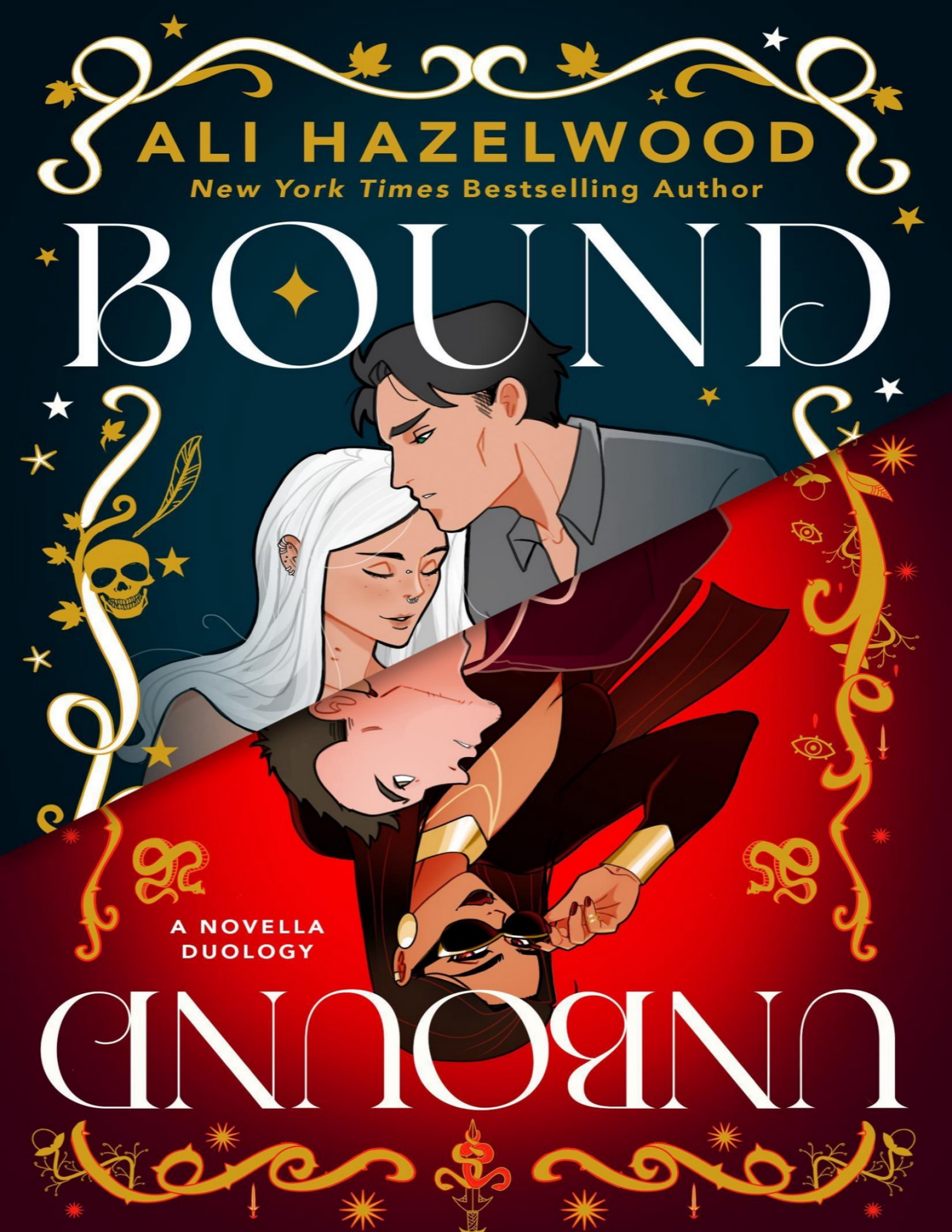
ALI HAZELWOOD

New York Times Bestselling Author

BOUND



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UNBOUND

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"Another Hazelwood home run."

—*People* on *Bride*

"A literary breakthrough…. *The Love Hypothesis* is a self-assured debut, and we hypothesize it's just the first bit of greatness we'll see from an author who somehow has the audacity to be both an academic powerhouse and [a] divinely talented novelist."

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"*Bride* is a delight! Passionate and witty and primal in its intensity, Ali Hazelwood's paranormal debut introduces a world as intriguing as its characters. I absolutely adored this read."

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Love, Theoretically
Bride
Not in Love
Deep End
Problematic Summer Romance
Mate

ANTHOLOGIES

Loathe to Love You
Bound/Unbound

NOVELLAS

Under One Roof
Stuck with You
Below Zero
Cruel Winter with You
Two Can Play
Hot for Slayer
First

YOUNG ADULT NOVELS

Check & Mate



BOUND AND UNBOUND

ALI HAZELWOOD

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CONTENTS

Bound

- Chapter 1
- Chapter 2
- Chapter 3
- Chapter 4
- Chapter 5
- Chapter 6
- Chapter 7
- Chapter 8
- Chapter 9
- Chapter 10
- Epilogue

Unbound

- Chapter 1
- Chapter 2
- Chapter 3
- Chapter 4
- Chapter 5
- Chapter 6
- Chapter 7
- Chapter 8

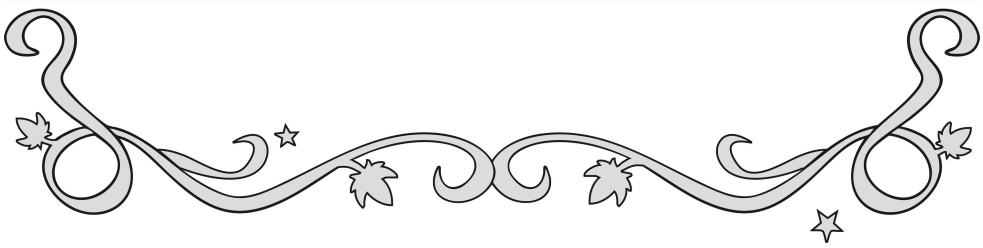
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Epilogue

Acknowledgments
About the Author

BOUND



CHAPTER 1



AS FOND OF AND CONSUMED BY MY OWN STORY AS I AM, I must admit that it's not too different from most others. Stories are stories, with their beginnings, trappings of middles, and nice, tidy conclusions; I've told so many, it should be second nature to grab a fountain pen, a stack of homemade paper, and add mine to the collection. But here I am, hesitating, because I cannot make up my mind on where to start.

A friend suggested that I begin with the summer prior to the final year of my PhD at Rockhaven University, a few months before I died. By then I had already been in trouble for quite a while, and my fate was decided, even though I was not yet aware of it. But I'm not convinced. It seems too bold a choice, starting in medias res, all the more because the first lines of this tale were written when I was still an elfin kid with oddly colored hair and a chewing gum addiction.

Back then, my main pastime was observing an elderly neighbor dip Kolinsky sable-hair brushes into vintage tins of watercolors. "You are lucky," Grace would say in her peeved, cigarette-rough voice, never glancing up from her latest piece. "That your no-good, credit card–skimming father got out of the clink just before your no-good, fake charity–driving mother went back in. Or you'd be in some foster home down in Tullahoma by now, just you and a box of Crayola.

C'mere, kid. I'm gonna show you why this layering I just did turned out to be such crap."

I was never a devoted wishful thinker. I refused then, as I do now, to claim that Grace's insistence on teaching me the ins and outs of craquelure, or how to properly clean mildew from leather binding, were vocabulary words in her highly individualized love language. Still, if I'm going to tell my story, she should get some credit for being the first to set me on the path of those who appreciate a certain kind of beauty. So should the judge who made it clear that his eyes were on me, and that they were going to stay fixed right there for the foreseeable future—unless, of course, I cleaned up my act, boosted my grades, and sent out those university applications, stat. Honorable mentions: the Chemistry of Conservation class I chose to take in my second year of college because it was the only non–eight a.m. option; the undergraduate advisor who suggested that if *this medieval art stuff* was *really* my thing, he might have a friend at some fancy university up north; the way time and space always seemed to disappear whenever the world shrank to something consumable through my eyes and my hands; that letter Grace left for me to read after she was gone, the handwriting as jagged and sparse as her heart. *I don't have much, but it should be enough for a U-Haul. Now get the hell out of this shithole.*

So, that's how my story started. There were lots of beginnings, but they coalesced into a perfect storm a few weeks into my first year of grad school, when Mortimer "Don't Call Me Morty" McManaman pulled his best trick out of a top hat and convinced Roxanne, my landlady, to go out with him.

Mortimer was a floppy-haired rich boy who loved to introduce himself as a *fine-arts connoisseur*, owned polos in every color of the rainbow, and repeatedly failed at growing an authoritative mustache. Not very likable, although he tried very hard. Sometimes I felt bad for him, and maybe Roxanne did, too. Or maybe Mortimer took

advantage of her rock-bottom phase. She was, after all, recently separated. Despite her reputation as one of the top gemstone experts in New England, her ability to take commissions had been severely curtailed by having to shoulder most of the care for Rorie, her toddler daughter. The ongoing divorce proceedings had been a financial hit, and desperate people tend to do desperate things. Dating a questionable guy was not qualitatively different from plucking a doctoral student from Craigslist and renting her out one's spare bedroom.

Mortimer may have been less threatening than Roxanne's lying, cheating ex, but they were still unlikely to have a future, especially after he started addressing her as *kitten* halfway through their first date and never wised up enough to stop. She knew it. I knew it. Judging by the sheer number of increasingly desperate presents that cluttered our home, Mortimer knew it, too. And yet, he clung fiercely to the idea that she might be the one. He'd come over once a week, or whenever Rorie was with Roxanne's ex for the night. He'd fuss with his hair in the entrance mirror and then lay his offerings at the altar of Roxanne's spin-sculpted body: imported coffee beans, wine that didn't live in a box, trays of assorted several-dollars-apiece pralines.

And, one fateful night, a first UK edition of *Dracula* by Bram Stoker.

This one, in all fairness, wasn't a gift, more like show-and-tell. "We just got it in today," Mortimer said, taking the book out of a leather briefcase and setting it on the table. The McManaman family was based in Boston, but they owned a local antique dealer of middling reputation here in Vermont, and Mortimer had recently gone on a break from his main gig—recommending local breweries and golf courses, unprompted—to take over the business. "Isn't it stunning?"

Roxanne gasped. "Oh my god." She reached out, maybe to trace the gilt-and-red lettering on the cover, but thought better of it and

snatched her hand back. "This is *incredible*. Look at the way the binding is sewn."

"I know." Mortimer smiled smugly. "Over a century ago, at some point in 1897, some guy sat in front of a fireplace to smoke his pipe and read this book. And now it's in your kitchen. Can you believe that?"

"No," I said. Which made Roxanne and Mortimer look up at me from across the table with surprise and irritation respectively.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

I glanced down at the panini press I'd pilfered from my last stint at the Costco deli, already regretting speaking up. "I think it might be a forgery," I said, as neutrally as I could—which was a lie. I was, in fact, dead certain. But despite my parents' repeated accusations, I did not *enjoy* disappointing people.

"I mean, you can *think* that the Earth is flat and clouds are made of marshmallows." Mortimer's tone was the usual—artificially affable—but his eyes narrowed. "That doesn't make any of it *true*."

"No, it doesn't." I longingly contemplated a world in which I could slip onto the balcony to eat my grilled cheese and mind my business, forgetting all about this conversation. But would it not have been a careless, selfish thing to do? If I said nothing, Mortimer was going to try to sell the book for one hundred grand. Either his reputation or his rap sheet was going to take a hit.

Cruel to be kind, and all that.

"It doesn't," I repeated. "However—may I?" I crossed the room to pick up the tome and flapped it open, ignoring Mortimer's darkening expression. "See here, the way the endpapers are attached? Can't be sure, of course"—I *could*—"but it suggests a more recent gluing technique than the ones used in the late 1800s. The regularity of the sewing patterns, the paper…This pulping is not Victorian, not to mention how unusually crisp some of this lettering looks, and…Well." I returned the book to the briefcase, feeling a

touch sorry for Mortimer. "All the stuff I just listed? *That* makes it true."

"Excuse me? What— How would you even know about fucking Victorian pulping?" He laughed nervously.

"Vero's getting her PhD in art history," Roxanne told him, clearly irritated on my behalf. "And her grandma did restorations. You didn't say she also did books, Vero."

Grace would rather have chewed on a palette knife than be referred to as someone's grandma, but I had little experience discussing my past with others, and didn't know how else to explain her role in it. Grad school was a fresh turn in the winding road of my life—starting anew, making friends, building community, that kind of stuff—and I was willing to give it all a try. Still, some abridging seemed wise. "She did mostly books, actually. Lots of demand."

That was when Mortimer's eyes settled on me, *really* settled, for the first time, as though I'd just now materialized from invisibility in the middle of the living room. They started at the center part of my hair, traveled down my long body, and then lingered around my bare feet. He and Roxanne were less than a decade older than me, but he eyed me like I was a ragamuffin begging for a bowl of porridge. "Vero, right?" he asked, sullen.

"That's me." We had been introduced before, had even exchanged pleasantries as I microwaved my soup or chopped salad ingredients, but I knew how Mortimer's kind saw the world, and that they could rarely be bothered to acknowledge the existence of women they didn't care to sleep with. Several inches taller than him, with silver-gray hair, crooked teeth, a penchant for piercings, and an almost exclusively oversize, shapeless wardrobe, I doubted I was his type. I'd long ago accepted that there was something about me that seemed to leave most men stumped, or scared, or indifferent.

Mortimer was nothing if not predictable.

"How could you even tell what the sewing pattern looks like from across the room?"

Because it's that *badly forged,* I didn't say. "Really good eyesight."

"Yeah? Is this what you're studying, rare books?"

"Not quite. Late medieval manuscripts."

"You wanna become a professor?"

"I—"

"See, that's the problem. You"—his finger pointed at me—"have taken half a class on a tangentially related matter and think you're better than the book expert my family has been working with for half a decade." He paused, perhaps expecting me to get angry and fight him on this. When I couldn't be assed to care about his tantrum, he smiled in triumph and muttered, "Grad students, man. They're all the same."

Roxanne scoffed at Mortimer, pointed out that she had a graduate degree (material sciences), too, that he was being rude, and other things I never heard because I didn't stick around. I had a delicious grilled cheese sandwich on the balcony while the early fall New England breeze swirled around me, and fed leftover crumbs to a brave pair of mated cardinals. I forgot about the whole interaction —until two days later, when I spotted Mortimer rocking on his heels under the late-morning sun outside of my pedagogy seminary. He was scanning my classmates' faces in search of someone. When his eyes landed on me and didn't move on, I wasn't even surprised.

"It was fake, huh?"

He nodded, pasty face even paler than usual.

I considered myself an averagely petty person, but this gave me no pleasure. "I'm sorry," I said, truthfully. "You should get a better consultant." I made to walk around him, but he blocked my path.

"Yeah, I should." He looked me in the eye so *unsubtly*, I wondered why Roxanne had stooped to seeing this guy. Maybe it was Stockholm syndrome. Maybe he had dirt on her. There must have been an explanation, because he had even less game than I'd originally suspected.

"Sadly, I am very busy with that doctoral degree that you so respect."

"It could be practice for your—"

"I don't need the practice." I sidestepped him and climbed down the stairs. "Have a good—"

"I can pay."

Alas, those were the three magic words sure to stop every graduate student in their tracks. We all needed money. Those who didn't still could have used money. Despite its preppy rowing clubs, stones engraved with Latin mottos, and thirty-five-billion-dollar endowment, Rockhaven University couldn't afford to pay us livable wages.

Someone really ought to have checked the math.

"Can you?" I turned back to him. "Pay, that is."

"Yes."

"How much?"

"Well. *Very* well."

Any romantic relationship between Mortimer and Roxanne may not have lasted past midterms, but for him and me, it was the catalyst for a long and fruitful collaboration.

—

THE FIRST THREE YEARS OF MY PHD WERE HUMDRUM AND uneventful—a true boon for someone who had spent the previous two decades and change as a drama magnet of great potency and misfortune.

In my defense, some of it couldn't have been avoided. I wasn't at fault if my parents were petty criminals gummed up in a toxic yo-yo pattern of getting together, grifting together, then grifting each other. Still, it must have left a mark, being raised by two people whose idea of love and respect was to get the other to pony up bail and then disappear.

I wonder now, after all that has happened, if the way I was raised made it easier for me to accept what happened once I got to Vermont. If this story of mine could have been anyone else's. Messed-up, mixed-messaged upbringings taught one expediency, resourcefulness, and how to embrace the fluctuating nature of ethical principles. By the time I entered puberty, I was already well acquainted with a number of short cons—fake raffle tickets, selling stolen electronics, ye ol' price tag–switch scams. Surprising that it took until I was fifteen to get caught. After that I'd mostly behaved, and despite little to no contact with Mom and Dad, I never fully weaned myself off my lawbreaking tendencies.

"And here's why." Grace, who flicked through every free magazine that landed on her doorstep and couldn't have distinguished a news item from a sponsored link to save her life, once looked up from under her green banker's lamp, pointing at the article she'd been reading. "Did you know that people with hypoactive amygdalas are more reckless? And that amygdala function is hereditary?"

"Can't say I did."

"I bet that's what's wrong with you."

"Maybe I'm just too broke to care about morals?"

"No, it's your brain. It predisposes you to nonviolent crime!"

"Spoken like a true brain scientist," I said. "By the way, please explain what an amygdala is, Grace."

She slid a hand out of her paint-stained apron to flip me off, and I bit back a laugh.

I'd always been a guest in Grace's home—a pantry-plundering, welcome-overstaying guest, but a guest nonetheless. It was during my sophomore year of college that I let go of my dorm room and began commuting to the University of Tennessee from her house. "Even though no one asked you to," she reminded me daily. "I like my privacy. If I wanted urchins underfoot, I'd have spawned my own!"

"Well, campus rent is crazy expensive, so thank you for saving me money," I would reply, unfazed. We both knew that getting around was becoming harder for her. She often forgot to eat, only took her meds once every two days, and where was that book on letterpress printing she'd been reading? No, *of course* she'd not tossed it out years earlier, what was I trying to imply, that she was an idiot? Young people these days were *unbelievable*. Grace may not have been easy, or even pleasant, but she'd opened her home (literally) and her skinny, rigid arms (metaphorically) to a neglected, wayward kid, and I didn't mind sticking around to take care of her. In October of my senior year, after a surprisingly lucid evening spent debating the type of animal glue an artisan would have used to attach a millboard in nineteenth-century France, she passed peacefully in her sleep, but I didn't feel relieved of a burden.

Just empty, and deeply unmoored.

I was twenty-one. A handful of credits away from graduating. For the most part, on the lawful path. Aside from a few circumstantial friends and the microdosing, *Halo*-playing guys I occasionally brought home, alone. I rummaged around within me, but all I could find was aimlessness and little motivation to plan for a future that, if my past was any indication, would thwart my efforts and unfold however the hell it wanted. But also, shoved aside in a corner, a genuine interest in the history of art.

So I applied to Rockhaven.

Got in, too.

Then debated whether to go.

I was not grad school material, and no number of brochures and first-gen inclusivity initiatives were going to convince me otherwise. *But*, I reminded myself, *fraud courses through your blood*. If anyone was going to be able to combat imposter syndrome, it was a real-life imposter. So I moved to Vermont and learned to deal with four p.m. sunsets and brutal winters that led to interminable mud seasons; with unaffordable housing and so many damn *rotaries* that *It has to*

be some kind of New England hazing ritual, right? I mused with Roxanne.

Rockhaven was a prestigious institution with a deep history of scholarly excellence, and even though I wanted to hate its preppy elitism, I couldn't help being charmed by the cinematic campus atmosphere. "Eighty percent of the undergrads you'll TA for are insufferable little fuckers," an upperclassman pointed out halfway through my first semester. We sat on a bench that overlooked the quad, and he asked, "What's your experience with rich people?"

It exclusively involved swindling them, so I said, "Not much."

"Well, look at them." Around us, coasting legacy kids sipped overpriced coffee while fast-walking in their Barbour coats, already twenty minutes late for class. I watched them go through massive doors and disappear into shiny marble hallways, never looking up from their phones.

"What about them?" I asked.

"They think they own the fucking world."

He was right: Many Rockhaven undergrads had trust funds, and operated under the impression that their professors had been handpicked by Daddy to act like occasionally stimulating (but mostly unobtrusive) babysitters. They loved to name-drop the family vacation property in Saint Barts and were going through rebellious art phases that would crash and burn into hasty applications to MBA programs, followed by guaranteed finance jobs after graduation, often of the soulless variety. But it wasn't *all* of them. Every semester, I'd come across one or two that reminded me of myself—scrappy, out of their element, evasive. I'd look out for them, feeling like my presence on campus wasn't wholly pointless. It was like paying a toll: After that, I could allow myself to scour mahogany libraries for cozy nooks, or sit by the fireplaces adorning the cathedral-like dining halls.

So I trudged on for the first few semesters, oscillating between romanticizing and rolling my eyes at this newfound academic life:

The Gothic bell tower was stunning, but I refused to believe that the ghost of a student who'd never completed his dissertation haunted it during finals. The stone memorials that littered every corner of campus were a bit much, and the tweed would have been charming *if* it weren't interspersed with glimpses of Patagonia fleece. All in all, when I think about those years, what I remember most fondly is the blur of misty mornings, and leather armchairs sliding over rust-colored Persian rugs. Slick cobblestone after a rainy night. The scent of fall leaves and fountain pen ink in my advisor's office during our weekly meetings.

When I enrolled in the Art History program, there were seven students in my cohort, but over the next couple of years, they all dropped out, taking jobs in schools and museums, moving with their families, or simply citing their unwillingness to hang their hats on the limbo of grad school for a degree that, by the time it was earned, might be worth less than the paper used to print its diploma.

By my third year, I was the only one left. It was, even for someone as solitary as me, a breeding ground for loneliness—and the reason McManaman Antique Dealers became…not quite my home. *That* was yet to come. But something approximating one.

—

MORTIMER REMAINED A CONSISTENTLY ANNOYING PRESENCE throughout my tenure at the store, a prime product of the rich-kid-to-loser industrial complex, but I did credit him with one thing: When his father had wanted to sell the antiques business, Mortimer had asked to take over the store, citing the family legacy. Daddy's paraphrased reaction had been: "Who? *You?*" followed by bouts of impolite cackling, after which Mortimer had sworn to prove his mettle.

That impetus, I could respect. The terrible eye the man had for antiques, not so much. But I let that slide, because several odd,

delightful figures gravitated around McManaman's, and I had to give Mortimer props for assembling them.

There was Cyrus, a balding middle-aged man who authenticated coins, always smelled of wintergreen, and talked about wars that had ended five hundred years earlier as if he'd personally fought in them; Lucille, a gruff, no-nonsense restoration expert with a glare for everyone—although, between appraisals, she could reliably be found in the back crying over dog rescue videos; Elias, a student at the local community college who should have been more at home at a rodeo than in an antique store, and yet showed up every weekend to pore over his textbooks while manning the register.

I went in for my book evaluations two or three times per week, working around my academic schedule. Tea would be waiting for me, always steaming, always oolong, always in the ceramic mug I'd claimed during my first week, the one with relief decorations of ivy and whimsical red mushrooms. It was Wanda, the shopkeeper, who prepared it. She had been at McManaman's the longest, since before Mortimer was born, and knew every cracked corner, stubborn cobweb, and unsold ashtray inside and out. She would greet me with an open, uninhibited warmth I was not accustomed to—wide smiles that rounded her plump face, concerned questions on whether my jacket was too thin or waterproof enough, and, unfailingly, *Vero, have you eaten yet?*

Grace had been formidable, and even doting in her own way, but never tender or maternal. Wanda baked Tupperwares full of muffins to ensure that I wouldn't skip breakfast, rubbed my back when it ached from bending over old documents, texted to remind me to let my faucet run during the coldest days of winter. In the spring of my first year of grad school, she alone remembered to wish me happy birthday, and gave me a magnifying glass engraved with my initials.

It felt a little awkward at first, but I learned to fold myself to return her hugs. I'd chat with her about my classes and her wife's garden for a few minutes, and then I'd slip into the back room.

There, standing on the creaky, sun-dappled floor, I would try to figure out whether incunabula were wrongly dated, leather bindings had been repurposed, the plausibility of a paper's fiber count—all things Grace had taught me over the years. Once or twice per afternoon, Cosimo, the store's sphinx cat, would wake from his nap to slow-blink at me, then twist into a more comfortable position. On my favorite days, Roxanne would whoosh inside in a cloud of short vintage dresses and cinnamon body lotion to take care of her jewelry appraisals.

"Because," as she bravely announced while coaxing her daughter's mouth to open for a broccoli plane, "McManaman's is an easy gig, it pays well, and I'm not going to give it up just because I temporarily fed at the batshit buffet and went on two dates with Mortimer."

"It was more like six or seven."

"That's it. I'm casting you out. Hope you know how to build yourself a mud hut."

I had been a fan of Roxanne since our very first meeting, when she opened her door to show me her spare room and blurted out, "Holy shit. Do you dye your hair?"

"No. It's—"

"Marie Antoinette syndrome!"

I cocked my head, feeling my silvery ponytail swing behind me. "How did you know?"

"It's not really homogeneous, so I figured it was natural, and you look so young…" She came closer, grinning. "So, what was it?"

"Excuse me?"

"The traumatic event that turned all your hair gray at once."

In time, we would grow close and I'd tell her the truth: that when I was five one of my mom's exes, very skilled at cloning credit cards but less so at embracing reality, convinced himself that I was his daughter. He stole me from under my dad's nose and took me on a twelve-hour ride out of state, which I mostly remember as a

whirlwind of panic and slushy-slurping fun. The really traumatic bit came after he was tracked down: a vehicular chase that ended in an upside-down car, me dangling from the seat belt, and my peanut M&M's rolling across the roof. My hair didn't turn gray overnight, but it had grown that way ever since, and I gave up on dyeing it halfway through high school.

"Car accident," I breezily told Roxanne. "Don't worry, no one died."

"Cool. My three-year-old is going to be obsessed with you. She's *totally* going to ask to touch the balls sticking out of the bridge of your nose."

It took a while for Roxanne to get back on her feet following her divorce, but by the end of the first year of my PhD, she was once again a hyperproductive big shot, traveling a lot on consulting business for most galleries and auction houses in New England. Over the summer after my second year, once she was financially stable, I returned her guest room and moved into a small apartment near campus. She stood with Rorie, and they waved me goodbye from the porch. "Don't forget to write. Or do. I'll just call you when I need a babysitter." During my third year, we still spent lots of time together, mostly getting high while watching *Antiques Roadshow*, or complaining about Mortimer's general ineptitude. Once or twice a month, she even allowed me the treat of bringing up what she referred to as her *most shameful indiscretion*.

"To his credit," I told her, "he does seem to have put your, um, brief entanglement out of his mind."

"Easier for him than for me, since he's not the one who stooped to date himself."

"There were extenuating circumstances. Don't blame yourself."

"I think I'll just blame you, since it happened on your watch. *And* it's not like there are lots of options out there. Good ones are taken, and all that. God, are the men in their twenties any better?" she asked me.

"Not sure."

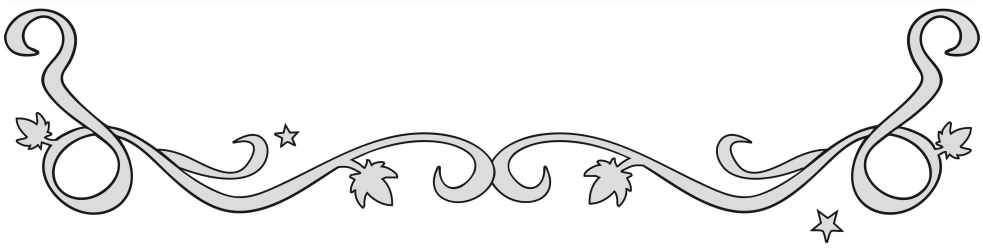
"You go out with them, don't you?"

I did, sometimes. But I chose them well: cunning, manipulative, smelling of an untrustworthy sort of confidence. Men like that were a promise—that they wouldn't stick around, wouldn't hold me back, wouldn't disappoint because how could they, if there were no expectations to be met? Men like that, I would never care about. "If I meet someone worthy of you and Rorie, I'll introduce you. Actually, have I ever mentioned my friend Mort— *Ouch*."

And that's how it happened: The first three years of my PhD were humdrum and uneventful, McManaman's was a place of joy, and despite their best efforts, the frigid New England winters didn't quite do me in.

Then, on a late-summer day, the leaf came in, and everything changed.

CHAPTER 2



"THIS BETTER BE WHAT I HOPE IT IS," MORTIMER TOLD ME THE second I stepped in for the appraisal, and the edge in his voice gave me pause.

He didn't often get excited about rare books. If the manuscript was well-known, maybe. Otherwise, and to no one's surprise, he was more of a pistol kind of guy. He reserved his giddiness for old guns and rifles. Those muskets that took ten minutes to reload after a single use, the ones the founding fathers had in mind when they wrote the Second Amendment.

And yet, he was being a restless little weasel about a *book.*

"What's going on?"

He pointed at a single piece of paper on the table. I sidestepped a sprawling Cosimo, went to take a closer look, and gasped.

"Is it…? No."

"Yes."

A chill traveled down my spine. Despite what everyone at McManaman's liked to call me, I didn't consider myself a *consummate book nerd*. I had fallen into the rare books line of work like Alice down the rabbit hole—accidentally. I appreciated good craftsmanship, but I rarely peed myself over a first edition or a collectible.

Now, though, seemed like a great time to change into my pissing pants.

"Where the hell did you get a leaf from the Gutenberg Bible?"

"Estate sale—that's why I traveled all the way to Bumblefuck, South Dakota. The dead guy was a collector, but the sons just wanted to get rid of his stuff. I bought it for next to nothing."

I stared at the table, mouth dry. For the most part, before the Gutenberg Bible, books had been painstakingly handwritten, copied by monks over long periods of time. Then, in the fifteenth century, Gutenberg came up with the movable-type printing press. A handful of copies of the Bible he produced were still in existence, but these days, it was mostly passed from prestige auction houses to collectors in the form of leaves—double-sided pages.

I leaned closer. The text in red ink caught my eye. "The rubrication. Fuck me."

"Not in front of the Bible."

I smiled. "You wish, Morty."

"Is it real? We *need* this to be real."

Again, that urgency. I turned to him. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Mortimer. What's wrong?"

His reluctance lasted only a few seconds. "Things are not great."

"What do you mean?"

"The store is…We could use some cash flow, right about now."

"Has business been bad?"

He glanced away. "It's better than when I first took over, for sure."

"Then…?"

"We're still just…less in the red."

"How is it possible? You're always selling pieces, and—"

"The overhead costs are astronomical."

I blinked at him, confused. "If you need capital, just ask Mommy and Daddy to write you a check and—"

"Mother and Father, as they like to be addressed, want nothing more than to get rid of something that's been hemorrhaging funds for over a decade. I had to beg them not to sell, and they only allowed me to take over on the condition that I turned a profit soon. Which, in case I haven't made myself clear, has yet to happen. Because of the overhead."

"Then let's reduce the costs—"

"I've slashed them, Vero. Elias barely got any hours this month."

"Oh." I'd assumed that now that Elias was a senior, he'd gotten too busy to work every weekend.

"I might have to let him go. Cut down on Lucille's restorations, too. But Wanda is the only full-time employee and the store's biggest expense, so I'm going to—"

"No."

"*Yes*."

"Wanda has been here since forever."

"And I can no longer afford her." He ran a hand through his hair. "There is a loan due to be repaid soon, and unless I can produce the kind of—"

"How much?"

He exhaled, and I felt irritation at his lack of transparency over McManaman's situation—quickly swept away by the realization that… Why would he tell *me*? It's not as though I'd ever asked. And he probably had no idea how attached I was to the place. I just *worked* here. "Listen, just tell me it's real. Please, Vero."

So I picked up the leaf and studied the two columns of evenly spaced Latin text. The richly inked Gothic typeface, framed with a vine-like illumination. When I held it up against the light, I could easily spot the chain lines. And yet, my stomach wrapped onto itself.

"This is spectacular," I said, and regretted it the moment I noticed the slump of relief in Mortimer's shoulders, because I had to hasten to add: "In the sense that it might be the best forgery I've ever seen."

His glare was pure betrayal. I nearly let out a hysterical laugh, but he'd just mentioned laying off Wanda, and there was nothing funny about *that*.

"Whoever forged this went to great lengths to make sure that they were using rag-based paper, that the trimming was congruous with Gutenberg's era, that the ink was oily enough. This tilt at the beginning of the line? It's sophisticated. I can see why an expert would be fooled, especially if the provenance checked out. But this bit here? It's like the lettering is *too* crisp. No indentation, no discoloration, no printing guide marks…This is a *really* well crafted replica. There are no obvious mistakes. The red flags are what's missing. Not sure why the forger didn't go the extra mile. I'm sorry, Mortimer."

He ran a hand over his face. "*Shit*. I already had a collector interested."

"Who?"

"Cromwell."

"That asshole." He was a Michigan-based oil exec. To him, rare objects were nothing more than a quirky way to diversify an investment portfolio. *And* he'd once touched Roxanne's butt at a party. Barf.

"He may be an asshole," Mortimer countered, "but he has money."

"No *but* there. There's definitely a causal relationship between the two. Maybe we should sell him the fake. Would serve him right." It was a joke—an unfunny one, born out of anxiety and frustration. I forgot all about it the second I put down the leaf.

Mortimer, however, did not.

—

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, WHEN I WALKED OUT OF THE minuscule basement office I shared with two other grads, he was

waiting for me.

Again.

This time, he handed me a steaming paper cup and a little brown bag. When I peered inside and found a cream cheese Danish, his intentions clicked.

"The answer is no," I said firmly.

"I haven't even asked—"

"If a guy brings me a"—I inhaled deeply—"chestnut latte—did you call Roxanne for my order?—either he wants me to join him in a threesome, or he's about to ask me to help him with a forgery, an illegal activity that carries a maximum of twenty years, which I do not wish to spend in a cell neighboring *yours*."

"Vero." He swallowed. "I don't think there's any other chance for McManaman's."

I scowled, because I'd been mulling over Mortimer's revelations for the past twenty-four hours and had decided that he was exaggerating his financial issues. "I don't believe you."

"I have proof."

"Do you."

"I'll show you the books. The accounts. And then you'll see."

He did. And I did.

That's what turned my *no* into a *yes*.

—

IT TOOK WEEKS. TWELVE, TO BE PRECISE.

We agreed that using the forged leaf as a base would be the best way to go about it. The page, after all, could be improved upon. It had a documented history, and provenance wouldn't need to be fabricated. More crucially, in the—perhaps likely—case we were caught, denial would be a viable option. *We were fooled, too,* I could picture Mortimer telling a haggard policeman who'd been pulled

away from traffic patrols to deal with us. *Those damn South Dakotans. Always at the scene of the crime.*

The drawback was that I had no room for error. I spent weeks practicing how to create slight depressions in strategic areas, introduce inconsistency in the rubrication brushstrokes, believably age the paper.

I was no stranger to crime, and I prided myself on my moral flexibility, but I did have *some* values I was not going to compromise on. An art historian in training taking advantage of her expertise to pollute the shades of the antique book world with shoddy, counterfeit work was pretty fucking terrible, and it came with a healthy dose of guilt, but it still fell within the bubblegum-stretchy boundaries of my ethical concerns—especially if it could guarantee the livelihood of my friends. McManaman's situation was dire, and this harebrained scheme could save the store, or at least give the others one or two more years to find new jobs.

Yes, it was wrong.

Yes, I did it anyway.

But I tried to mitigate the harm. "I get veto power," I made Mortimer swear, jabbing my index finger under his nose. "You sell it to Cromwell or to someone like him—some one-percenter dickhead with Masonic ties who doesn't give a shit about history. We're not conning honest collectors out of their life savings—"

"Veto power." Mortimer nodded earnestly.

"Swear it."

"I do. On my soul."

And then, of course, there was the *thing* inside of me that reminded me that I was my parents' daughter and no hospital crib swap had ever occurred. The one that fed off the thrill of engaging in something forbidden, that wanted to see how far it could get through its own sweat and tricks. That part, too, was me—maybe *more* me than any other. So I practiced. And while I wasn't sure I believed in an afterlife, I'd still mutter to myself, "Look away, Grace,"

even though, in some ways, honing my forgery craftsmanship made me feel closer to her than I had since she'd been gone. She had, after all, always encouraged my artistic pursuits. In the last few years, they'd fallen on the back burner in favor of studying, analyzing, critiquing, understanding, and obsessing over other people's art. To be once again working with different materials, producing, *making*, was thrilling at a level that I hadn't anticipated.

So I discovered bits of myself that I'd lost track of, as well as everything there was to know about the leaf. I made my way through Latin words, squinted at angular, ornate letters, learned every stroke of the illumination by heart. I even searched for a translation, feeling that if I was going to spend that long a time over a piece of paper, I should at least know what it said. It was, as it turned out, the book of Leviticus. It said…Well, it said a lot of things. But the one that stuck with me was: *No soul of you shall eat blood, nor shall any stranger who sojourns among you eat blood*.

"Thank god we had no plan of doing that, hmm?" I told Cosimo.

He stared at me, unblinking, for a long while.

—

BY THE TIME I COMPLETED THE FORGERY, THE FALL SEMESTER OF my fourth year was almost over. I was scheduled to deliver my dissertation proposal in a couple of weeks, and not in a position to focus on anything but my studies. Still, when Mortimer flew to Cromwell with the leaf, I held my breath for two whole days.

See, Grace? I may be reckless, but I'm not stupid. I know to be terrified.

On the third day, the phone call came.

"His experts authenticated it."

"How much?"

A pause. "Ninety thousand, Vero."

Air rushed out of me. I hugged my knees to my chest and held myself for long minutes, pride and elation, dread and relief sweeping over me.

So, this is it—where it all began. Our biggest mistake, of course, was thinking that it would end there, too.

—

MONEY, WE QUICKLY FOUND OUT, HAD A PECULIAR characteristic: The more one used it, the faster it ran out. At which point one needed to make more of it.

How unfortunate.

McManaman's was flush for a few months, and then funds dwindled again. Mortimer and I had agreed that only fools persevere in tempting fate, and that one stroke of luck almost never translated to two. But circumstances being what they were…

If we'd stuck to the plan, I certainly wouldn't be telling this story.

Still, we took precautions. We kept our actions a secret from everyone else at McManaman's, not wanting to turn them into our unwitting accomplices. None of the subsequent forgeries were as flashy or lucrative as our first, and we were careful to operate within an important guideline: No fake was ever created from scratch. Every replica had to come to us with an established provenance. "We're not making up new lies," Mortimer told me one day, sounding suspiciously defensive. I'd only asked him how long the coffee had been sitting in the carafe. "We're just…building on other people's dishonesty."

It was true enough. I mostly saw the fabrications as my favorite kind of crime: a victimless one—and no, the pockets of the three big collectors who bought the pieces, soulless C-suite types who surely donated to the Federalist Society to maximize their tax breaks, did not count as victims.

So I forged on. An early writing of *The Explorations of Captain James Cook in the Pacific*. *The Great Gatsby*, but without a dust jacket. A third printing of *On the Origin of Species*. A sixteenth-century French grimoire, full of unsettling drawings of grotesque demonic creatures. A John Adams autograph underneath a bookplate, just to hike up the value of an atlas.

The more pieces I worked on, the deeper the knowledge I accumulated, and the better my craft became. My small and otherwise crappy apartment was equipped with a large walk-in closet, which I stuffed with some metal shelves and a desk rescued from a curbside, and aspirationally began referring to as my *studio*. Even when I wasn't actively working on a replica, I spent hours rubricating in blue and red ink, refining my knowledge of kerning, practicing intentional misalignments and antique binding techniques.

In hindsight, those were the good times. And yet, my undoing was in the making.

Probate sale, Mortimer texted me a couple of weeks before the fall semester of my fifth and final year started. That morning, I'd woken up uncharacteristically exhausted, with a metallic taste coating my mouth, and my head still buzzed with dreams I couldn't recall. **You free today?**

I was a mess of freckles and golden skin from the scattered days I'd spent at a lake cabin with Roxanne and Rorie throughout the summer. Afternoons were still heated, even unbearable. The nights, balmy and starry. The only hints of the approaching fall were the thickening crowds of undergrads, slowly advancing on campus.

VERO: Who died?

MORTIMER: Some lady. I only know of her because she owned a First Folio a couple of decades ago. She sold it when she transitioned to coin collecting, but there might still be something interesting left.

Something interesting was the safe turn of phrase we used for unencrypted written communication. It could mean a chest full of

riches. Magic beans. A cheap manuscript that could be turned into an outrageously expensive one.

VERO: Where?

MORTIMER: Twenty minutes away. Can we head out around five?

So I got in his Nissan Altima, stared straight ahead at the scenic Vermont highways to subdue my motion sickness, and pondered an uncomfortable reality: Even after knowing each other for four years and committing several felonious acts together, Mortimer and I *still* couldn't avoid plunging into a stilted silence.

So awkward.

The old stone house was a Gothic Revival monstrosity. I usually enjoyed historical buildings, but the fieldstone walls and steep gables radiated an oppressive stillness that raised the hairs at my nape. At the door, the liquidator raised an eyebrow at my ratty denim cutoffs and lace vest top, and I found myself thinking that I wouldn't have minded if he'd decreed me too uncouth to attend the sale. But he knew Mortimer, and I was eventually allowed inside to browse the earthly possessions of one Ms. Loretta Lefebvre, which were plentiful and displayed little internal consistency.

"Talk about an eclectic mind," I murmured, staring at a lamp shaped like a fly agaric.

"She was loaded," Mortimer said, like it was an explanation.

My eyes fell on a particularly ugly bronze putto, and I flinched back. "Too loaded, maybe."

Only a handful of people milled around. Mortimer and I threaded through the rooms, exchanging comments about the improbable terra-cotta figurines, the foreign postal stamps, the yellowing possum skull that stared at us from a dusty glass case. By the time I spotted the Kensington Runestone, long shadows tinted the room yellow gold.

"No way." I shook my head, chuckling. The artifact was a cheap replica, perhaps bought at a museum gift shop. The runestone itself, the original, was nothing but a hoax, a carved slab of graywacke

that some nineteenth-century Minnesota farmer tried to pass off as proof that a Norse expedition had once reached North America. Still, there was something endearing about a copy that didn't even bother trying, an attempt so guileless, I couldn't help leaning forward to study the sharp lines of the lettering, the weathered texture of the slab.

"The runic alphabet is fascinating," I said when Mortimer came to stand behind me. He'd given up on finding hidden treasures and hadn't peeled his eyes off his phone for the last ten minutes. "I wish it hadn't been co-opted by every nazi movement under the sun."

"So would the Vikings, I'd hazard," Mortimer said at my back. Except, no—not Mortimer. The voice was too low-pitched and much too Queen's English to be his.

I spun around and found myself at eye level with a wide chest covered in a black shirt and dark gray blazer. To find a face, my gaze had to slide up several inches—a rare occurrence for me, with either men or women. I took in—automatically, almost against my will—an impression of stony bone structure, dark hair tamed into obedience around an obsessively neat part, deep-set green eyes narrowed to an observant stare.

Viking, I thought.

No, I hadn't *thought* it. He had said the word, just a few seconds earlier. Was saying it again, in that accent that made me think of croquet and coats of arms.

"Vikings' trade routes spanned Europe and Asia. They were a rather racially diverse society, one that offers a remarkably poor fit for white supremacist talking points. Not that historical accuracy seems to be of import." He spoke mildly, crisply, clean long vowels and dropped *r*'s, a hypnotic depth to his voice that had little to do with timbre. Even now, after so long a time has passed, I'm not sure how to explain its effect on me. I'll still make an attempt: I felt as though I heard him not with my ears, but with my flesh and

ligaments and marrow. His words, his stare, thrummed inside the hollow of my bones like a million flapping wings.

My heart broke into a race, and I couldn't shake the impression that he was able to hear it pound. Instinctively, I retreated, until the edge of a table rammed into the flesh of my thigh, forcing me to stop.

My eyes never left his clean-shaven face, which was young, but not boyish. A small scar from an old cut dissected the right side of his forehead, faded and pink. Two more traveled over his straight, high nose and chiseled chin. The deepest, though, ran through the back of his right hand, which he held out to me. "I am Dr. Viktor Ashworth," he said politely. "I teach in the History department at Rockhaven University. How do you do?"

I stared down at his fingers, unmoving. Unsettled.

Why *was* I unsettled? He was perfectly pleasant. This was just some guy, a couple of years older, looking for a five-minute conversation to pass the time. Or maybe to get laid. Although he wasn't my usual fare—too straitlaced to be hitting on someone whose piercings routinely set off metal detectors. The meticulous, repressed type. Probably annoyed that I was chewing gum in his face.

That didn't make him a threat, though, did it?

In the end, it all boiled down to my gut reaction to him, that odd feeling that I was being picked apart and assessed. The burst of alarm popping in my stomach.

I didn't want to be in his line of sight for a moment longer, and that was that.

"Nice to meet you," I said reflexively, without smiling or offering my name. "Excuse me, my boyfriend must be looking for me. There he is."

I gave the man a wide berth. With the corner of my eye I saw him nod, once, with razor precision, and clasp his hands behind his

back. I felt his gaze follow me and pushed down the urge to run, to turn around to avoid giving him my back.

"There you are." Mortimer tapped at his phone and didn't lift his eyes.

"We need to go," I whispered.

"Yeah. I've only seen junk. Let's speed through the rooms we haven't—"

"We need to go *now*."

If he'd asked why, I couldn't have given him a satisfactory explanation. But my alarm came across, and Mortimer nodded without protest, trying to keep up with my decidedly *not* leisurely gait.

"Vero, what—"

"Later." I sped up. This was new to me—acting with no apparent reason. Listening to my instincts. Then again, my instincts had never shouted at me that loudly before. When we made it to Mortimer's car, I let out a sigh of relief.

Until I heard footsteps against the gravel.

"Unlock," I hissed at Mortimer, sliding my fingers under the handle of the passenger door.

"I'm trying. The button sticks sometimes—"

"Ms. Mercer," an unknown voice called. Male. Foreign, but not British. Not the guy from before. Which was a weird thing to be *this* relieved about. "Could we have a minute?"

"No," I said without turning. But then I noticed *another* man. This one was tall and pale, wore pitch-black sunglasses, and was approaching from behind Mortimer, on the other side of the Nissan.

"Ms. Mercer," the first man repeated. "We would like a minute with you. And you don't really have a choice in the matter."

That's when it dawned on me how fucked we were.

—

MORTIMER AND I HAD DISCUSSED MANY, *MANY* TIMES WHAT TO do if confronted with our less than lawful activities. We had explored scenarios in which we were discovered by the authorities, by collectors, or by other experts, and put in place well-rehearsed protocols that consisted of acting gobsmacked, flatly denying every accusation, and lawyering up as soon as possible.

Of course, we never envisioned that we'd be caught by other criminals.

Because that's what they were, the people who discreetly showed their weapons, forced us into the back of two different cars, then tied our hands and blindfolded us. Criminals. Except, better at their craft than we'd ever be.

The drive lasted twenty minutes, and I tried to keep track of every turn, but quickly got overwhelmed. Even with my heart hammering in my throat, I knew there was no point in making a scene. As I was led inside a house that smelled like citrus and cedarwood, then forced to sit on a soft, unspecified surface after seventy-three steps and two lefts, I bided my time and swallowed the urge to scream.

I suspected that there would be time for that later.

Once the fabric was lifted from my face, my eyes were slow to adjust, sensitive to the late-afternoon light filtering inside. I was in a bright, west-facing expanse of a room parqueted with white oak. An office, probably. I tilted up my head to take in high ceilings, art nouveau furniture, and a mezzanine library that wrapped around the upper floor.

These people had money, which was never a good sign.

They'd sat me on a green velvet couch, and my wrists were still tied in front of me. Standing just a few feet away were the two goons who had approached us—screw that, *abducted us*. And crouched in front of me, even closer, was the man who'd introduced himself at the auction.

Dr. BBC McFuckface.

He cleared his throat, then said, in the same perfectly enunciated, dispassionate tone as before, "I mean you no harm, Ms. Mercer."

"Could have fooled me." The words came out hoarse. I should have been terrified, and I *was*, but the main breakthrough emotion was simmering, incandescent rage. "Listen, whatever you plan to do with me, once people realize I'm missing they'll trace my phone's last location, and end up right at your doorstep, so…" I trailed off as he slipped my phone out of the pocket of his jacket. It had been turned off, the battery removed.

Shit.

"Mortimer's car—"

"Is currently parked at his house."

"There are security cameras everywhere."

"No. Not everywhere."

Real, unfiltered dread crept over me.

"Is there anything else I may have forgotten, Ms. Mercer?" He sounded polite. And patient.

"Let. Me. Go."

"I will. Soon. And you will be free to report me to law enforcement at your earliest convenience. Of course, that would require you to explain how exactly you came to find yourself in this situation, which is certain to interest the authorities for a variety of reasons."

I clenched my jaw. Was I petty enough to spend two decades in federal prison just to stick it up this guy's ass?

Food for thought.

"As previously discussed, I brought you here for a private conversation, and I mean you no harm. But your reservations are only natural. Perhaps apologies are in order."

"Perhaps."

"When I asked that you be brought to me, I didn't intend this to be the manner in which it was done."

"It's not like you specified," said the man behind him with an elegant shrug. "And this *is* the manner in which we usually take people." He was the handsome blond who'd appeared behind Mortimer, with a strong jaw and a pockmarked face. His accent was faint, French or maybe Portuguese.

"Pierre is correct. Hence the…misunderstanding." There was no trace of remorse in his expression.

Fuck you, I thought, bile rising in my throat. "Sure. Well, I'm tired of chewing this piece of gum. You have five seconds to free my wrists, or I'll spit it out on your pretty Isfahan rug."

He stood and deftly fastened the single button of his jacket. Then he held out his open hand, letting it hover below my chin.

Fuck you, I thought again. But I leaned forward and let the gum drop from my lips into his palm, trying not to be too disappointed by his lack of disgust or his unhurried movements as he tossed it. Then he returned, unbuttoned his jacket again, and once more lowered himself to eye level.

Unflappable. He was impossible to perturb.

I pretended to be sore, twisting my arms a little to check the ropes for any give, but there was none. He stoically, placidly watched me, then said, "Ms. Mercer, let me assure you that I am an admirer of yours."

I snorted. "You *can't* be serious."

"I struggle to be anything but, I'm afraid."

"Do you just not know what 'admirer' means?"

"When I introduced myself back at the house you seemed… preoccupied. At the risk of being repetitive: My name is Dr. Viktor Ashworth." A pause. "You may address me as Dr. Ashworth."

I smiled. "How lovely to meet you, Vicky. What the fuck did you do with Mortimer?"

He didn't miss a beat. "My associates escorted Mr. McManaman to that corner." I followed the lazy flick of his finger and spotted a shivering lump strapped to a chair whose style perfectly matched the

couch. His hands were tied, too, but behind his back. In addition to the blindfold, a broad stripe of silver taped his mouth shut.

Clearly, *he* had not bided his time.

Sensing our attention on him, Mortimer began thrashing around as if he were auditioning for a spot on the Olympic breakdancing team. There was something so charmingly terrible about his writhing, I found myself ascending to a plane too fascinated to be worried. *This would make for an award-winning short movie,* I thought, and even caught a sliver of bemusement move over Ashworth's features.

"Not an admirer of *his*, are you?" I asked.

"Not terribly. But he *is* unharmed, too. Arlo, please allow Mr. McManaman to demonstrate his good health."

The third man, a curly-haired figure with a stocky build, crossed the room to peel the tape off Mortimer's mouth, who began screaming, "It was her! Vero did the forgeries, not me! You have to let me go, I can return the money, she was—"

The tape was slapped back into place, and supplemented with a cautionary kick to his shin.

"As you can see, your"—brief hesitation—"*boyfriend* is quite hale and healthy."

God, Morty. So fucking embarrassing.

"Classy. Very classy. You, sir, do not deserve to get laid." The blond boy, who must have been French after all, pointed his finger at me. "And you should consider finding someone who'll wait for longer than a fart's lifespan before throwing you under the bus."

"Why?" My eyes never left Ashworth's. "Are you applying for the position?"

"Forgive me for any misunderstanding, Ms. Mercer. Your body holds little interest for me." He sounded sincere, and maybe a touch apologetic.

"I figured. Because of the veiled threats and the jute-sack-over-my-head-style abduction. What *do* you want, then?"

In the corner, Mortimer let out a string of muffled whimpers, and Ashworth said, "Arlo, will you relocate Mr. McManaman to another room? His services are no longer required." After a pause, he added, "Pierre, you too."

I frowned at that, because Mortimer was *not* a two-person job. Arlo was already carrying him out one-armed, with an ease that should have been reserved for newborn kittens. I followed his progress, and nearly didn't notice that Ashworth was untying my hands.

"Really? Just like that?"

"I'd like for you to be comfortable." He got rid of the rope without ever touching my skin, and as I rubbed my wrists, he took a seat at the other end of the couch. His posture was impeccable, at once straight and relaxed.

"In that case." I slouched back against the armrest and folded my knees under me, sneakers and all, taking my time to dig into my pocket for a fresh piece of gum. My hair was in disarray, and I ran a hand through it.

Ashworth stared the whole time, his expression never leaking an ounce of emotion. His proximity was…uneasy. Sobering. A suggestion that there was something different about him, hidden under a paper-thin surface. A breakable one, perhaps.

"Are you someone who bought a counterfeit?" All my replicas were in the hands of three collectors I hated. None had mentioned wanting to sell, but maybe they'd changed their minds.

"I am, yes."

"I assume you want to be repaid." This guy wasn't an oil exec, or a health insurance CEO. I felt bad for scamming him, even if he'd kidnapped me. "I made no money from the sales. Mortimer would know better where it's gone, but I can help you find out. Maybe he can set up a payment plan—"

"There is no need. When I purchased them, I knew they were forgeries."

"Oh."

"In matters of replicas, I am not easily deceived. Although you may have come closer than anyone before."

"Did you say forgeries? Plural?"

"I made all the collectors very generous offers. As of last week, I am in possession of your entire oeuvre. Remarkable work, Ms. Mercer." After an infinitesimal pause, a frown creased his brow. "Would you rather be addressed as Dr. Mercer?"

Fresh alarm ran through me. His dive on me must have been deep. "That would be premature, wouldn't it?"

"I find that dissertation defenses are no more than a formality."

"You would know, since you're a professor. Or so you say." I glanced down at his tailored wool-blend suit. The shirt underneath, first button undone. Visibly high-quality. Rockhaven was by no means a casual campus, but faculty attire mostly involved browns and lots of tweed. This man clearly had money, and I didn't care to figure out how he'd made it.

What would it have cost him to buy *all* my forgeries? Just wondering made me nauseous.

"Have we ever met before?" I asked. "On campus?"

"You don't think you would remember if we had?"

"I should, right? But I have no recollection of you, and you seem to know a lot about me. Maybe you were too boring to make a lasting impression?"

"People find me quite memorable."

"Healthy ego, hmm?"

"Not as such. It's the disquiet I engender that one rarely forgets."

I scowled. "Yeah, well, I'm glad you know you're creepy, but you're not getting bonus points for self-awareness after you kidnapped me." I got to my feet. He did not, nor did he attempt to stop me. I looked down at him and thought I saw something in that flat gaze—a flash of curiosity, a private emotion that could be

classified as intrigue. A blink and it was gone. "Incidentally, you have yet to tell me why you did that, Dr. Ashworth."

He offered a measured nod, face tilted up toward me. "I haven't, have I?" He rose, too, forcing me to bend my neck. And then, with the old-world formality that permeated him and the space he inhabited, he said: "I would like to hire your services, Ms. Mercer."

—

WE WALKED SIDE BY SIDE DOWN A LONG HALLWAY, FALLING strangely in step with each other, his purposeful gait somehow matching my rolling one. I took in floating shelves stacked with well-used books and a handful of classical paintings, mostly Romanticism stuff. I'd met Ashworth less than half an hour ago, but if someone had asked me at gunpoint what style he would choose to decorate his home, I would have been able to name at least five.

Because, I suspected, that was where he'd brought me. Somebody *lived* in this giant historic mansion, and judging from the deference with which the woman we encountered greeted him, my bets were on him. She stood in front of an ultramodern steel door, one that stuck out like a sore thumb in a place where everything appeared to be laden with the past. When Ashworth asked her, "Will you excuse us?" she stepped aside to give him space to fiddle with a digital interface for a few moments. I stared at his long, elegant fingers, and when the door clicked open, he ushered me inside.

"Have a good session, Viktor," the woman said, and then closed the door, leaving us alone.

Abruptly, a chill settled over my mostly uncovered skin. I couldn't help a shiver.

"Apologies." Ashworth's eyes lingered on my bare shoulders, dropped to the length of my legs. "The room is dehumidified and temperature-controlled."

"This is where you keep your books?"

"Among other things."

The space was dry and windowless. It stored manuscripts, yes, but also prints, some textiles, and a variety of objects. Unlike most preservation rooms I've visited before, it managed to shirk an aseptic appearance, and made for a cozy, welcoming place.

"Please," Ashworth said. I turned to find that he was holding his jacket open for me to slip my hands into the armholes, as if we were in a New Hollywood movie, and this a twisted spin on a date.

I considered refusing with a scathing remark about how I drew the line at accepting my kidnapper's clothes. I wasn't *that* cold. But I wanted *him* to be, and having access to his jacket seemed like a good idea, even though when I dug my hands inside its pockets, I found them empty of phones, switchblades, or even goddamned lint.

I rolled my eyes and settled into the heat lingering in the fabric. "So you're into antiques," I said, walking past him to browse a small tapestry.

"I find that little can transport one back as efficiently as holding an object from a different time."

"And yet you bought my forgeries, whose lifespan could be measured in minutes."

"I hold countless worlds within me, Ms. Mercer."

He really did own my entire catalog. It was all there, laid out on top of a walnut desk at the center of the room. Every copy I'd ever made, on full display—including the Gutenberg Bible.

At least half a million, maybe more, I thought. *That's what he must have spent on fakes. Where the hell does the money come from?*

Not his faculty job. My advisor was a full professor, and I once heard her joke that unless the youths suddenly became obsessed with her twenty-five-hundred-page monograph on medieval knights fighting snails, she was never going to be able to pay off her mortgage.

"I see you liked the grimoire," I said, moving closer to the desk, tracing the deckle edges I'd toiled over for months. It was the only open book. *Les Secrets du Sang*. *The secrets of blood*, it meant. I'd taken Spanish in high school and didn't speak a word of French, but I'd looked it up.

"The word 'like' might not correctly convey my feelings. The grimoire is how I first learned about your work."

"That was months ago. And the sale wasn't publicized. How did you even know about…" I turned and fell silent. In his shirtsleeves, hands loosely clasped behind his back, Ashworth did not look any more approachable than before. He was a large man, and the strain of his biceps against the fabric had me take a small step back.

"People like me have their ways of procuring information." I waited for clarification on the *people like me* part—crime lords? The Brits? Lunatics whose idea of daily cardio was abducting grad students? None came. "Which brings us to the reason I invited you."

"'Invited'? That's *not* how to use that word in a sentence."

Amusement, fleeting, quickly discarded. With fluid, unhurried ease, he took off a wristwatch and laid it on the desk so that the band formed a line perfectly parallel to the edge. Then he moved to a shelf nearby, and after a brief search, pulled out a codex. He set it on the table, then nodded at me, as if to encourage me to study it.

So I did.

I started by tracing the binding, which was a beautiful mahogany-tinged leather, carved with insular designs that I would have placed in the late Middle Ages, if they hadn't been so well-preserved. When I lifted the cover, the bound manuscript fell open almost of its own volition, as if to show off its contents—and for good reason. It appeared to be written in something adjacent to Latin, although I couldn't recognize any words. The uncial script had been copied with standard ink and flew neatly over the vellum. Clearly, it was the painstaking work of an erudite scribe whose lifetime had been dedicated to the circulation of knowledge, and

who had even left some notes scribbled in the margins. I gently leafed through the pages, enjoying the velvety grain of the texture, the way the animal skin felt cool to the touch, so unlike modern paper. Then I went back to the start, looking for the title.

Ars Moriendi.

"Does it mean…*the dying art*?"

"Nearly. *The art of dying*."

"I see." I wrapped Ashworth's jacket tighter around me. "If you brought me here—sorry, *invited* me—for an evaluation or an estimate, I'll have to run some additional tests with specialized equipment. But my gut tells me that this is real."

"Your gut?"

I nodded, eyes and fingers still on the book, because I couldn't make myself let go yet. It was simply splendid, a once in a lifetime sight. Something I knew I'd never encounter again. "It has to be from…a long time ago. The simplicity of the decorations, the binding—Coptic? It reminds me of a piece Gr— a friend once showed me, and I want to place it in the first millennium, but that's highly improbable. We have little dating that far back, and its conditions are too good—"

"Ninth century, Ms. Mercer," he said gravely. "That's when it was copied. And no, it's not a fake. When I requested your expertise, I wasn't referring to an appraisal."

"Then what…" My jaw dropped. I glanced up at him. Exhaled sharply. "No. *Absolutely* no."

"I have yet to—"

"Come on. If you're not in the market for an appraisal, you want me to *forge a replica*. Of a book that will probably sell for *millions* and will invite worldwide scrutiny?" My laughter was shaky with disbelief. "The abduction should have clued me in, but this confirms it."

"Confirms what?"

"That you are fucking unhinged."

A faint twitch of his mouth, but his composure never wavered. "An entirely reasonable viewpoint. Nonetheless, I would like you to reproduce *Ars Moriendi*."

"Do you even— Why would you— It's not like I'm the only…" I covered my eyes and took a calming breath before resuming. "I've never done anything on vellum. I have little practice with uncial script. I have never even *seen* a carved binding of this complexity. Because, here's something about me your background check might not have revealed, something you might not know, I have never created a fake from scratch. And even if I had, this would take *months* and tens of thousands of dollars—"

"I did know," he simply said.

"What?"

"You worked on established replicas. I am aware." He looked untouchable. Like nothing I could say would ever surprise him.

"Then you know that I wouldn't even know where to start. This is entirely out of my wheelhouse." I had no idea what it said about me, that I felt more outraged by the idiocy of this proposition than by having been blindfolded and forcibly escorted to a second location. Must have been my parents' genes: I could excuse violent crime, but I drew the line at being cornered into admitting my own shortcomings. "Dude—sorry, *Dr. Ashworth*—this is a terrible idea. If the choice lies between rotting in your basement until the maggots eat me and doing this for you, I'm going with the former, so—"

"It is a major undertaking, yes. But I would help you."

"You would help me. Oh, well, in that case."

His eyebrow arched at my skepticism. Did it count as him doing an emotion? Probably not. "I do have some experience when it comes to antique books."

"Then why don't you do it yourself?"

He headed for the shelves that lined the wall farthest from us. For a moment, all I saw was the bunching of wide shoulder muscles, the clinical precision of the hair trimmed at his nape. When he

returned, he held several loose vellum sheets and something that resembled casing. "I attempted. With underwhelming results." He flipped through, showing me selected pages. "As you can see, my script isn't quite perfect. I also attempted binding, and I do have a knack for that. As far as the cover goes, the process of dyeing the sheepskin was straightforward enough, but my carvings are…is 'amateurish' too gentle a word for the monstrosity I produced?"

It wasn't. In fact, it might have been too harsh. Judged on its own merit, the work he'd done wasn't at all bad. But it would never pass for the original. A decent evaluator would have recognized it as a fake from a mile away. Without binoculars.

"Ms. Mercer, you may not know where to begin, but you are immensely talented," he said quietly. "I have the opposite problem. The knowledge—how to soak and age vellum, produce the iron gall ink, sew the binding—is at my disposal, but I lack the craftsmanship and artistry necessary to accomplish a forgery of this caliber." The dark green of his eyes, I couldn't remember encountering it before. Not in this shade. Not in this void. It was a canvas painted with a restraint so carefully guarded, I could not begin to guess how he felt about any of what was happening.

I didn't like it. Maybe I didn't like *him*.

"Okay. Say we partner up to forge a replica. While I toil away on your pet project for months, will I be allowed to leave this room? Are you installing a food tray slot? What chain model will you choose for my ankles? It's too early to discuss garderobe options, isn't it?"

He smoothed an invisible crease off his sleeve. "While I recognize that the abduction was a"—throat clearing—"rocky start, I never intended for you to neglect your other pursuits. Your work at Rockhaven, your dissertation on illuminations, your"—He hesitated, then said the words like they were a spell he was learning in his first semester at magic school—"private encounters. With your boyfriend."

He meant Morty. God, my reputation was in tatters. "I also have a job. At which I am actually *paid* to commit felonies."

"Needless to say, this is also a remunerated position."

"Not at all needless." I crossed my arms. "How much will you pay?"

"How much do you want?"

"Ten billion dollars."

He didn't hide his amusement—so, yes, on top of his factory default, he was capable of upward of one other affective state. Good for him. "There is no way to transfer an asset of that size to you," he said patiently, as if negotiating with a stubborn toddler refusing to brush her teeth. "Not without tripping all sorts of digital alarms. Please, name a feasible sum."

"One million," I said, just to annoy him.

Except, he nodded.

Screw this bullshit, I thought. But Ashworth had extracted a phone from the back pocket of his slacks and was tapping at it. Seconds later came a knock at the door. It was Pierre, who handed me my own phone, turned on and fully charged.

When I accepted it, I saw several notifications from my bank.

"That is half of what you requested. The other will be deposited in your account once the job is done."

It was a joke, had to be. I scrolled through my online banking, searching for a hint that this was some elaborate ruse, but…"Is this for real?"

"You are welcome to verify with your credit institution."

"You're kidding." I must have gesticulated too animatedly, because his jacket slid past my shoulders and pooled on the floor. We both ignored it. "Depending on the market, the fake might not even *sell* for much more than a million. Accounting for materials and commissions, you wouldn't make a profit."

"Ms. Mercer, money is a nonissue. I do not intend to make a profit. Indeed, in an ideal scenario, I will not be selling the replica at

all."

"Right. Sure. Uh-huh. So you'll overpay me to produce something that sounds dangerously close to a gag gift, in order to…Where's the money from, anyway? What did you do to get it? How— You know what, don't even tell me. You are part of some elaborate crime organization, and I don't want anything to do with that."

I spun around to leave, but a firm grip on my forearm stopped me. Ashworth didn't let go until I faced him again. "It's not like you to overthink the legality of certain matters, Ms. Mercer."

I frowned. "Isn't it? You have no idea, since you don't know *me* at all. There is a difference between stealing from large corporations or ruthless finance shitheads, and working for someone who, for all I know, traffics drugs, weapons, or *people*."

"I expected a pragmatist like you would see things differently."

I stepped closer and jabbed him in the chest, strong enough for the half-moon of my fingernail to leave an imprint. "A pragmatist like me cares little about the legality of things and a lot about the actual harm caused by her actions."

He considered my words, then nodded, conceding my point. "While I am part of an organization that occasionally must circumvent the law, I am not a criminal. The forgery will not lead, directly or indirectly, to the harm of innocents. Quite the opposite, in fact. The source of my wealth is complicated, but no part of it would fall under a federal RICO statute. Still, I would rather not delve into the reason I wish to commission you."

"If you tell me, then you'll have to kill me?"

His gaze darkened. "You would not joke if you knew how unpleasant it can be, Ms. Mercer."

"What can be?"

"The obligation to kill."

It was such a Grimdark, over-the-top statement, the only acceptable reaction would have been to laugh in his face. But the air he had about him was so earnest, goose bumps erupted all over my

bare limbs. Instinctively, I retreated, looking elsewhere just to take a break from all that intensity. I found myself in front of the shelf where Ashworth had stood, the one with a single gap, large enough to house *Ars Moriendi*. There were several other manuscripts around it, which seemed equally beautiful and rare. I reached for one.

"I'm sorry," Ashworth said, stopping me before I could pull out the volume. His flat palm pressed over my fingers, trapping them against the leather spines. He stood at my back, close enough that his shirt brushed against my shoulders, fabric warm from his body. Caged between him and the books, my lungs filled with the scent of juniper and old paper. "Those are off-limits, I'm afraid."

"Why?" Gently, I freed my hand and twisted my body around to face him. "Same reason you won't tell me why you need the forgery?"

He stared, level, intimidatingly *still*, and I decided that I wanted, *needed*, to know. The motive behind his request. The contents of the manuscripts in this room. Who the hell this man was.

"I will think about your offer," I said firmly. "But I'll need to sleep on it."

After a pause, he stepped back. Pinched between his index and middle fingers, he held out a business card. At its center, I recognized the wolf of the Rockhaven University logo. "My driver will see you and Mr. McManaman home."

What happens to the money you already gave me if I end up saying no?, *Did you really just hand me your calling card, which I could totally turn in to the police?*, and *I have no intention of giving your driver my address* were all responses that crossed my mind, and that I dismissed. I'd only just met Ashworth, but I knew what his answers would be: *Just return it*, *I know you won't tell anyone*, and, of course, *He already knows*. I walked to the door trying not to look as though I were running away, and only stopped when he murmured, "Have a good night, Ms. Mercer."

I spun back to him. “And, by the way, nobody does that.” His eyebrow rose, something I was beginning to recognize as a quiet request for elaboration. “Calls me ‘Ms. Mercer,’ I mean. My name is Veronica.”

His stern mouth curved faintly. “I am aware.”

“Then use it, please.”

“Do you know what it means, your name?”

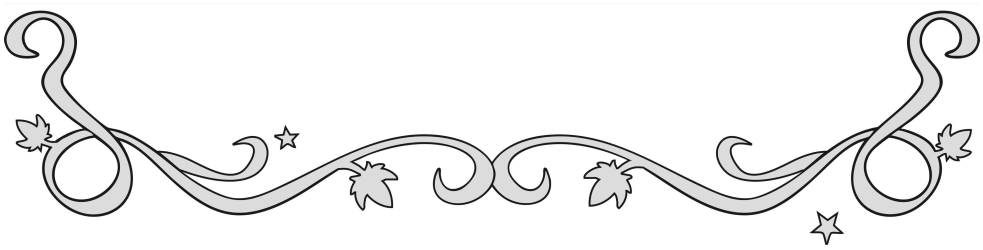
I waved my hand. “Something about bringing victory.”

“That is the Macedonian etymology. Has no one ever told you the Latin derivation?”

“Why? Is it different?”

“Yes. It means ‘true image.’ ” Ashworth’s expression sobered. His eyes stared into mine. “An apt name for the best forger I have encountered in my lifetime. Wouldn’t you agree?”

CHAPTER 3



ON THE WAY HOME, I LIED TO MORTIMER.

To this day, I couldn't name the reason, but when he asked me why we'd been brought to the house, I made up something about Ashworth wanting an evaluation. As an explanation, it didn't make sense, but Mortimer was never the brightest bulb in the box, or even in an underground speakeasy. He believed it. Or he didn't, but still kept his mouth shut.

"We need— This is getting too fucking real for me. No more fakes, Vero."

I felt remarkably calm. Mortimer, meanwhile, looked like he was going to leave a puddle of liquid shit in Dr. Ashworth's car.

On second thought, perhaps *he* was the smart one.

"You— God, maybe you shouldn't be around McManaman's for a while. I mean, what if it happens again? What if *others* come for you? You'd be putting everyone at risk."

"Why am *I* a danger and you aren't?"

"Well, these people are obviously focusing on you." A purple flush crept over his neck. "About what I said in there…I'm sorry. I was just — I mean, it was the truth, and it's not that I don't care about you, it's just…"

I sighed. But by then, my decision was already taking shape. "I'll stay away for a while."

Judging by the speed at which Mortimer ejected himself from the car when the driver dropped him off, I suspected that he might cauterize his fingerprints and flee the country. Arlo met my eyes in the rearview mirror and said with an accent much more untraceable than Pierre's: "You lied to him." He stared at me with a hernia-inducing amount of concentration. His round face and short haircut made him look like a very contemplative, very angry hemorrhoid.

"Yes."

"To your boyfriend."

"Ah…yup."

"You're a liar."

"Clearly."

I wondered if he'd report back to his…employer? Domestic partner? Daddy Dom? Didn't matter. He took me home and replied to my waved goodbye with a glare that would have burned a more flammable soul to a crisp.

That night I spent some quality time on JSTOR—unfruitfully. Still, I was unable to let go: I moved to some old, niche textbooks, smaller archives, and even got on the phone with a former professor who now worked on the West Coast and was more than happy to answer a few questions. Still, I uncovered nothing. By midnight, my decision was so fleshed out, I could look it in the eye.

"Fine," I told my ceiling. "Have it your way."

The following day, I went to my bank and took out more money than I ever thought I'd make in a lifetime. Later, reasonably sure that I hadn't been followed, I knocked at Roxanne's door.

"Hey." Her grin was surprised, but pleased. In the background, Rorie was running after her new puppy, determined to tie a bow around his neck. I'd liked her as a toddler, but now that she was older, with an explosive personality, marked likes and dislikes, and

unfettered opinions on the world surrounding her, I couldn't help adoring her. "Did we have plans?" Roxanne asked.

"Nope."

"Well, come in anyway. Rorie had none of the broccoli I steamed for her, so I can offer you a delicious healthy dinner that—"

"I can't, but I need you to have this." I handed her a duffel bag.

"Okay. What's in it?"

When I didn't reply, she unzipped it. Her head immediately jerked back up, gape-mouthed. "Is it—"

"Real? Yeah."

"How much?"

"A lot. I need you to split it between the others. Except for Morty, of course."

"Holy fuck. You robbed *a fucking bank*."

A high-pitched voice emerged from the depths of the living room. "Mommy? Why did Aunt Vero rob a fucking bank?"

"She didn't— It's not— Rorie, don't say words like—" Flustered, Roxanne stepped outside and closed the door behind her. "Jesus Christ, Vero. Tell me you didn't do anything irresponsible."

"I haven't," I said, but just as her shoulders slumped in relief, I added, "but I'm about to."

"Like *what*?"

"There is a…rich collector."

"Who? I know everyone in the area. I know everyone *outside* of the area. I—"

"Can't say. He's probably into shady stuff. Laundering, maybe. He needs someone on his team. And he pays well."

She muttered something that could have been *motherfucker.*

"I'm not going to be at McManaman's for a while. Till this gig is over. But tell the others I'll see them for game night, okay? And then maybe I'll come back, once I'm done with the supremely dumb thing I'm about to get myself involved in."

"Shit, Vero. If it's so dumb, why the hell are you doing it?"

I licked the back of my crooked teeth, and opted for honesty. "Because, as it turns out, I'd rather be intrigued than be smart."

—

I TEXTED ASHWORTH AND HIS REPLY CAME IN A HEARTBEAT.

Arlo will pick you up tonight at 5PM.

Arlo did. But when I stepped out of the elevator, Dr. Ashworth was there, too, standing tall in the golden afternoon sun. He opened the rear door for me without so much as a *hello*, and then entered from the other side, unbuttoning his jacket and taking the spot next to mine.

Curious, I watched him buckle up as Arlo pulled into traffic. "Why are you here?"

"Why am I in my car?" His expression was blank. His voice, softly hypnotic.

"Sending your driver would have sufficed."

"You should fasten your seat belt."

"If it's because you *really* enjoyed my company the other day, you can just say so. I won't think you're a creep." I popped my gum. "No more than I already do."

"The seat belt, Ms. Mercer."

Alone in my apartment, I'd reached the conclusion that my unease with this man was due to just *that*: Dr. Viktor Ashworth was a *man*. He wasn't much older than me—according to his CV, which I'd easily found on the website of the Rockhaven History Department, he'd finished his PhD a couple of years ago, which should have put him in his late twenties. But he *felt* different: not a bumbling grad student, but an adult with professional obligations and a team of accountants. The guys I met on apps were boys—if not demographically, then in spirit. Mortimer had never registered as a sexual being and never would, and most people I encountered

through the antiques and rare books business tended not to exude carnality.

Ashworth was a different, unknown breed, and probably felt the same about me. I doubted his preferred kind of company was someone who got drunk while staring at lava lamps, grew shrooms under her kitchen sink, and routinely chose guys with roommates and navy sheets as one-night-stand partners.

"Were you afraid that I would chicken out?" I asked. "Change my mind?"

"No," he said.

So unwavering. I realized something. "You knew it, didn't you?"

He gave me a quizzical look.

"That I would accept your offer."

"Not when I approached you, no. But when I watched you touch the book, I thought it…likely."

I sighed and slumped into the seat, tipping my head back. "Roxanne was right. I *am* just a book nerd."

"You are not alone," Ashworth said. Then he leaned forward and buckled me in with an indulgent gleam in his eyes that, for all I knew, was the typical fare of commissioner-forger relationships.

After that, we were quiet for the remainder of the ride.

—

MORTIMER'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO OUR REPLICAS HAD CONSISTED of setting deadlines, complaining about the cost of materials, and breaking my focus by showing me dating app pics of innocent women who were soon going to regret swiping right on him. Ashworth was…well, not like that at all.

He made two things very clear: that he was at my complete disposal, and that I was in charge.

"Any tool you need, I likely already own," he said the first night. We were not in the preservation room, where he'd taken me last

time. As it turned out, the magic was going to happen in a place he called "the workshop," which was a couple of doors down, impressively stacked with supplies, and equipped with ergonomic stations that could have rescued me from the chronic torticollis I'd nursed for the past year. "If not, I will acquire it. For anything else, I am at your service."

"There is something," I said, steepling my hands, and his eyes dropped to my fingers, the multiple rings that adorned them and the chipped black nail polish. I'd colored it back in with a Sharpie, but the tone didn't really match. Rorie had taught me that trick.

He quickly looked away. "Please." He dragged a stool to sit in front of me, long legs folded between us. A thought occurred to me, as sudden as a summer storm, and nearly as devoid of consequences: He was the kind of man most people would consider attractive. On my part, this revelation had probably been delayed by the fact that he looked like he might notify a partner of an impending orgasm via an announcement in *The Times*.

He wasn't my type. The realization that he might be someone else's was detached. A fact, collected then quickly forgotten.

"I looked all over and couldn't find anything about *Ars Moriendi*."

Ashworth didn't react.

"I understand that a healthy aura of unforthcoming secretiveness goes a long way in the delinquent, academia-adjacent underworld you move about, but I need a bit more."

Silence.

"I'm obviously dying of curiosity," I leveled. "But that's not the only reason. What's out there is going to affect the project. Does anyone have a picture of the original? Am I going to have to reproduce the location of specific wormholes? Will someone be comparing the pigments of the illuminations? Is there a record of the marginalia? I need to know the provenance of the—"

He was shaking his head. "None of what you listed is something I can easily disclose," he said with gravitas.

"Okay. Then disclose it *difficultly*."

He cleared his throat. "How comfortable are you with the uncial script?"

"As much as you are with subtle deflections."

A ghost of a smile, lopsided—every time I was ready to write him off as a piece of cardboard, he threw me off. But his mind was made up, and between the two of us, he was always going to win a patience contest. "Not at all," I mumbled eventually.

"Ideally, you would familiarize yourself with it while I procure the materials."

"Ideally. What is the text about?"

"The usual bits and pieces of Gospels."

"Which ones?"

He distractedly ran his thumb over the edge of the table, but stopped himself when he caught me looking. "One should be able to make a copy without understanding the content." He rose.

"*One* should, sure. But *I* want to know." I glanced at the text. "This is not Latin. It's written to look like it, but…"

Three feather quills were deposited by my right hand. Then, as if I hadn't been in the middle of a sentence, Ashworth produced a poised nod and walked out, leaving me to wonder if I'd been condemned to writing lines as a punishment for my curiosity.

—

IT WAS A WEEK BEFORE THE START OF THE SEMESTER, AND I FELL into a rhythm: During the day, I would work on my dissertation, attend TA meetings, and mentor the incoming first-year PhD student I'd been assigned to mother duck. Then, late in the afternoon, Arlo would pick me up at home oozing a contempt so tangible, I feared it would permanently stain the driveway. The passion with which he disliked me was so visceral, it had to be justified. Maybe my father

had stolen his family fortune. Maybe I'd stepped on his prized bush of Juliet roses.

It shouldn't have mattered, but I couldn't stand the weight of *two* mysteries.

"You know that you have no reason to waste all this industrial-strength loathing on me, right?" I said the second evening. "I'm not trying to steal your kidnapper-in-chief job. I'm not fucking Ashworth, so if that's what you're going for, the floor is yours. And this is an electric car, which means that you can't be mad on behalf of the environment. I know I'm chronically late, but it's five or ten minutes, *tops*, and you despised me well before finding that out. I may look like the girl who got to be the Monopoly car in second grade, but—"

"This," he grunted out.

"Excuse me?"

"Women like you—you always ruin things."

Old-fashioned sexism. *Not* what I'd expected. "Women like me, meaning…five nine and above? Ambidextrous? Of loose morals? I'm not sure what you're latching on to here—"

"Viktor is very important. Very preoccupied with crucial matters. Very necessary to the well-being of…" Maybe the accent was Eastern European. I wasn't well traveled enough to be sure. "He should not be wasting time with you."

"Shit, you're right. I should never have abducted him and coerced him into hiring me for a project that— Hey, wait a minute!"

"This," he spat with even more venom. "You are not *serious*. You are a distraction, and this plan will only put him in danger."

"What plan?" In an instant, I had unbuckled and was leaning forward between the two front seats.

Arlo's expression was horrified. "Sit back."

"Arlo, what *plan*?"

"Do *not* talk to the driver."

"Shut me up. Save the school bus. Tell me what plan you are referring—"

The car skidded to a stop, momentum slamming me backward with whiplash-inducing force. "We are here," Arlo declared, hateful.

I massaged my already aching neck. "Listen, blame me for whatever the hell you want—Ashworth's distraction, the decline of your beloved superhero franchise—I don't care. But can you tell me what the plan is?"

"Get. Out."

I did, slamming the door so forcefully that a nearby flock of barn swallows flew away in a hurry.

—

ASHWORTH'S HOUSE WAS ODD FOR MANY REASONS, CHIEF among which was the difficulty to determine who actually *lived* there. It was well trafficked, but none of the people I met in the long hallways seemed to be family members. Some of them moved about with grocery bags or vacuum cleaners, which identified them as staff. Others were more of a puzzle: men and women lingering in the same spots for hours, lounging in chairs by the windows, making brief, hushed phone calls. They nodded at me, sometimes returned my smiles, but never introduced themselves. They never appeared to be interested in socializing. It wasn't until I realized that there was always at least one person standing by the door of the preservation room that it occurred to me.

Security.

Viktor Ashworth, PhD, employed a twenty-four seven security detail. Just like every other tenure-track academic. *Not involved with criminal organizations, my ass,* I thought. And then I noticed the rest: Cameras monitoring every inch surrounding the house. Windows sealed shut. Doors that locked automatically, even the ones that led to the private garden. They couldn't be opened, not even from the inside, effectively trapping all of us. On my first day, Arlo begrudgingly gave me a key to the sets of sliding glass panes

that led from the hallway and the kitchen into the private courtyard. "If you want some fresh air," he said in the tone of someone who would gladly enrich uranium in my bronchial tubes. "Just remember to close the doors behind you."

The setup should have sent me running. At the very least, it should have been a reminder that I was there to make an immoral amount of money, and nothing more. Instead, because of my stupid risk-taking, self-preservation-lacking amygdala, all I wanted was to ask for explanations. Except Arlo would probably dip me into muriatic acid, and Ashworth's repertoire seemed to be limited to vacant stares and the occasional bullshitting.

So I tried with Pierre.

Coaxing him out of his polite disengagement required some effort. On the first night, I saw him from the restroom window: He sat on the garden patio, alone, barely visible aside from the burning red dot of whatever he was smoking. The following evening, I took a break from what I'd begun to think of as *practicing my goddamn letters* and went on an outing. I asked him if he had a spare cigarette, and pretended not to hate every drag as we sat side by side in companionable silence. I returned the next day—not because smoking was growing on me, but because *I* was growing on Pierre.

Most men seemed to be taken aback by my way of existing, but some liked me, and with Pierre I seemed to be in luck. His eyes lingered on my bare legs. When I laughed, his stare held longer than was customary. We had fun bitching about Unilever and out-of-state leaf peepers coming to Vermont without 4WD. Thirty minutes later, I felt comfortable enough to attempt a lighthearted, "Man, the amount of security in this house is crazy."

Pierre shrugged. "There are some pretty priceless historic artifacts here."

"Is that why?" I didn't buy it. "Wouldn't it be easier to just keep them elsewhere?"

"Not my decision to make." He shrugged, took one last drag of his cigarette, then stubbed it out.

When I popped a piece of gum, I offered him one, too. "So, are we at the point where we shit-talk our superiors yet?"

He laughed. "Arlo's pretty bad, yeah, but he has valid reasons. You see, there is a massive pole he once put up his ass that cannot be dislodged. Modern medicine has failed him."

"Wait, Arlo is your superior?" I made a face.

"Yup. Seniority."

"Not Ashworth?"

"Viktor?"

"Oh, he lets you call him by his first name?"

Pierre laughed. "He and I go way back. And you're an infant compared to us."

I snorted. "You're what, twenty-six?" His expression clouded. I had no idea why, but I tried to fix it by asking, "How did you two meet? Do you go to Rockhaven?"

"Rockhaven? Ah, the university. Nah. Not my thing. Never been the scholarly type." He smirked.

"Really?" There was a smudge of ink on my knee. I casually wiped at it. "So, was it through his other line of work?"

"What line of work?"

"Just…you know." I should have pointed out that professors didn't have bulletproof cars or an authentic Caravaggio hanging in their living rooms. Mostly, I was hoping for an admission, something like, *Yes, I met him through our old contract-killing business. He liked the way I laundered money, and so he hired me.*

But Pierre said, "He took care of me. After my…father no longer wanted anything to do with me."

It made no sense. I wanted to ask, *You mean, back in France? When he was five and you were two?* Instead I said, as diplomatically as I could manage: "He's not much fun to work with."

Pierre's eyes widened in surprise. "Why?"

"Very uncommunicative. Gives me nothing." I remembered Arlo's comments. "Is it a sexism thing? It would be nice to know."

"What? No. No, Viktor wouldn't…" Pierre stopped. Considered the matter. "Maybe, but not in the way you think. It just takes him a while to warm up and show himself."

"Is that so?" I doubted I was going to be dazzled by Ashworth's unexpected depths, but Pierre seemed plenty confident.

"And I think he might be worse at it with you, because…I can't even remember the last time I saw him interact this extensively with a…" He pressed his lips together.

"A woman?"

"No. Yes. Well, with someone who…doesn't work for him."

It was *not* what he'd been about to say. "I work for him."

"Right. Yeah. But you're different."

"Am I? How so?"

Quiet. And then: "It's getting late. I think we should return inside."

—

EVEN I, SOMEONE WHO RARELY COOKED ANYTHING MORE complex than mac and cheese, had to be impressed with Ashworth's kitchen, with its exposed beams, turned-leg island, and hanging copper pans, so wide that just the walk-in larder could have given my apartment a run for its money.

After my mostly unsuccessful break with Pierre, I stepped back inside, made sure that the doors were shut.

"Veronica, right?"

The lilting question came from a slight woman, who was playing with the single fridge magnet Ashworth had allowed on the premises. She had short brown hair, and the most doe-like expression I'd ever seen on something that wasn't a deer.

"Oh. Yes. Hi."

She nodded, but didn't reply. I considered reaching forward to shake her hand, but changed my mind at the last minute. She looked like a single touch might break her.

"Call me Vero, please." Again, no response. "Are you Dr. Ashworth's, um, wife?"

"Oh, no. No, I suppose I…help around the house." She smiled shyly. Her prominent incisors gleamed white. "I enjoy cooking. If you need anything—a snack, a meal…"

"I'm good. But thanks." I wasn't great at guessing ages, but I noticed now that in the warm light of the hanging lanterns she looked quite young, and made a mental note to test Ashworth's knowledge of labor and worker protection laws.

"What was the weather like, today?" she asked.

I blinked in confusion, pointing at the door. "Would you like to go outside and check for yourself? Pierre is out there, so—"

"No, I meant…during the day. I wasn't feeling well. Didn't get a chance to go." Her accent, I realized, was vaguely Southern and flowed like music. But something about this conversation had a cold wash creeping over me.

"Ah. It was nice, I think."

"Very sunny?"

"Yes. Spots of overcast in the morning." I glanced around, then crossed to her and whispered urgently, "Are you okay?"

Slowly, she nodded.

"You're here of your own volition, right?"

The question creased her forehead. "What do you mean?"

"Just, are you safe here?"

"Yes. Of course. Why—"

"Anything you need?" a hostile voice called from behind us. Arlo, standing by the kitchen door. "Because if not, you should leave Samantha alone."

I closely observed the girl's reaction to Arlo's arrival, but her expression split into a grin so wide, I couldn't imagine it being

anything but genuine. “Samantha is your name?” I asked, ignoring Arlo as he came to stand protectively beside her.

“It is.”

“Do people call you Sam?”

The question seemed to launch her into a sea of confusion. “Oh. I…Some people call me Sammie, but no one has ever…”

“Sammie’s lovely,” I reassured her. “I’ll go with that, if that’s okay.”

When I left the room, mostly satisfied that—unlike me—the girl was in good hands with Arlo, she was whispering the word *Sam* to herself, her lips pursed as if shaping a new sound.

—

I WASN’T SURE HOW TO FEEL ABOUT MY NEW WORKPLACE. I missed McManaman’s, its friendly atmosphere, and Wanda’s steaming cups of tea. I wished I could gossip with Roxanne, tease Elias about the girls who came to the store to flirt with him, laugh at Lucille’s loud curses whenever she caught a splinter while restoring a piece that *isn’t even worth my time, dammit*. Cosimo’s judgmental stares when we dared to disturb his slumber. I sighed and returned to the workshop, focusing once again on the reason I was here: *Ars Moriendi.*

I was a quick learner and already felt confident about finding the right quill nib to reproduce the broad letters and consistent stroke thickness of the uncial script. What I truly wanted, at that point, was to figure out the codex itself.

I had been right: It wasn’t Latin, or another language. A cypher, I was certain, mostly made of substitutions and transpositions. I covertly took a few pictures of the pages, optimistic that with some trial and error, even someone as mathematically challenged as me could crack it. But what I couldn’t get out of my head, the real reason I wouldn’t be able to walk away from *Ars Moriendi* until I

learned more about it, was the illuminated initials. Everything about the way the text had been transcribed pointed at a Gospel—including the decorations surrounding the capital letters at the start of a section. And from a technical standpoint, the art was arrestingly beautiful. The subjects, however…

As a rule, medieval illustrations were deeply weird. This set, though, was more disturbing than the usual monkey shitting on a plate, or fruit tree laden with ripe penises. The motif of *Ars Moriendi* was death, which wasn't at all surprising. But here, dying seemed to be surrounded by violence and decay. Harmless *B*'s and *O*'s and *C*'s had been turned into human corpses being eaten by animals—while eating those same animals themselves. Beasts with maidens' faces beckoned the reader with inviting half smiles. Beautiful naked women exposed the razor-edged spines covering their breasts. Guts spilled from abdomens to twist around blooming flowers. Fangs dripped, daggers slashed throats wide open, ever-thickening forests twisted into hellscapes. When I came across a gaping mouth vomiting a dark red substance, I felt myself physically shudder.

It was a new experience for me. I'd never been interested in the occult, religion, or even spirituality, perhaps because the practicality of my material worries bolted me to the ground. With a childhood like mine, it could have gone either way, and a more enlightened person might have found refuge in the certainty of an afterlife without bills. But wondering if I had a soul to be blackened, or whether my ancestors would be upset with my occasional bouts of promiscuity, had always seemed pointless. I was where I was, and I needed to do homework to avoid probation, and find a few bucks to get a pair of shoes that actually fit me. I wasn't going to worry about demons or monsters under the bed, not when my parents' friends were coked-up to the eyeballs just down the hallway—a much more pressing, concrete danger.

I was, deep down, a nihilist, and nothing about the idea of Satan breathing down my neck intimidated me. *Ars Moriendi*, though,

succeeded where countless horror stories had failed: I was creeped out. Maybe it was the eerie quiet of the house at night, or the fact that I knew nothing about the real reason I was being paid the equivalent of a low-budget film.

Maybe I just needed a break.

I stood and stretched my back, keeping my eyes on a vicious-looking snake in the process of strangling a baby. When I glanced up, Ashworth was at the door, his gaze trained on the strip of skin left uncovered at my waist.

I waited for a few moments, then unhurriedly lowered my arms. "Don't tell me you have the same."

"Excuse me?"

"Belly button piercing."

I thought I saw his throat move. "I do not."

"Phew. That would have been awkward." I grinned, and his sole response was a long blink. When he opened his eyes, his expression was extra blank.

"Pierre mentioned you might have some questions for me?"

Well, well, well, I thought, amused. *Ratted out*. "How lovely of him," I said, still smiling.

As usual, Ashworth had on a suit that looked exactly like the one he'd worn the day we'd met—except in a slightly different shade of dark gray, and with minor tailoring differences that only an industry professional could have picked out. Naturally, not an inch of him was rumpled. The formality was becoming ridiculous, especially because I'd come over wearing running shorts, off-brand Birkenstocks, and a star-shaped pimple patch on my cheek.

"Any news of the vellum?" I asked. Whatever ultrapowered auction house would take on the replica, they might decide to run radiocarbon or spectroscopy testing, and Ashworth was in the process of sourcing materials from manuscripts contemporary with *Ars Moriendi*.

"It should be here by the weekend."

"Cool." Inexplicably, I wondered what else he'd done today. Worked on his syllabi? Strip club crawl? Abducted a couple of postdocs? "Semester's about to start, hmm?"

"Indeed," he said, in that marvelously inscrutable voice.

"Teaching lots of courses?"

"One seminar."

"Undergrad?"

"Graduate."

"Oh, should I take it?"

"I was under the impression that you had completed your coursework."

"I'd make an exception for you. And I've been told that I'm a pleasure to have in class." He didn't return my teasing smile, nor did he seem anything but stoically resigned at the idea of being pleasured by my classroom presence.

But he said, "Yes, I can quite see that."

"So I should call the registrar?" He was silent. Languid, I strolled to him, until the air was citrus and wood. "No? I'll make you a deal, then. I won't infest your classroom, if you answer three questions about the manuscript."

His gaze swept down, appraising. "Ms. Mercer, you were not brought here to satisfy your personal curiosity."

"Brought? You mean *invited*."

"You have not been hired in exchange for information. You are being monetarily compensated for your services—"

"Then make it the tip."

His eyes cut sideways. Right there, in his cheek, was a little twitch. Like he was biting back something—perhaps as mundane as a smile. "I must decline."

"*Must* you?" I rolled my eyes, then raised my hands in surrender. "Fine. You keep your secrecy, and I'll keep my theory on who exactly you work for to myself."

"Once again, organized crime is not—"

"Oh, I outgrew that one about an hour ago."

Faint lines appeared between his eyebrows. He was curious. *New emotion: unlocked.*

"I think I've figured you out," I said, leaning a shoulder against the doorframe, playing with a gray strand of hair. I could have continued, but decided to wait him out. See if I was wrong about his interest.

"By all means," he said at last. I hid my satisfaction and kept staring at my split ends. "Enlighten me."

"If you insist."

"That seems like an overstatement."

"Not to me."

Our stares locked, taut, until the slightest hint of amusement softened his eyes. "I am adamant. Do be so kind, Ms. Mercer."

"Clearly, you are the boss of a cult."

He *coughed*. Then cleared his throat. Twice. I wondered if all these sentiments were giving him a stroke. "I am not."

"But it's some kind of religion, right? I mean, the secrecy, the hierarchical structure, the kidnapping, the weird obsession with the pseudosatanic manuscript. The *compound*. What's up with the security, by the way? Was there a recent schism? This whole thing stinks of sectarian conflict."

He parted his lips, then closed them, as if lost for words.

"Hey, if you believe in some weird shit, you can tell me. My father was a cult leader for a while, back when I was a kid."

"Pardon?"

"Cult might be a stretch. I never really got the full story. I think he infiltrated a polycule in the Bay Area and made up something about how if they cocooned themselves inside a chrysalis—though it was really just a cotton quilt—they'd turn into a butterfly. Then he scammed them out of twenty bucks and a bunch of kitchen appliances. I suspect they may all have been high."

"I see." Ashworth looked nonconsensually engrossed, and sounded disappointed in himself as he asked, "And your mother…?"

"Oh, she didn't care. Actually, that might have been while she was doing time for embezzling from that Make-A-Wish-like charity."

"A…fascinating genealogical history."

I laughed. "Boy, is it ever. Anyway, if you're part of some kind of millenarian church, or you believe that you can become immortal by drinking a glass of plasma stirred four times clockwise, or you decide which one of your five thousand identical dark suits to wear by reading the entrails of pigeons…well, poor birds. I'm of the vegetarian persuasion. But as long as you're not actively harming anyone, I don't care."

A slow blink. "Are you quite done?"

"I don't know. Do you need more reassurance that I'm of the 'live and let live' school of thought when it comes to this kind of stuff?"

"No. Your immense tolerance has been noted."

"Good. Now that we've established that I am, indeed, fucking amazing: What the hell is up with *Ars Moriendi*?"

This time he couldn't hide the lopsided curve of his smile, and a single dimple that seemed to restructure the entire fabric of the space-time continuum surrounding him.

Wow, I thought. That was *definitely* an emotion.

Quick to fade, maybe, but that clever gleam in his eyes was still there when he said, "Have a great night, Ms. Mercer. Arlo will drive you home at your discretion." He left me leaning against the door. One last waft of juniper drifted my way as he walked off with even strides.

Until I called, "Dr. Ashworth!"

He stopped, his straight back a miracle of linear architecture. Waited for just a heartbeat too long before turning to face me. The vacant mask was back on, but I cocked my head.

"Can I still take your class?"

He pressed his tongue to the inside of his cheek. "I shall make inquiries," he said, with so much gravitas I was sure I'd hallucinated the smile.

I watched him go, thinking that maybe he wasn't *as* awful a person as I'd suspected, then kicking myself for it.

Liking him was foolish. Above all, it was only going to make me feel guilty about what I was plotting to do the next day.

—

I'D HATCHED MANY DEVIOUS PLANS IN MY MISSPENT, unsupervised youth, and this one was neither a study in brilliance, nor the pinnacle of sophistication.

Still, it worked.

At least until it didn't.

It was the last Friday before the start of the semester, and I didn't have errands on campus. Some of the vellum had come in, and Arlo picked me up around noon. I'd never been in the house that early in the day, but while I'd assumed that it would be bustling, much more so than at night, it was unnervingly quiet. I walked down the hallway, thinking that they made for an odd contrast: the silent stillness of the hallways and the blazing late-summer sun.

Doesn't matter, I told myself. *Suits the plan.*

Ashworth wasn't in sight. Arlo had disappeared after dropping me off, which meant that I only had to deal with one body: the man currently standing by the preservation room. It was the only place that had a dedicated guard stationed in front of it at *all* times, which seemed like a dead giveaway that some of the answers I wanted might be in there. That, and the memory of Ashworth's palm covering my fingers against the spines of the codices that lived on the same shelf as *Ars Moriendi*.

He didn't strike me as the kind of man who simply decided to *touch* others. Not outside of extreme circumstances.

In a rare turn of events, I could even be grateful to my mother for something—a piece of wisdom she'd shared with me in elementary school: *If you see someone entering a password, memorize it.* Shockingly, this was the first time that specific skill had come in handy.

I'd been busy for about thirty minutes when I heard a familiar movement a few doors down: the guard leaving for the restroom. I waited for his steps to fade, then quietly slipped out of the workshop, looked left and right to make sure that no one was—

Well. Shit.

Slowly, as if her head weighed a thousand pounds, Samantha glanced over her shoulder at me. "Hi," she said, with a small smile, before turning back to stare at the garden.

"Hi." Dammit. How long did I have before the guard returned? The kitchen was just down the hall—was that where she was going, or did she plan to stick around for conversation? Why was she just standing there? "How are you?"

Her *good* sounded listless. Anything but *good*. She must have been having a rough day, because her pale complexion and shadowed sockets made her look much older than she had the other night. "It's such a beautiful day. Everything outside looks so…alive."

"Ah, yeah. A bit hot for my taste, but if you like being baked like a loaf of bread, it's not too bad."

"I do."

"Well, there you go. And if you sit in the shade, it's very pleasant."

She nodded. A quaint stone path flanked with lively flower bushes ran through the garden, and she gazed at it with the longing of a Dickensian orphan.

I needed to get her out of this hallway before the guard returned, and the suggestion slipped easily over my tongue. "You should go check it out. Maybe take a walk. You could bring a hat, or just find a spot under that big maple tree."

"I can't." Her hand slid to the handle, and she weakly tried to pull it. "It's locked."

"I have a key." I rummaged in my pocket and held my palm out.

Samantha reached forward fitfully, with hesitation, as though making up her mind in action. When she finally accepted the key, her knuckles were white with strain. "Really?"

"Sure. You can return it later."

She grinned, and the joy took ten years off her face. I glanced behind me to check on the whereabouts of the guard. When I turned back to Samantha, she had already unlocked the doors.

"By the way," she said, taking my hand to squeeze it with hers. "I decided."

"Decided what?"

"I want to be a Sam." She was gone with one last smile. I waited for her to be out of sight, then punched in the code and walked into the preservation room.

This time, I was impervious to the chilly air, and moved as quietly as possible to pull the manuscripts from the shelf. I knew full well that unless I finished my business in thirty seconds flat—unlikely—and unless the guard was experiencing a major gastrointestinal event—wishful thinking—I was going to get caught when I walked out. But I was prepared for that: Forgiveness trumped permission, and I wasn't going for a stealthy job, just for a job *done*.

Gently, methodically, I opened the books on the desk at the center of the room. There were six—all authentic, all very old, and in a variety of languages and lengths. Proto-French. A version of Latin that seemed closer to Italian. Old English. More Latin. A script that could have been Arabic. Runes. Together, these texts were probably worth a number of millions that would have made the Federal Reserve recoil. And as entrenched in the rare book world as I was, I had never heard of them.

"What the hell are you?" I murmured.

One of the manuscripts was richly decorated with multiple pigments, but the others were plainer. Notebooks, or maybe journals. For two, I could find title pages—*De ne pas mourir* and *De rerum maledictionis*. Arabic was beyond my skill set, but Italian wasn't too dissimilar from Spanish, and that manuscript seemed to be the most recent, so I leafed through the parchment pages and took note of the chapter titles. *S'incontra nel buio. La condanna oscura.*

No clue.

The one thing they all seemed to have in common—with each other and with *Ars Moriendi*—was that they had something to do with the arcane. Monsters. Blood. Macabre rituals. Magic. Just like the grimoire, which had put me on Ashworth's radar.

"I *knew* it was some kind of crazy cult," I muttered. Probably just as unfortunate as organized crime, but I wouldn't know until I figured out what the texts said, and I couldn't stand here until a merciful demigod blessed me with the gift of languages. I pulled out my phone, and made a video flicking through the manuscripts. About five minutes later I saved the files to my cloud, returned the books to the shelf, and prepared to walk outside and play dumb. *I didn't know the room was off-limits,* I would say, noisily chewing a piece of gum. *The door was ajar.* With some luck, the guy would think he'd been the one to leave it open and never mention the incident to Ashworth.

And then the manila folder caught my eye.

If a battered corner of it hadn't stuck out from the back of the upper shelf, I wouldn't have noticed it. But it did, and it was so mundane, so atypically sloppy for something in Ashworth's house, I decided to get on my toes and pluck it from its hiding place, which happened to be behind a row of tall books. It was a thick file, threadbare, and as soon as I opened it, my grip fumbled and it

spilled onto the floor, because the first thing I saw was a picture of a dead girl.

For long moments, I stood still, as if waiting for my brain to kick in and correct me: *It's not what you think it is. Chill, you dumbass. Get it together.*

But it was. And the more I stared at it, the gorier the photo became. It was film, and not high-quality, but I could easily make out the place where the unnatural pallor of the woman's skin was marred by multiple bone-deep lacerations. The lips and nails were a bluish white, and her limbs were flung wide, as if her end had come upon her right as she was in the middle of thrashing around.

I'll be honest: Even today, I am not certain that what followed was a conscious decision. I did not *want* to learn more, and my first impulse was to run out and pretend nothing had happened. And yet, as if guided by an invisible hand, I felt myself crouch to the floor to examine the rest of the folder. That's when I realized that there wasn't *one* dead girl, but at least a dozen. Boys, too. Women and men of all ages. The photos were forensic, professionally taken at crime scenes, and the majority came accompanied by police reports, which, based on the different letterheads and languages, had been gathered from all over the world.

The one thing they all had in common was the state of the bodies. The ashen flesh. The deep, jagged wounds that I could only describe as tearings. They would have been consistent with bloodbaths, but there was very little of it. A nineteen-year-old German boy had been nearly decapitated. And yet, the floor underneath him seemed clean enough to knead dough on.

The thought made my stomach revolt. Part of me wanted to shriek—the same part that would have gladly retched on the floor or called nine-one-one. Only one thing grounded me: The files weren't recent. They started in the sixties, with the newest dated in the early nineties. Before Viktor or Pierre were even alive. Arlo, no more than a toddler.

Because, yes, my first thought had been that one of them had to be responsible. That the file was some twisted spin on a serial killer's trophy box.

Calm, I told myself. *Stay calm.* And it worked. Efficiently, *calmly*, I decided that there had to be another explanation. With surprisingly steady hands, I took out my phone and made another video. Hid the folder again. Stepped out, ready to pretend with the guard that I didn't want to bleach my eyes.

But no one was there. Instead, a cluster of urgent voices drifted my way. I made sure that the coast was clear, quietly closed the door behind me, and followed the noise. In the kitchen, I found Ashworth, Pierre, Arlo, and the guard assigned to the preservation room. I schooled my face into its best *I haven't been snooping around* expression, stopped at the entrance, and asked, "Hey. Is everything okay?"

Their heads swung toward me. "Vero!" Pierre said excitedly. "Have you seen Samantha today?"

"Yeah, I did."

"When?"

"A few minutes ago?"

"Thank god." He pressed his palms together, as if to thank me, right as Arlo asked brusquely, "Where was she?"

"Right in front of the workshop. By the windows."

"Splendid." Unlike the others, Ashworth was perfectly composed. "She must still be inside, then."

"Uh, no?"

"Pardon?" he asked. Four pairs of eyes narrowed at me.

"I think she is outside."

Arlo paled. "That's impossible," Pierre said. "The doors are locked."

"I gave her my key."

Pierre and Ashworth shared a glance. Arlo spat, "What the fuck did you do?"

"I let her borrow my key. She wanted to go for a walk. Why is that a problem?"

My question seemed to send the men into chaos. Pierre rushed toward the garden doors, then halted in front of them. He patted his pockets, swore under his breath when he couldn't find his keys, and then, without even pulling back his arm to gain momentum, he hit the side of his closed fist to the door.

The glass shattered into a thousand pieces. As if it were made of caramelized sugar.

Bewildered, I blinked. I'd been at that door. I'd felt its substantial weight. I tried to make sense of what had happened, but there was no time to wrap my lagging mind around it: Pierre was darting outside at a dizzying, brain-tricking speed, and Arlo was advancing on me, screaming words in a language I didn't know.

"Stop," Ashworth ordered, inserting himself between the two of us. He pushed Arlo away from me with a hand on his chest, and gave him several sharp commands in that same language he'd been speaking.

With an animal snarl, Arlo backed off. He and Ashworth both followed Pierre into the garden—how the hell did they move so *fast*?—leaving me alone with the guard.

"What the hell just happened?" I asked, baffled.

The man just stared at me, eyes wide with…horror?

"Why shouldn't Sam be allowed to go outside? Is it against the rules in your weird home-brewed cult? Is she allergic to the sun or something?"

He swallowed and covered his eyes with his palm.

"I don't—" *Understand*, I wanted to say. But that wasn't quite accurate. Because the others were hurrying back inside, with Sam, and in an instant, the floor dropped from underneath me.

Pierre was carrying Sam in his arms, but it was *not* the same Sam I'd seen just moments ago. Her limbs hung limp, and her formerly unmarred skin was scorched to a raw, blistering expanse. Blood

seeped, copiously, through her clothes. When she opened her peeling lips, attempting to say something, I could see the gleaming white teeth and pink gums inside her mouth through a wide gash in her cheek.

What the fuck? I thought I said. But I didn't. I pressed my hands to my mouth and took several steps back, until the kitchen island bumped painfully into my lower back. Sam had been outside for a matter of minutes and looked like she'd been bathed in acid. Already, my brain started structuring the situation into comprehensible terms.

Sun allergy. Must be. Fuck. *Fuck*.

"We need to call an ambulance," I shouted, but no one did. Arlo was running his hand through the crisp remains of Sam's burned hair, and Pierre feverishly mumbled something about…

Blood, maybe?

Ashworth, who was shrugging off his jacket, replied, "Mine is best. The stronger the better."

As collected as always, he told Arlo, "Tilt her head up."

Then, methodical as ever, he unbuttoned his right cuff, pulled it back, and brought his wrist to his own mouth.

To *tear* through it with his teeth.

My knees went weak. I screamed noiselessly as I watched Ashworth lower his open veins to Sam's lips.

" 'S worthit," Sam slurred, before latching on to the wound.

Ashworth's mouth, a glistening red, curled indulgently. "Drink," he said, gentle. "You'll feel better soon."

Sam moaned with hunger and relief, her throat convulsing over and over. The noise of thick, syrupy liquid sliding down her throat hit me like a slap in the face.

Blood. She was drinking *blood*. Ashworth's blood.

"Go get Corbett," Ashworth ordered the security man, impossibly calm, even though his wrist was still…I was gonna throw up. "Arlo, we need to take off her clothes. Pierre, lay her on the table." He

continued, steadily, to lay out a plan, but I stopped listening. Because not only was Sam drinking fucking *blood*, but the gaping laceration in her face…maybe I had imagined it, because it was no longer there.

Arlo swiped a dozen objects to the floor, making room for Sam. Her injured body was a mass of red, sticky flesh staining the veined marble. I nearly lost my balance when the security guard knocked into me on his way to fetch whoever Corbett was. His elbow collided with my shoulder, and the pain knocked me awake. Self-preservation kicked in, a gust of air filling my lungs, oxygenating my brain, and it finally hit me that this was *wrong*.

I wasn't supposed to be seeing any of it.

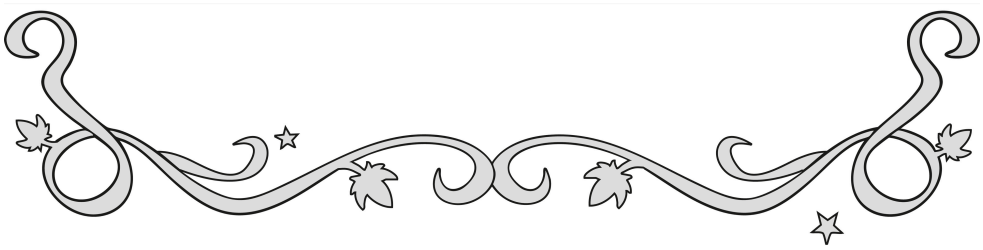
I needed to leave now, right *now*, or I was as good as dead.

I took a step back. Then another. The moment I made it past the threshold of the kitchen, Ashworth's eyes rose and met mine. He held my gaze, unblinking, even as he lifted his forearm back to his mouth to widen his incision, even as he once again lowered his wrist for Sam to drink from.

I spun around and ran.

Two minutes later I was outside, the world foreign and cold even under the midday sun.

CHAPTER 4



AT NO POINT DURING THE FOLLOWING WEEKEND DID I question whether what I'd seen was real.

I worried about Sam's fate. I beat myself up for putting her in danger. I wondered if someone from Ashworth's team—hive? *coven?*—would come for me, and whether the barricaded doors and windows of my woefully unequipped apartment would hold against their remarkable strength. I tried to come up with alternative explanations for the blood-guzzling that might fit with my established worldview. I didn't touch a single controlled substance, slept fitfully, almost called Roxanne three million times, and stayed away from liquids that weren't clear water and from solid foods whose color even approached the long wavelength of red.

But I knew what I'd seen, and I never tried to convince myself otherwise.

No, I wasn't superstitious, not a longtime believer in the paranormal. Yes, I was willing to update a lifelong skeptical stance in the face of high-quality evidence.

It wasn't until halfway through Saturday that I remembered the videos I'd taken in the preservation room.

The first thing I did was put the names of the victims from the police files into search engines, which turned out to be surprisingly

unproductive. Then again, most of the murders—and the reports agreed on this: They were murders—had been committed in the pre-internet era. Still, I found evidence that the folder wasn't just Viktor's morbid craft project. A UK family had put up a webpage asking for information on the unsolved homicide of their daughter, which had happened in 1978. An article reported that the Thailand case I'd found in Ashworth's possession was considered part of a broader group of accidents that had occurred throughout southeast Asia in the late eighties, which the local police believed to be animal attacks. Some posts speculated that a woman killed in 1982 was the victim of a Spanish serial killer, but the man insisted that he had nothing to do with it. The authorities had declined to charge him due to lack of evidence.

The police reports were real. The photos were real. And they belonged to a…a *thing* who possessed extraordinary strength, and whose flesh-tearing abilities I had personally witnessed. That the murders had occurred before said *thing* was supposedly born was no longer a source of solace, because…had they?

Ars Moriendi and its forgery should have felt laughably trivial by comparison, but there had to be a relation between the fictional monsters in the manuscripts and the real ones. So I started going through the footage, which gave me something to do that wasn't gnawing at my own hands.

By Monday morning, the shock and horror of what had taken place had…not subsided—would it ever?—but stalled, as though my nervous system acknowledged that it wasn't the right time to dissolve into hysterics. I was exhausted from lack of rest and frustrated with lack of answers. And yet, I got dressed and went to campus.

After careful deliberation, I'd decided *not* to pack my bags, use my forgery skills to cobble together a fake passport, and vanish into the great outdoors. Running may have been the wisest option, but I hated being cornered into reacting. Above all, I was a realist:

Ashworth had near-infinite means. If I was on his kill list, he would find me anywhere. Arlo had probably already applied for the job.

So I headed for class, fully aware that I might get butchered on my way. At least the trust fund kids were likely to enjoy the show.

It was the first day of the semester, and I moved through its crisp morning and humid afternoon in a daze, watching the campus groan under the weight of a new batch of students—who, just like every August before, seemed louder and ruder and more entitled than the previous year. I usually enjoyed this time of academic life, when libraries buzzed with freshmen clutching new textbooks, and the atmosphere was a mix of nervous excitement and ambition, not yet tainted by the despair midterms would bring. I found myself in line at the coffee shop, listening as the prefrosh in front of me discussed Plato's cave allegory. In the past, the snotty, hyperintellectual chatter would have made me smile. Today, I could only picture Wanda, Roxanne, and my advisor standing shoulder to shoulder as my coffin descended into the ground.

Should there be any remains, anyway.

Around four, after a long, draining day of being startled by shadows, I attended a seminar for the sole reason that it seemed safer than heading back home. "Didn't think this many people would be passionate about the Canaanite city-state," I muttered, glancing around the jam-packed auditorium.

Staring at manuscripts with a magnifying glass seemed to have precipitated my nearsightedness, so I took a seat up close and waited for the lecture to start. I unwrapped a lollipop I'd found in my office, pulled out my phone, and barely registered when someone sat next to me, too engrossed by the video of the manuscripts.

For someone who fancied herself a medievalist, I was pathetic when it came to dead languages. Still, I'd slowly been translating the Latin codex, which seemed to be a fictional story about the creation of an army to guard a…tomb, I thought, but the image quality was

not good enough for me to be sure, and I didn't want to involve other experts in this mess, which slowed me down significantly.

Then there were the Arabic manuscript and its drawings, the style eerily similar to the grimoire I'd worked on the previous year. That had been a fake, but some sections had seemed more authentic than others, so much so that Mortimer and I had both suspected it might be a Franken-book made out of two texts.

In the Arabic codex, there was an illustration I kept coming back to. A woman with waist-length, shiny dark hair. She was bending over a skeletal corpse to cup its cheek, as if giving a last blessing—or so I'd thought back in the preservation room. Now I wondered if the woman was making an offering to the dead, and if the cinnabar pigment that took over most of the page represented—

"You were never going to accept the job without trying to discover all you could about *Ars Moriendi*," someone said at my side. In clipped, perfectly enunciated British English. "You are uniquely curious and stubborn, just as you are uniquely skilled. It was daft of me not to take that into account."

My heart leaped into my throat. Every muscle in my body clenched, but I forced them to relax one by one, and glanced up at Ashworth with false serenity. He looked no different than he had a few days earlier—same freshly shaven cheeks, same expensive suit, same sunglasses folded in his hand. His shirt cuff covered his wrist, but I saw no traces of bandages. His lips were a perfectly reasonable pink. And yet he was, very likely, not human.

All I could think of was Sam, and whether she was alive. I wanted to ask, but Ashworth's presence paralyzed me.

Until he said, "Veronica."

I breathed. Swallowed. "Viktor."

"At last, my name." His mouth curved, pleased. "I was wondering if you'd ever use it."

"The first time we met, you asked me to call you Dr. Ashworth."

Silence. “You took me by surprise.” He glanced to the side. It took me a minute to recognize it as a sign of hesitation. “At the time, the idea of you calling me Viktor seemed overwhelming.”

It sounded too earnest to be a joke. Still, I replied with one. “Well, since I’ve been thinking of you as ‘that psycho’ for the past week, I’ll just carry on with that.”

The lights dimmed, and the lecturer began to speak. I faced forward, folding and refolding the candy wrapper in my hands. Wondering whether these were going to be the last forty-five minutes of my life.

God, what a way to spend them.

“Were you aware,” Ashworth said casually, “that in the days before meeting you—before the Kensington Runestone, that is—I almost decided not to approach you at all? I was concerned about how much I might frighten you.”

“It’s nice to know that I come across as a demure little lamb.”

“You are difficult to read. Not demure, but reserved, perhaps.”

“Reserved?”

He nodded. In the blue-tinted shadows, the bones of his jaw and cheeks looked like lethal weapons. “Maybe even shy. I don’t think I’ll make that mistake again.”

“Thinking that I’m shy?”

“Making any sort of assumption about you.”

I snorted softly. “Well, if either of us was off about the other, I’d argue that I should take the cake.”

A woman in the row ahead turned back to shush us—and then did a double take. She looked between me and Ashworth—*Viktor*—as if unable to reconcile his rigorously put-together appearance with the way I was crumpled in my seat, fighting off the hours until dinner with an out-of-season Halloween lollipop.

I popped it out of my mouth to offer it to her, and she turned around with a huff that had Viktor and me sharing an amused glance—until my face and heart fell.

Blood, my brain reminded me. *Burned flesh. Sam. Photos of dead people.*

I stared down at my knees, suddenly sick to my stomach.

I don't know if it was curiosity, or resignation, or simple exhaustion, but when he asked, "May I have a few minutes to speak with you, Veronica?" I nodded and followed him out of the auditorium.

—

WE ENDED UP ON ONE OF THE BENCHES AT THE NORTHERN EDGE of campus, where the neatly manicured lawns abruptly ended and the forest took over—thickly packed maples and oaks and balsam firs that reminded me of one of the illuminations on *Ars Moriendi*. It was possible, even likely, that following him here had been a mistake. But he'd bought us coffees on the way, and I decided to take it as a win.

"I find it quite interesting," he said after a sip. *Oh,* I thought, *he drinks*. *He drinks normal shit*. "That you seem more concerned about Samantha's well-being than whether I'm going to kill you."

Had I asked him about Sam? I couldn't recall. It was all a blur, and I was halfway frozen with terror. "I can do both. I hold countless worlds within me."

Behind the sunglasses, his eyebrows rose at my quoting him. He gave me one of those restrained nods, the ones he seemed to use for everything from punctuation to dispatch of lethal violence, and said, "She will recover. In fact, she already has. Corbett, our doctor, is overcautious."

"Good." I had some coffee to steady myself. I could have drowned in my relief. And in my fear. "Will you tell her that I'm sorry about…" I gestured abstractly.

"It's not your fault."

"Still." I glanced at his long-limbed, broad-shouldered body. Then at the bright, flattened light of the midafternoon sun. "Are you… Does it hurt you, being outside with me? Like it hurt Sam?"

"No. Samantha is young among us."

Us. "I see."

"Sunlight doesn't hurt me. Tolerance to the sun is built over time—except for the eyes, those remain somewhat sensitive, but can be easily protected with shades. I am considerably older than Sam."

Somehow, I doubted he meant ten years. "So, do you have to get rid of me, now that I know that…" For the past seventy-two hours, something he'd said had turned in my head like a rotisserie chicken, over and over.

You would not joke if you knew how unpleasant it can be, Ms. Mercer. The obligation to kill.

I half expected a dour *yes* or a merciful denial promptly followed by the snap of my neck. Instead, he asked, "What do you think you know, Veronica?"

So weird, having someone call me persistently by my full name. And yet, that was the least weird thing happening to me at the moment. "I know that you are some kind of nonhuman creature."

"Christ," he muttered under his breath.

My eyes widened. "Christ as in, you are secretly Jesus Christ, or…?"

"No. Christ as in, that touched a sore spot. Unintentionally, I imagine."

"Is it because I called you a creature? Or nonhuman?"

His lips flattened.

"Ah." The latter then. "Sorry. I didn't mean to offend you. Honestly, I'm surprised you're capable of an emotion as lowly as that."

He let out an elegant snort. "You have seen nothing yet. What else do you know?"

"Let's see. Your people are harmed by direct sunlight to some degree. You drink blood, and it helps you heal, even eleventh-degree burns. You're abnormally strong and fast. Likely, you've been alive for a long time. And a handful of manuscripts spanning seven or eight centuries contain information about your kind."

"Ah, yes. In the fray, I nearly forgot about your recent excursion into videography." He noticed my frown. "The cameras in the preservation room are hidden, but they do exist, and every visit is logged. Although, I should take responsibility for this one."

"Why?"

"I really should have known better than to think that you wouldn't snoop just because I asked you not to. Were the texts as revelatory as you hoped?"

"Not at all. Although, I guess I know more now than ever."

"Such as?"

"There seems to be some…death-defying elixir? Perhaps it's just blood. And after one passes, it turns them into…monsters? Bigfoots? Werewolves? Vampires? What are they called—fae? I'm not well-versed in the cryptid space. Just tell me and end my misery."

Viktor looked like that dimple of his might be on the verge of making a reappearance, but I *refused* to feel embarrassed by his amusement at my line of questioning. If I was going to be slaughtered for knowing too much, I'd love to actually *know* things. I refused to rot in the ground without being told if my murderer was a cannibal or god's wayward son.

"If you don't tell me," I said flatly, "I'll die assuming that you're some kind of were-leech. Just so you know."

"Can't have that," he murmured, a trace of warmth in his voice. "We are none of what you mentioned. 'Vampire' might come the closest, but it's not how we think of ourselves."

"I see. And what does being a not-vampire entail?"

"We prefer the word '*aptrgangr*.' We are those who walk again." A pause. "'Revenant,' in your language."

"Noted."

"As for what it encompasses, part of it is what you already mentioned. Other things you can probably deduce. The sensible stuff, that is. The last time I had this conversation, someone brought up holy water and crucifixes."

"How *weird* of them."

He hid a smile behind the rim of his cup.

This is fine, I thought, feeling as though I were watching my own body from a twelve-foot-high branch*. It's fine. The world goes on. The birds are chirping. Chlorophyll is being synthesized at this very moment.* "Are you born like that, or…?"

He shook his head. "We cross. But we all were like you, once."

"Like when?"

"Excuse me?"

"When was the last time you were human?" Too late, I remembered his earlier reaction to me calling him nonhuman. His brow furrowed, and ironclad, armored resolve wrapped around him again.

"We *are* humans, Veronica."

"Sorry, it's just…are you? I mean, do you even age?"

He shook his head, and a wave of nausea swept over me, so intense I had to ground myself. *The bees. They buzz around flowers and make honey from nectars. Bears steal their honey*. *Just regular stuff*. "Can you die?" I asked numbly.

"If our injuries are severe enough." Sam's boiling flesh zapped inside my mind, and Viktor must have read it on my face, because he added, "A few more minutes, and the damage would have been irreparable."

"Is everyone in your house a v— revenant?"

"Except for you."

"Even the security guards? Great job guarding and securing Sam, by the way."

"I am not pleased with them. But yes, revenants."

Maybe I hadn't been too far off the mark: They *were* a cult. But instead of worshipping flying macaroni monsters, they…"Are you their…king?"

"Whose king?"

"King of the revenants?"

He chuckled—a low, rich, unexpected sound that had me shivering in the heat. "No. We have no king, nor do we have a formal system of governance. But we do have a de facto leader, whose ruling is accepted by most revenants, and with whom I work closely."

"You're a political advisor?"

"Sometimes." His expression twisted into something vaguely rueful. "A fixer, some would call me."

"A fixer. Like a…cop?"

The tight corners of his eyes let me know exactly what he thought of my assessment, and I laughed—until I remembered what he'd said about killing out of obligation.

"Are you sent out to punish people?"

"Oftentimes, yes. But my jurisdiction exclusively applies to other revenants."

It was hard to picture. *Him*, capable of violence. He was measured in every response, always in check, so fundamentally self-possessed, it should have been impossible altogether. But there was something underneath that hard-shelled containment, a core of ruthless pragmatism, that said otherwise.

I remembered his palm below my face, waiting for me to spit out my gum.

The wet crunch of his wrist as it ripped open.

"Do you…feed from us?" I asked, my voice significantly lower. "For sustenance?"

His tone matched mine. "We do not require blood to survive. But it does enhance some of our traits. And it binds us together in a way that is difficult to explain to mortals."

"So, no sucking people dry?"

"As I said, we can stay alive—"

"I think I'm asking if you, specifically, do that?"

He nodded, and surprised me by taking off his sunglasses to find my eyes with his. "No. I do not. But you went through the folder. You know that others do."

"How do I know that you're not lying?"

"You don't. All you have is my word that I have never done anything like what you have seen in those pictures. However," he added dryly, humor tight between the syllables, "I may start now, if you persist wreaking havoc within my household." He slid his shades back on and I exhaled a laugh.

"And why would I ever return to your household, Dr. Ashworth?"

He set his coffee cup aside. "Because of *Ars Moriendi*." He was, once again, earnest. "You wish to work on it. And to find out more."

"But the more I know, the higher the likelihood that you'll take me out."

"Come on, Veronica."

I scowled. "Are you telling me that you don't discreetly eliminate those who discover your secrets?"

"We do not. And it's an exceedingly rare occurrence. Revenants tend to keep to themselves."

"To avoid detection."

The tilt of his head suggested that I wasn't quite right. "Because mortals are not very interesting. Their perspective tends to be limited. No offense."

"Hey. I thought we had a thing."

He ignored me. "And even if someone were to discover us…" He shrugged. It might have been the first time I'd seen him do something so pedestrian, and he was as elegant as ever. "What could they do to us?"

I didn't immediately catch his meaning. But then I considered the issue for the first time since Friday. I could go public with what I'd

learned. I could call up the local and national news, use social media, write a book—and *no one* would believe me. Even if I had video proof of Sam drinking blood, it would likely get dismissed as a fake.

I was never going to be able to talk about any of this. I would be pegged as a lunatic, destroy my career, worry my friends, and for what? I didn't care about the world knowing that immortal creatures existed. What I cared about…

I leaned forward, closing the space between me and Viktor. "Then tell me everything. I don't want to end up on the History channel discussing aliens, I want to *know* things. The manuscripts, and the blood, and the photos—"

"You will."

The nature around us went still. "Will I?"

"If you will forgive me for the…tumultuous start of our collaboration. And give me another chance."

"Oh. Is this an apology?"

A ghost of amusement. "It's a recalibration."

"A recalibration. When?"

He glanced down at me. Suddenly, I could feel my heartbeat. "Tonight. If you're free."

He is not mortal, I told myself. *He is not made of the same stuff as you*. *Words don't have the same meaning to him as they do to you. You cannot trust him.*

And yet I smiled and heard myself say, "Yup."

—

ARLO PICKED ME UP THAT EVENING, HIS EXPRESSION SO CLOSE TO a pout. I leaned forward and patted his shoulder from the back seat. When he twisted away from my touch and let out a catlike, venomous hiss, I laughed all the way to Viktor's house.

"Now that I *know*," I told him, "we can start working on our relationship."

"There is no relationship."

"Hatred does not *not* a relationship make."

"I don't care enough about you to hate you," he lied.

"I see. Whenever you see me, you just happen to have revenated on the wrong side of the bed?"

"These stupid jokes? *They* are why I hate you."

When we arrived, Pierre was waiting for me at the door, his smile flirtatiously wide. "I'm glad that Viktor decided to come clean," he said lightly. "My plan was to tell you that Samantha had a bad reaction to the sun, and Viktor accidentally cut himself, and you had hallucinated the rest of the hullabaloo."

"It totally would have worked."

"Really?"

"No. But I commend you on the gaslighting attempt."

He winced. "I only really hang out with revenants, and it's been a while since I was like you, so…"

I stopped in the middle of the hallway, and he did the same. "How long? When was it, the last time you were like me?"

"Oh." He swallowed. "Like I said, a while."

"Like, *before* the eighteenth century?"

He just swallowed.

Jesus. This couldn't be true. It had to be an elaborate prank. "And how did that happen, that you stopped being like me and—"

"Actually," he cut me off with a conflicted grimace, "let me stop you right now."

"Why?"

"The thing is, Viktor has been…very *specific*. About you."

"What does that mean?"

"Ever since we found the grimoire, he has been uncharacteristically micromanaging when it comes to…you. And

since talking about ourselves with outsiders is forbidden by our code —"

"What Pierre means is, if you would like to know something, just ask *me*."

We both turned to Viktor, who stood outside of the preservation room, looking…I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but if someone had forced me to, I'd have said: Content. Satisfied. *Pleased.* Earlier, on campus, there had been a hint of tension in his demeanor that was now gone. I wondered how much of it was related to the possibility that I wouldn't come back.

"Precisely," Pierre said.

I made a sad face. "But if you don't tell me about your favorite revenant holiday, how will I get you a gift?"

Pierre gave me an unimpressed look before slipping away, and I smiled widely at Viktor. He held the door open for me. As I brushed past him to enter the preservation room, a mug found its way into my hands.

I cupped it and inhaled deeply. Oolong tea.

How did he…?

"Come," he said, and together we went inside.

—

ON THE WALNUT DESK, HE'D LAID OUT THE BOOKS I'D TAKEN videos of, perhaps to use as props as he explained how history's first necromancy research group had cracked immortality. "Certain things, I am not in a position to discuss." He sounded less formal than he'd been, as if not having to pretend to be mortal helped him loosen up. "But I need a replica of *Ars Moriendi*, and you're the only person I trust to do the job. So I'll be as transparent as possible."

"My breath is bated."

I expected Viktor to launch into preambles. Instead, he said, "I plan to use your forgery to lure a dangerous man out of hiding."

Okay. One sentence, and already a million questions were percolating. I started with: "And by man, you mean…?"

"A revenant."

"Got it. Dangerous to whom?"

"Many." He noticed my raised eyebrow and continued, "Not to you. Rest assured, you are under my protection."

"As long as I work for you. But could he come after me later?"

His expression darkened. "You are under my protection, Veronica," he repeated, as if it made a difference. One more time, and the protection would be summoned to this room.

I let the matter go and asked, "Does this person know you are after them?"

"It's complicated. He has committed several infractions, and is no longer welcome in the revenant world, nor does he care to be. While it has been a long-winded game of cat and mouse between us, he has no idea that I'm actively attempting to draw him out."

"By long-winded, you mean…months?"

His gaze lingered on me, silent.

"Years?"

Silence.

"Decades."

Nothing.

"It's centuries, isn't it?"

"It is." He seemed slightly apologetic to have to lay this upon my shoulders. And honestly, the idea that Viktor was at least *centuries*-old made my stomach churn a little.

"I see." I didn't, not really. But I figured powering through might help. "Does he act alone?"

"If it's convenient to him. He has a handful of associates."

"Okay. And when you mention danger…what *kind* of danger are we talking about?"

"A variety. Plainly speaking, this man's actions have the potential to ruin many lives. But there are broader implications."

"Broader than lives ruined?" I asked skeptically.

Viktor ran his tongue over his teeth, thinking. "Earlier today, you said that I am not human, and I corrected you."

"I remember that, yes."

"Silas—that's one of the many names the man goes by—he would agree with you. He would say that those who survive the crossing transcend humanity, and are superior to mortals. That humans are like mayflies who move about the world with little knowledge or consequence, and no thoughts should be spared for their safety, well-being, or desires. Do you take my meaning?"

I nodded, picturing being targeted by someone strong and powerful and *ancient*. Someone like Viktor. *If Viktor wanted to hurt me,* I thought, *he could do so. Right now. I would be gone in the blink of an eye, and nobody would—*

"I disagree with him," he said, interrupting my spiraling, eyes fixed on mine. "And so does every revenant in this household. We may be immortals, but we, too, are human. You see why it matters, that we speak of ourselves as such?"

I nodded. Swallowed. And at once it occurred to me. "The police files. The photos. He—"

"Silas has been murdering mortals for decades now. And for a long time, his victims were the only trail he left."

"The files stopped in the nineties, though."

"That is just when we started keeping track of him via computers. The folder you found was a relic of sorts. Silas never stopped killing mortals for his own personal pleasure and will not cease unless he is made to. As I said, he sees them as nothing but mayflies."

The callousness of it made my blood boil. The disparity between revenants and us. "Is that what you think of, when you look at me?"

He gave me a curious look.

"Mayflies. I know you said you wouldn't hurt me, but…am I like a mayfly to you?"

His gaze lingered on me for so long, I felt it skim over my skin like a weighty, physical touch. "No," he said. Simple. Clear. Final. He didn't add an explanation, but I didn't need one.

"Okay." I tried for a smile that said *I think I believe you*. "What about revenants? Does he hurt his kind, too?"

"Silas has killed every person who happened to stand between him and his goals, revenants and mortals alike, and he will do so again. He is old, powerful, and intelligent. Above all, he relishes violence."

I bit the inside of my cheek. "And he wants *Ars Moriendi*?"

"Correct."

"Why?"

"Because it narrates parts of our history. And he believes that it might contain answers to some of his existential questions."

"Does it?"

"Some, perhaps."

"Does he know you own the book?"

He shook his head. "In fact, he's not certain that the book is real at all. Its existence is not well-documented."

"How do you know he wants it, then?"

"As a matter of fact"—he leaned back against the table, arms loosely crossed in front of him—"it's because of you, Veronica."

I exaggerated a sigh. "Must everything be my fault."

"Clearly." His green eyes gleamed in the dim lights, and against all odds, I found approval in them. When he was like this—gentler, softer, *ajar*—it was difficult to look away from him. "I've been trying to track him down for seven decades, to no avail. All I had to determine his locations were his victims, who are usually found weeks *after* he has visited one place. But he reemerged recently, when a collector began circulating the news that he had acquired a new text—"

"The grimoire," I breathed. "My forgery."

Viktor nodded. “Texts on the topic are very dear to him. And to me.”

“The topic being…” I glanced at the manuscripts on the desk. “Medieval folklore and bloodsucking.”

“And the like, yes.”

Silas and Viktor, all-powerful eternal overlords, shared a hyperfixation with blue-haired teens who traveled to out-of-state manors to spend their weekends LARPing. I found that somewhat endearing. “So, you want me to make a forgery of *Ars Moriendi*, and then…I assume that you’ll offer to sell it to him—no, that would tip him off that you’re onto him, and he’d know it’s a trap. You’ll anonymously use a large auction house, and when he shows up to purchase it…Are you sure he will?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“He came for the grimoire.”

“And yet, here it is. *You* bought it.”

“That’s because, much like me, Silas could immediately pinpoint it as a forgery.”

“Ouch. But I guess if you guys were actually alive and reading books during the time period in question…”

“Our advantage is unfair.”

“As long as you acknowledge it.” We exchanged faint smiles. “And when our boy Silas shows up to buy *Ars Moriendi*, you will…?”

“You already know, Veronica.”

“Is it…What if you come face-to-face with him, and you fight, and he wins?”

“As I mentioned, he is very powerful. Defeat is a possibility. One that does not influence my duty.”

He looked so quietly determined, so unyieldingly committed to doing whatever was needed, an untimely thought flashed through me like lightning: *How could I ever have believed that this man is a history professor?*

Perhaps I even said it out loud. Viktor's lips twisted into a playful smirk, and all at once I knew that Pierre had been right: There was more than polite restraint to this man, and I'd been a fool to believe that I was anything like an authority on him.

What was his life, his *real* life, like? Did he have a family? Did he go home—another home, a *real* home—to a partner and children who had taught him to smile like that? Did he *grade on a curve*?

"I do have a doctorate. Several, in fact. I have been employed at Rockhaven for the last few months, and I am remunerated for my work. I teach classes, produce scholarship, and mentor students. I am, by definition, a professor."

"And by other metrics?"

He reached for the Latin codex, gently running his thumb against the corner of a page. "I consider myself a researcher. I don't always enjoy the trappings of academia."

"Hmm. And once this whole business with *Ars Moriendi* is over, what then? Will you go up for tenure?"

That dimple flickered again. "I will discreetly disappear."

Right. Of course. How delightfully weird. Maybe this was all a dream. Maybe I could trick myself into thinking that Silas and Viktor weren't blood-guzzling creatures with body counts, but influential men bickering with each other. Members of a Masonic lodge. Templars. Ivy League secret societies. That summer camp for old rich men in Northern California with the tall trees.

I was just a humble country counterfeiter, caught between their power struggles.

"There's something I don't get," I said.

"Please."

"It sounds like Silas has a *very* keen eye." I chewed on my lower lip for a while, mentally thumbing through all the mistakes I could have made on the grimoire, trying not to spiral in a swirl of defensiveness and shame and indignation.

When Viktor interrupted my misery, he looked a bit too entertained. "This time he won't, Veronica."

I forced myself to stop pouting. "You have lots of faith in my growth as a forger."

"This time you have *me*. What he'd notice, I'll notice, too. And you'll be able to fix it."

"Maybe overly optimistic, but thanks. What I keep coming back to, though, is why do you even need a forgery? Why not just use the original as bait?"

He was very slow to respond, and I briefly wondered if he was making up a story for me, an elaborate excuse that would shut me up and turn me into an unobtrusive little worker bee. But when he spoke, his crisp, precise words were grim: "Should anything not go according to plan, the book cannot fall into his hands."

"And if it did, what would happen?"

His eyes pressed closed, just for a heartbeat. I understood that it wasn't something Viktor was willing to contemplate. "Nothing good."

"Nothing good," I repeated. I traced the forest in his irises, razor-thin in the low lights. Traveled down the bridge of his nose. Stared at his lips until I tore my gaze away, irritated at myself, and said, "Okay."

"Okay," he echoed.

"Yup. I just looked you in the eye. Went through the whole rigmarole. And now I feel like I can trust you, even though you are undead, or whatever." It was theater—I was no better at deciphering lies than my parents had been, which, given the number of times they'd scammed each other, was not good at all.

And yet, there was this drumming, persistent feeling in my gut. It was going to be okay. My instinct, which I rarely credited enough for keeping me alive over decades, said that it was fine to stick around.

"Okay," Viktor said again, a little bemused, and I began chuckling.

At the curious cock of his head, I waved my hand. "It's just, you know, when we first met?" He waited for me to continue. "How I felt

so…so spooked by you. Uneasy. And now here I am. *Cahooting* with you."

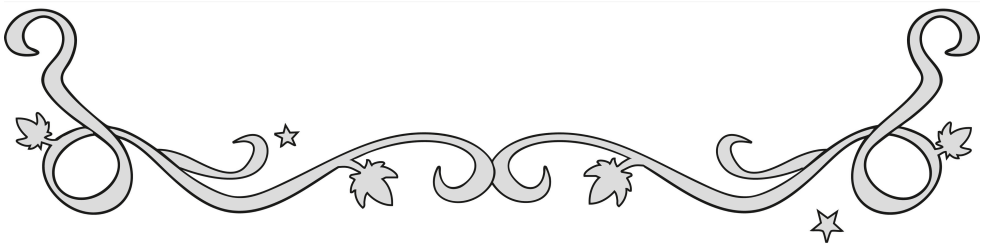
"Cahooting," he murmured, just barely audible.

I grinned and held out my hand to Viktor. A peace offering. Me, initiating what he'd attempted in front of the Kensington Runestone. It felt symbolic—a new beginning, this time with the cards laid out on the table.

Viktor looked at my hand like it was a Rubik's Cube made of flesh and cartilage, but he shook it. His was firm in its warmth, coarse, and a little tentative. I didn't understand why, not yet, but I couldn't bear the contact for too long. I was the one to break it, and rubbed my lower stomach, where a thrumming kind of buzz had somehow managed to reach.

He never returned my smile. I thought I saw something on his face, perhaps skin brightening across his cheekbones, but when I went for a second look, he'd already spun around, and was returning the books to their rightful places on the shelf.

CHAPTER 5



UNDEAD, ALMIGHTY CREATURES WALKED AMONG US—AND STILL, September came. The sky grayed all at once; to make up for it, trees exploded into fiery reds and bright golds that conjured up metal foil and antique pigments.

Or maybe it was just all I had on my mind.

I was a PhD student—one in her dissertation year, no less—but *Ars Moriendi* occupied my attention in a way a sixth pass on my intro chapter couldn't, especially once I began working on the forgery in earnest.

During the day, I was on campus, in my minuscule office now crammed with *four* students, or in one of the libraries least popular among the undergrads. I fingered brittle-paged editions of seminal works and quickly scribbled illegible words into my leather notebook, hoping that some abstruse theological theory would come in handy to build a smooth transition between the Carolingian influences subchapter of my thesis and the section on bestiaries. At night, I copied *Ars Moriendi* onto the vellum Viktor had tracked down for me, spending long moments completing a single letter of the alphabet. I curled around my sheet, adjusted the table lamp to a perfect angle, and made torturous but steady progress while the crickets chirred outside. The clerestory windows in the workshop were operable, and

sometimes, before fall showed its biting face in full, I would open them and breathe in the hoots of the owls or the rustle of dry leaves.

Marvelous, how at peace I could feel while doing something punishable by jail time. Apple, tree, et cetera, et cetera.

My routine was unremarkable, especially considering the seismic, core-shaking knowledge I now carried of the world and its inhabitants. But I adjusted quickly, because there was no alternative. Over the years, I'd learned that when faced with paradigm shifts, going with the flow suited me best. Frankly, I could have taught expensive webinars on the art of submitting to passive momentum.

I saw Viktor every night. He usually came by after I arrived at the house, the light rap of his knuckles against the workshop's doorframe coaxing my gaze up from the line I was calligraphing. I enjoyed his presence, if only because he was the sole person with whom I could discuss *Ars Moriendi*. Much like when Mortimer and I had been committing crimes together, there was something to say for the magnetic properties of being engaged in something that set us apart from the rest of the world. But while my body and brain had violently and reflexively rejected Mortimer, Viktor was easy to digest, even at his most detached, formal self.

Some nights, he'd just check on me. Others, he'd stick around. The best way to predict whether he would was what I'd started to privately refer to as The Wristwatch Ritual.

First, he would take off his suit jacket and neatly drape it over the back of a chair. (The first time he did it, I let out a scandalized gasp and asked, "Where do you think you are? A *brothel*?" His confused expression was adorable. His glare, after he realized what I meant, less so.)

Following that, he'd set his watch on the table with fastidious precision worthy of a bomb-disposal operation.

Then, after observing for a few moments, he would begin to critique me.

The first time, he took care. Not to be *effusive*—he was British, after all. But it was clear that, for every issue with a letterform or too-long ascender, he felt obligated to produce some praise.

Good use of the ink.

The spacing is correct.

Yes. Quite acceptable.

"I know you probably found this on a Reddit post crowdsourcing pro tips for educators," I finally told him, trying not to laugh in his face. "But there is no need."

"Excuse me?"

"I am able to swallow pills of any bitterness level. Without sugar. Be as exacting as you like."

"In that case." His lips pressed together. "Your *B*'s are shite."

I studied the latest one I'd written from every possible angle. "Are they really?"

"No."

We shared a smile—mine amused, his faint but warm. "Don't sweat it. The deadly trials of grad school gifted this to me," I said.

"What?"

"The strength to accept criticism. I mean, I'm sure you've lived through eras when one made a typo in the morning and was guillotined for it by suppertime. But by modern standards, I'm a pro at taking harsh feedback."

"Right." He traced the feathery edge of my quill. "Is that where you learned all of this?"

"All of what?"

He made a sweeping, amorphous gesture that seemed to mean books.

"Oh, no. Grace taught me. She was a kindly older lady who made sure I got fed when my parents were off on their felonious adventures—you know the archetype."

"Was she a forger?"

I laughed. “Oh my god, no. She was a restorer. If she saw what I’m doing with everything she taught me, she’d be so mad.”

He nodded, knowing. “The weight of pseudoparental disappointment can be crushing.”

“Oh, Grace would be mad, not disappointed. The latter would require believing that I could stay out of trouble, and she knew me better than that.”

“Is she the reason you went to grad school?”

“The reason I applied, for sure. She was attached to the pipe dream that I’d be the next great thing in art history, or something. It was all very muddled by the end.”

Viktor’s eyes were curious, sharp with a new kind of attention. He wasn’t just asking to fill a silence. He seemed to be listening, digesting, updating. It made my belly swoop in a warm, pleasant way.

I swiveled my stool until I was facing him, and leaned my elbow on the side of the table. “She was sick, back when I was in college. And she thought that having a graduate degree would be something for me to fall back on, maybe keep me off my parents’ path. I don’t think she’d read the latest stats—can you imagine believing that a PhD in *anything* will guarantee you a job?” I scrubbed my face, thinking about the students who’d graduated before me, the hundreds of applications they’d sent out to hear back a whole lot of nothing. I was a fifth year and should have been doing the same. My advisor kept asking what my plans were. “Anyway, someone mentioned Rockhaven to me, I mentioned it to Grace, and lo and behold, she’d gone there for undergrad. When she passed, I applied. Even though I was skeptical I’d get in.”

“But you managed.”

“Of course I did.” I grinned. Leaned forward just an inch, inhaling juniper and old books. Held his gaze—until he shook his head with a remarkably genuine brand of surprise.

“You *cheated*?”

"Of course I did."

"How?"

I shrugged. "It wasn't too egregious. Mostly on my standardized tests. What?" My hand found his forearm and gently slapped it, shushing away his scolding expression. "I don't need to know the properties of scalene triangles to understand why Giotto's art was groundbreaking."

"How does one even cheat?"

"A lady never tells." I considered withholding the next bit, but in for a penny…"Also, I might have changed my rec letters a tiny little bit."

He winced, pained. And maybe, unless I was in the grip of a fever dream, intrigued.

"Come on, Viktor. Since I'm the only surviving student of my cohort, I think we can collectively let those bygones be. You can't tell me that in your bajillion years you never cheated on anything."

His gaze rested on my face as he thought about it.

And thought about it.

And thought about it.

Then asked, like my answer mattered to him, "Define cheating."

"To someone who's fluent in fifteen dead languages? Never."

He drummed his fingers on the desk, thoughtful, just inches from the joint of my elbow. "Cheating necessitates a previous mutual agreement between two parties on what constitutes acceptable conduct. In the presence of conflicting ethical codes, cheating cannot occur."

"That sounds a lot like you're talking your way out of a DUI."

His lips twitched. "No need, as I have a very efficient driver."

"Affable, too."

His smile widened. "I'm sure I've done plenty of wrong things. But I have not betrayed my own moral code. At least, not yet."

"And that's how you can afford that holier-than-thou attitude while talking to the girl you hired to commit fraud for you." I grinned

up at him, and before I could talk myself out of it, I asked, "What about you?"

"Hmm?"

"Just…" I shrugged, suddenly nervous. I was beginning to accumulate general knowledge on the revenants, stray facts picked up by virtue of proximity. I let myself be lulled by how *mortal* they seemed to be—they ate and drank and slept as often as I did, they yawned and got tired, had headaches and teared up while sneezing—only to be reminded of their real nature when a security guard ran down the hallway at Olympic speed, or Viktor lifted a three-hundred-pound piece of furniture with one hand to retrieve a quill I'd dropped.

Yet, when it came to their personal lives, I was reluctant to ask questions. However long they'd been alive, they must have encountered more tragedy and death than I could ever conceive of. It didn't sound like a good idea, bringing up siblings who may have died back when people thought that the cure for dysentery was toe amputation. I tried to be mindful of that. "How did *you* get interested in history?" I asked Viktor, a little awkwardly. "Just from… being in it? Or were there high school history clubs, back in the Renaissance?"

"I wouldn't know. My early education was in a monastery."

I almost swallowed my tongue. "A monastery? Like for…priests, or monks, or whatever?"

He nodded, unbothered by my obvious shock.

"Did your parents force you?"

"No. I never met my parents."

"Oh. So, the pseudoparental figure you disappointed…?"

"I had an abundance of those. The church loves hierarchy."

"Right. Well…I can't picture you disappointing someone." But a moment later, I course corrected. "Although, I *can* picture you in a monastery. Really, this is not surprising at all. You would *totally*

thrive in that kind of high discipline, morally black-and-white, hyper-restrained environment."

He shook his head and began putting his wristwatch back on. "There is nothing wrong with discipline and restraint, Veronica."

"There is nothing wrong with ethical fluidity, either, Viktor."

He sighed, perhaps even fondly. It was easier to read him, lately. That, or he'd been letting his tells show more freely. That icy sense of distance and impenetrability was, if not cracking, slowly melting.

How on earth was someone like me teaming up with a former priest? I grabbed my quill, pulled the ink closer, and mumbled, "I was right."

"About what?"

"You *were* embroiled in some kind of cult."

Viktor gave me a flat look, then gently brushed the backs of his fingers to the side of my face. A caress, I thought at first, and my heart hiccuped—until he pressed his knuckles against my cheek, turning my head so that I was facing my vellum. "Back to work," he murmured, low and amused.

"Rude!" I yelled as he left. But it was disarming, how easy it had become to talk to someone who, for all I knew, had taken part in the Second Catilinarian Conspiracy.

By mid-September, Samantha (or Sam, as she now forcefully insisted everyone call her) was once again out and about. Our first meeting after her incident had been a flurry of hugs and mutual apologies, made even more moving by Arlo's peripheral but indiscreet seething. Sam was whole, flawless, her skin unmarred by the absurd pain she must have gone through. I wanted to ask her why she'd gone outside knowing that the sun would hurt her, but it seemed such a brutally invasive question, so I settled for, "You are… Is there anything I can do for you?" I lowered my voice, even though I suspected the revenants had enhanced hearing. Oh, well. "Are you happy here?"

Her smile was wistful. "Oh, Vero." Rationally, I knew that this woman had been roaming around since long before I was a blastocyst in the mind of God. Still, on some more fundamental level, I couldn't quash the idea that she *felt* younger than me. I was protective of her. And yet, when she took my hands in hers, it was I who felt like a naive child. "I am as happy as I can be. I am surrounded by people who care for me. And things…They will get better. I know they will."

I tried asking Roxanne for advice on how to best help Sam, but I had to be so vague and withhold so much information that the conversation backfired spectacularly.

"Hang on. Is this about the rich collector? You think he's mistreating someone who works for him?"

"No, no. Nothing like that."

"Are you sure? Because I have a baseball bat and a lot of barely suppressed rage."

"I have a baseball bat, too," Rorie said, not looking up from her coloring book. "It's pink!"

I smiled at her. "You and I can play with it during next week's sleepover, when your mom's in Boston for work." My smile vanished, and I glared at Roxanne. "He treats her well. And they're not together. It's not…He's not an asshole."

"Are you sure? Men rarely aren't. And men with money? Statistically, he's terrible."

"I know, but…I can't explain why, but not this guy." I stared down at my fingers. These days, they were always stained with ink.

"Vero, why is my spine experiencing the telltale tingle of doom? The one that overtakes me every time my best friend is on the verge of doing something incredibly stupid with the untrustworthy guy who gave her a white-collar-crime-worthy amount of cash?"

"This doesn't happen often enough to deserve a dedicated tingle."

She threw a pretzel at me. "Just watch your back."

I did. Always. But sometimes, *not* trusting Viktor was trickier than the opposite. To the point that toward the end of the month, when I saw him walk briskly across campus in a black peacoat and dark shades, I didn't hesitate before calling, "Dr. Ashworth!"

He halted and immediately turned to me, waiting patiently as I nearly skipped down the narrow path that led up to one of the campus coffee shops. Then, once we were face-to-face, I stared up at him unsure of what to say, wondering why I'd even shouted after him when I could have let him walk by.

Maybe I just wanted to see what he'd do. If he'd stiffen up, like he sometimes did when he seemed taken aback or surprised. That old nettlesome streak of mine.

"Dr. Ashworth."

"Ms. Mercer."

We regarded each other, as if proud of an exceedingly witty exchange. He was, I'd learned by now, very good at letting our silences stretch. I thought it might be because he was interested in hearing what I had to say.

"Braving the outside?" I asked at length.

"With some help." He pointed at his shades. "Where are you headed to?"

"Wilton Hall."

A nod. On a dreary fall day, his face was all corners and lush lips. "I'll walk with you."

"You don't have to," I said, even though we were already moving, our long legs matching pace, the smile I felt coming up my chest hidden in the plastic rim of my cup. In the past, I had been told that I was unpleasant to walk with—too erratic, lazy one step and bursting with energy the next—but Viktor didn't seem to mind. "It won't get you into trouble, will it?"

"What?"

"You know." Our arms brushed, fuzzy acrylic against cashmere blend. "Walking around campus with a grad student. One that's not

yours."

A tiny movement of his head, puzzled. "Why would it get me into trouble?"

"Well, I guess you don't care. Since this job is just a cover for you."

"But why would it get me into trouble?"

"Because."

"Because…" I saw it, the very moment he realized what I meant. Because his pale skin pinked up, a faint but obvious stain. "I see."

It had to be that monastic past of his. There was no other explanation. He had lived countless lives and met countless people. He had abducted me, then put half a million dollars in my bank account. I couldn't reconcile all of *that* with the fact that the possible unsavory implications of our association were only *now* occurring to him.

A young woman. A man in a position of power over her. Had he really never wondered how things might look from the outside? Was it cruel of me to point it out? "I was kidding," I reassured him. "No one cares. And even if they did, I doubt they'd buy that I'm your type."

"How so?"

"Because." I made a production of looking down at myself. I was wearing wide, discolored jeans, and a bulky sweater with a gingham-like pattern. Combat boots. My hair lay limply over my shoulders, a mess of silver strands scrambled by the breeze.

A muscle jumped in his jaw. "I don't see what you mean."

"You don't? Are you telling me you like your girls with piercings in hidden places, Dr. Ashworth?"

His posture seemed to tense. "I suppose it may depend on the place."

"Yeah, right." I snorted.

He stopped. Faced me with his whole body, frown visible even behind his sunglasses. "Veronica. Have I ever given you the

impression that I don't enjoy your appearance, or your stylistic choices, or your general demeanor?"

"Well, you did say that my body held little interest for you," I joked.

"To reassure you that you were in no danger from me." His elegant diction sounded terser than usual. Cutting, nearly. Maybe this soft-spoken ice was his version of lashing out. "What about after?"

"What about…what?"

"Did I say or do anything that may have been interpreted as criticism of your looks or anything else about you?"

"No, but—"

"Then you realize that this speaks of you more than me."

It was my turn to ask, "How so?"

"You are making assumptions about me. After I promised never to do that with you."

"It's just…" I scratched the side of my throat, suddenly mortified. "You are very precise. And polished."

"And so are you. You have to be, since both your craft and your scholarship require levels of precision that are unachievable by most."

"That's not what I…It's the suits. And the hair that defies the elements. And the whole aristocratic, old-world, authoritative scholar vibe that…Viktor, you know, own, and have seen *everything*. I thrift my clothes, go through two packs of gum a day, and don't even have a passport, so." I shrugged, thinking that would settle the matter. But clearly it had been the wrong thing to say.

Viktor's tone became even softer, and yet each word weighed a million pounds. "You think I care whether you make your bed in the mornings, or that your socks and shirt aren't color coordinated? You think that having known, owned, and seen everything would make me respect *you* less, instead of more?"

I had thought that, yes. Despite the fact that, I now realized, he had never once given me a reason to suspect it. "I'm sorry."

It took a minute, but he nodded. His posture relaxed. "You should be. But only because of what your assumptions say about how you see yourself."

I thought about rolling my eyes. Then I thought about something else altogether, stepped up to him, and grinned. "So, what you're saying is, I *am* your type?"

He pointed at the stairs behind me. "Wilton Hall. Your stop."

"Not an answer."

"Have a good day, Veronica." He was already walking away, and I smiled as I kept my eyes on his even strides and shrinking figure, touching my stomach and the flutter inside it that just would not stop.

"Cute," someone said, startling me. When I glanced to my side, I found a smiling red-haired boy. He was lanky, a few years younger than me, and I couldn't remember ever meeting him.

"Excuse me?"

"Oh. Nothing. Sorry, I…" He bent his head, clearly embarrassed. "I just meant…I didn't think Dr. Ashworth…partook."

My eyebrow rose.

The boy seemed on the verge of gouging his eyes out. "I promise I can be a normal person," he whined, and I couldn't help laughing.

"Do you know Viktor?" This was the first time someone who wasn't a revenant acknowledged his existence to me. The first piece of evidence that he wasn't just a figment birthed by my batty, overworked brain.

"Yeah. He's actually my mentor."

"Oh. You study history?"

The boy nodded. He must have been a first-year grad. "Are you faculty?"

I got the question frequently. People struggled to place my age, thrown off by my gray hair. "Doctoral student. Art history."

"Oh."

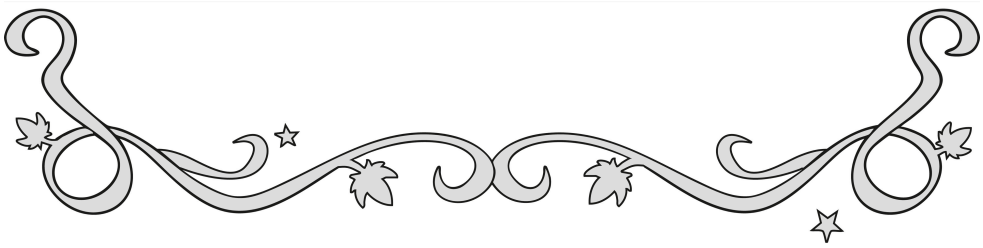
"Oh?"

He flushed. "Well. Dr. Ashworth seemed to be mostly devoted to…" He waved.

"To?"

"Theology and philosophy. I guess he contains multitudes. I'm…I guess I'm glad to know he has a friend." The boy gave me a pleased, amicable nod, and I walked up the steps of my building, wondering if Viktor and I were, indeed, friends.

CHAPTER 6



THE OCTOBER SUN SAT LOWER IN THE SKY, PALLID, AND ICED coffees turned into Rockhaven-branded thermoses. Tweed coats and knitted scarves fled the garment bags where they'd summered to swarm campus, often clinging to their mothball scent. It was my fifth year, but the bite of the chill still took me by surprise. I walked between buildings, wool hat tugged over my head, watching in disbelief the undergrads that still congregated on the grass lawn. Whenever one was racked by a shiver, I allowed myself a smug smile.

"By the way," my advisor told me one gloomy Thursday afternoon, "I saw you chatting with Viktor."

I stopped in the middle of opening my messenger bag. "Oh."

"You know who I mean? Viktor Ashworth? That British faculty member in History? Very smart, very polite. Very tall. He is always so elegant—"

"I— Sorry, yeah, I know who you're talking about. When was that?"

"Last week, I believe. Did you know that he asked me about you, back when he interviewed last year?"

"He did?"

"Yes. Well, not *you*—gosh, that sounds alarming. About your work. That article you wrote on the Passion cycle."

"Why?"

"I think he was curious about your research. I suspect he thought of asking you to collaborate on a research project, because he wanted to know about your work ethic."

I bit the inside of my cheek. "I hope you told him the truth."

"Which is?"

"That I'm the best damn student you've ever worked with."

She chortled, but leaned over the desk. "I know you're joking, Vero, but it's not untrue." She leafed through the papers in front of her. "Anyway, about this latest chapter: This is what I'd change."

Sneaky, I thought later that night, during the frosty silence I'd come to associate with the back seat of Arlo's car. We reached the house well after sunset—a common occurrence now that the days were shorter. Sam had turned on a dim yellow light to welcome us, and on the porch, a trio of confused moths engaged in their nightly battle. As I walked the path up to the entrance in the dark, I could no longer admire the ivy climbing up the brick walls. More days than not, my breath condensed into white smoke. By the time someone let me inside, my fingers refused to start their chores until I allowed them to cup a steaming hot mug for at least ten minutes. It was easy enough. I couldn't remember ever discussing Wanda with anyone in the house, but I must have let something slip in a bout of yearning, because a compact new cart had appeared in the workshop, equipped with a water boiler and several boxes of oolong tea.

I usually went straight to *Ars Moriendi*, but the evening of the conversation with my advisor, I broke the pattern and knocked on Viktor's office door. I wasn't angry or upset. I didn't feel betrayed that Viktor had observed me for months before approaching me, because he'd given me plenty of reasons to suspect that our first meeting had been a long time in the making. The Viktor I'd come to

know and like was methodical, precise, and obviously filled with a profound sense of duty. Silas had been terrible news for decades, and if I was to be a weapon against him, it made sense that Viktor would ensure that I would suit his needs.

He knew almost everything about me.

The problem, or at the very least the source of the weight that had settled in my chest after chatting with my advisor, was that I knew almost nothing about him. That had been true for a while. On that October night, however, I didn't manage to talk myself into not caring.

After my knock, Viktor's voice reached through the door, but I couldn't make out the reply. When I peeked inside, I found him sitting behind his desk, busy with a phone call. Still, he gestured at me to come in, so I did.

His conversation lasted several more minutes. He spoke a foreign language, one with a soothing rhythm, and for a while, I sat on the couch and entertained myself trying to guess which one it might be. When I started to get sleepy, I climbed up to the mezzanine library, wondering if the impression of eyes tracking my movements was anything more than wishful thinking.

The upstairs was a cozy space that smelled comfortingly like glue and old paper. The books were stacked two deep, illuminated by gentle spotlights, written in more languages than—I decreed then and there—anyone should be able to speak. Yet, as I pulled out each volume, I found that someone had taken a pencil and scribbled in their margins, a handful of questions, notes, little summaries in the very same languages in which they were written.

I blew away some dust motes to get a better look. The penmanship was obsessively neat, meticulously aligned even in the crevices between paragraphs. It was the kind of handwriting that belonged to someone who ordered his ties by color—but alphabetized. It was tenderly, poignantly familiar. It made my belly do something funny, something tight and shivery—

"Veronica."

I glanced up, clutching the book to my chest. Viktor stood in front of me, in the same way he often did when he first saw me: a faint smile of welcome, a haze of warmth around him. I should have gotten used to it—I *was* getting used to it, in fact, but the space on the half floor was so small, and the breadth of his shoulders shrank it even further, rarefied the air. I felt strangely suspended, dissolved in time, on the tip of a knife.

Viktor blinked. His quiet pleasure at seeing me went nowhere.

"Can I ask you something?" I felt dazed.

His chin tipped once.

"When people ask you how old you are, what do you tell them?"

"Twenty-nine," he said, without hesitation.

"And if they asked you where you were born…in the UK, right?"

"Correct."

I nodded. Lifted a hand to the back of my head, as if to massage it, but then I didn't. I had no idea why I needed to know about Viktor's life in that very moment. It was weird. I was being weird, and he'd noticed, too. But there was something right there, lodged in my throat, and it was going to burst if I didn't let it out.

So I asked, "How old are you?"

His eyes darkened. When he spoke, his words sounded like a recitation. "Our code forbids us to disclose our real origins, even more so than the existence of revenants. As much as we attempt to cover our tracks, any ill-intentioned individual could use historical records and biographical information to reveal our nature and move against us. When we cross, we leave who we were behind. For eternity."

I nodded again, because he was right. Totally right. A nutjob making Reddit posts about not-quite-vampires was one thing. A nutjob using primary sources to demonstrate that Dr. Viktor Ashworth's family tree looked more like a stump was another. Still,

my stomach sank with a phlegmy kind of disappointment, one I couldn't remember experiencing before.

"Of course. I get it." I braced and attempted a stilted smile. "Excuse me." I put back the book I'd been holding on to for dear life and tried to step around Viktor—who stopped me with a hand on my shoulder.

Had he touched me before? Once. Only once.

"Really?" he sounded amused. Sounded other things, too.

"What?"

"You are not going to ask again, Veronica?"

I looked up at him, eager to decipher his expression. But he was too close, and backlit. I worried at my lower lip, then asked, "How old are you?"

"I was born at the end of the eighth century. I don't know the precise date."

"Where?"

"Jumièges. A small town in Normandy."

"Is Viktor your real name?"

"With a different spelling."

It tried to picture it—any of it. I couldn't, not really, not yet, but found that it didn't bother me. It didn't make Viktor feel any less close or real or solid.

"Anything else?" he added, low and kind.

There should have been. I should have had so much to ask. But what I'd really needed was reassurance that he and I could be on even ground. A point proven. A launching pad for…for something. The weight in my stomach had gone, dissipated. I smiled, for real this time, and said, "We need to decide what to do for the red ink. Between the cinnabar and the vermillion."

"Ah. Yes, we do."

We stood in silence, regarding each other. I scanned the moment for awkwardness, but couldn't find any. Maybe I was just too tired.

"Come," he said, his lips curved upward in that lopsided way. "I'll get you some tea."

As I walked past him, toward the stairs, his hand—light, almost imperceptible, wide spanned—brushed against the small of my back.

I doubted he meant to do it, because when I exhaled a sudden breath, he did the same.

When I halted, still as a statue, he did the same.

After several heartbeats pounded in my temples, I looked back and found his eyes on me.

Neither of us said anything, but the world shifted around us, and maybe even inside us.

—

BY MID-OCTOBER I HAD COPIED ABOUT HALF OF THE MANUSCRIPT and was picking up both confidence and speed. One night I was in the workshop, putting the finishing touches on a *C* made of worms wriggling in a pool of blood, when Viktor stepped inside and froze.

"Oh," he said, eyes dwelling on the tiny figure squinting next to me. Her tongue was sticking out between her teeth, and she was writing her name over and over on a piece of parchment with a quill that I'd just taught her how to use.

"Oh, hi, Viktor. This is my friend Rorie. Rorie, this is Dr. Ashworth."

Viktor cleared his throat. "How do you do."

Rorie gave me a poor-man-he-talks-funny look that was intensely seven-year-old. "Rorie is helping me work tonight. Aren't you?"

She nodded forcefully, then returned to the pressing task of dotting an *i*.

"Sorry about springing this on you," I told Viktor, who was rubbing the bridge of his nose—a sign of *tremendous* confusion on his part. "It's a long story. Her mom, Roxanne, had an emergency at work, Rorie's dad just moved to Boston, so I was her only

babysitting option, but I was already in Arlo's car, so we met up a couple of blocks from here, and…" I shrugged away the rest of the ramble. Arlo hadn't been happy about the change in itinerary—until he'd met Rorie, whom he'd obviously found adorable, and for whose pleasure he'd somehow produced a Fruit Roll-Up.

What about me, Arlo? I had thought. *Am I not adorable? Where is my fucking roll-up?*

"Anyway, I'm just going to finish this illuminated initial and I'll get us out of your—"

"Are you the rich collector?" Rorie interrupted me.

Viktor seemed to take the question at face value. "I suppose I am wealthy. And I do collect certain items."

"Mama said that Vero doesn't come over as much because of you."

"I am afraid she's not wrong." He straightened his already straight cuff, flustered. I wondered if he'd ever met a child before tonight. Sure didn't seem like it.

"You don't smell like skunk," Rorie stated.

"I don't believe so, no. Should I?"

"Usually Vero's friends smell like skunk."

"What a subtle way to announce to the world that most of my exes are stoners," I said mildly.

"What is a stoner?" she asked.

"Don't worry about it."

"Is it someone who eats stones?"

"Sure."

"Don't their teeth hurt?"

With the corner of my eyes, I saw Viktor nod rigidly and retreat from the workshop. I bit back a laugh, but later, in bed, unable to fall asleep, I couldn't stop thinking about the exchange.

Most nights, I still took my breaks with Pierre. I had come clean about my hatred for cigarettes, which had amused him to no end and driven him to spin elaborate scenarios in which I'd loved him

from afar for so long and so intensely, I risked my lungs just for the privilege of making his acquaintance.

It wasn't particularly funny. But the night after Rorie's visit, it gave me a seamless opportunity to ask, "Does it ever happen, anyway?"

"What?"

"Revenants and mortals."

"Why? Do you have a friend to introduce to me?"

I studied him. "I can't picture you on a date."

"Who said anything about dating?" When I rolled my eyes, he laughed. "So, about those friends?"

"Hey, that's hurtful. What if I was about to offer up myself?"

He snorted. "Sure."

I turned my body to him, annoyed. "What does *sure* even mean."

"It means it helps no one, playing these games. Just ask the question you *really* want answered."

"I have no idea what you—"

"You don't care whether I, or other revenants, fuck mortals. You want to know if *he* does."

My stomach flipped. In the cool October night, my throat and cheeks glowed with heat. Embarrassment wasn't a frequent experience for me—*shameless*, Grace used to say—but when it swept over me, I *hated* it. "It's not…"

"It is. And is obvious for anyone who has functioning retinas."

"How?" I pushed back, weakly. "You don't know me. You don't know how I behave when—"

"I didn't mean you. It's him who's obvious. And by the way, since you asked…some of us do, occasionally, fuck mortals."

"Oh."

"But *he* doesn't."

A knot sank heavy in my chest. "Is it because of the monastery thing, or—"

"Fuck. He told you about that? It's even worse than I thought." Pierre sighed and tipped his head back, staring at the stars. "Arlo was right."

"Arlo is *never* right."

He chuckled, but his expression was somber when he looked at me. "He is this one time. This is new, Vero. I've known him for nearly a thousand years, and…" He rubbed his eyes. "I should have known it was bad when you fell asleep at your desk and I caught him laying a blanket over you."

"Oh. I thought that was Sam."

He huffed. "I don't even know what to hope for."

"What do you mean?"

He was quiet for some time. "I'm not sure. Maybe I'm wrong. I hope I am. I just cannot picture a scenario in which this mess doesn't end poorly."

—

I WANT TO BE CLEAR: EVEN BACK THEN, I TOOK WHAT PIERRE SAID to heart. I never thought that his concern was baseless, and actively tried not to dismiss it. But…

But: Viktor.

My world hadn't shrunk to him. I still had a full life on campus and with friends, and only saw him a couple of hours per day, always to work side by side. And yet, his presence lingered within his absences.

It's likely that somewhere, in an honest place deep down within me, I already knew what was happening. But throughout my life, any sort of remotely romantic entanglement had been blunt and unequivocally defined: *We made out three times after school. We're on our second date. We've been casually seeing each other for one point five weeks.* Back then, I thought that if something couldn't be put into words, it might as well not exist. I craved boundaries and

definitions, and the tentative, sweet thing that hung heavy between Viktor and me…it couldn't be spoken. It was too fluid to be tied up with phrases, and so ephemeral that it resisted categorization. Hazy and chaste and intoxicating enough that I could easily tell myself that—no.

I was *not* falling for some centuries-old creature.

So a few nights after my conversation with Pierre, when he dropped off a tray of snacks prepared by Sam and left mumbling, "I'll leave you two to it, since you look so chummy," I yelled after him.

"Collegial! It's called *collegial*."

But Pierre had already left the workshop, and I resignedly nibbled on a baby carrot.

"What's your objection to 'chummy'?" Viktor asked, not looking up from double-checking my latest page.

"Nothing. I mean, we are…" *Pals*? *Cool*? *Cordial*? Any of those words would have worked. But *chummy* sounded *intimate*. *Chummy* sounded like something I should be worried about. *Chummy* required a course correction that I didn't want to make. "It's not like we're baking pies for each other," I said. "We're mostly sitting in silence. Working side by side."

"Is that not chummy?" He glanced up, and it occurred to me that for someone as withdrawn and self-sufficient as Viktor, someone who guarded his thoughts and personal space like a fortress, maybe this *was* intimacy.

It definitely *felt* more intimate than any of the sex I'd had in… ever, probably. "Yeah. It is." I sat back on my stool, jittery. Grabbed one of the quills, then changed my mind and pushed two glass jars full of ink toward him. "For the last third of the manuscript, which red do you prefer for the rubrication? Since the pigment changes in the original, we should start a new one, too."

"Allow me." He gently pried the quill from my fingers. Calluses brushed against mine, equally rough, similarly placed. How odd, that

two people as worlds apart as him and me would bear the same maps upon their palms. "The last page you copied is perfect, by the way," he said, low.

"No mistakes?"

"No mistakes."

"Hmm." I watched him script two beautiful *M*'s on the practice vellum, then blot them out to compare the colors.

As we waited for the page to dry, he asked, "What are you doing after this?"

"The usual. Go home. Sleep. Unless Arlo decides that it's worth sacrificing himself just to rid the observable universe of my attendance and purposefully drives the car into a sinkhole."

His eyes flickered with wry humor. "I meant, after the forgery job is done."

"Ah." It was a new topic for us, and I sat up straighter. "Well, if you come through with the money, and you are way too virtuous not to, probably nothing? I've always wanted to be a gentlewoman of leisure."

He leaned back against the table and watched me. Sometimes—not always, not even often, but sometimes—I felt his focus at a molecular level. A skimming of fingers along the surface of my skin. The sense that he was riffling through the air between us as though it were a book, eager to get to the writing on the last page. "Before we met, what were you planning to do after graduation?"

"Well, before you *kidnapped* me, I hadn't really thought about it too hard. That's usually how it works for me." People with a past as adventurous as mine, I had observed, often found themselves at a bifurcation: They either single-mindedly strived to control their future, or they gave up on it.

"You don't plan what comes next?"

"Nope. I just stay in the moment. Try to survive. Make it through the next thing." His wristwatch was on the table, as usual. Without thinking, I picked it up to toy with it, watching the silver chain mail

mechanism of the band flow through my fingers. “What’s up with this?” I asked.

His brow quirked. “It tells the time.”

“Right. But so does pretty much everything else these days. Phones. Microwaves.”

“I value the singularity of an instrument that does not attempt to inform me of the romantic lives of actors I do not know. Or to reheat my lunch.”

“But of course.” I couldn’t stop grinning. “What was your life even like before pocket watches were invented?”

“I made do. But as someone who appreciates timeliness, I was rather tickled when they became available.”

“Is ‘rather tickled’ Viktor speak for ‘horny as fuck’?” His stare withered me, and I laughed. “Is this your favorite innovation ever?”

“I do think vaccines deserve the honor. But it holds a special place in my heart.”

“Hmm. Maybe I should try using one.”

“You do seem to struggle with punctuality.”

“Rude. It’s called being fashionably late.”

His mouth twitched. “If you were more often on time, your nights here would be longer.”

You’d spend more time with me, he meant. I was almost sure of it, because the hollows of his cheeks had changed color slightly, and because there were bees buzzing through my veins and in my belly.

“What about you?” I asked softly. “What happens after you get rid of Silas?”

I half expected some obfuscation, but he surprised me by saying, “I would like to take a break.”

“From books and history?”

“Books and history would be the break. It’s the rest I could do without.”

The *fixing*, I thought he meant. I mulled it over as I clicked the watch closed around my own wrist, pretending to myself that it still

held traces of his warmth. “Can you go on vacation?”

“It’s complicated. There aren’t very many revenants who can be trusted with what I do.”

“Can you train someone?”

“It’s not just a matter of skills.”

“What else, then?”

“What I do comes with a certain amount of sanctioned power. Some revenants might decide to abuse it.”

I wasn’t naive—I understood that his job included dealing out punishments and even killing. Still, the idea troubled me. “If you need a break and your boss won’t let you take one, just lie.”

“Lie?”

“Yeah. Say you’re sick, or something.” He seemed so unimpressed with my suggestion, I burst out laughing. “You desperately need someone to teach you how to be bad.”

“Maybe you need someone who’ll teach you how to be good.”

“I own that. We should partner up. Your discipline and my less-than-legal workarounds. We’d be unstoppable.”

“You might already be unstoppable, Veronica.” His head hung lower, as if to hide a smile. Or perhaps what he was about to say, which came out hushed and a little stilted. “I doubt Mr. McManaman would be pleased with any personal partnership between us.”

“Mortimer?” I’d half forgotten that he existed. He was almost never around when I visited the store. Wanda had decided to retire at the end of the year, and with Roxanne consulting for him less and less so she could take on more lucrative jobs, I had no one to remind me of him. “Why would he care?”

His eyes met mine, reluctant. “Are you not…partnered with him?”

“Ew,” I squeaked. “No.”

“When we met, you…” He cleared his throat. “You said he was your boyfriend.”

“Because I thought you were hitting on me. Not sure if you remember, that was before you declared that you found me fugly.”

"I never—"

"I know." I poked at his forearm with my finger. "I was just kidding."

Viktor's throat moved. "So, you two are no longer…"

"We two *have never*. And I am very offended that you'd think I'd tap *that*."

He looked away again, face turned so far from me, all I could see was the jut of his cheekbone, and—he was blushing. Very evidently.

Your seminary training is showing, I thought, and a minute later the blush deepened—I couldn't help wondering how he would act in a situation that might *really* call for self-consciousness. What would he be like in a relationship? Maybe he'd wait for the twelfth date to hold hands, and even then, no interlacing. Sex only after marriage, with the lights off, a prayer before starting, one right after. The rosary during. A staunch refusal of oral—because *sin*.

It didn't matter. It wasn't my business. Still, my skin felt warm and flushed, and as I watched the color dusting his face, I couldn't help saying, "That's a nice red."

He turned to me quickly enough to pull a muscle, eyes searching mine with an intensity I couldn't match. Yet.

"The second vermillion, I mean." I pointed at the vellum and the two *M*'s he'd written. "But the first looks like the original, and might be the best option. Any objections?"

I completely forgot about the watch I'd put on until later that night, when it was time for me to step into a steaming shower. I told myself that I'd return it the night after, and then the next one. Then I decided that I'd wait for Viktor to ask for it—but he never did. Maybe because, since I'd started wearing it, I'd been showing up for work a little earlier than I used to.

—

A GUST OF WIND AND NOVEMBER ROLLED IN, BRINGING THE scent of rain and woodsmoke. Sweaters became thicker, and in the cutting ice of the wintry air, even the campus bells sounded like solemn warnings. In the study halls, lively eschatological debates became rarer, replaced with the frantic memorization that always preceded the last stretch of the semester. Right as the month began, the first snow came: a day of blinding white followed by muddy leaves and treacherous sidewalks. No one, not even the most zealous of undergrads, looked happy to be in class.

"Fucking miserable," I swore as I took off my boots in the foyer of Viktor's house. Once I was confident that I wouldn't drip mud-caked sludge all over the hallway, I headed for the workshop. Arlo had beaten me there and stolen my usual spot. Pierre and Viktor stood in the center of the room, stern faced.

Clearly, they were waiting for me.

"Uh-oh," I said, pointing at Arlo. "Am I being replaced?"

He glanced at my work in progress and muttered something that sounded like, "Could totally do that. Wouldn't even take me months."

"I have a request," Viktor said. His expression was grim—not the blank slate he used to put up before he felt at ease with me, but genuine displeasure.

"Did you forget the protocol? You usually kidnap me before offering me a job."

I meant to cheer him up, but he remained stony. "I don't ask this lightly, Veronica. It comes with a level of risk that—"

"Viktor." I walked up to him, close enough to smell the juniper. I needed to bend my neck to look at him. "Just ask. I'm great at saying no if I want to."

He looked down at me, mouth twitching, and folded his arms. "Very well. You are almost finished with the replica, and soon we'll need to present the book to an auction house that—"

"I already know all of that." I crossed my arms, too. "Tell me what you need."

He looked at once annoyed *and* on the verge of a smile. I tried not to feel too proud of myself. "I will have to drink the blood of the director of the largest auction house in Boston, and will need your help for it."

I blinked. "You know, I kinda thought you were going to ask me to forge you a copy of a Da Vinci manuscript."

"Would it have been better?"

"Not sure yet. Tell me about the blood. Are you feeling peckish? Or do you just have a specific craving for the guy?"

All my jokes got me was a dry stare. "Taking someone's blood gives me continued access to them. It makes it easier for me to locate them if they were to vanish, and in some situations, with enough proximity, it allows me to read their intentions."

"Ha. I *have* been wondering."

"What?"

"What kind of fun perks came with being a revenant."

"Aside from immortality?" Pierre asked, offended. I'd forgotten Viktor and I weren't alone. It happened a lot, lately.

"Not sure how I feel about that one yet," I said, not looking away from Viktor. "The director is going to be in charge of selling the replica once I'm done with it?" He nodded. "And you need to be able to monitor him and predict his moves because?"

"He will be the bridge between us and Silas. There is no room for error—we must be able to observe him and track his true goals."

"And you need *me* because?"

For a heartbeat, the tendons of his neck flexed. "He likes beautiful women."

"Oh," I coughed out. "Well. Thank you. Not to talk myself down, but I'm not sure I'm the type—"

"You are," Viktor said darkly. Was that a scowl?

"Viktor is making it sound worse than it is, Vero," Pierre said, moving closer to us. "We're not asking you to have sex with him, or to touch him in any way. Viktor has been adamant about that."

I glanced at Viktor, whose molars appeared to be pressed together very tightly.

"We just need you to flirt a bit and take him to a semiprivate location," Pierre continued, "where Viktor will drink from him and send him off a little…dazed. Arlo and I will be there, too, and a dozen security guards."

"Where is *there*?"

"A gallery in Burlington. Next week, his wife has an exhibition there."

"His *wife*?"

"They are in an…an open relationship, I believe they're called." Viktor seemed baffled by the concept. "You don't have to do this, Veronica. There are other ways."

"There are," Pierre agreed. "Ways that are much more likely to end in casualties."

I could easily imagine that. "And once you have the director's blood, how long will the effect last?"

"As long as he lives. However, it will fade over time."

"But you won't mess with him, right? It's only to monitor him until you sell *Ars Moriendi*?"

Viktor nodded. "Correct. We do not meddle in the affairs of mortals."

Unlike Silas, I thought, recalling the pictures in the files. And it was that simple: If this weird plan got us closer to stopping him, then…"Yeah," I said. "I'll do it."

Pierre clapped, and Arlo mumbled as incomprehensibly as usual, but Viktor closed his eyes, as if he needed a moment to gather himself.

I had never been very demonstrative, and I could count on one hand the number of times Grace and I had exchanged physical affection. And yet, as I observed Viktor and his obvious aversion to the plan, my arms itched to be wrapped around him.

But I couldn’t do that, so I tore my eyes away. “Cool. Now that it’s decided, anyone want some tea?” My fingers were still frozen solid. I glanced at the cart, then changed my mind. “You know what? Today calls for hot chocolate. I’ll be in the kitchen.”

I stepped out of the workshop, but froze when I overheard Pierre’s voice. “—said that if she agreed to do it, you’d accept it.”

“I did.” Viktor’s voice was cold with anger. “But I don’t have to like it.”

“She’ll be okay. It’s nothing dangerous.”

“No one can guarantee that. She is fragile, and too important to put at any risk.”

“She made an informed choice. You gave her all the pieces, and she said yes.”

“Too many pieces,” Arlo scoffed. “You tell her too much, Viktor. She knows way more than what is needed.”

“I don’t tell her things because she needs to know them.”

“Then why?”

“I enjoy talking to her.”

“Oh, come on. She’s barely *alive*. She’s what, twenty-six?”

“I fail to see your point.”

“You don’t cavort with her kind.”

Cavort, I thought, sucking in my cheeks to avoid laughing. Maybe Viktor and I were meant for each other, because he said, toneless: “Cavort. Really?”

“You hate spending time with mortals. Why is she different?”

Viktor’s sigh, just deep enough for me to hear it. “I doubt I’d be able to explain it to you, since I can’t make sense of it myself.”

“She’s not good for you. You shouldn’t—”

“Shut up, Arlo,” Pierre said, irritated. “Viktor doesn’t need your permission—*you* need his.” He and Arlo started bickering, and a few seconds later, Viktor stepped out of the workshop, halting abruptly when he caught me lingering.

“Hey,” I whispered.

His nod was brusque, yet soft.

I should have been mortified. I felt anything but. "Would you like some hot chocolate?"

After some hesitation, he nodded. I smiled, wrapped my hand around his forearm, and led him into the kitchen.

It wasn't a hug, but I'd take what I could get.

—

DURING THE FOLLOWING WEEK, VIKTOR'S HOUSE SEEMED QUIETER under the low buzz of the central heating. "Should I be worried?" I asked Arlo. "Is this the calm before the storm? Are we about to be swatted?"

His nose curled, like my question smelled like the fish booth at the wet market. "If you do your job as well as Viktor keeps insisting you are capable of," he said skeptically, "then no. You have nothing to worry about."

"Is this a threat?"

"It's a *reminder* that your actions have consequences. And that maybe you should spend less time batting your eyes and more finishing your novel."

He seemed under the impression that Viktor and I were four-handedly plotting an original work of fiction, and I didn't bother to correct him. But the following day, when I found him staring at Sam playing the piano, his constant fury wiped away in favor of something much gentler, I wondered if *somebody* had a crush. I considered teasing him, but decided that the entertainment value wasn't worth being run over and left for dead in a puddle of cold Vermont slush.

By now, I knew *Ars Moriendi* was more than just the sum of its physical parts. I hadn't been able to decipher the code, but one night I'd asked Viktor what the text said, and he'd come to my station, laid one palm flat against the desk, and spent hours sight-

reading to me. We'd stayed there, angled toward each other, the original manuscript contained in the space between us, and he'd translated passage after passage—a hodgepodge of hermeticism, the fate of man, reconciliation of Christian traditions of paganism. The usual buzzwords were at the scene of the crime—*aether*, *humors*, *atonement*. Three whole damn pages about the soul, some paragraphs on nature that reminded me of Saint Augustine, a rambling chapter dedicated to the immortality of certain types of flesh.

Typical revenant shit, I figured.

My work on the forgery was almost completed, and I knew that I would mourn it once it was over. This had been my most ambitious project, and for months, from the moment I woke up in the morning, I'd felt my fingertips tingle with excitement. I wondered how I'd manage to let go of that.

Viktor, too, seemed caught off guard by how rapidly the end was approaching. He took to meeting me at the front door every night, opening it before I could even lift my fist to knock. He'd walk me to the workshop, sometimes in silence, sometimes asking about my day or telling me one or two things about his. There was little for him to do at this point, but he'd still spend the evening sitting in the high-backed chair perpendicular to my desk, watching me work, saying little.

I didn't mind it, his hawk-like presence. The opposite, in fact. Sometimes, although more and more seldom, he would lean behind me and point out oversights or imperfections. But for the most part, he sat and watched. Every once in a while, I'd look up and find him, hands gripping the armrests, and click my tongue softly.

"Relax, Dr. Ashworth," I told him once. "I'm not going to start writing in Comic Papyrus."

"Not sure I trust you."

"Of course you don't."

His throat moved, but his expression was serene. "I enjoy watching you. Even when you're copying something, there is something raw about the way you make art. Not wholly civilized."

"I'm not sure this qualifies." I laughed, pretending my heart hadn't just skipped a beat.

"As art, you mean?"

I nodded.

"Why?"

"It's not exactly original, what I'm doing."

He considered it. "I don't think that makes you less of an artist. But also, perhaps you should consider it."

"Consider what?"

"Creating something original."

Suddenly, my cheeks were burning. "I…Maybe."

"I hope you do," he said gently.

I turned to him. His earnest, serious face. I'd had phases—drawings, watercolors, calligraphy. Even my own bookbinding. I'd enjoyed them, but eventually *producing* art had become secondary to *studying* art. There wasn't time. Supplies were expensive. I'd somehow involved myself in a forgery scheme. "Do you really?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I cannot help but imagine that anything originating in your mind would be a sight to behold."

—

ON THE DAY OF THE ART EXHIBIT, I LEARNED WHAT VIKTOR WAS like when in a bad mood.

"He's furious," Arlo said when he picked me up to meet the others at the gallery. "Be very careful. You don't want to upset him when he's like this. None of your usual shit."

"Furious at whom?"

He snorted. “At Pierre for coming up with the plan. At himself for allowing Pierre to approach you with it. At the universe for containing you. Take your pick.”

The gallery was white, ultramodern, and painfully ugly. Dozens of guests already milled around, plucking champagne flutes from silver trays and stepping on one another’s toes as they desperately searched for observation angles that might make the paintings look less like amorphous blobs.

“You clean up well,” Pierre said, picking me up at the entrance—as likely to be a compliment as an insult. I’d decided not to take off most of my piercings—putting them back on could be an hour-long process, and some of my cartilages were still prone to closing up, even after years. Still, I’d curled my hair and dug through my bathroom drawer for the reddest lipstick I owned. Since my personal style was unlikely to impress the likes of the director, I’d put on a low-plunge cocktail dress that Roxanne could no longer wear because, as she liked to point out, unlike me, she actually had boobs.

I knew I looked beautiful. I just didn’t look like *me*, but on a night like this, that wasn’t a bad thing.

“Wanna take that off?” Pierre asked. “It doesn’t really fit with the ensemble.” I realized that he was frowning at the men’s watch on my wrist and ignored him.

“Is the director here?”

“Yes. Mr. Wiegand. He’s the tall, burly man in the too-big suit. By the silver sculpture on the right. Salt-and-pepper hair. He’s making a pass at the redhead.”

“I see him.”

“You know where to take him? The hallway and the office we discussed?”

I nodded, and then I was on my own. I spent a few minutes glancing at the paintings—much too abstract for me, although I did enjoy Mrs. Wiegand’s bold choices when it came to colors—and

strolled around, pretending not to recognize two of Viktor's guards posing as guests. I wasn't great at initiating conversation with new people, so when I was in Wiegand's general area, I did the easiest thing I could think of: I elbowed him.

Mr. Wiegand turned around, square face already scrunched with anger, and I gasped theatrically. "I am *so* sorry, sir. I was admiring the resin sculpture, and…" I put an apologetic hand on his forearm, and two minutes later, he was telling me all about the history of objet trouvé.

"But who decides what a piece of art should cost?" I asked, wide-eyed.

He looked like he'd just won the lottery. "Well, that is a whole other can of worms. Don't get me started." But he did start, and that was a big win for me.

Luckily, I had a lot of experience with the kinds of things that men found off-putting. All I had to do to lure Wiegand in was the opposite of what came instinctively—including pretending not to notice that he seemed to address his sermon on Picasso's genius to my tits. Appealing to these kinds of people wasn't something I'd ever really bothered with, but it was surprisingly easy, playing a part. Just like putting on a different skin for a night. A natural born imposter, just like my parents. I wondered how much simpler my life would have been in high school and college if I'd done it more often. Then I tried to imagine using this new persona to attract someone that I *actually* wanted to sleep with.

Say, Viktor.

I envisioned the two of us in the workshop and me going full steam ahead: flirty little touches, some well-timed hair tossing, a particularly revealing outfit. Vero, new and improved. I couldn't picture him doing anything but putting his knuckles to my forehead to check if I had a fever, and the thought warmed my belly like a supernova.

"That is so *funny*," I said to Mr. Wiegand about something that probably wasn't, and nodded when one of his assistants came to pull him aside. "Excuse me, sweetheart," he told me. "Do *not* move, I'll be right back."

So I stayed put, staring at the same dumb sculpture for five minutes. I almost convinced myself that it was a masterpiece.

"You look miserable," a quiet, clipped voice said from behind me.

I looked over my shoulder. Saw a broad frame held rigid, a clenched jaw, eyes like glass. "So do you."

Viktor's silence was so heavy, it sounded like a scream.

"So, do I not get a snide comment on how well I clean up from you?"

He scowled, then parted his lips, as if to say something. But before he could, Wiegand was back, apologizing to his *honey* for having to deal with a small matter, reassuring me that he was free to continue giving me that tour now. Viktor was already elsewhere, but I noticed the way Wiegand's pretty assistant stared at him mixing with the crowd, and I felt something like envy, or maybe jealousy.

I just wanted to be done. So after a handful more paintings and a wholly incorrect explanation on the historical evolution of trompe l'oeil, I said, "It's so hot in here."

It wasn't, and there was enough surprise in the look Wiegand gave me that I wondered if I'd been too hasty. But, no, he was a rich, older man, with a healthy opinion of himself and his dues. It was a given that I would fall at his feet.

"There is a balcony," he offered.

Shit. "Wouldn't a balcony be *too* cold?" I asked innocently, trying to sound like I was new to the concept of temperature.

"Ah, yes, yes. Let's just take a little break. Away from the throng." We wove between clusters of people, toward the back of the gallery, leaving behind the crowd and the pointless paintings. Wiegand's hand brushed against mine, and my stomach lurched.

It was just us in the hallway. There was an office at the end of it, and I was supposed to take him there.

"Do you paint, sir? Are you an artist?"

"Bill, honey. I told you to call me Bill."

"Oh, yes." I let out a mechanical chuckle. "Do you paint, Bi—"

It was my mistake: I'd expected Wiegand to wait until there was a locked door between us and his wife, but I should have known better—rich man, dues, all that. So it took me by surprise when his hand closed around my waist and pushed me into the wall. I didn't react quickly enough. His breath was pure alcohol and his skin smelled sickly sweet, like rotting cologne. When his stomach pressed against mine, for a moment I was smothered, no air, like falling into quicksand.

Fuck you, I thought, gathering myself and angling my body to knee him in the balls, but in that very moment, his heavy weight shifted away from me and I could breathe. Wiegand was still there, but no longer bearing down on me. In fact, he wasn't even touching me. He hovered a few inches away, eyes bulging, choked sounds emerging from his throat while his body tensed as if in great pain.

Viktor stood behind him, bent over to bite into the shorter man's neck. It was an astonishingly quick, neat job. Or maybe time flew by because Viktor's eyes never let go of mine, not as he took two, three gulps, not as he pulled away and extracted a handkerchief from his pocket to wipe his lips. Then he folded it and put it away, and once he seemed satisfied that he was again presentable, he casually reached for a still dazed Wiegand to…

Neatly break his arm in two.

The loud snap of the bone echoed horrifically. Even in his semihypnotized state, Wiegand whimpered and cradled his dangling arm to his chest. Still, he didn't seem to wake.

"You were looking for the restroom, became dizzy, and fell. You were alone. Go," Viktor ordered him, gesturing for one of the guards lingering nearby to escort him back from a safe distance.

“Did you…” I covered my mouth with my hand. Counted to five. “Did you just break his arm?”

He nodded, once.

“Why?”

His eyes flitted to my waist, where Wiegand’s groping paws had bruised me. “You know why.”

“Isn’t he—he can’t go back like that. They’ll know that something happened. He’ll know.”

“He will not. He’s in a highly suggestible state from the chemicals in my saliva, and I planted a cover story. Come on.” With a hand on my elbow, he led me away from the office.

“Where are we going?”

“Back exit. I’m going to escort you out. Arlo is waiting to take you home.”

“So—that’s it? We did it? You got what you needed?”

“I did.”

“Really?” Maybe it was the adrenaline, but excitement burst through me. “You can read Wiegand’s thoughts now?”

His lips flattened. “Yes. Relatable as they may be, they are very unpleasant.”

“Was it good?”

“What?”

“Wiegand’s blood. Was it good?”

Viktor exhaled. “No.”

“Really?”

He took off his jacket and held it up for me. “It was revolting.”

“Oh, wow.” Reflexively, I closed the warm fabric around me as Viktor opened the door. In the street, the temperature was impossibly cold. “So, um…there is blood that tastes good, and blood that tastes bad?”

“Of course.” He looked at me like no dumber question had ever been asked, but when I started shivering, he wrapped an arm

around my shoulders and folded me into him, leading me toward Arlo's car.

"Cool. What's th-the best blood you've ever had?"

He glanced away. Didn't reply.

"Come on, I'm curious. Are there specific correlations? Like, does it taste better if the person has brown eyes? Or if they are a virgin? Because if that's the case, I probably taste like vinegar—"

"Holy fuck."

I froze in the middle of the sidewalk, because that was Roxanne's *voice*.

And here, in front of me, Roxanne's *face*.

Startled, I tried to put some distance between me and Viktor—who did not budge a fraction of an inch.

"Didn't that dress use to be mine?" Roxanne asked, a shit-eating grin widening her mouth.

"Everything I own used to be yours, Roxanne." I sighed. Decided that I was too cold, too unprepared, and too high on adrenaline to properly navigate this accidental meeting, and simply gave up. "Viktor, this is Roxanne. Rorie's mother—remember, my little scribe in training? Roxanne, this is Viktor Ashworth. He…I work with him."

"Yes. Among other things," she murmured. God, she looked smug. "Nice to meet you, Viktor. What are you two doing here?"

"There is an exhibition that—"

"Alanna Wiegand's?"

"Oh. You know her?" Normally, contemporary art wasn't Roxanne's thing.

"I do. Well, I work a lot with her husband—he basically has a monopoly on Georgian and Victorian jewelry here. Shmoozing is de rigueur." She was staring at Viktor like he was a silver brooch to be assessed. "Well," she said at last. "Rorie did say that he was cute." Roxanne's eyes traveled from his face to his hand, which happened to be closed firmly around my waist. Her smile widened even further.

"Roxanne—"

"You look amazing, Vero. Doesn't she look amazing?"

The question was for Viktor. Who, I realized just then, hadn't said a single word since the start of this conversation, and whose nonplussed response was, "No more than usual."

"Indeed." The twinkle in Roxanne's eyes told me that she was entirely too pleased with that response. "Well. I hope you two have a fantastic night. Call me tomorrow, will you, Vero?"

"I'd rather snort rat poison."

"Ha. I bet—call me anyway. Bye, Dr. Ashworth." She breezed past us. In just a few steps, we were finally at Arlo's car.

"Sorry about that," I said. "She seems to think that we—"

"You should get in," Viktor ordered, strained.

"Why? I can come back inside and—"

"Because I say so."

"That's not—"

"Don't make me repeat myself, Veronica."

"I don't—"

"Because I want you *out of here*." I inched away from Viktor, and his throat worked. "I'm sorry." He shook his head. I watched him take slow, deep breaths. Saw the self-loathing on his face.

Oh, Viktor.

I smiled, cupped my hand to one of his cheeks, and then lifted myself onto my toes to press a slow, lingering kiss to the other. When I slid back on my heels, his eyes had fluttered closed, like he couldn't bear this. Like he couldn't bear *any* of it.

"Have a good night," I whispered.

I slipped into the car, and he closed the door after me. Before Arlo turned the corner, I glanced back at where we'd left Viktor. His hair, perfectly styled until a few minutes earlier, looked like someone had run both their hands through it.

—

FOR TWENTY-FOUR HOURS, I FORGOT HOW TO BREATHE, AND sleep, and eat. I just vibrated with anticipation and a bone-deep knowledge that something was about to yield. When Arlo finally picked me up, I'd been waiting in the gelid outside for fifteen minutes. "Did Viktor tell you?" he asked, merging into traffic.

"Who? What?" My heart sank. "Is this about the Wiegand thing? Is everything—"

"No, not that."

And that was all there was. For the first time in two weeks, Viktor didn't greet me at the door, nor in the workshop. I worked for almost an hour, restless, fidgety, and then gave up on being productive and went looking for him in his office. He wasn't there. Dejected, I returned to the workshop—found him waiting for me, hands in his pockets, posture military straight.

My pulse jumped with joy. "Hey."

"I must leave for a few days," he said, voice stripped of any warmth. His eyes met mine, then moved past me. It felt like a surgical cut.

"Ah," I said. It would be Thanksgiving in less than a week. Maybe that was why it felt like betrayal. Either way, a heavy knot lodged in my throat. "Did I…know this?"

"No. It wasn't planned."

I nodded, and then a horrid thought occurred to me. "Does it have to do with…?" That was the issue of discussing something that defied labels with a superpowered immortal guy, wasn't it? Without words, there was no way of properly doing that.

But Viktor understood anyway, and shook his head. "No," he said firmly. "My Sire needs me, but it has nothing to do with…what is occurring here." *Between us,* he meant.

His Sire needed him. I pictured Viktor putting together an IKEA bookshelf for a Nosferatu-like creature. "Is everything okay?"

"There was an attack. Two revenants are injured. While they will recover, the breach in security must be investigated in order to…I

should not be telling you any of this."

"No, probably not. Was it Silas?"

His lips pressed together. "It's a possibility."

"I see. When are you leaving?"

"Tonight."

My heart lurched. "Okay. Well, have fun."

"I shall not. Here." He brought my attention to something he'd set on the table. "I wish I had more time to explain, but when you get to the third-to-last page of *Ars Moriendi*, substitute the text in the manuscript with the one I left for you."

My eyebrow rose. "You want me to change the words in the replica?"

"Yes. When I return, I'll explain." He wet his lips. "When I return, we should have a number of conversations."

"Good ones?"

After a pause, he said, "I don't know." His eyes, however, were soft. "I hope so."

"Okay. I…I hope so, too." I tried for a smile. It fooled neither of us.

"Other than that, will you be all right?"

"I think so." Depending on how long he was gone, I might get started with the cover binding. Then I'd add some signs of aging, and then…after that I would be done, and I'd never see Viktor again. That's how it always worked, right?

Yup. Always. And I never minded.

For the first time in years, I felt like crying. *Please,* I thought, *let those conversations be good*.

"I mean," I corrected myself, trying to sound cheerful, "I *know* so. I am a consummate professional by now, and let's be honest, I barely need you anymore, so…What?"

There was a curl in his lips, barely suppressed. "Nothing."

"Hmm. I think it's something. Why are you laughing at me?"

He shook his head, just a hint of movement, but his eyes didn't let go of mine, and his hand traveled upward, closing the distance between us. A thumb rubbed against the round of my cheek. "The consummate professional has a smudge of ink on her face," he said, low.

I ignored the rapid stumble of my heartbeat. "Did it come off?"

He swiped at the same spot, again. Shook his head. Then his thumb moved lower, hovering in front of my mouth, and I wasn't sure what he…

Oh.

No words were exchanged, but an understanding passed between us. My skin burned as I felt the warmth of his flesh against my lips and I delicately licked the pad of his thumb.

It felt natural. Illicit. Somewhere, somehow, *liquid*.

Viktor froze so still, I wondered if I'd fucked up—gone too far. His eyes glazed over, settled on my still parted lips, and I was briefly certain that *this* wasn't what he'd meant for me to do. I'd embarrassed both of us, and now I wanted to die. I needed to run outside, source a shovel, start digging the hole where I'd finish off the rest of my life.

But then he said: "More."

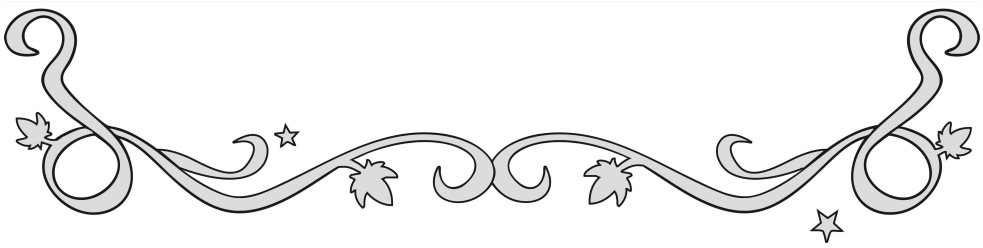
It sounded brusque and earnest, half plea and half order. A deep pulse reverberated through my body. I stopped thinking and did exactly as he wanted, watching that familiar flush spread across his pale skin. When the flat of his thumb returned to my cheek, it was warm and wet with my spit, solid with everything that made him *him*.

It didn't linger nearly long enough.

"All good," he murmured. His hand, not quite firm, hovered between us for an instant, and dropped to his flank. "All good."

He walked out soon after, but I kept staring straight at the spot he'd vacated, feeling as though a dam had broken and I was standing right under the spillage.

CHAPTER 7



THAT YEAR I SPENT THANKSGIVING WITH ROXANNE AND ELIAS AT Wanda's, and she teased me about my Mr. Rich Collector in between refilling my plate.

"Is he madly in love with you yet?" Wanda asked.

"Yes," Roxanne echoed. Rorie was with her dad for the holiday, which meant that she'd be out of town for the whole week. Roxanne was pining for her daughter, and it made my chest hurt. Also making my chest hurt, the way she hadn't shut up about Viktor for one single minute since the night of the exhibit. "Is he?"

"Of course," I lied, filling my mouth with sweet potatoes. "He mounted a valiant defense, but couldn't help himself."

"Roxanne said that he doesn't look like your type," Elias said.

I gave Roxanne a dirty look. "What? Just because he wears five-thousand-dollar suits and speaks received pronunciation, he cannot be with the type of girl who never got dental benefits and grew up drinking moonshine?"

"He cannot be your type because he looks at you like he's not sure whether the rest of the world exists, and you tend to like men who don't even know your name because of drug-induced short-term memory damage," Roxanne quipped back.

"Awww." Wanda fanned herself. "So, when and where will the nuptials be?"

"First, you're moving *very* fast. Second, you didn't even ask me if I reciprocate."

"Oh, darling. That's because we don't care."

"This is not about you finding love," Elias agreed. "We just need you to buy us a house on a tropical island."

I tried not to mind that Viktor was gone. In fact, I tried not to think about it at all. But I knew, deep down, that if he'd told me when he planned to be back, I would have probably set up a countdown. I filled my days with dissertation work. When that became unbearable, I texted Arlo, who sullenly picked me up. I spent hours focusing on the last few pages of *Ars Moriendi*, and then on the binding and the cover. Rinse and repeat for an endless, gloomy week. Then, eight days after they'd left, Sam opened the door with a smile and said, "Viktor and Pierre are back."

"Damn Arlo for not telling me," I muttered as I stomped down the hallway, daydreaming of a future in which he and I would be able to forget each other's names.

It was coming soon. Very. Unfortunately, it might overlap with Viktor's retreat from my life.

I stopped by the window to look at the garden, which was covered in snow and crows. I counted them—*is this enough to make a murder?* I wondered—until I realized that I was stalling.

I felt unsteady, unsure of what to expect from an honest conversation with Viktor, and only minimally because he was immortal. My experience with relationships was limited to intermittently good sex or getting drunk on beer while watching cartoons together, and I couldn't picture Viktor doing either—the sex or the drunken shenanigans. He and I were so different, I had no idea how we could even breathe the same air. But we had been. For *months*. With results that were quite spectacular.

In the hallway, I overheard familiar voices coming from a room I hadn't yet explored, probably because it was not relevant to my job description: a gym. There was someone inside, so I gently pushed the door open, and went motionless.

Viktor and Pierre were there, training in some kind of martial discipline. It could have been specific to them, or a shared revenant trait, but immediately it was clear that they were impressive fighters—preternaturally fast, hitting each other with immense strength, then nimbly bouncing back from each strike.

I couldn't take my eyes off Viktor, perhaps because for the first time since we'd met, he wasn't wearing a suit. Black pants tightened around his quads, and his gray sleeveless shirt was dark with sweat. He carried something similar to a kendo sword, which he swung to attack Pierre, who held one that looked just the same in his hands. It was almost too much—audiovisual overstimulation, too sudden to filter as I took in the guttural sounds Viktor made while brandishing his weapon, the blurry movements and coiled muscles, the bunch and release of his sweat-slick flesh. The hollows of his armpits as he held the stick over his head, skin flushed with effort, hair clinging to his nape—

"Vero!" Pierre called, noticing me and stopping the fight. Viktor turned to me, chest rising and falling, the jersey of his shirt plastered to him.

I swallowed. "Hey," I said. My voice sounded firm, and yet, I felt…*reminded*. I felt *admonished*. A sexual, tangible awareness of Viktor had slammed into me, and I wanted to go to him and *touch*.

"Veronica." His voice made the warm, twisting pulse in my guts that much sweeter. We stared at each other, and he seemed as stumped as I felt. This was a new theater, a new script, and neither of us knew how to perform.

What if I move closer to him? I thought.

Is his hair damp?

How fast is he breathing?

What does his sweat—?

He turned away from me and crouched down, grabbing a towel to dry his face, then whipping it over his shoulder with a violence that suggested self-flagellation.

I cleared my throat. "I'm done. With the copy. But have questions about the marginalia."

"Okay." His muscles were drawn taut, as if to hide something. "Can you— I'll come to you."

"Yeah. Sure. Take your time." I stalked to the workshop as fast as I could, a jumbled mess, and leaned back against a wall, taking a minute to deal with…*Is this desire?* I wondered. *This physical, brutal need*. *When people use the word "lust," is this* appetite *what they're referring to*? Yes. It had to be.

How fitting, I thought bitterly, *that the one to teach me about it would be some immortal vampiric dude. Just my damn luck.*

Fifteen minutes later, when he walked in wearing another fucking suit, all British nods and polite inquiries about my Thanksgiving, I'd collected myself. Mostly.

"This is perfect," he said, inspecting the work I'd done in his absence.

"Don't sound so surprised."

"It was awe."

"Ah. In that case, carry on."

His mouth curled, and I wished I could have used a magnifying glass to learn him. I wanted to study the peaks of his upper lip. That freckle, buried in his laugh lines. The tells of a recent shower, a microscopic spot missed while shaving, damp hair curling at the edge of his temple. Little hints that, while getting ready, he might have been as flustered as I had.

One had to be close to Viktor to find traces of his humanity, but they existed.

"So, do I copy the marginalia?" I pointed at the comments that the transcriber of *Ars Moriendi* had left in the blank sides of the

pages.

"They're unnecessary," Viktor said.

"What do they even say?"

He shook his head. "Mostly silly stuff."

"Now I want to know even more."

He sighed and riffled back to the first few pages. "This one says, 'My poor hand. Already in pain.' "

"Really? I thought it'd be some alchemical formula, or the location of the Holy Grail."

"Tragically, neither." His eyes twinkled. " 'Worst page yet.' 'I hope my candle will run out soon.' 'Why is it so cold?' "

"Poor man."

" 'Will this ever be over?' And here. At the very end: 'What is more beloved: the water to a tree, or the last line to a scribe?' "

I laughed. "I like this guy."

Viktor's eyebrow rose. "Do you?"

"He has a great sense of humor."

"I'm certain he would have liked you, too."

"I suspect that a ninth-century monk would look at my leggings and advocate for roasting me at the stake to purge Eve's original sin. But thank you for saying that."

Viktor closed his eyes. Then, after a deep breath, he said, "Veronica—"

He didn't finish. A knock at the door—Pierre, asking for a minute—and Viktor left, telling me he'd return soon, making me wonder what right I had to feel abandoned. I worked on the binding for a couple of hours, but my fingers never quite took over my brain and emptied my heart. Viktor wasn't back yet. Maybe he'd fallen asleep—did revenants get jet lag? I was acting clingy. Obsessive. Weird. It was midafternoon, and I decided to go home. Take a nap. Clear my head.

We could talk tomorrow. If he wanted to. Honestly, just spending a few minutes with him had been great.

God, I had it bad.

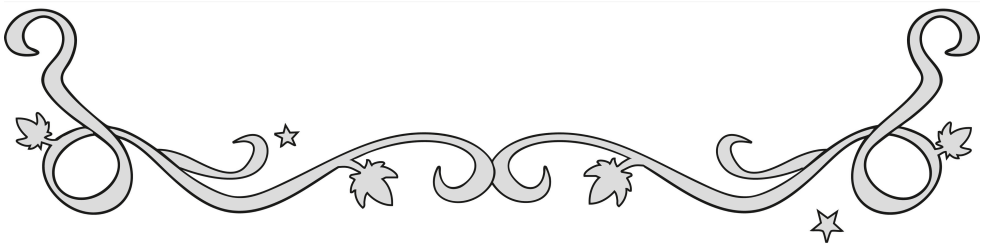
Before leaving, I wrote a note for Viktor (*What is more precious, the water to a tree, or a nap to a forger?*), but felt so self-conscious, I decided to trash it—only to change my mind when I was at the end of the hallway, run back, and lay it on the desk. Since I couldn't find Arlo, I waved at the security guards and slipped outside to take a Lyft home.

Hopefully, Viktor wouldn't hate it. The note, that is.

I sighed and made my way down the path, debating whether I should go back inside and flush it down the toilet, fondly recalling a time when I prided myself on not overthinking shit.

That's when something heavy slammed into me and threw me to the ground.

CHAPTER 8



THE PAIN WAS AS ACUTE AS THE SHOCK.

There was an *animal* on top of me—a large, snarling beast panting heavily in my ear. I screamed for help and thrashed in the snow, trying to squirm away from hungry, revolting pieces of its body.

I'm dead, I thought. *I'm dying.*

Dangerous situations were not new to me, but I'd never been attacked so violently, or overpowered so fully. I bit, kneed, spat. Scratched and scrambled away. Nothing worked. I was trapped, defenseless underneath this—this *monster*. It had to be a bear, as tall as me and three times heavier, grunting, ripping my clothes off to get to my neck, like I was a meal, like it had been starving for centuries and—

One second I was done for, and the next I could breathe again, and see the pale sun in the sky. I took in a lungful of air and quickly sat up. I was battered and scraped all over, but my limbs were still attached, and I rushed to turn in the direction of the noises.

They were *terrible*. Bones, broken. Flesh, torn. A skull, splintered. And when my brain finally deciphered what my eyes were taking in, I saw that the beast wasn't a beast at all, but a man. Two men, in fact.

One—in a ski mask, still twitching, unrecognizable—lay dead on the ground, his gray matter oozing into the snow, which now looked like it had been painted with cinnabar pigment.

The other had blood smeared all over the lower half of his face.

And wore a suit.

And calmly, unselfconsciously, ran a hand through his hair, as if to make sure that it was in order.

Viktor.

Not men, then. Revenants.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

The adrenaline was on my side, because I managed to get to my feet in one fluid motion. Either I had no broken bones, or I was powering through them.

"Did he hurt you? Who the hell was he?"

I looked around, but there were no close neighbors who could have witnessed this, and no cars driving by. The body—fuck. We were going to have to do something about it.

"Viktor, what do you…" For the first time since the fight had ended, I looked him in the eye and felt myself go still. "Viktor? Are you…Viktor?"

Perhaps it wasn't him, after all. The man staring at me from a short distance away, a mauled corpse at his feet, had Viktor's body and face and clothes. But his expression…that was new. It belonged to a predator.

A predator who had killed, but was hungry for more.

Terror seized me, and I bolted. It was impulsive and foolish—I could never have outpaced a revenant—but I only realized that I was running away when I heard the crunch of the snow under my boots.

Stupid, I told myself. *So stupid*.

But I was almost at the house, and where the hell was my phone, and if he caught me I—

A strong body slammed me against the front door, and I screamed.

"Don't. Run."

The voice was a hissing growl in my ear, foreign and yet unmistakable. I squeezed my eyes shut. Closed my fist. Tried to pound at the door for help, but he was pressed too close for me to get any leeway.

Fuck.

Fuck.

"Please," I shouted. Angry. Frustrated. The air smelled like tree resin. Juniper and blood.

"You. Can't. Run."

I squirmed underneath him, but his body didn't yield. Instead, he groaned and pushed further into me, his rigid muscles bruising mine, the heavy weight of his…

He was aroused. In the grip of some kind of bloodlust. His erection ground against my ass, hard, immense, and I let out a whimper, desperate to wriggle away.

"Veronica. Stop."

"Stop?" I let out a phlegmy, hysterical sound. "Am I supposed t-to sit here and wait while you—"

"You can *leave*," he snarled in my ear. "But you can't *run*."

I stopped thrashing. "Why?"

"Because if you run, I can't stop myself. If you run, I run, too. After *you*. Care to guess who's faster?"

His voice—*its* voice—was changing. Shifting. Returning to something that belonged to the Viktor that I…

Well. Viktor.

Calm down, Vero. Calm down.

I took a deep breath.

Just calm down.

"Better," Viktor said. My heartbeat immediately spiked again, a fresh wave of panic, and he grunted as though he could feel it. "Fuck—Veronica. Look at me."

I did. Slowly, but I did. I turned my body under his, and he was there, Viktor with the hollow, ravenous eyes, blood all over his beautiful face, inside his lips, coating his tongue. Bloody Viktor.

"You have nothing to fear from me," he murmured. "I am never going to hurt you."

"You just promised to come after me and kill me, so—"

"I said I was going to come after you. I never said that I'd *kill* you."

Oh.

Did that mean that…

Oh.

Fuck.

"If you want to leave," he said, eyes holding mine, "you can. But you need to walk away slowly. And I would rather you didn't."

"Wh-why?"

"Because whoever *that* was, he may not have been alone. Someone has to keep you safe. Since I can't, I want you to go inside and find Pierre."

Sure, I wasn't at my most rational, but something about that didn't sit right. "Why—why can't *you* keep me safe?"

"Because I—" Viktor's face broke into a grimace of pain. "*Shit*."

"Shit?"

"Veronica, go inside."

"What? Viktor, are—are you okay?"

"Knife. Poison. Go insi—"

And then he slumped on top of me.

—

"SO," I WHISPERED ABOUT TWO HOURS LATER, STARING AT MY hands and wondering whether they'd ever stop trembling, "I'm guessing it's too high a degree of wishful thinking, to hope that revenant corpse in the garden is Silas's?"

Pierre, who sat across from me, his chair on the other side of Viktor's bed, scrubbed his face and muttered, "The body has been disposed of. And no, it's not Silas."

He looked as shaken as I felt, which did nothing to reassure me. When he'd found Viktor and me outside, he'd cursed, then prodded at the wound in Viktor's abdomen. After bringing a blood-soaked finger to his lips, he'd sworn again, and then carried Viktor's unconscious body inside and called for Corbett. The entire household had been activated and in utter chaos, but not Pierre, who'd kept his cool—just like Viktor would have wanted.

And yet, now that we were alone, his face was in his hands. "But it doesn't matter," he added. "Silas sent that guy, no doubt about that."

I glanced at Viktor's slumbering face, now clean of blood. His gash had been bandaged, but despite my requests, Corbett had not bothered stitching him up, nor had she injected him with some kind of antidote. When I insisted, she'd stared me in the eye, said, "I didn't know you had a degree in revenant physiology," and then prosaically informed me that it was too soon to tell what would happen to him. All we could do was give him time to heal.

I fucking hated it.

And yet, here Viktor was: sleeping off his fatal injury, as revenants were apparently wont to do.

I wanted to *scream*. I wanted to do *something*. Anything but *wait*. "Has anything like this ever happened? The poison, I mean."

Pierre grimaced. "Yeah. It's not uncommon—we use it, too."

"Is it…"

"Deadly? Sometimes." I must have paled, because he hurried to add, "But Viktor is exceptionally powerful, and our bodies have their own ways of speedily healing themselves. There are metabolic factors that play into this, and age is a big deal, and…" He waved his hand. Clearly, he felt that telling me this was tantamount to explaining logarithms to a nutria, and I didn't blame him.

My stomach roiled. “I don’t like it,” I said through gritted teeth.

“What?”

“That ‘immortal’ is a fucking misnomer.” My eyes were on Viktor. At rest, he looked so young and handsome and *dear* to me, I had to clench my fists to avoid reaching out. “Would blood heal him? Can’t we give him some, like we did with Sam?”

“It was different with Sam. Sun damage is devastating, but straightforward. All Sam needed was for her blood to be replenished; Viktor has to fight off an infection.”

“But would it hurt to give him some? He can have mine. He can have as much as he wants. I don’t— I’m not sick, or anything, and I’m a universal donor. Maybe it’ll help.”

Pierre hung his head. “What a terrible shame.”

“What?”

“That he didn’t get to hear you say that.”

“Why?”

“It would *really* get him going.”

“How do you know?”

He laughed, rusty and unexpected. “Being offered blood by the woman you…Listen, I just know. Trust me.”

“You shouldn’t. Trust anything he says, that is.” It was Viktor speaking, and our heads swung to him. He sounded hoarse, and in pain, and yet I couldn’t help myself: I sprang to my feet and moved to the edge of the mattress, hoping that he wouldn’t pick up the riot of my heartbeat, the acrid taste of fear in my mouth.

“Hey,” I said, attempting a smile.

“Hey.”

He was paler than usual, his eyes dim and bloodshot. And I would never again call the bright chaos of what I felt for him anything but love. “Are you, um…alive?”

“For now.”

“Well, good thing we can always re-revenate you.”

A smile tugged at his lips. “I see Pierre has been giving you incorrect information.”

“Have not,” Pierre protested. “She made it up all on her own.”

“Leave us, please,” Viktor said gently.

He meant that for Pierre, but I misunderstood. When I made to stand, Viktor’s hand covered mine, holding me close to him with firm, unbreakable strength. And when the door closed behind Pierre, something happened that I’d managed to avoid for a long, long time: Fat, silent tears filled my eyes, turning my view of Viktor into a wet, glittering mess.

“Are you going to die?” I asked. “Because that would upset me greatly.”

“Is that so?”

I nodded. There was something on the tip of my tongue, something that threatened to burst free. I leashed it back and said, instead: “You can’t expect me to finish the binding on my own.”

“At last, you acknowledge the importance of my input.” There were a few droplets of sweat on his forehead. I brushed them away. Ran my hand through his hair. It was twice now that I’d seen it disheveled.

“Is that why you nearly got yourself killed? To force me to admit that I need you?”

“Worth it.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, as if to stave off all these…all these *feelings*, assaulting me with no mercy. I was under siege. Had no idea how to defend myself. “Is the poison…Are you okay? Do you need drugs? Anything?”

He shook his head. “My body is metabolizing it. I must apologize for losing control, and for putting you in danger—”

“No, no. Just…” I caressed Viktor’s head with my palm, to quiet myself as much as to comfort him. When he leaned into my touch, the lump inside my chest burned scalding hot. “Could you please not do it again?”

"Do what?"

"Get yourself stabbed to save me."

His smile widened. "I cannot make promises."

"I know you've been alive for over a thousand years. But I guarantee you, dying to save a dumbass like me would be the stupidest thing you've ever done in all of them."

"How unbreakable is the confidence of youth."

"Shut up. I know unparalleled idiocy when I see it." I wiped my tears with the palm of my hand. *Should I tell him?* I wondered, *How much I like him? That I love him? That the idea of waking up tomorrow and finding him gone is tearing me into a million different pieces?* "What can I do for you?" I whispered.

"You're doing it, Veronica." His hand traveled to my side. Lightly cupped my hip. "Just stay."

I have no memory of drifting off. When I woke up, the night was a moonless dark. I lay next to Viktor, my head nestled under his chin, a heavy forearm draped over the soft part of my side, right under my rib cage.

I fisted my hand in his shirt and let the steady thrum of his heart lull me back to sleep.

—

FOR SEVERAL DAYS, I DIDN'T LEAVE VIKTOR'S HOUSE. I ASKED A friend to cover my TA sections, and told my advisor that I was under the weather, and that I'd be working from home. Which was exactly what I did—just *not* on my dissertation. The forgery, in light of recent events, took precedence.

Viktor seemed to be recovering. Security was increased to a suffocating level, and everyone in the household fretted over him, me included. I'd check on him between bouts of work, and always found him supine, long legs perfectly straight, arms crossed over his stomach.

"He really does sleep like a vampire," I told Arlo.

"For the millionth time, we are not fucking vampires."

"Sure, sure."

I spent my days completing the binding and ensuring that every part looked subtly, appropriately aged. At night, when I collapsed into bed, I dreamed of linen threads and quills that dissolved into bloody ink in my very hands.

"I can set up a room for you," Sam offered once, but I declined. There was only one place in the house where I would sleep, and while I had never received verbal approval from the bed's rightful owner, I knew he wanted me there as well. In fact, the only times Viktor abandoned his coffin-like posture were when I stretched next to him, usually to pull me closer or to bury his face in my hair—which by now smelled of his shampoo.

Because, naturally, I'd also taken over his bathroom.

He woke up for good on the morning of the fourth day. My eyes fluttered open to find him staring at me, irises once again that brilliant, vivid green, a pleased smile on his lips. His fingers were at my temple, pushing messy gray strands behind my ear, briefly pausing when I turned to yawn into my pillow.

I wondered if he was taken aback by my presence, but he only seemed curious and charmed. "Where did you find that shirt?" he asked.

"Your closet."

"It does look familiar."

"I thought you only owned suits and oxford shirts. Imagine my surprise when I found out that you ran a 5K in the late eighties and have the swag to prove it."

"Unmatched, I imagine."

"Yup. Well—a bit matched. While you were out, I basically moved in, and let me tell you, I learned so many bonkers things about your friends."

"I bet."

"Did you know that Arlo helped build Big Ben? And Pierre has visited every country in the world *twice*?"

"I did know, yes."

"Right. You would. Well." I flopped onto my back and arched in a long stretch. When I rolled back to Viktor, his eyes were on me, a scattering of color over his cheekbones.

It looked good on him. Healthy.

"Do you think you're all better?"

When he lifted his shirt, only a pink, mended scar remained of his wound. "Yes."

"Good. Great. Because I hate Silas, and I want to hurt him as much as he did you and all those other people. I want him to *suffer*. The replica is basically done. I'm sure you'll love to nitpick, but—"

"It'll be perfect." I felt his hand nudge mine, fingers tracing my palm, then closing around it. My belly filled with warm, liquid longing. "Things have a tendency to be, when you are involved."

My heart leaped. There was not enough air in the whole world—even less so when he brought our joined hands to his face. He rubbed his nose against my palm. Inhaled the warm skin of my wrist. A pulse point. Where the blood was closest to the skin.

"Hungry?" I asked, caressing his cheek. My heartbeat was unbearably loud.

"You have no idea." His lips parted against my veins, and his tongue stroked there—a startling, obliterating heat that made me moan softly. But there was no bite. No white teeth, no metallic scent of blood.

"Afraid I'll taste bad?" I joked woodenly.

Viktor's response was a low, pained whimper that didn't sound like a noise that could possibly come from him. An exhale shuddered against my skin, and then he inched back. I swallowed my disappointment as his hand traveled up my arm, lingering at the wristwatch that I now wore every second of every day. His fingers climbed up to my shoulder, then down again, tracing the outlines of

my flank, directionless, exploratory. Unrushed, but trembling. Viktor's breathing deepened. Sped and slowed again as he sketched and mapped. When his palm brushed against the side of my breast, a guttural moan rose in his throat.

"Viktor?"

His eyes met mine, unfocused. Neither of us was wholly steady. We shook, vibrated together.

"Do I feel like a mayfly?"

Through the fabric, he thumbed the spaces between my ribs. "No, Veronica. You feel timeless. Right from the outset, I knew you would endure. So much so, I was afraid of it."

Heat radiated from him, searing my thoughts. We were barely touching, but I felt full of him, restless, stretched to infinity, and then I was arching into him, our mouths breathing against each other, almost a kiss. I couldn't remember ever wanting anything more. And yet Viktor drew away and rolled onto his back. Muttered a soft, terse *fuck*.

His arousal tented his pants obscenely. *Twitched*.

"No," he said, face contorting. He covered it with his palm, then repeated, "No."

"No?"

"Not until you know."

"Until I know…what?"

He turned to me. "You won't like it."

"No?"

He shook his head. Still, I couldn't help reaching out to him and smoothing my fingers between his brows, as if to erase the tension from his body. "Well, my hair's already gray. How much worse could it get?"

—

ANNOYINGLY, HE WAS ADAMANT THAT WE SHOULD TALK anywhere but in bed, and would not relent. A little while later, we sat facing each other in the workshop, like we had on dozens of nights before. Two mugs of coffee between us, Viktor armored with another suit, and me, defenseless in his stolen marathon T-shirt and pajama bottoms.

He said: "I have taken your blood, Veronica."

I was rarely rendered speechless, but all I could do now was watch the resignation spreading on his face.

"It's not the first time I took a mortal's blood without asking, and it will not be the last. Even with you, I would do it again, especially if my people's safety depended on it." He glanced away. "But this is different."

"Different. Why?"

A pause. "Because it's you," he said simply. And even though I should have been outraged, all I felt was a wash of warmth.

"Was it, um…like you did for Wiegand?"

A brief nod.

"Wouldn't I remember at least a bit of that? When was it?"

"The night before the estate sale."

"You mean, before the Kensington Runestone? *That* estate sale? Before we ever even met?" I read the answer in his eyes, and the warmth turned to ice. "Where?"

"On campus. Behind Wilton Hall. You were on your way home."

I had enough experience with being high that losing pockets of time should have been nothing new to me, but I wasn't sure what to do with this. I reflexively lifted a hand to my throat, patting its base in search of…what? The business with Wiegand had been so *tidy*. But going by what I'd seen in the crime scene photos, it might have been a thick, raised gash slashing my neck from one end to the other.

"Not there," he said quietly, and took my fingers in his to guide them to the back of my neck, then a bit to the left. At the top of my

shoulder blade, there they were: two raised bumps. Between them, a short, jagged line.

I inhaled sharply. "Did you…How?"

His hand let go of mine. "I broke the skin with my teeth," he said neutrally. "And then I drank. My saliva has both analgesic and coagulating properties that are activated by blood."

"How much?"

"Pardon?"

"How much did you take?"

He seemed surprised by the question. "Not a lot was needed for my purposes."

"So…how much?"

"A few mouthfuls."

"Five? Ten?"

Silence. And then: "Closer to ten."

"That's more than you took from Wiegand?"

It was a genuine question, as I tried to piece together how this all worked. Did he need more of my blood because it was diluted? Was there a conversion chart for this? But Viktor's eyes closed, and there it was, that color on his cheeks, brighter than any other time, as if he was profoundly embarrassed by his own actions. "I know," he murmured at last.

Something smoky curled in my stomach. "What did it taste like?"

"Veronica—"

"You took my blood without asking first," I pointed out. "I think I deserve to know whether it was good. Or, at least, what makes the blood taste good. Is it a specific type? Is AB your favorite?"

"No. It's complicated. And at a fundamental level, not even about the blood."

"About what, then?"

He sighed deeply. "Your blood, it's affected by everything that you are. Your emotions, feelings, experiences, fears, and hopes—

they all come together to neurochemically alter its flavor. The taste of your blood is as unique and indescribable as the essence of you."

"Oh." I scratched my temple. *And did you like mine?* I was dying to ask, but Viktor's body had already gone rigid, and…Maybe another day. "Why are you telling me this now?"

"You must understand, taking a mortal's blood is protocol whenever we work closely with them. It's a precautionary measure. We don't usually inform them of—"

"I know. Then why are you telling *me*?"

"I've wanted to. Almost since the start. And then, after you learned about us, I've thought about telling you…many times."

"But why?"

His hands were clasped between his knees, and he stared at them. "Because for the first time, it felt like a betrayal."

"I see. So…you can now find me in an Italian market?"

A brief hesitation. "Should I want it, I have some access to you, yes. I could locate you if you vanished, or read your intentions."

My brain must have been sludge, because I had totally forgotten about the pesky little fact that…"You can *read my mind*." I scrambled backward in my seat, feeling violated.

His eyes flicked away. "Not in the way you—"

"You can read my fucking mind?" I covered my mouth, remembering every single curious, odd, lustful, uncharitable, admiring thought I'd ever had about Viktor—and then realized that he could probably hear those very thoughts *now*, too, a spinning, never-ending cycle of mean, shameful, inappropriate—

"Veronica." He was at once stern and apologetic. "There is no need."

"Oh, there *so* is."

"It's not as you imagine. I don't overhear your every thought. I have to focus to tune in on your mind. Sometimes, if you make a point of broadcasting to me, or if you formulate a thought in complete sentences, I may accidentally pick it up. But that's

uncommon. Most humans, you included, don't think in an orderly fashion."

I love rabbits, I thought in his direction. *I love rabbits. Rabbits. Love them. Love rabb—*

"I am sure we can procure you one. Sam might be able to prepare them, or Pierre might know a restaurant—"

"Not to *eat*. I'm a vegetarian and— Jesus, Viktor." *I can't believe you took my blood and read my mind,* I thought to him. And then, out loud, not as heatedly as I would have wanted: "Honestly, fuck you."

He stifled a wince. "Deserved."

"God. Please tell me that you never heard me think that…"

"I won't lie. At times, I did." He lowered his gaze, eyelashes falling against his cheek. "Especially at the start, I had to make sure that you meant us no harm. But your thoughts were only natural."

My face boiled. "Were they?" I croaked.

"Yes. I am not mortal, and something inside you picked up on it— the discrepancy between what I am and what I should be. The older revenants are, the more distant they grow. Your unease is a common reaction."

Not the thoughts I'd been referring to. At all. "Oh," I said.

"It's the reason most of us don't dwell among mortals for anything but short business."

And that's what the forgery and all the rest were. Short business.

I must have broadcasted, because Viktor nodded and went to the desk. He began looking over the replica, and I followed after a few minutes, rubbing against a new ache forming behind my sternum.

"Spectacular," he said quietly.

"Thank you. I rewrote the last few pages the way you asked."

"I meant to explain." He met my eyes, solemn. "If you want me to. I don't want to burden you with—"

"You wrote *Ars Moriendi*, didn't you? The original." The possibility had occurred to me two days earlier, out of the blue. And as I

considered its implications, I began to wonder why it had taken me so long to realize it. Sheer stupidity, probably.

Viktor's lips pressed together. "I shouldn't have. It was forbidden to put this knowledge into the world, and for good reasons. But I was young."

"Only a hundred years or so?"

He puffed out a laugh, a bitter one. "I was raised with the monks. And then I was sick. And then I wasn't. After my Sire and the crossing, I let go of the church and its rights and wrongs, but I still wanted justice. Equity. I had no right to know more than others, so I thought I should share what little I had." He turned to the last few pages. "Most of the codex is worthless. My adolescent diary, if you will." He shook his head, amused.

"I did think the part on the soul was a bit much." I bumped my shoulder against his, and he leaned in, too. Lingered in my proximity.

"The end is the issue."

"What's in it?"

"The steps of the crossing. How to make a mortal into a revenant. The ritual, the conditions."

"Oh. Don't most of you know?"

"Once, yes. But not in the last two millennia, since well before my time. And it would be a catastrophe if Silas found out."

Viktor, I knew, wasn't prone to hyperbole. So it occurred to me: "The police files. The crime scenes—those dead people. He wasn't just doing it for fun. He is…Is he trying to make new revenants?"

Viktor nodded grimly.

"Fuck. That's grotesque. So it's just…trial and error for him?"

"Silas is of my Sire, a few centuries older than I am. About five hundred years ago, he decided that the world should be his for the taking."

I wondered if Viktor considered Silas a brother. "Why does he want to make new revenants?"

"He would no doubt attempt to create his own army. Take over our Sire's leadership."

"And is there a limit to the number of revenants that can exist at any given time?"

"Not strictly, no. But the process is not as simple as putting someone through the crossing. A revenant must be old and powerful to make another. Otherwise, even after performing the ritual correctly, they'll only kill the mortal with unspeakable pain. Not all revenants are conscious of their limitations. And then…much like in yours, there are ethics to our society that have developed throughout history. The crossing cannot be imposed on someone, but must be pre-agreed-upon between revenant and mortal. A bloodline's eldest Sire must grant permission. Above all, not everyone is psychologically capable of accepting immortality, and not all the fledglings have an easy transit."

"What does that mean?"

He glanced at the closed door of the workshop. "Sam's crossing was over eight decades ago, and she has yet to adjust."

"Oh. Is that why she…The sun? That one time?"

"Yes. She was made against her will, and with no preparation. She didn't know about revenants before becoming one, and her Sire put her through the crossing because he found her beautiful and wanted her for himself. He discarded her because, after many years, she still wasn't able to think rationally, and Pierre found her starving and confused not long after. She has yet to regain memories of her mortal life. In fact, she might never do so. And during times of confusion, she is a danger to herself."

"Who made her?"

"Her Sire is also Arlo's. An ancient revenant who has since been punished for his crimes."

"Punished by you?"

Viktor nodded, like the fixer he'd made himself into. Enforcer. Assassin. Not a particularly happy one.

God, he really needed that break.

"What about you?" I asked. "How many revenants have you made?"

"None. Nor will I." He lowered his chin. "I learned the rules of the ritual young, but only because I was where I should not have been, and saw my Sire perform a crossing. I had the best intentions when I wrote *Ars Moriendi*, but the existence of people like Silas makes the knowledge too dangerous to be spread. When news broke that the codex existed, revenants waged wars to obtain it, and I spent centuries convincing them that it had been destroyed. *Ars Moriendi* has begot nothing but chaos and death. As its author, it is my duty to use it to eliminate the most dangerous revenant in recent history."

He closed the replica, and I studied the easy curl of his hand around the spine. "What I don't understand is, you did the original. Why didn't you forge the copy yourself?"

He set the book aside and took off his jacket, a gesture so familiar, it may as well have lived in my head. He slowly unbuttoned his cuff to show me a long white scar that extended from the knuckle of his right index finger up to the wrist. I remembered noticing it the very first time we met. "It was several centuries ago, during a fight. It healed quickly and well, but it must have been a lightly poisoned blade, because something happened as the muscles and tendons stitched themselves together. I can no longer transcribe as skillfully as I used to. And I couldn't risk the original falling into Silas's hands."

I reached forward. Let my index finger move up and down the serrated line. Felt his pulse jump—or maybe it was mine.

I pulled my hand back to clench it at my side, letting a burst of courage pop. "I have a question. I already asked Pierre once, but his answer was…well. You know Pierre."

Viktor regarded me with curiosity.

"Do revenants marry each other, or spend their eternities together, or pair up, throuple up…that kind of stuff?"

"Some do."

"Many?"

"I have not taken a survey in centuries."

Does he not know? I wondered. *Does he really not realize what I'm asking?* And then I remembered that he could read my mind, that there was no point being fucking precious about any of this. "And I have been told that you guys have sex."

In the silence, I heard the distant sounds of Sam puttering around the kitchen. "I imagine so," he said. Carefully.

All those weeks ago, Pierre had been right: I was utterly uninterested in the general customs of revenants. *But they told me that* you *don't, Viktor?*

The only tell that he'd picked up on my thought was a bobbing movement in his throat. "I don't, no."

Of course, of *course*, I wanted to ask why. But that would have been way too intrusive a question—

"Because I have not been…keen."

"Because of how you were raised?"

"At the beginning, yes. And for a long time after. Even after I knew better, it was difficult not to think of it as a moral failing, or a sin."

"Do you still think it's a…a sin?"

"No. But I spent the last several hundred years making up for a stupid mistake from my youth, and wanting seemed…inconvenient."

"Inconvenient."

"And easily avoidable."

Was that what was happening between us? Was I an inconvenience? Was he trying to stop wanting me? My heart—stupid, weak, treacherous—bottomed out in my belly. I forced my mind to blank itself, begged it not to let Viktor know that I…

But why, though? I hadn't done anything wrong, had I? I'd simply fallen, just a little bit, in love.

"I think maybe I…maybe I saw something here that was never meant to be."

His eyes briefly shut. "You didn't, Veronica. No."

"Oh."

"I have been alive for over a thousand years. I know how to make myself not want," he whispered. "It was there. But I knew precisely what to do to make it go away, and I—"

There was a knock, and I almost screamed my fury. Arlo peeked in from the half-open door, and I took a step away from Viktor like a teenager caught making out in a cookie jar. Even though we'd already been at a perfectly respectable distance, and Viktor stayed exactly where he was.

"Still doing good?" Arlo asked warmly. Not to me, then.

"Yes," Viktor muttered, turning away from both him and me, busying himself with a practice parchment that I should have already thrown away. He scratched the paper with one of the old quills, like a boy with a fidget spinner. His nape was a lively pink.

We'd been on the *verge* of something. Maybe something bad, but *something*. We were having that conversation, at last. I didn't care that Arlo thought that it had gotten late, or that there was going to be a storm, or—

"Vero?" Arlo said from the door. For the second time, I realized.

"Yeah."

"I said, should I take you home? Is there anything you need?"

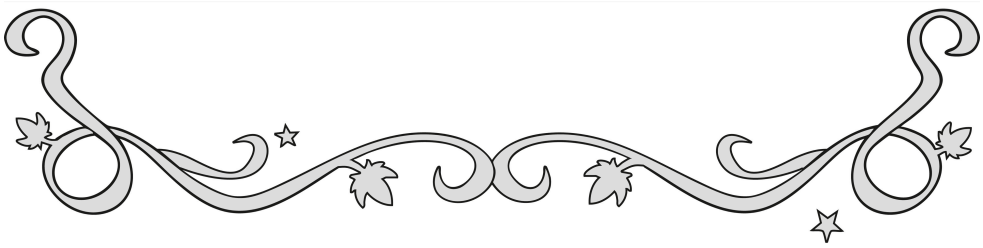
I was about to reply with a frustrated, resigned, "Sure," but with a twist of his wrist, Viktor turned the piece of parchment in my direction. There, in the same uncial script I'd been using for the last few months, he had written:

I tried not to want you.
It didn't work.

Arlo was talking about street closures. I looked up to meet Viktor's eyes. And the determination I found there may have been as novel to him as it was to me.

So I smiled, and said, "Thanks, Arlo. I don't think I'll need a ride today."

CHAPTER 9



IT WAS ALMOST POETIC, HOW QUICKLY VIKTOR AND I transitioned from months of casual hand brushing and timid touches to falling together on top of his bed. The bounce in the mattress knocked our teeth together, and I felt a pair of callused hands fumble under the hem of my shirt.

The pain, at least, reminded me of something.

"Wait," I said, pulling back, laughing silently at the crestfallen, silent plea of *don't stop, don't go* in his eyes.

"What?"

"Just curious." My hand went to his lips, and once they parted for me, I traced the outline of his teeth with my fingers, pressing the pad of my thumb to the underside of a canine.

He shuddered. "Christ. You are…"

I inspected them, tried to see if my skin would break. Nothing happened, except for Viktor's exhaled rush, the rumble in his throat.

"I'm…what?" I asked.

"Very bad. Or very good, I cannot decide."

He had always been quiet. Composed. In control of himself. Perhaps that was the reason I enjoyed the dissolution of his restraint so much. I watched the greedy, flustered look in his wide eyes as I

undressed for him, as though he couldn't wrap his head around me. I felt a deep, resonant kind of pleasure in pleasing him.

This was new for me, too. Before Viktor, sex had never been particularly mindful. Just something to rush through, rather than savor. "This okay?" I asked, coming to kneel on top of his thighs, unbuttoning his pants. His erection jerked under my fingers, eager.

He nodded, rigid. "Yes. Just, you are…" His gaze was trained on my body—hair falling over my shoulders, the jiggle of my tits, the vee between my hips. "Remarkable," he said, sounding exactly like the Viktor who'd found me by the Kensington Runestone, back when the leaves were still green.

"Remember when you said that you had no interest in my body?" I laughed, cupping him through his boxers, watching as his eyes rolled back in his head, fists twisted into the bedding.

"I was not being truthful," he rasped.

"But you looked at me so solemnly. Maybe you didn't know that you were lying?"

"I knew. I…I knew, Veronica. *God*, a minute. This is—good. I need *a minute*."

But we couldn't stop momentum. Once we were both naked, there was no patience to be found. I straddled him, moving my hips against his, my wetness meeting the plane of his stomach. His breath came fast, an about-to-snap coil to his muscles. "Veronica," he whispered, sounding uncertain, hands hovering just over the skin of my thighs, as if he didn't know where they should—could—go. I felt him palm the curve above my hip twice, then retreat. So I grinned, wrapped my fingers around his wrists, and moved his hands up to cup my breasts. Viktor shuddered, and swore. His grip tightened and again he said, "You are so…"

"Remarkable?"

His laughter was exhaled, incredulous. "Noteworthy."

He was inexperienced, but not naive. Shy, but not self-conscious. Overwhelmed, but never selfish.

"You know the mechanics, right?" I asked, just because, and then yelped when the gentle sucking at my neck turned into a bite.

"In the last four months, I've thought about little but the mechanics."

"Good." Breathing was becoming difficult. "Good, because we don't have to have *sex* sex—*ah*." I arched into him when his mouth found my nipple. He seemed fascinated by the piercing that ran through it. Worried at it with his tongue until I was so wet, I was afraid he'd wonder if there was something wrong with me. "There are so many things we could try, and—"

"I know." His eyes fell to the place where our bodies could have so easily joined. A wrong angle, a too-eager thrust, and he'd have been inside me. "I know we don't have to, but *can* we? You feel like…"

"Like what?"

"Like you were created for my own sexual pleasure." He let out a rueful sound. "Is that a terrible thing to say?"

"No," I told him. I'd never been more aroused. "Can you…have children?"

Viktor shook his head, and my hand slid between us. I took him in my palm, that large, trembling heat, watched his swollen lips part in wonder. I had to lean forward, kiss him lightly. Somehow, our first. Perhaps *his* first.

Viktor exhaled. I licked his full lips as I drew circles around the delicate head of his cock.

"The first time I saw you touch a book," he said between ragged breaths, "I thought…"

"What?" I gripped his length and felt a slight convulsion ripple through him.

"That your hands would feel good."

"And do they?"

He nodded, his thoughts dissolving stroke by stroke. "I hadn't," he whispered. "Before."

"You hadn't what?"

"Thought about somebody's hands like that." My belly clenched and my thighs quivered, and when every other breath of his was a grunt, I positioned him at my entrance, found his eyes, and gradually pushed myself down.

"Slow," I said, both to him and to myself, working him in gradually, in increments. "We have to…Slow, please." I watched the first two inches of him disappear inside me and felt the pleasure pool within—from being filled, from his skin slick against mine, from his lost, spellbound expression. Forced myself to breathe through it. "Okay?"

He nodded. "More than okay."

I strained to take more, even as my mind went fuzzy. "Remarkable?" I gained another inch, and saw it, clear as day, the moment it turned so good for Viktor, pleasure blanked out his mind: His neck arched, his hips canted, and his cock slammed inside me all at once, only stopping when he bottomed out.

I lost my balance and fell on top of him. I couldn't breathe. A mewling sound of pleasure-pain slipped out of me, and it hurt, the heavy press inside me, too deep, split open, and—

"Fuck." Viktor shuddered, a deep, heated flush spreading all over his skin. I could feel him catch up with the last few seconds. Realize that I was still adjusting, trembling around him, maybe too tight, maybe hurting.

He swore again. "Sorry. I'm sorry— It feels so *fucking*—"

"It's okay." Tears stung my eyes and I bit them back, leaning down to kiss him. He immediately arched up, meeting my mouth, pushing my hair back. His tongue stroking against mine, sloppy and clumsy and distracted. At once, it was good again. "I'm sorry," he repeated between kisses. "I'll try to be less…"

"Horny?"

He groaned. Hid a smile in my neck. Bit me without breaking the skin. "That might not be possible."

It still hurt a little, but I ground against him, slow little circles, then wider ones, and after that, it just felt perfect. Slipping, wet sounds rising from between us, the sweat of his body sliding against mine. I tried different angles, catalogued Viktor's and my reactions, wondered about all the things we could—would—do together. I looked down at him, feeling full of love. Listened to his groans, barely held back. Ran my lips against his red cheeks and slick temples, felt his teeth marks bloom on my shoulders, relished the friction he stoked inside me.

"I didn't know," he said to me. I found the pulse hammering in his throat and sucked it. "I had no idea."

It was too fast. I'd wanted to draw it out. Neither of us could help it, though. I felt him start to buck uncontrollably inside me, his breath hitching. I put my hand between us to stroke myself, and Viktor edged it away to touch me himself. "Like this?"

I shook my head, close, frustrated.

"This?"

Better, but not quite there.

"Fuck, Veronica. *Show* me."

My hand joined his, and it took so little: We got it just right, and he felt me clenching around him, and then he knew—without me speaking, without reading my mind, he knew my tells, my pleasure, and my orgasm was so hard, I felt it rewire my brain, create new nerve endings. And when my vision came back, I watched Viktor as he came, the look on his face as he mouthed my name, the grip of his hands as they clutched me to him, and knew that out of all the women who'd lived in the past thirteen centuries, I was undoubtedly the luckiest.

—

HE MADE ME LAUGH AFTERWARD–MY BODY STILL ON TOP OF HIS, aftershocks pressing hard against sweaty against soft, one hand

twined with his above our heads, palm to palm—because he asked, "Can we do it again?"

"Glad you liked it," I murmured, hiding my smile in his chest. Felt his fingers clinging to my hip like a prayer.

"I did." He was still catching his breath. "It was…"

"Noteworthy?"

His chuckle was exhaled, pure joy. "Remarkable."

The second time was somewhat slower, somewhat less awkward, somewhat better. We were on our sides, legs braided together, and even as we burned, we kept smiling, breathed into each other's mouths, licked sweat off slick muscles, and when I felt so full that I might never recover, I tightened my arms around his neck and let the pleasure come. My vision spotted, fireworks exploded across my eyelids. I savored the groan he exhaled against my cheek; I didn't think of anything but the moment we were in.

—

"WHAT ABOUT MARY SHELLEY?"

"No."

"Genghis Khan."

"Him neither."

"Shakespeare?"

"Sadly, no."

"Alexander the Great— Wait, he was before your time. Scratch that. Malala. Have you met—"

"Malala is alive and well." He tilted us so that his body was half on top of mine. His hands were quickly growing bolder, fundamentally at ease with my body, lingering on every curve, running through my hair in sleepy, happiness-drunk movements. "You could walk into the street right now and make her acquaintance."

"I could *not*. She's way too cool for me."

"Just like all the people you listed were entirely too brilliant for a recovering monk. I may have been alive when they were, but they would not have given me the time of day." He kissed me. Smiled. Kissed me again. For a while, we forgot the trail of our conversation. Then something occurred to me.

"Is this okay?" I asked.

Viktor pulled me in, arms clamped tight around my waist. "I thought we'd agreed upon remarkable."

"No, I mean, are you guys…Is it fine, if you do this with a mortal?" Pierre had said so, but he didn't seem as passionate about following rules as Viktor.

He inched back to search my eyes. "It is allowed, yes. However…"

I waited, letting my fingers trace the line of his jaw. His earlobe. His messy, messy hair. I had *defiled* him.

"I wasn't lying when I said that we don't usually mix with mortals. They find us unpalatable. And there is the issue of…" He ran his tongue over his teeth, seeming to retreat into himself. "Of becoming attached."

"Are you afraid that you'll become attached?"

With those amused dimples in his cheeks, he looked much too young for who I knew him to be. "Quite late for that."

"Should we have not…?"

"If we hadn't done any of this, I'd still be attached. This was…" His palm splayed on the small of my back, warm. "I wanted it." But his face grew shadowed, and I couldn't help guessing the direction of his thoughts. He and I, we may have felt as though we were made of kindred stuff, miscible substances fated to blend together. But pour us in water and one of us would float for eons, while the other…

The other was going to sink in the blink of an eye.

"I have never…" Viktor sounded confused, as though despite the length and the richness of his life, tonight had been too unique to easily understand. I watched him study the problem, rotate it and

twist it in his head, tackle it from all directions to uncover a fatal flaw to exploit. There was none to be found, but he had the right to reach that conclusion on his own.

After all, I'd been gradually coming to terms with the discrepancy in our life expectancies for months now.

At last, his eyes met mine, a poorly hidden trace of desperation in them, a brand-new disquiet. To make it go away, I thought at him, *I don't mind, that you're going to live forever and I won't. Really, I don't care. If this works, and I'm old, and you're young…I don't care. I already have gray hair! And we can take this slowly—you might be sick of me in two weeks for all we know—*

"No," he said firmly. He pushed against my thoughts until I had no choice but to let them slither away.

"Maybe we can talk about this later," I suggested gently.

Viktor nodded, but still said, "I've heard of a revenant who dealt with this, once."

"Hmm." I caressed his face, the dips under his cheekbones more pronounced than even just a few days earlier. I wanted to feed him. To touch him everywhere, a million times over, to make sure he was whole.

"The mortal he had come to care for…she asked for the crossing."

"And did she get it?"

"She did. But the revenant who loved her didn't know the ritual."

"So he refused her?"

"No." Viktor sighed. "He asked my Sire to make her, and my Sire agreed. The revenant killed his lover, brought her freshly dead body to my Sire, and…The crossing is not foolproof. Sometimes it doesn't work, and we don't know why."

"So, the revenant killed the woman he loved…for nothing?"

"He did."

"That's *tragic*. God."

Viktor's head tipped back against the pillow, and he was quiet. It took me a while to understand why.

"Are you afraid that I'll ask you to do that? That I'll want you to kill me and then make me a revenant?"

"Would you?"

Laughter slipped out of me. "Nope."

His eyebrow rose. "You seem very certain."

"Because I am. Listen, immortality seems exhausting. I mean, look at this frown." I smoothed the ridge between his eyebrows, first with my thumb, then with a kiss.

"People are usually drawn to the power and wealth that come with longevity."

"I'm sure they are, and I get it, but…then what? From what you've been saying, it sounds like one might go nuts during the process or die in tremendous pain. And for centuries, they're not going to be able to, say, use that sweet, sweet high-yield savings account interest to go on beach vacations. It seems to me that there are pros and cons to being mortal, just like there are pros and cons to being a revenant. The former may be fucked-up, but I can't even imagine dealing with the latter." I lifted a shoulder. "I'd rather stick with the drawbacks I know. Like you said, immortality is not for everyone. I'm not sure *I* have it in me to prolong my life past physiological improbability."

I'd thought that my answer would please Viktor, but his eyes dimmed. Still, he gathered me to him, and he kissed me, and there in his bed, anchored by his warmth, I fell asleep replaying my words to him, hoping he wouldn't hear my very last thought, the one I'd neglected to say out loud.

I'm not sure I have it in me to prolong my life past physiological improbability. But for you, I think I would try. I would become anything, just to get some more time with you.

—

TWO DAYS LATER, AND THROUGH A COMPLEX WEB OF intermediaries, Viktor anonymously sent off *Ars Moriendi* to Wiegand for appraisal. I cleaned up my workstation, feeling as empty as I always did after completing a big project.

"What about this?" I asked Viktor once I'd put everything else back in its rightful place. "What do you want me to do with the original *Ars Moriendi*? Back to the preservation room?"

He shook his head. "I'll destroy it," he said, without hesitation.

I hugged the book protectively to my body. "Are you serious?"

"Almost always, as you know."

"But why? You kept the other books."

"Because they contain no useful information. *Ars Moriendi* has done a lot of harm, and has outlived its utility."

"But it's an antique. You're a collector, it would be a tragedy to…" I trailed off, because I could see that Viktor was not going to be swayed. In fact, I understood his point. "Okay. But we should wait, at least until the situation with Silas is over. We might end up needing it."

He considered it, then declared: "Not a second longer."

That night, I decided to go home to water my plants and check my mail. My coat, half ripped and covered in blood, had been tossed by Sam. I tucked myself into a preternaturally soft jacket found at my new favorite apparel store—Viktor's closet—and headed for the garage, resigned to some qualityless time with Arlo.

As it turned out, I was wrong about that. "What are *you* doing here?" I asked, delighted.

Viktor gave me the once-over. Twice. "How fetching," he murmured. He leaned in and pressed his lips to my forehead. "I'm driving you."

"To my house?"

He nodded, opening the passenger door for me. "You should probably know," I started, "that my apartment is not fancy." I wasn't embarrassed by my place or my lifestyle or anything else that I'd

managed to obtain for myself, be it through honest means or slightly more mendacious ones. But Viktor had an aesthetic—timeless elegance. Understated detailing. That kind of shit. He probably wouldn't appreciate that flushing the toilet involved opening the tank and digging around for the chain.

"I know what your place is like," he pointed out.

"How?"

"I've been there."

"When— Oh. Some kind of background check?"

"Correct. The visit was very…"

I braced myself. "Very what?"

"Enjoyable." He seemed pensive, as if skimming through his old impressions. "Like no one but you could ever live there."

That, coupled with the knowledge that he'd survived many a preplumbing era, and the warm, content glances he snuck at me while we climbed the stairs, annihilated my anxiety. When we got to my place, I rose on my toes to kiss his cheek, turned to unlock the door, and opened it to chaos.

—

THE HOUSE WAS CLEAR, BUT WHOEVER HAD BROKEN IN HAD spared very little pity for both my possessions and my landlord's appliances. Tables and chairs were upside down. Drawers had been pulled off their tracks, and drapes ripped to shreds. Acrylic paint and half-sheared books littered the floor. The fridge door had been torn away and thrown onto the couch, where my once-impressive collection of hot sauces still leaked into the upholstery.

Viktor checked each room, making sure that the intruders hadn't left anything or anyone behind. In the meantime, I stood in the entryway, back pressed against the wall, too nauseous to follow him around.

I'd lived in places where these kinds of occurrences were not rare. I was not new to burglaries. But this was not the work of someone who'd been rifling through my shit in search of something to sell. They had meant to raze the place where I lived, and much like a few days earlier, in Viktor's yard, I felt exposed and violated. I felt like prey.

"Are you okay?" Viktor asked, tipping my chin up with his knuckles and scanning my eyes. When I nodded, he pushed a gray lock behind my ear and ordered, "Go pack. You're moving in with me."

—

"DO YOU THINK SILAS KNOWS ABOUT THE FORGERY?" I ASKED ON the ride back, not straightening up from where I leaned against the glass. The question had been on the tip of my tongue for days. The fact that I and several people I cared about were in critical danger was catching up to me all at once. My head hurt. My heart, too.

"I doubt it. Silas doesn't know that I'm the author of *Ars Moriendi*, or that I own the original." He considered the matter for a moment, then his mouth twitched. "Have you heard from your boyfriend recently?"

"My boyfriend?"

"Not me. The other one."

I turned to him. "Are *you* my boyfriend?"

"I—" He frowned. "Now that you mention it, I am not convinced I have it in my skill set to be someone's boyfriend."

I was frowning, too. "Really."

He nodded, solemn.

"How so?"

"The term carries a levity of which I might not be capable."

"Interesting." I played with the end of the cashmere scarf I'd stolen from his drawer. "What term would you prefer?"

He pondered it for nearly two blocks. "I think the word 'lover' best describes—"

"No. Nope. *Absolutely no*."

"Why?" He sounded slightly offended.

"Because I find it as upsetting as 'squelch' and 'moist' and—what *other* boyfriend?"

"The McManaman boy."

"*That* boyfriend."

"Do you have a way to get in touch with him?"

I pulled out my phone, dialed his number, and put it on speaker. After several rings, a nasal, snappy voice answered, "Yes?"

"Mortimer," I said. I couldn't make myself sound happy to be talking to him.

"Yeah? What? Who is this?"

"It's me." Odd. I hadn't changed my number.

"Me who? I don't have all day, lady."

"It's Vero." Silence. "Vero Mercer. I used to work at—"

"Oh. Oh, yes." His throat cleared. After the sound of one, no, *two* doors closing, he whispered, "What's going on? Did they come back for you?"

Viktor and I exchanged a glance, and I tried not to laugh. "Did you *delete* my number, Morty?"

"No. No—I just…It seemed like a good idea to, um, minimize our ties and, you know. In case someone checked my phone. If there is a connection between us, it would be easier for people who want to retaliate to—"

"Mr. McManaman," Viktor interrupted him.

At which point, Mortimer said, very clearly, "Shit."

"Has anyone contacted you regarding your forgeries?"

"What…what forgeries?"

Viktor sighed. "Mr. McManaman, this is important. Has anyone suspicious contacted you regarding your forgeries, or regarding Veronica, in the last four months?"

"No. No, I—"

"Are you telling the truth?"

"Yes! Of course I am! I mean, after what…I haven't heard from anyone about that stuff. I've been staying away, too—I hired a new manager for the store and have been traveling up to Vermont to oversee things once or twice a month, but I'm mostly here in Boston with my parents. To, um, distance myself. I never really wanted to do the forgeries. It was, um, mostly Vero's idea, and my lawyer—"

Viktor took my phone, disconnected the call, and then slid it into the pocket of my coat. "If Silas knew about the forgery, he'd have contacted McManaman first, and he wouldn't be alive to tell the tale."

"And what a loss that would be for humanity."

"A very measurable one, I estimate." He shook his head. "I am a known member of revenant society. I keep a lower profile than most of my Sire's aides, but it wouldn't be out of the question for him to hire observers and find out that I have been…desiring your company."

The way he talked, it *killed* me sometimes. In the best possible way. "Does that mean that the other day's attack…?"

"My original assumption was that it was meant for me, and you just happened to be the person who walked out of my house when whoever Silas had sent was around. And that might still be true."

"But why *now*?"

"Last week I was with my Sire to investigate a revenant attack. I wasn't able to determine with certainty that the culprit was Silas, but I suspect it may have been. If he lingered in the area, he could have seen me arrive and then followed me back to Vermont. But there is more. My Sire put out some…rumors about the reemergence of *Ars Moriendi*, to guarantee that Silas would hear of it. Silas must be assuming that, as my Sire's right hand, I've been tasked with retrieving the text. He may be targeting you with the intent of using you as leverage, but I still doubt he knows you are the forger."

We slowed for a stoplight, and I faced the window again, watching a family happily walk out of a diner. "Why not Arlo, or Pierre? Why me?"

"Silas is a strategic player. He understands what makes a difference in the game."

"And what's that?"

He was silent for a long time. "You are important to me, Veronica. Much more than I can afford."

—

IT'S PROBABLY AN ODD THING TO SAY, EVEN NOW THAT THIS STORY is so long in the past, but here it goes: That night, full of dread and fear and violence, turned out to be the start of the best time of my life. Because for the next few weeks, Viktor and I lived together, like a normal couple.

Or, at least, like I imagine normal couples do. I had no idea then, and even less now, what most love stories looked like. Still, I found it extraordinary, how quickly two people who had led mostly solitary existences became addicted to each other. Merging routines. Mutual learning. Overcoming not trivial differences in matters such as sleeping patterns, cleanliness, eating habits, work ethics, energy levels. I'd always expected that the compromises required to make a relationship work would murder my affection for someone. I'd pictured a partner as someone who'd ask me to keep better track of the toothpaste cap, to wear a bra around the house, to talk to him even when I'd rather be high and staring at the ceiling wondering what it would be like to be a chickadee. He'd have opinions about whether I should shave my body, whether I should go out and try to make friends, whether I should fall asleep earlier to take advantage of a full morning's hours. He'd want me to change little by little, and it'd be death by a thousand cuts.

But Viktor wasn't like that. And when I was with him, I never found myself wishing *he* would change—even the rigid, secretive, severe parts of him that I couldn't understand, even the cuff links, even the way he used the word *lover* as if to watch me squirm. The simplicity of us was startling. I cared about him deeply, and even the bits of him I didn't comprehend were dear to me. He liked me, which meant that he didn't mind if I was baked out of my mind and trying to write a song about a toe falling in love with a kidney. He'd just kiss me on the cheek, follow the slope of my nose with his fingertip, and whisper, "What's next for the toe, Veronica?"

For the first few days, while the semester was still ongoing, Pierre escorted me on every campus errand and Viktor joined us whenever he could. With *Ars Moriendi* off being evaluated, most of our commitments were of the academic kind. When I mentioned that I had to finish some edits on my dissertation, Viktor asked to read it. He found my takes on late medieval art hilarious and accurate, and then spent an afternoon listing all the things historians had been getting wrong about the High Middle Ages. Then his classes ended, and upon finding out that he was going to be grading finals, I looked forward to watching a former monastic scribe be aghast by the mix of plagiarism and general sloppiness that plagued modern students.

Sadly, what he said was, "They are not quite that bad. Not so much has changed from ten years ago."

"You were a professor ten years ago?"

"Under another name. In a slightly different field." He shrugged. "Once a decade or so, academia is an excellent place of employment. It guarantees access to research material and requires contact with young, motivated minds who'll catch me up on the salient points of how society is evolving."

"Is that how you learned about tailored suits, wristwatches, and the trendy relationship-defining term 'lover'?"

He gave me a dry look. "I have a few trades on rotation, and academia is among my favorites." He sobered. "Much better than

finance, at least."

"I bet," I said, and wondered, *How many different things has he done? How many lives has he lived?*

Viktor pulled me in, combed my hair back with his fingers, and said, "Lately, it feels like none at all."

We went for walks. We had meals together. We looked at his rare books and talked about history. After he told me between kisses that he'd worked on the set of a silent movie, I demanded he watch it with me. Early on, I tried to act discreetly around the house. It was not out of concern for privacy—our relationship came to the surprise of no one, especially after I spent days walking around wearing too-large, borrowed clothes that earned me long stares full of congratulatory innuendo (Pierre), scandal (Sam), and pure contempt (Arlo). But Viktor wasn't used to being perceived as a unit that excluded others, as someone who enjoyed intimacy with a woman, as part of a *couple*.

The first time we held hands in front of others, we were in the kitchen. It was a reflex, the logical conclusion to his knuckles brushing against mine and my shoulder bumping into his. I didn't think, and did what I would have done if we had been alone: twined my fingers with his. Immediately, I felt the glow of his skin against mine. A glance at him and there was scarlet on his cheeks, a stiff line to his spine. His embarrassment was a pulsating, tangible thing between us, and I felt miserable for putting him through it. So I tried to pull back.

He didn't allow it.

His grip clamped around my hand so forcefully, I had to hold back a wince. I tried to search his eyes for a hint of what I should do, but Viktor wouldn't look at me. Sam was chattering about meal planning, the upcoming holidays, but stopped when Viktor cleared his throat and said, "Excuse us."

He tugged me out of the kitchen, ignoring stray questions and puzzled glances. He pulled me down the hallway, then inside the

workshop, and kissed me against the closed door, pressing me flat into it, his leg already making room between mine.

My head started spinning. I tried to talk, but I couldn't. Not until he went down on his knees in front of me and I'd had a minute to collect some air.

"Is it— Is this…a good thing? Or payback? Or—"

He pulled down my sweats, confident, practiced. We'd had sex plenty of times by now. Sometimes, it felt like we couldn't stop, like it was a problem, like there was a feral, maniacal edge to this need we had to touch each other, because how long did we have left together? This, though, was different.

"I liked it," he told me, burying his nose in the crotch of my panties, then pushing them aside to lick me underneath, coaxing a shudder out of me. "That you…showed them."

"Showed them wh— *God*."

His tongue curled around me, and my head fell back. "Our hands." He was sucking me, and for a minute, I whited out, shuddering. But then I thought of how forbidden displays of affection must have been for most of Viktor's life. The claiming power of them. How indecent and filthy, the idea of holding hands in the middle of a private residence with someone he wasn't wedded to.

I grinned at the ceiling, trying not to come. "Since you enjoyed it so much, I'm going to do it every day," I promised, and it was my turn to watch him shiver, to run my fingers through his hair, to feel his lips part and his teeth clamp on my inner thigh.

"Can I?" he asked. "Please."

What? I almost asked. But I knew. Of course I knew. Of course he would want that. He might have even *needed* it from me.

I smiled. "You always can. No need to ask."

He let out a whimper, low, and then there was a millisecond of acute pain, followed by more pleasure than I could ever have imagined. His teeth buried deep in the soft flesh of my thigh, and

my body convulsed into something dark and welcoming and full of warmth. It was his hands on my hips that kept me upright, but I wasn't myself. I was a being made of pleasure and love and electricity, undignified, shameless, alive.

I don't know how long that lasted. Just that after, we were both stumbling into the very desk where we'd fallen in love, my long body pressed to his longer one. I was grinding against him, trying to move closer, sliding my hand down his chest, finding—

"When your blood is this fresh in me," he whispered, raw, "I can feel everything you feel." I glanced down at his abdomen. The remainders of his own orgasm, pushed past the edge by mine.

He was still hard.

"Can I take more?" he begged. I was already nodding yes, *please*, before the question was out, letting him flip me and bend me over the desk, climb over me, and then more stretching, that pinching feeling. Building, twisting heat.

Viktor reopened the wound on my shoulder, the one he'd used to take my blood before we'd even met. It felt like a do-over, like the first he and I really deserved. He arranged us so that my body arched back and upward, so that we would meet, and he thrust inside me deep enough to remake me.

"Too much?"

It's not. It's not.

"I know it's not. I can feel it."

He angled my hips, steeper, and I moaned, one cheek pressed against the wood.

"More?" he asked, and I was nodding, eager.

"Do you—*fuck*—do you think you could ask for it, then?"

"Ask wh-what?"

"Do you think you could say, 'I would like more, Viktor'?"

I did, and he let out a deep, guttural moan, and I realized that I wasn't going to be able to walk for a while.

After, while I listened to his heart beating against my back, while I waited for my lungs to start working again, he whispered, "Veronica?"

"Yes?"

His eyelids fluttered against my neck. "Whatever is happening here, I don't think I'm in control of it."

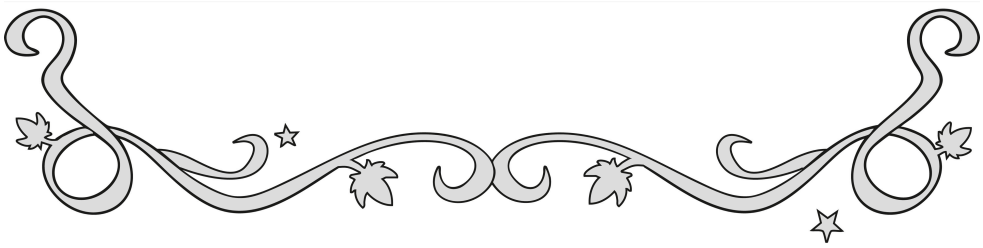
I swallowed. Fumbled across the smooth surface of the desk with my hands, finding nothing to cling to. And said, "Yeah."

—

FOR DAYS AND DAYS, IT WENT ON LIKE THAT, AND IT WAS BLISS.

Then, on the Monday of the third week of December, while I was teaching Viktor how to play cards in his office, a phone rang. It was Wiegand's auction house, letting him know that they'd just acquired a very, *very* rare book, and that they thought Viktor might be interested in putting forward an offer.

CHAPTER 10



I COULDN'T HELP FEELING A HEFTY AMOUNT OF PRIDE THAT THE manuscript had been authenticated so swiftly by multiple experts, and told Viktor so. He seemed to find my puffed-up chest weird *and* adorable.

"Did you know that forgery used to be punishable by the death penalty in the UK? Until well into the nineteenth century, I believe."

I haughtily stirred my hot chocolate. "I did not, and this information does nothing to dampen my sense of accomplishment."

He laughed, mumbling something about how my head was much too pretty to be guillotined off my body, then kissed me and pressed me against the stainless steel fridge. By the time Arlo stepped into the kitchen and made a gagging sound, we were quickly breaking apart, Viktor's skin flushed with an embarrassed sort of pride.

It was a quick turnaround for an authentication, and even quicker for a showing, but Wiegand knew he was sitting on a filthy sum of money, and wouldn't have minded closing the deal by the holidays. "I know from the director that five collectors are interested and have the financial availability. Some of them asked for a private showing before the bidding starts."

"Is Silas one of them?"

“Under a different name, but yes.” Viktor rolled his shoulders, thinking for a few minutes. “The starting price is almost twice as high as I had expected.”

“Can I take credit for that?”

“If you like.” His dimple flashed. “I doubt Silas plans to pay for the manuscript.”

“What do you mean?”

“Given his feelings toward mortals, I wouldn’t be surprised if he decided to just take the text.”

My eyes widened. “There will be armored rooms, and guards, and security, and—” I thought of the photos. My stomach sank.

“He will eliminate any obstacle with very little compunction. A dead mortal is nothing to him.”

“Viktor, if he hurts Wiegand’s staff while trying to steal the book—”

“He won’t,” he promised me. “We’ll get him before he even enters the auction house.”

A few days before the showing, Viktor and I drove to Boston, followed by Pierre and some guards in a separate car, while Arlo remained in Vermont to take care of Sam. I watched the snow-laden branches blur past the window, savored the pleasant weight of Viktor’s hand cupping my knee. In the midafternoon sunlight, I couldn’t get enough of his striking profile, or his easy grip around the wheel.

I’d considered staying back in Vermont, but: “Silas may still be planning on using you to get to me. It’s easier for me to keep an eye on you if you’re in Boston than—” Viktor had stopped mid-sentence, rubbed a hand down his face, and added, “Honestly, that’s all bullshit. I just want you with me.”

I’d closed my arms around his waist and squeezed him with all my strength, harder than ever before. Because, for *days*, my mind had been conjuring scenarios in which Viktor got hurt—or worse things that I refused to entertain.

"Not to worry," he said. "We'll ambush him before the showing, seize him, and I'll be back to the hotel in no time. We'll celebrate by burning the original *Ars Moriendi* in the fireplace."

"Pretty sure that's a fire hazard, but overall, I like your three-point plan." I grinned, but my brain couldn't stop itself from asking: *And then, Viktor? And then, what?* I wondered about it so often, I knew he must have read it in my mind. The problem was that no satisfying solution existed. We both knew that, and we both made the choice to abstain from the conversation.

Somewhere in the world, Viktor had shit to do. A job, responsibilities, pets, for all I knew, and he was going to have to return to them. Perhaps, after Silas was taken care of, he'd immediately go back to his Sire, or maybe he'd wait till the end of the spring semester. Either way, Rockhaven was not his home.

Still, I kept hoping that he would decide to stick around for a few years, and resolved to ask him. After Silas, I would tell him about all those realizations I'd had—that I was in love, that I was willing to follow him around on his important revenant business, that even if I couldn't have forever, I'd be glad to spend as much time as I could with him. As much time as he could spare me.

I thought he might say yes. I thought he *would* say yes. He cared about me deeply, and even though we both knew where the relationship would end…

I noticed the twitch in Viktor's jaw, and halted my train of thought. The future didn't matter, not for now. For now, we still had time. I found his hand, lacing our fingers together, and the gesture pushed back my sleeve, uncovering a glint of silver.

"It looks better on you than it ever did on me," Viktor said.

"Yeah?"

His mouth curved. "And I did notice an increase in your punctuality."

"That might just be because we live together."

"Perhaps. Still, you should keep it."

I'd seen plenty of spares in Viktor's room. And yet, his wrist had been naked ever since my little thieving job. "I'll return it."

"You don't—"

"I will. After this mess is over, and we…I'll return it." *And we'll talk*. It was a promise, and so was his firm nod.

We exchanged a smile, and then we played I spy.

—

"MY SIRE IS SENDING IN THREE REVENANTS," VIKTOR TOLD ME that night, after getting off the phone. "The showing is the day after tomorrow, around noon, and we need as many people as possible who can be quick in the sun, since it's just Pierre and me for now."

"When will they be here?"

"By tomorrow night."

I nodded. Smiled, because it was the whole reason he'd told me: He was including me in his plans because he knew it would ease my mind. The thought made it difficult to breathe.

"Can we order room service?" I asked, hating how small my voice sounded.

"Of course."

"Cool. I've never done it before."

"How so?"

"It's expensive. And the hotel usually already has your credit card, which makes it hard to dine and dash, you know?" I watched his eyes tighten in reproach and stuck out my tongue, but forgave him when he ordered a feast, and bubbly wine, and one of every dessert on the menu.

That night he kissed me, and he made fun of my mouth that tasted like orange *and* chocolate *and* caramel, and then he slipped inside me so effortlessly, I almost cried at how well our bodies already knew each other.

After I came once, he bit my breast, breaking the skin. He'd stopped asking, because he knew what I would say. His teeth sank right under my nipple, and then the pain was unbearable until it was bliss, blurring my vision, breaking me in, my soul lost to his body as he took what he needed.

"So many centuries," he murmured after, holding me close as he fell asleep. "So many minds I've read. And I never knew that it was possible to want like this."

—

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, I DRAGGED MYSELF TO THE LIVING area of the suite groggy and heavy-lidded, but immediately knew that something was wrong.

"I understand." Viktor sat on the couch, talking into his phone, his mouth a straight line. "No, no…I am more concerned about the possibility that this might be a trap."

I must have made a sound, because he turned in my direction. I took in his suit; combed-back hair; gleaming, spotless loafers. There was no trace of the mussed-up, sex-stained disaster he'd been the night before when we'd polished off the remaining desserts.

"I agree, but you have to admit that it's odd for him to change the appointment for the showing so last-minute…Was he alone, when he landed?…I see…It's unclear. I wouldn't be surprised if there was another revenant with him."

I swallowed. Went back into the bedroom, put on Viktor's marathon shirt, then returned to kneel between his legs just as he hung up. My eyes found his. Probed.

"Did Silas change the showing to today?"

He nodded.

"Do you think it's a setup?"

He bit the inside of his lip. "I don't know."

"And the revenants your Sire is sending…they're not here yet, are they?"

He shook his head.

"Okay. So it's only you and Pierre who'd be able to ambush Silas in the middle of the day, and you don't know whether he'll show up alone." I didn't bother offering to go in with them. I knew what I was capable of, and winning a physical fight with anyone was never going to be longlisted. "What are your options?"

His hands slipped around my waist, and he tugged me deeper between his thighs. "We could pull the plug. But that would entail leaving the auction house staff at Silas's mercy and losing our chance to capture him. Or, I can just risk it."

I wanted to ask him to pick the former so bad, I nearly dug my nails into the flesh on his quads. But he never would, and bullshitting myself seemed like a poor use of our remaining time. So I took his face in my hands. "We both know what you're going to do. And that's okay."

Viktor didn't protest. He twisted his head to the side, pressing his mouth to the center of my palm. "I'll be very careful. I'll make sure that the area is well monitored, and—"

"I know." I willed the muscles of my face to give me one more smile. For him. "I know." I lifted my wrist, showing him the watch. "I'll be keeping time. You better not come home late."

He and Pierre left two hours later.

—

I SHOWERED. I READ. I PLUCKED AT LEFTOVER FOOD *AND* AT MY eyebrows. I walked around the suite. I watched TV. I asked for a notepad. I sketched. I leafed through the original *Ars Moriendi*, picturing Viktor trying to flush it down the toilet. I ate some more. I unpacked, then repacked.

Every activity lasted no longer than a few minutes. I was jittery, bouncy, terrified, overstimulated even in complete silence.

I refused to call or text Viktor when the last thing he needed was a distraction. But I was desperate to occupy myself in ways that didn't involve grinding my teeth to stubs, so I dialed Roxanne, who picked up immediately.

"Look who finally got out of Rich Collector's bed!"

Apparently, I was the kind of person who didn't call her friend for over a week just because she was in love. *Never again,* I swore to myself. *Be better.*

"I'm sorry. I was just…"

"Having orgasms?"

"I mean, yeah. Could they have damaged the rational, friendship-treasuring part of my brain?"

"It's what they do."

"This is what I get for flunking biology."

She laughed. "Don't worry, I've been busy, too. And out of town."

"Oh. Where are you?"

"Boston."

I froze, even though there was no reason to. She was in the same city as me—just like over half a million more people. Big deal.

Yet, instead of *oh, me too!* I heard myself say, "How come, Roxanne?"

"Short answer, my ex." I could hear her high heels clacking against a marble floor. "I don't really have much time, but do you remember how he technically has Rorie for the holidays because we swapped last year? But Rorie hates being away from me?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I said, 'fuck that, I'm not going to *not* see my daughter for two weeks.' So when a job came up for a couple of last-minute showings, I told them I'd just come down. It pays well, so I'm using the money to rent an Airbnb to be with Rorie right before Christmas. By the way, you would love this place."

"I…Why?"

"We have this really rare book."

Something icy and viscous lurched inside me. "Are you…When do you work?"

"Today, then a couple more afternoons this week, and then after the holidays—"

"Now? Are you working *now*?"

"Yup. At Wiegand's. And by the way, in case you're wondering what an absolute waste of space my ex is, he couldn't even watch his daughter, whom he currently is supposed to be in charge of, for *two* hours."

I was going to throw up. "Where is Rorie?"

"Here with me. On her iPad. How that asshole of a man was able to produce this perfect child, I cannot tell you. Honestly, she probably got all of my— Shit, the curator's here. Gotta go. Talk to you soon."

—

PIERRE DIDN'T PICK UP, NOT EVEN AFTER I DIALED HIM TEN TIMES, my heart beating in my fingertips.

Viktor's phone wasn't even on.

"Roxanne," I begged into her voicemail, "if a man comes in, I need you to step outside with Rorie. I'll explain why—just go outside with Rorie." But she wasn't going to check her phone, not while on the job.

I was on the verge of bursting into tears.

Fuck. *Fuck*—

My phone buzzed. A call from Pierre.

"Vero? I saw the calls, what happened?"

"Where are you?"

"Outside of the auction house, waiting for Silas to arrive. Why?"

The floor fell from under my feet. "There is a child, Pierre."

"What?"

"Rorie. My friend Roxanne—her daughter is there."

A bitten-back but perfectly audible: "*Merde*."

"I— Listen, Vero, that's fine. We're going to stop Silas from going in altogether, so—"

There was a clattering, as if the phone had shattered against asphalt, and then several terrible sounds.

Pierre's voice turned into a scream, then into distant growls, and then it quieted.

—

IT WAS STUPID, AND NOT WELL-THOUGHT-OUT, AND VERY MUCH the wrong thing to do. When I called Arlo to tell him what was going on, even he told me to "Stay the fuck out of it, Vero. If anything happens to you, Viktor is going to raze the goddamn world to the ground. I'm on my way there—don't do anything stupid." I could hear Sam crying in the background.

Both their reactions seemed valid.

At least they made me rethink my plan—or lack thereof—for a couple of minutes. Still, I drove to the auction house, because there wasn't anything else I could imagine doing. I parked in the back, scanning the desolate gray of the lot, half expecting to find Pierre's unconscious body in the middle.

It wasn't there, which was a relief—a short-lived one, because soon after, I noticed a wide, red-brown streak staining the salt-crusted ice, as though a large, limp object had just been dragged over it.

My heart dropped. My stomach twisted. I had to tell them both that there was no fucking time to whine, not right now.

Maybe I was too late. I could probably do little for Pierre—shit, Pierre, *Pierre*—but the others…I couldn't help picturing them inside,

bodies strewn around the copy of *Ars Moriendi*. Wiegand. The faceless curator. Roxanne. Rorie, I would not let myself think of.

Viktor.

Maybe Silas had already come and gone. He'd walked out triumphantly minutes ago, skimming through his stupid fake manuscript, and was already miles away. Maybe it was just me and the occasional grackle. But through my blurry, tearstained vision, I counted the cars at the edge of the parking lot, and by my calculation…

The door of the auction house opened, and after a long, lifeless moment, a man stepped into the sun. He was wearing shades, carrying a briefcase, and the only thing I could make out from a distance was the combed-back rust of his hair.

The grackles flew away, broadcasting their displeasure with strident calls. One perched on a nearby telephone wire.

The man had to be Silas, or one of his associates. And if he was walking out of the auction house, he somehow had to have gotten past the people inside.

Pierre.

Roxanne.

Viktor.

I stared at the watch and let myself despair for exactly three seconds. Then I took a deep breath, grabbed the two objects I'd tossed onto the passenger seat, and got out of the fucking car.

—

THE CHARGED, ELECTRIC SILENCE IN THE AIR TOLD ME TWO things: There was going to be snow later, and I had no chance of taking Silas by surprise. After all, it was the middle of the day. Ice crunched under my boots, and to add insult to injury, my coat was a bright blood red.

So I slammed the car door shut and stalked toward the center of the lot, nearly tripping on a pothole full of muddy slush. Careful to keep both my hands behind my back, I shouted, "I have the book."

The man stopped in his tracks, sized me up with mild curiosity, and broke into a wide smile.

"Ah, there you are," an American voice said. "The girl."

My throat convulsed. "Where is Viktor?"

"How lovely to see you again. I trust you've been well?"

It was grueling to stop myself—from asking him what the hell he meant, and then, after I realized that he was right, that we *had* met before, from showing my surprise and my anger. I refused to give him the satisfaction.

The boy outside of the Art History building. Silas. They were one and the same. Viktor's grad student—or so I'd assumed.

Right after Viktor had asked me to stop making assumptions. How fucking poetic.

"You have been a veritable puzzle for me. And for quite some time. I am so intrigued by the mortal girl who made even Saint Ashworth, paragon of purity, fall so swiftly and so—"

"Where is Viktor?"

Silas's eyebrow rose. He took a leisurely, aimless step in my direction, hair shuffled by the wind. He was, much like most of the revenants I'd met, handsome, fit, and fundamentally, ontologically *different* from the world surrounding him. Good at hiding it, at least in short bursts. "Inside."

"Did you kill him?"

He shrugged. "I don't remember. I have a terrible memory for—"

"Did you kill him?"

"Well, probably." Another step closer. "If I did, he forced my hand. I was only going to kill the mortals. I just wanted the book. But Viktor was always like that—a self-righteous, prissy asshole who loved to be our Sire's favored and to—"

"*I* have the book." I was not going to let this motherfucker do his villain speech, and I certainly was not going to allow Viktor's name in his shitty mouth.

"Oh, honey." He glanced down at his briefcase, then back to me with a doubtful expression, as though he didn't have much faith in my ability to keep track of objects and their location. "Are you okay?"

I loathed him. Like I never had anyone before. "What you have in that briefcase is a forgery. A forgery *I* made. To set a trap for you."

He nodded, clearly not believing a word I was saying.

"Why do you think Viktor and I even met? I falsified the grimoire you tried to acquire months ago. Viktor knew it. He hired me to make a copy of *Ars Moriendi* to lure you out. But we changed the ending. The ritual's instructions."

Silas, I could tell, was surprised at how much I knew, and perhaps starting to doubt himself. From a dozen feet away, I saw the crease in his forehead, and decided that it was time.

My left hand. I moved it in front of my body, and gave him all the time he needed to take a good look at what it held.

"What is *that*?" he bit out.

"The real one."

His nose curled. "Not that I believe you, but…say it was the truth, why the hell would you come here to tell me?"

"Because," I said through gritted teeth, "you killed the love of my fucking life. I have nothing to lose. And I want a shot at you."

"A shot at me," he repeated, full of mirth.

"Yes. And if you want the real book, you have to come and get it."

"Is that so?" Slowly, he began to come closer, sinister smile never wavering. This time, he didn't halt after a few steps. "So, this is your master plan? Lure me closer with the book, so that you can…what?" He angled his head to get a visual of what else I was hiding behind my back, but I turned my body in response. "Oh, come on. Aren't

you better than this? You think I cannot see that you're concealing something? What is it, a kitchen knife? A stake? A dagger? Not a firearm, I can tell from your grip." He sounded concerned for me, like I was more likely to hurt myself than him. Maybe he was right.

"I'll show you. If you come closer."

"Right. Well, I don't want to break your fragile human heart any further, but unless you stopped by a nuclear reactor on your way here, you're not going to be able to do much with whatever weapons you scrounged up. If you insist, though."

"You bet I fucking insist. Come. *Closer.*"

He snickered. Walked forward. "More?"

"One more step."

He took it. Let his briefcase fall into the dirty residue of snow and widened his hands. He was still out of reach.

"Is this when you do it?" he asked condescendingly. "Is this when I find out what it will be, the formidable tool of my demise?"

"It might as well be." With more violence than was necessary, I straightened my right arm and showed Silas the ace up my sleeve.

"What the fuck is that?"

"You really don't know?"

Silence.

"It's a squeegee."

"Where the hell is it from?"

"Viktor's car."

He blinked at me. "You came here to kill me with a squeegee?"

"No, asshole. I came here to kill you with a musket."

"Oh, sweetheart. You don't have a musket."

In the corner of my eye, something caught the glint of the sun. I took a step back.

"I don't," I said, smiling. "But my friend Morty does."

Bang.

—

"I JUST KILLED A MAN," MORTIMER REPEATED FOR THE MILLIONTH time. Perhaps it was more. I couldn't tell over the ringing in my ears. "I just killed a man. I just—"

"He wasn't a *man*," I said bitterly, looking down at Silas's lifeless body. The bullet had gone straight through his brain, exploding half of his skull. Who would have guessed that Mortimer was a good shot? "And he deserved it."

"They're gonna arrest me. Oh, fuck—Vero, why did you put me up to this?"

"You owed me," I muttered distractedly, crouching to take Silas's pulse.

"They're gonna kill me. Shit, is this some—some Mafia shit?"

"It's not."

"It has to be— What the fuck did you get yourself into?"

"Can you please be quiet? I'm trying to make sure he's dead." I was almost sure he was. Could a revenant heal from missing most of his head?

"Oh, shit. *Shit.* Even if I survive, the other people in jail, they're gonna kill me. Vero—"

"You're not going to jail."

"Vero."

"You are going to be fine—"

"Vero!"

"—because no one even *knows* that this guy exists, so—"

"No, no—Vero, there is—*another*—only one cartridge—"

Mortimer, I realized, wasn't looking at me, but at a place behind my back. I turned around, and…

He was right.

There *was* another.

Fuck me, I thought, as I was once again slammed to the floor. There it was: the now familiar sound of splintered bones, fists meeting and breaking flesh. I heard footsteps over salted asphalt, someone running away, and hoped, *really* hoped, that Mortimer

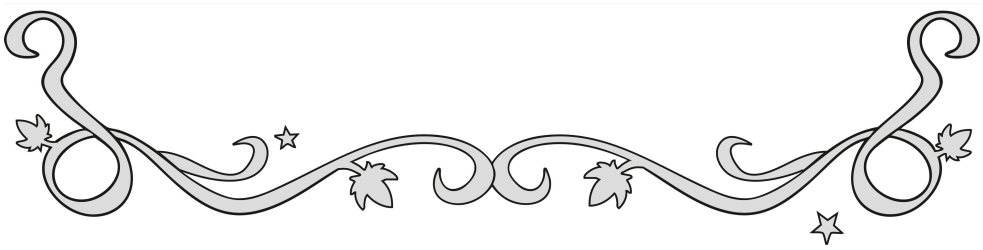
would be okay. And as the pain became unbearable, I concluded that even if what was happening to me was kinda shitty—*very* shitty—perhaps it was going to be okay. Because look—it wasn't so bad now, already starting to fade, *everything* starting to fade, so much so that the one thing I could hold in the grasp of my slippery, buttery mind was Viktor's face. The last few weeks. The way he'd looked at me sometimes while I worked, silent, steadfast, happy.

I wish we had more time, I thought, greedy, a little regretful.

But when my mind let go of its last piece of thought, I had a smile on my face.

That was the day that I died.

EPILOGUE



I WAKE UP AND EXPERIENCE NO DISORIENTATION.

I know who I am. I know that I have died. I know that I am no longer dead.

I *could* be in heaven, I guess. The bed I'm lying in is so soft, it could very well be made of clouds and stardust. In the room, every wall that isn't occupied by an arched window is covered in cedarwood shelves stacked with antique books. The smell of sugar and flour and fruit being baked together into some marvelous concoction is drifting inside from the half-open door. Viktor's watch sits heavy at my wrist. The perfection of the moment—yes, this could theoretically be some kind of paradise. But someone like me, with her repeat offenses, general malefaction, and stubborn refusal to avoid killing spiders and just escort them outside, would never end up in the good place.

Not to mention, the nightgown someone put on me is incredibly, infuriatingly itchy.

I quickly push back the covers and get to my feet, bracing for pain but pleased to find none. Perhaps I should be moving more cautiously, given that the last time I barged into a risky situation without help, I…Well. It wasn't a wise move. Still, I can't pace myself. I walk barefoot down a corridor, and my toes sink into soft

Persian runners while I trace uneven, centuries-weathered walls to anchor myself.

Wherever I am, it's several times larger than even Viktor's house, and its interiors resemble pictures I once saw of old European manors. I try to peek outside, but the sun appears to have already set, and I cannot see much past the wide stained glass windows. There are no ceiling lamps, but little lights shine from ornate wall sconces, guiding me farther down the hallway, until I come across a tall, wooden door.

It's open.

Inside, on a midnight blue chair, sits a slight woman. She has pin-straight dark hair, a button nose, and a face so geometrically flawless, I would have thought it impossible for organic matter to achieve. She appears young, perhaps as young as the freshmen students I used to teach, but when she glances up from her thick, leather-bound book, the solemn expression in her black-brown eyes is wise beyond her years.

For a minute, I find her so intimidating, I nearly retreat into the corridor. But then a soft, welcoming smile transforms the energy surrounding her, and she says, "You are awake."

I should reply. I just don't know *how*.

"Veronica, right? Ah, but I am told you go by Vero."

Her accent is a blend of the most educated British and something else—something musical and timeless and pleasant to the ear that almost has me begging her to talk more. Say something. Anything. Gibberish.

What? No, not *gibberish*. I have *real* questions.

"Where—"

"In Ireland. At one of my homes. I'll gladly give you a tour once you're settled."

"How long—"

"About six weeks." She gracefully closes her book.

"Am I…?"

"You were made, yes."

"Roxanne and Rorie—"

"Roxanne is…your friend? And Rorie is the child, correct? They are both healthy and unharmed. Rorie is a little shaken after the incident with Silas, but I am told that she is seeing a therapist and making excellent progress."

"Pierre?"

"He has recovered, too. His injuries were extensive. It was touch and go for a while, but he healed. He's still in the United States—cleaning up after the auction, closing the house in Vermont. We are attempting to give closure to the families of Silas's victims, too. There are always more loose ends than one would expect."

I nod. Feel my throat convulse. "Thank you," I say, instead of what I really want to.

Viktor.

And Viktor?

What about Viktor?

Where is Viktor?

But I remain silent, staring at the girl with the otherworldly black eyes. She answered all my questions so kindly, and if I were to ask, to mention Viktor's name, then she'd have to tell me. And once I am told, once I know, then the world, *my* world, is going to change accordingly, and not for the better.

I'm not ready for it. I don't fucking *want* a world in which I've been that stupid, so stupid, I didn't even scrounge up the courage to tell Viktor how much I loved him, and now he'll never know—

"That's not the world you're in," a warm voice says from the door. I spin on my feet, dizzy. "You can still tell me."

Viktor is leaning against the door, relaxed, beautiful, *alive*, and I put no thought into what to do next. I simply run from where I stand and into his arms, too forceful, knocking him into the wall and still refusing to stop. I squeeze him tight around the waist, and he returns the hug, one arm around my shoulders, the other cupping

the back of my head. "I love you," I say between tears, and I also think it to him, because I need to be sure, I want him to know that: *I love you, I love you.* "I love you."

I love you more, he says.

Except he doesn't say it. He…

Thought it, I hear. It reverberates through me, a deep, warm, resonant sound. His words are in my bones, carved into my flesh.

I gasp. Pull back, wide-eyed.

I don't just know that he loves me because he said so. I can feel the emotion as if I had experienced it myself. The way everything lost meaning when he found me bleeding in the parking lot. His uncontainable rage as he destroyed the revenant who hurt me. The weeks spent at my bedside, and the deep certainty that, if I hadn't woken up, he would have gladly given up immortality. His life was an endless gray, centuries of duty and discipline, and then *me*. I have taught him happiness. To keep me, he would cheat, and scheme, and betray his own moral code. Without hesitation.

Wait. How *do* I know this?

Hi, he says in my head.

"What…How?"

As part of the crossing, you drank some of my blood.

You *made me?*

Of course.

But you said you—didn't want to, and couldn't imagine ever doing it, and the risks—

Until I had to choose between all that and giving you up. He smiles. *As if I would have let anyone else take care of it.*

My fingers twist in his shirt. *I thought you were dead. Silas said you were.*

I was injured. It was two against one, and I was trying to keep the mortals safe. But then I heard you scream when Silas's man attacked you. His lips press against my temple. *I'm sorry I didn't ask for your permission before the crossing. Especially after you'd told*

me you weren't sure you'd want to live forever. But you thought something…I shouldn't have been listening. But that night, you thought about perhaps wanting to do it, if—

Viktor. I lay my hand flat to his chest, meeting his eyes. *I know what I thought then. Because I'm thinking the same right now.*

His eyelids flutter closed. I feel his relief and love and hope so intensely, they could be mine. They *are* mine. *So, now we are telepathic?*

As long as we keep drinking from each other. His mouth twitches. *I realize that it's hardly compatible with your vegetarian lifestyle.*

I stretch upward, to the tips of my toes, and kiss him, kiss him, kiss him. *I never thought I'd say this, but I really, really,* really *want to drink your blood.*

A low moan*. Veronica, you can't say—*

"I noticed," an amused voice points out from behind us, "that you have not asked about the other mortal, Vero. The one who brought the musket."

I whirl around, aghast. Not only did I totally forget that Viktor and I aren't alone in the room, but also that…"Oh, shit. Morty *died*?"

"No, he did not."

"He didn't?"

"Lilit is simply diverted because you asked about everyone but him." His palm finds the side of my belly and pulls me back into his warmth.

"In my defense, he has big roach energy. I cannot picture him *not* surviving a nuclear apocalypse."

"Viktor mentioned as much."

A kiss presses into the crown of my hair. "Veronica, meet Lilit. My Sire."

"Your Sire? Really?"

"Really."

"But she…" I wince. "I was going to say that you look too young to have sired someone, but…Oh my god. So, am I really like you

now? Give or take a couple thousand years?"

She nods, and her smile is compassionate. "It will take some time to really digest that you live in a world with new rules, new logic. New limits. You'll be struggling to adjust, and not for a few weeks. You won't truly grasp the truth of your immortality for decades. You won't be able to go outside during the day for just as long. For years, interacting with mortals will feel—"

"Shit," I say quietly.

Her eyebrows rise. "Is something amiss?"

"I'm supposed to defend my dissertation this spring. My advisor is gonna be so bummed."

Her eyes leave mine and travel up, meeting Viktor's. They exchange a brief, amused smile. I wonder if Viktor told Lilit about me. If Lilit is already finding that he was right.

"I'm sure Viktor will be able to make that happen," she says.

"Will he?" I ask, twisting my neck to look at him.

"I think Viktor wants nothing more than to make things happen for you." Her laugh is soft. "And to thank you both for all that you have done, I'll make sure that he is able to focus on that for the foreseeable future." She opens the book on her lap again. "I suspect he will want you for himself, Vero. At least for a little while."

A smile still lingers on her lips, but her eyes find her place on the page. Then Viktor's hand is clasping my waist, leading me outside and back to the bedroom where I woke up—a bedroom that, I am realizing, could only be his. In the corridor, he picks me up and carries me in his arms, his footsteps muffled by the carpets, his whispers muffled by my hair.

And only just now, it's occurring to me that this is it. The starting point.

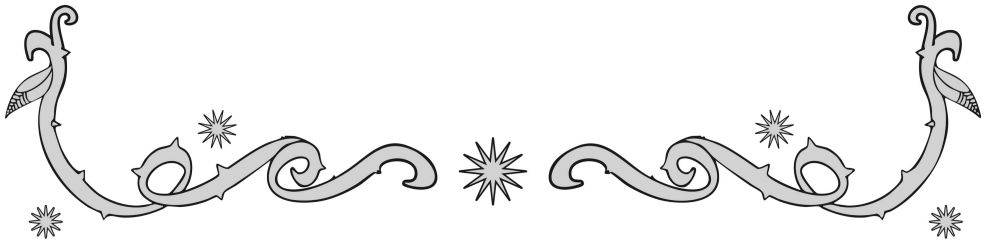
Where my story *really* begins.

KEEP READING FOR THE SECOND NOVELLA, *UNBOUND*

UNBOUND



CHAPTER 1



I TAKE NO PRIDE IN ACKNOWLEDGING IT, BUT FOR THE SAKE OF honesty, I must warn you: I have been compromised.

It's obvious from the way the whole affair plays out in my body, more or less the same every single time. A flip of my stomach before it hollows to a sharp, greedy hunger. That quiet hum coiling along my spine. Soft aches blooming hotly inside my rib cage. All in all, a simple misfiring of neurons that blazes, then quickly settles to a steady thrum.

I like to tell myself that it's not a big deal. Nothing unmanageable, for certain. Still, a biological upheaval of these proportions is somewhat mortifying, especially considering my age.

Especially when it's provoked by a *man*.

Here's the silver lining: If against my better judgment and my centuries of wisdom I must succumb to the somatic humiliation of wanting someone intensely enough that I fail to contain my neurophysiological responses, I suppose I could do much worse than *this* man.

I like him. With his muted laughter, competent hands, and puzzling lack of questions. I like his habit of pointing out lovely things for me to look at during our hikes, because he's too eager to share the beauty in this world to wait for me to notice it myself. I

like the scent of his collarbone. I like his determination to treat scraped knees and gunshot wounds with the same tireless care. I like Roman Martin so much I permitted myself to fall in love with him.

But that hardly signifies.

He shouldn't even *be* in this place. According to my highly unauthorized and regrettably easy inspection of the Comer Children's Hospital personnel scheduling database, Dr. Martin's shift was supposed to end several hours ago, well before my plane landed at the Chicago Executive Airport. But RSV and flu cases are surging, the pediatric emergency room is out of beds, and according to a scathing message sent out by the charge nurse, two of the senior attendings *went and licked some escalator handrail and got themselves sick, for fuck's sake, so everyone else is scheduled for a double. And don't forget about tonight's snowstorm! The streets are going to be a mess.*

So here is Roman, going on twenty-four hours on shift—if I had to guess, being held upright by stale coffee and the kind of work ethic elderly people in every era lament as extinct—on his knees in the hectic waiting room, probably to better meet the gaze of the sick little kid who's sitting in her father's lap.

I take off my sunglasses and lean against the bright yellow walls, staring at the back of Roman's head, the collar of a worn Fruit of the Loom shirt visible under his scrubs. Nape tanned where he always forgets to apply sunscreen before his runs. Dark hair that has gotten shorter and more manageable over time. Military, almost.

I miss the length, I must say. A couple of years ago, when he was sent on a hospital-mandated burnout-recovery sabbatical, I allowed him to convince me to take a trip to a cabin he'd rented in Shawnee Hills. Almost one month, just the two of us. No barbers. No razors. No scissors. He grew adorably unkempt. By the time we drove back, his hair, almost an inch longer, gleamed nearly blond in the late-fall afternoon light; my skin was covered in beard burns.

Obviously, I've been an irresponsible moron about this man for far longer than I am willing to contemplate.

"Still okay?" Roman is asking the injured girl with his serious, solemn tone.

Something I noticed early on about him: He always waits for the reply to a question, no matter the delay. It's only when he receives an equally serious, solemn *yes* in response that he goes back to working on her stick-thin arm, nodding his thanks to the nurse who hands him supplies from the rolling cart. It must be one of those days, if the staff is treating patients in the triage area. Around me, the noise is incessant, wheels and oxygen masks and clanking keyboards, parents arguing, children crying, residents barking out orders. The scent of blood and ill flesh and antiseptic coats all of it, a sickly, waxy sheen. But I know how to sharpen my senses to dig the signal out of the noise, and it's no effort at all for me to tune out everything that isn't the soothing timbre of Roman's voice.

"It doesn't hurt, does it?"

"No."

"Good. You're doing great. If it gets to be too much, you can squeeze Nurse Melanie's hand."

"What if I hurt her?"

"This one? You can't. She's made of steel."

Nurse Melanie kisses her own biceps, once. The girl giggles for a moment, then settles back into a grave expression. "Am I…?"

"Yes?"

"Am I going to need a shot, too?" she asks shyly.

"Nope. Not a single one." I hear the smile in Roman's voice. "Just this splint to make sure that your arm holds still. Bones are not very good at following instructions, so we use the splint to help them behave. Can you wiggle your fingers for me, Rachel?"

"How long till it heals completely?" the father asks, sounding worried and twice as shaken as the kid. *He* could probably use a shot of something good.

"Four to six weeks."

"And after?"

"She'll be as good as new."

The father exhales, relieved, but Rachel has her mind on more important matters. "Will I really get a sticker after we're done?"

Roman looks the child in the eye. "I wouldn't lie to you. Not about stickers."

"Can I choose which one?"

"You may."

"Even if I take a long time? My brother says I'm too slow."

"Tell you what: You've done so well you can have as many stickers as you like."

Nurse Melanie makes a show of gasping into her palm. "Dr. Martin! What if she takes *all* the stickers we have in the hospital?"

"It's a risk I'm willing to run. For my most fearless patient." Rachel's peal of laughter makes me wonder whether Roman winked at her—which, I know from experience, is a vision to behold. Warm brown eyes, crinkled at the corners. That hint of a smile that starts slow, always on the right side of his mouth. The way he ducks his head at the end of it, like he can't bear to linger too long on a single moment.

A familiar, tentative glow spills inside my chest just from picturing it. I must be a little too obvious in my appreciation of Dr. Roman Martin, because as the father fires off questions about showering protocols to keep the splint dry and the best sleeping positions, Rachel's eyes fall on me.

She stares, wide-eyed, the way most children do, like I don't make sense—a reasonable reaction, given that I don't. Adults recognize me as a foreign entity, too. They stumble over me, register the presence of something alien within their space; unlike kids, however, they tend to maneuver their brains into producing concrete justifications for their discomfort. They tell themselves that I move

just a bit too gracefully. That something about the specific combination of my long, glossy black hair and olive complexion is a touch unusual. I smile rarely, and never broadly. I speak too softly, yet confidently. My accent cannot be placed. The heels and topcoat I'm wearing are too corporate for an afternoon trip to the ER, not to mention the short blue dress I have on, which is simply unseasonable.

Of course, what *really* has them faltering is none of these details. I don't look unearthly because I'm at odds with my surroundings—just the opposite, in fact. But what is one to do when confronted with an anomaly, if not attempt to reduce it to its elementary components?

Children as young as Rachel, though, have yet to learn how to disassemble me. Still, they sense that something uncanny is afoot, and they stare.

"Dr. Martin?" she asks, voice pitched low. Now that she's been bribed with stickers, she sounds more curious than scared.

"Yeah?"

"Who's the woman staring at you?"

"Hmm?" Roman focuses on the gauze he's carefully cutting, and doesn't glance up. "Maybe someone who's not too happy at having waited for over…What's the wait time, Nurse Melanie?"

"Five hours, last I checked."

"Sounds about right. Can you hold still for me, Rachel? Perfect."

"So, she's not your wife?"

"No."

The child snorts. "You said no without even looking at her."

"I don't need to. Move your elbow a bit—perfect, just like that."

"Do you have eyes in the back of your head, like Mrs. Markov?"

"Mrs. Markov is her teacher," the father translates.

"No, I don't. But I also don't have a wife. We're all done here—I'll send someone out to make sure you have everything you need

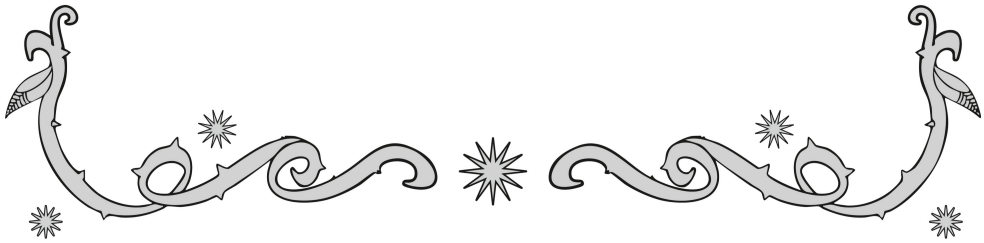
before you go home," Roman tells the father. Then, holding up his palm for a high five: "Good job, Rachel. You were so brave."

The girl beams, clapping her palm against Roman's. "Can I tell my brother that I was *very* brave?"

"No." He rises to his full height, shifting the proportions of the room in the process. He taps Rachel's nose and adds conspiratorially, "Tell him you were the bravest." Then he turns toward me.

The moment he spots me, I hear the beat of his heart come undone.

CHAPTER 2



ROMAN IS INTERRUPTED TWICE ON HIS WAY TO ME, BOTH TIMES by younger physicians who have clearly been waiting for a moment of his attention. "I'm going to take a three-minute break, and then I'll be right with you," he tells them, calm but firm, once they're done rocketing information at him. The second doctor recoils, slack-jawed, as though the concept of Dr. Martin stepping away for the precise amount of time it would take to toast a bagel is nothing but preposterous.

Three minutes, I think as he walks to me. That's how long I can expect to have him. It's not enough—it's *never* enough—but I've always liked it better, knowing beforehand. Bracing.

"Two visits in two months," he says once we're standing face-to-face, and the tip of his shoe nearly touches mine. He doesn't smile. He doesn't need to. "I must have been a really good boy."

I tilt my head. "When are you ever not?"

He sinks his hands into the pockets of his scrubs and takes a deep breath, as if casting about for something. "Well, I've been eating a lot of the organic gummy bears that the hospital buys specifically for patients."

"Abominable."

"I copy-paste a lot in the charting process."

"Pure evil."

"And the last time I was on night float, I did seriously consider running over my drummer neighbor."

"Isn't he twelve?"

"If I had been able to drag myself out of bed, that wouldn't have stopped me."

I laugh softly. Then he's quiet, too, just staring at me with that fond, melancholic expression that's as tangible a part of him as the bed of his nails.

"You usually text before showing up," he says, low.

"I do. This was very last-minute."

"A business meeting?"

I nod.

"Serious one?"

"Not too much." Truth is I don't need to be here. Just because Wenceslaus the Uncorked—appellation courtesy of Li Xiu; credit where it's due—demanded that the elders of each bloodline come to Chicago to council with him on an undisclosed urgent matter, it doesn't mean I should do his bidding. It certainly doesn't mean I should take the opportunity to meet with all the mortals who live in the city with whom I am acquainted. My presence here is, at best, a testament to my lack of restraint. And when someone as old and powerful as I am loses control…Well. No good can come of it.

Yet, Roman's eyes are soft. We left off somewhat awkwardly, the last time, and that was a first. In the last ten years, we've had our fair share of unspoken tensions, eggshell-walking, veiled requests, and silent denials. We have become experts at sidestepping difficult questions and uncomfortable truths. Roman and I are impossible. He may not know *why*, but he accepts the necessity of it.

Last time, though, I was called from Chicago a day earlier than I had originally planned. When I boarded my plane, I did so with the odd impression that, if I had stayed any longer, Roman would have

used the opportunity to ask me for something I wasn't in a position to give him.

Really, I have no business being here again so soon. No claim to the swoop in my stomach as he bends his head just an inch closer to me and says, "Hi, Lilit."

"Hi, Roman." We only have about ninety seconds before he needs to get back to his residents, and I know he's keeping track. "Are you busy later?"

"Always. But we are slowly getting things under control, and they'll probably kick me out of here once they realize how long I've been awake."

Good. At least *someone* is taking care of him. "Okay. Text me when you're home."

His lips press together. "What about dinner?"

"By the time you're off, I probably will have already—"

"Then you can look at me while I eat," he says, final, like he's laying down the law, or levying a tax on his time. I let it go, for two reasons:

The first is that, deep down, Roman believes all I want from him is sex, and he's not above using it as a bargaining chip in exchange for my company. I know this, because I have taken great pains to convince him this is the case.

The second is that his cheekbones look sharper than just a few weeks ago, the hollows underneath a little deeper, and the sight knots my stomach tight.

"Very well." I take a step back, because we only have about forty-five seconds left.

This is a habit of ours, one built over countless trial and error: Me, leaving a few moments before it's time to say goodbye, just to prove to him and to myself that our rare moments together are not a resource I plan to hoard. Roman, watching me go in silence, just to prove to himself and to me that he can bear it.

Except that this time he reaches for me. He stops me with a hand on my elbow and says, "Lilit."

I try not to show my surprise. Or how difficult it is for me to put any space between us, like he's my center of gravity. "Yes?"

He takes me in, quiet. Thirty-seven seconds left. Thirty. Twenty-six. For reasons unknown, I hear myself ask, "Should I not have come?"

His eyes flutter closed, and he puffs out a sigh. "It would have been better, yeah."

The thing about Roman is he lies. Much less often than most other mortals, and only about very specific matters. In professional settings, for the most part, he'll tell a small, inconsequential half-truth to spare a colleague's feelings, fib to save a patient from worrying themselves sicker, massage a set of facts for the greater good of the department. He lies when we're together, too, but only ever about one thing: his feelings.

His number one priority is, of course, to downplay them. Roman is just as stupidly in love with me as I am with him, albeit in the puppy way mortals are capable of. I've caught him lying a few times over the years—blinks that last longer than they should, cold palms, a tense trapezius—and it was always to hide something he thought would drive me away. *Yes, Lilit, it's okay if I have no idea what you're up to when you're not visiting me. No, I don't mind that you won't spend the night. Of course whatever you can offer is enough.* Every lie was meant to reassure me that his heart was not on the verge of being broken, and to lure me closer in the process.

But when he says that he wishes I hadn't come, he's telling the truth.

"I'm very happy to see you, though," he adds with a half smile. Again, I detect no lies. "I'll text you when I'm done."

We have fifteen—no, fourteen seconds left, and I'm not certain how to proceed. Let him off the hook. Disappear for good this time. Ask him to blow off work and stay with me.

"You have to go," Roman reminds me, his voice kind. His fingers pluck my sunglasses off the neckline of my dress, and he offers them to me. It's a long-standing joke between us—how often I wear them to protect my sensitive eyes. How particular I am about my shades: polarized, high-impact, ballistic. *Ridiculously overengineered*, he called them once, only to laugh harder when I lifted a warning eyebrow.

"Right," I say, accepting the sunglasses and sliding them on. I *do* have to go.

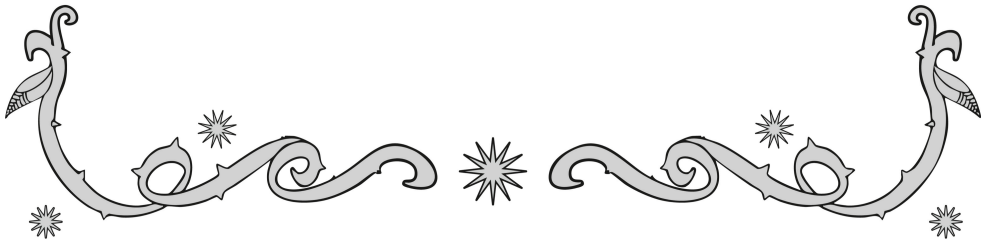
"Important immortal vampire business, I assume."

I nod, unfocused. Roman doesn't bend down to kiss me, but he does push a strand of hair behind my ear, and his thumb flutters against the swell of my cheek before falling back to his side.

I'm left standing there as I watch him walk away.

Another first.

CHAPTER 3



OF COURSE, ROMAN DOESN'T *REALLY* KNOW THAT I AM immortal, that I drink blood, or that I have been alive for several thousand years—and I do not plan on telling him. I have not voluntarily broached the topic of revenants, their biology, or even their existence with a mortal in half a millennium, and I doubt I'll have occasion to do so in the near future. As far as he's aware, he and I were born less than twenty-four months apart. I began lifting my head upright just as he completed potty training with full marks, and by the time he had learned to speak in simple clauses, I was taking my first steps.

May he keep on believing that for as long as he lives.

What he is referring to when he calls me a vampire is a conversation we had around five years ago, and the inside joke that grew on its grounds.

It was late summer. Early morning. Just about the halfway point of our acquaintance. I can't recall the reason I'd given Roman for my presence in Chicago, nor the one I'd given Viktor for absenting myself for nearly ten days. Not that it mattered: Neither was stupid, and they both knew better than to poke around for details that didn't concern them.

A few months earlier, Roman had, as he'd put it, *started making doctor money, on top of working doctor hours. About time, huh?* He'd moved from the cramped apartment he'd rented during the bulk of his medical training and bought a house in Lincoln Park. It was my favorite neighborhood in the city, which was something I was sure I'd mentioned, even though Roman had lied and pretended not to know when he informed me that he'd closed on the property.

As I said, it was barely past dawn, but we were already strolling in the park near his home, watching the daybreak light skim the surface of the lagoon. The two of us and, of course, Francois.

Francois was a dog—a small, beige creature whose coat somehow managed to appear at once fluffy and patchy. His tongue perpetually lolled between his bottom teeth, and his little paws were so puny, they required faithful sheathing before meeting the sun-warmed asphalt. The sight of him would transport me back to the majestic beasts of my youth—in the sense that he appeared to share *no* traits with the lions and caracals that dipped out of the jungle to bathe in the riverbank, or with the families of water buffalo dwelling in the marsh. The relationship between humans and animals, I would reflect, had morphed so much as to be almost unrecognizable. Fear and trembling had given way to a tepid, condescending sort of fondness, and neither beast nor man seemed to mind the transition.

If I enjoyed observing Francois, Francois couldn't help but return the favor; much like children, animals are often stumped by my kind. Whenever he caught sight of me, he'd stop in his tracks to stare, as though I were the awe-inspiring combination of a lamb chop and a vacuum cleaner of eldritch proportions. Roman had decided to interpret it as a sign of profound infatuation. *He adores you,* he would say. I suppose I could have called it out for what it was—projection—but I had no doubt that Roman already knew.

"How do you always find yourself in these kinds of situations?" I asked, glancing up at him from where he had me tucked under his

shoulder. He looked sleepy. Relaxed. I was certain that he'd mention pancakes any minute now, and then coax me back to bed for the brightest hours of the day, which suited me just fine.

"What situations?"

"The helping-out-people-you-barely-know kind."

"That's my whole job description, Lilit."

"Is being roped into dog-sitting for a neighbor you only just met part of it, too?"

"Okay, his name is Shawn, or Shane, or something with an *S*. I decided to befriend him precisely to get access to Francois. This is a long con. I've been scheming."

I laughed, utterly enthralled by the divot at the center of his chin. It was one of his most striking, singular features. "Did you consider getting your own dog?"

"Oh, yes. Many times."

"And?"

"And then I remembered that sometimes I spend four days straight at the hospital, and dogs need to be fed more often than that." He shrugged, and the movement brought me closer to him. "Maybe after I become permanent staff," he added after a pause, but it sounded absent-minded, the words murmured against my skin, a prelude to a soft kiss to my temple.

At the time, he was a senior resident. When I'd met him, he'd been an intern, and the idea that advancing in his career would lead to *more* free time, as unlikely as it sounded, seemed to be a common refrain. I doubted even *he* believed it.

"Or if you ever move here, to Chicago," he said, caution lowering his tone, "then you could help me co-parent."

Leaving aside the absurdist concept of parenting a canine, it was never going to happen. But those were early days. Roman's attempts to draw me closer were still in their infancy. Not subtle, but tentative. Overt, but never demanding. Back then, whenever I felt that our relationship was on the verge of becoming too important for

either of us, I liked to reassure myself with lies. I would reaffirm my ability to break things off whenever it became necessary. I would weigh the pros and cons, assess the risk of persevering, and…

Well. I'm still here, aren't I?

The best way to deal with Roman's mentions of the future was to ignore them. On that day, I simply pretended I didn't hear him, and instead, reached up to his face, brushing the tips of my fingers against the edge of his stubble. "Don't panic, but I think I saw a gray hair."

"Only one?"

"Were you expecting more?"

"I think I've earned at least fifty."

Francois was sniffing the base of a poplar, and Roman grinned, relaxed, his eyes warm on me, shimmery. They got like that when something percolated in his head, something that he had no intention of sharing. He was never a particularly effusive man. For instance, he'd never once mentioned that he found me beautiful. I wasn't wholly certain that he did.

"On the other hand, *you* look like you haven't aged a single day since the first time I saw you," he said, and his smile softened.

"Do I?"

"Yeah."

He was, of course, correct. I have temporary fixes. Haircuts, clothes, makeup—they can change a person and the atmosphere that surrounds them. I could, and have, believably played parts that range from late teens to mid-thirties. But the more time passes from the birth date on my driver's license, the less convincing my appearance becomes, and there's no way around that.

I've never known how old my body was at the time of my crossing. Back then, that kind of recordkeeping was uncommon. Yes, some infants' day of birth may have been noted down, to be used in divination ceremonies or to interpret their fate. But let us be frank: Whoever cared about my destiny would have been long gone by the

time it occurred to me to ask. I was no royal. No courtier. No priestess. I wasn't even a merchant's daughter. My craft and apprenticeship did not warrant documentation.

However, I do know the name of the temple administrator who had been in charge at the time I was born, and which of the city governors held power when I was made into a revenant. Based on that, and on the number of New Year's festivals I remember attending after reaching working age, I know that my mortal body must have existed for at least two decades before being turned into what it is now.

So, on that summer day, Roman was right to be at a loss. Given the age he knew me to be, and how long we had been together, my skin and muscles and ligaments shouldn't have looked the way they did.

"Maybe you just think I look young because I look younger than you?" I offered, watching the cars drive by as the morning traffic began to pick up. I was careful in my phrasing. I didn't enjoy lying to him, and avoided it if I could.

"Yeah. Still." He scanned the snub slope of my nose. His thumb brushed against my cheek, as if to swipe away an eyelash.

"Maybe my job is not as stressful as yours?"

"With how much you travel? I don't know about that." He was under the impression that I was a financial consultant, and that my profession was the reason I lived a seminomadic lifestyle. It had seemed like the ideal cover story. Roman was fundamentally uninterested in money, in a way only people born after the rise of the bourgeoisie could find admirable. Because my early life had revolved around the payments ruthlessly imposed on common families by powerful men, I'd always had a keen fiscal conscience, and appreciated that not caring about power and material possessions was a luxury few could afford.

I was vague with the details, but Roman never pried too hard. He was intelligent enough to deduce that I was wealthy, that I oversaw

people, that I was skilled at what I did, and that I made decisions with a high degree of autonomy. Most of all, he overflowed with gratitude that my complicated, hazily sketched work often brought me to Chicago. And yes, he seemed fascinated, if not actively aroused, by my expertise in areas he knew nothing about. Sometimes, he'd ask me to explain an economic concept or for my opinion on some matter he'd heard in the news. I'd give it with as much honesty and assuredness as I could, and read in his body and in his eyes how intensely he adored it.

"Maybe you just have a decent sleep schedule," Roman mused. "And that's why you look younger. Maybe you eat more antioxidants. Maybe you have better genetics. But there's another idea I'm toying with."

"Which is?"

"You are secretly a several-hundred-year-old vampire."

I wish I could say that my heart dropped, or that my stomach churned with worry at being found out. Either reaction would have been welcome—a sign of the humanity I'd been feeling slip away from me for centuries. But I was too accustomed to hiding and deflecting to be afraid of something as insubstantial as suspicions.

All Roman's words did was make me smile. "Why not a several-*thousand*-year-old vampire?"

He tipped his head. "Clearly, because I underestimated you."

"Clearly."

"So." He leaned down to press a quick kiss to my mouth. His lips were warm and dry. "What is it like to live forever?"

"Oh, you know."

"Hmm. I *don't* know, no."

"Ah, right. Well, it's…lonely. Boring. Slow. Repetitive. Lots and lots of paperwork. And some of the other millenarian vampires are such pains in the ass." I rolled my eyes theatrically, and Roman laughed until Francois decided that he absolutely had to pick a fight with a Great Dane—at which point, Roman grimaced and told me to "wait

here while I remind that dog that he weighs seven pounds. And, you know, don't exsanguinate anyone while I'm gone."

"I'm a bit peckish for breakfast, though."

"In that case, bon appétit."

That was the first discussion of my immortality, and it held nothing but joy and fun. The last one occurred less than a year ago, and it was somewhat different.

I take responsibility for it.

Roman had been given, after too many weeks without a break, three days off. I flew in to be with him. We spent the first twenty-four hours in bed, fucking and sleeping and fucking and sleeping, until he bit the inside of my thigh a little too forcefully, and then laughed against the mark he'd left. "I think I might need to eat something. Or, you know, something *else*." His words were muffled by my flesh, but I got out of bed, pulled up my hair into a ponytail, and followed him to our favorite diner. I was sweaty and flushed, skin scrubbed clean. My appearance was inconsequential, or it should have been, until the teenaged waiter who took our order asked Roman: "And for your daughter?"

It may have been a stretch, but it wasn't an impossible one: Roman was thirty-five, and looked it. Neither of us made a big deal of it, not wanting to embarrass the boy. Roman himself didn't seem uncomfortable, because in general he wasn't the kind of man who cared about what others thought. But once the waiter left, he sat back in his chair and studied me for a while. "You really don't look like you've been getting older," he declared at last.

"Mediterranean complexion," I said, pretending to study the menu.

"Is that why?"

I lifted my shoulder.

"Lilit, I…" Roman trailed off and stared. And stared. And stared. I couldn't stand it.

There have been many people infatuated with me. But *this*, I didn't know how to deal with. Feeling observed. Seen. By someone who shouldn't possibly have been able to understand me, yet he seemed to know me.

For a moment, I was almost tempted to say *fuck it*, and explain to him the exact reason I hadn't changed a lick in the past few years.

Perhaps I was going crazy.

"Vampire, remember?" I blurted out, mostly to stop myself from saying something much worse. Roman would probably never know how big of a victory this was for him. That I had outwaited countless kings and queens. That my patience was a bottomless well—except when it came to him.

"Right." His lips twitched. "I forgot."

"Understandable."

"Do you ever drink my blood when I'm asleep?"

"No."

"Why?"

"It would be…rude," I demurred.

"Rude?"

"To drink from you without permission. I'm a vampire, not an animal."

"Ah. Well, I'm O negative, which comes in very handy during mass casualty incidents. Feel free to sample, if that's to your taste."

I struggled to breathe. Roman had no idea what that meant, of course. He had no concept of ritualistic offers and blood covenants, and I wasn't going to drink from his vein—not when there already were so many inadvisable ways in which I carried him within me, everywhere.

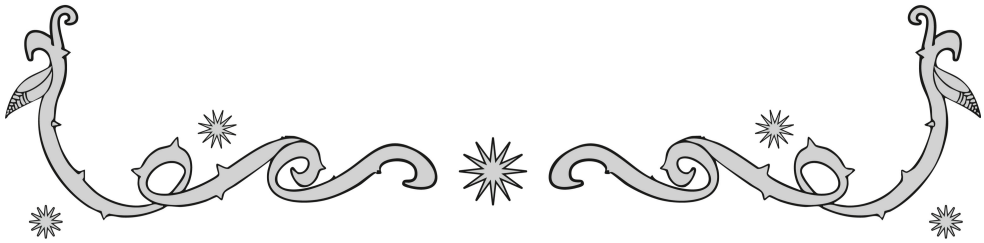
"Noted," I said. The topic shifted to something else, and he laced my fingers with his on top of the table.

When the waiter returned with our drinks, I noticed that his cheeks flamed red.

It’s a good memory. One that warms me up from within as I make my way through the Chicago streets, impervious to the first few snowflakes of the storm. The sun will set soon, and the click of my stiletto heels bounces over the icy sidewalks. A few passersby follow me with their eyes, certain that I’m going to slip and fall, wondering at the slight silhouette of a woman not bundled up enough for the coming night.

I pay them no heed, sweep my long hair behind my shoulder, and head toward the other revenants who have gathered in the city.

CHAPTER 4



WHEN ONE HAS BEEN ALIVE FOR AS LONG AS ANY OF THE people in this room, not much manages to come across as surprising—Wenceslaus's latest stunt included. Still, credit to him for attempting to disrupt thousands of years of cumulative tedium by having one of his underlings hurl a rotting corpse onto our table.

Ah. This must be why, I think, recalling the intel I received earlier this morning.

It's an unspoken but long-observed rule that, when the elder Sires of the bloodlines gather to council, they are to travel to the meeting place alone. It's common sense, really, that entourages are unnecessary, attract unwanted notice, and tend to give the other bloodline elders a general feeling of unease. Plainly, it's hard to trust someone who takes a small army to an informal summit, just like it's hard to feel trusted by someone who won't show up to said summit without a protective detail.

This morning, Wenceslaus flew in from Russia with one of his aides, and I was immediately alerted to the anomaly. None of my informants knew the reason, but now that there's a body decomposing just inches from me, I understand that Wenceslaus had it in his mind to dazzle us with some theatrics, and he didn't want to have to carry his own props. Judging from the other elders'

suddenly insightful expressions, everyone at the table is going through a similar thought process.

As far as tricks go, this is hard to ignore. Aside from Wenceslaus and me, there are four other elders in the room, and we have little choice but to pay attention to him. My recent encounter with Roman takes a back seat. I force myself to tear my eyes from the floor-to-ceiling windows that make up the east-facing wall of the office space where we convene. It's in a high-rise, on one of the upper floors, and although the room stretches for a few thousand feet, it's completely empty aside from a large round wooden table, and the nine chairs that surround it. Today, only six are in use.

I cast one last longing glance toward the dotted lights of Millennium Park and the dark sheet of Lake Michigan at dusk, then turn to face Wenceslaus, who, alas, is staring at me.

"You, Lilit of Nineveh, have not been appointed as our leader," Wenceslaus spits out in Latin. His long-nailed, gnarled finger stops caressing the end of his prophet's beard to point not quite steadily in my direction. "All bloodlines are equal and self-governing. No Sire stands above the others. You do not decide what revenant lives or dies. You do not have the authority to dole out punishments. You do not have the final say when it comes to which rules we must abide by. You, Lilit of Nineveh, overstepped *again*."

I scratch the tip of my nose and let out a deep sigh. It's almost word for word the same thing he blathered thirty years ago, in Rusyn; six hundred years ago, in a now dead Norse dialect; and about five dozen other times in between. I take back what I said about him shaking things up.

Wenceslaus the Uncorked *shits* tedium.

"I see a very tragic fate has befallen…Um." I lean forward for a better look at the corpse. A centipede slithers out of a bloated nostril, then crawls over a vaguely familiar birthmark. "Grigori?"

"Grigori, that's his name." From the seat beside mine, Li Xiu snaps her fingers. "Thank you, Lilit. I did feel that I recognized him

from something."

"You're welcome."

"Wasn't he of Wenceslaus's bloodline?"

"I believe so. Six, seven hundred years old, if I'm not mistaken?"

"Poor Grigori, slayed right as he'd finally worked up his full tolerance to the sun. How dreary." When I glance at Li Xiu, there is not a single trace of sorrow on her pale, heart-shaped face. The overhead lights glint off her bald head, briefly obscuring the complex lattice of tattoos that cover her scalp. Flowers and leaves and stems climb over the perfect sphere of her skull, inked to perfection in meticulous shades of gray, then part at the top to reveal a single, anatomically accurate eye. A long time ago, well before I became the eldest Sire of my bloodline, I asked her whether she'd mind if I shaved my head and tried to imitate her style. It was in jest, but she replied, *Of course I would, bitch*, and refused to talk to me for nearly fifty years.

I missed her dearly.

"Did not you and Grigori use to lie together, Li Xiu?" Atukhos asks, and it's a testament to how distracted I've been that my mind only now picks up an unusual detail: Atukhos sits *across* from us. Or, more notably, across from Li Xiu.

Interesting. Li Xiu and Atukhos have been companions for the last few centuries and typically choose adjacent chairs. Perhaps they are fighting. I glance at their faces, but Li Xiu looks serene and luminous as usual, and Atukhos…Well, Atukhos's demeanor is pale and grim, but that's just Atukhos, with those heavy brows and aquiline nose. His very presence turns any room into a dour, austere place—a by-product of the severe, martial air that has cloaked him since the Bronze Age in Mycenae. Once a general, or whatever, always a general. Or whatever.

"Grigori and I? No. At least not that I…" Li Xiu trails off, eyes fixed in the middle distance. "Hmm, maybe we did? Now that you mention it, it sounds plausible. I forget a lot these days."

"Atukhos has always had the best memory of all of us," Imhotep says, his voice so deep, it reverberates through the empty floor and seems to mix with the traffic pulsating down Michigan Avenue. Even the critters creeping out of Grigori's body seem to stop mid-squirm, as if charmed by his soothing bass. "Together with Lilit, of course." He sits on the other side of Li Xiu and leans past her to meet my eyes with a jovial smile, teeth blindingly white against his coppery skin and tight curls.

I nod my thanks, but I don't know if I agree with Imhotep. Far from it. I often feel like my recollection of history is wholly unreliable. My existence predicated upon lies. But before I can say any of that, Li Xiu shrugs. "Well, rest in peace, Grigori the Unmemorable." She turns toward Wenceslaus, whose scowl appears mummified. "What *did* happen to him?"

"Her *hound* happened, that's what."

The maggots squirming all over the polished walnut of the table are very distracting. That's why it takes me a few moments to realize that the *her* he's referring to is me, and that the hound in question is…

"Wenceslaus, this was not Viktor's doing," I say.

Viktor Ashworth, my closest aide, simply wouldn't. Even when he was a fledgling, the chances that he'd have gone out of his way to pursue an unsanctioned kill had been slim. These days, there are none. Viktor is very happy where he is, and it would take a cataclysmic event to drag him away. He has the perfect alibi: He's in love.

Unfortunately, the details of Viktor's private life are not something I'm willing to share with the class. The only thing I trust about other elder revenants is that trusting them would be pure folly.

"She lies," Wenceslaus rasps, and flips over the corpse with a poke of his cane, revealing a gaping abdominal wound. None too gently, he taps at its edges. "Is your hound not known for his skills

with a letter opener, Lilit of Nineveh? Has he not killed thusly before?"

For the last question, he turns to Aapo, who sits cross-legged on the chair next to Atukhos. Since the start of the assembly, she has been playing with a silver dollar—making it roll over her hands and knuckles, tossing it up in the air, catching it with her eyes closed—and doesn't seem in any hurry to stop, even as Wenceslaus adds, "Was Brigida de Roque not slayed in such a fashion, Aapo?"

"Come on, that's a low blow," I mutter under my breath.

I don't, as a rule, mess with other bloodlines, nor has it ever been my intention to tell revenants how they should live their lives. But mortals are virtually powerless compared to us, and *someone* should make sure they are not at the mercy of our whims. Since I am clearly the only revenant who's both interested in the job and powerful enough to see it done, I self-appointed as a supervisor of sorts.

Fucking sue me.

I have never played coy about ordering the hit on Brigida, Aapo's Sire. Someone had to: Brigida had been in the throes of some three-thousand-year-life crisis and spent over seventy years slaughtering mortals and making new revenants left and right, without first obtaining their consent, only to leave them to die right after the crossing. I tried to have multiple conversations with her about how it was a violation of a mortal's right to self-determination. When those didn't seem to awaken a single spark of empathy in her, I even tried to frame the matter in ways that might resonate with her courtly temperament (*It's simply abysmal etiquette. What will the people say?*). By the time I decided that she had to be eliminated, Brigida had been forewarned no less than five times.

So I sent Viktor after her, because he was my best and because he needed the distraction: He'd been going through some stuff, and the Catholic amounts of guilt that he experienced on the daily could

only be alleviated by onerous, time-consuming tasks. It was that, I figured, or putting up with all his self-flagellation.

It took Viktor the better part of twenty years to track Brigida down, which was unlike him. He disappeared for so long I briefly wondered whether he'd switched sides. Maybe while I worried whether the assassination of this Archduke Franz Ferdinand would turn out to breed trouble, Viktor was fucking Brigida de Roque on a bed of used tea bags (or whatever it was that stuffy British men found sexy). *Good on him,* I told myself. Being betrayed sucks, but I cared about Viktor, and all that sexual repression couldn't be good for him.

I was almost disappointed when he'd dragged her decaying remains all the way to my residence in Ireland. (He always had a flair for the dramatic; I blame it on all that scripture reading he did in his formative years.) Still, I smiled; said, *Good job*; and called the other elder Sires to council, so they might see that justice was administered, and so they might know what awaited them if they did not respect the welfare of mortals.

And sure, the wound on Brigida's abdomen looked very similar to the one on Grigori's. Which proves absolutely nothing.

"Do not involve me, Wenceslaus," Aapo says, flipping the coin impossibly high. When she catches it, her thick braid swings and hits Atukhos's shoulder. "I want no part of it."

"Lilit is responsible for the demise of your Sire, you foolish girl."

"Lilit is responsible for the demise of a crazy lady who'd accumulated a body count larger than your average Spartan war. With her gone, I am the eldest of my bloodline, so I'm not exactly inclined to hold it against Lilit." She produces a grateful tilt of her head in my direction, which I opt not to return. I didn't kill Brigida to do her a favor. "Oh, Wenceslaus, call me 'foolish girl' once more and I will firebomb you and your Fabergé egg collection. Pretty sure I'm older than you."

“We all are,” Atukhos confirms dryly. “Unlike us, however, Wenceslaus was made right before tripping into his shallow grave.”

Aapo snorts. “Then it would be great if he could finally speak something that’s not Latin. I barely know it—I wasn’t even in that part of the world when it was being spoken, and it’s been, what, fifteen hundred years since the damn language died? And what’s with the long white tunic? No one wears those anymore. Wenceslaus, you sound like those dumb vampires in movies who talk like they’re stuck in the thirteenth century, as if the trick to successful immortality isn’t being a fast learner and blending the fuck in.”

“Now, now,” Imhotep interrupts her. “Let us be reasonable. It is not surprising, given Wenceslaus’s age of crossing and his…religious commitments, that he is most resistant to modern English.” He smiles to deflate Aapo’s irritation. Imhotep has always been the peacekeeper among us. Looks the part, too, with his round, boyish face and tender eyes. “However, Wenceslaus, I’m not certain I agree with your assessment that Viktor must have something to do with Grigori’s death.”

“Do you not recognize his handiwork?”

“Viktor doesn’t own the only letter opener in existence,” I interject. “Not to mention, he would have nothing to gain from killing a revenant from another bloodline. Even if he did, he would know how to cover his tracks better than this.”

“She is right. Only a witless assassin becomes attached to a specific weapon, or to a modus operandi,” Atukhos says, rising to his feet. He steps closer to Wenceslaus, and as he grasps the man’s shoulder with one hand, his posture speaks of strength and of command. And, if I’m not mistaken, of annoyance at having been dragged halfway across the world for this shit. “Viktor is not witless, and neither is Lilit. They mean no harm to you and yours. Be at ease, friend, and look elsewhere for the culprit.” With that, he walks away and exits the room.

Oh, how I wish I were him. "I did not send Viktor after Grigori, Wenceslaus," I say calmly, hoping it will be the end of it. "In fact, I have not sent Viktor after anyone in years."

"What about Silas of Gaillimh?"

"Ah, yeah. The ancient manuscript deal, right?" Aapo asks.

"Correct. There was that instance. But the matter of *Ars Moriendi* was settled over a decade ago."

"Silas was of her bloodline," Imhotep points out. "Lilit brought him through the crossing. Lilit had every right to undo it." It's quite kind of Imhotep to point that out, especially considering that, while disposing of Silas's belongings, I found evidence of robust correspondence between the two men. Silas and Imhotep used to be close. Good friends. Even lovers, perhaps.

Silas had been a dear friend of mine, too. I felt no joy in hunting him down. I would have understood if Imhotep was to resent me for my action, and I'm grateful that he never did.

"Wenceslaus," Imhotep concludes, "next time, before you make accusations, I suggest that you look within your own bloodline. Moreover, I would like to put forward a gentle reminder that, while any of us has the right to call the other elders to council, it is not a right that should be abused for trivial matters."

"This whole fucking thing could have been an email," Aapo mutters. "What's the Latin word for 'email'?"

Li Xiu laughs and slides her chair back. "May luck accompany whoever tries to teach Wenceslaus the Uncorked about the internet."

"What have you called me?" Wenceslaus booms.

None of us can get out quickly enough.

—

I'M WALKING DOWN MICHIGAN AVENUE, FINGERTIPS TRAILING lightly against the rough surface of a stone wall, my head tilted up to catch the flurry of snowflakes, when I hear my name called.

I turn around, and Li Xiu is coming toward me. She takes off her sunglasses and blinks a few times, as if to make sure that the brightness of the sunset has dimmed enough not to bother her.

The longer a revenant lives beyond the moment of their crossing, the stronger their resistance to sunlight. While fledglings can be severely burned and killed by just a few minutes of exposure to UV rays, elders can easily step outside, even in the middle of the day. The one exception is our eyes, which remain sensitive even thousands of years after we are made. There is some individual variability: Li Xiu's eyes, for instance, have always been particularly affected by light, while Viktor is lucky enough to need protection only when the sun is at its strongest. I lie somewhere in between them.

All this to say, I know that Li Xiu doesn't enjoy being outside without her lenses, even when the sun is almost fully down, and I do not take her desire to have us meet each other's eyes lightly.

By her standards, this is PDA.

"So, Cassius and Karna and Pasiphaë decided not to attend the Wenceslaus show?" she asks, referring to the three bloodline elders who weren't present for the assembly.

"They're based the farthest from Chicago. And they were always the wisest."

"Maybe next time a useless council is called we should meet in Karna's backyard. Or in that cave where Pasiphaë retreats to observe her vows of silence."

"Why not? A change of scenery." Until not so long ago, there weren't many places on Earth where nine profoundly unsettling creatures of various ages and backgrounds could gather together without attracting unwanted attention, especially considering Wenceslaus's penchant for dressing like a clergy member from the Middle Ages. I suppose we could try to pass as relatives, but I doubt we'd be able to fool even an untrained eye—not because of our disparate looks, but because the kind of feelings that flow between

our people don't exactly resemble familial love. If someone were to look closely, we could probably convince them that we are a motley crew of friends. Big American cities tend to host plenty of those, and welcome visitors with a healthy dose of indifference. Therefore, they are ideal locations to gather.

But there are a lot of them. I'm not certain who decided, a few decades ago, that Chicago should be our default meeting ground. It wasn't me, I promise. That it turned out to be the place where I would later meet Roman is purely a coincidence.

"Is there anything you need?" I ask Li Xiu, wondering why she stopped me.

"To deliver a warning, that's all."

"A warning?"

"You should watch your back, Lilit."

A group of young men who smell like weed and alcohol walks past us. One of them slips on the ice and nearly bumps into Li Xiu. When he turns to apologize, she ignores him.

"Well, screw you," he mumbles, offended, and a small smile tugs at my lips.

Li Xiu doesn't *see* mortals. She doesn't love them and she doesn't hate them. She is simply so deeply indifferent to them, their presence doesn't register. Occasionally, she'll consume the art they produce or read the news to keep up with what's happening in the world. Her social interactions, however, are limited to other revenants. I doubt she remembers the last time she spoke with someone who wasn't alive during the Renaissance.

"What do you mean?" I ask. "What should I watch out for?"

"Just be careful, that's all."

I arch an eyebrow. "Is there something I should know?"

She shakes her head, but then amends: "Wenceslaus has always been bothersome, but calling a council over this was very…uncorked. Even for him."

"Ah. Well, I'm grateful for the concern, but he's a child compared to me. It's not in his interest to initiate anything."

"I know. He is a big, hairy, osteoporotic baby. But he is also mad, and mad people do silly things." She trails off at the sound of an SUV pulling up to the curb next to us. I glance at the driver's seat and feel a twinge of surprise when I spot Imhotep.

"Is that your ride?" I ask.

"It is."

I press my lips together, biting back a laugh. Once upon a time, when I was a young idiot who thought she knew what immortality was, Li Xiu told me that she got bored of everything, at some point or another. I guess Atukhos's time has come and gone. Thankfully, he is not the sentimental type.

"How long has this been going on?"

She shrugs. "Five, six years? When did we last council?"

"Around then, yes." I bite the inside of my cheek, and she arches a winged eyebrow, as if encouraging me to continue asking questions, if that's what I want. "Are you well?" I ask, at length.

"Of course. You know I am at my happiest when I'm in love."

I know no such thing. In fact, I'm not even sure Li Xiu and I fully understand the definition of that word. When we were young revenants, love was a madness, a curse of the gods, something that could only doom us. For most of our lives, commitments were forged through coin and blood, and not stuff as gossamer frail as feelings. Sex had nothing much to do with *love*. Marriage, even less. Companionship, only rarely. Love, now so aspirational, used to mean nothing but danger. Then the courtly tales arrived, the beautiful ballads of the troubadours, melancholic poets gazing at lakes and rocky precipices.

We who predate the modern concept of love by dozens of centuries might not be capable of experiencing it. Perhaps Li Xiu is just stealing language that she does not comprehend for the simple

reason that she hates the long, silent stretches of loneliness that come with immortality.

"We should meet soon, Lilit. Have tea. Catch up." She looks up at the sky with a smile. "We're not going to get out of this city for the next few days, anyway."

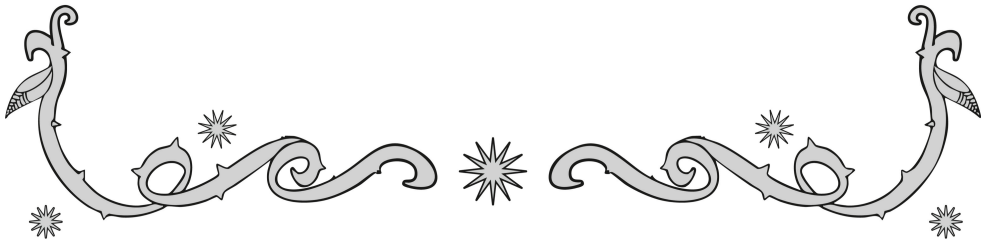
"Yes. Let's meet."

"Tonight?"

"Tomorrow," I say, because my phone buzzed in my pocket a few minutes ago, and Imhotep is waiting for her in the car. He is, undoubtedly, the kindest of all of us. Li Xiu could do much, much worse. "By the way, if you ever fuck Wenceslaus, I *will* put you down."

Li Xiu laughs, rises to the tips of her toes to press a kiss to my jaw, and enters Imhotep's car without a last goodbye.

CHAPTER 5



GIVEN WHAT I JUST SAID ABOUT THE WAY ANCIENT REVENANTS love—or don't—I am beginning to wonder if I should offer an explanation of how it happened that I stumbled into Roman, and why I didn't manage to get back on my feet for…Well, I'm still here, am I not?

I didn't seek him out. This, I want to make clear. In fact, I did not intend to take a lover at all at the time, and if I had, I would have acted responsibly, and I would have steered away from someone like Roman. Or, to be more precise, steered away from someone I enjoyed as much as I did him, from the very start.

It all began about ten years ago, in the fallout of the business with *Ars Moriendi*. Silas, a member of my bloodline, had reached what appeared to be a difficult age for a revenant, and decided to make it everybody else's problem, which required my intervention. In his mortal life, Silas had been a metalworker, and his skill for creating pendants, fibulae, and brooches had seemed to me as precious and rare as the gemstones of his trade. I was never too keen on wearing jewelry myself, but since my youth, I had a weakness for artists and scholars—and for those who honed a craft to perfection through discipline, hard work, and the kind of compulsive single-mindedness that would probably raise some

eyebrows among the sane and well-balanced. As my dear Vero would reflect many centuries later, when I wasn't quite out of earshot: "Lilit likes them weird, doesn't she?"

Plainly, I didn't know Silas's mind, or his temperament, or his proclivities. All I cared about was his talent, and when the world nearly lost it in a furnace accident, I went to Silas's sickbed and asked him if he might care for immortality. Just like every other person I ever put on the receiving end of that question, his response was, *Yes, please.*

Some fledglings mar a bloodline from the get-go. Silas, however, was perfect kin for the better part of a millennium. It wasn't until the last two or three centuries that he entered what Li Xiu once referred to as his oppositional adolescent phase.

"Maybe it's some hormonal cycle that hits revenants when they turn a certain age," she mused in the aftermath of the whole business that led to Silas's elimination. We sat at a deserted rooftop bar in Mumbai, surrounded by the spiced scent of our masala chai. The rising sun painted the sky a golden pink, and a flock of Siberian seagulls flew above, laughing at us. "But it's happened over and over in my bloodline, too. The delusions of grandeur, all that senseless violence. Almost never in Atukhos's or Karna's, though. At least, not that I know of. You and I must be doing something wrong, Lilit."

I pensively drummed my fingers against my ceramic cup. "Maybe we should stop bringing tortured artists stricken by divine madness through the crossing. We could focus on the less brilliant, more levelheaded kind. Accountants, perhaps."

"You know what? Screw trying to preserve beauty and competence, let's just borrow a page from Cassius's book and make the people we want to fuck. Or a gaggle of religious zealots who'll treat us as postexilic prophets, like Wenceslaus."

"Oh, but it all sounds so tedious."

"Right? That's probably why I haven't made anyone in…three, four hundred years? Don't tell the other elders. I know that's

ultimately going to weaken my bloodline," Li Xiu conceded, "but I'm no longer willing to deal with what immortality does to certain people. I'd rather stick a toothpick in my eye than spend enough time with a mortal to vet them beforehand. It's a gamble, anyway."

It had been even longer since I last brought someone through the crossing, but I didn't say it, because I never enjoyed the process of disclosing secrets, the way it always left me feeling shrunken and exposed.

But back to Silas. He had gone mad. His desire to build an army of revenants, develop his own cult of personality, rule over mortals as if they were cattle to slaughter for his convenience, it all needed to be handled, and quick. It fell on me, as his Sire *and* elder of his bloodline, to make the call. I meant to hunt him down and kill him myself, but Viktor—who, again, carried lots and lots of guilt about all sorts of things, including scribbles he'd jotted down when he was still in metaphorical diapers—asked to be put in charge of the matter, and proceeded to do as elegant a job as I'd hoped. It was quite self-centered on his part to fall in love in the midst of the mission, but I reckon it couldn't be helped. It meant, however, that he was otherwise engaged after Silas's death, and that taking care of the various loose ends of that affair—the other revenants with whom Silas had formed alliances, the mortals who'd aided him in his endeavors, the networks of informants and sycophantic followers he had assembled—became my task.

It was a very tiresome, unfortunate business. Nevertheless, it brought me to Chicago, and to Dr. Roman Martin.

The morning I made Roman's acquaintance started off with me executing three revenants of Cassius's bloodline—with Cassius's permission and well-wishes, of course—for conspiring with Silas and for harming a monstrous amount of mortals in the process. It wasn't uncommon for my pursuits to culminate in chases of sorts. That day's chase, however, produced one mortal victim: a kid of undetermined age, who was briskly shoved out of the way by one of

Cassius's revenants, thrown onto the sidewalk, and ended up in a heap of garbage. I didn't dwell much on it, but when I returned from my kills, I found the young boy sitting on the closest bench, crying silently. There must have been some aluminum in one of the trash bags, because blood oozed from an odd-smelling gash at his side. It wasn't too deep, I didn't think, but judging from the strong scent of iron, the boy was a bleeder.

I sighed. "Excuse me?"

The boy looked up at me, wide-eyed, and didn't recognize me as the woman who'd been running after the dickhead who'd pushed him. He seemed so floored by my appearance he forgot that he was weeping. Mid-sob and open-mouthed.

I sighed again. "Come. We are going to the hospital."

I don't *dislike* children. Rather, I don't recall ever being one. I must have, at some point, been four or five or seven years old, but as early as my first memory, I was expected to work to earn my keep, and it was apparent to me that the affection of those who surrounded me was not unconditional. Even when young, I was treated like an adult, which is very much at odds with the way childhood is conceptualized these days—a completely different set of society, inhabited by dreamy, whimsical creatures, full of trust and wonder, who require shielding, protection, and careful guidance as they ease into the chaos of life. Needless to say, they feel as alien to me as I do to them.

I have no doubt that Dr. Roman Martin noticed that from the outset.

"I am not the mother," I said quickly as we were admitted into a surprisingly quiet emergency room.

Dr. Martin's mouth twitched. "Oh, I can tell."

In modern times, medicine seems to have become a trade that rewards the bold and the daring, and this young man, strong and tall and hale, looked like he'd never known fear. Whether he was, objectively, other things—handsome, attractive, good-looking—I

could not say. Such notions change too rapidly. I can easily learn a new lexicon, or study a new scientific discovery, but some things cannot be taught semantically. Is a behavior *awkward*? Is a person *hot*? Is a comment *in poor taste*? These are not notions but sensibilities, and they rely on gut feelings, which, in turn, are informed by the kind of collective cultural consciousness that revenants can only observe from the sidelines.

That is to say, on that early spring morning, I could not determine whether Dr. Roman Martin was, by measurable standards, *attractive*. I could, however, state without a doubt that I was attracted to him.

"How can you tell?" I asked, curious. "That I'm not the mother."

He made a vague gesture in my direction. It could have alluded to a number of things, ranging from the fact that I didn't look old enough to have a nine-year-old son to the way I was clearly trying to make as little contact as possible with the child who clung to my hand. (In my defense, I *had* retrieved him from a pile of garbage.) Perhaps I just looked too anomalous, wearing sunglasses and a short summer dress in March. Weather-inappropriate outfits didn't help me blend in, but as much as I despised the cold, I hated the feeling of fabric over my body more—and the idea of wearing something that I did not find aesthetically beautiful the most.

"Well, I found a name tag on his backpack and called his parents," I informed him. "They will be here soon." The doctor looked, silent, at the place where the boy was *not* letting go of my hand. "I'll be on my way, then."

Conspicuously, the boy's grip didn't slacken.

I sighed. "Unless my presence is required?"

Dr. Martin didn't bother to hide his amusement, and I ended up at the boy's bedside, surrounded by the stink of chemicals and diseased blood, until his family burst in, panicked and teary-eyed, and I could finally disentangle myself from that terrible predicament and sneak out.

One more indignity to lay at Silas's feet.

Roman's next words to me were: "If you're thinking of seeing whether you can fly, it would be very inconsiderate of you to do it here."

It was fifteen minutes or so later, and I'd climbed up to the hospital roof to clear my head. I stood by the safety rails, watching the morning bustle of the city's never-ending traffic. I even welcomed the icy breeze, because it swept the unwelcome scents of the emergency department out of my airways.

I figured Dr. Martin might be joking, but I wasn't certain. Humor is, sadly, another of those gut experiences that require quick adapting, and I always seem to take too long to catch up.

I asked, skeptical, "Inconsiderate toward…?"

"The ear infection kids who are downstairs awaiting treatment, for one. They deserve better than to watch you get scraped off the sidewalk."

He made sense, I supposed. I nodded.

"And inconsiderate toward me. I'd have to fill in so many forms."

"Really?" I turned to him, curious.

When he pursed his lips, I wished I weren't wearing sunglasses. I would have loved to name the exact shade of pink of his mouth. "Actually, depending on your age, I might be able to get out of it. On account of this being a pediatric hospital."

"Does that mean you only treat children?"

"Correct."

"Wait. So, in a scenario in which I were to trip, fall from this roof, and break my leg—"

"You'd break more than your leg."

"Sure. But let's say, hypothetically, that I survived the fall—"

"You wouldn't."

"—and needed urgent medical care. Would you treat me?"

He shrugged. "Probably no."

My eyes widened. The intricacies of contemporary healthcare were mystifying, even to someone who'd been around for as long as I had. "So you'd turn me away?"

"No. I would draw you a map to the adult trauma center across the road. You could limp your way there." I had thought, downstairs, that he wasn't very good at masking his amusement. I realized in that moment that he simply didn't care to hide it.

"You are ruthless, Doctor."

He nodded slowly, all false consternation. "We *are* allowed to make some exceptions."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. I might be able to admit a patient over eighteen, if they are still under twenty-one years of age."

He stared at me, expectant, and only then did it click for me what the conversation was about. Another click, right after, informed me that, yes, I was interested in following its thread. I turned to lean against the rails and took my wallet out of the pocket of my dress. When I drew out my ID, he accepted it wordlessly, eyes flicking between the card and my face a few times.

"Lilit Kavvadias," he read. The current iteration of my identity had a Greek background. It matched my coloring, and I spoke the language like a native. "Born in London? Is that where the accent is from?"

My accent was a mess—overeducated posh tones overlaying a myriad of foreign quirks. I'd given up on corralling it toward a specific nationality, so I gave my standard response—"I was raised all over the place"—and let Roman make his own assumptions.

"And now you live in Chicago?"

"I don't. I'm just visiting."

"So, where's home now?"

"I travel a lot for work." (Another greatest hit.)

He glanced down at my date of birth, the reason for the whole pantomime, which put me at twenty-three. The doctor couldn't be

more than a couple of years older than that. “You’re done with school?”

I nodded, and he returned the ID.

“Why did you just show me your driver’s license?” he asked, as though he hadn’t spent the last forty-five seconds staring at it.

“Because it seemed like you weren’t sure.”

“Sure?”

“About whether I was age appropriate for you. I figured we’d just cut to the chase.”

That small smile, again, before he cleared his throat and glanced away. I wasn’t the kind to be fascinated by mysterious people, and I didn’t think he was hiding something from me, but I couldn’t quite pin him down or reduce him to a stereotype, either. “I came because I was looking for you. Liam—the boy you brought in—is about to be discharged, and the parents would like to thank you. You did a really good thing for him.”

“There’s no need to thank me.”

“Okay. If they request your contact information…?”

“Just ask for my number, Dr. Martin.”

He bit back a smile, stuffed his hands into his pockets, and rocked on his heels, but I didn’t make the mistake of thinking that he was floundering, or insecure. “How long are you going to be in town?”

“I’m due elsewhere tonight.”

Another of those thoughtful nods, followed by a long pause. He acted like everything I said needed to be carefully dissected by a committee of scholars safely ensconced in his skull. “Can I take you out for coffee?”

It was early and overcast enough that I felt it safe to take off my shades. In his natural colors, he looked even more inviting. “Do you always hit on people this aggressively?”

“Never. Please, consider it a sign of my desperation.”

It made me smile. “There is no need for coffee,” I said, staring at him squarely in the eye. They were, I was pleased to determine, a single shade of brown lighter than his hair. The contrast was beautiful.

He smiled back at me before nodding one more time. I thought we understood each other, but I had no idea. Absolutely no idea.

—

OUR FIRST TIME WAS FAST, AND CLUMSY, AND MOSTLY lackluster, which I hadn’t expected. I had no patience for incompetent lovers, and over time, I had grown skilled at spotting telltale signs and avoiding them. With the exception of youth, Roman had none of the qualities I had come to associate with sexually inept men.

So when it was over, I was surprised. Above all, *he* was surprised. The shame he obviously felt—heels of his palms squeezed into his eyes, deep flush creeping up his neck, the clenched relief of his quads—was baroque in its magnitude, and I nearly laughed. I stopped myself, not wanting to be hurtful, and glanced around his small, tidy apartment, ready to find my bra and make a strategic retreat in one fell swoop.

One didn’t make it to my age without knowing when to cut her losses.

“I’m not—not that it’s a valid excuse,” he said once he’d rallied, swallowing hard. “But you are the most attractive person I’ve ever touched. Or seen. Or…”

I only half listened, still scanning the room for my underwear. I never made much of compliments on my appeal—my features and general demeanor had gone in and out of style too many times for me to put stock in something as flaky as others’ opinions.

“Lilit?” I heard, and turned to Roman with a polite smile, still wishing I’d been smarter about this man. Wishing he’d lived up to

his potential.

He must have read my blank expression and my eagerness to leave, because any trace of self-deprecating humor drained from his face.

"Please," he murmured, holding out his hand to me. "Will you kneel on my face?"

The second time was what ruined me, and to this day, I cannot say why. I don't think it was a simple matter of technique, or skill, or size, or beauty, or endurance. Or maybe it was a combination of all. All I know is that it happened: He touched me, my vision whited out, and all was suddenly *good*.

I remember brief, isolated flashes, red-hot and stupefying. His mouth on me. The feel of his skin under my knuckles as I slid them across his stomach. Short swipes of his tongue over my nipples. His groans against my throat as he pushed inside me, and the scent of his blood, delicious even through the barrier of his skin.

I wanted to bite so much, my teeth ached.

The whole experience had a fuzzy quality, a little like the way directors choose to depict dream sequences in movies. I never found them to be believable—honestly, it's one of the reasons I've never enjoyed films, the arbitrary nature of cinematic conventions. But the pleasure of that first day felt exactly like that: Ghostly. Ephemeral. Pervasive. The only things that anchored me were Roman's eyes, locked on me, pleading. Over and over, he seemed to slip into the same odd trance that I experienced around him. I felt out of control, but not alone in that.

—

"WHAT LANGUAGE DID YOU SPEAK?" HE ASKED ME AFTERWARD, his strong arms cradling me like I was something precious and fragile. I allowed it. It had been *that* good.

"Excuse me?"

"You said something, during, but I couldn't…" He shrugged, a little bashful, and I burst into laughter.

"I think you may have made me forget my English."

He laughed, too, against the pulse point in my neck. "It's not all that impressive, if English isn't your native language."

English was not my native language. In fact, when I was born, English had not been a language at all. It hadn't come around until later, after I was already ancient, an old revenant in the body of a young woman. After I witnessed the wars and the conquests and the migrations. After I listened to Norse, Celtic, and French sounds fight for dominance. After I watched rules change, meanings shift, contexts collapse. English may not have existed when I was born, but I was there when it yawned its first cry, which means that I mastered it when it was still in its infancy.

Well over a thousand years later, this man came inside my body and made me forget all about it.

"What if I had been younger than twenty-one?" I asked him later still, much later, as he watched me get dressed. That day, I ended up staying at his apartment until the last possible moment. Very, *very* irresponsible.

"I don't know." Roman gave me one of those wry looks that I was already starting to recognize as self-effacing. "Walked away and banged my head against the roof's panic door, probably?"

I was baffled, but well-disposed toward him. "Why is *that* your age cutoff?"

"I don't know. Twenty-one sounds awfully young."

"Said from someone at the ripe old age of…"

"Almost twenty-five." At least he looked embarrassed. "The thing is I'm usually more attracted to older women. You're kind of an exception."

My eyebrow rose. "How much older?"

"Not much, just…" He laughed again. *Cute,* I thought. The word, as hazy and variable as I knew it to be, definitely applied to him.

"The things I find attractive tend to be more common among women who are older than me."

"Such as?"

He hesitated, but then shrugged. "I like women who are self-possessed, and confident, and direct. Capable. Steady. I find them very sexy. And you…"

I was all of these things—I had to be. But, "You spoke to me for about five minutes before you propositioned me. You have no idea whether I'm competent, or poised, or self-assured."

"Are you serious?" He snorted, sitting up in his bed, and the sheets pooled around his waist. He was, truly, beautifully made. "You managed to calm down a hysterical child whose name you didn't even know. You contacted the family. You sat with him, held his hand without batting an eye, and while you waited, a car crash victim came in and there was so much fucking blood and you didn't even flinch. You were calm and collected and had the kind of nerves that med students work years to achieve."

"I see." It was possible that Roman was more observant than I'd been willing to admit.

"Don't get me wrong, I'm very glad that I got to fuck you, and I'm not going to bullshit you and tell you that this wasn't the best sex of my life. But when I came up to the roof, all I wanted was to chat with you."

He was sincere, and I even found parts of what he said pleasing. But none of it mattered: I was never going to see this boy—man, *man*—again. It just wasn't wise to associate with mortals with any regularity.

Right as I reminded myself of that undisputable truth, Roman asked, "Can I have your number?"

I finished fastening my bra and cast what I thought was a neutral look in his direction, but he must have caught something. Perhaps a hint of regret in the slope of my shoulders. A drop of wistfulness in

the tilt of my smile. He was, after all, a chirurgeon. The human body was his kingdom.

"I have a very demanding job," I said, like dozens of times before. "I have no interest in a traditional relationship, and that's not going to change."

"Fine. Okay."

"You say so now, but—"

"I'm about to start a combined pediatrics and emergency medicine residency, and I'm not going to see the outside of a hospital for the next six years. Believe me, I'm not looking for a relationship, either." He jumped out of bed, naked, and walked up to me, reminding me of the statues sculpted by the greats. "Listen, don't give me your number if you don't want to. But can I give you mine?"

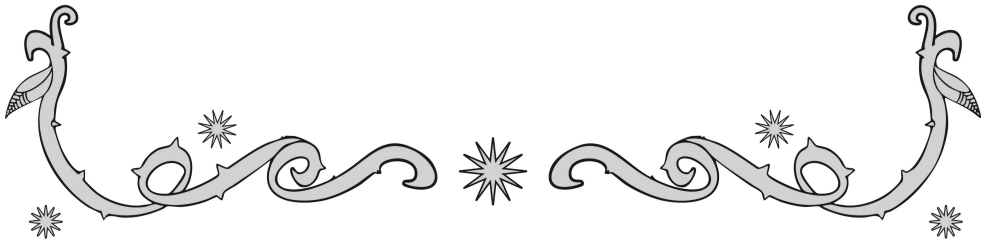
It seemed like a harmless compromise, so I allowed him to share his contact information.

Ten minutes later, I left Roman's apartment, body still thrumming from what I had experienced with him. I wasn't wholly pleased. I didn't, and still don't, enjoy learning new things about myself, especially when they are taught by a mortal less than a one-hundredth of my age.

No matter, I thought.

I was never going to meet him again, and the issue would fix itself.

CHAPTER 6



I FOUND MYSELF IN CHICAGO ONCE AGAIN BECAUSE OF A problem with the plane I was chartering. That time, I was on my way to Canada for matters that had nothing to do with Silas: A revenant two rings below in my bloodline was exhibiting signs of mental distress, and her Sire, who was quite fond of her, wanted my opinion.

I wish I could say that the option to contact Roman occurred to me late, in the middle of a long night spent waiting for the repairs to be completed. That Roman's existence was like an old classic: something I'd forgotten about until it was dusted off by boredom and idleness. The truth, of course, is that I was aware of his presence in the city—no, of *my* presence in *his* city—from the moment my plane landed.

Even as I texted him, I told myself that he was likely to be busy. That he might not remember. That he was mortal, and therefore, fickle. That I had his number, but I never gave him mine. I hadn't even properly saved the contact, which meant enough scrolling back through my logs that I should have regained my wits in the process.

No such luck.

Are you busy today? I sent.

He would ask: Who is this? And that would hopefully be the moment of clarity I needed to abort this insanity—the equivalent of a hand grabbing the scruff of my neck as I was about to jump into a pool full of sharks. Well, not sharks. Roman wasn't as dangerous as that. But he could prove an inconvenience, just like any other mortal who overstayed their welcome within our revenant lives. He was like a thongweed: harmless if left alone, but deadly if one got caught in it.

Unfortunately, his reply was lightning fast.

Lilit?

My Yes followed before I was cognizant of typing.

On shift until 7am. I can be with you a minute after that, literally.

I hoped my plane would be up and running by then. I hoped that the damage would turn out to be serious and take days to fix. I hoped for such conflicting things that I told myself to stop hoping. It was a novel occurrence for me, knowing better than to do something and yet keeping at it.

I met him at a diner near the hospital at seven fifteen.

"I really hoped you'd call." He looked boyish, flustered, happy. His heartbeat was elevated. The slight flush on his cheeks warmed the pit of my stomach. I thought then, for the first time of so many, there are not enough numbers to count: What if I took his blood? Would it taste sweet and ferric? Would it sit heavy and rich in my belly? What would it feel like, having access to his thoughts? I imagined the inside of his head to be as cool and tidy as his apartment. No doubt, most of his focus was on his job, and how to do it well. I was sure he had other interests—his shelves had overflowed with books, academic and not, and there had been clues of him belonging to some kind of sports team—but he appeared to

be singularly motivated, which was a relief in more ways than one. He was unlikely to dwell on me when I was out of his sight.

"Want to go to your place?" I asked.

"Breakfast first? I'm buying."

"Sure," I said, because I didn't mind. I was half curious to find out how the residency he'd mentioned was progressing. *Just checking in on the development of a skilled mortal healer,* I told myself. It was important for us revenants to keep track of what happened in the world. The news cycle and social media certainly helped, but nothing compared to direct contact with mortals.

Roman, I discovered by conversing with him, comprehended time in terms I wasn't familiar with. Shifts, lives. The number of people he could help, and the resources he would need to do so. To him, a day was split into chunks of twelve, conceptualized as bricks, moments of rest followed by stretches of all-consuming dedication. And, in the long run, achievements. Skills. *How ironic,* I thought, *that his entire existence is dedicated to gathering knowledge to combat the ravages of death.* He was sitting across from someone who could have bestowed immortality with a drop of her blood, and he had no idea. He would grow old without ever knowing how close to it he had once been.

I found the idea very sad. Which probably should have served as an early warning of what I was embarking on.

Annoyingly, every single thing Roman revealed about himself—his professional path, his lack of a family, his love for Chicago, the city where he was born—was followed by the same genuine inquiry: "What about you, Lilit?"

I deflected as much as I could, but he wasn't an idiot, and he didn't particularly enjoy the sound of his own voice. When he asked me, "Where did you go to school?" and I replied, "Here and there," he leveled his gaze at me.

"You are very cryptic, aren't you?"

"I am." A pause. "Is this something you could get used to?"

"Doesn't sound like I have much of a choice if I want you to stick around, huh?"

I won't stick around, anyway, I thought.

Like a fool.

—

I REALIZE NOW THAT I MIGHT NOT BE TELLING THIS STORY RIGHT. IN my defense, I never planned to go into detail about how I came to be. Trust me when I say: The longer one lives, the weaker the hold of one's origins on their future.

For the sake of completeness, however, I'll mention that my Sire was as powerful as he was cruel. He was a priest of the Temple of Ishtar, and much like me, he loved beauty, although his tastes lay less with the making of art and more with consuming the pleasures of the flesh. One day, I was accused of treason because of my loose ties with a group of insurrectionists and set to be executed. (I should say, *wrongly* accused; at the time, I had been too unaware, too hungry, and too overworked to engage in something as fanciful as *plotting*.) My Sire saw me in shackles, thought me beautiful, and decided that I would bring value to his estate. He carried me through the crossing, and while he did first ask for my permission, I would argue that his explanation of what eternal life would entail was…deceptive.

Still, I don't regret saying yes. I was his companion for the century that followed. During which he kept me under the impression that he and I were the only two of our kind, and during which I never questioned him. It would be false to say that I was unhappy by his side—in many ways, if not all, the priest treated me better and with more respect than I had ever experienced before. It would be just as bad a lie to insist that I was distraught when Li Xiu found us and quickly disposed of him in an act of revenge.

"He slayed my Sire," she told me after sucking the priest dry. "I've been searching for him for ages. Do tell, what poppycock has he been filling your head with?"

Perhaps this is what soured me to the idea of romantic relationships within a bloodline: the keen awareness of the fact that imbalances of power and knowledge are unavoidable. Or it could have been something else altogether, such as the slow realization that living forever seems to kill something fundamental in all of us. Likely, I am just very particular in my tastes, and most of the revenants I met simply didn't suit me. At any rate, as time went on, it became obvious that when it came to choosing lovers, I much preferred to look among mortals. Many have assumed that Silas and I, or Viktor and I, were companions at different junctures. I cannot imagine caring enough to set the record straight, but that is not true.

With mortals, however, I've always been careful never to return for seconds. They may be ignorant, but they aren't stupid. What their eyes barely notice, their brains scream at them. As cautious as we revenants try to be, we sometimes slip and forget to hide our superior strength or speed. Under the direst circumstances, the younger and more frail among us can be overcome by our thirst for blood and become violent.

The solution is straightforward: Dangerous beings who don't age and deal in power should *not* become a permanent fixture in a mortal's life. And yet, that morning, when Roman set his glass of water on the table and said, "I'm really glad to see you again," I responded: "Me too."

The hitch of his breath was audible over the blood rushing through his veins. He smiled at me, and I followed him to his apartment, and there we remained until he had to return to the hospital for his night shift, even though my plane had been fit for travel hours before then.

—

OF COURSE IT HAPPENED AGAIN AND AGAIN. IF I HAD STOPPED myself, there would be no story to tell.

I wish I could say that it was the sex that kept me—*us*—going back for more. That his worth resided exclusively in the way he helped my body feel forgotten things, or discover new, brilliant ones. But that's not the case.

As soon as I began to know Roman, I liked him. I liked his integrity, and his mind, and the way he seemed unable to volunteer a single piece of information about himself without wanting to know the corresponding tidbit about me, even after he learned how unlikely I was to disclose. I liked the scent of his blood, and that it coursed so forcefully I could map the path of it with my tongue to my heart's content. I liked his lack of ego. I liked the way he noticed people and strived to give them what they needed, like the elderly owner of the B and B in Indiana who every morning drank her coffee with him on the porch because she knew that he'd listen to the stories of her youth. I liked his disinterest in power and its trappings, his seductive competence, his willingness to postpone judgment, sometimes indefinitely.

I liked dozens of things about him, and I wish I could spell out which one of them made me fall for him at last. Even back then, I wished to know. For a long time, I hoped that dissecting and then naming his pull on me might be the key to coming free of his hold, like in one of those old fables where the magic word breaks the spell. *Rumpelstiltskin. Open sesame. Roman Martin.*

In the end, all I knew was that I liked him, and wanted him like nothing before. I had never been in love as a mortal, and I always questioned whether what I felt was deserving of that label. But one thing I did not doubt: This was the desire of poets and parables. I should have known better than to yield, and yet, I embraced it.

Roman liked me, too. I never deluded myself: My elusiveness, my obvious half-truths, the mysteries that trailed after me like crumbs, those would have been cause for excitement to any young man. Roman seemed at once genuinely frustrated by the secrecy and willing to work twice as hard to overcome it. "I told you," I would say, my head pillowed on his biceps. "I lead a very boring life, and don't like to talk about it. I travel for my job, and that's about it." He didn't believe it, nor should he have, but he knew that the deeper he dug, the further I would pull back. Slowly, he stopped asking about my past. Instead, he demanded my future.

"I'm not on shift until late tomorrow. Stay overnight," he said one evening, pushing sweaty strands of hair away from my forehead. That was his first victory. After that, it was a weekend together at a nearby national park. Three days at a lake, because *I'm actually a pretty good sailor. Let me show you*. A week in the snow. Then ten days. A fortnight. Weeks and months. Once a year to several times. I heard myself say yes once, then often, then always.

Those were relatively peaceful years in my world, with Silas gone and the dregs of that business tied up. And Roman…Roman was lonely, I learned, with the same brand of loneliness as me. He was brilliant and beloved, surrounded by friends and colleagues and acquaintances. And yet, he was lonely. He didn't say so, but it was clear that something set him apart from the people that populated his life, as though he stood at the margins of his own existence. I should have realized the reason for it early on, but I was busy savoring our time together. His enamored gaze as he watched me oil my hair. The way his movements faltered as I sighed my pleasure and wrapped my legs around him. The viciously handsome lines of his face that became even more beautiful with age.

Roman liked me to be in charge, which was fortunate, because it was what I wanted, too. I was, of course, always stronger than him. He didn't know at the time that I could have stripped his much-larger muscles off his bones with a flick of my finger. Still, he

behaved like he knew. In bed, every word I spoke was an order. He was quiet when I wanted him to be, and loud if I demanded it. He would kneel at my feet. Ask to worship my breasts. He would beg to come between my thighs and then beg to hold my knees open and watch himself trickle out of me. He would wait for my permission before allowing himself to feel pleasure, and when he finally did, his whole body shuddered against mine. If I had asked him to feed me his blood, he would have agreed without hesitation, and with no assurance that I wouldn't drink him barren.

"The first time I saw you, I told myself you looked like an angel," he told me once as I moved on top of him, his eyes bouncing between my eyes and my tits. He exhaled a laugh and added, "But I think you might be a goddess. A cruel, Old Testament one." He was mixing up his theology, but I didn't mind. He saw me for who I was, insofar as it was possible for a mortal to do so.

Whether he saw other women in the weeks I wasn't around, I never asked. I hoped he did, and I hoped he didn't. Once again, too conflicting. Once again, I stopped hoping. I had no interest in other lovers—or, truth be told, in finding companionship in others, be they mortals or revenants. All I wanted was Roman. Selfishly. Greedily. I hadn't known that my mind, my orderly, methodical, businesslike mind, could withstand such inefficient bouts of revelry.

During the fall of our sixth year together, he drove us out of the city, to a place in the mountains. That day, a dog escaped his leash and darted in front of our car. Roman braked immediately, narrowly avoiding hitting him, and threw his right arm in front of my body to protect me from the possible impact.

"Fuck—are you okay, Lilit?" He turned to me with wide, rattled eyes, and I couldn't help glancing down at his arm, still trying to shield me. The braids of biceps and triceps and vessels sheathed with paper-thin skin that stood no chance of prevailing over gravity, and matter, and the ruthless forces of physics.

I laughed in his face.

"Okay. Okay. Good. You're good." I think he attributed my laughter to shock. His smile came slowly, wide. It sank into my bones, then the urge to tell him that I should be the one protecting *him*. When he took my hand to comfort me, I squeezed it back and wondered, *What if I were to tell him about revenants?*

A single, simple question that brought about hundreds more. What would Roman say? Would he be angry at me? Would he beg me to carry all his sickest patients through the crossing? Would he instinctively know that one cannot remain alive for as long as I have without being responsible for reprehensible things? Would I see repulsion in his eyes? Worse, would he develop the kind of monomaniacal lust for immortality that some do when they discover that death isn't unavoidable? I felt no embarrassment, nor guilt, about my nature. I'd had a long time to come to terms with it. Still, I wasn't eager to see myself reflected in Roman's eyes.

I did, however, fantasize about coming clean. About offering him immortality. About him becoming my companion.

Do that, the rational side of my brain commented. *Tell him about revenants. See if he isn't repelled by the concept of defying death. See if he still wants to be with you once he knows the truth of you. If he does, you know how the crossing ritual works. You will first have to bring him to the end of his life to make him, and there is no guarantee it will work—sometimes the ritual doesn't take, and no one has any idea why. Then Roman will be dead, and the world will be a worse place for it.*

Time passed. I didn't say anything.

Several months later, as I dozed on top of him in his bed, the summer heat tacky against our flesh, his phone rang. I felt his muscles shift underneath me, but couldn't find the energy to stir.

"Yes?"

It was a woman. A colleague. They made small talk, and then she told him about plans for the night—a potluck, a colleague's house, a celebration.

"Maybe. I'm with…" Roman glanced up at me, a soft smile on his lips. "A friend. I'll see if she wants to go and text you."

The other end was briefly quiet. "Okey dokey."

I had known for years that Roman was inexplicably isolated. That he didn't quite fit, even within his own life. That someone like him should have belonged, and not gone about as though there were a thin film between him and the rest of the world. But I'd been too distracted by him, for too long, to truly realize what it was that had plucked him from the life he deserved: me.

—

ONCE I REALIZED THAT I WAS A BLIGHT TO ROMAN, I TRIED TO extract myself from his life.

I know that it might seem like I didn't. But I really did try.

When I wasn't visiting, we were in the habit of texting, but not often, and I took advantage of that. For the following few weeks, I warned him that I'd be busy. I didn't contact him first, and my replies to him were short. Somehow, I resisted the urge to fly to Chicago and covertly check on him.

The silence was hell itself. The silence helped. For the first time since I'd met him, I left the States for a protracted period. Before him, my residence had defaulted to Ireland. I owned a small castle there, where I could be found whenever I had nowhere else to be. But I hadn't visited it in over half a decade.

It appeared that I'd moved to North America without realizing it.

I told myself that all I needed to do was keep my distance. That Roman and I had both lived the majority of our lives without the other. It could be extrapolated that we didn't *need* each other to survive.

Don't let me hurt you, I thought. *Don't let me hurt you.*

Then, one morning, I woke up to a phone call. "I haven't heard from you in a while," he said, no accusation in his voice. "Has the

market collapsed or something?"

"I've been busy," I said.

"You mentioned. I just wanted to check on you." A pause. Wry laughter. "Honestly, I'm just happy to hear your voice."

I closed my eyes. "Yeah. Me too."

"Yeah?" He sounded surprised, but not daringly so. This was not a provocation: Roman truly wasn't certain whether I thought of him when I was gone. Whether he was an object with permanence in my life.

That's the thing, I thought. *You aren't. You are a mayfly, and I'm a stone in the body of water where you were born. You should never have known of me.*

But this was Roman in a nutshell. He didn't interrogate my absences, or demand explanations I couldn't give. He was happy to wait for me to be back. "We don't have to stay on the phone," he said. "I just wanted to make sure you were okay."

I crumbled more violently than the lighthouse of Alexandria.

—

SINCE I COULDN'T BEAR TO LEAVE HIM, I HOPED THAT HE WOULD leave *me*. *He'll get tired,* I told myself for the following three years. *He'll want something normal, like a family, or even just a wife who's willing to be introduced to his colleagues and bake brownies for a potluck (no nuts, because modern humans have somehow cornered themselves into allergies that are deadlier than the bubonic plague). Eventually, he'll do what I haven't been able to.*

So I pretended I couldn't hear him murmuring my name in his sleep, and tried not to let my soul shatter when he buried his face in my hair and bared his heart, confessing that he was terrified to fail his patients—what if he made a mistake, what if he missed a small detail, what if he stopped caring? I made myself not notice that my

visits were becoming more frequent, and the phone calls at the end of his shifts almost regular.

One night, as I helped him fold his laundry while he made me laugh with stories of the outrageous things some of his young patients had said during his shift, I remembered a moment from several years earlier. Viktor had come to me to discuss matters that had seemed important at the time, but that I could no longer recall. We'd spoken at length about his progress on several affairs, and at the end of our meeting, like an afterthought, he'd told me, "I think I may be falling in love."

I had looked at him, confused. By the disclosure. By his tone. By the sheer concept of stern, straitlaced Viktor falling, in any meaning of the word.

"With a mortal," he had added.

"I see." I had contemplated the issue. Eventually, I'd asked, "Could you stop it?"

"Excuse me?"

"The fall. You said that you are falling—are you in a position to pull yourself back up the cliff?" I'd hoped the metaphor would resonate with him, because I had no idea how to better articulate what I was asking.

"I…am not quite sure."

"Ah. Well, I reckon we'll find out."

He had frowned. "I thought you might be more upset."

"Why would I be?"

"Because I have found that now that she is in my life, several of my priorities have shifted. I could see myself becoming…careless."

I had nodded, feeling somewhat happy for Viktor, but also certain that he would be cross with me if I congratulated him on something as mundane as finding someone he could love as much as duty, or history, or old palimpsests. "Are you referring to the forger? The girl who knows of us?"

"I am," he'd said with his jaw tight, as if to open his mouth as little as possible and swallow the whole ignominious business back into his body.

"Does she return your—?"

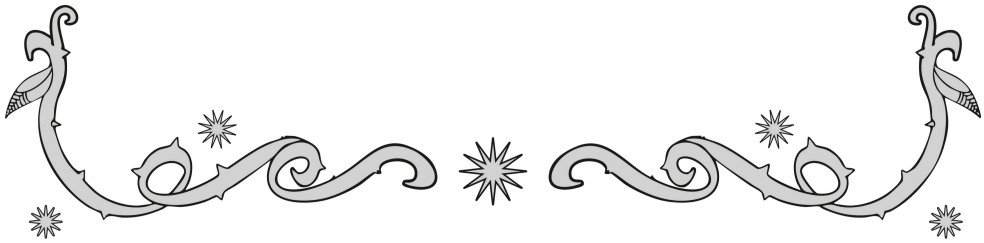
"No." A beat. "I don't know. Possibly."

"I see. Well, if you'd like my permission to bring her through the crossing, you may—"

"No. No." He had dragged his hand down his face—quite possibly the grandest display of emotion in which he'd partaken since well before Christopher Columbus had sailed off to commit all sorts of atrocities in the New World. "No, Lilit. I very much hope to…I have faith that I shall prevail in stopping this fall."

He did not. I witnessed the extent of his collapse, and that's why I could recognize my own demise when it came about: By the time I realized that my footing was perilous, I was already halfway past the precipice.

CHAPTER 7



THIRTY MINUTES AFTER I'VE NODDED MY GOODBYES TO LI XIU, I sit in the same diner booth where Roman and I have eaten countless meals. A few moments later, he slides onto the bench with a smile and a soft, "Hey."

This is a bit of departure from the tried-and-true structure of our encounters. The routine we've worked out usually starts at his house, where we have sex—a nice, if ineffectual, way of reminding ourselves what this *should* be about—and only later, with reluctance, eases into more intimate moments. Meals shared, conversations, movies on his couch that I never truly enjoy, except for the fact that Roman is too exhausted by his job to stay awake for them; I take the opportunity to watch him sleep for hours then, wondering what it says about me that the joyless numbness of my immortal life can only be broken by beholding this man as he breathes.

Tonight, perhaps because my visit was unannounced, the script is flipped. Roman sits relaxed, a small curve to his lips, hand curled loosely on the table. And yet, his expression is guarded, shuttered in a way I am not used to. "You look good."

I raise an eyebrow. "Do I?"

"Yeah. Impervious to the elements, as usual." His smile is fond, and he glances at where my hands are laced around a steaming

mug of tea. “Mostly impervious.”

Roman knows well that despite my vanity and my penchant for impractical clothes, I do get cold. He has told me more than once that he finds my predilection for haute couture charming, and likes to shield me from the consequences of my own choices. I half expect him to rub my fingers between his, or to get up, crowd my side of the booth, and warm me by sliding his open palm up my bare inner thigh.

He does neither, which triggers another realization: He hasn’t kissed me yet.

It’s not something he usually delays.

“Everything okay?” I ask, and even though his nod should be convincing, I know it to be a lie. I try to stop staring, but there are dark circles around his eyes, and his complexion is pallid against the green of his scrubs. He hasn’t shaved in a while, which is not like him. Then again, I didn’t give him a heads-up before visiting, did I? From the start, Roman has seemed both enchanted and appalled by my sensitive skin, both proud and apologetic for the marks he often leaves behind. It’s possible that he only shaves when he knows he’ll be seeing me.

“It looked like you might be busy with work,” he says.

“How so?”

He gestures vaguely. “There was a lot of talk of the Fed and interest rates in the news. I assumed you were off somewhere, in the thick of it.”

“Read *The Wall Street Journal*, did you?”

“‘Read’ is a strong word. I sounded it out. The way a toddler would.”

I laugh quietly. “You’ll never convince me that someone who deals with pressure-volume loops on the daily cannot understand shorting.”

“You know what they say about doctors.”

“What do they say?”

"They're idiots."

I study him sideways. "Do they say that?"

"I do. Every time I look in the mirror."

I feel my brow furrow. "Roman…" I'm not sure what to say.

He shakes his head, and yes, he does look tired, but he's still so beautiful, it nearly cracks my heart.

"Is everything okay?" I ask again. An odd impulse to wring my hands comes over me, but I marshal my body into the no-fidget zone I trained it to be.

"It is," he says with a small smile. We regard each other like that, politely, two people who are not tragically in love with each other, until our regular waitress, Diane—*Hey, you. Haven't seen you around in a while!*—drops off an extra glass of water and the specials menu.

Normally, Roman would pick it up and skim through it. This time around he ignores it, which tells me he has no plans to eat. Perhaps he simply isn't hungry.

But then he pushes his glass to the side and leans his elbows on the table.

My stomach drops.

"I'm sorry, Lilit," Roman says.

It occurs to me, dully, passively, that this is the end of something that lasted a decade, and for a brief moment, *everything* hurts. Then, nothing. Absolutely *nothing*. I am blessedly numb, and watching what's about to unfold from a distance.

"Very well," I say calmly, leaning back in my seat. He always liked my composure, after all.

"I know that this is against the rules, but I really can't help it."

"The rules?"

"Of this game we're playing."

"Ah."

His tongue roams the inside of his cheek, and his heartbeat pulsates faster, deliciously hard. This is going to end in devastation, but a selfish, reckless part of me wonders whether I should steal a

few drops of his blood before we part company. That way, I'll carry him inside me for as long as he lives. That way, I can find him forever.

"Believe me, I find no joy in telling you something you don't want to hear. I have been content to follow your lead, Lilit, I really have. You told me that you didn't want a traditional relationship, and I understood from the start the limits of what I could do, or ask, or have. But I'm no longer willing to play by the rules. Which, I assume, means that the game is over."

I nod, trying not to look sad, because I have no right, and this is how it has to be. He doesn't need to know that I tried.

I looked at every possible avenue. I consulted with revenants older than I. I spoke about you without saying your name. I went through every scenario, sought the best way to keep you with me and to ensure that I wasn't taking anything away from you. I tried. I really tried. And when I reemerged empty-handed, I couldn't make myself put a stop to us.

But he must notice the sorrow in my eyes, because he says, "It's fine, Lilit. Things have changed, somewhat." His beloved yellow-brown eyes are warm. Diane only brought one straw, and he pushes it toward me. "I have been seeing someone."

Two things register at once: First, the meaning of his words. Then, the steady beat of his heart behind them.

It indicates that Roman is telling the truth.

At some level, I am aware that the blank expression on my face is too alien to be exhibited in public. I should fix myself and approximate the kind of reaction a regular mortal would have upon receiving this piece of news. But I can't be bothered to school my features into anything that resembles normalcy.

"A woman?" I ask, remarkably steady.

"Yes."

"Do you…work together?"

"No. But she is a physician."

Again, not a lie. “I see.”

He nods with what seems to be relief. Was he afraid that I’d make a scene? In the ten years of our acquaintance, I have not raised my voice once. In fact, I don’t believe I’ve indulged in outward displays of anger since the start of the nuclear age. I was always self-possessed, and eternal life mellowed my temperament even further. “Perhaps I should have reached out to tell you. But it happened very fast, and you have always been forthcoming about your feelings regarding the possibility of a real relationship with me.”

My throat tightens. “Was our relationship not real?”

He ignores the question. “This thing…It’s new. It’s unexpected. It happened without my wanting it to. But it did happen, and…as bittersweet as it feels to end things, maybe there’s a reason for it. Maybe it’s for the best.” His eyes fall on a spot behind my shoulder and linger there for too long. “It would be unfair for me to continue seeing you. This has to be the last time. Right now should be the last of us.”

I stare at the place where his long fingers rest over the table. This one is not a lie, either. He is asking for what he actually wants.

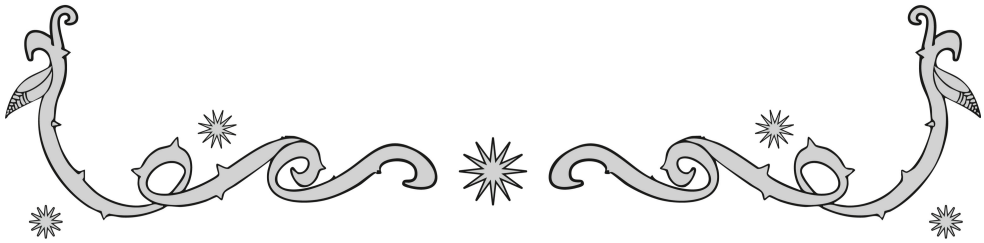
“In that case,” I manage to say, dry mouthed, “you should leave before Diane comes back for our orders.”

Roman doesn’t waver. I watch him rise to his feet without pause, and don’t move a muscle when he leans in to press a kiss against my cheek. The warmth of his scent thickens, and I try to be quiet as I inhale deeply.

“Goodbye, Lilit.”

I offer him my most gracious smile. Then, as he leaves, I remind myself that one cannot lose something they never had, and stay still as my body reacts as though I’m dying for the second time.

CHAPTER 8



IT TAKES ME A WHILE TO COLLECT MYSELF.

I linger at the diner, picking at the hummus plate that I only ordered to placate Diane, telling her, *No, I don't mind,* when she commiserates with me about the curse of dating doctors. (*Always on call, always, except when you want them to be.*) Outside, the snow piles up, dusting the street in white and softening the edges of the city.

I always knew that one day I would have to stop sharing Roman's life. I could only be along for a short ride, which I stretched for as long as it would allow. Perhaps cruelly so. For years, I hoped he would be the one to push me out of the vehicle. Now that he has done so, I have no intention of resenting the way he broke things off. As dismissals go, it seemed like a good one. Roman was honest and direct with me, like I could never be with him.

Still, it hurts like fucking hell—a new, bone-deep wound that I don't recognize from previous experiences. Because of that, I cannot predict the ebb and flow of it, or estimate if or when it will heal, which sets me adrift.

Trust Roman to give me another first as a parting gift.

When my phone rings, I can't even find it in myself to be grateful for the distraction. "Anything of import that I should be aware of?"

Viktor asks, all clipped sounds and brisk competence.

How does he know? I wonder. A beat later, I realize that he's checking in on the meeting with the other elders and bury my face in my palm.

"Nah," I say, leaving several bills on the table and plunging into the swirling snow. "Actually, there is something."

"Yes?"

"You have not recently taken the initiative to assassinate a revenant named Grigori, have you?"

"Grigori Andreyevich Markov? Of Wenceslaus's bloodline?"

Of course Viktor would have his birth certificate memorized. "The one and only."

"I was not aware of his…elimination."

"Good. I'll take it as a *no* and reiterate to Wenceslaus that you did not take your letter opener all the way over to the Urals to carry out a hit on one of the more insignificant members of the least powerful bloodline."

"Oh. Did Wenceslaus seem to be under that impression?"

"He did, but he also believes that baby sheep grow out of dandelions. No one puts much stock in what he says. However," I continue, recalling Li Xiu's words of caution, "keep an eye out for anything odd."

"Such as?"

"Wenceslaus has been acting erratically, and I'm not sure how that fun new facet of his personality is going to evolve. You're still in Alaska, right?" About a decade ago, Viktor began spending most of his winter months there. It's much easier for newly crossed revenants to dwell in places where sunlight hours are limited.

"I am."

"Good. No one but Pierre and I know about your residence there, so you should be safe. Just make sure to take care of yourself. And the girl."

"Okay, not to be needy," a dry, husky voice interrupts us, "but we've been hanging out weekly for, like, ten years. Don't 'girl' me, Lilit. You know my name."

"Hi, Vero." As usual, she makes me smile.

"Hi, Grandma."

Vero seems to find lots of amusement in transposing modern family concepts onto the structure of revenant bloodlines. I find some amusement in indulging her, mostly because of the face Viktor makes when she refers to him as *Daddy*. "Hi, Granddaughter. Are you well?"

"Well, I've had a hemiplegic migraine for the last four days, and yesterday, I ate a single chickpea and immediately projectile vomited it."

"That sounds dreadful," I say, walking into the lobby of my hotel, "but I know revenants who still hadn't regained their ability to speak fifteen years after being made. Compared to them, you are doing great. Compared to every other fledgling I've ever encountered, actually."

"I told you, Veronica." Viktor's voice is suddenly softer. "You are quite extraordinary."

"You only said it because yesterday I drew a very flattering portrait of you."

"I said it because it's the truth. I hold that the portrait was simply accurate."

"Oh, wow. He is hot *and* he knows it—"

"I have to go," I lie and quickly hang up. I am not predisposed to envy, and right now, that is a relief. I would hate to feel resentment toward Viktor for finding Vero, only because Roman isn't…

I lose my train of thought when I notice that while I was on the call with Viktor, a text from Roman was delivered. My heart leaps into my throat, and I halt in the center of the lobby to stare down at my phone, confused. Frankly, I wasn't sure I'd hear from him again this soon. Or ever.

ROMAN: I don't mind you keeping my spare keys, but moving forward, you should not be inside my house without first warning me.

Quickly, I type back: I'm sorry?

His reply is a picture of a pair of military-grade sunglasses, neatly folded over a stone kitchen counter. In the upper corner, I recognize the edge of a retro toaster he and I bought together right after he moved.

"I like that shade of red," I said, pointing at where it sat on the shelf.

"I like you," Roman said, and kissed my nose before putting the toaster in the cart.

But I haven't been inside Roman's house in weeks. Still, I clumsily pat my torso, relieved to find that my sunglasses are still hanging from the neckline of my dress, where I slid them before entering the diner.

I wasn't at your house, Roman. Is it possible that they've been there a while? I ask, even though I'm fully in wishful thinking territory. Roman is not fastidious, but he's tidy and observant. Above all, Roman's breakfast of choice is a toasted poppy seed bagel with eggs and cheese. The chances that he noticed *today* something I left behind weeks ago are infinitesimal.

My blood suddenly goes very, very cold.

Could they belong to someone else? I ask. And then, before giving him the time to reply: The woman you mentioned, maybe?

Lilit, have you not noticed that no one but you owns this kind of sunglasses?

I have not. Because what he said might be true in his circles, where Ray-Ban and Oakley are all the rage, but nearly everyone *I* know uses the same shades I do.

Because they're what revenants need.

I lift the phone to my ear and call him. He picks up on the tail end of a sigh. “Lilit, it’s okay if you came over while I wasn’t here. I’m only saying that from now on you shouldn’t—”

“Roman, be silent.” He must hear the urgency in my voice, because he goes quiet. “Are you at your place?”

“Yes.”

“Is anyone in there with you? Did you check every room?”

“What do you—”

“Just answer me. Yes or no. Are you alone?”

Silence. “Yes.”

“Have you been upstairs?”

“No.”

“Okay, don’t go up. For any reason.”

“I don’t see—”

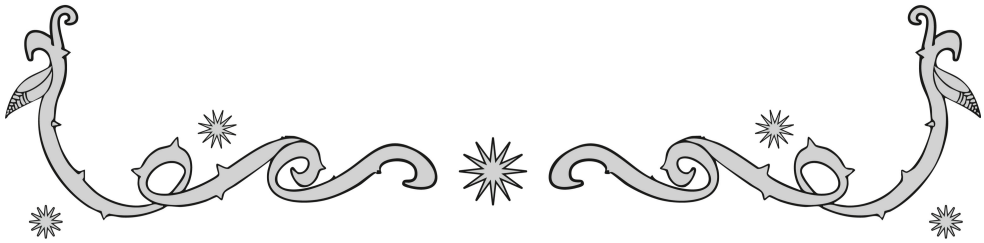
“Go to the living room. Sit on the chair in front of the windows, the one that has a view of the stairs. Stay there until I arrive. If someone who isn’t me knocks, do not open, even if you know them.”

“Lilit, what the—”

“I’ll be there in ten minutes. Do as I say.”

I hang up.

CHAPTER 9



ROMAN OPENS THE DOOR WITH A SCOWL ON HIS FACE, ONE that doesn't quite mask the jolt that runs through his heart the moment his eyes meet mine. Before he can say anything, I slip inside and rise on tiptoe, trying to bring our faces closer. He's much taller than me, so I reach up, wrap my hand around his nape, and pull him down.

"Listen to me," I whisper.

The gesture feels almost *too* familiar. For the last ten years, looping my arms around his neck has been my way to let him know that he was too far away. That I wanted a kiss—now. Our bodies have rehearsed this dance hundreds of times. That's the only reason Roman leans so easily into my touch, dipping down over my shoulder even now that he's in love with someone else.

Because he is. He told me so.

I turn my face until my lips brush against his ear and whisper, "I did not come here today. I didn't leave my sunglasses. I suspect someone else did, though. It could have been someone who works with me, or someone from my life who found out about my r— my former relationship with you. And I am concerned they might still be in the house."

Roman blinks. His eyelashes flutter against my cheekbone. "Lilit, I highly doubt that a competing financial advisor broke into *my* home. This is insane." But the tone of his voice stays low. Even if he believes I'm going mad, he seems willing to entertain my suspicions.

I tighten my arms around his neck. "Have you been upstairs at all?"

He shakes his head minutely and pushes me backward, caging me against the door. It occurs to me that he's angling his body between mine and the stairs that lead to the second floor of the house. It's all I can do not to slap my palm against my forehead.

Oh, Roman. You idiot.

"Let's say that this is true." He speaks against my skin. It sends a shiver down my spine, and it embarrasses me that I don't think of swallowing it back. "Shouldn't we call someone? The police?"

"The authorities can't help us, and the fewer mor— the fewer people involved, the better."

"Lilit, do you have a family history of psychosis? Or paranoid delusions? Because there is a genuine possibility you're going through an episode." His hand rises up my hip. Finds my lower back. *Does he even realize what he's doing?* I wonder.

"Listen, I'm not asking you to believe me. But consider this: If I am having a psychotic break and you do as I say, you'll lose twenty minutes of your time, tops, and end up feeling silly. If I am sane and correct, you will *not* lose your life. Easy choice, no?"

"Lilit, I…Why do I feel like this has something to do with the conversation we just had?"

I bite back a groan. "Feel free to ponder the matter. In the meantime, humor me. Consider this part of your Hippocratic oath. Didn't you vow to indulge your patients' delusions?"

"You are *not* my patient, and I've never sworn anything like that. What do you—"

"Hush for a minute, okay?"

Still pressed between him and the door, I listen carefully, wading past the biological noises of Roman's body and scanning for signs that something is amiss upstairs. But if the intruder is a half-competent revenant, they'll know better than to advertise their presence.

I strain my ears, making out nothing.

My arms slip from Roman's neck and fall against my sides, but instead of letting go of me, Roman pushes me flatter against the wooden door. His mouth finds an old favorite spot of his, right underneath the hinge of my jaw. He inhales, and his chest swells into mine. "Lilit, I can't tell if this is a prank, if you've somehow convinced yourself that you're a superspy, or if you actually are one."

"None of the above. I rarely joke, I am fundamentally anchored to reality, and I have never been employed by any governmental, military, or paramilitary organizations." Gently, I press my palms against his pectorals and ease him away. My smile is as bright as I can manage. "Let's go out for dinner," I say, loud enough for my voice to be heard upstairs. "Any idea where?"

Roman's expression is a mix of disbelief, anger, and amusement. But I know well that tilt of his head, forgiving, lenient, the same he would treat me to whenever I talked around a question about my job, my education, my past. "Wherever you like, *babe*."

My eyebrow rises. Neither of us is the type to use endearments, and *babe* is very much not in our repertoire. "Let's drive around and pick a spot. Can we take your car?"

"Sure. I parked in the usual space."

I clutch his hand and pull him to my side, heading for the back door. Covertly, I glance around, searching for anomalies. It helps that I know every inch of this house as if it were mine. I can easily list hidden corners and potential hiding spots. Roman and I have laughed in every room, fucked in most of them, and he's coaxed me to take a nap with him (*you and naps, my favorite things*) in at least a third.

Next to me, Roman oozes skepticism and real concern for my mental health, but I don't care. He is playing along, which is all that matters. At least until we slip outside, into the frigid air of the night.

The storm has thickened, and the snow now blankets every visible surface. The street that runs behind Roman's house is practically an alley, almost always deserted. The building across from him is a medium-sized coworking space, and despite vague promises, the city never bothered to install any street lights. The moment the door clicks shut behind us, Roman turns to me, arms spread in the universal are-you-happy-now? gesture. He even opens his mouth, probably to say it, but stops when he hears something.

Brief, but loud. A crunch. Like someone just landed on ice-crusted snow. It's followed by a deep, unnatural silence, as though whoever made the noise would love to take it back.

Roman points at the second story of his house, but I'm already looking at it: an open window, and a broken screen.

"Is this for real?" Roman mutters.

"Yes."

With a huff, he takes a step forward and maneuvers me behind his frame. "Stay behind me," he orders. "If you have your phone, call the police."

I ignore him, and consider myself fortunate that he has no idea from where the noise originated, and that he doesn't know just how far a revenant can leap. Roman is squinting at the eastern corner of the house, which means that I'm able to take care of the attacker charging at me from the other side.

It's a man, one I don't recognize. Young, both in the sense that he looks like little more than a boy and that his crossing must have been recent. *Very* young, given that his speed is not much faster than a mortal's, and that stopping him is pitifully easy. When he comes at me, one arm lifted above his head, the silver blade of his dagger glints in the moonlight. Before he knows it, I have kicked him in the stomach and sent him flying several feet backward.

"Who do you work for?" I ask.

The revenant doesn't reply and immediately scrambles upright. Unfortunately, Roman is now paying attention to him. When the boy seems intent on running toward us for take two, Roman's arms close around my waist to lift me out of harm's way. He carries me a few feet, putting the car between us and the revenant.

"He has a knife," he says feverishly in my ear, refusing to let me go. His muscles flex against my flesh as he rips open the passenger door, scrambling to push me inside. "I need you to stay behind and call the police and— *Fuck*."

His eyes widen with shock when I twist one of his arms behind his back. I carefully trip him with my foot, forcing his knees to the ground. "Lilit, what the hell—"

I leave him behind and round the car just as the revenant lunges toward me. This time, when he tries to press his knife into my stomach, I easily wrestle it out of his grip and sink it right next to his heart. The boy staggers backward, coughing a few sputters of blood. Slowly, as if in stages, he crumples to his side. I don't make the mistake of assuming he's done for: I stalk to his sprawled body, the click of my heels over the sidewalk muffled by the fresh snow.

Warm, familiar fingers close around my forearm. "Lilit, what the hell are you doing?"

I could easily shake myself free of Roman. His interference, though, is starting to feel like more of a problem than a cute quirk I am willing to condescend to.

"Stay back," I command.

"Are you— Did you just *stab* him?"

"I did. Stay back." The revenant is beginning to stir.

"Lilit, you have to get back into the house and let me—"

It's not a *good* idea, but it's the one I come up with in the little time I have available before the boy attacks again. If there were a way to make Roman lose consciousness without causing permanent harm, I'd do that. But I'm not willing to run any risk when it comes

to his well-being, so I settle for the next best thing: As forcefully yet delicately as I can, I push Roman against the outer wall of his house and pin him there.

Roman swears. Scowls. Pushes back. He shifts, and twists, and finds himself trapped.

The only points of contact between us are the tips of my fingers, pressed against the costal cartilage that connects the ribs to the sternum. I am cautious not to break bones or damage tissues. Still, tomorrow morning, he'll have five coin-shaped bruises on his chest, and they'll hurt like a bitch. All the more because of the way he keeps thrashing against my hand.

"What the hell?"

Roman grabs my wrist and tries to shove it away. I don't budge.

His eyes widen. "Lilit?" he rasps out.

Poor Roman. He's a man, and physically stronger than most of the other men he has encountered so far. For the first time in his adult life, he is being confronted with the fallibility of his own flesh.

It's a scene I've witnessed many times before. I am well acquainted with the expression in his eyes—in fact, I have savored it many times over the centuries. The mind-addling flavor of flipping a script. The sweetness of revenge. Force-feeding someone a taste of their own medicine. Roman, though, has never used his physical advantages to hurt others, and all I'm feeling right now is pity for his confusion.

I shove it away. "If you move from this spot," I say firmly, "you are only going to be in my way. Tell me you understand, and that you'll stay put."

Behind me, I can hear the revenant scraping himself off the ground.

"Lilit, I'm not going to leave you alone to—"

I increase the pressure of my fingers, and he finally gets the message.

"*Fine.* But if you need me—"

I unsuccessfully try to tone down the sarcasm in my tone. "I shall request your help," I say, and spin around.

The revenant is in terrible shape, but still, he comes at me, about as fast as a zombie in one of the old horror movies Roman used to make me watch when I was in town on Halloween. "Who sent you?" I ask.

The boy opens his mouth. All that comes out is a thick, red gurgle.

Well, then. "Who is your Sire?" I ask, switching to Russian. Then, in Latin, "Did Wenceslaus send you? Is this retribution for Grigori?"

He doesn't answer. With his last burst of strength, he lurches toward me. He has a second knife, which he pulls out when there are just a couple of inches between us. It's a stealthy move, and I'd love to give him the satisfaction of taking me by surprise. Unfortunately, the boy isn't a skilled fighter, and his reflexes remind me of the three-toed sloths I once saw hanging from the canopy of the Panama rainforest.

I nudge him away with an elbow to his side—very gently, if I say so myself. Unfortunately, the revenant loses his balance and drops once more onto the asphalt. This time, I hear a crack in his skull, and I know I fucked up.

"Well," I mutter when the boy doesn't get up. "Here's to finding out." I hang my head low and pinch the bridge of my nose, frustrated with myself for misjudging that last hit. When I hear a rush of movement, I glance up to see that Roman has kneeled by the revenant's side. His fingers are on his throat, as if he's checking the boy's carotid pulse.

"He's alive," he says, calmly tilting his head up to mine. "Give me your phone."

"Why?"

"Because I don't have mine, and we have to call the EMTs."

I arch an eyebrow. "You know he was trying to kill you, right?"

Roman's look clearly states what he thinks of my valid objection. "Phone," he repeats, holding one hand out to me.

I sigh. For a split second, I allow exasperation to fully sink its teeth into my flesh. Explaining to people what revenants are, watching them work through questions and reactions and reevaluate their understanding of life itself, has always been wearisome, heartbreaking business.

It's never easy on mortals. And I really, *really* like this mortal.

I fucking love this mortal.

So I pull myself together. "We are not going to call an ambulance, Roman. If we did, a dozen more issues would pop up."

I brace for his protests, but they don't come. After all the trouble he gave me during the fight, I am surprised when he slowly rises to his feet and levels me with a hard stare, ignoring the not-yet-corpse between us.

He doesn't appear to be scared—of me, or of the situation. His tone is no-nonsense. "Was he here after you?"

"I'm not sure. You, possibly."

"Me? Why do you think so?"

"No offense, but I'd like to think they'd send better, if I was the target."

He exhales a quiet laugh. "You just fought off a man twice your size, in *heels*, and you're not even sweating. I'm not offended." He sounds surprisingly calm. *Feels* it, too. His heartbeat is elevated, but rapidly regulating. Courtesy of his medical training, perhaps. Being an emergency doctor requires frequent and rapid adaptability, I'm sure.

"Believe me, some would be," I murmur distractedly, dropping to my haunches to search the revenant's body for clues as to who may have sent him. The knives—no, *daggers*, are plain. His pockets, empty. I'm ready to strip him and look for tattoos when I find something around his throat. A silver chain, and a pendant of two eagles.

Russia's coat of arms. Interesting.

"How did you do that?" Roman is asking.

"You know," I say, evasive, still staring at the necklace. "I have combat training."

"Not just that."

"Hmm?"

"It's not just training."

I glance up at him, wondering how to play my cards. His expression is completely sealed. He feels unreachable. "I know the limits of the human body, Lilit. Your strength—your *speed*—"

"I *am* human," I say, a little sullen.

"Are you? Do you have some kind of…enhancements?"

I tilt my head. Really, he's not freaking out at all. "You seem to be taking it quite well, this whole"—I gesture around myself—"thing."

He crosses his arms over his chest. "I watch a lot of movies."

The smile that stretches the corner of my lips is involuntary. And fond. And more painful than anything the revenant currently dying at my feet ever attempted. "No, Roman. You watch the first twenty minutes of a lot of movies, then sleep off your latest shift and snore in my ear."

"True enough."

He doesn't return my smile, and I avert my eyes. I wonder how he would take it if I came up with some excuse to send him inside the house. Maybe I could ask him to fetch a glass of water, or to go get his phone. The problem is I'm not sure the revenant acted alone, and I'm not willing to let Roman out of my sight until I get to the bottom of this.

I ask, "Will you turn around, please?"

"No."

"I insist."

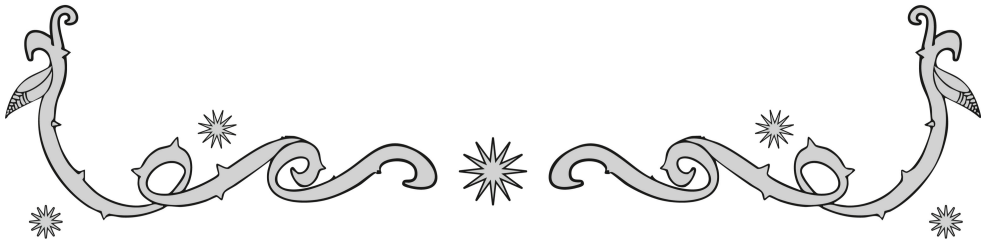
"Lilit, I'm not looking away."

"I figured." I sigh, resigned. "Well, if you found the fighting disturbing, you're not going to enjoy this any better. But since I

believe in self-determination…”

I pick up the unconscious boy’s arm, use my teeth to break the skin that covers the soft meat inside his elbow, and start drinking.

CHAPTER 10



WE TAKE ROMAN'S CAR, AND WHEN I OFFER TO DRIVE, HE doesn't object. We both feel like he *should* be in shock, even if he doesn't display any outward signs of it. Questioning his ability to operate a motor vehicle is the rational thing to do, and it's obvious that rationality is a quality he'd like to hang on to for the foreseeable future.

He seems content to sit in the passenger seat, eyes fixed on a stain on the windshield that could conceivably be blood. His silence, though, worries me. Twice, I nearly open my mouth, first to let him know, *You can ask me anything*, then to beg him, *Please, say something.*

"I'm going to keep you with me for the next little while," I tell him at last, trying to match the quiet in the car's cabin with a semblance of calm. "I considered dropping you off at a hotel, but whoever knows about you may also be aware of where I'm staying. I have called my…people, and some are trying to fly into the city to help me deal with the situation, but the snowstorm has created some logistical issues. In the meantime, I'm not sure you're safe anywhere I'm not." I shift my hips, slide my phone out of my coat, and hold it out to him. "Of course, you are free to call anyone you want to warn

them about your absence. I only ask that you don't tell them where you are, or…Well. I'm sure you can use your good judgment."

Roman accepts the phone, only to gently set it in the storage compartment under the AC controls. "What happens to him?"

"Him?"

"The man we left behind."

"Ah." I scrunch up my nose, remembering the revenant's taste in my mouth, sour and uninviting. A person's blood is like the distilled essence of all they are, and that man was definitely not my type. "I'm having a, um, young local associate take care of that."

"Which, I assume, doesn't involve taking him to a hospital?"

I shake my head. "Roman, I know that keeping people alive is what you do, and I understand that this goes against everything you have been taught and upsets you, but him and me? We're not part of your world. If he doesn't heal on his own, and it's highly unlikely he would, there is nothing you could have done for him."

He nods, and I can almost feel the tendrils of his mind coil between us, struggling to wrap around this new reality, not yet able to fully hold on to it. "Were you…the whole time?"

"Excuse me?"

"When I first met you, were you already…this?"

"Oh. Yes. Yeah. Since forever." His expression shifts. I can't say whether in his mind this makes the years of lies and obfuscation better or worse.

"A vampire?" he asks, at last. Out of everything—killing, displays of preternatural power, being subdued by someone half his size—the blood-drinking seems to have shocked him the most. He went really quiet, after that.

"I…Sure. That's as good a term as any."

"Is there another you would prefer?"

"Honestly, not really. Some of us are more particular about this, but I always found it an exercise in futility. The concept changes across times and cultures, and no term seems to really capture what

it is that we are. But I suppose that, in this moment in time, and in the language that you speak, we tend to call ourselves revenants."

He huffs out a single, silent laugh. "Like the film?"

"Ah…Yes, I suppose."

A long pause. "We watched it together."

"The movie? Yes. Well, sort of. You fell asleep in the middle of it and drooled against my neck."

"I would have stayed awake, if I'd known that it was about you."

"Oh, it's not. It's a passionate love story between a man and his bear friend. If you want to learn about us, you're better off reading the back of a box of Count Chocula."

His lips nearly curl up. I might be making progress. "Anything I should know, aside from marshmallow bats?"

"Just, the usual." I wave a hand.

"Right. So you are…much stronger and faster than I am."

"Yeah. But please, don't take it personally."

"Why should I take it personally?"

"Well, I find that men often put a lot of stock into matters like that."

He snorts, like toxic masculinity is the least of his concerns. He mostly sounds dazed when he asks, "You could kill me with no effort, couldn't you? You could have, all along?"

"Well, yes. Although that would have been true even if I weren't a revenant. I could have murdered you in your sleep, or poisoned your food, or tripped you down the stairs." His eyebrows shoot to his forehead, and I shrug. "I'm just being factual. Lots of assassination opportunities."

"Right. Yes." He clears his throat. "Anything else notable about you?"

"We live longer than regular humans. A lot longer. And we're sensitive to sunlight."

"Are you? Because you and I have gone on walks together, at midday— Ah. The sunglasses."

"Yes. The sensitivity decreases as time goes on, but our eyes are particularly delicate."

"You need food *and* blood to survive?"

"Only food. Blood is not a necessity. More of a luxury, and probably not in the way you think." I glance at him, and can easily predict his next question. "The reason I took the blood of the revenant who attacked us is that, in the unlikely event he recovers, it will allow me to track him down. Blood is…A mature revenant won't lose control at the scent of blood. We don't drink it because we lust for it, even though the act can be pleasurable. We certainly don't need it to survive, even though it does nourish us. Blood is what glues us to one another. It creates pathways between us and binds our minds together."

Roman looks confused, but determined to make sense of what I said. Then, without warning, his jaw tightens. "Fuck. Is that why…?"

"Why, what?"

"Can you control minds? Is that why I feel this way about you?"

I frown. "This way?"

"Like I can't think of anything but you. You're always— It's been like that since the start. Like I couldn't remember ever wanting anything else."

Roman's expression verges on accusatory, and heat rushes to my cheeks. It's such a rare occurrence I nearly don't recognize it for what it is: I am blushing. "If I could force people to do my bidding, the world would be a different place, Roman. I cannot manipulate others' beliefs or behaviors. I can, *sometimes*, hear their thoughts and pick out their general feelings, but only if they are physically close to me, and only after I take their blood. And I have never drunk from you."

"So I only have myself to blame," he says wryly. When I glance at him again, after narrowly making a yellow light, his irritation seems to have abated. He looks pensive.

I take a deep breath. "You have every right to be angry at me."

"Do I?"

"Yes. Obviously, I have been lying to you for ten years. I owe you an apology."

He waves a hand.

"Are you saying that I don't?"

He closes his eyes and leans back against the headrest. His Adam's apple moves under his skin, transfixing, and I have to tear my eyes away to focus on driving. "You were always honest about being a liar, Lilit."

"Oh."

"I met you nearly ten years ago, and you never even told me your birthday."

"That's because I don't have a birthday. That I know of." I sound a little defensive.

"My point is you were so evasive, and withheld so much, it was obvious that you kept secrets. It would be hypocritical of me to resent you for something that was as clear as day from the get-go."

"You were always very understanding about that," I murmur, gratefully, and he laughs.

"You could have been anything. A drug dealer, or a serial killer. You could have worked for Palantir. You could have turned out to have a plastic surgeon fiancé and three large dogs, somewhere on the West Coast. Short of stalking you, I had no way of knowing, but it didn't matter. When it came to you, I was always willing to sweep my morals under the rug."

"Roman—"

"You know, I decided to stop seeing you a dozen times. A hundred, maybe. Then the following day, I'd tell myself, just once more."

Me too, I want to say. But I stay silent.

"Honestly, you being some kind of immortal bloodsucking creature is better than some of the scenarios I had built in my head."

"Even better than the plastic surgeon fiancé and the dogs?"

He opens his eyes. “That was the bleakest, Lilit. It gave me nightmares.”

“You were mostly envious of the dogs, weren’t you?”

“You know I was.”

We share a small smile that feels so delightfully *ordinary*, I almost forget how fucked-up this situation is.

Until Roman asks, “Where are we going?”

“To nip this mess in the bud.”

“Hmm. Care to be more specific?”

“Well, I’m not sure who sent the person who attacked us, but I have some suspicions. There is another revenant, an elder like me, who has been acting somewhat erratically. He believes that Viktor killed one of his bloodline, and that I ordered the hit. Sorry, a bloodline is—”

“I think there are enough context clues for me to infer that,” he says dryly. “Your famous coworker Viktor, who calls you about once a day…He’s not a power broker, I gather?”

“Good guess.”

“You two belong to the same…bloodline?”

“We do.” I could leave it at that, and Roman wouldn’t press for more—because he has no idea that there is more to know. But after years of lies, the truth has an addictive, thrilling effect on me. “He is of my bloodline, to be precise. I am the one who made him.”

“Made? You weren’t born this way?”

“No.”

“You said you’ve been a revenant since forever.”

“Oh. Yes. Sorry, that was a figure of speech. For a long, long time, I meant. We start out mortal, like you. Then there is a ritual, and we cross. Viktor was an artist, a truly excellent scribe and illuminator. I’d never seen anything like his craftsmanship, so when he fell sick, I offered to make him one of us. I was all about keeping talent alive, back then.”

“And now?”

I snort softly. “Now, I believe mortals might benefit from being left alone, that plenty of talented people are born all the time, and that the best way for me to help the arts thrive is probably by throwing money at them and minding my business. Anyway, I’m the eldest Sire of my bloodline. Viktor is second-generation, so to speak, and Viktor’s spouse, Veronica, was made by him—third-generation.”

“Is that…?”

“What?”

“Slightly incestuous?”

“Are you asking me if Viktor is both Vero’s father and husband? Because it’s kinda gross that you went there. Ew,” I add mildly.

“*I* am gross?” Roman asks, baffled.

“Depraved, for sure.”

“You used the word ‘generation.’ The familial parallels are right there.”

“Maybe you have Oedipal issues?”

“*I* do?”

“Clearly, your mind dwells in a very filthy and inappropriate gutter.”

“Lilit, are you seriously telling me that none of your people have ever made the connection between…” His eyes narrow. “You are making fun of me.”

I give him an apologetic glance. “The whole thing is pretty messed-up. We must find little amusing tidbits where we can.”

He turns to the window, but not before I notice his smile. “Can you, by the way?”

“Can we what?”

“Have children?”

“Oh. No, not really.” I can’t make myself look at him, after I say it. Probably because, even though Roman and I never dared to even circle the topic at a distance, I have always known how much he loves kids.

Now that we're no longer together, for the very first time, I dare to clear my throat and ask, "You'd like to have a family, right?"

He seems to consider his words. "Yes. I would."

"Right." I scratch my throat. Think about his new…girlfriend, lover, whatever. "I'm sorry for taking up so many of your years. I guess you could have been with someone who—"

"Don't be obtuse, Lilit. I wanted a family *with you*. If that wasn't an option…I just wanted *you*."

The past tense, the way he refuses to meet my eyes, the obvious truth behind his words—it feels like having my skin peeled back from my flesh. A tiny, sustained, excruciating pain. "Oh," I say, feeling like an idiot. Then I hear myself babble, "I know revenants who have taken in and raised mortal children."

"Like an adoption?"

"More or less, yes."

"And after that? Do they watch them grow old and die? Or do they make them into revenants?"

"It depends. Sometimes they make them. With permission. The crossing is a complicated matter. The ethics of it, even more so. Not everyone wants to live forever, and those who do…The ritual is dangerous, and if it fails, it ends in death for the mortal. So…" A small shrug. "Conversations are necessary. There are a lot of aspects to consider."

"So, if you create a new revenant…you don't consider them your children?"

"Oh, no. There might be a degree of protectiveness, especially for the first few decades, while fledglings are learning to fend for themselves. But if Viktor ever calls me *Mommy*, I will put him through no less than three medieval torture devices."

"That totally sounds like a joke, and I'm not at all alarmed," Roman mutters. "Did Viktor really kill someone?"

"In the past? Absolutely. Dozens of revenants. This specific guy, Grigori? No. But Wenceslaus—that's the elder of Grigori's bloodline

—”

“What does ‘elder’ mean?”

“As I said, it would be the first generation—”

“I get that, but could you quantify that for me? How old are we talking? How old are *you*?”

“Oh.” I forbid my body from showing any discomfort. “This whole thing has been a lot for you. Do you really want to know right now?”

“Yes, please. Before I start imagining you finger-painting a cave in Lascaux.”

“I’m not quite *that* old.”

“How old, then?”

A pause. “A little less than five thousand.”

His eyes shut and stay like that for three blocks. “I knew I had a thing for older women,” he says at last, a bit raspy.

I chuckle. “You did mention that, yeah.”

“Robbed that cradle, didn’t you?”

“You know, the ethics of the matter are not lost on me. I’ve been contending with it for centuries.”

“Yeah? How many other impressionable young men have you ruined?”

“Oh, there have been others. Many others.” His stillness is too abrupt and too pure to be anything but tightly insulated restraint. I add, “Not since you and I met, though.”

“Christ.” He rubs his eyes. “What was the world even like back then?”

“Well, I’m not sure about the *world*. The logistics of extensive travel were very complicated back then. But where I was born—that is, Upper Mesopotamia…It was beautiful to me, at the time. *Very* beautiful. We lived by the river. Off the river. With the river. It was never cold the way it’s cold here, but also not at all like the desert that people seem to expect. It rained often, actually, and after the rain, the riverbeds would swell, and the waters would swallow the poplars’ roots. And we’d seen it happen hundreds of times, so we all

knew that when the flood receded, the soil would be cool to the touch, and it would smell like clay and minerals and crushed leaves. Those were always my favorite days." I smile, relaxing into my body. "There were barley fields, and rolling plains, and even small orchards, though they didn't look as neat as they do today. The settlement where I grew up, Nineveh, it was not a city quite yet. Our house was made of mud bricks, with a roof of timber mats, and every morning, we'd step outside and walk barefoot on narrow, winding paths made of packed earth. We'd dodge pigs and sheep and goats and carts, and potters would grind the stones and call out for us to look at their wares. I enjoyed them, but I liked the metalworkers best. I always stopped to admire them—just for a little bit, I told myself, and then I'd become distracted and stay much longer than I meant to. Around me there were so many tongues, some that I understood, some that made no sense. But my favorite was always the one my mother had spoken to me since I was a child. I don't even know if it had a name, but it tasted like the sweetest ale in my mouth. At the end of every day, the sunset…I've never seen anything like it, Roman. Every home would start a reed fire to cook porridge with leeks and lentils, the simplest food, but better than anything I've had since. The smoke would thicken and hang low, and everything would turn the color of honey—except for the sky. The sky was tangerine and blood, and then, right before the night came, it would purple like a bruise. In those years, it wasn't like now, you know? Now, there are dyes and synthetic pigments and computers, and if we are in the mood for Prussian blue or cinnamon brown, it's only a click away. We can touch them. We can *own* them. But back then, colors existed that people like me could only ever hope to see in the sky, and—" I stop myself. Run a hand through my hair, hoping to disguise the intense embarrassment that's suddenly lapping at me. "Sorry. I'm not sure why I'm still going on about this."

"Because I asked, Lilit."

"Oh," I say stupidly.

"It's nice, when you answer my questions. Maybe we should have tried it a while ago."

I shake my head and laugh. There is no recrimination in his tone. "The truth is I don't let myself think about it a lot. Because…" I try to wave it all off, but my body doesn't cooperate. "It's not like I can ever go home again."

In the dark of the cabin, Roman's eyes shine bright. His arm shifts, a suggestion of a movement that might culminate in him reaching out and squeezing my hand. I doubt I could bear it, so I lift my hand from my lap, and close it around the steering wheel. "Anyway. I should probably tell you about Wenceslaus. The elder we're visiting."

After some hesitation, he nods.

"The reason I think he might be behind this is that the revenant who attacked us wore a Russian necklace, and Wenceslaus is notorious for his zero non-Russian policy in his bloodline."

"How does he feel about other USSR nationals?"

"He'll begrudgingly accept them. On a good day. Anyway, all clues point to Wenceslaus having sent the guy. So we're going to have a chat with him. Or, more accurately, I will chat with him while you lock yourself in the car."

"You know where he lives?"

"I know where he stays when he's in the city, yes." A quick text to Pierre gave me the address I needed. "Whether he's home, I'll have to find out."

"What's the plan once you're there?"

"I'm going to ask him whether he sent the boy."

"That simple?"

"Yeah."

"Is that a reliable way to find out?"

"It is. If he did send the revenant, he won't deny it."

"Won't he?"

"Wenceslaus doesn't have enough executive functions to manage a lie, and he's a righteous asshole who believes he has been invested with a divine mandate—*not* the type to deal in subterfuge. Which is why he doesn't expect it of others, either. Frankly, I can't believe he survived this long. Well, I can, but only because he lives in a compound with other religious zealots."

"And if it wasn't him?"

"What?"

"It sounds like you think it might have been someone else."

Of course Roman reads me well. He and I have known each other for ten years, even if in some ways it feels like we met today for the first time.

But the wound on Grigori's body, so similar to Brigida's. The Russian coat of arms necklace, so easy to find. These kinds of mistakes strike me as a little *too* elementary. Like a giant neon arrow begging me to stare at Wenceslaus and be angry at him—and another equally gaudy sign asking Wenceslaus to do the same with me. "If it wasn't Wenceslaus, it was someone else, trying to sow discord between us, and that's going to be a whole different headache."

"Let's say that the Russian guy admits to having tried to kill you. What are you going to do to him?"

"What do you mean?"

"Is there a governing body you can report him to? Do you have a prison system? Do you believe in restorative justice? How does revenant society work?"

Very good questions. Roman sounds sincerely interested in their answers. "Well, there is no such thing as ratified authority within revenant society. We're barely a society at all, really. There are probably more of us than I will ever know, and I have no interest in conducting a census. The elders of each bloodline are, in a way, rulers, but we're not part of an official governing body. We are just

powerful enough to impose our will upon others, and we are old and wise enough to want to keep harmony among bloodlines."

Roman doesn't look impressed. "So you don't have a constitution? Or sets of principles that you all share?"

"We do, to some degree. For the most part, we are in agreement that revenants' existence should be hidden from mortals, and that mortals should be protected from those of us who seek to harm them—because our lives may be more enduring than theirs, but not more important. But these are not formal laws, or anything like that."

"Shouldn't you produce some, then?"

"I guess we could try, but it would be as effective as drying the sea with a spoon."

"How so?"

"To impose rules, you first need the bare-bones structure of a working society. That's just not where we're at."

"Okay. Then we drive up to Win…Wen…"

"Wenceslaus."

"We drive up to Wenceslaus, and he admits to trying to kill us. What do you do with him?"

I blink, confused. Only belatedly does it dawn on me that Roman really has no idea. "I'm going to kill him, Roman."

His lips part. He makes several false starts before managing to say, "You can't walk up to someone and kill them, Lilit."

"Didn't I just do that?"

"That was self-defense. We're talking about murder in cold blood. You can't do that."

I make a face. "Actually, I can."

"Lilit."

"Provided they are revenants," I add, bringing the car to a stop in front of a villa-looking property. I quickly unbuckle my seat belt. Through several sets of windows, I can see that the lights are on in

a few rooms, even if the curtains block me from seeing what's inside. "I think this is the place."

"Lilit, wait a minute. You can't kill someone without due process."

"I think what you mean is, I *shouldn't*. And maybe you are right. But since they tried to kill *you* first, I don't much care about that."

"Jesus."

I try for a reassuring smile, but it only serves to remind Roman that I own teeth capable of biting through human flesh. Oops. "I'm going to go talk to him. Make sure you lock yourself in. Not that a revenant couldn't force their way into a car, but if it comes to that, you can just drive away."

"And leave you in there?"

"Precisely."

He huffs, disbelieving, but when I try to hand him the keys, he notices something on my skin. "What happened to your arm?"

"What? Oh—I must have scraped it earlier, during the fight."

He reaches for my wrist. "Can I see it?"

"It's fine. I hadn't even realized."

"That's not what I asked," he says, sounding tired enough that I don't have the heart to deny him.

This is not the first time he has looked over minor wounds for me. I am familiar with Roman's professional touch, which is economic and practical, and with his personal, lingering one. This is, undoubtedly, the former. The injury *is* just a scratch, and the speed with which he lets go of me both confirms it and feels like a punch in the stomach.

"Do you expect Wenceslaus to be alone?" he asks.

"According to my intel, he landed yesterday with one of his revenants, but that's it."

"That's two against one, then. At the very least. More, if you are not correct."

"True, but I am over two thousand years older than Wenceslaus, which makes me exponentially more powerful. I could take him and

ten of his men easily."

I smile again, this time close-lipped, and make to exit the car. Roman stops me with a hand on my bare knee. "Still, I would feel better if you let me come in with you."

I barely hold back a groan thinking about the absolute nuisance he proved to be less than an hour ago. *You would be no less in my way than a kindergarten class,* I want to say. *I need you with me as much as I need a ball and a chain. Actually,* those *I could use as weapons. You, on the other hand, would make for a terrible whip flail.* The problem is, in my own weird way, which may be worth nothing to him but certainly means something to *me*, I love Roman. I don't want to hurt his feelings, and I enjoy the warmth of his palm against my knee. So I reply much more softly than I should, and limit myself to lifting an eyebrow.

Roman rolls his eyes. Then, in a tone that he reserves for his most toddler patients: "It's not that I think you can't handle yourself, Lilit. You are obviously better than me at any sort of combat, even in heels, and I know that my presence would hinder you. If a fight breaks out, I'm not going to try to get in your way. But if something happens to you and you need immediate medical attention, I want to be there to help as fast as possible."

"You are really hung up on these heels, aren't you?"

He stifles a smile. "You know I like you in heels."

"Yeah, I do." I am tempted to follow up with something irrelevant and catty. Like, *Does* she *know? Do you sometimes ask* her *to keep her shoes on, too? Remember the time we tried to go out to dinner, but you liked what I was wearing so much, you wouldn't let me leave? Because I can count at least six.* I rein myself in.

Okay. Well, what he just said does make sense. I can't really be angry at him for pointing it out, not when his leviathan-sized savior complex was one of the first things that drew me to him. "If I let you join me, you will stay back?"

He nods.

"Okay. Then you can come. However." I lean into the back seat, then hand him one of the daggers I took from the young revenant at his house. "If someone attacks you, you have to use this to protect yourself. Promise?"

He smiles, relieved. "Promise."

I am not afraid of Wenceslaus, but my chest feels tight as I knock on his door, because Roman is standing behind me, and my mind cannot help cataloguing all the ways in which his mortal body is frail and vulnerable, and all the ways in which the situation could go sideways. I linger outside the entrance, checking for heartbeats, but hear nothing. I knock again. Then a third time. When minutes go by without a reply, I tell Roman, "I'm going in. Stay close."

"Can you simply walk inside?"

"I thought I'd managed to convey my stance on mortal laws to you. That extends to respecting private property."

"I mean, don't you need to be invited inside, first?"

"What do you— *Oh*." I grin and reach up to cup his cheek. "You're so *cute*."

He flushes faintly, which makes him even cuter. "It was a pertinent question," he mumbles, gathering his dignity.

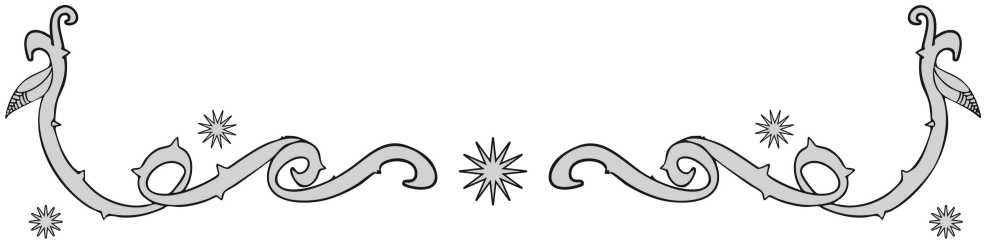
"Yes, it was."

"Spare me the condescension."

"I'll try to." I pat his chest—condescendingly—and open the door.

To rivers and *rivers* of blood.

CHAPTER 11



"WHICH ONE OF THE TWO IS WENCESLAUS?" ROMAN ASKS A few minutes later. His jeans are smeared with blood from when he knelt by one of the corpses in an attempt at resuscitation, and the right sleeve of his Henley smells pungently like something that could be cerebrospinal fluid. Around him, every cushion, every piece of furniture, every inch of the wooden floor is soaked in the types of juices that are squeezed out of the human body when it gets thrown about with little regard for the laws of physics.

All in all, he's taking it pretty well.

"Wenceslaus was…the one that looks more like a Wenceslaus?"

Roman makes a face, but glances in the right direction. Surprisingly, despite his general state of dismemberment, Wenceslaus's long, coarse beard has remained mostly unsullied, still its original color.

Poor Wenceslaus. He would be pleased, I imagine.

"And the other one?"

"His right hand, I believe." I grimace, staring at the man who hurled Grigori's corpse in front of me just a few hours ago. "This is going to create a huge mess. Wenceslaus's was already a young and stupid bloodline. Whoever takes over next is unlikely to have enough power to hold it."

Roman listens carefully, like the politicking of a slice of society he didn't know existed this morning is of great interest to him. "Their bodies are still warm. If revenant physiology isn't too different from humans', their death was very recent."

"Mortals'."

"What?"

"We're human, too. We're just not mortal. And yes, you're right. Whoever did this only just left. Judging from the way the fight played out, there was only one attacker."

"How can you tell?"

"It's in the scene." I point at a particularly gruesome splatter on the wall next to the door. "You see that? The killer entered the room and immediately walked toward Wenceslaus. When the other revenant tried to stop him, the killer easily threw him backward, and his skull splintered against that framed picture of…Is that the current Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople?" I rub my eyes. The coming night is going to be a long one. "Just trust me on this. I have a lot of experience reading the aftermath of violence."

"Then, if it was only one person, they would have had to be strong, right? Older than Wenceslaus?"

I nod, loath to admit the truth out loud. "One of the other elders, almost certainly."

"You said that they are in the city?"

"Some of them, yes." I lean back against one of the rare sections of wall that was spared bodily fluids. "There are nine of us in total. Besides Wenceslaus, who called us here to council, five elders came. Three didn't show up."

"Could those three be here in the city without your knowledge?"

"I suppose. It would have been difficult for them to fly in without being noticed by any of our informants, but if they had slipped in a while ago…it's possible, and it would certainly afford them the advantage of surprise." I entertain a scenario in which Pasiphaë, Cassius, or Karna have been lying in wait to set a trap. It seems

unlikely, given their personalities—too ascetic, too busy fucking his sprawling retinue, too uninterested in traveling more than fifteen minutes away from where he was born. Then again, the entire situation is unlikely. The more I look for hints of what caused Wenceslaus's massacre, the less I know.

"I have to tell you something, Lilit."

I force myself to look at Roman's face. It's beautiful. It deserves a much better background than one this bloody. God, we're not even together anymore and I'm *still* fucking up his life. "Yes?"

He swallows. "After you and I…After the diner, I got to my house. I walked in, closed the door behind me, and then I sat on the couch, and I stayed there, with my head between my hands, for…a long time. Until I made myself get up and walk to the kitchen, which was when I found the sunglasses and texted you. But before then, I sat still for at least thirty minutes."

My heart squeezes painfully. I stay silent, because I don't know what to say.

"At that point, the attacker had to be upstairs already. Which means that if he had wanted to kill me, he could have done it right then. It would have been child's play. He could have stuck this knife"—he lifts his arm—"through my back while I wasn't even looking, and you would never have found out, because we were never supposed to meet again." His voice turns rougher. Just the theoretical idea of this fills me with fear that's so sharp and unexpected, it takes me a moment to isolate the point he's trying to make.

"You're saying that the revenant must have been after me, or he would have attacked you before I arrived."

"Maybe. I know you said that that revenant was too young to take you out, but…" He swallows again, visibly. "What if you had been distracted?"

"That could have given him an advantage," I concede.

"Then consider this: Whoever sent the attacker has been observing us for a while. They knew that we'd be together. They knew you'd come to my home. They probably knew what we'd be doing there. That's why the attacker was on the second floor."

"You think he was going to take me by surprise." *While we had sex.* That's what he means.

He presses his lips together. "You two were so unevenly matched, he'd never have won a fair fight. Maybe he'd have killed me, too, after getting rid of you, but I wasn't the primary target. I was the bait."

I want to laugh at the dark, livid glint in his eyes. His grave tone. "Why do you sound disappointed?"

"Because," he says, stepping up to me with a scowl, "it means that someone is going out of their way to hurt you, and I have no fucking idea how to protect you. And I really, *really* don't like that."

His jaw clenches so tight it warms even my ancient heart. I can't help lifting my hand to his cheek to swipe my thumb back and forth over his prickly skin. Then, once the tension in him has softened, I lace my fingers with his and wordlessly guide us back to the car.

—

THIS TIME ROMAN SLIDES INTO THE DRIVER'S SEAT, AND I DON'T protest, because I could do with some thinking time. I give him the address of our next stop, and watch him drive with confidence even as the snowstorm gathers weight.

"Why would someone want you dead, Lilit?"

"You mean, *me*, specifically? Or me, and Wenceslaus, and Grigori?"

"Grigori? Ah. The one they tried to frame Viktor for."

"Yup. That's how this mess started. Though, who knows whether Grigori himself had any significance. The reason for killing him may have been to get Wenceslaus and me to eliminate each other." I kick

off my shoes, draw up my legs, and hug them to my chest, pondering Roman's question. "What *do* the three of us have in common?"

"A skill maybe? But you said Wenceslaus wasn't very…powerful." He says the word haltingly, like I introduced him to a new meaning of it. "Are you the most powerful revenant?"

"Oh, no. Power correlates highly with age, and Li Xiu is older than I am. By so much, I'm not certain even she knows. Imhotep and Atukhos—two other bloodline elders—are around my age, and we'd be more evenly matched in a fight. Aapo, the other elder who is in the city, is younger, though not as young as Wenceslaus. I don't know much about her. She keeps to herself."

"So, is…Li Xiu?" When I nod, he continues. "Does she try to use her power to control the rest of you? Or to hurt mortals?"

I laugh. "Li Xiu? No. She couldn't care less."

"So, if Li Xiu doesn't care, and she's the most powerful, who holds the other revenants accountable when they mess with mortals?"

"That would be me." I lift my shoulder at his surprised glance. "Believe me, I don't get off on playing vigilante. But no one else cares enough to take up the task. My bloodline is sufficiently strong and organized to make sure that mortals are kept safe, and we've somehow become enforcers of the no-killing-mortals rule."

"Do the others resent you for that?"

I think about it for a long while. "Wenceslaus used to, but only insofar as I policed the actions of his revenants. The others…The main thing that sets me apart from the other elders, I believe, is that I still find value in engaging with mortals, while the others all appear to have transcended that stage. Aapo will disappear for decades at a time to do who knows what and then reemerge without any explanation. Atukhos is first and foremost a warrior—he loves discipline and passes his days training in obsolete combat techniques, because he cannot conceive of other worthwhile

pursuits. Imhotep is a scholar, and perhaps a bit of a hedonist, too. He likes beautiful things and finds no pleasure in violence. As for Li Xiu…" I shake my head. "She doesn't even remember that mortals exist."

"Could she resent you for being their self-appointed defender?"

"It's not like that. She doesn't think mortals are inferior or that aggression against them is justified. She simply doesn't care. Her companions have always been other revenants, and that's who she usually focuses on."

"And by 'companions,' you mean…?"

"Lovers, yes. She is with Imhotep now. Before, there was Atukhos. Before that, Karna, and Felix, and Abd'ashtart, me, Wu Shin—"

"You?" Roman asks, surprise in his tone. Or maybe it's something else, going by the white of his knuckles around the steering wheel. "When?"

"Oh, ages ago."

"When you say ages, you are being literal?"

"Quite. True ancient history. We loved each other dearly, but we were never really suited. Even right after she left me, when I was heartbroken and inconsolable, I knew that she and I were too similar in some ways and too different in others. As I said, she is only interested in other revenants, while I prefer the company of mortals. I guess she has always been more inclined toward monogamy, while I felt more at ease going through thousands of mortal lovers—"

"Thousands?"

"Well, yes. Probably. I didn't keep count."

His sideways glance seems vaguely accusatory, and I frown.

"What's your favorite food?"

"I don't know." Now he's scowling, too. "Ramen?"

"How many times have you had ramen in your life?"

"I don't maintain a log. Hundreds, maybe?"

"That's what I mean. Sex, like ramen, is an enjoyable activity, but that doesn't mean that one has to keep a meticulous tally." There is still an odd rigidity to him. "Are you slut-shaming me, Roman?"

"What? No. *No.* I just…"

"You just?"

Roman takes a right and chews on his inner cheek. "I just wondered if that's why."

"Why, what?"

"Why you were with me to begin with. Because I am mortal."

"Ah." I rest my temple against my knee to better look at him. There is a smudge of blood at the base of his jaw. Directly or not, I'm the one who put it there. "There are a lot of mortals around, Roman."

"About eight billion, last I checked."

"More than that. Which means that I could be with ten different people every day, and still not be anywhere close to running out." When he keeps staring straight ahead, I add, more softly, "It's risky for me, to be with the same person twice. People become suspicious, ask questions, and notice things. Before you, Roman, I never even went for repeats. Let alone a ten-year relationship." I let myself smile. "I was with you because I loved you. If you had been a revenant, I would have loved you, still, and it would have made no difference at all."

His throat bobs. After a prolonged silence, he says, without inflection, "I don't keep track of how many times I had ramen. But I remember every time we were together."

I believe him. I think I might, too. It's impossible to look at him without being assaulted by memories—late nights swimming out in the lake, my hand wrapped tight around his throat, his face undone and my body unraveling as he pushed inside me and whispered against my ear, *We got this, we got this, there you go.*

I shouldn't care enough to remember. But I do.

He clears his throat. “Are there any assets that you own, and that someone might gain by eliminating you?”

“Like material things? No, not really. Revenants are the definition of generational wealth, and there is next to nothing that cannot be bought with the kind of means we have.”

“Then, if you’re sure that it’s not power, or money, what other motives does this leave? Could they be targeting you in exchange for information?”

“Hmm.” I drum my fingers against my shins. Could they? Silas was certainly ready to kill for the knowledge of how to make new revenants. But the other elders are already familiar with the ritual. Killing us would be a very counterintuitive way to go about learning how to do that, anyway. “I can’t think of anything. But that doesn’t mean much, considering that I’m privy to most of our secrets. Maybe I’m just not imaginative enough.”

“What about revenge?” My eyebrow quirks up, amused, but he’s unperturbed. “It may sound dramatic, but today’s introduction to revenant culture has shown me nothing but drama.”

“Can’t argue with that.” I chuckle, stretching my legs. When his eyes seem to be drawn to them, I ignore the heat that blooms in my belly. *He broke up with you, idiot. About two hours ago.* “We’re usually not this bad.”

He scrunches his nose. It has always been one of my favorite expressions of his. “Not sure I believe you.”

“Smooth sailing for ten years, and then I drag you to a string of crime scenes, like, *once*…”

He smiles. “So, there’s no one who bears a grudge against you?”

“Not that I can think of. Well, I did kill both Aapo’s Sire and one of Imhotep’s lovers.” I wish I could say that Roman’s pained expression is uncalled-for. “I know, I know. But that was a while ago, and neither of them seems to be holding it against me.”

He massages his temple. “Then I have one last question.”

“You know, I’m really liking this side of you.”

"The side that's scared shitless that something's going to happen to you, despite the fact that you've managed to keep yourself alive for longer than mammoths have been extinct?"

"I wasn't alive when—" His eyes stop me cold. "Okay, technically, I was, but back then, there were none on the mainland, just off the Siberian coast. What I mean is, I like the way you think. Your process of elimination. It's like you're going through differential diagnoses at work." I grin. "Anyway, what's the last question?"

"Out of the elder revenants who are currently in the city, is there one that you trust implicitly?"

I think of Li Xiu, whom I love deeply, but don't always comprehend. "It's complicated."

"You and Li Xiu used to be in love, you said."

"We did. But…trust and loyalty and friendship and honor, they are not immutable concepts. They have shifted over time and across cultures. I am not certain how she experiences them, not at the moment." *However,* I think to myself, *if Li Xiu wanted to eliminate me, she would. She'd require no subterfuge. And I do believe that she would mourn my loss as much as I would mourn hers.*

On impulse, I reach for my phone.

"Who are you calling?"

"Li Xiu."

"Decided that you trust her?"

"I have decided that if someone is after her, I don't want her to be caught unawares." Her ring back tone fills my ear. "She's not picking up."

"Does she usually?"

"Well, we aren't exactly active in the same group chats. But no—she doesn't enjoy technology, and she certainly doesn't see the value in being reachable at all times. She might be with Imhotep. I guess I could call him."

"But you don't trust him?"

"He hasn't done anything to merit my distrust, but again…" Instead of Imhotep, I make the split-second decision to call Aapo, who answers instantly.

"Where are you?"

"Flying back to South America before the snowstorm traps me in Chicago." She sounds groggy, like I woke her up from a nap. "Why? Are we counciling again tomorrow? Did Viktor kill another one of Wenceslaus's boy toys?"

"Wenceslaus is dead."

Her silence drags. "Oh."

"Yeah."

"Did *your* boy toy do that?"

I snort softly. "Aapo, I know someone who would rearrange your insides with her paintbrush and feed you to a colony of rodents for calling Viktor that."

"So, no?"

"I don't know who did it. But I was attacked, too. Since with him gone you are the youngest and the easiest target out of all the bloodline elders, I wanted you to know that you should probably watch your back."

"Ah." A brief pause. "How do I know that this isn't one of your bossy power plays? Maybe you got tired of us. Mortals are your pet project, after all. We all know that you're like one of those people who think dogs are better than humans."

There, I mouth at Roman, pointing ahead of us. *Go inside the parking garage.* Then, before hanging up, "You have no way of knowing shit, Aapo. Just watch your back, okay?"

—

AFTER A CHANGE OF CAR AND SOME MORE DRIVING AROUND TO make sure we're not being followed, I check us into a hotel where

I'm reasonably certain we won't be murdered in our sleep. It's a large suite, with a living space that leads into the sleeping area.

"You're not getting your own room," I tell Roman when I catch sight of the king bed. "Not that I expect anyone to barge in, with how high up we are and the armored door, but just in case—"

"It's a good idea."

I pause mid–toeing my heels off. "Hmm?"

"It's better if we stick together."

"Oh."

"Lilit, I'm not oblivious. You're all that stands between me and being slaughtered by omnipotent immortal creatures whose abilities I don't comprehend. We *should* share a room."

"Great. If your…girlfriend complains, you can tell her you had no choice." I fix my face into a smile. "Make me the bad guy. I don't mind."

His eyes briefly glaze over. Then he catches himself, and his gaze drifts to the window, where the snow blurs the nighttime Chicago skyline. "It sounds like you've been killing people left and right, Lilit. You might just be the bad guy."

"Good point." We stand awkwardly in the bedroom, as if being on our feet is something we learned less than an hour ago, as if we haven't spent countless nights together in hotels just like this one. I focus all my attention on smoothing the creases off my silk dress, then ask, "Would you like to shower first?"

"It's okay."

"I insist."

"It's fine. I don't have anything clean to wear, anyway."

I feel my face pinch. "I was trying to be polite, but you've been smelling like bodily fluids for a while now, and not the fun kind. Please, go wash Wenceslaus's prefrontal cortex out of your hair."

Roman bites back a smile and disappears into the bathroom. I let myself fall back onto the mattress, already exhausted, and decide to

call Viktor with an update. On my phone, I find several missed calls, both from him and from others in my bloodline.

Then, a single text.

Garfield Park Conservatory. Midnight.

Well. Fuck.

I sit up. Consider my options. By the time the shower turns off, I have formulated a plan and sent a reply.

Roman walks out of the bathroom wearing only boxer briefs, likely because they're the only piece of clothing he owns that wasn't dipped in bile or pancreatic juice. It's the furthest thing from an attempt at seduction, and yet my chest tightens, both at his beauty and at the familiarity of it.

His body was something he once granted me privileges to. No more, and the thought is unbearable.

"I have to make a request," I start. "And while I expect that your gut reaction will be to say no, I need you to know that I'm not asking for selfish reasons, and that if it wasn't necessary, I—"

"You want to drink my blood," he says calmly. He takes a seat on the edge of the bed, right next to me. The mattress dips. "That way, you can track me down in case we get separated."

I blink. "Well. Damn."

"I thought about it, too. It would be stupid not to."

"Right." His hair, always wavier and darker when damp, is a little messy. I itch to straighten it. "Are you comfortable with me doing that?"

He starts to nod, but halts. "You said something about being able to read my mind?"

"I did, yes, but it's not that simple. I won't hear your every thought or anything like that. But I might pick up the occasional stray, especially if you're being…loud."

"I'm not sure I know what that means."

"No, I suppose you wouldn't. But I can teach you to shield your thoughts. It's a very intuitive process. I promise that I won't listen in unless it's necessary, and that I won't track you down unless it's for your safety."

"Okay." It's humbling how easily he trusts. No one should have this much faith in me, but I still want to paw at it with greedy hands and hoard it within my body. I want to be worthy of him. I am hopeless. "How does it work? Should I cut myself? Would that be easier?"

My pulse kicks into a desperate gallop. I have to clear my throat. "No need. My teeth will do that."

"Wouldn't an incision be neater? It seems like it would minimize the risk of infection."

"Don't worry about that. My saliva is going to take care of that."

"Your saliva has healing properties?"

"Yeah. Analgesic, too. Oxygenated blood from living organisms triggering enzyme production. Ye ol' biochemical cascade."

"A G protein–coupled receptor, probably." He seems fascinated. "It'd be a really interesting scientific paper."

"*The New England Journal of Medicine* is going to have to do without, sorry."

He smiles. "Where do you want to bite me?"

I'm not proud to admit that I have to press my knees together. I wish my body weren't already responding so dramatically to the prospect of what we're about to do. I wish that a simple offer he's making only to ensure his survival weren't like a thousand fires burning under my skin. Was I this eager before my very first sip of blood? Did I feel this gnawing hunger?

I am disgusting.

"The arm is usually easiest," I say evenly.

"Not the neck?"

Heat hooks behind my belly button. Pulsates low in my stomach. "The neck has some good arteries, too," I inform Roman, a fully

trained medical doctor, who does me the immense favor of not laughing in my face.

"But you don't prefer it? All the stories, are they just folklore?"

"No. No, the neck is good. But it's more intimate. The logistics of it, they just require more proximity."

Roman's features shift, then lock into neutrality. He is expressionless as he lifts his wrist to my mouth, and I try to be just as professional as I cradle his arm in my hands.

But.

It's been a long, long time coming. I remember an evening two years ago, him so deep inside me. Fall had just started, and the scent of petrichor and fallen leaves wafted in through the open window. Sunset.

My right hand clutched his chest as I moved on top of him, and his heart thudded so close to the surface of his skin, I hallucinated, feverish, drunk and stupid with pleasure, that his blood was begging to leap from his body into mine. His fingers clamped on to my hips, and when he emptied inside me, repeating my name and obscenities and inane things about how much he wanted me, forever, forever, I opened my mouth around the base of his throat and thought, *now*.

I stopped myself then. Tonight, I don't. I don't even allow the moment to tighten before I break the skin, and the cut of my teeth is not neat, or precise, or deliberate. It must hurt, too, because I hear Roman hiss through his teeth. But that sound becomes a groan, and the world sharpens to just *this.*

I need two gulps, that's all. Two gulps, and I'll be able to track him for a long, long while. Two gulps, and I can be done.

One.

Two.

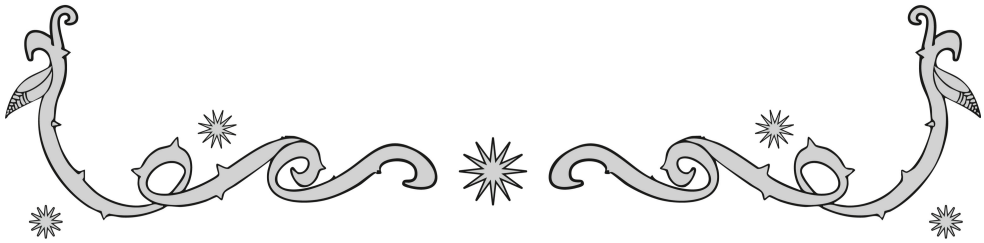
I take four more before I manage to tear myself away from his vein. I lick the wound, loath to miss a single drop, and seal it. Meanwhile, his blood fills my stomach, thick and rich, the taste so good I may be on the verge of blacking out.

For the first time in five thousand years, I understand the true meaning of bloodlust.

Then, it happens. *Fast.* The aftertaste hits me like a slap, sudden, punishing, and I free-fall back inside my skin.

I look up, meet Roman's glassy eyes, and breathe: "You are dying."

CHAPTER 12



THE FIRST STRAY THOUGHT I PICK UP FROM ROMAN IS: *–GOING to come in my pants.*

It feels slurred, and desperate. Inaccurate, too, because he's not wearing pants. But the erection twitching in his boxer briefs is unmistakable, and his blood is so fresh inside me, I feel the heat of his arousal zip through him like it's my own. My body clenches, and my vision tunnels.

He's on fire, and so am I.

Then my words register in his mind. I can feel their meaning sink in, and realize I just revealed to Roman that he's dying in the same tone I would use to inform someone that the peanut butter they're about to slather on their toast is expired.

His next train of thought is something like: *How— Shit— Fuck*. "How do you know?"

Roman.

Roman is *dying*.

It has been such a long time since I last experienced a shock of this magnitude, I struggle to parse my body's reactions. Trembling fingers. Tight chest. Burning pressure in the back of my eyes. I try to regulate all of it, then just some of it, then I give up.

"The taste, Roman. Your blood. It's…" I shake my head. Cup his cheek, relieved to find his flesh still warm. He is alive. There is time. We can fix it. "You are very, very ill. You must go to your doctor. Right *now*."

He doesn't move. Just stares at me, stony faced.

Oh.

Oh.

Right.

My hand drops back into my lap. "You knew that already."

He says nothing. He must have figured out on his own how to stop the thoughts leaking out of his mind, because at once he's entirely insulated. I pick up nothing from his expression, and even less from the blood connection that now tethers us.

"What is it?" I ask calmly.

He laughs, silent, unamused. "Can't diagnose it from the flavor?"

"You don't have diabetes mellitus, this is not the sixteenth century, and I drank your blood, not your urine," I grit out, unable and unwilling to soften my tone. On the tail end of my surprise, rage swells. He knew he was ill. He knew and didn't tell me. I am unspeakably angry—so much so, I have no intention of contemplating whether my reaction is justifiable, or whether Roman is deserving of it. "What is it?" I repeat, even more harshly.

"A tumor in my brain. In the astrocytes, to be precise, which are a type of cell that—"

"Glioblastoma?"

He nods, and I close my eyes.

No.

No.

"Symptoms?"

"Some nausea and weight loss. Seizures and headaches, but I've been able to manage them with the right medications. I think my vision might be getting worse, too, but that's a new development."

"How long?"

"How long have I known?"

I fix my gaze on him, unflinching. He knows what I'm really asking, because he sighs.

"Realistically, six months."

I turn away. Then back to him. "Treatment?"

He shakes his head. "Resection is not possible. Radiation and chemo would only buy me a few more months."

"You refused them?"

"I…" He scratches his temple, looking exhausted, like he can't bear to have this conversation again.

Too fucking bad, I think. "Why?"

"I looked at pros and cons and made my decision."

"Without consulting anyone?"

"I consulted with my doctor. Who else should I have conferred with, Lilit? I have no family. But you know who *does* have families to care for? My friends, who I don't care to put through the ordeal of watching me deteriorate—"

"*Me*, Roman. Why didn't you tell *me*?"

Come on, Lilit. You know why.

His voice reverberates in my head, clear as if he'd spoken the words. I fist my hands to avoid slapping him, and one of my nails breaks against my palm.

"Roman, you realize that there's a chance I could fix this for you, right?"

In his mind, my offer coalesces into a jumbled montage of hazy images. In most of them, I'm as youthful as I've always been, and he's old and frail, or young and frail, and in need of my care. He hates it so much he immediately shoves the thought away.

"This is not something you *fix*, Lilit. I'm supposed to be dying."

"I was supposed to die, too. But here I am." A foul-tasting mix of desperation and incredulity rises up my throat. I force myself to swallow it back. "Do you not get it? This is what revenants *are*, Roman. Those who rise again. Those who walk after death."

"Are you— Wait." His eyes widen with understanding, and he laughs. "Are you offering to make me like you?"

"*Yes.* I cannot guarantee that the crossing will work, but I'm powerful enough that the odds are favorable. It's not like your chances of survival are any better without the ritual, so—"

"And then what, Lilit?"

I fall silent, lungs tight. "Then you are *alive*, Roman."

"Then, after I become a revenant, part of your bloodline…then what would you do with me?"

"I— You will be free to do as you like. You won't be…Being of my bloodline won't make you mine. It won't erase your free will. This is not a contract that binds you to me forever. There will be an adjustment period, sure, but after that you could…travel. You could go back to practicing medicine. You could get a dog. You could— You said you want a family. You could adopt a kid!"

A hazy outline of a fantasy bubbles to the surface of his mind. In it, I am pregnant after a long and satisfying process that is vaguely classified as "trying." Then, in a hard cut, he and I are surrounded by little boys and girls that are, mostly, smaller versions of me. In this scenario, the impact of his genetic material is clearly inconsequential.

I let out a surprised gasp, and he walls his thoughts once again, though not before I spot a hint of embarrassment. "Yeah." He averts his gaze, voice gravelly. "Yeah. That's what…No, thanks. I don't think I would enjoy murder games, or consuming people like they're fucking toilet paper, or sitting alone in my ivory tower of power and wealth while others suffer. I don't think I want to become like you."

The pain of his rejection is such a tangible, physical thing, I press my palm to my abdomen. It feels like there should be a blade sticking out from it. A gaping wound. But no, I am hale. This is just a new variant of betrayal, one I had not yet experienced, one that comes with a new brand of hurt.

"You know that I could make you anyway, right?" I snap. "Your permission is not necessary."

"You won't."

"How do you even—"

"Because I may have spent ten years not knowing what you are, but I know *you* enough to call your bluffs, and you would never do that." He runs a hand down his face. Then, with that doctor-breaking-stuff-down tone that I used to adore, "Listen, I received my diagnosis weeks ago. I've had the time and tools to process it. It's not easy, and it's not going to get any easier, and…There's no point in lying. I would have loved to fall asleep with my head in your lap while trying to catch the game in between shifts until I was ninety-five. But that's not what's going to happen. If someone has to go young, it should be the lonely guy cursed with a single-minded obsession with an immortal creature who wouldn't have been part of his future, anyway. Outside of my time with you, I never quite figured out how to be happy. Better *I* am sick than a devoted husband and father. So if you are dead set on gifting someone a second chance, you should probably give it to—"

"You told me there was another woman, Roman."

He flushes and twists his head to the side.

The violence of my rage concerns me. "There is no one, is there? You were just…You wanted to push me as far from you as possible. You were going to get sicker and sicker, and you planned to let me go on thinking that you were happy with someone else. A year from now, or whenever I was going to lose the fight with myself, I would have come to check on you and discovered that—" My voice breaks. I rise to my feet to pace, unable to stay still.

That's when I hear, like an echo in my head: *For the best— Love her— So much— For the best—*

I whirl around. "No, you fucking don't, or you wouldn't be doing this," I bite out. My face is suddenly inches from his, and the tip of

my finger hits his chest so hard, it breaks the skin. When the scent of fresh blood wafts up, I take a step back, horrified.

I need him to recoil. I need him to be as afraid of me as I am of myself. I need him to realize that I could make him do what I want, and that I can be a *really* bad guy.

My insides feel like they are trying to punch their way out of my skin. "I need to be alone for a minute."

"Lilit—"

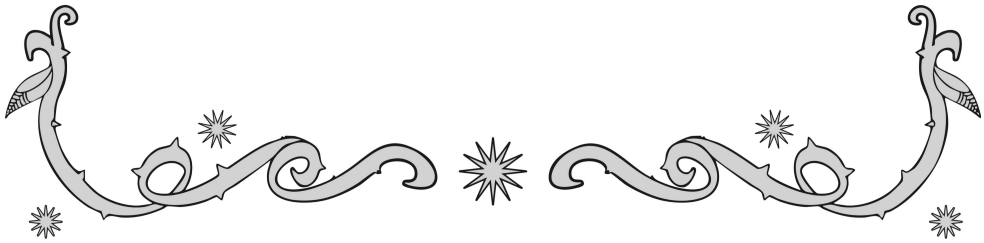
"No."

I stalk into the sitting room, letting the door slam behind me. I spend over an hour there, eyes closed, deep breaths, grasping around for something to anchor me with little success. By the time I trust myself enough to be in Roman's presence, he is sound asleep. Because, of course, all of tonight's events followed hard upon one of his frequent twenty-four-hour shifts. *Fuck*.

I observe him, supine on the bed, beautiful and breakable, and finally understand what the poets mean when they speak of the brittle line between hate and love.

I pick up my shoes and leave for my appointment.

CHAPTER 13



THE CONSERVATORY IS STUNNING, EVEN IN THE WINTER, perhaps all the more so because of the contrast between the snowy Chicago landscape and the lush and vibrant colors of the plants the hothouses shelter, brilliant even in the dark. When I let myself inside one of the greenhouses with a particularly firm turn of the handle, the tropical heat blooms against my bare legs, beading moisture against my skin and fogging the glass panes.

I stand on high alert. I know who I'll be meeting, but I don't know what to expect, and watching out for an ambush feels like a treat. How luxurious, to be forced to focus on something that isn't my fury toward Roman—or the fact that, with each passing moment, said fury feels more lifeless and undeserved.

I'm not usually short-tempered, by nature and by nurture. I don't allow myself tantrums. I value my control, and carefully consider my options before taking action, which is why I don't usually spend a lot of time feeling embarrassed about my behavior.

Roman rejected my offer of immortality approximately five hours after discovering that immortality was even a possibility—in a violent attack, no less. I saw red, reacted brashly, and now, I'm mortified that I tried to frame what amounted to little more than a hissy fit as righteous.

Of course he didn't tell me about his illness. For ten years, I have made myself be at the periphery of his life. I have no grounds to be surprised or offended by his choice to shove me into the very territory to which I relegated my own self. But because it's the middle of the night, and I've decided to walk into a potential trap, I have the privilege not to dwell on the magnitude of my fuckup.

I don't deserve it.

A quarter of an hour later, while studying the trunk of a pygmy date palm, I hear footsteps.

I don't turn. In fact, I adjust my heartbeat and posture to give the impression that I still believe I'm alone. I can't tell whether the visitor is fooled, but I give them the opportunity to take me by surprise.

Seconds pass. The attack I pretend not to be ready for doesn't come. At last, when my ignorance is no longer believable, I turn around.

Atukhos is injured and unsteady on his feet. It's a gory, brutal sight: The left side of his torso looks ravaged, as if someone attempted to peel the skin off it first with sandpaper, then with a rake. The classic-cut button-down he wore during our meeting is now ripped under one arm, and through the torn fabric, I spot open wounds, still oozing blood. If Atukhos were mortal, he'd be on the brink of death.

"What happened?" I ask calmly. No one else appears to be joining us. I'm still not certain that this isn't a trap, but at least we are alone.

"I was hit."

"By what?" I glance at his injuries. "A car?"

He nods, and must notice my skepticism at the concept of an old, powerful, *fast* revenant not seeing a vehicle coming at him, because he elaborates, "I thought myself safe."

"How so?"

"After I left our council, Li Xiu reached out to me. A written message. She mentioned important matters to relay to me and requested that I meet with her near her hotel."

I nod at him to go ahead.

"A vehicle pulled into the parking lot where I waited for her. The headlights were on, so I couldn't see well, but I believed that she was driving. I was certain that she meant to park in front of where I stood. I was foolish." His lips curl bitterly. "Then again, Li Xiu never stimulated my best judgment."

In the moonlight, I study the stern, long lines of his face, unsure whether to believe him. Atukhos died as a general and was reborn as a general. He has always been forbidding. Honest to a fault, but morally rigid. He and I never had much in common, and I've never been tempted to have anything more than cursory conversations with him. Yet, when it comes to the protection of mortals, Atukhos has always been my most consistent supporter.

I doubt he's particularly fond of them, as I cannot picture him caring for anything but the Macedonian phalanx and serrated blades. He does, however, value discipline and order. When compared with Wenceslaus's pompous self-importance, Li Xiu's profound apathy, and Imhotep's self-absorption and benign neglect, Atukhos's love for structure always made him a great ally.

I don't know who attacked him, but one thing is sure, they were smart about it. If I wanted to eliminate him, I would try to avoid a physical fight, too. Atukhos and I may be well matched in strength and speed, but his rigorous martial training is a significant advantage.

Li Xiu, though…"Forgive me, but I struggle to believe that Li Xiu would choose to run you over with a car when she could sever your spine with her pinky toe."

Atukhos's eyes widen. "It wasn't Li Xiu, Lilit."

"You said—"

"I said that someone lured me there under the guise of a meeting with her. But I never spoke to her. When the car was close enough, I saw that I was wrong, and that *she* wasn't the one driving it."

"Then who?"

His nostrils flare. His voice drips with anger as he speaks the name. "Imhotep."

I cock my head to hide my surprise. "He didn't finish the job? Wouldn't Imhotep know better than to leave you for dead?"

"He didn't leave me. I was quick enough to avoid more dire injuries, and then I ran."

That, I believe. "Does he know you saw him?"

"I do not believe so, no."

"I see. And Li Xiu, she fits into this…how?"

His throat bobs. "I cannot feel her, Lilit."

"Excuse me?"

"Li Xiu and I were lovers for centuries. We exchanged blood so often, and for so long, that even after we put an end to our relationship, I have been able to feel her. But tonight, as much as I try…she is nowhere. I call to her blood, and it doesn't reach back to me." His severe face is etched with pain. "You are the only one I trust, Lilit."

"Why me?"

"Because you wouldn't harm her. You loved her, too. You are her friend."

The flash of a memory: The two of us eating spongy bread with our hands, laughing. Her mouth, which tasted of spices and ale. My feelings toward Li Xiu are messy and complicated, they have ebbed and flowed, but she is the longest-standing presence in my life.

Was, if what Atukhos is saying is true.

"None of us is strong enough to harm Li Xiu, Atukhos. Imhotep included."

"Imhotep would have been in a position to catch her unawares." He presses a palm to his wound, but it's already healing. He will probably be like new in a matter of days.

"Why would he, though?"

That seems to elude him. "I cannot imagine. Perhaps a lovers' quarrel? But why would he then come after *me*?"

We are briefly quiet, occasional drops of condensation the only interruption, as I consider whether it is wise to reveal the extent of today's events. "Wenceslaus is dead," I inform him, taking care to sound neutral.

Atukhos's shock is restrained, and he looks all the more genuine for it. "Did you kill him?"

"No. I assume that the same person who tried to kill me took care of that."

"Someone attacked you? Tonight?"

I nod.

"Who?"

"I don't know. Maybe one of Wenceslaus's men. But now that you mention Imhotep attacking you…" Could this be about Silas, Imhotep's former lover? Maybe I should have known better than to assume that over a decade without retaliation would equal forgiveness. But if Atukhos is correct, this is not a personal matter. Imhotep seems to be simply making his way through all the bloodline elders.

"He won't give up," Atukhos says. "Not until we're dead. I cannot stop him—not on my own."

"None of your men are here?"

He shakes his head, which matches my intel. Coming alone is etiquette, after all. Wenceslaus was the exception, and we let him because…because he was fucking annoying. I might end up missing that son of a bitch, which is even *more* annoying.

What if Li Xiu is really gone? There are memories that only she and I shared. World events that we witnessed together. Moments in

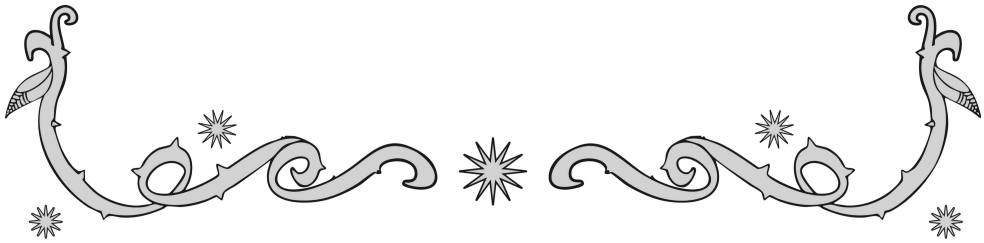
time, slices of history that no one else in all of humanity could ever imagine. If she's gone, they are now just mine.

"Do you have a plan?" I ask Atukhos.

He is quiet for a long while. "Imhotep doesn't know that I saw his face, or that I know that Li Xiu is gone. I could call him to council tomorrow. If he comes, I can retaliate for what he did to Li Xiu and me, and for what he tried to do to you. But I will need your help."

I close my eyes. See old faces and senseless violence. Heart resigned and heavy with grief, I say, "Yes. I will help."

CHAPTER 14



BY THE TIME I RETURN TO THE HOTEL ROOM, ALL I WANT IS TO BE out of my clothes and rid of the dirt of the last few hours, and thirty minutes in the scalding hot shower to take care of it.

I put on a spongy white bathrobe that swallows me and smells like industrial-strength detergent, and then step out of the bathroom. I need to rest, especially if tomorrow's activities will be as demanding as I expect. But instead of slipping into the living room and finding the couch, I lean against the wall and check on Roman's sleeping form.

He is still here. Not mine, but here. Not well, but alive.

It takes only a few moments for the distance between us to start feeling like a gorge, too wide to bear. With a sigh, I go lie down next to him, taking care not to jolt him.

I refuse to admit the real reason. I tell myself he must be having nightmares. Emergency doctor or not, it cannot be easy to process the kind of carnage he witnessed yesterday. So I'll just stay by his side for a few minutes, in case he needs to be fished out of a bad dream in which he's drowning in a bathtub full of blood. He'll never even know.

Except, Roman knows. The second I'm near him, his lips twitch into a smile, and before he's fully awake, a strong arm hooks me

into him. Fragments of sluggish thoughts hit me like hail—*mine—good—here—safe.* I feel, as if they were my own, his worry melt at having me back, his relief that I am whole, his sorrow at having hurt me by hiding his illness, his resolution to spare me the worst of it.

Then, nothing. Roman, apparently, is as quick a study when it comes to shielding his mind as he is at everything else.

"You didn't tell me where you went," he says against my hair, voice thick and sanded down by sleep.

"You didn't tell me you were dying," I counter, more sullen than angry, and bury my face in his neck.

"True. Then again, you didn't tell me about the whole revenant thing, so…"

I groan, and his arms tighten around me.

In our years together, Roman and I never had a real argument. There were disagreements, bickering over what to watch on TV, the occasional sour mood, but never something that could be described as a fight. At times, I wondered why. Whether our combined tempers were too mellow, or we simply didn't spend enough time together. To this day, I have no clue. What I do know, however, is that any quarrel of ours would have ended like this one, with us wrapped around each other, and the reason for the argument, valid as it may have been, put aside to be dealt with later.

Nothing is resolved between us. Roman's life is still in danger, my world is still in chaos, and the end of us comes nearer by the second, so close that I could reach for it and swat it away. And yet, for several minutes, we stay like that, as entwined as we can be, until there's no more air in the space between us, and I can no longer put off what's next. "I would like to say that I am sorry."

A board would sound less stiff than I do, but I've never been great at apologies, and Roman knows it. "Yeah?" His gentle amusement, it could shatter me into a million pieces. "For what?"

"For the way I reacted to…" I clear my throat and pull back, trying to meet his eyes in the dark. I can't make out much, but even

the glossy shine under heavy lids gives me the push I need to continue. "Of course you didn't tell me. It was not what you and I were, and I shouldn't have pretended otherwise."

He sighs. "Yeah, well. I'm sorry, too."

"For what?"

"For not telling you."

"But I—"

"Yes, you did not deserve to be told. You were not a stable presence in my life. But now that I know you are some all-powerful immortal being, your decisions make a lot of sense. Maybe I should cut you some slack."

"Fuck." I screw my eyes shut. "You always do this."

"Do what?"

"You act all perfect and compassionate. You take what I give you and never expect anything else from me. You let me go and then welcome me back with open arms. It's enraging."

A low chuckle. "Enraging?"

"Yes."

"You don't sound enraged."

"Because I'm not. I can't even be righteously angry at you if you're understanding and undemanding and selfless. It pisses me off to no end."

This time, I hear his laughter loud and clear. "How shall I survive the wrath of she who walks again?"

"You know," I say haughtily, "you could stand to be a little more terrified of me, my superhuman prowess, and the fury of the hundreds of revenants who have pledged their loyalty to me."

"Uh-huh. No, yeah. For sure." He smiles around the words, and then he dips and his lips find mine, and my mind goes blank of everything that isn't the awareness of him.

This is stupid, and reckless. I should move away from him before it costs me even more. But when Roman asks me, "Where did you go?" I cannot help sharing. Perhaps it's because I took his blood, but

the dam I built between us has collapsed, and I feel myself spilling into him.

"To figure out a way to fix this mess before more of my people end up dead."

"Did you?" When my response is little more than a plaintive noise, he chuckles and brushes my hair back from my face. "You will. I have no doubt about that."

"Maybe you should."

"I don't see why, given who you are."

"You mean, a bloodsucking monster?"

"I mean, *you*. Lilit."

I close my eyes again, wishing he were right. But none of this is straightforward, and I know I'm missing something. If Atukhos told the truth—and I have no reason to doubt him—Imhotep is on a revenge mission. As foolish as it sounds, I can understand, intellectually, that he would want to hurt me because of his past relationship with Silas. But why move against Atukhos, Li Xiu, and Wenceslaus, too?

Because he feared that we might side with you and try to stop him, Atukhos told me earlier, when I asked him. It's a plausible explanation. I just…

"This would be so much less convoluted if revenants' lies were as easy to spot as mortals'," I mutter.

Roman stays silent. When I glance up to check on him, he looks taken aback. "You can tell when people lie?"

"For the most part. It's a bit more complex than that—there are lots of physiological tells when someone lies, and it's easy for us to pick them up. Revenants are just better at hiding those little clues." I watch him digest this new fact. Then I say, "Sorry. I probably should have mentioned this earlier. Do you mind?"

"I don't think so." A contemplative pause. "The contrary. I'm glad you can call me out on my bullshit."

"Not much to call out. You're surprisingly low on that."

With his thumb under my chin, he tilts my head up. "Maybe. But I *was* lying, earlier. You know that, right?"

My throat tightens. "Earlier, when?"

"When I said that you were a murderer."

"I *am* a murderer."

"You are, yes. But I also said that you don't care about anyone but yourself, that you consider people to be disposable, and that I despise who you are. I don't. None of it is true. What I said about not wanting to be like you—it was unfair, and a cheap shot, and a knee-jerk reaction to you painting me yet another picture of an eternity in which you and I are not…" Roman squeezes his eyes shut and sighs. "I was angry, and I lied. You know that, right?"

My heart melts. I fist the fabric at his hip. "I hoped."

"Good." We smile at each other, sad, almost shy.

Then something occurs to me, and I let out a soft laugh. "Is your doctor a woman? Your oncologist, I mean."

"She is, yes. We were in school together, actually. Why?"

"Because when you said you were *seeing* someone else, it felt like you were telling the truth. I only just figured out why."

I lean closer, and I feel his unashamed smile against my cheek. "I always hated lying, ever since I was a kid. So I developed some cognitive tricks for when it's unavoidable. You know, how to tell a truth without telling *the* truth."

"Right." I roll my eyes. "Well, you won't fool me again."

"I'm sorry, Lilit. It seemed like a good way to break off things neatly. I wasn't trying to hurt your feelings."

"I know. I get it." I yawn. "I mean, I did learn the true meaning of the word 'jealousy' for the first time thanks to—"

Wait.

Wait.

I sit up with a gasp, heart suddenly racing. "Fuck."

"What?" Roman asks, following me upright. Then, breaking a long stretch of quiet, "Are you okay?"

"Yes. Yes, I just…" I shake my head, pulse in my throat. *Fuck*. "I figured it out."

"Figured out what?"

"The reason behind this entire mess." I cover my mouth with my palm. "*Shit*."

"That's a good thing, no?"

"Yes. No. Yes. But it's going to be a pain to fix."

"I see." Roman runs a hand up and down my back, under the curtain of my hair, unhurried. I feel his warmth through the terry cloth. "So, what happens now?"

"We'll take care of it later today."

"We?"

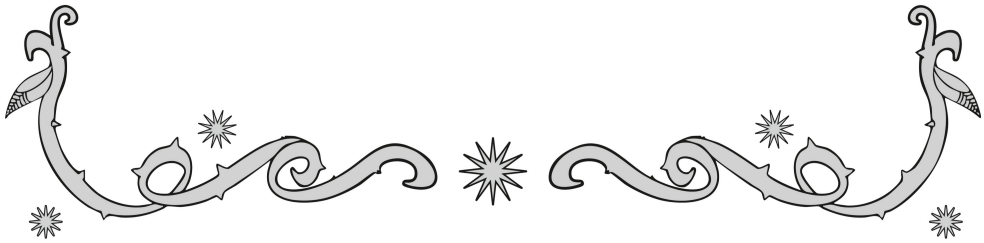
"Another elder and I."

"Ah. Anything I can do to help?"

"I don't think— Actually, yes." I let an idea percolate. "Yes, Roman. I need you to do something for me, but it's going to be a little risky. Is that okay for you?"

He nuzzles the crown of my head, and his *Anything* vibrates through my bones.

CHAPTER 15



THE FOLLOWING NIGHT, WE COUNCIL RIGHT BEFORE SUNDOWN, in the same location where we met some twenty-four hours earlier—now with three hundred percent more carrion bugs. The upper floor of the high-rise feels even more deserted than usual, and the scent of decomposing flesh still lingers in the cool air. Distractedly, I wonder where Wenceslaus put Grigori's body after his little scene yesterday. Whether it's floating in the river, or tucked away on a plane, awaiting funerary rites that it will never receive.

Poor Grigori. Out of all of us, he deserved what happened to him the least.

Without Aapo, Wenceslaus, and Li Xiu, the meeting will include only three elders: Atukhos, Imhotep, and me. I am the last to arrive, but not by design. During the day, I was busy setting up the pieces, and all I can do now is hope they'll fall into place. The snow may have stopped midmorning, but the temperature dropped steeply overnight, and the plows have not yet made their way through the streets. I underestimated how long the walk here would take.

Ice crusts every inch of the city, and for once, my reluctance to wear too much fabric lost to my desire for warmth. I both hate and love the black jeans and turtleneck that Roman watched me put on

with a smile, cracking jokes about whether I was planning to rob a bank or join an avant-garde theater troupe.

I considered retaliating by biting his throat hard, just to leave a mark where everyone would see. But before I am allowed to do that, he and I owe each other a real conversation, one that is not clouded by anger or panic. That will have to wait.

When I step into the room, Imhotep and Atukhos are sitting across from each other at the round table, a thick, unpleasant silence between them. The back of Atukhos's head, I notice, is stiff with tension, but the closer I get, the more obvious it becomes that his wounds are already almost completely healed. I wonder if he's in full fighting form. Then I recall that it doesn't matter; Atukhos and I won't be the ones fighting each other tonight. When our gazes meet, I exchange a nod with him and then fetch a chair for myself. I drag it next to Imhotep's and take a seat.

Atukhos's eyes widen infinitesimally in surprise. I wonder if he'll say something, perhaps to remind me of the strategy he conceived and we agreed on last night, but he remains quiet. After all, it's just a chair, and it will not interfere with the plan. If he were to ask, I'd tell him the truth: I only chose it because it gives me the best view of the elevator doors. One can never be too alert.

It's Imhotep who breaks the silence. "How noteworthy, that there were six of us here last night, and that number has now been halved." His demeanor, usually affable, is rigid. I study the pinch of his full lips. Question whether he is ready for what's coming.

"I'm sure that no one needs reminding," I say, kicking off the meeting in earnest, "that there are no laws that prohibit revenants from killing each other."

"Correct," Atukhos says. "You, Lilit, have taken advantage of that void in our customs many, many times over the years."

"She has," Imhotep agrees. "The protector of mortals. Not so much of revenants."

I tilt my chin, but say nothing. I am not on trial, nor am I the one who should be asked to answer for her actions.

"Perhaps we should discuss those of us who are no longer with us," Atukhos starts to say, but Imhotep immediately waves him away.

"I see no need for that."

"You don't?"

"Aapo has left, and who knows if we'll see her again during this century. Wenceslaus was killed. Grigori, too. Li Xiu…Well. What else is there to say?" An elegant shrug.

"Perhaps," I offer, "we could discuss the senselessness of us killing each other when very little stands to be gained."

"Oh, I don't know." Imhotep smiles coolly in my direction. "Sometimes, murder is satisfying in and of itself."

"You are going to regret those words when we end your life," Atukhos growls.

"When *you* end *my* life?" Imhotep clutches his chest theatrically. Then he slaps the palm of his hand to his temple with just as much flair. "Ah, yes. When Lilit and I counciled in the witching hours of last night, she did mention that you were planning to do that."

Atukhos turns to me. "Lilit?"

I nod. Because it's the truth.

"What is this?" Atukhos stands abruptly, tipping his chair to the floor, drawing his sword in a defensive gesture. "You said you would help me punish Imhotep."

"Well, yes. Maybe those are the words I said. But the intended spirit was that I would help stop whoever it is who has been attacking elder revenants. You know very well who that is, Atukhos."

"Are you *mad*?"

I glance at Imhotep, who stares in the direction of the door, impassive. "It's remarkable that your injuries have healed so quickly and so thoroughly. Last night, when we talked, I estimated that they would take at least a couple of days. But maybe you exaggerated

their severity? Not that I blame you. It's what I would do if I were trying to throw someone off my scent. A few self-inflicted wounds, and a lot of melodrama."

"Silence," Atukhos booms.

"I considered that you might be behind the killings from the very start. That you might be trying to get my help to get rid of Imhotep. But my suspicions fell to pieces when I couldn't imagine why you would even want that." I glance at Imhotep. "I left the conservatory, and I was so confused. But then…" My smile is private. "I think what I needed was a new perspective on what it is like to be in love with someone, and to learn that they are with someone else. Because that's what this was all about."

Atukhos's dark eyes are fixed on me, burning with rage.

"Do share," Imhotep says, curious.

"Of course. Atukhos and Li Xiu were lovers for a long, long time. Or at least, for what Atukhos considered a long time. Li Xiu, though, is much older than all of us, and has always been capricious. She tires quickly, doesn't she?" I may be responding to Imhotep's instruction, but it's Atukhos I'm looking at. "In her defense, she never makes promises. When she and I were lovers, she never once told me that she'd stand by me forever. She simply wanted to *be* together. When she no longer did, she moved on to new adventures. Like you, Atukhos. Or Grigori—poor, unfortunate Grigori. She didn't even *remember* being with him. And now Imhotep. That's why you wanted us dead, isn't it? If Karna had been present, you would have targeted him, too. Because you convinced yourself that everyone Li Xiu had ever loved was the competition, and that if you eliminated us, she would return to you." I feel myself soften with pity that Atukhos doesn't deserve. "It's terrifying, isn't it? The prospect of eternity without the person you love most of all. The jealousy that comes with picturing them with others. I've had a taste of it recently. I must admit that the pain of it is indescribable."

Imhotep nods. “Ah. This does come together beautifully. Let me guess—Atukhos killed Grigori, but tried to frame Viktor for it, hoping that Wenceslaus would eliminate you and save him from the pain of having to kill you himself.”

“Yes. But Wenceslaus wasn’t quite as impulsive as Atukhos had hoped. He made a scene, but that was it. So Atukhos sent a revenant to attack me, and made me believe that he was sent by Wenceslaus. I’m sure that in Atukhos’s ideal scenario, the revenant would have succeeded in his mission. But if he didn’t, I’d have gone to Wenceslaus, and we’d have been at war. That would have allowed him to get rid of me. As for Wenceslaus, I doubt Atukhos wanted to kill him. But he started to look into Grigori’s killing a little too closely, didn’t he, Atukhos? I bet you told yourself that he was a bearable sacrifice.”

“Indeed, no one ever liked Wenceslaus,” Imhotep agrees. “So Atukhos killed Grigori, then Wenceslaus, then beat himself up a little, tried to pin it on me, and recruited you to help him get rid of me.”

“It’s nothing personal,” I say. “He would have killed me, after.”

“Then a good portion of Li Xiu’s lovers would have been gone. Atukhos would have passed it off to Li Xiu as a simple matter of elders squabbling and killing each other, he’d have pretended not to have had anything to do with it, and…What, Atukhos? Would you have hunted down the other elders? What about Li Xiu’s other lovers?”

“I suspect we’ll find that some of them have already conveniently disappeared.”

“Of course. But what puzzles me is, do you really think Li Xiu would come back to you, then? Do you really believe that someone like Li Xiu could be coerced into something?”

Atukhos, red with anger, keeps silent.

So I answer for him. “He hoped, I’m sure. But it was a poorly thought-out plan, born of misery and desperation. Too many contingencies, too many things that went wrong. For instance, he

wanted me to believe that Li Xiu was dead because he couldn't feel her. But that was an easy lie to verify, because you, Imhotep, have exchanged blood with her, too, and much more recently. You could track her, too."

"But Atukhos counted on you believing him without coming to me. He counted on me being unable to trace Li Xiu if he managed to keep her unconscious while she was imprisoned." Imhotep huffs. "What I don't understand is how he managed to overpower Li Xiu."

"She trusted him," I say, repeating Atukhos's own words. "It was that simple. Wasn't it, Atukhos?"

"*Silence*," Atukhos repeats. He lifts his sword arm, looking between Imhotep and me, as if to make up his mind whom to attack first. "If you think you can win in a fight against me, even the two of you together, you are deluded."

"I think we can," I say calmly. "Or we *could*. But we won't. Someone else gets to claim that right."

"No one is going to—"

How poetic, that a blade spears through Atukhos's belly in that very moment. All the more so because I recognize the weapon to be one of his own.

"Perfect timing," Imhotep murmurs. His smile is sharp and cruel, as though it brings him great joy to know that Atukhos is dying; even more so that, with the few seconds left of his life, he chooses to turn around and face the person who inflicted his last wound.

Li Xiu is injured, bleeding, and obviously groggy from the drugs Atukhos administered to her. Still, she stands straight and proud as Atukhos collapses on his own blade, eyes unseeing, wine-colored blood spurting from his mouth.

"Pitiful," she mutters.

Behind her, Roman hovers, ready to catch her should she lose her balance. Imhotep may have used his blood bind with Li Xiu to track her down, but Roman was the one who retrieved her from Atukhos's residence while we distracted him with the pretense of a council.

Judging by the way Roman won't take his eyes off Li Xiu, he is going full healthcare professional on her.

It's cute.

Atukhos's body convulses once, twice, as choked noises rattle out of his throat. A red puddle spills underneath him. He reaches toward Li Xiu, perhaps beseeching one last touch of his beloved, for whom he schemed and plotted and slayed, without whom existence was no longer worthy of being pursued.

She kicks his hand. Then, for good measure, she kicks his rib cage, too.

His heart ceases to beat.

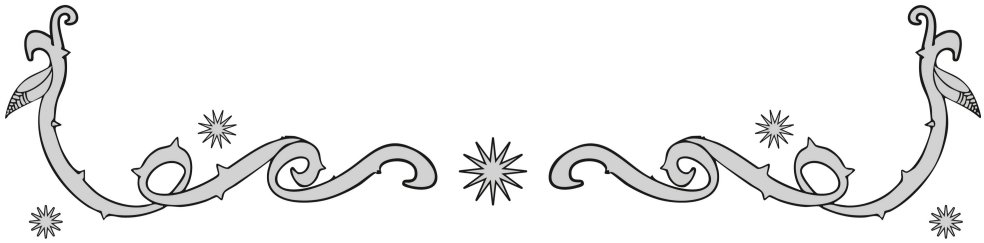
Li Xiu takes a step back and sags against Roman, who is there to support her. She looks first at Imhotep, then at me.

"Guess what, Lilit?"

"What?"

She grins at me. "I met your boyfriend, and I really like him. The four of us should go on a double date."

CHAPTER 16



IN THE FOLLOWING FEW HOURS, SOMETHING HIGHLY PERPLEXING happens: Despite Roman's ignorance of revenant physiology, and despite Li Xiu's lack of regard for mortals, he somehow becomes her primary care physician.

Knowing Roman, I shouldn't be surprised that he insists on making sure she's in recovery before leaving her in Imhotep's hands. What shocks me is that Li Xiu allows it—no, she welcomes it. She lets a mortal tend to her wounds, takes the drugs he administers to her, and even asks for his advice on the best rest protocols for the coming days.

Imhotep and I exchange a puzzled glance, but we're too relieved that she's taking her health seriously and too afraid that she'll change her mind to say anything out loud.

It's not until much later that we return to Roman's home, exhausted, hungry, and once again covered in blood. I have no idea what he's thinking: His mind has been leakproof since yesterday, and there is very little conversation between us. He showers while I have a lengthy call with Viktor to update him on the latest carnage and the lovely power vacuums that are likely to destabilize two major bloodlines for decades to come. Then, while it's my turn in the bathroom, Roman insists on making us dinner. Ten minutes later, I

pad downstairs wearing yet another oversize robe, except that this one smells pleasantly, heartbreakingly of Roman.

I don't immediately join him in the kitchen. Instead, I have to take a few minutes to sit on his couch—a nice place to despair, I have to admit—and process the idea that at any point in the next six months this very scent, my favorite scent in all of time and all of space, will cease to exist.

I take deep breaths, trying to calm my spiraling thoughts. Slowly, I manage to center myself into a semblance of composure—at least until my gaze falls on the closed envelope on the coffee table. It is, very obviously, a hospital bill.

In the last twenty-four hours, I've had to deal with a lot of emergencies. For better or worse, it meant having the privilege of pretending that Roman's illness is not the largest threat looming on the horizon. No more, though.

"Hey," Roman says, walking into the room. "Dinner's ready. Want to eat in the kitchen, or should we…" He notices what I'm staring at and trails off. The problem is I can't make myself look away. Not even after a low, muffled "*Shit*," some shuffling, and the sinking of the cushion next to mine under his weight.

"Hey." Roman's arm curls around my shoulders, pulling me into him. He speaks in soft tones, against my hair. "It's okay. I promise, Lilit. It's going to be okay."

He is trying to reassure me. I am falling apart because he's about to die, and *he* is reassuring *me*.

At once, I can no longer bear it. "Fuck this," I say. Low. Explosive.

"What?"

I straighten my spine and force myself to look at Roman. "I said, 'fuck this.' " He blinks in confusion, so I continue. "Listen, the other night…I'm sorry. I completely overreacted when I discovered that you…But it doesn't matter. How I found out, or what you hid, or what *I* hid, or what you *choose* to do with the time you have left.

What matters is that I am going to be here. And I am going to take care of you."

Roman is already shaking his head. "Lilit."

"Yes," I say firmly. Gently. My anger has drained, leaving room for determination. "I will."

"Lilit, you can't. You don't have time for this."

"Time?" I picture the vast expanse of eternity without him. If all I get is six months, then so be it. I won't leave his side for a single minute. "I have *nothing* but time, Roman."

"When? In between fending off people who are trying to kill you and making sure that your people don't go ham on mortals?"

I wince. "Okay, the past two days are not a representative sample of my usual workload."

"Maybe they aren't, but you're still…You're still *you*, Lilit. What stopped me from issuing ultimatums and making demands on you in the past is still true. Even before understanding what you were, I knew you were larger-than-life. You were fearless and perfect, and you clearly didn't care to be trapped. I never wanted to hold you back."

"Hold me back?"

"You are…" He halts, as if stumped for words. Combs my hair back from my forehead. "You are the most extraordinary creature. In all ways. I am…You know, I didn't plan on your finding out. But now I'm glad this happened. Because now I can tell you that I feel honored and humbled that I was able to have you for as long as I could. I may have wanted more than you were willing to give, but I never meant to ask for it, and—"

"Oh, god—*hush*." With an easy push, perhaps too forceful, I straddle his legs. I lean over him, pinning him to the back of the couch with a hand over his wrist.

"Lilit—"

"No. Just…shut up for a minute."

In the soft yellow light, his eyes are wide and his lips parted. His chest remains motionless, as though he doesn't dare to breathe.

"This is bullshit. All of this—it's bullshit, and it's my fault. Because I haven't needed to be honest with someone I loved as much as I love you in…ever. It has *never* happened. Now, you think that *I'm* extraordinary because my stupid cells don't grow old, but that's not true. *You* are special, Roman. *You* are one in a million—and I mean that as close to literally as possible. There have been so many, and no one was ever like you. You are the only one who asks me to be nothing but what I have always been. The only one who doesn't flinch when faced with death. The only one who has no interest in owning me, even though I've been yours from the start. The only one who feels like home, in a world where my home disappeared a long time ago. I just…" I know my eyes are welling with tears. It's a long-forgotten, unfamiliar feeling, and I cannot make myself fight it. "I don't think the world should be without you."

"The world will be fine."

"I don't think *I* should be without you."

His smile is small, and sad. "Now, that's another matter altogether."

I grit my teeth. "Listen, I won't push you to do anything you don't want. I will not corner you into a life you despise. But please, will you help me *understand* why you don't want to be a revenant? Is becoming one of us so objectionable to you?" My voice breaks, and I turn my head away. Then I feel his fingers on my chin, angling my face to meet his eyes.

"It has nothing to do with that. It's…I'm sorry. I can't explain it, Lilit."

My muscles slump at the rejection. I meant what I said—I'll stand by him no matter what, and no matter how long we have. But I need a moment to collect myself, and make to move off him.

Roman stops me with a hand on my waist. "I can't explain it," he repeats. "But maybe I can show you?"

It's a testament to how distraught I am that I don't immediately understand what he's offering. "You mean…?"

"I do." An invitation for me to look into his thoughts.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

I brush my mind against his, at first tentative, just a skim, a shallow dip. He nods like he doesn't mind, like he wants more, and then…I don't even need to stretch very far. His heart seems to reach out for me, pull me in, and swallow me whole, and a moment later, I'm there, dropped inside, in the midst of his inner life.

I heard him think it, before, in jagged fragments—the desperation of his love, the agony of uncertainty, the intensity of his yearning. Now I *feel* it. The weight of it all presses against every inch of my skin, a warm, thick blanket rescuing me from the chill of the night. I hang there, suspended in the depths of his emotions, and it all crashes into me.

Confusion the first time he saw me: *Beautiful, unshakable. Has there ever been someone like her? Have I ever wanted like this?* Longing through my absences, where *every day is like a fucking year*. The temptation to ask for more, quickly subdued by his fear of losing what little access to me he had. Brief, half-hearted attempts at meeting other women—*not her not her not her not her not her*—and the unabashed joy he could only find by my side. There is love for my body, my smiles, my scent, for the little pieces of myself I shared through the years, all neatly categorized and safe-kept as avidly as crown jewels; admiration for the steel core of my will; loneliness and happiness, alternating in whiplash-inducing swerves; his first thought when he found out that I was a revenant: *Maybe it's good, that I'm going to get sick and die, if I couldn't have grown old with her, anyway.* Then, after my first offer to bring him through the crossing, *What if she gets tired of me? What if I lose her again? What if I have to do without her, and this time it's forever?*

All throughout, at the center of his every thought, is *me*. I see myself, reflected through his eyes and through his love, and I am speechless to discover that the Lilit he adores is surprisingly similar to the person I know myself to be.

Roman is far from the first mortal to become infatuated with me. What sets him apart from the others is the fact I couldn't help returning his feelings. Before this moment, though, I wouldn't have been able to say why. With his mind bared to me, I realize that I am seen by him. I am *known*. Over the last decade, I have somehow been learned and memorized and understood.

I'm deep inside Roman's mind, and yet, I'm the one left vulnerable and exposed.

"Is *this* why you don't want me to make you a revenant?" I hear the tears in my voice before I realize that wet trails are already streaking my cheeks. "Because you think that I'll tire of you? *That* is the reason?"

A catch in his throat. Yet, his response is even-keeled. "I don't get to see into your head, Lilit."

"No. Not yet." I straighten, and wipe my cheeks with the back of my hands. "You will. If you want to, you *will*. But for now, you'll have to believe me when I tell you that I love you. You will have to trust me when I say that in the past ten years, every moment spent apart was as crushing to me as it was to you. That I tried to make myself leave you alone, for your own good, and you were witness to how abjectly I failed. That while I cannot promise you that I will be with you for eternity, no more than you can promise me your feelings won't change in fifty, or two hundred, or five thousand years, I just… I cannot picture not wanting you by my side. Not ever."

He stays silent after that. Except that I can hear his every thought like they're being hurled at me. *I love you,* they say. *I want you. I will do anything you ask. Anything you need, and things you don't need. I am yours to do with what you like. I—*

“Roman,” I say, looking down at him with wet laughter. “You are projecting.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes.”

“Good. I hope you can hear me loud and clear.”

When he pulls me down to him, our kiss is bruising, wild, different, not just because everything is out in the open. His blood is inside me, fresh, rich, and I feel every sensation of his as if it were mine.

It’s almost too good. I always enjoyed giving him pleasure, watching him flush to his hairline, putting my mouth around him just to see him throw back his head and praise a god who’s been alive fewer years than I. This, though, overwhelms me. The shudders traveling down his spine are like electricity to my body. I know when to stop, when to resume, and don’t let go until his fists grip the cushions and he is thrashing over the sofa.

With my thumb on the corner of his lips, I pry his jaw open and lean forward to spit in his mouth. A misstep, perhaps. I feel his vision blur, his pleasure crest, the desperate scramble to stave off his orgasm. Then, once he’s no longer in danger of coming, he swallows, and his pupils are wide and mirror bright.

I tear off his clothes and take him inside me, savoring his size and his eagerness, giving myself no time to adjust before I start moving atop him. He parts the sides of my robe and looks up at me, mesmerized and already breathless. “You’re stronger than I am,” he says between rugged pants.

“You said it didn’t bother you.”

“It doesn’t bother me.”

I can feel the truth of it in his arousal. His erection, which twitches inside me. It makes me happy, and I laugh, speeding up my movements as he bucks up inside me.

“A few years ago, you left a bruise on me.”

“I can be more careful—”

"And it was the hottest thing to ever happen to me."

I stop, taken aback.

"I kept looking at it. And thinking of you. It was the first time I had something of you for myself, even after you were gone." He sits up straighter. His abs, already sweaty, slide against my clit. I moan, and his mouth twitches against mine in a small smile. "I want more."

I love him. I *adore* him. "How much more?" I ask between breathless laughter. The rhythm is now his to set. He has taken over, and I'm free to…

"Do your worst," he pleads.

I mark him all over, leaving no doubt that he is mine. When I feel too close to the brink of coming, I glance down at the vein that pulses at the base of his neck.

"Do you…?" I ask.

His eyes move over my face, "Yes," he says. What he thinks, though, is, *Please. I beg you. I love you and I want your teeth deep inside me. I want my blood to be inside you, always. I want scars and pain and mottled flesh.*

I come with the taste of his blood in my mouth, and it's so intense I forget both our names for a little while and have to relearn how to tell us apart.

EPILOGUE

Ten years later

THEY SAY THAT DOCTORS MAKE THE VERY WORST PATIENTS, BUT I never found it to be true. The opposite, really: It's almost uncanny how resilient Roman has been when faced with the difficulties of transitioning into revenant life.

The crossing is challenging and physically taxing, and while I forewarned Roman, I still expected that the magnitude of it would cause him anger, resentment, and a lot of bitching. I loudly predicted—Viktor can confirm this—that Roman would hate feeling constrained, and that he would choose to disregard the limits of his new body over and over, driving me up the wall; then, one day, he'd get himself injured (severely, but not *too* severely; I wouldn't allow it, of course) and at last, he'd learn that he couldn't bring to immortality the same kind of grinding attitude he'd reserved for medicine, or running, or any other hobby he'd pursued throughout his life.

I looked forward to that breaking point. In fact, I had my reaction all planned out: I would sit at Roman's bedside, take his trembling hand between both of mine, and say in my most loving and accepting tone, "Time to calm the fuck down, wouldn't you agree?"

I was certain. I was on standby. I was ready. After all, that was exactly how it had gone for Vero and for every other revenant I'd made.

But Roman, of course, was too steady and even-keeled to do anything remotely harebrained. Perhaps because of his training, he knew full well that impatience would lead to setbacks, and that setbacks could have tragic effects on his recovery. So he channeled all his energy into getting better as soon as possible. It was, frankly, annoying, how mindful he was about the whole thing. He applied himself and figured out the right foods, the right blood feeding schedule, the right amounts of exercise and rest. Early on, he started observing patterns and how different elements of his convalescence seemed to interact. *No carbohydrate-heavy dinners before bed,* he told me after he slept for forty hours straight without even twitching. *Nightshade family vegetables might not be for me,* he said, straightening from emptying his stomach into the trash can with the aplomb of a minor monarch. *Not yet,* he decided, about two years after his crossing, when exposing the backs of his hands to the early-morning sun led to third-degree burns. (That one he didn't bother to say out loud.)

From the get-go, he asked a lot of questions about the biology of revenants. *How long till you were able to be outside? Did you find that you were bothered by specific scents? In your experience, does physical proximity to one's maker alleviate the symptoms of the transition?*

I had no clue, and little recent experience. My own crossing had been too long ago, and I'd had little interest in creating new revenants for centuries. When my replies were unsatisfying, he kissed my forehead and asked me for Viktor's and Vero's numbers. When they didn't have much insight to share, either, he started interviewing any revenant who would speak to him.

It was, heartwarmingly, all of them. Every single individual who was approached by Dr. Roman Martin sat down to be interviewed. Perhaps it had something to do with that circulating rumor, the one implying that whoever dared to refuse him would incur the wrath of Lilit of Nineveh. Perhaps it didn't. Impossible to say.

So Roman began collecting data on revenants of our bloodline. Then, on Imhotep's and on Li Xiu's. Then Aapo and Karna agreed to participate, too, and *then*, once the sample was large enough that patterns could be observed and conclusions benefitting the whole species could be drawn, every elder decided to participate. (Some took longer than others to reach that point; it was said that, after one or two friendly conversations with Lilit of Nineveh, they always came around.)

That's when the biological samples started. Blood and saliva and all sorts of DNA stuff. There were cell cultures, and radiographs, and MRIs. Because I was growing tired of finding vials in my fridge, I made the executive decision that Roman and I would start celebrating our anniversary, and that to commemorate the fifth year of his crossing, I would outfit our six-hundred-year-old Irish castle with a lab.

When I showed it to him, he was so intensely happy I was afraid his still ailing constitution might not bear it.

A couple of years later, there were guidelines. Speculations. Prognoses. Recommendations. Position papers. There were revenants being trained as research assistants, experiments that required thirty-six-hour monitoring, and that beautiful spark in Roman's eyes whenever he was on the verge of discovering something new. I would leave him for brief periods to see to important matters, and return to find him asleep on a workbench, a smear of ink on his log journal, the sentence he'd been writing dropped in the middle.

At the same time, he tried to stay abreast of new medical discoveries in the mortal world. "I don't think you need to keep up with your continuing education credits," I tried to point out. But he intended to start practicing once more, as soon as his body was strong enough.

"That might take fifty to one hundred years, Roman."

"I know. Healthcare will be a whole new beast by then. I figure that, if I advance with the field, it won't be too hard to catch up."

I really, really, *really* liked him.

—

"IT'S SO WEIRD WHEN YOU DO THAT," VERO TELLS ME ONE morning after I push a sweaty strand of hair away from her cheek. Viktor is off sparring with Pierre, so I'm keeping an eye on her. And on her tumultuous stomach problems.

(As a mortal, her diet was primarily plant-based; Roman recently found a high positive correlation between vegetarian habits and gastrointestinal issues following the crossing.)

"When I do what?" I ask, pressing my cool palm to her forehead.

"I don't know. When you take care of me like I'm a child who needs to be coddled. The whole nurturing, parental thing is weird when you're so much younger than me."

"I'm *not* younger than you."

"I know, but your body is, like, twenty."

"Twenty-year-olds can be nurturing. Many women are mothers by that age. Many women are mothers several times over."

"Oh, *god*."

"Vero, I think you simply feel uncomfortable with the idea of caretaking. Which I understand, given your background and the contradictions of modern society. But collectivism and independence don't need to be—"

"Can you not do the philosophy thing while I'm puking my guts out?" she asks before lurching back toward the toilet bowl.

"Of course. I shall wait until the next heave is done."

"I was thinking," she says after ten solid minutes of starfishing on the tiled floor, "about Roman."

"Ah, yes. Good thought."

"You know what's funny about that guy?"

"Do tell."

"If we'd stayed mortals, he and I would never have exchanged a single word."

"Because by the time Viktor made you, Roman had only just gone through puberty, and you were a fully grown adult?"

"That, too. But also, we have next to nothing in common, personality wise."

"Are you sure?"

"*So* sure. He would have found me shady and weird—rightfully so—and I would have found him insufferable. I mean…He can do *everything*."

"It appears that he can, yes."

"He's really nice about it, too?"

"I know."

Vero lifts her head with what looks like immense effort. "Last week, I saw him talking with Viktor in the blue parlor. They were *laughing*."

I hum. "Are you sure Viktor was laughing and not just grimacing in pain because he caught someone bringing food inside the library?"

"Yes."

"Interesting."

"All I'm saying is: Roman is great. Which is kind of an asshole move on his part."

"I concur."

"The other day I heard him tell Arlo that he didn't even use to be a researcher. He was a *physician*. He's just learning all this research shit as he goes."

"Enraging," I agree. Roman did, as a matter of fact, do some research in college and med school, but I don't think Vero wants me to point that out.

"Anyway. While he saves revenant society one microscope slide at a time, I've been on an oil painting kick."

"Viktor showed me. I *love* the lighting in the one with the kiwis. So unique."

"Oh, thank you. I was experimenting. I'm glad you liked it."

"You know, our bloodline has always been one for artists. Not much science to go about. Roman is going to be the black sheep. Might even get mercilessly bullied," I exaggerate.

"Yeah?" She sounds hopeful. "I cannot wait to steal his lunch money."

"Whose lunch money?" Viktor asks from the bathroom door. He looks tired and sweaty, but restrainedly happy. To be back within touching range of Vero, I assume.

"Vero plans on terrorizing Roman."

"Does she?"

"Indeed."

"Interesting. Because I can read Veronica's mind, and in there Roman is very much her 'fave.' "

"Oh, shut up. I haven't used that word since I was fifteen—Jesus Christ." She nearly topples over in an attempt to get to her feet. I make to help her, but Viktor stops me.

"Let her," he tells me in a language we spoke in North Africa at the dawn of the previous millennium. Undoubtedly because he doesn't want Vero to hear the fondness in his tone as he adds, "She likes to do it on her own. She's so stubborn."

Still on the floor, I watch them walk down the hallway, Vero wobbling, Viktor hovering patiently nearby in case of a fall. When they are almost at the end, she reaches for him, and he quietly carries her the rest of the way.

—

THERE IS A BIT OF A RUNNING GAG GOING AROUND REVENANT circles that, when it comes to Roman Martin, people should be scared of me. That the "protector of mortals" is putting all her might

behind her new lover—who's not even mortal, will you look at that? That when it comes to this fledgling, she is fearsome, and unforgiving, and perhaps unstable.

Roman thinks it's ridiculous. I, however, think about the day of the ritual. A few minutes before we started. When he said, "Lilit?"

"Hmm?"

"If it doesn't work out…"

"It will," I promised.

"I think it will, too." His eyes were soft. "I think you are too good at getting what you want to let this go any other way. But if it doesn't…Remember that I love you, and that the happiest moments of my life were the ones when you loved me back."

Before then, I thought I understood what it meant—to need. I realize now that I had no idea.

Another word redefined for me by Roman.

—

"DO YOU THINK THEY ARE COMPETITIVE ABOUT IT?" I ASK VIKTOR as we observe Roman and Vero walk through the grounds. We are rapidly approaching twilight. It's only in the last few months that Roman has built up some tolerance to the sun, but that's limited to the last few moments of daylight.

"About what?" Viktor asks.

"About how long they can be in the sun."

"Roman? No. Veronica? Absolutely."

Vero must have picked up Viktor's thoughts, because she flips us off. A few minutes later, when they join us, Roman's skin is flushed pink, but unmarred.

Good? I think.

I feel his satisfaction thrum through me.

Roman and I drink from each other so often I struggle to remember a time when we weren't tied together. He was never big

on conversation, and now that we can slip in and out of each other's minds so easily, we can go days without talking out loud.

There was a time when I thought he'd have problems adjusting to consuming blood. Fledglings need nourishment, and they *crave* blood. However, for some of them, it can be difficult to push past the mental block.

"Do you think you will be able to do it?" I asked him in the days leading up to the ritual, wanting to make sure that he was prepared.

He seemed to think about it for a long while. "The idea of swallowing another person's blood disgusts me," he said, and my stomach sank.

"I get it," I replied, quick but calm. "It's a common reaction. I do think that you will undergo biological changes that might…What?" I asked, noticing the twitch of his lips.

"You didn't let me finish. The idea of swallowing *another* person's blood disgusts me. But when I think about drinking yours, I find nothing repulsive about it. I could probably do it now."

I did not put that to the test. But after the crossing, he took to the whole thing very, very enthusiastically. It's been pleasant, having him inside my head. Cozy.

Tired, I feel him thinking at me as we step inside the castle. *But hey, three whole minutes of UV rays. Doing amazing.*

You better be saying that unironically.

Absolutely. I feel prouder than when I graduated med school. More exhausted, too.

Want to go to sleep?

He switches to spoken language. "No." He grins. "Let's watch a movie. One of those."

I groan. Not *those*.

Thirty minutes later, I watch a werewolf kill a vampire while Roman breathes softly, head in my lap. I stroke his hair and allow myself a smile.

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