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AUGUST 1926

ELISE FOUND THE WORLD MORE BEAUTIFUL WHEN she closed her eyes.

Melancholic jazz music rode the soft sea breeze around the pier, each note lingering like a clandestine kiss. Quiet and unseeing, Elise felt the most herself. Her other senses opened up and softened the edges of her anxieties, making her feel grounded.

Then she opened her eyes. Chelsea Piers came into view around her, the massive docking ocean liner just beyond the piers' entrance ablaze with the glow of the setting sun. Her pulse thundered in her ears and the jazz notes grew fuzzy. Trying to purge the clamminess from her earlier panic, she wiped her hands across her skirt, then stepped toward the waiting car.

Once finished loading Elise's luggage into the trunk, Colm, her

family's driver, helped her into the automobile. "Your ship docked late. My apologies, Miss Saint, but we're in a race against the sunset. Your father is already in a mood." He glanced at her through the rearview mirror as the engine roared to life. "Welcome home, by the way."

Elise thought facing her father again sounded worse than being out after the sun went down. As far as she was concerned, the house in Harlem was no longer her home. Not in a city full of monsters who craved the taste of her blood. Monsters like the one her best friend had become.

The car turned north, and though the sky over Manhattan darkened, the streets were still full of people, hats held down against the evening breeze and faces twisted with fear.

Colm stepped on the gas. To settle her nerves, Elise peeked into her bag for what she knew was the fifth time that hour. The letter with the lovely golden seal of the Paris Conservatory was still there, staring back up at her. Her fingers plucked at the loose threads on her coat seven times, her chest growing tighter while the residential buildings of Riverside Drive whipped past her window. They quickly neared Sugar Hill. Elise wondered how much had changed in five years. Whether Layla was even still alive—

Colm cursed in the front seat as he hit the brakes. Pedestrians rushed the intersection the car was trying to cross. "Everyone wants to be close to Saint territory at night," he explained.

Elise nodded. When she was younger and word had spread about her family's reaper-hunting services, it seemed like new neighbors

introduced themselves to her father every day. Some wanted to bargain with him for more of his steel bullets; only the ones made with the alloy he'd devised could reliably kill the reapers. Others wanted protection. The empire went from just distributing Saint steel to hiring ex-military who needed jobs and training young men around the neighborhood who were brave enough to hunt reapers. Back then, Elise enjoyed the fullness of their home. People who desired to enter the Saint inner circle brought with them some of her lifelong friends. Though none, not even Mrs. Gray, with her scientific advancements and a tentative hope for a better future, were as special as the Quinns, who had been the ones to welcome the Saints to New York. But friendship wasn't enough to keep people safe.

The business grew larger every year, though the number of reapers seemed to keep up. Elise almost couldn't believe her father had gone from a steelworker in Texas to a top steel manufacturer and distributor in New York.

The car crossed Amsterdam Avenue into the Sugar Hill neighborhood, the noisy traffic fading. The Saint mansion stood on what had once been a block of brownstones, which had been leveled on Mr. Saint's order. Now the iron gates of the Saint estate rose before them, guarded by two of the Saint security officers, their silver badges and guns glinting in the dying light as they moved to let the car in.

Elise waited while Colm opened her door. But he suddenly shoved it shut again as one of the guards called out, "Miss, this is private property—"

Elise looked out the passenger window to see a brown-haired young woman standing just inside the gate.

“The monsters are in my neighborhood, and you must do something about them,” she told the guard.

For a moment the young woman looked so familiar, a bitter name lodged in Elise’s throat, and her heart lurched. But when she turned to get a better look, Elise realized she saw a stranger—not the girl she had left behind years ago, bloody and bruised.

The Saint guard tried to lead her away from the gate. “Tomorrow we’ll send a patrol over—”

“No. They must be dealt with now,” the woman snarled. She stepped toward the car and her sharp eyes met Elise’s, her lips pulling back to reveal fangs. Elise scrambled back in her seat, though the car door separated them. Bloodlust swirled in the woman’s dark irises, her veins bulging and ripe with hunger. But other than her shining eyes and fangs, the reaper looked utterly human. “*Murderers*. Layla Quinn will be avenged—”

A gunshot cracked through the air. The reaper’s head exploded, and her body collapsed onto the pavement.

“All clear. Someone clean it up,” a guard ordered.

Elise let out a shaky breath and shoved the car door open, avoiding the bloody mess at her feet. As she stumbled out, a gentle voice halted her panic.

“Relax, Lise. She’s dead.”

Elise looked up. “Sterling,” she breathed. She could hardly believe she was looking Sterling Walker in the eye after five years of only

exchanging letters. Blood covered her friend's shirtfront, and he held his gun arm steady, but he still smiled. He had gone from a young boy seeking refuge in their home to one of the Saint's leading reaper hunters.

His thumb traced a cross over the handle of his gun, then he lowered it. "Welcome home, Lise." Sterling leaned toward Elise, his amber eyes glowing in the dusk, and kissed her cheek. He had always been beautiful with his smooth brown skin and perfectly styled curls. But Elise thought he looked even more beautiful now. She eyed his gun, knowing every day he worked as a reaper hunter, he put his life on the line for the citizens of Harlem. And for her father.

Elise swallowed. Her music studies had kept her father content for this long, but she had no idea how it measured up to the bloody work his people did for him every day.

Elise wanted to hug Sterling, but the blood kept her back. "Are you all right?" she asked.

"I'm perfect. As always. The blood isn't mine; I've been on a patrol. I've still got an hour or two left of work, but I wanted to catch you as soon as you got home." That overly confident grin of his hadn't waned, and Elise was glad. People said distance made the heart grow fonder, but time also changed people. And she wasn't sure she could handle Sterling changing. Not when everything else in her life had changed so abruptly.

Elise glanced over at the body by the gate. "The reapers know I'm back now." She couldn't even bring herself to say Layla's name out loud.

Sterling shook his head. "Just that one. Whichever guard let

her onto our street is getting fired. Though I will admit, it's getting harder to tell the reapers from us. Good thing I caught her just now, otherwise the whole Harlem reaper clan might know you're here. We can't have that."



The mansion seemed even bigger than Elise remembered. It still stood, proud and lavish, with the marble columns and pristine hedges fronting the house. The Saint empire seal, with its image of a lotus flower and the North Star, was set into the brick floor of the front veranda. Colm had placed her luggage around the seal, not a single trunk or bag touching the embossed brass. Superstition ran high in the Saint empire, and it was not limited to the hunters who traced the shape of a cross over their gun handles.

The front door swung open. "Lisey!"

Elise hardly recognized her younger sister standing there, eyes bright. Gone were the chubby baby cheeks of a four-year-old: Josi was still little, but *so big*. When she flew into Elise's outstretched arms, Elise felt right at home. "I missed you so much, Josi."

"Mama said you were coming soon, but she didn't say when—"

"*Josephine.*" A stern voice broke in as their mother approached. "Back to your lesson, please."

"I'm sorry, Mama." Josi ducked her head and went to her mother's side. The light had gone from her eyes, which made a painful lump rise in Elise's throat.

“Claude is waiting for you. Go now,” their mother ordered.

Josi shared one last look with Elise, then disappeared into the house. Her mother’s attention finally settled on Elise. “Oh, Elise...”

Elise blinked. A tight smile found her lips, and she nodded. “Mother.” Her skin prickled with unease as her mother’s sharp eyes roamed over her, stopping at the scars on her throat. A fresh pain filled her eyes, and Elise had to steel herself to keep from looking away.

“Welcome home, my love.” Elise accepted her mother’s stiff hug and followed her down the hallway. “Heavens, I’m already exhausted. Your arrival was nearly catastrophic. It’s distracting Josephine.” Her mother paused at the bottom of the grand staircase. “She’s worried about the reapers returning for you. I can’t do this again.”

“It won’t happen again,” Elise said quietly. She peeked over her mother’s shoulder to see Josi sitting restlessly with her tutor. “She’s been writing me about how excited she is to audition for the Paris ballet school. How have her practices been?” Elise asked.

Her mother’s lips tightened into a flat line. “She has not been practicing. There’s no time.”

“What do you mean?” Josi was only ten years old. She could not possibly have that many responsibilities. “Mother, the instructors in Paris are much stricter than the ones we have here. Josi needs to be perfect—”

“*You* are here to celebrate the ten-year anniversary of this empire, Elise. Your priorities should be set on being perfect for your father. People need to see that the heir of this business is focused on—” Her

mother sucked in a sharp breath and looked away. She reached up to push an imaginary loose curl behind her ear. “Let me worry about Josephine. You worry about yourself.” She proceeded up the stairs.

Elise trailed behind. *Heir*. Elise didn’t feel like the heir of the Saint empire. No, that role should have gone to someone whose name their family brought up only once a year, when they had enough time to prepare for the rolling pain that came with her memory. On the stair landing, Elise stared at the massive family portrait for the first time in five years and a shudder passed through her. The vibrant paint strokes could not conceal the absence haunting their family, the ghost that brought ruination to their memories.

“Your father is entertaining some new partners at the Savoy tonight,” her mother called from the top of the stairs. “We will meet him there later.”

Swallowing hard, Elise nodded. “Father is not home?” The news struck a chord of hurt in her, knowing she had been worrying about what he thought of her, yet he could not be bothered to be home for her. Another part of her felt distinct relief that she could put off facing him for a few hours.

“No, something came up at the factory.”

Elise opened her mouth to say something, but her mother was already halfway down the hallway. She shook her head and continued to her room. Much to her disappointment, someone had pulled it apart, rendering it nearly unrecognizable from the state she had grown up in. Though the blood from her last night there was gone, thankfully. New white drapes identical to the ones she had

when she was little surrounded her four-poster bed, which was still adorned with countless throw pillows and silk blankets. It was all recognizable enough, but she knew they were replacements to erase the bloodshed that had once filled her room. Even the books, the pictures, the records, the letters—the things that made her *her* were missing. The old Paris Conservatory music box she had wished on and wound up every night after piano class was gone, too—the main thing that had drawn her to Paris willingly, before Layla had given her no choice but to flee there. Elise had left so quickly all those years ago, she didn't even get to pack up her most precious belongings. And now they were gone. Her throat tightened with disappointment as she reached into her closet and picked out the nicest dress she could find.



The heart of Harlem came alive that night at the dance hall, and Elise stood witness to its allure. The music of the jazz band pulsed around her, shaking her bones and pounding between her heartbeats. The dance floor was a spectacle, and the lights strung throughout the club seemed to chase every sequin and crystal woven into the attire of the partygoers. The attendees were taking a risk to be out during prime reaper hours, their drunken haze and the threat of danger amplifying the thrill they sought.

Those who did not dance talked, their sharp voices carrying through the crowd. Politicians conferred with gangsters, their

wallets pressed to their palms and spilling cash between their fingers. Actresses draped themselves over the tables, blowing out hot smoke as they twisted pearls around their necks and spoke of their dream roles. Stoic heiresses forced smiles and lifted their chins to ensure their jewelry caught the light. Money, class, and diplomacy mixed to create a bacchanal of chaos, the most dangerous cocktail.

Prohibition had been in effect for six years by now, but many had learned how to skirt the selective enforcement, especially in Harlem. An owner of such a glamorous establishment would be well connected and able to fend off, or pay off, any legal suspicions. People came to clubs in Harlem for more than just dancing, and tonight, it felt like everyone was at the Savoy, drinking and dancing beneath the cut glass chandelier. Racial integration occurred in the search for liquor and urban thrills.

Elise narrowly avoided colliding with a couple dancing the Charleston and bumped shoulders with Sterling.

“What do you think of the Savoy so far?” he asked. “It opened while you were away.” He lifted a couple drinks from a passing waiter’s tray stacked high with crystal glasses. “I’m assuming the clubs are not as colorful in France,”

“You assume wrong,” said Elise, taking a glass from him. Admittedly, the Savoy Ballroom was glorious so far. As her eyes traveled over the vibrant crowd again, she spotted her mother and Josi near the tables. Her younger sister wore an expression of pure awe. She clapped wildly, silk bows in her hair stirring while she watched a row of costumed dancers over on the bandstand stage. Nearby stood

her father, Tobias Saint, patriarch and leader of the ever-growing Saint empire, in deep conversation with a business associate.

“Elise, if you’re not going to drink that, please allow me—” Sterling couldn’t even get his words out before Elise downed her drink.

She wiped the back of her hand over her mouth and grinned. “Champagne is much better in France too.” Elise’s gaze slipped past her friend, finding her father’s cold eyes staring right at her. His jaw had gone tight, and not a hint of warmth touched his expression. Then, almost as soon as Elise had caught his eye, her father turned, a smile cracking across his face while he continued the conversation with his companions.

Ice spiraled down Elise’s spine. She breathed in deeply, trying to settle her nerves, but the thick air and the heat it carried made it nearly impossible. Sterling nudged his elbow into her side and nodded toward the dance floor. “Dance with me.”

Elise shook her head. She had put off greeting her father for long enough. “I want to check on Josi first.” She left Sterling by the edge of the dance floor and made her way through the crowd to her family. When Josi saw Elise, her face lit up, and she rushed right into Elise’s arms.

“My angels,” her father crooned. He looked the same as Elise remembered him—tailored black suit, silver cufflinks glinting. The exhaustion in his black eyes betrayed the time more than his face. He turned back to his associate, an older Black man with a severe expression. “This is what I fight to protect,” Elise heard him say.

The half-hearted acknowledgment stung, but she supposed it was better than his usual overbearing attitude.

Josi tugged on Elise's arm. "I want to go by the bandstand so I can see the dancers better!" She had begged to come tonight, and Elise never had the heart to tell her no. They began to make their way across the crowded dance floor. Elise's eyes scanned the crowd, stiff hands on Josi's shoulders to steer her clear of any commotion, but her sister seemed completely unfazed, bouncing along with the music. As they got closer to the stage, Elise's dress felt heavy. With each step brushing against the silk hems of the nearby revelers or catching on their jewelry, it felt less like luxury couture and more like an extravagant trap.

Suddenly, Josi's shoulders slipped from beneath Elise's fingers. Elise gasped, "Josi!" She tried to rush after her, but someone collided with her. Feathers from a woman's boa went up Elise's nose and into her mouth. For a moment, her world went black, and the music swallowed her panicked shriek.

"Oh, heavens, I'm so sorry!" the woman said as she finally drew away. By now, Elise had lost sight of Josi, and the crowd seemed to close in on her. But she finally spotted her sister, her white dress a beacon. The showgirl dancers formed a neat line at the edge of the stage, blowing Josi kisses.

Elise almost thought it was sweet. But then she saw the dancers' faces; what should have been radiant brown skin beneath the lights looked pale, as if their blood had been drained. Their eyes held a vacant stare in the bright stage lights. The sound of the crowd faded

around Elise, and time seemed to slow as the dancers' bloodred lips stretched into wide slashes against their pale faces, teeth gleaming. One reached forward, hand outstretched toward Josi. Elise saw the dancer's eyes go black, a glimpse of fangs behind her sanguine-slicked smile.

A familiar face flashed in Elise's mind, sending her back to her blood-soaked bedroom five years ago, Layla crouching over her with dripping fangs and a ravenous snarl. She was too close. Josi would be next.

"Josi!" she shrieked. She stumbled, crashing into a waiter. His tray toppled over, and champagne sprayed the air.

The sound of shattering glass jolted Elise's senses back to the present. Only a few nearby guests stopped their dancing—the rest of the ballroom carried on, the music drowning out the commotion. On the stage, the dancers were shuffling away, feathered fans covering their faces.

Elise felt a strong hand clamp onto her shoulder. "Careful," her father muttered as he took her hand and helped her over the glass and champagne-soaked floor.

"Father—" she started, but he shook his head, pulling her out of the crowd. He waved to his guests to bid them goodnight. And while his smile never wavered, his grip grew so tight around Elise's hand that her fingers were numb by the time they made it out of the Savoy.

Elise could not hide her relief when Colm finally pulled up with the car and her father released her hand. She took her seat between

Josi and Sterling, and her parents sat opposite them. The moment the door closed, the smile dropped from her father's face.

Elise's heart rate picked up. "Did you see the reapers? They were there, weren't they?"

Her father snapped his focus to her. "What did you say?" he demanded.

"The dancers onstage... I saw the way they looked at Josi, and they had fangs—"

Sterling stiffened beside her. Even Josi lowered her gaze.

"There were no reapers," her father said.

"But—"

"Surely, Elise, you do not believe I would put my family in danger, do you?" her father asked.

Elise shook her head. "No." She noticed her mother's hand resting calmly on her father's shoulder.

"Then I assure you, there were no reapers in there." His tone softened and he leaned forward, taking her hands into his own. "It's possible that because of what you went through, you are seeing these things. You cannot trust these anxious thoughts. They will show you danger even when it does not exist."

Elise's heart beat so hard, her chest ached. She took a few deep breaths, forcing that familiar anxiety down, and nodded.

The car lurched forward into the night, darkness pressing around them from all sides.