"There are plenty of other vampires in New Haven. Give Eva Jäeger a ring."

“How Baldwin’s Eva? I haven’t seen Eva since she discovered Baldwin’s role in engineering the German stock market crash of 1911 and left him.”

“I don’t think either of them would appreciate your being so indiscreet, Matthew.” (c) The Book of Life, Chapter 16.

Set after the events of "The Book of Life".
Chapter 1

This was not how Matthew planned on spending his afternoon.

After a productive morning in the lab with Chris, where they were processing a freshly obtained vampire blood sample, he planned to hop on a plane and surprise his wife with an early return home. He’d been away only for three days and was already becoming restless. Diana’s regular messages were keeping his nasty side at bay, so he was, however relatively, in control of his emotions.

He had a feeling that being in a room with Baldwin and his ex would somehow change that.

A vampire’s ability to stay in one place without moving for a long period of time was one that Matthew usually found rather useful - it was a good ability to have during hunting or attending boring conferences – but now it was getting on his nerves since neither his brother, nor his former flame moved a muscle in the last few minutes. He couldn’t read Eva’s pose as he didn’t know her very well, but Baldwin might as well have been emitting steam. He didn’t regret asking Baldwin for a blood sample: it was crucial to their study of species and Matthew lowered himself enough to get it, even though it was Diana’s request that eventually persuaded the head of the de Clermont family. He just regretted not simply taking the sample back in France and transferring it to Yale in a container. Matthew mentally cursed himself for budging and travelling on Baldwin’s plane with him to the States and not protesting to Baldwin’s suggestion to come to the lab and check how’s the research going since he’s “already there”. Baldwin spent the first day minding his own business somewhere in the city, the next day he came to the lab to give blood, and this morning, instead of going away to New York immediately, he came to the lab again to discuss some Knights’ business with Chris. Matthew was walking him out of the building to make sure he goes away this time, and that was when they bumped into Eva on the stairs to the ground floor.

As far as Matthew knew, their affair was short-lived in vampire terms – a couple of decades or so – and Baldwin’s fondness of destroying things through the cash flow put the final nail in the coffin of that relationship. Eva was the one who did the dumping, and Matthew would’ve sympathized with his brother if he didn’t feel that Baldwin kind of deserved it. He didn’t hear about the break-up from Baldwin over a glass of wine and a brotherly chat about how cruel women can be – they weren’t that close – he learned about it from Ysabeau’s snarky comment that was somewhere in the area of “Good riddance”. She was on good terms with Eva and pitied the fact that she severed ties with the de Clermont family after the affair ended.

Standing now several feet away from the former paramours, Matthew wondered if it was possible to hold a grudge for so long. Strong feelings can survive war and famine – Matthew himself wasn’t a stranger to carrying guilt through years and centuries. However, both Eva and Baldwin turned out just fine after the whole ordeal, with Eva rebuilding her reputation, if her CV for the economics department of Yale was any indication, and Baldwin taking up a couple of lovers in the last few decades. But they weren’t just casually saying hello to each other and going their separate ways. They were engaged in a staring contest that was producing so much voltage that anyone fool enough to walk between them would burn alive.

Matthew contemplated looking at his watch, taking out his phone to check for messages from Diana or even coughing pointedly to draw their attention away from each other and defuse tension. The more brilliant idea would be turning on his hills and walking back to the lab, but he thought it rude. He still had to work in the same building with Eva, let alone face Baldwin at the next family gathering. He decided that a polite conversation starter on his part will do.
“Um, Eva?” he spoke carefully. She turned to the sound of his voice and the corners of her mouth formed a small smile.

“Hello, Matthew. Long time no see.”

“Long time indeed,” he smiled back, offering her a handshake. Letting go of her hand, he managed a quick look at his brother. Baldwin’s eyes weren’t only fuming.

They were also full of pain.
That scent.

He must be hallucinating. He spent too much time flying back and forth between countries lately and got so tired he imagines things now. Either that, or Matthew actually drugged him when they were taking blood in the lab.

Any of those suggestions seemed more plausible than Eva being in the same building as him.

His mind went racing, offering as many explanations per second as it could to explain the statistical impossibility of his ex-girlfriend being in such close proximity to him. She surely still lived in Mainz, right? She must have fled during the War World II, but she loved the city, so she must had come back there? In the past, she hadn’t fancied long-distance travel – a trip to the States had to be out of the question?

Baldwin couldn’t prove any of these theories. He made harsh assumptions based on the habits Eva used to have in early XX century. He didn’t follow her moves after the break-up. She seemingly cut the ties with his family, nobody was feeding hints of her whereabouts to him. He hadn’t seen or heard from her in over a century. The worst thing was that he didn’t know whether he wanted the scent to be a hallucination or a sign that she really was here.

He didn’t have a chance to choose as he turned the corner on the stairs and was met by her hazel eyes and a stronger, painfully familiar flowery scent. He stopped in his tracks, effectively growing into the stone floor and catching his breath. His brain betrayed him and stopped thinking in a straight line, simultaneously throwing him into several memories at once.

She wore a sky-blue ribbon in her hair during their second meeting. She loved to pick on the way he kept his financial records in alphabetical order by companies’ names rather than chronological to be able to pull out the latest one when needed. She once walked barefoot through the forest near Sept-Tours because he dared her to throw her shoes on a nearby tree and they were too tired from laughing to climb it and get them down. She always started pulling on the threads of her dress when she was deep in thought. Her terms of endearment for him were never spoken out loud; she whispered them, because she wanted him to be the only one to hear it.

She spoke just as quietly when she told him it was over. She kept her hands perfectly still, crossed at her chest, her decision made, without a chance of reconsideration. He kept hearing her heels click down the hall outside his flat for a long time, hoping that this time she’d be returning to him, rather than walking away. The silence was absolutely deafening, without her laugh, her whisper and the sound of her beating heart, on the night that she left his life.

It was as silent now that she stood in front of him after all those years. He couldn’t even hear his own heartbeat; it must have stopped working altogether. The question he thought long forgotten and didn’t even care for the answer burned anew in his eyes: Why? What actual reason drove her, without a long and tedious argument with pleading and bargaining on his part, to his door that night to say, “We’re done”?

He lifted his head a bit to meet her eyes with more confidence than he possessed, to get rid of any signs of weakness. There was a high possibility that the attempt was futile. She did know him too
well back in the day. But did she remember?

Matthew’s voice interrupted his thoughts, and she turned away from Baldwin, who closed his eyes for a second and took a breath. He’s the head of the de Clermont family. A natural-born strategist. A man who built his wealth from scratch, dividing and conquering everything he laid his eyes on. He will figure out what to do. Yet, every time his mind took a step towards a possible solution, it got shut down by a pang in his chest. He shook his head, and without saying a word, proceeded out of the building. He heard a faint sound of Matthew calling after him but didn’t slow his pace. In the wildest and most desperate dreams he stopped having half a century ago he thought that he’d had all the strength he needed if he came face to face with Eva ever again. He was painfully mistaken.

He used to think it fascinating and now he found it ironic that the scent coming off her in tiny waves was of *das tränende herz* flower. Because she did, didn’t she? Break his heart and left it bleeding.

Chapter End Notes

"*das tränende herz*" - a German name for a flower called "bleeding heart".
Chapter 3

When they first meet, she is 20 years old and human.

Long brown hair often braided, hazel eyes shining ever so brightly when she saw the stars coming out at night; she was full of life and light. She didn’t run from troubles, but she avoided conflicts. She had a curious mind and a fear of exploring the unknown. She made decisions on the spot with resolution only to backtrack and look for difficulties even if there were none. She coped with her own paradoxy daily, and at sixteen she’s the most peculiar thing in the whole village. By 20 few were brave enough to approach her. When a soldier happened upon their village one day, she noticed him coming close far too late, but still unsheathed his sword in a blink of an eye and he’s almost impressed.

She rarely hesitated and she was only truly scared once or twice in her life.

The first time she was dying of a disease that didn’t yet have a name and had already taken away her whole family, and she feared death. She feared its grip and accepted solution when it presented itself: eternal life in exchange for loyalty to her sire. Her new father died in a battle five years later, but not before he taught her the basics of what it took to be a vampire. She was yet again alone in this world, but she didn’t need to be afraid anymore. With her fear gone, the confidence took place, and it let her take whatever she wanted from her eternal life. She walked through centuries with her head held high without intervening much in human affairs.

One day she delivered her family’s pedigree to the Congregation, right into the hands of Philippe de Clermont. After a brief conversation, he jokingly noticed that, her being so headstrong, one of his sons would be delighted to meet her. He didn’t specify which son, and she left Constantinople that same day without being introduced to any members of Philippe’s family. Some said she lucked out not having close connections to the most influential vampire family in the world for such a long time.

Learning as much as she could in the following years – languages, sciences, industry – she resided in Europe, visiting almost every city, but always returning to the one she called home many years ago: Mainz, along the Rhine river in Germany.

The reason she’s in New Haven now was a huge favour to an old acquaintance. And had she known it would open some very old wounds, she would think twice before taking up the offer. She didn’t look forward to revisiting the second time in her life she was truly scared.

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When he made way down the corridor the only thing you heard was the sound of his soles touching the ground as everyone around became suddenly quiet. His sharp commands were never uttered twice, and gods forbid if they were not immediately executed. He had offices in countries across the globe, and in any language the answer he needed to hear to his requests was “Yes, sir.” That was the order of things he established with years of hard work, and when you’ve built something from nothing, you quite enjoy the perks of becoming the most important person in the room.
Baldwin Montclair did enjoy the way he ran his affairs.

He narrowed his eyes slightly to take in his surroundings before starting a board meeting. He sat like a spider in his web, pulling the threads to summon a victim closer or mercilessly cutting a webbing to get rid of a rotten meal. Every person sitting in front of him tended to think themselves accomplished in this life but shrank to the size of a fly the second they crossed the doorstep to his office. And they prayed not to be eaten alive.

Baldwin was able to go into that state of mind with a snap of his fingers – and he became a centurion, a chairman, a liege. An heir to the throne with a crown already passed down to him. And yes, surrendering a part of his influence to his brother’s newly formed scion seemed like a blow, but his own empire stood strong. A trip to New York not only stroked his ego, but it also gave him a breath of fresh air; nothing better to get a grip on yourself than to plunge into your element. And yet he sat listening to one of the investor’s excuses for not proceeding with the allocation of new funds for their company and tried to figure out why it bothered him so much. Seeing Eva. A hundred years ago he watched her turn around and leave, and he said nothing. This time he was having a driving impulse to grab her by the elbow to force her to face him, and out with it. Baldwin was accustomed to never miss a trick. And the fact that he can’t explain his own feelings on the matter was truly testing his temperament.

So when he marched up the stairs and knocked on a door, he summoned all the willpower and tenacity to surround himself with a wall that didn’t allow a shred of emotion to come through; he entered the room and without giving himself a chance to reconsider he uttered, without missing a beat:

“We need to talk.”

Lifting her eyes from a pile of documents on the table, Eva let out a breath, as though she was not a bit surprised by the unexpected visit.

“Hello, Baldwin.”
Nine feet of distance laid between them. His hands were buried in his trousers’ pockets, hers were crossed at her chest. On her 4-inch heels, she almost matched his height, and their eyesight was somewhat level. Neither of them had the higher ground.

A very faint sound of the radio was the only thing breaking the silence.

Both felt an impulse to yell. Irrationally, nonsensically, using every bitter word in their vast arsenals, till the other gave up and recognized defeat. Neither of them, however, had fuel for that just yet. Apart from the earlier encounter on the stairs, they hadn’t laid eyes on each other in a very long time, and both had repressed the emotions from the aftermath of their breakup for more than a century.

Eva spoke first.

“I don’t suppose it is a feather in your cap, but I guess congratulations are in order on your niece and nephew…”

“I’m not here to exchange pleasantries.”

She squinted.

“If you want to engage in a screaming match, I suggest you close the door. It is a workplace, after all.”

“Oh, ma che cazzo,” Baldwin muttered under his breath and shut his eyes for a second. Eva patiently waited for him to gather his wits.

It was once her part-time job to drive him insane. She didn’t do it out of ill-will or boredom; it was an exercise they discovered to be quite entertaining, as it put to good use their minds since they needed to think up good comebacks, and made for a good perseverance training. It was a useful thing to have when you’re working in high-stakes finance. Neither of them deemed their current conversation entertaining.

“It’s been a hundred years, and it didn’t bother me,” he finally spoke. “I was content with your decision, I moved on.”

Eva did not make any attempt to interrupt him. She never interrupted rants or disrespected one’s opinion. She’d see his lies through and through if needed. Right now, nothing was giving Baldwin away as a liar or a manipulator. He was simply relaying his thoughts to her.

“However sudden your breaking up with me seemed that night, I did not come chasing you for answers. But as much as I buried it under the piles of errands and misfortunes I’ve had to deal with, especially those last few decades, I found that it deeply bothers me that you didn’t show me respect.
with at least presenting an explanation.”

If Eva was any more hotheaded, Baldwin’s instincts of self-preservation would’ve kicked in right now to warn him that something heavy was about to be thrown at his head. Thankfully, Eva didn’t share her former lover’s explosive temper.

“It’s been a century, Baldwin,” Eva replied instead. “I think that explanation hit an expiration date.”

“Don’t make a fool out of me,” he spat out. “If there was something that I’d done to cause you to end a long-lasting relationship, just let me own up to it.”

The silence that he got in response went ringing.

“If you want me to say sorry, I’ll say sorry, just let me know what I’ll be apologizing for.”

“How very noble and unselfish of you.” Eva took the papers lying in front of her and shoved them to the desk drawer. “However shall your credibility recover after that? Such a blow to your character. Can’t have people hearing that you debased yourself to apologizing.”

“Eva…”

“I don’t want to spell it out for you, just as I don’t wish to reminisce. For how little care you showed on the last leg of our dating, right now it has definitely stopped being your business.”

Baldwin felt his stomach drop at an indirect accusation. In the final years of their dating he spent most of his time executing Philippe’s orders and playing his own cards right in the fluctuating market conditions, sure, but he didn’t neglect their relationship. He tried to reflect and pick up on instances she could have been referring to, but nothing came to mind. They didn’t even see each other enough in 1911 because of how deep in his family’s affairs he was at the time, so there was no way he could screw up…

Porca miseria, he mentally cursed.

“Is this really about the investments I made at the time of the Agadir Crisis?” he asked carefully.

Arguably, that was not the assumption he should have gone with, but he wasn’t about to dive head first into it.

“Yeah, sure, that’s—that’s’ exactly why I left. The stock market,” Eva let her gaze fall to the low side window in her office. “Cost a couple of my friends their fortune, so I guess, the reason was… justified.”

Something was off with the look in her eyes as she spoke, but Baldwin couldn’t quite place it.

“I could reimburse them for their losses…”

She looked back at him.

“No need, really. They’re no longer with us. Not because of the lost money, but because they were human and there was a war. So… don't bother.”

Baldwin took a deliberate step towards her desk and saw her flinch and take a half-step back. He gave her a look-over, trying to decipher the move. He didn’t smell fear on her. And she was never scared of him – he never gave her a reason to be. Yet he felt the why she didn’t want to get any
closer to him now was somehow rooted in the same ground that forced her to make their break-up alink-of-an-eye exchange.

“There’s the door. If you want to take your revenge and walk out on this conversation, be my
guest. I won’t even hold it against you,” she resolved, looking just above his shoulder, not making
eye contact, as though it could somehow help him unlock the truth to which she so desperately held
on.

Baldwin expected a rush of anger that would force him to take her up on that offer and storm out of
the office. Instead, he felt a different rush, and the realization would have made him change colour
if he weren’t already pale. He didn’t want to run from her. He very much wanted to fall on his
knees and seek forgiveness for a sin he didn’t know he committed if it would only make her look at
him again. And that thought was truly terrifying to one of the most feared living creatures.

He followed suit and averted his gaze from her. It was unfamiliar. It didn’t feel right. His senses
finally kicked in and he committed to physically removing himself from the element he was not
comfortable in. As he strolled off to the hallway, a postgraduate student who worked with Matthew
and Chris in the laboratory peeked into the office holding a paper folder.

“Could you please look at those files, Miss Jäger? I think someone got the numbers wrong.”

Eva finally moved from where she stood and reached for the folder offered to her.

“Thanks, Nicky. I’ll take a look.”

“That’s Dr Clairmont’s brother, right?” Nicky looked out into the hallway in a failed attempt to
steal another look at Baldwin. “He sure looks dashing in that suit. Do you know if he’s—”

A low growl from behind her back made the girl bite her tongue.
“I think it’s about to rain.”

The window overlooking a forest behind Sept-Tours was wide open, providing a flow of humid air into the room.

“Don’t fret, mon cœur. I think we’ll have a couple more sunny days.”

Diana Bishop and Matthew Clairmont occupied the library close to Matthew’s tower in his familial home. Neither of them was actually reading – they sat near the window enjoying the quiet and each other’s company. The twins were down for their nap, so the parents had some time to themselves. Despite having their own house – and a dozen of houses and flats across the world – they quite enjoyed coming back to the castle that held so many fond memories. Both Ysabeau and Marthe were currently absent, and the couple was adamant on spending that afternoon alone.

Suddenly Matthew turned his head slightly to the left, listening to something out of Diana’s hearing range.

“What is it?”

Soon enough Diana also heard the helicopter blades winging the air.

“Be nice,” she asked with a soft smile of Matthew, who already became a shade grimmer at the prospect of having to deal with his older brother. He sighed, gave his wife a quick peck on a cheek and started making his way to the ground floor.

“And the day started out so fine,” he said, offering Diana his hand when they were passing a chipped step on the stairs. “We could’ve taken the kids outside for a picnic. Becca is finally sleeping through her nap, so she won’t be fussy.”

“As much as Baldwin tries my patience from time to time, I don’t believe he has a reason to clash with us now.” Diana was keeping a positive look on things. “I doubt I failed to reply to any of his e-mails, and the Congregation is in recess. Maybe he came to visit his niece and nephew.”

“It is unusual, seeing him come around on the kids,” confessed Matthew. “Yet I have a feeling his visit has nothing to do with my family.”

“How do you mean?”

“Do you remember Eva from the economics department in Yale?”

“Oh yeah, she and Baldwin used to date.” Diana mused at that. While she wouldn’t deny anyone a chance at happiness, she had a hard time picturing Baldwin having a girlfriend. A stoic and ruthless mask he wore almost every time she saw him seemingly melted into his face and his softer side was nowhere to be found, save maybe for the times his tiny niece smiled when he lifted her in his arms.

“I’m not good at conversing with my brother on simpler topics, but when we stumbled upon Eva in Yale a week ago…” Matthew pinched the bridge of his nose. “I’m not sure what I should say to him If he does, however unlikely, ask for advice.”

“Wouldn’t you like someone to tell you that it’s okay to have those feelings when you yourself
“I knew exactly what feelings I was having when I fell in love with you.”

Diana kept smiling.

“Agree to disagree,” she murmured and paused at the lowest step to raise herself on tiptoes and give her husband a kiss on the lips. He visibly relaxed and allowed her to lead him into the ground floor living room by his hand.

However, slow Diana and Matthew were coming down the stairs, it was still confusing to see Baldwin already sitting in a chair with Les Échos in his hands. Matthew frowned.

“I thought you’d still be in New York.”

“Oh, I was in New York.” Baldwin kept flipping through the newspaper pages, though it didn’t really look like he was reading it.

“Then why are you back here?” Matthew inquired, earning himself a disapproving look from Diana.

Baldwin didn’t seem fazed by that.

“It’s my family’s home, I can come visit on occasion,” he replied, still buried in the newspaper.

“Where is your mother?”

Now that surprised both Diana and Matthew.

“You came to see Ysabeau?” Matthew asked his brother.

“One would think my question suggests it, and yet I don’t hear a proper answer.” Baldwin kept his tone cold, and while that head-of-the-family attitude should have already enraged Matthew, he remained still.

“I take it talking to Eva didn’t go very well,” he marvelled, which forced Baldwin’s browse through the pages to come to a halt.

Diana was baffled.

“I don’t understand; how are these things connected?”

“Oh, Miriam called,” Matthew elaborated. “Said she smelled Baldwin in Eva’s office when she was passing by. Since Eva wasn’t in the office at that moment, Miriam wondered if those two had an exchange that led to a possible murder of one by another.” He smirked. “She was kind of rooting for Eva to kill Baldwin, but Eva was simply on her break and Baldwin is here. She will be disappointed.”

“You’re not answering the question,” Diana mused.

“Annoying, isn’t it?” Baldwin offered spitefully from his chair. Matthew’s eyes darkened.

“It was your tale to tell and I was trying to be nice as was suggested to me by my wife,” he shot Diana a quick look signaling that this kind of play wasn’t on the table anymore. “Eva, being Baldwin’s girlfriend in early XX century, was on good terms with Ysabeau. I would assume my brother here wants to trouble my mother for some possible information she might possess about
Eva’s current position on the relationship. I’m sorry, but Ysabeau’s out of town and, to my knowledge, hasn’t been in contact with Eva since she broke up with you.”

Diana held her breath hoping Baldwin wouldn’t try to strangle Matthew there and then.

“I mean, sure, when the stock market crashed…”

Baldwin angrily closed his newspaper and threw Matthew a look that dared him to try and say one more word on the subject.

“That market crash has fuck-all to do with anything.”

“Didn’t it contribute to the tension which eventually led to World War I?”

“If you want to be dramatic – fine, it crashed. As I remember, it was just a small drop and it barely damaged anything.”

“You orchestrated the ordeal, of course it didn’t damage anything of value to you.”

Baldwin looked Matthew in the eye. His words would be hardly recognizable if it weren’t for Matthew’s vampire hearing.

“You know damn well that it did.”

The three of them sat in silence. Baldwin didn’t want to divulge any more than he already had, Matthew was trying to decide whether this conversation has gone too far already. Diana was deep in thought.

“Why did you break up?” Diana asked softly. Baldwin had his eyes fixated on the floor.

He hesitated before answering.

“I don’t know.”

“Mind if I drop in a theory?” Matthew suggested nonchalantly.

“I actually do mi—”

“You were very involved in the Agadir Crisis. You didn’t even have to be, you threw yourself into it head-first because you wanted to, because it was a great gamble for you. And it only ever took Philippe’s word to send you running his errands under the conviction that it was all for the good of our family. So off you went, so eagerly and so often. Initially I thought it’s just your usual self, but now that I think about it – Eva never really came with you on those trips, did she?” Matthew’s account of that year’s events was accurate, and therefore wearing Baldwin’s patience thin. “What happened? Got tired of one girlfriend and decided to neglect her till she takes it upon herself to break things off? If so, it’s just bad luck running into her all those years later.”

Baldwin’s knuckles went white from grasping the chair’s armrests.

“It was not neglect!”

“Wait…”

Diana’s eyes got very round, then she quickly composed herself. It didn’t stop Baldwin from eyeing her with suspicion.
“No, sorry, I got distracted,” she explained. Matthew didn’t buy it for a second but decided to leave it be for now.

“Don’t pretend to know what’s going on with me and Eva.”

Matthew offered him a semi-sympathetic smile.

“I certainly don’t have a clue as to what’s going through her head now. I just think you needed to be reminded of the circumstances before you make any assumptions in your own favour. If it was simply being fed up with you, I’d say she had a good reason. But I’m going to go ahead and assume that there’s more to it.”

Baldwin rose to his feet and threw Les Échos on the nearby coffee table. He shot both Matthew and Diana glances that weren’t particularly hostile but signalled his unwillingness to discuss the matter further.

“Give my regards to Ysabeau when she comes back,” he sighed. “Hope Rebecca and Philip are in good health?”

Matthew tensed up while Diana simply nodded to her brother-in-law.

“Yes, they are quite healthy and happy.”

Baldwin nodded back and walked out. Matthew carefully listened for the steps and when he was sure his brother was out of earshot, he turned to look at Diana.

“I know why they broke up,” she reeled. Then she relayed her theory.

Matthew tipped back in his chair, his brow furrowed. Her suggestion, all things considered, made a lot of sense.
“You’re mating with her.”

“You don’t fucking say,” Baldwin hissed through his teeth.

He has been sulking behind a desk in his rented flat in Berlin for several hours already when Matthew called.

The realization hit him hard that morning; mating was an instinct. It’s in his blood, his nature, his whole being. It was a spark that he supposedly couldn’t ignore. The reality of it surfacing just now was truly mind-boggling.

“So you already know.” Matthew was relieved that he didn’t have to help Baldwin come to this realization after all.

“Are you going to be un trou de cul about it?”

“Oh, touché,” the smugness in Matthew’s voice was hard to miss.

After a moment of silence, both brothers laughed quietly at the irony of the situation.

“This doesn’t happen overnight.” Matthew clearly sounded concerned. “You must have developed the instinct back when you two dated. The question is – how in the world didn’t you notice?”

The reason Baldwin did notice it now was unclear. He entertained the idea just for the sake of it, determined to dismiss it. He simply recalled all the times he saw Matthew go on the offence whenever Diana was threatened and tried to picture the same situation with Eva to imagine his own reaction. A moment later he found himself one foot already out the door with his adrenaline level spiking through the roof. Then he remembered how he felt when Eva took a step away from him in her office – and how he wanted to get closer. He was forced to take the diagnosis very seriously.

Matthew already realized that his question would not get a verbal answer.

“Are you back in New York?”

“No, I’m in Berlin on business."

“Oh.”

Matthew fell quiet, prompting Baldwin to raise a brow.

“What?”

“Eva is on a break from work, so she’s home right now. In Germany.”

Baldwin took a deep breath.

“You mean, in Mainz.”

“Well of course I mean in Mainz.” Matthew paused. “It’s a rather short flight to Frankfurt and
then…”

“I’m aware of the way I can get there. I’m not going uninvited.”

“Yes, you already barged into her office uninvited. This time try to ask.” Matthew’s words did not carry a taunt or an insult. He spoke with genuine concern and it only added to Baldwin’s chagrin. Matthew listened for Baldwin’s reply yet heard nothing but the tap of his finger on the table, probably trying to crack through the surface out of sheer frustration.

“Look…” Matthew lingered for a second but then decided to get on with it. “You helped Diana and me a lot, even if you didn’t fully approve in the beginning. And whether you like it or not, I’m the closest person who can relate to what you’re going through right now. I truly advise you to try and talk to her. I just hope she will accept.”

Baldwin wanted to object but he didn’t have a leg to stand on.

“Thank you…” he finally replied and took another deep breath before continuing. “…brother.”

He heard Matthew’s low chuckle on the other end of the line.

“I’ll text you her number. Good luck, Baldwin.”

And with that, he hung up. Baldwin was once again left alone with his thoughts.

He barely looked at his phone when it lit up with Matthew’s text.

His brother, he thought, had it all figured out. Even inflicted with blood rage, he managed to make his life and his marriage work. Would it be as easy for Matthew if he were in Baldwin’s shoes now – head of the family seated at the Congregation, as it was a short time ago, yet faced with the same dilemma? Baldwin winced, realizing that even if their circumstances were reversed Matthew would have still chosen Diana.

It all came down to the fundamental difference between the brothers: while Matthew, upon falling in love with Diana, would say “to hell with it” to ancient laws and others’ warnings just to be with her, Baldwin, who could’ve spent the last century with Eva by his side, would sacrifice his happiness in the name of the duty. He wanted everything to be in perfect order, and being mated, in his eyes, would be a storm disrupting that calm.

And Strasbourg was raining cats and dogs on that blasted night in 1911.

He shook his head, refusing to let that day fog his thought process.

He sat awake for the rest of the night thinking that he was hearing her heels clicking down the corridor, coming close to his door, going back to him.

Baldwin buried his face in his hands. It was a misstep. A strategic failure. How can you anticipate your enemy's movements if you can't even anticipate your own?

When the war started, he plunged into the first battle he could, earning himself a scar near his right clavicle from a point-blank shot of a Luger pistol and a coin from Philippe ordering him to return home immediately.

Baldwin felt sick. Finding a mate was never his primary goal, not even secondary one, yet he felt like his mind, making him blind to the obvious, betrayed his whole existence. Like it was supposed to tell him that he began mating. Instead, his strongest instinct was one of keeping face, and it
buried his feelings so deep that they could hardly be recovered.

*When Mainz became occupied by the French troops post-war, he refused to step foot there.*
*Philippe made a show of being frustrated with his older son, but he likely knew what was really going on.*

He channelled all his force of logic (did it even exist anymore?) to try and fit the last piece of the puzzle that stubbornly didn’t want to fit.

Eva.

*Is it even important why she walked away? He had the art of moving on perfected. Then why did he feel wounded by it?*

Did she realize he was mating with her but did not reciprocate? Did she end things because she couldn’t bear being with a person who could tear a rival into pieces if they even dared to look at her? Even the simple thought of it made him grasp the table edge and take a minute to regulate his breathing. The walls that held his emotions at bay have started cracking and he wasn’t sure he would handle their eventual fall.

*The physical door to his flat remained wide open. She didn’t even cross the threshold. She set the distance between them right then and there.*

Did he love her back then? He was sure he had. He remembered what he felt seeing her for the first time after weeks apart. How the warmth spread all over his chest at the way she looked at him, flashing him a bright smile.

*The way she pointedly refused to look him in the eye until the very moment she mustered the strength to say “I can’t do this anymore. We’re done.”*

Did he ever *tell* her that he loved her? Now that was an entirely different question.

He picked up the phone and typed a message. He had come to a resolution. His mating instinct kicked in around the last couple of years of them dating – that’s when he remembered the strongest connection to Eva. She sensed it – however she managed to do that before him – and it was too much too soon. She had, after all, that trait – the one that would make her rethink everything if even a single thing has gone wrong. He didn’t help the cause – when he subconsciously felt a weird pull towards Eva, he distanced himself as much as he could with the work which he considered the duty to his family. And that gave her a carte-blanche to cut ties without feeling guilty or troubling herself with an explanation.

Baldwin did not particularly like his theory, but it was all he had at that moment. He wasn’t certain whether he wanted to confirm or deny it – if Eva even agreed to a meeting.

Sending that message was hard. Waiting for her answer was excruciating.

When she finally replied, Baldwin already had car keys in his hand and a flight to Frankfurt secured. The road to Mainz from there wouldn’t take long.

Chapter End Notes
-- a song for the chapter: "Wasted" by MKTO
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Song for chapter -- "In Need" by Gert Taberner.

"Make it a short visit. The city still hasn’t warmed up to you."

In the evening light, it seemed like the city did not welcome him. Baldwin drove a rented car past St. Martin's Cathedral which he hasn’t seen since the last time he had been in Mainz. He first saw it when it was newly built. He didn’t have enough memories of it, or an eye for architecture, if he was honest with himself, to estimate the damage that had been done to the original building through time, fire and the World War II bombings.

He hadn’t really paid attention to anything in the city at the time. He was too happy to notice the shops closed and reopened, the buildings torn down and constructed, humans being born and dying. Perhaps, the unwelcoming feeling was just his imagination. Back then he didn’t care for Mainz and it didn’t care for him. Now he began taking a closer look and the city, it seemed, was taking his measure as well. I’ll see you burn if you hurt her, the city appeared to be telling him. Likewise, thought Baldwin, although he couldn’t imagine how her own city could bring Eva pain.

If only the same could be said of him.

He pulled over near the front of a house, stopped the car and took a minute to steel himself. He had a vague idea of what he wanted to say. In his head two forces measured swords: a part of him that was used to getting what he wanted and a part that truly wanted to respect her wish to reject him if she were to choose so. A third, still unfamiliar force threatened to undermine all of that: his mating instinct. He would not dare to hurt her if she rejected but would desperately try to approach her nevertheless. Let the chips fall, he carelessly thought, stepping out of the car.

The front door of the house opened before he even reached its steps. Eva gave him a quick once-over, seemingly checking that his presentability suited the inside of her home and invited him in, leaving Baldwin to close the door behind himself.

The tension in the air was palpable but there was little anyone could or was willing to do at the moment. He followed her down the hallway, keeping a lengthy distance, and stopped when she reached the sitting room, turned around and leaned on the back of the couch. Her stance was defiant, arms yet again crossed at her chest, and she was looking just above his shoulder.

“Talk.”

Baldwin felt irritated but not enough to lash out.

“Just like that?”

“Well, you wanted to talk.”

“I wanted you to actually participate in that talk.”

She actively avoided looking right at him. As hard as Baldwin tried to meet her eyes, he would not
succeed unless she let him. There was no point in trying to argue.

_Cards on the table._

“I came to realize the severity of some of my decisions back in the day,” he began. She was listening but still not moving. “I may have set my priorities incorrectly when it came to my father’s requests and attention I gave you. I was performing my duty – but I should have been more considerate of the time you and I spent together.” He ran an eye over the room before continuing. “I have discovered that—I realized that back when we were still dating, I developed a mating instinct towards you.” He looked at her, trying to detect a flinch in her pose or a change of facial expression.

He got nothing.

“I have considered that my inability to detect that in myself, however that came to pass, must have forced you to feel rushed into a commitment you didn’t necessarily want to take on. I feel like I should have been the one to end things and let you off the hook because I would’ve sensed if the instinct was reciprocated, and I didn’t. Yet however it all came to be I think it is not a coincidence that we met all those years later, because I want to make amends and ask you for a second chance. If you will let me.”

He spoke without pause and only after stopping did he notice the change in her expression.

She was frowning.

“Sorry – you thought on it and decided that it’s all about you?”

“No, but…”

“I know you’re mating,” she shrugged as-a-matter-of-factly.

Baldwin raised an eyebrow.

“Christ, Baldwin, I’m a vampire, I can smell it.” She pinched the bridge of her nose in frustration. “That’s not the only thing going on.”

“What is it then?”

“You said you would have sensed if the instinct was reciprocated.”

Baldwin was silent. She made a step closer to him that came off as a side effect of an adrenaline rush rather than a balanced decision.

“Do I have to step even closer before you smell the same on me?”

No.

_Oh, no._

Dismissing his own feelings was one thing. But with his theory he dismissed the existence of hers.

“When did you realize that you’re…” Baldwin couldn’t bring himself to finish the sentence.

“As soon as it started. 1910.”

A year before the breakup and a hundred years after.
She knew, all this time.

She lived with it all this time.

If Baldwin had a supposed higher ground with his decisive approach and a considered theory, he just lost it. He inhaled her scent since this was the closest he had stood to her in a long time, and damned himself. They both were mating. He was attuned to her right then, in the moment, and he could swear he tasted the pain she must have gone through handling that instinct on her own.

“I’m so sorry,” he barely managed to utter and watched her take a step back to the couch, as she realized how close they were standing.

Please look at me.

She kept her gaze averted anywhere else but him.

“What makes you think that you deserve that chance?” Her harsh words resounded as a nail hitting a casket door.

“Because I want it.”

“And because you always get what you want?”

“I should have paid more attention. I shouldn’t have ignored the instinct when it first appeared as a fleeting sensation. I’m owning up to it, can’t you see that I’m willing to change?”

“Do you genuinely think that now I’ll say ‘Thank you for finally understanding. I forgive you. Let me just forget the last hundred years or so and we will continue what we started’?”

She wasn’t yelling but the intensity in her voice hit just as hard.

“I have spent the last century trying to forget you. I have been suppressing one of the most basic instincts of my entire existence. I sabotaged every relationship and several friendships because of this. I will not betray everything I’ve built these last decades because you suddenly realized your own ignorance a whole 5 fucking minutes ago. What did you want me to say to this?”

She didn’t flinch when a single red tear rolled down Baldwin’s cheek.

“Baldwin, you weren’t the only one mating. I was mating too. You were so deep into your family’s affairs, your estates, your finances that you failed to notice both those things. And how could I trust you’d recognize the signs in me when you couldn’t even notice them in yourself?”

His heart began racing, and he could hear the same with hers.

“It was the single most terrifying feeling in my life,” she went on. “I wasn’t as scared on my deathbed. One moment I’m perfectly capable of surviving on my own, and the next you are the only thing I want in this life, body and soul, and you didn’t see that. The most powerful being in the universe, second only to your father, and your most primal senses were clouded by your need of personal gain.”

“That’s not true,” he retorted.

“Or your sense of higher duty, which has never, if we are completely honest with each other, never justified the means.”

“But it didn’t go away,” he held onto every thread he could. “In neither of us, it didn’t. It doesn’t
work that way, we couldn’t wish it gone, as hard as we both tried. I know it, and you know it.”

Was it the undeniable truth in his words or a feeling deep inside her that cut off her fair reasoning, it almost made Baldwin believe he must have got her to lower the defences.

The shake of her head shattered that hope to pieces.

“I can’t do it, Baldwin, I can’t get into this right now.”

“Please just talk to me, I can’t… I don’t know what else to do--”

He fell on his knees, and for a moment she stopped breathing altogether. No one, in thousands of years, has ever seen Baldwin de Clermont begging on his knees apart from her right at that moment. He would never accept being powerless. But that’s exactly what he was now.

Her lower lip started trembling.

“In dubio abstine, Baldwin,” her voice was just above a whisper. “Perhaps if you don’t know what to do, you shouldn’t do anything at all.”

“Then look me in the eye and tell me that you want me to do nothing.”

She warily moved her gaze, first up his left shoulder, then his chin, his lips, and finally met his eyes.

And the world around stopped spinning.

Baldwin slowly rose, holding her gaze, not rushing her answer – yet every cell in his body screamed for her to tear down the last remaining barriers between them right that second.

Her voice faltered.

“…I can’t go over this now.”

*His heart kept bleeding out. How ironic.*

The distance between them remained the same. Not an inch closer.

*Yet her flower scent was the strongest he’d felt in years.*

He nodded, conceding his defeat, and dropping his gaze to the floor, turned to leave the house. He made almost all the way to the front door before he heard her even tone.

“Baldwin, you don’t have a house in this city. It’s night. Where are you going?”

*Why would he stay?*

“I’m just going to drive to the airport. I can arrange a transfer in under three hours.”

She sighed, and he thought he heard a hint of annoyance that she used to show out of affection back in the day.

“You’re tired, and you’re underfed.” Baldwin would disagree but he knew she could smell it off him, that he hasn’t slept in weeks and barely had anything of substance to drink in quite some time. “I have a guestroom you can use for the night and a shot of red deer blood,” her tone was unquestioning if still a little bit shaken. “Don’t you worry; I’ll kick you out in the morning.” She
turned on her heels and strolled into the far reaches of the house.

Baldwin considered his options.

They haven’t reached a consensus and they wouldn’t, not tonight and tomorrow. He tried to push away a thought that whispered, “maybe not ever”.

He was too tired to argue. He truly needed some sleep.

He silently accepted a glass of blood she left on the kitchen table and strolled to the guestroom which was next to hers.

If there were no wall between the rooms, they’d both know they lay facing away from each other. Nevertheless, it wouldn’t help either of them to fall asleep. Baldwin tossed the pillow from under his head and laid on the mattress, eyes wide open, staring at the moonlight coming through the window and forming a slim blade on his white undershirt. He thought of getting dressed and storming out into the night twice already but barely moved on the bed. His suit, neatly hanging on a chair next to the guestroom door, felt so organic, so…homelike, that the thought of leaving hijacked his thoughts for the third time. He took a deep breath. So, this is what it felt like? More than 2000 years walking the Earth, and he was spared from the mating instinct, always considering him above making permanent connections or at the very least, not stopping to think why he still hasn’t experienced it with anyone. Having torn down the walls he’d built to protect himself from his raw emotions, he couldn’t believe how strong that instinct was. His whole being was drawn to her: her scent, her touch, her voice; and it wasn’t only primal and physical, he felt like he wanted to lay his soul bare in front of her, to offer her his heart, his devotion, to have his life at her mercy. He understood it, he finally understood. The word “love” didn’t even begin to cover it, but it burned in his mind, nevertheless.

He heard the floor creak and the bed slightly sunk behind him. He felt her hand circle his waist and saw it lay above his heart. She rested her forehead between his shoulder blades, and he released a breath he’d been holding for the last few minutes. He knew this was not a reconciliation. She just understood what hell he was going through now because she’d been there herself. Yet back then she had no one to hold her.

They lay in that position till the morning, both falling into an uneasy sleep sometime during the night. When they awoke, he didn’t dare to turn around and look as she withdrew her arm and left the room.
True to her word, Eva knocked on the guestroom door to signal the end of her hospitality in the morning, and Baldwin drove back from Mainz to Frankfurt. He’d left the country to let Eva decide when she was ready to have a real conversation. He didn’t own any property in Germany, so every time he came to Berlin on business, he rented a flat. It was part of an agreement they came to in the early 1900s as a joke – that she would have the country to herself, and he was only ever a guest.

Baldwin knew that one of the best ways to get your mind off things was to bury yourself in the work, and that was why he spent the following month working without a break. He hadn’t heard from Eva since their last meeting. Given their mutual states, they decided that staying away from each other would serve as preventive care at least, but soon enough he knew it wasn’t working. Being away from her was making him angrier than usual and he took it out on his employees, turning their lives into a living hell. When he finally received a call from Eva in the middle of a board meeting, his staff saw it as a godsend.

She told him to meet her in Strasbourg; the same place where she walked out on him in 1911. As he arrived, he saw her already standing on the sidewalk near the rendezvous point.

He knew she sensed him approaching even before he stopped to stand next to her, looking at a one-storey house in front of them.

“The building got torn down,” he answered her unspoken question. “I bought the land and built a house on the exact same spot. Stopped here a few times over the years but not for long.” She didn’t reply, taking in the details on the façade. “The furniture’s the same. Had it stored before demolition.”

He turned to face her.

“Why are we in Strasbourg?”

“It’s our no-man’s land. I didn’t want to meet at your house or for you to barge into mine again.”

“I did text prior to my last visit. And this property is in my name.”

Baldwin’s remark was a technicality. They both knew why they were meeting here – in the house that they’d bought together, and in the house that stood witness to their breakup. This had to be ground zero for whatever they wanted to do next.

“So, what exactly are we doing here?” Baldwin turned to her. Eva returned his look.

“We’re going to catch up. See how that goes.”

He opened the door and she walked through it, hung up her coat and then followed Baldwin into the cosy living room. He already removed his jacket and remained in a waistcoat, with his sleeves rolled up. She quietly scoffed.
“Could’ve added a pocket watch if you wanted to go for the whole shebang.”

He looked bemused. Eva shrugged.

“I’m not trying to make this a solemn affair.”

“Perhaps we should have some wine, then?” Baldwin looked around the room, trying to remember where exactly the bottles were kept. Then he proceeded to the kitchen and down the small staircase to the cellar.

“You said you barely visited, how is the wine still here?” he heard her call out from the living room.

“I moved everything into storage and then put it in the newly built house. But I updated the wine stock in the last couple of decades, so it should be good,” Baldwin replied, looking through the racks and pulling out different bottles that looked hardly touched by time. He then returned to the kitchen and selected glasses.

“Barolo?” he asked, turning one bottle to look at its label.

“What else do you have?” she said, still from across the wall.

“A selection of Claret,” he opened one of the bottles for himself. “A Pinot Grigio. Possibly a Bordeaux.”

“Do you have a Riesling?”

Baldwin turned his head towards the door with a pointedly horrified look.

“Is that meant to be a joke?” he shot back.

There was a pause, and Eva appeared in the doorway.

“It’s a joke. And Claret is fine.”

He poured them both some wine and then followed her into the living room. She took a seat on one arm of the couch while he settled in a chair. Subconsciously, they put the most space they could get between them without having to stand against opposite walls.

They stared into their respective glasses of wine. After the pause reached an unbearable length, Eva sighed.

“Let’s get the most obvious thing out of the way.”

“Which is..?”

“The relationships we’ve had over the last century. I’m sure we’re mature enough not to get overly jealous about them and yet…”

“No, it’s fair game.”

He thought for a minute.

“Three girlfriends. In the 1920s, 1930s and then in 1980s. Apart from that, a few short-term relationships, flings.”
“Don’t pretend like you don’t remember the exact years you dated them,” she softly teased.

“I do remember. But they were so formal and, in the end, so…unmeaningful, that I hardly think the years are important here.”

Eva raised an eyebrow slightly and took a sip of wine. He heard her heart, which picked up a pace a couple of minutes ago, slow down to its normal speed.

“What about you?”, he asked, refilling his glass.

“Yeah, a few.”

“Did you love any of them?”

Her heart wasn’t the one that sped up when she paused before replying.

“I don’t love them now if it makes you feel better.”

“I can handle myself.”

She picked at a tiny thread on a suture line of her trousers.

“We dated for almost 3 years. It got serious, and she became confused as to why I couldn’t mate with her.” She gave a sad smile. Baldwin would sympathize with her former girlfriend if his heart just stopped beating so loudly. “She was also a vampire. I had to explain that I couldn’t do that because I was already mating with another person.”

He let his gaze drop to the floor.

“I think I didn’t even want to connect to any of my partners after you on some level. And I’m not saying it to win your favour. It is what it is. And after Philippe’s death…” Baldwin shook off the painful memories of those days. “I assumed his position in the family and simply stopped trying.”

When he raised his head, he saw Eva staring intently at the edge of her glass.

“I’ll go get another bottle,” he said, eyeing her carefully. She slowly nodded.

The conversation proceeded at a lazy pace as the clock ticked away. After diving into the past, they switched closer to the present.

“I was more surprised to see you so far away from home,” Baldwin confessed, putting empty bottles under the table to make space for the full ones. “Are you more prone to travelling long-distance now?”

“I’m not, no. I barely travel by plane even on short distances. The America thing was all sorts of terrifying.”

“How did you even end up there?”

“Ah. I met Verin in Berlin some time ago. She explained to me your… crisis and said they needed people they can trust.”

“Did Verin ask you to avoid me?”
“She didn’t mention the level of your need to control Diana and Matthew, so I assumed we wouldn’t actually cross paths.”

Liar, they both thought.

“And you’re teaching a class now?”

“Just one. Can’t have too many people asking me stupid questions on a week-to-week basis.”

He chuckled.

“Economics. How did I miss that you knew the subject so well?”

“Baldwin, I dated you. Even if I didn’t have my own preexisting knowledge, your constant dealings and business meetings in the dining room would still allow me to recite the basic principles even in my sleep.”

After a second, they both burst out laughing.

The tension was finally broken, and they engaged in a livelier conversation, filling out the gaps of one another’s lives. Decade after decade, significant meetings, discoveries, losses and friendships – and it almost seemed like they never were apart. At some point of the conversation they both were seated on the opposite sides of the couch, shortening the distance between them. Baldwin was reminded that once upon a time she was the person he could trust with any tale of his. And he realized that some of his thoughts were kept to himself for far too long.

The story of how he became the head of his family went on for almost three bottles of Barolo.

“Why wouldn’t you be suited to the position?”

Eva was unused to seeing Baldwin doubt himself. She sat with her knees hugged to her chest, glass in one hand, the other twitching her trousers’ leg.

“Because I’m trying so hard to be the leader and the protector of the family, yet every time I start thinking that I’m succeeding, I get reminded of how Philippe would’ve done a better job.” Baldwin felt better with every sentence he spoke out loud, finally sharing his inner turmoil. “By every single member of my family. Worst of all, sometimes I think that myself.”

“It would be hard for anyone to fill Philippe’s shoes,” she reasoned. “But you don’t have to do that, you can lead the family in your own way. And you managed to protect it for more than half a century now. That’s a job done well enough.”

He offered her a sad smile. The burden he was entrusted with when Philippe died was his to carry. She didn’t have to try and lift half of its weight off his shoulders, yet miraculously her words made it just a tiny bit lighter.

“Maybe I felt as though I had to take revenge on his tormentors after his death, so it would make me feel like a rightful heir to his throne. Killing his enemies and establishing authority with a single swing of the sword.” He got to his feet and picked up their empty glasses from the coffee table. “But Ysabeau got to all of them first – the witches, that is. Back then we thought the witches were the most to blame.”

He didn’t notice her hand pulling at the buttons on her sleeves which she only did when she was extremely nervous.
“I have to tell you something.”

Baldwin was halfway to the kitchen, and she followed him to stand in the doorway.

“I think we barely have any secrets left between us at this point,” he stood with his back to her, getting another bottle from the shelf and cracking it open.

“They tried to force the information about Philippe’s location out of me. The witches. In 1944.”

With a loud thud, the bottle landed on the table.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Song for the chapter -- "Movement" by Hozier. Please take a listen after reading; the chapter was partially inspired by that track.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He still had his hand on the bottle and Eva became increasingly worried that at some point he would shatter it to pieces. She couldn’t see his face, yet the way his back stiffened and his empty hand gripped the counter was all the indication she needed. Her fight-or-flight instinct went off.

“Baldwin, please look at me.”

“Did they succeed?” he asked very quietly, his back still turned to her.

“Succeed in what?”

“In getting that information from you.”

The rational part of her brain struggled to avoid imagining him ripping her to pieces right there and then. She felt her throat close up.

“I have never been a traitor.”

He slowly turned to face her.

He didn’t blink.

“That doesn’t mean they didn’t get it out of you in some other way.” His voice was surprisingly calm. “These are witches we’re talking about. Spells. Mind control. Torture.”

“I told them nothing,” she whispered, tears forming in her eyes.

Baldwin crossed his arms.

“Did they use force on you?”

“No.” She started to shiver. “They locked me in some house for a week and tried to starve me into surrendering. They should have known better; I’m not a freshly made vampire who can’t withstand fasting. When they realized they wouldn’t get anything from me, they let me go. I tried to contact your family, but I was afraid it would lead them straight to you.”

“Then how do you know your attempt to contact us didn’t cause exactly that?”

“I didn’t know for years that it didn’t! I tried to track those witches down, to force them to tell me if I lead them to Philippe, however inadvertently, but by that time Ysabeau already got to all of them. I finally found a witch who was in on the plan. In 1953, she was hiding deep in Norway; she told me that they tracked my movements for some time, but eventually relented because I wasn’t of value to them.”
Eva’s blouse was now stained with red from the tears falling down her cheeks.

“I figured that they’d try and follow me, so I made no move to warn any of you. I wanted to. I had to. I didn’t want your father to die, he was always nothing but kind to me. After several months of looking over my shoulder I decided to try and reach you, I made the message go a complex and uneven way, it should’ve gotten to Stasia eventually… When I heard that Philippe was captured and killed, I thought that my message caused it. That I was careless to send it, and I led the witches to him. And even though I confirmed through that one witch in the 1950s that it was not the case, I couldn’t bring myself to face Ysabeau. I didn’t even send her my condolences. I figured that being considered rude is better than being blamed for the death of her mate.”

In her distressed state Eva didn’t notice that there was no anger coming off Baldwin.

He wasn’t silent because he was considering his options. He marvelled at how simple his decision was. With anyone else standing before him he would have lunged at them, no matter how small their role had been, when it came to a threat involving his family. But not with her.

Never her.

“The message was supposed to reach Stasia?”

“Yes, she lived further away from you all, I thought it’d be safer…”

“We got that message.” Eva’s bloodied eyes shot up.

“Three days after Philippe was returned home. It could not have helped witches trace him.”

Eva let out a sob she was holding back.

“Baldwin, I… I’m so so—”

“Don’t,” he shook his head and took a careful step closer. “There was nothing you could do to prevent it and there was nothing you did to make it happen.” She closed her eyes, trying to regain breath. Then she blinked them open and made a step to him.

Baldwin rooted in his spot.

She slowly raised her hands and placed them on his chest, probing their closeness for the first time in years, then traced small pattern details on his tie with her fingers. He placed his hands on her shoulders before brushing them down her upper arms. As fragile as this moment between them was, he also feared that he would break her.

“Tesoro, non potrei mai prendermela con te,” he whispered. Eva let out a shaky breath.

“Perché?”

“Perché ti amo.”

She crossed the final inches of distance between them and rested her forehead on his chest, her hands circling his waist. Breaking the last remaining barrier, he pulled her into an embrace. She was shaking, the tears of relief falling from her eyes.

“It wasn’t your fault. It couldn’t be your fault. It’s alright,” he kept whispering to her, stroking her hair and holding her close.

They stood like that for some time; Eva finally calmed down, yet didn't let go off Baldwin, only
slightly drawing back to face him.

“I want to go through with it,” she whispered, careful not to start crying again. He already knew what she was referring to. “The heart vein. I want to do it.”

He tilted his head to get a proper look in her eyes for signs of doubt.

“Are you sure?”

She nodded.

“I know there’s a technical—”

“I don’t care.”

“But you said it yourself, the fact that your family…”

“I don’t care. I’ll deal with it later – we both will. I want to be with you, whatever it takes.”

As Eva left for the bathroom to clean up, Baldwin paced in the living room, discarding his waistcoat and undoing his tie, leaving it hanging around his neck. She entered the room to find him by the fireplace finishing his glass of wine; the blood on her face was washed off, but her blouse was still stained and her hair messy. She came to stand in front of him, and he put the glass on the mantelpiece.

“Go first,” he offered.

She grabbed one end of his tie and slowly pulled it off him.

“Are you afraid that I will back out of this at the last second?”

“I really hope that you don’t. But I’d like you to have that option.”

She sat on the chair while he pulled the coffee table closer and sat on the tabletop, so their eye level almost matched, with her sitting slightly higher. Her legs were placed between his, but they dared not touch each other until the ritual was performed. He unbuttoned his shirt to clear her way to his heart vein and humbly lowered his palms to the table. Eva pulled his shirt back further, then, without hesitation, she bit through his skin, still gripping on the shirt.

Baldwin didn’t know what she was seeing as she took careful sips, but he felt no discomfort. With every passing second, he felt more and more at peace. She slammed her other hand onto the table to balance herself and Baldwin grasped it as well to keep them both from falling backwards. Whatever it was that she was seeing through his blood, it elicited strong emotions.

Eva finished drinking and detached herself, falling back in the chair. Her gaze was blank as she waited for the memories she saw to subside in her head, and he breathlessly held out for her decision. He was honest with her during the entirety of their conversation that day, yet he still feared that she saw something that would make her change her mind. His heart skipped a beat when a shadow of a smile touched her lips and she met his gaze.

She slid her hands down the buttons of her blouse, undoing them and revealing a beige brassiere. Baldwin’s eyes never left hers as she prepared for his part of the rite, the look of adoration on his face making her blush as though they were still in the courting period of their relationship.
Receiving her silent permission to move forward, he slid from the table to kneel in front of her, then gently touched the skin above her heart vein with his lips before ripping into the flesh.

He heard her nails clutch the arms of the chair as he took the first sip; it came in sync with a thud of her heart which seemed to be helping him, delivering blood right to him.

A swirl of memories took hold of him and he tried to concentrate and navigate through them. In bright flashes, he saw a series of moments from her past across the centuries; then those visions began to form a pattern – most of the memories he saw were about him. Baldwin’s hand slipped past Eva to the back of the chair for balance, and he took yet another sip.

_Nella gioia e nel dolore._ As she fixed a ribbon in her hair in the hallway mirror, she met his eyes, mesmerized by her fingers moving through the intricately placed pins. And he could’ve sworn he saw those hazel eyes before, though more defiant than they were now. The memory morphed into the last kiss before their breakup, her holding onto him almost with desperation, only now he understood why that kiss felt so bitter even though at the time he didn’t know it to be final.

_Nella salute e nella malattia._ After a reckless fight with an adversary who made an insult to his family, she was pulling a bullet from his shoulder blade, her hands shaking because of how close he’d come to a much worse fate. He pulled her into an embrace then, and she cursed him in every language she knew before moving close to his ear and whispering, for the very first time, “I love you. Don’t you dare do this to me again”. Baldwin blamed himself now for not responding in kind, even though he already reciprocated the feeling.

_Di amarti e onorarti._ Through all the times they argued, stayed apart for weeks on opposite ends of the world, he never, not once, thought of anyone else but her. She was a constant, a guiding light, a safety net – and through the swarm of memories filled with absolute happiness he knew that she felt the same about him.

_Tutti i giorni della mia vita._

Baldwin pulled away and sat back on the table. His thoughts cleared, and he blinked before raising his eyes to look at Eva. She may not have seen what he saw, but she felt it; the connection they now shared surpassed that of any warmblood couple. Her heart was picking the pace and she inhaled in short breaths. Her mouth slightly opened, pupils dilated, her stare fell to his lips.

He moved forward; fingertips brushing her waist, he placed another kiss over the heart vein where the skin already begun to heal, gave a quick nuzzle of her neck before finally, with longing and desperation, kissing her fully on the lips. She responded instantly, gripping his neck before moving to lock her arms behind his shoulders. He slid his hands under her knees, pulled her body flushed against him and lifted her in his arms. He carried her to the bedroom on the other side of the house, never stopping his kisses; her whole body trembling with need for him. He sat her at the foot of the bed, breaking their contact just enough for both to remove their shirts. Every touch of their skin ignited their hunger for each other further, and as the last piece of clothing was thrown to the floor, they were joined together, with his hands travelling across her body to bring them even closer and her nails digging into his back hard enough to leave scars even on a vampire. Both of their breaths hitching, their reinforced connection brought the passion they always shared to the earth-shattering level.

He looked into her eyes as he whispered, “I love you” and it sent her over the edge.
Translations from Italian:

1 -- "My darling, I could never blame you."
"But why?"
"Because I love you."
2 -- In joy and in sorrow.
3 -- In health and in sickness.
4 -- To love and to honour.
5 -- Every day for the rest of my life.
Chapter 10

“When did this happen?”

Baldwin lifted his head from the pillow to look at the scar Eva was tracing with her finger. It was his wound from World War I. He fell back on the pillow, and Eva’s eyes shot up to his.

“Why are you feeling guilty?”

“You can sense that?” Baldwin raised an eyebrow.

“Your emotions are clearer to me now that we are mated. Is it a gunshot wound?”

He nodded.

“Not long after we broke up.” Eva lay in the crook of his arm, and Baldwin ran his fingers up and down her spine. At his confession, he subconsciously pulled her a bit closer. “It’s a reckless scar. It wasn’t even accidental, it was just stupid.”

“Ah. So it’s not the guilt I’m feeling. It’s your hurt pride.” Eva watched Baldwin start to deny it. Then, to her amusement, he gave up.

“Yes, you’re right,” he said, gently removing her hand from his clavicle where the scar was.

Baldwin turned on his side, prompting Eva to lie on her back, and lazily started raining kisses along her neck, having spent all his energy in the hours before the sun rose. His palm cupped her other cheek first, before moving down the neck to the collarbone, his index finger tracing her curves, making its way to her lower abdomen.

“Would you like to help make some nobler scars?” His low voice sent shivers down her spine and reminded her of the scratches she left on his back during the night which had already healed.

“Are you asking for permission or setting yourself a challenge?”

As he slid his fingers inside her and circled just at the right spot, the question became irrelevant.

A little while later, Baldwin had thrown on some clothes, visited the wine cellar, and returned to bed. Now, he sat against the headboard while Eva propped her head on his arm, refusing to change from the sheet she had wrapped around herself.

“Can you help me solve one riddle?” Baldwin asked, putting his empty glass somewhere on the floor. Eva’s glass was already there.

“I’ll do my best. What’s your question?”

“Why do I sense le Cœur de Marie on you?”

“You want me to decipher the scents you’re picking up?”

“It’s not the only one but it’s the strongest. Feels like its own memory capsule. Is there some
significance to it in our lives that I don’t remember?”

“The bleeding heart, you say…” Eva knitted her brows, taking a minute to think. Then her features smoothed as the answer dawned on her. “It grew in my garden around the time we met for the second time.”

“In the 1880s?”

“They had recently come to Europe. I was curious so I had them delivered and they grew in the garden for some time. I took care of them myself, so I guess it imprinted. What else can you sense?”

Baldwin leaned in and took a sniff off her shoulder, making her giggle.

“A lot of things. I can single each of them out but in the end what matters is that I sense you. No matter how crowded the room or great the distance.”

“Biology aside,” Eva suddenly became very serious. “Why do you think you were drawn to me all this time?”

“Because you’re that person,” he simply said, gently tugging a loose lock of hair behind her ear. “Because you are absolutely, undoubtedly that person. And I was never as sure in my decision as I am now that I chose you. And I was never happier than now that you chose me.”

“Sappy.”

“How often do you get to see me like this?”

“I know. And I’m enjoying it.”

She pushed herself up on her arm and softly kissed Baldwin on the mouth. Her lips tasted of blackberry with a hint of truffle, and as ordinary as those flavours were, Baldwin got lost in the sensation. As she pulled away, there was a glint in her eyes.

“We need to get out of the house eventually.” She tightened the sheet around herself, then got up from the bed to find the clothes that were scattered all over the floor. She picked up her blouse that was surprisingly in one piece yet had dried blood stains left there last night. “Well that’s ruined.” She proceeded through the room, opened the closet and chose one of his shirts.

“It’s a bit too long for you,” Baldwin commented but then was immediately silenced by Eva ripping a chunk off, making it shorter.

“No, this will work,” she cheekily replied, throwing the modified shirt on the bed, then replacing the bedsheets with underwear and putting the shirt on top. Baldwin tried to bring himself to care for the decimation of his clothes but couldn’t stop staring at his mate’s delicate fingers pushing the buttons of his shirt through the holes.

“Where exactly are you going?” He slid down the bed to sit at its foot, while Eva fished her trousers from under the bed and slid into them, tucking the shirt so the ripped edges were not visible.

“My clothes aren’t here. I’m going to get myself something to wear. I’ll return soon.”

“At this hour?”
“In the time it takes me to drive there, something will come up. A lot of places open near Place Kléber at around 10 in the morning.” She put on her shoes and set decisively towards the front door. Baldwin almost decided to fall back on the bed and catch a quick nap before he felt a strong pull. He easily recognized it as his mating instinct telling him to close the distance between him and Eva right there and then. Frowning, he listened for the signs of Eva feeling the same thing, yet all he heard was the rustle of her trench coat. He strolled into the hallway as she picked up her purse and opened the door to leave the house.

She made it all the way to the car before stopping dead in her tracks. Baldwin, still barefoot, leaned on the doorframe.

“Is this how it’s going to be all the time?” she asked, still facing away from him.

“What did you expect in the first 24 hours?” he shrugged. She took a deep breath, and Baldwin felt her frustration all the way from where he stood. “Is it a problem?”

“It’s kind of a problem!” she exclaimed.

“Why are you shouting? I can hear you perfectly.”

“It’s just that this is not very convenient – I simply need to drive to the city centre and back, yet all I want is to get back into bed with you.” She turned to look at him only to see that he wore a wicked grin.

“Wipe that smug smile off your face, this is serious!” Yet the corners of her mouth also shot up. She caught sight of his lack of footwear and closed the distance herself. They both sighed with relief as they stood in close proximity to one another.

“It’ll become easier with time. Why does it worry you so much?” he asked.

“You’re always crossing borders,” Eva breathed out. “That’s a lifestyle you adopted a very long time ago, and I can’t ask you to change for my sake, and I wouldn’t want that. So we are facing a serious problem if the intensity of the instinct persists.”

“You say you can’t ask me, but I would do that in a heartbeat. For you.”

“Our heartbeats are not a frequent occurrence.”

He smiled.

“I’m not being literal. I’ll make any arrangements necessary.”

Eva took a step closer and straightened a slightly crooked collar of his shirt.

“I love you. The ‘you’ who scheduled meetings in France, Germany and England almost back to back, as much as the period-appropriate transportation allowed, and was never late to any of them. I’m not asking to give up your work time.” She let her gaze fall for just a second before lifting her eyes to look straight into his. “I just want to be a part of the rest of your life.”

Baldwin took her hand into his and placed a kiss on her knuckles. Her eyes shined even brighter.

“Would you go with me to Auvergne in a few days then?” he carefully asked. “I need to be there to close a deal. We can take a helicopter.” Eva gasped.

“I knew it—I knew that the moment helicopters would go into a large-scale production you will
have a hundred of them on standby.”

“Well, not a hundred. But the number has surely gone up since the 1940s.”

Eva thought for a minute, trying to visualize the possible routes from Bas-Rhin to Puy-de-Dôme.

“We can take a more relaxed road. We can even walk parts of it on our own two feet. I can tell that you haven’t done it in quite some time.”

“How do you manage to make me feel more alive?” Baldwin marvelled. Eva put her palms on his chest and her closeness set his nerve endings on fire.

“Would you look at that. Your heart sped up. One might say it’s almost human.”
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

It's the second to last chapter. We're in the endgame now (I'm sorry)

After a seven-hour drive, they finally stood before Baldwin’s chateau in Puy-de-Dôme. Eva took in her surroundings. The house was situated in a secluded area, with only nature around them. It also was located rather close to Baldwin’s ancestral home of Sept-Tours.

“Hold on,” Eva stopped before the steps to the chateau. “Where exactly are you holding your meeting?”

Baldwin pursed his mouth.

“That would be…” he hesitated. “Lyon.” Eva’s eyebrows shot up.

“We passed Lyon on our way here. Why didn’t we just stay there for the duration of your business trip?”

“It’ll be very short. A helicopter flight there and back.”

Eva snorted.

“A helicopter flight. Then why…” Her eyes suddenly got very round. “We came here so I could talk to Ysabeau, didn’t we?”

Acknowledging, that denial was pointless, Baldwin nodded.

Eva turned from the house and strolled back to the car.

”Wait—” he caught her by the shoulders, forcing her to look at him.

“I’m not doing it. You can’t make me.”

“I’m not making you, but you know you should get this over with.”

“This isn’t an appropriate time. I’ll arrange to meet with her some other day.”

Baldwin squinted suspiciously.

“You won’t.”

“Of course, I won’t! This is the last conversation I want to have!”

Her breath came in hitches and her hands started shaking. Baldwin stroked her upper arms.

“Do you need to sit down?” he asked, worried. Instead of answering, Eva clutchéd Baldwin’s hand and tried to breathe, gradually calming down.
“Honey, it’s going to be fine,” he whispered, placing a kiss on her temple.

“No in any of the scenarios I have running through my head.”

“I’m sorry that you found out this way, but arguably it’s better that I told you here than in Strasbourg. You would’ve spent the whole trip worrying about it.”

Eva had to admit that he had a point.

“Fuck you for always thinking you get to decide everything for me,” she muttered grimly.

“Fair,” he replied and moved a lock of her hair behind her ear. “Do you want to go inside?”

Over the years, the house’s exterior had changed, and there were many small alterations made to the inside as well. The floors and walls were upgraded to reflect more modern standards, and the furniture renovated and replaced, but the paintings and antiquities were the same as ever. Eva passed a particularly shiny helmet set atop a stack of books and snapped her fingers.

“Did you manage to find that sword by any chance?”

“It’s in Sept-Tours,” Baldwin replied, opening the door to the master bedroom with his free hand, while he held their travel bags in the other one. “Probably stacked up somewhere in the vault. I’ll dig it out. You’re long overdue for that rematch anyway.”

Eva chuckled at the private joke from their second meeting. Baldwin really had spent some of his free time in the 1890s looking for the sword in question before giving up.

He put the bags on the bedroom floor and checked his phone.

“My meeting’s in a few hours, so I suggest we go there tomorrow. Change into something more comfortable, go into the gardens, and maybe I’ll give you a head start.”

“Well, that’s so very kind of you.” Eva took a seat on the bed and fixed the skirt of her sundress. “Anyway, I have a hard time picturing you in anything other than three-piece suits.”

“I wear other clothes,” Baldwin retorted.

“Like what? Two-piece suits?”

“I don’t wear suits at home. I have some regular home clothes. Sweatpants and whatnot.”

Eva did a double-take.


Baldwin looked askance.

“Yes, I really own a pair of sweatpants. What of it?”

“In this house?”

“Yes.”

“Can I see them?”
Eva’s sudden enthusiasm was truly ominous.

“Are you… Really?”

“Please put on the sweatpants.”

Baldwin sighed and went to the closet. As much as he thought this fashion show ridiculous, he felt a pang of guilt for making Eva upset. Doing something nice for her would not exactly kill him.

“…Verdammte scheiße.”

He already regretted it.

“Can I take them off now?”

“Absolutely not, you have to wear them all the time.” Eva swept her eyes over his dark-grey sweatpants and a white undershirt.

Baldwin crossed his arms.

“I have a work meeting to attend!”

“Darling, I think you’ve established your authority enough to pull off wearing T-shirt and sweatpants in front of the board or whomever you’re going to meet.”

He took a step towards the bed, perched his left hand on the bed poster and leaned in to kiss her. Breaking the kiss off, she fell backwards on the bed, still enjoying the view of Baldwin in his casual clothes.

“I’ll return late in the evening.”

“Fine by me. The chateau is big. I’ll take a slow tour.” She sprawled comfortably on the bed. Baldwin smirked and drummed his fingers on her knee. She slightly twitched from the tickling sensation, and he kneeled at the foot of the bed. Pulling her shoes off, he made trail on her leg with small kisses from ankle to knee.

“You’re going to be late for your meeting.”

“I don’t care,” he smiled and continued his way up her inner thigh. She beamed and then threw her head back and let out a sharp gasp. The smile didn’t leave her lips for the rest of the morning.

***

“I didn’t hear a helicopter,” Matthew narrowed his eyes.

It was around noon, and Matthew’s family arrived at his ancestral home in the early morning. He noticed Eva and Baldwin arm-in-arm crossing the gates of Sept-Tours through the window and was baffled. He really would have preferred a heads-up on his brother’s arrival in the form of his usual transportation of choice winging its way through the air.

“We walked,” Baldwin shot back.
“Interesting,” Matthew replied, still eyeing his brother with suspicion. Then he turned his gaze to Eva. “Fancy seeing you here again.”

“Not entirely of my own free will,” she pursed her lips, although there was no real bitterness in her tone. Matthew smiled and went to offer her a hand to shake but stopped midway. He took a sniff, while Eva raised an eyebrow, defiantly staring him down. Matthew’s eyes widened.

“You’re mated,” he said slowly.

“We are, yes,” Baldwin answered flatly, daring him to comment on the matter. Matthew lowered his hand.

“Never thought I’d see the day,” he marvelled, his mouth’s corners going up. Eva began to reply, and then she looked over Matthew’s shoulder and gripped Baldwin’s arm tighter.

Ysabeau de Clermont stood at the top of the stairs leading to the main entrance into Sept-Tours. Baldwin watched his sire’s mate with obstinance and turned to look at Eva.

“It’s going to be okay,” he placed a quick peck on her cheek and then went up the stairs, pausing before Ysabeau. He greeted her with a kiss on each cheek, then bowed his head and whispered something to her. Neither Matthew nor Eva could make out what Baldwin said from where they were standing. He looked back at them over his shoulder, then Ysabeau came down the steps and silently approached Eva. Baldwin shared one last look with his mate before she and Ysabeau proceeded to the Sept-Tours grounds to have a heart-to-heart without anyone to bear witness.

“What did you say to her?” Matthew inquired of Baldwin, joining him at the top step.

“I asked her to hear Eva out,” he uttered. Matthew sensed the worry in his voice.

“Looks like it is going to be a long conversation. Let’s go inside. There’s someone eager to see you.”

***

It was uncommonly quiet in a house filled with people, as Eva made her way through a few rooms that went into others. She followed a low soft sound of her mate’s voice and opened a heavy door to one of the bedrooms.

“How did it go?”

Baldwin was squatting on the floor. Clutching his palm for support was a dark-haired baby girl who instantly raised her head to see who dared to catch the attention of her favourite uncle.

“Well,” Eva replied, and relief washed over him. “It went well.”

The girl looked from Eva to Baldwin and smiled brightly.

***
“Your kids are magic,” Eva exclaimed, accepting a wine bottle from Diana’s hands and filling her glass. The dinner table was set, and all the adults were seated around it. The atmosphere was warmer than both Baldwin and Matthew remembered ever being at such family gathering, and Ysabeau’s eyes shined brightly when she looked at the company surrounding her.

“That magic requires a lot of work, but we wouldn’t trade it for anything,” Diana happily sighed. She just put both kids down for their nap; while she changed Becca, baby Philip was showing Eva how he could make his plush bear fly. She found him ridiculously adorable.

“Best investment of time and money, I’d say,” Eva replied, taking a napkin to the corner of her lips to wipe down blood from red meat she was eating. “And I’m vaguely familiar with the subject.” She winked at Diana.

“I would think so,” Diana pointed at her brother-in-law with a fork. “I can’t imagine Baldwin ever losing money on investments.”

A gesture of "Well..." by Eva did not go unnoticed. Baldwin began determinedly cutting up his venison and didn’t look up.

“That is very misleading,” he stated, before taking a small bite.

“I mean…” Eva shrugged.

“It is misleading!”

“Well, yes, I suppose you can’t lose what you never had.”

“I have way too many questions about this,” Matthew muttered.

“Great, because you are not getting any answers,” Baldwin spit out in reply.

“How is your research going, Matthew?” Eva changed the subject to deflect from Baldwin’s descend into frustration.

“Ah, yes—Baldwin, your test results came back. It says que tu es un connard.”

Eva snorted.

“Matthew, I think you’re doing science wrong. You’re supposed to discover new things, not prove axioms.”

Diana giggled, Matthew nodded his head slightly in recognition of a worthy opponent. Baldwin kept a dead-pan face. While his brother and his wife engaged into a chatter with Ysabeau, he leaned towards Eva.

“You’re enjoying yourself, aren’t you?”

“Can you blame me?” she shrugged. “And I didn’t say anything they didn’t know about.”

“Lost money on investments?!”

“Well, okay. That might have been speculation on my part. Besides, who even buys R8s nowadays?” Baldwin’s face went dark while Eva’s dissolved into a smile.

“You know perfectly well it wasn’t a good time for such investments.”
“Sure. Did you invest in it later?”

He took in a long breath.

“Okay, I’ll stop vexing you,” she put her hand on his. Baldwin pulled it to his lips and kissed it.

“I dread the day that you do.”

“I take it you came here to pass the official changes into the family pedigree for the Congregation?” Diana turned from the previous conversation she was having. “I’m going there next week, I’ll be glad to deliver the papers.”

“We are not going to do that,” Baldwin replied.

He was met with three sets of very confused eyes.

“You said they are mated now,” Diana turned to Matthew for confirmation.

“They are,” he said, switching his gaze from Eva to Baldwin. “What the hell is going on?”

Eva took a sip of wine and put her glass back on the table.

“As you well know, according to the tradition, when the head of the family gets married in the eyes of other vampires, their mate becomes the second in command of that family. All things considered, us mating was rather… spontaneous, so there was no family vote. I cut in line in the family hierarchy, which isn't the kind of power move everyone appreciates.”

“I thought you didn’t care about power,” Ysabeau softly asked. Eva met her gaze defiantly.

“I don’t. On a pro forma basis, I’ll have the right to command your scion. On a personal level, I won’t touch that right. I was never in it for connections and power. Not back then, not now.” Her right hand laid on her knee, and she felt Baldwin cover it with his and give it a little squeeze.

“So what exactly are you planning to do?” Matthew frowned. Baldwin took a deep breath.

“We will have a talk with all our sisters. We’ll deliver the news ourselves, rather than have them find out about it after it’s been made official by the Congregation. Hopefully, they will accept, then we will proceed with the formalities.”

“And if they don’t?” Diana quietly asked. Eva turned her head slightly towards Baldwin, listening to the changes in his heartbeat. He smiled wryly.

“Common-law marriage is an option.” He looked at his mate for reaffirmation. “We’ll think of something.”

Matthew and Ysabeau exchanged concerned looks. The idea of offering Philippe’s daughters a chance to deny Baldwin his happiness sounded worrisome. Yet neither felt it right to tell him what to do.

And maybe it would work out after all.

After dinner, Eva and Diana strolled into the garden. They got along famously, and the conversation eventually switched to the fate of the Book of Life. Diana excitedly spoke of the ways it helped her understand the marvels of the creature world, and then let slip that it was also how she knew Baldwin was mating. To Eva’s wonderment, she explained how it was just a matter of asking the right questions, and the answer would present itself. Eva softly smiled and confessed
that it works the same way without the book pages running through your veins, as that was how she answered the musings of her heart. She looked back at the castle as the man in question crossed the threshold and stepped outside.

Baldwin paused for a minute in the front door to watch as his mate took off her shoes to walk the grounds of Sept-Tours barefoot. He almost didn’t hear his brother coming to stand beside him.

He clapped Baldwin on his shoulder.

“This is what happiness feels like,” he offered and went down the stairs.

Baldwin took his brother’s words in and, just out of Matthew’s hearing range, he whispered, “I almost forgot the feeling.”

He followed suit and joined Eva under the still warming light of the setting sun.
“One of them is going to end up hurting the other.”

“They can handle it.”

“I’m not saying they can’t. I’m saying it could potentially be dangerous.”

“For whom? We’re keeping our distance.”

“I just don’t think it’s a good idea.”

The clanking of Diana’s spoon against her teacup filled the resulting pause.

“He’s had a lot of experience. Trust me. He knows what he’s doing.”

Diana took a sip.

“Where did the second sword even come from? I only saw Baldwin drag one from the vaults.”

“He borrowed one of mine,” Matthew narrowed his eyes, staring at the action unfolding in the distance. “This is quite entertaining. I wouldn’t have guessed Eva could hold her own against him. On account of him having been a master soldier, you know.”

“You sound proud.”

“I’m just stating the facts.”

“Don’t deny it, Matthew – honesty is a better policy,” Eva called from the garden.

A moment later Diana and Matthew watched as Baldwin won a sword from Eva’s hands, leaving her angry and frustrated.

“Want to have another go?” Baldwin smirked.

“You don’t have to be so smug about it.” She shook her head at him.

“Then stop insisting that you overpowered me that time. Just admit it was simply luck.”

“I’ll admit it when it suits me.”

“Is this not your first time handling a sword?” Matthew nodded at Eva, approaching them with a glass of wine in his hand, Diana following close behind.

“What does it look like?” asked Baldwin, swiftly twisting a sword in his hand.

“Like she’s a little rusty,” Matthew offered Eva an apologetic smile which, judging by the squint of her eyes, she did not appreciate. “Although if there’s a story of you beating my brother in a sword fight, I’d love to hear it.”

“I doubt there’s anyone alive who can tell a story like that, Matthew,” Eva admitted. “All I did was take his weapon away from him for a minute there.”
“How did you manage to disarm him?”

“I’m good with my hands,” she replied, coming up to Baldwin, who froze on his spot. Eva took a sword from his hand and lightly patted him on the shoulder. After a moment, he shot back.

“Do you remember what you did next with that sword?”

Eva dead-panned him.

“I dropped it.”

“There you go.”

“It was quite heavy. I know you have no recollection of such things, but I was still human and ‘weakness’ was still a word in my vocabulary.”

“Ah, melioribus annis,” Baldwin mockingly sighed and initiated a new round. Diana switched her concentrated gaze from one to the other as if trying to solve a riddle.

“When exactly did you two first meet?”

“A long time ago,” Eva breathed out between the sweeps of her sword. “In an empire that no longer exists.”

“The German Empire?”

Baldwin scoffed, effortlessly repelling Eva’s attack.

“No, that was our second meeting.”

“Holy Roman Empire?”

Eva breached Baldwin’s defences for a second, leaving a messy cut on his forearm.

“Geographically close. Try the first Rome.”

“Are you trying to tell me you first met two millennia ago?”

A sword swooshed in the air, forcing Diana to take a cautious step back, while Matthew barely moved.

“When you say it like that, it does seem a long time ago,” Eva replied, going to pick up the sword that was knocked from her hand. “At this point, everything is relative. The flow of time included. We are all ancient citizens of the world who simply go with it, each in our own way.”

“It’s crazy, how long it took for you to find a way back to each other.”

“Well, tell me something, Matthew,” Baldwin lowered his sword, signalling a pause in the match. “Are you the same man you were a thousand years ago? Five hundred years? How sure are you that Diana would have chosen that version of you over what you became today?”

Matthew had to admit defeat.

“Not sure at all.”

“Exactly.” Baldwin swung his sword in attack without missing a beat, catching Eva off guard, her
lifting defences just barely. “To put it plainly, the Parcae didn’t think it was time for us to get properly introduced just yet.”

Diana smiled gently and took Matthew back to the terrace by his hand to leave the couple alone.

“You haven’t actually changed that much,” Eva murmured, throwing her weapon onto the ground.

“Oh really?”

She fixed the sleeve of his shirt which she ripped with her sword, the cut on his skin already healed.

“I can still see the stance and demeanour of that soldier. You’re adding layers to yourself, and they make you much more enticing, and powerful, and intriguing, but as I strip them away, I can still see you. And I still adore you,” the level of her voice dropped to a barely distinguishable whisper as she moved close to him, her lips near his ear. “And I still love you.”

“Antiquus amor cancer est,” he replied, caressing her cheek as she lifted her eyes to his.

“Who are you calling old now?” she lightly slapped him on the shoulder.

“I hardly think time ever was our enemy. You’ve always been at the forefront of my mind.”

“You seem familiar.”

She turned to face the man whose stare she just caught in the mirror.

“You don’t,” she replied dismissively, crossing her arms and examining him from head to toe. He mechanically fixed his tie. “Are you a frequent visitor of boring social events? Then our paths might have crossed in the past year or two.”

“No, I am not. Although the armoury the host was showing earlier today was quite impressive and frankly reminiscent of the battles past, so if those are a frequent activity at social gatherings, I might become a fixture.”

She suppressed a laugh with a hand to her mouth.

“It was indeed reminiscent. I haven’t seen a gladius in quite some time.”

He narrowed his eyes slightly.

“Can you wield a sword?”

“I may not have formal fight training but I’m more than capable of disarming the opponent. The first time I ever held a sword in my hands, it was from the sheath of a Roman soldier.”

He stopped dead in his tracks.

“It’s you.”

She raised a brow in question.

“Did your encounter with a Roman soldier happen outside Mogontiacum around 17 centuries ago?”
Her eyes got very round as the realization dawned on her. She took a step closer and looked into his eyes in search of confirmation.

“It’s called Mainz now,” she managed to utter, still not quite believing his words.

“I’m sure neither of us uses the name they did then,” the corner of his mouth went up.

She tilted her head slightly to the side.

“Well, we never actually introduced ourselves that day.”

“That we didn’t.”

She took a deep breath, taking in his scent and trying to place it within her memory.

“Were you a vampire back then?”

“About a hundred years old, yes,” he replied. “And you were still human.”

“That’s why I can’t properly remember you. Picking up different scents wasn’t a hobby of mine just yet,” she was fiddling with a skirt of her dress and he tried very hard not to drop his gaze and follow the movement of her fingers.

“How can I ensure your trust then?”

“Trust? For a Roman soldier?” the glint in her eyes made his grin even wider.

“If not my scent, would you recognize the sword if you saw it again?”

She smiled.

“Are you offering me a rematch?”

“If you tell me your name, I might consider it.”

She thought for a few seconds before extending her hand to him.

“Eva.”

He took her hand in his and pressed it to his lips.

“Baldwin,” he replied, and, like the wings of a butterfly, her heart had fluttered.

Chapter End Notes

The full soundtrack to the fic - by chapter numbers:
https://open.spotify.com/playlist/4qwS0Qq4sGedkN0Pu5FBJo

My Tumblr, where you can hit my inbox with questions or just generally follow me:
https://marirable.tumblr.com/
But I still read every single comment on here, so please leave one or several. I absolutely love reading your feedbacks :)
Thank you for following this story to the very end. I have ideas for a sequel - but can't promise when I will begin to post it. So stay tuned <3

End Notes

Comments are appreciated. Huge thank you to adowtrash for proofreading this.

Eva was mentioned in the books only once - in the excerpt seen in the fic's description. I thought that story deserves exploration.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!