

Red Sky at Morning

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Red Sky at Morning

by [petrodactyl352](#)

Summary

Ever since he was a boy, all Adrian has ever wanted is to follow in his father's footsteps, to take to the seas and sail at no one's command but his own. And ever since he found out what happened to his father, all he has ever wanted is revenge. So when he finally gets a chance at both, he feels that perhaps fate and luck are on his side after all.

But little does he know that secrets and mysteries shroud the sea that he has loved for so long, secrets about his father and his past. Secrets that make the thin ice beneath his feet crack, threatening to send him into the depths, to drown among the forgotten remains of a shipwrecked life. Now he must choose, between the life he thought he once lived and the life that beckons him toward it.

But balanced scales are the easiest to tip, and that one choice can change everything.

Notes

merry christmas everyone. :)

many thanks to [Amiandivh](#) for the title!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Part One: Current

The waves crash against the hull and he can feel it.

Feel it through his bones and through his teeth, through his marrow and every vein in his body. He hears it too, hears the dull roar of it and the raw power that it carries in every strike. He'll be alive so many centuries he knows he'll lose count one day, but he is sure he will never meet anyone or anything stronger than the sea.

The ship lists again and he's thrown against the far wall of the cell they've put him in, his wrists chafing together painfully as his body slams into the bars; somehow they've looped silver chains around his hands, and the bars of the cell are plated with the stuff. He wonders how many royal cargoes these pirates have raided, how many royal throats they've slit and how much blue blood they've spilled, to have this much silver at their disposal.

They've filled his blood with it as well, heavy dollops of it pushed into his veins with a syringe. He's tired and starving, his energy depleting. But these people are fools if they think this can stop him, if they think this is enough to quell him for longer than a day or two. They do not know what he can do, what he has become.

They certainly have taken their due precautions, however—there's all the silver, for one thing; they've been starving him carefully, with thin, meager portions of sustenance provided to him every other day, sometimes not even that; there are crosses burned into the padlock of the cell, burning his skin if he tries to reach for it. They've prepared to hold him here, that much is certain.

But breaking free will be child's play. He merely has to wait for the opportune moment to strike.

Every day at exactly noon a man comes down into the brig, with a glass tube filled with thick liquid silver that he pushes into his veins, dulling his senses and sending him under a temporary haze. He is the only person that he sees, the only real human contact he's had since they captured him, the only human contact he has as the minutes bleed into hours, which have bled into days, which he knows will bleed into weeks soon.

It has been long enough. They know what he is, but they don't know what he can do. They intend to sell him, he knows. Sell his teeth, his hair, his skin and his blood. Send them to alchemists, black magicians, men of the church who dabble in satanism and the occult behind the back of their bishops.

And they will dock soon. He can feel the currents shifting, giving way, the waves growing and lessening the way it does when there is land nearby. He knows that he cannot let them reach land.

He hears footsteps descending the steps and goes still, closing his bruised eyes. The smell of silver is heavy in the air, heavy on his skin. It will be even heavier in his blood, but he does

not intend to allow it to get there. Not today, and never again. This man will be the first to die.

He hears him reach the cell, crouching next to the bars, hears the thick clink of glass filled with liquid. He makes no move to throw the man off when he takes his arm, jamming the needle forcefully into his already sore and bruised skin, healed over poorly from the many previous jabs with it and the lack of blood to heal. The man moves to press down on the plunger.

He opens his eyes.

The man lets out a strangled cry as he brings his chained hands up, yanking them apart. The chain loosens, and he reaches out faster than the eye can follow, bringing his hands behind the man's neck through the bars and pulling him forward, the chains digging into his skin.

The man's head slams into the bars and he loses consciousness before he can make a sound. He withdraws, dislodging the needle with a careless flick of his arm, then pulls the man closer, feeling his teeth aching, his empty veins contracting, howling for blood. Finally, after weeks, he will have his strength back.

His fangs sink into the man's neck and his eyes snap open, another gurgling shout escaping his lips. It should be clean, should be perfunctory almost, taking his blood. But the hunger is too powerful, the darkness in his chest writhing with pleasure and delight as he swallows mouthful after mouthful of it, none of it seeming like it will be enough.

He sees his vision go crimson, and then he surrenders beneath the vast force of the primal creature he's become, his teeth sinking in deeper. The man inhales to cry out, but it cuts off into a choked wheeze as he grabs the man's hair, tilting his head and tearing his throat out with one single jerk of his head.

The man is dead before all the breath can rush out of his lungs, and fresh blood gushes from the ragged, weeping wound in his neck. He bites again and again, feeling the warm red essence of the man's life dripping down his face, coating his hands, filling his veins and running over the floorboards, dark and viscous.

He feels his strength and power returning with each swallow, his fingers slipping on the man's blood-slicked skin as he drinks. The silver that weighs his blood down begins to thin and dilute, its effect on him weakening until it is nothing but a faint heaviness in his limbs. He has been starving and weakened for so long now that he doubts this man's lifeblood will give him everything he once had, but it will have to do for now.

Once there is nothing left to take and the man is but a husk of skin and bone he stands, his eyes opening as he feels the whites of them bleed through, his power thrumming to life beneath his skin. He lifts his hands, gazing calculatngly at the chains that hardly pain him now. He pulls his wrists apart gently and the chain snaps as if it is made of paper, slithering to the floor where they rest with a soft clink.

He walks to the bars, grasping two of them and forcing them apart. He feels the silver coating them sizzle against his palms but it causes the barest of stings on his skin now; he

bends the bars and they come apart with a low groan, breaking apart in his grip. He steps out of the cell, gazing back but once to look at it, the rivers of blood running down the floor and the tightly covered porthole, the dead man lying limp at the bars and the glass tube of silver rolling across the floor as the ship sways.

He turns and makes his way out of the brig, ascending the steps and stopping at the very last one, breathing deeply; it has been long, too long, since he has felt the moonlight on his skin, felt the salty sea breeze on his face. It makes everything seem clearer suddenly, makes some deep-rooted instinct that has lived inside him since he was a man rear its head and roar its victory.

The woman standing guard is next. She doesn't even have time to scream before he tears her neck open with his teeth, spilling her throat onto the decks below their feet. Her eyes roll up into her head as her blood coats his hands, and her limp body falls forward into his arms.

He can hear the rest of the crew, hear their heartbeats and their breath as they stand at the rail for the watch. He can hear the captain in his cabin, hear his even breathing. They are not lucky tonight. But the ones who are asleep will wake up the next day at dawn to a new morning, a different morning. A red morning.

He looks down at the woman's body in his arms, her blood running steadily over his clothes. It would be a shame to waste it all, he thinks, and something almost like a smile pulls at his lips. His fingers tighten around her, weighted down with blood and life, life that is rapidly fading.

Once her body is little more than a shell he leans down, feeling her blood dripping down his chin, masking the lower half of his face and coating his hands in scarlet gloves till his elbows, black in the moonlight that filters down from the sky above. He bites again, this time gently, something meant to give and not to take. He allows the venom that runs through his teeth to trickle into her veins, filling the empty vessels. She doesn't wake, but he feels a tremor of something dark and powerful shudder through her.

He lifts his own wrist to his mouth, tearing the skin open with his teeth. Bright, ruby-red blood that shimmers beneath the moonlight as if crusted with gems runs down his forearm, the wound weeping. Already he can feel it healing, his skin knitting itself back together. Before it can fully heal over he presses his wrist to her parted lips, lips from which one last breath is escaping. He traps it, forcing her to swallow, condemning her to a life of undeath and a life that cannot even be called so. A half-life, perhaps. A damned, cursed life. But what consequence does a cursed life have when it is eternal?

Then he lowers her to the ground, straightening. She is entirely limp, and if it isn't for the venom and blood he knows flows through her veins now, he would have thought she was dead already. But she will wake. And when she does, she will be his to command. The first of his crew.

He looks up, breathing deeply, though he does not need to; it is more of a conscious, familiar gesture now, something that had once calmed him when he had drawn breath. It's clear, the sky, not a cloud in sight. The moon is but a curved slice of silver, so slender that it looks like a

rip in the endless crushed black velvet of the heavens, the curved blade of a knife insinuated between the stars.

The captain's quarters are dark, the lamps doused and the doors firmly shut. Nobody guards it—the Captain is a haughty man, and he dislikes proximity. He does not entirely trust his crew, he knows. He had seen it the very first night they had bound him and thrown him into the brig; he had refused to let any of them search him, doing it himself instead. His gaze had been shifting, suspicious.

He is not popular with them either, and they have not tried to hide it. Voices filter down sometimes to the cells, and he hears them curse his name and call him a coward, a blackguard, say that he does not honor the code and that he has no fear of the gods and no fear of the sea. Every pirate, no matter how dauntless, should fear the sea.

Perhaps he will be doing the crew a favor then, by killing him.

He wills his nails to grow, sharpening into deadly points. He slides his fingers between the doors, finding the latch. It pops open and he slips into the cabin silently, letting the door swing open behind him. He hears the Captain's breaths, even and shallow in sleep. He does not even sleep with a knife or a weapon, blissfully ignorant of his crew's mutinous countenance, and clearly arrogant.

His death will not be swift; he wants to savor this. This man had been the one to slaughter his crew, take his ship, took the stone—the source of his power—and threaten to bring him back to the one place he had sworn never to return to. He has filled his veins with silver and has starved him for days on end, has tortured him and threatened to sell him in the markets of his own home.

He should have known that his power would have attracted pirates, that word of his newfound darkness would have spread across the seas. But he had not been expecting an attack so soon, mere weeks after he had been born again. He supposes this is his lesson, one he has to learn from. This will be the last surprise, and this man will be the last greedy slaver.

He is standing above the Captain's cot, gazing down into his face. Slowly, so as not to miss a single moment of it, he drags a claw down his throat, down his chest and just below his navel. His eyes shoot open as his skin parts, sliced cleanly down the middle, blood spurting. He draws in a breath to cry out but the same blood-slicked nail that slit him up the middle swipes across his throat and he chokes instead, gargling on his own blood, his torn throat spasming.

His eyes are wide in his face, pale as death. Speckles of blood have splattered across his cheeks, and when his gaze rolls upward and lands on his attacker, his eyes widen even further, and he chokes again. Somehow despite the ragged flaps of his neck he manages to speak, blood gushing from the wound as he does.

“Y—you,” he gasps, fingers scrabbling at his ruined throat. Blood is everywhere, coating everything, but there is no hunger, not for the blood of a man who has brought him so low. His blood will be like poison in his veins. “It's... it's impossible... you were... chained with... silver...” He coughs, and blood sprays the sheets.

“You are a fool if you think your silly human tricks can work against one such as I.” He gazes down at the dying captain dispassionately, at the sight of him gargling and choking on his own blood. “And an even bigger fool for thinking you could capture me and live.”

The captain’s lips part, but all that gushes out is more blood. He gives one last choked wheeze, his dying breath rattling in his chest as he slumps backward. He relaxes slowly, his head lolling to the side, his eyes wide open and unseeing, the blood from his neck slowing to a sluggish pulse, then stopping entirely.

Carefully, he reaches into the captain’s chest, the wound he had made earlier barely holding his organs in. He removes his heart, slowly, gently. Perhaps he will adorn the bow with the heart of the man who had once captained this ship, for the gulls to peck at. Yes, that will be best.

He turns and leaves the cabin, moving away from the mutilated body in the bed and the blood on the walls. By the time the doors swing shut behind him he has almost completely forgotten about the captain, unimportant as he was—for now... now, he has a crew to make.

He inhales the scent of the sea as he stands a moment, letting the moonlight drench him and cleanse him. It feels good to be free.

He dissolves into the shadows, and leaves nothing but blood and screams in his wake as he exacts his vengeance, carefully, economically almost. The last of the crew have drawn their final breath and open their eyes just as the sun begins to rise, and the first red rays of dawn bleed into the sky.

His fingers close convulsively around the smooth cool handle of the knife as he jerks upright, a wordless cry scraping past his throat as he swings blindly at an attacker who isn’t there. His breath saws in and out of his lungs, dragging and heavy, and his eyes dart around wildly, expecting to see something, anything—

The world rushes into place around him and his fingers loosen on the knife as his mind catches up with his body. He’s in his room, on his bed, the curtains swaying gently with the breeze cascading off the sea, the salt-sand smell of it filling the room. He breathes it in deeply, feeling his shoulders loosen as he shuts his eyes.

The knife falls onto the sheets and he puts his head in his hands, rubbing at his temples with the tips of his fingers. Every night these dreams fill his head, flashes so vivid that when he wakes he doesn’t know where he is, *who* he is. He can never remember the dreams, only bits and pieces—the sizzle of burning skin, lines of fiery pain at his wrists, an ache in his teeth that makes his whole body shudder, the taste of blood in his mouth, coating his throat.

He twists away from it, cringing away from the memories, the visions, whatever they are. His shaking fingers scoop the knife up again as he lies back down, feeling sweat sticking his hair to his nape, his forehead. He tries to get his breathing to slow and his heart to even, but he can still feel the nightmare lingering at the edge of his consciousness, the sweet stench of old memories that aren’t his own.

They always get worse just before he sets sail, like clockwork. As if something in his blood twists and digs into him, trying to keep him away from the sea, a rope tied beneath his ribs that's tethered to something, and it's pulling him—but whether it's pulling him towards or away from it he doesn't know.

Half an hour of gazing at the shifting shadows on the ceiling later he realizes that sleep will continue to elude him. He sits up, sliding his knife underneath his pillow again as he swings his legs of bed, standing. He moves to the window, twitching the rippling curtain aside and gazing out at the moonlight-drenched town outside.

It's pretty, here—too pretty sometimes. Quaint, he supposes, with narrow cobbled roads bracketed by little houses that are stacked and sandwiched together, painted bright blues and greens and grays. The color of the sea that crashes against the shore of the town, the color of the heart of this place.

He can see the shore from here, see the way the waves writhe and curl in on themselves, hypnotized to sway and dance below the moon that pours her light down from the starry heavens. Tomorrow he has to take to those waters, the first time he will be at the helm, the first time he will claim his birthright and sail at no one's command but his own.

He gazes out over the churning waves, the endless stretch of the ocean towards the horizon, the mist-shrouded fringes of territory he wants to chart himself, lands no human eyes have ever seen. He wants that, wants to conquer the sea as his father had once conquered it—or so he's been told. He never knew his father.

Something in his chest catches at the sight of that misty horizon, something about the cold loneliness of it that seems to cry out to him, digging its talons into his heart. He can't help but think that there's something out there, lying in wait for him to walk between its teeth and into its maw, though what it is, a force good or bad, or whether he wants to know what it is, he cannot tell.

He swallows, feeling uneasy suddenly, the sea suddenly seeming sinister, off-kilter. The waves seem to curl into demented smiles, the wind howling and shrieking with manic laughter, the tides curving as if to beckon him towards a trap it knows he will fall into.

Abruptly he turns and moves back towards his bed, feeling cold. He turns his back to the window as he attempts to court sleep once more, and when he finally succeeds, his fingers have wrapped fully around the knife beneath his pillow, the hilt colder against his skin than it should be.

“It's a fine day, isn't it?”

The sun beams brilliantly down from the crisp blue sky, cloudless and bright. The wind is brisk but not biting, and the waves are strong but not forceful. It's ideal for sailing; the weather has attracted dozens of people to the docks, and the wide concave crescent of the shore is dotted with ships, the horizon littered with several more.

The unease he had felt the previous night has faded almost entirely from his mind, and he remembers nothing of the dream, just as he never does. He's grown so used to stowing the worry away that he does it almost unconsciously, turning away from all the unanswered questions and the lingering feeling that he is seeing this place for the last time.

"What?" He turns toward the man beside him, who has his thumbs hooked into his braces, puffing on a wide, short pipe.

"I said it's a fine day," the man repeats, nodding toward the shore. "You're a lucky man, Captain. Not everyone starts their maiden voyage on days as crisp as this. The gods must be pleased, or have you in their favor."

"There is only one God," is all he says in reply, eyes tracking the bright blue waves as they roll over the horizon, "and He favors no one."

The man only laughs. "Just you wait till you get home, Captain Tepeş," he says. "You won't believe that anymore."

He turns to the man, whether to ask him what he means or whether to tell him that he's wrong he doesn't know—nor does he find out. Someone calls his name and he turns, a hand automatically drifting to his hip, where his sword is tucked into his belt. A tall, proud-nosed man in sweeping black priest's robes is gliding towards him, looking faintly disgusted at the prospect of being at the docks. It's admittedly not the nicest part of it, that's for certain—there are fishermen gutting their fresh catches in plain sight, and men weaving their nets, untangling the thick rope and talking loudly over the general bustle of the crowd.

"Captain Tepeş," he says, inclining his head. "The Bishop requests your presence."

"Now?" He glances back at the *Seafarer*, the ship nearly readied in the hands of his crew, the sails dropping slowly, billowing outward in the wind. He turns back to the priest and his expression doesn't change, merely one of his eyebrows lifting.

"Yes, now," he says, and there's the slightest of edges to his voice. "Is there a problem, Captain?"

It is all Adrian can do not to sneer, but he manages to nod graciously instead. "None at all," he says. "Do lead the way."

He glances back at the man he had spoken to earlier, intending to say something to him, but when he looks back the place he had been standing is empty, the sunlight arcing off the surface of the water winking at him instead. The words stutter and die at his lips, and he feels his brows draw together.

"Captain, we do not have all day," the priest's voice says testily, and he turns, startled. "What? Oh, yes—yes, I'm... I'm coming..."

He gives a little shake of his head and glances back once more where the man had been standing before turning and following the priest away from the docks. "So," he says,

attempting to sound conversational, “did the Bishop tell you of what he wishes to speak to me about?”

“I do not inquire after the private matters of the Bishop,” says the priest distantly. Adrian gives up after that; he’s never liked the priests and deacons the Bishop surrounds himself with, and they’ve never liked him in turn. They’ve always thought he was after their position and favor in the eyes of the Bishop, but Adrian had never wanted to turn to the cloth. Not forever, anyway. He’d loved the sea too much for that. And he still does.

The priest leads him—unsurprisingly—past the church, further toward the port. Adrian has never been inside the church, not once. He’s never been allowed inside, and whenever he’s tried, the priests barred the doors and told him that by order of the Bishop he wasn’t to step inside. It had grown more apparent as he got older, and the few times he had asked after the reason, the priests told him they knew nothing, and that if he wanted to know, he should ask the Bishop.

He’s done that too, on many occasions. He never got answers, and eventually he had stopped asking. But he’s never stopped wondering why.

The priest stops at the tall, lean building that sits at the very edge of the docks, one that hangs over the water. He recognizes it as the place where all the paperwork is done, all the records are kept and the charts are stored. He’s never been inside, though he passes by it every day.

“The Bishop is expecting you,” the priest says haughtily. “Second floor.”

Adrian doesn’t bother thanking him; he strides away without acknowledging him, swinging himself onto the stairs and loping up three at a time. He’s not even short of breath once he leaps onto the second floor, reaching the top step—where he freezes, arrested at the sight of the room he’s just entered.

It’s devoted entirely to maps and charts, walls papered with them and the entire western wall painted over with a massive map that stretches from the New World in the west to Japan in the east. In the very center lies the Mediterranean, the heart of the world, the center of all land in all its glory. The eastern wall is made entirely of glass, allowing him a bird’s-eye view of the sea, its endless blue waves rippling and churning below the sun.

The Bishop is standing by the window, his back to Adrian. His arms are looped behind his back as he gazes out over the ocean, and his expression where Adrian can see in the reflection of the glass is remote, dispassionate almost. The harsh light turns his form into a silhouette, the sunlight bracketing his tall, lean form.

“Bishop?” he ventures cautiously, fingers loosely resting on the hilt of his sword. It gives him comfort somehow, solace, as if merely knowing the blade is there is enough to reassure him. “You wished to see me?”

The Bishop turns, his expression unchanging. The light slanting in from behind him sets his face in harsh, forbidding lines, and again Adrian is hit by that uneasy feeling deep in his gut, one that whispers caution in his ear, telling him there is something wrong, that there is something that’s changed, and not for the better.

“I did,” the Bishop says, dipping his head in the slightest of nods. His face is as familiar to Adrian as his own, if not more so; this man had raised him, had found him in the burning remains of his home and had taken him in, given him a home and given him a purpose. It was him who had told Adrian about his father, how he had been the best sailor east of the New World and how he had lost his life at sea serving the church as he had all his life. And he had been the one to teach Adrian to do the same.

“I have something of an objective for you, Captain Tepeş,” he says, moving forward so that he’s standing directly in front of Adrian. “Something I need you to do for me.”

Adrian feels his brows draw together. “I set sail in an hour,” he says. “Wouldn’t an objective be... ill-advised at such short notice?”

“Oh, you will be up to this task,” says the Bishop with a faint smile that doesn’t reach his eyes. “I am sure of it. You wished to captain your own vessel, I might as well give you a purpose besides... well.” His smile turns slightly crooked. “Trade. You should be free to chart lands, pursue, obtain.”

“What do you mean?” He tries—and fails, probably—to mask the hesitation in his voice. Something about the Bishop’s knowing smile and the calculating way he’s looking at him makes him feel uncomfortable, exposed almost.

“Have you heard of the family Belmont?”

Adrian shakes his head, at a loss in the face of such a sudden, out-of-place question. “Yes, of course I have—but I fail to see what this has to do with—”

“Then you know,” the Bishop says, his ringing voice cutting through Adrian’s with ease, “that they were branded heretics by the church, excommunicated for their crimes and their dealings in black magic. And you know how they fled like cowards, taking to the seas, and... *commandeering* our vessels after we seized their property.”

“They turned to piracy,” Adrian translates. “Yes, I’ve heard.”

“Well, we were under the impression that their line had extinguished itself,” the Bishop says, turning and walking towards one of the maps nearby, mounted on an easel. It shows an intricate positioning of the Black Sea, draining into the Mediterranean. Wallachia’s port is at the center, the surrounding lands outlined clearly. “Died out somehow, ridding us of their stain rather effectively.”

Adrian’s eyes narrow. “But?”

The Bishop heaves a sigh. “But,” he says, “that is rather unfortunately untrue. It seems there is one left alive. A ship was spotted near the coast, one bearing the Belmont family crest. They got close to the port—too close. Before any action could be taken, however, they had disappeared. They went east, towards open sea.” He taps the map, at the slender channel that leads to the Mediterranean.

Adrian’s eyes never leave the map. “You want me to find them.”

“Yes,” the Bishop says. “Find them, and bring the captain back here so that we may... give him a proper farewell.” He laughs a little and Adrian feels something in his chest twist disagreeably. “No one—not even the Belmonts—can live without God. They brought this upon themselves when they decided to fly black colors on their masts. Death was always waiting on the other side.”

“I already had a charted route,” Adrian protests. “I cannot go on a wild goose chase hunting down some excommunicated pirate.” The word sounds and tastes tarnished and bitter almost in his mouth; his father had been killed by pirates, and ever since he’d found out, he’s wanted to wipe them all out. Leeches, who take what others have and have earned, godless savages. The world would be well rid of them.

“There is none more fit for the task,” says the Bishop, and yet again his smile doesn’t reach his eyes. “Will this not be fit vengeance for your father?”

Adrian clenches his jaw at the mention of his father, his fingers twitching into fists. He does want to avenge his father, and he does think that what the Belmont family did was cowardly and sacrilegious and disgusting—but something in him doesn’t feel ready just yet, to have blood on his hands.

“You would be doing this country and our church a great service,” the Bishop goes on, turning his head slightly towards Adrian, affording him a glance of his small, cold smile. “Perhaps it would help you to know that the Belmonts were allies with the filth that murdered your father and even aided in his capture...?”

Adrian feels his breath catch violently in his throat. “What?”

“Yes,” says the Bishop, clearly enjoying himself. Adrian hardly notices; everything seems to be swimming in front of his eyes, indistinct and far away. “I’m sure they all rejoiced at his death, loyal as he was to our cause—as are you.”

Adrian stares straight ahead out the window, watching the waves shimmer and dance, feeling the same slow, hot, powerful rage roll over him that he had felt when they had first told him how his father had died. He had never known his father, but he knows that he had been there for the first few years of Adrian’s life, a warm if not slightly detached presence. The sea was in his blood, the same blood that runs through Adrian’s veins. The same blood that desperately wants revenge.

“Where was the ship last seen?” he asks.

The Bishop’s frigid smile widens. “So you will bring the captain back here for the church, as soon as you can?”

If I don’t kill him first. “I will.”

“Excellent.” He sweeps towards Adrian, holding out a rolled up chart. “Take this. You will need to cross beyond the borders of the land you know, and that family has been roaming the seas for nigh on ten years. They know the seas better than you do, though you’ve studied. Maps and charts often cannot give you everything. Bring him back, alive. He must be alive. I

don't care what condition he's in as long as he draws breath. And return as swiftly as you can."

"I will," Adrian says again, stiffly, taking the charts. "I swear."

"Good," the Bishop says, and his eyes are cold and hard. Adrian stands straighter, loosing a breath. "What of his crew?"

"Slaughter them, maroon them, drown them, do what you wish with them," says the Bishop dismissively. "I want only the captain. No one else. Perhaps his First Mate as well, in case he's managed to breed more of his filthy family." He looks disgusted by the very thought, and Adrian feels inclined to agree.

"What's his name?"

The Bishop raises his eyes to Adrian's, his face hardening. "Trevor Belmont."

"I'll bring him to you," Adrian promises. "As soon as I can."

"Perhaps if you bring him here soon enough," the Bishop says, turning away, "after he is tried by the Church for his crimes, you may be the one to deliver justice."

Adrian swallows, his throat dry. "I will bear that in mind."

"Go now," says the Bishop, turning his back to Adrian, "and do not return until you find him."

Adrian turns, stalking down the steps and into the sunlight. He stops there for a moment, feeling the salty spray of the sea cut through the heat. It should smell familiar and comforting, but now—now all he can smell, hear, feel, see and taste is anger. Anger, and revenge. This is what he was born for. And he will see it done.

He strides onto the *Seafarer*, fingers tightening around the charts he's holding. He spreads them out, gazing hungrily at the lines traced there, the bearings and the latitudes and longitudes that have been plotted. He will find Trevor Belmont, and he will kill him. If it's the last thing he does.

"Weigh anchor," he calls, moving to stand at the helm. "Full canvas." His eyes fixate on the horizon, his only destination now. Nothing else matters, he thinks as the ship erupts into life around him, shouts and the sound of sails lowering, metal being scraped against metal. Nothing.

"Where to?" his first mate—a man Adrian doesn't really *know*, but was provided with for the voyage, tradition outweighing his preference to sail without one—asks, raising a brow, and Adrian grins, holding up the charts. "We have our heading," he says. "We go east until we find them, then we go wherever the sea takes us." He gazes out over the sea, feeling his heart soar—he has a purpose now, something to live for. And he won't let it go.

"Tell me," he says, turning to the man beside him, "what do you know of the family Belmont?"

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

this chapter is dedicated to [hita](#), without whom i probably wouldn't have pulled this unfinished doc out and stared at it until i forced myself to write. your comments made me *want* to write this, which is a miracle in and of itself. thank you so much. *prayer hands emoji*

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Trevor can never decide what to do when he docks.

See, on the one hand, he can't be seen as who he is—a Belmont, an excommunicated heretic, a “user of black magic” and a “practitioner of unholy dealings with the supernatural”, and to top it off, a pirate. If they catch even a glimpse of the family crest that stretches across his back, gleams on his chest and adorns every weapon he carries, he'll be spitroast in a heartbeat.

On the other hand, he *wants* to be seen.

He's aware, on some deep and forgotten level of his subconscious and wherever the fuck he's stowed away his dignity and propriety, that it's vain. He knows that it's stupid, and he knows it's probably going to get him killed. But, as he steps off the gangway and casually strolls along the docks at Dranova—another risk, docking here at the place where every piece of shit in the Black Sea manages to drift to—he can hardly bring himself to care.

But he's desperate. Now more than ever. He knows it was a stupid fucking move to go home (if he can even call Wallachia home now, after so many years; still, it's a bit of sentimentality he clings to, occasionally checking on the place and allowing his gaze to linger on it for just a little while before turning away, a bitter taste in his mouth), and an even stupider fucking move to get within ten leagues of the port. The *royal* port. Where the church prowls like a watchdog.

It had been too wild and optimistic a fantasy to hope they hadn't seen him, so he had assumed they'd seen him and promptly turned tail, heading back out towards more open sea, where he's spent most of his life up until now. He knows they'll send someone to hunt him down. They always do, drunk with their own power and their sense of righteousness and the fact that they have risen from thinking they represent God to thinking they are.

More than half his crew had bailed in the last few days, clearly not wanting to get on the church's... well, worse side. He'd taken one look at their fear-stricken, pale faces, and told them they could leave if they wanted to. Keeping them on board despite their fear and

ignoring their pleas is as good as slavery to him—and fuck, does he have some choice words to say to the church about slavery—

He tenses as he feels eyes turn to him as he walks, tracking his every move, their gazes lingering too long on the flash of gold on his chest and the crest on his back that may well be a target painted onto him, for all the good it does him. He doesn't falter, still walking with just enough purpose and arrogance that nobody will try to stop him.

He's usually safe here, on Dranova. The people here know him, have practically watched him grow up, from the day he washed up here, young and starving and bleeding, his face slashed open and festering with infection. They'd healed him and fixed his eye up as best as they had been able to—and while he still has the scar to show for it, it's a badge of honor for him, something he wears as proudly as his family crest. A reminder, and a warning. It might bring back bad memories of fire and blood and hearing his family's screams, being a helpless boy unable to do anything but run and never look back—but it teaches him not to dwell on the past. It also reminds him that he owes these people, the people who helped him and healed him and hid him, owes them almost everything.

Which is why he's got to get off Dranova as fast as possible.

He knows the church isn't far behind him, and that they've been looking for an excuse to burn this island to the ground for years. Overrun with pirates, teeming with illegal traders and practically choking in stolen goods, wealth, tobacco and pipe weed so strong that it sets the marrow in your bones aflame. If the church catches up with him here, then that's it. They're going to clean it all out, and then the one and only haven for pirates south of Wallachia will be gone, and it'll be all Trevor's fault.

The worn wooden planks of the docks give way and turn to hard-packed earth beneath his boots as he turns out of the port and into the city—or if it can even be called so. The Serpent's Heart is something of an anomaly, as everything on this island is, crowded and bustling and always awake, always alive. It's less of an actual city and more of a massive black market, one where people had sold and bought and smuggled and traded until it swelled to twice, thrice, four times its original size. Eventually the traders and smugglers had settled, and it had grown into somewhere people could come and live; everyone on Dranova trades in the black market. It's the only way to make a living, stay out of debt, earn a respectable place in the hierarchy.

He ducks into the central structure of the Heart, glancing up almost involuntarily as he does so. The huge stone structure that the market has grown around had once been the shell of a great cathedral, since Dranova had once been under the jurisdiction of Wallachia and in extension, the church. It had been too far away from the mainland, however, and controlling it had proved to be too difficult. Eventually the cathedral was abandoned, and the pirates claimed the place as their own. He likes it, the dichotomy of it all and the way the whole place is one living, breathing antithesis—the crosses and angels and stained-glass paintings high above looking down over the dirtiest, roughest, most godless people south of the Black Sea.

He moves out of the cathedral and into the winding streets, choked with people and traders and drunk men lying in nooks and corners, bottles still clutched in their hands and passed out

cold. Houses line the streets, all the windows on every single one boarded shut. Some people nod at him as he passes by, some ignore him, some glance his way and mutter to each other out of the corner of their mouths. Spending most of his teenage years on this island hasn't stopped the rumors from springing up like weeds and shrooms after a storm, rumors that say that he's the devil wearing human skin, that he has no name and no home and he merely drifts, that he captains a ghost ship that never docks and never anchors.

And some rumors say that he's the last of the Belmonts, that the church had murdered his whole family when he was just a child, that he had just barely escaped with half his life and had ended up here, that he'd seen his childhood home burn to the ground and that the church is still looking for him, the last son of a cursed bloodline. He has a lot of names here on Dranova, to each their own.

Well, he can't say every rumor they've come up with about him is true, but some aren't too off the mark, really. And while under other circumstances he'd find it hilarious and love the attention and the stares and the whispers, right now he can't afford any delays.

He ducks into the tavern that sits at the edge of the marketplace, near a secluded bit of beach whose sands had once been salt-white but have turned gray over years and years of exposure to dirty boots and feet and spit. The water is crystal-clear and untouched, however—Trevor has found that no matter how bold and brash a pirate is, no matter how dirty and uncouth they are, they always worship the sea. Fear it, almost. It's one of the little things that he'd learned on his very first day on this island. *Whatever you do, do not disrespect the sea. Her vengeance will crash onto thy shoulders hundredfold, and no man has ever escaped her wrath. She will take thy body and thy soul and she will claim it for her own...*

"Well, well, if it isn't the devil himself," the bartender says jovially as Trevor walks in, raising a bushy eyebrow as he moves towards the bar. The whole place is mercifully empty, and there are only two men inside, sitting hunched over a table in the corner. "To what do I owe the pleasure, your malevolence?"

"Hilarious," Trevor says dryly, swinging himself onto a stool at the bar. He debates with himself briefly whether or not to rest his elbows on the bar (which he knows has seen some questionable things in its day), then shrugs and leans against it anyway. "Really, very droll, Percy."

The other man grins at him, reaching for a tankard. "Some people actually believe it, you know."

"I'm aware." He waves the tankard away rather regretfully when Percy makes to set it in front of him. "Afraid I'm here on business," he says with a sigh, folding his arms and leaning further on the bar. "Can't afford to drink now."

"Trevor Belmont, on Dranova for business?" He widens his eyes in mock shock, setting the tankard aside. "Who would've thought?"

"Yeah, well." He looks away. "Desperate times call for desperate measures, and I happen to be extraordinarily fucking desperate." He leans forward conspiratorially and so does Percy, bushy brows rising even higher. "I was spotted," he mutters. "By the Church."

“Lurking around the port and skulking about near the cliffs, no doubt,” Percy says, shaking his head tiredly. He’s one of the few people who knows him, really knows him—has known him since he’d been the one to stitch the cut across Trevor’s eye with a fishhook and thread from a net, and had given him a shot of whiskey afterward to dull the pain even though he’d only been twelve. He sighs. “Why do you do it, Belmont?”

“The lurking?”

“No. Going home. You know it’s dangerous, you know it’s just a matter of time before they see you and you get caught. And yet you go there anyway, whenever you get the chance to.”

Trevor glances down and away, rubbing a finger on the worn, warped wood of the bar beneath his palms. He doesn’t quite know which is rougher—his fingertip or the wood. “It’s—I have to,” is all he says, shortly. “I don’t know why, but I have to.”

“Well, it seems as though you’ve gotten your last eyeful of the place, seeing as you were spotted this time around,” Percy says, sitting across from him and peering out at him, not without some sympathy. “What will you do?”

“Get off this island as fast as I can.” He exhales. “They’ll track me here soon. I have to leave before they can find me here and burn the Heart to the ground. I need a crew, Percy. Everyone else bailed. Everyone.”

“Well, I don’t blame them,” Percy says stubbornly, folding his burly arms across his equally burly chest. “If I was on your godforsaken ship with a target painted right across the front of it, I would leave too.”

“I need a crew, Percy,” he says again. “I can’t sail without one.”

“I’m aware.”

Trevor raises an eyebrow.

Percy sighs. “I’ve got a couple of men willing to sail for some coin,” he says reluctantly, scratching at a stray splinter on the surface of the bar. He isn’t meeting Trevor’s eyes. “Might not be your first pick, but they’re willing.”

“I’ll take what I can get, thanks.” He eyes him carefully, but he doesn’t pry, doesn’t ask after his sudden hesitation and the way he seems to be not telling Trevor something. Whatever is worrying him, Trevor is sure he can handle it, and even if he can’t, he doesn’t care; he just needs to get the hell off Dranova, and fast. “When can they be ready to weigh anchor?”

“Nightfall,” Percy says, turning away and busying himself polishing glasses with a rag so filthy Trevor is pretty sure they were cleaner before he started wiping them with it. “I’ll wager they’ll want a decent wage for it as well,” he goes on. “They’re not too used to sailing so far away from the island.”

“Like I said,” says Trevor, slamming both palms down on the bar and standing up, “I can’t afford to be choosy, Percy. Not when the alternative is getting skinned alive, yeah?” He claps

the other man on the shoulder, ignoring his uneasy look in Trevor's direction as he moves to leave the bar. He allows the artifice of blithe carelessness to slide off his face as he turns away, glancing backwards with a frown. He'll deal with the crew when he has to, whatever the fuck their issue is. It isn't like he hasn't dealt with mutinous men before.

He feels eyes on him as he makes to leave the tavern, and he resists the urge to pull his cape over the gold crest on his chest to hide it. He doesn't look around either, knowing that doing so will only incite any potential scuffles. He's gotten his fair share of punches to the face just by looking at people the wrong way. It's easy to offend people on Dranova.

He's exactly halfway across the tavern when something steps in his way, effectively blocking his path to the door. He shuts his eyes for half a second, inhaling deeply and forcing a neutral expression onto his face, then looks up at whoever has stopped him. It's the two men who'd been sitting at the table in the corner, two men he's never seen before—or at least men he doesn't recognize, the light from the door crowding their faces with shadow and outlining them in dull light. He squints up at one of them, one whose face Trevor can hardly see owing to the fact that he's all but covered in ink; swirling symbols, numbers and sigils curl around his eyes and mouth and forehead, his arms, his neck, everywhere Trevor can see. The other man is shorter but no less wide than his companion, one of his eyes glowing an eerie blue, the other a brown so dark it's nearly black.

They're both glaring at him.

"Afternoon, boys." Trevor places a hand at his hip, where his whip is coiled, not bothering to be subtle. If they can't try and hide their clear and obvious desire to kick his teeth in, then neither will he. "Mind getting out of the way?"

Predictably, they don't get out of the way, the larger of the two men stepping forward instead. "You're him," he says, his voice low and gravelly. "The last Belmont. You're the one with the price on your head."

Price? He hides the momentary little burst of shock that the words send down his spine, wiping his face blank and setting his shoulders back casually. Has the church already caught up with him? "A price, huh?" He hooks his fingers into his pockets, half-turning towards the bar to raise an eyebrow at Percy, who avoids his eye, turning away. "You knew about this, didn't you? The church putting a price on my head?" When he gets no reply, he sighs. "Pirates," he mutters under his breath.

He turns back to the two men in front of him. "At least tell me it's a good number. I'm hardly what one would call a cheap man."

"Words travels faster than ships around these parts," the man says, ignoring him—again. "They want you alive. And it's a pretty price too."

"Is it now?" His fingers close around the handle of his whip. "What, you have to wrap me up like a present and take me to Wallachia?"

"Five hundred denarii," the man says, and Trevor's lips part almost against his will. Even he isn't sure he's worth that much. "For you, alive."

“And when they come here to take me, then what? They’ll destroy this whole island. They’ve wanted to, for centuries now. You sell me to them, you sell Dranova with me.”

“They’ve promised immunity to everyone on the island,” the man says with a grin that’s a flash of black and yellowing teeth. “They let us free, give us the island, in exchange for you.”

“That’s bullshit,” Trevor says through gritted teeth. “They’re not going to—”

“Shut up,” the man hisses. “Five hundred pieces in gold and silver and immunity for every piece of shit on this island, it’s a fair price to pay for the devil dressed in a man’s skin, isn’t it?”

“For fuck’s sake,” Trevor says bitterly and not without some exasperation, “I’m not—”

“Shut up!” The man lurches forward and Trevor leaps back nimbly, fingers tightening on his whip as he draws it at last, casting it out almost out of reflex. It snakes outward, a deadly black tongue of leather, striking the man directly across the face with a loud, satisfying crack of impact. Blood flies from his mouth along with a howl of pain—and several teeth as well, which Trevor notes with grim satisfaction as they roll across the floor, trailing bloody streaks. The man raises a hand to his mouth, eyes widening almost comically before he turns back to Trevor, looking murderous.

“You want to hand me over to the church?” Trevor spreads his arms wide. “Come and get me, then.”

The man lunges again, and Trevor sidesteps him with ease, sweeping a foot out. He yells as he falls, his momentum sending him down hard. Out of the corner of his eye he sees the other man advance, albeit more carefully than his companion, slipping a knife out of his belt. He steps into Trevor’s line of sight and swings, and Trevor ducks beneath the blade, leaning back an instant later and slamming the heel of his boot down onto the man’s foot. He feels the small bones there shatter and the man screams—Trevor seizes the distraction, spinning around and driving his elbow directly into his jugular, cutting off his breath.

He chokes and splutters, eyes welling up as he stumbles sideways and slumps to the ground, groaning. The larger of the two men is standing, spitting blood out of his mouth and moving forward again, lips twisted into a rictus snarl. He steps forward and moves as if to throw a punch; Trevor starts to spin away but he feints leftward instead, stepping directly into Trevor’s path and punching him hard in the face.

He feels his lip split, a brief flash of sharp pain shooting through his face as he lurches backwards, slamming into the bar hard enough for blood to fill his mouth. The man looms over him, grinning a partly toothless grin as he raises his fist again, his knuckles already raw and split from their earlier tryst with Trevor’s face. He swings, and Trevor ducks, angling his body and shoving hard, his shoulder connecting with the other man’s sternum and sending them both sprawling, his whip flying out of his hand.

He feels a knee drive into his stomach and an elbow connect with his cheek, and hears himself swear, the words half a groan. His fingers fumble at his belt for a knife, but it’s kicked out of his hand a second later, and then he finds himself pinned to the floor by pure

force of the man's brute strength, a knee digging into his chest and a hand around his throat. The man grins at him, blood trickling from between his lips, a wide gash having opened up across his mouth.

"They said they needed you alive, not undamaged," he says, bearing down on Trevor further. It's beginning to get difficult to breathe. "I suppose they'll have to do with their bounty having no eyes." His grin widens, and his blood drips onto Trevor's face. He tries as hard as he can not to gag. Any minute now... "Or his ears. Maybe his nose, too. Won't be so pretty without them, will you?"

He scrabbles for his knife and Trevor snatches the opening, arching up and spitting his mouthful of blood straight onto his attacker's face. He lets out a gurgling shout and his grip on Trevor loosens, his hands flying up to his face. Trevor glances down, aims carefully and slams his knee directly between the man's legs, rolling free of his grip easily once he wheezes and crumples in on himself, letting go of Trevor entirely. He stands, looking down dispassionately at the man pitifully groaning at his feet, eyes screwed shut. His companion is lying a few feet away, his foot twisted at a strange angle.

He stoops, snatching up his whip from where he'd dropped it earlier and looping it in neat coils at his belt again. He turns towards the bar, leveling a cold look at Percy, who has the grace to look ashamed. "If you tell the church, or anyone a single word about any of this, I'll have your eyes for it," he says, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. It comes away smeared with blood. "Both of them. And your hands, too." He looks down at both the men lying on the floor, blood drying on the wood. "Are those men you promised me of the same ilk as these?"

"I can get you good men," Percy says, a little too quickly. "They'll work for good coin. I swear."

"Yeah, except when they work better for five hundred gold coins and the false promise of immunity." He kicks one of the men hard in the side when he attempts to start getting up, and he falls again with a moan. "They're lying, you know. If they find me here, then they'll burn Dranova to the ground. You'll all be hanged one by one in the town square at Târgoviște, and they won't bat a fucking eyelash."

Percy says nothing.

"I need men, but I need men who won't sell me out the moment they get a better offer more," he says, wheeling around and planting his feet in front of the bar. "I get off this island before nightfall, and they won't be able to lay a hand on any of you. The overseers are too well paid with the right people on the mainland for that. You give me up, and it's the noose for you all. Which option do you fancy more?"

"I can get you seven men and no more," Percy mutters, avoiding his eyes. "They're my boys, work for me now at the docks. They're hardly the best sailors, but they won't rat."

"If they do—"

"They won't, Trevor."

“—then I throw them overboard blindfolded with their hands tied,” Trevor finishes, crossing his arms across his chest. “If I’m in an especially bad mood, they go over the rails with cannons tied to their boots, and then it’ll be the Locker for them all.”

“Fine.” He tosses Trevor a coin, heavy and silver. “Just show them this, they’ll know to listen to you.”

“They’d better.” He turns away from the bar, shoving the coin into his pocket. “I’m not thanking you yet, Percy.”

“I know,” he hears Percy say quietly in reply, and he doesn’t wait to hear more before he leaves the bar, reaching into his pocket, where the heavy coin in his pocket brushes against his fingers, colder against his skin than it should be. He yanks his hood over his face, throwing his cape over his shoulders to hide the crest stitched into the cloth at his chest and back.

It’s the first time he’s ever had to cover it on Dranova, and the realization is a bitter one, souring his mouth as he moves towards the docks. And not for the first time since he’d realized the weight of his cursed name, since he’d watched his family and his home burn to the ground—not for the first time, he hates the name Belmont for the burden he bears because of it.

Adrian lowers the telescope from where it had been pressing to his eye, a cold circle of metal against his skin. From afar, the island doesn’t look like much, just another spit of land curving around a reef, countless ships docked around it. But, upon closer inspection one comes to realize that it isn’t all it seems to be, or what it plays itself off as; the rock juts outward and curves, carved by centuries of ships chafing its surface and by structures built onto its face into the shape of a crude skull, most of the ships anchored at its mouth like long, grotesque teeth, and every single one of them flies black colors.

“Get closer,” he says, retracting the telescope, not taking his eyes off the island. “And lower the flags.”

“Captain?” His first mate sounds uncertain. “Lower the flags?”

“Was I unclear?” He turns away from the railing at last, raising an eyebrow coldly, and his first mate looks down and away immediately, ducking his head. Chastised. Berated, almost. It would be pitiful if it isn’t so pathetic. “No, sir.”

“Then do as I say and lower the damn flags.” He moves forward towards the helm, shoving the telescope into his chest as he passes. The other man squeaks out a little, “Aye, sir,” and makes himself scarce, hurrying off the helm to relay the orders. Adrian sighs, glancing up at the bright blue sky, dotted here and there with rolling white clouds. The sun beats down onto him as he moves to the rail, leaning out over the it. The sea beneath the ship is jewel-bright and the slight breeze teases the waves to sway and dance, their crests tipped with white foam. The weather has been perfect for almost the entirety of the last few days, not so much as a single raincloud darkening the sky above their heads. They’d caught sight of the island that morning, and Adrian had known immediately where they were.

“Dranova,” he murmurs to himself, folding his elbows over the railing and leaning out further. “What a shithole.” Of course the elusive Trevor Belmont would dock here; likely for supplies and men before he’d make himself scarce, fleeing towards the Mediterranean like the coward Adrian already knows him to be. Pirates—they’re all the same, all flea-bitten cowardly dogs who run away with their tails between their legs at the first scent of danger.

And this island is where they all wash up. Filled to choking with boorish lowlifes, men and women who haven’t worked a day of their lives, people who take and take from people who earn and pay in sweat and blood. They’d swarmed the place like an infestation, chasing away everyone who’d made a living there and claiming the land for themselves. The church and the royal authority had been forced to abandon it, and he’s heard the rumors that they’ve desecrated the cathedral that they’d been building there, that they’ve built whorehouses and black markets selling alcohol and tobacco inside. He’d burn the whole place to ashes if the headmen hadn’t bribed their way to a seat of power too high for him or anyone else to touch.

They cut through the shallows closer to the island and Adrian glances back at the stern, where the white flags bearing the Wallachian coat-of-arms have been lowered, leaving the signal flags mast empty. He turns back towards the island to judge their proximity to it, then moves towards the helm, where his first mate has a hand on the wheel.

“Stop,” he says. “We anchor here.”

“Here, captain?” He frowns at Adrian. “Not at the port?”

“Any closer and they’ll know exactly who we are,” Adrian says. “Drop anchor and hoist the Juliet flag.”

The other man looks as if he wants to protest, but a moment later he shuts his mouth and nods, turning away from the helm and hurrying away once more. Adrian grasps the wheel, pushing down and steering the ship starboard before bringing her back around, allowing the anchor to drop where it can catch firmly in the reef spreading around the island’s perimeter. Once she jerks to a complete halt he moves away from the helm, glancing towards the island. Nobody seems to have noticed them yet, and even if they have, they’ve clearly thought nothing of their presence.

He knows he should have told his first mate his plan, that it’s expected of him and he’s supposed to. But all these men have spent their lives crewing for merchants and traders, not naval commanders. He knows they mutter about him behind his back, they think he’s favored by the bishop and that’s why he was chosen for this task, and he knows the first mate is among them. And why can’t he be bitter about it? He hadn’t even been allowed to choose his own crew, instead being forced to sail with strangers. They don’t trust him, nor does he trust them. Why should he tell them anything?

He descends the stairs from the helm, moving towards the longboats. “Five of you, with me,” he says. “We anchor here and go aboard Belmont’s ship, where he will be alone. We bring him back here, then double back to Târgoviște. Once we’re gone, hoist the Juliet flag—that way nobody will come on board, and they’ll think we have harmful cargo. We won’t be allowed any closer to the island, nor will anyone think strangely of our hovering here.”

The men say nothing, only nod and do as they're told. He feels a strange kind of pity as he watches them work, scurrying like ants to their respective tasks. It's of no importance now—soon they will have Trevor Belmont and Adrian will kill him for what he did to his father, and they will return home, and he can be rid of this crew. Perhaps he can cook up some sort of elaborate excuse for Belmont's unfortunate demise before his trial; self-defense, maybe. Or perhaps that he shot himself once they cornered him, favoring death over capture.

Either way, no matter what happens, Adrian will make sure that Trevor Belmont does not leave Dranova alive.

Someone is following him.

Whoever it is has been tailing him for some time now; he's felt it nagging at the corner of his eye, like a shadow dancing just out of reach. Trevor keeps a wary eye out but doesn't stop or slow, moving steadily back towards the docks. Seven men should be enough; the ship isn't too big, and he knows he'll be able to manage. How well he'll be able to manage is another story; he'd been sailing with the same crew for nigh on three years, and to manage without them for the first time in that long will be difficult, and especially in the absence of Grant—his first mate had been the last one to leave, with an apologetic goodbye that had been the first real slap in the face, and the one goodbye that had made him realize that this whole church situation was indeed very, very bad.

Which is how he ended up on Dranova in the first place.

The streets are as usual, full of people trading and haggling and swearing, and he gets more than his fair share of looks. He ducks his head and glances away, hurrying forward lest anyone recognizes him. He'd probably like to call a lot of these people his friends (or maybe acquaintances), but if he's learned anything from pirates *about* pirates, it's that the only thing stronger than loyalty and honor is money. Which means that any and every one of his "friends" wouldn't hesitate to rat him out for a fair sum. And five hundred pieces in gold is a fair sum indeed.

He ducks into a narrow alleyway between two clapboard houses, pressing himself against the wall and making sure the shadows swallow him whole. A moment later a hesitant silhouette passes along the mouth of the alley and he explodes into action, grabbing the person by the front of their cloak and dragging them into the alley. He hears a startled gasp and a cry and feels his brows furrow; he knows that voice, and well.

He slams the person who'd been following him against the wall of the alley and their hood falls away, revealing a familiar face—large, stubborn blue eyes, a cloud of strawberry-blonde curls, a pale face smattered across with freckles and an expression that's entirely too defiant for her own good.

He fists a hand in her cloak, shaking her slightly and glaring at her. She glares right back at him and he bites back a groan and a frustrated oath. Could this situation get any more fucked up?

"Sypha," he growls.

Trevor Belmont's ship is one of the smaller vessels docked at Dranova's port, anchored a little away from the main docks and off to the side. He's had the common sense to cover up the Belmont family crest that's painted in gold across the side with a spare sail, but it doesn't hide the careful lettering that runs up the hull on the topside near the bow.

"*The Morning Star*," Adrian reads aloud, softly. "A pretty name for a pirate vessel."

"That's Lucifer's name, that is," one of the men says in a hushed voice. "The name of the devil. I heard my fair share of stories about this one—they say he's the captain of a ship of demons, and that he's the devil himself incarnate. Wearing the skin of a man the way you'd pull on a shirt or a pair of trousers."

"No, I heard that he's the captain of a ghost ship," says another man, sounding morbidly fascinated by it all, and more than a little complacent. "He sits in his cabin and the ship sails itself. Ropes moving on their own, canons firing by themselves. They say it's got a soul of its own, and he hasn't got one."

"A soul?"

"He's empty inside, they say," the man goes on, quietly. "No heart and no soul. Gave it all up when he took to sea. They say when you cut him, he bleeds seawater, that he traded everything human about himself to be one with the sea. His heart's a dead thing in his chest, the Last Belmont."

That's ridiculous, Adrian wants to say, but he holds his tongue. Sailors like these often hear outlandish tales, and they believe every word of it, no matter how stupid it sounds. But it doesn't matter. Adrian knows the truth—Trevor Belmont is very much human. And he will bleed blood as red as rubies when Adrian's sword slits his throat.

"Four of you, with me," he says, raising a hand as they draw up to the ship. "We get on. One of you takes the longboat back to the *Seafarer*. Wait there until my signal. Don't lower the Juliet flag till then, nor will you take the ship anywhere. Keep her right where she is until I say so."

"Onto—onto the ship, sir?" one of the men squeaks. "*His* ship?"

"For God's sake," Adrian says testily, "it's not haunted, nor is it a devil ship. It's a piece of wood and metal, it's not going to hurt any of you. Unless you wish for me to tell the bishop that you disobeyed your captain's orders because you were afraid of a boat, I suggest you follow me without hesitation. Do I hear any complaints, sailors?"

Silence answers him, punctuated only by the lapping of the water against the ship's hull and the cry of gulls overhead.

"Good," he says shortly. "Now board this damn ship before I lose my patience and hand you over to Trevor Belmont so he can deal with you himself."

He's never seen four men scramble onto a ship faster in his life.

“Let me go, you son of a—” Sypha struggles, caught in Trevor’s iron grip. “Get your hands off me!”

He shakes her again, pushing her further against the wall of the alley, glaring at her. “You were following me,” he says, his voice so low it’s almost a growl. “You’re not as subtle as you think, Sypha.”

“I could say the same of you,” she says, standing up straight to get directly in his face, which has definitely seen better days; there’s a purpling bruise high on his left cheek, and his lip is split and swollen, blood drying on his skin. “I’m not the one with the price on my head, Trevor *Belmont*.”

He stills. “You know about that.” It isn’t a question.

“Everyone knows about it.” She reaches up, fingers encircling his wrist and attempting unsuccessfully to pry him off her. “They were talking about it in the Serpent’s Heart yesterday, and it’s a pretty enough sum that everyone wants it.”

“Who started it? Who told them about the price?”

“One of the landlords.” She gives up struggling and goes limp, slumping against the wall and breathing hard, watching expression after expression flit across his face, none of them discernible. He finally settles on what looks like desperation, his lips parting. “You think they’re still in contact with the church?”

“Maybe they have ways to communicate, I don’t know. But they want you, and badly enough to get back in touch with the dogs who run this market. And I think that warrants you getting off this island, and now.”

“So why were you following me? Is your tribe in town?”

“We arrived last week,” she says. “And people have been staring at you, you know. You’re not too subtle either, Belmont. You have a ship, yes; but do you have a crew? Do you have a first mate? Do you even have a heading? Was your plan just to run and try your luck?”

“Sypha...” He lets her go at last with a sigh, sagging against the opposite wall and looking away from her. “I’m getting seven men now. I’m going to take what I can and run. I can’t let this place burn for my mistakes.”

“Trevor,” she says.

“Hopefully by the time I get the fuck out of this place they’ll come snooping around, and I’ll be long gone. I’m heading west, out towards open sea, it’s my best bet—”

“*Trevor*.”

“—maybe I can make it out of the Mediterranean and out further past their jurisdiction, or I’ll get them to lose me or something, and then I’ll be able to finish what my family started and hunt down Drac—”

“Trevor!”

“What?”

She raises an eyebrow at him.

He shakes his head even as the realization dawns on his face. “No,” he says. “No, Sypha, there is no way I can take you with me. It’s—I can’t.”

“Why not?” She balls her shaking hands into fists at her sides. “Because I’m a woman?”

“Yes and no.” He sighs, running a hand through his hair the way he does whenever he’s frustrated. It sticks out all around his head in messy spikes, almost endearingly ruffled. A stray lock falls across his eyes and her fingers itch to tuck it back in place “The Code says—”

“You’re going to use the Code to win this argument?” She narrows her eyes at him. “You of all people couldn’t care less about the Code.”

“It’s too dangerous.”

“I can defend myself.”

“If the church finds you, they’ll burn you alive. That’s what they do, Sypha.”

“They’ll do the same to you, only you’ll be at the end of a noose.”

“The crew will never agree to sail with a woman.”

“I can make myself look like a boy easily enough. And make me your first mate. They won’t be able to get a word in edgewise.”

“I don’t even know where we’re going.”

“I’m a nomad, Trevor. I know my way around the sea even better than you do. Having me on board will be an advantage. I will be an asset.”

“Having nine people on board is unlucky.”

“You’re full of shit.”

He sighs, shutting his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger, and she plows on. “The longer we stand here bickering, the closer the church gets, and the closer the people get to claiming that sum. You know that bringing me along is the best chance you have. You’ll be dead in days without me.”

“Fuck,” he exhales. “Fine. Fine, you’re coming with me. But your train—”

“I already told them,” she says. “They know I’m going with you.”

“Oh yeah?” They duck out of the alleyway and onto the streets again, moving quickly towards the docks and where the *Morning Star* is anchored. “What if I’d said no?”

“I knew you’d see reason eventually,” she says offhandedly, hiding a grin. “Taking me with you is the only really logical option.”

“I may go mad with only you for company,” he says, glancing down at her with a raised brow. “But I guess we all have to make sacrifices to save our own skin—except for you, of course. You sacrifice things to throw yourself headfirst into danger.”

“It is the Speaker way, to put others’ needs before your own.”

“And to show off.”

“That as well.”

They reach the docks and Trevor grabs her arm, pulling her up short. “Wait,” he says. “Percy gave me something to make sure these men will listen to me—hang on.” He digs around in his pocket and draws out a flash of silver that catches the afternoon sun, turning into a searing spark of light.

“First Mate Belnades,” Trevor says, eyes sweeping across the crowded docks, “it’s time to gather ourselves a crew.”

“Wait,” Trevor says.

“What is it?” Sypha pauses in the act of climbing aboard the ship, turning to frown at him. The wind blowing in from the sea lifts her robes and teases her hair across her face, lines of reddish blonde striping her cheeks. Her eyes are the same color as the water that glimmers beneath the sun. She’s pulled her hood up to hide her face in shadow, and partly unable to see her face she looks like a young man, her loose Speaker robes hiding the curves of her body.

“There’s a ship there,” he says, squinting around the *Morning Star*’s hull at a solitary man-of-war anchored several leagues away from the port. It looks completely still, no activity at all on its surface. “It’s just... sitting there.”

“They’re flying the Juliet flag,” Sypha says, also peering at the ship. “Leaking dangerous, toxic cargo. We’re not supposed to go near it. Come on, Trevor, it’s time to go.” She turns away, heaving herself up the rest of the way onto the ship, calling out orders to get it ready to weigh anchor. Trevor remains motionless, standing on the docks, staring at that single empty ship.

Something feels wrong.

He glances down, at where the water laps gently at the hull of his ship. It smells of oiled leather and metal and something else, something dark and familiar and something he hasn’t smelled for years now. Something unholy and inhuman. Something dangerous.

The blue-and-white Juliet flag flutters innocently in the breeze, and his eyes cling to it. Nobody he can see is on that ship. It looks completely empty. And something about the man-of-war is intensely familiar to him—the arch of the bow, the wide stern, the tall triple masts

and the double rows of guns that he can see running along the side of the vessel. It looks far too sophisticated and elegant for Dranova. It looks like a chartered ship. And around these parts, chartered ships only come from one place.

“Trevor!” Sypha’s voice calls. “Where are you? We have to weigh anchor now!”

He makes a split-second decision, thoughts and ideas and theories running so quickly through his head that they all seemed to blur together into one long smear. He quickly climbs up the side of the ship, glancing only once over his shoulder at the water below. He stands, looking over at the seven men who Percy had promised him quickly getting the ship ready and Sypha at the helm, calling out orders. Thankfully, none of them seem to have realized she’s a woman—though Trevor knows she’ll need to perfect her disguise as the days turn to weeks and the weeks turn to months. It won’t be easy to hide herself for so long.

His fingers drift towards his whip. Then he shakes his head, closing them over the pistol at his hip instead. He cocks it carefully, keeping it hidden behind his cape as he moves slowly towards the helm where Sypha is standing. She glances up at him, frowning. “Is something wrong?”

“Yes,” he says softly. “I think we’ve walked right into an ambush.”

She stills, but her expression doesn’t shift. “What makes you say that?”

“That ship over there, flying the Juliet flag,” he says. “They’re anchored awfully close to the port, aren’t they? And if you take a good look at it, I think it’s fairly obvious to one who’s sailed on of those that it’s come from Wallachia. Officially from Wallachia.”

She exhales. “The church caught up, then. They’re quicker than I thought.”

“And smarter. But not quite smart enough.” He grips the pistol tighter. “I know where they’re hiding.”

She swallows visibly, not looking around. “They’re here? On the ship?”

“Yeah.” He knows this ship inside and out; knows every nook and corner and every single hiding place she has to offer. It’ll take far, far more than a simple ambush on his own ship to take him out. “They’re not going to let us leave this port. So I’m going to give the order to do just that, and then they’re going to leap out of their little hiding places and try to shoot us.”

“When will you—”

“On the count of three,” he says, finger hooking tighter over the trigger. Beside him, Sypha tenses. “One...”

His eyes flick towards the barest flutter of movement beneath the steps. “Two...”

Another flicker near the shadow of the figurehead.

He draws his pistol. “Three.”

“Weigh anchor!”

Trevor Belmont’s voice calls out, and the instant it does Adrian moves, spinning out of the shadows behind the helm and drawing his blade. His final command had been the signal, and he sees four other blurs move out into the open, bayonets leveled and aimed at Belmont’s crew.

Adrian steps forward and finds himself staring down the barrel of a gun.

For all the trouble his name causes him, Trevor Belmont wears it the way one would wear a badge or a medal—it adorns almost every surface on the ship, in addition to gleaming gold on his chest. He’s dressed head to toe in red and gold, the colors of his family, and his eyes are a vivid blue, the color of the hottest fire and the coldest ice. A scar slices through the left one, faded to pale pink.

He grins at Adrian. “Well, well,” he says. “What do we have here? Five little choirboys on a pirate ship. It’s like a nursery rhyme.” He draws something out of his belt with his other hand, a glimmering black mass of leather coils stamped with the Belmont crest in gold. A family weapon, and one that shouldn’t even be in his hands. It should be ash, like the rest of his family and their weapons.

“By royal decree,” Adrian says through clenched teeth, “you are to return to Wallachia—”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Belmont snarls, his artifice of cheerful sarcasm shattering instantly. “You’re four men against nine. You’re outnumbered, pretty boy. Now surrender, or *you’ll* be the first to taste my whip when I shove it down your—”

Adrian lunges, swinging his blade. Belmont sidesteps it in the nick of time, spinning around and firing. Adrian twists out of the way of the bullet, raising his sword. The bullet lodges itself into the hilt and he steps forward again, only to be blocked by his whip, spooling and unspooling around him like a serpent before its charmer. Adrian feints forward, lunging again at his left shoulder, which he’s left exposed.

His sword slices through his shirt, drawing a line of blood. He hears one of his men gasp—but his blood is red. Human. As if he could be anything else. He hears Belmont swear, then a black blur strikes his wrist hard, hard enough for him to hear a distant crack. He gasps, fingers freeing his blade, which clatters to the deck at his feet. He tries to make a desperate lunge for it, but a heeled boot kicks it away before his fingers can close over it, sending it skittering away off the helm and down the steps.

He fumbles a knife from his belt, but Trevor Belmont laughs as he steps casually up to Adrian and strikes him across the face with his pistol, sending him sprawling, the blade flying out of his hand. His back slams into the rail and he slides to the ground, the wind knocked out of him. He can’t see his men, but he knows they’ve been subdued just as he is. “Like I said,” Belmont says, spreading his hands. “Outnumbered.”

“You killed my father,” gasps Adrian. “I’ll—I’ll kill you—”

The grin on his face falters, replaced by a sort of confusion, one that makes Adrian's vision go red. "Your father?" he asks, blankly.

"You've killed so many," Adrian pants, "that you don't even remember all the innocents whose lives you've taken—"

"What was his name?"

He hauls himself up onto his elbows and spits at Belmont's feet. "Țepeș. His name was Vlad Țepeș."

Belmont's face goes entirely slack, his lips parting and his eyes widening. Adrian slides his last blade from his boot, taking advantage of the momentary distraction and making to move forward, his blade aimed for Trevor Belmont's heart. But even as he does Belmont's expression turns from surprised and disbelieving to hard, resolving; he lifts his pistol.

As if time has slowed down Adrian sees his finger squeeze the trigger, the barrel pointed directly at Adrian's heart. He hears a deafening shot ring out, feels a momentary burst of pain in his chest—and then even that begins to fade as the world around him dims, fading at the edges and turning fuzzy, indistinct. He feels his limp fingers free the blade he was holding, hears his men shouting, and as if from a great distance he registers the clatter of the knife falling to the deck before his body follows it. The last thing he remembers is hearing the waves crashing against the ship's hull and smelling the salt of the sea before his eyes close and everything dissolves into blackness.

Chapter End Notes

history lesson time:

-dranova is an actual island off the coast of romania, but as you probably realized, i took my liberties with what its role was.

-the juliet flag is, as you also probably realized, hoisted when a ship is leaking dangerous cargo, and it basically means nobody is supposed to go near it.

reviews are, as ever, converted into fuel to keep the writer going. <3

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

i have placed a tiny little potc reference in this chapter, partly because the line was really fitting and partly because i am an uncreative hedgehog. not that i have anything against hedgehogs. i am merely an uncreative one.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

His mind fades in and out of consciousness and unconsciousness, and what little he manages to process while awake is far away and blurry, his brain interpreting it all in vivid, vague flashes. He feels sluggish, drugged, the world around him fissuring and cracking and breaking into glittering glass shards of unreality, each one tipped with his own blood. All he can hear is the roar of his struggling heartbeat in his ears and the sound of his own ragged, heavy breathing filling up the empty spaces in his mind. He wonders if he is dead and this is all some sort of dream; he'd been shot, hadn't he? Had he been? He can't remember...

Silver wires around his wrists and dollops of it in his blood.

His wrists chafe together as small, careful hands bind them with something thick and strong, so tightly that he can already feel his hands beginning to go numb. All he can make out of the boy who ties them is his eyes, swimming in and out of focus, the color of the sea—not quite turquoise and not quite blue. The ropes pull and pinch painfully at his skin, and he's sure that the bonds will be damp with blood soon.

The captain searches him himself, not allowing his crew to see. He fervently turns out his pockets, tears through the innumerable pouches and bags in his clothes, muttering to himself with a wild, cornered look in his eyes like a rat stealing food from the pantry, greedy little paws searching and tearing and finding. He divests him of his coat and belt, leaving him in only a thin shirt and trousers befitting a paltry thief, taking his dignity along with his belongings.

“Search him,” a familiar voice says. “Take everything he's got, just don't strip him.” A moment later a pair of hands—the same hands that had bound his own together, he realizes distantly—begin to carefully search his pockets, slipping beneath his coat and beneath his shirt, warm, soft fingers pressing to his chest and to his back, to his sides and hips and thighs. They're not invasive, only inquisitive. Gentle, almost. The same hands feel cautiously down his arms and legs, pressing down slightly to search and find. They slip the weapons from his belt and take the compass from his pocket, along with everything else. They don't take any of his clothes.

Iron bars plated with silver, bars he's thrown against till his skin is raw and his bones ache. A heavy padlock etched all over with holy symbols and crosses, burning his palms when he

reaches out to touch them.

He can feel the bars of a prison digging into his back where he's slumped half-sitting on the floor, hard and uncomfortable against his spine. His body is slammed against them hard, every time the damp, unyielding surface he's propped up on shifts and lists and rocks, and he can feel bruises beginning to blossom across his shoulder blades and back every time it does. His mind is still too weak to keep his body in his own command, and he isn't even strong enough to lift his head from where it lolls on his chest, his eyes fluttering open and closed, impressions of his surroundings coming and going in vague, blurry smears.

Hunger rips through him, his veins empty and shrieking. His teeth ache to satiate it, a ravenous emptiness opening up inside him, a chasm no amount of human food or water can fill. He can smell it on the air and on the bars, the scent of human essence and life, life that he longs to extinguish and drown himself in.

His throat feels unimaginably dry, and every time he tries to swallow he winces and moans; his throat feels as if it's lined with knives and sand, prickling and aching. How long has it been since he'd last eaten? Drank water? If the pain from the bullet in his chest doesn't kill him, then hunger and thirst might. His body feels so empty that it hurts whenever he breathes, a sharp little stabbing pain beneath his ribs.

He feels the currents shifting beneath the ship, powerful and free. The roar and crash of the sea outside seems to be calling to him, whispering his name, coaxing him to break free of his bonds and join her again, feel her power and her strength. He can feel the thrum of her crashing relentlessly against the ship's hull, and salty spray lashes the boarded-up porthole that is set into the wall above his head.

The light above his head sways in tandem with the rocking of wherever he's been thrown—it looks like a ship from what little he can see whenever his eyes are open, damp rotting wood and oil lamps and the sound of the sea, the swaying and the smell of salt. It blurs into a sightless blur of white and brown as his eyes open, then close again, his breathing loud in his own ears, pained and raw.

Death and blood on his hands, a tube of silver rolling across the floor.

His eyes flutter open again.

Moonlight on his skin and the taste of blood in the back of his throat.

He gasps for breath.

The captain's dying breath, his heart clutched in his hands and his blood drenching the white sheets.

His vision blurs, turning distorted and hazy. The pain is everywhere now—his chest, his wrists, his throat. He can feel what little grasp he had on his own consciousness begin to fade, reality slowly merging into unreality.

Freedom is a fickle mistress; one he knows to dote upon so that he may tempt her not to leave him. Freedom and cold wind, and a bloody dawn rising over his bloody deeds. A red sky and a red sun, making the ocean beneath them blush. And though he cannot stand in its light he watches it rise, and remembers, and smiles. Sunlight is a small price to pay for eternity.

His eyes close as the pain overwhelms him, making the merciful black wings of unconsciousness wrap him in its inky feathers, the world around him finally fading away to nothing.

He turns, and steps into the shadows just as the morning rears its head and the sun bursts from the sea and into the sky.

Sypha gazes into the mirror at her own reflection and bites her lip.

She had known that she couldn't wear her Speaker robes for the entirety of the voyage—they're impractical, and moreover, they're conspicuous. The men Trevor had picked up at the docks are superstitious as all pirates are, and she knows that they'd never agree to sail with a Speaker on board. Now if they were to come to know that she's a Speaker Magician *and* a woman...

Perhaps that's a truth to tell some other time. Preferably never. But for now, she has simpler things to worry about. Like trying to fit into Trevor's old clothes.

He had taken one look at her robes and had said, "There's no way you're wearing those," and had promptly ordered her to his cabin, where he'd dug around for a little bit and had scrounged up clothes that he'd long since outgrown, tossing them to her and telling her to get dressed, then locking the door behind him as he left. It feels unspeakably strange to strip naked and change her clothes in someone else's quarters—and especially when that someone else happens to be Trevor Belmont—but she had forced herself not to dwell too much on it as she'd stepped out of her robes and folded them up neatly, setting them aside.

She peers at herself now, chewing more voraciously at her lip. The clothes will fit, miraculously (apparently she's about the same size as Trevor was when he was fifteen), but that isn't the problem. The problem is that Trevor as a fifteen-year-old didn't have breasts; Sypha does.

She hasn't got the hourglass figure of some of the wenches and prostitutes on Dranova, that's for sure, but it'll still be conspicuous if she doesn't do something about it. She turns away from the mirror and pulls on the pair of trousers Trevor had given her, stitched from tough flexible cloth that thankfully doesn't cling to her legs. Once she loops the wide leather belt around her hips and tightens it to her liking, she moves around the room, searching for something she knows will do the trick.

She's been looking for only a few minutes when she pulls a cabinet below the sink in the bathroom open, her eyes falling on exactly what she's been looking for. She makes a triumphant little sound as she draws it out, shutting the cabinet and moving once again towards the mirror at the other end of the room. The bandages she'd filched from Trevor's bathroom are perfect, sturdy but thin, the fabric stretchy and starched and wide.

She gets to work wrapping it firmly around her chest, exhaling every time she loops it around her front so that it presses even tighter, compacting her figure as much as possible. The cloth is thankfully breathable, and thin enough not to seem too obvious through her clothes. Once she tucks it closed and ties the last end of the bandage off, she looks up, examining the results.

The cloth sits snugly around her chest, from below her collarbones down to her sternum. It's not too tight, and she can breathe around it, and while it'll definitely take some getting used to, she'll have to manage. She turns to inspect the back and the sides, and once she's satisfied she stoops, picking Trevor's shirt up and slipping it over her head. It falls till just past her hips and she tucks it into her trousers, stepping back and mussing her hair up so that it falls across her eyes.

She takes a step back and looks into the mirror again, blinking at herself. She supposes this is the best she can do until she finds something to darken her brows and jaw, but all in all it isn't that bad; she looks like a young boy, messy-haired and wide-eyed and skinny. It'll have to do.

She gathers up her folded robes, pulls on a pair of boots and gives herself one last once-over in the mirror before deeming her disguise worthy enough, moving towards the door with a sigh. She's halfway across the room when she hears a knock. "Sypha?" Trevor's voice calls faintly, muffled through the door. "You done?"

She jogs the last few steps to the door, then throws it open in answer. Trevor blinks down at her, taking a step back to take a good look at her. He looks down, eyes traveling slowly upward from her boots to her trousers, up to her hips, then to her chest, then her shoulders...

She's sure she's blushing by the time his heavy, languid gaze comes to rest on her face, her cheeks burning. He blinks once, his eyes on hers not wavering. He reaches up innocuously, a hand coming to rest on the doorframe, giving her the illusion of being trapped between his body and the room behind her. "You look good, Sypha," he says, and it might just be her imagination, but his voice is ever so slightly uneven. His eyes flick across her face, his lips slightly parted. She still can't read his expression, but the look in his eye makes blood rise hot to her cheeks again.

She looks away a second later, swallowing hard, her fingers tightening on her robes. "Thanks," she says, and to her utter relief her voice sounds normal, even and casual. "I stole your bandages, by the way," she adds, ducking under his arm and moving away from his cabin, mostly to escape her abject and frankly ridiculous and unnecessary—not to mention inexplicable—embarrassment. "I thought you ought to know."

"What? Why?" She hears the cabin doors click shut behind him, hears his footsteps following her as she weaves through the corridors purposefully. She half-turns her head to talk over her shoulder, making sure he sees her raised eyebrow. "Though my robes may make it seem otherwise, I do have breasts, Trevor."

She hears a startled little cough. "Oh."

"Yes, 'oh'." She stops and turns around in the middle of the corridor, so abruptly that Trevor nearly crashes into her. He takes a quick step back, and to her secret gratification his cheeks

are faintly pink. “I can’t room with your sailors,” she says. “Nor will I agree to sleep in the cellars.”

“Yeah, I, uh... have a spare room,” he says as he looks steadfastly at her face and not down at her chest. She bites her lip to stop the smile that threatens to spread across her face as he lapses into mortified silence, merely staring at her with wide eyes. She raises a brow at him, prompting him to go on. “Trevor? The room?”

“Right,” he says a little too quickly, his blush deepening as he turns away. “This way.” She grins to herself as she follows him through the corridors, holding her folded robes to her chest as she looks around. Despite having seen the ship from outside countless times, she’s never been on it, and has to admit she’s impressed; he’s taken immaculate care of it, every single surface gleaming and polished, the wood strong and glossy and the lamps glowing merrily. Everything is primarily in colors of red and gold, and the Belmont family crest is emblazoned almost everywhere the eye can see. He’s dangerously proud of his name—the sort of pride that’s sure to cause him more trouble than it’s worth.

She says nothing of it, however, and there’s a silence that’s almost companionable between them as they walk together along the corridors. She’s known Trevor for years now, ever since they were both teenagers and she’d been on Dranova with her tribe for the first time, having sailed in with them from Spain. She’d been walking around, fascinated by the sheer gracelessness of the place, the chaos of the unabashed way of life of the pirates, when she’d felt someone reaching into her pocket to take the coins her grandfather had given her, tucked into a little pouch. She’d wheeled around and had nearly burned his eyebrows off, and in true teenage-Sypha fashion, had shouted at him until he’d started to look chagrined.

After that—well, after that she hadn’t seen him again for weeks, until she’d seen him getting beaten to high heaven by a few of the older boys and had rescued him against her better judgement. And while he’d insisted later that he would have been fine despite his two black eyes, bloody nose and one broken rib, she’d known he was grateful. They’d found themselves sticking together after that, and she’s fairly sure now that neither of them had really known why. He’d taught her how to pick locks and how to fire a gun, and she’d taught him to stop drinking every day and earn honest coin. They’d watched each other grow up, turn from scrawny teenagers into not-so scrawny adults—or at least in Trevor’s case. She’d been away for almost a year traveling, and when she’d returned she’d hardly recognized him, for sometime over the last few months he’d turned from a boy into a man, tall and broad-shouldered and handsome enough that she’d found herself staring at him more than she was willing to admit. It had felt strange, parting as children and meeting again as adults.

“Here,” Trevor says, and she shakes off the memories, turning to the door he’s directed her towards. He fishes around in his pockets awhile for the keys, then unlocks the door, opening it and gesturing inside. “This should do.”

“Thank you.” She steps inside, then turns back towards him again. He’s silhouetted against the golden light spilling around him from the lamps outside, his outline gilded with it. The shadows pool between the angles of his face, turning him into a stained-glass painting of light and dark, one of his eyes pale gray in the brightness and the other vivid sapphire in the shadows.

He's been her closest friend outside of her tribe for years, but what he doesn't know—what he can never know—is that she's loved him for as long as she can remember.

“Least I can do,” he mumbles, turning away. “Tell me if you need anything, you know where I'll be. Night, Sypha.”

She watches him go, and once he disappears around the corner, leaving her alone in the corridor she says softly, “Good night, Trevor.”

In the end, it's the storm that wakes him.

He's pulled suddenly and abruptly from his hazy delirium of darkness and back to reality as a deafening crack of lightning sounds from outside the ship. His eyes snap open just as a boom of thunder rolls through the air, and as he looks around groggily, he hears rain lashing the side of the ship, churning the sea below into a violent, frothy maelstrom that crashes relentlessly against the hull below.

For the first time since he'd been thrown here as if he were nothing more than a sack of potatoes he gets his bearings, looking around and assessing, weighing, understanding—or trying to. He's clearly in the brig, whose cells are all empty besides his. And they've clearly weighed anchor and are God-knows how far away from Wallachia by now, and his men are nowhere to be seen. He's alone.

He tries to get up, but he's pulled back down with a jerk when he tries to sit up; glancing backwards and trying to move his hands tells him that his wrists have been bound together and the rope is looped tightly around one of the bars of the prison, making it impossible to move, much less stand. He sits heavily back onto the floor in a heap, legs sprawled and arms tied behind his back, muttering a few choice curses. His back is to the bars, and in extension the rest of the brig, and he's been tied up facing the wall inside his cell. The porthole he can see directly across from him about six feet off the ground is dark, and stray droplets of rain and seawater cling to its surface outside.

He's been sitting and staring at the wall listlessly for a few minutes when he jumps suddenly, the realization and recollection hitting him with an almost physical impact somewhere in his stomach. *Hadn't I been shot?* He remembers Trevor Belmont leveling his pistol directly at Adrian's heart, remembers hearing the shot ring out, remembers feeling it, a momentary burst of pain in his chest before he'd lost consciousness.

He looks down frantically, searching for a wound he knows should be there. And while there certainly is a ragged hole in his shirt and a bit of dried blood staining its edges, there's nothing else. Not a blemish on his skin, not even a scar. He shifts, trying to gauge the pain, but even that proves fruitless. It's as if the wound has simply vanished—a wound that most certainly should have killed him. Judging by the tear in his shirt, the bullet had hit something vital, a lung or even his heart. So how is he still alive?

“What the hell,” he whispers aloud to himself as he looks up again, so softly he can hardly hear his own voice above the howl of the wind and the lashing of the rain outside. It isn't possible. He should be dead. There's no way anyone can survive a bullet wound at point-

blank range to the chest like that. And he certainly had been shot; he'd felt the pain of it, and moreover the blood on his torn shirt proves it. As far as he's concerned, he shouldn't be breathing right now.

The ship rocks alarmingly with a sudden groan, the waves pummeling the ship and making it list and sway. He's yanked to the side, held in place by the ropes tying him to the bars, his already sore and bloody wrists chafing against the ropes painfully. His shoulder slams against the cold metal of them and it punches a grunt of pain from his mouth as he rights himself, still reeling from his recent discovery.

He has to get out of here. That much is certain.

He curls his hands into fists and pulls against the ropes, ignoring the screaming pain that explodes from his wrists as the ropes bite into the wounds there. He pulls and pulls, gritting his teeth against the ache of it, trying to loosen the knots. He knows his weak efforts won't do much good against ropes tied by a sailor's hand, but it doesn't stop him from yanking again and again, even as he feels the tough fiber of the ropes grow damp with his blood.

He stops, taking a deep breath and allowing his heart rate to settle back into some semblance of normalcy. Squeezing his eyes shut, he tightens his fists, pulling his wrists apart slowly. He bites his lip, counts to three in his mind, then with every bit of strength in his body, he yanks.

He hears a loud *snap*, and a second later he feels no resistance as he pulls his wrists apart, his shoulder blades hitting the bars as his arms finally move freely. He blinks at the wall, stunned, then scrambles forward, bringing his arms through the bars and staring at his wrists, wondering with a sort of detached horror if he's broken them and that had been the sound he'd heard.

He hasn't just worked through the knots—he's broken clean through the rope itself.

The knots are still firm and tight, weighing down his left hand. But the rope, thick and tough and made of the sturdiest fibers, has snapped as if it were made of paper. His wrists are still angry and bleeding, his skin having given way after possible days of chafing against the ropes constantly. But they're not broken. Not even sprained, by the way there's no internal pain when he rolls his wrists, examining the movement.

What on earth is happening to him?

He gets to his feet, quickly unknotting the ropes and letting them fall off his hands, flexing his fingers and working out the kinks in his shoulders and knuckles. He moves towards the cell doors, reaching through the bars and closing his fingers around the heavy padlock. He withdraws a moment later, taking a few steps back and eyeing the doors with his lower lip caught on his teeth.

If he had survived a bullet to the chest and had broken through two inches of rope with nothing but brute force, then breaking the cell door down is beginning to sound less and less ridiculous the more he thinks about it.

He swallows. What's the worst that can happen? He might get a concussion, or he might dislocate his shoulder. If he tries to kick it down, he might break his foot. But somehow, he doesn't think that's what will happen. He exhales, hunches his shoulders before he can lose his bravado, and surges forward.

Half a minute and one broken cell door later he's creeping up the steps out of the brig, his shoulder smarting faintly. Judging by the snores he can hear as he moves up a few levels to the berth deck, it's the middle of the night, and the lamps are doused, throwing everything into darkness. He can see shapes and suggestions of the hammocks strung up along the deck, shadows swaying in time with the ship as the storm seethes the waves beneath them. He casts but one look backwards to ensure he hasn't been seen or heard as he ascends to the next deck, stepping carefully to avoid any creaking stairs.

The ship is dark, and he can hear the rain pounding against the deck above his head. He moves forward cautiously, jumping at every crack of lightning and wincing every time a floorboard beneath his feet creaks. He stumbles into the walls on either side of him more than once as the ship lists, catching himself with a bitten-off curse every time he does. He feels along their wood-paneled surfaces as he makes his way through the corridors and up the steps to the upper deck, the storm screaming outside drowning out his footsteps and the sound of his breath sawing in and out of his lungs.

He comes to an abrupt halt in front of the door that leads to the deck, outside which the storm is raging, rain lashing against the glass set into the door. Beyond, all he can see is rain and darkness and flashes of lightning, a storm that will surely tear him to shreds if he dares to make his way overboard. He hangs back, wary, wondering if maybe he should have chosen a better time to make his grand escape. Well, it's too late now; he has no choice but to brave the storm.

He grasps the handle and pulls the door open just a crack, the wind screaming and moaning and whistling deafeningly through it. Drops of rain spray onto his fingers, the coolness of it soothing the bite of the ropes that still encircle his wrists like bloody cuffs. He wedges a foot into the open crack, making to pull it open wider.

"I wouldn't do that, if I were you."

He jumps violently, pulling the door shut quickly and turning, pressing himself against it. Standing behind him in the corridor is a young man—a boy, really, probably a few years younger than Adrian—one who seems vaguely familiar to him. The shadows sliding along his face through the glass behind Adrian transform his delicate, almost feminine features into a shifting landscape of black and white as he steps closer, his body language deliberate, casual almost.

"Don't come any closer," Adrian warns, though both he and the boy know it's an empty threat. "I'm getting off this ship."

"And going where?" he asks practically. His voice is low and soft, lilting with a rich accent. Spanish, Adrian thinks distantly. "The storm will tear you apart."

“It doesn’t matter. Anywhere is better than here.” The boy moves another step closer, affording Adrian a glance of his eyes; large and bright, the color of the sea or the sky. He can’t quite decide which, and it’s then that he realizes why the boy is so familiar to him. “You—you’re the one that tied me up.”

“And searched you, yes. You weren’t quite awake for either, but I apologize if I seemed a bit presumptuous; precautions had to be taken.”

“It doesn’t matter, nor do I need to hear your apologies. I’m leaving. I am of no use to you.”

“On the contrary.” He takes another step forward. “You are most important to us, and you have a great many uses. Now step away from the doors; the night is still young, and the storm is wrathful.”

“I don’t care,” Adrian says.

“How did you escape?”

Adrian swallows past the metallic taste of panic rising in his throat. “What?”

“I tied those ropes myself. The knots are too tight, you shouldn’t have been able to get out of them. And you were locked in a cell. How are you here?”

“Perhaps your knot-tying skills are not as superior as you boast of them to be.”

The boy raises an eyebrow, the moonlight leaching his skin of color. “Perhaps,” is all he says, and he sounds wry. “But the iron lock on the door of the cell we put you in, I do not have to boast of its strength. How did you get past it?”

“I...” He hesitates a fraction of a second too long. “It is no concern of yours,” he finishes at last, but it sounds halfhearted and reluctant even to his own ears. He reaches behind his back for the latch of the door, his fingers closing around it. “It doesn’t matter how I escaped. I’m getting off this ship, and I’m going back to Wallachia.”

The boy sighs. “I’m afraid I can’t let you do that,” he says in his soft voice, almost apologetically. “I cannot let you step out of that door.”

He sneers with every bit of disdain he can muster, which is a considerable amount. “Go ahead and stop me, then,” he says, and pushes the door open wide.

The storm surges inside with a low, rushing roar, rain and wind and the sound of thunder and lightning. Finally no longer held back by his weight against the door it’s almost gleeful in its freedom, lashing his back with a torrent of rainwater and spattering the floor halfway down the corridor with it. He’s about to take a step backwards outside and into it when the boy raises a hand in an odd gesture—his index and middle fingers raised together and his other three fingers forming a circle. He closes his eyes.

He hears a sound in his ears like rushing wind or beating wings—he can’t quite decide which—and a second later something cold and heavy strikes his temple hard. He doesn’t even have time to turn his head to see what had hit him before, for the third time since he’s boarded

Trevor Belmont's godforsaken ship, he feels unconsciousness make darkness seep into the corners of his vision and he blacks out.

He opens his eyes, and the first thing he sees after his vision swims back into focus is a pair of boots.

He's on his knees, hands once again tied behind his back, this time with heavy iron cuffs that will be impossible to break. There's a hard surface beneath his knees, and he can feel the bruises there, likely from where he'd either fallen or been thrown onto them. His head still aches from the hit he'd taken, making his vision blur occasionally. The room he's in is full of merry yellow light, and he can still hear the storm outside—which tells him he hadn't been out for too long.

He blinks at the boots in front of his face, then tilts his head up to follow the length of them upward. They seem to go on for miles and miles, and he squints as he allows his eyes to move higher past them. A belt that's composed of far too many loops and attachments and buckles, a cotton shirt so thin he can see skin through it, tanned and scarred. A gold family crest is stitched onto the left breast, a cross surrounded by swirling sigils. There are leather harnesses crisscrossing across a broad chest, holding innumerable knives and blades. He looks higher still. Wide shoulders, over which a dark red cape is thrown, its high open collar affording him an eyeful of the indents of the wings of a collarbone—and then even higher, to a face that's as familiar as it is unwelcome; messy dark hair carelessly uncombed, an even more carelessly unshaved jaw, and blue eyes with a scar through the left one that are glaring directly at him.

Adrian tips his head back, shoulders still hunched under the weight of the chains around his wrists. He looks up at Trevor Belmont through his lashes, breathing heavily through the pain and the humiliation of being chained up on his knees at his feet.

"You..." He swallows past his dry throat. "You dress well, for a pirate," he manages to rasp.

Belmont stares incredulously at him for a moment before he throws his head back and starts to laugh, the sound of his mirth filling the room they're in, deep and rich. Adrian can't tell if it's genuine or not, but the grin that remains on his face as his laughter trails away is nothing short of brilliantly false, a razor blade of a grin that's a flash of white teeth in the murky light from the lamps around the room cast low. He draws a blade sheathed at his waist with the hiss of leather on steel, one whose hilt is red and gold to match the rest of his clothes and in extension, the ship itself. He lowers the sword, leveling it beneath Adrian's chin, its point resting ever so lightly on his jugular.

"And you," he says, "have a smart mouth for a church boy." He takes a step forward, pressing his blade more firmly against Adrian's throat.

"If you want to kill me, just get it over with," Adrian says through gritted teeth. "Stop playing games."

"You think this is a game?" He raises an eyebrow, looking down at him. "Think again. I'm being entirely serious. And if I'd wanted to kill you, I would have done it a long time ago."

You wouldn't be here now if I didn't need you alive." He sounds almost matter-of-fact, as if Adrian is merely something expendable, something he can use and then throw away. Like a matchstick, or perhaps a toothpick.

Adrian keeps entirely still even though instinct tells him to jerk away and get answers, not wanting the point of the blade at his throat to nick his skin. "Where are my men?" he asks instead, keeping his voice as neutral as possible. Belmont only shrugs. "Dropped them off a few days from Dranova. Gave them a couple of guns in case the hunger and thirst get too hard to handle."

Adrian's lips part almost against his will, a blank sort of buzzing in his ears following the realization and drowning everything else out for a moment. "You—you left them to die? But what about the ship?"

"I'm sure the dogs on the island will realize eventually that the flag you hoisted was worthless," Belmont says offhandedly. "They'll put her to good use, don't you worry."

"I would rather see her at the bottom of the ocean than in the filthy hands of pirates!" Adrian snarls, rearing up with a jerk. A moment later the cold point of the blade at his throat kisses his skin just barely, forcing him back down, seething. Belmont tuts disapprovingly, pressing the flat of the blade's edge beneath Adrian's chin to tilt his face up. "We'll have none of that," he says, the words dripping condescension, and Adrian feels white-hot rage spread its scalding fingers down the back of his neck, making his vision momentarily go red.

"You fucking bastard," he hisses, jerking his head away despite the blade under his chin. He feels the point skid across his skin, leaving a shallow cut across his throat in its wake, one that beads with blood, welling up almost immediately. "You dishonorable piece of—"

"Shut up," Belmont snaps, the blade digging harder into his throat. "Your men and your ship were of no use to me. They would have been dead weight, so I dumped them the first chance I got. We're halfway to the Mediterranean by now, and if you try any little stunts like the one you did just now, then you'll die. There's nowhere to go but open sea, no land for hundreds of leagues."

"I'd rather die there than stay here your prisoner," Adrian says, baring his teeth. "Just kill me, toss my body over the rails. Why would you kill all my men but spare their captain?"

Belmont's face stills, as if he's trying to gauge whether Adrian is joking or not. Finally he gives a little shake of his head, lifting his blade from Adrian's throat and sheathing it once again. "It doesn't matter. But what we know now is that we can't afford to tie your pretty hands with something as flimsy as rope." He crouches down on his knees, their faces now on a level. "How'd you break through it, *Tepeş*?" he asks softly, a little teasing smile on his face, as if he knows something Adrian doesn't. "Sudden, unanticipated burst of strength, maybe? Adrenaline?" He raises his eyebrows. "Inexplicable force?"

Adrian gazes at him, uncomprehending. "I... I don't know," he says finally. "Maybe the fiber was rotted through."

“Okay.” He leans closer. “What about the bars? Four solid inches of metal, broken clean at the hinges. How did you get through that?”

He swallows hard. “I don’t know,” he says again. “It was... I didn’t think... I’ve never—” He sighs, shutting his eyes a moment before opening them again. “I’ve never had cause to use this much strength before,” he says finally. “I don’t know how I...” He trails off, then glances down at the ragged hole in his shirt still stained at the edges with blood, the only evidence of the fact that there had been a bullet in his chest.

He looks up. “You shot me.”

Belmont’s eyes are steady as he looks back at him. “I did.”

“What happened to the wound? Where’s the bullet?”

He shrugs, that same teasing smile tugging his lips upward. “You tell me. Wound to the chest like that, you should have died seconds after impact, right? And yet there’s hardly any blood on your shirt from the wound—if there ever even was a wound. And you were half-awake when my first mate tied you up and threw you into the cells. You remember it, don’t you?”

Adrian stares at him, mouth going dry. “I—I do. But... I shouldn’t. I should have...”

“Died.”

Adrian says nothing.

“And down the rabbit hole we go.” Belmont stands at last with a sigh, glancing back at Adrian with an expression that’s partly something like pity and partly that same knowing smugness he’s been looking at Adrian with ever since he’d woken up. It’s calculating almost, the way he looks at him. Assessing. Weighing. Appraising. As if they are at an auction and Adrian is his lot.

And then he realizes that no, Trevor Belmont does not look at him as if he is something expendable as he’d thought earlier. Not like he is something temporary and something he can get rid of, he amends—but like he is a weapon. Something he can use, yes, but something that is valuable, and more importantly, he looks at Adrian as if he is something that is dangerous.

“What?” Adrian asks, feeling his eyes narrow. “What do you know, Belmont?”

He hesitates visibly, reluctance pulling at his face for a split second before he schools his features once again into sardonic boredom. “What are you talking about?”

“Belmont.” He glares up at him. “What do you know?”

“I don’t think you want to,” is all he says in reply, turning away from Adrian. “Know, that is.”

“How would you—”

“Back to the brig for you, I think,” Belmont says, cutting across Adrian as if he hadn’t heard him at all. “This time in a stronger cell, too. Can’t have you breaking all of my doors down; getting those bars replaced isn’t easy. Or cheap.”

Desperation and panic in equal measure rear up in his chest, clawing up his spine. Belmont is already turning away dismissively and moving towards the door, and Adrian knows his last chance at getting any answers is slipping through his fingers with every step he takes. He makes one last desperate grab for it, straightening and clenching his hands in their chains into fists as he calls out.

“I challenge you, Belmont,” he says, and he freezes halfway to the door, his shoulders tensing. “A good old-fashioned duel. Swords only. Tomorrow, at dawn.”

Belmont wheels around, glaring at him. “What the fuck are you playing at, Tēpe\$?” he growls. Adrian only shrugs, looking back at him defiantly. “Unless you’re afraid of losing,” he says, and the taunt has the desired effect—Belmont’s shoulders tense even further, his jaw clenching. “I’m not afraid of some church-bred spoiled brat,” he snaps, and Adrian laughs. “Then it shouldn’t be a problem to accept, should it?” he asks.

He doesn’t tone down the glare. “And if you win?”

“Well,” says Adrian, “since there’s no point in asking for my freedom now, seeing as there is nowhere to go, if I win you tell me everything you know. About me, and my father. I know you know something, that you’ve found something out. Otherwise you wouldn’t have kept me alive, and you’re a terrible liar on top of that.”

Belmont hesitates again before shrugging, an oddly sinister look in his eye replacing his earlier defensive glare as he looks down at Adrian on the floor. “Fine,” he says. “Deal. And if you lose, then you go right back to the brig in blissful ignorance.”

“Fine.”

“Great. That’s settled, then.” He turns back towards the door, flinging it open and turning. “Get up and follow me.” Adrian struggles to his feet with the added weight of the chains on his hands and limps over to the door where Belmont is standing, feeling the painful kinks in his knees and ankles work themselves out with audible cracks as he walks. He’s an inch or so taller than Belmont, which he notices for the first time as he draws up to the door where Belmont is standing; he’d been a bit preoccupied the last time they’d spoken. But something about the realization takes him aback a little, and even he’s not quite sure why.

He follows him through the corridors and down the steps again, glancing around at the now-lit ship as they walk. He has to admit it’s beautiful, immaculately taken care of and clean, nothing out of place and everything draped or painted in red and gold. The sky is still dark and churning with the storm as he can see every time they pass an arching window, the glass sprayed with rain and seawater. Slender branches of lightning fork between the clouds with a sound not unlike the crack of Belmont’s whip, booming thunder following close at their heels.

“Shouldn’t one of your men be doing this menial job? Taking the prisoner back to the cells?” he asks, and Belmont grunts. “It’s two in the fucking morning. Everyone’s asleep.”

“Wake someone, then.”

“Sailors work harder than the captain does. They need more sleep than I do.”

“That’s... oddly compassionate of you.”

“I’ll have you know I’m known to be an extraordinarily compassionate man,” he says, and when Adrian glances at him with his brows raised, he sees Belmont grinning at him. “Of course, I’m also known to be a total asshole, but that’s only to people who deserve it, like pompous blond brats who ask too many questions.”

“I wonder who that could be.”

They both chuckle as they descend the last level and into the brig again, Belmont fishing a heavy iron key ring out of his pocket. He unlocks one of the cells at the far end of the prison, one that looks vaguely different from the others, with the largest, heaviest key. The bars gleam as if polished, the wood paneling the inside of it is lighter, and it’s the only cell without a porthole set into the wall. Belmont opens the door wide, gesturing. “In you go.”

Adrian steps inside, glancing around curiously. Something about it seems... different.

He hears a loud click as Belmont pops the latch of the lock closed, shutting Adrian into the cell. The moment the door closes between them Adrian shifts, frowning as the faintest of itches rises up beneath his skin, spreading from his chest and across his back. He twitches away from it imperceptibly, wincing, wondering if perhaps something has bitten him. He glances between the gleaming bars at Belmont, who’s watching him almost carefully. “Everything all right?”

He swallows past the discomfort. “I... it’s just—” His eyes catch on the bars, bright and polished. “What are these made of? They look different, almost like—”

“Silver?”

Adrian stares at him.

He only smiles back, that knowing, disarming smile that tells him that he has the key to every unanswered question in Adrian’s mind. “Dawn is only a few hours away. You might want to get some sleep before then, seeing as you’re the one who challenged me. I’ll send my first mate down to get you when it’s time.” He drops a stunned Adrian a single nod before turning and leaving the brig, his footsteps fading into the air within moments. But Adrian is still standing in the middle of the cell, gazing at the bars that surround him.

He steps forward carefully, turning around and angling his bound hands towards them. He reaches out, allowing his fingers to wrap around one of the bars, holding his breath as his skin comes in contact with the cool metal.

Nothing happens.

He exhales, relieved, and is about to move away when a sudden pain lances through his fingers with a low hiss, a sizzling burning pain that makes him pull his hand back with a cry. He looks over his shoulder and down at his fingers, which are blistered and burned, raw and red. Even as he watches, disbelief and horror exploding in his chest, the wounds begin to heal over instantly, new skin crawling over the burns until they fade entirely. There isn't even a scar or a blemish left on his hand where the silver had seared him.

He looks up again, heart racing, hardly daring to believe what had just happened. *That's impossible*, he thinks. *Impossible*. He stumbles backward, his back hitting the wall and sliding down until he's pressed against it, panic and shock and fear overwhelming him. The itch he had felt crawling beneath his skin is stronger now, making his body ache and his head spin. His throat closes up, his eyes stinging. He doesn't think he's ever felt more alone in his life than he does in this one moment; further away from home he's ever been, on an unfamiliar ship—the ship of a man he was supposed to kill—and sitting crouched in this cell that seems built to repel him, to cause him pain.

“Help me,” he whispers, but even he can hardly hear himself, the pain and discomfort growing with every passing second. He lets his head fall back against the wall and closes his eyes, and when he finally does slip into a fitful, uneasy slumber hours later, he isn't sure if he'd succumbed to the pain or if he'd actually fallen asleep.

When dawn breaks and the sun rises at last, its light doesn't reach his cell, nor is Adrian awake to realize it.

Chapter End Notes

me: i hate cliches

also me: so one character puts the edge of their sword under the other's chin to tilt their face up while they're chained up at their feet to taunt them during an interrogation

me again, but sobbing: ohmygod so one character puts the edge of their sword under the other's chin to tilt their face up while they're chained up at their feet to taunt them during an interrogation

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

She watches the storm outside give way and begin to die, the wind lessening and the rain slowing and the sea calming. The clouds overhead break and scatter, slowly drifting apart until they part like curtains and reveal the sky that had been veiled behind them, the darkest of dark blues and scattered across with stars. The moon is but a curved slice of silver above her, a slender crescent smiling down from the starry heavens.

She's perched on the wide windowsill in her room, knees drawn up to her chest and arms looped around them, her chin resting on her knees. The surface of the sea several yards below her window is tranquil almost, entirely still and gleaming black beneath the dark night sky. The ship cutting effortlessly through the still water creates wide ripples that fan out artfully from where the hull slices through the surface of the ocean, and it's lonely almost, with nothing around them for miles and miles, not a speck of land.

They could be, for all the world, a paper boat gliding atop a puddle on the ground, detached and other and just so *small*, so insignificant. She feels strangely unmoored as she gazes out at the world outside, the sky melding into the sea and turning into one long smear of night and day, of dark and light. She can't quite decide whether it is the sea or the sky that it makes look infinite, stretching on for forever.

The room Trevor has given her is small but comfortable, and it's admittedly much more luxurious than the caravans her tribe had used on land and the small boats they'd used at sea. It's decorated, much like the rest of the ship, in cheerful shades of red and gold, and to accommodate the curve of the side of the ship it's slightly oval-shaped, the furniture's inner edges curved in turn to fit to the walls. It merely accentuates the coziness of the little room, and she has to admit she's pleased with the arrangement. If they're going to be criminals and escapees of the law, may as well do it in style and comfort.

She slides off the windowsill just as the first streaks of dawn begin to stain the sky, finally distinguishing the sea and the sky in a slender strip of palest orange. She moves across the room, her new boots soundless on the paneled and carpeted floor, and slips out the door, shutting it softly behind her.

Her feet move with a sort of trancelike purpose, automatically carrying her towards the captain's quarters at the front of the ship. They come to a halt in front of the door and she's already raised her arm and curled her fingers into a fist to knock when she hesitates, taking a step back. Her stomach has been twisting itself into knots ever since she'd boarded the ship, and there's a perpetual swarm of butterflies that have taken up residence somewhere below her ribs, their delicate but insistent wings buffeting against her insides and turning her into a flustered, nervous wreck.

She's no stranger to this feeling, especially when Trevor is involved. But for some reason the confidence that had carried her here, so strong a moment ago, has faltered, and it's left a sort

of raging insecurity in its wake. The prospect of knocking, seeing the door open and seeing *Trevor* open the door, probably in his sleep things with that fuzzy, warm aura of drowsiness clinging to his disheveled hair and his dusky lashes, seeing him look at her and expect something from her is suddenly impossible to fathom.

She turns on her heel and all but flees from the place, weaving through the corridors at top speed. She turns out onto the deck, still slippery from all the rain, and ducks into the stairwell that leads down. She descends the stairs rapidly, hardly looking where she's going. She flies past the sleeper deck, where she can still hear snores, and down further still, to the dim, long bunker that is the brig.

It's probably her least favorite room in any ship since they're all built in the same place—all the way at the bottom. It's dank, and perpetually damp and grimy and cold. The *Morning Star's* brig is just as dark, but at least it's not moldy and creaking with water, she thinks as she advances carefully, taking wide, careful steps to maintain her balance amidst the slightly uneven surface below. As smoothly as the ship is cutting through the water, there's always tension and friction, and the closer to the hull you get, the more apparent it becomes.

She knows where their enigmatic prisoner will be—if she knows *Trevor* at all, she knows that after the stunt he'd pulled yesterday he would take no chances nor indulge in any risks, and she knows he'd have been at his most careful. And a prisoner whose presence guarantees maximum security will only be in one place.

Surely enough the lone occupant of the brig's numerous cells is crouched in the very last one, windowless and paneled with aspen and dry as a bone, with bars that gleam a bright, iridescent silver in the pale light of the dawn that leaks into the room from the other portholes set into the walls. His long body is folded rather awkwardly in on itself, his back pressed up against the wall and his head lolling on his shoulder, spilling dirty blond hair over his face, hiding it. If not for the slight rise and fall of his chest as he breathes, she would have thought he was dead already.

She steps up to the bars, fingers reaching out to encircle one of the cool metallic cylinders. It's so odd, that something that should be so ordinary and harmless to her would burn and hurt someone else, be so dangerous and painful.

She doesn't know why she's here.

She remembers talking to him last night, remembers his wild, cornered eyes and the already healed rope burns around his wrists, the clean hole in his shirt with nothing but whole skin behind it, skin that a bullet had punched through only hours before. And yet he'd been alive—nails cracked and clothes dirty and hair snarled, admittedly—but alive. She recalls how haughty he was, how arrogant even in the face of clear defeat, nowhere to go and nothing left to call his own but still sneering and cold and aloof.

But behind his artifice of indifference she'd seen how afraid he was; how could he not be? He was on an enemy ship in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by people who meant him only ill intent, his men gone and his home so far behind that help was an impossibility. He's well and truly trapped, and now crouched in this cell and caged like a wild animal she imagines he has even more reason to feel so.

So why is she here?

She'd been drawn to him for some reason yesterday, had seen him creeping along the corridors under the liquid silver-blue light of the moon, the wounds on his wrists still raw and favoring his left shoulder. She had let him draw closer to freedom, had wanted him to leave for one split second, wanted to let him go, let him escape in blissful ignorance of who he was, *what* he was. But he'd known too much, and he would die if he let the storm swallow him, no matter how powerful he was. Nothing is as strong as the ire of the sea.

So she'd stopped him. He'd recognized her, though he hadn't seen past her disguise. And then he'd challenged Trevor. Men, she thinks, somewhere between amusement and irritation. They can't walk away from a wager, from a challenge, a chance to prove their strength, their worth. Annoyingly predictable.

Dawn is not far away but she's still early, still hovering here and gazing at the crumpled figure in the cell. She sees his chest hitch ever so slightly and takes a step forward, her heartbeat taking flight, jolting to life in her chest. The end of her boot strikes one of the silver bars and the sound echoes in the room, oddly loud even amidst the gentle splash of the sea below. She curses her own clumsiness inwardly as she sees the figure in the cell move, his head lifting up off his shoulder, his hair swaying in mesmerizing waves of dull gold.

He turns towards her, legs still drawn up to his chest, face streaked with blood and grime. He doesn't move, simply staring at her. She stares back without the slightest idea what to say.

"Is it time?" he asks, and his voice is cracked and hoarse. "Is it dawn yet?"

She finds her voice. "It is. But it's still early."

There's something almost frightening about being on the other end of his cold golden gaze, something about his eyes that seems to root her to the spot, rendering her unable to move even if she tried. He still doesn't make a move to stand, looking out at her expressionlessly. "Why are you here?" he asks.

"I don't know," she says honestly.

"The Captain doesn't know you're here?"

"No."

"Who are you?" He lifts his face to meet her gaze, his eyes narrowed. She leaves her expression as honest and open as possible, wiping her face blank of emotion. "I'm just the First Mate," she says, making sure to pitch her voice as low as she can. It makes her sound soft and shy, but like a soft and shy boy. "I'm no one."

"You're quite young to be a First Mate, aren't you?" he says, still sprawled in the corner of the cell. Before she can even open her mouth to answer he goes on. "And how did you knock me out last night? I didn't see you holding anything when you struck me."

She smiled, but it was devoid of any humor. “I have my secrets just as you have yours, Captain Tepeş,” she says, bowing her head ever so slightly, and he stiffens almost as soon as the words leave her mouth, his lips thinning into a tight, defensive line. “I’m no Captain,” he says, his voice low. “Not anymore. *Yours* made sure of that.”

“He cannot take away your standing,” Sypha says, taking a step forward to keep him in view. “Only the things that constituted it. That does not take away your title and your duties.”

“A shipless, crewless Captain.” He scoffs derisively, looking away from her. “There can be no higher disgrace. A captain who cannot keep his ship and his crew should not be called so at all.”

He turns to look at her again after a few minutes of tense silence, his expression softening into something almost like curiosity. “Why is there no window in this cell?” he asks finally.

She blinks at him, thrown for a moment. “What?”

“This cell,” he says, glancing up at the bare stretch of wall where, set into the wood should be a porthole as it is for every other cell in the brig. “Why is there no porthole here? I couldn’t see the sunrise, nor does the light reach this corner.”

She reaches out and runs a finger along one of the bars, gazing at her own distorted, stretched and curved face reflected in its gleaming surface. “Well,” she says, choosing her words carefully, “let’s just say that if you win against Trevor today, you’ll find out.”

He sighs. “Another abnormality. Another question. Another lack of an answer. Is everybody on this fucking ship aware of my own secrets except me?”

Sypha only shrugs, then sits down by the bars, folding her legs underneath her so that she can feel the faint thrum of the ocean beneath her thighs and calves, feel the dormant power of it. She’s always been both fascinated and terrified of the sea, the latter ever since she’d fallen off a boat as a child and had looked down, where below her feet lay a ghostly dead reef, black and green and lifeless. She’d looked around, wildly, and had seen only endless blue, stretching sideways and downward for miles until it faded to the black of the unknown. Down there she knew there were billions of slimy slippery toothy things that never saw the light of day, down far, far below her thrashing little feet. The sheer thought of it, of how much water and how much *nothing* was beneath her and all around her, had petrified her. She had screamed and gasped and paddled, her limbs desperately keeping her afloat lest she go unmoored and sink into that bottomless abyss, until her grandfather had pulled her, choking and spluttering, back onto the boat.

She’s feared the sea ever since—not for the creatures that curl in its depths, but rather for the idea of it, how little is known about it and its depth, how far down it goes. Yet it fascinates her as all things fascinate her, its tides and currents and unpredictable spells of calm and rage. Perhaps that is why sailors speak of the sea as if she is a woman, for only a woman can be both a benevolent giver of life and ruthless taker of it. Only a woman feels with such intensity, shows herself in both dazzling beauty and tranquility and in fierce and terrible anger.

“What are you thinking about?”

She’s broken rather abruptly from her reverie at the sound of their prisoner’s voice, cutting through the haze of thoughts in her mind. She glances up from where she’d been tracing an absentminded pattern on the floorboards beneath her fingers and looks at him. “What?”

“You suddenly looked as if you were very far away.” He blinks enigmatic golden eyes at her—such an unusual color, a bright, iridescent sort of gold—and she pulls herself back to the present. “Nothing,” she says. “Just... thinking about when I fell in when I was a child.” She raps the floorboards lightly with her knuckles, tucking a wayward curl of strawberry-blonde behind her ear. “It still keeps me up sometimes.”

“How old were you?”

She casts her mind back, shaking her head. “I must have been... five years old when it happened.”

“That *is* young.” He gazes at her with a sort of renewed interest, brows furrowing slightly. “When I was that age I wasn’t even allowed on a boat. I wasn’t allowed in a lot of places as a child, the church included. I’m still not allowed in there, though I learned not to ask why. I’d sneak away on boats sometimes anyway though, and hide myself in the fishermen’s nets so I wouldn’t be seen.”

She feels her lips tilt up almost against her will, ignoring the way her heart jolted at his mention of not being allowed into the church. “The fishermen’s nets?” she asks instead.

“I’d come back all filthy and smelling terribly of fish,” he says, a wistful sort of look in his eye. “There was once when I got into an empty barrel, and nobody knew I was there; what I didn’t know was there were several netfuls of fresh catches ready to be brought in.”

“Oh, no,” says Sypha, beginning to smile, and he nods at her, amused. “Oh, yes. I got so buried in fish, I could scarcely breathe. That taught me not to go sneaking in places I shouldn’t be.”

She laughs, trying and failing to imagine the man in front of her as a little boy, gap-toothed and slippery-fingered, shrieking as he gets covered in dead fish. It only makes it more difficult to stop, and soon she’s breathless and flushed with tears in her eyes from laughter.

He’s looking at her, a sort of oddly wondrous expression on his face. Then, slowly, he cracks a small smile—the first smile of his she’s ever seen, she realizes with a jolt. Soon his little smile grows into a grin, which grows into laughter of his own, mingling with hers in the musty air. His whole face seems to transform, the corners of his eyes crinkling and the sharp lines of his face softening. He looks years younger, and even through all the dirt and grime and blood she’s struck suddenly by his unearthly beauty, how there must be flawless porcelain skin beneath all the crusted filth and dried blood gathered there, how if not for the tangles in his hair it must be fine as corn silk, and just as soft.

She pulls herself from the flustered thoughts, suddenly feeling herself being yanked back down to earth. He’s a prisoner, an enemy, a lackey of the Church. She should be wary of him,

shouldn't even be talking to him. But there's something about him that draws her to him, something dangerous and something entirely too intriguing to dissuade her. Unbidden in her mind rises the thought of Trevor, of what he'd think, of what he'd say if he saw her.

Ten years and he hasn't even looked at you, whispers a bitter voice in her mind. Ten years of loving him and all he's done is duck into alleys with other girls, prettier and curvier girls whose sensibilities are as loose as their corsets. You have every right to move on, to look at other men and allow yourself to like it.

She bites her lip, glancing hastily away from him and up towards one of the portholes lining the walls of the other cells. The sun has begun to rise in earnest and there's a thick bar of rose-gold sunlight slanting through it, spilling a perfect circle of warmth down onto the polished wooden floor. She can see dust motes dancing inside it, suspended in the air as if time has stopped in only that one bar of sunlight, as if nothing else matters.

She stands up abruptly, brushing the dust off her knees. "It's nearly time," she says, and out of the corner of her eye she sees the smile slip off his face. "We should go."

She fumbles for the keys in her pockets, finding the heaviest one, cast in the shape of a cross. She fits it to the lock, which springs open with a sonorous clang. Their prisoner stands slowly, all elbows and knees and disheveled hair. His expression is carefully neutral once more, as if even he knows as she does that their brief shared moment of vulnerability has passed as suddenly as they'd found it thrust upon them.

She opens the door and he steps out carefully to avoid coming in contact with the bars, giving an almost involuntary shiver of relief as he leaves behind the wood and metal that had probably caused him so much pain in the night, its weight lifting off his skin. She doesn't look at him as she locks the door once more and sets off towards the steps, steadfastly looking ahead.

And if she hadn't so astutely been avoiding his eye, she would have noticed that his own gaze is just as deliberately leveled away from hers as hers is from his.

The storm has taken every last cloud in the sky with it, leaving the dawn as brilliant and crisp as the edge of a blade. The horizon is stained gold, dyeing the sea below it a ruddy orange. The wind is cold and brisk, and carries with it the faint scent of salt and seawater.

Trevor is perched on the ship's prow, in his usual spot in a small nook on the figurehead. He supposes it's a little pretentious and more than a little blasphemous to have a massive carving of Lucifer falling from heaven wrapped in chains on the front of his ship, but one of the first things he ever remembered wondering about his family was why their most coveted weapon was named after the devil. Plus, it helped fuel the rumors on Dranova *and* piss off the Church at the same time—so what's not to like?

Moreover, he's grown fond of it. Even if it's sort of terrifying, what with Lucifer's beautiful face twisted with agony and betrayal, bloody tears running down his cheeks and two sawed-off stumps on his back, still bleeding from where his wings had once been, torn off by his father before He cast him out of heaven. His broken body is lashed to the front of the ship,

the chains around his ankles, wrists and neck, as well as the ones crossing over each other on his chest melding neatly with the prow and the rest of the front of the ship.

There's a small shelf of sorts near the figure's back, where one of Lucifer's torn-off wings meets his shoulder blade, that just happens to be perfect for sitting on and watching the sea go by below, and also happens to hide whoever sits there from the rest of the ship. He escapes here more often than he'd like to admit, away from the noise and general bustle of the ship and out here, where he can see the ocean stretching out for forever, turning into the horizon and turning infinite.

"Trevor?"

He turns, a hand reaching out and gripping one of Lucifer's wing stumps for balance as he stands. He peers over the figurehead's shoulder and at Sypha, who's standing near the helm with her arms crossed and her eyebrows raised, with a scowling and glaring Adrian Tepeş beside her, wrists bound together in thick iron manacles and looking positively murderous. It's time, then.

He gets a good foothold on the shelf, then pushes up and over its shoulder, levering himself easily with an arm on a wooden stump. He lands lightly on the other side, walking down the sloping slender wooden beam that attaches to the helm as casually as if he were walking on a broad gangway rather than a four-inch wide plank of wood. He drops neatly in front of them at the helm, and catches Sypha rolling her eyes in his direction, as well as her mutter of something that sounds a lot like "*show-off*". He studiously ignores her.

Adrian glares at him, and he glares right back. Hating this guy is a given, and it's almost too easy—he works for the Church, and what with his last name and his undeniable heritage, he's practically Trevor's sworn enemy on general principle. And to add insult to injury, he's a pompous, arrogant brat. Fighting—and winning—is going to be especially satisfying.

He holds out a hand without taking his eyes off Tepeş. "Keys."

There's a soft jingle of metal as Sypha presses the heavy iron key to the chains into his palm.

He still doesn't break eye contact. "Go."

She turns on her heel and leaves, vanishing from sight as she descends the stairs from the helm. Now it's just the two of them, the sun rising steadily behind Trevor in a burst of dazzling gold that begins slowly creeping up the figurehead. Soon it'll cover the whole ship and bathe it all in light. But he doesn't intend for this to last that long. Adrian Tepeş will be back in his cell before the sunlight can reach the helm.

"What did you put in that cell?" Adrian asks, golden eyes narrowed suspiciously after a few seconds of silent mutual glaring. "And what had you coated the bars with?"

"Why? They burn your delicate skin, Tepeş?"

A muscle in his cheek jumps. "Are you going to tell me what's going on, or are you going to wait till after I've beat you to touch on the finer points?"

Trevor laughs. “We’ll see about that. The winning bit, I mean. As for knowing what’s going on—smart boy like you, shouldn’t you have guessed by now? Or are you too scared of the answer, even if you already have guessed it?”

Adrian says nothing, but that muscle in his cheek jumps again.

Trevor takes a step towards him, finally looking away as he glances down, fitting the key to the heavy padlock on his manacles. Adrian holds himself still as Trevor undoes the chains, and the moment they come loose he lets them fall between them onto the deck. Then he kicks them away to the side, raising his face to turn the full force of his golden glare upon Trevor afresh. “Will you let me fight with my weapons, or were you intending to win this by leaving me unarmed?”

“Oh, I’m intending to win this fair and square, Church boy.” He reaches behind his back for the blade he’s kept sheathed there for safekeeping, not deeming his cabin secure enough to keep a clearly expensive sword. It’s massive, the hilt protruding over the curve of his left shoulder like a silver cross. Adrian’s eyes flash dangerously as Trevor holds the blade out to him hilt-first, but he says nothing as he reaches out and takes it.

“Don’t worry, I have no intention of using a sword the Church probably forged for you,” Trevor says, patting his whip, which is coiled on his belt. “I have my own weapons.”

“The Church didn’t forge this,” says Adrian, fingers wrapping firmly around the handle as he lifts it to his eye. “I inherited it from my father.” He lowers the blade, his gaze following the blade and latching onto Trevor with a thinly veiled contempt making them glitter maliciously, almost like a challenge. As if he expects Trevor to rise to the bait—which he doesn’t, mostly because he has no idea what he’s talking about.

“I’ve never even met your father,” Trevor says, drawing his whip. It slumps to the deck below in a mass of black leather coils, like a limp snake. “But believe me, if I had met him, he’d be dead.”

Adrian’s lips curl back in a snarl, and Trevor’s eyes linger on the points of his teeth. “He *is* dead,” he hisses. “And you would know all about that, wouldn’t you?”

Trevor stills for a moment, feeling that now-familiar confusion tug at him. His concentration slips for just half a moment, his whip dropping by a fraction of an inch—but Adrian catches it anyway, and a heartbeat later he charges, directly at Trevor. He takes a leaping step backwards, casting out his whip as he does, the heavy coils straightening and tautening, parrying Adrian’s slash in his direction. The edge of the blade skids across the length of the leather, dragging along it with a low hiss of metal.

He spins, then lashes out again, the whip curving in on itself and striking Adrian directly in the chest. He hears a low gasp, then the bright ring of his blade as it comes whistling towards him. He ducks, then spins backwards, slamming his back against Adrian’s chest and ramming his elbow into his throat for good measure. Before he can retaliate Trevor dances out of reach, cracking his whip as he retreats.

Adrian doesn't even falter, snarling as he advances again, knuckles white on the hilt of his blade. His eyes flick leftwards for a split second, and Trevor turns towards the movement just before he lunges—to Trevor's right. Caught off guard by the feint, Trevor just manages to twist away from the edge of the blade, but not quite fast enough. He feels the fabric at his side tear, the blade slicing cleanly through his shirt. It just barely grazes his skin, a cold kiss.

But it doesn't draw blood, and that's what matters—

He freezes, the thought hitting him so suddenly it's like a lightning bolt spearing into his head. Drawing blood doesn't matter—or does it?

He lets the idea sow itself into his head, lets it grow slowly as they trade blows, seemingly equally matched. He doesn't know which one of them has the advantage; rationally, it would be Adrian, but since his own advantage is lost on him and he doesn't know it's there at all, the scales have tipped. And if Trevor manages to do what he's planning to do, then they'll tip in his favor. He can use Adrian's own advantage against him, and even if it's not the fairest of moves, it'll work.

Adrian sidesteps nimbly as Trevor lunges again, and he sweeps his blade out, catching him by the fingers. Determined not to bleed just yet, Trevor turns his wrist and allows his grip to falter, the whip slipping from his limp hand, opting to lose the weapon rather than let the sword cut him. He darts to the side, then draws his own blade, raising it and charging.

He catches Trevor's short sword by the hilt, and the blades meet with a loud, ringing clash, sparks flying where the metals chafe against each other. Trevor feels his biceps strain as they both push to get the upper hand, their eyes meeting over their joined swords. Is it just his imagination, or is there a trace of scarlet where gold should be—?

Adrian sweeps his blade down and away from where it had been locked with Trevor's, aiming to slash at his ribs. Trevor jumps back, knocking the tip away with his own blade. He raises his sword up in front of him just as the flat of Adrian's blade collides with it with a clang, the sound ringing in his ears. He parries a thrust, then slashes. It's blocked by a silver hilt and a glaring Adrian, whose face is entirely closed and unyielding, his face remarkably clear of sweat as he moves with an unerring speed.

The next few minutes are a blur of slashing and thrusting and parrying, being blocked by Adrian's blade and twisting away from his blows. His arms are sore, muscles burning and screaming from exhaustion and overexertion. Still he plows on, seeking the right opening, the precise moment to let his defense slip just the barest fraction—

He turns inward, Adrian's blade whistling towards him. And instead of blocking it with his blade he allows his aching arms to give in to their pain and drop, the point of his sword dipping down as he raises his unguarded forearm to catch the edge of the sword. It drags across his exposed skin, opening up a wide gash in his skin, one that immediately wells up with bright ruby-red blood. It spills over his arm, and just before it can drip onto the deck at their feet, Trevor allows Adrian's momentum to carry him forward, and all he has to do is take a single step towards him and press his bloody forearm directly into Adrian's face.

Adrian recoils as Trevor's blood smears across his mouth—and then he goes rigid. Trevor yanks his arm back, but the damage is done; his eyes snap towards Trevor, and his breath cuts off sharply in his throat when he sees—actually *sees*—his pupils expand rapidly, so rapidly that between one heartbeat and the next they've turned almost entirely from gold to black. And a second later they flash into bright, bloody crimson.

Adrian drops his sword, and it hits the deck with a clatter. He inhales sharply, and then pain suffuses his face as he cries out, and Trevor sees his canines sharpening, then elongating, curved and slender and deadly fangs that slice into his own lower lip, drawing blood that's far, far brighter than any human's. It must have hurt, because Adrian's face is twisted with agony, his eyes still glowing an eerie, unfamiliar red. His face is drained of all color, leaving him chalk-white. Everything human about him has vanished, all replaced by alien features he probably didn't even know were lurking just out of sight, behind a façade he didn't even know he was wearing.

And it's Trevor's blood that did the trick.

Red eyes latch onto the gash on Trevor's forearm, and Trevor's heart skips a beat. He only has time to think something along the lines of *Oh, shit* before Adrian lunges, his blade lying forgotten on the deck beside them. Trevor jumps back, holding his bloody arm out of Adrian's reach. He supposes he should have anticipated this, but in his defense, he hadn't thought this far ahead.

“Oh no, you don't.” He aims a swift kick between Adrian's ribs and he crumples with a low moan, eyes still shining like bloody rings in his face. He lashes out with a foot, kicking Trevor's legs out from under him. Trevor loses balance, the wind knocked out of him as he falls in a heap beside the dhampir.

He scrambles back as Adrian bears down on him; the full force of his strength is finally released from its hidden reservoir, and he clearly doesn't know how to use it just yet. His fangs are at least two inches long and deadly sharp, sharp enough to tear his skin open and slice through his bones. There's no recognition in those crimson eyes, only hunger. *Shit*, Trevor thinks, still desperately scrambling backwards on his hands and knees. *What have I done?*

Just as Adrian lunges in for the kill something yanks him back, pulling him away from Trevor. He clambers to his feet, holding his throbbing forearm gingerly, and sees Sypha behind Adrian, slender cords of what looks like fire lashing his arms and torso. Her arms are holding his to her with a vicelike grip, and as hard as he struggles, her magic is stronger. He's snarling and thrashing like a wild animal, and it seems to be all Sypha can do to hold him back.

Trevor moves warily towards them and Adrian snaps at him, desperation in every jerk of his body. “Just a taste,” he's saying, eyes still clinging to Trevor's wound with an alarming hunger in them. “Just a small taste—”

“In your dreams, vampire,” Trevor says, then scoops up Adrian's blade from where it's lying on the deck at his feet and slams the end of the hilt into his temple, knocking him out

instantly. He crumples, his hair fanning out around his head artfully as he hits the ground, unconscious.

“Trevor, why?” Sypha asks, and she looks disapproving, almost disappointed. She’s frowning at him, face flushed from exertion. “Why did you have to trick him like that?”

“He didn’t even know what he was, Sypha.” He nudges Adrian’s unconscious body with the tip of his boot. “He had no idea. It’s clear that this was the first time he fought an actual person. He’s never seen blood before, and even if he has, he’s never seen it this close. And as for the silver, he probably used gold coins back in Wallachia. I don’t think he was allowed to use the silver ones.”

“He said, earlier,” Sypha says, kneeling beside his prone form, “that he’s not allowed into the church back at home. He said he was never allowed inside, and he’d... learned to stop asking why.”

“The bishop knew, then. The slimy son of a bitch knew he was dealing with a dhampir—the dhampir son of the most powerful vampire in the world. He probably raised him to be a weapon, to use against the enemy when the time came. He groomed him to be the perfect lackey, brainwashed and convinced that the church can do no wrong. He’d have been invincible with him by their side, and the bishop knew it. He hid his nature from him all his life, getting him to retract his fangs when he was a baby and not letting him touch the silver coins and never letting him see human blood.”

“That’s terrible,” Sypha says softly. She’s speaking more and more softly now that she has to mimic a boy’s cadence, and it’s almost disconcerting; he’s known Sypha to speak her mind and not care about who hears it, and he’s used to her not staying quiet for anyone. “Not knowing who he is, not knowing what he can do, having your identity repressed like that all your life...”

“Yeah, let’s not start feeling sorry for Dracula’s little boy just yet,” Trevor says, kneeling and snatching the manacles from where they’d been lying and snapping them closed over Adrian’s wrists again. “He’s still loyal to the church.”

“Now, maybe... but when he wakes?” Sypha blinks wide blue eyes at him, kneeling on Adrian’s other side with her palms resting on her thighs. “Once he finds out what the bishop kept from him, his natural response will be to turn his back on them. They took away who he was in favor of using him. Nobody would take kindly to that.”

“When you’re that close to someone, when you grow up with their ideas and their ideas of good and evil drilled into your head, you make excuses for their behavior,” Trevor reminds her. “I’ve seen it, you’ve seen it. Men whose wives and daughters and sisters were burned at the stake by the church say it was the right thing to do, say they were saving them from a terrible fate. Sinners are the only ones left free to think for themselves.”

She shakes her head. “He’ll come around, Trevor. I’m sure of it.”

He turns to her, eyes narrowed. “You said he told you he wasn’t allowed in the church. When?”

She hesitates for the barest fraction of a moment. “Earlier, in the cells. When I went to bring him here.”

He eyes her carefully. “Did he like you?”

Her cheeks flush a deep scarlet. “I—I don’t know, Trevor, we barely spoke. He’s our prisoner, remember?”

He weighs the idea in his mind, mulling it over before he speaks. “He told you that much, it must mean that he trusts you enough to talk to you about things. I want you to try and get closer to him, try to get information off him. If he finds you sympathetic enough, he’ll talk. I think he will. Then we’ll know a little more about what we’re up against.”

The redness in her cheeks deepens. “I’m not going to manipulate him into telling me things, Trevor. I’d actually rather you strap him to a chair and torture him—at least that’s honest. He’s already been lied to his whole life, treated like something to use. I’m not going to do that to him again.”

Trevor pinches the bridge of his nose, sighing. “Fuck’s sake, Sypha. I’m not asking you to seduce him or something, I just want to get him to talk. A little bit. And you know he sure as hell isn’t going to talk to me. So it might as well be you. And who knows, you may end up actually liking him. He seems a decent enough bastard when he’s not being an arrogant prick.”

“But you do want me to fake an interest in his well-being to get closer to him,” she says stubbornly.

He spreads his arms wide. “Yeah. Yeah, I want you to fake thinking he’s a poor unfortunate little boy who’s had his life taken away from him by that fucking madman bishop, then by mean Captain Belmont, and I want him to think you’re sympathetic and nice, and I want him to be able to confide in you. Okay? Can you do that?”

She sighs, clearly frustrated. “Do I have a choice, Trevor?”

He turns away, a sour taste in his mouth. “No, you don’t.”

“Fine,” she says bitterly, standing up. “Fine, Trevor, I’ll do it. But if anything bad happens because of it, I am not responsible for what befalls either of us as a result.”

She stalks past him and towards the stairs, and as she passes him he grabs her arm, stopping her. “Just—try not to lower *your* guard around him too much, okay? He’s dangerous, and I don’t want him to—”

To fall in love with you, because that’s my job. To pine after you and never have you even if I’ve loved you for what feels like a lifetime.

“To what?” she says angrily, glaring up at him.

“To—to hurt you,” he finishes, rather lamely. She scoffs derisively, saying nothing, then wrenches her arm out of his grip and storms away down the steps and out of sight. He

watches her go just like he's watched her go a thousand times before, his throat closing up.

His eyes fall to Adrian Tepeş' unconscious form at his feet and sighs, kneeling and pulling him up, slinging one of his limp arms over Trevor's shoulder to hoist him up. A close look into his face tells him his fangs have retracted, leaving behind just slightly-longer-than-average canines. Nobody would look at them twice.

He turns towards the sunrise just as its rays reach the ship, washing over him in a wave of buttery warmth. Sunrises are always best out at sea in his opinion, where it's as if it's rising right in front of you, with nothing between the sun and the ship to hinder its light. He glances beside him where he's holding Adrian up, and the rays make him drip with golden light, making his hair shimmer as if it's made of strands of the sun's rays itself. It seems so odd, that he has all the qualities of a vampire but he can stand in the sun, can let its light cover him and remain unharmed.

He closes his eyes a moment, tilting his face up to the light and the warmth, savoring it. He knows the next few weeks are going to be difficult to say the least, what with Sypha clearly disgusted with him and Adrian probably hating him, with a crew he hardly knows, sailing to God-knows where. And after that... after that he has no idea what's going to happen. All he knows is that he's entangled himself into something that's far bigger than just him and the Church. Now that Adrian Tepeş is his prisoner, now that he knows what he is, Trevor has risked attracting the wrath of people much more powerful than the Church. And far more dangerous.

And even though he does it so rarely it probably doesn't count, even though he doesn't believe anything will come out of it he sends a tiny little prayer flitting up to the sky, even if God doesn't give two shits about anyone, least of all an excommunicated pirate with very little to no moral fiber and even less honor.

Just let me survive this. That's all. I just want to walk out of all of this, preferably with all my limbs still intact and with Sypha safe. That's all I fucking ask.

He sighs, turns away from the sunrise, and then with Adrian Tepeş' limp body still supported by his own, he begins to make his way back down to the cells once more.

Chapter End Notes

did i make trevor's ship's figurehead so sick that i now want his ship for myself? yes. quit judging.

also adrian getting knocked out is starting to become a theme. he keeps getting knocked out. it's just so convenient lmao.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

the next update will be here anytime between next week and five months from now, so get cozy yall. :)

cw: blood, injury, some graphic descriptions.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The gash across his arm opens up and starts bleeding again when Trevor is stripping off his clothes, now stiff with dried blood like stains of rust-colored flowers blossoming across the fabric. His sleeve has grown sodden and scarlet with fresh blood before he realizes, and he has to peel the torn flaps of what remains of the garment off his arm, the cut stinging in earnest now. He winces, dropping the bloody shirt at his feet as he examines the slice in his skin. It's clean, a neat swipe that's parted his skin easily.

Stitches, then.

He sighs wearily, stomping over to the bathroom to run water over the wound to clean it before doing what has to be done. He hates doing his own stitches; they come out jagged and uneven on his better days, and since the cut is on his left arm he'll have to use his right hand, which he isn't as dexterous with. Usually he would ask Sypha, whose hands are steadier and more experienced than his own, but right now she probably doesn't even want to look at him. Asking her to stitch him up isn't exactly the best way to apologize for being an insensitive bastard.

He manages to thread a needle with numb fingers—he's losing blood, and fast, making the fingers of his left hand clumsy and stiff—and tie it tightly, making a fist as he sits at his desk, elbows braced on the wood. He poises the edge of the needle at the edge of the wound and braces himself, counting briefly to three in his head before driving the tip into the first torn bit of his skin.

He grits his teeth hard to stop himself from making any sort of noise, clenching his fingers tighter and ignoring the pain as he forces the needle through the other end of the cut, pulling the thread across and between the edges of his skin. Fresh blood wells up in the cut and spills down his arm, dripping steadily onto the floor. He pays it no heed, pulling the thread taut and moving on to the next stitch. It's messy work, and within seconds his fingers are wet with blood and the needle and thread are covered in the stuff, shining a dark red.

He's halfway up the cut when he hears a knock at the door.

Cursing under his breath, he stands, still holding the needle with his right hand as he stumbles across the room, his bare feet nearly slipping on the blood that's gathered on the wooden

floor. He shoulders the door open, his whole arm stiff with pain and the tips of his fingers aching from the several dozen times he'd pricked himself with the needle. "What?" he snaps, then stops short when he sees Sypha on the other side of the door, her face steadfastly expressionless. "Oh," is all he manages to get out. "What is it? Is something wrong?"

"The crew needs a heading," she says shortly. "Do we keep heading west?"

"Yeah. Yeah, keep going towards the Mediterranean," he says, glancing down, briefly distracted by the unpleasantly warm and tickling sensation of having fresh blood running down his arm from the half-closed wound. "Once we hit it I'll let you know when to change course—shit."

The blood has successfully traveled down the length of his arm and is now dripping ceaselessly off his fingers onto the floor between his bare feet and Sypha's boots, gleaming like spilled wine. "Sorry about that," he mutters, swinging his bloody arm out of sight as Sypha's eyes fall on the wound. They widen immediately. "I'll just—"

"Trevor, you *know* you're terrible at stitching yourself up—what have you done?" She grabs his arm before he can shut the door and he winces, deciding it's probably wisest to stay quiet. She glances up, brows furrowed with concern. "Let me," she says.

He only nods.

She sits him down on his bed, prizing the needle from his numb fingers and kneeling beside him. He's light-headed and dizzy from blood loss as she lowers her head over the wound and undoes the clumsy, unevenly spaced stitches he'd threaded through the cut and carefully does them all again. It doesn't hurt as much, but that's probably because he's seconds away from passing out. And because it's Sypha, Sypha with her careful hands and nimble fingers, Sypha sitting so close he can smell the faint, sweet scent that usually shrouds her and feel the warmth of her breath on his skin and see the coppery downward brushstrokes of her lashes, feathering over the tops of her faintly freckled cheeks as she looks down, entirely focused.

She finishes the last of the stitches with a faint tug and ties it off neatly, setting the needle aside as she examines her work. The rows of thread are neat and orderly, evenly spaced and close together, holding the wound closed. His skin is sticky with drying blood, and already the wound is beginning to itch. There's blood in various stages of drying everywhere, crusted underneath his fingernails, all over the floor by the desk and covering his hands and Sypha's fingers. Seeing so much of his own blood everywhere is disconcerting, and the room is beginning to swim in front of his eyes.

"Wait here," Sypha says softly. "I'll go get some bandages."

He thinks he nods, and she stands and leaves. He blinks, and his eyelids feel heavy and stiff. He can't even move his fingers, stuck together as they are with blood. He knows he did this to himself, that he's the only one to blame for all this. He'd baited Adrian Țepeș into exposing his own nature, and he'd paid the price—not just the wound, but so many other things. Sypha's trust, for one thing. Exposure, for another. He'd just drawn an even bigger target on his own back and the back of everyone on this ship, the whole crew. Soon it won't be just the church looking for them and hunting them down. And it's all Trevor's fault.

He feels something hot and damp drag across his stinging and throbbing forearm and jumps, realizing belatedly that Sypha has returned and is kneeling by his bed again, a tub of steaming water beside her and a sodden rag in her hand, gently cleaning the blood off his skin. He blinks down at her blearily, feeling oddly light-headed and detached from his own body, as if he's watching himself from behind a pane of misty glass, only able to see a faint, blurry outline and hazy suggestions of reality.

Sypha dabs at the stitched wound with something that stings and burns, and he doesn't even have the strength to articulate the pain of it, a soft little moan escaping his lips instead. "Hurts," he mutters.

"This will help with the healing," Sypha says, not looking at him. She hasn't looked at him the whole time she's been in here, tending to his arm. Even half-conscious he feels a little pang of something that's part regret and part anger. Why does he have to fuck everything up?

Sypha stands long enough to sit beside him on the bed, still wiping the blood off his skin. Somehow it's made its way onto his face and chest, and it's dried in sticky splotches of dark red. The smell of it is everywhere, the air thick with its heavy iron scent. He holds himself still as she dabs at his skin, suppressing a shiver or two as she leans forward, that sweet vanilla smell of her skin washing over him and filling his head. Her lips are slightly parted, and she's so close he can see the dents her teeth have made in the soft skin where she's bitten it. He can't take his eyes off her, no matter how many times he tells himself to stop. Her face is as familiar to him as his own, but he can never get enough of looking at her, and every time he does he discovers something new about her face—the freckles dusting her nose, the slivers of darker blue in her eyes, the way the left corner of her lips goes up first when she smiles.

He doesn't remember falling in love with Sypha, but he remembers realizing it. They'd been maybe sixteen or seventeen years old, sitting on the roof of one of the taller buildings in Dranova, swinging their legs over empty space and eating one of those expensive icing-covered tarts from the bakery in the market after Trevor had saved up enough coin to finally buy one. They'd broken it in half with their hands and shared it, licking their fingers and giggling. There had been icing and crumbs everywhere but the tart had been sweet and tasted of fresh green apples and cinnamon and it melted on his tongue, and with Sypha sitting squeezed beside him and the taste of it in his mouth he'd actually been happy, one of the first times he'd felt really happy since he'd been a child.

A bit of icing had fallen onto Sypha's robe and she was trying to rub it off steadfastly, chin tucked into her shoulder and tongue poking out just a bit, eyebrows scrunched together and all of her concentration leveled on that single task of getting the little icing stain off her clothes. There had been crumbs dusting her lips and her hair was in disarray, the evening sunlight slanting down onto her and coating her in dark gold. He was looking at her, just like he's looking at her now, and then he'd realized suddenly that his life would quite simply be nothing without this girl in it.

He's jerked back to the present when Sypha withdraws, having sponged all the blood off him. She gently begins to wrap his forearm with a cloth bandage, and he can feel a cool salve smeared on the inside. Once the wound is covered and the bandage is tied off she draws away, examining her work. She exhales, and he can see the vulnerable line of her throat move

as she swallows, then nods. “That should do it,” she says. “Make sure you don’t overexert yourself, otherwise the stitches will come undone.”

He says nothing and she sits back, her hands covered in his blood. Finally she glances up and meets his eye, and their gazes catch and hold. He sees hesitation tug at her face visibly, and then she glances away quickly. “You’ve still got blood on you,” she murmurs, and she leans down, wringing out the rag she’d used earlier into the bucket, still steaming gently. The water inside is more red than colorless now.

She wipes the cloth carefully across his face, and she’s still not looking at him. He can feel exhaustion and blood loss dragging him under, making his limbs heavier and his vision dimmer. He looks at her as she looks away from him, busying herself cleaning the blood off his skin. He swallows, and when he speaks his voice is cracked and dry.

“Sorry,” he says.

She glances up for the barest fraction of a second. “What?” she asks, and she sounds slightly uncertain.

“I’m sorry.”

She looks away again. “For what?”

“I don’t know—everything.” He sighs, shutting his eyes so he doesn’t have to see her avoiding his gaze. “I’ve been a shitty friend, especially in the past few days.”

“You’ve lost more blood than I’d thought,” she says, and now she sounds amused. “You have nothing to apologize for, Trevor. I know it’s been hard for you, what with everything that’s happened in the last week. You’ve been doing everything you can.”

“That’s still not enough.” He opens his eyes, and this time she’s looking directly back at him. “I haven’t been fair to you.”

“This is ridiculous,” she says, shaking her head and continuing to sponge the dried blood off him. “You don’t know what you’re saying, Trevor. This is your fatigue talking.”

“Then it’s best to wring a confession out of me now, since I don’t have the presence of mind to stop myself from saying it,” he says, and he reaches up, fingers encircling her wrist, stopping her. She inhales sharply, looking back up at him. Her fingers free the cloth and it slides to the floor, leaving a trail of bloody water in its wake. Neither of them pay it any mind, still staring at each other.

“Saying what?” Her voice is barely above a whisper.

“What I really think,” he says.

“About?”

“Everything.”

“Trevor...” She hesitates, and now she’s looking at him, really looking at him—not ducking her head and shying away like she was before. Being on the other end of the full force of her gaze is startling after she’d avoided his eye for so long, and her face is so familiar to him, more so even than his own. There’s a blazing sort of hesitation suffusing her features, a kind of insecurity, one that’s jarring; Sypha is many things—she is fierce and she is powerful and she is confident, and sometimes she’s obstinate and she can be a total pain in the arse—but she’s never insecure. She’s never uncertain.

But she is now.

He wants to answer that question he can see in her eyes. Because he can see it, hovering just out of reach of either of them, dancing in her periphery. It’s there, and he thinks he knows the answer to it. He hopes he does. He wants to tell her he loves her, wants to hope that that will fix everything magically somehow. But it will only put another burden on her shoulders, already hunched under the weight of so many others. So he swallows the words, just like he’s been swallowing them since he was sixteen. It will only ruin everything.

He always ruins everything.

And he can see her guard lowering, cautiously. His own is crumbling with every second, worn down as it is by pain and blood loss and Sypha’s proximity and the sound of her voice, the touch of her fingers.

He knows he can’t let this happen.

He’s fucked up—he’s shone a spotlight down onto this ship, another one. Now everyone in the Seven Seas will be gunning for them, everyone will be waiting to take their pound of flesh. Now Adrian Tepeş is his prisoner, and he knows what he is. He can’t allow anyone else to get hurt because of what he’s done. He can’t allow anyone close enough to share that spotlight, to widen that target.

Especially not Sypha. And that means he has to do whatever it takes to push her away. He’d rather Sypha hate him than die because of his carelessness. He steels himself, adjusting himself for another weight, another problem—and then he pulls back just barely.

He sees her eyes shutter almost instantly the moment he does, sees the walls close up around her again. She sits up, her fingers falling away from his chest and her other hand deftly scooping the blood-soaked rag up again. She ducks her head, and just like that that brief little moment, that slender cord that had connected them for just a few seconds, breaks once more.

“Thanks for...” He blinks down at his bandaged arm, feeling something hot and bitter growing in his throat. “You know. I’m rubbish at this stuff.”

She nods. “It’s nothing.”

He tries to swallow whatever it is that’s beginning to make it hard to breathe, leveling a blow and praying it lands, for her sake if not his own. “Lucky you decided to come by. I didn’t think you would—I thought you’d send someone else to ask about the heading.”

Her mouth tightens, and she stands, dropping the sodden rag into the bucket with a splash of bloody water. “I suppose,” is all she says, tightly. “It’s my job, isn’t it?”

He doesn’t know if she meant it to, but it stings. She begins to turn away, her shoulders tensing and her face closing up. She’s going to leave. She’s going to turn away, and she isn’t going to turn back around again. And it’s worth it. Anything to keep her safe.

She’s about to turn away fully when he aims his final blow. “You thought about what I told you earlier, right? About... about him?”

She stiffens, then glances back his way. “What?”

“You’ve given it some thought?”

She hesitates. “Yes... yes, I have.”

“Good. So now you’ll know it’s necessary. And again—lucky you’re here, because I think you’ll be up to the task. Better you than me. And it’s like you said; it’s your job, isn’t it?”

The blow hits home: Sypha flinches visibly, hurt flashing across her face for a split second before she hardens again. Her posture is stiff and unfriendly when she spins on her heel and stalks from the room, slamming the door behind her as she goes. The moment it does he sags against the back of the bed, all the energy draining out of him. He curls in on himself, blinking hard to get rid of the stinging in his eyes, and puts his face in his hands.

In his dreams, he sees his mother.

He remembers her, remembers that she had hair like spun gold and eyes like chips of summer sky, that her arms had been the safest place in the world and her voice the most calming thing he had ever heard. Sometimes he hears it in the wind that curls off the sea, hears it in the crash of the waves and the whisper of the tides, feels her arms around him instead of the water, sees her eyes instead of the endless blue expanse of the ocean. Sometimes he wonders if he will feel the same comfort she made him feel if he lets himself drown. Wonders if it will bring him peace. Succumbing to the one entity he loved more than anything—but is that the sea or his mother?

His mother’s eyes blink out at him, warm and kind and blue. He sees her smile, and beckon him towards her, her arms outstretched. She calls his name, and he goes to her.

His fingers pass through her skin like mist, and he falls forward into the choppy, storm-churned sea instead, realizing too little, too late that he had seen the waves, not her eyes, and heard the roar of the sea, not her voice, and now he feels the current drag him under and not her arms. But he doesn’t remember enough of her, doesn’t remember her as if she’s standing in front of him. He remembers her the way a half-remembered dream lingers in one’s mind, turning to liquid in your hands as you watch, dripping uselessly to the ground when you try to grip it tight, not wanting to let it go. He remembers her in impressions and suggestions, the sound of a lullaby and the feeling of silky golden hair, the softness of her cheek against his.

Her memory fractures and breaks into shards, each one tipped with blood—

Blood.

He can taste it in the back of his throat, coppery and thick and sharpening his vision, elongating his teeth, making everything stand out in bright, brutal detail. It makes him as quick and as intangible as the wind, sucks his soul out of his teeth bit by bit, drop by drop. If he fills himself with enough of it he'll turn into a soulless husk, a vessel made of hunger and instinct.

He sees the Bishop, sees the disgust on his face as he beholds the creature that Adrian has turned into, the creature he has been all along. Sees the cross in his hands, a cross that will sear his flesh, burn it away and turn him into ash. He sees himself as a boy, unallowed to enter the church, asking the Bishop why. He remembers never getting answers, remembers giving up on seeking the truth. He thinks he knows why, now.

He dreams of his father, which is impossible—he never knew his father. But does he? He sees blood on his hands even though the hands aren't his own, tastes blood on his teeth, but they don't belong to him. He sees a ship at midnight and a crew that doesn't breathe, and wonders if he is losing his mind.

He dreams about the sea, and he dreams of blood, and dreams of his parents. And in the whirlwind of memories and impressions and shards of bloody glass, he can't tell which is which and who is who. He doesn't think he even knows who he is anymore. Is he human, or is he a monster? Is he Adrian, or is he somebody else, somebody who has been lurking beneath his skin for his whole life? Is he his mother's son, or his father's? Or is he neither?

He thinks about the First Mate, the boy with the ocean eyes. He thinks about his soft voice, his direct gaze, thinks about the strange feeling he gets whenever they speak, as if there's something missing. And he thinks about Trevor Belmont, and he doesn't know whether he hates him or is indebted to him for what he did.

He thinks and he dreams, and he drifts. And outside, the sea laments its horribly beautiful symphony, and he isn't sure, but he thinks he hears the wind calling his name.

The wound on his arm itches, and he hates it.

Resilience and willpower are all well and good when it comes to enormously difficult things like being tortured for information and not giving in when that pretty young thief had attempted to seduce him in order to steal his dagger (he admittedly hadn't shown much willpower in that last situation, but Trevor had managed to hoodwink him and steal the emerald ring right off his delicate little finger, *after* allowing the boy to back him into a hidden alcove at that party). But those great qualities always seem to desert a person when faced with something as stupid as an itchy set of stitches.

He curls his fingers into fists to avoid the urge to scratch, knowing that he'll rip the stitches wide open and spill half his lifeblood down onto the prow. Not to mention it'll hurt like mad, get infected and make him regret it the moment he does it. But maybe he deserves it. He still

can't get the look on Sypha's face out of his head before she'd turned on her heel and slammed the door. God, he can't even fathom how much of an arse he is.

He sighs, leaning his head against the figurehead behind him. It doesn't work trying to convince himself it's worth it. Even if it is, it feels like shit.

He looks down, where beneath his boots the ship slices through the churning waves. Their surfaces are turned to the darkest of blues by the evening sky, and the sunset is beginning to streak across the sky above him. It's always beautiful out here in the middle of the ocean, where it's just him and the blue sky and the blue sea. Peaceful, almost. Like he hasn't got the church and a fuckton of pissed-off vampire generals on his tail.

He mutters a few choice curses under his breath, swinging himself over the figurehead and back onto the helm. Practice keeps him from slipping and being cut in half by the speed and weight of the ship moving through the water, as does a dash of caution. He may not be afraid of much, but getting sliced in half by his own ship isn't high on his bucket list.

The ship is bustling with activity, even if it's just seven men on board besides him, Sypha and Adrian Ţepeş. He just nods at the men as he passes by, turning and ducking down the steps belowdecks. He doesn't have it in him for small talk right now, even if it might be important small talk. Stopping on every third stair to make sure Sypha isn't down here he slowly moves down, down and down further still until he steps out into the brig, the creak of wood and the sound of the waves loudest here.

He stops in front of the last cell, and earlier he hadn't known whether he felt bad for Adrian Ţepeş or not. He'd thought about it a lot, about whether what he'd done had been morally right, or ethically wrong, or just plain stupid. And while he still doesn't know the answer to the last one, now he knows for sure that he definitely doesn't think he's done the man any favors.

Despite the silver bars and the aspen walls and the other anti-vampire paraphernalia that made up this cell Trevor had deemed it wise to restrain his arms, knowing that not much, not even silver, could stop a vampire if they were thirsty enough. And this particular vampire had technically been starving for about twenty-five years. Not a very optimistic number. So he'd shackled his wrists to the walls with iron, knowing it would both restrain him and restrict his blood flow, making it harder to move without it feeling like someone had just chopped both his arms off at the shoulders.

He looks like some heathen's version of Jesus, arms chained to either side of his body, half-slumped against the wall, wrists bleeding and healing and bleeding again, bruised and battered and the lower half of his face a mask of blood. His eyes are closed, the lids so dark they look like bruises on his face, which is more gaunt and hollowed than Trevor remembers. His hair is hanging around his face in lank golden strips, tumbling messily onto his shoulders. His chest barely rises and falls, the only sign that he's even alive. All in all, he looks like hell, and it's all Trevor's fault.

What the fuck am I even doing here? he thinks suddenly, swallowing hard and taking a step backwards. It's a mark of how disoriented he is that the swaying of the ship makes him

stagger, and it takes a few seconds for him to find his footing. He's beginning to turn away when he hears a weak voice behind him speak.

"Leaving so soon?"

He freezes, still halfway through turning towards the door. *Ah, fuck.*

He turns slowly back towards the cell, feeling oddly like a child caught with his hand in the cookie jar. Not that he knows how that would feel.

Adrian Tepeş hasn't moved a single inch, his hands still chained, wrists still bruised and skin broken and leaking blood and clear fluid, back curved awkwardly and slumped against the wall. Only now his eyes are open, no longer two dark circles but two dull golden disks that are filmed over with a heavy layer of fatigue and sleeplessness. He'd probably been awake the whole time. Bastard.

"It'd be a bit creepy if I just hung around watching you sleep, wouldn't it?" Trevor says, stepping up to the bars with his hands in his pockets. Adrian's face twitches minutely as he shifts, pulling his knees up to his chest with apparent difficulty, as if he doesn't want to show the pain he so obviously feels. Trevor ignores the sliver of guilt and pity that burrows between his ribs.

"I suppose," is all he says. "Only I wasn't asleep." He shakes his hair away from his face, which is alarmingly expressionless. This man's whole life has been flipped upside down and set on fire, everything he believed in ripped apart and scattered to the winds. Surely he should be feeling *something*. He looks at Trevor with those tired, lifeless eyes of his. "What are you doing here?"

"I... don't know," Trevor says, honestly.

"You're the second person to say that to me," Adrian says, leaning back against the wall. It looks incredibly uncomfortable, and Trevor knows that if he stands here for one more minute he'll end up tossing him the keys that sit heavily in his pocket. "Am I the person you all come to when you've nowhere else to go, then?"

"Maybe. I'd take it as a good sign, if I were you. It means people don't think you're a prick."

"I beg to differ." He frowns out at Trevor. "Or rather, you would."

"I don't think you're a prick, really," Trevor says conversationally. "I've just been raised to."

Adrian's face stills, and finally there's the barest sliver of emotion on his face—and it's an amalgamation of panic and fear and frustration and anger and sadness, and how that one little millisecond of expression can convey all that is beyond him. It's the realization that he really is truly upset by what he learned, that Trevor really fucked up *that* badly, that makes him grab the keys with minutely shaking fingers and unlock the cell door.

That earlier look of blankness along with a tinge of suspicion replaces his expression as Trevor opens the door with the squeak of hinges and fishes the other set of keys out of his

pocket. “Fuck this,” he mutters, unlocking the chains around his wrists. Adrian doesn’t move as Trevor frees his hands, but the moment the last manacle comes loose he exhales, his fingers wrapping around his own wrists to soothe the bites, sitting fully on the ground against the wall with his legs crossed beneath him. His shoulders slump with the relief from the pain almost instantly.

“I suppose these will look normal again in a few hours,” he says, examining the deep scores the iron had dug into his skin, braceleting his wrists with ribbons of scarlet.

“I’d expect so.”

“Couldn’t stomach how pathetic I looked, I suppose?” He raises an eyebrow, and Trevor shrugs. “Something like that.”

Adrian looks down at his hands, then back up at Trevor. “I’m not going to thank you, Belmont.”

“I wasn’t expecting you to,” Trevor says, turning around again. He shuts the cell door behind him again, locking it with a loud click. By the time he turns to face the inside of the cell again Adrian is looking at his wrists blankly—where the wounds are healing even as they both watch, the torn skin knitting itself back together and new skin smoothing over the scar tissue. Within seconds, all that’s left is the blood that had gathered there earlier.

“Not a few hours then, I suppose,” Adrian says after a pause, examining his own hands. “I still have to get used to this.”

“Not a bad thing to get used to, is it?” Trevor glances ruefully down at his own arm, where the skin around his stitches is still red and inflamed, sticky blood gathering between the threads. It still itches. “I mean, there are worse things that come with being half-vampire.”

“Like still being hungry no matter how much you eat and knowing you can’t satiate it with human food?” Adrian asks, and now there’s an edge to his voice. “Like feeding on the blood of the innocent? Like not being able to touch silver? Like staring eternity in the face and realizing you have nothing to live for even if you’ll outlive the whole world and possibly the very universe?”

“Look,” Trevor says, trying as hard as he can not to get irritated, “it isn’t my fault that—”

“That I am what I am? But it is your fault that you forced that realization on me when I was least expecting it,” Adrian snaps. “You knew exactly what you were doing, and you did it anyway. That’s on you, Belmont.”

“If you want to blame anyone,” Trevor says, “blame your Bishop. He knew what you were your whole life. I’ve known you a total of five days. Who’s to blame here?”

Adrian opens his mouth, then closes it again. “I don’t believe it,” he says, softly. “I don’t want to.”

“Well, it’s the truth, so you have to believe it no matter what,” Trevor says. “You’re a dhampir, ŢepeŞ. Your dad is fucking *Dracula*. You’re arguably the most powerful being on this planet, second only to your father. You have to believe it, because now there are probably a bunch of very angry and betrayed vampire generals sailing towards us in order to get you.”

Adrian gapes at him. “What?”

“Your father isn’t dead,” Trevor explains, not-so patiently. “He’s an immortal and all-powerful vampire king. The father of all vampires, the first vampire, whatever you want to call it. My family has spent their whole lives hunting him, but he’s good at what he does, and what he does is skulk out of sight. And now that you know all this, very pissed off vampire generals are going to try and get you to get an edge over your father.”

“But—” He splutters, a look of genuine and honest surprise on his face. “I don’t—”

“Everything you’ve been told about your past and your family is a lie,” Trevor finishes. “So you understand why I’ve taken due precautions?”

“I—I suppose—but—” He takes a deep breath. “I’m not sure if anybody’s told you,” he says, glancing up at Trevor, “but you simply *ooze* subtlety.”

“I never had cause to sugarcoat things, ŢepeŞ, and I never will.” He points at him. “And I am not starting with you.”

“So you have met my father,” Adrian says, clearly undeterred. Trevor sighs. “No, I haven’t. If I had, either I’d be dead or he would be.”

Adrian says nothing for a long time, merely looking down at his fully healed wrists with something almost like insecurity written all over his face. Finally, he speaks. “I... don’t really know what to say,” he says.

“How about ‘thank you for opening my eyes, Trevor’?”

“Fuck you,” he says without missing a beat, and Trevor can’t help but laugh. Even Adrian cracks a smile, but it fades away a second later. “I don’t know what to think,” he says. “My whole life I was taught to hate people like me, taught to think I’m unholy and the product of a violent mistake. How can I just be expected to live with that and act like it doesn’t mean anything to me?”

“You can’t just carry on,” says Trevor, taking a few steps forward and sitting cross-legged by the bars. “I get that. But you do have to acknowledge that the Bishop all but violated your whole existence and used you as a means to an end, and that he lied to you knowing who you were. Sy—my first mate said you weren’t allowed into the church as a kid. I’m sure you dealt in gold and not silver. I don’t think you’ve ever seen real, actual combat where people bleed heavily. He took who you are away from you, and that can’t be forgiven.”

He sighs. “I know that,” he says. “But I can’t deny that without him I would most certainly be dead.”

“It’s ‘not being dead’ against ‘using your existence to protect himself,’” says Trevor, holding his hands up. “It’s a simple choice to me.”

“But not to me.” Adrian frowns. “I understand what he did was unforgivable, but... if he had a chance to explain himself—”

“No,” says Trevor. “No way. That’s playing right into his hands. It’s what he wants, for you to try and forgive him. He hates you. He thinks you’re a monster and a thing of the devil, a by-product of hell. He acted like he cared about you. He sent you to kill me thinking you’d manage it, and that gets rid of the only thing standing between the church and their perfect vision of a world that bows down to them and they subjugate. Going to him with the benefit of the doubt is exactly what he thinks you’ll do if you find out, which you have. You have to cut him out, or he’ll end up popping up when we all least expect it and fuck everything up way more than it already is.”

Adrian lets out a long breath. He stays silent for a few minutes, then says, “All that being said, it would have been much easier simply to come down here and tell me who I was instead of—”

“Fuck’s sake, okay, fine—I’m sorry,” Trevor says, throwing his hands up. “What I did was unfair and mean and kind of cruel, and I should have thought twice before springing it on you like that. Okay? Happy now?”

There’s something almost like a smile on Adrian’s face. “I suppose.”

“So about the Bishop...?”

“I have to think about it,” Adrian says stubbornly. “I can’t just let go of such a big part of my life just like that. I need some time to think.”

“Right,” Trevor says. “Now that that’s out of the way, come on.” He stands, dusting off his trousers before grabbing up the keys and unlocking the door. “Out you come.”

“What? Why?” He looks genuinely bewildered, and it only succeeds in making Trevor feel even guiltier. *Because I’ll feel like shit knowing you’re rotting away down here when I could put you somewhere you don’t averesely react to every inch of.* “Because it’s too much work coming all the way down to the brig to bring you food and shit, and I’m a lazy bastard. How’s that?”

“Weak, but I’ll take it.” He stands, warily eyeing Trevor as he steps out of the cell. Trevor rolls his eyes. “Plus, you reek and are in desperate need of a bath.”

“That’s a better case,” Adrian says, turning to face him. Trevor side-eyes him, raising a brow. “You’re not going to jump on me and eat me alive, are you?”

“Much as I’d enjoy that, no,” Adrian says, haughtily turning his nose up. *And he’s back.* “There’s nowhere to run, so that would be fruitless. It’d be satisfying, though.”

“I’m sure I taste delicious,” Trevor says, locking the now-empty cell and moving towards the door with Adrian trailing behind him, muttering something about bitter blood and Belmonts. He hides his grin.

“Your arm is bleeding,” Adrian says helpfully as they climb the steps. Trevor glances down at the aforementioned arm, where one stitch has come loose. Blood is beading at the open tear, rapidly. He looks quickly at Adrian, who seems unfazed. Either he has iron self-control, or it doesn’t really affect him unless it’s at very close proximity. Either way, Trevor isn’t willing to risk it. He digs a scrap of cloth out of his pocket, wrapping it around the wound and ignoring the way it steadily begins to bleed through. “There,” he says. “All better.”

Adrian sighs. “I’m not going to turn feral at the sight of a cut, Belmont,” he says testily as Trevor leads him to the last empty room on the ship. He can’t believe he’s actually doing this. “Besides, it’s small. And I don’t need the stuff to survive,” Adrian goes on. “Moreover, I’m not a danger to any of you.”

“That,” mutters Trevor, “remains to be seen.”

There’s a certain vindictive satisfaction Sypha derives from ripping off her bindings every night when she goes to bed.

They may be necessary, but they’re uncomfortable. She can actually *feel* her body shifting to accommodate the tightness of them around her chest, compressing her ribs and giving her less space to breathe.

She collapses onto the bed, feeling the softness of the mattress beneath her back. It feels like heaven after a day’s constant work, and even though she thinks she sleeps better on her bed in the caravan, this isn’t all that bad. She sighs as she closes her eyes, allowing all the tension of the day to drain from her body.

It had taken longer than she’d anticipated to clean Trevor’s blood off her hands, watching the water run pinkish in the sink for what felt like hours and hours but was probably merely minutes. She still can’t shake off the unease and the anger at what he’d told her earlier, pricking her consciousness every few minutes and making her mood plummet. It had been uncharacteristic but almost predictable, as if she’d been expecting him to tell her what he’d told her. So why is she so disappointed?

Come on, Sypha, she tells herself. You know better than to trust Trevor Belmont.

But she doesn’t know why there’s a little voice lingering in her head, telling her that something’s wrong. And usually, that voice is never wrong.

She sits up, heart hammering. Quickly tying the bandages around her chest again and slipping on a coat, she turns the lamps low and leaves the room, shutting the door quietly behind her. She pads down the hall towards where the captain’s quarters are, making sure her footsteps are soundless on the paneled floors. Standing just outside the door she listens for a minute, but hears nothing. Casting one quick, cursory glance back at the firmly shut door she hurries towards the stairs, taking them down four at a time. Skidding into the brig, she moves

forward cautiously until she reaches the last cell, unable to see anyone inside. She steps out directly in front of it, unable to believe her eyes.

The cell is empty.

She doesn't waste a moment, turning and racing back up the stairs and towards Trevor's room. She's just about to knock when it flies open, revealing a very dubious-looking Trevor with both eyebrows raised. "Let me guess," he says before she can even open her mouth. "Our illustrious prisoner is missing."

She gasps for breath, shaking her head. "How did you—"

"Because I'm the one who moved him." He turns and walks back into his room, leaving Sypha to follow. "I suppose I felt a bit bad with him down there. That cell mustn't've been a load of fun."

"I didn't take you for a sympathetic-to-vampires kind of person," she says.

"Yeah, well." He gestures grandly, and it's then that her eyes fall on the half-empty bottle sitting on his desk. So he's drunk, or on the way to being spectacularly so. She sighs. "How did he take it?"

"Remarkably well. He didn't even try to eat me." He holds out his arm, where blood has dried to a sticky, viscous coating on his skin. She supposes it could be worse. "Good sign, I suppose. And we even had a conversation without punching each other, so I'd say that's progress."

"So would I." She hangs back warily, not knowing what exactly to do with herself. "So... he wasn't... upset? I find that difficult to believe."

"Oh, he was upset," Trevor says conversationally. "But I think he'll be all right. He said he needed time, so I decided to dump him somewhere with an actual bed because I'm a wonderful person."

She laughs. "Keep telling yourself that, Trevor."

"I will." He smiles at her, that same cocky, disarming yet totally earnest smile that she'd ended up falling for despite how annoyed it made her. "Stay for a drink? The night's still young." He gestures to the velvety navy sky outside, and Sypha hesitates for only half a second before shrugging. "Why not?"

He beams at her, holding the bottle out. "It's oak-matured. Good stuff. I found about eight bottles under the bed."

She takes the bottle from him, lifting it to her lips and taking a sip. It's strong, heavy and flavorful, and even the little mouthful she'd taken burns a fiery path down her throat and makes her fingertips tingle. Her eyes fall on the seven other bottles sitting innocently on the desk, and she feels her heartbeat quicken. It's going to be a very, very interesting night, she thinks, and then she lifts the bottle and drinks.

Chapter End Notes

i'm so weirdly obsessed with those scenes in movies where a character has to stitch themselves up after they get shot or something and there's a bunch of close ups and shit and it's super bloody and graphic and gross but it's really cool at the same time and i've secretly always wanted to write a scene like that, hence!!!

also hi pls feed me comments so I can convert them into writer fuel and provide you with more content. <3

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

me: *rollerblades in with shades on and holding a martini in each hand* am i late?

narrator: she was, in fact, late.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Sunrise is only a few hours away, and Carmilla is beginning to get impatient.

She had sent scouts out along the coast when night had first begun to fall, and even as she looks over the inky black sea and to the horizon beyond, she can see the sky beginning to turn gray with the oncoming dawn. She's sure she isn't the only one who had felt the tides and what cursed blood runs in her veins shift three days ago. And something as primal as this cannot go ignored. She's sure now that her earlier hunch has just been proven to be fact: Dracula's son is indeed alive. And blood calls to blood—Dracula's blood.

They're all connected, every vampire and the one who had begun it all. He was the first of her kind. And Carmilla has been alive for long enough to know that if that bloodline is tampered with, then they will all feel it. But only few will be clever enough to make that connection, to follow it. To take the opportunity this provides. Far too long has Dracula sulked in the shadows, removed from their world. Perhaps it's time somebody who actually cares about ruling takes the crown.

"My lady," says a quiet voice, and she turns with a hand on her blade to see a petite woman in nun's robes moving towards her, the sand crunching beneath her sandals. The beach is shrouded in low-hanging mist, and the wind blowing off the sea is cold.

"What is it?"

"We have news." She draws up to Carmilla, standing serenely beneath the moonlight. "We've heard word that the Bishop has sent the boy on a special assignment, the location of which is unknown."

She raises a brow. "But?"

The nun folds her hands. "But our placements in the church have heard that he was sent to bring back the last Belmont."

"Belmont?" She scowls. "Aren't they all dead?"

"Apparently not, my lady."

“Fuck,” she mutters under her breath, casting her eyes towards where her ship is docked near the cliffs a half mile off the beach. It’s secluded here, this black-pebbled crescent beach far off the main port. The convent is a few yards away from the shore, tucked into the cliffs. Unassuming and simple. Nobody ever comes here.

She wouldn’t have come to Wallachia if she didn’t have to. She hates the fucking place. It’s run by the Church, for one thing. Sniveling, God-fearing humans who tithe and preach. For another, it’s dangerous for her here, no matter how painful it is to admit it. Docking would pretty much be suicide, but Carmilla has always known that she would need to, someday. Which explains the nuns.

“Well, where is he, then?” she asks.

“Last the Bishop heard, he was at Dranova, my lady,” the nun says, and Carmilla bites back another curse. Well, at least that place is more forgiving than Wallachia is, but they don’t take very kindly to vampires, much less vampire queens. Even if they are the most godless pieces of shit south of the Black Sea.

“Is he still there?” Carmilla loosens her blade in its sheath, even if she knows it’s probably unnecessary. These nuns are one of the cults that had sprung up after Dracula’s resurrection and in the wake of the witch trials, ones that had seamlessly integrated themselves into the Church while whispering curses of hatred and anger behind the turned backs of their bishops and deacons. This particular convent of women were particularly reverent of vampires, particularly female vampires, and when Carmilla had sent Lenore to Wallachia to ensure safe port when the situation called for it, they had made it abundantly clear that any and all secrets shared would be safe within their walls.

She had been wary of them, initially. She’d thought they were one of those cults that practiced fake black magic and called the occasional magic trick a miracle. But Lenore had assured her that they could be trusted, and that they weren’t what Carmilla had once written them off as. It was only when she’d begun to dock here and started to use their help that she had realized that these women were the daughters and nieces and sisters of the women the Church had once burned at the stake as witches. And they were angry. Angry and vengeful, and wearing the garments of nuns as a disguise, wearing the livery of the church as a spiteful mask. She trusts these women, more than she’s willing to say aloud.

“I assume you have a source on Dranova,” she goes on, turning to the sister beside her, Sister Agnetha. They still call themselves sister as real nuns do, but somehow these connotations are different. Bound not by the holy laws of God but by the laws of their own sisterhood. She had told Carmilla in response to her raised eyebrow once that they had to uphold some of the customs of real nuns, that the charade was one so integral and one so deep-rooted that adopting some of their culture was inevitable. She supposes some of them are in good taste.

Sister Agnetha smiles a little. “We do,” she says. “And no, he never docked there. He never set foot on the isle.”

“Don’t tell me.” Carmilla sighs. “He’s with the last Belmont.”

“So it seems,” Sister Agnetha says. “He is popular on the island, that boy. He wears his family colors and his family crest too proudly, but there are still rumors, stories. Tales they tell about him. They call him the devil in human skin.”

“Of course they do.” She rolls her eyes. “So one is the other’s captive. Who is whose?”

“The ship that Dracula’s son sailed to Dranova on was still docked there a few days ago. It was empty when men ventured onto it. This leads us to believe that he is a captive on the Belmont boy’s ship.”

“Any idea where they’re headed?”

“No, my lady, but your guess is as good as mine.”

“The Mediterranean.” She shakes her head. “What game is he playing, harboring a captive so valuable? Maybe he doesn’t know.”

“There is no way to tell, my lady.” Sister Agnetha peers up at her, her deep brown skin turned soft and creamy by the moonlight. There’s a bad burn across her right eye, one that still looks livid and puckered despite being years old, one that has rendered her half blind. It’s in the shape of a cross, and Carmilla has never asked her how she got it. But she imagines that she keeps her right eye in her curses when she whispers them like prayers every night.

“Will you go after them?” she asks.

“We don’t have much choice.” She takes a step back, sweeping her coat out of the way as a particularly forceful tide breaks on the beach, reaching greedy wet fingers for their feet. Sister Agnetha makes no move to avoid the water, allowing it to lap gently against her ankles.

“If you get the boy, what then?” she says, seemingly uncaring that the hem of her robes are damp now. “Will you wield him like the weapon he was born as, or will your gentler sister counsel mercy?”

“Lenore?” Carmilla laughs. “She’s hardly gentle. It’s the prettiest, jeweled snakes that hide the worst venom, after all.” She sighs. “No, Lenore will not counsel mercy. She will insist we break him before we begin to use him. It’s her way. She thinks that men are like silences, or like laws. To be broken before being commanded.”

“So will you?”

“I don’t know,” Carmilla says. “We’ll just have to wait and see what happens. Until then...”

“Until then?” Sister Agnetha says, stepping back as another tide sweeps in. She turns towards Carmilla, looking at her with her one good eye. “Head west after them?”

“Not just yet.” Her mind ticks over the possibilities she has, all the contacts and all the favors she is owed near these parts, all the privateers and vampire captains who would be willing to help for a fair sum, and those who would bend under threat of force. One look at Striga and they all usually beg for their lives.

“Stay put, Sister.” She signals to the ship. “We’ll be back this way.”

“I certainly hope so, my lady,” Sister Agnetha says, bowing her head. “And if I may ask about what we had discussed earlier, about... about whether or not you could—”

Carmilla grits her teeth. “I told you already, I’m not the one to ask,” she says, hoping the boat rowing in from the ship can pick up the pace a little. “Eternity is a burden, Sister. It’s a curse. Not something you should want.” She raises an eyebrow at the smaller woman beside her, who has cast off her artifice of calm and now looks positively desperate. “Moreover, it’ll get more and more difficult to sneak around the church if you’re a vampire.”

“Aren’t you happy in your eternal reign?” She folds her arms, interlocking her fingers as if to physically rein in her emotion. “Are you not happy with this second life? If you could do it again, wouldn’t you?”

“I was turned against my will, Sister,” Carmilla says coldly. “I would rather have died than be reborn into servitude when my body could not break. I made something out of my new life, but if I could do it all again I would throw myself from the tallest tower of the castle to stop what came after.”

The boat has reached the shore, and Carmilla steps onto it, bracing herself to cross the moving tides. It’s not as harmful as running water in a river or a creek where it’s more forceful, but it’s still difficult for her. It’s something she’s willing to endure, however.

“If you really want this, take it up with Lenore,” she says to Sister Agnetha, who’s standing stiffly beside the boat, her fingertips gripping each other so tightly now that they look white. “Don’t ask me.”

She signals to the men to begin rowing back to her ship. “Stay vigilant,” she warns Sister Agnetha as they start to pull away from the beach. “And watch the horizon.”

She bows her head and steps back, saying nothing and merely watching them as they leave. Carmilla deliberately doesn’t look towards the beach even when they get to the ship and she climbs onto the deck, where a frowning Morana is waiting for her with her arms crossed.

“Well?”

“He’s headed for the Mediterranean. And get this.” She sweeps her long, loose silver hair over her shoulder. “He’s with a *Belmont*.”

“So they’re not all dead,” Morana murmurs, shaking her head. “One survived the purge. A boy?”

“Apparently. He’s got Dracula’s son captive, too. Fools, all of them. They have no idea what they’ve tampered with, playing these stupid games. He must know half the underworld will be after him now.”

“So what now? Do we go after them?”

Carmilla sighs, massaging her temples with the tips of her fingers. “Yes, but not right away. We need more than what we’ve got right now.”

“Who, then?” Morana asks as they weigh anchor, the ship beginning to drift away from Wallachia. Carmilla looks back for just a moment, and the beach is empty now, lonely almost, the tides crashing onto the shore and the wind howling as if in mourning.

Carmilla casts her eyes skyward, turning away from the beach and the whole godforsaken country and towards the open sea before her. “I can’t believe I’m saying this,” she says, “but we’re going to need Godbrand.”

The burn of alcohol in Sypha’s mouth is like liquid fire that trails a fiery path down her throat, making her shudder. It’s been a long time since she’s been tempted by drink, and she’d nearly forgotten how much it burns going down the first few times. She’d also forgotten how much of a lightweight she is; just a few passes of the bottle back and forth between her and Trevor later and she’s ever so slightly tipsy already, a pleasant sort of buzz emanating from somewhere in her stomach and radiating outward till the very tips of her fingers.

She’s perched on Trevor’s desk among the scattered papers and maps strewn across its surface, with Trevor on the chair beside her. They’re talking aimlessly, the way they used to when they were teenagers; discussing and arguing good-naturedly about everything from politics to the price of shoes, telling each other the stories and gossip they’d picked up from wherever they were when they were apart.

She can’t help but lean into it, this easiness she has with him. No matter how much they fight and how much they chafe against each other, they always seem to get sucked back into each other’s orbits, into this familiar steadiness that they have. And why not admit it? She likes being this close to him, likes looking at him when he’s relaxed and smiling and just a little tipsy.

“There was something I heard from one of my men,” Trevor says, gesturing unsteadily with his free hand. “Something about a sighting of that sea dragon near Greece. Twelve men swore by Poseidon they actually saw it.”

“I heard about that one,” Sypha says, grabbing the bottle from him and taking another generous swig. It burns less this time. “I was actually around that area then, so I went looking for it. I’d heard rumors that its scales were imbued with magic, so I thought I could track it.”

“Did you?”

She fends him off as she takes another gulp of whiskey, then allows him to snatch the bottle once she’s done. She sits back with a smug smile as he lifts it to his lips, crosses her arms, and says, “I did.”

His eyebrows shoot upward as he lowers the now-empty bottle. “You’re bluffing.”

“Not at all.” She smiles serenely at him. “It wasn’t hard, all things considered.”

“So what did you do once you found it?” he asks, reaching for another bottle. “You Speakers aren’t the type to kill these things.”

“No, but I took a scale or two.” She reaches for the bottle, frowning when she sees three hands in front of her and not one. She blinks hard, and her vision swims back into focus. Undeterred, she snatches it and takes another drink. She’s well on the path to becoming truly and spectacularly drunk now, but she doesn’t care. “They were lying around the cave it was hunkered down in, so I grabbed some.”

“Then I imagine in true Speaker fashion you all sang some hymn in praise of God’s creation,” Trevor says. Then without waiting for her to retort he says, “No, wait, I forgot—you love to mock God to His face, so you probably sang some hymn about how you’re all so much better than He is.”

“We did nothing of the sort.” She rolls her eyes. “We read its location into our memory stores so that it remains undisturbed. Then we went to the mainland and started a rumor that there’s a siren near that cave and she’s killed a bunch of sailors so that people would steer clear of it.”

“You know,” Trevor says, leaning back and raising a brow at her, “for a tribe of people who claim to be peace-seeking and all, you’re all a bunch of crafty little fuckers, you know that?”

She laughs. “I know.”

There’s a lull in their conversation after that, punctuated only by one of them taking the occasional sip of whiskey. They’ve finished a whole bottle and half between them, and she’s beginning to feel the effects of the alcohol in her blood, slowing everything down and making her sluggish, her thoughts scattering. She isn’t used to being this drunk, but it makes it easier to admit that it’s not all that bad.

It’s also easier to let herself look at Trevor, actually look at him, after avoiding his gaze for what feels like weeks but is probably just days. Her eyes cling to the flush in his cheeks, the overbrightness of his blue eyes, a small nick near his jaw where he’d most likely cut himself with his razor. The thought is, strangely enough, maddeningly endearing to her, and she feels that now-familiar knot of love and sadness hit her like a punch to the gut. He’s so close, but she knows she can never draw nearer, knows that he’s one step too far away for her to touch. He’s always been one step too far away from her.

She wants to stay, wants to soak in his nearness all night. She wants more, too; wants things she’s never allowed herself to think about and always tamped down on but things that run wild and untethered in her mind now, careless and slippery-fingered as she is in her drunkenness. Wants to feel his hands on her, wants to feel his mouth on her, wants to feel his hair between her fingers and wants to feel him all over her. And just as she thinks it his gaze catches and locks onto hers, and suddenly she knows with a horrifying sort of finality that he can see exactly what she was thinking about.

She looks away from him quickly, fingers tightening on the bottle as she forces herself to return to reality. She sets it down beside her with a clatter, feeling her cheeks burning. She has to get out of here.

“I... I should go,” she says, and her voice is scratchy and hoarse. “It’s late.”

He says nothing, merely looking at her with blue eyes glittering with some unreadable emotion. She slides off the table unsteadily, a hand on the edge of the table, then turns blindly towards the door.

“Wait.”

She freezes, her fingers still gripping the edge of the table so hard her knuckles are white. Suddenly speech feels immensely difficult to her; her tongue feels like it’s tied itself up into knots. She sees him stand up and then he steps forward into the space between her knees, crowding her against the table. His hands come to rest on either side of her hips and then it’s like all the air has been crushed from her lungs. Her eyes are level with his collarbone and she forces herself to meet his gaze, swallowing hard past her dry throat.

He’s looking down at her, that unreadable look still in his eyes. She’s stood close to him before but never like this, never when he’s looking at her like *that*. She tries to ignore the way it makes flutters of heat ripple over her skin and makes herself look back at him, and her breath catches at what she sees in his eyes.

“Sypha,” he says softly, and then he’s lowering his head towards her and she can’t breathe.

His lips just graze her cheek and she sucks in a breath, her eyes closing. She forgets about leaving, forgets about everything else but him. Time seems to have slowed down around them, everything else receding into the distance. All she can feel and all she can think is how close he is, the butterfly-soft touch of his mouth on her skin. She feels him move closer and then his lips are moving down her jaw, her head tilting involuntarily towards the touch. Her hands are in fists at her sides, and she can feel them shaking.

He breaths her name again and she feels it against her throat. It coaxes a shiver out of her and she hears her own breath hitch. This can’t be happening, she thinks wildly as he moves closer still, so close that her chest brushes against his every time one of them draws breath. She has to be dreaming. She’s passed out on the floor in Trevor’s cabin and this is some fevered, alcohol-induced dream. There’s no way this is real.

He’s stopped moving, and his lips are hovering at the curve of her throat, the barest of touches. All she can hear is the sound of their breathing, uneven and heavy. His hands are still on the table on either side of her, unmoving. She feels time stretch out interminably, feels every beat of her heart in her chest and every exhale of Trevor’s breath on her neck. She feels desire spread its hot, heavy dark wings low in her stomach, fueled by all the drink and how near he is. But it still isn’t enough; she wants more, she wants closer.

Almost as if he can hear her thoughts he shifts so that she’s standing flush against his chest, turning to cage her between the table and his body. She squeezes her eyes shut as his lips press to her skin, a searing, openmouthed kiss to her throat. It draws a soft, strangled sound from her mouth, one she never thought she’d make. It’s breathy and wanton and it’s so pathetically desperate that she might as well have told him to his face that she wants him. His chest hitches against hers as his breath catches, and then suddenly his mouth is hovering over hers, the barest of touches, the barest of kisses.

“Sypha,” he whispers, “I—can I—”

“Yes,” she breathes.

She hears Trevor swear quietly, and then he’s leaning back, his hands moving from the table to grip her hips so tightly she’s sure his fingers will leave bruises. And before she can even take in a breath he’s closed the distance between them and he’s kissing her.

Her body reacts before her mind does, her hands reaching for him blindly. Her fingers bite into his shoulders as she arches up to kiss him back. She doesn’t care that they’re drunk and that this wouldn’t be happening if they weren’t. She doesn’t care that this is a terrible idea, one that they’re definitely going to end up regretting. All she cares about is that she has wanted to kiss Trevor Belmont for years and years, and now she finally is.

One of his hands slides up her back, pressing her against him and pushing her back against the table. The edge is digging almost painfully into the small of her back, but she’s far too gone to even pay it any mind. It’s a messy, sloppy, unrefined kiss, blossoming out of control almost instantaneously. She pulls away from his mouth long enough to rip his shirt over his head, her fingers finding his bare skin, hot against her touch as she leans in again. Her restless hands move over him impatiently, one cupping the back of his neck and the other going around his shoulders as he groans roughly into her mouth, his arm wrapping around her waist as he half-lifts her against him, their bodies colliding unsteadily.

His lips slide against hers unevenly, his other hand slipping lower and lower down her back. He tips her backward onto the table, laying her down amidst the scattered papers and maps littered across it. She pulls him down over her and his fingers slide down her thigh to the inside of her knee, hiking her leg over his hip as he leans down.

Her legs wrap automatically around his waist to bring him closer, her hands on either side of his face holding him to her as he parts her lips with his, both of them swallowing down the gasps they give against each other’s mouths. The first brush of his tongue against hers is heavy and wet and tastes like whiskey and rain and cold wind, and she shudders against him at the contact, unfamiliar and alien almost as it is. One of his palms comes to rest flat on the tabletop beside her head as he tilts his head and deepens the kiss, and this time she licks greedily into his mouth to gather the taste of him, her fingers clenching in the shorter, softer hair at his nape. He moans into her mouth and the sound sends a dart of heat through her blood, settling low in her stomach in a slow, pulsing ache.

Her fingernails scratch lightly over his bare skin, almost feverishly hot against her hands. She’s seen him with his shirt off plenty of times, but she’s never allowed her hands to go where her eyes have, not the way she does now. Her palms smooth up his sides, over the swell of his pectorals and over every raised, ridged scar on his chest, every nick and cut and slash like a map her fingers are reading. Hard muscle shifts beneath his skin and her nails bite into his biceps as his teeth close over the swell of her bottom lip, tugging gently. Her head falls back as his lips press heavy, wet kisses to her cheeks and her jaw, the roughness of his stubble and the warmth of his breath a pleasing contrast to the softness of his lips.

His mouth comes to rest at the hammering pulse in her throat, his hands finding her hips as he sucks her skin into his mouth, hard enough that she knows the stinging mark left by his

teeth will bruise by tomorrow morning. She hears herself moan, the not-quite pain of the bite leaving a delicious ache behind in his wake.

Her fingers scrabble for purchase on the table and collide with the bottle she had placed there earlier, knocking it over. She hears it fall and shatter as if from a great distance, but it doesn't matter. Everything is far away, insignificant, unimportant. There's nothing else, she thinks as her fingers rake down Trevor's chest, feeling his heart hammering beneath them. Nothing else in all the world to her but this.

He kisses his way down her throat and she gasps for breath, her hands gripping fistfuls of his hair as his fingers yank impatiently at the laces of her tunic, nearly ripping them in his haste to undo them. They loosen and then he tugs the neck of her tunic down her shoulders so forcefully the fabric tears, his breath hot on her collarbone. She feels a slow, hot shiver slide down her spine at the unfamiliarity of the sensation, and she swallows hard.

His hand finds the place where she'd tied off the end of the bindings on her chest and her breath catches, her teeth closing over her bottom lip. Maybe if she were sober she would think twice about this, she would ask herself if now is the right time, she would tell him not yet. But she isn't, and so when he raises his head and asks her if this is okay, she nods and tells him it is.

He tugs the loops of bandage off slowly, layer by layer. He kisses every inch of skin each one exposes, and contrary to what she'd imagined this would be like (which she has, admittedly, too many times to count) his hands are gentle on her, careful, reverent almost. Halfway through getting the bandages off he pulls her up off the table for a kiss, the half-unraveled bindings trailing down her back and shoulders. There are only a few more layers of bandages covering her, and the thin cotton is sheer enough that it might as well not be there at all. To Trevor's credit he doesn't stare, doesn't leer the way the boys at Dranova do. He just kisses her, a hand resting lightly on her cheek, the other moving to her back to pull the rest of her coverings off.

And... then what? Then what will happen? Will she let this go on, go on until there are no more clothes to take off and no more boundaries to breach, no more lines to cross? Will she give in to whatever this is that has possessed them to do this, will she allow them to shrug it off as just a mere dalliance in the morning? Will she let that cheapen this for him while she clings to it knowing that she loves him and that this means everything to her?

She can't. She knows that this is happening because they're both drunk, and she knows that they're going to regret this in the morning. She can't let it happen, even if she doesn't think she's ever wanted anything more in her life. And she cannot let this go on until the point of no return.

And then suddenly it's like reason and awareness physically cut through the fog of drunkenness and kissing and Trevor in her mind, and it's like she's just walked in on herself. She feels it like a slap in the face, sudden and startling and painful, waking her up from a dream. And then she knows that they can't do this. Not now.

"Trevor, stop," she says, breaking away from the kiss. She sounds drunk, her voice slurred and uneven. "Stop."

He pulls away immediately, his fingers falling away from her back. “What?” He blinks hazy, dark blue eyes at her, his gaze coming back into focus. “What is it? Did I hurt you?”

“No.” She takes in a shaky breath. “No, you didn’t, but we—we can’t do this. Not now.”

“What do you mean?” He still looks drunk, drunk on both the alcohol and on her. “Why not?”

“We just can’t.” She steels herself, then puts both palms flat on his chest and pushes him away from her. “We’re drunk.”

He stumbles back and away from her, stopping a few paces away. His cheeks are flushed and his lips are flushed too, swollen and bruised from kisses. He’s looking at her, eyes shimmering and lips parted just barely, and a pulse of wanting beats through her blood, so strong it nearly makes her knees buckle. “I don’t care,” he says. “Don’t you want—?”

“Stop.” She takes in a shaky breath. “Don’t make this any harder than it is.”

“It doesn’t have to be.”

“It does.” She curls her fingers into fists, hard enough for her nails to bite into her palms. “You have no idea what this could—how long I’ve—” She exhales, shutting her eyes for a moment. “We just can’t, Trevor. We’re both going to hate ourselves in the morning.”

“I don’t get it.” He’s shaking his head. “A minute ago you were perfectly okay with this.”

“A minute ago I wasn’t thinking straight,” she says. Belatedly she looks down, at her torn tunic and half-undone bindings and her breasts nearly spilling from their pitiful remnants. Realizing for the first time how she must look, her hands fly up almost automatically to cover herself, but Trevor isn’t even looking there; his eyes are trained on her face, almost stubbornly.

“What does it matter? You’re—and I’m—” He shakes his head again at what he sees in her expression. “You don’t want this? Don’t want me to—”

“Trevor, don’t.” She grits her teeth. “Neither of us are thinking clearly. We might not even remember this in the morning.”

“Fuck, Sypha.” He runs his hands through his hair, clearly frustrated. “I don’t know why that matters to you at all. So what if we’re drunk? Why can’t you just—”

“Because this is all wrong!” Her voice, raised to a shout, cuts through his, silencing him immediately. “All of this! Look at us!” She lets her hands fall away from her chest and he looks away from her pointedly, his throat working. “Do you think that a drunken one night stand won’t change something between us? Do you think that’s what I want for us? Is it what you want? Is that all I am worth to you?”

“No,” he starts to say, shaking his head, but she holds a hand up to stop him, tears pricking at her eyes. God, when had all of this gone so, so wrong?

“It can’t be like this,” she says. “What do you think would have happened tomorrow morning? We would just shrug it off, laugh it off as something that happened while we were drunk and fooling around. And then I would get dressed and I would go and nothing would be the same. *We* wouldn’t be the same. And then all this will have meant nothing and it would be awful.”

He says nothing, just looking at her. She presses the heels of her hands to her eyes for a moment, dragging in a shaky breath. Then she looks up. “I have to leave,” she says, and she hates herself for the waver that’s clear in her voice. “I’m sorry.”

This time he doesn’t say anything, doesn’t call her back or tell her to wait. He just watches her go in silence, and his lost, bleak expression is the last thing she sees as she closes the door behind her.

Adrian runs his tongue over his teeth experimentally for what feels like the hundredth time in the last half hour.

Still no fangs.

He’s been trying to extend them for hours now, trying to will his canines to grow the way he’d felt them grow when Trevor Belmont’s blood had coated his tongue. He’s even tried remembering it, how it had felt. But it feels like memories that aren’t his, feels like he had been trapped somewhere in the back of his own mind while some ancient, primal monster made of thirst and instinct had taken over, commanding his mind and body. He had been helpless, feeling his hands bend into claws and his teeth elongate into fangs, every human feeling inside him burning away and replaced by *thirst*. Thirst for blood.

He remembers seeing his sword slash across Trevor Belmont’s forearm, remembers seeing dark red blood well up immediately at the wound. Remembers him stepping forward and shoving the bloody cut directly at Adrian’s lips, remembers it smearing across his mouth and onto his tongue. Remembers the taste of it, sharp and coppery and surprisingly sweet. He had recoiled—and then it had woken.

He shudders, hating the thoughts but leaning into them, trying to tap into how it had felt. He remembers the sudden, overpowering strength that had flooded his muscles, strength he hadn’t really known what to do with, how to channel it and how to use it. And he remembers the twin bolts of pain in his mouth as his teeth had grown and sharpened, tapering into deadly points.

He prods at his canines again, hopeful that the vivid recollections have tempted them to grow. But when his fingertips graze his teeth they meet only ordinary canines, maybe a little sharper than average. But nothing spectacular. Not *fangs*.

He sighs, sitting back and giving up. It’s only been a few hours since Trevor Belmont had brought him to this room, but he’s already restless. He’d bathed, which had felt like heaven after weeks of being absolutely filthy, and even if the water in the small wooden tub had been lukewarm at best and the soap had been hard and dry, he’d still gotten clean. He’d had to throw away his old dirty, torn clothes in favor of the loose cotton shirt and simple leather

pants that had been sitting in the cupboard. It's a little loose at the hips and short at the ankles, but all in all it's not too bad. At least now he feels like some semblance of a human being.

Night had fallen hours ago, but he can't sleep. He's been sitting at the windowsill, whose ledge is wide enough to comfortably settle onto, and is simply watching the sea go by outside. It's so dark he can barely make out where the sea ends and where the sky begins, and even through the glass of the window he can see trillions of stars strewn across the black expanse far above, twinkling like some mischievous angel had flung a handful of diamonds across the heavens.

Suddenly wanting to feel the salt-spray air of the sea in his lungs and see the stars above him without the barrier of glass between him and the sky he stands, letting himself out of the room and onto the deck. The ship's upper levels will be empty what with the lateness of the hour, and he's expecting not to be disturbed. But as he makes his way to the prow he sees a figure already standing there, a familiar short, slender one.

He wars with himself briefly about whether or not he should approach, then approaches anyway. Distancing himself from everyone won't do him any good, and he's already so far behind enemy lines that now he isn't sure he even *is* behind enemy lines anymore. Was he actually behind enemy lines all his life in Wallachia among the deacons and priests and the Bishop, and just hadn't known it? And if so, what is Trevor Belmont's ship to him, if not enemy territory?

Whatever it is, he doesn't dwell on it, merely drawing up to the first mate standing at the rails. He turns to look at Adrian as he stands beside him, as if unsurprised to see him. He says nothing as they both merely gaze out over the obsidian surface of the sea, the sky the same color above. He hears the gentle murmurs of it below them, lapping against the hull. He can see the moon above, full tonight. It sits nestled among the stars, plump and yellow and so bright that it casts a muted silver glow over the whole ship.

"Trevor told me he moved you from the cell," the first mate says after a few minutes of silence, his voice as soft and low as ever. "I have to admit I was surprised when he did."

"As was I." He watches him carefully out of the corner of his eye. He looks tired and haggard, with dark shadows beneath his blue eyes and fatigue in every line of his face. He looks far too young to be a first mate, maybe seventeen or eighteen. "I suppose I looked particularly pathetic down there all chained up and covered in blood, though. He took pity on me," Adrian goes on.

"I think there's more to it than that," is all the first mate says, quietly. Adrian sneaks another glance at him and his eyes snag on a red mark on the side of his throat, fresh and livid. He looks away quickly before he can catch Adrian staring, looking instead at the moon high above. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that Trevor always has his reasons," he says. "For everything. Everything he does is calculated. But sometimes that calculation is... it's marred by his impulses. Sometimes he follows his heart rather than his head."

“And this was one of those times?” Adrian snorts. “I hardly think placing me in a gilded cage in favor of a regular one counts as a matter of the heart.”

“Not that way,” the first mate says. “He... he isn’t what you probably think he is, whatever you do think he is.”

“Do you know him well?” Adrian asks. “He doesn’t seem like the kind of man who has... friends.”

The first mate laughs softly. “I suppose I’m the closest thing he has to one,” he says. “I’ve known him since we were children.”

“He was a child once? I assumed he emerged from the womb fully grown and drunk,” Adrian says, and the first mate laughs again, and Adrian joins him a moment later. It’s easy to laugh with him for some reason, easy to fall into some semblance of a rhythm that makes it nice to talk to him. Is this what making friends is like? Adrian isn’t sure.

“As likely as that sounds, he was a boy when I met him,” the first mate says after their giggles trail off. “On Dranova. He’d lost everything; his family, his home, his sense of self. He was just... surviving. I helped him start living.”

Adrian pauses. The soft sound of the sea is all he hears in the brief silence. “I’d nearly forgotten that the church burned down the Belmont family home,” he says. “I didn’t know he was just a child when it happened. I suppose I’d never thought about it.”

“He was twelve,” the first mate says, and Adrian thinks he feels something almost like sympathy dig a hook into his ribs and tug. How must it have been, to watch your whole life burn into ashes at twelve years old? At twelve Adrian had been living a happy, stable life surrounded by people who taught him and cared for him. He hadn’t had a care in the world then, and somewhere not so far away another boy had lost everything.

He isn’t used to this feeling, to feeling pity and sympathy and camaraderie for people he’d been taught to hate all his life. He’d thought Trevor Belmont was a lawless, godforsaken pirate who spat on the ways of the church and obeyed no country’s laws but his own. And he is, but—but he’s also a great deal more than that.

He sighs, a hand gripping the rail in front of him. “I don’t know what to make of all this,” he says. “I’m on the ship of my sworn enemy in the middle of nowhere, heading away from where my home is. But... my safety there was a kind lie. Here my safety is a terrible truth, but it’s still the truth. And I don’t know how to feel about that. Was I ever safe there? And here on the ship of my enemy, am I finally free?”

“This doesn’t have to be the ship of an enemy,” the first mate says. “It can be the ship of an ally.”

“The Belmonts are vampire hunters,” Adrian says shortly. “And I am—”

“Only half-vampire.”

“How does it matter?” He looks away, feeling his face twist with a now-familiar disgust. “I still have fangs and silver burns me.”

“But you can stand in the sun and you do not need to drink blood to survive,” the first mate says. “You are also human in more ways than one.”

“I thought I was entirely human until a few days ago,” Adrian says.

The first mate sighs. “I cannot imagine how hard this must be,” he says softly, and Adrian jumps when he feels his hand come to rest lightly on his arm. His skin is soft and warm, and for the first time he registers that he smells sweet, like vanilla and spices. He leans almost unconsciously into the touch, the first time in weeks someone has touched him with no ill intent behind it.

“I know it’s cruel to expect you to move on from this so quickly,” he goes on, and Adrian makes a soft, inarticulate sound in reply, still reeling a little under the casual physical contact. He’s always been a lonely sort of person, but it’s only now when his whole body has just reacted to being touched gently that he realizes that he may have been a little too lonely.

“But you must understand that the cause of your pain could have been avoided,” the first mate says. “And that that cause is not anyone or anything here.”

“I know,” Adrian says. “I know whose fault it is—but I still want to make excuses for him. I’ve known him for too long. I never would have thought there was any malice behind his... his artifice.”

“Just admitting that wrongdoing and knowing yourself well enough to be aware that you need time is a good thing,” the first mate says, his hand still lightly resting on Adrian’s arm. He’s hyperaware of the skin-to-skin contact, every nerve ending beneath his skin where the first mate’s fingers are resting firing ceaselessly. “It means that in time you can come to move on from this and start to do something about it.”

He lifts his hand from Adrian’s arm and he feels the loss of his warmth like a physical blow. He kicks himself internally immediately afterward, mortified. What the hell is wrong with him?

“When we reach the Mediterranean,” Adrian says, trying to distract himself, “what then? Where do we go from there?”

“That’s a question you have to ask Trevor,” the first mate says, and Adrian marvels at the trust he hears plain as day in his voice. He can’t imagine trusting someone enough to put his life into their hands and not even ask himself if they knew what they were doing. Not even the Bishop, though now he isn’t sure he’d trust the Bishop with anything ever again.

“He did say something about a bunch of angry vampire generals coming to get us,” Adrian mentions offhandedly. “Though I suppose that’s inevitable now that I know what I am.”

“*Who* you are,” the first mate corrects him softly. “You are not a thing, Adrian.”

It's the first time he's said his name aloud. He's surprised at how much he likes to hear it from his mouth, his accent rolling the *r* and flattening the *n* and turning his common, ordinary name into something different and something he doesn't think he'll ever tire of hearing.

He turns to look at him standing beside Adrian, unable to think of a single thing to say. He doesn't know how to name the odd feeling that he can feel in his chest as he looks at him, and he doesn't think he wants to. Naming it would require confronting it, and confronting it would require him to do a bit more introspection than he's comfortable with.

The first mate turns, and before Adrian can look away he turns the full force of his sea-blue gaze directly onto him, and Adrian doesn't think he'd be able to look away if he tried. They say nothing for a few seconds, merely looking at each other, and it's entirely quiet but for the gentle splashes of the waves against the ship below. Adrian isn't sure if it's understanding or friendship or something else that passes between them then, almost tangibly.

Then the first mate looks away, breaking the spell, and turns away from the rails. "It's getting late," he murmurs. "I should go and sleep. Good night."

He starts to leave and Adrian catches his wrist as he does, stopping him. When he turns surprised blue eyes to him he says, "I still don't know your name."

The first mate smiles a little then, a stray curl of reddish-blond falling into his eyes. Adrian's fingers long to reach out and tuck it back in place, and he curls them into fists to resist the urge. "I'm just the first mate," he says in his soft voice. "That's all you need to know about me."

Then he ducks his head, Adrian's fingers falling away from his wrist as he turns away, disappearing within seconds and leaving Adrian staring after him. He returns to his own room a few minutes later, and tosses and turns in bed with a pair of ocean eyes burning in the back of his mind until the sky blushes red with the dawn. Outside, the sea murmurs on.

Chapter End Notes

once again, no promises as to when the next chapter is coming. but! season 4 has revived my obsession with this show so it'll probably be sooner rather than later.

do drop a comment if y'all enjoyed this chapter! they keep me going. <3

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

look at me, posting all early!! and this chapter is like 9k words!! go me!!

cw: death, some graphic violence.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

He picks up the shards of glass that litter the floor of the cabin by the table, the spilled whiskey from the shattered bottle having dried to a sticky coating on the wood. He doesn't remember when exactly it had fallen over, only vaguely recalling hearing it shatter and not caring.

It hasn't broken cleanly; there are smaller shards scattered further away, and they nearly cut his hands when he tries to pick them up. The larger chunks of the broken bottle actually do cut him, but he can hardly bring himself to feel the sharp, stinging pain of it. He deserves it.

He'd just sat on the bed staring after where Sypha had left for at least two hours, white noise blotting everything out and ringing in his ears, filling his head with a blank sort of buzzing. He's wanted to kiss Sypha for—God, how long? Years and years, but he hadn't wanted it to be like this, alone in his room afterward picking up the shattered shards of a bottle that cuts his hand with nausea roiling in his stomach.

She'd been right about stopping when they had—of course she had been. She's always right. She was always the more rational of the two of them. And Trevor always, always fucks everything up. Every time. He supposes it's fitting then, that it's him that's here now, kneeling by the broken pieces of glass alone, painstakingly picking every single one up even as his shaking fingers grow slippery with blood.

He has to stop and lurch to the bathroom twice to throw up, and the whiskey burns twice as much coming up as it had going down. His whole body shudders as it tries to purge the alcohol left in his system, and it leaves him with a sour, dry taste in his mouth and a pounding headache that's worsening with every passing second.

He's no stranger to this feeling; he's never thought himself good enough for Sypha, not even when he was sixteen and he'd watched her turn from a skinny little girl into a beautiful young woman, confident and powerful and dangerous and far, far too good for him. She never failed to see the good in people, and she had seen it in him too, even if he'd been sure it was never there. And she made him want to be better, made him want to try.

She deserves someone who could give her everything and do nothing else but love her for the rest of his life. And Trevor, no matter how much he wants to be, cannot be that person. His life is one of running and hiding and hunting, always staying in the shadows and never

resting, and even though he loves her so much it almost hurts sometimes, he can't drag her into his life, into *this* life. Nor can he leave it behind. His family had burned for daring to stand up for the people, and damn him if he isn't going to at least try to honor them. Honor the name that, despite how much trouble it's brought him, he's proud to bear.

He tosses the last of the remnants of the broken bottle away after what feels like hours and probably is; a glance out the window tells him that dawn is approaching rapidly, threads of red and gold unspooling slowly in the midnight blue tapestry of the sky. He throws the window open to let the dawn in, the cold wind glancing off the sea leaching into the room along with the pale rose gold light.

He sits and stares at the sea and the sky outside, stares and stares but not really seeing it at all, feeling an all-too familiar bitterness and hatred open up inside his chest like some poisonous flower unfurling its monstrous petals somewhere the light can't reach. It feeds on him, feeds on whatever pitiful remnants of hope that he had left, stowed away somewhere so deep in the back of his mind that he hadn't even realized it was there.

He of all people knows that hope is dangerous. It clings to you, creeps inside you, eats away at you just as much as fear does, if not more. And when it dies—because it always dies—it hurts so fucking much he wishes he'd just die too. At least then he won't feel it.

He shuts his stinging eyes, feeling exhaustion grip his body in its arms and start to pull him into the blissful darkness of oblivion. He can't remember the last time he'd gotten a full night's sleep; he tosses and turns on the better nights, and others he just lies on his back and stares at the shifting shadows on the ceiling, lost in thought and unable to rest. It's gotten worse and worse now, and he can feel the fatigue that weeks and weeks of worry and tension and exertion has placed heavily onto his shoulders dragging him down.

He drags himself to his bed and collapses onto it, and he falls asleep before his eyes even close all the way.

"Mother," Trevor says, "there are men outside."

He's standing at the window, and when he twitches the curtain open just a crack he can see them, three or four men in priest's robes that fall in straight, elegant folds till their ankles. It makes them look taller, more important. It sweeps up the lengths of their bodies and turns them into men of deadly black glass edges, angles and planes and lines. The white clerical collars around their necks might as well be crowns for the sheer weight they lend them, the way they make even Trevor, twelve and still green, wary of their mere presence.

"Don't peek out like that, Trevor," his mother chastises. "Come away from there now." She moves towards him, putting a hand on his shoulder and drawing him back ever so slightly.

"But mother, there are priests," Trevor says, turning, his hand falling away from the curtain. "Out by the door."

"Priests?" He sees her frown, sees her turn and share a worried look with his father, sitting by the hearth. Just as the curtains swish shut he hears the deep, slow chime of the doorbell as it

rings, echoing through the house and making the stones beneath his feet vibrate. Another quick glance out the window tells Trevor that the priests have moved to the door, out of his view.

His father stands, the book that had been in his hands sliding from his fingers and falling facedown onto the floor. He still remembers the way it had fallen, how one of the pages underneath the binding had folded in on itself, the way the fire in the grate had reflected in the delicate gold foil on the spine, writhing and pulsing within the small embossed symbols. He finds himself entranced by it for a few seconds, the pattern of the flames and how they seem to dance in their little golden prison.

“I’ll go,” his father says, and Trevor tears his eyes away from the fallen book and looks towards him, at the guarded, grim look on his face. “I’ll see what they want.”

“Be careful,” his mother says, moving away from Trevor and towards his father. She puts a hand on his arm. “We don’t know what they are here for, so give them no reason to create more trouble.”

“I won’t,” he says, and then he leans down to kiss her, a brief brush of lips. He ducks out of the room, and that is the last time Trevor ever sees his father.

His mother sits in the chair his father had just vacated, worrying at a crease in her dress. She looks troubled, her fingers fluttering about nervously, as if she can’t bear to sit still. Trevor goes to her, pulling at her skirts, and she smiles at him before gathering him close and beginning to run her fingers through his hair. He lays his head on her knee, his hand still clutching a fistful of her dress.

“It’s going to be fine,” she says, and he doesn’t know if she is trying to reassure him or herself. “It’s nothing. There is nothing to worry about.”

They’re sitting like that, Trevor’s head in his mother’s lap and her fingers in his hair and the pop and crackle of the fire in the grate filling the silence between them, when everything falls apart.

He hears a shout, and then a loud bang. A moment later he hears the telltale sound of wood cracking and metal tearing, and the source is unmistakable—they’ve just broken the front door down. The sound of running footsteps reaches his ears, growing louder and louder, faster and faster until he can’t tell the sound of their approaching from his own hammering pulse roaring in his ears.

His mother lurches to her feet, alarm blazing in her face. Without waiting even a moment she strides to the door and shuts it quickly, shaking fingers pulling the latches closed before wedging a candelabra beneath the handle to keep it locked. She sweeps Trevor behind her skirts as if to shield him, but from what he doesn’t know, doesn’t understand—

The doorframe rattles as something—or someone—is thrown against it, and Trevor sees the knob spinning as they try to force the door open. He clings to his mother, fear and panic beginning to make their way through the icy numbness of shock that has rose up around him like a shield.

“By decree of the Church, you are to surrender at once!” shouts a voice from behind the door even as they try to bring it down. Trevor holds onto his mother even tighter, feeling the fear inside him beginning to rise like a tidal wave, gathering and towering higher and higher.

“On what charges?” his mother shouts back, her fingers clutching him back, both of them holding onto each other so tightly it hurts. “On whose authority?”

“Your blasphemous reign is over, Belmonts,” the voice calls. “You will no longer mock God with your black magic disguised as holy duty!”

“We do no such thing!” Her voice nearly cracks with the strain of it. “We will not surrender! Where is my husband? What have you done with him?”

“He dared to stand between us and the holy work of the Bishop who does God’s work and God’s work only,” the voice says, and the smugness in its voice makes Trevor want to kill whoever it belongs to, makes anger like nothing he has ever felt before fill his veins until he feels like he’s choking on it. “He paid the price for his insolence.”

The doorframe rattles, and Trevor sees the candelabra his mother had wedged underneath the handle starting to shake. His mother turns, kneeling in front of him, her eyes swimming with tears and her face full of panic but still trying to hold herself together for his sake. She brushes his hair out of his face, kisses his cheek, lets her eyes take in the sight of her youngest son one last time.

“Trevor, go,” she says. “Through the window. Can you jump?”

“Mother, what about you?” He still doesn’t entirely know what is happening, doesn’t fully understand—and how could he? “Will you come with me?”

“I... I’ll try, my darling.” She takes his face in her hands, presses another kiss to his cheek. “Can you get somewhere safe?”

He nods.

“Be quiet, and don’t let them see you,” she says. “Promise me you’ll get to safety, Trevor. Promise me you will survive.”

“I...” He swallows hard. “I—”

“Promise me!” She grabs his shoulders, looking at him with a blazing look in her face, and he feels a sob building in his throat but he forces it down.

“I promise,” he whispers.

“Good,” she says, her fingers still biting into his shoulders. She looks back towards the door as the priests try to get it open, and he can see the wood around the handle starting to splinter. They must be using some sort of battering ram.

“Where do I go?” he asks. He feels the tears fall, but he doesn’t care. There is too much fear in his mother’s face when she turns back to look at him. That much fear is always a portent,

and he knows as he looks into her pale, pinched face with a sudden crushing finality that he will never see her again and that he will mourn her for the rest of his life.

“Go to the beach. Take the fishing boat,” she says. “Go out to sea, and don’t look back, Trevor. And take this.” She grabs his father’s cloak from where it hangs by the wall and sweeps it over his shoulders, the soft fur of the collar brushing against his ears. It’s far too big, but it smells like his father, smells like home.

“Mother—”

The door slams open, falling off its hinges, and she pushes him towards the window hard. “Trevor, go!”

He goes, because he can do nothing else. He throws the window open, blinded by tears, hardly able to see. Scrambling onto the ledge, he looks down. It’s only one story, but somehow in that one moment he has never seen a longer distance. He hesitates, and is about to turn back just to look at his mother one last time—but then he hears a voice shout, “At the window!”

In his periphery he sees one of the priests lunge for him, but he’s too late. Trevor has already jumped.

He hits the ground hard, and his right leg buckles beneath him. He doesn’t stop to check if it’s broken, doesn’t stop to see if anyone is following, doesn’t stop to look at the horribly familiar figure lying crumpled on the front steps, a halo of red spreading around his head and dripping down the stairs. He just runs.

He stumbles through the woods behind the estate blindly, his father’s cloak catching on brambles and twigs and dead leaves as he runs. He clutches it to his chest, panic clawing its way up his throat. What about his sisters, his three older sisters sleeping upstairs? What about Nina, just two years older than him, what about Roxanne, who had gotten engaged just last week? What about Este, six months pregnant with her first child?

He hasn’t even realized he’s turned back until he’s already there, bursting out of the woods breathless and so full of fear that he thinks it may overflow out of his body, spill out through his blood and rip him open.

Because the house is burning.

Fire licks up the stone as if it’s coated with oil, devouring the whole structure and curling beneath the doors and windows. It blows the glass and wood out in a dry explosion, smoke rising and filling the air, burning the back of his throat. How so quickly the whole structure of it has caught and how so much of it can be lost already beneath the ire of the flame he cannot fathom, cannot even comprehend. All he knows is that they’re all gone. All of them.

He lurches a step backward, disbelief and horror and grief exploding in his chest. Tears fill his eyes, turning his vision blurry. All he sees is a smear of bright gold and red and black, hazy lights that make up the burning shell of what had, until just a few minutes ago, been his home.

A shadow rears up in front of him, taking the shape of one of the priests. Through his tears he looks to Trevor like some monstrous thing, all spindly arms and legs and a tall, narrow black body, coalescing in front of him suddenly. He hears his voice shout something, hears him jeering and laughing.

“What’s this?” he hoots, grinning down at Trevor. His teeth look like they’re melting out of his mouth, dripping moonlight and the reflecting flames. “Looks like we missed one!”

He steps forward, and Trevor pulls his father’s cloak tighter around his shoulders, stumbling backward. “You’re a little runt, aren’t you? How old are you, ten?”

Trevor steps back again, and the priest steps forward. “What’s the matter? Are you *afraid*?” The word drips mockery, and Trevor feels that anger again, the anger that makes his whole body seize up and makes his hands start to shake. “Are you sad that under God’s holy light we’ve brought your family to heel?”

He leans down, laughing openly now, and Trevor sees *red*. “Are you upset that we burned dear mummy and daddy and those pretty sisters of yours? One of them looked just about ready to pop, too. Good thing we got rid of her when we did, otherwise there’d have been one more of your filthy family for us to purge—”

Trevor feels something inside him snap. He lunges, blind with rage. The priest yells as Trevor flies at him, scratching and kicking and biting at whatever parts of him he can reach. He feels his nails rake a bloody gash right across the priest’s face, warm blood gushing over his hand and coating his skin. It’s such a dark red in the firelight, almost black.

“You little fucking bastard!” He feels something slam into his ribs and hears a crack, pain erupting from the spot. He gasps and stumbles backwards, a fierce, dull ache radiating from his chest. He looks up just in time to see the priest flick his wrist, a flash of silver materializing in his palm. He advances, the wound on his face dripping blood, the expression on his face murderous. Trevor tries to leap back, tries to turn away—but he isn’t fast enough.

The blade slices through his left eye, and all he sees of it is a blur of silver as it whistles towards him, and then a fountain of red. Pain explodes across his face, pain unlike anything he’s ever experienced before. He hears himself cry out, a hand flying up almost involuntarily to his eye.

“I’m going to kill you slowly, little Belmont runt,” the priest snarls, his blade wet with Trevor’s blood. “I’m going to set you on fire like I set your family on fire, and you’ll feel every second of it when I burn you alive.” He moves towards him, bloody blade held out, and Trevor knows he’s not lying.

Trevor turns tail, heels digging into the dirt, and runs.

He hears the priest shouting, hears footsteps running after him, but he doesn’t look back, doesn’t even falter. He keeps running, even as his lungs burn until they feel as if they’re going to split open and his right ankle throbs with every step and the slash across his eye weeps, blood filling his eye in a hot, wet flood of red. It runs down his face like tears and

spatters off his chin, a trail of liquid rubies that will surely lead the priests directly to him. But he doesn't care, stumbling forward, the only thing in his mind to get *away*.

He clears the trees and lurches forward as the earth beneath his feet gives way into soft shifting sand. The beach behind the estate is empty as it always is, and it looks so incongruously peaceful under the moonlight, untouched by the smoke, serene and calm. The sea spreading out before him is empty all the way till the horizon, the moon high up above casting her silver glow over the black water.

For half a moment he feels as though he's stepped back in time and the last hour was just some horrible nightmare, and soon he'll turn around and see his father running after him with a laugh, clutching his side. *Your old man is not as young as he used to be, Trev*, he'll say, putting a hand on his shoulder. *I can't keep up with your quick feet anymore*.

But he doesn't come, and Trevor is alone. He will always be alone, now.

The small boat his father had once taken Trevor to go fishing on is tied at the dock, bobbing up and down on the waves. He unties it desperately, his fingers slick with blood. He leaps into the boat, snatching up the oars and starting to row as fast as he can, even as he knows there is nowhere to go. By the time the priests reach the end of the docks, Trevor is long gone.

He rows and rows until his arms feel like they're on fire and his fingers can't unclench from where they're gripping the oars, and then he keeps rowing. He loses sight of the beach, and then he loses sight of everything and then it's just nothingness all around him, just open sea and the wind whistling in his ears. Nothing but the moon high above and the strange eerie calls of creatures deep below.

Eventually he gives in to his exhaustion and collapses, his arms burning and his fingers spasming, his right leg radiating pain and his broken rib screaming agony. Worst of all is the cut across his eye, still gushing blood, the pain so intense that he wants to scream. It seems to burrow beneath his skin and into his bones, setting his marrow aflame. It emanates all the way down till his throat, throbbing and aching. He cannot even cry for the pain he knows it will cause him.

All he can do is huddle on the side of the boat, his father's cloak wrapped around him, feeling the burn of infection beginning to take root in his eye. But there is something else that takes root too, something far colder and far uglier. It spreads its black wings inside his chest and rears its head like a vulture, beginning to feed on the remnants of everything inside him that had once been good and whole. It picks away at it with its razor-sharp beak, eating away at it until there's hardly anything left of it at all.

He swears to himself as he sits there, cold and alone and empty inside, that he will make the Church bleed for what they have done. He looks up at the stars, and gives each one the names of his sisters and his mother and his father, and with their light shining on him he closes his eyes, and he dies.

Both Trevor and his family had died that night. But only one of them had been reborn.

And he'll make sure that in this life, he will have his revenge.

Trevor jots awake with a shout, his head throbbing and his mouth dry and sour, that same fathomless grief still churning inside him. The knife twisting into the space between his ribs is still as sharp as it was eight years ago, unsullied by the passage of time. But that's not why he had woken.

At first he doesn't realize why—why his body feels as if it's readying him for a fight, why his head is turning involuntarily towards the door, why something feels very, very wrong.

Then he hears the first cannon fire.

"He's a skilled warrior and an important leader, Carmilla. He's intelligent in his own way."

"He's a fucking idiot, Morana," Carmilla snaps. "He doesn't think things through, he just... rushes into everything headlong. He lets his teeth and his thirst make decisions for him. That makes him a liability, particularly in situations like this one where everything is so delicate."

"Who else can you entrust with this?" Morana asks, practically. She's always being so fucking practical. It's infuriating. "Godbrand is the only vampire we know to be in those parts, and he is a skilled sailor and a seasoned warrior. He is perfect for the task at hand."

"He isn't subtle," Carmilla says, clenching her hands into fists. "He doesn't know how to tail people without being obvious."

"He is also still very much interested in convincing you to sleep with him," Morana says as if Carmilla hadn't even spoken. "This gives us a good hold on him. He will do whatever we tell him to do."

Carmilla throws her hands up. "For fuck's sake! I don't even *want* to sleep with him! I don't lay with pigs."

"Don't be disagreeable," Morana says, and now she's grinning. "He's quite good-looking."

"Don't even fucking go there." She points a finger at her. "He roots in his own shit and drinks his weight's worth in piss-poor ale-spiked blood every day. Moreover, he's got so little gray matter it's a miracle he's even a functioning being. I can't believe he's still alive. One would think he'd forget he can't go out into the sun and simply burn to a crisp." She sighs. "More's the pity."

Morana laughs. "Yes, yes, I get it. He's an idiot. But he is also our best chance at getting Alucard."

"God, is that what they're all calling him now?" Carmilla asks, examining her flawless nails. "Dracula's antithesis. I suppose it's clever."

"It is clever. Humans have their moments." Morana stands from where they're sitting at the table in the war room. Carmilla supposes it's a bit extravagant to have a war room on a ship,

but she'd insisted. It's a cramped space nevertheless, and the walls are covered in maps and charts, the table also strewn all over with papers. They spend most of their time here, the four of them. For now, however, it's only her and Morana; Striga and Lenore had elected to stay behind at Styria, preferring to strategize from the safety of the castle.

"Will you talk to Godbrand now?" Morana asks, moving towards the eastern wall, covered in maps of the Mediterranean. "Or will you wait for daybreak?"

"I don't know," Carmilla says. "I just don't want him for this job."

"You're the one who insisted we take his help."

"Not for this. I thought he might help us chart a route, or send out scouts, or give us his numbers when we eventually attack. Not be the one who tails Belmont's ship and gathers intelligence. We need *stealthy* people for that. Subtle people. Smart, tactical people. And Godbrand is anything but."

"What choice do we have?" Morana asks, and Carmilla sighs. "Little."

"None," Morana translates. "He is our only option. Is he near the boy's ship?"

"Last I heard from him, yes," says Carmilla.

Morana slides a quill from one of the innumerable pouches on her belt and holds it up to one of the maps. "How near, approximately?"

"Ten leagues, give or take."

She marks the map. "And how long will it take to catch up?"

"I told him to slow down out of sight so they don't know they're being tailed," Carmilla says. "He said he would, but that's the thing—I don't know if he will. He's just so fucking impatient and idiotic, he'll end up going and ruining everything."

"But for now he has not attacked."

"I don't think so, no," Carmilla says. "But—"

"Shh." She frowns up at the map and Carmilla shuts her mouth with a snap, grinding her teeth. "He can catch up within an hour, perhaps," Morana murmurs. She marks the map again. "How regularly are you contacting him?"

"Once a day," she says.

"And when was the last time you spoke?"

"Last night," says Carmilla with a sigh. "Morana, listen. I think we should just tell him to fall back, wait for us to get there. They're still hundreds of leagues from open sea. By the time we get Striga and Lenore and catch up we'll still have a week at least before we can plan an ambush."

Morana turns to her, frowning. "I will have to plan out how to manage the supply lines as well as the logistics of the whole operation."

"Can you do it?"

Morana glances back at the map, thinking for a few moments. Then she looks at Carmilla and inclines her head. "It will not be difficult," she says.

"Then we'll do it." Carmilla stands.

"If you're sure," Morana says, moving towards the table and tucking the quill back into her belt. "I am," says Carmilla, and Morana nods. "We will have an advantage if Striga is with us, and if we manage to capture the boy then Lenore will also be an important asset."

"Exactly. All I have to do now is convince Godbrand to stand down. It'll be quite the task." She rolls her eyes, stepping away from the table. "It's nearly dawn. You should get some rest. I'll deal with this whole Godbrand situation."

"Very well, then." Morana glides towards the door, reaching out to absently tuck a stray lock of silver behind Carmilla's ear before murmuring a good morning and leaving the room. Carmilla sits at the table again, feeling the day's fatigue in her bones as the sun begins to rise. She consults the maps for a little while, sipping on a chalice of blood spiked with strong, smoky cinnamon whiskey. It clears her head and dulls her senses at the same time, a heady combination.

Finally a few hours before noon she rises and makes her way to her chambers, moving towards the table at the far end of the room, atop which sits the chest that houses her mirror. Placing the chalice beside her, she opens it, allowing the shards of the mirror to rise and arrange themselves with the hypnotic tinkle of glass.

Once it stills she says, "Godbrand."

Her own impassive face dissolves, and coalesces into the view of a now-familiar room whose walls are covered all over with flags and armor and spoils of war. An equally familiar figure sits at the table, boots whose soles are caked with dirt and blood up on its surface and a tankard clutched in his hand. She refrains from making a face with great difficulty; even his nails are filthy. She's suddenly glad distance mirrors don't transmit smell.

"Godbrand," she says shortly, "I have orders."

"I don't take orders from you, Carmilla," is all he says in reply, taking another swig from his tankard. His crimson mane of hair is sticking out all around his head, and as usual he hasn't even deigned to dress fully, his armor strapped on over his bare chest. Arrogant, she thinks, careless. It's going to get him killed one day. Not that she would give half of a shit if it does, but still.

"I can phrase it as a request if it'll make your feathers lie flat," she snaps. "Either way, this is important."

“All right, what is it?”

She braces herself. “I want you to fall back and stop tailing the Belmont boy’s ship, then wait for us to catch up.”

He slams the tankard down and points a finger into her face. “No way.”

Her hands curl into fists. “You have to. It’s not safe. It was a coincidence that you happened to be around the Black Sea where the boy is heading for the Mediterranean, but it wasn’t a serendipitous one. You’re not the right man for this job, Godbrand, and we both know it.”

“No we fucking don’t,” he snarls. “You’re just jealous that I’ve caught up, that I could be the one to capture Alucard. So now you’re trying to undermine—”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” she says through gritted teeth. “That’s not what I’m saying, you idiot. You don’t know how to be subtle, you’ll just jump the gun and then we’ll all be fucked because we don’t know what we’re up against!”

“You think I can’t handle one little dhampir?” He laughs. “Please. I’ll have him on a stake in minutes.”

“We don’t *want* him on a stake,” she hisses. “We need him alive. And he’s no ordinary dhampir, Godbrand, he’s the son of Dracula. He’s more powerful than all of us put together.”

“He only found out about his other half a few weeks ago,” Godbrand says, waving an infuriatingly dismissive hand. “He isn’t in his full power.”

“And if you go and ambush them now, you’ll give him the chance to be,” Carmilla says. “It’s in moments like that when your vampiric nature takes over—you’ll be giving him an opportunity to get stronger. Moreover, he’s traveling with a Belmont. You and your warriors will all be slaughtered.”

He smirks at her, lifting his tankard again. “Isn’t that sweet,” he says, and she wants to reach through the mirror and strangle him. “I didn’t know you cared, Carmilla.”

She takes in a deep breath, closing her eyes for a moment. “I am not going to fuck you, Godbrand. I am never going to fuck you. I wouldn’t fuck you if you were the last living thing on this planet.”

He laughs. “You’ll come around.”

“You—”

“We’re closing in on Belmont’s ship,” he says, slamming his tankard down onto the table again. Blood thinned by ale sloshes out, running down the already stained wood and spattering onto the table. “There’s a storm brewing, but my ship can take it. It’ll catch them off guard if we attack while it’s got them on the defense against the hurricane already, so we’ll be able to capture Dracula’s spawn.”

“No, you stupid bastard!” She’s aware that she’s practically shouting, she’s aware that she sounds half-crazed and desperate, but God *damn* her if she’s going to let this reckless, moronic idiot of a vampire ruin her best chance at capturing Dracula’s son. “You’ll fuck it up and you know it. Wait for Morana, Striga, Lenore and I. We can—”

“You think you four little girls can handle a Belmont and Alucard better than me and my crew?” he snarls. “I’m Godbrand, terror of the Nordic Seas. Warrior chiefs of legend *pray* to their Gods when they see my flags on the horizon. Fuck, even the Gods pray when they see my flags and hear my cannons!” He shoves his chair back and stands as it topples behind him with a crash, and Carmilla wants to scream and claw his eyes out and tell him to just fucking *wait*—

“I’m going to capture Alucard,” he says, bracing both palms on the table and leaning forward to get right into Carmilla’s face. “And I’m attacking at midnight tonight. Next time you see me, I’ll have him and I’ll be having the Belmont’s blood for breakfast.”

“Godbrand, wait—”

He waves a hand, and his image dissolves. She’s left standing there, her shaking hands clenched into fists, staring at her own reflection. She looks furious. She definitely *feels* furious. She hopes Godbrand’s whole fucking crew gets massacred so that he knows she was right.

She snarls, slicing a hand through the air. The mirror dismantles with a gentle tinkle and settles back into the chest, and she slams it shut, her blood boiling. And they say women are too impulsive. Fuck them all.

She storms out of her room, stomping all the way to Morana’s chambers. Before she can even bang on the door Morana throws it open, wearing her sleep things and a frown. “What happened?” she asks without preamble.

“Godbrand happened,” she says bitterly. “He’s attacking at midnight, with absolutely no idea what he’s going up against. He’s going to ruin everything.”

“Come in and tell me everything,” Morana says soothingly, putting a hand on her shoulder and guiding Carmilla gently into her room. She hands her another goblet of blood, this one warm and sweetened with honey mulled wine. “Now what has he done to make you so upset?”

She sighs, scrubbing her hands across her face and taking a generous gulp of the blood. Morana has always had luxurious taste—the blood is rich and sweet, and tastes of spices. It relaxes her almost against her will; she wants to marinate in her anger a little longer, but even she knows she can grow reckless if she stays angry for too long.

“He didn’t listen when I told him to fall back,” she says after a few minutes of sipping the blood. “He’s attacking Belmont’s ship tonight.”

“It’s as you thought, then.” Morana looks troubled. “This is bad news.”

“No shit,” Carmilla mutters into the goblet.

“We should contact Lenore and Striga,” Morana says, ignoring her. “They should know this.” She strides to her own mirror chest, throwing it open and starting to speak the command, but Carmilla is hardly paying attention. All she can think about is what will happen now, how much this will change everything. All she can do is hope that it’ll go their way, that the boy won’t slip out of her grasp when she’d just begun to close her fingers around him.

And she’ll do anything she can to break Dracula’s curse before it breaks them all.

Trevor runs through the corridors, buckling his bracers onto his arms and slinging the harnesses that hold his knives across his chest as he does. His sword, strapped hastily to his back, slams against his spine with every step he takes, and his half-coiled whip trails behind him like a serpent.

He’d barely had time to get any armor on after he’d heard the cannons start firing, and a glance out the window had made him do a double-take; it’s after dark, maybe around midnight. He had slept the whole day, and now there’s a storm churning the sea below, rain slanting down in unforgiving sheets and lightning renting the sky open in searing flashes and deafening roars of thunder. How he hadn’t woken even once, he has no idea. He must have been more exhausted than he’d thought.

He bursts out onto the deck, rainwater and seawater lashing the ship and drenching him in seconds. The storm is fiercer than any he’s ever seen; the ship is being tossed up and down by the restless waves, and the sky above is a black mass of clouds, flashes of lightning illuminating the thick darkness every few seconds.

In the flashes he sees a ship pulling in beside them, a small heavy vessel flying the flag of the Nordic empire—as well as another, one bearing a familiar coat-of-arms, one he’s heard of in stories whispered on Dranova but never actually seen. The symbol of the Viking Vampire King.

“Shit,” he says, but it’s lost beneath the roar of the storm. The vampire council has arrived to take their pound of flesh.

He turns into the ship again, knowing that if they even catch sight of Dracula’s son they’ll stop at nothing to get him, and they’ll kill whoever stands in their way. He runs towards the room he’d put Adrian Țepeș in, his headache tripling and nausea beginning to churn in his stomach.

Just before he reaches the door Adrian steps out, blond hair disheveled and an alarmed, confused look on his face. “Belmont,” he says. “What—”

“Stay inside!” Trevor skids to a stop in front of him, shoving him back into the room. He’s out of breath. “Don’t come out no matter what you hear.”

“But what—”

“Just stay inside, you hear me?” He grabs hold of Adrian’s shoulders, shaking him hard. He’s half-shouting, but he doesn’t care; alarm and panic are rising in his throat, metallic and bitter, choking off his breath. “You can’t let them see you. Go as far into the ship as you can, lock yourself up somewhere, just don’t let them find you and don’t fucking come out no matter what, do you understand?”

His golden eyes are wide as he nods.

“Good. Now, go!” He pushes him back and takes off running again, not looking back to see if he’d obeyed. The moment he lurches onto the deck the ship starts to come to life, the crew shouting as they try to battle the storm and ready the cannons. Trevor looks around wildly for Sypha, then catches sight of her by the mast, pulling at the rigging.

He runs towards her. “Sypha!”

She turns to him, eyes wide and face flushed. “Trevor,” she says as he stops in front of her. “What’s happening? I recognize one of the flags they’re flying, but they’re not pirates.”

“It’s the vampires,” Trevor says, clutching at the stitch in his side. “They’re here.”

He hears her swear, sees her panicked expression in the next flash of lightning. “So soon,” she says. “This is bad.”

“We have to hold them off,” Trevor says. “Get the cannons ready. When I get the ship a good distance away from theirs, give the order to fire. We can’t let them get him.”

She turns towards him, her face set in hard, resigned lines, and nods.

Some kind of understanding passes between them then, something that tells them both that what had happened last night will go unmentioned. It’ll be as if it never happened. It was a temporary madness. Something that had come over them suddenly, and something that will not happen again. Even if it had nearly killed him to let her go, even if those few hazy, drunken minutes had meant everything to him, for her sake he’s willing to let it go. He’ll dream of it for a few weeks and remember it for longer.

He turns and heads to the helm, leaving Sypha at the rigging. He hears her shouting orders, feels the sails tauten against the winds to battle the fierce gales. The Viking ship pulls up alongside them, and their cannons are out. The next flash of lightning he sees allows him a split-second glance at their captain—a pale, stocky vampire with an untidy mane of scarlet hair and an equally scarlet beard, a crazed, wild expression on his face allowing Trevor an eyeful of his fangs. So that’s the infamous Godbrand.

He grasps the wildly spinning wheel and pulls with every ounce of strength in his body, tilting the ship away from the vampires’. If they get too close they’ll jump on board, and his crew will be woefully outmatched. They’re numbered only nine, and there’s probably half an army on the other ship.

He hears a shout, and then he hears Sypha call, “Fire!”

He whips his head around to watch as the cannons fire, three of them slamming into the Vikings' ship and one going wide. The heavy iron punches through the wood, splintering it. Sypha has had them aim for the guns, and he makes a mental note to commend her for it; two of their cannons are damaged beyond repair. Even if he's sure they have more, it's a start.

He checks his pistol, making sure he has enough bullets. They're made of heavy, solid silver, engraved all over with crosses and other holy symbols. One of these to the heart or the head and a vampire is as good as dead.

A second later the Vikings fire, and the impact nearly knocks Trevor off his feet. He manages to grab hold of the rails to steady himself, staggering to the wheel again. He pulls, trying to steer them away from the enemy ship, but even as he does, the Vikings pull up alongside them, their hulls colliding. The ship lists with a groan, and then their masts tangle together, locking and rendering both ships trapped.

He hears the vampire captain's manic laughter, hears him shouting orders to board the *Morning Star*. Sypha screams, "Fire!" again, and even as their cannons blow holes through the sides of the Vikings' ship, he knows that it's too late.

"Fall back!" He leaps down from the helm, drawing his sword with one hand and his whip with the other. The crew and Sypha gather behind him—and it's all they have, but they're only nine. Nine against the dozens and dozens of vampire soldiers that come pouring out of the Vikings' ship and onto his, clambering over the ropes and leaping across the gap with superhuman ease.

Well, if they all go out, at least they'll go out with a fight. And they'll take out as many vampires as they can while they're at it.

"Steady," he calls, sensing the crew's unease. They hadn't signed up for this, Trevor knows. Their task had been a simple one; sail and ask no questions. These are sailors, not warriors.

"Sypha, use your magic," he says, not looking away from the vampires surging towards them. She only nods. She doesn't have a sword or a gun, but her hands held out in front of her are weapons in their own right. There's no fear in her face, no hesitation. She looks resolute and determined, and pissed off enough to set a whole vampire army on fire, but not afraid. Fucking hell, he's so in love he feels like his chest is going to explode.

Godbrand the Viking Vampire King steps in front of his army, still grinning that manic grin of his. He's holding a massive broadsword, and he isn't even wearing armor, his pale, chiseled chest left bare. His body is unscarred, the mark of a vampire whose skin doesn't remember the wounds it had once borne.

He levels the point of his sword directly at Trevor. "That one is mine," he says. "Kill the rest. Find Alucard and bring him to me once they're dead. This will be over quickly enough."

He brings the sword down, and then all hell breaks loose.

Godbrand charges right at Trevor, but he's ready; he sidesteps neatly and casts out his whip, allowing the tongues of leather to find its target. It strikes Godbrand directly in the chest, and

he hears a satisfying crack of impact, as well as a low sizzle as the consecrated leather meets his skin. He snarls, advancing and swinging his sword.

He cracks his whip again, and it skids off the blade with a clash of sparks. He would be faster, more agile, if his head didn't feel like it's going to split open and if he could see a single fucking thing through the deluge pouring down from the heavens. As it is he's tired, and feels like shit, and he's basically half-blind. And Godbrand is none of those things. He's inhumanly strong, and he can see perfectly.

Trevor manages to hit the vampire with his whip again, this time on his arm. The wound blisters, raw and red, and he hears Godbrand swear. A second later he appears out of nowhere, his blade slashing at Trevor's wrist. He leaps backward, but he isn't quick enough; the blade opens up a long gash on his hand, forcing him to drop the whip. *Fuck*. It's too soon. He only has his sword and his gun now, and it hasn't even been five minutes.

Godbrand lunges again as Trevor parries his next thrust, opening up another cut on Trevor's shoulder. He spins out of the way, the wound trailing flecks of blood, and feints to the left. As Godbrand moves to block the slash Trevor moves lightning-quick to the right, stabbing his blade into the vampire's thigh.

Blood spurts from the wound, but it's only surface. Even as he watches the puncture heals over, sinking into his skin and leaving behind only a faint white scratch. That too will fade, in a few minutes. Nothing Trevor can do will kill him, unless he stakes him through the heart or cuts off his head.

And he's *toying* with Trevor now, feinting and lunging and slashing with practiced ease, each time managing to slip past his defenses and cut him on his cheek, his arm, his calf, his side. Soon Trevor is losing blood fast from several shallow cuts, all of them throbbing painfully. He's going to die, he realizes. He can't win this fight.

Godbrand's blade whistles towards him and he hears him laugh jeeringly, and he lifts his arms to catch the sword at the hilt. The blades collide with a sonorous clang, sparks flying where they chafe against each other. It's all he can do to push to try and gain the upper hand, push with all the strength left in his body—which isn't much, admittedly.

Godbrand sweeps his blade away with brutal force, sending Trevor stumbling backwards. His back slams into the rails and he hears a sickening crunch. Pain flares inside his chest like fire as he slides to the ground with a gasp, his sword slipping out of his bloody fingers.

This is it, then, he thinks blearily as he watches Godbrand advance leisurely, spinning his blade in his palm with a razor blade of a grin on his face. This is how he's going to die. He supposes it's somewhat heroic, to go out killed by a legendary vampire king, but for some reason he can't bring himself to think about it that way. All he feels is a bone-deep sadness, one so intense that he thinks he can actually physically feel it somewhere in his chest, a dull twist. And why, for the life of him he doesn't know. There are too many reasons he could be sad, and just acknowledging it makes him feel even sadder. God, he's so fucked up.

He fumbles his pistol out of his belt and fires. Godbrand lifts his sword casually, and the bullet lodges into the hilt. Trevor fires again, and again, and again, but he sidesteps every

bullet with such ease that it's almost laughable. He manages to hit him once, but the bullet sinks into the meat of his shoulder, missing anything and everything vital. Still, the vampire's face twists with pain, and he switches his sword to his other hand.

"I'm going to make sure you die slow for that one," he says, kneeling in front of Trevor and gesturing at his bleeding shoulder. Trevor tries to lift the gun again but Godbrand laughs, then kicks it out of his hand with a terrible ease. It skitters away into the shadows, and Trevor is defenseless.

"Thought that... thought that was a given," Trevor manages. He's definitely broken a rib. Maybe two.

"Yeah, well, I'll make sure you die slower," Godbrand says. "I thought the Belmonts fought vampires. I've had better fights with village peasants."

Trevor just shrugs. "Wasn't... feeling myself tonight," he wheezes. "Bad form. Drunk. Hungover. Right arm is a bit sore."

Godbrand laughs again. "You're mouthy for a man about to breathe his last," he says. "Get a good last look at your ship and your crew, Belmont. Tomorrow my crew and I dine on your blood."

"I've heard Belmont blood disagrees with you leeches," Trevor says, struggling to sit up. "Tastes bitter and gives you hives. Must be the whole 'sworn enemies' thing."

"I'll take my chances." He shoves Trevor back down, and he actually feels his cracked ribs shifting in his chest. He hears himself swear, sees stars dance in his vision as he fights to remain conscious.

"I swear I'll give you hell from the afterlife." He coughs, and he tastes blood in the back of his throat.

"Like I said, I'll take my chances. Nobody will remember you, Trevor Belmont. Not a soul." He stands, lifting his sword. "And we'll take Dracula's son and we'll dethrone the old bastard, and then it'll only be us and the livestock you're supposed to have protected. We'll drain them all, and you can't do a thing to stop it."

Trevor spits a mouthful of blood into his face.

Godbrand recoils. Then he snarls, wiping his face, which is twisted with rage. "All right, fine," he says. "No more talking."

And he stabs his blade directly into Trevor's gut.

Pain unlike anything he's ever felt before erupts inside him, a pain so intense that it blots everything else out for a moment, the whole world shattering around his ears. It's so much that he can't even make a sound, a choked wheeze escaping his lips instead. An equally horrible surge of pain shoots through him when Godbrand yanks the sword out of his body with a spray of blood.

He hears Sypha scream his name as if from a great distance, and hearing so much horror and fear and grief in her voice is almost as painful as getting stabbed. He turns towards the sound, wanting to see her face one last time before he dies.

Instead he sees a figure emerge from the shadows, a figure wreathed in golden light. Their face is hidden in shadow but Trevor can see their eyes, the same burning gold as the light limning their tall, elegant body. There's a halo around their head, shimmering and pale, and a long silver cross in their right hand. An angel, Trevor thinks. An angel come from heaven to take his broken body and lift him up to see his family again.

The angel surges forward, disappearing and appearing a moment later in a flash of red too fast for the eye to see. They coalesce in between him and Godbrand as if to protect him, an arm thrown out to shield his body. The cross in their hand shines bright as a fork of lightning cracks through the sky, and it's not a cross at all, Trevor realizes, but a long silver sword.

That is no angel.

Adrian Tpeş lifts his blade, his long pale hair cascading down his back and shoulders in the wind as he slashes at Godbrand, driving him back. Trevor can't see his face, but Godbrand as he beholds it looks—he looks terrified. He doesn't even stop to fight, doesn't jeer or laugh or anything. He just turns and flees.

He leaps over the gap between their ships and slashes at the ropes connecting them, his warriors following suit. Within moments someone has cut away the nets at the masts tangled together, and the ship groans as she rights herself, swaying. The vampires retreat so quickly that they're there one moment and gone the next, leaving only the storm howling in their wake.

"Trevor!"

Sypha's voice shatters the sudden stillness, and she slides to her knees beside him, tears in her eyes. She puts her hands on the terrible wound in his stomach, tries to staunch the bleeding, but there's simply too much of it. It's everywhere, all over his clothes and seeping into his boots, spreading around his body in a widening pool. If the pain doesn't kill him, the blood loss definitely will.

"Trevor," she whispers. "Just—just hold on, we'll do something, we'll fix you somehow—"

"Sypha," he manages. He tastes blood in his mouth and she shakes her head, tears sliding down her cheeks as she brushes his hair out of his eyes. "Shh," she says. "Don't talk."

"Have to—tell you." He coughs, and blood sprays onto her tunic. She doesn't even look at it. "Tell me what, Trevor?"

There is so much he wants to tell her. *I love you*, he wants to say. *I don't deserve you. I never deserved you and I never will. I'm sorry.*

"I..." He's so tired. He just wants to give in to the pain and die, but he has to tell her. "I—"

“Move aside. I think I might know a way to save him,” says another voice, and he looks up to see a blurry figure standing over him, one with waves of blond hair and eyes the color of the sunrise, brutal gold. Through the pain he sees his fangs, fully extended and curved, needle-thin and twenty times as sharp.

He lifts his wrist to his mouth and tears it open with his teeth, and dark red blood that shimmers like a fountain of rubies gushing from the wound is the last thing Trevor sees before darkness rises up all around him and everything fades away.

Far, far away, over mountains and forests and seas, red eyes open for the first time in twenty years.

Hands move, fingers bending into claws. Matted dark hair sways as a weary head lifts, pale bloodless skin tasting the air and the moonlight. Certainty and instinct wrap the dead thing inside his chest that had once been his heart like a vise, and then he knows.

My son is alive.

Chapter End Notes

godbrand, an important delegate and a general in dracula's war council, the viking leader and most likely the king of the vampires in the scandinavian region: *is literally fucking murdered and is never seen again*

everyone: oh no!

everyone: anyway

me: HELLO????????

i'm so fucking proud of this chapter. do tell me what y'all think in the comments please!

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

man i am dishing out chapters of this fic like a street food vendor and i am living for it. i am finally feeding you after i starved you for so long. eat up my dears.

cw: thoughts of suicide and self-harm. brief but still present.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The vampires' ship retreats so quickly it's almost as if Sypha is watching them fold away like paper, growing smaller and smaller until they vanish entirely. The ship is swallowed up by the storm within moments, leaving all seven of the crew and Sypha and Adrian Țepeș on the deck of the ship, miraculously unharmed somehow. But she can't even bring herself to feel glad or relieved; all she sees is Trevor's bleeding, broken form at her feet.

"Sypha," he rasps, and she shushes him, feeling her throat release the tears that had been making it difficult to swallow, and they slide down her cheeks. "Don't talk," she whispers.

"Have to... tell you," he says, then coughs. She feels blood spatter all over her clothes, but she doesn't care. "Tell me what, Trevor?"

"I..." he manages. "I—"

"Move aside," says Adrian's voice, nearly unrecognizable; he sounds firm, authoritative, regal almost. His whole demeanor is unrecognizable, had been unrecognizable since she'd seen him emerge from the shadows of the deck, his sword held aloft and his fangs fully extended. He had looked—he'd looked *feral*, every inch the creature that half his blood gives him the power to be.

He had phased through the air in a flash of red, warping in and out of existence like a ghost. He had moved from halfway across the deck to coming in between Trevor and the Viking vampire king between one heartbeat and another, covering a distance of almost twenty yards in the barest fraction of a second. She can't blame the opposing forces for fleeing; even she had felt a shiver of fear as she had beheld him standing there, his eyes glowing eerily and his delicate features turned harsh and unforgiving, his hair lifting around his head in long hypnotic curls of gold and his lips drawn back in a rictus snarl to bare his fangs.

"I think I might know a way to save him," Adrian says, and then he lifts his wrist to his mouth.

She sees Trevor look up at him as he tears his wrist open with his teeth, and she sees his eyes slip closed, his body slumping against the rails as he loses consciousness. Adrian kneels

beside him, and Sypha is so in shock and so full of panic that she doesn't even try to stop him as he leans forward and presses his bleeding wrist directly against Trevor's lips.

His blood drips down Trevor's chin, thick and dark. She can smell it everywhere, the hot iron stench of it filling the air and making nausea roil her stomach. Trevor's lips are parted slightly but the blood runs out of the corners of his lips, smearing across his face but none of it going into his mouth.

"Come on, Belmont, swallow it," Adrian hisses, a hand reaching to the back of Trevor's head and grasping a fistful of his hair to tilt his head up. Adrian's blood trickles between his lips, and as it does he angles his wrist carefully, allowing most of it to run down his throat. Trevor coughs even as he remains unconscious, his body spasming as it forces him to swallow.

"What—" Sypha can hardly speak, still half in shock. Her lips feel thick and clumsy, and she can barely get the words out. "What are you—"

He ignores her, pressing the cut on his wrist more firmly against Trevor's mouth. He's half choking and half swallowing, his eyes still closed and Adrian's blood smearing around his lips in fans of crimson. She can see the line of his throat moving as he swallows involuntarily, coughing and gasping. There's blood everywhere, so much of it that she feels a bit faint; both from the stab wound in Trevor's stomach and from Adrian's wrist.

Sypha's eyes find Trevor's wound, and they widen at what they see—it's shrinking slowly but surely, the ragged, torn skin knitting itself back together. With each swallow of Adrian's blood it heals over more and more, until all that's left of it is a wound only an inch or so deep, blood pulsing from it sluggishly.

"He can't swallow any more," Adrian says, and then he draws his wrist back. His own wound is closed now, not even a scratch left on his pale skin where his fangs had torn it open mere minutes ago. He lets go of Trevor's hair, and his head lolls onto his shoulder, unsupported. "He'll just throw it up. His body is unused to taking in this much blood."

"But it's not healed fully," Sypha says. "What will you—"

He doesn't wait for her to finish, sliding a knife from Trevor's belt and slashing his own wrist open again. Blood gushes from the cut in forceful spurts, and this time he holds it over the wound in Trevor's body, allowing the blood to work its magic on the cut directly. She turns her head to look at him, half in disbelief. His face is closed and expressionless as he clenches his hand into a fist, the slash in his skin weeping.

Gone is any and all trace of the quiet, almost shy boy she had spoken to last night at the rails. Now the call of his voice is as sharp as his blade, the look in his eyes is distant and removed, cold almost. She feels almost afraid of him for a second, feels like she doesn't know him at all.

Trevor's wound has closed fully but Adrian's wrist is still bleeding, dripping ceaselessly onto Trevor's skin. She glances into his face, alarmed; he looks vacant, as if he's in a trance, his lips slightly parted over his fangs and his eyes glassy. He looks asleep with his eyes half-

closed, and his skin is so pale he looks almost translucent. He's lost far too much blood, she realizes.

"Adrian." She gently takes hold of his hand and pulls his wrist back. "That's enough. He's healed, and you're losing blood."

He breaks out of his reverie with a jump, blinking at her. "I—you're right. Of course." He glances down at his wrist, and as they both watch the cut seals itself up within moments, leaving only a thin white scratch behind. That too sinks into his skin like ice melting into water, vanishing in a matter of seconds.

"He's still weak," Adrian says. "We should clean him up and get him onto a bed."

"How did you know your blood would heal him?" Sypha asks softly, brushing Trevor's sweaty, blood-stiffened hair out of his closed eyes.

"I didn't," Adrian admits. "It was... a shot in the dark. If my blood is the source of my power, and if my power is what causes me to heal as fast I do, it made sense that my blood could heal an ordinary human's wounds as well. I could think of nothing else."

"I've never heard of a dhampir's blood healing human injuries before," Sypha says, placing her fingers at Trevor's lips. His breath is steady on her skin, his pulse strong when she presses them to the side of his neck. "It saved his life."

He slumps back against the wall, his veins standing out stark against his throat, almost black. She steals a discreet glance at him—his fangs have retracted again. "Good," is all he says, his eyes closing.

"Will it... affect him?" she asks carefully. "Will your blood change anything?"

His eyes open and find hers. "I don't know. But it won't... turn him. I don't think I have enough vampire blood in me to be able to do that." His voice is thick with hesitation, not because of the words but because he has to say them. She can see that he hates this side of himself, hates that he is being forced to use it, to confront it, to think about it this way.

"I don't know how to thank you," Sypha says after a moment. "You saved him."

"You don't have to thank me." He ducks his head. "It's nothing."

"It isn't nothing." She doesn't know where it comes from, but a sudden surge of courage makes her reach out and take his hand. He stiffens for a moment, then relaxes, his fingers clutching hers back. "You performed a great sacrifice, Adrian."

He looks up at her through his curtains of pale hair, and his gaze is hesitant. "I heard them call me Alucard," he says softly. "My father's name spelled backward. As if we are two sides to the same coin."

"Did that bother you?"

"I... I don't know," he says. "I don't think so, but... it's a moniker that inspires fear. Like a title, or an epitaph. Something a warrior might use to frighten his enemies before he goes into battle. It's not a name, because I wasn't given to it, it was given to me."

He sighs, leaning his head back against the wall behind him, and the pulse in his throat is shallow and unsteady. When she glances down at their entwined hands she can see the delicate traceries of veins running beneath his skin—only they're black and ropy, raised like scars against his wrists and forearms.

"Adrian," she says, and her voice is a little sharp now. "Your hands."

He looks down—then he recoils, brows knitting together in clear disgust as he beholds his own veins like inky serpents twining up his arms. "What—"

"You've lost far too much blood," she says. "Have you ever bled this much before?"

He shakes his head, still staring at his own hands.

"Your vampire half must slow the natural production of blood in your body," she murmurs, leaning forward on her knees and brushing a hand across his neck, where the veins are equally dark and empty, rising through the thin, delicate skin there. "You need blood."

He shuts his eyes at her touch. "If you offer, I will refuse," he says quietly. "I cannot—I won't—"

"You need it, Adrian."

"I don't."

His eyes open to find hers, and they're just as stubborn as she imagines hers are. "I don't," he repeats. "I won't—I won't drink human blood. That is a line I am unwilling to cross. If I do, it will be—I can't come back from it. I won't let that half of me control all of me, dictate my body to its whims. I can stay human for a little longer."

"You were never human to begin with," Sypha says. "And that does not have to be a bad thing."

He stands, his fingers falling away from hers—then he lurches forward, clearly unsteady. He grabs the rails, staggering to his feet. He sways, his skin stretched tight over the bones of his face, hollowing it. He looks almost gaunt, as if someone has whittled his bones down to sharp, jutting lines.

"It does," he says. "Vampires are—they're leeches, just feeding off of others in order to survive, feeding on the essence of human life itself."

"That is not all they are," Sypha says. "There is also beauty to be found there, a grace of sorts."

"The grace and beauty that comes with being a predator." He shakes his head. "No. I will not drink your blood, *Sypha*."

She flinches at his use of her name—he must have heard Trevor say it, must have realized it's not a man's name, must have heard her real voice and not the soft murmur she had adopted for the last few weeks. Must have realized she had lied and lied and lied to him. He looks down at her, and now he just looks tired, and sad.

“You're a woman,” he says. “You're a Speaker Magician. Your name is Sypha. What else have you hidden about yourself from me even as you learned all my secrets before I myself knew them?”

“It isn't like that—”

“It is like that.” He turns away, hurt clear in his eyes, and something in her chest twists. “I'm sorry. I can't—” He swallows hard, stumbling backward with a hand held out as if to fend her off.

“I need to be alone,” he says, and then he disappears in a flash of red, his outline turning fuzzy before he vanishes, only the faint imprint of his body left in the air before that too fades. How ironic, she thinks bitterly, that he would use this vampiric power to get away from confronting another.

She stands, raising her hands. A gust of air buoys Trevor up, and she propels him across the deck towards the Captain's quarters. The crew say nothing even as they behold her power, merely watching her. She supposes she'll have to deal with them later.

She manages to get Trevor into the wooden tub in his bathroom, heating the water and cutting off his clothes before lowering him into it. She scrubs all the blood off his skin and out of his hair as gently as she can without waking him, and she has to drain the water thrice for how bloody it becomes. Once he's clean she wraps his chest with bandages, smeared all over with a salve for broken bones, dresses him, then manages to get him into bed.

She washes all the blood off her own hands, stripping off her blood-soaked clothes and tossing them along with Trevor's. She needs to burn them, later. They're unsalvageable now, stiff and damp with blood as they are. It takes her nearly an hour to wash Trevor's blood off her skin, watching the water run tinged with pink as she scrubs and scrubs at herself until her skin turns raw and red. She feels detached from it all somehow, like she's dreaming.

She dresses again in a loose shirt she manages to fish out of Trevor's closet, then drags a chair beside Trevor's bed. She sits, tucking her bare legs under her and watching him sleep, his chest rising and falling steadily with his breaths.

She sits by Trevor's bedside and muffles her sobs in her hands, her shoulders shaking and her whole body shuddering back and forth. All the fear and anger and bitterness and panic of the last forty-eight hours pours out through her tears, all the energy draining out of her along with it. She sobs now because she couldn't when she had been in this same room last night, because she couldn't at the rails speaking to Adrian, because she couldn't when she was watching the man she loved dying slowly in her arms, struggling to tell her something that he'd never even been able to say.

What had he been about to say? *I'm sorry? I can't let you see me this way?*

I love you?

She recoils from the thought, biting down on it hard. No. No, she will not allow herself to think like that. Not after she just nearly lost him.

She cries herself out, and once the tears stop she feels hollow and wrung out, as if someone has ripped her open and emptied her, then sewed her back up again, ragged at the seams. She cries until she falls asleep from the exhaustion of it all, bent over on Trevor's bed with her head pillowed on her arms, her cheeks still wet.

When Adrian comes into the room hours later that's how he finds her, and she's in such a deep sleep that she doesn't even wake when he tucks a blanket around her form and wipes the damp from her cheeks before leaving the room. But she doesn't say anything, and she doesn't open her eyes.

Four days later, Trevor washes up on Dranova.

They find him when the high tide sweeps in, bringing the little fishing boat into the beach. He's unconscious and covered in blood, lying at the bottom of the boat with his hands still clutching his father's cloak around his body. The left half of his face is festering with infection, swollen and with blood poisoning streaking beneath his skin in stark veins of red. They carry him ashore, murmuring to each other about the familiar family crest on his clothes.

He wakes when they're setting his broken ankle, sitting up with a gasp as he hears the telltale crack of the bone popping back into place. They tell him that if he's lucky it'll heal properly and he won't have a limp, but they can't be sure. They've cleaned him up as best as they could, and they've treated his broken rib with whatever they have, but they tell him that the gash across his eye has to be stitched.

The old bartender does it at the end, giving him a leather belt to bite down on and a shot of whiskey for good measure, even if Trevor is only twelve. He threads an old fishing hook with a line from one of the fishermen's nets and goes to work on the cut, stitching it up as best as he can. Trevor doesn't make a sound, but tears of pain gather and spill over his one good eye, streaking through all the grime and blood on his face and leaving clear stripes of skin behind.

The bartender lets Trevor sleep in the little clapboard room above the tavern, and doesn't ask him any questions. He lies in bed for days afterward, bedridden with a fever and his face still burning and infected, his ribs still aching and his ankle still stiff. He wonders if he'll lose his left eye, if he'll have to wear an eye patch like so many of the pirates on Dranova do, and he dreams about his family every night.

More than a week later the stitches come off, and there's a livid, puckered scar that slices through his eye, but he can see. He starts to leave the bar, starts to venture into the streets and manages to pick fights with the street boys, and gets beaten by shop owners that he carelessly steals from. He comes back to the bar every evening with fresh bruises, and the bartender frowns at them but says nothing.

He finds a whip in the folds of his father's cloak and he teaches himself how to use it until it's like an extension of his arm, until he's one of the deadliest people on the island with it in his hand. He learns how to pick locks and throw a punch, and he learns how not to get caught stealing. He refuses to do honest work and builds a tolerance for alcohol that could rival most of the island's drunks, and by the time his ribs and ankle heal fully everybody on Dranova knows him.

It doesn't take long after that for the rumors to begin, outlandish rumors about deals with demons and dethroning Satan, about how he's the unholy offspring of the sea and the devil. There are a few about the last son of the Belmont family too, but those are few and far between. Pirates like to believe in the worst tales, the most scandalous tales, the most unlikely tales. Stories about him spring up all the time, and he learns to like it, learns to lean into them and feed them whenever he can.

He grows older, and he grows ruthless and pitiless too. Some of the stories—stories about blood spilled in alleys and the crack of a leather whip and the fangs of vampires being torn straight from their mouths—aren't entirely untrue, and he makes sure there are people to bear witness to the worst of them. At least that way they'll know not to cross him.

A few years later he meets Sypha.

She's wide-eyed and innocent, too innocent for Dranova, too good. He tries to take advantage of it at first, tries to slip a hand into her pockets and take the money she's so carelessly put there. She turns and sends a jet of fire at his head and then she shouts at him and it reminds him so much of how his mother used to chastise him that he actually apologizes, and he actually means it.

They find each other again and again over the next few weeks, and he actually starts to like her, though he'd never say it aloud. He likes how hotheaded she is, how stubborn she is even if that same stubbornness is what makes him hate her sometimes. He likes the one little curl of strawberry blonde that always falls across her face, and he likes the gentle way she says his name and the way she takes his hand when they walk down the streets together.

He likes the way she makes him feel. She makes him feel like he's worth something in this shithole of a world, makes him *want* to be worth something. He likes how she makes him feel like he's the only thing that matters when she smiles at him or laughs at one of his bad jokes or puts her arms around him when she's sad, likes that she trusts him to make her laugh whenever she is. He likes that he's her only friend, because no one else can see her the way Trevor does—and how could they? No matter how much he sees her he realizes it will never be enough.

He falls in love with Sypha, because he can do nothing else. He realizes it and then he hates himself for it, because he knows he can live a hundred lifetimes, a thousand even, and never even come close to deserving her. And so he watches her, and he loves her from far away, and tells himself that not being able to have her is his punishment. And he endures it, because he deserves it.

He dreams that it was Sypha who burned in the fire instead of his family. He wakes with a gasp and with sweat covering his skin and fear writhing inside him, and he realizes that she

has become his sole weakness. As long as Sypha is there, Trevor is vulnerable. He is torn open. He has something to lose.

When she goes away with her caravan for a year he tells himself he's relieved. She'd taught him to start working, and he buys a ship with the coin he'd earned by her side. He paints it and polishes it himself, and he names it after his family's deadliest weapon. He grows dangerously proud of his name, stitching the crest in gold on all his shirts and dressing in its colors from head to toe. If he's going to be condemned for his heritage he might as well have the pleasure of claiming it.

He leaves the island. He gathers a crew, and he gathers a reputation, too. A good one this time, one he thinks Sypha would approve of. He frees slaves, and he treats his men well and pays them good coin, and he goes home every few months, letting his eyes drink in the sight of the familiar ports and churches and docks. He becomes Trevor Belmont, and even if he's a pirate, the only people who learn to fear him are slavers and pimps.

He goes back to Dranova and he's there waiting when Sypha returns, older and taller and *beautiful*, her face having lost the softness of childhood sometime over the last year and a half. Her eyes are the only thing about her that's unchanged, still wide and blue and full of life. Her face breaks out into a dazzling smile when she sees him, and she runs into his arms without a word.

He had hoped, that sometime while they were apart he might have lost those feelings he'd had for her. That the brutally sharp blade of love had dulled over the months that had passed, had lost its luster and its edge. But as he catches her up against him and breathes in the scent of her it drives home into his heart just as sharp as it had so long ago, and Trevor is still weak, still stripped bare and raw.

It nearly slips out of him on so many different occasions over the next year or so.

When he gives her a bundle of wildflowers he'd found on the beach and she closes her eyes to lift them to her face, a quiet little smile curving her lips as she smells them, he wants to say to her, *Sypha, I love you*. But instead he takes one of the delicate yellow blossoms and tucks it into her hair behind her ear and tells her she looks beautiful.

When she saves his life as they both fight hordes of night creatures that a rogue Forgemaster had created on a neighboring island, her hands raining shards of ice and leaping with flames, she grasps his hand and helps him to his feet and he almost says, *Sypha, I love you*. But he swallows the words, and instead of saying them he kills the last of the demons that had been behind her without a second thought.

When they're both sitting on the deck of the *Morning Star* and watching a meteor shower streak across the velvety heavens far above and she leans her head against his shoulder and loops her arm through his and points up at the stars with their light suffusing her features he wants so badly to tell her, *Sypha, I love you*. But instead he looks up and makes up a bunch of silly constellations to make her laugh and when she does it's more breathtaking than all the stars in the sky put together.

It rings in his mind all the time, a melancholy chorus whenever she's near, sighing *I love you, I love you, I love you*. He wants to tell her, but he knows he can't. He can't bear to burden her with his love too. Not after everything he had done. And now he's dying, and he hadn't even been able to say it to her, and he might not ever see her again. But maybe it's for the best.

And so he lets it echo inside him, empty and hollow as he is, because he can never say it aloud, because this is his worst secret. Because the words kill him slowly but he's never felt a sweeter pain, he lets them fill his head in a deafening clamor, thinking them over and over and over again.

I love you. I love you. I love you.

The sound of the mirror wakes Carmilla from her fitful slumber, soft and insistent. It doesn't take much to wake her, it never has. Still, she shakes off the lingering afterimages of dreams that paint the backs of her eyelids; the achingly familiar sight of long auburn hair rippling in the wind, of lips painted rose petal pink curving into a smile before pressing against hers, tasting of dew and honey and happiness.

She bites down on the memories hard, willing them away. God, even after hundreds of years her past haunts her, refuses to fade away like so many other things have faded away. Even now, the memories of it—of *her*—are as clear as they were the day she lost her.

She'd thought that after so many centuries of being crushed underneath another's will she would forget and the memories would fade. But if anything during those long, cold years she had clung to them like a tether, and it had been with thoughts of her old life burning in her mind that had helped her take control of her new one.

She had gone back to the village she had lived in once—only once. Those memories are newer. Cool grass beneath her knees as she had knelt by a grave, tracing the name on the headstone with her fingertips, seeing her tears run pinkish down her cheeks, tinged with blood as they had been. Allowing herself weakness for a few hours and no more before standing and leaving.

She stands, casting the memories off angrily. She doesn't have time to dwell on all this absurdity. It's sentimentality, weakness. Carmilla is a queen now, a woman of cold logic. She cannot afford weakness.

She scowls at her mirror as it shimmers before her, swimming into focus a moment later. "Oh, you're alive," she sighs, shifting to peer into the iridescent surface more directly. "I had hoped you'd all been fucking murdered by your ridiculous idea, but apparently I wasn't so lucky."

Godbrand doesn't even snap back. He just stares at her, eyes wild and hair tangled, and there's such fear on his face that she feels any remaining irritation and anger—and maybe just a little bit of relief that he's alive, though she'd never say it aloud—fade away as she gets a better look at him.

"Godbrand?" She sits up straight. "What is it? What did you see?"

“We’re all fucked,” he says. “We are so fucked, Carmilla.”

“What do you mean?” she asks sharply. “What happened?”

“He’s—” She sees him swallow. “He—”

“I was right, wasn’t I?” She crosses her arms and leans back in her chair. “It takes a lot to scare you this shitless. Did you see his father in his face?”

He shakes his head, his face so pale his complexion is closer to gray than white. “He looks like *her*.”

Carmilla freezes. “What?”

“He looks just like her,” Godbrand says. “He looks *just like her*.”

She doesn’t need to breathe, but when she drags in a lungful of air it’s almost a reflex, even if she hasn’t drawn breath for hundreds of years. “Shit.”

“Yeah.”

“Do you think he has...?”

“I don’t fucking know, and I didn’t stay there to find out,” he says.

“Fuck.” She turns away for a second, trying to process the information. If the boy has inherited anything from his mother, then they’re well and truly fucked now. She hadn’t even considered it before. Being Dracula’s son is bad enough. But if he’s anything like *her*...

“Now what?” she asks finally, turning back towards him. “You’re not going back again.”

“Fuck no.” He shakes his head. “We doubled back, put everything we had into it. We reached Wallachia last night, went on a couple of raids.”

Leave it to Godbrand to stoke his own ego right after it had been bruised. “Let me guess,” she drawls. “You just *had* to turn a few humans into boats to remind yourself you’re still worthy and strong after fleeing like a cowardly dog with your tail between your legs.”

“Anyone would have fled.” He glares at her. “Even you.”

She sniffs, inspecting her nails. “I don’t run away from things, Godbrand.”

“You’d have run from Alucard.”

“I’ll let you know how it goes after we capture him like you failed to do,” she snaps. “Let’s list out all the ways you’ve fucked this all up for us, shall we? So far, you’ve made them all vigilant, cautious. You’ve helped him lean into his powers and grow stronger. You’ve given away our intentions and blown our cover. You failed to capture him and, I’m assuming, also failed to kill the Belmont—”

“I killed the Belmont,” he snarls. “I killed him.”

“You did?” She raises a brow. “Well, there’s that.”

“He has a magician with him,” he goes on. “A Speaker. She reeked of magic.”

“Brilliant,” she says through gritted teeth. “Just what we need. A hunter, a scholar and a soldier.”

“The hunter is dead,” says Godbrand. “I stuck him good.”

“Well, let’s hope it did the trick.” She frowns. “What happened?”

“I would have cut his head off, but before I could *he* arrived. He moves like the wind, Carmilla, like his father. He protected the Belmont, so I assume they’re allies now.”

“Fucking hell,” she mutters. “That’s a first.” She raises her voice. “Where did you stab him? His heart, I hope?”

“No, his stomach. He’d have bled out in hours.”

She stills. “Hours?”

“Yeah, it—”

“You do realize,” Carmilla says slowly, feeling that now all-too familiar anger starting to build in her chest, “that vampire blood has healing properties, don’t you?”

He looks at her with a perplexed look on his face, and she has never wanted to slap a man more in her life. “What?”

“You idiot,” she whispers. “You fucking idiot. You can’t even kill a human properly. Why the fuck did you stab him in a non-lethal area? Why didn’t you just kill him?”

“He spat at me,” Godbrand says, and she almost laughs at that. Men and their fragile egos, their fragile fucking pride. They make everything about that, everything has to become a stupid dick-measuring contest with them. And they are who the world expects to be in charge?

“He’s not dead,” Carmilla says. “They saved him.”

“How do you even—”

“Because of course they fucking did,” she hisses, and he falls silent. “Do you not think anything through, Godbrand? Do you not think at all?”

He opens his mouth and she holds up a hand. “Don’t fucking answer that. It was rhetorical.”

“He probably doesn’t even know his blood can heal!” He glowers at her. “How would he—”

“Because it’s common fucking sense, Godbrand,” she says, now too tired to even yell. “Congratulations, you have failed to do anything for us and showed them all our cards. You fucked it all up, and I told you that you would. Didn’t I tell you that you would?”

“I know how much you love to say that,” he snaps. “But I’m not afraid of you, Carmilla.”

“No?” She raises a brow. “Well, you should be. Because the next time I see you in the flesh I am going to fucking flay you alive.”

He glares at her. “Whatever. Just—do whatever the fuck you want. Just don’t drag me into it. We can’t win this war.”

“It’s not a war yet,” she says, raising a hand to dissolve the connection between their mirrors. “But it will be. And when it turns into one, you’re going to have to choose a side, Godbrand. Or you’ll get caught in the crossfire.”

He opens his mouth to retort, but she’s already waved a hand, and his face dissipates into nothingness.

She sighs, putting her face into her hands and is almost considering praying for patience—or perhaps for a sudden and fortunate strike of lightning to hit Godbrand and kill him on the spot—when Morana bursts into her chambers, her hair disheveled and her face full of concern and panic.

Carmilla stands, feeling her body tense up almost immediately. “What?” she asks. “What is it?”

Morana’s face is as grim as her voice when she speaks.

“Pirates,” she says.

His tears are bloody.

He hates it even as they drip down his face, tinged pink and spattering down onto his hands, but he can’t stop them; it feels like someone has dug a hook into his ribs and is yanking the sobs out of his body, each one worse than the last. It *hurts*. It hurts him to cry, but he can’t stop it.

All of the fear and bitterness and anger from the last few weeks has finally caught up to him, everything he had been assaulted with since he had left home. It had slammed into him so suddenly and so painfully that his knees had given way, everything dissolving into white noise. He feels like the shroud of his entire existence is being ripped apart slowly, stitch by excruciating stitch. Every loose thread is unspooling into chaos and leaving only a ravaging emptiness behind.

He had been so detached from it before, so alarmingly emotionless. He’d thought that perhaps he had simply handled the shock better than he’d expected, and his body and mind had adjusted quickly to the new information. But he hadn’t; the shock had been a veil, a

shield that had gone up around him briefly. Now it's crumbled at last, and he's left bare before it all.

He's never wept blood before, but it's as if his body is leaning into that side of him, learning to rely on it more, learning to trust it even if he doesn't. It's coming to him more easily now—extending his fangs, moving so quickly that everything blurs in a flash of scarlet, crying tears stained with blood. He hates it. He hates himself. He hates himself so much he wants to kill himself.

He's kneeling the floor of the room Trevor had put him in, staring down at his hands, hands that he doesn't even recognize. They're pale as death, black veins rising up through his skin like there's ink in them instead of blood. His nails are bent into claws, tapering to deadly points so sharp that when he'd clenched his shaking fingers into fists they had cut into his skin, leaving blood from the now-healed wounds in his palms crusted beneath them in crimson crescents. It's as if the emptiness in his body is making that monster inside him rise to the surface, howling for blood.

He cries until there's nothing left inside him, until what pitiful amount of blood left in him has been purged from his body with the tears. Until all he can do is gasp and take heaving breaths, his chest hitching and his veins so *empty* that it's all he can do not to claw them open and just end the pain and the hunger and the hatred and everything that's devouring him inside.

He's so lost under it all that he barely registers it when a small, warm pair of hands takes his cold ones, a familiar pair of blue eyes swimming in his vision. She puts her arms around him and gathers him close, his face pressed into the curve of her neck. He can smell her blood. He can smell her sadness, too.

She holds him and he shakes apart in her arms, his hands clutching the fabric at her back and the scent of her filling his head. He hears her whispering his name, her voice soft and soothing in his ear, both crouching entwined on the floor. He clings to her like a life raft, lost at sea as he is, and they stay like that long after the lamps burn low.

Sypha opens her eyes slowly, and her eyelashes are fringed with sticky salt and dried tears. She imagines she feels tearing skin as she blinks, wincing as she rubs the wetness away. A blanket falls from her shoulders as she sits up, and she looks down at it, surprised. Adrian must have placed it there.

She glances at Trevor's still-unconscious form, his chest rising and falling shallowly. She places a hand on his forehead and withdraws it quickly with a wince; he's burning up. Adrian's blood might have healed the wound, but the damage to his body had clearly been far deeper than just surface.

There isn't much else she can do besides placing cool wet bandages on his forehead before she leaves the room, intent on finding Adrian. She wants familiarity now, wants someone to talk to. And there's something else, too, something she doesn't want to name whenever she's with him. Something that feels alarmingly like what she feels around Trevor, only it's not like

that at all. She's terrified of it, but she can't help craving it, a moth setting itself ablaze on the fire it's so helplessly but destructively drawn to.

She finds him crumpled on the floor of his room, his hands stained with bloody tears and his body wracked with silent sobs. She goes to him and kneels in front of him, taking his cold, trembling hands before folding him into her arms. He leans into her, and it's like holding a loosed arrow; he's shaking, fine tremors that wrack the length of his whole body. His heaving breaths puff out on her throat, and she knows it's reckless, knows it's dangerous to have a starving vampire's—dhampir's—mouth so close to the pulse in her neck. But she doesn't care. She doesn't care.

They stay like that for so long she loses track of time, his fingers knotting in the fabric of the shirt at her shoulder blades and one of her hands resting carefully on the back of his head. Slowly the tension gathered in his shoulders and back seems to dissipate, and he begins to relax ever so gradually, melting into her. She runs her fingers carefully through his hair and murmurs soothing nonsense into his ear, her own eyes drifting shut.

"Sypha..." His voice is so soft she barely hears it, and the suddenness of it after almost an hour of silence startles her. "Why did you lie to me about who you are?"

Her fingers still in his hair. "You know what pirates think of having a woman on board a ship," she says. "Moreover they're wary of magic and Speakers. I am several things they fear packed into one. My presence on board is considered unlucky. They will blame the events of the last few days on me."

"I... I suppose that makes sense," he says, and then he draws away. She feels the absence of his warmth like something physical, her arms falling away from him. His eyes are bloodshot, and he's so pale in the dimness, a ghost hovering before her with eyes like suns floating in his white face.

"What do they want from me?" he asks. "Why are they intent on capturing me?"

"You are the son of Dracula," Sypha says. "You are a valuable bargaining chip. Leverage. Something he has to lose so that they may yet gain something else."

"Like what?"

"Power," she says. "To dethrone Dracula is no small feat. Whoever does so will reign over the night for all eternity. It's a heady temptation."

He sighs, his eyes closing. "I am so fucking tired," he says, "of being treated like a weapon. Like a bargaining chip. Like bait. Like a *thing*." He opens his eyes and looks away from her, his throat working. "I hate it."

"I... I know, and I'm sorry," Sypha says quietly, putting a careful hand on his shoulder, emboldened when he doesn't throw it off and squeezing gently. "For what it's worth, I never thought of you that way. Nor did Trevor, though it may have seemed otherwise."

He chokes on what could be a laugh. It's a short, acerbic sound, devoid of any humor. "Don't lie. He kept me on board because I was valuable."

"Maybe," Sypha acknowledges. "But when he wakes..."

"He will never forgive what I did, even if it saved his life," Adrian says. "Forcing him to drink my blood... he won't take kindly to that."

"Why did you do it?" she asks, and his eyes snap up to meet hers. "Do what?"

"Give him your blood. Save his life." She withdraws, sitting back on her haunches. "You had no reason to."

"I..." He shakes his head. "I don't understand your question."

"It's not an unfair one," she says equably. "You were not treated like an esteemed guest for your first few days on this ship. You were chained and kept in a cell. You were beaten and bruised. You were forced to learn things about yourself that you should already have known, things that were hard to digest. Trevor has not been kind to you. Why did you save him? You did not owe him anything."

He stares at her. "He's a human being. He was dying. Moreover he was raised to see me as an enemy, something to hunt and kill without second thought. It wasn't a choice I made to save him, it was just... I had to."

"But you did make a choice," she says softly. "You could have let him die."

"And the guilt that would come afterward? The knowledge that I could have saved him but didn't? That would certainly kill me if the vampires did not kill me first." He shakes his head. "I would not have his blood on my hands."

"Your original intent was to kill him."

"That was when I believed he had killed my father," Adrian says shortly. "I thought it to be vengeance. Righteous comeuppance. Restoring balance to the world. But that was a lie. Even then it was misplaced anger that drove me to want to kill him. I would have regretted it for the rest of my life."

"You think of Trevor as an ally, then?" she says.

He hesitates. "I don't know what Trevor Belmont is to me," he says. "You're right, he may not have treated me like a prince. But he also gave me a bed when he could have left me in the brig. He told me he was sorry for forcing the knowledge of my nature on me, and it seemed as if he meant it. He warned me of the dangers that were to come. He spoke to me as if I were a person and not some creature he had to kill, and he—and you—fought the vampires so that they wouldn't get to me."

He looks away from her. "I know that doesn't absolve him of anything he's done. I know it doesn't magically fix everything that's happened. But it means something, and that is reason

enough not to want him to die. I don't think anyone, not even the worst of people, deserve a punishment as absolute as death."

He sits back and shrugs. "I don't know what he is to me," he says again. "But whatever he is, I could not stand the thought of his dying when I could do something to stop it. I am no killer. I never have been, and I hope I'll never have to be. I wasn't going to start there."

"Your blood saved him," Sypha says. "He will learn to admit that he has forgiven you in time. He may seem prickly and disagreeable on the surface, but..." She sighs. "He has a good heart."

Adrian watches her closely for a few seconds, as if he's studying her. Finally he says softly, "I thought so."

"What?"

"You love him," he says.

She drags in a shaky breath, looking away from him. There's silence between them for so long that it stretches into minutes, thick and heavy with expectation.

"You can..." She tries to compose herself, clenching her hands into fists to hide their shaking. "You can never tell him."

He shakes his head. "I would never. It is not my secret to tell. But..."

"But what?"

He looks at her a bit oddly then, as if he's unsure—not about what he's going to say, but about how she might react to it. "He... before he lost consciousness, as you two were..." He shakes his head. "The look on his face... I thought you knew."

"Knew what?" she asks, not knowing whether or not she wants to hear what he's about to say.

"That he loves you too." He stands, starting to turn away. "You should get some sleep. I'll look after Belmont now. And..." He takes her hand and presses a brief, chaste kiss to her knuckles. "Thank you, Sypha. Your kindness and your willingness to treat me with humanity mean more than you know."

Before she can say anything in reply he leaves the room, shutting the door carefully behind him. She stares after him for a long time, kneeling on the floor with her hand still hovering in the air.

The place where his lips had touched her skin is tingling.

in which everyone is in love with sypha. including me. ily sypha and i would die for you.

come and screech about castlevania with me on [tumblr](#)!

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

greta of danesti has entered the chat.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

There is something indescribably strange about looking at someone and knowing that your blood runs in their veins.

Watching Trevor Belmont sleep restlessly, his cheeks flushed a hectic pink and the sheets sticking to his skin with sweat Adrian feels it, that odd jumble of feelings and thoughts that he can't put a name to. He finds his eyes clinging to the vein in his throat, the sure, steady pulse of life, of blood—*Adrian's* blood—beneath corded skin and muscle.

He doesn't know what this will mean. What this is going to do. And not just to Trevor.

He's heard the stories, passed around behind hands in hushed whispers back in Wallachia, rumors and murmurs about the properties of a vampire's blood. That it gives you youth, that it turns back time, that it makes you immortal. That if you drink enough of it then it will turn you into a specter, neither human nor vampire. A sickly pale creature that cringes away from sunlight and craves a vampire's blood the way a starving man craves food. Then, they would say, the thirst would drive you to them and they would either kill you or turn you.

He doesn't know if the stories are true, but there's something almost like fear lingering in the back of his mind, the fear that when Trevor will wake he will be changed. That Adrian's blood would have altered something in him, that his blood has the power to drive him to madness. It had healed him, but what if it does something more? He knows that once Trevor wakes he will have to tell him what happened. And once he does...

There is fear there, too. In thoughts of what he will say. But it is not his anger that Adrian fears; it is the sunderance of an already-brittle trust that had formed tentatively between them, one that had not only offered him impunity but had also made him feel strangely at ease here. If that is destroyed by this then he knows that there is nothing he can do that will reforge it.

Because in these last few weeks unbeknownst to Adrian he had, somehow, come to like Trevor Belmont. He doesn't quite know when it had happened, but sometime in between the tentative laughter and companionable banter and the laying bare of Adrian's whole past something had burgeoned, something *good*. And loathe as he is to admit it, Adrian doesn't want to lose it.

Soft, the bishop would have sneered if he were here. *Naïve. Too quick to trust, gullible and ingenuous and foolish. You were always too willing to give everybody a second chance, a*

third, a fourth. When they inevitably slip a blade into the heart you gave them it will be no one's fault but your own.

He squeezes his eyes shut, his fingers curling into fists as he wills those thoughts away. Try as he might, he can't shake off thoughts of the bishop, of everything he had learned about himself in the past week, about how nothing he had known about his life had ever been real. If Adrian ever sees the bishop again, would he forgive him?

He remembers what Trevor had said to him in the cells, the firmness in his voice when he had told him that giving the bishop a second chance was exactly what he wanted, that note of near-desperation sharpening the words to a blade he had wielded like a weapon—to frighten him. And frighten him they had.

He lets out a breath, letting his head fall back against the back of the chair behind him. None of them had been prepared for this, for this sudden upheaval, this sudden riptide that had swept in before any of them could react and torn them from whatever had anchored them to the shore. The vampires, the battle, everything that had come afterward.

And now Adrian's blood runs in Trevor Belmont's veins, and he is terrified of what will happen because of it.

Have I saved you? he thinks, his eyes finding Trevor again, his body still and unmoving on the sheets. *Or have I condemned you?*

Almost as if in answer to his question he sees Trevor stir, his head turning towards Adrian almost as if can sense him. He half-stands, anticipation making his heart race as Trevor's eyes flutter open, the color of the sea beneath a storm, a restless grayish-blue in the dimness. They're bloodshot and red-rimmed with fatigue and fever, and filmed over with a heavy layer of sickness as he looks at Adrian, a sudden recognition shining in them clear as day.

"Sypha?" he asks hoarsely.

"I—" Adrian hesitates a moment, swallowing hard. He must be delirious, not quite awake yet. "No. It's not Sypha."

He sees Trevor blink, confusion drawing his brows together, sees him begin to separate dream from reality as his eyes clear slowly. He turns toward Adrian fully and his lips part as he stares at him as if trying to place him.

"Adrian?"

He sucks in a sharp breath; it's the first time he's used his first name, the first time he's heard anything but the usual scornful *Tepeş* in his mouth. It's startling in its intimacy, and it makes some strange emotion he doesn't want to name bubble up in his chest.

"Yes, it's me." He stands fully, getting to his knees a moment later beside the bed to put their eyes on a level. "I didn't think you'd wake this soon."

"How long has it been?" he asks, sounding dazed.

“A day, give or take.” He’s hardly daring to breathe, bracing himself for the inevitable revelation of what Adrian had done to save him and its sure-to-be messy aftermath.

“I feel like shit,” he mutters, trying to struggle into a sitting position, his elbows braced against the mattress to heave himself up. Adrian quickly reaches out, taking hold of his shoulders and easing him back down.

“Don’t,” he says. “You’re still weak. Your wound has healed, but you have a fever.”

“The vampires.” His eyes clear suddenly, something almost like alarm filling them a moment later. He glances down, then back up at Adrian. “Godbrand—the Vikings—they fled when you...”

Adrian hardly remembers it himself, hearing the battle and knowing he had no choice but to show himself, seeing Trevor’s broken body at the rails and hearing Sypha’s screams and the Viking king’s raucous laughter as he had readied himself to deliver the killing blow. He had felt some instinct he didn’t recognize rear up in his chest like a snake before its charmer, filling his veins with power and certainty, one that crowed its delight and victory as the vampires had fled at the sight of him.

This is what it’s like, it had crooned, dark and violent in its pleasure as it had writhed in his chest, to be your own weapon, to crave fear and drink it in like blood, to drench yourself in the blood of your enemies and feel as if you are bathing in the purest of waters. This is what it is like, it had said, to be a vampire.

“Yes,” is all he says, and his voice is so soft he himself hardly hears it. “They did.”

“You... how did you...” Everything seems to be coming back to him at once, all the memories of what had happened before he’d lost consciousness flooding back in one hard blow. A thousand emotions flit across his face in rapid succession, none of them discernible. He settles finally on what seems to be disbelief, shaking his head. “You moved so fast.”

“I...” He looks away, uncomfortable. “I wanted to move, so I moved.”

“I was dying,” Trevor says quietly. “I almost did, didn’t I?”

“It was... a close thing,” Adrian says haltingly. Hot, bitter anticipation rises up in his throat, nearly cutting off his breath. “A few hours and you would have bled out entirely.”

“You gave me your blood, didn’t you?”

Adrian shuts his eyes. “I—I had to. There was no other—it was the only thing that could have saved you. No amount of medicine or stitches could have closed that wound. It was give you my blood or watch you die, and even if you might have preferred death I could not...” He swallows hard past his dry throat. “I would not have it on my conscience to let you die when it was in my power to save you, I—”

“Adrian,” Trevor says, and it startles him into silence. He opens his eyes and Trevor is looking back at him, and his heart stutters unevenly in his chest at what he sees in his face—

and it's not anger or betrayal.

"Thank you," he says simply. "You saved my life."

Adrian's mouth opens, but no sound comes out. He tries again, and his voice comes out hoarse and cracked when he says, "I—I thought you would be angry."

"Me too," Trevor says, his lips twisting into a wry smile. "But I suppose nearly dying puts this stuff in perspective, and it's not even really a choice, is it? If you hadn't done it, I'd be dead. And as long as you didn't turn me, then there's not much to be angry about."

He squints at Adrian. "You didn't turn me, did you?"

Adrian shakes his head mutely.

"Then it would be ungrateful to react any other way," Trevor says equably, and a sort of half-incredulous disbelief wells up in Adrian's chest. "It'll take a while to see if this has any lasting changes, but until then I'm alive, and it's because of you. So... thank you."

"I—it's nothing," he says automatically, and if he had any blood left in his body then he's sure he would have been blushing.

Trevor's gaze sharpens as his eyes flick over Adrian suddenly, something almost like concern tugging at his features. "How much blood did you give me?"

"I'm not sure." He sits back on his haunches, letting out a breath. "Enough to close the wound fully."

"Did you feed afterward?"

He feels his face twist with disgust at the word—*feed*, as if he were little more than a wild animal, a wolf tearing open the body of a helpless deer and feasting on its flesh. A parasite sucking the life from an unsuspecting victim, leaching their essence and their life force one greedy swallow at a time.

It must be evident, because a moment later Trevor amends hastily, "I mean—if you had any blood, to replace what you gave me."

Adrian sighs, shaking his head. "No. Sypha offered, but I refused."

"What? Why?" He tries and fails to sit up again. "You'll starve!"

"I'd rather starve than drink someone's blood," Adrian says stubbornly. "I won't. Not while I'm still half human."

"Half human, half vampire, what difference does it make?" he demands. "If you starve yourself purposefully you're just killing yourself extra slowly and extra painfully, and you're putting the whole crew at risk. Believe me when I say nobody wants to be within five miles of a starving vampire, least of all a young one. You won't know what you're doing when the thirst takes over. You could tear half the crew apart and not even realize for days."

Adrian shakes his head again. “I can handle it. My human half will keep it at bay. You’ve never dealt with one of my kind before, you only know about full-blooded vampires.”

“That may be true,” Trevor says evenly, “but I saw firsthand how you reacted to my blood the first time.”

The words hit him like a slap across the face. “You—”

“You know I’m right,” Trevor says, maddeningly calm. “You damn near went feral. You’d have torn me apart if Sypha hadn’t restrained you.”

He clenches his teeth. “That was when I didn’t know what I was. Now I do. I can control it.”

“So... what?” He raises a brow. “You’re just going to starve yourself until you die? Is that the plan?”

“I’m not going to—”

“Show me your hands,” Trevor interrupts him sharply, his voice brooking no room for argument or protest. Adrian gnashes his teeth together but rips his sleeves back angrily, thrusting his arms towards Trevor and looking away, feeling infuriatingly like a child being chastised by a parent.

“Fuck,” Trevor says, and a second later Adrian jumps as he feels warm, almost hot fingers encircle his wrists carefully, thumbs tracing over the livid black veins running beneath his skin like cracks in white marble. “This looks bad.”

“How observant of you.” He makes to snatch his hands back but Trevor’s fingers tighten on his wrists, keeping him in place. He’s so weak that he can’t rip his arms out of Trevor’s grip even with his inhuman strength, and when he slumps back a second later it’s partly from fatigue and partly from defeat.

“See?” Trevor says, loosening his hold on Adrian slightly. “You need blood.”

“I don’t want it.”

“Don’t want it, or don’t want to live?”

Adrian’s eyes snap up to meet Trevor’s. “What?”

“You heard me.” He’s looking at Adrian steadily, his hands still closed over his wrists. Adrian wonders if Trevor can feel his pulse racing against his fingers. “You hate this side of yourself. You’re disgusted with it. You were raised to believe you’re vermin, something unholy and unnatural. The way you talk about it all, your face when you’re reminded that you are who you are—it’s like you hate yourself. Like you just want it all to go away.”

Adrian says nothing.

“So,” says Trevor, still in that same calm, even tone, “do you not want blood, or do you just want to let it kill you?”

He can't bring himself to answer, can't bring himself to even look at Trevor. His silence and his averted gaze are louder and clearer than anything he could have said aloud; Trevor nods a moment later, freeing Adrian's wrists. "I thought so."

Adrian snatches his hands back, his face burning with what can only be shame. "What is there to live for?" he asks, his fingers curling into fists, hard enough to make the half-moon shaped bruises on his palms where his nails had sliced into the skin there earlier ache. "So long as I'm alive I'm merely a target on your backs, and the vampires want me for leverage over my father. I've never even *met* my father."

Trevor sighs. "I'm not going to say I know what being in your position feels like, because I don't," he says. "But I know what it's like for your life to be fucked up enough that you just want to end it, for other people's sake if not your own. But that kind of thinking—it's just desperation. Things aren't always going to be this shitty, and if you just waste away it'll hurt more than it'll help. Killing yourself isn't the answer to this."

"Then what is?" he asks helplessly, and Trevor raises his eyes to Adrian's, his gaze resolute and unwavering as he answers.

"We find your father before the vampires do."

She can hear the bells ringing, loud and incessant somewhere at the helm. The sound of it pierces the air like a blade as she strides down the corridors, her unsheathed sword clutched in her fist with Morana half-running behind her to keep up.

The moon is high in the sky, a slender crescent nestled among the stars like a sly silver smile. It's a calm night, the sea beneath the ship entirely still like an obsidian mirror reflecting the night sky above and giving the disorienting impression that the ship is floating untethered in space. She turns to Morana, fingers tightening on the hilt of her blade.

"Contact Striga and Lenore," she says, her voice as sharp as the crack of a whip. "Tell them where we are and to get here as fast as they can."

"What will you do?"

"I'm going to tell Godbrand." She casts her eyes towards the ship advancing on theirs, their guns out and the tattered pirate flag at their mast flying high and proud. She recognizes it, the curved, bejeweled blade beneath the adorned skull on the fabric. "Hopefully we won't need his help, but it's always better to have reinforcements."

Morana's eyes are locked on the flag too, worry and concern tugging her lips into a frown. "These pirates are a long way from home," is all she says.

"I'm assuming the Arabian Sea didn't yield enough bounty for their liking." She turns swiftly, making to go back inside. "If we move quickly enough we can take them easily. Even more so if we let them assume we're human."

“Deception tactics, then,” Morana says, nodding. “I’ll see you back here in five minutes.” A moment later she slips back inside, disappearing from view in a flash of purple and gold. Carmilla turns swiftly inside as well, moving towards her chambers and quickly opening the chest inside which her mirror rests with the gentle tinkle of glass shards.

“Godbrand,” she says impatiently, sweeping around the room and gathering her weapons. She supposes armor would be a bit much—moreover she doesn’t need it. Strapping a few more daggers to her boots she turns towards the mirror again just as he swims into view, scowling as usual.

“What?” he snaps without preamble.

“Pirates,” she says, drawing up to the chest and securing one last dagger in a hidden sheath on her forearm. It locks into place with a soft, satisfying click and she looks up a second later, a hand falling on her sword at her hip. “We may need reinforcements.”

“So now you need my help?” he laughs, leaning back. As he does she sees the bars of a prison cell over his shoulder, grimy and rusted, and the wide, frightened eyes of the people behind them. Humans, she realizes, and vaguely recalls him saying something about a raid or two. She looks back at Godbrand with a frown.

“I thought you were done with taking prisoners alive.”

“Yeah, well, this one gave me a fair bit of trouble.” He jabs a thumb behind him at the bars. “Killed all but two of my lieutenants, and she had a mouth on her, too.”

Carmilla’s eyes find the front of the group, to the only one whose gaze is livid and defiant rather than cowering or fearful—a young woman, her brown skin streaked with grime and her dark hair tangled and matted, clothes torn and nails broken but still standing straight, still standing in front of the people as if to protect them. Almost against her will she feels a flash of grudging respect; it takes a hell of a lot of grit to be fearless in a situation like this, trapped in a vampire’s cell with death as sure as sunrise on the horizon.

“Well, good for her.” She crosses her arms. “Are you going to turn her?”

“Maybe,” he says offhandedly. “Not before I suck her people dry one by one while she watches, though.”

“Fuck you,” she hears the woman hiss, and when Godbrand turns, probably to say something crass or stupid or perhaps both, she leans between the bars and spits right in his face.

Carmilla bursts out laughing as Godbrand recoils with an enraged shout, wiping at his face and snarling obscenities. He makes a swipe for the woman but she steps back swiftly, the slightest of smirks on her face.

“Fuck that,” he snarls, turning back to Carmilla. “I’m killing her for sure.”

“Give her to me,” Carmilla says, grinning. “I could use a woman like that by my side—”

She hears a cannon fire, the sound of it exploding through the air and shattering the stillness. She turns towards the sound, alarm beginning to claw its way up her spine. “Shit.”

“What was—”

“Set your course,” she snaps, turning back to the mirror. “And get here quickly. We’re about two hundred leagues southeast of Wallachia, you should be able to get here in a day if you’re fast enough.”

“Fine,” he says. “But you owe me.”

“That depends on if you get here in time. Just fucking hurry.” She waves a hand, the mirror coming apart with a series of musical clinks. She spins on her heel and stalks out of her room and down the corridor, hearing the beginnings of a battle start to come to life outside. If they can keep up the illusion that they’re human for just a few minutes longer—

She joins Morana at the helm a moment later, watching the pirate vessel draw up alongside theirs smoothly, both rows of guns out and aimed directly at them. She catches a glimpse of the captain at the helm, shouting orders to ready the cannons—and she swears under her breath, drawing her sword in one smooth sweep.

“What?” Morana turns to her, worry darkening her violet eyes to a stormy purple. “What is it?”

“These aren’t just any pirates.” She spins around. “Are the guns ready?”

“They are—but who—”

“Fire!” she hears the pirate captain call, and at the same time Carmilla shouts, “Hard to port!”

The ship lists alarmingly but manages not to tip, groaning deafeningly as it slants sideways. The maneuver manages to spare most of the ship from the pirates’ cannons, catching most of their fire in the stern. She doesn’t give them a moment, calling out a moment later to fire their own guns into the attacking ship.

It’s sudden enough that it gives them no time to react, the cannons punching solidly through the wood of the pirates’ vessel and tearing out through the other side in an explosion of timber and iron. She hears the pirate captain shouting orders but the words are lost beneath the roar of the wind and the loud cracks of wood splintering and metal tearing. Carmilla’s cannons have done their damage; another blow or two and the pirates’ ship will capsize.

Morana turns to her, her sleek updo hanging half-undone around her shoulders, her eyes wide. “They’re going to board the ship,” she says. “They have no other option.”

“Let them.” Carmilla’s fingers tighten on her sword. “I’ve always wanted to best this particular princess.”

Morana’s eyes fly to their flag again, widening in recognition the moment they do. “Carmilla —”

“Fire!” she calls, bringing her sword down, and a moment later the guns go off with a deafening bang, the heavy iron slamming into the already rapidly weakening wood of the pirates’ ship. It buckles with a groan beneath the assault, and she sees a fire spring to life somewhere in the lower levels, leaping out of one of the portholes in the side of the ship in a blaze of gold and scarlet. *Perfect.*

Already she can see ropes being tossed from the sinking ship onto hers, the metal pikes on the ends catching and digging into the rails. She hears the captain shouting orders to board Carmilla’s ship and she makes no move to stop them, merely readying her weapon and swallowing the bitter taste of anticipation that rises in her throat. It’s been a while since she was in battle, but she can feel her blood singing; little feels as exhilarating as walking the tightrope between life and death.

Her eyes track the leather boots that alight onto the deck, studded with metal all along their lengths and rising up long slender calves and strong thighs. Her gaze moves higher still, catching on a thick belt carrying an impressive array of daggers and a long curved blade, its handle inlaid with precious gems in intricate patterns that catch the moonlight.

The hand that reaches down and draws it is almost as bejeweled; there are rings on every one of the captain’s fingers, gold and bronze and copper with stones and crystals clutched in their claws. She looks up just as the captain draws the sword, her eyes meeting Carmilla’s across the battle that’s beginning to break out, the pirates’ soldiers clashing with Carmilla’s.

She’s heard tell of this particular pirate queen here and there, the story of once-respectable Princess Kashi of a port kingdom in imperial India. The real story is distorted beyond recognition by rumors and word of mouth, sensationalized and warped till it’s practically a fairy tale. She’s heard several iterations, each more bizarre than the last; that she had killed her brothers and taken the throne, that she had poisoned her father and stolen every last coin from the royal coffers before fleeing, that she had been kidnapped as a child and murdered her captor, taking his place.

But every story ends the same way—that she had abandoned her duties as a princess and a respectable woman and had taken to the seas instead, quickly earning a reputation as the most ruthless pirate queen east of Europe.

She walks towards Carmilla, her blade held loosely in her hand. She’s tall—a good two or three inches taller than Carmilla—and built like a warrior, slender but strong. The moonlight casts dramatic shadows across her face, turning her eyes into pools of pitch. Her hair hangs in a thick braid down till her waist, so dark that it seems to absorb the moonlight that falls on it, making it look as if it’s made of darkness.

“You sunk my ship,” she says, her tone incongruously calm. Her voice is high and musical, her accent rich and cultured, clipping her words and making them sound like a threat.

“You made it easy to.”

She says nothing, merely watching Carmilla with that same maddeningly unreadable expression.

“You’re a long way from home, princess Kashi,” Carmilla says. “India is almost a thousand leagues away. What brings you to the Mediterranean?”

“Rumors and promises.” She gives no indication that she’s surprised Carmilla knows who she is; her infamy has reached lands far and wide, and there are only a few who don’t know her name. She takes another step forward, and something about her movements unsettles Carmilla, makes her hackles rise involuntarily. “I imagine you’re familiar with them as well,” she goes on.

“I don’t go after things as cheap as treasure,” Carmilla says, feeling her lip curl. “I seek something far more valuable than gold.”

“And what might that be?” She raises an eyebrow. “Power? Influence?”

“What I seek is none of your concern. Right now there’s only one thing I’d like to see, and that’s you and your pathetic crew either dead or locked up in the brig. If I’m feeling particularly generous, I might even let you choose.”

The princess only smiles, closemouthed and tight. “Your threats do not sway me, Queen of Styria.”

“So you know who I am.” She sighs. “No matter. I suppose it’s only a matter of our advantage being out in the open instead of being a nasty surprise.”

“You think I’m afraid of vampires?” Her grip tightens on her blade. “I do not fear you or your crew.”

“Well, you should.” She readies her own sword, spinning it leisurely in her palm. “Going against the holy notions of God, soulless creatures of the night, such like.”

Her smile widens. “I renounced the gods long ago,” she says. “They spare no mercy for people like me. I turned my back on them when I turned my back on my kingdom.”

“Fascinating,” Carmilla drawls. “Shall we get on with it, then? I’d hate to waste a perfectly lovely evening having to kill you.”

“I promise I can make it worth your while,” the princess says, sketching an ironic bow. A moment later she springs forward and her blade is descending towards Carmilla in between one heartbeat and another, a blur of silver. She takes a step back, raising her own sword, and then everything vanishes, everything but her opponent and her blade. The rest of the world shrinks into the background, her focus as single-minded and ruthless as an arrow.

It’s a tireless whirlwind of slashing and stabbing and parrying, taking steps forward and backward as they trade blow after blow. It’s almost as if they’re engaged in a dance and not a fight, every movement of it synchronized and complementary; for every step back the princess takes a step forward, the force of her blows sending sparks flying where their blades chafe against each other.

Distantly she can hear the sounds of battle, blades ringing and blood spilling, shouts and cries filling the stillness of the night air. The opposing crew are hardy for humans, and so is their captain; she doesn't seem to be tiring or slowing as they spar, matching Carmilla for speed and agility.

Doubt sows itself in her mind, one that takes root slow but sure. Perhaps there's more to this princess' story than what rumor and innuendo have to offer.

She sidesteps another blow and sweeps a foot out, intending on sending her crashing to the deck, but she grabs Carmilla at the last second, sending them both sprawling. She feels her sword tear itself from her grip and then something grabs her hair; she swears and swipes blindly with her nails, managing to draw bloody lines across her face. The scent of her blood fills Carmilla's head when she inhales—sweet and iron and unmistakably inhuman.

The realization is sudden and startling and is ultimately her undoing; she hesitates for a moment too long, and in between one second and the next she finds herself pinned to her own deck with pair of fangs poised at her throat.

She's dealt with pirates before, their graceless raids and their greedy hands, their crude skill and drink-thinned blood. And while the occasional unfortunate human pirates mistake her ship for a courtly vessel and easy loot and usually end up an easy meal for her and her crew, vampire pirates are—well. Harder to deal with.

Carmilla looks up at the woman above her, the cuts on her face vanishing even as she watches, the snarl twisting her lips putting her fangs on full display. This situation just got far, far more complicated than she had bargained for.

“Well, *fuck*,” she says.

A soft knock on the door wakes Sypha from her fitful sleep, cutting through the murky in-between she had been lingering in, on the cusp of being neither asleep nor awake. The beginnings of dreams fade from her consciousness, dissipating like mist in the sunlight; it had been something about a pair of eyes, but who they belong to she can't quite tell—whether they were gold or blue, whether they were his or *his*—

The knocking grows clearer and louder, gentle but insistent. She lifts her head groggily, blinking the drowsiness from her vision, and sits up slowly. The room swims into focus, her eyes burning; she had barely gotten a wink of sleep, and her limbs are heavy with fatigue.

She rubs at her eyes with a sigh, and jumps as another knock sounds from the door. She manages to get out of bed and stumble across the room and towards the door, throwing it open.

Adrian's hand is still raised, his fist poised to knock on the door again. His eyes widen as he catches sight of her, dipping downward in an almost involuntary reaction before he seems to force his gaze back up to her face, the line of his throat moving as he swallows hard. He clears his throat awkwardly, looking away a moment later.

“I, ah—hope I didn’t disturb you,” he says feebly, still looking anywhere but at her.

She glances down at herself with a frown and winces internally the moment she does; she hadn’t bothered dressing before answering the door, and all she has on is one of Trevor’s shirts, the hem falling halfway to her knees and the thin white cotton doing little to conceal her form. She’d also eschewed her bindings the previous night, and the plunging neckline leaves little to the imagination.

Deciding it’s wisest to simply act as though nothing is out of the ordinary she schools her features into an appropriately concerned expression, resisting the urge to reach up and hold the neck of the shirt closed over her cleavage. “Is anything wrong?”

“No, nothing’s wrong,” Adrian says, his eyes still trained determinedly on the wall. “I thought to—it seemed prudent to tell you—if you weren’t busy—”

“Adrian,” she says, hiding a smile. “What is it?”

His cheeks are the faintest of pinks as his eyes find hers; if he hadn’t been practically drained of blood she’s sure his whole face would have been bright red.

“Trevor is awake,” he says, and if the shock of the words hadn’t blotted out everything else, all the breath rushing from her lungs in a single instant, she would have noticed his use of Trevor’s first name. “What? So soon?”

He nods. “I was surprised too. He’s still weak, but I thought to tell you; he may fall back into unconsciousness at any given moment. His fever is quite high.”

“I—can I see him?” She’s already pulling the door closed, stepping into the corridor uncaring about her bare feet and her state of undress. “Is he awake now?”

His eyes glitter with a bemused sort of mirth. “Yes, that’s why I woke you,” he says. “He asked for you as well.”

“You spoke to him?” she asks as they head down the corridor together. The ship is swaying gently with the waves but neither of them stumble a single step, used to the rhythmic rocking of it as they are. *Sea legs*, her grandfather had called it.

“I did.”

“And?” She turns to look up at him and he merely shrugs.

“He took it... surprisingly well,” he says. “I think he may have been delirious with fever, but he said that as long as my blood didn’t turn him he could only be grateful that it saved him.”

“I told you he has a good heart,” Sypha says, gently bumping Adrian’s shoulder with hers. He ducks his head, but not before she sees the smile that spreads across his face—and it’s small and tentative but it’s there, and it makes something in her chest loosen agreeably; it’s been a long time since she’s seen him smile.

He stops at the door of Trevor's cabin, slightly ajar, and makes to step back. When she turns quizzical eyes up to him he only shakes his head and says, "Perhaps this is a conversation no one should be privy to. I'll be in my quarters if you need anything."

With one last little smile he turns and walks back the way they came, disappearing around the corner a moment later. Sypha watches him go, then turns towards the door to Trevor's cabin, a strange anticipatory panic rising in her throat all of a sudden. She remembers Adrian's words to her in his room before he had left, the certainty in his voice as he had said them.

Taking a deep breath she pushes the door open with her fingertips, something almost like nervousness quickening her pulse as she shuts it behind her and steps into the room.
"Trevor?"

"Sypha," she hears his voice say, weak and soft, and then her legs are moving almost of their own volition, closing the distance between them in three long strides and kneeling by his side as she practically throws herself at him, wrapping her arms around his waist and burying her face into his chest.

She hears him laugh, feels his arms come around her and catch her up against him, holding her back just as tightly as he presses his cheek to her hair. She wraps her arms tighter around him, mashing her face further against his chest, and no matter how hard she tries to stifle her sobs they bubble up anyway, relief and panic and fear and happiness all overwhelming her for a moment.

He does nothing but hold her as she shakes apart in his arms, his hands rubbing slow circles on her back, his fingers five warm lines she can feel on her skin even through her clothes. The scent of him fills her head when she breathes him in, blood and sweat and wood char and Trevor. It's earth-shatteringly comforting in its sheer familiarity to her, his nearness and the smell of his skin and the weight of his arms around her.

"I'm here, it's all right," he's saying over and over again, his voice thrumming through her bones where her cheek is mashed against his chest, vibrating through her whole body.

"I was so scared," she hears herself whisper, barely audible even to her own ears. "I thought I was going to lose you, that you were going to die and I couldn't do anything to stop it—"

"Don't." His arms tighten around her and then he's putting a hand beneath her chin to tilt her face up towards his, and he looks tired and his cheeks are flushed with fever but he's looking at her like she's the only thing that matters, like there's nothing else in all the world but this, here, now, her.

"I'd never leave you," he says, and it sounds like a promise, like an oath that binds them together with so much more than just physicality. "Even if it means I have to tear down mountains and swim through seas and lift the sky with my bare hands, I swear I will always, always find my way back to you."

She feels her breath catch in her throat as his thumb traces carefully across her cheek, wiping away her tears. There's something achingly vulnerable about seeing him like this, all his defenses lowered and his armor stripped away entirely, leaving him bare before her.

“I couldn’t tell you before I thought I was going to die,” he says softly, still holding her so gently that it’s as if she will otherwise break, “and so many times before that—every single day I knew you I should have told you, but I didn’t.”

“Tell me what?” she whispers.

“That I love you,” he says simply.

Everything seems to go still for a moment, suspending them both in one single moment that stretches out interminably. She feels like she’s caught in a dream, some delicate spun-glass halcyon fantasy that will shatter if she opens her eyes or if she speaks.

So instead she leans forward and kisses him.

She feels him exhale against her lips, soft and startled almost—and then he’s pulling her closer, one hand tangling in her hair and the other wrapping around her waist, half-pulling her on top of him. One of her hands finds his cheek, the other gripping his shoulder to anchor herself. He’s warm—too warm, she thinks, but now she’s far too gone to care. It’s so different from those desperate devouring kisses in Trevor’s cabin that night, drunk and half out of their minds as they had been; this is soft and blissful and careful, and in every press of their lips and every caress of their hands all she can feel is bliss.

She pulls away slowly, mindful not to be too rough, and Trevor’s eyes are still closed, his cheeks flushed a candy-apple red, his lips swollen from kisses. He opens his eyes slowly and looks at her, and all she can do is hold him tighter and say the words she has been choking on for so long that she can’t remember a time when she could breathe without them blocking the air in her throat.

“I love you, too,” she says.

He chokes out what could be a laugh and then he’s pulling her closer and kissing her again, and again and again and again, hard and desperate, as if he can’t get enough of her. She kisses him back, lost in the feeling of him here and close, in the relief that saying the words has brought her, easing some great weight her shoulders had been hunched beneath.

He pulls her closer and then she’s on top of him on the sheets, her knees on either side of his hips and his hands in her hair. It’s as if a dam has broken, years and years of hope and longing and want and love crashing through whatever had held them back for so long. This is what it’s supposed to be like, what all of it is supposed to be like. *This*.

“Sypha,” he breathes against her mouth, and God, she’s waited so *long* to hear him say her name like that. She pulls away for a moment, breathing hard, feeling drunk on the feeling of him like this.

He’s looking back at her, a faintly awestruck look on his face, as if he’s looking at a miracle. She can feel his heart hammering beneath her hands, and for a moment everything else falls away, the vampires and Dracula and the church, everything that they’re running from and whatever they’re running towards. Everything else fades away and becomes Trevor.

“I’ve wanted to tell you for so long,” he says.

“Me too.” She brushes his hair out of his eyes, gently cups his face in her palm. “Why didn’t you?”

He huffs out a humorless laugh. “Isn’t it obvious?”

“No.”

“Sypha,” he says slowly, his fingers tangling with hers where they rest gently on his cheek. “I could live a thousand lives and still never even come close to being good enough for you.”

“And I would never ask you to be any better a man than you already are,” she says softly. “The Trevor I know and fell in love with, he’s brave and honorable and good in his own way—and I would not have any other. He is as deserving of love as anyone is.”

He shuts his eyes, his head falling back onto the pillow beneath him. “But I can’t—I can’t love you the way I should. I can’t ask you to stay with me when this is my life. You deserve better than that.”

“Trevor,” she says, “I don’t want the life you seem to think I should have. A steady life? A house and a good husband whose children I would bear, one I would kiss goodnight every evening and then hone my magic after he goes to bed? That cannot be my life, Trevor. Not after everything that’s happened.”

He shakes his head, his eyes still closed. “You shouldn’t have my life, Sypha. You should have the world.”

She leans down and kisses him, soft and gentle. “I don’t want the world,” she whispers. “I want you.”

His eyes open then, finding hers, impossibly blue in the dimness. “Don’t say that.”

“Why not? It’s true.”

“I don’t—I’m not—” He exhales shakily. “I have nothing to give you. Nothing to offer you but what little I have, a tarnished reputation and this horrible existence of just running and hiding.”

“None of that matters to me, Trevor,” she says quietly. “Not as long as I have you.”

“I—”

“Don’t bother, Trevor.” She sits up, shaking her head. “Nothing you can say will change the fact that I love you. And that means I’m staying. No matter what happens.”

His lips curve up into the barest of smiles. “I don’t think I’ll ever stop feeling like I don’t deserve you.”

“I don’t know about deserving,” she says. “Deserving is a luxury none of us can afford. But I know what I want—and that’s always been you.”

“I—fuck, Sypha.” He looks away from her a moment, his throat working as if he’s trying to remember how to speak. “You’re—this is—”

“I know.” She presses one last kiss to his lips before carefully disentangling her limbs from his and standing up, perching once again in the chair beside his bed. Their fingers are still linked, neither of them willing to let each other go.

“How long?” he asks, and she knows what he means, even if it goes unsaid.

She meets his gaze. “Since I was fifteen.”

He cracks a halfhearted smile. “Me too.”

She smiles too, but it’s oddly melancholic, bittersweet in the shared knowledge that they had both been too afraid to say the words for so long and had chosen to stifle them in silence instead. That so many years had slid wasted through their fingers like water before they could grip it tighter.

“Trevor,” she says, gripping his hand tighter, “I need you to know that no matter what’s happened, no matter what *will* happen—this, here, the two of us—I would not change it for the world. If I could do everything again, I would always choose you.”

He only smiles at her and clutches her back, and there is a strange sort of wonder in his eyes as he says softly, “I think I’m just starting to realize that.”

Chapter End Notes

yes i am devoting a whole subplot to carmilla and my totally not self insert oc. don't come for me.

End Notes

if for some godforsaken reason you would like to see the moodboard i've created for this fic, [feast your eyes.](#)

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!