

## **Bane of Night – Daniel, Year 10, NSW**

Valentine and Lucian sat at the mouth of the Brocelind Forest, the trees towering over them like dark twisting spires, ascending towards the heavens. Above, the sky was a beautiful dark sapphire colour, veilless, littered with bright and gleaming stars that twinkled and winked at Earth. The moon cast its silvery incandescence upon rolling plains of lush green grass, which seemingly stretched to eternity. Beautiful.

They sat around a blazing campfire, the flame leaping and dancing, embers and sparks erupting. It drove out the harsh cold biting them, the warmth caressed them gently. It felt like the comforting touch of friends or family. Valentine sharpened his sword near his tent, his golden hair tumbling down into his face, and under the light of the fire his handsome face, usually a nordic fair with winter blue eyes, took on a sinister quality. It was a mask of a monster. Sparks erupted as he ran his whetstone along the blade, a thousand exotic colours and shades, the light reflecting in his eyes, warping and twisting. The runes etched onto the sword glowed an arcane aura along the blade. They spoke of higher powers, of something wild and strange.

"Are you ready for the hunt, brother?" Valentine asked, voice soft.

Lucian looked at him and did not respond. Just lately Lucian had been thinking about quitting, despite the fact that his membership in it was to be considered a mandate from Heaven, a mandate to keep the forces of evil at bay, a mandate to be humanity's shield. He thought about all this senseless murder of vampires. He thought about the murder of them for no reason but their existence. And humanity hunted them because they feared them. Humanity always feared things it did not understand.

"Yes, I am ready. But this shall be my last. I want no more of this senseless murder of creatures."

Valentine laughed, a booming laugh that shook his frame. "These creatures offend God by their mere existence. They are the creatures who prey on innocents, Lucian. They are the creatures who live in God's shadow. Our membership in the hunt is mandated from Heaven, a divine calling, not a career path to be declined or accepted."

Lucian watched as anger burned in Valentine's eyes, eyes as cold as a winter sky. Lucian sighed. "I know that. But all this senseless mur-"

Valentine cut him short. "Enough, Lucian. If you want to leave, I will not stop you. You are my dearest friend. Know I will support you no matter what. But let us hunt. One last time.

Gathering their gear they ventured into the tunnel of darkness. Soon all light was engulfed by darkness's greedy mouth. They lit their torches, the flames flaring into existence in the dark. The runes on Lucian's sword glowed and pulsed like a heartbeat. It wanted blood, because the hungry blade had an insatiable appetite.

Deeper and deeper they ventured in, and now the flames of the torch seemed infinitesimal in the engulfing darkness, and tiny silvers of moonlight shined through the canopy of the trees, quickly eaten. They were alert for anything that would betray the presence of vampires. A glint of scarlet eyes, a flicker of a shadow, a rustle of movement- suddenly the night exploded

with shadows. Instantly Lucian and Valentine formed the defensive position, a ritual that they were so familiar with they needed no conscious thought to do it. It had become instinct.

The fire kept the Night Children back. They flinched in the presence of light, for light was anathema to them. A single Night Child stepped forward, braving the light, his soulless eyes flaring crimson, his face a mask of hatred.

“Hunters. You intrude on Night Child territory. We have committed no crime against humanity. We feed not on the blood of humans but on animals. Why have you come here? You seek death?”

The anger in his tone was like Hellfire, hot, never-ending. This was one vampire who was tired of war and death.

“That may be true, vampire, but your mere existence is an offence to God. You are not God’s creations. You are creations of creatures that crawl into the depths of Hell. Why do you think the sun’s light scorns your flesh? Why do you think holy symbols scorch your skin?”

The vampire’s eyes flared an alarming shade of violet. “Fool. The Bane of Night has fed you much propaganda. You think your mission to kill all vampires is holy? You think your mission was granted to you by God? No. You are a foolish bunch of humans who have taught themselves a bit of magic and are now on a mission to kill anything that threatens your power. You serve a selfish cause. If I were you, human, I would turn around now. The entire Brocelind Coven is here. Twenty vampires against two hunters? Who will win?”

A spasm of anger crossed Valentine’s face. It twisted his features into something inhuman, then his face returned to humanity. It was like a sea that had calmed after a storm.

“Vampire. You mock me. You mock the order of The Bane of Night. Your head shall be upon my wall!”

With that he charged, sword raised, blue runes glowing with light. The vampire snarled, fang teeth snapping out, two canines grown wondrously sharp. Its face twisted and warped like liquid metal. Its face was no longer the face of a little boy angel, innocent and beautiful but the face of a primal beast, a beast that kills without mercy or compassion. It leaped with a terrible, inhuman swiftness, more shadow and less a physical entity. Lucian watched in horror as human and vampire clashed with unimaginable fury, locked in a maelstrom of hate and violence. He had seen many battles before, but they always ended quickly and brutally, with Valentine smoothly decapitating the vampire. However, now, the fight lasted for longer. Both the human and the vampires were no more than blurs.

Then suddenly Valentine was launched back with incredible force, his sword clattering to the ground. The runes that previously shone like a beacon of hope faded. The vampire stepped forward, his face longer a primal beast, but the face of an angel.

“Leave. My. Home,” the vampire snarled, his pale face inches from Valentine’s own. Valentine’s face contorted with fear. He was not used to being bested.

“What if I won’t?” Valentine snarled viciously, in an attempt to sound brave, but his voice trembled.

“What if you won’t? I will turn you into one of us. That would make you tainted, hunter. And what will you do then? Live on, hating yourself for what you have become, or take your own life?” The vampire chuckled with dripping malice. “You decide.”

Valentine scrambled up and turned to Lucian. “You. Lucian. You brought this down upon us. You bring shame to the order. Refusing to hunt anymore. Refusing your mandate from Heaven! I will leave you here at the mercy of those...creatures,” Valentine said, his voice covered in disgust.

A spasm of fear uncoiled in Lucian. “No! Valentine! They will turn me into one of them! I will be cursed to forever walk in the Night. Please!” he begged, but he might as well be begging a statue.

Valentine sneered, a thing that turned his handsome face into something ugly. “Then you deserve it. Consider it Heaven’s punishment!” With that, he leaped into the trees, and then he was gone.

Now Lucian was utterly alone. He looked around at the vampires surrounding him, twenty pairs of crimson eyes staring back at him, some filled with burning hate, some filled with pity. Pity? Lucian was taught these creatures felt no emotions, that they could only feign human emotions. All this in front of him contradicted what the order had taught him. Maybe vampires were still human. Maybe they didn’t want to kill and drink blood for survival, maybe they wanted to go back to being human.

The vampire that had fought Valentine stepped forward. He chuckled, but it was not with malice.

“Abandoned by your own kind, hunter. Do you see now, how deluded the Bane of Night is? They are a bunch of fools who fear what they do not understand. And the best way to get rid of fear? Kill it. Destroy it. They have somehow convinced themselves that the murder of vampires is a mandate from Heaven. The creatures they should be killing should not be us. They should be hunting the demons instead. All the magical folk of this world should be united against the demons.”

Lucian looked at him, stunned. Demons? Demons? The vampires were the demons! At least that was what the Bane of Night told him. He was starting to doubt them now.

“What...what are you going to do to me?” he stammered.

The vampire laughed, and this time it dripped with malice. This time it promised him eternal damnation.

“Turn you into one of us.”