's first desire was to be a leader with style. She decided to have a custom robe made for her out of grey material, and on its back, she had the clothier tailor in silver thread a fox engulfed in fire. Taking another special trip to a tannery, she bought a helmet of leather colored white to hide her face.

As she ran more errands for her newly formed group, she came to discover that while her father may not have cared about her whereabouts, Orion did. He was almost always home, waiting for her. The vampire just *had* to know where she'd been and why. It was as tricky as it was annoying. Neva though could not kill him. There were two main reasons for this. Her father might snap and kill her, and Orion's strength most likely outweighed her own greatly. She wondered how long she would have to deal with the bothersome creature.

It wasn't long before the day Neva came home from being at the Wolf's Head and quickly made a beeline to her room. She spent hours in there reading and reflecting. Then, suddenly, she realized she hadn't been disturbed for hours. Her father was out again as far as she knew, but Orion didn't seem to be there. He usually came in each evening to bid her a good night and attempt to gain her affection with sweet, meaningless words. This occurrence hadn't happened, and it was well through the night and early into the next morning.

She was suspicious of this absence and laid down the book to investigate. As she began to search, she thought, *Why am I worried? I hate him. In fact, I should just stop looking for him.* That last thought played repeatedly in her mind as she peered through all the rooms in the house. Neva braced herself quietly before going into his room, which she had saved for last. Opening the door, she found nothing. His bed was made, and his clothes were stacked neatly in the corner of the room by the armoire. The chairs were in their proper places.

"Orion?" Neva said quietly.

There came no reply. Though her thoughts were pleading against it, she decided to search outside the house. She headed in behind the house where the horses were kept. She found the Vampire there under a tree; a pair of arrows protruded from his neck. Orion would sit there in the afternoons and gaze up through the window at her, a habit of

his that bothered Neva. However, she had never said anything about it, for in secret, she was flattered by it. She stared at his body quietly.

Finally, Neva struck up the nerve to approach him and remove the arrows from his neck. She simply laid the body under the tree, expecting her father to take care of the corpse upon his return. Before leaving again, she knelt by his body, closing her eyes. She wondered, *Am I actually sad because he died?* She paused as the wind began to strike up. The leaves in the tree above her shuddered and shook. She could sense rain coming on. *No*, she answered herself, *I'm glad he's gone.*

Neva returned upstairs just as the morning clouds turned dark. She reseated herself by the fireplace as the sound of rain smattering against the windows began to play. Her eyes continually fled to the window as she attempted to read. As the rain drove on, she continued to fight to keep her focus on her book. It was a losing battle. Finally, she threw her book down and ran out in the rain to retrieve the Vampire's body. She dragged him up to the back of the house, under the door's arch, where it was dry. Satisfied, Neva returned inside with a sense of self-disgust.

Later that day the rain stopped, and scattered rays of sunlight shone through the clouds. Her father was home. She knew it for she could hear his quiet footsteps downstairs. Neva wondered what he thought of Orion's death. She decided to leave without asking, in case he looked at her as the cause. When she arrived, she found four strangers seated at a table with Lily. She was writing things down on a small slip of paper. Neva grew wary of these strangers and pulled the hood up on her robe to hide her face.

"Good morning, Silver Fox," Lily greeted. She bowed in return but said nothing as she stared at the newcomers. Lily continued, "These are four new recruits. I've decided to give them numbers in place of names to keep a further sense of secrecy."

Neva said, "That is good." The recruits stared at Neva with apprehensive looks, each fearing and wondering about her. As Neva looked over them, she noticed one of them the most. He was a young Dog Demon. While Neva wasn't completely sure of him, she knew she would have to trust Lily's judgment. In all, there were two females, a male, and the Demon.

They were curious about the group's purpose. For Neva, of course, it was a gather of people who would assist her in ridding the world of her sister and possibly her father, too. However, they didn't need to know that yet.

Neva returned to her house to ask Nikolai about her mother. He was standing on the balcony off his room, watching the real aristocrats' movements down below.

"Father," Neva said, "I wanted to ask you about...my mother."

"I do not wish to talk about her," Nikolai replied faintly.

She looked straight at him and said, "But I want to know about her." There came a silence between the two, until the rain began to pour down. Nikolai pulled his robes around him and started back inside.

"Don't get sick out here," he said before disappearing behind the curtains. Neva heaved a small sigh as she walked inside and went to dry off by the fire. She thought to herself, *What could possibly happen now?* After a short while, Neva retired for the night.

In the middle of the night, Neva heard a pounding upon the door downstairs. She groggily shook her head and rose silently. She opened the door and found Sekei standing

outside in the rain. His horse looked completely worn out as it stood in the rain. Neva let the mage enter the home and she quickly closed the heavy wooden door.

“Where’s your f-father?” Sekei asked shivering. Neva pointed towards the light down the hall, where Nikolai sat in his office by candlelight. Sekei nodded and made his way towards the room. He quietly knocked on the doorframe and entered the room.

“Sir,” said Sekei, “I f-found your d-daughter.” Neva silently crept up next to the door, listening to the conversation. Sekei stood close to the small, glowing fire in the fireplace.

“What of her?” Nikolai asked sternly.

“Well, apparently she’s returned to her stepfather’s house. I think she’s regretting becoming a villain. She’s...” Sekei trailed off, not knowing how his master would react. Nikolai remained silent for a few moments.

“Regret?” he said inquisitively. “I shall give her time.”

“Yes, would you like me to keep close tabs on her?” Sekei offered.

“Yes,” Nikolai answered. Then, he stopped and glared at Sekei, his azure eyes coldly focusing upon the man before him. “What made you make such an offer, Othedius?”

Sekei nervously replied, “B-because I want to serve you, my lord?”

Nikolai slammed his fist upon his desk and yelled, “You just want to see my daughter! You...you love her don’t you? You disgust me, you vile creature...”

“Sir! I...” he attempted to yell before Nikolai knocked him to the floor forcefully.

“You *know* that I have carefully worked out her betrothal, and you try this!”

Nikolai’s voice resonated through the quiet house soundly.

Then, Sekei’s voice became pitiful as he said, “I wouldn’t dare, sir! I promise! I keep all of my feelings to myself. She would...never have any interest in a man like myself...” The room grew quiet. Neva, still just outside the door, knew he had made up the last part. Then, she decided to return to her room before she was caught. Neva knew her father would have him look after her sister, regardless of his true feelings. She heard her father’s coarse laughter break out as she made her way up the stairs.

The idea of her sister brought out the worst in Neva. She loathed every fiber of her being, though she had not even seen her since that day in the forest. She wondered exactly who her father had planned for Aeyla to marry. *I bet she doesn’t have to marry a Vampire*, Neva thought with resent. She heaved a sigh and lay down on her bed with these thoughts on her mind.

The next morning when Neva rose, Nikolai called her to his office. She hurried down the hall to his office. Sekei was no longer there and he was pouring over several papers and books. Neva silently stood at his desk. A small grin formed at the corner of Nikolai’s mouth shortly before he looked up at Neva. Their piercing blue eyes met.

“I received word of...” Nikolai’s eyes darkened as he trailed off.

“Aeyla,” Neva finished for him. He nodded silently. “What of her?”

“Sekei says that she’s returned to her adopted father’s house, that smith, I believe. She’s...”

“What?” Neva inquired.

“She seems to be feeling regret for what she’s done over the years,” Nikolai answered distantly. His eyes were cast downwards at the floorboards.

Neva scoffed aloud and said, “She has no real backbone, has she?”

“What do you know?” Nikolai yelled quite suddenly.

“Possibly more than you do,” said Neva hostilely.

“What!” he exclaimed. She merely smirked and left the room. Neva didn’t know whether her knowledge of Aeyla’s life exceeded Nikolai’s, but she had grown weary of his reign over *her* own life. Things from there never seemed to improve however.

Her father called for her from across the house, a habit of his which frankly annoyed her. She answered his call and entered his bedroom, a place she avoided on a regular basis. Standing at the door, she peeked in curiously. Nikolai was bent over a chest, and in his hands was a small knife.

Turning to Neva he said, “This dull blade killed your grandfather and uncles.”

“It wouldn’t be the only family member you killed off,” Neva said with a displeased frown.

“Ah,” said he, “this is not *my* blade; it is your mother’s.”

“My mother?” she said inquisitively. “She...well, she never told me about that.”

“Of course not,” he replied with scorn, “your weak mother wouldn’t have. She was ‘ashamed’ of it. Such a fool.”

Neva quietly murmured, “I suppose.”

Then, Nikolai said, “Now, my daughter, listen.” He slammed the chest shut and stood facing her. “I have something to offer. To seal your loyalty, which you have so openly assured me as of late, you need to direct a blind, old soldier to the gate for me.”

She knew his silly words meant nothing more than to kill someone, sending them to the grim gate. Nikolai quickly grabbed her hand and sliced it open with the knife. Wide-eyed, she stared at her father inquisitively. He then proceeded to cut his own hand, allowing the red seepage to gather.

“This,” he said in a low tone, “is the same blood, only yours is weak with the blood of the wench that gave birth to you. Never forget it.” His emphasis on the last three words was so definite that Neva felt the tingling sensation of fear deep within her. However, Neva knew that she would never forget those words, though she had truly tried to before.

She proceeded to walk from that room with a drowned sense of dignity. She wrapped the cut on her hand before heading out of the house. She made her way to the Wolf’s Head, where she found Lily awaiting her arrival.

“Lily,” said Neva.

She replied with a smile, “Good day.”

Her slender frame was bent over a table. Books and other texts were spread around her. She hovered over her drink quietly. Grey shafts of light seemed to bleed from the dusty windows dully. The place looked far more desolate than ever. However, Neva wasn’t bothered by it in the slightest.

“I’m in a bit of a predicament,” she said fingering the slip of paper in her hand.

Lily inquired in a caring tone, “What is it, dear Silver?”

“Well,” Neva answered, “my father has asked me to kill a man.”

“That’s it?” Lily remarked inquisitively. She began to straighten the things in front of her unceremoniously. “I can take care of it for you, if you’d like,” she offered. Neva brought forth the slip of paper, handing it to her. Lily read it over quietly. She nodded and said finally, “Yes, I will do this. Hmm, your father is an interesting man.”

"I beg to differ," Neva said with a tone of resentment. Lily stood, placing the paper in her belt, and gathered her things quickly.

She said before leaving the tavern, "I'll speak with my husband tonight. We'll be off before tomorrow's sunrise. I only ask for half of your quittance."

"That's a problem," Neva said sighing. "The quittance is nothing but my father's trust."

"Well," Lily said slightly disdainfully, "that won't put food on the table."

"I'll gather a good sum for you, Lily, never fear," Neva mumbled as she slunk towards the counter in search of a drink.

Lily replied over her shoulder, "Oh, I never do, Fox of Silver."

With that, she disappeared from the tavern. Neva searched through the counter for a drink to suit her mood but was unsuccessful. She headed to the cellar in search of anything else. In the candlelight, she could see what a mess the cellar truly was. She grimaced in disgust at all the broken furniture and other various bits of aged debris. At seeing this, she began to wonder about the tavern's past. Its existence was a total mystery to her, a mystery she wanted the answer to. She blew out her candle and left the basement to find only Kiev in the tavern. He was silently drinking at the counter. Neva took a seat behind the counter and began cleaning it.

"You alone?" Kiev asked quietly. His eyes wouldn't meet hers as he simply stared down at his drink.

She replied, "As far as I know."

"I just saw Jacob at his house. He might come around later," Kiev said. He took another swig of his drink.

Neva mumbled wryly, "That's good to know. I ought to leave before then."

He chuckled deeply in reply. Neva wondered about Kiev some days. He was an alcoholic and an introvert. She knew she could place her trust in him, but she didn't quite know how much of it.

"Say," she continued, "you wouldn't happen to know anything about this tavern, would you?"

"No," he answered as he glanced around the room. He shrugged once before taking another drink. "Nothing at all."

"I think the answer lies within the cellar, which is in sore need of...an excavation," she said. Her blue eyes were focused on Kiev.

He heaved a small sigh and grumbled, "You're lookin' at me, aren't you?" His eyes slowly rose up to meet hers.

"Please?" she said with a slight grin. "You and Jacob could work together. I'm sure Bernard would be of assistance, too, when he comes around." Kiev rose without another word and headed to the cellar. Neva leaned over the counter, closing her eyes in thought. Only moments later, a loud crash resonated from the cellar, and Kiev's cries of disgust shortly followed. Neva headed down the stairs to investigate. Kiev was brushing himself off and heading for the stairs.

"Eh, Silver Fox, there's..." he trailed off as his eyes were drawn off by something in the corner.

Neva inquired, "What is it?"

"A body," he replied hastily, pointing a shaky digit towards the corner. She furrowed her brows and headed in that direction. There she found skeletal remains. Neva

kicked some other matter out of the way to identify the corpse. She found the skull and instantly saw the unmistakable features of a vampire. She could see the broken ribs where he had been stabbed or possibly beaten.

“A dead vampire, hmm,” she mused aloud. “My guess is that he died fighting. Well, just take these bones out of here. We’ll burn all these broken bits of furniture.”

Kiev glanced at her in disgust and said with repulsion, “I’d rather not touch it.”

“Get some gloves,” Neva replied in slight exasperation, “and some virility.” She returned upstairs to find Jacob entering the tavern.

A small grin formed on Neva’s face as she said, “I’m glad you’re here, Jacob.”

“That’s...surprising,” said he with a smile. Neva paused and allowed herself a small grin at his comment. Jacob never failed to insert a smart comment whenever unnecessary.

She replied, “Yes, now, you see that door there?”

“Don’t I just,” said he, moving towards it.

“Alright,” Neva continued, “just go ahead down there, and you’ll find Kiev. He’ll tell you what you’re doing.” Jacob perked a brow curiously at her, and she merely pointed him in the direction of the cellar. He shrugged and headed down there without another word. Neva reseated herself at the table. She heard groaning and bellowing coming from beneath her.

“I have to do what?” Jacob’s voice echoed from downstairs.

Kiev’s voice sounded in reply, “Yeah, she wanted you to take the body.”

“Hell no! That’s disgusting,” Jacob moaned. Neva’s eyes narrowed as she stood.

She made her way to the door and called down to them, “If you don’t get working, I’ll lock you both down there with the body. If you’re not going to move it, you can sleep with it.” Some quiet shuffling followed her words, and she assumed that they were now working on it.

“Man,” Jacob said, “what a bitch.” Neva’s jaw dropped slightly as she glared down the steps. She slammed the door shut, and immediately, the two began shouting at her with apologies and insincere comments. She quietly reopened the door and left the tavern for home, as she knew her father would begin wondering where she was.

The moon shone outside her window that night with a soft, comforting luminescence. Neva took it as a sign from Orion that he would be out there still, looking in her window and dreaming of her. It was this one instance of pity and sorrow that allowed the Silver Fox to shed a single tear for the Vampire who had fought so vainly to win her affection. She could not help but respect a man with such strong determination in his soul. However, from then on, she realized she’d never be able to trust another Vampire.

Her father gave her another letter a week later. Sitting at the counter in the Wolf’s Head, she looked over what it said. A number of recruits eyed her suspiciously, each one waiting to be chosen for this new contract. To Neva’s surprise, the name of the man was Sekei Othedius. *If I’m not mistaken*, she thought, *that’s the name of the man who was my father’s informant*. She thought about how it seemed. *My father used the mage to get what he wanted and now that he is satisfied, the mage is to be eliminated*. She decided

that the mage was not going to be easily caught. Anyone that dealt with Nikolai personally would have to be someone with strong blood.

Neva viewed the ones surrounding her casually. Each would be willing to take the task; she knew that. However, she needed someone with more strength and less intelligence, a gung-ho individual with little to lose. In the corner, she spotted the Demon, Recruit 3. She decided upon him and his Demonic strength and stamina. Their eyes met, and she signaled him to approach her.

“Don’t say a word. This contract is yours. Now, go,” she said briefly.

The Demon nodded and slipped the paper into his robe. He left the tavern wordlessly. Neva sat wondering how the Demon would fair against the might of a mage on the run.

Neva had been lucky so far; none of her murderers had failed her yet. She knew her luck could not hold out forever, but she did wonder where she crossed the line between chance and fate. She always thought of the latter cautiously in the back of her mind, for it was more than she would ever know. Her father had told her over and over again that it was her sister who was destined for great things. As far as Neva could see, her sister was hardly more than a roguish vagabond at best. In truth, Neva did envy the way all the men spoke of Aeyla in taverns. Her own cohorts, except Lily, spoke highly of the Swordslinger, even in Neva’s presence. It was hard for her to simply bite her tongue and hear what they said.

Piece by piece, the cellar was slowly unraveled in the following days. In the latter part of the week, Neva decided to look for herself. She took a candle and headed down the steps to see what she could find. However, in the dim light, Neva couldn’t see anything conspicuous or telling. She carefully scrutinized each marking and scuff on the wall in the candlelight but found them all to simply be the signs of age and wear. She paused in the corner of the room as she heard the sound of footsteps descending behind her. Her eyes averted towards the floor behind her to find Lily’s shadow come looming behind her.

“I haven’t found anything *still*,” Neva commented as Lily approached her.

She replied, “Silver, you stand on it.”

Neva perked a brow and knelt down, brandishing the candle. She found that in the very corner a deep red stain marred the aged wood with a savage type of mystique.

“What does it mean?” Neva asked as she stood up.

Lily held a cautious stance as she said, “Either this is a sign of a murder or someone broke a wine bottle.”

Neva replied, “There was a vampire corpse down here. However, look at this stain. It seems to continue through the wall.”

“Hmm, yes. I did take note of that, but I am unsure of it,” Lily said shaking her head with uncertainty. Her green eyes scanned over the small scene.

Then, another set of footsteps sounded behind them. Bernard entered the room without a word. He glanced at his wife cautiously, as if exchanging thoughts. He heaved a short sigh and began examining the spot. His hands went over the smooth walls quietly. Then, Bernard stopped with a sudden abruptness. He jerked the wall panel and it seemed to come loose from the wall.

“Bernard,” Lily said carefully.

His brows furrowed sharply, but Bernard continued taking down the wall. There appeared to be a small cubby behind it. He slid the section of wall aside to reveal a chest and an armoire. Bernard opened the armoire doors and metal threading shot into his neck as if from a set trap. He fell backwards, clutching his neck, and Lily cried out to him as he fell. She knelt down over him, fretting apprehensively. Neva simply stepped over his fallen body and moved forward cautiously to examine the armoire.

“Odd,” she remarked as she looked through the contents of the armoire.

Inside was a considerable amount of art supplies. Bottles of paint and cups filled with brushes lined the top shelf, while stacks of large pieces of parchment filled the lower shelf.

Lily said desperately, “Please, Silver, my husband...”

Neva said nothing in reply as she looked at the bottles in the armoire. There were smaller bottles with no labels, but the larger ones Neva could see were different tones of paint.

“The bottles...” came Bernard’s choked voice, “...it’s blood.”

“How do you know that?” Neva asked, staring at the man on the floor.

Lily answered quietly, “He needs help, and then he can talk to you about it. He’s going to die.”

Neva’s eyes met with Lily’s briefly in the dim light. Neva’s left eye twitched with a newborn feeling of agitation.

“Lily, how does he know there is blood in the armoire bottles?” Neva asked again.

Finally, Bernard gasped, “V-vam...”

A vampire. Neva’s lip instantly curled in disgust, and she stepped back from the two. Lily hung her head over her husband’s dying body.

“That’s disappointing. I’m sorry, Lily. There’s nothing I can or will do for him.”

Lily’s mouth fell open with unspoken shock. Her eyes shone with the fire of unjustly injured innocence. Glancing down at the body, Neva could see the greasy dyes in his hair, making him look more human, and his teeth, she knew, were filed down.

Bernard let out a faint, coughing sigh.

“I’ll send for someone to drag his corpse from the cellar,” Neva said over her shoulder. Lily merely remained by his side, stroking his hand with a sad, disturbed frown. Neva took a mental note of everything she saw, and then she left Lily there in the cellar to grieve over Bernard, knowing she would be the only one to do so. It was the last of Bernard Neva would see, and she felt better for it. *One less Vampire*, she thought. *It’s a shame it will affect Lily’s work though.*

Days later, as Neva was seated at the bar, Lily made an appearance at last. Neva, brandy in hand, greeted her politely but indifferently.

“Silver Fox, I’d like a word with you, in the cellar, if I may,” she said nervously. Neva nodded in reply and placed her drink upon the counter. She followed Lily down the steps, ensuring that she was the last one to go through the door. Neva had new reasons to distrust the woman, and that upset her slightly but not half so much as the idea of a Vampire alive and in her company.

Lily cleared her throat and stated, “I just have to know what type of grudge you held against my husband so as to wish him dead.” Neva’s eyes narrowed slightly as she thought of her reply.

“You may not remember, Lily, before...back in Helix with those under the shadow. Do you not recall my encounter with the Vampire who wanted to marry me?” Neva’s voice was always direct and swift; this sudden insecurity in the Fox’s voice worried Lily. She looked at her esteemed leader curiously.

Lily had a deep and seemingly unending respect for Neva. The Silver Fox was intelligent and determined. However, at that moment, Lily felt as though her loyalty was torn between the Silver Fox and her departed husband. Neva had once told her that loyalties to the dead ended with no rewards. Lily decided Neva was right, and she decided to continue her work with the woman, though her husband was now deceased, which could have been helped except for Neva’s cold heart.

Neva continued darkly, “He almost killed me over it.” Then, it hit Lily. *The Prince of the North*, she thought. *How could I forget? It was a huge issue in the gang.*

“My apologies, Silver Fox,” Lily said hastily. “I had completely forgotten about it. I understand why you refuse to trust Vampires.”

“Now, leave me Lily,” said Neva. Lily obediently left the cellar, and Neva remained alone to look through the armoire.

It had taken a number of days to unset all the traps held within the armoire. Neva looked through everything now that she was sure there would be nothing waiting to slay her as they had Bernard. Sketches filled small boxes in one drawer, and in the very bottom drawer, she found beautiful, half-finished portraits.

As Neva thumbed through them, she noticed they were all depicting the same woman, her mother. While much of the pictures seemed unfinished, their backgrounds had an array of reds painted in, spanning from crimson shades to rust. Infernos lit houses in the backgrounds and embellished the tips of unsheathed swords with fiery sunsets emblazoned behind the woman this painter had so adored. Turning one of them around, she found written in pencil, *Yomi Desiree’s Portrait #8*.

“Yomi...Mother,” she whispered quietly. Smiling to herself, she said, “Looks like you had a Vampire admirer too. I guess that’s where I get it from, huh?” Neva let out a long sigh. Then, she said as she glanced at all the paintings, “An artist who paints with blood, yet you chose Nikolai.”

Suddenly another voice said, “Who are you talking to?”

She slid all the portraits back into the armoire and glanced over her shoulder to see Jacob standing at the bottom stair, candle in hand.

“Myself,” she answered.

Jacob perked a brow and replied, “That’s a sign of mental illness, you know.”

“No, no, it’s a sign of the mind at work with itself,” Neva replied with a bare smile.

“Whatever you say, Silver Fox,” Jacob said, rolling his eyes. “She’s a crazy one, isn’t she Jacob? Why yes, Jacob, she is.” His words stopped as her smile had turned into a sour frown. Chewing his lip and clearing his throat, Jacob about-faced and returned up the stairs.

“Oh yeah,” he said over his shoulder, “I came down to tell you Lily found more people. She wants you to meet them.”

Neva followed Jacob up the stairs, putting on her dark leather helm and pulling up her hood. She found four strangers seated at the bar, drinking and chatting excitedly. Jacob seated himself at the bar next to them and pointed to Neva. Their drinks lowered

from their mouths and the room grew quiet. Four pairs of eyes were focused upon the dark woman before them, dressed mysteriously in a long grey robe. A fox was embroidered on the back of it in silvery thread, adding to the woman's pure mystique. It was a fear Neva thrived on and led her group with.

Neva said warmly, "I welcome you to the Wolf's Head Tavern. Please drink and be merry." She pulled her hood off and seated herself at the bar. She then added quietly, "We'll speak in the tavern cellar a day from now. Be sure to head down there one at a time. *Always* act casual." Then, she grew louder and said, "This is a tavern after all folks! Let's hear some noise." The recruits laughed and smiled as they clinked their glasses together happily.

With the new table in place in the cellar, Neva called for a meeting with her recruits to discuss plans for eliminating her sister. They slowly filed into the room, followed by Kiev, Jacob, and Lily.

"I assume Denali and Dana are still in Carlton?" Neva asked. Lily nodded quietly in response. Neva closed her eyes briefly as she fathered her thoughts. She opened her eyes to a scene which pleased her. Recruits were gathered around the table cautiously looking at their leader. Their fresh eyes shone with determination and eagerness.

"There is only one main goal for this group. While you may think it is to fulfill a certain man's need for death, that is not it. The only goal I have is to murder one, Neva the Swordslinger." She paused to allow her recruits to digest the information. "That is where I need your help. I plan to send half of you as scouts while the remaining will be with me. They will be at the ready for anything, prepared to attack. When comes the time to bring this woman down, we shall overwhelm her and slay the bitch. Every day that she lives is another thorn in my side."

The faces of the recruits altogether became more determined. She knew her influential hold on them was powerful. It would come to create a stubborn and savage loyalty, held together by the leathery bonds of insecurity and phobia.

Finally, she finished off her speech, "Details of the plan are to be released at a later date. Speak not of the wolf's death but only in cautious humor with others. You hold your fate in your hands."

Neva seated herself, which was the sign for the recruits to take their leave from the cellar. Neva remained in the room with Jacob, Lily, and Kiev. They were her original crew, and she knew they could be trusted. However she was hesitant to place them at a higher standard than the other recruits because that would cause tiny mixes of interest which would lead to corruption. She knew though, that she would need them as close ears and eyes more than as recruits.

"We'll codeword this 'The Nightmare of Aurum' and speak no more of it," said Neva. "Know also, as you may already, that you are my eyes and ears; never forget it."

Jacob cleared his throat and replied while motioning toward his ear, "I'm sorry, what'd you say?" Lily frowned at this comment while a bare grin formed on Neva's face. *Had anyone else said that, thought Neva, he'd have his tongue removed.*

"To fulfill your loyalty, you will kill him," he said as he placed a neatly folded up sheet of paper in her hand. Glancing at the paper, she nodded slightly. She quickly made

her way to the Wolf's Head and started reading the paper. Several members poked and prodded her inquisitively, but she answered no questions until she had completely read what her father gave her. The letter described a specific man in a small town off the south coast. Seeing nothing too difficult about the task, she decided to hand it off to any of the new recruits.

"Who in here knows where the town of Jencroft is?" she asked plainly.

A younger recruit answered, "Ma'am! I do!"

Placing the paper in his hand, Neva said, "Here. The contract is yours." His eyes shone eagerly as he smiled in gratitude. He immediately left the premises to fulfill his master's wishes. She placidly remained seated at the bar as she downed the rest of her brandy. Her eyes drifted to the sketch of her mother. *I'm not doing this for you*, she thought. *I'm doing this because of you*. A few of the newer recruits seated themselves around her, chatting excessively in hopes of starting a conversation with the Silver Fox.

The recruits, were always so curious about her. They feared her and respected her, but the recruits never ceased to inquire her about herself.

When Neva arrived to the tavern the next day, she found that a poster featuring none other than her sister had been posted on the outside of it. She stood in seething anger for several moments, quietly mulling over her disgust. Then, she suddenly tore the poster from the wall, shredding it to pieces. Her boot viciously drove the pieces into the dirt below her. She leaned against the tavern's front door, breathing deeply.

Neva made her way to the tavern and found only Jacob at the bar. He was leaning over the counter with a cool grin on his face.

Neva glanced around at the empty place and asked, "There's something amiss, isn't there?"

"No," he said in a jocular tone. "Why would you think that?" His unending sarcasm was almost tiresome. She frowned as she perked a stiff brow.

Neva mumbled, "Because you're here. That's why."

He chuckled lightly as he leaned even further on the counter. Jacob said nothing as he stared up at her. Neva merely sighed lightly as she seated herself at the bar. It was the first time she and Jacob were alone. A silence uneasily fell between the two.

Finally, Jacob broke the silence, "So, while I'm here, you want something to drink?"

"Sure," she answered.

"Well, you'll have to get it yourself then," he replied with a smirk.

Neva was hardly in the mood for a laugh or smile. Neva decided it was time to be serious. She needed to know exactly what the man could do. She sighed lightly and leaned on the counter, looking Jacob directly in the eyes.

"Do you have any fighting skills at all?" she asked directly.

His tone lowered as he replied, "Uh, I can use a bow." Then, he muttered under his breath, "But of course my brother Lee was the one gifted with archery."

"Hmm? A brother named Lee?" Neva inquired. Jacob nodded sullenly. "You've never mentioned him before."

He said frowning slightly, "With good reason. I don't like him very much. Besides, he's only my half brother; we just have the same father."

“What’s your last name?” Neva asked, hoping he would say what she thinking.

“Bennett,” he answered in a dull tone. “Why does that matter?”

She grinned lightly to herself, not answering his question.

Then, she asked him curiously, “Do you know where your brother is right now?”

“No,” he said, starting to sound defensive. His voice rose as he said, “I don’t care either. I hate him. My father always favored him. I was a mistake, he told me. I couldn’t really be a part of the family. It’s because of my brother. I can’t stand him.” The sound of anger in his voice and the look of fierce vengeance upon his face caught Neva’s attention. His words, too, struck her. She had never met anyone else with such a deep sibling rivalry as she, and here in front of her was someone who shared that. She stood and grabbed a bottle from a shelf.

Neva poured both of them drinks and said to him, “I understand how that is, Jacob.”

“No, Silver Fox, you don’t,” he grumbled as he accepted the drink. Jacob took a swig of it and sighed lightly, staring at the woman before him. Neva grinned darkly as raised her glass to her mouth. Then, after a pause, Jacob said, “Or do you?” Neva chuckled lightly as she began to drink.

Her eyes dropped to the counter as she asked, “Are we really alone?”

“Yeah,” he said quietly.

“Then I’ll fill you in on something,” Neva said. “My one goal in life is to kill my sister. Exactly who is my sister? Well, she’s nothing more than a rebellious renegade, a vigilante with a blade. Sure, she makes a living fighting, but I’m not afraid to take her down. This is driven in my head so deep that I believe it’s fate; it’s fate that my blade should run my sister through and cause her to cease existing.”

“That’s, uh, pretty scary. I just want to, you know, punch my brother or something,” Jacob said, sounding slightly nervous. “So who exactly is your sister? What’s her name?”

“It doesn’t matter. She stole my name. She stole everything. I should stop now. I won’t say anything else,” Neva mumbled. She closed her eyes and imagined herself in a place far from Liam, where she had no sister. It was a place where her father couldn’t find her, and there were no Vampires or Demons. When she opened her eyes, she realized how far away and unreal that place was, and it made her sad.

(WORK WITH NIKOLAI CONTINUES)

Her father had given her two notes. Neva wondered if he was looking to kill two people or if this was going to be an involved task. One again she made haste to the Wolf’s Head to read the notes. She opened one to find but a normal quest. Her next note simply said, *Use caution when using manpower; it is unreliable.* Her thoughts quickly turned to those under her. She turned to Recruit 2 next to her and quietly mumbled something about a meeting and to pass on the word. Neva headed to the cellar, now transformed into a large meeting room. After an hour’s wait, the rest of the recruits were present.

“Who, by name and number, is not present?” asked Neva clearly.

One reported, “Thompson, Recruit 9, the newest one, and Hisao, Recruit 3.”

“Where are they?” asked Neva.

The same answered promptly, “Thompson is fulfilling a task which you assigned, Silver Fox, and Hisao, who has fulfilled his own task, is currently in the Fort Derelict prisons in Helix.”

“Then, he is on his own,” Neva said. “Now...”

She paused to inspect each person quietly. There were about fifteen altogether. She had trusted each one, but because of her father, she was forced to put the group in this distrustful position. Looking at each person, she realized that the disloyalty laid not in that room but in the ones not there. Her thoughts focused upon the jailed dog. He had been the only non-human within the entire group.

As for the other, Recruit 9, Neva could not bring herself to suspect someone so new to the group. *It has to be the Demon*, she thought. *Demons are like that, shrewd, greedy, savage...and even Dog Demons aren't as loyal as humans.* Her thoughts were bitter with a heated mixture of disgust and rage. She had trusted the Demon, and though he had served her well, she could trust him no longer.

After fully gathering her conclusion, she asked, “He, the Demon, is the one Nikolai warned me of, a betrayer to the group, to me, and to each and every one of you. From here on, I banish him and every other Demon, Vampire, Lycan, and any other non-human scum from this place and us.”

Neva’s announcement caused a small stir throughout the recruits. Generally, she could see looks of approval amongst them. Lily drew a line through Hisao’s name on the paper.

Neva shook her head and said as she seated yourself, “As you were.”

They slowly filed up the stairs, one every few minutes or so. Before long, the only ones left were the original, non-recruit crew. Denali and Dana both took their leave with Kiev to have drinks with the recruits. Lily shut the door, leaving only herself, Neva, and Jacob left. Neva pulled off her leather helm as well as her hood. She heaved a small sigh as she ran a hand through her thick chestnut hair. Glancing at the helm, she instantly felt a rush of shame crowd her mind. She rested her head in her hands and sighed once more.

(THE WAR BEGINS, OFFICIALLY)

Neva sat in the tavern alone, as she always did. Cynically watching those around her, Neva gathered her observations as they spoke, moved, and drank. One conversation caught her ear.

“By the saints, those damned Lycans and Demons ransacked another town,” said a man.

A woman nearby yelled, “It’s because of those beastly Vampires!”

“Then why’d the Elites and the guards have to get involved?” another man joined. Neva thought to herself, *Because James Cervantes is an overzealous bastard.*

“Either way,” the first man said, “those dirty dogs had better be paying for it.”

The news hadn’t changed at all for a week. It was the same report each day, be it a Lycan attack or human attack. Neva felt as though things would get heated to a violent point of no turning back. *It’s already progressed this far*, she thought. *What will father say about this, and whose side will he take?* She took another sip of brandy quietly mulling things over.

“Yes father?” she said deeply. Her blue eyes examined his inquisitively. Nikolai remained silent for a few moments before answering.

He said, “I’ve received news that Lord James has finally been pushed over the edge. It’s been declared war now.”

“Bound to happen,” she noted. “However, I still think James is a fool for all this nonsensical bloodshed. Nothing good will come from this.” Nikolai’s dark face formed into a sick grin. Neva’s eyes grew slightly wider as she felt chills run down her back.

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” he said before disappearing from the bedroom doorway. Neva lay upon her bed and stared at the ceiling, wondering about her father’s words, like always.

When she awoke, she couldn’t find her father, which was odd. He rarely left the house, and if he did, she would have been informed.

(YEARS LATER AND SHE RECIEVES NEWS NIKOLAI WILL KILL NEVA.)

Sinister Sister

“What?” Neva cried aloud.

He only nodded his head solemnly. She fled from the room instantly. She grabbed a horse from behind the house and stormed away from Viland in a mad rush to impede her crazy father; Neva would not, under all the effort she could give, allow her father to kill the woman she had so longed to assassinate. She would stop the man by any means, even if it meant killing him.

Then, an odd feeling seemed to creep into her mind. What if there were more reasons to stopping Nikolai than because she wanted to be the one to kill Aeyla. Her eyes narrowed at the possibility, but for some reason, the thought seemed to linger on in her mind, and no matter what she did, it seemed to stay. Her cold heart could hardly cope with it as she rode onwards towards Helix.

Her horse strode through the gates of Helix with a loud clamor. She ducked down into an alley to get to Fort Derelict. She dismounted her horse and began running through the narrow streets towards the large, wide-open gate.

She heard a low shout come from the fort saying, “You bastard!”

Neva headed towards the gate. As she did, a man with a bow upon his back quickly bolted around a corner, and the two collided. The man was gone by the time she recovered from the blow. She simply ran into the fort, now almost fully winded. She stopped as she saw the guards lifting something covered in a bloodied sheet. She pulled her hood down lower as they passed. Neva knew it was Aeyla under that sheet. She felt defeated and worthless.

She grew angry as she made her back to Viland, for *she* had wanted to kill Aeyla. Though she was dead, Neva’s need for revenge against her sister was not fulfilled. For a long time that night she thought of several possible ideas. However, her most ingenious idea came to her in a dream. Neva had dreamt that that she and her sister were standing back to back. Her father held a sword to them both.

“Which is Neva? Which is Aeyla?” he said in her dream.

Neva smiled to herself wickedly as she lied, “I am Aeyla, father. The one superior to Neva.” With that, Nikolai slew Neva’s sister. She smiled with fiery vehemence, for that moment, and that moment alone, Neva had conquered over her sister. When Neva arrived home in Viland, she fled to the study where she immediately began writing down her dream in full detail. Then, she began to plan.

“There was a man,” said Nikolai. “He stood up to me.”

Neva looked at him curiously and asked, “Who?”

“That man, he had dark hair and green eyes. He knew you,” he replied. “He gave me...”

“Wha-what?” she inquired nervously. Nikolai fiercely ripped his sleeve open and held up his arm in the candlelight, which seemed to flicker in terror.

“This scar,” he answered. He slammed his fist upon the desk.

Neva said, “It’s not my fault.”

“It is your fault. It’s always been your fault!” he yelled. Her brows furrowed as her cheeks grew red with anger.

She said quietly, “You can’t blame everything on me, father.” Nikolai’s blue eyes focused upon her.

“I hate you,” she whispered before she ran out of the room and down the hall.

She continued running even after she left the house. She stopped when she reached the gates to the Nobles’ Division. She sighed heavily and looked up to the sky. The stars overhead seemed to grimace at her from above as they emerged into the deep, blue sky. She wiped a small tear from her eye and began walking towards the haunted tavern with an air of determination about her. Neva quietly stepped inside the rundown place. The boards under her feet groaned weightily. She lit a single candle and seated herself at the empty bar. She heard a set of footsteps coming from upstairs.

“Ma’am?” she heard a male’s voice ask. Through the darkness, she could just barely make out Kiev’s face. In his hand was a bottle of liquor. “Good,” he said with a relieved sigh, “I was worried some stranger wandered in here.”

“Since when do strangers *ever* wander in here?” Neva asked, perking a brow. Kiev tapped the glass bottle as he thought.

After a moment he replied, “Well, yesterday, remember that guy who came in? He...he was, um, an in-looter. Stole everything I owned.”

Neva rolled her eyes and grabbed the bottle of alcohol from his hands.

“The word you’re looking for is intruder, and that wasn’t an intruder. That was Jacob. You were drunk, just like you are now,” Neva said in slight disgust. Kiev chuckled lightly and then stopped.

“Hey, hey,” Kiev said shaking his head slowly, “I’m *not* drunk. You would *know* if I was drunk. I mean, if I was drunk *right* now you could tell, but I’m not drunk. I—” He cleared his throat before continuing, “—am just fine.” He slunk into a barstool and leaned on the counter, laughing slightly in spite of himself. “So...why are you here so early in the morning?”

Neva heaved a small sigh and replied, “It’s just after dusk. Anyway, I came here to think.”

“About...?” Kiev inquired.

“Well,” she answered, “just some personal problems.”

“No, no. You should think about...about other people. Don’t be selfish,” he said with a slight slur in his words.

Neva said with casual inquisitiveness, “You know about that Swordslinger person, right?”

“Who?” he said squinting in thought.

“Neva the Swordslinger,” she replied through gritted teeth.

“Oh!” Kiev replied nodding. “I know who you’re talking about. Yeah, I know her personally, in fact.”

Neva perked a brow and said, “You don’t say...”

“No, really, I do,” he shakily stood and ambled behind the bar to search for more booze.

“I’ll give you some nice old liquor I found if you tell me everything you know about Aey—Neva,” she bribed.

Kiev nodded approvingly and said, “Yes. Well, the first thing to know about Neva is that she has a temper. She does. You just don’t even...oh, she got so mad at me! I just can’t believe her!” He threw his hands into the air and slumped over. Neva heaved another sigh, this time showing annoyance.

“Fine,” Neva said, “I’m not giving you the liquor if you don’t tell me.”

“Okay,” he said composing himself slightly, “I’m okay. I *did* train while she had trained. She...she was called, um, Corey, Travis? No, no, well, the name doesn’t matter, but she was the best fighter, and she knew the most about history. None of us expected that she was really a woman. I remember at the graduation ceremony when she told us her real name was Nero and—”

“—Neva,” she corrected with a slight twitch of the eye.

“Yeah, Nina, and I was surprised. I couldn’t believe it. She...she tricked us all, you know? Then, they killed her or something,” Kiev said as he scratched his head. “Yep, she was a nice lady. I think she liked me better than the other guys, even though I never met her.” Kiev let out a wide yawn and slumped over the bar once more.

“Thanks Kiev,” Neva said frowning, “you’re absolutely no help.”

“I’m glad for you,” he murmured. As she was about to leave, Kiev said, “Yeah, Captain Balks didn’t like her.”

Neva turned towards him and asked, “Captain Balks?”

“Who?” he said shaking his head. “No, Chris. It was Chris, ma’am.”

“Was...*Neva* known as Chris while she was training and her trainer was Captain Balks?” Neva asked, attempting to make sense of it all.

He replied, “Yes! How did you know?” She merely shook her head and started for the door. “Hey,” he called out, “what about that liquor?” *He’s drunker than ever*, she thought, *yet he remembers the booze*.

“I lost it,” she mumbled before heading out the door.

“I’ll never forgive you!” she heard him yell after her.

She smiled to herself and shook her head. She made her way through the streets back towards home. Neva knew her father, being as odd-minded as he was, wouldn’t be angry anymore. She had to ask him about Neva and Captain Balks. *That’s the man I had the first contract for a long time ago*, she thought. Neva walked down the long, paved street to home in the still darkness. She took a deep breath and then entered.

“Father!” she called out.

There was no answer. She began searching through each room.

“Father, where are you already? Still mad?”

She treaded upstairs and opened the door to his study. There she found him lying on the floor in his own blood. She inhaled sharply as she kneeled by his body.

She shook him violently, “Father! What happened?”

His eyes were glazed over in death. Neva’s mind couldn’t contemplate what to feel. She sat at his desk and took a deep breath. She wondered how he had died until she looked at the book on his desk. In between one of the pages was a note.

Neva unfolded it and read it to herself, “Dear Neva, should you find this note, I committed suicide. As my only living daughter, please find a way to let your sister know how sorry I am for what I did to her. She was my beautiful girl, who didn’t deserve death. I couldn’t live with what I had done and with the way I was treating you. If only I had acted half as sane as I sound now, things might be different; Aeyla might still be alive. However, no amount of words, no matter how graceful, will ever bring her back. It is the curse of pain. Here a goodbye would be suitable, but I have already left you, dear Neva. I am joining my wife in Hell as of now. Be good; don’t make the same mistake I did so long ago. A father’s unrequited love, Nikolai.”

Neva dropped the note and collapsed onto the desk surface in tears. She cried long into the night, alone. Her father had loved both her and her sister. He regretted what he had done to them. However, taking another glance at the note, Neva didn’t see him apologizing for what he had done to his wife.

“I wonder what happened,” she mumbled to herself as she gazed at the note. Her eyes drifted to the words “don’t make the same mistake I did so long ago.” She wondered, *What mistake did he make that he regrets so much?* Neva folded the note and placed it inside a pocket. She looked down at the body sadly. It was like a man she had never known. His sanity had been locked away by the pain he endured from the Vampires and the years of dark magic from his youth.

She said to herself crossly, “This would not have happened if Aeyla were still around. It’s her fault things came to this. I will go on with this plan of mine.” As she looked at Nikolai’s corpse, she got an idea. Neva dashed out of the house and back towards the haunted tavern hastily, filled with the fury of inner demons.

Neva silently paced in her dark office. Only a single, scented candle was lit. She breathed in the faint aromas. She stopped and closed her eyes briefly, becoming deep in thought. The sound of a door banging open brought her to consciousness. A quick rapping upon her door followed shortly after. Neva opened the door and pushed her way past the man at the door. Several other men stood around a single crate.

“This is her?” she asked firmly.

“Yes ma’am,” Lily answered.

Neva slid the crate open to find her sister’s corpse, wrapped in white cloth. Neva hadn’t seen her sister since she was a child and removed the white linen curiously. Upon unraveling the last bit, she found a woman nearly identical to herself. Aeyla wore a blue robe with gold embroidery. It, she thought, must have been remade for her to be buried

in. Neva scowled as she saw her name sewn on it. She slammed the lid over the crate quickly.

“Ma’am?” Lily said inquisitively.

Neva replied, “She was a horrible person for taking everything that was mine. She took my clothes, the love of our father, and even the blanket with...my name.”

Lily looked up at Neva and said, “Silver, I have a question.”

“Yes?” she said after a short pause.

“Well,” Lily asked, “if...if your father loved her, why did he...kill her?” Neva grew silent as she stared at the crate. She wondered, *Why did he kill her?*

Neva finally answered, “I do not know.”

“Ma’am,” said one of the men, “what was your plan with the body?” She slowly removed the lid once more.

“I needed to examine it to see how closely we resembled each other, but I see that not much alteration will be needed. My hair, the clothes, and the armor, it would seem.”

“Yes, that black armor is quite rare,” Lily noted. Neva nodded as she continued to peer over the body. The woman’s cheeks were pale with death and hollow.

As she slipped her robe off, a small, folded piece of paper fell onto the floor. She looked at it curiously as she bent down to pick it up. When she unfolded it, she immediately remembered it was her father’s suicide note. As she looked at it in the candlelight, she saw something written on the back. *April 10th, 1470: Death of Aeyla. April 10th, 1449: Death of Yomi.* She sighed lightly and put the note back in the robe’s pocket. There came a quiet rapping upon her door.

“Silver Fox?” she heard Jacob’s voice call.

Neva answered, “Come in.”

“Well, I overheard in the tavern that Lord Dave has his eyes on another woman now. He’s over Neva and wants to *marry*,” he informed her. Neva glanced out the window and then back to Jacob.

She nodded slowly and replied, “Yes, thank you, Jacob. This means we must get our plan started. Now.”

“Now? We don’t know everything though,” he said cautiously.

Neva said firmly, “I know enough. Besides, I have a new plan.”

“New plan? You’re just full of ‘em,” Jacob commented as he left the room.

Neva cursed as she saw the woman behind her still.

“She must know something,” she whispered to herself. Neva kicked her horse onwards. She decided to just lead the woman to Piliad, where she could kill her. Once reaching Piliad, she found that the temple was the last standing building. She jumped off her horse and hurriedly rushed inside the building, situating herself perfectly into the shadows cast by statues. The young woman ran up the steps after her. Neva saw at once that she was a Lycan. She glared at the woman before her and leapt at her, blade in hand.

“Neva!” the woman shouted as Neva left the shadows.

Neva glared coldly into the Lycan’s emerald eyes as she thrust the sword through her neck. The woman fell to the steps of the temple clutching her neck, and Neva left her without a second thought. She mounted her horse and continued towards Helix, ever more wary of her surroundings.

Alone by the fire, she took her father's note from her pocket and read it through once more. It saddened her slightly, but she needed to see the words once more.

Sitting at her father's desk, Neva leaned back in the large chair deep in thought. She had reached a point where she needed something. All the resources she had offering information about her sister's life and behaviors were lacking. She had decided that she needed a new source, but she didn't know where one could be found. Her thoughts revolved around a diary.

Of all the informants she'd run through, none had mentioned Aeyla keeping a diary or journal, nor did her companion. *No paper*, Neva thought, *smart, sister. I'll get you though. Don't let your corpse smile just yet.* Then, she thought of her father, who had trailed Aeyla's every movement. *He had to have written it down*, she thought assuredly. Quickly, she began going through the drawers in the desk and glancing at the bookshelves.

"Where the hell would I keep a diary if I were a lunatic?" she wondered out loud.

"You wouldn't," said a voice at the door. Her eyes shifted upwards, catching sight of the person who spoke. Jacob stood at the door silently with a small grin on his face.

"Everyone knows crazy people don't keep diaries."

Neva heaved an exasperated sigh as she said, "Jacob, you're not helping."

"Of course not," he said laughing.

"Why don't you go get me some candles?" she ordered.

Jacob perked a brow and said, "Why *don't* I fetch some candles, or lightables as I like to call them."

"Go!" she yelled. Jacob ambled down the hall. Neva knew perfectly well that he wouldn't return with candles, but she needed to send him off somehow. "Damn," she muttered to herself, "can't tell if the guy is drunk or stupid sometimes."

"I heard that," Jacob yelled.

Neva answered, "You're supposed to be getting candles. What are you doing?"

"Heh, I have a friend at the window," he replied, "and I think he likes me."

"That's ridiculous," Neva said wryly as she left her desk. "No one likes you."

Neva leaned out of the doorway to see him narrow his eyes. As Jacob said, there was something in the window down the hall. Coming closer, she found that it was a small, black bird. In its mouth was a crumpled piece of paper. Neva opened the window and yanked the note from the bird. It screeched in detest, but Neva quickly swatted the bird away, slamming shut the window.

"What's that?" Jacob asked.

"I don't know," Neva said looking at the paper. She carefully unraveled the paper. She recognized her father's handwriting instantly. The note read, *It's in the west wing, on the floor of the marble dome, right now. Nikolai.* She almost felt as if it was some kind of message from beyond the grave. She wondered if the diary was still there. Neva knew there was only one way to find out and then proceeded down the hall to pack up for Helix.

The next morning she left Lily in charge of the home while she rode to Helix to find the diary. While she would have merely sent one of the members to complete such a task, Neva hadn't the patience to wait for his return. She needed the diary as quick as she

could lay her hands on it, and there would be no obstacle too great which would impede her. Upon reaching Helix, she headed straight to Derelict, to the place in the fort where she knew of a marble room.

In it, she found nothing but the signs of recent blood spill. Her eyes peered down at the floor, but she did not find the diary which Nikolai had promised. She tried remembering anything at all about what might have happened. She wondered, *Did my father take it back?* A guard parading the halls approached her.

“It’s a tragedy, isn’t it?” he asked, peering at the floor on the room. Neva didn’t reply but kept her head low. “Neva, though somewhat villainous, was only trying to help our country. It’s wonderful how everything is now, and we have her to thank. I curse the soul who would have taken such a wonderful woman from the good people of Liam—” *Oh god*, she thought in disgust, *I might just slay myself here.*

“—Yes, of course. Sadness and gloom for all. Now, I need to know where the diary is that she was after,” Neva said.

The guard thought for a moment and replied, “You know, I did hear something about a small, black book being laid in this room. I heard one rumor even that it talked about her parents, who she didn’t know. Poor thing.”

“Where is it now?” she asked, her patience strained by the continuous mention of her sister.

“Hmm,” he replied, “I’m not sure. Lord Dave most likely has it for evidence matters. He’s bent on finding the killer for sure. They know who it is too, but that’s all I’ll tell *you*, civilian. Now, let’s head on.”

She perked a brow in detest at being called a civilian, though she was. Neva heaved a small sigh and went on her way. Her new target would be Lord Dave. She knew that he would be easily swayed by charitable condolences about Aeyla. However, she was not inclined to do that without losing her stomach, that is.

She decided to mention it, gage a reaction, and take as needed. She didn’t care how she’d have to do it, but the driven power she had geared towards finding that book was now beyond determination. Finding the lord within Derelict was another obstacle, he was anywhere at any given time, as most lords would be. She would have to wait and search patiently to catch him at a time he’d be most open. Neva paced around the training fields, from the armory to the stables, and back again. Finally, late in the day as the sun was perched upon the horizon, she spotted Dave speaking with the stable boy. Neva immediately approached him. She quickly pulled up her hood.

“Lord Dave,” she said.

“Yes, what is it?” he answered. She peered at the little boy quickly, whose wide eyes were pressed upon her directly. Then, her eyes averted back to Dave.

Neva said, choosing her words carefully, “I need to see the journal which lay by Neva where she died.”

“Why for?” Dave inquired.

“For reasons of search,” she answered. “I am seeking Nikolai too.”

“Well, I am honored by your offer, but I must decline,” he replied. “It’s private matters really, and I can’t let something so important go to a stranger.”

She said in a low tone, “We’ve met before, Lord Dave.”

“I know,” he replied, “but I stand by my word.”

He then left her standing outside the stables, searching for anything to say. In resignation, she left the fort to gather her thoughts in a tavern. With her father gone, she decided to take a look at the old tavern. However, when she got there, she found that Rodney was no longer there. It seemed as though he too disappeared. With nothing left but her dignity and the few pieces of money, she spent it up on drinks as she sulked alone in a dark corner of the tavern. Of all the faces that entered, she could recognize none of them.

The night soon grew late. Even the late night crowds had diminished. Her gathered but inquisitive thoughts accompanied her though, as well as a half-filled glass of brandy. Her mind became unfocused as she grew lost in thought, wondering about the diary. Her mind scoured over the possibilities, but she seemed at the end of a dirt path that she created. Time was not a factor to waste in a tavern, and Neva knew that. Soon, they, the Swordslinger's adoring fans, would begin to forget about her and accept her death. Her thoughts came to an abrupt halt when she felt a warm hand on her shoulder. A book was shoved into her arms, forcing her to accept it.

"Eh, what?" she mumbled slightly as she turned around. To her surprise, she found an unshaven and slightly ragged Lee standing behind her, smiling as he always did.

He said quietly, "I know it's not a new robe or a bundle of freshly cut flowers, but I think that'd be the quickest way to *this* woman's heart," he said. Neva flipped through the book's pages finding her father's handwriting on every one of them. *This is it*, she thought. *It's my father's diary*.

"Lee," she said in a whisper, "how can I thank you enough?" The side of his mouth twitched into a small, awkward grin.

Lee replied, "I'm sure I can think of something." He took a swig of Neva's brandy before continuing, "I caught wind of your father's death not too long ago. I knew you'd be heading into Helix sometime. It was by chance that I found you tonight." Neva grinning lightly as she fiddled with the book in her hands. "I thought about finding you, but I didn't know whether or not that Vampire was around still."

"The vampire?" Neva asked.

With a sly, knowing grin he replied, "You know which one I'm talking about."

"Orion Relas," she replied glumly. "He lives no longer." An awkward silence ensued, so Neva stood from her chair and prepared to leave. Throwing what was left of the money in her pocket on the counter, she said to Lee, "Well, come with me. I'm headed back to Viland now."

"I can't," he said. "I have work to do here. I was hoping you'd stay in Helix."

"Well, I can't stay. I have so much to do now that I have this," she whispered. Neva's blue eyes searched Lee's curiously. He seemed to be distracted by something.

After a moment, he finally said, "All right, fine. On your way."

"Lee?" she inquired.

"Go," he said coldly. Neva's brows furrowed inquisitively, but she remained silent. Taking the diary, she made haste out of Helix to return to Viland.