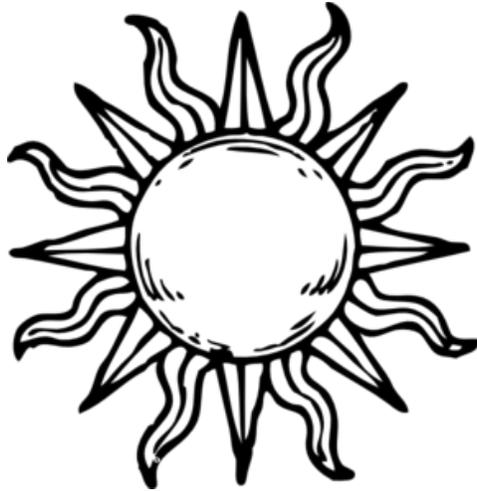


The Weathered Journal



of Lucie Thornbird

19th of Arios, year 412 of the Midnight Age

*W*hen I was four years old, I burned myself on a votive candle.

That is my first memory. At the time, I was living in a run-down manor that served as a home for orphaned children.

I shared my room, which had once been some kind of closet, with seven other girls. Four worn beds with dirty, tattered mattresses had been shoved into the cramped space, leaving no access to the creaky wooden floor underneath. The ceiling was rust stained, paint chipped and peeling to reveal mold and mildew underneath, and the occasional dripping of water from the bathroom overhead was often the only sound accompanying us throughout the otherwise silent nights.

As the smallest of the girls, I was fortunate. It was easiest for me to maneuver across the mattresses and dip beneath the angled ceiling to find a spot to rest my head. It was my own little corner where no one ever thought to bother me.

It felt safe.

It also had the benefit of being by a loose board in the wall that provided me an exceptionally narrow peek into the world outside the manor's walls. Occasionally, a draft would whisper its way through, but the chill was well worth the view.

I was alone in the room at the time I burned myself.

The sun was setting on a spring festival that many of the children of the manor had attended. I had caught a cold and was forced to remain behind in the room. I cannot say I minded much, I had always been one to keep to myself. So, there I was, four years old, alone in that tiny room, and playing with a tall, votive candle.

I liked seeing the shadows dance on the wall.

To my young imagination, it was as if an elegant ball scene were unfolding before me - elegant ladies in lustrous gowns of crushed satin and men with colorful cravats and coats with tails on them. All would whimsically whirl across the wall in circles to music heard only in my head. Their dance always ended the same way. Eventually, the music would stop and the sudden sensation of despair would wash over my tiny form.

As I was wallowing in my own self-pity, the candle's flame flared - leaping out, striking me and searing my flesh. I often wondered, out of some childish need to be different, if I had somehow caused the flame's reaction. I wondered if my sadness had somehow summoned forth the flare. More likely, it was a draft snaking its way around the loose board in the wall.

Regardless of its cause, I still have the remnants of the burn on the palm of my right hand.

Years 412 - 413 of the Midnight Age

How I ended up among the unwanted and unclaimed is a mystery to me. I was told by the headmistress that I had been turned in by a young fisherman who had found me wandering the banks of the Myesis river early one morning.

My gratitude to that fisherman is infinite. Still, at that young age I preferred to believe that I had ridden in on the back of a magnificent wyrm, scales painted in a riot of colors and maw riddled with jagged teeth that could form a menacing, toothy grin when amused. Her name was "Periwinkle" and she was going to come back and whisk me off to a new adventure at any moment.

Fortunately, I did not need such an elaborate rescue, for my residence at the children's home was relatively short lived.

7th of Variach, year 413 of the Midnight Age

On one cold winter day, a young atavian couple walked into the children's home with a young human boy trailing behind them. I had been playing in the snow, making friends with angels, when I saw them approach the run-down manor.

I loved the sight of them.

The woman had a smile that outshone any light that I had ever seen, and there was a certain kindness in her gaze that was completely foreign to me. The man was a relatively imposing figure, broad-shouldered with a square jaw, but his voice rumbled when he chuckled in a light-hearted way that softened his strong presence. The boy was fidgeting, obviously dressed up for the occasion in clean, freshly pressed clothing that he wore with clear discomfort. He had a sour expression on his round face that brought a smile to my own.

That delightfully awkward boy would become my brother and - for most of my young life - my own personal hero.

He was an orphan, like I was. Our father found him, dressed in rags and malnourished, trying to steal some food from the farmer's stand one bitter winter morning. He and his wife, being unable to have children of their own, decided to take the boy in and raise him as their son. Their business at the children's home was to find a second child - a daughter - to raise who would keep their new son company.

I would come to hang on his every word and cherish every moment of his attention. His name was "Claec" and he was my world.

Years 413 - 417 of the Midnight Age

The next four years were wonderful.

My mother, an atavian healer, was an incredibly generous woman. She had warm brown eyes lidded with long lashes, dimples in her cheeks near an ever-radiant smile, and lustrous raven-colored tresses that spilled about her in a carefree, capricious manner. She always smelled of the herbs and oils she would use in her craft and so, more often than not, the faintest scents of honey and peppermint would waft about her.

My father, a decorated champion, was a sturdy man with large calloused hands and boots that, up until I was nine or ten, I could squeeze the bottom half of my body into. He had a charming smile that often betrayed his otherwise gruff, rugged appearance, and a rather understated sense of humor. Though he had the reputation of being the city's most brutal combatant - which struck a certain sense of awe into whomever was in his presence - with his family, he was always kind, even-tempered and patient.

Then there was my brother, Claec. Unlike the rest of us, Claec was a human. He had perpetually unkempt brown hair that fell into his face, and a talent for mischief that got him into trouble more often than not. He was a charismatic, handsome boy - the type that made girls blush and giggle whenever he would walk by. But what was most important to me was that he was my brother - even when he was tormenting me as brothers are wont to do.

There was never any shortage of laughter, or love, in the humble dwelling we called our home. There were often guests around our hearth, singing and dancing, sharing in both story and food. A favorite story of mine was one that my mother often shared - the story of the thornbirds.

"There is a legend about a bird which sings just once in its life, more sweetly than any other creature on the face of the earth," she would begin, her voice solemn as she stood before the hearth's lowly burning fire. "From the moment it leaves the nest, it searches for a thorn tree and does not rest until it has found one."

I had the tale memorized. I knew each word before it left her plush pink lips to be shared with the gathered.

"Then, singing among the savage branches, it impales itself upon the longest, sharpest spine. And, dying, it rises above its own agony to out-carol the lark and the nightingale." My mother would always pause here, letting the silence sweep over the room with a certain sense of gravity.

"...One superlative song, existence the price. But the whole world stills to listen, and the Gods smile. For the best is only bought at the cost of great pain."

Another pause would follow, before a sly grin would twist at her lips. "...Or so the legend says."

That story always stuck with me. I often morbidly wondered what pain I would endure when the time came for me to sing my final song, or how glorious my song would sound. I remember musing about the matter in front of my mother in the kitchen one day. She told me to go outside to play with my brother.

Those are my favorite memories, but they were not without their trials.

My parents were part of a clan of atavians called "The Resistance." The clan focused on protecting our home and neighboring villages from the threat of Undeath. Their associated duties took them away often - a separation I routinely struggled with.

When our parents were off scouting and fighting, my brother and I would stay with our maternal aunt and cousins. We would play all day, blow wishes off the feathery petals of aged dandelions, laugh, and sing beloved childhood songs. I had even gotten rather adept at playing my uncle's flute, a silver one that was heavily tarnished from lack of use.

My aunt would say, with the certain fondness of jest, that my uncle used the flute to court her and then - once married - never played it again. In truth, my uncle was so busy with the affairs of the Resistance that we rarely ever saw him. Still, she never indicated anything hinting of regret.

She said that true love did not need physical presence because it was always present in the heart.

I had grown fond of those rolling hills. They were my home away from home - a place where I felt safe. Yet,

when twilight overtook the dawn and it was time to sleep, the nightmares always came. My brother was the only person who was ever able to calm me once the vivid visions took hold of my mind.

He would hear me screaming and would rush to my side and shake me awake. I would kick and scream, scratch and claw, until he managed to wrest me from them. "Everything is going to be okay, Lucie," Claec would softly say, "as long as we have each other we are invincible."

I believed him.

Once my breathing calmed, he would lead me outside and lay on his back next to me on the soft grass. There, we could see all the stars in the sky - millions of tiny twinkling lights spanning as far as the eye could see. I imagined them to be diamonds pinned to the dark night sky by the countless wishes and dreams that we mortals dared not speak in the light of day. My brother, instead, spoke of worlds far from our own.

"Count the stars, Lucie," he would urge as we laid there hand-in-hand. "Mom and Dad will be back before you are done."

And I would listen to him. I would count every star that I could, sometimes counting to the hundreds, a few times into the thousands... But to Claec, it never mattered how many I counted. He would simply lay by me and listen until I drifted back to sleep.

He was always there for me.

Year 418 of the Midnight Age

*I*t was my tenth year when things started to take a turn for the worse. A particularly brutal group of vampires began a routine assault against the Aerie and its neighbors. I was helping my mother triage the wounded at the city's infirmary - dressing wounds and administering herbal tinctures to numb pain and help the battle-weary rest.

I could see the bags grow under my mother's eyes with each passing hour. Yet, despite her obvious lack of rest, her radiant smile never faded. She would keep the mood light with songs that reminded us of better times and ask me to play my uncle's flute for her patients. She always said that music healed things that herbs and stitches could not.

One fateful day, my father entered the infirmary.

My mother and I rushed to him, thrilled to see his face after his rather extended absence. But as we approached him, the grimness on his face remained - as if painted in indelible ink. He raised his hand, halting us mid-stride and, after a long moment, stepped aside. There, two fighters were carrying the lifeless body of my uncle.

He died in the final battle that pushed the Resistance into the city. It was also the first, and only, time I saw my mother cry.

13th of Lanosian, year 418 of the Midnight Age

I remember my uncle's funeral well. I was dressed in a black velvet dress that itched at its hastily stitched sleeves. My father said a few words about duty and sacrifice that, at that moment, seemed so very... Hollow.

I mostly remember my aunt.

As her beloved husband's body was carried to the freshly dug grave, sounds escaped her that I had never heard before, sounds that were of pure, tortured anguish - the kind that sets every hair on your body on end and evokes a wrenching feeling in your gut. The kind that once a child hears, it brings them face to face with the grimness of reality for the very first time.

I will never forget that sound, nor how sickeningly pale my uncle looked as they lowered him into his final resting place. He had been such a lively man, full of energy and dreams. And yet, there he lay in a hole in the ground, still - like a marionette without its master.

I had never seen death up close before - not so personally, anyway.

It sounds strange, but when you hear about someone dying that you did not know, a certain generic sadness soon follows. You feel sad for the loss of someone to this world. You feel sad for his or her family and friends. You even feel a bit sad for them, mixed with a healthy dose of guilt, because you continue to live - and happily - while they do not.

But when someone you know dies - someone you loved, you feel as though the entire world mourns with you, because in everything you see there is an inherent sadness. The vivid colors of the world fade several shades, as if everything has a distinctly gray haze around it. The rainbow, no matter how brilliant, is a rainbow that you know your loved one will not see. The joke is one of many that you cannot share with the lost.

That day was a blur that ended with Claec and I sitting in front of our uncle's freshly-filled grave. Quite appropriately, it had rained, and so the ground smelled earthy and wet.

"We are never going to die." My brother suddenly declared, his tone heated with anger as the words heavily hung in the moist air.

"We all die eventually, Claec." I replied, glancing over at him.

His hands were jammed into the pockets of his jacket and his gaze was fixed on the granite headstone ahead of him.

"We won't." Those were the last words he said to me that night before we silently departed.

I left my uncle's flute beside his grave and never played again.

Year 419 of the Midnight Age

*T*he year following my uncle's death was a long, brutal year.

We constructed barricades with anything we could find. Tables and couches on their sides, chairs wedged up against wardrobes and bookcases, beds, spinning wheels and massive looms all served as materials to reinforce the main gates. All spare space was turned into places to treat the wounded, or catalog the dead.

During the day, the remaining members of the Resistance would leave the safety of the city's gates to track the enemy's movements, seeking out any vampiric nests. At night, they would stand guard - reinforcing the barricades and patrolling the city.

Every time I saw my parents leave, I felt like it might be the last time I would ever see them. I would burn the image in my mind, memorizing every detail - the sad smile on my mother's face, the ruffle of my brother's hair by my father as he instructed him to take good care of me... I have hundreds of these scenes forever engraved in my memories, each as sweet as it is bitter.

5th of Midsummer, year 419 of the Midnight Age

One night, I was sitting at the dining table before the hearth with my parents and brother. The laughter and cheer that had traditionally filled the home had long been swept away by an oppressive silence, the weight of which was suffocating.

"Why don't we just leave?" My voice sliced through the silence like the roar of thunder after a nearby lightning strike.

My father's weary gaze settled on me and my heart raced as a lump that refused to be swallowed formed in my throat. After a moment, his attention shifted to my brother. "Do you want us to leave too, Claec?" His tone had a texture to it, something indiscernible hanging on his each and every word.

"It has crossed my mind." The tone of Claec's voice was far easier to place - anger, and no shortage of it. "They are stronger than us. They will eventually find a way into the city and they will kill each and every one of us."

"Ah." My father's voice fell flat. "And do you think that these vampires are stronger than us, Lucie?"

"Y-yes." The answer felt like a betrayal spilling forth from my lips. I could feel the heat of shame rise through me, the weight of which lowered my head. I knew how hard my parents and the other members of the Resistance fought. I saw first-hand what sacrifices they were willing to make. Yet it seemed it as though a lost cause not still worth fighting for.

"The strong can only ever stand against the strong... The weak, only against the weak," my father began, his voice strong as he spoke. "So, you must always choose your enemy wisely. For just as the weak can suddenly find himself strong when facing strength... The strong can ultimately find himself weak in the face of weakness."

"If you allow yourselves to be tempted by lies of power, or lured by the path of least resistance, you will find that your limbs have atrophied, that time has muddled your brain from lack of use, and that you have become as hollow as the undead we fight against - even if your lungs still happen to crave air. In running, you will find only the fate from which you tried to run - you will die." His voice echoed through the room, his eyes finding my mother's as his hand reached for hers.

"Defend the weak against those who prey upon them and you will always find within you a strength you never knew, or could have otherwise known, existed. Then, and only then, can you say that you have lived."

In one fluid motion Claec pushed himself from the table, rose from his seat and slammed his chair back into place. The force of the iron connecting with the wooden table sent an unsettling rattle throughout the room. "You call this living?!" the teenager asked, his words spitting from his mouth. "No, father. By choosing to stay, you - not the vampires - have killed us." His words had an acidic quality to them, caustic enough to eat away at even the most resilient of surfaces.

I remember looking at my brother that day and barely recognizing him. There was so much anger in him. It twisted his features, making them as harsh and bitter as the wind off the Northern Tundra.

My father's fist hit the table. He could have dropped a bag of bricks and the sound would have been a mere whisper in comparison. "Enough," he bellowed.

Claec stared at him, his eyes trailing our father as if he were sizing up the larger man.

...A curious thing, time. It is a constant, though our perception of it might suggest otherwise. A joyous day can pass by in a flash, while the same time spent waiting for something could trudge on and on. I cannot say with any precision how long it was before Claec stormed out of the room with the fury of a tempest. I can, however, say that it felt like days.

That was the last time my family was together.

1st of Severin, year 420 of the Midnight Age

*W*e held a strong front against the vampires, but eventually the Syssin among them infiltrated the city.

Before long, all hope of escape from the city was lost. We were herded into our homes, trapped like animals awaiting slaughter.

Vampire sentries patrolled streets darkened with blood that flowed from the central square. There, the vampires would hold "cattle auctions," selling off citizens to the highest bidder. They would draw and quarter for sport and force children to fight to the death for amusement.

My father had been the first to die there.

That night, all citizens were forced from their homes and brought to the central square. Once they had ensured that everyone was accounted for, an atavian man was led through the crowd by shackles that had been affixed at his ankles and wrists. A burlap hood was pulled over his head, shielding his identity from the gathered. His wings were cruelly tied together with rough twine and the gaping wounds that bled through torn clothing indicated participation in a recent brawl.

Despite his condition, he stood tall when he walked - an undeniable pride in each labored step. It was that walk that gave him away to me. My stomach clenched and my chest grew tight even before the hood was lifted.

"Listen here, cows," one of the vampires barked, her frigid gaze sweeping across the gathered as she spoke, "You will either accept embracement, or you will be food." A sinister grin tugged her lips upward, revealing pearly white fangs that gleamed in the moon's light.

"The leader of your beloved 'Resistance' has..." she paused, her gaze lifting as if searching for the word that would please her most. Once she visibly settled on one, she continued, "...Volunteered, to show you all precisely how this is going to work."

With a dismissive flick of her right hand she signaled for the vampire closest to my father to tear the hood from his head. Sounds of shock and horror rippled through the crowd as my father was revealed, the noise growing to near deafening heights.

"SILENCE, SWINE," the vampire screamed, the sound sharp enough to slice through glass.

All at once, the gathered fell silent.

"Now," she smirked, a jaunty hop in her steps as she strolled over to my father's side. "Ask for the embrace."

I remember how proud my father looked, even bound in chains and facing down his ultimate demise. "I would rather die, leech." His voice was defiant, unbroken.

The vampire pouted, her bottom lip jutting out for the briefest of moments. Soon enough, her shoulders bounced in a shrug as she happily replied, "...If you insist!"

Forcing his head to the side, she bore her fangs and sunk them into his neck. She killed him right there - draining him dry of every ounce of blood while the rest of us watched, some crying out in horror, others paralyzed by fear.

I remember screaming and trying to run to him. My brother and mother held me back. In that moment, I hated them both. Looking back on it from a more mature mindset, I realize that there was nothing I could have done.

16th of Lanosian, year 421 of the Midnight Age

*M*ore and more atavians died during the occupation. The vampires called the Aerie their "farm" and its remaining citizens their "cattle."

One frigid night, I awoke to my brother standing over my bed. It was dark and I could not see anything but his silhouette in the moonlight streaming through my window. "Lucie," he said in a raspy voice, "come with me."

He extended his hand out for mine as he had countless times before, but something seemed incredibly unsettling about the familiar gesture. The instant my hand was placed within his, a shiver shot down my spine. It was so cold.

"Are you getting sick again, Claec?" I glanced up at his shadowed face. "I am sure that Mom could fix something up for you."

He grunted in reply as he led me from my bedroom to the main hall, the crackling of the dying fire in the hearth echoing through the room. "Get your coat."

"You know that we can't go outside, Claec." A heavy lump formed in my throat as my gaze sought out his to no avail. The faint light from the hearth cast shadows across his face and the walls around us.

"Be quiet." His voice was harsh as his hand painfully tightened around my own. "The little lamb should follow her shepherd."

I winced at the searing pain in my hand. "You're hurting me," I whimpered, tugging my arm in a futile attempt to wrest my hand from his. He had always been stronger than me, but his icy grip was like a vice about my own.

"I said be quiet!" His free hand soared through the air, connecting with my cheek. The force sent me into the brick wall by the hearth, my head hitting the hard stone as my vision blurred.

For a moment, he was quiet, though I could hear him move to stand directly over me. "...Now look what you made me do, Lucie." His voice was sickeningly sweet, a low 'tsk' following his words as he bent down before me.

He pinched my chin between his index and thumb, forcing my head to the left to inspect the damage done. "You're more of a troublesome bitch than Mom was."

The searing pain in my head made my stomach twist, the desire to retch overwhelming as I looked up at Claec, my eyes finally meeting his. I instantly noticed it - the soullessness in his normally lively, expressive gaze. "Wha-what did you do to Mom?"

I have observed this phenomena countless times - the asking of a question one already knows the answer to. It defeats the entire purpose of a question, really. A question is asked in order to extract previously unknown information from the questioned. Yet, time and time again, people ask each other for information already known. I suppose it is just hope's final stand. Whatever the case may be, I knew the answer to my question well before I received its answer.

A chuckle rumbled in Claec's chest as he stepped aside, revealing the body of our mother sprawled within a puddle of viscous red liquid pooling beneath her on the cold wooden floor, eyes hollow as she listlessly stared at the ceiling.

Tears brimmed in my eyes, further blurring my sight.

"Come now, Lucie, do not disappoint me." A growl rose in his chest as his hand trailed down my bruising cheek. "This was what they wanted, her and dad. This was their choice." He directed my gaze to his own, voice softening as he continued, "...But we... We have the opportunity now to choose for ourselves."

I stared at him. To anyone else, he might have looked like my brother. He had the same unkempt hair and handsome features - but all I could see through my tear-filled gaze was the corruption... All I could see was the monster that killed him.

He leaned in, his lips hovering over my ear. "We don't have to die, Lucie," he softly cooed. "...Don't you remember? Together, we are invincible."

The familiar words felt as daggers were forced into my gut.

"My brother is already dead." My voice was stronger than I had anticipated it, the fire of anger rising in my slender frame. "He died the moment he chose the path of the weak."

His face fell as he stood upright again, his booted foot slamming into me with a powerful kick. "Does that feel weak to you?!" An amused laugh followed his words as he watched me curl up in anguish.

"Don't be a naive little lamb, Lucie. Mom and Dad lied to you. They lied to US." His voice raised as the hard leather of his boot connected with my ribs once more - a sickening snap that I heard long before I felt echoed through the room.

"If you are going to kill me, just do it!" I dared him, spitting blood as I shakily grasped at the brick ledge by the hearth. Defiantly, I propping myself up once more. An inner rage was brewing within me, like a fire being fed by my very will to live.

"Don't. Tempt. Me." He growled, lowering himself to meet my gaze once more.

I stared back at him, and in that moment, I came to better understand my father as he faced down his fate. A certain peace washed over me. If I was going to die, it was going to be on the terms I deemed fit. I was not going to cower. I was going to stare it in the face and dare it to take me.

Claec emitted a bored sigh. "Fine. Have it your way." His hand reached for my cheek once more, his cold fingers trailing along it lightly. He pushed my head to the side, revealing the flesh of my neck. "Count the stars, Lucie," he sneered, "you'll be with Mom and Dad soon."

Tears flooded down my cheeks, my vision blurring from the searing pain running through every inch of my body. "Don't TOUCH me!" With my words, the fire in the hearth grew, rushing past me in a brilliant light that forcefully threw Claec across the room.

The tears in my eyes boiled in the fire's untargeted heat, darkness swept in from the edges of my vision and colors dimmed. I heard a cry of anguish as it forced its way from my lungs, the sound reminiscent of one I had heard only once before. Then, with a labored gasp, I finally succumbed to the pain.

12th of Niuran, year 421 of the Midnight Age

I woke up to the sound of unfamiliar voices stirring in the adjacent room. I was hot, tucked under several layers of quilts, but otherwise comfortable. Soft bandages had been deftly wrapped around each tender area, the residual pain of the abuse my body had taken pulsing through my frame.

My head was likewise bandaged, gauze wrapped about it, covering my eyes.

"Ah, the little miss has woken up!" a cheerful, feminine voice proclaimed. "We were worried that you would not make it through."

Not sensing any imminent danger, I pushed myself up to a seat on the mattress beneath me. "W-where am I?" My voice was weak, my vocal chords straining from apparent lack of use. I wondered how long I had been unconscious.

"About three weeks," the unknown woman answered. An embarrassed laugh soon followed. "I'm sorry miss, that was not what you asked... Well, verbally, anyway." A cough followed her words as she cleared her throat. "What I mean to say is... My mind was linked with yours to try and keep your vitals in check. I apologize for the intrusion! We are not usually permitted to enter the thoughts of others without permission."

"You are rambling again, Sister." The second voice was warm, masculine and kind.

"Ah. Yes. Yes, I suppose am!" The woman laughed for a moment, before she said, "I am out of your thoughts now though, Miss. As for your first question... You are in the Putoran Monastery."

"How did I get here?" I managed to muster, swallowing heavily.

"You were brought here. When the vampires left the Aerie, a few of its remaining citizens managed to make it down south to Enorian for help. Sad, but somewhat fortunate timing, that. None of us outsiders had any idea what was happening up there." I could feel the warmth of the woman's hand touching my shoulder as she spoke. "But there will be plenty of time for answers, Miss. For now... You should rest."

I lacked the strength to argue with her.

Years 422 - 424 of the Midnight Age

Physical wounds fade far faster than emotional ones, and so within a matter of weeks I was walking once again. My vision never returned to what it once was, but eventually I could make out that which was right in front of me, as well as vague outlines and shadows at a limited distance - enough to be relatively self-sufficient.

My caretakers, Sister Eirny and Brother Iason, lived a relatively modest life in a windowless hovel far beneath the monastery's public halls. Despite their relatively meager existence, they firmly believed that what little they had, they had to share.

"Nothing you have belongs only to you," the good Sister would say, "and nothing you do should be done with a selfish heart. If you believe both of these things, you will lead a simple - but happy - life."

During those two years I went from being an awkward girl to a young woman, and with the tutelage of Sister Eirny, my education was in excellent hands. The monastery's library had countless volumes from around the world, and the Sister never let me use my poor sight as an excuse to slack in my studies. "You are only as handicapped as you permit yourself to be," she would say in a firm tone that always frustrated me.

It was a trial of great persistence and frustration. Certainly, she had to realize that I could not just will my vision back to me, and yet she always pushed me as if I could. I now realize she was preparing me for the world beyond the monastery's walls, pushing my limits and letting me learn firsthand what I was capable of. I think... Being a teenager is a bit like living in a world with a substantial delay in it - the lessons you are taught rarely resonate until you are well past the time to show your appreciation for them.

While Sister Eirny was focused on training my mind, Brother Iason was focused on the rehabilitation and training of my body. He was young, just six years my senior, and I came to enjoy my time spent with him immensely. He was a serious man, the type to joke infrequently and only in the appropriate company, yet he had a certain tenderness to his touch that's only rival was found within his deep brown gaze.

He and I spent most of our time together, debating the merits of the different theologies, sparring and honing my senses, and taking long walks through the monastery's garden. With him, it was easy to forget my past, as none of it ever seemed to matter. I was there, as if I always had been.

But the night was always around the corner to remind me.

The vampires left the Aerie that fateful Lanosian due to the return of the Primus Abhorash to sire a new Empress for their kind, Sarita Bahi'ran.

There had been a battle in the desert village of El'Jazira leading up to the Primus' decision to give his blood to the vampire warlord, and the vampires wanted to pay homage to the new Empress - as well as reap the spoils of the freshly fallen village which was far wealthier than my own.

A luminary guard of Enorian had found me three days after the incident with Claec while purging the city of the few vampires that remained. He brought me to the monastery for medical attention he could not provide at the time, as he had been called to fight in the battle at El'Jazira.

I never discovered what happened to Claec. Was he killed in the blaze that blinded me? Did he leave with the rest of the vampires? I dwelt on it often.

Sister Eirny once told me that I should not dwell on things that I could do nothing about, but those were the things that I dwelt on most. There was a certain comfort in hopelessness - in being unable to effect any change on the circumstances that were before me. Hopelessness, I found, alleviated the guilt of inaction and numbed the body from the pains of disappointment.

And I so wanted to be numb.

5th of Nuiran, 425 of the Midnight Age

Bittersweet.

If there was one word that I could use to describe the day of my eighteenth birthday, "bittersweet" would be it.

Goodbyes are often the cruelest of creatures. More often than we would like to admit, they force us to turn the page to a new chapter in our lives - banishing people that have impressed many a fond memory upon us to our past, never to be seen again. Sometimes, goodbyes let you know when they are permanent, and so you can work up the courage to make peace with yourself and the person from whom you are parting. Most of the time, you do not realize a goodbye is permanent until well after the fact - leaving you unresolved into perpetuity.

I always believed my parting with Sister Eirny and Brother Iason to be temporary in nature. They both were so vibrant and filled with life. More importantly, they each held a special place within my heart and I strove to make them proud.

...Yet, as I wrote, goodbyes are often the cruelest of creatures.

"You will visit, yes?" Sister Eirny asked, for what must have been the hundredth time. We were at the entrance of the monastery; Sister Eirny had been bustling about all day ensuring that everything for my departure was perfect. She had cooked my favorite breakfast, knitted me outfits for just about any climate, and reviewed the directions to the Academy of Enorian with me over and over again.

"Yes, yes, of course I will visit." I promised, a laugh in my voice as I threw my arms around her in a warm embrace.

"You know how to get here from Enorian right?" the Sister asked, worry latent in her tone.

"Yes. Head to the desert and take a turn at the crack in the mountains." My jest received a withering glare that I could feel, despite my sight being kind enough to obscure it for me.

"You are going to give her a heart attack," Brother Iason said, his lips lifting into an amused smirk.

A playful sigh escaped my lips as my hand rested on Sister Eirny's shoulder. "I just reverse the directions you have written on every piece of paper you have slipped into my every pocket and I will get back here."

"...Maybe I should write it down for you," she replied, rushing back into the monastery in search of parchment and quill.

A chuckle rumbled in Brother Iason's chest. "...It's going to be hard adjusting to life without you, Lucie."

"Well I suppose it will be, since I am going to visit so much that you will not even realize that I have gone." I laughed in reply, nudging him with my shoulder.

"You will have better things to do than come visit us." Brother Iason simply replied, not a hint of resentment in his voice. "And that is fine. You were never meant to be stuck behind our walls... You burn too brightly."

I began to disagree, but Sister Eirny interrupted as she burst through the monastery doors waving a piece of parchment in her lifted hand. "Here! Directions back here!"

"I love you." I suddenly said, smiling fondly at Sister Eirny as I took the parchment from her, folding it and tucking it into my jacket pocket. "Both of you," I added, my attention drifting to Brother Iason.

Brother Iason was right. I never did manage to visit them again... And eleven years almost to the day I left them, waving at me from the monastery's gate, they perished in the burning of the Great Aetolian Library.

Epilogue

*T*here is nothing terribly unique about my story.

We live in a world riddled with Corruption and Undeath. One where great pain and suffering are commonplace... One where good people are slaughtered, and genocide is committed without even the bat of an eye.

But it is because my story is not unique... Because it is so commonplace, that I share it. These stories need to be shared so that they inspire action, so that they inspire change. The Age of Dawn has been prophesied, and the path to fulfill it has been laid out before us.

But it's a hard path. It is one that will exact a great cost upon many of us... And that should make sense to us... It should resonate with us that to achieve something great, we must embrace the struggle.

For as the thornbirds already know... The best is only bought at the cost of great pain.