

LBRIS

We know
books

Also by RuNyx

Dark Verse

The Predator

The Reaper

The Emperor

The Finisher

The Annihilator

Gothikana

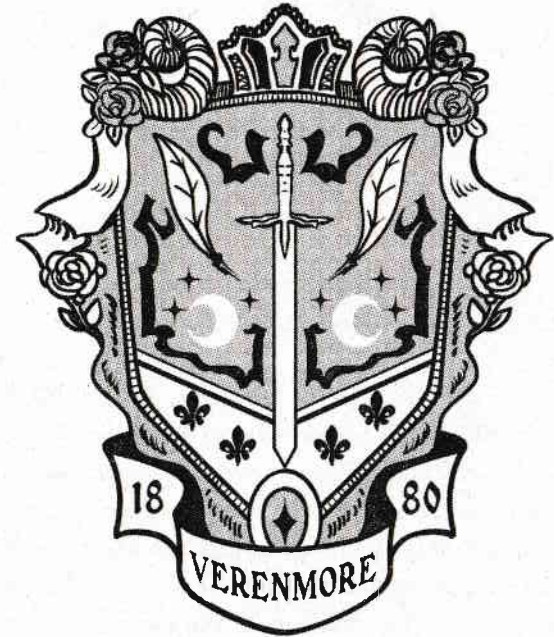
RuNyx



SOLARIS

MOUNT VERENMORE

The University of Verenmore





WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

Vad

THERE WAS NOTHING scarier than a blind old woman with whites for eyes suddenly gripping your arm under a full moon night.

Old Zelda had once been the caretaker of the home little Vad now lived in with other boys. But after she went blind, the admin people let her stay on, which was a mistake in Vad's opinion. Because she knew stuff, stuff she shouldn't know, stuff about boys she couldn't even see. She'd known Reed would drown in the pond a week before he did. She knew about Tor and his skin burning from the inside, something he'd never told anyone. And she said his best friend would 'eat flames' one day, whatever that meant, and Fury was scared of fires.

Old Zelda was scary as shit. And Vad avoided her every chance he could.

So, being caught in the small garden on a boy's birthday night in front of the others wasn't something he ever wanted.

Her frail, wrinkled hand gripped his thin arm with surprising strength.

'To a castle where none go,' she said, her voice shaking, her face heavily wrinkled, the whites of her eyes staring eerily at Vad, 'you will go, boy.'

Fury sniggered at his side. 'Why would he go to a castle, Zelda? Where would he even find a castle?' They were piss poor, the lot of them.

'He will find many things,' Old Zelda spoke over his friend. 'Purple eyes. You will find purple eyes.'

Ajax, another boy the same age as Vad, roared a laugh. 'Purple eyes? Nobody has purple eyes, Zelda. Or maybe a freak does.'

'Maybe he also finds a three-legged man,' another boy shouted with a girly giggle.

'Or a girl with two horns,' another said.

Vad blushed furiously, his seven-year-old self getting mad at Old Zelda for cornering him like that and saying weird stuff about him his friends made fun of.

Amidst the laughter at his expense, Zelda's grip on his arm tightened. 'Don't forget, boy. It's a matter of many deaths.'



A FEW YEARS LATER

Corvina

BLACK.

It was the absence of colour, the keeper of dark, the abyss of unknowns.

It was in her hair, in her mama's clothes, in the vast sky all around them.

She loved black.

The kids in town feared it from the shadows under their beds to the endless night that blanketed them for hours. Their parents taught them to be a little afraid of it. They taught them to be afraid of her mother, too — the odd lady with odd eyes who lived at the edge of the town near the woods. Some whispered she was a witch who practiced dark magic. Some said she was a freak.

Little Corvina had heard all the rumours, but she knew they were untrue. Her mother wasn't a witch or a freak. Her mother was her mother. She just didn't like people. Corvina didn't like people either, but then most people in town weren't very likeable.

Just the day before, she'd seen a girl her age throw pebbles at the crow that had been trying to find some twigs on the ground for its nest. Corvina knew this because she knew the crow. There weren't many of them in the woods here, but those that stayed knew her and her mama, too. And it wasn't because of anything witchy.

For as long as she could remember, her mother had taken her to a clearing a few minutes away from their little cottage every morning to feed the crows. Her mama told her, on one of her good days where she was speaking, that they were intelligent, loyal creatures with the spirits of their ancestors, and they watched over them from the skies during the day, just like the stars did at night.

And they needed protectors, the two of them.

Her mama didn't talk much but she did hear voices, voices that told her things. They told her to not talk to people, to home-school Corvina after that incident at the school, to keep her away from everyone. Her mama told her she couldn't wander or they would take her away. She couldn't leave her side in town or they would take her away. She couldn't talk to anyone or they would take her away.

Corvina didn't want to go away.

She loved her mama. Her mama, who smelled of sage and fresh grass and incense. Her mama, who grew their vegetables and cooked tasty food for her. Her mama, who took Corvina into town once a month, even though she hated it, to get her any books she liked from the library. Most days, her mama didn't talk at all unless she was teaching Corvina or whispering to the voices. Corvina didn't talk much either. But Corvina knew she was loved. It was just the way her mama was.

As she walked beside her on her little feet under the

moonlit sky to the clearing — a rare Ink Moon that happened once every five years, an Ink Moon she was born under — she smiled. Her mama was happy after a long time and that made her happy. With candles and incense sticks that her mother made, and the tarot cards her mother was teaching her to read, and the crystals they were going to recharge, ten-year-old Corvina looked around at the darkness and felt at home.

If her mother was a freak, then maybe so was she.

After all, sometimes she heard the voices, too.



CHAPTER 1

Corvina

CORVINA HAD NEVER heard of the University of Verenmore. But then again, she hadn't heard of most normal things, not with her upbringing. However, nobody else had heard of it either.

Holding the letter that she got weeks ago in her hands — a letter written in ink on browned, thick paper that smelled as old, beloved books did — she perused the words again.

Dear Miss Clemm,

The University of Verenmore is pleased to extend our offer of admission to you. For over a century, we have enlisted students who come from special backgrounds to attend our esteemed institution. Your name was referred to us by the Morning Star Psychiatric Institute.

We would like to offer you a full scholarship to our associate undergraduate course at Verenmore. This degree will give you access to some exclusive circles going

forward, and open many doors for you in the world. We believe with your academic records and personal history, you would be a good fit for our institution.

While we understand that this must be a difficult time for you, a decision must be made. Kindly revert to this letter at the attached address for further information. If we do not receive any response from you within 60 days, we will regretfully rescind the offer.

We hope to hear from you.

Regards,

Kaylin Cross,

Recruitment Specialist,

University of Verenmore

Corvina had never received a letter, much less one as bizarre as this.

And it was very bizarre.

She was a twenty-one-year-old girl who'd been home-schooled and secluded her whole life by her mother. Why would a university want an undergraduate student way past the normal age, one who didn't have anything close to conventional schooling? And who even sent handwritten letters anymore?

Weird thing was, no one knew about the university. She'd tried to find out something about it — asking the chief doctor at the facility, using her town library's computer, and no one knew anything. Verenmore didn't exist anywhere except on the map, a tiny blip, a small town by the same name in the valley of Mount Verenmore. That was all.

The school existed somewhere on the mountain that civilians weren't usually allowed on. And she knew this because her taxi driver — a very kind man called Larry

— had just told her so as he drove them up the mountain.

‘Not a lot of folks ’round here who go up to that castle ’nymore.’ Larry continued his barrage of information, winding the small private black car up the slightly inclined road. Corvina had found him right outside the train station when she’d come out. It had taken her two trains — one from Ashburn and the next from Tenebrae — and over twelve hours to get to Verenmore. Larry had been surprised when she’d given him her destination on the mountain, to the point he’d prayed before starting the car.

‘And why is that?’ Corvina asked, watching the little town get smaller in the distance as lush green swallowed her vision. She wasn’t used to conversation but needed to know as much as she could about the school she had agreed to go to. Not that she’d had anything better to do.

Living in the tiny cottage she’d grown up in, making jewellery and candles, and doing readings to earn, had become monotonous — especially when nobody in town except the old librarian had ever treated her with anything but suspicion. The letter of acceptance had come as a sign from the universe, and her mama had always told her never to ignore those. Corvina had always wanted to experience a school for the social nuances, study with other humans around her, and learn more about people who knew nothing about her. A clean slate to write whatever she wanted on it, however she wanted it. It was contradictory since she was a loner, but she was an observer. Whenever she got the chance, she enjoyed people-watching.

‘Dunno.’ The driver shrugged his slight shoulders under a thin beige jacket. ‘Tales ’bout the place, I reckon. Say the castle’s haunted.’

Corvina snorted. She doubted that. Old places and things, in her experience, had a tendency to get labelled as haunted over time. But she also wanted to keep her mind open.

‘And is it? Haunted, I mean?’ she asked, still curious to know more about the mysterious university.

The driver glanced back at her in the rear-view mirror before focusing on the road again. ‘You stayin’ at the castle or visitin’, miss?’

‘Staying,’ she told him, glancing down at the letter in her hand and stuffing it in the brown leather bag that had belonged to her grandmother. It had been the only thing she had got from anyone besides her mother.

‘I’d say keep your wits ’bout you.’ The driver concentrated as the incline got steeper. ‘Dunno if the place’s haunted but somethin’s not right with it.’

Silence reigned after that for a few minutes. Corvina rolled her window down slightly, looking out at the natural, incredible beauty of the mountain. The sight was unlike anything she had ever seen before. Where she came from, the woods had been more yellow and the air more humid.

As the cold, dry air whipped through the dark strands that had escaped her fishtail braid, Corvina let herself take in the abundance of deep, dark verdant that expanded below her, the little town a small clearing in the middle of the thicket. The scent of flora unknown filtered in through the open window, the sky a cloudy pale imitation of itself.

The music that had been on low through the ride crackled as they went higher. Corvina looked at the dashboard as the driver sighed. ‘Happens every time,’ he told her. ‘Signal gets worse up here.’