



MORGAN L. BUSSE

CRY OF
THE RAVEN

❖ THE RAVENWOOD SAGA ❖



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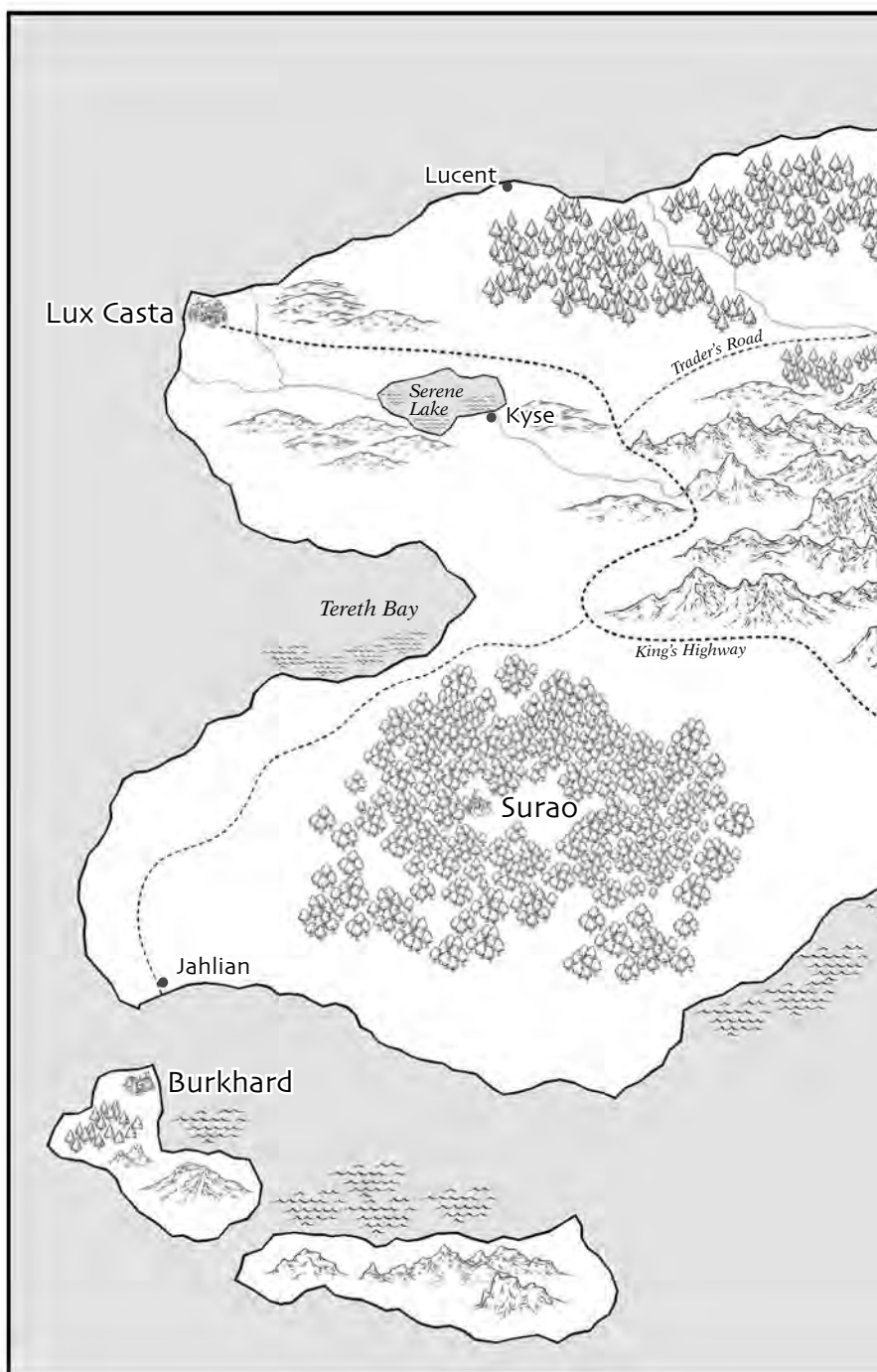
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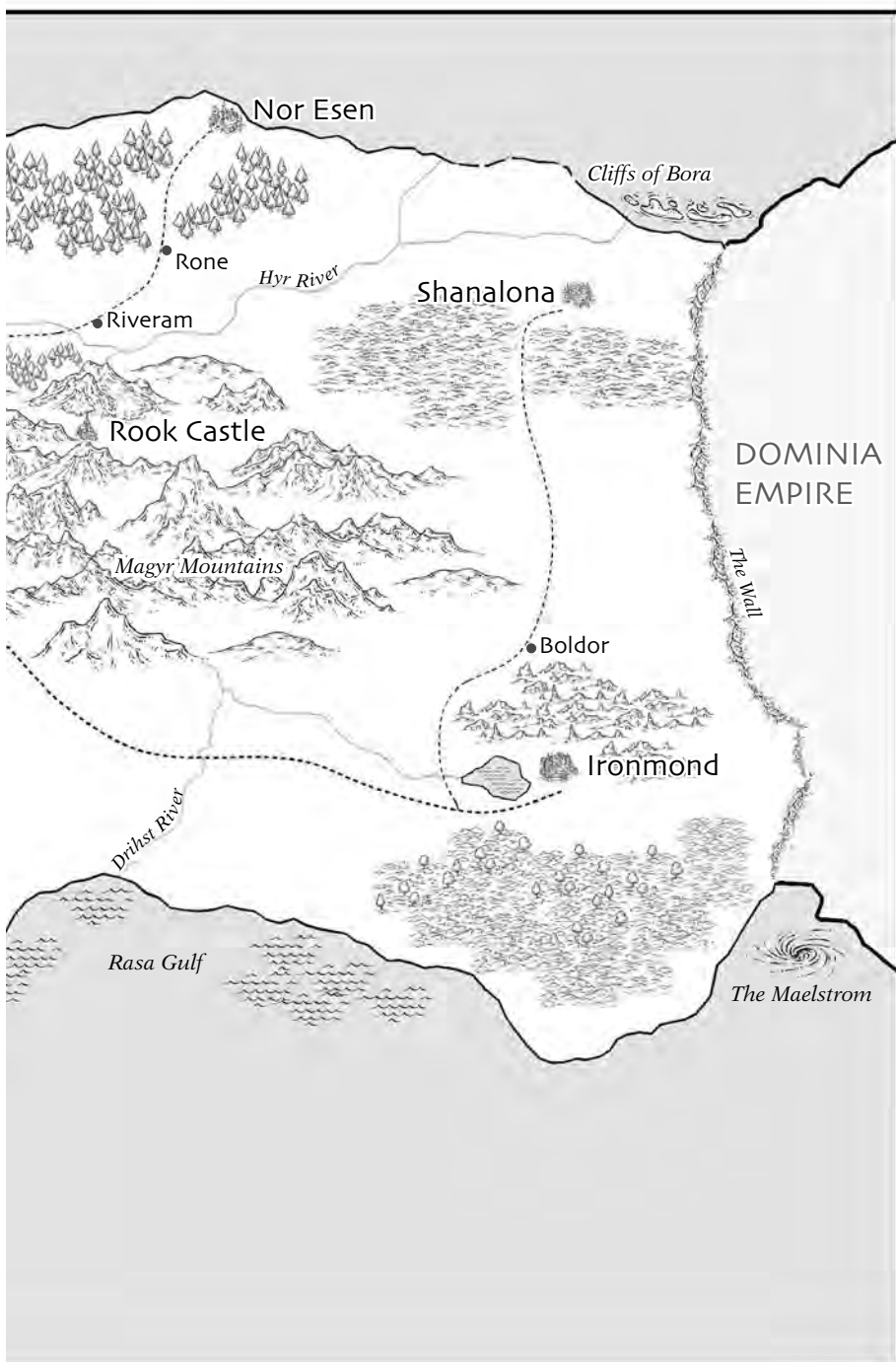
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To my mother.
Thank you for life, for love,
and for your wisdom.
I love you.





Character List

HOUSE RAVENWOOD

House of Dreamers

Grand Lady Ragna

Caiaphas (consort)

Amara (deceased)

Opheliana

HOUSE MARIS

House of Waters

Grand Lord Damien

Grand Lady Selene Ravenwood

Grand Lord Remfrey (deceased)

Serawyn (deceased)

Quinn (deceased)

HOUSE FRIERE

House of Fire and Earth

Grand Lord Ivulf

Raoul

HOUSE VIVEK

House of Wisdom

Grand Lord Rune (brother) (deceased)

Grand Lady Runa (sister) (deceased)

Renlar

HOUSE RAFEL

House of Healing

Grand Lord Haruk

Ayaka

HOUSE LUCERAS

House of Light

Grand Lord Warin (deceased)

Grand Lord Leo

Tyrn

Elric

Adalyn

HOUSE MEREK

House of Courage

Grand Lady Bryren

Reidin (consort)

Grand Lord Malrin (deceased)



Numb. So numb.

The only thing Selene could feel was the dull thump of her heart beating as she sat beside the window in the guest chambers the next day.

I love you.

Damien's words echoed inside her mind as she stared outside. Her sister Amara's last words before she died in the dreamscape were not far behind: *I think I cared about you too, a little. I was just too jealous to see how much we needed each other.*

A single tear trickled down Selene's cheek. Powerful words, words she had been waiting to hear for a long time, both spoken in the same night.

And she had no answer for either.

Amara was gone now. And she had yet to answer Damien's declaration, even though she already had her response.

I love you too.

The sentence lay upon her lips, waiting to be spoken. And yet everything inside of her felt heavy. With love came grief and hurt. It would be easier to steal back behind her cold mask, back to the numbness. If she had done what she had been trained to do, she

would not be grieving over Amara's death now. And she would not be feeling the euphoria of Damien's words.

"No." Selene spoke the word aloud, her hand curled over the arm of the chair. "I will not go back to who I was. No matter how hard it is to feel." She stood up and crossed the temporary bedroom she shared with Damien. He was already gone, making the inquiries of her sister on her behalf, letting the others know that she would be grieving for the rest of the day.

The blood on the floor in the other room had been cleaned, but she could still picture her sister lying there. She swallowed and paused. At least she had been able to show Amara who they were meant to be as dreamwalkers and who the Light was at the end.

A sad smile spread across Selene's lips. Her sister was at peace and free of their mother.

The pattering sound behind her announced that the rainstorm threatening Lux Casta had started. It was as if the weather was a reflection of her own grieving heart, and yet it was cleansing as well.

Selene left the bedchambers and entered the common room. The room was dark and cool, the windows filled with grey clouds outside. Karl stood by the door on guard, his dark hair brushed back, his spine straight. He glanced at her and nodded. She bowed her head in return. Sometime in the last couple days—or even weeks—Karl had finally dropped his disdain for her.

The main door opened a minute later, and Damien and Taegis walked in. The moment she locked eyes with Damien, the heaviness across her chest lifted, and her heart began to beat again.

He returned her look with an intense one of his own. "Selene." He crossed the room and took one of her hands and kissed her fingers. His lips and breath were warm across her skin. "I spoke to Lord Leo," he said as he lifted his head. "It is not their custom

to burn bodies, and he was less inclined to do anything for a would-be assassin, but since Amara was your sister, and she was a member of a Great House, he will see that her body is prepared and the ashes given to you.”

She curled her fingers around his. “Thank you, Damien.”

“While I was with Lord Leo, we received word that Grand Lord Renlar will be arriving tomorrow.”

“The son of Lord Rune Vivek?”

“I know you are grieving, but we cannot let any more time pass before signing the treaty. Would you be willing to represent House Ravenwood when he arrives?”

“Yes.” There was no hesitation in her voice. Her mother might still be the figurehead for House Ravenwood, but her gift had already marked her as the new head of house. And she had a promise to keep to Amara: to protect their sister Opheliana at any cost. She would find a way back to Rook Castle. One way or another.

The rain continued to fall as Selene walked beside Damien toward the meeting hall the next afternoon. The usual gleaming white halls of Lux Casta were cool and grey in the light of the storm. Every few minutes, lightning flashed outside, followed by a hollow boom.

Servants moved from room to room, removing the mourning cloth from pictures and furniture and replacing the black banners with the standards of House Luceras once again. Lord Warin’s body had been escorted to the family mausoleum that morning, but war did not allow time for grieving or for the luxury of announcing the next grand lord. Instead, Lord Leo had been named head of House Luceras in a private coronation in the Temple of Splendor, with only his siblings and the priests as his witnesses, shortly after his father was interred. Now Lord Leo would

represent his people in the upcoming treaty, and Selene wondered if he would still vote the same way his father had.

A guard stood on either side of the white double doors that led into the room beyond. Both bowed to Damien and Selene before one opened the door on the right and ushered them into a long hall with white stone walls, alabaster marble floor, and tall windows along one side of the room. Rain tapped against the glass in a soothing manner.

In the middle was a beautifully carved table that filled the length of the room. Around the table were ornate chairs, almost like small thrones. A silver chandelier hung above the table, casting light across the area.

They were the first to arrive. Damien walked over to the left and pulled out the chair farthest from the door. Without a word, Selene took the seat, and he pushed the chair in before taking the one next to her.

Soon after, Lady Bryren arrived. She spotted Damien and Selene and nodded, remaining unusually quiet and reserved as she sat on the opposite side of them.

Rain ticked off the time as the three waited. Low, muffled voices echoed on the other side of the doors. When the door opened seconds later, Lord Leo entered, his white cloak fluttering behind him and his blond hair brushing his collar like threads of gold.

Right behind him came another man, with rich dark skin and thick black hair, wearing the striking colors House Vivek was known for. His tunic was deep blue and made of silk, with stars embroidered along the collar, the symbol and colors for his house. A black leather vest and pants completed his outfit. His face drew Selene's gaze, those smooth edges, that glint of intellect. There was no doubt about it. He was Lord Renlar Vivek, the son of Lord Rune.

Lord Leo approached the table. He stopped at the head and placed his fingers along the wooden surface, then looked at those gathered. There was something different about him. He seemed taller, more regal. There was an air of confidence and authority around him. Almost as if the coronation had changed him from a firstborn son to grand lord.

He motioned toward Lord Renlar, who now stood at his side. “My fellow lords and ladies, may I present to you Grand Lord Renlar of House Vivek.”

Starting to the right, Lord Leo introduced each person present. Lady Bryren dipped her head at the mention of her name. Damien and Lady Selene bowed.

“Thank you, everyone,” Lord Leo continued, “for agreeing to meet on such short notice, even though you just arrived”—he glanced at Lord Renlar—“and with all the events that have occurred over the last few days.” His jaw tightened for a moment. Selene felt the same contraction as grief washed over her own heart.

Lord Renlar bowed. “I understand the gravity of this meeting.” His voice was low and had a slight rumble to it. “But perhaps before we begin discussing the treaty, we should talk about some events that have come to light, such as my origins, Lord Damien’s escape from Rook Castle, the duplicity of House Ravenwood and House Friere, amongst other things. I believe before we align our houses and people, there should be no more secrets.”

Damien affirmed Lord Renlar’s words with a small nod. Selene also agreed. No more hiding in the dark. It was time for the truth to come out.

Lord Leo took a seat at the head of the table and motioned for Lord Renlar to continue. “Please, Lord Renlar, go first.”

Lord Renlar nodded and took a step forward toward the table. “Many of you didn’t know of my existence until recently. My

mother was a commoner. Her marriage to my father was a secret, and so was my birth. Because of my mother's status, it was decided that my aunt would carry on House Vivek's line, and I was sent away to study in the great libraries. It was there that I learned to use my gift of wisdom and decided to apply it toward my people in quiet, subtle ways. Even when I became an adult, very few knew of my life or my connection to House Vivek. House Maris was one of those who did."

He nodded toward Damien before continuing. "Eventually my aunt married, but no heir ever came of her union. When word reached Shanalona last harvest of Lord Rune's and Lady Runa's deaths, I was given the choice to claim the title of grand lord publicly or to remain anonymous and allow a lesser house to take over House Vivek. My study of our history—all of our histories—informed my decision. What I came to realize is the importance of the Great Houses and our gifts. The only way we will win against the empire is to combine our gifts. It was this very reason we were given these abilities." He placed a hand on his chest. "I carry the gift of wisdom through my father's bloodline. Because of that, I have a responsibility to all people to use my gift to help them. And now I stand here today as grand lord of House Vivek in place of my father." Lord Renlar bowed again before he took a seat to the left of Lord Leo.

Lord Leo folded his hands and looked around the room. "I understand your sentiments, Lord Renlar. But as you know, only six of the seven Great Houses still have their gifts. And one of those houses has chosen to align with the empire. I'm afraid this unity you speak of will never happen, even if House Friere returns to us."

"I am aware," Lord Renlar said calmly, "but even still, I believe we have a chance."

A cool sweat formed along Selene's palms. They didn't know

yet that House Ravenwood still, in fact, had the gift of dream-walking.

Damien stood. "Since we are sharing secrets, it is time to share some of my own. As you can see, I'm still alive." Lady Bryren chuckled while the others nodded. "You already know from my letters that I was a target at the Assembly, and I had to escape in order to save my life."

"Yes, but did you know that House Vivek was also a target?" Lord Leo asked.

Damien glanced at Lord Renlar. "Not until it was too late. I'm sorry I wasn't able to help your father or your aunt."

A shadow passed over Lord Renlar's face.

"How did you find out you were a target?" Lord Leo asked. "And how did you escape? Can you tell us now?"

Damien pressed his fingers against the edge of the table. "Because of house secrets, there was very little I could reveal about that night through correspondence, other than it was Lady Selene who helped me escape."

All eyes came to rest on Selene.

Before they could question her, Damien continued. "However, I know who the real assassin was, and it was not the empire—not directly—contrary to what Lady Ragna told you."

"Then who was it?"

Damien stared down at the table as he answered. "As Lord Renlar said, things have come to light over the last couple of months. There have also been subtle shifts of power amongst the Great Houses. Due to those shifts, I can now share what I know of the events surrounding the Assembly of the Great Houses that took place at Rook Castle."

"You can share who the assassin was?" Lord Leo said.

Damien raised his head. "Yes. There were two of them."

Selene's stomach tightened. She knew Damien was going to

share about her family's involvement, and though she was tired of all the secrets, her heart beat rapidly, knowing that every house would learn of Ravenwood's duplicity and her own dark secret.

Damien took a deep breath. "The assassins were Lady Ragna . . . and Lady Selene."

There was a collective gasp around the room.

Lord Leo stood to his feet. "That is a grave accusation, Lord Damien. You never said any of this in your missives."

"I couldn't, because those facts were hidden within the secrets of House Ravenwood. But things have changed."

"That's not possible. House Ravenwood was wiped out centuries ago, and a lesser house took its place. When the gift of House Ravenwood disappeared, so did their secrets."

"And that's another secret of House Ravenwood's."

Lord Leo turned to Selene. "What is he saying?"

Selene drew on all her internal strength for the courage to step into the light. She placed her hand on Damien's and stood. He took that as his cue to sit. She looked around the room, at this one last time where she was regarded as a neutral party, then spoke. "Damien is telling the truth. Ravenwood has kept many secrets because we were never truly wiped out."

"Are you serious?" Lady Bryren stared at Selene. "How is that possible? The last Ravenwood died during the first razing of the Dominia Empire."

Selene noticed Lord Renlar eyeing her with a subtle fascination, almost as if he had figured out the truth. Then he looked away with a pained expression on his face.

She lifted her chin. "It is now time for me to share my own secrets."

Lord Leo sat down and crossed his arms, his face hard. "Indeed it is."

Where to begin? A whirlwind of feelings sent adrenaline cours-

ing through her veins. The gravity of what her ancestors had put into motion all those years ago came crashing down on her. They had lied to everyone. They killed and stole from the very people they should have been working with. How could she tell them that? She opened, then closed her mouth.

“Start at the beginning,” Damien said quietly, almost as if he could read her mind.

Just hearing his voice brought back a measure of control. “During the first razing, my entire house was wiped out except for one person, a young woman by the name of Rabanna. She was taken to Dominia when the empire’s forces were routed back to their country and the wall put in place. The empire took her as spoils of war. They had no idea who she really was. During her time in the Dominia Empire, she honed her power of dreamwalking and used it to make her way back to our lands.”

Lady Bryren stared at her with wide eyes. “How?”

A huge weight settled across Selene’s chest. “The gift of dreamwalking can be used in many different ways. Rabanna chose to use her gift to manipulate and slay those who stood between her and home. She found a ship willing to take her to the port town of Jahl-ian, then she made her way to Rook Castle, where she eventually married Grand Lord Remy, from the lesser house that took over the mountain region. Since then, every generation of Ravenwood women have honed their gift of dreamwalking in secret.”

Sharing Rabanna’s trials made her realize what her forebearer had gone through to make it back. It didn’t make it right, but it did show strength of spirit and a willingness to overcome great obstacles. If only Rabanna had found a better way.

Lady Bryren shook her head. “I don’t understand. Why did Ravenwood keep all of this a secret?”

“Fear.” Selene raised her eyes. “Fear that our house would be razed again. And hatred for what was done to us.”

The room grew uncomfortably silent.

Just as Selene went to sit, Lord Leo spoke. "If this information is bound in house secrecy, how is it that you can tell us about this? Lady Ragna is the head of your house, is she not?"

"My mother is a powerful dreamwalker in her own right. Each of my foremothers has always been powerful. However, the mark I bear on my back is different. Only recently have I come to understand what it means. The ancient power of Ravenwood has chosen me as head of House Ravenwood."

Lord Leo shook his head. "Only after the death of the grand lord or lady can a new head of house be chosen."

"Unless someone of exceptional power comes along," Lord Renlar said quietly. "I read of this happening one other time, with House Friere."

"How exactly?"

"If a member of a Great House exceeds in the power of his or her head of house, there will be an internal transfer of headship. The strongest always leads."

"You have the gift of dreamwalking, *and* you're the new head of Ravenwood?" Lord Leo looked from Lord Renlar to Selene.

"Yes, she is," Damien said in response. "I've witnessed firsthand what she can do. The Ravenwood gift is alive and well within Lady Selene."

"By the heavens," Lady Bryren said under her breath. "A dreamwalker." She glanced over at Selene. "But Lord Damien also said you were one of the assassins. Since Lord Damien is still with us, I assume you changed your mind. How did you go from almost killing Damien to being married to him?"

Selene looked down at Damien's hand on the table near hers. "I was trained to steal secrets and take lives. But when it came time . . ." She took a deep breath. "I couldn't do it."

"Couldn't do it?" Lord Leo asked suspiciously.

Selene looked up. "I'm not a killer, and I never will be. I chose to go against my mother and my own house and save Lord Damien."

"To go against one's house is treason of the highest degree." Lady Bryren tilted her head to the side in thought. "Yet you chose to save Lord Damien. That must have taken a lot of courage."

"We know from Lord Damien's letters that House Ravenwood and Friere are in league with the empire," Lord Leo said. "Is that why you were sent to kill Lord Damien?"

"Yes. And no." Selene sighed. "My mother received a prophecy from the Dark Lady before the Assembly. It was foretold that a threat would come from the north, one that would mean the end of House Ravenwood. My mother took that to mean she needed to take out the northern houses—House Vivek and House Maris—in order to preserve her own. I was tasked to kill Lord Damien." She lowered her eyes, unable to look at Lord Renlar. "While my mother took out House Vivek."

"And your marriage?" Lady Bryren asked.

Selene glanced at Damien.

"Because she saved me, I married Lady Selene so I could safely bring her into my lands and protect her from House Ravenwood."

"Ah yes." Lady Bryren nodded. "The water barrier. So you married Lady Selene to make her a part of your people?"

"Yes."

"Fascinating," she said. "So the threat the Dark Lady spoke of wasn't House Maris?"

Selene laughed bitterly. "That's the thing about interpreting prophecies. The threat to House Ravenwood was never House Maris or House Vivek—it was me. When I chose to leave my house, I became the fulfillment of the Dark Lady's words."

Silence fell across the room.

Lord Leo rubbed the back of his neck. "This is a lot to consider,

and the afternoon is growing late. I move to adjourn and reconvene in the morning.”

Lord Renlar nodded. “I agree.”

“And I,” said Lady Bryren.

Damien and Selene also agreed. The lords and ladies stood, some moving toward the doors while others stretched. Lord Renlar made his way around the table and approached Selene as Damien went to speak to Lord Leo.

“Lady Selene, if I may, could I have a moment of your time, in private?”

“Is it important?” Selene asked, feeling drained from the meeting.

“Yes, it is something I feel I must share with the others, but now that I know a true Ravenwood exists, it is only right I tell you first.”

Selene frowned.

“It is imperative that we talk.”

Selene looked over at Damien, who seemed to be in deep discussion with Lord Leo, then back at Lord Renlar. “All right, we can speak.”

“Good, then follow me.”