

House of Ash

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

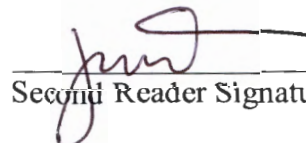
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*Abstract*

*House of Ash* is a novel of fiction that follows Ana, a young vampire duchess living in Florida who is torn between her unhappy marriage, her familial expectations, political allegiances, and the stirrings of war. She also seeks to understand herself and find her own happiness in the world. The novel is a work of Gothic literature that focuses on themes such as passion and repressed fears or desires, the nature of death and finding meaning in life, and the nature of obligation and expectation. The novel utilizes imagery, motif, and an intimate first person point of view in order to create an authentic, character-driven narrative.

*Prologue*

When I was nine and my brother Karl Erik was eleven, our tutor explained to us what it meant to be royalty. He did not stand at the front of our classroom with chalk smudged on his long, dark fingers. Instead, he pulled up a chair close to our desks and sat with us, as one of us. Jean Pierre was not royal. He was a common vampire who had been made by a royal, granting him the title of count. This made him one of the more dominant common vampires, but no matter how old he got or how natural his abilities were, he would never be as powerful as a royal. One day we would be stronger than him.

“You are descended from the original vampires, as all royal vampires are. This is as much a social responsibility as a variation in species.” His hair hung over one shoulder in long dreadlocks that swayed with the emphasis of his words. “Your titles are not just for show. When someone calls your mother the Duchess of Lavringraad, they are naming her the protector of the realm. It is her duty to guard and protect her people, your people, the vampires in this city, from any threat. The threat of hunger or exposure or attack from outside forces, these are all things I will prepare you for.” At the time, I was not afraid. His words instilled a sense of solemn duty in me, a responsibility to the vampires royalty had created and could not abandon, an obligation I would never forget. “When we study history, we are not just studying old men who died a long time ago. We are studying how they lived, and how their skills and strategies might help you and your people to live. Do you understand?” He looked us both in the eye to make sure that we knew how serious he was. He made us answer him out loud.

“I understand.” Karl Erik stood up to bring himself to Jean Pierre’s height, his face was as serious as I had ever seen it. He didn’t sit down until our tutor acknowledged him with a nod, until he turned to me, expectant, waiting.

Accepting this understanding was accepting that eventually our parents would be murdered. Whether it would be a rival city's assassin behind the bullet, a future coup, or the return of war didn't really matter. It was the price we paid for our position. The purpose of royalty is not just to control our own population growth, monitor the human death toll, and maintain secrecy from human awareness—while creating order from chaos is a definitive part of the job description, the ancient rite of the royal species is that of a protector, a sentinel to ensure the survival of the bloodline. We are born stronger, faster, with more power and more ability than a human brought into darkness will ever have. Legends long forgotten painted us as secret weapons, the first and last defense of entire bloodlines, warriors who could tear through swathes of common vampires in a single night. Royalty has distanced itself from this violent ideal over the centuries. In the age of industry, royalty has become the embodiment of grace and prestige, an ostentatious power that holds others at bay and staves off would-be threats. Royalty holds bloodlines in check; it maintains a stalemate of power to keep the peace. Some vampires still hold to the old belief that if every royal vampire of a bloodline died, their entire bloodline would die with them, as though we were their source and without us, they would become dust. In this way, there is a strange and eternal symbiosis: we protect one another.

I looked from Karl Erik to Jean Pierre, to the familiar, narrow planes of our tutor's face, and his dark brown eyes. He knew what I knew. One day, hopefully many centuries from now, this city would be our city, and we would not fail its people. “I understand.”

Later that month, Jean Pierre announced that we were going to go on a field trip to the Museum of Science and Industry downtown. Our mother had finally relented to letting us spend an evening in the heart of Lavringraad to learn. She had always been invested in our education and trusted Jean Pierre to that end, even convincing him to leave the Caribbean to teach her children everything a future duke and duchess might need to know. If he said we would be fine going to a museum for a private late night tour, she trusted him with us.

It was the first time we had ever dressed like humans. We wore jeans and tennis shoes. Mine had lavender glitter on them and I asked Jean Pierre if I could wear them every day. He laughed and told me I made them beautiful. Karl wore a t-shirt with a cartoon hero on it, but we didn't know who Spiderman was, or why he dressed in a leotard and mask. Jean Pierre tried to explain that he had spider powers, but when Karl asked if he drank blood like spiders do, like we do, Jean Pierre said no; he said nothing more on the subject. Spiderman and glittery sneakers were soon forgotten in favor of learning about space and dinosaurs. We felt like this was how normal children must be, illuminated in the glow of a thousand stars in distant galaxies. We were intoxicated on fossils and evolution, on car motors and constellations. Karl and I walked out of the museum as if waking up from a dream.

There were vampires in the parking garage. We recognized each other immediately. Not in the way one recognizes a friend or familiar acquaintance, but the way that predators recognize one another in the wild. They called out to us, whooping and shouting about how it was past our bedtimes. Their shouts echoed against the brick walls of the structure, around the cars that were still scattered throughout, left for the

evening. It was well past midnight, but we still had plenty of time before the sun came up. Most of the humans had left, the bars and clubs closed after curfew, leaving only the vehicles of those too drunk to drive or staff who were still closing up after a long night of revelry. It's anyone's guess why the vampires were there. Perhaps they had arranged a blood deal, or maybe they had parked a car here and come to collect it.

Karl and I didn't understand what they were talking about; we had always slept when our parents slept, at dawn. I didn't like the parking garage. It was poorly lit and smelled like some foul thing I couldn't identify. I had never smelled urine before. It made me scrunch my face up. Jean Pierre urged us to walk faster to his royal blue Oldsmobile, his mouth set in a grim line. His failure to acknowledge them only seemed to make things worse. They scattered through the few cars, but moved on a course to intercept us. When it became clear we could not avoid them, Jean Pierre told them he didn't want any trouble.

"You know it's illegal to make children." One of them stood in Jean Pierre's way and wouldn't let him pass. "You know it's fucking *sick*."

We didn't understand what he meant, otherwise Karl might have corrected him. I know now that the man thought Jean Pierre was a pedophile and criminal. There are very strict laws about making vampires, and we were too young to be legal. Had we been common vampires made from human children, the lot of us would have been condemned and destroyed. At the time, I wondered why Jean Pierre hadn't identified us as royalty, as important people. Now I know that my mother had many enemies, and we were safer as unwitting child victims than as the future of the city. We stood beside our guardian, unmoving and afraid.

I had never been afraid before, except for when I couldn't find Karl Erik during hide and seek. Sometimes, when I had been looking for well over an hour, I would be seized by the thought that I might never find him, that he was lost to me. This was not like that fear. This was a fear that latched onto the base of my spine like real, true death, shriveled and cadaverous, and it would not let go. Jean Pierre reached for me, pulling me behind him so that the other vampires would have to get past him to reach us. Karl took my hand and squeezed. I wasn't sure if he was comforting me or himself.

"We don't want any trouble." His accent came through then, as it did when he was agitated or perplexed, a hint of Creole and maybe some Spanish. Jean Pierre had shown us the island he was from on a brightly colored map at home. I wanted to be there now.

"Well what if we want trouble? What then, fuck face?" A female vampire with hair a similar color to my new shoes was standing off to Jean Pierre's right. Her chin jutted out and she sneered at him. She might have been pretty, but the sneer made her homely. I remember thinking that her lips were too thin, that no one should have made her a vampire.

"Then I must warn you that I have fought in two wars and will protect these children with my life. Are you prepared to die for a stranger in a parking lot?" He was pushing us away from him, his arm moving in a slow, deliberate motion. Karl and I stepped backwards in increments. We wanted to cling to him, to anything familiar.

One of them laughed, and it was an ugly, arrogant sound like a bird squawking. "I thought the battle cry of your people was *retreat*."



I was too young to understand an insult against the French, but Jean Pierre gave a light chuckle, nodding his agreement. “That’s very funny.”

The vampire who had laughed earlier frowned at him. “You won’t be laughing when we shove your own dick up your ass, pervert.” There was a beat of silence before he lunged, a moment where it seemed like everything had frozen still. I thought nothing might happen at all. I thought maybe they might still leave us in peace. Then chaos erupted.

The vampire directly in front of Jean Pierre struck first, his fist meant to collide with our tutor’s face. Instead, Jean Pierre stepped to one side to avoid the blow, and returned one in kind. His hit broke the vampire’s nose. A flat rivulet of blood painted a line out of each nostril, dripping down over his mouth and chin. It was the first time I had seen blood that wasn’t served in a glass, that wasn’t from a small scrape on my knee or a cut my brother got traipsing through our mother’s gardens. I watched it stain the collar of his shirt, the blue fabric becoming a strange brown. I was transfixed. My jaw ached.

Two others rushed to their friend’s aid, coming at Jean Pierre from either side. He moved to parry their blows and land his own, his limbs deft and graceful. I knew Jean Pierre was graceful because he tried to instill that grace in me during ballroom classes. He was tall and long-limbed and I always thought he moved like water. It wasn’t until one of them drew a knife that they even managed to hit him. By then, one of them had a sizable stain on his shirt, the blood still drying even though his nose had already healed, and another man was nursing a broken rib.

Jean Pierre landed a kick that threw the more foul-mouthed vampire several feet away, but when our tutor turned, he found a blade in the side of his abdomen. He was so

astonished that he looked down instead of at his opponents, and this allowed the girl with violet hair the time she needed to hit him in the face. I would have screamed, but there was no air in my lungs. I had forgotten to breathe. I could not think. The other one was getting up from the ground, wiping blood from his mouth, snarling.

Karl Erik's grip on my hand was a vice, but I did not pull away from him or utter a sound. I was frozen where Jean Pierre had pushed us earlier, and I could not have moved from that spot of poured concrete if I'd wanted to. I didn't know what to do. I didn't understand why this was happening. What would mother do? I didn't know. I was not her.

One vampire had the knife clenched in his hand, still wet with Jean Pierre's blood. He moved to circle Jean Pierre, as if he were a shark. The one with the broken nose was unconscious, lying face down on the asphalt. He wouldn't be down for long. The woman was limping after a hard kick to her leg had knocked her off her feet. They did not heal as fast and my brother and I did, and I thought that was strange. Jean Pierre's white linen shirt was torn and his blood gleamed wet on the fabric in the parking lot lights. He was unsteady but stood his ground. My free hand was shaking.

The one with the knife leapt first, and Jean Pierre put his strength into keeping the knife from connecting with his body. The woman punched him, but he didn't give way. Then she tackled him, throwing her weight against his body. The three of them went down together, and Jean Pierre did not get back up. She sat up on top of him, hitting his face over and over again, her arms blurry with the speed of her movement.

“Stop it!” Karl screamed, his voice high and thin. “You’re hurting him!” He moved towards them, but I held his hand. I held him back. I would not move. They would hurt Karl.

“Karl, no!” My heart was beating so hard it hurt my chest. My lungs were trying to compensate for earlier by heaving deep breaths of stale air.

“This is our city, Ana. We have to protect him!” Before I could argue with him, he jerked his hand away from me and ran towards them, screaming a battle cry. He tried to pull the woman off of Jean Pierre, to drag her from his body, but she was stronger than my brother. He seemed so small in comparison to them.

She grabbed my brother by his shirt and yanked him onto the ground beside her, but Karl wouldn’t give up. He wrapped both hands around her arm and pulled back. “Get off of him!”

The vampire with the knife staggered to his feet. He didn’t have the knife anymore, and I was horrified to think where it might have ended up. He wrapped his fist around Karl’s hair, blood making his dark curls shine, and flung him. I watched his body move through the air, weightless, until it hit a nearby car, denting the metal and shattering the side windows. He fell to the ground in a shower of broken glass and didn’t move. He was bleeding. There was blood on his new Spiderman shirt.

I screamed then. I don’t remember much past that. It’s blurry when I try to think of it. I remember screaming until my voice gave out. I remember moving towards the man that had thrown my brother. I was not afraid anymore. I was angry. I remember I wanted him dead. I remember I wanted his blood, all of it. I remember thinking that I would tear it from his body. I remember that they all died. I remember the blood.

Sometimes I still dream of it during the day sleep. I dream of Karl lying there on the cement, small and broken. I dream of shadowy figures lit by overhead lamps and of taking their blood, of taking their life, whatever it is that animates the dead to rise at sunset. I dream of taking that into myself, and I wake up covered in sweat, fearful not of them, but of myself.

But I don't remember killing the last two vampires. There is no clear sequence of events from the moment I began screaming to the moment I woke up in our mother's car, in the backseat with my brother, and the seatbelt digging into my neck. I remember my first thought was that my mother would be angry that we'd soiled her car seats. Jean Pierre struggled to open the car door and carry us out, one at a time. He whispered to me, something soft and comforting, but I didn't speak Creole.

I remember my mother's face when she saw us, how horrified she was. She was yelling in Russian, but I can't remember anything she said. Jean Pierre had to drink a bag of blood before he was able to explain what happened, and he wouldn't drink until my brother woke up. When my mother asked Karl Erik how we had gotten away, he stammered. It was unreasonable to ask a child about a traumatic event immediately after regaining consciousness, but I didn't know that then.

"Karl Erik killed them all, mother." It was the only thing I'd said since it happened. "He killed them to protect us. He saved us."

Our mother had nodded, satisfied. "A true heir." She bent to scoop him into her arms and held him closely to her. She did not look at me.

Later that night, after Karl and I had eaten and scrubbed the dried blood from our skin, when I felt the sun approaching the horizon like some low, distant hum, I climbed

into my bed. I heard Karl sneak into my bedroom, the soft sound of him opening and closing the door before he climbed into bed with me. My bedsheets were powder blue and covered in rosebuds. Karl lifted them and climbed underneath, letting the coverlet fall over us both. He lay his head on the pillow next to mine so that we faced each other. Half of his face was still bruised, mottled a dark purple red. The cuts from the glass had healed, but the deeper bruises would still take the day to disappear. I hated the way his face looked, but my anger was spent. I felt hollow inside, hollow and tired.

“Why did you tell them that I did it?” He whispered, reaching for my hand again.

I let him lift my wrist and wrapped my fingers around his. His hand was warm from the blood we had for dinner. I could have told him that it was what she wanted to hear, or that I didn’t know why I had said it, but that wasn’t really true. I adjusted my head on the pillow, my cheek against a pattern of stripes and flowers. “Because you did.”

His eyes searched my face for a moment longer, as if he still didn’t understand. But he didn’t say anything else. I wondered if he knew that I was afraid, that I had never been so afraid before. Sometimes Karl knew these kinds of things without my having to tell him. If he knew, he didn’t say so. He just stayed there with me until we fell asleep.

We never went back to the museum.

*Chapter One*

I was looking out the window at slow passing swampland in the night. Alligators sprawled motionless on rocks and logs, the leathery ridges of their hides shone in dappled moonlight as they waited for prey. There wasn't much between the city where I lived and the city where I'd been born. That was how the trains were possible. People often assume that because Florida is known for white beaches and tourism that the whole state is inhabited, but the state of Florida is larger than many European countries, and a lot of that land is everglades, swamps and jungle. The land is cheap because no one wants it, and if you plot an obscure enough course, humans will never know anything is hidden there. The state is covered in train tracks to begin with, mostly for shipping. People are inattentive, and with many different private contractors and parts shipped in from all over the country, not to mention a number of probable bribes and nondisclosure agreements, the earlier generation of royalty had achieved an efficient and highly secure form of private transportation that ran only for the privileged few and only at night. It had been a sign of trust and cooperation between houses, and enabled us to travel and ship assets to one another easily and without being seen. From the outside, each car looked like freight.

For a while the orange groves and cow pastures held my attention, a welcome change from the skyscrapers and highways of the city, but I wasn't distracted for long. Even my book lay forgotten on my lap. Karl had been more cryptic than usual when he called to suggest a visit and I was worried about him. I hadn't been to Lavringraad in months, though my brother was all the family I had left now. My husband was not overly fond of my absence. He didn't like me travelling, even through allied territories.

Lavringraad would always be home, even if I had been living for several years now in Vorograad with my husband. I briefly entertained the idea that I could just stay with my brother and his wife forever.

The door at the far end of the car opened and I looked towards the sound, curious at who would be moving cars in the middle of the trip. We weren't far from Lavringraad. An armed guard led a woman and a young human man inside. I knew the woman immediately when I saw her, she was a duchess who had visited with my mother and attended her parties many times, although I couldn't recall her name. She looked exactly the same as she had the last time I had seen her, many years ago. The same perfectly coifed, ashen hair in finger waves around her face, the same aloof and rigid bearing that I recalled in my childhood. She wore a dress made out of a fabric not unlike plastic; it shined in the fluorescent lighting of the train and clung to her every curve. One pale hand idly gripped a leash attached to a collar around her companion's neck.

I wasn't sure which was stranger, that there was a human on the train or that he was leashed to her like a dog. I knew many royals felt no need to be secretive about their lifestyles, but hadn't come across one in public very often. I sat motionless as I watched them. Commoners traveled with human donors, but it was rare to see a royal with one. My husband would have been offended by their blatant sexual relationship. I could almost hear him clicking his tongue in disapproval, making some comment about decency and the state of the world.

I didn't realize I was staring at them until it was too late. The duchess paused in the aisle, her stiletto heels digging into the plush carpeting, cold eyes raking over me with

interest. The guard didn't know what to do. He hesitated, a gloved hand awkwardly on his gun strap, unsure of what was happening, waiting for her to speak.

"Do I know you?" The question was directed at me, but it was not said with resentment. She wasn't insulted by my stare.

"You knew my mother. I'm Anaïs Voropaeva." I wasn't sure if my married name would confuse her more, but the recognition in her eyes meant she'd made the connection.

"Lucille's daughter." The emphasis was on my mother's name, and her head canted to one side as she looked at me. She gave the leash a light tug before moving into the seating area, taking a seat on the couch that faced mine on the opposite side of the window. Her dress and carry on bag blended in with the muted grey upholstery, but somehow she still seemed ornamental. She held herself as a duchess should, spine straight and shoulders back, as if even a seat on a train could be a throne. She crossed one leg over the other, her limbs pale and shapely. Her human companion sat on the floor by her feet.

"Very good," the guard said, as if this had been the plan all along. "Will either of your graces be requiring anything else of me?" He was a young vampire and I realized he probably had very little experience dealing with royalty. He looked almost afraid of her, in a way.

I tried to give him a reassuring smile. "I'm fine, thank you."

The duchess waved her hand towards him dismissively, her focus still entirely on me. "You look just like her you know. The strong jaw, the eyes, your hair. All those dark curls." She smiled at this, as if my resemblance pleased her somehow.



Her gaze made me self-conscious and I watched the guard as he left, envious that he got to spend the remainder of the journey unmolested by social constraints.

“Thank you.” I wasn’t sure she had intended it as a compliment, but my mother had been a great beauty, and I decided to take it that way. “I’m sorry, but I don’t recall your name. I know we’ve met before.”

She didn’t seem insulted by my question. Her expression remained impassive, eyes still making study of me. “Regina Sophia of Stoljarova.” She did not offer her hand.

Oh, of course. I had written to her many times, and my husband had done some business with her over the years. Her House was allied with ours, and Stoljagraad was only a half hour’s journey from Vorograad. Regina Sophia herself was rather infamous for owning *Incendier*, a nightclub themed with the nine layers of hell. The business did well and brought in money and blood. My husband thought it was a disgrace that a royal keep residence in a night club, and refused to actually visit her city, which explained why I couldn’t place her. She had responded to every invitation I had ever sent her with a cordial form letter citing prior obligations, but I sent her the invitations anyway.

Her scrutiny must have been satisfied, because she finally looked away, concerning herself with getting more comfortable on the seat. “My condolences. I didn’t like your mother, but I did respect her. She was...” The thought trailed off and her eyes were unfocused, thinking perhaps of some memory long ago. “No one argued with Lucille.”

I almost laughed at that, taken aback by her candor. Truer words had never been spoken. I wondered if she still respected my mother now, after everything. Many people

didn't. I decided I'd rather not know. "What brings you to Lavringraad?" I had been under the impression she didn't like to leave her city.

Her expression smoothed into humorless inscrutability and she leaned back into her seat, withdrawing from me. "I am in the city for a funeral."

I was sorry I'd asked. How inconsiderate and foolish of me. We would never age or suffer illness, but none of us were immune to war. The violence was getting worse every day, and many were certain that war was inevitable. I wanted to offer her some consolation, some form of comfort, but she was a stranger to me. My hand lifted as if to reach out to her, but only made it as far as the armrest. "I'm so sorry for your loss." The words sounded stupid and useless to me.

Regina Sophia nodded, and her perfect hair shook with the movement. "Very gracious of you." Her attention turned to the window, her spine straightening.

I had almost forgotten her human companion until I noticed him looking at me. He couldn't have been more than eighteen, and he was still sitting on the floor, though I didn't understand why. There was plenty of room beside her on the couch. I was distracted by how lovely and strange he was. His skin was pale for a human, and he was lanky in stature, wiry and painfully thin. He wasn't wearing much, just a cincher corset around his abdomen and tightly fitting pants.

He caught me studying him. A smirk tugged at one corner of his mouth. Without shifting his gaze from me, he leaned back, resting his cheek against the duchess' thigh. She reached for him, her attention still focused on the window while her nails combed across his scalp, wild corkscrew curls wrapping around her fingers like mahogany rings. He sighed and his breath shone on her skirt for a moment like condensation on glass.

“You must be visiting your brother then.”

It took me a moment to realize she was speaking to me. I touched fingers to the broach at my throat and lifted my eyes to her, trying to think of what she’d said.

“Pardon?” I tried not to look at the human again, but my gaze was drawn to him. He was still looking at me unabashedly, his eyes clear and blue. There was a shadow at the inset of his eyes that suggested fatigue. I couldn’t read his expression.

“Don’t let Aaron here bother you, he’s a pet,” she said, reaching out a thin hand to cup his chin with her palm. She momentarily dug grey lacquered fingernails into his jawline and he leaned into her hand, his eyelids lowering. “I asked if you were visiting Karl Erik.” She released the human suddenly, withdrawing back into her seat as if he were no longer there.

“Yes, and his wife.” I was disappointed that he wasn’t looking at me anymore.

My answer elicited a sound from the duchess that wasn’t quite a laugh. “Yes, from the north. She’s a pretty little thing.” The way she said it made it sound like it was almost a pity, like the beauty was wasted on my brother’s wife somehow. It did not seem like praise. I was trying to think of how to respond to that when she continued. “And you’re married to Luken.” She smiled at this, amused. “I suppose he stayed back in Vorograad.”

“He couldn’t get away on such short notice,” I explained. It sounded like I was making excuses for him. Maybe I was.

“You’ve never been to Stoljagraad, then, what a shame. You would love it there. You must come see us sometime.” The invitation sounded sincere enough, but I wasn’t sure she would ever care to entertain us as her guests.

I nodded to be polite. “Thank you, we should be delighted.”

She reached for the bag sitting on the seat beside her and pulled out a tablet, signaling the end of our conversation for now.

I was happy to return to my book, but I couldn’t help stealing glances at her “pet.” He wasn’t staring at me anymore, but he did occasionally look back at me. I pretended to be reading. Truthfully, I think I read the same sentence a hundred times on that train ride:  
*Why did they make birds so delicate and fine...*

I could hear his pulse thrumming from the other side of the aisle. My fingers curled against the pages of my book.

*Why did they make birds so delicate and fine as those sea swallows when the ocean can be so cruel?*

I was relieved when we reached Lavringraad, snapping my book shut with one hand and running the other over the lining at my collar. When the train finally slowed to a stop, I inclined my head towards Regina Sophia and smiled, “My regards to House Stoljarova,” I couldn’t help but lock eyes with him before adding, “and a peaceful eternity to you.”

“A peaceful eternity to House Voropaeva as well.” She almost returned my smile, but not quite, before turning her attention back to the window.

I stopped to thank the armed guard posted at the door before stepping off the train. He inclined his head and shoulders toward me in acknowledgment. I wondered if he found his job tedious, sitting on a train night after night, waiting for trouble. If we were lucky, there would never be any.

The air on the train had been climate controlled, and the moment I stepped out of the car, I was enveloped in tepid humidity. It was like walking into a weak sauna, and I decided it would probably rain soon.

“Ana!” I looked in the direction of the sound and saw a head of dark curls above the sea of people. He was coming towards me at a brisk pace. “Ana!” He shouted my name again and I waved, grinning like a small child.

He was a big man, a whole head taller than me, and he swept me up into his arms and spun me like we were still kids. I squealed with delight and insisted he put me down so I could get a good look at him.

He set me down on my heeled boots, then ruffled my hair before I could duck out of the way. “Karl! Cut it out!”

He sighed as I set about straightening up my mussed hair. “You look good though. Vorograad seems to agree with you.” There was something sad about the way he said that, despite his ever-present smile.

“You think? Sometimes I wonder if it’s possible to die of boredom.” I leaned back to look at him, giving his upper arm an affectionate squeeze.

He looked tired. He was wearing an elaborately embroidered jacket over his bare chest, which would have been inappropriate had he been travelling himself, his House tattoos clearly visible across his chest. The phoenix of House Lavrina burned against a large letter L on his left breast, and the unicorn of his wife’s House reared up beside an elaborate G on the right. Below that were a pair of black pants that laced up either side. His beard was always kept well-trimmed and he wore his hair loose and curly, like my own.

“Yeah, well, bored’s a lot better than dead.” It didn’t sound like a joke.

The problem with Karl’s jokes was that he was only ever half kidding. The problem remained the same when he was being serious, too. I was still watching his face when he offered me his arm. I frowned and took the offered limb, gloved fingers fixed on the velvet sleeve of his coat. He was like a tall shadow walking beside me, and I didn’t like it when he was too quiet.

“There was another duchess on the train—Regina Sophia of Stoljarova. She seems to think well of you, though I can’t imagine why,” I said.

“Did you come all the way up here to insult me? Because I don’t have to stand for this, you know. Is this yours?” We had reached the train compartment where the luggage was. Dark suitcases lined the concrete like irregular dominos, and I resisted the urge to nudge one with my foot and watch them topple.

“The ones with the pink ribbon.” I reached for the smaller of the two, pulling out the handle so I could wheel it behind me to his car. “Tabitha back at the house?”

Karl sidestepped a dark brown steamer trunk to get the other suitcase, awkwardly pulling it over the other luggage waiting to be claimed. He moved like he wasn’t tired, but I could still see it on his face. Eyes dark, mouth pressed into a straight line. He was too pale, his lips almost colorless. Was he not eating?

“So was she nice? The duchess? I always liked her, but you know me. I’m partial to other deviants.” He brought the suitcase to me, leading the way so that I could follow with my own smaller case in tow. He hadn’t answered my question.

“Yeah. She thinks it’s funny that I married Luken.” I expected some comment about my husband was to follow, but Karl let the opportunity pass.

“So no surprise train orgy then? How disappointing.”

“Nope,” I sighed. “Wrong sibling for that, I think.”

He laughed finally, but it was brief and airy.

The train station was a long, stucco building that had been painted white. There were no signs to give any indication of what it was, except the ones along the fence by the railway indicating that this was private property and it was under surveillance. Security cameras hung from every corner of the corrugated metal roof. There was a vampire inside watching, I was sure. If I knew who it was, I might have waved. But this wasn't my home anymore.

At the far end of the building was a parking lot lit up by overhead lights. Lightning streaked soundlessly across the night sky. Vorograad never had enough lightning to suit me. Karl's Audi was the only car parked along the sidewalk, in a clearly marked no parking zone.

He pulled out his keys and opened the trunk with a button.

“You going to tell me what's wrong, or am I going to have to call some enforcers to get it out of you?” I handed him one suitcase and he loaded it into the car.

He didn't answer me, just went back to the sidewalk for the second suitcase. My chest constricted and I swallowed, eyes fixed on him as he slammed the trunk shut.

I circled around to the passenger side, and we got in the car. It was quiet. An unsettling hush that I didn't like. His car smelled like leather seats and one of those air fresheners that had a name like ocean mist or morning dew.

“I think Tabby's going to leave me,” he said. His voice was soft. His face was completely sober. There was no laugh, no smile to tell me he was kidding.

My brother hadn't wanted to marry Tabitha to begin with. She was brilliant and beautiful, but she was a serious woman. Karl had never been a serious man, until our father died. That was when he fell in love with his wife, I think. I'm not sure exactly when it was, but I saw it once. When she was pregnant with their son, he'd been afraid for her. That was when I knew.

"Tabitha would never leave you." It was a fact. She wouldn't. She had loved him before he'd ever loved her. Even if her family didn't value their alliance with ours, I knew Tabitha would stay. She had stayed through the worst of it. "Look, Karl, you're an asshole."

His head hung to one side, black curls blending into the roof of the car like one shapeless mass in the dark. "Thank you. Very encouraging."

"Listen to me," I leaned forward to squeeze his forearm. "You're an asshole. But you're *her* asshole, okay? Nothing's ever going to change that. Nothing."

He looked away but made an attempt at a laugh. It sounded hollow. He took a breath, his chest rising, skin pale under his coat. "There was another attack. Last Friday. Downtown. Killed four of our men."

My arms went cold and numb. "Lilith in Eden. What the hell happened?"

"I don't know, but I'll find out," he said. His eyes were focused on the dashboard, and then he blinked and inhaled, as if waking up, and lifted the key to the ignition. The engine turned over and windshield wipers cleared yellow pollen from the glass. The console display brought up a Led Zeppelin album, but the music was paused. "Count Julian was one of them."



Count Julian had been made by someone in Tabitha's family, although I wasn't sure whom specifically. He had accompanied Tabitha to Lavringraad for her wedding to Karl Erik and never gone back. Now he never would.

"Is Tabby okay?" I was starting to understand why Karl was panicking.

"No," he answered. "She pretends, but she's..." He didn't finish the sentence, just shook his head and sighed.

The hum of the engine sounded impatient to me. A pair of sunglasses in a leather case sat in one of Karl's cup holders with two cigars, each wrapped in plastic. A pack of spearmint gum occupied the other on top of a handful of loose change.

"Okay," I said. My voice was too high, and I tried to make it sound normal.

"Alright. It's going to be okay. We're going to take care of her, and it's going to be fine."

Karl nodded, but didn't look at me.

"Let's go home, okay?" I wanted him to answer me. I wanted to hear his voice.

"Yeah," he said finally. He checked the rearview mirror before pressing down the clutch with his foot and shifting gears into reverse. He was quiet for the rest of the ride back to the house. I turned the radio on once we reached the highway, and we listened to Karl's playlist the whole way home, a medley of mostly Led Zeppelin, Metallica, and Megadeth.

The Lavrina Estate was an old Southern plantation house that had been here since my family had come to the New World in the early 1800s. My brother and I were the third generation to live within its walls, his children being the fourth.

It felt surreal to pull up in the driveway before the double story Corinthian columns and the cornice above them. Like someone else had grown up here instead of me, or maybe that was me and some other woman lived in Vorograad with my husband.

It was raining, so Karl dug an umbrella out from behind the driver's seat and walked around the front of the car to come get me. Tabitha opened the front door and stood waiting for us under the overhang. My sister-in-law had always been taller than me, especially in heels. Her eyes were puffy. She wasn't wearing any make up. Her vibrant red hair was unkempt, as if she'd taken a nap and forgotten to brush it out.

Karl escorted me under the overhang so I wouldn't get wet and I climbed the steps up to Tabitha, enveloping her in my arms. I held her tightly and she was tense at first, but then she relaxed into me. We stood there a moment before we let each other go. I held her at arm's length and smiled, "Hey, gorgeous." When you love someone, they are always beautiful to you, no matter how sad or tired they are.

When Tabitha first married Karl, I was worried that my mother would have chosen someone more like herself for my brother's wife. I expected his bride to be the picture of cold decorum and political ambition, but Tabitha wasn't like that at all. She cared more for books than politics and was kind to me, despite how much older than me she was. It was Tabitha that I called most often during my first year of marriage, both for her experienced advice and for her moral support. She was one of my closest friends.

Tabitha managed a warm smile and hooked her arm in mine as we went inside. "You don't look so bad yourself. How was the ride? Are you hungry?" She led me into the salon, where a small fire burned in the fireplace in front of a familiar seating area.

I nodded and looked around to see if they had changed anything. The ivory damask wallpaper was the same, my mother's Louis XV brocade sofas and mahogany tables were exactly where they had always been. "I could eat, but I should probably call Luken before he starts to worry. Where are the children?"

"Finishing their homework before dinner. If they know you're here, they won't finish their lessons, so I thought I'd wait to tell them—"

Her thought was interrupted by R.E.M.'s "ÜBerlin" playing in a muffled volume. It took me a moment to realize that it was my new ringtone. I opened my clutch and moved my wallet to the side in order to reach the vibrating device. Luken's name was on the screen and I slid my thumb across the plastic to answer his call. "I was just telling Tabitha that I ought to call you." I imagined him sitting in his study, thumbing through paperwork with the phone to his ear.

"I wanted to make sure you got in all right." His voice was quiet and tired.

Tabitha touched fingertips to my arm to let me know she was excusing herself before leaving me to my conversation.

"Yes, I'm fine. I just got to the house. How did your meeting go?" I could hear music playing softly in the background, I thought maybe it was Puccini but I couldn't be sure.

"Very well. I met with Pashkova's delegation. They seemed very amenable to my proposal. We shared a drink and discussed the possibility of keeping ambassadors in order to facilitate future communications and maintain goodwill between the families. They also seemed open to limiting arms and starting some trade." He spoke slowly, as if he were reading through his documents in between sentences.

I nodded, then realized he couldn't see me. "Well, that's very good then. I'll tell Karl that you're making progress. Did you hear there was an attack here last week? There were deaths."

There was a long pause before he responded. "I'm aware tensions have been higher. Your brother told me things were under control, otherwise I wouldn't have let you go to Lavringraad. Do you wish to come home?"

"No, no, of course not. I'm sure Karl has everything well in hand. I just think maybe you ought to send some men to him, just to make up for some of his losses. You know he's taking the brunt of the violence. I just want to make sure he has everything he needs."

"I cannot negotiate for peace and then send soldiers north, Anaïs. The deed would belie my words. The families have no trust built. I need to show Pashkova that Vorograad truly wishes to deescalate the situation." His tone suggested a certain level of patience with me, as if I were being unreasonable, as if I had no understanding of the situation or how it ought to be handled.

"I understand that you don't want to antagonize anyone, but Karl is burying good people here, and sending him more soldiers could help to turn the tide and keep Lavringraad safe until your negotiations are complete and peace is a reality." Not that I was certain that would ever be the case. I moved to sit on one of the sofas, trying to think how I could make the immediacy more real to him, how I could make him see that he had the chance to save lives here.

I heard him sigh into the receiver, and I could picture him touching his thumb and forefinger to his brow, eyes closed. "It's out of the question. Sending soldiers would

jeopardize everything we've been working so hard for. If he needs blood, I can have a shipment there by tomorrow. If he needs money, you need only suggest an amount. But I cannot send your brother soldiers, my love."

I knew the conversation was over. When he addressed me with overly sweet diminutives, I knew the argument was lost. I sat listening to the fire crackle for a moment before speaking. The population density was rich enough in Lavringraad that blood was never a problem. Often he even sent blood to Tabitha's family in Galiyegraad in case there was a shortage. Karl's business investments had been doing well for years, and my husband knew it. Although, now that he was sustaining so many losses, I wasn't as sure. "That won't be necessary." My voice was quiet and weary.

"Please try to understand our position here. I am working for the greater good. When we all are able to lay down arms, you will be grateful that I am so stubborn." The thought cheered him, and his voice was brighter for a moment.

"Of course. I have to go now, I don't want to hold up everyone's supper." There was no one waiting on me, but I didn't want to keep arguing with him.

"Very well. I look forward to your return. Do be careful."

"I will. Have a pleasant sleep."

"You as well."

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After dinner, there was an exchange of gifts I had brought with me. A first edition autobiography of Nikola Tesla for Tabitha, and an antique humidior for Karl Erik.

“The dealer who sold that to me said that it used to belong to Fidel Castro and it dates back to the nineteenth century. He found it at some estate sale,” I said.

Karl made a face at me, as though it couldn’t possibly have been true and clearly this salesman had taken his poor sister for a ride. He opened the lid with both hands and lifted one of the cigars to his nose, exchanging his expression of skepticism for one of surprise. “How did you even get this into the country?”

I shrugged, “Luken knows a guy.”

For Cecelia, my niece and Tabitha’s oldest, I brought a wooden painter’s set, filled with oil paints, mediums, and brushes. My nephew, Donovan, was only six. I brought him a set of three diecast car replicas, an Austin Healy, GM, and a Triumph. The children thanked me formally for their host gifts, then invited me to play cards. We played three rounds of Gin Rummy and I let them win. Soon enough the sun would be rising and Tabitha took them to get ready for bed. Karl excused himself to make a few business calls while it was still dark, and I made my way to my childhood bedroom.

Ingeborg, a vampire I had known all my life, knocked on the door and offered to help me out of my cincher and overcoat. She was old enough that she had been my father’s maid, and his mother’s before that, back in Sweden. My father had told me once that she was only forty two when she’d been made a vampire, but she looked much older than that to me. People had aged differently that many generations ago. She had learned perfect English and Russian when my father married my mother, and she loved Erik and I like her own children, just as she had loved my father.

“You don’t come visit enough.” Her fingers were deft and moved quickly. She pulled the cincher up over my head. “Your brother needs you.”

I sat on the Beauvoir chair by the vanity to untie my boots and pull off my lace hose. “I know. Luken makes such a fuss. He worries too much. I feel like a bad wife if I leave. But I’m a bad sister if I stay.” I pulled one boot off and handed it to Ingeborg, then reached for the buckle on the other.

“Your father didn’t live his life in fear, and he wouldn’t want you to, either.” She held her hand out for the other boot.

I placed it in her hand and hooked my thumb under the top of one stocking. “Did he have a hard time when he first came here? With mother, I mean.”

She considered the question for a moment, then nodded. “Of course. Your mother liked everything just so. There is an adjustment period always.”

I pulled one stocking down my leg idly, trying to imagine what it would have been like to come here from another country. It had to have been much harder than moving to Vorograad. “How long did the adjustment period last?”

Ingeborg was already opening my luggage to find a nightgown, but she paused to answer me. “*Sōtnos*, your husband looks at you like your mother looked at your father. You are going to be just fine. I promise you.” She motioned for me to continue undressing.

I pulled off one stocking and then the other and folded them over the back of the chair. She handed me a nightgown and I pulled it over my head while she began to close and bolt the shutters on the windows. My mother had had them painted with a mural of the night sky when I was a small child, and the scene was familiar and homey. I went to the opposite end of the windows to help her, and we met in the middle.

She touched fingertips to my shoulders like she used to when I was a child. “If you are ever unsure, you just remember: not all who wear trousers are men.”

I laughed and bent to kiss her cheeks. “Thank you.”

Ingeborg looked at me for a moment, and I wondered if she thought I looked like my mother, too. She straightened my nightgown’s strap and patted my cheek. “Welcome home.”

“I’ll see you at sunset.” I watched her leave, closing the door gently behind her. I could feel the night slipping away outside, dawn creeping up on us like a burglar.

I also felt the unsettling but familiar absence of life as, one by one, the vampires that lived in the house with us died for that early morning light, until all that was left was myself and my brother’s family, safe in their rooms. I took the pins out of my hair and shook my curls out, laying each pin gently on the vanity before climbing onto my bed. I drew the thick brocade curtains around myself, poster to poster until they latched together. Then, slipping under the covers in the complete darkness, I slept.

I dreamt I was back on the train with Duchess Stoljarova. But instead of heading for Lavringraad, we were hurtling at full speed across the surface of the sun. It was so bright it hurt my eyes, and outside the windows were hellish flames, but somehow I was unafraid. I was staring at the boy, sat on the floor under collar and leash. He stared back at me. And then, while we burned through what felt like eternity, he smiled at me. He grinned like he knew something I didn’t. His smile was brighter than the sun, and he was all I could see.



*Chapter Two*

The next evening I set about unpacking and getting dressed before finding Tabitha. It wasn't difficult, Karl kept the belongings I had left behind mostly untouched, aside from cleaning them. He was adamant that I would always have a home here.

My bed still sat centered on the far wall, framed by pale blue wallpaper that featured the silhouette of various plants and birds. The carved wooden nightstand matched the vanity on the far wall, the cherry stained a reddish hue. Brushes and powders were still situated on them as though I had been gone four days rather than four years. Porcelain urn table lamp, ormolu clock, phone charger, notepad and pen. My vanity still had photos of Karl and I as teenagers tucked into the edge of the frame. A photo booth strip of us at the county fair, dressed in t-shirts and laughing. A portrait of my parents on their wedding day, their clothing Victorian, expressions solemn but their eyes happy. There was a set of tortoiseshell brushes, nearly identical to the ones in my suitcase, laid out for me. Tabitha must have bought me an extra set so that I wouldn't have to pack as much. The earrings I'd worn on the train lay side by side next to them.

In the closet, every blouse, corset, and skirt I hadn't taken to Vorograad hung exactly where they had been the day I left. My suitcase lay open on a stand for me, and I selected a set of plainly strapped pants, a blue blouse and bustier. There was no need to impress family. I could feel Tabitha's presence nearby, just beyond the bedrooms. I slipped on my boots and walked out into the hallway towards her.

She was in the playroom. I could tell the children had been with her earlier, as various dolls and stuffed animals lay strewn about the beige carpeting. Plush cartoon characters keeping one another company near an assortment of action figures. Crayon

drawings were pinned with brightly colored thumbtacks to the walls around my mother's picture frame molding. Tabitha stood unmoving by a green chalk board, a plastic dinosaur in one hand as if she couldn't remember what she had been doing. Her eyes were glassy and unfocused.

"Are you okay?" My voice was soft, I didn't want to startle her.

Tabitha turned to me, eyebrows raised. "Hm? Oh, I'm fine." She leaned over to straighten the blocks on the card table, arranging them in an orderly fashion on the painted wood surface next to a tin of assorted crayons. "Honestly? No. I don't... I don't know how to feel. I don't know how to be."

"Julian was a good man. Loyal. He served where he was needed most. That kind of sacrifice is rare, and it's awful that we lost someone so good, but at least he died doing what he came here to do. Keeping us all safe." It had to help her to know that this was what he'd dedicated himself to. Everything now was for a greater good.

Tabitha collapsed into a child-sized chair, her hands on her face. "You don't understand! Ana, please!" Her words were muffled behind her palms, and then were lost altogether in what I assumed were repressed sobs. Her shoulders heaved in silence.

I didn't know what to say. I finally went to her, cradling her shoulders against my waist. She turned her face into my hip and cried for several moments before she could compose herself enough to speak.

"Julian came to House Lavrina because he wouldn't abandon his Duchess. He loved me, Ana. He loved me. He loved me..." She trailed off.

“Oh, Tabby...” I bent over to envelope her thin frame in my arms. I wanted to ask her more, but I couldn’t bring myself to say anything more than comforting sounds and apologies.

“Please, I don’t want to seem ungrateful. You and Karl have been so kind to me and I love you both! You know that right?” Pink-tinted tears spilled down her round cheeks.

“Of course, of course.”

“You have your own life in Vorograad, and I’m so happy for you! And Karl works so hard, providing for this family and for his House and I try to throw myself in my own work...” She sniffled and wiped the tears from her face. Then she spoke again, quieter now, “When Karl talks to me about his work, I feel so honored that he wants to share his daily life with me. I smile and I listen, but I can feel my eyes glazing over. I have no interest in clients and investors or in production or stock. I know he sees it, because I see it when I talk to him about the pressure created by virtual particles on surrounding components. I told him a joke about Heisenberg last week and he looked at me for a full thirty seconds before realizing he was supposed to laugh.” She shook her head thinking about it. I couldn’t really blame my brother for not understanding Tabitha’s jokes. She had doctoral degrees in both physics and applied mathematics and considered biochemistry to be a hobby. She had published several books on her theorems and often spent nights at a time in her office, writing on her glass boards and muttering to herself. Her genius was far beyond me. I was lucky I remembered how to do long division.

I could relate to her plight more than I wanted to admit, but I wasn’t sure I should say so. I understood how difficult it was for Tabitha and Karl to relate to one another.

Tabitha's mind was more concerned with the things we couldn't see than the things we could. She knew more about particles than politics and found nuclear fission more interesting than high fashion.

She attempted a smile and took a deep, shaky breath. "Julian always laughed at my jokes. When I told him I was worried about being a mother, I was afraid I would be bad at it, he said to me 'fears have no mass, so they don't matter' and I laughed so hard I forgot I was afraid. He made me feel like I was... seen. And even though he knew I was a married woman, and that he could never be with me, he gave up his status in Galiyegraad to follow me here. So he could be close to me. He told me I was the proton to his electron, and even if he couldn't attach to me, he would stay in my orbit. I never even kissed him. The closest he got was a hug, the touch of my hand. I... I could never have betrayed my husband. I love Karl."

We stayed like that for a long while, Tabitha leaning into me while I stood bent over her, awkwardly embracing her shoulders and combing my fingers through her hair. A small mountain of plush toys sat in the corner next to a dollhouse large enough that my niece could play inside it. Pieces of colored chalk were scattered on the floor below the chalkboard mounted on the far wall. A rocking horse that had belonged to Karl and me stood guard over a small bookcase full of art supplies. I thought how brave Tabitha had been to come here and get married, to start a life with a virtual stranger and to have his children.

"I'm terrified of having kids, too," I admitted.

Tabitha laughed, a short, surprised sound. She sniffled and rubbed her eye with the back of her hand. "Good. It doesn't seem like it should be a good thing, but being

scared means you care, and caring is what makes you a good parent. Mostly. I read every book I could get my hands on about parenting and child development, because I didn't know the first thing." She leaned her head back on my hip. "They're the best thing I've ever done with my life. They're worth it."

"I have this strange, irrational fear that it will kill me." It was the first time I said it out loud. "I mean, I'm also scared of being a bad mother, or of disappointing Luken. But sometimes I dream that I die pregnant. I'm not scared in the dream though. I only get scared when I wake up."

Tabitha's brow furrowed and she pressed her lips together. It was similar to the expression she had when her equations made no sense. "You know that won't happen, though, right? None of those things would ever happen. You come from a strong bloodline. And I don't think Luken could ever be disappointed by you. Honestly, I'm a little jealous of how he looks at you. Must be all that curly hair!"

"Must be." I smiled. "We should probably get dressed. I don't think Karl would be too happy if his guests of honor didn't show up."

She was right. Our families were descended from the first vampires, thousands of years ago. It seemed so far away from Lavringraad, but those bloodlines were the basis of our station. Royals were the only species that could reproduce. Many vampires died trying to sustain another life in utero, or simply miscarried. Neither my mother nor Tabitha had experienced such trouble. They'd both provided not just one heir, but two.

Tabitha nodded and took a deep breath before standing. "Let's go get prettied up." She dramatically offered me her arm and I made show of taking it. We walked out of the playroom together, towards the bedrooms, arm in arm.

People underestimated Tabitha because she lacked political ambition, but she was imposing in her own right. I had no doubt that if their home were overrun with vigilantes, she and Karl would have what it took to fight them. That was the point, wasn't it? To be strong enough, capable enough to keep a city safe. To keep our people safe. Immortality was a difficult task.

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I had brought several formal gowns with me from Vorograad, but for tonight's occasion I selected a shiny, off-the-shoulder gown in black. The bodice, corset, overskirt and bustle were all made of PVC so that the dress shined like water. The underskirt was layered black organza, more subtle than the PVC but still an iridescent fabric that shined an almost purple color under certain lighting.

Making an appearance in society was exactly as it sounded, an appearance. A ball was festive but above all else a spectacle meant to behold. Dressing for such an occasion held a political obligation. You weren't just dressing for a night out, you were representing your House and your family, and the appearance must indicate strength and wealth.

I pinned my hair up with a feathered fascinator while Ingeborg helped Tabitha into her dress. Tabitha had chosen a champagne polyvinyl sheath gown with a transparent overskirt framing her on either side. The crystalline silhouette was festooned with understated embroidery around the edges. It almost reminded me of a lowered peacock's tail – if peacock tails were made of glass.

Before leaving to find my brother, we looked each other over once. Tabitha smoothed the organza at my décolleté, and I darkened the line of black eye shadow she had hurriedly painted on.

Karl, we found, was also impeccably dressed. He wore a charcoal blazer with black leather sleeves over a lighter grey vest, his buttons were black and shiny like my dress. His tie was striped black and white and his tan-collared shirt was a small brown plaid. My brother favored black leather pants with almost any outfit. He bowed to us, holding his homburg on his head with one hand and extending the other.

“You look dashing, but I don’t think our mother would approve.” I loved his sense of style and rebelliousness but our late mother hadn’t approved of much of his choices in that area while she was alive. Most of his adolescent years had been spent changing clothing when our mother refused to “let him in society looking like that.”

“Should we sneak out the window, then? Just for old times’ sake?” Karl offered an arm to each of us and escorted us towards the front hall.

“I’m quite fine with using the door.”

“Are you sure? Might be a thrill.” He waggled eyebrows at us as he held the doors open to the anteroom and then the grand entrance.

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My brother had rented a grand hall from one of the most prestigious establishments in the Lavringraad for the occasion. When we entered other people were just beginning to arrive, and Karl took the opportunity to make sure all of his

arrangements were followed to the letter. The space was large and papered in lavish golden damask, the floors were marble and exquisite.

There was a large bar area in the back that featured an overly complex fountain of blood with waiters serving golden rimmed glass flutes of the refreshment. It was mostly for show, as it required anticoagulants to keep the blood running. It was safe to drink but likely the actual blood being served was freshly donated behind the bar and not from the fountain itself. All the same, Karl made sure it was kept at an appropriately warm temperature.

On either side of the bar a double ended staircase led up to a mezzanine where an eclectic band of both symphonic and electronic instruments was assembled, warming up before their first set. The music was industrial orchestral, blending traditional ballroom music with modern synthetic sound. Small seating areas were placed on the outskirts of the room, for those who wanted to rest or socialize.

Slowly at first, but then all at once, guests began to arrive. Pastels were in fashion, and soon the dance floor was filled with pale pinks, peaches, buttercup yellows, crème de menthe, and lilac.

The Duchess Regina Sophia made a grand entrance in the colors of House Stoljarova, her dress was a deep midnight-blue velvet, scattered with clusters of tiny crystals like stars in the night sky. Thick PVC straps wrapped around her neck and décolleté like a harness, attaching underneath the dress itself, a perfect match for the dark blue color.



Her “pet” was there at her side, no longer on a leash but wearing a matching harness underneath his blue velvet jacket. His buttons shined like her crystal accents, his pants were white like the flowers in her hair. He looked so terribly young.

They danced the first waltz together, and I tried not to watch them, instead focusing on my brother and his wife whirling across the dance floor.

“Grand Duchess Anais Lavrina Voropaeva, you look more beautiful every night.” I knew that voice before I looked to see its source. My brother had asked Jean Pierre to be the Master of Ceremony for his ball, and he would never have left me without partner for the first waltz.

My face lit up at his familiar presence, those warm, dark eyes and his dreadlocks tied back at the nape of his neck. His suit was dark and formal, the coat tails a bit old fashioned for my taste, but the fabric was well cut and fit him perfectly. “How handsome you look!”

Jean Pierre had taught me how to dance as an awkward child. My grace, posture and confidence I owed to him, and so much more. As we whirled along the dance floor, I wondered how long it had been since I’d seen him. My wedding, perhaps. His suit was brighter then.

His eyes were focused on a point of balance, like he’d taught me. It kept dancers from getting dizzy as they whirled about. But he must have seen my face. “What are you thinking about so thoroughly, *ma pupuce*?”

I wasn’t sure how to answer right away, letting the music lead our steps. “I am so lucky. I have so many people who care for me. So many people I love.”

He hummed an acknowledgement, eyes focused on me before returning to his point of balance again. It made me think he understood, that brief moment as we turned, that he knew what it was to not understand your own thoughts.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a flash of midnight blue and my gaze was drawn to it, but then Jean Pierre spun me and I lost it. I looked back over my shoulder for them, for another glimpse of that blue, but they were gone, perhaps on the other side of the floor.

“Is everything all right?” Jean Pierre’s voice brought me back to myself and I smiled at him. He looked at me as though he saw something there that troubled him. I hadn’t meant to upset him, to make him feel that I wasn’t fully engaged.

“Yes, perfectly.” It was hard to focus on him, I felt suddenly very warm.

The waltz lasted far too long. I was grateful to excuse myself afterward and finally sit on one of the camel-backed sofas placed on the side of the room. I leaned against pastel toile and white painted filigree. Small sets of furniture like standalone sitting rooms were situated in front of fireplaces back to back on either side of the dance floor. They afforded a view of the festivities and also a place to relax and have a conversation. I sat where there was no one sitting. I felt a bit sickly, like I had drank bad blood. Or maybe I had gone too long without a drink. I couldn’t decide.

Distantly, I heard a pulse. Not the dull, slow throbbing of a dead heart pushing stolen blood through cold veins, but the lively exuberance of human vitality. It had to be him, I knew. There weren’t many humans here. He was getting closer to me, his heartbeats got louder and louder until they filled my head. I swallowed and took a deep breath.

“Can I ask you a serious question?” He sat down in the empty chair closest to me, so close I could have touched my arm to his as we pretended to watch the spectacle of the dance floor. His manner was casual, he did not face me.

“Do you mean me?” I asked. His pulse was a normal volume now. I blinked and tried to hear what he had said to me, I felt a bit ridiculous sitting next to this strange human. He smelled like youth and sweat and some expensive cologne, no doubt a gift from his duchess. I wanted to look at him, but somehow that felt improper, as if this stranger were naked in the chair beside mine. I kept my eyes forward, focused on the many partners moving in time to the music.

“No, no. I just talk to myself like that. It’s only crazy if you answer.” He snuck a glance at me out of the corner of his eye.

I blinked several times, unsure of how to respond to that. Or even if I should. He could very well be mentally unbalanced, a lot of the people in and around the monarchy were. I thought briefly of my mother, whom so many people had spoken of as such. When she died it only seemed to confirm their merciless opinions.

“I was kidding.” He turned his head now, addressing me more directly. His eyes were dark with lack of sleep and he slouched in his seat.

“What’s your question?” I was facing him now, too.

“Well it’s too late now, I totally forgot what I was going to ask you.” He shook his head dismissively and shifted back to the dance floor.

“Perhaps you should ask yourself. But then you wouldn’t get an answer unless you’re crazy,” I suggested.

“That’s my secret. I’m fuckin’ nuts.” He sighed as if resigned to this truth.

“I beg your pardon!” I didn’t mean to sound judgmental, but I heard it come out that way.

He made a sound against the roof of his mouth and looked at me again. “Sorry about that. I didn’t mean to offend your delicate sensibilities.” He widened his eyes at me a bit, punctuating the latter sentence and emphasizing his sarcasm.

“You’re mocking me.”

“A bit, yeah.” A lopsided grin tugged at one corner of his mouth and made him look arrogant; it also made my hands ball into fists in my lap. “So why are you sitting over here all alone, looking bored?”

“I wasn’t feeling well, I wanted to sit down.” That was true, at least.

His brow furrowed and he seemed to focus more directly on me. “Are you alright, do you need blood?”

I shook my head, “I’m sure I’m fine. Just too much dancing, I think.”

He was experienced enough to know that vampires, especially royals, do not fatigue easily, nor do they experience sickness. I saw alarm, curiosity, and some other emotion I could not identify on his face for a moment before he smiled again and looked back out at the dancers like so many brightly colored fish moving in time with the music. This was a different smile than before, a masking expression meant to hide what he did not want seen. Anyone in politics knew that smile. “Maybe you just need some fresh air,” he suggested.

“Won’t you be missed?” I asked, indicating his duchess on the far side of the dance floor.

His eyes followed mine and he regarded his mistress momentarily before answering me. “She won’t even notice I’m gone. She doesn’t care.”

“Well, then. Lead the way.” I offered him my arm, which he took after a second of slight confusion, and we stood in unison before making our way towards a side door. Outside the door was a long veranda decorated with twinkle lights that led to a terrace overlooking the city. We weren’t that high up, but the view was stunning nonetheless. Most of the taller buildings were square and mirrored, an attempt at deflecting the strength of the sun. These were accented with concrete structures, two of which were hotels. The mirrored buildings were mostly banks, but I could never remember which was which without seeing their names. One of them had a neon roof. The tall, thin building beyond them was a broadcasting company. Their logo was situated atop several levels of metal scaffolding, and its colors lit up the night sky. Another building had their logo as well, something spelled out in red. Maybe another hotel.

We walked across the stone tiles to the rail, arm in arm. The water looked like a mirror itself from here, reflecting the building shapes back to us.

He led me slowly, as if I were fragile and delicate, not immortal. We moved in measured, even steps. “Are you okay?”

I nodded, although I felt strangely in turmoil. Anxiety coupled with a strange sense of surrealism gripped my mind. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Better. A cool breeze drew my curls over my shoulders from where Tabitha had pinned them to my head earlier. It was quieter out here than in the ball, the muted sounds of the city soothed me. Traffic, the occasional horn or siren. “Are you sure the Duchess will not be looking for you?”

He shook his head as he looked out over the concrete structures and the streets below. "I'm... an amusement." He pronounced the word languidly, almost resentfully but not quite. "What about you? Don't you have someone looking for you?" He turned the question back on me and looked up.

"My brother is too busy distracting his wife, and my friends..." I trailed off. The pressure to conceive was worse than the social obligation to recite my husband's latest political champion. It pained me that I was failing their expectation, but worse than that it terrified me that I had no desire to complete my duty. "I fear I am a disappointment to them," I admitted.

"I have a hard time believing that, and I know a little something about disappointing people." He raised his eyebrows at me, then smiled that guarded smile again. "We can talk about something else if you want."

"How did you meet the Duchess Stoljarova?" I turned to look at him, leaning against the concrete half wall. A tendril of hair fell across his forehead and he brushed it out of his eyes absently. The small lights strung overhead from one end of the veranda to the other gave his pale skin a yellow hue and reflected on strands of his hair like highlights of molten gold.

He let out a small breath of air that was halfway between a laugh and a sigh. "Ah, well that's kind of a long story, but I'll tell you if you really want to know."

"I do." I gave a polite smile and turned towards him. The sky was gray behind him, lit up by the city below.

He licked his lips and studied my face, like he wasn't sure I was telling the truth, or maybe I didn't know any better. "Okay. When I was seventeen, I ran away from home.

I didn't wanna be there anymore, so I just left, you know? Took off one night. I kind of lived in the middle of nowhere so I hitched around for a while and I ended up at a bus station where I met this guy who said he knew a place where I could stay a while free of charge, and they had a good connection."

"Connection?" I was out of my depth.

"Drugs. Pills mostly, but there was harder stuff if you wanted it." His gaze was focused on the slow moving lights of cars in the distance.

"Oh, I see." My brother had gone through a phase where he desperately tried to escape the grooming and endless political maneuverings that characterized our youth through large amounts of cocaine, but his blood was too strong. He would metabolize it within an hour or two and the effects wouldn't last. It was an endless disappointment to him. I was glad, I didn't like the way he was when under the influence, however temporary, and it had made our pre-dawn forays into the city more dangerous and unpredictable.

"Anyways, I went with him and it turned out he was right. All it cost me was a little blood and I had it made." He shrugged. Either this was normal for him, or he was trying to impress me.

"You mean, a blood den?" I tried to keep the incredulity out of my voice but I was mostly unsuccessful. I hoped I didn't sound judgmental.

"I guess that's what you call it. Most of the people there don't ask questions. Anyways, one night Regina Sophia came in, and I guess she liked me." He shrugged again, as if his story were nothing new or special. As if he weren't really sure.

The informal way that he referred to the duchess shocked me as much as his assertion of how he'd come to know her. "Lilith in Eden," I said, looking back over the city. It seemed so calm out there, the water reflecting distorted lights back to us, cars moving slowly along straight lines. I couldn't imagine it—him so young and lovely in what I pictured to be a place of filth and ill repute. Stained floors and bathrooms without stalls. The smell of cigarettes, alcohol, and vomit. What the hell was Regina Sophia doing there? She certainly could afford better blood. "My husband says the duchess is a deviant."

"Your husband, huh?" He turned and regarded me with that unreadable expression.

"He says she has forsaken her obligations as a duchess and prefers her nightclub and her wild sex parties over her civic duty. He says her tribunals are a sham." I suppressed a smile, "He gets terribly upset about it." Luken became indignant about things that were mostly irrelevant to his own existence. Radio announcers getting Wagner's date of death wrong. The trains running late in Vorograad (even when we weren't using them). The number of vampires moving cities per calendar year.

"And where is your husband now?" He was leaning against the wall too, now, his clear blue eyes searching my face.

I sighed. "At home. In Vorograad. Probably in his study, reading or writing some very important political document negotiating something or other." I imagined him there, bent over his desk, deep in thought, his brow knit in concentration. Papers piled in neat stacks. His father's pen in his hand as he read.



“Well that’s kind of shitty of him. If I had a gorgeous wife like you, I would never leave her sitting alone at some party.”

I let out a laugh, “No, it’s not like that. Luken is very dedicated to his work, and I get homesick. I like to visit with my brother and he gets his quiet and everybody is happy.” That wasn’t true. He hated it when I left. I didn’t know why I had lied.

“Hey man, that’s fine, whatever floats his boat. I’m just saying if it were me, it’d be a different story.” He seemed amused by this, his crooked smile was back.

I shook my head. “You said you ran away from home. Where’s home for you?”

“Louisiana.” He looked out towards the water and I wondered what he was looking at.

I had never been to Louisiana, but I imagined the landscape wasn’t much different from here. Just as hot, humid, and swampy. “I have cousins there.” I had never met them, but I knew they were there. I knew the older members of my mother’s family were in what was now called Belarus, I think. As a child I had imagined their ancient castles rising out of the mists of primeval forests, lit up in the night like beacons. The new generation of vampires in America were only a pale reflection of our predecessors. I knew this because my mother had told me, because it was what all vampires knew. My brother and I were the last vestiges of an old and powerful line of royals. We had read about them in textbooks.

He didn’t acknowledge my comment. Maybe I’d reminded him of something, too, or maybe he felt it was too personal to discuss with a near stranger. “Taking that Greyhound to Ft. Lauderdale was the best thing I ever did.”

“You mean Stoljagraad.” I corrected him, my tone terse. It was rude to use human words in front of a vampire, especially a royal. The insult wasn’t to my city or my brother’s, but I still took offense.

He inhaled sharply and stood a bit straighter, resting less of his weight on the ledge. “Sorry. I forget.” He cast a sidelong look at me before turning around and leaning back on his elbows. “Don’t you think it’s a bit unnecessary to have two names for every city?”

I straightened my back and squared my shoulders. “These cities would not exist if it weren’t for my people. Early settlers wouldn’t have made it in these swamps if it weren’t for us. It was our money, our resources, our political clout that shaped the New World. They’re not *your* cities. They’re *our* cities. Humans just live in them.”

He pressed his lips together, giving the barest effort to repress his amusement. “If they’re your cities, then why don’t we call them by your words?”

I turned to face him. I wasn’t going to let him goad me into anger. “Because they are not human words. We don’t care what humans call our cities because we didn’t build them for humans.” I wondered what Regina Sophia had told him about our monarchy, about her responsibilities. Perhaps my husband was right, and she eschewed her position and her people in favor of whatever humans preferred to do with their time.

“Right. We just live in them.”

“Precisely.” I watched the interior of the ballroom through a line of tall windows. The distant movement of people milling around the dance floor and the musicians playing for them was reassuring. I looked for my brother among the shapes that I could

see, but I couldn't find him. Maybe he was dancing with Tabitha. I hoped they were happier than I'd left them.

"Fair enough."

The band finished their set and music stopped drifting into the night. We had been gone for a while. It was my brother's party, and I was supposed to be cheering up his grieving wife. I should have done more to reassure Karl that things were going to be okay. "We should go back."

"If you want to." He was still leaning back against the wall, slouching in his tailored blue jacket. The color looked almost green in the yellow light.

"We can't stay out here all night." I attempted a smile, but didn't manage very well.

"Do you always do what you're supposed to do?" He lifted his chin, eyebrows slightly drawn together. The gesture brought my gaze to his neck for a moment stomach tightened. I looked away.

"I'm not sure what you mean by that." The poured concrete floor had been smoothed out by some kind of grooved tool that left striated designs in the surface. They looked like sand patterns in a Japanese rock garden.

"I'm just saying, if you don't want to go back in, we don't have to go back in."

I shook my head. "I should get something to eat."

I heard him move, saw him step towards me in my periphery. When I looked up, he was taking his jacket off. There were puncture wounds in various stages of healing at the base of his neck, on his chest, and the inset of his elbow. When he turned towards me, I saw another set on his abdomen and a fifth half hidden underneath the metallic vinyl

straps of his harness. There were other marks, too. Hickeys here and there as well as some bruising and discoloration from what I assumed was some kind of thick cord, perhaps rope.

“What are you doing?” My voice sounded unsteady.

“You said you were hungry.” He folded the jacket and draped it carefully over the half wall. He was so thin and pale, his skin seemed almost translucent in some places; I could see the blue lines of his tracing patterns through his arms. I had the horrible impulse to reach out and touch him.

I drew breath to speak, and I could smell his cologne again. Sandalwood and soap. I couldn’t breathe. “You don’t have to do that.” My words came out sharper than I had meant them, but I didn’t care.

He smiled and it was that crooked, self-amused expression that I was starting to think of as familiar. “I’m not like you, duchess. I do what I want.”

I could see his pulse beside his throat, just above the strap over his shoulder. It was a steady, pale flutter, like something small trapped beneath the surface. I swallowed and my fingers wrapped around the fabric of my dress.

Somewhere down on the street, a car honked and someone gave a shout.

“Take me back inside, please.” I licked my lips and swallowed again.

It didn’t seem like he’d heard me at first. I thought I might have to repeat myself, but then he gave a nod and reached for his jacket. He slipped the garment on casually, studying my face as if he weren’t sure of me anymore. He offered me his arm and I hesitated before taking it. I shouldn’t touch him. I wanted to, so I shouldn’t. My fingers barely touched the fabric.

The band was playing a waltz now, and I heard my brother laughing before I saw him. He was standing with a flute of blood over by one of the fireplaces.

“Thank you for taking the air with me.” I spared a glance at my companion and he seemed younger than he had moments ago.

“Anytime, duchess.”

I released his arm and headed towards Karl, ignoring the feeling that the human was still standing where I had left him. He was there, and I was walking away.

“Ana, where have you been? I was just telling the joke about the sultan.” Karl handed me his glass and I took a sip. The blood was too thick and tasted of chemicals.

I turned to look back where the human had been standing, but he was gone.

*Chapter Three*

It was late when we got back. The sky was still dark, made even darker by the perpetual storm clouds that drowned out the starlight and obscured the moon. I estimated that we had maybe three more hours until sunrise.

Tabitha sat next to me in the car, her head resting on my shoulder. I laced my fingers in hers and watched Karl checking his phone, typing out messages with his thumbs until the limousine came to a stop and Earnest opened the door to let us out. Tabitha gave my hand a squeeze before moving to get out. I slid to the end of the seat to follow her, but paused when I felt Karl's hand on my arm.

His mouth was set in a grim line and he looked out the window, motioning with a jut of his head for me to follow his gaze. There was a car parked to the side of the drive that I hadn't noticed when we pulled in. It was a green four-door pick-up truck, but I couldn't see what make from this angle.

"Who is that?" I didn't really expect Karl to answer.

The driver's door opened and a human emerged from the truck. I could feel his life energy pulsing out in the darkness. As he got closer, I could see his skin was a darker brown color and his hair was cut very short to his head. I was studying his jacket when Karl moved to get out of the limousine to meet him. I followed.

We stood outside the car watching him cross the driveway in our formal wear. I looked to Karl and back to the human. The steady chirp of crickets and hum of cicadas seemed louder than usual. I heard croaking, too, but I couldn't be sure if it was frogs or gators.

“Ana, this is Muhammad Nagi. He goes places I can’t go and sees things for me that I can’t see.” I knew Karl had daytime help. Most vampires did, royal or not. It was impossible to conduct business in the human world without someone who could act between the hours of nine to five. I was more surprised that I’d never met him before.

“Pleasure to meet you, Mr. Nagi.” I inclined my head in respect.

“Wish it were under better circumstances.” He paused to look at my ball gown and Karl’s suit. “Guess you weren’t kidding about the party.”

“You said you had something for me.” Karl Erik had never been a patient man, and the way Muhammad seemed to straighten up in reaction to his tone almost made me smile.

“I do.” The human produced a plastic bag from the inside of his coat pocket. Inside was a single bullet casing. He handed the bag to Karl. “I found this on the street outside the warehouse. It was a real lucky break, these guys were pros. They policed all their other brass. I think it was just dumb luck that they missed one. I doubt ballistics will tell you anything you don’t already know, but it’s worth a look.”

Karl nodded. “I’ll have them take a look at it. You said you found something else.”

“Yeah. I think I figured out where the attack came from. I think they were staking us out from a parking garage down the street. I was going to take a team of your guys and check it out, but you said not to make a move without your say.” He seemed to trail off, as if he were waiting for Karl to give the word and he’d be off.

Karl looked at the bullet casing. “No. No team. I want to see for myself what these men were doing. Don’t tell anyone about this. Not even my wife. Not until I know what’s going on. Am I understood?”

The human nodded. “I’ll be in the car.” He looked to me for a moment before turning back to where he’d been when we pulled up to the house. I thought more of him for saying nothing about calling the police. He seemed astute and loyal.

When Muhammad was out of earshot, Karl turned to me. “I want you to come with me.”

“Why?” I almost laughed at the notion, but his face was utterly serious.

“Because either you or your husband doesn’t understand what we’re dealing with here, and I think it’s time you saw for yourself.” His tone was softer now than it had been when he’d been speaking to Muhammad.

I opened my mouth to argue with him, then closed it and nodded. He wasn’t wrong. I wasn’t entirely sure what was going on, and every time I thought I had a handle on things, Luken made me feel as if I were wading into the deep end of murky waters that I could never hope to navigate. And even if I came out of this adventure no more clear on what was happening, I wanted Karl to know he could rely on me, as I relied on him. “I’ll need to borrow clothes from Tabitha.”

Karl nodded. “Ask Ingeborg.” He led the way up the driveway and into the house, where Ingeborg was already waiting for me on the steps. Karl must have texted her.

It took more time to get out of my gown than it did to get dressed again. Ingeborg had gotten me an old pair of jeans and a black Sonic Youth shirt that I used to wear when my mother was still alive and Karl and I would sneak out and get into trouble. I had no



idea that he still had my things after all these years. They must have been tucked somewhere in the back of my closet. I was more surprised that they still fit.

Karl was already dressed and waiting for me when I stepped out into the hallway.

“Do I look human?” I managed a wry smile. I certainly felt underdressed standing on my mother’s hardwood floors with a backdrop of wallpaper and oil portraits.

He looked up from his phone at me and gave a snort of laughter. “You look ridiculous. Very human. Come on.”

One of Karl’s guards was waiting in the front seat of Muhammad’s truck with him. I had met Nikola several times before and he lifted his head to acknowledge me when he saw Karl and I approaching. He was a large man, almost as tall as Karl, with long, dark hair that he kept in a knot high on the back of his head. I got the feeling he didn’t like me very much, though I couldn’t say why. Karl and I slid into the back seat and Muhammad drove us back into town.

It was late enough in the evening that the bars and restaurants had shut down for the night. Any establishment that served alcohol had to be closed by three, so most of the people who were looking to party had migrated out of the downtown area by now. There were still a few stragglers here and there, alone or in pairs, walking along the sidewalks and past the cast iron lamp posts, one white globe upright, two hanging upside down. We drove past them, past the brick facades of converted cigar factories that were now trendy apartment complexes, past memorial parks with cast iron statues and archways and cheap shops selling tacky clothing I doubted even humans would wear. We parked in another parking garage, Muhammad taking a ticket from the automated system and tucking it in

his visor, pulling into a parking spot furthest away from any other cars. We would have to walk wherever we were going.

I wondered if we looked strange, the four of us an obviously mismatched group. Pale skin and dark clothes, except for Muhammad. He was the only normal looking one. We crossed a street of uneven asphalt and moved at a brisk pace towards some unlabeled brick buildings. Most vampire buildings look nondescript. If there's an industrial looking building tucked away somewhere with no signs indicating who owns it or what it's there for, chances are it's one of ours. Just look for the no trespassing signs. We take privacy laws very seriously.

The door had a small keypad beside the handle, and Nikola punched in the code without waiting for Karl to tell him to. The warehouse that the attack had happened in was behind a popular restaurant, we had seen them closing up around the corner. Mostly it had a lot of crates of restaurant supplies, barrels of beer and crates of wine along with more nonperishable ingredients were stacked against old brick walls. There was a corner of the room that was completely empty of inventory. There were traces of sawdust on the concrete floor, some of it scuffed around by shoes, but some still in the shape of whatever had been there, something large and square. Whatever it had been was gone now. Faded bloodstains darkened the dust in some places, painting odd shapes around the floor. One of the windows was covered with paper where it had been shattered. There were small holes in the far wall. I was willing to bet there were bullets in them.

This was where Julian had died. I tried not to picture his body on the floor and to look at my brother instead. His face was grim. What had Julian been protecting? What had been here?

“What are we looking at?” Karl was following Muhammad over to one of the side doors and watched him unlock the bolt and push the metal open with a creak.

“Here. If you look at the sidewalk out here, there’s a blood trail that starts a couple yards heading west. My guess is one of your guys got a shot in on their way out and it took a bit for the blood to start dripping. Or you mentioned that the bodies they left had their house tattoos cut off. Not like they can leave those lying around, so it’s possible they cut ‘em off in a hurry and ran out the back door with something dripping. Either way the trail leads out here.” Muhammad pointed out the sparse droplets with a flashlight he’d produced from his belt. They looked almost black in color and didn’t seem like much if you didn’t know what you were looking for.

I felt numb. There was something horrific about tearing off a vampire’s flesh, and that made sense to me, but somehow it was more profane that they’d done it to cut off their tattoos. Their badge of honor. Their claim to home. Their identity. My hand reached over my shoulder as if to touch the ink I knew lay there, under the fabric of my human t-shirt. It was a particularly cruel thing to do to your own men, to take their identity in order to protect your own.

We followed Muhammad as he tracked the blood down the street, around another block, and eventually to a different parking garage than the one we’d parked in. This one was also red brick, much like most of the buildings in downtown, but it smelled of urine. Thankfully there weren’t many humans loitering around, and the few who were seemed inebriated enough not to make reliable witnesses.

“The blood trail stops at this parking spot. I think they were parked here, and if I’m right, then we might have a visual on their escape. Might even have a license plate

number if we're still lucky." He pointed to a corner of the ceiling at a security camera. He was right, the angle could very well have caught something. It was a careless mistake on the part of whoever had attacked us. "Security office is on the other side of the garage. I figured you could think of a way to persuade them to let us have a copy of the tape from last week."

Karl nodded. "Good. This is very good work, Nagi. Remind me to send you a bonus if this pays off. Where's the office?"

Muhammad gave a curt nod, then jerked his head to indicate what direction we were headed in. The garage was mostly empty and the sounds of our footsteps echoed back to us, louder than the occasional street noise or the dull buzzing of the fluorescent lights on the concrete ceiling. Muhammad and Karl led the way with Nikola and me following close behind them. We didn't get very far before I smelled blood.

Karl must have smelled it, too, because he held up a hand to indicate caution as we approached. I assumed the gesture was for Muhammad's benefit, as his sense of smell was not as keen as ours. Nikola drew a gun from his hip.

There were police cars parked outside the office. White sedans with POLICE in black lettering on the sides. If police were involved, this would be very difficult to cover up. There was no amount of bribery that would cover up dead policemen.

The door to the security office was metal, painted a dark grey color, and had a thick glass window taking up the upper half. The glass was shattered and the door was ajar. A key card reader on the right side of the door was blinking red. I was trying to feel if anyone was alive inside when there was movement beyond the broken glass.

Karl reached inside his jacket and I realized he was drawing a gun from a side holster. I only had a moment to wonder how long my brother had been carrying a gun for when the door was thrown open and two men emerged.

“Don’t move!” Nikola’s warning was loud and clear, despite his heavy accent.

The men clearly weren’t human, though I didn’t recognize them. When they saw us, they raised weapons rather than heeding Nikola’s warning.

Nikola shot the first vampire in the chest before he could fire his weapon. It didn’t hit his heart but it would have been a very painful wound. His partner raised a gun in our direction.

I froze. Despite having been at war or on the brink of war most of my life, no one had ever aimed a gun at me before. I didn’t know what to do. I heard the gun go off and felt Karl shove me to the side.

I could hear more shots being fired, but by the time I got to my feet, the two men were making a run for it, Nikola chasing after them.

“Are you hit?” Muhammad was yelling at me, his voice echoing in the enclosed space. His voice was accompanied by a high-pitched whine.

I shook my head and looked over at Karl, who was still on the ground.

Muhammad followed my gaze and knelt beside him. He rolled Karl over and found blood underneath him. “Shit. Karl, are you still with me?” Car tires screeched on the other side of the garage, but I didn’t look to see where the sound was coming from.

Karl blinked, his eyes unfocused. “It’s silver,” he groaned. “You have to dig it out before it burns its way through me.” He grit his teeth and made a sound I’d never heard him make before. It was a sound I never wanted to hear him make again.

“You think you can make it back to the truck?”

“Where is Nikola? We cannot leave a body for the human police to find.” He reached a hand for Muhammad and the human wrapped the arm around his shoulder in order to hoist him to his feet. Karl made a sound like a repressed yell. “Ana, find Nikola and meet us at the car.” His eyes were wide and glassy with pain.

I nodded but didn’t move right away.

“Ana! Go!” Karl’s voice was strained as they started walking. The front of his shirt was soaked with his blood.

I turned on my heel and ran in the direction that Nikola had gone in. I didn’t get very far before I found him walking towards me.

He was holding his arm and looking a bit paler than he had been when we left the house. “I lost them. Is everyone okay?”

I shook my head. “Karl’s been shot. The bullet is silver. We need to get it out of him. It’s burning a path through him.” My voice was unsteady and thin. It didn’t sound like me at all.

Nikola nodded. “My arm’s hit. It went right through, but I won’t be able to use it until I’ve had blood. Here.” With his left hand he placed a black piece of metal in my hand. It took me a moment to recognize it as a switchblade.

“Me? I can’t, Nikola.”

“It’s either that or you’re driving. You know how to drive a stick?”

Muhammad’s green Dodge pulled up alongside us, stopping short with a screech. He was in the driver’s seat and my brother was lying in the back. There was blood on the car seat. “Get in!” He yelled.

I hesitated.

Nikola opened the door to the back seat and pushed me inside with Karl, then climbed in the front passenger seat. “Drive.”

Karl was groaning again, his voice higher pitched and more shrill than before. “It burns, Ana. Get it out of me, please!”

“What do I do?” My eyes were wet and I had to blink to see Nikola clearly as he turned in his seat to get a look.

“Cut off his shirt. Find the entry wound. It shouldn’t be healed yet.”

I pulled at the bottom of his shirt. The fabric was wet and stuck to his skin. I peeled it up off Karl’s abdomen and opened the knife with the press of a button. The blade flipped out so suddenly I nearly dropped it. The car went over a bump and Karl let out a scream.

“Hurry up! If he heals the wound you’ll have to cut through half of him just to find where it went. Hurry!” Nikola’s voice strained to be louder than my brother’s.

I tore the shirt in two movements, pushing the fabric to either side of his torso. His chest and stomach were covered with a fine layer of congealing blood. He was contorting with the pain. There was a hole, the source of the blood, slowly closing up just above his stomach. He was still yelling, so I doubted the bullet had hit his lungs.

“Insert the knife into the hole and feel with your fingers where it went. Do it quick.” Nikola’s accent was getting thicker and I could hear that he was in pain and losing patience.

My hands hovered over Karl’s stomach, the one holding the knife trembled. The wound was closing and I remembered what he said about finding it. I pushed the blade of

the knife into the hole with little resistance. I pulled the blade back out and replaced it with my fingers. My brother's stomach was cold. I cut along further and pushed my fingers in, feeling around for something hard. "Am I close?"

Karl could only continue to scream. He was beyond words. His eyes were wild and his hair was dark with sweat.

I moved lower, then higher. I pushed my hand in deeper, moving through his organs as quickly as I could. I was shaking and so was the truck. A sharp pain alerted me to the silver. "I found it!" Getting it out would be another matter.

Nikola leaned over the back of his seat, holding an open baggie for me with his good arm. I wondered briefly where he'd gotten it from. "Hurry up or you'll burn your hand. Come on."

I grasped the small piece of metal with my index and middle finger and pulled it up using my fingers as a hook. Karl's scream faded as he lost consciousness and went limp underneath me. I dropped the bullet into the baggie just as the pain in my fingers became serious. "Now what?"

"Hold his organs in. Put pressure on the wound. We're still a ways out."  
Muhammad advised from the driver's seat.

I pressed the flat of my hands on top of the incisions, but it was slippery and the ride wasn't exactly a smooth one. "Can he bleed to death? I didn't think we could bleed to death."

Nikola looked back at me again and shrugged his good arm. "I don't know, I've never tried. In training they tell us that the only way to be sure is to remove the head or the heart, but he does not look good."



I swallowed and tried to press my weight down on him. “But we can heal. Royals can heal anything. His heart is fine. He’ll heal.” I didn’t sound very sure, even to myself.

We stayed like that for what seemed like much, much longer than twenty minutes. Me straddled over my brother, trying to press all of my body weight onto his abdomen, and Nikola leaning backwards over the passenger seat keeping an eye on us as Muhammad drove ten miles over the speed limit back to the house.

The sky was turning a lighter shade of purple when Karl regained consciousness. He didn’t say anything. He just looked at me, his face paler than its usual alabaster shade as we waited to reach the house. I was never more relieved to see the white structure of my mother’s house appear from behind the trees, lit up like salvation.

Earnest and Nikola carried Karl up the stairs while Muhammad went to the kitchen for blood. I followed them into the house, standing uselessly in the foyer while they lay him down on the white tiled marble.

When Muhammad came back, he was holding four bags of cold blood. He handed one to my brother and another to Nikola, who nodded thanks. They each bit into the plastic directly and drank. It took all of the blood plus another run for two more bags before Karl’s stomach was a smooth piece of skin again.

He reached a bloody hand for me and I took it with my own, giving a hard squeeze as I sat down beside him on the floor. Neither of us said anything.

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The duchess of Stoljarova wasn’t on the train when I went home. The first class car was nearly empty, and I was grateful for the silence. I had brought my book again and

it sat neglected in my lap, without even the pretense of reading. My eyes were fixed on the wood paneling of the walls, the contrast with the darker window trim. I didn't want to go home.

I kept thinking about the back of Muhammad's car, the way Karl's hair had clung to his forehead and cheek, how sallow his skin had been against the color of his sweat. I could see every vein in his eyelids, thin and purple like branches of a dead tree.

Immortality is an illusion, Jean Pierre had told us as children. We have only been granted more time, a better chance for survival. We weren't as fragile as humans. He also taught us that entropy was a law of the natural universe. The monarchy was supposed to impose a sense of order in a chaotic world. Maintain peace, secrecy, focus on a common good. All I could see was my brother's blood drying on the velour car seats, turning the graphite color black.

I shouldn't have left him. It felt cowardly, running back home to my husband, to the safety and order of my life. Of course, I could never tell Luken what had happened. He would only be alarmed for my safety, angry at my brother for dragging me into his mess. Karl Erik had protected me with his life, but all my husband would see was his failure to keep me from the situation to begin with. He would never let me go back if he knew.

I squeezed my hands into fists until my fingernails bit into my palms and my knuckles went yellow. I wanted to throw my book at the wall, smash the fake antique wall sconce on the tile floor, pitch the side table through the window and out into the night. There was a couple sitting on the couch on the far side of the car, the youth of their faces a lie. I didn't know them, but I wanted to scream at them, to rage. I didn't know

what I would scream, what words might fall out of my mouth. It was a surprise to me what came out half the time anyway.

I was going to go home like none of this ever happened. Ryland, my husband's chosen bodyguard, was going to pick me up at the train station and ask about my trip. Make small talk about the weather. It looks like rain. Not a star in the sky. Can I carry that for you? I would get in his champagne Lincoln. Text Tabitha and Karl that I was safe. I miss you already. Thank you for the lovely trip. Must come again soon. Luken sends his love. I was going to sit in my bathroom and stare at myself in the mirror until I looked ugly. Until my husband knocked on the door to ask if I was decent. Until he held the door ajar, hesitating to invade my privacy. He would smile the way he does when he looks at me sometimes, perfectly symmetrical with his eyes crinkled at the corners and a row of perfect teeth. My husband smiles like a little boy, like true joy is possible, like he's seen the sun. I could never decide what I'd done to earn such an expression. How do you answer a smile like that?

My throat hurt. It felt small and thick. That's how it starts, in the back of the throat. The worst part about being an emotional person is that you can feel it coming on, like your own body betraying you. I fight it. I swallow over and over, clench my teeth, force myself to breathe deep instead of sniffing like a child. I can always hear my mother's voice, telling me to stop with the histrionics. I could hear her while I sat there, staring at the wall with my throat closing up. Don't be so melodramatic. Stop it. I turned my face so the couple couldn't see. The trick is not to speak. Once I talk, the game is up. You can hear it in my voice. I do not accomplish this trick. I always try to say something

and my voice betrays me, too, and then I'm blinking back tears, my whole body is sweating, and I feel dumb.

I reached into my purse and pushed aside my wallet and a small notebook to find my phone. The screen unlocked with my thumbprint and I opened my text conversation with Karl. The last text was him asking me what time I needed to leave for the station this evening, followed by my answer. I wanted to say something reassuring to him, something about my faith in him, or about coming back soon, but it all seemed plastic. He was a world away already, and I didn't know when I would go back. The screen went black and I put the phone back in my purse.

*Chapter Four*

Luken was in his study, drafting paperwork by hand with the pen I had given him for his birthday last year. His hair was getting longer now, long enough to fall into his face when he was reading, and he brushed black strands behind his ear absently. He looked up at me after he'd finished the page. "Welcome home. How was your ride back?" He capped the pen and set it down next to his papers before standing up.

"Uneventful." I tried to muster a smile, but it faded quickly.

"I missed you." He smelled of tobacco and mint, and his smile was more genuine than mine. He touched fingers to my face. "I was worried about you. I don't like it when we fight."

I thought of my fingers in Karl Erik's stomach, his blood cold and slow and smeared over my wrists, up my forearms. I looked back at my husband. "I don't like it when we fight, either."

He leaned in to kiss me, his lips brushing against mine, soft and cool. "You're still mad at me. I thought we'd been through this." He gave a patient sigh, as if we would go over things until I understood.

I didn't answer him.

"Ana, I know you're worried for Karl. It is one of your many, many virtues that you have such dedication to your brother and his House. It is precisely because of your brother that we've made so much progress towards peace. I know Karl doesn't agree with my methods, but he is very young, and I believe he still blames Zelenskaya for your parents' death." He paused to lick his lips. "I know he is angry. I understand that anger, I do. Your mother was..." He trailed off with another sigh, touching his thumb and finger

to his forehead. “But vengeance only begets further vengeance. It is a slippery slope between perceived justice and chaos.”

I stood rooted to where I was, rigid and impassible. My jaw clenched as I remembered how the silver bullet had burned my fingers. “Perhaps we have already reached chaos.”

His brow knit again and he reached for me, fingers pressing to my forearm. “Don’t say that. I promise you, we’re not moving towards war. Both sides want peace, we will have it. Your brother is an impatient man, but given time, this will work. We are in a new age now, and civility goes a long way.”

I knew he was trying to comfort me. I knew that he just wanted my fears soothed. “Tell that to Julian.” I focused my gaze on the area rug under my husband’s desk. My eyes traced the paths of vines as they twisted around a golden frame, blooming flowers symmetrically.

Luken took a step away from me, leaning back against the lacquered wooden surface of his desk. He was careful not to disturb his papers. “That’s not fair. Just because some vigilantes are taking matters into their own hands doesn’t mean that my efforts are without merit. Once we reach agreements on territory and trade, it will be much easier for Zelenskaya to rein in the troublemakers. The violence will cease when it is clear that we’re not going to war.”

My focus lifted from the carpet to his face, the deep-set hollows of his tired eyes. His eyes were darker than usual, though the color changed depending on the light or his mood. “And what if it doesn’t? What if things just get worse until Karl Erik ends up like Julian?” I could hear the fear in my voice, the strain in my throat.

“Ana!” His voice chastised me, but his brow furrowed with concern. “Please calm down. Nothing like that is going to happen, I promise you. These ruffians may be interested in profiting off of the discord between Houses in the meantime, but there is no plot against your brother’s life, I assure you. I know you worry for him, but you must be reasonable.”

I gave a sharp exhale and nodded, lips pursed into a thin line. Reason was, after all, the mark of civilization. We were nothing if not creatures of civility. “I hope you’re right, because if you’re not, my brother will pay the price.”

He pushed his weight off the desk and stepped towards me, his gait slow and careful. “I love you. Everything that I do is for you. Please trust me to keep you safe. Trust me to know what is best for us, and for your brother. I would never let anything happen to you or your family, Ana. You are the jewel of my life.” He held out his hands, palms up, in offering.

He closed the space between us with a step, standing beside me like a tall, cold shadow. His hands slid up my forearms, cradling their weight as he leaned in to press lips to my forehead. Luken had to lean down to reach my mouth with his, so when he bent at the waist, I lifted my face towards him. His kiss was slow and soft, a reserved enveloping of the lips.

I stood still and patient for him, holding my breath and trying not to think about what would happen if he were wrong. Pulling away from the kiss was almost reflexive, as if his mouth over mine could actually suffocate me, although I knew that wasn’t possible.

His hands slid up my arms and pulled me closer to him, his posture still bent to keep our faces aligned. When his lips claimed mine again, the kiss was stronger, more adamant. His tongue brushed against my upper lip and my whole body tensed.

I withdrew, almost falling backwards a step. If he hadn't been holding my arms, I might have bumped into the wall behind me.

Luken's face was stricken. His lips were still parted but now they were downturned, his eyes searching my face for what had interrupted us. "I know that you are upset, and maybe you blame me. Instead of dwelling on your fears, I think it would be more constructive to look to the future. Think of all the good things we still have ahead of us." He let go of my arm in order to touch fingers to my hair, to brush a curling tendril behind my ear. "If you had something to anchor you, something to focus your attention and to buoy your happiness, I think it would go a long way towards banishing these dark thoughts until the treaties are signed and you can feel safe again."

I knew what he was alluding to and the thought of it pulled my gaze from his face. I focused on the embroidery on his lapel, the dark silken threads festooning the velvet. I was too young to have a child. My husband still treated *me* as a child. A knot tightened in my gut.

Luken's thumb brushed across my cheek, a gesture meant to soothe me and regain my attention. "Please don't let your anger keep me from taking care of you."

I couldn't tell if I was being unreasonable anymore. I knew Luken loved me. He tried very hard to be a good husband and to make sure I never wanted for anything. Could I blame him for doing what he felt was best, even if I disagreed? Who was I to say that Karl's way was better? Perhaps if he had sent soldiers to Lavringraad, things would be



even worse. I nodded and lifted my eyes to meet his. “I’m not blaming you. But it doesn’t change how I feel.”

He studied my face for a moment, as if judging the truth of my words for himself. Then he gave a nod himself and leaned forward to press lips to my forehead again. “Let’s go to bed early, then. You’ve had a long night and I’m sure you’re exhausted from your travels. Things will look better after you’ve had some rest.”

I let him lead the way out of his study and down the hall towards our bedroom. Lighted portraits of the Voropaeva family lined the walls, some long dead and some still in the old country, alive and well. Their austere expressions were framed in heavy, dark-stained wood, and I avoided their gazes as I walked past them, side by side with Luken.

I hated our bedroom. The walls were covered in an awful green damask. I suppose it was meant to look masculine and strong and maybe the intention was to engender some sense of virility in the royal couple, but to me it was more of a sickly color than anything else. The style was something my mother might have picked—although not in such a repulsive shade. It didn’t match the Spanish architecture of the home we lived in, although Luken’s concerns were far beyond interior decorating and I doubt he’d ever noticed. Maybe his father had picked it out.

We separated into our closets to change. I hoped for a moment that the sun might rise earlier than either of us had anticipated and that we would pull the shutters closed and go to sleep, but the sky was still dark outside and my husband was waiting for me in our bed. I shouldn’t have had that hope, and guilt immediately followed it. Our people relied on me, on Luken. If I had died in that parking garage, if Karl hadn’t pushed me out

of the way, I would have left behind no heir. I took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and went to bed.

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I woke in darkness. The sun still hovered on the horizon in the world outside of our home. It was a low, insistent hum, not exactly a sound, but some other sense altogether in the periphery of my awareness, a warning. Don't go outside yet. Not safe. Our bedroom smelled faintly of bergamot cologne and day-old roses. The bracket clock on the writing desk ticked in a familiar rhythm. There was no pulse but my own.

In my sleep, I had kicked the comforter down by my feet and twisted the sheets around my legs. My pillow lay askew somewhere near the top of my head. Luken's side of the bed was far more orderly. He had folded the sheet and comforter back over the mattress and fluffed his pillow. The curtain was latched to the bedpost so the lamplight wouldn't wake me. I couldn't see the floor on his side, but I was certain his slippers were gone.

I groped for the latch along the post on my side of the bed and unhooked it, pulling the brocade back. The brass lamp on Luken's nightstand cast a yellow glow over the room. My phone sat on my own nightstand, plugged into the charger and blinking at me.

*Luken: I will be attending to business until 8:30pm.*

*I will meet you in the foyer.*

*Betsey: You know what would be truly philanthropic?*

*Not having to go to philanthropy galas.*

I take exceptionally hot showers. Luken's theory is that I am compensating for my lack of ability to produce my own body heat, but I just like the way they feel. I like how hard the water pressure beats down on my back when I pull my hair over my shoulder and hold still. It stings just enough to feel it, but it eases some tightness in my muscles, some constriction between my shoulder blades I didn't know was there. If I've eaten before I shower, my skin turns pink all around my shoulders and chest until I get dressed.

When the cold air in the bathroom hit me, I felt more awake, more alive. The sun was almost down. I wrapped a towel around myself and stood dripping on the bath mat. Steam clouded the mirrors. Luken's things were arranged around his sink. Toothbrush upright in its stand. Brown square of soap in a brass dish. Clouded glass jar of q-tips placed symmetrically between the two sinks. I took four wet steps to his sink and looked at my distorted reflection. In his drawer, I found a familiar brush and comb, ebony with a golden letter V on the back, grooming shears, an electric beard trimmer, nail clippers and an emery board.

I touched fingers to the comb, leaving an outline of my skin in condensation. I closed the drawer and stepped toward the cabinet, a string of water droplets marking my path. It was all familiar to me. I knew exactly which two colognes Luken kept in his cabinet, which hair gel made his hair behave, which brand of lotion he applied to his hands and face when he had put off eating too long and his skin took on an ashen hue.

He had to have eaten today. We always ate before a human function. It made us look more passable, more real. It also reduced the chance that we might say or do

something inappropriate, that we might become transfixed by someone's neck or wrist. Can't have hungry vampires in a room full of wealthy human benefactors. Too risky.

I picked up the cologne and unscrewed the cap, holding it level with my chest so that the fragrance wouldn't overwhelm me. Luken's tie knot pressed against my chest as he leans into me. Luken smiling at me from across the car seat. The surprised look on his face before he laughs at something I've said. The fine black hairs on his forearm underneath his dressing robe sleeve. The measured cadence of his voice when he reads to me. His hand reaching out for mine, wordless, patient. I put the cap back on the cologne.

My dress was hanging on a wall hook in my closet, wrapped in plastic. Luken bought it for me from a human designer, a gift to wear tonight. I wasn't particularly fond of human fashion. Not many vampires were. It lacked a certain attention to detail, a sophistication that vampire fashion focuses on. We liked corseted gowns, straps and buckles, a wider variety of fabrics and materials, bolder cuts. Human dresses were always so soft and plain. There was no sense of grandeur or shape to them. I unzipped the bag to look. A soft golden nude, three quarter sleeves and an illusion collar, the bodice made entirely of lace that gives way to a tulle skirt. No corset. No cut outs. No slits. No straps. No beading. Very soft. Very human.

I wore body lotion with bronzer in the formula. It was supposed to give humans a tan, but for me it only managed a somewhat healthier looking olive glow. The pale quality to a vampire's skin had nothing to do with melanin anyway. We retained whatever melanin we had when born into the night; it's the blood that posed a problem. Without blood to keep our cheeks ruddy, most of us looked like we'd just seen a ghost. Haggard, with shadows around our eyes like bruises and maps of blue veins just under

the skin. A steady diet could help eliminate this effect, but some of us preferred extra help.

I sat on the settee and flipped on the small tv sitting on the vanity, shaking up the bottle of lotion. I applied a generous portion along my left arm, then the right, up my shoulders and across my chest, over my neck and on my face. I was still rubbing it in when I felt the sun slip beyond the horizon.

We did have cable, but more often than not, my tv was set to a streaming input from a private channel. The news was just ending, but it wasn't anything I didn't already know. Luken and I received notifications on our phones when anything relevant to the vampire community happened. It was more like a phone tree rather than a proper news network, and therefore far less reliable than, say, the *Times*, but it's what we had. Vampires were a secretive people to begin with. Bad publicity could make your territory seem vulnerable. Information was spared only when it might cause a dispute with another duke or duchess, or if it could potentially spill into the human awareness. We had enough trouble fighting ourselves without adding humans to the mix. Secrecy had been a primary code for hundreds of years. *The finest trick of the devil was to persuade you that he does not exist.*

After the news was a commercial for the season premiere of *The Enforcer*, a vampire produced drama series that followed a young enforcer as he tried to solve a string of murders in his duchess' territory. I opened my jewelry box and looked through rings as they showed preview clips of the new episode. The actor bent over a mutilated vampire corpse before announcing, "This is too sloppy; the murder has to be personal somehow. But it doesn't look like the victim knew their killer." Another actor gasped and

asked how this was possible. The next clip showed him kneeling before a tall redhead in a dress made of fine platinum chains draped across her body. “Are you questioning your duchess?” She demanded. A close up of his face, contorted with conflict. I hit mute on the remote.

I considered the shelves of shoes on the far wall to go with the dress. Most of my collection was boots. It would be more human to wear high heels. Something golden and strappy. A pair of tan over the knee boots would not be a human choice. I pulled them off the shelf anyway. Who’s going to see them under all that tulle?

The kitchen was empty. I knew that beyond the kitchen were a series of suites for donors to stay in, should they be so inclined. They had no idea why they were donating the blood. I think the story we gave had something to do with being a family with congenital hemophilia or something similar. We needed private donations of blood because we required regular transfusions—which, all things considered, wasn’t technically a lie. We just drank our infusions.

Younger vampires, that is, newly made common vampires, required roughly a gallon of blood a night or every other night for the first year or so. Older vampires could go a few days longer. Luken could go weeks without eating. I ate every few days, although I wasn’t sure I had to. I’d never put it to the test.

Our fridge had human food on one side for the donors and shelves of blood on the other. I picked one from the topmost shelf and glanced at the label. Type A positive. Donated the day before yesterday. I peeled off the label and popped it in the sous vide machine, then carried it to the sink to fill with water. Once the machine was filled to the designated line, I plugged it in and turned it on. The instruction booklet said to preheat

the water first, but if you immersed cold blood in hot water, it congealed. Letting the water and blood heat gradually together yielded a better result. Betsey says it's like warming up a baby's bottle. I wouldn't know.

The clock above the stove read 8:07pm. I'd never used the stove. Glasses were in the cabinets beside the fridge. We had a lot of them, most of which were here before I came. Some were old enough that it's possible they travelled here from Basque with Luken's father. I picked a plain, modern wine glass and set it on the granite countertop. There were two ways to drink bagged blood. Either stab the bag with a sharpened straw, which can be a difficult and messy technique to master, or slice the bag open and pour it into a glass. The latter would ensure my dress stayed clean. There was a pair of scissors in a tall cup of ladles and serving spoons, tucked in like they belonged there.

When the machine beeped, I used a small hook to pull the bag out, careful not to burn myself on the plastic while I cut off one corner. I tilted it slowly and watched the blood pour out. It smelled like pennies and my stomach twisted.

Really good blood was dangerous. You could forget where you were, who you were. There was nothing else the second it touched your lips, a world unto itself. Your heart pumped with new electricity and you could feel that spark across your veins, down your fingers, behind your knees, like it was doing figure eights on the inside of your skin. This bitter sweetness coats the inside of your mouth, so good your teeth ache with it, your cheeks tingle, you can't stop swallowing. You are warm and good and melting, melting, melting into this liquid version of yourself.

Your nerve endings are a tempest, firing impulses much faster than you can sort them, process or understand them. The result is that you see what you are seeing—I could

still see the kitchen where I was standing—but it might as well be the head of a pin. The universe expands around you, your own existence blown open. This is just one star, one single burning ball of light in a grand constellation, in a galaxy, in an eternity that stretches out before you: perpetual, amaranthine, unyielding, and so close you could reach out and touch all of it.

I could hear the clock over the stove, the water in the pipes, my husband having a conversation on the other side of the house, but these things were not at a meaningful frequency. When your consciousness unfurls, you can hear the world tilting on its axis, you can hear every living thing in the world growing, breathing, dying, you can hear nirvana, the great eternal sound of existence, the resonance of being that is the beginning and end of everything and nothing, not quite a melody but more ecstatic than any music you've ever heard.

You experience every sensation possible, every thought possible, and your exaltation erases everything you have ever known, until the blood is gone. You come back to yourself in increments. Your awareness of your body, your physical surroundings, and your aural comprehension return by degrees and in vibrating clarity. It is a descent from the cosmic to the corporeal that allows you to experience the vastness of the planet anew. Every sensation is magnified to new size and color, fascinating in new facets, you are easily lost to the art of your surroundings.

When I snapped out of it, I was sitting on the kitchen floor with my back against the cabinets, contemplating the nature of sunlight because I think, at least for a very brief moment, I might have glimpsed the sun.



On Tuesday, I met Betsey for a painting class downtown. Countess Betsey Dufrene was one of my few friends in Vorograad. My husband wasn't her biggest fan, but she was sweet and didn't care much for politics. Betsey was from New Orleans and had enough scandalous stories to make you feel like baths just weren't clean enough. She was one of the most vibrant people I'd ever met, and that included her hair, which was a different color every other time I saw her. Today it was rosebud pink, a shade that brought out the smoky topaz of her skin, and tied up in a bun high on her head so that it wouldn't get in the paint. She was already painting, a long-stemmed brush in hand and her focus on the canvas in front of her.

"Hey." I set my purse down at the empty easel beside hers and took a seat on the stool. "Did they already start? I thought it wasn't until eight."

Betsey put her brush down. "No, no, you're fine. I got here early and was bored. There's canvasses over there." She indicated the wall over her shoulder with a toss of her head.

I took a step towards her to see what she was painting, expecting some variation of the still life assembled on a table in the middle of the easel circle. Instead of a bowl of fruit, Betsey had begun what looked like a nude portrait of actor Idris Elba. I snorted a laugh and shook my head. "I don't know why I'm ever surprised."

"Well I'm very talented. Sometimes I even surprise myself." Betsey had the kind of smile that lit up her whole face, bright and warm like Christmas Eve. She stood and leaned over to press lips against my cheek. "How was the trip?"

I didn't want to think about it. I had texted Karl when I woke up, but he hadn't answered me yet. "It was okay. I should really go more often." I examined the stack of canvasses leaning against the wall before selecting something smaller and bringing it back to the easel.

"Yeah? How does Luken feel about that?"

"I just got back. I don't want to start a fight." I started to outline the shape of an apple in pencil, taking care to leave room for the oranges next to it. This was ridiculous. I'd never eaten fruit before and I never would. I sighed and erased the lines I'd just drawn.

"Did Tabitha tell you I was right?" Betsey had only met my sister in law a few times, but she thought well of her, and often encouraged me to seek her advice.

"She said it was normal. Every couple has an adjustment period. We just have to give each other time to adapt, is all." I leaned back and stared at the smudged white of the canvas. Maybe a nightscape? The silhouette of palm trees against a starry sky? I was going to need darker paints.

"Yeah, if by *adapt* you mean embrace your inner kink, then I agree." She lifted eyebrows at me and grinned.

I fought the urge to roll my eyes at her. "Bets, do you think you could be constructive for just a little bit here? I'm serious."

She pressed her lips together and looked up from her own canvas. "I am being serious. Look, I'm not saying that it's going to fix everything, but in my considerable experience, sex can fix a lot. I think you're underestimating its importance in a relationship. Plus, you told me he's always bringing up kids, and I'm just saying it might

take care of two birds with one stone.” Betsey lifted her palms upright, her right hand still holding the paintbrush, as though she would back off and drop the subject. She had a point though, and she certainly was much older than I was. Maybe that was another obstacle, too. I lacked the experience to know these things.

I looked up to see if anyone was listening in on our conversation, but there were only three other people here so far and the instructor was late.

I stopped sketching palm fronds and turned towards her. “Okay, so what would you have me do?”

Betsey considered the question earnestly. “Well there’s a lot of things you could try. Dirty talk, toys, you could lick blood off each other. Roleplaying, you could be the duchess, he could be the stable boy, or he could be like a soldier going to war. I mean if you really want to go nuts, you could try a ménage à trois or tying each other up, maybe some friendly spanking... I mean we could be here all night.”

I couldn’t imagine my husband saying anything inappropriate or pretending to be someone else, and I was certain that he would find the conversation to be wholly unnecessary. It made something twist in my stomach to think of bringing it up with him. “I don’t know, I don’t think he’d be into any of this.”

“Oh, come on. Luken? He’s an old geezer! The older ones love this kind of shit. They’re all perverts from ages where you couldn’t do anything, and now they can. And you know, I’m sure the more stuck up they act, the crazier they like stuff in bed. I’m telling you. You should just take charge and try some new things. He’ll love it.” She nodded at me as though this were common knowledge, and she couldn’t believe I didn’t know.

I sighed and went back to sketching awkward palm trees. “I’m terrible at this.”

“What, painting or sex?”

“Both. We should have gone for another dance class. At least I have rhythm.” I shook my head and erased a lopsided leaf.

“Well we’ve taken all the introductory classes they offer aside from country line dancing. But if you want to learn how to *boot scoot boogie*, I guess I could get on board.” Betsey put down her brush and picked up the palette knife. “I’m not doing tennis again, though. That was awful.”

I couldn’t blame her, really, my aim wasn’t much better than my artistic prowess. “Maybe something a bit less... violent. Tai chi?” I suggested.

“I think you’re overcorrecting.”

I laughed. “Well then you pick next week.”

“Deal. Are you coming to my exhibition? The artist is this fabulous kid from up north. I really think you’ll like the work.” Whenever Betsey’s art gallery downtown had a significant exhibit, I was first on her invitation list to the inevitable private soiree for our kind of society, though I didn’t always feel like I understood some of things she displayed. I wanted to support her, though, so I always went.

“It’s already on my calendar.”

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There was a pink silk mannequin in the store window wearing buttercup yellow lingerie. The bra was gauzy and transparent, made more tangible by layers of lace flowers clustered on top of one another. The matching garter belt fit over the panties, the

suspenders hung loose where they would hold up a pair of hypothetical thigh high stockings. In the poster behind the display, a dark haired model with glossy, red lips posed in an identical outfit, smiling like she knew when the world would end. She seemed brave to me, somehow. In control. She knew how to handle any situation. When she walked into the room, her husband couldn't take his eyes off of her.

I walked into the store before I'd even made the decision to do so. Did Luken even like yellow? Inside the store, the walls were painted in wide, pink stripes. Shadowboxes featured different styles of underwear: more bra and panty sets, teddies, baby dolls, corsets with plastic boning. Ruffles, bows, feathers. Everything smelled like sugary musk. I was out of my depth. None of this was made for me.

"Can I help you find something?" The salesgirl was younger than me. Maybe twenty. Her smile was so big and shiny that it made her taller. Her name tag said Michelle.

I shook my head. "I don't know what I'm looking for, really."

"Okay." Her mouth was a touch too big for her face, her lips almost pillowy. Her hair had been ironed flat, her highlights a light butterscotch. "Well what sort of occasion did you have in mind?"

There was no occasion. I tried to think of some kind of a convincing lie. His birthday, maybe? An anniversary? These were happy things. The answer died in my throat and I stood there, dumb, in front of rows of bralettes and bustiers.

“Not that a girl really *needs* an occasion to feel glamorous, right? Feeling beautiful is super important.” Michelle salvaged the conversation. My smile was pure gratitude. “What sort of lingerie do you like?”

“I liked the set in the window. The yellow?” I pointed over my shoulder, back in the direction of the door.

“Oh great! I can definitely pull that in your size. Would you like to try it on?” She was already leaning in that direction, ready to lead the way at a moment’s notice.

I shook my head. “No, my husband wouldn’t like something so bright. Maybe something more traditional?” It wasn’t like they had a Luken collection. This was a terrible idea. “I want something...” I didn’t know what I wanted. I didn’t know what I was doing. I had inconvenienced this poor girl, and I wasn’t even sure what I wanted to buy. What the hell was I thinking coming in here anyway? I should just leave.

“Ma’am?” She was wondering if I’d had a stroke, if I wasn’t in my right mind.

“I want my husband to forget about work for an evening. I want... I want him to see me.” My stomach clenched. I shouldn’t have said that.

Michelle chewed at the inside corner of her big lips while she thought. It was an endearing habit. “You know, I think we have just the thing. Right this way.” Her smile was back, and she lead me off down a small pathway in between racks of silk robes.

In the back left corner of the store, there was another pink mannequin. This one was wearing another bra and panty set, a satin houndstooth accented with a layer of black

French lace. The fabric was opaque but delicate, the pattern cool and cultivated. There were tiny, pink velvet bows on the garter straps. It was perfect.

Michelle took two sizes to the fitting room with me, although the first one fit like it was molded to my body. I stared at myself in the mirror. I looked older, more refined. I could have been friends with the girl from the poster in the yellow lingerie. We could drink blood early into the morning together, laughing, satisfied, beautiful.

“What do you think?” I asked Michelle, but I was already sold. “I think your husband won’t know what hit him.”

When I got home, Luken was in his study. I walked by his door on the way to our bedroom, listening for the sound of his voice. All I could hear were papers being shuffled about. I kept walking, closing the bedroom door behind me so that I could change into my new purchase. The lingerie was wrapped in baby pink tissue paper. I unfolded it slowly, as though I might damage it, and cut the tags off with a pair of manicure scissors.

For a moment, I was seized by the idea that it might not look as good on me now as it did in the store. Maybe it was only the lighting. Maybe the spell would be broken here. But the bra still fit, and I was able to push the garter clasp through the stockings myself. With a pair of plain black heels, I looked good. Serious. Confident. Maybe this wasn’t such a bad idea.

I knocked twice on Luken’s door and waited for him to answer.

“Come,” he called.

My pulse was faster than it should have been when I opened the door. I stepped in all at once and closed the door behind me, although I'm not sure why. There was no one in the hallway to see me.

Luken sat at his desk, a stack of papers in one hand, his pen in the other. He was reading from a binder, engrossed in thought.

"Luken." My chest was going to burst.

He made a soft sound of acknowledgment, then raised his head to look at me. His eyebrows lifted upward and stayed there. Aside from the shock, his face was inscrutable.

I stood up straighter, fingertips running along the hem of one stocking. "Well?"

He cleared his throat but said nothing.

It wasn't far from the door to his desk. I crossed the expanse of tile floor in two steps, the area rug in four. I pushed his chair back a few inches, enough that the desk wasn't in the way. He didn't stop me.

I fit my knee between his thigh and the armrest of his chair, using the leverage to straddle his lap, lowering myself onto him slowly. He leaned back in his seat, the surprise still fixed on his features when I kissed him. His lips were slow to respond, enveloping mine as though in a daze. Maybe Michelle had been right, maybe he didn't know what hit him. I smiled against his mouth and pressed myself into him. His fingers idled on my waist, tentative and gradual. He dropped his pen and it fell to the carpet below us.



His hair was thick and dark and I ran my fingers through it, my thumb tracing the curve of his cheekbone. My lungs ached. I kissed a line across his cheek to his ear. “Tell me what you want.” My voice was breathless, hoarse.

“What I want?”

“Yes.” I pressed a hand against his chest in order to look at him more fully. “Tell me anything.”

“I’m not sure I follow.” He shook his head, as though I’d posed a riddle.

My smile broadened and I let out a short laugh. “Tell me what you want to do, anything you want to do. Do you want to lick blood off of me? Leave the door open? Tie me up?” I tried to think of what else Betsey said. The list had sounded so long. “Spank me?”

“Lilith in Eden, *tie you up*? Ana, what the hell is going on?” I couldn’t decide if his voice sounded more aghast or angry.

“Nothing is going on. I’m trying to seduce my husband.” I blinked at him, unsure of what to do. How was my intent in any way unclear? Should I have worn a neon sign?

“Ana, what has gotten into you?”

I shook my head, confused. “Nothing, I just thought...” I don’t know what I thought. It seemed so silly now, so juvenile. “I was just trying to...” None of my sentences had endings. I climbed off of his lap, taking awkward, uneven steps backwards in my heels. I felt nauseous. “I don’t...”

“I don’t understand what’s going on, but I don’t like it. Did you have some bad blood? Something medicated? I thought the testing had come back clean...”

“No! No, that’s—there’s nothing wrong. I was just trying—I thought you’d like it.” I couldn’t manage much better of an explanation, of what I had been thinking when I’d come in here. I had to have been thinking something.

“Well I don’t! I don’t understand what would make you do this.” His face was filled with concern, the creases at the corners of his eyes tight, his mouth drawn downward.

“I’m sorry. You just work so hard, and I wanted to take your mind off of things for bit.” It wasn’t an inaccurate explanation, but it wasn’t entirely right, either. Why had I done this?

“I work hard to make a future for you, Ana. I thought you understood that. I thought you valued the work that I do here. I thought you knew how important this was, how many lives this will protect.” He stood up, gesturing towards the desk with one arm.

I swallowed, one arm cradling the other against my chest. “I know, that’s not—I didn’t mean it like that. I thought you’d want me, is all.”

He offered a soft sigh. “Ana... I do want you, but not like this. Not in some deviant...” The sentence trailed off as though he didn’t even want to think about it anymore. “When I am feeling amorous, I will let you know. I promise.”

I nodded, but my gaze was focused on the dark grout in between the tiles. I thought I might be sick. “Okay. I’m going to go. Get dressed.”

“Good.” He watched me as I turned towards the door.

In our bedroom, I took the lingerie off and wrapped it back up in its pink tissue paper. I gently placed it in the trash can in my dressing room and got ready for bed.

*Chapter Five*

I was beginning to regret my decision to hold the fundraiser in a banquet hall. The smell of human food still lingered in the air from a previous party, and it nauseated me. At least the party looked lovely. Swathes of warm grey fabric hung down the filigreed walls and adorned the round tables in alternating textures. The smell of human food was almost masked by the fragrance of the hydrangea centerpieces. Peals of laughter in the corner meant at least some people were having a good time.

The wealthiest vampires in south Florida tended to be either highly politically minded or not at all, which meant half of my conversations were a hot debate about whether or not it was the responsibility of royalty to raise the funds to feed the city's vampires (inevitably leading to an argument on the merits of socialism and trickle-down economics), and the other half were about my husband, my dress, the latest gossip, or some unrelated business venture. I couldn't decide which was worse.

Countess Philippa Henderson was one of the former. She was a severe looking woman with thin lips and eyebrows who had died somewhere in her fifties. She was pretty in her own way, with long, dark hair and striking brown eyes. She had been sired by Luken's father several centuries ago, and attended my gatherings out of loyalty to my husband and his family, but I never believed she had warmed up to me personally. It was possible she didn't care for my personality, or maybe she doubted the stability of my family. I knew she envied my husband. Or maybe Luken was right and I only imagined her feelings for me, and she simply was a cold person by nature. Regardless, she had purchased a seat at my table and I was obliged to entertain her for the remainder of the evening.

“Your husband was kind enough to send me some literature on your plans to expand the blood banks in the city.” She took a sip of very expensive blood, thin eyebrows raised to indicate there was a point to follow. “It’s a very ambitious plan. Are you unconcerned that so much private involvement in the medical sector won’t raise suspicions? I would think that you might be wary of federal involvement in your practices.”

I smiled at her and wondered if she could tell how much I disliked her. “What a shrewd and clever observation, Countess, I’m glad you asked.” I’d found over the years that it was easier to argue with Philippa when she thought she was in control of the conversation and that her opinions were invaluable to me. “The Polidori Foundation has systems in place to make sure that we’re conducting enough legitimate research that no one really focuses on the high turnover rate of blood. Even better is that our research is actually very helpful to vampire sustainability. We’re learning new things about the nutritional qualities of blood every day.”

She made an appreciative sound and eyed the glass flute in her gloved hand. “How fascinating. I agree that it is very important to be focused on sustainability. I would be interested to hear more about these advancements and what they could mean for our future. And I’d love to discuss the blood banks more. I’m sure your financial plan is just as well thought out.”

I mustered another in an endless string of plastic smiles. “That would be lovely, although I wouldn’t want to neglect my other guests.”

A familiar hand touched the small of my back. My husband had arrived. He had done something to slick back his hair and it looked orderly and wet.

“Hello darling. How is your paperwork coming along?” I offered my cheek for a kiss. I knew the Countess was watching us with interest, and I hoped she couldn’t see my relief.

Luken pressed his lips against my face in a chaste show of affection, one hand signaling a waiter. “Very well, thank you. It’s just addendums at this point, but I like to be thorough.” He took a seat next to us and reached for the Countess’ hand to kiss her knuckles. “You both look lovely this evening. What did I miss?”

Philippa answered him. “Your wife was just telling me all about her efforts to expand the blood banks through research and private funding.” She pronounced these last concepts as if they were foreign to her mouth and innovative, but not in the way she appreciated.

“Oh yes. Anaïs is very passionate about feeding the hungry and educating the poor.” Luken gave my shoulder a gentle squeeze.

Philippa was less enthusiastic for his encouragement. Her smile became more of a grimace. “I do recall receiving an invitation to a supply drive for the city’s public school system. I was very surprised to find the Duchess so involved in such a human affair.” She watched for my husband’s reaction before continuing. Maybe she was disappointed he didn’t share her views. “I know you both must be fully occupied with treaty negotiations. I’ve heard such wonderful things about your efforts, Luken. Your father would be so proud.” She reached over to grasp his hand on the table. This smile was more genuine than the last; her smiles were always brighter when they were for my husband.

“I think it’s incredible that Anaïs is so dedicated to her causes. She is a true believer in the fundamentals of social change, and her ideas are so innovative and

refreshing,” Luken said. A waiter had brought him a flute of blood on a silver tray and he thanked the man, raising his glass to me before taking a sip.

Philippa’s face had that same palsy quality to it, as if her expression were frozen in place. “I’m afraid I don’t understand what you mean. Surely we live in the most advanced of ages. I could hardly think a vampire might hope for anything better than the stellar conditions you and your father worked so hard to set forth. Vorograad is a beacon of vampire vitality in our times.”

I fought the urge to roll my eyes and ask her how it was possible to carry on such a lively conversation with us from so far inside my husband’s rectum. I had to remind myself how much Luken enjoyed this woman’s company and how much money she had donated to the Foundation for that singular reason. It was more important that vampires didn’t go hungry than it was to ruin my good standing in society by putting the Countess in her place. I chose my words very carefully. “It is most certainly not my intention to cast a shadow on all the good work my husband and his beloved father have done for this city. I simply feel that the reason they were able to secure such a strong present was by looking to the future and imagining a better world for vampirekind.” Let her argue with that one.

Philippa’s eyes narrowed at the corners as she nodded. “But of course. No shadow at all, my darling. It would not be possible to cast a pallor on the work of men like your husband. We must all be grateful for the efforts of House Voropaeva and treasure their dedication, for all vampires.” At this she raised her glass as if to toast her own words before taking a sip.

We obliged her and drank to her sentiments. The blood wasn't as warm as the start of the evening, but it still had a lighter quality to it, something pure and encompassing. It was almost worth sitting next to the Countess for several hours just to drink blood this good. Almost.

"Will you be attending the fundraiser next month, Countess? I'm sure my wife would be doubly indebted for you to support both of her causes. She aims to put Vorograad's school systems at the top of Florida in the next five years. I have every faith in her ambitions." The inside of Luken's lips had been stained a darker shade of pink and his face already seemed more flush with color than when he arrived. He was never very good at remembering to eat when he was fixed on a particular project. I had left instructions that blood be taken to him, but I imagined it might still be sitting on his desk.

Philippa raised her thin eyebrows. Her smile didn't move. "You know my support for House Voropaeva is endless, though I hardly expected to be investing in backpacks and pencil cases. I suppose philanthropy never goes out of style."

Luken was taking a sip of blood, but he made a sound of approval. "I couldn't agree more. Even in times of strife and uncertainty, my Anaïs is thinking of others. She has the most kind and selfless heart, truly. She is always reminding me of the immense importance of our work." He reached for me, giving my arm an affectionate squeeze.

I cleared my throat. "It is not mere charity, I assure you, Countess. Investing in the city's education system is an investment into the future of Vorograad. An educated population is more likely to grow up healthy and contribute to the community in noticeable ways. Human politics improve, which makes it easier for us to coexist; the economy improves, which puts money in our pockets; and the population is more likely



to receive healthcare and avoid drug addiction, which puts blood in our banks.” The problem with older vampires was that they were so used to existing outside of society that the idea of creating a symbiotic relationship with humanity seemed invasive to them. I was certain Philippa wouldn’t be too keen to consider the benefit or wellbeing of anyone but herself, but my husband’s presence offered an advantage. Philippa’s eyes widened at the explanation, and it was punctuated with a sharp laugh. “Can you imagine, Luken? Books and paper are going to make Vorograad the new state capital. What a charming idea.” She drained the last of the blood from her glass and set it on the tablecloth with a dainty flourish.

My husband signaled the waiter again to refill the Countess’ glass before taking another sip himself. “Sociologically speaking, of course, Anaïs is quite right. A good education system is the foundation for a stronger society. If human lives improve, that only creates better quality blood for us. It’s not unlike a farmer investing in the wellbeing of his livestock. You have to cultivate healthy humans if you want the best possible blood.”

That wasn’t what I’d meant at all, but I wasn’t sure how I could recover now. “Of course, I would never compare human beings to cattle. I only meant that the city is an ecosystem. If you want things to improve for vampires, things must be approached holistically, that’s all.”

The Countess gave that high, toneless laugh she had, usually reserved only for my husband. Now, I feared, it had been the result of my own doing. “Oh, darling, there’s no need to be politically correct here. You’re in old company. We vampires who have a few centuries of experience possess a unique understanding of how humans really should be

dealt with, and you're absolutely right. I've always felt that vampires were the newest kind of pastoralists, a highly evolved result of the food chain." Her thin lips pursed in her own certainty.

It was clear there was no way to recover the situation. Accepting the Countess' donation to the school drive was no longer the goal of the evening, but the unhappy result of my attempt at explaining my plans for the city to someone so clearly bent on a different goal altogether. I opened my mouth to respond, but found I had nothing to say on the subject that could in any way change her mind or reverse the course of conversation. I closed my mouth and looked down at the table.

"Well then, I think I can trust that you'll be at my wife's side next month, Countess. You have always been such a tireless supporter of the city." Luken had let go of my arm. Their conversation continued, but I wasn't listening. I wondered how many more hours this fundraiser would last and tried to focus on how much money Countess Philippa had contributed to the Foundation. Probably enough to feed the city for several months.

I wondered if she'd count that in cattle.

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Redecorating had been Luken's idea, to help me feel more at home. It was easy to feel like a guest in my own house once I moved in. Luken's father and his second wife had decorated their home decades before I was even born, and although I'm sure they had their merits, they had some very questionable taste. My guess was that the last time the house had been decorated was sometime in the 1920s, given the small hexagonal tile in

the bathroom and kitchen and the outdated brass fixtures. The house itself was beautiful in design, traditional Spanish Mediterranean architecture common to Florida built with many Moorish accents, mostly in the shapes of the archways, windows, and doors.

I had never asked about how many rooms there were, but just exploring in our first few weeks of marriage, I had discovered at least twenty two. The halls were filled with paintings of vampires I had never met and cities I had never visited. Some of the closets still had clothes in them. Breeches and tunics packed inside wooden boxes, moth eaten and worn with use. Hats of various eras, cravats, and ambiguously gendered shoes. Sometimes Luken recalled who they had belonged to, other times he was unsure. He asked me if I wanted to get rid of them, but I shook my head, afraid to disturb the things that had lived in this house longer than I had.

Our bedroom was the worst of it, though it took me years to mention how distasteful I thought it was. The olive drab and faded gold everywhere, from the damask of the wallpaper to the heavy velvet draperies hung from the ceiling. Even though we opened the drapes nightly, I could still see dust motes floating away from the fabric in the dull light of the brass lamps. I wondered if maybe the velvet itself was beginning to disintegrate with age. Half of the walls were eclipsed by raised panel wainscoting, the wood stained a dark espresso color that matched the canopy bed, the chests of drawers, the reading chairs and end tables. The woodwork wasn't ugly, the carvings in some pieces were ornate and exotic. The privacy screens that hid the doors to our dressing rooms, the window shutters that unfolded in the day like panels of hidden art, and the sigil of house Voropaeva, a great beast keeping watch over us above fireplace.

I was worried that a decorator wouldn't want to come all the way to our estate so late at night, but it turned out with a high enough retainer, they became very flexible to our hours. I picked a woman named Genevieve Graham from her portfolio online. She made it to our appointment at nine on the dot, and smiled brightly at me when I opened the door.

"Please, come in." I stepped back to allow her room to pass. If she had been a vampire, I would have been more specific with my greeting. Friends and allies are welcome in our home. Human courtesies were not based on the idea that someone might exsanguinate you in your own living room.

She wore jeans and a black blouse under a tan blazer. Her high heels clicked on the tile in the front hall and there was a binder thick with papers and fabrics tucked under one of her arms. Her hair had been bleached a tasteful shade of dark blonde. "Your home is absolutely gorgeous. Those columns and the balustrades are to die for."

"Thank you. My husband inherited it. It's been in his family for generations." Only two generations, but Genevieve didn't need to know that.

"I'll bet. It looks like it was built back in the 1800s." She studied the windows and crown molding as I led her through the living room and into the back hallway, past the doors to the kitchen and dining rooms and Luken's empty study.

I had left the lights on in the bedroom, but locked the double doors out of habit. I opened them for her while she waited in the hall, studying the painting of Luken's great aunt in the hallway. It wasn't until I opened the slide in the second door that I

remembered she'd been painted holding a whip. Maybe Genevieve would mistake her for an equestrian.

Thankfully, she reserved her impressions for the bedroom. "Oh wow, these antiques are immaculate. Yeah, we can definitely repurpose these. If we don't use them in here, we can spread them throughout the house." Her heels sank into the thick rug under the seating area. It had been golden at some point, to match the wallpaper, but now it just looked like a muddy brown.

"Oh good. I don't want to get rid of anything. If we replace something, let's put it in another room or store it somewhere." It wasn't my place to throw away someone else's things. I planned to make sure Luken was alright with removing anything we wanted to take out, despite his assertions that I could do what I liked.

"What is this?" She pointed to a series of seven horizontal pieces of old wood, assembled one above the other on upholstered supports that were mounted on the wall. It took up most of the wall over the writing desk, and if stood up on its side, it may have been taller than me.

"Oh, that is a txalaparta. It's a traditional xylophone from Basque. Family heirloom." I stepped toward it, imagining how difficult it would have been to play. It was Luken's actually, from the old country. He was too young to remember when his family had lived in the old country before that one, back where our ancestors originated. He told me he hadn't played the instrument since he was a boy. It was one of the few things in the room that I knew Luken had put there, something that wasn't a remnant of his father's life. "I'd like to keep it, if possible. We could move it, maybe?"

“Wow that’s so crazy. I love it. Yeah, what a terrific focal point.” She paused to look at it a little longer, walking carefully through the carpeting from one end to the other. “It’s so big.”

“Yes, it takes two people to play it.”

“Aw, how romantic.” Genevieve turned to look at me, her face bright with potential.

I had never thought of it that way before. “It is,” I agreed.

She moved on to the chairs next, taking notes in her binder on whether I preferred one style over another, what kind of upholstery I was interested in. We discussed table sizes and function, and each sat in both chairs and on the sofa in order to assess comfort, depth, and height.

“Tell me about this bed,” she asked finally, leaning over to inspect the woodwork along the bottom. “This is very imposing. It kind of overwhelms the room a bit.” She stepped backwards to regard its height.

“Well,” I didn’t want to say anything mean. It had been my husband’s bed for years. “I do think it’s a bit masculine. I definitely would like to move this to a guest room or something, but I’d like another bed if we can.”

“We can do anything you like. What kind of bed are you thinking of?”

“It has to be another canopy. We have trouble sleeping, so the curtains on the bed and the windows have to be blackout. Right now, we have little hooks sewn in so that

they hook to the frame on all four sides, but I was hoping we could do something more modern and convenient.”

“Oh definitely. Off the top of my head, we could embroider some small magnets so that you don’t have to feel around in the dark.” Her binder sat in the crook of her arm while she took more notes. Her pen had *Graham Designs* written down the side in golden script. She set it down on the coffee table when she was finished, turning to some embossed wallpaper samples. “So here’s, what I’m thinking. Much more subtle anaglypta wallpaper in a lighter, warmer color, like a dove grey maybe? We could paint over all of this gorgeous wainscoting in a Navajo white, just really open everything up and make it brighter. And some more modern, geometric fabrics to update the space, give it back some of that youth.” Underneath her book of wallpaper samples were selected paint chips and a ring of upholstery swatches for me to look at.

“That sounds lovely. Just promise me nothing damask.”

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Betsey’s art gallery, appropriately named *The French Quarter*, was mostly glass walls and orange marble floors, though she did have some white walls positioned for the installment of various works, their faces illuminated by lamps extending down from the ceiling like steel swan’s necks.

This exhibition was some kind of abstract painter. I was no artist, so I couldn’t say if this was more surrealist or avant-garde work. The first painting I looked at was taller than I was and mostly painted a sickly yellow color washed with brown. Splashes of green and blue punctuated an array of strange shapes and gradients of yellow.

I heard Betsey approach me, the click of her heels on the tile floor unmistakable. She had changed her hair color again. A shade just darker than lavender highlighted by her natural dark brown here and there. Her bangs were twisted into a pin curl, their color highlighting the smoky topaz of her skin. “What do you think? It’s so...” Her hands moved around as she struggled to find the right words. “*Passionate and base*. It’s like he stripped himself down of any inhibition and painted his soul.”

I loved how happy it made her, though I couldn’t speak to the same interpretation. I did my best to think of something positive. “It’s very colorful.”

She nodded, gaze still locked on the canvas. “His palette is so evocative of emotion.”

I touched fingers to her arm to indicate I was moving on to another piece and she waved me away absently. The next display was black and white, with streaks of color and a dark, ominous circle in the center. I stared at it and wondered what the message was supposed to be.

“It kind of looks like they left a black canvas on a rooftop and let birds shit on it until they got this. You know, maybe smeared it around a little. Made sure it really got in there.”

A snort of laughter erupted from me before I could help it. I turned to see who had spoken. It was the boy from the train. Duchess Stoljarova’s human. Though he wasn’t human now, and no longer a boy. His hair was longer and still wild, a curling halo around his pale face. The gaunt of his cheekbones was more pronounced, his jaw more angular. His neck had no pulse.

“Good evening, Duchess,” he said.



My smile was glued in place and I couldn't move. It took me an embarrassing amount of time to respond. "I—good evening."

"I'm sorry, is this your favorite piece in the collection?" He lifted his chin towards the painting but it took me too long to move my focus from him.

"No, I'm afraid I haven't picked a favorite yet." Even if Betsey pressed me, I wasn't sure that I could be forced to choose which of these were the least awful. I was already looking to the next piece, my boots making soft clicking sounds on the glossy tile floor.

The next piece over was a horizontal canvas mounted on a narrow wall and lit from above. It was more chaotic than the other pieces and brought to mind the sensation of bees swarming and vibrating along the canvas. Only the bees were layers of thick oil paint in grey and yellow, spiraling across and on top of each other, competing for space. I stopped walking to consider it. A vampire couple I didn't recognize lingered with me before heading in the opposite direction. I heard Aaron walk up behind me. He was silent as he stood taking it in.

"I feel like I can relate to this one more, but I'm not sure that I like that feeling." My voice came out quiet, almost a murmur. I wasn't sure he'd heard me until he answered.

"I think I know what you mean." He took a step towards it and I noticed he was wearing a suit. It was such a human thing to wear that I almost forgot the painting. "It kind of reminds me of a bad trip, you know? Where you don't really know where or who you are and you have no idea whose vomit is on the floor. Or maybe it just reminds me of

vomit. That could be it.” He shifted his head to one side as if acknowledging the validity of his new theory.

I smiled but managed to stifle a laugh. “It’s not that bad.”

Aaron turned to look at me and his eyes seemed somehow bluer than they had years ago. There was a fine layer of stubble growing on his cheeks and neck. “Forgive me, Duchess but I think maybe you aren’t well enough acquainted with vomit to make that call.”

I laughed despite the grotesque nature of the statement. “That may be a fair assessment.” The sound of laughter drifted from the front of the gallery.

“Do you ever think about how much paint had to die for this installment?” He leaned his head back as he considered it. “I mean, can you even buy oil paint by the can? Because I think this artist must have to. You know, buy in bulk.”

I shook my head. “Be kind. This is my friend’s gallery and she is very proud of the work here.”

He shrugged. “I’m not saying it’s a bad thing. Very economical. And you can even use them as weapons in a home invasion like Macaulay Culkin.”

“I’m not sure who that is.” I shook my head and tried to think of something nice to say about the painting. All I could think of was a plague of locusts.

“You know, the kid from *Home Alone*?” He moved past me, heading for the next painting over. “Don’t tell me you never saw *Home Alone*.”

Maybe he had the right idea and the next painting would be better. I took slow steps across the veined orange floor to approach him, careful to leave space between us. The painting he was looking at was various shades of blue layered over each other. The

brush strokes were thick and reassuring. “It kind of looks like what calm feels like. Or maybe dreaming.”

“You dream?” The younger vampire turned but didn’t close the space between us.  
“What do you dream about?”

Most of my dreams were strange abstractions of my present life or recollections of my childhood. Sometimes when I slept I found myself in Lavringraad, where my father was still alive and happy, and Karl Erik and I would run through the gardens under starlit skies. “Oh, you know. Melting clocks and paradoxical stairs. The usual.”

“I had a dream about you once.” He took a step closer.

“I think this painting is my favorite so far.” Or at least, it wasn’t as offensive to the eyes as the other ones we’d looked at. I’d have something good to tell Betsey. I just hoped she wouldn’t send this one home with me, like the time I’d complimented a rather childlike painting of an elephant. The elephant now hung beside my dressing table. I would have to be less enthusiastic with my support. Although, now that I thought of it, this might have been an improvement from the elephant.

“Yeah? I don’t know. This one just kind of looks like a Smurf threw up instead.”  
He spread his arms as if to imply that nothing could be done for it.

I didn’t know what a Smurf was, but I decided it was better not to ask. “So which one is your favorite then?” I stood on tiptoe to get a better view of the gallery. Betsey was standing with a handsome gentleman in the corner and I could hear her flirtatious giggles from here.

“Oh, I’m not really a big fan of contemporary art. These all kind of look less like art to me and more like paint being held hostage on the canvas. Personally, I think art

should say something, or feel something.” Aaron shook his head, as if this were such a waste.

I laughed. “Well, if you’re not a fan of the art, then what are you doing here?”

He took another step towards me. “Well you know, it’s really hard to get a ticket to one of your fundraisers. I tried, but I guess it’s all about who you know these days. I guess I’m too new to be invited to the good parties.” His gaze was focused on me, watching for my reaction.

We held each other’s gaze until a familiar voice called my name. Betsey sauntered up beside us and offered Aaron a glass of blood. “Well I see you two have been acquainted. Ana, did you know Aaron is from Louisiana, too? He’s not from New Orleans, but I figure we should look out for each other all the same. Apparently, he loves art.” She paused to take a sip from her own glass.

“So I’ve heard. He’s particularly fond of this blue one here. He told me it reminded him of a dream he once had. Personally, I think it’s very much like Frankenthaler’s work. Your friend here has excellent taste in paintings.” Betsey let me take her glass as she considered the painting in question. I lifted the crystal to my lips and drank.

“It is quite a moving piece. I immediately thought of the ocean, of course, but it feels more transcendent than that. It’s as if he was trying to capture the essence of serenity. I’m so pleased you’re taken with it. Perhaps you should take it back to Stoljagraad with you.” Betsey linked her arm around Aaron’s. Her cheeks seemed pinker than they had when I’d arrived.

“Aw thanks, Betsey. But I actually don’t think I’ll be heading back to Stoljagraad anytime soon. I’m starting to like Vorograad—and besides, I just couldn’t take this painting from the Duchess here. She told me it was her favorite out of the entire collection tonight. I tell you what, if you’d have your man pack it up, I’d love to send it home with her, my treat. She’s been so nice to me tonight.”

Betsey turned to him, her face bright. “Well aren’t you a peach. I’ll tell him to box it up right now. You know, it’s the perfect companion piece to that elephant painting you have.” She reached out and gave my shoulder a quick squeeze before heading towards the front desk.

As soon as she was out of earshot, I turned to Aaron. “I can’t believe you did that. Now she’s going to put that in my car and expect it to be on my bedroom wall the next time she comes to call.” I shook my head.

“It’s something for you to remember me by. I think it would look nice in a bedroom.” He lifted his chin towards me. “You know, for when you dream.”

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That night Luken noticed the new painting on the wall as he got ready for bed. He secured the robe around his waist with a tug on the sash. “This is new.” He took a step towards the wall to regard the piece. “I think it’s perfect for you.”

I pulled a bobby pin from my hair and a lock of hair fell loose against my neck. The metal made a sound as I placed it on the marble surface of the vanity. “How do you mean, for me?” I glanced up at him in the mirror.

“Just your personality. You’re elegant and composed. The painting is a tribute to everything having its place and being at ease. Don’t you agree?” He lifted a hand to his chin in consideration.

I turned around in my seat, resting on arm on the back of the tufted chair. “You don’t find it to be too... blue?” I tilted my head to one side, reconsidering how the painting suited the room. The wallpaper in here was still an awful damask, but the blue toned it down and made it seem somehow less oppressive and masculine. It hadn’t seemed feminine in the gallery, but it made the room feel more like someone lived here other than my husband.

“Not at all. I think it was very kind of Betsey to send it home with you. It very much compliments the elephant in your dressing closet.” He stepped away from the wall and began turning down the comforter on the bed.

I hesitated before turning back towards the vanity. “Yes it was. She’s very sweet. I think I’ll write her a thank you note before bed.” Another cluster of bobby pins and my hair fell down past my shoulders.

“That’s precisely what I meant before. You’re so good and considerate.” He swung his legs up under the sheets and reached for the copy of *Moby Dick* sitting on his nightstand. “Don’t be too long, or I’ll be lonely.”

I shook my head, although I didn’t think he saw the movement. “I won’t be long at all.” I paused to look at my reflection in the mirror. I was pale and colorless. I had never lied to my husband before. I turned back towards the bed, but he was already engrossed in the pages of his book. I reached for the box of stationary on one side of the table.

*To my thoughtful benefactor—*

*My sincerest thanks for your gift. The painting adds the perfect sense of comfort to my home. Your generosity is appreciated and will of course warrant an invitation to all the good parties. A peaceful eternity to you.*

— A

*Chapter Six*

Luken hated museums. It was easy to forget how much older than me he was until he said something anachronistic, like how he missed the days when everyone wore a hat, or how he hated that the items that once were part of someone's life ended up behind glass. The last time I took him to the opening of an exhibit was in our first year of marriage. It had been a traveling showcase of salvaged items from the RMS *Titanic*. On the first wall we saw a mounted display of platters, plates, saucers, and silverware. Luken stared at it for a long while, his spine straight and his shoulders back. His arm stiffened under my hands, and all I could think was that neither one of us had ever had a need for dishes or flatware.

"This is it." His voice was soft and quiet, almost a murmur. "This is all that remains of these people's lives." I stood with him, waiting until he was ready to move to the next display. Luken wasn't reading the descriptions below each item, but I was. I wanted to know what each fork and serving spoon was for. The menus were fascinating to me. I made a mental note to look up what exactly "cockie leekie" was on my phone.

The next feature was a matched pair of plates and assorted cutlery assembled on a table rather than mounted on the wall. Behind the utensils was a square pedestal that held up crystal drinking glasses. They seemed too clean to have been picked up off the ocean floor. I hazarded a glance at Luken, my fingers still hanging on to the inside of his coat sleeve.

We moved on to reconstructions of the ship's hull accompanied by bits and pieces of the ship itself. Luken considered the sections of riveted metal. "It looks so small."



His mouth was drawn in a way I hadn't seen before, and I couldn't decide if it was sadness or anger—perhaps both. There was something else there, too, something in the crease of his brow and the tension in his jaw that I didn't recognize. It unsettled me to see an expression on my husband's face that I didn't know. "Well, they wanted to bring the whole ship, but it wouldn't fit." I gave his arm a squeeze and hoped he would smile at me, that the look on his face would be replaced by good humor.

He was still studying the reproduction of the ship's bow on the ocean floor, the twisted metal torn away from the rest of the hull like margins of notebook paper. The harsh overhead lights illuminated his irises and made their usual jade green retract around the pupil, replaced instead by a shade of cerulean I had never seen before. Had his eyes always had some blue to them? I tried to remember.

"The ship that my father and I came to America on wasn't so different from this one," he remarked. "The technology wasn't so advanced back then, of course. Our ships were wooden."

I didn't know much about Luken's father. I had seen him only once when I was a child. It was at a party my mother had thrown. Luken and his father, Marko, had attended with Marko's second wife. Luken's mother had died in Basque centuries before I was born. Of course, they had both seemed so much older to me at the time. I remembered Marko as looking younger than his son did. He had been shorter, although they shared the same aquiline nose and hooded, downturned eyes. On Luken, the eyes struck me as kind and sometimes sad. On his father, they had seemed flat and disapproving. Most of what I remembered of Luken's father was the severity of his expression and tone. He had been a humorless man. What had struck me most as a child was that he wouldn't dance, not even

with his wife. Luken had danced with her instead, and he was one of the few dignitaries to acknowledge my existence. The second time I saw Luken had been after his father had died. He had said nothing during the length of the funeral.

“We can go home if you like,” I said.

He considered the idea for a moment before shaking his head. “We have an obligation to fulfill. I wouldn’t want to offend our host.”

Beyond the showcases of plates were pieces of rock that looked like cement maybe, sculpted to look like the ocean floor. Imbedded in one piece were matching pairs of shoes. Protruding from the other was a bathtub complete with pipes that sat at an almost ninety degree angle. I wasn’t sure which of them was worse. Perhaps the shoes, though I couldn’t say why. “We could make a polite excuse. It’s not so early in the evening.”

“There’s no need.” He said, leading us to the next case. This one had jewelry displayed on blue velvet, a diamond necklace and golden pocket watch surrounded by smaller baubles. Earrings and cufflinks, a tarnished broach. The pocket watch reminded me of the one Luken wore, and I wondered if they had been purchased in the same decade.

“If I had known it would upset you, I wouldn’t have insisted you come with me. I’m sorry.” Clearly this had been a bad decision.

“My treasure, fifteen hundred people died when this boat sank. Fifty three of them were ours, floating in freezing waters just waiting for the sun to rise. It was an upsetting and needless circumstance.” His voice was strained, as though his reaction had been the only reasonable response.

I hesitated, unsure if answering him would only upset the situation further. I didn't want him to think me heartless. I had been trying to do something good, something constructive. Surely he could understand that. "It is very sad, but the exhibit is for a good cause. We're hoping to raise enough money to restore Flagler Station." I had argued with the historical society for a more useful and educational landmark than an abandoned train station, but I had been almost unanimously outvoted. The vote wasn't altogether surprising, considering I'd only joined that year, and the few other vampires in the society were only nominal members.

"A train station?"

"Yes. We're going to restore it and make it a landmark."

"Why?"

"Well, it's very old," I said. "It was built in the early 1800s."

"I meant why repair it? Is anyone using it?" He wasn't looking at the display of personal effects anymore. A young couple passed behind us, clearly displeased that we were not moving along to the next installation at a reasonable pace. The woman's dress had too many sequins, and her companion wore too much cologne.

"No, it would be for tourists."

"Because we are so limited in our city's tourism?" If he had smiled, the question might have seemed more like a joke. He wasn't smiling.

"The train station would not have been my first choice, but it's part of an ongoing program I want to be part of. Bringing landmarks back to their glory beautifies the city, which makes it easier to gentrify neighborhoods and improve the standard of living. After the station, we'd like to start on some of the parks."

He gave a nod, but didn't respond. Beyond the glass case in front of us was a doorway leading to another part of the exhibit. I could see a projection of a map on the wall that illustrated the ship's route, its intended destination, and where the ruins had been found.

"I know that your work is vitally important to everyone in this city. You're keeping us all safe, and that is the first priority. I just want to make sure that our city, the city you work so hard to protect, stays just as valuable as the day you inherited it. That's my contribution. Or I would like it to be, anyway."

His posture eased, and I felt him relax by degrees beside me. "Your heart is in the right place," he assured me, "but we must not sacrifice integrity in accomplishing our goals."

If he hadn't been holding my arm, I would have stepped away from him, I was so surprised. "I'm not sure I understand. How are we sacrificing integrity by honoring the men and women who died when this ship sank?" I had to forcibly quiet my tone halfway through the question.

"There is nothing honorable about parading death for the novelty of it."

I had no idea what to say to that. It hadn't occurred to me that anyone might view the exhibit that way. Were we exploiting a tragedy? "I thought it was a very respectful memorial."

"Any one of us who was alive when it happened does not need a memorial to be reminded of that awful night."

Of course he had been alive when the *Titanic* sank. I should have thought of that. I was too young to know any better. He was the only one here old enough to remember. “Humans don’t remember these things. Perhaps the memorial is for them.”

“It doesn’t matter if humans remember,” he answered.

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I went to museum openings alone after that, even after almost four years with the historical society. This year our exhibit was of ancient civilizations. Roman tombstones, Minoan bowls, and coins from across the Mediterranean. It had been a rousing success, supplying us with more than our goal to restore one of the oldest neighborhoods in the city.

Ryland drove me home, as he always did, in relative silence. I emailed the accountant about the funds we had made and how they should be earmarked before texting Betsey about how she’d missed all of the frescoes and mosaics. Truth be told, there was another reason I’d wanted to go to the opening alone that had nothing to do with my husband’s feelings about museums, and I was disappointed that Betsey and her new friend hadn’t come.

Aaron had been attending many of the social engagements on my calendar lately, and I was becoming accustomed to his presence, even as I pretended to ignore it. Betsey finds it amusing, and teases me about how often we see each other, and I smile and tell her it’s always lovely to see her. Why hadn’t they come to the museum? Had something changed? I shouldn’t care if they came or not. It didn’t matter. But I couldn’t stop

thinking about it. I was so absorbed in my own thoughts that I didn't notice the car had stopped.

We weren't at the house yet, but the road we were on was rural and didn't have any intersections that would require this kind of a stall. My cell phone was still in my hand when the car door opened. Ryland was not on the other side. It was a vampire I did not recognize, and he was holding a gun.

"Get out." His voice was calm and firm with an accent I couldn't identify. Maybe something Scandinavian. He had died in his late thirties, maybe early forties, and he wore a brown jacket over a grey hoodie.

I blinked at him, stunned. He rolled his eyes, then leaned into the doorway. I shrank from him, but there wasn't much room for me to evade him in the back of the car. He gripped my forearm and yanked me back towards him. I was indignant and confused. What vampire in his right mind would lay a hand on the duchess of the city?

"Who the hell are you? What is going on?" I demanded answers, unable to fully grasp the situation. The man had successfully dragged me outside, and I could see the two vampires standing with him. There was a bullet hole in the driver's side window. Blood splattered various shades of reddish black over the center console. Flecks of crimson painted the passenger's window on the opposite side of the car. I could smell the blood, but it smelled dead and empty. Vampire's blood offered very little in the way of taste or nourishment. Luken had trusted Ryland with my safety since our marriage, and now he was lying in there. My brain didn't have time to catch up. The man with the accent was pulling my arms together and a sudden burning sensation brought a pathetic sound from my mouth. He was tying my wrists together with something made of silver.

“My apologies, your grace, but you would break anything else.” He was still so horribly calm, and I couldn’t think of how to answer him. “Hold still.”

I tried to turn towards him, ignoring his command, but any movement I made caused the chains around my wrists to touch new skin. The pain was immediate and hot. There was a separate, sharper pain in my arm and I had a moment to gasp before I realized there was a syringe in it.

“What the hell is that?” My voice was weak and afraid. I hated how frail it sounded.

“Sedative. It will make things easier. Come on.” He pulled the syringe out, capped it, and pushed me forward with an arm on my shoulder. I didn’t move. I didn’t know what to do. These men were armed and they knew who I was.

“What do you want?” Maybe this was for ransom. Had things become so miserable for our people that this was how they planned to remedy the issue?

“If you don’t get moving, you won’t make it to the car and we’ll have to carry you.” His voice drifted towards the end of the sentence and he seemed far away. He pushed at my back again, harder this time, and I stumbled onto the pavement, my knees and shoulder taking the brunt of my fall.

I sucked in air, but the pain felt abstract and remote, like it was someone else with skinned knees bleeding on the inside of her dress. I felt his hand on my arm again, and I was back on my feet, though I couldn’t remember getting up. When he pushed me again, I moved in awkward, drunken steps. I regretted wearing shoes with such high heels.

“Oh for—here.” The man linked his arm in mine, guiding me from behind my back and matching my gait step by step. It occurred to me dimly, like some bulb lit miles

away, that I should struggle or be frightened, that I should fight him off of me, but it was hard enough to stay standing or keep my eyes open. By the time we got to the car, I was resting most of my weight on him, and I couldn't even identify the car we were at. It was black. That was all I could see. He helped me into the backseat, and that's all I remembered of being abducted.

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I awoke in a well-lit room. Too well-lit. I squinted and blinked as I tried to figure out where I was. It seemed to be a bedroom. The bedspread I was lying on was white and soft, probably stuffed with down. My immediate thought was concern that I'd gotten blood on it. It didn't matter. The bed faced French doors leading out onto a balcony and the sound of ocean waves on a beach floated up from below. Expensive drapes framed the door on either side, swaying with the breeze. The walls were a tasteful beige color, and the cashmere throw folded at the end of the bed matched. I sat up carefully, my wrists searing with pain and my head spinning. I wasn't tied up anymore, but the burns hadn't healed yet. Angry red lines bisected my wrists. How long had I been out for? Did Luken know that I was gone?

Dawn still felt far away, so I couldn't have been asleep more than an hour, which meant we were still in the city or near it. I could feel four vampires nearby, at least two inside the house. The others might have been outside. It was difficult to say without knowing how big the house was. It had to be sizable to be on the beach. Beachfront property was expensive. One of the vampire's presences moved, and I realized it was coming closer to me just before the door opened.



The vampire who had taken me from the car stepped in. The door to the bedroom was around a corner I couldn't see past. There was silence beyond the door he'd come through. Only the ocean waves, buzzing insects, and rustling palm fronds from outside. He saw that I was awake and cleared the space between us in a few quick steps, bending down to look me in the eye.

I leaned away from him, unsure of what he was doing. "Don't touch me."

He paused for a moment before leaning back. "I was checking your pupils." He took a step away from me, glancing around the room before deciding on a taupe upholstered chaise by the French doors. He sat down and held up three fingers. "How many fingers?"

"Fuck you." I might have spat. But I'd never spit on anyone before.

He smiled. "I appreciate that, but I have to make sure that you're not all messed up from the drugs. Now what's more important, me fucking myself or making sure that you're healthy?"

I glared at him. His eyes were dark and alert, his nose had a strong, almost crooked arch to it, as though the bridge had been broken back when he'd been human. A moustache and goatee met a thin line of facial hair tracing the square of his jaw and moving upward to meet his hair. There was a touch of grey at his temples.

My wrists and forearms ached and my mind felt blurry. I didn't want to answer him, but I had no idea what was in that needle. "Three."

"Very good." He leaned forward in the seat, elbows resting on his knees. He was definitely the oldest of the vampires here, though I wasn't sure if I'd say he had been dead more than fifty years. Perhaps sixty, at most. The others felt younger, two of them

much closer to my own age, and the last maybe a decade dead, maybe less. “Can you tell me your name?”

“You know my name.” I said. He had called me “your grace” earlier, at least once. It was hard to remember, but I knew that much. “What’s your name?”

“I’m Hans. I want to make sure that you know who you are.” He had the same sort of nonchalance to his demeanor as he had when he’d told me to get out of the car. It pissed me off how calm he was.

“Anaïs Elizabeth Lavrina Voropaeva.” My wrists were killing me. The burns were worst where I had been tied, but my forearms had shiny, pink marks anywhere the silver had touched me. I was sure I smelled my own blood. My dress was probably ruined. “Are you going to tell me why I’m here?”

“You’re here because I have some questions for you. If you tell me what I need to know, this can go very easily for us both. If not, then...” He spread his hands, implying that I could imagine how things might go.

My head hurt, and the more I tried to think about what information I could possibly know that would be of use to some criminal, the more confused I became. “I don’t understand. It’s not like I have access to any state secrets or missile launch codes.”

“Let’s talk blood.” He glanced down at the watch on his wrist before looking back at me. “How many units of blood does Vorograad have?”

“How would I know that?” Math had always been my worst subject, and aside from the numbers I reviewed on occasion, that was only a reflection of what vampire-owned blood banks had access to or how much blood was currently in transit. It wasn’t an accurate reflection of every unit of blood in the city. For that, I’d need access to not

only my own files but also that of every hospital in the county—and that didn't include private sources. Blood dealers or private buyers. I knew Luken had a privately owned store. Some was kept at the house for emergencies. There was another few hundred cases in cold storage somewhere. I didn't know how many exactly.

I shrugged and it hurt. "Even if I could give you the exact number of units my husband could get his hands on, that's only maybe half of the supply of legal blood in the city. A lot of that blood goes to distributors for our people to eat and then there's the units that go to replication research. Legal blood doesn't account for blood dealers and rogues who obtain their own supply with no questions asked. Your question is too general."

"You know what I'm asking you. After the blood that is consumed and the blood that goes to research, how much do you have leftover? How much blood does House Voropaeva have to its name?"

The more important question was why did he want to know? Was he trying to calculate our wealth through blood and money? It might have provided a crude but efficient method for calculating a war chest. I shook my head carefully, it hurt to move much and my head was starting to pound. I looked down at the floor and noticed that the beige carpet was an area rug. There was a wooden floor leading out onto the balcony. I felt nauseous. Maybe I needed to eat something. Or maybe that was the drugs. "You would have to ask my husband. I only have access to the numbers for the Foundation—that doesn't account for anything that Vorograad may have stockpiled somewhere."

It was clear that he didn't believe me. "I assume you're referring to the Polidori Foundation. Very well. How much blood does the Foundation have access to?"

“What does it matter? That’s only a fraction of the blood in the city. There’s no way to extrapolate the city’s entire supply of blood from that.” My leg was falling asleep and I shifted my weight on the mattress, careful not to touch my arms or wrists to the bedding. I didn’t want him to see how much they still hurt to touch.

“Well if it doesn’t matter, then it wouldn’t be a problem to tell me, now would it?” There was a sharpness to his tone that promised I couldn’t evade his questions forever. Maybe it didn’t matter if I told him—but if he was willing to kidnap a duchess to find out the information, I was willing to bet that there was a very good reason not to tell him.

“Maybe it wouldn’t, but you certainly wouldn’t be able to use any of this information.” I sat up, straightening my back and shoulders.

“And why is that?”

“Because whatever your exit strategy here is, my husband will find you, or my brother will. This was a suicide mission. You should all just leave while you still can.” I pursed my lips and set my jaw, trying to look as sure of myself as possible. Maybe Luken might not find them, but I knew that Karl Erik would hunt Hans down, and my husband would help him. We were two of the strongest cities in Florida. Wherever they went, they wouldn’t get far.

Hans smiled, nodding to show me that he understood what I was saying, or maybe to indicate that it was a valid point. “Your grace, I tracked you for weeks without your security noticing. I’ve had you here for several hours, and I doubt your husband or brother even knows. I could have you tortured and killed before the sun came up and I’d

still have time to get to the airport.” It seemed like that was the end of his threat, but then he stood up and walked out the same way he’d entered, leaving me here alone.

I felt him walking over to where the three men sat, maybe in another room, maybe in another building. It was too far away from me to be sure. Could he be right? Could Luken have no idea that I was here? I thought back to the car and realized I’d dropped my cell phone when Hans had pulled me from the back seat. I had no way of sending for help. No way for them to track where I was. Maybe he would find my phone sitting on the side of the road next to a town car with a dead vampire in the driver’s seat and an open side door. He would be beside himself with worry. He would call Karl Erik. Something would be done. People would be looking for me, if they weren’t already. They had to be. I repeated that last part to myself several times because the alternative was too terrifying to hold in my mind: what if they weren’t?

What if Luken was sitting in his study reading about territory negotiations for Zelenskaya’s treaties? What if he was looking at the county lines and trying to figure out how many humans would be donating blood to Zelenskagraad’s hospitals and blood banks, while I sat here bleeding all alone? For the first time, I was afraid. Even through the grainy quality with which I could think, muddling through the drugs still being metabolized through my system, a cold tendril of fear crept up the back of my spine with gripping clarity. I was alone here. I had never been alone in my life. My husband had no idea where I was. And if I died, I wasn’t sure he would go to war over me. No, that was crazy. Of course he would go to war over me.

*Chapter Seven*

I was the first to wake. There wasn't another living soul in the house with me, but I knew given an hour or two they would begin to wake. The shutters had been bolted shut, although I didn't remember anyone closing them. I didn't remember much after the second dose of drugs. Just the vague thought that I could try jumping off the balcony to escape and that it might be worth a broken limb or two. I couldn't unbolt them yet; I could feel the sun hadn't finished setting. The shape of the nightstand was a blurry, black mass. I hit my hand trying to grope for the lamp, but the pain only registered very dimly and far away. The sudden illumination sent a much sharper and more immediate pain through my forehead and I groaned. Whatever they kept giving me was making the walls vibrate and my stomach churn.

It took me nearly ten minutes of blinking and covering my eyes to realize there was someone else in the room. Or there would be, come sundown. There was a little girl lying on the chaise. She looked like one of my niece's porcelain dolls. Her skin might have been even paler than mine, and her hair was a yellow halo spread out across the beige fabric. I felt nothing from her, but it was still early. Maybe she wasn't royal. Or maybe she was truly dead, and sunset wouldn't change anything. Why would they leave a dead child in the room with me? To frighten me? To prove that they had no qualms with killing?

Sitting up was difficult. Standing seemed like an impossibility. My body felt like so much ungainly weight, clumsy and uncooperative. It took me too long just to crawl to the far end of the bed, on top of the brown knit bed throw, and then the vast expanse of area rug between the bed and the chaise seemed more like an ocean. I collapsed onto the

blanket and let out a frustrated whimper. It didn't matter. She wasn't human and she wasn't royal, so I couldn't wake her up. She was either dead until the sun went down or she was dead permanently, and my being beside her wouldn't do anything to alter the situation. She looked so small lying there.

I waited. Staying conscious was difficult, and I lost spans of time to sleep, fading in and out of awareness. I was drifting when I felt Hans wake up. He was somewhere below us, on the first floor, I guessed. I knew it was him because he was the only vampire his age in the house. Unless he'd brought new people in since yesterday. He didn't move much. Maybe he was drinking his breakfast.

If the girl wasn't dead, she would wake soon. I hoped. Her legs were thin, sticking out from under the grey cotton fabric of her dress. She was wearing saddle shoes over polka dotted socks. One of the laces was untied.

I tried to sit up again. It took both arms to prop myself up, and I still felt unbalanced. It was better than when I first woke up, which reassured me. I knew my body would metabolize whatever was in my system, given time, but I had a feeling Hans had accounted for this. I was trying to calculate how many hours it had been since he'd dosed me last when I felt the girl wake up. One moment I was alone in the room, and then suddenly I wasn't. I looked to her, waiting for her to move or make a sound.

She inhaled and I saw her chest rise with the intake of air. Her eyes opened and she looked around, blinking, before she saw me. "Who are you?" She sat up slowly and raised a small hand to pull flaxen hair out of her face. Maybe it only seemed so yellow because her skin was so pale. I couldn't tell in the lamp light.

“I’m Ana. Are you okay?” She didn’t seem injured, just confused. Maybe they had drugged her, too. I knew that she couldn’t be royal because she had been completely lifeless while the sun was up, but now that she was awake, I was realizing what that meant. She felt old to me, not as old as Hans maybe, but she had Betsey beat by about a decade. I would guess maybe a century and a half? It was hard to be sure. I tried to remember how long ago making child vampires had been declared illegal. The 1930s? I had never met one before.

She nodded at my name and looked around the room. Her eyes were large and round. “Where are we?” She asked.

“I think we’re still in Vorograad. I’m not sure. We’re by the beach. I can smell the ocean.” Our voices sounded too loud to me. I would have held my head, but I was afraid if I let go of the bed that I would fall over. At least I was feeling more stable now than when I had first woken up. “What’s your name?”

She hesitated, her eyes tracing around the room and then back to me. “Elise.” She swung her legs over the seat to face me, letting the toes of her shoes touch the area rug on the floor. “Did they take you, too?” Her voice was quieter, like she was asking about a secret.

I nodded, then regretted the movement as my head swam.

There were buttons down the front of her dress and she looked too small for the seat. I wasn’t sure how old she’d been when she died, but she looked older than my niece. Maybe eight? Nine at most. “What do they want?”

It was a straightforward question, but I wasn’t sure I could provide as simple an answer. Hans had told me he wanted information, although that hardly illuminated his



purpose. There was also very little to indicate what they wanted from her. “I don’t know.” I wished I had something better to tell her.

The sounds of the ocean and insects seemed far away. I wanted to open the shutters and breathe fresh air, but I wasn’t sure I could stand yet. I was only just starting to feel like I could sit up without using both hands to steady myself.

“Do you think they’ll kill us?” She was looking down at the floor when she asked, like she was afraid of what my answer might be. Her voice was calm and she sat very still.

Hans didn’t seem stupid to me. I was certain he knew exactly what would happen if he acted on any of his threats, although maybe he was arrogant enough to think that he could escape before the repercussions caught up to him. There was a chance he would, but I doubted it, and I didn’t want to scare her. “No. I think he needs us.”

Her eyes flicked up to me, her expression unchanged. “For what?”

I didn’t have a good answer for that, either. “I’m not sure.” I hesitated, trying to think of something reassuring to say. Nothing came to mind. “Can you think of why they might have taken you?”

Elise raised eyebrows and nodded, as if this were all a foregone conclusion. “I can think of a few reasons. My family is in diamonds and I’m probably the one who would fit most easily in a car trunk. What about you?”

“I’m a duchess.” It sounded weird now. I did not feel nearly as important as the title implied, but that was certainly why Hans had taken me.

“You win.”

Her humor was dry and unexpected, but my head hurt too much to smile. The nausea was starting to pass though, and I felt a bit more like myself. Maybe in a few hours I could even try standing up. “Did they drug you?”

“No,” Elise shook her head, “but I guess I’m less of a threat.”

She was right. Even without Elise as impaired as I was, we had little hope of overpowering one of our captors. I didn’t have much faith in my ability to walk a straight line let alone fight someone.

“Can you check the windows? Maybe they didn’t lock them.” It seemed like a very stupid mistake to make. Hans wasn’t stupid, and Elise might seriously injure herself in a second floor drop. If we were even on the second floor.

She moved to the shutters in a blur that hurt my eyes. I had to close them while she tugged at the latches. The sound of metal hitting metal was not promising. “Any chance you got a bolt cutter hidden in that dress?” Her voice sounded like it came from the chaise again.

I would have shaken my head, but I didn’t want to make the dizziness worse. The only ways out were the windows or the door, both locked. I didn’t know how to pick a lock. Breaking the door down would be too loud. We couldn’t fight our way out. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Were you awake when they brought you here?”

Elise was still standing by the shuttered windows, studying how the panels interlocked. “Yeah, but I don’t know where we are. I couldn’t see out the windows and I didn’t hear anything but road noise.”

“The men who brought you here, did you see if they had cell phones?”

She gave up on the shutters and returned to the chaise, pulling her legs up to her chest and wrapping her arms around them. “Yeah, but I don’t think they’re going to let us make any calls.”

That was true, at least until they had to provide proof of life to someone. I didn’t say that last part out loud, though. “You ever picked a pocket before?”

Elise let her chin rest between her knees and smiled. “I mean, I’m no Oliver Twist, but I like the way you think. I’d have to get close to him without him realizing why.”

That would be a challenge. Hans wasn’t an idiot, as far as I could tell. Aside from his decision to kidnap a duchess and essentially place a death warrant on his head across two thirds of the state, he seemed to have his plans mostly together. It was really more arrogance than a lack of understanding. Arrogant men underestimated others. It made it less likely for him to see us as a threat—especially Elise. She was small and common.

“He needs us alive. So we need to make him think that might be an issue. Check all of these drawers for anything that would be very bad to ingest.” I wanted to look for myself but I was struggling to stay as still as possible so that the room didn’t start spinning again.

Elise moved for the nightstands first. Pens, a yellow sticky note pad, a small plastic flashlight. “You do realize that poisoning yourself will be extremely painful, right?” She closed the top drawer and opened the bottom. An alarm clock, a cell phone charger, and a pair of white slippers that looked as though they’d never been worn.

“It’s better than whatever he’s planning.” I watched her move from one side of the bed around to the other, rifling through sparse drawer contents before moving to the dresser against the far wall. “What do you have?”

She sighed, pushing one thing to the side and then another. “A change of sheets, some blankets. There was something else here. The right side of the drawer is empty.” She closed it and moved one below. “T-shirts and pants. Various sizes. Towels.”

Faking it was risky. I didn’t think of myself as a particularly accomplished actress. I couldn’t fake vomiting, but maybe I could try for a seizure. “Okay, I’ll have to think of something. Whatever I do, you have to get the cell phone and hide it. If he figures out what we’re doing, he’ll suspect why. Slip it under the bed with your foot or something. It’s fine if he catches us, as long as we get the phone.”

Elise nodded, her face grave. “What if he kills us for trying?”

Her fears weren’t misplaced, but there were a hundred reasons why Hans might decide to kill us regardless of what we did. Telling her that would have scared her more. “We’re going to have to take the risk to make sure we get out of here. Right now he needs us alive. We have to trust that until he gets what he wants, he’ll keep us that way. He’s going to have to come check on us eventually. I’ll create a distraction and you play up how concerned and afraid you are. Don’t let him leave with that phone, okay?”

I could tell she didn’t like the plan. She leaned back against the dresser, eyes focused on the floor. Maybe she was trying to calculate our odds of being killed. Or maybe she was wondering whether or not she could do it.

“Okay. I’ll do it.”

Now all we had to do was wait. They had to come in here eventually. Even if Hans didn't have any more questions for me, he likely would come up to drug me again, if not to feed us. The thought of food brought a wave of nausea and I gagged. Maybe I wouldn't have to fake being sick after all.

"Who are we going to call?" She was looking at me now, her voice bolstered. Maybe having a plan made her feel better, more hopeful.

It didn't matter how far out of the city we were, my brother was too far away. It would take him at least three hours to get anywhere close to our location. "We'll enable the GPS and send our coordinates to my husband."

"Your husband any good at kicking ass and taking names?"

"When he needs to be." I sounded unsure, even to me. I was grateful when Elise said nothing. I couldn't think of anyone else to call. I didn't know what to do.

She slid down the front of the dresser until she reached the floor, arranging the fabric of her dress around her legs. Her shoe was still untied. "I don't like waiting."

"Think of something else. Something that makes you happy," I said.

Elise nodded, her fingers picking at the hem of her skirt. "So what's Mr. Duchess like?"

"Stubborn." I smiled to take the bite out of the criticism, but I wasn't sure if it came across. Maybe it was too honest an answer. My husband was gifted with many attributes, but diffidence wasn't among them. He had the unique ability to be so assured of his world view that there was no room for self-doubt. In a way, it was almost idealistic. "Every woman should be so lucky to have a husband as principled as mine."

"Yeah, that's what I would want in a husband. Big, hulking principles."

Talking about something else must have been calming her down, if she was making jokes. That was good. “You should, though. There are many men out there who would lie to you and break your heart. An honest man is rare.” I thought of Karl Erik and how little Tabitha knew of his actual life.

Elise’s face was sober and I realized that I’d spoken to her as though she was the age she looked, as though she would grow up and be chased after by men who might desire her. That would never happen for Elise. She would be in that body forever.

I had to change the subject, divert her to something lighter. “He’s lovely though, if that’s what you meant. He’s got the best smile I think I’ve ever seen. Lights up his whole face, and he looks...” I wasn’t sure how to describe it. Luken’s smile made him look like a whole other person than he was. Someone young and happy— not my husband, buried under the weight of inherited responsibility. “Sweet.”

There were many woman who envied me my husband, I knew. Some were more obvious about it than others. He should have had no problem finding a wife, but he was a very exacting man, and he refused to settle for any woman that didn’t meet his standards. I wasn’t really sure how I had made the cut. The Countess Henderson might have been a better choice, but she wasn’t royal, and that disqualified her.

“That’s real cute and all, but smiles aren’t exactly going to get us out of here.”

She had a point, but I wasn’t sure I could move enough for a convincing performance. The pounding in my head had gone down, and I no longer felt the need to hold on to the bed to keep myself from falling over, but I was still keeping a lot of weight against the headboard.

“Give me a bit for the drugs to wear off.”

“Right. You’ll need your strength for pretending to be unconscious.” One side of her mouth twitched upward, as though she might have smiled under better circumstances.

“I might, if it doesn’t go well.” The twitch disappeared and I regretted saying it.

“What about you? Where are you from?”

“Belgium, originally, but all over, really. My brother and I don’t like to stay in one place, and most cities don’t want an oath from us anyway. We took a city once a while back, swore an oath for fifty years of fealty—didn’t make it more than a week before everyone started whispering, which became arguing, and that nearly ended up in a tribunal over whether or not I should be destroyed.”

I sat up straighter, angry now. “But they didn’t pass the law until after you’d been made,” I argued as though she were the one disagreeing and had to consciously adjust my tone.

“Yeah, the issue was whether or not the law should be retroactively applied. I mean, I don’t happen to know how many child vampires still live in this world, but making a ruling like that would’ve set a precedent that put them all in danger.” She chewed at her bottom lip, eyes fixed on the carpet under the chaise.

“So what happened?” Obviously she wasn’t dead, but that could have happened in a number of ways. I made a mental note to look the issue up in Luken’s records when I got home. If I got home.

“My brother happened. He went to the duchess and argued that an oath of fealty worked both ways, and that she was obligated to protect me. He didn’t make any direct threats, as far as I know, but he made it clear he was willing to take the issue to the crown, dispute the oath, maybe even start some kind of revolt. I’m not sure if he’d have

actually pulled any of that off, but I think in the end, the city couldn't afford to lose the money our business brought in. After that, we went abroad, avoided the states for a while."

And now she was kidnapped. In my city. "I imagine things were easier in Europe."

Elise shrugged. "Depends on where you go, really. It's all relative."

I wanted to say something supportive, something that might reassure her, but I couldn't think of anything helpful. I wanted to offer her a place here in Vorograad, should she want one, but I knew my husband would never agree to it. Luken would have found the idea of a child vampire abhorrent, and argued that supporting her would set a precedent of support for child vampires that he was not comfortable with. It was an argument I would lose.

"It's okay," she said, as though she knew what I'd been thinking. "I know I freak people out. I get it. Being eight for the rest of my life isn't exactly a summer festival, either. I'm just grateful for the time I've had."

I nodded, still at a loss for what to say. Maybe it was better to refocus on the task at hand. "I'm feeling a bit better now. Let me see if I can stand." I scooted slowly to the edge of the bed, and the dizziness was irritating, but not debilitating. I stood up, Elise's eyes following me as I took a few steps. "I think I'm good. Let's do it before we lose our nerve."

She unfolded her legs, her saddle shoes just touching the carpet, and gripped the seat with both hands. "So should I just scream, or?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe yell for help?"



“Well, I mean don’t all kidnapped people yell for help?”

She had a point, but there wasn’t much we could do about it. “Go bang on the door. Yell that something is wrong.” I sat back down on the bed and considered how to go about faking a seizure. I’d only ever seen one on tv.

Elise moved for the door, glancing back at me to make sure I was ready before she started. She nodded, then hit the door, her hand open, frantically. I surprised me how hard she hit; it was convincing show of panic. “Hey, open up! Something’s wrong! We need help!”

I looked down at the comforter as though I might see through the bed and the floor to the vampires one floor below us. It was hard to sense where anyone was exactly, and I wasn’t sure if Elise could sense them at all. One of them moved. I felt them coming closer, and the shock of more adrenaline helped push the nausea down.

I lay on my back, looking up at the white ceiling until I heard the mechanism on the door being unlocked. I rolled my eyes into the back of my head and let myself go limp, forcing my muscles to relax. I hadn’t considered until then that I wouldn’t be able to see what was going on if I was pretending to be unresponsive. I’d have to trust Elise and concentrate on not giving myself away.

It took a while for the door to open, and Elise shouted the entire time. “She’s had some sort of seizure! I don’t know what’s going on! You have to help her!” Her voice took on a high, almost squeaking quality that was convincing in its desperation.

There were footsteps on the hard wood, light and fast ones that I reasoned were Elise’s and then heavier ones presumably from a guard. The steps hushed on the throw rug and I felt the bed bow under someone’s weight.

“What the hell did you do?” The voice was male and suspicious.

“I think she had a seizure. She just dropped and started shaking. That’s when I screamed.” Elise’s voice was close, maybe at the edge of the mattress? I hoped she was close enough to find the phone.

The man touched my face, pulled back my eyelids, placed two fingers on my neck. It was a strange way to respond to a vampire having a seizure—not all vampires have a pulse, especially if they haven’t had anything to eat. He slapped my cheek gently. “Hey, wake up. Wake up! Shit.” He went quiet for a moment, and I tried to imagine what he might be doing. Was he waiting for me to wake up? A patting sound, then, “Hey where the fuck is my phone?” Oh no. “You little shit!”

Elise screamed and I opened my eyes. Her back was against the wall, her body obscured by the vampire on top of her, struggling. I put both hands on the man’s shoulders and pulled as hard as I could. His weight slammed into my chest and knocked us both backwards onto the bed, his body heavy on top of me. I pushed, trying to shove him aside, but he was moving against me. His elbow reared back, hitting the bed beside my face, and I lifted an arm to block him from getting any closer. He twisted, hissing at me.

Heat rippled along the length of my arms like a breeze too warm to be comfortable. I recognized the feeling, although not at first. Not until it reached my throat and it felt like I had swallowed fire. There were flames inside my lungs, traversing down my spine, coals underneath my ribs. I could feel the other vampire’s pulse in the palms of my hands as I held him back, too slow to be human. I tugged at it, at that thin, wavering rhythm, not with my hands, but with something inside myself, with whatever fueled the

blaze in my chest. His eyes went wide and he froze on top of me, unable to continue his struggle. I knew if I pulled at it, if I pulled at that fragile light within him, that I could take it away from him. His heart had stopped beating, but mine was thundering in my chest, a thousand beats per minute. I pulled as hard as I could.

He wasn't an old vampire, but he was strong. His life felt heavy, like I was dragging it somewhere, instead of just lying underneath him and taking his essence into myself. My arms didn't move, but I tore it from him with everything I had. His body withered above mine, his flesh shrinking back onto bone as though I'd starved him for years. His eyes were too large for his skull and his cheekbones were sharp and gaunt. His fangs stood out almost like protrusions from his mouth. I shoved him off of me easily and sat up, looking for Elise.

She was sitting on the floor where I'd pulled the man off of her, her legs strewn out and her back and arms pressed firmly into the wall. There was a small dent in the sheetrock above her head where her spine had hit the wall earlier. Her eyes were wide, her jaw was clenched, and for a moment I couldn't tell if she was afraid of me or the man I'd just killed.

"Are you okay?" My voice sounded deeper in pitch, like the heat in my chest had altered my vocal chords somehow.

"He's dead," she answered.

I nodded. "Elise?"

I wasn't sure if she heard me or not. She was staring at the body, more skeleton than vampire now.

"Elise!" I raised my voice. It still didn't sound normal to me.

She nodded, but still didn't look up at me. "Help me check his pockets."

She hesitated to touch him, then shoved her hand in one pocket and lifted him by his belt to check his back. There was a gun holstered in his pants. Elise pulled it out, holding it in her free hand. She could barely get her fingers around the handle.

I moved his legs to check the other side pocket. Chewing gum and a house key. His back pocket had a wallet. No ID, only cash in large bills. I took it.

"How long do you think until they notice he's not coming back?"

Elise looked up at me, her lips pursed tight together like a rosebud. "Not long. We have to run. They're going to come up here, see this, and kill us. We have to try and sneak out. It's our only shot. I can't fight, Ana, come on." She was still holding the gun. She was right—if we stayed here, this guy's his friends would come looking for him, and none of them were going to be happy.

"Okay. Stay behind me." I took the phone off the bed and stepped over the man on the floor. Outside the bedroom door was a long hallway, wood floors and cream colored walls with nothing hanging on them. I took off my shoes, one pump and then the other, holding them in my free hand so we wouldn't make noise. There was a television on somewhere downstairs, a laugh track drifted up from below. A few feet from the bedroom door the railing started, then stairs going down. I could see the front door from there, bolted shut from the inside.

It was painful how slowly we moved. My chest hurt and I kept thinking about the other vampires, where they were and if they could feel us leaving. The door wasn't particularly far from the base of the stairs, but my fear was of what we couldn't see—there was a room behind the stairs that, for all we knew, could have a clear view of the

front hall. I looked up at Elise, three steps above me, and she urged me on with her eyes. I stayed slow until we reached the bottom step. There was a dining room off to my right, a wide arching doorway and a long wooden table with upholstered chairs. The house was decorated like a realtor had staged it, and I wondered if that's exactly what had happened. It didn't matter.

I sprang for the door, and refused to look behind me. I had to choose between opening the locks quickly or silently. I chose quickly. I pulled back the deadbolt, twisted another deadbolt between that, and turned the handle. It turned. I pushed. The door opened. Stairs. A driveway. The night sky. I reached back for Elise's hand and we ran.

There was an SUV in the driveway. Doors locked. No keys. Nothing above the tires. The concrete was warm under my feet. Someone shouted from inside the house.

"Come on!" Elise yanked at my hand and pulled me away from the vehicle and around the side of the house.

"Where are we going?" My voice was a breathless whisper.

"If we go down the road they'll see us. If we go to a neighbor, we trap ourselves there." She led me around a corner past carefully landscaped palm trees and bushes with wide, yellow pink leaves. Elise stopped short and I realized it was because there was little to no back yard. Just water. It stretched a long line of shining blackness that disappeared somewhere out to our right. "Fuck."

I tugged at her arm—we had to keep moving. We were lucky the windows were boarded up with hurricane shudders, but if they figured out what direction we went, we would lose our head start, and we couldn't head back toward the road. We ran for the water, the grass stiff and dry under my feet.

The dock was built of thick logs, and miraculously had a small skiff tied there. The square, aluminum sides reflected light from the water's surface, bobbing calmly. I helped Elise get in as they came around the back of the house. The boat was tied to the dock with a complicated knot. I grabbed it and yanked. The wood groaned and then splintered, the post ripping from the dock. Elise was already pulling at the boat's motor. It took a couple tries before it started, but then the boat began to pull away. I jumped in, landing hard on one of the seats, but we were clear.

Elise sat at the back and steered us away from the neighborhood and out towards open water. I left my shoes on the floor and tucked the cash in my bra so it wouldn't blow away. The phone was a black flip phone, one of the ones you can buy cheap with prepaid minutes. It was still working, but only had one bar of reception.

I dialed my husband's cell phone number and pressed the metal to my ear. There was static ringing and the sound cut in and out, then silence. "Luken?" I called. My voice echoed out over the water and in the phone receiver. I pulled the phone from my ear to check the screen. "Out of range" was flashing in red. I hung up and pressed redial, but it didn't ring this time. "I can't get through."

Elise was looking ahead of us, watching where the boat was headed. "Alright. We're going to have to find someplace to get help. Let's get away from the shore in case they're following us on shore and then head towards light."

I nodded in agreement and looked back down at the phone. Maybe we would move back into range again. I opened the navigation application to try and figure out where we were. The screen lit up blue with water and I had press the button to zoom out. We were heading away from Biscayne Point towards the mainland. If we went straight,

we'd hit Miami Shores. "If we keep going, we're going to a neighborhood. They won't be able to tell where we land." If there was no signal there, we could knock on someone's door. We had a couple more hours before the sun came up, and the salt breeze made me feel better.

Elise gave a brief smile, her lips still pressed together. "Is Mr. Duchess ready for a fight? They might follow us, you know. We're not the only ones in Vorograad with a boat."

I didn't have an answer to that. I had never thought of my husband as a man who was ready for a fight, but then, I hadn't known my brother carried a gun, either. He had bodyguards, certainly, but were they prepared for us to arrive with Hans on our tail, for a firefight? Would Hans take it that far? "I don't—I don't know."

She lifted her free hand, palm skyward to suggest her own bewilderment. "How can you not know that? I thought you said you were a duchess." Her voice was an octave higher than it had been before.

"I am," I said. "I just don't handle that sort of thing."

"What sort of thing? Running the damn city? How do you not know how many enforcers you have? How do you not know how long it takes to rally them?" She looked at me like I was out of my mind.

Luken had only called for an enforcer a handful of times in the four years we'd been married. There had been nothing as dramatic as a kidnapping in the time I'd lived in Vorograad. Perhaps this spoke more to the order my husband had maintained during his time as duke, but Elise had a point. Shouldn't I know these things? Karl Erik would know. Tabitha, too.

“That’s ridiculous. How the hell are we supposed to count on this guy if we don’t know he can help us?” It was getting harder to see her the further out we got, but I could still hear the disapproval in her voice. Maybe she was thinking we should call someone else.

“Look, we can call your brother if you want, but eventually this is an issue to bring up with the city, and my husband is the city.” Of course he had to be prepared for things like this. My husband was good at his job. He was smart. He cared. He had to be able to help.

“I thought you were *both* supposed to be the city.”

“We are.” My voice was defensive, but I wasn’t sure it had the conviction it should have.

“Then how do you not know what men you have?”

I opened the phone again. Still no signal. I closed it. “Look, I’ll call him, and he’ll send men. You can call your brother. We can join our resources.” That would go a long way towards making a good impression on Luken, too. This could have been a winning situation. Maybe he’d be grateful enough to offer them a position in Vorograad after all. “We’re going to be fine.”

“Ana, we’re stranded in the middle of fuck knows where with violent kidnappers chasing us. I think this is the sort of situation where a bit of alarm is merited.” Elise glanced back over her shoulder to see if there was anyone behind us. Her hair blew back across her face, casting a silhouette against the remaining line of lights behind her.

“Alarm is fine. I think we’re both plenty alarmed. I’m just saying—” There was a loud sound, a rending of metal that echoed out, though I only had a matter of seconds to



hear it. I was pitched forward, airborne for a moment, confused, and then in the water. It was lukewarm and even darker here than it had been moments before. I couldn't see anything, and I was spinning as I sank down. Vertigo dizzied me, and it occurred to me that I should swim, but I couldn't tell which way was upward. Would I just be diving deeper? I kicked and my leg hit something sharp in the water. Pain blossomed from my ankle up the outside of my calf and all the air went out my mouth. I was sure slow, dead blood was leaking into the water. I followed the bubbles, using my arms to buoy myself higher, careful to let my legs just float under me.

When I breached the surface it was quiet. A wave splashed in my face and I had to start kicking to avoid going under again. I looked around but all I could see was more water under a cloudy night sky. I wished there were more stars, a brighter moon.

"Elise!" I called. There was no answer. Vampires couldn't die from drowning. We couldn't. "Elise!" My voice was getting sharper, more shrill, and my body rode a wave that pushed me up and then released me down again. I dove under the surface and forced my eyes to open. Even I couldn't see much under water. Just bubbles. I went back up.

"Elise!" It was more of a sob than anything else. Where the hell was the boat? I couldn't see anything floating. There were lights behind me and in front of me, in more or less equal distance. Which way had we been going? I couldn't tell. I had no choice but to just pick a direction and swim, but I refused go without Elise. I called her name again and waited. Nothing. It was hard to keep kicking in my dress, and I could feel my own pulse in my calf. What if Hans was right behind us? What if he found me here, waiting for Elise? I called her name.

It was so quiet. I didn't hear anything but water answer me. No boat motors—not even our own. The boat must have hit something. I couldn't think of what else could have happened. What else could have thrown us from the boat? What else could have caused it to disappear? I screamed her name.

I'm not sure how long I stayed there, screaming for Elise, but I realized that there was a limited amount of time until the sun came up. If I didn't make it to shore before then, to safety, then I would die at sunrise.

I called her name again, and my voice cracked. Then, I swam.

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I was exhausted and hardly lucid when I made it to the shore. I remembered staggering into a Seven Eleven, dripping water and mud across the floor, asking the stunned teenager behind the counter if I could use his phone. Dialing with pruny fingers. Collapsing at the counter, sitting on the linoleum with my back against a slurpee machine. I didn't remember much after that. All I had was the vague awareness that I was home now, and safe, but not much else. I slept. There was very little to help me discern one night from another. The windows in our bedroom were bolted shut to allow me peace and darkness, and perhaps also as an added precaution for my safety. When I finally woke up, I had no idea how many days I had been home or how long ago I had been taken.

It was clear that I was in my own bed. The smell and shapes of the room even in the pitch blackness were familiar to me. The arch of the tufted headboard. The urn-shaped silhouette of the lamp on the nightstand. There was someone lying on the edge of

the bed with me, but it took me a moment to realize that he was not my husband. A mild spike of panic forced me awake, and only then did I recognize my brother. Karl Erik stirred when I moved, and I realized he had pushed a chair against the bed and fallen asleep there.

“How do you feel?” Karl’s voice was soft and reassuring. It helped anchor me to the present. I was home. I was safe. I was with Karl.

I supposed I could be worse. I wasn’t a hostage. I wasn’t so much ash at the bottom of the bay. “I’m okay. How long was I asleep?” I struggled to orient myself in time and space.

“A couple of days. You needed the sleep.” He meant my injuries.

I touched fingertips to my calf. My skin was cold and smooth. I wondered why there was no dried blood and realized that someone had bathed me. I wasn’t wearing the bloody dress from the museum opening anymore. I was in a nightgown. “Who dressed me?”

“Tabitha gave you a sponge bath. You were pretty out of it.” He propped his weight up on his elbows and groaned, and I wondered how long he had been lying there next to me. Had he gotten much sleep? The chair didn’t look very comfortable. “She had to go back to take care of the children, but she was here the first night.”

I nodded. That made sense. “Where’s Luken?” I already knew the answer.

“He’s meeting with delegates from Zelenskagraad over the treaty addendums.” There was no judgement in my brother’s voice. He understood how things were. Karl shifted his weight onto the chair, moving to sit up properly. “You should eat something.”

There was a distant, hollow feeling in the pit of my stomach. Something akin to hunger but not quite. I shook my head. My eyes were beginning to adjust to the darkness better, and the distant, yellow light from under the hall door seemed to illuminate more. I caught the shine of Karl's eyes and the irregular mass of curls around his head, the mound of blankets at my feet that I must have kicked away in my sleep. He smelled like leather and citrus and something woodsy. "Can we just sit here?"

He nodded and I almost missed the movement.

I followed the line of his hair to his shoulder and then down his arm in order to find his hand in the dark. I took it with both of my own and squeezed. I suddenly felt like I might cry and I looked away from him, though I doubted he could see me. "When do you go back?"

"Tomorrow." He had other responsibilities. The world didn't stop because of me. It would be selfish to ask him to stay longer. We weren't children anymore.

Besides, I was fine. The wounds on my wrists and calf had healed, and my whole body didn't ache anymore. It was like it had never even happened.

"I want you to know that my man tagged the ransom money." Karl said.  
"Wherever it goes, we can follow it. We're going to find out who took you."

"What ransom?"

"The ransom your kidnappers took," Karl's voice was patient.

A ransom. That made sense. People who were kidnapped were often ransomed, and it would explain why Hans brought me home rather than killing me. But I couldn't remember him mentioning it. No one had said the word "ransom" in front of me the

entire time I'd been in that safe house. When I'd asked Hans why he'd taken me, he had a different answer.

"He wanted information. That's what he told me. He asked about the blood stock, about money. He wanted to know if we kept records on our people. If I knew how many of us were in the city. I didn't tell him anything." At least, I didn't think I did. It was hard to say—everything felt like a distant nightmare that I couldn't pin down now that I had woken up. "I tried." My voice came out softer than I'd intended and I swallowed, setting my mouth in a tight line.

"Hey." Karl waited until I looked up at him, though I could only make out the shape of his face. "No one is blaming you. We're going to find out what this asshole wanted and why. None of this is your fault."

I rolled my eyes at him, though I wasn't sure if he could see me. "I'm not a goddamn after-school special. I'm just saying I don't think any of this was about money."

Karl Erik said nothing for a long moment. Eventually he leaned back into the pillows.

"Karl." I waited for him to make a sound. "How much was the ransom?"

He didn't answer right away, and I imagined that he was trying to think of a way to say it without upsetting me. "Twenty million."

Twenty million was a lot. Too much. We could have done so much for the city with that kind of money. We could have fed every vampire in the county. We could have funded years of blood research. If Hans was looking to cripple us, taking twenty million out of House Voropaeva's vault would certainly do it. "Tell me my husband paid it."

There was silence from the edge of the bed. Karl didn't move.

I shook my head and took a slow, even breath. “How much?”

“Half,” he said.

Lavringraad had to be hemorrhaging money. There was no way around it.

Between the loss of inventory, the deaths, the bribes to cover up the deaths— I couldn’t really estimate how much had been lost, but it had to be considerable. “We’ll pay you back.”

“There’s no need,” he said.

“You’ll tell me if Hans touches the money.” It was meant to be a question, but I sounded more like I was reassuring myself than anything else.

Karl nodded. “You’ll be the first to know.”

*Chapter Eight*

It isn't that vampires don't have birthdays—we do. Mine is March 16<sup>th</sup>. However, we have so many birthdays that we tend to lose count of them. Older vampires hardly notice the passage of time, and birthdays are celebrated only for the sake of the youngest of us. Betsey and I are both younger than a century, so the novelty hasn't worn off for us. This year, she had a Mardi Gras themed soiree planned that would be the envy of any Louisiana native. I had gotten my dress a month in advance, and it hung on the door of the closet, the pink color a vibrant contrast to the elephant painting that hung on the wall beside it.

“Are you sure you don't want to come with me? It'll be fun.” I turned the light on in my dressing room and caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. My hair was a mess of curls around my head. My things were where I'd left them on the grey and white marble countertop. A cosmetics bag left unzipped, a couple of makeup brushes left to dry on a hand towel during the day, bobby pins and a pair of earrings from the night before left in a seashell soap dish.

Luken answered me from the other side of the closet. “I'm very sure, my pearl. Send Betsey my affections. I'm sure she'll love the present.”

My husband didn't care much for Betsey. He found her to be vulgar of company and had thought she was a poor influence on me. “So by ‘send her your affection’ you mean advise her to reevaluate her life choices?” I grinned and padded barefoot into our bathroom. Scones illuminated grey walls, dark cabinetry, and more veined marble. Various soaps flanked each sink. Our toothbrushes sat in their own respective cups.

He sighed somewhere from inside the closet. “I do not dislike Miss Dufrene. I simply have prior obligations that demand my attention. Do express my regrets that I couldn’t attend.”

I resisted the urge to make another quip about his “regrets,” and turned on the faucet instead, cupping my hands under the flow of water. “I’ll let her know how profoundly miserable you are that you couldn’t come with me.” Water pooled in the palms of my hands and I leaned over the sink to splash it onto my face. I reached for a hand towel and caught Luken’s reflection in the mirror while I patted my face dry. His blazer was unbuttoned. The golden pocket square I’d bought him was the brightest thing he wore. “I’d like you to send my brother money tonight, if you have the time.”

He combed through his hair in increments, starting on the left side of his head and moving one comb length at a time, his hand following after each movement to keep his hair flat and even. He’d gotten it cut. I liked it longer. “Oh.” When he was satisfied that every hair was in place, he returned the comb to its drawer and turned towards me. “How much am I sending?”

I dabbed moisturizer onto the middle of my forehead and at my temples before rubbing it in with small, circular motions. “Well I thought ten million might be in order.” I tried to keep my tone light, but wasn’t sure if I had managed very well.

“I see.” He straightened the knot in his tie with both hands, one smoothing the fabric down his chest, gaze focused on his reflection. “I thought we had talked about this.”

“Don’t think of it as funding terrorism. Think of it as a really, really nice gift. Or as an investment into Lavringraad’s anti-kidnapping program.”



My husband did not look amused. “I am not going to compromise my principles because your brother disagrees with my methods.”

I watched him unscrew the cap to his cologne. “So if Karl Erik hadn’t made you pay the ransom and provided half the bonds, then what would have happened?” It scared me to think that if he hadn’t told my brother what happened, I might not have been standing here now. The question had been slowly gnawing at me since my return: would my husband have let me die for the sake of those principles? Were they more important than my life or his love for me?

Luken carefully touched fingertips to either side of his throat. He had worn the same cologne since before we had been married. “They would have called to renegotiate, which would have bought us the time to find you. These people certainly weren’t going to kill the duchess of Vorograad. That would be unthinkable.”

I knew Karl would have gone ballistic. But if my brother wasn’t there to advocate for me, if his threat to exact revenge for my death didn’t exist, what would have happened? “Unthinkable,” I repeated. I thought about how surreal it had felt to pull a bullet out of Karl’s abdomen. But it had happened. I had done it. I had burned my fingers on the bullet. “And what if the unthinkable happened?”

Luken turned to regard me. “It isn’t healthy for you to dwell on what happened or what might have happened. Nothing we do now will change anything. You are home, safe and sound. It is important for you to focus on the future, and think about what good things are to come.” He closed the space between us with a few steps and took my hand, giving it a soft squeeze. “This is what I mean about having something positive to focus

on. Maybe it's time we discussed children again. I don't want what happened to keep your mind in a dark place."

I stayed very still, gaze focused on the veins of dark grey that swept across the countertops. Would that have been his biggest regret if I died? That I had provided him no heir? I closed my eyes, taking a moment to push my frustrations into a tiny ball in the back of my mind. "I want you to repay my brother. You know how difficult things in Lavringraad are. Please."

He squeezed my hand again. "I will send your brother money, but I will not send him ten million dollars for a debt that I do not owe." His expression was so earnest, the frown sad but stubborn, brow creased for my benefit.

I wanted to scream at him. Instead, my words came out quiet and evenly spaced. "Perhaps then, the debt is not yours. Perhaps it is my own debt. Would you settle your wife's debt to put her mind and her heart at ease?"

The crease in his brow deepened and he sighed. "Anushka, this is not your fault. What happened to you was the result of terrorism, and nothing that you have ever done. I know that you want to do right by your brother. You have such a kind and generous heart. But you are not indebted to a man who acted of his own free will to help a sister that he loves, however misguided his choices. If Karl Erik wishes to fund the sort of men that would take his beloved sister, then that is not a reflection of you." He took the towel from my other hand and placed it on the countertop so that he could hold both hands in his own. I knew he was trying to comfort me, but I found no comfort in his touch or his words.

“He was trying to save my life, Luken.” I didn’t know how this was so difficult a concept for him to grasp. Everyone always told me how brilliant my husband was.

“We all were, my treasure. If the ransom had not been paid, we would have found another way to bring you home safely.” He let go of one hand in order to press fingers to the side of my face.

The lack of specificity alarmed me. It was all well and good to say that he would have found a way, but I wasn’t as sure of that as he seemed to be. I nodded, but I was sure he could see my lack of faith written on my face. “I have to get ready, or I will be late to Betsey’s party.”

He smoothed the pad of his thumb over my cheek, and for a moment I thought he would say something more on the subject, but instead he withdrew, leaving my hand at my side.

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Betsey’s party was already in full swing by ten o’clock. I had been worried that my costume might be too much, but when I arrived, I was instantly enveloped in a sea of bright colors and feathered masks. A live band was playing jazz music on the far side of Betsey’s ballroom, and most of the guests were dancing. Shining strings of multicolored plastic beads swathed the ceiling and a jester dressed in full motley was doing tricks for a group of people gathered on the opposite wall. I looked around for the birthday girl, but it was difficult to identify anyone in the sea of golden faces, glitter, and harlequin patterns. I stood off to the side of the festivities, trying to recognize anyone until I heard Betsey calling my name over the din.

I turned twice before figuring out where she was. Her gown was purple and green. It was even louder than the fuchsia dress I had on. I was only able to recognize her from the pile of platinum ringlets piled on top of her head. “This place is a circus!” I yelled, leaning in to give her a hug.

Betsey kissed my cheek as she pulled away and grinned. “Isn’t it fabulous? I feel like a bayou queen!” She took my hand and led me through the hall of dancers and into a parlor. The music was quieter here, and several people were lounging on sofas and chairs. “I’m so glad you came. I feel like I haven’t seen you in months. It’s not healthy to lock yourself away like that, you know.”

I gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. “I would never miss your birthday.”

“Do you want something to drink?” Betsey pointed out a tray of glasses of blood on a carved wooden coffee table.

I wondered how long the tray had been sitting here. “Any chance you have anything fresher?” I also wasn’t sure there wouldn’t be something extra in the glass. Betsey tended to keep company with more adventurous souls than I. The thought of being under the influence again made my stomach churn.

Betsey nodded. “Of course. I’m famished. Let me run back to the kitchen.” She turned as if to leave, then turned back towards me. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

“Me, too.” I watched her fade into the multicolored revelry before finding a seat on an ivory settee. There were other vampires sitting already, but I couldn’t tell who they were with their masks on. I lifted fingers to my own mask to make sure it hadn’t been knocked askew when Betsey kissed my cheek earlier.

A man with a thick accent was speaking—perhaps Spanish or maybe Italian? His mask was chartreuse and lined with feathers. “Oh yeah. They found the whole place covered in blood. Left two bodies and ran.”

“No!” A woman answered him from the floor. She was draped on a faux fur rug, her cheek propped up on one gloved hand. She looked like a canary in all the yellow. Even her lips were painted with golden glitter. “What, did he think they weren’t going to find him?”

Chartreuse was shaking his head. “Apparently not. Clearly he’s an idiot. I mean, if you’re going to commit a double homicide, maybe don’t leave the bodies in your apartment for enforcers to find. It’s sloppy and lazy. Someone could have called the cops.”

Another woman snorted from the couch opposite the coffee table. She held a goblet half full of blood in one hand and her dress was made of peacock feathers. “What a waste of a team of cleaners. He must have been suicidal.”

“Was he in the apartment with the bodies?” Canary asked, her own drink forgotten in her hand.

The man pursed his lips. “No, no. Some enforcer picked him up in a blood den, drunk off his ass. He tried to fight his way out. I’m surprised they didn’t stake him there.” He took a sip from his own glass. Screeches of laughter echoed from the other room, competing with the music. People seemed to be having a good time.

“Have they scheduled the tribunal yet?” Peacock Feathers seemed bored with the conversation already, she was looking out into the people dancing like she didn’t care about the answer to her own question.

Chartreuse leaned forward to set his empty glass on the tray. “It got pushed back because of the kidnapping. They haven’t announced the new date.”

I froze, my back straight and rigid.

“Do not even get me started on that mess. This city is going to hell.” Peacock Feathers didn’t bother to turn her head.

Canary sat up on the floor, eyebrows raised. “Why? What did you hear?”

Chartreuse made a humming sound as though considering if he should answer. “I heard her husband didn’t even pay the whole ransom. Apparently he only kicked in half.”

Canary was aghast, her glitter-painted mouth hanging open like a trout. “That’s terrible. If that were my husband, I’d sell him for the ransom money and buy a new one. Something young with abs like warm buttered rolls.” She must have been young to remember food.

“I wouldn’t have paid the ransom either. That woman isn’t worth a penny. Let them martyr her, and then the duke can marry someone who isn’t a fraction of his age—or his IQ.” Peacock Feathers finally turned her attention back toward her friends and took a sip, waiting for them to react.

“You are so bad!” Chartreuse shook his head at her, though his tone belied how little he actually disapproved. “I think she’s cute. She’s always trying to raise money for something.”

Peacock Feathers made a sound while she swallowed her mouthful. “Let her raise her own ransom money then! It’s disgusting that she involves herself in business. It’s bad enough her brother does it, but at least he’s handsome enough that we can forgive him.

Money should come from titles and properties. You don't *earn* it like a peasant." She shook her head as if the idea disgusted her, as if I were a disgrace.

"Maybe she needs the money after her mom went all psycho. Maybe she didn't leave them a penny. Poor little orphans." Canary pouted and held out a hand for Peacock Feathers to hand her the glass.

The other woman obliged, rolling her eyes underneath her cerulean mask for a second time. "If she's that broke, maybe she faked the whole thing. Who would kidnap her anyways? She's absolutely useless. If it were me, I'd have kidnapped the brother instead."

I couldn't breathe. I knew logically that there was no need to, but the feeling of suffocation was overwhelming. Betsey would find me later. I couldn't stand to be in the room one more second. I rose without saying a word and headed in the direction I'd come from, into the room of loud music and moving bodies. I pushed my way into the crowd, unsure of where I was going or even where the door was. I just needed to get the hell out of there.

As soon as I'd broken free of the dancers, I ripped the mask from my face, letting it dangle from my hand by fuchsia ribbon. Where was the door? I was all turned around. There was an archway on the far wall, and I nearly ran to it, relieved to have some sense of direction. It led into a hallway rather than an exit, but it was quiet and there didn't seem to be anyone around. I leaned against an urn in one corner, trying to catch my breath. I wanted to scream, but I didn't have the air. For a moment I thought I might throw up instead, but then I remembered I hadn't eaten since I woke up at sunset. What time was it?

I didn't hear footsteps until I realized someone was standing in front of me. It was a young vampire in a black costume too dark to match the theme properly. Blue eyes looked out from behind a shiny mask, and I didn't recognize him until he spoke. "You okay? Party's that way." Aaron motioned toward the direction I'd come from with a jerk of his head. He reached up to pull his mask over the mass of wild curls around his head.

Of course. This evening could not possibly get worse. "I know," I answered him finally, and my voice sounded shaky even to me. Maybe I really would throw up. "I just—I need a moment." I needed a lot more than a moment.

"I always seem to find you feeling sick. I thought royals were supposed to be the picture of good health." The comment was meant to be good-natured, but I heard it as one more expectation that I was apparently failing.

I smiled and the expression didn't move past my lips. "Royals are supposed to be a lot of things." I shook my head. Why wasn't there a place to sit down in here? I might have just sat down on the floor, had I still been alone.

"Hey," He took a step towards me, as if he might touch me, then hesitated. "How can I help? How can I make it better?"

"I don't think you can, really." There was nothing to be done. It hardly mattered if other people thought my contributions to the city were useless.

"You sound so sure about that, but I don't know. Come on. Try me." His crooked smile was back and it unnerved me.

I shook my head. "It's nothing. I just overheard a conversation not meant for me, that's all." Although, knowing that their brutality had been honest only made it worse. I touched fingertips to my forehead and lamented how much of an idiot I felt like.



“Yeah?” His eyebrows drew together and he watched me for a moment. I didn’t like that I could never tell what he was thinking. It made me nervous. “Doesn’t sound like nothing. What did they say?”

Oh, I thought, just that I was more valuable to my husband dead than alive and that I contributed nothing to our families’ legacy. I gave a nervous laugh and turned away from him. The reflection of the chandelier and wall hangings made it difficult to see out the window but I thought I could make out the gardens beyond Betsey’s home. I knew there was a swimming pool out there somewhere and I imagined harlequin guests diving in, fully clothed and drunk on blood and jazz. “They think I’m a poor excuse for a duchess.” I admitted, my voice soft. “They think my existence is trite and inconsequential.”

He gave a slow nod as he considered that. “Well, whoever *they* are, they’re fucking idiots. Who the hell cares what people think? People *don’t* think. They’re sheep. Fuck ‘em.”

I wasn’t sure what surprised me more, his rampant profanity or the prompt dismissal of complete strangers. He was right in one sense. I didn’t know these people, why should their opinion matter so much to me? I let out a nervous laugh and leaned against the window sill.

He took another step towards me, a smaller one so that he wasn’t quite touching my dress. “Why are you so upset about what people think? Are these people important to you? I mean, are these people you need to impress for some reason?”

I shook my head. “No. No, nothing like that.”

“Then why do you care?” He repeated. “I say fuck ‘em.”

“Because they’re right!” It burst out of me before I knew what I was saying. I should have been embarrassed, but I was too miserable to care. My eyes stung and my throat felt thick. “They’re right. I’m not worth anything. I don’t do anything but go to parties and galleries and museums and an endless train of fundraisers for causes people think are stupid and useless. My husband doesn’t listen to me, I can’t help my brother, and you know, she’s right about the kidnapping. It makes no sense—” I was rambling. I cut my sentence off halfway and sniffed.

Aaron was frowning at me, and I couldn’t tell why. “You’re wrong.” He said.

I gave a mirthless laugh. “Am I?”

“Yeah. You’re smart and nice. You care about the people in this city—even the ones who aren’t dead. And maybe that’s looked down upon by *these* kinds of people, but these kinds of people are assholes, and you shouldn’t be bending over backwards trying to gain their approval. You’re a good person. You work to make sure people you don’t even know are fed and educated and have access to healthcare. You know, human politicians don’t even do that. You fucking care. These people should be worshipping the ground you walk on.”

I stared at him in stunned silence. “I thought these people were your friends.”

He shrugged and ran fingers through his hair, suddenly concerned with the garden on the other side of the window. “I don’t really know half of these people. I get the feeling they’re not too fond of fresh blood, if you know what I mean.”

“Then why are you here? I don’t understand. You could be back in Stoljagraad or wherever you want to be.” I had a duty to this city, but he did not.

His gaze focused on me again, his head tilted to one side as if considering something. “I *am* where I want to be.” His voice was softer now, the passion of his earlier tirade abated. “I’m with you.”

My arms were covered in goosebumps and if my hands hadn’t been gripping the window sill, I knew they’d be trembling. I couldn’t breathe again, but this time it wasn’t an unbearable sensation. My eyes were fixed on him and I knew I should look away, but I couldn’t. He looked so much older than he had the night I’d met him. His features were more angular and gaunt. His hair was longer, and his cheeks were covered in dark scruff. His eyes were still purple with exhaustion.

He took another step, closing the space between us until his legs were against my dress. I could hear the sound of my own pulse. He leaned into me and I couldn’t move. My eyes were still open, still focused on him while our faces hovered near each other. He waited for me to object or move away but I didn’t. His lips brushed against mine so softly I almost couldn’t be sure they were touching.

My hand moved from the sill as if independent from my body, pressing fingers into his hair. There was a strange sense of weightlessness, not quite vertigo, and all I could process was that buoyant dizziness and his lips on mine.

Then he was pulling away from me, taking a step back, and I wondered if I had done something wrong, ruined the kiss somehow. He took my hand and led me down the hallway.

My shoes sounded loud on the floor. I had to remind myself that no one would hear them over the music. “Where are we going?” I glanced back over my shoulder but the hallway behind us was empty. Our steps echoed against taupe-painted walls.

He didn't answer me, just pulled me along until we turned a corner and came to a pair of double doors. He turned one of the handles and pushed before I could protest that this wing of the house was probably not open to the public. The room was unoccupied but it was clear someone was staying there. The bed had been slept in and was unmade, ivory sheets tangled and askew. The windows' shutters were still bolted shut from the day. A pair of jeans hung over a chair in the corner. Aaron shut the door and locked it behind us and I realized this was his room. He was staying as Betsey's guest, not an uncommon occurrence for her larger parties.

I turned to face him and found him watching me. He cleared the space between us with a single step, his hand maintaining a soft grip on mine. There was a hesitation again, an opportunity for me to back away, to turn my head or break eye contact or say no. I said nothing. He smelled like soap, sandalwood, and something earthy that I couldn't place. His free hand found my cheek, his palm cradling my jawline, fingers on my neck. His face was so close to mine, eyes focused on my mouth.

He kissed me again, and I leaned into him, matching his pressure with my own. We were moving, but I wasn't sure exactly where until my leg pressed into the side of the bed. Vibrant fuchsia against the grey striped comforter. I couldn't say if he had led me there or it had been the other way around. At any moment I could wake up and this room and everything in it would cease to exist.

He knelt down, lifting my skirt to pull off one pink heel and then the other, placing them both on the hardwood floor beside him. His hands gathered up the fabric of my skirt, movements slow and deliberate as he pulled it upward. He made it to my knees before I stopped him, my hand on his wrist. "I don't—I can't..." There was no end to that

sentence. I hadn't thought of one before my mouth opened. I had no idea what I was trying to say.

Aaron's hands stayed exactly where they were, holding handfuls of silk chiffon. He waited for me to clarify, to gather my thoughts. There was something about him kneeling on the floor looking up at me that made it harder to think.

I swallowed, took a breath. "What is it that you want? From me, I mean. What are you looking for?" It seemed like such a sharp line of questioning, but I hadn't meant it that way. "I have... obligations."

"I want you in any way that you'll have me." His voice was steady. He just knelt there, waiting, holding my gaze.

My fingers were digging into his arm. I let go.

He waited a moment, watching my face to make sure I had no other questions, no other doubts. His hands moved again, pulling at the fabric slowly, deliberately. Maybe he was expecting me to stop him again, or he wanted to make sure I had made up my mind. He leaned forward to push my skirt up over my knees, over my thighs, and placed a soft kiss on one knee. His hand pressed at my leg and I moved to allow him room. Another kiss followed, his head turning to push against the inside of my leg with his cheek, his lips on my inner thigh. He made a languid trail of kisses upward, his hand lifting my leg from underneath, pressing his face into me with more pressure. Teeth nipped at my skin and I made an ugly sound, my fingers digging into cotton sheets. His mouth was impossibly warm and I was breathless, almost afraid to move, to interrupt him. When his mouth found me, I nearly fell back onto the bed, my arm holding my weight above the mattress. The room tilted; my lungs begged for air.

The sensation left my mind fragmented. I would try to think of where we were, what we were doing, but everything shattered, melted. I couldn't be anything but there with him. The world had narrowed to him, to the way his mouth felt, and the heat he sent through me. The intensity was building, and I wasn't sure what that meant. My hips were starting to move to meet him, not something I had consciously decided to do. My breath was ragged, desperate. Everything he did felt magnified. My arms were shaking, but I wouldn't let go of the sheets. I wanted to see him, to watch him on his knees, his fingers digging into my legs, focus singularly on me. My body rocked with him, a thin layer of pink sweat on my skin. It hurt, a kind of ache I wasn't familiar with. It was too much, but I couldn't have pulled away even if I'd wanted to.

Then everything stopped. My breath halted in my throat. The world was hushed and motionless. My body seized and I collapsed backward onto the comforter as the spasm racked up my spine. My back bowed, head tilted backward into the mattress, eyes unseeing. My fingers grasped for something, anything to steady myself. I felt myself floating as if I'd left my body. I came back down to myself in increments, relearning how to breathe, unable to move. I swallowed and stared up at the ceiling. The chandelier's crystals painted prisms of light across the eggshell white.

He kissed me again and I nearly cried out, but it was a chaste kiss, affectionate and soft. He stood, unbuttoning his vest with deft movements that I would not have been capable of. The garment slid down his arms and fell to the floor.

I lifted my arm, reaching for him. He stepped forward and took my offered hand. His counterweight helped me to sit up again and I unbuttoned his shirt in slow, clumsy movements. He pulled it off, leaving it with the forgotten vest. He was just as pale as I

remembered, but now his skin was unmarred by bruising or bite wounds. Just an expanse of pale, perfect skin over muscle and bone. I was starting to get feeling back in my legs, and I stood up, leaning against the bed for support as I undid his pants.

He had to help me unzip the back of my dress and also to step out of it, a difficulty without the added challenge of weak legs. It occurred to me that I hadn't been naked in front of another man that wasn't my husband in a very long time. Then he kissed me, and I forgot. I moved backward so that he could climb onto the bed with me, but he didn't lay me down, didn't move on top of me. He sat with me, fingers brushing hair out of my face, and kissed me again.

I ached. My whole body ached, craved. It was a need I had never felt so strongly, like realizing I hadn't eaten all night. Like realizing I was holding my breath. My teeth grazed his bottom lip and he made a sound that I liked.

He moved underneath me, positioning himself so that it was my choice, my decision. I pressed myself down onto him and cried out. I sat frozen for a moment, unable to comprehend the electricity in my mind. Then he moved, and I moved with him. It was different than earlier, heavier somehow. I liked being able to see him, to look down and see myself on top of him. His eyes were so blue, so intent on me. There was a dip in his sternum where the skin followed the line of bone. I held onto him more tightly as my body started to tremble. Everything was building so much faster than it had before, and I was struggling, unable to maintain an even pace. He sped his movements up to match mine, and it tore a sound from my throat. He kissed me to muffle the sound, and the feeling of his mouth on mine was overwhelming. This time when my body seized, he caught me, his arms supporting me, keeping me where I wanted to be. I tried to keep

going, but I couldn't make my body do anything but shake. He groaned, and I collapsed against his chest, gasping for air. I felt boneless and warm, and I didn't want to move ever again.

He leaned backwards toward the headboard and I moved with him, disentangling my legs from his as we lay down. His arm kept me close to him and I rested my head on his shoulder, pressing lips to his chest. He leaned forward to kiss my hair, his fingers tracing a line across my waist and hip.

If I listened for it, I could hear the party, the music and din of laughter and conversation. I closed my eyes and listened for his heartbeat instead. I wished for the world outside of the room to disappear, the party, the people, all of it. I just wanted this, here, and nothing else. It was a terrible thing to wish for, and I immediately felt guilty. Strange that I should feel guilty for that, but not for what we had done. I was sure I'd feel it later.

I sat up carefully, unsure of my own strength. It was late. I was sure Betsey was looking for me. I sighed and ran a hand through my hair, which I was certain was in disarray.

He stayed where he was, watching me, his face inscrutable.

"I should get back." My voice was hoarse and quiet. I cleared my throat.

"You don't have to." He took my hand and brought it to his mouth, pressing my palm against his lips. Both of his hands enclosed mine, and he let them rest on his chest.

I had been gone for hours. Disappeared. It was rude. People might have noticed. It was hard to think about when I looked at him. He was so lovely that it was easy to halt my worries and think about staying. Just another hour. Just to lie here with him.



I pulled my hand from his and got up, looking around the floor for my underclothes. I picked them up one at a time and tried not to look at him, lying there naked for me.

“I have obligations.”

\*

At sunset the next evening, I woke first and lay in bed waiting for my husband to move. I didn't have to wait long before he got up, pulling back the comforter delicately and sliding his feet into his slippers. He stood carefully so as not to disturb me, and shuffled into the bathroom, closing the door behind him. I listened to him go about his daily routine until I was left in silence, alone in the dark.

When I was a child and I needed guidance, or I didn't know something, I asked my tutor. Jean Pierre had always been encouraging of curiosity and learning new skills. He was kind and patient, and I was unsurprised when I reached for my phone and dialed his number. I waited while it rang, wondering where in Lavringraad he was waking up this early in the evening. I sat up from the pillow, brushing hair from my face.

“Your grace,” he greeted me. “To what do I owe the pleasure of your call?” He didn't sound tired or bothered, but rather genuinely glad to hear from me. Karl Erik must have told him about what happened. Karl trusted Jean Pierre; it made sense that he would be relieved to know I was home safely. “Your grace?”

“I'm here.” I wasn't sure what to say. “*Maître*, I am calling to ask if you are so invaluable to Karl Erik that he could not spare you.” It had been years since I had called

him my teacher—it had been years since he had been my teacher. Not since before I’d been married.

He didn’t answer me right away, and it was as if I could hear his concern on the other end of the line. “Your grace, I believe that your brother could spare me, if my efforts would be better spent elsewhere. May I ask what need you may have of me?”

“I find myself in need of a tutor once again, if you would have me as a student.” I didn’t want him to think I was summoning him, as my mother would have. I was not calling upon the obligation of his oath to my family. I was calling upon him as an old friend.

“I’m not sure I understand. What is it that you require my tutelage in?” His words were slow, as if he anticipated an unusual request. He wasn’t wrong.

I swung my legs over the side of the bed, letting my bare feet hang above the floor. “You told me once that you were a soldier in your human life.” It was a statement rather than a question. I knew that Jean Pierre had fought both for and against Spain and France, and then for Haiti as well. He had told my brother and me when we were learning about colonialism and revolutions.

He let out a sigh. “That was a very long time ago.”

“Have you forgotten then? How to fight?” I asked.

“*Non*. That is not something you forget.” I could picture him shaking his head at the question. Jean Pierre did not forget much of anything, if he could help it.

“So then,” I forced myself to swallow past the knot in my throat. “You could teach me to fight. To defend myself.” My voice got quiet at this last. I knew the implication there.

“Your grace, perhaps you would benefit best from an instructor more familiar with modern fighting techniques. There are many who are more acquainted than I.” His voice was less confused now, though his words were still spoken slowly.

“I think I would benefit best from an instructor that I trust.” It came out as a sharper comment than I meant it to be. “I’m—everything is falling apart, Jean Pierre.” I covered one side of my face with my free hand and tried to focus on my breathing. I hated crying.

“Okay. When should I arrive?”

I still had to call Karl Erik. And then there was Luken. “There’s one more thing.” My hand slid down my face, resting at my chin. “I want you to tell anyone who asks that you are teaching me the art of gardening.”

“Gardening.” He repeated, though it sounded as though the word didn’t fit right in his mouth. “I’m afraid I know very little about gardening. My father worked in sugar fields, but I very much doubt it’s the same.”

“Well then I suppose we’ll have to learn together. It was the only thing I could think of that would get us out of the house.” I didn’t want to be anywhere that Luken could look in on us easily, or that someone who worked in the house should run into us and say something to him. “Unless you can think of something better?”

“Gardening is good. It’s therapeutic, isolated, and cultured.” I was certain he would arrive with several books on the subject. Jean Pierre’s great pleasure in life was to learn.

“So it’s settled. We’ll learn to garden, and you will teach me to fight.” I said. “I’ll send you a train ticket when I’ve spoken to Karl Erik.”

“I look forward to it, your grace.”

I pressed the button to end the call and finally felt like I could face the night.