Rune Songs: The Collected Works of Eric Northman

by Melusine10

Summary

Eric Northman has kept a diary from his earliest days, when he went by the name of Eiríkr and his maker was known as Goðrik. Ever wonder about his turning? What he did in his first years as a young vampire? How did he and his maker's relationship develop to be so close? What adventures did they have? Curl up and read his recollections.
"You don't look so good"

Circa 750 C.E.

A few small fires scattered the battlefield providing enough light for my men to finish cutting down the last of our enemies. The cries of agony and the sound of metal ringing out upon metal were slowly dying down. Smoke and sweat stung my eyes as I leaned into the hilt of my sword, thrusting every last bit of my weight into its target. Ulrike cried in shock. Entirely possessed by the need to kill this loathsome, spindly coward, I kept pushing. Down, down, down, until I felt my fingers slip into the hot watery wound in his chest. I'd driven my sword, Grendl, deep into the sandy soil beneath him, pinning him to the earth like an insect.

I cannot know what came over me then. Refusing to break our locked gaze, I took hold of Grendl with my left hand and let the sputtering traitor watch as I licked his foul blood off my swordhand and spat it at his face.

"To Hel with you, Ulrike! You leave no heirs. You leave no memories. You depart this world without honor. You are nothing," I whispered to him, inches from his glassy eyes.

The searing bite of a blade between my thighs was so sudden, I doubt I even gasped. Ulrike coughed, blood spattering from his mouth. And then he was dead. The weapon that had just brought the hammering blow of justice down on my father's murderer was now unexpectedly a crutch. I held myself up against it, glancing down briefly to see just how bad he'd gotten me. Blood pulsed down the inside of my right thigh. I laughed. Never once had I doubted whether the cost of revenge would be great. I knew a high price was to be paid.

I quickly looked across the field to my brothers.

Forgive me, Grendl, I must leave you.

I abandoned my sword and stumbled in the stiff grass. Each step sent more blood gushing out of the heinous wound and my vision started to blur. I tried calling out to Leif and Asvald, but I could not make a sound issue from my mouth. The last thing I remember was the ground reaching up to punch me hard in the face and the earth whirling top over end.

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Woozy sounds of a voice drifted around me and I was floating. Someone was giving me deliciously ice cold ale and I swallowed it down greedily. I couldn't stop myself; it was the sweetest drink that had ever touched my lips. I drank like a dying man. Somewhere in the back on my head I knew this was because I was a dying man. The coolness spread, numbing the horrific pain that wracked every inch of my body. I am dying! I thought. I am dead! I wanted desperately to see. I wanted to see Valhalla. I managed to open my eyes; it took the force of a hundred men to raise those soft lidded gates onto the world. All I could see was the sky – the beautiful swirling night sky.

A shining, iridescent boy suddenly looked over me.

"You don't look so good."

The words of the boy enraged me. I had never seen a creature such as he before – strange tattooed markings covered his skin and his hair was matted into long locks. My stiff fingers flexed, trying
to find my sword. But no, I remembered. I'd left her in the fucker that killed me, too weak to pull her from the ground. I felt my heart ache.

The boy disappeared from view between my thighs. I could feel him touching my flank strangely with cold slithery caresses.

Pushing my chest together with great effort, I found my voice, albeit a croaking hiss. "May dogs eat you! I'll defile your mother, you filthy bastard, and your sisters too! Fiend! Devil!"

He popped back into sight, his mouth smeared in blood. It was then I saw he had two long knives for teeth. He cocked his head curiously. "I am no devil, child. I am Death."

I laughed. "Death? You're just a little boy! Bring me my sword you fucker of pigs; I'll show you death…"

He threw his head back, shaking it in amusement.

Seeing the golden firelight reflecting off his unnaturally pale face and those bloody, gleaming fangs, cold horror ran through me.

"Death!"

He nodded.

The realization shocked me. Death. The weight of my life's events suddenly felt final. This was all there would be. It was done. I'd never sleep with my wife or laugh with my children again. I'd not see the snow fall on Uppsala during the midwinter fest, nor walk through my fields, satisfied that my labors would feed my people. I felt this sadness begin to choke my throat, but I refused to give this trickster the pleasure of seeing my weakness. "If I had known you were a boy I would have fought more bravely and fucked twice as much!"

"I have never seen a man fight as fiercely or as bravely as you. It was a glorious thing to behold."

I was stunned. "You saw?"

He nodded and grinned fiercely at me, stroking my face in a paternal gesture. "Could you be my companion? Could you forsake the day and walk the nights with Death?"

"What gain is there in it for me?" I blurted out.

He howled and thumped his fist against wood. It was only then that I realized we were still in Midgard, the human world. And the wood around us was one of our small landing boats. I was laying upon my funeral pyre.

I blinked to clear my eyes, my vision blurred and slipping. The boy leaned closer to me and whispered, "Eternal life, my child. Eternal life."

In an instant, he had disappeared.

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I cannot say how long I lay there immobile on the hard planks of the boat. The rolling surf crept slowly towards my deathbed in foamy sweeps. Up the sandy bank of the shoreline, I could hear my men laughing and singing around a fire. No one came to check whether I was dead yet and the sea breeze chilled me to the bone. I longed for someone to cover me in a fur, but I hadn't the strength
to call out. My brothers in arms were drunk and reciting praise poems in my honor. The lyrics made me think of my father in the magnificent halls of Valhalla and I felt at peace with my deeds. This was a good death. An honorable death.

For hours, I waited to see if the strange young man would return. He did not come and exhaustion finally took hold of me. My sleep was haunted by bizarre, twisting dreams.

Someone shook me, jostling the images away. "Eirikr! You live among us still!" The midday light filtered through a grey pall of low hanging clouds over my brother Leif's shoulder.

"Brother," I said hoarsely.

He began to shout excitedly, calling for small beer and porridge. I tried to take a little to please him, but it tasted of ash in my raw throat.

"Leif, take the men up the coast and reclaim Kings Hall," I said. "The throne is yours. Please care for Astrid and the children. Tell them all - my son Thorson especially - that they have always made me proud. I know Thorson will bring honor to the family."

"We aren't leaving you behind, you damned fool!"

"No. No. You must."

"Eirikr, you have won, Ulrike is slain! Here. Here is Grendl, she served you well." He put my hand on top of our father's sword. Someone had cleaned it and placed it alongside my body. "Your wounds are many, but by some miracle this one here – the worst - has closed. You may live long yet!

"I cannot return. The God of Death has visited me."

"You madman! You are alive!"

"He came to me, Leif, a real god! He wants me to go with him. You will leave me here if you love me. Return if you wish in nine days time. If I am gone then you will know I have joined Death."

"These are the tricks of Loki!"

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. I shall see what fate brings."

My brothers and men laughed at me, saying I must be drunk on the blood of my enemies. Did I not taste Ulrike's blood, they teased!? My mouth was crusted in crimson, as though I'd feasted on the fellow! Only Eirikr of Åsaviðr would win back his rightful crown only to say there was yet another adventure to begin. Lesser men, they said, would be happy to grow fat and lazy and do nothing but eat, drink, and spill seed in women all day.

They left me on that coast, joking thusly and offering casual well wishes, saying they would see me soon. I could not explain it, but I knew these would be our last words. To this day I remember the expression on Leif's face as the longboat pushed offshore, growing smaller and smaller in the horizon. He gave me a little saluting wave with two fingers and a loving smile, not really believing he was going home to lead our lands so soon. He was a loyal brother and my closest friend in life. I never saw him again.

Now alone, I tried to pass the time by singing snatches of old tunes. I inspected as much of my body as was visible. I could see that some of the gashes had been quite deep. I'd shouldered several horrible blows and many superficial ones, but none were as vicious as Ulrike's stab wound into the
sensitive skin of my inner thigh. The flesh had knitted partially together by some sorcery and oozed angrily with foul pus. Too weak to venture out of my little boat and afraid that wild animals would be glutting themselves on the remains in the battlefield uphill, I cast rune stones in my lap, snacked on dried fish, and even counted the gulls circling over head. I waited for Death, napping on and off, trying to reserve what little strength I had left. I did not know if he would still want me to accompany him if I could not walk far. Where would we go? What did he want me to do for him? So many questions burned in my mind, but I tried to remain calm. I braced myself for the possibility that this creature was indeed some kind of trickster demon. Several times I confirmed that there was still enough vigor in my sword arm to fight him if necessary. I waited and waited. Finally, I grew so restless that I upturned the boat and sat atop it, wasting the last of my energy, telling myself that I'd be damned if I laid there in a deathbed like a marooned codfish.

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Late that night, I heard the splashing footsteps of someone far down the beach. It was too dark to see anything more than a shadowy movement. Unsure whether to call out to the stranger, I began to sing an old song.

*Cattle die and kinsmen die*  
*Death looks my way*  
*And I too shall die*  
*But I know a thing that never dies:*  
*The fame of the honored dead*

*I see the hearth-fire burning*  
*A dead man's at the door*  
*Lo, it is my father, 'tis each sister, and my mother*  
*'Tis me, I see at last*  
*With each and all my brothers*

*Death nears and I wait*  
*Hail friend, we greet in tiding*  
*May Odin guide us To Valhalla*  
*With glory, honor, always viking*

Within a few minutes, the figure drew closer and I could make out the eerie glow of pale skin and the thick spiky hair of the boy I'd seen before. He walked up to me, hands buried in the pockets of the leather leggings he wore.

"You came," I said in astonishment.

"You lived." A wry smile snaked across his face. In a flash, he hopped atop the boat and sat next to me, still bare above the waist.

"Are you not cold? Take my fur…" I went to unclasp the thick pelt from my shoulders.

"No need. I feel neither cold nor heat." He tilted his head. "I see you are generous as well as ferocious. What is your name?"

"I am Eirikr of Ásaviðr, son of King Ragnar, himself the son of Thorbjörn the Wise."

He grinned, but his sharp teeth were gone. Had I dreamt them? "A prince of God's Tree. This is the meaning of Ásaviðr, no?" He had a slight lilting accent and pronounced the Norse with care.
"Yes. Those are my homelands, not two days north by strong wind from here."

"Soon all the world shall be yours. Most simply call me Death, but you may call me Godrik."

I nodded. "That is a strong name, though I have never heard it in the Sagas."

"I am older than your Sagas, child. In my ancient tongue, my name means 'god ruler'."

"Over which gods do you have power?"

"None. My kind are not gods, but creatures of the night - blood drinkers, bringers of death, unbound by time or age."

"I must tell you that I have always done the sacrifices to our gods and ancestors dutifully, but I have never served another nor bent my knee."

The boy laughed and clapped me on the back. "Of course you haven't! Do you think this is what I wish of you? To be my slave?"

"I do not know your wishes, sir."

"We will be each other's father, brother, and son. Come now, it reeks of death here, as do you. Let us leave this place and begin."

"Are we to go far?"

"I will carry you."

"No," I said sharply. I slid off the boat to stand. As soon as I made the movement I knew it had been in vain and there was nothing left in my legs. Before crumpling to the ground, humiliated, he jutted a hand under my arm faster than I could see and it held me up like a stone pillar.

"Foolish, proud boy," he said, clucking his tongue at me. I went to protest, but he snatched Grendl from me, then grabbed me tightly. "Hold on."

In an instant, wind tore at my hair and tunic. I twisted around to get my bearings and realized we were speeding through the air like a comet, my legs kicking at nothing. The landscape zipped in a blur beneath us and I felt Godrik laughing against my side.

After traveling what must have been a tremendous distance, he changed course and we began dropping out of the sky. Moments before I thought we would crash, he slowed us and landed softly on a mossy forest floor near a rocky outcropping. "In there," he pointed.

Under the canopy of whispering conifer trees, it was too dark for me to see what he meant. He hucked me over one shoulder as though I was no heavier than a sack of potatoes and walked a few lengths into a cave before setting me down on what felt like a pile of furs. I could hear his echoing footsteps shuffling around, then the sounds of iron clanking on stone. The dull orange glow of an ashy pile of embers was revealed. The boy blew on them, dropping bits of fuzzy tinder and then small twigs onto the coals until the flame caught.

"Can you manage this? We'll need it hot. I'll be back shortly."

Dragging myself over to the tiny fire, I added more kindling into it until I could see a stack of wood nearby. I was quickly panting with exhaustion from the simple action of rummaging through the logs trying to pick out nicely cured pieces of ash. Once the blaze was really going, I tossed in a
small stick of fir for its aromatic quality. I'd always preferred my home fires this way.

The heat felt amazing on my skin and damp clothing. Soon I heard Godrik padding back into the depths of the cave. He had brought pails of water. Tossing even more wood on the hearth, he lifted a huge iron pot with a single hand and casually placed it on the hook of a fire spit set over the licking flames.

I raised an eyebrow in awe and he chuckled at my expression. "Come. Let's get this off you." He tugged at the sleeves of my chainmail, then helped with the lacing on my boots. They were stiff with caked mud and blood.

"Thanks," I said.

He hummed in thought. "Your tunic is not going to be as easy."

"No?"

"No. It has dried into a gash on your back. I think I can see bone. It's a wonder your legs still work at all. Let's wait until the water is warm."

"What do you mean to do?"

"Tonight? We shall prepare your body for immortality."

"Oh," was all I could manage to say.

He withdrew a pouch from his waist and sprinkled lavender into the heating cauldron. He stirred it with a hand, as if the heat could not touch him. After some time, I could see steam coiling of the waters' surface. He dipped his palm in it and held it out to me. "How is this?"

"Warm, but not nearly hot enough to begin a potion. Is there not some sister who might help you cook?"

"We're not making witches brew here, fool! I'm going to wash the stench off you. I'd rather you not freeze to death in the process."

"You are heating the water?" I asked curiously.

"It is commonly done in the more sophisticated places of the world. Trust me, it will be better than your icy dips." With that, he pulled the cauldron off the fire. It was too amazing a feat for me to comment upon. Such an act would have melted flesh; even cold those damnable pots took several strong women to handle. Godrik dipped a wooden bowl into the fragrant water and beckoned me towards him. He snatched the furs from underneath me and tossed them aside. His movements were utterly untamed and lightening fast, yet the next minute he would be still as a stone. It was dizzying to witness.

"Kneel down. We'll start from the top." He handed me a jagged cube of soap and pushed my head down. I scrubbed my face and hair while he poured, then my chest and arms. I couldn't help crying out as the soapy water ran through my cuts and gashes.

"No. Don't avoid them. Clean them well. Here..." he tossed several more large logs into the fire. "Now, you'll be able to see clearly. I will heal anything that you don't wish to wear as a scar for all eternity. Then we'll trim your hair and nails as you want them. It will all be set as in stone, Eirikr, once you are turned."
"How is this done?" I whispered.

"With my blood." I flinched backwards on my heels, stunned. "Ha! So now you are squeamish about blood?"

"No!"

"You are bloodthirsty even in life. Trust me, you will not be disappointed in death."

He stepped around behind me. "Let's work on this shirt." He dipped the bowl again and poured hot streaks down back. The searing pain that suddenly took hold of me was so great that I pitched forward and vomited. He held me with a single, crushing hand. "That's okay. It will be worse before it is better." Opening his mouth, those knife-like teeth dropped down and he bit into his wrist.

"Drink." I was confused. "Drink quickly before it closes." He shoved a cold, bloody wrist into my mouth. The thick liquid hit my tongue and I immediately moaned and started sucking at the wound. It was that same life saving ale I had tasted before. I realized now that no one had brought me beer – it had been Godrik's blood which I'd tasted. It was sweet and perfumed my senses. The heady substance quickly had me gasping, it was so delicious. It bore little resemblance to the hot, watery tin that poured through a man's veins.

I never felt his hand creep down to the edge of my tunic, but I certainly knew when he tore it off. I doubt I screamed so horribly when I received the blow. There was no hiding my weakness now. He was at my back then, doing something to the wound, much like he'd done to the gash in my flank. The flesh tingled, almost like inhaling quickly after chewing peppermint leaves.

"Drink again." I heard him crunch into his arm again and he held it to my face. I didn't hesitate; I sucked hard at the bite it elicited a deep groan from him. His blood was a divine elixir. I felt stronger with every pull. "Alright. Finish washing. Can you see? Shall I add more wood to the fire?"

"I'm battle-worn, not blind," I retorted.

"Of course," he laughed at me, ignoring my stubbornness. He inspected me then more closely than anyone had ever done. Though I'd never been shy about my body, it felt strange to be looked over so thoroughly for imperfections.

"Do I pass?" I joked.

He snorted and stood back, tapping a finger on his nose in contemplation. He then bit the pad of his thumb and began tracing over each cut and abrasion on me. I watched as they miraculously disappeared.

"Your blood is magic!"

"Aye. This here," he pointed to a place on my hip. "This scar is especially nasty. Shall I fix it?"

I shrugged. "Sure. It was a burn from when I was a child."

Godrik knelt down and glanced up at me. Then much to my surprise, he sunk his fangs into the spot.

"Ow! Fuck!" I tried to push him away, but I would have had better luck moving a mountain.
He chewed and sucked at the skin with closed eyes, then slowly licked at the wound, making it heal. The flesh sealed over and he worked more of his blood into it until it was a flawless, smooth expanse of skin. He repeated this action several more times, perfecting and beautifying my body.

When he'd at last finished, he pulled out a very fine pair of shears and a comb to trim my shoulder length hair and to even out my nails. It felt odd being attended to this way. But then, my people had our methods of preparing bodies before burial too. They just usually weren't still alive for it.

"Your beard is a shaggy mess."
"I cut it short for battle. It never grows out evenly."
"How shall I do it then? It won't ever grow longer than how we cut it tonight."
"Cut it close. That way I will always be ready for war."

He nodded and began snipping at it. While he focused on his task, I took in the details of his face for the first time. Like me, he had the high, strong cheekbones and almond eyes of a man from the north country. If his hair hadn't been so filthy and matted into dreadlocks, I could tell it would naturally be a lustrous golden brown. His sensuous mouth was full and shaped like a bow. Though nothing about him struck me as gentle, his eyes were soft and fringed in long lashes. They were a stormy blue green and his pupils were ringed in a sage color. Rather like the sea, I thought. I found myself fascinated with the dark blue collar tattooed around his neck and the bands encircling this biceps, but I didn't dare risk offending him.

"Marks of honor," he said, sensing the question in my roving eyes. "There. That will do." He handed me the bowl to wash off the stray whiskers and I inspected his handicraft in the reflection of the water.

"Not bad," I remarked.
"How are you feeling?"
"Better. Stronger," I lied. I felt like Hel warmed over, but I thought it better not to let on.

Godrik dusted off my fur stole and put it around my shoulders, then tossed me a little satchel.
"Dried fruits?" I wondered aloud, pouring its contents into my hand.
"Eat that tonight, but nothing after the sun rises, only water. No more of those foul little fish, understand?" he smirked. I'd never even realized he'd snitched my food pouch off my belt. "Your body is going to reject all the human fluids in you. The less there is to come out, the better for both of us. I will return tomorrow night at sundown and we shall truly begin."
"Where are you going?"
"To rest for the day. Say your goodbyes to the sun, for it is the last time you shall ever see it. Stay close and don't get yourself killed while I'm gone." He winked, then disappeared.
"I know a thing that never dies"

The sun could not have set more slowly the following evening. I watched it set through the trees, but felt no particular remorse as it disappeared from sight. Ulrike had certainly not shown me any such courtesies when he tried to relieve me of my life. I should have died already without any goodbyes to the sky or my brethren were it not for my strange new friend. If indeed I could call the demon boy a friend.

When Godrik returned, I felt tremendously relieved. Still too ill to wander far, I had been left yet again with my unsteady thoughts. A weak and creeping concern had nagged me all day. Perhaps he would change his mind and abandon me in that dank cave. Yet as before, he found me. Godrik strolled in casually without acknowledging me and set down an armload of clothing. Not being one to waste wood, the fire I'd made was modest. He glanced at it with a small disapproving frown and chucked more fuel onto it before joining me where I sat in a bed of furs.

"Good evening, child."

"Hello."

"You look well."

"I'm not dead, if that's what you mean."

"No, indeed. Not dead. Yet." He watched the fire for a long moment and chewed at his cheek. "Eirikr, there is doing a thing…and then there is doing a thing well. Do you appreciate the difference?"

"Of course."

"We shall do this thing well. We must do it right."

I nodded eagerly. "Tell me what to do."

All day I'd wondered what would happen to me. Even in my wilder and more morbid imaginings, I could not have even begun to anticipate how the transformation would come about.

He looked at me then with pain in his eyes and stroked my cheek. His gaze unfixed and his pupils bored into my very mind. "No matter what, you must not give over to death too soon. No matter how painful, how desperate you are, how much you beg, you mustn't let it win. You will struggle, you will fight, and you will not let your heart cease beating until I decide the moment. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Godrik," I replied, entirely under his spell.

He caressed my face, pushing my golden hair away from my neck. I saw his fangs descend and he ran a tongue over them. Godrik embraced me, nuzzling my neck and inhaling deeply, as if committing my scent to memory. He kissed my throat and licked it, sending a thrill of anxious excitement up my spine. Then I felt the pressure of his teeth and a searing sting that sent me gasping. He moaned loudly and growled, sucking up my blood. I started to feel lightheaded and then a woozy tilt sent the shadowy walls spinning around me. Godric held me with an arm around my back and another fistig my hair and he let me fall back gently, still glutting himself on my blood. Darkness slid over my eyes and I tried to tell him he was killing me, but my disembodied voice came out as a gurgled, strangling sound. There was no point. I passed out.
Consciousness crept in. I felt the cool, sluggish blood of my companion sliding down my throat. "Drink now. Take me into you." I stirred, feeling ravenous. His ambrosia sent a fiery electricity through me. "Yes, that's it," he guided. I sucked on the wound, pulling his cool blood into my mouth.

He moaned a whisper into my ear. "Don't let it close. Keep drinking." I understood his meaning. His body healed almost immediately.

I did as he ordered and dug my blunt teeth into his flesh. As I drank, raw power zinged through my limbs and my hunger grew.

I do not know how long I lay there slurping upon his youthful fount. Finally, he pushed me away, panting. He looked horribly pale – a sickly purple dappled the hollows of his eyes and what were the fine arches of his cheeks now were drawn and gaunt.

"Gods. I have hurt you!" I gasped in horror.

He started laughing weakly, which only served to make him seem all the more ghastly.

"Hardly. Come here and feed me." I knelt down over him, offering my neck. He latched on, those needle teeth piercing me once again, and he began draining me once more.

And so it went, over and over that night. Each time sapped to the point of death, each time revived by the miracle of Godrik's blood.

No rays of sun touched the deep recesses of our hiding place. Blood tears began to stream from Godrik's eyes and trickle from his ears and nose. He explained that dawn had broken beyond the rocky walls of our hiding place and he was not meant to be awake in the day.

"Keep drinking from me, I wish to fight the sun and keep taking from you as well. Bite my flesh as hard as you can and drink. Don't stop biting or I may accidentally drain you. The longer we draw this out, the stronger you will be. Come."

He pulled me to his firm, cool chest, but did not offer me a bleeding wrist.

"Bite me. Hard." He stroked a spot on his neck. I obliged, wrapping my arms around his frame.

"Oh gods! Uhnmmnmnm" He cried out, then sunk his teeth into my shoulder. Drinking together in this perfect circuit, I could hear him in my mind and I knew instinctively he could hear me in the same way. I caught snatches of hazy thoughts, and felt like I was drifting through his very soul as I lay there locked in his vice-like embrace. More than anything I felt extraordinary pleasure, coupled with the digging sting of his fangs. This union in the blood was intensely erotic and several times my own orgasmic release washed over me.

I lost all sense of time or place and we lay like this for many hours. At one point I must have dozed off, because he slapped me and ordered me to bite again. Some time later I felt his head slump against my shoulder. I assumed he wanted me to do the same for him, so I whacked him hard and he roused just enough to find the seeping bite again and take hold of it.

By nightfall, my shoulder was screaming horrendously from his teeth and each time he sucked it pulled directly in the middle of my chest. My body felt heavy, deadened, and weak, though nonsensically I didn't feel sick, save for the hot burn of his bite. It was more like the sluggish weight of a deep sleep holding me down.
"Godrik. Godrik. It hurts unbearably."

He looked at me through half-opened eyes, groggy and disoriented. He slashed his tongue and healed the wound.

"You're in rough shape," I offered, truly concerned at the effect this was having upon the boy.

He laughed, rubbing at the dried stains of blood on his face.

"How are you holding up? Your heartbeat is still steady, though slow."

"I can't really move and I'm starving."

Stumbling onto two feet, he brought me a dipper of water.

"Nothing more. You'll just puke it up."

I swallowed it down but it caught in my throat and I sputtered, coughing.

"It doesn't taste so good anymore, does it?"

Hacking, I shook my head. "Blood. Give me more of your blood. I'm so thirsty."

"Ahh..." he chuckled, stepping back and holding his arms out with an impish glint in his eyes. "If you want it, you'll have to take it from me then."

I tried to get my legs beneath me, but they were like wet rope. "At least help me up..."

He offered me a hand, but instead of taking it to pull myself up, I grabbed it and tried to bite his arm. He found this hilarious and effortlessly yanked free, letting me fall on my ass.

He grasped my neck then parted my thighs, pointing to the spot where I'd been stabbed.

"After the neck, the blood flows most freely here." He bit into the sensitive flesh almost meanly, making me cry out. "Never bite into the actual artery. The human drains too quickly and is certain to die. Unless, of course, you intend to give them your blood. Which you won't." He slurped at the wound with several greedy gulps before sealing the puncture with a lick. Then he pulled my wrist towards his razor sharp fangs.

"The wrist bleeds slowly but steadily. It's a solid place to drink from, always reliable and easy to access." I gasped as he took a bite there as well. He nosed the inside of my elbow. "This spot too has good flow, though a little awkward to get at in a pinch." He traced his fingers over my breast, just above my heart.

"There is great pleasure in drinking so near the heart, where the strong pulse sends your meal gushing right in your mouth. Take care, however, if the human is a wiggler. It's easy to snap a fang on a rib. Not fun."

I gasped as he ran a hand over my hip into the crook of my groin.

"Anywhere close to a man or woman's pleasure is delicious at the height of their passion." He licked his lips and released me, just as I felt myself start to become aroused.

"Where else?" I asked, fascinated by his lesson.

"Hmm. Depending how long your fangs are and how particularly vicious you're feeling, you can
hit the artery in the belly...here. You'll gorge, but again, it's a death blow." He paused, thinking. "Now, the tongue is very nice, especially another blood drinker's. It tells you many things about the person."

"You drink the blood of your own kind?"

Godrik's eyes glittered. "Oh yes, but only occasionally and not for sustenance." He slashed his tongue and leaned in to me, offering it. I hesitated, then let my tongue slide over his and sucked. He sighed through the kiss and gently pulled away.

"Eirikr, are you ready to begin again?"

"Again?" I asked, shocked.

"Yes. I want you to be perfect. We must continue."

"How long..." I whispered, unsure whether I wanted to hear the answer.

"Another full night and day, and another night more. You can take it, I know you can. It will not be easy, but you are strong and my blood is ancient," he replied full of determination.

I cursed and fell on my back in resignation. "Alright. Let it begin, then."

"You may go first." He settled next to me, resting his head on a bent arm. "Just try not to drain me entirely, you bloodthirsty mongrel. I'm only half your size," he teased with the hint of a smile.

Taking his wrist, I went for the spot I'd tried to bite earlier, just to see if he'd allow it now. He watched me curiously and made no indication that he would stop me, so I bit down hard. It took a surprising amount of force to break the skin. Digging my teeth in to keep the bite open, I drank and drank until he started getting that sickly look again. I let up.

"Keep going," he mouthed, eyes closed. I took several more big gulps before he pulled away, looking positively dead.

"This is hurting you."

"Of course." He shrugged, then rolled me over roughly and sent his fangs singing into my skin.

It went on like this as he predicted. It was grueling, beyond excruciating. By the end of the third night, I was barely clinging to life. I did not know until then that such agony existed; nothing in the preceding nights had ever prepared me for such a trial. My heart lugged in great thuds, in time to each shallow, labored breath I managed to draw in. Godrik's glamoured order to live forced me to endure it.

He, on the other hand, was suffering more greatly than any creature I'd ever seen. In truth, nothing living could be alive in such pain. He shook violently as though in a fever and was covered in a sheen of blood sweat. His compact frame had grown so emaciated, he looked like a skeleton wrapped in papery skin. I would have told him as much if I could speak. In the back of my mind, I knew I should be afraid of him, but I wasn't. I could already feel his own essence stirring in my breast, as if he were a part of me. I only feared now that he might perish in his fervent attempt to transform me.

Finally, trembling, he took hold of my face and whispered into my ear.

"It is time. When you arise you will be the blood of my blood. Good night, Eirikr." He kissed my
cheek and said something that seemed like a prayer in a strange language, then bit into my neck, draining me dry. I knew my life was slowly stilling and felt a white fuzziness take over my vision. My heart made a final lub and then went silent.

It was then that I truly died.
"Blood!"

I wrenched up, gasping, desperate for air I didn't yet realize I no longer needed. The most noxious stench assaulted my senses. Godrik knelt before me, clapping my back. He had a ferocious grin on his face and his eyes dazzled in amazement, taking me in.

"Arise, my child…" he said, his voice full of wonder.

"The smell!" I gagged. He laughed and pulled me to my feet.

"Come." We went outside into the night air.

A barrage of thoughts assaulted me instantly, zipping through my head so rapidly it was impossible to meditate on any single one of them. As I inhaled deeply, scents of a thousand things sprang to mind. Sounds of creatures rang in my ears from every direction: breathing, stalking things; crawling, gnawing things; chirping, squeaking things. The light of the moon was bright and I could see…I could see everything. Well over an acre to the right, I spotted a deer lifting its head to look my way. Beetles crawled over the bark of a dead log many lengths to my left. I could count every one of them if I wished at a glance. The leaves in the trees shimmied happily in the breeze and I smelled…

"People! There are people just over those hills, Godrik!" As though my body had its own agenda, I wanted to run that way. Godrik snatched my hand in an iron grip, refusing to release me.

"You are covered in your death fluids. You will strip and bathe now."

"But…"

"Eirikr? I command it. You will go nowhere and do nothing other than what I say tonight. Understand?"

The order knocked me in the chest and I gasped. It was like the gods themselves had told me I'd failed them. Every instinct in my soul wished to please him.

"I understand!" I cried, hurriedly grabbing the bucket and soap from him. I set to work, gagging at the human filth on me. Godrik flung the soiled bedding and loincloth far down over the hillside and took a seat on a nearby rock. He looked remarkably better, though still very unwell.

"Aren't you glad I didn't let you eat your vile fish sticks now?" he laughed.

I scrubbed like a madman, desperate to remove the overpowering smells. "You had a very good point," I agreed. "My head is spinning. Everything is moving and alive and in sparkling rainbow colors. It's wondrous!"

"These are your new senses. Learn them well. You will have other gifts too, which will reveal themselves in time."

"Like what?"

"Hard to say just now. Each of us is unique. Let's work on what is obvious for the moment. Go back inside and dress, there should be something in the clothing I brought that will fit you. You will wait there for me, do you understand? I will return with a meal."
My mind was suddenly gripped with a single thought. "Blood!" I growled, then jumped in shock at the new animal noise that had issued from my own throat.

Godrik put a firm hand on my shoulder. "If you wait inside, then I will reward you. Again, I command it." He shifted his weight nervously, as though he was unsure whether he should leave me.

"Please. I'm waiting." Too overcome with thirst to be ashamed at sounding like a child, I jogged lightly back to our home base. The cold air on my nude body felt as pleasant as a summer's breeze, but the thought of blood made my skin itch and I felt jumpy, consumed with need. The dry scratching thirst in my throat was torturous.

Inside the cave, I built up the fire as I knew Godrik liked it: bright and blazing. Within moments I realized why. The licking flames dazzled me and danced hypnotically, sending pulsing shadows around me. It was pure magic – to be dead and never feel more alive.

In the pile of things he had brought back days ago, I found an especially well-made tunic of black linen with delicate embroidery around the neckline. A pair of leggings were long enough to tuck into my boots and a dark blue wool cape with silver fox fur struck me as appropriate. I found the pile of my old dirty clothes in a corner and went to pull my cloak pin off, but when I touched it a searing pain scorched through my hand, melting the flesh. I screamed in shock, falling flat on my ass, then watched in complete fascination as the skin knitted slowly back together.

"Silver harms us," I wondered aloud. The former wound tingled and my arm felt as though it had fallen asleep up to the shoulder. Realizing that my regenerated body was perfectly fit and healthy, I could not help but inspect myself in awe. Only days ago I was a stinking, oozing, half-dead creature. Now I was a force to be reckoned with!

The crunch of gravel outside alerted me to someone's presence and I snatched up my sword and took cover in a dark corner of the cave. It was only Godrik and he brought with him a man and a woman. They appeared to be in some type of thrall and stared about stupidly with glazed-over eyes.

Godrik sniffed the air and a wry curl of a smile formed at the edge of his mouth. "Already getting yourself in trouble, I see. Come. Feed."

The throbbing pulse of living human blood filled the close confines of the cavern and I crept toward the man. I heard and felt a snick in my gums. I had fangs, just as the demon boy. I touched them in fascination, and shivered at how sensitive they were.

"Who are they?" I asked.

"They are your food. Drink. Bite anywhere I showed you."

"But who are they, Godrik? Will they be missed?"

A fierce look passed over his features and he bit down on the man's neck in a single, savage movement. He pulled away, sending streams of blood gushing down his neck.

My thirst took hold of me and before I could protest my own body's reaction, I crushed my mouth over the wound, sucking the throbbing life force out of him. I sucked and sucked at the delicious blood, feeling more and more sated and somehow aroused at the same time. I wanted to swallow every ounce of him. I wanted to literally consume his entire life.

"Eirikr." Godrik touched my shoulder. "Eirikr, he is dead." He didn't seem at all fazed by this fact.
I managed to pull away, only to be horrified at what I’d done. The man's arms were crushed at unnatural angles and his throat entirely torn out.

"Gods!"

"You did what your nature dictates. But you do not know your strength. Now feed from her. Try not to mangle that one."

"No! I do not wish to kill her!"

"Eirikr, it must be so in the beginning. Control your strength first, then I will show you how to master your hunger. Now, drink," he ordered harshly.

I closed my eyes and listened to the woman's soft gurgling heart. Waalump. Waalump. I found myself caressing her neck. I bit as gently as I could, focusing on the throbbing sound. I didn't dare embrace her lest I desecrate her body as horrifically as I had her friend's. She sunk down and I followed her to the ground. Waa-lump. Waa-lump. Her heartbeat slowed, then stilled. I licked at the wound, cleaning it like a pleased cat, then turned on one knee to see Godrik's response.

His beautiful sea-colored eyes were wide and glittering with admiration. He stared, caressing my hair and running a hand over my new raiment. "You are, without a doubt, the most magnificent blood-drinker ever made. So beautiful. So new, yet so very strong. And all mine."

I felt his pride and excitement as though it were my own. We were bonded somehow, and though I knew not the first thing about the wild demon boy, he lived inside me. I could feel his consciousness tickling the back of my mind. His pearly skin shone brighter than the moon and I felt as though the world revolved around him and he alone. I longed to reach out and touch him or perhaps fall prostrate at his feet.

"My creator," I gasped, hoping he could understand the flush of complex emotions swirling within me.

"Your maker, yes." His fingers wandered impulsively to the place on my neck where he'd ended me. "I hope you find the sacrifice worthwhile."

I thought back over those long sessions. Being drained was tortuous, true, but without fail Godrik always returned with a gift no one else could or would ever offer me again. I didn't even know him and yet he was as certain and reliable a truth to me as the constancy of the sun and moon. His relentless determination to make me, to fill me with his power, to keep me – regardless of the gruesome toll on him - inspired nothing short of pure worship in my eyes. I did not care if he claimed he was no god. He was my god. The memory of of being filled by his essence over and over again sent shivers through my limbs. There would never be a greater intimacy as the one I had felt as he tethered me to his very being.

"You saved me," I whispered.

"Aye. You were worthy, my child."

The burning in my throat distracted me and I stole an envious glance at the bloodless corpses.

"You are still thirsty."

"Terribly. Will it ever be sated?"

"Yes and no. The hunger will lessen over the centuries, but the pleasure the blood brings you will
never end. You will always want it, even if you do not need it. Now, we must be rid of these bodies. Here. For your cloak. It started snowing." He dug in his pocket and handed me an intricately carved gold pennanular brooch.

I stared at it momentarily before realizing he'd kept it from me so that I would seek out my own. "You did that on purpose!" I barked accusingly.

"Yes. And what did you learn?"

"Silver burns us. Weakens us."

"Very good."

His passive aggressiveness infuriated me. "You could have simply told me!"

"Yes, but would your fear and respect of the metal's power over us be the same?"

I gave no answer, knowing he was right.

"Exactly. Now, discard the bodies over the cliff."

I recoiled in horror. "No! They deserve a proper burial."

"The wolves and other beasts will take care of them."

"They sacrificed themselves for this atrocious need!"


Every fiber of my being quivered at the hatefulness in his voice. I could only obey and it sickened me as I saw their pale forms clattering down the sheer cliff side. Their shredded and battered bodies lay like disgusting, broken bugs in the ravine below and the fact that I could see and smell their death even at these heights revolted me. I vomited a crimson sheet of fluid at my feet.

Godrik was at my side immediately. "No, that won't do. You need every drop." The fiend stroked my back and I shrugged off his attempt to comfort me. After all, this was his doing. I gave him a hard shove and he stumbled back several steps. I had the distinct feeling he let me push him.

Angrily, I stomped back to the cave and sat on the hard ground in front of the fire, furious. He joined me silently, wrapping his arms around his knees. The graceful architecture of his face made him look so young, yet his knowing eyes betrayed his youthfulness. His beauty was distracting and it only angered me further.

"I thought you did not want a slave, yet you order me about forcing me to do wicked things." His head jerked sharply at my angry words and he stared at me as though my words had cut him to the core. "What? You don't like that I speak to you honestly? I am an honest man, a good man. I may have slain many, but never innocents. It is for this that I've forsaken Valhalla?!"

"Enough!" his voice silenced me. "Eirikr, there is only survival or death. All things die, even we can die. What I order you to do is for your own protection. Do not test me with your insolence, child. I will happily punish you for it if that is what it takes to keep you safe. But I promise you…" he took my hand, pressing it against his bare chest and looked at me forcefully, "I will teach you all that I know. I promise that I will never abuse my maker's power over you. Father, brother, son. You have my word."
His sincerity burnt deep within me and I looked away in shame. I did not understand this creature, at once so passionate and so cruel.

"I have never made another and I have been alone for quite some time. Forgive me if you find me a poor excuse for a companion."

I considered this. He had chosen me. Only me, above all others. "How old are you?"

"I do not know, truly. Well over a thousand years old. Probably close to 1500 by now. Maybe older."

I was aghast at his confession. "And how old were you when your maker turned you?" I asked incredulously.

"I believe I had lived a score."

"You were only twenty?!"

"Aye."

"Where do your people come from?"

"You are my people now."

"But your family, where did they come from?"

"Eirikr, you are my family now. You are mine as I am yours."

"But... You are infuriating! Where were you born, for Odin's sake?"

Godrik sighed deeply and tossed bits of stray wood into the licking flames. "My people are long dead. They were Keltoi, the ancestors of the Celts, far west of here."

"I have heard of them, yes. Not many of the Norsemen venture that way, but we have heard tales of you. Tell me, you must have seen much of the world."

"Indeed."

"Have you been in the north country long?"

"Only about 75 years. I've never ventured into these lands before." Godrik stretched out his legs and gave his thighs a resigned slap. "But alas, this is one of the few places still untouched by those filthy Roman bastards."

I raised an eyebrow at his heated words. "They possess great armies do they not? My cousins do good trade across the sea with the German clans. The Romans are great enemies of theirs, no?"

"Eirikr, they are great enemies of mine. You cannot know what a scourge they have been to this world. They seek only to dominate and bend others to their use."

"Have you been to their cities?"

"Yes," he smiled meanly, like a child taking vicious delight in plucking the wings off a dragonfly. "I like to watch them burn. They live to make war, so I like to make sure they get it."

"You are a warrior too, then?"
"I have been a great many things, my child."

"Did they attack your people?"

"Eventually, yes, many centuries after I was turned. But that is not why I despise them."

"Then why?"

Godrik stared into the popping coals of the fire and gave no response. I could feel the turmoil my question caused in him.

"A story for another night, then," I said quietly after a drawn out silence. "Are there many others of our kind? Do we owe fealty to anyone?"

"Intelligent questions. There are very few of us this far north. The long winters and scattered settlements make it difficult to hide our activities and the short summer nights leave us with precious little time to adequately feed. You'll learn this soon enough. We must never, ever be exposed for what we are. But this is an ideal place for a wanderer like me. I am the only authority here. My age alone demands it."

"But elsewhere?"

"Elsewhere our society can be very complicated. There are rules and formalities in nests, and these you find in the great cities and larger towns. I left Constantinople almost a century ago because the politics – human and blood drinker alike - were getting entirely out of hand. The cult of the dead god they call Christ is spreading like wildfire."

I had not heard of this Christ, but it seemed bizarre that anyone would pray to a dead god. "We will not go there then," I said, not hiding my disappointment. "Where will we go next? What will we do?"

"We will stay here while you learn our ways, though far from your human clansmen. You must forget them, Eirikr. You are not one of them any longer. You are a draug," he explained, using my people's word for the walking dead.

I held back the choking pain in my throat at the thought of my wife and children, but I knew I was already lost to them as my body lay dying on the battlefield. I told him as much.

"Then you do not regret your decision to join me?"

"No. To die would be a great adventure, but to live forever sounds just as fine." Godrik rocked over in a peel of laughter. "Besides, you said we can still die, so I may yet make that journey too."

"But not for many, many ages, my dear child, if ever." The impish boy roughly tousled my hair. His touch made me feel forgiven for my previous defiance. I relished every drop of his attention. Above all, I basked in the feeling that I had pleased him, even though his labile temper and feral nature struck fear into me.

A thought occurred to me. "Silver harms us. What else?"

"The sun will burn us and turn us to dust. Silver or wood to the heart will end us, as will decapitation - usually. We are very susceptible to fire, though impervious to heat and cold. There are other, stranger things, too, that I will teach you to recognize when we come across them – the blood of some unusual beings can poison us and very rarely humans can carry a sickness in their blood that weakens us temporarily with a sort of fever."
"You said blood from another blood drinker cannot sustain us, but is this true of other creatures? What of elk's blood or sheep's blood or the like?"

"Animals?!" Godrik sneered. "That is disgusting! Perhaps it will temporarily slake the most desperate of thirsts, but it would be like a human eating a tree's bark to live. It cannot fulfill your needs."

"I don't know. I'm still so hungry I might just try biting a badger," I said, not entirely joking.

"I wouldn't. It would likely make you violently ill. You must be careful not to get nauseous again. It's like breathing or blinking – you don't need these useless human reflexes and you will soon outgrow them. But you are a tall man and you'll need a lot of blood in these early days. I should have realized. I'm thinking you'll need more like three or four humans a night." Godrik fell silent again, lost in some memory. "Fairy blood is intoxicating though exceedingly hard to come by, but nothing will ever satisfy you like your maker's blood."

Before I could react to his assertion that fairies were actually skipping about the world and that they were apparently fucking delicious, he bit into his wrist and offered it to me. My fangs slammed down instinctively, cutting my bottom lip. The scent of his dripping wrist enveloped and overpowered me, yet I was deeply apprehensive. Taking his blood felt as though I was doing something exceptionally wrong. I was quickly realizing that my new nature possessed a primal drive to protect him from all things - even myself.

"I may?" I asked, already cradling his arm in my hands.

"Drink."

I didn't need to be told twice. The thick liquid hit my tongue and I was instantly blinded with pleasure. I pulled at the wound as hard as I could, knowing it would quickly close and heard my own thunderous roars of bliss echo alongside Godrik's sensual moans. I'd never known such ecstasy. I wasn't even conscious of my own actions. I reached into my leggings and was stroking myself and slurping his arm in a bloodlusted haze. Before I knew it the wound closed and I'd splattered a thick jet of my release all down the inside of my leathers.

I cannot be sure how long I sat there, slumped back on my heels, staring wide-eyed at the youthful man before me. There aren't words to express how I felt in that moment. He tasted of divinity - like time and god. I had never even thought such pleasure existed. Everything in my cosmos was reordered and he shone like a dark lord in the midst of it. Godrik simply watched me in curiosity. Impulsively, I moved to kiss him, but he turned his face and placed a firm hand on my shoulder. I pierced my tongue on a fang and offered it to him, imploring him to take the offering, only to have him give a shake of his head and rise, leaving me where I sat.

His rejection crushed me. "You don't want me?" I asked pathetically.

He shifted uncomfortably on his feet. I felt tentatively through our bond for his emotions but could not discern his state. "It is a normal urge. For most of us feeding and sex go hand and hand."

"And what, for you they do not?"

"They do. But I am your maker." A shadow of fear crossed his face, but I didn't recognize it then as such.

"So what? It doesn't feel wrong."

"Give it some time. You may feel differently later. You are not even a night old, Eirikr."
"I've had men before. Many offer themselves to me!"

"No doubt. But this isn't some long military campaign away from our women. We will be companions for eternity."

"What's the point of eternity without eternal fucking? If you expect me to be celibate you picked the wrong man!"

Godrik couldn't help but laugh at me. "It won't be long before you'll be able to control yourself enough around humans. Just give it some time," he said dismissively.

Clearly he had declared the topic dead, but I wasn't about to let the matter drop. I was Eirikr. I was a Norseman for Odin's sake!
"I have always been an opportunist"

In the following weeks, Godrik taught me to hunt and track humans using my extra-heightened senses. He challenged me repeatedly with new tasks and I relished the moments when I was able to exceed his expectations. He was an excellent teacher, albeit peculiar in his approach and a borderline madman at times. Like his stint with the silver brooch, he loved creating all kinds of dangerous games and scenarios by throwing me – often quite literally – into trouble. To be sure, he never actually put me into any situation beyond his control, but it still felt wild and risky. I wasn't a month old when he dared me to go into a village pub, order a cup of ale, and sit for ten minutes pretending to be human. It would have worked until, distracted by a rather voluptuous woman, I took a big swig of beer out of sheer habit. It immediately bounced back out as a tremendous spray of blood vomit across the table and floor. Godrik could barely stop laughing long enough to glamour the human patrons. It annoyed me to no end that he took more delight at my failures than in my successes.

"Child, your dick is going to be your downfall," he said as we sped through the woods back to our isolated cave.

"And whose fault will that be?" I spat in frustration. Although I had been relentless, he continued to reject my advances. I was still unable to feed without killing and he knew perfectly well that the thought of raping a dead or dying meal horrified me. My glamour was also not yet completely reliable, so luring willing lovers was out of the question. Needless to say, I had never been so ridiculously horny in my life and I'd certainly never gone this long without someone else giving me a hand.

The waves of fury rolling off of his end of the bond caused me to slow to a jog. "Oh this is priceless!" I shot at him with as much disgust as I could muster. "You only get angry with me when I tell you something true that you don't want to hear. What maker denies their progeny something as basic as sex? You won't fuck me. You clearly have refused to help me fuck somebody else. You might as well deny me blood too! You're a shitty fucking maker!" Before I saw it coming, Godrik turned and cuffed me over the head so hard I saw stars. It was the first time he'd ever hit me.

"Fucking Thor's tits! AAAAAHHH!" I screamed, blinded by the pain. He'd flattened me with the flick of a wrist. I laid there like a dead codfish in the damp leaves, waiting for the dent in my skull to heal. Godrik stood over me with an indescribable look. His fists were balled and his jaw was set, but his eyes were rimmed with crimson tears that refused to fall.

"I'm sorry," I gasped breathlessly, holding my hands over my face protectively in case he struck again. "I'm sorry!"

"No. It is I who am sorry." He turned then and vanished into thin air.

I called after him, but he was gone. A few minutes passed before I started to worry. I was hardly ever out of his direct line of sight, let alone separated from him by any distance. I called to him but knew he was nowhere nearby. In fact, I couldn't feel his location at all.

"Godrik!"

The only reply was an owl's angry screech, disturbed by my hollering. I ran back to our cave at record speeds and was horrified to find he was not there. I waited, trying to keep a grip on my increasing anxiety. I dared to venture out to scan our territory in a few meticulous, fanning circles
to see if I could pick up his scent, only to be disappointed. As dawn neared, I dug out a soft spot of earth and braced myself for a day alone in the ground. He may not have allowed me much intimacy, but he always let me ball up around him in our day death. This would not be pleasant.

The next night, I awoke by myself only to feel the same hollow absence. Godrik's end of the bond was closed down to the tiniest wheedling spark. It was only enough to know he lived. I had thought surely he would return. But I was still alone. He couldn't have possibly left me for good. Could he?

Cold fear struck through me. I wasn't naïve. Only an idiot would think he had mastered the skills needed to survive an eternity. I didn't even know where to find another blood drinker, let alone anything about the strange customs about which Godrik had only obliquely mentioned. I was a newborn, I reminded myself. I couldn't even feed without leaving a body count. I would not make it without my maker. And here I had run my mouth off to him like a spoiled child!

I was spoiled, I realized. Godrik did nothing but indulge me. He could have been cruel in my lessons, but instead he was playful. He was never pedantic and preferred I learn through firsthand experience. He had never once punished me for my errors, only insisted I get back up and try again. Gods, I was an asshole. The thought that he'd given up on me circled dangerously in my mind and I felt completely paralyzed. I had never felt as helpless as I did now and I despised feeling so weak. I lay unmoving deep in my earthen grave well past an hour after sundown and let tears slip from my eyes.

A muffled voice called out from above. "Are you going to stay planted down there all night feeling sorry for yourself?" Instantly I shoved an armload of soil away and sat up, still buried waist deep.

"Godrik!" I gasped in relief, feeling him again in the bond. "Bless the fucking gods you're back! I've behaved terribly. Forgive me! I've learned my lesson."

He raised an eyebrow. "Oh? What lesson might that be?"

Worming my way out of the ground, I fell to his feet, wrapping my long arms around his waist.

"I will never take you for granted. You do nothing but try to make this life easier for me. You are my life, in every way."

"You give me too much credit."

"No. I haven't begun to give you what you deserve."

He sighed and pulled me to my feet, muttering something under his breath. He said nothing about where he had gone in his absence and I felt I deserved no explanation. We found our meals that night with relative ease. I tried desperately to stop drinking from the drunken traveler I'd picked as his heart began to slow, but only when I thought of Godrik abandoning me again for being such a terrible excuse for a child did my fangs pop back into my gums.

"Look!" I pointed at the pile of filthy human taking raspy breaths. He sauntered over to inspect my handiwork, wiping a smear of blood off his face.

"Hmm. Good." He clapped my shoulder. "Now kill him."

"What? But it's taken me this long to figure out how not to kill him!"
"You heard me. Kill him and end him viciously, too. Destroy him! Never be afraid to be what you are."

"For fuck's sake!"

Godrik shot me a look that could have frozen the sun. "I am not teaching you not to kill," he seethed. "I am teaching you to choose to kill. Whether and how you end a life must always be in your control; that they die is irrelevant."

I lowered my head in submission and quickly ripped the man's throat out and gorged on what the few gulps of blood he had left in him. I had to admit that feeding with cruel abandon felt wonderful. I was noisily licking my fingers when Godrik caught me by the waist and shot into the air.

I clung to him as the wind tore around us and closed my eyes, thankful that he'd returned and that I could make him proud of my growing self-control on tonight of all nights.

He remained virtually silent the rest of the evening, lost in his own thoughts. Having always been meticulous in my personal grooming when I was alive, the discovery of bathing with warm water had become something of an obsession for me in my undeath. I was washing from the heated cauldron in a corner of the cave when Godrik finally spoke.

"Forgive me for striking you," he said in a small voice.

I stopped mid-scrub. "No, I deserved it. I pounded my own children for similar disrespect."

"Do not doubt that I will 'pound' on you, as you say, if you ever again dare to insinuate that I do not take my role as your maker seriously. There is nothing in this world more important to me. But in this case, I hurt you because I was angry and afraid. There was no lesson in such punishment and so I ask for your forgiveness."

"Everything you do teaches me something, Godrik. I'm not so proud that I can't recognize when I am wrong."

He snorted in laughter, lightening the mood. "What's that, Norseman? Not proud, you say?" he joked. "Easily admit your mistakes, you say?!"

I heaved the kettle over one shoulder and sent a good splash over his head. Godrik shook his hair out like a muddy dog and shot me an amused look. "I suppose I am overdue for a bath."

"You stay filthy on purpose."

His mouth twitched slightly.

"Imp," I teased, then picked up the soap and tentatively - giving him plenty of time to stop me - began lathering up his crusty locks. Much to my surprise, he let me. "I deserved your anger, but what could you possibly fear?" I asked gently.

Godrik hung his head limply, submitting to my attempts to detangle his disastrous hair.

"I'm afraid that in trying to avoid repeating the mistakes of my master I am merely making another one."

"Tell me," I ventured, knowing we were treading into dangerous territory. Godrik was already a quiet one, but any mention of his past and he would clam up entirely. I had quickly learned not to ask, lest I wanted to spend the entire night in silence. My maker revealed things at his own
measured pace.

"It is…not something I like to talk about."

Well, obviously, I thought, but I wisely kept my mouth shut.

"You were barely out of the ground when I promised you I would never abuse my maker's power over you. I meant every word that I said."

"I know that."

"You do and you don't. Perhaps in a few more months I will take you to Roskilde to meet more of our kind. Then you will begin to understand. It might be useful for us both to make a study of maker-progeny relationships so we don't both completely mess this up. My own experience was… unique...to put it mildly."

The prospect of leaving the stale cave had me giddy, but I kept focused. "How am I supposed to understand when you're being so obtuse?"

"Use your brain, Eirikr. I can command you to do anything and you must obey. Anything."

My eyes widened in sudden comprehension. "Your maker…" the question caught in my throat.

Godrik sighed deeply and looked up at me from under his sudsy hair. "My master did absolutely anything and everything he wanted to do to me. For 300 years I was nothing more than a sex toy, a diversion, a punching bag, an assassin, a quick gold piece. I was whatever his foul mind wished me to be. And then some."

I'd never felt such uncontrolled rage in my life. Only the tiniest bit of Godrik's anguish leaked across our bond and I was positively out of my mind with the need to avenge him. I went out stark naked into the night and began kicking over trees, hurling boulders - anything to release the anger.

"Eirikr!" he whipped me around by the arm. "I command you to stop this instant! Calm yourself!" I was panting unnecessarily but I felt his maker's power curl around my will. "A blood drinker is never at the mercy of his emotions. He masters them! Look at yourself, huffing and puffing!"

"I'll fucking kill him. Where is he? Is it the dark-haired man I saw in your mind when I was drinking your blood? I'll kill him, Godrik!"

"He's dead."

I howled in frustration and he simply put a hand on my shoulder. "He is dead, Eirikr. I killed him," he said, looking me straight in the eye.

For a second I thought I'd misheard him, but he held my gaze and cold horror shot goosebumps over my preternatural flesh. "You…your maker?" I gasped in a whisper, clapping a hand over my mouth, incapable of even uttering such blasphemous words. The mere thought of harming Godrik made me positively ill.

"I said master, not maker."

I was utterly confused. "Master? You were a slave?"

Godrik dragged me back to the cave, shaking his head at my mindless destruction of the forest around our territory. I knew he'd have me chopping every last twig of it into firewood.
Stripping off his grubby leather leggings, he sat back down on his stool and handed me the bar of soap. It was the first time I'd seen his glorious body entirely nude. "Finish," he ordered calmly.

All I could think of was someone hurting the exquisite expanse of skin before me, someone forcing their attentions on it. I couldn't bear to touch him. I thought of all the times I'd snuck a kiss on his shoulder or neck before we'd fallen asleep or my shamefully ridiculous attempts to convince him to please me. "I didn't know…"

"Don't be absurd. Continue."

Reverently I bathed him, as gently as possible. Kneeling behind him I soaped up his back and circled my thumbs into his thick, lean muscles. He moaned under my touch and the sound struck deep within me. I dawdled behind him trying to will away my massive erection. I worked over his hard chest, sluicing bubbly streams over his blue tattoos and down the peaks and valleys of his chiseled abdomen. Although dirt doesn't grind into our impervious flesh like it does in a human's, his feet still required some serious scrubbing since he rarely wore shoes. By the time I was done even they were pearly pink. I went to rinse off the last of the suds on his powerful thighs and calves.

"You missed a spot, Ei."

I raised an eyebrow at this nickname. Eirikr meant something along the lines of "eternal ruler" or "the one prince." Ei, separated from its suffix, bore the sense of being singular or lonely. "I am not 'alone'. I have you, right?" I asked, hoping he'd promise to never leave me again as he'd done.

"Aye, you do." He shot me a dark, mischievous look before leaning back on his hands and spreading his knees suggestively. I looked elsewhere, afraid his gaze would utterly destroy my attempt at respectful self-control. Soaping up my hand, I caressed the glossy curls of hair crowning his manhood then stroked his length and the tender skin of his plump balls. I moved for the dipper of water, but Godrik caught my hand, guiding it back to him.

"That's not good enough. I am very dirty," he said in a sultry voice that had me clenching my eyes and breathing unnecessarily. He'd never spoken to me seductively and I thought I might die all over again. A long thread of pre-cum dripped down between my knees to the ground. I took his flaccid cock in my hand and pumped a soapy fist over it, letting my thumb play on the sensitive underside of his rapidly hardening head. He swelled thickly in my hand.

"Gods! You have really been holding back on me." My mouth was watering at the girthy sight and secretly I was relieved to learn that his body responded as a man's should.

Godrik chuckled softly and raised my chin to meet his eyes with a finger. "Not everyone has to be a blond giant to be well-endowed." Before I could avail him with more intimate touches, he rinsed himself suddenly and stood to dry off, leaving me kneeling there in desperate need. I don't know what came over me then, but suddenly I felt like bursting into tears for the second time in my undead life. I'd reached my breaking point.

"Please, Godrik," I said, barely audible.

He ignored me for a long moment as he blotted himself dry. "You said you have been with men? Tell me about this."

"What do you want to know?"

"How, when, who, how often?" he paused, adding. "Why?"
"Hmm, you sound a touch jealous, my future lover."

"Eirikr," he cautioned, but I swore he nearly blushed at this new term of endearment. Perhaps it was simply my boldness that caught him off guard.

I plopped down onto the bear rug I'd stolen to replace the ones we'd lost during my turning. The feel of the ruffled fur against my nude immortal flesh was divine and I rolled onto my belly, trying to think where I might begin."

"I have always been an opportunist, so it's hard to remember all of them," I said, more than a little boastfully and realizing suddenly that my human memories felt fuzzy and distant. "As soon as I discovered my body as a maturing young man I think I messed around with most all of our thralls, regardless of gender."

"You mean slaves," he said harshly, making me instantly cringe at my stupid slip.

"Yes, but you know we care for them as our own people," I quickly added, trying to backtrack. "We all slept under the same roof. It's not like the stories I have heard about how people are treated in the southern lands. We did not trade them like cattle; they were adopted into the family and everyone obeyed the household head equally. It was better than being killed simply for being in the wrong village at the wrong time." I stopped, feeling like I was digging myself into a hole.

"Go on," he waved me off, uninterested in my feeble justifications. I did not understand his weird, paradoxical sense of violent supernatural superiority and quirky liberalism.

"One of the washer women had a son, Håkan. He was a little older than me and we would sometimes sneak off in the forest and he'd tell me naughty things that he did with other boys in his age grade and touch me. I didn't yet spill seed, but I liked it."

"Who else?"

"Young warriors, of course. We spent a lot of time away fighting Ulrike and we found release with each other, though it was mostly furtive and fast. They would come to my tent, emboldened with drink and making small chat. I could always tell the ones that came wanting more. They'd suck me off or sometimes let me…" I felt sheepish discussing something that was completely commonplace among my people but no one ever felt the need to talk about.

"I can feel that you are nervous. Are you ashamed?"

"No. I've just never told anyone before. I don't mind telling you. They liked it when I took them from behind. It felt fantastic. I was happy to discover that some women liked it too. So tight and hot."

"Hmmm," he responded vaguely.

I wished to Freya he would turn around so I could see his face, but he merely stood there in the shadows with his back turned, swaddled in the red linen cloak he'd used to dry himself.

"My wife and I would sometimes invite friends to join us in bed. I wouldn't let them spill seed in her womb, of course. She was mine alone to have like that and besides, as royals we couldn't risk her having another man's child. But we had our fun."

"You smelled of many men and women even when I found you. No doubt you plundered virtually everyone from here to Uppsala."
I grinned broadly. "More like Trondheim."

His shoulders bounced in a quiet laugh. "My child is a bit of a slut, it would seem."

"You can see why I've been frustrated," I replied defiantly, without an ounce of embarrassment.

"I should spank you for being so insolent."

Gods! His words went straight to my groin. I swallowed unnecessarily.

"That could be fun," I teased.

"Or incredibly unpleasant," he shot back.

"I suppose that would be up to you," I dared.

He sighed at my stubbornness. "So, who was the first to penetrate you?"

The question caught me off guard. "In my ass? I…I never…"

Godrik whipped around, a frightening, predatory gleam in his eyes. I couldn't help but notice a very prominent tent in the cloak wrapped around him.

"You mean you are untouched in that way?"

"Yes. I told you. I have never submitted to anyone - before you, that is." My sense of loyalty to him was an indescribable thing, more than any sense of duty or respect I ever held as a human.

He narrowed his eyes, his fangs running out fully. Taking a deep breath, he turned and began pacing the cave, his footfalls softly crunching in the pebbled and gritty granite crumble strewn about the floor. "Eirikr, you are what we call a dominant. Men and women throw themselves at you and you have always been in charge."

"So?"

"So?! These past weeks you have incessantly tried to get me to pleasure you. You realize I will always be stronger than you? I will always be the one in control."

I felt ashamed that I had acted so selfishly, especially now knowing that he had been so horribly abused. "I want to please you just as much."

"I did not turn you to be my play thing!" he barked. His sudden anger made me jump. He chewed his cheek and took a calming breath. "I turned you because the moment I saw you, I couldn't accept that anything would ever defeat you. Not even death. I fear your interest only comes from your natural obeisance to me as your maker and my own desire for you humming around in our bond, spurring you on to actions that aren't yours. I refuse to take advantage of that and have you resent me later."

My undead heart leapt at his words. He wanted me. My Godrik desired me! I flipped onto my back to better see him. "Maker, look at me." He stopped pacing and crossed his arms impatiently. "You are right. Death did not defeat me. He chose me as his companion and I am grateful to be at his side. He is an eternally beautiful young man and I am his, body and soul. I want you to claim what is yours, Godrik."

He froze stock still and stared, statue-like. "Those are…powerful words…to our kind." I could sense something unraveling in him. No, not in him, all around us. It was as though he sighed and
unfurled his strength into the very air. His presence vibrated louder in me than I'd ever sensed before. I sat up on my elbows, trying to understand what was happening. He had been using some unfathomable restraint to cloak the full extent of his powers.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"I have never been more certain of anything in my life."

He dropped the cloak and in a flash was kneeling before me, balanced on the delicate balls of his feet and fingertips. I watched, quivering with anticipation. He cocked his head and scented me deeply, pupils swimming black with excitement. Then in a blur, he struck at my neck with razor precision, biting into my flesh. With every hard pull he took, he drew out my arousal, spiraling me higher and higher. His hands crushed me to him, enveloping me in his delicious scent and velvety skin. I heard myself telling him to drain me, to make me all over again.

All too soon he released me, ruby-lipped and cheeks flushed with a delicious pink.

"You. Are. MINE," he growled ferociously through his fangs, eyes blazing.

I thought my fangs and cock would literally explode at the declaration.

"Say it," he hissed.

"I am yours."

He pounced on me, placing his weight across my lap. Holding me down with his impossibly strong thighs, he leaned in and pressed his forehead to mine. "Say it!"

"I am yours, Godrik. YOURS. Forever."

"Only mine," he whispered hotly. He pressed a rough kiss on my mouth and exhaled, trying to steady himself. "And I am yours. Always." The possessiveness his quiet words suddenly riled up in me was shocking. It was the first taste I had of this aspect of our nature.

"MINE!" I growled into his mouth, claiming it with a passionate abandon.

His tongue worked over mine expertly, while his hands caressed my back and tugged at my hair and wandered across my chest, setting my skin ablaze. Just when I thought I couldn't be any further spun up, he suddenly sucked at one of my fangs, sending me into a complete frenzy. I'd known, of course, that they were extremely sensitive. But to have someone else touch them - to have *him* touch them with that devilishly talented tongue of his - put me in grave danger of ejaculating without a single touch to my cock. At least I was consoled knowing that my newly transformed body never really tired – a fact I had learned during my extended masturbatory forays of late. If I blew it now, at least I'd have another raging hard-on waiting right in line after this one if I so desired. And Odin's eye, how I desired.

Sensing my state, Godrik pushed me flat onto my back, pinning me down by my wrists. He didn't move for a long moment, waiting for me to regain a bit of control over my overloaded supernatural senses. He was pushing calm at me through our bond and judging by his expression, struggling to rein himself in as well.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"You! Whatever you want," I plead.
"You wish for me to pleasure you?"

"Yes, maker. Please."

"Then I will pleasure you. Tell me why I choose to do this."

"Because you want me."

He chuckled, shaking his head. "That is true, my arrogant Norseman, but not why."

My mind scrambled, trying to figure out what answer he was trying to drag out of me. "Because you can. It is your choice."

"Closer."

"Because you are my maker. Mine and mine alone!" I cried out, determined to satisfy his question. "Because you want to please me, you choose to please me, it is your right to please me and…and…because you ask me what I want and you offer me your gifts."

He smiled. "Exactly right, my beautiful, perfect Eirikr," he purred into the shell of my ear. "You ask and I offer."

His lips met mine in another searing kiss that threatened my sanity.

"Please," I panted. "Tell me what you want, lover. Teach me how to please you best. You promised to teach me all that you know."

He laughed mirthfully, shaking out his locks and giving me a nip on the chin. "My lover is so eager. Such an earnest lover." He voiced the word over and over, turning it in his mouth in consideration as though it was a foreign concept. If I thought about it carefully, perhaps it was unknown to me too. Despite my innumerable exploits, I had never really indulged (or thought possible) such unmitigated affection for anyone.

Godrik seemed to pick up on my thoughts. In fact, I had already begun to suspect he could read my mind much more clearly than he let on. "What does it mean, Eirikr? Blood drinkers do not love, we claim."

"Pshah. Who told you this? I think that person lied, Godrik." How could he deny the surging, torrid emotions that now pulsed so easily in our psychic connection?

He rolled back on his hips, thinking carefully. I could feel him prodding our blood bond, searching for something. Perched over me like my personal alabaster god of the night, I was painfully aware that his cock had fallen heavily over mine. A seductive smile ghosted at the corner of his mouth as he found an answer that pleased him. What he uttered took me by surprise.

Up until this point, our conversations had been clipped and focused on the harsh realities of the world I now inhabited. I knew him to be cold, precise, and deadly. He was a shrewd tactician and a clever, inventive person, not to mention experienced beyond measure. But he had also proven to be given to unpredictable extremes. In one instant, he could be dangerously excitable and playful, and in the next, withdrawn and standoffish. I did not know until now that he could be poetic. More truthfully, I did not understand the magnitude of the potential he saw in our relationship or the enormity of his aspirations in turning me. A lesser man would be intimidated. I took it as a worthy challenge.

"'Love' is a dry, flimsy word, is it not?" he said. "Let us leave the piddling love to humans, whom
inevitably will crumble to ash and dust in the blink of an immortal's eye. They are all blindly grasping towards each other because deep down, insignificance is the reigning star in every one of their fates. Words cannot do justice to our bond or capture its essence - what it is, what it will be. Languages will emerge and die while we will live on in every tongue, in every age. In time, we will be all things to each other. Some apparently sooner than others," he grinned conspiratorially, running a hand down my chest. "Lover," he playfully added, pinching my left nipple into a hard peak.

I melted at his words and touch, feeling the intoxicating passion coursing through our bond. He was right. Nothing could describe the experience of it.

Godrik took torturous time caressing my body, memorizing every dip, curve, and line of me with the soft pads of his fingertips. More than a few times he bit me, sinking his fangs into me but not drinking, claiming every inch of my body as his. I was growling in need when Godrik bit his palm suddenly. He worried the wound with his fangs, never taking his eyes off me. He squeezed his fist hard over his thick shaft, then, pressing himself against my own length, he stroked us, rocking forward to rub the super sensitive skin under our heads together. I cried out incoherently, nails digging into his tattooed biceps. We writhed together like this, encased in his strong hands, sliding in his sacred blood. I felt my loins tighten and I knew I was about to be done for. I managed to gasp his name in warning.

Bite me! he called within my mind. I nipped him with blunt teeth, my fangs absolutely unwilling to descend against my maker's flesh. Quickly tearing open a wrist, he shoved it into my mouth as he bit into my neck, completing the circle.

It was beyond exquisite. Beyond unsurpassable. It was simply sublime.

I had been virtually blacked out, awash in ecstasy for who knows how long when I finally came around. Godrik was lazily ghosting circles with his tongue across my groin and inner thighs. I was positively covered in seed and suddenly became distraught that I didn't get to taste his.

He laughed with a happy abandon I'd never seen him possessed by. Joy actually crinkled at the corners of his eyes. "We made a mess," he professed. "You'll have to wash me all over again."

I grabbed his wrist and he willingly tumbled against me.

"You smell like snow before it falls," he confessed, nuzzling my temple. "Of the frozen sea and warm, rare spices, with the softest hint of a summer breeze wafting through an evergreen forest."

My nostrils flared as I tried to pick out his own delicious musky signature – sandalwood, vetiver, and sweet fall leaves. It was difficult because my own scent now strongly bore traces of him too.

"I smell like you now. Do you mind?"

"Always fishing for compliments…" He kissed me deeply, setting my body on fire once more. The demon boy was positively luscious. I couldn't get enough of his fragrance, his taste, his touch. I was throbbing painfully in need again. Godrik extracted himself from my embrace and slid back down between my thighs. He hitched one of my long pale legs over his shoulder and shifted my other knee to expose me. I should have felt incredibly vulnerable, yet I trusted my maker completely.

"I do not mind at all that you bear my scent. I want to fill every bit of you with my essence, over and over. You are mine." A dark, hungry look passed over him and my skin turned to gooseflesh in anticipation. "Is that what you like, Eirikr? When naughty young boys take you into the woods and
whisper dirty, filthy things to you? That is exactly what I've done, yes?"

I swallowed, my throat dry with carnal hunger. The crazed look in my eyes must have given me away, because he began whispering the most depraved ideas about what he might do to me. Seeing his delicious mouth utter such filth had me clutching at the rug for some hopeless measure of control.

"Mmm," he half-purred, half growled, and suddenly licked my exposed ass. The sensation surprised me, both tickling and making me ache in need. As he lapped at me, he pressed two fingers to my lips and I trapped them, sucking them just as I wanted to suck another part of him. He withdrew his hand and sliced open the same fingers I'd been enjoying only a moment before. Slowly, he took my hardness into his mouth and he slipped one digit into the tight ring of muscles at the base of me.

"Oh Gods!" The feeling was alien and burned for a second but was rapidly soothed by my maker's healing blood. He slid his gorgeous mouth up and down my shaft, down further and further, greedily taking all of my manhood into his throat. I gasped, never having been sucked so fully or deeply. He began working me in a rhythm, swallowing my length and striking me inside, stretching me. I grasped the ground wildly, bucking as he slipped a second finger in and pumped harder. He struck something deep inside of me that had me crying out instantly. I was writhing and incoherent under his masterful touch. Somehow I managed to hear him ask for his "blood kiss" – the very one I'd longed to give him the night I turned. Instantly I had bitten my tongue for him and saw through a bloodlusted haze that he was palming more of his thick crimson juices over his erection. As he sought my mouth, he pushed at my entrance, sheathing himself deep within me and claiming me as his for all eternity.

He was exceptionally gentle, at least in the beginning, which I did not expect. He slowly rocked his narrow hips against mine, massaging that secret place within me that made my cock leak and beg for more. As I grew accustomed to his width, he began to pull out at a tortuously slow pace and work back into me, teaching me how to receive the battery of amazing sensations he was unleashing on me. Suddenly, much to my chagrin, I realized that I must have been a rotten lover this entire time, jamming my big dick in people and rutting at them like a common barnyard animal.

"Stop?" Godrik asked, feeling my emotions shift.

"No! Sorry," I snapped out of it and dared to grab the firm, round globes of his ass to bring him closer.

"Do not let yourself be distracted again," he chastised, falling over me and pinning my arms over my head. "You will think only of me. Or there will be consequences." With that, he rammed a hard thrust at me.

My head fell back and I completely melted beneath him. "Oh fucking gods, do that again!"

He did. And it sent me right over the edge.

We lay together for hours upon hours, to the point that my body ran out of seed for several runs as it struggled to keep up with the rate I was pumping it out. Godrik maneuvered me into an array of different positions, showing me how we might connect our forms together to make love. I was truly astonished to discover how good surrendering to him could feel, even when he took me from behind in an unyielding hold, pulling my hair and demanding that I cry out his name. Normally I despised feeling so exposed and defenseless, but this was something else entirely. He freed me to simply feel, experience, and be. Submission, he explained, required far more strength of character,
for it was much harder to do. My favorite position, however, was exactly where we'd begun – my
arms and legs enveloping him as he was enveloped by me, his muscles rippling with the force of
his exertion against the flat of my chest, his mask of calm lost to the bliss of release with me.

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The fire had long ago burnt out and only the softest hiss and pop of the dying coals lit our stony
den. I lay tangled with Godrik in the plush brown bear rug, nude and silent. His head rested in the
crook of my shoulder and his hand was lost in a tumble of my blond hair. Pressed together, satiated,
our bond thrummed with unfiltered expressions of fulfillment and serenity - a discourse more
pure than any words we might utter.

Beyond the walls of our nighttime lair, the first of the larks' songs floated across the early morning,
signaling dawn's approach. Godrik stirred minutely, pasting a kiss onto my chest. I squeezed him
tighter, not wanting this night to be overtaken by the sun. Within a few minutes, however, I knew
he would pull me up and insist that we dig our earthen grave for the day.

"I hope we never meet your gods," he said softly.

"Why?" I asked, confused.

"Because I do believe I've just run afoul of Odin. I've stolen his finest warrior from his rightful
place in Valhalla. I expect he had reserved the seat next to him," he replied with an amused grin.

"Well, if we are suddenly attacked by a murder of menacing crows, I suppose it will be confirmed.
But I think you were fated to find me."

He grunted a neutral response.

Once situated safely underground beneath a thick layer of soil, I was nearly asleep when I heard
Godrik speak to me in my mind, confessing something far more sobering.

You are the first and only thing I have ever had to myself...the greatest gift...

Love. Mine. I pushed back before succumbing to the sun.
"I was born to darkness in a tree like this"

"No. It is out of the question," Godrik said with a finite sternness.

"But you said we could go to Roskilde!"

"Upon further consideration I have determined it to be unwise."

"Why?" I threw my hands on my hips, exasperated.

"There are many factors," Godrik replied, toeing the ground, refusing to meet my gaze.

"Which are?" I pressed, incensed that four months later we were still roaming around the Nordic countryside, nowhere near a city. I longed for a bit of variety.

Godrik turned and walked out, leaving me standing among the slew of small, soft bodies. We'd dined on a whole family tonight - a mother and her children, all desperately thin and diseased in the midst of winter. Their weak blood offered us little in the way of sustenance, forcing us to drain them dry in order to wring out the most meager of meals. Months before, I would have been disgusted to feed upon the little ones, but Godrik had pointed out how their midwinter deaths would have been far slower otherwise. They would all die eventually anyways, why not in my arms? Already we had encountered hamlets that had resorted to eating the dogs, the hard winter grasses under the snow, and in several places, even their own. The taste in their blood was unmistakable. This was an especially hard winter for the peasant folk. Absentmindedly I thought of the people in Ásaviðr and wondered how my eldest, Thorson, was managing. I looked at the corpse of the pitiable lad I’d drained and angrily discarded the useless thought. Stooping to avoid the low lintel of the hut, I found Godrik standing in an open field some distance away from the isolated thatch roofed house.

"Godrik, I only know what you tell me. If my ignorance annoys you, then you alone are the remedy." I smiled inwardly, pleased that I was beginning to figure out how to deal with my oftentimes mysterious and unyielding maker.

He dipped down faster than I could track and in a blink I found my face smashed with a snowball.

"You forget I can feel that smug attitude of yours dripping all over our bond, Norseman," he criticized sharply, then tackled me at full force. In a flurry of limbs and feathery white powder, an all out lethal snowball fight ensued. He was far quicker than I and being shorter, had the advantage, but I crushed the snow in my big palms with all my strength, hurling nasty iceballs that were far meaner than the puffy splats he was lobbing my way. Eventually we scraped so much snow off the field there wasn't anything left to gather and we called a truce, laughing hard at the strange scene we'd conjured with our high jinks.

We wended our way through the forest in a companionable silence. Although the longer nights were a definite benefit, winter presented certain challenges to our kind – the malnourishment of our hosts being only one issue among several. Frankly put, it was absolute pain in the ass to dig out the frozen ground. Our daytime hiding places needed to be sufficiently insulated so that we didn't freeze during the day. Though the cold didn't hurt, waking stiff as a board was momentarily immobilizing and could present a risk if we were to be ambushed before we got ourselves limbered up. To offset the problem, we kept multiple safe places scattered around our large hunting territory. Presently we were headed towards an ancient burial mound. Godrik abhorred spending the day anywhere but below ground, so our abandoned cabins and cozy caves were only for wiling away
the evening hours. We owned virtually nothing but the clothes on our backs, a few treasures kept in a small rucksack, and our swords. I longed to sleep in a bed, but the possibility seemed less likely than getting my maker to take me to somewhere civilized.

I was mulling over Godrik's refusal to take us to Roskilde when he stopped several paces in front of a massive oak. While we spent our nights as shadows tacking back and forth across the same hills and forests, we had never happened upon this particular ancient tree. "Wait," he held a hand up. I froze instinctively. Silent as death, he stalked forward, scenting the air. He gave its base a sharp rap with his knuckles and the tree answered with a hollow sound. He looked up at me. "We'll sleep here tonight."

With some effort, we chipped away the solid ground around its roots until we tunneled into a spacious cavern inside the old oak. It was surprisingly comfortable, given some of the truly foul places we'd slept before - aforementioned burial mound being one - and it was pleasantly warmer. We left the entrance open for the time being, as there were still a few hours of night left. I slipped down onto my back, resting my head in Godrik's lap. He ran his fingers through my hair and worked it into several thick interlocking braids that he knew I favored.

"I was born to darkness in a tree like this," he said out of the blue.

I twisted around to see him. "Really?" Suddenly the warm, sweet, earthy notes in his scent made complete sense to me. They were not dissimilar from the ones perfuming the air around us now.

He grunted and went back to fiddling with my hair. I held the piece I felt him fussing at so he could secure the end with a bit of dried sinew.

"You've seen him in my blood. He was beautiful, with long silky black hair like wisps of smoke and jewel-green eyes. I accidentally disturbed him during his rest."

I didn't dare speak, knowing how precious admissions such as these were. He had never spoken to me of his maker. I couldn't make head nor tails of the bizarre snippets I knew of his life before me. Nothing pieced together and it didn't help that the few glimpses I'd gleaned were spread across 1500 years of history. Godrik was a puzzle that didn't want or need to be solved. It was positively maddening at times, but the most I could do was stay silent and mine his every word for understanding.

"Was beautiful. Meaning his maker was no more. I focused on the sad affection I felt on his end of the bond and wondered yet again how he claimed to have had a master that was not his maker."

"Let's play a game," he suggested, breaking me away from my thoughts.

"Sure."

"I want you to have sex with me."

I snickered. "Was I not already planning on doing that?"

"Not like this. I want you to take me like I take you. Take me as if you are my maker." This caught my attention. I would readily admit that where I tended to be prolific in my conquests, he was a far more creative and accomplished lover. I swear on Odin's beard, it was as if his mind had never quite been tamed. He was my kinky, weird boy and he always would be.

In the past few months, I had managed to master feeding and coupling with humans without killing them, but only because Godrik demanded it of me. He had insisted it would teach me independence. I rather suspected he had other motivations. My interest in sex with humans at this
point was something akin to wishing to drink wine with one's meal or pairing bread with a hearty stew; they went together instinctively but only because it was what was on the metaphorical table at the time. What I desired – what truly fulfilled me - was my maker and he alone. I think he took perverse enjoyment in watching me from the shadows, knowing that the course and fleeting pleasures of mortals only served to elevate him higher in my regard. They only served, in truth, to inflame my need of him. Whenever I got particularly stubborn about meeting some challenge of his, instead of inflicting pain on me as he said other makers would, he would withhold himself from me to get me to cave to his wishes. His tactics, I later realized, instilled me with a level of self-restraint almost unheard of for one so young. And I would never begrudge his need for authority over his own body, especially when he came up with such mad ideas to allow me to explore my own.

"It is role play, Eirikr. Just channel how you perceive me and I'll be your good little Godrik."

"You…want to submit to me," I asked cautiously.

"Yes, maker," he replied obediently, initiating the game. I hitched up between his legs where I had lain, already throbbing with excitement.

He had never allowed this. He was offering himself up to me, giving me free rein to discover how to pleasure him. How I longed to see him ride astride me, to set the pace of his release, to reduce him to a quivering, boneless mass.

"I am the one with dominion over you," I confirmed warily.

"Yes," he said breathlessly. He unfastened his cloak and shrugged out of his fur vest in invitation. Not wasting a second, I hastily pulled him out of his tunic.

Now exposed to me, I caressed his cheek and neck, running a hand over his blue tattooed collar.

"You are mine. All mine. My beautiful boy," I whispered as I ghosted open-mouthed kisses along his shoulders and across his chest. I sucked and nipped bluntly at his flesh. He arched his back in a moan and I circled my arm around his narrow, tight little waist. I loved the taper of his torso, so lean and muscular. I pulled him to me and fastened my mouth over the dusky pink peak of a hardened nipple, rolling the tender bud between my lips and tongue. His eyes fluttered and I worked a trail of kisses and licks down his taught stomach, nibbling at his sweet little belly button – the only proof that he had ever really been human.

"Strip for me," I ordered, testing the waters. Godrik knew me well enough that given a sliver of latitude, I would inevitably try to take it as far as I could.

He obeyed, wriggling out of his leggings until he was nude, splayed between my legs where I knelt. I continued my trail of kisses, nuzzling his sexy thatch of curls and the sensitive skin of his inner thighs.

"Touch yourself, lover. Show me how you like to pleasure yourself." He bit his lower lip as he ran his hands down his body, taking his hardened length in hand. He tugged gently at himself and stroked with the lightest, teasing touch, using only a thumb and two forefingers. I could have died all over again seeing him perform for me, his breathless panting growing by the minute. He palmed himself overhand several times and then switched to his awkward right hand, getting closer by the second.

I pulled him up by his hips and took him into my mouth, deeply as he'd shown me. He moaned and his eyes rolled back. I sucked him hungrily, keeping my fangs tucked carefully away. The taste of
him tested my determination to emulate his usual brand of restraint. As I worked his body mercilessly, he began to lose that fine control he exercised over himself so rigorously. He began bucking wildly in my hands, barking out something incomprehensible in his native tongue. Suddenly he wretched upright and grabbed my hair. With a sharp thrust into my mouth and a cry he exploded, contracting over and over in thick jets. He collapsed back to the ground and shivered, still riding out the last of his orgasm. In that moment, he appeared so absurdly young and vulnerable. I felt fiercely possessive. Gathering him up into my arms, I pulled him onto my lap, holding him close.

"My lover, my boy. I will always protect you, always give you what you need," I whispered into his hair. I may have still been playing his game, but I meant every solemn word.

He clung to me and nodded against my chest. I stroked his back softly with my fingertips until he began to move against me. I felt him grab me, placing me at his entrance.

"Is that what you need?" He ground against me. I took that as a 'yes'. In a single, slow movement I pushed into him, feeling his impossibly tight body accept me to the hilt. He let out a long, haunting moan and collapsed against me, arms wrapped around my neck. I do not know how long we sat like that, still and connected. I was overloaded with unnameable forms of ecstasy, analyzing and committing each to memory. Feeling my maker give himself fully to me, to have his all-powerful body relax and yield to my touch, to see his eyes widely innocent and needy - needy only for me...

There is little that can be said to capture it, so I will simply say only this: there are thirsts that rise and burn in demanding need, then fall away forgotten once sated. With Godrik, that pressing desire and ever-rushing ache for more would never be relieved. Never. Passion, obsession, addiction… The words do not matter.

Finally, I heard him mewl and he squirmed atop me in complaint. It drew me back into this realm. I took him firmly by the shoulders and rolled my hips, staring into his eyes. I focused intensely on his reactions to each thrust and caress. Seeing what made him grunt and cry my name, gave me confidence. Determined to undo him entirely, I flipped him under me and used my supernatural speed to pound into him at an angle I hoped would thoroughly undo him. Godrik started to unravel and I watched as he lost himself in my arms, panting and letting out a haunting moan as we came in unison. I fed him my blood, letting him drink well beyond the point of reason. The ground began to spin about me dangerously.

Long after, I held him tightly, protectively, whispering promises of how I would care for him through our eternal nights. When it was finally time to seal over the entrance to the tree and bed ourselves for the day, he cuddled back into my arms. I had a sneaking suspicion I had just helped fulfill some deeply buried fantasy of his.

"I wish you had made me," he confessed quietly in the pitch black.

"Maybe we've made each other, Godrik."

I felt his emotions contort in the bond with boyish joy and sadness all at once. I smelled his blood then and licked up the single crimson tear that had slid off his cheek.

"Don't be sad, maker."

"I am not. These are new days. I may have saved you from death, but you are healing me from so much life."

I wanted to ask, but I knew I'd not get any answers. Not tonight at least.
"Zeus has found his Ganymede"

The next night Godrik rose with a spring in his step. The morose air that had hung about him the previous evening was gone, much to my relief.

"You're feeling fresh," I remarked wryly, covering up the disturbed soil at the base of our oak with a spread of freshly fallen snow.

"We can go."

"The village south of here or the one further southwest?" I asked. We had to be incredibly mindful of the body count my nightly thirst created. I was an unusually hungry oaf of a newborn (so I was told) and still required very large amounts of blood.

"To Roskilde."

I dropped my sword in shock. "Do not jest!"

"If you truly wish it, I will take you."

This did not mean, however, that my maker intended to make it easy for me.

The trip there took far longer than necessary. Godrik refused to simply fly us to Zealand island where the city was located. Instead, he insisted that I guide us using my own abilities - as if navigation wasn't one of my strongest skills. Days later, when we finally arrived at the sea, the plan I had imagined to protest the drawn-out journey immediately backfired. I had hoped to make us both suffer a long icy swim across the sound, but as soon as we reached the shoreline I immediately began rethinking my approach. The black waters swirled in strange, angry currents and large frozen icebergs scuttled erratically through the straight. These were very dangerous waters and I hadn't the slightest clue as to what risks such conditions might pose to us. Sensing my indecision, Godrik stood watching me in silent amusement as I dithered over what to do. Thinking quickly, I announced that I would glamour a ferryman to convey us across the choppy sea.

It was one of the rougher passages I had experienced, though Godrik sat staring impassively at the turbulent black waves as though they were no more than glassy ripples in a stream. Once across, we clambered out of the unsteady boat onto solid ground. The town was nothing more than a sleepy fishing hamlet. "This cannot be Roskilde!" I barked in outrage. The old ferryman peered at me through jaundiced eyes and gave a hearty, toothless laugh. "You're on Amager Island, young fool! You've still to cross the channel to Zealand and only then can you travel the day's journey it takes to get to the city." He gestured to a winding sandy trail and we headed off immediately. I do not care to record here the stream of obscenities that subsequently issued from my mouth.

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The following evening, we at last arrived at the outskirts of the city. Gravitating towards the sounds of life, we came to a large outdoor market. I was amazed by the dazzling array of people I saw, drawn from seemingly every corner of the world. The air was alive with the chattering of a dozen different languages. Traders, migrants, and travelers of all sorts flooded into the bustling city and commerce was lively even after dusk. The central aisle of the market was rutted with mud and
merchants harangued passersby with fork tongued promises of superior quality and impossible
deals. The aromas of the crowd and their foodstuffs were enticing and revolting in equal measure.

At one point a grimy urchin of a child ran by and attempted to filch a coin from my pocket. I caught him by the wrist and growled in his face, much to his terror. Perhaps the light of a nearby torch illuminated my pallid features in too horrific detail - I cannot be certain. In an old trick that delighted my own lost babes, I scraped behind his ear with my free hand and discovered a small gold piece. He scampered off into the crowd sniffing back his tears, gleefully clinging to his treasure. Godrik snorted, calling me a 'sentimental hen' and continued to stroll through the throngs of people unfazed, his hands clasped behind his back. He seemed to part the seas of humanity with his very presence and I followed in stride at his shoulder, scanning for any potential trouble. Though he seemed to be out merely for a casual meander, I could tell by the slightest shift of his eyes and the sublest turn of his head that he was soaking in every detail of information pouring in around us.

At one point Godrik paused and headed over to a grain seller who was speaking rapidly in another tongue to a client. He nudged his way to a place at his cart and scooped up a heavy palm of barley, letting the pearls sift through his fingers as if he was inspecting their quality. He commented on something the merchant said, then, looking slightly troubled, bought a small sac of grain and hurried back to me.

"The Roman Empire defeated the Persians since I've been away and Leo III died," he relayed in hushed tones.

"Who was Leo III?" I asked.

Godrik stopped in his tracks. "You don't know who the emperor is in Constantinople?"

"Maker, I've never been this far south. I don't even know what language that was you were speaking!"

"Wait…What?" he gasped, thoroughly shocked. "What do you speak apart from Norse?" he demanded, suddenly incredulous at my limitations.

"A little German and enough Finnish to get a beer and a wench," I said, grinning.

"Then you only write in Runic?"

"Well, no…I recognize the symbols, though not many of yours," I gestured to the archaic runes on the arm hidden beneath his cloak.

"You aren't lettered!?" he screeched. Rolling his eyes and muttering something that sounded suspiciously like 'ignoramus for a child,' he snatched me by the arm before I could give a saucy retort. He dragged me roughly through the crowds, hunting for something specific.

We stopped at a scribe's table. Godrik picked up a leaf of parchment and flipped it, testing its pliability.

"You've no better vellum? This is poorly cured indeed." He sniffed it, making a face. "Jackrabbit skin? Eech."

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir," said the man operating the kiosk. "We ran out of our best stock some months ago. You've a keen eye for quality, if I may say so."

"Fine. Give me two sheaves of this, several of those quills there, and six pots of ink – and none of
the dried up offal that the customers have been peaking in and spilling everywhere. Give me six fresh pots."

The scribe gathered the materials and after a quick haggle over the price, he was paid, the useless bag of grain being thrown in to sweeten the deal. Godrik shoved the bundle of writing supplies at me. "Here. Happy belated Yule. You're to learn Greek and Latin by the month's end." Though I hadn't the slightest clue how to begin, I didn't dare question him. I sensed a hard displeasure across our bond.

We left the market and headed away from the city towards the countryside. Godrik grew even more tense as we walked and he began instructing me in low tones. "Listen very carefully to me. We are now in the Danish kingdom. We must present ourselves to the lord of the draugur here, King Cornelius. You will say nothing unless you are spoken to and you will follow my lead in every instance. Among our kind you must always address me as 'master', but I forbid you from ever using this term when we are alone. Am I clear?"

"Of course."

"If you disobey me in front of our kind or dishonor me in any way, then gods as my witness, I will have your fangs. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"'Yes, master' from here on out."

"Yes, master."

He swore under his breath and pulled my sword off me, slinging it over a muscled shoulder alongside his own. "Best if you aren't armed. I don't want you doing something incredibly stupid in case they rile you up - which they will. Be clever and don't give anyone the satisfaction of a response. You're the lowest bump on the log now, boy."

"Great," I said, feigning enthusiasm.

"King Cornelius and I get along well enough, but his court is full of snakes. His underlings are distrustful of me and his consort, Sigrid, dislikes me even more. I've lingered in the territory too long and my age permits me to demand his throne. I do not wish it, of course, but remain wary at all times. Under no circumstances are you to let yourself be separated from me." He grabbed my chin and forced me to look at him. "This I command as your maker. If anyone there asks about your turning, say you remember very little of it and nothing more. You must not reveal the details of how I made you to anyone else, Eirikr. It is our secret. Again, I command it."

The torrent of orders sent shivers down my back. "I understand. May I ask why? What is so secret about how you made me?"

"Virtually all draugur are turned after a few exchanges. A night, no more. Most are weak and profane, useless beings in the beginning – and often well into their centuries. You will see this for yourself soon enough."

"Then I am unique?" I responded, feeling flushed with pride.

"Aye. It is nearly unheard of to be the sole progeny of an elder and I suspect no one has ever been made as you were. But do not let such petty facts rule your ego and incite you to act like a boastful fool. It will get you murdered - and quickly at that. Do not ever forget this, Eirikr: the only blood drinker you can ever fully trust is the one you make."
I nodded, realizing now the complexity of my request to come here. I understood court intrigues well enough, but how that translated into the politics of our own kind, I could only begin to guess. It was evident that I was unwittingly my maker's biggest, if only, weakness. I quickly resolved to endure whatever indignities our visit might entail so as to not be either a failure in my maker's eyes, nor a pawn against him in someone else's ploys.

Godrik started fussing with my cloak and hair, smoothing it over to ensure that I was especially presentable. "Alright, alright!" I said in annoyance, pushing him off. "Who's the hen, again?"

We continued along the barren countryside. Approaching a low grassy hill, I saw something that from the distance appeared to be a door. Nearing it, I realized the hillock was in fact an enormous underground sod house, the size of which I had never before seen. I felt apprehensive suddenly, as though we'd crossed into a dangerous place and perhaps we should turn back. Godrik stiffened too. "Magic wards," he explained. "We bear no ill will. They will let us pass."

At the door, a man stood rigidly at guard. His scent carried on the air and I immediately recognized he was like us – a night walker. "Who goes there?" he called out, drawing a long blade.

"Tis Godrik, Baldr. We wish to have an audience with the king."

"Ah!" he exclaimed, relaxing, "You return to us at last, Godrik. It has been nearly a year. The king will be pleased to receive you."

At the door, the sentry looked over me thoroughly, undressing me with his eyes. Perhaps I stared too long as well simply out of naïve curiosity. He was the second blood drinker I had ever met. "My, my, what have we here?" he drawled, smelling me with flared nostrils and licking his lips. Godrik let out a low threatening growl. Baldr threw his hands up in submission, clearly terrified of the diminutive boy who bore an innate authority. He scrambled to unbar the door and hastily bade us to enter.

The long hallway was framed by a low ceiling and lit by clay oil lamps. Godrik swept through the winding passageways with ease, ignoring the doors that creaked open and whispers that filled the corridors as we went. Finally, behind double doors, we entered into a spacious hall – the main court itself. No less than two dozen blood drinkers filled the room. Some were playing board games, another strolled about with a lute, singing, and the king himself sat perched upon a dais strewn lavishly with rich furs and a throne covered in hammered gold.

"Godrik! Always a pleasure," he greeted us, arms thrown up in a poor imitation of surprise. I immediately disliked him.

"Your highness." Godrik bowed shallowly and reached over to push me far lower in my supplication. "May I introduce my progeny, Eirikr."

The king raised an eyebrow and looked over me appraisingly. Cornelius was dressed strangely, swathed in an elaborately folded white garment and a shawl in fine purple wool. I'd never seen such a color dyed into fabric. Casting a furtive glance around the room, I realized the people here wore all manner of bizarre attire. I wanted Godrik to explain, but I would have to ask later.

"Well, he is certainly one of the prettiest draugur I've ever met," he said in a thick Danish dialect that was difficult to understand. "You have made quite the plaything, Godrik. Can he do anything beside stand there looking like something Polykleitos sculpted out of bronze?"*

I cut my eyes at Godrik, not comprehending what sounded to my ears like an insult. The two laughed in unison, though I could tell my maker's mirth was as forced as Cornelius' welcome.
"He was a warrior prince, my lord, and shows great promise as one of us. He will go far, I believe."

"Indeed. This is your first, is it not? Your discerning taste honors our kind, Godrik. We shall celebrate his joining our ranks." Clapping, he called for more musicians and had a small herd of glamoured humans brought in. The hall quickly turned into a raucous feast and the general atmosphere of bloodlust was extremely difficult to resist. Afterwards, many members of the court made a point of stopping by where we sat to congratulate my maker. I was thoroughly ignored and galled to be spoken of like chattel, but I heeded my maker's strong words of advice and kept my mouth firmly shut. I passed the time observing others' wary reactions to Godrik. None touched him and indeed most kept a fair distance between his seat and where they stood, averting their eyes to his direct gaze. He was dismissing a man requesting to sketch a portrait of us in charcoal when a commotion broke out on the far end of the chamber. A woman floated in with waist-long hair so fair it was nearly white.

"Master?" I whispered, barely audible. Before he could respond, she was directly before us, offering her hand for Godrik's kiss. I felt my maker's annoyance, but his face was a mask of perfect cordiality.

"Dearest Godrik, we are honored once more with your presence. You come with such unexpected news."

"Aye, madame, this is my child, Eirikr. Child, this is Sigrid." I gave another deep bow. She stepped uncomfortably close, narrowing her sky blue eyes at me.

"How extraordinary. He gives off the scent of being a decade old, even two decades old. But that cannot be."

"No, madame, he is not yet a yearling."

"Blessed goddess. I dare say there has never been an elder who has turned a first after so long. I do hope you keep him around for at least a little while, Godrik. It would be a shame to waste all that undiluted blood." She tossed her hair and gave a coy smile. "Alas, he is quite the specimen."

Without further ado, she slipped an arm around my elbow and pulled me towards the center of the room for a dance. Thankfully, I recognized the song as one we used to dance at home. Each time we passed and touched hands for a turn, she stared icily at me, trying to unnerve me.

"Does madame like what she sees?" I smirked.

"You mean the semen dump before me? You reek of your master's pleasure." she spoke through a wide smile.

Rage burned in my throat. I glanced over to Godrik, who was conversing casually with Cornelius at the dais. He nodded slightly with a knowing look, reminding me to remain calm.

"I apologize for the offense, though surely madame does not begrudge me for serving my master dutifully," I replied, disgusted by the requisite scraping and bowing.

"What offends me more than your master parading you about in my court is his intentions in doing so. Tell me, underling, what did Godrik promise you when he turned you?"

"He promised me nothing, Lady Sigrid," I lied smoothly, willing my palms not to ball into fists. "He simply took what he wanted."

She seemed satisfied with my response but continued to pepper me with questions. Near the end of the song, her suspicions became apparent to me. She assumed Godrik had turned a child in order to
help him take the court by force. Alarm rang out in my mind and I broke from the dance to sweep the royal consort in a series of circles, enabling me to check the various exits and take stock of who among us was armed. If Sigrid understood my actions for what they were, she paid no mind and laughed at my embellishment to the choreography.

"Well, you are a charming dance partner, young one! Perhaps you will share a dance with me again before Godrik returns to Tarquinius. Or even better, perhaps he'll leave you in our care when he does."

I knew as soon as she spoke that she was to rattle my confidence, but before I could school my features, she caught my momentary confusion.

"Oh! Of course, silly me. You would not have met him yet."

It was not news that Godrik had told me virtually nothing of his friends and associates and less surprising still that Sigrid could not be trusted. If there was one thing at which I excelled, however, it was playing both sides to feel out a middle ground. "Tarquinius..." I murmured, taking a wild guess. "He's still in Constantinople, yes?"

A slight smile played across her features, as if in appreciation of my cleverness. "Indeed. I'll see if I can't find his messenger. He's been waiting here for months." Sigrid patted my arm and then abandoned me to snap at a servant.

I made my way back to Godrik's side and stood a behind him, head bowed in imitation of the other young progeny I'd picked out in the group. Lost to my own thoughts, I heard only snatches of my maker's conversation with the king. There was comfort in the knowledge that Godrik had been adamant about not returning to Constantinople, but it would be a lie to say I was not concerned.

"Do you not agree, child?" Godrik asked.

I whipped my head up. I tried to recall what they had been discussing, but I found that I had utterly lost the thread of the conversation. "I'm not certain it is for me to give an opinion on the subject, master." It was a lousy bluff.

"Oh come now, you musn't be so bashful, youngling!" the king guffawed. "Goodness, Godrik, you've certainly beat him into submission quickly. You must share your methods with me."

Before Cornelius could continue to press me for an answer, a tall, lithe man dressed head-to-toe in black interrupted us with a bow. His head was crowned with a wild shock of wavy, jet hair and his skin was as pale and opaline as the moon.

"But of course! How silly of me to forget. Amleth has been here awaiting your return for some time, Godrik."

My maker nodded coolly at the blood drinker, but a fondness lay quietly underneath his still exterior. I might have been more jealous if I weren't simultaneously fascinated by him and thankful that he'd saved me from embarrassing myself further. He had been turned around the same age as me, but his features were all razor sharp angles and aquiline planes. His eyes were viridian, neither green nor really blue, and his irises seemed to change based on the colors reflecting around him. Amleth turned his piercing gaze upon me and the corner of his expressive mouth twitched almost imperceptibly.

Godrik exchanged a few polite words before excusing us. I was relieved to escape the scrutiny of the court and retire to our private accomodations. When I discovered our room included a large,
luxurious-looking bed, I could barely contain my joy. Godrik snickered at my response, nostrils flaring as he suppressed an impish smile. He invited the messenger and I to sit at a small round table and my maker rested a hand on my shoulder.

"Amleth, this is my progeny Eirikr." He bowed his head at me with sincere respect. "Eirikr, this is Amleth of Cumbria, the child of Lucius Tarquinius Superbus. Tarquin was…well, he is presently the chief magistrate of the draugur High Consul. Tarquin is also a very old friend of mine." I nodded in appreciation of what seemed like a rather important title.

"I am sorry you have wasted your time waiting on me, Amla. Has your stay here at least been comfortable?"

"Well, they haven't tried to kill me, if that is what you mean, Godrik," he said with a hint of amusement.

"I dare say that would sit poorly with your dear maker."

Amleth let out an ironic laugh. His voice, his carriage, even his glorious raven mane - everything about his bearing smacked of a refined cosmopolitanism. I was mesmerized by his beauty. He was truly an exquisite creature.

"I should think so. Tarquin requests your presence."

"Formally or informally?"

Amleth waved a slender hand around nonchalantly. "Does it matter?"

"I'm afraid it does this time."

He shrugged. "Informally, then, but you should know that the Consul is gravely unstable."

"The Consul is always unstable, Amleth. We founded it on democratic principles; that's the nature of the beast."

"He knew you would say that. Master says he needs his oldest ally. He wouldn't have sent me if it wasn't important. People are contesting the electoral process. There's talk of involving other creatures."

Godrik did not hesitate. "If that is the case then I truly cannot go. I am a maker now. There are other considerations. He will understand."

"He will be disappointed."

"Will you be punished if you return without me?"

Amleth chewed a lip in thought. "No." His frown slowly morphed into a smile and he jerked his head at me. "As excuses go, he's not a bad one. I cannot wait to see master's face when I tell him."

"Will you stay a while longer?"

"If you wish it."

"I do," Godrik spoke affectionately.

"Then it is settled. I should very much like to get to know this one," he said, grinning mischievously at me.
The following night Amleth joined us in our chambers. Godrik had cagily refused to answer my questions about Tarquinius and further infuriated me by insisting we sleep under a trap door in the floor that could be secured with heavy deadbolts. The beautiful bed lay in the middle of the room with its rich covers still pristinely drawn. I'd risen firmly committed to my foul mood, but before I could take it out on my maker, he left me in the care of the young messenger to attend court, extracting promises from us both that we wouldn't leave the room or do anything else foolish.

Amleth folded a long leg underneath his frame and sat gracefully on a chair. His movements were positively leonine.

"How long have you known Godrik?" I asked, eager to have someone answer me normally for once.

"Nearly my entire life."

"Do you have siblings or…" I wasn't sure what to call them. "Blood kin?"

"I do. I am one of Tarquin's eldest."

"Your maker is very important, I take it," I observed, too embarrassed to admit I did not know what the High Consul actually was.

Amleth gave a genuine smile. "Thanks in no small part to your own maker, young friend! I see Godrik has been his usual forthcoming self. No matter. You can ask me anything. But first things first. Have you eaten yet this evening? Would you share a meal with me?" Within minutes Amleth had a buxom woman sent to the room. She was dressed in a simple shift gown and had rich chocolate locks that furled around her bare shoulders.

"Good evening, darling," he purred, pulling a curtain of her hair away to reveal her throat.

"My Lord," she murmured and curtsied.

"I don't like them heavily glamoured, nor bitten to smithereens like most of the royal stock. She's only been mine up until now."

"She smells delicious."

"Oh, just you wait," Amleth said, pressing a kiss at her pulse point. The moment he bit delicately into her flesh, the tinny perfume of her blood slammed against my senses. He held a thumb over the tiny puncture, controlling the tendrils of precious fluid so that they slid down her neck one tantalizingly slow drop at a time. I could not help the growl that escaped my throat. Amleth chuckled at my eagerness. "Here. Take it slowly. The delay only makes it better," he explained in a husky voice, drawing me in by a shoulder.

I raised an unconvinced eyebrow at him, but followed his lead. He lessened his grip on the bite and I greedily lapped up what he released for me, then nipped playfully at his hand for more.

"Steady, mate," he chastised, then let out another pulsing flow. I tried to comply, but the heat of the woman's blood and the excitement of being watched by a stranger in the midst of feeding proved
overwhelming. Lurid thoughts of ravishing her with Amleth began to cloud my thinking and I pushed myself away from her before the instinct to bite proved too strong. I didn't know what the repercussions of draining someone else's human might be.

"Your control is truly impressive," Amleth remarked after he had healed the woman's neck and sent her away. He sighed and collapsed onto the bed.

"What shall we do now?" He wondered aloud.

"Perhaps you'd like to see what else is impressive about me," I quipped without thinking. Amleth sat up sharply, eyes slightly wide. "Or not," I countered, realizing my usual forwardness was probably utterly inappropriate. He could easily overpower me if he so chose.

"Don't get me wrong. It's just…You are marked, darling. You smell like ancient vampire and it's very much meant to be a warning."

"Oh come on. You know Godrik. Why should you fear him?"

Amleth looked at me like I was crazy. "I fear him because I know him! There are few creatures that don't! He is capable of…" Amleth licked his lips nervously and dropped his voice into a bare whisper "of terrible, wonderful things."

The horrifying image of his gaunt, drained figure sprang to mind. He'd done that to himself by choice in order to turn me. With a calm, steady hand. As a gift. I couldn't imagine if he unleashed the same energy out into the world in anger.

"I can tell you were turned here in the north country. You smell of ice and fire and the sea." He held a long-fingered hand out, palm up. "Read me."

I flopped down on the bed next to him and inhaled his palm, letting my nose and lips brush lightly against his skin. "Leather and metal and…hyacinth? Were you turned in the spring?"

"Hnnn, yes. Good. You'll get better in time. There's also old power there. Tarquin's."

"Ah." I hesitated, unsure whether my new acquaintance was as touchy about his history as my maker. "Tell me about him."

Amleth laid back, threading his hands together behind his head with a happy sigh. "Well, he is the most prideful man you'll ever meet, hence the nickname 'superbus'. Uncompromising. Fierce. The only person I've ever seen him defer to is Godrik. Of course, they fight constantly and about everything. It's rather hellish when they're together but invariably it seems too quiet when Godrik's gone."

"Are they lovers?" I asked quietly, dreading the answer.

"Don't you know?" he replied in surprise. "They were long ago, I'm sure. Godrik's been virtually celibate for a century at least. Maybe more. He refuses everyone. Even me," he said with a wry, ribbon-like smile.

I laughed, relieved of some of the jealousy that roiled in the pit of my belly. "I know the feeling. He strung me along for a while too."

"Psshh. You've no idea how lucky you are. A draug like him is highly prized, especially in the south."
"What do you mean?" I asked, genuinely curious.

"He is what the Greeks call a kouros – not quite a man, not still a boy. He is the embodiment of male beauty - an ideal made flesh."

I nodded, carefully filing this revelation for further consideration.

"And what of Tarquin? Is he as beautiful as his child?" I inquired with a smirk.

Amleth gave a gentle laugh. "We look nothing alike. He is a big, hardy man with a soldier's build. Everything about him is severe. But he is very handsome in his own way."

"Go on." I gave in the urge to stroke Amleth's iridescent hair, carding my fingers through its silken lengths. It was astonishingly soft.

"He has dark auburn curls cropped close to his head and a beard as red as a flame when it grows out. A toothy smile that's always a bit vicious. And like all Romans, he loves blood and power."

"I should like to meet him one day."

"You will, no doubt. He'll die all over again when I tell him what Godrik's gone and done."

"What will you say?" I pushed, tracing a finger down the pale column of this throat, entranced by the bounce of his Adam's apple as he spoke.

"Hnnn," he hummed, turning to face me. "I shall tell him Zeus has found his Ganymede." My brows knit together in confusion. "Zeus is the king of the Greek gods and the son of Time," he explained. "Ganymede was a beautiful mortal – the only lover the god of all gods ever made immortal. I'll say you are a thing that must be seen to be believed."

"Your words are almost as pretty as you," I murmured, running a tongue over my teeth. Daringly, I leaned in and whispered a suggestion as to what else Amleth might do with his talented mouth.

"Shocking!" he gasped, entirely insincere. He shoved me away and then laughed like a madman, throwing an arm around my shoulder. We carried on like that for some time, teasing and telling stories like schoolboys. I was elated to have a friend. Amleth's black attire and his pale complexion had made a rather austere first impression, but in private he was witty and warm and terribly charming. This relaxed camaraderie only served to remind me of the supreme intensity with which Godrik did everything. I loved how my maker's tendency toward extremes made everything more exciting; momentarily I missed him and wished he was sharing in the evening's pleasantries.

Amleth and I were still whispering conspiratorially in bed when Godrik returned. "Enjoying your nanny, I see," he remarked, casually setting his things down on the table.

"I like him. Can we keep him?" I said boisterously, emerging from underneath the sheets.

Godrik rolled his eyes. "You should have been teaching him something useful, Amla," he chastised. "Have you done anything besides loaf around?" Amleth smiled broadly. My maker shook his head in dismay and gestured for me to get up and help him out of the heavy leather cuirass he'd worn that evening. "You're wasting precious time, child. Two nights have gone by and you've not progressed an iota in your studies."

I looked up from the intricate laces and buckles I was unfurling and grinned proudly at Amleth. "I'm illiterate."
The dark slip of a man merely raised an eyebrow. "I see. Another of your impressive attributes, no doubt." He covered his mouth with a finger to suppress a smile.

Godrik gnashed his teeth, making a show of his annoyance and shrugging out of the breastplate. "Thick as thieves already. I hope I do not rue the day you two were introduced."

"Nonsense. Amleth will help me and he has already taught me things. It is merely a question of motivation."

"Did you think me in a gaming mood when I tasked you? I demand it! What more motivation do you need?" he retorted, sitting down in irritation. The old chair creaked in protest under his weight. Clearly his time at court had done nothing to improve his disposition.

"It's no problem, Lord Godrik," Amleth offered, scrambling to kneel at the Celt's feet. "I will teach him to read and write. It is the least I can do, after all."

Godrik stared silently at the floor before running the back of his knuckles down the plane of the pale man's jaw, giving him a soft, conciliatory smile. "Sweet Amleth. It was lucky that we happened upon you here. I despise this place."

"Me too. Shall we leave?"

Fear and excitement struck discordantly within me. How I wanted to go off on adventures with these two, but I dreaded losing Godrik's attention to the blood drinker knelt before him.

"No. It is better to catch up on news from an unimportant place. Gods, if this isn't a backwater."

"How about moving on to the lower Rhinelands? At least it would be a little closer to the action. Once we get blondie here up to speed on his penmanship it might only take a few weeks for his letters to arrive."

"Meh," Godrik scoffed. "I prefer being out of the empire's reach. It already boasts far too long an arm."

"But it is your empire."

"Enough. You are excused," he said, uninterested in Amleth's opinions about what authority he did or did not possess. "Shall we reconvene the same hour tomorrow?"

"Certainly. I bid thee good rest." Amleth gave a deep bow and made his way out, pausing to nod at me. "Goodnight, my young friend." He winked and disappeared behind the door in a flourish of black velvet.

Godrik leaned back, folding his hands neatly in his lap. He was waiting for me to share my thoughts.

"He is exquisite. I want to eat him up."

"You want to what?! Do you even hear yourself?"

"What?" I asked innocently. My maker stared at me incredulously, unblinking. "I mean, just for fun. It wouldn't...it doesn't change things between us." He said nothing. I ran over my flippant words, searching for how I'd misspoken. "Shit. People would know," I said, furrowing my brow. Godrik narrowed his eyes, unimpressed. "His maker would know...Oh." I felt stupid. "We'd be sending back the high counselor's messenger and child bitten and banged up, without you in tow."
"Claimed by a yearling, no less, raising the likely suspicion that I'd forced him to do it and thus making an already weak ally appear even weaker. We don't share blood lightly, Eirikr. It is sacred."

"Right. Got it. Anyhow, he seemed quite convinced that you'd kill him if he even looked at me the wrong way."

Godrik closed his eyes and sighed. "I'll make you a proposition. If you learn to write an alphabet tomorrow, I will tell you how Amleth likes to be pleased."

"He said you'd never been intimate together!" I accused.

"That does not mean I am blind to his tastes, though he does have a great many appetites."

"Okay. A whole alphabet. In a night." I was uncertain how difficult a task would be. I certainly cottoned on to skills quickly in my transformed state. Perhaps this was not unreasonable for my preternatural mind.

"You learn two and I'll show you how. It is a technique foreign to this part of the world."

He had my full attention. "And if I learn three?"

Godrik couldn't suppress an amused smile at my audacity. "Hmm. You learn three and I'll join in."

"Can I start now!?" I made a dash for my bag of supplies.

An hour later I was messily scratching out misshapen Greek letters, trying to imitate the example set Godrik had penned out across the top of the sheet. It was difficult to mirror his left-handed demonstration with my right and I produced a series of ugly, distorted little things, marred by blotches of ink splatters - the result of my utter lack of control over the quill. Unrelenting, I pressed forward, dutifully filling a page with hideous scribbles and beginning a second when I'd run out of room. My overly large hands felt clumsy and ill suited for the refined task and several times I snapped the nib of the instrument. Godrik showed me how to shape it with a blade. Carving came far more naturally to me than controlling the flow of ink out of a damnable feather.

I was deeply focused when a panicked knock sounded at our door. Godrik snatched the knife off the table and opened the door a sliver, ready to gut whomever stood on the other side. He relaxed and pulled Amleth in roughly. "What?" he barked in concern.

"I went to see Cornelius after I left. Someone's been in my room. I think it was one of the consort's chambermaids," he said breathlessly. Amleth appeared genuinely rattled. "I suspect she sought correspondence dealing in my purpose here since you've arrived. There was nothing to find."

Godrik scowled. "Stay here," he ordered and slipped into the hall, tucking the knife in the waistband of his leggings.

"No one has done this in all the time you've been here?" I asked.

"Such a thing is not done. I represent the Consul! It is a great offense, leaving her stench all over my things!" He frowned, seeing my attempts at writing strewn about the table. "Oh gods…" he blurted out.

"Don't say another word," I warned sharply. "Tell me this: you said Godrik refused your advances. Do you wish he had accepted them?"

"I….well…"
'Yes or no. It is a simple question.'

He huffed and crossed his arms. "Yes," he admitted.

"Then help me learn three alphabets by tomorrow and you shall have us both."

"Indeed? Well…” he sucked in a contemplative breath. "We have our work cut out for us."

Amleth was leaning over my shoulder, pointing out how I needed to conceptualize the smoothness of my brushstrokes as if it were it a sword stroke in miniature, when Godrik re-entered.

"These fools. They no doubt think we're here for an official power grab. As if!"

"I already told you as much," I said.

"This country's an uninhabited block of ice!" Amleth protested in outrage. "Who wants to rule over a handful of half-starved night walkers?"

"I know. Stay here tonight. We'll sort the matter tomorrow." He picked up a huge armoire as though it weighed nothing and blocked the door with it. "Take note, child. Why do I let Amleth share our day space?"

"He's possibly endangered and you know him."

"No. The absolute opposite. It is because my age permits me to go to ground long after you both are asleep and rise well before. He chooses to stay because he trusts that I will not kill him."

Calmly he withdrew his dagger and started sharpening it with a whetstone, grimacing with each slow scrape down its edge.

"What will you do about the consort?" I asked.

He looked up at me coolly. "Negotiate."

No sooner than the sun had released me from the sleepy shackles of day I was back at work, refusing to pause even to sate my newborn's hunger. My mind whirred in comprehension, pleased by the challenge and soaking up information as fast as Amleth could create examples for me. I could clumsily produce the scripts for Norse, Latin, and Greek, but now had to understand the sounds they each represented, nevermind the actual meaning of the foreign words. Amleth recited snatches of old poems he knew and I dutifully attempted to transcribe the sounds.

Soft leathered footsteps echoing in the long corridor of the hallway announced Godrik's return from the great hall.

"Hurry!" Amleth encouraged, scrambling to arrange the letters I'd created in a neat presentation.

There was a long pause and the chamber door creaked open, but my maker did not enter. We both looked up, full of excited anticipation…

…and were met with a perfect picture of horror.
Godrik stood glistening and matted head to toe in gore, his eyes like two green stones set in a crimson sea. Dumbstruck, neither Amleth or I uttered a word.

He looked about slightly forlorn, gaze unfixed. "We should probably go."

Amleth managed to find his voice. "What happened?!"

"I tried to negotiate. Sigrid threatened me and insulted me. I tried to make her see reason, but she refused to see my point of view. So I took out her eyes." Godrik sucked at his teeth and daintily pulled a white sliver of something away and flicked it to the ground. I realized it was a shard of bone. "There was a bit of resistance."

"And Cornelius?" Amleth asked.

"Lives. Perhaps he will be better host next time." Without batting an eye he walked over to assess the papers at the table. He merely glanced over the runic praise poem, less interested in what would be the easiest for me. "Eeesh. Your spelling in Greek is atrocious." He leaned over my Latin paper, inspecting it closely. "You've butchered Ovid." He raised an eyebrow at Amleth, knowing full well he'd dictated the passages piecemeal to distort the dead poet's meaning into a fairly suggestive declaration of love for my maker. A crooked smile snaked over his bloody features as he saw how I'd chosen to sign my name: Godrikson. He looked positively innocent and monstrous all at once. "Let's keep it," he said in an even tone, flooding our bond with his happy pride.

Somehow that little shred of vellum managed to make the journey with us. Not just that night when we fled the Danish court (what was left of it), but through the years that followed. I have pasted it here on the following for safekeeping. Though it is full of grievous errors and in an unsteady, awkward hand, it seems only appropriate to include my first attempt at writing at the beginning this journal, yet another in a line of firsts. After all, all my rune songs must begin and end the same: with the name Godrik on my lips.

<>

I was singing, while Cupid quickly selected an arrow from his open quiver, to engineer my ruin, and vigorously bent the sinuous bow against his knee and said, 'Poet take this effort for your song!'

Woe is me! That boy has true shafts.

Pierce me, boy! I'm offered naked to your weapons:
this is your power, this is what your strength does:
as if your arrows came here now fired by themselves –
their quiver is scarcely more familiar than me!

You'll grant me a happy theme for singing –
reasons for song, worthy of you, will rise.
I too will be sung likewise through all the world,
and my name will always be linked to yours.

-Eiríkr Godrikson
Some days ago, Godrik reviewed my first attempts at documenting our early days together. He seemed pleased, although he said the censors would clap me in silver for the lewdness of certain passages. He said this to me with one of his secretive smiles, so I suspect he's not overly concerned. Before perusing my work, he made a great fuss about going to market to buy a particular stone mined in Persia - iazhward, he said it was called. I could not fathom why he needed a rock so badly. After several sea crossings, he finally found it when we reached the city of Treva in Germania. He paid a hefty sum for it.

That night he set out a number of tools: a mortar and pestle, bowls, several spoons, and his prized stone. "You're performing seiðr magic?" I asked. He snickered at me, shook his head at my ignorance, and began to work. Godrik ground the crystalline rock into a fine dust. He then repeated the process with the dried leaves of the woad flower common to these lands. Combining the powders, he added animal glue until the substance transformed into a thin liquid. Ink. He had made his own ink in an astonishing vivid blue. It was the same color as was embedded in his skin.

Godrik spent the evening making a great many corrections to my runes. I should have been galled to be so thoroughly remonstrated in my mother tongue, but I liked seeing his blue ink scribbled all over my black penmanship, as though my very words had been tattooed by him. He asked me to continue my journal, this time trying out my barely passable Latin. I have had to stop frequently to ask for the right words and I have very little grasp on the verb tenses. Amleth told me these are called "declensions." He can decline my perfect ass, as far as I am concerned. I have hardly heard anyone actually use this language yet.

Apologies in advance, maker mine, for what will no doubt be riddled with errors. What follows is not an easy episode to convey in any tongue.

Note: Correction by the author for the Gregorian calendar conversion. This was probably mid-April 752. Fucking humans. Signed, E., 1582

May 752.

Spring broke through the frozen crust of the north country. The ground was crunchy slush under our boots. My preternatural senses, bored by the endless expanses of snow and ice, delighted in every sign of the coming season. Here and there patches of snowdrops and crocuses sprouted up, promising to carpet the valleys in a profusion of colors and scents. Eight months of brutal winter was difficult to survive as a hardened warrior; now as a draug it was tortuously lifeless and dull. This new body craved stimulation, purpose.

I do not pretend that my desires have much sway with my maker, for his indecipherable reasons are always his own. Decimating the Roskilde court certainly helped speed along his decision, however. Norns be praised, following the massacre we headed south with Amleth in tow. The foreign terrain, with all its strange new aromas and sights, had me ecstatic. Godrik insisted that we take the journey slowly (yet again). We strolled along at what felt like a lazy pace. Over a matter of weeks, we wended our way through the Danelands to Jutland and then crossed down into Germania.
"Places change slowly, young ones. You have an eternity to explore the world. They will only ever be new once," he warned. "Savor it."

Amleth listened with rapt attention and acted as much a student as me, though he already was familiar with this terrain. We nodded soberly at Godrik's lesson and I tried to appreciate his advice. My maker had traced these worn pathways for a millennium and a half. There was little mystery left for him in the world. I wanted to share my own awe with him so that perhaps he might remember a world once filled with mystery. I indulged him with a barrage of questions and was rewarded when he lost himself in an enthusiastic explanation. I didn't tell him how young he looks like this, but I relished it. It was a fair trade – showing my embarrassing ignorance to have a glimpse of his youthful exuberance.

[-Do not quarrel with me on this point, Godrik, you promised these are my memoirs. I shall write things as I see them. If you dare scratch out those lines, I'll burn this parchment and it will be the end of this journal experiment of yours.-]

Where was I? Oh yes…

Occasionally Godrik pointed out an especially distinct feature for us to memorize: an oddly shaped series of hillocks, a particular convergence of streams, a string of cities in the distance. Sometimes he accompanied these observations with random snippets from his past.

"I once ate that entire village," he said, gesturing to a small hamlet. "They used to make a particular kind of soft cheese there in great quantities. Gave everyone's blood a funny creamy taste. It was irresistible." He paused in thought. "I guess we will just have to go west to Gaul if we want that kind of blood now."

I grew increasingly frustrated with this kind of weird commentary from him. It was too obtuse for my liking. Instead, I grilled him about what I thought was interesting. "Maker, tell us about Greece in its heyday. Amleth says…" The sentence was not out of my mouth before Godrik disappeared into the horizon in a blur, putting a great distance between us.

"Shhh, Eirikr! Don't say 'Amla says this' and 'Amla says that'. Godrik is an elder! Do you know how you sound? Just shut up and listen to him!"

"But I don't…"

"SHUT UP!" he hissed, jerking a fistful of my hair. "We are too young to even know what we should want to know. You are too eager sometimes."

"Godrik likes my eagerness!"

"He likes your pretty arse, you dumb blond savage."

I hurled an especially foul curse at him.

He gave me a sudden, sharp slap and jammed a finger in my face in warning. "Case and point! That nasty mouth of yours needs improvement. Immediately. Swear at me again and I'll break your jaw, underling." He said the latter with an extra dose of condescension. Furious, I spat in his face, then wrenched from his grip and huffed off to catch up with my maker.

Godrik said nothing. Amleth's reprimand, I gathered, was sanctioned. The insult stayed under my skin.

The next night, we were in a barn among several oblivious cows and sheep. They slept munching
on their cud with hot breath while we made a feast of the shepherds in the building. Godrik caught me off guard when he moaned and pulled away from the boy he had chosen.

"This one is good," he said, licking his lips. "Amleth, come try him." Across the hayloft I saw him oblige. Godrik placed a gentle hand on his back and rubbed circles across his shoulders as he took greedy drafts of his reward. Neither paid any attention to me and it had the distinctly chilly feeling of a snub. I felt a hollow knot form in the pit of my stomach. Part of me knew Amleth was right, but I did not understand why. And I didn't appreciate his attempts to help me, nor did I have any intention of letting him steal Godrik's favor. It put me in a thoroughly nasty mood.

The insult began to simmer. I channeled the energy into the corner of my mind where I keep future plans. It stayed there for some time, no more than a kernel of an idea. It had no shape, only a taste and a request. It was bitter. And it wanted revenge.

Admittedly, when this toxic little seed finally came to fruition, it had never been very well tended. I don't say that as a regret. It was simply a bad fucking idea, start to finish. In fact, the entire thing sounds thoroughly ludicrous after the fact. But of course, I did not realize it in the thick of my anger. There were many things I did not realize at the time, it turns out.

It all came to a head in a place once known as Baudobriga, lately called Boppard. The town itself was a Frankish settlement built atop a Roman military outpost set just outside of an old Celtic stronghold. At least, this was how Godrik remembered it. The landscapes and languages were all layered upon one another, sealed and yet separated by the yarns of the tapestry that is his mind. I will never forget this place, nor the lessons I learned there.

Baudobriga, Baudobriga. I much prefer this name. It sounded so melodic when it tumbled out of Godrik's beautiful mouth in his deep, lilting base tones. Bow-doh-bREE-ga. He pronounced the syllables in their true form, the way the Celts spoke them when they first bequeathed the ground with a word.

To me, it was a place where steep green hills were threaded almost perpetually with mist. They loomed over the Rhine with a heavy calm, sheltering the sluggish river down below as it coiled back upon itself. On the western bank, the air smelled thickly of wet pine. If you crossed the river, however, the acrid scent of pitch from the shipyards overwhelmed everything. It was cloying and smoky and laced with the equally rank aroma of dank, rotting fishnets and sodden ropes. This was my first Baudobriga, in the early spring of 752.

As we approached the town, Amleth and I bickered about something idiotic - the relative length of our fangs or some such pointless debate. It began in jest, but our insults quickly became barbed. He walked atop a wall above me, precariously leaping from loose stone to stone. Much of the mortar had long since crumbled away and he teetered and flailed. I snorted at his antics, hoping he would fall, which only encouraged him to jump more wildly. He embellished his steps with raucous spins and twirls, whipping his travel cloak about him. As much as I was determined to see him make a fool of himself, it galled me further that his graceful movements were still so damned entrancing.

"You and your walls," Godrik quipped.

"What does he mean, Tarquinson?" I demanded.

"Oh, nothing. Your old man never tires of reminding me of my humble beginnings. I grew up near a wall like this in Britain."

"The wrong side of it, if you ask me," Godrik retorted.
"You're a Celt too?" A creeping twist of jealousy welled up in the pit of my stomach. I realized suddenly with a shock that Amleth looked suspiciously like….That silken black hair and those blazing green eyes were like…

My mind kept running aground of one of the strongest commands Godrik has given me: I do not speak of him. I do not even think about him. Even now, I am unable to write concisely. The command blocking me from considering the person he once told me about in an ancient oak tree gives my thoughts a jagged, fractured feeling.

So I focused on something simpler. Amleth was a Celt! To Hel with his undead bloodlines – Amleth's human ties made him practically kin to my maker. Godrik could have been his ancestor, for all we knew. Godrik was mine. Only mine! I suddenly wanted to destroy every living Celt who could claim a relation to my maker, beginning with the one in front of me.

The fire of bloodlust rocketed through my veins and I went to jump. The barely caged animal in me was going to tear out Amleth's throat. End him, it screamed. But before I could even bend my knees, my maker had me pinned to the ground.

No, is all I heard in the bond. His gaze was ferocious for a long moment. "Tarquin found him in Cumbria," he explained quietly. "Cumbria is a land of many lakes, south of Hadrian's wall. He is Roman by birth and most certainly in death, the poor fool." When I finally relaxed under his unyielding grip, he released me.

Amleth hesitated, shifting nervously. He wasn't entirely sure what just happened. "May I tell him?"

Godrik shrugged. "Your secrets are yours to tell or not." He shot me another chilling look in warning.

Amleth hopped down from the wall and looped an arm freely around mine. "The only blood that matters is your maker's now. You know that, silly." I grunted, not yet willing to concede that he was Roman. He jostled me in a friendly way, trying to shake me out of my funk. "Don't be so cross. I know you're still angry that I hit you. Will it make us even if I tell you a secret?" I remained silent. "Oh c'mon laddy," he said, falling into a well-hidden brogue I hadn't known he possessed. "It is a good one."

"Out with it, then," I ground out.

"In me first life, unbeknownst to me, I was a distant descendant of the Fae." He paused, searching my face for effect, as if the revelation was supposed to mean something to me. "I am a bastard, very-much-diluted and now very undead, fairy!" He said cheerfully, effortlessly switching back into his usual, silken accent.

"Okay?" I said.

Amleth broke into laughter. "No one else much cared either until Master Tarquin found me in the dodgy part of my hometown one night. He trapped me and said I was the best smelling snack he'd caught wind of in a century. Carted me off as a gift for this one here." He gestured to Godrik. "Not before putting a few holes in me, mind you. More than a few, actually."

"Godrik mentioned something about fairy blood."

"My fae heritage is probably responsible for a few of my abilities." He paused, looking sheepish, and turned to Godrik for help.

"It is why no creature of the night can tear their eyes away from him," the Celt coolly explained.
"Why even his dead blood somehow seems interesting to us. He is graced with the enigmatic and mischievous charm of the Fae."

My mouth fell open. That beguiling bastard. No wonder I was virtually attached to him at the hip despite wanting to strangle him half the time. It also explained why Godrik often avoided meeting his gaze. But then, I thought - in a turn of entirely unsound reasoning - actively not looking at him was just as much an acknowledgment of wanting to look at him! I felt my bloodlust surge again.

"Told you it was a good secret."

"Yes, which came at an exceedingly high price," Godrik interjected. Amleth dropped his eyes and pressed his lips together in a tense line. "The Fae Prince was less than pleased about even a long lost faeling several times removed being turned into a blood drinker. This turkey practically started up another inter-species war after he was made." My maker threw an arm around his shoulders, effectively peeling him off of me. Amleth instantly moulded himself to Godrik's side and nested his head on his shoulder. The unruly feeling in my stomach twisted higher into my throat.

I should have read it as a protective gesture. Godrik wanted to get the wiry creature off of me, knowing I was about to lash out again. Had I listened more closely to what Amleth had said about his abduction, I would have seen Godrik's actions as an attempt to comfort Amleth - a salve for old wounds between the two. But I did not. I only saw Amleth curling around my maker as something possessive. Possessive over what was mine.

Godrik sighed in annoyance. "Now Prince Niall won't have anything to do with the Consul."

"Why would the fairies - the Fae, I mean - want to be involved in our politics?" I asked through clenched teeth.

"Because we are natural enemies. It serves everyone well to have at least a little communication. If they build their damn portholes in our territories unknowingly it's not our fault when our kind eats everything that pops out of them."

"Portholes?"

"They live on another plane of reality. Kind of like the gods," he explains.

"Seriously!?" I screeched in disbelief.

"You didn't tell him?" Amleth asked, lifting his head in surprise. He looked at me in amusement. "Oh, you'll love this. Guess what? Odin is a total asshole," he said and fell into hysterical laughter.

Hearing the sylph insult my people's gods was all it took. I snapped. Before I even knew what I was doing, I tackled Amleth and twisted his arm until it made a deliciously satisfying crunch. "That'll teach you to touch my maker, you filthy dog! He's MIIIIIINE!!" I screamed in his face. Amleth laid there limply, blinking. There wasn't an ounce of concern in his eyes. He was so goddamn beautiful I couldn't stand it. I started pummeling him.

"Get off of me you miserable...ouch!...you stupid...unf!...son of a..." He easily held me back with his good arm. It dawned on me that I was throwing my full strength at him.

Godrik intervened only when Amleth finally grew annoyed enough to snap his fangs at my neck. He pulled me off in the nick of time by the scruff of my tunic. "Enough of this stupidity. Apologize, Eirikr."

"The fuck I will! He can suck my big..."
My knees suddenly met the ground with such a tremendous force that it jarred my vision. "You will apologize and you will do it now! You just assaulted your liege lord."

"Fuck him! I bow to no one!" I exclaimed in defiance and tucked my chin in case Godrik decided to hit me.

"APOLOGIZE!" he roared, kicking me into the dirt at Amleth's feet. The ear he had bellowed into was temporarily deafened and began to bleed.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" I whimpered into the damp soil.

"Tell him why!" Godrik bent down to yell in my face, as if I and every other creature for miles couldn't hear him clearly.

"He provoked me!"

"Have you gone mad? What the Hel is wrong with you!?" Amleth said haughtily, brushing the grass off his clothes.

"Silence," Godrik barked and threw up a hand, warning him not to interfere. It didn't matter that I had a knee ground into my back. It made me feel ever so slightly better to hear Amleth put in his place.

"Tell him why this is unacceptable!"

Against my will, I was chattering from the anger flooding our bond. It only humiliated me further. "I don't know!"

"Think!" he ordered.

"I'm sick of him showing off."

"Wrong."

"I don't like him touching you all the goddamn time!"

"Wrong," Godrik stressed.

"He spoke ill of the gods!"

"WRONG!" He was back to yelling again.

I screamed into the dirt. "I don't know!"

"THINK!" he railed, grinding the knee he held me down with even harder into my back.

"BLOOD!" I finally wailed in frustration, accidentally sucking in a mouthful of dirt.

The weight on my back was suddenly lifted.

"And so it is. A bloodlusted yearling utterly OUT OF CONTROL! Get up, beserker."

I found my feet rather unsteadily. "Now look your friend in the eyes and tell him why you're acting like demon spawn instead of the child of Godrik."

"Bloodlust," I muttered, only glancing at Amleth.
"I forgive you," he offered a little too quickly.

"Great," I said, unenthused.

"It happens to us all. I should have realized. Telling you about my heritage - I wasn't trying to show off. I truly wish for us to be like brothers. Can we not?"

"Brothers," I repeated mindlessly. The deep bruises to my spine and knees throbbed as they healed.

"Brother Eric," Amleth announced, pleased. In the back of my head something preened at the Anglicization of my name. I liked it instantly, but I would have sooner burned in Sutur's fiery breath than tell him that then.

"Fine," I begrudgingly agreed. I still wanted to punch in his face. "Bror Amlóði."

"Will you guard my secret?"

"Yes," I muttered. As if I had a choice, I thought. The grim shadow on Godrik's face told me this one was to go straight into my mental lockbox with all the other information I guarded. At least I knew the reasoning behind this secret. I didn't understand 90% of what I was commanded to remain silent about.

"I'm happy to know you have my back in case the Fae come after me," Amleth continued. "That was quite the little display you just put on."

I made a rude gesture with my hand and tried to walk off, wanting to cool down by myself. Rather than let me go, however, Godrik sent Amleth ahead and sat me down. I got an earful that evening about taking responsibility for my impulses and the shoddy job I'd done of feeding my instincts with unruly, pointless emotions. There was quite a long interlude about how, given the importance of his person and those he represented, Amleth could have reported me to the Consul or even executed me on the spot if he'd been so inclined. It all seemed fairly moot since he didn't and I knew damn well he wouldn't dare do anything to displease Godrik. How I managed to simultaneously feel completely insecure and overly confident about my maker is beyond me. When it was all said and done, I got a firm squeeze on the shoulder and a tussle to my hair. It was an amends of sorts and I should have let go of my ridiculous resentment and jealousy then and there. But I did not.

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For the next few nights, we camped in the high hills above the sleepy town. One evening I was tasked with getting more firewood and it took a while to locate anything that wasn't sopping wet from the perpetual fog that seemed to live there. As I returned, I heard Godrik and Amleth talking in low tones.

"... it can't be so, can it?" Amleth said, his voice thick with grief.

"Must we go over this again?" Godrik chastised softly.

"No...you are right. You are always right."
I snuck closer. I was totally unprepared for the scene I stumbled upon. Amleth was on his knees, his head in Godrik's lap. He raised it and offered his swan-like neck to him.

"Take more."

"It was plenty."

"Please."

Godrik caressed his cheek and said something too quiet to hear. Amleth stood quickly then, looking upset. I made my presence known and dumped the wood by the fire pit, saying nothing. The coil in my stomach tightened into resolve.

The next night, Godrik sent Amleth and I out to hunt alone. He did this occasionally when his hunger lagged. His lack of appetite – and the raven-haired reason behind it - only further solidified my determination. I seized the opportunity to talk Amleth into going to a brothel I'd heard about in a city to the south. He was deeply apprehensive at first. I laid it on thick, pointing out that our "brotherhood" would be firmly sealed if we shared a voluptuous woman with questionable morals. It would be a rite of passage, I argued. We would feast upon her and take her together. I told him that it was all I had wanted since we first met in Denmark. It was a beautiful lie wrapped in the thinnest veneer of truth. He relented and we set out.

The hunt was beyond excellent and we enjoyed ourselves immensely, if for entirely different reasons.

When we strolled merrily back into the clearing of our sylvan home in the hills, we were arm in arm and full of blood and sex and raunchy jokes. In the camp, Godrik was waiting for us, sitting stock still on a log. When he finally looked up at us, his gaze is cold and hard. Amleth froze.

"What is it?" he asked, sounding fearful. A low growl rolled out of the Celt. His fangs dropped and he lowered his head further, looking unquestionably deadly. "Oh gods. What have you done, Eirikr…" Amleth gasped.

"Just a little fun, my liege lord," I said, wringing my arm around his neck and giving him a peck.

"Just a little fun, my liege lord," I said, wringing my arm around his neck and giving him a peck.

A look of horror crossed his face. "No…no, Eirikr," he stammered in disbelief. "You didn't…you would not have…" I smiled wickedly at him. "You fool!" he yelled, pushing me away. "Were you told not to go to Mainz?!"

I began shaking with laughter, not at all seeing the situation as dire. I expected we'd both get thoroughly reamed out.

"Don't you know Godrik gives you just enough rope to hang yourself with!?" Amleth screeched and twisted back to my maker with a shocked hand over his mouth. He fell to his knees and knotted his hands together in a trembling plea for mercy. I did not realize then how well-acquainted he was with Godrik's special brand of punishment.

My maker stood slowly, folding his arms across his chest. "When are you going to start listening to your friend, child? He keeps trying to help you yet you grow more resentful of it by the day."

"Oh lighten up, maker. It was only a practical joke."

In a blink he was millimeters from my face. "Am. I. Laughing," he hissed.

Amleth tugged at my leggings in warning. He was shaking like a leaf. Godric snapped at him to get
up. "Get a branch. Yew or black locust. Very green and as long as my arm."

When I saw the thick piece of hardwood Amleth returned with, I started to grow anxious.

"Godr-?"

"Go stand facing that tree. Hands above your head."

"Maker, you're not going to...that could kill a man!"

Godrik looked at me funny, the corners of his mouth turned down. "But you are not a man anymore, are you?" I felt ill. "Tree. Now. You may not move. This I command!" He unleashed a wave of sickening fury at me through our bond.

With a few efficient passes of his dagger, he stripped off the twigs and shoots from the limb. He then split one end into thin sections, making an extremely lethal cane. "Since you saw fit to defy me and seek out pointless danger, then pointless danger you shall have, children."

Somewhere in the back of my mind I knew Godrik didn't intend to kill me, but the fuller meaning of his words suddenly took shape. I could now survive all sorts of torture that would ordinarily kill a mortal, but it did not lessen that the fact that the experience would still be absolutely horrific. From the corner of my eye I could see Amleth waiting for further instructions, head cowered in total submission.

"Tell Eirikr your age, if you would."

"I am not yet 300," he whispered.

"And when, pray, did your master first send you on missions alone?"

"Well into my second century."

"Indeed. Do you hear that, son? He was, if I recall, 138 the first time he was allowed to leave his maker's area," Godrik seethed. He thwacked the stick against his thigh in agitation. The spliced sections made a sound that sent shivers of fear down my spine. "As you are a newborn and I have no area, Eirikr, your place, by default, is at my side!" He paced, trying to ratchet down his fury. "Remind me, Amleth, how many are there of you now in Tarquin's bloodline?"

"Master has six progeny."

"And how many should there be?"

Amleth's voice wavered and cracked. "Nine, my lord."

"Nine, Eirikr. A cautious and good maker has lost three of his children over the ages. Two of those came before Amleth here. The third did not make it through his first year."

"None, maker."

"How many other children are in my line, child?"

"None, maker."

"How many children have I lost?"

"None, maker."
"And how many do you suppose I am prepared to lose?"

"None, maker." I sputtered, lips reddened with my own blood.

"Amleth, do I do anything in half measures?"

"No," he said gloomily. "No you do not."

Godrik turned back to me. Dread was practically pouring out of my pores. "That city you so desperately needed to go feed in? That city which I forbade you to enter? That damnable place which you thought yourself clever enough to trick Amleth into accompanying you to? Last I knew, Mainz was run by a double-agent thug of a draug who betrayed and killed my allies and would happily cause me trouble again."

"I did not know, maker! We saw no others," I cried.

"I know!" he screamed.

Shit. Of course he had followed us.

"Why do you think this blood drinker enemy of mine has not met the true death?"

"I do not know, sire."

"He is a good few centuries older than me. There is always someone older. There is always someone craftier or with unseen friends. At your piddling age, there is always, always danger! You are immortal, not invincible, you fool! Do not ever confuse the two."

"I apologize, maker. To you and to Amleth. It was wrong," I blurted out, hoping to circumvent my punishment.

"You are not your own to do with as you please! You are your maker's creation. You are mine. Do not ever forget that. You will remember the pain of my disappointment with you tonight the rest of your days, this I swear." Godrik stepped closer. "Do not think I enjoy all your firsts, child," he whispered between my shoulder blades.

Before I could ready myself, Godrik struck. I heard the crack of wood against flesh first and foremost. It was so impossibly fast and violent that it took several long seconds before my nerves could even comprehend the shock of pain. When they did, I was suddenly on fire. It was so intense, so engulfing, that the brutality had no dimension. A searing, screaming heat raged from everywhere and I thought irrationally that he had switched his stick out for a sword. I actually looked down at my chest, expecting to see myself rent in two.

"Get up," he demanded, his voice emotionless. I tried and found that I could not move. My vertebrae were crushed and had yet to realign. The scent of my own blood perfumed the air, taunting me.

"GET UP!" he bellowed. "Must I command you to follow my every order? Do as I say!"

I was grateful for the tree in that moment. I dug my fingers into the spongy bark and dragged myself upright, clinging on for dear life.

"For going to a place that I explicitly told you to avoid, twenty lashes. For going somewhere unknown without me or my knowledge, another twenty. For risking the safety of Tarquin's child, ten - ten only because Amleth should know better than to be duped by a reckless yearling barely
out of the ground." The pronouncement went straight to my gut, sending pins and needles of shock through my already overstimulated senses. A few more blows like that and I would be battered in half.

Godrik let me stew over this and turned his wrath on Amleth, aiming the stick at his chest. He grabbed at the splayed ends feebly, as if he could stop the ancient Celt from impaling him. "I am thoroughly astonished by you. How dare you endanger what is mine! Did your education go entirely to the dogs the moment I left?" Amleth shook his head, speechless. Godrik circled him, trying to get a grip on his rage. "Give me one reason why you should live."


"Hm?"

"Tarquin," he repeated, chattering.

"Oh? You think your maker could stop me?" He laughed cruelly. "If you ever, EVER endanger my child again, I will send you back to Tarquin in a jug. Understand?" The hate in his voice made it clear that this was no threat. It was a promise. He hurled the stick at him and Amleth hunched defensively, shouldering the blow. It dropped to his feet with a heavy thunk. "You can have the honors. You fucking idiots got yourselves into trouble together, you can dig yourselves out."

A violent shudder suddenly ripped through Amleth and Godrik broke into a vicious grin. "Excellent. Your punishment begins tomorrow, Amla." He stormed off, leaving us to the nasty business.

For a brief few seconds, I couldn't see Amleth behind me and I realized I was pinned to this tree by my maker's command, utterly exposed to him. I wanted to ask him to go easy, but my pride stopped me.

"You utter twat," he swore and laid into me. After the first five lashes, he paused. "Why?!" he demanded. I refused to answer, so he let loose, wailing on my back with more force. It was horrible, but nothing compared to Godrik's single blow. "Tell me! Why do you hate me? What has earned me your ill favor?" He wallowed me with a fierce series of stripes, all neatly lined in a row. It was then that I realized he was purposefully avoiding hitting the same place twice. Only, he had run out of space.

I let out a breath I wasn't aware of holding and cursed. "No chance of convincing you to throw in the towel now, hmm?" I taunted half-heartedly. He responded with a hard crack, crisscrossing the red welts on my skin. I felt the skin pop and split. And so it proceeded like this for the remaining lashes.

"I've done nothing but be kind to you! I've wanted nothing but your friendship! You have used me badly, Eirikr! Badly indeed!" Amleth cried. I could smell his tears. He beat me until we were both sobbing. When it was over, he took off his shirt and used it to blot the disaster that was now my back.

He thrust a wrist in my face. "Drink," he ordered. I didn't move. "Drink, damn it, or you'll go to ground like this. Godrik expects me to take care of you."

"You pass your blood out like a whore!" I spat.

"What's this?" he said, truly astonished. He dropped down beside me where I was laid out, hands still touching the tree. Pushing back my hair, Amleth rested his head in the crook of my arm to see
me squarely.

"Is that what this is all about? You perfect dingbat!" he sighed, running his fingers through my tangled, blood-splattered hair.

"I'm going to kick your ass once I can stand again," I muttered.

"No you're not, darling. Even if you could, you're going to shut up and finally listen to me. Is all this because I've bossed you around a few times and you saw me feeding your maker?"

I grunted noncommittally.

"All you had to do was ask. Assumptions are dangerous things in our world. I was showing Godrik images of suspected spies in the Consul court. He sees very clearly in the blood. Not many of us are so talented. He won't get anywhere near us now that he has you, but it doesn't mean he has abandoned us altogether. I cannot stress how dangerous the situation has grown. We're on the verge of war." He bit his lip.

I considered this, keeping my features carefully neutral.

"I do not understand it, but he chose you. He..." A single shining tear slid down his face. "He will always choose you." He searched for more words, but seemed unable to explain himself.

"I'll take that wrist now."

"Mhmm. I thought so."

I bit carelessly, enjoying the wince my fangs elicited. Amleth's spicy blood flooded my mouth and I moaned, much to my chagrin. He was absolutely delicious and utterly incomparable to anything I'd tasted before. As I fed, he peeled back his makeshift bandage. When my wounds were sufficiently healed, he took his wrist back.

He stayed with me until Godrik returned, whispering comforting words and caressing me with tender hands.

"Go to bed," my maker growled, releasing me from the tree. He crawled into his daytime den and kicked the dirt up, concealing the entrance. I was clearly uninvited.

"Come on," Amleth said, offering me a hand.

"What is he going to do to you?" I managed to ask hoarsely once we were curled up together underground.

"You'd have me ruin the surprise? Just you wait…" He nuzzled me through the soft earth and my hands instinctually pulled his bony hips against me.

The next evening I awoke to find myself alone. When I worked myself out of the ground, Godrik already had Amleth tied to the same tree that served as my whipping post. There was a blazing fire going and my maker patted the empty space on the log beside him.

"Watch carefully, Eirikr."

Dutifully, I took my seat.

We sat in silence for a long time with only the owls and occasional cricket rasps to keep us company. Godrik had his hands folded neatly in his lap and he waited with rapt attention.
"What are we watching, exactly?" I finally asked.

"You'll see," he answered cryptically.

A tedious hour passed before Amleth suddenly shuddered hard in what appeared to be a near seizure.

"What have you done to him?" I demanded. Godrik shushed me with a finger over his mouth.

It took another ten minutes before Amleth started gasping. He groaned and squirmed against his bindings.

When a half hour had gone by, he suddenly coughed up a thick burble of blood. It splatted obscenely down his nude chest.

After two hours, Amleth was weeping inconsolably and writhing in pain. When he shivered yet again, a wet, crimson sheet of vomit exploded from him, painting the ground.

"Maker, let him down! What is this cruel game? Let us be done with it!" I exclaimed.

Godrik was in my face and had me by the neck before I knew it. "Tell him, Amla. Tell him why you suffer."

"My MAKER!" he screamed across the clearing.

"His maker," Godrik spat. "The gods have seen fit to grant makers the power of command and the power of call. You cannot disobey, child. Tarquin calls for his child. This is what disobedience looks like." He marched me over to where the dark beauty was bound.

"Cut him down," I begged, seeing the fear glint in Amleth's eyes.

"I will not. You did this. You are the one who plays games with others' lives. You are the one who sent shock and terror and dread through your friend and thus you are the reason Tarquin calls to his child. And you will be the reason he leaves us now." He spun me around and I felt a sharp bite in my right hand. I looked up in utter confusion. There was a dagger in my palm. He had pinned me to a tree with his dagger!

"I recommend getting yourselves down by sunrise," Godrik hissed before stalking off.

Alone in the woods, our situation seemed vastly worse. "Well, this is less than ideal," I commented.

Amleth simply groaned, knocking his head back. "You have to pull your hand through it," he said with eyes closed.

"The Hel I will!" I looked up in panic. Godrik had somehow gotten my right arm higher than I could reach with my free limb.

"Do you think this is the first fucking time I've been on the receiving end of this shit?" He squealed and kicked uselessly. "Pull it the fuck out and set me loose, you imbecile, before I bleed out!" Amleth's usual composure had evaporated. "I'll have you know he's thrashed me worse for half of the insolence you spout on a daily basis. You deserve every second of this! It should be you up here barfing and dying! Now GET ME DOWN!"

It took an excruciatingly long time to work my hand out. I had thought to just jerk the hilt through
my flesh, but Godrik's knife had other plans. It involved me working my stretchy undead tendons over the flange of the cursed thing and willingly breaking a few bones to make adequate room to maneuver. Meanwhile, Amleth continued flailing and screeching inconsolably, further unsettling my nerves. When I finally managed to untangle myself, I had him down in an instant and he collapsed in my arms.

"You need to feed," I said, jostling him into the crook of my neck.

He bit with those perfectly sharp incisors and took a hard pull. It went straight to my knees and I dropped hard, taking the both of us down. When I managed to finally get us inside his den, he was still shaking violently and weeping. I pulled him to my chest and let him drink more. He was gorging on me as the sun came up and I prayed he wouldn't drain me too badly before he fell asleep. I sunk my fangs into his shoulder. In my grogginess, I felt the flicker of a blood bond form. "Bror," I whispered he hummed against my skin.

I had lied to Amleth that night when I said that our expedition to Mainz would make us brothers. It ended up being the truth, however, albeit through very different means. The bloodlust and the jealousy and the desire for revenge were gone and all that was left in its place was shame. I had hurt my friend and I felt unworthy of the love he offered me so freely.

Betrayal and ignorance do not suit me at all.

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"I have to go," a heated voice called from somewhere, rousing me from the deepest of slumbers.

"No..." I managed to slur, still too heavy with sleep. Amleth shook me and I latched onto him, suddenly aware of what he was saying.

"You bastard. You're not going anywhere," I declared, eyes still closed. I tried to lock myself around him but he merely laughed in response. I felt him slip from my grip and he apologized again.

When I finally dragged myself out of our resting place, Godrik had him by the shoulders and was giving him rapid instructions.

By the look on Amleth's face, he was as shocked as I was when Godrik bit his own wrist. Amleth tried to drop to his knees in supplication, but the Celt caught him. He held up the offering and Amleth glanced at me with uncertainty.

"Take it," I said, knowing what bliss he was about to receive.

When his lips met the ancient blood, he gasped in surprise. A red tear escaped down his cheek. Godrik licked it up and pressed his forehead to Amleth's.

"Now fly along, little magpie. We expect to see you soon." Amleth threw his arms around my maker and my maker stiffened at the unexpected contact. Then, slowly, Amleth stepped away, unwilling to turn his back to us. A breeze picked up through the trees and the firs give a whispery sigh. In a blink, he was gone.

Godrik turned to me, his expression blank. "He has waited nearly three centuries for my blood."
I didn't know what to say, so I said nothing at all.
An Aggressive Education

In the forested hills above Baudobriga, Amleth's departure hung over us, heavy and hollow. The sudden loss of his silken voice was deafening; my shoulders felt bare without his arm constantly slung around them.

"You have questions," Godrik said, toeing the grass. No doubt he felt my inner turmoil.

"Will Tarquin be angry?"

"In due time he will be relieved. Amleth has many gifts, but communicating clearly through his maker's bond is not one of them. Tarquin won't know it was just me straightening out his child until Amleth reaches Constantinople."

"I meant about us." We had both blood bonded with the raven-haired slip of a night walker.

"No. If anything, it is a reassurance. Our blood pact is a declaration of solidarity with Tarquin's bloodline."

"But why give him your blood now? After all this time?"

"You wished to be like blood brothers. Does it not make the illusion seem more real?"

"Come on. You didn't just do that for me," I said, unconvinced by his deflection.

Godrik stared at the ground for a long moment, as if it might yield up an answer. He let out a long sigh. "Amleth's existence is entirely because of me and not because of me at the same time. It haunts him…haunts us," he corrected. "Sometimes a journey is overshadowed by a bad start. Amla and mine, ours has never been a simple path. You have opened old wounds, min son."

The meaning of this jumble of strange aphorisms was lost on me, but the sadness that rang out through our bond was clear as a bell. "Forgive my ignorance, maker." I slid down to sit, head hanging. "Please explain."

He shuffled around the campfire, staring up at the stars before wandering back over to where I sat. "Tarquin brought that poor boy to me as a gift. He thought it would please me to have a pet that resembled…" Godrik swallowed nervously and scanned the area. "…that resembled the one who made me."

It dawned on me that Tarquin must have known my grandsire. I was desperate for him to continue. 

"He even supposed that I might turn him. I was not pleased. Not one bit." An involuntary shiver worked its way down my spine. 'Terrifying' was too mild a word to describe a displeased Godrik. "Why Tarquin believed I would want a pet I will never understand. I do not keep humans and neither shall you. It is an extraordinarily dangerous habit. We are not meant to play house with our food. We are predators of other predators. Weaker and mortal, yes, but humans are predators all the same. Do not ever forget this."

I quickly agreed. "What happened when you refused Amla?"

Godrik caressed the waist-high weeds with open palms. The weeds danced in jagged currents along with the breeze, rustling against his leggings. The gesture seemed almost gentle. Then he tore off handfuls of the green tips and scattered the ruined shreds to the wind. "Tarquin and I argued
bitterly. Words were said that cannot be unspoken. Memories dredged up that should have long been forgotten. In a rage, I drained the boy."

"You meant for him to die."

"Yes. But Tarquin revived him at the very brink of death and saved him after I stormed off. Some time later, I came upon him in our local brothel. Imagine my shock. He was feasting like a piglet on one of my regular meals and turned to me and said 'she smells like you Master Godrik' with a big bloody smile. I wanted to be furious, but he was so new and naïve." Godrik closed his eyes at the bittersweet thought.

"He was lucky you didn't destroy him. Tarquin took a bold risk in turning him."

"Aye. He was worthy of the dark gift, in the end. I saw at once how well the transformation suited him. He doesn't mean to spellbind others, you know. His irresistibility is simply part of his nature."

"Do you regret that he is not yours?" I ask softly.

Godrik gave me a ferocious look. "Never," he barked, nostrils flaring. He dropped down on crossed legs beside me. "I could never have had a child that wasn't of my own choosing. That is why Amla may have my blood now. Our bond will never be more or less than one of fellowship. He understands that fully at last."

Amleth's pained words return to me with full force. 'He chose you. He will always choose you.' "I cannot imagine living so long in the shadow of your rejection," I admit.

Godrik scoffed. "It had nothing to do with him. He knows this."

"Then what?"

"A rose can never be a thistle, no matter how many thorns it grows. Amleth is too lovely to be so unfavorably compared to the blooddrinker that gave me this life. He did nothing for me; he meant even less to me. Tarquin was a fool to think I should want a reminder of such...worthlessness."

His words were angry and pained. I did not dare speak. Godrik lapsed into downtime, deep in thought, a hard glare burning into the sky overhead. Only the creeping slide of the stars above marked the slow turn of time as I waited for my sire to confess his secrets.

"I was orphaned," he whispered. Even as he constricted his end of the bond, an indescribable despair leaked past his iron-clad shields.

I edged toward him and rested my head in a crooked arm. "It happens, maker. It is not shameful," I said, thinking of the many Norse children raised in adoptive families.

"Not through death." Godrik's eyes narrowed. "Abandonment. The very night I was turned."

I felt something constrict in my chest where my human heart used to beat. Perhaps it was simply some leftover human habit- I cannot know. I reached for him, but he yanked his arm away. "You never have to be alone again. Ever," I swore.

At that he relaxed slightly and his features stilled into an unreadable mask. I did not know then that this was the look Godrik gives as he strings his deadly bow - right before he snaps. That this was the look when he truly was the Boy Death.

"Save your empty promises," he hissed in the same terrifyingly low tone he had used the night
before, moments before he'd leveled me with the worst beating I had ever endured.

"Maker?" I hiccupped in shock.

"Your words are meaningless when I have a progeny who won't last a full year, let alone outlive me." Contempt roiled off him in waves. I decided I much rather liked him yelling. Yelling meant I'd only annoyed him with my foolishness. This…this was dangerous.

"Don't say that," I stammered, instinctively backing away.

He sucked at his teeth, a sure sign that he was about to do something frightening. "We still have the little matter of your punishment to resolve."

My mouth dropped open. "I…I thought…"

Godrik's eyebrows raised in amusement. "Oh, you thought you were absolved? My good graces are not so easily won."

"But the lashes…"

He snickered cruelly. "The beating? That was just to get your attention. Have I got it now?"

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I dropped my face into my hands and took several pointless breaths. "Tell me what I must to do make this right."

A malicious glint flashed in his eyes. "You are going to kill Kaspar."

Who in Hel was Kaspar? A possibility dawned on me. "Oh gods please tell me this isn't your 'friend' in Mainz," I groaned miserably.

"The very same."

The elder nightwalker would destroy me like a fly. "It's a suicide mission," I declared.

Godrik tapped his chin thoughtfully. "Hmm. It would seem so. Not unlike running around whoring and hunting in the territory of your maker's enemy after explicitly being told not to do so. Tell me, how would you have defended yourself had Kaspar or one of his cronies got a hold of you?"

"I…I would have relied on Amleth to get us out of it. He said no one crosses him since he represents the Consul." It was an ugly thing to admit. I had planned on hiding behind the same friend I had purposefully endangered to cause him trouble. The very same creature whose dark looks and secret smiles and hysterical laughter I now greatly missed.

"Coward," Godrik jeered. The word stung in my ears and I could not bear to meet his gaze. "That was your only play? The first thing you learned about Amleth was that he came running to me when someone rifled through his sock drawer. What if I were unable to reach you in time? How do you know Amleth's title would shield you? Do you even know what the Consul does or whether their authority is respected by Kaspar?"

"No. You don't know the first thing about anything. So you are a coward and an ignoramus."

His disappointment was physically painful. I felt ill. "Forgive me, maker. Please."

He was on his feet now, towering over me with balled fists. "Eternity is yours to lose, yet I am the one who gave it to you. Are you in such a rush to leave me for Valhalla? To toss away the greatest thing I could bequeath another?" he spat hatefully.

"No!"

"Then figure out how to kill an elder and maybe you'll appreciate why what you did was so incredibly, staggeringly stupid!"

"Well are you in such a rush to send me to my true death?!" I retorted. "I'll be killed!"

"Now you are starting to see my point."

"Then you will help me?"

"Why should I? It is not my punishment."

"Fine!" I cried. "At least tell me where I can begin recruiting others for a militia."

"Oh, my dear, dear Eirikr," he sneered. "Putting the sharp end of a sword into your opponent is far from the only solution. Brains will win over brute force nearly every time. You're going to have to learn about finesse and discipline. And as it stands, you stink at strategizing." He taunted me with a laugh and shook his head. The stench of dried blood encrusted into his matted locks assaulted my nose and I suddenly felt irate that he demanded so much of me when all I wanted was for him to bathe regularly.

"I stink?! You smell like a butcher's block! How dare you insinuate that I am anything less than a warrior prince of…"

"A 'warrior prince'?" he mocked, clapping his hands in amusement. "With a track record to match! You chased a ragtag band of sea pirates in circles for a few years until you were uneventfully cut down in your prime. The only thing you were going to reign over was a grave. Call that victory, do you? You lost your silly human crown the moment you gained it."

I bit my cheek hard in outrage, filling my mouth with blood. No one had ever called me a loser before. Worse, it was true.

Godrik left me there to ruminate hotly on how little I had to show for myself in my undeath. I didn't speak or move for over an hour. When at last he realized I was too arrogant and prideful to budge, he spoke from where he sat across the field in front of our small campfire, oiling his sword methodically by its light. "In this life, you have no lands, nor have you titles. Lands need defending, young one, and are hardly ever worth the effort. Titles? No more than an extra puff of air after your name. We have nothing, you and I, and so we are free."

I spat on the ground at his words. Bloody spittle caught on my chin and Godrik clucked disapprovingly at me. "You cling to useless human values," he said.

"And you value nothing!" I barked in return, launching to my feet. It was too much. I felt insulted and useless and inept. Frustration thrummed in the base of my throat and my fangs shot loose. Bloodlust tore through my veins, hot as a flame, and every fiber of my being wanted to feed the bloodlust with violence.
Godrik was at me in split second, twisting my head with a handful of hair and dragging me to my knees before him. "Submit!" he commanded, pulling my braids hard. "Submit to me now!" I felt my legs turn to jelly and I crumpled at his feet. "Do you think freedom is so worthless? That the luxury of a concerned maker is so stupid!?" Godrik hissed into my ear, fangs dangerously close to my neck. He jerked again at the hair caught in his iron hands. His anger rumbled through the bond like the pounding darkness of a terrible storm. "Perhaps I should tell you of what it is like to be unable to go where you like and do as you please. To be chained like an animal for years on end. Maybe you would like to hear about the many, many rapes? How I was tortured and starved? Or…"


He whipped me around to face him. The look in his eyes was wild "I could command you to hurt me. Then you would understand the disgust one feels when ordered to do something against your will. Is this what you need to understand your freedom? I will make you hurt me! As your maker, I…"

"Godrik, no! Please!" I threw my arms around his shoulders and tucked my head into his neck. "You promised!"

He was quivering in fury, stiff and unyielding.

"I am sorry. I am sorry! I was a fool," I sobbed into his belly, holding him tightly. Just as quickly as the tempest rose in him, it evaporated into thin air. He slumped against me.

"You could have been taken from me, Eirikr," he whispered almost inaudibly. "I cannot…I will not allow it." Godrik buried his face in my hair and took sharp breaths of my scent. "I cannot lose you." I ran my hands over his shoulders and down his back, trying to soothe him. I spoke ardent words of my absolute dedication and love for him. And the harder I tightened my grip on him, the more he seemed to melt into my ferocious, desperate embrace.

Unexpectedly, the pinching sting of razor-sharp teeth hit my throat. Godrik drank greedily from me, taking long, deep draughts that pulled at the core of my being. I felt too much at once – the total pleasure of his bite jumbled with the anger of our argument. Quickly he bit his own wrist and pressed it to my mouth. When the smoky honey of his blood reached my tongue, all was forgotten. We were one in the blood and it was the only apology necessary.

After several minutes, he released my neck and extracted himself out of my lap. Taking my large hand in his, he drew me to sit with him near the fire pit.

He licked his lips. A look of hard determination settled over his features. "It was I who promised you eternity, not the other way around. I owe you a far more aggressive education. I have had a millennium to make enemies. Your skills are good for one so young, but 'good' will not suffice with a maker such as myself, nor will it withstand the cruelties that this world holds for our kind. I need you to be superlative if you are to survive."

I thrust up a haughty chin. Godrik gave a strange half-smile at my gesture and touched the curve of my ear with two fingers. One might be tempted to say he looked at me with something akin to pity. "My verdict stands," he said softly. "You must kill Kaspar."

If I could have broken out into a sweat, I would have.

"Between your untimely human demise and this stunt with Amleth, it occurs to me that you are far too willing to go down in a fight for a quick taste of revenge. It is a weakness that will be used
against you if you do not unlearn it. Immediately. I can already foresee ten different ways an enemy might draw you in if they had you spoiling for a fight."

I set my jaw, seeing the pattern of my own defeat.

"You've no motive for killing this old blood drinker, other than I demand it. Such a thing is counter to all reason, just like your rash attempts at revenge. Let us hope you consider this plot with better forethought."

I mustered a grunt in response.

"Your default position on elder blood drinkers should be one of wariness and extreme caution. I am almost universally viewed with suspicion and disdain by them."

"But why?" I demanded.

"I realize you were barely alive at the time, but what part of being called Death by most of our kind did you miss? It's not exactly a vote of confidence from a people whose star quality is avoiding death." He started laughing. "Gods, I'm beginning to sound like you."

"You mean witty and alluring?" I tried, seeing him soften slightly.

He rolled his eyes and brushed off the hand I had placed on his thigh. "I cannot be bought, lured, or provoked into doing anything I do not wish to do. I have always been unpredictable to others. No one likes someone who seemingly lacks motivations."

He was still an untamed madman to me too, but I saw his point. "Oh...Oh I see now." As a maker, he now had one enormous, blond motivation. "I make you weak," I stated bluntly.

"No. I make you a target. You make me more."

I nudged the end of a log in the fire with my toe. "I miss the Baltic Sea. Things were easier then."

"We can go back. We will go back. But not yet." A conspiratorial smile spread across Godrik's face. "We have only worked on feeding and passing among humans this first year. You must now learn the art of our politics. Why be good at it when I know you can be the best, Eiríkr?"

The compliment wrenched an unwilling smirk from me.

"If you deliver me an area without a lord, Norseman, I'll teach you everything you need to know about the things you seem to value. But I warn you, you will not feel the same about territories and titles when we're through."

I was caught entirely off guard. This punishment was a lesson, another of his games. He had my undivided attention. "Teach me, maker. Teach me everything."

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"I say kill Kaspar. How do you begin? Not by rushing at him headlong with your sword, I hope."

"Gather intelligence?" I suggest.
"Very good. How?"

"Does he know your face?"

"No, but my reputation precedes me. My tattoos constantly threaten to reveal me. A slip of my tunic and I am easily recognized."

"Then you cannot go with me. Will they have heard about the Denmark massacre?"

"Perhaps. Perhaps not."

"I could go to Kaspar's court and claim to have lost my maker in Roskilde. Ask for shelter. Spy upon them."

"Clever, since no one your age should be running around without a maker nearby, but incredibly stupid by any other measure." Godrik shook his head. "You would put yourself into their power by choice. That is the exact opposite of what I'm trying to teach you."

"Damn," I muttered.

"You must know everything that you can learn about a situation before you walk into it. Reconnaissance must be conducted with nothing less than absolute stealth. In these first few months, you will simply practice how to veil yourself from our kind before you go anywhere near that city again. You didn't have the first clue that I'd followed you into Mainz and we are of one blood." Godrik whacked me lightly up the backside of my head. "Dummy!" he added. "You'd better start by learning how to be aware of your environment and how to cover your tracks. The German courts were treacherous back when I knew them and I expect they're no better now. You'll need details. Lots of details."

"Like what? Who supports Kaspar? Who holds grudges against him?"

"Yes, very good. Who takes orders from whom. Everything about their security setup. Who comes, who goes, where and why. And money. We need to find out where their money comes from."

"Why is that?"

"Finances easily cripple those who hold the reins of power. People assume they can either buy loyalty or create the appearance of strength with material things. But bought loyalties run out the moment the coin purse does and gold thrones are only as good as the asses sitting in them. There are many pressure points that can be leveraged to create fractures in a regime, these are but a few. Above all, if you can discover where any of them go to ground or what supernatural talents they may possess, their lives will quickly be yours to take."

I nodded, hungry to learn.

"Write to Amleth. Do not reveal your task, but have him send you several texts from the things I've left with his maker. You'll want The Deeds of Alexander and The Art of War – both are important works on strategy that you should memorize cover to cover. Political assassinations take planning and time if you have any intention of surviving the fallout."

"Okay."

"And you need better combat training. You cannot rely on having superior strength anymore, so we'll need to invent a more effective set of techniques suited to your height. Perhaps a combination of martial arts. I'll think on this more."
I started to feel excited by the challenge. "Godrik, do you know how to play any tafl games?"

"Of course. I know a great many variations of chess. Why?"

"If I make us a board, would you teach me better gaming strategies?"

He gave a boyish smile and carded a hand through my hair. Impulsively, Godrik leaned over and pinched the dimple in my chin. I leaned into him and his lips found mine. He kissed me hard, tongue curling into the depths of my mouth.

"You've been bored. I should have realized," he breathed against my skin.

"Oh, I think you know perfectly well how to keep me occupied," I gasped, hands wandering over his clothing towards the lacing and clasps I knew would free him.

He tilted his head back, exposing his firm neck to me, and looked up through his long, dark lashes with shining eyes. "You are intelligent and relish having goals. You need more stimulation."

"Stimulation? Gods, how you seduce me, Godrik…"

"I do not," he denied.

"You're doing it right now. If you could only see yourself. You seduce me with your every word and glance."

"You only see what you wish to see," he chided.

"Mmmhmm," I hummed, kissing his throat.

In a single leap, he tackled me flat on my back, pinning my arms above my head. Kneeling over me, he whispered conspiratorially into my ear, as if to reveal his greatest secret yet. "I haven't begun to teach you of seduction, Eiríkr Godrikson. We've no need of such lessons just yet. But do not doubt: you will know it when I do."

His eyes found mine. When I realized there was no bluff in his admission, I shivered and swallowed hard.

"Now get up. We have work to do."

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Godrik was silent as we made our way down the hillside into town. The first time my large frame brushed past the dry, tangling fingers of some overgrown brush, they snapped loudly. Godrik stopped dead in his tracks. He said nothing and did not turn around.

When we emerged from the thick forest into the clearing of the sloping riverine meadow, our presence startled a slumbering sparrow. It screeched in surprise and flapped from its nest. Godric snorted and shook his head. "That's twice your clumsy banging around has told another vampire of your presence. Twice you have already died tonight. Don't make another sound until we reach the main road or I'll whip you again."

I swallowed hard. It had been one thing to know intuitively that he was immensely stronger than
me; it was another thing entirely to experience a tiny fraction of that strength- to know, indeed, that he might willingly use it. I took the threat literally and found myself walking in a slight crouch, stepping only in the slight depressions in the damp earth where my maker's own footsteps fell. I traced his odd patterns, trying to appreciate how and why he moved just as he did, in light springy steps, toes first. Not a single leaf crackled or twig crunched.

We reached the bottom and he smiled wickedly. "Now go back to camp and descend again, this time using your true speed." I'm certain my eyes widened. "Remember: not a sound," he warned.

Godrik waited while I made the trek again in short, near invisible bursts. When I arrived once more at his side without error, he offered no words of praise. He simply flipped up the hood of his dark green wool cape. I followed suit and we slipped out onto the broad, well-graded boulevard - an ancient remnant of the Roman's engineering feats, Godrik had explained.

"Head south," he instructed. I felt the twist of hunger in my throat but said nothing. He fell behind me apace.

"Are you my servant, apprentice, or son?" I inquired, assuming he would choose our cover story for the evening.

"Just walk, child."

We trudged at human speeds, the ever-present stone wall to our left. A few carts drawn by miserable donkeys passed us going north and we only needed to dip our heads in greeting to escape notice. Only when a fortified wagon drew up from behind us did Godrik hail the driver. He ascertained how far the man intended to travel.

"Argentorate, sir."

Godrik produced a heavy gold coin and pressed it in his palm. "If you continue on to Brigantium–Bregentz and give this letter to a soldier named Amleth of Cumbria stationed in the old fort by the lake, the recipient will reward you with 10 more of these gold pieces."

"So much?" the man gasped and tried to take the money. I, too, had not reckoned that mail would be such an expensive proposition as a night walker.

Godrik gripped the driver's hand and pulled him closer. "You will not open the letter. You will speak to no one else of its existence. Do not fail in this task." The man nodded, fully under my maker's compulsion. The wood wagon lurched forward and, with it, the first letter I had ever penned.

At a fork in the road Godrik ordered that we turn left. We crossed the Rhine River by way of a rickety footbridge and continued due east, following a stream. It was not long before we came upon a large hamlet. The narrow lanes in the hamlet were deeply rutted with mud and pig excrement. Peasants sat on wood benches amidst the rot and stench, washing away the day's labors with horns of ale. We kept to the outskirts where the stream divided the town from the dense German forest. Godrik paused at a maple tree situated on a hillock. He appraised its vantage point over the village and finding it satisfactory, leapt up to one of its low branches like a bird.

"Go feed. Bring me my meal here. Let no one see you."

I hesitated. Godrik had never had me choose his meal. "Who would you like to feed upon?"

His dangling legs swung happily. "Procuring well is about identifying the kind of blood other night walkers desire. It shows that you understand their most basic interests. Show me that you know
what I like."

"So another test. Super. I'll see what I can manage."

I set off into the village, darting down a shadowy alley, avoiding the intersections where torches lit the main paths. Following my nose and ears, the sound of giggling brought me to the threshold of a one room house with naught but a single candle lighting its roughhewn walls.

"Good evening, ladies."

They were sisters – fraternal twins – and were quick to hurry the client they had been servicing out the back door. His trousers were still unfastened around his buttocks. Perhaps their eagerness came from the expensive cloak pin I wore, or perhaps it was the promising way my tall frame filled their doorway.

"What can we do for you tonight?" they said in unison. One had yellow-spun hair of cornsilk and the other, golden brown locks and big, brown doe-eyes.

"It is what I would like to do to you that we ought to discuss."

With a quick glamour to keep them amiable, I fell on the blond and bit her between the thighs. She smelled of many men and her sister. Such wanton lasciviousness excited me, but her eyes held a vacant stare. She watched the ceiling in boredom as I fed and tried uselessly to please her. It soured the meal for me entirely and I gave up before finishing.

Turning to the prettier brunette, I was disheartened to discover that she was weeping in the corner. She muttered something about never being chosen first.

"Oh for the love of Odin," I swore and glamoured them to forget me. I had thought to give the brunette to Godrik, but tears and melodrama were unacceptable. Back in the streets, a warm disgust gripped my half-filled stomach. If I couldn't find my own decent meal, how in the name of Midgard would I locate someone pleasing to my maker? He didn't seem to have any clear pattern that I could discern. What did he even like?

I crept silently, lingering under eaves and observing the townsfolk carefully. The people lived in abject squalor. My supernatural senses could barely tolerate the incessant buzzing of flies and rank filth that permeated the place. From the corner of my eye, the glint of gold flashed in the dull night. A stumpy, wrinkled man was pocketing a coin from a boy. He sent him back out into the street with a vicious slap.

"An' don't come back till you've got at least twice this, you dirty, whoring thief!"

Recalling Godrik's painful words, I knew I had found my man. Like a breeze, I materialized before him. His sweat was acrid and his breathe even worse.

"An' wha' do you want then?"

"Invite me in," I demanded.

He conceded, grumbling, "I ain't got no more stock tonight. They's all sold out."

Glancing about the man's dingy quarters confirmed he was no ordinary shopkeeper or tradesman. "The boy that just left…?"

"Ack! You'll never catch him now. He'll be hidin' out till next Tuesday knowing the beatin' he's
due to get. Cheatin' little rat."

A plan quickly formed in my head. "Then perhaps you'd be interested in acquiring something more…exotic."

The old man pursed his lips. The straggly beard gracing his oily face screwed sideways in a grimace. "Go on."

"I have a very talented young boy in my employ, just up the way. He's learned the most unusual tricks while traveling in the Mediterranean. Shall you come see him?"

He dithered with a few objects on a shelf in feigned disinterest. "I suppose I could have a looksee."

I must have grinned like a fox.

The greasy pimp huffed and puffed his way up the hill. When we reached the summit, Godrik dropped from his perch in the tree, startling the human so greatly that he would have tumbled right back down into the meadow below had I not caught him by his grimy shirt collar.

"This is the boy. How much?" I said.

The man gave a figure that betrayed the greed in his eyes.

"You wish to buy me?" Godrik asked, cocking his head. He scented the human through parted lips.

"Aye. Your master don't want you no more. Now be a good lad and let me inspect you."

Godrik's tone dropped. He stepped closer, pupils blowing wide. "I wish to inspect you too. What do you think is beneath all that fat and gristle? Is there more to you than just...meat?"

"'Scuse me?" the man stuttered, slowly realizing something was off about the boy.

When Godrik struck, it was untraceable. The pimp grabbed at a sudden, sharp pain in his neck. He was bleeding. The boy stood before him just as he was a moment ago, only now there was a stain of blood across his mouth. The man screamed and ran. Godrik watched him impassively, appearing bored by the predictability of his flight. He allowed the pimp to pant and flounder, gaining a little ground and a thread of hope, only to drag him back to the maple. He toyed with his prey for hours: wounding him in quick passes, letting him escape, only to further drain him. When he was done, he was not done, for he desecrated the corpse with a violence I had yet to witness. If there was anything human in me still, it was not present as I watched my maker strip muscle from bone. All that was left of the vile sex trafficker was a red smear upon the hillside. From the steaming sludge, Godrik retrieved a blood-soaked satchel of money – the proceeds of the dead man's commerce – and chucked it at me.

I stared dumbly at the purse in my hand and then to my maker, who strolled off as though nothing had happened.

"What is this for?" I called after him.

"A reward. And a reminder."

I sighed through strained eyes, the bloody scene in my head too dizzying to make sense of Godrik's puzzles. I could only trot after him, hoping for clarification. Godrik bid his time, as usual. He could be absolutely maddening.
"You procured well tonight," he offered. We were just rounding the bend where the stream fed into the river.

"I saw him shaking down one of the chattel boys for pay. I knew he was for you."

Godrik hummed. "As I suspected. It was the gold that caught your attention. The fact that he grew fat off the sale of children was only secondary to you, though it was what sealed his fate. Remember that. Gold draws the eye. You never know who might be watching."

I touched the wet leather satchel at my side, rolling its gems and stamped gold pieces in my fingers. The little treasure was dangerous, then. Another of Godrik's tests. As it was, I was struggling to keep track of all the lessons I was supposed to be remembering.

"The pimp was a hypocrite," Godrik explained.

"Was he?"

"Men who torture and maim, who love to cause others' pain – they need the fear of another to feed their own pleasure and yet they all secretly fear what they do. They fear receiving the very pain they love to give. Did you not hear that stinking bloodbag beg me for mercy?"

"He only shut up when you broke his jaw," I conceded.

"Exactly. How many jaws do you suppose he broke in his pathetic little life? He was terrified of the same backhand when it didn't come from him. They are all cowards in the end. Their violence is no more than an expression of need and fear. It is vulgar. Hypocritical."

He had lost me completely. Abandoning any pretense of my success, I decided to be blunt. "So you didn't kill the pimp like that because he was evil?"

"Evil?" Godrik snorted. "I obliterated him because I chose to. Whether and how one kills isn't an ethical stance, child, it is a choice realized through brute strength. Nothing more."

When he looked at me, his eyes were still pools of black, his fangs drawn down. "But you are bloodlusted!" I protested. "How is our hunger and the violence we do to feed it any different?"

"Ah, young one," Godrik said, lapping a splatter of blood at the corner of his mouth and rolling it sensually in his tongue. He threw an arm around my waist, staining my clothing beyond repair. "The only real monsters are those who do not fear what they do. Those who do not need to do violence, but simply choose it because they can. That is the power of a true immortal."

"I don't understand, maker. What the Hel does that mean?" I growled, thoroughly frustrated.

"Why do you think you brought him to me?"

I brooded over the question for some time, replaying the night's events in my mind. I had presumed Godrik would want to hurt someone who caused similar trauma as he had experienced. That he would kill out of vengeance. I slapped my forehead in recognition. My mistake was blindingly apparent. My feeding choices and the selection I'd made for him were driven by my own impulses - the beauty of the twins, the flashing wealth of a coin in the moonlight, the desire for revenge. The first three things that caught my eye. I had not made any choice. I let my impulsive desires choose for me. Procuring for Godrik was a trick. He had no type. He had no preference, at least none that he would ever allow dictate his actions. Somehow, he had divorced his need for blood from all emotion. He no doubt expected me to learn to do the same.

A smile skipped breezily across Godrik's mouth. "But now you have succeeded."

How the devil had he manipulated me so expertly? Godrik had crammed in more instruction tonight than he'd offered in half a year! I couldn't help but laugh. "You set me up like a puppet."

"I'm glad you noticed. You'll be mindful now of how others' see you feeding? Take note when others feed in front of you?"

I grunted in response.

"See how much something so basic gives away? It is a great weapon."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Villain!" I shouted gleefully and unceremoniously shoved him off the footbridge into the river. He splashed against the current and I booked it for the meadow at the base of our mountain. He caught me halfway, toppled me into the weeds, hollering 'you're it!' and disappeared up the path. I scrambled after him as fast as my legs could carry me.

"Remember, not a sound!" he called in the distance.

"But you're yelling!"

"Your rules, not mine. Go!"

I never did catch Godrik that night, but that didn't stop me from trying. He loved every minute of it. After all, I was the only motivation he possessed.
Nearly four years had passed since Godrik tasked me with killing the neighboring leader, Kaspar. Four years, and I was not even remotely closer to a solution. With a single-minded focus that seemed to reveal itself as the first of my true immortal powers, I threw myself into mastering Godrik's intensive lessons. When he asked me to shadow a target, I became a ghost. When he taught me a new martial art, I became a sensei. He gave me books and I transformed into a scholar. No skill was beneath me, no craft too dispensable. I wanted everything he had to offer.

I grew so doggedly insistent about my education that Godrik complained. He then tested my resolve by refusing to teach me anything. Within a week I became so despondent and restless that my skin crawled. He immediately declared this too to be a weakness and reversed course entirely. There would be more pointless nights than I could ever imagine, he had said. So he taught me yoga and meditation. He taught me songs in an ethereal voice he had apparently hid from everyone, including me, and he gave me an odd harp-like instrument which I played quite poorly. "Good gods!" he winced, covering his ears. He pled for divine intervention that I might never attempt the wretched thing again. And so he taught me the value of laughter. There was so very much laughter.

We settled into a fine rhythm and the seasons morphed around us unobtrusively. As I progressed, Godrik had me set my own schedule, ever mindful that we lived at the measured pace of a breed for whom there is nothing but time. Some nights we practiced escaping from all manner of complicated knots and silver chains – usually somewhere impractical, like the middle of a freezing rapid. Other times we held belching contests with elaborate rules and regulations that, despite my rampant cheating and in spite his smaller stature, Godrik inevitably won.

Regardless, I never let the ultimate goal wander too far from my mind. When he finally deemed me ready, I began to track and spy upon other blood drinkers in the German countryside at a careful distance, reporting every detail back to my maker. What I learned was chilling: the likelihood of realizing Godrik's challenge was even more unrealistic than when I began.

I refused, however, to be discouraged.

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One evening I returned from a reconnaissance mission. "See anything interesting?" Godrik asked.

"What does 'being released' mean?"

Godrik did not move, save for an odd twitch in his left eye. "Where did you hear that?"

From Johan, I explained. Johan was one of the younger members of the Mainz clan and hence someone I felt safest trailing. He had been talking about it with a nest mate. It was rare to find them isolated out in the city and I had lingered to catch as much of their conversation as possible.

"It is a maker's power," Godrik responded.

"Like when you undo a command?"

"Yes."
"He was crying and carrying on. Shouldn't he have been relieved?"

Godrik shrugged. "Depends."

Being commanded was always stressful, even when the command was necessary and right. Compulsions felt urgent and dire; having them lifted was heavenly, like an ejaculation in one's mind. In the rippling nuances of our blood bond, I knew he was leaving something unsaid. "Tell me what it means," I demanded.

He met my gaze directly, unflinching. "It means, young one, that Johann was not happy to be released by his maker. It means his maker undid her power to command him. He is no longer bound to her, nor her to him. Hence the expression. Now are you satisfied?"

My blood ran cold.

Godrik clenched his jaw. His eye twitched again. "You are too young for this conversation."

The earth felt off kilter, as thought I might slide off if I didn't hang on.

"Why would...why..." I couldn't even form the words. My hands, unbeknownst to me, had clamped down on my maker's wrists. He carefully twisted out of my crushing hold and pulled my shaking fists to his chest.

"What's this? You are never afraid, my child."

"Johann can't be more than 50," I whispered.

"It is a little young, but not unheard of."

"But...Amleth! Amleth is not released. He's almost 300!"

"Yes. And that is between Tarquin and him."

His calm only unnerved me more. Fear yielded to anger. "No," I declared.

"No?"

"You do not do that. Ever."

He looked away. "We will cross that bridge when we come to it."

"The fuck we will!" I screamed and pushed him away. "I will burn that bridge if you even go near it!" I shoved him again for good measure. He allowed it and it enraged me more. I screamed like a banshee, doubling over from the effort. The rage came from a place I didn't know existed.

"Eirikr, stop."

I kept screaming.

"Stop!" he ordered.

"NO!"

"Master your emotions!"

I refused. Not about this. Never about this. In undeath I was still a child, and like a child, I had
naively discovered the horrible truth that one day I would grow up. One day, I would lose my maker. "What happened to 'father, brother, son?!' Ditching me wasn't part of the deal!"

"It is not that simple."

"Clarify for me, master!"

A growl ripped out of him, primal and deadly, aimed directly at the title he absolutely despised.

"You just, what, choose that you're done playing maker and poof, you absolve yourself?"

Now he that was the one bellowing at the top of his lungs with denials.

"It's your power!" I accused.

"And do I abuse my power over you?!"

"It's a choice!"

"And the choice of release might be yours!" he screamed back. "You might beg me for it! Where is my choice in that?!" He had a crazed look in his eyes.

I charged at him and he overpowered me easily, pinning me down. I was panting and struggling like a maniac. He wouldn't let me go and he was determined not to use a command to get me to calm down.

"You're just teaching me well so that your conscience is clear when you leave me!" I wailed.

"No!" The fragile chords of his pubescent voice box had gone hoarse.

"Bullshit! You're a fucking liar!" I screamed. He despised being sworn at and he smacked me hard. So I said it again and he smacked me even harder. The logic in my brain completely disintegrated. I spat in his face. In a single movement, he rolled us both and kicked me halfway across our clearing. I had no time to fold myself properly for the landing and my body hit the ground not with a thud, but with a loud snap. My leg had taken the brunt of the fall beneath my torso and broken.

Godrik was at me instantly, thrusting a wrist at my mouth. I stubbornly turned my head, refusing the power of his blood.

"Drink!" He begged, cradling me in his arms. "Please drink! Please!"

Without his blood, the leg took nearly half an hour to mend. Even so, we were still both a wreck of blood and dirt and tears. We sat in the grass, stunned.

"I wish you had not learned of this so soon," Godrik admitted.

"When were you planning on telling me?"

"I…." He shook his head and his shoulders slumped. "I had no plan."

"Not going to spring it on me as a surprise 50th birthday gift, then?" I asked bitterly.

He refused to dignify the jab with a response.

"Hey, I know what you can get me for my fifth birthday."
"Must you make everything a joke? We do not celebrate birthdays like ridiculous mortals, Eirikr."

"I am as serious as the grave. If you wanted to give me to something, something second only to turning me, then you will promise never to release me."

Godrik pinched his eyes to hide the tears that welled up. "I cannot make that promise, no matter how much I wish to."

The hurt was unbearable. "You choose not to."

He looked at me then, a shattered little boy with the haunting stare of an ancient. "I cannot," he said and his voice cracked. He buried his face in his hands and began to sob. I had never seen him cry. I held him and shushed him and cried alongside him. We mourned for the mere possibility of each other's absence. The idea that such a thing could come to pass was unfathomable.

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The threat of dawn rushing toward the horizon found us in marginally better shape. "Can we please not ever do this again?" I asked.

Godrik gave a joyless huff of a laugh that did not reach his eyes.

"Look at us. We've never fought like this. This is insane."

"Madness," he agreed.

"I cannot even believe that I -"

" - I know."

"Forgive me -"

" - it is forgotten."

"I crossed a hard line."

"Several. As did I. I am truly sorry that I hurt you. I forgot my strength."

I snorted. The bad fall had been entirely my fault. "Aim for something softer, next time."

"Duly noted."

"I love you."

He rubbed at the dried blood on his cheeks and sniffled. "I love you, too."

"I know you won't make false promises, but can you do me a favor at least?"

He looked at me warily.

"Let's not talk about this for a hundred years."

"A hundred years?"
"Every century, you need only ask 'Still feel the same, Eirikr?' And every century, I'll say 'yep.' And that is all that ever need be said more on the matter."

Godrik smiled weakly. "I like that."

"It is a deal, then."

"Deal," he replied and laid back in the grass.

I knew he doubted me. I knew that he had wept again in the morning hours while I slept at his side, thinking that one day, in the worst version of our future, he would ask and I would not say yes. But I would always say yes. And I would prove him a fool for ever doubting. We would never cross that bridge.

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When the leaves began to curl upon themselves and the air took on the sweet chill of autumn, I wrapped a gift in a scrap of cloth. It was the fifth year since I had awoken from death transformed. As much as I enjoyed rituals, Godrik had no idea when he had been turned or even his exact age. He rounded up or down by centuries, depending on his mood. After some reflection, I decided to celebrate my maker on my own turning day. He had given me everything. My role in the event had been limited strictly to not dying the day I'd gotten myself fatally stabbed.

There was so much to be thankful for it was difficult to know where to begin. An apology seemed like a sensible place to start. As much as I had avoided thinking about it, our horrid argument still lingered in my thoughts. I needed Godrik to know that my trust in him was absolute. It had been too hard at the time to recognize Godrik's fear through my own. How ironic that we only ever seemed to argue about how much we wanted each other's companionship.

Godrik was occupied with a pile of twine. He was twisting it into rope and every few twists he embedded a sharp silver stud. That would certainly be a tricky bastard to deal with when the time came. I looked forward to the challenge. For now, I took the small cloth bundle from my rucksack and set it down beside him. He barely took his eyes off the twine.

"What's that?" he asked, pausing to tighten the cords down into a hard loop.

"A gift for you."

"Oh?" he murmured. I loomed over him with crossed arms. Sighing, he laid his treacherous project aside. He opened it and found an iron key. "Well, what is it to?"

I managed to school my features. "Kaspar's treasury."

Godrik took off his work gloves and pinched his brow in exasperation. "Did it not occur to you that it will be missed? How long have you had it? It must go back immediately."

"No one will miss it. It is our copy."

He picked up the hefty key to inspect it. The bit was exceptionally elaborate. "How on earth, Eirikr?"
"Clay, of course. I made a mold of it while the head guard had his fangs and prick stuck in some girl. The blacksmith only finished forging the duplicate last week."

"What do you propose to do with it?"

"Nothing. It is yours now."

Godrik was taken aback. "I do not ask nor do I want tribute from you. That is not why I made you."

"I know. But I am too young to know what to do with access to this kind of money, so it's yours. Do with it what you will."

"It is useless. What do you suggest I do? Stroll out of Kaspar's fortress with a sack over my shoulder and wink at the gatekeepers on my way out?"

I settled down beside him. "Always a skeptic. Don't you want to know the best part?"

He grunted noncommittally.

"All of Kaspar's coffers use the same lock."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"I swear to Freya, it is the truth. Every chest of gold that goes into Kaspar's vault uses a lock opened by that key. All you need to do is intercept the taxes rolling in from his subjects. You needn't go anywhere near his city."

Godrik looked more closely at the duplicate in his hands and cursed in his ancient tongue. He then began laughing uncontrollably. "You clever child!" He pulled me into a rough hug and kissed my temple. "Is this your way of saying I ought to have given you a birthday gift? Guilting me with presents of your own?"

"Hardly," I scoffed, though the fact that he had not forgotten secretly pleased me. I thought to say more – about how much he deserved for his patience with me, for how generous he had been with his wisdom, but the words were clumsy in my mouth. Suddenly the gesture felt foolish.

"Very well. If you're going to pout, come on." Godrik pulled on his cloak and gestured for me to follow.

It was my turn to be taken by surprise. "Maker?"

He merely raised an eyebrow and made his way down the footpath to the village.

On the outskirts of town, Godrik led me to a muddy spring. Shepherds used it to water their livestock and the surface was covered in a thick layer of filth.

"Go on. Jump in, birthday boy."

"Goddy, it's foul!"

"Get in the water already," he huffed and waded in. He pawed his way through overgrown cattail reeds and toward what appeared to be a reinforced stone embankment. Then he disappeared.

Still grumbling, I plunged underneath the murky surface. A hand grabbed me and pulled me forward. I felt my way blindly and discovered we were swimming through some sort of tunnel. We swam for a distance until the ceiling sharply inclined. The tunnel opened into a low, vaulted
"Where are we?" I spun around the cavernous room. Despite being underground, the much water was fresher here. It smelled of warm rain.

"Nearly there." Godrik crouched through a narrow opening to the left and shimmied up a vertical passageway there. He shot up the shoot like a frog, using only his toes and fingers as leverage. My shoulders were too broad to pass comfortably and I only fit by angling one arm over my head and scraping the other. The passage ended abruptly and Godrik helped me to my feet. He pushed a rectangular marble covering back over the hole we had climbed through.

I eyed a suspiciously round aperture in the stone box. "Odin's eye, did we just crawl through a latrine?!"

"All roads lead to Rome - even the shitty ones," he quipped. Without missing a beat, he shook the water from his head like a dog then padded out of the room up a staircase.

On the ground floor, my maker lit several candle stubs and stuck them into the shallow alcoves built into the curved walls. In the light, I recognized the building. "This is one of the guardhouses in the old Roman wall!" The floor was littered with potsherds, metal scraps, and a few pieces of broken furniture. There were no windows.

"It's not much, but…happy birthday, Eirikr. You have made great strides these few years."

I touched the stone, appreciating its solid construction.

"I know you've wanted to explore it."

"Yes, very much." I skipped up to the second floor and continued to the third, where I found a series of narrow windows on the uppermost level. Centuries before, there had been a wood deck that wound around the exterior of the tower, affording its occupants a lookout. The decking had long since rotted away. Regardless, the view was still impressive. The main 'entry' was located on the third floor, reachable from outside only by ladder and still barred from within by a reinforced door which was more rust than metal.

"What do you think?" Godrik called after me. I began to relate my observations about the architecture.

"I meant about staying here?"

I rushed back downstairs. "No!"

"No?" he said, a gleam in his eyes.

"No, Godrik. Don't tease. What!?"

He couldn't suppress his mischievous smile. Kicking a musty piece of fabric aside, he revealed a small chest tucked in the shadows of a corner. Inside lay hundreds of gold ingots, jeweled rings, and exquisitely wrought torc necklaces. "Since you have proven that you can restrain yourself around money and we will grow wealthier by the day thanks to you, perhaps you could use some of this to spruce the place up."

I stared at the hoard, dumbfounded. Amleth had sent the chest to us years ago! Godrik had claimed it was full of books and I had thought nothing of it when it promptly disappeared. I braced myself against the wall, needing a moment to digest the present. "Maker, I don't know what to say."
He squeezed my shoulder. "Welcome home."

I had to sit down. The place was a wreck and it was absolutely perfect. All I could see were possibilities. "Hullooo house!" I called through cupped hands. The walls were so thick the sound absorbed rather than echoed. We would be incredibly well protected here. The faint trickling sound of moving water below the building was pleasant – a reminder of the sea.

Godrik gathered some of the broken wood scraps scattered on the floor and made a small fire to dry our clothes. He was already lecturing me about the dangers of living in plain sight. "You are ready for the risk," he asserted. One had the distinct sense he had just upped the stakes of our lifestyle twofold.

"I will not disappoint you," I swore.

Godrik leaned against the wall, watching me. I had stripped down to my loincloth and he, a stranger to underwear, had tied his cloak around his waist like a sarong. The flickering light in the secluded tower deepened the dips and shadows of his sculpted torso. He looked like a god of the underworld.

"Are you happy, my prince?" he asked.

"Beyond belief."

A sly smile escaped his lips. He rummaged around in the chest of jewels, pulling out a thin gold crown. It was engraved with Celtic knots and set with small round stones and he examined it thoughtfully. Sauntering over to me, he placed the coronet upon my head and caressed my cheeks with his thumbs.

"What about you, Godrik? Do you like your gift?"

He touched the key that he had strung onto his necklace. "Aye. Very much."

"What will you do with it?" I wondered.

His eyebrows raised. "I will rob Kaspar and his people blind."

"And then?"

He broke into a vicious grin. "You will watch how quickly they turn on each other. Soon my prince shall have his throne."
The Arrival

The rehabilitation of our first true house proceeded quickly. Some years prior to our arrival in Baudobriga, a group of Christian missionaries had arrived and used the old Roman watchtower as a makeshift monastery while they attempted to convert the locals. The monks foolishly denounced the solstice celebrations and were promptly run out of town – but not before the self-righteous lot had the good foresight to rebuild the tower's roof.

As for the walls, Godrik showed me how to mix and cure concrete in order to repair the worst of the crumbling mortar in the building's joints. Thinking at first the material was little different than the mud daub I had used to construct my own longhouses, I slopped the concrete all over myself and the floor. Godrik laughed himself sick when I discovered how hard the substance became when let dry. He was still laughing in fits while we spent two nights working side by side scraping up the mess. It would be weeks before I got the last of it out of my hair.

Once the structural issues were addressed, I retrofitted the basement with false paneling to conceal its existence. Beneath it was ample space for sleeping quarters and multiple exits connected to the forgotten Roman aqueduct passages underneath the valley. The third floor was left in shambles as misdirection, though it was necessary to bar the windows and add a stronger iron gate on the stairwell to keep out unwanted intruders.

I commissioned furnishings from a reputable workshop in Bonn and when they arrived I was pleased to discover that Godrik approved of their craftsmanship. He had left virtually every detail to me and seldom voiced an opinion, even when prompted. It came as a surprise, then, when I found him hammering a long string of swirling lines and markings into the stone lintel of the stairwell. He avoided my curious gaze. I moved an oil lamp closer to his tools and let him be. He spent several more nights incising the house with Druid symbols. The result was stunning. That he should also feel possessive of our tower was deeply moving.

After three months of effort, we lit the small hearth for the first time and pulled up our chairs. The sheer normalcy of it felt surreal, given I had woken up in half-frozen dirt for so long.

"Will you miss our nights living like the wind?" I asked.

Godrik pondered the question. "We will always live like the wind, even if we settle for a time. We will pick up. Drift away. Settle again."

"But together," I insisted. "Always together. He stared into the dancing flames of the fireplace and smiled.

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It is difficult to express how delicious it was to finally enjoy the comfort of a soft bed was after years. Godrik struggled to understand. "What does it matter where you sleep if you cannot feel it during the day?" he protested.

"It's the falling asleep and the waking that I enjoy – especially when you're next to me and you haven't tracked mud all over the sheets!"
"Safety is the greatest comfort. You'll never be safer than when you are buried inconspicuously in the earth."

"You just miss your little mole den up in the hills," I said. Godrik glared at me but didn't argue. He remained uneasy with the arrangement and often checked and rechecked the locks on the gates before sunrise. Months passed and I noticed that he made a concerted effort to leave his boots by the entryway as I did. He also lingered in bed at sunset, waiting for me to wake for the evening.

Just when I thought I had perhaps made some headway civilizing him, I rose one night to find the spot beside me empty. I went up to the first floor, only to see that the hearth lay cold and the house was silent. Godrik was gone. He never left without a forewarning. I immediately checked our bond. He was nearby and calm. Did he want me to go to him? He pushed back at me, asking for distance. I didn't press further and went about my business, first feeding quickly on a farmer out looking for a stray cow who had escaped her pen. Sated for the moment, I sat down at my desk and penned a letter to Amleth. The distraction proved helpful. Now that I could actually write, I enjoyed our correspondence greatly, especially the anecdotes my friend relayed about life in the far-off places where he traveled.

Amleth taught me so much about a world I had yet to see and he teased me relentlessly about anything and everything. I happily added fuel to the fire by sharing my latest foibles and was appreciative for the pointers he would offer in return. Even on paper, his scorching wit sent me into stitches. I could just imagine how he would raise a suggestive eyebrow and dryly insult me in his perfect diction. I missed him. It seemed hard to believe that I had ever found his jokes to be mean-spirited.

Godrik returned near dawn without comment. For the next week, he continued to leave me each evening and return late. I grew increasingly concerned. One night, I finally reached my breaking point. "Is there something specific I should be working on while you're away?"

"No," he said. He suggested that I might continue filling my journal and practicing my German and Latin.

"Are you brooding?" I countered. "I think this is you brooding."

"Hardly."

"Then are you unhappy here?" I was grasping at straws. He ignored me and disappeared downstairs.

My worry deepened when I discovered him snipping off his locks one night. The matted brown bits lay strewn like overfed caterpillars around his bare feet.

"Your hair!" I cried.

He offered me the shears. "Can you even this out?"

"But...why?"

He shrugged. "If I am going to pretend to be tame, I might as well look the part."

After all the grumbling I'd done over hygiene and the forced baths I'd given him each Saturday, those years of struggle between us lay in ruins on the floor. I should have rejoiced, but instead I felt devastated. The damage was already done. I sulked silently while I finished cropping his hair close to his skull. It wasn't an especially bad look for him. Just different. When I was finished, I threatened a thick hank of my own long mane with the scissors. "Perhaps I need a change too?"
"Don't you dare," he hissed.

"Admit it. The legendary Godrik is vain about his progeny."

Godrik laughed at the accusation and tugged one of the thin braids at my temple. "More like I prefer having a convenient handle on my insolent child's head." He tussled my hair and took the scissors. They disappeared and, oddly, were never seen again.

Winter began to creep back into the land. A courier arrived unexpectedly one evening. Unbeknownst to me, Godrik had ordered new garments for us, and not just any clothing, but finery such as we had never before owned. For himself, he had selected a long, wine-colored leather doublet and a shirt of pure white linen. My packages contained a similar ensemble in all black, as well as a tunic in black velvet with gold embroidery and piping. The cut and materials were exquisite.

"These are too nice for the Rhinelands. Are we going somewhere?" I asked.

"No. Do you want to go somewhere?"

I ran my fingers over the sumptuous fabric. "Godrik, please tell me what is going on."

He gave me a gentle smile. "They are just clothes. I have to spend Kaspar's money on something." His end of the bond remained unchanged – as placid and smooth as an undisturbed lake. I began to suspect he was muting it somehow.

Not long after, another shipment arrived. This time it was more furnishings. Chairs and rugs and furs and -quite improbably- drapes. Drapes, of all things!

"You bought curtains," I stated flatly, pulling the gauzy things out of their packaging.

He blinked innocently. "For the sleeping niches downstairs."

"I am so not even having this conversation with you right now." I slammed the door, slid down the tower's ladder, and went out to feed.

I had nothing against beautiful possessions. Absolutely nothing. When I looked around our abode and saw the creature comforts and minor splendors that my maker had provided, I marveled at how well we lived. But these changes seemed so contrary to Godrik's character that it put me wholly on edge. How often had he warned about the flighty nature of things? Had he not promised to teach me a lesson about the human values to which I still clung? Giving me a crown and calling me his prince – was that a warning? It seemed only a matter of time before my maker might smash it all to dust, simply to prove a point.
A few weeks later, a wagon pulled to a creaking halt outside the tower and someone whistled loudly.

"What now? Drapes for the hallways?"

Godrik's eyes narrowed. He carefully set his book aside. "Go downstairs and put on your new tunic." Alarm shot through my spine. "Remain unarmed and stay by the door here until you are called." Godrik adjusted several cushions and added wood to the fire.

I changed as fast as I could. When I returned to the first floor, Godrik was descending the staircase with several people. Blood drinkers, my senses supplied. Every muscle in my body grew tense.

A rugged man in light armor and laced boots stopped at the foot of the stairwell. His red wool cape pooled on the stone floor. There was a light dusting of snow feathered around his shoulders. He gazed about the accommodations, looking past me as though I was something ornamental. It was immediately clear that he wasn't old enough to be Kasper, but it did not mean he wasn't one of his henchman. The stranger had a lean, hard build and his eyes were quick and calculating. My hands felt empty without a sword or knife.

Godrik invited him to sit. The man took my usual seat closest to the fire. He scraped the chair across the slate floor and slammed his metal-clad rump down carelessly. My fangs snapped down unbidden. One of the women lingering at his side snickered.

"Thea, enough," the man said. "Take Sibyl and go feed."

"Stay north of the river," Godrik added.

"Keeping a low profile these days?" asked the one named Thea.

Godrik turned in his frighteningly slow manner, as if offended that something so young would even dare to speak to him. "We keep no profile here. Understood, little underling?" Both women curtsied deeply, acknowledging Godrik's authority. My mind raced to parse the situation.

The elders exchanged a few words in a form of early Latin I couldn't follow. The stranger's gaze drifted back to me. He gave a tight smile. The slit of his mouth was too broad for his face. "Let us not beat around the bush, Godrik. Let us get down to introductions."

My maker gestured at me. The man stood, nearly as tall as me, and I left the safety of the basement door frame to stand before him. Everything about the vampire's countenance radiated an imperious strength. He had been turned later in life and the creases in his otherwise perfectly smooth preternatural skin were unsettling.

He looked over me, appraising me. "Turn," he ordered. I obeyed. His eyes crawled over my skin. He leaned in uncomfortably close and scented me. I gripped my hands behind my back to keep from striking out. The man asked to see my palms and I prayed that I could remain compliant. Godrik eyed me in a strong warning. The guest had me lift my tunic. He inspected my nude chest and back and - to my complete horror - asked to examine my teeth, as though I were a slave or a beast on the auction block.

"Name?" he demanded.

I took a deep breath, feeling that Godrik was about to throttle me if I failed whatever test this was. "Eirikr, sir."

"Age?"
"Far younger than you, sir." Godrik had instructed me never to reveal anything personal of this nature.

"And your maker?"

I gritted my teeth. "Shall I not have the pleasure of knowing your name first, sir?"

"Who is your maker!?" he barked.

"Surely you know already."

He moved to backhand me and I stilled myself for the blow. I did not flinch. He stopped mid-strike and began to laugh. "Oh, my, my. He is well-trained, Godrik! Well-trained indeed." The man gave a toothy grin that did nothing to soften his features. He grabbed my forearm by the elbow and greeted me vigorously in the Roman style.

"Welcome, son. Welcome, truly, to our ranks. You cannot imagine how long I have waited for you."

"Try me," I quipped.

He snorted and shook my arm more, apparently amused by my acidic tongue. He then embraced Godrik in a crushing hold, thumping him on the back with a heavy paw. He whispered something inaudible and my maker nodded.

"You psychotic little devil!" he declared. "Not even a scar on him. How did you manage it? Amleth swore his descriptions could do no justice to your handiwork but —"

"Amleth?" I blurted out, stunned to hear the name.

"Eirikr," Godric said, bringing me to his side. "Allow me to introduce you to my oldest friend and ally. This is Lucius Tarquinius."

Time stretched out uncomfortably, slowing and warping its contours around me. Godrik's mouth was moving and Tarquin was laughing. I heard nothing. I said nothing.

This was Tarquin.

The longer I stared him down and sized him up, the more I came to the disconcerting conclusion that he was uncommonly handsome. It was a severe, unapologetically masculine sort of beauty, and so not very beautiful at all. His broad shoulders screamed of a soldier's brute athleticism, while his compact torso gave his movements a decisive energy. As if he heard my thoughts, Tarquin met my stare with a knowing smile. A knot of dread coiled in my stomach. Dread – because I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that this man could kill me.

Only the light jogging tap of soles against the stair risers drew me out of my daze. In a swirl of black, there at the doorway, though I could hardly believe it, stood Amleth.

"Sorry that took so long," he said. "The horses were terribly thirsty."

I tried to say his name, but nothing came out. He held his arms wide and I rushed into his embrace and into his scent and softness. I had never needed his friendship more than at that moment. I refused to let go of him.
Amleth sat on the stoop looped in my arm for the remainder of the evening. The two women returned and the blood drinkers held a lively conversation about the state of politics much further south. Tarquin recounted how he had delivered the true death to three royals in the last year. His booming laugh and animated hands made for riveting storytelling and, much to my chagrin, I could not help but enjoy listening to him. Thea too had tales from the Slavic lands in the east. She had gone on a diplomatic mission to negotiate a treaty between our kind and 'the dogs.' Even the unassuming Sibyl spoke about traveling on the Nile River in a place I had only vaguely knew existed. She had been a guest of honor at an important wedding. Godrik was especially keen to hear more.

"Thalia?! Married into the house of Senusret?" he said, nearly choking. "Egypt will be torn asunder before the century is through!" Everyone exploded into laughter.

Everyone, that was, except for me. The whole scene in the living room felt like a punchline I had missed out on.

"And what about you, son?" Tarquin asked, finally acknowledging me again and leaning back into my chair. "How are you liking your new life?"

"I like it very well," I replied.

"Oh come now! Spare us the meaningless court talk. How do you like it? What has your maker had you doing?"

I swallowed. "Godrik has taught me many things. We practice game strategy. I train-"

"- He is trying to depose the neighboring king," Godrik interjected.

Tarquin burst into laughter. "Surely not Kaspar?" he said, hurling over in hilarity. His female companions laughed and their laughter sent Tarquin laughing harder. He slapped his knee repeatedly. The guests' amusement bounced off the walls. Godrik sat stone-faced and motionless. When Tarquin realized I wasn't smiling either, his guffaws stuttered. Then he grew very serious.

"You jest, Godrik," Amleth gasped.

Godrik made no reply.

"Jesus Christ!" Thea exclaimed, clapping a hand over her mouth. My maker set his piercing gaze on her, daring her to speak of that dead god in his house again.

"Godrik, this is insane, even for you, old friend," Tarquin said.

"It is his punishment for playing with his life and that of Amleth's. He must learn the game or he will fail to become a child of the millennia."

The room fell oppressively silent.

"Can I speak with you alone?" Tarquin asked Godrik. They excused themselves and went upstairs. Within minutes, we heard shouting. Thea rolled her eyes. "And so it begins."

"They fight more than they talk," Sibyl explained.

I got up and Amleth pulled me back down onto the stairs. "It is best to let them go at it, Eirikr. They'll tire eventually. You do not want to be in the middle of two quarreling elders." I shoved him
off and tromped upwards.

On the third floor, Tarquin and Godrik were practically at each other's throats. They quieted when I reached the landing.

"What seems to be the problem?" I demanded.

"Go downstairs. We will rejoin you shortly," Godrik said.

I turned to this 'cherished' friend of Godrik's, who had not been in our house for more than an hour. "Tarquin, I realize you have just arrived and the journey was taxing. You are most welcome and I am honored to meet such a steadfast friend of Godrik's. But you are in our home now. I do not like how you are speaking to my maker."

"Run along, young one, this is makers' business," he replied.

I took a step forward. "Yes. I can see that. It is my maker's business - which you are openly questioning under my maker's roof."

Tarquin gave a surprised snort and put his hands on his hips. The slightest hint of a smile crept over Godrik's mouth. He turned and walked out, leaving me alone with the imposing Roman. "Kaspar is a renegade," he said. "He will kill you - slowly. Amleth said you were bold. Are you also stupid?"

I went to a window and rested my elbows on the ledge. "I know well enough that I have hardly begun to understand the task that Godrik has set before me. But a stupid man would fear remedying his ignorance. I, on the other hand, do not." I turned back around.

Tarquin's gaze was hard and unwavering as he tried to figure me out. "At this rate, Godrik is far more dangerous to you than Kaspar. We shall speak more about your task in the coming nights, you and me."

I crossed the distance between us and dared to settle a hand on his shoulder. "Tarquin, my new friend? I will listen to your advice without prejudice, if that is what you mean to offer. But let us be perfectly clear with each other. As young and stupid as you might suppose I am, no one ever needs to protect me from my maker or his choices. Ever. Do you understand?"

We stared each other down for a long, tense minute. He finally nodded and I went to leave, but he caught me by the upper arm. "My loyalty to Godrik is nearly a millennium old. You are barely out of the ground."

I looked at the pale hand gripping my arm, then at him. "Then take your loyal hand off what is his." Tarquin's nostrils' flared and he grinned ferociously. He was still all too pleased by my resistance and he released me.

Daybreak could not come fast enough. When I finally crawled into bed, I had only two words for Godrik.

"You knew," I spat and let the sun pull me under.
"Go on. You two catch up." Godrik shooed Amleth and I out of the tower. He wanted to discuss
private business with Tarquin.

Tarquin. Godrik's oldest friend. His oldest ally. The thought made me nauseous. I held onto
Amleth and my feet followed mindlessly. We walked a short distance until I petulantly collapsed
against a tree. Amleth sighed and rested his head on my shoulder. "Godrik did not tell you we
were coming, did he? Always so perfectly stubborn in his ways. Just like you." He laughed at his
own joke and toyed with the gold embroidered hem of my tunic. "This is very lovely. I might steal
it."

"You will not," I retorted.

"Yes, I will. And your cozy bungalow. I'm going to live in it."

I guffawed, feeling more like myself.

"And your bed. Do you have a bed, you vagrant?" I did. Quite a luxurious one, in fact. "Well, I am
going to sleep in it too," he declared.

"That, I will allow. But only if I am in it with you," I said and felt shock at my own daring words.

I grabbed him by the back of the neck and I kissed him hard. He stiffened in surprise. I pulled his
long raven hair and I forced him to kiss me back. I kissed him until he was breathless. "Four
fucking years and you didn't tell me you were finally coming." I was outraged and ecstatic and
everything in between.

"You know I can't reveal our movements."

"That you were all coming! Those women - they are your blood sisters?"

"Yes."

"You utter asshole."

He laughed at me and I smothered his beautiful, full mouth with my hand and bit his neck. Not
enough to draw blood, but enough to make him writhe. I couldn't stop biting and licking him. He
rewarded me by moaning and shivering louder each time. His slim whip of his frame was so lean
and long underneath me. Two of my fingers slipped past his lips and he sucked them with a lusty,
dark look in his eyes. Without thinking, I yanked his leggings down around his hips and flipped him
over.

"Eric!" he barked. I pushed up his tunic, exposing his smooth, porcelain rear. I slapped it and
jerked his hips against me.

"You're going to sit on my cock, Amla. Right now," I whispered in his ear. I had him by the throat
and the waist. He began to melt into my hold. "Right now," I told him. His head dropped and he
ground against my throbbing erection. He sunk onto me and fell forward, overwhelmed. The globes
of his buttocks were perfection under my hands.

"You want it," I said. He sobbed something incoherent. "Tell me yes or I'll stop."

"I want it. I've always wanted it," he cried and slammed back on every inch I had to give him. I felt
him let me take possession of him, opening to me, begging me for pleasure. I took him there in the
dead winter grass, rough and hard, pounding his firm frame with a domineering abandon that I
desperately needed, using all of my supernatural speed. He called out my name over and over in a
frenzied chant and he came fast and hard around my swollen cock. I fucked him through his orgasm and through another still, until I filled his beautiful body with a flood of seed.

We were spent and sticky and lay in a heap. I threaded a long tendril of his silky hair between my fingers and ran it over my lips repeatedly.

"Holy shit," Amleth said, breaking the silence. "Godrik is going to castrate me!"

"Was it worth it?" I asked.

"Yeah."

We both laughed hysterically. Somewhere in the back of my mind I knew this wasn't supposed to be funny, but I couldn't remember why. I held Amleth close and inhaled. "I cannot tell you how glad I am that you visited with him." We both knew who I meant. I was not at all equipped to deal with Tarquin's presence or how I felt about it.

"Just keep your bullshit to a minimum," he advised.

"I'm going to give him as wide a berth as possible."

"A wise choice."

We lapsed back into silence, Amleth's hair still wound in my fingers, my sea scent wreathed across his body.

<>

My eyes snapped open. I felt startled and extremely disoriented. My body was sluggish and heavy. Next to me in bed, Godrik was watching me curiously. "The sun has not yet set," he explained. I had never awoken so early.

Beyond the scrim of curtain that closed off our bedroom nook from the others in the basement, the rustling grunts and panting sounds from Tarquin's berth suggested that we weren't the only ones awake.

"What did you dream?" he asked as quietly as possible. I wasn't about to share the perverted weirdness my mind had concocted. "The dreams of our kind are rare, Eirikr. They are to be savored, revisited."

Since being reborn, I had not ever dreamt once that I could remember. And like my waking senses, I was reeling from how vivid and palpable this first experience of my dreamlife could be. "I'll tell you later," I whispered, hoping he would forget.

<>

"Eirikr," Godrik repeated. "Are you listening to me?" He was lecturing me while we hunted. Tarquin's brood would be staying with us for several weeks, he had explained.
"I heard you. I should watch out for Thea."

"Yes. She is the eldest and I was not around when she was made. I do not know her as well as I should. Do not go off by yourself with her."

"And Tarquin?" I asked coldly.

"Watch and learn from him."

"Do I have to obey him?"

Godrik smirked. "Would you?"

"No."

"Then I shan't waste air. Just be considerate. That is all I ask."

I wondered if pegging Tarquin's prized fairy hybrid progeny in the ass fell under 'being considerate,' but what the fuck did I know. Godrik was still talking and all I could think about was my dream. "Maker," I interrupted.

"What?" He pulled his cloak tighter around his shoulders. A storm had blown in from the west and the snow whipped around us in icy gusts. We were trying to get back home before it grew worse.

"I dreamt that I had sex with Amleth."

He looked at me blankly. "Okay."

"It was hot. Fast. Very rough."

"I see."

"Don't you care?"

"About what?"

I wanted to rip out my own hair. "Nevermind," I muttered.

He stopped me with a hand and looked up at me. "I told you, child, living in a nest has this effect. It riles everyone up and amplifies our instincts. But you are upset by this dream. Why?"

"Because you don't seem upset! I am giving serious thought to doing it for real just to spite Tarquin and you don't even care!" I growled in frustration.

Godrik actually grinned at my outburst. For a split second I contemplated slapping him. "You want me to be jealous."

"Yes! Of course!" Now I really thought about taking a swipe at him.

He looked thoroughly pleased. "Which is why I know I do not need to be jealous. You are mine, Eirikr. Mine." He squeezed my shoulder and I felt immediate relief. Leaving a ghost of a kiss at my temple, he added in a whisper, "Plus, if you ever tried something like that with me? I'd break your neck."
I quickly learned why Godrik warned me about nesting with other blood drinkers. A bland evening started out tamely enough. Everyone separated off into pairs to feed. As we all reconvened at the tower, Tarquin convinced Godrik to perform an old play he liked. Ignoramus that I was, I had never heard of it and was excited to see it acted out. We cleared the furniture in the living room to form a stage. Sibyl expertly folded spare sheets and pinned all of the actors into makeshift togas. The play was an amusing tale about a troublemaker faun - half god, half goat. Godrik was hilarious in the lead role and everyone but he laughed and broke character. I couldn't stop laughing either.

By the second act, however, things disintegrated. The two muses, Sibyl and Thea, began to make out. Tarquin made an impromptu revision, subbing in as the god Hermes, who apparently went clad in nothing more than an upturned bowl on his head and a cape. The faun abandoned the play entirely and without his attempts to keep to the script, the play devolved into an outright orgy. Sibyl was servicing a spread-eagled Tarquin while Thea loudly critiqued her sister's techniques. Amleth started to disrobe. Tarquin crooked a finger at me in invitation. I smiled and stood, then very purposefully turned my back to him and went downstairs.

Godrik was in bed, hidden behind the curtain. I crawled in and found him still wearing his faun costume. "Tarquin hijacked your show," I said.

"I expected nothing less."

"He is a complete jerk. He is loud and brash and self-centered."

"He is a lot of things." Godrik pulled off the goat horns tied around his head and put them on me. My transformation into a Greek demi-god amused him.

"I don't like it. This is your household," I said.

"Did he just proposition you?" Of course Godrik had heard. Nothing got past him. I nodded. "You refused him."

"You're god damned right I did."

Godrik smirked. "He's done nothing to deserve your scorn."

"Oh? He marches in and acts like he has a right to everything, including me."

Godrik seemed so calm. He ran his knuckles over my cheek. "I will tell you a secret – but only if you tell me one in return."

"Sure." I snuggled closer to him, pulling the covers up around our necks.

"Tarquin had not been reborn to darkness more than 30 years when I met him. He didn't know up from down. I was already something like 300? Probably older."

"You brought him up too?" I said, astonished.

"I wouldn't say I raised him. Not like Amleth, at least. And it is incomparable to you, my beloved child. But I have saved Tarquin's life more times than I care to remember and he has always looked up to me."
"Oh."

"Do not be fooled by his posturing. He is wildly intrigued by you. Odds are three to one that he'll be overthrown for having left Constantinople just to meet you. He could not resist staying away. It galls him that he cannot impress you with his gaudy palace and his hordes of servants and all his useless finery."

"Why do I feel like I'm caught in some screwed up power play between you two?"

Godrik gave me a funny look. "Because you are. All of us are tangled in webs of power. That is life."

"Is that why you made everything so nice for him?"

Godrik laughed and shook one of the goat horns on my headband. "Silly child. Is that what you think? I did it because it makes you happy. I would have taken great pleasure at making the whole lot of them sleep in the frozen ground up in the hills. But you are proud and I wanted you to be surrounded by beauty. I did not want you to feel dishonored by your maker in the company of others."

I bit my lips to hold back the tears. "So long as I am by your side, I always have beauty." Godric gave an embarrassed smile and pulled me to his chest. "I don't mind being spoiled, though," I added.

"I thought not," he chuckled and nuzzled my neck. "Now, quid pro quo. Tell me a secret."

I hummed in thought. "I will tell you, but you cannot laugh."

"Oh? You have me intrigued."

"I am serious. It is something that I hate that I like."

"Out with it, then." He was genuinely excited to hear something new about his progeny.

"You truly promise you won't laugh at me?"

Godrik became quite grave. He put his hand on my neck in the final place where he had finished turning me. "I swear on the blood and the blood of my blood."

I sighed, still mortified I was about to admit this to anyone. "You've heard my name in the tongue of the Angles?"

"Certainly. Eric."

I shivered and buried my face in a pillow, it affected me so deeply. The 'ayer' of the 'E' became an 'air,' like a gasp of pleasure, a whisper, a promise. "Say it again," I whispered through the down feathers. He did, fascinated by how greatly it impacted his Norseman. The sound of those consonants on his tongue, rolling in his accent, and lilting into the air...My body was helpless. I flushed with pleasure at the sound.

"Oh goodness," he said, and grabbing my horns, jumped on top of me. I had never seen Godric so ravenous. He stripped me in seconds. The beautiful clothes he had given me were in ruins on the floor. Before I could even comprehend what was happening, he was sucking my cock like a starved man. I came three times before he would even let me loose.
"Quite some time ago, I promised you something, Eric."

I clutched the sheets for control, dismayed at how I had been probably been loud enough for all of the city to have heard and how my maker was wielding my name at me. "What?"

Godrik grinned conspiratorially and kissed me again. "Tomorrow, you will talk with Tarquin. He'll have his advice, but you will also have your own."

"Oh Frey's dick," I swore. "What am I supposed to do now?"

"This is an important lesson. I want you to convince Tarquin and his girls – absolutely not Amla," he said, giving me a ferocious look to make sure I understood, "- convince them to take out Kaspar and his court." I must have laid there, unmoving, for a very long time. "Eirikr? I command you."

The order shuddered through me and I pitched forward. Godrik held me and he spoke sweet things into the shell of my ear while I tried to right myself from the shock of the command and how mad it sounded. He pushed me back so he could look deep into my eyes. "Eirikr? Eric..." A bizarre calm fell over me and I could have sworn it felt like a compulsion. I had only once before felt it - the night he glamoured me when I was human. "Use your handsomeness. You are very persuasive when you want to be. It only appears that you bother to employ it for women and your own pleasure. Use it. Should you succeed, I will tell you more about how I will give you the promise I made to you and Amleth in Roskilde."

My eyes widened. Godrik rolled over, pulling half the furs off of me. He had declared the conversation over and soon he was fast asleep.
"The Promise"

The evening thirst drew us from our resting places. I was refilling the wood box beside the hearth when Godrik casually announced that he would like to hunt with Thea that night. She blushed, beyond flattered, and put her arm around Godrik’s waist. He smiled coyly at her and wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

“Tarquin,” Godrik asked, pulling his companion closer and leaning into her side, “Would you be so good as to look after Eirikr tonight? We might return a bit late.” Thea’s eyes lit up at his suggestive words.

“It is an honor to have the company of your progeny,” Tarquin replied. The imposing Roman looked at me hungrily and clapped a paw over my back. "Shall we be off?"

We set out on a northerly dirt path and walked in silence. The crunching of our boots in the snow and the wind moving through the trees were the only sounds to be heard for leagues.

It gave me time to reflect on the intricacies of Godrik’s clever manipulation. It was so simple and seamless and yet achieved many goals at once. This time apart from each other gave me the opportunity to fulfill his command. It gave Godrik the chance to learn more about Thea. He remained distrustful of her. As he had taught me, observing how blood drinkers stalked and chose their victims revealed all kinds of information about them. No doubt, he would keep a keen eye on her and would expect me to watch Tarquin just as carefully.

Tarquin slipped an arm around mine after some distance. “I am glad we finally have a chance to speak alone.”

“As am I,” I said, entirely wary.

“Then you are no longer opposed to my presence here?”

“It is rather ironic that Godrik despises Romans and yet his best friend is the last king of Rome.”

“He is complicated.”

“Tell me about it.”

Tarquin laughed heartily and squeezed me hard, his armor and the sheath of his sword digging into me. “You don’t trust me, do you?”

I looked him dead in the eye. “No.”

He laughed again with his broad shark grin. “Good. Very good. I am an elder and a member of the Consul. You have every reason to distrust me. Godrik is teaching you well.”

“Godrik doesn’t need to teach me common sense.”

His mirth evaporated and his face hardened. He stepped uncomfortably close. “Godrik hasn’t taught you how to kill an ancient either. You’ll not accomplish that task with intuition alone.” He backed away and smiled again. “What are we going to do about that?”

“I’ve considered several options. May I seek your advice, Master Tarquin?”

He appeared intrigued. “Of course.”
“If I could quickly take out the sentries around Kaspar’s court without alerting the guards inside, I could then chain the entrances and burn the building to the ground.”

“Effective, Eirikr. It would indeed likely kill the regent. But every maker of the slaughtered innocents lost in the blaze would be after your head once they discovered that you were the engineer of their progenies’ deaths.”

I cursed fouly, recognizing how stupid I sounded. It was the best strategy I had concocted and it was idiotic.

“The trouble with immortality, young one,” Tarquin said, clasping my shoulder, “is that we have to put up with each other for a very long time. We have ages to unleash our wrath upon those who have committed blood offenses against us. You cannot kill others’ children in your pursuit of Kaspar.”

I outlined several other potential plans. Blow by blow, Tarquin picked them apart. I sounded increasingly foolish as he pointed out the gaping flaws in my ideas. But of course, that was the point. I was sacrificing my pride for a higher goal. “I’ll die in all of these scenarios, won’t I?”

Tarquin pursed his lips. “Far worse, Norseman. You would be captured, tortured, and subsequently ransomed to your maker. Godrik would likely die trying to save you. You would be confined and forced to starve for a year as punishment. Afterwards, you would either be sold off as chattel or be tortured further and killed. In your case, you are strong enough to serve as someone’s mercenary and you are pretty enough to end up as someone’s sex slave. Immediate death would actually be the best outcome should you pursue these paths.”

I shook my head and stopped walking. Facing him, I set my hands on the armored pauldrons of his shoulders and searched his face in desperation. “Tell me what to do, Master Tarquin. I need your help.”

He ran his calloused fingers down the length of my cheek. I mustered the sultriest look I could manage. He stepped closer. “I could kill him for you.”

“How?” I said, feigning shock. “You’re younger than Kaspar by many centuries and a beloved companion of my maker. No. No.” I stared at the ground and curled my hand around his neck. “I will not allow you to risk your life on my behalf, certainly not when this is a punishment for deceiving and hurting your progeny.”

Tarquin smiled. “Perhaps you underestimate me, child. I will go in under the auspices of a diplomatic mission. Such meetings are always private. It would isolate Kasper from his followers and his guardsmen. Thea will slit his throat ear to ear as we talk. That fiend has committed numerous acts which justify capital punishment from the Consul. Should any of his subjects somehow actually turn out to be loyal and demand an explanation, there are many charges we might offer to explain his execution. He has had this coming for a long time.”

I squeezed his shoulders. “It sounds like a brilliant plan, Tarquin! I had no idea your position of power could do such things. Sibyl should go too, don’t you think? Another beautiful woman in the room would be an excellent distraction. Kaspar loves lean thighs, so I’ve heard, and – no offence at all to your progeny, sir – but Sibyl does have exquisite legs.” I hummed, appearing distracted. “Amleth, though.” I sucked at a cheek. “Another male might be perceived as a threat. Better to have him protect the home base.”

Tarquin fingered one of the ends of my braids, contemplating my words and seemingly fascinated by my North Country fashions. He was far too old and far, far too close to me. It took all of my
composure to remain calm.

“Will Godrik allow it, do you think?” I asked. “Is this cheating his command?”

He shrugged. “Who knows what that wildling Celt will do. No one can predict him. There’s not much he can do once Kaspar is a pile of goop. We will kill him easily. If Godrik punishes you too severely, I will intervene.”

“Thank you,” I sighed in relief. I took his arm by the elbow. “So.” He looked slightly surprised that I would grasp his forearm in the Roman way. “What do you expect in return?” I asked.

Tarquin huffed a laugh. “Clever boy.” He squeezed my arm. “I expect your respect and your fealty to my bloodline henceforth.”

I stared him down for an uncomfortably long time. “Agreed.” We shook on it and he pulled me forward in an embrace, scenting me at a terrifyingly close range. Tarquin paused to run his nose over the crook of my neck. I heard the snick of his teeth and for a split second I thought for certain he was going to bite me. I was ready to scream out for my maker in the bond.

“It is a shame Godrik would kill me if I drank from you unwillingly,” he whispered into my ear.

“Yes. A shame.” I pulled back to meet his gaze. “A shame, too, that I am so very, very unwilling,” I warned.

He laughed and clapped me on the back and suggested a nearby hamlet where we might find our meals.

<>

When we returned to the sentry tower, Godrik was already there. Thea did not get the exciting evening Godrik had implied. She was sulking on the settee and gave me a nasty look.

"Ah, Eirikr," my maker said, coming up the stairs from the basement. "Shall we do a quick patrol?"
He led me up to the third floor landing. “Were you successful?” he whispered. I gave him a patronizing look. He smirked. “I see. Very good. What else did you learn this evening?”

We spoke in low, nearly inaudible voices. “Tarquin is fast. Very fast. Not nearly as quick as you and he hunts differently too. He takes unsuspecting women and they never see who has snatched them. They never even feel his bite. He drinks briefly, then glamours them away. To make up for his short feeds, he takes several to slake his thirst.”

“What of the women he chooses?” Godrik pressed.

“They are comely and well-proportioned like his progeny.”

A hint of smile curled at the edge of his mouth. “You have done well, child. What do you make of Tarquin’s character from this knowledge?”

“He is far more merciful than he lets on. His countenance, his bearing, and manners - everything is rough and brusque and seemingly cruel, but I now suspect he is quite fair and even-handed with his subjects. He does, however, have a dangerously love of power and he expects to be the one to adjudicate all things around him.” I paused. “Am I close?”

“Oh, you are spot-on. It does, however, sound suspiciously like someone else I know.” Godrik glared at me for a painfully long time.
I understood his meaning perfectly well. I didn’t have the patience for it that evening, however. “You’ve asked me to risk our friends’ lives sending them into Kaspar’s court. Weren’t you trying to teach me *not* to jeopardize our allies?”

“Three against one offers excellent odds, regardless of age differences. Kaspar will be alarmed to have the High Counselor and two of his most fearsome lieutenants march into his court.”

"Wait, Sibyl? Fearsome?"

"Oh, ho, ho, my boy. You *must* learn not to judge by appearances. She’s as dangerous as they come. But she’s deeply loyal to her maker and doesn’t act outside of his orders, which is why she shows promise."

"Kitten with claws. I like it."

"In any case, as you’ve gleaned from your spying, that useless regent is a peacock and he will want to demonstrate his importance by magnanimously receiving them before all of his followers, likely with ostentatious gifts. Then he will be cornered in an official Consul meeting, alone, and whatever Tarquin will say will get his immediate attention. He does not know that I have long been allied with Tarquin, nor that it was the Consul’s decision to send me a few centuries ago to broker a deal with him that, as I’m sure you’ve by now garnered, went horribly wrong. Sibyl will flirt with Kaspar subtlety and I imagine Tarquin will have Thea decapitate him while he isn’t paying attention.”

“That…that is almost precisely the plan Tarquin proposed. How could you -”

“Know my friend so well?” Godric laughed. “Using the authority of the Consul is one of the best ways to handle problems like Kaspar. Meditate on this in the coming days. When the deed is done, I want you to tell me what lesson you have learned.”

I bowed my head at him. Godrik tousled my hair and took my hand and we rejoined the others downstairs.

<>

Weeks later, raucous laughter filled the tower. Tarquin, Thea, and Sibyl were stripping out of blood-soaked clothes in front of the hearth. They were giddy with victory.

“I am going to wager that you paid Lord Kaspar a visit,” Godrik remarked calmly, looking up from his book at the crimson-splattered war party in his living room. “That job was my child’s to complete.”

“Kaspar is no more, my friend. Consider this a baptismal gift for you and your progeny,” Tarquin boasted. He shook out his destroyed clothing, splattering blood all over the carpet. I clenched my jaw at the mess.

“Did you encounter resistance?” Godrik asked.

“Only two of the older children. The rest of his offspring appeared to be relieved and his subjects even more so. Many thanked us. We found there were scores of others he had enslaved in the dungeons. We freed everyone with instructions to return to their makers or head south where they might be given employ by the Consul. You are still going to have some makerless wanderers that may need guidance or cause trouble in the area.”

Tarquin set a large, blood-soaked velvet pouch next to me. “Your crown, my sovereign of the
Rhinelands. As promised.”

I remembered the strange compulsion Godrik had placed on me. I smiled broadly and looked up at Tarquin with hooded eyes. “Thank you, High Counselor. Like my maker before me, I shall always endeavor to protect your bloodline as you protect ours.”

The flattery set an enormous grin on Tarquin’s face. He was all too pleased. The girls and he descended down into the catacombs to bathe in the fresh aqueduct water.

Godrik opened the pouch and held up the bloodied crown. He gave me a piercing look. “What have you learned from this, Eirikr?” He snapped sharply at Amleth. “You pay attention too.” Amleth was spread out on the settee with his long legs hanging over the armrest. He laid his manuscript down, shocked by the harsh summons from the ancient.

“I was never going to accomplish killing an older enemy alone,” I said. “I couldn’t have accomplished it with a band of paid militiamen. They would have run away the second they saw the certain death they faced. With my lowly station, I could not have managed to get him cornered and alone either. What I needed was an elder ally with power and influence who was willing to do the job for me.”

“Friends in high places, Eirikr.” He clanked the crown on a side table to emphasize his point. “Unless absolutely unavoidable, never be the hand holding the sword. Be the man behind a veil of unknown friends who would do anything to protect you. Be the shadow of those who wield high political positions. Cultivate your influence with them. Use your gifts without revealing them. Never be the fool wearing the crown. It is nothing but a golden target on your head.” He tossed it unceremoniously in a chest. “Why do you think I’ve forbidden Amleth from becoming an official Consul lieutenant?”

I turned to Amleth in surprise. I wondered whether Godrik’s order conflicted with his own maker’s desires. Maybe that is why they seemed to clash constantly. I couldn’t fathom Godrik’s rage if I were to follow someone else’s demands and defy his own. I’d finally learned the full extent of that lesson tonight. Five years. I had spent five long years atoning for disobeying him and tricking Amleth into going to Mainz with me.

“Amleth’s sisters are already at great risk as public figures in our world. Their movements are under constant scrutiny. Tarquin only needs to anger the wrong person and they will be targeted for his failures. By contrast, Amla appears no more than an errand boy. He slips through the empire and does as he pleases, which makes him far more deadly.”

“Will all your teachings be so fucking roundabout?” I inquired.

“There was nothing ‘roundabout’ in this. As you’ve struggled to resolve the puzzle I set before you, you have learned many valuable hunting and tracking skills in the belief that you could actually best a 2200 year old blood drinker in a court full of his subjects. Tarquin risks his children today by making an enemy. You are already at great risk from the many enemies I made long before you were born.”

I nodded vigorously, accepting his explanation.

“Very well. Amleth?” he said quietly, turning to him. “Get three fresh sheets and several fibula brooches from my wardrobe.” Amleth was quick to his feet and out the door.

Godrik touched my shoulder to get me to lean my ear down to his mouth. “You still need to work on that rude mouth of yours, but I am very proud of what you have accomplished. A promise is a
promise, child. Our other guests are bloodlusted from the fight and they shall be occupied in the pools for some time.” He looked up at me with sin and total mischief in his eyes. I swallowed hard in anticipation.

Amleth returned with the items. Godrik pulled his tunic off with one arm and slipped out of his leggings. Amleth responded immediately and wreathed his body with the fabric, creating defined pleats as he went. "Tsk! A himation, not a toga," Godrik corrected. He wanted a Greek garment, not a Roman one. Amleth unwound the sheet and began again, folding it around him reverently, as though he were dressing a god. He wrapped Godrik’s narrow waist loosely with the cloth, flipping one corner outwards so that it hung down in a draped triangle just above his navel.

“Do you wish to wear the amethyst or the ruby fibulas?”

“Keep the amethyst for yourself, Amla. Violet flatters you far better.”

Amleth pinned the garment at his hip and pulled the remaining edge under his left armpit and slung it over his shoulder. I looked on in fascination. My maker was stunning in this foreign fashion. It left his biceps and chest bare, highlighting his striking tattoos. Amleth stepped back to examine his handiwork. He fussed with a few of the folds at his stomach and on his shoulder. "There. You look every bit the philosopher. Or perhaps Zeus himself. Shall we dress Ganymede next?” he asked with a sly smile.

Godrik raised an eyebrow at his cheekiness. "I don't recall that Ganymede wore much. I'm sure Eirikr can manage getting stark naked all by himself when the time comes. I believe it is your turn."

Amleth stripped down to his loincloth. Godrik took one of the other sheets and quickly doubled it across itself, shortening it by half. He repeated the process with the other and pinned the folded edges at Amleth's shoulders, letting the collar of his chiton hang very low across his chest.

"Arms up." Godrik grabbed his own thin corded rope belt from his pile of clothes on the floor and tied it around Amleth's waist. When Amleth lowered his arms, it left his hem so short it barely covered the tops of his thighs. Looking down at his costume, Amla furrowed his brow. “You’ve dressed me like a youth!”

"And indeed you are. What were you reading just now?"

“Herodotus. But if we are to stage a play I should perhaps get my copy of Aeschylus. I also brought some pieces of Euripides if you think those are more suitable.”

“We are not staging a play. Your text will serve its purpose. This evening we shall instruct Eirikr in Greek customs.” Godrik looked at me and sent me a silent message. “Do not be jealous. You will have your turn. Enjoy watching.”

Amleth brought the manuscript and stood before Godrik, confused. “Which passage shall I narrate, sir?”

Godrik dragged a chair to the center of the den. “I believe we made a deal in Roskilde, Amleth. Tonight I shall make good on my promise.” Amleth froze in shock. Godrik patted his leg. “Sit down, boy. Demonstrate your excellent pronunciation to Eirikr. His Greek remains rudimentary at best.” Amla sat slowly, unsure whether such a transgression was truly allowed. He turned to Godrik as if to confirm that this was acceptable, stunned to be sitting in his lap. "Read,” Godrik ordered.
Amleth began reciting an entry in the history text. I was puzzled as to why this was supposed to be interesting. My Greek still sucked as Godrik so kindly pointed out and I could not really follow. When Godrik’s hands began to roam down Amleth’s arms, I sat forward. Amleth stuttered.

“You mispronounced several words, child,” Godrik chastised. “Keep going.” He tried his best, but Godrik was slowly, tantalizingly, pulling up the edge of his short chiton and running his fingertips across Amleth’s half-bare chest. He gasped when Godrik pinched a nipple and stroked the inside of his thigh. “So many errors, my young scholar.” Amleth tried to focus on the passage. No sooner had he redoubled his efforts than he felt Godrik’s hand slip underneath his loincloth. He arched his back and moaned. “Another mistake and I will have to punish you,” his ‘tutor’ warned.

Amleth tried to enunciate the lines of the text as accurately as possible, but he had an obscene tent in his clothes and could barely focus. Godrik began nibbling at his earlobe and neck and Amleth dropped the sheaves of parchment to the ground. “But this will not do, young one.”

“Forgive me, Master.”

Godrik stopped him before he could pick up the text. “Bend over the settee. You are a disobedient pupil and do not take your studies seriously.” Amleth did as he ordered. Godrik flipped up his tunic and slowly pulled off his loincloth, exposing his bare bottom to the cool night air. He gave it a soothing, promising rub. Gooseflesh prickled across Amleth’s skin. If he could have blushed, he would have.

Godrik looked at me and smiled. The sound of the smack reverberated off the walls. He spanked Amleth with a tiny fraction of his strength. It was plenty enough to sting and turn Amleth’s round ivory cheeks pink. The reprimand made him even harder and he bounced rudely with every strike. Godrik pulled him upright by a hank of his hair. He took Amla’s unsteady hand and placed it over his own rock-hard erection. “See what you have done?” Amleth lost whatever last bit of composure he possessed. “I will have to remedy your misbehavior and fix how your lusty, wanton ways have gotten the better of you.”

Amleth sunk to his knees. Godrik pulled him up and snapped at the stairwell. “Go to my bedchamber and wait.”

I stood once we were alone, I was as painfully aroused as I was baffled. “What the-”

“It is merely a game – one he likes very much. There are many things you do not yet know about the world. In Greece, mentors were extremely important. They taught young men everything they needed to know. It was accepted and expected that they would seduce their pupils slowly and induct them into the world of pleasures too, though the youths were always supposed to be a bit coy and reluctant about such attentions. It is simply about the interplay between an elder dominant and a younger submissive partner – the erastes and the eromenos, as they were called. If he could have his way, he’d rather I took the role of the submissive because of my appearance. It is what he has always wanted.”

"You don't like submitting."

"I am a millennium older than him. I will always be the erastes. But I'm feeling generous tonight."

“You wish me to watch, then?”

Godrik grinned conspiratorially. “Oh no. I rather thought we would ravage him together.”

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Godrik pulled the gauzy material of the sleeping berth aside. I stood behind him at his shoulder. Amleth was splayed out on the mattress and looked exquisite in the candlelight. His hair was a pool of ink and his frame was long and lean. “You’re still dressed,” Godrik said, acting annoyed. He took off the fibula pins holding Amla’s pupil’s tunic together and tossed them to the floor, uncaring that they were made of gold and encrusted with jewels. He hopped to the far side of the bed and I sat at the edge to Amla’s left.

“You taught my child to read and write a few basic scripts in a single night,” Godrik said. “Though I do seem to recall that you made some interesting edits to Ovid.” Amleth grinned. “I appreciated your help and now you both shall have your reward.” He grasped the edges of Amleth’s tunic and pulled it down slowly to his waist. He undid the knotted belt with his teeth while Amla looked on in disbelief. Then Godrik ripped the entire thing off and threw it out of the sleeping nook.

I laid down next to Amleth, the scent of his hair in my nose. “I had my first dream as a nightwalker not long ago.”

“Oh?”

I placed a hand on his chest and kissed his delicate collarbone and put my mouth to his ear to whisper softly. “It was of you. And me. Together.” Again he broke out into goosebumps.

“Were you any good?” Amleth asked with a wry smile.

I snorted. “You’ll have to tell me.”

When Amleth felt the sudden soft wetness of my mouth swallowing down his length, he cried out and gripped the furs on the bed. I held his hands down. “Look at me,” I paused to say. I wanted to see those dark glittering eyes watch me as I pleasured him.

Godrik studied Amleth’s face in fascination. “It’s true. He is good.”

“Oh…yes…good,” he said breathlessly.

Godrik smiled, caressing his cheek. “But not as good as me,” he said with a secretive smile and slithered his way down Amla’s body, pasting a trail of kisses from his neck to the fine downy trail leading to his sex. He nudged me to the side. Godrik knelt between his legs and stroked his thighs, sliding his hands under his knees. Without warning, he gave them a sharp pull, dragging Amleth down the bed and splaying him wide. Amleth laughed in surprise. Godrik adjusted his own position, spreading his legs wider and crooking his ankles over his shins to lock him in place. Amleth was wide-eyed and looked like he might faint. My maker tilted his head to the side and his eyes unfixed, the way did when he was considering something.

When he attacked, Amleth shouted, unprepared. Godrik licked long stripes up the insides of his thighs, nipping them. He lavished the creases of his groin. His hands were everywhere but the one place Amla needed them to be the most. His tongue wandered south over the heavy hills of his sac and even further south to that most sensitive place between his cheeks. Amleth clutched at me desperately then, digging his nails into my skin. When he saw Godrik’s absurdly beautiful mouth descend on his sensitive head – a scene he had fantasized about for centuries – he really did almost lose consciousness. Godrik was relentless, taking him to the hilt, slipping a finger, then two, into him, and growling hungrily to send vibrations through his whole body. Amleth had no control over the sounds that came from him then.

“He’s being loud, Eirikr. Give him something to keep him quiet.” I raised an eyebrow. It was always a bit shocking when Godrik was raunchy. I pulled myself out of my leggings and Amleth
latched onto my girth immediately. As it happened, I had long harbored a similar fantasy. Amla took as much of my length as he could manage and he sucked me in the same rhythm Godrik was using to quickly destroy him. I couldn’t help but grab the back of his head and thrust deeper. Amleth pulled off of me abruptly. “Ah, no!” he hissed and his fangs snapped down. Godrik stopped just before his orgasm, gripping him firmly at the base.

“Please. Please, Godrik!”

“I think it’s Eirikr’s turn. Perhaps you would like to show him what you dreamed, child?”

My jaw literally dropped. I glanced at Amleth, then at my maker. “No, Godrik. He’s so much stronger than me. He won’t let me…”

“He’ll allow it. He will like it.”

“What will I like?” Amleth looked up at me expectantly. I kissed him tenderly, then rolled him over onto his belly. Taking a cue from my maker, I slapped his immaculate ass hard. He moaned something incoherent, then startled when he felt the drizzle of oil down his backside. I slicked myself as well and knelt on my knees. I grabbed a chunk of his beautiful silken hair and pulled him against my chest, where I dragged my fangs over his throat. “You are going to sit on my cock.” I held him close by the neck and waist. “Right now,” I demanded. “Tell me you want it.”

“I…I do. I always have.” He was already grinding on me involuntarily.

“What have you wanted, raven-haired lover?”

“To feel you. All of you.”

“You want Godrik to watch me take you? Do you think he'll touch himself seeing how well I wreck you with pleasure?” He groaned helplessly. “I’m going to give you every inch of my attention and then some. Now sit down.” He eased himself down, gasping at the huge stretch, then without any prompting, began riding me with abandon. Once I was certain he could take it, I pushed him on all fours hard. Still holding a handful of his hair and a hip, I began pounding into him roughly. His slim svelte body under my control was glorious. I threw my head back in ecstasy.

“Say my name,” I ordered.

“Eirikr!”

“No, my name.”

“Eric. Eric!” he cried. He kept crying it out and I was nearly about to lose it. So was he.

Godrik placed a hand on my bicep, halting me.

“No, No! Don’t stop,” he begged.

"Please, maker..."

“Patience boys.”

“But it’s been hours!” Amleth complained.

“Yes, it has. I thought you liked to be edged, Amla? Perhaps you don’t want what comes next.”

Godrik handed him his favorite oil. He unwrapped himself out of his himation in the most seductive way possible, showing off his muscles and form through each slow twist of fabric. Once
he was nude, he sprawled out and ran his hands over his body suggestively, displaying his powerful thighs. “I will play this part for you tonight, just this once.”

Amleth swore in incredulity. “You mean…?”

I had never seen Godrik do it purposefully, but he morphed his features into the sweetest, doe-eyed boy possibly in existence. Gods above, he wasn't joking about knowing the erotic arts.

Amleth spent nearly half an hour just rubbing fragrant oil into his thighs, massaging them, running his lips over them. Not once did he touch him elsewhere. “An ideal made flesh - the very image of male beauty,” he wept.

Godrik looked away shyly. Amleth raised him to his knees. “Like this. From the front. So I can see you,” Godrik suggested. He looked over Amla’s shoulder to me. “Another Mediterranean specialty,” he explained. I was still not sure what they meant to do.

Amleth embraced him and slid himself between Godrik’s thighs. “Oh gods,” he breathed. He thrust again and let his head fall on Godrik’s shoulder. He was panting and moaning while Godrik whispered sweet words into his ear, praising him and caressing his hair and back. Godrik looked over his shoulder and crooked a finger at me. Amla took me easily once more and was pinned between us, getting pleasured from both sides. When we were all frenzied and nearly about to explode, Godrik quickly bit his wrist and offered it to me before pressing Amleth to his neck and biting into him as well.

The effect was earth shattering.

Godrik was the first to collapse back onto the bed, followed by Amleth and me. Godrik threaded his arms around both of us. “This is nice,” he said quietly. I snuggled into him and Amleth turned to look at my maker. The ancient stared at him for the longest time with soft eyes and a slight ribbon of a smile. His fingers ran up and down the length of Amleth’s arm as he pondered something.

“AFTER tonight, you are mine,” he finally said. Amleth sucked in a ragged breath and I looked up in equal astonishment. “You are mine, Amleth of Cumbria. I claim you as a child of my house and line. I wish for you to be at my side and that of my progeny’s. He needs your guidance and we both would like your companionship. I will ask Tarquin to allow you to stay with us, if you should find such an arrangement acceptable.”

Amleth blinked back crimson tears. He nodded vigorously. Words were trapped in his throat.

“There is not a single piece of news that I hear from Constantinople that assuages my concerns. I do not want you anywhere near the Consul right now,” Godrik said. “War is in the air. You belong at my side and that of your brother. Your maker may not easily be swayed, but you know I usually get my way.”

Amleth bit his lip.

“I had my part in your turning and I have raised you and loved you for nearly three centuries. To see you and my progeny so happy together and helping one another…” Godrik lost the words to describe what such a thing meant. He had only recently begun relearning how to express emotions.

For Amleth to hear Godrik say that he loved him- it was a life-altering moment. He could not hold back the dam of tears. He began to sob against Godrik’s chest.

“Sshh, min bror Amlóði,” I said. “It is true. We love you. You are family,” I told him, rubbing his
cheek. "I missed you every night that you were away these five years."

Godrik wiped away the tears pooling between his pecs and licked them from his fingers.

“If war breaks out, what of my other kin?” Amleth asked, his voice cracking.

“I can only promise to shelter Sibyl and your brother Arun.”

“Just them?”

“Tell me. What do you think of your eldest sister Thea?”

He furrowed his brow. “She’s a very capable fighter. Cunning. Intelligent. She shadows Master often to learn the ways of politics.”

“Can she be difficult?” I looked at my maker, wondering just what precisely he had observed when out hunting. I could feel his deep apprehension in our bond.

“She sometimes fights Master’s orders when none of us dare to do so. She resents Arun for being the eldest and does things to undermine him. She picks on Sibyl and me. Just little cruel things behind Master’s back though. It’s nothing serious.”

“And the youngest of your brood?”

“Calla and Sonia? She sees them as no threat. She doesn’t bother them.”

Godrik rapidly shifted away from his interrogation. “Food is hard to procure in the north country. We simply cannot all be in this territory. If it truly grows ugly in the capitol, I will find safe houses for everyone else in your bloodline and the rest of those I protect. Have I ever failed you?”

“No, of course not,” he said. He clasped Godrik, nuzzling the garland of indigo spikes trailing across his neck. As daybreak began to pull us under, Amleth pressed his lips to Godrik's temple and sighed. "Thank you. I love you, Goði. I swear I will always bring honor to your bloodline.”

Godrik pulled us both closer. "Our bloodline,” he corrected.
"You Dare"

Chapter Notes

For Uki96, who wanted more.

Quick note on the geography of the old kingdoms mentioned in this chapter:
Dál Riata = western Scotland and northeastern Ireland.
Northumbria = northern UK, bit of S. Scotland.

Amleth and I were fooling around in bed. The household had left for the evening and we were still lounging about pleasing each other. I’d tried to make an advance on Godrik at sundown but he just pointed to Amleth’s sleeping berth and walked off. Sating my unusually high sex drive was really a problem – even more so now with the effects of being in a nest. If I could have had my way, I’d have wasted Godrik’s entire nights pursuing carnal delights, so greatly did I crave him. Secretly I think he was slightly glad to have a trustworthy blood drinker to help relieve him of my constant pestering.

As we lay there, a thunderous rage suddenly tore through the bond with my maker and Amleth froze too, having felt it in the thin bond he shared with Godrik. I thought I knew how terrifying his temper was. I had never felt this before.

“Get off me. Move!” I shoved Amleth aside, jumped into my leggings, and flew up the stairs. He followed right behind me.

Tarquin and his girls were standing in the den with two humans. “Oh holy gods,” Amla swore and grabbed me and threw me behind him to protect me. He crowded us both backwards towards the basement doorway. I did not understand precisely the scene we found before us, but it was clear there was about to be a deadly brawl between two elders. Amleth understood the problem and was ready to bolt. Sibyl was pressed against the far wall and kept looking at Amleth and me, considering running to hide with us.

Godrik had his head lowered and let out a knee-quaking growl of fury. His immense power unfurled so ferociously into the air that everyone flinched. “You dare. You dare violate the sanctity and security of my resting ground. You dare cross me.”

Tarquin rolled his eyes. “Godrik, calm down. We’ll have a little fun with them. No one saw us enter.” In a flash so fast I couldn’t even track it, my maker snapped both the humans’ necks and they dropped to the ground.

“What the fuck!? That was our dinner!” Thea said.

Godrik turned slowly towards her. “No one will be eating tonight except for me. You’re going to be my meal.” He fell on her and instantly overpowered her, then savagely bit into her neck. He began glutting down her blood in huge gulps.

“Godrik! My child!” Tarquin cried. Godrik held up a single finger to keep him from trying to intervene and Tarquin actually stepped back in fear of what he might do next.
Godrik drained Thea within an inch of her life and threw her down. Standing over her with balled fists, he spat, “That is the only warning you will ever get from me, Thea Tarquinii. Question me so disrespectfully again and it will be the last thing you ever say.”

“I tried to remind Master of your rule,” Sibyl said meekly, shaking in terror.

“Gods above, Godrik!” Tarquin shouted. “She’ll take months to fully heal!”

“Silence, you fool. You be grateful you’re both not dead. You will never put my children at risk again.”

“Children? Have you turned another already?” he asked, baffled.

Godrik sneered and sucked at his fangs. “I was going to give you the courtesy of asking nicely, but since you’ve chosen to compromise my presence in this territory by playing with your food inside my lair against my express orders, I will simply tell you what is going to happen. You are going to pack up and leave my area before sunrise. Do your job and resolve the impending crisis in the south so I don’t have to go down there and fix your utter incompetency. I had zero interest in winning another supe war for you before tonight and I certainly have far less desire to do so now. Amleth will not be returning with you. I have claimed him and he is now mine. He wishes to stay with me.”

Tarquin ran a hand over his mouth in shock. “Do you…do you wish to be released, child? Is that it?” he asked Amleth.

Amla shook his head. “No Master. But I am honored to be both a Tarquinii and a Godrikson. I always have been, in truth. I shall stay with them for a time.”

“You will not summon him south with a maker’s call until I permit it. Do not even think of testing me, Lucius Tarquinius. You do not want to find me on your doorstep for having defied me. I have allowed you too many liberties and you forget that I am very much your elder. In the meantime, educate your other children. You are going to get more of them killed if you do not smarten up and hold to the principles I have taught you.” Thea was still writhing around on the ground. “That one?” Godrik gestured at her. “You need to reign her in and keep her on a much shorter leash.”

“I apologize, old friend. This is not how I wish to part.”

“I could care less what you want right now.”

They stared at each other for a tense moment until Tarquin bowed his head and went to gather up his things and say goodbye to Amleth. With the situation slightly diffused, I let out a breath I didn’t know I was holding.

As our guests went to leave, Tarquin turned back to Godrik, who was still standing his ground in the middle of the den. “I know we have had our disagreements…”

“This is not a disagreement. This is you being simply wrong in your actions. I will send word to you soon and see if you finally see the truth.”

“Fare thee well, old friend. Goodbye Eirikr.”

“And leave the cart and horse. You can walk back to Constantinople.”

They left and I put a tentative hand on my maker’s shoulder. He looked up at me and just shook his head. “Do you understand why what they just did is completely, entirely unacceptable?”
I had a vague idea. Only once had Godrik ever brought humans to our resting ground - the night I rose a blood drinker and had to be immediately fed.

“You do not ever draw attention to the place where you die for the day. It is why we take our meals where we find them or take them somewhere else. We will have to leave now.”

“Leave our tower?” I cried.

“We will lock it up and bring what we can.”

“If a village or town suddenly becomes suspicious of us,” Amleth added, “they might gather a mob and capture us during the day and burn us at the stake. The daytime is obviously our greatest weakness and humans are superstitious.”

Godrik nodded. “There is no land I have ever journeyed to that does not have some sort of myth about our kind, however ridiculous. It doesn’t help that we know there are a few rogue blood drinkers in the area now too. There could easily be other creatures capable of cloaking themselves we haven’t detected. Humans may not have noticed that idiot bringing clumsy, slow moving blood bags here, but another supernatural might have seen.”

“So we’ll move back up into the hills?”

“No. I’m taking us elsewhere. In 20 or 30 years most of the people in the surrounding towns will be dead and no one will remember. We can come back.”

“Can we go back to Svealand?” I asked, nursing a spark of hope that we might return to my homelands.

“It was hard enough with just the two of us and those interminable summer days and everyone starving in the winter. Go get whatever chests you want and load them onto the cart down in the ravine.”

Amleth started helping me. After the eighth chest we brought up to the landing, he stopped and chewed his cheek. “Godrik?” he called downstairs.

“What?”

“There’s no way a single horse can take this baggage and the three of us. The books and clothing are fine but all these chests of treasure are going to be too heavy.”

He came up to look. “Indeed. Eiríkr, pick which gold and gems you want to bring and sink two of these down in the aqueduct. It’s pitch black and no one will find them.”

We lashed everything together and covered it with a tarpaulin. Taking one last look around our first home, I ran a hand over the swirls Godrik etched into the lintel and sighed. I supposed we’d be back to sleeping in the ground.

Godrik directed us north and we started back up the winding road we had traveled together five years before. Amleth drove at a fairly clipped pace and we moved through the night quickly.

I put a hand on my maker’s leg. “Are you okay?” He grunted. I could tell he was still deeply disturbed. “Has it ever been that bad between you two?” Amleth looked over his shoulder back at us. It was clear from his face that the answer was a decided ‘no’.

Godrik was quiet for a long time. “I very nearly killed him. My oldest friend. I would have
“I’ve decided where we are going,” he announced.

“Hopefully not back to Denmark. I don’t think they’d be too welcoming.” Amleth laughed at his own joke.

“Once we get to the end of the Germanic Limes roads, we’ll head west. We’re going to my island.”

“You have an island?!” I said incredulous.

“Of sorts. We’re going to the Kingdom of Dál Riata. You’ve often asked about where I came from.”

“You’re going to show me your homelands?”

He nodded. “I have not been there in ages. The Gaelic is not even remotely close to what I speak, but no one speaks that now except for me. We’ll pass through Amleth’s country as well on our way. The mainland highlands of Dál Riata are about as far away from Constantinople as you can get and no weres or fae live on the islands. We’ll be safe if war comes.”

“Who is the blood drinker lord there?”

He gave a secretive smile. “On the island which I claimed long ago? Me. No one lives on Gòmastra, or what you would call in Norse, Goðrmaðrey Island.”

My jaw dropped. “The warrior priest’s island?”

“It’s close enough to other islands and the mainland that we can easily get meals, but no one is going to know we’re there. Amla? Do you happen to know who’s running the mainland now?”

“Erm, I believe it’s a Pict named Maelchon.”

“Ah, yes. I know him. This is very good indeed. He’s known to be fair but he’s much younger than me. We can take care of him easily if he becomes a problem.”

“Do you just wipe out every court you encounter?” I asked teasing him.

“Oh brother Eric, this is Godrik being mild-mannered and tame. You should hear the stories people tell of the Boy Death. He used to lay waste to whole swaths of the world.”

Godrik just shrugged and I started laughing uncontrollably.

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Over the following months, we wended into Gaul and crossed the sea into the land of the Angles, working our way up to Northumbria. Amleth found it hilariously amusing to be back in the place of his birth.
“When were you last here?” I asked.

“Not since I was human.”

We wandered around in circles as Amleth tried to relocate his hometown. We came across a number of ruins and sometimes unnatural fields which had clearly once been inhabited. “Huh,” he finally said one night. “I think it’s disappeared. Oh well. Probably for the best. That place was a dump. Shall we move on?”

Godrik chose to keep us there briefly wanting to expose me to the language of the Angles and to give me a crash course in Gaelic. Amleth helped me practice as we made our evening rounds for a bite to eat. I found I liked the sound of English (and of course, most especially the sound of my name in it) and the Gaelic wasn’t very difficult. The area was a good place to pause in our journey. In a number of towns, human tribes of Angles and invading Saxons were fighting each other and the battlefields made for very easy feeding.

Soon we were on the move again. Reaching the highlands, the terrain became quite dramatic and beautiful – impressive, shapely mountains and plunging valleys threaded with ribbon-like streams. Godrik grew increasingly frisky, fascinated to see how his homelands had transformed.

We were nearing the stronghold of the blood drinker king Maelcon one evening when Godrik stopped dead in his tracks. “There are others here.”

How the devil his senses were so keen I do not know. I did not pick up their scent for another ten minutes and we did not encounter them for another twenty. It was a pair of blood drinkers. At a great distance one hailed us and called out in Gaelic. “We mean you no harm, friends.”

“That’s what they all say right before they try to slit your throat,” I quipped and Amleth snorted. They approached and one of the strangers started bumping the other with his elbow to get his attention. “My gods. Look. It is the Boy Death!” Godrik’s tunic was open wide at the throat and they had seen his unmistakable markings. They bowed humbly, afraid to hold Godrik’s gaze.

“We are honored, sir.” They quickly introduced themselves. “Shall you reside in this territory long? King Maelcon would undoubtedly be pleased to host one so powerful and feared as you in his court.”

“No. I have my own territory in the isles of the Inner Hebrides.”

“Ah, I see. If you wish, please join us at our blood brothel. We have many delicious options, all well glamoured, and we can water and feed your horse while you partake.”

Godrik considered the invitation. Amleth and I looked at him hopefully, but I was surprised when he actually accepted. “I do believe I am feeling ravenous,” he said. “I must warn you, however, that whichever of your stock I select, they will not survive. What is your restitution fee?”

“We will happily waive it for you.”

“How generous. Lead the way then.”
In the stone building, Godrik surveilled the common area. I knew he was tabulating exactly who else of our kind was inside. Judging no one there to be a threat he could not handle, he pointed out four of the nude humans lounging about. “Where is my room?” he asked.

“Right this way, sir.”

“Come.” He snapped at the three women and young man he had picked. His eyes had gone black with hunger and glittered strangely.

“I didn’t think you indulged in this sort of thing,” I whispered in Norse.

He looked up at me. “I haven’t in over a century because…well, you’ll see why.”

Amleth and I made our own selections and departed to each of our assigned quarters.

My feed was decent enough and the woman plenty talented, but I was distracted the entire time by wild twisting sensations coming from Godrik’s end of the bond. His thoughts were snarly and indecipherable. I couldn’t fathom why he had taken four humans or what his intent was in doing so. He never had sex with his victims. Amleth rapped on my door and I gave my whore a light smack on the bum and sent her off.

“All done?” he asked.

“Yeah, how was yours?”

“Fine. He certainly seemed to enjoy it.”

We knocked on Godrik’s door. When he bade us enter, I pushed the door wide and stood there in shock. Bodies lay crumpled on the floor, throats viciously torn out. There was blood painted over the sheets and walls – even sprayed up on the ceiling. The room reeked of sex and death. Godrik sat on the edge of the bed quietly.

“Uh…maker?” The ancient man who still looked like an innocent boy looked up at me, hands folded in his lap. “What happened?”

He belched he was so full. “I feasted.”

“You can say that again. I didn’t know you had sex with humans.” Something feral had come unchained in him, a beast usually kept caged. Was this what the Boy Death looked like? I had seen him kill to protect me. I knew he could be extraordinarily dangerous. I’d watched him rip a man into red ribbons for being vile. But this? He had never fed like this.

As we walked to find resting places, Godrik glamourd a passerby to guard our cart for the day and threatened him with death if he or anyone else robbed us. Digging out my earthen den, I kept thinking about the violent tableau my maker had left in his brothel room. It appealed to every primal instinct our kind possessed: to feed, to fornicate, to kill, to wield our immense powers. Giving in to those desires gave great pleasure. But Godrik usually only drained his meals when they were undernourished, albeit efficiently and without trauma. Tonight he had been out of control. Considering further who he typically ate, I stopped mid-shovel. There was a pattern that had been right in front of me and I’d been blind. I’d never seen him look slightly rosy or so pink-lipped. Odin’s beard! He hadn’t been joking when he said he was ravenous.

I got in his face. “God dammit, Godrik! Have you been starving yourself?” He stared at me impassively. “Have you been taking less so that I can have more? Eating the weak so that I get the healthiest? Perhaps not eating at all when you say you’re going to hunt alone?”
“I wondered when you would notice.”

“What? WHY would you do that?!”

“Why do you think?”

I bit my tongue so as to not let out a litany of curse words at him. “I do not want to hear your riddles. Answer me!”

He took a menacing step forward and dropped fang. “To make you strong. To keep our presence hidden when all we had were tiny hamlets and villages to feed in. To protect my nest when our numbers suddenly tripled and you were plotting to kill a king who could have decimated us all.”

I shook my head. “It’s just as important that you stay strong. You sacrifice too much. Don’t do that anymore.”

“I won’t have to. There are more places here like the one we visited tonight. But Eirikr?”

“What.”

“I always kill human pets. You cannot trust another’s glamour for your safety, especially with humans that are allowed around our kind. They might remember a random detail – just enough to realize that you are not human. Or not remembering a large chunk of their lives can make them suspicious. The penalty for revealing your nature to a human is the true death.”

“Well you didn’t kill -”

“The ones you and Amleth saw tonight? I did.”

I had no clue how he managed that without me seeing. “But not the one in -”

“Mainz? She was dead before you got back to the forest. And in Roskilde?”

“Same?” I guessed.

“No. I killed them all.”

I ran a hand through my hair, maddened yet again by the fact that he refused to be straightforward about anything.
"Foreigner!"

“We need to change our clothing,” Godrik declared.

“I like this tunic. You bought it for me,” I said, looking down and its soft black wool and intricate gold embroidery.

“Yes, but we’re all dressed in garb from Germania. If you hadn’t noticed, they have been invading these lands. This is the first time you are truly entering a different part of the world than from whence you hail, child. The Norse and Germanic traditions are very similar. The people intermarry and they trade goods. You didn’t look out of place in the Rhine. Since crossing the sea, we’ve stuck to the countryside and hardly been seen by anyone. We’re nearing a large city.”

“The road traffic has picked up markedly,” I said, confirming how he’d deduced what lay ahead.

Godrik chuckled. “True, a sure sign. I also simply asked the brothel keepers where Maelcon’s court was to be found. We will need to pass through the city undetected by the humans. Unless, of course, you’d prefer to figure out how to get this cart over that mountain there in the horizon in order to avoid the city.”

I looked out at the giant black silhouette in the distance and back at the pathetic animal dragging our belongings around. New clothes it was going to have to be.

Amleth started laughing riotously. “Big blond giant! Foreigner!”

“Shut up, Amla.”

“He’s right,” my maker said. “We are still very near the eastern coast. The brothel keepers also warned me that Norsemen have begun sailing excursions here. Apparently they have not been peaceful, so you really need to blend in if you don’t want to look like you’ve arrived to go viking.”

“Okay. What do we do?”

“Unlock one of those coffers and take out a satchel of our gold.” Godrik asked to switch into the driver’s seat. Amleth got in the back with me. We continued on the path until a passenger carriage approached going the opposite direction. “Quick, Amla, I’ll hail the driver, you ask the fine folk inside where the best inn is nearby. And for the love of the gods, Eirikr, put the hood of your cloak up and cover your braids.” Amla reached over and pulled my cloak over my tunic, then similarly bundled up in his.

The coach creaked to a halt and Amla, wind whipping his lustrous hair around his features, stood to lean into the fancy coach window. The people inside were dressed in finery and greeted him warmly. They bickered momentarily about which inn to recommend for “such a dashing young lord” and once Amleth was given a final answer and directions, we set off.

“You and your stupid beautiful fairy face,” I muttered shoving his head away. Amla socked me in the arm in retribution.

At the inn, Godrik pulled up to the side of the building. He hunted down a particularly muddy patch in the rutted path. A cover of trees kept us out of direct sight of the people inside. “This will do.” He crooked a finger at me. “Take out your hair.” He helped me undo the elaborate plaits weaved over the top and sides of my head and knotted together into a thick tail in the back. Then he snatched the penannular brooch off my cloak. “This is from Svealand. The dragon motif and
craftsmanship stick out, eh? You and Amla jump in the mud and roll around. I’ll find you a different pin.”

Both Amleth and I looked at each other skeptically.

“Now!” Godrik growled.

We flopped around and started laughing it was so ridiculous. Then Godrik joined us and he was shaking in silent laughter too.

I re-pinned my cloak and waited for further instructions. Again, Amla was asked to do the talking. We entered the inn. I dipped my height under the low lintel and Godrik stayed behind me.

A hostess came to greet us with a look of horror on her face.

“Miss, forgive our unfortunate appearance. Our transport overturned and this, as you can see, was the result. Might I trouble you for some ale and your assistance?” Amla asked.

She eyed the obvious fine quality of our wool cloaks and jewelry, but the mud obscured any details that might give us away. “How may I be of service?”

“We are travelling north for a ceremony and desperately need something to wear. There’s no time to wait for a tailor. Might some of the other customers or someone you know in town be able to help outfit us? We can pay handsomely.”

I shook the sac of gold in front of her and she bit her lip.

“There will of course be a little something in it for you as well.” Amleth winked.

She smiled brightly and it struck me that she was rather pretty. Suddenly I felt my thirst burning in my throat.

“You gentlemen take a seat, I’ll get you your drinks, and see what I can do.”

“My younger brother here needs a long léine, please. The ceremony is in his honor.”

She nodded and we settled into the darkest corner of the inn. A few of the other lodgers were staring and whispering, but soon forgot about us and went back to their conversations. We pretended to sip our ale. Most of it was surreptitiously dumped on the floor under the table or into the absorbent fabric of our cloaks.

“Maker, what’s a léine?” I wasn’t quite fluent enough to follow everything being said.

“It’s just the tunic style here. Different embroidery and cut.”

The woman finally returned with a large bundle. “Oh! It’s so dark.” She lit several more candles and Godrik quickly hid his arms and leaned back to block his face behind my shoulder. Up close, he looked too ethereal in this much light.

“You are lucky. We have a great lord and lady staying here who volunteered some spare things.” She displayed the pieces she’d collected. They were very well made. She held up the long tunic for Godrik. “This might be a bit long, young sir, but if you pull it out over a belt a bit more than usual it should do.” Godrik nodded and thanked her in a soft voice.

Amleth dug around in the coin purse and sighed. “Well, miss, it appears to be your lucky day. I’ve spent all my silver.” I bit my tongue so I didn’t smile at the ruse. He counted out two coins for the
nobles upstairs and shrugged and gave her one for herself. Her eyes grew square. It was easily what she earned in a year. “I hope you can deduct the cost of the ale from that.” She could only shake her head, speechless. “Please tell your most helpful clients that Lord Gabrán and his brothers thank them. Now, I’m afraid we must be on our way.” He slapped the table and stood, while I took our purchases. As Godrik got up, he blew out two of the candles so fast the servant must have thought it was the wind.

We managed to get out of the stale, smoky room before bursting out in more laughter.

“Couldn’t we just have stolen some clothes?” Amleth asked.

“Would it have been as much fun?” Godrik replied.

“No!” Amla and I said in unison.

“Seriously, do I look like a Gabrán?” Godrik said.

“I was thinking on my feet!”

Godrik scented the air for water. There should be a well nearby for them to wash off in. “That way,” he pointed.

Dressed in our new clothes, Amleth help straighten Godrik’s tunic. “Why did you get a long one,” I asked?

“It’s for persons of very high status. I’m not going into Maelchon’s court looking like a peasant when I’ll likely be received with great fanfare due to my age.”

“I see.”

Godrik was, of course, right. Maelchon treated us with a lavish greeting party. We feasted like fools, except for Godrik, who was still utterly stuffed from his wild night at the blood brothel, and were given a beautiful suite to rest in for the day.

“It’s nice here. Maelchon lives well and is friendly,” I said.

“We continue on tomorrow. There will be a lot of work to repair my cottage, if it’s still standing.”

“How can you be so certain the island is still uninhabited?” Amla asked.

Godrik cut his eyes at him. “If it isn’t, it will be soon.” A shiver ran down my spine.

The next evening, Godrik plopped a heavy sum down to buy a boat. We sold the run-down horse who was no doubt going to be eaten. It was a miracle he hadn’t died along the way. Loading up the boat, Godrik set sail for the islands on the coastline. It was wonderful to be back on the water. I really did not care for being land-locked. We passed a number of islands as we navigated out to a southwestern point on Gômastra where an inlet allowed us to pull in. It effectively hid the boat from the other islands.

It was hillier than I expected and very lush. At the base of a high cliff we found Godrik’s cottage.

“Oh gods,” Amla said. “Repairs indeed.” The structure of the stone house was mostly intact but the thatch roof had long ago disappeared. The inside was filled with decayed plant matter and rocks that had fallen from the cliff. “When were you actually last here?”

Godrik sucked at his cheek. “It’s been about 200 years.”
“Well I guess we had better get to work,” I said and rolled up my sleeves.

“There should be a grassy field north of here where you can collect reeds for the thatching. You two do that and I’ll start cleaning this mess up.”

Naturally, Amleth and I started being idiots and whacking each other with the reeds, chasing each other in circles.

When we returned, Godrik just shook his head at us and chucked an armload of rubbish at me to haul outside.

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