



Thirteen Guests

Thirteen Short Stories

Joleene Naylor



Author's Note:

This is a collection of thirteen short stories about guests at Andrei's party. They may or may not make sense to readers who have not read *Masque of the Vampire* by Joleene Naylor.



<http://www.joleenenaylor.com>
Joleene@joleenenaylor.com

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You never know what you'll find in the shadows.....



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COMING SOON:

Tales of the Executioners



Thirteen Guests

A collection of thirteen short stories meant to take place during the events of *Masque of the Vampire*.

Every fifty years, Andrei throws an expensive house party for the crème de la crème of the vampire world. With attendance down and news of dangerous events in the world, Andrei invites some new faces and requests security, pulling Jorick and Katelina into a swirl of intrigue and mysterious vampires.

But, there's only so much time in the novel, and only so much Katelina can see. Discover the things she didn't and enjoy thirteen stories, told through the eyes of the guests themselves. Dive into their histories, share their pain, their joy, and their hopes in the days leading up to the party's first official day.

Includes:

William – As William gets ready for his journey to Canada, he takes a trip down memory lane. Can he ever forgive the Executioners for what they did?

Diana – When Diana's son Des comes home in a funk, she lets him pout for a few days, but now it's time to make him snap out of it.

Urian – After two years of sharing his lover with a young fledgling, Urian is at the limit of what he can stand.

Grimald – While dining with his nearly-adopted-son Wolfe, Grimald hears some disturbing news. Could the cult of the Night Goddess really be starting again?

Anyia – When her brother went missing, she never expected to see him again. Now he's back, and a cripple. Can she cope?

Möngkedai - Traveling by airplane is always boring; almost as boring as immortality can be, unless you know the secret to a long happy life.

Rangvald – Though Rangvald long ago came to terms with the fact that his mate is trapped in the body of a fourteen year old, she hasn't.

Brandle – One of the new faces at Andrei's party catches Brandle's eye, but can he get her to relax long enough to talk to him?

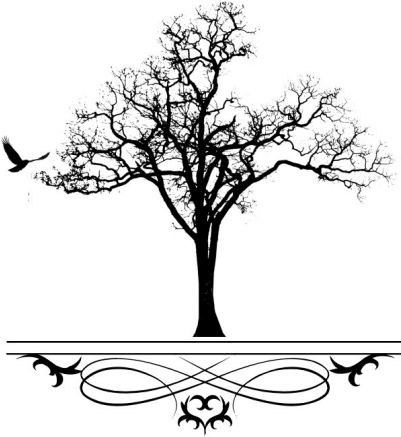
Eagan – Eagan is just trying to be friendly, but it seems like he never says the right thing. Maybe he should give up socializing?

Trevor – As a servant for Callise and Saul, Trevor's life is easy and comfortable, but it wasn't always that way.

Lykke - Lykke and her lover Edvard are happy together, but their personalities couldn't be more different.

Jome – A quest for information takes a strange turn, and Jome finds himself in the red nailed hands of the sexy Trivila.

Ren – Born without pigmentation in a superstitious time, Tol and Ren spent their lives believing they might be half demons.



William

April 17th

William stood at the foot of the bed, phone held to his ear by a shoulder. A suitcase yawned in front of him, half packed, as he nodded along to his words, “Yes...Of course...I’ll see you there.”

With a final goodbye, he hung up and tossed the phone on the bed. Last minute arrangements were always the most annoying, and you couldn’t get more last minute than the night before departure.

The invitation lay open on the dresser and, though he didn’t look at it, he knew the slanted cursive words inside:

You are cordially invited to attend the semi-centennial house party, hosted by Andrei at Falconwood Estate, Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada. Activities will include hunting, boating, equestrian activities, and theatrical entertainment. The Feast of the Night Goddess will be held the first Saturday, and a Masquerade Ball will bring the party to a close the following Saturday.

It went on to detail RSVP information. A handwritten note, stuffed inside, said that this year they were inviting “new blood” – with no details on who the new blood might be. The message had sent invitees scrambling to contact their friends and find out who had been invited, and who had been excluded in favor of someone “new.” William hadn’t bothered. The only two vampires that mattered had already called him. Past that he didn’t care who was there. In fact, new blood might make things easier.

He picked up a bright blue tie from the bed, folded it, and placed it in the suitcase with the others. The neat row looked back at him with every color of the rainbow.

“Master will need extra shoes?”

He glanced to his human servant. Zin Le Yee was her birth name, though he preferred to shorten it. He’d never understood the Burmese’s need to give their children a laundry list instead of a single good moniker. Then, adding the honorific their culture demanded made it even longer. Not that he bothered with any of it.

“Yes, Zin. Put them in the trunk.”

She bobbed her head and did as she was told. Her long black hair shimmered in the lamp light, and her skirt hugged her slim hips. He knew others found her attractive, beautiful even. To him, her only appeal was the human blood in her veins and the work she could do.

She put two more pairs of footwear in, then stopped and looked at him questioningly, her dark eyes shy.

“Those are enough. The party only lasts two weeks.”

She nodded and turned to the stack of shirts on the dresser.

He left her to finish packing and wandered through the apartment. All the modern conveniences packed into a few rooms with large windows and polished floors. The city moved outside, even at this time, and he peered out at it. Nearby, a knot of electric lines were tangled like a bird's nest at the top of a pole. He gave them a narrow eyed glance. When he'd first stepped foot in the place, those had been his top concern. What if they caught fire, he'd asked. The agent only looked slightly apologetic and promised him it was safe. It was better than having no electricity, like so many of the rural places. He was lucky to find this.

He tugged the curtain closed and dropped onto the couch. Lucky. Lucky to live on a metaphorical island of civilization, surrounded by a sea of primitives. But they weren't so primitive. He remembered times not so different.

His eyes roamed the room. The electric lights gleamed on a myriad of things he'd never dreamed possible; a television, a DVD player, a shiny chrome plated stereo. Chrome! Like silver except it didn't tarnish.

The gleam reminded of him of a sword – his sword – and he slipped back into memories. He stood next to Acwellen, a friend and coven mate whose long blonde hair was bound in a ponytail. Henry, the leader of their coven, stood behind a rough table. His face was wadded in fury as he read from a parchment. With a snarl, he threw the letter to the tabletop. William snatched it up. Acwellen peered over his shoulder and read aloud, for the benefit of the others in the room.

"Have you found someone missing from your numbers? Perhaps three maidens, with dark hair and crystal eyes? They have strayed into our territory. Their skin is soft and their lips sweet. On further discussion we have decided to keep them, unless you swear oaths to leave this land and trouble us no more. Signed, Dirk McKenzie."

A roar echoed from the plaster walls as the assembled vampires vented their anger.

William threw the paper to the table and demanded, "What will we do?"

Henry's hands were white knuckled fists. "We will na' leave what belongs ta' us. This land be ours, our coven was here first, and we won'a back down ta' bullies and thieves."

Elizabeth pushed her way to the front. "But what of the sisters? We can't leave them with McKenzie's coven, to be raped and tortured."

"No, we can'a. The time for talk is o're. We will take the sisters back by force."

A cry of approval swept the group. Swords rattled, and William raised his own. The candlelight glinted from the shiny surface, like the light on the chrome stereo.

"Master will be wanting winter clothing?"

Zin's voice cut in and William looked up into the soft face of his young servant. "Um...yes. I believe so. It's cold there. I don't want to look out of place."

"Yes, master." She bowed and bobbed, then hurried to the second bedroom to dig the clothes from storage. They weren't something he needed regularly, so they were hidden away with other semi-useless items. Clothes that were no longer in style, a box of photographs he couldn't stand to look at, his old sword.

It wasn't in decent shape now, more rust than steel. The gem on the hilt was missing, long ago made into a tie pin, and the blade was notched and scarred. One of those notches had come from that long ago night when they'd stormed McKenzie's den.

They snuck through the darkness until the manor house was in sight. Windows glowed with firelight, and music floated on the night breeze; a party. McKenzie's coven celebrated what they assumed was their victory. William tightened his hold on his weapon and sneered. Those boisterous songs would soon become a funeral dirge.

They crouched in surrounding vegetation until Henry gave the signal. Plants crunched under their feet as they leapt from their places and charged the house. William was the third to arrive. He launched himself at a window and crashed through in a spray of glass.

He slid to a stop on the polished floor, then quickly hopped out of the way for Acwellen. His friend gave him a quick nod before he dashed past him, following Henry and Abel. William gripped his sword and did the same.

The music came to an abrupt halt. Cries came next. When William burst into the room, Henry and the others already hacked at opponents whose bright blood splashed crimson on the floor. William's eye fell on three huddled women with golden hair. Dressed in finery, it was obvious they were treated well.

Unlike the sisters. I doubt the filth has done to them what they did to our women.

With a snarl, he fell on them, slashing and cutting. They crumpled to the floor and he spun in time to meet the weapon of a foe. The wielder was young to immortality, no stronger than a mortal, using a fireplace poker in place of sword. William pierced his heart, then strode on in search of larger prey.

Henry pressed his sword to McKenzie's throat, but the vampire only gazed with disdain at the chaos. "So this be yer answer, then?"

"Aye. This be our answer. Now give us what ye took 'afore we take what's left a yer coven."

"And what's ta stop ya once I do?" McKenzie asked.

"I give ya my word."

With an air of boredom, McKenzie snapped his fingers and a cringing vampire came out from behind a pipe organ, the kind that had sat in a church until the Reformation saw their demise.

"Bring the prisoners," McKenzie commanded. "And be quick, lest our friends soil anymore of the rugs."

Henry put more pressure on the sword, so that his foe's skin puckered. "Aye, we'll pour enough blood on 'em to make it worth our while."

"I wann'a worried about the blood. Yer presence itself is enough ta necessitate a washing."

William growled at the disrespect and lunged, but Henry waved him back. "Not now, lad. They return our girls an' promise ta leave our lands, an' they can go wi' their lives. That's the word I gave, and the word I'll keep."

The command tasted bitter, but there was naught William could do. Henry was the master – Henry was his master, the one who had brought him into immortality – and it would be wrong to disobey, even if the orders made no sense.

The fighting in the room had stilled. William chanced a quick glance to see his friends standing over broken, bleeding bodies of men and women. Scarlet splashed on walls and floors, stained draperies and rugs. The spill of organs sat like gelatinous islands in a sea of blood. The smell of death was overwhelming, and William's stomach tightened in response.

I could use a drink.

The servant returned, dragging the sisters with him. Dark hair tumbled around their shoulders, and blue eyes shimmered with tears. Their dresses were torn and dirty; a naked shoulder exposed here, a bruised knee there. Their wrists and ankles were bound in heavy shackles, connected by a chain, but at least they were alive.

When they saw Henry, hope flared in their eyes, and their step quickened. Angelica practically dragged her sisters in her haste to gain their perceived freedom.

They stopped near Henry. Angelica's certainty wavered as she looked over the bloody room, but returned when she met her coven master's eyes. Henry nodded to them, then to William and Abel. "Cut their chains, lads, an' let's away."

And that was where the notch came from. The first strike sent him reeling, his sword ringing from the impact. The second severed the chain. Abel made quick work of the other, but his blade fractured in two.

Henry held the sword steady at his opponent's throat. "All right, lads, take the girls and git out o' here. I'll follow in a moment."

"I doubt that," William said. "As soon as we turn our backs this snake will strike you down."

"Nay, he'd have ta care enough for such treachery an' he doe'n. If ya worry then stay behind and we will go together."

Henry was right. There was no duplicity, and in moments they breathed the sweet night air again. It was later when the double-dealing came.

William remembered the night in crystal detail, like one of the unbearable photos in the closet. A storm gathered in the distance. Heavy clouds hung bloated and angry. Low thunder rolled and the flash of lightning cut the darkness of the night sky. The sisters were cleaned and dressed, and the coven was once again whole and happy. In the five weeks since the confrontation, McKenzie's men had not been seen; neither hunting, spying, or warring. The peace was like the old days, before they'd come from whatever cursed place had born them.

The horses' hooves were scarcely audible over the thunder, but Acwellen shouted that strangers approached. William peered through the heavy night to see the three riders. One wore a white beard, and another had long raven hair that snapped in the breeze. The third was dark, skin the color of mahogany. The set of her body looked feminine.

Acwellen and William moved to bar them, swords drawn. As they drew close, the horses were pulled to a stop. The bearded man raised his hand in greeting. "Hail. We seek the coven of Henry. Have we found it?"

"That depends on who asks," Acwellen said carefully.

The man drew aside his cloak and lifted a heavy medallion from around his neck, as though it was proof of something. "I am Malick, an emissary of the Kugsankal, the True Council, rulers of our kind. I bring with me my trusted servants. We come on business and wish to see the master of this coven."

William's scalp prickled and a shiver passed up his spine. Acwellen was older than he, as was Henry, but neither could hope to claim the years the bearded man carried.

"Aye, if it's business from them, then you have the right place," Acwellen said and stood down. He motioned William to do the same. A warning stirred in the back of his mind. He could feel the danger these three presented, like predators waiting in the weeds to strike. But, at a second motion from Acwellen, he lowered his sword.

"You may pass."

Malick stayed on his horse, as did the woman. The third hopped down and guided his steed through, dark wary eyes on them, as if he thought they might attack. For a wild moment William contemplated it; imagined swinging his notched blade with enough force to sever the vampire's head. Instead he waited until they'd gone by, then followed.

They led the group to the great hall where Henry sat before a fire with his mate. He dismissed her, and turned to his guests. "I am Henry, fledgling of Fergen. Who be ye? And from where do ya hail?"

The bearded man lowered his hood to reveal a pleasant face. Dark eyes throbbed like jewels against toasted brown skin and long white hair fell to his shoulders. Though he smiled, there was no warmth in the gesture. "My name is Malick. I am an emissary of both the Kugsankal, and the Sodalitas. I bring with me my servants, Jorick and Kateesha." As her name was said, the woman pulled back her hood and smiled. Her bright red lips made William think of blood, and something in the depths of her eyes brought more carnal pleasures to mind, as if she knew how to mix the two in delightful ways he had yet to image.

"I see. I have heard a' ya before. The Destroyer an' his servants; The Tormentor and the Hand o' Death."

Malick gave a half bow and Kateesha laughed softly. "If you prefer such titles."

"Jus' wha' do such well known travelers wants of us?"

Malick held out his hand and Jorick placed a rolled parchment in it. Malick snapped the heavy wax seal and read a long string of Latin. William recognized some of the words: War. Trespass. Death. And Dirk McKenzie.

They've come to find the truth of the battle, no doubt.

Henry looked equally unsure. Malick's smile got friendlier, but no warmer. "Perhaps you would like me to try a different language? In gist, the Sodalitas have received a complaint that you waged an illegal war with the coven belonging to Dirk McKenzie, fledgling of Orbin, that you trespassed on their

hunting grounds, and that you took many lives in an unprovoked attack a month ago. Does this sound familiar?"

William gaped, but Henry silenced him with a motion. "Nay. 'Tis not the way it happened."

Malick turned to them one at a time. When William met his eyes, he felt the spark of something in his mind; a dream stealer. It was a skill that rarely worked on him, but this vampire was stronger than any he'd come in contact with before. Suddenly the great hall dropped away and he was in McKenzie's den, slashing at the golden haired women, their crimson blood arching through the air.

Malick released him and turned back to his host. "Tut, tut. The Sodalitas do not suffer untruths without just punishment. Twelve of their number were killed that night, and so twelve will you lose. Call your coven so that we may dispatch the punishment."

William staggered back, his knees shaky from both the mind reading and the pronouncement. "They encroached on our territory!" he cried. "They are the usurpers."

"And what proof have you?" Malick asked. "Were you in the right, why did you not come to the Sodalitas for aide?"

Henry stood angrily. "We don't need the help o' a council that sits on the other side o' the sea. We've always seen ta our own, an' we plan to keep seein' ta it."

"Would you deny the authority of the Sodalitas?" Malick seemed to grow larger before William's eyes. Though he was ashamed ever after, he drew back from the pulsating power that flooded the chamber.

Henry glared, his mouth a hard line, and Malick motioned to his underling. Jorick gave a stiff nod and stepped forward. In a fluid motion he drew his sword and swung. The fireplace snapped and hissed as drops of blood rained down among the flames, and Henry's head landed at their feet.

William stood paralyzed, eyes wide in disbelief as Jorick rammed his blade through Henry's heart, then wiped the sword before returning it to its scabbard.

"We need only take eleven now," Malick intoned. "My children, assemble the coven so we may choose the unlucky."

Even as the shock waned, William couldn't move. Like something from a nightmare, he stood frozen, watching Henry's blood pool on the floor. His eyes flicked to Acwellen to see his friend was no better than he. They were held immobile, bound to the bearded master's will.

Malick gave them a pleasant smile that seemed more terrifying than kind. "It is best for you both to remain this way, lest you find yourselves among the chosen number as your master did."

William wanted to swear revenge, but his tongue was as heavy as his limbs. The master laughed, as though he'd seen the threat anyway. "And will you destroy the Sodalitas as well? How interesting it would be to watch you try."

The coven members were herded through the door, some willingly, and some forced. When they saw Henry's body the reactions were a mixture of anguished cries and furious snarls.

Malick turned to address them. "You have been summoned on orders from the Sodalitas, the true rulers of our kind. Your coven broke The Laws when you trespassed on the land of Dirk McKenzie, fledgling of Orbin. You further compounded your sin when you attacked illegally, and slaughtered twelve of his coven. In recompense, you shall lose an equal number."

Elizabeth and her daughter rushed the bearded master, but Jorick took them out before they could reach him. Their limp bodies fell to the floor and he dispassionately cut out their hearts.

"Is there any other who would challenge me?" Malick's voice boomed like the thunder outside. The others cringed back, terrified gazes locked on the grim spectacle of their dead.

"No?" Malick asked, then turned to his servants. "My children, take one woman and eight men. Choose who you will."

William tried to scream as Kateesha eagerly cut down Abel, then a screaming vampiress. Her red smile grew as their blood poured onto the floor. Conversely, her counterpart killed with quick clean cuts, his face expressionless and his eyes as cold as Malick's smile.

The Tormentor and the Hand of Death. So they live up to their titles.

William's phone buzzed to life, and he jerked back to the present; his well-lit apartment with its television and shiny chrome stereo. He ran a hand through his hair, as though to brush away the vivid memories. The phone buzzed again. Impatiently he snatched it up.

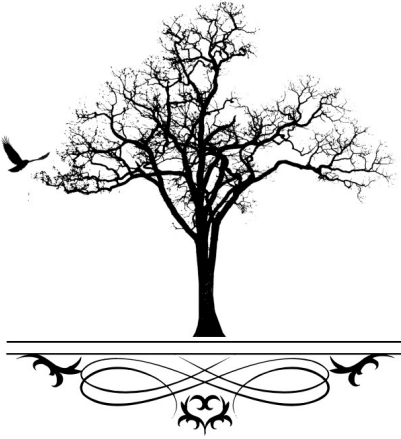
"Yes?" he paused as the woman replied, her voice a low sweet purr. Though she couldn't see him, he nodded once, twice, three times. Finally he said, "I know. I haven't forgotten."

She hung up moments later and he tossed the phone to the stand.

Trust me, he said silently, as though she could hear him across the miles. *I remember. I remember everything.*

If only he could forget.





Diana

April 17th

Diana walked through the doorway to find her son flopped in a chair. His dark hair was cropped short and his beard was neat and trim. It was the sunglasses perched on his head, his terrible posture, and the baggy clothes that made him look like a slob.

“Des! Sit up straight.”

He rolled his eyes. “I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not.” She snapped her fingers and, with a grudging grumble, he shifted in the chair. “There’s no reason to act classless.”

“There’s nothing classless about slouching in a chair. You need to get with the times, Mother. This isn’t 1840.”

“It doesn’t matter what year it is. Manners are still manners.” She studied him. Trapped in the body of a twenty-six year old, he had been immortal for nearly two hundred years. The calculations surprised her. Had it really been so long? Perhaps that was his problem.

“You’ve moped around here for ten days. I don’t know what you’re upset about, but it’s time for you to grow up and move on.”

“I’m not upset,” he replied angrily. “I’m just...” He slouched down in the chair and ignored her growl of impatience. “I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“Neither do I,” she said brusquely. “It’s not over Adam, is it?”

Des flinched and, though she was no mind reader, she sensed his guilt. Adam had been Demetrious’ pet project, a vampire he’d discovered freshly turned and abandoned. Demetrious had brought him home and acted as his master, teaching him and training him. The last time Des had come for a visit, he’d joined a war coven, and invited them to do the same. After much debate, it was only Adam who went. Not long after Des sent a letter asking if Adam had returned because he was missing. The follow up message said he was dead, but there were no details.

“No, it’s not Adam,” Des said gruffly.

“You’ve never told us what happened to him. Was he killed in battle?”

Des sucked air through his teeth and finally muttered, “I didn’t see it.”

She frowned and perched on the arm of his chair. “It isn’t your fault, darling. He was old enough to stand on his own.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Silence fell and she tried another topic. “In your last letter you said you had a new coven.”

“Do you mean Anya’s? Nah. I waited around to see if she was coming back, but I’m pretty sure she’s not.”

It was another conversational dead end, just as every sentence had been since he'd come home. Obviously Diana needed to pry the information from him. "Why isn't she coming back?"

"It's a long story." She gave him her best mother-stare and he sighed. "Fine. I'll make it short. You remember I joined that war coven to fight Claudius?"

Diana nodded. Though she didn't know Claudius well, she was familiar with his ruthless reputation.

"After I invited you to join, things went south. Kateesha betrayed us. We won in the end, but Executioners killed Oren's family. We're pretty sure it was Kateesha's fault, so since it was part of the war, we agreed to keep the coven together and fight The Guild. Why not, right?"

Diana took a sharp intake of breath. "Des...Is that the battle Adam died fighting?"

"Let me finish. We only fought The Guild once before we got sidetracked with Kateesha."

"She's the one who betrayed you?" He nodded but refused to meet her eyes. "Is she the one who killed Adam?"

"For telling me not to worry about it, you're pretty obsessed with what happened to him."

She absently stroked his head. "No, I think you are, and if you get it off your chest you might feel better."

"I swear to you that this has nothing to do with him. You're right, he was old enough to make his own decisions, and if what I heard was true he earned what was coming to him."

She frowned at the odd turn of phrase. "You mean he fought well and earned his death?"

"Yeah. Something like that. Anyway, we fought Kateesha, but again someone betrayed us. We all thought it was Jorick."

Jorick. Diana knew that name by reputation. "Is he an Executioner?"

"He was. But he quit. As I was saying, Jorick and Kateesha used to be a thing. Word was they still were, so it wasn't hard to figure out he was the one helping her. Things only went bad after he showed up, and in the end he had his human kill her, so no one ever got to question her. On top of that he conveniently found a bunch of papers that said the traitor was Anya's brother."

"Anya was the woman you were seeing, whose brother headed the war coven?"

"No. That was Torina, Oren's sister. Anya and her brother were just members in the war coven. Like I was saying, there was a pretty strong case against Jorick, and those papers seemed suspicious to me. Torina took Jorick's side and it just pissed me off. She was always sticking up for him, and it wasn't just her. Everyone except Anya acted like he was some hero. The minute Jorick showed up again, Oren even offered to let him lead the coven. I'd been helping out for two years while Jorick just skated in and out when he felt like it, and they still deferred to him, even after he..." He broke off and looked away.

"After he what?"

"He killed Adam, all right!"

She reeled back. "What? I thought he was your ally?"

"He was. I-I don't know. There was a story that Adam and another guy made a deal with Kateesha to attack Jorick's human. Kateesha was insanely jealous of her, so it's not completely out there, and Adam... You know how Adam got bored all the time. The battle we had with The Guild went really bad, so maybe he decided to defect. I don't know. He didn't tell me anything about it, he just disappeared, and the first I heard of it was after Jorick joined us."

Diana gave a soft, heavy sigh. "Now I understand why you wouldn't tell us."

"Yeah, can you imagine Demetrious' reaction?"

She chose her words carefully. "He will be disappointed that his adopted fledgling would do such a thing, but he won't blame you or Jorick, and neither should you."

"Jorick," Des bit the name off angrily. "You'd do better to call him God. Torina acted like he was goddamn superman. She was desperate to get him to join us. When he finally did she was ecstatic. 'It will be all right now.' And 'We'll win now' and on and on."

Diana was starting to understand the complex situation. "There's nothing wrong with jealousy, son, until it hurts you."

"I'm not jealous! Just...sick of it. Anya was the only one who understood, and she agreed that Jorick was the traitor. We split off together. Then, just before New Year's, Jorick showed up. He was with another coven and looking for Thomas."

"Who's Thomas?"

"Anya's little brother. The one Jorick claimed was the traitor. Now they said he'd helped kidnap someone. Anya refused to relinquish him, so there was a fight. A neighbor called the human cops and I told Jorick to just take Thomas. He wasn't worth the mess we were going to be in otherwise. He was one of those simpering, smug little twerps. The kind who sneer in your face. Then, when you go to backhand them, they sic a Pitbull on you and laugh while it tears you to pieces. He reminded me of Master Cosgrove."

Diana shivered at the name. It conjured images of a foreign world; of a manor house, a pinched angry woman and her cruel drunken husband. For a nanosecond she was back there, the man's booze scented breath in her face, his wiry body on top of hers...She shuddered and pushed the memory away.

"Don't you call him that. Don't you ever call that...filth master. Demetrious is the only master we will ever know again, and he earned that title when he saved us. Do you understand me?"

Her voice grew sharp and Des nodded. "Whatever. You can't pretend he didn't exist. It happened, whether you like it or not."

How could she deny Cosgrove's existence? The proof of it stared back at her with angry eyes; eyes whose owner didn't know his father's name.

And he never needs to.

She took a cleansing breath and laid her hand on Des'. "It happened before we were turned, son, and before doesn't exist anymore. All that matters is this life, our new life, the life Demetrious gave us." Des looked ready to argue, and she switched tack. "You said they kidnapped Anya's younger brother? Is that why you're upset?"

"No. I told you I let them go, and I've never felt bad about it. But Anya was furious. She took off, just dumped me and the coven. I waited around to see if she was going to come back. Then, a couple of weeks ago, we got a message from The Guild that they were investigating Thomas' kidnapping and requested we appear. I thought he was dead, but I guess they used some old punishment on him. The High Council called it illegal."

"The old way."

They turned to see Demetrious standing in the doorway. His smile turned grim as he joined them. "The old way was a punishment reserved for the most heinous crimes. A criminal's arms and legs are removed, and in some cases their lower jaw, and then they are buried in the ground, left to die over countless years. It was outlawed. Now it can only be administered by The Guild. In the new version, the vampire is encased in cement, most often with their limbs intact."

Diana shivered as she imagined the horror of the act. "How cruel."

Demetrious rubbed her shoulders softly; a soothing gesture he'd employed a million times over the years. It still worked. "Those who suffer this fate have usually committed crueler crimes. What did this one do?"

Des made a low angry noise. "That's just it. At the trial they had to read Thomas' mind because he doesn't have a tongue anymore. Turns out he really was the one who betrayed us. We almost got killed, and the worst part is he had no reason to do it. Jorick at least had a history with Kateesha, but Thomas...I mean they knew each other. They were all down south together before the Civil War, but he didn't have that kind of history with her. He didn't owe her any loyalty. He sentenced all of us to death and I don't even know why."

Dina's motherly fury rose to the surface. Her son could have been killed, and for what? A war that didn't matter?

Demetrious rubbed her back and said soothingly, "But you weren't harmed. That's the important thing to remember."

"I suppose," Des said slowly. "But now I look like a jack ass. I've told anyone who'd listen that Jorick and his human are traitors. Don't get me wrong, I still don't like them, but they didn't do what I said they did."

"People make mistakes," Demetrious offered.

"Yeah. A mistake is one thing, but calling God himself a traitor when he's not is something else."

A terrible scenario leapt into Diana's mind. She saw her son dead; murdered by a furious former Executioner. "Perhaps if you apologized Jorick won't seek restitution."

Des motioned her opinion away. "I'm not worried about Jorick. He won't bother me, and I'm not going to bother him. It's Torina. She wouldn't accept an apology." He sighed and dropped further into the chair. "It's probably just as well. Jorick is her hero, and I can't live up to the guy's legend. As for Anya, no way will she forgive me. Truth is I don't want her to. Last thing I need is tangled up in her mess. But now I don't know what to do. I could go home, I guess, but why bother? There's nothing there now. Benjamin's dead, and Herrick's dead, and Micah's off with Jorick and his bunch. Marcellus left years ago. Maybe it's time I do the same, though I don't know where to go."

"You could come here," Demetrious said.

It took Des a moment to answer. "I appreciate the offer, but I'm not sure it would work out after living on my own."

Diana didn't understand, but the choice wasn't hers to make. As long as he was safe she'd be happy. "I thought you were working on a picture book?"

"A graphic novel. Yeah, I got it done. I guess I just need some down time to pitch it to publishers."

Demetrious smile turned inquisitive. "How will you do that? Do they meet with clients after sundown?"

"Nah. It's all email now. I doubt I'd ever meet the agent or the publisher in person. And if I go Indy or small press..." he trailed off at his mother's blank expression. "I suppose you're going to say that this is my chance at down time."

She hadn't been ready to say anything, but better to let him think she was omnipotent. "Is it?"

"It could be. I don't know. I guess while you're gone at that party thing I'll think about it."

"I have a better idea. Why don't you come with us?" She looked to Demetrious for approval, and he nodded. "I'm sure Andrei won't mind an extra guest. This year's invitation said there would be 'new guests' to add 'variety'."

"I won't say it's not time," Demetrious commented. "I've been to at least eight of these. Though the entertainment changes, the faces don't. It's the same vampires with the same complaints."

"Yes, but those who weren't invited feel slighted." Diana said quietly. A round of angry phone calls, shortly after the invitations were mailed, had revealed who was going, and who wasn't. Those that weren't were mad.

"Very probably. I imagine Andrei will be begging forgiveness for years to come. That is, if he cares. I'm not positive he does."

Diana tried to imagine being so self-assured, so powerful, that other's opinions didn't matter. She couldn't do it. She blamed her humble beginnings; the life of a slave wasn't pleasant, but how could she hang on to that and at the same time tell Des to let it go? Though she saw the hypocrisy, it made no difference. Compared to the other beautiful glittering vampiresses she always felt lacking. Though Demetrious dressed her in expensive jewelry and designer gowns, she knew they could see through the luxurious wrappings, and see that she didn't belong with them. She wasn't one of them. She was a slave, a servant, not one of the ladies.

She shook back to the conversation at hand and eyed her son. A gentle prod in his ribs, and he asked, "They won't care if you bring an uninvited guest?"

"It happens all the time," Demetrious said dismissively. "If it would make you feel better, I'll send word tonight. We aren't planning to arrive until the day after tomorrow."

Des hesitated. "What kind of party is it? I get that it lasts two weeks, but what do you do?"

"It's mostly rich vampires spending time trying to convince one another that they're all better off than anyone else." When Des frowned, Demetrious laughed. "It isn't as bad as I've made it sound. Come, there's a feast, a masquerade ball, and a hundred amusements. All the blood you can drink, and perhaps you can find someone to replace your unforgiving lady friend."

"I need that like a hole in the head." Des scoffed, but then relented. "Yeah, all right. I'll go to the party. Maybe it will take my mind off of everything." He made to stand, and Diana left her perch so he could. "You'll send them a message?"

"Yes," Demetrious promised. "I'll see to it tonight."

"Thanks." The hint of a smile tugged at Des' lips. It disappeared and, with a half wave, he slumped out of the room.

Demetrious laughed softly. "Despite what he says, I believe a woman would do him good. Our son is one of those who always needs to be in love. It's a pity he can't find someone to stay with." He caught Diana's hand and brought it to his lips. As he kissed her knuckles, his eyes twinkled. "Perhaps one day he will be as lucky as I am."

She tugged her hand back and stifled an embarrassed laugh. "You say such things."

"True things." He dropped her hand to pull her to him. "Some nights I look at you and wonder how I was so blessed to find you. After all the long years of loneliness, at last I have that which makes immortality bright."

"You could have any woman you wanted."

"Ah, but I wanted you." He nibbled her neck, ignoring her squeals. "Do you remember when I first saw you?"

"You were masquerading as a man from London, and came to the Cosgrove's country manor."

"And they sent you into the library with tea while I waited. You offered scones, but the only thing I wanted to taste was your lips. Perhaps I'll taste them now." He claimed her mouth and she melted against him, like butter in the sun. His warm hands cupped her head and her back, and pressed her body against the hard, lean length of him. Her heart raced and she bit back disappointment when it ended.

With a soft sigh, he held her to him. Her head on his chest, she closed her eyes and listened to the steady sound of his heart. Yes, she remembered when he'd come to the Cosgrove's. He'd come again, and again. After one month he'd asked to buy her. At first Mr. Cosgrove had refused, but eventually the price was right and she was sold. Demetrious was nothing but a wealthy man to her; he'd not made any overtures or given any hint. Her despair at being sent away was complete, but she had no choice. In her mind's eye she could see the manor house fading into the distance, knowing that her son was still there.

When she arrived at Demetrious', he'd offered her every comfort. It took a week to battle her confusion and decide that the new situation was real, that he did not wish her to be a slave or mere bed warmer. Still, it was a month before she was brave enough to ask the question: Why do you want me? Another month brought questions of a more superstitious nature: Why do you never wake in daylight? Her Christian education whispered tales of monsters that Demetrious' echoed. But, she asked herself, how could he be a demon cursed by God and yet be the kindest man she had ever known?

Soon, she accepted his offer of immortality. Only then did she mention her son. Though a grown man, she couldn't bear to leave him enslaved. As she explained the circumstances of his birth, Demetrious' face hardened, until his eyes were slits of hatred. She feared the wrath was directed at herself, but he corrected that false impression. There was no offer to buy Des' freedom, as he had hers. Instead they visited in the dark and gave Des the immortal gift. Master Cosgrove and his wife made a fitting first meal for her son.

After that, they fled England for the United States of America, and settled in the rugged north. The winters were colder, but as a vampire she didn't mind. What she appreciated was that the women were different; not wilting lilies in lace and heirloom jewels, but rough and loud, and as hard working as their men.

Civilization rolled over them. It brought with it finery and tea parties, but it was a society that she never approached, never got involved with. The last thing she wanted was to play her ladyship in a starched dress.

Demetrious' kiss brought her back to the plant filled room and she asked, "You'll send the message?"

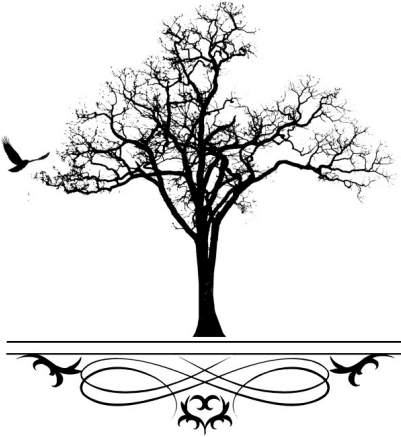
He winked. "I already have." She looked confused and he whispered, "When he first arrived, sulking and fretting. I thought then it would be good for him."

"You didn't tell me!"

"No, because it is better if he thinks it's his idea. If you knew you'd have simply ordered him to attend." He grew serious. "I know you don't like the semi-centennial parties, but perhaps this one won't be as stiff as usual. Your son is willing to give it a chance. Surely if you ask it of him, you can manage it yourself?"

Though she promised him she would, secretly, she doubted she'd be able to let go of her past and the self-loathing it left behind. Even if it did make her a hypocrite.





Urian

April 17th

Urian combed his blonde hair and studied the effect in the mirror. Of medium length, it curled just before his shoulders, leaving delicate wisps that teased his ears. With his fine features, porcelain skin, and bright blue eyes, he more than earned the title beautiful.

If only Grayson could remember that.

He dropped the comb and glared at the disarrayed countertop. Taylor's toiletries were scattered like a teenager's. With a snarl, Urian made use of the cologne. Grayson's favorite, it cost nearly four hundred dollars a bottle.

There was a time he used to buy it for me. Now he gives it to that kid.

And kid was what Taylor was. Not because he looked all of nineteen – Urian didn't look more than twenty-one himself – but because he'd only been immortal for two years.

And he's so useless he can't even recap the cologne properly.

Urian started to screw the lid on, then stopped and perched it haphazardly on the bottle, just the way he'd found it. He wasn't their maid. Let one of them deal with it.

He stormed out of the bathroom and down the hall. Taylor's annoying laugh floated to him from the living room, and he drew to a stop. He remembered the first time he'd heard that laugh. He and Grayson had gone to a club in search of dinner, as they did every Saturday. The clubs changed, but the routine was the same; even their conversation was the same. They dressed in their hottest threads and sashayed through the door as if they owned the place. At one time they'd danced and enjoyed themselves, but after a few years the process was an oiled machine. An immediate scan of the room revealed their victim: some pretty boy who wanted to drink himself to death. They took turns – one would split off to the dance floor and the other would approach their prey and warm him up. After the signal – in this modern age it had become a text message – the other would join them and suggest they go somewhere quieter. Too pissed to think it through, their mark would agree. In the alley, or along some lonely road, they'd fulfill his death wish. Then they went home and made passionate love or, sometimes, they did it right in the car, the bloodless body still warm in the seat near them.

But not that night. Urian felt Grayson's excitement when he saw Taylor, like a fluorescent bulb firing up. His eyes fairly crackled with electricity as they roamed over the youth. Messy dark hair, an open collared shirt, and a stud in his ear; he was nothing new to Urian. He'd seen hundreds of them drowning their misery in alcohol, trying to pretend they were having fun while running from their demons.

It was Urian's turn to lure the prey. In retrospect, he should have been alarmed when Grayson dismissed the routine to approach the boy himself, but he hadn't been. He'd only agreed, and wandered deeper into the throbbing dance floor. He waited for the buzz of his mobile. As one song after another

played, nothing happened. More than once, he checked to make sure it was powered on. Checked that he had signal. He even went to the bathroom and sent a text to his friend Yandra to make sure it was working.

“Yeah. I got this. Your phone is working,” came the reply, so he chanced fate and texted Grayson. The answer left him confused.

“We’re out back.”

Why in the bloody hell would they be out back? That wasn’t supposed to happen until after he joined them. Unless the kid had gotten ill, or decided he wanted air. As he shoved through the club for the door, he told himself that was the answer. The kid had bolted outside and Grayson had followed.

What he saw in the alley made his heart stop. The kid was half draped over a dumpster, his shirt and pants open, his face and chest smeared in blood. Long lashed eyes were partially closed, and his mouth hung at an odd angle, as though he might drool.

Grayson leaned against the rough brick of the building. His scarf fell over his naked shoulders. Crimson stained his mouth and his hands. The cigarette that hung from his full lips spoke words Urian didn’t want to hear.

When the boy groaned, Urian demanded, “Isn’t he dead?”

Grayson blew a thin stream of smoke. “No. We’re keeping him.” He pushed off the wall, retrieved his missing shirt and wiped himself clean.

Urian stepped back, arms crossed. Incredulous eyes flicked to the moaning human. “We don’t need a pet. Remember the last one?”

Grayson paused and shook his head so that his long hair danced around his face. “Not as a pet. As an equal.”

Taylor rolled over and opened his eyes. Urian recognized the vivid gleam, the myriad colors shimmering in their depths.

Grayson had turned him.

The kid gasped, then his whole body pulled rigid, like a clenched fist, and he howled in agony. It was the death throes. Urian felt a moment of pity, but the hungry look on Grayson’s face killed it. Let the kid suffer.

They’d hauled him home, and by the next evening Taylor was reborn; an immortal beauty with model-like cheekbones and perfectly sculpted eyebrows. He wore the same size clothing as Urian, and Grayson lightly suggested he loan their new “brother” something to wear. “Unless you prefer to leave him naked. He has the body for it.” He chuckled. “Once he’s fed, we’ll take him shopping for a wardrobe of his own.”

Urian nearly bit through his tongue as he hauled his least favorite clothing to the locked guest room. Inside, Taylor sat hunched on the edge of the bed in his underwear. He leapt to his feet, muscles tense. Urian readied for an onslaught, but the kid pulled up short. “Who the fuck are you?”

Urian’s answer was to throw the clothes on the floor and walk out. Grayson waited in the dining room. His fake casualness barely concealed his impatient excitement.

Urian grabbed the pitcher from his hands. “Why is he here?”

“Who?” Grayson asked, as if his every thought wasn’t already consumed with the youth.

“That...child. Why did you turn him?”

He’d asked the same question the night before but hadn’t gotten a real answer. Now was no different. “I thought we could use some company.”

“Really? I thought I was your company. Remember when you said I was the only one you wanted to spend forever with?”

Urian’s heart dropped with the same speed as Grayson’s eyes.

“I see. This is your way of saying it’s over.”

Grayson caught up his hands earnestly. “No, love, not over. It’s just...we need some new blood. Something exciting.”

Urian pulled free. “If you mean ménage à trois, I don’t share. You know that.”

"But you do." Grayson moved close enough to make Urian's heart pound. His breath was cool on his face as he whispered, "In the car, sometimes, when we both..."

Urian knew the rest. The lust filled moment when they drank together, biting one another, biting their prey, drinking all at once, wrapped in a crimson world of need, desire, and pleasure.

He purposefully stepped back. "That's different. They're only humans. This...this is another immortal. You've made him one of us!"

"It's no different. But if you don't want to do it that way, we don't have to. We can take turns. You can have him, too, when you want him."

Urian took another step away. "I told you, I don't share."

Grayson's mouth turned into a pretty pout. "You want me to choose?"

For a moment Urian couldn't breathe. He forced ragged breaths in and said softly, "I didn't know there was a choice to make."

Taylor blundered into the room, dressed in the borrowed clothes, his hair finger combed into place. He looked from one to the other, then, "Where the fuck am I? What's going on?"

He didn't remember anything. *Let Grayson handle it.*

And he had. Taylor took a day to come to terms with his reality, and another day to fully embrace it. After that there was a whirlwind of shopping, of redecorating his room, of teaching him all the things he needed to know to survive, and trying to break his crudest habits. Language was the worst. "Arse" and "tit" were his favorite words, and it took bribery and nearly four thousand dollars to temper him down to "bloody hell".

The pub tradition continued, but Taylor had a habit of picking fights, or falling into them. Grayson spent his time babysitting, and it was Urian who had to warm the victims up. He'd decided that Grayson really wasn't sexually interested in the brash young man when he caught him hungrily eyeing the shirtless youth.

"Do you want him that bad?" he asked with false casualness.

"What? No, of course not."

But they both knew it was a lie.

At first, Grayson worked hard to keep up the illusion but, as weeks passed, he spent fewer and fewer nights in Urian's bed. Desperate, Urian turned to Yandra for help.

"He obviously wants some spice. You said yourself that's why he turned the boy. When was the last time you took the initiative? Made Gray feel special and desired?" He didn't know and she pushed. "Go on, give it a try."

Giddy with excitement, Urian dressed in his sexiest garb, filled a bottle with blood from their stash, grabbed a pair of wine glasses and an armload of candles, and sashayed to Grayson's room. He threw open the door and stumbled inside to see naked limbs twisted together on silk sheets. Taylor looked up, licking Grayson's blood from his lips. "Don't you know how to bloody knock?"

Urian dumped his burdens on the floor and flew back to his room. He packed his suitcases in a hurry and stormed to the car. Fat white snowflakes fell from the sky, like feathers fallen from angels. In the distance the clouds glowed with the reflected light of London. He'd get a hotel room there. Call Yandra. Try to think of something.

Grayson appeared, walking barefoot through the snow, wearing guilt and a housecoat. "You have to believe me, love, I didn't mean for it to happen. We were talking and it just..."

"And your dick just fell into him?" Urian snapped as he shoved the last suitcase in the backseat.

"No, no it didn't." He tried to catch Urian's hands, but failed. "We didn't have sex like that. There was only blood."

"As if that makes it better!" Urian fought tears and looked away. Snow gilded the property's heavy gate and melted on the bricked driveway. Though he was terrified of the answer, he asked, "Has this happened before?"

"No. I swear, Urian." When he didn't respond, Grayson pressed, "Urian, please stay."

He spun towards him, eyes shiny with tears and betrayal. "Why should I?"

Grayson's voice was raw, "Don't go, love. I know I hurt you, but I never meant to. Please, the three of us--"

"There is no three of *us*. There's you-and-him, or you-and-I. Nothing else."

Grayson's hands wadded into fists. "Why do you have to be so unrelenting? Can't you let me have this one little thing? He's only a toy, I'll tire of him and then it will be us again, like it was."

"And you expect me to stay here, to watch this? You and him, fucking on our sheets?"

"But we won't." Grayson stepped closer, his voice even and soothing. "I promise we won't. We'll only share blood, nothing more." Snowflakes melted in his dark hair and on his broad shoulders. "I love you, Urian. Don't go. Just allow me this one little eccentricity. I'll make it up to you. Anything you want. Name it, and it's yours." He caught his lover's hands and ran his thumbs over his knuckles. "Don't throw away everything we've been, everything we could be. All these years, Urian. Don't dismiss them like trash."

"Isn't that what you're doing?"

In the end he stayed. He confided in Yandra, but her opinion wavered back and forth. "You need to stand up to him. You deserve better." Then she'd say, "Though you've been together more than three hundred years. Maybe it is time you took a break. You could stay with me. Think of the fun we'd have."

But he wouldn't have fun. He'd miss Grayson too much. Right or wrong, Grayson was like a drug, an addiction he couldn't shake, and the thought of spending a lifetime without him left only one option; the darkness of eternal sleep.

Which might be better than this.

Urian shook back to the present and forced his feet forward. Since that night he'd seen less and less of his lover, and it had been six months since they'd been intimate. Grayson lived and breathed his toy, the way he'd once lived and breathed Urian.

They sat in the dining room, dressed in their sexiest, laughing over their plans.

"Going out?" Urian asked.

Grayson didn't look at him. "Yes. Since we'll miss our Saturday. You can come."

As if he wants me to.

"No." Taylor snapped. "He's too gloomy. I want real fun before we go to that boring-ass party."

"Andrei's party?" Urian demanded. "I didn't know he was invited."

Taylor tossed his head so that his hair shimmered. "I'm Grayson's mate. Of course I'm invited."

"Now--" Grayson started, but Urian cut him off with a chuckle.

"Did you see the invitation?" Taylor's hesitation said he hadn't, and Urian smiled for the first time in days. "Shall I fetch it?"

"That's not necessary," Grayson said quickly.

"It's no trouble. I'll be right back." Grayson's voice followed him, but he ignored it, and only returned once he'd gotten the envelope from the study.

"Let's see what it says." Urian pulled the invitation out with a flourish and read, "To Grayson and Urian, you are cordially invited--"

Taylor jumped to his feet and turned accusing eyes on Grayson. "You said I was invited!"

"Yes, you--"

"Of course you weren't." Urian tossed the invite onto the table. "You're not old enough. Andrei has servants six times your age, and they're still not considered worthy enough to participate."

"What the bloody hell?"

"Enough!" Grayson shouted. "I sent the RSVP for three, so it's settled. We're all going."

Taylor dropped back into his chair, sulking. "Maybe I don't want to go."

"I don't care what you want, you're going. And Urian," Grayson focused on him. "You're going too. We will enjoy ourselves."

"With a bunch of crusty codgers," Taylor muttered. "Bloody brilliant."

Grayson gave the boy a hard look, then tossed him the car keys. "Warm it up. I'll be out in a moment."

Taylor pouted, but did as he was told. When the sound of the front door echoed through the house, Grayson sighed. "He's getting willful. Perhaps I spoil him too much."

"Perhaps?" Urian scoffed. "His every whim is your command. I can't think how much you've spent on him; clothes, shoes, parties, that stripper we had for a month – a month! I was tired of listening to her shout for help."

"Well, the basement is soundproofed now, so if there are any others..."

"There shouldn't be any others. It's ridiculous that you put up with his behavior just because he's attractive. There are other fish in the sea; shinier, prettier, better behaved fish."

Grayson stared at the table top, as if seeking an answer. "To be honest, love, I'm starting to get tired of fish."

"Then perhaps it's time you went back to your plain boring budgie."

Grayson looked up. His mouth twisted in a smile that was both sad and amused. "You're far from a boring budgie, love."

"You could have fooled me." Urian reached for the invitation and Grayson snatched his hand.

"I'm sorry. I know this has been hard on you. I should have listened back when I first...I was just bored. Not with you, but with everything. I thought Taylor could inject some youth into our dried up old corpses, but more often than not I find him grating rather than invigorating."

Urian resisted pulling away. "Do you mean he's leaving?"

"Maybe."

Urian glared and Grayson sighed. "The trouble is, there's nowhere to send him. He's too brash to let him on his own, and I don't know anyone who would take him."

"You could kill him."

Grayson gave him a hard look and he amended, "I could kill him for you."

"No. He's one of us now. You can't just murder him because he's gotten annoying."

Urian didn't see why they couldn't, but he knew it was pointless to argue. "Maybe he'll meet someone at the party."

"That's what I'm hoping for." Grayson looked into the distance wistfully. "He is beautiful, though."

"Beauty does not a good companion make. I hope you've learned your lesson."

Grayson released him and stood. "Yes, I think I have. For now, at any rate, and if I relapse slap me and remind me of this." He checked his watch. "You're sure you won't come?"

Urian shook his head and Grayson pressed a kiss to his cheek. "I'll see you when we get back, love."

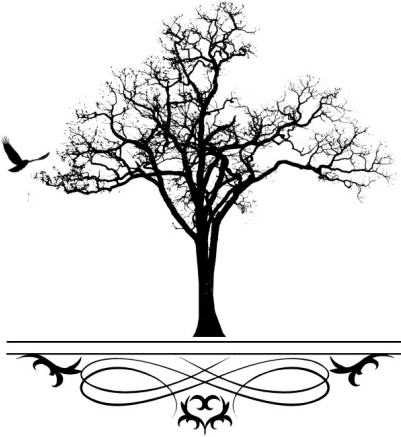
His lascivious tone made his intentions clear, but Urian refused to make it easy for him. "We'll see."

He watched Grayson make his way out the door and on to a night at the club. His mind ran with calculations. If he could only scrape Taylor off on someone else, they'd be free. The boy liked both men and women, so it shouldn't be hard to find someone to his taste among the rich beautiful guests. Hopefully he could keep his mouth shut long enough to get them interested in him. Urian made a mental note to talk to Grayson about it. He'd have to offer the kid another few thousand to get him to behave like he hadn't been raised in the gutter. They only had to fool someone for two weeks.

Two weeks. If Urian could just make it through, Grayson would be his again.

Take that, Taylor.





Grimald

April 18th

The bang of the gavel echoed through the council room. As the leader of the Höher Rat detailed the council's findings, Grimald eased his hand out of his wide sleeve to glance at his watch. It was almost time to stop for the evening. Surely there wasn't time for another trial.

"Have you packed yet?" The thought whispered through his mind and he looked to the vampire next to him. Darion had dark hair that fell in his eyes and the face of a man in his thirties. Though he looked younger than Grimald, he was actually older.

Darion gave a subtle nod, to say the implanted words had come from him. Like everyone on the council, he was a dream stealer, a vampire who could read minds and, like more than half of the council, he was also a whisperer and could send thoughts to someone else. Whether for better or worse, the thoughts seemed as if they came from the thinker's head, and many times a whisperer had manipulated someone into feeling or doing something with the assumption it was their own idea. Even Grimald had done it. But, since he'd joined the council, he used the gift more for work and communication.

With a glance to the council leader, Grimald replied silently, *"No, I haven't packed. I have a dinner engagement, but I will after that. We're not leaving until tomorrow."*

"Better to be prepared early," his friend popped back.

Grimald dismissed the over-cautious idea. *"It's only two weeks. How much do I need to take?"*

The council head turned to them with a dark look. Grimald's mouth snapped shut and he tried to look innocent. Among a group of whisperers, it was useless.

Their leader said coldly, "If we are all in accord, this council is dismissed."

The gavel banged and those sitting among the chamber's benches exited. Grimald and his fellow councilmen stood and headed through an invisible door in the back of the room. A narrow corridor led to the council chamber. From there they filed into dressing chambers where they stripped off their emerald robes in favor of everyday clothing.

Grimald dressed in a light gray suit and finished it off with a watercolor tie in vivid shades of blue and green. He combed his thin gray hair and mustache, and tried to tame his right eyebrow. For some reason it was always determined to stand straight out, while its twin behaved.

He hung the robe on the hook and headed out. Darion waited in the council chamber wearing a Hawaiian shirt and a baggy pair of khakis. With a nod, he fell into step with his friend. "You said you had dinner plans?"

"Yes. Wolfe and Sadihra invited me to join them." Grimald made his way through an antechamber, and into a marble hallway. "Will you join us?"

"I appreciate the invitation, but I don't think I'm dressed for it."

Grimald held back a chuckle. "You're never dressed for anything."

“Yes I am. I’m dressed for going back to my apartment and relaxing with a book and a warm jug of blood. Besides, Wolfe gives me a headache.”

“Suit yourself.”

Darion grinned. “I know he’s one of your favorites.”

“I am fond of him, yes.”

“He’s stiff. Stuffy.”

“Focused,” Grimald corrected. “But he’s not so serious when he’s off duty.”

“I’ll take your word on it.” They paused at a T-junction. “This is where we go our separate ways. Don’t forget to pack. I don’t want our flight delayed because you’re throwing things in a trunk.”

“If you’re worried you can always travel alone.”

“And foot the cost for the whole trip myself? That’s crazy, especially when you’re invited, too. It makes more sense-”

“I know, I know. I was only joking. Never mind. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Early,” Darion reminded him.

“Yes, yes. Early. Good evening.”

He shook his head as he walked away. He understood Darion’s concern. Though both had been invited to Andrei’s party, neither was keen to go alone. When an enclosed note explained that some of the old guests had not been invited in order to accommodate “new blood”, they’d called one another in unison and demanded, “Did you get an invitation?” Grimald had then called Fredericka and Gigi, as she called herself now, but both had been cut.

“You could come with us,” he’d suggested.

The women scoffed. “I wouldn’t go now if Andrei paid me. If I’m not good enough for an invitation, I’m not good enough to be your plus one. Have fun with the ‘new blood’.”

“*New blood*,” he mused silently as he stepped onto the ornate elevator. “*I wonder just who that means.*”

Though he’d spent the five months since the invitation arrived asking around, he couldn’t find anyone else who’d been invited, besides Darion and some of the usual guests. The whole thing smelled mysterious to him, and where there was a mystery there was usually excitement.

I’m too old for all that.

When he reached the restaurant he was escorted through the main dining room into a more private back room. Though it had fewer tables, it was decorated in the same black and white motif with only an occasional rattan wall hanging to add texture or color. He supposed they called it sophisticated nowadays. He just called it boring.

Wolfe and Sadihra were already seated at the table. He looked young with dark shoulder length hair and shrewd gray eyes that suited him well in his role of head Scharfrichter. His wife was a plump blonde, but not to be underestimated. She’d earned her place as a Scharfrichterin, one of the Sodalitas elite police force.

When they saw him, they stood. Wolfe offered his hand and, after a round of greetings, they took their seats.

“How are things?” Grimald asked cheerfully. “I heard you were both on assignment?”

“Wolfe returned yesterday,” Sadihra answered. “I only returned this evening.”

“Nothing too exciting, I hope?” he asked politely.

Sadihra toyed with her napkin and frowned. “It was technically routine, but something...it may be nothing.”

Wolfe gave her an indulgent smile. “You worry too much.”

“After everything we’ve seen...” she trailed off. Grimald didn’t need to use his abilities to know what she meant: the god-like Samael. An ancient legend, Samael was a six thousand year old vampire who had turned out to be real. Wolfe and Sadihra had gotten mixed up in the myth’s resurrection, and had watched the vampire kill with a thought.

Though Grimald hated to undermine Wolfe, there was a reason Sadihra was where she was, especially being a woman. She had the skills – and the instincts – of a warrior. “There must be something to have you disconcerted, dear. Now what was it?”

“There was a pack of rogues near Thale. The usual thing; they went on a rampage, killed a shop owner and his wife and kidnapped their children. Luckily there were no witnesses, so we left the bodies for the human authorities. We tracked down the pack; they’d already drained two of the children and put the third in a holding pen. If the skulls are anything to go by, they’ve had other children there before.”

A waiter interrupted. After they ordered, Grimald turned back to the conversation. “What part of this disturbed you?”

Sadihra shifted uncomfortably. “The children are...sad, of course but it was the suicides that still bother me. After we killed the leader and half of the coven, one of the remainder shouted a...I can only call it a prayer, addressed to the Night Goddess. The others took up the call and then they cut out their own hearts. It was...I’ve never seen anything like it. They didn’t scream, or cry, or rage, only chanted in a monotone.” She shivered and wadded the napkin into a ball.

“They were crazy,” Wolfe said dismissively.

“Yes, but the Night Goddess?”

Grimald dismissed it. “That explains the children. Her cult always preferred the blood of the innocent. She was once worshipped by all, though she fell along the road to modernism. It was in the hundreds, perhaps? No, to be honest she had been fading long before that, and when the Kugsankal unified us, they stamped out her following wherever they found it. By the fourteen hundreds it was only cults and religious lunatics who clung to the practice. Still, it’s not completely surprising to find some small pocket that still remains.”

“But they weren’t so old,” Sadihra said quietly. “The oldest could have been no more than one hundred.”

“So they’ve picked up the old religion. Youth does that sometimes, in a quest for belonging.”

“Perhaps,” Sadihra murmured. “But with the reappearance of Samael...”

“You think a resurgence is coming, brought on by his resurrection?”

The waiter appeared with three tall glasses of blood. They thanked him and sipped their drinks. Though the conversation moved on, something in Sadihra’s eyes remained unsettled.

After dinner they said their goodbyes. Wolfe told him to have a good trip and, as they shook hands, asked softly, “You don’t think there’s anything to this Night Goddess, do you?”

“No, I wouldn’t think so. Why?”

Wolfe glanced over his shoulder to where Sadihra talked to an acquaintance they’d run into. “We don’t know where Samael is right now. The Kugsankal can’t find him; Ishkur is still looking. After what Samael did in Chengde, it wouldn’t surprise me to find he is raising an army.”

“Perhaps, but if he is, would the followers worship a goddess, or a god? Unless he is a very different personality than I imagine, I can’t see him sharing the adoration.”

“I don’t know,” Wolfe admitted. “My brushes with him were both minor and left little time for conversation. I’d hoped to speak to him in China and discern his plans, but he disappeared before I had the chance.” He dropped his voice even lower. “I did an international search in the database for Goddess of Night and found several incidents over the last three hundred years, mostly confined to Asia. In the last year there have been a few elsewhere. That they’re branching out may be a sign that the religion is gaining traction again.”

“True, but Samael was only resurrected months ago, not a year. He couldn’t be recruiting for a cult from his grave.”

“Yes,” Wolfe said slowly. “I don’t want Sadihra to worry, but I feel it, too. Something has shifted in the world and a storm is coming.”

“Then may I suggest you carry an umbrella.” Grimald patted the Scharfrichter’s shoulder. “Stay vigilant.”

“I will.”

Sadihra waved her acquaintance on and joined them. “You’re leaving tomorrow?”

“Yes. And as Darion so kindly reminded me, I need to pack.” He pressed a kiss to the vampiress’ cheek, shook Wolfe’s hand again, and took his leave. Back in his room, he dragged out his traveling trunk, but abandoned the work for his bookcase. Leather-bound tomes in various condition looked back and he moved through them, seeking one in particular.

He found his objective and tugged it from the case. The gold symbol on the front gleamed in bright contrast to the dark leather binding. He flipped it open, turning page after page impatiently, until he came at last to the section on Satrina, the goddess of night and blood. The engraving was a naked woman with long black hair, dark bird wings, glowing eyes, and fangs.

It was funny to hear her mentioned when her holiday was so close. The night of April’s full moon – the Goddess Moon – would fall the first Saturday of the house party, if he understood right. Andrei planned to celebrate with a traditional feast, something he was under the impression Andrei did every year. If even Andrei refused to let the old superstitions go, what was to stop others?

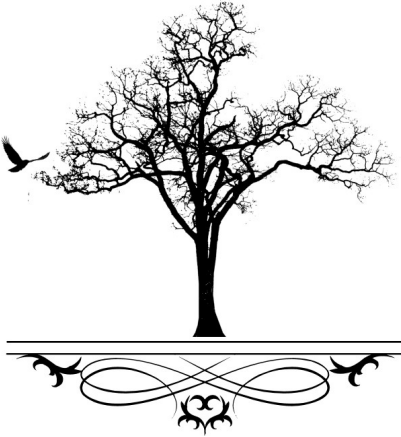
“But they weren’t so old.”

There was likely a logical explanation. No doubt one of their masters had been superstitious, like Andrei, and had passed the legends on. When the new coven formed, they embraced the religion. And why not? The Night Goddess preached the excesses of blood, violence, and sex. No matter what the enlightened wanted to believe, those things were the very core of vampiric nature. Of course it would be appealing.

Grimald snapped the book shut and shook it away. He didn’t have time to ruminate on old myths. He needed to find clothes, and a coat. *Yes. It will be cold in Canada.* Besides, he was too old to worry about the excitement of a conspiracy. After eighteen-hundred years, he’d earned a rest.

Let the young handle it. I have a party to worry about.





Anya
April 18th

Anya walked down the sidewalk. Fresh spring grass filled the air with a sweet aroma, and bright streetlights tried to blot out the stars overhead. She moved in smooth brisk strides, the kind that said she knew where she was going and didn't want to talk.

She hefted the messenger bag higher on her shoulder. The grisly contents bumped against her hip; a dead cat. Not ideal, but it was the best she could do. It wasn't as if she could drag a victim to the apartment building kicking and screaming.

And even if I could, how would he feed?

She followed the curving concrete through the grassy park that surrounded her building. The Apartment had been a good find – a great find at the price – and had worked perfectly while Thomas was missing. As a young woman, she drew no suspicion from the neighbors. Wearing yoga pants, a blonde ponytail, and a windbreaker, people assumed she was out for late evening exercises. The small stroll park around her building, or the larger one eight blocks away, served as perfect places to find her dinner; whether human or animal. From there it was home again and on with her night, ignored by the indifferent tenants.

But they wouldn't be indifferent if they saw me dragging someone into the elevator.

Now that her brother had been found, the apartment was more hindrance than help. She had to bring food home for him; food that the human tenants would not understand. Lacking the abilities of a mind reader or a whisperer, she had no way to make them forget – or accept – what they might see. If they saw too much her only recourse was to kill them.

We need somewhere less crowded, with fewer prying eyes.

A newspaper was stuck in the pocket of her bag with three circled properties. All were outside of the city, all had enough land to make them safe, and all required a human to purchase. But now that Thomas was back, what choice did she have?

She remembered the call. She was in the middle of a Netflix binge-watch when her phone rang. She let it go to voice mail; she didn't want to talk to any of the miserable assholes that had her number. When her curiosity got better of her, she checked to find an unknown number and a voicemail. Clipped tones told her that, per her complaint filed on January fifth, her brother Thomas had been found. She could be reunited with him at The Guild.

A number followed for more details. She let it slide by as she stared wide eyed at nothing. Thomas. Found. Alive. When Jorick and his friends had taken Thomas right after Christmas, she'd believed he was being held for ransom. Or to make him confess for betraying their war covenant. She'd complained to The Guild a week later, only to be told that Jorick had been reinstated as an Executioner, and that her brother was probably dead. Though she'd revolted against the idea, by February she'd come

to accept it. Jorick was many things, but patient was not one of them. If he was working for The Guild, he was too busy to mess with a prisoner.

Still, she refused to openly admit it. She told herself, and others, that she was waiting the suggested “couple of months” to refile her complaint. Secretly she was moving on. Exploring immortality without his presence. Three months later, she’d settled into a new reality that didn’t involve him, one she hadn’t realized she enjoyed until it was snatched away from her.

That night, as she listened to the message over and over, the TV muted in the background, she thought about calling Jess. She hadn’t seen the vampiress since Oren’s war coven. After the first battle with Kateesha and The Guild – when Georgia had been killed and before Jorick had joined – Jess hightailed it out. She wasn’t one of Anya’s fledglings, so she hadn’t stopped her, but now Jess was the only vampire Anya could think of that might be glad to see Thomas alive. And even she might not. They didn’t part under the best of terms.

Not that anyone ever left Thomas under the best of terms.

When Anya finally calmed down, she called The Guild, packed a suitcase, and headed to Iowa. It was two days later when she was guided to a private meeting room and warned by a guard that her brother might not look the way she remembered.

The warning wasn’t enough.

What was left of Thomas sat in a chair. The top of his head remained perfect and untouched, almost a mockery of the rest. His legs and arms were gone, as was his lower jaw, leaving his top lip to trail away, his teeth and fangs – one broken to a blunt end – exposed.

Worse than his mouth were his eyes. The familiar cockiness was gone from their odd gray-green depths, leaving only a sick desperation that made her wretch.

She covered her mouth and turned away. Had she been human she’d have thrown up on the floor. What was this – this thing? That wasn’t her brother. Couldn’t be her brother. This was a remnant, a half-thing that should be dead.

She looked again and recognized the curl of his hair, the slant of his eyebrows, the tiny freckle on his right cheek. Oh holy gods, it was him.

Her eyes skittered away and she forced her voice calm. “Where was he found?”

The guard told her the details of Thomas’ confinement. How he’d been allegedly tortured, then buried at an abandoned farmhouse in Kentucky. “We only received the information this week, and an Executioner was dispatched immediately.”

When she asked about Jorick; the one who must have done this, she was told that the suspect was in custody and there would be a trial the next day.

“They’re finally going to try Jorick?” she’d demanded with a sneer.

The guard consulted their clipboard. “The suspect isn’t listed as a Jorick.”

Of course not. He’s Malick’s pet. Except she’d already heard that Malick wasn’t in charge anymore.

Thomas gave a strange gurgling sound, and her stomach clenched. God, he couldn’t even talk. What in the hell was she supposed to do with him?

“Right now your brother is needed as a witness. After the trial, he can be put to death.”

The guard kept talking. Anya struggled to understand the words, comprehend the implication. This thing was her brother, the brother she was responsible for. He was her burden, and she’d be damned if she’d let them kill him.

“You will do no such thing!” she roared. What kind of sister would she be if she stood back and let that happen?

Maybe you should have.

Anya dropped back to the present; to the warm spring night and the lights of the city. She turned off the main sidewalk and let herself into the apartment building. Down the hall, the elevator was empty. She leaned in the corner as it scaled the floors and exited when the doors opened. Her apartment was around the carpeted bend. She hesitated, hand on the knob. The sound of the TV drifted out to her, a movie she’d left running or else an auto-play suggestion. It wasn’t as if Thomas could use the remote.

She pushed her way inside to find him propped up on the couch where she'd left him, wedged in by pillows. His eyes rolled towards her, a fathomless expression in them. She ignored him as she stalked past to the kitchen.

She dumped her bag on the counter, then gathered a bowl and a steak knife. Carefully, she held the dead animal over the bowl and slit its throat.

When the cat was drained, she threw the corpse in the trash and carried the bowl to the living room. Thomas groaned and gurgled, but she had no idea what it meant. She wasn't a mind reader, and for once she was glad of it.

She positioned a baby bib over him, complete with baby chicks and bunnies. He wriggled and she forced him still. "Dinner."

Where his mouth had been was now a hole in his throat, the upper half like an awning over a doorway. She cringed as she dumped the bowl into it. He choked and sputtered. Blood ran down his neck and spotted on the bright white bib. A dollop blossomed on the head of a happy chick.

She waited until he'd finished drooling out the extra before she jerked the bib off of him and headed back to the kitchen to rinse it clean.

Just like a baby.

Except, she'd never wanted a baby.

When she was finished with her tasks, she shut herself in the bedroom. Better to hide in there than be faced with Thomas. She knew he was her blood, her younger brother, her responsibility through the ages. But at that moment, she wished her answer at the Guild had been different.

Josephus's warning came back to her. They were still in England then. She too headstrong to win a husband and her brother too rakish to keep the wife he had. She worked in the tavern, filling the men with as much ale as she could. The drunker they were, the less carefully they counted their coins. It was with consternation that she dealt with the dark haired stranger. Each night he bought one drink. He sipped from it slowly, if at all, then left with a customer. It was never one of the regulars, always someone who was as unknown as he was, so she had no chance to ask his marks what happened once they left. After two weeks, she confronted Josephus for the thief she thought he was and demanded a share.

He'd laughed at her. "You don't want a share of what I'm taking from them."

His words snaked a shiver down her spine, and she stepped back even as she blustered, "How do you know?"

He leaned close and whispered, "Because I take their blood."

Terror flashed in her eyes as she realized what he was: not a thief but a murderer. His laughter said he knew her fear, and his amusement made her angry. She demanded a cut of his profit – no murderer would kill and not empty their victim's pockets – for the promise of her silence and perhaps cooperation.

"I won't be here much longer, so I require no assistance. Still, I admire your spirit. If you want a share of the spoils, a share you'll get."

He fell on her then, flashing pointed teeth. She beat him off with a flagon and made to run, but he tackled her to the floor. She screamed as he tore through her flesh and drank her blood. At last she lay drained on the store room floor, too weak to think. His words seemed far away when he offered her what he had. "Immortality," he promised. "Never to be sick or weary or cold again."

She took it. And when she'd recovered from the initial death throes, Josephus explained that she had to leave now. "You're my fledgling and you owe me a blood debt, which means you have to travel with me."

Only, she couldn't, not unless her brother came too.

When she'd asked, Josephus had said, "You want me to make him immortal? Why?"

Her answer didn't involve love, but responsibility. If she was gone, who would drag him from his various haunts with the whores and take him home in the wee hours? Who would pay the women to dispose of the issue of his unions? Who would handle his funds so that, when he'd spent all gambling, there was still enough to buy bread? Who would soothe his angry wife with reminders of their children and what happened to unwed mothers? Alone, Thomas was doomed.

Josephus was unmoved. "Think carefully before you make this request. Once it is done, it cannot be undone. He cannot be returned to mortality, only killed. When you've had enough of the responsibility that binds you, will you be able to do that?"

The suggestion was unthinkable. Thomas was whiny, arrogant, smug, and sneaky, but he was her brother. She could never kill her own brother; never want him to be killed, not even as she watched him drain his wife and his own children, not even when he created problems or started fights, not even when a century had passed.

No, not one century. Apparently it takes three.

She turned to the half packed boxes and resumed her work. Pack up her belongings. Find a house in the country. *Focus on the tasks you need to complete.*

She still owned the house in Ohio. Though the location wasn't ideal, with the neighborhood more suburban than isolated, it had more privacy than the apartment and meant she didn't need to contact a Guild representative to buy a new property.

Except Des and the others are probably still there. Why leave when they have a free ride?

She growled as she pictured them voting to leave Thomas in Jorick's custody. She was the master of the coven. By law they were supposed to follow her orders unwaveringly.

"Sorry," Lennon had said. "I quit being a puppet when Claudius died."

In a fit of fury she'd packed all the things she cared about and stormed out, leaving them with the broken furniture and the bills. There was no way she could go back there now.

As she sorted through a stack of papers, a small envelop fell out. Irritated, she snatched it up. The return address was Canadian, and it took a moment to recall the contents.

That's right, that invitation.

Inexplicably, she and Thomas had been invited to a two-week long house party by someone named Andrei. Des said he thought his father knew him, but she'd tossed the thing aside. There was no way she was going to a weird party, surrounded by strangers, and she certainly wasn't going to take trouble-making Thomas.

Only he can't make trouble now.

No. She wouldn't know any of the guests. Hell, she didn't even know the host, or how he'd gotten her name.

But it would be a vacation from this. And maybe while I'm there I can find someone who can fix Thomas.

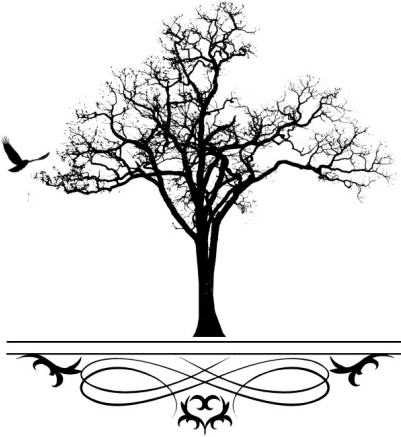
Except, he can't be fixed.

Then maybe I can find someone who can do what I can't.

No, she repeated to herself. There was no way she was going to go, no way she was going to parade Thomas in front of strangers like some freak. He was her responsibility. Her problem. She didn't need a vacation. She just needed to buck up.

I wonder if it's too late to RSVP?





Möngkedai

April 18th

Möngkedai flipped the magazine page and gritted his teeth. How much longer would it be until they landed? If he didn't get a cigarette soon he'd hurt someone. The soft *thump thump* of Yin's music tickled his ears and he decided she was a good candidate for the pain.

"Is it really necessary to have your music turned up so loud?" he demanded. "You have headphones on."

She didn't answer, and he flung his magazine at her. She jerked her startled gaze up to him. The surprise sharpened to irritation. "What?" she shouted.

"Turn that crap down!" He bellowed.

She blew him off with a motion and turned back to her coloring book.

I hope we hit turbulence and ruin the whole picture, he thought. Sometimes Yin was more child than woman. There were days the mixture intrigued him but, moments like this, it was irritating. He should have chosen a daughter more wisely.

With a snarl he retrieved his magazine and tried to concentrate on a travel article. Sunny fields and photos of local foods filled the page. With a final grunt of disgust he threw it to the floor and surrendered.

Why isn't there a magazine for vampires? It could highlight the best travel destinations, tips on hunting prey, and the latest in immortal politics, like warnings where not to travel.

If he'd had one of those, he'd have given Indonesia a miss the month before last. Over all, he supposed he should be glad neither of them were hurt or severely injured – the death toll from the Children of Shadows' attack had been astronomical – but mostly he just felt annoyed. The ruling body could have at least warned visitors of the impending terrorism. Given all the extra enforcers, they'd obviously known about it.

The pilot's voice came over the intercom, "We will be landing in one hour in the United States. Local time will be 4:30 a.m. Weather conditions are clear."

One hour left. Möngkedai reached impatiently into his pocket and fondled the pack of cigarettes. He could surely make an hour.

And then it will be a hurried smoke before we're stuffed in a vehicle and rushed off to accommodations for the day. Then tomorrow we get to do it again.

He really hoped Andrei's party was worth it.

He'd been to several of them over the years. Though Andrei spared no expense, and his mate spent years devising entertainment, in the end there was only so much anyone could do. Möngkedai had skipped the last four, but he supposed it was time to try again. Besides, Yin needed the distraction.

"A two week long party?" she'd asked uncertainly. "Don't you usually ignore those?"

“Yes, but there’s new blood this year. Maybe it will be interesting.”

She’d shrugged her shoulders, then brightened. “We could spend a week in Tokyo first. I love shopping there.”

He sighed at the memories. He could have picked anyone as his plus one. Why, oh why had he chosen her? But he knew why. She reminded him of Ning.

At ten years old, identical twins Ning and Jun, had bright eyes, winning smiles, and a mother as lovely as a plum blossom. He’d wooed the woman and finally promised her anything she desired, so long as she would be his. She’d agreed, with the stipulation that he must turn both her and the girls.

Immortal children were an iffy topic. Some labeled them taboo, others shrugged and said it depended on when they were made. At one time twelve was considered adult enough to wed. Since the Kugsankal had taken over, they frowned on anyone under sixteen. Knowing that meant that a vampire took a risk to turn a child who was younger.

But Lanfen had been worth the risk.

For two hundred years they’d enjoyed themselves, traveling Asia and sampling the delights each culture had to offer. India intrigued them and eventually they wound their way through what was now Turkey and on into Europe. That was where they made their mistake. They should have been content to stay in the less westernized civilizations, but Lanfen so wanted to see Europe.

They’d seen it, all right, and in 1666 while they were staying in Austria, representatives of the Sodalitas burst through their doors and dragged them out into the little courtyard. Under the stars they passed their judgement. With a swift motion, the enforcer removed the children’s heads. Lanfen screamed and threw herself to her knees, begging to follow.

“Without them my life has no meaning.”

At his master’s command, the enforcer had granted her wish.

Möngkedai sighed at the memories. Other men would spend eternity seeking – and turning – those who reminded them of their lost love, but not him. Though Lanfen was dead and he missed her, he kept circling back to the girls instead.

Maybe because they were the only ones who truly loved me.

And they had. They’d called him father and worked to amuse him with songs and hand written plays. Though twins, Jun was better at singing and dancing, while his favorite, Ning, enjoyed crafting the work. He often wondered what they’d have grown up to accomplish had they been left to nature. Perhaps something wonderful.

More likely not. They’d have married and produced babies and worked themselves to the bone as all other women did at that time. It’s only the lords and ladies who get to become fine things. The peasants are too busy in the fields.

Though the memory of the girls was bittersweet, it always left him with a smile for their enthusiasm, their joy in the simple and everyday. A plum blossom had been enough to delight them. They’d both run and danced through the shower of petals in the spring evenings.

He opened his eyes and glanced to Yin. She bobbed her head in time to her music, her long black hair bouncing with the motion.

“After this party, how would you like to go see the plum blossoms?” he shouted.

She lifted a headphone to free her ear and he repeated his question. She shrugged. “I guess, though we’ve seen them before.”

“No, you have never seen these blossoms before. No one has. They will exist for this year only and then never appear again, just as one day we shall all cease to exist, never to be reborn the same.”

She clicked her music to a stop and lowered her headphones. “You’re getting philosophical again. I thought we agreed not to do that?”

“We agreed on a lot of things. You promised not to bother me with the crap you call music, but here we are.”

“You’re too old to appreciate it.”

“And you’re not?” he asked with amusement. “At one hundred and fifty you should have better taste.”

"I have wonderful taste, actually." She leaned back to study her coloring page. "You're not gloom and dooming about Indonesia again, are you?"

He stifled a smile. She knew he was lost in the past, but her guess was far too recent. "No, much longer ago than that. Why? Does it still bother you?"

"Bother? No, but I will say it's made me appreciate things more. I suppose infinite life holds no meaning because of its never ending nature; when you have forever there's no rush. All of the death reminded me that there is no such thing as forever. Vampirism is only a reprieve, not a guarantee."

"That, my dear, is one of the wisest things you've ever said. I'm rubbing off on you."

"I hope not." Her chuckle softened the insult. "Seriously though, since we're on the topic, what happened to the group who attacked? They blew up a bunch of places and then disappeared."

"Who knows? I'd say they were defeated, but they were supposedly wiped out long ago and yet there they were. I suppose that should be another lesson for you. Though death is a guarantee, so is rebirth, for nothing stays dead forever."

"It's just not reborn the same?" she teased.

"Exactly."

She used a pink crayon to add a few touches, and then studied the effect. "I've been thinking of taking up the violin."

It was an odd comment, but it was better than the steady noise of her music. "Have you?"

"Yes. That went along with it; that immortality is not really immortal, and so rather than putting everything off until tomorrow I'd be better starting it today." She paused to look at him. "Not literally today, but figuratively."

He tried to bite back his amusement. "I understand. An airplane is an odd place to start lessons."

"And so is a party. I thought afterwards? That is if it won't interfere with your plum blossoms."

"Not at all. You can stay in the hotel and practice and I'll look at them in peace."

They fell silent as she added a touch of blue to her work, then scrutinized it only to add some more.

"It's a shame Hwan left."

Möngkedai offered her a sympathetic look she didn't see. "Forever is a long time, dear. Often people find they're not as compatible with someone as they thought they were."

"I know. But he was lovely." She gave a heavy heartfelt sigh. "And I know you advised against turning him. I just thought..."

"You thought you were in love. Maybe you were. Maybe at one point you both really truly loved one another. The trouble with forever is that even true love is rarely as immortal as we are. More often than not, it wanes after a few hundred years. The ideas of a forever sentiment are a holdover from the mortal world, where forever is at most eighty years. Even you and Hwan lasted that long."

"So you're saying I should be satisfied because we made it as long as a human relationship?"

He shrugged. "Yes. Had you both been mortal, friends and family would stand around your graves chattering about your beautiful love that lasted until the end."

"What was the longest relationship you ever had?"

The question opened a veritable Pandora's box of memories. Though Lanfen had lasted two hundred and twenty years, she was not the longest. "Aigiarn. She was my wife when I was turned, and my master gave her the gift as well; a matching set he used to call us. That wasn't done often. The old way was to choose an apprentice for their skills and beauty, turn them, and then take them with you."

"Why is that?" Yin asked. "Why didn't anyone stay where they were?"

"It's too dangerous. Imagine if he had turned me but not my wife? What would happen when she found out?"

"She'd want to be turned, too?"

He chuckled. "That's a very modern sentiment. At that time the world feared monsters. A normal woman, on discovering her husband was a fanged blood-drinking beast, would scream and run away. She'd alert the village elder, or her strongest neighbor, or whatever the equivalent was. The townsfolk, or

the guards, or some citizenry force would descend on the house with torches and a host of pointy weapons, and thus would end our vampire. The more Christianity spread, the worse it got.”

“You know, I never thought about Christianity persecuting vampires.”

“Not vampires in particular, but demons. Everything was a demon or a witch, which is the consort of a demon. The Pope wielded monsters like a weapon to keep the peasants under control. It’s a shame, really. The teachings themselves were good, but the religion spoiled it.”

“Don’t they usually?” She selected a green crayon and made a few last adjustments. “You didn’t tell me about Aigiarn. How long were you with her?”

“Five hundred years.”

Yin looked up impatiently, as if waiting for more. When none came she pushed, “What happened?”

“I guess we tired of one another. I told you, it happens. One day that irritating laugh, or that annoying habit, becomes more than you can stand and your love isn’t a big enough umbrella to cover their flaws anymore.”

Yin smiled knowingly. “She left you, didn’t she?” He grumbled and the girl laughed. “It’s all right. There’s no shame in it. Hwan left me, after all.” Her humor slipped away. “We’re both abandoned losers. I guess we deserve one another’s company.”

He pulled to his feet and moved to put an arm around her shoulders. “You’re not a loser, my dear. I told you-”

“I know, I know. I just miss him. It’s funny. I think, ‘What if he hadn’t left? What if he’d been in Indonesia with us? If he’d been killed at the Persatuan?’ Then it would be all right for me to mourn. But since he didn’t, since he left willingly and we parted on so-called good terms, I should smile and be brave. It’s not fair. I know it sounds awful, but it’s worse with him being alive. I wish he was dead. Then I wouldn’t have to wonder what he was doing.”

Möngkedai patted her back consolingly. “If you want to mourn, then mourn. I never told you to be happy about it.”

“Not you. The others. Kichi and Yöng-gi.”

He gave a knowing sigh. His other immortal “daughter” and her mate; who had stayed behind at the den in Thailand.

“Kichi tells me to grow up and stop it, but that’s easy to say when her boyfriend is still there, attached to her hip.”

“Just ignore them.”

“Like you do? You’re gone fishing all the time, or doing whatever it is you do, and I’m stuck there with them all night.” She dabbed at her eyes.

That was the real reason he’d chosen Yin over Kichi as his plus-one. Both were his daughters in blood, representations of the long gone Ning and Jun, but Kichi was wrapped up in her domestic life at the moment. Though he wasn’t a mind reader, he heard and saw things they didn’t realize and he could feel the climate of the household.

Since her lover had left, Yin had been alone. He’d hoped she’d move on by herself, but when she didn’t he’d packed up five months ago and dragged her on a trip that wound through Asia, into the ill-fated Indonesia, and eventually to Tokyo where they’d spent a week shopping before heading to the party in Canada. After this he’d planned to go home, but now, he might not.

“Well, you haven’t seen them for nearly half a year. Surely that’s enough of a vacation?”

“Maybe.”

“You know, when we go home you can always go with me instead of staying at the den with them. You used to like fishing now and then.”

Her shoulders sagged. “I knew you’d say that. But I don’t want to. I don’t really want to do anything.”

He tried not to smile. “A moment ago you wanted to learn the violin.”

“I do. I just...at the same time...”

“You miss Hwan, and though you want to do things, they aren’t the same without him. I understand. It’s only been a year, child. Give it time.” He patted her shoulder and kissed the top of her head in fatherly affection. “Maybe you’ll meet someone interesting at the party.”

As he moved back to his seat she gave him a brittle smile. “Or maybe you will. It’s been a long time since you had a girlfriend.”

He scoffed and picked up the abandoned magazine. “The last thing I need is a woman. I have you children to look after.”

“You call us that, but you look younger than Yǒng-gi. I was seventeen when you turned me, and Kichi was nineteen. You couldn’t have been more than twenty-four when your master made you.”

“I was twenty-five, thank you, and that was almost two thousand years ago. Comparatively you’re infants.”

The pilot’s voice interrupted, asking them to ready for landing. Yin packed up her things and dutifully moved to a seat with a belt. Mǒngkedai put the magazine away and snapped his in place. What an irony it would be to survive two thousand years of war and women only to die in a plane crash?

It’s not the crash that’s going to kill me, but these kids and their drama.

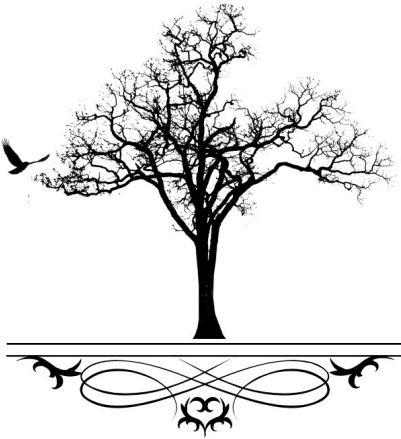
Immortal drama, no less. In truth that was the root of the problem. To live forever, one had to have something to live for. Just as Yin had commented about needing to feel a sense of urgency, one needed that; needed the reminder of every second ticking by to make them feel alive. The girls’ trouble was that they looked to others to give it to them.

Yin’s Hwan and Kichi’s Yǒng-gi. They hoped their mates would keep them fulfilled and give them that sense of earnestness they so needed. But he’d learned long ago not to center your life on another person. Though there was nothing wrong with love, or with affection, your reason for being needed to be wrapped up in something else – something you could control. Otherwise you were likely to find yourself cut adrift with no purpose. Just as poor Yin had done.

As the plane descended, the thoughts of Yin and Kichi’s problems disappeared under the certainty of a cigarette. Those were his special thing, his way of counting out the minutes, his sense of urgency. As long as he had those he could handle anything.

Even an eternity of Yin’s music.





Rangvald

April 19th

Rangvald stepped out of the small jet and onto a temporary landing strip. The sky above shone with thousands of stars and a chilly wind blew, heralding weather to come.

He shaded his eyes against airstrip's bright lights to view the sprawling mansion beyond. The back of the building was no less elegant than he remembered; four stories topped with a gabled roof and decorative cresting fashioned after a wrought iron fence. From his angle he could see two patios, one filled with chairs and tables, and another with scattered benches and an empty fountain.

"I'd forgotten how large it was."

He turned to his mate Petta and smiled. Slight and pale, her blonde hair was pulled up on her head and her large blue eyes sat like luminous pools of summer sky. Her slight body was wrapped in a dress that served to accentuate her missing figure. He knew better than to tell her that.

"Andrei's houses are all ridiculous," Rangvald agreed and slipped an arm around her waist. "Do you remember the one in France?"

"It was beautiful, though," she said wistfully. "All that gold and carved wood. Like living in a church."

"Only you would want to live in a place of worship. Come, *ástin mín*. After two days of travel I'm ready for civilization."

She pressed herself against him and whispered, "I'd have rather we stayed away from civilization."

He chortled at her lascivious meaning and kissed her forehead. Too delicate to be real, he sometimes wondered how he'd been lucky enough to find her.

Servants met them at the edge of the airstrip and he motioned to the plane where their trunks waited. They bobbed and nodded correctly before rushing off to do their work. Near the patio, another servant met them and guided them around to the front of the house. A massive columned porch was topped in double doors. Inside was a grand marbled entryway. Statues and flowers leant the place an elegance that strings of lights destroyed. Andrei always knew how to go just over the top.

At least he's not as bad as Claudius. Rangvald smiled at the memory of the single function he'd attended at Claudius' summer home. In the middle of nowhere Ohio, the location might have been clever had a town not sat less than ten miles away. The house was grand in a lottery-winner-trying-to-fit-in sort of way, as if Claudius had fallen into money and used it to fill a single house with everything he thought a rich person should have.

Rangvald and Petta had barely made it through the double doors of Andrei's mansion when they were greeted by a man in black. Long dark hair was pulled up in a bun, and an emblem around his neck

said he was a representative of one Guild or another. Andrei had certainly meant it when he said new guests were invited!

The vampire gave a slight bow of his head. "Good evening. My name is Jamie. I'm an Executioner of the North American Guild. We've been asked by Andrei to provide security for this event."

Rangvald arched an eyebrow but offered his hand. "Very good. I heard about the attacks by the Children of Shadows this last month or so, though I thought they were limited to Asia?"

Jamie shook his hand, his face expressionless. "They were. Your names?"

"Rangvald and Petta."

Jamie nodded and motioned to another vampire in black, this one with his hair long. His matching necklace said he was also an Executioner.

His expression was as enthusiastic as a rock's, but he strolled towards them. Rangvald felt the spark of a mind reader and realized this was part of their security. Petta stiffened and looked ready to complain, but he motioned her to relax. Better to get it over with.

The second Executioner gave them a cool nod and moved back to his place along the wall, just as the servants entered, lugging the trunks. Rangvald readied to follow, but instead of heading for the stairs and his room, they stopped and dropped the luggage.

"We'll need the key," Jamie said.

Petta tightened her hold on Rangvald's arm. "For what?"

"As part of the security we are required to search everyone's belongings."

Rangvald bit back a surge of irritation. "What are you searching for?"

"Various things," Jamie said vaguely. "Roger. Cornelius."

A pair of guards in black and silver uniforms appeared and Jamie held his hand out. "The keys to the trunks?"

"No," Petta snapped. "If Andrei doesn't trust us then he shouldn't have invited us."

Rangvald sighed and handed the keys over, ignoring his mate's angry look. As the guards moved to the trunks, he apologized. "If we cooperate it's easier."

Petta scoffed. "You're too agreeable. I don't want them going through our private things."

"We have nothing to hide, pet. Look, they're nearly done." He stepped closer to Jamie. "Can we see our room now?"

"Of course." The Executioner motioned to a servant. "Show them the way."

Rangvald patted Petta's back soothingly and tugged her after their guide. They made their way up a sweeping staircase and down a corridor. After several turns, the servant stopped before a door and bowed.

"Thank you," Rangvald nodded to the vampire, then stepped inside. The room was really a suite with a small living area, a bathroom, and a bedroom, all furnished in expensive antiques. Petta breezed past him to survey the details, and floated back looking satisfied. "It's not as beautiful as the French manor, but it's pretty enough."

He caught her up, ignoring her soft mew of surprise. "Not as beautiful as you." Then he drowned her reply in a crushing kiss.

Two hours later they appeared downstairs, bathed, dressed, and refreshed. A servant motioned them towards a blue salon where several vampires were gathered. A vampiress with ash blonde hair and generous breasts sat on the piano bench sipping from a glass of blood. She met Rangvald's eyes and offered him a flirty smile. He nodded a polite greeting and turned his attention to her right where Andrei stood. Like all immortals, he looked exactly as Rangvald remembered.

"Greetings, Rangvald, Petta. So glad you could come."

"Thank you for inviting us," Rangvald replied politely.

"Allow me to make introductions." Andrei pointed from one to the other. When he got to the blonde, who he called Trivila, she gave a flirty wave. The niceties finished, he offered them blood and a broken conversation resumed.

Rangvald poured glasses for himself and Petta. As he returned to her, a brunette joined Trivila at the piano and the two turned around on the bench and began a tinkling concert. He watched their fingers dance on the keys – a skill he'd never learned – and barely noticed as Peta downed her blood in a single gulp.

The song ended and everyone clapped politely. Before they could begin another, a pale vampiress with red gold hair entered. Her ghostly pallor was accentuated by her dark dress. Nervous eyes touched on one thing then another, like a pair of fluttering birds. As with the blonde, Rangvald had never seen her before.

“Good day,” Andrei said graciously. “Allow me to introduce Zarra.”

Rangvald watched her as she nodded to each introduction, never quite meeting the eyes of her fellows. She reminded him of Petta when they'd first met: slender, pretty, and haunted.

Andrei offered her a glass and she took it with a murmur of thanks. After a sip she asked, “Animal?”

“Yes,” Andrei replied. “Bovine to be exact.”

She flinched at his answer, as if she regretted having said anything to begin with. Though not a dream stealer, Rangvald sensed her discomfort and said cheerfully, “Human is better, of course, but I suppose he couldn't collect enough for a two week party without arousing suspicion.”

Trivila offered a bright smile. “You could always find your own human. There's a village not far from here.”

Andrei shook his head. “We ask that you refrain from such activities. Unfortunately if each guest were to descend on the village, even once during our gathering, that would total fifty affected villagers, which would hardly go unnoticed.”

Rangvald turned to Petta, a reply on his lips, when he noticed that her satiated relaxation had morphed into stiff shouldered animosity. A quick glance at the room revealed no known enemies, and he shot her a questioning look.

As if in answer she announced, “It was wonderful meeting all of you. We hope to see you again.” Then she clamped down on his arm and half dragged him out the door.

He pulled them to a stop further down the hall. “We just got there.”

“So?” She narrowed her eyes accusingly.

“So it would be polite to stay longer than a minute, pet.”

“I'm sure you'd like that, but we stayed long enough. I'd rather explore the grounds.”

Though Rangvald accepted the excuse, he didn't need mind reading to know it was a lie.

The night hadn't changed since they'd last been out in it. Rangvald followed as Petta led him to the pond with its tiny boathouse and pier. They stood at the end and watched the water ripple, wrapped in silence. He thought of Zarra with her red gold hair and stooped shoulders and wondered what her story was. Had she been brutalized by her master as Petta had been?

He remembered the first time he'd seen his mate. It was the 1400s. He and Hopper, a dark skinned vampire from the reaches of Africa, had been invited to mediate peace talks between several covens. Among them was Alfrith, whose cold dark eyes seemed like windows into an unforgiving purgatory. With him was a host of his coven, including a chained slave.

Her long blonde hair hung over her face, and her half-starved appearance showed what blood rations she was allowed. During negotiations, Alfrith called her to bring him his meal. When, in her desperate state, she'd dared to drink from the struggling fox she carried, Alfrith had roared in fury and beat her to the ground with his fists. She hadn't screamed, or cried out, only curled in a ball, arms up to shield herself, as if this was too common of a thing to bother making a fuss over.

The implication had pulled Rangvald to his feet. “Enough! You will leave this child alone!”

Alfrith kicked her in the side then spun to him. “She is my property and I will do as I please. She has disobeyed and will be punished.”

Rangvald moved to kneel over her. He brushed her hair back from her face and met her terrified eyes – and that was it. In that moment he knew her, knew she was meant for him, and knew that he would kill Alfrith before he let him touch her again.

He murmured soothing words, then stood and faced down the furious master. Less than sixty years his elder, he was certain he could defeat him if it came to it. "She's more than a hundred years old. That's long enough for a blood debt from someone like you who has no exceptional abilities."

"And who are you to decide when her blood debt has been served?"

Hopper moved to stand beside him. "No one. But the Sodalitas in Bavaria may feel differently. Have you heard of them?"

"A power hungry group who try to take control? We won't bow to them."

"But you will," Hopper said conversationally. "Unless someone can defeat the ancients in what they call their True Council, we all will in time. It would be safer for you to begin practicing their laws before they punish you the way you punish your subjects."

Alfrith called to the others to help him, but Hopper's mention of the Sodalitas had stopped any aid. Stories of those who defied the power hungry ancients had been circulating for at least two hundred years, each worse than the last, and, though no one liked to admit it, they knew Hopper was right.

It was later, after Petta was washed, fed, dressed, and tucked away in Rangvald's private chamber that he asked his friend, "There is no law concerning the length of a blood debt, is there?"

"No, but he did not know that."

Rangvald didn't remember how the negotiations had played out, only that when he left he took Petta with him. It was weeks before she would speak to him, and months before she'd meet his eyes, however briefly. When she finally opened the dam of her miserable thoughts and poured out her experiences, he hated Alfrith all the more, and would have killed him had word not come that he'd died in a battle with the very Sodalitas who had so terrified the others.

Rangvald pulled back to the present and the tiny woman next to him. He wrapped his arm around her, to pull her close, but her body stayed rigid.

"What is it, pet?"

Without looking at him she demanded, "You thought she was attractive, didn't you?"

He floundered through old memories looking for a "she", and then realized Petta must mean the party – and Zarra. Obviously he'd looked a little too long. "She was pretty, yes, but too timid."

Petta scoffed. "You have an odd idea of timid. Her kind are filled to overflowing with courage. I imagine it's easy when you have every asset a man could wish for."

He stroked his red beard and tried to puzzle out her reaction. "I'd hardly say that."

"That isn't what you thought while you watched her play the piano, her breasts waiting to spill out of that dress with every movement!"

Piano? And then he realized they weren't talking about Zarra. "Who do you mean?"

"Trivila, of course! I saw the way you looked at her, at her...accomplishments."

He had to stop himself from laughing. Trivila? Of all the vampiresses in the room, she was the least attractive; too brassy and loud. And as for her "accomplishments", as Petta called them, they were nothing she'd earned, only fleshy mounds of fat. "I'm afraid you misinterpreted things, my dear."

"There's no point in lying." Her shoulders sagged as some of her anger seeped away. "I know you prefer her shape, not that I blame you. No man wants to be stuck with a child's body forever." She motioned bitterly to her own slender frame. "They crave the softness of a real woman."

With a smile he tugged his mate to him. "What I crave is you, *ástin mín*. I thought I showed you that after we arrived."

She wriggled free and shook her head. "Do not try to change the topic. Be honest for once. You wish I had matured more before he turned me; that I was not trapped in the body of a fourteen year old."

Rangvald sighed. It seemed there was no way out of this conversation. "If I wish anything about the circumstances of your rebirth, it would be only that someone else had done it, someone kinder, and that you had been spared from the pain you endured your first years. As to your age, or your shape, they hardly matter. You may have been fourteen when he took you, but now you're almost seven hundred. Whether your body has grown or not, your mind has. You are most certainly not a child by any stretch of the imagination."

"But I look like one," she insisted. "I have no...no womanly virtues!"

He tried not to smile at her inability to say the words after all those years. “Darling, if you mean your breasts, they are fine as they are. I’ve never yet found occasion to complain about them, and I doubt I ever will, except for a certain lack of accessibility.” He reached for her. “You will keep them covered.”

“Rangvald!” She slapped his hand away. “I’m being serious!”

“So am I. You’re beautiful as you are, and no amount of large fleshy breasts are going to make me feel differently about you. You should know that by now.”

“I know you say it, but I don’t know that you feel it, or that you won’t stop feeling it. We’ve been together a long time. How many couples last hundreds of years?”

He took her hands and met her crystal eyes. “The ones who are meant to be. The ones who remember what it was like before they found the meaning of their life. You forget I spent over four hundred years waiting for you. After such a wait, do you think a mere six would be enough to bore me? It will take a lot longer than that, and more than a cheap fledgling in a tight dress.”

“She is young, isn’t she?”

“Yes. Less than a hundred for sure, and I’d be surprised if she’s sixty. Besides, look at her. Among the humans I can pass for twenty-seven, and she doesn’t look a day under thirty-six. It could never work.”

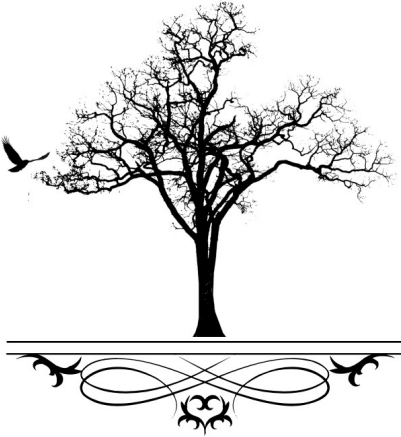
Petta giggled and finally began to relax. “I’m sorry. You’re right. I shouldn’t worry. It’s all the beautiful women that bother me. I never feel good enough.”

“That’s because you aren’t ‘good enough’, you’re better.” He pressed a kiss to her forehead. “And you’ll do well to remember that.”

“I suppose I’ll try.” She pulled her hands loose so she could embrace him, her head on his chest. “It’s not too late to go home and skip the party is it?”

His laughter was his only answer.





Brandle

April 19th

When the Executioners finished their interrogation, Brandle followed a servant up the sweeping staircase. He'd been to most of the previous house parties and the security was new. In truth, he'd have skipped this year's because of the forecasted weather, if it hadn't been for a note that promised new blood. He didn't care particularly about meeting someone new, but curiosity had driven him to contact the regulars. Among them, both William and Angelica had made him promise to come.

"I suspect this year's party will be the most interesting yet," William commented.

Brandle had to see that.

He was shown into his suite; a living space, bedroom, and sumptuous bathroom. Showers were still a relatively new novelty to him and he was disappointed to discover they'd left one out in favor of a large claw foot tub. As if he hadn't soaked in enough of those in the last 1600 years.

Had it really been so long? It didn't seem like it, but the math checked out.

What a terrifying thought.

He unpacked his suitcases and hung the clothes in the wardrobe. Two weeks was barely worth the effort, but it seemed a shame to waste what amenities they offered.

His task done, he headed downstairs to find out who'd already arrived. The Executioner in the entryway was kind enough to point him down the corridor. He found several vampires assembled in a blue room, including his host.

"Andrei," he said warmly as he shook the vampire's hand. "How are you?"

"We're fine. You?"

"Good. I think I know everyone here," he paused and eyed a shy vampiress with red gold hair. "Except you." He moved to her and stuck out his hand. "Brandle. And you are?"

She drew back, eyes wide. "Zarra," she murmured.

"Now that's an unusual name."

Before he could get farther, a dark skinned vampire chuckled. "What did you say your name was?"

He gave the interloper a cheerful smile. It was Bassile, one of the regulars. "Brandle. B-R-A-N-D-L-E."

Bassile chortled and patted Zarra's shoulder, ignoring her alarm. "Don't let him fool you, dear. He's been Acwellen for at least a thousand years."

"Yes, but I'm tired of that name."

"That's as may be, but it seems a little late to try on a new one."

"It's never too late," he replied.

“For what?” A female voice asked, and Brandle turned to see Angelica, her hair piled on her head and her green eyes glinting with amusement.

“Nice to see you made it,” he said. “This is Zarra.”

“Yes, I know. Andrei just told me who everyone was, including you. Brandle? Where ever did you come up with that?”

Zarra made a soft noise and tried to withdraw, but Brandle followed her. “I read it in a book. Sad to say he wasn’t the romantic hero, but he was a rather intriguing side character who, interestingly enough, turned out to be the villain in the end. I didn’t see that coming. Anyway, I liked the name and thought this seemed the perfect time to try it out.”

Angelica stayed where she was and raised her voice so he could hear her on his retreat. “You should have warned me when you called.”

“I hadn’t thought of it then,” he replied. “Now, Zarra, you must excuse the interruption. That is Angelica, an acquaintance I’ve had for many years. She’s quite harmless really, despite her ferocious appearance. As I was saying, yours is a lovely name, Where ever did you find it?”

“My master gave it to me,” she murmured.

“He made a good choice then. It is a he, isn’t it?”

Zarra cringed. “No.”

He sensed her discomfort without surprise. Most vampires had a strange relationship with their masters. They were bound to them by blood, but often hated them at the same time. It created an interesting dynamic that even he wasn’t free of. “A she? Well, she must have had some taste, at least. Enough about her. I’m more interested in you. Do you have a mate?”

Angelica gave a huff and pulled him away. “Would you leave her alone? She doesn’t want to talk to you.”

“And you do, I suppose?”

“Not particularly.” She flashed Zarra an apologetic smile. “You’ll have to excuse him. He’s too old to know better.”

Before he could argue, William walked through the door wearing an open jacket and his usual dour expression. He bypassed their host to make a beeline for Brandle and Angelica. “Good. You came.”

“Of course we came. We couldn’t miss it.” Angelica surveyed the room coolly.

Brandle looked for Zarra, but the redhead had slipped away. “I hope you’re not going to spend the entire party getting in the way.”

“In the way of what?” William asked.

Angelica answered impatiently, “He was trying to lure a poor helpless female into his bed.”

“I never said that was the destination,” Brandle replied testily. “I was just trying to talk to her. She looked rather fetching.”

“Fetching is a little old fashioned considering you have a new name, don’t you think?”

William looked from one to the other. “What new name?”

As Angelica filled him in, Brandle gave the room a last once over in search of the woman, but she was gone.

“That’s bloody ridiculous,” William said. “Almost as ridiculous as this security thing.” He looked to Andrei and called, “Why was my luggage searched?”

“The Guild is very thorough,” their host answered evasively.

“Why are they here in the first place?” William pressed.

Andrei cleared his throat. “There is an unfortunate climate at the moment. You heard about the attacks by the Children of Shadows?”

A blonde in a low cut dress joined them. “Andrei was worried they might attack us.”

Angelica gave the vampiress a once over, as if checking to see which of them was more attractive. “Why on earth would they do that? They’re only attacking government buildings. Unless Andrei’s joined a Council?”

“No,” their host drawled.

A bell tinkled and they looked towards the doorway. A servant bobbed her head and Andrei called loudly, "Dinner is being served in the formal dining room. If you would follow me?"

They filed out of the room and down the corridor. The formal dining room, as Andrei called it, was massive. Polished pillars held up the long chandelier studded ceiling. The walls were papered in a delicate print, and carved sideboards looked elegant and expensive. The room's centerpiece was a long table – no doubt made of several individual ones placed together – encircled by at least fifty matching chairs. Each place was set with a napkin, spoons, and three crystal glasses.

They took their seats and servants bustled in with heavy trays. One laid cut glass bowls of spices and the others carried glass decanters of crimson. They made the rounds, filling the smallest glass of each guest – the first course. Polite chatter followed, intermingled with sipping. A second course was brought with a new array of flavorings, and then dessert; the blood of baby calves sprinkled with cinnamon.

"I always like the fresh taste of the young ones," Angelica commented as she finished her glass. She nodded to the doorway. "Don't look now, but it's one of the Executioners."

They followed her eyes to see Jamie taking stock of them. He gave a small nod, then turned and disappeared.

"They're not going to be hovering the entire time, are they?" Angelica pushed her glass away.

"That seems to be the point of security," Brandle replied.

William smirked into his drink. "They may be earning their pay for a change."

Brandle and Angelica exchanged curious looks. "What do you mean by that?" she asked.

"You'll see."

Brandle leaned back with a frown. He was familiar with William and his plans. They'd fought a war together long ago when they were in Henry's coven. The old man wasn't Brandle's master, but in those days vampires didn't go off alone – it was simply too dangerous. Covens controlled land like feudal lords, and straying into another's territory meant death unless you had an army of your own to back you up. Of course, the Sodalitas had worked to eliminate that.

He thought of the war, and Henry, killed by an Executioner. It was a pity, but he'd let it go long ago. William, on the other hand, hadn't. After Henry died and they were forced to leave their territory, William headed a group to fight the Sodalitas. In the end they disintegrated to little more than a band of outlaws who robbed and murdered.

Brandle had taken his leave, and the next time he and William joined forces was in 1712 for another battle. In the 1800s William joined a dissident group and tried to recruit his friends. But Brandle stayed away. He'd had enough of war and now that the Sodalitas had regulated everything he wanted some peace and solitude while it lasted.

"You're not up to your old tricks are you?" Brandle asked suspiciously. "Trying to overthrow?"

William glared. "Would you keep your voice down? As for what I'm up to, I told you, you'll see. I need to hash out a few details before I let the two of you in on it."

"Sounds fun." Angelica elbowed Brandle. "You look like you're at a funeral. Cheer up. Don't take everything so seriously."

He was silent a moment, then said, "Do you realize I am more than 1500 years old?" They looked at him blankly and he explained, "I've survived for 1500 years by letting things go and moving on. You should try it, William. Whatever it is you're planning, I'm not interested. I'm retired."

Angelica laughed. "How boring. Well count me in, no matter what it is. Anything would be better than going home and listening to Constance and Bernadette fight."

"You have both your sisters living with you now?" Brandle asked.

"Yes. Constance had another young 'nephew' leave her last year, and I've had Bernadette since her lover committed suicide. Not that I blame him. I'm considering it to get rid of them."

"That's why intelligent masters refused to turn whole families," Brandle said cheerfully.

Angelica laughed. "There's a law the Sodalitas should make. No...what's the word? Biological relatives as coven mates."

"There are enough damn laws," William snapped.

She flinched away from his anger. "I was only joking."

“The trouble is they take it seriously. There’s a law for everything! Who you can turn, what you can do, where you can hunt.”

Brandle frowned. “The only laws I’ve noticed are the ones that stop everyone from killing everyone else for no reason.” The same laws that allowed him to live on his own, free of a coven, without the worry of attack.

William scoffed. “No, they stop everyone from defending themselves. You remember Henry-”

Brandle held up his hands. “William, we’ve known one another a long time. I consider you a friend, but I’m not interested in rehashing this.” He pushed his chair out and stood. “If you’ll excuse me?” “You’re happy to live under tyranny?”

Brandle hesitated. “In order for any society to function there has to be rules. Even here, at this party, there are rules. We can’t destroy Andrei’s property or kill his human servants. We can’t attack someone just because we don’t like their clothes. We can’t steal. We can’t wage a war and murder half the guests.

“Those rules allow all of us to enjoy the party. Yes, they’re common sense, and no, Andrei hasn’t posted them with a list of disciplines, but that’s because we all know better. Out there-” he motioned to the world beyond. “- there are idiots who don’t know any better, megalomaniacs, lunatics, power hungry nuts who would kill, bleed, torture, steal, and murder just because it pleases them. Now that there are consequences for their actions, they at least pause for a moment before destroying another coven. I’m sorry, but that isn’t a bad thing.”

“There were always consequences.” William sneered. “Before, when a coven attacked another, the consequence was their own casualties; the coven defended themselves from thieves and murderers and administered punishment. Now we’re all supposed to sit back and let the Sodalitas handle it. You’ve traded freedom for not having to defend yourself.”

Brandle’s laugh was cold. “Do you remember the time before them? Because I do. I was there for nine hundred years of it; nine hundred years of coven law. Of murdered masters, of backstabbing, of constant war and fighting and arguing over territory. Vampires are petty, sick bastards, William. They’re selfish, and most have no respect for life – immortal or mortal. I watched covens destroy whole villages of humans, watched them wipe out entire vampire settlements just because they were bored. I lived those days, before either of you children were born, and I’m not interested in going back to them. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’d rather have a conversation with a rock than rehash this.”

He strode out of the dining room and ended up in a library. With a huff he threw himself in a chair before the dark fireplace. Memories tickled the back of his mind; blood, screams, terror. His master was a lord who lived in castle and bred his undead army. When his numbers dwindled, he traveled to a knot of human villages, dressed in finery and surrounded by his men. At each village he presented himself as royalty and demanded the young men be brought forth. From their ranks he would choose those who suited him, promising glory and honor. But, just as the local legends said, when you were chosen it meant that your family never saw you again.

He’d been chosen, leaving behind a wife, three sons, and a babe on the way. He’d never found out what the child was, its name, or if it even lived. Instead he’d marched to the far away castle and there been turned and trained. His old life was washed away with his master’s blood and a new one given. One of chaos.

William, and so many others, thought they understood the world, but they didn’t. He’d seen it in all its raw glory, seen into the black hearts of men, seen the atrocities committed in the name of conquest, defense, or entertainment. He doubted the leaders of the Sodalitas were any better than his master had been, but at least there was only one council of ancient lunatics instead of hundreds.

He heard the door creak and instantly utilized his phantom powers. Though he didn’t move, whoever his guest was wouldn’t see him or sense him; he’d be invisible.

But it wasn’t William as he expected, rather the slender Zarra. Her red gold hair fell around her shoulders and her dark dress made her skin look like milk. Seemingly alone, she was relaxed, and moved to light a fire in the grate.

He thought about slinking to his feet and out the door before she knew he was there - unless she had mental powers he was unaware of and could already sense him.

She arranged the logs and he decided that she didn't. Softly, she hummed an unfamiliar song. Though he knew it wasn't polite, he flexed his own mind reading abilities just a little; not enough that she'd feel it, but enough to catch her surface thoughts.

Funnily enough they were concerned with her task. If he wanted more he'd have to dig. Or he could just ask her.

He relaxed and the phantom effect disappeared. He thought about speaking, but decided it would be better if she discovered him herself.

Flames crackled to life and she straightened, wiping her hands on her dress. As she turned, her eyes caught his and she jumped. "Oh! I didn't-"

"It's all right." He smiled pleasantly.

"No, I'll, go and leave you alone."

"If I wanted to be alone I'd have left before you saw me," he said. "I think it's you who wants to be alone. Am I right?" She hesitated and he asked, "How do you know Andrei?"

"I don't. I know Lykke."

The name was familiar, but he couldn't immediately place her. "She's your master?"

"No. Jamine is. Was. Lykke bought me from her and set me free."

Hmmm. Selling fledglings was rare anymore, or so he thought. "I didn't know that was still done."

"I don't think it is. Jamine seemed surprised by the suggestion."

Jamine was a wholly unfamiliar name, but he could see the echo of her in Zarra's eyes, and it wasn't pretty. "I can only assume you had a long blood debt."

"Very long." Zarra clasped her hands before her. "I was Jamine's human slave until she decided I was old enough to be turned, and then I was an immortal slave."

He stood and made a show of stretching. "How long have you been immortal for?"

"Three hundred years."

It was a long time to be a slave, though not as long as his own servitude had been. Still, he doubted his had been as rough. "Then a belated welcome. I can only assume you and Lykke are friends?"

"No. I was friends with Heshika, a member of Jamine's coven. Heshika and Lykke were friends who met in a war coven. When the war ended, Lykke purchased me. She said it was a promise she'd made to Heshika."

"That was kind of her to keep it."

She nodded a reply and they fell silent. The fire cracked and he caught threads of Zarra's thoughts; she hadn't been free long - a year maybe? It was Lykke's suggestion to invite her, or that was what the note in her invitation said. The last time she'd seen her benefactor had been when Lykke set her up in an apartment and left for her own coven. She'd invited Zarra to come, of course, but she didn't want to. She didn't want to be around anyone. She just wanted to hide in the dark away from the horror.

Why did I come?

He disconnected from her thoughts and stepped towards her. "I should also welcome you to the party. It's refreshing to see someone new, though I understand your thirst for solitude. Religions speak of a hell after death but the real hell is here, in the dark hearts and bloody deeds of men. Sometimes one must hide away or risk losing what little is left of their soul."

She caught her breath and nodded emphatically. "Yes. That's it exactly."

He smiled. "Enough of these black topics. Have you had a tour of the grounds? I'd be happy to escort you."

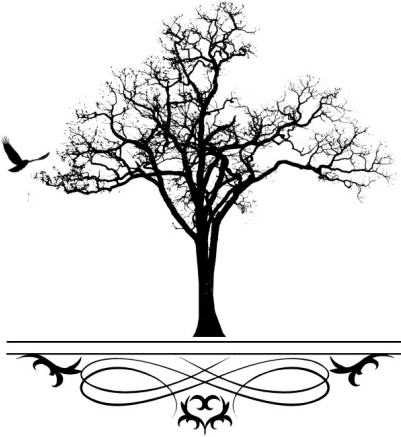
She hung back a moment, like an indecisive butterfly, and finally consented. "Yes. I think that would be nice."

He offered his arm and she took it. As he led her out the door he thought of William. They all knew that the Sodalitas couldn't last forever; no government could, but he didn't see the point in hastening its death.

Zarra's story was terrible, but it could have been worse, like many he'd witnessed in his youth. If William was smart he'd shelter in the peace while it lasted instead of running towards war. But then, by its very nature, peace bred rebellion, because in peacetime, in prosperity, people had nothing to worry about. Boredom was one of the greatest incitements for violence.

Truth be told, he was just as bored as everyone else, but unlike William he'd have to have a real cause to fight. Blood for the sake of blood never served any purpose, not even if it was entertaining.





Eagan

April 19th

Eagan oversaw his luggage being deposited in his room. Hands on his hips, he gave the servant's directions, then bid them out when they'd finished. A quick check in the mirror showed he still looked the same; long blonde hair that fell in curls and a heavy beard. As if he thought he might transform after all these years.

He changed his clothes and headed downstairs. A servant told him dinner was over but he could catch a snack in the kitchen. On his way there, he ran into a dark skinned vampire with short hair and a beard tinged in gray. It was Bassile.

"Greetings, old friend. An' how have ya kept?"

Bassile returned his smile. "Good, good. And yourself?"

"As well as can be expected. Two days it took ta get here." The memory of the long boring flight was etched crystal clear in his mind.

"You need a faster jet. I slept while my pilots flew. It's the best way to do it."

"I kin see that. Have ya fed? It seems I missed dinner proper so am on me way ta the kitchen fer a snack o' some kind."

"Actually, I have fed, but I'll come with you anyway." Bassile brandished a deck of cards. "I was hoping to tempt someone with a game of rummy."

"Aye. Rummy. I kin play it. Let me feed and then we'll find a table."

The kitchen staff looked alarmed at their arrival, but quickly poured Eagan a large glass of crimson. He downed it in a few gulps, thanked them, and then he and Bassile headed back the way they'd come, chatting as they went.

"There's just not much ta tell since I saw ya last," Eagan said. "I don't think anythin' has changed."

"No new covens? Or fledglings?" Bassile asked. "Not even a new slave?"

"Nay. And yerself?"

"I've moved. I have a new den near Halmstad, Sweden. It's a lovely place. And I've made a couple of acquisitions, though none as big as the one I hope to make here." He rubbed his hands together.

Eagan recognized the gleam in his companion's eyes. "Ye and Sorino are goin' a' it hammer an' tongs again?"

"Oh no, not Sorino, though he's trying to sell reproductions of a rare scroll I might think about. He claims it gives the location of the Raven Queen's temple and, furthermore, that he has been there."

The Raven Queen... "Aye, 'tis Lilith ya mean, right? She's naught but a myth."

"True, but her temple may exist. The Greeks built a temple to Athena, after all, and she's no more real."

“’Tis a good point. Though if he’s been there already he’d a took anythin’ worth findin’.”

“And that’s why I haven’t bought the scroll yet. He claims most of the temple is untouched; that he didn’t have time to explore because he was with a group, but I don’t know. If he lowers his price I might buy it and head there myself, just for something to do after the party.”

They reached the doorway to the salon when Cutter, one of Andrei’s coven, caught up to them. “The master says if you’d like to see his new acquisitions he’ll be happy to show them to you now.”

“About time. I’ve been waiting for...” Bassile glanced at his wrist but he didn’t have a watch.

“Well, since I got here. Tell him we’ll be along presently. I want to make sure to beat Sorino.”

Cutter disappeared to deliver the message, and Bassile turned to Eagan. “You will come?”

“More o’ yer relic hunting?” Eagan asked. “I cannae see why ya spend yer time an’ wealth to collect old rubbish.”

Bassile balked. “Not rubbish, friend, but artifacts of great interest!”

“If they were so interestin’, why did their owner’s discard ‘em? Why don’a they still have ‘em?”

“Because they’re dead, of course. For instance, do you know what Andrei claims to have?” Eagan shook his head and Bassile whispered, “The Spear of Destiny. That has to impress even you.”

When Eagan only shrugged, Bassile asked sharply, “You do know what it is? The spear that-”

“Aye. They say ‘tis the spear that pierced the side o’ Christ as he hung upon the cross.”

“Yes! The Holy Lance, imbued with powers we cannot imagine. You can’t say that doesn’t fire your imagination even a little?”

“Aye, I can. Even if Andrei’s claims be true, then it be nothin’ but a hunk o’ metal stained in blood, an’ I have plenty o’ my own already.”

Bassile looked annoyed. “Then do as you please, but I’m going to look at it.”

He stomped away. Eagan was tempted to let him go and find a new rummy opponent. As though sent by God to fill that void, Grayson appeared. Next to him was a young fledgling and trailing behind them was Grayson’s mate Urian.

“Greetings!” Eagan called cheerfully. “Good ta see ya, Grayson, Urian. I see ya have a new servant?”

The young vampire, more boy than man, looked instantly furious. “I’m not a slave! I’m Grayson’s new lover.”

“New lover?” Eagan scratched his beard. “Seems hard ta believe, laddy, when his old one is right behind ya.”

The boy snapped, “That’s because he won’t go away!”

“Enough.” Grayson quickly silenced him. “You’ll have to excuse Taylor. He’s young.”

“An’ ill-mannered it seems. Don’a know to show respect ta his elders.”

“No,” Urian agreed acidly. “He doesn’t.”

“So if ya don’a mind me askin’ who is he really?”

The other two looked away and Taylor sulked. “Really, Gray? You’re not going to claim me?”

“His name is Grayson, not Gray, you idiot,” Urian seethed.

And that was enough for Eagan.

“Well it was nice ta see ya, but it seems my rummy partner has left without me. Ya will excuse me?”

They nodded and he hurried away. That was more of a circus than he wanted to get caught up in. He couldn’t figure out if the boy was really Grayson’s new toy, or if there was something else going on. It just seemed odd to take a new lover and keep the old one at the same time.

As he neared a turn in the corridor he heard a male voice drawing closer. “-doesn’t need to be so closed minded. He could listen.”

A female answered. “It’s Brandle now, remember? And you always do this. We don’t need him. He isn’t a god.”

“I didn’t say he was, but he’d be handy to have. I just need to talk to him. I can usually get him to see things my way if I have enough time.”

“You mean manipulate him? Nice. Now you sound like a woman.”

The pair came around the corner. The male was William, a dark haired vampire who hadn't lost his rebellious streak. The pretty vampiress on his arm was Angelica, and if Eagan remembered right, they'd been a couple for quite some time.

"Good ta see ya," he said as he came to a stop and tried to figure out who Brandle was. It wasn't a name he'd heard before, but he couldn't ask or they'd know he was eavesdropping.

"Hello," Angelica purred. "Nice trip?"

"Aye, passable." He tried to catch a flicker of their thoughts, but both were impenetrable. The mystery would have to remain a mystery. "Good ta see the two a ya are still together. I just passed Grayson and Urian an' seems they have some kinda complicated situation."

"Together?" Angelica echoed. "Oh good lord, no!" She stepped away from her companion. "No we're not...just, no."

William glared. "You needn't be so horrified by the suggestion. A simple no would have been enough."

"Excuse me if I want to make sure there's no mistake," she snapped. "Seriously, if he was the last vampire on earth--"

"He gets it!" William snapped. "I had no idea my company was so terrible!"

"Not your company, in general, just...the idea of being romantically intimate with you..."

Eagan cleared his throat. "My apologies, lassie. If you'll excuse me, I'm lookin' for Bassile. Nice ta have seen ya."

He hurried on, leaving their argument behind. If they didn't want people to think they were together then they shouldn't look like they were, pure and simple. It was a mistake anyone could make.

He made a wrong turn and ended up in a side entryway. He started to turn back when the door opened. A blonde vampire and a vampiress with golden-red hair stepped through.

"It seems ridiculous," she was saying. "Even with a coven of twenty, why would they need so much land?"

Her partner stopped from answering her to greet the newcomer. "Eagan! Hello. This is Zarra. Zarra, Eagan."

"Acwellen! How are ya, lad? Though from the look o' things yer doin' well." He gave him a wink and inclined his head towards the girl. "She one o' yours?"

She drew back into herself, her eyes wide. Though Eagan could read minds, he didn't need the skill to feel her fright. "Aye, lass, ya got nothin' ta be afraid of. Least not from me. This rogue on the other hand." He laughed and clapped Acwellen on the shoulder. "Did ya steal her like the last one lad, or did ya lure her inta comin' willingly?"

Zarra's eyes widened and she looked at Acwellen with horror. "Does he mean you kidnapped someone?"

Eagan laughed and Acwellen tried to soothe her. "No, no. It's only a joke."

"Of course," she said stiffly. "I-I...If you'll excuse me?"

She didn't wait for an answer before she fled, and left Eagan scratching his beard.

"What was all that in aid of?"

Acwellen sighed. "She's a touchy one. Just got free of a blood debt to someone who wasn't very nice. Jamine, if you know who that is."

"Never heard o' him."

"Her."

"Never heard o' her. I didn'a mean ta chase her off. I seem ta be havin' that general effect tonight."

"Pay it no mind. I'm sure there will be plenty of chances to talk to her."

"I hope so, lad. I wondered why yer weren't with yer friends. Seems like they're cookin' sumthin up."

"You mean William? What gives you that impression?"

"I overheard him and his lassie arguin' about someone named Brandle. Apparently he don'a agree with him o'er sumthin', and Angelica said they didn'a need him anyway, but William thought he could manipulate him into seein' things his way if he gets the chance."

Though Acwellen's mild expression remained, his voice hardened, "Oh he does, does he?"

"Aye, that's what he said." Eagan broke off when he saw the flash of anger in the other's eyes. "Ya know this Brandle fella then?"

"Aye. It's me. I've changed my name."

Eagan sucked in his breath sharply. Ah. Acwellen was the mysterious Brandle. Whoops. "I'm sure they didn'a mean no harm from it, laddy. I best be on me way, I'm in search o' Bassile. Good ta have seen ya."

He tipped an invisible hat and scurried back the way he'd come. He shouldn't have mentioned the conversation. But how was he to know Acwellen was Brandle? No good ever came of changing a person's name!

Eagan got back on track, and was nearly to Andrei's trophy room when he came across Terric heading the other direction. The dark haired vampire wore hip hugging jeans and a turtleneck. Next to him walked a small olive-skinned male with a ponytail and a baggy shirt.

Eagan hesitated to say hello. His last three encounters hadn't gone well, but Terric initiated contact for him. "Eagan! Good to see you. Are you on your way to Andrei?"

With Terric's heavy Spanish accent, it took Eagan a moment to translate the words. "Aye, that I am. Lookin' for Bassile."

"I thought you were going to have a look at his newest prize." Terric stifled a chuckle. "The Spear of Destiny, he calls it."

Thanks to Bassile's earlier comments, Eagan was able to figure out about the spear. "Aye, but old relics don'a hold my interest. I didn'a know they held yers."

"They don't really, but Andrei invited me to have a look and hinted at selling it to me. Not that I'd buy it. How have you been?"

Eagan understood the last four words, and that was all that mattered. "Oh, good, good. Can'a complain. You?"

"Just fine. Have you met Felipa?"

"Phillip?" he echoed and stuck out his hand. "No, lad, I haven't had the pleasure. Is he your brother?"

A moment of tense silence followed. Felipa glared and Terric said between clenched teeth. "My mate."

That he understood. "Oh, I'm sorry lad. I didn'a know that ya went that a way. Nothing wrong with that o'course. Grayson and his bunch do the same thing, though I think they expanded the fold, if ya know what I mean."

Felipa's glare turned withering. "I'm a woman."

Eagan scratched his beard. If that was a woman, it was an ugly one. "O'course ya are, lass. An' a lovely one at that. If ya'll excuse me, I need ta catch Bassile. Nice ta have met ya."

As he scurried away from his latest failure he made up his mind to quit socializing. The place was like a circus and they were all oversensitive.

How was I supposed ta know she was a woman when she looks like that? Maybe if she wore a dress I woulda known.

The door to Andrei's trophy room was open and he strolled through. The vampires stood at a glass case. Their host laid a long cloth covered box on top, then looked up to Eagan. "We'd given up on you."

"Aye, I was comin', just ran int'a few acquaintances on me way."

"Half of the household, if I'm any good at guessing," Bassile said cheerfully. "All right, Andrei, we're ready."

Andrei pulled the cloth away with a flourish and announced, "The Spear of Destiny."

Eagan leaned close and studied the item. Rather than a spear, it was only the head. The thick diamond shaped spike was more than a foot long, and came down to a neck piece made in a honeycomb design. Thick scaly tarnish colored it in shades of green and white, and obscured any details.

He might not be a relic hunter, but he was a warrior, and that looked more like a long dagger than the head of a spear.

“Yer sure this is a spear head, are ya?”

Bassile chuckled. “My friend is right, Andrei. I hope you didn’t pay much for this.”

Andrei frowned and dropped the cloth on it again. “I see.”

A knowing twinkle shown in Bassile’s eyes. “I can’t think of anyone who’d be interested in that, no matter how cheaply you sell it for. It doesn’t stop you from trying though. I won’t say anything to discourage anyone.” He tapped the side of his nose, then turned to Eagan. “About that rummy game?”

Eagan stopped from pointing out the trouble he’d taken to get there just for that. “O’course. I’m ready if ya are.”

“I assume you’re not interested either?” Andrei asked.

“In what? Buyin’ that bit o’metal? Not a chance, me friend. I don’a go for those things.”

“You’re especially not interested in that,” Bassile assured him. “Thank you for showing it to me, Andrei. I admit, it’s something I’ve never seen before.”

They said polite goodbyes, and Eagan followed his friend towards the salon again. On the way they passed Terric and Felipa, then Brandle and William, and finally found the odd Grayson three-some in the blue salon. Though none of them glared openly, he felt the hostility and was happy to take a corner table and try to disappear into the drapes.

“It’s a pretty unhappy place for a party,” Bassile commented. “Seems like everyone’s mad about something. The extra security I suppose.”

“Aye, could be that,” Eagan agreed halfheartedly.

“Or else Andrei has already tried to pass that off as the Spear of Destiny to them. Really. How could he think that would work?”

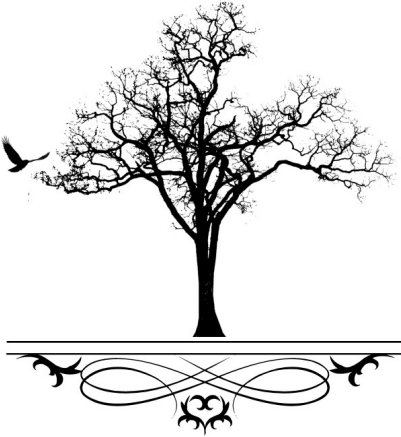
“I don’a know,” Eagan muttered.

“Oh well, maybe he’ll get lucky and find a sucker.” Bassile produced the deck of cards. “Your shuffle or mine?”

After the night he’d had so far, Eagan decided it was better off if he didn’t touch the cards. “You go ahead.” It was better to risk Bassile cheating than to spend twenty minutes picking them up after he dropped them.

I hope this don’a set the tone for the whole party.





Trevor

April 20th

Trevor laid Saul's clothes out and then moved to the bathroom to run his bath. After more than fifty years, the rituals had become a routine.

He watched the steam curl from the tub. It reminded him of the way the fog had drifted up from the river on a cold morning. It was such a short time in his life, yet it felt like those had been his defining days.

Back then, he'd climb out of his bedroll as the sun rose, the sky to the east still blushing like a bride. He'd make a pot of coffee, eat whatever he had on hand, then ready to start a day of panning. Just him and Mother Nature; the gurgling water and the occasional shine of gold.

When the bathtub was full, he returned to Saul's room and woke him. The vampire groaned and rolled over.

"Master, your water is getting cold."

"Then warm it up for me," Saul murmured.

Despite the order, Trevor knew he'd be out of bed in a moment. As soon as he was in the tub he'd be wide awake and spouting orders.

In the interim, Trevor hurried to Callise's room and knocked. "Mistress. It's morning." Her reply was a moan that he took for admittance. Inside, she lay under a heap of blankets. Her hair spread out on a fluffy pillow.

"Mistress," he repeated. "It's morning."

"Fine. Fine. Run the bath."

Trevor ducked into her private bathroom and turned the water on. Callise liked it cooler than her husband, but no less full. Trevor split his attention between it, and listening for the sound of Saul's voice. The cool cold water took him back to memories of his past. He'd lived there in the mountains for only a year, writing home to his mother and his girl when he had news to share. Things had been great, until the pale man showed up.

It was late and a thunderstorm rumbled to the east. He'd lain in his bedding, sheltered by a lean-to, and tried to sleep. The air was heavy with the expectation of coming rain. The tension seeped into him and left him too on edge to really settle.

He'd felt the stranger before he saw him. He couldn't explain it, but the hair on the back of his neck stood to attention, and he knew that someone – or something – was approaching. He was damned if he was going to wait for it.

He clambered out of bed, grabbed his gun, and shoved his way outside. At first he didn't see anything but then, among the rocks, there was the flash of a pale face.

"Who is it?" he called gruffly. "I've got a gun, mister, and I don't want no trouble."

From the gloom, he soon picked out the man's shape; pale face and hands, long dark hair, a ratty coat, dark clothing, and naked feet. The man lurched forward and Trevor shivered, as if he was seeing something otherworldly. He called again, but the man kept coming. Unreasonable fear rose, and finally, when Trevor could make out the man's face and dark hungry eyes, he fired.

The gun blast echoed off the rocks. He saw the man jerk from the impact of the ball, saw him stumble back. Only he didn't fall. He snarled and charged.

"Trevor!" Saul's voice brought him back to the present. "Where the blazes is he?"

Trevor shut off Callise's water and hurried back to his master's room. Saul was out of the tub, swathed in a towel and holding out his pale blue shirt and dark blue tie. "Do you really think these go together?"

He obviously did, or he wouldn't have laid them out, but he knew better than to say so. "I'll find a new one, master."

"I should think. Together they are monochrome. There's no contrast." Saul tossed the tie to the floor and busied dressing. Trevor brought two more and let the vampire have his pick. It was easier than trying to guess.

"I imagine Callise will take forever. I'll never last until breakfast. Fetch me something to tide me over."

Trevor nodded and scurried away. He passed several meandering guests, also on their way downstairs. When he reached the dining room, he poured himself a quick glass from the sideboard, downed it, then made Saul one with a pinch of cinnamon.

He started back up, watching the blood slosh gently in the glass. There'd been a lot of blood that night; his blood. It was smeared on the monster's face. It stained Trevor's shredded clothes, and pooled in the dirt. He lay choking, clawing at his own torn throat. Thunder rumbled loudly and lightning sizzled across the sky. For a moment, illuminated in the bright flash, he saw the man kneeling over him, licking crimson from his fingers. *Like a cat cleaning its paws.*

The gun lay nearby and he grabbed it. The man moved to counter, but Trevor got another shot off. At the close range, he saw the ball pierce the man's chest, saw his blood splatter, and knew that the demon was at least going to hell with him.

Except, he still didn't fall.

The man snarled in a foreign language, German, it sounded, and tackled Trevor. He wrestled the gun from him and threw it out of reach. Then he turned back, mouth open and bloody fangs gleaming in the flash from another bolt of lightning.

Holy God. Fangs.

And then blackness took him.

Trevor shook off the memories as he reached his master's suite. Saul waited inside on a Victorian style couch. He took the offered glass and finished it quickly. "Less cinnamon next time."

Trevor bobbed his understanding as Callise called him. He found her with her hair up and the back of her dress open.

"Zip me up," she ordered.

Trevor did as he was told, then helped her choose which gaudy bit of glittering jewelry to wear. "Not everyone is here yet," she said. "So I don't want to waste the good pieces, but I want Kali to see I have more than she does."

"Of course, mistress."

She held up a broach. "Is this bigger than the one she had on last night?"

He wasn't sure. Though being wrong meant a tongue lashing later, he just nodded and said, "Yes, mistress."

"Good. Is Saul ready?"

"Yes, mistress."

"Fine. I'll be out shortly and then we can go to breakfast. Tell him not to wear that ugly flowered tie today. The one with the lilies. It will clash with my dress."

Of course it was the tie Saul had chosen. Trevor agreed, and delivered the message dutifully. Saul's reply was to scoff. "I was dressed first. It falls to her to coordinate."

With a sigh, Trevor made to deliver the message, but Saul stopped him. "Oh never mind. We don't have another two hours to wait for her to dress again. Bring me the blue tie."

Trevor stopped from pointing out that it was the one they'd started with.

When Callise emerged, Saul stood swiftly and gave her a polite peck on the cheek. "You are ravishing, darling, as always."

"And you. I'm glad to see you had the good sense to coordinate today."

They left for breakfast and Trevor trailed behind them. He was tired of the daily routine, but it was still better than the one he'd had. Back then, he'd woken from the darkness to find himself inside the lean-to. His neck was bandaged and his ruined clothes changed for a cleaner pair. His whole body ached and his throat throbbed. Just sitting up was a struggle and he fell back, gasping for air.

He tried to call for help, but his voice was too weak. He was too weak. There was nothing for him to do except lay in the bed and wait to die.

He thought of his ma, of his girl and their plans. They were going to be married when he got home. That's why he was in California in the first place – to make enough money to get them started in life. They were going to be happy. He just had to make it through this.

It felt like hours passed as he crawled out of the lean-to. Outside, the sun was already setting in a pool of dazzling gold and purple. A crow cawed, and he shivered, praying that it wasn't ushering on his death.

Not yet. I can't die yet.

He found water and some food, though both were hard to swallow. Shadows lengthened and drew together in pockets of night. Soon the sun was gone, leaving the sky the pale gray of twilight.

He started the arduous journey back to the lean-to when he heard footsteps. His heart hammered with terror and he reached for a gun that wasn't there. He was weak and defenseless. If it was the demon again, there would be nothing he could do to stop him.

He rolled over and found himself looking at the man from his nightmares. The pale face was clean, and the eyes seemed clearer and saner than they had when he'd last seen him. Still the hair stood up on Trevor's body, and goosebumps raced up and down his spine. He could feel the man's unnaturalness, as though the very air itself parted rather than touch him.

The man stopped and surveyed him. When he spoke, it was heavily accented. "You should not be out ov bed. You must rest."

Trevor could only stare, and the man gave a huff of impatience. He lifted Trevor by his armpits and dragged him back towards the lean-to. Now, looking back, Trevor liked to think he'd fought, but he hadn't. He'd hung like a limp terrified sack of potatoes and let the man stuff him back in bed.

"There. You vill rest. Have you eaten?" Trevor looked at him blankly and the man left to return with food and water. "Take zis. You must get back your strength."

The man ducked outside. Trevor felt him there all night, standing guard, but in the morning he was gone, like a ghost.

They continued that way for three days. On the third, the man introduced himself as Timothy. "I suppose you have questions, yes? If I answer zem you can never escape. Do you understand?"

He didn't, but Timothy didn't give him time to say so.

"You have guessed that vhat happened to you vas supernatural? Given ze bible you keep, you have probably concluded I am a demon, yes?" Trevor nodded and the man shook his head. "You would be wrong. I am not a demon, but an immortal. A vampire."

Timothy had given him a rough explanation of the monsters and their nature. "Ve drink blood, ov course. Vhen I found you I vas starving and lost control. But I do not vish for you to die. A human would be very useful."

Though Trevor couldn't figure out how he would be useful, he soon found out. As he regained his strength, Timothy gave him chores to do. He dug what was essentially a root cellar for the vampire to

sleep in. He hunted animals for his meals, and he went to town with a shopping list of supplies and a pocketful of the vampire's gold.

For two months things were palatable. Timothy insisted he call him master and bow when he saw him, but it was a small price to pay. The days were Trevor's own and he could soak in the sun and let it wash it away the horror of the darkness. Then, one night, when Trevor gave Timothy his game, the vampire roared, "I am sick ov these animals! I vant human blood!" He grabbed Trevor by the front of his shirt and snarled in his face. "You vill bring me human blood or I vill drink yours! Go!"

He flung Trevor away to catch himself on the rocks. Human? How was he supposed to find human blood for the monster? He couldn't expect him to bring someone back to be fed on, could he? "Trevor!"

He jerked back to reality to find Callise glaring. They stood in the dining room of Andrei's mansion, waiting for their breakfast.

Trevor quickly pulled her chair out and she sat with a huff. Saul took the one next to her, and though neither spoke, Trevor knew he was expected to fetch their cups.

He returned and handed them out. The pair sipped daintily, conversing with the vampires across the table from them. Callise's laughter was high and fake, but the other set were no better.

They're still nothing like Timothy.

That night, long ago, he failed to bring a human to his new master as ordered. The vampire raged. He threw Trevor into the rocks. The crunch of his bones echoed loudly in his ears and took his breath away. He struggled to stand, but Timothy was on him again. He lifted him by his throat and held him aloft, feet dangling in the air. With a roar he ripped into Trevor's chest. Hot blood flowed out and the vampire lapped it greedily. When he'd had his fill, he flung Trevor back to the stones and left him to bleed. Darkness crowded the edge of his vision and he knew that was it; he was going to die.

But he hadn't. Timothy had relented; had bandaged him and finally shoved his wrist in Trevor's mouth. He didn't understand the purpose, but he instinctively drank the blood that oozed from it. Not enough to turn him, just enough to heal the worst of his wounds and keep him from dying.

When the last of his injuries healed, Timothy sent him to bring back a human again. This time, he did as he was told. A husband and wife team panned not too far from him, and in the cool hours of the day he wandered over for a visit. As he'd hoped, her husband was nowhere to be found. Trevor chatted uncomfortably with her, and tried to think of a plan. The set of her shoulders, and the way she looked over her shoulder again and again said she picked up on his nervousness. He imagined her calling out for her husband, screaming his name so that he came running, his gun ready.

It was a risk Trevor couldn't take, so when she turned her back to tend to the coffee he knocked her in the head with a piece of firewood. She was heavier than she looked and he had to drag her back to his camp. There he gagged her, tied her up, and threw her in the lean-to.

The sun was setting when her husband came around looking for her. Trevor tried to act casual, but he did a poor job and looked towards the lean-to one too many times. The man finally shoved Trevor out of the way and barged in. He roared as he dragged his wife out, spitting threats and obscenities. In a panic, Trevor grabbed his gun. Before he could use it, Timothy broke onto the scene. With a single swipe he knocked the man backwards. Then, with hungry, half-crazed eyes, Timothy snatched him up and ripped into his throat. The man screamed and struggled, but soon fell still.

The commotion woke the woman, and she shrieked behind her gag, a sort of muffled miserable sound that made Trevor sick. Timothy threw the husk of her husband aside and moved towards her. "I am too full tonight, *mein Fräulein*. You vill have to keep until tomorrow. Trevor, see zat she is stored somewhere and deal with zat mess."

Trevor apologized as he stuffed her back inside the lean-to and checked her bonds. He tried to ignore the tears on her cheeks, but they stuck in his mind as he dug a grave for her husband. He dumped the body in and concentrated on the work of burying it again. Anything to keep from realizing he was a murderer.

Timothy didn't take the woman the next night, or even the third. He waited for five days before he finally drained her dry. By then she was rank and filthy, starving and beyond terrified. Trevor scrubbed

out the lean-to but he couldn't wash away the smell of her. Finally he had to move it and burn half the contents.

After that, he thought Timothy would be satisfied for a while, but when he brought him game the vampire flew into another rage and beat him nearly to death. It was only his blood, again administered just when Trevor neared oblivion, that saved him. That was a pattern they would repeat, even after they left California. One day Timothy would be gracious and giving, and the next he would nearly kill Trevor with his fury. Five months into their relationship, he did too much damage, and had to either let Trevor die, or make him an immortal slave.

He went for the second.

For over one hundred years Trevor worked for Timothy. He killed for him, bled for him, endured his sudden rages and abusive tempers. He did everything that was asked, even when it made him sick, until the night Timothy demanded he bring him a woman. Not for food, but for sport.

"They are fun, yes? Ze terror is in their eyes as zey scream, and zen, the hopelessness when zey realize you are too strong and zey cannot stop you from doing anything you vant."

Trevor had tried to follow orders; he even brought the girl to their den, but when Timothy grabbed her, when he tore off her clothes and groped her naked body, leaving finger nail scratches in her delicate skin, it was too much.

He charged his master and knocked him to the ground. They wrestled and finally fell apart. Timothy swore he would kill him, "When ze dog bites ze master, he must be put down!"

But Trevor grabbed the fireplace poker and rammed it through his chest. Timothy knelt, frozen, mouth open, eyes wide. Blood gurgled from his lips and then he fell forward and lay still.

Trevor tried to help the girl, tried to get her dressed, tried to calm her, but she was too hysterical. She lashed out, and in the end he had to snap her neck. She lay dead on the floor, naked and bruised, her hair soaking up the puddle of Timothy's blood.

Trevor didn't clean it up, only packed a bag and left. It was in New York that he found Saul and Callise. A wealthy pair of snobs from the old world, they were in the market for a new servant in exchange for wages, room, and board. He signed on and had barely begun his life with them when a short stocky Executioner came. Trevor hid in another room, ear pressed to the door, while the Executioner introduced himself as Zuri, then explained the reason for his visit. The human police had found Timothy and the girl, and The Guild had had to cover it up. It was illegal to make a mess for the mortals to find. Zuri was hunting the perpetrator so he could be punished.

Trevor's heart froze in his chest. He'd heard stories of The Guild's punishments; violence, starvation, and death.

"How awful," Callise said. "But I can't imagine why you've come to us with this grisly tale."

The Executioner sighed. "We believe your servant was previously employed by Timothy."

"Really?" Saul asked with surprise. "That must have been years ago. We've had him nearly... what is it, dear? Going on twenty now?"

Trevor blinked. He'd only been with them a month at the most.

"At least," Callise agreed. "The years do run together, don't they?"

The Executioner sounded unhappy. "You're sure it's been that long?"

"Oh no, it may be more," Saul replied. "Would you like to talk to him directly? I can summon him."

"Not until he finishes the laundry," Callise said primly. "I'm afraid, sir, that you may have the wrong man, and I refuse to have my linens ruined over it."

They continued to talk the Executioner in circles until he finally gave up and left. Trevor dared to peer through the keyhole and saw the couple give each other a long knowing look. Finally Callise called, "Trevor! Come here!"

He scrambled to obey. His mistress looked him over and snapped, "Why aren't you washing the laundry?"

The reaction was unexpected, and he had no answer.

"Then go do it," she said angrily, and waved him off. "No more dilly dallying."

And that was it. They never mentioned it again, never asked him what happened. In the fifty years that followed they didn't expect him to kill humans, or bring them victims, or watch them torture someone to death. Instead it was ironing, and laying out ties, and choosing jewelry.

"Trevor!"

He shook himself back and saw Callise giving him another hard look. "We are ready to go."

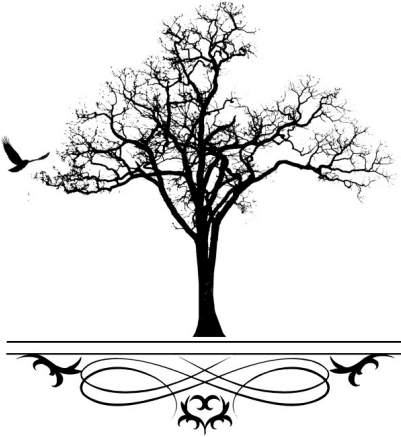
"Of course. Sorry mistress."

"I should think. You need to pay attention. I realize the excitement of the place is distracting, but you really must do better than this."

Though she didn't say it, he always felt like the next sentence was, "Don't make us regret lying for you."

I won't, he thought quietly. *I promise I won't*.





Lykke

April 20th

Lykke waited patiently for Edvard. She'd finished her breakfast and made it to the hallway, but he'd stopped to talk to someone. She could always back track to pick him up again, but it seemed easier to wait.

"Lykke! Hello!"

She looked up from her thoughts to see Terric and a short homely woman who wore a shapeless dress. Terric was in bellbottoms and a turtleneck, a pair of sunglasses perched on his nose and strings of beads around his neck.

"Hello. How are you?"

"We're fine. Let me introduce Felipa, my mate."

Lykke tried to hide her surprise. Terric was a known womanizer, and even more known for being shallow. She'd never seen him with a woman who was less than stunning, and she couldn't imagine him forming something permanent with one who didn't even register. Perhaps it was a sick joke?

"Nice to meet you, Felipa." She offered her hand and a smile. The woman accepted both, and Terric launched into a long story about his new found spiritualism. Felipa nodded along, interjecting a comment here or there, and Lykke tuned out. In the end she gathered that the whole thing had to do with gurus and beetles, though why he'd brought bugs up she didn't know.

"-your mate?"

The words caught her attention and she answered quickly, "Edvard is talking to someone."

"As long as it isn't Eagan," Terric said darkly. She was tempted to ask why, but was afraid the explanation would be too existential.

"I think it is, actually."

"Good luck then. If you'll excuse us? Breakfast." Terric gave a half bow and then led his mate away.

Lykke wondered if it was his newfound spiritualism that made him see beyond Felipa's appearance, or if he was just doing it for effect, to prove that he was spiritual because he could ignore appearances. It was an interesting circle that left her pondering.

Not that she was shallow herself, or at least not shallower than anyone else. She liked a mate that was attractive to her, and Edvard fit the bill. He was tall with broad shoulders and clear eyes, and had a sort of commanding majesty that made others take notice, or at least it made her take notice.

She'd first met him forty years after her husband was killed in a war. Her sisters had tried to convince her she'd mourned enough, but it was only when Edvard smiled at her that she believed them. Their courtship had been brief by immortal standards, and when he asked her to come away with him

she'd gladly accepted. It meant permission from the head of her coven, but he didn't care, and so she followed Edvard to his home in Finland.

There, in the frozen north, surrounded by tundra and reindeers, they'd lived happily for three hundred years. Friends had come and gone, migrating from one place to another, but they'd remained, steady and strong like the rocky earth.

Steady and isolated. Edvard wasn't one for socializing, except for Andrei's parties. To her knowledge he'd never missed a one, and certainly not since she'd started coming with him. But that was it. When the party ended they went home, settled in, and Edvard stayed put for another fifty years.

Unlike her. It wasn't that she didn't enjoy Edvard's company, or the quiet of their home, but unlike him she still had people she cared for. Her sisters-in-blood, for instance. Only two years ago her sister Jóna had invited her to join a war coven. The cause was just, so how could she refuse? The war had only lasted a year, but in that time she'd made friends; Heshika for one. A pretty vampiress who looked at least part Middle Eastern, Heshika was thoughtful, kind, and compassionate, as proved by her concern for Zarra, the immortal slave of her coven mate Jamine.

Though turned by the same master, Jamine was cruel and cold, and seemed to delight in being mean to anyone she could. Of lowest rank, Zarra had taken the brunt of her abuse. More than once, Heshika had tried to intervene, and always the results were the same: Zarra owed her blood debt still, and until Jamine released her she could do as she pleased. Zarra was her property. Sadly, she was right, that was the law, and there was nothing anyone could do about it.

But when Heshika was killed in a fight, Lykke had fallen back to an old idea, and offered to buy Zarra from her master. Jamine had been surprised by the offer, and Lykke had to double her proposed price, but finally she'd agreed.

The first thing she'd done was to free Zarra, and then she'd made plans to take her back to Finland. They could use a fresh face around the place, and it would be the perfect, quiet location for Zarra to get used to her new status in life. When she proposed the idea, Zarra looked ready to cry, but declined. She said she needed to be alone; needed solitude to come to terms with everything.

Though the idea seemed odd to Lykke, she helped Zarra get an apartment and left her to her own devices. Edvard had only murmured his regrets when she told him about it, but she was pretty sure he was happier that way.

He'd be even happier if I would stay away from war covens.

And she understood why. His last wife had been a war minded woman. When a young coven invaded their territory, she'd killed most of them, and in turn had been killed by the Sodalitas. When he'd first told Lykke about it, she'd asked if he still loved her.

"Yes," he'd admitted. "Just as you still love your husband. Loving someone who is gone doesn't mean you don't have room in your heart for another; love isn't finite."

And he was right because, despite the years, she thought she loved Edvard more every day.

She perked up as Edvard stepped into the corridor, Eagan at his elbow. The bearded vampire gave a bow. "I should apologize for monopolizin' yer mate. It's jus' nice ta talk ta some'ne who don'a get offended at every word."

She stifled a chuckle. Eagan was known for talking without thinking first. "Had an interesting morning, have you?"

"Nay, not so much the mornin', but the night 'fore. Speaking of that, I hear ya know one a' our new guests. Zarra, Acwellen said her name was."

Lykke didn't bother to hide her surprise. "She actually came?"

"Aye. She was with Acwellen last night, though she took off in a hurry."

Edvard snickered. "I wonder what the rogue said to her."

Lykke shrugged. "Hard to tell. I hear Acwellen's one for the ladies, though he's never tried his charm on me."

Edvard puffed up indignantly. "I should hope not. I'd hate to have to hurt him."

She laughed and stopped from mentioning their age difference. As far as she knew, Acwellen was at least 1500, while Edvard was two hundred years younger than she was, leaving a spread of a thousand years between them.

"That would be a fight ta see asure," Eagan said cheerfully. "Might spice thin's up, an' from the looks of it we might be a needin' it. You'll have ta excuse me, I've kept ya long enough and better be gettin' on. Nice ta see ya, Lykke. Don'a be a stranger." He gave her a wink and then wandered away.

"You're not going to accuse him of trying to charm me, are you?" she teased her mate.

"Hardly. Poor Eagan couldn't charm a piece of toast." He winked. "What shall we do now, love? The organized entertainment doesn't start until tomorrow."

"Andrei's taking a risk letting us run amuck without guidance."

"Luckily we have the new security to keep everyone in line." He chuckled.

"You say that, but I haven't seen them today."

"They're in the entryway I hear, inundated with a rush. I suppose we could watch them torture everyone with questions?"

"That could be amusing, but I think they'd throw us out." She turned thoughtful. "If I recall Andrei has horses, doesn't he?"

Edvard nodded, and they agreed to visit the stable. After a trip upstairs to change – her dress was hardly suited for riding – they headed outside.

They passed a shooting range and tennis courts, and Lykke joked, "They keep the horses far enough away, don't they?"

"I suppose it's because of the blood," Edvard replied thoughtfully. "Someone might be tempted to have a bite of his prize winning Arabians."

"I'd forgotten he had expensive ones. Doesn't he race them or something?"

"I honestly don't know. You should ask him. I'm sure he'd be happy to tell you all about them."

"I'd never get away. He's as talkative as Eagan."

They found a vampire servant stationed at the stables. He bowed and helped them get the horses ready for a ride. Lykke mounted the steed and squealed with delight as it raced over the fields. Wind tangled her red hair and teased her cheeks pink.

After an hour, they stopped to let the horses rest and she watched as their caretaker brushed them, readying them to go back in the stalls. She remembered doing that once, back when they'd had their own stallions. Hers had been the color of caramel and named Conqueror. Not that he'd conquered much except the frozen fields around their den. He'd been a beautiful sight running free against a backdrop of white, and she'd loved to ride him, the wind in her hair, and the snowflakes stinging her skin.

She tugged on Edvard's arm. "We need to get some more horses."

He smiled indulgently. "I'll tell you the same thing I've told you before. If you're willing to clean the stable you can have as many as you like. I'm not doing it."

And there was the sticking point. When they'd last had horses, they'd also had a coven mate who didn't mind the work. Rowan had happily slopped the mess out and fed the beasts. All she'd had to do was ride Conqueror and brush him when she felt so inclined.

Like a child with a pet, whose mother did all the work.

Experience had taught her there was no point in pressing the discussion, so she took his hand and tugged him back toward the house. As they passed a large garage, she noticed an RV camper parked behind it.

"Look at that. Do you think someone drove all the way here?"

He motioned to the plates. "No. It's a rental."

"Oh." She'd had a romantic notion of the American road trip, like the TV showed, but it disappeared in a puff of reality. "Why would they rent a motor home?"

"I don't know. Maybe in case things got too crowded in the house."

She dropped his hand and moved closer to it, craning her neck and trying to see in the windows. "I've never been in one. Have you?"

"Obviously not, darling."

She motioned away his amused sarcasm as she crept forward. "I wonder if it's locked." She tried the door and deflated. "Oh. It is."

Something banged inside and she jumped back with a gasp. Her fear faded and she stifled a giggle. "That scared me."

"It should. You were breaking into their camper."

"I wasn't going to break in. I was only going to peek inside if the door was open. You notice that since it's locked I'm leaving it alone."

"You're leaving it alone because you think the owner is inside." He smirked. "Come on before you end up in a fight."

She gave the vehicle a final wistful look and abandoned it. "I wouldn't end up in a fight. I'm not that violent."

"No, but whoever is inside, doing whatever it is they don't want anyone to know about, might be."

Lykke stopped walking to stare. "Oh! You mean that they... You think they're..."

"Having a secret rendezvous? It's a strong possibility, dear."

As they walked towards the house, she turned the possibility over in her mind. Who could be in it? Were they really making love, and if so were they cheating on their mates? She tried to think who she'd seen without their significant others, but couldn't come up with anyone.

Back in the house, they headed to their rooms to change out of clothes that smelled like horse. Lykke took a quick bath, and suggested Edvard do the same, but he refused. "No one is going to be close enough to smell me."

"If you say so. I thought we might look for Zarra if you're finished. It was my suggestion to invite her, so I think I should at least say hello."

"I suppose," he said unenthusiastically.

"You've never met her. You might like her."

A servant in the hallway directed them to Zarra's room, but a knock on the door yielded no answer. Lykke pressed her ear to the wood and listened for any signs of life.

"And?" Edvard asked.

"And nothing. She must be out. Perhaps with Acwellen again. Good for her."

"Or she might be hiding in the bathtub."

Lykke blinked at him. "Why would anyone do that?"

"To get away from busybodies." His laugh took some of the sting out of his words. "Let's go downstairs and see if we can't find someone who actually wants to talk to us."

On the ground floor, they ran in Mōngkedai and a young Chinese vampiress. She wore a modern dress and played on some kind of electronic device.

The round faced vampire smiled and stepped closer. His greeting morphed into a chuckle, and he said. "You smell like horse."

Lykke stopped from saying that she'd told him so.

"It's your imagination," Edvard replied breezily.

The Mongolian vampire leaned closer. "No, it's not. You smell like horse."

Without looking up from her device, the girl said, "He's right. You smell like a barn."

Mōngkedai smiled. "This is my daughter Yin. Yin, this is Lykke and her horse-smelling lover Edvard."

The girl glanced up from the screen. "Nice to meet you."

"Yin."

Mōngkedai's voice held a warning and, with a sigh, the girl put her device away and offered her hand. "It is lovely to meet you."

Lykke shook it and smiled. "And you. Your dress is very...fashionable." Or at least she thought it was. It reminded her of the television commercials.

"We went shopping in Tokyo before we came. Are you interested in fashion?"

Lykke gave an uncomfortable chuckle. "Sadly, no. I'm a bit out of things."

“That seems to be the general consensus around here. Everyone’s stuck in some other decade.”
Möngkedai smiled. “You’ll have to excuse her, she’s young.”

“There’s nothing wrong with youth or enthusiasm,” Lykke replied.

Edvard took Lykke’s hand and gently tugged her back a step. “She should enjoy it while she has it. You will pardon us?”

They said their goodbyes and Edvard pulled her away. “There’s a reason I like to hide from the modern world. It’s vapid.”

“I don’t think she’s worse than the others here.”

“I know. That’s why I avoid civilization all together.”

“Except Andrei’s parties?”

He smiled. “Except Andrei’s’ parties. It’s good to meet everyone and remind yourself why you spend the rest of the time avoiding them.”

“So you come to remind yourself that you don’t like any of them?”

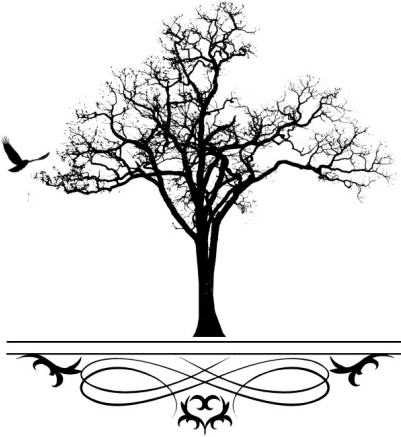
“Precisely, my dear. Otherwise I start to get lonely and think maybe I’ve judged them too harshly, that they’re really not bad vampires at all, and I forget all the reasons they annoy me. Then we come to a party and I instantly remember all their irritating faults and look forward to leaving again.”

“You, sir, are insane.”

“And you love me that way.”

Though she wanted to, she couldn’t deny it.





Jome

April 20th

Jome checked his watch. It was after midnight already. He'd meant to arrive yesterday, but a delay had set them back and now they were crawling in at nearly the last minute. Which was ridiculous since they probably lived closer than anyone else.

He wished he could blame his coven mate Yuki for it. It was standard to blame the woman for taking too long to pack, or for not being able to make up her mind about what to wear, but he couldn't. Not if he was honest. Yuki was too no-nonsense to waver on her fashion choices. She had a collection of black and white pieces, and a small handful of red or orange clothing that she mixed and matched effortlessly. With her naturally creamy skin, delicately slanting eyes, and shiny black hair she always looked elegant – even when she didn't try.

On the other hand, he had dirty blonde hair that, unless he gelled it into place, curled out at all angles. He wasn't fat, but he certainly wasn't thin enough for modern designs; the suits and shirts didn't fall from his shoulders the way they were supposed to, and forget about skinny jeans. Sometimes he despaired of keeping up with modern times and thought it might be better to bury his head in the sand circa 1830 like so many of the others had.

The mansion's double doors opened and Jome walked through, Yuki on his heels. The scene was a chaos that pulled him to a stop. Trunks were open, and vampires dressed in black sorted through them. A man with dark hair waved the newcomers to a stop and approached, paper in hand. As he drew close, Jome recognized the medallion around his neck; he was an Executioner from the United States.

"What in the world?" he whispered to Yuki. "You don't think something exciting's happened and we missed it already? Oh if we did I'm going to be furious."

Her reply was dry, "At who? You're the one who took forever."

Before he could comment, the Executioner arrived and introduced himself as Jamie. "Andrei has requested we provide security."

The spiel went on and involved them checking everyone's luggage. Jome was tempted to throw a fit, but if Andrei had requested it there must be a reason. Did he know something no one else did? Had there been some kind of threat? There'd been terrorist attacks in Asia a couple of months ago, and he'd heard that just last month a famous park in China was nearly destroyed. Did Andrei expect something like that to happen there?

When they were cleared, they were shown to their suites. Jome followed the servant and asked casually, "Is Andrei expecting trouble?"

"I couldn't say, sir."

"He must have some reason to call in The Guild."

"I couldn't say, sir."

Jome gave up, but as soon as his luggage was settled he popped back out of his room and down the stairs in search of answers. In the library he found Xenon, browsing through the books.

"Hello! It's been a long time!"

Xenon turned, blinked, and then gave a nod of acknowledgement. "Greetings...Jome, isn't it?"

"Yes. It's been a bit since you've come to one of these. Two hundred years, I think?"

"Yes, I believe so. It was when I last changed my name. How have you been?"

"We've been all right. We relocated to Saskatchewan, and I've had some changes to the coven, vampires in, vampires out, you know how it goes. I brought Yuki with me this year. We're not an item by any stretch, but it's been a few parties since she's gotten to come. Who did you bring?"

"No one. I've split with my coven and have been enjoying the solitude."

"Really?" Jome's interest was piqued. "Did you just get tired of them?"

"We had different life philosophies."

Jome waited hopefully, but no more details came, so instead he commented, "I wonder what the point of all this security is. Are Executioners really necessary?"

"Andrei must believe so."

Jome realized he wasn't going to get anywhere; it was a bit like talking to Yuki. Simple, straight forward answers that gave away very little. It wasn't the sort of conversation he was looking for.

Getting away from the vampire wasn't hard, a quick goodbye did it, and Jome wandered out in search of someone more talkative.

Preferably who knows what's going on.

In the corridor he ran into Petta, Rangvald's petite mate. It was none of his business who the vampire wanted to consort with, but really, she looked twelve. Though since he didn't see the vampire anywhere, maybe he'd finally realized how bad it looked.

He greeted her and asked where her mate had wandered off to.

"Rangvald is at the shooting range with some of the others."

So he hadn't broken up with her. Oh well. "Getting ready to hunt, are they?"

"There's a hunt scheduled in, though I don't know when."

Jome didn't care about hunting, or shooting, so he swung the topic around to something more interesting. "I'm surprised you're not out there with him."

"Actually, I'm looking for Grimald. Have you seen him?"

Grimald? Didn't Rangvald look old enough for her? What could she possibly want with a graying old man? "I'm sorry, but I haven't. Are you sure he's arrived? He's notorious for being late."

"That's true." She tugged at her hair, a nervous habit that made her look even more juvenile.

Jome gave her a warm smile. "If I see him I'd be happy to pass on a message."

She hesitated, then looked around, as though checking for eavesdroppers. "Only if you promise not to tell Rangvald."

And with that things got twice as interesting. "Of course not. My lips are sealed."

She relaxed a little. "Rangvald's birthday is the day after the party ends. I thought it might be fun to organize something for it. Of course I know almost everyone is leaving that day, but I thought we could do something before the mass exodus."

Sure she did. "What a wonderful idea, but why do you need Grimald for it?"

"He and Rangvald are friends, and he enjoys these kinds of things. I thought he'd like to help me organize it."

It was the flimsiest excuse he'd ever heard. He concentrated on her thoughts, trying to pick up what he could without prying, but all she was thinking about was the party and the time, and whether Rangvald liked her new blouse.

Of course she's hiding thoughts of a tryst. She knows I'm a mind reader.

"If I see Grimald I'll be sure to tell him."

"Thanks so much." Petta beamed and, after polite goodbyes, they went their separate ways.

Jome snickered quietly to himself. Who did she think she was fooling? Grimald organizing a birthday party? Really? The old codger was better at organizing a funeral than a celebration!

He suddenly realized that he'd been so caught up in the intrigue of her affair that he hadn't bothered to pry about the security. *Oh well, I doubt she knew anything, anyway.*

In a green room, a blonde and a brunette sat near a window chatting. The brunette was on the plump side with midnight eyes and a youthful face, while the blonde looked slightly older; mid to late thirties, perhaps. Her hair was piled on her head and she wore a sweater that hugged her generous curves. He didn't recognize them, and decided they were either in Andrei's coven, or else some of the new guests.

Either way they might be interesting.

"Hello, ladies. I don't believe I've had the pleasure."

They looked at him, and the blonde smiled sweetly. "I'm Trivila, and this is Marna. We're members of Andrei's coven. You?"

"Jome, and I'm a member of my own."

Trivila took his offered hand and held onto it longer than necessary. "Your own coven? How exciting?"

"Not really so much exciting as convenient." He returned her smile. "It looks like there's going to be quite a party."

"Oh yes, it does," Trivila agreed.

"I can't help but wonder at all the security."

The blonde laughed. "You're not the first to wonder about it. Andrei is worried about The Children of Shadows."

Jome gave a satisfied nod. He'd been right. As usual. "That's what I thought." Now on to his next question. "I found the guest list interesting this year."

Trivila leaned forward a little, and Jome noticed the stretch of her sweater over her breasts. "Yes. I heard that attendance was down, and Andrei believed inviting some new vampires would help. I wouldn't know, I wasn't here for the last one."

She did seem very young, where immortality was concerned. "More's the pity. If you had been, attendance would have surely improved."

Trivila giggled and Marna rolled her eyes and asked, "Where's your mate?"

"I don't have one," Jome replied.

Trivila's smile grew, as did Marna's impatience. She stood and gave Trivila an aggravated look. "I suppose I'll see you later."

She marched off and Trivila slipped to her feet. "That was abrupt."

"I noticed." Jome eyed the blonde warily. Her surface thoughts were giggly and slightly erotic, and he tried to decide which he was most interested in; her or information.

"She gets impatient," Trivila explained. "Her mate left two years ago and she hasn't gotten over it."

"It's always hard, especially if they were together for any length of time."

Trivila shrugged. "I suppose. I was happy to get rid of my husband when immortality found me. But anyone would be glad to lose him."

Jome saw a flash of a fleshy man in an undershirt, whiskers on his neck and a beer bottle in his hand. Though he disconnected with the memory quickly, he couldn't blame her for wanting to get away from him.

"What about you?" she asked. "Are you nursing a broken heart?"

The question was more direct than he was used to. "No, not at all. My last mate left twenty years ago, after a mutual agreement."

"Did you just get tired of one another, or was there something juicy and exciting?"

Jome struggled for an answer. "I-I suppose we just grew bored." There hadn't been an exciting scene – no tears or screaming or throwing things. That had happened years before and at the end they'd settled into a comfortable pattern of indifference that fizzled into nothing. He still remembered when Evelyn had walked into the study, looked him over and said, "I think I'm going to leave."

He was elbow deep in finances, papers stacked everywhere and bank books open on the desk.
“Are you going anywhere in particular?”

“I thought Italy could be fun.”

He hadn’t bothered to look up. “I’m not sure we have enough at present to pay for it. The stocks took a hit and I’m trying to move funds around now.”

She cleared her throat. “You misunderstand. I meant I would go alone. With my own money.”

“That’s all well and good, but I don’t think you have enough either.” He tugged out her bankbook and flipped pages. “Perhaps if you would settle for something modest.”

“I’m going to stay with Marguerite’s coven.”

“In that case-”

“And I’m not coming back.”

And that was when he got it. “Oh. I see. Do you need help packing?”

“No. I think I have it handled.”

“All right. Safe travels then.”

She hung on the door a second, as if waiting for him to say something else, but there wasn’t anything to say. Finally, she said softly, “Take care, Jome.”

“You, too, dear.”

And that was the last he’d seen of her. One of the coven members came to tell him Evelyn was leaving, but he hadn’t bothered to go have a final goodbye. There was no point.

Trivila’s voice brought him back to the present. “There seems to be a lot of that; just getting bored. I find it interesting that anyone could ever think being alive was dull.”

“You must be very young,” Jome responded, only half paying attention.

“By your standards I am, I suppose. How old are you?”

It wasn’t the kind of question one just flat out asked, but he found himself answering it anyway, “I was turned in 1327.”

“Wow! That was a long time ago. Do you smoke?”

He wasn’t sure what smoking had to do with anything. “Cigars now and then.”

“Oh good. Let’s nip out and have one, shall we?” She grabbed his arm and propelled him down the hall. He didn’t actually have a cigar on him, and anyway they weren’t the sort of thing one “nipped out” for. They were something you enjoyed after dinner in a lounge full of men talking about boring wars and even more boring hunts.

They emerged outside to find heavy clouds in the distance. Jome could smell the rain coming and estimated it would be pouring by sunrise.

“Doesn’t that smell wonderful?” Trivial asked and took a deep lungful of air. “I love when it rains.”

Jome had never been one for excessive moisture. It did terrible things to his hair and made his clothes stick to him. Nothing was more uncomfortable than heavy, damp, sticky clothes.

He said so, and Trivila gave a throaty laugh. “In that case you could always take them off.”

His mouth opened, a reply ready about the absurdity of her suggestion, when she pounced. She knocked him back against the rough wall of the house, grinding her body against his so that her soft breasts squashed into a mass against his chest. “There’s no one out here,” she whispered. “We could try a test run.”

A test run of what? Taking off his clothing? *No. Just...just no.* He put his hands on her shoulders, to push her away, when her ruby painted lips found the sensitive spot on his neck. He caught his breath and stiffened as she sucked gently, then teased it with her tongue. One red nailed hand dropped and wedged between his legs. Expertly she plucked his trousers open and then her fingers snaked inside and –

“Oh, good lord!”

She laughed softly against his skin. “You like that, don’t you? When was the last time you had a lover do that? They’re too busy worrying about just biting and drinking, no interest in any of the other parts. But God gave them to us for a reason, and it’s more fun if you pay attention to them.”

Before he could formulate a reply she dropped to her knees in front of him. By the time he figured out what she was doing, she'd already wrapped her mouth around his hardening shaft. He slumped back against the building, gasping as she worked on him in long slow strokes. She was right, he couldn't think of the last time anyone had done this. Evelyn certainly hadn't; not once. Their lovemaking had been more vampire-traditional. A kiss, a touch, a bite. After all, it was all about the blood, so why bother getting messy when it wasn't necessary?

Except...Except...

His brain couldn't form coherent thoughts. He watched Trivila pull back and swirl her tongue along his length and then, for a terrified second, he realized what she was going to do.

"No-"

His cry cut off as she bit him. There. The pain was excruciating, but in a second it was replaced with euphoria. Her hands snaked up and down his legs, stroking, touching, tickling, while she wrapped around his mind like the slow twist of a cherry stem. He gasped, palms pressed flat against the stone, desperate for the climax.

It came in a burst of crimson and he slouched back panting. Trivila fastened his pants and stood slowly, letting her breasts brush him all the way up. Her plump lips shimmered with the moisture of his blood.

She leaned close, her breath tickling his ear. "I bet you feel better."

And he did. He felt better. Much better. But at the same time he was terrified. That she could knock him into a wall and do that before he could even get a word out...what kind of vampiress was she? A cupid? Oh God, he wasn't going to get mixed up with that! And even if she wasn't, even if she was something else, he didn't need this kind of thing. What if someone had come out and seen them like that? Seen her mouth around his...It was too much to think about.

She pressed a laughing kiss to his ear, then moved back and lit a cigarette. He watched the thin stream of smoke leave her lips, mesmerized as his brain shuffled backwards to a moment before when something else had been between them.

"Are you all right? You seem shell shocked."

"I-I'm fine." He said quickly. He needed to get ahold of himself before he got caught in something. "I was just...uh..."

"Thinking you needed to go?" she asked with a knowing smirk. "It's all right. I did that because I wanted to. I enjoy it."

"Of-of course." He didn't know what else to say, and he didn't like that. "But, yes, I, uh, I need to..."

"All right. Maybe I'll see you later." She winked and made a show of slowly sucking from the cigarette, then releasing the smoke. "Have a good night."

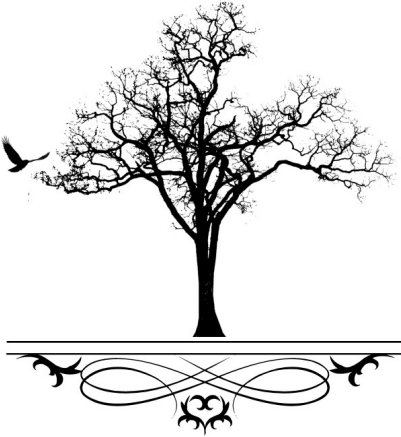
"Yes...you-you too." He felt something more should be said, but didn't know what, so he did the only thing he could think of.

He fled.

Back in the house he could hear her laughter, and he chanced a peek out the window to see her wandering away, as if for a stroll. For a moment his brain admired the way her hips swayed before he managed to rein it in. He certainly didn't want mixed up with a woman like that. She was uncouth, uncivilized, far too young, and obviously didn't understand how things were done.

But damn she had a sexy mouth.





Ren

April 20th

Ren turned off the shower and stepped out of the tub. The steam on the mirror reminded him of fog. Without contrast, his snow colored hair and skin were lost in it. Only his bright blue eyes stood out in smeary spots of color.

He toweled his thin body and pulled on his pajamas. From habit he tidied his mess; picked up the towels, wrung out his rag, hung up his clothes, straightened the thick rug. When he was finished it was only the fog on the mirror and moisture in the tub that said he'd ever been there.

Invisibility was something he'd learned long ago. The memories were as hard to see as his reflection in the mirror, but the feelings were still there. He and his twin brother Tol had been born in the early 1600s in Lower Austria. Some said it was a beautiful time to be alive, and a beautiful place, but those who said that didn't look like he did.

Ren didn't know his mother, had never seen her face, and had long ago given up imagining it. She'd deposited her twin infants in the baby hatch of the church. No one knew what to do with the snow white pair, and it was Sister Mary who declared their odd appearance was a miracle of God rather than the mark of a demon.

Ren had a few memories from that time, all colored golden like the sun slanting in the windows, and scented with the heavy smell of flowers in Sister Mary's garden. She'd given them names from the holy book, he Andrew and his brother Peter – or had it been the other way around? She fed them, clothed them, taught them to read and to write, and to recite.

Though she was not affectionate, she preached love to them; love for everyone that God had made – the wretched, and the poor, and the sick, and even the beautiful in their stone castles. She taught them right from wrong, good from bad, and sang them to sleep with hymns. Despite the animosity of the rest of the world, with her they knew they were safe.

Then Sister Mary got sick. Some said it was proof of their demonic parentage, that they had cursed her, or that their very presence brought evil. He remembered kneeling with his brother by her bed, listening to the dry rattle of her breath, and praying to an unseen God to save her.

It was raining the day she died, and from that moment on his memories were colored the gray of overcast clouds. Without Sister Mary's protection they were turned out. At ten years old they struggled to fit into a world rife with superstition. Their pale skin burned easily, and their white hair earned them scorn.

They were thirteen when Salile found them in the mud, dirt clumped in their hair, their clothes ragged. He remembered her strange slick smile. Something about it and her pointed teeth sent a shiver up his spine and he'd gripped his brother tighter, as though they'd finally found the demon the sisters were so afraid of.

But demon or angel, Salile was a better option than the streets. She praised their odd coloring, admired their bright eyes, and invited them home. Her cottage was outside of the town, near a stream and thick trees. She bid them bathe in the water and gave them clothes that were too large. Dressed and cleaned, she brought them inside and made them beds before the fire.

“You must be tired, my children. Rest now. When the moon rises tomorrow I will see you again.”

As she promised, she was gone when they woke. They searched the house and the woods for her, but it wasn't until dark that she appeared, laughing. “I told you I would not see you again until night. You must learn to trust and obey my words. Here. I have brought you bread.”

They ate like starving children. When they finished, she took them to the woods and taught them to look for herbs. Thanks to Sister Mary's garden, they knew some about plants already, and caught on quickly.

The first month passed this way. Though where Salile went during the day was a mystery, they soon discovered why she so carefully collected and dried herbs.

Salile was working; chopping roots, when she suddenly went stiff. She sniffed the air, then hurriedly stuffed the twins in the cupboard and bid them to be silent. A moment later, a young lady came through the door, begging for a potion to make her lover stay. Ren watched through the crack between the doors while Salile made a foul smelling brew and, in exchange for coins, sent the lady away with a bottle.

That was when Ren realized that Salile was a witch; a sorceress, a worshiper of darkness and demon magic. It went against everything Sister Mary had taught them, and Ren remembered the punch of guilt and fear. He'd gripped his brother's hand and whispered their need for escape.

“We have nowhere to go,” Tol whispered back.

“But she is evil. Sister Mary said-”

“Sister Mary said we should love everyone. Besides, do you want to go back to the streets? To be spat upon, and have rocks thrown at us? Do you want to starve again?”

And he didn't, so he stayed.

The next night, Salile gave them new names; Tol and Ren. Then she produced a dagger and took some of their blood – just a little – for “a very important spell.” When Ren asked why she needed it, she looked at him as if he was a lack wit. “The blood of an albino is powerful, child. Why else would I have saved you?”

From then on she took from them; always the same small vial. As the months passed, her customers increased. Most times they hid in the cupboard and took turns peering through the crack. The visitors spoke in half ashamed whispers, and always mentioned that so-and-so had sent them, promising results from what was the most powerful witch; the witch who used the blood of half-demon children.

More business meant more bloodletting, and soon Salile took from them twice a week or more. Ren worked up the courage to ask if they were really half-demons.

She stopped stirring to stare at him, and then she laughed. “Was your father a demon, child?”

“We don't know,” Ren admitted.

Salile went back to her work. “You are what you are. There is no point in trying to guess where you came from, or why you look as you do. Destiny will take you where you are meant to go, and that is all that matters.”

The answer wasn't comforting, but it was better than nothing. Ren often turned it over in his mind as he stood in the cupboard, waiting for the customers to leave. But one night a large well-dressed man and his guards held Ren's attention. He strode around the cottage, hands behind his back and chest puffed out. The usual shame was replaced by imperiousness.

“How can I help you?” Salile asked suspiciously.

He poked his finger into a dish and tested the texture of the herbs between his fingers. “I come for a totem, one that will guarantee my continued...good fortune.”

Salile frowned, but said, “I can make you one from-”

“No. What I want requires no making.” He moved to stand before her, at least a foot taller and twice her size.

“I don't know what-”

He grabbed her arm and bared his teeth. "I know what you have here, and I want a totem. A toe will do."

She pulled away and glared. "No. You may leave."

He slapped her hard enough to send her stumbling. At a nod from him, the guards rushed in and grabbed her, one on either side. She twisted in their grip, fangs snapping, as they pulled her upright.

The man pressed his face close to hers. "I know what you are, bride of demons! Unless you wish to burn you will give me what I want. Refuse and you and your magic children will die in the roaring flames."

He slapped her one more time, then motioned the guards to release her. "I will return tomorrow night. Have my totem ready."

He swept out of the cottage. Salile snarled after their retreating figures, hands balled into fists at her side, but after a moment her shoulders sagged and she turned towards the twins' hiding place.

"Come out, my children. We do not have much time."

Ren thought they were going to run away, instead she told them that she must take a toe from one of them. "He is cousin to the Archduke. To disobey him means death."

"But you're stronger than him," Tol said. "You could curse him."

She laughed, a strange throaty laugh that sent goosebumps up Ren's spine. "My child, there is no curse known to man or vampire that could take down a man such as that. Only an army, and that I do not have." She picked up a stick and broke it unevenly. Turning from them, she hid the bottom portion in her hand, so they appeared the same length. "We will allow fate to choose the loser."

Tol drew the shorter piece. Salile poured a calming potion down him, then ordered Ren to hold him. Tol stayed still, heavy eyes nearly closed, until the knife touched his skin. His body went rigid and his eyes bulged open. Ren struggled to hold him as he wriggled. Salile shouted foreign words and hacked at his toe. Tol screamed and kicked, and finally Ren threw himself on top of his brother, tears in his eyes as he forced him still.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

Tol only screamed in reply.

When the toe was removed, Salile bid Ren hold a cloth to the gushing wound, then she bit into her own arm. Ren watched, horrified, as crimson blood bubbled to the surface. Thinking it some penance rite, he started to speak, but she shoved the wound between Tol's lips. "Drink, child, and be healed."

To Ren's surprise, Tol fastened on and sucked the blood from her. She gave him a moment or two, then peeled him loose.

"That's enough. Ren, take the bandages away."

With disbelief he pulled the cloth back to see that the wound was now covered with raw pink skin, as though half healed. He looked to the woman with a mixture of terror and wonder. "Magic."

"Just as they believe your blood has power, so does mine." She pressed a hand to her arm until the bleeding stopped. "Now we must prepare this."

The toe was to be dried over the fire, then wrapped in linen and at last placed in a leather pouch with spices. While Salile worked, Ren helped his brother to stand, and walk. They both stared at his marred foot. With the missing toe it was like a gap-toothed smile.

The Archduke's cousin returned as promised. He ripped the bag open, smiled at the withered toe, and stuffed it back again. "You have done well, witch. You will be spared."

Salile stood, her shoulder's tight. "There is a matter of payment."

The man smirked. "The payment is your life. Be silent or I will take it back."

He left, the guards on his heels. Salile cursed his presence, then turned back to her work.

"Why don't we leave?" Ren asked.

"Where would we go?" Salile snapped. "There are territories you do not understand, child, and to invade one is worth more than our lives. We have no coven."

"Is a coven a group of witches?" Tol asked.

She snickered. "You might see it that way."

Tol hesitated. "Could we become witches, too?"

Salile stopped her work to stare at him. Then she shook her head and turned back to it. "You are too young. When you are older, perhaps."

Time slipped past. Customers came. Salile took the twin's blood. They grew. When they were sixteen the Archduke's cousin returned like thunder. They watched from the cupboard, now smaller than it had once seemed, as he postured and circled, his face clouded.

At last he stopped before Salile and flung the leather bag at her feet. "Your totem has lost its potency, witch. You will give me a new one."

"I don't have one to give."

He grabbed her by the throat. "Do not lie to me! Your magic children are still here. People speak of them and the power of your brews. Give me what I desire, or I will take it myself. Rather than a toe I will have a leg!"

He threw her aside and strode out the door. Salile picked herself up, and cursed foreign words of fury. Tol and Ren climbed out of the cupboard and Ren forced the words out. "Take mine."

Salile eyed him carefully. "Are you sure?"

He nodded. "Then Tol and I will match once more."

It was Tol's turn to hold him down while she cut the toe free, and then he held the cloth as she bit her arm and shoved it into Ren's mouth. He should have been repulsed, but the flavor was intoxicating, and he greedily took what he could before she pulled away.

The Archduke's cousin came and took the bag, and again he offered no payment except their lives. Salile snarled after him, and promised Tol and Ren that when they were older she would indoctrinate them in the ways of her magic. "Together we will overpower them and string his innards from one end of the forest to the other."

But she never got the chance

It was a night nearly three years later when *they* came. Ren mended clothing while Tol ground herbs. Salile suddenly grabbed him and threw him towards the cupboard. "Inside. Both of you. Don't make a sound."

They did as she ordered and had barely pulled the cupboard shut when the cottage door burst open. Three women walked through, dark hair unbound and eyes burning like dark stars. Long scarlet cloaks trailed after them.

They stopped before Salile and the one in the center said silkily, "Greetings, Salile. The stories of your miracles have reached Bachius' ears. We have come for the children with the magic blood."

Salile's back stayed straight. "You have not been invited. Leave now or I will send the demons of hell after you."

The woman's laugh tinkled like silver bells. "I am a demon of hell."

She lunged at Salile, but her prey dodged away, knocking over a rack of vials. The woman nodded to her companions and then, like magic, they vanished into thin air, only to reappear next to Salile. The woman wrenched Salile's arm behind her back and growled, snapping pointed teeth in her face. "You have shielded them, but I will find them, and Bachius will drink from them."

Salile screamed a mesh of foreign words. She slashed at her attacker. Claw-like fingernails left a bloody trail down her face. The woman flinched away, furious, and the other two leapt in, knocking Salile to the floor. Their leader recovered from her shock and, before Salile had time to move, snapped her neck.

The woman dropped Salile's limp body to the floor, then the three moved through the cottage, ripping open cabinets and throwing aside furniture. At last they came to the twins' hiding place.

She stared into the cupboard. "So her stories are true." She grabbed Ren and, with a cry, Tol bit her hand and kicked at her.

The woman snarled and hauled them out by their hair. Angry eyes glowed as she looked them over. "You will learn respect!"

The women dragged them out of the cottage. A carriage waited on the edge of the woods and they were forced inside.

"Where are you taking us?" Tol demanded.

One of the women slapped him hard enough to leave blood trailing from the corner of his mouth; bright red against the white of his skin. "You speak when you are told, and not before."

She banged on the roof of the carriage. The driver slapped the horses and they rumbled off into the night, leaving the cottage and Salile's broken body behind.

The women bound them with ropes for much of the journey. When they stopped at the foot of a mountain they were released, but there was no relief.

"You will climb," the woman ordered. "If one of you does not cooperate, I will kill the other. Your brother's life is in your hands."

Ren remembered the taste of fear and the cold. Such cold as he had never known. His feet went numb. His face and hands burned, and then also lost feeling. His teeth chattered and he shook until he could hardly stay upright, but the women drove them on up slippery frozen slopes to reach a collection of wooden buildings. They were forced into the largest, and shoved across a rough floor to fall to their hands and knees before a mountain of a man.

Bachius sat on a throne. His beard and hair were thick and dark, and his eyes overshadowed by thick brows. He looked them over with surprise and stood, stretching on and on into a monster twice the size of the Archduke's cousin.

"You found them. Well done." He moved before their trembling forms and forced Ren to look at him. "Your blood is said to hold unimaginable powers. Shall we see if it is true?"

He lifted Ren in the air, so that his feet dangled. He shivered too hard to fight, and could only stare dully as the man's lips drew back from his pointed teeth.

Pain radiated through him as the man tore into his neck. He felt the warm moisture of his own blood on his skin. In the distance he heard Tol screaming, but he knew there was nothing he could do, nothing either of them could do.

It wasn't Bachius who gave them his blood, though he claimed them as his fledglings. That night was the worst Ren had ever known. He and Tol curled together, gasping and crying out as death spasms overtook them. When the thirst came, the women threw a child to them. Out of their minds with need, they ripped the boy to shreds and lapped his blood.

And that was how they became immortal. Bachius held them to a blood debt for nearly two hundred years before he turned them free. With nowhere to go, they made their way back to the town of their birth. Salile's cottage was gone, but rumors said she had not died. She'd lived on for more than fifty years before she disappeared.

Though they were vampires, their appearance made it hard to blend in. Mortal and immortal alike sneered at them, and it was only when they hid in the shadows, alone, that they found peace.

And then they met Kali.

As Salile had done so long ago, Kali stroked their hair, and praised their beauty. "Not children, but not men, so perfectly frozen in transition. Come with me, and you will never need to hide again, never need to fear the taunts and violence. I will protect you."

And she had. She'd done everything she promised and more, earning Tol and Ren's loyalty in a way no one else ever had. With Kali's help they found Salile, who was indeed alive. The woman was surprised to see them, but offered no apology for their fate. "Destiny will do as it chooses."

Ren shook away the memories to exit the bathroom. The bedroom light was off and Tol was already in bed. Ren hung his clothes in the wardrobe, then crept across the soft carpet to take his place on the other side.

Tol yawned loudly and shifted to fluff a pillow. "Good night brother."

"Good night," Ren returned.

"Rest well. Kali has promised we will find much excitement at this year's party."

"Yes. I wonder what it will be?"

But neither had the answer. Just as Salile said, destiny, fate, God - whatever name she wanted to give it - it, and it alone propelled one down a path they were powerless to deviate from. He and Tol's journey had been strange; crowded with unexpected meetings, moments of pain, of sorrow, and of joy. Ren could only wonder what stood around the next corner, unseen and unexpected.

Hopefully it lived up to all the expectation.



THE STORY CONTINUES IN *MASQUE OF THE VAMPIRE*.

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About the Author

Joleene Naylor is the author of the glitter-less *Amaranthine* series, a world where vampires aren't for children. As a compliment to the novel series, she has also written several short story collections and the *Amaranthine Files* encyclopedia..

In what little time is left she watches anime and updates her blogs, all from a crooked Victorian house in Villisca, Iowa. Between her husband and her pets, she is never lonely, and should she ever disappear one might look for her on a beach in Tahiti, sipping a tropical drink and wearing a disguise.

Ramblings from the Darkness at www.JoleeneNaylor.com
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