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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
EDGE OF DAWN

A TOUCH OF
MIDNIGHT

A MIDNIGHT BREED NOVELLA

“Evocative, enticing, erotic.”

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**A TOUCH
OF
MIDNIGHT**

A Midnight Breed Novella

by

LARA ADRIAN

~ ~ ~

*This novella, a prequel to the Midnight Breed series, was previously published in its entirety in **The Midnight Breed Series Companion** (May 2013).*

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~ A Touch of Midnight ~

Savannah Dupree is a freshman studying at Boston University on a full scholarship. But academic excellence is only one of her gifts. Savannah possesses something even more remarkable than her quick mind and insatiable curiosity for learning. With a simple touch, Savannah can see an object's past—a skill that puts her life in danger when her studies bring her into contact with a centuries-old English sword and the terrible secret hidden within the blade's history.

In all his three hundred years of living as one of the Breed, vampire warrior Gideon never dreamed he'd see the blade again that spilled his young brothers' lives ages ago in London. Ever since the boys' deaths, Gideon's been on a personal quest to rid the world of Rogue vampires, but now he can't help wondering if the brutal slayings of his only kin was something more sinister—an act perpetrated by an unknown enemy. An enemy who is apparently living in hiding somewhere in Boston. There's one certain way to prove Gideon's suspicion, but it will mean using innocent, gifted Savannah to help uncover the full truth—a truth that will shatter everything she knows about herself and the world around her. And with danger closing in from all sides, the passion that ignites between Gideon and Savannah will tempt them to risk their hearts and lives for a love that might just last an eternity....

~ ~ ~

DEDICATION

For every reader who asked me to share this story.

Thank you for loving Gideon and Savannah. I hope this glimpse into their past will make you love them even more.

~ ~ ~

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Chapter 1

Boston University
October, 1974

Savannah Dupree turned the silver urn in her gloved hands, studying its intricate engravings through the bruise-colored tarnish that dulled the 200-year-old work of art. The floral motif tooled into the polished silver was indicative of the Rococo style of the early and mid-1700s, yet the design was conservative, much less ornate than most of the examples shown in the reference materials lying open on the study lab table in front of her.

Removing one of the soft white cotton curator's gloves meant to protect the urn from skin oils during handling, Savannah reached for one of the books. She flipped through several pages of photographed art objects, drinking vessels, serving dishes and snuff boxes from Italy, England and France, comparing their more elaborate styles to that of the urn she was trying to catalogue. She and the three other freshman Art History students seated in the university's archive room with her had been hand-picked by Professor Keaton to earn extra credit in his class by helping to log and analyze a recent estate donation of Colonial furnishings and artifacts.

She wasn't blind to the fact that the single professor had selected only female students for his after-hours extra credit project. Savannah's roommate, Rachel, had been ecstatic to have been chosen. Then again, the girl had been campaigning for Keaton's attention since the first week of class. And she'd definitely gotten noticed. Savannah glanced toward the professor's office next door, where the dark-haired man now stood at the window, talking on the phone, yet staring with blatant interest at pretty, red-haired Rachel in her tight, low-cut sweater and micro-miniskirt.

"Isn't he a fox?" she whispered to Savannah, a row of thin metal bangle bracelets clinking musically as Rachel reached up to hook her loose hair behind her ear. "He could be Burt Reynolds' brother, don't you think?"

Savannah frowned, skeptical. She glanced over at the lean man with the shoulder-length hair and overgrown moustache, and the mushroom-brown corduroy suit and open-necked satin shirt. A zodiac sign pendant glinted from within a thick nest of exposed chest hair. Fashionable or not, the look didn't do a thing for Savannah. "Sorry, Rach. I'm not seeing it. Unless Burt Reynolds has a brother in the porno business. Plus, he's too old for you. He must be close to forty, for crying out loud."

"Shut up! I think he's cute." Rachel giggled, crossing her arms under her breasts and tossing her head in a move that had Professor Keaton leaning closer to the glass, practically on the verge of drooling. "I'm gonna go see if he wants to check my work. Maybe he'll ask me to stay after school and clean his erasers or something."

"Mm-hmm. Or something," Savannah drawled through her smile, shaking her head as Rachel waggled her brows then sauntered toward the professor's office. Having come to Boston University on a full academic scholarship and the highest SAT scores across twenty-two parishes in south central Louisiana, Savannah didn't really

need help bolstering her grades. She'd accepted the extra credit assignment only out of her insatiable love for history and learning.

She looked at the urn again, then retrieved another catalogue of London silver from the Colonial period and compared the piece to the ones documented on the pages. Doubting her initial analysis now, she picked up her pencil and erased what she'd first written in her notebook. The urn wasn't English in origin. *American*, she corrected. Likely crafted in New York or Philadelphia, if she were forced to guess. Or did the simplicity of the Rococo design lean more toward the work of a Boston artisan?

Savannah huffed out a sigh, frustrated by how tedious and inexact the work was proving to be. There was a better way, after all.

She knew of a far more efficient, accurate way to resolve the origins--all the hidden secrets--of these old treasures. But she couldn't very well start fondling everything with her bare hands. Not with Professor Keaton in his office a few feet away. Not with her other two classmates gathered at the table with her, working on their own items from the collection. She wouldn't dare use the peculiar skill she'd been born with.

No, she left that part of her back home in Acadiana. She wasn't about to let anyone up here in Boston think of her as some voodoo freak show. She was different enough among the predominantly white student body. She didn't want anyone knowing how truly strange she was. Aside from her only living kin--her older sister, Amelie--no one knew about Savannah's extrasensory gift, and that's how she intended to keep it.

Much as she loved Amelie, Savannah had been happy to leave the bayou behind and try to make her own path in life. A normal life. One that wasn't rooted in the swamps with a Cajun mother who'd been more than a shade eccentric, for all Savannah could recall of her, and a father who'd been a drifter, absent for all of his daughter's life, little better than a rumor, according to Amelie.

If not for Amelie, who'd practically raised her, Savannah would have belonged to no one. She still felt somehow out of place in the world, lost and searching, apart from everyone else around her. For as long as she could remember, she'd felt...*different*.

Which was probably why she was striving so hard to make her life normal.

She'd hoped moving away to attend college right out of high school would give her some sense of purpose. A feeling of belonging and direction. She'd taken the maximum load of classes and filled her evenings and weekends with a part-time job at the Boston Public Library.

Oh, shit.

A job she was going to be late for, she realized, glancing up at the clock on the wall. She was due for her 4PM shift at the library in twenty minutes--barely enough time to wrap up now and hurry her butt across town.

Savannah closed her notebook and hastily straightened up her work area at the table. Picking up the urn in her gloved hands, she carried the piece back into the archive storage room where the rest of the donated collection's catalogued furniture and art objects had been placed.

As she set the silver vessel on the shelf and put away her gloves, something

caught her eye in a dim corner of the room. A long, slender case of some sort stood propped against the wall, partially concealed behind a rolled-up antique rug.

Had she and the other students missed an item?

She strode over to get a better look. Behind the bound rug was an old wooden case. About five feet in length, the container was unremarkable except for the fact that it seemed deliberately separated--hidden--from the rest of the things in the room.

What was it?

Savannah moved aside the heavy, rolled rug, struggling with its unwieldy bulk. As she leaned the rug against the perpendicular wall, she bumped the wooden case. It tipped forward suddenly, about to crash to the floor.

Panicked, Savannah lunged, shooting her arms out and using her entire body to break the case's fall. As she caught it, taking the piece down with her onto her knees, the old leather hinges holding it together snapped apart with a soft *pop-pop-pop*.

A length of cold, smooth steel tumbled out of the case and into Savannah's open hands.

Her bare hands.

The metal was a jolting chill against her palms. Heavy. Sharp-edged. Lethal.

Startled, Savannah sucked in a breath, but couldn't move fast enough to avoid the prolonged contact or the power of her gift, which stirred to life inside her.

The sword's history opened up to her, like a window into the past. A random moment, fused forever into the metal and now exploding in vivid, if scattered, detail in Savannah's mind.

She saw a man holding the weapon before him as in combat.

Tall and menacing, a mane of thick blond waves danced wildly around his head as he stared down an unseen opponent under a black-velvet, moonlit sky. His stance was unforgiving, the air about him as grim as death itself. Piercing blue eyes cut through the tendrils of sweat-dampened hair that drooped into the ruthless angles of his face and square-cut jaw.

The man was immense, thick roped muscles bulging from broad shoulders and biceps beneath the loose drape of his ecru linen shirt. Smooth, fawn-colored trousers clung to his powerful thighs as he advanced on his quarry, blade poised to kill. Whoever the man was who'd once wielded this deadly weapon, he was not some post-Elizabethan dandy, but a warrior.

Bold.

Arrogant.

Magnetic. Dangerously so.

The swordsman closed in on his target, no mercy whatsoever in the hard line of his mouth, nor in the blazing blue eyes that narrowed with unswerving intent, seeming almost to glow with some inner fury that Savannah couldn't comprehend. A dark curiosity prickled inside her, against her better instincts.

Who was this man?

Where was he from? How had he lived?

How many centuries ago must he have died?

Through the lens of her mind's eye, Savannah watched the warrior come to a halt. He stared down at the one he now met in mortal combat. His broad mouth was flat, merciless. He raised his sword arm, prepared to strike.

And then he did, driving home the blade in a swift, certain death blow.

Savannah's heart raced, pounding frantically in her breast. She could hardly breathe for the combination of fear and fascination swirling inside her.

She tried to see the swordsman's face in better detail, but his wild tangle of golden hair and the shadows of the night that surrounded him hid all but the most basic hints of his features.

And now, as so often happened with her gift, the vision was beginning to fracture apart. The image started to splinter, breaking into scattered shards.

She'd never been able to control her ability, not even when she tried. It was a powerful gift, but an elusive one too. Now was no different. Savannah struggled to hold on, but the glimpse the sword gave her was slipping...fading...drifting out of reach.

As Savannah's mind cleared, she uncurled her fingers from their grip on the blade. She stared down at the length of polished steel resting across her open palms.

She closed her eyes and tried to conjure the face of the swordsman from memory, but only the faintest impression of him remained within her grasp. Soon, even that was slipping away. Then it was gone.

He was gone.

Banished back to the past, where he belonged.

And yet, a single, nagging question pulsed through her mind, through her veins. It demanded an answer, one she had little hope of resolving.

Who was he?

Chapter 2

Broken glass and debris from the rotting rafters rained down in the dark as three members of the Order patrol team dropped through a filth-clouded skylight of the abandoned clothing factory in Chinatown. The surprise attack from above sent the group of feral-eyed, blood-addicted squatters in the old ruin of the building scrambling for cover.

For all the good it would do them to run.

Gideon and his two comrades had been tailing one member of this Rogue nest most of the night, waiting for the opportune moment to strike. Waiting for the suckhead to lead them to his lair, where the Order could take out not just one Bloodlust-crazed predator, but several. Half a dozen, by Gideon's quick count, as he, Dante and Conlan dropped in unannounced just after midnight.

Gideon was on one of the Rogues as soon as his boots hit the rubbish-strewn floor. He leapt after the suckhead, grabbing a fistful of the vampire's dirty trench coat as it flew out behind him like a sail. He took the Rogue down in a hard tackle, pinning it with his forearm braced against the back of the rabid male's neck. With his free hand, Gideon reached for the shorter of the two blades he wore in combat. The twelve-inch length of razor-sharp, titanium-edged steel gleamed in the scant moonlight shining in from the open roof overhead.

The Rogue began to fight and flail, snarling through its fangs as it struggled to get loose. Gideon didn't give the suckhead a chance to so much as hope it might escape him.

Shifting his hold, Gideon clutched a hank of the Rogue's unkempt brown hair and wrenched its head back. The vampire's amber eyes glowed wild and unfocused, its open maw dripping sticky saliva as it growled and hissed in the mindless fury of its Bloodlust.

Gideon plunged his dagger into the hollow at the base of the Rogue's exposed throat.

Death from the blade might have been certain enough, but the titanium--fast-acting poison to the diseased blood system of a Rogue--sealed the deal. The vampire's body convulsed as the titanium entered its bloodstream, began devouring its cells from the inside out. It wouldn't take long--mere seconds before there was nothing left but bubbling ooze, then dried-up ash. Then nothing left at all.

As the titanium did its worst on Gideon's kill, he wheeled around to gauge the situation with his comrades. Conlan was in pursuit of a suckhead who'd fled for a steel catwalk above the factory floor. The big Scot warrior dropped the Rogue with a titanium dagger shot from his hand like a bullet.

A few yards away, Dante was engaged in hand-to-hand combat with a Rogue who'd had the bad sense to think he could fight the dark-haired warrior up close and personal. Dante calmly, but swiftly, eluded every careless strike before drawing a pair of savage, curved blades from their sheaths on his hips and slicing them across the attacking Rogue's chest. The suckhead howled in sudden agony, collapsing in a

boneless heap at the warrior's feet.

"Three down," Con called out in his thick brogue. "Another three to go."

Gideon nodded to his teammates. "Two heading for the back loading dock now. Don't let the bastards get away."

Conlan and Dante took off on his direction without question or hesitation. They'd run Rogue-hunting missions under Gideon's command for years, long enough to know that they could rely on his direction even in the thickest of urban combat.

Gideon sheathed his short blade in favor of his sword, the weapon he'd mastered back in London, before his travels--and his vow--brought him to Boston to seek out Lucan Thorne and pledge his arm to the Order.

Gideon swiveled his head, making a swift, sweeping search of the shadows and gloom of the old building. He saw the fourth Rogue in no time. It was fleeing toward the west side of the place, pausing here and there, ostensibly seeking a place to hide.

Gideon focused on his quarry, seeing it with something more than just his eyes. He'd been born with a much stronger gift of sight: The preternatural ability to see living energy sources through solid mass.

For most of his long existence--three-and-a-half centuries and counting--his gift had been little more than a clever trick. A useless parlor game, something he'd valued far less than his skill with a sword. Since joining the Order, he'd honed his extrasensory talent into a weapon. One that had given him new purpose in life.

His sole purpose.

He used that ability now to guide him toward his current target. The Rogue he chased must have decided better of its notion to look for cover. No longer wasting precious seconds out of motion, the feral vampire veered sharply south in the building.

Through the brick and wood and steel of the sheltering walls, Gideon watched the fiery orb of the Rogue's energy shift direction, pushing deeper into the bowels of the run-down factory. Gideon trailed its flight on silent, stealthy feet. Past a chaos of tumbled sewing stations and toppled bolts of faded, rodent-infested fabric. Around a corner into a long, debris-scattered hallway.

Empty storage rooms and dank, dark offices lined the corridor. Gideon's target had fled into the passageway before making a hasty, fatal mistake. The Rogue's energy orb hovered behind a closed door at the end of the hallway--just a few scant feet from a window that would have dumped him onto the street outside. If Bloodlust hadn't robbed the vampire of his wits, he might have eluded death tonight.

But death had found him.

Gideon approached without making a sound. He paused just outside the door, turned to face it. Then kicked the panel off its hinges with one brutal stamp of his booted foot.

The impact knocked the Rogue backward, onto its back on the littered office floor. Gideon pounced, one foot planted in the center of the feral vampire's chest, the blade of his sword resting under its chin.

"M-mercy," the beast growled, less voice than animalistic grunt. Mercy was a word that had no meaning to one of the Breed lost to Bloodlust as deeply as this creature was. Gideon had seen that firsthand. The Rogue's breath was sour, reeking of disease and the over-consumption of human blood that was its addiction. Thick spittle bubbled in its throat as the vampire's lips peeled back from enormous, yellowed fangs.

“Let me...go. Have...mercy...”

Gideon stared unflinching into the feral amber eyes. He saw only savagery there. He saw blood and smoke and smoldering ruin. He saw death so horrific, it haunted him even now.

“Mercy,” the Rogue hissed, even while fury crackled in its wild gaze.

Gideon didn’t acknowledge the plea. With a flex of his shoulder, he thrust the sword deep, severing throat and spinal column in one thorough strike.

A quick, painless execution.

That was the limit of his mercy tonight.

Chapter 3

Savannah arrived early at the Art History department that next afternoon. She couldn't wait for her day's final class to let out, and made a beeline across campus as soon as English Lit 101 ended. She dashed up the three flights of stairs to the archive room outside Professor Keaton's office, excited to see she was the first student to report in for the after-class project. Dumping her book bag next to her work table, she slipped into the storage room containing the items yet to be catalogued for the university's collection.

The sword was right where she'd left it the day before, carefully returned to its wooden case in the corner of the room.

Savannah's pulse kicked as she entered and softly closed the door behind her. The beautiful old blade--and the mysterious, golden-haired warrior who'd once used it with lethal skill--had been haunting her thoughts all this time. She wanted to know more. Needed to know more, with a compulsion too strong to resist.

She tried to ignore the little pang of guilt that stabbed her as she bypassed the bin of clean curator's gloves and sank down, bare-handed, in front of the container that held the sword.

She lifted the lid of the long box, gently laying it open. The length of polished steel gleamed. Savannah hadn't had the chance to really look at its craftsmanship yesterday, after it had fallen so unexpectedly into her hands.

She hadn't noticed then how the tooled steel grip was engraved with the image of a bird of prey swooping in for a brutal attack, its cruel beak open in a scream. Nor had she paid attention to the blade's gemstone pommel, a blood-red ruby caged by grotesque metal talons. A cold shiver ran up her arms as she studied the weapon now.

This was no hero's sword.

And still, she couldn't resist the need to know more about the man she'd watched wield it in her glimpse from before.

Savannah flexed her fingers, then gently rested them on the blade.

The vision leapt into her mind even faster than the first time.

Except this was a different peek at the weapon's past. Something unexpected, but equally intriguing in a different way.

A pair of young boys--tow-headed, identical twins--played with the sword in a torchlit stable. They could be no more than ten years old, both dressed like little seventeenth-century lords in white linen shirts, riding boots and dark blue breeches that gathered at the knee. They were laughing, taking turns with the sword, stabbing and lunging at a bale of straw, pretending to slay imaginary beasts.

Until something outside the stable startled them.

Fear filled their young faces. Their eyes went to each other, dread-filled, panicked. One of them opened his mouth in a silent scream--just as the torch on the wall of the stable went out.

Savannah recoiled from the blade. She let go of it, shaking, gripped with a marrow-deep terror for these two children. What happened to them?

She couldn't walk away. Not now.

Not until she knew.

Her fingers trembled as she brought them back over the blade again. She set her hands down on the cold steel, and waited. Though not for long.

The window to the past opened up to her like a dragon's maw, dark and jagged, an abyss licked with fire.

The stable was ablaze. Flames climbed the stalls and rafters, devouring everything in their path. Blood bathed the rough timber posts and the bale of yellow straw. So much blood. It was everywhere.

And the boys...

The pair of them lay unmoving on the floor of the stable. Their bodies were savaged, broken. Barely recognizable as the beautiful children who'd seemed so joyous and carefree. So alive.

Savannah's heart felt trapped in a vise, cold and constricted, as this awful glimpse played out before her. She wanted to look away. She didn't want to see the terrible remains of the once-beautiful, innocent twin boys.

Ah, God. The horror of it choked her.

Someone had killed those precious boys, slaughtered them.

No, not someone, she realized in that next instant.

Some *thing*.

The cloaked figure that held the sword now was built like a man--an immense, broad-shouldered wall of a man. But from within the gloom of a heavy wool hood, glowing amber eyes burned like coals set into a monstrous, inhuman face. He wasn't alone. Two others like him, dressed similarly in hooded, heavy cloaks, stood with him, parties to the carnage. She couldn't make out their features for all the shadows and the flickering, low light of the flames twisting up the walls and support beams of the stable.

Not human, her mind insisted. But if not human, then what?

Savannah tried to get a better look as the image of the boys' attackers began to waver and dissolve.

No. Look at me, damn you.

Let me see you.

But the glimpse started splintering, visual shards that broke into smaller pieces, turning this way and that. Slipping out of her grasp. Distorting what she saw.

It had to be a trick of her unsteady hold on her gift.

Because what she was seeing from this vision of the past couldn't possibly be real.

From within the deep hood of the one now holding the sword, the pair of glowing eyes blazed bright amber. And in the instant before the image vanished completely, Savannah would have sworn on her own life that she saw the bone-white glint of razor-sharp teeth.

Fangs.

What the...?

A hand came down on her shoulder. Savannah shrieked, nearly jumping out of her skin.

"Take it easy!" Rachel laughed as Savannah swung her head around. "Don't

have a damn heart attack. It's just me. Jeez, you look like you just saw a ghost."

Savannah's pulse was hammering hard, her breath all but gone. She had no voice to answer her roommate, could only stare up at her mutely. Rachel's gaze went to the sword. "What are you doing in here by yourself? Where did that come from?"

Savannah cleared her throat, now that her heart had finally vacated the area. She pulled her hands away from the blade, hiding them so Rachel wouldn't see how they shook. "I...I found it yesterday."

"Is that a ruby in the handle of that thing?"

Savannah shrugged. "I think so."

"Really? Far out!" She leaned in for a better look. "Let me see it for a second."

Savannah almost warned her friend to be careful, that she wouldn't want to see what Savannah had just witnessed. But that gift--a curse, today--belonged solely to her.

Savannah watched as Rachel picked up the blade and admired it. Nothing happened to the girl. She had no inkling of the horrific past secreted in the centuries-old weapon.

"Rach...do you believe in monsters?"

"What?" She burst out laughing. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Nothing." Savannah shook her head. "Forget it. I'm just kidding."

Rachel gripped the sword in both hands and pivoted on her heel, taking on a dramatic combat pose. Her wristful of thin metal bangle bracelets jingled together musically as she mock thrust and parried with the blade. "You know, we shouldn't be handling this thing without gloves on. God, it's heavy. And old too."

Savannah stood up. She plunged her hands into the pockets of her flared jeans. "At least two hundred years old. Late 1600s would be my guess." More than a guess, a certainty.

"It's beautiful. Must be worth a fortune, I'll bet."

Savannah shrugged. Gave a weak nod. "I suppose."

"I don't remember seeing this on the collection's inventory list." Rachel frowned. "I'm gonna go show it to Bill. I can't believe he would've missed this."

"Bill?"

Rachel rolled her eyes. "Professor Keaton. But I can't very well call him that tonight on our date, now, can I?"

Savannah knew she was gaping, but she didn't care. Besides, it was nice having something else to think about for a moment. "You're going out with Professor Keaton?"

"Dinner and a movie," Rachel replied, practically singing the words. "He's gonna take me to that scary new one that just came out. *The Chainsaw Massacre*."

Savannah snorted. "Sounds romantic."

Rachel's answering smile was coy. "I'm sure it will be. So, don't wait up for me at the apartment tonight. If I have anything to say about it, I'm gonna be late. If I come home at all. Now, hand me the case for this thing, will you?"

Savannah obliged, giving a slow shake of her head as Rachel donned a pair of curator's gloves and gently placed the awful weapon back inside the slim wooden box. Tossing Savannah a sly grin, the girl turned and left.

When she had gone, Savannah exhaled a pent-up breath, realizing only then

how rattled she was. She reached for her own pair of gloves and the notebook she'd filed on the shelf the day before. Her hands were still unsteady. Her heart was still beating around her breast like a caged bird.

She'd seen a lot of incredible things with her gift before, but never something like this.

Never something as brutal or horrific as the slaughter of those two children.

And never something that seemed so utterly unreal as the glimpse the sword had given her at a group of creatures that could not possibly exist. Not then, or now.

She couldn't summon the courage to give a name to what she witnessed, but the cold, dark word was pounding through her veins with every frantic beat of her heart.

Vampires.

Chapter 4

For almost a hundred years, the city of Boston had played unwitting host to a cadre of Breed warriors who'd sworn to preserve the peace with humans and keep the existence of the vampire nation--its feral, Bloodlust-afflicted members in particular--a secret from mankind. The Order had begun in Europe in the mid-1300s with eight founding members, only two of which remained: Lucan, the Order's formidable leader, and Tegan, a stone-cold fighter who played by his own rules and answered to no one.

They, along with the rest of the cadre's current membership--Gideon, Dante, Conlan and Rio--sat gathered at a conference table in the war room of the Order's underground headquarters late that afternoon. Gideon had just reported on his team's raid of the Rogue lair the night before, and now Rio was relaying the results of his solo recon mission on a suspected nest located in Southie.

At the head of the long table to Gideon's left, the Order's black-haired Gen One leader sat in unreadable silence, his fingers steepled beneath his dark-stubbed chin as he heard the warriors' reports.

Gideon's hands were not so idle. Although his mind was fully present for the meeting, his fingers were busy tinkering with a new microcomputer prototype he'd just gotten a hold of a few days ago. The machine didn't look like much, just a briefcase-sized metal box with small toggle switches and red LED lights on the front of it, but damn if it didn't get his blood racing a bit faster through his veins. Almost as good as ashing a Rogue. Hell, it was almost as good as sex.

Not that he should remember what that was, considering how long it had been since he'd allowed himself to crave a woman. Years, at least. Decades, probably, if he really wanted to do the math. And he didn't.

While Rio wrapped up his recon report, Gideon executed a quick binary code program, using the flip toggles to load the instructions into the processor. The machine's capacity was limited, its functions even more so, but the technology of it all fascinated him and his mind was forever thirsty for new knowledge, no matter the subject.

"Good work, everyone," Lucan said, as the meeting started to wrap up. He glanced at Tegan, the big, tawny-haired warrior at the opposite end of the table. "If Rio's intel shakes out, we could be looking at a nest of upwards of a dozen suckheads. Gonna need all hands on deck down there tonight to clear the place out."

Tegan stared for a moment, green eyes as hard as gemstones. "You want me to go in, take the nest out, say so. It'll be done. But you know I work alone."

Lucan glowered back, anger flashing amber in the cool gray of his gaze. "You clear the nest, but you do it with backup. You got a death wish, deal with it on your own time."

For several long moments, the war room held an uneasy silence. Tegan's mouth twisted, his lips parting to bare just the tips of his fangs. He growled low in his throat, but he didn't escalate the power struggle any further. Good thing, because God

knew if the two Gen One warriors ever went at each other in a true contest, there would be no easy victor.

Like the rest of the warriors gathered around the table, Gideon knew about the bad blood between Lucan and Tegan. It centered on a female--Tegan's long-dead Breedmate, Sorcha, who'd been taken from him back in the Order's early days. Tegan lost her first, tragically, to an enemy who turned her Minion and left her worse than dead. But it was by Lucan's hand that Sorcha perished, an act of mercy for which Tegan might never forgive him.

It was a grim but potent reminder of why most of the warriors refused to take a mate. Of those currently serving the Order, only Rio and Conlan had Breedmates. Eva and Danika were strong females; they had to be. Although the Breed was close to immortal and very hard to kill, death was a risk on every mission. And worry for Breedmates being left behind to grieve was a responsibility few of the warriors wanted to accept.

Duty permitted no distractions.

It was a tenet Gideon had learned the hard way. A mistake he couldn't take back, no matter how much he wished he could.

No matter how many Rogues he ashed, his guilt stayed with him.

On a low, muttered curse, Gideon yanked his thoughts out of the past and entered the last string of his programming code into the computer. He flipped the switch that would execute the commands, and waited.

At first nothing happened. Then...

"Bloody brilliant!" he crowed, staring in triumphant wonder as the red LED lights on the front panel of the processor illuminated in an undulating wave pattern--just as his program had instructed them to. The warriors all looked at him with varying expressions, everything from confusion to possible concern for his mental wellbeing. "Will you look at this? It's a thing of fucking beauty."

He spun the processor around on the table for them to see the technological miracle taking place before their eyes. When no one reacted, Gideon barked out an incredulous laugh. "Come on, it's remarkable. It's the bloody future."

Dante smirked from his seat across the table. "Just what we needed, Gid. A light-up bread box."

"This bread box is a not-yet-released tabletop computer." He took the metal lid off so everyone could see the boards and circuitry inside. "We're talking 8-bit processor and 256-byte memory, all in this compact design."

From farther down the table, Rio came out of a casual sprawl in his chair and leaned forward to have a better look. There was humor in his rolling Spanish accent. "Can we play *Pong* on it?" He and Dante chuckled. Even Con joined in after a moment.

"One day, you'll stand in awe of what technology will do," Gideon told them, refusing to let them dampen his excitement. No matter how big of a geek he was being. He gestured to an adjacent closet-like room where years earlier he'd begun setting up a control center of mainframes that ran many of the compound's security and surveillance systems, among other things. "I can envision a day when that room full of refrigerator-sized processors will be a proper tech lab, with enough computer power to keep a small city up and running."

“Okay, cool. Whatever you say,” Dante replied. His broad mouth quirked. “But in the meantime, no *Pong*?”

Gideon gave him a one-fingered salute, smiling in spite of himself. “Wankers. Bunch of hopeless wankers.”

Lucan cleared his throat and brought the meeting back on track. “We need to start ramping up patrols. I’d like nothing better than to rid Boston completely of Rogues, but that still leaves other cities in need of clean-up. Sooner or later, things keep going like they are, we’re gonna need to evaluate our options.”

“What are you saying, Lucan?” Rio asked. “You talking about bringing on new members?”

He gave a vague nod. “Might not be a bad idea at some point.”

“The Order started with eight,” Tegan said. “We’ve held steady at six for a long time now.”

“Yeah,” Lucan agreed. “But things sure as hell aren’t getting any better out there. We may need more than eight of us in the long run.”

Conlan braced his elbows on the edge of the table, sent a look around to everyone seated with him. “I know of a guy who’d be a good candidate as any, I reckon. Siberian-born. He’s young, but he’s solid. Might be worth talking to him.”

Lucan grunted. “I’ll keep it in mind. Right now, priority is taking care of business at home. Six Rogues ashed last night and another nest in our crosshairs is a decent place to start.”

“Decent, yes,” Gideon interjected. “But not nearly enough for my liking.”

Rio gave a low whistle. “Only thing sharper than your mind, amigo, is your hatred for Rogues. If I ever fall, I’d not want to find myself at the end of your blade.”

Gideon didn’t acknowledge the observation with anything more than a grim look in his comrade’s direction. He couldn’t deny the depth of his need to eradicate the diseased members of their species. His enmity went back about two centuries. Back to his beginnings in London.

Dante eyed him speculatively from across the table. “Counting the suckheads you took out last night, how many kills does that make for you, Gid?”

He shrugged. “Couple hundred, give or take.”

Inwardly, Gideon did a quick tally: Two-hundred and seventy-eight since coming to Boston in 1898. Another forty-six Rogues lost their heads on the edge of his sword, including the three who slaughtered his baby brothers.

He could no longer picture the boys’ faces, or hear their laughter. But he could still taste the ash from the fire as he tried desperately to pull them out of the burning stable the night they were killed. Gideon had been hunting Rogues ever since, trying to douse his guilt. Trying to find some small degree of redemption for how he’d failed to protect them.

So far?

He wasn’t even close.

Chapter 5

Savannah took the T in to the university campus from her apartment in Allston, still groggy and in dire need of coffee. She'd had a restless night's sleep, to put it mildly. Too many disturbing dreams. Too many unsettling questions swirling in her head after what she'd witnessed by touching that damned sword. She'd been more awake than not for most of the night.

It hadn't helped that Rachel never made it home from her date with Professor Keaton. Of course, that had been her intention. Hadn't she said as much yesterday? Nevertheless, Savannah had lain awake in her bedroom of the cramped little apartment, listening for her roommate to return. Worrying that Rachel was getting in over her head with a guy like Professor Keaton, a much older man who made no secret of his willingness to play the field. Or, in his case, a large part of the female student body.

Savannah didn't want to see her friend get hurt. She knew firsthand what it felt like to be played by someone she trusted, and it was a lesson she hoped never to repeat. Besides, Rachel would probably only laugh off Savannah's concern. She'd call her a mother hen--too reserved and serious for her age--things Savannah had heard before from other people throughout her life.

Truth be told, part of her was a little envious of Rachel's free spirit. While Savannah had fretted and worried the night away, Rachel was probably having a great time with Professor Keaton. Correction: *Bill*, she amended with a roll of her eyes, trying not to imagine her roommate gasping out Professor Keaton's name in the throes of passion.

God, how she was going to get through class today without the involuntary--totally unwanted--mental picture of the pair of them naked together?

Savannah rounded the corner onto the university campus on Commonwealth Avenue, still considering the potential awkwardness of it all when the sight of police cruisers and a parked ambulance with its lights flashing in front of the Art History building stopped her short. A pair of reporters and a camera crew jumped out of a news van to push their way through a gathering crowd outside.

What on earth...?

She hurried over, a heavy dread rising in her throat. "What's going on?" she asked a fellow student toward the rear of the onlookers.

"Someone attacked one of the Art History profs in his office late last night. Sounds like he's in real bad shape."

"At least he's alive," someone else added. "More than you can say for the student who was with him."

Savannah's heart sank to her stomach, as cold as a stone. "A student?" *No, not Rachel. It couldn't be.* "Who is it?"

The reply came from another person nearby. "Some chick in his freshman Antiquities class. Rumor is they were engaged in a little extracurricular activity up in his office when the shit went down."

Savannah's feet were moving underneath her, carrying her toward the building entrance, before she even realized she was in motion. She ran inside, dodging the cops and university officials trying to keep the growing crowd outside and under control.

"Miss, no one's allowed in the building right now," one of the police officers called to her as she dashed for the stairwell. She ignored the command, racing as fast as she could up the three flights of steps and down the corridor toward Professor Keaton's office.

The news crew she saw arrive a few minutes ago hovered in the hallway, cameras rolling as the police and paramedics worked just inside the open door. As she drew nearer, a stretcher was wheeled out into the corridor with a patient being administered to by one of the ambulance attendants.

Professor Keaton lay unconscious as they pushed his gurney toward the elevators, his face and neck covered in blood, his skin bone-white above the blanket that covered him up to his chin. Savannah stood there, immobile with shock, as Keaton was whisked off to the hospital.

"Coming through!" a gruff Boston accent shouted from behind her. She jolted back to attention, and took a step aside as another gurney was pushed out of the professor's office.

There were no medics attending this patient. No urgency in the way the emergency responders wheeled the stretcher into the hallway and began an unrushed march toward the second bank of elevators. Savannah brought her hand up over her mouth to hold back the choked cry that bubbled in her throat.

Oh, Rachel. No.

Her petite body was draped completely in a sheet mottled with dark red stains. One of her arms had slid out from under the cover to hang limply over the side of the gurney. Savannah stared in mute grief, unable to tear her gaze away from that lifeless hand and the dozen-plus bangle bracelets gathered at Rachel's wrist, sticky with her blood.

Reeling in disbelief and horror, Savannah stumbled into the professor's office, her stomach folding in on itself.

"Outta here now, everybody!" one of the police detectives working inside ordered. He put a hand on Savannah's shoulder as she slumped forward and held her midsection, trying not to lose her breakfast. "Miss, you need to leave now. This is a crime scene."

"She was my roommate," Savannah murmured, tears choking her. Nausea rose at the sight of the blood that sprayed the wall near Professor Keaton's desk and sofa. "Why would someone do this? Why would they kill her?"

"That's what we're trying to find out here," the cop said, his voice taking on a more sympathetic tone. "I'm sorry about your friend, but you're gonna have to let us do our work now. I'd like to talk to you about when you last saw your roommate, so please wait outside."

As he spoke, the news crew seemed to think it was the opportune time to crowd in with their camera. The reporter inserted himself between Savannah and the officer, shoving his microphone at the detective. "Do you have any indication of what happened in here? Was it a random break-in? Robbery? Or some kind of personal attack? Should the campus be concerned for the safety of its students and faculty?"

The cop narrowed his eyes on the vulture with the mic and heaved an annoyed sigh. “Right now, we have no reason to believe anyone else is in danger. There are no signs of forced entry, nor any obvious evidence of a struggle beyond what occurred here in this office. Although it doesn’t appear anything was stolen, we can’t rule out theft as a motive until we’ve had a chance to fully review and process the scene...”

Savannah couldn’t listen to any more. She drifted out of Keaton’s office and into the adjacent study lab where she, Rachel and the other students had been working less than twenty-four hours ago. She dropped into a chair at one of the work tables, feeling outside her own body as the discussion of Rachel’s murder and Professor Keaton’s narrow escape continued in the blood-splattered office.

Savannah’s gaze roamed aimlessly over the reference materials stacked on the lab tables, then over toward the archive storage room. The door was wide open, but no cops or university officials were inside.

She stood up and approached numbly, walked into the darkened room.

And even through her fog of shock and grief, she realized immediately that something wasn’t right.

“It’s not here.”

She pivoted, a sudden surge of adrenaline sending her back to Professor Keaton’s office at a near run. She made a quick visual search of the room, looking past the disheveled desk and well-worn sofa. Past all the blood.

“It’s gone.” The police officers and news crew went silent, everyone turning to look at her now. “Something was taken from here last night.”

~ ~ ~

Eva had set off the compound’s kitchen smoke alarm again.

The high-pitched beeping brought every warrior in the place running at full tilt to shut the bloody thing off.

Gideon abandoned his morning’s work on the microcomputer--his new obsession--and hot-footed it up the serpentine corridor of the underground headquarters to the kitchen installed specifically for Eva and Danika, the only two residents biologically capable of eating anything that came out of it. Even that was questionable, when it was Rio’s Breedmate’s turn at the stove.

The Spaniard arrived in the kitchen mere seconds before Gideon got there. Rio had silenced the alarm and was pulling Eva into an affectionate embrace, chuckling good-naturedly as she tried to make excuses for what happened.

“I only turned away for a minute to watch something on the news,” she protested, waving her hand toward the small television set on the counter as Lucan, Dante and Tegan shook their heads and returned to what they’d been doing. Conlan stayed, going over to put an arm around his mate, Danika, who stood nearby, trying to hide her smile behind her hand.

“Besides,” Eva went on, “there was only a little bit of smoke this time. I swear that alarm hates me.”

“It’s all right, baby,” Rio said around rich laughter. “Cooking has never been your best quality. Look at the upside, at least no one got hurt.”

“Tell that to their breakfast,” Gideon said wryly. He picked up the skillet of